

The Greek Road to Emmaus

Imagine an account of two students bickering on a road, one is named and the other is unnamed. The road they are on stands as a metaphor for a system of thought: the way toward meaning and understanding. They encounter their wise teacher, whom they long to be near, they eat with him in ritual, and then he disappears (but not forever). Sprinkled throughout the story are additional metaphors of fire and hearts representing concepts of knowledge and inspiration. The story moves off the road to a shared meal and the interlocutors engage in discussions about love. Classicists and philosophers may recognize this story as the beginning of Plato's *Symposium*. At the same time, Biblical scholars and lay Christians may instead recognize this story as Luke's "Road to Emmaus" story. Both are correct.

The beginning of Plato's *Symposium* mirrors the end of the *Gospel of Luke* with many parallel elements including identical language, plot points, and themes. Particularly important is the setting of a metaphorical "road" that in Greek can also mean "way" (ὁδός). Just as "ὁδός" has a meaning in the physical setting as "road" it also has a conceptual meaning as "way." Because of this and other similarities, Luke's Emmaus story is a creative retelling of the beginning of Plato's *Symposium*. Luke, influenced by the Greco-Roman literary tradition of his colonizers, transforms this Greek philosophical setting into a setting for all, both Jewish people and gentiles, in order to demonstrate that the Jesus movement is literate in at least one major text in Ancient Greek philosophy.

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1. Metaphor Theory

The use of a metaphorical “road” to symbolize a means or method to attain truth and wisdom is present in the setting of these stories. The meaning depends on the concept map of roads and destinations such that they are generalized to depict a method or practice (the road) and the goals of those practices (destinations).¹ For example, contemporary phrases such as “my way of life is [blank]” is easily understood to mean one’s expression of a system of values, such as a religion or philosophical school of thought. These kinds of uses of the “road” metaphor through various phrases are not typically used to refer to trivial or circumstantial goals. Other phrases such as “the road of life” or “the direction I have chosen” further illustrate the ordinary ways in which people include this kind of “road” symbol to coherently express meaningful existential explorations.

The road as a conceptual metaphor was not invented by Plato but is instead a general metaphor that different thinkers have utilized across many times and places. For example, outside of the Greco-Roman world, “the Way” is a significant metaphor in other traditions: “The Dao” means “The Way” in Daoism and “The Middle Path” or “The Middle Way” in Buddhism is key for the Buddha’s awakening.² Although less profound than

1 For detailed explorations of how certain fundamental metaphors inform and shape sophisticated philosophical concepts (their formation and their expression), see works on metaphor theory and conceptual blending, such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

2. Although it is not the most common rendering, the English word “course” works better in some ways to communicate just how complex

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Buddhism and Daoism, we can see the sustained influence of the idea of two friends being educated on a trip embodied in contemporary media like *Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle*, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, and the *Shrek* movie series. This "road to meaning" metaphor is certainly not exclusive to Plato.

The "road to meaning" as a metaphor is a pervasive part of Luke's world of meaning (both Jewish and Christian). Within Luke's Judaism one is reminded of the *Exodus* story, wandering around the desert where spiritual growth matches precisely with the physical locations, and salvation is Israel's destination. In Mark's gospel, Jesus scolds his disciples for bickering about which one is the greatest in what one can imagine is a stand-in for the tension in the leadership of the early church (Mark 9:33): who is first, who is ahead, and who is behind are the metaphorical stakes here. Luke uses examples of a "road to meaning" elsewhere in his work such as in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (*Acts* 8:27-39) and Paul's road to Damascus (*Acts* 9:1-19). These Jewish and early Christian uses of the road-way metaphor are not identical to Plato's use of the metaphor. These examples demonstrate that Luke's exposure to the metaphor is not wholly genealogically dependent on Plato so this means his similar execution of the metaphor in the "Road to Emmaus" story is purposefully utilized.

such metaphors are: a course is a road/path to follow, but it is also the sap the courses through the tree, or the total structure/syllabus of a course of study (a class, a major, or a professional discipline). See also *marga* in Sanskrit and consider the symbolism of "wheels" in the Indic traditions to refer to ways of life or systems of meaning. Consider too the symbolic structure in intended meaning of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.

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2. The Importance of the Setting in the Wider Work

The road setting is intentionally meant to signal the meaningfulness of the narratives. Both accounts focus on an in-between space, heading towards a location.³ The stories share the same setting: a liminal place between city and town. The Emmaus episode is Jesus' final pre-Ascension appearance, meaning this choice to utilize Plato as inspiration is highly significant as this story takes place during the climax of the gospel, between resurrection and ascension.

"The Way" has profound importance to the Christian tradition, this is why the setting in Luke is an important metaphor. Luke documents in *Acts* that "the Way" becomes the name of the early Church. This attestation means that "The Way" is not only important in this story but for the identity of the Church itself (*Acts* 9:2; *Acts* 24:14). In a later Christian writing, "the Way" achieves its utmost metaphorical importance with direct correlation with Jesus when he said "I am the 'ὁδός' and the truth and the life." (*John* 14:6). Here we see the central figure of all Christian meanings — Jesus — among other things, become the "road" to the ultimate: God and salvation. Reading this passage in the context of the wider Christian tradition shows the pervasiveness of this "way" or "road" metaphor upon Christian communities.

In the same manner, "the road" is an important metaphor for Plato. Clinton Corcoran notes how the setting which includes a road in *Phaedrus* has a metaphorical meaning for Plato.⁴ Additionally, Plato uses "way" (ὁδός) in *The Republic*

3 As opposed to starting the story having just left from the place of origin or having just arrived.

4 Clinton Corcoran, *Topography and Deep Structure in Plato: The Construction of Place in the Dialogues* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 124.

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to refer to a “method” or “system” (*The Republic* 435a; 533b).⁵ Considering *The Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are sister dialogues sharing the same topic and *The Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *The Republic* are all thought to be written around the same time, one can recognize the shared metaphorical significance of the road for Plato.⁶

The importance of the metaphor is demonstrated in *The Symposium*. As the dialogue progresses, “way” is utilized by Pausanias as a metaphor with regards to love between men (184b). The usage of “ὁδός” is an important metaphor as a system of thought for Plato just as it takes on an important conceptual meaning in the name of the early Church. This shared utilization of language that starts as a physical reference and transforms into an abstract metaphor places a focused thematic weight on the setting of “road” (ὁδός). The road is the physical basis for the conceptual “way” which becomes an important metaphor for Christianity and Plato. What “way” comes to mean for the Christian traditions is in part inspired by Plato and the ethos of Greek intellectual culture. The road setting we find in our stories is intentionally meant to signal the meaningfulness of the narrative.

3A. Characters

On this meaningful road, both stories commence with identifying a travelling pair: Plato lists Apollodorus and an unnamed friend and Luke lists Cleopas and the unnamed disciple. In both pairs,

5 The metaphor of the “longer road” in the *Republic* is addressed at length by C. J. Rowe in *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially chapter 5.

6 In addition to these sister dialogues, also consider the similarities (invoking of “the Way,” two friends, in between two places) at the beginning of Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

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one is named and the other is unnamed. The pairs are both moving toward a city. In the opening lines of *The Symposium*, Apollodorus recalls he was walking from the town of Phaleron towards Athens (172a). In Luke's construction of this narrative, he describes two disciples walking towards the "town without walls" (κώμην LSJ, s.v.) Emmaus from the city of Jerusalem (24:13). Both stories are types of travel stories, which utilize spatial change to invoke a change in status.⁷ The stories share the same premise: a liminal setting between city and town and a cast of two comrades with only one name between them.

3B. Bickering

In addition to similar characters in a nearly identical setting, both stories have the pair engaged in impassioned conversation like one would expect in a religious movement or on a philosophical journey to truth.

Although in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, these translators soften the tension translating "ἀντιβάλλετε" as "exchanging", looking at other Greek sources suggest "ἀντιβάλλετε" is a word denoting more tension in the disciples' conversation, usually being translated as "throw against" (LSJ, s.v.). In the Emmaus story, the two disciples are arguing. Perhaps the two disciples are a metaphor for the types of ministry of the Jesus movement; that is, ministry in the *polis* versus the *chora*. Or, perhaps, they could represent the tension between Jews and Gentiles in the early church. Speculation aside, the followers of Jesus are bickering after the execution of

⁷ Jonathan D.B. Kraus, *Symposium Scenes in Luke's Gospel with Special Attention to the Last Supper* (Ann Arbor: Vanderbilt University, 1991), 131.

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their movement's leader. In a similar manner, Plato has the companion argue with Apollodorus about Socrates (173d).

Luke's concept of religious debate is inherited from the philosophical tradition of his Greco-Roman world. His use of the image of these two disciples in *intense* conversation relies on what his informed readers know about such conversations: deep conversations take place full of contention, meandering, and are sustained for a long time. Lovers of wisdom engage in such conversations. It is only fitting that Christians do the same because for many Christians, "σοφία" (wisdom) is a manifestation of Jesus as God.⁸ The connection between students engaging in conversations about love is related to the road metaphor because just as peers are connected through friendly bickering, a road can be a dangerous space that nevertheless connects two cities.

3C. Agency

Both passages make note that their bickering characters have agency in their respective conceptual "way" by their physical movement on the physical road. Plato makes this point twice, first in the case of Apollodorus's friend (172a) running up from behind and then Socrates falling behind.⁹ Likewise, Luke uses movement in the case of the not-yet-identified Jesus walking ahead of the disciples (24:28-29).

⁸ I am speaking here about Orthodox traditions especially, but not exclusively. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul associates Jesus with wisdom. If one is interested in this subject as well as Gnosticism, see *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* from the Nag Hammadi library. James McConkey Robinson and the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Coptic Gnostic Library Project, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 1st U.S. edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

⁹ Interestingly, the text does not explicitly describe Socrates' thoughts on the Way.

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This movement is significant because it suggests the characters have agency in the metaphorical “way,” just as one has agency on a physical road (one can be ahead, one can fall behind). Plato’s character emerges ahead to catch up with not just the characters but to emerge in the story itself. Interestingly, Socrates’ metaphorical reason for stopping along the road to meaning is provided: he only pauses because his thoughts about “the way” were so profound he had to stop (174d). Luke also has a significant message about Jesus going beyond the disciples, he starts to fall behind (disappear) but then reemerges ready to impart wisdom. This visibility is symbolic of Jesus’ disappearance in the tomb followed by his resurrection. These are examples of spatial change used to invoke a change in status within the conceptual structure.

2D. Long to Touch

Related to the agency of movement on the road, both accounts share a theme of physical closeness as a representation for conceptual cooperation and ideological adherence. During the dinner, Plato has Agathon long to touch the wise Socrates (175d). Socrates remarks that he wishes wisdom could be transferred through touch (175e). This touching reminds one of the story from earlier in Luke’s *Gospel* with the bleeding woman longing to simply touch Jesus (8:43–48). The desire to be incredibly near the wise, to the point of almost being engulfed by them is portrayed in the Emmaus story when Jesus is described as entering in the disciples who ask Jesus to “abide with them” (24:29). This image of Jesus entering into the disciples is profoundly expanded with the unintentional Eucharist of the passage, where the two disciples consume Jesus as bread in his presence just as they eagerly consume his words.

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This continues the similarity of both pairs wanting to be in company with one another, both passages contain a closeness between the pair, their wider dinner company, and their desire to be close to their wise teacher. Sharing the desire to become one with the teacher through physicality as a result of the road is yet another example of a shared connection in the execution of the road metaphor between Luke and Plato.

2F. Disappearance

Related to agency and closeness is also the disappearance of the wise teacher. Jesus first disappears when he moves ahead on the physical road which relates to his ultimate sacrifice on the conceptual “way” through his disappearance first in death and then from the tomb. Upon his return to the disciples, he imparts wisdom to them over dinner (24:32). Jesus then disappears again at the conclusion of the Emmaus story vanishing once the disciples recognize him, signaling his ascension. Similarly at Agathon’s symposium, Socrates also disappears for a short time to reemerge to discuss philosophy in greater detail than before his disappearance (174e). Luke and Plato both utilize disappearance along “the Way” as a metaphor to convey details about the relationships of the characters in the story and their need for love of their teacher.

2G. Symposium

Beyond the similarities of setting, cast, and action on the road, when both pairs and their wise teachers leave the road, they similarly eat a ritual dinner together at night (Luke 24:29-30; *Symposium* 174e). These scenes do not take place on the road, but in the communities of the destination. Unlike other uses of the road metaphor, Luke is sure to utilize a “symposium” just

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like Plato. Both dinners contain a ritual with food and drink: for Luke's story this is one of the early instances of the Eucharist (Luke 24:30) and for the philosophers it is a prayer to Dionysus. At each dinner, the wise teacher vanishes with Socrates unseen but suspected of being nearby (*Symposium* 175a) and, more critically for the Christian story, Jesus vanishing once he reveals himself to them through the breaking of the bread which is the breaking of himself (Luke 24:31).¹⁰ Although Socrates's disappearance is described as a quirk and he eventually returns, Jesus does not return to the two disciples but does make one final appearance in the following story when he returns to the eleven apostles before he makes his ascension and Luke ends his gospel.¹¹ Although these symposium stories do not take place on the road, it is important to note the similarities because Luke and Plato do not just share the same road to meaning metaphor, but coupled with the other shared details, the specificity of Luke's use of "road to symposium" is impacted by Plato.

2H. Fire and Hearts (The Shared Metaphors)

Additional language with fascinating meanings is shared between the authors which further suggests a connection between their work. Both passages mention the "καρδία" (heart), in connection with knowledge. Apollodorus in the first sentence, mentions that he knows the story he is going to tell

10 It is not of concern for this essay, but it may be significant for some readers to know that many Christians would argue Jesus is still physically, literally present in the bread and the cup. This presence is particularly relevant in the "abiding with them" because Jesus in the Eucharist enters their body.

11 Kraus, *Symposium Scenes* addresses the similarities of Plato's and other Greek symposiums in context of Luke's gospel.

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by heart, presumably because he has told it repeatedly (172a).¹² Luke also associates heart with knowledge, as Luke has Jesus first explain that the disciples are slow in heart to believe the prophets (24:25) but later the two disciples seem to think they have learned because they state their hearts were burning as he spoke with them on the road (24:32). Notably, Plato in his cave allegory utilizes fire as a source of knowing in *The Republic* (514b). The education of Jesus' two road disciples shares references to fire, heart, and knowledge with Plato. Plato and Luke use these same metaphors within the larger metaphor of the road, to explain that by going on the journey gives one insights of a special wisdom from their teacher. The inclusion of these smaller metaphors indicate that Luke is influenced by Plato because of the abundance of these shared specific references.

2I. Ending

The conclusion of Luke's story is a reduction of the rest of *The Symposium* into a sentence. Luke concludes his story by stating that the two road disciples "relate" the things of what had happened along the way with the Eucharist (24:35) and comparing stories with the eleven apostles of the leadership in Jerusalem (24:34). Luke's conclusion of his Road to Emmaus story is stating there was an exchange of speeches and stories with the disciples in Jerusalem, which a reader of Plato knows is how *The Symposium* continues through the exchange of speeches and stories in a city.

12 This "retelling" should be read as ironic, however, because Apollodorus source is a bit faulty and with a retelling one is liable to exaggerate details.

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Throughout Luke's Emmaus story there are meaningful images: a road, a wise teacher, bickering students, dining, drinking, touching, fire, and hearts that all function together in a similar manner as in Plato's *Symposium*. The metaphors in Luke's Road to Emmaus story that are borrowed from Plato's *Symposium* demonstrate not only the influence of Greek thought in the Jesus movement but also their importance. While not dealing explicitly with the Road to Emmaus episode, other scholars have elsewhere explored other Greco-Roman ideas that influenced Luke.¹³ The insight of the similarities between these Road stories affirm a new aspect of the Greekness of Luke.

4. Frame

The shared images not only interact in the same way but both of these accounts are presented in frames. The reader finds both texts are not presented as a direct dialogue from author to audience. Plato does not use his own voice but instead channels Apollodorus as the narrator in the setting of a road, who tells a story to the unnamed friend, which he had previously told to Glaucon. The accuracy of the story is questionable, Apollodorus was never even at the symposium. Instead, he had heard the story from Aristodemus, who is also described travelling on the road with Socrates. But Aristodemus falling asleep for part of the affair adds another wrench into the "accuracy" of the story (223c). This muddling of perspective creates distance between the story and the audience. In his intentional mangling of layers

13 Michael Kochenash, "'Adam, Son of God' (Luke 3.38): Another Jesus-Augustus Parallel in Luke's Gospel." *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 3 (2018), 324; David P. Moessner, *Luke the Historian of Israel's Legacy, Theologian of Israel's 'Christ': A New Reading of the 'Gospel Acts' of Luke* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 339.

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of borrowed stories, Plato is either clearly the first Christian pastor or clearly the first post-structuralist.

Luke frames his gospel (and also *The Acts of the Apostles*) as an account for Theophilus and he is sure to attest that he was not an eyewitness to the stories (Luke 1:1-4). Luke functions as an aggregator of stories, he takes different oral and written traditions (Mark, the Q source, the Hebrew Bible, Plato) to compose his gospel. Upon aggregating these stories, Luke presents the text for Theophilus, but of course his audience goes well beyond just him. Luke and Plato both claim to have been absent from the events they document and they frame their stories as addressed through intermediators.¹⁴

5. Why Use Plato?

These texts share so many parallels. Luke chooses Plato as a source because a part of his audience of Hellenized Jews would recognize the *Symposium* story. Luke is recognized as a talented writer and modeling Plato's work, used as a canvas to expand this Emmaus story of the early Church. *This* would no doubt be a way for him to demonstrate to other learned believers of his literary and philosophical brilliance (much like *The Symposium* is a poetic and philosophical masterpiece for Plato). Yet at the same time for those Christians uninitiated to Plato, the Road to Emmaus story could serve as an introduction to *The Symposium*, and explanation to the philosophical aspect of Greek life Christianity inherits.

14 For more on Luke's audience of Theophilus as a part of his rhetoric see: Moessner, *Luke the Historian*, 43-7. It is beyond the scope of this paper, but frame stories are also utilized in Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Panchatantra*.

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Luke demonstrates his literary capabilities when he adapts the gospel of Mark and the Q source.¹⁵ Luke is familiar with earlier gospel traditions not only in their content but also in their form. One of the aspects of a gospel as a genre is how it is neither a comedy nor a tragedy, because the good news is in the death of the hero.¹⁶ Luke uses this same skill to allude to and adapt the dialogue of Plato within his gospel. Plato's fusion of comedy and tragedy would likely appeal to Luke because of the complexity of the gospel message; it is both profanely tragic and beautifully inspiring. Plato in the *Symposium* fuses comedy and tragedy while at the same time discussing comedy and tragedy itself.¹⁷ As an author with a story to tell that blends comedy and tragedy, Luke would be attracted to the *Symposium* for its treatment, both as a discussion on genre and as a genre-bending text itself, in the blurring of the comedy and tragedy.

Ultimately, Luke's version of the Emmaus story finds a mold for its cast in Plato because *The Symposium* and the Road to Emmaus story convey the same message of going down a road. Phrased plainly without all of the wonderful poetic nuance, Plato tells a story about a bunch of men talking about love. But his symposium is different from the traditional symposium, they chose to turn away drink and recount shared stories of love. This reminds one of Luke's original Eucharist (Luke 22:14-23) that

15 The "Q Source" is a hypothetical document that is the source of the similar material shared by Matthew and Luke but is not found in Mark. For more on this see: Burton Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

16 I would be inclined to think that this is not exclusive to the gospel genre but also to any resurrection narrative. I would be interested in comparing the gospel genre with the ending of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, with Oedipus' ascension and semi-rehabilitation.

17 William Buchanan, "Tragedy and Comedy at the End of the Symposium." *Grand Valley Review* 4, no. 1 (1988), 45-7. See *Symposium* 223c.

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has Jesus and his disciples with the bread and cup and Jesus explaining how this ritual is symbolic of his body given to them. Giving one a body certainly invokes images of love: perhaps the love a parent offers a child through a hug, perhaps the love between sexual partners, or perhaps the love of sacrifice from one friend to another. Further, Jesus commands to his disciples to "Do this in remembrance of me." That is, carry out the love he gave them in the ritual of eating together. Through the different kind of wine and the different kind of love in the Last Supper, one finds, like in Plato's work, a different kind of symposium.

6. Conclusion: The New Socrates

Luke serves an interesting dual role as both a competent "biblical theologian" and "Hellenistic historian,"¹⁸ aggregating themes from both the Hebrew Bible and Greek literature in his gospel. In the Emmaus story, there is a tension with the two disciples arguing as a symbol of the early Church debating about its direction. Considering Greek was spoken in the occupied city of Jerusalem and Aramaic in the countryside town of Emmaus,¹⁹ one can envision Luke, an associate of Paul, attempting to bridge this linguistic divide by utilizing different themes from both Greek and Jewish cultures, and rewriting Plato is certainly a way to flaunt one's competence of the knowledge of the Greek world. Luke's adaptation of the Greek text plays an important role in appropriating Plato's message on the behalf of the Jesus movement.

18 Moessner, *Luke the Historian*, 339.

19 Roland Boer and Christina Petterson, *Times of Troubles: A New Economic Framework for Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 80.

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Luke as a gospel is adapting the philosophy of his Greco-Roman colonizers to argue for spiritual and political liberation from sin and empire. Luke replaces Socrates with the backwater Jesus and replaces the road to wisdom with the church to wisdom. Luke takes Greek philosophy and does it his way.

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