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God's Coming into the Widow's »Today«: An Analysis of Luke 7:11–17 from a Communication Perspective

Božji dolazak u udovičin »danas«. Analiza Lk 7,11–17 iz komunikacijske perspektive

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Abstract

Because of its literary beauty and theological reflection, Luke 7:11-17 has attracted the attention of many scholars. Most of them hold that the central message of this kerygmatic account is faith in the risen Jesus Christ. However, an analysis of Luke 7:11-17 from a communication perspective – which pays special attention to the pragmatic force and function of the text – leads to the conclusion that the central message of the account is God's visitation of the widow, who belongs to those whom Scripture calls *ʾānāwîm Yhwh* – »the poor of God«. The communication context, marked by inner and external debates about God's faithfulness to his promises, together with the communication strategy focused on the widow, the mother of an only son, places at the center God's coming into the widow's »today«. In Jesus Christ, the eschatological prophet, God has fulfilled his salvific promises, and in his encounter with the widow he revealed his compassionate and merciful face. In God's coming into the widow's »today« the reader is invited to live his faith in Jesus the Savior authentically and joyfully bear witness to it. Moreover, recognizing in one's own »today« the place of God's salvific visitation and being aware that salvation passes through the paths of the small and marginalized, the poor and the oppressed, the reader is invited to go out to meet their neighbor and, through concrete acts of love, mercy, compassion and responsibility, to build a »Church which goes forth« in which everyone feels accepted and loved like a son in the Father's house.

Keywords: God's visitation, widow of Nain, eschatological prophet, the poor of God, fulfillment of promises

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Sažetak

Zbog svoje književne ljepote i teološke refleksije, Luka 7,11-17 privukao je pozornost mnogih učenjaka. Većina njih smatra da je središnja poruka toga kerigmatskog izvještaja vjera u uskrslog Isusa Krista. Međutim, analiza Luke 7,11-17 iz komunikacijske perspektive – koja posebnu pozornost posvećuje pragmatičnoj snazi i funkciji teksta – dovodi do zaključka da je središnja poruka izvještaja Božji pohod udovici, koja pripada onima koje Sveto pismo naziva *ʿānāwīm Yhwh* – siromasi Božji. Komunikacijski kontekst, obilježen unutarnjim i vanjskim raspravama o Božjoj vjernosti njegovim obećanjima, zajedno s komunikacijskom strategijom usmjerenom na udovicu, majku sina jedinca, u središte stavlja Božji dolazak u udovičin »danas«. U Isusu Kristu, eshatološkom proroku, Bog je ispunio svoja spasenjska obećanja, a u susretu s udovicom otkrio je svoje suosjećajno i milosrdno lice. Božjim dolaskom u udovičin »danas« čitatelj je pozvan autentično živjeti svoju vjeru u Isusa Spasitelja i radosno svjedočiti o njoj. Štoviše, prepoznajući u vlastitom »danas« mjesto Božjeg spasenjskog pohoda i svjestan da spasenje prolazi putovima malih i marginaliziranih, siromašnih i potlačenih, čitatelj je pozvan da izađe u susret bližnjemu i, kroz konkretna djela ljubavi, milosrđa, suosjećanja i odgovornosti, izgradi »Crkvu koja izlazi« u kojoj se svatko osjeća prihvaćenim i voljenim poput sina u Očevoj kući.

Cljučne riječi: Božji pohod, udovica iz Naina, eshatološki prorok, Božji siromasi, ispunjenje obećanja

Introduction

The account of Jesus raising the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11-17) is one of those unique Lukan accounts distinguished by exceptional literary artistry and profound theological reflection. According to most scholars, the central message of this kerygmatic account is faith in the risen Jesus Christ.² It is therefore unsurprising that many studies have focused on analyzing Luke 7:11-17 in light of the Old Testament accounts of prophetic raisings of the dead, particularly Elijah's raising of the widow's son at Zarephath of Sidon (1 Kgs 17:17-24).³ However, a more detailed exegetical-theological analysis of Luke 7:11-17 from a communication perspective leads to surprising results that shed new light on the interpretation of Jesus' encounter with the widow of Nain.

² Luke presents four accounts of resurrections: two in his Gospel: the raising of the widow's son at Nain (7:11-17) and the raising of Jairus' daughter (8:40-56), and two in the Acts of the Apostles: the raising of Tabitha (9:36-42) and of Eutychus (20:7-12).

³ In his study: *La visita di Dio alla vedova di Nain (Lc 7,11-17) e la risurrezione di Gesù (Lc 24)*. *Rivista biblica* 62/1: 49-74., Massimo De Santis devotes particular attention to the narrative and theological motifs that link Luke 7:11-17 with the account of Jesus' resurrection in Luke 24.

This approach belongs to the field of »semiotic analysis« as presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in the document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. The historical-critical method places particular emphasis on historical facts, real authors, the community of historical readers and so forth, without paying sufficient attention to the final form of the biblical text and to the message it conveys, thus leading to a rift between the biblical text and today's reader. In radical opposition to the historical-critical method, fundamentalist reading completely rejects critical thought and investigation as means of understanding the biblical text. In contrast to these approaches, the interpretation of biblical texts from the communication perspective encourages the contemporary reader to enter into dialogue with the biblical text, pointing not only to the meaning of the text but also to the reactions, transformations, and actions that the text evokes and demands from the readers (Fužinato and Grilli, 2019, 7). From the communication perspective, the biblical text is no longer viewed as an open window onto the past or as a deposit of fixed truths, but rather as a door that is opened through reading, enabling communication between the text and its reader (Ricoeur 1983, 243). To say that the biblical text is a communication event does not mean depriving it of its historical foundation, but above all recognizing that the biblical word is not static or confined to a precise historical situation. On the contrary, it is living and relevant in every age. However, like any other method and approach, this one also has its potential risks: remaining at the level of formal analysis of textual content and failing to perceive the message of the texts (*The Pontifical Biblical Commission* 1996, no. 1322).⁴

The first step in discovering this light is to determine the literary context in which the account is placed. The second is the analysis of narrative, grammatical, and syntactic elements the author used in shaping the text and the textual unit through which communication takes place. The third step involves a semantic analysis of the account according to the previously defined structure in light of its Old Testament, Jewish, and Hellenistic background. The final step examines the communicative situation emerging from the text and the communication strategy the author employed to achieve his intended goal. Special attention is given to the pragmatic force of the text, which still today invites and encourages readers to embody the truth of salvation in the concrete circumstances of daily life.

⁴ More extensively in: Grilli, Massimo, Maurizio Guidi, and Elżbieta M. Obara. 2016. *Comunicazione e pragmatica nell'esegesi biblica*. Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) and Roma: San Paolo and GBPress.

1. Literary Context

According to Kenneth R. Wolfe's chiasmic structure, Luke 7:11-17 is situated within the first part of the Gospel (4:14–9:50). In this section, following the prologue (1:1-4) and the narrative preface (1:5–4:13), Luke presents Jesus' activity in Samaria and Galilee. This is the section that Massimo Grilli defines as the first stage of the »journey of the Word« (Grilli 2012, 18). Although Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem through Samaria and Judea explicitly begins at 9:51 with the statement: »When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem«, the use of the imperfect verb ἐπορεύετο in 4:30 informs the reader that Jesus' journey actually begins immediately after his first proclamation in the synagogue at Nazareth and his rejection by his fellow townspeople: αὐτὸς δὲ διελθὼν διὰ μέσου αὐτῶν ἐπορεύετο – »But he passed through the midst of them and went away«. Unlike the aorist, which denotes a completed past action, the imperfect here expresses a permanent change of action. Thus, the journey of the Word begins already in 4:30, even though from 9:51 onward the author will repeatedly remind the reader that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem⁵ (Grilli 2012, 19).

After Jesus' programmatic proclamation in the synagogue of Nazareth (4:14-30), Luke depicts the effects of the saving power of the Word in Jesus' ministry. In 4:31–6:19 he narrates Jesus' activity in Capernaum and Judea, characterized by his teaching and various healings. Alongside the healing of the possessed man (4:31-37), Peter's mother-in-law and other sick people (4:38-41), a leper (5:12-16), a paralytic (5:17-26) and the man with a withered hand (6:6-11), the author also recounts the calling of the first disciples (5:1-11) and of Levi the tax collector (5:27-32). Jesus' ministry in Capernaum and Judea concludes with the establishment of the Twelve (6:13-19).

For our study, of particular importance is the ministry of the Word presented by Luke in relation to those whom Scripture calls *'ānāwîm Yhwh* – »the poor of God«. The saving power of the Word is revealed in Jesus' Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49) and in his actions toward the Gentiles (7:2-10), the widow (7:11-17), the possessed and the sick (7:21-22), tax collectors (7:29, 34), sinners (7:36-50), and women (8:1-3). Unlike the leaders who close themselves to the Word, all these categories of *'ānāwîm Yhwh* recognize in their own »today« God's saving visitation and become participants and witnesses of the fulfillment of his salvific plan of love.

⁵ Cf. Luke 13:22; 17:11; 18:31; 19:28.

Silvano Fausti holds that the accounts concerning Jesus' love for enemies (Luke 7:1-10), his care for the lowly (Luke 7:11-17), and his acceptance of sinners (Luke 7:36-50) frame Jesus' self-revelation and indicate his specific form of messianism (Fausti¹⁰2006, 208).

In 8:4–9:50, Luke continues to recount the effectiveness of Jesus' word. Thus, Jesus teaches in parables (8:4-18), calms the storm (8:22-25), heals the possessed man (8:26-39), heals the woman who suffered from hemorrhage for twelve years and raises Jairus' daughter (8:40-56), feeds five thousand people (9:10-17), and heals the epileptic boy (9:37-43). In that section, Luke also places the transfiguration (9:28-36) and the twofold prediction of the passion and resurrection (9:22, 43–45).

According to most authors, Luke places the raising of the widow's son at Nain here as a preparation for the answer to John the Baptist's question: »Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another«? (Luke 7:19). To John's disciples, Jesus responds: »Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me«. (Luke 7:22-23)⁶

The literary context in which Luke places this account, whatever the reason, serves as the entryway to its deeper understanding. Set within the broader context of Jesus' encounters with people living in hard situations of marginalization and worthlessness, of spiritual and physical suffering, judgment and death, Jesus' encounter with the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17) invites the reader to recognize God's saving visitation within his own »today«.

2. Communication Articulation

Luke 7:11-17, a passage not found in the other Gospels, is crafted by the author in a unique way. Without entering into the complex question of the sources available to him in composing his work, we shall structure the text at its formal level, analyzing the narrative, grammatical, and syntactic elements the author employed in shaping the text that are crucial for conveying the message.⁷

⁶ Massimo De Santis sees the connection between Luke 7:11-17 and 7:18-23 in Jesus' prophetic-messianic identity, rather than in the necessity that the miraculous raising of the dead precedes the expression in v. 22: νεκροὶ ἐγείρονται (De Santis 2012, 50–51).

⁷ In structuring the text, we shall follow the criteria proposed by Alivero Niccacci in his articles: Dall'oristo all'imperfetto o dal primo piano allo sfondo. Un paragone tra sinta-

Verse 11 serves as the narrative introduction in which Luke provides the reader with the information necessary to understand the event, such as the time and the place of the action, and protagonists. The temporal indication ἐν τῷ ἔξῃς – »afterwards« links Luke 7:11-17 with the preceding account of the healing of the centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10), drawing the reader's attention to a new event about to unfold. The change of setting also signals the beginning of a new account. After the miracle performed in Capernaum (cf. Luke 7:1), in 7:11 Jesus sets out toward the city of Nain. Alongside the main protagonist, Jesus (Ἰησοῦς), the author also mentions his disciples (οἱ μαθηταὶ) and a large crowd (ὄχλος πολὺς), thereby linking this text with the preceding ones (cf. Luke 6:17; 7:1, 9). These collective characters follow Jesus on his missionary journeys, yet here they remain in the background and the author does not assign them any specific role (Aletti et al. 2012, 79).

Verses 12–15 form the central section of the account, which can be divided into three narrative moments. In verse 12, the evangelist depicts the narrative scene in vivid detail, describing the encounter of two processions at the city gate: the procession of life, led by Jesus, enters the city and meets the funeral procession, led by the mother of an only son, as it leaves the city. In verse 12b, through the expression καὶ ἰδοὺ – »and behold« the author captures the reader's attention, introducing into the continuous action a new event (Bovon 2005, 423). The use of the imperfect passive indicative in the third person singular: ἐξεκομίζετο – »he was being carried out«, which appears only here in the New Testament, suggests that, while the action is in progress, something new is taking place (Nolli 1993, 299). The large crowd from the city (ὄχλος τῆς πόλεως ἱκανός) accompanying the coffin is a new collective character to whom the author will assign an important role at the end of the account (Grasso 1999, 214). Yet the narrative lens focuses on the widow, the mother of an only son: μονογενῆς υἱὸς τῆ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὴ ἦν χήρα. In the detailed description of this new narrative figure, who, alongside Jesus, will be the main protagonist of the account, it is significant to note – besides the noun *mother* (μήτηρ) – the double repetition of the feminine singular personal pronoun αὐτή: first in the genitive (αὐτοῦ), and then in the dative case (αὐτῇ). Here the personal pronoun αὐτή draws the reader's attention toward the mother, emphasizing

ssi greca e sintassi ebraica and La narrativa di Mc 1, based on Harald Weinrich's theory. Thus, the first column presents the narrative background; the second lists the verbs in the aorist and historical present, used by the authors in the New Testament storytelling to shape the logical sequence and which are called first-level verbs; finally, the third column contains direct speech.

her situation with an irresistible emotional impact of compassion (Nolli 1993, 301). Using the dative case in the phrase μονογενῆς υἱὸς τῆ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ – »the only son to his mother«, the author expresses belonging and highlights the (economic) dependence of the mother on her son (Rossé ³2001, 256, note 44). Equally interesting is the silence that mysteriously surrounds the movement and encounter of the two processions. A large multitude moves toward and out of the city, yet Luke records no emotions, no opinions, no reactions from any of the participants.

At the moment when the reader can almost touch this mysterious silence, the author slows down the pace of the action, focusing entirely on Jesus. The brevity of the description of Jesus' actions in the second narrative moment (vv. 13-14) holds the reader in suspenseful anticipation of something new. This is the narrative *climax*, where the tension rises and reaches its peak (Aletti et al. ²2012, 74). Unlike the preceding verses, shrouded by Luke in a veil of silence and in the dark tones of mourning, pain, and death, the narration in verses 13-14 is illuminated by the bright colors of Jesus' feelings, thoughts, words, and deeds. As in the accounts of the calling of the disciples, everything begins with Jesus' gaze, which, surprisingly, is directed not toward the son, but toward the mother. By the use of active aorist participle in the masculine singular nominative case ἰδὼν – »he saw« rather than by nature indicates priority in relation to the main action, expressed with the aorist passive indicative in the third person singular ἐσπλαγχνίσθη – »he was moved with pity« (Nolli 1993, 300). The gaze provokes or accompanies Jesus' emotion, which Luke, without hesitation, describes using the verb σπλαγχνίζομαι, here applied to Jesus for the first and only time.⁸ In verse 13, Luke also uses for the first time in the Gospel the title ὁ κύριος – »the Lord« not as a vocative, but as a name in the central part of the account (Rossé ³2001, 256), assigning it a particular pragmatic function and meaning that we shall try to define in the final part of this paper. The present active imperative in the second person singular μὴ κλαῖε – »Do not weep« constitutes Jesus' first words in this account, and it is of great interpretive significance that he addresses them to the mother, the widow. The negative form of the present imperative commands the cessation of an already initiated action. The verb κλαίω, which appears eleven times in Luke's Gospel, here denotes loud, emotional weeping, accompanied by sighs and lamentations. This is the first and only time the author depicts Jesus directly consoling

⁸ This verb will be used twice more: in the parables of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and the merciful father (Luke 15:20).

a suffering person (Nolli 1993, 300–301). It is also important to note in this verse the triple repetition of the feminine singular personal pronoun αὐτή, which underscores Jesus' reaction and action toward the widowed mother.

In verse 14, the author shifts the reader's attention from the widowed mother to her deceased only son. Jesus once again takes the initiative: he approaches and touches the bier. The aorist active participle in the nominative singular masculine προσελθὼν – »he stepped forward« by its use also indicates priority over the main verb ἥψατο – »he touched« (Nolli 1993, 301). The noun σορός⁹ which appears only here in the entire New Testament, refers to the bier on which the deceased was carried, wrapped in a shroud (Peterson 2018, 366).

Just as in verse 13 compassion preceded the word addressed to the mother, so in verse 15 touch precedes the word addressed to the son. In light of the communication strategy of the account, this is a highly significant interpretive sign, as indicated by its placement between two imperatives: the first addressed to the mother in verse 13: μὴ κλαῖε – »Do not weep« and the second addressed to the deceased son in verse 15: νεανίσκε, σοὶ λέγω, ἐγέρθητι – »Young man, I tell you, arise!«¹⁰ The aorist passive imperative ἐγέρθητι – »arise« issues a command for the beginning of a new action. Normally, for an action performed in a single moment, one would expect the present imperative. The use of the aorist in such a case is rare (Nolli 1993, 301).

In verse 15, which constitutes the third narrative moment, the author very simply describes the fulfillment of Jesus' word: καὶ ἀνεκάθισεν ὁ νεκρὸς καὶ ἤρξατο λαλεῖν – »The dead man sat up and began to speak«. While in the command of verse 14b appears the noun νεανίσκος – »young man« and the reader expects it spontaneously here as well, Luke deliberately uses the noun νεκρός – »dead man« (v. 15). By placing it after the ἀνακαθίζω – »he sat up«, which appears only here and in Acts 9:40 in the entire New Testament (Popović 2016, 23), the author gives it special emphasis. Yet the central focus of this verse is Jesus' gesture toward the mother: ἔδωκεν αὐτὸν τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ – »and he gave him to his mother«. The use of the personal pronoun αὐτοῦ, which is narratively unnecessary since the reader already knows that it refers to his mother, clearly indicates that the true protagonist of the narrative, alongside Jesus, is the mother, not the son. The frequent use of the noun μήτηρ – »mother« and

⁹ Gérard Rossé discerns in it a probable Hellenistic influence (Rossé 2001, 257, note 54).

¹⁰ Schweizer 2000, 131 holds that Jesus' gestures and words addressed to the dead man, together with his reaction – framed by Jesus' address to the mother (vv. 13, 15b) – form the center of the narrative.

the personal pronoun αὐτή – »she« in verses 12-15, apart from showing that these verses must be read together, clearly demonstrates that the emphasis lies not so much on the son but on his mother. These features carry a particular pragmatic function, which will be defined in the continuation of this study.

Verses 16-17 form the conclusion of the account, where Luke presents the reaction of the crowd (v. 16) and the effect of the Word (v. 17). In describing the reaction of the crowd, it is important to note the use of the imperfect active indicative in the third person plural ἐδόξαζον – »they glorified« and the present active participle in the nominative plural masculine λέγοντες – »saying«, which are second-degree verbs in the narration and indicate the duration of the action. Verse 17 can be defined as a transitional verse, since, besides preparing for John the Baptist's question that follows in Luke 7:19, it also serves as a bridge to the following text.

In light of the preceding analysis, Luke 7:11-17 may be structured as follows:

Introduction (v. 11)

¹¹ Καὶ ἐγένετο
 ἐν τῷ ἐξῆς ἐπορεύθη εἰς πόλιν
 καλουμένην Ναῖν
 καὶ συνεπορεύοντο αὐτῷ
 οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ
 καὶ ὄχλος πολὺς.

Encounter of the two processions (v. 12)

¹² ὡς δὲ ἤγγισεν τῇ πύλῃ τῆς πόλεως,
 καὶ ἰδὸν ἐξεκομίζετο τεθνηκῶς
 μονογενῆς υἱὸς τῆ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ
 καὶ αὐτὴ ἦν χήρα,
 καὶ ὄχλος τῆς πόλεως ἰκανὸς
 ἦν σὺν αὐτῇ.

Gaze of compassion, touch of solidarity, and word of salvation (vv. 13-14)

¹³ καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτὴν ὁ κύριος ἐσπλαγχνίσθη ἐπ' αὐτῇ
 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ· μὴ κλαῖε.
¹⁴ καὶ προσελθὼν ἤψατο τῆς σοροῦ,
 οἱ δὲ βαστάζοντες ἔστησαν,
 καὶ εἶπεν· νεανίσκε,
 σοὶ λέγω, ἐγέρθητι.

Gift of life (v. 15)

¹⁵ καὶ ἀνεκάθισεν ὁ νεκρὸς
καὶ ἤρξατο λαλεῖν,
καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτὸν τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ.

Conclusion (vv. 16-17)

¹⁶ ἔλαβεν δὲ φόβος πάντας
καὶ ἐδόξαζον τὸν θεὸν
λέγοντες ὅτι προφήτης μέγας
ἠγέρθη ἐν ἡμῖν
καὶ ὅτι ἐπεσκέψατο ὁ θεὸς
τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ.

¹⁷ αὐτὸς ἐξῆλθεν ὁ λόγος οὗτος
ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ περὶ αὐτοῦ
καὶ πάσῃ τῇ περιχώρῳ.

3. Semantic Configuration

3.1. Introduction (v. 11)

After the healing of the centurion's servant (Luke 7:1–10), Jesus set out for a town called Nain. This is the only place in Scripture where the town is mentioned. It is located south of Mount Tabor, on the northern slopes of Jebel Dahī, along the road that ascends from the Sea of Galilee toward the Jezreel Plain (Bovon 2005, 422). Scholars identify it with the modern Arab village of Neīn, situated between Mount Gilboa and Mount Tabor (Crimella 2015, 145).

Jesus, who in the preceding chapters had proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, promised beatitude to the poor, the hungry, and the sorrowful, and commanded love, mercy, and benevolence, continues his journey toward Jerusalem. In Luke's theological vision, this is the journey of the fulfillment of God's salvific plan. Yet on this path – which is both the personal path of the Messiah (cf. Luke 9:51; 13:22) and the path of his people, whom, in obedience to the Father's will, he has come to lead into the fullness of life (Bovon 2005, 425) – Jesus does not travel alone. A great multitude, which from the very beginning of his public ministry had gathered around him, listening to his teaching and witnessing his healing works, accompanies him together with his disciples.

3.2. *Encounter of the Two Processions (v. 12)*

Approaching the city gate, the procession led by the teacher and giver of life meets a funeral procession that, at that very moment, is coming out of the city. The encounter of the two processions occurs in a perilous zone between two realms of human existence: the town and the rural area (Bovon 2005, 423), is enveloped in the darkness of death and feelings of distress. Luke depicts this tragic situation in brief yet profoundly meaningful words. A large crowd from the town accompanies the deceased, the only son of his widowed mother. The author does not provide any explanation for the young man's death, yet through his careful choice of words he allows the reader to perceive the new and desperate life situation of his mother.

Although he does not describe her emotions, reactions, or behavior in the face of the loss of her only son, the expression μονογενῆς υἱὸς τῆ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὴ ἦν χήρα – »the only son of his mother, and she was a widow« (v. 12) points to the grave and hopeless condition in which she has found herself. He is the only son of a woman who is herself a widow. The life of a widow at that time was extremely difficult, for with her husband's death she lost both legal protection and economic security.¹¹ Regarded as the property of her husband, she inherited nothing from him and could dispose only of what she had brought into the marriage. After her husband's death, the eldest son assumed responsibility for the household (Rebić 1992, 91). Yet to this poor widowed mother her only son, her sole wealth and her only security in old age, had died. Without husband or son,¹² without love or protection, sorrowful and alone, deprived of rights and identity, of livelihood and consolation, she who once brought new life into the world now bids it farewell in a painful and dramatic way. Together with her son, this widowed mother is about to bury all her hopes and certainties, her joys and dreams. The large crowd from the town that accompanied her shared in her sorrow, yet could not offer her the help she needed.

3.3. *Gaze of Compassion, Touch of Solidarity, and Word of Salvation (vv. 13-14)*

Into the widow of Nain's hopeless and despairing »today«, wrapped in the darkness of pain and death, God himself comes to visit her. In his only-begot-

¹¹ Cf. Exod 22:21, 24; Deut 10:18; 24:17-22; 26:12-13; 27:19; Jer 22:3.

¹² Stöger 2019, 200 recalls that in those times, premature death was often seen as punishment for sin. According to contemporary custom, the mother most likely walked in front of the funeral bier (Morris 1983, 140).

ten Son, God reveals his compassionate gaze, his merciful love, and the saving power of his word. In the encounter between the two processions, Jesus' gaze rests upon the widowed mother who was leading the procession of death.¹³ The pain that pierced her maternal heart like the edge of a sword reaches into Jesus' own heart. This is the gaze of the Lord¹⁴ who is not and cannot remain indifferent to human pain and suffering, especially to the suffering of the smallest and weakest, the unprotected and vulnerable, to whom his paternal heart is particularly attached. Luke confers on Jesus the title *ὁ κύριος* – »the Lord« only in especially solemn contexts, giving it the full meaning it bears in the Old Testament.¹⁵ Luke presents the Lord in a very concrete way. In Jesus' walking, approaching, seeing, feeling compassion, touching and speaking, the reader discovers a Lord who has feet, eyes, a heart, hands, and a mouth. He is not like the idols that do not speak, do not see, do not hear, do not smell, do not feel, do not walk (cf. Ps 115:5-7). God, incarnate in his son Jesus Christ, has feet that move toward humankind, eyes that see them, a heart that loves them, hands that touch them, and a mouth that proclaims to them the word of life.

»If he draws near with his feet, through his eyes we enter into his heart. To see, indeed, is to allow the other to enter into us. For the eye is the organ of the heart, and its most profound activity is to move one to compassion toward another; it impels the one who sees to go forth to the other and to suffer their pain together with them. Seeing describes the whole activity of Jesus, who came to reveal the face of the Father so that humankind might be converted (cf. Luke 23:47). It is the principle of every action that flows from the heart. For to see is to love, and the eye moves only where the heart is stirred. In this sense, seeing is a characteristic of God who creates, saves, and loves the human being (cf. Gen 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31; Exod 2:25; 3:7; Ps 139)« (Fausti 102006, 210).

From Jesus' gaze arises compassion that Luke expresses with the verb *σπλαγχνίζομαι* – »to have compassion«, »to be merciful«, »to be moved with pity«. The verb is related to the noun *σπλάγχνα* – »bowels«, which in Hellenistic times acquired a figurative meaning, since the bowels were considered the seat of intense emotions (Bovon 2005, 424, note 6). The verb *σπλαγχνίζομαι*

¹³ According to contemporary custom, the mother most likely walked in front of the funeral bier (Morris 1983, 140).

¹⁴ The term *ὁ κύριος*, used here by Luke for the first time, according to some authors has to be interpreted in light of Jesus' resurrection, as referring to the Lord of life who encounters the power of death. Others hold that it should be read in relation to Luke 7:19, as tied to Jesus' messianic identity – seen less as a royal Messiah and more as a Savior Messiah.

¹⁵ Cf. Luke 10:40; 12:42; 13:15; 16:8.

appears in the New Testament only in the synoptic gospels: five times in Matthew's, four in Mark's, and three times in Luke's gospel. In the Septuagint it appears only twice: in 2 Maccabees 6:8 in a literal sense, referring to a pagan ritual meal, and in Proverbs 17:5 in a figurative sense, expressing the inner emotion accompanying compassion – perhaps anticipating its later New Testament usage (Walter 2004, 1390). Timothy Johnson holds that here Jesus demonstrates the very kind of compassion he commands of his disciples in Luke 6:36: »Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful« (Johnson 2004, 107). Although Luke generally avoids attributing excessive human emotion to Jesus, in his encounter with the widow of Nain he portrays Jesus the Messiah in a profoundly emotional way. Moved with tenderness, pity, and compassion, Jesus takes the initiative and addresses the mother with the words: μή κλαῖε – »Do not weep« (v. 13). In this compassionate gaze and in his gentle words of consolation, Luke reveals one of the fundamental traits of the Jesus the Messiah – traits that did not align with Jewish messianic expectations. Namely, in the Old Testament, it is God himself who personally shows mercy to the oppressed and the poor, to the marginalized, and those deprived of rights, to those who in the world's eyes are insignificant and worthless. We may thus conclude that the author attributes to the verb σπλαγγνίζομαι, which he has preserved only here, a meaning that goes beyond Jesus' merely natural feeling. Rather, it mirrors the divine compassion toward his people spoken of by the prophets (cf. Jer 31:20; Isa 54:7–8) (Rossé 2001, 257).

The invitation addressed to the woman: »Do not weep«, at first glance seems inappropriate, considering that it is directed to a widowed mother who had more than sufficient and legitimate reasons to express her pain and despair through tears (Grasso 1999, 215).¹⁶ Moreover, even Jesus himself, upon learning of the death of his dear friend Lazarus, wept (cf. John 11:33–35), and in the garden of Gethsemane, in mortal agony, he sweat blood (cf. Luke 22:44). Therefore, these words of Jesus must be read not so much in their semantic as in their pragmatic meaning. In the pragmatic sense, this is a directive¹⁷ and commissive¹⁸ speech act by which Jesus calls upon the woman to stop weeping while simultaneously committing himself to a future action. In other words,

¹⁶ For Ambrose, the widow represents the Church mourning her sinful children, dead and lost because of sin (Petri and Taponocco 2006, 178).

¹⁷ Directives are speech acts in which the speaker seeks to induce the hearer to perform a certain future action (Obara 2016, 102).

¹⁸ Commissives are speech acts in which the speaker commits himself to a future action (Obara 2016, 102-103).

moved by compassion, Jesus not only consoles the woman but also prepares her for the powerful and salvific action of his word that will immediately follow.¹⁹ In this light, we may say that Jesus is already fulfilling the promise he made to his disciples and to the great multitude after descending from the mountain in Luke 6:21b: »Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh«, a saying reported, interestingly, only by the evangelist Luke.²⁰ Without denying or diminishing the tragic consequences of death, Jesus awakens in the woman a hope in the victory of life. Indeed, he will soon reveal to her that the final word does not belong to death, but to life.

Jesus expresses and offers his compassion not only in words of comfort, but also through a concrete act of solidarity and closeness, of mercy and goodness, of love and life. This is seen above all in his approach and his touching of the bier. »Consolation has its source only in God who can awaken the dead. Jesus reveals this plan and his divine will not by a new word, but by a gesture – the touch of the bier« (Bovon 2005, 425). Although the Greek term σορός evokes a closed coffin, most authors maintain that it refers to an open stretcher, on which, according to Jewish custom, the body of the deceased was carried wrapped in burial cloths. Jesus approaches the bier on which the body of the young man was lying and touches it, disregarding the purity laws (cf. Num 19:11,16). This act of nonverbal communication by Jesus has undergone a shift in meaning throughout tradition. Rationalized and set against any magical interpretation, Jesus' touch came to be explained merely as a gesture intended to stop the funeral procession. Yet François Bovon points out that, in its original context, the touch – as in other Lucan miracle accounts (cf. Luke 5:17; 6:19; 8:46; Acts 5:15; 19:11-12) – indicated the transmission of divine power (Bovon 2005, 425).²¹

Thus, observing Jesus' touch in its pragmatic dimension, we may see in it his solidarity with suffering humanity, extending even to death itself, as he will fully reveal when crucified.²² It is worth recalling that Jesus meets the widow of Nain on his journey toward Jerusalem, the journey of fulfilling the

¹⁹ Schmid 1965, 188 argues that, as in Luke 8:52, Jesus' words μή κλαίετε are not merely meant to console the widow but to prepare her for the forthcoming miracle.

²⁰ In Matthew's parallel Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares blessed those who mourn: »Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted« (Matt 5:4).

²¹ Müller 1996, 79 sees in Jesus' act of touching the bier an expression of the personal and bodily totality of his encounter.

²² Grasso 1999, 216 claims that in a society where touching a corpse rendered one impure, Jesus with his gesture desires to challenge the taboo of death and breaks the barrier separating the living from the dead.

Father's salvific plan of love in his passion and death on the cross. »His gaze is an approach, his pity a movement toward compassion, all the way to touching and being himself touched by our death. That death will be his own! When he touched the wood of the coffin, the feet of those carrying it stopped. When he, sharing in our suffering, will touch the wood of the cross, death itself will be defeated« (Fausti ¹⁰2006, 208). To the question of what is stronger than the word of God, and why Jesus did not perform the miracle merely by speaking, but also by touching the coffin, Cyril of Alexandria responds: »Therefore, beloved, that you may understand that the holy body of Jesus bestows salvation. The flesh of the almighty Word is the flesh of life and it is clothed with his power« (Petri and Taponecco 2006, 179).

Jesus' solidarity and compassion with the suffering human being will be fully revealed in the gift of life. After addressing the mother with words of consolation, Jesus speaks directly to her son. Unlike Elijah, Jesus does not invoke God or lay his body upon the body of the deceased,²³ instead, he acts solely through the salvific power of his imperative, authoritative, and performative word: νεάνισκε, σοὶ λέγω, ἐγέρθητι – »Young man, I tell you, arise« (v. 14).²⁴ This is a directive and declarative²⁵ speech act by which Jesus restores the young man to life. Two particular aspects of this act deserve attention. The first concerns the multiple meanings of the verb ἐγείρω. Its primary sense is »to awaken« (intransitive »to wake up«), »to rise« (intransitive »to get up«). Yet in the New Testament, out of its total of 144 occurrences, it is used thirteen times with the specific meaning »to rise/resurrect from the dead«, twenty times to denote »resurrection/resurrection at the end of time«, and as many as fifty-two times to refer to »Christ's resurrection« (Kremer 2004, 987).²⁶ Recognizing in this verb the echo of Jesus' call to resurrection and respecting its polysemy, François Bovon paraphrases Jesus' words as: »wake up from sleep«, »awake from the dead« (Bovon 2005, 425).

The second aspect concerns the aorist passive imperative ἐγέρθητι, by which the author places emphasis not so much on the young man's passivity in favor of, for example, God's action, as on the realization and manifestation of this awakening by the subject himself (Caird 1968–1969, 268). Luke presents

²³ For a detailed analysis of similarities and differences between Luke 7:1-11 and 1 Kgs 17:17-24, see: De Santis 2012, 57-60.

²⁴ Jesus' command is identical to that by which, in Mark 5:41, he raised Jairus' daughter: τὸ κοράσιον, σοὶ λέγω, ἐγείρε – »Little girl, I say to you, arise«!

²⁵ Declaratives are speech acts that change the status of a person or event (Obara 2016, 103-104).

²⁶ Bovon 2005, 425 maintains that here the logic of the narrative imposes the image of awakening.

the raising of the young man as one of the messianic deeds confirming the mission of Jesus the Messiah (Crimella 2015, 147). In Jesus' word, therefore, the salvific and life-giving, creative and redemptive power of God's word is revealed.

3.4. *Gift of Life (v. 15)*

The fulfillment of Jesus' command is described by the evangelist in his own characteristic manner, with simple and carefully chosen words, focusing less on the miracle itself than on its effect and meaning, especially in relation to the young man's mother: *καὶ ἀνεκάθισεν ὁ νεκρὸς καὶ ἤρξατο λαλεῖν, καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτὸν τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ* – »the dead man sat up and began to speak, and he gave him to his mother« (v. 15). In this description, it is interesting to note the use of the noun ὁ νεκρός – »the dead man«²⁷ and the verb ἀνακαθίζω – »to rise«, »to sit up«,²⁸ by which the author confirms the salvific power of Jesus' life-giving word. The reader cannot fail to notice the sharp contrast with v. 12: the dead man who had been carried out of the city on a bier now sits and speaks on that very same bier. The young man's words, which remain unknown to the reader, are an unmistakable sign of his return to life (Schmid 1965, 188) and of the restoration of human relationships in which word has great importance (Grasso 1999, 216). The life that had been prematurely extinguished is now restored to the young man, and also to his mother.

In this regard, the expression »and he gave him to his mother« is of great significance, as Luke once again highlights Jesus' particular attention, affection, and concern for the widowed mother. The precise meaning of Jesus' gesture remains unknown. The text does not specify whether he merely took the young man by the hand or lifted him into his arms. Yet this is a detail a serious reader should not overlook, for the very same expression is used in 1 Kings 17:23 to describe Elijah's raising of the widow's son in Zarephath of Sidon (Broccardo 2012, 71). In presenting the son to his widowed mother, Luke once again underscores, as in verse 13, Jesus' solidarity with the suffering human being. Thanks to Jesus' compassionate gaze, merciful touch and saving

²⁷ In v. 14, the author uses the noun νεανίσκος – »young man«.

²⁸ In that verb, the attentive reader perceives the value of the prefix ἀνα – »up«, »again« (Bovon 2005, 426). The verb appears in the New Testament only here and in Acts 9:10, and in an identical context. In medical language, it was used for a patient who sat up in bed (Rossé 2001, 257, note 55).

word, the funeral procession becomes a procession of life, bearing witness to God's visitation of his people.

3.5. Conclusion (vv. 16-17)

Luke concludes the account with the reactions that Jesus' saving action aroused among those present: ἔλαβεν δὲ φόβος πάντας καὶ ἐδόξαζον τὸν θεὸν λέγοντες ὅτι προφήτης μέγας ἠγέρθη ἐν ἡμῖν καὶ ὅτι ἐπεσκέψατο ὁ θεὸς τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ – »Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, exclaiming: 'A great prophet has arisen in our midst', 'God has visited his people'« (v. 16). The first reaction is fear. By stating that fear seized everyone, the author once again emphasizes the greatness of Jesus' deed. It should be noted, however, that this is not the usual human psychological reaction to an unexpected or extraordinary event. With the noun φόβος – »fear« – Luke describes a characteristic human response to a heavenly intervention or to the revelation of God's power manifested in Jesus' works (Balz 2004, 1816),²⁹ and as such, it is closely connected with faith.

Indeed, the multitude transforms the fear before the incomprehensible miracle of raising the dead into praise of God, professing their faith: »'A great prophet has arisen in our midst', 'God has visited his people'« (v. 16). In Jesus, who by his word raised the son of the widow from Nain, the crowd recognizes a great prophet. From the text, it is not entirely clear whether the expression »great prophet« refers to the prophet Elijah or to the eschatological prophet, whose coming was expected at the end of time. The phrase προφήτης μέγας, which Luke uses after a miracle that recalls 1 Kings 17:7-24, certainly evokes a connection with the prophet Elijah. However, the absence of the definite article suggests that the crowd does not explicitly identify him as Elijah *redivivus*.³⁰ »The adjective μέγας – 'great' and the verb ἐγείρω – 'to arise', point to the exceptional status of this prophet, to the extraordinariness of his appearance and perhaps already foreshadow his resurrection. The author places on the lips of the people a confession of faith which, though still imperfect in its expression, is sufficient to recognize in Jesus the prophet be-

²⁹ Cf. Luke 1:65; 5:26; 8:25, 37; Acts 2:43; 5:5, 11; 19:17.

³⁰ Contrary to Bovon's view, Rossé ³2001, 257, note 58 holds that the absence of the definite article before the noun προφήτης excludes the interpretation of the eschatological prophet and that the aorist passive indicative ἠγέρθη points to the return of a prophet from the past. Schweizer 2000, 132 holds that in this verb Luke maybe perceives an unconscious foreshadowing of Easter.

lieved to be the eschatological prophet (Deut 18:15) and the Elijah who is to come (Mal 3:23-24) (Bovon 2005, 427). Luke has implicitly portrayed Jesus as a prophet already at the beginning of his public ministry. In his programmatic discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus said to those gathered: »Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place« (Luke 4:24). And the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, when asked by the Risen One what had taken place in Jerusalem, will answer: »The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people« (Luke 24:19).

In Jesus, the crowd recognizes not only a prophet but also God's salvific visitation. The exclamation »'God has visited his people'«, recalls Zechariah's canticle. Of the eleven times the verb ἐπισκέπτομαι – »to visit« occurs in the New Testament, it appears three times in Luke's Gospel: here, and twice in Zechariah's canticle, referring to the fulfillment of God's saving plan (Luke 1:68) and to the expectation of its future realization (Luke 1:78). The promise God gave to the fathers through the prophets and which Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, prophetically announced under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 1:68-79) is fulfilled in his son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus' coming and his deeds, the crowd recognizes God's saving and compassionate visitation to his people. Just as in the Old Testament God delivered his people from Egyptian and Babylonian captivity³¹ through miraculous deeds, so now, through his son, he delivers them from the bondage of death. God's visitation thus signifies his saving intervention on behalf of his people, who now witness the return of one of their sons from the slavery of death to life.

The third reaction of the crowd is proclamation: καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ὁ λόγος οὗτος ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ πάσῃ τῇ περιχώρῳ – »This report about him spread through the whole of Judea and in all the surrounding region« (v. 17). This word about him (ὁ λόγος οὗτος), i.e. the account of the miraculous raising of the widow's son at Nain, spread throughout all of Palestine and beyond.³²

³¹ In the Old Testament, the verb ἐπισκέπτομαι denotes God's visitation (Exod 32:34; Ps 17:3; Isa 10:12; Jer 9:24; Zech 10:3) for the liberation of his people from Egypt (Gen 50:24; Exod 3:16; 4:31; 13:19) and their return from Babylonian exile (Jer 29:8; Ezek 34:11-12; Ps 80:14; Zech 10:3) (Grasso 1999, 216, note 20).

³² Luke often uses the term Ἰουδαία to refer to the whole territory of Palestine (cf. Luke 1:5; 6:17; 23:5; Acts 10:37), including Galilee, while the expression καὶ πάσῃ τῇ περιχώρῳ may refer to the surrounding regions.

4. Pragmatic Implications

In the final part of this study, we will define the pragmatic function of Luke 7:11-17 by analyzing the effects and actions that the text evokes in readers of today.³³ In seeking answers to the questions: »How does the reader or listener of Luke 7:11-17 respond and act?« and »For what reason and with what intention was it written?«, we begin from a simple and well-known pragmatic assumption: with words we not only describe but also act.

4.1. *The Communicative Context and Strategy of Luke 7:11-17*

In determining the pragmatic function of the text, it is necessary, on the one hand, to establish the communicative context that the text presupposes and in which it originated, and, on the other, to identify the communication strategy that the author employed in order to persuade his readers to adopt, change and/or strengthen a particular way of life and action.

At the time the Gospel of Luke was written, the Christian community, composed largely of Gentile converts, was confronted with a hostile environment, intensified by internal and external conflicts. Within the community, debates arose with Jewish Christians who imposed overly strict conditions on the admission of new members. These internal disputes are reflected in Jesus' controversies with the Pharisees (cf. Luke 5:17–6:11), in his teaching on the true children of Abraham (cf. Luke 13:10-17; 19:1-10), in the broadening of the Old Testament concept of the »poor of God« who now become participants in God's salvific plan (cf. Luke 1:51-53; 4:18-19, 25, 28; 14:21; 16:23), and in the role of women within the community of the saved (cf. Luke 7:36–50). External disturbances came from Jewish synagogue leaders (cf. Luke 21:11-19) and are manifested especially in the difficulties faced by Peter, John, Barnabas, and Paul as described in the Acts of the Apostles (Harrington et al. 1997, 260–261).

The central question within the community's internal discussions concerned God's faithfulness to his promises. If God had not remained faithful to the promises given to his chosen people – since he had allowed the destruction of the holy city and the Temple – why should Gentile Christians believe that he would be faithful to the promises made to them? In the external debates, the question focused on the interpretation of Scripture and the manner in which God's promises were fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Harrington et al. 1997, 260–261).

³³ The fundamental question of pragmatics (from Greek *pragma* – »action«, »deed«) is: »What do we do when we speak (or listen)?« (Andorno 2012, 7).

Amid these internal and external tensions, Luke calls the Christian community to form a correct understanding of Jesus Christ, but also of themselves (Brown 2008, 265). In shaping this personal Christian identity in the light of a proper image of God and of themselves, the account of God's visitation to the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17) plays a role of great importance.

4.1.1. God – Faithful to His Promises

The first words of the adult Jesus in Luke's Gospel refer to God's faithfulness to his promises (cf. Luke 4:21), which is the first and fundamental feature of God's face revealed in Luke 7:11-17. In Jesus, whom Luke here calls ὁ κύριος – »the Lord« (v. 13), God has fully revealed his face: a merciful and gentle, compassionate and tender face of God who creates, saves, and loves humanity, for his heart is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (cf. Exod 34:6). The righteous and devout Simeon, to whom the Holy Spirit had revealed that he would not see death before seeing the Lord's Messiah (Χριστός κύριος),³⁴ recognizes in his personal encounter with him the moment of fulfillment of God's promises: »the consolation of Israel« (cf. Luke 2:25) and »the salvation of all peoples« (cf. Luke 2:31). The promises made by God to Israel are thus fulfilled in Jesus, but in an unexpected way. Alongside Israel, God's chosen people, the recipients of the fulfillment of his promises also include Gentiles, the unclean, the poor, women, Samaritans, and tax collectors (Harrington et al. 1997, 260).

In Luke's Gospel, widows – whom Luke pays particular attention to – also find consolation and salvation in their encounter with Jesus Christ. Thus, the widow Anna, meeting the newborn Savior – Christ, the Lord, prophesies about the child's future, recognizing in him the fulfillment of God's promises: the redemption of Jerusalem, that is, the messianic deliverance of the chosen people (Luke 2:36-38). In justifying his mission, Jesus recalls the example of the prophet Elijah, who was sent to the widow in Zarephath of Sidon (Luke 4:25-26). In the parable of the widow and the judge, she becomes a model of perseverance in prayer (Luke 18:1-8), and in his judgment of the scribes, the widow is an example of selfless giving (Luke 21:1-4). The widow of Nain, who according to Old Testament tradition belonged to the group of the poor, becomes, through her encounter with Jesus, a participant in the fulfillment of

³⁴ τὸν χριστὸν κυρίου is a typical Old Testament expression pointing to the divine choice of the Messiah, the anointed one whom the Lord has anointed (cf. Exod 30:22), i.e. consecrated for a salvific mission (cf. 1 Sam 24:7, 11; 26:9; 2 Sam 1:16).

the promise of salvation given by the Father.³⁵ This salvation is not the result of personal merit but a pure gift of divine mercy and love. The God who is faithful to his promises, who stands at the center of salvation history and who, in the Old Testament, saves his people, takes upon himself in Jesus Christ the care for every human being.

4.1.2. Jesus – the Eschatological prophet Faithful to God

The fulfillment of God's promises began through the ministry of Jesus as the eschatological prophet (Monasterio et al. 1995, 276). In light of the Old Testament prophetic resurrections from the dead (cf. 1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:18-34), the raising of the widow's son at Nain represents the coming of the prophet of the last times. This episode reveals another crucial aspect of the manifestation of God's face in his son Jesus: faithfulness to God. It is noteworthy that Luke begins and ends his work with this very theme. God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus' birth and resurrection. The God who did not allow his Holy One to see decay (Acts 2:27) will also remain faithful to the promises made to Jesus' followers, who journey from all parts of the world to take their place at the heavenly banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Harrington et al. 1997, 262).

In fact, the entire earthly life of Jesus can be described as prophetic. Consecrated by the Holy Spirit, he listens to God's word and is sent by him (Luke 3:21; 4:18; Acts 18:15,19). He is the promised eschatological prophet (Acts 3:22), consecrated as a prophet at his baptism and throughout his mission he proclaimed the word of God, deepening his own messianic identity until he himself became the »prophetic word« in the resurrection (Acts 3:22,26), which Luke presents as the fulfillment of the promise of the eschatological prophet foretold by Moses. His prophetic activity is manifested in proclaiming the word through deeds and words, and its content is the fatherhood of God, who gives rise to his own kingdom (Luke 10:22; 8:1; 16:16) through Jesus' work (Luke 24:24; Acts 1:3). This means that forgiveness, reconciliation and filial and fraternal life are already possible (Luke 4:18; 7:38–50), a life in which the law is love and mercy (Luke 6:27–49). This word is addressed to all, but especially to the poor (Acts 3:22; 7:37) (Monasterio et al. 1995, 278–279). In this light, we can confidently say that the widow of Nain belongs to the group of privileged recipients of the fulfillment of God's promises.

³⁵ Cf. Luke 4:21 with Isa 58:6; 61:1-2; Luke 7:18-23 with Isa 26:19; 29:18; 35:5; 61:1 (Monasterio et al. 1995, 283).

4.1.3. God's Poor – the Privileged Recipients of God's Visitation

In the coming of the eschatological prophet, God has visited his people, not to condemn them, but to save them.³⁶ The focus of Luke 7:11-17 is not on the resurrection of the son but on the merciful visitation of God toward the widow mother who had lost everything she had. The communication strategy of the account is entirely centered on the widow who faced the death of her only son and consequently, poverty. She belonged to the group of the God's poor, whose lack of basic necessities made a dignified human life impossible. Yet it is precisely the poor, the beggars, the oppressed, the hungry, the lame, the paralyzed, the widows, and the barren women³⁷ who become the privileged recipients of God's saving visitation (Monasterio et al. 1995, 288).

Luke presents a continuity between God's action in the Old Testament and his action in Jesus, the eschatological prophet, which is revealed in his preferential option for the poor. The history of salvation is fulfilled above all through God's poor, those who, obedient to his law, await salvation from him and are able to recognize in their own »today« God's saving visitation and the fulfillment of his promises. Like Zechariah, Elizabeth, the shepherds, the aged Simeon, the prophetess Anna, and Mary, we can say that the widow of Nain, in her »today« filled with pain and darkness, death and uncertainty, becomes a privileged recipient of God's saving visitation. It is a visitation of the God of love and life, compassion and goodness, whose heart does not remain indifferent before the suffering and pain of the most vulnerable and the weakest. On the contrary, filled with the deepest and most sincere compassion, he frees the human being from everything that enslaves them – be it from outside or from within – and leads them into the fullness of life for which, according to his salvific plan of love, they were created.

4.2. *Luke 7:11-17 and the Model Reader*

The communication context, marked by external and internal discussions about the fulfillment of God's promises in Jesus the Messiah, and the communication strategy of the narrative, centered on God's visitation of the widow

³⁶ In this light, it is significant that in his programmatic discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19), quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6, Jesus omits the announcement of vengeance from 61:2, presenting Jesus' mission solely as one of salvation.

³⁷ Cf. Luke 1:48, 52, 53; 6:21; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:3.

mother, reflect a complex and deeply engaging model reader³⁸ with whom real readers are invited to identify, embodying in their own lives the salvific truth the text reveals.

The first characteristic of the model reader is faith in Jesus, the eschatological prophet, who in his words and deeds fulfills God's salvific plan of love. In a personal encounter with him in the saving power of his word, which frees one from the slavery of death and pain, fear and insecurity, despair and loneliness, the reader is called to bear witness to his faith in Christ the Savior through an authentic life and the joyful proclamation of God, the Lord of life and death.

The second characteristic of the model reader that emerges from Luke 7:11-17 is the ability to recognize, like the widow of Nain, God's saving visitation in one's own »today«, and to discover in life's events – especially in those where his presence seems absent and where suffering and death appear to have the final word – the revelation of the face of God of love and life, mercy and goodness, compassion and gentleness. He is the God whose fatherly gaze notices the person in need, whose motherly heart sympathizes with human suffering, whose brotherly hand is extended in solidarity, whose word stops tears, removes pain, and gives life. The reader's »today« is also the place of God's merciful visitation, of the fulfillment of his promises, and of salvation. Yet it is also the place where the reader is called to assume personal responsibility: like the widow and the crowd, to recognize his coming and open oneself to the gift of faith and salvation, or, like Jesus' townspeople in the synagogue of Nazareth (cf. Luke 4:28), to close oneself in rejection and unbelief.

In Luke's Christian community, which was relatively well-off and where existing tensions often revolved around wealth and its management (Grilli 2012, 53), God's visitation to the widow of Nain, who, due to her difficult social and economic situation, belonged to the group of God's poor (*ʾānāwīm Yhwh*), acquires significant meaning also for readers today. Following the example of Jesus, who, faithful to God's promises, turns his gaze toward the widow, the mother of an only son, comforts her and restores her child to life, readers too are called, in the awareness that salvation passes through the paths of the lowly and marginalized, those who in the eyes of the world are losers and

³⁸ The model reader, unlike the real reader who reads the text at a particular moment and in a specific situation, is the one inscribed in the text, the reader presupposed and created by the text itself. This is the ideal reader in whom the intention of the text is fulfilled, and with whom the real reader is invited to interact in order to embody the truth of the text (Fužinato and Grilli 2019, 38-39).

worthless, to go out and meet their smallest brothers and sisters. By recognizing the face of their Creator on their faces, and through concrete acts of love and mercy, compassion and responsibility, in fidelity to God and humanity, they are called to live and bear witness to God's merciful visitation and the fulfillment of his salvific promises.

Conclusion

In depicting God's coming into the widow's »today«, the evangelist Luke, with a pen of remarkable narrative beauty, has outlined the face of God as love and life, mercy and goodness, a God who, in the life and mission of his son Jesus Christ, the eschatological prophet, has fulfilled his promises. On his path toward the fulfillment of the Father's salvific plan of love in his passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus – meeting the funeral procession led by the widow mother – is moved by her pain and tears. His heart, like that of the Father, especially sensitive to the small and the insignificant, the powerless and the unprotected, does not remain indifferent to human suffering. By the power of his saving word, he restores the widow's son to life, revealing that the final word does not belong to death but to life.

God, faithful to his promises, continues even today to visit his people, offering them the gift of salvation. God's merciful visitation and the fulfillment of his salvific promises call believers of today to go out and meet their fellow human beings – especially the marginalized and abandoned, the oppressed and devalued, the poor and the stranger – and, in responsibility and solidarity, to bear witness to their faith in Christ the savior, thus building a »Church which goes forth«, in which every person may reach the goal of their seeking and find the fulfillment of their longing for the fullness of life.

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