

LUKE 4:31-44: RELEASE FOR THE CAPTIVES

GEORGE E. RICE
Andrews University

In an earlier study,¹ I presented the programmatic nature of the passage (Isa 61:1,2; 58:6) which Jesus read in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-19). At that time I suggested that Luke uses the pericopes that immediately follow (4:31-6:11) thematically so as to interpret the passage from Isaiah. Luke understands the OT passage to be a proclamation of release that will be achieved through the ministry of Jesus. Thus we have release from (1) Satan's power (4: 31-44), (2) the power of sin (5:1-32), and (3) cultic traditions (5:33-6:11).

In the earlier study I dealt with the motif of release from sin, concentrating mainly on the chronological rearrangement and the differing account of the call of the first disciples. In the present study, I will deal with the first of the three blocks of interpretive material—release from Satan's power (4:31-44).

1. *The Isaiah Scroll and Luke 4:31-44*

Although the majority of commentators see Luke's use of the Isaiah scroll as being programmatic, few tie the healing miracles that immediately follow in 4:31-44 to the program of ministry outlined in the Isaiah passage.

Of these few, some imply the relationship only. John Drury, for instance, states that Luke's overall plan is to show "the manifesto" in the Isaianic passage as "working itself out in word and action."² E. J. Tinsley makes a similar comment, i.e., the sovereignty of God is active in his kingdom and disclosed in "the content and manner of the actions and words of Jesus."³ G. B.

¹George E. Rice, "Luke's Thematic Use of the Call to Discipleship," *AUSS*, 19 (1981): 51-58.

²John Drury, *Luke* (New York, 1973), pp. 58-59.

³E. J. Tinsley, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Cambridge, Eng., 1965), p. 57.

Caird points to the exorcisms of Jesus in 4:31-41 as the "preliminary skirmishes in the campaign to be waged by him on behalf of the kingdom of God against the kingdom of Satan,"⁴ while Leon Morris holds that the exorcisms in this section of Luke are evidence of "God's rule in action," and that "God's kingdom had really come."⁵

Other writers are more specific about the exorcisms and healings that follow the programmatic statement of Isaiah. Frederick Danker observes several times in the course of his commentary on 4:31-44 that the exorcisms of Jesus were an act of freeing the captives of Satan and thus were in line with the program announced at Nazareth.⁶ Helen Kenik remarks that Jesus' authority over demons and diseases (4:31-44) is intended by Luke to "be read in line with the vision of conditions in the Kingdom which Jesus identified with his mission when he read from the scroll."⁷

Recognizing Luke 4:31-44 as the first of three blocks of material used to interpret the prophecy of Isaiah, I wish to comment on four aspects of this passage: (1) Luke's use of the exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum (4:31-44), (2) the manner in which Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law (4:38,39), (3) the proclamation of the demons who were exorcised (4:40,41), and (4) the necessity for Jesus to preach "the good news concerning the kingdom of God" (4:42-44).

2. *The Demoniac at Capernaum*

It is generally noted by commentators that at 4:31 Luke picks up "the Marcan material." This viewpoint assumes Marcan priority and takes Lucan indebtedness to Mark for granted. It is not my purpose to argue sources, but rather to look at the material in Luke and to see how it is treated.

⁴G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Baltimore, Md., 1963), pp. 88-89.

⁵Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Westminster, Md., 1958), p. 111.

⁶Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age According to St. Luke* (St. Louis, Mo., 1972), pp. 62-63.

⁷Helen Kenik, "Messianic Fulfillment in Luke," *The Bible Today*, 18 (1980): 236-241.

There is no question in my mind that the presence of the Isaiah scroll in Luke casts "the Marcan material," if you will, into a Lucan mold (here Luke 4:31-44). Subsequent changes made by Luke in this material strengthen its identity with him. The exorcism at Capernaum, although containing minor alterations, closely parallels the account in Mark (1:21-28). However, the reading of the Isaiah scroll immediately preceding this pericope demands that we understand this exorcism in a Lucan milieu.

In Mark, the exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum follows closely his introductory statement concerning the Galilean ministry: "When John had been imprisoned, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is here [ἤγγικεν]; repent and believe in this good news'" (Mark 1:14,15). The burden of the exorcism at Capernaum is to validate Jesus' proclamation about the presence of the kingdom.

In Luke, the comment of Jesus about the Isaiah prophecy, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21), introduces the element of the present kingdom. However, although Luke is interested in this element, at this point in his narrative it is not his major concern. Rather, Luke desires to identify some of the characteristics of the kingdom for his readers so they can understand its nature, and the nature of the one who claims to be its king. At a later point Luke will deal with the kingdom's presence (e.g., 10:9,11; 11:20; 17:21).

Therefore, the exorcism at Capernaum in Luke must be understood in a different context than in Mark. In Luke the exorcism is a fulfillment of Isaiah's prediction that the Messiah would bring release to the captives of Satan. Rather than being a proclamation of the presence of the kingdom, as it is in Mark, it is a statement on what the kingdom and its king offer to those who are willing to become its citizens.

3. The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-law

Luke's account of the events that followed the exorcism in the synagogue is seen as adding to the motif of release from Satan's power. At 4:38,39, Jesus left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Here he found Simon's mother-in-law stricken by a high

fever. A comparison with the parallels shows the emphasis of Luke's interest—release from the captivity of Satan.

Whereas at Matthew 8:15 Jesus healed the woman by simply touching her hand, and at Mark 1:31 he seized her hand and raised her up, in Luke Jesus stood over her and addressed the fever as though it possessed intelligence, or was caused by an intelligent being (vs. 39). But William Hendriksen and Alfred Plummer are not willing to admit that the fever is a personal agent.⁸ William F. Arndt, I. Howard Marshall, and John M. Creed see the rebuke as an instance of personification.⁹

There are those who regard the verbal rebuke given by Jesus as indicating that the fever was "a demonic effect,"¹⁰ "a demon to be brought under control,"¹¹ "a living creature, the fever demon,"¹² "a form of demon-possession,"¹³ or a "healing . . . within the perspective of the exorcism recorded in vv. 31-37."¹⁴

If one does not wish to speak of this fever in terms of "a living creature, the fever demon," as Dillersberger does, it is permissible to speak of it as an instrument of Satan by which he torments human beings (cf. Luke speaking of the deformed woman at 13:10-17 as tormented by the binding of Satan). In freeing the sufferer, Jesus rebuked the source of the illness and wrenched the victim from his power. The intention of Luke seems to be clear: This miracle illustrates Jesus' power to free the captives from Satan's power.

⁸William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1978), p. 268; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh, 1913), p. 137.

⁹William F. Arndt, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (St. Louis, Mo., 1956), p. 148; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary of the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1978), p. 195; John Martin Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London, 1960), p. 71.

¹⁰Danker, p. 62.

¹¹Drury, p. 59.

¹²Joseph Dillersberger, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Westminster, Md., 1958), p. 190.

¹³Tinsley, p. 56.

¹⁴Frederick W. Danker, *Luke: Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia, 1976), p. 91.

4. *The Demons' Identification of the Messiah*

The pericope closes with the report of Jesus exorcising many demons and healing the sick. The exorcised demons identified Jesus, crying out, "You are the Son of God" (vs. 41). Some commentators see Jesus' rebuke which silenced the demons' announcement as a reflection of Mark's messianic secret.¹⁵ Others simply interpret the rebuke as evidence that Jesus did not want demonic powers proclaiming his mission.¹⁶

However, the fact remains that Luke *does* mention that the demons speak and identify Jesus *before* they are silenced. If Luke would have been interested in maintaining the messianic secret, he could simply have written something similar to Mark, "and he did not permit the demons to speak because they knew him" (Mark 1:34), or he could have omitted completely any suggestion that the demons attempted to identify Jesus, as does Matthew (8:16), thus leaving the demons silent.

The fact that Luke includes the detail about the demons proclaiming Jesus' divine sonship would indicate that the author is interested in this testimony. The demonic announcement at 4:41, coupled with the statement of the demon in the synagogue at Capernaum ("I know who you are, the Holy one of God," 4:34), identifies as divine the person and the power that fulfill the stipulations of the Isaiah scroll, i.e., release for the captives.

5. *Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*

The first block of interpretive material (5:31-44) concludes with a summary statement (vss. 42-44). When the people of Capernaum attempted to restrain him from leaving them, Jesus answered, "It is necessary for me to proclaim the good news concerning the kingdom of God in other cities also" (vs. 43). The statement is unique to Luke and must be read in conjunction with the motif of

¹⁵Wilfrid J. Harrington, *A Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York, 1967), p. 90; J. Alexander Findlay, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London, 1937), p. 65.

¹⁶Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, p. 63; Arndt, pp. 148-149; Marshall, p. 197; Caird, p. 89; Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary On the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1954), p. 177.

release. In the context of Luke's interpretation of the Isaiah scroll to this point, the "good news concerning the kingdom of God" is release from the captivity of Satan as demonstrated by healings, and especially by exorcisms.¹⁷

6. *Conclusion*

The programmatic nature of the Isaiah scroll for the ministry of Jesus was noted in an earlier study. There I noted that the relocation and differing account of the call of the first disciples introduces the second of three blocks of material in which Luke interprets the Isaiah scroll. That second block of material, which begins with the call of the first disciples and ends with the call of Levi (5:1-32), shows how Jesus brings release from the power of sin.

The present study deals with the first block of interpretive material (4:31-44) and shows how Jesus delivers from the captivity of Satan through healings, and especially exorcisms.

In the third block of interpretive material (5:33-6:11), Luke shows how Jesus liberates from cultic traditions. This topic will be presented in a future study.

¹⁷I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1970), p. 137; Danker, p. 63; Kenik, p. 239.