

LUKE 5:33-6:11: RELEASE FROM CULTIC TRADITION

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In two previous studies¹ I have shown the following: (1) The passage read from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19) is to be seen as a programmatic statement of Jesus' ministry, (2) the emphasis of the Isaianic passage is on release, and (3) the material that immediately follows (Luke 4:31-6:11) is designed to interpret the Isaianic theme of release (a) from the power of Satan (4:31-44), (b) from the power of sin (5:1-32), and (c) from cultic tradition (5:33-6:11).

Although a large number of commentators recognize the Isaianic passage as a programmatic statement, very few see a relationship between this passage and the following material in Luke. Of those who do see a relationship, Frederick Danker² and Helen Kenik³ are among those who make a direct connection. However, this link is with the first block of Lucan material only (4:31-44), i.e., release from the power of Satan. The chronological rearrangement of the call to discipleship in Luke and the differing account, along with the remainder of the material that makes up Luke's interpretation of the Isaianic passage, are not tied to the programmatic statement at 4:18-19.

Having in my earlier article already dealt with the first two interpretive blocks of material (release from Satan's power [4:31-44] and release from the power of sin [5:1-32]), I will now turn to the last block of material—release from cultic tradition (5:33-6:11).

¹George E. Rice, "Luke's Thematic Use of the Call to Discipleship," *AUSS* 19 (1981): 51-58; and "Luke 4:31-44: Release for the Captives," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 23-28.

²Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age According to St. Luke: A Commentary on the Third Gospel* (St. Louis, Mo., 1972), p. 63.

³Helen A. Kenik, "Messianic Fulfillment in Luke," *The Bible Today* 18 (1980): 239.

1. *Fasting*

Although the call of Levi to discipleship (5:27-32) concludes the block of material dealing with release from the power of sin ("I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" [vs. 32]), this pericope supplies an excellent bridge to the next group of pericopes, three of which deal with release from cultic tradition. By entering Levi's house and sitting at table with "publicans and sinners," Jesus is brushing aside social restrictions that were designed to maintain cultic purity. Levi's banquet leads the reader into the next motif that Luke wishes to develop.

The first of the three pericopes dealing with release from cultic tradition contains the issue of fasting and Jesus' illustrations of the new patch/old garment and new wine/old skins (5:33-39). At 5:33 it is pointed out to Jesus that his disciples do not fast frequently and pray as do the disciples of John and the Pharisees. Jesus' reply reflects an accepted social custom: the attendants of the bridegroom cannot be expected to fast while he is with them (vs. 34).⁴ However, Jesus adds that there will come a time when they will fast, i.e., when the bridegroom is removed from them (vs. 35). The central issue in this conversation is not whether one should or should not fast, but rather the motivation for fasting.

Devout Jews, like the Pharisees, fasted twice a week (Monday and Thursday) and had set times for prayer.⁵ One would assume from the statement in vs. 33 that the disciples of John followed a similar practice. The very tone of the statement suggests (1) that the practice of frequent fasting and prayers was a sign of one's piety, and may be considered as meritorious deeds; (2) that Jesus was again ignoring an accepted norm of Jewish piety and was rejecting cultic traditions of his people, much as he did by accepting Levi's hospitality, and (3) that Jesus was teaching his disciples by example

⁴G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Baltimore, Md., 1963), p. 97; F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, trans. E. W. Shalders, 5th ed. (Edinburgh, 1952), 1: 274-275; and William Manson, *The Gospel of Luke* (New York, 1930), p. 56.

⁵Burton Scott Easton, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh, 1926), p. 70; and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Gospel according to St. Luke*, 4th ed., ICC 29: 161.

to do the same, in that he was not requiring of them the acts of piety practiced by the disciples of John and the Pharisees.

Jesus' reply that his disciples cannot be expected to fast while he is with them, and that a time for fasting will come to them after his departure (vss. 34-35), strongly suggests that he is isolating the motives for fasting. While the disciples of John and the Pharisees are concerned with works of piety that are considered to have meritorious value, Jesus says that his disciples will fast after the bridegroom is removed from them. The bridegroom's departure and whatever that may entail for the disciples, not a desire to perform deeds that were thought to possess meritorious value, will motivate them to fast.

To say precisely what events will cause Jesus' followers to fast after his departure is speculation. Jesus did not elaborate. However, we may conclude the following: (1) Jesus' departure and events associated with his absence will motivate his disciples to fast, (2) fasting as an act of piety that contains meritorious value, which motivated the disciples of John and the Pharisees, is rejected by Jesus, as can be seen by the fact that Jesus is faulted for not encouraging his disciples to follow the accepted fasting practices, and (3) thus, by his example and teaching, Jesus frees those who follow him from the encumbrances of Jewish cultic tradition.

2. *New Patch—New Wine*

The two illustrations (new patch/old garment [vs. 36] and new wine/old wine skins [vss. 37-38]), which follow Jesus' explanation as to why his disciples do not fast, are generally seen as pointing out the impossibility of imposing the freedom brought by the gospel of Jesus upon the old structures of Judaism. This view is in line with the milieu set by the reading from the Isaiah scroll. The religious structure of Judaism could not support the call to freedom that is contained in the gospel of Jesus. To attempt to impose it upon Judaism would only result in irreparable damage to both.

The position of Alistair Kee⁶ and Paul Trudinger⁷ is not

⁶Alistair Kee, "The Old Coat and the New Wine," *NovT* 12 (1970): 13-21.

⁷Paul Trudinger, "The Word on the Generation Gap: Reflections on a Gospel Metaphor," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 5 (1975): 311-315.

applicable to Luke. Both have taken the position that the illustrations of the new patch/old garment and new wine/old skins do not teach the incompatibility of Christianity and Judaism. Rather, according to them, Jesus is teaching that the old is worth saving, and, indeed, can be saved, through careful, thoughtful action. Dealing with Jesus' two illustrations in the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark, both Kee and Trudinger transfer their conclusions to Luke. It is true that they recognize differences in Luke's account, but they do not take into consideration Luke's context. The motif of release is not recognized by them, and the present pericope (5:33-39) is not seen as an element in Luke's interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Messiah. However appropriately Kee and Trudinger's conclusions may fit the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark (the reader will have to make the assessment here), they do not fit the milieu of Luke. Luke adds these two illustrations to this pericope, and this pericope to others, to show how Jesus brings release from cultic traditions.

Jesus' unusual statement at vs. 39 is not out of place in this motif of release. It is here that Jesus says, "No one, drinking the old, wishes the new; because he says, 'The old is better.'" Having investigated Jesus' message of release, there will be those who will choose to cling to what they have. Perhaps pious deeds performed for merit are more reassuring to them than is Jesus' gospel of grace.

3. *Two Sabbath Pericopes*

William Hendriksen observes that there is "no close chronological" connection between the pericope we have just examined and the two sabbath pericopes that follow (Luke 6:1-11). However, he does venture to say that there may be a "logical connection." "According to the teaching of Jesus, those who are living in close fellowship with him, the Bridegroom, should be feasting instead of fasting; they must rejoice rather than mourn. And this manifestation of gladness instead of sadness characterizes even the manner in which the sabbath is kept. This is probably the connection and accounts for the order in which these events are here related."⁸

⁸William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1978), pp. 317-318.

The pericope of Jesus and his disciples passing through the grain field on the sabbath (6:1-5) and that of Jesus healing the withered hand of a man on the sabbath (6:6-11) are indeed tied to the issue of fasting, as well as to the illustrations of the new patch/old garment and new wine/old wine skins. The sabbath pericopes of 6:1-11 bear out the motif of release.

The popular interpretation of the sabbath controversies reported in the Gospels is that Jesus was proclaiming the seventh-day sabbath as no longer binding, and that it was to be replaced by Sunday observance following the resurrection.⁹ However, not all agree on this point. There are some commentators who take the position that Jesus did not set aside the seventh-day sabbath, nor did he ignore the plain requirements of the law of God.¹⁰

What is pertinent for our discussion is the recognition that Jesus' defense of the disciples, as they reaped and ate the grain on the sabbath, and the restoring of a withered hand on the sabbath, constituted a rejection of man-made restrictions that had been placed on God's holy day by the religious leaders. The object of these sabbath controversies was to show the humanitarian nature of this day and how this day was to be properly kept. Upon this point there is agreement among commentators, whether they see Jesus as eventually replacing the seventh-day sabbath with a new sabbath or not.¹¹

The role of these two sabbath pericopes is now obvious. They join the preceding pericope on fasting and the illustrations of the new/old to present Luke's understanding of Jesus' ministry. Jesus fulfilled the conditions of the Isaianic passage that he read at the

⁹William F. Arndt, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (St. Louis, Mo., 1956), p. 174; W. R. F. Browning, *The Gospel According to Saint Luke* (London, 1960), p. 76; Joseph Dillersberger, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Westminster, Md., 1958), p. 204; Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1954), p. 200; Godet, p. 289; and Wilfrid J. Harrington, *A Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York, 1967), pp. 97-98.

¹⁰Easton, p. 75; Manson, p. 61; and C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels* (London, 1909), 2: 884.

¹¹Danker, p. 76; Dillersberger, p. 204; Geldenhuys, pp. 200, 204; Godet, pp. 287-288; Hendriksen, p. 318; Manson, p. 59; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1976), pp. 121-122; Plummer, p. 168; and Ray Summers, *Commentary on Luke* (Waco, Texas, 1972), pp. 70-71.

beginning of his ministry. He brought release to those who were burdened and crushed by the weight of man-made restrictions, and freed them for a proper and meaningful relationship with their God.

4. *Conclusion*

Luke begins the ministry of Jesus by reporting his participation in the synagogue service at Nazareth. By reading Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6, the motif of release is introduced. Luke builds this motif by working with his material—by making minor additions and omissions and by rearranging and rewriting—as he did with the call to discipleship. The result is three blocks of material at the beginning of Jesus' ministry that show how Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled, i.e. (1) release from the power of Satan (4:31-44), (2) release from the power of sin (5:1-32), and (3) release from cultic traditions (5:33-6:11).