

“To Evangelize the Poor:” The Gospel According to Luke, Isaiah, and Origen

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Abstract

In this essay, I will examine the scriptural basis for Origen’s interpretation of Luke 4:18-19 as an allusion to Jesus’ identity as savior, not as a call to social justice. I argue that this interpretation is consistent with the intentions of the gospel writer. The essay begins with an analysis of the gospel writer’s redaction of Mark 1 in Luke 3-5. Based on that redaction, I hypothesize that Luke intends to emphasize Jesus’s identity with the anointed one mentioned in Isaiah 61:1-2. This excerpt from Isaiah not only gives Luke 4:18-19 its Christological significance but also clarifies Luke’s understanding of poverty in relation to the Gospel. I then examine Origen’s application of the Lucan passage for his pastoral purposes. To conclude, I suggest that we, like Luke and Origen, read Scripture Christocentrically in order to better facilitate the church’s encounter with Christ during the liturgy.

Text

If you want to see what it means to preach the Gospel, look at Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue. Within the Gospel of Luke,¹ this occasion marks the first time Jesus preaches—and the first time he is rejected—during his public ministry. The other three evangelists don’t seem to remember it well. For Matthew and Mark, the rejection at Nazareth pales in comparison to the many miracles Jesus previously performed throughout Galilee; for John, this event goes unmentioned.² What matters to Luke is the message Jesus preaches in the Nazareth synagogue, an excerpt from the book of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, on account of which He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to release and send forth the oppressed, to

¹ See Luke 4:16-30.

² See Matthew 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6.

proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV).³ Although many modern readers value this excerpt from Isaiah as a call to social justice and care for the poor, such an interpretation was not as prevalent in the early church. In a third-century homily on Luke 4:14-20, Origen of Alexandria interprets the Isaiah excerpt as a reference to Jesus’s identity as the savior who takes away our sin, not primarily as an expression of his solidarity with the socially marginalized.⁴ Given Origen’s influence on interpretations of Luke within the Christian tradition, it is worth investigating whether this homily respects the intentions of the gospel’s author.⁵

In this paper, I examine how well Origen’s homily comports with critical readings of Luke’s synagogue episode and the excerpt from Isaiah. I argue that Origen’s interpretation goes beyond the intentions of Isaiah and Luke without going against them. The paper begins with a comparison between Luke’s version of the Nazareth synagogue episode (Luke 4:16-30) and its Marcan parallel (Mark 6:1-6). Operating with the longstanding assumption that Luke uses Mark as a source, I attempt to explain the differences in Luke’s version in light of other changes he makes within the wider narrative context of Luke 3-5. The Isaiah excerpt (Isa. 61:1-2) is treated within the context of Isaiah in its final canonical form to see how it informs Luke’s use of that passage. As we will see, Origen respects Luke’s understanding of Isaiah when interpreting the synagogue episode for his third-century pastoral purposes. The paper concludes with a consideration of how Origen’s homily challenges us to rethink the way we preach on the Scriptures today.

³ Luke 4:18-19 SBLGNT: “Πνεῦμα κυρίου ἐπ’ ἐμέ, οὗ ἕνεκεν ἔχρισέν με εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς, ἀπέσταλκέν με κηρύξαι αἰχμαλώτοις ἄφεςιν καὶ τυφλοῖς ἀνάβλεψιν, ἀποστεῖλαι τεθραυσμένους ἐν ἀφέσει, κηρύξαι ἐνιαυτὸν κυρίου δεκτόν.”

⁴ Origen, *Homilia in Lucam* 32.5, in *Patrologiae Graece*, Tom. XIII (Paris: J.P. Migne, 1862), 1883. Originally composed in Greek, these homilies only survive in Latin translation.

⁵ Origen’s homilies make up one of the three extant patristic commentaries on Luke (the other two being by Cyril of Alexandria and Ambrose of Milan). Both Ambrose’s commentary (which relied heavily on Origen) and Jerome’s translation of Origen’s homilies (meant to outdo Ambrose’s work) reflect the authority those homilies had by the fourth century. For further discussion of the reception of Origen’s homilies, see Joseph T. Lienhard, “Introduction,” in *Homilies on Luke* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), xv-xi.

Although the versions of the synagogue episode in Mark 6 and Luke 4 have parallels, they substantially disagree in detail.⁶ Jesus enters Nazareth with his disciples in Mark's version but arrives there alone in Luke's.⁷ Mark simply states *that* Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, whereas Luke extensively details *what* Jesus was teaching about.⁸ The Nazareth congregation asks Jesus many questions in Mark's account; Luke only records one question asked: "is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:22 NRSV).⁹ Mark remembers Jesus answering that "prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown" (Mark 6:4 NRSV); Luke recalls Jesus explaining this answer by comparing himself to past prophets.¹⁰ At the end of Mark's version, Jesus manages to heal a few faithful people; according to Luke, he leaves town after nearly being pushed off a cliff.¹¹ Given these differences, we need to look outside the accounts to explain why Luke decided not to retain Mark's version of the synagogue episode.

The simplest explanation for these differences is the way in which Luke uses Mark 1 as a template for chapters 3-5 of his own gospel. Luke relocates the call of the first disciples by placing it after Jesus's departure from Capernaum, thereby making room for his own synagogue episode in the call episode's original place. This reordering magnifies Jesus's success in Capernaum, now a solo effort following his near-demise at Nazareth. Jesus's recitation of Isaiah 61:1-2 functionally replaces his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God in Mark 1:14-15, which Luke rewrites as a summary statement about Jesus's impending success in Galilee.¹² The

⁶ David Peter Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts* (Linz, Austria: Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt, 1982), 45. On the basis of both the verbal disagreement and structural similarity between the versions of the episode, Seccombe argues that we should entertain the possibility that Luke's version comes from a source other than Mark. Regardless, we still need to account for why Luke uses this version rather than Mark's.

⁷ Luke 4:16; c.f. Mark 6:1.

⁸ Luke 4:17-21; c.f. Mark 6:2.

⁹ Mark 6:2-3.

¹⁰ Luke 4:23-27; see S. John Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 164.

¹¹ Luke 4:28-30; c.f. Mark 6:5-6.

¹² Luke 4:14-15.

Isaiah 61 excerpt takes on a fuller meaning thanks to the preceding baptism and desert episodes, during which the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jesus and remained with him.¹³ Luke inserts Jesus’s genealogy between these two episodes, which both reminds the reader about Jesus’s miraculous conception and addresses the question about his relation to Joseph.¹⁴ Taken together, these adjustments indicate that Luke intends the synagogue episode to convey Jesus’s identity as the one the Spirit of the Lord is upon—an identity which is foundational to his mission and central to his message.

Luke’s prioritization is consistent with Isaiah 61:1-2 when those verses are viewed within the context of the entire book of Isaiah. Since there are several allusions to Isaiah 11 within Isaiah 60-62, the evangelizer in Isaiah 61 is most likely the descendant of Jesse whom “the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon.”¹⁵ Given that Luke traces Jesus’s descent from Jesse through David, Jesus’s recitation of Isaiah 61 effectively amounts to a claim to the Davidic kingship. According to Bradley C. Gregory, the poor to whom this king brings good news are the Jews who have remained faithful to God’s commandments.¹⁶ Gregory argues that this understanding of poverty has a textual basis: while the word “poor” in earlier material within Isaiah (i.e. Isa. 1-39) may have originally referred to Jewish exiles in Babylon, the use of that word in the book’s post-exilic additions (i.e. Isa. 40-66) indicates that later editors spiritually refined the word’s meaning. If this is the case, these editors deserve credit for employing the acceptable year of the Lord, the jubilee year, as a metaphor for the “day of vengeance of our God.”¹⁷ Taken together, these phrases give Isaiah 61 an eschatological meaning that can only be known when the time comes.

¹³ Luke 3:21-22; 4:1-13.

¹⁴ Luke 3:23: “Jesus...being the son, according to custom [ἐνομιζέτο], of Joseph.” See Luke 1:26-38.

¹⁵ Bradley C. Gregory, “The Postexilic Exile in Third Isaiah: Isaiah 61:1-3 in Light of Second Temple Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126:3 (Fall, 2007), 480. See Isa. 11:1-2 LXX: “καὶ ἐξελεύσεται ῥάβδος ἐκ τῆς ρίζης ... καὶ ἀναπαύσεται ἐπ’ αὐτὸν πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ.”

¹⁶ Gregory, “Postexilic Exile,” 491.

¹⁷ Gregory, “Postexilic Exile,” 486.

KELLY: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE, ISAIAH, AND ORIGEN

According to Luke, this scripture has been fulfilled when Jesus recites it at the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:21). The acceptable year of the Lord corresponds to the kingdom of God, the everlasting reign of Jesus foretold by Gabriel to Mary and first proclaimed publicly by John the Baptist.¹⁸ In Luke's words, John and Jesus bring good news about this kingdom in order to exhort others to welcome it by turning away from sin.¹⁹ Echoing Isaiah, Jesus specifies that the poor must receive the good news since they belong to the Kingdom of God.²⁰ If Luke follows Isaiah's spiritual understanding of poverty, then his stories about Lazarus and the needy widow take on greater metaphorical significance; the widow visibly entrusts her life to God out of the same faith that leads Lazarus to the Bosom of Abraham.²¹ That is not to say that the materially poor are not important to Luke; in continuity with Jewish writings from the Second Temple period,²² he believes that God spiritually rewards all people who give alms to these poor ones.²³ For Luke, almsgiving is inseparable from and instrumental to following Jesus.

Origen interprets Luke 4:16-20 according to this theological framework. When Jesus recites Isaiah's remarks about the poor, Origen believes they apply to gentiles in his day since they have "nothing at all: not God, not the Law...neither justice nor the other virtues."²⁴ Explaining Origen's interpretation is his understanding of the acceptable year of the Lord as a new order of time when we are liberated from sin and sickness.²⁵ Thus, Origen agrees with Isaiah

¹⁸ Luke 1:26-33; 16:16.

¹⁹ Luke 3:3-18; 18:16-17.

²⁰ Luke 6:20; 7:22.

²¹ Luke 16:19-31; Luke 21:1-4.

²² Gary A. Anderson, *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 2. For a similar study on the place of the poor in the Lucan corpus, see Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor*.

²³ Luke 18:22; 19:8.

²⁴ Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 32.4 (PL 13, 1883): "Pauperes, nationes significant. Isti enim erant pauperes, nihil omnia possidentes, non Deum, non Legem, non Prophetas, non justitiam, reliqueasque virtutes." All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

²⁵ Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 32.5 (PL 13, 1883): "Futuri sunt enim alii dies, non tales quales nunc in mundo cernimus, et menses alii, et kalendarum ordo diversus...post libertatem ex vinculis...veniamus ad annum Domini acceptum."

that poverty is the privation of God's saving presence - what Luke might call the longing for the kingdom of God. To us, Origen's definition is a refinement of Isaiah's in light of Luke; to Origen himself, it is "something concealed...[which] the divine phrase signifies."²⁶ Origen traces this concealment back to the composition of Isaiah, when Jesus "was speaking in the prophet...[so that] he would proclaim about it himself" later on in the Nazareth synagogue.²⁷ This faith in Jesus, above all else, inclines Origen to trust Luke's proclamation of the message concealed in Isaiah.

Origen's exposition of Luke 4:16-20 is foundational to the exhortation he makes to his audience. Linking the exposition and exhortation is his belief that Jesus's opportunity to read from Isaiah was "an act of God's providence."²⁸ Since the word "God" refers to Jesus's Father in this context, Origen invites his hearers to consider how the Father helps Jesus through ordinary activities like the synagogue service, not just in extraordinary events like prophetic inspiration. For this reason, Origen believes Jesus speaks "today...in [his] congregation" and "in other gatherings...in the whole world."²⁹ In saying so, Origen prepares his hearers to consider how Jesus speaks when the Scriptures are read aloud within every church. According to him, you can encounter Christ at this time in the liturgy because "when you direct your heart's attention to wisdom and truth while contemplating the Only-Begotten [Son] of God, your eyes look upon

²⁶ Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 32.5 (PL 13, 1883): "Nisi forte quidam sacramenti in praedicatione anni Domini divinus sermo significat."

²⁷ Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 32.4 (PL 13, 1883): "Quae sunt igitur quae in propheta loquebatur, et postea de se ipse in synagoga personet contemlemur."

²⁸ Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 32.3 (PL 13, 1883): "Non fortuita revolvit librum, et apud se vaticinans reperet lectiones, sed et hoc providentiae Dei fuit."

²⁹ Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 32.2 (PL 13, 1882): "Si vera sunt quae scripta sunt, non solum tunc in congregationibus Iudaeorum, sed et hodie in hac congregatione Dominus loquitur: et non solum in hac, sed etiam in alio coetu et in toto orbe docet Jesus."

Jesus.”³⁰ It is through this gaze that Origen has the courage to say, “O Lord, the light of your face has been sealed upon us.”³¹

In conclusion, Origen firmly grounds his pastoral application of Luke in the evangelist’s Christocentric understanding of Isaiah. As Henri de Lubac rightly notes, Origen believes that “the Mystery of Christ attains its plenitude in the Christian soul” once she or he knows Christ fulfills the Jewish Scriptures.³² To put this theory into practice, we could follow the risen Christ’s example, as Luke describes it, when he appeared to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. In the words of Richard B. Hays, Jesus encourages the disciples to “read backwards,” to look back on Christ’s life in order to discern how the Jewish Scriptures prefigure it.³³ Jesus offers this way of thinking since the disciples can’t help the way they feel about the crucifixion; they have lost hope in Jesus, they no longer believe he was redeemer promised by Scripture, and they fail to recognize him in their presence. Luke tells us that their hearts were burning within as Jesus explained the crucifixion by means of Scripture, and this burning set their hearts aflame once they recognized him “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:32-35 NRSV). If we want to have a similar encounter with Christ when we break bread, then perhaps we should, like Origen, first break open the Scriptures whenever we preach the Gospel.

³⁰ Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 32.6 (PL 13, 1883-1884): “Et nunc si vultis, in hac synagoga coetusne possunt oculi vestri attendere in Salvatore. Cum enim principalem cordis tui direxis aciem ad sapientiam, et veritatem, Deique Unigenitum contemplandum, oculi tui intuentur Jesum.”

³¹ Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 32.6 (PL 13, 1884): “Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine.” See Psalm 4:6-7.

³² Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*, trans. Anne Anglund Nash (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007), 164.

³³ Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 56.

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