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The King James translation of Luke 4:18 includes the phrase to heal the brokenhearted in the long quotation from Isaiah 61 in Jesus’ speech in the synagogue at Nazareth. The phrase is missing from the modern editions and translations of the New Testament. In this chapter I will argue that it is part of the original text of the Gospel, and that it is important to the theology of Luke, and vital for our understanding of the healing power of the Christian faith.

TWO REJECTIONS

Luke 4:16–30 is the story of Jesus’ preaching and rejection in the synagogue in Nazareth. He read from the prophet Isaiah chapter 61, adding words from Isaiah 58:6. He followed the reading with the comment, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The positive response to a local boy with a growing ministry turned negative as Jesus continued to expound with proverbs and stories from the scriptures.

Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ And he said, Truly I tell you, no prophet is acceptable in the prophet’s home town.

The reaction went from bad to worse as Jesus gave famous examples from the ministries of Elijah and Elisha of healings outside of Israel, the widow of to kill Jesus. Jesus was rejected at Nazareth.

But in the story of Jesus’ rejection in his hometown is another tale of rejection. One of the key elements in the quotation is from Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18, the phrase “to heal the brokenhearted.” Modern editors of the text of the New Testament reject this phrase. Editors and commentators would concur with the UBS committee, who judged the words to be “an obvious scribal supplement introduced in order to bring the quotation more completely in accord with the Septuagint text of Isaiah 61:1” (Metzger, 1998, p. 114). They are not found in what are generally considered the oldest and best manuscripts of the New Testament (χ B D etc.). Concerning the textual variation, J. A. Fitzmyer wrote, “the omission ... is of little consequence” (1981, p. 532). The text that follows questions both parts of this assertion. Has Luke omitted the phrase? Is the notice about the healing of the brokenhearted of little consequence?

New Testament textual critics take various different factors into consideration in making a judgment concerning which readings are what the author originally wrote. In addition to the external manuscript support for any reading, there are internal factors like the theology and style of the author. In addition, both intrinsic and transcriptional probabilities must be weighed. We will consider each of these factors in putting together the case for the originality of the longer text at Luke 4:18. The final decision as to the original text requires the critic to be both scientist and artist.
MANUSCRIPT SUPPORT

Modern students of the text point out that the extra line from Luke 4:18 is not found in the oldest manuscripts of Luke. A few scholars believe that it is original with Luke (Grundmann, 1966, p. 118; Schürmann, 1969: 1, p. 229). The reading is found in a large number of manuscripts, versions, and in several early Christian writers.

It is worthy of note that among the witnesses for the longer reading is Irenaeus (Sanday & Turner, 1923, p. 55). We note that in Against Heresies IV xiii.1 Irenaeus is not quoting from Isaiah 61, but consciously referring to Luke 4. It appears, therefore, that he is not harmonizing to the LXX, but citing—what he finds in the text of Luke. It is not always easy to weigh the value of patristic quotations, but this citation from the late second-century bishop of Lyons in Gaul, if authentic, would constitute our earliest witness to the verse in the manuscript tradition. At the very least, we may say that the longer reading was current in the so-called Western tradition in the second century.

There has been a growing appreciation in text-critical circles for the value of patristic evidence. For example, Bart Ehrman, in his study of the text of Luke 3:22 noted the value of the testimony of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and the Gospel to the Hebrews in witnessing a reading earlier than that found in the early papyri or great uncials (Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus), the manuscripts normally given—greater weight in decisions on the text (1993, p. 62). It is therefore no longer sufficient to dismiss a reading simply by noting that it is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts. A fresh assessment of the external evidence is called for.

TRANSCRIPTIONAL PROBABILITIES

In Tischendorf’s eighth edition of the Greek New Testament, the presentation of evidence for the longer reading at Luke 4:18 is followed by the succinct “e LXX” (i.e., from the Septuagint). Most scholars, together with the Textual Commentary, adopt this explanation that the words were added to conform to the LXX. Bruce Metzger noted that “since monks knew by heart extensive portions of the scriptures, the temptation to harmonize discordant parallels or quotations would be strong in proportion to the copyist’s familiarity with other parts of the Bible” (Metzger & Ehrman, 2005, p. 262). But for the present case, the evidence from Irenaeus comes from before the rise of monasticism. Moreover, the argument for harmonization, especially in the Gospel tradition, has recently been called into question (Holmes, 1990, pp. 651—64). Fresh scrutiny must also be given to the assumption of harmonization in the case of Old Testament quotations.

On the other hand, the possibility of accidental omission by scribes of Luke’s Gospel has become more attractive in recent years. Whereas earlier studies had emphasized the tendency of scribes to add to their manuscripts, several scholars working on the early papyri have shown that the scribes of these manuscripts were more prone to omit material as they copied (Royce, 2007; Head, 1990, pp. 240-247; Head, 2004, pp. 399-408).

INTERNAL CONSIDERATIONS

When we turn to internal criteria for assessing a textual variation, matters of style, theology and the like, we find that the longer reading is certainly compatible with the Gospel of Luke. We note that the word for healing (hiaomai) is common in this Gospel. Indeed, Luke is by
far the most frequent user of this Greek verb. The figures from Moulton and Geden are as follows: Luke 11, Matthew 4, Acts 4, John 3, Mark 1, Hebrews 1, James 1, 1 Peter 1. Furthermore, that healing is an important emphasis in the Gospel of Luke is undeniable, whatever weight we may give to the tradition that the author was “the beloved physician.” (Col.4:14).

Joel B. Green asks pointedly why either Jesus or Luke would have dropped this phrase from Isaiah 61:1 (1997, p. 206). A number of suggestions have been made, and they are reviewed by F. Bovon. Reviewing the possibilities (an attempt to avoid connecting Jesus’ miraculous healings with the Spirit? Concentration on messianic interpretation?), Bovon concludes, “Neither is convincing, but I have no better suggestion” (2002, p. 153). But no further suggestion is needed if Luke included the line from Isaiah 61 in his Gospel.

Attempts have been made to settle the question of the text of Luke 4:18 on literary and stylistic grounds. In a recent discussion of the story of the rejection at Nazareth, Kenneth E. Bailey has argued that the whole passage, with the encasing of Isaiah 61:1-2 in the center, conforms to a carefully framed rhetorical structure. According to Bailey, the omission of the phrase “to bind up the brokenhearted” is important (together with an addition from Isaiah 58:6) to maintain that rhetorical structure (2008, p. 149). At first sight Bailey’s presentation, in an otherwise penetrating study, seems quite convincing. But in an earlier study, Bo Reicke argued that the rhetorical structure calls for the inclusion of the line from Isa 61:1c (1973, pp. 47-55). Arguments from chiasm and other literary patterns are inconclusive, it would seem, in solving the text-critical question.

NARRATIVE FEATURES

Every culture has a story to tell, and every group within that culture has its own peculiar telling of the common story (Wright, 1992, pp. 6-144). Often the specific understanding of the common story by a subgroup will find expression in the way that group imagines how the story will end, and their own place in that climax. So it is with Judaism in the second temple period. All groups shared the same story: Creation and covenant, exodus and exile, kingdom and messiah. But each told the story, especially the final chapter, in their own way. For the people of Israel that story was told using midrashic methods, the re-telling and interpreting of scripture. Therefore, by comparing and contrasting midrashic methods of the different groups, we may bring into sharper focus the distinctive self-understanding and theology of each.


The linking of two or more biblical passages together because of similar words, phrases, or ideas is the Jewish interpretive technique called gezerah shewah. This literally means an equivalent regulation, and was one of the seven exegetical rules of Hillel the Elder. The rule states that “one passage of scripture may be explained by another if similar words or phrases are present (Evans, 2005, p. 290). The use of this technique is evident in the Nazareth periscope in
Luke 4. Several passages have been brought together and illuminate each other because of a similar word, phrase, or idea. Scholars have generally recognized this, but have offered various suggestions concerning the catchword that brought the passages together. Perhaps it was the word acceptable (dektōn) (Bovan, 2002, p. 153). Some have suggested that the link-word was forgiveness or release (aphsēi), a word found in both Isaiah 61:1-2 and Isaiah 58:6 (Fitzmeyer, 1981, p. 533). There may also be a link based on a parallel between Sabbath and Jubilee (Bock, 1996, p. 405). However, there is another word and theme that may tie together all the elements found in Jesus’ synagogue homily in Luke 4:16—30. That word is healing. If the line in question, to heal the brokenhearted, is restored to the text in Luke 4:18, a verbal link is established with the proverb of verse 23, Doctor, cure yourself. There is also, of course, the conceptual link with the two Old Testament stories of Elijah (vss. 25—26) and Elisha (vs. 27). In other words, restore the missing words in verse 18 and the whole passage makes perfect sense from the standpoint of Jewish interpretation.

I conclude that on both external (manuscript) and internal (stylistic and theological) grounds, and especially from the perspective of Jewish narrative technique, the line to heal the brokenhearted is not only fitting, but essential to the story of the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth.

CONCLUDING APPLICATIONS

It is generally recognized that the story of the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth plays a central role in Luke’s Gospel. Many scholars use the word programmatic to describe the function of the episode in Luke. Richard Hays, for example, wrote that by placing the synagogue episode at the beginning, Luke “turned it into a programmatic statement” (1996, p. 115). David Balch suggested, “The sermon supplies the basic themes for the whole two volume history” (2008, pp. 112-3). Other scholars have noted the importance of the story and its implications for politics (Yoder, 1972, pp. 34-40) and mission (Wright, ABD: 3, pp. 1025-1030). Indeed, Christopher J.H. Wright is not wide of the mark to state that Jesus’ quotation from Isaiah 61 is “the clearest programmatic statement” of the inbreaking of the eschatological reign of God (2006, p. 309). If the mission of Jesus includes the healing of the brokenhearted, and the words from Isaiah 61:1 belong in the original text of Luke’s Gospel, there are important implications for our application of the Gospel in the world today. We may ask, what is the importance of Jesus including this line, to heal the brokenhearted, as the first item in his proclamation of the kingdom of God?

To answer this question we need to consider the radical nature of Jesus’ teaching both for his contemporary culture and for the 21st-century world. In his article on comparative midrash, James A. Sanders drew a contrast between the teaching of Qumran (11Q Melchizedek) and Jesus (Luke 4). Qumran and Jesus had much in common. In particular, both the Essenes and Jesus believed that they were living in the end time, and that the scripture was being fulfilled in their day. Just as the Qumran applied the scriptures to their own community, so Jesus states, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). But where they differed was in their attitude toward their enemies. On this point Sanders (2001) writes:

Where they differ radically is in the Lucan Jesus’ midrash on who the poor, the captives and the blind were. Whereas 1 1QMelch, by citing Lev 25:10’ and Isa 52:7, reflects the second Essene axiom that the captives to be released are the in-group of the Essenes,
Jesus’ citation of the gracious acts of Elijah and Elisha toward the Sidonian widow and the Syrian leper shows,, that he does not subscribe to the Essene second Axiom, (p. 62)

In other words, whereas Qumran (and Jesus’ listeners at Nazareth) expected blessing for the insider and “the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa 61:2) for the outsider, Jesus offered the blessings of release and healing to the outsider. This is reflected in the radical teaching of Jesus, “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27—28) and the remarkable action of Jesus, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:44). The healing of the brokenhearted consisted not only in the reversal of their fortunes, but also in their ability to find freedom and cleansing by forgiving their enemies. Herein lies the radical nature of the good news of Jesus Christ for his day and for our own.

In his landmark discussion of the Gospel of reconciliation, Exclusion and Embrace, Miroslav Volf explores the nature of this healing of the brokenhearted as it applies to our contemporary, war-torn world. This study, born out of the conflicts in Volf’s native land, the former Yugoslavia, points to the necessity of change not only in the heart of the oppressor, but in the heart of the oppressed. Both need to repent. In a section entitled “The Politics of the Pure Heart,” Volf (1996) writes, commenting on Luke 4:16-30,

The truly revolutionary character of Jesus’ proclamation lies precisely in the connection between the hope he gives to the oppressed and the radical change he requires of them. (p. 114)

The poor and oppressed are not healed of their broken hearts simply by the reversal of fortunes. Those who have lost their families in war, their homes or jobs in recession, their innocence to abuse, their reputation to slander, or their clean air to polluters are not healed simply by seeing themselves vindicated or reimbursed and their enemies punished. A radical healing of the broken heart is required, and this can only come by repentance of the hatred and envy that the circumstances of oppression have allowed to gain a foothold. Such radical repentance is not easy. In many cases in our war-torn world it seems impossible. But with Jesus as mentor, model, and mediator it is possible. Through his proclamation, his life, his death and resurrection, and the new kingdom of freedom and reconciliation, there is the opportunity for the healing of the brokenhearted.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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