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Jesus' Inaugural Address (Luke 4:16–27)

By Mark E. Moore, Ph.D.

I. Introduction

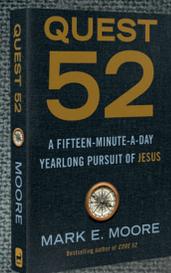
- A. This is the clearest presentation of Jesus' ministry agenda. It sets the tone for the rest of Luke's narrative of Jesus' mission to Gentiles. This is shocking given Matthew 10:6 and 15:24.
- B. Luke alone recounts this narrative, and he is a Gentile. Thus, some argue that he may be presenting a biased perspective.¹
 1. Matthew (13:54–58) and Mark (6:1–6) tell of Jesus in his hometown in Nazareth. There they also inquire about his family and Jesus responds with the “prophet” proverb. Yet Luke adds considerable detail and moves the story to the beginning of Jesus' ministry.
 2. This narrative has Luke's fingerprints all over it.²
 - a. Gentile inclusion represented by Elijah/Elisha.
 - b. The foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection represented by the Nazarenes' attempt on his life.
 - c. Jesus' Spirit anointing (cf. 4:1, 14; Acts 10:38).
- C. Can we take this as an authentic account?
 1. Jesus was at home in the synagogue and frequently preached about the liberation of the poor particularly because of his role as harbinger of the Kingdom of God.
 2. There is evidence that Luke used an earlier source.
 - a. First, the mention of Capernaum (v. 23) is out of place since Jesus has not yet been there in Luke's narrative.
 - b. Second, the use of the Aramaic Nazara, (rather than Nazareth), *τεθραμμένος*, “brought up”, and *βιβλιον*, “book”, would also indicate Luke used an earlier source, and Luke typically follows his sources carefully rather than freely composing stories.
 3. Luke portrays Jesus as a classic rabbi in how he interprets Scripture.
 - a. Jesus' approach to Isaiah 61 looks similar to that of Qumran (cf. 11QMelch).³

¹ E.g. Ulrich Busse, *Das Nazareth-Manifest Jesu: Eine Einführung in das lukanische Jesusbild nach Lk 4,16–30* (Stuttgarter Bible—Studien 91; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1978).

² For more details see Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke—Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (2 vols.; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986): 1:60–73; Jacques Matthey, “Luke 4:16–30—The Spirit's Mission Manifesto—Jesus' Hermeneutics—and Luke's Editorial,” *IRM* 89/352 (2000): 3–11; and Jeffrey S. Siker, “First to the Gentiles: A Literary Analysis of Luke 4:16–30,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 73–90.

³ [Its inter]pretation for the last days refers to the captives, about whom he said: Isa 61:1 “To proclaim liberty to the captives”. And he will make their rebels prisoners [...] and of the inheritance of Melchizedek, for [...] and they are the inheri[tance of Melchi]zedek, who will make them return. He will proclaim liberty for them, to free them from [the debt] of all their iniquities.” (11 QMelch 4–6)

[For the heav]ens and the earth will listen to his Messiah, ... For the Lord will observe the devout, and call the just by name, and upon the poor he will place his spirit, and the faithful he will renew with his strength. For he will honor the devout upon the throne of eternal royalty, **freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind**, straightening out the twisted ... for he will heal the badly wounded and **will make the dead live**, he will proclaim good news to the meek give lavishly to the needy, lead the exiled and enrich the hungry. (4Q521, 2:1–14; cf. Isa 35:5–6)



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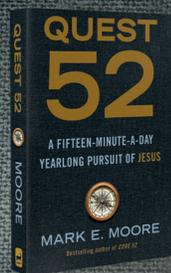


- b. 1 Kgs 18:1 speaks of a three-year drought, but Jesus, like Jas 5:17, specifies it as 3 ½ years (cf. Dan 7:25; 12:7; Rev 11:2–3; 12:6, 14; 13:5; Josephus, *J.W.* 1.32).
 4. The narrative has the look and feel of an authentic synagogue service based upon the available data.⁴ For example, Jesus *standing* to read then *sitting* to teach or receiving the scroll from the “attendant” and handing it back to him.
 5. The use of a couple of proverbs (παροιμολήν) is typical of Jesus. Both proverbs are used in ways one would expect. The first, by the Jews, supports traditional values; the second, by Jesus, explodes them.
- II. The Prophetic Text Applied to Jesus
- A. Analysis of Isaiah 61:1–2 as used by Jesus:
1. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me [61:1a], because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor [61:1b]. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind [61:1d; MT= “release from darkness for the prisoners”], to release the oppressed [58:6d], to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor [61:2a].” Omitting 61:1c, “Bind up the broken-hearted” and 61:2b, “The day of vengeance of our God”. This kind of textual combination, though forbidden in a lectionary reading, would be common among Rabbinic instruction.
 2. Qumran applied this text to the Messiah, which is natural enough given the key word “anointed”. Like virtually all Jewish literature on the Messiah, they applied it to a powerful and vindictive figure who would crush Israel’s enemies and restore the exiles. [see Ftn #3]
 3. Jesus, on the other hand, seems to highlight the servant nature of the Messiah, particularly to those who were oppressed, which becomes paradigmatic for Jesus in Luke (e.g., 6:20–22; 7:22; 14:13, 21). It is even possible that he brackets off Isaiah 61:2b for a future judgment.⁵ For Jesus to apply this text to himself is an extraordinarily bold move!
 4. The other time Jesus cited Isaiah 61 he combined it with Isaiah 35:5–6 in answering John the Baptist’s question about his identity (Matt 11:5/Luke 7:22).
 5. While the sabbatical year seems to have been observed to some extent (cf. 1 Macc 6:49, 53, Josephus, *Ant.* 13.234; 14.475; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4; Schürer, *History*, 2:366–67), the very establishment of *prozbul* by Hillel show how debts were not released. It is possible that Jubilee was reconfigured by Jesus into forgiveness of sins for Israel. It should be noted, however, that in the rest of Luke, where the poor are mentioned, they are literally poor (6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:3) and that this emphasis in Luke 4 is paradigmatic for the rest of Jesus’ ministry in Luke.⁶ While Jubilee was never practiced, at least as far as any historical texts

⁴ See Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175B.C. – A.D. 135)* (ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973–87) 2:447–54 and Str-B 4:154–171.

⁵ The theme of judgment is not absent from Luke, but it does seem to be reserved for unbelieving Israel (e.g., Luke 10:13–16; 11:29–32, 37–54; 13:5–9, 28–30, 33–35; 19:41–44; 21:20–22), not Gentiles; cf. M. Alvarez-Barredo, “Discurso Inaugural de Jesús en Nazaret (Lc 4,16–30): Clave teológica de Evangelio de Lucas,” *Car* 2 (1986): 28–29.

⁶ Some have understood Jesus’ words as a literal economic renewal program: André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 39–44 and John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972, 1994), 34–40, 64–77 argue that Jesus saw his ministry as the actual inauguration of Jubilee in 26 C.E. in the Sabbatical year (cf. Luke 4:14–21; 6:20–26; 12:30–33). They follow the chronology



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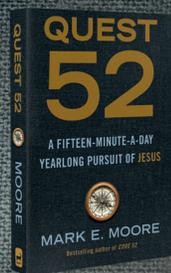


- indicate, it remained a powerful idea in Judaism of salvation and a consequent return to pristine roots.
- a. *Pss. Sol.* 11:1–3, “Blow ye in Zion on the trumpet to summon (the) saints, Cause ye to be heard in Jerusalem the voice of him that bringeth good tidings; For God hath had pity on Israel in visiting them. Stand on the height, O Jerusalem, and behold thy children, From the East and the West, gathered together by the Lord; From the North they come in the gladness of their God.”
 - i. *Shemoneh Esreh* 10, “Sound the great horn for our freedom; raise the ensign to gather our exiles and gather us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed art thou, O L-rd, who gathers the dispersed of Your people Israel.”
 - b. 11QMelch [see footnote 3].
 - B. Jesus’ astounding claim to fulfill Isaiah 61 raised questions, particularly about his genealogy (v. 21–22).
 1. It seems contradictory that their amazement quickly turned to consternation and violence. How can the citizens of Nazareth “speak well of him” (v. 22) then suddenly became furious and attempt to kill him (v. 28)?
 - a. One suggestion is that “spoke well” [ἐμαρτύρουν] should be understood as a witness against Jesus and “were amazed” [ἐθαύμαζον] should be rendered “were in consternation” (e.g., Luke 11:38; John 7:15) rather than “wonder”.⁷ This is highly unlikely given the normal meaning of these terms, the mood of the narrative, and the unlikelihood of χρατις taking on a technical “Pauline” definition so early.
 - b. A better solution rests with three observations.
 - i. Amazement, even praise, does not equate to support. The “public” in Luke typically recognizes Jesus’ (and Christians’) impressive deeds (cf. Acts 5:13–14; 6:15) without predicting a particular response.⁸
 - ii. The crowd may be divided in opinions over him.
 - iii. We should not underestimate the offense of turning one’s attention to Gentiles/outsideers (cf. Acts 22:21–23).
 2. Two Proverbs:
 - a. “Physician Heal Yourself” is used by the crowd in standard ways.
 - i. One rabbi in the Midrash on Genesis (23 IV.3c) quoted virtually the same phrase, “Physician, Physician, heal your own limp.”
 - ii. Plutarch, *Enemies* 4d, retorted: “Would you heal others, full of sores yourself?”
 - iii. Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 49:13, “But if a man, alleging that he is not competent, is reluctant to administer his own city when it wishes him to do so and calls upon him, it is as if someone should refuse to treat his

developed by August Strobel, “Das apokalyptische Terminproblem in der sogenannten Antrittspredigt Jesu (Lk 4,16–30),” *TLZ* 92 (1967): 251–54, which is rightly debunked by D. Fiensy, *The Social History of Palestine in the Herodian Period* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 12 and M. Rodgers, “Luke 4:16–30: A Call for a Jubilee Year?” *RTR* 40 (1981): 72–82.

⁷ J. Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations* (trans. S. H. Hooke; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 44–46, follows B. Violet, “Zum rechten Verständnis der Nazareth-Perikope,” *ZNW* 37 (1938): 251–71.

⁸ John Nolland, “Impressed Unbelievers as Witnesses to Christ (Luke 4:22),” *JBL* 98/2 (1979): 226–27.



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own body, though professing to be a physician.”

- b. “No prophet is accepted in his own hometown” (cf. Mark 6:4/Matt 13:57; John 4:44) runs counter to *b. Shabb* 145b, “Why are the scholars of Babylon distinguished [in dress]? Because they are not in their [original] homes. As people say, ‘In my own town my name [is sufficient]; away from home my dress.’”

III. Jesus’ comparison to Elijah and Elisha

A. Historical Background:

1. Jesus is compared to Elijah (1 Kgs 17:7–24) & Elisha (2 Kgs 5:1–14) in two ways:⁹
 - a. All three were noted miracle workers.¹⁰
 - b. All three reached beyond the boundaries of ethnic Israel. Luke’s uses of the Elijah/Elisha motif in the rest of the gospel supports this (Luke 7:11–17 reflects the raising of the widow’s son in 1 Kgs 17:17–24 and Luke 9:52–55 shows Jesus “milder” disposition than Elijah’s fire from heaven in 2 Kgs 1:9–16).

B. Why this comparison?

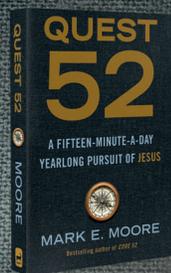
1. Malachi 4:5–6 (MT 3:23–24, cf. 4Q558) gave the impression that Elijah would usher in Yahweh. Here this eschatological prophet, who mysteriously vanished from the earth in a flaming chariot, would return to usher in the dreadful day of the Lord.
 - a. Sir 48:10 (2nd Cen B.C.), “At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob.”
 - b. 2 Esd 6:25–26 (1st Cen A.D.), “It shall be that whoever remains after all that I have foretold to you shall be saved and shall see my salvation and the end of my world. And they shall see those who were taken up, who from their birth have not tasted death; and the heart of the earth’s inhabitants shall be changed and converted to a different spirit.”
2. But where is Messiah? It appears that Elijah is the direct precursor to Yahweh.
3. It should be transparent that Jesus understood John, not himself, to be Elijah (Mark 9:11–13/Matt 17:11–13; Matt 11:14–15/Luke 7:27; Matt 17:13; Luke 1:17 and especially Matt 16:14–16/Mark 8:28–30/Luke 9:19–20).
4. So not only did Elijah break through the boundaries of Israel, his return would usher in a new eschatological era where the final act of Yahweh would play out and Jesus would be the embodiment of Yahweh! (cf. Acts 3:20–21)

C. Implications:

1. Jesus’ connection of Isaiah 61:1–2a to Elijah/Elisha is surprising. Instead of a call

⁹ Aside from these two obvious comparisons, one might also add Luke’s redactional comparison of Jesus’ raising of the widow’s son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17) with Elijah raising the widow’s son at Zarephath (cf. 1 Kgs 17:17–24) though one wonders why he jumped over the hill from Zarephath to Nain. Further attempts at multiple comparisons seem forced at best; cf. Philippe Guillaume, “Miracles Miraculously Repeated: Gospel Miracles as Duplication of Elijah-Elisha’s,” *BN* 98 (1999): 21–23.

¹⁰ Elijah was a superior miracle worker (cf. Str-B 4:2, 769). Though one could argue that Jesus looks more like Elisha than Elijah since he followed John and had the ‘double-portion’ of the Spirit; Christine E. Joynes, “A Question of Identity: ‘Who Do People Say That I Am?’ Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus in Mark’s Gospel,” in *Understanding, Studying and Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 20. This is especially true of the feeding of the 5,000 which seems to be patterned off of 2 Kgs 4:42–44 by (a) the mention of barley loaves, (2) the question by Elisha’s servant concerning how they could feed so many people, and (3) the great surplus after the feeding.



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- for Israel to repent it becomes a justification for a ministry to those outside of Israel.¹¹
2. His messianic program was not, therefore, to be a campaign of liberation of Israel through power but liberation of the marginalized through service.
 3. Thus, Jesus' Jubilee was no longer limited to Israel, it was no longer limited to economic debts, and it was no longer limited to the 49th year. While Jesus' Jubilee cannot be limited to economics, nor applied under the same stipulations of the ancient theocratic government of Israel, it would be a serious mistake to ignore the economic implications of the preaching of Jesus because he supposedly "spiritualized" Jubilee.¹²
 4. It seems significant, therefore, that in Acts 10:38 Peter describes Jesus' ministry to the first Gentile convert using the basic outline of Isaiah 61:1–2: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."

¹¹ Craig A. Evans, "Luke's Use of the Elijah/Elisha Narratives and the Ethic of Election," *JBL* 106/1 (1987): 75–83; and Larrimore C. Crockett, "Luke 4:25–27 and Jewish-Gentile Relations in Luke Acts," *JBL* 88/2 (1969): 177–183.

¹² These concerns are taken up by several theologians in response to very specific geo-economic issues; cf. David Tiede, "Proclaiming the Righteous Reign of Jesus: Luke 4 and the Justice of God," *WW* 7/1 (1987): 83–90; Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 119–123; and Samuel O. Abogunrin, "Jesus' Sevenfold Programmatic Declaration at Nazareth: An Exegesis of Luke 4.15–30 from an African Perspective," *BTh* 1/2 (2003): 225–49.