

LUKE'S THEMATIC USE OF THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

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The call of the first disciples to full-time ministry as recorded in the Gospel of Luke (5:1-11) raises two problems that are familiar to all students of the Synoptic Gospels. First, this pericope in Luke is placed in a different chronological order from that of its parallels in Matthew and Mark; and second, Luke's account is much expanded over that given in the other two Synoptics.

In the following, I shall first outline briefly the specifics of these problems, then indicate various solutions which have been proposed by NT scholars, and finally set forth my own analysis and solution.

1. *The Problems Of Chronology and a Differing Account*

With regard to the chronological order of the pericope itself within the sequence of materials in the three Synoptics, the following should be noted: In Matthew, the call to discipleship is preceded by the wilderness temptations (4:1-11) and a summary statement concerning the beginning of the Galilean ministry (vss. 12-17), and it is followed by a second summary (vss. 23-25) and by the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7). Mark similarly begins the sequence with the wilderness temptations (1:12, 13) and a beginning summary statement (vss. 14, 15), only in a shorter form than in Matthew. Then comes the call to discipleship (vss. 16-20), followed by the healing of the demoniac in the synagogue in Capernaum (vss. 21-28).

In Luke, by way of contrast, the beginning of Jesus' ministry presents a different chronology from that of Matthew and Mark. The wilderness temptations (4:1-12) and the beginning summary statement (vss. 14, 15) follow the Matthean and Marcan order. Where we find the call to discipleship at this point in the other two Synoptics, Luke records first the rejection at Nazareth (vss. 16-30),

the healing of the demoniac in the synagogue at Capernaum (vss. 31-37), the healing of Peter's mother-in-law after the synagogue service and Jesus' healing ministry to the multitude after sunset (vss. 38-41), and the summary of a preaching tour (vss. 42-44)—all of these preceding the call of the first disciples as recorded in 5:1-11.

With regard to the second problem concerning the pericope, it should be noted that whereas in Matthew and Mark the disciples Peter, Andrew, James, and John are simply called from their occupation as fishermen to become fishers of men, in Luke we find an expanded account that includes Jesus' preaching from Simon's boat, a miraculous catch of fish that nearly sinks two boats, Simon's confession of his sinfulness, and then the call to become fishers of men.

2. *Solutions Which Have Been Suggested*

The differences in the chronology and the accounts have generated a great deal of discussion. The simplest solution which has been set forth is that of seeing two different calls being extended by Jesus to the fishermen.¹ Matthew and Mark record the first call which led to the four disciples' following Jesus on a part-time basis, and returning to their livelihood of fishing on several occasions. Luke records the second call, when the disciples forsook their employment in order to become full-time associates with Jesus.

However, F. Godet observes that one is hard pressed to envision two separate calls to the same men, in which Jesus said, "I will make you fishers of men," and they in turn respond twice by *leaving all* in order to follow him. Therefore, Godet concludes that what we have is two differing accounts of the same call.²

As far as the differing accounts are concerned, I. H. Marshall suggests that Luke is following an independent source which contains a miracle story. Luke places this miracle story into a

¹Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1954), pp. 180-181; William F. Arndt, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (St. Louis, Mo., 1956), pp. 155-156.

²F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, trans. E. W. Shalders, 5th ed. (Edinburgh, [1952]), 1: 255; cf. Herschel H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1966), p. 97.

framework based on Mark, but replaces the original ending of the story with the Marcan call to discipleship.³ However, Alfred Plummer suggests that an identity between this pericope in Luke and those in Matthew and Mark can neither be affirmed nor denied, therefore we must remain in doubt as to the relationship between the call accounts of the disciples in the three Synoptics.⁴

Some commentators see a similarity between Luke's call to discipleship and John's account of the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples as they were once again fishing on the Sea of Galilee. J. M. Creed regards Luke's account as being borrowed from John 21, because several points in Luke's pericope fit John's setting better than John's account fits into Luke.⁵ C. G. Montefiore also considers this borrowing from John as a possibility.⁶ B. S. Easton notes that the similarities between Luke and John are sufficient enough to suggest a common origin, with the two differing accounts of Peter's experience originating in the oral sources, and John's account being the more original one.⁷

G. B. Caird believes that the differences between the Lucan and Johannine pericopes are more striking than the similarities. He suggests the possibility of two independent stories interacting upon one another during the course of oral tradition.⁸ Plummer takes the position that there is little probability of a uniting of two stories: "The context between all the main features of the two miracles is too great."⁹ Marshall says there is no evidence that Luke was dependent upon John. As far as the dialogue between Jesus

³I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1978), pp. 199-201; cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1971), p. 65.

⁴Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, 4th ed., ICC [29], pp. 142, 147.

⁵John Martin Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London, 1960), pp. 73-74; cf. J. Alexander Findlay, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London, 1937), p. 69.

⁶C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 2 (London, 1909): 879.

⁷Burton Scott Easton, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh, 1926), p. 62.

⁸G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Baltimore, 1963), p. 91.

⁹Plummer, p. 147.

and Peter in the two pericopes is concerned, the only common element is Jesus' command to let down the nets.¹⁰

The agreements and disagreements given above are only a sampling of the suggested solutions to the problem presented by Luke's account of the call of the first disciples. There is, however, one more proposed solution that should be noted before I put forward a suggestion of my own.

Frederick Danker detects a thematic parallelism in the structure of Luke. He points to chap. 5 as one example of this thesis, where Simon stands out as the recipient of mercy in a "thematically integrated series" of such recipients. He receives absolution following his self-proclaimed sinfulness by an invitation to share in the mission of Jesus. Simon's experience (5:1-11) is paralleled by the experience of the paralytic (vss. 17-26), both finding forgiveness of sin. The cleansing of the leper (vss. 12-16) is paralleled by the call of Levi (vss. 27-29), and both are typical examples "of religious and social outcasts." So Danker sees the pattern **a-b-a-b** (Simon, leper, paralytic, Levi). This series reaches its climax in the "thematically integrating logion of vs. 32 (I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance)."¹¹

Based on Danker's proposal, we would conclude that Luke located his version of the call to discipleship in its present position in order to achieve the literary structure **a-b-a-b**, thus developing the theme of divine mercy.

3. *The Motif of Release*

Danker is close to the solution I wish to propose. Both the chronological location and the differing account of the call of the disciples are indeed thematic, but this pericope is only one of a series (4:31-6:11) used thematically. The themes of the pericopes have their roots in Luke's account of Jesus' visit to his home town of Nazareth and his reading from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue.

It has long been suggested that the home-town visit (4:16-30) should be seen as programmatic. Norval Geldenhuys remarks that

¹⁰Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 200.

¹¹Frederick W. Danker, *Luke* (Philadelphia, 1976), p. 91.

the sermon at Nazareth “announced the programme of the kingdom of God so clearly that Luke removed it from its Marcan sequence to place it in the forefront of his account of Christ’s ministry.”¹² W. J. Harrington comments that the text read from Isaiah effectively outlines the work of the Messiah and the age of salvation.¹³ Marshall notes that the “internal features” of this pericope suggest that it is not in its original position. However, the narrative is placed by Luke where it is because of its programmatic significance, and because “it contains many of the main themes of Luke-Acts *in nuce*.”¹⁴ Montefiore says that in this pericope Jesus proclaims his mission: “He is not (according to Luke) the ‘political’ Messiah; he is no warrior king and deliverer. He is the servant of God whose mission it is to bring to the poor and the afflicted spiritual enlightenment and salvation.”¹⁵

The programmatic passage read from Isa 61:1, 2 and 58:6 states, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and the recovery of sight to the blind; to bring release to those broken by calamity, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

I would like to suggest that Luke arranges the pericopes found in 4:31-6:11 thematically so that they become his interpretation of this passage from Isaiah. With the arrangement of these pericopes, Luke clarifies the significance of this prophetic statement as it relates to Jesus and his ministry. The emphasis, however, seems to be placed on the statement from Isa 61:2, “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” This is taken by Luke as a proclamation of freedom. We do not have space here to examine each pericope in 4:31-6:11 to see how the motif of freedom is developed, but let me suggest for the present that three aspects of the motif of release are developed: 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).

¹²Geldenhuis, p. 170; cf. Easton, p. 50.

¹³Wilfrid J. Harrington, *A Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York, 1967), p. 88.

¹⁴Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, pp. 177-178.

¹⁵Montefiore, p. 873.

4. *Call to Discipleship and the Release-from-Sin Motif*

It is generally recognized that the call of the first disciples marks the beginning of the Christian ministry. Where the accounts in Matthew and Mark simply proclaim its beginning, it is thought that the account in Luke portrays the degree of success that the disciples will have in proclaiming the gospel. Some commentators look to the miraculous catch of fish as the reason why Luke records this differing account of the call to discipleship. John Drury says that Jesus' command to Peter to launch out into the deep is Luke's portrayal of the church "launching out beyond the home waters of religion and Judaism." The theme is one of an expanding mission of the church.¹⁶

Although this motif may be perceived in Luke's pericope, one wonders if this is the main reason for his differing account. Can this motif explain Luke's relocation of this pericope? I would suggest that the miraculous catch of fish is an important element in this pericope, but only as it lays the foundation for the confession of Peter's sinfulness. William Manson is correct when he says, "The centre of interest in this section is the profound moral crisis effected in the soul of Peter who, overwhelmed by the supernatural prescience of this teacher of faith in the power of God, cries, 'Lord leave me; for I am a sinful man.'"¹⁷

By seeing Peter's confession of his sinfulness as the climax and central point in this pericope, we can now explain its relocation and its independence from Matthew and Mark. Marshall is no doubt correct when he says that Luke took this pericope from an independent source.¹⁸ However, there is no need to see this pericope as a miracle story that Luke altered by dropping the original ending and replacing it with Mark's call to discipleship. Godet is probably correct that what we have is two differing accounts of the same call.¹⁹

This pericope was juxtaposed to the pericopes of the leper and the paralytic for thematic purposes. The pericope of the leper

¹⁶John Drury, *Luke* (New York, 1973), p. 62; cf. Arndt, p. 155; Creed, p. 73.

¹⁷William Manson, *The Gospel of Luke* (New York, 1930), pp. 47-48.

¹⁸Marshall, *Luke: Historian*, p. 65.

¹⁹Godet, p. 255.

(5:12-16) deals with the theme of sin. Leprosy was seen as a symbol of sin, i.e., the result of the curse of God against sin. The pericope of the paralytic (5:17-26) shows that Jesus possesses the authority to deal with the sin problem.

5. Summary

The reading of the Isaiah scroll in Nazareth is programmatic. Luke sees its fulfillment in the ministry of Jesus, especially the final line read from the scroll, "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Luke sees this proclamation as an announcement of release from the captivity of Satan (4:31-44), release from the power of sin (5:1-32), and release from cultic traditions (5:33-6:11).

The differing account of the call of the first disciples and its relocation in Luke's chronology gives us a unit of four pericopes that deal with the issue of sin. Peter's admission of his sinfulness (5:1-11) raises the problem of sinners accepting the invitation of Jesus to enter his kingdom and to become co-workers with him. The pericope of the cleansed leper (vss. 12-16) shows how God solves the problem. As leprosy is a symbol of sin and Jesus touches the leper while healing him (vs. 13), so God personally will come into contact with sin in order to bring cleansing from its defilement. The pericope of the paralytic raises the question as to whether Jesus possesses authority to deal with the sin problem. Jesus puts this authority to the test when he asks his antagonists, "What is easier, to say, Your sins are forgiven, or to say, Rise up and walk?" (vs. 23). When the paralytic arose and walked, the issue of Jesus' authority was settled.

The series of pericopes that deal with the theme of sin now closes with the call of Levi to join the other disciples (5:27-32). Levi's response shows the extent to which the gospel call is to be extended. As Jesus freely associated with Levi and his publican friends at a great banquet prepared in his honor, the climax of Luke's interpretation of this segment of Isaiah's words is reached with Jesus saying, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:32).

Danker is quite right in pointing out that in the Gospel of Luke we must see the thematic significance of the call to discipleship. However, it is not necessarily a literary parallel, **a-b-a-b**.

Rather, it is an interpretive attempt on the part of Luke to show his understanding that the words of Isaiah read by Jesus were a proclamation of Jesus' ministry.