

LUKE 4

Luke 4:1–13. The Temptations

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 230–236.

The verses that treat the temptations focus on control—not only on Jesus’s discipline of Himself but also on His harnessing of matters beyond Himself (animals, kingdoms). At the front, in the emphatic position, we encounter Jesus’s storied effort to control His appetites by fasting. Subduing His appetites as He begins His ministry will serve Him well as time goes on and will also stand as an example to His followers. For, as an angel prophesied about one hundred fifty years before this moment, “he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer” (Mosiah 3:7). In a way, we suppose, Jesus was testing the limits of His physical being as He gathered Himself to step into His public ministry.

A second matter has to do with Jesus’s steely determination to remain obedient to His Father. This dimension arises clearly in His oft-repeated references to obeying God: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God. . . . Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God. . . . Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God” (Luke 4:4, 8, 12). Thus, Jesus’s words disclose that the temptation not to obey God runs through His encounter with the devil.

A third issue concerns elements of this world that lie beyond Jesus’s person. Although Luke does not make evident Jesus’s interaction with the natural order during these momentous days, Mark does so when he writes that Jesus “was with the wild beasts” (Mark 1:13). This expression forms a clear pointer to the messianic age when all of nature will be at peace (Isaiah 11:6–9). In his turn, Luke dwells on how the Savior will interact with the human world through the latter two temptations. One has to do with the

kingdoms of this world, whose tinsel, noisy allurements Jesus resists. The other features the temptation that Jesus announce His messiahship in a spectacular public manner by jumping off a pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. Again, Jesus resists the obvious popular admiration that will surely come to him in the aftermath of such a spectacle. His messiahship will not follow the fawning paths of the world.

A fourth dimension signals Jesus's ability to deal with the powers of the unseen world. The fact that the devil comes personally to the wilderness where Jesus is and the later note that Satan possesses a "kingdom" (Luke 11:18) both underscore this dimension. For the duration of His ministry, the Savior will face unseen powers in the form of "devils, or the evil spirits which dwell in the hearts of the children of men" (Mosiah 3:6; also 1 Nephi 11:31). In each future meeting, the minions of Satan will try to challenge and draw down Jesus's powers. The story of the temptations thus frames Luke's first written notice of Jesus's encountering this unseen world and triumphing over it. This triumph over the devil and his agents frames one of the chief reasons for His mortal ministry (see the notes on Luke 11:21–22).

On another level, virtually the whole of chapter 4 deals with Jesus's power and authority. It is the devil who presents and presses this pair of issues by claiming authority—he, of course, possesses a form of authority and even a "kingdom" where he exercises it—and then offering it to Jesus: "That [authority] is delivered unto me," hisses the devil. If Jesus complies with this request, the devil temptingly promises, "All this power [authority] will I give thee" (Luke 4:6). But rather than taking up the devil's vacant claims and resolving them on the spot, Jesus simply pushes away the issues by quoting scripture: "It is written." Significantly—and this point is most important—Jesus resolves the question of who truly holds authority and power later, inside synagogues (see the notes on Luke 4:18, 16–30; 5:24).

After the temptations and the posturing and the grandiose assertions by the devil, Luke follows the Savior into two synagogues, where Jesus finally confronts the devil's claims. Within the walls of synagogues and the religious institutions of Jesus's world, not the devil's, Jesus discloses first His divine authority and then His power. For after Jesus "returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee," we find Him first "on the sabbath day" in the Nazareth synagogue, where He announces Himself. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," He declares, "because he hath anointed me" (Luke 4:14, 16, 18). Here is the grand announcement of the ages; here, on this man, rests God's holy authority; here, with this man, comes God's Spirit. Then, after congregants forcefully reject Jesus at Nazareth, Luke follows Him into the Capernaum synagogue, where in a tingling moment of disclosure, He casts out "a spirit of an unclean devil" from a man. Those present in that synagogue, although "amazed," recognize that Jesus's powerful act exhibits "authority and power" (verses 33, 36).

Within this sequence of events, the reader comes to recognize that the Savior chooses to announce His authority and power inside the institution of the synagogue, an institution of devotion and worship and ordinances and sanctifying learning. This is the proper place for God's Spirit and its holy manifestations; this is the proper place for ordinances and their enduring influence; this is the proper place for sacred teaching and learning. On one level, the reports from the synagogues in Nazareth and Capernaum settle

the questions of true power and authority, questions that the devil first throws to Jesus in the wilderness. On another, we see that God's authority and power are manifested in institutions of worship—in this case, synagogues—that enjoy the authorizing presence of the Savior. It is an easy step from the synagogue to the church. For at this point, the distance between the synagogue where Jesus and His contemporaries worship and the church that will arise from His work is paper thin.

The issue of Luke's sources arises when we ask about the order of the temptations that he preserves. At first glance, Luke appears to follow the details of Matthew's account but rearranges the order of the temptations. Matthew's arrangement is bread, pinnacle, mountain; Luke's ordering is bread, mountain, pinnacle. Mark reports merely that Jesus is "in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan," with no mention of fasting or of the individual temptations (Mark 1:13). Setting aside the introductory lines in Matthew and Luke, which do not match (see Matthew 4:1–2; Luke 4:1–2), we focus on three other elements. The first has to do with how Matthew and Luke reproduce Jesus's introduction of Deuteronomy 6:16: "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God," a line that responds to the devil's suggestion that Jesus jump from the temple's pinnacle. Matthew writes, "Jesus said unto him, It is written" (Matthew 4:7). In contrast, Luke records Jesus as saying, "It is said" (Luke 4:12), which brings an entirely different cast to the scene. There is little value in speculating which Gospel writer is correct. We simply notice that the two reports differ in how Jesus introduces the quotation. At base, Luke's report supports a view that Jesus not only carries the living voice of God within Himself but especially understands that the written scripture consists of God's living, authoritative words, which in effect speak audibly, even loudly, to an attuned reader.

The second concerns the phrase "into an high mountain." The phrase is original in Matthew's account (see Matthew 4:8), but because it does not appear in the earliest manuscripts of Luke, it was possibly added to his Gospel by a later hand to harmonize it with Matthew's report (see Luke 4:5). The phrase is vivid and gives context to the devil's temptation. From our perspective, Luke would have added this important color to his account if he knew it, especially because of its connection with holiness or sacred space. Hence, it seems that Luke or his source was not aware of this detail. However, the temptation at a "pinnacle of the temple" does tie to a sacred spot and, additionally, to a height that carries its own sense of holiness. Here we behold the devil's effort to create a counterfeit experience by mimicking that which belongs to the realm of God.

The third and final expression is "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Luke 4:8). Theologian I. Howard Marshall is probably right that these words form the conclusion of the series of temptations and establish Matthew's order as original.¹ If so, then we have to explain Luke's quotation of these words of Jesus either as an attempt by a later hand to harmonize Luke's account of the mountain scene with Matthew's or, if they are original with Luke, as his conscious placement of these words in the middle of the temptations where they seem out of place. In either case, Luke is not following Matthew's order and thus is likely not following an earlier document that he and Matthew might each have consulted and drawn upon.

The final item to treat consists of Jesus's quotations of scripture. What strikes the reader first is the devil's willingness to quote a scriptural passage in order to confer a sense of celestial purpose on his words. But Jesus quickly overturns this trickery. The devil's quotation of Psalm 91:11–12 elicits the Savior's quotation of Deuteronomy 6:16 (in Luke 4:10–12), a passage taken from the law that overpowers any passage from the Psalms, as the order of Jesus's words about the divisions of scripture illustrates in Luke 24:44 ("the law . . . the prophets . . . the psalms").

Luke 4:14–30. Return to Nazareth

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 251–257.

The Savior's visit to Nazareth stands as the radiant centerpiece of Luke's Gospel. This visit displays all the important strands of Jesus's ministry, highlighting the grand tapestry of His teachings and miracles, His life and redeeming death. In the first place, He comes to Nazareth to undrape His messiahship and chooses the synagogue to do so, the one place in the town where, within a few moments, He turns acquaintances into witnesses. Jesus's chosen pattern of teaching in synagogues where He can reach many is one essential thread that will become visible again and again in Luke's report.

Further, in Nazareth Jesus puts His stamp on the character of His ministry. Only days before, He withstands the temptations to aggrandize Himself by performing a miracle and to draw followers by a dazzling public display from the temple's pinnacle. In Nazareth He faces the very same temptations, this time to satisfy the expectations of friends, people whom He loves and who will surely support His ambitions. Instead, He demonstrates that His powers are not for mere display but that His earnest exertions will be to deliver "the poor" and "the brokenhearted" and "the captives" (Luke 4:18). His ministry will be to those in need of His aid who will accept it. To be sure, He will offer the "recovering of sight to the blind," which on one level means drawing on His miraculous powers (verse 18). But such acts will answer to a searching person's need for spiritual sight, as a blind person seeks and relishes light and sight.

In addition to His announcement about His authority, the Savior weaves a subtle but direct reference about His powers into His remarks. He cites the biblical stories of Elijah's nourishing stay with the widow of Sarepta during a famine and Elisha's healing of Naaman the Syrian leper (see 1 Kings 17:8–16; 2 Kings 5:1–14). The congregation, of course, reacts negatively to these references because they highlight Gentiles. But Jesus is appealing to more than Gentiles who received heavenly blessings. He is lifting up a clear reference to divine powers that He will match during His unfolding ministry, powers that will preserve and enrich people's lives. The first manifestation will occur a week or two later in the Capernaum synagogue, but the announcement rings through the Nazareth synagogue at the very moment He frames the proclamation of His authority. In this moment, He has fully engaged the devil's earlier challenge to His authority.

The Savior's featuring of the widow in Sarepta emphasizes His compassionate intentions. Drawing attention to her and to her situation is plainly purposeful, carrying the subtle message that on a spiritual level, He has come to deliver individuals from death-dealing hunger and illness, to heal people from spiritual lack. More openly, Jesus ties Himself to the enormous powers that Elijah exhibited, though He holds them back in Nazareth. In addition, as in the case of most widows, the woman of Sarepta is invisible inside the larger society, except for her presence in this story. By pointing to her, Jesus pushes forward the message that He has come to meet the needs of the little-noticed, the vulnerable.

In this connection, the Savior's powers emerge into the full light of day, but not in a form that we might anticipate. As we have seen, it is plain that people in Nazareth expected Jesus to perform a miracle as He had elsewhere (Luke 4:23). His refusal only heightens the drama of what finally happens: the expected miracle occurs in a way that the angry crowd cannot see—right in front of their dimming eyes. As they furiously seek His death and roughly lead Him to “the brow of the hill,” He turns and passes “through the midst of them [and] went his way” (verses 29–30). That He escapes is astonishing. That He calls on His powers to rescue (in this case to rescue Himself) is plainly evident from the account, though Luke does not report it as a miracle. Yet a miracle occurs within plain sight of the townspeople, one that they refuse to recognize because of their newly aroused ire.

The crowd's stormy response to the Savior elucidates another irrepressible theme that pushes through Luke's narrative—rejection. This response affects mostly the disciples, for we behold some of the intensifying exasperation that builds within the circle of the Twelve when, after villagers in Samaria refuse them customary hospitality, “James and John . . . said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them?” Gratefully, Jesus was in control of His emotions and, after rebuking the two brothers, declared that “the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them” (Luke 9:54, 56).

With rejection, death also raises its frightful countenance as a major theme to be fulfilled at the end of the Gospel. Although Jesus does not die at the brow of the hill as a result of the congregants' actions, it is the people's intent to kill or seriously injure Him, as opponents will succeed in doing at Jerusalem. His death becomes more explicit when He, in transfigured form, speaks with Moses and Elijah “of his decease.” It is also explicit when Jesus draws the Twelve to Himself and intones, “We go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished” (Luke 9:31; 18:31).

The Savior's citation of Isaiah 61 in the synagogue highlights a compelling link, this one bonding to Melchizedek. One of the fragmentary texts—now titled Melchizedek Commentary—that has come out of Cave XI at Qumran at the Dead Sea consists of a commentary on a series of Old Testament passages that envision Melchizedek and those of his “lot” fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah embedded within Isaiah 61:1–3. That is, Melchizedek will “proclaim liberty to the captives,” meaning that he will “free them from [the debt] of all their iniquities.” Moreover, he will be the messenger of God who comes to “comfort the

afflicted” by instructing them “in all the ages of the wo[rld].” Plainly, in the view of the people of Qumran, a person of the “lot” of Melchizedek, one who bears his priesthood, is to fulfill the expectations envisioned in Isaiah 61. Whether Jesus is aware of the thinking that comes to be embedded in this document is unknown. However, by quoting lines from Isaiah 61, He shows that He stands within a shared stream of Jewish expectations about a Messiah who is tied to Melchizedek and his lofty priesthood.

To take this observation one step further, when Jesus announces who He is by declaring, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21), He brings the entire focus of His people’s expressed and unexpressed expectations directly onto Himself. He is the Expected One who will bring promised relief, who will offer sweet freedom, who will give reassuring comfort. In light of the words of the Melchizedek text, Jesus also fulfills the expectation that this person will come as a Melchizedek who is both “king of Salem”—that is, a king of peace—and “the priest of the most high God” (Genesis 14:18; Hebrews 7:1). In a word, the Savior comes as both king and priest, the righteous ruler, when fulfilling Isaiah 61.

Luke 4:31–37. Healing in the Capernaum Synagogue

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 261–262.

In a twist of irony, Luke informs us that demons know who the Savior is but that some humans do not. This situation explains in some measure why Jesus is misunderstood and rejected by many in His own society. For some reason, even with a physical witness, people do not or will not see Jesus for who He is. Luke does not impute motives to such people; he simply reports the gap between what Jesus says and does and how people perceive Him. To be sure, those who witness Jesus’s teaching and miraculous powers must have begun to ask whether He is the Expected One. But curiosity about Him—even joy over what He offers—in contrast to rock-hard loyalty to Him represent very different textures in connections between people.

Even so, Jesus makes witnesses of the most casual observers. Beginning with His major announcement in the Nazareth synagogue and continuing with His efforts in the Capernaum synagogue, He creates first-rank witnesses of His divine character. Though people might reject Him or simply be amazed at His powers, they have seen firsthand the palpable evidences of His ministry. This aspect fits tightly with the Gospel’s prior emphasis that as God’s work begins to unfold, He clusters witnesses about important events so that it is evident through all sectors of society that He is beginning to stir His work to life. We think of the relatives and neighbors of Elisabeth and Zacharias and the acquaintances of both the shepherds and Simeon and Anna.

It is curious that Jesus performs this miracle on the Sabbath in a synagogue while those needing His help wait respectfully until the Sabbath ends to come to Him (Luke 4:40). After all, a prohibition against

work of any kind has grown up as a part of Sabbath observance in Jesus's day. We see it surface in the accounts of His healing the man with the withered hand, the bent-over woman, and the man with dropsy—each occurring on a Sabbath.² In such cases, of course, He appeals to the need of animal owners to care for their animals on the Sabbath as justification for His merciful acts (Luke 13:15; 14:5). Hence, in the Capernaum synagogue, He evidently sees a desperate need in a fellow human that overpowers the strictures of the then customary Sabbath observance.

We wonder how observers perceived the Savior's miracle of casting out the unclean devil (Luke 4:33–35). To some, the act may have seemed modest. After all, Jesus acknowledges the work of other exorcists elsewhere, an apparently common phenomenon in the society (Luke 11:19). We read of such exorcists whom Paul meets (Acts 19:13–16). To others, Jesus's action forms a bright signal that He can make a difference in the lives of those afflicted with disease and demons (Luke 4:40–41). Further, the power of Jesus's miracles, begun here by Jesus's liberating a man who has evidently suffered for a long time, will increase in the next two chapters until opponents cannot let them pass without a fight (Luke 6:11; 13:14).

As a town, Capernaum lies between the Sea of Galilee and hills that rise to the north, bounding a rather narrow but gently sloping plain a few hundred meters wide. It stands next to one of the more important local roads that passes through this part of Galilee, making it an inviting stop for travelers. Much of the reason for the town's existence, therefore, ties to regional trade and fishing. In fact, because Capernaum sits only two miles west of the crossing where the upper Jordan River enters the Sea of Galilee (which stream serves as a territorial border between Galilee and Gaulanitis), a customs station stands just to the east of the town, where officials collect tax revenues from merchants who carry goods across the frontier. It was at this customs station that Jesus called Levi to the Twelve (Luke 5:27–28).

Luke 4:38–44. Healing Peter's Mother-in-Law and Townspeople

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 264, 267–268.

The two verses, Luke 4:38–39, frame a pair of important dimensions in Luke's rehearsal. First, they continue the story of the Savior's miraculous powers that He first unwraps in the synagogue just minutes before the scene in Peter's home. This element in Luke's report will soon expand beyond the healing of the man with the unclean demon and the woman with a high fever to include (among other manifestations) Jesus's powers to reverse the severe, lifelong disabilities of a quadriplegic individual and blind people as well as to intervene with the forces of nature in quieting a storm on the Sea of Galilee.³

Second, they serve as a prelude to the miracle of the fishes that elevates Peter from being just an admirer to being a deeply committed disciple (Luke 5:1–11). To this point, Peter has heard Jesus teach in the Capernaum synagogue and has witnessed the two miracles on the same Sabbath day. And He will yet

see the miracles that follow at the end of that Sabbath (4:40–41). In Luke’s recounting, all these events stand as a perfect prologue to the first stunning conversion experience that he will narrate in the next chapter—that of Peter himself.

In Luke 4:40–44, the Savior’s ministry steps off the small, limited stage of Capernaum’s synagogue and reaches out to embrace those who live more than a Sabbath day’s journey from the city, a restricted distance of approximately a kilometer. This shift signals a widening path of activity. Moreover, during a single Sabbath, Capernaum becomes the center point for Jesus’s exertions for He performs two healings there and then welcomes those who come specifically to the town from outlying areas because they hear of His remarkable powers. Subtly woven into the pattern of these verses sits the imposing question of Sabbath observance: How will Jesus treat the Sabbath? The fact that those who come to Him for healing travel only at the end of the Sabbath (“when the sun was setting” [Luke 4:40]) implies a deep respect for its sanctity. Jesus evidently reverences the custom of limited travel on the Sabbath, a custom that rests on “let no man go out of his place on the seventh day” (Exodus 16:29), but He is about to overlay the Sabbath with His own divine view of the day’s significance in people’s lives—a view that will jolt some of His hearers (see the notes on Luke 6:2 and 6:5).

In fact, He has begun. When He strides away from the threatening crowd in Nazareth on a Sabbath, He exerts powers that protect Him and ward off hostile acts. When He casts the demon out of the possessed man in the Capernaum synagogue, He performs a merciful act for the man through action. When He graciously heals Peter’s mother-in-law following the worship service, He pulls celestial energies down onto this woman. The last two instances bring forward Jesus’s willingness to aid others on the Sabbath day, a type of aid that His critics will eventually challenge. Although these people have not yet begun to raise their shrill, chilling voices, Jesus’s healings on this Sabbath form a warm, glowing prelude to more miracles and, inversely, to the cold hatred that is coming.

In a sense, the disrupting voices of the demons also point to the criticisms that will dog Jesus’s ministry. In the demons’ case, their noisy protests reveal their grasp of who Jesus is, an understanding that humans do not yet enjoy. In a way, their loud outbursts work to Jesus’s advantage, drawing attention to Him as a worker of mercy. This observation stands against the now widespread idea that Jesus muzzled the demons to preserve the secret of His messiahship. By Luke’s account, Jesus allows them to say enough so that those who are willing to pay attention will learn who He is. In addition, Jesus has already announced publicly who He is in Nazareth. In Luke’s recounting of events, there is no secret about the true identity of the Savior.

Notes

- 1 I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 172.
- 2 See the notes on Luke 6:9; 13:14–16; 14:3.
- 3 Luke 5:18–26; 7:22; 8:22–25.

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