

Release from the Debt of Sin: Jesus' Jubilee Mission in the Gospel of Luke

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DURING THIS present era, when the distance between the specialized fields of biblical scholarship and dogmatic theology has seen much widening, Joseph Ratzinger has often recommended the twofold approach to Scripture outlined in *Dei Verbum* 12—an approach that synthesizes a historical reading of the Bible with a theological one.¹ On the one hand, since God speaks to men in a human fashion, the interpreter of Scripture must “carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind” (*Dei Verbum* 12). This involves a close consideration of the literary forms, the historical context, and the modes of narration and expression common in the time of the sacred writer.² But on the other hand, since Scripture also has a divine author, it must be interpreted in light of the same Spirit by whom it was written—the same Holy Spirit who inspires the rest of Scripture and animates the Church’s sacred Tradition throughout the ages. Thus, *Dei Verbum* 12 affirms that the interpretation of Scripture must consider the content and unity of the Bible, the living Tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith.³

Along these lines, Gary Anderson’s work *Sin: A History* is quite encouraging, for it offers some positive examples of how a thorough, historical reading of Scripture can be at the service of a theological interpretation

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict” in Joseph Ratzinger, *God’s Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 96–97; *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xv–xxiii; Pope Benedict XVI, Address during the 14th General Congregation of the Synod of Bishops (October 14, 2008).

² See Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” 96; *Jesus of Nazareth*, xv.

³ See Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” 97; *Jesus of Nazareth*, xiii–xx.

that considers the Church's Tradition.⁴ In particular, Anderson shows how "debt" as a biblical metaphor for sin can shed light on later developments in Catholic atonement theology. In this article, I will apply this chief insight from Anderson to the third Gospel in order to demonstrate how Luke sets up, not just individual passages, but Jesus' entire redemptive mission as a ministry of release from the debt that is most problematic from a biblical standpoint—the debt of sin.

To accomplish this task, we will begin by focusing on Jesus' Sabbath-day teaching in the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4:16–30 and we will show how this foundational scene defines, to a large extent, the nature of Jesus' ministry in the third Gospel. Then we will consider how in this programmatic scene, Jesus describes his mission in terms of the hopes surrounding the Jubilee year. In this section, we will, first, briefly explore how the prophet Isaiah, whom Jesus quotes in the Nazareth synagogue (Lk 4:18–19), used Jubilee year imagery to express eschatological hopes. The Jubilee legislation itself (see Lv 25; Dt 15) brought release from debt and slavery and restoration of family land to those individuals who fell into financial trouble; Isaiah drew upon and expanded these themes to express hopes that God would liberate his people from the nations, freeing them from oppression and restoring the Promised Land to Israel (as seen most clearly in Isaiah 61:1–2). Second, we will see that, at least in some later Jewish texts such as Daniel 9 and 11QMelchizedek from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the expected Jubiliary release from debt was spiritualized to be understood as a release from the debt of sin—a point at the heart of Anderson's overall project.

Indeed, this is a key background for understanding the way Jesus, in his foundational teaching in the Nazareth synagogue, frames his own ministry with Jubilee year imagery. In particular, we will see that Jesus depicts his ministry against the backdrop of the Jubilee year "release" (*aphesis*)—a technical word describing the Jubiliary release from debt and a word used twice in Luke 4:18. Significantly, everywhere else this key word is used in Luke-Acts, it denotes release from sin. Thus, in light of Luke's overall narrative strategy, Jesus' mission as announced in Luke 4 is one which involves release from the debt of sin in a manner reminiscent of the Jubilee release from debt and slavery.

Luke 4:18–19: Part of a Programmatic Text for Luke-Acts

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' allusions to the Jubilee year begin in his Sabbath-day sermon in a Nazareth synagogue (Lk 4:16–30)—a passage that is commonly recognized as having central importance for the third Gospel.

⁴ Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

In 1960 Hans Conzelmann called 4:18 in particular “one of the programmatic passages which describes the ministry of Jesus.”⁵ Similarly, in that same year, Gunther Bornkamm wrote that in this passage, which presents Christ drawing from the prophet Isaiah (Is 61:1–2), Luke “expressly set down the relevant word of the prophet as the governing text of all Jesus’ works.”⁶

Insights from more recent scholarship have confirmed and deepened our understanding of the foundational character of this passage for Luke’s Gospel. First, this passage serves as the first episode Luke narrates in detail from the public ministry of Jesus, and its importance on that account has often been noted.⁷ Second, it is placed right on the heels of the summary statement in 4:14–15—and so further indicates the importance of our passage for Luke’s Gospel. The summary statement provides the following synopsis of Jesus’ overall ministry in Galilee: “And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out throughout all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all” (Lk 4:14–15). What is significant for our purposes is how the summary highlights that Jesus “taught in the synagogues.” This is important because in the very next verse—the verse that introduces our scene of Jesus’ Sabbath-day teaching in Nazareth—Luke reports that Jesus “went to the synagogue” (Lk 4:16). Immediately following the summary statement about Jesus teaching in synagogues, Luke sets up the Nazareth episode by noting that Jesus was giving instruction in a synagogue. This indicates that the account of Jesus’ teaching in Nazareth is intended to serve as a “snapshot” of Christ’s overall synagogue ministry or as what Tannehill calls “the primary illustration of what Jesus was saying when teaching in the synagogues.”⁸

⁵ Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Luke*, trans. G. Buswell (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 221.

⁶ Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. I. and F. McLuskey and J. M. Robinson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 75.

⁷ For example, Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 526; Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 61; Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 207; Patrick Miller, “An Exposition of Luke 4:16–21,” *Interpretation* 29 (1975): 417–21.

⁸ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 61. Tannehill also notes how Luke reports a ministry in the synagogue which was repeated over a period of time, as seen in the imperfect tense used in 4:15: “he was teaching in their synagogues.” He concludes that this might indicate that “Jesus has been saying such things for some time” (60–61). If so, this would further underscore how Luke 4:18–19 serves as the key example of Jesus’ regular synagogue teaching.

Moreover, the third Gospel often notes Christ's ministry in the synagogues (4:15, 31–37, 44; 6:6; 13:10–17), but in no passage except 4:17–18 does Luke narrate the content of that teaching. “Hence, here we have an exemplar of the sort of message Jesus proclaimed in synagogues throughout his public ministry.”⁹ This may be further supported by the phrase “as his custom was” in 4:16, which refers back to Jesus’ regular practice of teaching in the synagogues in 4:15 and “makes the Nazareth scene into a concrete exemplification of Jesus’ Galilean synagogue teaching ministry.”¹⁰

Finally, the scene itself embodies key features of Jesus’ entire public ministry. The Nazareth episode contains a general statement about Jesus’ mission which points to the kinds of actions he will perform in his public ministry: preaching good news (4:43–44), preaching good news *to the poor* (7:22; cf. 6:20), giving sight to the blind (7:22; 18:35), releasing people from various forms of captivity (political, social, demoniac—discussed below). Later summary statements about Jesus’ ministry point back to this episode (Lk 7:21–22; Acts 10:38), showing that “Jesus is continually doing what he was sent to do, according to his declaration in the Nazareth synagogue.”¹¹ Moreover, Jesus’ general statement about his mission is followed by an initial acceptance (“All spoke well of him”—4:22) and an eventual rejection (4:28–29). This two-part response anticipates how Jesus will be received in his ministry. Many will initially accept him, but he ultimately will be rejected in Jerusalem.¹²

⁹ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 207.

¹⁰ John Nolland, *Luke* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 195. Luke indicates that not only was it Jesus’ custom to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath, but also it was his common practice to teach there—to be the one who “stood up and read” (4:16). Green notes, “The reference in v. 15 to Jesus’ *teaching* in their synagogues points in this direction.” Joel Green, “Proclaiming Repentance and Forgiveness to all the Nations,” in *The Mission of the Church in Methodist Perspective*, ed. Alan Padgett (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 24 n. 26. This would underscore “the paradigmatic quality of this episode, both in regard to his Sabbath practices, and with regard to the content of his proclamation.” Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 209.

¹¹ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 63.

¹² “Luke has deliberately put this story at the beginning of the public ministry to encapsulate the entire ministry of Jesus and the reaction to it. The fulfillment story stresses the success of his teaching under the guidance of the Spirit, but the rejection story symbolizes the opposition that his ministry will evoke among his own. The rejection of him by the people of his hometown is a miniature of the rejection of him by the people of his own *patris* in the larger sense.” Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 529.

Jesus and the Jubilee

In this paradigmatic passage, Jesus presents his ministry against the backdrop of some prophetic hopes associated with the year of Jubilee. In this section we will see that Jesus picks up on a tradition of using Jubilee imagery to express eschatological hopes—hopes that, at least in some cases, involve release from a debt understood in a moral or spiritual way.¹³

Jubilee Themes in Isaiah

The foundational legislation for the Jubilee in Leviticus 25 addresses the problem of an Israelite who falls into various degrees of financial debt, ranging from having to sell his land to becoming a debt slave.¹⁴ The Jubilee year called for the release of slaves, cancellation of debts, the fallowing of the land, and the returning of the land to its original owner or family every fifty years. This legislation particularly helped those who never recovered financially and did not have a kinsman redeemer who could pay their debt to redeem their land for them.

More important, however, for understanding Jesus' announcement in Nazareth is the metaphoric way later Jewish writers used Jubilee year imagery. Prophetic and other texts in the post-exilic period move "away from more literal applications of the Jubilee legislation to the employment of jubiliary themes to signify the eschatological deliverance of God."¹⁵ One theme that developed was that of the indebted man envisioned in Leviticus 25 becoming a symbol for the whole people of Israel, who are spiritually in debt to the Lord for transgressing the covenant. This is seen in the latter part of Isaiah (Is 40–66), which often depicts Israel as a debt slave, the exile as a period of slavery, the end of the exile as an act of redemption and the Lord as the kinsman redeemer.¹⁶ Isaiah 50:1, for example, explicitly uses the debt metaphor to describe Israel's sin:

Thus says the Lord. . . .
 "which of my *creditors* is it
 to whom I have *sold* you?
 Behold, for your iniquities you were *sold*."

¹³ For an excellent, thorough study of the Jubilee throughout the Old Testament and into the Second Temple period, see John Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

¹⁴ For other references to the Jubilee in the Pentateuch, see also Leviticus 27:16–25 and the "year of release" in Deuteronomy 15 as well as Numbers 27:1–11; 36:1–12.

¹⁵ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 212.

¹⁶ The root "to redeem" is used twenty-two times in Isaiah 40–66; thirteen of those are occurrences as a divine title, "Redeemer." John Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 192.

Similarly, Isaiah 49:7–9 portrays the Lord as acting as redeemer, carrying out a Jubilee on behalf of Israel, who is envisioned as a slave under the nations:

Thus says the Lord,
 the *redeemer* of Israel and his Holy One,
 to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
 the *servant* of rulers. . . .
 “[I]n a day of salvation I have helped you;
 I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,
 to establish [*restore*] *the land*,
 to apportion the desolate heritages;
 saying to the prisoners, ‘Come forth,’
 to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’”

Finally, Isaiah 61 stands as the text that represents “the most widely recognized biblical allusion to the jubilee outside of the Pentateuch.”¹⁷ Whereas in Isaiah 49:7–9 the Lord is the one enacting the Jubilee provisions, in Isaiah 61:1–3 it is the Lord’s representative: the one anointed with the Spirit.¹⁸

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
 because the Lord has anointed me
 to bring good tidings to the afflicted;
 he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
 to proclaim *liberty* to the captives
 and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
 to proclaim the *year of the Lord’s favour*;
 and the day of vengeance of our God;
 to comfort all who mourn.

Here, the anointed one of Isaiah 61 is envisioned as personally enacting the Jubilee. The work he will accomplish is certainly reminiscent of Jubilee year themes. First, he comes “to proclaim liberty.” This exact phrase is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Old Testament only in Leviticus 25 (which gives the Jubilee legislation) and Jeremiah 34 (which narrates King Zedekiah’s release of the Jerusalemite slaves by alluding to the Jubilee imagery of Leviticus 25).¹⁹ The future anointed one also comes “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”—another allusion to the Jubilee year, which brought

¹⁷ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 198.

¹⁸ The one anointed with the Spirit in Isaiah 61 should be identified as the prominent Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42–66, since the servant in Isaiah 42 is introduced as the one upon whom God has put his Spirit (Is 42:1).

¹⁹ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 201 n. 80; see also John Watts, *Isaiah* (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 303.

favor to those in debt and slavery.²⁰ Finally, though a redeemer figure is not explicitly mentioned in this passage, the Lord is called “redeemer” in Isaiah in the two immediately surrounding passages (Is 60:16; 62:12) and in other passages with clear references to Isaiah 61 (Is 49:7–13; 52:7–10).²¹ From this, one could deduce that the favor and liberty being proclaimed in Isaiah 61 ultimately come from the redeemer Lord. In conclusion, Isaiah once again symbolically depicts Israel's condition in exile as a form of debt-slavery and the future end of the exile as the release from debt-slavery associated with the Jubilee year.

The Eschatological Jubilee in Later Jewish Writings

The eschatological restoration of Israel continues to be depicted with Jubilee year themes in the corpus known as the Second Temple writings. In some of these texts, the restoration might be enacted by a royal messianic figure (as in Daniel 9) or by a messianic priestly character (as in *T. Levi* 18:2) or, in the case of the Essenes, by a royal-priestly figure (11QMelch). Most significantly, the kind of release envisioned in these writings for the eschatological Jubilee is not release from financial debt (as in the actual Jubilee legislation) or release only from exile (as in Isaiah), but release from moral-spiritual debt. In Daniel 9:24, a royal anointed figure is associated with the end of the exile and the restoration of Jerusalem that will come at the end of a period cryptically described as “seventy weeks of years.” The other most explicit reference in the Old Testament to “weeks of years” is found in Leviticus 25:8, where the expression is used to calculate the Jubilee year. In that passage, “seven weeks of years” adds up to the forty-nine years that must pass before the arrival of a new Jubilee every fifty years.²² Daniel's timetable for the restoration of God's people, therefore, draws on this Jubilee imagery.²³ Furthermore, Daniel envisions a restoration of Israel that does not focus on eliminating financial debt, but one that will “put an end to sin” and “atone for iniquity” (Dn 9:24).²⁴

Another pre-Christian text that draws on Jubilee themes to describe the eschatological restoration of Israel is 11QMelchizedek from the Dead Sea Scrolls. This document tells of a royal-priestly figure named Melchizedek

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 214.

²¹ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 201.

²² See, for example, John Collins, *Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 352; Norman Porteous, *Daniel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 140.

²³ See Collins, *Daniel*, 352.

²⁴ This mention of iniquity being atoned for might recall the Day of Atonement (Lv 16), which itself was linked with the Jubilee year, since the Jubilee was announced on this particular feast (Lv 25:9–10).

who will come in the tenth of a series of Jubilees to proclaim liberty to the captives.²⁵ The fragmentary text opens midstream with a partial quotation from Leviticus 25:13 about the Jubilee year call for property to be returned. According to Joseph Fitzmyer, Leviticus 25 as a whole serves in 11QMelchizedek as the “thread which apparently runs through the whole text and ties together its various elements.”²⁶ The document’s connection with Old Testament texts related to the Jubilee year also can be seen in the proclamation of liberty in line 6 of 11QMelchizedek (“He will proclaim liberty for them”), which recalls the announcement of the Jubilee in Leviticus 25:10. Similarly, line 4 (“To proclaim liberty to the captives”) clearly draws from the language of Isaiah 61:1—a prophetic text that we saw employed Jubilee themes to depict Israel’s future release from exile.²⁷ Moreover, the ten Jubilees timetable in 11QMelchizedek is likely an allusion to the “seventy weeks of years” in Daniel 9:24. Daniel itself, as we saw, seems to draw on the Jubilee “weeks of years” language (Lv 25:8), and the time envisioned in both texts amounts to a similar period (seventy weeks of years in Daniel 9 = 490 years; ten Jubilees in 11QMelchizedek = 10 x 50 years = 500 years). Finally, and most significantly, 11QMelchizedek spiritualizes the significance of the Jubilee by envisioning a release from moral or spiritual debt. The priestly, kingly Melchizedek figure is expected to come “to free them from [the debt of] all their iniquities.”²⁸

In summary, the kind of release envisioned in these texts for the eschatological Jubilee is not release from a financial debt but release from a moral-spiritual one. This is implied in Daniel 9:24 [and *T. Levi* 17:10–11; 18:9], and made explicit in 11QMelchizedek, where the liberty proclaimed is one that frees the people from the debt of their sins.²⁹ Anderson notes the importance of this latter text: “It is on this point that 11QMelchizedek is so interesting. The author of this document is supremely confident that the formulas of debt release found in Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 have a different purpose. ‘Liberty will be proclaimed for [the inheritance of Melchizedek] to free them from [the debt of] all their iniquities.’³⁰ These developments in thought about the eschatological Jubilee will serve as an important background for understanding Luke’s use of the Jubilee theme in his Gospel.

²⁵ 11QMelchizedek.

²⁶ Joseph Fitzmyer, “Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 29.

²⁷ Merrill Miller, “The Function of Isa 61:1–2 in 11Q Melchizedek,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 467–69.

²⁸ 11QMelchizedek, line 6.

²⁹ Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*, 304.

³⁰ Anderson, *Sin*, 36–37.

Luke 4:18–19: Jesus' Use of Jubilee Themes from Isaiah 61

Luke reports that Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61:1–2, a passage which we saw has been called one of the clearest biblical allusions to the Jubilee year outside the Pentateuch. While drawing from this passage, Jesus picks up on the tradition of the eschatological Jubilee already developing in the Old Testament and in the Second Temple period.

Although most of Luke 4:18–19 comes from Isaiah 61:1–2, two divergences are noteworthy. First, the phrase “the day of vengeance of our God” (Is 61:2b) has been dropped,³¹ and second, a phrase from Isaiah 58:6 has been inserted: “to send forth prisoners in release.” This latter addition is important for our specific purposes, because it draws attention to the word release (*aphesis*), which is used twice in 4:18: “to proclaim release (*aphesin*) to prisoners” from Isaiah 61:1 and “to send forth the captives in release (*aphesei*)” from Isaiah 58:6. Thus, *aphesis* is a key word uniting these two prophetic texts in 4:18.

Why does Jesus in Luke draw our attention to the word *aphesis*? The word means “release” and is a technical expression that refers to the Jubilee year release of Hebrew slaves and property every fifty years.³² In fact, twenty-two of the approximately fifty uses of *aphesis* in the Septuagint are found in the Jubilee passages of Leviticus 25 and 27; there, it most often translates the Hebrew word *yobel*—a word which is roughly transliterated “Jubilee” and means “ram’s horn” (Ex 19:13; Jos 6:5).³³ The word *aphesis* also translates the Hebrew term *deror* (meaning “release” or “emancipation”), which was used by the prophets to refer to the Jubilee year (Jer 34:8, 15, 17; Ezek 46:17; Is 61:1) and most significantly was used in the Jubilee year legislation of Leviticus 25 to announce that every 50 years Israel is “to proclaim release” (*deror*) of property and slaves (Lv 25:10).

This seems to be in the background of Jesus’ use of Isaiah 61 and 58 to describe his mission “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:19). In light of Luke’s double emphasis on “release” in 4:18 and the basic Jubilee themes contained in the two Isaian passages quoted, Jesus’ announcement of this “acceptable year of the Lord” in 4:19 recalls the Jubiliary year of release (Lv 25:10). Therefore, Jesus, in this foundational passage

³¹ This was done probably to avoid drawing attention to this negative aspect of Isaiah 61:1–2 in a passage that goes on to highlight how the blessings of Christ’s ministry will go out to the Gentiles (Lk 4:24–27).

³² R. Harris, G. Archer, and B. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), I, 455.

³³ The name for this feast may have been derived from the ram’s horn that was blown at the start of the Jubilee (Lv 25:9). See Robert Sloan, *The Favorable Year of the Lord: A Study of Jubiliary Theology in the Gospel of Luke* (Austin: Schola Press, 1997), 15; Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 319.

for Luke's Gospel, introduces his ministry against the backdrop of the Jewish hopes surrounding the Jubilee year release.

But what kind of Jubilee is Jesus announcing in Luke 4:18–19? Was it an immediate execution of the Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25, as John Howard Yoder has claimed?³⁴ Jesus' Jubilee mission in Luke 4 does relate to some concrete aspects of his social ministry. For example, "to preach good news to the poor" (4:18) points ahead to a summary statement Jesus later makes about his ministry. In response to a question from John the Baptist's disciples, Jesus says, "the poor have good news preached to them" (Lk 7:22). Similarly, the mention of "recovering of sight to the blind" (4:18) anticipates Jesus' healing of a blind man in 18:35 and his summary response to John the Baptist "the blind receive their sight" in 7:22. Finally, the phrase, "to send forth in release those who are oppressed" might foreshadow the release Jesus will grant to people suffering from various kinds of oppression, whether physical, political, or demonic.³⁵

However, whatever concrete social aspects of Jesus' ministry to which 4:18–19 may point, the passage primarily relates to the eschatological Jubilee described in the Second Temple writings; in these, the Jubilee release brought the restoration of Israel and was, at least in some cases, envisioned as releasing people from moral-spiritual debt. This is seen in the way Luke-Acts uses the key Jubilee word *aphesis*, which is more prominent in Luke-Acts than anywhere else in the New Testament. It is used seventeen times in the New Testament, and ten of those occurrences appear in Luke-Acts (five in Luke and five in Acts);³⁶ by contrast, Mark uses the word only twice, Matthew only once, and John not at all.

Most significant is the way Luke-Acts employs this term in association with forgiveness of sin. At each of its other occurrences in Luke-Acts, *aphesis* is used in the combination "release from sin."³⁷ Moreover, the entire sweep of the literary diptych Luke-Acts is bound up with this theological motif of release from sin. The phrase appears in passages of strong theological importance: In the *Benedictus* early in Luke's Gospel, Zechariah fore-

³⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 34–40, 64–77.

³⁵ For examples of physical oppression, see Luke 4:39, 5:12 and 18, 6:6, 7:2; also see Rebecca Denova, "The Things Accomplished among Us: Prophetic Tradition in the Structural Pattern of Luke-Acts," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 141 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 134–36. For political oppression, see Denova, 137. For oppression by demons, see Luke 8:36, 9:1, 10:17; also see Denova, 137.

³⁶ Luke 1:77, 3:3, 4:18 (2x), 24:47; Acts 2:38, 5:31, 10:43, 13:38, 26:18.

³⁷ Tannehill *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 65–66; B. J. Koet, *Five Studies on Interpretation of Scripture in Luke-Acts* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 34.

tells how John the Baptist will “give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness (*aphesei*) of their sins” (Lk 1:77). John the Baptist is described as preaching a baptism of repentance “for the forgiveness (*aphesin*) of sins” (Lk 3:3). The word appears twice in the passage recounting Jesus’ teaching in the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus’ mission is “to proclaim release” (*aphesin*) to the captives and “to set at liberty (*en aphesei*) those who are oppressed” (Lk 4:18). In the commissioning at the end of Luke, Jesus says “forgiveness (*aphesin*) of sins should be preached in his name to the nations” (Lk 24:47). Furthermore, this theme in Luke crosses the threshold into Acts of the Apostles, showing Acts to be the ecclesial and sacramental continuation of Christ’s ministry of release. In the account of Pentecost, a programmatic passage for Acts of the Apostles, Peter tells the crowd they must “repent and be baptized for the forgiveness (*aphesin*) of sins” (Acts 2:38). The various speeches in Acts which sum up the Christian story of salvation also employ the technical term “release” in association with forgiveness of sins (see Acts 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18).³⁸

There are no exceptions to the rule. Everywhere else in Luke-Acts, *aphesis* is employed with the meaning “release *from sin*.” It should be understood in the same way in the Nazareth scene in Luke 4:18–19.³⁹ Some further support for this conclusion may be found in the fact that the verbal form of *aphesis* (*aphiemi*) is prominently used in Luke in relation to forgiveness of sin, understood as release from sin. For example, Jesus tells the paralyzed man “your sins are forgiven (*apheontai*)” (5:20), and he tells the woman kissing his feet the same thing: “Your sins are forgiven (*apheontai*)” (7:48). Luke’s account of the Our Father prayer uses *aphiemi* twice in the petition “forgive (*aphes*) us our sins, for we ourselves forgive (*aphiomen*) everyone who is indebted to us” (11:4). Jesus’ prayer on the cross also uses this verb, “Father, forgive (*aphes*) them; for they know not what they do” (23:34).

Thus, while Jesus’ redemptive mission in Luke, as introduced in this foundational scene in the Nazareth synagogue, is cast in the categories of Jubilee release, the liberation primarily envisioned in Luke-Acts is release from the most significant debt strapping the human family: the debt of sin. As Patrick Miller notes, “The oppression from which Jesus sets people free is the tyranny of the evil one. The chains that Jesus breaks are the bonds that enslave them to sin in all its forms.” While Jesus certainly releases people from various concrete forms of physical, social, and economic

³⁸ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 66.

³⁹ With every other use of *aphesis* in Luke-Acts occurring with the meaning “forgiveness,” Koet notes, “It is almost impossible that Luke by means of this term does not allude to this important element of Jesus’ proclamation of salvation in Luke 4,18–19.” Koet, *Five Studies*, 34.

oppressions, “Luke will not allow us to assume that those things which oppress the souls and minds and lives of people are *wholly* tied to their physical situation. The Gospel reminds us that the freedom God intends through Christ is at root release from the entanglement and dominance of sin in our lives.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, on a most basic level, the Jubilee character of Jesus’ ministry in Luke can serve as an example of how the later development of medieval atonement theology—and in particular, its understanding of sin as debt and of Christ freeing people from the debt of sin—has clear lines of consistency with the biblical view of sin and redemption. But this theme of Jubilee release in Luke also does much more. It shows how the later Christian understanding of sin as debt not only has foundations in various individual passages of the New Testament but flows from the very heart of the redemptive mission of Jesus as revealed in the third Gospel. In the foundational episode at the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4, Jesus casts his entire ministry in terms of the prophetic hopes surrounding the Jubilee year—hopes which, at least in some Second Temple writings, included release from moral-spiritual debt and hopes that are clearly developed in this direction throughout the rest of Luke–Acts. Therefore, careful attention to the way Luke’s Gospel itself presents Jesus’ ministry can be at the service of theologians exploring the topic of sin and redemption in Anselm’s atonement theology, for that presentation suggests that the redemptive mission of Christ is indeed meant to be understood, in large part, as a mission of release from the debt of sin. N V

⁴⁰ Patrick Miller, “An Exposition of Luke 4:16:21,” *Interpretation* 29 (1975): 417–21. Emphasis mine.