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“Today this word is fulfilled in your hearing”: A Scriptural Hermeneutic of Biblical Authority

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A common, if unexamined and unacknowledged, assumption of many conversations about the Bible and its place in contemporary life and religious practice sees Scripture as a passive resource and the person of faith as a consumer. When Scripture is seen primarily as a resource, treasure trove, or mine, even as a source for contemporary religious life, Scripture risks becoming a static repository of words. This understanding of Scripture's role in a living religious community can restrict the possible generativity of Scripture for contemporary life, as if Scripture's contribution to the life of faith consists of a verbatim recitation of what Scripture says. Such a perspective downplays the ways that Scripture is embedded in the communities that generated it initially and in the communities that continue to regenerate it through time.

The earliest interpreters of Scripture—scribes, rabbis, teachers, and preachers of the early church—recognized the generativity involved in reading Scripture. They were not interested in simply reproducing or mimicking the words of Scripture in their interpretations. They were interested in inhabiting what Scripture does. Their openness to creating new meanings and new contexts for Scripture meant that Scripture was not static and the interpreter was not simply a consumer.

Scripture is not a repository of authority once fixed in the past, but authority and life are generated in the present as Scripture is proclaimed and heard.

The interpreter created something new in each reading and appropriation of Scripture and tradition.

To illustrate this, I want to begin with Luke 4:16–30 and use it as a heuristic lens to see how one appropriates Scripture for ever-changing contexts. I have chosen this text first of all because, based in synagogue worship, it is a narrative of a religious practice and of a community engaged in that practice. The narrative depicts a setting in which interpretation and textual reappropriation take place. Secondly, within this narrative of a religious practice, the Lukan text contains implicit and explicit assumptions about the interpretation of Scripture by and for a religious community.

LUKE 4:16–30

Luke 4:16–30, Jesus' visit to his home synagogue in Nazareth, is often referred to as the "Nazareth inaugural," a name that highlights both its place as the inaugural act of Jesus' ministry in Luke (as it follows immediately upon the temptation story) and the ways in which it inaugurates key themes of Jesus' ministry in Luke (e.g., good news to the poor, the universality of the good news). I am interested in the roles that Scripture and its interpretation play in this story and the ways in which the story embodies the power and possibility of preaching.

Luke 4:16–30 presents the reader with a glimpse into a synagogue preaching service. This setting and the act of proclamation that is narrated in this story are often taken as a backdrop to more important Lukan themes, but I want to suggest that it is not accidental that Luke has Jesus inaugurate his ministry in a synagogue worship service that focuses on the generativity of Scripture to shape contemporary practice.

A member of the worshipping community, in this case Jesus, stands to read the prophetic text of the day. By the first century, the readings from the Torah were already fixed into a lectionary cycle. It is not clear if the prophetic readings were set by this date, but regardless, the passage attests the public reading of Scripture in worship. The reading of Scripture as part of a lectionary indicates a communal and liturgical appropriation of Scripture that enables it to be more than a passive repository to be consumed. The communal reading of Scripture is generative of new meaning and new practice. After reading the Scripture, the words of which Luke includes in his narration, Jesus sits down, the traditional posture of a teacher, and begins to interpret for the gathered community.

Two features of the story can be noted as beginning observations. First, the Scripture that Luke has Jesus read is an amalgam of two different texts in Isaiah. The citation is not a direct quote of the Septuagint or any other known version of Isaiah. Most of the lesson is from Isa 61:1–2, with additions from Isa 58:6. Luke quite definitely presents the words that Jesus reads as Scripture, yet the words that he provides are easily recognizable to anyone who knows the book of Isaiah as an amalgam of texts rather than as an exact quotation.

A second striking feature of Luke 4 is the way in which the story is narrated in something that approximates real time—Luke places each of the component parts of the worship service before the reader. The reader, like the congregants in the synagogue, sees Jesus stand up, receive the scroll, find the words that are written. The words that the congregation hears read are incorporated into the telling of the story, so that the reader experiences the same Scripture as the characters in the story. The reader, like the congregation in the story, watches Jesus roll up the scroll, hand it back to the attendant, and sit down. As a result of this real-time narration, when the Lukan narrator says, “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him,” readers and characters alike are included in that description.

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By placing the communal experience of Scripture at the center of the story, the story implicitly communicates something about the generativity of Scripture in the life of the worshiping community and about the generativity of the communal context for the meaning of Scripture. To speak of the generativity of Scripture is to say that in the reading and rereading of Scripture, something new is created. Scripture does not remain static while the contexts around it change. Scripture generates new life and meanings for itself in a community’s appropriation of it. In fact, there is a generative doubling here, because Luke’s first audiences almost certainly heard this gospel story read out loud in their own worship setting. When Jesus begins to speak after the reading of Scripture, both Luke’s audience and Jesus’ audience are full of expectation.

Within the narrative details of the initial story, then, we already can see several items that point away from Scripture as static and the interpreter as a consumer and toward the creative interaction of text, context, and interpreter:

1. The Gospel writer is not constrained to replicate the precise words of Isa 61 or Isa 58, but creates a fresh text that meets the needs of his storytelling.
2. The reading of Scripture and the possibility of its interpretation for the community’s present moment generate anticipation and expectation.
3. The anticipated generativity of interpretation—the newness both for text and context—is already displayed in the biblical text that is at the center of the story, because its content highlights the power of proclamation.

THE SCRIPTURAL HERMENEUTIC

The words with which Jesus begins his interpretation of Isaiah explicitly name the dynamic relationship between biblical text and contemporary experience

that the first part of the story has illustrated: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

This phrase, with which Jesus introduces the interpretation that follows, is worth parsing carefully, because each element is key in thinking about Scripture as generative for community practice.

1. The opening word, “today,” highlights the immediacy and temporal specificity of the interpretation of Scripture in the context of a worshipping community. The interpretation of Scripture that occurs in a particular sermon receives its authoritative significance because it happens *now, today*. The preacher—in this case, Jesus—is not trying to replicate a past event, but to recreate the text for the present moment. The present moment, “today,” determines how Scripture gets read and interpreted. Jesus’ listeners learned this as they listened to the sermon that he preached after these words. They began to listen with positive amazement (v. 22), because there was a sense that the moment of waiting for the fulfillment of Scripture was at its end. But Jesus’ sermon did not simply bring the past forward to the present. It showed how the present moment altered whatever the text might have meant in its past. In his sermon, Jesus weaves seamlessly between the prophetic anointing that the Isaiah text announces, the reception prophets receive, and illustrative stories of two prophets, Elijah and Elisha.

“Jesus has created something new out of Isaiah that did not exist for anyone prior to the moment of his interpretation”

In this “sermon,” the Isaiah text is transformed from nostalgia about what has been promised to proclamation for today. The text in the present moment is so transformed that the congregation rejects the message of the preacher. There is a clash between what the synagogue congregation assumed were the implications of the Isaiah text and what Jesus identified as its implications. Clearly, the Isaiah text is not reified, with one meaning fixed in time and space. Nor is the interpreter simply the consumer of this text, because in this moment of proclamation, Jesus has created something new out of Isaiah that did not exist for anyone prior to the moment of his interpretation. What he creates challenges the interpretation that the congregation itself had created out of its hearing of the text.

The importance of the present moment in determining meaning is underscored further by the words that conclude Jesus’ opening phrase, “in your hearing.” These words repeat the temporal specificity and singularity of the preaching moment, but equally important, they highlight the congregation’s active involvement in what is transpiring in the worship service. Jesus does not say, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in my speaking”—but “in your hearing.” The crucial interpretive role that a listening community enacts contributes to the clash and conflict with which this story ends. Jesus’ speaking moves in one direction, and the community’s hearing moves in another.

2. “The Scripture” (ἡ γραφή) names explicitly what is at the center of the preaching moment—the written word of God that is claimed by the worshiping community. The text that all the community has heard read is now put before it again in Jesus’ introduction. Most important, Jesus describes the Scripture as having been fulfilled. The Greek verb here is *πεπλήρωται*, the perfect tense of *πληρόω*. The perfect tense should be reflected in the translation, “is now fulfilled” (as opposed, for example, to the NRSV, “has been fulfilled”). The perfect tense describes an action that is completed in the present moment but that has ongoing significance. The perfect tense here is essential for what the verb communicates about the ways in which Scripture can be experienced as authoritative and generative.

By saying, “The scripture is fulfilled,” Jesus asserts that something has happened in this moment of the communal hearing of Scripture (today). To say that the text is fulfilled is to say that now, in the present moment of proclamation, the text finds its meaning. Jesus does not evoke a former meaning of the text that he wants his listeners to recall or a future meaning of the text that he wants them to conjure. He points explicitly to the present meaning of Scripture that did not exist prior to this singular moment of proclamation and communal hearing and that will not exist in the same way after.

In the particular context of Luke 4, the fulfillment of Scripture can be interpreted in a narrow christological sense, that Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah. But importantly, this is not the interpretation that Jesus preaches—and it is certainly not what the congregation hears. The congregation hears Jesus saying that the fulfillment of Scripture in this present moment, in their hearing, is about them. The “fulfillment” is the mandate to redefine the mission of the chosen community, to recognize that outsiders—Gentiles and lepers—belong to the jubilee of God. The crowd’s angry and violent reaction leaves little doubt that they understood that Jesus was preaching that the Scripture is now fulfilled for them—and that the lasting significance of this present fulfillment is that the way they ordered their world would have to change.

3. There is an element of christological fulfillment in Luke’s interpretation of Isaiah: by placing the Isaiah quote in the mouth of Jesus, Luke identifies Jesus as the liberating prophet. Jesus, like Isaiah before him, is anointed with the Spirit to proclaim God’s intentions for the community. Jesus is empowered by the Spirit to preach these words, and this empowerment points to another way in which Scripture becomes generative for community practice and religious life. The presence and power of the Spirit, named in the words of the Isaiah passage, are enacted in the authoritative and transforming voice of Jesus the preacher. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that enables Scripture to move from the past into a future that was not imaginable to the author of Isaiah. The presence of the Spirit grounds generative interpretive work in something other than the interpretive idiosyncrasy of the individual preacher or of an individual community. The Spirit guides Jesus the preacher and leads him in discerning how to make the old story new.

4. Each of the preceding points draws attention to a final element necessary for Scripture to be generative of new life: the preacher who embraces the prophetic vocation to proclaim God's presence. The word heard is the word proclaimed. The offer of a fresh word for today depends on the preacher who can discern—through the gift of the Spirit, knowledge of tradition, and attention to the present moment—where past and present intersect. The centrality of preaching for the life of the community, of the ministry of proclaiming the word for today, is presented by Luke in the model of Jesus himself, the prophet mighty in word and deed (Luke 24:19).*

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If we allow Luke 4:21 to guide us as we think about the interpretation of Scripture for communities of faith and practice, where does it take us? It suggests that in any given present moment (“today”) of communal experience of the proclaimed word of Scripture (“in your hearing”), Scripture acquires a meaning (“is fulfilled”) that it did not have before that moment of proclamation. Something happens—through the preaching, the word of Scripture is made real in the life of the worshiping congregation. If we use Luke 4:16–30 as a heuristic device for thinking about the ways in which Scripture is a “resource,” it follows that one does not impose a particular understanding of the authority and meaning of Scripture on a congregation. Nor is authority of Scripture defined by particular standards of doctrine or even of precise quotation of the words of Scripture. Rather, the worshiping congregation experiences the authority of Scripture in the present moment of proclamation by the way in which Scripture comes to fulfillment in the speaking and in their hearing. Scripture is a living word that is recreated and regenerated through the guidance of the Spirit in each preaching moment for each distinct congregation (see John 16: 12–13, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come”).

What applies to Jesus' and this community's interpretation of Isaiah applies to the interpretation of Luke 4 by later communities as well. Jesus' interpretation of Isaiah unsettled the Nazareth congregation's assumptions about where and how God is at work in the world and their place in God's liberative work. Jesus' living

*I presented an earlier version of this essay at the McDonald Conference on Evangelical Perspectives on Christianity at Harvard Divinity School on May 7, 2005. The respondent to my paper was François Bovon. I owe points 3 and 4 to Professor Bovon, whose response helped me to name two additional elements that were assumed but not made explicit.

interpretation of Isaiah created an image of the people of God that was not limited to those who were traditionally understood to be the chosen people, but expanded the circle of those included in God's jubilee. Jesus read other parts of Israel's story through the lens of his interpretation of Isaiah—in particular, stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha—to show not only a new interpretation of Isaiah, but also of other stories that the community thought it understood. The past, present, and future look different in light of Jesus' reading of Isaiah.

But to take Jesus' reinterpretation, and the changes generated by that interpretation, and reify that interpretation—so that one historical group (here, the Jews) appears permanently to have less of a claim on God's jubilee, and another (here, the Gentiles) a greater claim—is to misappropriate what Jesus and the Gospel writer do here. To set in stone this or any interpretation of Isaiah or Luke 4 is to miss the point of the passage. It is to turn what is a fluid present moment, "Today this word is fulfilled in your hearing," into a static past moment, "Yesterday that word was fulfilled in their hearing." What is transferable from this passage is the mode of engaging Scripture, not a particular interpretation. A community's appropriation of tradition always involves a re-creation of tradition.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES AND THE REAPPROPRIATION OF TRADITION

Implicit in the preceding discussion is the question of the authority of the Christian Scriptures in and for the life of contemporary communities of faith. It seems appropriate to end by turning an explicit focus on this issue.

As Luke 4:16–30 suggests, Scripture moves in three directions at once. Reading Scripture is an act that connects the contemporary Christian community with believing communities of *the past*. Any conversation about the authority of Scripture must acknowledge the changing roles that Scripture has held through time as well as the many different ways that Scripture has been interpreted and the different ways in which authority has been understood by Christian communities through time.

Reading Scripture also is an act that looks for the meaning of Scripture in *the present moment*. Present-day Christian faith communities are looking for the contemporary word that Scripture can speak. If the faith community claims that Scripture can speak in the present moment, then it is also claiming that Scripture can speak in many and varied ways, since the contemporary word must speak to a variety of ever-changing contemporary moments. To say that the way Scripture speaks cannot change is actually to limit the authority of Scripture by deciding in advance the possible places and ways that Scripture can inform contemporary life. Just as the history of Christian faith communities is a history of vastly different ways of finding authority in Scripture, so too is the present moment full of vast possibilities.

Just as Scripture simultaneously summons the past and the present, it also si-

multaneously moves in the direction of *the future*. Reading of Scripture points to possibilities beyond the present moment, to possibilities of a future moment in time of which no contemporary community will be a part. Any notion of the authority of Scripture must look backward and forward and recognize that those who went before us and those who will come after us read the same Scriptures and have and will find in them vastly different understandings of the claims of Scripture on their lives. The intersecting perspectives of past, present, and future in the authority of Scripture is another way of looking at the essential relational aspects of authority.

We have seen that Scripture opens faith communities to conversations that embrace and reenvision past, present, and future, and that faith communities have been nourished by knowing that Scripture conveys more than one meaning. This fluidity and the active engagement of both tradition and community in the creation of meaning suggest that conversations about the authority of Scripture and the place of Christian Scriptures in the practices of contemporary religious communities should be conversations that have as their goal not the narrowing of options, but the widening of the circle of life and faith. ⊕

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