

attributed similar phenomena to external powers acting on the person. Perhaps the most honest response for an interpreter is to acknowledge how limited our understanding of spiritual and demonic forces is. While we may not wish to encourage belief in demons that invade human persons, neither are the explanations of the Rationalists very satisfying. The Gospels declare that Jesus approached the mystery of evil in human experience and conquered it. In his presence and by his word or act, human beings were delivered from their bondage, derangement, or illness and restored to wholeness. In such stories we understand God's nature and work among us even if we do not also always understand the mystery of the spiritual or demonic forces that some human beings experience.

LUKE 5:1-6:16, CALLING AND TRAINING DISCIPLES

OVERVIEW

① To this point Jesus has acted alone, unaccompanied by disciples. In the next major section (5:1-6:16), however, Jesus begins to call others to leave everything and join him in the work of the kingdom. This section is framed by two scenes that feature the disciples: the call of Simon and the fishermen (5:1-11) and the appointment of the Twelve (6:12-16). Between these two scenes Jesus heals a leper (5:12-16) and a paralytic (5:17-26), calls Levi to follow him and eats with tax collectors (5:27-39), allows his disciples to pluck grain on the sabbath (6:1-5), and heals a man with a withered hand on the sabbath (6:6-11). Throughout this section we see the work of the kingdom spreading and separating those who respond from those who refuse Jesus' call. The latter are often represented by the scribes and Pharisees.

Striking comparisons can be made between Mark and Luke in their handling of these scenes. Throughout this section, Luke reproduces Markan material with varying degrees of revision:

- Luke 5:1-3—Mark 1:16-20; 4:1-2
- Luke 5:8-11—Mark 1:16-20
- Luke 5:12-16—Mark 1:40-45
- Luke 5:17-26—Mark 2:1-12
- Luke 5:27-32—Mark 2:13-17
- Luke 5:33-38—Mark 2:18-22

② Luke 6:1-5—Mark 2:23-28
 Luke 6:6-11—Mark 3:1-6

The similarities between the two accounts should not mask the significant differences. The call of the first disciples (paralleled in Luke 5:1-11) comes just fifteen verses into Mark's Gospel (1:16-20). Mark races through the ministry of John, the baptism of Jesus, the temptation in the wilderness, and the announcement of the gospel of the kingdom. By contrast, Luke has provided extensive interpretation of Jesus' birth and identity as the Son of God; God's redemptive work has been highlighted; the prophetic context of Jesus' work has been presented, and Jesus' teaching in Capernaum and healing of Peter's mother-in-law have been reported. In terms of the characterization of Peter and the other fishermen, Luke's sequence makes their response to his call to discipleship psychologically plausible. Perhaps more significantly, Luke has delayed the introduction of characters who might serve as role models for the reader's response to the challenge of the gospel until the identity of Jesus and the nature of his ministry have been clearly developed. The reader is now ready to begin to consider a response to the call to follow Jesus, just as the first disciples turned away from their daily pursuits to give themselves to the kingdom work to which Jesus called them.

Luke 5:1-11, Calling the Fishermen

NIV

5 One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret,^a with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God,² he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down^b the nets for a catch."

⁵Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

⁶When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" ⁹For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." ¹¹So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

^a That is, Sea of Galilee. ^b The Greek verb is plural.

NRSV

5 Once while Jesus^a was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God,² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

^a Gk *he*

COMMENTARY

3 The call of the fishermen takes the form of an extended pronouncement story (a story that features a saying of Jesus) centered around Jesus' challenge to Simon. The larger unit is a composite constructed from three distinct parts: the setting by the lake (5:1-3), for which Luke used Mark 4:1-2; a miracle story—the catch of fish (5:4-7), for which there is a parallel in John 21:3-8; and the call of the fishermen (5:8-11), for which Luke used Mark 1:16-20. The first three

verses set the scene and introduce the characters. The catch of fish introduces the first dialogue between Jesus and Simon Peter and prepares for the call to discipleship at the end of the scene. Isolating the dialogue serves to highlight its role in this scene:

Jesus: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Simon: "Master, we have worked all night long

but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

Simon: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

Jesus: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

Following the narrative technique of framing scenes or episodes by means of entrances and departures that Luke uses repeatedly, the scene is introduced by a reference to the crowd's coming to Jesus and closes with the report that the fishermen left everything to follow Jesus.

④ **5:1-3, Teaching the Crowd Beside the Lake.** The temporal relationship between this scene and the preceding one is left vague: Whereas Luke 4:42-44 indicates that Jesus left Capernaum and went to Judea, the beginning of Luke 5 finds Jesus still in Galilee, beside the lake. This is the only place in the NT where the lake is identified by reference to the adjacent territory (Gennesaret, south of Capernaum; cf. Matt 14:34; Mark 6:53), but the designation is found in Josephus, who knew Galilee well.⁶⁶ The crowd is presumably the same crowd introduced in 4:42, who were thronging to Jesus because of the mighty works he was doing. Consistent with Jesus' announcement in 4:43 that he had to declare the good news of the kingdom of God, Jesus is not healing but preaching "the word of God" (cf. 8:11, 21; 11:28). In the light of Luke 4, the reader is prepared to associate "the word of God" with the work of the prophets, God's redemptive work declared in the canticles of the birth narratives, the preaching of John the Baptist, and above all the teaching of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth.

The primary elements of this scene are all found in Mark in the call of the fishermen and the introduction to the parables in Mark 4: the lake, the boat, the crowd, and the fishermen washing their nets. As in Mark 4:1-2, Jesus gets into the boat to teach the crowd on the shore. The second boat will be summoned following the catch of fish (cf. v. 7).

⑤ **5:4-7, Enclosing a Catch of Fish.** Fish was one of the staples in first-century Palestine, where

more fish was eaten than any other meat (see Luke 11:11; 24:42) and a thriving fishing industry flourished on the Sea of Galilee. Fish was eaten fresh, processed, salted, dried, or pickled, for export. The fish of the Sea of Galilee are of three main varieties: the *cichlidae*, a family of large panfish that includes "St. Peter's fish"; the *cyprinidae*, or carp family; and the *siluridae*, or catfish. The Jews did not eat catfish, however, because it did not have "fins and scales" (Lev 11:9-12; Deut 14:9-10).

② The various types of nets mentioned in the NT were probably similar to the nets used by Arab fishermen until recent decades. These include (1) the casting net (ἀμφίβληστρον *amphiblēstron*, Matt 4:18), a circular net that was cast by a wading fisherman; (2) the trammel net (though this word is used generically for various nets [δίκτησον *diktyon*, Matt 4:20]), or a line of three nets hanging from floats, the inner net having a small mesh that trapped the fish; and (3) the drag net (σαγήνη *sagēnē*, Matt 13:47), which could be several hundred yards long. Luke's description of putting out into deep water and letting down nets suggests that the fishermen were using the trammel nets.

⑦ Luke underscores the wonder of the catch of fish by saying that it filled the boats so much that they began to sink. Recently, a first-century fishing boat was recovered from the mud near the edge of the Sea of Galilee. The shell of the boat is 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet deep and could be rowed or sailed.⁶⁷

② By placing the call of Simon Peter and the other fishermen after the miraculous catch of fish, Luke provides a psychologically plausible account of why they left everything to follow Jesus. Luke 5:4-7 seems to depend on a traditional story found also in John 21:1-14, where a strikingly similar catch of fish is reported in a post-resurrection context. Raymond E. Brown lists ten points shared by the two accounts: (1) The disciples had fished all night with no results, (2) Jesus challenged them to let down the nets, (3) the disciples enclosed an enormous catch, (4) the effect on the nets is mentioned, (5) Peter reacts, (6) Jesus is

67. For a more detailed discussion of the fishing industry and the status of Galilean fishermen, see R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994) 10-15.

66. Josephus *The Jewish War* 3:463, 506.

called Lord, (7) other fishermen take part in the catch but say nothing, (8) the theme of following Jesus, (9) the catch of fish "symbolizes a successful Christian missionary endeavor," and (10) the same words appear at various points in the two stories.⁶⁸ In spite of all these similarities, the differences between the two accounts should also be noted, the foremost being its setting in Luke as the call of Simon Peter rather than as his post-resurrection reconciliation to Jesus following Peter's treachery in the courtyard during the trial of Jesus. Other differences between the two accounts arise from the fact that in John 21 Jesus is not in the boat but on the shore, there is only one boat, and the nets are untorn despite the large catch.

9 What are we to make of these parallel accounts? Do the traditions reach back to one event or two? If one event lies behind both accounts, was it originally the call of Peter to discipleship or a post-resurrection appearance? The tradition has apparently gone through an extended process of development, but the similarities are sufficient to point to a common tradition lying behind both Luke 5 and John 21. Three considerations tilt the balance in favor of the hypothesis that Luke has taken a post-Easter appearance tradition and placed it back in the ministry of Jesus. First, other accounts of the call of Peter and the other fishermen to discipleship do not involve a miraculous catch of fish (Mark 1:16-20; Matt 4:18-21; John 1:35-42). In Luke, moreover, the account of the catch of fish is sandwiched between other traditional elements of the call of the disciples (Luke 5:1-3, 10-11), suggesting that Luke has created this setting for the story. Second, following Luke's geographical scheme of the ministry in Galilee—the journey to Jerusalem, and the mission beginning from Jerusalem following Jesus' death and resurrection—there is no place for a Galilean appearance (as in Mark and Matthew). The story of the catch of fish from the Sea of Galilee, if included, had to be placed somewhere during Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Third, Peter's response

("Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!") would have a special force if it followed his denials of Jesus in the courtyard. Luke seems to have retrojected the tradition of the catch of fish into the ministry as a call story. The alternative is that John 21:1-14 is a story from the ministry of Jesus that has been recast around the themes of resurrection and eucharist. Whether the miracle story was originally an appearance tradition is indeed debatable, since no other appearance takes the form of a miracle story. This story, therefore, may have had a complicated history that we cannot now recover with any confidence.

10 **5:8-11, Calling the First Disciples.** The story concerns Simon Peter and his commissioning as a disciple. Peter is the only disciple introduced prior to this scene (see 4:38-39), he is the only one to speak to Jesus, and Jesus' commission is addressed to Peter. The others, James and John, are introduced as Simon's partners, almost as an afterthought.

At the heart of this scene is Jesus' call to the fishermen to leave their nets and give themselves to the work of the kingdom. The metaphor "fishers of men," or "catching people," is striking both because it arises out of the situation and because it is a clever play on words. The fishermen are themselves caught by Jesus and given a new vocation. In the OT and the Dead Sea Scrolls fishing is used metaphorically for gathering people for judgment (Amos 4:2; Hab 1:14-15; Jer 16:16; 1QH 5:7-8). Seen against this background, the call to the disciples was a commission to gather people for judgment, a theme found in the preaching of John the Baptist (3:7-9). The metaphor of fishing was also common in Greek literature as a metaphor for the activity of philosopher-teachers. In the Gospels, however, the call to become fishers of men becomes a call to gather men and women for the kingdom. It retains eschatological overtones from the biblical traditions, it authorizes the disciples as representatives of their teacher and agents of the kingdom, and it looks forward to the church's evangelistic mission.⁶⁹

68. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, AB 29A (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970) 1090.

69. See Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee*, 20-21.

REFLECTIONS

① Peter's call to leave everything and "catch people" is the counterpart in Luke of the call of Paul in Acts, where the commission is actually communicated through Ananias (Acts 9:15). Both Peter and Paul were called dramatically, through a miraculous event, while they were in the midst of their routine activities, and both were given a commission to devote themselves to bringing others to Jesus. Peter would become the leader of the early church in Jerusalem; Paul would become the great apostle to the Gentiles. These call scenes are important because, although not everyone experiences such a dramatic conversion or call, these scenes contain elements that continue to mark experiences of God's calling in our own context.

② Christologically, the miraculous catch of fish should probably be understood as a sign that, as the Messiah (4:41) anointed by the Spirit, Jesus did mighty works not unlike the works of Moses, Elijah, and Elisha. This is the first miracle that was not a healing or an exorcism. Jesus does not command the sea or the fish, nor does he instruct the fishermen to do anything out of the ordinary. Like Moses, whom God used to supply manna and water in the wilderness, or Elijah, who supplied an abundance of meal and oil (1 Kgs 17:8-16), and Elisha, who provided an endless supply of oil and fed a hundred people with twenty loaves of barley bread (2 Kgs 4:1-7, 42-44), Jesus provided an abundance of fish. The work of the kingdom, therefore, will be accompanied by signs of God's gracious love. It will inaugurate a time of abundance and blessing.

③ The counterpart to christology is the Gospel's teaching on discipleship. Three observations can be made in this context. First, the fishermen had done nothing to warrant or merit Jesus' call to them. Regardless of what Jesus may have seen in the fishermen, to contend that he called the most capable or most qualified to be his disciples would contradict an important element in the Gospel story. The fishermen were not called because of their qualifications, character, or potential. God's call is as unpredictable as it is unmerited. Second, the call to discipleship did not come in a holy place (the temple or a synagogue) but in the midst of the fishermen's daily work. The point is significant not because God does not call people in a holy place (cf. Zechariah in Luke 1) but because it is a further sign of the work of God's kingdom reaching into the arena of human life. Third, the call to discipleship in Luke's account does not include the familiar words "follow me," as in Mark 1:16-20. Rather, Jesus commissions the fishermen for kingdom service: "catching people." Fourth, the metaphor of fishing suggests various facets of the disciples' role in relation to Jesus and the kingdom. Henceforth they will live by Jesus' teachings and call others to him just as they themselves have been called. Their work will be evangelistic in nature and infused with eschatological urgency. Finally, the call of the kingdom requires a reversal of priorities and a reordering of commitments. The disciples left everything (a more inclusive term than is used in the call accounts in Mark and Matthew), and "they followed him." The language of following Jesus echoes both Elijah's call to Elisha (1 Kgs 19:19-21) and Socrates' call to Strepsiades: "But come and follow me."⁷⁰ The last word in Luke's story is Jesus. He will order their lives from now on.

70. Aristophanes *The Clouds* 497-517; Diogenes Laertius *Lives* II.48.