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Jesus declares He is the Messiah. Image via Church of Jesus Christ.

WHY DOES JESUS ANNOUNCE THAT ISAIAH 61:1–2 IS FULFILLED?

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isaiah 61:1–2

THE KNOW

Luke records that early in His ministry, Jesus returned to His childhood home in Nazareth. While there, Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, stood, picked up the Isaiah scroll, and read from Isaiah 61:1–2 before the men of the synagogue.¹ The passage Jesus chose to quote would introduce Him as the Messiah to all present:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18–19; cf. Isaiah 61:1–2)

Isaiah 61:1–2 deals with imagery relating to the Jubilee year, a time set apart in the law of Moses for debts to be forgiven and slaves to be set free (see Leviticus 25:8–24).² This passage may have had special significance for the people

Jesus read it to that Sabbath because a Jubilee year had likely ended shortly before Jesus began preaching publicly.³

In addition, as Kerry Muhlestein notes, these verses were clearly understood “to be a messianic prophecy, at least partially because the verse begins by saying that the speaker has been anointed (Messiah means ‘anointed one’).”⁴ Messianic themes are strengthened by similar language in Psalm 72, which describes the Lord’s anointed king in terms similar to Isaiah’s.⁵

Jesus would demonstrate the messianic nature of this prophecy by connecting it to Himself and declaring, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21). Connections to Jesus are also immediately drawn by Luke. According to Luke, this is the first time Jesus taught following His baptism; thus, statements such as, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me” (Luke 4:18), would remind Luke’s readers of what they

had just learned about Jesus at the baptism. By doing so, Jesus proclaims where His authority originates early on in Luke’s Gospel: from the Father, who sent the Holy Ghost upon Jesus at His baptism and declared from heaven Jesus’s divine identity.⁶

Jesus notably finished His reading with a statement regarding “the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:19), but He did not continue to quote any more of Isaiah’s prophecy. The remainder of Isaiah 61 deals with the redemption and restoration of Zion and the Lord’s judgments against the wicked. By ending His citation where He did, Jesus effectively separated the two aspects of Isaiah’s prophecy—who the Messiah would be and what the last days will be like when the Messiah comes in judgment. By declaring that this passage had been fulfilled, Jesus effectively declared Himself to be that very Messiah. Far from offering deliverance from Roman occupation, however, Jesus would focus His ministry on healing the brokenhearted and the blind and on conquering death and hell.

Unfortunately, the people of Nazareth rejected Jesus’s testimony:

And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way (Luke 4:28–30).⁷

Much like the scribes and Pharisees, the people of Nazareth apparently desired a sign that Jesus was the Messiah. According to S. Kent Brown, Jesus’s prediction that the people would say, “Physician, heal thyself,” could be understood to mean, “‘Establish the proofs of your own claims’ or ‘Show yourself really to be the person we hear about.’” (Luke 4:23).⁸ Ironically, Jesus would perform the very miracles spoken of by Isaiah—healing the blind and broken hearted, preaching the gospel to the poor, and many more—but never in Nazareth.⁹ He could do no such things there because of the people’s lack of faith.

THE WHY

Jesus’s statement to the people of Nazareth remains a powerful testimony of His messiahship and would prove to be indicative of His earthly ministry. Jesus Christ, the Anointed One, was filled with the Spirit during His ministry and maintained the presence of the Father throughout mortality (John 16:32).

Jesus would fulfill all of Isaiah’s prophetic declarations: He taught the Gospel to all who would listen, especially among the poor (Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3). He performed many miracles, including healing the blind (Luke 18:35–43).

Ultimately, Jesus would perform the consummate act of the Atonement, allowing our broken hearts to be healed and the chains of death and hell to be broken.

Just as Isaiah foretold the mortal ministry of Christ, he knew of Jesus’s ministry in the spirit world. After Joseph F. Smith received his vision of that ministry, he connected the wonderful event to the prophecy recorded in Isaiah 61 (see Doctrine and Covenants 138:42). By “preach[ing] deliverance to the captives,” Jesus undoubtedly brought His listeners good news both in His mortal ministry and after.

Modern readers can take great comfort from learning about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. His Atonement is infinite and eternal in scope and reaches out to us today—just as it did to those He healed during His mortal life. As Elder Neil L. Anderson taught, “Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the incalculable gift of His Atonement, not only saves us from death and offers us, through repentance, forgiveness for our sins, but He also stands ready to save us from the sorrows and pains of our wounded souls.”¹⁰ We can look forward to the day when He comes again, in the pleasing year of the Lord, and we enjoy His presence once more.

FURTHER READING

S. Kent Brown, “Luke 4,” in *New Testament Minute: Luke*, ed. John W. Welch (Springville, UT: Scripture Central, 2023).

S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 239–257.

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NOTES

1. For more on the ancient custom of reading and commenting upon scripture in synagogue, see S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 241–242.
2. See Donald W. Parry, “Isaiah 61,” in *Old Testament Minute: Isaiah*, ed. Taylor Halverson (Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2022); Kerry Muhlestein, *Learning to Love Isaiah: A Guide and Commentary* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2021), 492–493; Cecilia M. Peek, “Early Galilean Ministry and Miracles,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ: From Bethlehem through the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), 295–296.
3. See Brown, *Testimony of Luke*, 245. This Jubilee year would have occurred in AD 26–27.
4. Muhlestein, *Learning to Love Isaiah*, 492. Similarly, S. Kent Brown notes that the Melchizedek scroll found at Qumran includes language from Isaiah 61 in describing a messianic figure. See Brown, *Testimony of Luke*, 255–256.
5. Brown, *Testimony of Luke*, 243.

6. Book of Mormon Central, “Why Was Jesus Proclaimed the Son of God at His Baptism? (Mark 1:11; cf. Matthew 3:17; Luke 3:22),” *KnoWhy* 655 (January 24, 2023).
7. Cecilia M. Peek notes that the rejection Jesus encountered in Nazareth, including the life-threatening situation that followed, foreshadows the ultimate rejection He would face when He was crucified. Peek, “Early Galilean Ministry,” 294–295.
8. Brown, *Testimony of Luke*, 249.
9. For these miracles, see Mark 8:22–26; 10:46–52, Luke 7: 22, 37–50; 18:35–43, and so forth.
10. Neil L. Anderson, “Wounded,” October 2018 general conference.