

# INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE WITH SATAN?

## THE DEVIL'S USE OF SCRIPTURE IN LUKE'S TEMPTATION NARRATIVE

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### Summary

*This article considers Luke's evaluation of the devil's interpretation of Psalm 91 in Luke 4:9-11 and offers four lessons regarding Biblical interpretation that can be drawn out of the text: 1) context is key; 2) the dawn of the messianic era enables a greater experience of the Scriptures than was previously the case; 3) the promises of Scripture should not be taken to mean that every experience on earth will match the promise made; and 4) if we use the locutionary meaning of Scripture to produce perlocutionary acts that oppose the intended perlocution of the text, we misuse the text.*

### 1. Introduction

Beginning from Moses and from all the Prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27).<sup>1</sup>

In Luke's Gospel Jesus is both the greatest interpreter of Scripture and the greatest topic of Scripture. Luke concludes his gospel with Jesus opening the minds of the apostles to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45), and he populates the speeches in Acts with apostolic interpretations of Old Testament texts. Clearly one of Luke's goals in writing is to open the minds of his own audience to understand the Scriptures, and he uses frequent quotations of Scripture by Jesus and the apostles to accomplish this goal. Indeed, the first three times Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are the author's own translation.

speaks as an adult in Luke's Gospel, he is quoting Scripture in an encounter with the devil (Luke 4:4, 8, 12). Here we have clues as to how Luke wants his audience to read Scripture. But in the midst of this encounter, the devil, too, offers an interpretation of Scripture (4:9-11). How does Luke want his audience to evaluate the devil's interpretation? This paper will answer this question by first considering the importance of context for Jesus's interpretation of Scripture in the temptation narrative; then examining the numerous ways in which the devil's use of Psalm 91 plays off of the historical, literary, and canonical contexts of Psalm 91; and finally exploring Luke's assessment of the devil's interpretation through related passages in Luke-Acts.

## 2. The Importance of Context for Jesus's Interpretation of Scripture

Before Jesus even speaks, the connections between Jesus's situation and the context of his OT quotations are clear. Luke 1–3 makes Jesus's sonship a key issue (1:32, 35; 2:49; 3:22, 38; cf. 4:41), culminating with a declaration from heaven of Jesus's divine sonship and with a genealogy that, unlike Matthew's genealogy, ends with Jesus as the Son of God. Not surprisingly two of the temptations begin with the words εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ ('if you are the Son of God'). The testing of Jesus specifically concerns whether or not he is qualified to be the Son of God.<sup>2</sup> This makes the relationship between Jesus's forty days in the wilderness and Israel's forty years in the wilderness all the more significant. The exodus begins with God declaring Israel to be his 'firstborn son' (Exod. 4:22) who was to go into the wilderness to worship God (Exod. 4:23; 5:1, 3; 7:16; 8:27). Of course, Israel's time in the wilderness was a time of grumbling about bread, of practicing idolatry, and of testing God rather than a time of unadulterated worship (Pss. 78; 106). And yet God used these experiences to discipline Israel 'as a man disciplines his son' (Deut. 8:5).<sup>3</sup> So now the newly acclaimed

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance of sonship for this narrative, see Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991), 1:54-56; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 191.

<sup>3</sup> As will be shown, Deuteronomy 8 is instrumental for Luke's understanding of Israel's wilderness experience.

Son of God is led into the wilderness (ἤγετο ... ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ; cf. Deut. 8:2: ἡγαγέν ... ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ) to undergo the same tests that Israel failed.<sup>4</sup> Notably, when Jesus turns to Scripture to overcome the temptations, he repeatedly turns to Deuteronomy 6–8, where Moses recaps Israel's wilderness experiences and the sins that were exposed there.<sup>5</sup> This means that the nature of Jesus's temptations is clarified when comparisons are made with the temptations Israel faced.

The first temptation in Luke 4 is to turn a stone to bread. Sometimes it is thought that this would be wrong because it is an act of self-gratification<sup>6</sup> or demonstrates a lack of trust,<sup>7</sup> but the real problem becomes clear when we consider Jesus's response. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8, which reads:

<sup>1</sup>The whole commandment that I command you today you are to be careful to do, so that you may *live* and become great and enter and possess the land that Yahweh promised to your fathers. <sup>2</sup>And you shall remember the whole way that Yahweh your God led you these forty years in the wilderness in order to afflict you, to test you in order to know what is in your heart, whether or not you would obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup>And he afflicted you and caused you to hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, in order to make you know that not on bread alone will man *live* — that on all (MT; LXX: every word) that comes forth from the mouth of Yahweh will man *live*.

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<sup>4</sup> John A. T. Robinson, 'The Temptations', in *Twelve New Testament Studies*, SBT 34 (London: SCM, 1962), 59–60; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 2 vols., AB 28, 28A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981–1985), 1:510–11; R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (London: Tyndale, 1971), 53; David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, 'Luke', in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 251–14, esp. 286; etc.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, 'Temptations', 54; France, *Jesus*, 52; cf. D. A. Carson, 'Matthew', in *Matthew—Mark*, vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Revised Edition*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, 13 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 23–670, esp. 141.

<sup>6</sup> Heinz Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, 2 vols., HTKNT 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 1:209; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 170–171; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1:510.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, 'Temptations', 55–56; E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, NCB (London: Oliphants, 1974), 94; Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC 24 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 146; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, 2 vols., BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994–1996), 1:373; Green, *Luke*, 194; François Bovon, *Luke*, 3 vols., trans. Christine M. Thomas, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002–2013), 1:143; Kenneth Duncan Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts: Telling the History of God's People Intertextually*, JSNTSup 282 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 112.

In verse 1 Moses continues a theme that runs throughout Deuteronomy, that by obeying God Israel can *live* (Deut. 4:1, 4, 26, 40; 5:16, 33; 6:2, 24; 11:9; 16:20; 22:7; 25:15; 30:6, 15-20; 32:47). The references to living in verse 3 should be understood in the same way. Eating bread is not sufficient for life; Israel must be careful to do the entirety of Yahweh's commandment. Verse 2 indicates that the purpose of God 'testing' Israel (LXX: ἐκπειράζω; compare Luke 4:2: πειράζω) was to reveal whether or not Israel had a heart to obey God's commandments (in other words to do that which truly gives life). Then verse 3 reveals that the purpose for Israel's hunger and God's provision of manna was to make them know that physical bread by itself will not give life but that Israel needs to learn to receive all that comes from God's mouth (his commandments). So the wilderness experience and the accompanying hunger had a purpose in the life of Israel. Peter Craigie writes:

On the one hand, the desolation of the wilderness removed the natural props and supports which man by nature depends on; it cast the people back on God, who alone could provide the strength to survive the wilderness. On the other hand, the severity of the wilderness period undermined the shallow bases of confidence of those who were not truly rooted and grounded in God.<sup>8</sup>

Craigie goes on to say: 'The basic source of life was God and the words of God to his people; *every utterance of the mouth of the Lord* (v. 3) was more basic to Israelite existence than was food.'<sup>9</sup> This is the same principle Jesus teaches in John 6:49–50: 'Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven that one may eat of it and not die.' Israel's time in the wilderness was thus 'the time of adolescence in Israel's history'<sup>10</sup> (compare Deut. 8:5: 'as a man disciplines his son, Yahweh your God is disciplining you'), in which Israel learned to look not for what physically sustains life, but for what spiritually sustains life, namely God's commandments. Likewise Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, had to undergo a time of all physical props being taken away so that he could learn to rely on spiritual sustenance. Once again we find Jesus teaching a similar idea in the Gospel of John: 'I have food to

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<sup>8</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 185.

<sup>9</sup> Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 185, emphasis his.

<sup>10</sup> Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 186.

eat that you do not know about.... My food is that I might do the will of the one who sent me and complete his work' (John 4:32, 34).<sup>11</sup> But one need not look outside the Gospel of Luke to find a similar teaching:

Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat.... For life is more than food.... And do not seek what you may eat and what you may drink or be worried. For the nations of the world seek after all these things, but your father knows that you need these. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you.... For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Luke 12:22-23, 29-31, 34)

The reason Jesus needed to not turn a stone to bread was because he needed his heart to be in heaven, or to paraphrase the words of Deuteronomy, because he needed to live off the words of Yahweh rather than off food. That Jesus succeeded in living off God's word is evidenced by the fact that in each temptation he responds with Scripture.<sup>12</sup> Israel's constant grumbling in the wilderness, however, demonstrated that their hearts were fixed on earthly food rather than on the word of God. Israel failed the first test of sonship, but Jesus passed.

The nature of the second temptation is obvious, with the devil enticing Jesus to commit idolatry, a sin that Israel commits in Exodus 32 and Numbers 25. Here the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms that rightfully belong to the Son of God<sup>13</sup> and offers them to Jesus without requiring that Jesus walk the path of the Son of God. What Yahweh would offer to his Son (Ps. 2:8) can be gained another way. Would Jesus choose the easy way or the way that demands that the Christ suffer and die before entering into his glory (Luke 9:22; 18:31; 24:26)?<sup>14</sup> Once again Jesus turns to Deuteronomy for direction, this time to words that follow the Shema:

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<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 113; cf. Carson, 'Matthew', 141.

<sup>12</sup> Walter L. Liefeld and David W. Pao, 'Luke', in *Luke—Acts*, vol. 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Revised Edition*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, 13 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 19-355, esp. 101; Green, *Luke*, 194.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Christ's realm is rightly greater than Satan's realm, for Christ's realm will include all of creation (angels etc.) and not just the earthly sphere that Satan offers Jesus as a cheap substitute. It may be that Luke uses the word *οικουμένη* where Matthew has *κόσμος* in order to clarify how much less Satan offers than what Jesus will gain through his death and resurrection (Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989], 38).

<sup>14</sup> Liefeld and Pao, 'Luke', 101; Ellis, *Luke*, 95; Litwak, *Echoes*, 112-13.

<sup>10</sup>When Yahweh your God brings you to the land that he swore to your fathers — to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob — to give to you, with great and good cities, which you did not build, <sup>11</sup>and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and wells dug out, which you did not dig out, with vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant, and when you have eaten and are satisfied, <sup>12</sup>watch yourself, lest you forget Yahweh who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves. <sup>13</sup>Yahweh your God shall you fear, and him shall you serve, and by his name shall you swear (Deut. 6:10-13).

Moses anticipates that Israel will continue to face temptation toward idolatry even after Yahweh has provided everything they could hope for. Jesus, however, having been nourished by the word of God for the previous forty days, knows that in the end nothing good comes from idolatry (indeed, destruction comes according to Deut. 6:15!) and he resists the devil's temptation by recalling the passage in which Moses impresses upon the Israelites the need for worship of God alone.<sup>15</sup>

In both the first two temptations, Jesus must overcome the devil to meet the requirements of the Son of God.<sup>16</sup> Had Jesus failed to rely on spiritual nourishment he would not have been able to walk the road to the cross. Had he failed the second he would not have been able to 'proclaim liberty to the captives' (4:18) or to cast out demons (for example 4:31-37). The devil could only offer Jesus the authority that had been given to him, but the Messiah was to have a greater authority, as one 'stronger than' the strong man (11:21-22).<sup>17</sup> Both of the first two temptations offer Jesus something that is likened to messianic authority (Jesus will miraculously provide food later; Jesus will have the authority and glory of all the kingdoms of the world later), but it is offered in a way that would subvert Jesus's identity as the Son of God. The third temptation will do the same.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is also reminiscent of Deut. 3:23-29; 32:49-52; 34:1-6, where Moses is shown the entire realm that belongs to the Son of God in the old covenant and is told that he will die before Israel receives its inheritance. In Deut. 3:23-29, Moses pleads with God to be able to enter the land, but God gets angry and says that Joshua (LXX: Ἰησοῦς) will give to the people the land that Moses will only see.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur A. Just, *Luke*, 2 vols., CC (St. Louis: Concordia, 1996-1997), 1:173.

<sup>17</sup> Garrett, *Demise*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Likewise Gerhardsson argues that the idea of testing in the Old Testament is almost always related to testing a covenant partner 'to see whether he is keeping his side of the agreement' (Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son (Matt. 4: 1—11 & Par.): An Analysis of an Early Christian Midrash*, ConBNT 2 [Lund: Gleerup, 1966], 25-28, esp. 26). This is the significance of the temptation narrative and for Jesus to fail one of these tests is to demonstrate that he has not faithfully carried out the duties of the Son of God.

In the third temptation the devil tries to get Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple. Some have thought that the temptation is to prematurely reveal Jesus's majesty,<sup>19</sup> but again the Scripture Jesus uses demonstrates that this is not the case.<sup>20</sup> Jesus explicitly states that testing God is the issue. This is even clearer when we consider the Deuteronomy passage that Jesus quotes in response to the temptation.<sup>21</sup> Deuteronomy 6:16 says, 'Do not test Yahweh your God as you did in Massah', an allusion back to Exodus 17:1–7, where the Israelites 'quarrelled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink"', and so Moses named the place Massah 'because they tested Yahweh, saying, "Is Yahweh in our midst or not?"'<sup>22</sup> We see from Exodus 17 that Israel's problem was that they lacked certainty in God's presence and provision, leading them to test God. They ask in Exodus 17:3, 'Why is it that you have brought us up from Egypt — to kill me, my sons, and my livestock from thirst?' Now the devil tries to get Jesus to fall into the same sin of testing God out of an uncertainty about whether or not God is really present and protecting him.<sup>23</sup> Someone who is secure in his identity and certain that Yahweh is with him has no need to 'prove it' by jumping.

Thus each time Jesus quotes Scripture an awareness of the broader context of the passage he quotes illuminates what is taking place in the narrative. Deuteronomy 6–8 is a survey of the ways Israel proved to be an imperfect son of God by falling to the devil's temptations in the wilderness. Luke not only understands Deuteronomy 6–8 this way but also demonstrates Jesus as the perfect Son of God who succeeds where Israel has failed in the past. Sometimes interpreters misunderstand the nature of the temptations in Luke because they fail to pay attention to the Old Testament context of the passages Jesus quotes. This suggests that Luke hoped his audience would have more of an awareness of the broader narrative in Deuteronomy 6–8 than many Christians have

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<sup>19</sup> Ellis, *Luke*, 95; Bonnie T. Lepin, 'The Use of the Psalms in Luke-Acts: The Theological-Historical Implications and Hermeneutical Principles' (MA thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1978), 100; cf. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1:517.

<sup>20</sup> So Marshall, *Luke*, 173; Stein, *Luke*, 148n51; John Nolland, *Luke*, 3 vols., WBC 35A–C (Dallas: Word, 1989–1993), 1:181.

<sup>21</sup> Gerhardsson, *Testing*, 28–31, 60–61; France, *Jesus*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Robert L. Brawley, *Text to Text Pours Forth Speech: Voices of Scripture in Luke-Acts*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 23.

<sup>23</sup> Brawley, *Text to Text*, 23.

today. Such a hope is not in vain, even for first-century Gentile Christians. They were likely immersed in the text of Deuteronomy and in the story of Israel's wilderness wanderings from conversion. The question arises how Luke would have understood the only remaining OT quotation in this passage, the one placed on the lips of the devil.

### 3. The Context of Psalm 91

Each time the devil tempts Jesus, Jesus responds with Scripture, so for the third temptation the devil enters into the same arena in which Jesus repeatedly chooses to fight, himself quoting Scripture to support his proposal.<sup>24</sup> The devil sees his suggestion that Jesus jump from the pinnacle of the temple as supported by Psalm 91, a psalm that promises protection to the one who takes refuge in God. As with the other quotations of Scripture, it is clear that Luke expects his audience to be familiar with the OT context. Six observations make this clear.

First, the psalm as a whole addresses demonic powers. Fraine and Gaster have noted that the four elements of Psalm 91:5-6 would have been understood as four demons that operated at four different times in the day,<sup>25</sup> and Hossfeld and Zenger argue that angels are mentioned in verses 11-12 as the counterpart of the demons in verses 5-6.<sup>26</sup> Goldingay is sceptical that this was the original intention of the psalm,<sup>27</sup> but even if it was not, it is clearly the way the psalm came to be used. Psalm 91:5-6 (לֹא-תִירָא ... מִקֵּטֶב יְשׁוּד צָהָרִים), 'you will not fear the destruction that devastates at noon') is rendered in the LXX οὐ φοβηθήσῃ ... ἀπὸ συμπτώματος καὶ δαιμονίου μεσημβρινοῦ (Ps.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1:517.

<sup>25</sup> Jean de Fraine, 'Le "démon du midi" (Ps 91:6)', *Bib* 40 (1959), 372-83; T. H. Gaster *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (Harper Row: New York 1969), 770-71; cf. Rashī, *Rashī's Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. and ed. Mayer I. Gruber, The Brill Reference Library of Judaism (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 482.

<sup>26</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, 3 vols., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005– ), 2:431.

<sup>27</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., BCOTWP (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006–2008), 3:45; cf. Corinna Körting, 'Text and Context — Ps 91 and 11QPsAp<sup>a</sup>', *ETL* 85 (2009), 567-77, esp. 573; Derek Kidner, *Psalms*, 2 vols., TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973–1975), 2:332; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1961), 650; Mika S. Pajunen, 'Qumranic Psalm 91: A Structural Analysis', in *Scripture in Transition: Essays on Septuagint, Hebrew Bible, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of Raija Sollamo*, ed. Anssi Voitila and Jutta Jokiranta, JSJSup 126 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 591-605, esp. 603-4.



90:5-6 LXX: 'you will not fear the midday demon'); Psalm 91 is grouped with three non-canonical exorcistic psalms in 11Q11; and *Midrash Psalms*, *Midrash Rabbah*, and Rashi all interpret this psalm apotropaically.<sup>28</sup> Luke also understands this psalm this way, as can be seen by his allusion to it when Satan falls from heaven in Luke 10:19 (see below). It is thus ironic that the devil would bring up this weapon against himself in the midst of a battle with Jesus.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the devil wants Jesus to place a false pride in the psalm, as if the mere speaking of the words could fabricate what the psalm promises.<sup>30</sup> And yet, within Luke's narrative, we see Jesus's victory over Satan so that God *does* protect Jesus as the psalm promises.<sup>31</sup> This psalm surely does give power over the enemy, but that power is not intended to lead one into a false pride.<sup>32</sup>

Second, Psalm 91 may have a wilderness context. Canonically it is placed after the Mosaic Psalm 90, which on the lips of Moses laments the death of Moses's generation in the wilderness (Ps. 90:9-12).<sup>33</sup> Psalm 91 then speaks of the protection that someone wandering in the wilderness would need — shelter and shade (91:1), protection while thousands fall at your side (91:7), angels helping you to not strike your foot on a stone (91:11-12), and protection from different types of lions and serpents (91:13).<sup>34</sup> David Mitchell also notes a number of correlations between Psalm 91 and Deuteronomy 32–33, further strengthening the wilderness context of this psalm.<sup>35</sup> That Luke also

<sup>28</sup> *Midrash Psalms* 91:1, 3, 4, 5; *Midrash Rabbah* on Lam. 1:3; and Rashi, *Psalms*, 582-83.

<sup>29</sup> David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*, JSOTSup 252 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 281; Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 159; Matthias Henze, 'Psalm 91 in Premodern Interpretation and at Qumran', in *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran*, ed. Matthias Henze, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 168-93, esp. 185; Pao and Schnabel, 'Luke', 285.

<sup>30</sup> Pirim Hugger, *Jahwe meine Zuflucht: Gehalt und Theologie des 91. Psalms*, Münsterschwarzacher Studien 13 (Würzburg: Vier-Türme, 1971), 292-93.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Labahn, 'The Psalms in Q', in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 47-60, esp. 51.

<sup>32</sup> If the interpretation of *Targum Psalms* that this psalm will help Solomon (= the Messiah?) overcome temptation is based on an older tradition that goes back to this time, the confidence that this psalm can give Jesus in this instance is strengthened all the more.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell, *Message*, 276-77.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, *Message*, 277.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, *Message*, 277-78.

sensed a wilderness context for this psalm is suggested by the fact that when he alludes to this psalm later, in Luke 10:19, he uses the language of ‘snakes and scorpions’ (ὄφειων καὶ σκορπίων) rather than lions and serpents. Snakes and scorpions occur together elsewhere in Scripture only in Deuteronomy 8:15, where Moses says that God ‘led [the Israelites] through that great and dreadful wilderness, where there is biting serpent and scorpion and thirst’ (LXX: τοῦ ἀγαρόντος σε διὰ τῆς ἐρήμου τῆς μεγάλης καὶ τῆς φοβερᾶς ἐκείνης, οὗ ὄφεις δάκνων καὶ σκορπίος καὶ δίψα).<sup>36</sup> In contrast to Matthew and Mark, Luke has this mission take place after the feeding of the five thousand and after Jesus’s transfiguration, placing this reference to Psalm 91 within the journey narrative, which may be understood as a new exodus.<sup>37</sup>

Third, Psalm 91 has connections not only with spiritual warfare and with the wilderness, but also with the temple. Hans-Joachim Kraus notes:

The address is to a person who has found residence and security in the protection and refuge of the sanctuary, סֶתֶר, originally ‘the hiding place’, ‘the refuge’, had in the language of the psalms become a term for the protective area of the sanctuary, (cf. Pss. 27:5; 31:20; 61:4). And with צֶלַח, as is clear from v. 4, צֶל כְּנָפֶיךָ (Pss. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7), the reference is to the secure area underneath the outstretched wings of the cherubim in the holy of holies. Here the person who is persecuted and who is in distress ‘hides’ (תַּסְתִּירֶנִּי in Ps. 17:8). Here he ‘sojourns’ (cf. beside יִתְלוֹן in Ps. 91:1: יָגוּר and יִשְׁכֵּן in Ps. 15:1).<sup>38</sup>

True to form, Luke has Jesus taken from the wilderness to the temple for this temptation. The purpose is not to make this a public event but to place Jesus in the one place on earth where God’s presence and protection is most powerfully experienced.<sup>39</sup> The irony continues to

<sup>36</sup> Pao and Schnabel, ‘Luke’, 318. Philo also uses the expression ‘serpents and scorpions’ to refer to what the Israelites faced in the wilderness (*Alleg. Interp.* 2.84; *Moses* 1.192). The only other place he uses the expression is in *Rewards* 90, where he speaks of the last age, when ‘the genus of scorpions and serpents and other reptiles will have their venom made powerless’.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. C. F. Evans, ‘The Central Section of St Luke’s Gospel’, in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 37–53; David P. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989); though see the criticisms of Evans and Moessner in Mark L. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke—Acts: The Promise and Its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology*, JSNTSup 110 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 261–36.

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, 2 vols., CC (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988–1989), 2:222.

<sup>39</sup> Pace Ellis, *Luke*, 95

build. Luke even uses the words τὸ πτερύγιον τοῦ ἱεροῦ ('the wing of the temple') to make a further connection with Psalm 91, where a person can find refuge ὑπὸ τὰς πτέρυγας αὐτοῦ ('under his wings', Ps. 90:4 LXX).<sup>40</sup> Thus Jesus is asked to jump down to the very place where Psalm 91 says a person can find God's protection.

Fourth, Psalm 91 has a special application for the Messiah. Some have denied that there was a messianic interpretation of this psalm in Second Temple Judaism, but in *Targum Psalms* 91 it is specifically Solomon who would be delivered. A messianic interpretation may even be intended by the placement of Psalms 90–91 after Psalm 89, which ends with a question regarding the future of the messianic hope. Lane argues that because Psalm 89 is individual and messianic, the next two psalms, which are also individual should be read as referring to the Messiah.<sup>41</sup> That Luke reads this psalm messianically is suggested by the devil beginning the temptation with the conditional statement 'If you are the Son of God'. In other words, the expectation is that if Psalm 91 holds true for anyone it certainly holds true for the Messiah. We have already seen that the first two temptations involved things that rightly belong to the Messiah (the ability to create bread miraculously and the authority to rule all the kingdoms of the world); it is not surprising that Luke would understand the third enticement to be something that is also the Messiah's prerogative.

Finally, the psalm has a special eschatological significance. Language that is used in the psalm is used in Isaiah to refer to the messianic era. After the branch from the stump of Jesse shoots forth (Isa. 11:1) and the Spirit comes upon him (11:2), Isaiah says 'the weaned child will stretch out his hand over the den of a viper, and they will not harm or destroy' (Isa. 11:8-9). Philo also speaks of a future in which venomous animals will no longer harm people (*Rewards* 90). Luke makes it clear that the son of David has come (Luke 1:27, 32, 69; 2:4, 11; 3:31) and that the Spirit has come upon him (Luke 1:35; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18), thus inaugurating the eschatological era (Luke 4:21).

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<sup>40</sup> Gerhardsson, *Testing*, 59; Brawley, *Text to Text*, 23. Brawley notes that there is an implication here 'that the temple replicates in microcosm the divine care promised in Psalm 90 LXX'.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel C. Lane, 'Messianic Connections between Psalms 89, 91 & 92: Implications for the Overall Trajectory of the Psalter' (paper presented at the Midwest Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Cincinnati, Ohio, 26 March 2011), 24; cf. Mitchell, *Message*, 281.

Thus we see that the selection of Psalm 91:11-12 for this temptation is not a poor proof-text but an engagement with Psalm 91 in its historical, cult-functional, and canonical contexts, including its connection to the world of exorcism, to the places of wilderness and temple, to the person of the Messiah, and to the messianic age. As with Jesus's quotations of Scripture, the devil's quotation engages the reader who is familiar with the world of Psalm 91.

#### 4. Luke's Assessment of the Devil's Interpretation

So far we have seen sophistication — even irony — in the devil's use of Psalm 91:11-12. This raises the question: was the devil correct? Would God command his angels concerning Jesus so that he would not strike his foot against a stone? Everything up to this point in Luke suggests that this is the case. Gabriel has announced that Jesus will reign forever (1:33). Mary has celebrated God's strength and victory over the proud and mighty (1:51-52). Zechariah has rejoiced in the present salvation from enemies and ability to serve God without fear (1:71, 74). Jesus is referred to as a 'Saviour' (2:11), and peace is promised to those with whom God is well-pleased (ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας, 2:14), which would certainly include Jesus (ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα, 3:22). Simeon expected 'consolation', 'salvation', and 'glory' to come through Jesus (2:25, 30, 32). Others were expecting 'the redemption of Jerusalem' (2:38). Repeatedly Luke tells us about Jesus's strength, wisdom, and favour (2:40, 52). Perhaps one will think of the Suffering Servant when Luke quotes Isaiah 40:3-5 in the John the Baptist narrative (3:4-6), but he does not yet make that connection for the reader, and it seems that John himself does not yet see it. John's words evoke imagery of power and victory ('He comes who is mightier than I am ... he will baptise you in the Holy Spirit and fire. The winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire.') Luke mentions the imprisonment of John, but with regard to Jesus the impression is that he is invincible. Not even the devil himself can succeed in harming or diverting Jesus. Jesus has escaped the arrow that flies by day and the terror of the night.

In Luke 4:23 we have the first hint of physical harm coming to Jesus when he predicts that they will say to him, 'Physician, heal yourself',

but immediately after this we see a murder attempt against Jesus come to nothing. Just as the devil failed to get Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple, the people of Nazareth fail to throw him from a cliff (4:29). God's protection of Jesus is clear as he is able to 'pass through their midst and go on' (4:30). Not only this, but Jesus offers physical protection to others, casting out demons in a way that they can do 'no harm' (4:35). Luke's narrative continues with countless healings (4:38-39, 40; 5:12-13, 15, 17-26; 6:6-10, 18-19; 7:1-10, 11-17, 21; 8:2, 42b-48, 49-56; 9:11; 13:10-13; 14:1-4; 17:12-14; 18:35-43) and exorcisms (4:41; 6:18-19; 7:21; 8:2, 26-39; 9:37-43; 11:14; 13:10-13) that further suggest that sickness and demonic forces will not touch God's people in light of the presence of God's kingdom. Even death is reversed by Jesus's touch (7:11-17; 8:49-56). The raging sea (an allusion to the *Chaoskampf* theme in the Hebrew Bible?) is also unable to harm Jesus (8:22-25).<sup>42</sup> There are only a few small hints in Luke 1:1-9:21 that full physical protection will not be the case for Jesus and his disciples;<sup>43</sup> for the most part we see in Luke 1:1-9:21 a Jesus who is invincible.

Starting in Luke 9:22, however, a very different picture emerges. Jesus says, 'It is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things and to be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and to die and on the third day to be raised', a truth that will be repeatedly emphasized in Luke (9:44; 17:25; 18:32-33). Jesus goes on to speak of the daily taking up of the cross and the losing of life that must happen for his disciples (9:23-24; see also 14:26-27; 18:33).<sup>44</sup> When he sends them out, he sends them 'as lambs in the midst of wolves' (10:3). They will be brought before synagogues and rulers and authorities (12:11).

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<sup>42</sup> On *Chaoskampf* here, see Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, Sarum Theological Lectures (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 169.

<sup>43</sup> There is a hint of this in Jesus's words at Nazareth: 'Certainly you will say this proverb to me: "Physician, heal yourself"' (4:23), but overall the tone of that passage is one of Jesus's invincibility. Then in 6:11 and 6:16 we read that the scribes and Pharisees have begun plotting against Jesus and that Judas Iscariot will become a traitor. In the Sermon on the Plain Jesus speaks a blessing upon those who are hated, excluded, reviled, and spurned (6:22-23) and a woe upon those who are spoken well of (6:26), and he implies that Christians will be hated, cursed, and mistreated (6:28-29), though he says that if they obey him they cannot ultimately be shaken (6:47-49). Additionally in Luke 9:9 there is a brief mention of the fact that John had been beheaded, but beyond these hints there is nothing in Luke 1:1-9:21 that would lead one to expect Jesus to see physical harm.

<sup>44</sup> Note that 'daily' is a Lukan addition that is not present in Mark or Matthew.

They will be hated, persecuted, handed over, and in the case of some, put to death (21:12-19). So Luke clearly does not think the promise of protection in Psalm 91 will be literally realised in every circumstance. Perhaps Acts 12 sheds light on Luke's theology here, where James is put to the sword and an angel is commanded to guard Peter and deliver him from prison. The protection described in Psalm 91 literally happens at times in the now-present messianic era, but at times it does not.

How, then, does Luke read Psalm 91 — as a general principle that will not prove true in every individual situation, not even for the one who dwells perfectly in the shelter of the Most High? It does not seem that this is the case. At times Luke uses an expression that sounds very much like absolute, literal, physical protection. Most interesting in this regard is Luke 21:16-19, where Jesus says, 'You will be handed over even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, and you will be hated by all for my name. *But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives* (ψυχάς).' This promise that 'not a hair of your head will perish' is very similar to the promises in Psalm 91 (especially verses 7 and 10). To Luke, however, this promise does not mean the person will not die ('they will put some of you to death'); it just means that the person will gain his life,<sup>45</sup> similar to what we read in Luke 9:24: 'Whoever loses his life (ψυχὴν) for my sake will save it' (also Luke 17:33). Perhaps Luke reads Psalm 91 in the same way: a thousand may fall at your side, but the (ultimate) death will not come to you.<sup>46</sup> Luke is thinking on a different plane:

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<sup>45</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 2:333.

<sup>46</sup> This is the same way Augustine reads the psalm:

At first, when the emperors and kings of the world imagined that they could extirpate from the earth the Christian name by persecution, they proclaimed, that any one who confessed himself a Christian, should be smitten. He who did not choose to be smitten, denied that he was a Christian, knowing the sin he was committing: the arrow that flieth by day reached him. But whoever regarded not the present life, but had a sure trust in a future one, avoided the arrow, by confessing himself a Christian; smitten in the flesh, he was liberated in the spirit: resting with God, he began peacefully to await the redemption of his body in the resurrection of the dead: he escaped from that temptation, from the arrow that flieth by day.... But to those who persevered in professing Christ, what could the sword do, by killing the body at one stroke, and sending the soul to God? (Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 91:8 [NPNF<sup>1</sup> 8:448]).

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body and afterward do not have anything more they can do. But I will warn you whom you should fear: fear the one who after killing has the authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear this one. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Not even one of them is forgotten before God. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear. You are worth more than many sparrows. (Luke 12:4-7)

The fact that God has numbered the hairs on his children's heads — or the fact that he commands his angels concerning them — means not that they will not die, but that they are *eternally secure*. Repeatedly Luke turns our focus from what happens in this life to what will happen in the next. The disciples are not to fear because their Father is pleased to give them the kingdom (12:32). One whose treasure is in heaven fears for his eternal condition rather than his earthly condition (12:13-34).

This is not to suggest that the psalm has no application for this life. Clearly Luke portrays Jesus as — at times — invincible. His narration of the failed attempt to throw Jesus from a cliff later in the same chapter is probably intended to make the point that God *does* command his angels to physically protect Jesus. Luke also provides similar accounts of the disciples. Peter is able to walk out of prison. Paul survives a stoning, a snake bite, and a shipwreck in which 'not a hair from the head of any of you will perish' (Acts 27:34), an expression that here applies to *this* life. There are times in which Psalm 91 is clearly displayed to be literally true of this life, and yet these are merely a shadow of the ultimate protection that God offers to the one who dwells in the shadow of the Most High. In Luke's understanding, the ultimate protection of every hair of the Christian's head often first involves a violent death. *Present experiences of rescue from death or from physical harm are proleptic experiences of the ultimate reality that Psalm 91 promises will be true when the kingdom has been fully realized.* In Luke's understanding, Psalm 91 speaks not primarily of an absolute, literal, physical protection available here and now (the way the devil reads it) but of an ultimate reality that in the end nothing will have harmed the one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High and who has, by losing life now, gained an imperishable life. This ultimate reality will sometimes, but not always, find expression in the here and

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Note also the application of this psalm to the martyr Jim Elliot in Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot* (New York: Harper, 1958).

now, but this does not mean that Psalm 91 expresses a general principle, more that it expresses an absolute *eschatological* truth. Luke reads Psalm 91 as necessitating a greater experience of God's protection than is actually given in this life, but he also sees in the psalm an expression of the partial realisation of that eschatological protection in the present age.

What would have happened if Jesus had jumped? It may very well be that God would have miraculously intervened to physically protect Jesus. In the first temptation the devil was certainly correct to assume that the Son of God could miraculously produce bread. In the second temptation the devil was certainly correct that the Son of God will receive authority over all the kingdoms of the world. In light of Luke 4:29-30, the devil may well have been correct that physical protection would have been made available to Jesus. There is no indication that either Jesus or the devil thought this might be a trap that would result in Jesus's death. The problem with the devil's suggestion is not that it might *kill* Jesus but that it would *corrupt* Jesus. Just as with the first temptation a failure on Jesus's part would have prevented him from learning to rely on spiritual sustenance and with the second temptation a failure would have prevented him from binding the strong man, with the third temptation the threat is not a premature death of Jesus but a Jesus lacking in faith, one who like this 'evil generation ... seeks a sign' (Luke 11:29).<sup>47</sup> Jesus may very well have received the physical protection that the devil suggested would come, but in the process he would have fallen to his spiritual demise, for he would have repeated the error of the earlier Son of God, Israel, which was unable to bring about redemption through its lack of faith.

As is clear from the 'if you are the Son of God' statements, this is an identity issue. No one who is secure in his own identity feels the need to prove something. To jump would have been to express at the same time both trust and doubt. The person who jumps is willing to jump because he has faith but at the same time feels the need to jump because there is something to prove. If Jesus would have jumped, he would have succumbed spiritually to the devil. But for Luke, Psalm 91 promises spiritual protection to the one who takes refuge in the Lord.

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<sup>47</sup> I am indebted to Cyril of Alexandria for the connection between this temptation and Luke 11:29 (cf. the quotation of him in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, 3 vols., ed. John Henry Newman [Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1841–1845], 3:151).



Jesus proves his sonship not by jumping but by refusing to jump and in the process trampling upon the serpent before him (compare Ps. 91:13). Thus Origen is probably correct to fault the devil for reading the psalm too literalistically (*Hom. Luke* 31:2). Luke is no literalist when it comes to divine protection. The truth of God's protection of the individual may imply that God would have physically protected Jesus, but the psalm means so much more — ultimate spiritual protection against the plans of the enemy — not a hair of his head would perish.

## 5. The Expanding Horizons of Psalm 91

This is not the last time Psalm 91 appears in Luke-Acts. Whereas in Luke 4, Psalm 91 is applied specifically to the Son of God in the temple (specifically as he jumps from the temple's 'wing') immediately after the Messiah has been anointed, in Luke 10:17-20 the psalm is used more broadly. Once again the context is battle with Satan, which is not surprising since the psalm clearly has apotropaic connections. But now there is no 'if you are the Son of God' clause and no need to be on the wing of the temple. Jesus has just sent out seventy-two disciples, and they have reported that 'even the demons are subject to us in your name' (10:17). Jesus describes what is happening in terms of Satan's fall from heaven and states, 'Behold, I have given you the authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and on all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall harm you' (10:19).

Here we have a combined allusion to Genesis 3:14-15, Deuteronomy 8:15, and Psalm 91:11, 13. That Luke reads Deuteronomy 8 and Psalm 91 in conjunction with one another is not surprising in light of Luke 4. Combining these Scriptures with the story of Adam and Eve's temptation by Satan is also not surprising. The idea of treading upon animals recalls the promise of Psalm 90:13 LXX: 'You will walk upon the asp and the basilisk, and you will trample on the lion and the dragon.' Nowhere else in the LXX do God's people tread upon animals.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the promise that 'nothing shall harm you' recalls the previous stanza of Psalm 91, where it says: 'Evil will not come to you, and a scourge will not draw near to your body' (90:11 LXX). But instead of using the animals listed in Psalm 91, Luke

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<sup>48</sup> The closest parallel is in Dan. 7:7, 19, 23; 8:7; where beasts trample upon other beasts, but those doing the trampling are not the people of God as in Ps. 91.

uses animals that are mentioned together in the LXX nowhere but in Deuteronomy 8:15, where the ‘biting serpent and scorpion’ are seen as the threats of the wilderness that Moses has led the people through.<sup>49</sup> Luke may also recall the judgment upon Satan for tempting Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:14-15 by referring to the ‘serpent’ (ὄφις in both Luke 10:19 and Gen. 3:15) and the ‘enemy’ (ἐχθρός in Luke 10:19; compare ‘enmity’ [ἐχθρὰν] in Gen. 3:15) and by mentioning a treading upon the serpent, as in Genesis 3:15. Clearly Luke 10:18 implies a reversal of the ascent of Satan that originated with Genesis 3 and is referenced in Luke 4:6. Whereas at the fall enmity was placed between the serpent and humanity that involves a threat to either side, now the threat is only to serpents and scorpions; of the humans involved Jesus says, ‘Nothing shall harm you’. Therefore the authority Jesus gives the disciples to trample on serpents and scorpions is an authority that no one has had since the fall and yet that has been anticipated ever since the fall, embedded in texts such as Psalm 91 and Isaiah 11:6-9. This is important because it points to the eschatological significance of what is happening at this stage in the Lukan narrative. The ‘strong man’ under whom humanity has been captive for thousands of years has now been conquered and his spoils are being distributed (compare Luke 11:22).

## 6. Conclusion

The devil interprets Psalm 91 in its historical, cult-functional, canonical, and eschatological contexts as promising God’s physical protection to the anointed Messiah in God’s temple as he engages in spiritual warfare at the dawn of the eschatological era. Luke likely agrees with the devil that the psalm has a special application to spiritual warfare, to the Messiah, and to the messianic era. He also sees the connections with the wilderness and the temple. But Luke reads the psalm less literalistically. The fact that Luke agrees with the devil’s implications in the first two temptations — that Jesus really could create bread miraculously and that Jesus really should inherit all the nations of the earth — alongside the fact that later in the chapter Luke

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<sup>49</sup> Luke returns to the ‘serpent and scorpion’ imagery in Luke 11:11-13, where the two creatures are in opposition to the Holy Spirit, which the Father freely gives to those who ask. It appears that Luke sees these creatures as symbolic of the Satanic realm.

portrays Jesus being miraculously delivered from what was destined to be a great fall, suggests that Luke expects that angels would have protected Jesus had he jumped. But the fact that Jesus does strike his foot — not against a stone, but against a nail<sup>50</sup> — in Luke 23 suggests that Luke sees physical protection as a secondary issue in Psalm 91. The psalm is about something deeper, about the ultimate protection God provides from the devil. What, then, does Luke want us to learn from the devil's use of Scripture here? I suggest that there are four lessons Luke offers us.

First, context is key. Both Jesus and the devil — at least in the cases examined — interpret Scripture in light of its historical, literary, and canonical contexts. The modern interpreter should do the same. Second, the dawn of the messianic era enables a greater experience of the Scriptures than was previously the case. We should thus expect the psalms to ring truer now than they ever did before the coming of Jesus. To limit a psalm to its implications *before* the coming of the Messiah is to misread the psalm. Even the devil does better than this. We should therefore read Scripture not only contextually but also christo-centrally. Third, the promises of Scripture should not be taken to mean that every experience on earth will match the promise made. Instead our focus should be on the kingdom of God rather than its shadow. This point perhaps most strongly critiques the prosperity gospel. We are looking for the *enduring* significance of the promises of God more than for the *temporal* significance. 'Seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you' (Luke 12:31). Finally, if we use the locutionary meaning of Scripture to produce perlocutionary acts that oppose the intended perlocution of the text, we misuse the text. In other words, any reading of Scripture that does not produce greater faithfulness to God is a misreading of Scripture, even if it correctly interprets the locutions of the text.<sup>51</sup> Scripture should then be read not

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<sup>50</sup> Technically Luke does not mention the use of nails in Jesus's crucifixion, nor whether a nail was specifically driven into Jesus's feet, but the point is the same: Jesus is physically harmed in Luke 23.

<sup>51</sup> Origen compares the devil's use of Scripture to the use of Scripture by Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus: 'Whenever you hear quotations from the Scriptures, be careful of trusting the speaker immediately. Consider the person: what sort of a life he leads, what sort of opinions he holds, what sort of intention he has. Otherwise, he might pretend that he is holy and not be holy, and, infected with the poisons of heresy, he might be a wolf concealed in a sheep's skin. The devil might even be in him, citing the Scriptures. When an opportune moment arises, the devil cites the Scriptures' (*Hom. Luke 31:3* (FC 94:126)).

merely for improved knowledge (orthodoxy), but also, and perhaps more importantly, for improved practice (orthopraxy). It is in these last two areas that the devil misinterprets Scripture, but Luke gives us clues throughout his two-part narrative to make it clear how he hopes that we will read Scripture.