

# A Response to “Spirit Aggression in the Gospel According to Luke”

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If there's one truism about spending an extended period of time in a very different culture, it's that many of your assumptions will be challenged. Reading Stuart Love's paper on spirit aggression brought to mind a wonderful and eye-opening summer I spent in Kenya in 1987, working with a local Christian church. In particular, I recalled an extended conversation with another American that summer. He had been a missionary in West Africa for many years, in a remote place where traditional cultures were more vibrant than in the big city of Nairobi. He told stories about how some people in the churches in West Africa were terrified by evil spirits and especially by the manipulation of these spirits by workers of magic, who might place curses upon them. He told these stories to illustrate how he, as a rationally-oriented Westerner, made the beginner's mistake of not taking these concerns seriously enough. He assured new converts to Christ that such spirits either did not exist or that they had no power. However, as time passed, he discovered that this approach simply made no sense in the social context of West Africa. Eventually, learning from the people there, he began instead to teach new believers that Christ has ultimate power over evil spirits. Instead of acting as if a curse had no power, he prayed aloud that Christ would overcome this evil, and he taught new converts to do the same. As a result, the oppressive fear that plagued the new community of Christ diminished, releasing the people to grow in their relationships with God.

As a Westerner, I found this missionary's perspective challenging, because it forced me to reconsider some of my presuppositions. It strikes me that Stuart Love's paper functions for readers of Luke's gospel in much the same way. Through God's wisdom, Scripture speaks to us through the prism of the past. If we allow the light of Scripture to shine through this prism, we will perceive a richer spectrum of God's word to inspire our lives of faith today. And the past, as novelist L.P. Hartley famously phrased it, “is a foreign country.” Love's work on spirit aggression offers a helpful, if perhaps unsettling, reminder that the world of the New Testament is not our world. As he puts it, “care must be taken not to identify contemporary psychology and cosmology with that of spirit possession . . . for the data in Luke.”<sup>1</sup> He reminds us that when we force upon Scripture our views about reality, we may well misunderstand it or, at the very least, overlook important aspects of its witness to us. In this response to his paper, I will reflect on three of its major themes and point to some possibilities for further exploration of the topic Love has opened up for us.

First, while Love never uses the phrase *spiritual warfare*, it seems to me that this theme runs throughout his paper. Making the case that Luke views reality through the lens of an overarching battle between good and evil, Love writes of “a struggle between two dominions: that of Satan and that of God,”<sup>2</sup> of a conflict between “two empires,”<sup>3</sup> and of Jesus' struggle against the power of evil, which is particularly centered in the figure of

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1. Stuart Love, “Does the Holy Spirit Really Work?: Spirit Aggression in the Gospel According to Luke” (paper presented at the Christian Scholars' Conference, Lipscomb University, Nashville, TN, June 7, 2013), 6.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 6.

the devil.<sup>4</sup> However, as he notes, this conflict is not dualistic, because the power of evil is no match for the power of God. Love's analysis hones in on a distinctive and sometimes neglected feature of Luke. After all, the gospel opens with Mary praising God as a warrior who "has shown strength with his arm" to help his servant Israel (Luke 1.51, 55). Right after Jesus is born, a heavenly host praises God, terrifying a group of shepherds (Luke 2.13). The word for host is *stratia* or army. The army of God appears in the sky ready to combat the forces of oppression about which Mary has just sung.

Second, Love finds another theme interwoven with this theme of spiritual conflict: that of the arrival of the long-awaited restoration of Israel. As he observes, Zechariah's praise sings of "the coming deliverance and restoration of God's people."<sup>5</sup> In Jesus, "God's power and justice have become active and perceptible again in the world and in history."<sup>6</sup> Indeed Luke-Acts presents a form of inaugurated eschatology, in which we see the salvation of God arrive powerfully, if partially, in the present. Through Christ, God first restores Israel to glory and then reveals light to the Gentiles, just as Simeon anticipates when he holds the infant Jesus at the beginning of the story (Luke 2.32).

However, at the time of Jesus, at least some of the people of God expected this arrival of divine power and justice to be directed violently against oppressive Rome. But in Luke, God's army in the heavens declares peace—not war—upon the earth (2.14). In other words, the conflict is "not with flesh and blood," as Ephesians puts it, but "against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6.12).

Thus, Love's work reminds us that even though some humans in Luke's story tragically choose to stand on the side of evil, the real conflict is a spiritual one. Yet, somewhat counter-intuitively, this spiritual battle yields positive results in the real world. In other words, the conflict is otherworldly but its results are "this worldly." Since the supernatural forces of evil oppress and "imprison humanity,"<sup>7</sup> whenever Christ defeats evil, humans—like the man with the withered hand or the bent-over woman—experience release from spiritual oppression now. Love notes that Jesus defines his salvation this way in chapter 4. Jesus repeats this point in chapter 7, when John's disciples arrive to ask whether Jesus is "the one who is to come." Jesus replies, "'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them'" (7.22). Drawing on certain restoration traditions in Isaiah (35.5–6; 58.6; 61.1–2), Jesus defines salvation not in terms of triumph over human powers but over the source of evil, which results, as Love puts it, in a "significant social reversal"<sup>8</sup> related to "human issues of need."<sup>9</sup>

This observation brings me to the third theme I'd like to discuss. Love makes a convincing case that in Luke, illness and disability are symptoms of the dominion of evil. He does so by ably pointing out the shared vocabulary in stories of healing and exorcism. Love's analysis of the language of rebuking (*epitimaō*) related to healing was informative, and it might be useful to investigate whether the vocabulary of rebuking conveys the theme of spiritual conflict throughout the gospel.<sup>10</sup> The link between healing and exorcism could be further investigated in additional passages in Luke and Acts in which healing (*therapeuo, iaomai*) and release from spirits are equated or set in parallel or in which curing the sick is equated with the arrival of the kingdom (Luke 6.18; 8.2; 9.1; 10.9; Acts 5.16; 8:7). Interestingly, this same equation appears in the book of Tobit, where an angel is described as healing (*therapeuo, iaomai*) a young woman who has been afflicted by a "wicked demon" (3.17; 12.3).

4. Ibid., 9, 14.

5. Ibid., 12.

6. Ibid., 17.

7. Ibid., 4.

8. Ibid., 11.

9. Ibid., 17.

10. Jesus rebukes the disciples (9.21, 55; 18.15) and the wind (9.42), while anticipating that in the future, sin will need to be rebuked (17.3). A blind man who seeks healing is rebuked by bystanders, but Jesus heals him anyway (18.39). Some Pharisees in the role of opponents to Jesus tell him to rebuke his disciples for their praise (19.39). One of the thieves on the cross rebukes the other for his disregard of God's messiah (23.40).

Overall, Love's analysis shows that as God's empire triumphs over the dominion of Satan, healing and wholeness result. This insight helps explain why healing is integrally related to divine salvation, both in Isaiah's vision and in its fulfillment in Luke. Or, as Love puts it, healing is essential to Jesus' task in a sociopolitical sense. Moreover, Love's social-scientific comparison helps highlight the fact that in Luke's world, illness is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather one aspect of a whole system of oppression that also includes poverty and other disadvantaged conditions.<sup>11</sup> The anthropological section could point toward additional material in Hellenistic writings, such as the Asklepiian testimonies or what has been called the "pneumatist school" of Greek and Roman medicine, which viewed health and disease as related to various spirits (*pneumata*) within the body.

Luke also seems particularly interested in *responses* to healing. In my own work, I have investigated praise of God in Luke, and I could not help noticing that two of the topics Love connects—spiritual conflict and healing—are also linked in Luke through the motif of praise of God. Mary praises God as a warrior who reverses the oppression of the poor by lifting them up with a mighty arm. Next, the army of God appears in the sky, also praising God. Then, five stories of healing—six if you include Acts—are greeted with praise of God (Luke 5.17–26; 7.11–17; 13.11–17; 17.11–17; 18.35–43; Acts 3.1–10; 4.21). In the Greco-Roman world, it was typical for people to express acclamations of a healer, but in Luke-Acts, the praise is directed to God, rather than to Jesus. It would be interesting to know whether anthropologists have investigated responses to healing in the cultures from Love draws in his study.

To conclude, I'll reflect briefly on how Love's analysis may speak to people of faith today. He reminds us that when we follow the call of Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves or to invite everyone to a banquet, we are—through the power of the Holy Spirit and not our own—participating in the holistic salvation that Jesus has brought into the world. It calls us to remember that when we serve, we are actually engaging in spiritual warfare, with the important reminder that the battle consists not in fighting other humans but in loving them. Finally, the anthropological insight that patients and healers are "embedded in a cultural system," and it is the "whole system that heals" strikes me as not too different today.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, Love's analysis of the economic implications of the man's withered right hand is particularly instructive. The point is obvious in societies with few social safety nets. But it is also evident in the United States as well, where mental illness plays a significant contributing role in homelessness and where more than a few families must choose between paying the rent or purchasing expensive medications, while others face financial crisis following a lengthy hospital stay. In the end, Love's analysis reminds us that oppressive systems are often interconnected, and that through the Spirit, God is at work overturning them all, here and now. As Christ's followers, we are called to play our part in God's healing of the world.

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11. Love, 30.

12. *Ibid.*, 13.