CLASSICAL AND RABBINIC PARALLELS TO “PHYSICIAN, HEAL YOURSELF” (LK. IV 23)

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The proverb 'Iξατρέ, θεράπευσον σεωτόν from Lk. iv 23 may well be the key to our understanding of the sequence of thought that runs from iv 22 to the end of that most perplexing pericope 1). Certainly the choice between referring σεωτόν to Jesus personally or to the inhabitants of Nazareth collectively makes a great difference to how we understand the sequence of thought. Classical and Rabbinic sources are frequently cited in comments on the verse as offering some parallel to the Lukan statement 2). It would seem particularly appropriate to look to these parallels for help in understanding the Lukan proverb when we consider that Luke clearly sets it forward as a current secular proverb. Attributed as it is to the thoughts of the Nazareth crowd it is a παράβολή in a class apart from all other Lukan uses of that word. In all other cases there is an element of creative novelty, attributed of Jesus 3), in what is described by the term παράβολή, but here we deal with a traditional saying.

Now while scholars have referred to the Rabbinic and Classical parallels, I have not discerned any serious attempt to appreciate how these function in their own contexts, as a means of illuminating

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2) While those who cite parallels are too numerous to list the most complete list still seems to be that of J. J. Wetstein, Novum Testamentum Graecum ... ex scriptoribus veteribus Hebrais, Graecis et Latinis historiam et vim verborum illustrante, Amstelaeami, 1751.

3) Attempts to discover sources for the parables, even where convincing do not for the most part detract from the genuine originality of the gospel parables. In any case it is the evangelist’s belief in the creative novelty of the parables to which I refer.
the way in which we might expect the Lukan parable to function in its context. The following is an attempt to help fill that gap. It is not a study of the Lukan proverb. It claims to go no further than to provide a more adequate survey of the Classical and Rabbinic materials against which background the Lukan proverb is best understood. The basis for inclusion of material is for the most part the presence of the notion of a sick doctor 4), and the emphasis in the perusal of each reference is on what the proverb, similitude etc. serves to achieve in its given context.

One thing which emerges clearly from this investigation is the very different thrust and significance which even identically worded uses of proverbs can have in different contexts. In the realm of metaphor and simile, context is decisive and it is the contention of this paper that for purposes of comparison with the Lukan proverb, the verbal similarities or dissimilarities have less significance than the functioning of the compared materials in their respective contexts.

Literary reference to the incongruity of a sick doctor begins at least as early as Homer (before 700 BC) 5), where in the Iliad XI 833-5 we read

\[ ητρολ... \]
\[ τὸν μὲν ἐνὶ κλαίσεσσον ὀίωμα ἔλοκος ἔχοντα \]
\[ χρησίζοντα καὶ αὐτὸν ἀμύμωνος ἤτηρος, \]
\[ κεῖσθαι... 6). \]

Here the reference is quite literally to a doctor, who has sustained injury in battle. The incongruity of a sick doctor is pointed up to no further purpose than in the interests of more colourful expression. Homer has no particular point to make in drawing our attention to the incongruity.

By the time of Aeschylus (525/4-456 BC) we find the incongruity of a sick doctor being used to make a comparison. The passage in question is in Prometheus Bound lines 469-75.

4) Also included are a reference to a doctor whose medical skills are placed in question, and a reference to a sick drug-seller.