

## THE REJECTION AT NAZARETH: LUKE 4:14-30

Luke's presentation of the scene at Nazareth has long vexed the exegetes.<sup>1</sup> The chronology and geography of the account, as well as some of its essential details, differ greatly from Mark or Matthew. In Mark, the scene is located just before the end of the Galilean ministry (6,1-6); in Matthew, it comes at the climax of the Galilean ministry (13,53-58). In Luke, on the other hand, it is a kind of inauguration scene, prefacing Jesus' ministry. Whether Luke has used Mark or a special source remains a difficult question.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes, it suffices to notice that in recounting or constructing the scene, Luke involves himself in some inconsistencies. Verse 23 presupposes healings already performed in Capharnaum, but Luke has related none of them. The short summary in v. 15 had spoken only of teaching. Further, the gap between vv. 22 and 24 is quite noticeable: the attitude of the people changes too suddenly from acceptance to hostility. The effect is that the Lucan narrative seems somewhat badly contrived; Luke has, seemingly, constructed it somewhat carelessly.<sup>3</sup>

This fact has led commentators to inquire into the meaning of the scene. It has been suggested that Luke intends the scene to telescope the career of Jesus, and to bear a symbolic meaning.<sup>4</sup> But this may be true in ways which have not hitherto received notice. If this is so, the scene may have more importance than has been suspected for understanding Luke's interpretation of the person and mission of Christ.

In verse 16, Jesus enters the synagogue and announces that this day the prophecy of Isaiah 61 is fulfilled in him:

<sup>1</sup> H. Anderson finds in the different interpretations given to the passage an indication of changes in the trend of biblical scholarship: "Broadening Horizons," *Interpretation* 18 (1964), p. 259-75.

<sup>2</sup> In the Jerusalem Bible, Osty attempts a solution by considering the scene a condensation of three distinct events: "Apparently this passage combines three visits: the first, vv. 16-22 (Jesus is honoured), occurring at the time indicated by Mt 4.13; the second, vv. 23-24 (Jesus astonishing his audience), the visit of which Mt and Mk speak; the third, vv. 25-30 (the life of Jesus threatened), not mentioned by Mt or Mk and to be placed toward the end of the Galilean ministry." *The New Testament of the Jerusalem Bible*, edited by Alexander Jones (Garden City, N.Y., 1966), p. 99, note g. On this problem, see H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, translated by G. Buswell (New York, 1960), p. 32-36.

<sup>3</sup> "It is not too much to say that Luke . . . has given us an impossible story. . . ." A. R. C. Leaney, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* (Harper's New Testament Commentary; New York, 1958), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> ". . . Il a dépeint, en un raccourci symbolique, la mission de grâce de Jésus et le refus orgueilleux de son peuple. C'est une page très soignée et que Luc a écrite avec amour." E. Osty, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc* (BJ fasc.; Paris, 1961), p. 50, note a. Cf. also J. Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (RNT; Regensburg, 1955), p. 110.

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,  
 for he has anointed me.  
 He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,  
 to proclaim liberty to captives  
 and to the blind new sight,  
 to set the downtrodden free,  
 to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

This prophecy seems to have been applied to the prophet himself.<sup>5</sup> It is, thus, primarily as prophet that Luke presents Christ's inauguration of his mission. The first reaction of the people is favourable: "And he won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips." (v. 22)<sup>6</sup>

But the mood shifts suddenly. The people question his identity, and evidently challenge him to perform a mighty deed to prove his claim. Christ answers with the saying that "No prophet is ever accepted in his own country," and cites the examples of Elijah and Elisha, both prophets, wonder-workers and healers, whose mission took them outside of Israel. He seems thus to insinuate that salvation is to pass to non-Jewish nations, and the people immediately react in anger: "They sprang to their feet and hustled him out of the town; and they took him up to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw him down the cliff." (v. 29) The people now, far from receiving the prophet, are suddenly trying to kill him—and this is the opening scene of the ministry!

The passage bears closer examination. The phrasing of the verse, *exebalon auton exō tēs poleōs* is reminiscent of the vocabulary used in the parable of the vineyard in Luke 20,15: *ekbalontes auton exō tou ampelonos apekteinan*. This parable obviously refers to Christ's death; in the pericope under examination in chapter four too the people intend his death. The same details and phrasing appear again in the account of Stephen's death in Acts 7,58, an account commonly understood to be modelled upon the death of Christ: *ekbalontes exō tēs poleōs*. The expression, then, is one already known to Luke. In 4,29 the addition of the detail that the town was built upon the brow of a mountain—a detail which exegetes are unable to identify—<sup>7</sup> suggests a reference to the city of

<sup>5</sup> The Targum on Is. 61 reads: "The prophet says: the spirit of prophecy (come) from the Lord God is upon me. . . ." Cited by I. de la Potterie, "L'onction du Christ. Etude de théologie biblique," *NRT* 80 (1958), p. 230. Cf. also J. Schmid, *Evangelium*, p. 112.

<sup>6</sup> After a detailed study of this phrase, F. Gils concludes that it characterizes a discourse which is charismatic and prophetic. Cf. *Jésus prophète d'après les évangiles synoptiques* (Louvain, 1957), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> "Impossible de préciser l'endroit. L'identification avec le Djebel el Qafzé (précipice de plus de 200 m.) situé à plus de 3 km. au sud-est de la ville moderne, n'a pour elle aucune vraisemblance." E. Osty, *L'Évangile*, p. 52, note b.

Jerusalem, popularly known as the city seated upon the mountain. Given the fact that Luke's gospel as a whole focuses upon Jerusalem as the destination of Jesus' journey, this interpretation seems quite likely. It is additional evidence that the Nazareth scene has been constructed as a prophecy, pointing to Christ's future destiny, his death at Jerusalem.

The final verse of the passage supports this conclusion. The scene ends with an apparently simple statement: *autos de dielthōn dia mesou autōn eporeueto* (4,30).

A study of the verb *dierchomai* reveals that it is used once commonly by Matthew and Luke, once by Mark and Luke, and once by Mark alone. But it is used twenty-eight times by Luke alone, eight times in the gospel, and twenty times in Acts. It is, thus, a familiar Lucan expression, and may have a special connotation.<sup>8</sup> For Luke seems to use it most often with reference to the missionary work of Christ or the apostles, or the preaching of the gospel. In Luke 9,6 and in Acts 8,4 and 40 it is used with direct reference to preaching the gospel; in Acts 20,2 it is used with *parakalein* and in 20,25 with *kērussein*. More importantly, it is used in the somewhat formalized speech of Peter in Acts 10,38, a speech which begins with a reference to Christ as "anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power," and continues, *hos diēlthen euergetōn kai iōmenos pantas tous katadunasteuomenous hupo tou diabolou*. . . . The similarity between this characterization in Acts and the use of Isaiah 61 in the scene at Nazareth seems obvious: in both cases, a reference to prophetic anointing with the Holy Spirit, a ministry of doing good, curing or freeing.

The mysterious expression *autos de dielthōn dia mesou autōn eporeueto* is translated in the Jerusalem Bible "he slipped through the crowd and walked away". It is most frequently interpreted as a miraculous action of Jesus, signifying his immunity from harm because "his hour had not yet come". But is this its real meaning? We have suggested that the verb *dierchomai* is most frequently used by Luke with reference to mission—either Christ's or the apostles' continuation of the mission of Christ. It is interesting to note that the verb is here used in conjunction with another of Luke's favourite words, *poruomai* which, though also a common word, seems to bear in some cases a fixed religious conno-

<sup>8</sup> It is not unlikely that the verb might have a special significance, since the root verb *erchomai* is used in the synoptic gospels and in John with a theological content: "The word belongs to the circle of ideas connected with the divine epiphany." J. Schneider, "Erchomai; The Specific Use of *erchomai* in the NT," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by G. Kittel (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964), p. 668.

tation.<sup>9</sup> It is used throughout the central section of Luke's gospel, in which Luke high-lights Christ's journey to Jerusalem to accomplish his *exodos* (cf. 9,31) or new passover (9,51-57; 10,38; 13,22; 13,33; 19,28; 19,36; 22,22); in 17,11, still in the context of the journey, it is used in conjunction with *dierchomai*. It is also used in Acts 1,10-11 for the ascension, the completion of the journey.<sup>10</sup>

Since, in the first place, the scene at Nazareth is thought to be symbolic or programmatic, and since in its closing sentence Luke uses the important verb *poreuomai*, might it not be that this concluding sentence is also programmatic, having as its function to conclude and summarize the life and mission of Jesus? If the verb *dierchomai* is understood to refer to Christ's mission, and the verb *poreuomai* to his journey, then the concluding sentence *autos de dielhōn dia mesou autōn eporeueto* might fittingly refer not to a miraculous escape but rather to Jesus' ministry among the Jewish people—preaching the gospel of salvation, making his way to Jerusalem to accomplish the new passover of death, resurrection and ascension.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

The evidence points strongly to the conclusion that when in the pericope 4,16-30 Luke introduces Christ's prophetic ministry, he does so not only by depicting him as fulfilling the Isaian prophecy, but also by constructing a whole scene which is itself prophetic of the destiny of the prophet. The scene stands as a symbol at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, so that the whole gospel will be read in the light of the climax toward which it is pointed—the death, resurrection and ascension of the prophet messias. Christ is the prophet sent by God, anointed with the Spirit to announce the good news of salvation. He is a prophet who, like other prophets before him, will have to suffer at the hands of his own people. The Nazareth episode prophesies how this will happen. He will speak of salvation for all nations; he will be cast out and killed by the Jews at Jerusalem, the city seated on the mountain. The final sentence, *autos de dielhōn dia mesou autōn eporeueto* summarizes his whole career: his mission was to go through their midst

<sup>9</sup> "... *poreuesthai*, linking the journey, death, and ascension, becomes almost as much a Lucan technical term as *exodos* and *analepsis*." J. H. Davies, "The Purpose of the Central Section of St. Luke's Gospel," *StEv* II (TU 87; Berlin, 1964), p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to compare John's usage, which is perhaps only better developed than Luke's: *egō pros ton patera poreuomai* (14.12; cf. also 14.2, 3; 16.28); *ean de poreuthō, pempō auton pros humas* (16.7).

<sup>11</sup> This theme has been studied in detail in my unpublished dissertation, *Luke 24.26: A Passover Christology* from Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1967.

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announcing the good news of salvation, making his way to Jerusalem and through death, resurrection and ascension, into the glory of the Father.

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