

# Jesus and Elijah in Luke 4:15-30 by Jack Poirier

If our goal is to understand the Bible on its own terms, there is an evident danger in creating new typological associations between the Gospel narrative and Old Testament events. At the same time, however, we cannot turn our back on typology altogether, as it is vividly clear that the New Testament writers often embraced such a way of reading classic Old Testament narratives. Most notably, there have been a number of fine studies on the use of “new exodus” imagery in both Paul and the Synoptic Gospels.

One of the more obvious typological connections is that between the prophet Elijah and John the Baptist. Although it feels like a game of Ping-Pong to figure out when Jesus and John press these connections and when they deny them in the face of common opinion, most readers of the Gospels probably come away thinking that, apart from Elijah’s mysterious appearance at the Transfiguration, there seems to be an efficient identification between Elijah, as the promised herald of the end time deliverance, and John, as the forerunner of the Messiah. It is mainly for this reason, no doubt, that readers often miss the fact that Elijah fulfills a *dual* typological function, in that he is also associated with Jesus himself. As we will see, the connection between Elijah and *Jesus* is actually more prominent in Luke-Acts than the connection between Elijah and John.

There are other reasons that the Elijah-Jesus connections in Luke- Acts are often missed. For one thing, they seem to be more “narratively active” at a pre-synoptic stage of the tradition. That is, they appear to be more the concern of Matthew’s, Mark’s, and Luke’s *sources* than of Matthew, Mark,

and Luke themselves. If Otto Bauernfeind's analysis is on target (see his commentary, *ad loc.*), Peter's speech in Acts 3 provides an example of Elijianic imagery being applied to Jesus in a way that doesn't seem to concern Luke in his reuse of this material. (To appreciate Bauernfeind's point, it is not necessary to follow him in his more radical suggestion that this block of material was originally about Elijah himself, and only secondarily applied to Jesus.) On the other hand, depending on how sophisticated a web of allusions we think the evangelists are wanting to create, one could also imagine that this sort of submerged allusions operates at the level of their own concerns. (Recent scholarship has shown the sophistication of the narrational art in the Gospels, but one must beware of the current scholarly trend of turning any and all redactional inconcinnities into intentional literary devices, without first explaining why they could not simply be the redactional seams that they appear to be.)

Another reason that readers miss the Elijah-Jesus connections is that it takes an eye trained in ancient Jewish reading strategies to recognize many of them. The images and ideas that spring to mind when we read a verse of Scripture are based as much upon the history of how that verse has been read in our traditions as upon the true intratextual dimensions of that verse. The same goes for the way in which first-century Jews and Christians read Scripture: without doing the requisite homework, latecomers like ourselves will fail to grasp how scriptural quotations and allusions operated in Jesus' arguments. We will see the relevance of this point below when we attempt to read Isaiah 61 through the lens of early Jewish messianic expectations.

Jesus' association with Elijah is actually a prominent theme in Luke-Acts. I will not try to determine whether this theme is a concern of Luke's or simply a pre-Lukan theme

that Luke (who in many places is more of a wholesaler than a retailer of tradition) has allowed to shine through. These echoes of Elijah traditions begin with two associated events: Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, and his cool reception in his home town. Although these events are separated by sixteen verses of genealogy and the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, scholars have pointed out that they appear to comprise a single interpretive complex, as it is Jesus' quotation and commentary on Isaiah 61 in the Nazareth synagogue that provide the theological rationale for his baptism by John. As Max Turner writes, Luke "has laid a clearly marked track from the banks of the Jordan right up to the door of the synagogue in Nazareth through his redactional references to the Spirit in 4.1 and 4.14."<sup>[11]</sup> That Luke (or his source) intentionally brought the Nazareth incident near to the baptism is suggested by the fact that Mark's parallel (essentially a stripped-down version) doesn't appear until 6:1-6, as well as by the apparent anachronism of Jesus' mention of Capernaum in Luke 4:23: "what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country." Luke includes a flashback to an episode that he doesn't record. (Jesus will later enter Capernaum in Luke 7:1.) In Lukan story-time, this looks like an anachronism, although the fact that Jesus is found ministering in Capernaum in the Mark chapter 1 shows that the flashback by no means violates the chronological ordering of the broader bed of tradition (which is almost certainly represented in Mark 6:1-6). Luke appears to have replaced the account of Jesus ministering in Capernaum with the telescopic report in 4:15: "And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all."

Such inconsistencies on the narrative surface are uncharacteristic of Luke. His failure to record the Capernaum ministry suggests that he is trying hard to make a point. The fact that Luke includes 4:14-15 shows that his

theological motive is not to present the Nazareth incident as an inglorious ministry debut: it really is not a debut at all. Rather, the theological motive is found in what Jesus says to his hometown crowd at Nazareth.

We must turn our attention to the passage that Jesus read, quoted here in its Lukan version (which omits “to bind up the brokenhearted” and adds [from Isa. 58:6] “to set at liberty those who are oppressed”):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (RSV)

Few scholars are aware of the fact that this passage was apparently associated, in the minds of apocalyptically minded Jews, with the end time appearance of Elijah. There is, in fact, a very good (that is, by contemporary standards) exegetical basis for this belief: Isaiah 61 speaks, in the first person, of an “anointed” figure whose activities seem to suggest that he is prophet. Jews who knew their Bible well will have known that only two prophets in Scripture were said to be anointed: Elijah and Elisha. While the offices of king and priest were signified by an anointing,<sup>[2]</sup> the office of prophet was not. This fact, combined with the anointing of Elijah and Elisha, led to the popular belief that Elijah was also a *priest*. He was, moreover, the priestly messiah, made famous in our day by the Dead Sea scrolls. Marks of Elijah’s priesthood appear all over the traditions of his end time reappearance.<sup>[3]</sup> This identification of the anointed one of Isaiah 61 with a priest was undoubtedly abetted by the mention of the priesthood just beyond the part of the passage that Jesus

quotes (v. 6: "But ye shall be named the Priests of the LORD..."). The priestly nature of the anointed figure in Isaiah 61 has been noticed by Pierre Grelot and Emile Puech. Puech writes,

Some authors think that "The Spirit of Lord YHWH is on me for YHWH has anointed me, he has sent me to bring news to the poor..." can only be attributed to a prophetic figure, dismissing without any serious analysis and arguments the proposition of a high priest. On one side authors do not distinguish generally the gift of the spirit for prophecy and the anointing which is proper to king and priests, but is never said of a prophet. The unique example in 1 Kings 19:16 about Elijah is improper and is no anointing to become a prophet, thus the term "anointed-messiah" to designate a prophet must be taken as a figurative meaning (Psalm 105:15//1 Chronicles 16:22, 1QM XI 7, CD II 12, V 20-VI 1). But this cannot be the case in Isaiah 61:1, where the gift of the spirit of YHWH depends directly on the anointing.<sup>[41]</sup>

Furthermore, the striking similarity between the works attributed to the anointed one in Isaiah 61 and those attributed to the end time Elijah in Mal. 3:23-24 (= 4:5-6) lends support to this reading. Furthermore, Isaiah 61 was apparently read in conjunction with an Elijianic messianism at Qumran. The wondrous works of Isaiah 61 are attributed to an eschatological figure in 4Q521, whom John J. Collins identifies as Elijah, on the basis of a reference to raising the dead and a possible echo of Elijah's prayer to shut the heavens.<sup>[51]</sup> (In the Old Testament, raising the dead is a distinctively Elijianic miracle.) It should also be noted that Ben Sira read Elijah into another Isaian passage: Sir. 48:10 combines Mal. 3:23 with Isa. 49:6.<sup>[61]</sup>

Jewish messianism of Jesus' day was intensely interested in

the figure of Elijah, but let us not forget that Elijah's disciple Elisha was similarly anointed. If Jews in Jesus' day associated Isaiah 61 with Elijah, the only thing that might have prevented their associating that passage with Elisha as well would have been the latter figure's lack of an eschatological profile. That, of course, is no small matter, but suppose someone were to read this Isaian passage as paradigmatic for an end time redeemer, *without* supposing that the envisioned redeemer represented a *literal* return of Elijah. That is, what if the end time redeemer is not Elijah himself, but rather someone else working in the power and spirit of Elijah? In that case, might not Elisha sit alongside Elijah as a prototype for this end time figure? And could not the plural of "priests" in Isa 61:6 have promoted this understanding?

Although I have no proof that Elisha was also read into Isaiah 61, I think that the likelihood of this reading helps explain Jesus' mini-sermon in Luke 4:16-30. After closing the "book," Jesus announces to the congregation that "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." Notice what Jesus says in verses 23-27:

And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.'" And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." (RSV)

For whatever reason (see below), these words incensed the crowd, and they attempted to stone Jesus. (As Robert Lindsey well recognized, the attempt to push Jesus off a precipice was the first step in the ritual of stoning.)

It is not coincidental, I suggest, that the examples Jesus cites happen to be the only two Old Testament prophets who fit the description of Isaiah 61, that is, the only two who were anointed. In other words, Jesus does not adduce Elijah and Elisha as two random examples of prophets who are not accepted at home, but rather he is referring to *the* two prophets that are specified according to contemporary exegesis of the Isaiah passage that Jesus read. This should affect how we understand the point of what Jesus is saying.

I agree with those scholars who think that the crowd originally welcomed Jesus, and that they even received his announcement that Isaiah 61 was being fulfilled in their midst. It is what Jesus says next that turns the crowd against him. The crowd hopes to see Jesus work the wonders that have made him famous, and they correctly read their hopes and understanding of Jesus' ministry into the passage that he quotes. They are not ready, however, for Jesus to press the parallels between his ministry and the careers of Elijah and Elisha in quite this way. How dare Jesus compare the Nazarenes with the apostatized public of Elijah's and Elisha's day! As it turns out, their conduct betrays the correctness of Jesus' judgment against them. The final detail, that Jesus "passing through the midst of them went his way" (v. 30), is perhaps a final echo of the Elijah-Elisha cycle, as it recalls the way in which Elijah so facilely slipped through the grips of Ahab and Jezebel.

Nowhere else in the Gospels are the remnants of an Elijianic model of messianism so clearly preserved. As is well known, the evangelists much prefer to portray Jesus as a Mosaic or

Davidic messiah. Luke 4:16-30, however, shows that the struggle to understand Jesus took in just about the whole range of Jewish messianic expectations, and it was up to the evangelists to show in what way Jesus fulfilled these expectations. The loudest echoes are those stemming from proof texts incorporated into the earliest *kerygma* (preaching) of the Church, which included Mosaic (esp., Ps. 68) and Davidic (esp. Ps. 2, 110) echoes. In other contexts, not directly shaped by the *kerygma*, there was an equal opportunity for Elijianic echoes to be heard.

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[1] Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke Acts* (JPTSup 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 213.

[2] The root *mashah* denotes a king in Jdg. 9:8, 15; 1 Sam. 2:10, 35; 9:16; 10:1; 12:3, 5; 15:1, 17; 16:3, 6, 12-13; 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16, 21; 2:4, 7; 3:39; 5:3, 17; 12:7; 19:10, 21; 22:51; 23:1; 1 Kgs. 1:34, 39, 45; 5:1; 19:15-16a; 2 Kgs. 9:3, 6, 12; 11:12; 23:30; 1 Chron. 11:3; 14:8; 16:22; 29:22; 2 Chron. 6:42; 22:7; 23:11; Ps. 2:2; 18:50; 20:6; 28:8; 84:9; 89:20, 38, 51; 105:15 (?); 132:10, 17; Isa. 45:1; Lam. 4:20; 9:25-26 (messianic); Hab. 3:13; and a priest in Exod. 28:41; 29:7; 30:30; 40:13, 15; Lev. 4:3, 5, 16; 6:20, 22 (ET); 7:36; 8:12; 16:32; Num. 3:3; 35:25. [[return to article](#)]

[3] I discuss this at length in the next issue of *Dead Sea Discoveries*, in an article entitled "The Endtime Return of Elijah and Moses at Qumran." [[return to article](#)]

[4] Emile Puech, "Some Remarks on 4Q246 and 4Q521 and Qumran Messianism," *The Provo International Conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls: Technological Innovations, New Texts, and Reformulated Issues* (eds. Donald W. Parry and Eugene Ulrich; STDJ 30; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 545-565, esp. 556-557. See



also Pierre Grelot, "Sur Isaie LXI: La Premiere Consecration d'un Grand-Pretre," *RB* 97 (1990), 414-431. John Collins disagrees with the arguments of Puech and Grelot ("A Herald of Good Tidings: Isaiah 61:1-3 and its Actualization in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders* [eds. Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon; Biblical Interpretation Series 28; Leiden: Brill, 1997], 225-240, esp. 227; see also William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* [London: SCM, 1998], pp. 7-8), but see my response in "The Endtime Return of Elijah and Moses at Qumran." [[return to article](#)]

[5] "The Works of the Messiah," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 1 (1994), pp. 98-112. Turner demurs, suggesting that "the parallels with 11QMelchizedek do not favour an Elijianic identification" (*Power from on High*, p. 116, n. 27). [[return to article](#)]

[6] See James D. Martin, "Ben Sira's Hymn to the Fathers: A Messianic Perspective," *Crises and Perspectives: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Polytheism, Biblical Theology, Palestinian Archaeology and Intertestamental Literature* (OS 24; Leiden: Brill, 1986), 107-123