ELIJAH AND ELISHA IN LUKE 4:25–27

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO
DR. SEAN MCDONOUGH
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Jesus’ sermon at Nazareth in Luke 4:16–30 has been the subject of many detailed studies and analyses. It is recognized by nearly every commentator as bearing programmatic significance in Luke’s two volume work. That this sermon would serve as a launching point for Jesus’ ministry is made all the more interesting given Jesus’ mixed citation of Isaiah 61, Jesus’ declaration of the Scripture’s fulfillment and the mixed reaction of the townspeople. His pointed response to their wonder forms a transition in the passage that causes some scholars to label the passage “inchoate” and “impossible.”¹ The crowd’s favor turns to rage after Jesus illustrates the fulfillment of Isaiah’s message from the lives of the paradigmatic prophets, Elijah and Elisha. The difficulties in the passage are many, but the focus of this essay will be on the second half of Jesus’ sermon and his use of the Elijah and Elisha narratives. In so doing Jesus’ sermon will be evaluated in light of other Second Temple Jewish literature to see if there is precedence for the pairing of Isaiah’s oracle with the ministries of either Elijah or Elisha. It will be asserted that the crowd’s reaction to Jesus’ illustration, while disheartening, was understandable given the possible eschatological expectations they may have associated with his choice of text and illustrations.

Before delving into Jesus’ use of Elijah and Elisha in this sermon, a brief exploration of the first half of Jesus’ sermon is necessary. In vv. 18–19, Jesus reads from Isaiah 61, but he does so while omitting and conflating parts of the text. Jesus’ sermon is compared to the LXX below:

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This passage has numerous textual difficulties reflecting differences between the LXX, MT and Luke's presentation of Jesus' sermon. Some of these changes are significant for the interpretation of the homily and for understanding the synagogue's reaction. First, part of Isa 58:6, “to release the oppressed,” is inserted into the reading of Isa 61, based on gezerah shewah. This insertion would have surely raised the hopes of the synagogue that not only heard Jesus announce good news, liberty and recovery of sight, but also effective salvation from oppression. Second, Jesus ended his citation of Isaiah, stating that the anointed one was sent “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (κηρύξαι ἐνιαυτὸν κυρίου δεκτόν), but Jesus neglected to finish with the second half of Isaiah’s parallelism promising the “day of vengeance” (ἡμέραν ἀνταποδόσεως).

James A. Sanders has made the case that the congregation would have been puzzled given his choice of omission of the “day of the vengeance.” Comparing Luke 4 and 11QMelchizedek, Sanders concludes that the two documents are “in striking harmony” as they are both concerned with the idea of “release” associated with the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25). Both also have Isaiah 61 as the hub around which other scriptural allusions revolve (Lev 25; Isa 52; Ps 82 in 11QMelch and Isa 58:6 in Luke 4). In 11QMelch, however, both salvation and judgment are connected to the jubilee release, as the anointed one of Isaiah 61 proclaims both the “year of the Lord’s favor” (lines 6–9) and the “day of vengeance of our God” (line 13). Mention of the “day of vengeance” was not limited to 11QMelch, as the phrase is found several times throughout the scrolls (1QS ix 23; x 19; 1QM vii 5; xv 3, 15[?]). Sanders proposes that 11QMelch reveals two hermeneutic axioms that guided the Qumran community’s use of

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2 Thorough explanations of the textual difficulties have been made by Darrel L. Bock, Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology (JSNTSS 12; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 105–111; 316–321 and Charles A. Kimball, Jesus’ Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke’s Gospel (JSNTSS 94; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 97–119. In addition to the changes addressed in the following discussion, note the omission of ἰάσασθαι τοὺς συντετριμμένους τῇ καρδίᾳ (line d) and the change of καλέσαι to κηρύξαι (line h). Luke’s text also follows where the LXX differs from the MT: omitting Ὕψω (Isa 61:1) and replacing ἐφεστάκι with τυφλοῖς ἀνάβλεψιν.

3 The link based on ἀφεσιν (58:6; 61:2) does not rule out the use of Hebrew word linking, as šlḥ occurs in both 61:1 and 58:6; while ῥαγὸν appears in 61:2 and 58:5 (Bock, Proclamation, 106). The text of Isa 58:6 is changed slightly, as the imperative (ἀποστεῖλε) is changed to an infinitive (ἀποστεῖλαι).

4 Bock, Proclamation, 109.

5 The MT has “the day of vengeance of our God” (κηρύξαι ἐνιαυτὸν κυρίου δεκτόν); παρακαλέσαι πάντας τοὺς πενθοῦντας/ἐναλῆσαι/κολ-ἀβέλιμ “to comfort all who mourn” is also omitted.


Scripture. First, each generation considered itself to be the “True Israel of the End Time.” Second, each generation believed that “in the Eschaton God’s wrath would be directed against an out-group while his mercy would be directed toward an in-group.” When Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61 and 58, he was in essence asserting the first axiom of Jewish hermeneutics—declaring the present fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise, but when he omitted reference to “the vengeance of our God,” he in essence challenged the second axiom (or at the very least he challenged the synagogue’s anticipation of what that vengeance would look like). While blessing was announced, the vengeance was avoided. As Jesus stated that a prophet is not δέκτος in his own country and then gave examples of God’s blessing a gentile widow in Zarephath and a leprous general from Syria, he redefined the expected lines of the “out-group” and the “in-group.”

Below we will explore how Jesus used the Elijah and Elisha narratives to challenge Nazareth’s eschatological expectations, but first we will explore how the Elijah and Elisha narratives can be connected to Isaiah’s oracle.

Between Jesus’ reading of Isaiah and his use of the Elijah narratives, he interacts with the members of the synagogue. First, he addresses their perception of his declaration, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21). The crowd marveled at Jesus’ “words of grace” (τοῖς λόγοις τῆς χάριτος; v. 22), and that they were being spoken by one of their own native sons. The crowd assumed that if Isaiah’s words, announcing God’s favor, were fulfilled right in front of them (in the person of Jesus), then that same favor should be for their benefit. This is seen in Jesus’ use of a familiar proverb: “Physician heal yourself” (v. 23). He translates the proverb into plain language: “What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” Jesus’ proceeds to respond to this misplaced perception, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is δεκτός in his own hometown” (v. 24). This statement is preserved in all four Gospel accounts (Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4 and John 4:44; cf. G. Thom. 31), but Luke differs

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8 Sanders, 94–97.
9 Literally, “in your ears” (ἐν τοῖς ὠσὶν ὑμῶν).
10 Nolland remarks, that these “words of grace” are words “endued with the power of God’s grace” (emphasis added). In essence, the power of Jesus’ message was a manifestation of the subject of Isaiah’s prophecy. See John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20* (WBC on CD-ROM 35A; Dallas: Word, 2002), n.p.
12 Prior to the Nazareth pericope, Luke reported that Jesus returned from his temptation ἐν τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ πνεύματος, and the entire Galilean countryside was buzzing with reports of his ministry (4:14–15).
particularly by saying that no prophet is δεκτός, as the other gospels have either τιμή (negated with οὐκ; John) or ἄτιμος (Matt, Mark). Luke most likely chose his wording carefully (or perhaps preserves the original wording that Jesus used in his sermon), as he links it to ἐνιαυτὸν κυρίου δεκτόν (v. 19; Isa 61:2). On the one hand, this could represent the height of irony. While proclaiming the “acceptable year of the LORD,” Jesus knows that he would not be accepted in is own hometown. An interesting argument has been made, however in support of δεκτός referring not to the prophet’s acceptance in his hometown, but rather the benefit of the prophet to his home town. In the LXX, δεκτός is used to translate rāṣôn (25 x). While in the OT cultic context (Exod 28:38; Lev 1:3–4; 19:5; 22:19–20) rāṣôn can mean “acceptable” or “welcome,” in Isaiah δεκτός/rāṣôn has a more active meaning such as “favorable” or “pleasing” (49:8; 61:2). Bajard concludes that in Luke’s use of Isaiah, δεκτός can mean “bringing benefit/salvation.” Thus, the anointed one of Isaiah 61 declares the year of the LORD’s favor or benefit, and Jesus—the anointed prophet—states that he does not benefit his own home town, just as a physician would not heal himself. This translation of δεκτός, while explaining the violent reaction of the crowd, seems linguistically strained. Overwhelmingly δεκτός is used for God’s favor, thus in v. 19 (Isa 61:2) it is speaking about God’s appointed time of salvation. Sanders notes the importance of linking Jesus’ initial reading with his saying here, but highlights that the negative response was in reaction to Jesus’ prophetic hermeneutic—abandoning the second axiom mentioned above. No prophet is favored by his home town because no prophet’s challenge of the status quo is readily accepted by his own people. Thus, the ironic reading, mentioned above, stands.

It is here that Jesus illustrates this unanticipated aspect of prophetic ministry with the lives of Elijah and Elisha, prophets who both spoke words of judgment to those inside the borders of Israel, while serving as agents of God’s favor to those who would have been considered outsiders. It is interesting that Jesus chooses episodes out of lives of the

13 G. Thom. 31 (P.Oxy. 1.31–35) agrees with Luke, λέγει Ἰησοῦς· οὐκ ἐστιν δεκτὸς προφήτης ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ, οὐδὲ ἱατρὸς ποιεῖ θεραπείας εἰς τούς γεινώσκοντας αὐτόν.
paradigmatic prophet and his disciple. The prophet Elijah looms large in the lore of both early Judaism and Christianity, bested only by Moses, Abraham and David in the number of times that he is mentioned in the NT. Elisha, on the other hand is mentioned only here in the NT. In determining the function of these illustrations in Christ’s Nazareth sermon, it is necessary to explore exactly how Christ tells the stories, noting similarities and differences with the OT context (1 Kgs 17; 2 Kgs 5) and connections between the narratives and the message of the Anointed One in Isaiah 61.

Jesus’ introduces the illustration, ἐπ’ ἀληθείας δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, “Truly I say to you.” This echoes the ἀμὴν that introduced the aphorism in v. 24, and connects it to the two stories. In examining Jesus’ presentation of the stories, it is helpful to observe a few things regarding its structure:

First, it can be observed that Jesus’ gives roughly parallel accounts of Elijah’s ministry in Sarepta and Elisha’s ministry to Naaman that for the most part follow closely to the OT narrative. Just as there were “many widows” during Elijah’s days (v. 25a), there were many lepers in Elisha’s (v. 27a; cf. 2 Kgs 7). Yet in both stories those suffering in Israel were not the beneficiaries of the prophets, but rather a widow in Sarepta and a Syrian general (Luke 4:26c–e, 1 Kgs 17:8–24; Luke 27c–e, 1 Kgs 5). Also in both stories, the active character is God, as the passive verbs, ἐκλείσθη (v. 25b), ἐπέμφθη (v. 26c) and ἐκαθαρίσθη (v. 27c) reflect a God who “shuts up heaven,” “sends” Elijah to Sarepta, and “cleanses” Naaman the leper. These passive verbs, reflecting an active God help connect the narratives to Isaiah’s prophecy, as the Anointed One is sent and anointed to proclaim God’s favor (4:18–19; Isa 61:1–2).

More space is given to the timing of Elijah’s drought (v. 25b) and the description of Elijah’s destination εἰς Σάρεπτα τῆς Σιδωνίας (v. 26d). This extra material seems to lend more emphasis to the Elijah narrative, as it is double the length of Jesus’ account of Elisha (43 vs. 20 words).
words). The extra details given in the account of Elijah’s drought and the following encounter with the Sidonian widow also serve to enrich Jesus’ illustrations.

Jesus states that during “the days of Elijah” there was a drought and a famine for three and a half years (v. 25b). No such detail is given in Luke’s parallel account of Elisha, and the OT account does not give this specific time period, though it does state that Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal at Carmel took place “after many days...in the third year” (μεθ’ ἡμέρας πολλὰς ἐν τῷ ἐνιαυτῷ τῷ τρίτῳ; 1 Kgs 18:1). Various explanations could be offered for Jesus’ specificity in the timing of the drought. It could simply reflect in more concrete terms, the addition of “after many days” to “in the third year,” or it could refer to the exact interval between the Elijah’s pronouncement of drought before the “latter rains” and the “former rains” that finally came three years later. Also, “three and a half” could simply be a round number—half of seven—similar to today’s “half dozen.” It should be noted, however, that the time period of three and a half years became an apocalyptic symbol, beginning with Daniel’s writings. In Daniel, the temple was desecrated and out of service for three and a half years during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (cf. Josephus, J.W. 1.32). The symbolic value of this figure has caused some scholars to see an intentional association of Jesus’ illustration (Elijah’s drought) with an apocalyptic timetable. Others are a bit more reserved, contending that while Jesus did not intentionally allude to apocalyptic imagery, the period of three and a half years is simply a reflection of Daniel’s apocalyptic imagery entering into popular Jewish culture.

The importance of this time frame can be deduced from how other NT writers used Elijah’s drought. In James, Elijah’s prayer stopped the rain for “three years and six months” (ἐνιαυτοὺς τρεῖς καὶ μῆνας ἕξ; 5:17). James’ use of Elijah as an example of fervent prayer is

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17 Lives of the Prophets 21:5 states that the drought lasted three years, a number easily figured from the biblical narrative. In studying the OT context, one must question whether the “after” in this phrase refers to “after Elijah first pronounced the drought” (1 Kgs 17:1) or “after Elijah came to Zarephath, or left Zarephath” (17:8–24). Jesus’ account chooses the former option.
20 The same time period is represented in various ways throughout Daniel: “a time, times and half a time” (7:25; 12:7); “half a week” (9:27); “1,290 days” (12:11). The situation is similar in Revelation: “forty-two months” (11:2; 13:5); “1,260 days” (11:6, 12:6); “a time, times and half a time” (12:14).
21 Danker, 109–110; see also Barbara Thiering, who gives the most detailed treatment of this view, though her theory that the number reflects a dispute between the Lucan and Johannine community is unfounded, as it is based on her equation of the Qumran Community with the early church (“The Three and a Half Years of Elijah,” NovTest 23 [1981]: 41–55).
22 Fitzmeyer, 1.537; Bock, 421.
given in the context of prayer for the sick that involves confession of sins (5:13–18).

Immediately following mention of Elijah’s drought, James admonishes his audience on the value of “bringing back a sinner from his wandering” (vv. 19–20). In Revelation 11, the Two Witnesses prophesy for 1,260 days (= three and a half years). Like Elijah they are able to consume their foes with fire (Rev 11:5; 2 Kgs 1:10–12; ; Sir 48:1, 3) and to “shut the sky, that no rain may fall (κλεῖσαι τὸν οὐρανόν, ἵνα μὴ ὑετὸς βρέχῃ) during the days of their prophesying” (Rev 11:6; 1 Kgs 17:1). Their acts of judgment result in their own martyrdom (vv. 7–8), but they are vindicated in resurrection and ascension after their bodies are shamefully displayed in the city (Jerusalem) for three and a half days (v. 9–12). Their vindication (which included an earthquake) kills seven thousand inhabitants of the city (one tenth its population), but terrifies the remaining nine tenths, so that they give “glory to the God of heaven” (v. 13). In both James and in Revelation Elijah’s three and a half year drought is associated with judgment, but specifically judgment for the sake of repentance. In later rabbinic literature the three and a half year period is used similarly. Particularly in the Lamentations Rabbah, the duration of Israel’s persecution under Gentile leaders is described as lasting for three and a half years, regardless of whether the actual historical chronology was equivalent. This time frame was not simply a period of judgment, but also a period of time when Israel’s God called for repentance. Rabbi Jonathan remarks:

R. Jonathan said: Three and a half years the Shechinah abode upon the Mount of Olives hoping that Israel would repent, but they did not; while a Bath Kol issued announcing, ‘Return, O backsliding children’ (Jer 3:14), ‘Return unto Me, and I will return unto you’ (Mal 3:7). When they did not repent, it said, ‘I will go and return to My place’ (Hos 5:15; Lam. Rab. §5).

Though late in compilation, the midrashim show that the three and a half year period was associated with judgment, but this last example from the Lamentations Rabbah, along with the contexts discussed above in the NT, show that the timeframe was associated closely with God’s

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23 The identity of the second Witness is debated, but Elijah’s association with the first is generally agreed upon.

24 Richard Bauckham notes an inverse connection between the number killed in the earthquake and the seven thousand who did not “bow the knee to Baal” in 1 Kgs 19:14–18. He comments, “Not the faithful minority, but the faithless majority are spared, so that they may come to repentance and faith.” See Climax of the Covenant (Edinburgh, T&T Clark: 1993), 283.

25 The rulers include: Nebuchadnezzar, Lam. Rab. §30, 1.40; Vespasion, Lam. Rab. 1.31, 40; Hadrian, Lam. Rab. 1.4 (See also j. Taanit 68d). The editor of the Soncino edition of the Midrash Rabbah mentions that neither of these rulers actually sieged or ruled over Jerusalem for a literal three and a half years. It seems highly likely that rabbinic tradition associated the cataclysmic time of Antiochus’ desecration of the temple with other similar catastrophes in Israel’s history. Translations of the Talmud and midrash, unless otherwise noted, are obtained from Davka Corporation’s Judaic Classics Library on CD-ROM (Version 2d. 1991–1995).
judgment given for the sake of effecting repentance. Jesus’ specific choice of words, in describing the drought, point precisely in this direction.

Jesus states that “the heavens were shut” (ἐκλείσθη ὁ οὐρανός; v. 25b), though the wording is not used in the narrative of 1 Kings. On the one hand this turn of phrase could simply reflect Jewish tradition.26 In Sirach 48 Elijah “shut up the heavens” (ἀνέσχεν οὐρανόν) by the Word of the Lord (48:3) in response to Israel’s sin—incited by Jeroboam and Rehoboam (47:23–25). Pseudo-Philo states that God promised Phinehas the priest (equated with Elijah): “you will shut up the heaven then, and by your mouth it will be opened up (L.A.B. 48:1; tu claudus celum tunc, et in ore tuo aperietur).”27 On the other hand, all of these passages reflect the language of covenant curse in the Torah. Moses warns in Deuteronomy:

Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then the anger of the L ORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens (συσχῇ τὸν οὐρανόν/ wēʾāsar ʾet-ḥaṣšāmayim), so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the L ORD is giving you (11:16–17).

For Jesus to state that the heavens were “shut up,” simply reflects wēʾāsar ʾet-ḥaṣšāmayim of Deuteronomy (though the LXX terminology differs). One may be inclined to think that Jesus, in Luke’s narrative is highlighting judgment alone in this passage, but in evoking the deuteronomic curse, he also invokes its remedy found within Solomon’s Temple dedication prayer:

When heaven is shut up (ἐν τῷ συσχεθῇ τὸν οὐρανὸν/ bēḥēʾāsher šāmayim) and there is no rain because they have sinned against you...if they pray toward this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin, when you afflict them, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk, and grant rain upon your land... (1 Kgs 8:35–36).

Solomon’s prayer reflects the theology of Deuteronomy. The drought is caused by sin, and is given for the express purpose of bringing about Israel’s repentance and future restoration. Elijah in the context of 1 Kings, stands as a prophetic witness to this theology. He challenges Israel’s idolatry by invoking the God-ordained curse, but all the while this is done so that Israel will one day repent and confess, “The L ORD, he is God; the L ORD, he is God” (1 Kgs 18:39).

In highlighting God’s benevolence to the Sidonian widow (by the agency of Elijah), Jesus shows that while Israel is under judgment for the sake of repentance, he is calling others to repent as well. Robert L. Brawley is correct to observe that Jesus is not prefiguring Israel’s rejection and exclusion in favor of the Gentiles, but he is wrong in removing any aspect of judgment from the scene. The motif of the “shut heavens” and the “three and a half year drought” need not point to apocalyptic time tables per se, but they do point to Jesus’ prophetic ministry—declaring God’s judgment for the sake of effecting Israel’s repentance and restoration. Skillfully, Jesus echoes his Elijah-like cousin who declared earlier: “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham” (3:8). Indeed Israel’s consummate prophet, Israel’s God, points to the days of Elijah and Elisha for examples of a new daughter and a new son, raised for Abraham from a Sidonian stone and a Syrian rock.

As mentioned above, Elijah’s drought was associated in James with the theme of prayer and confession of sin in times of sickness (or judgment). While Jesus does not explicitly mention the sickness and death of the widow’s son during the drought (1 Kgs 17:17–24), the boy’s sickness could very well be implied as the widow’s story stands in parallel to Naaman’s leprosy. If this is the case, then the story of the widow could also highlight the correct response to judgment (or at least perceived judgment). When the boy died (17:17), the mother cried out, “What have you against me, O man of God? (τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί ἄνθρωπε τοῦ θεοῦ) You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!” (v. 18). While the reaction of the widow may not reflect the best theodicy, her theology is quite an improvement over Ahab’s. The rebellious king wandered through an Israel-under-judgment trying to find food for his livestock, while his wife was killing the prophets of the LORD (1 Kgs 18:3–5). Yet he still had the gall to accuse Elijah of being Israel’s “trouble” (1 Kgs 18:17). The contrast between the widow’s “poor theodicy” and Ahab’s rebellion is heightened as Ahab’s steward (a faithful Yahwist) echoes her “confession.” Likewise, the irony of Jesus’ encounter at Nazareth is heightened in the following narrative, as a demonized man, echoing the widow’s

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exclamation recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God coming in judgment, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (Luke 4:34). As mentioned above, the widow’s “confession” is echoed later in the Kings narrative, as Ahab’s steward, when confronted with Elijah’s being whisked away by the Spirit—and his master’s resultant wrath exclaims to Elijah: “How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me?” (1 Kgs 18:9). It does not seem completely strained that the steward’s worry over Elijah’s disappearance is reflected in Jesus’ chosen method of escape from the enraged crowd at Nazareth (1 Kgs 18:12; Luke 4:30). Both the king’s steward and a Gentile widow recognize that the purpose of God’s judgment is to bring about repentance.

The account of Naaman’s healing is also illustrative of the proper response to God’s judgment. God’s judgment had fallen on the obvious target, the enemy of Israel—Naaman the Syrian invader. Within Israel, affliction with leprosy (ṣāra’, sāra’at, λέπρα, λεπράω, λεπρός) meant complete separation from the community, and exclusion from worship (Lev 13–14), but it also could be viewed as God’s judgment. During Israel’s wilderness sojourn, God struck Moses’ sister Miriam with leprosy (Num 12:10), and their brother, Aaron likened the disease to death (v. 12). Later Israel is warned to avoid the same punishment (Deut 24:9–10). Uzziah the king was struck with leprosy as well, for violating the sanctity of the temple (2 Chr 6:20–23). Surely, this Gentile and “commander of the hosts of Syria” (ὁ ἄρχων τῆς δυνάμεως Συρίας; 2 Kgs 5:1), was getting his just reward. After all, he served a king who had on occasion raided Israel, carrying off the faithful as slaves (v. 2). But instead, the historian of Kings describes Naaman as having great favor with his pagan king on account that the Israel’s LORD had given him victory (v. 1). So, the leprous Gentile had already been the recipient of God’s favor—to the disfavor of Israel, but one Israelite child knew how to respond to the apparent judgment of God. She recognized that her captor could be changed by her God—represented by his prophet in Israel (v. 3). Faced with the prospect of being delivered from his affliction, Naaman goes to the prophet only after an interchange with Israel’s king who did not recognize Elisha as an agent of God’s power (v. 7). Elisha sends for Naaman, to show Naaman—and Israel’s faithless

30 The irony of this statement is enhanced later in the Kings narrative, as the King of Syria invades Samaria (6:24–7:2), the LORD intervenes and lepers are the first in Israel to benefit from his intervention.
king—that “there is a prophet in Israel” (v. 8). Only after Naaman humbly submitted himself to the word of the prophet, and bathed in the Jordan was he healed (vv. 9–14). Naaman declares, “Behold I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel” (v. 15), and offers sacrifices to Israel’s God, renounces the idolatry of his king, and takes “from the red earth” (ἐκ τῆς γῆς τῆς πυρρᾶς), and transports the land of Israel’s God back to Syria (vv. 17–18), perhaps spreading the Promised Land past the river-border in which he bathed. Unfortunately, Elisha’s servant Gehazi became one of the many lepers of Israel in punishment for his greed and jealousy over the favor shown to the Syrian general (vv. 20–27). The broad strokes of this story fit well into the theme of judgment for the sake of repentance. It was the judgment of God poured out upon a Syrian general who had known God’s favor in battle, that lead to Naaman’s conversion. Only in his humble submission to this judgment was he cleansed. The little girl of the Diaspora stands as a bright example of how to respond correctly in midst of exile, while the greed and jealously of Gehazi stands in stark contrast. All of these factors could play in Jesus’ challenge to the synagogue at Nazareth. Those who knew of God’s favor, could not see how to respond when his favor went elsewhere.

The scandal of Jesus’ sermon may be seen a bit clearer if one more aspect of his illustration is highlighted. While it is disputed whether or not there was an expectation of Elijah as a predecessor to the Messiah in Second Temple Judaism, it is not disputed that his eschatological return, in itself, was a part of Israel’s eschatological expectations. God spoke through the prophet Malachi:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction (Mal 4:5–6 ET; 3:22–23 LXX; 3:23–24 MT).

The LXX broadens mission of the eschatological Elijah to include “restoring the heart of a man towards his neighbor” (ἀποκαταστήσει...καρδίαν ἀνθρώπου πρὸς τὸν πλησίον αὐτοῦ). Even Sirach, who is not known for his heightened eschatological expectations, pays tribute to the return of the fiery prophet:

At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the

31 Richard A. Horsley is typical of those scholars who hold that Elijah as “forerunner” to the Messiah is a late concept developed only after the advent of Christianity. See his article, “Like One of the Prophets of Old: Two Types of Popular Prophets at the Time of Jesus,” CBQ 47 (1985): 435–463.
tribes of Jacob. Happy are those who saw you and were adorned with your love! For we also shall surely live (48:10–11).

Sirach’s broadens the mission of Elijah in a slightly different way, as he paraphrases Malachi’s prophecy and conflates it with the mission of the Servant of the Lord, found in Isa 49:6: (καταστῆσαι φυλὰς Ιακωβ). It is intriguing to see Sirach link the ministry of Servant of the Lord to the future ministry of Elijah. Scholars have shown that Anointed One of Isaiah 61 is profoundly linked to the Servant of earlier chapters in Isaiah. J. B. Koet has noted that in Sirach’s connection between Elijah and the Servant, he may also allude to the conversion of the nations, as he conffates Malachi with Isaiah:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth (Isa 49:6).

The restoration of Israel is tied to the salvation of the nations. This theme of Gentile salvation being directly related to Israel’s restoration had already been stated in Isaiah’s prophecy, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (Isa 42:1). The same Spirit is set upon he Anointed One of Isaiah 61.

The mission of the eschatological Elijah is also connected with the Servant of Isaiah (specifically Isa 61) in 4Q521 (4QMessianic Apocalypse). The second fragment opens, “the heavens and the earth will listen to his anointed one” (2 ii 1). Though the fragment begins with the “anointed one,” it appears that the Lord (dny) is the subject of the blessings listed in the passage, as 2 ii 5 states, “the Lord will consider...” Both John J. Collins and Émile Puech agree that the anointed one of line 1 is still the agent of the deliverance described in the following lines. Echoes of Isaiah 61 appear throughout the blessings that are described. The Lord’s “spirit will hover upon the poor” (w’nwym rwḥw; 2 ii 6). And “the Lord will perform marvellous acts such have not existed, such as he said, [for] he will heal the badly wounded

32 J. D. Martin (p. 112) notes that the Hebrew text of Sirach, while damaged at this line, still retains the final lamed of “Israel.” This reflects 1QIsa 49:6, where the proper names are reversed from the order of the MT to read “the tribes of Jacob/the preserved of Israel,” rather than “tribes of Israel/the preserved of Jacob” (“Ben Sira’s Hymn to the Fathers A Messianic Perspective,” in Crises and Perspectives [OTS 24; Leiden: Brill, 1986], 107–123). The Greek of Sirach retains “tribes of Jacob.”
33 Koet, 51–52.
and will make the dead live, he will proclaim good news to the poor (‘nwym ybšr; cf. Isa 61:1) and [...] [...] he will lead the [...] [...] and enrich the hungry (2 ii 11–13). The next fragment ties The allusions to Isaiah 61 with Malachi’s prophecy of Elijah’s return as the next column contains the line, “The fathers will return towards the sons” (b’y m ywb t l bnym; 2 iii 2). Thus, the phenomenon that attend the mission of the anointed one, whether performed by the anointed one or not, is associated in some way with the purpose of Elijah’s return in (Mal 3:23–24 MT). Collins furthers the connection to Elijah by suggesting that the “anointed” of 2 ii 1, whom “the heavens and the earth” will obey, may allude to Elijah’s ability to shut the sky.35 Another possible connection exists between this Elijah-like anointed one and the Servant of Isaiah, as the bottom of col. 3 on the second fragment contains the letters, w’t {š/š} b [...]. Puech restores the line to read w’t šbt[w w] yrmw, “and [his] scepter, and they will exalt,” taking the line to refer to a royal messiah, but Collins disagrees. He points out that it is doubtful whether the third letter of the word is either a mem or a tet, and that even if it were a tet as Puech insists, it would be better to take šbt as “tribe(s),” in keeping with Sir 48:10, where Elijah is said to “restore the tribes of Israel” (lhkyn šbty yšr’l; cf. Isa 49:6).36 If Collins’ reconstruction is accepted, the eschatological agent of 4Q521 bares a striking resemblance to the Anointed One of Jesus’ sermon—the agent of God’s favor, described in terms of Elijah’s ministry. (Though Jesus’ sermon highlights the historical rather than the eschatological Elijah.)

There is yet another text in Second Temple Judaism that pairs the eschatological Elijah with the Servant’s mission in Isaiah 61. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Numbers 25:11–12 describes the eternal covenantal reward bestowed on Phinehas for his zealous slaughter of the Israelite idolater and his pagan consort. The text reads:

The zealous Phinehas bar Eleazar bar Aaron, the priest, has turned aside my anger from the Israelites because when zealous with my zeal he killed the sinners among them; and because of him I did not destroy the Israelites in my zealousness. In an oath I say to him in my name: Behold, I have decreed to him my covenant of peace, and I will make him an angel of the covenant, and he shall live eternally, To announce the redemption at the end of days.37

35 Collins, 102.
36 Collins, 103. Puech contends that the reconstruction suggested by Collins (w’t šbt[y]m tmkw “and the tribes they have seized,”) simply cannot fit the lacuna (559 n. 45).
Sanders mentions this text as a possible connection between Elijah and the Anointed one of Isaiah 61, but he does so without making reference to specific verbal parallels. The closest thing to a verbal parallel comes at the end of v. 12, where Phinehas is said “to announce the Redemption at the end of the days” (lmbsr’ g’l’t’ bsnp’ ywmy’). This could very well echo the “good news to the poor” (bsr’ nwym) in Targ. Isa. 61:1 (bsr’ nwtny’). Martin Hengel notes that the Phinehas/Elijah connection served as a rallying call for various factions of Judaism that were concerned with overthrowing the Roman occupation and establishing a pure, holy Israel. While it is not the assertion of this author that Jesus was challenging zealots, it is helpful to place Jesus’ proclamation of Isaiah 61 in the context of the nationalistic prophetic movements of the time. During the first century, Josephus describes various “prophetic figures” that lead sizable groups of people in order to demonstrate to them symbolic acts of deliverance. These “prophets” perceived themselves to be agents of God and understood these actions as eschatological reenactments of events in Israel’s history. Josephus describes two such prophetic leaders below:

These were such men as deceived and deluded the people under pretence of divine inspiration, but were for procuring seditions and changes of the government; and these prevailed with the multitude to act like madmen, and went before them into the wilderness, as pretending that God would there show them the signs of liberty [σημεῖα ἐλευθερίας] (J.W. 2.259).

And now these impostors and deceivers persuaded the multitude to follow them into the wilderness, and pretended that they would exhibit manifest wonders and signs, that should be performed by the providence [πρόνοιαν] of God (Ant. 20.167–168).

Richard Horsley states that the above “signs of liberty” and “signs and wonders” were understood by the crowds that followed these prophets as allusions to the deliverance of Israel at the exodus, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. He also notes that the “providence [πρόνοιαν] of God” is best understood against the background of the “mystery

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38 The equation of Elijah to Phinehas when covenant of peace given to Phinehas (Num 25:12) was later equated with the covenant of life and peace given to Levi (Mal 2:4-5). The messenger of this covenant (3:1) was then equated with Elijah in Mal 3:23. Also, Phinehas is identified with Elijah on account of his zeal (Perq de R. Eliezer 26; cf. Num 25:11; 1 Kgs 19:10–14). Robert Hayward, “Phinehas—the same as Elijah: The Origins of a Rabbinic Tradition,” JJS 29 (1978): 22–34.
that is a prominent theme in Daniel and the Qumran literature, so that the people were responding in “faith” to what they perceived as the work of God.  

Regarding place of these prophetic leaders in Israel’s society, N. T. Wright explains that for them, “Retelling, or re-enacting, the story of the exodus,...was a classic and obvious way of pre-telling, or pre-enacting, the great liberation, the great ‘return from exile’.” In light of Wright’s observation and the contemporary existence of these “prophetic leaders of movements,” one can see that as Jesus was re-telling the story of the great sign prophets, Elijah and Elisha, he was pre-telling the people of Nazareth what the restoration of Israel would look like. As he healed the blind and the lame, cleansed lepers, restored hearing to the deaf, resurrected the dead and preached good news to the poor (7:22)—everywhere but ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ, he was enacting God’s prerogative to restore Israel through judgment. His actions did not prefigure his rejection of the Jews for the sake of the Gentiles, but instead demonstrated a zealous love that calls his people to repentance.

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41 Horsley, 456. Unfortunately, I have not had the time to explore this idea, but it would certainly be interesting to explore the links between this
42 Wright, JVG, 155.
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