Luke 4:14-30

Contextual Analysis
Luke 4:14-30 marks the start of a new section in the book of Luke which concludes at 9:50. (Just, 1996, pp. 177-178). This section describes Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. Jesus is portrayed as a teacher, healer and forgiver of sins who calls people to follow Him. Though Luke does not mention Jesus entering Capernaum until after this section, in verse 23 he “lets slip” that the people had already heard of Jesus’ actions there (Poirier, 2007, p. 359). Verses 14-15 make clear that Jesus had been teaching around Galilee before this introduction.

Luke has purposefully placed Jesus’ sermon at Nazareth here even though Matthew and Mark put this account “almost at the end of the first year of Jesus' ministry” (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 227). It is likely that Luke’s purpose is to introduce Jesus as a prophet, who brings news to the poor and oppressed. It also shows the general reaction to Jesus: firstly, excitement and then, rejection (Hendriksen, 1978, p. 250).

It is possible that this narrative is positioned between two stories that present Jesus as an Elijianic priestly messiah figure (Poirier, 2007, p. 360). Prior to this text, Jesus fasted for 40 days in the wilderness and afterwards a demon calls Jesus “the Holy One of God”, a similar title to the one given to Elisha (2 Kings 4:9).

This passage contains common elements of Luke. Jesus is presented as the saviour of the Jews and the Gentiles (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 231). This account is one of the eight in Luke where Jesus expounds on Scripture (Kimball, 1994, p. 179) and one of six that occur on the Sabbath that cause conflict (Schweizer, 1984, p. 88).
Formal Analysis
Luke 4:14-15 is a transitional passage that Luke uses to move Jesus from the temptation narrative to Nazareth. Luke 4:16-30 is its own pericope with two sections made up of Jesus reading Scripture and the people’s reaction to it.

The structure of the first section is a chiasm indicated by the phrases “stood up”, “given to him” and “he opened” (16-17) in contrast with “rolled up”, “gave it” and “sat down” (v20) (Schweizer, 1984, p. 85; Nolland, 1989, p. 191). There are two climaxes in 4:16-21 (Siker, 1992, pp. 77-78). In verse 16b-17, Luke slows down the narrative building to the Isaiah citation as the climax, the centre of the chiasm. Then the tension is increased afterwards with the suspense of all eyes fixed on Jesus in verse 21.

The second section appears to be more disjointed due to “various traditions and sayings that Luke combines” in verses 4:22-30 (Siker, 1992, p. 79). The flow of verses 22 to 27 suggests that Luke was not dependent on a simple unified account but welded them together (Nolland, 1989, p. 192). However, Abogunrin (2003, pp. 239-240) asserts that breaking the passage into difference sources “cannot be proved from the text as it now stands”. Likewise, Kimball (1994, p. 201) finds all of Luke 4:16-30 to be a single unit due to there being similar “catchword connections” that indicate “a unified exegetical discussion that has been highly summarized”.

It is likely that Luke knew about Mark’s account however there is only a loose connection. Luke 4:15 is a similar phrase to Mark 6:2, although Mark has a singular “the synagogue”. It is most likely that Luke used an independent version of the same incident, possibly from his L source or other traditional material since Luke 4:24 is similar to Mark 6:4, John 4:44 and saying 31 in the Gospel of Thomas (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 227; Kimball, 1994, p. 181).
**Detailed Analysis**

The transitional passage (4:14-15) gives a summary of Jesus’ previous ministry “where he was acclaimed for his teaching” (Kimball, 1994, p. 184). Jesus returns from the wilderness where the Spirit had led Him (4:1) to Galilee in the power of the Spirit (4:14). Luke’s presentation of Jesus is one who is in the Spirit, even from childhood (1:80, 2:27) and later Jesus quote’s Isaiah claiming that the Spirit is upon Him (4:18).

Luke’s gospel is the only synoptic to mention Jesus’ ministry in synagogues (Kimball, 1994, p. 185). As opposed to Mark’s account, Luke stresses the location twice, first as Nazareth then by stating this is Jesus’ hometown (Siker, 1992, p. 80).

There is a disagreement as to whether the Isaiah reading was planned or if Jesus selected the passage. Jesus “was given” the scroll of Isaiah. This may mean there was an assigned reading. However, Jesus “unrolled the scroll and found the place” may indicate that Jesus selected the passage. Based on this ambiguity, Walker (1988, p. 322) suggests there is no reason to think one way or the other. Most other commentators suggest it is likely Jesus chose the Isaiah 61 reading (Kimball, 1994, p. 186) at the time since in the synagogue the reading of the Law was fixed, but the readings from the prophets were chosen (Schweizer, 1984, p. 88).

The quote Jesus reads in verses 18-19 is “a conflation of Isa 61:1a, b, d; 58:6d; 61:2a that omits 61:1c, 2b” (Kimball, 1994, p. 183). This joining of two verses based on common catchwords is known as *gezerah shawah* and was used in Jesus’ day by Jewish teachers (Kimball, 1994, p. 190). It is possible that this insertion was a *midrash* or *comment* by Jesus which He added to explain that the blind would recover their sight after they have been set free from their oppression (Hendriksen, 1978, pp. 253-254). The reason Jesus added “to let
the oppressed go free” within 61:1-2 may have been to show that He was both the prophet who proclaimed the messianic release and the agent of this liberation (Kimball, 1994, p. 193).

The Isaiah prophecy in its original context “was an announcement of the end of the Babylonian exile” (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 233). God would restore Jerusalem, the exiles would return to Israel and God would reign over them. This would bring about joy because their oppression had ended and they “would experience pardon, liberation and justice” (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 233). Jesus interprets this prophecy to the exiles to be about Himself.

There is debate around how literal the Isaiah prophecy is in relation to Jesus. The literal poor and blind are mentioned later in Luke¹ and possibly in a figurative manner², but the captives and oppressed do not appear again. (Kimball, 1994, p. 188). Since Jesus never directly set any captives free³, it is perhaps better to spiritualise the oppressed while not negating their physical needs (Walker, 1988, p. 323). Jesus most likely means both those in physical bondage and those “in spiritual bondage to sin and death” (Just, 1996, p. 193). The congregation who doubt Jesus’ statements were prisoners bound by the law even if they were unaware (Walker, 1988, p. 323). Likewise, the poor is a reference to those who are “financially poor, but certainly it includes... both moral and spiritual poverty from which all people can suffer.” (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 234).

Jesus cuts off the final section of Isaiah 61:2 not mentioning the day of God’s vengeance. This is because that day of vengeance was “not an emphasis of Jesus’ earthly ministry” (Kimball, 1994, p. 193) as that day is yet to come. It “will surely follow, but not immediately” (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 235). Instead the focus of Jesus in this setting was the

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³ Although the Greek word could mean forgiveness See Luke 1.77; 3.3; 24.47; Acts 2.38; 5.31; 10.43; 13.38; 28.18 (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 233)
proclamation of freedom to the poor and oppressed and the proclamation of the year of the 
Lord’s favour.

In verse 20, Luke gives a dramatic pause with the people’s eyes fixed on Jesus. There is a 
sense of heightened expectation. Will the crowd see what Jesus proclaims, or will they be 
blind to him? (Just, 1996, p. 193). Jesus proclamation that the Scriptures were fulfilled in 
their hearing (4:21) could be a summary of Jesus’ sermon “rather than a formula that 
introduces his interpretation given in 4:22-27” (Kimball, 1994, p. 196).

It is not clear in verse 22 if the people first responded positively or negatively to Jesus (Just, 
1996, pp. 194-195). Schweizer (1984, p. 90) contends that the people’s reaction is something 
like “noncommittal or even mistaken agreement” because of Jesus’ rhetorical skill. When 
compared with Mark 6:3 it is clear that “Luke omits the clear rejection describe in Mark” 
exclusively on rejection”. The crowd’s reaction is perhaps best described as “a neutral 
surprised confusion” (Just, 1996, p. 195), because it is their hometown boy speaking (Siker, 

Jesus’ responds to the peoples’ reaction in verse 23 by predicting what they are thinking, 
changing the situation dramatically. Jesus suggests that the people wanted a sign for what he 
proclaimed (Siker, 1992, p. 83) essentially “asking him to heal his hometown folk” (Poirier, 

The people mentioned what they had heard Jesus did in Capernaum (4:23) even though Luke 
did not record it. A contrast is set up between the people of Nazareth and Capernaum (Siker, 
1992, p. 81). In the next narrative Jesus goes directly to Capernaum where He teaches on the 
Sabbath and amazes people who do not try and kill him (4:31-32).
In Jesus’ response He calls Himself a prophet. In this narrative there are two prophecies fulfilled (Siker, 1992, p. 86). One is the reading from Isaiah that Jesus explicitly states He fulfilled; the other is that a prophet is not accepted in his home town. Ironically this last prophecy is immediately fulfilled by the people who do not think Jesus is a prophet.

Jesus’ reference to not being accepted in His hometown (4:24) can be taken in a broader sense to mean Israel as a whole (Siker, 1992, pp. 82-83). This explains Jesus’ reference to Elijah and Elisha (4:25-27), whose ministries were not “narrowly nationalistic” (Nolland, 1989, p. 201). This rejection of Jesus in his hometown is a dress rehearsal for the passion where Jesus will face rejection in the capital of his homeland (Nolland, 1989, p. 200).

Verses 25-27 “provides the hermeneutical key for understanding what Jesus means by the Isaiah citation in 4:18-19 and by his declaration of fulfilment in 4:21b” (Siker, 1992, p. 83). Jesus expands His statement about a prophet without honour in their homeland by mentioning two events that took place in Elijah and Elisha’s ministry (4:25-27). Elijah insisted to a poor widow of Zarephath that she should make him some food, even though she had a “fatal lack of resources” (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 237). She trusted Elijah without demanding a sign first and simply obeyed (1 Kings 17:8-16). Naaman was insulted because Elisha did not come out and perform a sign or ritual for him, and yet he still obeyed Elisha’s instructions (2 Kings 5.1-19). The point is that unlike the widow or Naaman, the people of Nazareth refused to face the truth about their “spiritual condition and hence their murderous anger and the refusal to repent” (Abogunrin, 2003, p. 238).

Most commentators state that the “Gentile mission is anticipated already in Jesus’ first service” (Just, 1996, p. 196) based on the references to Elijah and Elisha and their actions towards Gentiles. Poirier (2007, p. 361) disagrees, suggesting that Elijah and Elisha are mentioned because in Jesus’ day the Isaiah reading was read in light of those two prophets.
The context of this event took place in a synagogue for which Jesus was famous for ministering (4:15) and which excluded Gentiles (Poirier, 2007, p. 362). Poirier (2007, p. 362) argues that the people were enraged (4:28) because Jesus compared the “the Nazarenes with the apostatized public of Elijah’s and Elisha’s day” not because of the inclusion of blessings to the Gentiles.

However, in the context of Luke there have already been hints of the universal mission to the Gentiles (2:32, 3:6) (Nolland, 1989, p. 201). In this setting the crowd understood Jesus’ proclamation as applicable to Israel but Jesus’ told them it was a reference to Gentiles and only to the Jews to the extent they were able to include the Gentiles (Siker, 1992, p. 83). The Jew’s unbelief does not produce blessing, paralleling Elijah and Elisha who brought no blessing to Israel (Nolland, 1989, p. 201). The people were enraged because Jesus told the people that the Gentiles, the enemies of Israel would receive the blessings of God (Kimball, 1994, p. 197).

The crowd was so angry they tried to push Jesus off a nearby cliff but He passed by them (4:29-30). According to a collection of laws ascribed to second century Rabbi Meir, blasphemers were stoned by being thrown from a reasonable height and if necessary pelted with rocks (Schweizer, 1984, p. 91). The almost docetic-sounding escape recalls the way in which Elijah so facilely slipped through the grip of Ahab and Jezebel (cf. John 8:59) (Poirier, 2007, p. 362). The rejection of Jesus becomes a paradigm that will eventually lead to “another crowd and, at the right hour, the cross” (Just, 1996, p. 196).

Conclusion
Luke introduces Jesus as the Spirit anointed teacher and Messiah for the world. His mission was to proclaim good news to the poor and the oppressed. The people’s response reveals they were blind to Jesus and in need of a saviour.
Works Cited


