



THE BEREA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Mad Enough to Kill

David Anguish

Just what did he say to make them so angry? The beginning was uneventful. He stood, found his text, and read one of Scripture’s great promise passages. When the Lord’s anointed arrives, the poor will hear the good news and the brokenhearted will be healed. Captives will be released, the blind will see, and the oppressed will be liberated.

At first, his words were well received. So, too, was his bold claim that followed: that *he* was the one fulfilling the great promise, even as they were listening. They were amazed by his words, amenable to his message, and complimentary.

But as he continued, the mood changed. Their amazement turned to resistance, irritation, boiling rage. How dare he say such things! The fury of each was reinforced by the rage of all. As a group, they arose, pulled the preacher from the building, dragged him to the cliff, and prepared to throw him to his death.

That’s the gist of Luke 4.16–30, positioned by Luke at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry to establish its programmatic theme (Green 1995, 76; cf. Matt 13.53–58; Mark 6.1–6). In this elaboration of Jesus’ synagogue teaching, Luke reports that he began by reading from Isaiah 61.1–2, as translated in the LXX, altering it a bit by replacing the phrase about God’s vengeance with a phrase from Isaiah 58.6 promising freedom for the oppressed.

As noted, his hearers were at first pleased, even when he said, “‘Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled.’ They were all speaking well of him and were amazed by the gracious words that came from his mouth” (Luke 4.21–22a).

The mood began to shift in verses 22b–24. The hearers noted, perhaps with pride, but probably with growing consternation, that their speaker was (merely) Joseph’s son. Jesus apparently sensed that their mood was leading them to question his credibility. Doubtless, he said, they wanted him to “heal himself.” Do a miracle for them like he had done in Capernaum. He then identified the reason for their skepticism: they were living the proverb, “No prophet is accepted in his hometown.” We can feel the tension rising.

But it’s what he said next, accurate though it was, that sent them over the edge. There were widows in Israel during the great famine in Elijah’s day. “Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them except a widow at Zarephath in Sidon” (v. 26). And in Elisha’s time, “there were many in Israel who had leprosy, and yet not one of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian” (v. 27) (cf. 1 Kings 17.8–16; 2 Kings 5.1–14).

People from enemy territory. Gentile territory. Not God’s people. Jesus had driven home his

point, and the people who had known him since childhood didn't miss it. Or like it.

We'll fully grasp it only if we keep in mind that the references to Elijah and Elisha are part of the same sermon in which he quotes Isaiah 61. That text says the Lord's anointed would proclaim good news to the poor, give liberty to captives, restore sight to the blind, and free the oppressed. The word *liberty* (ἀφεσις, *aphesis*) is especially important. Appearing in the LXX of both Isaiah 58.6 and 61.2, and twice in Luke 4.18, it refers to "the act of freeing from an obligation, guilt, or punishment, pardon, cancellation" (Bauer 2000, 155).

As their initial reaction shows, Jesus' hearers welcomed that news. But it quickly became apparent that they did so with a caveat: it was acceptable only if the poor and oppressed people under consideration were Israelites. That was the accepted view. But Jesus didn't limit the good news to Israel. Instead, he made it clear that, "Unlike ... the wider Jewish world of Luke's Gospel, people are not to be predetermined as insiders or outsiders by their sex, family, heritage, financial position, location in the city or in rural environs, religious purity, and so on. The message of Jesus is that such status markers are no longer binding.... Anyone may join the community of Jesus' followers. All are welcome (Green 1995, 82).

For the religious synagogue attenders in Nazareth that day, that was a bridge too far. God's promises were for God's people, and only for God's people. All others were, by definition, enemies of God who rightly deserved his *vengeance*—Jesus' omission of the phrase in Isaiah 61 notwithstanding. Because they were so committed to that understanding and opposed to any other, they surrendered to their rage and tried to murder the good man they had known his entire life.

Both observation and experience show that the Nazarenes' spirit lives on. So we should ask what they might still teach us. But more importantly, we should also ask what we can learn from Jesus' definition of his mission.

Works Cited

- Bauer, Walter. 2000. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press.
- Green, Joel B. 1995. *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*. New Testament Theology. ed. James D. G. Dunn. Cambridge University Press.

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From the Articles for Teaching, and Edification page ([here](#)), "Better to Serve the Egyptians?" ([here](#)) — We're tempted to criticize the Israelites who received their freedom and then hesitated. But our obstacles often seem too large, too.

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