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Throw the Blasphemer off a Cliff: Luke 4.16–30 in Light of the *Life of Aesop**

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In Jesus' sermon at Nazareth in Luke (4.16–30), his reminder that Elijah had aided non-Jews (vv. 26–7) is met with an unusual death sentence – to throw Jesus from a cliff. This has been conceptually and geographically vexing for scholars. This paper reads the passage beside the *Life of Aesop*, in which the Delphians condemn the fabulist to the same fate for blasphemy (130–42). Aesop's offence, like Jesus', is to malign the special status of the Delphians before their god. The Lukan Evangelist's use of the same manner of death for the same type of speech act indicates that the crowd at Nazareth has condemned Jesus for blasphemy.

Keywords: Luke, Aesop, blasphemy, cliff, execution, Nazareth

Classics scholars have recently 'rediscovered' the *Life of Aesop*.[1] As the classicist Helen Morales has recently exclaimed, '*Life of Aesop*, your time has come!'[2] Not surprisingly, biblical scholars have also recently discovered the *Life of Aesop*. Whitney Shiner has argued that the literary process of collecting individual Aesop stories into a single narrative may shed light on the plotting and literary

* Versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston, November 2017; and the Pacific Coast Regional Meeting of the SBL in Fullerton, CA, March 2018. We are grateful for the insightful questions and comments we received at these presentations.

1 The lack of scholarly attention to *The Life of Aesop* is well illustrated in the brief reception history provided by J. B. Lefkowitz, 'Ugliness and Value in the *Life of Aesop*', *Kakos: Badness and Anti-Value in Classical Antiquity* (ed. I. Sluiter and R. M. Rosen; Mnemosyne Supplements 307; Boston: Brill, 2008) 62–7.

2 H. Morales, 'Challenging Some Orthodoxies: The Politics of Genre and the Ancient Novel', *Fiction on the Fringe: Novelistic Writing in the Post-Classical* Age (ed. G. A. Karla; Mnemosyne Supplements 310; Boston: Brill, 2009) 5.

development of the gospel genre.[3] In a longer study, Lawrence Wills has argued that the Gospels of Mark and John show significant genre parallels with the *Life of Aesop*, because all three documents serve a community gathered around the cult of 'the revered dead'.[4] And more to our concern, in a recent issue of this journal, Steve Reece has argued that that Gospel of Luke and the Q document were influenced by and interacted with the Aesop tradition.[5] In this article, we want to suggest a point of contact between the Aesop tradition and the Gospel of Luke that Reece appears to have overlooked: Aesop's trial and death in the *Life of Aesop* and the crowd's attempted assassination of Jesus in Luke's Gospel (4.16–30).[6]

1. A Quick Review of the Aesopic Tradition

Aesop was clearly an important character in antiquity. In the classical period, he was mentioned by both Herodotus (2.134) and Aristophanes (*Wasps* 1446–8). Accounts of Aesop have been suggested as a source, or at least inspiration, for Hebrew Bible stories,[7] Plato[8] and other ancient literature.[9] Many

3 W. Shiner, 'Creating Plot in Episodic Narratives: *The Life of Aesop* and the Gospel of Mark', *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (ed. R. F. Hock, J. B. Chance and J. Perkins; SBLSS 6; Atlanta: SBL, 1998) 155–76.

4 L. M. Wills, *The Quest of the Historical Gospel: Mark, John and the Origins of the Gospel Genre* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Because Wills assumes that Matthew and Luke employ Mark as a literary model, he does not argue that the second and third Gospels directly employ the *Life of Aesop* as a literary model. Also see S. S. Elliott, 'Witless in your Own Cause: Divine Plots and Fractured Characters in the *Life of Aesop* and the Gospel of Mark', *Religion & Theology* 12 (2005) 397–418; and D. F. Watson, 'The *Life of Aesop* and the Gospel of Mark: Two Ancient Approaches to Elite Values', *JBL* 129 (2010) 699–716.

5 S. Reece, '"Aesop", "Q" and "Luke"', *NTS* 62 (2016) 357–77. See also the earlier comparison to Luke's Gospel by M. A. Beavis, 'Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–8)', *JBL* 111 (1992) 37–54.

6 Some NT scholars have found parallels between the passion materials in the Gospels and Aesop's death (e.g. Wills, *Quest for the Historical Gospel*, 23–50), but not between the Aesop tradition and the attempt on Jesus after his sermon (Luke 4.16–30).

7 E.g. in regard to the story of Joseph, his brothers and a stolen cup in Genesis, see C. Grottanelli, 'The Ancient Novel and Biblical Narrative', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 27.3 (1987) 7–34.

8 T. Compton, 'The Trial of the Satirist: Poetic Vitae (Aesop, Archilochus, Homer) as Background for Plato's *Apology*', *The American Journal of Philology* 111 (1990) 330–47.

9 On the widespread popularity and use of Aesopic traditions in antiquity, see G. A. Karla, '*Life of Aesop*: Fictional Biography as Popular Literature', *Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Technique and Fictionalization* (ed. K. de Temmerman and K. Demoen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 45–160; and L. Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 16–46.

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classicists regard the Aesopic traditions as important generative texts for the origin of the ancient novel.[10] Although the figure of Aesop was widely known from the fifth century BCE forward, direct textual witnesses to the *Life of Aesop* as a distinct document are relatively thin and varied. Critical editions of Aesop draw on two textual traditions: an older version published in 1845 (W) and a more recent edition published by Ben Edwin Perry (G).[11] Although both families of texts relate similar stories, they appear to have largely independent histories and neither textual tradition has clearly traceable historical or geographical provenance.

Both the sheer scope of the reception history of Aesopic traditions and the diverse textual witnesses appear to support Leslie Kurke's assertion that the *Life of Aesop* 'is a text that does not represent a single "symbolic act" by a single (postulated) agent or author, but the accretion of multiple acts and agents, in a written work that itself already contains a centuries-long conversation of "great" and "little" traditions'.[12] The *Life of Aesop* was, again in Kurke's words, 'an open text in dialogue with a long-lived oral tradition'.[13] As Reece recently reported in this journal, Aesop was both widely known in the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean and widely employed in educational endeavours. We concur with his assertion that 'it seems most natural for Luke, in crafting his version of the gospel from his inherited sources, to have drawn from the fables and proverbs of Aesop, as well as from other mythoi, that were so central to his own educational training'.[14]

2. A Quick Review of Jesus' Sermon at Nazareth

Scholarly investigations of Jesus' Nazareth sermon (Luke 4.16–30) are typically marked by at least two characteristics. First, as John Nolland noted nearly

10 E.g. F. R. Adrados, 'The "Life of Aesop" and the Origins of the Novel in Antiquity', *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 1 (1979) 93–112. Classicists have debated whether or not Aesop belongs within the genre of the ancient novel or on its 'fringe'. In any case, the Aesop tradition clearly developed in close connection with the genre of ancient novels. See G. A. Karla, ed., *Fiction on the Fringe: Novelistic Writing in the Post-Classical Age* (Mnemosyne Supplements; Boston: Brill, 2009).

11 For a detailed comparison of the texts, see B. E. Perry, *Studies in the Text History of the Life and Fables of Aesop* (Haverford, PA: American Philological Association, 1936; repr. Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981) and *idem*, 'The Text Tradition of the Greek Life of Aesop', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 64 (1933) 198–244. For a more up-to-date discussion, see Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 16–22; and, very succinctly, R. I. Pervo, 'A Nihilist Fabula: Introducing the *Life of Aesop*', *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, 80–1.

12 Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 8. Also see R. Giannattasio, 'Su due recenti papiri della *Vita di Esopo*', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 76 (1989) 7–10.

13 Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 25.

14 Reece, '"Aesop", "Q" and "Luke"', 369.

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thirty years ago, interpreters routinely describe the account 'as a programmatic text for Luke's whole enterprise'.[15] This assumption of the account's importance is shared both by those who interpret the account in the context of the Luke's Gospel[16] and by those who view it in the context of Luke/Acts.[17] Second, scholars likewise rather routinely associate this programmatic agenda with a Lukan concern for Gentile inclusion – and an apparently corresponding Lukan concern for Jewish rejection of the message delivered by Jesus and his followers.[18] James Sanders's influential (and persuasive) reading remains an appropriate illustration of how contemporary scholars tend to interpret the themes of Gentile inclusion and Jewish rejection in this account.[19]

While drawing upon parallels from Qumran, Sanders, with characteristic clarity and acumen, noted that in the opening verses of the account,

> [t]he people were both pleased and astonished by Jesus' acclamation that this very familiar and key passage of Scripture was being fulfilled on that very day … [But] [t]hat which in v. 22 is pleased astonishment, in v. 29, seven verses later, becomes threatening anger … Luke forces us to ask what happened within vv. 23–27 that would cause a receptive congregation to turn into an angry mob … What had the man said that made them so angry?[20]

15 J. Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20* (WBC 35A; Dallas: Word, 1989) 195.

16 Explicit use of 'programmatic' language is common (e.g. F. Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (ed. H. Koester; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) 152; and R. K. Baawobr, 'Opening a Narrative Programme: Luke 4.16–30 and the Black *Bagr* Narrative', *JSNT* 30 (2007) 29–53, esp. 42). Synonyms for 'programmatic' are ubiquitous. For example, L. T. Johnson (*The Gospel of Luke* (SP 3; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991) 80) considers this passage 'of particular importance for grasping Luke's literary and religious intention', and J. T. Carrol (*Luke: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2012) 109) finds '[t]his inaugural episode laced with theological concerns that bear great import in Luke's narrative'. Also see U. Busse, *Das Nazareth-Manifest Jesu: Eine Einführung in das lukanische Jesusbild nach Lk 4,16–30* (SBS 91; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1978) ; M. Prior, *Jesus, the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4.16–30)* (BS 26; Sheffield: JSOT, 1995); C. K. Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (BZNW 139; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006) 78–80; and P. E. Spencer, *Rhetorical Texture and Narrative Trajectories of the Lukan Galilean Ministry Speeches* (LNTS 341; New York: T & T Clark, 2007) 63–70.

17 For example, I. H. Marshall (*The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 177–8) notes that this 'narrative is placed here, then, for its programmatic significance, and it contains many of the main themes of Lk.-Acts *in nuce*'. Also see R. C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. I (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986) 60–73; and J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 207.

18 Fitzmyer's comments are typical of scholarship: 'Luke's narrative is a conflation, there is, on the one hand, the fulfillment-story ending on the note of Jesus' success; on the other hand, there is a the rejection-story.' J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) 530.

19 J. A. Sanders, 'From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4', *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (ed. C. A. Evans and J. A. Sanders; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 46–69.

20 Sanders, 'From Isaiah 61', 58.

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Sanders, who read this account as containing at least some echoes of the voice of the historical Jesus, answered this rhetorical question simply. According to him, Jesus (and his Lukan interpreter) issued 'a challenge to in-group meanings of election'.[21] By referring to Naamann the Syrian and the widow in Zarephath, Jesus had expanded election to include the Gentile outgroup. Sanders explained that

> Luke's Nazareth pericope is the foundation stone of his Gospel, which he wrote largely to answer the embarrassing question of why Jesus was crucified … Jesus so challenged his compatriot's assumption about divine election that he met the prophet-martyr's end … The angry reception his message received in Nazareth anticipated, according to Luke, the reception it would finally receive at its end.[22]

As far as it goes, Sanders's reading of this account is widely accepted and, in our eyes, essentially correct. The crowd's violent response to Jesus was motivated by what Luke regarded as their hostility towards the outpouring of God's Spirit and blessings upon Gentiles.[23]

3. A Lingering Question

This paper presumes that Sanders' (widely shared) reading of this passage is essentially accurate, but asks a follow-up question: why throw Jesus off a cliff? Why not stone Jesus? Stoning was, after all, both the most prescribed (Lev 20.2, 27; 24.14, 16, 23; Num 15.36; Deut 13.10; 17.5; 21.21; 22.21; cf. Luke 13.34) and most feared (Ex 8.26; 17.4) form of capital punishment in the Septuagint – a threat and fear which carried over in the New Testament (Luke 20.6; John 8.7, 59; 11.8).[24] Or why not shoot Jesus with arrows, another Septuagint means of dispatching the religiously undesirable (Ex 19.13)? Or why not engage in a lethal stabbing as Josephus reports the Sicarii frequently did?[25] Why throw Jesus off a cliff?

Of course, murder, executions and violent deaths were common in the ancient world, but death by a lethal plunge was not a common *modus operandi* for

21 Sanders, 'From Isaiah 61', 68

22 Sanders, 'From Isaiah 61', 69.

23 On the complex question of Luke's supposed anti-Judaism, see T. E. Phillips, 'The Mission of the Church in Acts: Inclusive or Exclusive?', *Acts within Diverse Frames of Reference* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009) 118–29.

24 Stoning remained, at least rhetorically, the form of capital punishment required in the Mishnah. See J. Blinzler, 'The Jewish Punishment of Stoning in the New Testament Period', *The Trial of Jesus* (ed. E. Bammel; Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1970) 147–61; and 'Das Synhedrium von Jerusalem und die Strafprozessordnung der Mischna', *ZNW* 52 (1961) 54–65.

25 On the identity and rhetorical function of this obscure group in Josephus' writings, see M. J. Vandenberghe, 'Villains Called Sicarii: A Commonplace for Rhetorical Vituperation in the Texts of Flavius Josephus', *JSJ* 47 (2016) 475–507.

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execution or assassination. There are only a handful of references to death by deliberately being thrown from a height. The Athenians apparently cast victims into a pit (βάραθρον),[26] a death which Euryptolemos in Xenophon's *Hellenica* reserves for persons who 'should wrong (ἀδικῇ) the people of Athens'.[27] The Judean king Amaziah threw 10,000 men of Seir from a cliff (in the Septuagint κατεκρήμνιζον, 2 Chr 25.12). A legend in Pseudo-Plutarch tells of two brothers who died by falling off a cliff while in mortal combat.[28] Finally, Demosthenes cries, 'if anyone brings up the subject of the temple treasure, he is thrown from a cliff (κατακρημνίζεται)'.[29]

None of these references to death by being plunged into a pit or off a cliff offers a clear parallel to the events in the Lukan account. (In fact, the clear majority of uses of κατακρημνίζω or its relatives in the *Thesaurus linguae Graecae* are post-biblical and specifically refer back to the Lukan passage under consideration.) Because a general survey of capital punishment by being cast down or being cast off a cliff sheds so little light on this phenomenon and its likely significance in Luke, it is probably wise to engage in a different kind of investigation.

We suggest that an examination of one well-known tale of intrigue, violent plots and death, Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*, may be useful for understanding the relative infrequency and significance of death by lethal plunge. In this account of twelve brutal emperors, scores of people die. People are burned alive (× 1: 4.27), clubbed (× 2: 4.32; 12.8), consumed by beasts (× 2: 5.14; 6.37) and dogs (× 1: 12.15), crucified (× 3: 1.74; 12.10, 11), drowned (× 4: 2.33, 67; 4.16, 32), poisoned (× 11: 3.61; 4.23, 29, 38; 5.1, 44; 6.33–4, 35, 36; 7.9; 9.14), strangled (× 7: 3.53, 75; 4.2, 28; 6.6, 35; 9.17), forced to commit suicide (× 9: 3.56; 4.38; 5.29; 6.35, 36, 37, 49; 8.9, 12), sawn in half (× 1: 4.27), stabbed (× 8: 4.32, 58; 5.29; 6.26; 7.19; 9.17; 11.6; 12.17), starved (× 2: 7.7; 9.15), and have their throats cut (× 3: 1.74; 4.33; 5.34).

More to our interest, five people are killed or are intended victims of death by fatal plunge. These deaths – or intended deaths – fall into two categories. First, in three of these scenarios, the primary means of death was drowning: the victim was thrown off a cliff into water to drown (3.14, 62; 4.27). In all three of these cases, the

26 Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.20–2; Pl. *Rep.* 4.439e.

27 Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.22. The Tarpeian Rock was used for similar purposes. Tac. *Ann.* 6.19; Plut. *Mar.* 45; Josephus, *B.J.* 1.2.4. The rock was named, at least according to legend, after the Vestal Virgin who opened the gates to the Sabine army. Livy 1.11; Ps.-Plut. *Parallela* 15. On being cast off the Tarpeian Rock as punishment for political crimes against the people, see J. Rüpke, 'You Shall Not Kill: Hierarchies of Norms in Ancient Rome', *Numen* 39 (1992) 58–89, esp. 64–5.

28 Ps.-Plut. *Fluv.* 2.

29 Dem. 19.327. In a recent commentary on the speech, D. M. McDowell conjectures: 'He must really be referring to one individual who said that the money taken from the temple at Delphi ought to be repaid by the Thebans or by Philip, and was subsequently (no doubt on some other pretext) executed on Philip's orders; but the case is not otherwise known.' See D. M. McDowell, trans. and ed., *Demosthenes: On the False Embassy (oration 19)* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 348 n. 327.

descent from a cliff or embankment functions like the sack that encases drowning victims in other scenarios (2.33). Both the sack and the rapid descent are simply convenient ways to ensure that the intended victim is unable to effect an escape by some rapid freestyle swimming.[30] In the case of one of Tiberius' victims, the descent is so incidental to the death sentence that special squads are placed in boats at the point of impact to club the victims to death (3.62). Second, in the two remaining cases, death – or intended death – by fatal plunge is a mere matter of geographical convenience. In one case, one of Augustus' intended victims jumps from a high window to his death in order to avoid a longer, more agonising death at Augustus' hands (2.27). In the other case, one of Augustus' would-be assassins plans to eliminate him by pushing him off a cliff as they travel together through the Alps. This was undoubtedly a plot of convenience and opportunity; one could hardly approach the emperor fully armed, but the Alps offer many potentially lethal precipices. Eventually, however, this plot comes to nothing when the assassin is won over by Augustus' personal charisma and abandons his lethal plan (2.79).

On the basis of this sampling, we again suggest that death by lethal plummet was relatively uncommon in the ancient world. And, of equal importance for our purposes, it is particularly significant to note that in spite of the scores of executions in *The Twelve Caesars*, there are no planned executions that employ cliff plunges as the intended means of execution. Three people die after being thrown off cliffs, but all three of these persons are plunged into water and eventually drown. Another death by lethal fall, an assassination as opposed to an execution, is planned but never completed. Finally, one successful death plot does involve a lethal vertical descent, but this suicidal plunge is the only option available to ensure the victim a speedy death before being turned over to the emperor's torturers. Simply stated, apart from the cases where the condemned is intended to eventually die by drowning, there are no planned executions by being thrown off a cliff in all of the executions recorded in *The Twelve Caesars*.

I. Howard Marshall seemed to recognise the lack of robust cultural precedent for execution by throwing the accused off a cliff and he, therefore, suggested that Luke's language (κατακρημνίσαι, 4.29) could mean 'to stone', the idea being that a person was thrown down on the ground and then stoned (Num 19.13).[31] This suggestion is highly improbable for two reasons. First, the use of κατακρημνίζω elsewhere (e.g. 2 Chr 25.12; 4 Macc 4.25; Josephus, *A.J.* 9.191) indicates death by fall from a precipice. Second, Luke clearly distinguishes

30 On drowning people in a sack in the Roman Empire and beyond, see F. Egmond, 'The Cock, the Dog, the Serpent, and the Monkey: Reception and Transmission of a Roman Punishment, or Historiography as History', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 2 (1995) 159–92.

31 Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 190. Marshall is following Blinzler, 'Jewish Punishment', 153–6. Cf. N. Hyldahl, 'Die Versuchung auf der Zinne des Tempels', *StTh* 15 (1961) 133–27.

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between deaths by stoning and death by fatal plummet. On the one hand, Luke reports both that the prophets were stoned (λιθοβολοῦσα, Luke 13.34) and that Jesus' opponents fear being stoned (καταλιθάσει, Luke 20.6), but neither act of violence (or potential violence) is associated with being cast down. On the other hand, the devil asks Jesus to tempt death by casting himself from the pinnacle of temple (βάλε σεαυτὸν ἐντεῦθεν κάτω, 4.14). Thus, in the context of Luke's Gospel, it seems pretty clear that the crowds at Nazareth want to kill Jesus by subjecting him to a fatal plunge off a high place.

So, we return to our question: why throw Jesus off a cliff?

4. A Plausible Answer from the *Life of Aesop*

A quick topographic survey of the rolling Galilean hills around Nazareth would seem to suggest that the terrain is not well suited to cliff-diving. If the primary driver behind the attempted murder in the Nazareth story is not historical accuracy, how should we understand the story's attempted homicide? It is our suggestion that the Nazarenes – as depicted in the Lukan story – are imposing the penalty upon Jesus that they deem appropriate to a blasphemer. The Delphians presume that the same punishment is appropriate for Aesop when he is perceived to have committed blasphemy against a people, their sacred heritage and their land, as the Delphians' announcement of Aesop's death sentence from the W textual tradition illustrates:

> You are to be thrown from the cliff today, for this is the way they [the citizens of Delphi] voted to put you to death *as a temple thief and a blasphemer* who does not deserve the dignity of a burial (132, emphasis added).[32]

What has Aesop done to deserve such punishment? Put simply, he has offended the Delphians with his words. As Todd Compton has explained: 'His trial is unjust; the poet's "crime" was justified blame, "evil speaking"; he is

32 Although the textual history is complex (as already noted), scholars are generally agreed both that Aesop's conflict with Delphi and this false charge of blasphemy make up some of the oldest and best-known Aesop traditions, attested as far back as Aristophanes (*Wasps* 1446). See Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 68–73. The charge of blasphemy appears in the W text; the G text includes only the charge of temple-robbing. There is no way to determine which text is older or was better known in antiquity. For a detailed analysis of the textual status of the 'blasphemy' in W and its absence in G, see Kurche, *Aesopic Conversations*, 86–8.

The translation here is by L. W. Daly in W. Hansen, ed., *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 160. The Greek text with critical apparatus is available in G. A. Karla, *Vita Aesopi: Überlieferung, Sprache und Edition einer frühbyzantinischen Fassung des Äsopromans* (Serta Graeca: Beiträge zur Erforschung griechischer Texte 13; Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert, 2001).

βλάσφημος.'[33] The charge of blasphemy against Aesop and the resulting death sentence were well known in antiquity. His 'blasphemous' words against the Delphians and their religious leadership are widely recognised to contain some of the oldest and best-known parts of the Aesopic tradition.[34] Aesop's admirers are even reported to have built a shrine at the site of his death (P.Oxy. 1800),[35] although neither the archaeology nor topography provides any support for this dubious historical tradition.

Like Jesus' words, Aesop's are initially well received. The narrator explains: 'the people [i.e., Delphians] enjoyed hearing him at first' (124). The narrator of Luke speaks similarly of the Nazarenes' initial response to Jesus: 'All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth' (4.22).

However, Aesop, also like Luke's Jesus, is not one to accept vain praise, and so he chides his audience. Aesop is well aware of the Delphian claims to superiority within the family of Greek cities: he explicitly mentions the Greek practice of paying tribute to the Delphians and their temple of Apollo whenever the Greeks enjoyed the spoils of war (126). However, when the Delphians, in a transparent attempt to force Aesop into singing the praises of their ancestry, ask him about the identity of their ancestors, he responds by reducing his audience to mere 'slaves of all the Greeks', thereby denying their special status before Apollo (126). Aesop, though a provocateur, is no fool. After uttering these words, he 'made preparation for his departure' (126).

The Delphians are having none of this. Aesop has not merely called into question their social standing, though he certainly does that. More importantly, he strikes at the very core of their identity and relation to Apollo. As Aesop's speech clearly notes, Delphi and the Delphians reportedly had long received a

33 Compton, 'Trial of the Satirist', 333.

34 L. Kurke, 'Aesop and the Contestation of Delphic Authority', *The Cultures within Ancient Greek Culture* (ed. L. Kurke and C. Dougherty; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 77–100.

35 Some classicists have suggested that Aesop took on the role of a heroic φαρμακός (scapegoat) who gave his life in a fight against the corrupt religious authorities at Delpi. From a Classics perspective, see Adrados, 'The "Life of Aesop"', 93–112; I.-T. A. Papadēmētriou, *Aesop as an Archetypal Hero* (Athens: Hellenic Society for Humanistic Studies, 1997); and G. Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (rev. edn; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 118–41. Adrados argues that the use of the φαρμακός theme in the *Life of Aesop* demonstrates how elements of Greek mythical and ritual elements were merged in the *Life of Aesop* to create 'a new and original genere [sic] … which was biographical and novelistic' (112). Wills compares the sacrificial death of the heroic φαρμακός in Aesop to the passion narratives, but he does not address the assault on Jesus in Nazareth (*Quest for the Historical Gospel*, 23–50). Classicists are increasingly questioning the characterisation of Aesop as a φαρμακός (e.g. the devastating criticisms in Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 29–31, 75–94). At the very least, one is forced to acknowledge with Kurke that even if the Delphians wish to impose the role of scapegoat upon Aesop, he refuses to accept it. Aesop dies at his own hands, not at the hands of the Delphians (*Aesopic Conversations*, 86).

tithe from the spoils of Greek wars. Even if this report about Delphi's claim on all spoils of war is hyperbolic (or espoused more in theory than in practice), it testifies to the outsized importance of Apollo's sanctuary in Delphi – and by extension, to the Delphians' special relations to Apollo and status in the Hellenic world.[36] Thus, for Aesop to say that his audience members are the descendants of slaves – quite possibly sent to Delphi as part of the spoils of war – is tantamount to saying that they are no more significant than anyone else in the eyes of Apollo, and less significant than many. In narrative terms, Aesop's reduction of his audience to the descendants of mere slaves is phenomenologically equivalent to the Lukan Jesus bringing Naaman the Syrian and the widow in Zarephath into the blessings promised by the prophet Isaiah. Aesop's audience is no more special to Apollo than mere slaves. Jesus' audience is no more special to Yahweh than the Gentiles.

So how do the Delphian officials respond? They engineer Aesop's demise on the trumped-up charge of temple-robbing. In a plot worthy of Joseph in Genesis, they take a golden cup from the temple and place it in Aesop's bag without his knowledge (127).[37] Then they hunt him down, recover the temple's stolen treasure, and take him into custody (128). Although Aesop is arrested after this 'stolen' cup is found in his possession, it is significant that he immediately faces two charges: temple theft and blasphemy.[38] These are best understood as two distinct charges: although both crimes were sacrilegious and would probably cause religious defilement, being a 'sacrilegious thief' (ἱερσύλημα) entails a property crime, while being a blasphemer (βλάσφημος) entails an infraction of speech.[39] Note, however, that stealing the cup would make Aesop guilty only of theft, not blasphemy. Yet he was charged with both theft *and* blasphemy. The (false)

36 On the critique of Delphi in the *Life of Aesop* and the history of war offerings, see Kurke, 'Aesop and the Contestation', 77–100.

37 See Grottanelli, 'The Ancient Novel and Biblical Narrative', 7–34.

38 Kurke (*Aesopic Conversations*, 88 n. 103) argues that 'we cannot translate βλάσφημον as "blasphemer," since Aesop has said nothing irreverent or hostile to Apollo himself: instead, βλάσφημον seems to refer to his invective against the Delphians, which threatens to transform them into scapegoats'. However, the translation 'blasphemy' is quite justified. Aristotle records that Alcidamas was, like Aesop, condemned for blasphemy after challenging the city council; see Compton, 'Trial of the Satirist', 334–5. According to the evidence in Josephus and Qumran, first-century Jews likewise assumed that one could also be guilty of blasphemy without uttering the divine name. See A. Y. Collins, 'The Charge of Basphemy in Mark 14.64', *JSNT* 26 (2004) 379–401. The comprehensive study of blasphemy and its punishment within ancient Judaism remains D. L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus* (WUNT 106; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 30–112.

39 In both textual traditions (W and G), one charge is a property crime and the other charge inappropriate speech. On the terminology, see F. Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (trans. M. Goh and C. Shroeder; Boston: Brill, 2015) s.vv. ἱερσύλημα, βλασφημία and ἀλαζονία. On the textual traditions, see Karla, *Vita Aesopi*, 232 nn. 1–2.

charge of theft makes sense in the context of the frame job to which Aesop has been subjected, but why blasphemy? He has not directly disparaged Apollo in any way.[40]

The answer is clear. In the mind of his accusers, Aesop's real 'crime' is the blasphemy he committed by disparaging the people of Delphi.[41] The set-up with the stolen cup is just a ruse to bring him to account. Aesop had reinterpreted one of the foundational histories of their *ethnos* and challenged their status as divinely set apart.

Interestingly, while Aesop is in custody, one of his friends, who immediately recognises how Aesop has been framed, chides him for getting himself into this lethal fix. Aesop's jail cell visitor says nothing about the set-up with the temple cup; instead, getting to the real heart of the matter, he asks the rhetorical question:

> Why in the world did you have to insult them in their own land and city, and do it when you were at their mercy? Where was your training? Where was your learning? You have given advice to cities and people, but you have turned out witless in your own cause (130).[42]

What has transpired? Aesop insulted the people and called their special relationship to Apollo into question. And how did the Delphians' leaders respond? They conspired to have him killed on charges of blasphemy. How is a blasphemer killed? By being thrown off a cliff, as noted earlier in the text (132).[43]

To sum up, our agenda has been to answer a simple question: why did Jesus' accusers try to throw him off a cliff in Luke 4.16–30? Our answer has been equally simple: Jesus' assailants, as Luke narrates them, assume that death by involuntary, lethal plunge is the proper end for a would-be prophet or philosopher who blasphemed a people, their land and their status before divinity. We have supported this claim by arguing that the Lukan account shares a common set of cultural presumptions with Aesop's *Vita*. Aesop's accusers presume that death by lethal

40 If the alternative textual tradition of ἀλαζονία is adopted, all pretence of linking the accusations to the crime of the supposed temple thief disappears – and the Delphians' true motive, anger over Aesop's words, becomes even more transparent.

41 Although one could say that Aesop had not insulted all Delphians, but only those in his audience, Aesop's accusers include the city's highest officials (127). Therefore, from a narrative perspective, it seems that Aesop has offended all Delphians. The narrative certainly portrays no one – not even Aesop's friends – who endorse or are otherwise sympathetic to his words against the Delphians.

42 For possible NT parallels to this tradition, see Elliott, '"Witless in your Own Cause"', 397–418.

43 The conceptual background for killing a blasphemer comes from Greco-Roman tradition, primarily Aesop, and not from Judaism. Except when Jewish authorities worked in conjunction with the Romans to perform an execution, Jewish executions were accomplished via strangulation, burning, stoning and swords (see Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus*, 30–112, esp. 100 (m Sanh 7.1)). Bock does not consider Luke 4.16–30 or Aesop in his investigation, so he never mentions killing a blasphemer by fatal plunge.

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plunge is the appropriate punishment for Aesop's crimes; the Nazarenes in Luke's Gospel share the cultural assumption of Aesop's *Vita* regarding the appropriate end for a blasphemer. Both sets of accusers want to throw the blasphemer off a cliff. Aesop, like Jesus, avoids this execution. Unlike Jesus, he throws himself off the cliff to rob his executioners of their intended victim (142). Jesus' death, still arguably voluntary, must wait for a later time.

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