1. The sentence suggests a comparison. Does it mean that Jesus met with no faith in Israel? Out of context it could mean that, but in context it need not (and does not). That is, it could also just as easily mean that Jesus found faith in Israel, but not as great a faith as he found in the Centurion. That is, Jesus would have expected to find faith in Israel, which was awaiting its Messiah; he found it, but even in an Israel responding with faith, Jesus found even greater faith in this Centurion. Thus, there need be no denial that Jesus found faith among the Jews of Galilee. And indeed Jesus found faith among Gentiles, those said to come to him “from the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon” (6,17). So far, however, Jesus praises only this one Gentile for faith in him.

2. One might translate tosauten (the description of faith) as “such”, but the word could also be translated “so great”. Does the word indicate quality or quantity? Strictly speaking, the dictionary meaning points to quantity. In this sense, the Centurion has “more faith” than others. But should we translate it in the qualitative sense: the Centurion has a quality of faith not seen in others who have faith? On the assumption that the distinction between quantity and quality should be kept, perhaps a decision can be better made at the end of the consideration I offer in this essay.

3. To appreciate Jesus’ remark, I believe Luke intends the reader to have in mind the examples of faith the reader had earlier encountered. Let us briefly review these; they occur in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Examples of faith in Luke

1. (4,38-39) “They” ask Jesus about “her”; presumably the “they” includes Simon, whose house Jesus has entered, and “her” refers to Simon’s mother-in-law who
was held by a great fever. Responding to their question about her, Jesus orders the fever to depart. Certainly there is sign here of faith that Jesus could heal this woman; this faith is based on the immediately preceding experience when Jesus, by a word, drove a demon out of a man. Is faith that Jesus could heal demoniacs (sickness was considered a dominion by demon[s]) not the equal of the Centurion’s faith?

2. Luke reports (4,40-41), immediately after the cure of Simon’s mother-in-law, that many at the close of the day brought their sick and possessed to Jesus, who with a touch healed. People here had to have faith in Jesus; are we to suppose that they had more hope than absolute certitude that he would and could help them? How is their faith less than that of the Centurion? Presumably, there is faith shown by those who searched for Jesus in a deserted place, asking him not to leave them. Their action and words show that they believe that he is a healer.

3. (5, 1-11) Simon, to be called Simon Peter now, reacts to the miraculous catch of fish by falling at the knees of Jesus and asking that Jesus depart from him for he is a sinful man. Expressed here is the perception that Jesus in some way manifests divinity; such is the significance of putting oneself on one’s knees and confessing sinfulness, and of seeking to separate oneself from the wonder-worker. It is difficult to be precise about Peter’s act of faith here. Certainly he cannot be made to say that he thinks Jesus to be divine; perhaps we are to understand that here we have the beginning of what Peter will later make explicit: “As you know, God worked though him powerful acts, signs and wonders in your midst” (Acts 2, 22). In any event, Peter surely manifests a certain estimate of Jesus here; the fact that he left all to follow Jesus reveals a strong faith. In what way can Peter’s faith be surpassed by that of the Centurion?

Though I take him out of story-telling order, Levi (5, 27-32) belongs here thematically. That is, this man, too, leaves all to follow Jesus. Can there be a faith greater than this?

4. (5, 12-16) With Peter and the sons of Zebedee in his train, Jesus meets a leper who says, “If you wish, you can cure me” Nothing further is reported about the leper. We can only conclude to a faith in Jesus that is sure, that only calls for his willingness to heal. Is this a faith less than of the Centurion?

5. (5, 27-32) Luke explicitly notes that Jesus saw the faith of the people involved in lowering a paralytic to him. Certainly, the power to forgive sins, which
is so central to the story, is not within the expectations of these people. But their determination shows a high degree of certainty that Jesus can cure this paralytic.

6. (5, 33-39; 6, 1-5) Jesus is described as having disciples. These followers do not fast and they pluck grain on the Sabbath for eating. They must know the usual religious obligations, but have learned to ignore them. There is significant trust expressed here in going against the generally acknowledged religious customs of the day. How does this faith compare with that of the Centurion?

7. (6, 17-19) Finally, before the Sermon at the Plain begins, there is another Lucan report of many healings; now great crowds swarm to Jesus from long distances, and even want simply to touch him in their conviction that great power flowed from him. With this astounding experience just read, Luke's reader now meets the Centurion, about whom Jesus will say that not even in Israel did he find such faith. What is singular about this Centurion?

**A Consideration of the Centurion's Faith**

A. The Centurion is introduced as one who is calling upon Jesus for help “because the Centurion had heard about him”. The faith implied here, that Jesus can cure and will cure, is a faith based on previous reports about Jesus; in this matter, the Centurion does not seem to be much different from the many Israelites who had heard of Jesus and come to him, confident in his ability and willingness to help. There is another circumstance here which is peculiar: the Centurion feels the need for help in attracting Jesus, and so makes use of the Elders of Capharnaum. On the face of it, however, such a request shows, not a new degree of faith, but a need to have Jews speak to Jesus, a Jew.

The rather simple story outline, which pictures the Jews leading Jesus to the Centurion’s home, while he waits there for them - this changes. As Jesus and the Jews draw near, a second group, that of friends of the Centurion, deliver a message to Jesus. He is asked not to enter the Centurion’s house, a departure from the original request. The important element is the reason for this change of plan: the Centurion has his friends speak his words, “I am not worthy that you enter my house.”

One might suggest that the Centurion was simply showing respect for what many Gentiles knew, that the religious Jew could not enter the house of a non-Jew, for doing that the Jew would become unclean, i.e. unworthy to stand before God. If
this be the Centurion’s reason for not having Jesus enter his house (though Jesus will enter the house), it has little to do with a faith that is remarkable.

More likely, however, the Centurion is expressing to Jesus, through words the Centurion thinks must be mediated, a humility which exalts the person of Jesus to a very high degree. One sees here something of the reaction of Simon to the miracle of the catch of fish (Luke 5): Peter asks that Jesus depart from him, and the reason given is Peter’s sinfulness. The Centurion does not cite his sinfulness. The suggestion is that the distance between Jesus and himself is based on something other than sinfulness, something which is unexpressed, yet not unintelligible to the Christian reader. And it is such a distance that the Centurion cannot present himself personally to Jesus. No one else in Israel has related himself to Jesus in this way.

If we were to propose what helps the Centurion to this form of relationship with Jesus, we might fix quickly on the background of a military man. A centurion would be accustomed to not entering easily into the presence of a superior officer unless called for, or for other serious reasons; the distinctions of rank are regularly preserved. That a centurion would enter the presence of what is the Jewish equivalent of lord - this would be most unlikely; the lower ranks know their place. Ancient history witnesses so often to the inaccessability of supreme commanders and lords; Jesus is one of these, and the Centurion knows his place.

B. This first reflexion fits with the next words of the Centurion and their revelation. Again, against the backdrop of military life, the Centurion recognizes the relationships of command and execution, of orders and obedience. His application of the military image to Jesus, the one who commands sickness and receives instant obedience from sickness, reveals a knowledge which others perhaps had not reached. The commanding word from Jesus must be met with obedience; there is no other option when sickness is faced with Jesus’ word. Dominance, that nature must leave unchallenged – this is the perception of the Centurion about Jesus.

Another element, however, is added when one reads the Lucan version of this discussion. Luke has the Centurion speak the word (not in Luke’s source Mark) which means “put under authority” in reference to himself and, implicitly, to Jesus. By explicitating the relationship contained in this word, the Centurion is stressing not only Jesus’ unchallenged superiority over all sickness, but also Jesus’ dependence on a higher authority. In putting forward this relationship, the Centurion spells out,
I have not found such faith in Israel

according to his own limited perception of things, what is most clearly for the Christian the relationship of Jesus to the Father.

Thus, perhaps better than anyone else, the words of the Centurion link Jesus to his Font of power (and wisdom and holiness as well). Jesus is master of sickness, which obeys him instantaneously, but Jesus is also servant of a greater authority, whose existence is implied here. Jesus, then, follows orders, unchallengeable orders. The statement of the Centurion, then, reveals an awareness of a higher Authority, (for the Christian the existence of the Father), and of His dominance over Jesus, who instantly obeys his Superior.

The Centurion is limited in his knowledge of Jesus, and in his analysis of Jesus. But Jesus knows that the words of the Centurion respond to the deepest reality of Jesus and his mission. From Jesus’ point of view, the Centurion’s words, unlike anything expressed so far in Israel, suggest a some kind of perception of just what constitutes his mission. Jesus is to cure, because he is commanded by Another to cure. No one in Israel had expressed Jesus’ relationship to the Father with the clarity of the Centurion.

One hesitates to think that the Centurion in some way was confessing Jesus to be Messiah of Israel (though it is far from impossible that the Centurion, so much a friend of Jews, knew of Israel’s hopes and promises in this matter). But the elements which might lead to this confession are present: Jesus as one who dominates all other powers, in perfect obedience to the command of Another. What one must add here are two further points.

C. First, all the power expended by Jesus and known about by the Centurion is power to give life. This giving of life was the prominent image by which the Messiah and the Messianic times were known. John made a whole Gospel out of this image. Cornelius was given the “repentance that leads to life”, which is not the repentance of John the Baptist, but the repentance of Jesus, involved as it was with the reception of the Spirit of life. In a sense, that is without realizing fully what he was saying, the Centurion’s faith is a faith which recognizes the essential mission of Jesus, that of Messiah of Israel.

Secondly, it is a truism now among scholars that Luke’s chapters 7, 8 and 9 are meant to lead up to the question Jesus puts to his followers, “Who do you say I am?” Much of these chapters is meant to lead the reader to a proper answer to that
question. It would not be surprising, then, that Luke would begin this christological pursuit with the perception about Jesus’ identity suggested in the Centurion’s faith, a perception not so clearly, if ever, expressed by earlier faiths.

Conclusion

I have noted two elements of Luke’s Centurion story which express the Centurion’s faith. His refusal to put himself in Jesus’ presence is noteworthy; no one in the Chapters 4, 5 and 6 reacts to Jesus in this way. (Though Peter’s initial response was to ask Jesus to depart from him, he very quickly follows Jesus.) Added to this is a perception, not only of Jesus’ total dominance over all know powers, with total obedience owed him by them, but also of a dependence on Authority superior to Jesus, who, in his turn, acts in total and immediate obedience to that Authority.

That Jesus’ majesty and authority are instruments for life over all powers that destroy it - this makes the reader see Jesus more clearly than before to be Lord. That Jesus himself acts as he does out of obedience to a still higher Authority - this is a suggestion of Messiah which will become ever clearer, till it becomes the title after which Christians are named. No one in Israel had yet given Jesus an identity such as we find contained in the Centurion’s actions and words. It is not a question, then, of a greater quantity of faith, as of a greater quality of faith that we have reached by Chapter 7 of Luke’s Gospel. It is this faith which must still be sharpened, made more perfect, in order to have faith express adequately who is this Jesus Christians follow.