



# Negotiating Difference: Theology and Ethnicity in the Acts of the Apostles

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Race and ethnicity are powerful forces. Racial and ethnic notions have forged communities and torn neighbors asunder. Racial and ethnic identities have helped people face the world's challenges with solidarity. Racial and ethnic prejudice has precipitated both mere dislike and violent warfare. Race and ethnicity are inevitable features of human life whenever and wherever we gather to form communities of "fictive kinship."<sup>1</sup> Whether for good or ill, race and ethnicity are inescapable.

We have, however, tended to neglect or otherwise marginalize the presence, function, and importance of ethnic difference in the biblical witness. Though motivated by the hope that the gospel might bring to pass a world in which racial and ethnic animus are a remnant of the distant past, such neglect has left this central feature of human life underexplored. Moreover, theological insight into ethnic difference has proved lacking.

The Acts of the Apostles is a natural home for exegetes hoping to make sense

<sup>1</sup>"Fictive kinship" is a phrase used to define ethnic identity by Jonathan Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1997).

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of the rich ethnic diversity of God's people. At root, Acts narrates the intrusion of the gospel into the myriad populations that dotted the landscape around the Mediterranean in antiquity. Propelled by persecution and the Spirit's guidance, these first followers of Jesus carry the gospel message to the very ends of the earth. A number of cultural boundaries are crossed in Acts, but at no point does Luke narrate the cessation of ethnic difference. Instead, the text invites us to enter a world in which ethnic difference and faithful unity coexist.

#### WHAT ROLE DID RACE AND ETHNICITY PLAY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY?

In both our churches and biblical scholarship, the description and reconstruction of the earliest days of the Christian church as a movement that strived for the end of racial and ethnic differences is widespread. Recently, Denise Kimber Buell concluded,

Most historical reconstructions published in the last twenty years depict earliest Christianity as an inclusive movement that rejected ethnic or racial specificity as a condition of religious identity. "Christianity swept racial distinctions aside," proclaims Frank Snowden, Jr., a classicist whose influential scholarship has helped to reframe the way we think about race in antiquity. Similarly, Anthony Smith, writing for anthropologists as well as historians, states that earliest Christianity "helped to...transcend existing ethnic divisions." And the feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts that "class, ethnicity, and gender are...specifically singled out as the divisions overcome by redemption in Christ." These are only three examples, ranging across three disciplines, but they are typical in making the rejection of the relevance of race or ethnicity a defining feature of earliest Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

These depictions emerge from a clearly positive desire to see the end of the ethnic and racial strife that pervades our world and our shared histories. However, by denying the continued importance of racial and ethnic differences among the earliest Christians, such reconstructions advocate an inaccurate portrayal with significant impact today. In our hope to make racism a relic of the past, we may strive too quickly and move too easily into a mode of forgetfulness or denial. By denying the reality of difference, we may end up only exacerbating the problem of prejudice.

Especially problematic has been the tendency for scholars and pastors alike to draw a fundamental binary between a nationalistic, ethnocentric Judaism on the one hand and a universal, ethnic-free Christianity on the other.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Christianity becomes an open association of all peoples wherein their differences are no longer of importance, in stark contrast to a purported Judaism with rigid lines of demarcation. Though such exegetical decisions may seem innocuous at first, they

<sup>2</sup>Denise Kimber Buell, "Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition," *Harvard Theological Review* 94 (2001) 453. See also Buell, *Why This New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup>See Denise Kimber Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge, "The Politics of Interpretation: The Rhetoric of Race and Ethnicity in Paul," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004) 235–251.

have misshaped our theological and historical imagination. Both Christianity and Judaism in antiquity traded on the cultural leverage that ethnic discourse provides. Moreover, both recognized that the negotiation of our ethnic differences is an irreplaceable component of our social fabric.

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If we read the New Testament with an eye towards ethnic discourse and pay attention to the importance of ethnic differences in antiquity and today, we will discover a deeply theological and sophisticated engagement with human differences. The theological question of inclusion and exclusion is central to much of the New Testament. How can the many peoples of the world together worship the one God of Israel? What does it mean that the story of God's interaction with God's chosen people extends to the rest of the world? To answer these important questions, the author of Luke-Acts turns to ethnic discourse, to the consideration of human differences not as obstacles to unity to be transcended but theologically vibrant sites for God's actions in the world.

At core, the author of Luke-Acts views our differences as a gift from God to be treasured, not a difficulty to be overcome. Ethnic and racial differences are not the problem. Prejudice and racism inject our differences with the sinful notion that our difference leads to superiority and inferiority or the distorted belief that our differences are merely cultural cues for determining who is in and who is out, rather than emblems of God's gift of diversity.

#### WHAT ROLE DO RACE AND ETHNICITY PLAY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES?

Luke cannot help but think of ethnicity when composing Acts. After all, the travel itinerary of Acts' main protagonists covers a broad swath of the ancient world. As Acts 1:8 indicates, these earliest proclaimers of the gospel move from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and finally to the very edges of the world. From its very first chapter, therefore, Acts narrates the crossing of ethnic and cultural boundaries. Acts guides us through some of the great cities of antiquity, finally finding Paul preaching unencumbered at the urban seat of Roman power. The negotiation of ethnic boundaries is part of the very narrative fabric of Acts.

Examples of these negotiations abound. I will focus on Acts 16 in the next section; however, I would like to highlight just a few other elements of the narrative of Acts as a means of introduction.

The extended scene of the promised outpouring of the Spirit in Pentecost is a powerful story. Jesus promises his disciples to send a gift to them both at the con-

clusion of Luke's Gospel (Luke 24:49) as well as the opening verses in Acts (1:8). That promise comes to fulfillment in Acts 2 right as the city of Jerusalem is teeming with visitors from around the world. Tongues of fire descend upon the gathered faithful as the Holy Spirit grants the power to speak in other languages. Such a miracle baffles the Jews gathered for the festival from every corner of the Roman Empire. In 2:5–11, Acts outlines the ethnic identities of all these peoples in detail. Scholars refer to this catena as the "Table of Nations." Whether Luke is here imitating some other forms of ancient literature is unclear though entirely possible. What may be clearer, though, is the nature of the scene he paints.

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Despite their sharing of a faith that draws them from great distances, these gathered masses are not homogenous; they are not all entirely alike. It is this scene of ethnic and linguistic diversity in which the Holy Spirit makes a grand appearance. Each person hears the gospel proclaimed in her own language. The Holy Spirit does not speak with *one* language but with all the languages of the human tableau. If you have had any experience with foreign languages, the enormity of this feat is even starker.

Remember that languages do not correlate exactly. That is, you cannot speak a new language by looking up individual words in a dictionary and translating them accordingly. One has to learn the language at a deeper, syntactical level. Moreover, language and culture are inextricably tied together. So, the Holy Spirit's translation of the gospel must cross not just linguistic boundaries but cultural ones as well. In this scene, the differences among us are not made void or ended. The Holy Spirit does not force all those gathered in Jerusalem to hear the gospel in a universal heavenly language. Instead, the Holy Spirit accommodates and lives into the multiplicity of human language and culture as a direct expression of the gospel's wide reach over all the peoples of the world.

To be sure, the story of Babel lies in the background here (Gen 11:1–9). That story sought to comprehend how human cultural and linguistic diversity came about. Here, Luke pursues a similar though not identical thought. How can the good news of Jesus be proclaimed in a world rife with ethnic and linguistic diversity? How can the gospel find expression in other tongues and cultures? What will bind these believers together? Pentecost suggests that this sharing occurs in the very midst of ethnic diversity with the Spirit's intervention as a binding agent. The Spirit permits all to hear the gospel in their own vernacular and in their own cultural contexts without requiring our differences to be brought to an end. The Parthians and Medes, Cretans and Arabs that filled Jerusalem that fateful Pentecost day did not leave their ethnic identities behind in order to follow the Mes-

siah. Instead, the Spirit spoke in the multiplicity of human languages to draw all near to God.

The theological problems and opportunities afforded by the multiplicity of peoples populating the world emerge powerfully in a number of critical narrative moments in Acts, inviting even further investigation of the early church's negotiation of ethnic boundaries and the theological import of such moves.

The encounter of Peter and Cornelius (chap. 10) begins to erode the sharp rituals and mores that kept Jew and Greek from breaking bread together and thus embracing full fellowship. Peter's acceptance of Gentile believers as sisters and brothers in faith lags behind the powerful moving of the Spirit. The conclusions of the apostolic council in Acts 15 further engage in ethnic discourse by paving a theological path by which both Jew and Gentile could draw near to God. In neither case does difference come to an end. Instead, God provides a way to live into these differences in a faithful way.

Earlier in the narrative (8:26–40), Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch signaled the expansive ambitions of God and God's church.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the powerful, looming shadow of Rome also precipitates a number of questions about identity, especially when so many of the peoples depicted in Acts are colonial subjects of a hegemonic empire. The negotiation of their ethnic identity is complicated by the hegemony of Rome's imperial might.

The kind of analysis of ethnic discourse I propose could be conducted with a number of important passages in Acts. In this essay, however, I would like to turn our attention to an important but often neglected chapter. In Acts 16, rich stories, the crossing of cultural boundaries, and profound ethnic negotiations intersect.

#### NEGOTIATING JEWISHNESS AND ROMANNESS: ACTS 16 AS A TEST CASE

Acts 16 narrates the aftermath of the consequential conclusions of the Jerusalem council in chap. 15.<sup>5</sup> Faced with complex questions about the composition of God's people and Gentiles receiving the good news, the leaders of the early days of the Jesus movement reach a consensus. Gentiles need not embrace fully the dictates of Jewish religiosity—especially circumcision and eating practices—though they ought to abide by certain cultural regulations dealing with pagan religious practices (15:28–29). Acts 15 thus narrates a critical turn in the narrative of Acts that had been brewing since much earlier. That the Gentiles would be welcome amid the followers of Jesus was augured at least as early as the prophetic songs of the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel. In Acts, the ambiguously identified Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40) and the conversion of the centurion Cornelius and his household (chap. 10) signaled an openness to Gentiles that would only receive offi-

<sup>4</sup>See Clarice Martin, "A Chamberlain's Journey and the Challenges of Interpretation for Liberation," *Semeia* 47 (1989) 105–135.

<sup>5</sup>For a fuller treatment of Acts 16, see Eric D. Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations: The Function of Race and Ethnicity in Acts 16* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

cial ecclesial sanction in Acts 15. With the conclusions of the apostolic council, we might safely assume that the question of inclusion had been fully settled, that the dividing line between Jew and Greek had been clarified and transcended. Acts 16 quickly challenges this seemingly clear consensus.

*Negotiating Identities on Timothy's Body (16:1–5)*

The opening verses of Acts 16 are both brief and enigmatic. Much is left unsaid in this rather controversial moment of Pauline biography in Acts. In v. 1, we are introduced to Timothy, a disciple whose father was Greek and whose mother was Jewish and a “believer.” His reputation is generally sterling, but he faces one significant obstacle to the work Paul hopes to accomplish alongside him. “The Jews who were in those places” (16:3) knew that his father was Greek and thus are suspicious of Timothy’s fealty to Jewish religious and ethnic practices. To preempt this concern, Paul has Timothy circumcised. Lest we think that this circumcision violates the conclusions of the apostolic council, v. 4 recounts that Paul and Timothy successfully communicate its decision.

This brief narration leaves many gaps in the story. Why was Timothy not circumcised as a child? Some scholars have theorized that his father might have prohibited it or that local cultural pressures “de-incentivized” it. But Luke provides no clarification. Moreover, what was the ethnic status of Timothy prior to his circumcision? What was his ethnic status following his circumcision? Notice that at no point does Acts attach a single clarifying ethnic term to Timothy. Much scholarship has wondered whether Timothy would have been considered to be a Jew or a Gentile in antiquity.<sup>6</sup> Yet the narrative suggests that this question may miss a wider point. Timothy never receives a clarifying ethnic appellation because his ethnic identity remains irreducibly mixed. He remains—even after his circumcision—the product of a mixed marriage and thus both Jewish and Greek.

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In the end, Timothy embodies an ethnic seam running through the end of Acts, representing the ethnic divide between Jew and Greek with which the church in Acts needed to grapple. Evidence for this conclusion can be found in Timothy’s fleeting appearances in the closing chapter of Acts. Paul’s role in the circumcision of Timothy never emerges again even when he is accused of teaching Jews to forsake their ancestral ways (e.g., 21:21). But Timothy’s presence is noted four times in the final chapters of Acts (17:14; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4). In none of these instances does Timothy play a prominent role in Luke’s storytelling; he is only one among

<sup>6</sup>See for example Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 363–377.

Paul's entourage, but his presence is powerfully symbolic. In these lists, Timothy is not a stranger, an alien, or an outsider whose presence requires justification. As I have argued elsewhere, "He is no longer under the critical gaze of those who would question his fractured ethnic identity. Instead, he is wholly a part of a movement that does not erase one's ethnic origins but finds ways to embrace these differences. . . . He shows that ethnic incertitude is no obstacle to the gospel and that ethnic purity is not requisite for membership in the multiethnic people of God."<sup>7</sup>

*A Roman Citizen? (16:16–40)*

Ethnic controversies continue later in Acts 16 with the arrival of Paul and his retinue in Philippi. Paul has already discovered a place of prayer populated by faithful women on the outskirts of the city and found success in proclaiming the gospel to Lydia and her household. On his way to the place of prayer, Paul would regularly encounter a mantic girl whose prophetic abilities were exploited by her master for economic gain. Driven to the edge of impatience, Paul reacts apparently without too much forethought. He ejects the spirit and precipitates the impending tumult.

The business syndicate brings Paul and Silas before the local authorities accusing them, not of ruining their enterprise,<sup>8</sup> but of destabilizing the fragile social, cultural, and political fabric of this Roman colony. They posit a stark contrast. These "Jews" are asking us to do something that we "Romans" ought not do. The ethnocentric accusation is unmistakable, as Richard Pervo recently concluded: "The owners were shrewd enough to mask their avarice with a potent brew concocted from the ultimate resort of the scoundrel, a dose of old-time religion, and a garnish of racism."<sup>9</sup>

The accusations are so effective that Paul and Silas end up at the receiving end of a vicious physical attack and are imprisoned. A miraculous earthquake and the conversion of a guard fill the long narrative night. The next day brings seeming liberation. For unknown reasons, the local authorities decide to release Paul and Silas, but Paul has been affronted by the previous day's events, and he refuses to leave quietly. He makes a bold declaration that I think has been poorly translated recently.

Most modern translations record Paul's claim of Roman *citizenship* in 16:37–38.<sup>10</sup> However, the same Greek term is used in these verses as in the accusation leveled against Paul and Silas earlier in v. 21. The addition of a claim to citizenship is not entirely misplaced. The rights of citizenship are certainly in view here. But pointing in these verses solely to a claim to Roman *citizenship* misses a key narrative theme. Paul's claim to be "Roman" is a direct refutation of the scurri-

<sup>7</sup>Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations*, 117.

<sup>8</sup>Compare the complaints of Demetrius, the Ephesian artisan of statues of Artemis, in 19:25–27. There the economic loss that Paul's preaching would cause is at the forefront.

<sup>9</sup>Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 406.

<sup>10</sup>See e.g. RSV, NRSV, NIV, and TNIV. In contrast, see KJV, NKJV, ASV, and NASB.

lous accusation brought against him and Silas. The claim is not solely juridical or legal but ethnic in nature. Paul's assertion is a bold claim that he and Silas are not contraveners of the local culture but truly at home in these Roman environs. In claiming to be Roman, they do not therefore challenge the accusation of v. 20. They indeed are "Jews" but that ethnic identity does not naturally lead to the conclusion reached by the sinister business syndicate.

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***Paul and Silas are both Jewish and Roman. These two identities are not at odds, and they along with other believers do not have to sacrifice their ethnic and cultural identities in order to be faithful followers of Jesus.***

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Scholars have frequently seen in this story a glimpse into Pauline biography. This may be the case, but such a focus may miss the narrative and theological implications of Paul's claim. Paul is not merely claiming political rights due to a citizen but undercutting wholly the baseless accusation lobbed their way. Paul and Silas are not a threat to this Roman colony, for they indeed are Romans! In this way, Luke narrates how the early church negotiated a space in the midst of the teeming ethnic diversity of the ancient world. Paul and Silas are both Jewish and Roman. These two identities are not at odds, and they along with other believers do not have to sacrifice their ethnic and cultural identities in order to be faithful followers of Jesus.

#### WHAT ROLE SHOULD RACE AND ETHNICITY PLAY IN OUR READING OF SCRIPTURE?

Ultimately, as Cornell West noted in the title of one of his books, "race matters."<sup>11</sup> That race and ethnicity matter in the study of Scripture is made evident by a number of recent efforts to understand how these admittedly difficult notions helped shaped biblical texts.<sup>12</sup> Fundamental to how we view ourselves individually is how we group those who are like us and those who differ from us. Such reflections were impossible to avoid in the narration of the earliest days of the communities that embraced the gospel.

In light of my reading of Acts, I advocate four basic principles that might guide our theological reflection around these important but difficult issues:

1. race and ethnicity are unavoidable;

<sup>11</sup>Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, Mark G. Brett, ed., *Ethnicity and the Bible* (New York: Brill, 1996); Buell and Hodge, "The Politics of Interpretation," 235–251; Charles H. Cosgrove, "Did Paul Value Ethnicity?" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (2006) 268–290; and Dennis C. Duling, "Ethnicity, Ethnocentrism, and the Matthean *Ethos*," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005) 125–143. For two recent theological explorations of race and ethnicity, see J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). For a fuller bibliography, see Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations*, 195–199.

2. race and ethnicity are indispensable;
3. race and ethnicity are a gift from God;
4. race and ethnicity shape profoundly our reading of Scripture.

In narrative form, Acts forwards a powerful theological argument that faithful unity and ethnic diversity are neither at odds nor mutually exclusive. Luke cannot fathom a world in which our differences are transcended or effaced but narrates a church in which ethnic differences are taken seriously but not allowed to divide us between the inferior and the superior. The cultural contexts have certainly shifted in the intervening centuries, but analogous pressures today demand a robust theological response. What new stories might we craft as we consider the struggles of the church today to make sense of ethnic difference in light of the early days of the church? ⊕

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