



Hearing Peter's Speech in Acts 3: Meaning and Truth in Interpretation

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It is remarkable how significantly interpretation can be shaped by the sorts of questions asked of the Bible. Consider, for example, the question: What does Peter's speech in Acts 3 mean? For ordinary Bible readers, the question may seem perfectly appropriate. The more sophisticated might insist that the first question should be, "What *did* the speech mean?" It was, after all, written to people of a different time and circumstance—people who spoke a "foreign" language. Students of beginning Greek soon sense the distance between themselves and the original audience. A still more sophisticated Bible reader might insist that the question be more precise: What does the Bible mean to a particular person or audience? The speech might mean one thing to Peter's audience, something different to Luke's readers, and something else entirely to a modern-day audience. Even "modern-day audience" may be too general, since there are many. Perhaps we can ask only, "What does this passage mean to you?"—a rather different question from, "What does this passage mean?" Who speaks for a "general" audience—and what would such an audience look like? What would be their interests? In what ways would they be addressed by the speech?

The academic community has dealt with such questions by limiting them. Interpreters ask what a passage means to an imagined audience, usually the historical audience for whom Luke wrote (an audience about which we know little and that must thus be "imagined"). We seem to have agreed to speak and write for a contemporary audience that will discuss only how others are addressed by the Scriptures. Public conversation keeps the Bible at a distance, providing a safety

zone for personal opinion about what the material "means to me" and making it difficult to imagine how we could speak about what it "means to us."

What then of the question, "Is it true?" Such a question cannot be addressed to Peter or to Luke or even to the church that preserved Luke and Acts in its canonical collection, since none of these can answer. The question can only be addressed to one another, and it makes sense only if it is asked about our interpretations of what the speech means. What public claims do we wish to make in our interpretations of the speech, and what would qualify them as "true"?

Most interpreters, if pressed, would probably feel most comfortable dealing with "truth" questions by restricting them to historical matters, i.e., to matters of "fact." Discussions about whether or not Peter could have given such a speech and, if so, how it would have been preserved and translated, deal with one small dimension of the truth question. "Did it really happen?" is a legitimate question, though a limited one. Those who ask such questions must be prepared to operate within the rules laid down for historical argument, rules of evidence which

spell out how a convincing argument can be made about a proposition.

Dealing with such matters of “historical fact” does little to assist interpreters in determining what a passage means, however. For as students of history recognize, history is rhetorical in nature: history is written to make arguments. “Facts” are important within a framework that makes them significant—that renders them meaningful. Luke tells the story of the early Jesus movement because he intends to convince an audience of something—and to change and shape that audience in view of the story he tells. The events reported mean something; they set out to convince readers “of the certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4).

Most students of Acts are well aware of such matters and are willing to make arguments about the literary form and the rhetoric of the work. Not any interpretation of Luke and Acts can be sustained. We know something about conventions in the ancient world and in our own that make conversation possible. There are good reasons to believe one thing or another about the function of the speeches in Acts, knowing as we do their place in the narrative and conventions among ancient historiographers. We can offer arguments about how scriptural exposition in the speeches is to be understood—arguments that we expect to be convincing—in view of the exegetical rules and the ethos of the Jewish community in the hellenistic age. While scholars might hesitate to claim that their interpretations are “true,” they do expect others to be persuaded.

While historical and literary matters require attention, the real question is how we will hear the claims made in the two-volume work. Luke-Acts makes public claims about God and Jesus that it expects readers to find convincing, claims that promise to enrich and sustain life. The narrative seeks to make a case that “what you have been taught” is reliable—that it is true. As readers, we are challenged to determine if we are included in the “you” who will find the narrative argument convincing. Historical study and literary analysis can assist in the process of becoming a sensitive audience. But until we have asked what the narrative means to “us” in our historical particularity and have heard its claims, we have not finished the task of interpretation.

What follows is an argument about Peter’s speech in Acts 3:11-26. It seeks not

to determine what the speech meant for its narrative audience in Jerusalem or for Luke’s first-century readers, though we may ask about such matters, but what the speech means for us—and how we may understand its claim to be true.

I. INTERPRETING ACTS 3: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

To understand Peter’s speech is to read it first within its setting in Acts. The speech, the second major address in Acts, is set in the temple precincts. It follows a dramatic healing of a lame man and is addressed to the astonished crowd that has gathered at Solomon’s gate (“the whole people,” whom Peter addresses as “Israelites” [3:12]). In simplest terms, the speech seeks to explain to the crowd what the healing means. It is not a sign of Peter’s own power or piety but a sign of what is possible through “faith in this name” (3:16, a reference back to Peter’s previous speech, in which he quotes the passage from Joel: “whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [Acts 2:21]). The speech calls the crowd to respond (“Repent, therefore, and turn...” [3:19]) and it makes promises. God intends that sins be forgiven and that people be turned from their wicked ways (3:19-20, 26). Unlike the previous account of a speech, this one reports no

response from the crowd but only from the religious authorities, who immediately have Peter and John arrested (Acts 4:1ff.).

The speech offers an interpretation of the healing by tying the event to an account of what God has accomplished in Christ, then spelling out the implications. A major feature of the speech is the interpretation of the Scriptures. Understanding what the speech means requires a sense of that scriptural argument. There is an explicit citation of Deut 18:19-20, supplemented with words from Lev 23:29. God's promise to Abraham, recounted in v. 25, combines features of Gen 22:18 and 26:4. Verse 13 clearly alludes to Isa 52:13 ("my servant shall be exalted and glorified"); the references to "name" in v. 16 allude to Joel 2:32 ("whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"), already quoted in Peter's speech in Acts 2. Behind Jesus' identification as "seed of Abraham," "servant," and "lord" lies an elaborate tradition of scriptural interpretation for which messianic oracles like 2 Sam 7:10-14 and Psalm 89 are important.¹ Jesus can be identified as the "seed" of Abraham in Genesis because as Messiah he is the "seed" promised David (2 Sam 7:12). In similar manner he may be identified with the mysterious "servant" of Isaiah 52-53, because the king (the coming Messiah-King in particular) is referred to as God's "servant" (Ps 89:50; Zech 6:12). "Lord" is used to speak of the Christ in a passage regarded as a messianic oracle (Ps 110:1; see Acts 2:33-36). Scriptural interpretation is a major feature of the speech and not, as Martin Dibelius argued, a stock feature of sermons in Acts.² It presumes an audience familiar with the Scriptures and with the rules of scriptural argument (according to which verbal correspondence provides the primary means of connecting biblical passages).³

Certainly the most prominent citation is Deuteronomy 18, an oracle in which Moses speaks of a prophet whom God will raise up, to whom God's people are

¹All the speeches in Acts presume a complex history of Old Testament interpretation within the church. See my *Messianic Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) chapter 3, esp. 82-84.

²Martin Dibelius, "The Speeches in Acts and Ancient Historiography," *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Scribners, 1956) 138-185.

³See chapter 2 of my *Messianic Exegesis*.

obliged to listen. The oracle, as we know from Jewish and Samaritan sources, was heard as an eschatological promise before the Christian era and beyond the boundaries of Christian scriptural interpretation. Striking here is the use of the passage to speak about Jesus. Elsewhere Jesus is identified as the Christ from David's line. While the identification of Jesus as "one of the ancient prophets that has arisen" may be a familiar assessment to the crowds who saw and heard Jesus, the disciples (and readers) know that Jesus is "the Christ of God" (Luke 9:18-20).

Understanding the meaning of the identification involves a sense of earlier Christian tradition. One of the developments that occurred in Christian tradition was the transfer of all eschatological titles to Jesus.⁴ We may observe in Luke 4 one of the ways in which confession of Jesus as "Christ" (Anointed) came to incorporate prophetic imagery that had not been part of Jewish messianic tradition. Jesus' citation of Isaiah 61, where the prophet is identified as "anointed" by God's Spirit, provides a means of filling out what it means that Jesus is the crucified and risen "Anointed One": he is "anointed" to preach and heal. The vocation of prophet may be ascribed to him as well.

The point of identifying Jesus as the "prophet like Moses" from Deuteronomy 18 is less

christological than “ecclesiological.” The passage provides a way of understanding what is at stake in the disagreements within the Jewish family about Jesus. The Scriptures identify the battle over the apostolic preaching of Christ as a crisis within Israel’s history. As membership within Israel depended upon allegiance to Moses, so, in the present, membership within the family depends upon heeding the word of the prophet like Moses whom God has raised up. Jesus is that prophet; he is likewise the “seed” promised Abraham in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Crucial here is Jesus’ descent from Abraham and David, as well as his relationship to Moses’ promise of a new prophet. Jesus belongs within the scriptural heritage of Israel. Those Jews who accept the gift offered in this “Christ,” “lord”, and “prophet”—who believe in his name—will be saved. Those who do not will be rooted out of the people (Acts 3:23). According to Peter’s speech, that is the message of the Scriptures.

The speech offers to interpret a critical feature of what begins here and develops through the story in Acts: the preaching of the gospel results in a division within Israel. Many Jews believe (tens of thousands, Acts 21:20); most do not. Only those Jews who have faith in Jesus can lay claim to their heritage. Only they can rightfully identify themselves as “the people,” i.e., Israel, children of Abraham. Those who reject Jesus (like the Sadducees who cannot believe in resurrection) forfeit their rights as Jews. Stephen’s speech builds on this construct, completing the framework within which conflict in the family of Israel is to be understood. While he and his would-be judges are all children of Abraham (“our father,” Acts 7:2), there is now a gulf between them. Those who believe in Jesus are descendants of the prophets whom “your fathers killed” (Acts 7:51-53). Israel’s family has always been one marked by conflict, with the majority usually on the wrong side.

It has been customary to refer to the early speeches in Acts as “missionary

⁴N. Dahl, *The Historical Origins of New Testament Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 27-64.

addresses.” The category is too narrow to capture all that the speeches mean. Peter’s sermon has a critical function not only in chapter 3 but within the whole narrative. Its rhetorical function is aimed not simply at converting a large group of Jews in Jerusalem but at making an argument for the reader of Acts that gathers up the whole story. This speech and Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 are perhaps the critical pieces for understanding an essential aspect of Luke’s thesis about the story of the early “church”: the gathering of the law-observant Jews who believe in Jesus (among whom Paul is included) represents the continuation of Israel. It is the purified remnant. Those who refuse the apostolic testimony thrust their heritage from themselves.

Nothing has been said yet about gentiles. There is no suggestion in these early chapters that gentiles are involved at all. Peter addresses a Jewish audience; Stephen’s troubles are internal to the Jewish community. There is no debate in these chapters about replacing Israel by a gentile religious body. Peter remains determined to keep the law (Acts 10-11). James and the elders in the Jerusalem church never abandon food laws (Acts 11 and 15).⁵ The best they can do for Barnabas, Paul, and the Antioch-sponsored mission to gentiles is to identify those places in the scriptural tradition where provision is made for non-Jews to live among Jews by observing a minimum of dietary laws (Acts 15). The “apostolic decree” imposes on gentiles those purity laws essential to carry on social interaction with Jews within the community of the faithful;

specifically, it permits table fellowship.

What does the speech mean within the context of Acts? It makes a claim about what is occurring (from the perspective of author and reader, about what has already occurred). The speech characterizes the division within Israel regarding Jesus as a decisive purge of God's people, a purge foretold in the Scriptures. As the "prophet like Moses," Jesus is the one chosen by God to speak words by which divisions will be made (cf. Luke 2:34, where Simeon says, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel"). There is no suggestion that God has rejected Israel and replaced the old people with a new one. There is the audacious claim, made from within the family of Israel, that only those Jews who believe in Jesus can claim membership in Israel. The case is argued in the speech largely by appeal to the Scriptures, operating according to the rules of the game within the community of the first century. If we are to understand the argument, there are things we must know about the Scriptures, about speeches and forms of argument in the ancient world, and about the movement of Luke-Acts as a unified composition.

II. PETER'S SPEECH: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US?

The speech makes claims about God and the history of which we are a part, claims that are meaningful and that presume to be heard as true. We can understand what is at stake in Luke's argument. The gospel opens with a litany of God's promises to his people (esp. Luke 1:46-55, 67-79; 2:29-32; 4:17-21). The story recounts the "events that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1). If God keeps

⁵Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 188-191; Juel, *Luke-Acts: The Promise of History* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983) esp. 105-7.

promises—if he kept promises even when things looked darkest, raising Jesus from the dead and sending out apostles to preach repentance and forgiveness—there are reasons to be confident that God will not abandon his people in the future and will overcome hostility with mercy. We are invited to "acknowledge the certainty of what you have been taught" (Luke 1:4).

But what have we been taught? For centuries Christians have learned that a gentile Christian church has taken Israel's place as the people of God. Luke makes no such argument. Peter's sermons do not speak of a new people of God but of a refined Israel. What the story "means" depends upon who hears it, not in the sense that his argument is read differently but that it strikes the hearer differently. It is one thing for a Jew or a Jewish believer in Jesus to hear the story Luke tells. It is another for a non-Jew. One of the tasks of interpretation is to highlight our investment in the story as the "you" for whom it is written—and to acknowledge the difference between ourselves and other audiences.

The story of God's dealing with Israel is meaningful to us as it was to Cornelius the gentile (Acts 10:1-11:18): in Christ, we have been cleansed and invited to sit at table with God's people. For Luke, that does not imply a change in the rules. Cornelius is a gentile who observes the law. The apostolic decree reaffirms the validity of kosher laws for all gentiles who become members of the family of believers (Acts 15, esp. vv. 28-29). When were such rules abandoned? And if the law has been abrogated—something Acts never even hints—what are we to make of the Old Testament, of God's election of Israel, of God's fidelity to promises? What right do

gentiles have to Jewish promises?

These are questions Acts does not pose. The story is largely about the fulfillment of God's promises for Israel and the division within the Jewish community that results from Jesus' ministry. As gentiles, we are invited into that branch of the Jewish family that understands its heritage through the preaching of Jesus the Christ. We are addressed by the story as strangers with no claim to a place at the table. We become part of the "you" for whom Luke writes only by the gracious act of Israel's God through Jesus the Christ.

III. MEANING AND TRUTH

If the story Acts tells is meaningful—meaningful, that is, in a way that determines how we understand ourselves, our place in the world, our relationship to God, and our tasks—and if it claims to be true—true in a public way that makes a potential claim on everyone—certain questions take on an urgency. In our own setting, perhaps one of the most important questions may be formulated in this way: How does a gentile hear the story as meaningful and true?

There is space for only a few suggestions.

1. The meaning of the speech has much to do with scriptural interpretation. Peter claims that Jesus is the "prophet like Moses" from Deut 18, presuming both that his audience understands the eschatological character of the oracle from Deuteronomy and that Jesus' identity as that "prophet" can be convincingly asserted. Understanding the nature of scriptural argumentation in the New Testament is essential for understanding the assertions. Whether or not such arguments are convincing depends upon our own rules of scriptural argument.

2. The meaning of Peter's speech is tied principally to its place in the narra-

tive. The issue in the speech is not Jesus' identity, nor is the speech essentially a "missionary address." In Acts, it functions to provide some framework within which to understand the conflict within the Jewish community over the gospel.⁶ It is the identity of believers in Jesus that is at issue—more specifically, it is their identity with respect to Israel's heritage. The speech asserts that only those Jews who believe in Jesus can claim to be real Jews. The speech does not yet deal with the status of non-Jews who believe Jesus to be the Christ.

3. Acts argues that in Christ and in the mission of his followers, God has kept his promises to Abraham and his offspring, as well as his promises to David. The "fallen tent of David has been raised up" (Acts 15:16-17, quoting Amos 9:11f).⁷ Unbelief within the family, always a mark of Israel's history, remains a reality even after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That the preaching of the death and resurrection of the Messiah causes family division has precedent, and itself only fulfills "what is written." Because the Scriptures foretold the story of the apostolic preaching as well as of the Christ, they can be trusted. Thus God can be trusted as one who has kept his word to his people. And in view of God's fidelity to his word in past and present, there is reason to trust God with the future of his people—"trust" being the form of "certainty" appropriate to faith.

4. Such claims can be meaningful even to non-Jews, since in that "offspring of Abraham" all the families of the earth will be blessed (Acts 3:25). Are the claims true? They are to the degree that Jesus was and is actually a blessing to the nations of the earth. While Peter's speech is not simply a missionary sermon, there are missionary implications. If there is power in the

name of Jesus, it must be spoken. If those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved, that possibility must be made available through new generations of preachers. If Jesus is the blessing God promises, the gospel must be spoken so that people can repent and be forgiven. The “truth” of the speech depends upon an activity it engenders. Its truth must be confirmed in the mission of Jesus’ followers. Luke’s testimony makes sense only if it leads to mission.

5. If we are included in the promises made in Peter’s speech, we must also acknowledge that our relationship to the story is different from that of Jewish believers in Jesus who observe the law. The “truth” of Acts’ assertion about God’s faithfulness cannot be demonstrated in historical terms alone. The absence of law-observant Jews from a gentile Christian church places the claims of Acts in jeopardy. Has God kept his word to Israel? Acts does not anticipate a time when Jewish believers will no longer serve as the theological heart and the foundation of God’s people. That is our own situation, however. It is appropriate that the book of Acts ends without a conclusion. The “truth” of Peter’s speech cannot be determined solely within the confines of the narrative.

Will God remain faithful? Will promises be kept? Luke-Acts does not envision the problem in the way we must, though it does end with a sense that the future lies with gentiles. Israel’s fate, however, is still uncertain. That Jesus is the

⁶This is essentially the argument of Jervell’s essay, “The Divided People of God: The Restoration of Israel and Salvation for the Gentiles,” in his *Luke and the People of God*, 41-74.

⁷Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 51-52; Nils A. Dahl, “A People for His Name,” *New Testament Studies* 4 (1957-58) 319-327; Juel, *Luke-Acts*, 103-112.

promised Christ and the prophet like Moses may be asserted. That Jesus is the seed promised to Abraham in whom all the nations will be blessed may be argued from our own history. That this “seed of Abraham” is a blessing first to Israel remains in question. At least in regard to this matter—central to the narrative argument Luke makes—we may say that the verdict is not yet in. That it is true cannot be determined by a study of the past. Faith lives by God’s promise. While there may be good reasons to believe in the certainty of what we have been taught, final confirmation of the “truth” of Peter’s speech involves a future of Israel beyond that which Luke envisioned—and thus awaits eschatological confirmation. Here we wait with Peter’s audience for the time when God “may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:20-21).