



Interpretation of Luke-Acts and Implications for Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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At first glance Luke-Acts hinders Jewish-Christian dialogue. The passion narrative places the responsibility for Jesus' death heavily on the Jewish leaders and people (Luke 22:47-23:35), and the author has Peter charge that his fellow Jews killed Jesus (Acts 3:14-15; 4:27). Stephen accuses them of continual disobedience to God and of killing Jesus (Acts 7:51-53), and this accusation is verified by a pattern of opposition to Peter and the early Jerusalem community (Acts 3-12) and to Paul in the cities he visits (Acts 13-20); it climaxes with the rejection of his teaching by the Roman Jewish community (Acts 28:17-28). Jerusalem and its leaders are rebuked and threatened for rejecting the prophets and Jesus (Luke 11:47-51; 13:33-35; 19:41-43; 21:5-6, 20-24; 23:27-31); Jesus is rejected by his townspeople at Nazareth (4:16-30); and the Pharisees and others oppose Jesus frequently (Luke 5:17-6:11).

Though Luke-Acts is filled with prophetic warning and polemical denunciation of various Jews, yet more than any other book in the New Testament it affirms Israel as God's people and as the recipient of the divine promises which have been fulfilled in Jesus. The author of Luke-Acts authenticates all the claims he makes for Jesus through citations and allusions to Scripture and to the story of Israel which it contains. His main characters respect Jewish laws and customs (1:6; 2:22-24), and even Paul is tamed so that he observes the law (16:1-3; 21:20-26; 22:3; 25:8-10; 26:4-8). The author defends Paul against charges that he encourages non-observance of the law (24:11-21; 28:17-22) and creates a compromise between Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus (Acts 15) so they can share the same table. He envisions the followers of Jesus forming a unified community of Jews and gentiles who have

repented of their sins and accepted salvation through Jesus Christ (Luke 2:29-32; 3:4-6; Acts 4:12; 28:28). Yet history did not turn out as the author of Luke-Acts wished.

The complex narrative of Luke-Acts recounts frequent conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish leaders and between his followers and various Jewish communities. The rejection of Jesus and the apostles produces apologetic defenses designed to explain that rejection. Polemical challenges against Jews and gentiles who fail to repent and to accept Jesus vindicate Jesus' work and teaching. This strife, which reflects first-century conflict between Jews and Christians, qualifies Luke-Acts' affirmation of Israel as God's people and renders the author's attitude toward Jews ambiguous and subject to opposite interpretations. Some hold that the Jews are rejected by the author from the beginning and that they are replaced by the Christians. Another more common interpretation understands Luke-Acts as salvation history in which God's favor

moves from Israel to the mostly gentile church. In this scheme the Jews are finally rejected completely by God in response to their rejection of Jesus. An increasing number of contemporary commentators suggest that Luke-Acts reflects disappointment that most Jews have rejected Jesus, but keeps alive the missionary appeal to Israel and the hope that some Jews will continue to accept Jesus. Still others argue that the author is himself a Jew engaged in inner Jewish debates and so not anti-Jewish at all.

No consensus has emerged from this varied discussion, but a few comments may bring some clarity and order to the situation. Though the commentators advocating the extremes, either that Luke-Acts is virulently anti-Jewish or that the author is a Jew writing from within Judaism, make their cases with learning and sophistication, the intrinsic complexity and ambiguity of the text make it very probable that the author of Luke-Acts is trying to balance and integrate contradictory tendencies in early Christianity. The salvation history scheme, according to which Israel's history leads to the initiation and legitimation of the mostly gentile church in Acts, is attractive for Christians seeking to understand and defend their special place in God's providential activity and world history. However, this neat scheme corrupts the Old Testament and Lukan views of God as unconditionally faithful and forgiving toward Israel in favor of a pro-Christian God separated from the Old Testament and its people. In addition, the sharp distinction between Judaism and Christianity implied by salvation history is an anachronism from the centuries after Luke-Acts and cannot be imposed on the fluid and varied relationships between Jews and believers in Jesus during the first century.

The author of Luke-Acts has no grand theological or historical scheme; like the preachers and teachers of today, he interprets God's work in the concrete circumstances of his time and situation. The words and deeds of Jesus and his followers reflect the author's understanding of God and his community's situation in the late first century. He has ambitiously sought to assimilate the whole of the Jewish tradition and the entire gentile world into a universal, saved community. His project is filled with tension, conflict, and mystery, and its outcome is vague because still unrealized. Nineteen hundred years later, Christians are still trying to understand and actualize Luke's vision with the help of the New Testament, Christian tradition, and our communal experience.

I. THE JEWS IN LUKE-ACTS

The author of Luke-Acts is most probably a gentile interested in explaining how God's forgiveness of sin and promise of salvation affect both Jew and gentile. In his view, Jesus fulfills the promises made to Israel that it would be saved. In addition Scripture promises that gentiles will be included in Israel and its hope. Thus God and Israel are constants in his understanding of divine purpose and activity. However, the interpretation of who belongs to Israel through faith and obedience changes. In telling the story of God, Israel, Jesus, and the gentiles, the author is not interested in Jews as a separate religion but only in Jews as they relate to what his community believes and to how it lives. Thus the biblical terms "Israel" and "people" and the common Greek and Latin term "Jews" do not have consistent, technical, and universal meanings, especially meanings which would designate Jews pejoratively as outsiders. Rather meanings change according to context and interpretation of events. These terms can refer to a theologically definable and significant people chosen by God (Luke 1:68, 77; Acts 1:6; 28:20) or to Jews as an

ethnic group in contrast to Greeks who are not Jews (Acts 19:10; 20:21). These terms also refer to parts of the Jewish people, either Jews of a specific locality (Acts 14-19; 21:11) or those belonging to some time in the past (Luke 4:25; Acts 7:17). The Jews can also be the community leaders and those who follow them (Acts 12:3). Jews can be either believers in Jesus (Acts 13:43; 14:1) or well-disposed to Jesus and his followers (Luke 7:29) or neutral (Acts 13:31, 45) or hostile (Acts 14:2), as circumstances dictate. The author of Luke-Acts does not deal with rigid categories of people saved or lost, but with concrete groups and individuals enmeshed in both the sinful world and God's steady work in history. Israel and "the Way" overlap and interweave in the tapestry of divine purpose and activity.

How then do Jews and gentiles relate to one another and to Jesus in Luke-Acts? How does the author understand the relationship of Jews in the late first century to God, Jesus, and the church? Contrary to many commentators, gentiles do not replace rejected Jews in God's plan. Rather, as Luke-Acts unfolds, gentiles are included within Israel, God's chosen people. Jesus begins God's work by appealing to his own people, Israel in Galilee and then Judaea. Gradually in Acts the message of repentance and salvation which was brought to Israel by Jesus (Acts 3:19-26; 4:12; 5:31) is transmitted to gentiles. The missions to the Jews and gentiles remain active through the end of Acts. Luke's Paul goes first to the synagogue of each city where he works and convinces some Jews to follow Jesus (Acts 13:16-43; 14:1-7). Then he is expelled and turns to the gentiles in the city and includes them in his community of believers in Jesus. This process of forming a community of repentant Jews and gentiles continues during Paul's imprisonment in Rome where he appeals to the Jewish community, with mixed results, and then to "all who came to him" (Acts 28:30), presumably both Jew and gentile. In Acts, gentiles become notably major parts of the church of believers in Jesus, in contrast to the all-Jewish followers of Jesus in the gospel. But this enlargement of Israel is amply foreshadowed in prophecy and story (Luke 2:32; 3:6; Acts 10-11). In Luke-Acts the gentiles are added with nothing lost.

What then of the author's scorching attacks on Jewish rejection of Jesus in the gospel narrative and the sermons in Acts? What of the stress on official opposition to Jesus and his followers from the Pharisees, scribes, and lawyers, the chief priests

and council in Jerusalem, and synagogue authorities throughout the Roman empire? Some have claimed that Luke is a Jew arguing within the fold with his fellow Jews. However, the tone and details of Luke-Acts suggest that the author is a gentile believer in Jesus who is very familiar with the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Bible). And the Bible is the key to his critique of Jews who reject Jesus. Both to legitimate Jesus and the early Christians and to attack Jews who reject Jesus, the author of Luke-Acts quotes prophecy (Acts 2:16; 3:18, 21-25; 7:37-48) and cites the continual rejection of the prophets (Luke 4:24, 27; 6:23; 11:47-51; 13:33-34; Acts 7:52). The author's critique is prophetic, that is, it affirms the importance and worth of Israel while rebuking its misdeeds and threatening it with disaster. Though the author is not himself an ethnic Jew, he speaks as an insider because he sees himself as part of Israel through his acceptance of Jesus. Certainly the majority of Jews then and now reject this claim, but from the author's own point of view, he is part of Israel and has Israel's best interests in mind.

That the gentile author of Luke-Acts sees himself as an insider, as a member of Israel,

strikes modern Jews and Christians as odd. Christianity and Judaism have developed strong, distinct identities as separate religions and have been divided by centuries of conflict and persecution. In the late first century, however, most Christian communities included Jews and non-Jews, and the boundaries with the Jewish community were shifting and indistinct. The author of Luke-Acts based his claim to be part of Israel on biblical and theological grounds, not on social or historical reality. According to the teachings of Jesus, God's promises to Israel and his faithfulness throughout history apply to gentiles who repent of their sins and accept salvation through Jesus (Luke 2:32; 24:47; Acts 13:47; 26:20) as well as to Jews. These promises and the life and teachings of Jesus do not operate outside of Israel, nor do they replace the promises and gifts given to Israel. Rather they grow out of Israel's history recounted in the Bible (Luke 24:46-47; Acts 11:18) and embrace the whole world. Jews and non-Jews are one chosen people of God and must only recognize God's will and accept God's forgiveness through Jesus to be saved.

In Luke-Acts, Israel, the people of God, is understood concretely as the historical Israel which now calls and accepts gentiles. As in the biblical narratives, Israel may be divided into sinful and faithful members. The sinful members are confronted by prophetic rebukes, threats, and promises, and the faithful are encouraged by gifts from God and promises of salvation. The gentiles too are called to be part of God's people, but not some new, abstract entity. They are called to join with historical Israel, to accept the promises contained in Scripture and live by the laws of Israel. This is why Luke so often quotes the prophets and so carefully respects and preserves biblical law. Jesus in the gospel and the apostles in Acts stress table fellowship between Jews and outsiders (sinners, gentiles, etc.) and the modification of Jewish practices and laws so that Jews and non-Jews can live together in one community. Though hindsight suggests that the author's community was becoming a separate entity from the majority of the Jewish community, the author's hope was that Israel would repent of its sins and welcome the gentiles, according to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles' interpretations of Scripture, and that gentiles would come to know God through Israel and join the people of God. Thus all people would be saved together by God through Jesus.

Even as he proposed this divine vision of the future, the author of Luke-Acts knew that it was not working out smoothly. Jesus had been opposed by some, ignored by many, and executed. The apostles in Jerusalem had been opposed by the authorities and rejected by many. Paul met with limited success among both Jews and gentiles. Both the imperial authorities and the leaders of the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean rejected Jesus' teaching and the early Christian vision of a united, all-embracing Israel. Some Jews and some gentiles had repented of their sins and turned toward the new vision of reality proposed in Luke-Acts, but the majority remained unconvinced. And so the situation remains today.

II. JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

How can the way of life envisioned in Luke-Acts enhance or hinder Jewish-Christian relations? We cannot escape history, but we are not determined by it. Both Judaism and Christianity have strong, divergent identities supported by centuries of traditional teaching and faithful living. Christians and Jews have been thrown together historically in the west where

Christians have often persecuted Jews. Christians and Jews are necessarily linked theologically in Christian tradition, and Christians have often denied the authenticity and validity of Judaism in order to defend and expand their identity and claims to divine approval and truth. Yet, Jews and Christians share the Hebrew Bible, faith in one God, a respectful view of humans, and common ethical norms. Many types of relationship are possible between the two communities socially, morally, and theologically. But what is possible today?

Nineteen hundred years after the composition of Luke-Acts, the permanence and vitality of Judaism and the fidelity of many Jews to God are plain to see. The author of Luke-Acts affirmed the permanence of God's promises and God's fidelity to Israel in Jesus. But he did not envision Judaism continuing without Jesus. Thus he wrestled with a social and theological crisis caused by the rejection of Jesus by the majority of Jews. At the end of Acts, Paul continues to appeal to his fellow Jews to accept Jesus and to rebuke them prophetically for their resistance to his teaching. The process of contact and confrontation has continued through the centuries, most often without the insiders' sympathy and anguish which characterized Paul and other early Jewish Christians. From that history Christians can learn some lessons.

Most Christians believe, with the author of Luke-Acts, that salvation comes from God through Jesus. However, the world is more varied and complex than the author of Luke-Acts perceived. The Creator God's relationship to the many cultures and peoples includes but transcends the efforts of the apostles and their successors in the Mediterranean and the west. How Jesus' teaching is to reach other peoples effectively remains a mystery. Christian missions often supported cultural imperialism and failed fully to enter foreign ways of thought and life. Conversions were often coerced or pressured by social circumstances. History has shown that active missions to Jews are ineffective and inappropriate. Just as Paul approached his fellow Jews from within Israel and the author of Luke-Acts tried to do the same, so anyone seeking to influence, much less instruct, Jews must fully accept their continuing relationship with God and participate in their well-articu-

lated understanding of God. The continuing Christian tradition of anti-Semitism and historical lack of trust make this presently impossible, except in rare cases.

How shall Jews and Christians relate to one another? Carefully, respectfully, and constructively. Both traditions must subject their beliefs, practices, and communal relationships to prophetic critique. Just as the prophets sought to reform and preserve Israel from within, community members must promote growth and openness to God. God's relationship to Jews, Christians, and all peoples must be mutually and deeply acknowledged. As trust grows, we may serve as prophetic guardians for each other, but not until the relationship between the communities has been healed by repentance and forgiveness. When disputes divide Jewish and Christian communities, apologetic expressions designed to protect each tradition should embrace what is good in others as well as self, just as the author of Luke-Acts sought to embrace all in one people under one God. Disputes should be resolved through attention and fidelity to God's teaching and not be polemics seeking the rejection or destruction of the other. Luke-Acts' vision of a universal, diverse people of God remains as a permanent goal.

Select Reading

- Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972). A collection of studies which show Luke-Acts' affirmation of Israel.
- David Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). Shows Luke-Acts as deeply rooted in the Bible and Israel's history.
- Robert L. Brawley, *Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology, and Conciliation* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987). Sees the author as responding to Jewish antagonism, especially toward Paul, with an offer of conciliation.
- Jack T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). Sees the author as thoroughly anti-Judaic in outlook and as rejecting Israel entirely.
- Joseph B. Tyson (ed.), *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988). Excellent essays with very divergent points of view.
- Robert C. Tannehill, "Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985) 69-85. A sophisticated literary interpretation of Luke-Acts as a continuing appeal to Israel, despite Jewish rejection of Paul.
- Lloyd Gaston, "Anti-Judaism and the Passion Narrative in Luke-Acts," in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Peter Richardson (Waterloo: Laurier, 1986) 127-153, and S. G. Wilson, "The Jews and the Death of Jesus in Acts," in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, 155-164. Both contextualize Luke-Acts' polemics against certain Jews.
- David Tiede, "The Exaltation of Jesus and the Restoration of Israel in Acts 1," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986) 278-86.
- Paul M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, 3 vols. (San Francisco: Harper, 1980-88). A complete theology which integrally includes Jewish and Christian thought.