

Mission to the Gentiles in Luke-Acts as fulfilling God's promise to Israel: A critical reading of the Apostolic Decree of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-29

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Mission to the Gentiles in Luke-Acts As fulfilling God's promise to Israel

----A critical reading of the Apostolic Decree
Of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-29

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Abstract

The overall narrative in the Acts of the Apostles displays a noticeable dual-emphasis of the author: emphasis on the mission to the Gentiles despite the obstructions of the Jews and emphasis on the Jewish roots of the Gentile mission, which results in an ambivalent attitude toward the Jews and Judaism. These seemingly contradictory emphases easily push careless readers to an unbalanced interpretation and reading of Acts, and the Holocaust is the ultimate horrible consequence of the anti-Semitic interpretation of Acts. This thesis argues that the two emphases, rather than being contradictory, are mutually intertwined: Jewish roots help illuminate the origin and meaning of the mission to the Gentiles, and the mission to the Gentiles fulfills the promise God made to Israel. A good example of this is the Apostolic Letter composed at the Jerusalem Council, which was held to address and solve the problem of the conditions by which the Gentiles could be members of the church (cf. Acts 15:2). In this study, I will place the Apostolic Letter (15:23-29) within a larger theological and narrative framework of Luke-Acts—the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel— and argue that, as Luke’s rhetorical device, the Decree (15:20, 29; 21:25) not only serves to explain some already existing practices among Jewish and Gentile Christians, but more importantly, serves as a guiding principle for concrete table fellowship between Jewish believers and Gentile believers within a community that calls its believers to be of “one heart and soul” (4:32).

Introduction

Reasons for Writing the Thesis

One of the hotly debated issues among Acts scholars is how Luke understands the relationship between the mission to the Gentiles and the fate of the Jews and how to face the challenges of day-to-day community fellowship brought about as a result of the successful Gentile mission. The difficulty lies in the fact that Luke demonstrates a seemingly ambivalent attitude toward the Jews and Judaism. On one hand, Luke underscores the continuous spread of the word to the Gentiles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In line with this, Paul is portrayed as the great missionary “divinely chosen and sent to the Gentiles” (13:2; 22:21). Accordingly, all those who oppose the word of God and the Gentile mission are opposing the Spirit, and these opponents of the Gentile mission, as is evident in the texts of Acts, are almost always the Jews. As such, Jews are portrayed negatively to the point they are formally denounced three times by Paul (13:46; 18:6; 28:28). On the other hand, however, Luke also positively portrays the Jews and Judaism (21:20). In line with this, Luke repeatedly emphasizes the Jewish identity of Paul (22:3; 24:14; 26:5) and the Jewish roots of the Gentile mission. This intriguing ambivalence becomes more obvious at the Council of Jerusalem in which the apostles and the elders decide not to require Gentile believers to be circumcised; a move seemingly doing away with the Mosaic Law. Yet, at the same time, James proposes four restrictions drawn from the Mosaic Law to be kept by Gentile believers, and includes them in the Apostolic Letter sent to the Gentile churches.

This ambivalent attitude of Luke toward the Jews and Judaism does not, as some scholars suggest (J. T. Sanders, E. Haenchen, H. Conzelmann) imply an irreconcilable relationship between mission to the Gentiles and Judaism, or the “writting off” of the Jews (Haenchen). Rather the Gentile mission is precisely the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel in the Old Testament. The identity of Israel can be true only when its mission is carried out: a blessing to all the families on earth and a light to all nations. In this study, I would like to offer a way to clarify and reconcile Luke’s attitude toward the Gentiles and the Jews, so that readers of Acts will not be confused or opt for the extreme, unbalanced interpretation.

Synopsis of Intended Work

This thesis consists of three chapters, with an introduction and a conclusion.

In Chapter one, based on an examination of references to God’s promise to Israel, such as Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, etc. in Luke-Acts, I shall point out the importance of God’s past promises to the understanding and interpretation of present events in Luke-Acts. I will also offer a discussion of various covenantal traditions in the Old Testament and their development in Israelite history, especially as found in the words of the prophets quoted in Luke-Acts, such as Amos and Isaiah. Thus the larger theological framework of Luke-Acts will be clarified.

In Chapter two, based on a narratological reading of both the positive and the negative portraits of Jews and Judaism in Acts, I shall point out that the positive portrait of Jews and Judaism serves as a rhetorical device to bring readers to recognize the remnant of the people of Israel that God has preserved and that the message of salvation is proclaimed to the world because of the reception of the Jews rather than the rejection of some Jews. Then I shall point out that the negative portrait of Jews and Judaism, especially the third renunciation of the

Jews by Paul in Rome, serves as rhetorical device that even the unbelief of some Jews has already been foretold by the prophets in the scriptures. Paul's renunciation of Jews, especially the end of Acts, does not express a final rejection of the Jews. Rather, understood in biblical sense, the words that Luke quotes from the prophet Isaiah convey a hope that the unbelieving Jews will one day return and believe in the Gospel.

In Chapter three, I will take up the Apostolic Council, together with its decision expressed through the Decree, as a particular case to show that the author of Acts sees the inclusion of Gentiles in the community of believers as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, and also understands Gentiles to be open to some practices that make association with Jewish believers possible. The removal of the requirement of circumcision for Gentile believers is by no means contradictory to the inclusion of the four requirements of the Decree; it only demonstrates that the apostles and the elders are faithfully following the Mosaic Law regarding Gentile believers, because the four abstentions given to the Gentile converts in the church of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia are drawn from the teachings of Moses. Thus, Luke is demonstrating that to free the Gentile converts from the requirement of circumcision does not mean that church has abandoned the Torah or has acted against Mosaic teachings. Rather, it shows that the decision of the Apostolic Council is in accord with the teachings of Moses. The church is a continuation and expansion of Judaism.

The Conclusion will summarize the main points in the arguments above, and point out the actual implications of this way of reading and interpreting Luke-Acts in our contemporary world.

Chapter I The identity of Israel in the light of God's promise in the Old Testament

1. Israel's identity is rooted in God's promise in the Old Testament

Since this thesis aims to clarify the seemingly existing tension between the early church's mission to the Gentiles and its Jewish heritage as found in the narrative of Acts, it is appropriate to start with a brief discussion of the identity of Israel, for like other races or nations in the world, the people of Israel has its own history of identity formation.

There are two reasons for me to focus on God's promise in the Old Testament in order to give light to our discussion of Israel identity.

The first reason is that in Acts, the fulfillment of what is promised in the scriptures is an important theme. Behind this theme of fulfillment of God's promise is Luke's conviction that God's plan shall be realized. In fact, the term "Luke-Acts", which has been widely accepted among the NT scholars, speaks for the unity of the two volumes of Luke, and this unity between the two is best manifested (among other aspects of unity) by their thematic emphasis on the progress of God's plan. In his book, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, John T. Squires rightly comments,

The plan of God is a distinctively Lukan theme which undergirds the whole of Luke-Acts, becoming especially prominent in the speeches of Acts. A variety of

thematic strands are woven together to emphasize the certainty and consistency of the plan of God as it is worked out in the life of Jesus and the history of the early church.¹

Right in the beginning of his Gospel, Luke speaks of his work as an orderly account of “the events that have been fulfilled among us (Luke 1:1).” No doubt, “the events” here refer to the events of Jesus. In fact, it is precisely because Jesus’ life, death and resurrection have fulfilled what God has promised through the prophets in the Old Testament that the early church has received the mission from Jesus to bear witness to and spread the Good News “to the ends of the earth” (1:8). Even within the frame of Acts, the whole narrative could be considered as a fulfillment of 1:8. The fulfillment of God’s promises in the Old Testament serves as the rationale for the early church’s mission to the Gentiles (Luke 1:1; Acts 3:24). Thus the church’s mission is not a human campaign from the church itself, but is part of God’s plan and it is of divine initiative and has God as its director.

The second reason is that by his recurrent references to God’s promise in the Old Testament in his narrative, Luke is emphasizing not only that the Old Testament promises have come to be fulfilled (3:26; 2:39) but also that the early community of disciples is the bearer of the same promises God made to Israel in the Old Testament and therefore share the same identity. Regarding this point, Fitzmyer says,

The concern of Luke to stress the connection and the continuation between Judaism and Christianity is seen clearly in his use of the OT to interpret the Christ-event. He cites many passages of the Hebrew Scriptures that, although formally lacking predictive elements, he reads

¹ John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1.

not only as prophecy but even as predictions of what came to be in the ministry of Jesus and its sequel, “the events that have come to fulfillment among us (Luke 1:1).”²

For Luke, the community of believers is not a new establishment different from Judaism; on the contrary, it is the continuation and expansion of Judaism. It is the “people of God” in the Old Testament, it is the agent from which salvation shall be brought to the whole world, that is, through the mission of the Church after Jesus’ ascension.

2. God’s promise in Luke-Acts from the perspective of covenantal tradition

2.1 God’s Promise in the Gospel of Luke

As I have mentioned above, one of main themes of Luke-Acts is the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel made in ancient times. In his two-volume work, Luke repeatedly refers to the theme of the OT promise and its fulfillment.

Luke already makes it clear in the beginning of his first volume, the Gospel of Luke, that his purpose in writing is to testify to “the events that have been fulfilled among us (Luke 1:1).” Although the exact meaning of the Greek word “πεπληροφορημενων” is disputed among scholars, since it could mean “accomplished” or “fulfilled,” the most widely accepted translation is “fulfilled.” For Luke, these fulfilled events are God’s plan of salvation foretold in the ancient times.³

In the Gospel of Luke, the first explicit reference to God’s promise in the Old Testament comes in the Canticle of Mary when she visits her cousin Elizabeth, “He has helped his

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 60.

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 56-57.

servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (1:54-55). Although most likely the composition of the Cantic of Mary has been influenced by the Song of Hannah found in 1 Sam 2:1-10, it is clear that the two ending verses were added by Luke. Together with the previous verses (vv. 46-53), they express the Lukan understanding of the birth of Jesus as fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham. The Cantic of Mary interprets the event of Jesus by remembering “God’s promise” and recalling his wonderful works in the past (v. 55). The Cantic of Mary places the coming birth of Jesus within the salvific plan of God which has started in the past and continues in the present.

At the birth of his son, Zechariah proclaims that the coming of the Savior is a concrete sign of God’s faithfulness to his promise to Abraham, “Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham (1:72-73).” Comparing Mary’s Magnificat and Zechariah’s Benedictus, Bock notices that Mary starts praising God from a personal perspective to that of Israel, with its scope becoming broader. Zechariah starts from praising God from a national perspective to that of personal, with the scope being narrowed down.⁴ Another difference is that Zechariah explicitly relates the birth of John and the coming of the Messiah with David, “he has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David (v. 69).” For Luke, the event of Jesus fulfills God’s promise to David through the prophet Nathan,

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his

⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 172.

kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me (2 Sam 7:12-14).

By reference to God's promise to Abraham, Luke sees in the coming of Jesus the realization of God's promised blessings, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen 12:3)." By reference to God's promise to David, Luke shows that Jesus is the long-awaited king, the Anointed, in whom the kingdom of David shall last forever. Thus arrival of the birth of Jesus both signifies the continuation of Israel and predicts the future mission of the church to Gentiles. God's promise to Abraham links Israel and its mission. On one hand, God's choice of Israel necessitates its mission to the Gentiles; on the other hand, its mission to the Gentiles fulfills the promises it received from God. Hence God's promise to Abraham—the Abrahamic covenant—is the ultimate goal of God's election of Israel. In the process of the formation of Israel's identity, the other two important covenants—the Mosaic covenant and the Davidic covenant—are two steps toward the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham, in which God promises blessings for all the families of the earth. At this point, it might be helpful to linger a bit with the covenant theme, since the covenants are the backdrops of God's promises in the Old Testament, including but not limited to the prophecies in prophetic literature. It is in their constant awareness of being the covenanted people of God that the self-consciousness of the Israelites was formed. In his article "Abrahamic covenant traditions and the characterization of God in Luke-Acts," Robert Brawley supports this way of synthesizing the various covenant traditions,

Choi specifies three particular ways that covenant traditions are synthesized in the Second Temple period: (1) subordination of the Abrahamic covenant to the Mosaic; (2)

subordination of Mosaic to Abrahamic; and (3) a synthesis by coordinating the covenants without establishing relationships among them. Luke-Acts, however, synthesizes covenant traditions in yet another way. The Abrahamic covenant is a characterization of God with respect to history. God promises to bless all the families of the earth at canonical narrative beginnings (Gen 12, 1-3). Davidic and Mosaic covenants are related to the Abrahamic covenant as part of a sequence. They are particular ways God moves the promises toward their term. For Luke-Acts, Mosaic, Davidic, and Abrahamic covenants do not compete with each other but function properly when they play their role in a holistic program.”⁵

In proposing this way of synthesizing the covenant traditions, I am not saying that they are synthesized in such a way in the Hebrew Bible; rather, as Brawley makes it clear, this is most likely how Luke synthesizes them in order to bring forth his theological claims. After all, many Old Testament scholars have expressed their cautions in synthesizing various covenant traditions while reading the Old Testament. In his book, *Old Testament Covenant: A survey of current opinions*, D. J. McCarthey expresses such a caution,

In summary, it is impossible to bring all the interpretations of the various covenants together under one definition or a simple linear line of development. There are problems in the relation of the promise to Abraham with the covenant with him. There are problems in the relation of the Abraham covenant with the Davidic. Most of all, there are problems in the relation of the Sinaitic and the Davidic covenant. Surely this is in

⁵ Robert Brawley, “Abrahamic Covenant Traditions and the Characterization of God in Luke-Acts” in *The Unity Of Luke-Acts* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), ed. by J. Verheyden, 131-132.

part due to our failure to understand, but it is also evidence of the vital complexity in our texts.⁶

The preaching of John the Baptist brings out the issue of eligibility of being Abraham's descendants. Clearly his warning to those who come to him for baptism reflects a kind of thinking among Jews at that time that only the descendants of Abraham could participate in the salvation of God and receive the promised blessings and one becomes a descendant of Abraham only by physical birth. In his review article of the book, *The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke-Acts*,⁷ D. Reinstorf gives a summary for the issue of ethnocentricity,

Forbes recognizes that the Old Testament attitude towards such nations is ambivalent, both promoting ethnocentrism and rejecting it. On the one hand, these nations are the objects of God wrath (see inter alia Pss 2:8-9; Isa 13-23; Ezra 25-32). On the other hand, ethnocentric views are the subject of rebuke (see inter alia Isa 2:2-4; 42: 1-7; Zech 2:11). But from the intertestamental period onwards, especially in the later rabbinic writings, there is a definite shift to an exclusive attitude to the nations. Forbes claims that it "would be reasonable, on the whole, to conclude that in post-biblical Judaism the Old Testament balance between the judgement and destruction of the nations and their salvation shifted to the former."⁸

⁶ D. J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Basil Blackwell: Peter Lang, 1972), 85.

⁷ Greg W Forbes, *The role of the Lukan parables in the purpose of Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

⁸ D. Reinstorf, "Luke's Parables and the Purpose of Luke's Gospel," *Harvard Theological Studies* 58, no. 3, (2002): 1291.

Bock also remarks on the issue of the Jewish attitude of relying on ancestors,

Abrahamic heritage was a source of pride in Judaism (2 Esdr. [=4 Ezra] 6: 56-58 [conceptually]; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.5.3 §§87-88; Ps. Sol. 9.9; 18.3; Jub. 22.10-24; SB 1:116-21). Such heritage was thought to bring protection from God since judgment comes on the nations, not on the people of Abraham.⁹

John the Baptist's warning has a two-fold implication. On one hand, one could not rely on physical connection to Abraham for salvation. This is attested to later in Luke 16:23, where the rich man, apparently a descendant of Abraham, finds himself in Hades, being tortured and separated from Abraham. On the other hand, John the Baptist is telling people that people could be counted as children to Abraham not by birth, but by bearing fruit. In order to be saved, one has to repent and bear fruit. John the Baptist's preaching here is already about the issue of qualification of becoming Abraham's descendants, though not explicitly. Understood in this way, John's preaching has laid a foundation for one of Luke's theological claims: Gentiles could also participate in the expected salvation without being Jewish. This universalist view of salvation is grounded in Gen 12:1-3 and Gen 22:18.

In Luke 13:16 and 19:9, the crippled woman is healed and Zacchaeus comes to repentance and Jesus explicitly calls them "daughter of Abraham (13:16)" and "son of Abraham (19:9)." God's promise to Abraham serves as the backdrop of these two events. God has shown mercy to the descendants of Abraham because of his faithfulness to Abraham.

⁹ Bock, *Luke*, 304.

Brawley suggests that this Lukan passage be read through the lens of Acts 3:25 to “construe the healing of the daughter of Abraham as a concrete case of God’s promise to bless all the families of the earth.”¹⁰ Israelites are also part of and first among those who shall be blessed.

There are different foci for the two events. In the case of the crippled woman, the action of healing is questioned by the leader of the synagogue because it takes place on a Sabbath. Sabbath observance is part of Mosaic Law and Jesus’ healing action is a “concrete case of God’s blessing,” to use Brawley’s words. In the eyes of the synagogue leader, all works should stop on the Sabbath (13:14). What seems to be at conflict are the Mosaic covenant and the Abrahamic covenant. But in the eyes of Jesus, there is no conflict between the two. When Jesus says to the woman, “Woman, you are set free from you ailment (13:12),” he uses the language that recalls the exodus event in which the Israelites were set free from the land of slavery. Thus Jesus turns the Sabbath into an opportunity for blessings. The conflict between the Mosaic covenant tradition and the Abrahamic covenant tradition is resolved in such a way that Mosaic covenant serves to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant.

The promised blessings to the descendants of Abraham do not just pertain to the material or physical dimensions. Zacchaeus the tax collector is considered a sinner and an outcast and held in disdain by his own people. Although he is a Jew, he is alienated by other “righteous” people. He is considered not worthy to receive the promised blessings. Hence, Luke narrates, “All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner (19:7).’” About the sinners and outcasts, Forbes’ remarks are nicely summarized by Reinstorf,

¹⁰ Brawley, *Abrahamic Covenant Traditions*, 120.

The Old Testament shows concern for the restoration for the wicked, never delighting in their downfall (see inter alia Ezek 1:23, 32). In later Jewish writings, however, God is portrayed almost exclusively as rejoicing over the destruction of the wicked based primarily on the lack of ritual purity. These views are dominant in sectarian literature such as that of Qumran, but also features in Ben Sirach and other rabbinic literature. Forbes rejects the view that the destruction of the wicked was simply an “ideological extreme” within rabbinic Judaism. Although there is some evidence that the rabbis may have granted sinners the right to repent, there is little evidence that they showed active concern for sinners.¹¹

However, by calling Zacchaeus a “son of Abraham,” Jesus is saying that he, too, is a recipient of God’s promised blessing. The blessing that comes to Zacchaeus this time is not wealth or physical health, but spiritual restoration, as he repents for all his unjust deeds in the past.¹²

What is stressed here by Luke is that God does not abandon anyone and his promised blessings for the descendants of Abraham extend also to sinners. In fact, in the case of Zacchaeus, although it seems that it is Zachaeus who takes the initiative to go and see Jesus, the visitation of Jesus is narrated as God’s plan, for when Jesus addresses Zacchaeus, he uses the word “must (19:5)” to express not just a geographical or temporal necessity, but also a theological necessity (see also Luke 4:43; 9:22; 24:7). After all, that is the mission of Jesus, “for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost (19:10).”

Jesus affirms in Luke 13:24 that not all will be saved. This seems to have confirmed the Jewish view of salvation based on election. However, Jesus’ further clarification hits his

¹¹ Reinstorf, “Luke’s Parables and the Purpose of Luke’s Gospel,” 1292.

¹² Fitzmyer argues that some details of the narrative indicate that Zacchaeus is not a sinner as he is traditionally perceived. Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 1218-1222.

audience with a double strike. First, when Jesus says, “you yourselves [will be] thrown out (v. 28),” he is backing up the warning already pronounced by John the Baptist that one should not rely on one’s ancestral heritage for salvation (Luke 3:8-9). Secondly, when Jesus says, “Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God (v. 29),” he is saying that many Gentiles, whom the Jews consider to be outsiders of the expected salvation, will be saved and sit in God’s kingdom. Although people “from east and west, from north and south” could mean the dispersed Jews (Pss 107:3), Bock argues that it refers to the Gentiles here.¹³ He suggests that this passage be read in the light of the Cornelius event (Acts 10-11) so that the universal dimension of God’s salvation can be made clear. Indeed, in Acts 10:34, Peter speaks to Cornelius and all those who have gathered in his house, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” Clearly Luke is telling his readers here that salvation is offered to all and everyone, Jews and Gentiles, has equal access to God’s salvation.

A first glimpse at the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) tells the reader that one should be prudent in using his wealth and be generous toward the poor. Indeed, warning against the dangers of wealth is a characteristic of Luke-Acts. However, readers should also have noticed the appearance of Abraham and Moses and the prophets in the parable. From the perspective of covenant traditions, one notices that only those who follow the teachings of Moses and the Prophets can in the end gain the blessing to be with Abraham. Brawley complains that many have neglected this perspective. He says,

¹³ Bock, *Luke*, 1239.

But interpreters have generally overlooked the overtones of Abrahamic covenant traditions in both Deuteronomy and Luke-Acts. From the beginning Deuteronomy synthesizes Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant traditions. In Deut 1:8, possession of the land is fulfillment of God's promise to the forebears, and 1,10-11 alludes to God's promise to multiply Abraham's descendants. Deut 4, 31 reinforces God's memory of the Abrahamic covenant. Repeatedly, possession of the land is both the Abrahamic inheritance and the basis for Mosaic exhortations. Thus, Deut 15,4 recalls the inheritance of the land (εν κληρω κατακληρονομησαι αυτην) and God's promise to bless (ευλογων ευλογησει σε κυριος ο θεος σου) as correlates of the command to help the poor. Helping the poor is part of the way God blesses in the land God gives as an inheritance.¹⁴

Having Abraham commending the rich man's brothers to the teachings of Moses and the Prophets, Luke not only affirms the authority of Moses and the Prophets, but also aligns the Mosaic covenant tradition with the Abrahamic covenant tradition, thus extending God's salvation to "all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3)."

2.2 God's promises in Acts

Covenant traditions are referred to two times in Acts. In 3:25, Peter speaks to the people after he heals the crippled beggar, "You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" Another reference to the covenant comes in 7:8,

¹⁴ Brawley, *Abrahamic Covenant tradition*, 122.

where Stephen recounts God's call of Abraham and the covenant of circumcision that He gave to Abraham.

The event of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, is another important case of fulfillment of God's promise in the Old Testament. In Acts 1:4, the disciples are told to wait for the promise of the Father; in 2:1-13, the promise is fulfilled and in 2:14-40, Peter testifies to the people that this promise has actually been foretold by the prophets. And he quotes from the Book of Joel (Joel 2:28-32). In 2:39, Peter says, "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." In saying this, Peter makes it clear that the coming of the Holy Spirit not only has fulfilled God's promise through a prophet, but also signals the coming of a new era: the era of the Messiah. The receiving of the Holy Spirit becomes a concrete sign of participating in the promised salvation brought by the coming of the Messiah.

The Holy Spirit is the fruit of repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus (2:38). Thus it is Christ Jesus who ultimately brings about God's promise to its fulfillment. Not only the actions of Jesus himself are concrete cases of the promised blessings of God for all people, Jews and Gentile alike, but every action that is done in his name becomes a blessing to all who have faith in him. When Peter and John heal the crippled beggar at the gate of the temple, Peter makes it clear to all the people gathered around them that "by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong (3:11)." After establishing Jesus as the cause of the healing, Peter continues and says that God has foretold about the Messiah through the prophets (3:18, 21, 24) and through Moses (3:22). He further points out that Jesus, the servant that is raised up after Moses (3:22; Deut 18:15-20), is the one descendant / offspring (σπέρμα) of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

In his commentary on Acts, Robert Wall offers an analysis regarding this passage. According to Wall, what Luke has in mind here is that the final restoration shall be universal (which has already been foretold by God through the prophets, see Acts 3:21), but before the universal restoration, a number of Jews will be converted first as they are the descendants of Abraham, and through their witnessing and preaching, all the nations shall also be converted and receive the promised blessings.¹⁵

Here I would say, by this scenario of future universal restoration, Luke has already set the foundation for the narrative pattern for the rest of his work, that is, the Gospel shall always be preached to Jews first, then to Gentiles.

Stephen's answer to the high priest regarding accusations brought against him is another occasion whereby Luke strategically places Mosaic covenant tradition within Abrahamic covenant tradition. The accusations made by some freedmen against Stephen is that "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law (6:13)." In fact, Luke has already made it clear there that the accusations are "false witnesses." In defending himself, Stephen has to prove that he is not against the holy place and the law.

Stephen does not go directly to Mosaic Law and the temple. Rather, he starts his speech with the call of Abraham. Tracing one's community origin to an ancient ancestor could be a mere strategy to impress the audience. In his article, David Peterson mentions the non-religious purpose of tracing one's origins to the ancient. He says,

In the Hellenistic age it was also common for a people to try to trace its own origins back to the remotest antiquity (e.g., Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.152; Diodorus, 1.44.4; 1.96.2). So it is likely that Luke emphasized the Old Testament roots of Christianity and

¹⁵ Robert Wall, *Acts* in NIBC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 65.

the fulfillment of Scripture in the events that he records for more than religious reasons. His approach would have given Greek-speaking Christians the chance to appeal to an argument from antiquity, allowing them to feel ‘not the least bit inferior to pagans with their cultural and religious claims allegedly rooted in antiquity...In a social context where such matters were considered important, it offered Christians a confident basis from which to address their contemporaries.¹⁶

However, by starting the speech with the call of Abraham, the purpose is more than just providing Christians with confidence to their origin. It means that Stephen interpreted the whole history of Israel in the light of Abrahamic covenant tradition. In v. 16-17, he specifically pointed out that the Exodus from Egypt was a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. Again, what Luke has in his mind here is that Mosaic covenant tradition is part of the larger framework, namely, God’s promise to Abraham. In support of this point, Brawley says,

The overt presence of an allusion to Gen 15,13-16 in the near context means that the time of the drawing near of the promise to Abraham includes not merely the multiplication of Abraham’s descendants but also Moses, the exodus, Sinai, and the entrance into the land...Stephen, like other characters in Luke-Acts, synthesizes covenant traditions by making the exodus, Sinai, and the possession of the land particular ways God fulfills the promises to Abraham.¹⁷

¹⁶ David Peterson, “The Motif of Fulfillment and the Purpose of Luke-Acts” in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*. Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting v. 1. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), ed. by Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, 103.

¹⁷ Brawley, *Abrahamic Covenant Traditions*, 127.

Stephen did not forsake or act against Mosaic law, for he emphatically stated that it is Moses who announced “God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up (7:37).” Whoever is obedient to Moses should follow the words of the prophet that he foretold. Although Stephen did not specifically say that this prophet is Jesus, “the Righteous One” in v. 52 echoes “the Holy and Righteous One” in Acts 3:14 where it refers to Jesus. Again in Lk 23:47, the centurion says about Jesus, “certainly this man was righteous.” Since Jesus is the one whom Moses foretold, it is clear now that Stephen proves to be faithful to Moses’ instructions, and his accusers are not obeying Moses’ words.

Regarding the temple, Stephen pointed out that instead of offering a dwelling place for God out of reverence, Jews tried to confine God in the temple structure. Thus unlike the “tent of testimony in the wilderness (v. 44)” the temple had become for them an idol like “the tent of Moloch (v. 43).” Stephen did not act against the temple; rather, it was his accusers who had wrong knowledge of God and the temple. Again, they were bearing false witnesses (6:13).

Stephen defends his cause by re-interpretation of the Mosaic covenant tradition in the light of God’s promise to Abraham. Not only does he start with Abraham’s call (7:2-3) and his covenant of circumcision (7:8), he concludes his speech by returning to circumcision, charging his opponents to be “uncircumcised in heart and ears (7:51).” Brawley summarizes this point in a concise way toward the end of his article. He says,

In short, Stephen’s speech is quite unified under the canopy of God’s promises to Abraham. Moses, the exodus, the announcement of the prophet like Moses, Sinai and the tent of witness, the Temple, and the coming of the righteous one are particular ways God moves

promises to Abraham toward their term. Like Zechariah, Stephen synthesizes covenant traditions under the umbrella of the Abrahamic covenant.¹⁸

To conclude my discussion on covenantal traditions in Luke-Acts, I shall say that Luke has consistently and explicitly presented the birth, life and ministry of Jesus as the fulfillment to God's promise to Abraham. Through canticles, speeches of various figures, he synthesized all the major events in Israelite history with Abrahamic covenant. Luke did this not without reason. There are important theological implications in doing this. Since it was to Abraham that God promised "all families of the earth shall be blessed", Abrahamic interpretation of salvation history means all people shall be blessed in the end. Furthermore, it also means that salvation will reach to the descendants of Abraham first, and through them, to all peoples of the earth. Here we come to the issue of the identity of Israel in Luke-Acts.

3. The identity of Israel in Luke-Acts

The composition of Luke-Acts, its narrative language and structure, is largely shaped by Luke's understanding of the relationship between the church's mission to the Gentiles and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. A better understanding of the identity of Israel in Luke's mind, can in turn make it easy to better understand the narrative of Luke-Acts. Our discussion of covenant traditions in Luke-Acts enables us to better grasp the identity of Israel as it was understood and presented by Luke. Acknowledging that how the Jewish people in the Old Testament viewed themselves in relation to God and other nations in the world, here I will not discuss the identity of Israel in the Old Testament. Rather, I will only focus on the identity of Israel as presented in Luke-Acts.

¹⁸ Brawley, *Abrahamic Covenant Traditions*, 128.

3. 1 Israel as the people who are descendants of Abraham

This identity of Israel, first of all, refers to the natural relationship of Israelites to Abraham. The Book of Genesis testified to God's call of Abraham, his gift of Isaac, the faith of Abraham and God's promise to Abraham that his descendants shall be numerous as the stars (12:1-3; 15:5-6; 17:1-6; 22:15-17). Abraham is called by the Jews "our father" (Luke 1:73; Acts 7:2), "Father Abraham (16:24, 30)," "our ancestor (Luke 1:55)." Paul called the Jews "Fellow children of Abraham" (Acts 13:26).

As children of Abraham, Israel must keep the covenant that God made with Abraham, that is, the covenant of circumcision. Israel is to preserve their heritage from him, among which faith and trust in God's care are most important (Gen 22:4). In fact, against some people's reliance on physical connection to Abraham, in Luke 3:8, John the Baptist emphasized the necessity of one's spiritual connection to Abraham through faith and repentance. Brawley observed that there were pre-Lukan debates about "how one qualifies as an offspring of Abraham." He says, "The pre-Lukan debate ranged from physical descent from Abraham at one extreme to following in his footsteps at the other. The two poles represent appeals to exclusivism on the one hand and universality on the other."¹⁹ Thus, from Luke 3:8, we can tell that Luke clearly and intentionally downplayed physical connection as a reaction against confidence in ancestral connection for salvation.

¹⁹ Brawley, *Abrahamic Covenant Traditions*, 116.

3.2 Israel as the chosen people of God

Part of God's promise to Abraham is that He will be a God to Abraham and to his offspring (Gen 17:8). This was fulfilled by the Sinai Covenant through which Israel became God's "treasured possession" (Exod 19:5). From among all the peoples of the earth, Israel became the chosen people of God. This identity made Israel distinctive from other peoples. In fact, every call of God is a call to be distinctive. This identity of Israel as the people of God is in fact the most important one in the Bible. Rolf Rendtorff, in his book, *The Covenant Formula*, says, "That Yahweh is Israel's God, and Israel Yahweh's people is one of the central statements in the Old Testament."²⁰ As the chosen people of God, Israel enjoyed many privileges over other nations.

In Luke 1:68, when Zechariah foresaw the coming of the Christ, he praised the Lord for having looked favorably on his people. When Simeon took the child Jesus in his arms in the Temple, he rejoiced that his own eyes had seen the salvation which is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel (Lk 2:29-33)." When Paul spoke to the Jews in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, he called God "the God of this people Israel (Acts 13:17)."

As the people of God, Israel is called to be a "priestly kingdom" and a "holy nation" (Exod 19:6). In his book, *Covenant and Creation: A theology of Old Testament Covenants*, William Dumbrell has analyzed the structure of Exod 19:4-6, especially the adding-on of "the whole earth is mine (v. 5b)" and concludes that the two terms "priestly kingdom" and "holy nation" served as the purpose of God's choice of Israel in Exod 19:4-6. He compared Abraham with Israel in their respective covenant context and noticed that "both are chosen

²⁰ Rolf. Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 11.

outside of the land of promise, the choice of both is meant to serve the wider purposes of divine intention expressed through the initial act of creation.”²¹

Since the words “priestly” and “holy” both mean something that is separated for special use, Dumbrell pointed out the way through which Israel is to carry its responsibility,

Just as a priest is separated from an ancient society in order to serve it and serves it by his distinctiveness, so Israel serves her world by maintaining her distance and her difference from it.²²

The responsibility of Israel as the chosen people of God brings us to another title of Israel, namely, God’s servant.

3.3 Israel as God’s servant.

In her Magnificat, Mary describes Israel as “God’s servant” (Luke 1:54). Israel as “servant” (v. 54) echoes the identity of Israel as “God’s servant” in the Book of Isaiah, “And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified (Isa 49:3).’”

As the servant of God, Israel is given both the mission from with-in and from with-out. The mission from with-in is to “Gather Israel” (Isa 49:5) or to “restore the survivors of Israel” (49:6). The mission from with-out is to be “as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6). Clearly Luke is aware of this identity of Israel, for in the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon proclaims, “for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you

²¹ William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 90.

have prepared in the presence of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel (Luke 2:30-32).”

Here the subject of the light to the Gentiles is the salvation (v. 30). In Luke 1:78-79, as Bock observes, the subject becomes the Messiah.²³ In Acts 13:47, the subject changes again to refer to all the preachers of Messiah’s salvation. There Paul said, “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” Amidst the changes of the subject of the light, one thing that has remained is that the root of salvation is from Israel. The privilege of Israel over other nations is that through Israel God shall bring forth the expected salvation. Bock remarks about this, “Israel’s task makes it special.”²⁴ Accordingly, Israel could not claim its special status and privileges without accepting and carrying out its mission.

Conclusion

A brief discussion of the theme of God’s promise in Luke-Acts from the perspective of covenant traditions has shown us how Luke interprets various covenant traditions in the light of the Abrahamic covenant. His synthesizing of other covenant traditions with the Abrahamic covenant leads him to an understanding of Israel’s history as a continuous unfolding of God’s promise to Abraham. There are a number of theological implications to this interpretation and understanding of Israel’s history.

²³ Bock, *Luke*, 244.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

First, Israel is a people specially chosen by God, with all the privileges and favors. They enjoy special relationship with God, but this is not without purpose.

Secondly, Israel, who is descendant of Abraham, is to become an agent through which all peoples and all nations receive God's blessings. In this way, Israel becomes God's servant, a light to the world and witness to God's faithfulness and love to the world. Thirdly, no matter how often Israel failed in its commitment to God, it remains God's people. The fact that salvation comes from Israel will not change and cannot be changed. The Jewish roots of the Messiah must not be denied.

And lastly, the understanding that God's blessings come first to Israel, then to all peoples of the earth also shaped the narrative structure of Acts. With a better understanding of Luke's theological mindset, it could be easier to approach Luke's narrative in Acts with regard to his attitude towards the Jews.

Chapter II Portrait of Jews in Luke-Acts

Luke's overall portrait of Jews in Luke-Acts has been interpreted as anti-Jewish since the time of the Apostolic Fathers. Aside from the fact that Jesus was handed over and eventually condemned to death by Jews, the disputes that arose later from between the early church and Jewish authorities also contributed to the anti-Jewish sentiments among early Christian readers of the New Testament. In Acts, Luke reports three instances wherein Paul seemingly renounced the Jews for their rejection of the Gospel (Acts 13:46; 18:6; 28:28). For centuries, Christian readers of Luke-Acts took it for granted that Luke portrays the Jews in a negative way. The end of Acts has been interpreted by so many biblical scholars (J. T. Sanders, E. Haenchen, H. Conzelmann) as a sign that the Jews have been "written off" (to use the word of Haenchen). However, recently there have been more and more biblical scholars who returned to this issue and started to re-examine it. Reasons for this re-examination are multiple. The experience of the Holocaust against the Jews certainly is an important factor, since it has revealed what a disastrous consequence an anti-Jewish sentiment could have. We may not be consciously and intentionally advocating such an anti-Jewish mentality, but if not done carefully, our reading and interpretation of the NT could contribute to the growth and spread of it. Other reasons for this re-examination of the treatment of Jews in the NT include new methods of approaching the texts. For example, the three-time denouncement of the Jews by Paul in Acts may not be intended as such, but rather serve as a rhetoric tool for Luke to justify the early church's mission to the Gentiles. Inter-religious dialogue has certainly contributed to mutual understanding between Christians and Jews. In this chapter, I will join with this effort of re-examination by re-viewing the portraits of the Jews in Luke-Acts,

aiming to clarify the author's intended message and argue that Luke himself intended to prove a relationship of continuity rather than conflict between "Judaism" and "Christianity."

I shall make a brief investigation of Luke's portraits of the Jews by focusing on some of the key events, figures and speeches, starting with the positive portrait. Then I shall offer an analysis of Luke's concerns behind the portrait.

1. Positive portrait of Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts

Even in a quick reading of Luke-Acts, one will surely find many positive portraits of Jews by Luke. These can be events where Jews heard and accepted the word of God, portraits of pious Jews living a righteous life according to Mosaic Law, speeches that imply more expectation than rejection. What is important is that we should situate them within the religious and cultural background of the author and his intended readers, resist the temptation to "read back into the NT times and into the thought of the given the NT author our insights and concerns and to judge him by our standards,"²⁵ thus avoiding arbitrary interpretations.

1.1. Portrait of pious Jews

In the Infancy Narrative (Luke 1-2), Luke presents Mary, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna all as pious Jews. Though Joseph is only mentioned with his connection to David, the fact that he was chosen as the husband of Mary speaks of his righteousness. Their constant prayer and their faith speak eloquently for their close relationship with God.

According to Luke, both of Zechariah and Elizabeth "were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord" (Luke 1:6).

²⁵ Robert O'Toole, "Reflections on Luke's Treatment of Jews in Luke-Acts." *Biblica* 74, no. 4 (1993): 530.

“Obeying the commandments” is the typical way of depicting a pious Jew. “Living blamelessly” echoes God’s word to Abraham “I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be blameless” Their old age and the barren womb of Elizabeth remind the readers of the story (Gen 17:1).of the parents of another important figure in Israelite history—Samuel (2 Sam 1:2-20). As we shall see also in his portrait of Mary, it is one of Luke’s narrative skills to portray some people positively by linking them to the role models in the past.

Luke gives a detailed account of Mary’s obedience and faith. Even though the dialogue between Gabriel and Mary centers around Jesus and his mission, in her submission to the incomprehensible message of the angel, Mary’s obedience and faith are demonstrated. The words of Gabriel “for nothing will be impossible with God” recall the angel’s words to Abraham when promising a child to Sarah “is anything too wonderful for the Lord (Gen 18:14).” Mary’s obedience and faith in God is presented side by side with that of Abraham.

Simeon is explicitly described as “righteous and devout,” and he earnestly looked forward to “the consolation of Israel (2:25).” Besides, the Holy Spirit “rested on him (v. 25).” One of the Jewish beliefs is that the Messiah will come. As a pious Jew, Simeon was told by the Holy Spirit that he would not pass away before he was able to see the Messiah. In the encounter between Simeon and Jesus, Luke is telling the reader that what the pious Jew was looking forward to has been realized in the birth of Jesus. The early church thus is in continuity with Judaism and fulfills its beliefs. The prophecy of Simeon that pertains to the future “falling and rising of many in Israel” will become a charge against those unbelieving Jews, since even Simeon—a righteous and devout Jew filled with the Holy Spirit—has already accepted Jesus.

Another figure whom Luke portrays positively is Anna who is a prophet and a widow. She “never left the temple” and worshiped God “with fasting and prayer night and day (2:37).”

She probably is one of those whom Paul refers to in his defense before King Agrippa. He said, “and now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship day and night (Acts 26:6-7).” Here Anna is depicted as a representative of all those pious Jews who are “hoping to attain the promise of God”. The fact that Anna “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” functions to prove that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah of the Jews. Hence the church is in continuity with Jewish beliefs rather than contradicting it.

Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector in Jericho, is also portrayed positively by Luke. This might seem not to be the case in the beginning, since the tax collectors were considered to be the outcasts and sinners in the time of Luke,²⁶ and Zacchaeus makes his announcement that “if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Scholars have offered different interpretations of Zacchaeus’ announcement. Some suggest that it should be a sign of his repentance of his past injustice, others suggest it should be rather his protest to the injustice of the crowd who assume that he is a sinner.²⁷ However, the comment of Jesus we have in v. 9 makes it more likely that Zacchaeus’ announcement is a sign of his repentance from his own past injustice. And it is precisely his repentance that shifts the negative portrait of Zacchaeus into a positive one, for “bearing fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8) is what descendants of Abraham are expected to do. Jesus’ comment about Zacchaeus in v. 9 makes him an exemplary not only of the rich, but also of the descendants of Abraham.

²⁶ R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke* in NIBC series (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 299.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

1.2. Events that portray Jews positively

There are a number of events in Luke-Acts, where Judaism is portrayed positively. When Jesus had his face transfigured on the mountain, Moses and Elijah appeared to be with him (Luke 9:28-36). As Moses is the OT figure through whom the law was given to the Israelites, and Elijah is one of the greatest prophets in the OT and represents here the prophetic tradition, Jesus therefore is depicted as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. This point is further echoed and attested by the saying of Jesus, “the law and the prophets last until the time of John (16:16).” Hence the church is by no means at odds with Jewish beliefs and expectations. On the contrary, it is in continuity with and fulfills Jewish beliefs and expectations. In Luke 24:13-34, appearing to the two disciples who are on their way to Emmaus, Jesus explains to them the Passover mystery of the Messiah, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

In Acts 23:6-10, when Paul defends himself before the council, he identifies himself with the Pharisees (see also 26:5). Although this self-identification as a Pharisee could be a strategy employed by Paul to evoke sympathy for himself, there is considerable evidence to show that Luke indeed has a relatively favorable view toward the Pharisees. In 22:3, Paul acknowledges that he was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel who, according to 5:34, is a teacher of the law, “respected by all the people”. Robert O’Toole also observes that in Luke 13:31-35, the presentation of the Pharisees is positive as they come to help Jesus.²⁸ Some may argue that in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14, the Pharisee is depicted unfavorably. However, it could be a literary device for Luke to make the contrast stronger by selecting roles from contrasting groups, one from the group of the most respected Pharisees, the other from the group of the most despised tax collectors. In this way,

²⁸ Robert O’Toole, "Reflections on Luke's Treatment of Jews in Luke-Acts." 549.

this parable rather provides evidence that, in the mind of Luke, the Pharisees are a group of respected people and, in most of the cases, they are portrayed positively by Luke.

In Acts, Luke consistently reports, implicitly or explicitly, that some of the Jews who heard the word of God became believers of Jesus. Clearly the portrait of Jews who believed in Jesus is positive. On the day of Pentecost, after Peter's speech, there is a mass conversion of the Jews, "and that day about three thousand persons were added (Acts 2:41)." At the beginning of this chapter, Luke describes the Jews who form the audience of Peter's speech as "devout Jews from every nation under heaven (2:5)." Here these devout Jews serve as the models of Jewish adherents who were able to recognize not only the continuity that the early church has in relation to Judaism, but also that Jesus is the Messiah, who has already received testimony from "the law of Moses and from the prophets (Acts 28:23)."

There are a number of places where, with his special summary style, Luke narrates the conversion and adding-on of many Jews to the church. In 5:14, we read "more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women." In 6:7, Luke tells us "the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." In 9:31, the mission of the church continues to bear fruit among the Jews, "meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up." Again in chapter 21, when Paul arrived in Jerusalem, James informed him that "many thousands of believers there are among the Jews and they are all zealous for the law." The portrait of the Jews who welcomed the word of God and became the followers of Jesus echoes the examples of Mary, Simeon, Anna who welcomed Jesus as the expected Messiah.

1.3. Speeches and sayings that portray Jews positively

Aside from specific figures and events, a number of speeches and sayings in Luke-Acts also speak positively of Jews and Judaism.

As I have mentioned previously, the oracle of Simeon in Luke 2:32 testifies that the salvation which God has prepared is for both the Gentiles and Israel, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” While Luke narrates the church’s mission to the Gentiles, he always makes sure that Jews are also the recipients of God’s salvation. He even makes it clear that this salvation is first sent to Jews. In Acts 3:26, Peter declares to Jews, “When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

Some of Jesus’ sayings have expressed constant awareness of and obedience to the law. In Luke 5:14, Jesus commanded the cleansed leper, “Go and show yourself to the priest, and as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.” In Luke 24:44-45, Jesus enlightens his disciples’ understanding about the Scriptures, “these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”

According to O’Toole, among Jesus’ teachings, the parable of the prodigal and his brother also has a positive picture of Jews.

Luke 15 reveals a positive Lucan attitude toward Jews. Jesus’ receptive attitude toward the publicans and sinners (themselves Jews) and even eating with them irritates the Pharisees and scribes (vv. 1-2). However, Luke in this chapter calls for a joyful appreciation of God’s welcoming back of repentant sinners (cf. vv. 5-7, 9-10, 20, 22-24, 27, 30, 32). Given this context, the Pharisees and scribes are surely compared to the

elder son who does not celebrate or rejoice because his brother has returned (vv. 25-32).

However, the elder son is admonished, not rejected for his father tells him, “My son, you are with me always, and everything I have is Yours (v. 31).”

Since the message of the parable of the prodigal and his brother is about the unconditional love of the heavenly Father, it is less likely that the elder son is rejected in the end.

What we have mentioned above are some positive portraits of Jews and Judaism. As I have said earlier, it is not difficult at all for any reader, even with just a quick reading of Luke-Acts, to notice these positive portraits. Luke is not just a historian, he is first of all a theologian. Richard Pervo comments, Luke “knows more than he says and says more than he knows.”²⁹ But what are the reasons for these positive portraits? What are Luke’s concerns behind these narratives? Following this, I shall offer some opinions that may well explain the positive portraits in Luke-Acts.

2. The purpose of positive portraits of Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts

According to Luke 1:1-4, the Gospel of Luke is an account of “the events that have been fulfilled among us.” Jesus himself, and later on the believers of Jesus, did not intend to form a distinct religion. Jesus, together with his followers, were Jews themselves. They observed the Law of Moses. Every day they entered into the temple to pray (Acts 3:1). In every aspect, the followers of Jesus in early church considered their community to be one with Judaism. And it was only after the church had a successful mission in Antioch that they began to be known as Christians according to Luke (Acts 11:26).

²⁹ Richard I. Pervo, *The Mystery of Acts: Unraveling Its Story* (Santa Rosa, CA: POLEBRIDGE, 2008), 52.

But the followers of Jesus did have special claims that traditional Judaism didn't have. They claimed Jesus to be the Messiah who would bring about the salvation that God promised long ago. For them, the kingdom of God had already arrived. Besides, they claimed that this Jesus, who was condemned and crucified by the leaders of Jewish authority, has risen from the dead.

The special claims of the followers of Jesus rendered their religious status and social status quite at odds with the largely Jewish society. There was the special need for believers of early church to demonstrate their Jewishness. Indeed they sought to prove their loyalty to Judaism by recounting their shared history, recalling God's promise to their patriarchs and by citing the prophets from the Hebrew Bible to interpret the events. In emphasizing their continuity with Judaism, they stressed their shared Jewish roots. Thus, Jesus explains his passion, death and resurrection from the teachings of Moses and the prophets (Luke 24:27), he opens their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). And most of the speeches in Acts, noticeably Stephen's speech in 7:2-53, Paul's speech in Antioch in Pisidia in 13:16-41, appeal to their shared history and memories of God's deeds. It is also because of this need to emphasize their continuity with Judaism that, in Acts, Paul repeatedly declares that the reason he is on trial is for the hope of Israel (23:6; 24:15; 26:6-8; 28:20).

Aside from the need to demonstrate their continuity with Judaism, Luke's second reason for his portraying Jews and Judaism positively is to declare that God's promise of salvation has been realized. Jesus is the promised savior. This theme is already shown through the message of Gabriel to Mary in the Infancy Narrative (Luke 1:26-38). In order to declare the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, Luke first has to recollect God's promises to his people and he does this through the mouths of various figures, such as Mary (the Canticle of Mary in Luke 1:46-55), Zechariah (the Canticle of Zechariah in 1:68-79), Simeon, Anna, Stephen, Paul, etc.

He does this also through narrating events and interpreting them. When Jesus heals the crippled woman in Luke 13:10-17, he calls the woman “a daughter of Abraham”, reminding his audience of God’s promise to the patriarch. Again in 19:1-10, when Zacchaeus shows his repentance for his past injustice (see above for the argument of Zacchaeus’ repentance), Jesus calls him “a son of Abraham”, which reminds his audience of God’s promise to the patriarch. The events of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection, the coming of the promised Holy Spirit, all become occasions for Luke to recollect scriptural promises and declare their fulfillment.

Since Jews are the chosen people of God, the message of the promised salvation was sent to Jews first (Acts 3:26). Luke’s concern to demonstrate the primacy of the Jewish people over the Gentiles in hearing the message of salvation also contributes to the positive portrait of Jews and Judaism.

In short, through his positive portrait of Jews and Judaism, Luke aims to underscore that the movement of Jesus and its mission to the Gentiles, instead of separating itself from Judaism, is in continuity with Jewish religion. While the early church claims that scriptural promises have come to their fulfillment, these promises are foretold long ago by the prophets. Thus in claiming the fulfillment of scriptural promises, Luke affirms the Jewish heritage and identifies the community of believers within Judaism. On this point, Brawley rightly comments, “Therefore, the standard paradigm for understanding Luke’s view of the relation between Christianity and Judaism should pivot 180 degrees. That is, rather than setting gentile Christianity free, Luke ties it to Judaism. And rather than rejecting the Jews, Luke appeals to them.”³⁰

³⁰ Brawley, Robert L. *Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology, and Conciliation*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series; No. 33. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1987, 159.

3. Negative portraits of Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts

What makes Luke's attitude toward Jews and Judaism ambivalent and therefore intriguing among scholars is his inclusion of negative portraits of Jews and Judaism alongside the positive ones. It is this negative portrait of Jews and Judaism that have caused some readers of Luke-Acts to consider Luke to be anti-Jewish. For them, the end of Acts means the final rejection of the Jews by the early church of believers. However, such a interpretation of Luke-Acts would do injustice to Luke's overall theology, especially his conviction that God's plans get fulfilled no matter what.

What follows is an investigation of the negative portraits of Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts and an explanation and clarification of Luke's concerns behind these negative portraits. Again, I shall group the negative portraits by some key figures, events and speeches and sayings.

3.1. Some figures that portray Jews and Judaism negatively

3.1.1 *The elders, chief priests and the scribes*

When it comes to the Jews that are negatively portrayed by Luke, one naturally thinks first of Jesus' opponents in his ministry. His opponents include a variety of people: Pharisees, scribes, the elders, the chief priests and, for a moment, even the crowds. Although they all have conflicts with Jesus, these different groups of people are not treated the same by Luke. Compared with the Pharisees, Luke portrays the scribes, the elders and the chief priests more negatively.³¹ It is this group of people that will reject and hand over Jesus and eventually

³¹ Comparing the Pharisees with the group of the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, one could notice that Luke favors the former over the latter. While Matthew has John the Baptist reproach "many Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 3:7)," Luke simply mentions "the crowds (Luke 3:7)." In Matthew, the Pharisees are

have Jesus crucified. It is the high priest, the chief priests, the elders and the temple police who arrest Jesus (Luke 22:50-52), it is the assembly of “the elders of the people, both chief priests and scribes” that brought Jesus to the council and examine Jesus (22:66) and the same group of people bring Jesus to Pilate (23:1) and shout for the crucifying of Jesus (22:21, 23). In Acts, too, it is “the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees” that arrest Peter and John when they preach in Solomon’s Portico (Acts 4:1, 5). The high priest and his people, who Luke specifically identifies as the Sadducees, arrest the apostles and imprison them (5:17-18).

In emphasizing the culpability of the elders, chief priests and the scribes, Luke makes a subtle distinction between the Jewish leaders and the people. “The people” (τον λαον) does not always include every Jew, since Pilate says to the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, “you brought me this man as one who was perverting the people (v. 13).” Clearly the first “people” does not include the second “people.” Even though the people do play a role in the condemnation and death of Jesus (Luke 23:13), and Peter accuses the Israelites in general of their rejection and killing of Jesus (Acts 3:14-15), it is the Jewish leaders who are the real opponents of Jesus. The point of Luke here is that not all Jews have rejected Jesus and his message, some Jews accepted him and followed him. O’Toole reminds us,

Luke has not included “the people” among those who oppose Jesus,³² but now he does. However, within a few verses, he writes “of the great multitude of people and of women” who followed Jesus on the way of the cross and lamented over him (Luke 23:27), of the people (ο λαος) who stood watching Jesus’ crucifixion but did not

mentioned once in the Passion Narrative (27:62), there is no mention at all of the Pharisees in Luke’s Passion Narrative.

³² For a summary of Luke’s treatment of the ordinary Jewish people in his Gospel, see J. D. Kingsbury, *Conflict in Luke: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples* (Minneapolis, MN 1991), 28-31.

participate in their leader's mockery of Jesus (vv.35-36a) and of the crowd who after they had seen what had happened went home "beating their breasts" (v.48; cf. v. 27).³³

Readers of Luke-Acts should be careful to keep this point in mind when they come to the end of Acts, where they might quickly assume that, by quoting the words of the prophet Isaiah, Luke has rejected Jews and excluded from God's salvation as a whole because of their unbelief.

3.1.2. *The ten lepers cleansed by Jesus*

In his narrative of Jesus' cleansing of ten lepers, Luke includes a detail that has surprised readers. One of the ten healed lepers was a Samaritan and he was the only one that returned and thanked Jesus (17:11-19). The positive portrait of this Samaritan who returned and thanked Jesus contrasts with the negative portrait of the other nine, who could be reasonably assumed to be Jews, "but the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner (v. 17-18)?" In contrasting the gratitude of the Samaritan leper with the ingratitude of the other nine lepers who were Jews, Luke is telling his readers that people who are non-Jews can be grateful and receptive to God's grace.

In narrating this story, Luke presents a reversal of responses expected from the Samaritan and the other nine. What was expected from the other nine lepers, who were Jews, came only from the Samaritan leper; and the nine Jewish lepers gave an ungrateful response that, from the perspective of the Jews, a Samaritan was expected to do. This reversal prepares the readers to face the coming reality that, while many of the Jews will turn their backs against the word of God, a lot of Gentiles will listen to the word of God and become believers of Jesus.

³³ O'Toole, "Reflections," 538.

3.2. Events that portray the Jews negatively

The events in Luke that portray Jews negatively are mainly the arguments between Jesus and his rivals, which eventually lead to Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion. The events in Acts that portray the Jews negatively are the persecution of the early church by Jews, most importantly the arrest and condemnation of Stephen and Paul. The issue of requiring Gentile believers to be circumcised reveals some opposition from the Jews, but since these Jews are the believers within the church, I shall discuss it in the following chapter.

Talking about the argument of Jews with Jesus, one can find numerous cases in Luke. These arguments, though many in number, can be classified into a few groups according to their related issues. There are arguments over observance of Sabbath (6:1-5; 6-11; 13:10-17), the authority to forgive sins (5:17-26; 7:47-50), association with sinners (5:29-32; 7:36-46), the source of the power to drive out demons (11:14-23). Aside from these arguments, there are questions that Jews raise, either to seek clarification from Jesus (10:25-37) or to trap him (20:20-26; 20:27-40).

If we read these arguments between Jesus and Jews closely, we can notice two commonalities among them. First, they are all about the Jews' doubt or protest that Jesus does not follow the law of Moses, though Jesus insists that he observes the law of Moses. At times Jesus appears to be breaking the law, such as healing on the Sabbath, touching the lepers, etc., but he always affirms the Mosaic Law and asks others to follow it. This is most clearly demonstrated when he says, "it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped (17:17)."

Secondly, arguments with the Jews often turn into opportunities by which Jesus reveals and teaches the true meaning of the law and establishes his unique authority. In answering Jews' protest against his association with sinners, Jesus said, "those who are well have no

need of a physician, but those who are sick (5:31).” Unlike some Jews, Jesus does not please God by meticulous observance of the law; what matters the most for him is to totally trust in the love of the Father and to love one’s neighbor. In fact, this double love commandment was his answer to a lawyer’s question seeking to inherit the eternal life (Luke 10:25-27) and his answer is what the Law of Moses teaches. When questioned about his disciples’ plucking some heads of grain on the Sabbath, Jesus used the scriptural example of David and his companions to teach Jews that “the Son of Man is the lord of the Sabbath (6:1-5).”

On one level, Luke narrates the arguments between Jesus and his opponents to show their hostility to and misunderstanding of Jesus. Historically speaking, there is no doubt that there was objection and hostility from some Jews to Jesus that eventually led to his crucifixion and death. However, it is not the purpose of Luke to stir up among his readers hostility and hatred toward Jews and to promote anti-Jewish ideology. On the second level, Luke—a skilled writer—employs these arguments as his tools to prove that Jesus and his followers are not against the Law of Moses as many Jews thought. Jesus is truly Jewish in what he says and does. As the Messiah, the King of the Jews, Jesus affirms the validity of the Law of Moses and fulfills it.

3.3. Speeches and sayings that portray Jews negatively

Most of the speeches and sayings that have negative portrait of Jews express the reversal theme: either reversal of the traditional attitude toward Jews and non-Jews or reversal of the order in coming to accept God’s salvation. Some other speeches and sayings are reproaches whose function is to invite and urge the audience to repent and bear fruit.

3.3.1 *The inaugural speech in the synagogue of Nazareth*

In the beginning of his Galilean ministry, in a conflict with his own townsfolk, Jesus recalls God's favor upon the Gentiles in the OT. The prophets Elijah and Elisha were messengers of God and were agents of God's salvation. Both of them were Jews, yet they did not work miracles in their own land. By showing himself with Elijah and Elisha, Jesus shows that he is the agent of God's salvation now. The point of Jesus' saying here is not the exclusion of the Jews from God's salvation, but rather, the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation. What is stressed here, as Culpepper suggests, is the "inclusiveness of God's mercy." According to Culpepper, "Jesus affirmed a fulfillment that was not limited to Israel only—God would bless all the poor, all the captives. Neither was the fulfillment Jesus announced radically different from the work of the prophets. Israel's Scriptures themselves bear witness to God's blessing on Gentiles as well as Jews."³⁴ The fact that Luke places this saying right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry suggests its importance to Luke's theology: Gentiles will be saved if they listen to God's messenger and repent, Jews will not be saved if they do not listen to God's messenger and repent. Throughout his two-volume work, Luke consistently expresses this point.

3.3.2. *The parable of the Good Samaritan*

In answering the question of how to inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25), Jesus quoted the double commandment to love from Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18, but he gives a different definition of one's neighbor. To illustrate to the lawyer his new definition of one's neighbor, he surprised his listener by telling the story of a Good Samaritan. As I have mentioned above in the case of the ten lepers healed by Jesus, it was practically impossible to think of a Jew

³⁴ Culpepper, *Luke*, 85-86.

praising a Samaritan, since the Samaritans were despised by Jews and were considered to be among the impure and the marginalized people. However, in his parable, it is precisely the Samaritan who is able to show his love for the victim. In doing what the Jews would consider to be impure and displeasing to God, the Samaritan has shown love from a pure heart and has done what is pleasing to God.

The effect of the negative portrait of the priest and the Levite and the positive portrait of the Samaritan is a reversal of traditional thinking about Jews and Gentiles. Having heard Jesus' recommendation of the Samaritan as "good" and his invitation to "do likewise" after him, readers are naturally prepared to have an open mind to see the Gentiles included in the community of believers. However, readers should not interpret that Luke intends the rejection of the Jews from the community of believers, but only that they have an incorrect knowledge of God and of neighbor.

3.3.3. *Sayings about the narrow door*

Another saying of Jesus that expresses the reversal theme is found in Luke 13:24-30. First, Jesus warns his Jewish audience of the stern reality that some of them who are Jews, indeed many of them as Jesus emphasizes here, will be excluded from the eschatological banquet because of their way of life (evildoers). Their ancestral connection cannot guarantee their final salvation. On the other hand, what the parable of the Great Dinner in 14:24 offers is a warning that those who reject God's invitation will be rejected by God.

3.3.4. Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees, scholars of the law, and Stephen's accusation of the Jews

Perhaps the lengthiest negative sayings against Jews are found in Luke 11:37-54, where Jesus denounces the Pharisees and scholars of the law. Luke places this saying within the context of Jesus' dining with a Pharisee. It starts with the Pharisee's observation, or perhaps verbal complaint, that Jesus did not do the prescribed washing before the meal (v. 38). At first, Jesus focuses on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, pointing out their misbehaving under the guise of following the Law of Moses. In doing so, Jesus clarifies for them the true meaning of the Law of Moses: justice and love of God (v. 42). When one of the scholars of the law protests, Jesus then includes also the scholars of the law in his targeted group. From v. 47 on until v. 52, Jesus accuses both of them of their rejection and killing of God's prophets. On one hand, this accusation of the Pharisees and scholars of the law puts in front of readers the hostility to and rejection of God's prophets in the past by Jews in general; on the other hand, this accusation serves literally to prepare for the coming rejection and killing of Jesus by Jews in the following chapters.

The accusation of Stephen against his persecutors in Acts 7:51-53 is similar to that of Jesus. This accusation of Stephen, along with his persecution, puts Stephen in line with Jesus and the prophets of OT. It also leads literally and rhetorically to the scattering of the disciples among the Gentiles and the harvest of Gentile believers.

3.3.5. Paul's formulaic renunciations of Jews

In Acts, as a result of the unbelief of his synagogue audiences, three times Paul renounces them and declares that he will go to the Gentiles to preach the word of God (13:46; 18:6; 28:28). Especially in 28:28, Paul quotes from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, reproaching their dullness and the hardness of their hearts (vv. 26-27). It seems at first that Paul is declaring that he has given up on the Jews as a whole. However, a closer reading of

Acts shows that Paul is not “writing-off” the Jews. First, Luke consistently reports that there are some Jews who have listened and accepted the word of God (Acts 6:7; 21:20). The effect of Paul’s preaching always results in a division among the Jews: some believe and some refuse to believe. Even before Paul reproaches the Jews for their unbelief, there are some Jews who come to believe, “some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe (28:24).” The result of his insistence on the belief of some of the Jews is that Luke is not intending the rejection of the Jews as a whole.

Secondly, Paul continues to go to the Jews each time after his renunciation of the Jews. After his first renunciation of the Jews in 13:46, we read in 14:1, when Paul and Barnabas move to Iconium, they first go into the Jewish synagogue and “spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers.” Again, after his second renunciation of “the Jews” in 18:6, Luke reports that Crispus, who is a synagogue official, come to believe in the Lord together with his whole household (18:7). This indicates that Paul continues to preach to the Jews. If Paul could continue his preaching to Jews after 13:46 and 18:6, there is no reason to deny his continual preaching to the Jews after 28:28. In fact, in 28:30, Luke narrates that Paul “welcomed all who came to him”, which indicates that Paul continues to preach to both Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews are not finally rejected and salvation of God is still open to them.

So then, what is the purpose of Paul’s renunciation of the Jews? The answer is given already in 13:46 when Paul says, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles (13:46).” Paul’s (the narrator’s) priority of the Jews is attested by his habitual practice of entering the synagogue first everywhere he goes. In fact, as early as 3:26, Peter narrates that “when God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.” The Gospel shall be preached to the

Jews first, but their unbelief has already been foretold by the prophets. This foretelling of the unbelief of some Jews help to resolve the fact that why some Jews, who are the first to be called by God and to whom the Gospel is preached first, would not believe. Perhaps in narrating this way, Luke is also answering the questions raised by some Gentile converts regarding the unbelief of some of the Jews. In any way, Luke is saying that even the unbelief of the some of the Jews has been foretold by the prophets.

The narrative also shows that it is the unbelief of Jews that turns the missionaries to the Gentiles. Here Luke is saying that it is not that the church wants to part from the Jews; rather, their unbelief turns the church to the Gentiles. The unbelief of some of the Jews is employed as a rhetorical device to argue for the innocence of the church in her relationship with Judaism.

Lastly, readers should not jump quickly to the conclusion that by Paul's three-time renunciation, Luke intends the final rejection of the Jews. Vittorio Fusco has offered a fresh perspective from which readers could have a better grasp of the intended meaning of the end of Acts. According to Fusco, when Luke quotes from the prophet Isaiah, he also uses the prophet's vocabulary in its biblical sense. Fusco proposes that "blindness" and "hardening" should not be considered to mean "curse or definitive rejection."³⁵ He says,

Within biblical tradition, hardening always implies the possibility of a future enlightenment, when God touches a heart of stone and renders it able to listen once more. Returning to Isaiah, right after proclaiming the blindness of the people, the text adds: "until when, Lord?" (Is 6:11a). The answer confirms the punishment, but also states that it will come to an end (Is 6:11b-13).³⁶

³⁵ Vittorio Fusco, "Luke-Acts and the Future of Israel." *Novum Testamentum* 38, no. 1 (1996): 6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561520>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

Thus, instead of rendering a rejection of the Jews, Paul's three-time renunciation, especially the end of Acts, expresses hope that those unbelieving Jews will return and believe the Gospel.

4. The purpose of negative portrait of Jews.

A writer as skillful as Luke, could deceive as well as entertain his readers. Being an ancient historian, Luke's narrative commands our cautious reading. Christopher Matthews comments well, "in the ancient world, common convention permitted historians to elaborate their narratives in ways that would be unacceptable to modern practice."³⁷ Adding the fact that Luke is not just a historian, he is also a theologian, we have to be mindful of his concerns other than that of history.

At first glance, his negative portrait of Jews might tempt readers to label Luke as an anti-Jewish writer. Although he has various purposes with the negative portrait of Jews, it is by no means his purpose is to incite readers' hatred toward the Jews. First, through his negative portrait of Jews, Luke is writing as a historian to convey some possible conflicts between Jesus and his opponents. The fact that Jesus was a reformer of Judaism and that he was condemned and crucified suffices it to assume that there must have been considerable conflicts between Jesus and the Jews. Luke is just presenting the hostility and objection of Jews toward Jesus. In this way, he is presenting some facts rather than promoting a systematic anti-Jewish ideology.

³⁷ Christopher R. Matthews, "'We Had Hoped That He Was the One to Redeem Israel': The Fragility of Hope in Luke-Acts" in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment* (New York: Paulist, 2013), ed. by R. Lennan and N. Pineda-Madrid, 61.

Secondly, Luke faced a dilemma that God's promised salvation to Israel is not accepted; rather, it is joyfully welcomed and accepted by the Gentiles. As a theologian, Luke has to offer an explanation for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the community of the believers. He needs also to cope with the issue of the salvation of Jews: has God's promise to Israel failed? What is the fate of the Jews? By portraying Jews negatively, Luke first works out a reversal between Jews and Gentiles (including the Samaritans). This reversal prepares readers for welcoming the Gentiles into the community of believers. Besides, Luke is demonstrating that it is not the fault of the church to turn away from the religious authority of the Jews; rather, it is their unbelief and persecution of the church that scattered the church among the Gentiles and so started the preaching to the Gentiles. The church, represented by Paul, is always open to Jews and willing to preach to them the message of salvation. In this sense, the negative portraits function as a rhetorical device for Luke to acquit the church from its conflicts with the religious authorities.

Conclusion

To summarize Luke's purpose behind his positive and negative portrait of Jews, we can say that Luke has two main concerns. On one hand, he is eager to demonstrate that the community of Jesus' believers are Jewish. Positive portraits of Jews indicate this eagerness to a Jewish self-identification. The church is a continuation of Judaism. At the same time, it carries also the fulfillment of Jewish expectation of God's promised salvation.

On the other hand, instead of seeing a communal restoration of Jews, the church witnessed a large number of Gentile converts, who were once considered to be outsiders of the eschatological banquet. Through his portraits of some Jews (but also a consistent report of some Jews who became believers), Luke employs the unbelief and objection of Jews as the cause of the church's mission to the Gentiles, the result of which is the conversion and inclusion of Gentiles in the community of the believers.

Chapter III Mission to the Gentiles as fulfilling

God's promise to Israel

In the first chapter, I have discussed God's promise to Israel. God takes initiative to love his people and he has shown his faithfulness in the history of Israel. In the second chapter, I examined Luke's portrait of Jews, both positive and negative. His negative portrait of Jews suggests some existing conflicts between the early church and some Jews.³⁸ His positive portrait of Jews tells the reader of the fact that indeed on the one hand, there were many Jews who heard the word of God and came to believe in the Gospel. On the other hand, by saying that many Jews who were believers of Jesus were devout Jews (Acts 21:20), it seems very likely that Luke is concerned to defend the early church as loyal to the law of Moses and the worship of God from the opponents' accusations that believers of Jesus are against Moses, the holy temple and God. Jesus, Stephen and Paul represent the church in experiencing these false accusations (Luke 23:2-4; Acts 6:11-14; 21:28). Thus, while narrating the church's mission to the Gentiles, Luke is demonstrating that the church has not gone against the Law of Moses and the worship of God and that the church is the continuation and expansion of Judaism.

As a result of the plentiful fruits of the church's mission to the Gentiles and the inclusion of Gentiles in the church in large scale, the church has become a community of various ethnic groups. The question about the qualification of Gentile believers to be saved was raised once

³⁸ John G. Gager holds a view that "Jews" who are portrayed negatively in Luke-Acts are not Jews outside the Jesus-movement; rather, they are the believing Jews within the community of Jesus' followers (Jewish Christians or Christian Jews). see John G. Gager, "Where does Luke's Anti-Judaism come from," in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, ed. by Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 207-211.

again and, presumably, problems regarding social interaction within the community of believers emerged also. Whether the church could solve these issues would greatly affect its future mission or even the legitimacy of its own existence. In Acts, Luke strategically presents the issue and its resolution in the so-called “Apostolic Council.”³⁹

1. The problems to be solved at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem

1.1 The position of the Apostolic Council in Acts

The episode of the Apostolic Council comes right in the middle of Acts.⁴⁰ Its structural location gives a hint about its theological weight. Scholars have claimed that it is the “turning point” “centerpiece” and “watershed” of the book.⁴¹ Hans Conzelmann rightly comments,

Thus chapter 15 is not only the literary center but also the real center of the whole book. Peter and the apostles disappear from the field of view. From now on the whole history of the church is compressed into the story of Paul’s work. He represents the connection between the early days of the church and the present.⁴²

Although prior to chapter 15, there are already narratives about mission to the Gentiles, especially chapters 13 and 14, these early narratives seem to set up the stage for the Apostolic

³⁹ Not all scholars agree on the term “council of Jerusalem.” Joseph A. Fitzmyer complains that this term is just a “misnomer”, since those who were present at the council represented very limited mission fields and it is not counted as one among the many councils in the history of Christianity. See Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 543.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 538. Fitzmyer even has conducted a word count about Acts, which attests to the middle location of the Apostolic Council in Acts. According to Fitzmyer (using his translation), there are 12,385 words in chaps. 1-14 and 12,502 words in chaps. 15-28.

⁴¹ See Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 461.

⁴² Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 121.

Council. C. K. Barrett has pointed out a Lukan pattern for solving a problem: A difficulty comes; senior members take steps to deal with it; the result not only solves the existing problem, but also an advance is made because of the result. Thus chapters 13 and 14 present the mission to the Gentiles and its fruits; the fruitful mission is threatened (15:1); representatives and senior members take steps to deal with the issue (vv. 2-6); a solution (decision) is worked out (vv. 7-35); a great advance in mission to the Gentiles takes place (15:36-28:31).⁴³ Thus it is by no means exaggerating to say that the episode of the Apostolic Council is the watershed of the whole book of Acts.

1.2 Historicity of the event and the Chronological discrepancy between Acts 15:1-35 and Gal 2:1-10

Scholars disagree with regard to the historicity of the Apostolic Council. Fitzmyer mentions that Haenchen and Dibelius regard the whole episode of the Apostolic Council as a composition invented by Luke “without any recourse to sources.”⁴⁴ Considering the fact that ancient historiography allowed historians to “elaborate their narratives in ways that would be unacceptable to modern practice,”⁴⁵ it is not impossible that Luke invented the whole episode.

However, an echo of this Apostolic Council is found in Gal 2:1-10 where Paul recalls that he went to Jerusalem to meet the “acknowledged leaders” over the issue of circumcision. The event in Gal 2:1-10 is very similar to the narrative of the Apostolic Council in Acts

⁴³ C. K. Barrett, *Acts: A Shorter Commentary* (London, New York: T & T Clark, 2002), p. 226.

⁴⁴ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 540.

⁴⁵ Christopher R. Matthews, “‘We had hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel’: The fragility of hope in Luke-Acts” in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, ed. by Lennan, Richard, Pineda-Madrid and Nancy (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), p. 61.

15:1-15 so much so that it can be counted as a supporting evidence to the historicity of the Apostolic Council. However, since Gal 2 does not agree with Acts 15 in many details they relate, there are also problems for one to identify the latter with the former. Among the many discrepancies,⁴⁶ the most obvious one is how many trips to Jerusalem Paul has made up to the time of the council. Is it two (Gal 2) or three (Acts 15)? While other discrepancies can be mapped out with some efforts, the discrepancy over the number of trips is too blatant to be harmonized. As a result, Conzelmann claims that “a harmonization of the data about the journeys to Jerusalem in Galatians and in Acts is not possible.”⁴⁷

Bock offers a survey of scholars’ stances over the timing, the historicity and the relationship between Acts 15 and Gal 2:

The scholarly debate over the event’s timing concerns this event’s relationship to Gal. 2 and the connection of Gal. 2 to Acts 11:30. For those who think a choice is possible, two views exist. (1) Acts 15 could equal Gal. 2:1-10 (Gutbrod, TDNT 4:1065-67, “certainly no invention of Ac[ts]”; Williams 1990: 257-59; Polhill 1992: 321-22; Fitzmyer 1998: 539-40; Jervell 1998: 404n745), or (2) Acts 11:30 equals Gal. 2 (Bruce 1990: 330-31; Marshall 1980: 244-25; Witherington 1998: 440-42; Schnabel 2004: 987-90). Johnson (1992: 270) appears to make no choice in the historical debate over the timing, apparently regarding it as unresolvable...Other scholars question the entire scene, representing a third approach to the issue. For example, Haenchen (1987: 457-58, esp. 463, where he calls it intrinsically impossible), building on Dibelius (1956: 93-101, originally published in 1947), distinguishes Luke’s literary work from his historical

⁴⁶ A detailed discussion of the discrepancies between Acts 11, 15 and Gal1-2, see Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K: Paternoster, 1998), 440-449.

⁴⁷ Conzelmann, *Acts*, 121.

work and questions the historicity of this meeting and the production of a decree. This view is followed by Bornkamm in TDNT 6:663, who sees the authority over the entire church of the Jerusalem elders in the council as not historically credible.⁴⁸

In this article, I choose to equal Acts 11:27-30 to Gal 2:1-10 with the following reasons: (1) The number of journeys that Paul made to Jerusalem would be harmonious. (2) Both journeys in Acts 11:30 and Gal 2:1-10 are a result of revelation. (3) Both accounts mention material support for the poor in Judea. Witherington stresses the present subjunctive of the verb that implies “a hoped-for continuing of an activity Paul had already begun to undertake when he delivered the first funds from Antioch to the Jerusalem church.”⁴⁹ (4) Peter’s behavior in Antioch can be understood since the Apostolic Decree has not been issued yet. (5) Most importantly, Paul’s silence in Gal 2 about the event of the Apostolic Council and its decision can be reasonably explained since the event takes place after Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

This identification is not without its problems. Titus’ conversion has to take place prior to so-called Paul’s first missionary journey. With regard to the silence about circumcision in Acts 11:27-30, I would argue that it is not Luke’s time to take up the issue yet, as Bock contends, “Luke chose to discuss the Gentile problem in detail in Acts 15.”⁵⁰ Probably the biggest difficulty with this identification is the tightened Pauline Chronology.⁵¹ In the end, we have to acknowledge that there is no perfect matching regarding this issue, as Simon

⁴⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 487-488.

⁴⁹ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 442.

⁵⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 490.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 490.

Kistemaker remarks, “no theory is without its flaws and every hypothesis has its own set of problems.”⁵²

1.3 The issue involved in the Apostolic Council and its solution

In 15:1 we are told that “certain individuals” from Judea came to Antioch and taught “the brothers”: “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” From this verse we are not sure about the identity of these “certain individuals”, however in v. 5 Luke mentions that “some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees” insist on a similar requirement on the Gentiles believers, namely, “it is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.” Taken also into consideration of the “false brothers” in Gal 2:4⁵³ and the “circumcision faction” in Gal 2:12, those who came to Antioch from Judea in v. 1 and those who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees in v. 5 basically share the same view: circumcision is necessary for salvation.

1.3.1 The issue of circumcision for salvation

The issue involved here, first of all, is not whether the Gentiles could be included in the church; rather, it is about the conditions under which they could be included. To quote from Conzelmann, “it does not have to do with the admission of the Gentiles as such, but with the conditions for their entrance.”⁵⁴ Some may feel confused at this point because earlier in

⁵² Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 536.

⁵³ By placing Acts 15:1, 5 together with Gal 2:4, 12, it is not that I am unaware of the my decision of identifying Acts 11:30 with Acts 2:1-10. The reason for treating them together is based on my assumption that these people are members of Jewish believers of Jesus the Messiah and they all held the view that circumcision is necessary for salvation.

⁵⁴ Conzelmann, *Acts*, 115.

chapter 10, Luke has already recounted the story of Cornelius, a God-fearer who is eventually admitted into the church without first receiving circumcision. Furthermore, one reads in chapter 11, after Peter's returning to Jerusalem and his explanation in view of the questions raised by the circumcised believers (v. 2), that the issue on the admission of the Gentiles has already been settled. Why then does Luke bring it up again in Chapter 15? Or would it not seem better if the question on the conditions of admission in chapter 15 should come before chapter 10?

First of all, the story of Cornelius, as Luke presents it, seems more likely to be dealing with the issue of the admission of a Gentile per se, rather than the conditions of admission. In the vision that he had in Joppa, Peter is told, "what God has made clean, you must not call profane (10:15)." While in the vision the words "clean" and "profane" refer to food, this vision is interpreted "not in terms of food but of men."⁵⁵ Interpreting his vision, Peter speaks to Cornelius and all who are present, saying, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean (v. 28)." This vision serves as the divine endorsement, and indeed a command, to also go to the Gentiles and bring them salvation. Out of this experience, Peter testifies and says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (vv. 34-35)." Again in 11:12, in answering those who criticize him for "[going] to uncircumcised men and eat with them (v. 4)," Peter says, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." Later on, at the Jerusalem Council, Peter recalls the event of Cornelius' conversion and considers it as the beginning of the admission of Gentiles in the church, saying, "my brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and

⁵⁵ Barrett, *Acts*, 158.

become believers (15:7).” Cornelius’ admission to the church signifies God’s salvation is open even to the Gentile believers; “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life (11:18).”⁵⁶ It is, therefore, reasonable to say that the story of Cornelius in Acts deals more with the admission of Gentiles per se, rather than the conditions of their admission, though the issue of admission shows up in the story.

Some might argue that since the issue on the conditions of Gentile admission has already showed up in the story of Cornelius, why then does Luke bring it up again in Chapter 15? The answer is that Cornelius is only a particular case in which a Gentile is admitted in the church without circumcision. After Peter’s testimony that the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius, those who criticized him “were silenced” (11:18). It is more of a temporary concession on the part of those who insist on the necessity of circumcision, it is far from being an official norm that Gentile believers could be admitted without circumcision. Hence further debate over the issue on the conditions of admission is still lying in wait. And this debate is triggered by the numerous Gentile converts due to Paul’s so-called first missionary journey. These Gentile converts are admitted to the church without first receiving circumcision. This is not a particular case anymore, this is something really serious for those who insist on the necessity of circumcision. Hence, right after the narrative of Paul’s first missionary journey, some of those adherents of circumcision, “certain individuals (v. 1),” come and teach by their own authority, saying, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Their point is clear: you can be saved provided you are circumcised. There is no problem for the Gentiles believers to be admitted in the church, only that they receive

⁵⁶ Some contend that the first Gentile believer of the Gospel is not Cornelius; rather, the Ethiopian Eunuch who received baptism from the hands of Philip is the first Gentile believer, for example, Kelly holds this view in his “The First Lukan Convert.” However, 15:7 strongly suggests that Luke has made a conscious attempt to make Peter the first apostle preaching to the Gentiles. Other scholars argue that since Luke does not emphasize the Gentile identity of the eunuch, very likely he is a diaspora Jew living in Ethiopia. See Witherington, *Acts*, 290-301.

circumcision first. The conflict is so serious that there is “no small dissension and debate” among them, the result is that representatives be sent to Jerusalem to seek a solution.

1.3.2 The issue of table fellowship in a mixed Christian community

Besides the issue on the condition of admission of Gentile believers, another issue involved in chapter 15 seems to be table fellowship, though not obviously so. The reasons that the issue of table fellowship is involved are the following.

First, although the Apostolic Decree—which is the result of the Apostolic Council—appears at three places in Acts with different orders of the texts (15:20, 29; 21:25), all contain regulations that pertain mostly to food rituals. Saying so, I am not unaware of the textual problems regarding the Book of Acts. An investigation of the texts of the Decree will be offered in the following section. As for now, it suffices to say that the texts of the Decree according to the Alexandrian version of Acts, which is believed by most modern scholars to be the original texts of Acts,⁵⁷ are regulations about food practices. It is reasonable to presume that disputes about food regulations have been raised in Antioch where Gentile converts and Jewish believers formed a mixed community and they were challenged in their day-to-day social interactions, most importantly, their table fellowship. The Decree in chapter 15, therefore, aims to provide an authoritative opinion regarding food rituals and thus enable Christian table fellowship in the mixed community of believers in Antioch (also Syria and Cilicia).

Secondly, identifying Paul’s visit to Jerusalem of Gal 2:1-10 with that of Acts 11:30, the dispute over Christian table fellowship recounted in Gal 2:11-14 should then take place

⁵⁷ See Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 66-72.

before the Apostolic Council, which makes it probable that the dispute over Christian table fellowship in Antioch was raised at the Jerusalem Council. Paul's words describing this dispute over Christian table fellowship in Antioch suggest that it was no small matter at all.

Verse 12 suggests that those Jewish believers who insist on receiving circumcision and keeping the Mosaic Law have pretty strong influence, "he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction." The consequence of this dispute is so serious that, according to Paul, "even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy (v. 13)." Since both sides would not give in (presumably this incident is the high point of a tension that has existed for a period of time), this issue would then be brought up for discussion in the Apostolic Council.⁵⁸

Excursus

The term "Gentile" in Luke-Acts does not refer to any ordinary person who is not a Jew. Although Luke has nowhere clarified or specified the meaning and implication of the term "Gentile", reader can detect the difference between Lukan usage of the term and its ordinary meaning. In Acts 16:14, Lydia, the Gentile lady who listens to Paul's preaching and is converted, is a "worshiper of God." The first Gentile convert in Acts, Cornelius, is not just any ordinary non-Jew, he is a God-fearer (Acts 10:2). Some other passages in Acts reports Paul preaching to both Jews and Greeks in the synagogue (Acts 14:1; 17:4; 18:4). In Luke

⁵⁸ Although Barrett mentions twice in his commentary on Acts that "the question before the Council" concerns not the terms about table fellowship in a mixed Christian community, but "on what terms may Gentiles be saved, that is, become Christians," he nevertheless acknowledges that the issue of Christian table fellowship "lurks in the background and was important." Perhaps the reason for Barrett to have this seemingly confusing thought is that he identifies Acts 15:1-5 with Gal 2:1-10, while placing the Decree and the letter on a separate occasion other than the meeting in Acts 15:1-5. See Barrett, *Acts*, 222, 224.

7:5, the Gentile centurion whose slave is healed by Jesus is one who appreciates and respects Judaism and Jewish practices.

From these cases, we can see that by the term “Gentile,” Luke refers to those “Who were in some way or another ‘sympathetic’ to Jews and to Judaism, who may thus have adopted certain Jewish customs or practices (prayer directed to the God of Israel, synagogue attendance, Sabbath observance, alms-giving, food laws, etc.), but who stopped short of becoming proselytes to Judaism (a step that would involve, for male converts, circumcision).”⁵⁹

2. The Decree of the Apostolic Council as a Jewish solution.

According to Acts, the issue of circumcision had caused “no small dissension and debate (v. 2)” in the church of Antioch, but also “much debate (v. 7)” among church leaders in Jerusalem. This emphasis on the seriousness of the matter and its severe consequence for community life could be assumed as reflecting some historical dissensions among believers of different backgrounds, namely, believers of Gentile background and believers of Jewish background. At the time when Luke composed Acts (that is between the 80s and the 90s),⁶⁰ believers of Jesus still considered themselves to be Jewish, though they started to be called

⁵⁹ Martinus C. de Boer, “God-fearers in Luke-Acts” in *Luke’s Literary Achievement* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 50.

⁶⁰ For a detailed discussion of the date of Acts, see Barrett, *Acts*, xxv. For an account of scholars’ opinions, see Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 51-55.

“Christians” (Acts 11:26).⁶¹ It is untrue to say that the early church during apostolic times already considered themselves as Christians in the sense that we use the term today, namely, a religion other than that of Judaism. It is therefore disastrous to interpret Luke-Acts as Christianity battling against and gaining victory over Jewish religion. Even though more and more Gentile believers continued to join in, the church still considered itself as Jewish, viewing things and solving problems in typical Jewish ways. Thus, New Testament writers write about and testify to Jesus by citing from the Jewish Bible. It is against this background that the issue of circumcision and of table fellowship were discussed and debated. In what follows, I shall point out that the decision of the Apostolic Council is not against Mosaic Law as it appears to be; rather, the Decree is a very Jewish decision.

2.1 The decision on the issue of circumcision is a Jewish decision

The importance of the practice of circumcision for Jews lies in the fact that it is “the sign of the covenant (Gen 17:11)” between God and Abraham. In Jewish tradition, the practice of circumcision is traced back to Abraham (Gen 17:9-14), and confirmed by Mosaic Law (Lev 12:3) which requires that every male Jew must be circumcised on the eighth day of his birth. In fact, according to Gen 17:9-14, to keep God’s covenant means to be circumcised and any uncircumcised male Jew will be “cut off from his people” for he breaks the covenant (v. 14).

It is clear here that circumcision is important in so far as it is the necessary means for a male Jew to gain membership in God’s covenanted people. But what about circumcision for Gentiles who also would like to become members of God’s covenanted people? Are Gentiles

⁶¹ John G. Gager notices that, aside from Acts 11:26, the term “Christian” also appears in 1 Peter 4:16, in the letters of Ignatius and also in “the correspondence between Pliny and the Roman Emperor Trajanall.” See Gager, “Where does Luke’s Anti-Judaism Come from?” in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), ed. by Eduard Iricinschi and Holger M. Zellentin, 207.

required to fully convert to Judaism and become Jews in a religious sense and then become God's chosen people? Or as long as they confess the one true God of Israel, can they have membership in God's chosen people without submitting themselves to the Jewish practices of circumcision, Sabbath observance and dietary laws? Perhaps a brief look into Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles with regard to the conditions required of them can illuminate our present discussion on the Apostolic Decree.

There are different opinions among Jews when it comes to conditions by which Gentiles can have a share in the promised salvation.⁶² Professor Malka Z. Simkovich has done a detailed study on Jewish universalism. His recently published work, *The Making of Jewish Universalism*, offers a clear and fresh thought on the attitudes of Jews regarding salvation for Gentiles in the end time. Simkovich presents four patterns of Israelite and non-Israelite relationship in view of eschatological salvation for the Gentiles, with three of them being models of particularism and one being a Universalist model.

Biblical authors employ four possible relationship models that are set in this future context. Among these, just one model is Universalist. I call these models Israel as Subjugators, Israel as Standard-Bearers, Naturalized Nations, and Universalized Worship. In the Israel as Subjugators model, Israel dominates its former enemies, who are forced into their service. In the Israel as Standard-Bearers model, Zion functions as a light for all of humankind, and the nations remain separate from one another but come together to acknowledge the One True God. In the Naturalized Nations model, the foreign nations assimilate into the Israelite covenant and participate in the Israelite community as full members of the covenantal relationship. Finally, in the Universalized

⁶² "God's promised salvation" refers to a future reality which is different from a view of present-day salvation. Fitzmyer suggests that "salvation" should be understood in its eschatological sense in Acts 15:1. See Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 541.

Worship model, the foreign nations are not naturalized into the Israelite covenant, but actively worship God and participate in the Israelite cult.⁶³

Noticeably the language of Simkovich speaks more of foreign nations rather than individuals. The reason for this, according to Simkovich, is that most of the biblical materials discussing the relationship between Israel and the foreign nations contain eschatological content. He notices that “passages that address nations highlight an author’s policy toward what should happen to foreign nations in the eschaton, whereas passages regarding individuals tend to be more concerned with a narrative message.”⁶⁴

While not all scholars may agree with Simkovich’s four patterns, it is clear that there have been various attitudes toward Gentiles and their relationship to Israelites in view of their access to salvation. Simkovich confirms this by saying, “But the rejection of idols, the acknowledgment of the Israelite God, the extent to which God is served, and the level of integration into the Israelite covenant vary from author to author,⁶⁵ and sometimes vary within a single passage.”⁶⁶ What is of special relevance to my discussion here about the conditions by which Gentiles can be admitted into the church is the fourth model—the Universalized model, which “reflects a scenario in which individuals or whole nations cling to the Israelite God without entering the Israelite covenantal community.”⁶⁷

It is perhaps this Universalized model that is behind the decision of the Apostolic Council not to impose circumcision on Gentile converts. The whole narrative in which the

⁶³ Malka Z. Simkovich, *The Making of Jewish Universalism* (Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Book, 2017), xxiii-xxiv.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁵ The word “author” here refers to authors of biblical books, especially of prophetic literature.

⁶⁶ Simkovich, *The Making of Jewish Universalism*, xxiv.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

decision of the Apostolic Council is made (15:6-19) argues that Gentiles should retain their ethnic identities. What is being emphasized is the fact that Gentile converts stand equal with Jews in their faith in God. In his speech, Peter testifies that “And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us (vv. 8-9).” What matters is not circumcision, but God’s grace, “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (v. 11).” In fact, earlier in Acts, Peter speaks to Cornelius and all those who are in his house, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (10:34-35).” It is likely that either Luke’s own composing of Peter’s speech or whatever source⁶⁸ on which he relies for the composition of Peter’s speech shared the same attitude with that of the Universalized model in Simkovich’s patterns. This attitude of allowing the Gentile converts to retain their own ethnic identity, not imposing circumcision and the obligation to observe all the Mosaic law, is by no means an un-Jewish or anti-Jewish decision; but rather, part of Jewish universalistic tradition with regard to salvation for Gentiles.

In the speech given by James (vv. 13-21), a similar dynamic moves behind the narrative. First, James continues the discussion from Peter’s experience and testimony. This indicates that James speaks from the perspective of Peter.⁶⁹ Then James makes a quotation from the Scriptures. Strikingly, James, who is the leader of the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem, quotes Amos 9:11-12 from its LXX version, not from its Hebrew version which was used among Jewish Christians. Scholars have made various assumptions why James does

⁶⁸ Fitzmyer attributes Peter’s speech to an Antiochene source. See Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 544.

⁶⁹ As Fitzmyer remarks, some scholars see in James’ speech a disapproval of Peter’s stand because James, rather than allowing the Gentiles to be free from the Law, imposes some restrictions on them.

so, or even, whether it was Luke himself who invented this speech.⁷⁰ Whether or not the speech was actually from James, there should be a reason for James/Luke to select the Greek text of Amos 9:11-12. A comparison between the Hebrew version and the LXX version is helpful here. The Hebrew version of Amos 9:11-12 reads,

“On that day I shall raise up the hut of David that is fallen, and I shall repair its breaches; I shall raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that are called by my name”—oracle of Yahweh, who does this.⁷¹

And the LXX version reads,

“On that day I shall raise up the tent of David that is fallen and rebuild the ruins of it, and the parts thereof that have been broken down I shall set up, and I shall rebuild it as (in) the days of old, that the rest of humanity may seek (it), even all the nations, upon whom my name has been invoked” —says the Lord, who does all these things.⁷²

In the Hebrew version, Israelites (the hut of David) shall dominate “the remnant of Edom” and “all the nations.” This reading of the text suggests that, although the remnant of Edom

⁷⁰ Witherington fights for the authenticity of James’ speech. He quotes from R. Bauckham that Jewish exegesis of this period would not consider the LXX verse of this text as misreading, but either as a “variant text” or “a deliberate alternative reading of the text.” The exegesis would choose from among the variant texts whichever fits better their interpretation. See Witherington, *Acts*, 457.

⁷¹ See Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 555.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 555.

and all other nations will be admitted as God's people, the condition for this to happen is that they submit themselves to Israelites and to the Jewish religion, observing Jewish practices like circumcision, the Sabbath and the dietary law. In the LXX version, however, there is no support for such a reading. What is prophesied by the prophet Amos here is simply that "the rest of humanity" and "all the nations" will seek the Lord when the tent of David is rebuilt by the Lord. The fallen tent of David, according to Barrett, refers probably to the Davidic Dynasty that came to an end in 587/586 BC.⁷³ The rebuilding of the tent of David is fulfilled in the person of Jesus, now all the other nations are called to become God's people through Jesus. There is no mention of any obligation for the Gentiles who will seek the Lord. Therefore, this version of Amos 9:11-12 perfectly fits James'/Luke's purpose here, namely, "the words of an OT prophet have already provided for Gentiles becoming part of a reconstituted 'people of God', for an incorporation of them into Israel."⁷⁴ It flows naturally to James' conclusion that "we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God (v. 19)." In fact, according to Simkovich, the Hebrew version of Amos 9:11-12 is a supporting text for the first model of particularism: the Israel as Subjugators model.⁷⁵ Given the fact that the two versions of the same text having almost the opposite implications, James' choice of the LXX version of Amos 9:11-12 expresses his universalistic view with regard to salvation for Gentiles and the conditions for their admission. James' speech, aside from that of Peter, offers another testimony that Gentile converts do not have to be circumcised and to keep all Mosaic laws in order to be saved. It fulfills the rule about "two testimonies" prescribed in Mosaic Law for a judgment to be made (Deut 19:15). Thus the decision of the issue over circumcision for Gentile converts is solved and it is in accordance with the Hebrew Scriptures.

⁷³ Barrett, *Acts*, 231.

⁷⁴ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 555.

⁷⁵ Simkovich, *The making of Jewish universalism*, 5-12.

The decision is by no means anti-Jewish or against Mosaic Law, for it is done in fulfillment to the prophecies.

2.2 The decision on the issue of table fellowship is a Jewish decision

After James makes the judgment not to burden the Gentile converts with the obligation of circumcision, he moves on and says something that seems to be irrelevant to the issue that has caused the Apostolic Council. In 15:20-21, James says,

But we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

This part of James’ speech is traditionally called “the Apostolic Decree.”⁷⁶ Because the content of the Decree has nothing to do with the issue of circumcision for Gentiles, some scholars consider it as the result of a separate council at a different time.⁷⁷ However, it could also be that the issue of circumcision and the issue of table fellowship were discussed at the same council. After making the official decision on the issue of circumcision, some voiced out their day-to-day challenges of common life in a mixed Christian community, especially table fellowship between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. In fact, it is less likely that a council like this would discuss just one matter, though it could have been convoked because

⁷⁶ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 551.

⁷⁷ For the three reasons that chapter 15 is a combination of two distinct reports, see Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 552-553.

of one particular issue. In any case, there is no sure evidence that the Decree must be a result from a separate meeting at a separate time.

Another difficulty about the Decree is with regard to its texts. The Decree appears three times in Acts (15:20, 29; 21:25), but with different orders of the elements. In 15:20, the four abstentions are: “things polluted by idols (των αλισγηματων των ειδωλων),” “fornication (της πορνειας),” “whatever has been strangled (του πνικτου)” and “blood (του αιματος).” In 15:29 and 21:25, however, the order of the four abstentions are: “food offered to idols (ειδωλοθυτων),” “blood (του αιματος),” “what is strangled (του πνικτου)” and “fornication (της πορνειας).” And in 15:29 and 21:25, “ειδωλοθυτων” is used instead of “των αλισγηματων των ειδωλων.” What is not specified by “των αλισγηματων των ειδωλων” is specified as “food” by “ειδωλοθυτων.”

What makes the texts more complicated is that there are various versions with regard to the Decree. Manuscripts differ from one another. Witherington has summarized the main differences among the manuscripts as the following:

1. p74, 8, B, and various Byzantine texts have ειδωλοθυτον, blood, things strangled, and πορνεια
2. p45 has only ειδωλοθυτον and things strangled
3. D and various Western texts have ειδωλοθυτον, blood, πορνεια, and the negative Golden Rule “Do not do unto others...”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Cf. Witherington, *Acts*, 460.

The majority of scholars agree that the version with four elements, without the Golden Rule,” is the original.⁷⁹ D and various Western texts, by adding the Golden Rule, seem to be making an effort to make the Decree ethical rather than ritual. What is most controversial among scholars is the context and source of the four abstentions of the Decree.

Various suggestions have been offered. Fitzmyer considers the four elements as taken from Lev 17-18, where one finds similar regulations for both Israelites and the aliens living within the borders of Israel.⁸⁰ The advantage of this opinion is that it explains better the possible motivation behind the Decree, namely, to provide the minimum requirements that enable the Gentiles and the Israelites to live together. This fits perfectly the context of the church in Antioch, where a mixed Christian community of Jewish believers and Gentile converts live together. After all, the letter (vv. 23-29) that contains the Decree is sent to the churches of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, which all have a mixed Christian community. Besides, it also explains why James mentions that Moses has been read in every city for generations past (v. 21). This means that the four abstentions of the Decree are in accord with Mosaic Law itself. Moses agrees that the four abstentions are enough for the Jews and Gentiles to live together. The weakness of this opinion, however, is that the word “πορνεία” does not appear in Lev 17-18 at all. Special effort has to be made to render it to mean the “forbidden degrees of marriage” in Lev 17-18.

Witherington argues that there might be no scriptural background for this set of four abstentions.⁸¹ These four abstentions do not refer to Christian table fellowship or food rituals; rather, they are meant to guard the Gentile converts from entering the pagan temples, since all

⁷⁹ Cf. Conzelmann, *Acts*, 118; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 556; Witherington, *Acts*, 460.

⁸⁰ Cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 556-558.

⁸¹ Witherington, *Acts*, 465.

four elements of the Decree could be found within pagan temples.⁸² The strength of this opinion is the internal unity among the four elements of the Decree: they all “transpire” in pagan temples. Thus the word “πορνεία,” which according to Witherington, basically means “prostitution,” will not upset its unity with the other three. The weakness of this opinion is that the four elements have loose connection to Mosaic teachings, whereas v. 21 most likely suggests that the basis for these four elements is to be found in the teaching of Moses. Although Witherington has made an effort to link the four abstentions to Moses, his effort is not convincing.⁸³

Still a third opinion holds that the four abstentions are taken from the Noachic regulations applicable to all races and they are meant here to provide ethical guidelines for Gentiles converts. H.-J. Schoeps is but one of these proponents. The strength of this opinion is that it explains why the Decree is directed to the Gentiles believers and not the Jewish Believers. The weakness is that the Noachic regulations consist of seven abstentions, but only four are mentioned in the Decree. Besides, as Barrett rightly remarks, nothing in Acts recalls Noah.⁸⁴

Barrett himself holds that among the four elements, three are rabbinic teachings about matters that cannot be compromised: idolatry, the shedding of blood and incest. The fourth element, “what is strangled”, is added to “facilitate common means.”⁸⁵ This opinion appears to be a combination of ethical interpretation and ritual interpretation. The problem of the unity among the four elements remains.

⁸² Ibid., 460-467.

⁸³ Ibid., 463.

⁸⁴ Cf. Barrett, *Acts*, 234.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 234.

The most convincing opinion among these is the first one. What concerns James at the Council of Jerusalem most likely is the unity of the mixed Christian communities, represented by the church in Antioch. As the leader of the mother Church in Jerusalem, James has more concerns than pure doctrine. Since the Church is harvesting a lot of believers both of Jewish background (6:7; 21:20) and Gentile background (11:21), peace and unity of the Christian community are being threatened as it is evidenced in the case of Antioch (Gal 2). Whether or not the Church could manage this challenge will affect the continuation of the mission of the Church. As the leader of the mother Church, James has to be broad-minded. It is very likely that these concerns have moved James to propose the four abstentions for the Gentile converts. But the intention of James is not so much about Mosaic Law itself as about the social life of the mixed Christian community. Fitzmyer rightly comments,

James' intention is not "to retain the Law as valid, not even symbolically or 'in principle.'" Rather, it enables Jewish Christians to have contact with Gentile Christians. James' regulations seek only a *modus vivendi* of Gentiles among Jewish Christians and imply no salvific purpose in them.⁸⁶

In his book, *Reading Acts*, Charles H. Talbert expresses the same view, "The Gentile Messianists are to behave in this way not because the law says so but because it is the minimum that will allow Jews who observe the law to associate with Gentiles who do not."⁸⁷

In this way, a solution is made for the challenge of daily associations among Christians of different background, which is most often manifested in common meals. And as I have

⁸⁶ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 556-557.

⁸⁷ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 142.

argued above, the decision on this issue, with no intention of imposing Mosaic Law, is based on the teaching of Moses. Clearly it is a Jewish decision.

3. The rhetorical purpose of the Apostolic Decree in Acts

Following James' proposing of the decree, there is still the issuing of the letter (vv. 23-29) and sending of the delegates. For my discussion in this article, however, I will not move on to the letter and its delegation. In what follows I shall offer a discussion of the rhetorical purpose of the Apostolic Decree in Acts.

The importance of the Decree in the overall narrative of Acts can hardly be overestimated. Luke Timothy Johnson, in his commentary on Acts, comments on the importance of the Decree from a narratological perspective. He says,

The importance of the meeting is signaled as well by the proposing (15:20) and issuing (15:29) of a formal decree, the only such official directive in the entire narrative. Luke gathers his main characters together for the first time only for the fashioning of this decision, and then disbands them. The only time two of the participants meet again, the subject of the decree will also surface: when James meets Paul on his last visit to Jerusalem, he reminds Paul of the terms of this conciliar decision (21:18-25).⁸⁸

I have already mentioned some scholars' suggestions regarding the context of the decree and James' possible intention in proposing it. There are doctrinal interpretation, ethical interpretation and ritual/practical interpretation. And I proposed that the better suggestion is the ritual interpretation, according to which James'/Luke's intention is to provide a basis for Christian table fellowship in a mixed community.

⁸⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), No. 5 of *Sacra Pagina* series, ed. by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., 268.

However, the pastoral concern for peace and unity of Christian community is just the immediate intention of James. What then is the role of the narrative of the decree in the whole Book of Acts? What might be the purpose of Luke in presenting the readers such a formal decree?

Perhaps the words which James speaks after his proposing of the decree could help toward an answer. In v. 21, James says, “For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues.” In referring to Moses, Luke reminds the reader that the church is not abandoning the teachings of Moses, or the Torah. All that has been decided at the council is done according to the teachings of Moses. The four abstentions are taken from the Torah (Lev 17-18). The decision to free Gentile converts from circumcision is made according to the scriptures (Amos 9:11-12) and God’s will (Cornelius received the Holy Spirit without first being circumcised). A consistent effort is being made here by Luke to show that the church is not abandoning the teachings of Moses or the Torah. The church does not replace Judaism; rather, it is its continuation and expansion.

The reason why Luke could have this purpose in mind is obvious. The teachings of Jesus could have given many Jews the impression that he is forsaking the teachings of Moses. The conflicts between Jesus and religious leaders of Judaism, for example, conflicts over Sabbath, dietary law, add more to the impression that Jesus has come to establish a new religion. The fact that not only Jesus but also Stephen and Paul are all accused of being against the teachings of Moses and the temple also attests to the existing impression of many Jews that Jesus and his followers are abandoning the Torah and Judaism. Hence very likely Luke feels the need to defend the fact that the church is not parting from Judaism. Just like Luke has Paul defend himself by saying “I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors (28:17),” he also makes it clear that in making the decision to free Gentile converts

from circumcision and to impose on them the four abstentions, the church is doing what Moses and the scriptures would allow. At this point, let me quote from Johnson's remarks and end this section:

The elimination of Mosaic ethos (custom) for the Gentiles does not mean the elimination of Torah, but rather the fulfillment of its prophetic intention, 'made known from long ago (15:18),' as well as the continuation of those aspects of Torah that have always applied to the proselyte and sojourner.⁸⁹

4. The church's mission to Gentiles as fulfilling God's promise to Israel.

Reading the Book of Acts, many people have the impression that because of Jewish unbelief and rejection of Jesus, the church starts its mission to the Gentiles. As a result, it is quite natural to assume that the hope of Israel has finally turned out to be a failure. The end of Acts, in particular, adds to this impression and interpretation. After Paul's third time of renunciation of Jews, Jews are "written off."

However, if one agrees that Luke presents the church as a continuation and expansion of Judaism, then he would have a different interpretation of Acts. The church is not against Judaism, or Mosaic teachings or the scriptures. The reason why the church starts its mission to the Gentiles is that, as the case of Cornelius shows, God wills it. Mission to the Gentiles is directed by divine initiative, having nothing to do with Jewish unbelief and rejection of Jesus. In fact, Luke is making his effort to show that many Jews indeed have come to believe and accept Jesus (6:7; 21:20). Jewish unbelief and rejection are no worse than Gentile unbelief and rejection. The reason for Paul's renunciations of Jews is perhaps the high expectation he

⁸⁹ Johnson, *Acts*, 268.

has placed upon them. After all, compared with Gentiles, Jews have many advantages in coming to believe and accept Jesus. When it turns out that Jews are not accepting Jesus as the Messiah promised foretold by Moses and the prophets, Paul naturally reacts and blames them for their obstinacy. Paul's reaction probably reflects also what is in the mind of Luke, who very likely is perplexed as to why Jews do not easily accept Jesus as the Messiah.

Finally, if the church is the continuation of Judaism, then the hope of Israel is tied to the mission of the church. The successful and fruitful mission of the church as it is narrated in Acts offers a positive scenario for the hope of Israel. This way of reading and interpreting Acts is also consistent with Luke's theological belief that God's plan is irrevocable, that whatever is foretold will be fulfilled. God's promise to Israel has not failed, but is being realized in the church's mission to the Gentiles.

Conclusion

Due to the differing emphases of various texts of Luke-Acts, the attitude of the author toward Jews and Judaism can appear to be ambiguous. As a result, readers can interpret Acts as both anti-Jewish and pro-Jewish. Positive portrayals of pious individual Jews in Luke's Gospel such as Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna and narratives in Acts that show the faith and conversion of Jews, such as the conversions of the three (Acts 2:41) and five (4:4) thousand Jews, express Luke's positive attitude toward Jews. However, there are also narratives that show the unbelief and stubbornness, or even the hostility, of Jews. The narratives of members of the Sanhedrin who question and threaten Peter and John (4:13-22), Jews who fear false witness against Stephen and have him stoned to death (6:8-15; 7:54-60), Jews who oppose Paul's mission and persecute him (14:1-20) are all such narratives. These narratives express Luke's negative attitude toward certain Jews. Sad to say, up until early 20th century, what was frequent among Christian interpreters was an anti-Jewish reading and interpretation of Luke-Acts. Some even consider Luke-Acts as the source of anti-Judaism. This biased reading and interpretation of Luke-Acts has caused disastrous social and political consequences. The Holocaust in the 20th century witnessed how far people can travel down the path of anti-Judaism. The brutality the human beings exhibited in the Holocaust forced readers, especially scholars, of Luke-Acts to re-examine their way of reading and interpreting the texts and narratives of Luke-Acts.

One of the many problems facing readers of Luke-Acts is to grasp Luke's understanding of the relationship between the early church and Israel. Very often, Christian readers quickly come to the conclusion that Luke understands the church as the replacement of unfaithful Israel. Texts such as Paul's renunciation of Jewish audiences (13:46; 18:6; 28:28) have

particularly aided readers in reaching this conclusion. However, Luke's numerous quotations from the Old Testament and his consistent emphasis on the fulfillment of God's promises in the events of Jesus and in the church have proved the implausibility of such a conclusion. Rather, Luke's emphasis on the fulfillment of God's promises in the person of Jesus and in the mission of the church shows that Luke understands the church as a continuation and expansion of Israel. The church is deeply rooted in Judaism, the apostles themselves are Jews, the church starts its mission from the Jews. Another important factor that readers often neglect is that in talking about the church's mission to the Gentiles, the audience of the church's preaching are seldom pure Gentiles, there are always Jews among them. The Gentiles are by no means just any ordinary Gentile people, they are God-fearers (Acts 10:2) or God-worshippers (Acts 16:14) or those who love Judaism and Jewish practices (Luke 7:5). The Gentiles in Luke-Acts are always related in some way to Judaism. Hence it is improper to draw a line separating the Jews and the Gentiles. Preaching to and inclusion of the Gentiles in the church do not mean the rejection of Jews. Through Paul's three-time renunciation, Luke is showing that the unbelief of some Jews has already been foretold by the prophets in the scriptures. Fusco's argument proves to be very helpful in understanding Paul's renunciation of Jews, especially at the end of Acts. Indeed, Paul's renunciation of Jews serves as a warning against their stubbornness and an invitation to repent. Reading in this way, Luke does not intend to communicate that Jews are rejected. Rather, Luke "awaits the fulfillment of Israel's hopes sometime in the future."⁹⁰

The ambivalent texts not only reflect seemingly existing external tension between the church and Judaism, namely, between believers of Jesus and non-believing Jews, but also reflect an internal tension between the church and Judaism, namely, Gentile converts and Jewish believers. Although these Gentile converts are God-fearers and worship the God of

⁹⁰ Fusco, "Luke-Acts and the Future of Israel." 8.

Israel in one way or another, they are not circumcised. The conservative group of Jews refuse to associate with the uncircumcised. This internal tension is manifested mostly in Christian table fellowship. The incident in Gal 2:11-14 is an attestation to this tension within the early church. The four abstentions in the Apostolic Decree that is sent to the Gentile converts in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia aim to provide a solution for this internal tension within the early church. On the one hand, the decision of the Apostolic Decree to impose only the four abstentions (without the requirement of circumcision) confirms that Gentile converts are saved not through circumcision but through the grace of God as it is shown in the case of Cornelius. On the other hand, the four abstentions are drawn from the Mosaic Law. This means that the decision of the Apostolic Decree is a Jewish decision and that the church is not parting from Judaism. To free the Gentile converts from the requirement of circumcision is done according to the words of Moses. In this way, the Apostolic Decree functions not only to solve the tension within the church, namely, the problem of Christian table fellowship, but also to help solve the external tension between the church and non-believing Jews. The decision shows that the church is in continuity with Judaism. The church is the continuation and expansion of Israel.

For modern readers who live in a post-Holocaust era, perhaps it is more important than ever to guard against a biased reading and interpretation of the texts of Luke-Acts. Anti-Judaism is not something that cannot repeat itself. It can always happen again once it gains its soil to grow. The best way to keep it from repeating is to read and interpret the texts of Luke-Acts in its original context instead of reading our thoughts into the texts.

Emphasizing the continuity between the Church and Judaism is also helpful in modern inter-religious dialogue. It is a pity that while all religions aim to bring peace to the world, conflicts and wars are caused more often by emphases on doctrinal differences and factional disputes. Emphasizing the continuity between the Church and Judaism can focus both

Christians and Jewish believers on the common root that they share. It helps members of both religions to engage in a constructive dialogue and foster a spirit of mutual forgiveness. After all, it is the one and only vision of both the OT and the NT that God shall be worship by all nations of the earth.

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