

Jew–Gentile Relations and the Geographic Movement of Acts 10:1–11:18

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Abstract: In this article, I examine how the geographic dimensions of Acts 10:1–11:18 contribute to the narrative portrayal of the Jewish apostle Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, a gentile centurion. First, I sketch the dynamics of Jew–gentile relations in first-century Caesarea, the location for the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, showing the unique heritage of Caesarea in comparison to strongholds of Jewish nationalism such as Joppa and Jerusalem. Second, I examine how the geographic progression of the narrative contributes to a contextualized reading of Acts 10:1–11:18 on the theme of Jew–gentile relations. I argue that the geographic movements in the story are not extraneous to the development of the plot. Rather, they are an integral part of what makes the behavior of Cornelius and Peter so remarkable, the intervention of God so necessary, and the conversion of Cornelius so significant for the trajectory of the early church in Acts.

Key Words: Caesarea • ethnic relations • Acts 10 • geography • spatial setting

THE STORY OF THE ENCOUNTER between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:1–11:18 is advanced through a sequence of geographic transitions: the story begins in Caesarea, where Luke’s audience is introduced to the gentile Cornelius, a pious God-fearer who also happens to be a centurion in the Italian cohort (10:1–2). Through a visionary prayer experience, an angel of God directs Cornelius to send to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter (10:3–5), and Cornelius dutifully obeys by sending two of his servants along with a soldier to call upon Peter, whom Luke’s audience knows has been staying in Joppa “for many days” (10:7–8; cf. 9:43). As the men sent by Cornelius travel into town, Peter has a visionary prayer experience of his own (10:9–16), compelling him by the Spirit to welcome the envoy from Cornelius and join the men on their way back to Caesarea (10:19–24).

Cornelius welcomes Peter into his household; Peter proclaims an evangelistic message; and Peter's sermon is accompanied by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all who hear Peter's word (10:24-44). Accordingly, the new believers are baptized, and Peter remains in Caesarea for some days (10:45-48). During this time, news of the gentile conversion spreads throughout Judea. Thus, upon Peter's return to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς) confront Peter about his association with uncircumcised individuals, which provides an occasion for Peter's own retelling of the events that have recently transpired (11:1-18).

If this colorless summary of the Cornelius story hardly does justice to the literary artistry and theological depth of Luke's account, it nonetheless underscores the significance of geographic markers in advancing the plot. Indeed, without the geographic movement, there would be no plot. The scene moves from Caesarea to Joppa and back again before eventually turning to Jerusalem. At each step in the sequence, the shift in location allows the plot to advance, as the geographic transitions enable the introduction of the principal characters in the story as well as the interaction among these key figures.¹

Furthermore, the precise geographic setting for the story is by no means coincidental.² Caesarea, Joppa, and Jerusalem represent three markedly different contexts for first-century Jew-gentile relations. Hence, the geographic designations in Acts 10:1-11:18 relate closely to the leading theme of Luke's narrative in

¹ The prominence of geographic designations throughout the Cornelius pericope is in keeping with the general tendency of the narrator of Acts. Acts 1:8 provides in some degree a geographic outline for the expansion of the church over the course of the narrative, and Luke frequently tailors his tales of individual episodes to fit their specific settings within the narrative. The burning of magical books and the riots depicted at Ephesus in Acts 19, the scriptural focus of Paul's sermon at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13, the erudite speech of Paul before the Athenian Areopagus in Acts 17—all of these passages in different ways attest to the narrator's concern to coordinate the events of his story with their appropriate settings. On the significance of setting for characterization and plot development in Luke-Acts, see Matthew L. Skinner, *Locating Paul: Places of Custody as Narrative Settings in Acts 21-28* (SBLMS 13; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 34-48.

² The lone context in which Lucan scholarship has attended at length to the geographic setting of Acts 10:1-11:18 has been in connection with the question of whether Luke's account holds up to historical scrutiny. Rudolf Pesch contends that the episode is anachronistic, as Roman troops were not stationed in Caesarea under the rule of Agrippa I (*Die Apostelgeschichte [Apg 1-12]* [2 vols.; EKKNT 5; Zurich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986] 1:335-36). However, Craig Keener has recently defended the historical plausibility of Luke's account, offering several possible scenarios according to which a centurion of Cornelius's stature could have been present at Caesarea around the time of Agrippa I ("Acts 10: Were Troops Stationed in Caesarea during Agrippa's Rule?," *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 7 [2010] 164-76). See also Alexander Kyrychenko, *The Roman Army and the Expansion of the Gospel: The Role of the Centurion in Luke-Acts* (BZNW 203; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014) 39-40.

this sequence of scenes.³ To move beyond the customary ethnic boundaries between Jew and gentile, the characters in the story must also take steps of faith to move beyond the safe confines of their respective spatial frameworks. Geography and ethnicity are thus inherently intermingled in this sequence of scenes, and in this article I will seek to show how the geographic progression of the narrative contributes to a contextualized reading of Acts 10:1-11:18 on the theme of Jew-gentile relations.⁴

In order to illuminate the significance of the geographic setting for the Cornelius story, a bit of historical contextualization is necessary. Therefore, I begin by sketching the dynamics of Jew-gentile relations in first-century Caesarea, the location for the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, showing the unique heritage of Caesarea in comparison to Jewish strongholds such as Joppa and Jerusalem. Aside from the available archaeological evidence, what can be known about such matters is found principally in the writings of Josephus, and so my analysis will rely rather heavily on the works of the famed Jewish historian. Certainly Josephus's writings reflect their own biases and agendas, yet they nonetheless offer a wealth of otherwise inaccessible historical material regarding the land of Judea. In the second section of the article, I turn to Acts and examine the geographic progression of Acts 10:1-11:18, arguing that the spatial setting for the story is an essential key to its suspense and message. In this way, I hope to show that the geographic movement throughout Acts 10:1-11:18 is an important factor for interpreting this sequence of scenes within the narrative of Acts.

³ Interpreters of the Cornelius pericope have typically devoted only a fleeting consideration to the geographic designations that occur throughout Acts 10:1-11:18. Exceptions in this regard include Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) 4:1732-34; J. Julius Scott Jr., "The Cornelius Incident in the Light of Its Jewish Setting," *JETS* 34 (1991) 475-84, esp. 478. These interpreters affirm in general terms the significance of the setting of Caesarea for the narrative, though they do not provide a sustained analysis of how the geographical movement in the story contributes to the development of the plot. In addition, Matthew Sleeman devotes careful attention to the spatial dimensions of the Cornelius story (*Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* [SNTSMS 146; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009] 222-53), yet his emphasis is on the "ascension geography" of Acts, in which space is reconfigured by the ascended Christ. See also Chris Shea, "Imitating Imitation: Vergil, Homer, and Acts 10:1-11:18," in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative* (ed. Jo-Ann A. Brant, Charles W. Hedrick, and Chris Shea; SBLSymS 32; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005) 37-59, esp. 57.

⁴ Purity codes, dietary restrictions, and Jewish identity markers are certainly central to the story of Peter and Cornelius, and so commentators have understandably concentrated primarily on such factors in their exposition of the story. While acknowledging the significance of such concerns, I seek to address a lacuna in scholarship by focusing instead on the spatial dimensions of Acts 10:1-11:18. What I attempt is not a full exposition of the whole story of Peter and Cornelius but rather a focused analysis of the significance of place in the sequence of scenes in Acts 10:1-11:18.

I. Jew–Gentile Relations in First-Century Caesarea

Caesarea was a Roman city with Jewish roots. The city was founded during the second half of the reign of Herod the Great (22–10/9 B.C.E.).⁵ Formerly a small coastal town known as Strato's Tower, Caesarea was rebuilt and renamed in honor of Herod's imperial patron, the Roman emperor.⁶ As such, the city was an emblem of Herod's imperial loyalty, designed to gain the confidence of Herod's non-Jewish subjects on account of its unambiguously Hellenistic orientation.⁷ A colossal temple of Roma and Augustus was constructed in the center of the city, and statues of the imperial family were installed at the mouth of the harbor.⁸ Moreover, upon the completion of Herod's public works in the city, the Jewish king instituted games and contests for the city in the name of the emperor,⁹ so that the city's founding was celebrated with Hellenistic festivities staged in unmistakably Hellenistic venues, such as the theater and amphitheater.¹⁰

From its inception, then, Caesarea was characterized by a mixed heritage. It was closely associated with Roman authority, yet the city was founded and initially governed by a Jewish king whose center of administration was located in Jerusalem. Caesarea's architecture was thoroughly Hellenistic,¹¹ yet the city's population included a sizable Jewish contingent that was apparently wealthy and politically influential.¹² Even the location of the city reflected its peculiar status in relation to

⁵ See Josephus *B.J.* 1.21.7 §415; *A.J.* 15.2.7 §341.

⁶ The coastal location for the ambitious building project was strategic, allowing Herod to construct a suitable harbor that would enable the city to serve as a center for trade with the broader Mediterranean world (Josephus *B.J.* 1.21.5 §§409–10).

⁷ Josephus *A.J.* 15.9.5 §§327–30. See Aryeh Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities in Eretz Israel: Relations of the Jews in Eretz-Israel with the Hellenistic Cities during the Second Temple Period (332 BCE–70 CE)* (TSAJ 21; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990) 199; Lee I. Levine, *Caesarea under Roman Rule* (SJLA 7; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 12; Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Studies on Personalities of the New Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996) 178.

⁸ Peter Richardson, "Archaeological Evidence for Religion and Urbanism in Caesarea Maritima," in *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima* (ed. Terence L. Donaldson; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000) 11–34, esp. 16–17.

⁹ See Josephus *B.J.* 1.21.8 §415; *A.J.* 16.5.1 §§136–41.

¹⁰ Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities*, 203. For an archaeological description of the public works at Caesarea, see Joseph Patrich, "Herodian Caesarea: The Urban Space," in *Studies in the Archaeology and History of Caesarea Maritima* (AJEC 77; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 24–35.

¹¹ On the significance of the city's architecture for its sense of self-definition, see Stephen Fai, "Architecture and Conflict in Caesarea Maritima," in *Religious Rivalries* (ed. Donaldson), 267–78.

¹² Estimates of the size and influence of the Jewish population in first-century Caesarea are deduced primarily from Josephus's accounts of events involving Jews in the city (*B.J.* 2.13.7 §§266–86; 2.18.1 §457; *A.J.* 19.9.1 §§356–59; 20.8.7 §§173–78). See Kenneth G. Holum et al., *King Herod's Dream: Caesarea on the Sea* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988) 74–75; John S. Kloppenborg, "Ethnic

Judaism. Later literary sources are ambiguous as to whether Caesarea lay within the bounds of the land of Israel (*t. Shebi.* 4.11; cf. *t. Ohal.* 18.13), a matter that would determine the halakic status of the city concerning matters of purity and impurity in Jewish law.¹³

In keeping with the dynamics of Caesarea's founding, the subsequent history of the city was marked by frequent tensions in Jew-gentile relations. In 6 C.E., Judea was annexed to the Roman province of Syria following the exile of Archelaus (Josephus *B.J.* 2.7.3-4 §§111-17; *A.J.* 17.13.5 §§354-55), and Caesarea became the administrative capital of the province. This shift of administration from Jerusalem to Caesarea carried clear symbolic weight, signifying that the spiritual center of the country would no longer stand unrivaled for influence over Judea. Now Caesarea would serve as the dominant military and political hub connecting Judea to the Roman empire.¹⁴

From Caesarea, procurators governed the affairs of Judea; when a grievance arose among the Jewish populace, a delegation would occasionally be sent to Caesarea to address the matter.¹⁵ Hence, according to Josephus, when Pilate's soldiers attempted to bring the standards of the emperor into Jerusalem, a delegation from the city rushed to Caesarea to stage a protest over Pilate's decision (*B.J.* 2.9.3-4 §§169-74; *A.J.* 18.3.1 §§55-59).¹⁶ Similarly, the trial of Paul before Felix in Acts 24 furnishes another well-known example of how matters of dispute within Judea could be referred to Caesarea for resolution.¹⁷

and Political Factors in the Conflict at Caesarea Maritima," in *Religious Rivalries* (ed. Donaldson), 227-48, esp. 245-46; Levine, *Caesarea under Roman Rule*, 22-23; Lee I. Levine, "The Jewish Community at Caesarea in Late Antiquity," in *Caesarea Papers: Straton's Tower, Herod's Harbour, and Roman and Byzantine Caesarea* (ed. Robert Lindley Vann; Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series 5; Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1992) 268-73, esp. 268.

¹³ See Joseph Patrich, "The Wall Street, the Eastern Stoa, the Location of the *Tetrapylon*, and the Halakhic Status of Caesarea Maritima (Interpreting *Tosefta, Ahilot*, 18:13)," in idem, *Studies in the Archaeology and History of Caesarea Maritima: Caput Judaeae, Metropolis Palaestinae* (AJEC 77; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 41-70, esp. 55-56. Luke himself appears to place Caesarea beyond the boundaries of Judea (cf. Acts 12:19). See Martin Hengel, "The Geography of Palestine in Acts," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting 4; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 27-78, esp. 56, 62-63.

¹⁴ Michele Murray, "Jews and Judaism in Caesarea Maritima," in *Religious Rivalries* (ed. Donaldson), 127-52, esp. 131.

¹⁵ Levine, *Caesarea under Roman Rule*, 20.

¹⁶ Philo (*Legat.* 299-305) provides an alternative account, in which the protest occurs in Jerusalem and the standards are then moved to Caesarea in order to resolve the dispute. See Lee A. Johnson, "A Literary Guide to Caesarea Maritima," in *Religious Rivalries* (ed. Donaldson), 35-56, esp. 38.

¹⁷ Josephus also records a later incident in which a soldier in an unnamed village in Judea burned a copy of the Jewish Scriptures and the Jews sent a delegation to Caesarea to seek justice (*B.J.* 2.12.2 §§229-31).

The rivalry between Jerusalem and Caesarea was heightened during the reign of Agrippa I (41–44 C.E.). Upon being declared king of Judea, Agrippa transferred administration of his realm from Caesarea to Jerusalem, made his permanent residence in the holy city, appointed Iturean and Jewish officers rather than Romans to the senior posts in his military (*A.J.* 19.6.3 §§299; 20.8.3 §353),¹⁸ and generally showed preferential treatment to the Jews (*A.J.* 19.7.3 §§330).¹⁹ Such actions would surely have unsettled Caesarea's non-Jewish population and harmed the city economically and politically.²⁰ Indeed, the divided response to the death of Agrippa in Caesarea reflects the ethnic division of the city.²¹ Whereas the Jewish population mourned (*A.J.* 19.8.2 §349), the non-Jewish population, led particularly by the local soldiers, responded to Agrippa's death with celebration and insults against Agrippa's family (*A.J.* 19.9.1 §§356–59). In fact, Josephus traces the roots of the Jewish revolt in 66–70 C.E. back to the conditions that arose in Caesarea following the death of Agrippa in 44 C.E. (*A.J.* 19.9.2 §364). From this time onward, disputes and tensions between Jews and gentiles in Judea increasingly came to a head in Caesarea.²²

When the conflict between the Jewish and non-Jewish population in Caesarea eventually reached a boiling point around 58 or 59 C.E., it was over the issue of *ισπολιτεία*, the civic rights of the Jews in relation to the official governance of the city (ca. 58/59 C.E.) (*B.J.* 2.13.7 §§267–69; *A.J.* 20.8.7 §§173–76).²³ The Jews in Caesarea claimed that the city was truly Jewish, since it had been founded by a Jew. The non-Jewish population objected to such a characterization of the city,²⁴ and delegations from each of the two parties were sent to the emperor to seek a resolution to the issue (*B.J.* 2.13.7 §270; *A.J.* 20.8.9 §182). Nero eventually decided against the Jewish delegates (66 C.E.), and the equal rights of the Jews in Caesarea

¹⁸ See Kloppenborg, "Ethnic and Political Factors," 242–43; Murray, "Jews and Judaism," 133.

¹⁹ Josephus's portrayal of Agrippa's warm relations with the Jews is contrasted with a correspondingly negative description of Herod (*A.J.* 19.7.3 §329).

²⁰ Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities*, 241. Indeed, Kasher even posits that perhaps Agrippa's sudden death in Caesarea was accomplished through a treacherous plot by gentile enemies in the city (pp. 243–44).

²¹ See Levine, *Caesarea under Roman Rule*, 27–29; Murray, "Jews and Judaism," 132.

²² On the centrality of Caesarea in the progression from Agrippa's death to the eventual Jewish revolt, see Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities*, 246–63.

²³ The precise nature of the prerogative that the Jewish population was seeking to establish is unclear, for the claims of the Jews are presented in slightly different terms in Josephus's two accounts. For a detailed discussion of the conflict, see Kloppenborg, "Ethnic and Political Factors," 241–47; Lee I. Levine, "The Jewish–Greek Conflict in First-Century Caesarea," *JJS* 25 (1974) 381–97.

²⁴ In *B.J.* 2.13.7 §266, the non-Jewish response appeals to the architecture of the city, arguing that the city had clearly been built for Greeks because it contained so many Hellenistic buildings. In *A.J.* 20.8.7 §173, the appeal is rather to the history of the area prior to Herod, as the non-Jews assert that there had been no Jewish population in the city prior to its refounding.

were revoked (*B.J.* 2.14.4 §284; *A.J.* 20.8.9 §§183-84). Jew-gentile relations in the city swiftly deteriorated, and a dispute over the synagogue eventually led to the flight of some of the Jews and the spreading of hostilities to Jerusalem (*B.J.* 2.14.4-6 §§284-93).²⁵ Josephus then records that at the outbreak of the war, twenty thousand Jews were slaughtered in Caesarea, and the rest of the city's Jewish population was taken captive (*B.J.* 2.18.1 §457).²⁶ Throughout the war, Caesarea served as a strategic base for Roman military operations (*B.J.* 3.9.1 §412; 4.9.2 §491; 4.11.5 §663),²⁷ and after the war the city was proclaimed a Roman colony.²⁸

By contrast, the city of Joppa, located approximately fifty kilometers south of Caesarea, remained a stronghold for Jewish nationalists from the Hasmonean era all the way to its eventual capitulation to Roman power in the Jewish war.²⁹ During the Maccabean revolt, Joppa was captured by the Maccabean forces, and the non-Jewish population of the city was eventually expelled under Simon, son of Mattathias.³⁰ With the help of the Roman senate, John Hyrcanus was able to preserve Hasmonean control of Joppa, and hence the city remained a strategic Judean port throughout the Hasmonean era (*A.J.* 14.10.6 §205). Josephus refers to Joppa as a nuisance to Herod in his consolidation of power in Judea (*A.J.* 14.15.1 §396), and it is probably not coincidental that Herod chose to found Caesarea as his favored port city rather than to fortify Joppa, in keeping with his efforts to solicit the goodwill of his non-Jewish subjects and imperial patron (see *A.J.* 19.7.3 §329).

In the Jewish revolt, Joppa was a stubbornly insurgent city. Cestius sent troops from Caesarea to Joppa to take control of the city, and Josephus records that eighty-four hundred Jews were slain in the siege (*B.J.* 2.18.10 §§507-9). Jewish rebels, however, later rebuilt the city and used the harbor as the base of operations for a pirate campaign up and down the Mediterranean coast. The insurgency at Joppa was quickly stamped out by Vespasian, whose troops demolished the city (*B.J.*

²⁵ The synagogue conflict entailed both a property dispute and an offensive gesture by a local Caesarean, who sacrificed birds on an overturned pot at the entrance to the synagogue one Sabbath day. See Murray, "Jews and Judaism," 135.

²⁶ Reflecting back on the massacre of the Caesarean Jews at the outbreak of the war, Josephus interprets the event as the outworking of a long-standing animosity against the Jewish inhabitants of the city (*B.J.* 7.8.6 §§361-63).

²⁷ See Johnson, "Literary Guide," 42-43; Levine, *Caesarea under Roman Rule*, 31-33.

²⁸ For the precise dating of the declaration, see Joseph Patrich, "On the Proclamation of Caesarea as a Roman Colony," in idem, *Studies in the Archaeology and History*, 71-90.

²⁹ See Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities*, 200-201. For a summary of the history of Joppa from the Hasmoneans to the Jewish war, see Jacob Kaplan, "Archaeology and History of Tel Aviv-Jaffa," *BA* 35 (1972) 66-95, esp. 89-91.

³⁰ 1 Macc 12:33; 13:11; 14:34; cf. 2 Macc 12:3-7; Josephus *A.J.* 13.5.10 §180; 13.6.4 §202. The city was initially captured by Jonathan (1 Macc 10:75-76; Josephus *A.J.* 13.4.4 §§91-92), but control of the city was only permanently established by Simon, an accomplishment which the author of 1 Maccabees praises as the crowning achievement of Simon's leadership (1 Macc 14:5).

3.9.2-3 §§414-27). Thus, whereas Caesarea served as a crucial outpost of Roman authority and Hellenistic culture during the first century, Joppa was characterized by its legacy of Jewish nationalism throughout the same time period.

Summary

The city of Caesarea was a frequent setting for tensions and conflicts concerning Jewish communal boundaries and Jew–gentile relations. The mixed heritage of Caesarea naturally led to ambivalent Jewish attitudes toward the city. On the one hand, the sizable Jewish population in the city appears to have prospered there and even attempted to claim Caesarea as their own by appealing to its Jewish founder. On the other hand, the city often functioned as a center for Jewish grievances against unwelcome encroachments upon the Jewish way of life and worship. Furthermore, Caesarea was an economic rival to Joppa and a political rival to Jerusalem, and in the Jewish revolt Caesarea was characterized by violence against Jews and strategic military support for the Romans.

II. Caesarea, Joppa, and Jerusalem in Acts 10:1–11:18

In light of the divergent dynamics in play in Caesarea, Joppa, and Jerusalem on the matter of Jewish identity and Jew–gentile relations, the geographic progression in Luke’s account of the story of Peter and Cornelius can hardly be coincidental.³¹ Rather, plot and geography are closely intertwined in this sequence of scenes, as Luke locates the church’s initial attempt at navigating the boundaries between Jew and gentile in places that immediately call to mind the complex and volatile history of encounters between Jews and Roman gentile representatives in Judea.³² Granted, Luke’s readership is likely to have been unfamiliar with the particulars of the history of each of these cities and their relative distance from each other.³³ Nevertheless, Luke shows an impressive knowledge of the coastal

³¹ Contra Richard Ascough, who writes, “Other than naming Caesarea as the location of this meeting, very little is made of the specific location in the story” (“Christianity in Caesarea Maritima,” in *Religious Rivalries* [ed. Donaldson], 153–79, esp. 154). Instead, as Skinner notes, “settings can relate to one another in ways that create oppositions that enhance an understanding of the plot” (*Locating Paul*, 52).

³² By the time of Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, it would seem that in actuality the church may have already expanded well beyond Caesarea to Antioch—where there was a mixed congregation of Jews and gentiles—following the death of Stephen (cf. Acts 11:19). Thus, the narrator has broken from the chronological sequence of events in order to present the encounter between Peter and Cornelius as the watershed moment for the inclusion of gentiles within the Christian community.

³³ See Hengel, “Geography of Palestine,” 28–32. On the perils of seeking to establish the precise knowledge of either the author of Acts or its intended readership, see the insightful remarks

region depicted in the Cornelius story,³⁴ and one can reasonably suppose that Luke's readers are likely to have had at least a general familiarity with the reputation of these cities on the matter of Jew-gentile relations, particularly in the case of well-known locales such as Caesarea and Jerusalem.³⁵ In the remainder of the present analysis, I will examine how the geographic progression of the narrative contributes to the development of Luke's story in this sequence of scenes.

From Caesarea to Joppa

The story of the encounter between Cornelius and Peter begins in Caesarea with the introduction of Cornelius. The new figure is introduced as "a certain man in Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion from the Italian cohort." Hence, the initial characterization of Cornelius strongly establishes his gentile identity. His name is unambiguously Latin.³⁶ His profession identifies him as a representative of Roman power,³⁷ and his setting, Caesarea, is the center of Roman power in Judea.³⁸

In light of all of this, the next line of Luke's description of Cornelius comes as something of a surprise, as this Roman centurion located at a well-known hotbed of hostilities between Jews and gentiles is characterized as a veritable model of devotion to Israel's God and a friend of the Jewish people in Caesarea: Cornelius is a devout man who fears God with all his household. He gives many alms to the Jewish people (τῷ λαῷ), and he beseeches God continually (10:2).³⁹ This portrait of Cornelius as a pious man resembles the characterization of the centurion in Capernaum in Luke 7:1-10, and Cornelius's benefactions toward the Jewish people correspond well to the way in which centurions frequently functioned as patrons in the localities in which they were stationed.⁴⁰ Still, Cornelius's station and setting would have made him an unlikely candidate for Jewish devotion and service, since

in C. Kavin Rowe, "Luke-Acts and the Imperial Cult: A Way through the Conundrum?," *JSNT* 27 (2005) 279-300, esp. 286-87.

³⁴ See Hengel, "Geography of Palestine," 56-58.

³⁵ On the spatial imagination of readers, its cultural dimensions, and its significance for narrative, see Skinner, *Locating Paul*, 36-42.

³⁶ See Kyrychenko, *Roman Army*, 15-16.

³⁷ Wendy J. Cotter, "Cornelius, the Roman Army and Religion," in *Religious Rivalries* (ed. Donaldson), 279-301, esp. 282-83.

³⁸ Laurie Brink suggests that perhaps the centurion has retired in this city (*Soldiers in Luke-Acts: Engaging, Contradicting, and Transcending the Stereotypes* [WUNT 2/362; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014] 151).

³⁹ On Jewish attitudes toward the Roman military, see Kyrychenko, *Roman Army*, 94-142.

⁴⁰ Justin R. Howell, "The Imperial Authority and Benefaction of Centurions and Acts 10.34-43: A Response to C. Kavin Rowe," *JSNT* 31 (2008) 25-51, esp. 31-32.

centurions more typically associated themselves with the imperial cult.⁴¹ Particularly in a locality such as Caesarea, where the imperial cult was eminently visible in the architecture and calendrical festivities of the city, a figure such as Cornelius would have been a most unique individual, a walking juxtaposition of Roman power and Jewish piety.⁴²

It is important at this point to note that the location of Caesarea is not new to the narrative of Acts, for Philip has already traveled as far as Caesarea, where he apparently established a more permanent residence (Acts 8:40; cf. 21:8). Additionally, Paul is said to have stopped in Caesarea in the course of his flight from Jerusalem to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). Thus, the introduction of Cornelius in Acts 10:1 brings the readers back to a place that, according to the narrator, has already been visited by leading figures of the Christian movement. Indeed, the narrator has yet to actually depict any Christian activity in Caesarea, so the references to the city up to this point function solely to demonstrate that significant Christian spokespeople have come to the city. Consequently, when the narrative proceeds to relate how an angel directs Cornelius to send men from Caesarea to Joppa in order to call upon a man named Simon who is called Peter (Acts 10:3-8), the readers can see that this divine directive cannot be simply a matter of fetching the nearest available spokesperson for the Christian movement.

Rather, the angelic instructions place what might be viewed as a sort of test before the faithful centurion. He has demonstrated a degree of devotion to God and to the Jewish people within the safe confines of Caesarea. Now, in response to his prayers and his alms, the angel directs Cornelius to undertake a more perilous task. The centurion is to send a detachment of men to the Jewish stronghold of Joppa and call upon a man named Simon to leave that city and return with the men to Caesarea. From the vantage point of a Roman representative such as Cornelius, such an action could easily be perceived as a risky endeavor with the potential to upset the fragile peace of the region, since it might be viewed in Joppa as an act of unsolicited Roman aggression. Nonetheless, Cornelius impressively obeys, reinforcing the characterization of this remarkably faithful centurion.

The name of the individual whom Cornelius is told to summon would have done little to assuage any concerns Cornelius might have had. In contrast to the usual diction of Acts, where the leading apostle is typically called simply by the Greek nickname "Peter," the angel in Acts 10:5 refers to the figure at Joppa first by his Jewish name, "Simon." Only with reference to this sequence of scenes is Peter called by the name "Simon" in Acts,⁴³ so that its usage here merits further consideration. The name "Simon" had experienced a resurgence in popularity during the Hasmonean era in part on account of the memory of the great military leader

⁴¹ Ibid., 33-35.

⁴² Kyrychenko, *Roman Army*, 176-78.

⁴³ Peter is called "Simeon" in Acts 15:14, though again in that context the passage is referring back to Peter's experience with Cornelius.

Simon Maccabeus and the eschatological expectation of the restoration of Israel's twelve tribes.⁴⁴ In fact, as we have already seen, Simon Maccabeus was the figure who had expelled the non-Jewish population from the city of Joppa at an earlier stage in its history.⁴⁵ In Acts 10 there is no indication that the naming of the man at Joppa is meant to recall any of this Maccabean history.⁴⁶ Even if Cornelius is unaware of the potential Maccabean resonances of Simon's name, however, the manner in which the angel has referred to the man at Joppa clearly identifies the man as a Jew, which is the crucial concern for our purposes.⁴⁷

Strikingly, the angel at this point offers no explanation to Cornelius for why the man must come to Caesarea (Acts 10:6, 31–32). Cornelius is only told *what* to do, not *why* to do it, and yet he nevertheless obeys the directions of the angel immediately (Acts 10:7–8).⁴⁸ Were it not for the impressive nature of the angelic appearance (cf. Acts 10:4), one can scarcely envision Cornelius pursuing such a course of action.⁴⁹ The geographic dimension of the story contributes significantly to the dynamics of suspense and surprise in the narrative, for it is largely on account of the places involved that one perceives both the risk entailed in the angelic instruction to Cornelius and the striking nature of the centurion's willingness to obey.

From Joppa to Caesarea

If the divine directive may have been somewhat uncomfortable to Cornelius, one can readily imagine how troubling the arrival of Cornelius's envoy at Joppa would have been for Peter. Three unknown men appear unsolicited at the doorstep

⁴⁴ See Markus Bockmuehl, *The Remembered Peter: In Ancient Reception and Modern Debate* (WUNT 262; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 137–40; Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, part 1, *Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE* (TSAJ 91; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 6–7, 56; Margaret H. Williams, "Palestinian Jewish Personal Names in Acts," in *Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (ed. Bauckham), 79–114, esp. 107–8. The precise way in which the name is mentioned by the angel—"Simon who is called Peter"—may simply serve to differentiate this Simon from his host, Simon the tanner (cf. 10:6). On the significance, or relative insignificance, of the host for the interpretation of the passage, see Isaac W. Oliver, "Simon Peter Meets Simon the Tanner: The Ritual Insignificance of Tanning in Ancient Judaism," *NTS* 59 (2013) 50–60, esp. 60.

⁴⁵ See p. 84 above.

⁴⁶ Some interpreters have noted that Peter's location at Joppa may evoke elements of the story of Jonah. See Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 1730; Robert W. Wall, "Peter, 'Son' of Jonah: The Conversion of Cornelius in the Context of Canon," *JSNT* 29 (1987) 79–90, esp. 80.

⁴⁷ The naming of the apostle as "Simon" could also be connected to the link between Peter and Jesus in Luke's Gospel. See Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative*, 225.

⁴⁸ It is true that in Peter's retelling of the story in Jerusalem, the readers learn that the angelic pronouncement included an assurance that Peter would explain a message of salvation (cf. Acts 11:13–14), but in the sequential development of the narrative, that information is withheld from the readers so that the suspense about what will happen is sustained all the way until Peter's speech in Acts 10:34–43.

⁴⁹ Cornelius's obedience to the angelic directive corresponds to the stereotype of military obedience, a prevalent motif in literary depictions of soldiers (Brink, *Soldiers in Luke-Acts*, 154).

of the home of Simon the tanner. One of the men is a Roman soldier (cf. Acts 10:7), and the men inquire for “Simon who is called Peter.” They report that they have come at the order of a centurion, and they summon Peter to return with them to that centurion’s home, explaining only that their peculiar directive has been motivated by an angelic appearance and that Peter will be given the opportunity to speak to Cornelius once he arrives at his home (Acts 10:22; cf. 11:13).

Perhaps because most participants in Western biblical scholarship seldom experience direct and unsolicited encounters with law enforcement, the anxious tone of this scene is most often missed. Hence, in all of the major English translations, Peter’s initial question to the men (τίς ἡ αἰτία δι’ ἣν πάρεστε; [Acts 10:21]) is translated innocuously as something like, “What is the reason for your coming?” Or, “Why are you here?” In reality, however, the noun αἰτία appears invariably in contexts of examination elsewhere in Acts (13:28; 22:24; 23:28; 25:18, 27; 28:18, 20), and so a more fitting translation of Peter’s question might be, “What is the charge [ἡ αἰτία] on account of which you have come [πάρεστε]?”⁵⁰

Readers should not miss the judicial connotations of Peter’s nervous remark in Acts 10:21, as Peter’s inquiry captures well the anxious tone of the encounter between the Jewish apostle and the envoy from Caesarea. Indeed, when he travels to Caesarea, Peter brings along six fellow Jewish believers for his journey (Acts 10:23; cf. 11:12). These men subsequently play an important role as witnesses to the miraculous events that transpire at Cornelius’s home (cf. Acts 10:45), so that their appearance at this stage in the narrative may serve no purpose other than merely to establish their presence with Peter. It is tempting, however, to wonder whether these men might also have made the journey intending to offer some measure of protection for Peter, or even to act as witnesses on his behalf before Cornelius, since centurions frequently functioned as judges in local settings (see Cicero *Phil.* 1.8.20).⁵¹ At any rate, were it not for the Spirit’s guidance for Peter to go with the men “doubting nothing” (μηδὲν διακρινόμενος, Acts 10:20), one doubts whether the visit of the envoys from Cornelius would have proceeded so peacefully.

At the very least, the scene with the messengers at Joppa contrasts with Peter’s prior behavior in Acts 9:38-39, where two messengers implore Peter to travel from Lydda to Joppa. There, Peter travels with the two men to Joppa without delay or questioning. In Acts 10, it takes an assurance from the Spirit for Peter to leave Joppa for Caesarea with an entourage at his side.

Rather than sending Cornelius from Caesarea to Joppa to inquire of Peter there, the Lord has so orchestrated events that Peter must leave the safe confines

⁵⁰ Two of the other four uses of the verb *πάρεμι* in Acts also appear in judicial contexts (12:20; 24:19), which may lend further support to the suggested translation.

⁵¹ Howell, “Imperial Authority,” 36-37.

of a Jewish home in Joppa to visit the home of the gentile centurion in Caesarea. Just as the angelic directive to Cornelius placed a definite challenge upon the centurion, so the Spirit's guidance to Peter requires of him a step of faith far different from what we may safely presume would have been Peter's preferred course of action. Once again the geographic element of the story is indispensable for the development of the plot, for it is precisely in the geographic movement of the narrative that the suspense is found.⁵²

For a rather imprecise comparison that nonetheless illustrates the significance of the geographic component of the story, one might imagine an adaptation of the story set in modern-day Chicago. The city has a long history of racial tensions. At present, much of the north side of the city is predominantly white but with a sizable African American population, and much of the south side of the city is over 90 percent African American. Now suppose an angel directed a white police officer from the north side of Chicago to send a squad car with three white officers to the doorsteps of an African American man's home in the south side in order to bring an African American guest staying there to the officer's station on the north side, unsolicited and without clear instructions. Readers familiar with the atmosphere of racial tension in Chicago would immediately perceive that neither the white officer nor the African American visitor would likely feel comfortable with the proposed scenario. I suggest that a similar dynamic is at work in the story of Peter and Cornelius.

At Caesarea

When Peter arrives in Caesarea, the geographic movement of the characters stops for a while, yet spatial concerns remain important as Cornelius exercises hospitality toward Peter.⁵³ Peter moves first "out of" (ἐξῆλθεν) the city of Joppa (Acts 10:23), and then "into" (εἰσῆλθεν) the city of Caesarea (Acts 10:24), and then "into" (εἰσελθεῖν) the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:25). Once he has arrived, the topic of travel lies at the center of the exchange between Peter and Cornelius, as the discourse is dominated by the language of "sending" and "coming." Peter explains that it is unlawful for a Jew to "come to" a foreigner, recounts how he nevertheless "came" without objection whenever Cornelius "sent," and then asks why Cornelius has "sent" for him (Acts 10:28-29). In reply, Cornelius retells how he was directed by an angel to "send" to Joppa, explains that he therefore "sent"

⁵² On the way in which setting can function to intensify the plot, see Skinner, *Locating Paul*, 53.

⁵³ On the theme of hospitality in the story of Cornelius and Peter, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 109-11.

for Peter immediately, and praises Peter for acting kindly by “arriving” (Acts 10:30-33).

Significantly, Cornelius’s reply to Peter ends with a statement that effectively summarizes the outcome of all of the divinely initiated geographic movement in the story: “Now then, *we all are present before God*,” states the centurion, “to hear all that has been commanded to you by the Lord” (Acts 10:33). These words from Cornelius communicate in spatial terms the very lesson about divine impartiality that Peter has learned through his visionary experience. Accordingly, Peter’s response to Cornelius begins, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation the one who fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). Then Peter’s speech goes on to assert that Jesus of Nazareth, whose ministry was conducted among the “sons of Israel” in Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem (Acts 10:36-39), is the “Lord of all” who has been appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:36, 42).⁵⁴ If people of every nation all stand equally before one God, then that God’s work in Jesus Christ cannot be confined to a particular people or region. In this way, the universality of God’s presence in every nation becomes a springboard for Peter’s declaration of the universal lordship of Jesus Christ for Jews and gentiles alike.

When the narrative then describes the surprise of Peter’s Jewish companions at the outpouring of the Spirit ἐπὶ τὰ ἔθνη, one should not ignore the extent to which geography and ethnicity are intermingled throughout the narrative, such that the amazement of the Jewish believers might involve at least some element of surprise at the spatial setting for the miracle: the Spirit has come upon the nations at the home of a gentile in Caesarea, just as the Spirit at Pentecost came in a similar manner at the home of a Jew in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:1-2). Granted that the primary source of amazement is surely that gentiles have received the Holy Spirit, might the surprise of Peter’s companions involve not only *who* receives the Spirit but also *where* it happens? At any rate, the spontaneous outpouring of the Spirit on Cornelius’s household functions as the last in a series of divine interventions that legitimate the inclusion of gentiles into the fellowship of believers.

From Caesarea to Jerusalem

After staying with Cornelius for some time, Peter travels from Caesarea to Jerusalem. At this stage in the narrative, attention to the geographic dimensions of the story helps to clarify the precise nature of the objection against Peter. When Peter arrives in the holy city, it is scarcely surprising that his affirmation of the legitimacy of Cornelius’s conversion is met with skepticism (διακρίνοντο) by the Jewish believers in the Jerusalem community (Acts 11:2-3), given the long-

⁵⁴ See Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative*, 238-41.

standing rivalry between Caesarea and Jerusalem. Interestingly, the report of a gentile conversion per se is not what is troubling to the believers in Judea. In Acts 11:1, when Luke states that the apostles and believers throughout Judea heard about what had happened, Luke makes no mention of any adverse reaction to the news that even the gentiles had received the word of God.

Instead, a conflict arises only *when Peter travels to Jerusalem* (Ὅτε δὲ ἀνέβη Πέτρος εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ), as again the advancement of the plot coincides with the geographic progression of the narrative. Furthermore, the matter of dispute in Jerusalem relates in part to Peter's spatial accommodation in traveling to Cornelius: "You went to men who were not circumcised [εἰσῆλθες πρὸς ἄνδρας ἀκροβυστίαν ἔχοντας] and ate with them."⁵⁵ Based on Luke's narration of the charge against Peter, what is offensive to the sensibilities of Peter's accusers is not that gentiles have received the word of God. Nor is the problem simply that Peter has eaten in the presence of gentiles.⁵⁶ The issue of contention is that Peter has traveled to the home of gentiles and allegedly eaten with them.⁵⁷ Thus, Peter is compelled to recount how God himself brought Peter from Joppa to Caesarea and simultaneously convinced Peter of the legitimacy of gentile inclusion into the fellowship of the believers (Acts 11:4-17).

As in the unfolding of the events themselves, the geographic dimensions of the story are indispensable for the conclusion that Peter wishes to draw from his experience. While Peter mentions neither the name of the gentile man nor his occupation (Acts 11:12-17), Peter is careful to clarify that his visit to Caesarea occurred only on account of divine intervention, with the Lord sending an angel to Cornelius, who then sent a group of men to bring Peter from Joppa (Acts 11:11-14). Therefore, since God had arranged for the encounter and then conferred divine blessing on the gentiles through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Peter contends that he is justified in welcoming the gentiles into the fellowship of believers.

At the end of the story, the Jerusalem believers declare, "Then to the *gentiles/nations* [ἔθνεσιν] also God has given the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18).

⁵⁵ The same verb is employed in Acts 10:3, when the angel visits Cornelius, and in 10:24-25, and 27, when Peter visits Caesarea and then goes into Cornelius's home. Hence, the use of εἰσερχομαι in 11:3 recalls not merely Peter's table fellowship with the gentiles but also his movement from Joppa to Caesarea.

⁵⁶ Theoretically a pious Jew could eat with gentiles and not violate the Jewish law, so long as the food was properly prepared. Yet Jewish attitudes toward the propriety of such table fellowship were certainly varied. See John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan, 323 BCE-117 CE* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 434-38; Chris A. Miller, "Did Peter's Vision in Acts 10 Pertain to Men or the Menu?," *BSac* 159 (2002) 302-17.

⁵⁷ Certainly, given Peter's visionary experience prior to the encounter with Cornelius, the passage as a whole is directed toward the issue of table fellowship. Yet it is important to note that the specific charge against Peter in Acts 11:3 also entails the element of geographic accommodation. See Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative*, 247.

In light of the interest in spatial concerns in the accusation against Peter and in his self-defense, it is tempting once more with this final statement to surmise that the Jerusalem believers may be affirming not only the ethnic universality of their fellowship but also the spatial universality of their mission. They had been offended by Peter's journey to the home of a gentile. Might they now recognize that God has ordained an active outreach to the nations? If so, the story of Peter and Cornelius would be an important precursor to Paul's missionary commission, not merely in the sense that Cornelius's conversion legitimizes the inclusion of gentiles into the fellowship of the church but also in the sense that Peter's experience provides a precedent for recognizing a divinely commissioned outreach to the nations.

III. Conclusion

The advancement of the plot and the geographic progression of the story in Acts 10:1–11:18 are closely intertwined, and both depend at every turn on divine intervention. For Cornelius to send from Caesarea to Joppa, for Peter to go willingly from Joppa to Caesarea, for both men to move beyond their accustomed spheres of social interaction between Jew and gentile, and for the community of believers in Jerusalem to affirm the legitimacy of Peter's behavior and of the gentile conversions, it is necessary for God to initiate each step of the movement with angelic appearances and divine proclamations. The geographic movements in the story are not extraneous to the development of the plot. Rather, they are an integral part of what makes the behavior of Cornelius and Peter so remarkable, the intervention of God so necessary, and the conversion of Cornelius so significant for the trajectory of the early church in Acts.

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