

7.1 Crossing Boundaries

Beginning with Acts 10 the narrative clearly moves beyond the boundaries of Judaism since here the first non-Jew joining the movement is found on the scene.

This elaborately narrated unit of Acts 10.1 – 11.18 constitutes a climactic moment of the first half of Acts. It is the story of the events which were in view from the beginning (cf. 1.8 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth').

Prior to this passage, in Acts 8.1f we learn of persecutions and the scattering of Christ-followers throughout Judea and into Samaria. This indicates that the message of the gospel is in the process of moving beyond the boundaries of Judaism since the Samaritans were generally regarded as being outside Judaism. Subsequently we actually do learn of many people joining the movement in Samaria (8.4-25), and the conversion of the Ethiopian (8.26-39). With the latter it is unclear whether the convert is a Jew, a godfearer, or even a gentile. It is unlikely, however, that Luke introduces the mission to the gentiles in such an unspectacular way – rather the emphasis is on the inclusion of a eunuch into the Christ-movement which has been pointed out convincingly by Fitzmyer in his commentary on the passage (cf. Essential Reading 7.1).

The crossing of the boundary, from being an entirely Jewish movement to becoming a movement which includes gentiles as gentiles is such a significant moment in the development of the movement that Luke tells the episode over the length of one and a half chapters (10.1-11.18). As such it is actually the longest narrative episode within the whole of Luke-Acts. Moreover it is associated with the key figure among the Christ-followers, Peter, rather than the later key figure of the mission to the gentiles, Paul. Whether it is historically accurate that Peter was the first disciple to spread the message of the gospel of Christ to gentiles is not the point here, but rather that Paul was not the initiator of the gentile mission. Significantly, despite his emphasis on being an apostle, called to preach the gospel to the gentiles, Paul in his letters never claims that he initiated the mission beyond the boundaries of Judaism.

The episode begins with scenes that focus in turn on two characters separated by some distance: Cornelius and Peter. Each of them has a vision and each receives a divine message. Each vision and message is incomplete in itself, in both cases human action and reflection is required. Cornelius only learns that he should send for a certain Simon Peter, whereas Peter's vision tells him that he should eat food that is inconceivable for a Jew to even think of eating. The vision thus calls Peter to perceive the issue of purity from a different perspective. But the vision is not self-explanatory (10.17) and only when Cornelius takes action and sends men to invite Peter, and through a subsequent vision does Peter get actively involved in the event. Thus when Cornelius' delegation arrives at Peter's lodging, Peter, prepared by the vision is willing to welcome them, providing hospitality for them. Then Peter and his colleagues travel to Caesarea and are welcomed at Cornelius's house. Cornelius, the narrator had clarified earlier in the narrative, was a centurion of the Italian cohort. He is clearly a non-Jew, that is a gentile, but one whose piety is described in a way that parallels that of a devout Jew. Giving of alms (to the people, the Greek word here indicates that this means to the Jews) and faithfulness in prayer are indications of faithfulness in Jewish perspective (cf. Tob 12.8; Mat 6.2-6; 1Pet 4.7-11). He is described as 'a devout man who feared God with all his household'. These are words Luke uses for gentiles who worship Israel's God and who associated themselves with the synagogue without converting fully to Judaism. They are called Godfearers – and there is a debate among scholars whether such a distinct group of non-Jews associated with Jewish communities existed during the Second Temple period. What can be asserted is that there were people from among the

nations who had sympathies for Judaism – whether they were a clearly distinct group throughout the Roman empire or not.

Luke refers to people whom he describes as godfearers and these are clearly non-Jews, but they have close relations with Judaism (Grk. *sebomenoi* cf. 13.16, 26,50; 16.14; 17.4;17)

Such god-fearers are the first non-Jews in the narrative to hear the message of the gospel, primarily due to their own initiative. They represent the beginning of the mission to non-Jews which in the second part of Acts will be the focus through the mission of Paul to the non-Jewish, that is, gentile nations.

Peter's vision and action

Although Peter in his vision sees 'pure and impure' animals, in subsequent narrative eating is actually not the issue as might be expected, but the association of non-Jews to the Christ-movement and their incorporation as gentiles through baptism.

When Peter crosses the threshold of Cornelius' house he reflects on what is happening at this moment in addressing the people gathered inside. On the one hand he regards association with gentiles as unthinkable. However, the Greek word used here does not mean 'unlawful', but rather 'unconventional'. It was not contrary to the Torah for Jews to associate with gentiles. The issue was under what circumstances and preconditions. Upon entering Cornelius' house Peter understands part of his vision – he relates the vision with the situation he finds himself in: he thus transfers the categories of profane and pure to humans and understands that he should not call any human being profane (it should be noted here that these categories have nothing to do with clean or dirtiness, these are categories which qualify the status of something in relation to cultic purposes). Peter is seen as understanding that these categories should not be applied to human beings.

The first significant step taken in the narrative is not the proclamation of the gospel, but the crossing of this boundary, that is the encounter of people who are different. Interestingly there is no mentioning of food in the entire episode following Peter's vision. The issue here is not pure and impure in relation to food but how people of different cultures can relate to each other. Thus Peter is not depicted as eating impure food – but to initiate the fellowship of Jews and non-Jews/gentiles in Christ. In as much as sharing the table, and thus providing hospitality is an expression of such fellowship, food may be an issue but it is not the primary issue here (and as elsewhere in the NT), the primary issue is the fellowship of people who are and remain different in Christ.

Peter's speech (10.4-43)

This speech is similar to previous speeches of Peter (2.14-36; 3.12-16) but the opening verses 34-35 reflect the present situation. Peter formulates his understanding of God who is impartial, in that he looks upon humans not according to their class, power, or group/cultural affiliation but in relation to their actions: people from the nations who fear God and do justice are called by God. This applies to Cornelius and his household, which does not mean that it applies to any pagan household. But the claim in 10.36 that someone other than the Emperor is bringing peace and is lord over all is quite a steep proclamation in the house of a Roman army officer !

While Peter is speaking the Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his household. This is remarkable as it happens prior to their baptism, and triggers amazement among Jewish Christ-followers. Peter realizes that there is nothing which hinders them from getting baptized. The Jewish Christ-followers recognize that the Spirit is at work in these events not because anybody had forced them to do so but because they recognized that these godfearing Gentiles share in their own experience of God.

At the beginning of the following chapter (11.1-18) we learn that some questions are raised in Jerusalem, but after Peter's explanation of the events the issue is clarified without any

further problems. Luke does not hint at any opposition or further questioning of a mission to the gentiles!

The Christ-followers in Antioch

The following sequence is like a geographical outline of the story of 10.1.11.18. In the same way as this extended narrative told how the gospel spread beyond Judaism, 11.19-30 introduces the first community of Christ-followers beyond Jerusalem - in Antioch. Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria, and had a very mixed population including a large Jewish population.

Interestingly this summary narrative seems to indicate that the first community which included non-Jewish Christ-followers was the community at Antioch. Upon receipt of this news in Jerusalem an ambassador is sent north, Barnabas, to find out about the community there and check whether they actually were living according to the same gospel as the Jerusalemites. Paul is reintroduced here, as the junior partner of Barnabas. There is a lot to be said in relation to the mentioning of Paul and Barnabas in the context of Antioch. Paul himself indicates that Antioch was important to him, and he was associated with Barnabas before they parted ways (Gal 2.1). It is interesting to note that here in v.26 in the context of Antioch the label 'Christianoi' appears for the first time – emphasizing that it was there that the term was used as a designation for this movement for the first time.

In ch.13. 1-3 we learn that it was the community at Antioch which commissioned Barnabas together with Paul/Saul to become missionaries beyond the boundaries of their own community.

Essential Readings

** Gaventa, Beverly, Acts., pp. 134-145

** 7.1 Fitzmyer Joseph, *The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday 1998, pp.409-417.

** 7.2 Tannehill, Robert C., 'The Function of Peter's Mission Speeches in the Narrative of Acts' in *NTS* 37, 1991, pp.400-414.

** 7.3 Bockmuehl, Markus, 'James, Israel and Antioch' in *ibid. Jewish Law in Gentile Churches*. Grand Rapids: Baker 2000, pp.49-83.

Further Readings

Rosica, Thomas M. "The Road to Emmaus and the Road to Gaza: Luke 24:13-35 and Acts 8:26-40." *Worship*. 68.2 (Mr 1994): 117-131.

Brawley, Robert L., *Centering on God: Method and Message in Luke-Acts*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1990, pp.139-47.

Soards Marion, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1994.

Perkins, Pheme, *Peter: Apostle for the Whole Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2000.

Zetterholm, Magnus, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation Between Judaism and Christianity*. London: Routledge 2003, pp. 129-177.