

4.3 Israel and the Jews in Luke-Acts

Luke uses particular terms to refer to the people of God in addition to the name 'Israel' and the designation 'Jews'. The term *laos* is used when reference is made to the people of God mostly in the sense of the pious Jewish community, whereas the term *ochlos* can more generally also refer to a big number of people gathered in a place. The people of God is first of all and primarily Israel. This term is used by Luke as well and similarly to the words *laos* and *ochlos* it is exclusively used to refer to historic Israel (Lk 1.17; 1.77; 2.10). Luke also shows clear awareness of insider and outsider designations as he has his characters refer to Israel/the people of God as the Jews only in contexts where gentiles, predominantly Romans, are present (Lk 7.3; 23.37-38; 23.51). A similar distinction is found in Acts. Also the Greek word for non-Jewish nations is never used when referring to Jews/Israel except in contexts where non-Jews refer to Jews as 'Jewish nation', indicating that this an 'outsider' talking about Jews. In this differentiated use of terminology Luke demonstrates close familiarity with Judaism to the extent that he could well have been a Jew himself.

Although early on in the Gospel we find the prophetic word of Simeon which points to the role of the child presented in the Temple (Lk 2.29-32) the issue of the mission to the Gentiles only actually begins with the Book of Acts. Throughout the Gospel Jesus is seen as addressing only the people Israel and only one scene tells of a healing of the slave of a gentile (7.1-10). It seems as if in the Gospel narrative the expansion of the mission and the inclusion of gentiles is put on hold. However, when it is in view and finally fully developed, this expanding of salvation to the Gentiles does not in any way reduce the promise of salvation for Israel/the Jews (Cf Lk 2.29-32 et.al.).

We have come across this characteristic already when dealing with the infancy narratives (unit 1). There 'Israel' is mentioned very frequently in the first two chapters of the Gospel, cf. 1.16; 1.54; 1.68; 1.80; 2.25; 2.32; 2.34. This is followed by brief mentions again in the announcement of Jesus' public ministry in 4.25-27, in the scene of the healing of the centurion's slave and in the Emmaus sequence. The term occurs then very frequently in Acts (21x) and significantly again at end of Acts 28.20. Paul is depicted as affirming that 'for the hope of **Israel** I am bound with this chain'.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus' ministry is depicted as the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel. Although according to the Gospel Jesus' earthly ministry was confined, geographically and ethnically, to the people Israel, this hope for, and message of, salvation for Israel includes the hope for the nations - 'ethne', that is, people from other peoples. The inclusion of gentiles is not to replace Israel and her particular calling. Israel continues to have a special role in Luke's understanding of God's purpose and activity. Thus it should not come as a surprise that the mentioning of Israel is never negative throughout Luke-Acts, the hope for God's people, that is the hope for Israel, is never given up and Israel is not seen as rejected or judged.

The image of particular groups within the people Israel is ambivalent, as we have seen with regard to the Pharisees. But the Christ-movement never replaces Israel, nor is it named Israel in Luke-Acts. The term used by Luke to designate the Christ-movement is 'the way'. And 'the way' and Israel are and remain two different entities.

Jesus begins God's work by appealing to his own people Israel first in Galilee and then through Judea on the way up to Jerusalem. The ministry and life of Jesus do not operate outside of the boundaries of Israel nor do they replace promises and gifts given to Israel – they grow out of Israel's history as recounted in the Bible and embrace the whole world. As noted above, only brief indications that this 'good news' will be transmitted to gentiles and the latter will be included in the plan of salvation can be found in the Gospel; only when the Gospel narrative draws to a conclusion in Lk 24.47 is it clearly stated that the message of repentance and salvation will be transmitted to all people – meaning non-Jews as well.

Beginning with Acts the message of repentance and salvation is gradually transmitted to gentiles (Acts 3.9-26;4.12;5.31). This, however, does not happen at the expense of Jews as the mission to both Jews and gentiles remains active throughout the book of Acts. Paul in each city first goes to the synagogue where he works and convinces some Jews as followers of the way. Only when he runs himself into trouble does he turn to gentiles in the respective city and includes them in the community of Christ-followers; thus communities of Jews and gentiles in Christ are formed.

This is scenario which is restricted to the book of Acts, and only here gentiles become a major part of the movement – whereas in the Gospel narrative the movement is an entirely Jewish one.

This is why Luke often refers to the Scriptures and carefully respects and preserves the law. The issue at stake in the question of table fellowship is not the law but community between gentiles and Jews in Christ, that is, a transformation of aspects of the law in light of the Christ event.

If the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are demonstrating such a clear embeddedness within the tradition of Judaism, and do not give evidence of a rejection or replacement of Israel as people of God by the Christ-movement (or 'the way' in Lucan terminology), what then are we to make of Luke's strong language in relation to Jewish rejection of Jesus in the Gospel narrative and the sermons of Acts ?and what are we to make of the emphasis on official opposition to Jesus and his followers from Pharisees, scribes, law teachers and priests?

In the tradition of the Scriptures there is a strand of strong critique of the behaviour of either the leaders of the people or of the people in its unfaithfulness to the covenant. Luke portrays the opposition to Jesus (in the Gospel) and the Christ-movement (in the Book of Acts) in the context of such mainly prophetic traditions. These depict scenarios of controversies between the critical prophets and leaders or the people Israel as a whole which in some cases lead to the rejection of prophets in Israel. Seen in this prophetic vein, Jesus' and the Christ-followers' critique of those who cannot accept Jesus as the Messiah affirms rather than denies the abiding importance and the worth of Israel while rebuking its misdeeds. The critique is thus a critique from within the Jewish tradition and in its critique is affirming this tradition and its promises to the people who have been and still are the bearers of this tradition. Critique should not be confused with rejection, or replacement theories. In this critique nobody is replaced by anybody else. The function of the critique of the prophets was not destruction but a call to return and thus a sign of hope.

The fact that the Jewish people did not as a whole or at least in its majority embrace the message of the Gospel of Christ obviously did cause irritation within the early Christ-movement and the narrator of Luke-Acts and the Christ-followers he represents provide a vivid image of the extent of this irritation but at the same time of their ongoing concern for the Jewish people. Thus this narrative, even where it raises sharp criticism is an expression of stumbling and an expression of their attempt to come to terms with the obvious historical situation that not all Jews responded positively to the message of salvation proclaimed by the followers of Jesus. This implies, nevertheless, that the Lucan community was of the view that this message was and is first of all meant for Israel and then for the nations – but never at the expense of Israel. Gentiles are called by God to join but not to become or replace Israel.

Useful Readings

Matera Frank J., 'Salvation for Israel and the Nations' in *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity*. Louisville,KY: Westminster/John Knox 2007, pp.68-81.

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Carras George, P., 'Observant Jews in the Story of Luke and Acts: Paul, Jesus and Other Jews' in Verheyden, J. ed. *The Unity of Luke-Acts*. Leuven: Leuven University Press 1999, pp.695-708.