

"The Jews in Acts"

By Dr. Ashley S. Crane, Fourth AustralAsian Conference - July 2014

1. Introduction

Frequently the use of 'the Jews' in Acts has caused a misunderstanding in the church wherein missions to the Jews is left to a few specialist organisations. Three times Paul declares in Acts that he is leaving the Jews and turning to the Gentiles, which has often fueled the withdrawal of missions to the Jews. It can be confusing dealing with the varied interpretations of 'the Jews' in Acts, with many admitting it can be "quite dizzying to see the same verses quoted as evidence for opposite interpretations" (Wills, 1991, p. 631) **(1)** Some claim Luke distinguishes between individual Jews who accept or reject the Gospel, and others claim Luke rejects all Jews collectively because they rejected the Messiah (Sanders, 1986, p.111).

Yet we must ask if Acts holds all Jews responsible for this shift to the Gentiles, and if this shift is due to a Jewish rejection of the Gospel? It is important that we clearly comprehend Luke's intent, particularly in light of the past 2,000 years of church interpretation that has often led to violence against the Jewish people. This also has important and far-reaching impact upon evangelism strategies in today's local churches and mission organisations; is Paul's strategy of 'To the Jew first' still relevant?

We will examine the text of Acts first for the historical context, and then for the literary, seeking clarity for how Luke viewed the Jewish people, and his usage



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of 'the Jews,' and if Luke announced an end to the church's Jewish mission.

2. Historical Context

2.1 Inside or External Criticism?

Firstly, we should attempt to establish if Luke saw himself within Judaism or separate, and if he saw Jewish covenantal observance as an ongoing lifestyle for those Jews who had accepted Yeshua as their Messiah. If Luke saw no continuance of Jewish lifestyle and did not see himself within the framework of Judaism, then those who view Acts as anti-Semitic would have grounds for their arguments. If, however, Luke is writing as one within Judaism then the speeches and treatment of 'the Jews' must be seen as an in-house critique, and claims of anti-Semitism are invalidated. **(2)**

Although scholars like Sanders and Haenchen (Sanders, 1986, p.123), portray Luke vehemently rejecting the Jews, we may observe Luke's writing be-

ing favourable to things Jewish, making fine distinctions in a way one would omit were they declaring a rejection of the Jewish people (5:17; 17:2; 21:20; 22:12; 23:6; 24:14-16; 28:17). This detailed concern of Jewish ways suggests Luke knew, embraced and enjoyed Jewish life. Luke gives "a great deal of attention to Torah observance. His heroes, **(3)** Jesus in the Gospel, Paul in Acts, are observant Jews" (Salmon, 1988, p.79; also Wills, 1991, p.631). Hence, the speeches of Stephen, Peter and Paul that Luke transmits in Acts containing strong criticism of the Jews can be seen as in-house criticism, the same type of criticism found in the Prophets and Josephus, who criticized various groups of Jews, yet "we would not say that Josephus was anti-Jewish" (Wills, 1991, p.646). Lowe (1987, p.271) also points out, these criticisms in Acts, and those by Yeshua in the Gospels, "are comparable with criticisms ... found in rabbinic literature." **(4)** One would hardly declare the Talmud, or the Prophets in Tanach, as being anti-Jewish or anti-Israel, and so we should hesitate claiming that similar criticisms contained in Acts are such. We may agree with Salmon (1988, p.79) that it is conceivable to view Luke "as an insider, a Torah-observant Christian Jew."

2.2 Jews Out / Gentiles In?

Some claim God's original purpose for sending Yeshua was not to save the Jewish people but the Gentiles, claiming Acts shows God's rejection of Jews and the establishing of God's Kingdom with the Gentiles. Sanders (1986, 127) claims that in Luke's Gospel, that Yeshua

"make[s] it clear to his audience that they were never the intended recipients of God's salvation, which is a salvation for the Gentiles." (5) Yet it is unlikely that Luke's Gospel or Acts promotes such an anti-Jewish bias as "its context is to lead the listeners to repentance and accept Jesus as the Messiah (2:36-38)" (Wilch, 1991, p.50). These 'listeners' in Acts include both Jewish and Gentile; some accept, and some reject, the Yeshua message.

Many scholars today hold that Luke did not portray Jewish exclusion in the church; he merely saw Gentile inclusion (13:47; 15:16f), for Acts is "a tale told within the history of Israel rather than at the expense of the Jews" (Tiede, 1986, p.143). Bock (2012, p.300) points out the Gentiles "needed salvation because of their association with idolatry. This inclusion did not take place at the expense of the mission to Israel but out of it and alongside of it." (6) In fact "nowhere in Luke-Acts does the idea occur that gentiles replace the Jewish people (as opposed to individual Jews)" (Lowe, 1987, p.270). Any inclusion of Gentiles was never at the expense of the Jewish people, nor did Gentiles receive salvation "only because of Jewish rejection, as an afterthought or as a second choice" (7) (Tannehill, 1986, p.130). Hedrick (2012, p.303) says Luke's use of some Jews as rhetorical anti-heroes who "are not able, in his narrative, to thwart the divine will; in fact, their very failure to seize the opportunity is used to indicate God's immediate plan for the church. This periodic reversal helps to explain the rhetorical use of 'the Jews' in Acts."

Luke believed in Jewish atonement / salvation in Yeshua (Acts 2:36), and his "narrative is a call to Israel to repent by accepting Jesus" (Tyson, 1992, p.25). It is important to remember that Acts reveals an exclusive Jewish church until Peter's vision led him to Cornelius (Acts 10:26). Yet this story tells only of Cornelius' household accepting Yeshua, and not a mass

conversion of Gentiles. Even following Stephen's stoning we find those scattered from Israel were preaching only to Jewish people in the Diaspora (11:19). However, God's eternal plan of salvation included the Gentiles as Gentiles without their converting to Judaism, as was the finding of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). This Council declared God always planned to include the Gentiles, and their inclusion was not because of Jewish rejection; the majority attending this Council were Jews who had not rejected God's Messiah. God, in his wisdom, had called a Pharisee named Saul, Rav Shaul, for the specific ministry of reaching the Gentiles, without any suggestion that this calling was due to Jewish rejection (Acts 9:15). We may also observe there was no significant number of Gentiles in the church until "Paul's mission got underway at the end of the second decade" [Acts 13-14] (Lowe, 1987 p.280).

Although Rav Shaul received this direct call to reach the Gentiles, he was never able to forget his own people (Rom. 9-11), seeing the Gentiles as being grafted into the Jewish root (Rom. 11:17), and not replacing the Jewish people (Rom.11:1-2). He frequently reached out to his fellow Jews and typically started his outreach in any new area with the Jewish people (see below). As noted above, an underlying theme of Acts is how the Gentiles can believe in the Jewish Messiah and yet still remain Gentile (Act.15). (8) One purpose of Acts is to give support for Gentile inclusion, not Jewish exclusion or rejection (9), thus giving "legitimacy to Gentile mission without ever suggesting that Gentile supremacy is the final will of God" (Tiede, 1986, p.151). Therefore outreach to Jewish people is still current in Acts and today.

2.3 Luke: the Goyim Lover?

We may also examine how Luke viewed the Gentiles in Acts. The first observable aspect is "Luke has no romantic view of the Gentiles" (Tiede, 1986, p.51). Luke portrays Gentiles as also opposing the Apostles and rejecting the Gospel message (see list below); as Bock (2012, p.288) observes, "Luke does not always blame the Jews." We may observe the majority of Gentiles reached in Acts were the God-fearers (10), and not the pagan Gentiles who often reject God's Word when they hear it (17:32). These God-fearers found in Acts "are a very special group of Gentiles, more semi-Jews than Gentiles" (Jervell, 1988, p.12). Gager (1986, p.99) says God-fearers were "in some meaningful and official sense, a member of the Jewish community." God's plan for Gentile salvation is seen throughout the Tanach, and prophesied would occur with the coming of the Jewish Messiah (Isa.9:1; 49:6; Amos.9:12; Joel.2:28). This finds fulfilment in Luke's message of Acts with the movement to include the Gentiles. Many of the major characters in Acts, especially those proclaiming the Good News, are Jewish people; the use of 'the Jews' is therefore mentioned in a rhetorical contrasting style, in a way similar to John's Gospel (see below).

3. Literary Context

3.1 'Them Jews!'

At 2009's Australian LCJE, I presented a paper covering the use of the phrase 'the Jews' in John's Gospel. (11) Based on a careful examination of the text, we established four (4) different applications by John, none being anti-Semitic, but rather rhetorical. (12) Much of the reasoning for the use of 'the Jews' in John's Gospel also ap-

plies to Acts, where 'Jew/s' occur about 81 times. We may also find a similar breakdown in Acts as in John's Gospel: **(13)**

- **Its natural sense, simply 'Jewish people':** (Acts 2:5, 10; 9:22; 10:22, 28; 11:19; 13:5, 6; 14:1; 16:3, 20; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:2 (2x), 4, 5, 19, 24; 19:10, 14, 17, 33, 34; 21:21, 39; 22:3, 12; 24:5; 25:8, 10; 26:3, 4; 28:29).

- **As 'Judeans': people who live in or near Jerusalem:** (Acts 10:39).

- **Jewish people hostile to the Yeshua message:** **(14)** (Acts 9:23; 12:11; 14:2, 4, 19; 17:5; 17:13; 18:12, 14, 28; 20:3, 19; 21:27; 24:18).

- **The Religious Authorities: in Jerusalem** (Acts 10:39; 12:3; 21:11; 22:30; 23:12, 20, 27, 30; 24:9, 27; 25:2, 7, 9, 15, 24; 26:2, 7, 21; 28:17, 19); in Antioch Pisidia (13:45, 50); 14:5 (Iconium).

Here in Acts, we may add two new groups:

- **Jews who accepted the Yeshua message:** **(15)** (Acts 2:5x10x 41; 3:4 (implied); 6:7 (implied); 9:31, 42 (implied); 13:43; 14:1; 14:19 (implied), 16:14, 15 (Lydia and her household); 17:4 (Thessalonica); 17:12 (Berea); 18:2, 4, 8 (Corinth); 18:20 (Ephesus, implied), 18:24; 19:8, 10 (implied), 19:17; 20:21; 21:20 (Jerusalem); 28:24 (Rome).

- **Gentiles hostile to the Yeshua message:** **(16)** Acts 12:3, 11 (Herod); 13:50 (Antioch Pisidia); 14:4, 5 (Iconium); 14:19 (Lystra); 16:20 (Thyatira); 17:5 (Thessalonica); 17:13 (Berea); 18:17 (Corinth); 19:23-41 (Ephesus); 24:27 (Felix).

As noted above, all Luke's major

players in Acts are Jewish; some accept and some reject the message that Yeshua is the promised Messiah. Gentiles also, some accept and reject this message; there is no record of any mass Gentile conversion upon hearing the Gospel message such as happened with the Jews (Acts 2:41; 3:4; 5:14; 21:20). Many of the opposing Gentiles in the list above were leaders of their communities, who appear to operate out of the same fear of jealousy and losing power or position as the Jewish leaders (see Bock, 2007, p.46). Yet not all leaders rejected the message; Bruce (1988, p.8) comments that "in Acts a variety of officials, Gentile and Jewish, show goodwill to Paul and the other Christian missionaries, or at least admit that there is no basis for the accusations pressed against them by their opponents." Thus, by an examination of the various rhetorical uses of 'the Jews,' and noting that many thousands of Jews accepted Yeshua; we do not find any wholesale or national Jewish rejection of Yeshua as Messiah.

3.2 Three times: 'Off to the Goyim'!

Rav Shaul's philosophy of outreach 'to the Jew first' stated in Rom.1:16 informs the mission paradigm in Acts, starting with 1:8 and concluding, as an inclusio, in 28:17f. Paul practiced this in his missionary journeys going first to the synagogue, establishing a pattern where "The Jews must be addressed first. If they reject the gospel, the missionaries are free to begin the second phase of their mission" (Tannehill, 1986, p.130). There are three main occasions in Paul's journeys where some claim a supposed national rejection by Jews of the Gospel resulting in him turning to the Gentiles (13:46; 18:6; 28:26). A lesser example is seen in 14:5. Wills (1991, p.644)

sees this pattern to the extent that "Where there is no Jewish opposition there is no dramatic expansion of the mission." These three 'rejection events' have generated much of the debate concerning 'the Jews' in Acts, with scholars differing greatly over their conclusions. To Sanders, these three events show a universal rejection not just of these Jews but of all Jews to the point where "Luke has written the Jews off" (Sanders, 1986, p.118). **(17)** However, Wills (1991, p.632) cautions that "we must be careful not to see a blanket condemnation of unrepentant Israel."

The hope of 'the promise,' and Yeshua's resurrection, are tied to David in both Peter's and Paul's speeches, declaring Yeshua as the fulfillment of the Messianic hope promised to the Jewish people (2:25-31; 13:22,32; 23:6; 26:6). Tannehill (1986, p.131) states that this "should guide our interpretation of 13:33." This message of Yeshua as the Davidic Messiah had to be preached first to the Jews in order that they repent (13:46 c.f. 3:26). The result was "many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed" (13:43; See list above).

By going first to the Jews meant Paul did not have to spend any lengthy time explaining Israel's salvific history or of Messiah, just his identity as Yeshua; the hearers knew what Paul was saying and could therefore quickly accept or reject Yeshua as Messiah. There were always those who accepted, and these formed the foundation for further ministry and congregational life.

We find the first 'Jewish rejection' in Pisidian Antioch when most of the city returned to the synagogue the

following week after Paul's first message, and the non-believing Jews began to oppose Paul (13:45). Here we see a shift in usage of "the Jews" to where "it becomes an abbreviation for 'the Jews who disbelieved'" just as in John's Gospel (Lowe, 1987, p.270). This usage shift, also repeated in 14:2; 17:4; 17:12;18:2; 20:19, demonstrate it is "commonplace to see in Luke-Acts the underlying theme of division of the Jewish people ... between Jesus' opponents and supporters" (Lowe, 1987, p.268). When these opponents become abusive to the point of blaspheme (blasphemoues) Paul transfers the focus of his ministry towards the Gentiles, which completes the previously mentioned "pattern in which initial missionary successes are met with resistance, almost always by Jews, which is in turn followed by movement [to the Gentiles] and new successes" (Wills, 1991, p.639; see 13:45 cf. 18:6). We may note that there were always Jewish believers following these Synagogue visits.

Yet Sanders (1986, p.118) states that Paul so rejected the Jews in Pisidian Antioch (13:46, 51) that he "does not speak to or about 'the Jews' again until he is in Corinth delivering the second such announcement." Perhaps Sanders' bible omits 14:1 or 17:2, 10 that declares Paul 'as his custom was' goes to the synagogue, thus showing any 'rejection' is local and not national, and only focused upon those who refused to believe; there is no reason to continue reaching out to these Jewish people. This mission's 'pattern' is repeated in 18:6; 28:28. Paul's words in 18:6 "your blood

be on your own heads, I am clean," must be "understood in the light of the necessity laid on Paul to speak the word of God first to the Jews, as mentioned in 13:46" (Tannehill, 1986, p.134). Paul's words are likely a veiled reference to Ezek.33:5 where if the people disobeyed, their blood would be on their own heads and the watchman was freed of any further obligation to that community. Yet, "this is not a complete abandonment of the Jews (18:19; 19:8; 28:17-24)" (Bock, 2007, p.579). Importantly, in all these cases, Paul is not declaring his rejection of them, but theirs of Messiah Yeshua; "so rejection and lack of salvation are their responsibility" (Bock, 2007, p.463). However, the Synagogue sadly eventually becomes the abode of those refusing to believe, while the believing Jews join with Gentile believers, increasingly in home gatherings. **(18)**

The third occurrence of 'rejection' from unbelieving Jews and Paul turning to the Gentiles is in 28:28. Sanders (1986, p.118) believes this final rejection "applies probably to all Jews and not just of Paul's Roman hearers." Sanders' reasoning for this is Paul's quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10. But we may agree with Salmon's (1988, p.81) point that "In Rome ... the distinction Luke makes is not between Jew and non-Jew. His distinction is between believing Jew and non-believing Jew. All are Jews." Those present, and Luke's audience, would have understood this point. As this statement was made in Rome we may propose that this statement also included Gentiles who hardened their hearts against the Gospel message. This is likely given the general charge that the message of Yeshua as Messiah was "spoken

against everywhere" (28:22). Bock (2007, p.755) also states "Paul cites the passage to warn the audience that the nation of Israel is falling into the national pattern of not believing and of reflecting hardheartedness. Paul is like Isaiah, and the present Jewish community is like the ancient nation." **(19)** Isaiah was not anti-Semitic, nor was Paul and Luke!

These final verses of Acts do not "report that Paul turned away from the Jews with finality, but rather that he received and [still] preached to 'all' (28:30-31)" (Wilch, 1991, p.52). Importantly, "Acts 28:28 makes no mention of turning from anyone. There is no remark that Jews have been excluded, only that the gospel will be preached to Gentiles, and they will respond" (Bock, 2007, p.756). We also propose that Paul's attempt to reach the Jews in Rome shows Paul, nor Luke, had wholesale rejected the Jewish people; Luke in fact finishes his writing exemplifying 'to the Jew first.'

3.3 The Jews killed the Christ

We briefly examine one final area; the charge that 'the Jews killed the Christ.' **(20)** Importantly, the only time in Acts that guilt over Yeshua's death was laid at the feet of 'the Jews' was in Jerusalem (all Israel: 2:36; Religious Authorities: 4:10; 5:30; 7:32), and in Caesarea (10:39 Peter's reference to 'Jerusalem' implies the Religious Authorities). Therefore all but 2:36 is directed at the religious leaders in Jerusalem, or those under their influence. Within Peter's charge of the religious authorities 'murdering' Yeshua, comes the purpose statement "to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins" (5:30-31.

To which Bock (2012, p.286) says "Here a call to repentance is tied to a fresh offer of forgiveness of sins. It is not too late." Yet, when speaking outside Israel, Paul appears to excuse the Jerusalemites' guilt by saying they acted in ignorance (13:27). The charge of the Jews killing the prophets by Stephen (7:51, 52) "was employed as Jewish self-criticism before Christianity, as well as [found] later in rabbinic literature" (Lowe, 1987, p.279). This charge also was levelled at the Religious Authorities. **(21)** This, as above examples, again appears to be 'in-house' criticism against the actions of their leaders, and not

a charge into the Gentile world.

4. Conclusion

Overall, we may conclude that Acts shows "no final separation or fundamental hostility between Jews and [Gentile] Christians" (Wilch, 1991, p.52). Acts reveals there were Jews and Gentiles who accept the message of Yeshua the Messiah, and there were Jews and Gentiles who reject the message. Bock (2012, p.287) finds "Luke continues to have his characters plead for Jews to accept Jesus." **(22)** Paul reaches both Jews and God-fearers initially in the synagogue, but the Gospel had to expand beyond

these boundaries to the Gentiles, and so begins the process of reaching Gentiles in the marketplace, outside the confines of the Synagogue. This removal permits the Gospel to reach a far greater audience even "to the ends of the earth" (Act.1:8), while still starting 'to the Jew first.' This mission's paradigm should still be practiced today with a conscious effort to reach Jewish people to their Messiah. Those churches that are not located in a Jewish area can support those who are, and financially support the many Messianic Jewish ministries that exist in these days around the world, and in Israel.

References

1. "These two explanations of the portrayal of the Jews in Luke-Acts are so different that one almost wonders if the representatives of the two opposing views have been reading the same edition!" (Sanders, 1986, p.113).
2. One example is Chrysostom, the 'golden mouthed': "The synagogue is worse than a brothel...it is the den of scoundrels and the repair of wild beasts...the temple of demons devoted to idolatrous cults....the refuge of brigands and debauches, and the cavern of devils. [It is] a criminal assembly of Jews.....a place of meeting for the assassins of Christ....a house worse than a drinking shop.....a den of thieves; a house of ill fame, a dwelling of iniquity, the refuge of devils, a gulf and abyss of perdition" (Brown, 1992, p.10),
3. Wilch (1991, p.53) says "Although this is an emotionally charged issue, not every statement that is conceivably detrimental to Judaism should for that reason be stamped as anti-Judaic."
4. Hedrick (2012, p.303) points out "According to the early rhetorical theorists, the comparison may be made between two like elements, between two similar elements but with one preferred, or between one worthy of blame and the other worthy of praise. Luke uses this rhetorical strategy to portray individual Jews as heroes of God's plan, to depict some Jews as understanding and following those leaders, but also to depict some Jews as anti-heroes."
5. Turner (2008, pp.76-77), after examining Jesus' strong denunciation of the Jewish leaders in Mat.23, concludes "No one can doubt that the language of Matthew 23 is severe, and that it castigates certain Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day in terms that make genteel modern folk extremely uncomfortable ... neither should it be extrapolated to apply to the Jewish people as a whole, either then or now." Turner finds Jesus' criticism as in-house and done with love and respect (Matt.23:37).
6. Sanders stands strongly that the use of 'the Jews' in Acts is anti-Semitic.
7. For more, read Bock (2012) *The Theology of Luke and Acts*: chapter 13.
8. One may be excused thinking that God was caught out by a supposed wholesale Jewish rejection of Yeshua, and then, as an afterthought, decided to walk over to the Gentiles in the hope they would accept his offer of atonement.