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# LUKE ON PLURALISM: Flex with History

*Delbert Wiens*

This essay is based on an unpublished manuscript which re-interprets Luke's contribution to the New Testament. Here I cannot do more than sketch some of the results of what I claim to have found in *The Gospel according to Luke* and *The Acts* and to apply these findings to the question of Luke's understanding of the Gospel which was to be preached "to the ends of the earth." The essay probes Christian mission approaches in a religiously pluralistic world.

## *Stephen's Sermon as Luke's Summary of the Gospel*

In the Prologue to his two-volume work (Luke 1:1-4), Luke tells "Theophilus" that the structure of his work is the clue to its meaning: its "order" will reveal its significance. The phrases he uses are also intended to remind his reader of the prologue to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and therefore to the importance of speeches for discerning the author's interpretation of the events that are being reported. It is my claim that Stephen's Sermon in Acts 7 is both a summary of the Gospel that is to be preached to Gentiles and a key to the structure of both parts of Luke's writing.

Luke does not promise Theophilus any new information. His reader has, presumably, read the "many" accounts of Jesus which had been

*"Jesus is the fulfillment of the pagan quest as much as he is the fulfillment of the Jewish one."*

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written. But it is possible to be fully informed of the facts and yet to be confused and troubled, as were the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who were incapable of making sense of the crucifixion of Jesus and of the report of his resurrection. Then the unrecognized Jesus appeared beside them and “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24: 27). Only after they learned how the recent events fit into the larger structure of the working of God in the history of the Jews could they recognize Jesus and understand the significance of his deeds and words and of what had happened to him.

When Theophilus got to Stephen’s Sermon, he would have recognized that this was the right place to be told what Jesus had expounded to the two disciples en route to Emmaus. This sermon is carefully “set up.” In Acts 6 Stephen has been lauded as a man “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” who “did great wonders and signs.” A Hellenist, his preaching to Jews who had lived abroad was so powerful that “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.” Clearly, his message had powerfully adapted the Good News of Jesus to Greek-speaking audiences. They then instigated “false witnesses” to charge him with blasphemy and heresy before the Jewish council.

The charges, repeated three times, were that 1) Stephen had denied the validity of the Mosaic customs and law, and 2) he had blasphemed God and the temple. In other words, the Christian message, as voiced by Stephen, seemed to be denying both the “covenant” way of life and the way of worship that God had given them in their history. If this was true, the Christians were rejecting everything the Old Testament scriptures had stood for. When the High Priest challenged Stephen, “Is this so?” he was asking whether this version of the teaching of Jesus was proclaiming the death of Yahweh as well as the destruction of their worship. He was also asking about the meaning of history and God’s relation to it. And then “all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” At this point Theophilus would recognize the allusion to Moses coming down from Sinai. Stephen represents nothing less than a new “Moses” presenting the claims of a new Covenant. What must follow is a constitution and a worship for a new people of God. What is more, what follows this speech will be a persecution which spreads the message (hammered out in Jerusalem) to Judea and then Samaria and then to “the uttermost parts of the earth.” This is the logical place for Luke to explain what is the Gospel that the earliest Christian missionaries take to fellow Jews, to Samaritans, and to Gentiles.

## A Speech about Epochs

The over-all structure of the speech (Acts 7:2-53) can be quickly sketched. Verse 41 concludes the answer to the charge that Stephen (and Jesus) had spoken against Moses and the law. Verses 42-50 answer the charge that Stephen had blasphemed against God and the temple. Stephen accuses his listeners of resisting the Holy Spirit (v.51). They are angered. Stephen tells the vision he is having of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. This vision is the real conclusion of the speech.

The first section (Acts 7:2-41) summarizes the work of Moses with a series of clauses which are introduced by dramatic uses of *this*: "This Moses....This man....This is the one...." These clauses successively refer to Moses as leader/deliverer, as prophet, as lawgiver, and again as deliverer. In other words, the discussion of Moses depicts him as Israel's leading culture-bringer.

But Moses was not the only hero. During the first century A.D., as in the immediately preceding century or two, Abraham and Joseph had also been hailed as important culture bringers. Many a Jewish writer had been careful to claim the chronological priority of these over Greek, Roman, and even Egyptian sages. Stephen does not make this claim. Significantly, the first section of his speech discusses Abraham, Joseph, and Moses as "only" the heroes of specific epochs of Israel's history.

Three major themes appear in each of the pericopes of this first part of his speech. Each carefully specifies a geography which is appropriate to the character of that epoch. A second theme or cluster of themes deal with the societal structures which the hero created or represented. The story of Abraham is confined to a family setting. The Joseph section introduces tribal structure. The Moses section deals with an emerging people. Each of these social settings generates a particular conflict. A third major theme is the religious ritual (and actual or implicit "covenant") which appropriately, and ideally, resolves the inherent conflict. These themes may be outlined as follows:

<b>The Hero:</b>	Abraham vv. 2-8	→ Joseph vv. 9-16	→ Moses vv. 17-41
<b>The Geography</b>	Mesopotamia to Canaan	→ Canaan to Egypt	→ Egypt to Sinai toward Canaan
<b>The Polity:</b>	Family	→ Tribe	→ People
• <i>Status:</i>	Free Wanderer	→ Wards of Pharaoh	→ From Slaves to Citizens
• <i>Conflict:</i>	Father/Son	→ Brother/Brother	→ Leader/Led
<b>The Covenant:</b>	Circumcision	→ Burial	→ Living Law

Three other themes emerge in each section. There is always resistance to the new stage and persecution of the one who comes to announce and inaugurate it. Secondly, the culture-bringer suffers a kind of death and undergoes a re-education. In the third place, it is only in a second coming that the task that God has given the hero is completed. Finally it is important that subsequent heroes recapitulate the earlier stages. Joseph is a son before he is a brother. Moses is both son and brother before he becomes the leader of God's people.

The outline of this structure does not by itself spell out the meaning of each epoch, but it does already point out that God has led Abraham and his heirs long before Moses appears to mediate the ethos which is being defended as absolute by those who have met to hear Stephen. The laws and customs and covenants of Israel have been preceded by family and tribal laws and customs and covenants. Though each had been God-ordained, none of these earlier stages are eternal epochs. In fact, the later stages have been present implicitly and as promise in the originating prophecy to Abraham. Nor are any of these stages wholly lost. Each of these ways to be a society persists, though subordinated to later and larger structures.

Therefore "Moses" is also relativized; his laws and customs represent only one such epoch. In fact, Moses himself, as prophet, predicts his supercession. "This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up'" (v. 37). In this swift climax, the entire history Stephen has sketched is seen to be incomplete. "Another Moses" means another geography, another polity, another status, another conflict, another covenant. A new set of arrows springs up at the end of each line of the chart given above. It also implies another rejection and death and second coming. On his way to founding the polity (the sociology and constitution) of the Kingdom of God, this "second Moses" will also have to pass through the epochs represented by Abraham, Joseph, and Moses.

The first charge about denying the validity of Mosaic customs has been fully answered. The "false" witnesses have told the truth! Stephen teaches that one like Moses will lead beyond the entire Mosaic "dispensation." But they are false witnesses nonetheless. The true follower of Moses refuses to absolutize Moses. Each of the stages are gifts of God and each stage points beyond itself to the God who uses it to enter into relationship with human beings. At the same time, each stage leads forward, when fully developed, to a greater gift. Like a master dramatist Stephen has set the scene for the naming of the one like Moses.

To answer the second charge about blaspheming God and the temple (7:42-50), Stephen traced the "places" for Israel's cult in a series which formally parallels the answer to the question of "Moses." First, there was

the making of the golden calf by Israel and God's subsequent abandonment of them to "the host of heaven." Then Israel had the tabernacle. Next came the period of the temple. But it was not the case that the stages of the two series exactly matched each other. Presumably Stephen could have made the case that the temple belonged to the nationhood of Israel and that the tabernacle corresponded to its existence as a tribal confederation. He could even have pointed out that polytheism was inherent in familial divinities. In fact, his main point is the contrast between false (idolatrous) and true worship at every stage of Israel's cult.

But now Stephen, who was moving swiftly, alluded again to a fourth stage in his progression of epochs. Verse 37 had promised a fourth era beginning with a new Moses. But nothing more had been said about it. Verses 48-50, quoting another prophetic text, affirm that not even the entire cosmos can contain God.

Idols → Tabernacle → Temple → (?)

The vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God above the heavens (vv. 55-56) completed the apologia by disclosing the goal of both the Jewish polity and its worship. Now Stephen, who was standing in the shadow of the temple, was made to look through the opened heaven to the reality of which the temple and the tabernacle, and perhaps even "the host of heaven," have been types and precursors. Although Luke had presented the temple as the goal of the earthly ministry of Jesus, it now turns out that the resurrected Jesus is the house "not made with hands" through whom God is both to be understood and to be approached. Jesus, not the cosmos, truly models God. And this Jesus is the continuing giver of a newer "living law" (Acts 2:33) which is the Holy Spirit within each believer. As the one whose martyrdom crowns his witness, Stephen is a model of the normal disciple in the new and universal people of God. As the one who participates in the killing of Stephen, Saul is the promise of the Paul who will be the bearer of this gospel to the end of the earth.

What Stephen had presented was a large structure for explaining the actions of God through history. To create a new people for God in a Kingdom for his direct rule, God had first created a new kind of family in Abraham, a new kind of tribal polity with Joseph and his brothers, and a new kind of people through Moses. Each of these epochs led to a successor epoch, and all of them were completed and fulfilled in what was inaugurated with Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

### *Preaching This Gospel to the Gentiles*

We can ask now "Is Christ the exclusive way to salvation?" What is to be said about "religious pluralism"? I intend not to give a final answer to

this question but only to present some key aspects of Luke's answer. Though only one part of the New Testament, Luke's answer should be important for us. All we now need to do is to see how Luke applies his understanding of the Gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles.

Between the end of Stephen's apologia and his vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God, there is a passage in which Stephen directly confronts the Council with the claim that they and their fathers have always persecuted the prophets who looked forward to the coming of the "Righteous One." Two interpretations of the meaning of their history now confront each other. Stephen denies that God can be identified with any stage of God's dealings. To absolutize even Moses and Temple is to create idols. Only God is to be absolutized, and God is dynamic, free to move to better gifts. In keeping with a significant theme in the Hebrew Scriptures, God's dynamic movement cannot rest until all nations have been blessed "in Abraham." The other, the "pietistic" version which Luke has rejected, is to insist that God's best gifts are absolute and that they have been given to Israel. Their own national fulfillment and aggrandizement is the point of the story, and "Moses and Temple" are the final seal and sacrament of that purpose.

Luke's interpretation implies also that what has been revealed in Israel's story is not a special truth for themselves alone. Nor is their history a sacred history so totally different from all others. Rather, it is Israel's glory to have so wrestled with God that their own history has yielded a revelation of the deeper truth of all histories. And, as a fulfillment of the epochs of their own wrestling with God's purposes, they have become the stage for the coming of the one who is the goal of all other histories.

At the very beginning of Luke's story, Simeon had proclaimed that Jesus was "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel (Luke 2:32). Near the end of Luke's story, Paul links "hope" to the resurrection and insists that the resurrected Christ "would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 23:6; 24:15; 26:6-8, 17-18, 22-23). Thus the resurrected Jesus is made possible by Israel's history and extends the promises inherent in that history to the destinies of all other nations. In this shift to other nations Paul's speeches play an important part.

## Gliding from Jew to Gentile

The last large section in Luke's story is devoted to Paul's missionary journeys (Acts 17:1-21:14) and is organized around two speeches. In the first Paul sketched an "indigenous" theology for the Gentile church (17:16-34). In the second he explained the nature of his ministry and

charged the elders of one of those churches to assume the supervision which he was relinquishing (20: 13-37).

The introduction to Paul's first speech, his sermon on Mars Hill (17:16-21), connects the ensuing events with the events and message of Acts 6-7. Athens was a city full of idols. Some Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, both curious and condescending, expressed interest in Paul's "new teaching" and brought him to the Areopagus. The events remind the reader of Acts 6. There it was Stephen who had a message particularly aimed at Jews in Hellenized synagogues in Jerusalem. And those Hellenized Jews brought Stephen before the high Council to explain his message. Here in Athens the confrontation was transposed into a Gentile key. Paul began in a Hellenized synagogue but moved to the larger "marketplace" of Athenian—and Greco-Roman—thinking. Representatives of the two leading schools of Greek and Roman philosophy confronted Paul and brought him to the highest religious court, which met on Mars Hill. At that time, like the Jerusalem Council, it also had some sort of role in censoring what was taught in the city.

The content of Paul's address contains much that reminds the reader of Acts 7:42-50. As there, it is preceded by negative judgments on idolatry. Here also there is a progression from idols to shrines to the God who transcends everything made by human hands. And, as in Acts 7, he quoted from the "Scriptures" to substantiate his points; but the "scriptures" were not the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather, he quoted from the old poets who received canonical status among the Gentiles. One of those quotations makes an almost identical point to the one made in the Isaiah quotation used by Stephen to close off his speech. Finally, as in Acts 7, the speech ends by pointing to the resurrected Jesus. The point implicitly made by Stephen is explicitly made by Paul: this Jesus will return as judge. From all of this I would argue that Luke intended Paul's speech to parallel Stephen's answer to the second charge made against him and the other followers of Jesus. In the Jewish context that question was about God and the temple. Here in Athens the question was the same. What do Christians take to be the meaning of the Greek (and other Gentile) conceptions of deity and of the cult? The implication is clear. *Their own* religious beliefs and worship, when most profoundly understood, point ahead to fulfillment in Jesus. As in Peter's sermons (Acts 2 and 3), the past ignorance was said to be excusable.

So far, as also in Paul's speech at Lystra (Acts 14:8-18), Paul's appeal had moved from the categories of creation and "nature" rather than from that of history. In the middle of the speech, however, there is a surprising and important appeal to history:

And God made from one every human race dwelling on the face of the earth, fixing their appointed epochs and their geographical borders, in order to open the possibility of seeking and finding God. (17:26-27a).

This single sentence forced the readers to recall the content of Stephen's answer to the charge that believers deny Moses and the law. As noted, Stephen had sketched the polity of Israel in a series of three epochs and a sequence of geographical places. Now we are invited to apply that structure from Acts 7 to Greek and other Gentile histories. Every "race" can trace its history as a logical sequence from "family" to "tribe" (or something like it) to the sort of "peoplehood" it possesses. That this would make sense to everyone with a Hellenistic education is clear from their writings. These stages through which peoples develop are intended to lead them nearer to God. Of course, this does not always happen. Even the Hebrews were prone to absolutize partial understandings, to "make idols" of provisional and partially true "images." And much in both Hebrew and pagan tradition was both false and a dead end. Though Paul was sure that Stoic, and especially Epicurean, thought was inadequate (its categories can make no sense of resurrection from the dead for example), he also was sure that some of their teachings pointed in the direction which was climaxed by the revelation possible through Christ. Every people possesses its own "Old Covenants" in some form or other, "but now [God] commands all men everywhere to repent," that is, to transform their thinking in the light of what God had now done. Luke can now trust the Holy Spirit, thinkers like Apollos, and Gentile church leaders to develop these hints into a full apologia for Gentiles.

### "Outsider" Stories Echo "Insider" Stories

Having been invited by Paul to consider the "allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation," serious Roman readers would have been inspired to reconsider their own history and geography in the light of Stephen's apologia. According to their most important myth, their own Abraham (Aeneas) had been directed to leave his homeland for a place that would be revealed to him. Taking his own Terah (Anchises), he "bogged down" in a land that seemed to be the appointed place and wasn't. Like Terah, Anchises had to die and be buried along the way. Like Abraham and Joseph and the patriarchs, there was a seductive but ultimately painful interlude along the North African coast among a people whose polity and politics were opposed to what their god had in mind for them. Their own tribal divisions were developed. Like Moses, there was a significant lawgiver (Numa). Indeed, scholars have long insisted that Paul's voyage to Rome was deliberately presented to evoke memories of the final voyage of Aeneas to Rome. The end of the Lukan story even suggests that Rome

has now been revealed to be a larger Israel, the center from which the Kingdom of God will spread among the Gentiles.

What Luke appears to be offering is a new destiny for Rome, one which will fulfill its deepest meaning. Of course, first it will have to suffer a crucifixion of its own interpretation of its own politics and meanings. Jesus, not Octavian Augustus, will have to become its Savior and kingly ideal. Of course, this Gospel will initially be rejected and Paul will have to die. But here too there can be expected to be a second coming. One suspects that Luke would not have been surprised at the Constantinian turn-around, though he might well have agonized over the question of whose polity had really triumphed.

To summarize, Luke has claimed that there is a structure of God's dealings with all people for the purpose of leading them to "feel after him and find him." But we may ask whether Luke actually believed that in fact "pagans" had done so. The answer to that comes in the story of the Holy Spirit baptism of Cornelius. This Roman army officer was "a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God" (Acts 10:2). The opening words of Peter's "sermon" reveals that a powerful conversion has taken place. It is Peter's! Peter's thinking has been radically turned around. "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (10:34). Cornelius was not "converted" here. He had already been accepted by God. While Peter was in the act of saying that "every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name," the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius, implying that Cornelius had already also been forgiven. What Peter's preaching of Jesus had made possible was the fulfillment of Cornelius' "pagan" faith and his reception of the Holy Spirit. In his report to the apostles and brethren in Jerusalem, Peter stressed that "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them," implying that Cornelius had been so fully prepared that only the briefest account of Jesus sufficed as the message by which he had been saved (11:14-15). Luke insists that it is Jesus who saves and fulfills the human quest for God. He is also here saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of the pagan quest as much as he is the fulfillment of the Jewish one.

### *Is There Here a Gospel for Us Christians?*

To this point I have intended only to express the thoughts of Luke. Building on Luke, I now offer a few comments of my own. As during the Hellenistic Age, the emergence of strong peoples has led to an era of empire building, especially in the West. As then, centralized state power

has grown as clan and tribal loyalties have deteriorated and even peoplehood is threatened. And, as then, religious movements emerge which offer a strictly personal self-fulfillment and even "divinization."

Again there are surprises. Modern empires have again proved to be both too large and too small. They are too large to furnish a satisfactory focus for identity for those who have lost the disciplines of healthy lesser identities. And they are too small to guarantee security and prosperity. Therefore localism and tribalism, in demonic forms, spring to life. There is a second surprise. This time, at least in the modern West, it is the Christian church which has become a "Mystery religion," offering individualistic conversion, this-worldly self-sufficiency, and expressivist emotionalism. In short, we have largely forgotten that Jesus came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. And, at least where I live, it can hardly be imagined that Christians were originally taught what it meant to be "family," and "clan," and "tribe," and "nation" on the way to becoming a universal people for God. Not understanding the "polity of Jesus," we also fail to recognize the radicalness of the "politics of Jesus."

By the twenty-first century we may be ready to hear that neither the person, nor the nation, nor even the nuclear family can survive in the absence of social structures which can do the job that clan and tribe (and village) and people were shaped to do. Like the early Christians, the time has come to re-invent those structures. Of course, as Luke also knew, we may have first to die. His story closes with Paul awaiting martyrdom in Rome. But he is awaiting also a pouring out of the Pax (peace)-ordering Holy Spirit by the Jesus who is standing at the right hand of God to welcome the martyrs, to overlook those who remain ignorant during first comings, and to judge those who reject even second ones.