CHAPTER ELEVEN

ONCE AGAIN: THE GENTILE MISSION IN LUKE-ACTS

This paper deals with two problems, one major and one minor, related to the depiction of the Gentile mission in Acts. (1) How is the origin of the Gentile mission in Acts to be understood theologically? (2) Why is there a disproportionate amount of attention given to Jewish rejection of the gospel in Acts? These two questions will be treated in order. We begin with the first.

Luke-Acts is a narrative account in two parts: part one, the life of the founder of the Christian community; part two, a sketch of the Christian community from its beginnings in Jerusalem to its expansion to Rome. The story is about a Jewish founder and a community of Jewish followers in Palestine that ultimately becomes a predominantly Gentile Christian community in lands outside Palestine. How did a Palestinian Jewish movement become a non-Palestinian Gentile one? That is the historical question. What justification was there for a Palestinian Jewish movement becoming a non-Palestinian Gentile one? That is the religious question. It is on the latter question that this essay focuses.¹


It was to the Jews that salvation was first offered, and offered again and again. It was not until they refused it by their vilification of Jesus that the emissaries of Christianity turned to the Gentiles.²

At three points in the Pauline mission, in Asia Minor, in Greece, and in Rome, there are statements to this effect.

¹ Dixon Slingerland, ‘The Jews in the Pauline Portion of Acts,’ JAAR 54 (1986): 305–21, argues that Acts is not historical either in its picture of Paul or its portrayal of the Jews. Whatever one makes of such a claim, it is irrelevant for our purposes. This article is concerned solely with Acts’ theology.
1) Acts 13:46–47 indicates that when the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia rejected Paul’s preaching, Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying:

   It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. (RSV)

The turning to the Gentiles is depicted as a fulfillment of scripture (Isa 49:6):

   I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.

2) Acts 18:6 tells how, when Paul preached to Jews in Corinth and experienced their rejection of his message that the Christ was Jesus, the apostle said:

   Your blood be upon your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles. (RSV)

3) Acts 28:25–28 relates how in Rome, after the Jewish response to Paul’s preaching was divided, he made two points. First, the Jewish failure to respond properly fulfilled the prophecy of Isa 6:9–10 (Acts 28:26–27). Second, “let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (Acts 28:28, RSV).

   J. C. O’Neill has also contended that the Stephen episode marks the same point in the mission to the city of Jerusalem signaled by the threefold refrain in Paul’s mission in the Diaspora. By the end of the Stephen episode, the city as a whole has lost its chance, though individual Jews might still repent. Furthermore, the spread of the gospel ultimately to Gentiles results from the city’s rejection (8:4–5; 11:19–21; 13:1–3). If so, then there is a motif in Acts that portrays the Gentile mission as originating because of Jewish rejection of the gospel. Both the rejection by the Jews and the turning to the Gentiles, moreover, are seen as fulfillments of scripture.

   On the other hand, other scholars argue that in Lukan theology the Gentile mission originated because of Jewish acceptance of the gospel. Their argument unfolds in several stages.

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