The ancient historian who is the author of Luke-Acts argues for the reception of all nations into the people of God, a social policy that is a radical contrast with the attitude toward foreigners expressed by the Priestly editors of the Pentateuch and by the Maccabean books.¹ This paper investigates the antecedents of this social policy. There are structural parallels between Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities, and Luke’s history that involve this social policy. I will very briefly set out some of those similarities and then ask another question: can we trace the origin of the language and the social inclusiveness involved back to Alexander the Great, i.e., back to a cultural impulse of Hellenism?

Dionysius and Plutarch on Romulus Accepting Foreigners

Without going into detail, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities,² and Luke-Acts both divide history into three periods: First, they each inform about ancestors, second, they narrate a central period of history in which the Founder(s) teach(es); and third, they tell of the successors.³

¹ I offer this essay in gratitude to Abraham Malherbe, a mentor whose ideas and approach to exegesis has been generative for me. This contribution builds on the sort of question he discusses in ““Not in a Corner”: Early Christian Apologetic in Acts 26:26,” in Paul and the Popular Philosophers (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 147–63. John Fitzgerald’s suggestions as an editor have also been very helpful.


A social policy that the Founder of Rome and the Founder of the church have in common is the policy of receiving foreigners into the citizen/church body. In a key apologetic passage, Dionysius argues that Rome is the most hospitable (ξυνοτάτη) and friendly of all cities (Rom. Ant. 1.89.1), having intermixed Aborigines, Arcadians, and Peloponnesians, a mixture of barbarians. But this reception (ὑποδεξάμενη) of Samnites, Umbrians, Iberians, and Gauls with innumerable other nations (ἐθνη), who differed from each other in language and habits, did not cause innovation in the ancient order (1.89.2–3). This mixture, the intermingling with many nations, only results in Romans not pronouncing Greek properly (1.90.2).

The second book of Dionysius’ history sets out Romulus’ constitutional policy (Rom. Ant. 2.15–17). From the very beginning, Romulus made the city large and populous by welcoming (ὑποδεξοθαι) fugitives, making the power of Rome grow (αὐξησα; 2.15.4). With these additions (προσπιθέντες) Rome became inferior in numbers to no other nation (2.16.3). Greek customs, especially those of the Athenians, who pride themselves on their noble birth, grant citizenship to none or few, and who even expel foreigners, are not advantageous and not to be praised (2.17.1). Through a single defeat [by Philip II at Chaeronea in 338 BCE], Athenians lost the leadership of Greece and their liberty. Later in the narrative, an Alban charges the Romans with admitting (ὑποδεξάμενοι) the homeless, vagabonds, and barbarians in great numbers, so that most are of an alien race (ἀλλοφύλον; 3.10.4). The kings are outsiders, and senators are newcomers (3.10.5). Rome is a city without order and discipline (πόλει ἀδιακόσμητος ... καὶ ἀδιάταξτος), a conglomeration of many races (ἐκ πολλῶν ... ἐθνῶν; 3.10.6). The Roman respondent to the charges, however, takes pride in Rome being a mixture of foreigners (ἐπιμεξίας τοῖς ἀλλοφύλοις; 2.11.3–4), a policy that has made Rome great, in contrast to Greek Alba (3.11.7). Factional strife makes Rome grow (αὐξησε; 3.11.8).

Not only Dionysius, but also Plutarch uses this language when writing of Romulus. Plutarch’s first sentence is that Rome is famous among all mankind (διὰ πάντων ἀνθρώπων; Romulus I.1). Plutarch tells alternative legends of Rome’s origin; one involves the descendants of Aeneas reigning as kings in Alba. According to well-known legends, Romulus and Remus are born. Later, to the displeasure of Numitor, king

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