

TITLE:

'For Luke, the mission to the Jews has failed. At most it may be hoped a few brands will be snatched from the fire.' Give a critical explanation and evaluation of this verdict.

1	Introduction
2	Why the Mission to the Jews is considered a 'failure'
3	Antithetic views
4	Critique
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## **1 Introduction**

There can be no doubt that Luke takes a great interest in the ‘hope of Israel’, despite his supposed Gentile origins, and indisputable Gentile interests. From the restorationist tone of Gabriel’s first announcement to Zechariah in Luke 1.16-17 to Paul’s affirmation in Acts 28.20, the Gospel is frequently expressed in terms of the Messianic hopes found both in the Scriptures and in popular Jewish expectation.

A majority of current scholarship would probably concur with the proposition of the title. However, a minority take a diametrically opposite view. Debate centres on *how* Luke regards the Jews, or even *whom* he regards as Jews. Sanders<sup>1</sup> puts the division thus: either Luke distinguishes between Jews who become Christians and those who do not, the latter being rejected altogether, or he does not, and condemns all Jews collectively.

But this is an oversimplification. It also needs to be established how central to Luke’s theological purpose is the mission to the Jews, either in terms of its failure *or* success. And it is important to consider whether Luke regards any type of Jewish rejection as final; whether, and in what sense, he would recognise such rejection as a ‘failure’, and to what extent the church is continuous with, or divorced from, Israel’s spirituality.

## **2 Why the Mission to the Jews is considered a ‘failure’**

It is a historical fact that the axis of Christianity shifted early on from the Jews to the Gentiles. It is generally considered that *Acts* documents and explains this transition. At one extreme this is seen as a complete rejection of the gospel by Jews, with the nation's consequent rejection by God.

So Haenchen<sup>2</sup> sees in *Acts* a developing Jewish opposition to the gospel which demonstrates the Christians, not the Jews, to be ‘*the group in continuity with the Old Testament*’. This culminates, in Paul’s final speech in *ch.28*, in

...a final rejection of Israel and its being replaced with the Gentiles.<sup>3</sup>

This radically negative view of Israel is worked through in detail by J T Sanders. He (like many others) notes the way that throughout *Acts* the gospel is first preached to Jews, then rejected by them and accepted by Gentiles. He sees in the speeches an initial, and sole, invitation to repent on the basis that Jewish rejection of Jesus was based on ignorance (*e.g.* 3.17). When the Gospel is rejected this excuse is closed (so Paul omits mention of ignorance in referring back to Jerusalem’s Jews, 13.27*ff.*), and so the proclamation moves first away from the leaders to the people, and then from them to the Gentiles.

There seem to be no second chances, once such opportunities are past.<sup>4</sup>

In effect, as the Jews are progressively evangelised, Israel as a nation ceases to exist outside the Church.

In the narrative Sanders recognises that the Jews are sometimes presented as favourable, sometimes as unfavourable, to the Church, but considers that in portraying this Luke

...has carefully constructed a progression that is intended to put the Jews in a bad light.<sup>5</sup>

The term '*the Jews*', used with the same negative connotation seen in *John*, is subsequently transferred from the Jewish leaders to the people, representing the rejection of the whole people.

In contrast to this gradual intensification of the *narrative* criticism of the Jews, in the *speeches* there is a uniformly critical attitude to them which reflects Luke's 'real' views. The final scene in Rome, Sanders says, has Paul denounce the Jews even though they pose no opposition.

The final scene of Paul's ministry is therefore a reprise of the first scene of Jesus' [*i.e.* Luke 4.16ff.],<sup>6</sup>

both episodes implying that salvation is not for the Jews, but for the Gentiles.

This interpretation is so negative towards Israel that Sanders concludes that Luke is fundamentally anti-Semitic: the Jews were always, in fact, reprobate, and only appear in a good light to give them the chance to repent. The mission to the Jews is therefore a failure because Israel has irredeemably failed. Examples of Jewish believers are an almost embarrassing exception, leading to Paul as Luke's hero being almost an honorary Gentile, opposed to the law and even to a 'reactionary' Jewish Church. Thus Tyson's assessment of Luke's Jerusalem church is scathing:

The last we hear of Christians in Jerusalem involves shattering disharmony and incredible impotence.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 *Antithetic views*

In the light of this it is more than surprising that other writers, notably J Jervell, take a completely opposite view of Luke's intentions. In *Luke-Acts*,

Luke presents to us more Jewish and Jewish Christian material than the majority of New Testament authors do.<sup>8</sup>

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He sees the Jewish mission as a resounding success, and regards the opposite view as arising not from Luke but from our common conception of the history of early Christianity. Gentile Christianity only became dominant in the second century, after Luke's time, and so is anachronistically read into Acts.

His thesis is radical. Both Jews and Gentiles accept the gospel, but the Jews are the great majority. As regards the Gentiles,

We get throughout *Acts* the notion of a Gentile mission which from the beginning was accepted, but gradually surrounded by scepticism. And this corresponds to the gradual hardening of the demands to the Gentiles.<sup>9</sup>

The Jerusalem church, far from being a reactionary backwater, has authority over all the churches, and represents a successful continuity with the Israel of history. Luke stresses its numbers ('*many thousands*', 21.20), its zeal for the law (21.20), its adherence to circumcision (21.21) and to the temple (21.24), and Paul's own submission to this viewpoint (21.24, 24.11-18, 28.17 *etc.*).

Even more radically he regards the Gentile mission as only starting in earnest in Acts 28, not because of the Jewish mission's failure, but because of its success. He does this by seeking to demonstrate that the earlier 'Gentile mission' was not to pagan Gentiles, but to God-fearers who were already on the edge of the community of Israel<sup>10</sup>.

Presenting Cornelius as paradigmatic of all Gentile conversions, he concludes that terms like *Ἕλληνες*, *λαος πολθς* and *παντα τα εθνε* refer only to God-fearers who were already obedient to Jewish practice. Those few occasions when pagans are evangelised (*e.g.* at Lystra and Athens) lead to failure.

Jerusalem's letter to Gentile believers is seen as bringing them within the laws for resident aliens in Leviticus 17-20, rather than as exempting them from the law. To Jervell, Israel consists of the Jews who accept Christ: Gentile believers are a separate people graciously allowed to associate with Israel:

The Gentiles are, strictly speaking, not 'people', because *the* people is Israel, whereas 'the Gentiles' involves many different peoples.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, Luke is held to present in *Luke* a particularly Jewish version of the gospel promise, and in *Acts* its substantial fulfilment through acceptance by many Jews from Jerusalem, Judaea and the Diaspora, by proselytes, by Samaritans and finally by God-fearing Gentiles. In the end, Luke rejects further mission to the Jews not, as Sanders says, because Israel is rejected in favour of the Gentiles, but because it is already *restored* in the Jewish Church, and the time of the Gentiles (when restored Israel reaches out to bless the nations) has come.

#### **4 Critique**

How can such disparate views emerge from the same book? One reason, it has to be said, is that both poles of the argument are rather selective in their use of the text, and somewhat loose in their argumentation.

Sanders, for example, is less than correct in his assertion of a uniformly anti-Jewish attitude in the speeches. Paul's court hearings, though admittedly implying criticism of Jewish rejection of the Gospel, also contain very positive statements both about the people and its law<sup>12</sup>.

He also uses unacceptably subjective criteria for assessing Luke's literary intentions in his references to the Jews. Where Luke seems

sympathetic to Jewish matters, it is to show the Church's continuity with Old Testament revelation. Where he is critical, it reveals his hatred of Israel<sup>13</sup>. But inevitably this procrustean logic contorts the text to the theory. The description of the Jerusalem church in ch.21, though in its plain sense perfectly sympathetic, *must* be negative because of Luke's supposed anti-Semitism.

Then again, in his assertion that Luke gives one chance only for the various Jewish groups to repent, Sanders ignores the fact that the churches in these places continue to grow. It is hard to reconcile the theory that Jerusalem no longer had the excuse of ignorance for their unbelief with the later record of a church consisting of 'many thousands' of zealous Jews.

Regarding the end of *Acts*, it is difficult to see that Paul's denunciation of the Jews is any more general or final than similar statements earlier in the book. Afterwards we read that Paul welcomed all who came to him over the next two years, and there is no clear implication that this excluded Jews.

At the other extreme, Jervell is also selective with the facts. His assertion of the failure of pagan evangelism is weak on close examination. Though no conversions are mentioned in Lystra, Paul does return to strengthen the disciples (14.21-22). In Athens, though few conversions are mentioned at all, at least one is a pagan member of the Areopagus. The Philippian gaoler and his family, scarcely mentioned as an exception by Jervell, nevertheless constitute a majority of converts specified in the text.

Jervell's restriction of the meaning of words for 'Gentile' to 'God-fearers' lacks any justification<sup>14</sup>, and furthermore his picture of such God-

fearers as ‘all-but Jews’ seems not to take into account recent work which demonstrates that they were sometimes ‘all-but pagans’:

Some of the God-fearers were only one step from becoming converts, while others just added the Jewish God to their pantheon. So long as they showed some kind of sympathy with the Jewish religion they were considered God-fearers.<sup>15</sup>

Specifically Cornelius, as a Roman centurion, would have been obliged to participate in the official cult<sup>16</sup>. To make him a paradigm of all other Gentile converts hardly serves Jervell’s purpose.

In Jervell’s scheme, restored Israel remains obedient to the law (oral as well as written) and circumcision, not for salvation but to maintain their covenant identity. But the Judaisers’ insistence on Gentile circumcision is not based on whether or not the Gentiles are to be identified as Israelites, but on their eligibility for salvation (Acts 15.1-2)<sup>17</sup>. If the decision of the Council of Jerusalem was intended to show that that Gentiles were an ‘associate people’ with, but not within, Israel, then it is hard to see how they were to be counted as within God’s covenant.

Surely this was the significance of Peter’s vision of Acts 10 – this is why Peter alludes to it at the Council. The Gentiles were now of equal status with Jews, which was bound to have implications for Jewish law-keeping too.

## 5 *Synthesis*

If the two extremes are excluded, the truth is necessarily between. But the fact that the extremes are so far apart may be a clue to where the truth, from Luke’s viewpoint, lies. Sander’s views force us to confront Luke’s shift of attention from the Jewish mission to the Gentile mission. What are his

reasons for this? How concerned is Luke with the gospel's rejection by a majority of Jews? Is he recounting what is essentially a tragedy?

The tragedy of the Gospel is the execution of the last Great Prophet, who journeys through the pages of the Gospel towards his inescapable fate.<sup>18</sup>

The book should be called 'the problem of Jewish rejection'.<sup>19</sup>

If so, there seems little trace of regret on Luke's part, still less of triumph. If the Jewish mission is a failure, Luke makes no attempt to explain it or even mark its passing.

Jervell's work, on the other hand, keeps us from too easy acceptance of a purely Gentile interpretation of Luke. It reminds us that Jewish Christianity was both prosperous and vigorous. If it under-emphasises the Gentile mission, it reminds us that by Acts 28 Luke would have been justified in describing the Jewish Church as redeemed Israel, albeit in remnant form, fulfilling the Scriptural promises of being a blessing to all nations. Jewish believers were not merely 'a few brands snatched from the fire' but the prophetic people who brought the good news both to the scattered tribes and to the Gentile nations.

Nevertheless Luke does not say this, though it could be argued that he *assumes* it. There is enough in *Luke-Acts* about the rejection first of Jesus, then of the Church, by a majority of Jews to make the eventual Gentile predominance unsurprising. There is enough of Jesus's own prophetic insight to show that both the nation's rejection and its destruction were inevitable. But there is no attempt by Luke, unlike Paul, to explain it.

I would suggest that there are two main reasons why Luke fails to lay as much stress as we might expect on the failure of the Jewish mission:

- It is not the important theme of his book(s). Luke writes for a Gentile readership, and his stated intention is to write ‘an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us’ (Luke 1.1), which the beginning of Acts shows to include the spread of the gospel ‘to the ends of the earth’. In other words, his theme is how the Jewish gospel has come to the Gentiles. In pursuing this, he needs to make reference to the fact that it has been offered to them partly because it has been refused by much of Israel, but he does not need to stress it overmuch.
- When Luke wrote, the Jewish rejection was not complete. Jervell may well be right in his suggestion that the eclipse of Jewish Christianity came later than we normally suppose. He certainly seems justified in pointing out that a substantial portion, if not a majority, of the Church were Jews and God-fearers when Paul reached Rome. If this were also true when Luke wrote, he would have no reason to write of the Jewish mission as a failure, still less as a tragedy. To Paul, writing for a didactic reason in *Romans*, it was different, which explains both his grief and his final optimism, both absent in *Luke-Acts*<sup>20</sup>.

## **6 Conclusion**

For Luke, the Jewish mission was not a failure both because of substantial success of the Jewish Church, and because it could be seen as a

fulfilment of the hope of Israel, particularly as expressed in his Gospel. Though early Christians sought to explain the widespread rejection of Christ by the Jews, Luke seeks to use it only to explain how the word came to his Gentile readers, and as a paradigm of the struggles inherent in discipleship.

On the matter of any future hope for Israel as a nation, he has little to say both because it is irrelevant to his theme, and perhaps because it had not yet become a critical issue when he wrote.

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### References

- <sup>1</sup> Sanders, 1988, p.52.
- <sup>2</sup> Haenchen, 'Judentum & Christendom in der Apostelgeschichte', ZNW 54 (1963), pp.165-6, quoted in Tyson, 1988, p.53.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.185.
- <sup>4</sup> Sanders, *op. cit.*, p.60.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.
- <sup>7</sup> Tyson, 1988, p.136.
- <sup>8</sup> Jervell, 1984, p.40.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.
- <sup>10</sup> Jervell, 1988, p.13.
- <sup>11</sup> Jervell, 1984, p.40.
- <sup>12</sup> cf. Weatherly, 1989, p.108.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.
- <sup>14</sup> 'When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' H. Dumpty, quoted in L. Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, ch.6.
- <sup>15</sup> Levinskaya 1996, p.78.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.121.
- <sup>17</sup> Turner, 1974, p. 21.
- <sup>18</sup> Sanders, *op. cit.*, p.75.
- <sup>19</sup> Tyson, *op. cit.*, p.136.

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<sup>20</sup> I doubt that Luke could have left the Jew's future so open-ended had he written after the fall of Jerusalem, any more than someone writing after 1945 could fail to make clear reference to the holocaust. This seems to me an underestimated factor in discussion of the dating of Luke-Acts.

### ***Bibliography***

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   J B Tyson, *The Problem of Jewish Rejection in Acts*, *pp.124-37*.  
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