

**“Can the Character and Mission of God’s People Clash?
The Formation (and Re-Formation) of God’s People and the Book of Acts”**

*Richard P. Thompson
Northwest Nazarene University*

Questions about the purpose(s) or central theme of the Book of Acts are not new, and of course it is doubtful that such questions will be put to rest anytime soon. After all, Acts is a narrative text with its unique twists and turns in action and suspense. Narratives are, by their nature, much more implicit than explicit, at least in comparison to a letter. Added to that is the fact that narrative plot is easier to talk about than it is to describe. While Aristotle described plot as what holds the various scenes and actions together,¹ it is much more like a rope, made up of multiple strands woven and twisted together, than it is a single, distinct thread that holds everything together. Thus, any attempt to explore the nuances of one strand must admit upfront that there are many other matters that are intricately connected to it.

With such a caveat in place, I would like to explore the idea that, among those central themes and issues that run through the Book of Acts, is the redefinition or understanding of what it means to be the people of God.² Such a proposal is not substantially different from matters regarding Christian mission and its legitimacy that often receive attention in Acts studies. To be sure, studies of the speeches in Acts, particular the Stephen speech in Acts 7 and Paul’s speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13, have uncovered in helpful ways how these speeches legitimate the Christian mission that ends up extending to non-Jewish and Jewish persons alike. The speeches in Acts stand as significant elements in the narrative as the narrator employs them to provide implicit commentary at strategic points. Certainly, much can be said in

¹ See Aristotle, *Poetics* 7.1-10; 8.1-4.

² This paper is part of some larger projects, including my *Keeping the Church in Its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in the Book of Acts* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2006) and a forthcoming commentary on the Book of Acts (2009).

affirmation that in the speeches of Acts one hears clearly the Lukan voice. However, it is the contention here that the focus on the Acts mission speeches has not adequately addressed other aspects of this work that also contribute to that narrative and what it might say and do. Among those aspects is the Lukan combination of repetition and narrative conflict as a literary device to emphasize particular scenes and highlight matters of importance. Of particular interest is the narrative conflict on three fronts: (1) in Jerusalem between Jewish religious leaders and the Jewish believers (Acts 1–7), (2) in Jerusalem again among the Christian believers themselves (Acts 11, 15, and 21), and (3) in Paul’s ministry between him and “the Jews” in general. When one examines these aspects of the Acts narrative, one finds that the conflict may be provoked by mission and practice but is not over the legitimacy of the Christian mission *per se*.³ Rather, the conflict is ultimately over a theological understanding of what it means to be the people of God.

Thus, this paper will explore (a) the nature and character of the people of God and (b) the formation and re-formation of such a people in the book of Acts. The focus will be on the three conflict scenes in Jerusalem among the Christian believers that accentuate differences between understandings of what it means to be the people of God (differences in ecclesiology) and the corresponding Christian mission as presented in Acts, with the hope that such a study may contribute to theological discussions and praxis in the Wesleyan-Methodist traditions of our day.

A. An examination of the conflict scenes of the Jerusalem church

One finds the three conflict scenes of the Jerusalem church placed in strategic narrative locations at the heart of the Acts narrative following the extended narrative focus on Jerusalem in chapters 1–7, in which Luke describes the fulfillment of God’s purposes to *Israel*, the people of

³ Contra Gregory E. Sterling, “‘Opening the Scriptures’: The Legitimation of the Jewish Diaspora and the Early Christian Mission,” in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke’s Narrative Claim upon Israel’s Legacy*, ed. David P. Moessner (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 199-225.

God. The Temple as the probable location of the Pentecost episode in Acts 2,⁴ the interpretation of what happened as the fulfillment of divine promises in the Jewish Scriptures, and the summary materials regarding the sizable group of believers all point to what God had done on behalf of God's people by exalting Jesus and establishing him as Lord over that people. However, the Jewish religious leaders rejected the believers' proclamation of Jesus' lordship and leadership, so that essentially the religious leaders created division among the Jewish people by opposing the fledgling movement of Christ-followers. The contrasting images of the Jewish religious leaders and the Jewish believers in these chapters differentiate the two groups,⁵ with the former group in opposition to God and the latter group in obedience to God.⁶ The differences between these two portraits of Jews in Jerusalem function rhetorically to entice the reader to identify the believers rather than the leaders with what it means to be the people of God.

1. *The Jerusalem church and their confrontation of Peter over the incident with Cornelius (Acts 11:1-18)*

Given the ways that the Lukan narrator portrays the Jerusalem church in Acts 1–7, the reaction toward Peter after the incident in Caesarea at the home of the Gentile Cornelius may come as something of a surprise. To be sure, the Jerusalem believers do not have the benefit of the perspective of an omniscient narrator, who offers to the reader a view of that meeting between the likes of Peter and Cornelius and focuses distinctly on the divine initiative that instigated and blessed the encounter. At the same time, both the cumulative image of the Jerusalem believers to this point in the narrative and the juxtaposition of this scene with the

⁴ This interprets “the one place” where they together as the Temple rather than the upper room of Acts 1:13.

⁵ Cf. Dionysius, *On the Style of Demosthenes*, 21.

⁶ See Thompson, *Keeping the Church in Its Place*, 29-115, esp. 111-15; also Richard P. Thompson, “Believers and Religious Leaders in Jerusalem: Contrasting Portraits of Jews in Acts 1–7,” in *Literary Studies in Luke–Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson*, ed. Richard P. Thompson and Thomas E. Phillips (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 327-44.

initial glimpses of the believers in Antioch suggest that there may be more here than what initially meets the eye.

Three aspects of the Lukan depiction of this conflict scene between the Jerusalem believers and Peter are important for our purposes. First, the narrator mentions that the believers in Judea have received wind of what had happened with Cornelius, in particular that Gentiles had also “received the word of God” (Acts 11:1), the same Lukan expression used earlier to describe the Samaritan’s response to Philip’s ministry (8:14). Thus, when Peter himself arrives in Jerusalem, he is met with intense criticism from, according to Luke, *hoi ek peritomês*, “those from the circumcision” or simply circumcised believers (11:2), a rather odd description given the fact that the believers in Jerusalem would be Jewish believers and therefore presumably circumcised.⁷ However, there is a narrative gap regarding how such information drifted their way, not to mention how they obtained the more incriminating details against Peter: that he had not only *entered* into the home of the uncircumcised but also *ate* with them (11:3).⁸ It is quite possible that those who first broke the story about Peter were none other than those Jewish believers who accompanied Peter to Cornelius’s house but who were strangely missing when Peter was invited, presumably by Cornelius and the others, to stay for a few days.⁹ While these who were amazed that Gentiles had received the same gift from God that they had received (cf. 10:45) seemingly dropped out of sight just before this narrative gap, one way to make sense of the story’s peculiarities is this: that these men objected to Peter’s obvious acceptance of these

⁷ A similar expression (*hoi ek peritomês pistoi*; Acts 10:45) refers to the Jewish believers who accompanied Peter to Caesarea (10:23b). See C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols. (ICC; Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1994, 1998), 1:536, who mentions questions whether this means that the whole group of *hoi apostoloi kai hoi adelphoi hoi ontes kata tèn Ioudaian* (11:1) interrogated Peter or only a minority group.

⁸ One should note that this matter of table fellowship is a prominent feature of the Lukan gospel that has significant overtones regarding the nature of the people of God. See my forthcoming essay, “Gathered at the Table: Holiness and Ecclesiology in the Gospel of Luke,” in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁹ In Acts 10:48, the invitation was extended only to Peter (the pronoun *auton*).

Gentiles-turned-believers (although the narrator mentions nothing about any dissenting responses to Peter’s question in 10:47) and had scurried back to Jerusalem with the juicy details in hand. Thus, the narrator’s description of these “from the circumcision” contrasts directly with those “uncircumcised men” (*andras akrobustian echontas*)¹⁰ with whom Peter had associated—a contrast that places in sharp relief the substantive issue facing the believers and their understanding regarding the nature of the people of God.¹¹

Second, Peter’s response to the critical interrogation by these circumcised believers includes both narrative repetition and some strengthened emphases that suggest that there is something in this specific scene that the narrator does not want his readers to miss. (a) Peter reiterates both his vision and Cornelius’s brush with the angel (although Peter reverses the order). (b) Peter reiterates over and over again what the reader already knows about his own encounter: the vision came from God (the visionary sheet came down from heaven, 11:5; Peter responded to the voice as “Lord”, 11:8; the Spirit told him to go with Cornelius’s emissaries, 11:11). (c) Here Peter emphasizes how closely the sheet descended to him (*êlthen achri emou*; 11:5) and how carefully he examined it: the participle *atenisas* and the imperfect indicative *katenooun* (11:6) stress the impact of that vision as he sought to understand it. (d) In addition, Peter does not simply repeat his objection to the “kill and eat” directive but intensifies it in ways that would make even his accusers swell with pride: “nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth” (11:8; NRSV).¹² (e) Peter also repeats his conclusion after the coming of the Holy Spirit upon these Gentiles: that it happened to them “just as it also happened to us in the

¹⁰ This is the only occurrence of *akrobustian echein* in the NT.

¹¹ One should also note that their questions deal with Jewish boundary markers over table fellowship.

¹² See F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 128, who also adds parenthetically that the narrator “never discloses that he [Peter] was lodging with Simon the tanner: that would have been too much to explain.”

beginning” (11:15, cf. 10:47).¹³ (f) Finally, Peter’s response here includes the addition that he remembered what Jesus had said—that Jesus’ followers would be baptized with the Holy Spirit—which is lacking in Luke’s rendition in chapter 10 but by which Peter concludes that doing anything differently would have placed him in the foolhardy position of standing in the way of God and God’s purposes (11:17). Thus, the Lukan narrator seems to play with the verb *diakrinô*, which appears both to describe the criticism of the circumcised believers (11:2) and the distinction that Jews would typically make between themselves and non-Jews which would cause a faithful Jew like Peter to hesitate to accompany the messengers from Cornelius (11:12).¹⁴ On the one hand, the circumcised believers are guilty precisely of the divine prohibition spoken to Peter. On the other hand, in this meeting Peter uses the discernment and discrimination associated with this same verb to confront a flawed understanding of what had happened, what God was doing, and ultimately what God intends regarding the nature of the people of God. While Peter stands with his fellow Jewish believers in wrestling with his issue, he also helps them to discern and think through what has just happened and ultimately what it might mean to be the people of God by appropriating the words of Jesus, so that what he has experienced is understood and brought into focus through these sacred words that function here much as the Scriptures in Peter’s Pentecost speech in chapter 2 or Stephen’s speech in chapter 7.

Third, the inclusion of this particular scene within the Jerusalem believers, followed immediately by the Lukan narration of the activities that spawn the Antioch church, suggests at least that the reader compare and contrast these two images of these two distinct groups of

¹³ One should also note the addition of the ‘save’-language of Acts 11:14, where the angel states that Peter would give Cornelius a message “by which *you* and all your household will be saved” (*en hois sôthêsê su kai pas ho oikos sou*). This first use of the verb *sôzô* after Peter’s Pentecost speech (2:21) and its aftermath (2:40, 47) links what God had done among Cornelius and the Gentiles to what God had done back then.

¹⁴ Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 197; and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 172.

believers. This suggestion is bolstered by the fact that the introductory materials of Acts 11:19ff point back to the scattering of the believers after the murder of Stephen and the subsequent persecution (7:54–8:3). That is, these materials regarding the Antiochan Christians may not belong *chronologically* in chapter 11, yet the Lukan narrator has *narratively* positioned these materials here ... right after telling about the controversy provoked by the Cornelius incident. To be sure, the opening verse describes precisely what the Jerusalem believers would have endorsed: they “proclaimed the word to no one except only to Jews” (*lalountes ton logon ei mê monon Ioudaiois*; 11:19).¹⁵ However, Luke uses the same verb, along with the phrase “delivering the good news about the Lord Jesus” (*euangelizomenoi ton kurion Iêsoun*; 11:20), to describe in much grander fashion what the reader has already encountered with the Cornelius material: the reception of the gospel message by large numbers of Gentiles (11:21, 24).¹⁶ The sending of Barnabas to Antioch provides the reader with a reliable witness to what God was doing. This man whom the narrator characterizes like Stephen¹⁷ recognizes the grace of God when he sees it, rejoices (a typical Lukan response to the purposes and activity of God), and serves in ways that results in a “considerable crowd” of people being “added ... to the Lord” (11:24). The latter description is reminiscent in both wording and content of what happened in Jerusalem after Pentecost (2:47; 5:14) and is then bolstered by the recruitment of Saul from Tarsus (11:25-27). While some may write off the last few verses as insignificant to the narrative, the response of the Antiochan Christians regarding the predicted famine over the Roman

¹⁵ Both the verb *laleô* and the noun *logos* are used here in distinctly Lukan ways, to refer to the speaking or proclamation of the gospel as God’s “word” for humanity.

¹⁶ That are textual and interpretive issues regarding the noun that identifies the recipients of the proclamation in Acts 11:20. This interpretation assumes that the two main textual variations, *Hellênistas* and *Hellênas*, both refer to non-Jews, due to the contrast of this term to the identified recipients of the gospel message in the previous verse.

¹⁷ Stephen is characterized as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5); Barnabas is characterized as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (11:24).

empire¹⁸ illustrates something about the character of this group. The narrator mentions nothing about the motives behind their actions other than that they gave financial resources for the believers living in Judea (11:29) as ministry (*eis diakonian*; 11:29). It is difficult to miss the irony here: those in Judea questioned the legitimacy of associating with Gentiles and of considering the possibility of Gentiles being numbered among the people of God; the Antiochan believers, including both Jews *and* Gentiles, treated these Judean believers with a kind of benevolence similar to that which the narrator in earlier chapters had considered noteworthy among the Jerusalem believers themselves.

In many ways, it appears as though the Antioch Christians¹⁹ have taken on at least some of the ideal qualities that the Lukan narrator has, up to this point in the narrative, reserved for the Jerusalem church. While the initial depiction of the Jerusalem believers offers a distinct portrait of the Jewish believers as the people of God due to the leadership and lordship of Jesus as the Christ, the first of three scenes of conflict within the Jerusalem church at the center of the Acts narrative, juxtaposed with the introduction of the Antiochan Christians, offers the reader a rather puzzling tale without much assistance toward resolution. Certainly, there are questions, but the questions deal more with Jewish categories than Christian mission. These questions arise because Peter's experience has precipitated theological questions regarding the people among whom God works. The ambiguities between the conflict scene itself and its context may suggest what we already know: that the Lukan narrator has not finished his work in telling the story of

¹⁸ There are historical difficulties regarding this prediction. See, e.g., Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 375-79; and Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 90.

¹⁹ The designation of the Antiochan believers as *Christianoi* may suggest that these believers are seen as a distinct group apart from the Jews and the synagogue. See Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 103; and Spencer, 131-32.

what it means to be the people of God.²⁰ What one may conclude, at least in a preliminary way, is that Luke's inclusion of this scene of controversy has set the table—at least a new table—for further considerations and deliberations regarding what it means to be the people of God.

2. The so-called “Jerusalem Council” and the debate over circumcision (Acts 15:1-35)

Perhaps the most familiar of the three scenes regarding debate and controversy within the Jerusalem church is the one in Acts 15, typically called the “Jerusalem Council” or the “Apostolic Council.” This episode has attracted much more scholarly attention than the previous one, which is not entirely surprising due to its extended treatment, questions that arise regarding the historicity (or lack thereof) of this material, and debate over the decree that the church endorses. However, given the similarities between this episode and the one in chapter 11, a plausible suggestion is that we consider this latter episode in light of the former one, due to narrative sequence. In light of such a reading, several aspects of this episode stand out.

First, similar to the first scene, here in chapter 15 an issue is raised by persons from Judea (Acts 15:1; cf. 11:1-2). While the narrator does not state that these are Jewish *believers*, most likely they are, since Barnabas, Paul and some other believers are soon sent to meet with the apostles, elders and other *adelphoi* in Jerusalem. However, while the stated issue is related to the criticism directed toward Peter in chapter 11, the matter here has a different focus. The problem has to do with the requirement of circumcision.²¹ Probably what precipitated this problem was the success of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, as narrated in chapters 13 and 14. As the

²⁰ E.g., as Gaventa (Acts, 175) correctly notes, “In no sense would it be accurate to claim that Peter or the Jerusalem church *decides* to include Gentiles.”

²¹ One should note that there is a shift in focus between the first statement by the Judeans (“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”; Acts 15:1) and the second statement by the Pharisaic believers in 15:5 (“It is necessary to circumcise them [the Gentiles] and require them to keep the law of Moses”). The first requires circumcision for salvation—salvation in a more holistic sense rather than simply as entrance into salvation (cf. 15:11), since the latter would deny what the Jerusalem believers decided in chapter 11. The second emphasizes the need for circumcision for any Gentile who had accepted the gospel message.

extended account in another Antioch, in the region of Pisidia, makes clear, a significant number of Jews, converts to Judaism, and non-Jews responded favorably to the gospel message that the ministry team proclaimed at the synagogue (cf. 13:42-44, 48-49). The concluding description of disciples (*mathêtai*) “filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (13:52) is reminiscent of earlier depictions of the believers in Jerusalem. Similar things happened next in Iconium (14:1-7). One should note that these responses by both Jews and non-Jews mirror what occurred earlier in Antioch of Syria, with the narrator mentioning nothing in any instance about Paul and Barnabas requiring circumcision of Gentile believers.²² Thus, it is likely that this contentious issue²³ came up due to the conversion of Gentiles and their increasing presence. In other words, the problem concerning circumcision seems to be a problem of Jewish identity and self-understanding, particularly as it relates to them as the people of God.²⁴ Thus, the question focuses on the issue of Gentile partnership or inclusion into the people of God rather than on the legitimacy of a Christian mission that includes Gentiles.²⁵

Second, the substance of the debate has a threefold focus that is similar to the episode in chapter 11: (a) the witness or testimony of what God has done, (b) the interpretation of what has happened according to Scripture, and (c) some level of resolution to the problem with the endorsement of the church. Each of these require brief attention. (a) Although the narrator

²² See Joseph B. Tyson, *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 146.

²³ Note that the narrator mentions “no small dissension and debate” (*staseôs kai zêtêseôs ouk oligês*; 15:2) created by the contention of the Judean believers.

²⁴ Cf. Robert Wall, “Israel and the Gentile Mission in Acts and Paul: A Canonical Approach,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 449: “Perhaps apropos of narrative literature, the depiction of theological crisis and reflection follows from the fact of experience: the experience of conversion requires the Jerusalem Council to settle the theological conception which undergirds the church’s mission.”

²⁵ One should also note that there is no mission to the Gentiles in Acts 13–14 but a mission that goes to *both* Jews and Gentiles.

mentions that there is considerable debate²⁶ among the “apostles and elders” (15:6), Peter again takes center stage and offers a generalized account of what God had been doing. In this short speech (15:7-11), he reiterates what he had stated earlier: that God’s activity among the Gentiles was nothing different from what God had done among the Jewish believers.²⁷ The narrator also mentions (almost in passing) a report of Barnabas and Paul to the entire gathering (*pan to phêthos*) that supplements Peter’s address by affirming “what God had done among the Gentiles through them” (15:12).²⁸ When James addresses the gathering and reiterates what Peter had stated,²⁹ it is noteworthy that he describes God as taking from among the Gentiles “a people [*laon*] for his name” (15:14). One cannot miss the significance of the usage of the term *laos*, which in Acts is typically reserved for the Jewish people as the people of God, because here it is used here with reference to the Gentiles.³⁰ Thus, according to the Lukan James, God had also made it possible for Gentiles to be identified among the people of God.

(b) However, this conclusion by James was not based merely on what the believers had observed as God’s activity. James compares this conclusion with “the words of the prophets” and finds it to be in agreement with them.³¹ Not surprisingly for the Lukan narrator, he offers a version of the passage to which James refers, Amos 9:11-12, that follows more closely the Septuagint’s rendering rather than the Massoretic Text. Although the Hebrew passage predicts

²⁶ The noun *zêtêsis*, used here to describe the debate, is one of two terms used to describe what happened in Antioch when the Judean believers raised the issue there (15:2).

²⁷ Note the ways that Peter compares God’s actions among the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers: “just as God did to us” (15:8); “no distinction between us and them” (15:9); “we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (15:11).

²⁸ Of course, the ministry of Paul and Barnabas did not focus exclusively on Gentiles and was not a mission to the Gentiles, as many assume to be the case in Acts. However, the point of this episode focuses on the place of *Gentiles* when considering the people of God, not on their ministry to both Jews and Gentiles.

²⁹ It is interesting that, when James addresses the group, he refers to Peter’s report and mentions nothing about the report from Barnabas and Paul.

³⁰ Cf. Acts 18:10, the only other use of the term in Acts that also includes Gentiles. Cf. Jacque Dupont, “Un peuple d’entre les nations (Actes 15.14),” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 322, 324-25; and Gerhard Lohfink, *Die Sammlung Israels: Eine Untersuchung zur lukanischen Ekklesiologie* (SANT; München: Kösel, 1975), 58-59.

³¹ The verb *sumphôneô* gives a word picture of the prophets and him “speaking together” on this issue.

the restoration and rule of Israel over all other nations, the quoted passage from the Septuagint suggests not only that God's promises benefit the Jewish people but that the *Gentiles* are also benefactors of the enthronement of the Davidic Messiah (which in Acts 2 is understood as having taken place through Jesus' exaltation).³² Thus, as Robert Tannehill states, "[T]he fulfillment of a central promise of Jewish scripture is understood to bring saving benefits to both Jews and Gentiles."³³ In other words, James interprets God's extraordinary activity in bringing salvation to the Gentiles and incorporating them into the people of God by appealing to the Jewish Scriptures—an appeal not uncommon in the Book of Acts.³⁴

(c) James's conclusion not only contributes to a reformation of the understanding of the concept "people of God" but also lays the foundation for his proposed solution, which is outlined in verses 19-20 and then reiterated when the narrator reveals the contents of the agreed-upon letter in verses 24-29. The questions regarding the differences in the two (or three, if one considers Acts 21:25) versions of the decree need not sidetrack us here. The similarities between these requirements and the material in Leviticus 17-18 suggest that the decree does not offer something new but simply reaffirms basic conditions already established by the Jewish Scriptures that enable social interaction (in particular, table fellowship) between Jews and Gentiles.³⁵ The fact that the Jerusalem church readily accepts James's recommendation in unanimous fashion, as the letter indicates (*edoxen hēmin genomenois homothymadon*; Acts 15:25), is somewhat surprising, given the rather emphatic declarations that began the debate.

³² See Barrett, *Acts*, 2:727.

³³ Robert C. Tannehill, "The Story of Israel within the Lukan Narrative," in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim upon Israel's Legacy*, ed. David P. Moessner (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 328.

³⁴ Cf. Wall, "Israel and the Gentile Mission," 449: "What informs James's use of Amos, then, is the concern to provide theological justification to the fact of Gentile conversion by 'calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus.'"

³⁵ One should note, however, that there is no hint in Acts that this was a problem in Antioch or in any town among believing Jews and Gentiles, before or after this meeting. In addition, there is no sign of any Gentile presence among the Jerusalem church in Acts. Cf. Gaventa, *Acts*, 222-23, who sees the requirements as necessary to keep Gentiles from falling into idolatry.

When one adds to this the positive response of the Antiochan believers to the letter, it does appear as though the resolution fulfills the intent behind it by easing the controversy and the tensions behind it. However, the intense disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over whether John Mark should accompany them that leads to them unceremoniously parting company, almost immediately after this resolution, offers some subtle hints that perhaps there is more here than what meets the eye. Given the precarious nature of the character of John Mark in Acts as one who had deserted (*ton apostanta ap' autôn*; 15:38), at least from Paul's perspective, the work to which the Spirit had called (see 13:1-3) and who had family ties to the Jerusalem church where the questions had first surfaced, it is conceivable that the rift occurs over the whole issue of the place of the Gentiles, within the people of God and thereby within the Christian mission.³⁶ To be sure, the narrator may have left out as much if not more of the story than he includes. Nonetheless, the decree may be more ambiguous than it initially appears to be, since those requirements had functioned in the past to enable social interaction between Jews and Gentiles but never placed the two groups as equal partners within the designation "people of God."

Third, one should note the narrative structure of the larger passage. The setting of the opening scene is Antioch of Syria, from which all the ministry endeavors of Acts 13–14 originate in response to the divine call realized by the church in worship (13:1-3). While the challenge by the Judean believers appears to be in conflict with what God was seemingly initiating and enabling, the narrator quickly moves the action to Jerusalem, where the church leaders confirm what had been happening and thereby are cognizant that God was behind these things. Consistent with the Lukan narrator's emphases throughout Luke and Acts, there is a movement back to Jerusalem. One may argue that the city functions as the center of Luke's

³⁶ See the important essay regarding John Mark as a character in Acts by C. Clifton Black, "John Mark in the Acts of the Apostles," in *Literary Studies in Luke–Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 101-20.

symbolic world,³⁷ and this episode does offer support to that view.³⁸ However, one cannot ignore the fact that, upon leaving Jerusalem, the action returns to Antioch, with what happens in the next five chapters originating again from that city. Thus, like in chapter 11, the churches of Jerusalem and Antioch are juxtaposed in ways that entice readers to compare and contrast them. In many ways, Jerusalem may be the center from which the church and her mission are born, but Antioch functions as a center of a different sort: the center of an alternative understanding of the people of God, for which the Lukan narrator uses the designation *ekklêsia*, that includes both Jews and Gentiles and that spreads the gospel message to the “ends of the earth” (1:8).

3. *The Jerusalem church and accusations against Paul (Acts 21:17-36)*³⁹

Of the three conflict scenes involving the Jerusalem church, the third one has received the least scholarly attention. However, its narrative placement suggests this episode’s significance, both as the third of this series of conflicts scenes before us and as something of a narrative hinge for the rest of Acts, since the narrative takes a decidedly different turn after this by focusing the readers’ attention onto the trials and defense of Paul. While the heightened drama, charged emotions, and escalating tension are the makings of a good story, their appearances *here* reveal substantive issues that are concerned primarily with the understanding and nature of the people of God rather than with mission. These issues, hidden in part by the narrative ambiguity of this passage, require a closer examination of this particular scene.

³⁷ See, e.g., Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper, 1961), 70; Johnson, Acts, 10-11; and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 2 vols. (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981, 1985), 1:168.

³⁸ However, I agree with Mikeal Parsons (see below) that the ambiguity by which the narrator describes Jerusalem suggests that such a view is not adequate. See his “The Place of Jerusalem on the Lukan Landscape: An Exercise in Symbolic Cartography,” in *Literary Studies in Luke–Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 155-71.

³⁹ This treatment of the materials in Acts 21 parallels my “‘What Do You Think You Are Doing, Paul?’ Synagogues, Accusations, and Ethics in Paul’s Ministry in Acts 16–21,” in *Acts and Ethics*, ed. Thomas E. Phillips (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 64-78; and “‘Say It Ain’t So, Paul!’: The Accusations against Paul in Acts 21 in the Light of His Ministry in Acts 16–20,” *Biblical Research* 45 (2000): 34-50.

In many ways, the raising of a rumor or accusation against Paul by the Jerusalem church leaders comes abruptly upon the reader. After the narrator summarizes that Paul reports what “God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19)—a summary similar to that found earlier (15:12)—he also mentions that “those who heard this were praising God” (21:20), a description reminiscent of earlier pictures of believers praising God and what God was doing (cf. 4:21; 11:18; 13:48; see also 2:47). Surprisingly, however, the narrator continues the sentence without interruption, introducing concerns about Paul’s ministry.⁴⁰ The accusation itself is prefaced by a reminder⁴¹ of the many Jews who are believers and who are zealous for the law (*pantes zelôtai tou nomou hyparchousin*). The reminder itself becomes all the more significant when the accusation or rumor is revealed: that Paul has been teaching all Jews of the Diaspora to abandon their Jewish heritage—everything that identified them as the people of God (21:21).

The seriousness of the charge is indicated by two aspects of the text. First, the rumor is not about something that Paul had allegedly done on one or two occasions: the present tense indicative *didaskeis* suggests that this kind of teaching was Paul’s regular practice. Second, the accusation describes his teaching as nothing less than *apostasian ... apo Môuseôs*, a most serious charge to any Jew. In other words, the allegation is that Paul was teaching against circumcision and the Jewish law, toward which the zeal of the Jewish Christians is said to be directed. And there is no doubt from the narrative that the Jewish believers take this rumor seriously and believe it. Interestingly, there is no opportunity in the narrated chain of events for Paul to defend himself. Rather, the Jerusalem church leaders instruct Paul to participate in and pay for a rite of

⁴⁰ Note that the introduction to their words, *eipon te autô*, is connected by the postpositive *te*, which often links a clause or sentence to a previous one to explain, amplify, or even indicate a result of the previous. See Hebert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), §2968.

⁴¹ While typically translated as an emphatic statement or declaration, the reminder may also be translated as a question. Either way, they make their point.

purification with four other men, thereby dropping the responsibility in Paul's lap to prove to all (*pantes*) that the accusation about him is not true (21:24).

While the tensions over Paul escalate near the end of his days of purification at the Temple, the new set of accusations posited by Jews from the province of Asia against him in verse 28 mirror the earlier charge in three ways. First, at the center of the accusations is what Paul had been teaching (*ho anthrôpos ... ho didaskôn*). Second, this teaching has been allegedly against, among other things, the law (*kata ... tou nomou*). Third, Paul's audience for such teaching is described in hyperbolic ways as "all persons everywhere" (*pantas pantachê*), which here points beyond Jews to also non-Jews as he purportedly taught "against the people, the law, and this place" (*kata tou laou kai tou nomou kai tou topou toutou*). Thus, the allegation is that Paul is a disloyal Jew who has betrayed his own people, the ultimate sign of apostasy. In addition, the Asian Jews also accuse Paul of bringing a Gentile into the Temple. The result of these accusations is nothing less than a riotous mob scene, as the agitated crowd in verse 27 (*sunecheon panta ton ochlon*) quickly escalates so that now "the whole city" was aroused (*hê polis hôlê*; 21:30). As a result, the people seize Paul and drag him out of the Temple to kill him, only to be snatched from the grasp of his would-be murderers by Roman soldiers (21:30-32).

The similarities between the accusations against Paul lead one to conclude that the same issues have created the apprehension of both the Jewish believers and the other Jews in Jerusalem about him. While the non-believing Jews of the Diaspora seem to accuse Paul directly, the believing Jews apparently assume the validity of such allegations and do nothing to discredit them. In addition, the narrator mentions nothing about any protection of Paul or assistance to him from the Christian Jews within the riotous scene—certainly out of the "myriads" of such believing Jews, some could have come to his aid. Thus, the distinctions

between these two groups of Jews are blurred in this scene. The implications are that, when “the whole city” is aroused and violently goes after Paul, both non-believing and believing Jews comprise the mob.⁴² No help comes because, as Luke Timothy Johnson states, the believing community in Jerusalem “was divided from within concerning Paul’s loyalty to Judaism.”⁴³

In part, I agree with Johnson’s assessment. What one finds here in Acts 21 ultimately deals with the character and nature of the people of God, as the issues over circumcision, the law, and apostasy suggest. As Robert Tannehill correctly notes, the opposition forces against Paul focuses on three marks of Jewish identity that they believe Paul has attacked through rejection: they are the people (a) whom God has chosen, (b) whom God’s law has governed, and (c) whose worship of God centers on a divinely established Temple in Jerusalem.⁴⁴ However, such an assessment does not go far enough, in part because these allegations against Paul do not correlate with other features of the Acts narrative, most notably the characterization of Paul himself. Throughout the Pauline portion of Acts, the narrator presents Paul as a devout and loyal Jew. Paul’s custom on the Sabbath was to go to the Jewish synagogue. He not only circumcised Timothy “because of the Jews who were in those places” (16:3) but also served as a member of the party that delivered the decree from the Jerusalem church to Antioch (cf. 15:22, 25, 30) and to Asia Minor (16:1-4). Persons in Philippi supplement the narrator’s characterization of Paul as a Jew by identifying Paul and Silas as Jews before the authorities (16:21). He even does what the Jerusalem church leaders ask of him by participating in a Jewish rite of purification. Both in word and deed, the reader finds impeccable fidelity to Judaism in Paul the narrative character.

⁴² Cf. Joseph B. Tyson, *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 162: “But it is notable that they [the Christians in Jerusalem] hold essential the same suspicions about Paul as do the Jews from Asia and that they do nothing to protect Paul from the violence of the rest of the population.” Cf. also Tannehill, “The Story of Israel,” 337, who notes in passing that the Christian opponents “drop out of the narrative.”

⁴³ Johnson, *Acts*, 379.

⁴⁴ Tannehill, “The Story of Israel,” 337.

At the same time, one cannot ignore that in the narrator's rendition the intensity of Jewish opposition against Paul dramatically increases between the meeting of the so-called "Jerusalem Council" and this latest incident. If both Jewish believers and non-believers perceive Paul as an apostate Jew who has renounced everything they understand themselves to be as the people of God and this perception is the spark that ignites that volatile situation in this latest scene in Jerusalem, then what is behind these accusations? From where do they come? And how does the interpreter make sense of what is going on?

There are several ways to interpret these accusations in light of the incongruity between them and the Lukan characterization of Paul. One way to interpret them is to see them as preposterous in light of the Lukan Paul. Since the Jewish people in the Pauline portion of Acts are generally presented unfavorably, the reader would see the ludicrous allegations as consistent with their depiction.⁴⁵ After all, even as early as Acts 6 false witnesses conjured up accusations against Stephen, so there is narrative precedence for such behavior. However, in chapter 21 there are no hints about the unreliability of the charges. Surprisingly, the narrator even explains why Paul's accusers assumed that Paul had taken a non-Jew into the Temple, which to some extent takes them off the hook. A second way to interpret the accusations is to see them as reflecting actual teachings of the *historical* Paul as found in his letters rather than the teachings of the *Lukan* Paul as found in Acts. Such an interpretation assumes that there are intertextual connections between Acts and at least some of the Pauline letters, especially Galatians.⁴⁶ If one maintains that the Lukan audience would possess the familiarity with those letters recognize such

⁴⁵ Cf. Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols., ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 9:293. See Jack T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 284: "[I]nasmuch as Luke has prepared for this scene by recounting how Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16.3), he wants us to see how baseless and, indeed, devious the charge of the Jewish Christians is. There is no basis for their charge, but they are involved in a 'scheme' to get rid of Paul. Jewish Christians, therefore, are here little to be distinguished from non-Christian Jews. Both are hostile to Gentile Christianity, to what is for Luke proper Christianity, and both bring absurd charges against Paul."

⁴⁶ See, e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed. (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 405.

connections, then that does raise questions about how such an audience would have perceived the significant differences between the “Lukan Paul” and the “Pauline Paul.” However, if one tosses canonical considerations into the ring or even proposals that Acts was written in response to Marcion and his use of the Pauline letters, as Joseph Tyson has recently argued,⁴⁷ there may be some intriguing possibilities for such intra-canonical readings.

These two aforementioned ways of interpreting the accusations against Paul have varying degrees of plausibility that deserve greater attention. However, another way to interpret them seeks to answer these two basic questions: (a) In Acts itself, are there any cues or details about Paul’s ministry that would provide possible bases for the charges? (b) In Acts, do we find any intratextual matters that may explain why Paul’s accusers saw him as they did?

Two seemingly insignificant details in the Acts 21 account provide a helpful place to begin. In verse 27, the Lukan narrator identifies Paul’s accusers as “the Jews from Asia.” Then, in verse 29, the narrator offers a partial explanation why they thought Paul defiled the Temple by bringing a Gentile into it. At the heart of their assumption is an earlier sighting of Paul with Trophimus, whom the narrator describes as “the Ephesian.” On the surface, these two details offer little to the scene itself, yet the downward spiral of this scene begins here in the narrative with these Asian Jews over their assumptions about Paul with regard to an Asian Gentile, specifically from Ephesus. Is it mere coincidence that the last stop for Paul’s itinerant ministry was in Asia? Could these two minor details encourage the reader of Acts to recall again what happened in Paul’s ministry there, which just so happens to have been in the city of Ephesus?

The Lukan account of the Pauline ministry in Ephesus takes the entire nineteenth chapter of Acts. It may not be unimportant to note that Paul remained in the city for two years (see Acts

⁴⁷ Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006).

19:10), the longest stay for Paul in any one city. The latter half of the chapter focuses on the dramatic riot scene that city silversmiths instigated (19:21-41), where they regarded Paul as Jewish and where the Ephesian Jews tried to defend him (19:33-34). In addition, the last half of chapter 20 includes what is often called Paul's "farewell speech" to the Ephesian church elders (20:17). Unfortunately, nothing here offers any help regarding the allegations in chapter 21. However, the brief Lukan summary (19:8-10) of Paul's ministry mentions something easily overlooked. On the one hand, one finds the typical pattern for Paul's ministry in Acts, including: (a) Paul first going to the synagogue, (b) Paul proclaiming the Christian message, (c) some Jews and non-Jews responding favorably to his message, and (d) some sort of Jewish opposition that soon follows. However, unlike the scenes in many other cities, this summary states that Paul does not leave *town* but instead leaves the synagogue as the context for his ministry activities in favor of a lecture hall (19:10). What is most significant is that the participle in verse 9, which describes Paul's departure from the synagogue, is none other than *apostas*, a most provocative term that seems to characterize his actions as *apostasy*.⁴⁸ Remember that the rumor that the Jerusalem church leaders reported was that Paul was teaching *apostasian ... apo Môüseôs* (21:21), although nothing here in chapter 19 mentions anything about what Paul taught. To be sure, the narrator implies that Paul had little recourse but to leave the synagogue. Still, one cannot ignore the word choice here because it suggests not only a departure or separation from the synagogue but also the possibility that some could interpret such actions negatively.

However, this is not the first time in Acts that Paul left a synagogue and continued his ministry outside that religious context. Because the other instance, when Paul ministered in Corinth, appears contextually just before the account in Ephesus, connections between them are

⁴⁸ Of the eleven NT occurrences of the verb *aphistêmi*, nine are found in Luke (2:37; 4:13; 8:13; 13:27) or Acts (5:37, 38; 12:10; 19:9; 22:29), with all but one (12:10) describing actions of separation.

likely.⁴⁹ Similar to many other scenes from the Pauline portion of Acts, opposition follows his proclamation at the Corinthian synagogue (18:5).⁵⁰ Unique to this point in Acts is that Paul does not leave town. The narrator describes Paul as shaking off his clothes, either as an act of protest to the way he is treated or as a demonstrative act of severing all ties with the synagogue (18:6), and moving his ministry next door (18:7).⁵¹ Like the subsequent description of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, Paul remains in the city for an extended period of time while serving outside the synagogue context, due largely to a divine call and message that speaks of a *laos* in Corinth belonging to the Lord (18:10)—the same word that Luke reserves in Acts for the people of God but applied even to Gentiles by James in chapter 15.⁵² The narrative rendition, much like what follows in Ephesus, clearly indicates that Jewish opposition to Paul’s message instigates his departure from the synagogue. What becomes important for purposes of this study is that here, in the account of Paul’s ministry in Corinth, the Acts narrative first includes charges or allegations against Paul by, it just so happens, Jews of that city. While Luke summarizes that Paul had been teaching⁵³ the “word of the Lord” (18:11), the Jewish accusers perceive things very differently—that Paul had been persuading or, as the verb *anapeithō* may connote, misleading or seducing people to worship God in ways that are “contrary to the law” (*para ton nomon*; 18:13). The difference in perspective between the Lukan narrator and Paul’s Corinthian

⁴⁹ Cf. Philip H. Towner, “Mission Practice and Theology under Construction (Acts 18–20),” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 429–35. Contra Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986, 1990), 2:230–40.

⁵⁰ Both verbs describing the Jewish response have negative connotation: *antitassō* often describes a battle between opponents (cf. Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.134; 5.110; 7.103; and Thucydides, *Hist.* 2.87; 3.83; 4.55), and *blasphēmeō* in Acts describes Jewish opposition (cf. Acts 13:45).

⁵¹ The verb *sunomoreō* implies that Paul moves next door to a location shares a wall with the synagogue.

⁵² See Towner, “Mission Practice,” 425–26, who notes that the typical pattern of Pauline ministry in Acts is modified by the divine message (Acts 18:9–10), so that he no longer leaves town when opposition arises but rather leaves the context of the synagogue (from where the opposition comes) and continues to minister outside that context. The basis of this modified pattern is a theology of the people of God,

⁵³ This is one of only seven instances of the Lukan use of the verb *didaskō* or its cognates to describe Paul’s activities in Acts (see also 11:26; 13:12; 15:35; 17:19; 20:20; 28:31). In each instance, it describes Paul in a context other than the synagogue.

accusers is about Paul's teaching. One cannot mistake the similarities between this accusation and the ones raised later about Paul's teaching by the Jerusalem Christians and the Asian Jews (21:21, 28). To be sure, the prepositional phrase here compares with the hostility suggested later on by the phrase *kata ... tou nomou* (21:28), but the nuance of the preposition *para* suggests that Paul had been teaching in ways contrary to the law because he was working *alongside* it. Such a description coincides with the narrative sketch of Paul's ministry, with Paul's new location being next door or alongside the synagogue. Since the Jewish synagogue functioned as a center of Jewish identity, law observance and teaching, and worship, with teaching commonly mentioned in connection with both the Temple and synagogue, it is plausible to conclude that at least some Jews may have perceived Paul's teaching activities outside and/or alongside the synagogue as something distinct from the sacred purposes and practices of the synagogue and its association with the identity of the Jewish people as the people of God.⁵⁴

In light of these earlier episodes from the ministry of Paul to which the accusations against him seem to allude, it is plausible to conclude that Paul's actions were interpreted by at least some Jews, both among the believers and those who were not, as indications that he had rejected what they all considered to be the categories and markings of the people of God. And in many respects, they may have been correct. As Philip Towner argues, it is in Corinth, through divine revelation (18:9-10), where the theological concept of the *laos* of God as including both Jew and Gentile comes together fully with Paul's practice of ministry. He writes,

Mission experience and developments in mission practices are closely bound up with theology; the historical experiences characterized by opposition, dissonance, paradox and divine revelation finally lead to a breakthrough which enables a nascent theology to be implemented in practice. In Corinth, adjustments in mission practice allow Paul to plant a church which, as earlier in Antioch, may transcend old categories and barriers: the people of God whose sole basis is the gospel about Jesus the Messiah.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Thompson, "What Do You Think You Are Doing, Paul?," 75.

⁵⁵ Towner, "Mission Practice," 426-27.

The ugly reactions to Paul in Jerusalem in Acts 21, then, heighten the theological clash between different understandings of the people of God. Such images are not anti-Jewish, as often interpreters have contended. Rather, these episodes present the failure of one believing group to develop a theology of the people of God that identifies with what God was doing and creating rather than with historical Jewish distinctions.

B. The conflict scenes in the Jerusalem church and the (re)formation of the people of God

What, then, is one to make of these narrative twists and turns in the Book of Acts? If these three scenes in the Jerusalem church all seemingly deal in one way or another with conflict that comes with the clash of different understandings of the nature (and therefore mission) of the people of God, then what does the unfolding of these episodes in a narrative like this say or imply about such a people?

As I have articulated elsewhere,⁵⁶ the narrative arrangement of the book of Acts presents in progressive fashion three different understandings of what one might designate “the people of God”: (1) Israel or the Jewish people as the historic people of God, (2) repentant or believing Israel, and (3) a people including both Jewish *and* non-Jewish believers of the gospel. In Acts, the first understanding is modeled by the Jewish religious leaders and by the Jewish people in general in the Pauline portion; the second is modeled by the Jerusalem believers; and the third is modeled by the Antiochan church and those groups formed during Paul’s ministry. While these different understandings or images of the people of God are developed through the first 21 chapters (with the defense of Paul in Acts 22–28 actually functioning as a defense of what has been laid out in Acts 1–21), all three appear together in the last of the conflicts scenes that we examined, which may well explain the explosiveness of the situation. In the Lukan presentation

⁵⁶ See my *Keeping the Church in Its Place*.

of these differing views, the identification of those who truly belong to God is not through traditional Jewish distinctions but through the working of God. Such indications of divine activity are consistently demonstrated throughout Acts by unanimity, worship and the caring for one another's needs through the *koinônia*, and the proclamation of the gospel message.

While the first seven chapters in Acts legitimize an understanding of the Jewish believers as the people of God, it is obvious that the Lukan "universal" agenda also includes the consideration and potential place of non-Jewish believers in the theological understanding of the church or *ekkêsia* as the people of God. The question in the implied Lukan author's mind is not whether the Gentile believers were Christians, were part of the church, or members of the "people of God." The narrative presentation suggests that the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles and the acceptance of that message by some of them were part of God's plan and were evidence of God's blessing. The accounts of the deliberations by the Jerusalem church in chapters 11 and 15 both indicate that those "divine" situations—situations that also created conflict among them—were interpreted and legitimized in light of Scripture. Rather, the question is whether *Jewish* believers would respond to *Gentile* believers as equal partners in the church, with actions demonstrating unanimity or division. A response of acceptance and unanimity by the Jewish believers would affirm what God was doing; they would also acknowledge their identity together with non-Jewish believers as those who belong to and are called by God to be God's people. A response of rejection by the Jewish believers would divide those in whom God had worked and whom God blessed; they would deny that divine presence and activity as the basis of their identity as the people of God. This latter possibility would blur most distinctions between the Jewish believers and the Jews in general, whom the narrative consistently presents as God's opponents, rather than with those whom the narrative presents as

the people of God, the ones in whom one finds the divine presence and blessing. The contrasting images and the narrative interactions among the various groups of believers and the Jews in general all seem to identify the church as the people of God that is not distinguished by traditional Jewish boundaries but by divine activity, worship, and a strong, communal bond among those who are believers in the gospel message.⁵⁷

One of the debates in contemporary scholarship has focused on the Lukan understanding of the church and Israel. Many contend that the Lukan understanding of the church is of the “new” Israel or that which replaces the historical people of God. For others such as Jacob Jervell and Gerhard Lohfink, the church is the “true” Israel or the “restored” Israel, that which represents the repentant ones among the historical people of God.⁵⁸ The Gentile Christians, in this latter understanding, are included as an “associate” people of God, due to the acceptance of God’s promises by repentant and faithful Israel.⁵⁹ However, while the Lukan narrator emphasizes the continuity of the church with the historical understanding of God’s people (which may be why he continues to use the language of the Septuagint to describe the church), such interpretations do not adequately account for the dynamic quality of the church as a character in Acts. On the one hand, these interpretations do not consider the rhetorical nature of the contrasting portrayals of the church and of the Jewish people. Narrative texts do not lend themselves to precision in definition, but to the creation of an effect in an audience that is invited to participate in the narrative world of the text.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the progressive nature of the Acts narrative indicates that the *replacement* of the Jewish people is *not* the critical issue;

⁵⁷ Contra I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 212-15, who sees no Lukan concern for relational issues, but only sees a concern for institutional issues.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 41-74; and Lohfink, *Die Sammlung Israels*.

⁵⁹ See Jacob Jervell, “The Law in Luke-Acts,” *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971): 32; and idem, “The Acts of the Apostles and the History of Early Christianity,” *Studia Theologica* 37 (1983): 19.

⁶⁰ Cf. Lohfink, *Die Sammlung Israels*, 97, who notes that Luke does not provide a systematic “ecclesiology.”

rather, it assists the implied readers in wrestling with the issue of their identity as the *laos*, the people of God, or the *ekklêsia*, the assembly of those called by God.⁶¹ That is to say, the Acts narrative does not define precisely the relation between God and the Jewish people. What the narrative *does* present, however, is an understanding of the church, not in Jewish or Gentile terms but as those who belong to God. Thus, in Acts, the focus is on the church as the group that belongs to God and in which God’s blessing and activity are found.

3. Reflecting theologically on the people of God and mission as Wesleyan-Methodists

What, then, do we as Wesleyan-Methodists see regarding the church and ecclesiology or understanding of the concept “people of God” as we engage with texts such as Acts? If Scripture among the four components of the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral is the foundation of theological reflection, then how might the narrative of Acts shape our self-understanding and practices? And what are those areas that we affirm as members of the Wesleyan-Methodist theological tradition that intersect with what we have seen here in Acts? To be sure, the open nature of the narrative of Acts may leave us with as many questions as answers. May we seek to engage with this text and the other texts as Scripture—seeking to respond faithfully as we converse about what it might mean for us in the Wesleyan-Methodist theological tradition to be the people of God in the 21st century.

⁶¹ It should be noted that the translation of *ekklêsia* as “church” misses the fact that Luke is appropriating a term that, in the Septuagint, refers to Israel as the assembly of God’s people.