

## THE CORNELIUS INCIDENT IN THE LIGHT OF ITS JEWISH SETTING

J. JULIUS SCOTT, JR.\*

As the primitive community struggled with its self-understanding in relation to Judaism it faced two basic issues: (1) Who is Jesus, and what are the implications of our answer? (2) What place were contemporary (first-century) Jewish traditions, attitudes and observances to have in the new faith? Implicit in these were such additional matters as the fact and implications of the presence of the final age, the status of Israel in the divine economy, Jewish separatism, particularism, and privilege. Also implied were hermeneutical questions including the place and relevance of the OT and intertestamental developments as well as the means and scope of Christian salvation. All these affect not only the nature of Jewish Christianity but also the legitimacy of the Gentile mission.

The description of the activities of the primitive Church in Acts 2-6—preaching, teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayers, communion of goods, developing organization, confronting internal disorders—are all paralleled in one or another of the Jewish groups of the time. Thus we may conclude that to the casual observer the first believers in Jerusalem looked just like one more Jewish sect or party. They were distinguished only by what they believed about Jesus of Nazareth. Something of the nature of this belief is indicated by the titles of Acts 2-7, where Jesus is referred or alluded to as “Lord” (2:36; 7:59, 60), “Christ/Messiah” (2:20, 31, 36, 38; 3:6, 18, 10; 4:10, 26; 5:42), “the Crucified” (3:36), “the Holy One” (2:27; 3:14; 4:27, 30), “the Just One,” (3:14), “the *Archēgos*”<sup>1</sup> (3:15; cf. 5:31), “Child/Servant”<sup>2</sup> (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30), “prophet [like Moses]” (5:22; 7:37), “savior” (5:31), “stone” (4:11), “Son of Man” (7:56).

Each of these titles has messianic implications and when applied to Jesus identifies him as the Messiah. Although there was a variety of expectations about the meaning and nature of the work of the Messiah, in a Jewish context to assert his presence also carried the affirmation that the final age had dawned. And this implied radical (although ill-defined) changes in divine activity and in the socio-historical-religious situation of God's people.

\*Julius Scott is professor of Biblical and historical studies at Wheaton College Graduate School in Illinois.

<sup>1</sup> Possible translations include “originator,” “path-breaker,” “pioneer,” “founder,” “source,” “author,” “leader,” “ruler,” “prince,” “captain.” On the meaning and significance of *archēgos* see J. J. Scott, “*Archēgos* in the Salvation History of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *JETS* 29/1 (March 1986) 47-54.

<sup>2</sup> *Pais* can mean either “child” or “servant.” It is used in the LXX to translate *ebed* in the Isaianic servant passages.

## I. SECOND COMMONWEALTH JEWISH ATTITUDES AND SENSITIVITIES

The general lack of unanimity on most issues<sup>3</sup> in second commonwealth Judaism certainly included attitudes toward Gentiles. Yet in the land of Israel, especially in the Judean hill country in which the nascent Christian community lived, the assumed reality of Jewish privilege, particularism, and exclusivism were not only prominent but dominant.

The Biblical perspective assumes Israel's special relationship with God. Such is rooted in the covenant, in consequence of which Yahweh is Israel's God and she his people. Israel is called Yahweh's "own treasure" in Exod 19:5, when the covenant was reratified, and "a special people" in Deut 14:2 (cf. 7:6).<sup>4</sup> OT law also regulates and at times restricts contact with non-Hebrews. Yet there is a fundamental difference between the OT concept of Israel as Yahweh's "special treasure" and the second commonwealth Jewish insistence upon Israel as his exclusive concern with privileges that could not be shared. This was the issue when first Jesus and Paul incurred the ire of the Jews by suggesting that God had favored Gentiles over Hebrews (Luke 4:22-29) or had concern for them (Acts 22:21-22). It seems that the predominant view among at least Judean Jewry of the first century held untenable either the possibility that a Gentile could obtain God's favor without first becoming a naturalized Jew or proselyte or that the uncircumcised had any place among God's people and work.

Experiences of Gentile domination in the late monarchy, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., and the threats from Hellenistic culture from the fourth century B.C. onward served to harden Jewish attitudes against Gentiles. They also stimulated the growth of protectionistic and isolationistic barriers and attitudes against all but essential associations with Gentiles. The OT commands include circumcision, Sabbath observance, and kosher regulations. During the intertestamental period special emphasis was placed upon these three and other prohibitions,<sup>5</sup> including restrictions upon dining companions (an issue specifically raised in Acts 11:3).<sup>6</sup> They had been turned first into instruments for protection of racial, cultural, national and religious identity and then into

<sup>3</sup> There was, of course, at least general but firm commitment to the OT foundation of monotheism, covenant and Torah.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew *sēgullâ* is used in all three passages. In Exod 19:5 it stands alone and means "treasure"; in Deut 7:6 it modifies "people" and in 14:2 "possession." The LXX and NT (1 Pet 2:19; cf. the allusion to Exod 19:5; Titus 2:14) used *periousios* (= "chosen" or "especial," BAG) as its Greek equivalent.

<sup>5</sup> Such as the belief that entering a Gentile building would defile a Jew and make it impossible for him to participate in the Passover meal (John 18:28); cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 210 n. 35.

<sup>6</sup> As in other contemporary societies, the very question of those with whom one ate could have widespread ramifications. The dining arrangements reported in Gen 43:32 are particularly interesting. Joseph, although ruler of all Egypt, as a Semite could not eat with Egyptians. Since he had not yet acknowledged his brothers, they had to eat by themselves. Evidently there were three different groups eating separately at this one dinner.

emblems of Jewish superiority, privilege and exclusivism. Post-Biblical Judaism displayed a variety of attitudes toward non-Jews, almost all negative. Gentiles were godless, idolatrous, unclean and rejected by God. Dealings with them made Jews unclean.<sup>7</sup>

The implications of all this on the question of suitable candidates for Christian salvation, entering a favorable relationship with God, must be stressed. Without information to the contrary, many in the Jerusalem Church would assume that the requirements for admission into their messianic community would include that Gentiles become proselytes to Judaism. Although circumcision, Sabbath observance, kosher laws, and dining associates were prominent in the protectionistic structure, they were merely parts of a greater whole.

Peter's mission to the coastal plain of the land of Israel was itself a departure from a more restrictive outlook, for this was the area of the great coastal highway along which moved travelers and armies from many lands. Jews who lived along it were suspect in the eyes of their more rigorous countrymen, since they could not avoid frequent contact with Gentiles. This was the area and the setting for the next great step in the mission and expansion of Christianity.

## II. THE CORNELIUS NARRATIVE AND ITS FIRST-CENTURY JEWISH SETTING

The Cornelius incident occupies a sizable amount of space in the book of Acts (10:1–11:18), and reference to it is also a part of the record of the later council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:7–9). There is no question that it records an important instance in the admission of some Gentiles into the community and serves as a part of the later justification for the Gentile mission as a whole. But just what role does it play in the total scheme of the development of the self-understanding of the early Christians?

At least a general answer to the first of the two basic questions—"Who is Jesus?"—is assumed in the Cornelius episode. He is the one "God anointed" (a statement tantamount to "God made him Messiah"),<sup>8</sup> he is "lord of all" (although the Jewish Christians were to learn that "all" really means "all," Acts 10:36), and his career is sketched in the form of the *kērygma* of the primitive Church and basic outline of Mark's gospel.<sup>9</sup> The issues in the Cornelius story center around the second issue—the priority of Jewish traditions and attitudes—especially those relating to particularism and privilege within Christianity.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. *Midrash Rabba* on Leviticus 20; Juvenal *Satires* 14.103; Tacitus *History* 5.5.

<sup>8</sup> So C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London, 1952) 52–53, 94–96; followed by Bruce, *Acts* 214.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London, 1936); "The Framework of the Gospel Narrative," in *New Testament Studies* (Manchester, 1953) 1–11. D. E. Nineham, "The Order of Events in St. Mark's Gospel—An Examination of Dr. Dodd's Hypothesis," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (ed. D. E. Nineham; Oxford, 1955) 223–239, objects to some of the basic features of Dodd's conclusions.

Elsewhere<sup>10</sup> I have examined key elements of the Cornelius story and dealt with its role in the total scheme of the development of history and theology in Acts. Here I will focus on its significance in relation to the early Church's struggle with its attitude toward Gentiles against the pressures of its Jewish environment.

The geographical location of the incident is itself significant. Caesarea with its artificial harbor was, of course, built by Herod the Great on the site of Strato's Tower as a "magnificent" Greco-Roman city<sup>11</sup> in which Jews were a minority. There was frequent friction between its two ethnic groups. Many Jews refused to acknowledge Caesarea as a part of Judea and called it "the daughter of Edom."<sup>12</sup> If the Judean coastal plain was suspect, how much more this essentially pagan city as a site for Christian missions!<sup>13</sup>

The delicacy of associating with Gentiles and acknowledging them as legitimate candidates for inclusion in the messianic community is illustrated by a number of points and emphases in the account. Although an uncircumcised Gentile (cf. 11:3) and an officer in the Roman army of occupation, Cornelius is introduced as possessing commendable qualities and engaging in good deeds. He is called a "God-fearer"<sup>14</sup> (10:2, 22), "devout" (*eusebēs*), and "just" (*dikaios*), one who gave alms and prayed (significant acts in Jewish piety) and one who had won the commendation of "the whole Jewish nation" (10:22). Thus he is identified as an exceptional, a "good," Gentile in the eyes of at least some Jews.<sup>15</sup> There was divine concurrence with this evaluation in the form of an angelic vision in which Cornelius' alms and prayers are mentioned (10:3-4).

The issues at stake were great.<sup>16</sup> The centurion's good qualities alone would have been insufficient to overcome the obstacles of Jewish objection to close associations with and acceptance of Gentiles. Peter was prepared

<sup>10</sup> J. J. Scott, Jr., *The Church of Jerusalem, A.D. 30-100: An Investigation of the Growth of the Internal Factions and the Extension of Its Influence in the Larger Church* (dissertation: University of Manchester [England], 1969; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International [catalog no. 8211034], 148-155).

<sup>11</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 15.9.6.

<sup>12</sup> So D. J. Williams, *Acts* (New York: 1985) 171, but without documentation.

<sup>13</sup> On the Christian mission on the coastal plain and Peter's role see M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 116-119.

<sup>14</sup> *Phoboumenos ton theon* ("who feared God" [RSV]). This phrase, along with *seboumenos ton theon* ("worshiper of God" [RSV]) (or simply *sebomenoi*), was used to refer to an unofficial class of Gentiles who stopped short of becoming full proselytes but were permitted limited participation (by some Jews) in Jewish worship. These individuals, "God-fearers," worshiped Yahweh only, practiced imageless worship, attended the synagogue, observed the Sabbath and food laws, and conformed to other basic elements of Jewish law and tradition.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J. Jervel, "The Church of Jews and Godfearers," in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People* (ed. J. B. Tyson; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 12 ff.

<sup>16</sup> The issues may have included the physical safety of believers in Jerusalem. Bruce frequently points out (e.g. *Acts* 219-220) that the Jerusalem Christians may have won tolerance from officials in the city by carefully observing a strict Jewish lifestyle. The fraternization of members of their group with Cornelius in Caesarea and with "Greeks" in Antioch (11:20) may have contributed to upsetting the delicate balance in the city and resulted in the persecution under Herod Agrippa I described in Acts 12.

for Cornelius' messenger by a thrice-repeated vision (10:11–16) and a communication from the Spirit (10:20–21). Later the report of the coming of the Holy Spirit with the accompanying phenomena of glossolalia, an "equal gift" (*isēn dōrean*, 11:17) to that given the Jewish Christians at Pentecost, was needed as additional support to silence objections in Jerusalem (11:4–15). Even so, vestiges of his Jewish prejudice remain, for at Cornelius' house Peter reminds his hosts that it is "unlawful for a Jew to associate with anyone of another tribe"<sup>17</sup> (10:28).

Interpreters struggle with the fact that while Peter's vision deals with clean and unclean foods, Peter and the Jerusalem believers interpret it to refer to people. Martin Dibelius says this and other factual inconsistencies were the result of the combination of early sources and Luke's invention that produced a legend about the incidental conversion of a God-fearer. This, he says, was not done on principle, but Luke turned the account to establish the principles that justify the Gentile mission.<sup>18</sup> Haenchen believes such details show the account to be more Lucan than historical. He argues that individual difficulties in the text "lose their strangeness, and the effect of the whole is marvelously rounded and self-contained" when one sets "aside all questions of historical authenticity or sources" in order to understand it "only from the standpoint of its theological meaning."<sup>19</sup> He argues that the narrative demonstrates Luke's concern to show that "the Christian Church was on good terms with the Roman authorities" and that the beginning of the Gentile mission was not a "freelance" operation but a legitimate, divinely directed enterprise.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Allophylos* (which occurs only here in the NT), literally "of another tribe," is used rather than *athemitos*, "foreigner" or "Gentile" (*ethnos* is usually the collective, "nations" or "Gentiles"; cf. its use in a similar situation in Gal 2:12). *Allophylos* is commonly used in the LXX for, among other things, "Philistine." Josephus *War* 5.194) uses it in describing the signs on the wall surrounding the temple proper in Jerusalem that warned Gentiles not to enter the inner courts (a surviving inscription, now in the Museum of the Ancient Orient, Istanbul, uses the word *allogenēs*); cf. Bruce, *Acts* 209 n. 34; J. Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (2d ed.; London: 1946) 325 and plate 118. Williams (*Acts* 177) suggests that *allophylos* represents Luke's "much gentler way of speaking of Gentiles . . . to show with what delicacy Peter handled this situation." I wonder, however, if *allophylos* may be a precise term used in the first century to refer to uncircumcised persons present in the land of Israel, thus similar to the Hebrew *ger*. Its use in the LXX and Josephus and in relation to Cornelius in Caesarea seem to point in that direction. The word appears in 1 Clement 55:4 where Judith is described as asking permission to go "into the camp of the aliens (*allothylōn*)," again referring to foreigners who were present in Palestine. Diogn. 5:17 says that in waging war against Christians the Jews treat Christians "as those of another tribe" (or maybe "resident aliens," *hos allophyloi*).

<sup>18</sup> M. Dibelius, "The Conversion of Cornelius," in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. H. Greeven; London, 1956) 109–122.

<sup>19</sup> E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: 1971) 357.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 306. Haenchen goes further to complain that in the Cornelius event "Luke virtually excludes all human decision. Instead of the realization of the divine will in human decision, through human decision, he shows us a series of supernatural interventions in the dealings of men. . . . To the extent that he has removed the decision as far as possible from the hands of men to please it in those of God, Luke has forsaken the dimension of reality in which the genuine decisions of faith are taken, instead of enabling us to trace the acts of God, substituting a

Other recent commentators, though they may recognize the presence of a Lucan literary and theological hand, see both a unity to the narrative as a whole and an appropriateness of its content to the situation.<sup>21</sup> In an insightful article Joseph B. Tyson<sup>22</sup> shows that, unlike other passages in Luke-Acts, the Cornelius account lays justification for the Gentile mission without appealing to OT Scripture. In fact the OT may have been something of an embarrassment for Luke because it does erect a barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In particular Tyson suggests that the vision of foods and the question of eating with Gentiles are part of the same social restrictions that must be faced before the Gentile mission could begin. For Tyson the Cornelius incident shows Luke's belief that "the social barriers between Jews and Gentiles have been broken down, because God shows no partiality. . . . The Cornelius episode constitutes an exception to the rule that, for Luke, scripture provides a justification for the Gentile mission."<sup>23</sup>

Robert W. Wall, building on suggestions by C. S. C. Williams,<sup>24</sup> notes parallels between the story of Peter and Cornelius and that of Jonah.

Luke's appeal to Jonah's "prophecy" as the Word of God is appropriate in two ways: first, Jonah's God is the one who forgives the sins even of Gentiles; and second, Jonah's God is the one who would send his people to the Gentiles. Against this scripture-scape, the "theo-logic" of the Gentile mission is painted by Luke: the Cornelius conversion is legitimized as the continuation of God's merciful work at Nineveh, Simon-Peter is the bar Jonah, who is called by his ancestor's God to convert the Gentile, and the people of God should do nothing but praise God and say, "God has granted the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).<sup>25</sup>

Thus Wall seems to go beyond Tyson in establishing both a divine imperative and an implied Scriptural basis for the Gentile mission in the Cornelius story.

The fact that the vision refers to foods and is applied to unclean persons seems of little difficulty to me. Tyson, I believe, is correct in seeing foods and eating companions as part of the same prohibitions that limited social intercourse between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>26</sup> This category is broader

---

string of 'miracles.' . . . In all of us there exists a longing to have the weight of personal decision lifted from our shoulders by abandonment to the choices of God. It is the more important, therefore, that we should resist the temptation inherent in this particular aspect of Lucan theology" (pp. 362-363).

<sup>21</sup> E.g. R. P. C. Hanson, *The Acts in the Revised Standard Version* (ed. H. F. D. Sparks; Oxford, 1967) 119-120; I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: 1980) 180-183; Williams, *Acts* 170-171; Bruce, *Acts* 201 ff.; cf. 3-16.

<sup>22</sup> J. B. Tyson, "The Gentile Mission and the Authority of Scripture in Acts," *NTS* 33 (1987) 619-631.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> C. S. C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London, 1957) 152-153.

<sup>25</sup> R. W. Wall, "Peter, 'Son' of Jonah: The Conversion of Cornelius in the Context of Canon," *JSNT* 29 (1987) 84-85. One of my students has developed this theme even further; cf. T. E. Klutz, "Tradition, Redaction, and the Use of the Greek Old Testament in Acts 10:1-11:18" (unpublished paper; Wheaton College Graduate School, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> "The subject of table fellowship was involved with the subject of food regulations, and both with the subject of circumcision. When therefore Luke introduces into his story of the acceptance

yet and includes the whole package—all of the various Jewish laws and devices for protection of racial, cultural and religious identity. Thus the principle “to offend in one part of the law is to offend in the whole” (cf. James 2:10; Gal 3:10) suggests that to lower the barriers of foods would imply that all other proscriptions were likewise in question. The issue is not just foods and associates, or even the whole of *kašrūt*, but the entirety of the system that both maintained Jewish distinctives and separated them from Gentiles. Note that in Acts 11:3 circumcision, yet another of the protectionist elements, is clearly in the minds of Peter’s interrogators.

This interplay between foods and people may reflect the same kind of thinking implicit in some of the Jewish interpretative methods,<sup>27</sup> such as the seven *middot* of Hillel. Two of these rules may be especially significant. *Qal waḥōmer* (from the light [less important] to the heavy [more important]) asserts that what applies to less significant persons, things or actions applies equally to the more significant.<sup>28</sup> *Kēlāl ūpērāt ūpērāt ūkē-lāl* (general and particular, particular and general) asserts that truths, principles or procedures relating to a particular thing or incidents relate also to general classes and groups, that what can be said of the general applies as well to the particular. Thus what could be said about foods or eating companions (the lesser) should apply as well to the greater: all parts of the system and all persons, even Gentiles. If God pronounced foods clean (a particular part of the general structure that maintained Jewish distinctiveness) then the whole structure might also be involved.

To the Jews of the second temple period their distinctives, privileges, and separatism and the rules associated with them were of divine origin. How could such a wide sweeping action that seem to alter these be justified? Again Tyson and others are correct in emphasizing direct divine action and authority behind Peter’s associations and acceptance of Cornelius. But how could the immutable God annul his own choice and regulations?

First of all, the narrative implies that the change does not involve an alteration of God’s outlook but rather a return to his original design. The Jews had misinterpreted and gone beyond God’s original intention. The

---

into the Church of an uncircumcised Gentile a sub-plot describing a vision about clean and unclean food, it may well be that he is combining two different traditions, two different pieces of material, but they are not incompatible. Ultimately they are both concerned with the same subject; Luke knows this. These themes cross each other several times up to the end of the fifteenth chapter, and though it is virtually impossible to determine in what order they arose, and the exact course of the controversies about them, and though we cannot avoid the conclusion that Luke has admitted, or has failed to dispel confusion in his materials relating to the subject, we can allow that he is right in treating both subjects within the context of the problem of admitting Gentiles into the Church” (Hanson, *Acts* 120).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. H. L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York/Philadelphia, 1959 [1931]) 93 ff.; M. Mielziner, *Introduction to the Talmud* (New York, 1968 [1894]) 117 ff.

<sup>28</sup> This principle seems to be behind Jesus’ reference to birds and people in Matt 6:25–27; Luke 12:22–25. If God provides for birds (the lighter or less significant), how much more will he do so for people (the heavier or more significant).

principle of divine nondiscrimination (10:34), an OT truth,<sup>29</sup> is not a rejection of the Jews, only of Jewish claims for God's exclusive care and love. These claims were ill-founded. There is ample evidence in the OT to indicate Yahweh's concern and inclusivistic attitude toward Gentiles. Exclusivism as practiced by many first-century Judean Jews was a development of the intertestamental period that had gone beyond the intent of God. The same distinction between first-century Jewish practice and God's designs was made by Jesus when he drew the line between "the traditions of the elders" and "the commandments of God" (Mark 7:1-23; Matt 15:1-20).<sup>30</sup> Israel was God's "special treasure" but not his exclusive one. Inherent within the covenant call to Abraham was the expectation that through Israel "all the nations of the world will be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

Second, the new eschatological situation cleared the way for reevaluation of the place of Gentiles *vis-à-vis* Israel in salvation history. Implicit in the acceptance of the Messiahship of Jesus, a given in the Cornelius account, was the recognition of the arrival of "what was spoken by the prophet Joel . . . these last days" (Acts 2:16-17)—that is, the arrival of the final age, the age of fulfillment, when radical changes should be expected. The gift of the Spirit and glossolalia in Caesarea (Acts 10:44-46) were identical with the experience of the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 10:47; 11:15) and not only indicated divine approval and acceptance of the Gentiles but also their incorporation into the people of God of the new age. It was expected that in one way or another the Torah, both written and oral, might be subject to review, change, alteration, or reinterpretation because of the arrival of the final age.<sup>31</sup> This indeed was happening, as is well illustrated in the Cornelius incident.<sup>32</sup>

The human mind and emotions can assimilate only so much. Peter and his colleagues had witnessed the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the other events of early Christianity. But what did it all mean? There seems to have been something of a time lag between the point at which the early Christians came to intellectual knowledge and acceptance of these facts and their understanding and willingness to accept the implications of them. History and theology are inseparable, and it is through historical events that the-

<sup>29</sup> Deut 10:17. The principle of divine impartiality and its implications for God's people are far-reaching in Scripture and in early Christian literature. For example, in the NT it is the basis for (1) determining proper candidates for inclusion in the Christian community (Acts 10:34), (2) the nature of relationships between Christian masters and slaves (Eph 6:9), (3) the administration of divine punishment and judgment (Col 3:25), and (4) the esteem and treatment to be given the poor within the Church (Jas 2:1); cf. also *Ps. Sol.* 2:19; 1 *Clem.* 1:3; *Barn.* 4:12; *Ep. Poly.* 6:1; E. Lohse, "Prosōpolēmpsia," *TDNT* 6, 779-780; J. M. Bassler, "Luke and Paul on Impartiality," *Bib* 66/4 (1985) 546-552.

<sup>30</sup> Note again the hermeneutical principles that might identify "washing of cups" as "the lighter" or "the specific," and "all foods clean" (Mark 7:19) or "everything is clean for you" (Luke 11:41) as "the heavier" or "the general."

<sup>31</sup> Cf. W. D. Davies, *Torah in the Messianic Age and/or the Age to Come* (SBLMS; Philadelphia and Atlanta, 1952).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 4 ff.



ology is presented and its significance made evident. This is hardly more clear than when Peter upon entering the house of Cornelius exclaims: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35 RSV). The verb *katalambanomai* is in the present tense, middle voice, showing action in progress for the benefit of the speaker. A better rendering would be: "I am just now coming to perceive for myself that God is not partial." At that very moment Peter was in the process of coming to a personal realization of this truth about God.

The implications of the nondiscriminatory nature of God as revealed in the OT, the inauguration of the final age by Jesus, and even the full meaning of Peter's own thrice-repeated vision with the voice that addressed him from heaven dawned fully upon him only at the threshold of the centurion's home. Only later did some in Jerusalem begin to apprehend the same fact: "To the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). Peter's experience and his understanding of it were a pivotal part of the discussions at the Jerusalem council where the issue involved Gentile salvation in general, not just of the occasional "good" Gentile. There the Cornelius incident becomes something of a precedent case (Acts 15:7-11) for the conclusion that not only Jews but also "the rest of men may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles" (15:17).

It should not be surprising that both the NT and early Christian literature attest the subsequent continuing activity of Judaizers. Some Jewish Christians were simply unable to grasp or to accept the full implications of the dawning of the new age and the nature of the new people of God. Human nature is often not only slow but sometimes incapable of perceiving and accepting radical change, especially when long-standing traditions and deeply rooted emotions are involved.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

What place were contemporary (first-century) Jewish traditions, attitudes and observances to have in the new faith? These were issues rooted in a second commonwealth Judaism that resulted in deficiencies in at least three areas: its doctrine of God, its doctrine of Christ, its eschatology. It held to an aberration of the true nature and work of God that promoted and sustained a blatant ethnocentricity. As long as this misunderstanding persisted, the Jewish Christians faced an insurmountable barrier in fulfilling the purpose of God that "all the nations shall be blessed."<sup>33</sup> It took visions, heavenly voices and a clearer understanding of the statements and implications of the OT Scriptures to establish the truth that "God is not a respecter of persons." Furthermore they needed to comprehend more fully the implications of the fact that Jesus Christ is

<sup>33</sup> A proper theological foundation, especially in the areas of the nature of God and Christology, were essential to the beginnings of the Christian missionary enterprise; see J. J. Scott, Jr., "Stephen's Defense and the World Mission of the People of God," *JETS* 21/2 (June 1978) 131-141.

“Lord of all” and the nature of the altered eschatological situation introduced with the dawning of the new age.

Isolation, protectionism, and claims of national or ethnic superiority and privilege are often symptoms of inherited disorders derived from cultural and/or racial background. They involve personal and community interests that may blind the afflicted to the truth of God and hinder fulfilling the implications of that truth in thought and action. Underlying Luke’s account of Peter’s dealings with Cornelius are the very real problems faced by first-century Jewish believers because of their Jewish circumstances and traditions. It shows how these problems were dealt with head-on and appropriately in the experiences of Peter and his associates.

Modern cross-cultural missions, like the Gentile mission of old, must proceed from a proper theological understanding that is firmly rooted in Scripture. The theological understanding and also traditional attitudes and convictions must constantly be reevaluated and corrected against an ever-expanding knowledge and appreciation of the content and implications of the Bible.

Many cultures and races met along the road from Joppa to Caesarea. The traveler could not isolate himself from them. Luke makes it clear that as early Christianity moved along that coastal highway, both geographically and theologically it distanced itself from its original exclusivistic and protectionistic environment. The road led to the threshold of Cornelius’ house and the open door of faith for all nations. The same journey lies before all Christians in all times and places.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of my graduate assistant, Joyce M. Brooks. As usual I am deeply indebted to my wife Florence for encouragement in writing this paper, suggestions (stylistic and other), and proofreading.