

A Time and a Place for Everything and Everyone **By Reverend Litton Logan**

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Scriptures:

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. Acts 10: 34-48, NRSV

Sermon:

It is often said that Luke is the most "Gentile" of our gospels; that is, directed to non-Jews like ourselves. And the author's sequel, the book of Acts, is all about the expansion of the Gentile mission and subsequently the founding of the Christian church. This is the case to a degree, but I think we must understand the term "Gentile" as having a much more inclusive meaning than just non-Israelites. The word "Gentile" could also be a term used to describe Israelites or Jews of lesser degrees of compliance and devotion to Israelite religious traditions, especially as viewed by post-Temple, rabbinic Judaism. I add that the more Hellenistic Israelites referred to their counterparts, who did not or would not speak Greek, as barbarians, uncivilized, or primitive.

Bearing that in mind, Luke wrote around 85-90 C.E., some fifty years after the events he reports and fifteen to twenty years after the destruction of the Temple, using a body of oral traditions and the Gospel of Mark as his primary sources. It is believed he wrote in and to people of the Way of Jesus in one the most pluralistic cities in the Roman Empire, Antioch in Syria. Furthermore, the main antagonist to the gospel at his time would have been those post-Temple, Judean Israelites, who saw themselves now as the determiners and purveyors of what was or was not orthodoxy for all Israelites. In addition, Luke uses the term "Jews" as a catch-all term for such folks, whether in Judea or wherever.

This morning I want to share with you a non-traditional, although solid, scholarly approach to our Lectionary texts. This perspective reveals that in the ancient world as in today's world, Judaism was far more variegated than we may have been led to believe. Also, as I pointed out last week, I

believe the author of Luke was himself a Hellenistic Jew, writing under the commission of his Jesus community's Hellenistic patron, one named Theophilus. Luke, in his Gospel of Jesus Christ and his book of the Acts of the Apostles, stressed God's efforts to unify disparate Israel, be they Judean Hellenist, Samaritans, or "others". I think the author also wanted to show that Jesus-believers, unlike other Jews, did not pose a threat to the Roman Empire.

Our passages today come from a section in Acts that opens with a Roman Centurion in the Italian Cohort stationed at the port city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. Caesarea was the Roman administrative center of the Judean Province. We are told this Centurion was a pious, godly man; that is, he revered and venerated God and dutifully kept the ways of God. He was also a benevolent patron of a community of Israelites in Caesarea.

Traditionally, we have understood this Roman soldier to be a non-Israelite but a God-Venerator. A God-Venerator being a non-Israelite who embraced the moral, ethical, and monotheism of the Israelite religion, but would not conform to certain aspects of the purity codes especially dietary laws, feast days, and of course the circumcision of male children. However, many scholars make a good case for this Roman Centurion actually being a full-fledged member of the Israelite faith, albeit on the extreme fringes of that religious-ethnic identity.¹

Cornelius would have slipped off the last rung on the Israelite religious continuum for who was in and who was out. He would have fallen well beneath the Hellenist in Jerusalem, the Samaritans, and the Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts Chapter 8. He would have been classified by many as an "other" or as I indicated, a God-Venerator. However, what all the people in Acts 8 and Cornelius have in common is that they blurred the lines in the social-religious-political map of Judaism, especially at a time when Judaism was not only having to redefine itself minus the Temple and its establishment but who was in and who was out. Therefore, I think we should see this story of Cornelius and Peter as going even further to include people on the farthest fringes of the Israelite faith.

In support of Cornelius being of the Jewish faith, Andrew J. Schoenfeld, a Jewish professor at Harvard Medical School, in a very concise and seminal article, along with many other scholars, make a good case and cite solid resources for Israelites serving with distinction in the Roman Army at all levels. However, most of the Israelites or Jews serving in the Roman Army came from Italy, Syria, and Egypt, not Palestine. This knowledge is not generally disseminated among Christians or Jews outside of certain scholarly circles by Jewish or Christian scholars but for different reasons.²

To make my point, I mention one Tiberius Julius Alexander. Alexander, contrary to his Greco-Roman name, was an Egyptian Jew from Alexandria, Egypt. Alexander's father was a member of the Egyptian aristocracy and a government official and his uncle was Philo, the great Alexandrian, Jewish philosopher. Alexander was appointed governor in 42 C.E. of Thebiad, a region under Roman control in ancient Egypt, Procurator of Judea itself in 46 C.E., and from 66-69 he was the Prefect of Egypt.³ During the Jewish rebellion of 66-70 C.E., Tiberius Julius Alexander served as chief of staff and advisor to the Roman General Titus. Many believe Alexander, given his familiarity with Judea and Jerusalem, was the mastermind behind finally squashing the Jewish rebellion.

There are many, many references to Jewish soldiers, even whole garrisons serving Imperial Rome all the while keeping their religious devotions, although I am sure their devotion was not up

¹ Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch. *Social-Science Commentary of the Book of Acts*. Fortress Press, 2008, pp 75-76.

² Schoenfeld, Andrew J. *Sons of Israel in Caesar's Service: Jewish Soldiers in the Roman Military*. *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, Volume 24, Number 3, Spring 2006. Pp.115-126 (Article) Published by Purdue University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/Sho.2006.007>, Accessed Project Muse, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/197158>, 30 Apr. 2018 18:55 GMT. pp. 116-126.

³ Ibid

to the standards of Judean rabbis or met with their approval. These men's service was not unlike Jews serving in the armed forces of many countries today. Again, let me mention that male circumcision among Israelites in the Diaspora was not as prevalent as it was among those living in the Jewish precincts of ancient Palestine. In fact, in Acts 15 and 21, we read that the Jerusalem Jesus community under the leadership of James, the brother of Jesus, suspended circumcisions for uncircumcised Hellenistic, Jewish Jesus-believers and/or non-Jews. In the fifth century, after Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire, Jews and Jewish units were phased out of the Roman military due to Christian prejudices and a generalized condemnation of the Jews.

So, given that Cornelius was a devout and pious man and a member of the Italian Cohort - by implications maybe a Jew from Italy or given the author was writing from Syria, a Syrian Jew, and the author's interest in showing how the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a unifying and harmonizing force for God's people and no threat to Rome, let us see Cornelius as a devout Israelite, although off the traditionalist scale. I think this will bring a unique perspective to our scriptures.

Luke tells us that Cornelius, while in prayer, had an altered state of consciousness experience. In this event, he had his prayers, his patronage, and his life affirmed by an angel of the Lord. In his experience, he was instructed to send for Peter, who was at the time in Joppa. Cornelius sent two of his servants and a "devout" soldier, possibly another Jewish soldier, to fetch Peter.

The next day, a very hungry Peter, ironically was staying with Simon, a tanner, someone whose household would have been deemed perpetually unclean because of its association with dead animals, their hides, and tanning ingredients. Peter was up on Simon's roof in prayer, awaiting dinner, he was also probably trying to get above the stench and get some fresh air. At this time, Peter also had a vision; wherein, he saw all sorts of unclean - not kosher - creatures lowered from heaven. A sky voice told a hungry Peter or tempted him to kill and eat. Peter, ever the devout Jew, defied the voice and did not break with Israelite dietary laws. He was left perplexed by this vision. His perplexity was compounded when Cornelius' servants and the soldier arrived requesting that he return to Caesarea with them. Peter extended hospitality as an honored guest to these men although it was not his home and they all stay overnight in what would have been considered one of the stinkiest, most ritually unclean or profane households a Jew could imagine.

The next day Peter and his Judean, Jesus-believer companions - those of the circumcision - and Cornelius' people returned to Caesarea. When they were met by Cornelius, a man of power and social status, Cornelius prostrated himself before Peter as if he were some kind of grand rabbi. Peter, possibly out of the social awkwardness of such a demonstration, told Cornelius to get up because he was just a man like himself and was owed no special honor or recognition.

Cornelius retold his vision experience to Peter, whereupon Peter had an "aha" moment, tying his vision and Cornelius' experience to a more comprehensive understanding of several Hebrew scriptures about God not being a respecter of a person's social status or so-called religious pedigree. (Deut. 10:17, Lev. 19:15, 2 Chron. 19:7).

What Peter said next erases some important but secondary lines in Israel's traditional social-religious-political map. Peter stated that anyone, meaning anyone there or elsewhere, who respects God and does what is right or is righteous per God's Law is acceptable before God. Peter did not throw out the Laws of Moses or throw open wide the doors of Judaism for just any and all, any more than he killed and ate unclean animals. What Luke had Peter doing was minimizing or discounting some of the Jerusalem, Judean traditions that labeled people such as this Roman centurion and his household as unclean, unworthy, and outsiders.

Now, let us note that Israelite religious traditions or the traditions of the elders were seen as protective fences or buffers around the Laws of Moses. The Laws of Moses defined reality for God's

people - a time and place for everything and everything in its time and place, but the adjunct traditions of the elders of Israel - the sages, teachers, and now rabbis - in their attempt to keep God's people holy, as God was holy, often pushed things too far and their rulings and traditions became burdensome and ridiculous.

Peter went on to say that everyone knows that it is not in keeping with tradition for a Jew to associate with or enter the home of those deemed "other" like this Roman soldier. I think the author wants us to contrast Cornelius' household with Simon's stinky and unclean household where Peter had stayed and eaten. However, if a person, who sees himself of Israel, venerates God and keeps the moral and ethical demands of the Law, is acceptable to God, they should be acceptable to all of God's people no matter what the rabbis say.

Peter punctuated this insight by saying that all those who believe in God's Christ will receive forgiveness of sins through his name or who and what he represents. That is, these people will receive forgiveness for their various religious lapses, which caused them to be labeled Gentiles in the first place. Such people are forgiven, and they are made right before God through their belief in Jesus the Christ even though they may be unacceptable according to emerging rabbinical Judaism. As Peter says in verse 36, "This is the word of good news (the preaching of peace, shalom, wholeness, NRSV) that God sent to Israel by Jesus the Christ (he is Lord of all)." (RSV, 10:36) Jesus is Lord of all Israel and Israelites, regardless of their cultural traditions, so-called religious pedigrees, or nationalities.

Peter proclaimed to Cornelius and his household the Good News of God in Jesus Christ; whereupon, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard. The Holy Spirit was not channeled through Peter or his more traditional Jewish companions by the laying on of hands as with the Samaritans, but the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household just as it had upon those Israelites from every nation in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Peter, in amazement, asked his more traditional Jewish companions if any of them, given what they had just witnessed, could deny these people baptism and fellowship in the community of Christ.

Given my sortie into a non-traditional understanding of these passages, some will ask, "so what, aren't the results the same?" The gospel goes to Jewish outsiders, some closer in their life postures and practices to non-Jews, but in the end all Jewish and non-Jewish Jesus-believers are brought into covenant blessings in Jesus Christ. My response would be to say, "Yes," but as much as Acts is about the growth of the early Jesus-believer movement within Judaism and subsequently the forming of a more inclusive but separate religious community or church comprised of Jews and non-Jews, it is to a greater degree an indictment of an emerging, highly exclusive, Judean Judaism. Do you get that Theophilus?

The message of the Good News of God in Christ once freed from the shackles of such an exclusive Jewish sectarianism, sadly, over the following two-thousand years would development its own exclusivities and sectarianism with resulting horrors and blessings.

As I shared last week, I have seen firsthand the abuses, the pain, and suffering fostered by Christian sectarianism. As we today stand smack in the middle of an unfettered and unprecedented globalism, people and their religions and life philosophies are colliding, mixing, and mingling in ways never imagined. In response, we as Christians, with our distinctive message must go beneath the parameters of traditional Christian sectarianism and denominationalism to rediscover or, for some, discover for the first time the Spirit of Truth in the Gospel. God's eternal Spirit of Truth within the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls all who hear it to be open to it and changed by it. The Holy Spirit, as promised, will bring to mind and bring to bear God's message of universal love, peace, and wholeness in ways never imagined, if we will be open to it, respond to it, and work with it. Folks, this is the Spirit's work, to bring everything into and under God's will and not be our little feel-good emotional pet on a religious leash. I think the Spirit of Truth will even prepare us for and

equip us for that day and time when we step foot on other worlds and meet the “others” of God not like ourselves.

But for now, the good news of Jesus Christ that we have embraced and has changed our lives, giving us eternal validation and assurances, will continue to blur lines in our various social-religious-political maps about who is in and who is out. I am referring to those religious traditions that all too often have dictated to everything and everyone has his or her place and everything and everyone should stay in that place or stay quiet and out of sight. Now, however, it is the time of the Christ and we are in the place of Christ so let us be found in prayer and open to a vision for our time. Holy Spirit fall on us, fall on us.

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