

“Making/Taking Her Place in the World: The Church among Others in Acts 16–19”

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By the time our working group reaches this paper, we will have already read and discussed a majority of the papers before us in relation to our meeting’s theme, “Wesleyan Communities and the World beyond Christianity.” And yet as we begin to think about what we will contribute from our working group to the Institute itself regarding our theme, it may also do us well to be reminded again of some questions suggested for us as we consider the role of the Christian scriptures in the Church’s theological task of responding to the issues before us:

- In what ways do the scriptures represent God’s people as relating to communities outside of Judaism and Christianity?
- How do the Old and New Testament scriptures represent Jews and Christians relating to followers of other religious beliefs?
- How do they represent Jews or Christians relating to governmental groups or non-governmental groups that might have similar sends? In what ways do the scriptures represent God as relating to all created beings?
- How do new ways of understanding the Christian scriptures open up new ways to understand how Christian communities can relate to the world beyond Christianity?

There is no doubt that, in the second part of the Christian canon, there are significant and diverse contributions that our group has not explored that would open some stimulating conversation in response to most of these questions. And the book of Revelation would be a fascinating place to land for a while to wrestle with these issues!

But my area of expertise is Luke and Acts. So when the Institute’s call first crossed my desk, scenes from Acts naturally began to come to mind as I thought about these questions, because Acts is ultimately about the redefinition or reconstitution of “the people of God” in the context of other competing definitions of being a “people.”¹ However, because of presuppositions regarding Acts as history or as a mere record of the church’s geographical movement from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the rest of the world (see the programmatic statement of 1:8), Acts materials are often consulted or cited merely as historical answers to questions like the above or as supporting evidence for theological claims without due regard for the *Lukan* issues at stake within the Acts narrative. For such issues and perspectives within Acts may well be different from our own. That does not mean that Acts has nothing to offer. Yet the concern here is to re-appropriate and re-engage *Acts* as we think about important contemporary issues by also taking seriously the complexities of the narrative of Acts.

This paper proposes to examine an aspect of the Lukan characterization of the church among others in Acts 16–19, since this section in Acts deals with the expanding Christian mission into what is now Europe. It should be noted that this portion of the narrative is characterized by increasing conflict faced by Paul and his ministry, not only in Jewish contexts but also from various groups of Gentiles, which the believers encounter as “others” who *themselves* see the believers as outsiders or “others” making their own place in the world. Thus,

¹ See Richard P. Thompson, *Keeping the Church in Its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in the Book of Acts* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006); and my forthcoming commentary on Acts for the New Beacon Bible Commentary series (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2014).

these increasingly diverse contexts with accompanying conflict and tension provide potentially useful situations to explore the interactions of the church with these various “others,” especially since conflict and tension often arise within these contexts where “otherness” threatens the situation. Although, for topics such as ours in relation to Acts, persons often begin with Paul’s speech to the Athenians (17:22-31), I would like to suggest a different place to begin: the account of the Jerusalem Council and, in particular, the speeches that Luke² offers from that meeting. For it is from this narrative vantage point that the Lukan narrator both evaluates what has happened previously in Acts and also sets the theological trajectories for what follows.³

1. The theological assessment of the Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)

The early chapters of Acts depicts the good news that God fulfilled God’s longstanding promises to Israel (see Joel 2:28-32) through the resurrection/exaltation of Jesus, who received that promise of the Spirit from God and then “poured out” that Spirit during the extraordinary Pentecost happenings (2:1-36). Despite the hostile resistance of the Jewish religious leaders to what God was doing, the Lukan narrator depicts the believers as blessed with God’s presence among them, worshiping God, caring for one another’s needs, and united in living faithfully before God (see, e.g., 2:42-47; 4:32-37). The Jewish religious leaders’ disobedience and resistance created a division among the Jewish people as the people of God over the gospel.⁴

The movement of the gospel beyond the sacred city of Jerusalem moved the church’s mission into uncharted territory. The Jewish believers struggled most with Peter’s association with the Gentile Cornelius, yet their recognition that God granted repentance to him (11:18) did not prepare them for what regularly transpired in the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. Their ministry typically began with them proclaiming the gospel in the Jewish synagogue, but most noteworthy was that, according to Acts, *both* Jews and Gentiles accepted that message (see, e.g., 13:42-44). Since one would anticipate at least *some* favorable Jewish response, the Lukan focus on the portion of the report of the ministry pair to the Antioch church (i.e., the group that supported the work to which the Holy Spirit called them; 13:2) that mentioned *Gentile* response stands out most distinctly (14:27). However, this same Gentile response was also prominent for those concerned about maintaining the religious identity of the Jewish people as the people of God (15:1), especially since nothing in Acts 13-14 (the portion describing the ministry of Paul and Barnabas) addressed these concerns.⁵ That is, the narrator mentions nothing about what these

² Although I refer to the author/narrator as “Luke” here, this is not an endorsement of the tradition that identifies the physician Luke, a ministry companion of Paul, as the author of the Third Gospel and Acts. For this paper and for the sake of variety, I am simply using “Luke,” “narrator,” and “Lukan narrator” synonymously.

³ This suggestion about the speeches from the Jerusalem Council is consistent with the function of speeches in Acts, as has long been noted. For a classic study on the speeches in Acts, see Martin Dibelius, “The Speeches in Acts and Ancient Historiography,” in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. M. Ling; London: SCM Press, 1956), 138-85. See also Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

⁴ See 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. R. P. Thompson and T. E. Phillips; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 327-44; and idem, *Keeping the Church in Its Place*, 29-115.

⁵ It should be noted that the Gentiles who responded to the ministry of Paul and Barnabas were typically from a group known as “Godfearers,” whom Luke depicts as attracted to Judaism and the synagogue but not converts. For a description of Godfearers and Luke-Acts, see Joseph B. Tyson, “Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts: Reading as a Godfearer,” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995): 19-38.

two required of converts from those considered “outsiders” by the Jewish believers. The successful ministry of Paul and Barnabas among both Jews and Gentiles, then, set the stage for what is commonly known as the Jerusalem or Apostolic Council, the account of which appearing literally in the exact center of Acts.⁶ It has long been noted as a “turning-point” in Acts,⁷ especially since this meeting reconsiders the story of Cornelius and tackles additional questions about Gentiles (i.e., “others”), salvation, and their relation to the people of God. The contention here is that the decisions made during this meeting were significant contributions to the narrative and theological trajectories, and necessary for understanding subsequent episodes in Acts, particularly those in chapters 16 through 19 that deal with the remainder of Paul’s ministry and depict increasing interaction (and conflict) with others both inside and outside Jewish circles. That interaction provides instructive contexts for our consideration regarding how those before us dealt with increasingly diverse situations and contexts.

For our purposes, we will not focus on the circumstances leading up to the convening of the meeting or even on the historical debates surrounding Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-14.⁸ Rather, we will give attention only to the meeting’s debate. After the debate wore on for a while (15:6-7), the narrator concentrates on two perspectives for specific consideration.

a. The assessment by Peter (15:7-11)

Peter’s contribution is critical, because he alone among the apostles, not to mention the Jerusalem leaders, had experience in dealing with Gentiles. Thus, he refers them back to his experiences with Cornelius a decade earlier (ἀφ' ἡμερῶν ἀρχαίων; 15:7). He summarizes what happened in chapter 10 but more briefly than he did once before for the Jerusalem believers (11:5-16), yet *here* he offers some distinctly theological conclusions. He affirms God’s initiative in the election or “choice” (see ἐκλέγομαι; 1:2, 24; 13:17) of the Gentiles to hear the “gospel”⁹ and to “come to believe” (see aorist tense: πιστεῦσαι; see 13:8, 12, 39, 41, 48; 14:1, 9, 22, 27). Peter underscores God’s work through him without mentioning his own resistance or even that of the Jerusalem believers themselves. The designation of God as the one “who knows the heart” (καρδιογνώστης, 15:8; see 1:24) conveys a common biblical idea of God as aware of the person’s

⁶ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 538, who notes nearly as many words precede as follow it.

⁷ See, e.g., Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (trans. B. Noble and G. Shinn; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 461-62.

⁸ Although the majority of interpreters see the two passages as describing the same general event, some significant differences in detail between the two accounts in Acts 15 and Gal 2 are difficult to reconcile. Among those differences are these: (1) Acts 15 states that the problem was created by some who “came down from Judea” (15:2) “from the party of the Pharisees” (15:5), but Gal 2:4 describes the culprits as “false believers” (NRSV); (2) Acts 15 describes the controversy as starting in Antioch (15:1), but Gal 2 depicts the controversy as arising in Jerusalem; (3) Acts 15 depicts the Antioch church sending representatives to Jerusalem (15:2), whereas Paul declares (Gal 2:2) that he went to Jerusalem “in response to a revelation”; and (4) Acts 15 mentions only the so-called Apostolic Decree (15:20, 29; a third time, 21:25) as stated requirements for Gentile believers, but Paul states only to “remember the poor” (Gal 2:10). Those who understand these two passages as referring to the same general events see these differences as a reflection of different contexts, perspectives, and rhetorical purposes. See, e.g., C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols. (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994-1998), 2:xxxvi-xli; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 539-41; and Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006), 79-96.

⁹ See also 20:24, the only other appearance of the noun εὐαγγέλιον in Acts.

inner thoughts (see, e.g., 1 Sam 16:7; 1 Kgs 8:39; Ps 7:8; Jer 17:10; Luke 16:15; Rom 8:27; 1 Thess 2:4; Rev 2:23). God alone was capable of discerning the human condition and, more specifically, the Gentiles in question. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, God offered witness (*ἐμαρτύρησεν*) to God's own redemptive actions among these outsiders to the Jewish people, just as God had done among the Jewish believers. This is the only instance in Acts describing God as God's own witness (see also 13:22). This divine testimony was given as confirmation to the *Gentiles*, whom God accepted and included in God's expanding salvific purposes, *and* to these Jewish Christians, who were wrestling with the question of the place of these outsiders within those divine purposes.

Peter's final reflection on his experience with Cornelius reiterates more forcefully the theme of God's impartiality between Jews and Gentiles (see 10:34; 11:17; cf. Rom 2:11; 3:22; 10:12; Gal 2:6). The verb *διακρίνω* (15:9) reminds the reader when the Spirit instructed Peter, who struggled to make sense of his heavenly vision in Joppa to go with Cornelius's representatives "without hesitation" (*μηδὲν διακρινόμενος*, 10:20; see 11:12), and when the circumcised believers in Jerusalem "criticized" (*διακρίναντα*) him for staying at Cornelius's house for several days (11:2). As in chapter 11, Peter understood the vision as about the salvation and acceptance of Gentiles (i.e., "outsiders"). However, this is where Peter makes a significant theological move. The evidence of God's refusal to discriminate was God's "cleansing" (NRSV; *καθαρίσας*) of the Gentiles, which recalls the heavenly voice in Peter's vision: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (*ό θεὸς ἐκαθαρίσεν*; 10:15). In particular, he acknowledges that this "heart-knowing" God (15:8) cleansed their hearts "by faith" (see also 15:7). Obviously, some Jewish Christians still thought social contact with Gentile Christians (an oxymoron to them) made them ritually "unclean" in terms of the social/religious markers of Judaism, even after their prior conclusion of 11:18. Thus, they demanded that Gentile Christians become Jewish converts through circumcision and obedience to the Mosaic law (15:5). Peter's conclusion trumps this contention, since God also made these Gentile Christians clean by removing what made them "outsiders" to the people of God. Faith—rather than circumcision, the Mosaic law, or other related regulations governing "insider"/"outsider" that were so prevalent in table fellowship—was *the* criterion for the salvation and definition of this people.¹⁰

Whereas Peter's rhetorical question (15:10) addressed the Pharisaic demands (15:5) by characterizing them as "putting God to the test,"¹¹ his final statement emphasizes (note its placement at the beginning of the Greek sentence) the requirements for salvation.¹² The means

¹⁰ See Richard P. Thompson, "Gathered at the Table: Holiness and Ecclesiology in the Gospel of Luke," in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament* (ed. K. E. Brower and A. Johnson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 77-79.

¹¹ This idea draws from OT examples of mistrusting and opposing God (see Exod 17:2, 7; Num 14:22; Deut 6:16; Ps 78:18, 41, 56; Isa 7:12), something that Jesus condemned (Luke 4:12; Matt 4:7). Within Acts, this idea is reminiscent of Ananias and Sapphira, whom Peter accused of conspiring to "test the Spirit of the Lord" (5:9). However, the argument was not about the *deficiency* of the Mosaic law but about Israel's *disobedience* to that law. See John Nolland, "A Fresh Look at Acts 15.10," *New Testament Studies* 27 (Oct. 1980): 105-15; and Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte: Übersetzt und Erklärt* (Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 392-93.

¹² See Earl Richard, "The Divine Purpose: The Jews and the Gentile Mission (Acts 15)," in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar* (ed. C. H. Talbert; New York: Crossroad, 1984), 191; and Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986-1990), 2:185.

by which salvation occurs is “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (15:11) rather than circumcision or Jewish law (see 13:38-39) and therefore characterizes *all* believers inclusively—both Jewish and Gentile—as the people of God. Surprisingly, Peter does not compare the Gentiles’ salvation to that of the Jewish believers. Instead, he reverses the order and underscores the *Gentiles’* salvation to disclose the basis of the *Jewish believers’* salvation (15:11), so that salvation is defined on the basis of the “outsider.” Following this, “Barnabas and Paul”¹³ reported about God’s salvific work “among the Gentiles” (ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεστιν), not because their ministry was exclusive to this group but because the debated topic challenged that specific idea of *Gentile* salvation. Thus, this brief report offers confirmation to Peter’s perspective about the Gentiles.

b. The assessment by James (15:13-21)

The response from James, for whom Luke offers him no introduction but who appeared earlier (12:17), suggests his role as a leader within the church to be obvious, both by his participation in the meeting and his handling of the situation.¹⁴ Interestingly, James mentions nothing about what Barnabas and Paul just reported and refers presumably to what Peter said.¹⁵ He summarizes Peter’s message about Cornelius’s conversion as a visitation from God (15:14), a common OT image of God’s intervention and deliverance.¹⁶ James discloses the purpose of this visitation to be God “taking” ($\lambdaαμβάνω$) or creating “a people from the Gentiles” (or “nations”) that would belong to God. The idea of God choosing Israel as God’s own special people *apart* from the nations is a common one in the Pentateuch (see, e.g., Exod 6:7; 19:5; 23:22; Deut 4:20; 7:6; 14:2; 26:18-19). However, the phrase “from the Gentiles” ($\εξ ἔθνῶν$) paradoxically specifies the source or *from where* those chosen ones came (see Zech 2:11).¹⁷ Although they were not Jews, God also drew from outsiders or literally “took from the Gentiles” for God’s chosen people ($\lambdaαός$),¹⁸ who were to be known by God’s name.¹⁹

James’s citation of Amos 9:11-12 correlates these divine actions with Amos’s depictions of divine restoration. His introduction to the citation (15:15) is significant, as he understands “the

¹³ Barnabas is probably listed first due to his prominent role among the Jerusalem believers; see 4:36-37; 11:22.

¹⁴ For a thorough treatment of James, see John Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition* (2nd ed.; Studies on Personalities of the NT; Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁵ The immediate context suggests that “Simeon” is a reference to Simon Peter, with this form of the name added for local color. However, since nowhere else in the NT Gospels and Acts is Peter called this but only Simon (see, e.g., 10:5, 18; Luke 4:38; 5:3-5, 8, 10; 6:14), two other possibilities exist. One is that this refers to Simeon Niger (see 13:1), who could have been one of the other chosen representatives who accompanied Barnabas and Paul (15:2) and may have participated in the earlier debate (15:7; see Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 553). Another less likely possibility, following the early lead of Chrysostom, suggests this to be the elderly (who would now be *very* elderly!) Simeon who, upon seeing the infant Jesus presented at the temple by his parents, prophesied that the salvation that would come through Jesus would be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:32); see Rainer Riesner, “James’s Speech (Acts 15:13-21), Simeon’s Hymn (Luke 2:29-32) and Luke’s Sources,” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ* (ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 263-78.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Gen 21:1; 50:24-25; Exod 3:16; 4:31; 13:19; 32:34; 1 Sam 2:21; Jer 5:29; 9:8, 24; 11:22; see also Luke 1:68, 78; 7:16; 19:44. This verb depicting divine visitation (ἐπισκέπτομαι) appeared earlier in Stephen’s speech to describe God’s intervention through Moses to deliver Israel from their Egyptian oppression (7:23).

¹⁷ See Jacques Dupont, “Un peuple d’entre les nations (Actes 15.14),” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 321-35.

¹⁸ In Acts, the term $\lambdaαός$ is typically reserved to describe the Jewish people as the people of God. See 2:47; 3:9, 11-12, 23; 4:1-2, 8, 10, 17, 21, 25, 27; 5:12-13, 20, 25-26, 34, 37; 6:8, 12; 7:17, 34; 10:2, 41-42; 12:4, 11; 13:15, 17, 24, 31; 19:4; 21:28, 30, 36, 39-40; 23:5; 26:17, 23; 28:17, 26-27. The one other place where it does not is 18:10.

¹⁹ See Nils A. Dahl, “‘A People for His Name’ (Acts XV.14),” *New Testament Studies* 4 (1957-58): 319-27.

words of the prophets” to be in agreement (*συμφωνέω*; see 5:9) with God’s inclusive actions outlined in the previous verse. Thus, God’s actions provide the hermeneutical context for understanding this passage of Scripture. The citation itself is an adaptation of the LXX version of the Amos passage. Similar to Peter’s citation of the Joel prophecy (see 2:17), the opening phrase *μετὰ ταῦτα* (“after these things”) replaces the LXX phrase *ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ* (“in that day” (Amos 9:11) so that the fulfillment of Amos’s prophecy may be understood as having occurred in the Christian mission after Pentecost. James underscores the divine restoration of Israel, which Amos described in terms of God “raising up” to restore the fallen Davidic dynasty. However, the first and last verbs in verse 16—forms of *ἀνίστημι*, a verb often associated with Jesus’ resurrection (see, e.g., 2:24, 32; 3:26; 10:41; 13:33-34)—have been changed. This change seems to be influenced by Jeremiah 12:15-16: “And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and ... they shall be built up in the midst of my people” (NRSV), which refers (i.e., “them”) to the conversion of the Gentiles. This alteration removes the possibility that either James’s audience or Luke’s readers would directly link God’s actions to Jesus’ resurrection. However, it underscores God’s restoration of “David’s fallen tent” (CEB), which may be interpreted broadly in terms of Israel as God’s people²⁰ or more specifically in terms of the eschatological temple (or people of God, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles) over whom the Davidic Messiah reigns as Lord.²¹ In either sense, Luke proclaims Jesus as the fulfillment of those divine promises to Israel.²²

The second half of the citation explains the purpose (*ὅπως*) behind that divine restoration. The Hebrew text of Amos 9:12 offers the promise that Israel would “possess the remnant of Edom” (NRSV) and other nations as a restored kingdom. But the cited LXX verse offers a much different promise: that “remnants from humanity” would “seek the Lord” (15:17). Such persons are further defined as “all the Gentiles” upon whom God’s “name has been called” (NRSV), an expression that signifies divine ownership (Deut 28:10; 2 Chr 7:14; Jer 14:9; Dan 9:19) and designates them as the recipients of God’s salvific initiative (see 13:48). In other words, God’s call upon Jews and Gentiles alike creates a people belonging to God. Thus, James interprets this adapted LXX version of Amos 9:11-12 as validation of the testimonies of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul alike: that the divine plan of restoring Israel includes the salvation of “outsider” Gentiles apart from becoming Jewish proselytes. The last phrase in verse 18, an addition perhaps influenced by Isaiah 45:21, further accentuates this inclusion of the Gentiles as a long established part of God’s salvation purposes.

Based on his assessment of the Amos passage (*διό*), James’s proposal (15:19-20) addresses the ecclesiological implications of the debate (see Lönning 1990, 315-17). The present infinitive *παρενοχλεῖν* (see LXX: Judg 14:17; Job 16:3; 1 Macc 10:35; 2 Macc 11:31) indicates his grave concern that the deliberating body cease what he characterizes as undue trouble or harassment toward those Gentiles “turning” (*ἐπιστρέφουσιν*; see v 3: *ἐπιστροφήν*) to God by the

²⁰ See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Abingdon NT Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 219; and Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 395.

²¹ Richard Bauckham, “James and the Gentiles (Acts 15.13-21),” in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (ed. B. Witherington III; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 164-67; and Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (12 vols.; ed. L. E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 219.

²² See Jacques Dupont, “Je rebâtrai la cabane de David qui est tombée” (Ac 15,16=Am 9,11),” in *Glaube und Eschatologie: Festschrift für Werner Georg Kümmel* (ed. E. Grässer and O. Merk; Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), 19-32.

insistence for circumcision and the law. However, the conjunction $\alpha\lambda\lambda\alpha$ signals James's equal concern to address the other side of the debate by sending the Gentile believers some instruction by letter (see the verb $\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\lambda\lambda\omega$) that would be consistent with their deliberations (15:6-18). He outlines a short list of four things from which the Gentiles should abstain without requiring them to become Jewish proselytes through circumcision and the law.²³

Questions remain as to the specific source and function of this instructive list, commonly known as the “Apostolic Decree.” Some contend that the list bears striking similarities to later rabbinic prohibitions against idolatry, murder, and incest.²⁴ Much more likely is the notion that these prohibitions reflect the purity teachings of Leviticus 17--18, especially those passages referring specifically to “resident aliens” or Gentiles living among the Jewish people (see Lev 17:7, 10, 13, 15; 18:26).²⁵ Some downplay these connections between the decree and Leviticus 17--18, contending (a) little direct correlation between the two texts (i.e., Lev 17--18 is about Gentiles in a largely Jewish context, not the other way around) or (b) resident aliens were also obliged to follow many other Jewish laws than just these.²⁶ However, the selection of these *four* specific prohibitions (and not others) was dependent on James's interpretation of the Amos prophecy (15:16-17) in light of Jeremiah's reference to Gentiles being “built up in the midst of my people” (Jer 12:16), which shifts the focus from Gentiles living *in* Israel to them living *among* Jews without a specific location.²⁷ James's instructions reflect the pragmatic issues that Gentile believers faced in their daily lives: the persistent problem of idolatry, especially celebrations and feasts at religious temples. Everything in the list was associated with such contexts, which is consistent with Luke repeatedly raising concerns about idolatry in Acts (7:40-41; 14:15-17; 17:22-31; 19:23-41).²⁸ In reality, these different understandings are somewhat

²³ Three things complicate interpreting the list: (1) three slightly different versions in Acts (15:20, 29; 21:25); (2) rare terminology and brevity of wording; and (3) early MSS differ over the wording of verse 20.

The first requirement, the avoidance of “whatever has been polluted by idols” ($\tau\alpha\omega\alpha\lambda\iota\sigma\gamma\mu\alpha\tau\omega\alpha\tau\omega\alpha\epsilon\delta\omega\lambda\omega\alpha$; 15:20), was due to commonplace idolatrous practices in Greco-Roman culture and politics. In 15:29, a more general term refers to “things sacrificed to idols” ($\epsilon\delta\omega\lambda\delta\theta\omega\tau\omega\alpha$; 1 Cor 8:1-10; 10:19-30; Rev 2:14, 20; 4 Macc 5:2). This prohibition included anything consecrated to a god (see Lev 17:7-9; Dan 1:8; Mal 1:7, 12; Sir 40:29).

The second requirement, the avoidance of “sexual immorality” ($\pi\omega\eta\omega\epsilon\alpha$), does not use the specific term for sexual infidelity ($\mu\omega\chi\epsilon\alpha$) but one with broader connotations including sexual irregularities and prostitution. This term also referred to sacred prostitution, which Jewish tradition often associated with ancient idolatry (see Hos 5:3-4; Ezek 16:15-46; Jer 3:1-10; Wis 14:12; *Jub.* 22:16-23; 1 Cor 10:7-8; Rev 2:14, 20). This specific prohibition could have referred to forbidden marriages and banned sexual practices (Lev 18:6-23).

The third and fourth prohibitions, against “whatever has been strangled” ($\tau\omega\omega\pi\omega\eta\omega\tau\omega\alpha$) and “blood” ($\tau\omega\omega\alpha\omega\delta\omega\alpha$), may be similar. The former likely refers to the consumption of meat from which the blood had not been properly drained (see Exod 22:31; Lev 17:13-14; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 4.122). The instructions in magical papyri about the practice of choking a sacrifice to transfer its spiritual life into idols suggests there may have been religious practices in the first century CE to which this prohibition was directly pertinent. The latter seems to refer to the consumption of an animal's blood (see, e.g., Lev 17:10-12; Deut 12:23-35; 1 Sam 14:31-35; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.260), which the Jewish tradition often associated with the idolatry of neighboring peoples (see Wis 12:3-5).

²⁴ See Barrett, *Acts*, 734-35; and Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 77.

²⁵ See, e.g., Terrance Callan, “The Background of the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993): 284-97.

²⁶ See, e.g., Stephen G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (SNTS Monograph Series; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 68-102.

²⁷ Bauckham, “James and the Gentiles,” 172-78.

²⁸ Cf. Gaventa, *Acts*, 222-23.

related, as James's proposal was concerned with three things: (1) the Jewish believers' perception of the uncircumcised Gentile believers (i.e., "outsiders") as part of the people of God, (2) the Gentile believers' protection from the idolatrous practices of "others" in their world, and (3) the Jewish believers' protection of their identity as the people of God that may be threatened by practices and perspectives of "others" in their world.

James concludes his proposal by offering an explanation ($\gamma\alpha\rho$). Although other Jewish writers made similar claims about the long-standing influence and tradition associated with Judaism (see, e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 16.43; *Ag. Ap.* 2.175; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 2.62), James asserts that these instructions would help Gentile believers figure out how to live in harmony and fellowship with those Jewish believers who were "deeply committed to Mosaic law."²⁹ But these Gentile believers, who were already associated with the Jewish synagogue, undoubtedly would have been familiar with these requirements that Moses provided for "resident aliens" and likely would have followed them already, especially in their fellowship with the Jewish people.

2. Conflict scenes in subsequent chapters (Acts 16–19)

The conclusions of the Jerusalem Council provided a different perspective toward Gentiles or those typically considered "outsiders" or "others" by the Jewish people who identified themselves as God's chosen people. It provides something like a "blueprint" for the Christian mission as depicted by Paul's ministry as it continues in Acts. But this perspective is only shared by a relative few, who themselves were struggling to make/take their place in the world among others whose understanding and perspective were different. Conflict is typically an indication of at least two groups making similar claims for a common or shared place.

a. Conflict and arrest over a Philippian slave girl (16:16-40)

An encounter in Philippi between the ministry team of Paul and a "slave girl" ($\pi\alpha\iota\delta\sigma\kappa\eta$) as the group was on their way to the "place of prayer" or synagogue (see 16:13)³⁰ provides the basic context for observing the first intersection of the post-Jerusalem Council perspective in the narrative of Acts. In comparison to Paul and his companions, whom the narrator has associated with divine guidance from the Spirit (see 16:6-10), the girl is described as having a "spirit of Python" ($\pi\nu\epsilon\tilde{\nu}\mu\alpha\pi\nu\theta\omega\alpha$; 16:16), a reference to the mythical snake Python that supposedly lived in Delphi and associated practices of telling the future.³¹ Thus, their encounter proves to be a

²⁹ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:190.

³⁰ This conclusion is based on the use of the same word ($\pi\rho\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\chi\jmath$) as a synonym for the synagogue of the Diaspora in Jewish writings (including inscriptions), with there being no evidence to suggest that Luke may not have done so here (see, e.g., 3 Macc 7:20; Philo, *Embassy* 155; *Flaccus* 45-49; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.258; *Life* 277, 280, 293; *Ag. Ap.* 2,10). See Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (SBL Dissertation Series; Atlanta: Scholars, 1999), 111-18; Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting* (The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 207-25; Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (trans. L. M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 78-92; BDAG 2000, 878-79.

³¹ Python was the great snake that lived at Delphi and was the representative of the underworld. The god Apollo defeated Python and founded at Delphi what would become the most famous oracular center in the ancient world (Ovid, *Metam.* 1.438-47). A woman from Delphi would serve as the prophetess, who would descend within the temple of Apollo where the spirit was believed to enter her and provide her answers to questions. Such consultation of the gods was highly revered (see, e.g., Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.51, 66-67; 5.42-43), as the gods were believed to speak

“contest” of sorts between two different religious systems or perspectives. However, unlike the respected oracles at Delphi, the girl’s owners exploited both the girl and popular beliefs for profit (ἐργασία; 16:16), probably by placing her in the marketplace so she could tell the future for those willing to pay for her services. Notably, the narrator mentions nothing about the Pauline party’s initial interest in the girl, as she initiates the confrontation. The narrator does not describe the spirit as evil or unclean, or even as tormenting the girl (cf. Luke 4:35-36; 8:32-33). This fortune-telling slave girl not only “followed” the Pauline party but was practically “under foot” (see the intensive verb *κατακολουθέω*) as she incessantly “cried out” (see imperfect tense: *ἐκράζεν*) her message (16:17). Her description of God as “the Most High God” echoes those found both in Acts (7:48), the Third Gospel (Luke 1:32, 35, 76; 2:14; 6:35; 8:28; 19:38), and the OT (e.g., Gen 14:18-22; Num 24:16; Deut 32:8; 2 Sam 22:14; Isa 14:14; 57:15; Mic 6:6). Nonetheless, people within the polytheistic context of first-century Philippi would have heard something different, as they would have used the same description for many of their gods. She also characterized Paul’s proclamation with a more generic term—using a form of the verb *καταγγέλλω* (“declare”; 16:17) that the Greeks used when announcing the sacred feasts of the gods—rather than *εὐαγγελίζομαι* (“proclaim the good news”). Thus, the girl’s more generic message would ultimately lead to misunderstanding.³²

While the text is silent regarding a reason for Paul’s delay in responding to the girl, it is not when it comes to Paul’s annoyance with the situation.³³ His response was directed to the spirit, not to the girl. Paul, reminiscent of Jesus, commanded the spirit to depart. His command of the spirit “in the name of Jesus Christ” echoes early emphases in Acts regarding the authority offered through Jesus (see, e.g., 3:6, 16; 4:10, 12, 17, 18, 30). Also notable is that the girl’s owners remained her masters (note the expression *οἱ κύριοι αὐτῆς*; 16:19, also 16:16) after the departure of the spirit; she is not freed from her slavery. However, the participle *ἰδόντες* (from *ἴδω*) indicates their recognition that Paul’s actions robbed them of future profits, which explains their anger and rough treatment in hauling off Paul and Silas to initiate legal proceedings against them before the city officials.

On the surface, the stated charges (16:20) appear to have little to do with the situation, other than the identification of Paul and Silas as Jews. Raising this issue reflects general Roman suspicions of Jews as disloyal to the empire—since they refused to worship the gods associated with the politics of that day—and categorizes the pair among the “others” of the empire. The first part of the charge—that Paul and Silas were “causing an uproar in our city” (CEB)—labeled them as creators of social chaos and confusion (see *ἐκταράσσω*; Josephus, *J.W.* 7.41; *Ant.* 17.253), although the only noted upheaval came from the accusers! The second part of the charge about unlawful customs seems ambiguous, since the narrator never mentions Paul advocating *any* such

through human instruments. But popular belief led to distorted practices and abuses (see Plutarch, *Def. orac.* 414e), including charlatans who exploited persons’ beliefs for profit. Among such abuses was the practice of ventriloquism as a means to “declare” divine messages for money. Jewish tradition rejected such practices and associated them with idolatry and witchcraft (e.g., Deut 18:9-14; Isa 8:19; 29:4). Later Jewish writings also considered these practices as unacceptable for the Jewish community (see, e.g., *Sib. Or.* 3.224-26; *T. Jud.* 23.1; Philo, *Dreams* 1.220). See John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 318-20.

³² Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. B. McNeil; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 68-69.

³³ The verb conveying Paul’s annoyance, *διαπονέω*, is the same one that described the Sadducees’ response to Peter and John speaking in the Temple after healing the crippled man (4:2).

practice or custom (although such associations would not be surprising). These could be fabricated charges to cover up the plaintiffs' actual complaints against Paul and Silas: their economic losses. But more importantly, the charges reflect the deeply disruptive character of Paul's actions. By those actions against the pythonic spirit from the slave girl, Paul through the gospel exposed the weaknesses of the popular religious system and attacked the economics and power associated with that system.³⁴

The latter part of this passage also conveys other aspects of these interactions with others. The imprisonment of Paul and Silas was followed by a dramatic earthquake that freed the singing prisoners of the chains that bound them (16:26). Although Luke leaves numerous questions unanswered about the effects of such a serious earthquake, he focuses specifically on the exchange between the two believers and the jailer. Upon the jailer awakening and discovering the doors of his secure prison wide open, he assumed the worst. His initial decision to commit suicide (16:27) may have been prompted by the Roman punishment for a jailer's dereliction of duty: taking upon himself the punishment of the prisoners (see 12:19). Ancient literature often depicted such dramatic moments for characters facing loss or shame.³⁵

The narrator's lack of explanation for Paul's knowledge of both the jailer's intentions and of the prisoners' whereabouts (16:28), given his pitch-black location (see 16:24), leaves the reader to infer that he had divine insight. Ironically, Paul's assurance that no one had escaped presents Paul the prisoner as the one in charge of the situation. Similarly, the jailer asked for a lamp (which he needed in the total darkness of the inner prison) and "fell trembling" before the imprisoned pair of preachers, which may indicate his fear that the earthquake revealed divine displeasure of his treatment of the two. In a reversal of roles, the one who treated them as common criminals (16:24) now honored them by bowing before them (see 4:34-37; 10:25) and addressing them as "masters" (*κύριοι*). His question about how "to be saved" (*τί με δεῖ ποιεῖν ἵνα σωθῶ*; 16:30) faces his pragmatic fears to rescue his own life from a certain punishment of death, not about salvation in Christian terms (cf. 16:17). In turn, the narrator describes only a summary of the gospel message spoken to the jailer. Although that summary alludes to themes that echo throughout Acts,³⁶ the emphasis on the salvation of the jailer and his household (*σωθήσῃ σὺ καὶ ὁ οἰκός σου*; 16:31) not only works from the pragmatic concerns of the jailer but also ironically confirms the message of salvation proclaimed earlier by the slave girl (16:17). The narrator offers no explanation as to how the Christian proclamation might effectively communicate in such circles that speak completely different theological "language." However, the assumption here is that it does.

The text does not explain how Paul and Silas met the jailer's household before entering his house (16:34). Nonetheless, the jailer treated the pair as guests by caring for wounds incurred from the beating prior to their incarceration (16:22-23). In turn, the pair baptized the jailer and

³⁴ C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23-27; see also David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 436.

³⁵ See, e.g., Chariton, *Chaer.* 1.5.2; 3.1.1; Xenophon of Ephesus, *Ephesians* 2.4.6; Apuleius, *Metam.* 6.12, 17.

³⁶ The call to "believe in the Lord Jesus" (*πίστευσον ἐπὶ τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν*; 16:31) alludes to Peter's Pentecost message (2:14-37) and repeated references to believing and faith in Acts (see, e.g., 2:44; 3:16; 4:4; 8:12-13; 10:43; 14:27). The declaration that the jailer would "be saved" echoes the theme of salvation heard throughout the narrative (see 2:21, 40, 47; 4:9, 12; 7:25; 11:14; 13:26, 47; 14:9; 15:1, 11). During the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council, the association of faith and salvation was central to Peter's articulation of the gospel (15:7-11).

his household (cf. 16:15; also 10:47-48 and earlier), signifying their membership within the people of God. Similar to Lydia prior to all this (16:11-15), the jailer responded by providing a meal for the two men (16:34). There is no mention about fulfilling kosher requirements for the Jewish pair, yet this is not entirely surprising, given the conclusions of the Jerusalem Council. Rather, at this late hour, his hospitality is noteworthy since *he*, of all people, knew they had not eaten while in custody. Rather, the narrator focuses on their extreme sense of joy (*ἀγαλλιάω*), which alludes to the “gladness” (*ἀγαλλίασις*; 2:46) enjoyed by the earliest believers in Jerusalem when they ate together as a celebration of salvation.³⁷ That this jailer was the first who came from the Gentile masses rather than the so-called “Godfearers” who were already attracted to the synagogue and the God of Israel makes his response all the more remarkable.³⁸ For in such fellowship, the “other” is no longer so.

b. An encounter with the Areopagus in Athens (17:16-34)

After Paul’s initial distress that Athens was a city “full of idols” (*κατείδωλον οὖσαν τὴν πόλιν*; 17:16), the narrator describes him doing similarly as before in Thessalonica: he was “in dialogue” (*διαλέγομαι*: see 17:2) with others about the gospel. Here in Athens, such activity occurred both in the synagogue and in the *ἀγορά*, the “center” of the city, which led to accusations of him being a “proclaimer of foreign divinities” (*ξένων δαιμονίων ... καταγγελεὺς*; NRSV) and presenting a “new teaching” (17:17-19), and which resulted in him being taken before the Athenian Areopagus.³⁹ Although interpreters differ over whether these actions constituted an arrest and formal hearing, these accusations and actions against Paul are reminiscent of what happened to Socrates in Athens, which led to his death.⁴⁰ This offers a hint of danger, since there were potential political, economic, and social implications of Paul’s message (see, e.g., 16:20-21; 17:6-8).

Paul’s speech before the Areopagus is typically considered to be a prime example of early Christian dialogue extending into the Gentile world. But several features of that speech are noteworthy in thinking about how the narrator portrays Paul’s interaction with these “others.” First, Paul starts with the idea of the “unknown” to counter the charge that he was spreading a “new teaching” (17:19). He begins by inferring that his message about new “foreign gods” (17:18) was actually about what the Athenians *themselves* unknowingly attributed to God already in their acts of worship. However, Paul clarifies that this unknown god is actually “the God who made the world and everything in it” (17:24), thereby connecting this god with creation and undercutting the charges of new teaching or gods.⁴¹ The problem was not the *newness* of Paul’s teaching but the Athenians’ ignorance, both in their worship and of Paul’s teachings. This theme of not knowing or ignorance frames the entire speech to the council and recurs later (17:30-31).

³⁷ Cf. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:200.

³⁸ Cf. John Paul Heil, *The Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts: An Audience-Oriented Approach* (SBL Monograph Series; Atlanta: Scholars, 1999), 278-83.

³⁹ See 16:19, where the same verb (*ἐπιλαμβάνομαι*) describes the actions of the owners of the slave girl in “seizing” Paul and Silas and then taking them to the governing authorities. See Schwartz 2003, 125-26.

⁴⁰ See Karl Olav Sandnes, “Paul and Socrates: The Aim of Paul’s Areopagus Speech,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993): 13-26.

⁴¹ See Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 34.

Second, because of Paul's claim that God is Creator and Lord of all (17:24), he stresses the distinction between God as Creator and humans as creatures to rule out any human attempts to fashion God in human terms, whether by constructing shrines or sanctuaries in God's honor or by performing specific duties for God's honor (17:24-25). Such a distinction was also not new, as Greek philosophers since Socrates had been critical of the unsophisticated theological ideas reflected by the common practice of caring for the images of the gods.⁴² But such views obviously differed from the practices and implied beliefs of the masses and the general populace of the empire. One cannot underestimate the impact of such beliefs and practices on the various social, economic, and political structures intertwined with these religious systems.

Third, the focal part of Paul's speech (17:26-28) continues to deal with Athenian idolatry and their understanding of God by bringing it within the framework of the biblical story.⁴³ Paul contends that God's purpose in creating "every human nation" (17:26) "from one person" (ἐξ ἑνός; 17:26) was that they might "seek God" (ζητεῖν τὸν θεόν; 17:27), with the hope that they might even "grope" after and "find" God (see optatives: ψηλαφήσειαν and εὗροιεν). The basis for this purpose is biblical (Deut 4:29; cf. Isa 55:6), but it also provides connections with the Greek philosophers and poets. Paul affirms human reflection upon creation and attempts to search for God. He also affirms that God "is not far" from anyone, a concept shared by Greeks, Romans, and Jews alike.⁴⁴ Thus, Paul describes God as available to those who seek God, yet ultimately depicts the human dilemma as unable to find God, apart from divine revelation (see 17:30-31).

Thus, this fourth feature is perhaps the most crucial piece to the puzzle. While Paul's speech may be characterized as focusing largely on universal dimensions of his message, his speech ends with "the radical particularity of the Christian message." As Rowe states,

[T]here is a particular man (ἀνήρ) upon whom and a particular day (ἡμέρα) upon which the relation of God to the entirety of the world depends. Moreover, the theological intensity of this focus has been given public demonstration—πίστιν ... πᾶσιν—in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Indeed, it is this particular event that effected the decisive change in the human situation indicated by τὰ νῦν.⁴⁵

Such particularity "changed the game" because it required a different cosmology of the audience (which is the reason behind some responses; 17:32), which is what the resurrection does. This speech has often been understood in terms of the church entering into meaningful conversation with philosophies and religious beliefs different from the Christian message, perhaps even the translation of "basic presuppositions of the Christian gospel" into a different language.⁴⁶ But the call to repentance was essentially a call for the Athenians to abandon their former interpretive framework(s) in favor of this Christian one, which would disrupt the other systems (social, political, economic) that ordered human existence. Without such critical engagement, the

⁴² See Plato, *Euthyphro* 12e-15e.; Seneca, *Ep.* 95.47; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.8.11-29..

⁴³ The speech has a chiastic structure, with the following parts: A -- Introduction: The ignorance of false worship (17:22-23); B -- The focus of true worship: The Creator God (17:24-25); C -- The proper relationship between God and humanity (17:24-25); B' -- The focus of false worship: Idols (17:29); A' -- Conclusion: The removal of ignorance (17:30-31). See Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia Commentaries on NT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 245.

⁴⁴ For Greeks/Romans, see, e.g., Seneca, *Ep.* 41.1; Dio Chrysostom, *Dei cogn.* 27-28. For Jews, (see, e.g., Ps 145:18; Isa 55:6; 65:1; Jer 23:23-24; Josephus, *Ant.* 8.108; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.31.

⁴⁵ Rowe *World Upside Down*, 39.

⁴⁶ Gaventa, *Acts*, 254; cf. Johnson, *Acts*, 319.

“fundamental structures of the old life remain standing, and the gospel loses its culture-transforming power.”⁴⁷

c. Ministry and conflict in Ephesus (19:1-40)

The extended passage of Paul’s ministry and its effects in Ephesus is potentially significant for our consideration due to its strategic role within the narrative of Acts. This passage serves as the second of two “bookends” for several literary sections:

- Along with Pentecost (2:1-4; and Acts 10:44-48), it depicts the coming of the Spirit in extraordinary fashion, signifying the Spirit’s role throughout the Christian mission.
- With the first description of the addition of 3000 believers on Pentecost (2:41), occasional descriptions of growth and the spread of the gospel have indicated divine blessing (e.g., 6:7; 12:24). The last description occurs in this account about Ephesus (19:20), which suggests that Paul’s ministry as depicted in Acts has been completed.
- With the Philippian account (16:11-40), the Ephesian episode occupies the most attention after the Jerusalem Council. Together, these two passages offer the beginning and ending of this section dealing with implications of the assessment and meeting’s decisions.

After an initial period of three months of ministry in one of the Ephesian synagogues,⁴⁸ opposition arose against Paul from a minority (*τινες*) of those in the synagogue (19:8-9). There is no mention of the cause behind the resistance or of Godfearing Gentiles here, but it is probable that the inclusive understanding of salvation and the people of God associated with Paul’s gospel message provoked their discontent.⁴⁹ The pointed depiction of this group indicates the intensity of their response.⁵⁰ The narrator does not indicate the duration, but the verb tenses (two imperfect indicatives, one present participle) indicate ongoing opposition. Although the narrator mentions nothing else about such resistance, readers may assume similar actions as in previous episodes (cf. 1 Cor 15:32; 2 Cor 1:8-11).

The narrator also depicts Paul’s response as equally pointed and abrupt (19:9-10). As in Corinth (18:5-7), Paul left the synagogue context, this time because the opposition made both civil discourse and a place for these believers impossible.⁵¹ However, the participle *ἀποστάς*

⁴⁷ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:215. See also Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 40-41.

⁴⁸ Three months was a relatively long time for Paul in Acts, compared to previous cities, and suggests some positive response. The earlier invitation from the Ephesian synagogue goers (18:20) and the ‘tolerance’ of different groups in that synagogue (note the Johannine disciples, 19:1-7), made this particular setting more open to Paul’s message. See Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament; Zürich: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 2:167.

⁴⁹ The Lukan depiction of the conflict that Paul experienced in those synagogue contexts was over the inclusive message of the gospel. The increase in conflict after the Jerusalem Council reflects the implications of that message.

⁵⁰ The vocabulary and imagery of hardening of heart or being stiff-necked (*σκληρύνω*; see 7:51) allude to Pharaoh (see, e.g., Exod 7:3; 9:12; 13:15; 14:17-18) and to Israel turning from God (see, e.g., Deut 10:16; 2 Chr 30:8; Neh 9:16; Ps 95:8; Isa 63:17; Jer 7:26; 17:23). In contrast to those whom Paul was “persuading” (*πείθων*; 19:8), these others were not (*ἢ πείθουν*; 19:9; see 14:2), which made them disobedient to the gospel and to God (see 5:39). This resistant group went public with their opposition before the synagogue congregation, where they “were speaking evil” (*κακολογέω*) against (see 13:45; 18:6) “the Way” (18:25-26; see 9:2; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

⁵¹ In Acts 18:5-7, Paul is described as leaving the synagogue and setting up his ministry center at a house “next door” (*συνομοροῦσα*). Later accusations of him teaching “contrary to the law” (*παρὰ τὸν νόμον*; 18:13) may also be understood as “alongside the law” and offer a subtle assessment of his problematic selection of an alternate location.

(from which the word “apostasy” is derived) does not convey that Paul merely left the synagogue for another location; the verb ἀφίστημι connotes complete separation (see LXX: e.g., Deut 7:4; Jer 6:8; Dan 9:9; Wis 3:10) or political revolt (see, e.g., Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.95; Thucydides, *War* 8.35; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.102). Such a term connotes more than just the departure from a building but his refusal to identify with them. Luke stipulates Paul separated “from them” (ἀπ’ αὐτῶν), that is, his Ephesian opponents.⁵² He reestablished his ministry in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, probably a building where pupils and teachers met and philosophers often lectured, which would have extended Paul’s influence into Ephesus beyond the limitations of the Jewish synagogue. As a result, Paul’s opponents did not succeed in squelching the proclamation of Paul as “other” but inadvertently amplified it, as his ministry continued for another two years. In typical Lukan hyperbole, “the word of the Lord” (τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου, 19:10; see 4:4, 31; 6:2, 7; 8:4, 14, 25; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5, 49; 15:7, 36; 16:32) reached not only all the Ephesians but πάντας τοὺς κατοικοῦντας τὴν Ἀσίαν (“everyone living in Asia”). Although the text leaves much left unsaid, the narrator directs readers’ attention to the phenomenal success of Paul’s ministry among “both Jews and Greeks,” not only despite the separation from the synagogue but perhaps because of it.

Interestingly, the narrator mentions nothing about how Paul succeeded in relating to others outside the Jewish synagogue, at least in terms of the specifics of his proclamation.⁵³ What is mentioned may make twenty-first century readers uncomfortable, as the descriptions are of ancient superstitions and magical practices. Yet described here are some ancient religious beliefs regarding divine powers, healings, and even magical practices (19:11-12) that may have had enough in common among these “others” to enable a different level of “conversation” that might not have otherwise occurred. The narrator explains that God was responsible for the “unusual deeds of power” (δυνάμεις τε οὐ τὰς τυχούσας; see 2:22; 8:13) associated with Paul.⁵⁴ Through this remarkable activity, Paul developed such notoriety that persons took articles that had physically contacted him to cure those with illnesses and evil spirits (19:12), which parallels previous healings when someone touched the fringe of Jesus’ garment (Luke 8:44) or Peter’s shadow passed over the sick (5:15).⁵⁵ As a result, the narrator indicates there to be a φόβος over the entire city (ἐπὶ πάντας αὐτοὺς; 19:17) resembling what came over Jerusalem after Pentecost (2:43), resulting in many who previously became believers now confessing their participation in magical practices and publically denouncing those practices by burning materials that probably

⁵² The verb referring to Paul taking the disciples with him also connotes separation (ἀφορίζω; see Luke 6:22; LSJ 1996, 139; BDAG 2000, 158).

⁵³ Readers cannot assume that Paul spoke as before, since the two notable examples where Acts offers speech materials of Paul addressing an audience without connections to Judaism—outside the Lystran temple (14:14-18) and before the Areopagus in Athens (17:22-31)—were both largely ineffective in persuading the respective audience (although, in the latter case, a few did respond favorably).

⁵⁴ In Acts, Luke cites God’s presence/activity through individuals as evidence of divine endorsement. E.g., in Peter’s Pentecost speech, he described Jesus as “attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs” (2:22 NRSV). Later, Peter and the apostles were described similarly to indicate that God was among the believers (see 2:43; 3:1-10; 5:12-16; 9:32-43). In chapter 14, Luke’s depiction of Paul healing a crippled man (14:8-20) mirrors a similar healing by Jesus (Luke 5:17-26) and by Peter (3:1-10), despite the Lystrans’ misinterpretation.

⁵⁵ The “handkerchiefs and aprons” could be common materials used in tentmaking/leatherworking: cloths were used for wiping perspiration; aprons, belts, or towels were worn around the waist for protection. But there has been no mention of Paul’s craft since his arrival in Ephesus. Rather, Paul is depicted as a lecturer/orator (19:9), whose customary attire also included a similar cloth around the neck for perspiration. Thus, people may have wanted these pieces of clothing that they believed to exude the special powers that Paul demonstrated when he taught. See Rick Strelan, “Acts 19:12: Paul’s ‘Aprons’ Again,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 54 (2003): 154-57.

contained magical incantations or formulas for which Ephesus was renowned (19:18-19).⁵⁶ Some interpreters question whether such respondents had truly come to believe prior to their subsequent confession of magical practices.⁵⁷ But the latter actions probably reflect how the Christian mission had reached out to these “other” Ephesians in “stages,” not in a syncretistic fashion but with time being needed to realize certain implications of the Christian message.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, such notable results indicate the symbolic defeat of a particular religious system and its associated economic and power structures.

These other issues are precisely what the remainder of Acts 19 seems to consider. Questions abound regarding the inclusion of these materials in the latter half of the chapter, since they supposedly add nothing about the Christian mission or Paul’s ministry. Yet this extended scene of chaos because of perceived threats to the Artemis cult exposes the broader implications of the interaction between church and “other.s” The cult of the goddess Artemis was deeply embedded in the social, economic, and political structures of the city and region. Her temple in Ephesus was the banking center of Asia and attracted worshipers from all over the empire.⁵⁹ So Demetrius’s speech on behalf of silversmiths who fashioned “silver shrines” (*ναοὺς ἀργυροῦς*; 19:24) in honor of Artemis—probably replicas of her Ephesian temple—reveals that, as much as *piety* may have driven their actions, *economics* and *political power* were much more prominent concerns for these Ephesians (19:23-27). The inherent risk (*κινδυνεύω*; see 19:40) that Demetrius outlines (19:27) for allowing Paul’s message and the Christian mission to go unchecked suggests that the economic threat had serious cultural, civic, and religious implications. In an honor-shame culture, Demetrius identifies different ways in which honor would be lost in an ascending hierarchy of values: trade, temple, and goddess.⁶⁰ These potential extensive effects indicate that collision rather than coexistence is the result of the meeting of these two competing religious perspectives. Luke depicts “the profound incompatibility between the way of Christ and the ways of being that commonly defined pagan life, precisely as such incompatibility breaks violently into the public sphere.”⁶¹ The basic problem is that these “others” in Ephesus reflect their attachment to wealth, possessions and power, which the narrator consistently depicts in contrast to God’s salvific purposes (see, e.g., 1:17-20; 5:1-11; 8:20-22; 16:16-18). As a result, one should not be surprised that the town clerk’s warnings about problematic issues over this Ephesian ἐκκλησία (19:32, 39, 41) contrast with the broader characterization of the ἐκκλησία of believers that is found throughout Acts.

⁵⁶ See Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 7.5; Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity*, 101-2.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke’s Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 95-96; Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 138, who state that these believers were “still hedging their bets by seeking to balance faith in Jesus with reliance on magic;” and Peterson, *Acts*, 540-41.

⁵⁸ See I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Tyndale NT Commentaries; Leicester: InterVarsity 1980), 312. Also Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 479-80.

⁵⁹ Dio Chrysostom, *Rhod.* 31.54. See Richard Oster, “The Ephesian Artemis as an Opponent of Early Christianity,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 19 (1976): 24-44; and Paul Trebilco, “Asia,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting* (ed. D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 316-31.

⁶⁰ See F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Critical Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 197.

⁶¹ Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 46.

3. Some “initial/final” remarks

So what might these passages suggest to us and the task of this Institute? There is no doubt that Acts offers one perspective among various views within the Christian scriptures. It seems that Acts offers an alternative understanding of the people of God that is inclusive of those who had theologically/historically/politically/culturally/socially been considered “outsiders” or “others.” According to Acts, the theological basis for all this is God’s resurrection of Jesus (2:14-36). This expands the Christian mission in such a way that none is excluded from the reach of the gospel. The simplicity of that statement is both inviting and terrifying at the same time, as the narrative of Acts *itself* suggests (as does the history of Christianity!).

On the one hand, this expanded understanding of the people of God and its corresponding Christian mission is inviting because it opens doors for interaction and the possibility for transformation that would have otherwise been closed. Or perhaps it even may help the church to recognize people and places where God may be at work that have been previously considered “outside” the purview or boundaries of the church. As Wesleyans who seek to embody and practice a radical optimism of grace, it may be part of our ecclesial/theological DNA to engage Acts in ways that push open these doors as wide as we can and begin to imagine contemporary issues/peoples that correspond to the Gentiles/“outsiders” of the narrative.

On the other hand, what this narrative also depicts may be seen as terrifying as well, because the inclusive nature of the church and her mission also creates new issues as she interacts with others with whom she now “competes” for a legitimate place as a people. And as we see in Acts, such interaction can sometimes be contentious. Within Acts, there is a collision of “values” or “kingdoms” [in this instance, the gospel as “kingdom of God” (1:3; 19:8) vs. empire]. Although there was a trend several decades ago to interpret Acts as written from a perspective that presented Christianity as favorable to the Romans, the narrative itself offers little support for that interpretation. Rather, the values of the gospel often conflict with those embedded in the economic, political, social, and (even) religious systems/structures of the Acts narrative. And the same may even be true in contemporary contexts, even where the Christian church is believed to have been formative in such systems/structures.

Finally, something that needs to be considered is how the church should read and engage the book of Acts in contemporary times, given that the church often approaches scripture from a position/place of power and privilege, in contrast to the church in Acts and likely those who first read Acts, who were themselves considered “outsiders” or “other” in their world. How might we recover the hermeneutical position that we find in Acts when we engage this portion of scripture in the present? And how would such readings differ from typical contemporary readings of Acts?