

Acts 10:1–11:18, Cornelius

The critical importance of the Cornelius episode is evident from its length, location and theme. Its sixty-six verses make it the longest narrative in the book.¹ The main geographical location of the episode is Caesarea, the seat of Roman power in the land. The spread of the gospel there is an important symbol pointing toward the geographical advance of the gospel from Jerusalem toward the “ends of the earth” (1:8; 11:19 ff.). Together with Apostolic Decree (Acts 15) it is the most comprehensive statement regarding the social and religious dilemmas encountered as the Messianic movement began to embrace both Jews and Gentiles. Exactly what Luke is affirming about those dilemmas, however, is critical to understanding the message of the book.

All interpreters would agree that the door to the Gentile mission is opened in this episode. What is now open to question, however, is the place of Israel in this new development.² Does the Jewish Messianic movement simply and directly embrace Gentiles or is there an intermediate step in which it first drops its nationalistic trappings and only then is able to reach out to Gentiles? That is, did the early church in Jerusalem continue happily in the traditions of the Law, distinguished from other Jewish parties only by their belief about Jesus as Messiah, or did they question the place of Judaism in the new order, proclaiming a non-Jewish message? Scott holds to the latter understanding, alleging that the church struggled early with its relationship to Judaism and that those questions are answered decisively with the Cornelius incident.

As the primitive community struggled with its self-understanding in relation to Judaism it faced two basic issues: (1) Who is Jesus, and . . . (2) What place were contemporary (first-century) Jewish traditions, attitudes and observances to have in the new faith?³

¹John H. Elliott, “Household and Meals vs. Temple Purity: Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (Fall 1991): 105.

²“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?” J. Julius Scott, Jr. “The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting,” *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 34 (1991): 477.

³Scott, “The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting,” 475. Elliott adds, “At the heart of this episode lay a fundamental controversy within the Jesus movement over the ethnic boundaries of the Jesus movement and the continuing validity of conventional Jewish purity rules as standards of behavior,” John H. Elliott, “Household and Meals vs. Temple Purity Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (Fall 1991): 105.

Some argue that this discussion, and the story of Cornelius, really begins with a tanner named Simon.

The Significance of Simon the Tanner

Because a tanner had contact on a daily basis with the skins of dead animals, some modern interpreters have thought them to be unclean in violation of the Law (Lev 11:31-40). Peter's willingness then to associate with a man of such an occupation is interpreted as a softening in his loyalty to Moses. Neil interprets: ". . . this man's trade is mentioned, not merely to distinguish him from Simon Peter, but perhaps also to point to another break with the restrictions of rigid Judaism: Peter lodges with a man who handled skins of animals which were technically unclean."⁴ This understanding is hardly likely, though, for several reasons. First, Luke portrays Peter as one whose loyalty to Moses is unflinching. His threefold protest to the thought of eating "unclean" animals is testimony that he was not questioning the place of Moses at least in his own personal practice (10:14-16). Second, the prohibitions involving the uncleanness of dead animals only applied to those which died of natural causes (Lev 11:31 ff.), otherwise, even the priests would have been rendered unclean in their normal duties of sacrifice! As long as the tanner avoided the carcasses of animals which had died on their own he would be as clean as the next Israelite. Finally, historically, tanners were not considered unclean by first century rabbis. The occupation was somewhat despised, but only for practical, not for moral or religious, reasons. Because the process of tanning required acid, the tanner worked daily with animal dung.⁵ Thus, while the tanner may have been on the lower end of the social scale he was not a religious outcast. This understanding seems to agree better with Luke's message of the gospel finding a home with the poor and the lowly. Peter's decision to reside with Simon is probably not an evidence of a soft attitude toward the Law.⁶

⁴Neil, *Acts*, 136.

⁵Jeremias describes the trades of the tanner and dung collector which were practiced also in Jerusalem, as ones which were "certainly not considered dishonourable, but were repugnant especially because of the foul smell connected with them. Dung-collectors and tanners went together, since the former collected the dung needed for fulling and tanning. If anyone engaged in one of the three trades in this list, his wife had the right to claim divorce before the court, and to be paid the sum of money which had been assured her in the marriage contract in case the marriage was dissolved or her husband died," Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 308.

⁶Marshall comes to the same conclusion from a slightly different angle, "The detail is included because it gives Peter's 'address' in anticipation of the directions in the following story (10:6). Commentators have noted that the tanner's occupation was an unclean one, and that a person with Pharisaic scruples would avoid contact with such a man. We may doubt whether Peter was ever worried by such scruples, and hence whether Luke intends to record a step forward in his liberation from them," Marshall, *Acts*, 180.

The Place of Cornelius in Relation to Judaism

Luke clearly describes Cornelius as a pious follower of the God of Israel. What is not so clear is exactly where along the Jewish/Gentile spectrum he belongs.⁷ The discussion revolves around the meaning of the significant terms with which Luke describes Cornelius such as *devout* (εὐσεβῆς) and *God-fearing* (φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν). Do these terms describe Cornelius as a member of a distinctive class of Gentiles which were attracted to the synagogue and adopted the Jewish religion or, differently, do they merely depict his character as pious? Luke asks the question well: “The point at issue is to what extent φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν is a technical description of the non-Jewish fringe attending the Synagogue, or is merely an honourable epithet applicable to Jew, Gentile, or Proselyte, as the context may decide.”⁸

Luke uses two similar participles (or participial phrases) in his work, *fearing God* (φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν) and *worshipping God* (σεβομένοσ τὸν θεόν), the former five and the latter⁹ six times. The first two instances (10:2, 22) describe Cornelius himself while the third (10:35) seems to refer generally to pious individuals in any nation. The last two instances which involve φοβούμενος (13:16, 26) could either be appositives referring to faithful Jews or to Gentile adherents to the synagogue.¹⁰ The significant factor in Acts 13, however, is that Luke describes the same people with both terms, φοβούμενος and σεβομένοσ.¹¹ In addition, σεβομένοσ is used adjectivally to describe the

⁷Those Gentiles which were attracted to Judaism and chose to convert to it fully adopted the Jewish way of life and took the final step of conversion, namely, circumcision. According to biblical and rabbinic law these Gentiles were considered in all respects Jewish and were termed *proselytes*, BAG, s.v. “προσήλυτοσ ,” and Kirsopp Lake, “Proselytes and God-fearers” in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part One: The Acts of the Apostles, eds. F. J. Foakes, and Kirsopp Lake (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 4:80-84. Luke uses this term to describe this class of people elsewhere (Acts 2:11; 6:5 and 13:43), and, does not apply it to Cornelius, who was, of course, not circumcised (11:3).

⁸Lake, “Proselytes and God-fearers,” 84.

⁹Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26; 27:17 and Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7, respectively.

¹⁰“Ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται καὶ οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, ἀκούσατε,” (13:16) “Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, υἱοὶ γένουσ Ἀβραάμ καὶ οἱ ἐν ὑμῖν φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν . . .” (13:26).

¹¹Cf. 13:16, 26 (φοβούμενοσ) and 13:43 (σεβομένοσ). Σεβομένοσ is also used in 13:50 referring to religiously zealous, but, as far as the gospel is concerned, misguided, women. This only serves to expand the semantic range of the term and call into question its technical meaning as a particular class of individuals. As Kraabel says, “The fact that Luke can use two terms suggested that he did not believe he was using technical terminology” A. T. Kraabel, “Greeks, Jews, and Lutherans in the Middle Half of Acts,” *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986): 151.

well-fixed term *proselyte* (προσήλυτος).¹² Since *proselyte* does refer to a class of individuals which are fully converted to Judaism, σεβομένος, must have the meaning of *piety* or *zeal* rather than a class of individuals which are not fully converted. Wilcox summarizes the data:

In Acts, then, οἱ φοβούμενοι τόν θεόν would seem to refer to “the pious” amongst the Jewish community, whether Jew or Gentile, *proselyte* or “adherent”. This in turn fits with the fact that the phrase occurs only in that part of Acts in which the thought of the specifically Jewish mission is uppermost Cornelius would thus be one who has adopted the piety proper to the Jews. The term φοβούμενος τόν θεόν—if a technical term at all—denotes one who is especially devout.¹³

What can be affirmed about Cornelius then is at least that he was righteous, pious, and worshipped the God of Israel. He gave alms to the nation of Israel, prayed continually (10:2), influenced those around him toward Yahweh (10:7, 24, 44), and was therefore “well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews” (10:22).¹⁴ Yet because he had not taken the final step of proselytization, i.e. circumcision, he was still a Gentile and therefore unclean.¹⁵ Whether he observed the Sabbath, and kept the kosher laws, though possible and perhaps likely, is not made clear by Luke.

Peter’s Vision: The Possibilities of Meaning

Luke records that the original vision left Peter “greatly perplexed” and “at a loss” as to what to think (10:17). He has not been alone in his bewilderment. The point of greatest confusion is that while the vision deals with foods, Peter and the Jerusalem believers understand it to refer to

¹²Cf. the discussion on προσήλυτος, as a technical term in note 75 above.

¹³Max Wilcox, “The ‘God-Fearers’ in Acts—A Reconsideration,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13 (1981): 118. The same may be said for Luke’s word for devout (εὐσεβής, Acts 3:12; 10:2, 7; 17:23). Paul uses the verb form (εὐσεβεῖτε) to describe the worship of religious pagans in Acts 17:23, indicating that it probably does not describe a particular class of people. For a dissenting viewpoint see John G. Gager, “Jews, Gentiles, and Synagogues in the Book of Acts,” *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986): 91-99. After reviewing historical evidence from Sardis and Aphrodisias Gager maintains that “it now seems likely that the θεοσεβής was, in some meaningful and official sense, a member of the Jewish community,” 99. Even if Gager is correct, though, he is still unable to give definition to the question of how relatively Jewish the lifestyle of these Gentiles was.

¹⁴“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” Scott, “The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting,” 478, n. 14.

¹⁵E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. Basil Blackwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 346. Cf. also Lake, “Proselytes and God-fearers,” 74-96. Kuhn quotes from the Mishnah and then puts the place of the “god-fearer” in perspective, “‘A goy who keeps the Torah is of much greater value in God’s sight even than the high-priest himself’ (S. Lv., 18, 5 etc.). . . . Nevertheless, the predominant evaluation of the ׀מִשְׁ׀רָ׀ר in Rabbinic Judaism is unfavourable” G. Kuhn, “προσήλυτος,” *TDNT*, 6:741. Cf. also G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, 323-53.

people.¹⁶ If (1) the vision had involved people and Peter applied it to people or (2) if the unclean animals of the vision were applied to Peter's eating of unclean foods then the application would easily flow from the vision. The mixture of foods and people, however has caused Conzelmann and others to assert that

Luke found the vision somewhere else (he did not construct it himself) and inserted it here The original intention of the vision does not conform with Luke's use of it. Its original point did not have to do with human relationships (Jews and Gentiles), but with foods—that is, with the issue of clean and unclean (cf. vs 15b).¹⁷

Assuming, however, that Luke has recorded the facts accurately and that the application to people is appropriate from the vision of animals, how are we to understand the incident? Two proposals are offered: "a reference to food and then people" and "a reference just to people."

A Reference to Food and Then People

Explanation and support of the view

The first proposal actually sees two major issues unfolding in the Cornelius incident: the abrogation of the food laws of Israel and a consequent reaching out in the Gentile mission. Though these are two distinct issues they are combined here by Luke because, in this view, one is a natural consequence of the other. The view holds that God first announced the end of the food laws for Israel through the vision to Peter. Then, since the food laws, which were a major barrier to Jew/Gentile relations had been broken down, the expansion of the mission to the Gentiles was a much smaller theological and practical step. If the Jew no longer had to concern himself with avoiding pork then he could freely mingle with Gentiles who ate pork and could preach the gospel to them as well. Thus, the Gentile mission is a theological deduction based upon a literal understanding of the vision.

¹⁶"The major problem is that, although Peter's vision in Acts 10.9-16 is ostensibly about the abolition of the distinction between clean and unclean foods, Peter's own interpretation of the vision is that the distinction between clean and unclean people has been abolished (Acts 10. 28). With this the judgment of the other apostles and the Judean Christians, recorded in 11.18, agrees. Likewise, Peter speaks of the cleansing of the hearts of the Gentiles in Acts 15.9" Tyson, "The Gentile Mission and Scripture in Acts," 625. Cf. also Scott, "The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting," 477-83.

¹⁷Conzelmann, *Acts*, 80. Dibelius comes to a similar conclusion, positing that Luke drew on an original and simple story about the conversion of Cornelius, but then embellished it with speeches and the vision which "muddled" its meaning. Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. H. Greeven, trans. Mary Ling (London: Clowes, 1956), 109-22. Somewhat differently, Löning argues forcefully for the literary unity of the story. He concludes his arguments with, "Kurz: die Petrusvision paßt nicht nur in den Kontext der Korneliustradition, sondern ist konstitutives Element ihrer Struktur als Erzählenheit," Karl Löning, "Die Korneliustradition," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 18 (1974): 6.

Support for the literal understanding of the vision is marshalled by Dibelius who cites the reference to the setting of the vision.

In the first place, we are told in 10.10 that Peter became hungry and wanted to eat. This suggests that the command “kill and eat” is meant quite literally and that the food from heaven, which is intentionally mixed with unclean animals, is to serve as earthly food.¹⁸

Literal hunger on the part of Peter however, hardly implies a literal understanding of the vision. After all, God’s command to “kill and eat” can hardly be taken literally as Dibelius insists simply because one can not “kill and eat” a vision. The significance of Peter’s hunger rather seems to accentuate the certainty of his response. That is, much like the hunger of Jesus at his temptation (Matt 4:2-4) emphasized his resolve to resist the thought of bread, so also Peter’s resistance is all the more clear in light of his desire for food.¹⁹ The hunger of Peter provides a meaningful background for his emphatic refusal to eat the food and thus sharpens the contrast in the *dialogue* between Peter and God, which seems to be the critical part of the vision incident.²⁰

A second line of support for a literal understanding of the vision is given by Dibelius: “Next, the account of the vision (11:5-10), which is given in Peter’s defence, seems to supply the direct answer to the reproach in 11.3 that Peter has eaten with the uncircumcised: obviously, this has involved eating that which is unclean.”²¹ The problems with this support, however, are at least twofold: textual and historical.

Dibelius has to qualify his assertion with the words “obviously, this has involved eating that which is unclean,” because the text does not do so.²² The accusation of the brethren in Jerusalem was not directed toward *what* Peter ate, but rather, *with whom* he ate; not his menu but his compan-

¹⁸Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 112.

¹⁹This point is not compromised by the previous point that the incident did not involve literal food. Peter’s hunger and consequent refusal to eat would be affected not only by literal food but also the vision of food, much like one’s appetite can be aroused by not only the sight of literal food but also the thought of it.

²⁰The significance of the dialogue which is repeated three times (10:16) and referred to several others (10:28; 11:6-10; 15:9) is addressed later on page 94.

²¹Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 112. He continues, “Since, as we have seen from 10.28b, Luke has interpreted the vision differently, as referring to the distinction between men and not between foods, a reference to foods was apparently inherent in the vision right from the start.”

²²Ibid. Cf. 11:2-3, “And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’”

ions. Our misunderstanding of the sociology and culture of the first century has caused us to misread “you ate with them” as shorthand for “you ate unclean food.” The distinction in Jewish society however was clear and significant.²³ Because a common table was the best expression of fellowship (cf. 2:42-46), Peter had taken unclean Gentiles into an intimate fellowship by sharing meals and this was judged as inappropriate by his peers. Simply eating with Gentiles was a significant charge by itself and does not necessitate that Peter ate unclean food. This understanding is also corroborated textually by Peter’s initial objections upon entering Cornelius’ house. His misgivings did not involve food for the thought of eating was surely far from Peter’s mind at that point.²⁴ His concern was simply being in the house of a Gentile and associating with him. “And as he talked with him he entered, and found many people assembled. And he said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him . . .’” (10:27-28).

Furthermore, to assert that Peter was non-kosher because he ate in the home of Cornelius, one must assume first that Cornelius’ household was non-kosher. As we have seen before²⁵ by the way Luke describes Cornelius’ attachment to, and reputation among, the Jewish nation it is quite possible that he followed the food laws. It is, of course, also possible that he did not keep a kosher kitchen, but the point to be made is that if Cornelius’ non-kosher kitchen is a critical point in understanding the meaning of the vision as Dibelius would make it, then we could at least expect Luke to make the point certain. Therefore, what is certain from a textual standpoint is that we can not assume that Peter was non-kosher when he ate with Cornelius. In addition, and this brings us to our next point which is historical, it was possible for a Jew to eat in a kosher way even at a non-kosher table.

Several historical possibilities can be suggested. Even if Cornelius’ kitchen was not kosher, it is hard to imagine that one so sympathetic toward the Jewish nation would be so insensitive as to offer his guest (for whose arrival he had four days to prepare and at whose feet he fell at their first meeting!) unclean food. Sanders addresses the question of how a Jew could see a Gentile socially:

²³“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,” Scott, “The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting,” 476, n. 6.

²⁴At this point Peter is still at a loss as to why he has even come to Cornelius’ house! Note his words in the next verse, “And so I ask for what reason you have sent for me” (10:29).

²⁵Cf. the discussion of Cornelius on page 80.

One answer was to eat Jewish food. We do not hear that vessels in which pork had been cooked were a problem, and it seems to have been only the actual food that constituted a difficulty. The king in *Aristeas* had Jewish food prepared, presumably in the regular kitchen. All a Gentile would have to do to entertain a Jewish friend would be to buy meat and wine from a suitable source. It was not necessary to have a separate set of Jewish dishes and utensils.²⁶

Even if Cornelius was extremely crude in his sensibilities and offered questionable food, Peter could still have simply chosen only the clean. After giving several examples of intertestamental literature designed to advise Jews how to handle themselves when eating in Gentile lands or at non-kosher Gentile tables, Sanders summarizes in the words, “Avoid the meat and wine, and preferably bring your own food.”²⁷ Or as Daniel handled himself, drink only water and eat vegetables!

In summary the textual and historical evidence would suggest that what both Peter and his fellows in Jerusalem objected to at first blush was his company rather than his menu. Therefore if there is little evidence to suggest that Peter violated the laws of *kashrut* it is especially ill-advised to posit on this basis that Peter understood the vision as a literal abrogation of the food laws of Moses.

Criticism of the view

Our first criticism of this view is that it is unnecessarily complicated or perhaps just unnecessary. That is, the proposition of “if the Gentile mission, then the end of the Law” is simply untrue. The Mosaic law in general and the food laws in particular did not stand in the way of the mission to the Gentiles. The abrogation of Moses was not a necessary step on the way to the Gentile mission.²⁸ To be sure, the Law did serve to make Israel distinctive and the food laws in particular did regulate and sometimes restrict interaction between Israel and her neighbors. 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

²⁶E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 282.

²⁷E. P. Sanders, “Jewish Association with Gentiles and Galatians 2:11-14,” in *The Conversation Continues*, festschrift presented to J. Louis Martyn, eds., Robert Fortna and Beverly Gaventa (Nashville: n.p., 1990), 177. Even today this is the accepted custom in orthodox Jewish circles in Israel. Dr. Channah Safrai, personal interview by author, Jerusalem, Israel, July 20, 1992.

²⁸“Jervell has argued that from Luke’s perspective the mission to the Gentiles does not arise because Israel has rejected the gospel. Jewish rejection of the missionary message is not the decisive presupposition for the Gentile mission. Rather, for Luke, Israel has not rejected the gospel but has become divided over the issue. Because some in Israel have accepted the gospel, the way can be opened to the Gentiles” Charles H. Talbert, “Luke-Acts,” in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 303-4.

shared.”²⁹ The attitude towards Gentiles fostered in the Old Testament was one of compassion and openness.³⁰ Indeed, Israel’s mission given upon the very establishment of the law was that she would be a light to the Gentiles (Exod 19:6)! It was not until the experience of Gentile domination beginning with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B. C. and continuing through the intertestamental period with the threat of Hellenism from the fourth century onward that the Jewish attitude toward Gentiles began to harden. This stimulated the growth of protectionist and isolationist barriers against all but the most necessary of Gentile associations.

The OT commands include circumcision, Sabbath observance, and kosher regulations. During the intertestamental period special emphasis was placed upon these three and other prohibitions, including restrictions upon dining companions (an issue specifically raised in Acts 11:3). They had been turned first into instruments for protection of racial, cultural, national and religious identity and then into 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.³¹

It was not the Law which stood in the way of the Gentile mission, rather it was the xenophobia which had developed since the close of the Old Testament, and this attitude could be addressed apart from the abrogation of Moses.³²

²⁹Scott, “The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting,” 476.

³⁰Cf. for example, Exod 23:9; Lev 19:33-34 and 23:22. According to Numbers 15:14-16 a Gentile who was so inclined could even bring sacrifices to the Temple in the same way as Israelites, though this certainly was not the attitude of first-century Judaism. The placard which apparently existed during Jesus time warning that Gentiles could only enter the Temple area upon the pain of death demonstrates the change in attitude during the intertestamental period.

³¹Scott, “The Cornelius Incident,” 476-77. Scott footnotes *Midrash Rabba* on Leviticus 20 for this last sentence.

³²Interestingly, when Peter objects to visiting in a Gentile house, “You know how *unlawful* it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or visit him” (10:28), he does not use the most common word to refer to the Torah, i.e., νόμος, but rather ἄθεμιτος, which Bruce translates as *taboo*, Bruce, *Acts*, 222. Perhaps Peter is admitting that he is breaking a social custom but not necessarily Old Testament law. “If . . . we suppose that Luke deliberately chose ἄθεμιτος rather than the more specific ἄνομος precisely because it had a more general meaning, it may express his awareness that the distinction between clean and unclean was seen to be part of the order of things, a matter of ingrained custom and practice, rather than the result of a legal prescription. If so, then the effect of the vision is not to contravene the law as such but to challenge what Luke knew to be the common Jewish practice of segregation from Gentiles. Certainly it contradicts the view of the Jamnian sages and what was probably the view of pre-70 Pharisaism as well as the practice of many other Jews, but the law as such is not at stake. If this is what Luke means then what is otherwise the only incident in Acts where Jews or Jewish-Christians are discouraged from keeping their law disappears and we are left with a uniform picture,” Stephen G. Wilson, *Luke and Law*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 70.

In reality, the Old Testament foresaw the accomplishment of the Gentile mission not apart from, but by means of the Law. Isaiah prophesied:

and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (Isa 2:3).

It was precisely when Israel obeyed the Law that she would be a light to the nations as Isaiah says again, “Listen to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation; for a law will go forth from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples (51:4). And it was Jesus who said, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations” (Mark 11:17). Finally, Paul looked to Isaiah 49:6 as justification for the mission through Israel to the Gentiles as well (13:47). The end of the Law was not a necessary prerequisite to the Gentile mission.³³

A second criticism of the view involves the unity of the Law. If in fact the vision signals the end of the kosher guidelines, then the implications go well beyond food laws. The principle of “to transgress in one point of the law is to transgress the whole” (James 2:10 and Gal 3:10) is based on the unity of the Law. It was given as a single covenant to the nation which could not be subdivided at will. It would be impossible for one part of the Law to have been terminated and the rest to have remained. Scott recognizes that “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.”³⁴ Thus if the food laws had indeed been abrogated by this vision, then the rest of the law had been terminated by it as well, including the Temple and sacrifices, tithes and offerings, the feasts and celebrations and in short, the distinctive way of life as prescribed by Moses. This is not an unthinkable situation, and indeed we would hold it to be true—from *God’s point of view*. However, the issue to be determined here is *what did Peter and Cornelius understand* about the end of the law? And, once again, as we seek to determine the answer to this question the later revelation about the incompatibility of the Old and New Covenants from Hebrews can not be projected back upon the understanding of

³³Contra Mark A. Seifrid, “Messiah and Mission in Acts: A Brief Response to J. B. Tyson [N T St 33 no 4:619-31 1987]” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36 (June 1989): 47-50, who insists that the Gentile mission could not occur until the Mosaic Law was repealed.

³⁴Scott, “The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting,” 481. Wilson also understands the various issues, “If the vision implies that the levitical distinction between clean and unclean has been revoked then a radical departure from the Torah is clearly implied. Luke, however, does not pursue this matter because he understands the vision primarily as a sort of parable about the problem of mixing and eating with unclean people.” Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 69.

earlier generations without good reason. This incident could be the revelation from God to Peter that the Old Covenant has been abrogated but it might also simply be revelation from God to Peter that the doors of salvation are now swinging open to Gentiles.³⁵ Our point in this context is that *if* God was speaking to the issue of the abrogation of the food laws then any Jew would have immediately realized the unmistakable implications for the entire law. It is difficult to overestimate the gravity of this teaching and the effect it would have had on the Jerusalem church. It would have effectively taken the Jewishness out of being Jewish. It would have been judged as the height of apostasy by the laity and leadership of the nation.³⁶ The problem is that nothing in the narrative indicates that Peter, his fellows, the believers or unbelievers in Jerusalem understood it this way. As Haenchen notes, “. . . the men of Jerusalem do not infer ‘So now we can eat unclean food as well’, but ‘So God has given repentance unto life to the Gentiles also.’”³⁷ Likewise, the flow of the rest of the book, Acts 15 and 21 in particular, would argue against this understanding.³⁸ All of the indications suggest that the subject in chapter 15 is the place of the law in the life of the believing Gentile not Jew. The relationship of the Jew to the Law is never discussed because the leadership takes it for granted that the Jews are still under the authority of the Law. If this understanding is missed in chapter 15, Luke clarifies the distinction between Jewish and Gentile obligation to the Law in chapter 21. James calls upon Paul to demonstrate his fidelity to the Law while giving the disclaimer that of course according to the apostolic council (Acts 15) Gentiles are not obligated to keep the Law.

A Reference Just to People

If we were to interpret the vision alone (10:9-16) apart from its context we would agree that the meaning probably referred to the cancellation of the food laws. A great sheet is lowered from

³⁵Our concern at this point is twofold: to interpret with sensitivity to the historical and literary context of Acts. We simply want to avoid a *theological informing* of the text.

³⁶Cf. the immediate riot which formed when the rumor of Paul’s having brought a Greek into the temple area was circulated.

³⁷Haenchen, *Acts*, 362.

³⁸“. . . this would be tantamount to abolishing the food commandments of the Old Testament. Now this standpoint was never recognized by the Jerusalem community, and we have no evidence that Peter ever adopted it. That it is foreign to Acts itself is clear from the so-called Apostolic Decree” Haenchen, *Acts*, 362.

heaven containing both³⁹ clean and unclean animals which Peter is commanded to kill and eat. It appears that the distinctions between clean and unclean of Leviticus 11 are being annulled. Like most other biblical visions, however, only the divine interpretation can assign the correct meaning. That interpretation is provided by Luke in the rest of the Cornelius narrative⁴⁰ where he *consistently* and *only* applies it to people rather than foods or the Law. With sensitivity to the literary development of the story Tyson insightfully writes:

But Luke has . . . refused to interpret Peter's vision as an annulment of the food laws. That point is borne out in the so-called apostolic decree in Acts 15.20 (cf. 15. 29; 21. 25), which seems to impose some dietary regulations on Gentiles. This is a notorious problem for those who think that the vision of Peter constitutes an annulment of the laws of kashrut. . . . Despite the indications in his own narrative, Luke refuses to say that the food laws have been abolished or altered.⁴¹

Haenchen argues that the vision as it now stands does not refer to foods and "Expositors would not have thought of interpreting the vision in terms of food (the actual text sees it only in terms of men!) if 11.3 had not emboldened them to do so."⁴² That the vision is understood in a figurative sense "is the conclusion of most of the more recent commentators with regard to 10:28b," according to Dibelius.⁴³

But one may ask, How can the vision not refer to the annulment of the food laws? Wilson explains:

A vision which is aimed at teaching something does not necessarily have the same content as the problem to which it refers. That is, visions can have parabolic significance. The vision of foods and the twofold command and refusal may originally have been intended to teach Peter something about clean and unclean men. Because Peter's vision is to do with eating, this does not narrow its terms of reference to the problem of foods. It may be a parable whose terms of reference are much wider.⁴⁴

³⁹This is most likely the significance of 10:12, "and there were in it *all* (πάντα) kinds of four-footed animals"

⁴⁰Interpretation of the vision apart from the narrative is futile because as Conzelmann rightly observes "Luke intends that the narrative action interpret the vision for the reader" Conzelmann, *Acts*, 82.

⁴¹Tyson, "The Gentile Mission and Scripture in Acts," 628. Dibelius concurs, "Luke does not, however, interpret it in the sense of removing the distinction between *foods*. To him it was (according to 10:28) a sign that God no longer wished there to be any distinction between 'clean and unclean' *people*," Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 118 (emphasis his).

⁴²Haenchen, *Acts*, 362.

⁴³Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 112.

⁴⁴S. G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, eds. Matthew Black and R. McL. Wilson, 23 (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), 174.

Thus, according to this view the vision, though cast in terms of animals, is intended to be understood figuratively and applies only to people. It thus provides divine encouragement for Peter to begin the Gentile mission and, contrary to the previous view, it does so without reference to Israel's obligation to the Law. The basis for this type of meaning is discovered in Luke's careful interpretation of the vision in the continuing narrative of 10:17–11:18. We will now seek to validate this view through the interpretation of the remainder of the text.

The literary presentation of the vision

Although Peter's experience involved only a vision of foods rather than literal foods, Luke records that he became hungry while those in the house prepared for a meal. As mentioned previously, against Dibelius, this does not necessarily imply that the vision was intended literally to apply to foods. Rather, Peter's hunger may function in a literary way to heighten his response in the dialogue of the vision. That is, even though Peter was hungry and thus presumably was tempted to eat, he instantly recoiled at the thought of eating unclean food and refused to comply, showing his absolute fidelity to the food laws.

The text states that in the sheet were "all (πάντα) kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air" (10:12). Most likely Peter saw both clean and unclean animals in front of him.⁴⁵ Some have asked whether Peter could not have killed and eaten one of the clean animals and not violated the Law. Bruce comments that ". . . he was particularly scandalized by the unholy mixture of clean animals with unclean; this is particularly important when we recall the practical way in which he had immediately to apply the lesson of the vision."⁴⁶

The dialogue which follows is short, involving only an initial command by God, a response by Peter and a final statement of principle given by God. God's command of "Arise, Peter, kill and eat," is met with an immediate and emphatic refusal by Peter, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." Peter's polite but emphatic refusal to eat should not be considered as belligerent but as an appropriate expression of fidelity. The statement serves as a foil for

⁴⁵*Contra* Marshall who insists that only unclean animals appeared in the sheet. Marshall, *Acts*, 185.

⁴⁶Bruce, *Acts*, 218, n. 15.

God's response in which he concludes the dialogue with a general principle, "What God has cleansed, do not call common" (ἃ ὁ θεὸς ἑκάθάρισεν σὺ μὴ κοίνου, 10:15).⁴⁷

Peter's response and the arrival
of Cornelius' men

If the message of the vision was the cancellation of the food laws, it was lost on Peter. Luke tells us he was clueless about the meaning of the vision, "he was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be." The word διαπορέω means "be greatly perplexed, at a loss . . . ἐν ἑαυτῷ in one's own mind Ac 10:17."⁴⁸ Luke, however, means to interpret the vision for the reader as he notes the providential arrival of the men from Cornelius at the very moment Peter is wondering about the meaning of the vision, "Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind . . . the men who had been sent . . . appeared at the gate" (10:17). Clearly the answer to Peter's conundrum involves men, namely, god-fearing Gentiles.⁴⁹ And just as Luke makes this providential connection clear to the reader (10:17-18), God makes the connection clear to Peter (10:19-21). The narrative returns here (10:19) to Peter with the genitive absolute (*while* Peter is still ruminating about the meaning) the Spirit encourages him to meet the men and go with them "without misgivings." Clearly, the command by the Spirit signals the reader that Peter still does not understand the point of the vision. Not until Peter arrives in the house of Cornelius does Peter articulate the meaning of the vision.⁵⁰

Peter's arrival at Cornelius' house

⁴⁷At the risk of arguing from silence the reader should be aware that the statement does not read "What *foods* God has cleansed, do not call common," but rather stated in very general, principle form, "What God has cleansed . . ." We would therefore take exception to Bruce's understanding, "Actually, the terms of his vision on the housetop at Joppa taught him to call no *food* common or unclean if God pronounced it clean; but he was quick to grasp the analogy between ceremonial food-laws and the regulations affecting intercourse with non-Jews," (emphasis his) Bruce, *Acts*, 222.

⁴⁸BAG, s.v. "διαπορέω."

⁴⁹One of the messengers whom Cornelius sent is described in the same terms as he, i.e., a *devout* soldier (στρατιώτην εὐσεβῆ, 10:7, 17).

⁵⁰Part of the reason for Peter's lack of understanding is Luke's emphasis to show that the Gentile mission originates with God rather than men. Peter is not the initiator in any part of the incident. He is led along step by step by God and is as surprised as anyone else as the story unfolds. Through angelic appearances, visions, providential meetings, direct communication and miracles from the Holy Spirit, Luke demonstrates that the whole incident originates with and is directed by God. Cf. also, Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Acts*, 177-78.

When Peter greets the family of Cornelius he immediately acknowledges that his very presence in the house is a serious breach of Jewish custom, but that he has done so because of God's revelation "that I should not call any man unholy or unclean" (10:28). For the first time, Peter articulates the meaning of the vision and clearly understands it in terms of men. Evidently the greatest obstacle which Peter had to overcome in the story was his reticence to associate with and visit within the house of a Gentile.⁵¹ At this point Peter still does not understand that he is to preach the gospel to his host (10:29), much less eat with him (10:48) and yet already the message of the vision has been articulated by Luke as the catalyst for the Jew to associate with a Gentile.⁵²

Peter's message to Cornelius

A clear and appropriate emphasis in Peter's speech is the universal nature of the gospel. He now recognizes that God does not show partiality but "in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him (10:34-35). He notes also that Jesus Christ is Lord of all (10:36) and finally that "everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins" (10:43). This accords well with the fact that God calls no man unclean. However, the particularist nature of Peter's message is also emphasized. The Jewish context of Jesus' ministry is featured. Peter begins with the fact that this word was sent "to the sons of Israel" (10:36). As he continues he repeatedly mentions the Jewish regions of Jesus' ministry, "throughout all Judea (ὅλης τῆς Ἰουδαίας), starting from Galilee" (10:37), "in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem" (10:39). The message starts with the baptism of John (10:37) and news of the resurrection is given to "all the people" (τῷ λαῷ, i. e., Jewish people, 10:42). The

⁵¹Elliott notes that the domestic setting is emphasized by Luke. "The story moves back-and-forth between the house of a Gentile (Cornelius) and that of a Jew (Simon), Cornelius' vision at home and Peter's vision at home, and Cornelius' offer and Peter's acceptance of domestic hospitality. In this reciprocal exchange of hospitality, Simon the tanner is Peter's host (9:36; 10:6, 17-18, 32; 11:11); Peter (and Simon) are hosts to Cornelius' emissaries (10:17-23a); and Cornelius (and his household) play host to Peter and his companions (10:24-48; 11:3, 12-17). For the Gentile family of Cornelius, like the company of Jews at the first Pentecost (2:1-42), it is a house where the Holy Spirit and the speaking in tongues is experienced (2:2; 10:44-47; 11:15) and it is the household of Cornelius which is baptized and saved (10:48; 11:14-17). Most importantly, it is the occasion of domestic hospitality, social association and commensality which posed the problem over which Peter and the circumcision party struggled (11:2-3); 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'" John H. Elliott, "Household and Meals vs. Temple Purity Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (Fall 1991): 105.

⁵²Marshall insists that "a new application of the vision was being made by Peter," Marshall, *Acts*, 188. Our point is simply that as Luke has narrated the story, this is the only application which is given to the vision.

message is confirmed by “all the prophets” (10:43). Comparing this speech to the other speeches in Acts, Tannehill notes the uniqueness of it.

This story of the Jewish Messiah is placed in a universal frame, which affirms God’s acceptance of Gentiles as well as Jews. The speech thereby becomes an affirmation of the significance of the Jewish Messiah for Gentiles also. Jesus, however, does not cease to be the Jewish Messiah in this sermon to Gentiles. He is the Jewish Messiah who graciously offers the benefits of his peaceful reign to all, thereby becoming “Lord of all” (10:36).⁵³

Thus, Israel has not been set aside here for the sake of the Gentile mission, but is in fact the very channel of that mission.⁵⁴ This is not to deny the reality of the rejection of Messiah by most of the nation. Clearly a majority of the Jews not only rejected the Messiah himself but became confirmed in that decision as they rejected again and again the later preaching of Messiah by his followers (Acts 7). This, however, should not obscure the fact that Peter understands that God is reaching out to Gentiles through the believing remnant of Jewish disciples (Acts 10:41-42).⁵⁵

While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles who began to speak in tongues. This has rightly been called the Gentile pentecost, as Peter says, they “have received the Holy Spirit just as we” (10:47).⁵⁶ Peter then resides in the house of Cornelius for a few days, presumably to instruct them in the faith. The news of this soon reached and rocked Jerusalem.

⁵³Robert C. Tannehill, “The Functions of Peter’s Mission Speeches in the Narrative of Acts,” *New Testament Studies: An International Journal* 37 (July 1991): 413-14. Tannehill also suggests that “The concern to make this point suggests that Peter’s presentation of the Jewish messiah to Cornelius may also have an underlying theological purpose. The ‘Lord of all’ must remain the Jewish Messiah and the apostles’ missionary witness, presented for the last time in this speech to Cornelius, should ensure this,” *Ibid.* We would agree that the presentation of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah is not emphasized by Peter or Luke for simply historical purposes. Given Luke’s well known inclination toward *theological* history, we are probably right in understanding his point as theological.

⁵⁴Lenski calls this the “sloughing off the old Jewish legalism and ceremonialism,” Lenski, *Acts*, 436.

⁵⁵A theological consequence of this view is that it allows us to maintain the distinction between Israel and the Church. This point will become clearer, and is more appropriately discussed in the context of Acts 15 in which James quotes the Old Testament scriptures that speak of the message given to the Gentiles *through* Israel. To state the point briefly here, at the inception (A.D. 45–49) of the Gentile mission, in our view, Peter and James understand that Gentiles are saved through the outreach of the believing remnant of Israel. Later at the close of the book of Acts (A.D. 60), when clearer revelation is given by Paul (Eph 3:1-5), the uniqueness and distinctive nature of the Church compared to Israel are much better defined.

⁵⁶Krister Stendahl, “It Took a Miracle to Launch the Mission to the Gentiles: The Cornelius Story, Acts 10:11–11:18,” *Faith in the Midst of Faiths* ed. S. Samartha (1977) 123-24.

Peter's explanation before the Jerusalem leaders

The first point to be clarified here is the nature of the group which "took issue with Peter" (11:2). The RSV translates οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς (11:2) as "the circumcision party" as though only a particularly strict sect of the leadership was concerned.⁵⁷ When a situation does arise, though, which involves a conservative section of the Church (Acts 15) Luke knows how to identify a conservative group and calls them "Pharisees" (15:5). In this context (especially, 10:45; 11:2, 3) where the main concern is the difference between those who are circumcised and those who are not, it seems likely that Luke is simply identifying the whole congregation in terms which point to the issue of the moment.⁵⁸ Haenchen says "this appellation (cf. 10.45) explains the attitude of the primitive congregation towards the 'uncircumcised' mentioned in verse 3."⁵⁹

The charge which is brought against Peter is also significant. Interestingly, the Jerusalem leadership objects neither to the salvation of the Gentiles, nor to their baptism, but once again, to Peter's association with them, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them," (11:2). This was, of course, Peter's main objection to the whole affair as well as Luke has conveyed the story.⁶⁰ Once again, Luke retells the salient points of the story, not only for emphasis but also to demonstrate that the eventual acceptance of the mission to the Gentiles was not merely initiated by God and approved by Peter but also confirmed by the entire mother church at Jerusalem as well. Their response is instructive: they "quieted down," that is, dropped their objections to Jewish associations with Gentiles and recognized that "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (11:18).

⁵⁷Several follow this lead, for example, Neil refers to οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς as "the ultra-conservative element in the mother church," Neil, *Acts*, 141. Cf. also Lenski, *Acts*, 438, and Elliott, "Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts," 106.

⁵⁸"the Greek phrase simply means 'those belonging to the circumcision', *i.e.* 'those who are of Jewish birth' (NEB). There is no suggestion that there was a definite 'party' in the church at this stage," Marshall, *Acts*, 195. Conzellman agrees "For Luke οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς, 'the circumcision party,' is not a group, but the whole Jerusalem congregation; they are so designated here in order to point to the problem," Conzellman, *Acts*, 86.

⁵⁹Haenchen, *Acts*, 354.

⁶⁰Haenchen says "Luke shrinks from having the Church protest in so many words against the baptism just effected, though that is what is really meant. Instead he represents the accusation as levelled against table-fellowship with the uncircumcised," Haenchen, *Acts*, 359.

Conclusion

We have found that the abrogation of the Law was not a prerequisite to the Gentile mission. The abrogation of *something* was necessary however to launch the Gentile mission and that was the misplaced xenophobia of Judaism which had developed in the intertestamental period and was a fundamental misunderstanding of the Law. However traditional it may be to see the end of the food laws in the Peter's vision, Peter and Luke have not interpreted the vision in this way. What is stated in the narrative is that no man is now unclean. This is the essence of the story as Luke has recounted it for his reader. Dibelius summarizes the incident from a literary standpoint.

Luke does not regard Cornelius as the main character, and Cornelius' adoption of the Christian faith is not the essential content of the story; it is Peter whom we find in the centre of the narrative from Acts 10.1 to 11.18, Peter, his newly acquired knowledge and his defence of it. For, obviously, the insertion of the paragraph 11.1-18 is intelligible only if seen from this point of view. It is not the centurion's belief which is being proved, but the apostle's right to enter the houses of uncircumcised men—and then not in order to convert the uncircumcised to Christ, but in order to eat with them. This new truth is expressly proclaimed at the end of the paragraph in question: "Thus God has granted to the Gentiles also a repentance unto life" (11:18). . . . This is why Luke has elaborated the story.⁶¹

This understanding fits better with the flow of the book, particularly Acts 15. If in fact Peter and the Jerusalem leadership have concluded that the Mosaic covenant has come to an end in chapter 11, then the question in chapter 15 would probably not have arisen in the first place and, if it had, would have concerned first the Jewish believer's relationship to the Law before the place of the Gentile was even discussed. If however Acts 10–11 teach the admission of the Gentiles into the community of the redeemed without reference to the Jewish believer's relationship to Moses, then it is understandable that some would grant admission to Gentiles but then later (Acts 15) disagree about their continuing obligation to the Mosaic covenant. After all, Cornelius' lifestyle was very Torah-centered as it was. The question of Cornelius' continuing obligation to the Law was a fairly moot point because his attachment to the synagogue and Jewish lifestyle was so close already. He probably already more than met all the terms laid upon Gentiles in the apostolic decree.

Although it may be hard to imagine that Peter would not have understood the vision in terms of literal foods, the modern reader must not be careful to anachronistically understand the passage. For the twentieth century believer who now understands that the Mosaic law had come to an end at Calvary in God's view, the messages of clean food and clean people may seem to overlap. But if

⁶¹Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 118-19.

the end of the law had not yet been clearly disclosed, the food laws were not suspect prior to Acts 10, and indeed Israel's self-understanding was not a burning question, then the perspective of seeing the vision as only referring to people would have been much easier. In our view, when Peter reflected on the vision, he would have understood it as a very dramatic and powerful statement that "Whatever God cleansed, he had no right to call unclean," rather than being a double pronged message which first abrogated the Law and then allowed Gentiles into the Church.