PETER'S VISION: WAS IT ABOUT THE MEN OR THE MENU?[1]

Introduction

The Cornelius episode (Acts 10:1–11:18) plays a pivotal role in the expansion of the gospel from Jerusalem to "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) and most interpreters happily agree that the door to the Gentile mission is opened in this episode. What is not often considered, however, is the place of Israel in this new development.[2] Many would say that Gentiles are allowed entrance to God's people *only* because the barrier of the Law (as symbolized by food laws) is first abolished. This interpretation is often supported *externally* by reading the vision in light of later epistles or even earlier pronouncements of purity by Jesus (Mark) and *internally* by the meaning of Peter's vision itself. Others argue that the Jewish (Torah-observant) Messianic movement did not first drop its nationalistic identity in the law but moved simply to embrace Gentiles.[3] Perhaps more specifically, does the story of Cornelius teach that Peter first abandoned his observance of the Law enabling him to reach out to Gentiles, or did the Jewish (Torah-observant) Peter simply carry the gospel to Gentiles?

This question goes to the heart of the meaning of Peter's vision. Are both of these seemingly distinct ideas, 1) the abrogation of Jewish law, and 2) God's acceptance of Gentiles as equal citizens in his household, found in the same vision? Humphrey has argued that a "collision of modes of expression" often happens in the vision genre

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[2]"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. Scott adds, "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?," J. Julius Scott, Jr. "The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting," *Journal of the Evangelical Society* 34 (1991): 475.

[3]Michael Pettem, "Luke's Great Omission and His View of the Law," *New Testament* Studies 42 (1996): 35-54, Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles,* ed. Eldon Epp and Christopher Matthews, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald Juel. Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary,* trans. Basil Blackwell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), Stephen G. Wilson, *Luke and Law*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Jacob Jervell, *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1984).

and that visions "tend toward polyvalence."[4] If this is true, then how can one be sure how varied the meaning(s) of a vision may be and who is the arbitrator? While many would naturally call on Mark or Paul to explain the vision I believe that Luke has the right to be heard first and if we listen carefully, he will supply the entire answer. This paper will seek to outline the meaning of Peter's vision and the implications it has for the message of Acts[5] by paying special attention to the interpretation offered by Luke, especially as it can be discerned through his literary development and rhetorical strategy.

Preliminary Considerations

Before we focus on the actual visions two areas need historical and cultural clarification: the relationships of both of Peter's hosts (Simon and Cornelius) to the Law.

The Significance of Simon the Tanner

Because tanners had contact on a daily basis with the skins of dead animals, some interpreters consider them unclean in terms of the Law (Lev 11:31-40). Peter's willingness to associate with a person of such an occupation is understood as a softening in his loyalty to Moses. Neil states: ". . . 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."[6] 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 in his own personal practice (10:14-16 and repeated in 11:8-10). Second, the prohibitions involving the uncleanness of dead animals only applied to those which died of natural causes (Lev 11:31 ff.),

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[4]"Whenever visions are used within argumentation, there is a possible collision of modes of expression. Vision reports have the potential to take on a life of their own and tend towards polyvalence," Humphrey, "Collision of Modes?–Vision and Determining Argument in Acts 10:1–11:18," *Semeia*, 65.

[5]It is well beyond the scope of this paper to address the abrogation of the Law in the New Testament or even to Luke's view of the law in general. Likewise, we do not seek to address the question of Jewish adherence to the law in the first century, but only to deal with Jewish/Gentile relations within this passage..

[6]William Neil, *Acts*: *New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 136.

otherwise, even the priests would have been rendered unclean in their normal duties of sacrifice.[7] 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.[8] 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 then is probably not an evidence of a soft attitude toward the Law.

The Place of Cornelius in Relation to Judaism

A second critical factor is the place of Cornelius in relation to Judaism because it may bear on the kind of defilement to which Peter subjects himself during his visit. 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.[9] The discussion revolves around the meaning of the significant terms with which Luke describes Cornelius such as *devout* (εὐσεβὴς) and *God-fearing* (φοβούμενος τόν θεὸν). 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? Lake asks the question well: "The point at issue is to what extent φοβούμενοι τόν θεόν is a technical description of the non-Jewish fringe attending the Synagogue, or is merely an

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[7]"The corpse or severed limb of an animal make a person who moves or touches it or a utensil that touches it impure, as it says . . . but if a permissible animal was properly slaughtered its corpse is not a source of impurity" *She'ar Avos ha-Tumos*.

[8]While it is difficult to be dogmatic about first century *halacha* there is evidence that tanners were not considered unclean. 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. Jeremias 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.

[9]Those 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).

honourable epithet applicable to Jew, Gentile, or Proselyte, as the context may decide."[10]

Luke uses two similar participles (or participial phrases) in his work, *fearing God* (φοβούμενος τόν θεὸν) and *worshiping God* (σεβομένος τόν θεόν), the former five and the latter[11] 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.[12] The significant factor in Acts 13, however, is that Luke describes the same people with both terms, φοβούμενος and σεβομένος.[13] In addition, σεβομένος is used adjectivally to describe the well-fixed term *proselyte* (προσήλυτος). 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.[14]

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[10]Lake, "Proselytes and God-fearers," 84.

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

[12]"Ανδρες Ἰσραηλῖται καὶ οἱ φοβούμενοι τόν θεόν, ἀκούσατε," (13:16) "Ανδρες ἀδελφοί, υἱοὶ γένους Ἀβραὰμ καὶ οἱ ἐν ὑμῖν φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν . . ." (13:26).

[13]Cf. 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.

[14]Max 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 (εὐσεβὴς, 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.

What can be affirmed about Cornelius then is at least that he was righteous,[15] pious, and worshiped the God of Israel. He gave alms to the nation of Israel, prayed continually (10:2), and prayed at the traditional times of prayer (10:3, 30), 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).[16] Yet because he had not taken the final step of proselytization, i.e. circumcision, he was still a Gentile and therefore unclean.[17] His lifestyle was probably very Jewish, but he was still one surgery short of full acceptance.

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 is not 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 people.[18] 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).[19]

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[15]Davis argues that Cornelius was in effect a righteous "pre-messianic" saint, Glenn Davis, "When was Cornelius Saved?" *Reformed Theological Review* 46:2 (1987): 43-49.

[16]"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.

[17]E. 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 יראי שמים in Rabbinic Judaism is unfavourable" G. Kuhn, "προσήλυτος," *TDNT*, 6:741. Cf. also G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, 323-53.

[18]"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.

[19]Conzelmann, *Acts*, 80. More recently Pettem has argued that while Luke has omitted Mark 6:45–8:26 from his gospel because it contradicts his understanding of God's law he has included a thematically similar section in Peter's vision in his second volume. For Pettem Luke achieves the same basic goal of overcoming the dietary barrier between Jews and Gentiles, "but not as Mark says by the abolition of Jewish dietary purity, but by the declaration

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

The first proposal actually sees two major issues unfolding in the Cornelius incident: the abrogation of the food laws of Israel (a metonymic reference to the abrogation of the entire Mosaic law)[20], and a consequent reaching out in the Gentile mission. Though these issues are distinct they are combined here by Luke because, in this view, one is a natural consequence of the other. If God first announced the end of the Law 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. Fellowship with non-Jews would not be a problem because the Jewish lifestyle would now no longer differ from that of the moral Gentile. Thus, the Gentile mission can be a theological deduction based upon a literal understanding of the vision.

Dibelius finds support for this view in 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.[21]

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that all people are clean" Pettem, "Luke's Great Omission and His View of the Law," 54. Dibelius, before him, came 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.

[20]Scott recognizes that "The issue is not just foods and associates, or even the whole of *kašrût*, but the entirety of the system that both maintained Jewish distinctives and separated them from Gentiles." Scott, "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. 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,'" Haenchen, *Acts*, 362.

[21]Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 112.

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. Peter's hunger may serve as a device 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.[22] The hunger of Peter provides a meaningful background for his emphatic refusal to eat the food thus sharpening the contrast in the *dialogue* between Peter and God, which is a critical part of the vision incident.

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."[23] The problems with this reasoning are at least two fold: 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.[24] The accusation of the brethren[25] in Jerusalem was not directed toward *what* Peter ate, but rather, *with whom* he ate; not his menu but his companions. 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.[26] Because a common table was

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[22]This idea 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.

[23]Dibelius, *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."

[24]Ibid. 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.'"

[25]"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.

[26]"Eating with them" should be understood in the culture as a point of intimacy and acceptance rather than defilement. A clue to this meaning may be found within Peter's speech at Cornelius' house when he says that after the resurrection Jesus "ate and drank" with him (10:41). This is probably a reference first to the physical reality of

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.[27] 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 before by the way Luke describes Cornelius' attachment to, and reputation among, the Jewish nation it is quite likely that he followed the food laws. It is, of course, 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

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the resurrection, but intimacy with his close associates is probably also involved. The resurrected Christ ate with Peter, and now Peter will eat with a Gentile. "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.

At 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.

[27]At 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).

the question of how a Jew could see a Gentile socially:

> 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.[28]

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."[29] Or as Daniel handled himself, drink only water and eat vegetables!

In summary the textual and historical evidence suggests 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.[30]

A Reference Just to People

What strikes us as most unusual about both Peter's vision is the lack of an explicit interpretation: "a

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

[29]E. 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.

[30]Interestingly, 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 ἀθέμιτός, which Bruce translates as *taboo,* Bruce, *Acts*, 222. Perhaps Peter is admitting that he is breaking oral but not written law. "If . . . we suppose that Luke deliberately chose ἀθέμιτος 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," Wilson, *Luke and Law*, 70.

feature that is a highly conventional part of visionary literature, particularly when the visions are being used to make doctrinal points."[31] As the story progresses, however, Luke weaves narration and vision together, providing his interpretation with rhetorical skill. He records the visions of both Peter and Cornelius, retelling them five more times in the course of the story.[32] With each retelling of the visions details are given which add to the climax of Peter's speech before the brethren in Jerusalem. The effect of this unfolding of events is the emergence of understanding, "one accessible to anyone of reason and insight."[33] Several examples of Luke's rhetorical art deserve attention including 1) emphasis upon houses and entering 2) the narrative development found in the retelling, and 3) the element of slowly unfolding mystery.

Houses and crossing thresholds

Luke refers continuously to the ideas of "house" and "household" and to the act of entering the same.[34] In the second verse of the story Luke informs us that Cornelius feared God as did his all his house (παντὶ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτου, 10:2). The angel informs Cornelius to send for Peter who is staying at the house (οἰκία) of a certain Simon (10:6). So Cornelius sends two of his household attendants (δύο τῶν οἰκετῶν) to fetch Peter (10:7). Peter sees his vision while on the housetop (10:9) and Cornelius' men ask for directions to the house (οἰκίαν) where Peter was staying (10:18). They then retell the essential command of the angel for Peter to come to Cornelius' (οἶκον, 10:22). When Peter asks Cornelius himself why he sent for him, the centurion responds again, "I was praying in my house"

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[31]Humphrey, "Collision of Modes," 73.

[32]Please see appendix.

[33]Humphrey, "Collision of Modes," 74. "Such an organic inclusion of interpretation, over against the more common rhythm of vision-*angelus interpres* found in esoteric literature has a rhetorical power that draws the reader into the discussion. . . . There is an undeniable rhetorical force to the narrative, but its character is the type that wins by finesse, rather than by playing an oracular or visionary trump card" 74.

[34]Elliott 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?'" Elliott, "Household and Meals vs. Temple Purity," 105.

(τῷ οἴκῳ μου, 10:30) and an angel told me that you were staying "in the house (οἰκία) of Simon" (10:32). After Peter recounts his vision before the Jerusalem brethren he notes "behold, at that moment three men appeared before the house (οἰκίαν) in which we were staying" (11:11). Peter defends his actions with the Spirit's command to go and "enter the man's house" (τὸν οἶκον τοῦ ἀνδρός, 11:12). Peter then recounts Cornelius' vision of an angel standing in his house (οἴκῳ, 10:13) who claims that Peter will tell him words that will save him and his household (οἶκος, 10:14).

Very much related to this, but perhaps more interesting, is the theme of actually entering, or hesitance to enter, a house which can be traced in the different forms of εἰσέρχομαι (10:3, 25, 27; 11:3, 8, 12). The one who does the first "entering" is the angel who comes to Cornelius' house (10:3). Then the men from Cornelius locate Simon's house, but wait *outside* the gate (10:17). They are not invited *in* until *after* the Spirit directs Peter to listen to them and they tell their story (10:23). When Peter arrives in Caesarea and actually does the forbidden thing of entering the house of a Gentile, Luke has him do it twice! When Peter *came in* (Ὡς δὲ ἐγένετο τοῦ εἰσελθεῖν τὸν Πέτρον) Cornelius fell at his feet in worship (10:25). After an exchange Peter then "enters" again (καὶ συνομιλῶν αὐτῷ εἰσῆλθεν) and meets the people (10:27). In a curious, rhetorical twist of this theme Luke retells Peter's vision differently the second time. Whereas Peter's words were originally reported as "By no means, Lord, for I have never *eaten* (ἔφαγον) anything unholy and unclean" (10:15), the second telling has, "By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever *entered my mouth*" (εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸ στόμα μου, 11:8). This rewording is given just four verses before he and the six brothers enter the man's house (εἰσήλθομεν τὸν οἶκον τοῦ ἀνδρός, 11:12). As Humphrey notes, "Unclean food may never have entered Peter's mouth, but Gentiles are on the verge of entering his house, and he is about to go into their domain, as well."[35]

Luke's literary use of houses and crossing thresholds emphasizes the mixing and acceptance of people who were previously unaccepted. It also advances the argument in the direction which answers Peter's detractors, "you went into (εἰσῆλθες) uncircumcised men and ate with them" 11:3.

Narrative development

A second tool in Luke's rhetorical arsenal is the gradual development of the story. He retells and

[35]Humphrey, "Collision of Modes," 76.

expands the visions several times and also rearranges the order of events to suit his desired effect. The variation in the two accounts of Peter's vision is a good example of this technique. As we just mentioned, Luke varies the retelling of Peter's vision so that the contrast between food never *entering* Peter's mouth (11:8) and his *entering* the house of the Gentile finds its climax at the critical moment of defense before the Jerusalem brethren.

Though Peter's vision generally receives most of our attention, Luke develops Cornelius' vision to a greater degree,[36] giving us information about it four separate times. In the first vision Luke, the impersonal narrator, mentions that Cornelius has very clear sight (φανερῶς) of the angel but does not describe him nor is Luke explicit about his whereabouts except that "he came in to" Cornelius (εἰσελθόντα πρὸς αὐτὸν, 10:3). The orders from the angel to fetch Peter are clear, but the purpose for the visit are as yet unrevealed (10:5-6). In the second description of Cornelius' vision, this time told through the three messengers, the angel is described as "holy" (10:22), and the purpose in sending for Peter is made clear. We now find out that the angel directed Peter to "come to Cornelius' house and hear a message from you" (11:22).

The third account of Cornelius' vision comes from his own mouth. He recounts how he was "in his own house" and a man appeared "before him in shining garments" (10:32). This time Cornelius is actually praying, rather than simply being at the hour of prayer.

In the fourth and final recounting of the vision, this time from Peter's mouth in Jerusalem, we find the exact location of the angel, "he had seen *the angel standing in his house*" (εἶδεν ἄγγελον ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ σταθέντα,11:13). The rhetorical impact of this revelation can not be overemphasized. The statement has come directly after Peter admits that he has entered the man's house (11:12) in the face of the accusation ("you went into the uncircumcised," 11:3). Peter admits that he is guilty as charged but the trump card of his defense, heretofore played close to the chest by Luke, is that Peter was not the first one in the house; an angel of God had entered this Gentile house before him! "Blame the angel," is Peter's cry.

The craft of Luke in developing his argument can also be seen in the reverse order he uses in this final recounting of Cornelius' vision. Luke explicitly states that Peter's response to the charge from the Jerusalem group was explaining to them in "orderly sequence" (καθεξῆς, 11:4, cf. Luke 1:3). One thing is certain, however: the order

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[36] *Ibid*.

which Peter uses (his vision first, 11:4-10; Cornelius' vision second, 11:13-14) is not the chronological order,[37] nor is it even the original narrative order, but it is a powerful rhetorical order.[38] This gradual development of the story by Luke brings clarity to the interpretation and draws the reader into the meaning of the visions and the incident as a whole.

The element of mystery

A final rhetorical element which Luke uses to his advantage is unfolding the mystery of the story. This is true for both parties involved, and not only concerning the visions but also their meeting in Caesarea.

The most overt statement of mystery is Peter's puzzlement about the meaning of his own vision. Twice Luke tells his reader that Peter did not understand his own vision. He first puzzled[39] over what the vision could mean (ἐν ἑαυτῷ διηπόρει ὁ Πέτρος τί ἂν εἴη τὸ ὅραμα ὃ εἶδεν, 11:17), and later still reflects on what it means (Τοῦ δὲ Πέτρου διενθυμουμένου περὶ τοῦ ὁράματος, 11:19). The technique certainly draws the reader into watching the mystery revealed by the skillful storyteller and perhaps is an encouragement also not to jump to one's own conclusions about the meaning of the vision.

Once again, we find even more development of Luke's technique in the vision and story of Cornelius. In the original vision (10:3-8) the angel tells Cornelius to send for Peter but he has no idea why. At the second account of the vision (10:22-23) told by the messengers we learn that the purpose for the visit is for Cornelius to "hear a message" from Peter. When Peter arrives the mystery lifts just a bit. He offers the first interpretation of his own vision "God has shown me not to call any man unclean," but still does not know why he has come: "And so I ask for what reason you have sent for me," (11:29).[40] Cornelius next repeats his own vision and concludes with the

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[37]As Luke weaves this story together he does so with obvious transitions and clear temporal markers ("about the ninth hour, 10:3; "and on the next day . . . at about the sixth hour," 10:9, *et al*) so that the factual development of the story is without question.

[38]"This technique (change of order) used in functional reduncancy brings the crux of the matter to the fore . . . ." Ronald D. Witherup, "Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: 'Functional Redundancy' in the Acts of the Apostles," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 49 (1993): 53.

[39]BAG, s.v. "διαπορέω," "be greatly perplexed, at a loss . . . ἐν ἑαυτῷ in one's own mind Ac 10:17."

[40]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. At this point Peter still does not understand that he is to preach the gospel to his host

words "we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord" (11:33), revealing that neither party fully understands the purpose for the visit. Only in the final recounting of the vision of Cornelius by Peter (11:13-14) do we learn that these words of Peter were to lead to salvation for the audience ("and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household," 11:14).

Throughout the whole incident this element of mystery is slowly but deliberately solved by divine direction, whether miraculous or providential. As has been noted, God is clearly the initiator in this action and the one who reveals the mystery.[41] While Peter wonders about the meaning of the vision *men* appear at the gate (11:17). While Peter is reflecting on the meaning of the vision, the *Spirit* says to him three *men* are looking for you (11:19). When Peter enters the house he utters his first and only verbal interpretation of the vision in the words "*God* has shown me that I should not call any man unclean. . ." (11:28). Of course the most significant miracle is the work of the Spirit in this "Gentile Pentecost." In the final stages of Peter's defense before the Jerusalem assembly the references to divine initiative more densely populate his speech. The *Spirit* told him to go (11:12), an *angel of God* was already in the house (11:13), the *Holy Spirit* fell on them (11:15), Peter remembers the words of the *Lord* (11:16), "*God* gave them the same gift," and "who was I that I could stand in *God's* way?" (11:17). In short, Luke skilflully uses the unfolding mystery of the story to draw the reader along to his conclusion: God has given a riddle which he alone has answered. God is the author of the mystery and the revealer of the mystery.

In summary of this section, it appears that all Luke's formidable skills as a writer have been utilized to draw out the lesson of the vision to people. As the angel and Peter entered Cornelius' house so also Cornelius has entered God's house. God has now granted the Gentiles not only the repentance unto life, but also the fullness of the

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(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. Marshall 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 so far.

[41]". . . in endeavouring to make the hand of God visible in the history of the Church, Luke virtually excludes all human decision. Instead of the realization of the divine will *in* human decision, *through* human decisions, he shows us a series of supernatural interventions in the dealings of men: the appearance of the angel, the vision of the animals, the promptings of the Spirit, the pouring out of the ecstatic πνεῦμα. As Luke presents them, these divine incursions have such compelling force that all doubt in the face of them *must* be stilled. They compellingly prove that God, not man, is at work," Haenchen, *Acts*, 362. Cf. also Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Acts*, 177-78.

Holy Spirit, and full acceptance into his household as first class citizens.

Conclusion

In conclusion we return to the original question of how many meanings a visionary passage may have. Humphrey, one who understands the rhetorical argument of Luke, states the question in a direct manner:

> Another issue that has been debated is the strange manner in which Peter's vision is not applied to food laws . . . but to Gentiles themselves. It would seem that Luke is at great pains to avoid the obvious implication of the vision. . . . Moreover, although the lesson drawn from the sheet vision underscores people rather than food, food is not uninvolved in the Acts account, since Peter is accused of (and does not deny) eating with Gentiles.[42]

Admirably, she has looked for clues to the polyvalence of the vision within the passage itself, but as we have seen, that evidence may not exist. The charge of "eating with gentiles" probably has everything to do with *gentiles* and nothing to do with what they were *eating*. Luke goes to great lengths to convince us of the righteous and Jewish lifestyle of Cornelius. Though we can not be certain, the *likelihood* is that the centurion's home was kosher and Peter's apparent violation was entering the house and enjoying the hospitality of people whose only unique feature was their uncircumcision. Reading the charge of "eating with the uncircumcised" as "Peter ate pork" is ill-advised at best and therefore seems to be a weak foundation for establishing another meaning of the vision referring to food.

Humphrey also allows for a double meaning on the basis of extra-Lukan theology, "The polyvalent potential of vision is demonstrated, however, by the fact that later ecclesiastical traditions have appealed to the sheet vision as being primarily about the abrogation of kosher laws. . . . It is difficult to sort out such matters, since we tend, despite all efforts, to read Acts from the side of Galatians and later church history."[43] While "later ecclesiastical traditions" certainly have appealed to this as the abrogation of kosher laws, they should carry far less weight than textual evidence in our hermeneutic. It is also true that we often read Acts from the side of Galatians, but when we look to Mark or Paul to explain Luke I believe we do fundamental disservice to Luke and to ourselves. Such attempts to find harmony in our theology at the expense of our exegesis should raise red flags especially among those who claim a high view of Scripture.

Can visions can be polyvalent? Perhaps they can. This study can not begin to speak to this broader

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[42]Humphrey, "Collision of Modes," 80-81.

[43]*Ibid*, 81.

question, but it can speak to the polyvalence of Acts 10. The interpretations of food and people seem distinct enough to be called separate meanings. By the way Luke draws the reader along with supreme rhetorical skill it seems clear that he wants us to understand the visions in terms of men and as Humphrey says, goes to "great pains" to avoid references to food. I would affirm that this event *could* be the abrogation of the food laws[44] but it would be very difficult to prove such from the book of Acts. My feeling is that Luke sees Jewish believers as Torah-observant[45] in the rest of the book and this passage does not show divine disapproval of the practice. The interpretation of a vision report is a complex one in which each interpreter will have to carefully weigh the manifold factors, but I would suggest that when we listen carefully for the soft but certain voice of Luke we will hear that the only change in Peter's dining habits at this time had to do not with the menu but with the men.[46]

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[44]I say "could be" simply because we have not been able to establish that the passage can not be polyvalent. Humphrey acknowledges Pettem's view of Luke as the "fundamentalist" who was comfortable with "two standards, and expected Jewish believers to maintain dietary purity, but Gentiles to follow a modified code (Petterm)," and then responds, "Be this as it may, it is not at all clear to me that Luke does damage to the vision's 'obvious' meaning, nor inedeed, that visions by and large have one obvious meaning, although they may be directed along one line to the exclusion of thers within a range of possibilities," *Ibid*, 80-81.

[45]"[In Acts] . . . Luke assumes that Jews remain subject to the Jewish law after becoming Christian believers. They continue to frequent the temple, showing all proper respect and correct behaviour. They remain circumcised, and do not encourage neglect for the circumcision of their sons. They observe Jewish dietary purity. The one major change in this area is that gentiles are declared clean, so that Jewish Christians may assoicate and eat with them without incurring impurity. Luke does not reflect on the other sources of dietary impurity which might be encountered when eating with gentiles. It is probable that he was of the opinion that as long as gentiles observed the four special provisions outlined in the Apostoic Decree (Acts 15), there would be no further danger of impurity in assoicating with them," Petterm, "Luke's Omission and View of the Law," 43-44.

[46]If these conclusions are correct, then one area for further study is why God would use a symbol (the sheet full of animals) the meaning of which could be so easily misconstrued–one that Luke would have to "take pains" to avoid. I hesitate to answer with confidence because the answer is not found directly in the text, but my suspicion involves the response of a kosher person to the vision of the sheet. Much discussion has involved why Peter did not simply choose the clean animals if as Luke says the sheet contained "all kinds" of animals. Bruce notes that the *mixture* would have been the key element of Peter's "scandalization," (Bruce, *Acts*, 218, n. 15). If this is true, and it seems likely, Peter's concern would not have been with eating bacon, but how he could eat the steak that had been rendered impure by being mixed with the bacon. This mixing theme certainly is carried forward in the story with the mixing of the households and even in a small but curious reference to the numbers of the men. At first three (10:7, unclean) men come from Cornelius but when Peter's brethren join them and they enter Cornelius' house we find six men (11:12, presumably three unclean and three clean), quite a mixture, that enter the gentile household. Thus, when God cleanses the gentiles, Peter is free to mix with them without fear of becoming unclean.