

Abstract

The article argues that the name Tabitha (Acts 9.36), which means 'gazelle' is used metaphorically in the Acts narrative for a proselyte, and that the town in which she lived, Joppa, is used symbolically for the Jewish issue of 'mixing'.

Keywords

Gazelle
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Tabitha: The gazelle of Joppa (Acts 9:36-41)¹

In Acts 9.36, Luke introduces into his narrative a woman called Tabitha, a name which, he says, is translated into Greek as Δορκάς. Both the Greek, Δορκάς, and its Aramaic equivalent, טביתא, mean 'gazelle', as is commonly noted.² In the Septuagint, the word Δορκάς is usually used to translate the Hebrew צבִי or צבִיָּא.³ If commentators remark at all on this name, it is to give its meaning and its Aramaic and Hebrew forms,⁴ to note that it is a rare name⁵, often that of a slave.⁶ Others suggest that the use of the name in this episode indicates Luke's knowledge of a local tradition⁷ and that the story is 'assuredly rooted in good historical memory'⁸. Some also see a link between the name Tabitha in Acts 9 and the word 'talitha' used by Jesus in addressing a dead twelve-year old girl (Mk 5.41).⁹ Tabitha has received some notice in order to highlight the importance of widows, while others see her as illustrating the power of communal love that is stronger even than death.¹⁰ But little attention, if any at all, has been given to the possible metaphorical use of the name itself in the Acts narrative.¹¹

I will argue that the name of the disciple at Joppa, Tabitha, which means 'gazelle', not only reflects her character and her status, but can also be read as a metaphor in the narrative for fringe-members, such as proselytes, in the Christian community. There are a number of characteristics and physical attributes of the gazelle that make it a logical choice as a literary metaphor for the proselyte. I will also show that the name of Tabitha's town, Joppa, can be read as symbolic of the issue of the 'mixing' that was so crucial in Jewish dietary and ritual law. Both the

¹ I wish to acknowledge the comments and suggestions made by Dr Richard Fellows (Vancouver) and Dr David Luckensmeyer (Brisbane) on various drafts of this paper.

² See, for examples, Fitzmyer, J. 1998 *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday); and Jervell, J. 1998 *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).

³ For example, in Deut 12.15, 22; 14.5; Song of Sol 4.5.

⁴ See Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 445 et al.

⁵ It occurs in the Jerusalem Talmud, y.Ned. 1.5 49b and 2.1 49d. The Greek and Latin forms of the name are a little more common.

⁶ Williams, M. 1995 'Palestinian Jewish Personal Names in Acts', in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 96.

⁷ So, for example, Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, 296.

⁸ Dunn, J.D.G. 1996 *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge: Trinity International) 129.

⁹ See, for example, Bruce, F.F. 1988 *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 199. The Western text of Mk 5.41 actually reads ταβιθα in place of ταλιθα.

¹⁰ Richter Reimer, I. 1995 *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A feminist liberation perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress); Pesch, R. 1986 *Die Apostelgeschichte* (2 vols. Zürich: Neukirchener Verlag) 1.326.

¹¹ Chrysostom sensed significance in Tabitha's name. He wrote:

It is not without a meaning that the writer has informed us of the woman's name, but to show that the name she bore matched her character; as active and wakeful was she as an antelope. For in many instances there is a Providence in the giving of names, as we have often told you (*Homily 21 on Acts of Apostles*).

metaphorical use of the gazelle and the symbolic use of Joppa occur in a narrative that deals with critical and divisive issues surrounding the status of gentiles (and what is expected of them). These issues are central to Acts' understanding of Peter's mission in particular. The story of Tabitha at Joppa introduces the issue of the proselytes, the narrative continues with the sanctification of the God-fearing Cornelius (Acts 10.1-11.18), and gentile issues as a whole are finally resolved in the narrative by the pronouncements of the apostolic council decree in Acts 15. So the episode about Tabitha is part of the wider narrative in which Peter learns that the eschatological holy spirit promised to Israel, and the 'repentance unto life' (11.18), are gifts God intends to be given not only to Israel but also to God-fearers, proselytes and other marginal members of the community. The name Tabitha, and her location in Joppa, draw attention to this point to the audience.

People with animal names are reasonably common in the Jewish scriptures alone: for example, Oreb (raven), Zeb (wolf); Caleb, possibly a proselyte (dog); Khamor (wild ass), Ja'el (ibex); Ephraim and Ephron (fawn), 'Eglon (calf), Akhbor (mouse), Shaphau (cony or rock-badger), and Khezer (swine). Jewish women named after animals are also known: Rachel (ewe), Leah (possibly, cow), and Deborah (honey-bee) are familiar examples. Tabitha has precedence in Zibiah (2 Kgs 12.2) and in the male equivalent, Zibia (1 Chron. 8.9), both meaning 'gazelle'. Nor is it unusual for humans to be depicted metaphorically as animals. In Gen. 49, where the various patriarchs of Israel are so described: Judah is a lion's whelp; Issachar a strong ass; Dan a serpent in the way; Naphtali is a hind/gazelle let loose;¹² and Benjamin is a ravenous wolf. As is well known, lovers are described as stags and gazelles in the *Song of Solomon* (2.5; 4.7). Well known also is the Christian use of the lamb (Jn 1.29; Rev. 6.1), and of the lion, bull and eagle (Rev. 4.7).

The Gazelle

In order to appreciate the metaphorical use of the name Tabitha, it is helpful to know some of the features and characteristics of the gazelle and its significance in ancient Jewish (and other) cultures.

The gazelle is an animal known for its striking physical features, especially its colouring, marking, and its eyes. It has white markings and colouring, and attractive large bright eyes. Physically, the *dorcus gazelle* that still inhabits modern Israel (there are a few other types) is a comparatively small, slender animal. It has a body length of about 90-110 cm (3-3.6 ft) and stands 55-65cm (1.8-2.1 ft) at shoulder height, with a tail 15-20 cm (6-8 in.) long. It weighs 15-20 kg (33-44 lb.). In colouring, its head and back are sandy-red, while its rump and underside are white or beige. It also has an attractive white eye-ring, and a pair of white and dark brown stripes running from each eye to the corners of the mouth. The ridged, lyre-shaped horns in females are much thinner and straighter than in the male, with fewer ridges, and they grow to a length of 15-25 cm (6-10 in.). The white markings on the gazelle are a dominant feature of the animal, along with its delicate but 'royal-looking' horns, and make it very attractive. It is also a very agile, speedy animal exuding a springing, leaping vitality. But for all its agility and vitality, it is prone to disease and becomes a hapless victim if it breaks one of its very fragile legs. It was also a hunted animal, and its meat regarded as somewhat of a delicacy (compare 1 Kgs 4.23).

¹² According to the Numbers Rabbah II, the banner of Naphtali had a hind in its centre.

Gazelles were commonly seen in ancient Palestine in hilly and rocky terrain, but they also inhabited the coastal plains, such as are around Joppa. It was not a domesticated animal, but was found in the fringe areas of human habitations. Female gazelles today are found in herds that vary in size, depending on conditions, with forty being the maximum, but most are in the 5-10 range. They might sometimes be accompanied by adolescent males, but never by adult males.¹³

The Gazelle in Jewish Dietary Law

As stated, the gazelle's habitat was on the borders. It was neither truly wild nor tame, neither of the desert nor of the town. It was a small, fragile, attractive, game animal. In dietary law, it was representative of those animals that could be eaten in circumstances which had little impact on the clean/unclean state of the eater. By translating the name Tabitha into 'gazelle', a Jewish audience was given an entrée to the clean/unclean issue that is raised in Peter's later vision in Joppa. Peter sees 'all four-footed animals and reptiles of the earth and fowls of the air' (Acts 10.12), and this is symbolic of the issue of his association with the God-fearer Cornelius, because that association is one in which food is shared. It is for sharing food with the uncircumcised that Peter is later criticised (11.3).

The gazelle was a 'four-footed' animal and in Jewish dietary regulations belonged in the 'clean' category. Peter could associate with Tabitha the gazelle without offending Jewish consciences, including his own. Since the dietary laws were highly important in many forms of Judaism, it can be assumed that at least Jews in Luke's audience were aware of the gazelle's dietary status. Its ritual status was used in the Torah as the standard for correct practice when it came to eating meat in the town or household (in contrast to the foods that were ritually legitimate within the sacred precincts). The gazelle was representative of animals that 'both clean and unclean alike may eat'. According to Deut. 12.15, Moses commanded,

Eat flesh within any of your towns, as much as you desire, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which he has given you; the unclean and the clean may eat of meat, as of the gazelle and as of the hart (ἀκάθαρτος ἐν σοὶ καὶ ὁ καθαρὸς ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ φάγεται αὐτὸ ὡς δορκάδα ἢ ἔλαφον).

And again, in Deut.12.22-23, he says,

Just as the gazelle or the hart is eaten, so you may eat of it; the unclean and the clean alike may eat of it (ὡς ἔσθεται ἡ δορκὰς καὶ ἡ ἔλαφος οὕτως φάγη αὐτό ὁ ἀκάθαρτος ἐν σοὶ καὶ ὁ καθαρὸς ὡσαύτως ἔδεται). Only be sure that you do

¹³ Walther, F.R. Mungall, E.C. Grau, G.A. 1983 *Gazelles and their relatives: a study in territorial behaviour* (Park Ridge, N.J: Noyes Publications) 36. For more details on the habitat and habits of various gazelle species in Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, see Martin, L. 2000 'Gazelle (*Gazella* spp.) behavioural ecology: predicting animal behaviour for prehistoric environments in south-west Asia', in *Journal of Zoology* 250: 13-30.

not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh.

According to Deut. 15.22, the gazelle, as well as other non-consecrated meat, could be eaten in homes, without its blood, but was not to be used in sacrifices. The reason for this permission to eat the gazelle is that it belongs to the category of those animals that have cloven hooves and chews the cud. According to Deut. 14.4-6,

These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the hart, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain-sheep. Every animal that parts the hoof and has the hoof cloven in two, and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat.

So the gazelle was a 'clean', non-consecrated, non-sacrificial four-legged animal (τετράπους) that anyone could eat, regardless of their state of purity or impurity. It could be eaten by all, but only outside the sanctuary. It was not a 'holy' animal but neither was it profane or unclean. Peter had no grounds to reject the invitation to 'eat' the gazelle, as he later objected to eating other four-footed animals seen in his vision (Acts 10.14).

When we turn to the rabbinic literature, the status of the gazelle there is a little more complex. There was a difference of opinion as to whether the gazelle could be eaten at all. R. Akiba, 'who maintains that at no time was it ever forbidden to eat flesh at will' saw Deut. 12.22 as sanctioning his attitude; R. Ishmael questioned whether the gazelle was 'ever permitted to be eaten at all'. Only sacrificial meat was allowed to be eaten by Israel in the wilderness, and therefore gazelle was never permitted (Hull. 17a).

For the rabbis, the gazelle is clearly a non-consecrated animal, not to be used in Temple sacrifices, but it also appears to be the model for animals that were sacrificial but blemished in some way. In the discussion of what to do with consecrated sacrificial animals that became blemished, the Gemara states, 'as a gazelle is exempt from the law of the firstling (being a non-domesticated animal), so dedicated sacrifices which have become unfit for the altar are also exempt...' (Bek.15a; compare also 33a). Since the gazelle was exempt from the law of the firstling, it could not acquire the holiness of the firstling (Deut. 15.19). However, some rabbis taught that the gazelle had to be ritually slaughtered because it was on the same footing as a blemished consecrated animal (Hull. 28a). In other words, the gazelle had a degree of holiness associated with it.

The Gazelle as Symbol in Jewish and Christian Art and Literature

Asa Strandberg argues in a recent doctoral thesis that in Egyptian art the female gazelle is a symbol of the nurturer and life-giver while the male gazelle is the symbol of the hunted and of death.¹⁴ In Jewish literature and art, the gazelle often seems to serve the same symbolic purposes. Most extant art is probably from the third century or later, but there is little reason to suggest the gazelle was not similarly used in earlier artistic and literary symbolism. In the decorations of the synagogue at Naaran, for example, gazelles featured peacefully grazing at a clump of living flora or at a

¹⁴ Personal communication by email, April 10, 2006.

well.¹⁵ Water, of course, is a symbol of life, so the link between water and the gazelle is an obvious one to make. The gazelle is capable of going without water for long periods of time because it stores its own fluids. In addition, Ps. 42.1 refers to the desire of the deer for the living waters. In early Christian art, the deer symbolized the spirit and soul of the believer and often was depicted in baptismal churches near the images of pools and springs that symbolised the fountain of life. Deer were also often depicted intertwined among acanthus scrolls, where they symbolised renewed life, life that comes out of death.¹⁶

Four physical features of the gazelle make the animal a suitable symbol of life. The first are its eyes which are strikingly soft, big, alive, and alert. Life is in the eyes; at death the eyes are closed and the spirit of life moves from the face. When Peter raises Tabitha to life, she opens her eyes (9.40), a feature mentioned in the raising by Elisha of a young boy who 'sneezed and opened his eyes' (2 Kgs 4.35). Attention is drawn to the eyes. Because they are open, life must have been restored. The open eyes are a symbol of life, especially of divine life. It is said that the gazelle sleeps with one eye open, and so it was later used as an image of Yahweh. The Aramaic Targum to the Song of Songs, 8.14, says: 'In that hour the elders of the Assembly of Israel will say, 'Flee, my Beloved, Lord of the world, from this polluted earth, and let your Presence dwell in heaven above. But in times of trouble, when we pray to you, be like a gazelle which sleeps with one eye closed and one eye open'.

A second feature of the gazelle is its speed and agility. Not surprisingly, speedy humans were likened to the gazelle (2 Sam. 2.18; 1 Chron. 12.8). Their speed sometimes allowed them to escape the snares laid for them (Sir. 27.20), that is, it allowed them to escape death. The sure-footedness of the gazelle was used metaphorically for the security offered by God: '[God] has made my feet like gazelles and made me stand on my high places' (2 Sam. 22.34 and Ps. 19.34). In the Targum on the Song of Songs, the speed of the gazelle is seen as a positive metaphor for the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob 'who were swift in worshiping Him, as a gazelle (2.17), and Yahweh himself is said to have 'run like a gazelle' in his saving actions in Egypt (2.9). It is possible that speed was the reason that the revolutionary, John, was also called 'the son of Dorcas' (Josephus, Wars 4.145).

The attractive horns of the gazelle provided a suitable symbol of the sun and of a new day. The rabbis played especially on the reference in Ps 22.1, which is headed 'To the chief musician upon Ayelet Hashachar (the Gazelle of Dawn)'. Yoma 29a says, 'Just as that gazelle's horns divide to here and to there, so the dawn comes up here and there'. According to the Jerusalem Talmud, Rabbi Chiya, Rava and Rabbi Shimon Ben Chalafta were walking through the Valley of Arbel at dawn and they saw the gazelle of Dawn as its light first appeared. R. Chiya said to R. Shimon Ben Chalafta: 'So will the redemption of Israel be, at first little by little but as it continues it will grow continually' (j. Berak.1.1.2). The gazelle of Dawn was a sign of hope.

The gazelle uses her horns to dig for water, and the rabbis interpreted this activity as an indication of her piety and closeness to Yahweh:

¹⁵ See Fine, S. 2005 *Art and Judaism in the Graeco-Roman World: Towards a new Jewish archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University) 96.

¹⁶ See, for example, Najjar, M. – Sa'Id, F. 1994 'A New Umayyad Church At Khilda – Amman', *Liber Annuus* 44: 547-560. The frescoes of San Clemente basilica use the deer motif as a symbol of life.

She digs a hole and enters her horns into it, and lows, and the Deep raises water to her, as it is said, 'Like a gazelle, as she moans for streams of water' (Psalm 42:2). When David saw how the Blessed Holiness answers her, he began the arrangement of a psalm with her: 'For the conductor, on the gazelle of the dawn' (Midrash Tehillim 22:14).¹⁷

Finally, the gazelle was considered a beautiful, much-loved, and greatly admired animal. In Gen. 49.21, Naphtali is identified as a gazelle 'dropping beautiful fawns'. In the Song of Songs, the lover sings fondly of the lovely features of the gazelle as symbolising the beauty of the beloved. 'My beloved is like a gazelle' or a young stag (2.9); 'Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle' (4.5; 7.3; compare also Prov. 5.19). O. Keel writes, 'both breasts and fawns of a gazelle in particular symbolise the warmth of life, an inspiring and victorious counter-form to death'.¹⁸ A dead gazelle was a symbol of the tragedy of death.

This very positive view of the gazelle among the rabbis is enhanced by their claims that the gazelle is the animal 'most loved by God . . . because a gazelle harms no one, and never disturbs the peace' (Midrash Samuel 9). According to the Zohar,

our Rabbis have said that she [the gazelle] is the kindest of the animals, and she has more compassion than she has children. When all the animals are thirsty they gather around her, since they know her kind deeds, so that she will raise her eyes on high, and the Blessed Holiness will have compassion for them (Midrash Tehillim 22:14).

The Zohar¹⁹, referring to Psalm 22.1, says,

What is the gazelle of the dawn? She is an animal who is compassionate; among all the animals in the world, none is compassionate like her. Because, at a time when time is pressing on her and she needs to feed herself and all the animals, she goes into the distance, by a distant path, and brings food. And she does not want to eat until she comes back and returns to her place. Why? So that the rest of the animals may gather to her, so that she may divide that food for them. When she comes back, all the rest of the animals are gathered to her, and she stands in the middle and distributes portions to each and every one. A reminder of this is: 'She gets up while it is still night and gives food to her household...'. And from what she distributes to them, she is satisfied, as if she had eaten more food than all of them...

And at a time when the world needs rain, all the rest of the animals are gathered to her, and she goes up to the peak of a high mountain, and conceals her head between her knees and lows, lowing again and again. And the

¹⁷ Is it coincidental that the next character in the narrative is Cornelius, a name that is derived from the Latin *cornus* = 'horn'? The horn was a symbol of strength and power, especially in military symbolism.

¹⁸ 1994 *Song of Songs* (Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis) 94.

¹⁹ The authenticity and dating of this text is much debated. It was certainly known in the thirteenth century, but there are claims that it dates back to the second century of the Common Era.

Blessed Holiness hears her voice and is filled with compassion, and takes care of the world. But she descends from the peak of the mountain and runs and hides herself. And all the rest of the animals run after her, but they do not find her. As it is written, 'Like a gazelle, as she moans for streams of water'. What is 'for streams of water'? For water from those streams which have dried up, and the world thirsts for water – then she moans (Zohar III. 249a-b).

In Jewish traditions, then, the gazelle was often seen as a very positive symbol of love, of life, and even of God. For the rabbis, one of the most positive things to be said of a bride is that she is 'as graceful as a gazelle' (Ket. 17a). This very positive view of the gazelle suggests that the name Tabitha was given to a woman who was viewed very positively within the community to which she belonged. In Luke's narrative, Tabitha is characterised by compassion. She was 'full of good works and acts of charity' (9.36), the classic actions of the righteous. She fits the image of the gazelle, later (if not earlier) regarded as the most compassionate and gentle of creatures. Physically, there is a certain grace and beauty in the animal, in its shape and form, but also in its movements and behaviour towards others in the herd. It might be remembered that Tabitha, the gazelle, is closely associated in Acts with a group of widows, is clearly loved by them, and appears to have had a caring and nurturing role among them. She belongs to a group, a community made up of 'saints and widows' (9.41). Her presence was a source of life and strength and hope; her death was something to be mourned as a significant loss to the community. To be named Tabitha, to be called a 'gazelle', was very positive and affirming. This affirming status, however, was modified by the ritual status of the gazelle as an animal that was not consecrated for sacrificial service.

The Gazelle as Metaphor for the Proselyte

The characteristics of the gazelle that have been mentioned make the animal a suitable metaphor for the proselyte. The gazelle inhabited the fringes, it was a clean animal but not to be dedicated for sacrifices, and it could be eaten by clean and unclean. The gazelle was an animal of the desert fringes often on the search for water – a suitable metaphor for the proselyte looking for the living water. Understandably, Ps. 42, which refers to the deer panting after the living waters, was used by Augustine to indicate the catechumens preparing for baptism, and he says the Psalm was chanted on the occasion of their baptism.²⁰

There are later Jewish and Christian literary uses of the gazelle or deer as metaphor for the proselyte. According to Lev. 19.34, 'The stranger (προσήλυτος) shall be to you as one of your citizens'. Rabbi Alexandri (a third century Palestinian sage) is reported to have commented:

How loved is the stranger in the eyes of the Lord, who commanded regarding them in forty-eight instances. [The proselyte] is like a deer that joins a shepherd's herd and is favourable in his eyes. He says, 'In this one I have not invested from its birth but it joined my sheep therefore I love it'. Such are the righteous proselytes. God said, 'since he came under my wing, he shall be to you as one of your citizens' (Midrash Ha-chadash on Leviticus, cited in Torah Sheleima).

²⁰ Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*.

In the later *Numbers Rabbah* there is the following story:

The Holy One loves the proselytes exceedingly. To what is the matter like? To a king who had a number of sheep and goats which went forth every morning to the pasture, and returned in the evening to the stable. One day a stag joined the flock and grazed with the sheep, and returned with them. Then the shepherd said to the king, 'There is a stag which goes out with the sheep and grazes with them, and comes home with them.' And the king loved the stag exceedingly. And he commanded the shepherd, saying: 'Give heed unto this stag, that no man beat it'; and when the sheep returned in the evening, he would order that the stag should have food and drink. Then the shepherds said to him, 'My Lord, thou hast many goats and sheep and kids, and thou givest us no directions about these, but about this stag thou givest us orders day by day.' Then the king replied: 'It is the custom of the sheep to graze in the pasture, but the stags dwell in the wilderness, and it is not their custom to come among men in the cultivated land. But to this stag who has come to us and lives with us, should we not be grateful that he has left the great wilderness, where many stags and gazelles feed, and has come to live among us? It behoves us to be grateful.' So too spoke the Holy One: 'I owe great thanks to the stranger, in that he has left his family and his father's house, and come to dwell among us; therefore I order in the Law: "Love the stranger"' (*Numbers Rabbah* 8.3).²¹

The underlying message, taken as a whole, is clear: Protection of the rights of the proselyte is Israel's responsibility and the convert and the descendants of converts are to be integrated fully into the family of Israel.

In Christian literature, there are indications of the deer and gazelle being used as metaphors for the neophyte. In the Barlaam and Joseph narrative, the gazelle is so used. Barlaam tells Joseph:

A certain rich man once reared the fawn of a gazelle; which, when grown up, was impelled by natural desire to long for the desert. So on a day she went out and found an herd of gazelles browsing; and, joining them, she would roam through the glades of the forest, returning at evenfall, but issuing forth at dawn, through the heedlessness of her keepers, to herd with her wild companions. When these removed, to graze further afield, she followed them. But the rich man's servants, when they learned thereof, mounted on horseback, and gave chase, and caught the pet fawn, and brought her home again, and set her in captivity for the time to come. But of the residue of the herd, some they killed, and roughly handled others ... But this is the will of the Lord concerning time; thou now indeed must be signed with the seal of holy Baptism, and abide in this country, cleaving to all righteousness, and the fulfilling of the commandments of Christ; but when the Giver of all good things shall give thee opportunity, then shalt thou come to us, and for the remainder of this present life we shall dwell together;

²¹ Cited in Barrett, C. K. 1956 *The New Testament Background: Selected documents*. (London: SPCK) 165.

and I trust in the Lord also that in the world to come we shall not be parted asunder' (ch 18).

Because the gazelle was a commonly seen animal in certain parts of Israel and elsewhere,²² and because the Torah gave clear indications of its status, we can assume with reasonable safety that any metaphorical use of the animal would have been understood by Luke's original audiences. In addition, it would seem that by translating the name Tabitha into Greek, Luke drew attention to its meaning, 'a gazelle'. Instead of reading Δορκας as a Greek version of the Aramaic name, I suggest it be read as referring to the animal. In that case, Peter addresses her by her name 'Tabitha' in 9.40, and the narrator calls her 'the gazelle' (rather than 'Dorcas') in 9.39.

In sum, the female gazelle is viewed very positively in both Jewish and Christian art and literature. She is a symbol of love, grace and beauty, of service and compassion; and she is a symbol for the proselyte and the neophyte.

Tabitha, the gazelle-proselyte, in Acts

I suggest that the Tabitha in Luke's narrative was a proselyte. Female proselytes are, of course, not unknown from Jewish literature and also from inscriptional evidence. Josephus records the well-known cases of Fulvia in Rome (Ant. 18.3.5) and Helena, queen of Adiabene (Ant. 20.2.3; compare also Wars 2.20.2). Beturia Paulla, a rich proselyte of Rome, is known in inscriptions as *mater synagogae*.²³ Luke himself refers to Lydia in Philippi as one who 'revered God' (σεβομένη τὸν θεόν, Acts 16.14).

It is possible that Tabitha was not her birth-name, but a name given to her by the Jewish community of which she was a proselyte. The use of the word μαθήτρια (unique in the New Testament) suggests Tabitha belonged to a Christian community, if the use of the masculine forms μαθητής/μαθηταί in the rest of Acts is any indication. She was given her name because it fitted her character. Tabitha had some of the characteristics of a *dorcas*, a gazelle. By translating her name for a Greek-speaking audience, Luke draws attention to that character. The name (and especially re-naming) and character link is well known from elsewhere in ancient Jewish and Christian literature. For example, Abram is called Abraham by Yahweh 'because I will make you father of a multitude of nations' (Gen. 17.5); Simon, son of John, is renamed Cephas which the narrator says means πέτρος (Jn 1.42). James and John are renamed Boanerges which is translated υἱοὶ βροντῆς, 'sons of thunder' (Mk 3.17); Joseph Justus is given a new name, Barnabas, which means 'son of consolation' (Acts 4.36).

But what was Tabitha's status within that community of saints (ἄγιοι) and widows (9.41)? I suggest that the name was given to her not only because of her character but also because she was a proselyte. The gazelle was a suitable name and metaphor for a woman on the fringes of a Christian community – a God-fearer or a proselyte. I suggest this for two main reasons: The gazelle was an animal that inhabited the fringes, and for many Jews was regarded as an undomesticated, wild, animal. It was exempt from the law of the firstling, which meant that it was not a consecrated animal. On the other hand, it was an animal that the 'clean' could eat, and

²² It is still found in good numbers in Syria, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Jordan. Its horns commonly feature on the headdresses of ancient Egyptian and Syrian deities, especially of Reshep, the Syrian war-god.

²³ See Huskinson, J. (ed), 2000 *Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge) 312.

it belonged to the category of 'clean' animals. So there was a degree of ambiguity about the gazelle. The proselyte also raised questions of ambiguity. Attitudes towards proselytes, and acceptance of them, varied from situation to situation, from rabbi to rabbi, from community to community. Their very existence commonly raised questions. It seems that the gazelle was a suitable metaphor for them. Luke refers to 'proselytes' three times in Acts (2.11; 6.5; 13.43), and twice he clearly distinguishes them from 'Jews' (Acts 2.11; 13.43). He also commonly mentions people (often women) who were associated with the synagogue. They were not Jews, but 'God-fearers' (Acts 10.2, 35; 13.16, 26) or those who 'revered God' (13.43, 50; 16.14; 17.4, 17; 18.7). Luke could be read as having some concern and interest in such people since they were the ones who were attracted to the gospel as Paul, in particular, presented it.

So it certainly need not be assumed that Tabitha was born a Jew, despite the Aramaic name; I suggest she belonged to the class of proselytes and was similar to the God-fearing Cornelius. She is said to have been 'full of good works and charity' (πλήρης ἔργων ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἐλεημοσυνῶν, 9.36) just as Cornelius is described as 'doing acts of charity' (ποιῶν ἐλεημοσύνας, 10.2). Such actions qualified both to belong to the category of 'righteous ones'. According to 1 Tim. 2.10, 'good works' are befitting of women who 'profess religion' (ἐπαγγελομέναις θεοσέβειαν).

Tabitha is also closely connected with the widows in the Christian community of Joppa. This too is a possible indication of her proselyte status since the προσήλυτος is very closely linked with the 'orphan and the widow' in the Deuteronomic code (for example, Deut. 24.17-21; 26.12; 27.19). What the proselyte and the widow have in common, at least, is that they both have lost family roots and ties – the one by choice, the other by death. Like the widows, as a proselyte Tabitha was vulnerable, and in her weakness could expect support from and protection in Israel. In Acts, the audience might well ask, 'Will the proselyte find protection in the renewed Israel?'

I suggest that Tabitha, the gazelle, represents those located on the fringes of a Christian community, those who were 'non-domesticated' and more importantly, 'non-consecrated', that is, they had not yet been brought into the community of the holy ones. It is true that she is called a 'disciple', but that category is not sufficient to imply full acceptance and full membership among the saints. The strange twelve men of Ephesus, who were 'believers' but had been baptised only with the baptism of John, are also called 'disciples' (Acts 19.1). But they had not been purified – they had not received the holy spirit (19.2). In Acts, the only authorised conveyors of purification by the holy spirit are Peter (10.44-47; and John, 8.14-17), Paul (19.6-7), and Aeneas (9. 17). Tabitha and Cornelius, despite being closely associated with the people of God, had not yet been purified by the holy spirit. Their purification only comes when Peter is present. It took Peter some time to recognise that God shows no partiality (10.35) and that the promised eschatological purifying spirit was also for the proselyte and the God-fearer. Tabitha's death and subsequent restoration to life are metaphors of the process by which such disciples were accepted as 'living ones' into the community of the holy. It is a metaphor for the 'repentance that leads to life' (εἰς ζωὴν) that God was now giving 'even to the gentiles' (καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, Acts 11.18). Death as a pathway to holiness and purification is not an uncommon idea. I have suggested elsewhere that Eutychus, the νεανίας of Troas (20.9), is another whose death and restoration by Paul is a metaphor for the transitional process that needs to

take place for a ‘young’ member to become a ‘living son’ (παῖδα ζῶντα) in the community (20.12).²⁴

From a narrative perspective, Tabitha’s meeting with Peter prepares the audience for the apostle’s critical meeting in the house of Cornelius, the Roman soldier – a meeting that clearly is of great significance in the Lukan narrative. It is often noted that Luke’s narrative operates with pairs of events or characters. Gaventa (and many others) therefore links the raising of Tabitha with the healing of Aeneas (2003: 159; compare also Spencer 1997: 106). The pairing is admittedly close, but I suggest that the Tabitha episode can also be paired equally closely with the Cornelius episode that immediately follows. Her story is part of the Peter cycle of stories in Acts (9.32-12.19) that concludes with Peter entering into the God-fearer Cornelius’ house, accepting his hospitality, eating with the ‘common and unclean’ (κοινὸν καὶ ἀκάθαρτον, 10.14), and witnessing the outpouring of the gift of the spirit of holiness on pagans (10.45). The sanctification of a God-fearer, evidenced by the outpouring of ‘holy spirit’, is the climax of the cycle. Tabitha, ‘the proselyte-gazelle’, her location in Joppa, and her death-to-life experience are all part of leading the audience to that climax. Like Cornelius, Tabitha symbolises the issue facing the Christian community: what is the status of god-fearers, proselytes, diaspora Jews and other fringe or ‘risky’ associates? Can those with whom ‘both clean and unclean’ may eat be accepted into the community? More importantly, can people like proselytes belong to the ‘holy ones’? Luke’s answer is a clear ‘Yes, by all means; but they, like all of Israel, need to go through a transforming process’.

Peter restored Tabitha to life and ‘presented’ her as a ‘living one’ to the community of ‘widows and saints’ (9.41). The verb ‘presented’ (παρέστησεν) is used with the same sense it has in the episode of Mary and Joseph who ‘present [Jesus] to the Lord’ (παραστήσαι τῷ κυρίῳ) in the Temple (Lk. 2.22). It has a strong sense of dedication and consecration.²⁵ Language similar to that used by Paul when talking about baptism can be discerned here. The same verb is used in Rom. 6.13 where Paul urges Christians to present themselves (παραστήσατε ἑαυτούς) to God as ‘the living ones from the dead’ (ἐκ νεκρῶν ζῶντας). Paul uses this language to describe the life of those baptised into Christ (Rom. 6.1-11) and into the community of Christ. Peter presents Tabitha to the community as a ‘living one’ (ζῶσαν, 9.41). Her status changes from death to life, from outside (or from the fringe) to inside the community of the holy ones (τοὺς ἁγίους, 9.41). It is as if she was ‘born again’, and as the infant Jesus was presented, so Tabitha is presented as a new born child to the community. Many of the locals ‘believed the Lord’ (9.42), possibly attracted by the good news that the proselyte is also included in the renewed Israel.

The audience is being prepared for Peter’s vision in the very next episode in which he sees all sorts of quadrupeds (10.12; there were ten ‘clean’ quadrupeds, including the gazelle; see Deut. 14.4) in a sheet and he is told to kill and eat. It is obviously a vision preparing him for entrance into Cornelius’ house and for the change in his thinking that he undergoes there. So the very mention of the name, Tabitha, which by being translated has attention drawn to it, might well conjure up the issue of clean and unclean for an audience alert for such clues. That Luke’s audience

²⁴ Strelan, R. 2004 *Strange Acts* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter) 251-257. There are a number of striking parallels between the stories of Tabitha and Eutychus.

²⁵ I suggest that the verb is used with that meaning also in v 39. The widows do not merely ‘stand beside Peter’ (RSV) but *present* to Peter the clothes of Tabitha as dedicated objects of the dead woman.

might be expected to watch for such clues is supported by the fact that the relation between gentiles, God-fearers, and Jews in the Christian communities was a burning issue. So crucial was it that the subsequent decision, spearheaded by Peter's report on his visit to Cornelius, was, as Johnson says, 'so unprecedented that the entire section of chapters 10-15 struggles with it'.²⁶ So it is that very issue that forms the immediate context of this section of the narrative. It is apt, then, that the episode immediately prior to the vision of Peter and the acceptance of Cornelius and his household into the Christian community should have a woman whose name means 'gazelle', the animal that clean and unclean alike may eat, but is not consecrated or holy.

Joppa

Another reason for suggesting that Tabitha was a proselyte or someone who represented the fringe members of a Christian community is her location in Joppa. It is apparent that much about Tabitha relates to an issue that caused many headaches for Jewish (and many Christian) communities, namely, the issue of 'mixing'. The name Tabitha, given in both Aramaic and Greek forms, itself indicates her 'mixed' identity. Translating the name into Greek draws attention to the woman's status as 'mixed'. The gazelle could be eaten by 'clean and unclean alike'. By associating Tabitha with widows (if she was not one herself), Luke might expect the audience to recall the tensions that existed in Jerusalem between Greek and non-Greeks regarding widows and their care (Acts 6).

Locating Tabitha in Joppa accentuates the issue of mixing and adds weight to the argument that she was a proselyte – that is, a Jew who had gentile origins. As Barrett suggests, the double name fits the mixed demographics of Joppa.²⁷ It is significant that Joppa is mentioned repeatedly (ten times, in fact) in the Peter cycle of episodes (9.36, 38, 42, 43; 10.5, 8, 23, 32; 11.5,13) – too many times to be coincidental in the narrative. Repetition draws attention. In the context, the repetition draws attention to Peter's move to the edges and fringes, where mixing is inevitable and critical decisions need to be made about mixing with 'the common and unclean' (κοινὸν καὶ ἀκάθαρτον, 10.14). Locating Peter in Joppa, a sea-port town known by the audience to be of mixed, if not predominantly gentile, population prepares the way for his pivotal meeting with Cornelius. Peter is yet to move into the homes of the God-fearing gentiles; but he is willing to go on invitation into a house where there is a dead proselyte disciple in the mixed town of Joppa (9.38-39).

Many Jews in Luke's audience would have known of Joppa. It was a town allotted in the inheritance of Dan (Josh. 19.46), located between Caesarea and Gaza, and at a distance of thirty miles northwest from Jerusalem. It was an important seaport that linked Jerusalem and the Mediterranean world. Seaports notoriously consisted of mixed peoples from various parts of the Mediterranean world, resulting often in social behaviour that raised eyebrows in more mono-dimensional Jewish communities. Joppa was a fringe town in Israel in that it had a large population of non-Jewish inhabitants and relations between Jews and local citizens were not always harmonious, if the episode reported in 2 Maccabees is any indication. According to that episode, the pagan locals tricked the Jewish population into boarding boats, and

²⁶ Johnson, L.T. 1992 *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minn.: Michael Glazer, Liturgical Press) 179.

²⁷ Barrett, C.K. 1994 *The Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark) 1.482-483.

when out to sea, drowned two hundred of them (12.3-9). In its recent history, Joppa ('beauty') had been sometimes under Jewish control, sometimes not. For example, under Simon Maccabeus, it was in Jewish control (1 Macc. 12.33); Antony gave it to Cleopatra (Josephus Ant. 14.10.6); and Caesar restored it to Herod (Ant. 15.7.3).

Joppa belonged to Japheth, and Japheth is said to have had seven sons (Gen. 10.2; Josephus, Ant. 1.6.1) who in turn became known as the ancestors of the gentiles. According to the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Gen. 9.27 ('May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem') was interpreted to mean that the descendants of Japheth will become proselytes and will study the Law in the schools of Shem. In other words, there was a known link between Japheth/Joppa and proselytes. If Luke wanted to locate a proselyte in a town that was symbolic of the proselyte, Joppa would have been an understandable choice.

From a narrative point of view, many in the audience familiar with the biblical narratives would have known that it was from Joppa that Jonah wished to flee to Tarshish and so escape the Lord's commission for the Jewish prophet to call Nineveh to repentance (Jon. 1.3). In that story, Joppa represents 'the edge', the point of decision, and crisis time for Jonah. In Acts, along comes another one sent by the Lord, Peter. What will happen as he is called upon by the two messengers 'not to delay but to come with us' (9.38) to Joppa? Will Peter do a Jonah? The audience is immediately assured: 'Peter arose and went with them' (9.39). It is the first step that Peter takes in the transformation of his own thinking about the status of proselytes and God-fearers in the renewed and purified Israel.

There is another Jewish story that has echoes in this episode and one that also deals with Israel's relation to outsiders. It is the story of Balak, king of Moab (Israel's 'cousin', the descendants of Lot), and Balaam, the prophet of Israel. The words used by the messengers of the disciples at Joppa in addressing Peter, 'Come to us as soon as possible' (μη ὀκνήσης διελθεῖν ἕως ἡμῶν) echo the words of the messengers of Balak to Balaam (μη ὀκνήσης ἐλθεῖν πρὸς με, Num. 22. 16). In that incident, a foreigner, but a 'relative' of Israel, requests a man of God to come. Here in Acts, the disciples of Joppa request the holy man Peter to come to attend to a deceased proselyte, and 'Peter rose and went with them' (9.39); this recalls how Yahweh told Balaam to go with the messengers of Balak (Num. 22.20).

The idea that Joppa was used by Luke as a symbol of mixing, of borders and fringe-dwellers is reinforced by the sentence that links the episode of Tabitha with that of Cornelius (9.43). According to that verse, Peter stayed in the house of Simon the tanner at Joppa. A little later in the narrative that house is said to be 'beside the sea' (10.6). Simon the tanner's house in Joppa is sandwiched between the house where the dead Tabitha was placed, and the house of the God-fearing Cornelius. As is frequently noted, tanners dealt with 'unclean' skins of dead animals in their trade.²⁸ It is all part of the ambiguity in which Peter finds himself and for which he needs divine revelation to instruct him (10.3-23). Peter quickly learns the significance of the divine instruction as he invites the 'men sent by Cornelius' into his house and provides them with hospitality (ἐξένιζεν, 10.23).

Conclusion

²⁸ So, for example, Bruce, *Acts*, 200.

I have demonstrated that Tabitha and Joppa are names that were used as metaphors for proselytes and for the issue of mixing. The status of gentiles was clearly a divisive issue among many early Christian communities, especially among those with significant Jewish members. In Acts, these gentiles often appear in the narrative as proselytes and God-fearers and those who revered God. Luke employs the names Tabitha and Joppa as metaphor and symbol in his narrative as he builds towards the Jerusalem council's decree regarding the status of gentiles and their obligations. If there is any merit in this reading of Tabitha and Joppa, then it is possible that other names in Acts, both of people and of places, deserve closer attention for the role that they might play within Luke's narrative. It might suggest that certain episodes in Acts call for a closer metaphorical and symbolical reading than those concerned for the historical reliability of the episodes would concede.