

Success Through Failure: Luke's Paradoxical View of the Christian Mission to the Jews

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Abstract

The present article sets out to analyze Luke's view of the Christian mission to the Jews. Specific attention is paid to the question of whether in any sense this mission may be considered as being successful or it may be regarded as having a future. A key distinction is introduced between Luke's representation of the Christian mission to the Jews and his interpretation of it. Thus, the first section looks primarily at how Luke represents the Jewish response to the mission, while the second section explores the way in which he interprets this response. The conclusion of the study is that Luke's concern is neither to show that the mission to the Jews has failed because of a negative response, nor that it has succeeded because of a positive response, but rather that it has achieved its goal and it has a future despite a predominantly negative response.

Key words: *Gospel of Luke, Acts, success, failure, Christian mission*

Introduction

Luke's portrait of the Jews has been, for several decades, one of the main topics of interest in Lucan studies (Sanders 1991, 434-436). Within this broader theme, the present article sets out to analyze Luke's view of the Christian mission to the Jews and, more specifically, the extent to which this mission may be considered a success or a failure. Thus, the first section will look primarily at how Luke repre-

sents the Jewish response to the mission (which in the context of Luke – Acts, is a *Christian* mission, i.e. a call to a relationship with God *via Jesus the Christ*). The second section will then look at how Luke *interpreted* this response (more specifically: what, in Luke’s view, the mission to the Jews was meant to accomplish, and whether, in the light of this, the Jewish response of section 1 is to be regarded as a success or as a failure).

It needs to be also noted that the main concern of this article (the *mission* to the Jews) is deliberately distinct from that of most of the relevant scholarship on the subject (the *portrait* of the Jews). The implication of this is that the references to the contributions of various scholars should not necessarily be regarded as summary statements of their main arguments.

Luke’s Representation of the Jewish Response to the Christian Mission

The main problem which one encounters in attempting to understand Luke’s view of the Jewish response to the gospel is the tension between one set of passages which represent the Jews as divided on the issue and another set of passages which include blanket statements regarding the Jewish unbelief (e.g. Ac. 7:51-3; 28:25-7) (Sanders 1988, 56-58).

One attempt of solving the tension has been by attributing the apparently conflicted statements to different sources, but this solution is nothing more than shifting the same problem to the editor who was responsible for the final form of the narrative (Sanders 1988, 58).

One of the most thorough recent dealings with this tension is to be found in the works of J. T. Sanders. Following Lohfink, he tries to solve the tension by separating speech from narrative (Sanders 1988, 58). Thus, insofar as the speeches are concerned, the Jews in general, and their response to God’s visitation in particular, are described in uniformly negativistic terms (Sanders 1988, 59-66). The narrative on the other hand, Sanders argues, seems to present the gospel as dividing Israel, but even the narrative only records positive response as far as Acts 5, after which the narrative increasingly matches the speech, so that by the end of Acts “the Jews become what they form the first were” (Sanders 1988, 73): the opponents of the gospel.

Despite Sanders’ very detailed analysis of the biblical material, he has correctly been accused of not doing full justice to it when he asserts that beginning with Stephen’s martyrdom, the Jews become uniformly the enemies of the gospel. M. Salmon gives a list of passages which indicate that even beyond Acts 9:22 there are Jews who respond positively to the gospel (13:42-3; 14:1-2; 17:4; 17:11-12; 18:4; 18:20; 28:24-5) (Salmon 1988, 81). Particularly significant in this respect is also J. A. Weatherly’s remark that even at the end of Acts (28:4), where accor-

ding to Sanders's scheme the resolution between speech and narrative must be complete (i.e. totally negative response), in which some Jews are 'persuaded' by Paul's preaching (ἐπειθοντο being best understood as an indication of conversion) (Weatherly 1989, 109-110).

In contrast to Sanders' position stands Jervell's approach, which denied the existence of any Lucan material which would suggest Israel's *en bloc* rejection of the gospel. Rather, "the missionary proclamation has divided Israel into two groups: the repentant and the unrepentant" (Jervell 1972, 42). These statements, as it stands, might seem to indicate a *via media* approach, but Jervell's later explanation of his position reveals that, far from describing Israel as a whole as rejecting the gospel, Luke's concern was to emphasize the *positive* side of the Jewish response (Jervell 1972, 49). Even when the emphasis of the Christian mission eventually shifts from Jews to Gentiles, this happens, according to Jervell, not because the Jews have *rejected* the Gospel, but quite the opposite: "only when Israel has *accepted* the gospel can the way to Gentiles be opened" (Jervell 1972, 55; italics mine). According to Jervell, Israel's *en bloc* rejection would mean not only that God's promises to Israel have not been fulfilled but also that the Gentile mission would be impossible (Jervell 1972, 43), since the believing Gentiles are only the "associate" people of God and they cannot share in salvation as long as Israel itself has not been "restored" (Jervell 1972, 43, 56-61). This is indeed a very important observation and we will come back to it in section 2. 1. For the moment, it suffices to say that pointing to the *implications* of an *en bloc* rejection is not a sufficient basis for assuming that the negative statements about the response of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι or τὸν λαὸν cannot possibly refer to the whole nation.

Between the extreme representations of Sanders (together with his predecessor E. Haenchen) and Jervell stand most other contributions to the debate. One important feature, which a number of these contributions share, is the assertion that throughout Luke-Acts, there is a pattern in the Jewish response to the Gospel: in the midst of general Jewish rejection, there is always a minority who responds positively (some agreement between these authors on *what* the Jewish response was does not mean, however, that they also agree on how this response is to be interpreted, i.e. as a success or a failure of the mission, but this is an issue which will be discussed in the next section). The difference between this position and Jervell's "divided Israel" theory is that, while for Jervell, the division is between two parts of Judaism, with the permanent emphasis on the believing side, here the division is between Israel as a nation and a Jewish minority. According to this view, the ratio between those who believe and those who reject certainly varies from place to place and also from one period to another (thus, for example, the very early days of the mission in Jerusalem, as they are recorded in the first five

chapters of Acts, are often singled out as “the Jerusalem springtime”), but what seems to remain constant in Luke’s presentation, is that the Jews as a nation, are portrayed as rejecting the gospel, while a certain minority accepts it gladly. R. I. Brawley, for example, summarizes his findings in the words: “large islands of acceptance jut out in the midst of the opposition” (Brawley 1987, 156). A similar division (although on a more negative background tone than Brawley’s) is made by R. Maddox: “Israel, viewed as an institution (and always excepting many individual Jews) rejects what was offered to them” (Maddox 1982, 55). This distinction between the response of the Jewish nation as a whole and the response of individual Jews is also taken up by J. B. Tyson and defended as the solution to the tension between the Jewish divided response to Paul’s preaching in Rome and his blanket condemnation of the Jewish people (Ac. 28:24-28); moreover, Tyson suggests this distinction as the key for the understanding of a number of other equally problematic passages in Acts (Tyson 1988, 126, 131-133).

Despite the disagreements which exists between the advocates of this last approach (Brawley 1987, 154 vs. Tyson 1988, 137), and even despite the weaknesses or exaggerations of their arguments at various points (Turner, n.d. 2, 4-5), it nevertheless seems that this distinction between the corporate response of the Jewish nation and the individual response of the various Jews does best justice to the biblical material. Such a distinction allows room both for the positive response of a Jewish minority and the negative statements regarding the response of Israel as a nation. This is particularly obvious at three key points in Luke’s narrative, where Paul turns from Jews to Gentiles (13:46; 18:6:28:25-28). In each of these incidents, a Jewish minority responds positively, while the majority, which stands for the whole nation, rejects the message and gets condemned. We shall limit our discussion to one of these passages and, given its key role in regard to Luke’s understanding of the mission to the Jews, we shall choose the third one. Following J. Dupont, Turner argues that *τον λαον τουτον* in 28:26 does not refer to the Jewish people as a whole but only to the unbelieving part (Turner n.d. 2, 4-5). Several points which Turner makes deserve more special attention. First, he notes that the representatives of the “people” of 28:17 have been divided by Paul’s preaching (v.24) so that in v. 28, “the people” only refers to the unbelieving part of the Jewish people. The remark is correct insofar as it states that “people” in v. 28 carries a negative connotation which was not there in v. 17 (mirroring the changed context) but that the unbelieving “people” of v. 28 denotes only a part of the ethnic Israel cannot be adequately proved by v. 24. Paul does not qualify the term either in the sense of “a part of Israel” or in the sense of “every single Jew.” The meaning of “people” is rather determined by the contrast with “the Gentiles” of v. 28 (which suggests Jews

as an ethnic group) and by the original meaning of the quotation (which again indicates Israel as a whole – cf. Isa. 6). Turner's second point of interest is his disagreement with the premise that "the people" and "the Jews" in Luke are univocal, always standing for "the whole Jewish people." This objection is valid, as his examples demonstrate, but the fact that "the people" does not always mean the whole Jewish nation does not exclude that meaning here, if the context says so. The third point Turner makes is that if "the people" stands for the whole nation, this would bring even those who have been "persuaded" (v.24) under the condemnation of vv. 26-27. This objection only applies if one takes the term in an absolute sense, as referring to every single individual, but we have already suggested that such is not the case.

If this distinction between an unbelieving nation and a believing minority is then to be taken as a satisfactory understanding of Luke's representation of the Jewish response to the Christian mission, its implications for Luke's interpretation of this response are to be worked out in the next section.

Luke's Interpretation of the Jewish Response

Having paid some attention to Luke's representation of the Jewish response to the Christian mission, the question remains now to be asked how he interpreted this response. Did he regard it as the failure and termination of the mission to the Jews or in some other ways? It has often been assumed that Luke's *representation* of the Jewish response to the mission mirrors his *interpretation* of it. Thus, the degree of success of the mission would be directly proportional to the rate of positive response which he records. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the contribution of J. B. Tyson. His (largely correct) assessment of the Jewish response leads him to conclude that "two facts seem clear: for Luke, the mission to the Jews has failed and it has been terminated." This conclusion however, is dependent on his assumption regarding the goal of the Jewish mission: "what is intended," he says, "is the conversion of people as a whole" (Tyson 1988, 126). What his basis for such an assumption is, he does not explain. Yet, it is very important to appreciate this connection between the success and future of the mission and what it was "intended" in the first place to achieve. A brief survey of Luke's two-volume work suggests that beginning with the birth narratives, through the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah, to the formation and development of the Church, the mission to the Jews was meant to achieve the restoration of Israel (Luke 1:33, 68-72, 2:11, 30, 32, 34, Ac. 15:16-17), which would also result in the conversion of the Gentiles (Luke 2:31-2, 3:6, 24:47, Ac. 1:8, 15:17). There can be little doubt that Luke saw the conversion of the Gentiles as fulfilled, especially in the mission of the apostle Paul, who becomes for Luke, a kind of symbol

of Israel, spreading light to the nations (note the repeated emphasis on Paul's Jewishness: Ac. 13:26, 38; 22:1, 3; 23:1, 6; 26:4-7; 28:19). The slightly less straightforward issue is the meaning of "the restoration of Israel" and whether Luke regards this as having been accomplished. Does this "restoration" mean that the whole Jewish people was hoped to be converted (as Tyson would seem to imply)? There is some convincing evidence that Luke believed that the restoration of Israel was right from the beginning meant to be brought about by a sifting of Israel (Luke 3:17; 8:9-10; 12:51ff), which will apparently mean the salvation of a minority and the judgment of the majority (Luke 13:23-4; "remnant" in Ac. 15:17). Particularly noteworthy in this respect is D. P. Moesner's essay "The Ironic Fulfillment of Israel's Glory" (Tyson 1988, ch. 3). Despite the questionable distinction he makes between "point of view" and "omniscient" perspective in Luke – Acts (Turner n.d. 2, 11-12), his discussion of "Israel's rejection in the Acts which seems to have taken on monolithic proportions by the end of the story" (Moessner 1988, 46) remains entirely valid (Moessner 1988, 46-50). He notes how, according to Luke, God's plan for the restoration of Israel is fulfilled both in the Jewish minority who accepts the gospel and the majority who rejects it. He argues his case by pointing to two patterns adopted by Luke: (i) the servant pattern (inspired from Isaiah's servant passages) indicates that Israel's restoration is achieved by the salvation of a remnant which takes God's message to the unbelieving part of Israel and which glorifies God precisely through its "rejection and humiliation by Israel as a whole" (Moessner 1988, 48); (ii) the Deuteronomistic pattern of rejection of God's prophets by Israel culminates in the rejection of the "Prophet like Moses" together with his people, and by Jesus' resurrection Israel is offered again a lasting opportunity of repentance. Jervell, too, argues that the restoration of Israel includes both the gathering of the believing part and the cutting off of the unbelieving one (Jervell 1972, 41-69; Helyer 1993).

If this is the correct picture of what the mission to the Jews was intended to achieve, then one cannot but see it realized in Luke's representation of the Jewish response (section 1 above) which would mean that the Jewish mission has (paradoxically) achieved its goal.

When one moves from the issue of Luke's understanding of the failures/success of the mission to the Jews to that of the future of the mission, what for Jervell and Moessner were in the first place their points of consensus, become, in the second place, the points of their utter disagreement. Thus, the fact that a part of Israel has believed and one has rejected, means for Jervell that "Luke has excluded the possibility of a further mission to Jews for the church of his time" since "the unbelieving portion of the people is rejected for all times, and to those who have been converted, the promises have been fulfilled" (Jervell 1972, 64).

The same fact means for Moessner that within an unbelieving nation, there is a remnant entrusted by God with the precise mission of bringing his message and salvation to the unbelieving part.

While it may be possible that with the rejection of the gospel by the representatives of the Roman Jews, Luke foresaw more significant hardening of the Jews, the narrative does not end with the condemnation but with Paul welcoming "all" who were coming to him (presumably Jews included) and preaching the gospel "boldly and without hindrance" (28:30-1). The Isaianic quotation (28:26-7), however negative it may be, comes from a passage which ends with the promise of a "stump" coming out of the cut tree (Isa. 6:13).

Concluding Remarks

This essay has attempted to assess Luke's view of the mission to the Jews by distinguishing between Luke's *representation* of the Jewish response to the Christian mission and his *interpretation* of this response. This has revealed that Luke's concern is not to show that the mission to the Jews has failed because of a negative response, nor that it has succeeded because of a positive response, but rather that *it has achieved its goal despite a predominantly negative response*. Such a reading of Luke's material allows room for Luke's both positive and negative statements about the Jewish mission without declaring them as contradictory and without playing down either side. It was important for Luke to give plenty of evidence of positive response of Jewish individuals (hence Jervell's positive emphasis) if he was to show that God's plans for his people have not failed, but it was equally necessary to show that on the whole, Israel was not too ready to cooperate (hence the negative findings of Haenchen, Sanders, Tyson), if the fruits of the mission were not to be attributed to human qualities but to the divine wisdom. God has turned into success a cause bent towards failure.

Perhaps a similar paradox may also be the key to Luke's view on the future of the Jewish mission: God may allow the hardening of his chosen people, but he will not completely give up on them; He has kept a Remnant (the Church) and has called it to be the servant and the hope of all nations (Jewish included).

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Uspjeh kroz neuspjeh: Lukin paradoksalni pogled na kršćansko poslanje Židovima

Sažetak

U ovom se članku analizira Lukino viđenje kršćanskog poslanja Židovima. Posebna se pozornost posvećuje pitanju može li se u bilo kojem smislu to poslanje smatrati uspješnim te treba li ga nastaviti u budućnosti. Predstavlja se ključna razlika između Lukina prikaza kršćanskog poslanja Židovima te Lukina tumačenja toga poslanja. Stoga se prvi dio članka prije svega bavi pitanjem kako Luka prikazuje reakciju Židova na kršćansko poslanje, dok se u drugom dijelu istražuje način na koji Luka tumači njihovu reakciju. Zaključak ove studije jest da Lukina namjera nije bila pokazati da je poslanje Židovima bilo neuspješno zbog njihove negativne reakcije, kao ni da je bilo uspješno zbog njihove pozitivne reakcije, već da je ono postiglo svoj cilj i ima svoju budućnost, unatoč pretežno negativnoj reakciji Židova.