

The Significant of God-Fearers for the Formation of the Early Christian Identity in Acts 8-10

Antonius Galih Arga W. Aryanto^{1)*}

¹⁾ Faculty of Theology, Sanata Dharma University Yogyakarta, Indonesia

^{*)} Corresponding author: galiharga@usd.ac.id

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Abstract

This article attempts to analyze the important role of God-fearers in informing the early Christian identity. Luke and Acts use an ethnic-reasoning to define the Christian community. Luke and Acts uses the words gentiles, unbeliever and other ethnic groups, such as Romans and Greeks, to describe outsiders. When outsiders join the Christian community, they need a new identity that contrasts with their former. This study employs ethnicity theory to understand how people from different groups accept each other while negotiating their differences, such as their cultures, beliefs, and social relationships. The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius in Acts 8-10 demonstrates how the early Christians began to develop a fluid identity. Meaning some exceptions may be allowed for Gentiles to retain their practices and customs while at the same time becoming a member of the Christian community. In this new group, God-fearers find a sense of solidarity and belonging as they enter into a table fellowship in the name of Jesus Christ, showing the uniqueness of the Christian identity.

Keywords: Early Christian Identity, Cornelius, God Fearers, Race and Ethnicity, The Ethiopian Eunuch.

Abstrak

Artikel ini berusaha menganalisis peran penting dari mereka yang takut akan Allah dalam formasi identitas Kristen awal. Dalam Lukas-Kisah Para Rasul menggunakan dasar etnis untuk mendefinisikan komunitas Kristen. Kisah Para Rasul menggunakan kata orang asing, orang yang tidak percaya, dan kelompok etnis lain seperti orang Roma, orang Yunani untuk mendiskripsikan mereka yang ada di luar kelompok. Saat orang dari luar bergabung dalam komunitas Kristen, mereka membutuhkan identitas baru yang berbeda dari identitas lama mereka. Teori ras dan etnis memberikan kerangka berfikir untuk memahami bagaimana orang dari berbagai grup berusaha untuk menerima satu sama

lain dan menegosiasikan perbedaan seperti budaya, kepercayaan dan relasi sosial mereka. Pertobatan sida-sida Etiopia dan Kornelius dalam Kisah Para Rasul 8-10 memperlihatkan bahwa Kristianitas mengembangkan identitas yang cair, memberi ruang pengecualian yang memungkinkan orang asing untuk tetap mempertahankan praktek hidup mereka dan sekaligus menjadi anggota komunitas Kristen. Di dalam kelompok Kristen, mereka yang takut akan Allah menemukan rasa kepemilikan dan masuk dalam perjamuan makan bersama sebagai tanda keunikan dari identitas Kristen.

Kata-kata Kunci: Identitas Jemaat Perdana, Kornelius, Orang yang Takut akan Allah, Ras dan Etnis, Sida-sida Ethiopia.

Introduction

The term of God fearers designates for those who are attracted to Judaism and partially practiced the Torah. They are interested in Judaism because Jewish customs are unique and require people to follow the rules persistently. In their relationship with non-Jewish people, the Jews establish a boundary between themselves and others to maintain their own identity. However, the boundary can be crossed so that Gentiles can associate with Jews and be a member of Jewish people. They cross the boundaries of ethnicity by renouncing their own ethnic identity and entering into Jewish identity.

The New Testament calls non-Jewish ethnic groups as Romans, Greeks, and Gentiles, those interested in the Jewish religion and life. They are “God fearer” who renunciate some of their cultures and beliefs to enter a new identity as the followers of Christ. Acts 8 presents the conversion story of the Ethiopian eunuch, an outsider from Africa. Acts 10 tells us of Roman Centurion Cornelius. Both figures have different ethnicities when they entered into Christian community.

Denise Kimber and Caroline Johnson argue that race and ethnicity are an important role in formulating the self definition of the early Christian.¹ Luke-Acts and Paul uses ethnic-reasoning to define the

¹ Denise Kimber Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge, “The Politics of Interpretation: The Rhetoric of Race and Ethnicity in Paul,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123/1 (2004): 235-25. See also Erich S. Gruen, *Ethnicity in the Ancient World-Did It Matter?* (Boston: Walter e Gruyter GmbH, 2020): 5-6. Another Asian scholar, Benny Liew provides a comprehensive summary on the development of the study of New Testament and Ethnicity since 1970s until recent study. See Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Colorful Readings: Racial/Ethnic Minority Readings in the New Testament in the United

Christian community. Both use words such as gentiles, unbelievers and to describe other ethnic groups who are not Jewish as outsiders. For example, Paul says, “Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,” (Rom. 11:13). The contribution of this study is to show that the conversation of the Eunuch and that of Cornelius depict how people from different ethnicity accepted Christianity and negotiated the differences, such as their cultures, beliefs, and social relationships.

Theory of Ethnic Identity in the New Testament Study

Race and ethnicity are inevitable features of our lives. Thus, they are an important consideration in seeking to understand or study how a community is formed.² In recent years, biblical studies have been employing social science theory as the lens to explore ethnic and racial identity in the text relating to this aspect.³ Ethnicity is relatively a new conceptual category in the New Testament study. It is a contemporary concept, and we need to be careful when applying modern terminologies in order to understand ancient terminologies. At present, ethnic groups are determined by their objective features such as languages, territories, kindships, and customs. In his study of ethnicity in the New Testament, Jonathan Hall argues, “The connection with a specific territory and the common myth of descent are the distinctive characteristics of ethnic groups.”⁴

Scholars develop the idea of Hall and argue that ethnicity is socially constructed and fluid. If an ethnic group is defined only through cultural factors such as ancestral lineage, connection to specific territory,

States” in *Soundings in Cultural Criticism: Perspectives and Methods in Culture, Power, and Identity in the New Testament*, edited by Francesco Lozada and Greg Carey (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 177-189.

² The term ethnicity came to Oxford English dictionary in 1953. It was used to describe various people from different areas influenced by their cultures, languages, and their environment.

³ The interdisciplinary study of ethnicity and the New Testament in the USA started in the 1970s. The study developed in the 1990s when Asian and Latin American biblical scholars concerned their existence in the States. For example, Chan-Hie Kim, compares the story of Cornelius in Acts 10 and his identity as Asian immigrant in the United States. See Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Colorful Readings: Racial/Ethnic Minority Readings, 180-182.

⁴ Jonathan M. Hall. *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25.

and social customs, then the ethnic group remains relatively stable as long as these primordial factors remain unchanged. New Testament scholar Markus Cromhout expands on these ideas and argues that ethnicity is related to the social identity of groups. He states: (1) ethnicity is a form of social identity and relation, referring to a sense of belonging and a shared cultural tradition; (2) it is socially constructed and the outcome of social relationship among groups; (3) ethnicity is about cultural differentiation and similarities: sharing meaning, norms, myths of ancestry, sharing memories, kinship, a shared religion, and attachment to specific ancestral land.⁵

The word “ethnic” comes from the term *ethnos* in early Christian literature and it refers to outsiders and foreigners. Aside from *ethne*, there is another term for people of Israel namely *laos*. It refers to the people of Israel who see themselves as belonging to the group while all non-Israelites outside the group are *ethne*. The “*ethne*” constitutes the “them” who are outside the group of Israel. In the Septuagint, *ethne* translated the word *goyim* describing all those who stand outside Judaism.⁶ In the Vulgata, *ethne* are translated as *gentilis* and later into English as Gentiles. For example, Romans 16:4 writes: “All the churches of the *ethne* (Gentiles).”

The fluidity of ethnic identity leads us to understand that ethnicity is not created merely by cultural factors. Rather, ethnicity creates a boundary that defines the group. The ethnic group is defined by a sense of group-ness (self-understanding and understanding of others) that exists in relation to other groups. Because ethnicity is identified by the

⁵ Markus Cromhout, *Walking in Their Sandals: A Guide to First-Century Israelite Ethnic Identity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 7. Some pioneers who have developed the theory of ethnicity were Frederick Barth and Ronald Cohen. Cohen analyses the meaning of ethnicity by reviewing the term in the context of anthropology and sociology. The anthropological definitions of ethnicity include four elements: a) biological self-perpetuating population; (b) sharing of values and forms; (c) a field of communication; (d) a grouping that identifies itself. See Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969). Ronald Cohen, “Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1978): 379-403. Rodney Steven Sadler, JR. *Can A Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and othering in the Hebrew Bible* (London: T&T Clark, 2005): 9-10.

⁶ Paul R. Trebilco, *Outsider Designations and Boundary Construction in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 150-151. See also David G. Horrell, ‘Race’, ‘Nation’, ‘People’: Ethnic Identity-Construction in 1 Peter 2:9,” 123-143.

sense of belonging to a group, the cultural object of the ethnicity, such as language, share history and territory, can change over time while the sense of ethnic identity is preserved.⁷ Therefore, it is better to understand ethnicity in the first century as a way for a group to maintain its identity and boundaries from others. In summary, the ethnic group is marked by five aspects. They are as follows: (1) shares a collective name; (2) has a common myth of Ancestry; (3) shares a distinctive customs and belief; (4) shares a sense of solidarity; and (5) shares a specific ancestral land. People who do not share all these five aspects are outsiders.

Method

This paper employs the interdisciplinary study of ethnicity theory and the New Testament. These studies demonstrate that the reconstruction of the early Christian identity leads us to understand that the Christian identity is also specifically related to an ethnic identity. Ethnic identity refers to a group that shares the same cultural practices, beliefs and traditions. In this sense, they are also the identity of the Christian community as a people, nation and race.⁸ The question of identity requires explicating the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the Christian community. Thus, this paper draws on the modern definition and theory of ethnicity. We may discover that early Christian identities are constructed as ethnic groups' identities to accept people from various ethnicities and cultures. If ethnicity is a construct, some elements of its construction define the group, and these elements are salient features that constitute a collective identity. Using the ethnicity theory, the paper attempts to answer the question, "What are the roles of God fearers in Acts 8 – 10 in the construction of the early Christian identity?"

The author will use the theory of ethnicity developed by Jonathan Hall who studied the ethnicity of the Greek Antiquity. another idea by Markus Cromhout studied on the Israeli ethnic identity also provides

⁷ Aaron Kuecker, "Ethnicity and Social Identity," in Brian Tucker & Comeman Baker (eds), *Social Identity in the New Testament* (New York: T&T Clark, 2014), 60-61.

⁸ David G. Horrell studies on 1 Peter 2:9 and he argues that all three words, people-nation-race, occur together in the New Testament to describe the early Christian community. See David G. Horrell, 'Race', 'Nation', 'People': Ethnic Identity-Construction in 1 Peter 2:9," *New Testament Study* vol. 58 (2012): 127. See also Erich S. Gruen, *Ethnicity in the Ancient World-Did It Matter?* (Boston: Walter e Gruyter GmbH, 2020): 201.

relevant sources for studying ethnicity in Acts. The ethnicity theory is used here to analyze the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-34). Both narratives depict the conversion of Gentiles to Christianity without severely following Jewish laws and traditions which brings the issues of identity and ethnicity in the early Christian community. The construction of a new identity allows Christianity to develop a fluid identity by allowing Gentiles to retain their practices and customs while being a follower of Christ.

Result and Discussion

The Ethnic Identity of God-Fearers in Acts

There are two terms used for God-fearer in the New Testament: *σέβω* and *φοβούμενος*. In the Acts of the Apostles, the word *φοβούμενος* occurs five times: 10:2, 22, 35, 13:16 and 16, and *γεσηβη* appears six times: 13:43; 50; 16:14; 17:4; 17; and 18:7. These two expressions *φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν* (fearing God) and *σεβομένη τὸν θεόν* (worshipping God) are identical in Acts.⁹ No other references are found in the other New Testament texts. It seems that Luke creates the term God-fearer because of his theological interest. In other words, Acts is the *locus classicus* for God-fearers.¹⁰

There are three characteristics of God-fearers in Acts: (1) they are Gentiles interested in Judaism, but they do not convert fully to Judaism; (2) they are found in some numbers in the synagogues of the diaspora, from Asia Minor to Rome; (3) these groups are the first Gentiles attracted to Christianity.¹¹ The *Encyclopedia Judaica* explains that the God-fearers were increasing to perhaps millions in number by the first century. They were Gentiles who had not gone the whole route toward conversion. The proselytes are Gentiles who convert fully to Judaism and

⁹ Dietrich-Alex Koch analyzes the meaning of these two terms “worshipping God” and “fearing God” in Acts. He concludes that Luke uses these terms to designate non-Jewish people who close ties to Judaism. Dietrich-Alex Koch, “The God-Fearers between Facts and Fiction,” *Studia Theologica* 60 (2006), 80.

¹⁰ A.T. Kraabel points out the strategic places at which God-fearers appear and disappears in Acts. He concludes that God-fearers are literary tool employed by Luke. The God-fearers appears to represent a bridge between the Jewish community to the Gentiles. He says, “we would not know the term God-fearers if it were not for Acts.” A.T. Kraabel, “The Disappearance of the ‘God-fearers,’” *Numen* XXVIII (1981), 115-121.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

are considered members of the Jewish community. The proselytes would be allowed to participate in the sacred meals, bring their legal cases before the communal authority, pay taxes, sit with Jews in the public area, and after death be buried according to Jewish custom. The proselytes are like the native Jewish.¹²

The word proselytes occur four times in the New Testament, one in Matt. 23:15 and three times in Acts (2:10, 6:5, 3:43). In Acts 2:10, the word “proselytes” occurs in the list of nations present in Jerusalem on the Pentecost day. The second time Luke uses the same word for describing one of the seven Hellenist deacons, Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch (Acts 6:5). The term *prosilutoi* is used technically to denote Gentile converts.¹³ The last text is Acts 13:43: “And when the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.”

There are seven categories of intimate association between Gentiles and Judaism: (1) admiring some aspect of Judaism; (2) acknowledging the power of God or incorporating him into the pagan temple; (3) benefiting from the Jews for being conspicuously friendly to Jews; (4) practicing some ritual of the Jews; (5) venerating the God of the Jews and abandoning pagan gods; (6) Joining the Jewish community; (7) converting to Judaism.¹⁴

Conversion to Judaism entails three essential elements: practicing Jewish laws, exclusive devotion to the God of Israel, and integration into Jewish community.¹⁵ An intertestamental text, *Joseph and Asenath*, written in the early of the second century C.E, describes Asenath as a proselyte. She destroys her idols (*Joseph-Aseneth* 9:2; 10:13-14), renounces polytheism, and prays to the God of Israel (*Joseph-Aseneth* 12-13). She observes Jewish laws by putting ashes on her head for repentance and fasting. Another example is in the book of *Judith*. Achior the Ammonite, when he saw what the God of Israel had done, “He

¹² In the eye of outsider, a proselyte will be called a Jew or become Jew. In the Act of Pilate, the High Priest says, “They were born children of Greeks, and now have become Jews.” See Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82 (1989): 13-33.

¹³ Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its First century Setting* (Grand Rapid, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 46-49.

¹⁴ Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” 14-15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-30.

believed firmly in God, and was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel, remaining so to this day,” (Judith 14:10).

Luke calls Cornelius φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν (fearing God, Acts 10:2) and Lydia as σεβομένη τὸν θεόν (worshipping God, Acts 16:14). They may practice some Jewish customs such as fasting, lighting lamps, absenting from pork, refraining from work on the Sabbath, and attending synagogues or public ceremonies. The Jews, however, did not acknowledge them as proselytes for they did not join the Jewish community ultimately. In contrast, the proselytes are Gentiles who abandon their customs, God, and immerse fully into Judaism. Philo praises the proselytes for their courage to abandon “Their kinsfolk by blood, their countries, their customs, and the temples and the images of their gods, and the tributes and honors paid to them.” Instead, they take a “journey to better homes, from idle fables to the clear vision of truth and the worship of the one and truly existing God.”¹⁶ Philo also emphasizes three essential elements of conversion: denial of the pagan gods, the belief in God of Israel, and integration into the Israelite community.

Josephus also says that conversion to Judaism includes the rejection of pagan gods and entrance into the Jewish community. He says that the Jews of Antioch “Always drew to their religious ceremonies a great multitude of Greeks whom they made on some way a part of themselves.”¹⁷ Josephus also considers that circumcision is an important part of the acceptance of Judaism because for him, “To adopt the custom of the Jews” and “To be circumcised” are synonymous expressions (*Vita* 23 § 113 with 31§ 149).

In summary, there are some differences between the commitment of God-fearers and the proselytes to Judaism. The proselytes will commit exclusively to Judaism by being circumcised, practicing the Torah, and praying only to Yahweh. The proselytes are also called Jews or “becoming Jews” by outsiders because they are practicing Jewish customs. The God-fearers will practice some Jewish customs, but not fully commit to Judaism. They still maintain their own identities and status. The Jews see themselves as a separable ethnic group and a

¹⁶ On the Virtues 20-21§§ 102-8; 34§182; 39§§212-19; On the Special Laws 1.9 §§ 51-55; 4.34 §178.

¹⁷ Jewish War 7.3.3 §45.

distinct group. They have their own customs that define their identity. Conversion to Judaism may include renouncing allegiance to the state/empire and attaching themselves to the land of Judah.

The Conversion of God-Fearers to Christianity

The Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius in Acts 8 and 10 depict stories that outsiders may enter into the Christian community without following Jewish customs. The early Christian mission expands its audience from the Jewish community to the Gentiles through the conversion of the God-fearers. The movement begins with the mission of Philip, who baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) and is continued by the baptism of Cornelius by Peter in Acts 10. The Cornelius conversion builds a bridge for the mission to reach the Gentiles.

The conversion of the Gentiles brings the issues of identity and ethnicity in the early Christian community. The eunuch and Cornelius are baptized voluntarily in the name of Christ. When they enter into a Christian community, what is their new identity? Should the newly converted follow Judaism in order to be Christian? Their conversion story provides solutions to these issues. They break the Jewish customs and enter into a new relationship and solidarity. The Christian community provides them with a sense of belonging, and they believe in the same faith that Jesus is the Messiah.

The Conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40)

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch begins with Philip being directed by the angel of the Lord to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, a deserted road (Acts 8:14) after he proclaimed the Gospel in Samaria. On the road, he meets the Ethiopian eunuch on his way home after worshipping at the Jerusalem temple and was reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip explains the meaning of the Isaiah text in connection with Jesus' event (Acts 8:35), and finally, he baptizes the eunuch (Acts 8:39).

Luke does not provide information on whether the eunuch is Jew or Gentile. There is no reason to conclude that he is a Gentile because there is evidence of Jewish people living in Nubia long before the first century C.E. Isaiah 11:11 refers to scattered Jews living in Ethiopia: "On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the

coastlands of the sea.” Thus, there is no external evidence of the man’s ethnic background.¹⁸

The man is both a eunuch (euvnou/coj) and a minister (dunasthj). The term “minister” is used for describing a high official or ruler. Luke describes that he is in charge of the queen’s treasury (Acts 8:27). Thus, he is an important person. The eunuch owns a chariot and a scroll of scripture. He reads Isaiah while riding his chariot, have command of a driver, and has the leisure to travel to Jerusalem to worship. Therefore, it can be said that he is a “God fearer” because he has gone to Jerusalem to worship. But, can the scroll and Jerusalem trip indicate that he is a Jew or proselyte? It is difficult to say because there are insufficient details to arrive at such a conclusion.

At that time, Ethiopia represented the limit of common geographical knowledge. In the Septuagint, Ethiopia refers to Nubia, which adjoins Egypt to the south (Ez. 29:10; Jdt. 1:10). It is described as one of the corners of the earth (Isa. 11:11-12). Greek writer, Homer regarded Ethiopia as the “Furthermost of men” (*Odyssey* 1.23), and Greek geographer, philosopher, and historian Starbo described Ethiopia as the “extreme limits” of the Roman Empire (*Geog.* 17.2.1). When Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, his proclamation of the Gospel reached the end of the world.¹⁹ The conversion of the eunuch fulfilled the words of Jesus when he asked his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations until the end of the world (Luke 24: 46-48, Acts 1:8).

Although the conversion of the eunuch is seen as the fulfilment of Jesus’s word in Acts 1:18, it is not the complete realization of the mission, but rather it is a foretaste of what is still to come. In Acts 9:31, the gospel has grown only in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Luke does not tell the story of any mission in Ethiopia upon the return of the eunuch to his

¹⁸ Keith H. Reeves, “The Ethiopian Eunuch: A key Transition from Hellenist to Gentile Mission, in *Mission in Acts*, Robert L. Gallagher, Paul Hertig, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 114-122. But other scholars argue that the Ethiopian Eunuch is a Gentile because if the eunuch is understood in a physical sense, a eunuch could not be a full Jew. Jewish disdain for eunuchs during this period is evident in numerous places beyond Deut. 23:1, “He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the LORD.” Scott Shauf, “Locating the Eunuch: Characterization and narrative Context in Acts 8:26-40,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 763-764.

¹⁹ James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 287-290. Thomas J. Lane, *Luke and the Gentile Mission* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1996), 111-112.

country. There is no church at the end of the world yet; only one eunuch is a Christian.

The setting of the story also reveals the idea of the remote location of the eunuch. The episode of conversion takes place far away, where nobody is around to see or hear the conversation between Philip and the eunuch.²⁰ Tannehill describes well the solitariness of the event when he writes, “An Ethiopian eunuch is a very strong representative of foreignness within a Jewish context. He comes from the edge of the known world, of the black race, is a castrated male, and probably a Gentile.”²¹

The Ethiopian eunuch narrative provides a significant step to the Christian mission. The mission focuses on the geographical expansion that the Gospel will reach to other lands outside Jerusalem. His conversion is the preparation for the future mission to the Gentile.²² Luke will present the story of Cornelius as the turning point of the early Christian mission to the Gentile.

The Baptism of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-34)

In the narrative of Cornelius’ baptism, Luke incorporates two stages to prepare Peter’s encounter with Cornelius. He cannot simply tell the story of Cornelius’s baptism through Peter because the Jews cannot associate with Gentiles.²³ For the first stage, Peter receives three signs after his vision: (1) Cornelius’s messengers appear to him, (2) the Holy Spirit tells him to go with the messenger without raising any objections, and (3) the messengers report Cornelius’s vision in which he commanded be sent to Peter. Peter and his companion arrive at Cornelius’s house in the second stage. Cornelius and the crowd greet them, and Peter announces the interpretation of his vision, “God has

²⁰ Scott Shauf, “Locating the Eunuch: Characterization and narrative Context in Acts 8:26-40,” 770-773.

²¹ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts II: A literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), 108.

²² There is a parallel story between Philip’s ministry to the Ethiopian Eunuch to the Cornelius story: both occurs in the coastal plain, The Holy Spirit guides both Philip and Peter, both tell the foreigners sympathetic to Judaism and shatter the barriers preventing Gentiles being Christians. These parallels tell that Philips ministry is a prelude to the conversion of Cornelius. See Thomas J. Lane, *Luke and the Gentile Mission* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1996), 111.

²³ Mark A. Plunkett, “Ethnocentricity and Salvation History in Cornelius Episode (Acts 10:1-11:18),” in *SBL Seminar Paper* (Atlanta: SBL, 1982), 466-468.

shown me that I should call no one common or unclean” (Acts 10:28b). Peter then baptizes Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:38).

Peter received a vision just before he went to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:9-16). At the beginning of his vision, Peter is hungry, and he is instructed to eat impure food. In fact, Leviticus 11 proscribes the animal flesh except that from beasts which has cloven hoofs and are ruminants. In the vision, Peter is told to eat birds and reptiles, and he objected saying that he would not eat it because he has never eaten anything profane and impure. The voice in his vision responds, “Do not call profane those things which God has purified” (Acts 10:15).

After the vision, Peter meets Cornelius’s messenger. He goes with them to Caesarea. One of them is a soldier, and the other probably is a Gentile (Acts 10:7). They tell Peter, “The centurion Cornelius, who is a just and God-fearing man, and highly regarded by the entire Jewish people, was directed by a holy angel to send for you and bring you into his house to listen to what you have to say” (Acts 10:22). The messengers understand that inviting Peter to come to the house of Gentiles may offend him. Therefore, they use Cornelius’ virtues, especially his excellent reputation with the Jewish people, to ease Peter’s visit.²⁴

The outstanding virtues of Cornelius are not in themselves sufficient to legitimate Peter’s coming to the Gentile house. But, since he knows that the Holy Spirit directs him to go with the men to Cornelius, then God himself abrogates the Jewish ban on the fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. Peter says to Cornelius, “You know it is forbidden for a Jew to mix with people of another race or to visit them. But God has revealed to me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). After baptizing Cornelius, Peter stays in his house for some days.

The central issue in the conversion of Cornelius is not that the gospel is preached to the Gentile, but rather it is a problem of table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.²⁵ The complaint of the members of Christian in Jerusalem to Peter emphasizes their concern, Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them? (Acts 11:3). Jews are not permitted any social contact with Gentiles, especially eating together, traveling together, and sleeping under the same roof.

²⁴ Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 93-94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-97.

Two apocryphal texts mention that Jews will not eat with Gentiles. The book of Tobit, composed before the persecution of Antiochus, tells that Tobit was carried off to captivity in Nineveh. He did not eat the food of the Gentile even though his fellow Israelites did (Tobit 1:11). Tobit behaves in this way to underline his piety and his loyalty as a Jew in the diaspora. Another text is from Joseph-Aseneth, written in the last second century C.E. When Joseph enters the house of Pentephres, the high priest, they “Set a table before him by itself, because Joseph never ate with the Egyptians, for this was an abomination for him,” (Joseph-Aseneth 7:1).

From the Jewish point of view, eating with Gentiles in the Christian community means they deny their ethnicity and faith. This objection constitutes a major problem for early Christian mission throughout the diaspora region. Luke presents his stories about Cornelius in order to solve the problem of table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. Table fellowship is the development of a distinct Christian identity *vis-a-vis* Judaism.²⁶

Peter’s statement, “God has shown me that I should call no one common or unclean,” shows that God not only accept the Gentile, but the Gentiles are also clean for Jews. There is no longer any need for Jews to avoid social contact with them. Luke takes up the story from the issue of clean and unclean food and extends its interpretation to include the issue of clean and unclean people. The vision is used to claim that no one is unclean. Here the clean and unclean are not understood in the context of purity ethic, but in the context of an ethnocentric issue.²⁷ God extends his salvation beyond the ethnic boundaries, and the Gentiles will be saved and enter into the fellowship with God’s people. When the border between clean and unclean people is eliminated, the obstacle to the Gentile mission is removed.

The Cornelius episode plays a vital role at the Jerusalem synod because Peter refers to the Cornelius story to defend his position (Acts 15:7-11). The issue in Acts 15 is the claim of some Jewish Christians that Gentile cannot be saved unless they are circumcised and keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:1-5). Referring to the baptism of Cornelius, Peter argues,

²⁶ Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, 109.

²⁷ Mark A. Plunkett, “Ethnocentricity and Salvation History in Cornelius Episode (Acts 10:1-11:18),” in *SBL Seminar Paper* (Atlanta: SBL, 1982), 474-475.

“Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:6-8). His point is that Gentiles become Christians without circumcision and purity requirements, because the Holy Spirit remains also in them.

The climax of the story is the statement in Acts 15:18: “To the Gentiles also God has given repentance unto life.” God opens the way to the Gentiles’ mission and no one may call them unclean. God has chosen Israel to be his special people, and Israelites want to keep their purity as a special group by refusing contact with the Gentiles. But the Jerusalem Council extends the meaning of the chosen Israel in that, Gentiles now participate in the promises and salvation of Israel.

The theme of table fellowship also occurs in the story of Peter and Cornelius. After the baptism, Peter and his companion stay in her house and presumably they have a meal with Cornelius and his household (Acts 10: 48). The usual antipathy among Jews for dining together with Gentiles, circumcision, and food regulations are traditional means for Jews to keep themselves apart from the Gentiles. They create boundaries that will maintain their Jewish ethnicity. Luke presents his story about Cornelius in order to break the taboo of table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. The breakdown of the Jewish law allows the Christian mission to reach a broader group of people, in terms of region and ethnicity.

The Role of Ethnicity in the Development of Christian Identity

In responding to the Gentiles attracted to Judaism, Jewish authority implements fixed regulations and strict norms that they should follow as requirements. Conversion to Judaism entails observing particular religious practices, abandoning pagan gods, and behaving like Jews. They observe the dietary, Sabbath, and honor Yahweh. All practices indicate their belonging to the Jewish group and creates group identity. In a case of conversion to Judaism in the diaspora, the connection to the homeland in Jerusalem is required for their identity. Tacitus explain that the diaspora Jews always send tribute to Jerusalem and pay taxes. They are loyal toward one another, but don’t like outsiders. They will not eat with them and sleep apart. Even They

abstain for sexual relationship with foreign women. Jews institutes the custom of circumcision so that they may recognized their difference toward others. Those who are converted to Jewish belief should follow the same practices: to despise the gods, disown their own country and leave their family.²⁸

The specific practices and norms are the means to create a sense of commonalty within Jewish community. It helps members of the group to see themselves and the world through the lens of beliefs and norms of the group. Thus, the group helps its members to have the same perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Adopting the God-fearers to Jewish customs and practices is the mean for them to become like Jews, thinking like Jews and behaving like them. Therefore, in the first CE Jewish identity and ethnicity are fix and strict. There are no room for exception. Only Gentiles who abandon their belief systems will be acknowledged as fully members of the Jewish community.

Early Christian community has different approaches in responding to the Gentiles who want to join the group. Christianity develops a fluid identity, meaning some exceptions may be allowed for Gentiles to retain their practices and customs while in the same time becoming a member of the Christian community. Drawing from the ethnic theory, Christianity provides new identities for those who become a follower of Christ.

A Collective Name

When Christians become aware of themselves as a group that is different from Judaism, Christian members will identify themselves with the name "Christian". The eunuch and Cornelius are not called Christian yet, but in Antioch, the disciples are called Christians for the first time (Acts 11:26). The name summarizes the group's remarkable history and communicates the character of the community.²⁹ The name "Christian"

²⁸ Histories 5.5.1-2. Quoted in Shaye Cohen, *The Beginning of Jewishness: Boundaries Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 43.

²⁹ The word "*christiano*" is a Greek form of the Latin "*Christiani*". This implies that this word was coined by the Roman authority in Antioch because it is analogous to Herodians (*Herodianoi*) or Caesarians, the party of Caesar. The Christians were called this because they were members of a group, which was comprised of followers of Christ. This is the name by which the early Christian movement is identified by outsiders, and later the name sticks. James Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009): 14.

was later adopted by the Church as a designation to distinguish itself from other religions. In the Gospel and Acts, the Christians are also called the disciples (Acts 6:1-2; 7, 9). This name refers to the mission of Jesus and his close disciples. Another name is “those who call upon the name of the lord” (Acts 9:14). Luke also calls them a sect (Acts 24:14; 28:22) or “the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5). Calling the followers of Jesus a sect, Luke regards the early Christians like the sect of Sadducees (Acts 5:17), and the sect of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5).

A Common Myth of Ancestry

The common myth of descent is *sine qua non* (prerequisite) of ethnicity. It serves to articulate the origin of the group and its destiny. This criterion answers the question, “Why are we one in community?” The answer is because we came from the same ancestor and share the same destiny.³⁰ The myth of common ancestry provides a frame work by which the group makes sense of its experience. In his discussion with the eunuch, Philip summarizes the salvation given by God through the prophet and Jesus Christ (Acts 8:32-36). His story implies that Christians have the same story of ancestry of Jews, but the salvation of God is offered to everyone, not exclusively to the Jews. The Christians participate in the salvation promised by God to Israel through Jesus Christ.

A Shared History

The center of the Christian interpretation of the Israel's history is the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah. The crucified messiah is the key to Christian identity. Christians identify the God of Israel as God who raised Jesus from the dead: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:26). Philip interprets that the lamb is led to the slaughter in Isaiah 53:7 is Jesus Christ (Acts 8: 35). He convinces the eunuch that Jesus is the redeemer whom God had promised and whom the Jews had been waiting. Then the eunuch says, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God” (Acts 8:37). His answer shows that both Philip and the eunuch share a common history of salvation, Jesus is the Messiah promised by God. In the same tones, Peter

³⁰ Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986): 24.

interprets the story of Jesus' crucifixion as the way of salvation for everyone who has faith in Him (Acts 10: 42-43). Accordingly, the Christian community has to find new identification for the ancestral lineage and kindship that are defined the new ethnicity.

A Distinctive Shared Culture

Practices and religion are the signs of cultural distinctiveness. There are two major rituals in early Christianity: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism may be compared with Jewish immersion of proselytes. In Christianity, the immersion of the full body into the water constitutes the initiatory rite. The eunuch and Cornelius are baptized after they declare that they believe in Christ Jesus. The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is the example of the breakdown of the law that allows the Christian mission to spread geographically and ethnically. The sign of membership is not circumcision, but believing in Jesus Christ through baptism. However, the stories of the eunuch and Cornelius do not mention the Lord's supper. It only shows the practice of baptism as a sign of acceptance as a member of Christian community. But, in Pauline letters, Paul shows that the Lord supper is the common practice in the Christian community (1 Cor. 11: 25-26).

A Sense of Solidarity

A sense of belonging and identity are important to a community. Sharing table-fellowship between Peter and Cornelius indicates the crossing of boundaries from Jewish custom. Gentiles may keep their practice to eat any food that is not allowed for Jews.³¹ Even Peter negotiate his own belief as a Jew by accommodating the Gentile's custom of eating. In this case, Christianity attempts to redefine its identity by separating the cultural aspects that are fluid and negotiable from the fundamental and essential belief.

Finally, the story of the eunuch and Cornelius highlight that God-fearers play an important role in the early Christian mission because through them, the mission spreads out to the entire Roman Empire. The

³¹ The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them: Speak to the people of Israel, saying: From among all the land animals, these are the creatures that you may eat. Any animal that has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud-- such you may eat. But among those that chew the cud or have divided hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. (Lev. 11:1-4)

mission in the diaspora has mixed members, including Jewish Christians and Gentile. Both groups enter into table fellowship which is a distinct Christian identity. Gentiles are attracted to Christianity because Christian mission offers them the possibility to be fully Christian without converting to Judaism and keeping their ethnic identity.

Conclusion

Stories of the Eunuch and Cornelius show that ethnicity plays a vital role in formulating the early Christian self-definition. Act uses ethnicity for defining the identity of Christian community. Both God-fearers receive a new identity as members of Christ-followers. Their new identity differs from the Jewish, Roman and Ethiopian identities. This means that salvation does not depend on any specific ethnicity or the laws that preserve the identity of one ethnic group. The new identity in Christ allows Gentiles to participate in the salvation promised by God regardless of the differences in their ethnicity. In other words, a newly constructed identity provides a space not only for uniqueness but also for universality.

Luke portrays that the mission work spreads to the Roman Empire through God-fearers. The crucial development of the mission outside Jerusalem is establishing mixed members, including Jewish Christians and Gentile God-fearers. The two groups enter into table fellowship creating a distinct Christian identity. Many God-fearers are attracted to Christianity because the fluidity of Christian identity allows them to fully become Christian without converting to Judaism. Through baptism and other rituals, the members share their solidarity as one community. They develop the same story that Jesus is the Messiah and saviour. In the name of Christ, whether men and women, Jews and Gentiles, enjoy equality and share their identity as the children of God.

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