

Mission and Universalism in Luke-Acts

J.G. MUTHURAJ*

Mission and NT Studies

The mission studies have often sought to draw upon the NT to enrich the understanding of mission but a similar interest is often lacking in the NT studies. The NT research has not so far taken seriously the missiological concern as an important ingredient to the interpretation of the NT even though in form-critical terms, the gospel materials are regarded as having been shaped by the missionary needs of the early Church. D.J. Bosch is right when he says that the NT studies have not always recognised the missionary character of the New Testament.¹ There are, of course, few works in English relating to mission in the NT published in this century, but even those works have not adequately dealt with the multi-faceted nature and the character of NT mission. This is particularly so in the study of Luke-Acts.

A.D. Harnack's classical work on the spread of Christianity, published at the turn of this century, depends largely on the sources outside the NT writings.² For a chapter dealing with the mission to the Gentiles, Harnack draws most of the materials from the writings of the second and the third century Christian apologists. In the entire chapter, there is only one reference cited from the book of Acts. Later in this century, F. Hahn³ and M. Hengel⁴ devoted more attention to the study of the concept of mission in Luke-Acts. But both of them have argued in their own ways to establish a single paradigm, that the Gentile mission is defined fundamentally and exclusively by Christology. S.G. Wilson's *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*,⁵ the only work in recent decades on

*Dr. J.G. Muthuraj is a Professor of the New Testament.

the study of the Gentile mission in Acts, is occupied largely with the question of historical reliability of Luke-Acts than on Luke's concept(s) of mission.

A brief and yet a comprehensive study on Luke's theology of mission, in our opinion, can be found in the work, D.J. Bosch's *Transforming Mission*.⁶ Bosch devotes one fourth of his work to the study of NT models of mission and in this section, Luke's view of mission gets the largest share. The prime value of this work is that it treats NT studies and Missiology in a complementary manner. There is an interaction between, whatever little has been said about mission by the NT writers and the various understandings of mission held by Missiologists Historians over the decades. The most important value of his study is that he offers a panoramic view of the distinctive characteristics of theology of mission of the individual writers of the NT: Matthew, Luke and Paul. With regard to Luke-Acts, Bosch points out the centrality of mission in Luke-Acts and outlines as many as eight ingredients of Luke's missionary paradigm. What I would like to look closely in this paper, is his observation that 'the intimate linking of pneumatology and mission is Luke's distinctive contribution to the early Church's missionary paradigm'.⁷ The Spirit not only, initiates the mission and guides the missionaries but enforces a particular character of mission which we must explore. The question is, what sort of universalism is established by the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts?

From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth

We begin with a statement from D. Senior who observes, "The scope, the structure, and the content of Acts are dominated by the question of the universal mission."⁸ The universal mission is understood by Senior in terms of a geographical expansion from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth (Ac. 1:8). Such an observation is nothing new. 'Mission everywhere and mission for all', is the explanation behind the term 'universalism'. By 'universalism', Luke does not merely imply universal

expansion of mission in geographical terms. The structure of Acts does not suggest a linear one-way movement from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The scenes of missionary activities shift back and forth and they do not move only in one direction. In the first fifteen chapters, the pattern is, Jerusalem-Samaria-Caesarea-Phonicia-Cyprus-Antioch. But on each occasion, the news of the people receiving the gospel came to the ears of the Church in Jerusalem (8:14; 11:22). Jerusalem was not always the centre from which the mission was planned and implemented each time. It surprised the apostle in Jerusalem, when the gospel was received by people outside Jerusalem.

By 'universalism', Luke does not mean that 'particularism' of one group, namely the apostles, is to carry out the mission all by themselves to the ends of the earth. Jesus did not expect all the work to be initiated and accomplished by the twelve apostles. In the process of the spread of the gospel, new centres were formed. Paul's first missionary journey began from Antioch (Act. 13:1ff.), and the results of this mission was reported back to the congregation in Antioch (Ac. 14:27). The second missionary journey also began from Antioch, but this time it was the decision of Paul and Barnabas to embark upon the mission and not of the whole Church. "And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are' (Ac. 15:36)". What seems like a pastoral visit to the Churches already established ends up as a venture to preach in new cities of Asia Minor. Notable among them are, Paul's preaching in Pisidian Antioch (Ac. 13), Lystra (Ac. 14:8-24), Athens (Ac. 17:16-34). The preaching in Athens happens when Paul was least prepared for mission. He was merely waiting for his colleagues in Athens (Ac. 17:15, 16a). This brief stay led him to a great adventure of debating with the Stoics and the Epicureans, and to deliver the unique speech before the Areopagites, the supreme body of jurists in Athens (Ac. 17:16ff.). The third missionary journey was taken up by Paul himself. Again, the plan is to strengthen the disciples (Ac. 18:23). But it ends up with a successful mission in the province of Asia, particularly in Ephesus

(Ac. 19:8ff.). Through some extraordinary circumstances, Paul is taken to Rome which is the centre from which the mission is to proceed further. Universalism means that the task is to be carried out by all disciples of Christ and mission is a two-way process, that is, there is a movement from Jerusalem/Antioch/Ephesus to other cities and vice versa. On many occasions, as Luke has reported, mission took place when the disciples were least aware of it because mission-witness, to the ends of the earth, is not man-made plans and strategies to be executed.

Mission and Ethnology

Another important aspect of Luke's universalism is that, in Luke-Acts, there exists a connection between pneumatology and ethnology. The mission of the Church brings people together. The mark of the Spirit is that people of different races, and of different ethnic and communal identities are joined together, and that a new community in solidarity to one another has been formed. This is very evident in the account of the conversion of Cornelius in chs. 10 and 11. The voice told Peter three times, "What God has cleansed you must not call common or unclean" (Ac. 10:15). The vision that Peter saw does not distinguish between the clean and the unclean animals in relation to what one should eat. To Luke, it was "a sign that God no longer wished there to be any distinction between 'clean and unclean' people".⁹ The lesson that the Spirit's universal mission had taught him is, that when it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation, God had shown Peter that he should not call any man common or unclean (Ac. 10:28). The negative pronouncement in 10:28b 'there are no unclean persons' gives way to a positive one in 10:35: 'in every nation there are those who are pleasing to God'. What the mission has achieved is, that it has been an instrument in bringing people of different ethnic groups among whom normal fellowship was no longer possible on the basis of their origin and ethnic identity. Mission transcends human-set boundaries. Mission unites, not divides.

Commission for Mission

Matthew in his mission passage has, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (10:5ff.). Luke omits this verse in his account of sending the twelve (9:1ff.). Whereas, Matthew's mission account stresses the group that is targeted in the mission activity, namely the Jews. Luke focuses on the number of people, the twelve apostles, who were *sent* to preach and heal (9:6). Their mission probably took place within the region of Galilee as the following passage shows (Lk. 9:7:-9). The ministry of Jesus and his apostles had such an impact in Galilee that the Galilean Tetrarch became perplexed. Jesus' Galilean ministry reaches its climax in the sending of the twelve apostles to preach and heal in the region of Galilee. The new phase of Jesus' mission outside Galilee is about to begin. In Lk. 9:51, Luke begins his account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Unlike the Galilean phase of his ministry, it is marked by the *sending* of the seventy/seventy two evangelists (10:1ff.). The significance, of the sending of the twelve in ch. 9, is clear as it refers to the twelve tribes of Israel. The number seventy/seventy two is also quite significant that it probably represents symbolically the seventy/seventy two nations of the world. Luke probably alludes to the OT idea of Noah's children as nations populating the whole earth. This finds support in Gen. 10, the tables of the nations, a map of humanity which as a family of nations stretched across the earth. Both numbers 70/72 are suited to express the symbolism of nations. According to the LXX, the number of the Noah's children is 72 and the MT (Hebrew text) records them as 70. What is important to note is that the table of nations is 'unique and has no parallels, either inside or outside the Old Testament'.¹⁰ 'Nowhere is there a survey of the relationship of peoples to each other comparable to the biblical table of the nations...'¹¹ The Noachic origin of the nations of the inhabited world, which are seventy in number, was widely held by the Jews in the Graeco-Roman period. The notion that Noah's sons and their children occupied the whole earth, and that the earth was divided among them, was prevalent in the writings

of Pseudepigrapha and Jewish historiography. Gen. 10 is fundamental to Jewish concept of universalism. This means that all the seventy nations are engaged in mission to preach and heal. Mission is a universal task in which the nations of the inhabited world participate. God is the Lord of the seventy nations, and he sends them all as he commands all nations to turn to him.

Pentecost (Ac. 2:1-13)

There is undoubtedly, a close connection between mission and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Ac. 2. Newbegin calls mission as 'an overflow from Penecost'.¹² Bosch comments that on the day of Pentecost, Christ 'throws open the doors and thrusts the disciples out into the world'.¹³ M. Dibelius observes that Ac. 2:1-13 is 'a prototype of the mission to the world'.¹⁴ The story of the Pentecost looks forward to the proclamation of the gospel to all the peoples (cf. Lk. 24:47). The miraculous event is that the disciples began to speak in 'other languages'. First of all, they spoke in 'other languages' as the Spirit gave them utterances. Luke sees the new experience as an instance of prophecy, a distinctive feature of the Pentecost event. The word 'utterance' in Greek (*apofthegesthai*) means, 'to speak in a solemn or inspired way, but not ecstatic speech'.¹⁵ Elsewhere in Acts, the word is used for an intelligible speech relating to the proclamation of the gospel (Ac. 2:14; cf. 26:25). Luke portrays the early Christian community as having received the languages to communicate to the nations the mighty works of God.¹⁶

However, a closer look at Ac. 2:1-13 shows few other ingredients, which are significant not only for our understanding of the relationship between mission and universalism, but of the idea of universalism itself. We observe that the key word in the passage is *glossai* (tongues/languages) (vv. 3, 4, 11) and the related word *dialektos* (dialects) appears twice (vv. 6, 8). Some argue that the phenomenon of 'speaking in tongues' is same as that of the 'glossalalia' found in the Corinthian Church (I Cor.,14). But the problem of 'glossalalia', as we know of it from the Corinthian Church, is different in

its nature and function from speaking in other languages in Ac. 2 though they share the same character of being imparted by the Holy Spirit.

Luke shows his ethnological and missiological interests in the composition of the list of nations. In the monumental five volumes of *The Beginnings of Christianity*, K. Lake draws attention to the three Jewish traditions which probably were in Luke's mind when he narrated the Pentecost event. One of them was the view that the phenomena of the tower of Babel were the reverse of those of Pentecost. Luke draws upon materials from Philo's interpretation of the incident at Babel who saw the event mainly as the confounding of the language.¹⁷ Philo, a Jewish theologian of the first century A.D., interprets the story of Babel under the title *De Confusione Linguarum* (Confusion of Language) which, to him, sums up the whole episode. The term 'language' has a two-fold meaning for Philo. One refers to the normal sense of the word, the philological aspect and when Philo speaks of 'language' in this sense, he consistently uses the word *dialektos* (*De. Conf.* 8, 10, 190, 191). At Babel, as Philo interprets, the one speech and one language of the humanity became different 'so that from that day forward they could no longer understand each other, because of the differences of the languages into which the single language which they all shared had been divided' (*De. conf.* 8). The Babel incident not only caused the differences of languages but also created evil and lawlessness. The division of languages meant 'a consonance of evil deeds, great and innumerable, and these include the injuries which cities and nations and countries inflict and retaliate, as well as the impious deeds which men commit not only against each other, but against the Deity' (*De. Conf.* 15). It was Philo's contention that the Babel event did not merely explain how the various dialects of the world originated, but the confusion which was conceived in terms of breaking the harmony between nation and nation and nations with God. The tower was called 'tower of lawlessness'. The incident also goes to show how different nations scattered in land and sea were full of innumerable evil deeds (*De. Conf.* 10). In the light of the interpretation of the Babel incident by the first century writer, it is possible to

understand the meaning and the significance of 'languages' and 'dialects' (Ac. 2:1-13).

The initial event in Pentecost is described by the phenomenon of the 'divided tongues' (v. 3). The RSV uses the word 'distributed' but the Greek word suggests 'division' rather than 'distribution'. Luke uses the Greek word *diameridzo* elsewhere, in the sense of divisions appearing as a result of a dispute (Lk. 11:17, 18; 12:52, 53) or a situation different from the one created by peace (Lk. 12:51). The appearance of the 'divided tongues' is followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which enabled the disciples to speak in 'other tongues' (v. 4). The reference to 'division of languages' can be easily explained from the standpoint of the Jewish interpretation of the Babel episode. It is a phenomenon largely associated in Jewish literature with the story of 'divisions', illustrated by the Babel episode. In *Sibyllene Oracles*, it is said, 'When the tower fell, and the tongues of men were diversified by various sounds, the whole earth of humans was filled with the fragmenting kingdoms' (3:105-107). The *Book of Jubilees* describes thus: 'Therefore...the Lord mixed up all the languages of the sons of men' (10:25). The Targums in the later period emphasise the fact that the division and the confusion of languages were caused at Babel. The *Targum Neofiti* has, 'He (God) scattered them thence, upon the face of all the earth into seventy languages, so that one did not know what the other said, and they killed one another. Further the reference to 'mighty wind' and 'fire' are all reminiscent of the destruction of the tower. Luke hints at the outcome of the Babel incident through the words 'mighty wind', 'fire' and 'divided languages' (cf. *Book of Jubilees*, 10:26). The awareness of the consequences of the Babel incident grows in the minds of the first century readers as the account of the Pentecost advances. The reversal of the incident at Babel takes place on the day of Pentecost. It is worth noting the similar conclusions reached by J.G. Davies and M. Goulder. Davies concludes thus: "This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who reverses the previous disruption in the unity of creation, when the Most High parted the nations asunder by Himself manifesting His coming to the Church under the form of tongues of fire 'parting asunder'".¹⁸ The

division of languages is healed and the nations are gathered together again.¹⁹ *The nations together hear the mighty works of God.*

Luke says, 'Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven' (v. 5). Hence, several commentators argue that the catalogue of nations in vv. 9-11 refer to the Diaspora Jews who had migrated to Jerusalem. However, closer observation shows that the structure of the list of nations makes references to several non-Jewish nations. In the list of the nations, we see a combination of the names of peoples, countries and city. The names Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans and Arabians are to be taken ethnographically as nations. Secondly, nations are described by their own geographical identity, i.e. 'those who are the residents' of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt and Cyrenian Libya. Thirdly, the visitors from the city of Rome, both the Jews and the proselytes are included. The nations, countries and city represent exclusively the Near East, i.e. Western Asia, Asia Minor, and northeast Africa. The Jews are identified topographically by the term 'Judea' and ethnologically as 'Jews' from Rome. Hence, it is obvious that the rest were the nations other than the Jews and the proselytes.

Most of the nations that occur in the list of Luke, figure in the list of woes to the nations in the third book of the *Sibyllene Oracles*. The long train of prophecies of doom are announced to the nations by the Sybil, many of which are found in the Lukan list. We have references to almost all the nations in Ac. 2:9-11 in *Sibyllene Oracles* who are regarded a recipients of the prophecy of condemnation and doom (See particularly, 3:342-345; 489-493; 504-505; 514-519). Sybil predicts and announces evil, affliction, eschatological gloom on Crete, Libya, Egypt, Phrygians, Pamphylia, Egypt. Some of the nations, e.g. Egypt and all of Asia, are condemned by the Sibyl for their idolatry and immoral way of life (3:595-600). The prophetic utterance of the Holy Spirit, for Luke, restores the community of nations through the message of the mighty acts of God to all nations.

These features of the list we should assign to the composition of Luke which reflect Luke's sense of mission and universalism. The nations which gathered together heard the message in their own dialects. Though there is a reference to each nation hearing in its own tongue, the content was the same, namely, the mighty works of God. Here lies the universalistic mission in which all nations together hear the prophetic speech in their own languages. The Spirit not just enables the nations to understand the prophetic message but gathers the nations, and the nations share with one another the mighty acts of God. In the mission of the Holy Spirit, there is healing of division and restoration of unity among the nations.

Conclusion

Luke's universalism implies that the mission to the ends of the earth does not lie in the hands of a few. It is not only one continent which always feels called to preach to the nations. The Holy Spirit does not preserve a particularism of one nation as the centre of mission but forges a multi-particularism in which all nations participate in a universal task. God is the God of the seventy nations. The Spirit gathers together the nations that are divided by race and boundaries. Though there is a diversity of languages, there is a unity in the message all hear. The Holy Spirit does not lead to fragmentation but mutual acceptance, in which one nation does not regard the other as unclean.

References

1. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis Books, 1992.
2. *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. & ed. by J. Moffatt, vol. I, London: William & Norgate, 1908, pp. 103ff.
3. *Mission in the New Testament*, London: SCM, 1965, pp. 63, 74.
4. *Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM, 1979, p. 106.
5. Cambridge University Press, 1973.
6. New York: Orbis Books, 1992.
7. *Transforming Mission*, p. 114.
8. *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, New York: Orbis Books, 1984, p. 269.

9. M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, London: SCM, 1956, p. 118.
10. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11; A Commentary*, London: SPCK, 1974, p. 501.
11. Quoted by Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 528.
12. Cited by Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 40.
13. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 40.
14. *Dibelius, Studies*, p. 106.
15. E. Haenchen, *Acts*, p. 168, n. 3.
16. Note the emphasis is on the hearing of the speech as the word akouo 'to hear' appears three times (vv. 6, 8, 11).
17. "The Day of Pentecost", vol. V, pp. 114ff.
18. "Pentecost and Glossolalia", *JTS*, 3, 1952, p. 229.
19. *Type and History in Acts*, London: SPCK, 1964, p. 158.