

Church's Mission: The Example of the Apostles

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There is a small country called Slovenia, extending over an area of 20,000 square kilometres home to two million people. Surprisingly, this small country has given many missionaries, and presently there are 46 Slovenians involved in the the *missio ad gentes* around the world. Yet, I have never had the opportunity to visit any of them. How come? Is it a lack of missionary fervour? Not enough courage? Being a priest, working in a seminary and in a parish, I would not say that I am lacking in evangelical fervour; however, studying theology and the Bible in Rome was already quite a challenge for me. Meeting people from all over the world, confronting different colours, different cultures and perspectives in such a motley setting, was indeed a challenge. It is in Rome that my story encounters the story of the *Acts of the Apostles*. Both stories seem to have reached the furthest cross-cultural limit; for me, it is the globalized city and for the Acts the centre of the Roman Empire. Rome represents the meeting point, but there is some similarity also in the hesitation and fear of confronting the cultural-religious boundaries. It is through the Holy Spirit that decisions are made, and bold action taken.

Crossing cultural and religious boundaries is a demanding task for each one of us. However, the present article, shedding light on some phases of this courageous endeavour in the story of Acts, should resonate and encourage both writer and readers. Luke, in his role as the author of the two-volume work Luke-Acts, narrates the story of the mission and development of the first Christian community. He does not write a manual on "How to form a Church mission," but rather reveals his universal perspective of the mission through a cluster of variegated aims: theological, apologetic, moral, and eschatological. For the purpose of this article, I will try to present Luke's missionary perspective by examining briefly (1) the composition of the narrative, and (2) the narrative plot, focusing above

all on some episodes, which convey the content of and the decision for the universal mission. The examination of the Luke-Acts narrative, as hinted in Luke's understanding of the mission, allows for the drawing up of some (3) conclusions, and thus stimulate the Church's current *missio ad gentes* of the Church.

1. Composition of the Narrative

Observing the composition and the structural elements in Luke-Acts, a reader might notice how the narrative is interwoven by both some important movements and alterations with regard to (1.1) topography and (1.2) terminology, as well as some repetitions with regard to (1.3) the divine plot and agency. These elements indicate Luke's universal perspective and missionary tendency.

1.1 Topography

Luke composed his two-volume work by combining two movements: (a) centripetal, towards Jerusalem in the Gospel; (b) centrifugal, away from Jerusalem in Acts.

a) For Luke, Jerusalem functions as the centre – the “navel of the earth” – as James Scott asserts.¹ His claim can be sustained both by the number of instances it appears (i.e. 30 times in the Gospel and 58 times in Acts), as well as by the extended narrative of Jesus' journey towards the city (Lk 9:51-19:28). Jerusalem, as Scott points out, plays an important eschatological role within Jewish tradition. Jerusalem embraces both the Jews from Diaspora (i.e. those who are once again assembled in the city from all four corners of the globe: Isa 11:12; 43:5-6), as well as the Gentiles (coming from all directions: Isa 2:2-3; 49:12); or even both, coming as a single movement (Isa 60:3-16).²

b) The geographical movement in Acts, however, is centrifugal, as illustrated in Acts 1:8 and developed in different stages: Jeru-

¹ J. M. SCOTT, “Acts 2:9-11 as an Anticipation of the Mission to the Nations”, in J. ÁDNA – H. KVALBEIN (eds.), *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 127, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2000, 99.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, 100.

salem (1-7); Judea-Samaria (8-12); Asia minor, Europe (13-28).³ The community's ever stronger commitment to missionary work, which provides the narrative plot of Acts, follows the plan of God, as John Squires indicates.⁴ In other words, Jerusalem plays the role as the initial centre of the universal mission.

1.2 Terminology

Luke composes his two-volume work around two significant socio-religious terms, i.e. places where the community gathers to encounter the divine presence: the *temple* and the *house*, as Daniel Marguerat points out. Underscoring Luke's Gospel is the *temple* theme, as shown in the inaugural scene of Zechariah at the temple service and in the final scenes when the temple veil is torn in the middle at Jesus' death and, after Jesus' ascension, when the Apostles remain therein to pray (Lk 1:9; 23:45; 24:53). In Acts, on the other hand, the community, the place of gathering, is not limited to the *temple* but extended to the *house*. Acts begins with Jesus sharing a meal with His disciples (Acts 1:4) and ends with Paul's house arrest (Acts 28:30-31). The *temple* theme is restated: it is the *sanctuary* in the Gentile world (Acts 19:24), or the *temple compound* (i.e. the place of teaching and prayer: Lk 22:52-53; 24:53; the place of pilgrimage: Lk 2:22-52; Acts 2:5-11; the place of the Sanhedrin: Acts 4-5) or the *house of God* (Lk 6:5; Acts 7:49). The *house*, including the edifice itself and the family, becomes the centre where growth takes place (Acts 2:46), where the Risen Lord is encountered (cf. Lk 24:29; Acts 1:3), where the Holy Spirit is empowered (Acts 2:1) and continuous missionary activity is carried out (cf. Acts 10:22; 28:16).⁵ In brief, by switching from *temple* to *house*, Luke determines not only the passage from the first to the second volume, but also the shift from Jesus' Jewish-oriented activity to the universal mission of the Apostles.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴ Cf. J. SQUIRES, "The Plan of God in the Acts of the Apostles", in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1998, 21-23.

⁵ Cf. D. MARGUERAT, "Du Temple à la maison suivant Luc-Actes", in C. FOCANT (ed.), *Quelle maison pour Dieu?*, Cerf, Paris 2003, 306.

1.3 The Divine Plot and Agency

Luke binds both volumes and guides the events of the growing community through (a) the Holy Spirit. This divine agency is expressed also as (b) the Word of God.

a) The Holy Spirit, as Marguerat observes, is a “constituent part of the birth of the Church.”⁶ In the Gospel, Jesus as the Son of God receives the anointment of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35) that empowers His mission (Lk 4:18-19; Isa 61:1-2).⁷ In Acts, Jesus becomes the Lord and the giver of the Spirit (Acts 2:33) that empowers the life and the testimony of the community (cf. Acts 4:31). Luke, as Marguerat aptly emphasizes, “marries two Jewish scriptural traditions without confusion.”⁸ By linking the empowerment of the Spirit both to the Messiah (cf. Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1) and to the people (cf. Num 11:29; Joel 3:1), Luke underlines the continuity both in terms of Jesus’ mission and of God’s plan for His people. Moreover, Luke demonstrates the continuity of God’s plan in describing the growth of the community. Despite fierce opposition, the community grows as shown in the summary narratives (cf. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16); the summary statements at the different geographic stages of the narrative (Acts 1:8)⁹ and the numeric summaries of the growth of the community (cf. Acts 6:1.7; 12:24; 19:20).

b) Key to the community’s growth, as Brian Rosner points out, is the “Word of God” (cf. Lk 3:2-17; Acts 4:29.31; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5; 16:32; 17:13; 18:11). This concerns both “the King-

⁶ D. MARGUERAT, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts: A Western Perspective”, in P. DRAGUTINOVIC – K.-W. NIEBUHR – J. B. WALLACE – C. KARAKOLIS (eds.), *The Holy Spirit and the Church according to the New Testament. Sixth International East-West Symposium of New Testament Scholars, Belgrade, August 25th to 31st, 2013*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 354, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2016, 113.

⁷ Cf. Ibid., 114.

⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁹ The Spirit accompanies different stages of the narrative: the Jews in Jerusalem (2:4), the Samaritans (8:14-17), the Gentile proselytes of Judea (10:44-48), and the Gentiles of Asia Minor (19:6). P. ZINGG, *Das Wachsen der Kirche. Beiträge zur Frage der lukanischen Redaktion und Theologie*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, vol. 3, Freiburg 1974, 20-59; A. CHAMBERS, *Exemplary Life. A Theology of Church Life in Acts*, B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2012, 119-121.

dom of God" (Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23) and "the salvation of God" (Acts 28:28).¹⁰ Notwithstanding the strife and persecution (9:29), the Church lives in peace¹¹ and consolation¹², and in fear of God¹³ (cf. 9:31), echoing the original experience of the Apostles (5:41) and conveying God's work in the community as described in the summaries (cf. 4:33). In brief, the repetitive summary statements show that the community is guided by God's Spirit and Word, and is thus empowered to fulfil the universal mission despite the rejection.

c) Some scholars focus on the narrative function of the Old Testament quotation. For instance, James Meek claims that these quotations characterize the figures at different stages of the narrative so to underline the universal scope of the mission. In this sense, the "light to the nations" of Isa 49:6 is set at three important points of the narrative. At the beginning (Lk 2:32), at the heart of the story in Acts (Acts 13:47) and at the final stage (26:23). Therefore, the Gentile mission is not a result of Paul and Barnabas' failed mission in Israel, but had been foreseen in Isaiah's prophecy.¹⁴

2. Narrative Plot

The story of Luke-Acts reveals not only a structural coherence but also a narrative plot, as the universal mission unravels from Jesus to

¹⁰ B.S. ROSNER, "The Progress of the Word", in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, 224.

¹¹ "Peace" refers to Christ (Acts 10:36), but implies a favourable attitude and release (Acts 15:33; 16:36; 24:2; cf. Isa 52:7).

¹² "Consolation" implies material goods (Lk 6:24; Acts 4:36), words of encouragement (Acts 13:15; 15:31), nuance of healing (Acts 5:14-16 [Isa 57:18]), and salvation (Lk 2:25).

¹³ "Fear" is a prerequisite for the faith of the believers (cf. Acts 2:43-44; 5:11; Isa 8:13).

¹⁴ J.A. MEEK, *The Gentile Mission in Old Testament Citations in Acts. Text, Hermeneutic and Purpose*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 385, T&T Clark, London – New York 2008, 4-54. See also Robert Wall, who argues that citation from Joel 3:1-5 in Acts 2:17-21, and from Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:16-17, structures the narrative plot of Acts. R. WALL, "Israel and the Gentile Mission in Acts and Paul: A Canonical Approach", in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, 441.

His community. Here, I introduce (2.1) an overview of the narrative plot concerning the mission theme and (2.2) a close reading of some of the most significant and pertinent narrative episodes.

2.1 An Overview of the Narrative Plot about the Theme of Mission

Luke, in contrast with other evangelists, extends the story of Jesus to His disciples. This enables him to portray narratively the tension between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. While Jesus walks the prophetic path from Galilee towards Jerusalem (Lk 9:51-19:28), His community opens the doors of Jewish tradition, initiating the evangelization mission of the whole world (Acts 1:8). Despite the initial expectations of the universal mission (cf. Lk 4:25-27), Luke's Jesus does not encounter the Gentiles (cf. Mt 8:11; Mk 13:10), but rather remains within the boundaries of the Jewish world (cf. Lk 9:52). Additionally, for Luke's Jesus the temple cannot remain a place of prayer also for the Gentiles, as the redactional omission hints at (cf. Lk 19:46; Mk 11:17 [Isa 56:7]).¹⁵ Nevertheless, he sends His disciples to spread the news of God's Kingdom, initially in Israel (Lk 9:2; 10:1), successively commanding them to evangelize the entire world (Mt 28:19; Lk 24:47; Acts 1:8), after the ascension (i.e. after the revelation of His divine Lordship). Since the Apostles conceive the restoration, i.e. the renewal of the people, in nationalistic terms (Acts 1:6), the Holy Spirit represents a rectification of their mission in universal terms (Acts 1:8).¹⁶

While the universal mission seems to be a consequence of the persecution and dispersion (cf. Acts 8:4; 11:19-20), the universal perspective is already revealed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Lk 2:32; 3:38, 4:25-27). Jesus' mission, as the "light for the revelation of the Gentiles" (Lk 2:32; [Isa 49:6]), is confirmed by His lineage that goes back to Noah, Adam and, ultimately, to God (Lk 3:23-28). It is Jesus who ultimately grounds divine sonship of all humanity (cf. Acts 17:28). Jesus interprets His mission as both empowered by the Spirit to bring the Good News of release to the outcasts (Lk 4:18-19 [Isa 61:1-2]), as well as destined to go beyond the borders of Israel like the prophets Elijah and Elisha (Lk 4:25-30).

¹⁵ B.S. ROSNER, "The Progress of the Word", 118.

¹⁶ S.G. WILSON, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, Society for the New Testament Studies Monograph Series, vol. 23, 1973, 90-91.

Luke portrays his approach to the Gentile world gradually. Described as the “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (5:27-39; 7:34; 19:5-7), Jesus also approaches the Samaritans positively (9:55; 10:30-35; 17:11-19).¹⁷ However, Luke’s specific attitude towards the Gentiles is revealed by comparing the accounts of the healing of the centurion’s servant (Lk 7:1-10; Mt 8:5-13; official’s son in John 4:46-54). While John plays with the theme of faith and Matthew allows a direct encounter of Jesus with the centurion, Luke introduces mediators to portray the centurion’s respect and Jesus’ appraisal of his faith which is found nowhere in Israel. Jesus reveals His universal perspective when he describes the eschatological banquet (Lk 13:28-29) and entrusts the mission first to the Apostles (9:1-6) and successively to the seventy-(two) (10:1-12). These two missions coactively prepare the mission to all nations (Lk 24:46-47; Acts 1:8), as signalled with the reference to Israel’s tribes (cf. Lk 22:29-32; Acts 1:26) and to the 72 nations of the known world (Acts 2:5: every nation).¹⁸

Luke portrays the mission to a Gentile world gradually in the narrative of Acts. The initial community in Jerusalem represents Israel re-gathered and restored. Despite the missionary mandate (Acts 1:8) and the universal understanding of the Spirit’s empowerment (cf. 2:39; 3:26), the community first remains in Jerusalem, growing as the multitudes from the surrounding cities gather in Jerusalem (5:16). After Pentecost and the persecution (cf. 8:3ff.), Peter and Philip begin the mission to Samaria and the coastal area; yet, the decisive turning point in the narrative is the account of the conversion of the centurion Cornelius (cf. 10). After this turning point, the mission to the Gentiles is enacted by Paul. The mission proceeds with “ecclesial embeddedness,”¹⁹ and not because of persecutions, but because the mission to the Jews has been accomplished.²⁰ In

¹⁷ B.S. ROSNER, “The Progress of the Word”, 220.

¹⁸ J. M. SCOTT, “Acts 2:9-11 as an Anticipation of the Mission to the Nations”, 89-99.

¹⁹ C. STENSCHKE, “Mission in the Book of Acts: Mission of the Church”, *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*, vol. 103, 2010, 67-74.

²⁰ Jacob Jervell argues that the mission to the Gentiles is only after the completion of the mission to the Jews. J. JERVELL, *Luke and the People of God*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, MN 1972, 41-66 [previously published as “Das gespaltene Is-

brief, Luke introduces high hopes for the mission of salvation universally spread. These hopes are not denied but developed in stages: first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles.

2.2 A Close Reading of some of the most significant and pertinent Narrative Episodes

Here, I observe some episodes in the narrative of Acts: (A) Acts 2-5: this sequence portrays life at the Jerusalem Church after the bestowal of the Spirit; (B) Acts 10-15: this sequence illustrates the beginning and confirmation of the mission to the Gentiles. A close reading of the sequences should help us better understand both the narrative development of the mission as well as Luke's universal perspective.

A. The bestowal of the Holy Spirit and the growing conflict (Acts 2-5)

Acts 2 represents the fulfilment of the promises regarding the coming of the Spirit (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4-5.8). The event hints at the mission both to the Jews as well as to the Gentiles. The sequence of the event-speech follows a similar pattern regarding Jesus' mission as presented at the beginning of Luke's Gospel.²¹ In both cases we notice that (1) the coming of the Spirit is related to prayer (Lk 4:18; Acts 2:17-18); (2) the scriptural quotation of both speeches characterizes the mission as a "release" (cf. Lk 4:18) and "release of sins" (Acts 2:38); (3) the speech is followed by rejection (cf. Lk 4; Acts 4-5).

The event is placed within the sequence of Jewish feasts (cf. Lev 23), namely it is associated with the Feast of the Weeks²² and with the experience of both Mosaic and Isaianic Exodus, as the audible-visible elements also indicate.²³ The interpretation of the Pentecost

rael und die Heidenvölker: Zur Motivierung des Heidenmission in der Apostelgeschichte", *Studia Theologica*, vol. 19, 1965, 68-96].

²¹ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. A Literary Interpretation. 2. The Acts of the Apostles*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA 1990, 29.

²² The Old Testament shows the correlation of Pentecost with Passover (Lev 23:15-21).

²³ Lexical correlations include: hear/sound (Ex 19:5; Acts 2:6); sound/noise (Ex 19:16; Acts 2:2); fire/smoke (Ex 19:18; Acts 2:3); be amazed (Ex 19:18; Acts 2:7); all the people/all (Ex 19:18; Acts 2:1); multitude of people (Ex 19:21; Acts

in terms of the covenant renewal is attested in the *Book of Jubilees*²⁴ and Qumran (cf. 1QS 1:7-2,19; CD 16:1-4), but also implied in 2Chr 15:10-12. The Spirit, symbolically depicted as water (Isa 44:3) and fire (5:24), empowers prophetic mission (61:1) and witness to the Lord (Lk 4:1; Acts 1:8).²⁵ Since the crowd, consisting of devoted Jews from every nation under heaven (2:5),²⁶ also represents the Gentiles of their homes. Robert Tannehill arrives at the conclusion that this event provides “a hint of the mission’s power to cross ethnic and religious lines.”²⁷ The centripetal and centrifugal movements echo Isaiah when he recounts the return of the exiles (cf. Isa 45:20), the proclamation to the nations (45:22), and the pilgrimage of the nations (cf. 2:1-5). Despite a clear Jerusalem-centred perspective, the universal kingship of Jesus is defended, building up a new identity, empowered by the Spirit.²⁸

Peter explains the bestowal of the Spirit by referring to prophetic words (Acts 2:17-21; LXX Joel 3:1-5). Minor notes in 2:14 (“all those dwelling in Jerusalem”), 2:36 (“the whole house of Israel”) and 2:39 (“all those far off”) refer to all the Jews, both to those who reside in Jerusalem as well as to those, scattered throughout the world, but now present in Jerusalem. However, this is a proleptic anticipation of the universal mission, since the Gospel is first addressed to all Israel, scattered throughout the world, and, second, it addresses also the Gentile inhabitants of the Jewish Diaspora. The bestowal of the

2:6); together/together in one place (Ex 1:8; Acts 2:1). See also S. PARK, *Pentecost and Sinai. The Festival of Weeks as a Celebration of the Sinai Event*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, vol. 342, T&T Clark, London 2008, 176-238.

²⁴ R.H. CHARLES, *The Book of Jubilees, or, the Little Genesis*, A. and C. Black, London 1902.

²⁵ Cf. H. BEERS, *The Followers of Jesus as the “Servant.” Luke’s Model from Isaiah for the Disciples in Luke-Acts*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 535, Bloomsbury, London 2015, 128-133.

²⁶ With regard to the additional list of nations (2:9-11), James Scott relates it with Gn 10-11, as well as its reformulation in Isa 66:18-19 and Jub 8-9. J. M. SCOTT, “Acts 2:9-11 as an Anticipation of the Mission to the Nations”, 116-119.

²⁷ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. A Literary Interpretation. 2. The Acts of the Apostles*, 27.

²⁸ A.J. THOMPSON, *One Lord, One People. The Unity of the Church in Acts in its Literary Setting*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 359, T&T Clark, London 2008, 68-70.

Holy Spirit represents the eschatological realisation of Joel's promise. In fact, Peter twice underscores the eschatological tone of the prophecy (LXX Joel 3:1[2]: afterward [those days]; Acts 2:17-18: in the last days). The discourse marked by the "latter days" evokes Isaiah's view, indicating that the Lord's Law and His Word of judgment are valid for both Israel and all the nations (cf. Isa 2:2-4).²⁹ Likewise, the gift of the Spirit bestowed "upon every flesh" (Joel 3:1; Acts 2:17) suggests an eschatological and universal dimension (cf. Lk 3:6; Acts 2:39 [Isa 40:5; 49,26]; Acts 13:47 [Isa 49,6]) and enables universal comprehension.³⁰

Acts 3-5 portray the growing conflict with the official religious authorities on the one hand, while the Apostles continue to enact the Spirit-empowered mission, both inside and outside the community, by teaching and healing. The healing account in Acts 3 is significant, since it both echoes Jesus' healing pattern (Lk 5:17-26) as a realisation of Isaianic hopes (Lk 7:22 [Isa 35:6; 55:12]),³¹ as well as indicating the competence of the Apostles, as it is later confirmed in the mission of Paul (Acts 14:8-13). The nature of the healing, by calling on Jesus' name (3:6), defers from the magic-like incantations and has an important social function as it reintroduces the healed person back into the community.³²

Peter takes the crowd's amazement (3:10ff.) as an opportunity to explain the healing in the light of the history of salvation that climaxes in Christ. A change of mindset as a return to God is necessary for the realization of the eschatological times envisioned in three stages: (1) the remission of sins (3:19), (2) the arrival of the

²⁹ Cf. D.W. PAO, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II, vol. 130, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2000, 156-159.

³⁰ J. MCWHIRTER, *Rejected Prophets. Jesus and His Witnesses in Luke-Acts*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2013, 51.

³¹ H.K. NIELSEN, *Heilung und Verkündigung. Das Verständnis der Heilung und ihres Verhältnisses zur Verkündigung bei Jesus und in der ältesten Kirche*, Acta Theologica Danica, vol. 22, Brill, Leiden 1987, 170-172.

³² D. MARGUERAT, "Magic and Miracle in the Acts of the Apostles", in T.E. KLUTZ (ed.), *Magic in the Biblical World. From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement, vol. 245, T&T Clark, London 2003, 101-103.

Messiah who refreshes (3:20) and (3) brings restoration to all things (3:21). The future blessing intended as the eschatological restoration in Christ is addressed first to the Jews, as the heirs of the promises, and then to the Gentiles (cf. 3:25-26). This same pattern, i.e. the Word of God addressed first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, is also echoed in the mission of Paul later in the narrative (13:46; 18:5-6; 28:23-28).³³ In the sequence of the events in Acts 3-4, Peter presents the *kerygma* – i.e. God's plan of salvation in Christ – by explaining Jesus' name. Linking it to other Christological titles such as servant, holy, righteous, leader to life (Acts 3:13-15), Peter evokes the figure of the Isaianic Servant (cf. Isa 43-53).³⁴ Moreover, by applying the Old Testament's "cornerstone" theme to Jesus (cf. Ps 117:22; Isa 8:14-15; 28:16; Acts 4:11), Peter stresses the universal and soteriological meaning of the name (cf. Acts 4:10-11).³⁵ The fact that Jesus represents the fundament of the community's life and salvation is later confirmed when Peter acclaimes Jesus as the "forerunner and saviour", that is, as the one who leads to life and represents a guide towards salvation (Acts 5:31; cf. Hebr 2:10), since God delivered him from the agony of death (Acts 2:24) and made him the first-born from the dead (26:23). Thus, Jesus becomes the judge of the living and the dead (10:42; 17:31), the guide who leads beyond sin and death, and lastly, the life-giving ruler who guarantees entry into the eschatological restoration (cf. 3:21).³⁶ In brief, Peter reveals God's plan of salvation in Christ not for the inculcation of the Jews, but rather as a turning point for conversion and salvation. The theme of salvation having universal repercussions is echoed later in the narrative, as the mission enters the Gentile world first through Peter (10:43) and then through Paul (13:39).

³³ W. G. HANSEN, "The Preaching and Defence of Paul", in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, 299-300.

³⁴ M. D. GOULDER, "The Anointed", in J. L. NORTH – S. MOYISE (eds.), *The Old Testament in the New Testament. Essays in Honour of J.L. North*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 2000, 72-73.

³⁵ Also, Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10-11; Lk 20:17; Rom 9:32-33; 1Pt 2:6.

³⁶ T. ESKOLA, *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament. Exploring the Meta-narrative of Exile and Restoration*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 350, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015, 221.

B. The divine intervention and the community's decision for the universal mission (*Acts 10-15*)

Acts 10-11. In the episode of Cornelius' conversion, the reader might notice the specific, Jewish-like characterization of Cornelius as devout (Sir 11:22), God-fearing (Lk 1:50; 2:25), and righteous (Deut 16:20; Lk 1:6); as one who prays at the hour of prayer (Sir 4:5; Lk [2:37]; 5:12; 10:2). Second temple Judaism develops the idea that prayer, alms-giving, and the study of the Torah represent a spiritual sacrifice, equal in value to that performed in the temple (cf. Tob 12:12; 1 QS 8:1-9) so that the offering of the righteous man cannot be disregarded (Sir 35:9). Cornelius resembles Simeon, who is yearning for Israel's consolation and salvation, i.e. the Messiah appointed also to the Gentiles (Lk 2:32). This characterization is a decisive turning point: the heavens, previously closed for the Gentiles, are now opened to allow Cornelius achieve the message of salvation (cf. Acts 10:4). Cornelius "sends" for Peter (10:8) according to the divine command (cf. 10:5[20].32.33) because a new stage of the mission is at stake.³⁷

The narrative shifts to portray Peter, who abides in a setting on the edge of (1) ritual purity, as he resides in the house of "Simon, a tanner" (9:43; 10:6); (2) topographical juxtaposition between earth, sea and heaven, as he abides "by the sea" and stays "on the housetop" (9:43; 10:9). In the minds of people, the sea represents a primordial chaotic force that only God manages to dominate by His divine and creative power (Job 38:8.16; Isa 40:12), the only one capable to place limits on it and control the forceful creatures that abide therein (Job 40:25; Isa 27:1). Therefore, Peter finds himself on the border of human capacities, while contemplating the greatness of God. This initial description already announces to the reader that something is about to happen. However, Peter adheres to tradition, as the temporal setting of the prayer "at the sixth hour" seems to indicate. Peter enters the divine through revelation on two levels:

³⁷ The verb "to send" refers mostly to the divine act in sending His agents (Lk 1:19.26) – Jesus (Lk 4:18.43; Acts 3:26; 10:36), the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:49; Acts 3:20), and Jesus' messengers – to proclaim the Kingdom of God (Lk 9:2; 9:52; 10:1) and salvation to the Gentiles (Acts 26:17; 28:28). P. G. BOLT, "Mission and Witness", *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, 194-195.

(1) *vision* (open heaven: Lk 3:21; Acts 7:56) and (2) *explanation* (Lk 3:22; Acts 7:31). The vision remains unclear – i.e. like a vessel (cf. Acts 9:15) containing all the living beings as in the account of creation and Noah (cf. Gn 1:24.26; 6:20) – and calls for the additional explanation that follows the scheme: (1) command, (2) rejection, and (3) explanation.

The command “kill and eat” (Acts 10:13) implies the ritual sacrifice (Ex 8:25; Deut 12:15); however, it becomes problematic because of the presence of the ritually impure animals that taint all the others (Lev 11). For this same reason, also the encounter with strangers (i.e. Gentiles) who eat impure animals and food sacrificed to the idols, or live immorally, is problematic.³⁸ Although the strangers are to be treated with respect and care (cf. Lev 19:33-34; Deut 27:19), meeting them and sharing meals with them is to be restricted due to idolatry (Deut 18:9-14) and immorality (Deut 20:16).³⁹ Every observant Jew, knowing the list of impure animals (cf. Lev 11-16) would reject such a command, as Peter does; he claims never to have tasted anything “common/unclean” and “impure” (10:14). The word pair “common” and “impure” explain each other, revealing the semantic field that goes from the “ritually impure” to the “common”. The latter, deriving from Hellenistic culture, illustrate the origins of the community when its members hold everything in common and share all goods and break bread together (2:44).

God's answer, “What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy” (Acts 10:15), resolves the situation. Peter, despite the tradition that “nothing impure comes from heaven” (m. *Sanhedrin* 59b), discerns the vision and the voice. Peter applies this vision directly to the encounter with Cornelius by recognising God's impartiality, since God accepts everyone who fears Him and works righteously (cf. Acts 10:34-35). Thus, as Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead, everyone who believes in Jesus receives the remission of sin (Acts 10:42-43).

³⁸ Cf. G. C. LESTER, “Paul and the Mission to the Gentiles: A Study in the History of Scholarship”, Thesis in History, University of Missouri, Kansas City, 1998, 51-52, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.469.5814&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

³⁹ Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, “James, Peter, and the Gentiles”, in B. CHILTON – C. A. EVANS (eds.), *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity*, Novum Testamentum Supplements, vol. 115, Brill, Leiden 2005, 111.

Peter's proclamation of "remission of sin in Jesus' name" evokes earlier speeches, but only through the Spirit these become the "words of salvation" (cf. 2:40-41; 11:14; 13:26). The Spirit confirms Peter's words and repeats the initial event (2:4), but also prevails over the condition of the baptism in Jesus' name (2:38). Peter will connect the event to Jesus' promise of the "baptism in the Spirit" (cf. 1:5; Lk 3:16). Thus, if the Spirit is given also to the Gentiles who believe in Christ, it must mean that God has purified these Gentiles of their moral impurity. God once again demonstrates His power (4:31) by giving conversion that leads to life (11:18) and by cleansing hearts through faith (15:9). For this reason, Richard Bauckham concludes that "the distinction between the Holy people of Israel, separated for God, and the profane peoples, separated from God, has been abolished".⁴⁰ However, baptism must follow: both as inclusion in the messianically renewed people of God and as the expression of divine intervention in repentance and forgiveness (10:48). The conversion of Cornelius is decisive for the subsequent Gentile mission, as it is not the work of men, but of God.⁴¹ For this reason, Peter refers to this event twice. First, as he arrives in Jerusalem, he retells the event (11:5-17) by arriving at two conclusions: (1) the faith of the Gentiles and (2) God's intervention that cannot be hindered (10:17). The community recognizes the event as a conversion that leads to life given by God (10:18). Second, on the occasion of the Jerusalem assembly, Peter retells the event concisely by affirming God's intervention in: (1) choosing him so that the Gentiles would hear and believe the words of the Gospel; (2) knowing their hearts, bearing witness for them, and bestowing them the Holy Spirit (15:7-8). Therefore, Peter claims that there is no distinction, as God has purified their hearts through faith (15:9).⁴²

The conversion of the first Gentile is decisive for the narrative plot. For the purpose of the general acceptance, it is Peter, as a prominent figure of the Jerusalem Church, who is witness to this crucial event. The Church has been prepared by God to make a further step into the Gentile world. From Caesarea the narrative shifts to depict the community in Antioch, consisting of both Jewish and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 115.

⁴¹ Cf. S. G. WILSON, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, 177.

⁴² Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, "James, Peter, and the Gentiles", 105.

Gentile disciples, defined as “Christians” (11:26). Since this community has embraced the faith in “the Gospel of the Lord Jesus”, the first during the persecution of the original Jerusalem community, it enjoys a primacy over the other communities of Gentiles (cf. 11:19-21), and is set on the universal mission by the decision of the Spirit in choosing Barnabas and Saul/ Paul (13:2)

Acts 13-14. Here I will try to show how they confronted both the Gentile and Jewish worlds during their first mission by pointing to: (1) the purging of the pagan beliefs and (2) the retelling of the story of salvation.

1. At Paphos, they encountered a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet Bar-Jesus, who tried to hinder them in their proclamation of the Word of God, by opposing them and seeking to turn his master proconsul Sergius Paulus away from faith (13:7-8). Paul perceives Bar-Jesus as full of deceit and wickedness (13:10). Magical powers, in fact, appear to be related to money, manipulation, and power (cf. 8:9-24; 16:16-19). Therefore, they are in direct contrast to the power of Jesus' name and His Spirit that sets free and leads to life. Paul arrests this kind of activity by blinding Bar-Jesus (13:11). At Lystra, when they heal the lame man who had faith (14:9; cf. the healing in Acts 3) and the people acclaim them as gods, they tear their robes (14:14) and rush to reprimand them by proclaiming the Gospel of the living God, as creator, provider of all goods and joy of heart (14:15-17).

2. At Antioch in Pisidia, going into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, they are invited to proclaim “words of encouragement” (13:15). Paul concisely retells the history of Israel (13:16-41: cf. Stephen's speech Acts 7:2-53) showing how the Davidic promises climax in Jesus: in the resurrection, remission of sins and justification (cf. 13:32-39).⁴³ However, Paul quoting Hab 1:5 hints at the rejection of the message by the Jewish audience. The rejection, caused by envy, introduced the repetitive pattern of Paul's mission. Due to the rejection of the Jews, the Word of God is directed at the Gentiles (13:46). Isaiah's “light to the nations” (Isa 49:6) describing the mission of Jesus, also obtains the same function for Paul (Lk 2:32; Acts 13:47). Thus, Paul addresses

⁴³ W. G. HANSEN, “The Preaching and Defence of Paul”, 301.

first the Jews and then the Gentiles (cf. Acts 13:45-47; 17:1-15; 18:4-7; 19:8-9; 28:23-28). Paul and Barnabas' shift of focus to the Gentiles is seen as a realisation of the prophecies (cf. Acts 13:47; Isa 49:6) and the divine work in opening a door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27). However, each new step towards the Gentile world requires the confirmation of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15).

Acts 15. The question of the Gentile mission, i.e. the Gentiles' membership of the people of God, with or without circumcision, demands a decision on the part of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15:15).

Peter, as a prominent member of the Jerusalem Church, recounts his experience of God's intervention in cleansing hearts through faith and by the gift of the Holy Spirit (15:8-9). His testimony precedes those of Paul and Barnabas (15:12; cf. 2:19)⁴⁴; however, the decisive role is given to James. For him, the Gentiles belong to the messianic people of God, as was foretold by the prophets (Acts 15:14). Introducing the citation Amos 9:11-12, he identifies this situation as a restoration of David's tent with the inclusion of the Gentiles. Using the idiomatic expression "all the nations over whom my name has been invoked" (Acts 15:17; cf. 2:21.39), he argues that now all the nations are the Lord's own people. The four prohibitions included in the apostolic decree, to refrain from sacrificing to idols, blood, things strangled, and sexual immorality, obliged every stranger within Israel (Lev 17-18).⁴⁵ Thus, a new life refraining from moral impurities derives from the purification of hearts.

The decision causes joy and the final stage of the mission to the ends of the world. God's plan to introduce the Gentiles to the messianic people of God (Acts 15:14) is confirmed later in the narrative. First, in Corinth God claims to have "many people" in the city (18:10) and second, Paul, recounting his Damascus' experience, sees it as a divine mandate to open the eyes of the Gentiles in order that they may "receive remission of sins and an inheritance among them that is sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18). Lastly, in Rome Paul's

⁴⁴ The "signs and wonders" is a catchphrase of 2:19. Cf. R. WALL, "Israel and the Gentile Mission in Acts and Paul: A Canonical Approach", 443.

⁴⁵ Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, "James, Peter, and the Gentiles", 119-120.

mission seemingly comes to an end. Once again, the Jewish audience does not listen (28:25-27; cf. Isa 6:9-10).

The narrative plan on the Church's mission (Acts 1:8) has reached its goal at the centre of the Roman Empire, but neither the Jews nor the Gentiles have listened to the Word of salvation. For this purpose, an open-end of the story (28:28) functions both as a prophetic critique and as such also represents a hope for Israel, as well as an invitation to the reader to listen and to accept the Word of salvation.

3. Concluding Observation on the *Missio ad Gentes* in Acts

The analysis of both the structural markers and the narrative plot has shown how the theme of the *missio ad gentes* is constantly present (cf. Lk 2:32), but it develops gradually first to the outcasts in the Gospel and finally to the Gentiles in Acts (cf. Lk 9:51; Acts 1:8). The conducting agents of the mission represent the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1:15; Acts 28:25) and the Word of God (cf. Lk 1:13; Acts 28:28). The kerygma announced is that Jesus is the Christ and Lord. He leads to life in God's Kingdom, i.e. delivering from the bondages of spiritual, social, and physical types. By the power of the Holy Spirit sins are remitted, the magical powers revealed and overturned. Moreover, this Spirit empowering the life of a new, family-like community that shares life. In the power of the Spirit, the sick ones are either cured or cared for. The mission takes into account the way of life of the Gentiles. Firstly, by considering the socio-religious provenance (theology of creation), and secondly by rejecting the bad elements (magic and idol worship) to introduce them to the living and loving God. The mission consists in the openness of the heart, in listening to the Word and living it, despite the daily struggles, no matter where, even in the smallest regions of the earth such as Slovenia or at the farthest outskirts of the globe (cf. Acts 1:8).