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PILGRIMAGE: LUKE/ACTS AND THE WORLD OF RELIGIONS

MARTIN FORWARD

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Why did Luke make so much of the motif of journeying? This paper contends that he regards the Christian life as a journey within God's world to God. This means that new discoveries are always possible for those who explore the life of faith.

Perhaps the circumstances of the early church whose beginnings and early years he narrates led Luke to this motif. The story begins in Jerusalem and in the temple, centre of the Jewish religion. It ends in Rome, with Paul preaching salvation to the gentiles. During its course, the principal characters have much to learn about God from the faith of others. Perhaps Christians in modern multi-Faith Britain have much to learn from Luke's interpretation of the earliest Christians' encounters with the multi-Faith world in which they lived.

The people of God whom Luke describes were learners in God's wide world, and to read of them reminds us that as we meet people of different religions and cultures, sharing the good news with them can teach us of God as well as them.

Luke's account of the healing of the centurion's servant (Luke 7 vv1-10) highlights the amazement of Jesus at the centurion's direct and perfect faith, surpassing the faith of any Jew he had encountered. (Matthew's parallel account makes the same point.) Jesus appears to share the prejudice of many of his countrymen about gentiles, but finds himself forced to admit that he had misjudged at least one of them. So Jesus is depicted as learning from the faith of another that a knowledge of God is not confined to Jews.

Peter learned much the same point as Jesus did from his encounter with a different centurion named Cornelius. Earlier, he had claimed, speaking of Jesus, that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4v12). That verse was addressed to elders and rulers of the Jews, so it has no wider immediate reference than Jesus's relation to the Jewish religion of Peter's and Luke's times, whose leaders should have recognised him as the culmination of their religious hope. Moreover, the verb 'to save' can also in Greek mean 'to heal' and since Peter's speech arose out of the context of a healing miracle, he would most naturally have used it to mean 'to heal' rather than 'to save'. Theology has to be done in particular contexts, which can modify even deeply cherished beliefs about God. Peter's bold statement about Jesus had eventually to be tested in a wider world than that of an intra-Jewish debate about the source of authority for healing. Observing the will to fuller faith by Cornelius, a gentile whom he first thought 'unclean', Peter exclaimed, "I now perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10v34).

There is no Lukan account of Paul realising that a knowledge of God was to be found among the gentiles, but it probably never occured to Luke that he had to labour this point. Paul was a Jew of the diaspora and, unlike Palestinian Jews, would have had the opportunity to meet many gentiles, whose capacity for faith he would take for granted. Certainly, Luke makes it clear that Paul recognised a knowledge of God among non-Jews. Paul's speech in the middle of the Areopagus in Athens bears witness to this, when he quotes with approval a Greek philosopher and poet (Acts 17v28). Moreover, it is recorded that in Ephesus, Paul entered the synagogue, dialoguing and pleading about the kingdom of God. After three months, when some were stubborn and disbelieved and spoke ill of "the way", he removed to the hall of Tyrannus, where he dialogued daily for two years. (*Dialogomenos*, in Acts 19vv8 and 9 comes from *dialegomai*, which in this context most naturally means to talk together, to discuss. Paul would surely not have lasted so long in either venue if he had monologued, argued and harangued!) To dialogue is to commit oneself to the ministry of listening as well as talking. Nowadays the word 'dialogue' has been made to bear a variety of pseudo-technical meanings, and is (almost?) beyond redemption as a meaningful term. With what relief then one finds it used in Acts 19 as meaning something like 'meeting together and talking about God'. It is not just since Martin Buber that people have talked together of God across the boundaries of faith-systems!

This capacity of Jesus and his leading followers to learn from the faith of other people goes hand in hand with a recognition of the universal Lordship of Christ. The centurion whose servant Jesus healed called him Lord and recognised in him God's healing power. Peter's exclamation, recorded in Acts 10v34 is not a denial of the centrality of Christ, but a recognition, which once at least he fell away from (Galatians 2vv11f.), that the basis for a pilgrimage to God begins not just from within Jewish experiences of the divine, but from within any religious person's reverence for God and desire to serve him. Furthermore, Peter's earlier statement of faith in Acts 4v12, though directed to people who shared a common Jewish tradition about God's dealings with his world, and primarily about healing and not salvation in all its fullness, implicitly raises the question of the unique authority of Jesus. This can be seen by reading Acts 3-4v22 alongside Acts 14vv8-18, which describes how Barnabas and Paul were called Zeus and Hermes when they healed the cripple at Lystra. It seems that Luke intends a deliberate parallel with the earlier miracle, which was also that of healing a cripple. The point of the second account is that the miracle was done by a servant of Jesus, and that Zeus and Hermes have no real power to heal. Finally, Paul in Athens, despite his recognition of the presence of God within the faith of others, felt "his spirit . . . provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols", and declared that although God had overlooked the times of ignorance, he now commands all men everywhere to repent.

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Luke also condemns the blindness of Jewish leaders but this does not mean that he plays down the importance of Jewish history and experiences for deepest faith. Too much has been made by some scholars of the 'Christianity' which Luke describes in his second volume. Luke knows nothing of two religions, Judaism and Christianity. In his view, Christians owe to Jesus one interpretation of the history and experiences of living in God's world recorded in the Jewish scriptures. Clearly, he believes it to be the 'correct' interpretation, but he recognises variant interpretations even when he condemns them or aspects of them; those, for example, of the pharisees and sadducees. The Christians he writes about share Jewish festivals, worship in synagogues. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see how the entry of the gentiles into the promises of God, which became after some debate the Christian interpretation of Jewish faith, led to an irrevocable split with other interpretations, particularly that of Pharisaism which, broadly speaking, became with Christianity the surviving 'school' of Jewish religion after the Roman/Jewish war leading to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Luke did not have our advantage, and though we can trace the beginnings of that irrevocable split in his works, we must not read too much of the present back into them. Paul could, in his view, be both a pharisee and a Christian (Acts 23v6), a pharisee who had accepted Jesus as Lord.

This means that what has sometimes been interpreted as anti-Jewishness or even anti-semitism in Luke's works is more properly understood as profoundly different interpretations of the meaning of Israel's history and vocation being recognised and evaluated by him. His may not be a delicate and careful evaluation; his descriptions of pharisees scarcely does full justice to the movement they represent; but he does at least recognise (as his recording that Paul was both a Christian and a pharisee shows) that awareness of God and a desire to serve him is not a monopoly of any 'school'. So Luke's attitude towards Jewish religious experiences is rather like his attitude to gentile religious experiences; that they are authentic, but that accepting the Lordship of Jesus is what is required "today", a word which is used at least twice in his gospel (19v5; 24v43) to indicate the importance of responding to God's invitation to find him in Jesus.

Paul's claim to be both a pharisee and a Christian does justice to the fact, apparent in both Acts and the Pauline epistles, that he was indebted to and built upon his Jewish heritage. Paul's vision of Jesus on the journey to Damascus, which must be of crucial interest to Luke since he recounts it on three separate occasions (Acts 9vv1-19a, 22vv3-16, 26vv4-18), was not a conversion experience leading him to transfer from one religion to another. Rather, it led him to recognise the Lordship of Christ whom he believed called him to witness to the gentiles. It meant that he saw his Jewish heritage through different spectacles by which Jesus came into view as the focal point of God's dealings with his people.

Among both Jews and gentiles God "in present generations . . . did not leave himself without witness" (Acts 14vv16f.), and it is clear that for Luke the clearest witnesses were the Jewish scriptures. His works are soaked in an understanding of them, and his interpretation of them often weaves into his motif of journeying.

In particular, Abraham is more often cited in Luke's works than in any other New Testament author's writings. Jews regarded Abraham as, among other things, the exemplary pilgrim who heard God's promise and went on a journey in God's world through many vicissitudes to receive, understand and share that promise. For Luke, such faith in God demands openness and wonder, and recognises that the Almighty cannot be constrained by static laws or customs, however venerable. Hence it is easier for the sinful and sick, who know their need of God, to travel hopefully and faithfully with him, than the type of self-satisfied religious person who thinks himself to have no real need of God and nothing more to learn from him, who thinks rather of all that he does for him. So Jesus calls the woman whom he heals on the sabbath a daughter of Abraham, and the implication is that the ruler of the synagogue and other Jews who condemned miracles done on that day were not Abraham's children, because they tried to fetter God's healing power with rules instead of praising him for his boundless compassion (Luke 13vv10-17). Likewise, Zacchaeus, more of a 'quisling' than an orthodox Jew, becomes a son of Abraham because, like Abraham, he hears God's word, obeys and moves away from his past (Luke 19vv1-10).

In other places, Luke is content to admit that the Jews are the children of Abraham but denies that, of itself, it is of any value in God's sight. So John the baptiser declares the futility of trusting in kinship with Abraham without meaningful faith, obedience and compassion: "Bear fruits that befit repentence, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Luke 3vv1-14, esp.v8). The need for compassion as an essential part of faith is dear to Luke and comes to the fore in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man throughout his life has ignored the needs of the poor man at his gate. After death and in torment, he appeals to his father Abraham to have mercy on him. Abraham accepts the relationship by calling him son, but can do nothing for him. He utters the sombre words: ". . . between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us" (Luke 16v6). Those who do not travel faithfully with God, open to him and his promise, one day may want to but will find that it is too late and they cannot. And then no relationship can be of help.

Luke also takes from the Jewish scriptures the important theme of Jerusalem. The importance of Jerusalem in Luke/Acts is that it shows that Jewish antagonism to Jesus and his followers is a profound misinterpretation of the faith of Israel. For Luke, Jerusalem is a deeply compromised city, its supposed holiness being as much a sham and a delusion as it had seemed to Jeremiah 600 years earlier (e.g. Jeremiah 11vv1-17). Luke depicts movement to and then away from Jerusalem: Jesus sets his face towards the city in Luke 9v51 and takes until the latter half of chapter 19 to get there; this evangelist brings to bear the image of the exodus on his account of the transfiguration, whereas none of the others do (in Luke 9v31 Elijah and Moses talk with Jesus about his exodus which he is to fulfil at Jerusalem, but significantly the image has shifted from a geographical this-wordly event to an act of glory and obedience, death and resurrection, a journey to the promised land beyond); and Jesus's lament over Jerusalem as recorded by Luke takes place away from the city and holy week, and becomes a sombre statement of her forsakeness and of how she will receive him in blessing but only to accomplish his death (13v34f.). So Jesus's long

journey towards a fateful destiny depicts Jerusalem as a city flawed by the blindness of its citizens who do not recognise their Lord when he comes and who are to suffer the punishment of destruction (Luke 23vv28-31). Moreover, it is in Jerusalem where the first witness to die for the good news is killed, outside its walls like Stephen's Lord (Acts 7v57). And it is in Jerusalem that Paul is rejected and begins his journey which leads him to Rome (Acts 21vv27ff.). In Acts, the spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus empowers his followers in a city where he met his fate and where some of them will meet theirs (2vv1ff.), a hint that no place, however holy, can override the will of God. Thereafter, the gospel gradually moves away from Jerusalem to other cities in the gentile world where it finds small but ready audiences.

Jerusalem is the place where a tragic hero meets his destiny. It is the locus of misplaced holiness and of faith misinterpreted and betrayed. It never becomes for Luke the heavenly image it becomes for Paul (Galatians 4v26), and the authors of Hebrews (12v22) and the Apocalypse (21v2). He uses it as a symbol to illustrate the corruptibility of faith.

Luke realised that stories can tell far more about God than dogmatic statements. Three stories which he uniquely records are among the greatest stories ever told and all of them are about a journey.

The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10vv23-37) is a story of human behaviour, of vulnerability and violence, heartlessness and compassion. It is clear where Luke's sympathies lie; he believes that religious people should care. To be sure, such care can be discerned in the rules and regulations which religion prescribes, but these prescriptions hinder rather than further the will of God when they cause people to pass by on the other side or else to ask questions instead of reacting spontaneously to help a person in need. The Samaritan proves himself a neighbour to the man in need whereas the priest and the Levite, and the questioner, for all their knowledge of religious law, do not. On the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho, God is encountered where he is least expected, in a Samaritan, and not where he might most be expected to be found, in the professional religious. So on the journey of faith, it is necessary to be open to find God in extraordinary people and places and to be wary of people who are expected in some way to embody him.

Stories cannot usually be contained within one neat interpretation. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15vv11-32) has sometimes been interpreted as a story of divine love meeting human need and greed, or else as God's relationship to Jew and gentile. But it can also be read differently as the story of a human family beset by difficulties which often attend such close-knit institutions: a father who loves well but perhaps not wisely, a son who chafes against parental discipline, another son who sees obedience in terms of duty and who resents his father's loving forgiveness of a young wastrel. In this interpretation, the hurt, self-righteousness, self-interest and anger of fragile human relationships need a power beyond the protagonists to find genuine reconciliation. This may be to read out of the story more than Jesus and Luke meant, but it is the fate of stories to give up treasures more than the original teller could know they contained. Stories resonate in the imagination, they take on new possibilities of interpretation in different situations and at different readings, they remind us that our creative imagination is as much a God-given gift as is our capacity to rationalise, simplify and categorise. For a religious person, the known and the cherished, such as this parable, can yield up new insights on the journey of faith.

This point is made plain in the story of the journey to Emmaus (Luke 24vv13-35). The Jewish scriptures, the Lord's supper, a sudden and intuitive recognition: in this wonderful story these are well-loved but ever renewed and renewing things which mediate the presence of God. Yet as soon as the risen Lord is recognised, he vanishes. Too much dogma or indeed the central activities of faith can trap God; whereas an encounter on a journey challenges the pilgrim not to contain that vision but to go from it to new insights on the way.

There are dangers in regarding faith as pilgrimage, as travelling in God's world to God. It might encourage too personal an interpretation of faith, namely that *my* faith is what is important. The account of the journey to Emmaus indicates that there are the safeguards of scripture and eucharist which anchor the Christian's individual experiences of Jesus in a corporate response to the grace of God in Christ. The Christian treads a way and comes to his own convictions, but these must be measured against the life and teachings of Jesus and the community's share in his spirit. As the letter resulting from the Council in Jerusalem of apostles and elders puts it: "It has seemed good to the holy spirit and to us . . ." (Acts 15v28).

A second danger is that too much can be made of the interpretation of faith as journeying. There are other symbols for faith. If the Theophilus to whom Luke sends his works (Luke 1vv1-4; Acts 1vv1f.) really is a person and not a literary device, then he would probably be a Roman of high rank ("most excellent Theophilus"). Indeed, it was probably the intention of these works to win gentiles of social standing for the way of Jesus. Certainly, Luke's works tacitly approve of Roman authority; it is worth recording that the *pax Augustana* had brought to an end a long period of civil war in the Mediterranean region, and established conditions in which the gospel could be spread through a large area with stable government and at peace. Circumstances alter cases. It is not, for example, to be expected that the author of the book of Revelation, writing at a time of imperial persecution of Christians, would have much sympathy in the interpretation of faith as journeying in God's wide world; nor does he, finding faith as trust in the certain and ultimate triumph of God over evil as much more appropriate to his and his readers' circumstances. However, readers of Luke's works should not blame him for what he omits, but be grateful for the insights his writings contain, and recognise that his insights need to be read alongside others offered in different responses to the good news of Jesus, recorded in those various writings we now know as the New Testament.