Engaging the First Christian Historian

Essays on Luke-Acts in Honour of Steve Walton

Edited by
Daniel M. Gurtner and Brian J. Tabb

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11

The Intimate God and the Social God in the Book of Acts

Daniel Marguerat

If a man were in an ecstasy, as St. Paul was (2 Cor. 12:2-4),
and he knew of a sick person who needed some soup,
I would consider it much better that, out of love, you leave the ecstasy
and serve the needy man in greater love.
Meister Eckhart, *Rede der Unterscheidung* 221.7-8

The book of Acts has been read as the manifesto of the Christian mission. It has been read as the great epic of the Word's conquest, the lightning-fast expansion of the gospel in the Roman empire. And it has been read as the great story of the beginnings of the Church. Taking up this last reading, I ask what image Luke paints of the Church and its role in society. My argument is that, unlike those who today opt for a retreat of the Church into spirituality or those who, conversely, see its future in diaconal activity, *the author of the Acts of the Apostles helps us think simultaneously about the spiritual God and the social God*. In other words, Luke creates a role for the community of believers in which spirituality leads to, and nourishes, social action. Moreover, for Luke, there is no authentic Christian spirituality if it does not lead to social engagement.

My discussion is divided into three parts: (1) the book of Acts, a collective memory for Christianity; (2) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and its effects on communal living; (3) reintegrating those who have been excluded, a symbol of the resurrection. A brief conclusion focuses on a new way of life under Christianity.[1]

11.1 The book of Acts, a collective memory for Christianity

Luke was the only author in antiquity to write a Gospel followed by an account of the birth of Christianity. This would not be repeated. However, we must note that ancient

[1] I am delighted to dedicate this chapter to Steve Walton, who has a profound and admirable knowledge of the book of Acts. I also thank Jasper Donelan for translating my text into English.

historians, especially biblical historians, were not archivists or chroniclers. Memory of the past is not an end in itself; fixing it in writing is, rather, *a question of identity*. We write history to know who we are because we know who we are when we know where we come from. Stories of beginnings help build the identity of the group for which those stories are told. Luke offers contemporary Christians a story of their past so they can understand themselves.

This need for identity, which is inherent in any historiographical undertaking, becomes vital in times of crisis. When a group is weakened, the need for an awareness of its own identity grows. In the years 80–90, when Luke was writing, Christianity was facing two crises. The first was the death of the apostolic generation. The apostles and the first generation of believers had passed away, taking with them their precious oral histories. Secondly, the Jewish revolt against Rome (66–73), the catastrophe of the burning of the Second Temple as well as the growing tensions between Jews and Christians had caused the Church to distance itself from the synagogal orbit.[2] This rupture with the mother religion – which began in the 80s but was not completed (in quite different ways, depending on the region) until the second century – weakened communities who were threatened with losing their connection to the history of Israel. They were now in search of a 'collective memory' that provided answers to the questions 'who are we?' and 'what should we do?'

11.1.1 Constructing a collective memory

Jan Assmann has explored the conditions that are required for the creation of a collective memory. The German Egyptologist differentiates between communicative memory, which 'comprises memories related to the recent past [that] the individual shares with his contemporaries', and cultural memory that 'transforms factual into remembered history'.[3] Assmann revives Maurice Halbwachs's work on collective memory as a memorial reconstruction of the past.[4] Halbwachs wrote:

> Although religious memory attempts to isolate itself from temporal society, it obeys the same laws as every collective memory: it does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of material traces, rites, texts, and traditions left behind by that past, and with the aid moreover of recent psychological and social data, that is to say, with the present.[5]

At what point does a collective memory form? For Assmann, it happens when there is a break in tradition: 'Every substantial break in continuity or tradition can produce

[2] The term 'Christian' is an anachronism at this stage, and one should talk rather of Christian Jews. But I will use 'Christian' throughout as a convenient shorthand.

[3] Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 36–8.

[4] Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994 [1925]); Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[5] Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 119.

the past whenever the break is meant to create a new beginning. New beginnings, *renaissances* will always be shaped by a recourse to the past. Cultures rediscover this past while developing, producing, and constructing a future.'[6] In other words, for a group to have a future, it must have a past on which to hang its identity.

Assmann's categories provide a good heuristic framework for understanding the emergence of the 'great narratives' of Christianity after the 60s.[7] Mark, the inventor of the literary genre of the gospel, was the first to make the memory of Jesus sacred. Luke, for his part, offered Christianity a new version of the story of Christ followed by an epic narrative of the beginnings of Christianity.[8] He was the first to bring Jesus and the apostles together in a single memorial work, in other words, to claim that Christian identity cannot be understood without both the gospel and the apostles.[9] The author of Luke-Acts created a memory of Jesus coupled with an apostolic memory to preserve the tradition of Christian origins and link it to Pauline Christianity. In the second century, the canon of the New Testament would support this theological choice, which was pioneered by Luke.

11.1.2 A Gospel with a sequel

Why did Luke choose to follow his Gospel with another volume, referred to in the second century as the Πράξεις ἀποστόλων ('Acts of Apostles')? He did this out of a desire to be exhaustive about the gospel. For him, as for the first Christians, the life and deeds of Jesus do not end on Good Friday or at Easter. The anamnesis of Jesus Christ is not the remembrance of a dead person but the celebration of a living one. Christ's presence continues in the community of disciples. The author demonstrates this in several ways:

- The Holy Spirit who descended at Pentecost was sent to his own people by Christ (Acts 2.33).
- The miracles performed by the apostles are attributed to the 'name of the Lord Jesus Christ', which acts as a source of power (3.6, 16; 4.7, 10, 30; 19.11-17); the apostle Peter can even say to Aeneas 'Jesus Christ heals you' (9.34) – a condensed expression that is found nowhere else in the New Testament.
- The witnesses are treated with mistrust and rejection just like their Master. The story of the death of Stephen, the protomartyr, was modelled on the Passion

[6] Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 18 (slightly adapted).

[7] On great narratives (*Meistererzählungen*), see Jörn Rüsen, 'Kann gestern besser werden? Über die Verwandlung der Vergangenheit in Geschichte', in *Kann gestern besser werden? Essays zum Bedenken der Geschichte* (Berlin: Kadmos Verlag, 2002), 17–44.

[8] Luke writes what Walton calls a 'biblical history' (Steve Walton, 'Acts as a Biblical History?', in Simon Butticaz, Luc Devillers, James Morgan and Steve Walton (eds), *Le corpus lucanien (Luc-Actes) et l'historiographie ancienne: Quels rapports?* (Fribourg: LIT Verlag, 2019), 51–68.

[9] I have discussed this in my article: 'De Jésus à Paul: l'invention du christianisme dans les Actes des apôtres', in Simon Butticaz and Enrico Norelli (eds), *Memory and Memories in Early Christianity* (WUNT 398; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 157–75.

(7.54-60); one can also speak of a 'Passion of Paul' analogous to the Passion of Christ (Acts 20–27).[10]

The modalities differ, but the Master's presence continues through his church.

11.1.3 A theology of the Word

Oecumenius, writing in the seventh century, was the first to speak of the Acts of the Apostles as the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'.[11] Eugène Jacquier went further, writing that 'Les Actes sont, pour ainsi dire, l'Evangile de l'Esprit'.[12] Pneumatology is, to be sure, a major theme in Acts, but these commentators are wrong on one point. The protagonist in the book of Acts is not the Spirit, but the Word, the *logos*.[13] Pentecost (Acts 2), which marks the transition between the history of Jesus and the history of the Church, consists of an outpouring of the Word. From that moment on, the apostles are less bearers of a word to be spoken than witnesses of a Word that precedes them and whose effects they observe. Throughout the narrative, the Word acts on them rather than being acted on by them. It 'grows' (6.7; 12.24; 19.20). It 'wins' the land (13.49). It is 'received' (2.41; 8.14; 11.1; 17.11) and 'glorified' (13.48). Paul is 'possessed' by it (18.5).[14]

The conflict between the apostles and the authorities in Jerusalem (Acts 3–5) centres around control of the Word, and the narrator exposes the powerlessness of opponents to censor it (4.1-4, 17; 5.17-28, 40). The opponents' attempts to silence the witnesses come up against the earth-shaking power of God in Jerusalem (4.23-31) and Philippi (16.19-26). The growth of the Word is also coextensive with that of the Church. The same verb πληθύνω, which evokes pullulation, is applied to the *logos* (12.24) and to the Church (6.1, 7). Like with Paul in Rom. 9.8-9, the Church in Acts is a *creatura verbi*. Believers are defined by their welcoming of the Word (8.14; 11.1; 17.11; cf. Lk. 8.13) and are called 'hearers of the Word'.

During the farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus, Paul says: 'I commit you to God and to the word of his grace' (τῷ λόγῳ τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ, Acts 20.32). Paul commits these Church leaders not only to God, as one would expect, but to the Word of grace. The Lukan theology of the Word is thus linked to the Old Testament idea of **רבד**, the word of YHWH that verges on divine hypostasis.

Let us not lose sight, however, of the fact that the spread of the Word via the witnesses (apostles and evangelists), whose journey Luke narrates, is by no means an easy or triumphal path. Yes, the rise of the Word was supported and protected by divine power,

[10] See Daniel Marguerat, *Les Actes des apôtres* (2nd edn; 2 vols; CNT 5b; Genève: Labor et Fides, 2024 (2007–15)), 2:250.

[11] 'Aptum est evangelium vocare Actus Christi, librum Actuum autem Actus Spiritus Sancti' (Oecumenius, *Scholia in Act. Ap.*, *PG* 118.32).

[12] Eugène Jacquier, *Les Actes des Apôtres* (EtB; Paris: Gabalda, 1926), cvii.

[13] Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles'* (SNTSMS 121; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 37–8. Jerome Kodell, '"The Word of God Grew": The Ecclesial Tendency of ΛΟΓΟΣ in Acts 1,7; 12,24; 19,20', *Bib* 55 (1974): 505–19.

[14] The verb that appears here, συνέχεσθαι, is employed in Luke to express possessing, embracing, having strong control over (Lk. 4.38, 19.43, 22.63; Acts 28.8).

but it also comes up against strong and constant resistance.[15] Above all, this resistance comes not only from the synagogues but also from the Graeco-Roman religious world, where Christian witnesses were met with suspicion and rejection (Acts 16–18). The spread of the Word took place in a highly competitive religious environment, and the witnesses suffered violent rejection of their preaching.

11.1.4 The universality of the Gospel, the DNA of Christianity according to Luke

One of the most enduring theological contributions of the book of Acts is the revelation of the universality of Christianity. It is during the meeting between Peter and Cornelius in ch. 10 that, at the end of an eventful journey (Acts 10.28-36), the apostle is led to the revelation that the God of Jesus Christ is no longer exclusively the God of Israel, but the God of everyone (10.34-35). Cornelius and his household are the first non-Jews to receive the Holy Spirit and baptism.

Luke makes a point of reserving this revelation of universality for the 'prince of the apostles'. It brings to an end the thousand-year exclusivity of God's covenant with his people in Israel. But the chosen people are not disqualified from salvation, as some readers of Luke concluded. Israel is not excluded, but merely deprived of its special privilege. Paul's entire mission will consist in making openness to all nations a reality. The drama of Luke's Paul was that he insisted on preaching firstly to the synagogues of the Diaspora. Starting from his mission to Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13.42-52), *a pattern is established that repeats itself to the point of tedium*: mission to the synagogue, favourable reception by a minority of Jews, (violent) rejection by the majority, successful preaching to the Greeks and God-fearers. The pattern is repeated at Iconium (14.1-7), Lystra (14.19-20), Thessalonica (17.1-8), Berea (17.10-15) and Corinth (18.12-17), with Paul and his group often beaten and their lives threatened as they flee.

Why this obstinacy when Paul had declared in Antioch of Pisidia (13.46) and Corinth (18.6) that he would henceforth turn to the Gentiles? Luke was keen to defend this narrative equivalent of the Pauline slogan 'first the Jew, then the Greek' (Rom. 1.16b). Readers of the Acts of the Apostles can no longer ignore the fact that Jesus is, first and foremost, 'the Saviour of Israel' (Acts 13.23). However, as the Pentecost story makes clear, the universality of the gospel represents the core of Christian evangelization and communion.

11.2 The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and its effects on communal living

The story of Pentecost (Acts 2.1-13) is well known, but Luke makes it programmatic for his narrative. The memory of Pentecost, as the founding act of the Church, serves

[15] See Scott Cunningham, *'Through Many Tribulations': The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (JSNTSup 142; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Brian J. Tabb, *Suffering in Ancient Worldview: Luke, Seneca, and 4 Maccabees in Dialogue* (LNTS 569; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

as the memory of every birth of the Church, of every birth into faith. Pentecost becomes the mythical foundation of the Church insofar as it recalls the advent of every community of believers. The proof of this is that the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit is repeated at Cornelius's house (10.44-48: the 'Pentecost of the Gentiles') and in Ephesus with Paul (19.1-7).

11.2.1 A communicable Gospel

The Pentecost event does not consist in the outpouring of indecipherable tongues, but rather in the outpouring of a comprehensible word. The miracle of Pentecost is a miracle of communication. The multitude of Jews, present for the occasion in Jerusalem and coming from all over the world, adopt the message of the apostles who proclaim the great deeds of God (Acts 2.7-11). The list of peoples and nations represented among the audience is inspired by the catalogue of nations in Genesis 10, but also borrows from the inventory of peoples used in Roman imperial propaganda.[16] The list covers most of the Judaism of the Diaspora. Luke knows that the time for universality has not yet come (for that, we must await the meeting between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10). However, in the Pentecost event, Christian universality is already present *in nuce*.

This story teaches us two things. Firstly, there is no faith until a believer receives the Holy Spirit from God. Whereas the Judaism of Jesus's time considered that the Spirit had been extinguished and would re-emerge at the end of time, the Pentecost guarantees not only the arrival of the Spirit into history but also its democratization as it is granted to every believer (Acts 2.17-21). Secondly, in Acts, the Spirit is linked first and foremost to bearing witness. At Pentecost, the pneumatic outpouring takes the form of a witnessing word. Throughout Acts, it is clear that the Spirit empowers believers to bear witness (through their life as much as through their word) to the Gospel. Accession to the faith is therefore accompanied by a welcoming of the Spirit, which gives rise to witnessing, as Peter says to the crowd at Pentecost: 'Repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (2.38).

11.2.2 A missionary Church by definition

Born at Pentecost, the Church is evangelizing by nature. In Luke's eyes, Christianity did not develop as a group of people who wanted to satisfy their religious needs and who decided to share their conviction of faith. The Church is founded rather as a group of witnesses whose very essence is to disseminate the Word they have received. That Word is not their own, but precedes them, overflows them and establishes them.

[16] Gary Gilbert, 'The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response', *JBL* 121 (2002): 497–529.

11.2.3 Life in communion, work of the Holy Spirit

The Pentecost narrative is usually seen as ending with Peter's speech that interprets the event his audience has just seen (Acts 2.14-41). However, the narrator links this speech syntactically to the text that follows, namely the great summary that describes the life of the first Church in Jerusalem.[17] The fluid transition means there is no narrative break. The description of life in communion, which is the subject of the summary, is not a separate topic. It lays out the internal repercussions of the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not limit itself to words. It leads to, and is accomplished by, an act of communion. In Edgar Haulotte's words, life in communion is 'la phase ultime de la Pentecôte.'[18]

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2.42-47)

Salvation is embodied in community life. The summary sets out the four *notae ecclesiae*, which are attachment to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship (κοινωνία), to the Eucharist and to prayer (2.42).

When the Holy Spirit pours over the believers, it creates a community ethos that cultivates what I call the intimate God and the social God. The intimate God is represented by prayer and sharing bread and wine; this is how the community is built up spiritually. The social God is represented by the exemplary life of sharing material goods and concern for society, which prevents the group from closing itself off into sectarian isolation. This polarity of the intimate God and the social God constitutes κοινωνία. Privileging the intimate God would steer the Church towards religious inwardness, whereas privileging the social God would dilute the gospel into a *dikonia* that lacks both significance and resources.

11.2.4 The benefits of communal living

The κοινωνία at the origins of the Church involved the sharing of goods, as described in the second summary of Acts.

> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power

[17] The transition is clearly marked by δέ.

[18] Edgar Haulotte, 'La vie en communion, phase ultime de la Pentecôte, Actes 2,42-47', *FoiVie* 19 (1981): 69–75.

> the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (4.32-35)

This is not about social egalitarianism or anti-materialism. Rather, it is about not tolerating brothers and sisters having their humanity degraded by economic misery. Or to put it another way, since the gospel has at its heart the equality of value and dignity conferred upon everyone by the Lord, one must avoid a scenario where resource inequality reintroduces the hierarchies inherent in economic systems that generate wealth and poverty. In this case, those possessing surplus goods sold them and laid the profit at the feet of the apostles who redistributed the resources according to each person's needs.

Luke insists that spiritual communion translates into material sharing. Throughout his Gospel and Acts, Luke reminds us that the gospel does not end with the salvation of souls but rather embraces the whole of life, including one's relationship with money.[19] The dichotomy between the material and the spiritual, which still looms large in modern culture, is of Greek origin, while Hebrew culture is holistic and considers all aspects of human life.

Historians have wondered whether, in narrating this sharing of goods, Luke was idealizing the past. Was he describing a utopia born from his admiration for the first Christians? We do know that there was an Essene quarter in first-century Jerusalem where followers practised the sharing of goods. So, it is not implausible that a Christian group also did this. But Luke was probably generalizing from the practice of a particular group.[20] Why does he do this? To make subsequent generations feel guilty? Not at all. By Luke's time, this particular type of sharing was no longer practised. But the churches founded by Paul included wealthy people (in the minority) and modest people (in the majority); the wealthy Christians shared their wealth by making their homes available for community meetings, for example, Lydia (Acts 16.11-15, 40). Luke does not evoke a memory of material sharing at the origins of the Church to impose this as a rule, but to remind his readers that adherence to the gospel encompasses all aspects of life, even those areas that might seem alien to inner spirituality. The gospel stands in opposition to the power of money.

11.2.5 Signs of compassion

> The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. (Acts 5.12-14)

[19] Lk. 6.20-26; 16.1-13, 19-31; 18.18-30; 19.1-10; 21.1-4; Acts 2.42-47; 4.32-35; 8.18-24; etc.
[20] See Marguerat, *Les Actes des apôtres*, 1:162–63.

This third summary in Acts reinforces the community's openness. The 'signs and wonders' (healings and exorcisms) are acts of compassion performed in the name of Jesus Christ. The community of believers is not separate from society or created to defend itself against society, but rather exists to spread a love that comes from God.

11.3 Reintegrating those who have been excluded, a symbol of the resurrection

If being a believer means receiving the Spirit in order to become a witness, to what must one bear witness? The answer according to the author of Acts is: witness to the resurrection.[21]

11.3.1 The reintegration of the lame man at the Temple

The first act of healing by the apostles is that of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple (Acts 3.1-10). This disabled man was excluded from the religious community in Israel because of his impurity. Barred from entering, he was reduced to begging in front of the Temple esplanade. As Peter and John go up for the afternoon prayer, he holds out his hand, expecting to receive alms. Peter stares at him and makes this surprise statement: 'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk' (3.6). The man gets up and enters the Temple. The narrator explains how he walks and jumps with the apostles, happy not only to regain his mobility but additionally and above all to be introduced into the community of believers.[22] The miracle of the Beautiful Gate is a miracle of an outcast's reintegration. Once more, the dignity bestowed on all by the God of Jesus Christ lies at the heart of the story.

Peter gives a speech to the astonished bystanders to explain the meaning of the event.

> When Peter saw this, he said to them: 'Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is

[21] On this topic see Daniel Marguerat, *Paul in Acts and Paul in His Letters* (WUNT 310; Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 78–91, 130–47.

[22] Among the seven (!) verbs used by Luke in vv. 7b-8 to describe the lame man's restored mobility, a rare and apparently superfluous one catches the eye: (ἐξ)άλλομαι. Of the five occurrences of this verb across the Septuagint, Isa. 35.6 stands out: 'the lame man will leap like a deer' (ἀλεῖται ὡς ἔλαφος ὁ χωλός). This suggests to readers that the act of healing fulfils the eschatological prophecy, namely the restoration of humans' covenant with God. The last words of the verse confirm that the purpose of healing is to restore man to his relationship with God, that is, to praise Him (3.8c).

> Jesus's name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.' (Acts 3.12-16)

What do we learn here?

First, Peter dispels a misunderstanding. Attributing healing to the therapeutic skills of the apostles would be a mistake. Neither their own power nor their piety matters, rather divine power works through them.

Second, contrary to what we might expect, Peter does not deliver a speech about the Holy Spirit. He focuses rather on God who raised Jesus from the dead. To say that the God of the fathers 'has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you betrayed' (Acts 3.13) is not anti-Jewish. Rather, it confirms that God has rehabilitated the one condemned by men. Their murderous deed was not the last chapter in the life of Jesus. God has done Jesus justice and raised him up, and he offers forgiveness to all those who put their faith in his Word.

Third, the somewhat convoluted formula in v. 16 attempts to clarify the origin of the miracle. 'By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong; it is Jesus's name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.' The accumulation of ideas results in the jumbled phrasing. Luke is trying to avoid two conclusions: on the one hand, the idea that human faith can perform miracles and, on the other, the idea that the Name magically acts on its own. It was 'the Name' of Jesus Christ that acted, but the Name was activated by the faith of the apostles. Peter's interpretation of this miracle is clearer: the healing and reintegration of the outcast is *a consequence of Easter*. The reminder of God's resurrection of Jesus in the preceding verses (3.13-15) takes on its full meaning. The power of the Risen One is at work in this miracle, which is to be understood symbolically as a triumph of life over death. The God who rescues human beings from their state of failure, marginality and fragility is the same God who rescued Jesus from death. The force that overcomes evil and suffering is the energy of Easter.

11.3.2 The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch

The book of Acts directs us to find traces of the resurrection in the chiaroscuro of history. In addition to the story above, we see the language of resurrection emerge at the baptism of the eunuch from Ethiopia (Acts 8.26-40; v. 33: αἴρεται), at the healing of Aeneas at Lydda (9.32-35; v. 34: ἀνάστηθι), at the resurrection of Tabitha at Joppa (9.36-42; v. 40: ἀνάστηθι), at Peter's escape from prison (12.6-17),[23] at the healing of the lame man of Lystra (14.8-13; v. 10: ἀνάστηθι), at Paul's and Silas's escape from prison (16.25-34; vv. 30-31) and at the resurrection of Eutychus (20.7-12; v. 10c: ἡ γὰρ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἐστιν). The survival of Paul and the boat's occupants after the shipwreck off Malta – and especially Paul's reception by the Maltese as a divine epiphany (28.6b: αὐτὸν εἶναι θεόν) – have also been seen as a sort of 'resurrection

[23] For more detail, see my commentary *Les Actes des apôtres*, 1:427-29.

of Paul'.[24] Luke models the destiny of his characters on that of Jesus by employing language that recalls the Gospel.

I will dwell on the episode of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.26-40), where the reference to the resurrection is particularly subtle.[25] Before the meeting with Philip, the narrator takes the time to introduce the character of the eunuch at length (8.27-28). The man is Ethiopian (ancient Ethiopia, in Hebrew *Kush*, corresponds to the present-day north of Sudan, between Aswan and Khartoum). He is a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος may in the Septuagint be the title of a high political or military official, but it most often applies to castrated men whom the Oriental courts, especially those of queens, attached to themselves). The man is a court official (δυνάστης) responsible for the treasury. He has just returned from Jerusalem, where he had gone on a pilgrimage (προσκυνέω: *to worship, prostrate oneself*). On the way back, he reads a scroll from the prophet Isaiah. His religious status is that of a God-fearer, those pagans drawn to Judaism and living in the wide orbit of the synagogue. In short, the man is a foreigner, a eunuch, powerful and a worshipper in Jerusalem. This wealth of information implies that the extraordinary nature of the encounter lies in the man's identity.

And yet, the man's portrait is also paradoxical. The eunuch/dignitary contrast is one of weakness/power. On the one hand, the man is powerful. He enjoys considerable responsibility and has the financial means to afford a chariot with a crew and a scroll from the book of Isaiah. On the other hand, eunuchs were outcasts. Greek and Latin authors made no secret of their contempt and mockery for them. Israel considered these 'dry trees' (Isa. 56.3) to be impure and did not admit them to the assemblies. Within the Temple precincts, they did not go beyond the courtyard of the pagans. Corporeally and socially, eunuchs were set apart. 'Eunuchs were to be avoided and all dealings with those deprived of their virility were to be shunned', wrote Flavius Josephus.[26] The Ethiopian illustrates the paradox of the powerful and excluded man, rubbing shoulders in Luke's work with characters for whom the narrator has obvious sympathy, namely Zacchaeus the despised rich man (Lk. 19.1-10) or the centurion from Capernaum who begs for his servant to be cured (Lk. 7.1-10).

The prophetic text read aloud by the eunuch is highlighted by its position in the middle of the narrative (Acts 8.32-33). This text from Isa. 53.7-8 plays an important role in the Christology of the early Christians. It is well suited to a Christological catechesis centred on Scripture but, surprisingly, this is its only whole quotation in the New Testament. The extract is carefully selected by the narrator. He chooses two verses from the fourth song of the servant of YHWH (Isa. 52.13–53.12), which he quotes from the Septuagint version (Isa. 53.7b-8c).[27]

[24] Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 673; Jean-Noël Aletti, *Quand Luc raconte* (Lire la Bible 115; Paris, Cerf, 1998), 87–96.

[25] Here I echo ideas discussed elsewhere: Daniel Marguerat, 'Eine Randfigur der Apostelgeschichte: Der Eunuch aus Äthiopien (Apg 8,26-40)', in Max Küchler and Peter Reinl (eds), *Randfiguren in der Mitte. Hermann-Josef Venetz zu Ehren* (Luzern: Exodus, 2003), 89–101; and Marguerat, *Les Actes des apôtres*, 1:301-13.

[26] Josephus, *Ant*. 4.290. Jewish anthropology, which links procreation with blessing, cannot but repudiate castration.

[27] The extract carefully avoids two references to Jesus's death that precede (Isa. 53.7a) and immediately follow (53.8d) the quoted passage; a sacrificial interpretation of the cross is not to Luke's taste.

The text first describes the distress of the servant, who accepts the violence done to him without protest (Acts 8.32). It paints the picture of a person subjected to violence and whose body and speech are affected. Like a mute lamb, he does not open his mouth. On top of this first layer, the reader also recognizes a reference to the cross. However, the second part of the story (8.33) is less clear, even in the Septuagint. At first sight, it confirms the suffering of the servant: his right (κρίσις) has been taken away (ἤρθη), and no one will be able to speak of his offspring (γενεά) 'for his life is taken away [αἴρεται] from the earth'. With no one to defend or outlive him, his life is written off among humans. And yet, this is not the only possible reading of this text because the verb αἴρω means not only *to remove, to take away*, but also *to raise*, *to lift up*. If we adopt this second meaning, the last line of the quotation sounds quite different: 'For his life is lifted up far from the earth.' We can thus read here a reference to Christ's resurrection, following a Christological pattern of lowering and raising that we find, for example, at Phil. 2.6-11. From this perspective, the meaning of the preceding lines can also be turned on its head. Because he lowered himself, his judgement (another possible meaning of κρίσις) was lifted, that is, raised by God. And who will be able to recount his spiritual descendants (γενεά), so innumerable are they?

> He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
> And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
> So he did not open his mouth.
> In his humiliation his justice was raised up.
> Who will speak of his descendants?
> For his life is lifted far from the earth. (Acts 8:32-33)

Which is Luke's reading? Contrary to his custom, Luke does not interpret the Scripture here (cf. Acts 2.25-36; 4.25-28; 13.34-37). Either he assumes his readers are familiar with it or he takes advantage of the ambiguity of the Isaianic ending. The latter would not be out of character. Luke quotes other texts whose ambivalence he deliberately preserves to legitimize questioning their meaning. Only of Christ can one definitely say that his life was exalted (2.34; 13.34-37).

The prophetic text opens up a third level of reading when applied to the situation of the eunuch. Despite his high social position, the man was the victim of demeaning remarks to which he could offer no rebuttal. He too had the hope of earthly descendants taken from him. But he could nevertheless hope that God would raise him from his humiliation and restore his life. Three stories are thus superimposed on the text of Isaiah where the reader sees the destiny of the suffering servant, of Jesus and of the eunuch.

Baptizing the eunuch confirms his integration into a new people to which all believers have access via baptism. Contrary to a manuscript variant that reads v. 37 as a confession of faith, the narrator does not mention the eunuch's faith.[28] The baptismal

[28] 'If you believe with all your heart, it is permitted. The eunuch replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God"'. The earliest attestation of this reading is from ms. E (sixth century), with a number of variations. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 315–16.

rite of integration comes first. Regarding the integration of non-Jews, for that we have to wait until the meeting between Peter and Cornelius. Like a good historian, Luke does not overly compress the various stages of salvation history.

11.4 Conclusion: Living together, a new way of life

For Luke, the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples, at the origin of the Church, promises that every baptized person will receive the Spirit in order to bear witness to Christ. 'And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly' (Acts 4.31). But the author *ad Theophilum* also describes the effects of the Spirit on the community of believers. In addition to the universality of bearing witness, living together (κοινωνία) means the Church involves both the intimate God and the social God. On the one hand, a common spirituality unifies the group in its relationship with Christ; on the other hand, paying attention to marginalized people demonstrates faith in a divine grace that does not discriminate. Recognizing the value of each and every individual in the baptized community goes hand in hand with a commitment to care for those neglected by society. In sum, we are dealing with a new way of life *sub specie resurrectionis*.

Historically, the spread of Christianity in its early days was not just a spread of faith but a spread of communion. The quality of life and the quality of fraternal relations in communities of believers contributed greatly to the credibility of the new religion. Men and women who had been denied dignity and honour observed the inestimable value that God recognized in them. Living together was the ethical and ecclesial embodiment of God's embrace.