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COLOSSIANS 4:11 AND THE ETHNIC IDENTITY OF LUKE

Robert Wayne Stacy¹

I. INTRODUCTION

Luke's place in the life of the Church is fixed both liturgically and canonically. Liturgically, the Revised Common Lectionary provides for the reading of one of the Synoptic Gospels each year, with the Gospel of John being read every year, especially during Advent, Epiphany, and Lent. Year C is the year for the Gospel of Luke. Moreover, each year, in Ordinary Time, the Church reads Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, as a way of reminding itself how the story of the Church began, and as a way of reconnecting the contemporary Church with its origins and roots in antiquity; that is to say, with its purpose, mission, and destiny.

Luke's canonical status, like that of all Biblical writers, rests on two claims chiefly: his association with an apostle and the utility of his writings in the ongoing life of the Church. The latter we call "inspiration," and though difficult to define empirically or even theologically, experientially I think it means that in these writings, in some unique fashion, one encounters a "Voice" beneath and beyond that of the writer's, a Voice that continues to speak to us, call us, claim us. The Gospel of Luke, and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, continues to be read as Scripture by the Church precisely because the Church continues to be called and claimed and captured by the echoes of that "Voice" in these writings.

Luke's other claim to canonical status (namely, his association with an apostle), however, rests somewhat more precariously on the tradition that he was a traveling companion of the apostle Paul. Virtually all scholars agree that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were composed by the same person, but the identity of that person remains the subject of debate. Strictly speaking, Luke-Acts is anonymous,¹ but

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the tradition holds that the author of Luke-Acts was the same “Luke” mentioned three times in the New Testament and identified as a traveling companion of Paul.

II. THE CASE FOR LUKAN AUTHORSHIP

The evidence for Lukan authorship is generally divided into two categories: external and internal evidence.

1. *External Evidence.* The external evidence in support of Lukan authorship of Luke-Acts is both early and strong. In the mid-second century Marcion of Sinope identified the author of Luke and Acts as Paul’s traveling companion, as does Justin Martyr (d. 165), and the Muratorian Canon (traditionally, though not universally, dated late 2nd cent.). Moreover, Irenaeus (AD 200) claimed that the physician Luke, Paul’s companion, wrote the gospel, as do also Tertullian (early 3rd century) and the so-called “Anti-Marcionite” Prologue to the Gospel of Luke, the latter stating that he was a native of Antioch.

2. *Internal Evidence.* The internal evidence in support of Luke, the beloved physician and Pauline traveling companion of Colossians 4, being the author of Luke-Acts rests on four arguments.

a. *The author was not an eyewitness.* The prologue of the Gospel of Luke (1:1-4) is interesting for many reasons. For example, it openly acknowledges the use of sources in the composition of the Gospel.

Επειδηπερ πολλοι επεχειρησαν αναταξασθαι διηγησιν περι των
πεπληροφορημενων εν ημιν πραγματων, καθως παρεδοσαν ημιν οι απ αρχης
αυτοπται και υπηρεται γενομενοι του λογου, εδοξε καμοι
παρηκολουθηκοτι ανωθεν πασιν ακριβως καθεξης σοι γραψαι, κρατιστε
Θεοφιλε, ινα επιγνωσ περι ων κατηχηθης λογων την ασφαλειαν.

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to order a narrative concerning the things having been accomplished among us, and just as those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and attendants of the word delivered to us, it seemed (appropriate) also to me, having followed up all things accurately, to write to you in sequence, most excellent Theophilus, in order that you might have confidence in the words about which you were instructed” (author’s translation).

Moreover, the prologue states that the author was not an eyewitness of the things he was reporting, but that he had consulted eyewitnesses (directly or indirectly) in preparing his narrative.

b. *The author was a physician.* Colossians 4:14 describes Luke as “the beloved physician” (ιατρος ο αγαπητος). The Greek of Luke-Acts is some of the best in the New Testament. Acts especially reflects a classical, self-consciously rhetorical style that suggests an educated, literary person penned the document. There are numerous “Atticisms” in the Greek of Acts suggesting some degree of erudition on the part of the author.² And, of course, there are the oft-noted medical references in the Gospel of Luke suggesting to some that the author was conversant with contemporary medical terminology, if not himself a medical practitioner. The classic treatment of this subject was by W. K. Hobart who noted numerous passages in the Gospel where Luke appears to have employed contemporary medical terminology.³ H. J. Cadbury somewhat derisively dismissed the thesis in an article titled “Luke and the Horse Doctors,” in which he attempted to reduce Hobart’s argument to the absurd by pointing out that many of the same so-called medical terms Luke used in the Third Gospel could be identified in other contemporary writings dealing with equine care in the ancient hippodrome.⁴ While Cadbury’s caution does indeed point out that this kind of evidence is “circumstantial,” circumstantial evidence is nonetheless evidence that must be weighed in making a judgment and, taken with other evidence, can help to make the case. It is demonstrable that Luke does seem to add medical detail to the stories he shares with the other Synoptic Gospels. For example, in Luke 7:2 Luke describes the centurion’s servant as “sick and at the point of death” (Εκατονταρχου δε τινος δουλος κακως εχων ημελλεν τελευταν, ος ην αυτω εντιμος. The phrase Luke used to describe the servant’s condition (κακως εχων) is the precise term from which we get the modern medical term “cachexia” which means “death pallor.” Or again, in Mark 1, Mark describes the person whom Jesus healed as a “leper” (λεπρος) whereas Luke (5:12), in describing the same scene, refuses to call the man a “leper,” choosing instead to refer to him as a “man full of leprosy” (ανηρ πληρης λεπρας), as though no one should be defined by their illness. And then, of course, there is that oft-cited passage in Mark 5 where Mark describes the woman with the hemorrhage as having been victimized by physicians who had taken all her money and had not helped her; on the contrary, they had made her worse (Mark 5:25). Luke, curiously, omits that detail.

c. *The author was a traveling companion of Paul as evinced by the so-called “we passages” in Acts.* The so-called “we passages” in Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16) lend some support to Lukan authorship as well. The argument is essentially that the writer of Acts switched from his typical third person narration to first person plural narration because he himself was among Paul’s traveling companions during the

events therein described. Some suggest that the tone and tenor of the narration shifts so significantly that the author must have been dependent upon his own reminiscences and reflections of the events. Others suggest that the author has utilized a source not his own or that it is merely a stylistic device.⁵ However, attempts to account for these four passages apart from some first-hand memory on the part of the author of Acts all fall victim to Occam's Razor and are, on the whole, both unnecessary and unconvincing.

d. *The author was a Gentile.* Indeed, a popular maxim in New Testament studies is that Matthew is the Jewish Gospel while Luke is the Gentile Gospel. A quick look at some New Testament introductions, dictionaries, and commentaries is sufficient to make the point. Werner Kümmel says of the author of Luke-Acts, "The only thing that can be said with certainty about the author, on the basis of Luke, is that he was a Gentile Christian."⁶ "Luke was probably a Gentile," says R. Alan Culpepper in *The New Interpreter's Bible*.⁷ E. P. Blair dismisses the identification of "Luke" in the New Testament with "Lucius" of Rom 16:21 because Paul calls Lucius "my kinsman" (that is, a Jew), whereas Luke, he states as axiomatic, was a Gentile.⁸ R. T. France, in G. E. Ladd's *Theology of the New Testament*, states of Luke: "His particular perspective as a Gentile believer has been noted."⁹ Stephen Harris, *The New Testament*, states unequivocally: "Because of his interest in a Gentile audience and his ease in handling the Greek language (he has the largest vocabulary and most polished style of any Evangelist), the writer may have been a Gentile, perhaps the only non-Jewish Bible writer."¹⁰ Finally, D. A. Carson identifies what is regarded as the "smoking gun evidence" for this scholarly consensus: "On the basis of Colossians 4:10-14, Luke is usually thought to have been a Gentile Christian. In verses 10-11a of this passage, Paul transmits greetings from three men and then says, 'These are the only Jews [literally, 'those of the circumcision'] among my co-workers for the kingdom of God.'" Carson continues, "A few scholars have contested this conclusion and argued for various reasons that Luke was a Jew. But the case is not a persuasive one."¹¹

III. THE EVIDENCE FOR LUKE'S GENTILE ETHNICITY

Luke's Gentile ethnic identification appears to be based on two factors chiefly: (1) Luke's urbanity, facility with the Greek language, cosmopolitan perspective, and general sophistication as a writer, and (2) the assumption that Col 4:10-11 precludes Luke's being numbered among Paul's Jewish companions in that it identifies Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus as the only "men of the circumcision" who are also "fellow workers" of Paul.

1. *The Linguistic Argument.* Of course, the first argument is notoriously weak in that it is predicated on the assumption that only a Gentile would have had the facility with the Greek language demonstrated by the author of Luke-Acts. However, anyone who has read Philo Judaeus in the original knows how silly an argument that is.

Moreover, there is a latent “anti-Semitism” in this kind of argument as well, as though a first-century Jew would have been too provincial and unlettered to produce a Luke-Acts. That was demonstrably untrue in the Diaspora, and recent excavations at places like Sepphoris have challenged that assumption in Palestine as well. Moreover, it ignores compelling internal evidence to the contrary; namely, that the author of Luke-Acts was thoroughly at home in the world of Judaism. Indeed, he thinks and writes in Jewish imagery, language, and metaphor, albeit in perfect Hellenistic Greek. Luke’s use of Semitisms, especially in the infancy narrative of the Gospel, is well documented.¹² His knowledge of Jewish synagogue worship, practices, geography, and measurements (for example, he gives distances in the opening chapters of Acts in Jewish terms – “a Sabbath day’s journey”), and supremely, his understanding of, appreciation for, and use of the Jewish Scriptures, especially in their Greek translations, as both the framework and idiom for his story is without parallel among the Gospels. For example, two “L” stories in the Gospel of Luke make the point convincingly. Note that the entire story of the “Rich Man and Lazarus” in Luke 16 turns on the fact that the Rich Man’s brothers already had access to Moses and the prophets (that is, the Scriptures), and yet they still were unrepentant, a thinly-veiled reference to the fact that some Jews (not all!) refused to recognize the prophecies about Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures, even though these prophecies were readily available to them. Similarly, the Emmaus Road story (Luke 24) underscores the same point when the Risen Christ chides his disillusioned disciples by saying: “Were not these things necessary – that the Christ should suffer and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” Witness also Luke’s impressive use of intertextuality as he makes extensive allusive use of the Hebrew Bible in telling his own story: Mary=Hannah in the infancy narrative; Peter=Jonah in the Cornelius story of Acts 10; Jesus=Elijah in Luke 7, to name a few. Moreover, Luke’s preference for the old Jewish “martyr theology” rather than the atonement theology so prevalent in Paul and Mark, as noted by David Flusser and others, is telling.¹³ All of this makes it possible indeed to speak of the “Jewishness” of Luke.¹⁴

2. *The Evidence from Colossians 4:10-11.* The second argument is the one that has gained the most traction among scholars, regarded by many as axiomatic. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that Luke’s alleged Gentile ethnicity rests chiefly on a single statement made by Paul in Colossians 4. However, the argument is not as compelling as first appears. The argument turns on the translation of Col 4:11, and it is to that passage we now turn our attention. My thesis is that Col 4:11 does *not* refer to ethnic Jews as most scholars contend and thereby identify, by his exclusion from Paul’s list, Luke as a Gentile. Rather, this language reflects what was the principal intramural debate within the earliest Jewish-Christian movement; namely, the challenge of multiculturalism and how to assimilate the non-Jew into the covenant community

without compromising what many regarded as the *sine qua non* of God's election – circumcision.

In Colossians 4, Paul is giving his customary final greetings from persons with him known to the recipients. He appears to identify two different groups of three: Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus (all of whom he describes as “men of the circumcision” to use the RSV's translation), and Epaphras (who is apparently a Colossian), Luke (whom he calls “the beloved physician”), and Demas. The usual assumption is that this latter group of three were not “men of the circumcision” as described in the first group. It is on this understanding that most scholars identify Luke as a Gentile.

IV. THE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Obviously, the key verse is Col 4:11, and the key phrase is “those of the circumcision” (οι οντες εκ περιτομης). The assumption is that Paul intends the phrase to serve as a circumlocution for “Jews.” But does the evidence support that assumption?

The phrase εκ περιτομης occurs six times in the New Testament (Acts 10:45; 11:2; Rom 4:12; Gal 2:12; Col 4:11; Titus 1:10), four of the six occurring in Paul. The passages follow:

- και εξεστησαν οι εκ περιτομης πιστοι οσοι συνηλθαν τω Πητρω, οτι και επι τα εθνη η δωρεα του αγιου πνευματος εκκεχυται· (Acts 10:45)
- Οτε δε ανεβη Πητρος εις Ιερουσαλημ, διεκρινοντο προς αυτον οι εκ περιτομης (Acts 11:2)
- αι πατερα περιτομης τοις ουκ εκ περιτομης μονον αλλα και τοις στοιχουσιν τοις ιχνεσιν της εν ακροβυστια πιστεως του πατρος ημων Αβρααμ. (Rom 4:12)
- προ του γαρ ελθειν τινας απο Ιακωβου μετα των εθνων συνησθιεν· οτε δε ηλθον, υπεστελλεν και αφωριζεν εαυτον φοβουμενος τους εκ περιτομης. (Gal 2:12)
- και Ιησους ο λεγομενος Ιουστος, οι οντες εκ περιτομης, ουτοι μονοι συνεργοι εις την βασιλειαν του θεου, οιτινες εγενηθησαν μοι παρηγορια. (Col 4:11)
- Εισιν γαρ πολλοι και ανυποτακτοι, ματαιολογοι και φρεναπαται, μαλιστα οι εκ της περιτομης, (Titus 1:10).

For our purposes, however, the pivotal passage is Col 4:11. Below, underlined, is a sampling of the various ways in which the translations treat this phrase.

- And Jesus, which is called Justus, who are of the circumcision. These only are my fellow-workers unto the kingdom of God, which have been a comfort unto me. (KJV)

- And Jesus that is called Justus, who are of the circumcision: these only are my fellow-workers unto the kingdom of God, men that have been a comfort unto me. (ASV)
- These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. (NIV)
- These three men are the only Jewish followers who have worked with me for the kingdom of God. They have given me much comfort. (CEV)
- These are the only Jewish Christians among my co-workers; they are working with me here for the Kingdom of God. And what a comfort they have been! (*New Living Translation*)
- These are the only ones left from the old crowd who have stuck with me in working for God's kingdom. Don't think they haven't been a big help! (*The Message*)
- These are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me. (NASB)
- These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. (NRSV)
- Of the Jewish Christians, these are the only ones who work with me for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. (NEB)
- These are the only converts from Judaism that are fellow-workers with me here for the kingdom of God, who have proved a real comfort to me. (*Williams New Testament*)
- These [Hebrew Christians] alone of the circumcision are among my fellow workers for [the extension of] God's kingdom, and they have proved a relief and a comfort to me. (*Amplified Bible*)
- These alone of the circumcision are my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. (Holman Christian Standard Bible)
- These are the only Jewish Christians among my fellow-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. (Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary*)¹⁵

V. THE TRANSLATION OF οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς

The belief that Luke was a Gentile rests chiefly on the assumption that the Greek phrase Paul used in Col 4:11, οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς, means “Jews;” Luke being excluded from οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς means that he must have been a Gentile. The problem with

this assumption, however, is simply stated: If οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς means “Jews” in Col 4:11, then why does it not mean “Jews” elsewhere in the New Testament? For example, the NIV translates οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς “Jews” in Col 4:11, but when virtually the same expression is used in Titus 1:10 (οἱ ἐκ τῆς περιτομῆς) inexplicably they translate it “the circumcision group.” Or again, the NIV renders οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς as “Jews” in Col 4:11, but when the very same articular expression, minus the participle, is used by Paul in Gal 2:12, τοὺς ἐκ περιτομῆς, the translators render the phrase “the circumcision group.” If the articular ἐκ περιτομῆς is a circumlocution for “Jews” in Col 4:11, then why is it not also a circumlocution for “Jews” in Gal 2:12? Of course, the obvious answer is that translating the phrase as “Jews” in Gal 2:12 would be nonsense since the context is an account of Paul’s confrontation with Simon Peter over his duplicity in eating with Gentiles until “certain men came from James” at which point Peter withdrew and separated himself from the Gentiles “fearing,” Paul says, τοὺς ἐκ περιτομῆς, “those of the circumcision party.” If the phrase means “Jews” as the NIV translates it in Col 4:11, then both Peter and Paul, who were already present when τοὺς ἐκ περιτομῆς arrived, would have been excluded! Of course, the phrase doesn’t mean “Jews” in Gal 2:12, and it only means “Jews” in Col 4:11 if we import that meaning into it.

But turn the question around for a moment: If the phrase οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς doesn’t mean “Jews” in Col 4:11, then what does it mean? Back in 1968, Earl Ellis challenged the popular inference that the phrase was a circumlocution for “Jews” by insisting that it was a reference to those belonging to the circumcision party or group, as the NIV translates it in Gal 2:12.¹⁶ Ellis argued that the consensus definition of the phrase, οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς, is neither self-evident in the passage itself nor supported by the occurrences of the phrase elsewhere in the New Testament. Rather, Ellis suggested that the phrase is best understood against the backdrop of the early Christian mission, and specifically the early Jewish Christians in Acts identified as “Hebrews” and “Hellenists,” the former characterized by their strict, ritualistic perspective on the mission and the latter by a freer, more inclusive attitude toward Jewish law and the cultus. As it relates to Col 4:11, Ellis argued that the phrase refers to Jewish Christian preachers, the so-called “Hebrews” of Acts, who uncharacteristically took a non-proselytizing posture in their approach to the Christian mission. It is for this reason that Col 4:11 identifies Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus as “the only ones” (οὗτοι μόνοι) of this group to have supported Paul in his inclusive approach to the mission. According to Ellis, then, the other group of three, excluded from the group characterized by the phrase οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς, were not Gentiles at all, but rather, “Hellenists.” However, by and large, Ellis’ suggestion has been ignored by the scholarly community despite the fact that it makes the most sense linguistically, contextually, and historically. So understood, the phrase is an artifact of the so-called “Judaizer debate” within the early

church, the intramural struggle within the formative Jewish-Christian community over the continuing place and priority of covenant fidelity as signified most sharply (no pun intended) in the insistence on the circumcision of new converts as a prerequisite for participation in the emerging new “Jesus movement.”¹⁷ More precisely, Judaizers were Jesus-believing Jews of the early church who believed that pagans had to be circumcised and convert to Judaism (i.e., become a proselyte) *before* they could become Christians. These were they Paul referred to as “the circumcision party” (οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς, literally, “the out-of-the-circumcision ones”). This is certainly the meaning of the phrase in Gal 2:12, as everyone agrees.

Moreover, it is likely the meaning also of the two passages in Acts (10:45; 11:2). The context of both passages is Simon Peter’s hesitancy to evangelize a Gentile (Cornelius), until the Holy Spirit convinced and compelled him to do so. Accompanying Simon, Luke says, were “some of the brethren from Joppa” (τινες τῶν ἀδελφῶν τῶν ἀπο Ἰοππῆς). The context makes it clear that the reference is to Jewish-Christian believers. That Peter himself was still struggling with implications of the Christ-event for his Jewish faith and culture is witnessed by the fact that when he is commanded in a vision to consume meat that violated the kosher, he demurs insisting that, though a believer, he nonetheless still observes the *kashrut* (“Absolutely not, Lord; for I have never eaten anything common or unclean;” Acts 10:14). Given that context, the most likely meaning of the articular expression οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοὶ in Acts 10:45 is “the faithful among the circumcision group or party.” Acts 11:2 is even clearer. The articular phrase οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς in the context (διεκρίνοντο πρὸς αὐτὸν, “were criticizing him”) clearly refers to the circumcision party, as most of the translations render it. The phrase cannot mean “Jews” in that such a translation would have excluded Peter and the other Jewish-believers excluded from οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς.

Though more difficult to be sure, it is not impossible that this is also the meaning of the phrase in Rom 4:12. The issue at stake in Romans 4 is whether or not circumcision was required in order to experience “the blessing” (ὁ μακαρισμός).¹⁸ Paul argues that Abraham experienced the blessing through faith centuries before circumcision was required of God’s people. Consequently, he goes on to argue that Abraham was “the father of the circumcised” (πατέρα περιτομῆς), “to those not out of circumcision only, but also to those walking in the footprints of the uncircumcised faith of our father Abraham” (my translation of τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν τοῖς ἰχνεῖσιν τῆς ἐν ἀκροβυστία πίστεως τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ). Paul no doubt intends the phrase τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον not to mean “Jew” in the ethnic sense of the word so much as in the cultic sense of the word, as exemplified in the rite of circumcision. This is clear from the fact that the phrase πατέρα περιτομῆς is further explained by two epexegetical dative constructions, both beginning with the dative

article τοις (οις ουκ εκ περιτομης μονον and τοις στοιχουσιν τοις ιχνεσιν της εν ακροβυστια πιστεως του πατρος ημων Αβρααμ). That is, Abraham is the “father of the circumcised” (here he probably does mean the Jewish people), which is comprised of two groups: (1) those actually circumcised, and (2) those walking in the footprints of Abraham’s faith before circumcision. Both groups (“the circumcised” and “those walking in the footprints of uncircumcised faith”), however, would have been “Jews” in the ethnic sense of the word since the context is the “blessing” Abraham realized (long before circumcision became the *sine qua non* of what it means to be a “Jew”), both for himself and for his progeny. That is to say, Paul is not here intending to distinguish between “Jews” and “Gentiles” so much as between circumcised and uncircumcised Jews. Elsewhere, in the service of his belief that God has created a new humanity in Christ in which such ethnic distinctions no longer obtain, Paul will extend the argument to say that both circumcision and un-circumcision are nothing (see Gal 5:2ff.), but not yet, and not here.

Leaving aside for the moment the issue of the authenticity of the Pastorals, οι εκ της περιτομης in Titus 1:10 clearly makes reference to “the circumcision party” rather than “Jews” per se, as the RSV correctly translates it. This is evidenced by the fact that the writer employs the word Ιουδαικοις (“Jewish”) in verse 14, both indicating that he knows the proper word for ethnic Jew, as well as establishing the context of the discussion in 1:10-16 as one of the disruptive influence of Judaizers among the Jewish-Christians on the island of Crete.

In brief, the evidence suggests that the phrase οι οντες εκ περιτομης and its cognates is the standard New Testament expression for “the circumcision party” or “the circumcision group.” It is not an ethnic designation at all but rather a cultic one, intending to identify those early Jewish believers who insisted that circumcision was a requirement for full inclusion into the people of God.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that had Paul wanted unambiguously to say “Jews” as opposed to “Gentiles,” he did not have to resort to a circumlocution such as οι οντες εκ περιτομης. He could have done so merely by using the word Ιουδαιος. He clearly knows the word; he uses it twenty-six times.¹⁹

If this is indeed what Paul had in mind when he referred to “those of the circumcision,” then he was not making reference to Gentiles at all, *but to Jews*, specifically Jews who did not believe conversion to Judaism was a necessary “half-way step” to becoming a Christian. That is, in Paul’s usage *both* “those of the circumcision” and “those not of the circumcision” would have been Jews. Paul’s normal term for “Gentiles” was not οι μη οντες εκ περιτομης (“those *not* of the circumcision”), but rather the typical Jewish word for Gentiles; namely, εθνη (from which we get our English word

“ethnic”), which means “pagan” or “nations” or “Gentiles,” a term Paul employs no less than fifty-six times.²⁰

What I am suggesting is that properly translated “those of the circumcision,” οἱ οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς is not intended to identify Luke as a Gentile. Quite the contrary, Paul was describing Luke as a Jew who, like himself, *never* believed that circumcision and becoming a proselyte were requirements for becoming a Christian. That is to say, he never was one of the “circumcision group or party.”

This also helps to explain what is an otherwise obscure reference in Col 4:10: “Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions – if he comes to you, receive him).” Why would Paul have to counsel the Colossians (a predominantly Gentile congregation) to “receive Mark, Barnabas’ cousin?” Because, according to Luke, Barnabas parted company with Paul following the Jerusalem Conference of Acts 15 when, according to Luke, the issue that threatened to divide the young Jewish-Christian movement was assimilation of non-Jews into the movement, especially as regards the covenant obligation of circumcision. Luke implies that Mark was apparently not as progressive on this issue as was Paul, abandoning in Pamphylia on the first campaign the missionary enterprise to the Gentiles. And so, when Barnabas suggested to Paul that they take Mark with them on the second campaign, Paul objected rather strenuously it seems, and Paul and Barnabas went their separate ways, Paul taking with him Silas, and Barnabas, Mark. Apparently, both Mark and Barnabas’ credibility among the Gentile converts had been compromised by this episode, and so Paul has to encourage them to “...receive him, if he comes to you.” What I am suggesting is that some awareness of contextual and inter-textual factors in translation, in order to be sensitive to the cultural, historical, social, and theological issues endemic to the semantic situation envisioned in the text, can shed light on what would otherwise be obscure.

VI. CONCLUSION

But what difference does it make, finally, whether or not Luke was a Jew or a Gentile? If Luke was a Jew, and not a Gentile as the scholarly consensus asserts, then he was not, as so many claim, the sole Gentile writer in the New Testament. That is to say, all of the New Testament writers were Jews. This is particularly significant in a day when most contemporary Christian readers are all too eager to retroject anachronistically onto the pages of the New Testament their own 21st century understandings of Judaism and Christianity as two separate and distinct religions. The New Testament, however, reflects more the period before that separation was final. Indeed, in the New Testament period it is problematic to talk about “Jews” and “Christians” as though they comprise two different groups or constitute two distinct religions. As the New Testament itself makes clear, all of the first Christians were Jews.

To be sure, already in the New Testament relations were being stretched and strained among those Jewish Christians over whether, and if so how, Gentiles should be incorporated into the movement, but the earliest believers in Christ are more correctly identified as “Jesus-believing Jews” than “Christians,” if the latter term is intended to describe a movement fully separate from the Jewish faith. If, in fact, Luke was a Jew it would underscore just how thoroughly Jewish the New Testament really is, and that whatever disagreements were already in play among New Testament people, they were over issues intramural to the Jewish faith, not arguments between two competing “religions.”

Moreover, if I am correct and Luke was a Jew rather than a Gentile, then his well-documented inclusivity becomes all the more impressive. Everyone recognizes Luke’s advocacy for Gentiles both in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles. I submit that this advocacy would not have been very surprising (and perhaps even self-serving) if Luke was, in fact, a Gentile. But if Luke was a Jew, then his advocacy for his Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ becomes all the more surprising...and compelling.

¹ Until recently it has been assumed that the four Gospels had circulated anonymously until about AD 125, at which time the titles of the Gospels were formally attached to their works. This assumption held that these designations were based on traditions held by the early church. A study by the late Martin Hengel of the University of Tübingen argues that, while the writers of the Gospels do not overtly identify themselves in the body of their works, there is no evidence to indicate that the Gospels ever circulated without a title attached in the form of a tag attached to the scroll.

In support of his thesis, Hengel offers the following: (1) it was common practice in the ancient world for books to have titles and these titles were necessary to identify any work to which a reference was made; (2) the church fathers' attitude towards anonymous works was to reject them. Tertullian criticized the heretical Marcion, who published his own gospel without his name attached, saying, "a work ought not to be recognized which holds not its head erect...which gives no promise of credibility from the fullness of its title and just profession of its author." Yet all four Gospels, presumably anonymous, were readily accepted into the canon and used very early on as the standard of faith; (3) Hengel argues that as soon as more than one Gospel were circulating, out of necessity, a title would have been designated. He claims that it is inconceivable to think that the Gospel circulated for 60 years or so and then suddenly appeared with a title in the second century; (4) he claims that, had the Gospels' authorship truly been anonymous, it is likely that there would have been conflicting, multiple authors attributed to the work as is seen in some anonymous apocryphal writings. But with the canonical Gospels, there is neither manuscript tradition nor ascriptional tradition that attests to multiple claims of authorship. See Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 64ff.

² Attic Greek was the classical Greek dialect upon which Koine Greek was based; even in the first century it was regarded as somewhat arcane and pedantic. See A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (4th ed.; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934) 51ff.

³ *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, & Co., 1882).

⁴ "Lexical Notes on Luke-Acts, 5, Luke and the Horse Doctors," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 52 (1933), 55-65.

⁵ C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 2.xxv-xxx; Vernon K. Robbins, "The We-Passages in Acts and Ancient Sea Voyages," *Bible Review*, 20 (1975) 5-18.

⁶ W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. English ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975) 147.

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- ⁷ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIB 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 9.
- ⁸ E. P. Blair, “Luke (Evangelist),” IDB 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) 179.
- ⁹ R. T. France, “Matthew, Mark, and Luke,” in *A Theology of the New Testament* by George Eldon Ladd, rpt. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974) 237.
- ¹⁰ Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1999), 160.
- ¹¹ D. A. Carson, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) 206.
- ¹² Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke: New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986) 46-49. Whether the Semitisms are indicative of Luke’s own style or that of a source he employed is debated. However, Marshall asserts that the vocabulary and style of the infancy narrative “...show considerable traces of his hand, and the theology is closely integrated with that of the rest of his work.”
- ¹³ Cf. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982) 106; 208-09.
- ¹⁴ Indeed, the late Robert Lindsay (Baptist linguist and missionary to Israel) was convinced of Lukan priority primarily on the grounds that Luke’s Greek moved so easily into modern Hebrew. Lindsay argued that this fact served as mute witness to the fact that Luke was thinking in Semitic, rather than Hellenistic, linguistic patterns.
- ¹⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982) 245.
- ¹⁶ E. Earl Ellis, “‘Those of the Circumcision’ and the early Christian Mission,” *SE* 4 (1968) 390-99.
- ¹⁷ To be precise, the word “Judaizer” is never used in the NT. Rather, the verb form of the word (*ioudaizein*) is used in Gal 2:14 from which scholars have extrapolated the moniker “Judaizer.” Reading from Galatians, it appears that after Paul and Barnabas left the region and churches of Galatia (on the South Galatian Theory), some Jewish Christians followed behind them and undermined Paul’s ministry by insisting that Gentiles convert to Judaism and keep the law, including circumcision, in order to be considered faithful Christians; that is, they regarded Judaism as a “halfway step” to becoming Christian. The term Paul uses for that in Gal. 2:14 is *ioudaizein* (“to Judaize”) from which the term “Judaizer” derives. What Paul said in Gal. 2:14 is *αλλ οτε ειδον οτι ουκ ορθοποδουσιν προς την αληθειαν του ευαγγελιου, ειπον τω Κηφα εμπροσθεν παντων· ει συ Ιουδαιος υπαρχων εθνικως και ουχι Ιουδαιικως ζης, πως τα εθνη αναγκαζεις ιουδαιζειν*; “Rather, when I saw that they (meaning Simon Peter, Barnabas and the “circumcision party” from the church in Jerusalem) were not walking rightly

toward the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas before them all: ‘If you being a Jew should live paganly and not Jewishly, how can you compel pagans to Judaize?’” (my translation). I have translated the Greek somewhat literally (using the words “paganly” and “Jewishly,” even though there are no such words in English), in order to render the force of Paul’s language. Hence, Paul apparently fashioned the word “Judaize” to describe what Simon, Barnabas, and the others are doing to the Galatian Gentiles; namely, compelling them to adopt Jewish customs (cf. the *kashrut*).

¹⁸ Cf. Ps 31:1.

¹⁹ See, for example, Gal 3:28: οὐκ ἐνὶ Ἰουδαίῳ οὐδὲ Ἕλληνι, οὐκ ἐνὶ δούλῳ οὐδὲ ἐλευθέρῳ, οὐκ ἐνὶ ἀρσενίῳ καὶ θήλυτι· πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἓστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

²⁰ Rom 1:5, 13; 2:14, 24; 3:29; 4:17, 18; 9:24, 30; 10:19; 11:11, 12, 13, 25; 15:9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 18, 27; 16:4, 26; 1 Cor 1:23; 5:1; 12:2; 2 Cor 11:32; Gal 1:16; 2:2, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15; 3:8, 14; Eph 2:11; 3:1, 6, 8; 4:17; Col 1:27; 1 Thess 2:16; 4:5; 1 Tim 2:7; 3:16; 2 Tim 4:17.