

## **GOD AND THE GENTILE MISSION**

A Lukan Theological and Missiological Agenda

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**vanTHANH NGUYEN**

Catholic Theological Union, USA

### ***Abstract***

A literary and narrative analysis of the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:8 will unveil how Luke as a biblical writer and a master storyteller resolves the crucial crisis moment concerning the inclusion of the Gentile mission. According to Luke's theological agenda, the mission to the Gentiles is initiated and legitimated by God; hence, readers must accept it as the normative interpretation of the story and should respond appropriately. Understanding the theological significance of this watershed story in Luke-Acts is tremendously insightful for theological and missiological studies today.

### ***Vital Points***

Peter and Cornelius, Luke-Acts, Gentile mission, visions and angels, Holy Spirit, salvation

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this study is to examine the theological significance of the longest narrative found in the New Testament, namely the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18. The mission to the Gentiles and their inclusion in the church were no small

matter for the early Christians since the crisis could have divided the church. To help resolve the conflict, Luke masterfully retells this watershed story in an artistic way to persuade the readers to accept the Gentile mission as a fulfillment of God's salvific will and plan, which is fully initiated by God. By means of a literary and narrative analysis, as will be demonstrated, the whole event is theologically legitimated by visions and angels, the Holy Spirit, Jesus the Savior and Benefactor, and the Holy Scriptures. Since the mission to the Gentiles is completely guided by God, readers must therefore accept it as the normative interpretation of the story and should respond appropriately. Before we explore the missiological significance of this important story, let us begin by examining Luke's understanding of God's role in the development of the Gentile mission in Luke-Acts.

## **II. THE ROLE OF GOD IN THE GENTILE MISSION**

Direct references to God in Acts 10:1-11:18 are abundant. The term God (*theos*) appears twenty-two times in this episode: 10:2 (twice), 3, 4, 15, 22, 28, 31, 33, 34, 38 (twice), 40, 41, 42, 46; 11:1, 9, 17 (twice), 18 (twice). There are also four other indirect references to God represented by the Greek third person masculine pro-

noun: him (*auton*) (10:35 [twice]) and he (*autos*) (10:36; 11:17). Appearing twenty-six times in sixty-six verses, God is clearly the central focus of this narrative.<sup>1</sup> In approximately every three verses the word God (*theos*) appears while in the preceding unit (Acts 9:32-42) there are no references to God, and in the following unit (Acts 11:19-29) God is mentioned only once (11:23). Thus, the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18 is highly theocentric, while its surrounding units are not.

From the very beginning to the end of the story, God is the primary actor and initiator. The Spirit of God commanded Peter to go with the messengers to Caesarea “without hesitation because I [the Spirit] have sent them” (10:19-20; 11:9). In Peter’s vision the voice declared three times, “What God has made clean, you must not continue to call unclean” (10:15; 11:9). Peter’s understanding of the vision was attributed to God’s action: “God has shown me not to call any person profane or unclean” (10:28). Peter later recognized that “God shows no favoritism” (10:35).

Divine initiative is especially accentuated in Peter’s speech concerning the life and ministry of Jesus. Peter made a series of

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<sup>1</sup> R L Mowery points out that God is the numerically dominant title in Acts. It occurs 159 times. See R L Mowery, “Lord, God, and Father: Theological Language in Luke-Acts,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 34 (1995) 82-101, at 90-91.

faith proclamations: “God *sent* the message to the children of Israel, preaching the good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (10:36); “God *anointed* Jesus from Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power” (10:38); “God *raised* him on the third day and *allowed* him to show himself” (10:40); Jesus is “the one *appointed* by God as judge of the living and the dead” (10:42); and “God *was present* with him” (10:38). Furthermore, Peter painstakingly points out in his speech that God is in full control and is the initiator of the whole affair. Peter, on the other hand, is just an “instrument” responding to the divine promptings. For Luke, the Gentile mission was first and foremost initiated by God. In the defense speech, Peter attests: “God *gave* them [the Gentiles] the same gift as he *had given* us” (11:17). His opponents publicly admit: “God *has granted* even to the Gentiles the repentance unto life” (11:18).<sup>2</sup>

In short, both the key terms and the actions of God highlight the theocentric motif of God’s guidance in Acts 10:1—11:18. God is evidently the primary actor throughout this narrative. God guided Peter to the house of the Gentile Cornelius and helped the apostle to understand the meaning of his vision. God was directly

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<sup>2</sup> Peter’s speech indicates that the life, ministry, and mission of Jesus Christ fall within the great plan of God. God has complete power and control over all human events and is actively involved in the salvation of humankind. Peter’s usage of the different verbs highlights this point.

involved in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Even the final judgment falls within the divine providence. The mission to the Gentiles too is presented as an activity initiated by God. For Luke, God is a sovereign who controls events both in heaven and on earth.<sup>3</sup> God determines what will happen, as well as when, where, and how events will occur. Since God is completely in charge, everything happens according to the will and plan of God.<sup>4</sup> Certain key terms which emphasize the foreknowledge, will, plan, or purpose of God make this apparent. These terms include compound verbs formed by the prefix “before” (*pro-*) and the verbs: to do, to fulfill, to determine, to set, to stand or set up, to appoint, and to be destined. Three other words

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<sup>3</sup> The theme of divine control or guidance of history is also a widespread belief among Greco-Romans. Providence was a central theme in Hellenistic historiography, where it often had an apologetic or religious application. See J T Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge University, 1993) 37-52.

<sup>4</sup> The plan of God as a central theme in Luke-Acts has been noted by many scholars. See F Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed.; Waco: Baylor University, 2006) 1-89; I H Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 103-115; J A Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 179-181; M A Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* (New York: Paulist, 1991) 39-40; M L Soards, *The Speeches of Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 184-185.

While many scholars recognize the plan of God as the central theme of Luke-Acts, they nevertheless only treat it superficially. For an excellent survey of the literature on this theme, see Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 3-10.

or expressions also denote God's sovereignty: it is necessary (*dei*), the plan of God, and will. Key events in Acts are narrated as the action of God. They take place under the guidance of God: the day of Pentecost (2:17-21), the Samaritan mission (8:1-40), Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (9:1-19), the apostolic council in Jerusalem (15:1-35), and the mission of Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles (13:1-14:28). Likewise, Luke painstakingly shows that God always intended and directly authorized the Gentile mission and the Gentiles' integration into the church in Acts 10:1-11:18. Since divine revelations or visions are connected with prayer, it is through prayer that Cornelius experiences the presence of the angel of God (10:4); likewise, it is through prayer that Peter discovers the salvific will and plan of God, which is now offered to the Gentiles (10:9). In addition, four important verbs highlight the theme of God's sovereignty in Acts 10:1-11:18: God *sent* the message to the children of Israel (10:36), *anointed* and *appointed* Jesus of Nazareth (10:38, 42), and *chose* him in advance (10:41). Consequently, the narrative of Acts 10:1-11:18 is narrated as an event completely within the sovereignty of God. It is God who directs the whole affair of the Gentile mission and Gentiles' inclusion.

### GENTILE MISSION AS FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PLAN

For Luke, God's purpose and plan is particularly realized in terms of fulfillment of prophecy.<sup>5</sup> This is an important theme in Luke-Acts. In the preface of the Gospel, Luke describes the aim of his work, "to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1). Towards the end of the Gospel, the risen Jesus reiterates the theme of fulfilled prophecy by saying, "everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (24:44). Likewise the opening verses of Acts indicate both the promises and ongoing fulfillment of Scripture concerning the gift of the Holy Spirit, which will be poured upon Jews as well as Gentiles (Acts 1:5, 8; 16-20; 2:16-21). At the end of Acts, Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 to show that the Gentile mission and salvation are fulfilling Sacred Scripture (Acts 28:25-28). Thus John T. Squires rightly observes, "The beginning and ending of each volume point to the importance of fulfilled prophecies in Luke's literary and theological purposes."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 180. See esp. D Peterson, "The Motif of Fulfilment and the Purpose of Luke-Acts," in B W Winter and A D Clarke, eds., *The Book of Acts in its Ancient Literary Setting*, BAFCS 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 1:83-104.

<sup>6</sup> Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 137.

One of Luke's major theological and apologetic concerns is to show that the mission to the Gentiles is intended by God and consequently fulfills the words of the prophets. How then does Luke demonstrate that the Gentile mission in Acts 10:1-11:18 is a prophecy-fulfillment, which is in accordance with the salvific will and plan of God? The whole event is realized in or legitimated by: 1) visions and heavenly beings; 2) the Holy Spirit; 3) Jesus; and 4) the Sacred Scriptures.<sup>7</sup>

### **1. Visions and Angels**

Visions (Acts 2:17, 19; 10:3; 10:11-19; 11:5-10; 16:9-10) and angels (Acts 5:19; 8:26; 10:3, 7, 22; 11:13; 12:7-15, 23; 27:23-24) play an important role in revealing as well as executing God's plan in Luke's second volume.<sup>8</sup> In our narrative, both Cornelius (10:3-7)

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<sup>7</sup> According to C H Talbert fulfilled prophecy in Lukan narrative comes from three types of sources: 1) the Jewish Scriptures; 2) a living prophet; 3) a heavenly being. It is noticeable that our text consists of not three but four types of sources, and furthermore the order is different from Talbert's. See C H Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 234-240.

<sup>8</sup> References to visions and angels are frequent, particularly in the infancy narratives of the Gospel of Luke. See R O'Toole, *The Unity of Luke's Theology: An Analysis of the Luke-Acts*, Good News Studies 9 (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984) 30-31.



and Peter (10:11-20) saw visions<sup>9</sup> and were guided by an angelic messenger or a spirit<sup>10</sup> to begin the Gentile mission. It is noteworthy that visions and angels appear in almost every scene of Acts 10:1-11:18.

There is a fourfold reporting of Cornelius' vision. It is significant that these four versions of the same event are narrated from four different points of view: first, by the narrator to the reader (10:1-8); then by the messengers to Peter (10:22); later Cornelius himself tells Peter about it (10:30-33); and finally Peter tells the Jerusalem church (11:13-14). It is noted that there is a steady progression in what the reader (or hearer) learns from each of these four accounts. Furthermore, the fourfold account of Cornelius' vision—particularly from the point of view of different character-narrators—not only creates suspense and interest but more importantly enhances the role of God's action and initiative in the entire Peter and Cornelius episode. In general, Cornelius receives

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<sup>9</sup> The word "vision" (*horama*) appears in 10:3, 5, 17, 19, and the word "trance" (*ekstasis*) occurs in 10:10; 11:5.

<sup>10</sup> In Cornelius' vision, it is an "angel" (10:3; 11:13) or "a man in dazzling clothes" (10:30) who appears and speaks. In Peter's vision, however, it is either a heavenly "voice" (10:13, 15; 11:7, 9) or the "spirit" (11:12) who speaks.

an exceptionally favorable portrayal.<sup>11</sup> From a narrative analysis, particularly from characterization, the narrator goes out of his way—even sometimes to the point of being redundant—to impress upon the reader the fact that Cornelius is not just any Gentile. He is religiously and morally upright. The reliable narrator specifically describes Cornelius as *eusebes* (“devout, godly, or pious,” 10:2) and *dikaiosune* (“righteousness,” 10:22). He is charitable and sympathetic to the Jewish nation. His obedience to the command of the angel shows that he is a man of faith. Although he is a Roman centurion possessing a high social status, he is nevertheless humble and respectful.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, he is open and receptive to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This characterization not only makes Cornelius different from the stereotyped Gentiles—impious and idolatrous—but ironically makes him resemble a faithful Jew whom the implied author wants his reader to imitate.

Unlike Cornelius’ vision, which is told and retold four times, Peter’s vision is narrated only twice: first, by the narrator to the reader (10:9-16), and second, by Peter himself to the assembly in

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<sup>11</sup> For a fuller examination of the characterization of Cornelius, see T V Nguyen, “Paradigm of Missionary and Christian Response (Acts 10:1-11:18)” *Verbum SVD* 49:2 (2008) 159-65, esp. 161-63.

<sup>12</sup> For example, when Cornelius finally meets Peter face to face, the centurion falls down at the apostle’s feet to reverence him (10:26).

Jerusalem (11:5-10). While the variation in details between the two versions is minimal and appears relatively insignificant, the difference in point of view adds vividness and color to the repetition and more importantly reinforces the divine guidance through the perspective of Peter, the reliable character-narrator.<sup>13</sup>

In short, the visions of Cornelius and Peter are told and retold repeatedly from different points of view. While each version adds new information in order to maintain the reader's interest, the variation in perspectives reinforces the function and purpose of Luke's repetitive rhetorical techniques. Luke assures the reader that the whole ordeal of going to the Gentile home and eating with them is completely guided by God. Moreover, the divine plan for the salvation of the Gentiles is being realized through the guidance of visions and angelic messengers.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed examination of the character of Peter and how he engaged in mission, see Nguyen, "Paradigm of Missionary and Christian Response," 159-61.

<sup>14</sup> For the role of visions and angels in God's salvific plan, see O'Toole, *The Unity of Luke's Theology*, 30, 40, 106; and Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 234-240.

## 2. The Holy Spirit

No one can deny the important role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts.<sup>15</sup> In Acts 10:1-11:18 the term Spirit or Holy Spirit appears eight times: 10:19, 38, 44, 45, 47; 11:12; 15, 16).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the manifestation of the Spirit among the Gentiles is elaborately portrayed.<sup>17</sup> First and foremost, the event is narrated

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<sup>15</sup> G W H Lampe, "The Holy Spirit in the Writings of Luke," in D E Nineham, ed., *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R H Lightfoot* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955) 159-200; G H Prats, *L'Esprit force de l'Église: Sa nature et son activité d'après les Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Cerf, 1975); W H Shepherd, *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994); F F Bruce, "The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles," *Int* 27 (1973) 166-83; A T Lincoln, "Theology and History in the Interpretation of Luke's Pentecost," *Expository Times* 96 (1985) 204-209; M Turner, "The 'Spirit of Prophecy' as the Power of Israel's Restoration and Witness," in I H Marshall and D Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 327-48; E Rasco, "Spirito e istituzione nell'opera lucana," *Rivista biblica* 30 (1982) 301-22.

For a complete bibliography and review of this research see Bovon, *Luke the Theologian*, 227-74; Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 50-56; and Shepherd, *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit*, 3-11.

<sup>16</sup> References to the Holy Spirit occur at least seventeen times in Luke (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25, 26, 27; 3:16, 22; 4:1 [twice], 14, 18; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12), and fifty-seven times in Acts (1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4 [twice], 17, 18, 33, 38; 4:8, 25, 31; 5:3, 9, 32; 6:3, 5, 10; 7:51, 55; 8:15, 17, 18, 19, 29, 39; 9:17, 31; 10:19, 38, 44, 45, 47; 11:12, 15, 16, 24, 28; 13:2, 4, 9, 52; 15:8, 28; 16:6, 7; 19:2 [twice], 6, 21; 20:22, 23, 28; 21:4, 11; 28:25). The Spirit is mentioned only six times in Mark, twelve times in Matthew, and about fifteen times in the Gospel of John. For a complete listing, see Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 227.

<sup>17</sup> Other important texts are: Acts 2:1-4 (Pentecost); 4:31 (the community at prayer); 8:14-17 (the Samaritan mission); 19:1-6 (John's disciples). For a comparison of and contrasts between these principal texts, see E Richard, "Pentecost as a Recurrent Theme in Luke-Acts," in E Richard, ed., *New Views on Luke and Acts* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1990) 135-43.

twice. The actual outpouring of the Spirit takes place in Acts 10:44-48, which Peter later recounts in 11:15-17. Second, since there are two accounts of the same event, the descriptions of the Spirit's manifestation are more elaborate. The event is perceived and interpreted in six different ways by various characters (the narrator, Peter, and the circumcised believers).<sup>18</sup> First, the narrator recounts that "the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the word" (10:44). Likewise in his defense Peter declared that "the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning" (11:15). Second, the circumcised believers saw that "the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (10:45).<sup>19</sup> Third, Peter said that the Gentiles are those "who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (10:47). Fourth, Peter recalled Jesus' words saying, "You will be baptized by the Holy Spirit" (11:16).<sup>20</sup> Fifth, the circumcised believers witnessed the

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to these six manifestations, the narrator says that Jesus was *anointed* with the Holy Spirit and power (10:38). Perhaps, Luke is making a thematic link with Luke 4:16-21, which in turn alludes to Isaiah 61:1. See J Dupont, *Nouvelles études sur les Actes des Apôtres* (Paris: Cerf, 1984) 327-28.

<sup>19</sup> Richard, "Pentecost as a Recurrent Theme in Luke-Acts," 138, correctly points out that the verb "pour out" is rare in Luke. It occurs here and at Pentecost. Luke's usage here definitely alludes to Joel's citation: "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17, 18; Joel 3:1-5).

<sup>20</sup> The "baptism with the Spirit," first mentioned by John (Luke 3:16) and promised by Jesus (Acts 1:5), is now fulfilled according to Peter (11:16).

Gentiles “speaking in tongues” (10:46). Sixth, Peter testified that “God gave them the same gift as he had given us” (11:17).<sup>21</sup>

Obviously Luke uses various terms and different characters (although Peter is the most important and most frequent witness) to describe the manifestation of the Spirit to the Gentiles. The language is rich in imagery. Furthermore, the different speakers create a powerful effect upon the reader (/hearer). The perspectives give the impression that this event was real and reliable because many people witnessed it. Moreover, the double versions and the repetitious descriptions of the same event impress upon the reader that the Gentiles have indeed received the same gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke goes out of his way to make sure that no reader misses this crucial aspect of the story.

The manifestation of the Spirit to the Gentiles does not follow a fixed pattern. The outpouring is not a result of baptism (2:38) or prayer (4:31) or of the laying on of hands (8:17). Rather, it is a result of Peter’s preaching or *kerygma*.<sup>22</sup> The narrator clearly points out that “while Peter was still speaking these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the word” (10:44). Through preaching the Gentiles were able to hear the word,

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<sup>21</sup> Luke also refers to the Spirit as a gift in 2:38; 8:18; 10:45.

<sup>22</sup> Richard, “Pentecost as a Recurrent Theme in Luke-Acts,” 139, 145.

which led them to believe. Thus, it is through faith that the Gentiles were granted the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There are three principal missions of the early church, which Luke attributed to the working of the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> These missionary beginnings are: the mission to the Jews (2:1-42) to the Samaritans (8:4-25) and to the Gentiles (10:1-11:18). On all three occasions the Spirit functions as the authenticator of Christian missionary activity. Throughout our narrative the Holy Spirit plays a major role in launching and authenticating the Gentile mission. It was the Spirit who guided Peter to Caesarea and directed him to enter Cornelius' house and to participate in table fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles. The coming of the Spirit—particularly the granting of the gift of *glossolalia* in 10:46—irrefutably legitimated the Gentile mission as an activity of the Spirit. Peter indicates several times in his defense that the Gentiles' reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit is equal to that of the first believers in Jerusalem (11:15, 17; again 15:8-9). The divine initiative and the equality of the gift of the Holy Spirit convinced the Jerusalem community to accept unconditionally both the expansion of the Gentile mission and Jewish-Gentile table fellowship.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 143.

Consequently, the Spirit plays an important role in the implementation and authorization of the Gentile mission in this story. The Spirit is portrayed as its driving force (10:38, 44; 11:16) and its legitimator (10:45-46; 11:17). Nevertheless, like the angels, the Holy Spirit serves as God's agent to implement and execute God's salvific will and plan for the inclusion of the Gentiles. For Luke, God is the director of the whole affair. God is the one who gives the gift of the Holy Spirit (11:17) and is also the one who grants salvation to the Gentiles (11:18).

Luke often portrays the Holy Spirit as the biblical Spirit of prophecy.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the Spirit is the fulfillment of the promises made by the Father (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:39) by John the Baptist (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5) and by Jesus (1:8). Similar to the Jewish Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles also fulfills the Old Testament prophecy of Joel. In the Pentecostal address, Peter says:

This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I *will pour out* my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

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<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive survey of scholarly research on this theme, see Shepherd, *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character*, 11-22. For a more concise presentation, see Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 50-56; M Turner, "The 'Spirit of Prophecy'," 327-48.



and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I *will pour out* my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:16-18; *NRSV*; emphasis mine).

This citation of Joel 3:1-2 authenticates the Jewish Pentecost as a prophecy-fulfillment. Since the Gentiles received exactly the same gift as those first followers had received at the beginning, Luke clearly links the Gentile Pentecost with the Jewish Pentecost. Thus, if the Jewish Pentecost fulfills the prophecy of Joel, then the Gentile Pentecost fulfills the same prophecy.

The outpouring of the Spirit upon the Gentiles is also a fulfillment of the promises made by John the Baptist and by Jesus. In his defense speech, Peter recalls the word of the Lord, who said: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized by the Holy Spirit” (11:16). This is an exact citation of Jesus’ direct speech in Acts 1:5, which in turn fulfills the promise made by John the Baptist. John says, “I baptize you with water; but he who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). By showing that the Gentile Pentecost fulfills the Baptist’s promise, Peter also demonstrates that it is the Spirit of

Jesus, which was poured out on the Gentiles. Furthermore, the outpouring of the Spirit of Jesus on the Gentile believers fulfills the promise made by God the Father (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:39). At the end of his speech, Peter concludes: “If God gave them the same gift as he had given us, when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to be able to hinder God?” (11:17).

### 3. Jesus

Salvation is an important Lukan motif.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the words “salvation” and “savior” are found only in Luke-Acts (eight times in Luke [1:47, 69, 71, 77; 2:11, 30; 3:6; 19:9] and nine times in Acts [4:12, 5:31; 7:25; 13:23, 26, 47; 16:17; 27:34; 28:28]).<sup>26</sup> For Luke the plan of God is a plan of salvation. God wills and directs salvation history.<sup>27</sup> God has brought salvation to Israel in the past and con-

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<sup>25</sup> Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 77-102; J B Green, “Salvation to the End of the Earth,” in I H Marshall and D Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 83-106.

<sup>26</sup> For a complete list of terms related to the theme of salvation, see Green, “Salvation to the End of the Earth,” 86.

<sup>27</sup> The most influential work on this theme is that of H Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit* (Tübingen: J C B Mohr, 1977). He proposes that salvation history is divided into three distinct periods: Israel (from creation to the imprisonment of John the Baptist); Jesus (from his baptism to his ascension); and Church (from Jesus’ ascension to his parousia). For a concise summary and criticism of Conzelmann’s work, see Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 181-92.

tinues to bring salvation in the present through Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Thus, according to Luke, Jesus Christ is *the* agent of God's salvation. Joseph Fitzmyer writes: "The key figure in Lucan salvation-history is Jesus Christ himself, for he is the one in whom God's activity in human history is now manifested. He is not only the one who proclaims salvation; he becomes himself the object of the proclamation."<sup>29</sup>

In the Acts of the Apostles salvation is always offered "in the name of Jesus" (Acts 2:21, 38; 3:16; 4:7-18; 8:12; 10:43). Apostles and Christians heal (3:6; 4:30) teach (5:28, 40) baptize (8:16; 10:48; 19:5) exorcise demons (16:18; 19:13) preach (9:27-28) witness (9:15) and serve (15:26) in Jesus' name. They also call upon (9:14, 21; 22:16) suffer for (5:41; 9:16; 21:13; 26:9) and honor (19:17) the name of Jesus.

Luke's salvation, which is exclusively found in Jesus' name (4:12) is not limited to Israel but includes Gentiles as well. Jesus says, "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47).

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<sup>28</sup> D M Sweetland, "Luke the Christian," in E Richard, ed., *New Views on Luke and Acts* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1990) 52-54; H C Kee, *Good News to the Ends of the Earth: The Theology of Acts* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 6-27; Soards, *The Speeches in Acts*, 186-89.

<sup>29</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 192.

Just before Jesus ascends to heaven, he commissions his disciples, “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Consequently, according to Luke’s geographical plan of salvation, Acts 10:1-11:18 fulfills the third part of Luke’s programmatic purpose and structure—that is: “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). A close examination of the story of Peter and Cornelius will reveal that for Luke, Jesus is also the Savior and Benefactor of the Gentiles.

In the Greco-Roman world of the first century C.E., the title “savior” (*soter*) was specifically used only of people who had exceptional merit and honor. It was often applied to gods, philosophers, physicians, kings, and emperors.<sup>30</sup> These saviors were also often called “benefactors” (*euergetes*).<sup>31</sup> Augustus Caesar was acclaimed “Savior” because he had brought peace to whole the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>31</sup> F W Danker points out that the verb *sozo* and *euergeteo* were used interchangeably; see F W Danker, *Luke, Proclamation Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 28. Danker defines *euergeteo* as “to render exceptional service, especially to a community;” see Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (University of Chicago, 2000) 405. J Green notices that the noun “salvation” was a semantic cousin of “benefaction” (“Salvation to the End of the Earth;” 87). C H Talbert suggests that Greco-Roman immortals (exemplary rulers and philosophers) were also considered benefactors. They attained immortality because of their benefactions to humanity; see Talbert, “The Concept of Immortals in Mediterranean Antiquity;” *JBL* 94 (1975) 419-38, at 420-25.

world. Similarly, the emperor Nero was pronounced “Savior and Benefactor of the world.”<sup>32</sup> The famous Priene inscription from the Provincial Assembly of Asia (today’s western Turkey) which is dated around 9 B.C.E., gives a historical account of Augustus being honored and worshiped as divine and the savior who fulfilled humanity’s hope and aspiration:

Since the providence that has divinely ordered our existence has applied her energy and zeal and has brought to life the most perfect good in Augustus, whom she filled with virtues for the benefit of mankind, bestowing him upon us and our descendants as *savior*—he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar, who by his epiphany exceeded the hopes of those who prophesied good tidings [*euangelia*] ... and since the birthday of the god first brought to the world the good tidings [*euangelia*] residing in him.... For that reason, with good fortune and safety, the Greeks of Asia have decided that the New Year in all the cities should begin on 23<sup>rd</sup> September, the birthday of Augustus (OGIS 458).<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, Augustus was depicted in poetry and inscribed in stone tablets as Son of God and Savior of the world. Moreover, his reign or victory was announced as “gospels” or “good

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed description of the inscriptions of Augustus and Nero, see Danker, *Luke*, 29-30; for other important inscriptions, see F W Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing, 1982) 26-48.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted from J D Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: Harper, 2007) 148. For a full text of this Priene inscription and explanations, see C Evans’ article entitled, “Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel,” found on <http://www.craigaevans.com/Priene%20art.pdf>, accessed on March 7, 2009.

news.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the emperor Nero was pronounced “Savior and Benefactor of the world.”<sup>35</sup>

In Acts 10:1-11:18 Jesus is addressed by various titles: “Lord” (10:36; 11:16, 17) “Jesus Christ” (10:36, 48, 17) and simply “Jesus from Nazareth” (10:38).<sup>36</sup> One particular title—which occurs exclusively in Luke-Acts—merits our attention.<sup>37</sup> In his sermon Peter depicts Jesus as “Benefactor” (10:38) a title that is significant and very familiar to the Gentile Cornelius. According to Frederick W. Danker, the Greek participle *euergeton* in 10:38 functions as a substantive which should be translated as follows: “Benefactor that he was, he went about healing all who were being tyrannized by the Devil.”<sup>38</sup>

Besides the title, Peter’s sermon contains many traditional elements that depict Jesus as Benefactor. These include Jesus as the bearer of the good news of peace (10:36) and Jesus as a servant

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<sup>34</sup> For further in-depth study on the impact of Roman Empire on the New Testament, see vanThanh Nguyen, “Evangelizing Empire: The Gospel and Mission of St. Paul,” *SEDOS Bulletin* 41 (2009) 99-105 and “Roman Empire and New Testament,” *New Theology Review* 21 (2008) 84-86.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed description of the inscriptions of Augustus and Nero, see Danker, *Luke*, 29-30; for other important inscriptions, see also Danker, *Benefactor*, 26-48.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion on these titles, see Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 197-219; and D J Jones, “The Title *Christos* in Luke-Acts,” *CBQ* 32 (1970) 69-76.

<sup>37</sup> Two other occurrences are found in Luke 22:25 and Acts 4:9.

<sup>38</sup> Danker, *Luke*, 32, n. 6.

who went about doing good and healing all who were in need (10:38). Jesus' words and deeds are noticeably compatible with the Greek concept of Benefactor. Similar to many saviors or benefactors, Jesus was unjustly put to death (10:39). However, after three days God raised him up and allowed him to show himself to his followers (10:40) while anyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (10:43). Evidently, Luke depicts Jesus as the Savior/Benefactor who exhibits exceptional merit and who confers God's beneficence and salvation. Luke's audience—whether as Cornelius or Theophilus—would have certainly understood such a familiar presentation, because it is steeped in the imagery of Hellenistic benefactors and in the Mediterranean culture and milieu.<sup>39</sup>

As Benefactor, Jesus is “Lord of all” (10:36). He healed all (10:38) and offers salvation to anyone who believes in his name (10:43). Jesus' arrival brings “good news of peace” for the whole world (10:36). The impact of Jesus is universal for he is Savior not only of the Jews but also of the Gentiles. Although the Gentile mission does not actually begin until Acts 10:1-11:18, the theme of

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<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the lives of benefactors and virtuous people who became immortals, see Talbert, “The Concept of Immortals in Mediterranean Antiquity,” 417-36.

universal salvation has already been introduced by Luke (Luke 1:48b, 79; 2:14, 30-32; 3:6; 4:25-30; 7:1-10; 24:47; Acts 1:8; 3:25; 9:15). The numerous promises of universal salvation—particularly of the Gentiles—are fulfilled in the story of Peter and Cornelius. Gentiles are included among the people of God. Since Jesus is “Lord of all,” salvation applies not only to the Jews but to the Gentiles as well. God has always designed it to be so. Thus Peter rightly recognizes that the acceptance and integration of Gentiles is not a scandal but a fulfillment of God’s plan and purpose which neither he nor anyone else can hinder (10:47; 11:17).

In summary, according to Luke the plan of God is the plan of salvation to all people, including the Gentiles. The acceptance of Gentiles is not a scandal but a fulfillment of God’s plan and purpose. This promise is now realized in Jesus. Jesus is the agent of God’s salvation and beneficence. Those who believe in him will be saved. Salvation is no longer a matter of inheritance but is a gift for those who respond positively to the good news of Jesus Christ.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, for Luke salvation ultimately comes from God. God is the true Savior and the Great Benefactor of all. Green

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<sup>40</sup> D Bock, “Scripture and the Realization of God’s Promises,” in I H Marshall and D Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 57.



poignantly says, “Though Jesus is the agent of salvation, God’s redemptive plan was operative prior to Jesus’ birth and subsequent to his ascension (*cf.*, 13:16-41); before Luke’s soteriology is christocentric, it is theocentric.”<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. Sacred Scriptures

Biblical allusions and echoes are abundant in Acts 10:1-11:18, demonstrating that events are being fulfilled according to God’s providential and salvific plan.<sup>42</sup> Fitzmyer points out that, besides the thirty-seven direct citations, there are many allusions to the Old Testament throughout the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>43</sup> In the Peter

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<sup>41</sup> Green, “‘Salvation to the End of the Earth’,” 98.

<sup>42</sup> For the pattern of fulfillment in the Gospel of Luke, see D Peterson, “The Motif of Fulfillment and the Purpose of Luke-Acts,” 87-94. Peterson notices that the terms and theme of fulfillment are extensively used in the infancy narratives (Luke 1:20, 23, 45, 57; 2:6, 21, 22, 39, 43) where Luke introduces some of the main themes of his Gospel.

<sup>43</sup> For the list of the citations found in Acts, see J A Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 90; B Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 123-124. For Luke’s skillful use of Old Testament citations placed on the lips of his characters to express the author’s point of view and ideology, see B T Arnold, “Luke’s Characterizing Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Acts,” in B Witherington III, ed., *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge University, 1996) 300-23.

and Cornelius episode biblical allusions and echoes are abundant, reflecting the importance of this passage for Luke.<sup>44</sup>

There are two clear Old Testament allusions. The angel's message to Cornelius in 10:4 alludes to various Old Testament passages dealing with sacrifices and the criteria for God's acceptance of one's prayers and offerings (Lev 2:2, 9, 16; 5:12; Psa 111:6; Tob 12:12).<sup>45</sup> In our narrative the angel tells Cornelius that his prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God (10:4). The allusion implies that, although a Gentile, Cornelius' prayers and alms have been accepted as if they were a sacrifice made by a righteous Jew (Sir 35:5-6). Clearly God makes no ethnic distinctions when it comes to prayers. The second biblical allusion occurs in 10:34. Peter sets the tone of his sermon by saying, "In truth I realize that God shows no partiality." God's impartiality—which occasionally implies the willingness to listen to the

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<sup>44</sup> According to D A Handy there are two definite biblical allusions in the P-C episode, at least seven probable echoes, and several more possible echoes or overtones; see D A Handy, "The Gentile Pentecost: A Literary Study of the Story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18)," Ph.D. Diss., Union Theological Seminary, Virginia, 1998, 40-61. On the contrary, J B Tyson says that apart from the reference in Acts 10:43, Scripture plays no role in the story of Cornelius in providing a justification for the Gentile mission; see Tyson, "The Gentile Mission and the Authority of Scripture in Acts," *NTS* 33 (1987) 619-31, at 629.

<sup>45</sup> For further references and explanation, see L T Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992) 183.

poor, the widows, and foreigners—is accentuated in various biblical passages (Deut 10:17-19; 2 Chr 19:7; Sir 35:15-16). These biblical passages highlight and recall the covenant that God made with Abraham and David and portray God as merciful, inclusive, and impartial.<sup>46</sup>

It seems clear that the Lukan purity arrangements are not based on the Old Testament notion of “holiness” (belonging to the covenant of Moses) but on “mercy” (belonging to the covenant of Abraham and David). This confirms the words of the voice made from heaven, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean” (10:15; 11:9). At the Jerusalem Council, Peter—referring back to the Cornelius episode—again says, “God made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith” (15:9). Clearly God had not only annulled the distinction between clean and unclean foods but also between clean and unclean persons. Thus, for Luke, the biblical allusions to the covenant of mercy, which God made with Abraham and David, justify

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<sup>46</sup> Biblical literature distinguishes two types of covenant, the covenant with Moses (which emphasizes the Law and holiness), and that with Abraham and David (which emphasizes God’s mercy). Luke-Acts favors the Abrahamic-Davidic type of covenant. See J H Neyrey, “The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts,” in J H Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 296-97; Bock, “Scripture and the Realisation of God’s Promises,” 49-52.

the Gentile mission and legitimate the social intercourse of Jewish-Gentile table fellowship.<sup>47</sup>

Besides the two definite Old Testament allusions, Acts 10:1-11:18 has five major biblical echoes and two possible hints. The five biblical echoes are briefly listed here according to their degree of significance:

- A. The references to “making a distinction” between clean and unclean (Acts 10:20; 11:2, 12; 15:9) echo Leviticus 10:10; 11:46-47; 20:25.
- B. Peter’s protest against the divine command to eat non-kosher food in Acts 10:14 and 11:8 echoes a similar protest in Ezekiel 4:14.
- C. The descent of the Spirit is described in the language of “being poured out” (Acts 10:45) which echoes Acts 2:17-18, which in turns alludes to Joel 3:1-2.
- D. The story of the gentile Cornelius echoes Luke 4:27, which in turns alludes to the Old Testament story of the pagan general Naaman in 2 Kings 5.
- E. The whole story echoes the mission of the seventy-two (Luke 10:1-12) which in turns alludes to the table of seventy-two nations in Genesis 10.

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<sup>47</sup> For an opposing view, see Tyson, “The Gentile Mission and the Authority of Scripture in Acts,” 619-31. According to Tyson, Luke omitted quotations and allusions to Scripture in the Cornelius episode precisely because he was aware of the difficulty that Scripture has concerning the issue of annulling dietary regulations; thus, Luke appeals to a higher authority than Scripture can provide, namely God.

In addition, Luke makes two possible biblical hints. First, the reluctance of Peter to preach to the Gentiles may hint at the story of Jonah.<sup>48</sup> Second, the references to “fearing God” (Acts 10:2; 34) might indirectly refer to the wisdom motif concerning “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7; 9:10). Although these are possible hints, the strong biblical allusions and echoes illustrate that Luke made good use of the Sacred Scripture to justify and legitimate the mission to the Gentiles. Furthermore, since the mission to the Gentiles is part of God’s design, it naturally fulfills the biblical promises.<sup>49</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

The paper has demonstrated that the Gentile mission in Acts 10:1-11:18 is fully initiated and completely guided by God and hence fulfills God’s salvific will and plan. God is not only the actor and initiator but also the director of the whole event. Luke reassures the reader—especially through the repetitive techniques of recounting visions—that the entire event of entering a Gentile

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<sup>48</sup> See R W Wall, “Peter, ‘Son of Jonah’: The Conversion of Cornelius in the Context of the Canon,” *JNT* 29 (1987) 79-90. According to Handy, “Gentile Pentecost: A Literary Study,” 41, the hint is weak because it is really only an overtone.

<sup>49</sup> See Bock, “Scripture and the Realisation of God’s Promises,” 41-62.

home and eating with the uncircumcised is completely guided by God through divine visions and angels. The Holy Spirit too serves as God's representative to implement and to legitimate God's salvific will and plan for the inclusion of the Gentiles. Luke shows that the outpouring of the Spirit of prophecy upon the Gentiles not only fulfills the promises made by Joel and John the Baptist, but also those made by Jesus himself and by the Father. As God's anointed Messiah, Jesus becomes the "Lord of all." Moreover as universal Savior and Benefactor Jesus has the power to confer God's beneficence and salvation to anyone who calls upon his name. Jesus' salvation of all people, including Gentiles, fulfills the promise made by God long ago. The abundant biblical allusions and echoes also indicate that the Gentile mission fits within God's great design and naturally fulfills scriptural promises. As it has been clearly demonstrated in this investigation, Luke the master story-teller uses a variety of poetic devices to help the reader to align with God's evaluative point view that the Gentile mission is fully initiated and completely guided by God. ♦

**vanThanh Nguyen (S.V.D., S.Th.D., Pontifical Gregorian Univ., Rome)** is associate professor of New Testament Studies and the Director of the Master of Divinity program at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois, USA. He is the convener and coordinator of the Bible Studies and Mission (BISAM) study group of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS). He is the author of *Peter and Cornelius: A Story of Conversion and Mission* (Pickwick Publications, 2012) and *Stories of Early Christianity* (Ligouri Publications, 2013). *Email: tnguyen@ctu.edu*