"WHAT DOES THE SCRIPTURE SAY?"

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BIBLICAL PROPHECY AND THE FATE OF THE NATIONS IN EARLY JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATIONS OF ISAIAH

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1. Introduction

In this essay I seek to investigate how a study of exegesis of Isaiah's phrase “light for/to the nations/peoples” (42:6; 49:6; 51:4) and the few surrounding verses can be used to contribute to our understanding of a wide divide in early Jewish and Christian attitudes toward a mission to the Gentiles. I consider how some Jews and Christians, through their interpretations of the biblical text, thought about Gentiles, and especially their ultimate fates, as well as their motivations for either preaching or not preaching about their religious beliefs to Gentiles. I have chosen to track this one biblical phrase as a way to comparatively assess roughly contemporaneous views toward proselytism. It appears in works concerned with the Gentiles, in both Jewish texts from the late Second Temple period (roughly the last few centuries B.C.E. and first century C.E.) and in Luke–Acts, an early Christian text especially focused on a Gentile mission.

We find in the late Second Temple period Jewish texts numerous interpretations of this phrase, from a time prior to or contemporaneous with Luke, and I have chosen from them some prominent examples. By comparing it with Luke, it will be clear that the phrase has in the Jewish texts very different meanings. Luke, I demonstrate, uses it at key moments in his work when he defends the Gentile mission and the creation of Gentile churches. Revealingly, the same phrase, when cited in late Second Temple Jewish literature, is never given a similar application to justify missionary activity. This reflects a wide divide between Christian (in this case, Lukean) and non-Christian Jewish attitudes toward the Gentiles and specifically toward proselytism, one that is especially clear in the second volume of Luke's two-volume work. As I argue, different goals prompt different interpretations of Isaiah, and helpfully reveal the ways that Jews and Christians appropriated aspects of the biblical tradition to very different ends.

I begin by looking at attitudes toward a Gentile mission in Luke–Acts and in late Second Temple Judaism. I first consider Luke's views, and highlight the prominence he gives to this theme. Then, I review the current scholarly consensus that Jews in the late Second Temple period were almost without exception uninterested in and sometimes hostile to precisely the types of missionary activities that Luke values most highly. Though persuasive, this relatively recent consensus has seldom been applied to comparative studies of Jewish and Christian exegesis. Next, I turn to exegesis of the Isaiah phrase. I briefly situate it in its biblical and historical context. However, my focus is not on the original meaning of the phrase itself but on interpretations of it in passages from Luke–Acts and late Second Temple Jewish texts that reveal different attitudes toward the Gentiles and the desirability of efforts to bring them, in the present, into one's religious community. These two groups of texts are the main foci of the present study. A comparative exegesis demonstrates wide divergences between, on the one hand, Luke, and on the other, late Second Temple Jews, that are significant for understanding how scriptural interpretation is used to support diverse approaches to theologically and socially complex issues of mission and conversion.

2. Luke–Acts and a Mission to the Gentiles

Scholars have long recognized the centrality of the Gentile mission in the first few generations of Christianity, and above all in Luke's two-volume work. The first volume, Luke's Gospel, contains important indications of the future expansion of Christianity beyond the land and people of Israel. Luke provides the attentive reader with hints about events that will occur, in some cases, decades later. The second volume, Acts of the Apostles, narrates the remarkable spread of faith to the far reaches of the Roman empire.


Empire. Through the zealous and indefatigable efforts of Peter, Philip, Paul, and others, many Gentiles, and some Jews, hear their message about Jesus and come to believe in him. The mission slowly gathers steam until it bursts forth in ch. 10 with the conversion of Cornelius. After this paradigmatic event, the conversion of the Gentiles becomes the dominant narrative trajectory of the work. Paul’s contributions are especially significant. While the mission did not originate with him, during his lengthy and dangerous journeys he not only boldly proclaims the word of God but plants and tends to new communities of believers. This mission is a fulfillment of God’s plan for all people. It begins with successful preaching and eventually leads to the growth of communities filled with Gentile believers.

This last result is remarkable and long-lasting. The founding of new churches and creation of communities of Gentile believers inaugurates a major change in the constituency and organization of the early Jesus movement. This change goes beyond the outcomes in vague stories about one or a few Gentiles being convinced by Christian preacher’s claims about Jesus. For example, in both Acts 8:38 (the Ethiopian eunuch) and 10:48 (Cornelius), after dramatic scenes of successful preaching followed by Gentile baptism, the preachers disappear. There is no indication of a broader mission, nor is any Christian community planted. However, after these and other early scenes, the missionaries begin to do more than preach and baptize. They are not “simply traveling evangelists, but are leaders of communities who are concerned for their identity and stability.” Preaching to large groups and setting up communities are their preeminent goals. Already in Syrian Antioch, before Paul’s work begins, Luke narrates the birth of these local communities, now called “churches,” a noteworthy first use of the term for Gentile believers (Acts 11:26). After this he describes similar groups of Gentiles gathering together in local congregations. Importantly, they are called “disciples” and “brothers,” terms formerly reserved for Jews.

Luke says it was God’s will that a mission to the Gentiles, followed by the founding of churches of Gentiles, should succeed. This was an immediate and present outcome, the fruits of zealous preaching. These groups, in which all believers (including Gentiles) are welcomed as equal members of the church, are new, indeed novel types of faith communities. Instead of the Jewish (both Christian and non-Christian) communities that welcomed Gentiles as visitors without extending full membership, these communities welcomed all who had faith in Christ, whether Jew or non-Jew. Actually, by Luke’s time, probably late in the first-century, churches had become increasingly, perhaps overwhelming Gentile, while there had been little success among Jews. His narrative of the expansion produces a portrait of scattered Christian communities—largely urban, largely Gentile, largely indifferent or opposed to observance of the Torah’s commandments—undoubtedly familiar to his own readers.

Luke wants to demonstrate that there is nothing accidental or incidental about the Gentile mission. On the contrary, he believes that God had always intended for the Gentiles to be welcomed as Gentiles (i.e. not as Torah-observant converts to Judaism) into the young churches. Luke justifies the successful Gentile mission, along with the surprisingly disappointing failure to convince many Jews of: the claims made about Jesus, in a number of ways: with accounts of miracles, speeches, and citations of the Hebrew Bible. It is the last category I want to focus on,

8. Gentiles could be present for worship, study, meals, and so on, but were not expected to convert nor were they seen as equal members (membership here not being used in a formal or modern sense); see Paula Fredriksen, Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 36–37.


10. On the relevance of the narrative to Luke’s own day, see Wilson, Gentiles, 246–47.


the use of Scriptural proof-texts, for these texts constitute an essential defense of the Gentile mission, which was controversial not only among Jews but even among Jewish Christians. Luke’s emphasis on the divine imperative to preach to Gentiles and to found non-Torah-observant communities of Gentiles relies on his application of passages from Scripture. These are valuable sources of legitimacy, for they link present events with ancient promises.

3. Late Second Temple Jews and a Mission to the Gentiles

Until the last few decades, scholars were widely convinced that Judaism in the Second Temple period was a missionary religion. Such claims, however, were often highly speculative, and discussions lacked nuanced treatment of Jews’ views of Gentiles. Assumptions about dramatic increases in the Jewish population in the late Second Temple period, for example, are not only unreliable because of a lack of sound demographic data, but, even if true, would prove little about the reasons for the increase, such as proselytism. Statements about Gentile interest in Judaism seldom indicate that such interest is the result of Jewish missionary activity, and nearly always emphasize that Gentiles were attracted to Jewish monotheism or ethical living, rather than to observance of the detailed commandments in the Torah. Some scholars say that the many examples of Jewish literature in Greek, while often intended for Jews (e.g., to present Judaism in respectable Hellenistic terms for assimilated readers), were also missionary tracts. Embellishments of biblical narratives, like those by Arたanus; usage of Greek philosophical language, as in Philo’s writings; the fictional attribution of works praising Judaism by non-Jews, as in the Letter of Aristeas and the Sybilline Oracles; direct defense of Judaism, as in Josephus’ Contra Iubern— all might have been useful for converting Gentiles. Yet there is no evidence that this was either the purpose of the texts or that they had thus effect, especially in convincing Gentiles to take on Torah observance. On the contrary, this material can much more likely be explained as intended for a Jewish audience, both by design and also on practical grounds (i.e., it would only be understood and also only be read by and accessible to Jews). Also, scholars gave little attention to any possible Jewish motivations for missionary activity. Claims that Jews vigorously sought to convince Gentiles of the truth of Judaism and to bring them into their synagogues should account for such supposed activity by explaining why Jews would even bother with something so potentially onerous and possibly even dangerous. In fact, many Jews held positive views about Gentiles and


22. That was often Paul’s experience; see, e.g., 2 Cor 11:26; cf. Acts 1619–22; 19:23–41. Many Gentiles were not just puzzled by but detected the thought of conversion to Judaism. They would have seen it only as a religious but a political (and politically threatening) act, in light of the close association between pagan religious rituals and family and social identity; see Fredriksen, Augustina and the Jews, 7–39, 388.
believed that upright Gentiles could be saved at the end of days, without circumcision, conversion, observance of Torah, and so on. They therefore lacked a compelling religious motive for advocating a change in their present religious affiliations. According to this (probably dominant) position, "it is hard to see why they should have thought good gentiles needed to become Jews to win divine approval." Most Jews simply did not believe this was necessary. Other Jews had such negative views of the Gentiles, and of Gentile idolatrous and immoral behavior, that they showed no interest in interacting with them, let alone interest in converting them to Judaism. They too therefore lack any motive for proselytism.

These alternative perspectives illustrate the types of topics that should be considered in such a study of missionary motivation, for the lack of interest in proselytism from opposite ends of the spectrum of views about Gentiles reveals the near-unanimous opinions of late Second Temple period Jews. There is, to put it simply, almost no evidence of support for intentional efforts at missionary outreach. While I of course do not want to deny that some Gentiles did actually convert to Judaism, claims that Judaism was a missionary religion, or even that some Jews were missionary-minded, must demonstrate an underlying intentionality. For without any explicit intentionality, conversions are incidental, and may say more about an inherent appeal of Judaism than about any missionary zeal.  

23. Paula Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2," JTS 42 (1991): 532-64, esp. 546-48; Terence L. Donaldson, Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism in Lower CB (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2008), 499-505. Some did expect that Gentiles needed to give up idolatry to be considered righteous Gentiles, at least at the end of days; see, e.g., Sir 36:11-17.


26. For example, Josephus narrates the conversion of the royal family in Adiabene (Ant. 20:24-53), though the motivations of the missionaries are unknown; see Cohen, "Missionary Religion," 18. Also, of the many pagan sympathizers with Judaism (the so-called God-fearers in Acts and elsewhere), some probably went all the way and converted to Judaism (e.g. Acts 14:43).


29. Goodman, Mission, 3-4, 14. This may involve circumcision, religious education, socialization into a new religious community, and so forth, though evidence for a formal conversion process post-dates the Second Temple period; see Shaye J. D. Cohen, The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 236.


The absence of some theological justification for undertaking such activity—like an altruistic desire to extend salvation to non-Jews otherwise cut off from it—naturally explains the absence of evidence for it. Actually, many Jews ignored this topic entirely. They expected that only at the end of days would God (who was of course the God of all humanity, not just of Israel) decide the fate of the Gentiles.\textsuperscript{33}

I have summarized the consensus opinion of scholars of this period about a lack of interest in proselytism among late Second Temple Jews in order to highlight a stark contrast to Luke's views. This contrast is directly relevant to our study of exegesis of Isaiah's prophecy. Luke, as noted above, saw preaching to the Gentiles and the creation of communities of believing Gentiles (and sometimes Jews), as an expression of God's will as found in the words of the prophet. So important is the missionary imperative that it is the main point Jesus makes in his post-resurrection appearances.\textsuperscript{34} Faithfulness to the Bible and the missionary command at Luke 24:47 is manifest in precisely the type of activities that earlier and contemporaneous Jews shun.

4. Second Isaiah's "Light to the Nations"

Before turning to the main texts, it is necessary to introduce briefly the Isaiastic phrase "light for/to the nations/peoples" (42:6; 49:6; 51:4).\textsuperscript{35} This phrase appears in a section of the book (chs. 40–55) attributed to a prophet modern scholars call "Second Isaiah," which was likely composed in the mid-sixth century B.C.E. This was a time of optimism about return to the land of Israel following an end to exile in Babylonia.\textsuperscript{36} The original referent of the one who God has called to bring forth this light is uncertain.\textsuperscript{37} However, the emphasis is on the future creation of a just social order under the rule of Israel's God (42:1–4; 51:4). This order will be marked by dramatic changes and reversals. Most prominently, Israel's present condition of exile and powerlessness will be brought to an end (49:5). God will uphold the ancient promises to care for the beloved people (49:7; 51:2). Those scattered far from home will be gathered together again (49:5), and brought back to a land once devastated by violence but soon to be a new "Eden" (51:2).

As one would expect in any biblical prophecy, the focus is on God's covenant with Israel.\textsuperscript{38} Yet the light that goes forth will bring God's "salvation" not just to Israel but—the indirect objects of the phrase "light"—to all peoples as well (42:1–6; 49:6; 51:4–8). It is to them that the light is sent. They will recognize the greatness of God (49:7), and can expect God's aid and assistance too (42:7; 49:9–10). There are few details, for the hope is for the future and awaits fulfillment. It should be noted that there is no missionary command, and no expectation of present action or outreach on behalf of the people of Israel. Instead, we have a broad demonstration of God's concern for all humanity in the three passages.\textsuperscript{39}

We find here early stirrings of a characteristically post-exilic interest in God's relationship with and rule over the nations. This Isaiastic phrase is a rich and also usefully vague text for raising this issue of the fate of the Gentiles vis-à-vis the God of Israel.\textsuperscript{40} It is no surprise, then, that it was

\textsuperscript{32} Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 3.


\textsuperscript{34} The Hebrew varies slightly: יַעֲבֹל יָּהָּד at 42:5; יַעֲבֹל יָּהָד at 51:4. Other examples of "light" imagery are found elsewhere in Isaiah; see, e.g., 2:5; 9:2; 60:1–3.


\textsuperscript{36} Or referents (in the plural), if the passages, as seems most likely, have different people or peoples in mind (e.g., the Persian emperor Cyrus, the prophet, the people of Israel, God); see ibid., 210–12, 299–300, 328. The first two passages also refer to a "servant" (42:1; 49:3, 5, 6), hence the scholarly designation of these sections as "Servant Songs."
cited by later Jews and Christians alike, and it appears in numerous Second Temple and early Christian texts with very different interpretations. I want to turn to these next, beginning with selected passages in Luke—Acts that I believe illustrate Luke’s distinctive treatment of this phrase.40


a. Luke 2:2641

While in a very early passage Luke briefly and ambiguously refers to the sending of “light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (1:79), the Isaiah theme of the light of future salvation for the Gentiles emerges more fully a chapter later. In an important scene in Jerusalem (2:25–32), the baby Jesus is brought into the Temple by his parents so they can offer the requisite animal sacrifice after a birth. He is seen by a pious old man, Simeon, who speaks “in the spirit” upon the presentation of the boy (2:26–27). In a short speech while he holds the boy in his arms, he celebrates the salvation that Jesus, here linked directly with the light, will bring: “for my eyes have seen [God’s] salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”42 At this early scene in the narrative, in the Jerusalem Temple, no actual Gentiles are present.43 Rather, Simeon’s message is forward-looking, characteristic of the Lukan trend to introduce central themes later developed in Acts.44


41. Translations are taken from the NRSV. However, I have occasionally made small adjustments.

42. This passage has no clear parallel in the other Gospels and is undoubtedly Lukan.

43. Though Gentiles were not banned from the Temple precincts entirely (Josephus, Ant. 15.417; J.W. 5.194), it is reasonable to see that this scene takes place without any Gentiles being present.


In this passage, Luke, drawing on Isaiah’s language, sets up a sort of parallelism in the “salvation” (2:30) Jesus brings to Israel and to the nations: “light” for the nations, “glory” for Israel. His application of light imagery to the Gentiles alone is consonant with the use of the term in Isaiah. There as well, light is not applied to the Jews. This careful use of terminology preserves some of the differences in the original prophecies between the two groups. Yet in Luke there is no privileging of the promise to Israel, unlike in Isaiah, which first emphasizes Israel and then turns more briefly to the nations.45 By contrast, Simeon speaks of the hope that the coming of Christ be directed equally to all people and be relevant to all people. In his statement, the two promises stand alongside each other, with Luke perhaps even privileging the promise to the Gentiles by its occurrence in the first position.46

Luke does not quote from any of the three biblical passages exactly. Also, he adds the phrase “revelation to the Gentiles.” This hints at a more concrete content to the light imagery not present in Isaiah. For example, the biblical prophet refers to God’s “teaching” (אָדָה), though apart from one very ambiguous reference to “the coastlands [that] wait for his teaching,” the message is sent to Israel alone (42:4).47 Isaiah says that the Gentiles, while recognizing that God is both real and faithful to Israel (49:7), know God mainly through his salvific deeds on Israel’s behalf.48

By contrast, Luke’s addition of the phrase “revelation to the Gentiles” reveals an interest in a comparatively deeper religious awareness on the part of the Gentiles. He indicates something beyond a peripheral role for them in what was originally an Israel-focused futuristic scenario in Isaiah by referring to their exposure to some content (“revelation”) of the Christian message. Gentiles will not simply benefit from the (side) effects of the coming of God’s justice and salvation. Rather, they are, Luke says, fellow witnesses to the kerygmatic revelation, for it has been “prepared in the presence of all peoples” (κατὰ πρόσωπον πάντων τῶν λαῶν, 2:31). This is significant, for, as noted, there are no Gentiles present at this scene, though they will soon be eagerly committing themselves to this revelation and joining churches.49 Luke foreshadows this future “presence” or inclusion with a word used elsewhere for a literal presence.50

It is even more striking and unexpected that, though Simeon's announcement begins with references to Jews and Gentiles, his universality is immediately qualified. Simeon ominously alludes to future Jewish resistance to Christ and the message being sent to them as well as to Gentiles. Jesus is, Simeon says, a "sign that will be opposed," with many Jews "falling," presumably by not believing in the claims made about Jesus (2:34). By contrast, there is no concern about a mixed reception to the salvation in Christ offered to the Gentiles, or hint of resistance. Only the Jews are mentioned as future opponents, signifying Luke's expectation that the Gentiles will be more enthusiastic followers. This is of course a key theme for Luke, and the dominant trajectory in the narrative of Acts. Revealingly, Simeon's hope for the Gentiles' acceptance is not consistently confirmed by later events in Acts; Jews but also Gentiles resist Christian preaching. However, Luke does not foreshadow this challenge. Rather, he presents, at this early stage, an unqualified hope for the inclusion of the Gentiles when interpreting Isaiah's prophecy.

b. Acts 1:8
There are hints in Luke's Gospel about the call of the Gentiles, and Christ gives an explicit missionary command after his resurrection at the very end of the volume (24:47). However, only in Acts are there practical steps taken to bring Gentiles into the churches. Clear support for this comes early, in a statement by Jesus quoting Isa 49:6 ("I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth"). At Acts 1:8, the resurrected Christ replies to a question about the fate of Israel at the end of days by offering a bold endorsement of a Gentile mission in Isaiah language: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Christ, discouraging eschatological speculation, instead sets forth a future, open-ended hope for a universal mission by his followers, beginning in Israel but expanding to all places and, by extension, all people. In this scenario, the followers implicitly are given the role of Israel's servant, and likewise charged with a similar task: bringing forth the "light."

52. E.g., Acts 14:5.

Luke appropriates Isaiah's prophecy of a "light to the nations" that brings forth "salvation" (49:6) for his Christological and missiological interpretation. That is, Luke is filling in some of the ambiguities of the Isaiahian prophecy by making Christ the center of the proclamation ("my witnesses") and suggesting that his followers are the light in their role as "witnesses." It is to Christ that missionaries will give testimony. In comparison to Isaiah, who is vague regarding the content of the salvation, Luke later repeatedly spells out in detail the many benefits to those who come to believe in Jesus.

It is important to note the centrifugal pattern described in 1:8, for this fits the narrative trajectory of Acts, away from the land of Israel and the (disbelieving) Jews and toward the (believing) Gentiles. Luke does not portray a linear or entirely consistent development, but the overall trend in the book is clear. Even though Jews will continue to play a prominent role in the narrative (Paul preaches to them again and again, up to the last scene), the salvation of the Gentiles is the dominant theological trend. They are not tangential to the divine plan or an only occasional focus, as they are in Isaiah. The Gentile conversions are not sporadic or limited. Luke in Acts first describes the conversions of a few individuals, but starting at 11:19–26 and increasingly afterward he describes groups of Gentiles being brought to faith in Christ and joining or founding churches scattered throughout the Eastern Mediterranean.

c. Acts 13:47
We turn next to Paul's visit to Pisidian Antioch (13:13–51). This is a section containing a noteworthy reinterpretation/reapplication of Isaiah's prophecy at 13:47 that shifts its meaning from future, unfulfilled promise to present, fulfilled reality. Because of its length, careful construction, and prominence in the narrative, this section is "of special importance" to

55. These include, for example, salvation (Acts 2:21; 4:12; 11:14; 13:26, 47; 16:17, 30–31; 28:28) and forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 5:31; 8:22; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18); see further Wilson, Gentiles, 57–87; Fitzmyer, Acts, 66–67.
56. Wilson, Gentiles, 93, 123–24.
57. For example, the meeting in Acts 15 is entirely devoted to the terms for their inclusion. Paul, the great hero of Acts, is above all charged with teaching to the Gentiles, and celebrates his successes among them (21:19; 22:21).
58. In 11:28, the converts are called "Hellenists," a word that elsewhere refers to Jews (e.g., 6:1), but here, when used in contrast to Jews, it clearly refers to Gentiles. As noted above, this is the first usage of the term "church" (11:26) to refer to a local community of believers, a harbinger of dramatic changes to come (cf. 5:11; 8:1; 9:31; 11:22, where "church" has different meanings).
understanding the missionary pattern of Acts, especially the practice of preaching to the Jews first.64 These verses, recounting Paul’s two synagogue visits, can be seen as a sort of sustained introduction to his remarkable career. Luke narrates his activities and quotes his speeches. In this setting, Paul naturally offers an Israel-centric message. He reviews past examples of God’s kindness to the chosen people in order to demonstrate that the messiah Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises. He then offers an unexpected rebuke, warning the Jewish listeners against disbelief even before they have had a chance to respond. However, his sense of foreboding is well-founded, for some Jews reject the message, and even try to assault him.65

At the climactic moment of his second speech, after facing some Jewish opposition, Paul quotes Isaiah’s prophecy at 49:6: “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you [Jews]. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying [Isaiah], “I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth”’” (13:46–47).66 Note that Paul offers no biblical warrant for beginning with the Jews, the first point he makes. Following his review of God’s goodness to Israel, this presumably was obvious.67 Rather, Isaiah’s quote furnishes a justification for the less obvious aspect of his work, a mission to the Gentiles, the implied referents of those at “the end of the earth.” Importantly, Gentiles are present in Antioch and even hear his speeches (13:16; 26), though they are less visible. Unlike the Jews, they respond positively: “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers” (13:48).68

This may seem unexpected, for Gentiles are largely tangential to the bulk of this section. For example, in his first sermon Paul reviews the history of Israel; the few mentions of the opportunity for all to be saved through belief in Christ are brief and undeveloped (13:26; 39). Nonetheless, the hint about salvation for “everyone who believes” (13:39) is key because it demonstrates the relevance of the message about Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles.69 This makes it possible for Luke to elevate the Gentiles to a dominant theological role in this section. God had always intended that they hear the Gospel and their positive response is immensely significant.

Though Gentiles start out as silent visitors to a Jewish synagogue, the changes are rapid and consequential. Even before Paul leaves, many Gentiles separate from the hostile Jewish community and become “believers” (εὐπριότυπος, 13:48). This is an important term used elsewhere in Acts for those who are members of Christian churches.67 In Pisidian Antioch, it designates an emerging group of the faithful who are endowed with spiritual rewards upon their initiation. The promise of eternal life is something Gentiles can be assured of now, through membership in the Christian community, for they had been “destined” for it already (13:48; cf. 13:46). These benefits of salvation are not simply deferred to a later date, or even the end of days.

Isaiah’s phrase therefore furnishes a powerful link between the ancient prophecy and the Gentiles’ positive response.68 For the first time, Luke departs from the originally future-oriented message found both in Isaiah and even earlier in Luke—Acts, as shown above. In this scene, the prophecy of a shared message of “salvation” going forth to all people is no longer a distant hope but a present reality. It even offers guidance for the direction of Paul’s current mission. This application of the prophecy to his missionary activity among Gentiles resembles the commission in 1:8. However, it is immediate and, in the able hands of Paul (now cast as the Isaian servant: “I have set you”), sure to find success in his subsequent travels.

d. Acts 26:18, 23

Paul, in prison in Caesarea because “the Jews” convinced the Roman authorities to arrest him, is given a chance to defend himself before king Agrippa (26:2–32). While Luke makes clear that Paul has done nothing to deserve punishment, the lengthy speech Paul gives is largely tangential


60. In fact, Jews’ responses are mixed. Some, for example, seem eager to hear more (13:43), a nuance lost in 13:46; see the next paragraph. Despite Paul’s threat to turn from the Jews, he continues to preach to them (e.g. 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8).


64. Similar statements were made earlier when Jews were present; see, e.g., Acts 2:21, 39; cf. 10:43.


to the charges.67 Instead, Paul reviews his call by Jesus to preach to the Gentiles and his subsequent missionary activity. In a speech before this Jewish king, it is perhaps appropriate that he focuses on religious themes. However, the near-exclusive interest in biblical and Jewish themes of messianism, resurrection, and the salvation of all peoples reveals Luke’s primary purpose: to justify the Gentile mission as the will of God and the fulfillment of prophecy, despite Jewish doubt and opposition.68 The secular, judicial context of the speech is largely ignored, as Paul instead offers biblical quotations, kerygmatic statements, and exhortations to each hearer (even Agrippa, who sits in judgment) to “become a Christian” (26:28).

Isaiah’s prophecies, as reinterpreted by Luke, again provide vital support to the Gentile mission, which has emerged as the work’s dominant theme and Paul’s main responsibility and accomplishment. In his speech, Paul reports to Agrippa about his call years earlier on the road to Damascus, when Jesus unexpectedly spoke to him and presented him with a momentous task: “I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you—to open [the Gentiles’] eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (26:17–18). This recalls the statement in Isa 42:6–7, that the servant is to be “a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,” while drawing on traditional Jewish ideas about transformation and spiritual rewards.69 Luke applies the role to Paul, casting him, once again, as the appointed servant. He is to be the agent of this transformation, sharing the message and, most importantly, bringing Gentiles into the community of believers.70 The transfer language—“from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God”—supports the identification of Gentiles (as former idolaters) as the likely audience.71 By setting out this ambitious goal, the statement maps out a missionary strategy. Now no longer a persecutor of Jesus, Paul will reorient his life to carry out this demand. He personally takes on this responsibility of sharing this “enlightening” message with the Gentiles in particular.

A few verses later Paul returns to Isaiah’s prophecy, investing it with a kerygmatic sense reminiscent of similar statements. Boldly, he says, “I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:22–23).72 It is not clear if Luke has a specific biblical verse in mind, for Paul’s quotation does not reproduce exactly any phrase from the Septuagint, but generally reflects the idea of a “light to the nations” in Isa 42:6; 49:6; and 51:4. However, the vagueness of Isaiah’s “light” motif is useful, for Luke invests it with a distinctly christological meaning. He links it to the image of a suffering messiah whose experience is universally relevant to all people. That is, the content of the “light” is none other than Jesus himself, in whom all are to have “faith” (26:18). While believers are also expected to reform their lives (to “do deeds consistent with repentance” [26:20]), the emphasis is on coming to right belief about Jesus as the resurrected messiah announced long ago.

Here as well, the practical implications of the citation should not be missed. Alongside the kerygmatic message in 26:22–23 is Luke’s support for a missionary strategy of preaching to Jews and Gentiles. This reflects the idea that the salvation promised in Isaiah is intended in some vague way for members of both groups, albeit primarily for Israel, so that Paul commits himself to bring to all (“to our people and to the Gentiles”) the message of Jesus. Jews are not exempt. This diverges from the first citation in this section (26:17), discussed just above, that also draws on Isaiah, but most probably only to endorse only a Gentile-alone mission. That is, Jesus, in this earlier statement, wants to elide any mention of a mission to the Jews. Yet in the latter citation, 26:23, Paul insists that Jews and Gentiles must both hear the Gospel. This discloses an ambiguity about preaching to the Jews. However, this inconsistency between the two mission fields is predictable, for, as noted, Luke is convinced that Jews must hear the Gospel, but also knows that few will be convinced.

67. This is not to deny that Luke is concerned about how this new religious movement appears to the Roman authorities. He downplays any hints of resistance to Rome; statements questioning Paul’s guilt under Roman law are made by Paul himself (26:6) and by Agrippa (26:31–32), and appear also in Luke’s editorial comments (25:7).
69. Jesus’ statement also alludes to other passages in Isaiah (e.g. 52:14; 42:16).
70. Also, the relative clause in the phrase “from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you” (εἰς τοὺς λαοὺς καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἐθνοὺς ὑπὲρ οὓς ἔστω ἄνωτερος αὐτοῦ) uses the plural form ἕως ὑπὲρ which fits with the plural form of “Gentiles,” suggesting that it is to them that Paul is sent, and probably preceding “your people” (in the singular), that is, the Jews. (The possessive “your people,” while not present in the Greek, is implied and added by most translators.) Less likely, it is possible grammatically that the latter could be included in the phrase “to whom.” For support of this focus on Gentiles, see Haenchen, Acts, 666; Wilson, Gentiles, 168. However, see Tannehill, Acts, 119.
71. For similar ideas about Gentiles’ being in “darkness” before coming to believe in Christ, see Luke 1:79; Eph 5:8–11; Col 1:3.
The Jews cannot be ignored; neither can their lackluster response be denied. This constitutes an "unresolved problem" for Luke, and can be glimpsed here in the two ways that Isaiah's phrase is applied.

As in Acts 13, Luke's allusions to Isaiah's prophecy reveal his interest in reapplying what was originally a future hope to a present reality. Hopes for the salvation of the nations are now linked with events already taking place. In Paul's recounting of his past vision to Agrippa, Jesus' charge naturally pointed toward Paul's future responsibilities among the Gentiles. The demand was for Paul to try to convince them about Jesus. Yet in the context of this speech in Caesarea, as Paul looks back later on his experience on the road to Damascus, this mission of course already has achieved significant momentum. Through Paul's work and that of others, these efforts began and are still ongoing, so that Paul's retelling of the epiphany should be seen in the context of his current missionary strategy. Though Paul is not boastful, it is clear that this commission has come true. Even when Paul faced violent opposition from some Jews, with God's support the prophetic word has not failed.

Though this scene contains no conversions of Gentiles, Luke's terminology signals the immediate and practical implications of Isaiah's prophecy, the inclusion of Gentiles in Christian churches. The "place" (ἀναπάντησις) promised to those who believe in Jesus (26:18) is not an abstract notion of inclusion, but more specifically refers to membership in the faith community. Luke uses the term with a similar meaning elsewhere. It also recalls earlier usages in biblical and Jewish literature. The "turn" (ἀνακολοθίαν) in the same verse, and also in 26:20, likewise fits with Luke's descriptions elsewhere. Though it sometimes is used for repentance by Jews, as the mission throughout the Empire progresses it refers to Gentiles' converting and entering churches. The word still retains a sense of individual, spiritual transformation—believers "should repent and turn to God" (26:20)—but it should not be limited to an internal process of change alone. Rather, it suggests an actual influx of new converts and the formation of new communities of believers as a result of Paul's preaching. The assumption by this point of the narrative is that these changes have begun to occur, and on a larger scale than the scattered conversions early in Acts. In these remarkable events the reader would see Luke's claim that Isaiah's prophecy has been confirmed.

6. Late Second Temple Jewish Texts

Isaiah's prophecy appears numerous times in late Second Temple Jewish texts. Just as Jews' views of the Gentiles (e.g. regarding their morality, their ultimate fate, etc.) vary widely, interpretations of the phrase "light to the nations" also vary widely. However, there is agreement on one key issue: it is not cited as support for efforts to convert them to Judaism. On this there is no diversity in the sources. Martin Goodman summarizes this viewpoint as unanimous, writing, "I know of no Jewish text that interpreted the passage [Isa 49:6] in this way," that is, as an exhortation to seek proselytes. At most, some later Jews with favorable views of the

75. Paul's conviction that he is "saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place" employs the present participle (ὁλόκληρον ἐπιστρέφων) with the sense of assurance or certainty (26:22).
76. For example, Judas "was numbered among us and was allotted his share (ἄντικα) in this ministry," at Acts 1:17.
77. In addition to the common meaning of "lot," the Septuagint uses the word for an "inheritance" of the land of Israel (e.g. Josh 14:14) and for membership in the community of "the children of God" (Wis 5:5). It is also used for the faithful at Qumran (e.g. 1QS 2:5; see Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, Frank Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, ed., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (4th ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 435a; Fitzmyer, Acts, 760.
78. A "turn" by the Gentiles occurs in the section on Syrian Antioch, the city of the first great missionary success among Gentiles (11:21), and in Lystra (14:15). The term is also used in the discussion about the requirements for Gentiles who want to join churches (15:19). The term does not always refer to conversion in the present, though I believe it does here; see Fredriksen, "Judaism," 548.
80. Translations of passages from the Septuagint are from the NRSV (when available) or my own. Translations of texts from the Pseudepigrapha are taken from OTP. However, I have occasionally made small adjustments.
81. In general, see Donaldson, Judaism and the Gentiles.
82. Goodman, Mission, 142. To be precise, Goodman says he does not know of any parallels to the Jew Trypho's statement, in Justin's Dialogue with Trypho 121–22, that the phrase refers to a Gentile mission. Also, though Goodman refers to 496, this
Gentiles expect that it will be in the future when salvation will come to the nations. While a complete review of all appearances of the phrase is impossible here, I have selected a representative sample in order to demonstrate the consistency of this position. These texts include both translations of Isaiah and quotations or allusions to phrases from the relevant verses. A comparative approach makes clear the wide gap in missionary motivation between these views in late Second Temple Jewish texts and in Luke–Acts.

a. Septuagint Isaiah
The Septuagint's translation (better, interpretation) of Isaiah is complex. For our verses it evinces a favorable attitude toward the Gentiles in the future, without any interest in converting them. The rendering of the “light to the nations” phrase is straightforward in all three places, preserving the focus on the Gentiles' salvation in the future found in the Hebrew text. Interestingly, in a few key places the Septuagint ratchets up hopes for the Gentiles by presenting phrases that were vague or Israel-focussed in the Hebrew with an explicit focus on the Gentiles.

For example, the Hebrew of Isa 42:4, usually translated “the coastlands wait for his teaching/Torah” (יַחֲוַת הָעַמִּים), is in Greek rendered “in his [God's] name shall the Gentiles trust/hope” (διὰ τοῦ ὄνοματός αὐτοῦ). This not only clears up the murkiness of the Hebrew original but more directly links the Gentiles to the salvation offered by Israel's God. Similarly, in the Hebrew of Isa 49:8 the servant is sent to establish a “covenant to/of the people” (𬀩 נַעֲבוֹ), in which “people” likely has a singular meaning, referring to Israel. In the Greek, however, the covenant is to the “peoples” (ὅσιοι), using the plural to refer to the Gentile nations. This formulation leaves no ambiguity about who have been so designated. Also, the Septuagint of Isa 51:4, a passage that in the Hebrew focused on Israel alone, is expanded to include the Gentiles as well. The demand to listen to God's teaching was originally addressed to Israel in the Hebrew. Both addressees of the first half of the verse were the same:

"Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation (לְאָדָמִים)," which is a type of repetition common in biblical parallelism. In the Septuagint, the second phrase no longer issues a demand to “my nation” (i.e. Israel) but rather to the “peoples” (ὥσιοι). They stand for the Gentile leaders and by extension the nations generally. Just like Israel, they are asked to listen to God as his salvation goes forth like a “light.”

In these examples, trends present in the Hebrew text foreshadowing God's blessings on the nations are emphasized, but there is no redefinition of Israel's role vis-à-vis the Gentiles. The eschatological nature of the Gentiles' ingathering remains unchanged.

b. Tobit 13:11
The Septuagint text Tobit (from the third or second century B.C.E.) draws on prominent themes in Second Isaiah. In chs. 13–14, the hero Tobit, supposedly living in exile following the eighth-century B.C.E. deportation of Israelites from the Northern Kingdom (1:2), speaks of the time when Israel will return and all peoples will recognize God's greatness. His two speeches in these chapters in particular resemble statements of Isaiah, evincing hopefulness like that found in LXX Isaiah (above) regarding the salvation of the Gentiles. The context of these chapters is a future, not present, expectation, that all people will cast aside their idols and praise God's greatness and majesty (13:9–10).

Then, referring to Isa 49:6, he says, “A bright light will shine to all the ends of the earth; many nations will come to you [i.e. to God in Jerusalem], from far away” (13:11). This merges pilgrimage-tradition imagery of the nations coming up to Jerusalem (along with exiled Jews) with words taken from Isaiah's prophecy. The Isaian "light," sent forth by God, will somehow make known to them God's greatness and prompt them to want to worship him at the holy city. There is no role for Israel in this process. We might have expected otherwise, for a few verses earlier Tobit emphasized that Israel lives in exile among the very people who are later to turn to God: “he has scattered you [i.e. Israel] among them [i.e.

86. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Tobit (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 50–54. The manuscript tradition is complex; I follow his numbering of the verses.
87. It is possible to identify references to other parts of Isaiah as well in this verse (e.g. 60:1–5). This line is not in all manuscripts; see ibid., 313.
the nations]" (13:3). Yet the Gentiles will receive no guidance from the people of Israel. This vision of the Gentiles’ eschatological participation in Israel’s salvation through the agency of the mysterious “light” therefore has no direct implications for Israel in the present or in the future.

c. Testament of Levi 14:4
A passage from the Pseudepiprogenal Testament of Levi (probably from the second or first century B.C.E.)

91. Cf. b. Peah, 87b.
92. Donaldson and Fredrikson correctly demonstrate that the author in these two chapters envisions not conversion to Judaism (through circumcision, Torah observance, etc.) but simply a turn from false gods to the one true God; see also Fredrikson, “Judaism,” 545; Donaldson, Judaism and the Gentiles, 42–45.
93. Likely date and provenance is discussed in OTP, 1:777–78.
94. One manuscript (Bodleian) inserts the phrase “to the nations”; see ibid., 793.
97. This is the conclusion of a typical prophetic exhortation, focused on Israel and its faithfulness to the Torah, without any practical implications for Jews’ outreach toward Gentiles.

through conversion and observance of the Torah, and the vagueness of this passage, caution against reading this text as a demand that Gentiles be saved through some type of conversion followed by Torah observance.

Furthermore, the text is ambiguous about the timing of the demand. The chapter begins with Levi’s reference to “the writings of Enoch” about the end of days (14:1). This gives his message an eschatological context. He then moves to his insistence in the quoted verses that Israel be faithful to the Law, for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of the nations. This may refer to the present, though scholars generally place this in the future. However, with regard to proselytism, there seems to be no indication that Jews are actually to preach to Gentiles, let alone strive to bring them into their community. This passage at most seems to reflect an abstract conviction: Israel’s behavior has implications for all humanity, and God’s commandments, if humanity observed them, would benefit everyone. The high standard set here reflects this conviction and links with a common hope that not only Israel but the entire world may one day be saved. Yet there is no encouragement to do anything to bring about this. Most likely, the author’s expectation is in line with that seen elsewhere, that the changes will occur at the end of days, and that Israel has no responsibility for actual missionary outreach. Levi’s warning against disobedience to the Law is a typical prophetic exhortation, focused on Israel and its faithfulness to the Torah, without any practical implications for Jews’ outreach toward Gentiles.

d. Wisdom of Solomon 18:4
Another text that draws on Isaiah in seemingly similar ways is Wis. 18:4 (probably first century B.C.E.). This verse, in a section (17:2–18:4) retelling the story of Exodus, contrasts God’s harsh punishment of the Egyptians (in this case, with the plague of darkness) to God’s kindness to Israel. While their enemies were blinded, Israel was able to see, for God “provided a pillar of fire as a guide” (18:3). This image of light is then transferred to another context. The next verse begins with a literal
The most favorable reading to the Gentiles is to see this as reflecting a genuine desire that they somehow profit from the Law that Israel possesses. They are not expected to take on observance of the detailed commandments and join the Jewish community. Rather, the Law’s relevance to the Gentiles is generic, reflecting the author’s confidence in the Jews’ “possession of the light of truth.” Gentiles, once somehow exposed to Israel and their Torah, might then turn from their idolatrous ways. This is the most common expectation in late Second Temple Jewish literature, though, as elsewhere, it is likely that the Gentiles were expected to take the initiative themselves. This is not Israel’s task.

On the other hand, a more pessimistic explanation is possible as well. In a section that is very critical of the Egyptians (and in a book often critical of Gentiles generally), the author hints at his sense that such hopes were fanciful and unrealistic. This is not the fault of the Torah, for it is “imperishable” and “divine” (18:3). Rather, the nations are murderous and impious. One should not expect that they would respond positively. The phrase “the light of the Law was to be given (יוֹםָלַאֲנָא ... דִּיצֶנִיטָנָא) to the world” may suggest past intention that is unfulfilled. That is, God wanted all to learn from the Torah, but this will not come to pass. By sandwiching this “hope” between stark reminders of Egyptian maleficence (e.g. imprisoning children, killing infants [18:4–5]), the author may say more about the greatness of the Law in general than about any possibility that the nations will learn from it. Though drawing upon Isaiah’s imagery, the author, according to this interpretation, shares none of his hopefulness. Needless to say, this interpretation offers even less support than the previous one for a missionary motivation.

1. 1 Enoch 48:4

This verse, from the section of 1 Enoch (second century B.C.E.–first century C.E.) known as the Similitudes or Parables (chs. 37–71), is found in a chapter replete with references to the book of Isaiah. The author, focusing here on the coming of the pre-existent, messianic Son of Man, links this eschatological figure with the servant of Isaiah’s prophecies. For example, the naming of the Son of Man before creation in 1 En. 48:3 recalls the naming of the servant in Isa 49:1. The worship offered to the Son of Man by those who fall down before him in 48:5 recalls the “princes” who shall “prostrate themselves” in Isa 49:7. The same is true for Isaiah’s “light” imagery. “He Son of Man, the author of 1 Enoch writes in 48:4, will “become a staff for the righteous ones in order that they may lean on him and not fall. He is the light of the Gentiles and he will be the hope of those who are sick in their hearts.” While there is some murkiness regarding the identity of the one(s) who brings(s) forth “light to the nations” in the Hebrew of Isa 42:6/49:6/51:4, here the author of 1 Enoch directly applies Isaiah’s phrase to the expected redeemer. Second Isaiah’s vague phrase, perhaps originally associated with the people of Israel generally or the prophet himself, is reapplied to a superhuman agent of God. After a long period of concealment, he will appear on earth to inaugurate a reversal of present injust conditions, benefiting both Jew and Gentile (50:1–5). His activity, the author writes, is foretold in Isaiah’s prophecy.

The author’s primary concern of course is Israel. They are the “righteous” and “elect” ones who have faced persecution and perhaps martyrdom (47:1, 4; 48:4–9, using traditional language of chosenness). Their

99. The Greek does not exactly replicate the Septuagint of Isaiah.
100. McKnight, Light, 37; Ware, Mission, 124–27.
101. The quote is from McKnight, Light, 103.
102. Donaldson, Judaism and the Gentiles, 512.
103. E.g. Wis. 13:1: “For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature.” On the author’s antagonism to Gentile culture, see Barclay, Mediterranean Diaspora, 184.
104. On this use of the paraphrastic form, see Herbert Weir Smyth, Greek Grammar (rev. ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 437. 105. The date of this composite work, like much else, has prompted intense scholarly debate; see the discussion in OTP, 1:6–4. For a late dating of chs. 37–71, see E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 348. Even its language of composition is unknown. While extant only in Ethiopic, this presumably was not its original language.
deliverance is eagerly awaited; no longer will they be mistreated by "sinners" (50:2). Yet the Son of Man's arrival also bodes well for some of the Gentiles. Apart from the grievously sinful, they need not fear the divine judgment. That is, the coming of the Son of Man does not spell doom for all but the members of the author's group, or even for all but the Jews. Most Gentiles seem to be included in this vision. Not only are they the counterparts of the "righteous" who benefit from the arrival of the Son of Man in 48:4, but the thankful praise offered him at his arrival by "[a]ll those who dwell upon the earth" in 48:5 must include both Jews and Gentiles.108

Importantly for our purposes, this scenario regarding the Son of Man as "light of the Gentiles" is an eschatological vision, without any implications for missionary conduct.109 While this section offers an inclusive view of salvation at the end of days, it does not alter relations between Jews and Gentiles in the present or future. Isaiah's phrase is not linked with any missionary command, and there is no exhortation that all Jews should aspire to convert the Gentiles. The Son of Man will somehow help righteous Gentiles at the end of days. However, if they come to know God, they will do so not as Jews but as non-Jews, for there is nothing about Torah observance or conversion to Judaism. As if to minimize any actual responsibility for the people of Israel or even the Son of Man for the Gentiles, the author casts the even the Son of Man's role in largely passive terms. While ambiguity about the referent of Isaiah's "light" is dispelled (i.e. it is the Son of Man), ambiguity about his responsibilities is not (i.e. what does it mean to "become the hope of those who are sick in their hearts"?). The intense focus on the glorious Son of Man seems to reveal, at the core, indifference to the Gentiles. By emphasizing their recognition of his greatness and the benefits they will receive at his arrival, without saying much about what if anything he accomplishes or is expected to do, the author simply identifies yet one more reason to revere him. The Gentiles are peripheral at best to this Israel-centric vision.

107. Bad leadership, economic injustice, and hostility to the one God are singled out (46:7, 48:8, 10).

### 7. Conclusion

The prominence of eschatological interpretations of Isaiah's phrase in these late Second Temple texts fits well with a widespread, well-documented lack of interest in the conversion of the Gentiles in other Jewish texts. By largely situating Isaiah's prophecy in the future, the authors reflect their indifference toward the inclusion of Gentiles in Jewish communities. Some also maintain vague future hopes for the Gentiles, again without immediate conversion. On the other hand, Luke has composed a narrative of two periods in the past, of Jesus and of the early Church, and frequently draws on biblical prophecies to explain events that have already occurred. Above all, these include the conversion of Gentile believers to faith in Christ and their incorporation into churches. Isaiah's phrase is one of many used in his two-volume work this way. Yet when comparing these sources, we should not overlook the different genres and chronological periods covered by them. Luke's historical-style narrative (of course, one heavily influenced by his theological convictions), for example, can be easily contrasted to the futuristic vision of 1 En. 37–71, in which the author interprets many prophecies eschatologically.

However, the different interpretations of Isaiah can be explained by reference to more than simply different genres and foci. Luke's decision to apply Isaiah's phrase to events in the early church reveals a profoundly different attitude from many Jews' vague hopes for the Gentiles. This reflects his experiences and theological views about the Christian kerygma. By his time, likely late in the first century, the Jesus movement, which began as a reform movement entirely within Judaism, has undergone major changes. It was increasingly separate from and self-consciously at odds with non-Christian Judaism.111 By then, most churches were largely or exclusively composed of Gentiles.112 This was a stunning development, for, as noted above, in the first decades after Jesus

the (non-Torah-observant) Gentile mission prompted both resistance and surprise. Yet the influx of Gentiles continued, a source of consternation for some and celebration for Luke and others like him. The reasons for this demographic shift are complex, but by Luke’s day the trajectory was clear.

By interpreting Isaiah in terms of past and present fulfillment, Luke draws on biblical prophecy to suit the pressing needs of his own community, above all to legitimate its present composition and likely expansion. He is not the only ancient Jew or Christian to do this. Many others believed that earlier sacred texts were relevant to—indeed, written for—them in their present. They solved current conflicts, answered pressing questions, and above all explained how things got to where they were (and why this reflects God’s will). The contrasting approaches to Isaiah’s “light to the nations” phrase reveal these starkly different underlying contexts. There was nothing remotely like the influx of Gentiles in these Jewish communities to which Isaiah’s prophecy might be applied. Widespread indifference to Gentile conversion in the present, along with a desire to maintain traditional, stable boundaries between Gentiles and Torah-observant Jews, obviated the need to turn to Isaiah, or other possible passages. Luke, who witnessed remarkable, dynamic changes in the early Christian world, naturally turned to this powerful image from Isaiah to explain them.


114. See Barclay, Mediterranean Diaspora, 399–444.