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Acts 4:12 and its First Century Setting

Helen K Bond

'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved'

Introduction

The New Testament is full of problematic passages; passages which, at face value, seem pointlessly restrictive or even morally dubious in our modern world. Paul, for example, advises the Corinthian Christians to remain single as he himself is single (1Cor 7.8) – yet few Christians feel obliged to follow the apostle's advice today. The author of 1 Timothy announces that women are to be saved through childbirth (1Tim 2.15) - a view which, if pressed, would cause childless women a great amount of hurt and anxiety. And Matthew has the entire Jewish people declare to Pilate: His blood be on us and on our children (Mt 27.25) - a verse which has been taken all too literally over the years, with devastating consequences for generations of Jews. What do we do with passages like these? How do we make sense of verses which seem to go against everything which just, fair-minded, and neighbour-loving people hold dear?

The best way to make sense of difficult passages, I believe, is to read them in *context*. In an age when very few people sit down and read biblical books from cover to cover, verses of scripture are all too often quoted out of context. In this way, the meaning intended by the original author and understood by the original readers is all too easily lost. By reading problematic passages in context, we can keep a sense of the larger picture; we can see the real issues and avoid being bogged down by cultural and historical expressions.

So, to return to my earlier examples, Paul urges the Corinthians not to marry because he thinks the end of the age is about to dawn. In the midst of the world-shaking events associated with the imminent parousia, there was clearly little point in settling down in marriage. Today, of course, we know that the parousia did not come quite as soon as Paul had anticipated, and it is reasonable to interpret his words on marriage in a less restrictive manner. Paul didn't have a problem with marriage; he was rather so fixed on the parousia that all human institutions faded into insignificance. The author of 1 Timothy knew that there would be a wait before Christ's second coming. His concern was with how Christianity appeared to outsiders, and his words to women need to be interpreted as part of an attempt to make the new faith look respectable in the Roman world. And the incriminating words – which Matthew alone puts into the mouths of the Jewish people – have to be seen against the background of the intense hostility between some Christian churches and local synagogues at the end of the first century. The anti-Jewish tone of parts of Matthew's gospel is not to be seen as an essential element in the Jesus movement itself, but as an unfortunate reflection of the late first century historical situation.

The important point in all these cases is that we appreciate the context of a difficult passage. Its only when we've grasped its context that we can interpret a passage in a more informed way, and can begin to question the extent to which we should be guided by it today.

Acts 4.12 is another of these difficult passages. The verse comes early on in the book of Acts. The disciples Peter and John heal a lame man (3.1-10) and are preaching to the assembled crowds when they are arrested by a group of Sadducees (4.1-3). The next day, the disciples are hauled in front of the Jewish council, or Sanhedrin, and asked by what power or name they have healed the lame man (v.7)[1]. Peter takes centre stage and, full of the Holy Spirit, declares that the man has been healed 'by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead . . . This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner' (vv.10-11). And, in a rousing conclusion to his speech, Peter declares:

'And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.' (Acts 4.12)

It is this last statement that this paper will be concerned with. Taken on its own, the verse smacks of fundamentalism, Christian imperialism, and an intolerance of other faiths which can be embarrassing to modern Christians. James Dunn, in his commentary on Acts, suggests that Luke was carried away with a 'flush of enthusiastic triumphalism'[2], while Ben Witherington remarks more sombrely that Luke is 'No advocate of modern religious pluralism'[3]. But what is the text actually saying? What is the real issue as far as the author was concerned? Does he really want to imply that people who have never heard of Jesus have no chance of any kind of salvation (as many interpreters over the centuries have supposed)? Again, as with the passages with which I opened this discussion, I think the best way to make sense of Acts 4.12 is to try to understand it in its context. It is only once we have established what was at stake for Luke that we can see the application of the verse to our own day.

I want to focus on three contexts which shed some light on this passage. (1) The first is the most general and is the context imposed on the passage by its genre. The next two are more specific: (2) the context of salvation history, and (3) the context of the Gentile mission. I'll go through each of these in turn, indicating how I think they help us to make sense of our passage.

Genre

The genre of a text is crucially important. It is only by understanding what kind of text we are dealing with that we can begin to understand what a particular passage means. So, what kind of writing is the Acts of the Apostles?

We know that it forms the second part of a two-volume work. The gospel traces the spread of Christianity to the holy city of the Jews - Jerusalem - while Acts traces the good news to the heart of the Roman Empire - the city of Rome. The two volumes have occasionally been

categorised as biographies, novels, or Hellenistic romances, but the vast majority of modern scholars regard them as some kind of history. Like other Hellenistic historians, Luke prefaces his account with a prologue, shows an interest in causation and the sequence of events, includes a series of journeys (which were all the rage in first century histories), and connects events in the history of the Christian movement with events on the larger world stage.

But we should be extremely wary of concluding from this that Luke's is an objective, dispassionate history of the early church. Far from it! It would be more accurate to refer to his work as 'apologetic history'. The two volumes are full of rhetoric, irony, hyperbole, and Luke is extremely selective in what he chooses to report. It is clear that he writes his particular version of the beginnings of Christianity with two purposes in mind. First, to reassure believers that whatever difficulties they may have to endure, God will keep his promises to them. And second, to present the new faith to outsiders as no threat to Roman law and order, but rather as 'enlightened, harmless, even beneficial'[4].

How, then, does an appreciation of genre help us to understand our passage? I think there are two things worth noting. (1) The first is fairly obvious. We need to recognise that Luke's narrative is not a neutral record, but a highly rhetorical, persuasive text. If you are writing to reassure insiders, and possibly to convert outsiders, you don't say that there are a range of ways of finding God – you stress the overriding importance of your own. (2) The second point is more subtle. Our passage comes in the context of a speech, and it was in their speeches that ancient historians really went to town. Speeches were not so much what a person *actually* said as what the historian thought he (or occasionally she) *should* have said. Speeches nearly always reflected the outlook of the author and the general themes of the work as a whole. Luke followed this convention and crafted the speeches himself (this is why all the characters tend to speak in the same way). Its not impossible that he drew on historical traditions and even some eye-witness testimony, but the speeches as we have them now reflect Luke's own theology and interests. This means that what we are dealing with

here in Acts 4.12 is not an historical record of what Peter said to the Jewish council, but a reflection of Luke's own theology. And it is to one important aspect of Luke's theology now that I want to turn.

Context of salvation history

Luke-Acts was almost certainly written for a gentile audience. Acts ends with Paul preaching openly in Rome, declaring that the 'salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles' and 'they will listen' (28.28). Throughout the book, Gentiles are always presented in a positive light, and Luke is particularly interested in the Gentile mission. It is quite possible that Luke was himself a Gentile, perhaps the only Gentile writer in the NT. Yet despite this Gentile background, it is clear that both Luke and the majority of his readers had a profound knowledge of and respect for the Jewish scriptures. And this would have caused him some difficulty. Luke knew that God's promises had been made to Israel, but he also knew that those promises were now coming to fruition amongst the Gentiles. But what did this say about the God of Israel? Had he abandoned the Jews? Had he failed them? Could he be trusted in his dealings with Gentiles?

One of Luke's major purposes in his two-volume work was to reassure his readers that God had kept his promises to Israel, but Israel had not responded. Only then were God's promises offered to Gentiles who could now regard themselves as the new Israel. He presented his case as a history – a history of salvation – which showed how the promises to Israel had come to be fulfilled amongst Gentiles. He presents his work, above all else, as a continuation of biblical history, the last chapter of the Jewish scriptures.

I'd like to spend a moment or two looking at how Luke does this. The gospel opens with the coming of the promised Messiah to Israel. And, at first, the Jewish people respond positively to Jesus who is presented as a pious, law-abiding Jew. Opposition to Jesus comes from the chief priests and rulers who arrest Jesus and engineer his death. But Jesus' followers live on and the opening chapters of Acts present an idealised picture of the Jewish-Christian community. Based in the holy city of

Jerusalem, they visit the Temple regularly and keep the Jewish law. Luke shows his readers in the clearest terms possible that God has kept his promises to Israel – the early Jewish-Christian community are living proof of that.

But everything is about to change as opposition raises its head once more. First of all it comes from the chief priests and rulers, but then, as the story unfolds, resistance spreads to other sections of Jewish society. After the conversion of Cornelius in chapter 10, the word 'Jews' is increasingly used of those who reject the gospel, and the story becomes one of growing conflict between Christianity and parent Judaism. When it becomes clear that the majority of Israel will not accept Jesus, the gospel is taken instead to the Gentiles. What was once a Jewish sect has become a universal religion. For Luke the failure of the Jewish mission and the turn to the Gentiles was not an accident, or an indication of failure. It was all foreseen and promised by God in the Jewish scriptures. His two volumes are peppered with OT quotations and allusions which emphasise that God had kept his promises to Israel and that the present growth of the church in the Gentile world was all part of God's design from the very beginning.

How, then, does an appreciation of Luke's concept of salvation history help us to understand our passage? I think its extremely important in appreciating what Luke wants to say in Acts 4.12, and would like to highlight three things.

(1) The first is the presence of the word 'salvation' here. I've just been suggesting that salvation is the central theme of Luke-Acts[5], but what does Luke mean by it? In v.9 Peter talks about the healing of the lame man. It is interesting, I think, that the word for healing here is the word 'to save' (*sozein*). The play on words suggests that salvation doesn't just have a spiritual dimension, but has physical and social implications too. It involves detaching yourself from your former associations and attaching yourself to the true people of God. Salvation, Luke maintains, is only through Jesus. He doesn't explain exactly what Jesus has done to effect salvation (though presumably it is through the cross and resurrection). The emphasis is much more on human

acceptance of the saving power of Jesus. As Acts 2.21 indicates: 'And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'.

(2) A second point which comes out of a consideration of Luke's salvation history, concerns the presentation of the Jewish leaders in this scene. By the fourth chapter of Acts, the Jewish leaders are openly hostile to Jesus' followers, but the Jewish people are still ambivalent and the gospel has not yet been taken to the Gentiles. The trial scene in chapter 4 is extremely dramatic. Peter stands up in front of the supreme Jewish council and speaks openly. The man who, at the end of the gospel, was afraid of the high priest's serving girl, is now empowered by the Holy Spirit to testify to the high priests themselves. Luke's presentation of this scene is surely guided by his view of salvation history. Peter tells them in no uncertain terms that salvation is from Jesus. Once it was true that salvation was from Israel, through its Law, Temple and cult. But now God has inaugurated a new age in which Jesus has been exalted to God's right hand (Lk 22.60). Salvation is no longer through the institutions of Judaism, but through Jesus alone. The Jewish leaders have been told the error of their ways. But, within the story they are too blind to recognise the truth of Peter's words and continue in their opposition.

The negative picture of the Jewish leadership has probably also been influenced by the Jewish leadership of Luke's own day. Controversy between Christian groups and the local synagogues continued well beyond Luke's day, and the gospels of Matthew and John reflect something of the pain felt by Jewish-Christians as they came to see themselves as something distinct from the synagogue. As a Gentile Christian, the split was less traumatic for Luke, but he may still have felt a sense of incredulity that the Jewish leadership did not accept Jesus. The only explanation, of course, was that it was all part of God's plan – the Jewish rejection of Jesus no less than anything else.

(3) And the third point which comes out of an appreciation of Luke's salvation history is that there can be *only one line of salvation*. Luke is only interested in the promises made to God's chosen people: salvation belongs exclusively to them. It is only by becoming

incorporated into the salvation history of Israel that Gentiles can be saved (10.36ff, 15.14ff). As far as Luke is concerned, there are no promises in the history of the Gentiles, their past is one of idolatry and ignorance (Acts 17.25f, 30), and their future – if they do not accept Jesus – is one of nothingness. Luke's overriding sense that there is only one history of salvation leads him to write in a way which appears intolerant and exclusivist today.

Context of Gentile Mission

Despite his saturation in the Jewish scriptures, I said earlier that most scholars assume that Luke was a Gentile, writing predominantly for other like-minded Gentile Christians. Perhaps too his works were read by Gentile sympathisers, wondering what this new movement was all about, and asking whether they might convert. In this final section, I'd like to think about this last group of people – Gentiles with an interest in Christianity who had not yet converted.

We tend to think of Graeco-Roman society as pretty irreligious. We think of the imperial cult and the traditional Gods of Rome and see hollow religion, nothing but empty sham. But, the first century was actually a time of great religious expansion – Christianity wasn't the only religion to flourish in this era. The imperial cult was thriving – archaeologists have found numerous statues, amulets, and votive offerings. Mystery cults too were very popular, particularly the eastern cults of Isis, Cybele, and, later, Mithras. They were exciting, exotic, and, at a time of growing individualism, offered personal choice and individual salvation for adherents. Christianity was one competing religion amongst many in an ancient Graeco-Roman city. But there was one significant difference: adherents of mystery cults could belong to as many cults as they wanted. Although there were moves towards henotheism (the adherance to one God rather than others) in some circles, no ancient cult was exclusive. And even if, for example, a person decided to devote her life to the goddess Isis, she would still have paid homage to the Gods of Rome, and would never have dreamt of denying the existence of other Gods.

Christianity, of course, *was* exclusive, an exclusivism born from its Jewish monotheistic roots. In the same way that a Gentile convert to Judaism had to give up his allegiance to all other Gods, so a Gentile convert to Christianity had to reject his former deities. The God of Christianity was a jealous God who tolerated no rivals.

I think we need to take this context seriously when trying to understand Acts 4. Luke wants to attract Gentiles. But Gentiles can't just become interested in Christianity and add it to their portfolio of religions. It is exclusive. Adherence to Christianity means rejection of Graeco-Roman religion, and all the implications of that in terms of alienation and break with family and friends. This would have been a huge commitment. A convert was asked to reject the Gods that his family had held dear for generations, to reject the Gods of his city, and his land. Adherence to Jesus didn't just mean rejection of other Gods, but negation of their very existence. It is difficult to imagine the trauma this would have caused. Within families it could have caused hurt and resentment; politically, the rejection of a city's Gods could have led to the charge of atheism and suspicion of subversive practices. The further up the social scale you were, the more serious could be the consequences. In the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81-96), a contemporary of Luke, a number of prominent courtiers were put to death on the charge of 'atheism'. Modern scholars cannot agree on whether the people in question were converts to Judaism or Christianity, but – from our point of view – it probably doesn't matter very much. The point is that by adopting an exclusivist religion they abandoned their own religious heritage and left themselves open to hostility and even, in extreme cases, execution. Judaism and Christianity were the only ancient religions which asked so much of their followers. If Luke hoped that Gentiles would convert to the new faith he had to stress the great things which it offered. But he also had to stress that rejecting one's traditional beliefs and cutting oneself from one's cultural moorings was worth it. He had to stress that no other faith could lead to salvation: salvation came through Jesus alone and was worth risking everything for.

Conclusion

We have now looked at three different contexts which, I hope, help us to see what were the real issues for Luke when he wrote Acts 4.12. We've seen that this verse reflects Luke's own theology, and that it is embedded in a piece of highly rhetorical literature. Luke wants to show that the promises given by God to Israel and revealed through the Jewish scriptures have all been fulfilled in the life/death/resurrection of Jesus and the present time of the church. The verse reflects contemporary debates with Jewish leaders: Luke wants to tell Jews of his own day that salvation doesn't come from the Jewish Law, or dependence on God's grace in the past, but *only* through acceptance of Jesus as God's Messiah. To inherit the promises bestowed on Israel, Jews *have* to accept Jesus; there is simply no other way of being saved. The verse also speaks to Gentiles wondering about converting. Luke tells them that they need to give up their old ways and devote themselves exclusively to Jesus. Whatever hardships are involved will ultimately be worth it, since salvation can be found nowhere else.

We need to recognise in all this that Luke is the spokesman for a fledgling church. The small Christian community is struggling to define itself now that it has begun to break away from its Jewish parent. It is also a struggle for survival – it is important to remember that Christianity was still a small insignificant movement in a world where Gentiles and even Jews were much more numerous and influential. It is precisely because the stakes are so high that Luke has little time for discussion or dialogue, but writes in a way which today sounds intolerant and blinkered.

How, then, should we interpret Acts 4.12 today? We perhaps need to accept that the verse tells us a great deal about the late first century church – its disputes with Jews and dialogue with Gentiles. But we need also to accept that the verse simply does not speak to many of our modern concerns. The verse reflects the experience of a small church struggling to survive in an often hostile world. It is not concerned with dialogue between accepted and respected religions. Still less does Luke address the fate of those who have never heard of

Jesus. He disparagingly suggests that non-Christians have no hope of salvation, but he does this in the context of a work which is preaching the gospel to these very same non-Christians. We just do not know what Luke thought would happen to people in far flung corners of the Empire who never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus. (Though the fact that he can present even unconverted Gentiles as reasonable and open-minded, eg 28.7-10, may suggest a greater level of tolerance than is apparent from a consideration of 4.12 alone).

Would Luke have put things differently if he were writing a similar work today? We could equally well ask: would Paul have said different things about marriage if he wrote today? Would the author of 2 Timothy have said that women are saved by childbirth in the 21st century? And could Matthew have described the trial scene in the same way if he was writing in our post-holocaust world? Of course, we can never know what any of these authors would have said in different circumstances. But I think we need to accept that parts of the NT are conditioned by their first century setting. It may be that Acts 4.12 is simply one of these passages.

[1] There are a number of odd features about this passage. The disciples are arrested in v.2 because they 'were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead'. The trial, however, centres on the healing of the lame man, and the members of the Sanhedrin do not seem to know that the disciples are followers of Jesus. Luke is probably combining different sources here.

[2] J. D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1996, p. 53

[3] B.Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press, p. 194.

[4] L. T. Johnson, 'Luke-Acts', *Anchor Bible Dictionary IV*, 407. For discussion of the genre of Acts see the essays in B. Witherington (ed.), *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts*, Cambridge: CUP, 1996.

[5] C. K. Barrett notes that variations on the Greek word 'to save' (*sozein*) occur 22 times in Luke-Acts. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994, vol 1, pp. 230-1.