

# Constructing Christian identity in *Luke-Acts*: the purpose of Pharisees in Lukan theology\*

*Construindo uma identidade cristã em Lucas-Atos: o propósito dos fariseus na teologia lucana*

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to analyze the references made by the author of the third gospel and the book of *Acts* (so-called Luke) to members of the Christian communities in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE who defended that Christians had to fully observe *Torah* laws and who especially defended circumcision for Gentile Christians. Luke refers to them as 'Pharisees' in *Acts* 15, 5. Indirect allusions to these Christian Pharisees are ubiquitous in Luke's work, showing that this issue was very important within his theology. When writing *Luke-Acts*, Luke was confronted with the sense of orphanhood of the Gentile Christian movement after the Apostle Paul's death. Careful analysis of his books reveals more clearly the evangelist's intent to convince his readers that the Gentile Christian movement is heir of the eschatological blessings promised to Judaism.

**Resumo:** Este artigo tem por propósito analisar as referências feitas pelo autor do terceiro evangelho e do livro *Atos dos Apóstolos* (o assim chamado Lucas) a membros das comunidades cristãs no século I d.C. que defendiam que os cristãos deviam manter a observância completa das leis da *Torá* e que defendiam, especialmente, a circuncisão dos cristãos gentílicos. Lucas se refere a eles como 'fariseus' em *Atos* 15, 5. Alusões indiretas a tais cristãos fariseus são abundantes na obra lucana, o que revela ser esta questão muito importante no quadro da teologia do autor. Ao redigir a obra *Lucas-Atos*, o autor se sentia confrontado com o sentimento de orfandade do movimento cristão gentílico após a morte de seu fundador, o missionário Paulo de Tarso. Uma análise minuciosa de seus livros revela mais claramente a intenção de Lucas de convencer seus leitores de que o movimento cristão gentílico é herdeiro das bênçãos escatológicas prometidas ao judaísmo.

**Keywords:**

Christian identity;  
Christian literature;  
Gospel of Luke;  
Acts of the Apostles;  
Pharisees.

**Palavras-chave:**

Identidade cristã;  
Literatura cristã;  
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Fariseus.

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## Introduction

It was in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1836) that the German historian Johann Gustav Droysen coined the scholarly term 'Hellenismus' as signifying the blending of cultures that took place after Alexander the Great's conquests in the East. The scholar also classified the Hellenistic period as a moment of transition. According to the words of Professor Hermann Krüger, in his biography of Droysen from 1884:<sup>1</sup>

[...] the Greek spirit was brought into connection with the 'Oriental' nature, so as, by a process of fermentation, decomposition and illumination, to cause a mighty transformation in the thinking and feeling of the ancient world, by which, withal, the path was leveled for Christianity (DROYSEN, 1893, p. xviii).

When studying the oriental cultures, Droysen focused primarily on Jewish tradition. It is easy to understand why only Jewish culture received Droysen's attention among all cultures and societies ruled by the Hellenistic dynasties. He sought to explain Christianity – for him, the powerful Christian Church that since the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE dominated the West – through a simplistic teleological analysis. The German scholar found in Hellenistic culture and in Jewish tradition the roots, or better, the seeds that, brought together (by fusion), would result in the embryo of Christianity. "Sharply criticized at that time, he later admitted having been too inspired by the Hegelian method of constructing history", explains Monica Selvatici (2004, p. 1).

Anyhow, Droysen's formulation had such great influence on later scholarship on Christian origins and ancient Judaism that the study of Jewish and Hellenistic cultural interaction is as old as the very study of Jewish history.<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons for the major success of this interpretive framework is that it does encounter support in some biblical texts: in 2 *Maccabees*, for instance, one finds both the term ἑλληνισμοῦ (ἀκμή τις ἑλληνισμοῦ – 'an extreme of Hellenism') – in the text signifying the Greek culture as something strange to Judaism – and the term Ἰουδαϊσμός as its counterpart (COLLINS; STERLING, 2001, p. 2). In the New Testament, in the book of *Acts*, the didactic presentation of two different groups in the early church, Hebrews and Hellenists, can also be reckoned as evidence for the legitimacy of such a type of analysis. The distinction between Judaism and Hellenistic culture is still widely used in the study of early Christianity. Martin Hengel's

<sup>1</sup> The year Droysen died. The biographical sketch is reproduced at the beginning of Droysen's work on the principles of history (DROYSEN, 1893, p. xv-xxxv).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Elias Bickerman's work, *Der Gott der Makkabäer*, published in Germany in 1937 and translated into English in 1979 as *The God of the Maccabees*. This author is, according to L. I. Levine (1998, p. 6), a pioneer in the study of the Hellenization process in Palestine and of Jews in the Greco-Roman period.

work – *Judaism and Hellenism* –,<sup>3</sup> considered to be a landmark in Hellenistic Jewish studies, draws heavily on Droysen's interpretation but, at least, has a specific focus on the "conflict between Palestinian Judaism and the spirit of the Hellenistic age" which erupted with the Maccabean revolt and continued down to the first century CE (HENGEL, 1974, p. 107).

Underlying Hengel's analysis is his own understanding of Hellenistic Judaism – a term he applies to both Diaspora and Palestinian Judaism. He understands Hellenistic Judaism to be a somewhat uniform body of thoughts and values that takes a universalistic stance and is characterized by openness towards the gentiles, and by a lesser importance given to the following of *Torah* prescriptions. This phenomenon is, in his opinion, the result of the intense process of interaction between Judaism and Hellenistic culture. In summary, following Droysen's path, Hengel understands the blending of Jewish tradition and Hellenistic culture as the ultimate background for the development of Christianity (SELVATICI, 2006, p. 10).

The distinction between a universalistic form of Judaism (mostly represented by Diaspora Judaism) and a legalistic form of it (as Palestinian Judaism is often depicted) still lies in the background of many Early Christian studies.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies, however, show that it is necessary to historicize "both scientific interpretive frameworks and the 'invention' of evidence in order to find new evidence and the 'creative power' for understanding it" (FUNARI, 1999, p. 42). Thus, once we understand that the analytical framework 'Judaism – Hellenism' is a creation of Droysen in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century we are able to leave it and try to find new evidence and a better way to analyze such evidence.<sup>5</sup>

This new trend in social studies requires the use of new theoretical concepts. The concept of ethnicity is one of them. This notion questions the supposed direct relationship between textual and archaeological evidence and the ethnic or, more generally, cultural identity of the group that produced it. By discussing such a relationship, historians, social theorists and archaeologists who work with the question of ethnicity focus on the construction of identities and do not take them for granted, as essential elements, but, rather, as relational ones.<sup>6</sup>

One important aspect present in identity formation/construction is literary representation. As Judith Lieu (2002, p. 7) has rightly put out, Christian literature is at the heart of the foundation of Christian identity in the sense that literary representation has the ability to impress itself as experience.

<sup>3</sup> Hengel wrote the book in German in 1969 and it was translated into English in 1974.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Hengel (1979; 1983); and, more recently, Snee (2003).

<sup>5</sup> And go back to it only when necessary.

<sup>6</sup> See the seminal work by Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1998); and subsequent analyses by cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1992) and archaeologist Siân Jones (1997).

Once Christian literature comprehends many texts and many different types of texts, for the purpose of the present article we choose to analyze the references made by the author of the third gospel and the book of *Acts* (so-called Luke) to members of the Christian communities in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE who defended that Christians had to fully observe *Torah* laws and who especially defended circumcision for Gentile Christians. Luke refers to them as 'Pharisees' in *Acts* 15, 5. Indirect allusions to these Christian Pharisees are ubiquitous in Luke's work, revealing that this issue was very important within his theology.

### Luke and the Pharisees

As Beverly Roberts Gaventa (1988, p. 150) has well argued: "The theology of Luke is intricately and irreversibly bound up with the story he tells and cannot be separated from it. An attempt to do justice to the theology of *Acts* must struggle to reclaim the character of *Acts* as a narrative". In fact, one of the most visible markers of Lukan theology is his representation of scribes and Pharisees in the gospel and in the book of *Acts*. According to David Gowler (2008, p. 305-6), "few characters or character groups are important enough to appear frequently in the two volumes. The Pharisees, though, reappear time and time and again, with a certain amount of consistency but with an intriguing and seemingly complex portrayal".

Scholars who study the role played by Pharisees in Luke's works are careful enough to avoid reaching rapid conclusions on them. They realize, in the words of Anthony J. Saldarini (2001, p. 144) that:

The gospels do not easily provide information for the historical understanding of the Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees. They often project onto the life of Jesus later controversies between the Christian and Jewish communities and may simply reflect a later author's misunderstanding of traditions at his disposal and of Palestinian society.

The Third Gospel gives us a first impression that Luke is favorable towards the Pharisees. However, the passage in the book of *Acts* that better shows Luke's opinion on the Pharisees is *Acts* 26, 5: according to what Luke makes the apostle Paul say in his speech before King Agrippa, the Pharisees were known to be the strictest and most severe sect (ἀκριβεστάτην αἵρεσιν) within first century CE Judaism.

In the Gospels, while Matthew does not present the scribes as a major force in the events leading up to Jesus' death (some argue that it is because he knows of Christian scribes and has a positive view of scribalism), eliminates Mark's scribes when they are opponents of Jesus and replaces them with Pharisees, Luke reduces the negative image

that Matthew and Mark draw of the Pharisees in several passages and he sometimes presents a positive one. For instance:

1. He transfers the scene of scribes and Pharisees observing that Jesus' disciples had not washed their hands before eating into the context of an invitation (*Lk* 11, 37f), a strategy to reduce the level of hostility;

2. *Luke* 11, 16 states 'Others demanded a sign', changing the passage from *Matt* 16, 1 and *Mk* 8, 11, which present: 'Pharisees and Sadducees';

3. In *Lk* 20, 45-47 Jesus judges the scribes, but in *Matt* 23, 6-7 the Pharisees are judged by Jesus as well;

4. The Pharisees never want to kill Jesus, they only want to entrap him in one of his statements.

Such different portrait makes some authors, like John A. Ziesler (1978-9, p. 146-57), argue that Luke is favorable toward the Pharisees. This conclusion, however, is the result of *a priori* reading of Lukan narratives and is not correct. A. Saldarini (2001, p. 179) has a greater perception of Luke's purpose when analyzing his different characterization of Pharisees:

Luke's view of the Pharisees' social position is brought out in several passages where the Pharisees keep their distance from social outcasts. The contrast of the Pharisees with tax collectors and sinners is typological for Luke and symbolic of the paradoxical rejection of Jesus by Judaism and acceptance of him by the Gentiles. The Pharisees are presented as the guardians of the normal social boundaries against Jesus who seeks to change the boundaries and reconstitute the people of God.

The apparently favorable portrait of the Pharisees in Luke's Gospel is better explained when the book of *Acts* is taken into consideration. In *Acts* 15, 5, "[...] but some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up [in the apostolic council in Jerusalem] and said: 'It is necessary for them [the Gentile Christians] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses'".<sup>7</sup> Günter Stemberger (1995, p. 33) highlights the fact that this is the only passage in *Acts* in which "the Pharisees cause problems, and these are Pharisees that had come over to Christianity!". Stemberger's

<sup>7</sup> M. Hengel (1979, p. 116) argues that, as time went by, the influence of those former Pharisaic converts grew in the Jerusalem community and the sense of opening, which had prevailed at first, started to fade away among Hebrews (Aramaic speaking Christian Jews). Hengel does not explain such change in light of the broader socio-political context of growing tension between Jews and Roman power. The German author is not capable of leaving aside, in his analysis, the dualist interpretive framework by which Judaism and Hellenism are compared and contrasted. For that reason, he understands Pharisaic influence on mid-1st century Judean Christian Jews as the result of constant and inevitable pressure of Mosaic tradition over Palestinian Jews despite early sparks of universalism that had existed in Jesus' own preaching and among the group of Hellenists who, according to Luke, withdrew from the Jerusalem church and fled from the city after Stephen's stoning.

observation brings to light the subject at stake in Luke's narrative, which is the criteria to be adopted for Church membership: were circumcision and the observance of *Torah* rituals the correct requirements?

Luke spares the Pharisees of serious accusations, but makes Jesus repeatedly condemn them for their incorrect life style. So every time a Pharisee invites Jesus for dinner Jesus accepts and then takes the opportunity to reprehend him.<sup>8</sup> For example, in *Lk* 7, 36-50 the Pharisee Simon recommends that Jesus take the sinner who washes his feet with tears and dries them up with her hair away from him. Jesus's reply to Simon is the parable of the moneylender who forgives the debts of two people (one who owed the men five hundred *denarii* and another one who owed him fifty *denarii*). According to Jack T. Sanders (1985, p. 176),

The Pharisee in this episode is a prototype of those Christian Pharisees in *Acts* 15, 5 who want Gentile Christians to be circumcised and to follow the Law of Moses. The Pharisee Simon wants only righteous people in Jesus' entourage, not those "sinners" who get in [the Kingdom of God] only on the basis of repentance, contrition [...] and belief; for Jesus concludes this episode extremely pointedly by proclaiming to the sinner that her "faith has saved" her. *It is the criteria for church membership that are under discussion here, not Christology* (Italic text added).

The proper criteria for church membership are repentance and contrition, not following Pharisaic *halakah*. Thus, when Luke emphasizes that the Pharisees were not baptized by John (*Lk* 7, 30), he means that they did not accept the true membership of the Church, which, in his opinion, is the new people of God gathering Jews and Gentiles in Christ. This true membership is based on faith in Jesus Christ and, as for Gentiles, on repentance from their previous idolatry.<sup>9</sup>

In Luke 11, 37ff, the evangelist reserves the charge of hypocrisy for the Pharisees alone, while Matthew accuses both scribes and Pharisees in 23, 15ff. According to Judith Lieu (1997, p. 96), the second and third woes to Pharisees in *Lk* 11, 43-44,

[...] condemn the Pharisees for their love of status, and compare them to hidden sources of impurity, leading people astray, unawares [...]. Luke, here, is not simply repeating Matthew's polemic for dramatic intensity; he has one eye to the potential dangers within his Christian community.

When referring to legists (it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that Luke separates the invective against the scribes from that against the Pharisees and calls the

<sup>8</sup> See *Lk* 11, 37-44; 14, 1-6. The same happens in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (*Lk* 18, 9-14). The moral that Luke appends to it is: "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted".

<sup>9</sup> Darrell Bock (2015) holds a similar interpretation to the one above.

scribes “legists”) (SANDERS, 1985, p. 173), who were concerned with finer interpretation of the Law, the first and third woes to them in *Lk* 11, 46, 52 symbolize the intolerable burdens of *Torah* detailed prescriptions, according to Pharisaic interpretation, that made daily life impossible and prevented people from reaching true interpretation of the Law: that of Jesus Christ. That is why it is said that they remove the key of knowledge and hinder those who are trying to enter the kingdom of God. Sanders (1985, p. 173) believes that:

Luke wants to make a connection between the legists’ loading up people with loads “that can be hardly borne” and Peter’s explaining in the Jerusalem Council (*Acts* 15, 10) that requiring Gentile converts to Christianity to keep the *Torah* is “to put a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.

In *Lk* 12, 1c-2, Jesus says to his disciples: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known”. The Pharisees’ hypocrisy, so proclaimed by the Lukan Jesus, is like leaven. Leaven, as we know, is supposed to ferment the whole of the dough. Luke’s metaphor is explained later on. In *Lk* 12, 4-6 – the most interesting passage in the Gospel relating to the Pharisees for the word ‘Pharisee’ is not even mentioned – Jesus states the following: “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has the power to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”. The parallel in *Matt* 10, 28, however, says the following: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell”.

The context of both passages is completely different. In Matthew, Jesus is telling the apostles that they will be persecuted and hated by all because of his name. In Luke, Jesus is referring to the Pharisees or, more precisely, to the Christian Pharisees who are telling Gentiles to submit to circumcision or, in other words, to “kill the body”. The topic of leaven is also explained by the fact that the Pharisees referred by Luke are Christian Pharisees. Once they are members of the Christian community, their demand for Gentile Christians to be circumcised may have as a result the persuasion of the other members, ‘fermenting’ or ‘leavening’ the whole dough of the community. They are hypocrites because, being part of the Church, they do not follow Jesus’ teachings and are concerned with something Jesus said not to be important: the following of the Mosaic Law in every detail.

J. T. Sanders’s (1985, p. 166) conclusion on the ambiguous characterization of Pharisees in the two-volume work *Luke-Acts* is that:

It seems that Luke has portrayed the Pharisees in this strange way in order to let them represent the position within Christianity of traditional Jews, with the added nuance that the friendly Pharisees in Acts help him to demonstrate the continuity between ancient Judaism and Christianity.

## Conclusion

Luke's determination in bringing into focus in such a long way the hypocrisy of Christian Pharisees who demanded circumcision for Gentile Christians (after all, the Pharisees in the Gospel can only be truly identified in the last part of the work, that is, in Acts) raises the question that, most probably, such demand was present at the time he was writing his books, in the 80s or 90s of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. He shows that the demand in question was already a strong one at the moment of the Jerusalem Council – which occurred around the year 50 – and approximately, it seems, thirty or forty years later the same issue was brought up again so as to render nervous and insecure his fellow Gentile Christians.

A good understanding of this process is implicit in Jack Sanders's words above: "the friendly Pharisees in Acts help Luke to demonstrate the continuity between ancient Judaism and Christianity" (SANDERS, 1985, p. 166). By way of them the author alludes to the context of orphanhood lived by Gentile Christian communities established by Paul throughout the Roman East after the death of their founder. To make things worse, Paul had failed in his attempt to reconcile with the Jerusalem Church. Therefore, those communities did not have the same status or authority held by, for instance, the Christian community at Antioch, Syria, mostly Jewish in its background. The prevalent Jewish character of that community brought legitimacy to its own existence because the belief in the coming of a Messiah had always been a Jewish belief. The coming of the Messiah was the fulfillment of ancient Jewish prophecies for he was meant to be savior of the people of Israel. Besides that, we are reminded by the French author Étienne Trocmé (1985, p. 148) of the fact that Jewish Christian communities, especially in the Diaspora,

[...] went through a time of optimism and growth thanks to the death of James and to the end of Jerusalem Church's crushing rule and the helpless confusion that prevailed in the synagogues between Jerusalem's Fall and the spreading of the Jamnia school's Reform movement.

When writing his two-volume work *Third Gospel – Acts* at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, Luke was confronted with the sense of orphanhood of the Gentile Christian movement, a crucial issue at that time. He seems to have been particularly affected by it,

for careful analysis of his books allows for us to see more clearly the evangelist's purposes and, therefore, his theology: the Gentile Christian movement is heir of the eschatological blessings promised to Judaism. In fact, it is the coming true of the kingdom of God here on earth. Luke needs to convince his readers of that fact, for as Trocmé (1985, p. 148) points out, he

[...] realized that the small group of churches which persisted in claiming a Pauline origin would be swallowed up by that conquering trend within Christianity [that of Diaspora Jewish-Christian communities] if nothing was done to redefine their heritage so as to prove that it was as firmly rooted in Judaism as any of its competitors.

For those reasons, Luke's decision to stress the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in the Gospel and also depict Jesus as sympathetic to Samaritans (*Lk.* 9, 51-55; 10, 30-37; 17, 11-19), becomes more meaningful later in *Acts* with the prophetic words, attributed to him in 1, 8, according to which the apostles would take, guided by the Holy Spirit, the Good News to Samaria and to the ends of earth. As noted before, literary representation has the ability to impress itself as experience. So, presenting to its readers the "true" story of the Christian movement since its beginnings until the time before Paul's death in Rome, the narrative in *Acts* is intended to legitimate the widespread presence of non-Jews inside Pauline Christian communities.

Luke's account in the book of *Acts* presents the gradual process of Christian expansion, guided by the Holy Spirit, from a Palestinian Jewish setting to a completely Gentile setting.<sup>10</sup> Luke is, by way of the narrative, constructing early Christianity or, also, early Christian identity when he chooses to represent early Christian history in the form of steps guided by the Holy Spirit towards the integration of Gentiles into the people of Israel.

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of Luke's stress on the Gentile mission as the result of the plan of God, see John T. Squires (1993).

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