

UNINTENTIONAL SINS IN PETER'S SPEECH: ACTS 3:12-26

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INTRODUCTION

The speech which Luke records as being made by Peter in Solomon's porch (v. 11) is a response to the amazement expressed by the Jews (vv. 9-11) when they saw the lame man who had been healed by Peter and John at the Gate of the Temple (vv. 1-8). Peter accounts for the healing by the power of God working through faith in Jesus; he explains that Jesus was the means chosen by God for accomplishing the promises which had been made to the Jews in the course of their history, and which were well-known to them. Throughout his explanation, he draws point by point on evidence from Jewish scripture, alluding to a combination of texts including Deuteronomy 18 and passages from the latter part of Isaiah. This study of Peter's speech will focus on the use of Isaiah in vv. 13-22, a source which will be seen to be more clearly evident in the text of Codex Bezae (D05) than in the Alexandrian text which is the usual printed one.

A cluster of variant readings occurs at v. 17: in D05, *ανδρες* is read before *αδελφοι; επισταμεθα*, «we know», is read instead of the singular *οιδα*, «I know»; the subject of *επραξατε* is reinforced with the emphatic *υμεις μεν*; and finally, the object of the same verb is made explicit — *πονερο(ν)*, meaning something evil or wrong.

In his influential monograph on Codex Bezae¹ published in 1966, E. J. Epp contended that the combination of variant readings in v. 17 reveals «calculated anti-Judaic sentiment» (p. 44). In his discussion, he assumes that Bezae is the later text and, following this assumption, that the modifications serve to insist on the guilt of the Jews in killing Jesus. On his interpretation, in Codex Bezae *επισταμεθα* refers to «we Christians» and is intended to emphasize the contrast between Christians and Jews; *υμεις μεν* introduces a further contrast

1. E. J. EPP, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts*, Cambridge: CUP, 1966.

between «you Jews» and God in v. 18, ο δε θεος; πονερον (an evil deed) reveals Peter's evaluation of what the Jews did and cancels out any possibility of excuse to be found in *κατα αγνοιαν*. All of this is offered as evidence that Codex Bezae is a deliberate rewriting of the original text by Gentile Christians who wanted to highlight the blame that rested on the Jews for the death of Jesus. The view expressed by Epp is echoed by various commentators on Acts who make reference to the Bezan readings in this passage. His understanding of the role of the Jews in Codex Bezae is very close to that displayed by several scholars who have focussed more recently on what they perceive to be the negative portrayal of the Jews in Acts in whatever text².

The problem with Epp's interpretation of the Bezan variants is that his exegesis derives from the particular questions he assumes the text to be answering. He assumes, *a priori*, that by qualifying the deed of the Jews as *πονερον*, a later editor of Acts has introduced an amendment in order to settle the question of Jewish guilt and so pass judgement on the Jews. The question presupposed by Epp is «Were the Jews guilty or were they not guilty for the death of Jesus?» They were, is the answer given by Codex Bezae; they did a *wicked* thing and therefore ignorance is of no help to excuse them, as it is, so Epp believes, in the alternative text. Furthermore, on this understanding of the speech, their guilt is heightened by the contrasting goodness of God (v. 18), the contrast being brought into focus by the addition of *υμεις μεν* in D05.

It is the questions that Epp assumes are being asked: «Were the Jews guilty?» «What judgement should be passed on them?», which lead him to the view that the text has been modified by Gentile Christians who consider the Jews to be the enemies of Christianity and who wish to intensify the account of their wrong-doing in order to underline the superiority of Christianity over and against Judaism. That in turn inevitably places what he considers to be the amended text at some distance in time from the original composition of Acts; it sets it in a period when Christianity had become clearly separate from its early Jewish origins.

Within our own 20th century Western judicial framework, Epp's questions are entirely valid and acceptable. I would like to suggest, however, that there is a different set of questions which lie behind the Bezan text and that they are questions which are to do with Jewish law. I would further like to advocate that they are questions which belong to the time and situation of the early Church and which reflect the Jewish preoccupations of the original writer of Acts.

The matter is best seen by approaching the text of the Bezan version not as a modification of any prior text but as a coherent text which stands in its own right³. The exegesis of the text which thus emerges will be seen to justify this approach.

2. See notably J. T. SANDERS, *The Jews in Luke-Acts*, London: SCM, 1987.

3. The inner coherence of Codex Bezae in Acts emerges from a linguistic analysis of its text, as I demonstrate in my thesis, *The Contribution of Discourse Analysis to Textual Criticism: A Study of the Bezan Text of Acts*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, 1994.

EXEGESIS

Verse 17. πονεῖσθαι in the LXX translates words used in the Hebrew Scriptures for that which is evil, or sinful. Within the written and oral traditions of Judaism, there are to be found many detailed specifications as to just what constitutes evil and to the exact circumstances of the various deeds. Amongst the numerous types of evil action which are classified and analysed, reference is made to wrong-doing carried out in ignorance. The problem is dealt with especially in passages of Leviticus as well as in a tractate of the Mishnah, *Horayoth*, which is concerned with erroneous judicial decisions and which was in existence in at least oral form in the first century. The dilemma posed by deeds of ignorance is not, however, whether or not they should incur blame. All evil actions incur blame; ignorance is viewed as a cause of evil not an excuse for it. As Leviticus 5 says:

«If anyone sins and without realising it does one of the things forbidden by the commandments of Yahweh, he must answer for it and bear the consequences of his fault» (Lev 5:17).

The problem for the Jew is this: all sin deserves retribution, as decreed by the laws given by God. Since blame then has been incurred, how is it possible, if at all, to avoid punishment? That is the question a Jew would ask. Not «Are we guilty?» but «*Since* we are guilty, how can we avoid the legal sentence?» This is the implicit question in Peter's response to the Jews. His answer is that the only possible way to escape punishment is through repentance and the provision of God (vv. 19-20).

With that in mind, let us return to v. 17 in the Bezan text. Here, Peter addresses the Jews in a typically Hebraic phrase: ἀνδρες ἀδελφοί in place of simply ἀδελφοί as in the other text. He speaks not just for himself but in the plural —«we know». The simplest way to take that plural is that Peter is including John in what he is saying. John is a fellow-Jew and shares Peter's understanding of Jesus as the chosen servant of God (v. 13), killed by the Jewish people who are the addressees of the speech (ἀνδρες ἰσραηλιταί v. 12), and raised to life by God (v. 15).

They both know, as well as do their hearers, that the penalty under Jewish law for killing another man is death (eg. Ex 21:12-14; Num 35). In this incident, the case is compounded by a number of aspects. Peter has just informed them that he and John can testify that it is the Messiah whom they have killed. Then there is the matter of false witness having been borne (v. 13) and of choosing to have a known murderer released in place of Jesus (v. 14). These, too, are details which are catered for in the legal codes of Judaism.

Accusation from Peter in such a critical situation would hardly have been appropriate or sensitive, especially in view of Peter's own recent denial of Jesus which is recorded by Luke in his Gospel (22:31-44 + 54-62) using precisely the same verb (ἀπαρνῆσθαι, vv. 34, 61) as that found in the Bezan text of Acts to describe the denial of Jesus by the Jews (3:13 ἀπηρνῆσασθαι).

Compassion would be far more fitting and it is that which Peter displays in going on to emphasize the providence of God over and against the wickedness of killing the one sent by him. The Christ was bound to suffer (v. 18) and that in itself may be mentioned by Peter because it has an attenuating effect on the consequences (cf. Ex 21:13). He then urges his hearers to repent and to receive forgiveness as a means of escaping the consequences of their actions. He reiterates the possibility of forgiveness at the end of his speech (v. 26) where he again uses the word *πονερόσ* (in both texts) to refer to evil deeds. Repentance is not preached as a demand or as a legal condition to escape punishment, as if Peter were speaking on God's behalf, that is from the injured party's point of view⁴. Rather it is given as an offer of hope and peace, as the way opened up by the grace of God for order to be restored. He is identifying with the people whom he is addressing, speaking (as only a Jew could) as one of them.

Verse 13. In verses 13-15, Peter describes the actions which constitute the *πονερόσ* of v. 17, and which Luke relates in his Gospel (Lk 23:1-5) as being the deeds of the rulers and of the people. The initial act was the handing of Jesus over to Pilate. The purpose of handing him over was, of course, for the death sentence to be passed, this being the only sentence at the time which was required by Roman law to be passed by the Roman authorities. The Bezan text specifies the intention of the Jews in appealing to Pilate: *εἰς χριστὸν* is read after *παρεδωκατε*, very much like the account of the same incident in Luke's Gospel in chapter 23; and furthermore, their responsibility in the outcome of the appeal is specified since they are clearly presented as going against Pilate's judgement by the presence of *αὐτὸν θελοντες* after *ἀπολυεῖν*. This has the effect of conveying the meaning «When Pilate had judged him, he wanted to release him» in place of simply «Pilate decided to release (him)» as in the alternative text⁵.

It is interesting to note that in Paul's speech in Acts 13 the details concerning the responsibility of the Jews for having the death sentence pronounced are similarly amplified in the Bezan account. Epp sees all of this as conclusive evidence for a Gentile rewriting of Acts undertaken for the purpose of showing the Jews in a bad light. But it is superfluous to introduce the notion of imaginary Gentile editors, editors who were bent on making accusations against their enemies when, within the context of the narrative itself, the original speakers (Peter and Paul) had ample consciousness of what constituted wrong-doing within their own very detailed religious legal system. That is to say, the Jews did not need Gentiles to emphasize to them why and how they were guilty. They had their own system of laws and regulations which taught them quite plainly what was right and what was wrong.

4. This misunderstanding is frequent among commentators on Acts. For a recent example see J. B. TYSON, *Images of Judaism in Luke-Acts*, Columbia, S. Carolina: University of S. Carolina Press, 1992.

5. I have developed this argument in my thesis (see note 3), ch. 4, section C. II.

To view the Bezan readings as modifications made from a moral, judgmental standpoint and therefore as originating from within Gentile circles, is in itself to consider the matter from a later, non-Jewish perspective. From a Jewish point of view, the supplementary details in Codex Bezae are fine, technical points of a complex legal system. They depend on a sound knowledge of Jewish law both in the author and in his recipients. In that case, the text of Acts, and in particular of the manuscript D05, is very much Jewish property. Who else but the Jews would think it relevant or applicable to evaluate Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus using technical points from the Jewish legal code? Who else, indeed, would have the knowledge to do so? There are other aspects of the Bezan text which tend to confirm this interpretation of Peter's speech.

χριστον. Just as they possessed a detailed moral code, so it was the Jews more than anyone else who would have been aware of the extent of their crime if they learnt that they had killed the Messiah. In the Bezan version of Peter's speech, the reference to the Messiah is specific. χριστον is read after ησουν in v. 13, as it is read in other places in that text where it is absent in the text of most manuscripts.

It is customary to explain this feature as the addition of a formal title, the intention of which was to make the name of Jesus conform to what had become acceptable usage in the established Church; as such, χριστος is deemed to have no Messianic content and to be simply a title of respect without which, so the argument goes, ησουσ would appear to be too familiar in speaking about the deity. It is commonly viewed as an amendment similar to the addition of «Holy» to the mention of «Spirit» in Codex Bezae, another feature interpreted as reflecting established ecclesiastical usage.

That this is an accurate explanation of any of the supplementary readings of χριστος or αγιουσ in Codex Bezae is questionable⁶. In any case, for this particular instance of χριστος in v. 13, even Epp concedes that it is more than a formal title and that it should be seen as carrying the meaning of «Messiah» in view of the context and also of the presence of Old Testament references in Peter's speech, and because it strengthens the force of what he supposes to be Gentile accusation against the Jews —they killed the Messiah whereas the (Gentile) Christians recognized him for who he was and as sent by God.

Epp appears to be ignoring the setting of Judaism in which the early Church of Acts flourished. It is worth paying careful attention to the situation in which Peter's speech is pronounced. Here is a Jew speaking to Jews and to no-one more than to the Jews was it a matter of extreme seriousness that the Messiah had been killed, *by Jews*. The Messiah was first and foremost the Jewish Messiah and acceptance or rejection of the Messiah was primarily a Jewish preoccupation. There is no need at all to see the underlining of the Messiahship of Jesus as an essentially anti-Judaic concern —Peter's message

6. Cf. Thesis, ch. 6, sections B + C.

is thoroughly in line with a Jewish way of thinking and, as an examination of the variant readings shows, even more so in Codex Bezae than in the more familiar textual tradition. This becomes further apparent when the use of scriptural traditions is taken into account.

Targum. A difficulty that may be felt in stressing Jewish consciousness of the Messiah here in v. 13 is that in the Old Testament the connection between «servant» and Messiah, just like the connection between suffering and Messiah in v. 18, is scarcely made explicit textually. Not in the Old Testament as we read it, that is. Existing, however, alongside the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Jewish scriptures in Palestine there was an Aramaic version, the targums, which was initially produced orally as a simultaneous paraphrase translation into the local dialect alongside the reading of the Hebrew Bible in the synagogue. The earliest evidence for the written targums as such dates from after the first century AD. but there is evidence for their circulation in an oral form from before 70 AD. It has been shown, notably by Bruce Chilton⁷, that some of the sayings of Jesus which were apparently well-known to his hearers but were not taken from one of the familiar versions of the Old Testament, are in fact direct quotations from the Targum of Isaiah.

It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that in addition to the presence of specific references to Isaiah which can be detected in Peter's speech in Acts 3 (in particular Is 52:13; 53:7-8,11), the development of the line of argument shows in a more subtle way marked similarities with the combination of emphases and theological focus which is peculiar to the Targumic translation: the presentation of Jesus as God's servant (v. 13); the understanding of Abraham as a figure of promise (v. 25); the description of the ministry of the prophets and the assurance of the firm certainty of what God had spoken through them (vv. 21 + 24); the fusion of a present and a future hope (v. 20; cf. v. 26); the underlining of the compassion of God in waiting and longing for the return of Israel in repentance (vv. 19 + 26); the temporary withdrawing to heaven of the divine presence (v. 21).

There are features of the Bezan version of Peter's speech which can be identified as further characteristics of the Isaiah Targum:

1. *The Messiah.* The servant of God and the Messiah are explicitly associated in the Isaiah Targum. In Is 52:13, the Hebrew text reads (RSV translation):

«Behold, my servant shall prosper,
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.»

This is commonly seen in commentaries as the reference behind v. 13 of Acts 3, εδοξασεν τον παιδα αυτου ιησουν, where in D05 χριστον is read after ιησουν. The Targum for that verse in Isaiah reads (Chilton's translation):

7. B. CHILTON, *The Glory of Israel: the Theology and Provenience of the Isaiah Targum*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982; *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus, Notes*, The Aramaic Bible, vol. II, Edinburgh: T+T Clark, 1987.

«Behold, my servant the Messiah shall prosper,
 he shall be exalted and increase,
 and shall be very strong.»

2. *Wrong-doing.* The insistence on the seriousness of Israel's wickedness in the Bezan version of v. 17, as noted above, is similarly a constant feature of the Isaiah Targum. As Chilton explains it (1987, Introduction), the discomfort and guilt involved in sin are viewed in the Targum from the point of view of a debtor who cannot pay, not from the point of view of a banker or an outside observer. This is relevant to the understanding of Acts 3. It is the latter point of view which Epp, and most modern commentators, seem to assume is being taken by the Bezan text, but the tone of Peter's speech overall coincides more closely with the former, and the Bezan readings are entirely in line with the point of view of the guilty party who is seeking a way to resolve his debts.

3. *Oppression.* Various types of wrong-doing are given specific mention in the Targum of Isaiah, especially in chapter 58 where, for example, perversion of justice is portrayed as a particular instance of transgression of the law (cf. Acts 3:13). The sin, however, which is underlined more than any other is that of oppression. Already a concern at the forefront of the Mosaic law, and denounced vigourously by the prophets of all times, oppression of the helpless is several times spoken of in the Targum as the sin which is the paramount cause of God's wrath and of the withdrawal of his presence. It is therefore again in keeping with the focus of the Targum that Codex Bezae states in v. 14 of Peter's speech: «you oppressed the Holy and Righteous One» —εβαρουνατε standing where most manuscripts read ηρνησασθε, «you denied». What has been interpreted by exegetes as hostile accusation by Gentile Christians, who wanted to spell out the crime of the Jews, can once more be noticed to be a concern at the heart of the Jews' own ethical and legal code and one which was especially highlighted by the developing Judaism of the period following that of the Old Testament, the period such as is reflected in the Isaiah Targum.

CONCLUSIONS

The text of Peter's speech in Codex Bezae reveals an intimate familiarity on the part of its author with Jewish religious and legal codes. It is composed from an insider point of view, displaying attitudes towards God and the Messiah, as well as towards such concepts as sin, repentance and forgiveness, which are firstly characteristically Jewish and only in the second instance, Christian.

A heightened criticism of the Jews and their actions is discernible when the Bezan text is compared with the more usual text. The criticism is such that it, too, displays attitudes and reasoning which are typically Jewish—in that sense, the Bezan text is not hostile to the Jewish people so much as admonitory and hortatory in line with the prophetic writings of the Jewish scriptures. Peter's speech in Codex Bezae is no more anti-Judaic than is the book of Isaiah on

which he draws. The presence of targumic-like emphases and the development of prophetic themes in the readings peculiar to the Bezan version of the speech confirms that the perspective of the Bezan writer is Jewish and not Gentile.

The notion that the book of Acts overall is essentially written from a Jewish standpoint is being increasingly advocated by New Testament scholars⁸. Several exegetes have concurred in contending that the chief aim of the writer of Acts was to show how Christianity was a continuation of Judaism rather than a contradiction, that the new faith was nothing less than the divinely initiated fulfillment of the scriptures of the Jewish people. The sample passage of Acts in Codex Bezae which has been examined here demonstrates how closely the Bezan text corresponds to this original intention. The implication is that it represents, indeed, the original text.

The version of Peter's speech in D05 is unique to that manuscript. The text of the other manuscripts lacks, in comparison, several of the Jewish references and allusions. If the more common text is a secondary one, then the motives for its modifications and omissions need to be looked for in the history of the early Church for they were widespread from an early date. For reliable and productive research, the study of the New Testament text must be carefully associated with a study of the communities which it served.

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SUMMARY

In this examination of Peter's speech in the Temple, attention is paid to the readings of the Greek text of Codex Bezae. Although superficially they appear to express anti-Judaic hostility, and as such belong to a secondary version of Acts, a closer look reveals that they derive from a context of traditional Jewish teaching and scriptures. Peter's speech thus stands as a reflection from a Jewish religious and legal viewpoint of the killing of the Messiah and the situation facing those who were responsible for his death. The allusions in the Bezan text to detailed Jewish teachings demand a knowledge of the background if they are to be properly understood, it could well be such a factor which caused the text to be modified for later readers who were unfamiliar with the Jewish traditions.

8. For a full discussion of this development see J. G. DUNN, *The Partings of the Ways*, London: SCM, 1991, and the literature cited in the Introduction. In Catalan, the commentary on Acts by J. RIUS-CAMPS (*Comentari als Fets dels Apòstols*, Barcelona: Herder, vol. I 1991, vol. II 1993, vol. III 1995, vols. IV + V forthcoming) emphasizes the Jewish background of Acts and pays particular attention to the text of Codex Bezae.