The portrayal of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts has produced conflicting interpretations concerning their characterization. Some scholars say that Luke is, in both parts of his double work, sympathetic to the Pharisees, some claim that the Pharisees are presented consistently in a negative light, and still others say that the Pharisees in Acts are presented as more friendly than the Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke. In this essay, I approach the portrayal of the Pharisees in Acts from a social identity perspective. I focus especially on the surprising appearance of some “friendly” Pharisees in Acts (Acts 5 and 23) and claim that they make an important contribution to the validation of the social identity of early Christians. The social identity perspective explains how Luke can present these non-Christian Pharisees as fairly sympathetic to early Christians whereas Christian Pharisees (Acts 15) represent convictions that are misguided from Luke’s perspective. Furthermore, the role of these “friendly” Pharisees is not necessarily in conflict with critical attacks on the Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke; both the criticism of the Pharisees and the appearance of “friendly” Pharisees serve the need to categorize early Christians as a group distinct from Judaism.

I. LUKE-ACTS AND THE PHARISEES IN RECENT STUDIES: OVERVIEW AND CRITICISMS


The confusion concerning the characterization of the Pharisees mirrors the confusion concerning Luke’s assessment of Jews and Judaism in general. There is no consensus on this question to date, even though in recent decades scholars have been more willing than they were earlier to admit that there are important positive images of Jewish people and Jewish religion in Luke-Acts alongside more or less overt criticism. Joseph B. Tyson has traced this change in scholarly attitudes to the historical developments in the twentieth century and especially to the aftermath of the Holocaust.¹ This catastrophic event in the heart of Christian Europe challenged previous ways of understanding relations between Jews and Christians and prevailing views concerning early Christian origins. According to Tyson, “the major shift ... in the understanding of Luke’s treatment of Judaism was, to a significant degree, influenced by a recognition of the connections between NT scholarship, Christian anti-Judaism, and the anti-Semitism

that prevailed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” ² Before this shift, such scholars as Adolf von Harnack or Adolf Schlatter, despite great differences in their theological outlook, pointed to the negative images of Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts “without recognising that there might be social problems.” ³ Ernst Haenchen and Hans Conzelmann continued this tradition even in the post-Holocaust situation, even though they both “questioned the anti-Jewish tradition of critical scholarship at a number of points.” ⁴ For Tyson, the work of Jacob Jervell represents a major shift in the studies on Luke-Acts and Judaism. ⁵ In a series of publications, Jervell has quite deliberately challenged earlier scholarship and claimed that Luke does not present the Jewish people as totally rejecting the Christian proclamation and the church as the replacement of Israel. While many scholars have seen the failure of the Jews to receive Jesus as a part of Luke’s schematic view of history and as the necessary condition for the Gentile mission, Jervell emphasizes the division of the Jews into the repentant and the obdurate in Luke-Acts. ⁶ Jervell has even stated that “Luke knows that extra Israel nulla salus est, that Israel is the one and only people of God destined for salvation.” ⁷

Jervell’s interpretation has opened the way to accentuate Luke’s positive attitudes toward Judaism and to challenge, in the post-Holocaust climate, the claims that Luke-Acts represents Christian anti-Judaism. ⁸ However, not all scholars have been satisfied with this development. Jack T. Sanders has represented a position quite opposite to that of Jervell and his sympathizers. ⁹ Sanders has noted that pre-Holocaust

New Testament scholars “had no difficulty seeing Luke’s portrayal of the Jews for what it is, a condemnation of them for rejecting the offer of salvation in Christ (for which God has rejected them) and for being Christ-killers.” According to Sanders, New Testament scholars in our time are divided into two camps: those who see Luke’s anti-Jewish intent accurately and condemn it – like Sanders himself – and those who refuse to see anything condemnable in the New Testament and, therefore, “grasp at straws to explain it away.”


Joseph Tyson has summarized his review of scholarship on Luke-Acts and Jews by saying that there is – and was even in much pre-Holocaust scholarship – “an impressive if generally unacknowledged agreement” that “there are both pro-Jewish and anti-Jewish materials in Luke-Acts.” The same kind of ambivalence characterizes Luke’s presentation of the Pharisees which has made it difficult to find consensus concerning their function and role in Luke’s two volumes. Those who hold that Luke is favorable in his overall presentation of the Pharisees find support for their case especially in the Acts narrative. In Acts 5, Luke tells how the apostles were brought before the members of the council who, after listening to Peter and other apostles, “were enraged and wanted to kill them” (Acts 5:33). In this context, Luke tells how Gamaliel, a Pharisee, stands up to put a stop to the execution of the apostles. Gamaliel’s intervention for the apostles is successful, inasmuch as they are released after being flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus (v. 40). After this, there appear in the apostolic meeting in Jerusalem “some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees” (Acts 15:5). The Pharisees as a group appear for the last time in Acts 23 where Paul defends himself in front of the Jerusalem council (Acts 22:30-23:10). The high priest and his allies are eager to convict Paul, whereas “certain scribes of the Pharisees’ group” defend Paul by saying, ‘We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’” In this context, Paul himself testifies that he once was a Pharisee, a theme that is developed further when Paul defends himself in front of the king Agrippa (Acts 26:5).


Many scholars have proposed that the fairly positive roles assigned to the Pharisees in Acts are suggestive of Luke’s intent in the gospel as well. Redaction-critical comparison of Luke to Mark and Matthew have provided reasons to describe Luke’s portrayal of the Pharisees as more positive than other early Christian portrayals. John Ziesler has concluded that, although Luke does not minimize the theological distance between Jesus and the Pharisees and does not shrink on occasion from accusing the Pharisees of hypocrisy, his overall tendency is to soften the opposition found in Mark. This tendency found in the gospel is in line with Acts where the Pharisees are throughout “shown in a favourable light as the ‘political,’ if not always as the theological, friends of the Church.” In a similar vein, Robert Brawley maintains that the third gospel already “tends to present the Pharisees in comparatively favorable light” and thus anticipates their presentation in Acts. In the two volumes, Luke describes the Pharisees “as respected and authoritative representatives of Judaism who can hover close to the edge of Christianity.” In Acts, the Pharisees legitimate the apostles, Paul, and Christianity. In Luke, they legitimate even Jesus. The Pharisees can fulfill this role because Luke writes from a post-70 perspective and “takes over the Pharisees in a historical, cultural, and religious context in which they demand admiration and assigns them a commensurate role.”

Peter Tomson follows Ziesler and Brawley in describing the Pharisees in Luke-Acts in quite positive terms. He knowingly rejects all attempts to understand Luke’s work as anti-Pharisaic and concludes that, “while the gospel is clear about the differences between Jesus and the Pharisees and candid in its criticism of the latter, the Lukan author on the whole displays a remarkable sympathy for them.” Tomson focuses on Gamaliel’s intervention and says that “the well-respected and popular Pharisee does not in fact choose position: he leaves the discussion undetermined. This implies no irony, at least no sarcasm.” According to Tomson, Luke “puts Gamaliel and other Pharisees in a role of permissive tolerance towards Christianity.”

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15 Brawley, Luke-Acts, 105. According to Brawley, Luke writes in an environment where “the Pharisees continue to win respect” and their prestige “stands out” (97). However, there have been dramatic changes in the estimation of the power and influence of the early rabbinic movement which, in one way or another, carried on the heritage of Pharisaism in the post-70 situation. The early rabbinic movement has been repeatedly described as a relatively powerless group that did not have much influence on non-rabbinic Jews. For a discussion, with full references to recent rabbinic studies, see Raimo Hakola, Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness (NovTSup 118; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 55-74.
17 Tomson, “Gamaliel’s Counsel,” 596.
compares this attitude to rabbinic traditions connected to the house of Hillel. These traditions suggest that Luke “puts a saying of apparent Hillelite vintage in the mouth of Gamaliel, to the effect that Jewish leaders must leave the ultimate truth about the new movement for Heaven to decide.”

It is problematic to describe Luke’s attitude to the Pharisees on the whole as sympathetic, even though the Pharisees, including Gamaliel, appear in Acts in fairly positive roles. To be sure, Luke sometimes seems to soften the harsh tone of his sources in the gospel (e.g., in 6:11, cf. Mk 3:6), but these cases are counterbalanced by instances of Pharisaic opposition that are not found in other sources. For example, Luke attaches a fitting conclusion to Jesus’ attack on the Pharisees and the lawyers (Luke 11; cf. Matt 23) by stating that “the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say” (11:53-54). Luke also adds a scene where the Pharisees and the scribes grumble about Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them (15:2) and has his Jesus describe the Pharisees as lovers of money or as those who justify themselves in the sight of others (16:14-15). The self-righteousness of the Pharisees is further illustrated in the parable of a Pharisee and a tax collector, a parable peculiar to Luke (18:9-14).

Furthermore, the narrative of the gospel – if read in its own right and not in comparison to other Synoptics – does not give any inkling of the narrator approving of the Pharisees. The narrator introduces the Pharisees in a series of conflict stories where Jesus disputes with them over forgiveness of sins (5:17-26), eating with the sinners (5:27-32), fasting (5:33-39) and the Sabbath (6:1-11). After these conflicts, the narrator comments that the Pharisees “were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus” (6:11). The narrator later makes this disapproving stance on the Pharisees unmistakable in a narrative aside where he says “by refusing to be baptized by

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18 Tomson, “Gamaliel’s Counsel,” 601, refers especially to Avot of Rabbi Nathan 46 (parallels in m. Avot 4:11 and 5:17): “Every gathering in the name of Heaven will keep existing in the end, but every gathering (that is) not in the name of Heaven will not keep existing in the end. What is the gathering in the name of Heaven? You should say: That is the gathering of Israel before Mount Sinai. Every dissent in the name of Heaven will keep existing in the end, but every dissent (that is) not in the name of Heaven will not keep existing in the end. What is a dissent in the name of Heaven? You should say: That is the dissent of Shammai and Hillel.” Tomson recognizes that he is not the first to refer to these passages. See, e.g., C. K. Barrett, The Acts of the Apostles (ICC; London: T & T Clark, 1994), 297: “It is probably true that some Jews, including some influential Jews, took this line [as evidenced in m. Avot 4:11 and 5:17] with regard to the Christians, and it may be correct to infer that their tolerant attitude made possible the emergence of Christianity.”

19 Tomson, “Gamaliel’s Counsel,” 602-603.

him [John the Baptist], the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (7:30).\(^{21}\) After this sweeping statement, however, several individual Pharisees still invite Jesus to dine with them in their homes. These repeated meals (7:36-50; 11:37-12:1; 14:1-6) picture the Pharisees as open to Jesus and, therefore, seem to soften their characterization. Time and time again, however, these meal scenes develop into more or less open conflicts. During one of these meals, Jesus scorns the religious practice of the Pharisees by saying that they are “full of greed and wickedness” and “neglect justice and the love of God” (11:39, 42). After this, the sudden appearance of Pharisees who warn Jesus that Herod is trying to kill him (13:31) is not developed further in the gospel in which the Pharisees appear for the last time when “some of the Pharisees in the crowd” ask Jesus to rebuke his disciples who acclaim Jesus as Messiah (19:39).

Because the Pharisees disappear from the story before Jesus has even entered Jerusalem and are not mentioned in the Passion Narrative, several scholars have concluded that Luke quite deliberately exonerates them from any responsibility for the death of Jesus.\(^{22}\) This is not at all clear, however, because the Pharisees are closely associated in many passages with the scribes (5:21,30; 6:7; 11:53; 15:2) who frequently appear in the Passion Narrative together with the chief priests (19:47; 20:1,19; 22:2,66; 23:10). The Pharisees and the scribes discuss what they might do to Jesus (6:11) and cross-examine him about many things to catch him in something he might say (11:54), which speaks for their shared willingness to act against Jesus.\(^{23}\) All in all, despite some ambiguous and undeveloped signs that they could be open to Jesus’ message, the Pharisees in the gospel repeatedly misunderstand Jesus and oppose him, are disbelieving at the best, corrupt and wicked at the worst.


Some scholars have claimed that Luke’s critical stance on the Pharisees evident in the gospel continues in Acts, where the Pharisees appear only in seemingly positive roles. Jack Dean Kingsbury asserts that the portrayal of the Pharisees in Acts is neither positive nor serves to legitimate Christianity. Gamaliel’s evaluative point of view is

\(^{21}\) Again, this narrative comment is not found in Matthew’s parallel version of the scene, Matt 11:11-19; see, however, Matt 21:31-32.


clearly different from Luke’s own point of view. Gamaliel connects the Jesus movement to the previous Theudas and Judas movements and thus betrays that he anticipates that this new movement will also fail (Acts 5:36-38). Gamaliel’s advice that if this movement is of God, “you may even be found fighting against God,” is, of course, true from Luke’s own point of view (5:39). Gamaliel, however, speaks these words unwittingly which makes him an “ironic character,” who “is not knowingly either a friend of Christianity or an ally of the apostles.” In a similar vein, John Darr contends that Luke’s reader knows that Gamaliel’s words are of God but identifies Gamaliel’s response as ironic, as “sadly misguided, presumptuous, even ludicrous.” Darr has no difficulty in reading the Gamaliel episode or the remaining appearances of the Pharisees in Acts as a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. For Darr, “what one reads in Acts merely nuances and intensifies some of the negative traits that have already been attributed to Pharisees in the Gospel.” Gamaliel is not to be seen as “a prototype for Jewish appreciation of Christianity, a figure to help bridge the hurtful gap between sibling faiths.”

The question remains, however, whether those who see the Pharisees in Luke-Acts consistently in a negative light underplay some notable shifts between Luke’s two volumes. Even though Gamaliel may not be “an ally of the apostles,” or “a prototype for Jewish appreciation of Christianity,” there are sufficient signs in the narrative which make him unlike his openly hostile and plotting fellows in the gospel or other members of the council in Acts. For example, Luke introduces Gamaliel with the words “But a Pharisee in the council stood up” (5:34: a)nasta\j de/ tij ej\n tw~| sunedri/w| farisai=oj). The use of the participle a)nasta\j “often introduces fresh action in Acts.” By using this introduction Luke clearly separates Gamaliel from his associates in the council and presents his action as a counterforce to their openly murderous intentions. Steve Mason has rightly noted that Gamaliel “is the only councillor we have met [in Luke-Acts] who has the slightest interest in discussing the Christians’ claims, and this

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26 Darr, Character Building, 116.
27 Darr, “Irenic or Ironic?,” 139.
29 Darr, “Irenic or Ironic?,” 126, does not appreciate this as he says that “neither the narrator nor any other authoritative textual evidence serves to dissociate Gamaliel from the Sanhedrin and its decisions concerning Jesus and his followers.”
alone sets him apart from the chief-priestly councillors.” Furthermore, Luke says that Gamaliel was “a teacher of the law, respected by all the people,” which reminds us of his earlier remark that the people held the apostles in high esteem (5:13, cf. also 2:47, 4:21). As Jack Dean Kingsbury details, this remark serves to portray Gamaliel “as an exemplary Jew and man of authority” who is “right in character when he suddenly stands up;” furthermore, this remark helps Paul, at a later point in Acts, to show that “his pedigree is that of the exemplary Jew” because the respected Gamaliel was his teacher (Acts 22:3).

There is no reason to play down the fairly positive implications that the Gamaliel scene and the later scene where some Pharisees defend Paul (Acts 23) have for the overall presentation of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts. John Darr claims that the harsh and consistent censure of the Pharisees in the gospel also colors later incidents in Acts “which, if isolated from the narrative flow, would seem to reflect well on the Pharisees,” but now “actually assume a dark and ironic aspect.” Darr emphasizes the significance of the “‘primacy effect,’ which holds that what comes first in a narrative conditions the reader’s understanding of what comes later, and therefore, that the critic is to weigh earlier data more heavily than later information.” This methodological point of departure, however, if taken to its logical conclusion, becomes “a formula for producing stereotypes in reading” because it implies that “the same characters will always do the same thing,” as Robert Tannehill notes in his criticism of Darr’s reading of the Lukan Pharisees. Tannehill also points out how many literary critics and biblical scholars have both argued that characters in ancient literature including the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are not unavoidably simple, static types.

Literary critic Meir Sternberg, whom Darr cites as giving support for the “primacy effect,” has traced in the Hebrew Bible “the procedure whereby the narrative lures us

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31 Kingsbury, “The Pharisees in Luke-Acts,” 1504. Darr, “Ironic or Ironic?,” 135, says that the attribution of honor is far from a good thing in Luke-Acts but just about “a backhanded compliment” because, “as virtual paradigms of unreliability, the people can by no means establish any other character’s reliability.” However, both the apostles and Gamaliel are described as honored by the people in Acts 5, which creates a common bond – however vague it may be – between them and adds a new and at least somewhat positive dimension to Gamaliel’s portrait.
32 Darr, “Ironic or Ironic?,” 133.
33 Darr, “Ironic or Ironic?,” 133, n. 33.
into a false impression about a character or event and then springs the truth at the least expected moment.”

Sternberg remarks that “even the most static characters ... change or crystallize;” sometimes new features “even fall out of character, that is, out of the particular image given or formed earlier. ... It is by trial and error, as always, that the reader learns the lessons of complex character and difficult coherence.”

The Pharisees in Luke-Acts may not pass for a truly complex and profound group of characters, but there should be no methodological or other reason for crossing out some key signs of indeterminacy from their portrait. Although Gamaliel and his fellow Pharisees in Acts are not on their way to faith in Jesus, even Darr admits that Gamaliel “courageously resists the momentum of mob violence that grips his fellow council members. His discourse encouraging a patient, wait-and-see attitude is a model of practical wisdom for all religious and political leaders who must deal with upstart sects.” It remains to be asked what the special function of this kind of a relatively positive Pharisee is for Luke and his readers.

D. Luke’s Portrait of the Pharisees is Ambiguous

Many scholars have concluded that Luke uses the Pharisees in Acts to legitimate Christianity, even though they have not been convinced that Luke presents the Pharisees consistently in a positive light. According to Jack T. Sanders, the friendly, non-Christian Pharisees in Acts are presented in positive terms and they demonstrate the continuity between ancient Judaism and Christianity and underscore that Christianity is the true and authentic Judaism. The Christian Pharisees in Acts and the Pharisees in the gospel, however, are negative characters who stand for Jewish Christians of Luke’s own day who opposed accepting uncircumcised Gentiles into the church and insisted on maintaining Pharisaic halakha. John Carroll also allows that the Pharisees in the

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39 Darr, “Irenic or Ironic?,” 123.
gospel “in the end refuse participation in the kingdom defined by Jesus.”

Carroll understands that this raises the question of how the positive role of the Pharisees in Acts is to be explained. Carroll solves this problem by taking the Pharisees in Acts as legitimators of Christian faith. For example, Luke uses the figure of Gamaliel “to make a statement not about the Pharisees but about Christian faith and its preachers. They are legitimate, directed by the God of Israel.”

David Gowler has perhaps most strongly represented the position that the presentation of the Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke is at odds with their presentation in Acts. Gowler rejects the attempts to describe the Pharisees in the gospel in positive terms and concludes that “the portrait of the Pharisees in Luke is primarily negative, whereas the portrait of the Pharisees in Acts is primarily positive.” Like Sanders and Carroll, Gowler sees that the Pharisees in Acts serve as “positive legitimation of Christianity.” But Gowler also advises scholars to acknowledge the discontinuity in Luke’s portrayal because, as a matter of fact, “the portrait of the Pharisees in Acts deconstructs the portrait found in Luke.”

Gowler does not connect this conclusion to the ongoing discussion about the literary unity of Luke-Acts, but William John Lyons has claimed that it is this question that is at stake here. For Lyons, Gowler’s conclusion is understandable only as “resulting from the prior assertion that the two texts [Luke and Acts] are separate,” a suggestion made especially by Mikeal Parsons and Richard Pervo. For Lyons, however, John Darr’s position (cf. above) that takes the Pharisees in Acts simply as another variation of the negative appraisals made in the gospel is quite logical and unavoidable if Luke-Acts is read as a unified narrative.

Like Gowler, Steve Mason emphasizes that scholars should put aside their desire to make the Pharisees “a static symbol of some kind” because “Luke’s whole narrative seems to resist static identifications.” According to Mason, “to make sense of all the narrative indicators, one must respect Luke’s avowed historical interest ... and shed the old form-critical bugbear that requires each item in the story to correspond to some aspect of the reading community’s life.”

Luke uses the Pharisees or other Jewish leaders in his gospel simply because “he thinks that they were important in

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45 Gowler, Host, 315.
Jesus’ career.” Likewise, the portrait of Gamaliel is an example of “a historian’s concern for verisimilitude.”

In the following, I agree with those who think that Luke’s portrait of the Pharisees is ambiguous and claim that the differences between Luke and Acts should not be denied. I draw on social identity approach which makes it possible to take seriously both the criticism of the Pharisees in the gospel and the, at least comparatively, positive roles of the Pharisees in Acts. I suggest that, while a purely text-centered approach goes only halfway toward explaining Luke’s conflicting images, a wider perspective clarifies that these seemingly conflicting pictures do not really deconstruct each other, but, rather, both negative and positive appraisals of the Pharisees contribute to an early Christian identity. While differing portraits may clash in the text world, they may well have a parallel function as different components of the symbolic world that validates the social identity of the writer and his audience. For this reason, it is not merely Luke’s interest in historical verisimilitude that accounts for his representation of the Pharisees, but his portrait complies with the need to construct and maintain the identity of early Christians as a group distinct from other Jews.

II. THE SOCIAL IDENTITY APPROACH

The social identity theory was first developed by social psychologist Henri Tajfel and his colleagues in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This approach has also increasingly been applied to early Jewish and Christian sources. One of the key ideas

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48 Mason, “Chief Priests,” 130.
49 Mason, “Chief Priests,” 151.
50 In addition to the above-mentioned scholars, see also Tyson, Luke, 126; “The role of Pharisees in Luke-Acts is complicated.”
51 My larger hermeneutical background here is the so-called three-world model that is based on a distinction among a literary work’s text world, symbolic world and the real world behind the text. See Kari Syreeni, “Wonderlands: A Beginner’s Guide to Three Worlds,” SEA 64 (1999): 33-46; “Peter as Character and Symbol in the Gospel of Matthew,” in Characterization in the Gospel, 106-152. For an evaluation of the model, see Merenlahti, Poetics, 119-124. I have applied the model to John’s views on Jews in my Identity Matters, 33-40.
behind the theory was formulated by Tajfel as the “minimal group paradigm.” In a series of experiments Tajfel and his colleagues found out that, even in minimal groups where there is neither conflict of interest nor previously existing hostility, people tend to favor ingroup members over outgroup members. This means that “the mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups – that is, social categorization per se – is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the in-group.” The need for social differentiation between groups “is fulfilled through the creation of intergroup differences when such differences do not in fact exist, or the attribution of value to, and the enhancement of, whatever differences that do exist.”

The findings connected to minimal group studies resulted in the formulation of the concept of social identity which can be understood as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.” The concept of social identity was later developed into a more general explanation of all cognitive processes connected to group formation in self-categorization theory. According to John Turner and other social psychologists, “the central hypothesis for group behaviour is that, as shared social identity becomes salient, individual self-perception tends to become depersonalized.” This means that when we experience ourselves as identical with a certain class of people and in contrast to some other classes, we tend to stereotype not only the members of outgroups, but also ourselves as a member of our own ingroup. Therefore, the process of categorization concerns both the self-conception of an individual in relation to his or her ingroup and people who are experienced as different from the ingroup. Social categorization helps individual group members to orientate themselves in variable social environments by making those environments more predictable and meaningful. Self-categorization theory emphasizes that categorization is always a dynamic, context-bound process, which results in maximizing the clarity of intergroup boundaries in a given social context. Social categories are not inflexible but always dependent on the specific social

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56 Tajfel, Human Groups, 276.
57 Tajfel, Human Groups, 255
environment and those comparative relations that are present in that environment. It can even be claimed that “people who are categorized and perceived as different in one context ... can be recategorized and perceived as similar in another context.”

The social identity theory was originally developed to explain intergroup discrimination and it addressed such questions as, “Why do people in groups discriminate against each other?” From a social identity perspective, a simple answer would be that, because of social categorization, people commonly tend to favor ingroup members and discriminate against outgroup members. Some recent studies, however, have revealed that it is problematic to think that ingroup members are universally regarded as more attractive than outgroup members. As a matter of fact, we who deal with religious sources and religious groups know very well that those members of a group who deviate from ingroup norms quite often receive much harder criticism than obvious outgroup members. Deviant group members have recently received much attention among social identity theorists, especially José Marques and his colleagues who have tried to explain the function of deviant group members for social identity. In a series of experiments, they found evidence for what they called the “black-sheep effect.” This term conceptualizes a common sense observation that a person who behaves against the norms of an ingroup is even more strongly rejected than the members of outgroups. “Black-sheep effect” means that ingroup members are judged more harshly than outgroup members who have similar attitudes and values. This phenomenon has nothing to do with the personal qualities of members in question but is dependent on the significance of the ingroup norms for social identity. Anti-norm behavior of an ingroup member is something unexpected that forms a threat to social identity because such behavior challenges the authority of ingroup norms and reduces social differentiation between groups. However, an outgroup member, by definition, is

supposed to act against ingroup norms and, therefore, similar behavior is tolerable for the outsiders.

An interesting observation made in the research on the “black-sheep effect” is that an outgroup member who behaves against the norms of the outgroup in a way that is in line with ingroup norms is quite often evaluated more positively than an ingroup member who acts against the ingroup norms. The relative approval of the “friendly” outgroup members is explained by the fact that, from the perspective of an ingroup, outgroup deviants help to undermine the legitimacy of the outgroup and, at the same time, help to verify the social reality implied by the ingroup norms.\textsuperscript{61}

By primarily focusing on social rather than personal identity, the social identity approach maintains that under certain conditions social identity is more relevant than personal identity in the self-conception of human beings. Two things suggest that this may well have been the case with early Christian groups. First, many cultural anthropologists have made a distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures; ancient Mediterranean culture is mostly described as a collectivist culture where people “depend on ingroup others to provide them with a sense of who they are.”\textsuperscript{62} Individuals did not act or think of themselves as persons independent of these groups. Second, many studies on the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christian writings, especially the gospels, have emphasized communal aspects in these writings; while written by different individuals, these writings give voice to different groups by expressing their collective convictions and shared view of the world. From this perspective, the first readers may not have approached the characters in early Christian writings simply as literary constructs with recognizable individual features but as symbols of groups that had a crucial function for how they understood their position in the world. It is fully legitimate, therefore, to ask what function the literary portrait of the Pharisees has for the social identity of Luke’s readers.

CONCLUSIONS: SOCIAL IDENTITY AND “FRIENDLY” PHARISEES IN ACTS

The above overview enables us to see what possibilities the social identity perspective has for explaining Luke’s portrait of the Pharisees. I think that this perspective increases our understanding in at least four ways:


First, the social identity approach proposes that social categories are not fixed but may vary if there are changes in the social context that provides the nearby points of comparison. According to social identity theory, “individuals’ social identities have a multitude of facets” which “may gain different weights in different situations.” Also, the findings connected to the “black-sheep effect” speak for “the subjects’ flexibility with regard to which aspect of their social identity is actually used.” This means that, although the members of a group like the Pharisees are on one occasion defined clearly as outsiders, this categorization need not be absolute but may be adjusted to any given social environment. It is obvious that the contexts where the Pharisees appear in the Gospel of Luke and in the Book of Acts are very different. In the gospel, the Pharisees are compared to Jesus or to his followers, or, in a more unspecified way to the poor, the hungry or the humble. It is clear that the Pharisees do not fare well in comparison with these groups. Things change, however, in Acts where the nearest points of comparison for the Pharisees are the overwhelmingly hostile priestly circles and the Sadducees. There appear new shades of meaning in Luke’s portrayal of Pharisees, because Gamaliel and later unnamed Pharisees in the council are contrasted with some more fundamentally distinct other. While the Pharisees are used mostly as a negative foil in the gospel, now they appear in a comparatively positive light, thanks to the fully wicked and hostile Sadducees.

Second, from a social identity perspective, the role of outsiders who endorse ingroup norms can be described as relatively positive. This means their role is closely related to their being outsiders. Therefore, the function of the somewhat friendly Pharisees for a Christian identity does mean that they are presented as the group closest to Christianity. Their role does not mean that they are described as turning into insiders. It is not correct, either, to maintain that Luke uses Gamaliel and other sympathetic Pharisees to underline the Jewishness of Christianity and to show that early Christians represent a movement inside Israel. Rather, it is especially in their role as outsiders in relation to Christians that these Pharisees can give a boost to an early Christian social identity. The mere presence of the Pharisees who do not consistently sustain the rejection of Christian gospel serves to contest the principles they represent for Luke and his readers. It can be even argued that, because the Pharisees as a whole are presented

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64 This is claimed by Jacob Jervell, Die Apostelgeschichte (KEK 3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 212.
as outsiders in the Gospel of Luke, they can support early Christians and legitimate their identity in Acts.

Third, from a social identity perspective, the Christian Pharisees are to be separated from non-Christian, friendly Pharisees. These believing Pharisees represent convictions that are, in the end, misguided from Luke’s perspective. Christian Pharisees can be seen as ingroup deviants whose appearance poses a threat to the social identity of the ingroup which results in their rejection. It is often noted that Luke’s way of presenting these Pharisees (Acts 15:5) is reminiscent of the negative portrayal of the Pharisees in the gospel, where the Pharisees repeatedly take care that the law is not broken. Luke joins these Christians who support the keeping of the law to clearly disbelieving Pharisees in the gospel and thus discredits their position. Luke’s critical stance on the believing Pharisees is not necessarily contrary to a qualified approval of those non-Christian Pharisees who support Christians. Both of these groups undermine the integrity of their respective groups, which is a bad thing in the case of ingroup deviants, Christian Pharisees, and a good thing in the case of outgroup deviants, non-Christian Pharisees.

Fourth, from a social identity perspective, the criticism against the Pharisees in the gospel is not in conflict with the appearance of the relatively friendly Pharisees in Acts. The completely negative portrayal in the gospel is not deconstructed but is adjusted to a new comparative context in Acts. Both the criticism of the Pharisees and the “friendly” Pharisees promote the social identity of early Christians by clarifying the intergroup boundaries between emergent early Christianity and the Pharisees. Rather than affirming the theological continuity between Judaism and Christianity, the Lukan portrayal of Pharisees serves the need to categorize early Christians as a group that is distinct from the kind of Judaism typified by the Pharisees. At the same time, Luke presents early Christians as group that had to be legitimated even by the best among those who represented “the strictest sect of our religion,” as the Lukan Paul has it (Acts 26:5).

Immediately, and the reader sees that the Jews are not clear about their own religion.” Thus also Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 557.

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