



The Acts of the Apostles

Acts 9-12: Gentiles Join the Movement

The Gospel (and baptism) have spread from the Hebrew or Aramaic speaking apostles to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem who speak various languages, to the Ethiopian eunuch, probably also a Jew or at least a proselyte, who has traveled from afar to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem.

Now in Acts 9 the Holy Spirit pauses to recruit one more Jew, Paul. Then the Spirit uses Paul and Peter to spread the Gospel even farther – to the world of the Gentiles. The stories of Acts' two heroes are contrasted and juxtaposed.

Furthermore Acts 9 and Acts 10 provide two rather neatly constructed and detailed narratives – the story of Peter and Cornelius is the longest sustained narrative in the Book of Acts. In each case our protagonist interacts with a supporting character (Ananias, Cornelius) whose role is essential to the story Luke is telling.

The story of Paul on the road to Damascus is told three times in the Book of Acts, once by the narrator (9:1-9) and twice by Paul in an appearance before the authorities (22:6-21 and 26:12-18). Each of the three accounts has its own unique features, perhaps indicating that the stories come from different sources available to Luke. On the other hand it may be that Luke shifts the emphasis from account to account in order to make the story more interesting and to fit the particular narrative context (and theological point) of each chapter.

Paul gives his own account of his call in Galatians 1:13-17. In that passage he implicitly compares himself to the prophet Jeremiah, and he insists that he is not dependent for his apostleship or his ministry on any one who was an apostle before him. Perhaps for this reason he nowhere mentions Ananias, who plays such an important role in Acts 9:10-19. It is also true that in Acts, Ananias is not responsible for Paul's radical reversal, though he is God's instrument to restore Paul's sight, to declare the gift of the Spirit and presumably to baptize him (9:18). Nor does he speak about the blinding light or the voice from heaven that we find in Luke's account, though nothing in Galatians rules out the possibility that Paul had some such supernatural experience.

As we read through Acts 9, we note two motifs that are essential for Acts' overall story. First, God is entirely in charge. It is God who sends the light that blinds Saul, and God through Jesus

who calls Paul to repentance and fidelity. It is God through a vision who instructs Ananias, against his own best judgment, to bring Paul into the community of faith.

Second, when God is in charge what God brings about time after time is a “great reversal.” Peter, who denied Jesus in Luke, has become the great apostle of the Jerusalem church in Acts. Paul, who has persecuted Jesus and Jesus’ people, now becomes Jesus’ prophet, the founder of new Christian communities and (almost immediately) the object of persecution.

Paul’s move from opponent to proponent of the faith and from outsider to community member and leader drives much of the story of Acts but it is never more succinctly and dramatically signaled than in Ananias’ inspired word to the one who has been his enemy: “Saul, Brother.” (Acts 9:17)

Note, too, that in Ananias’ vision, God tells Ananias (9:15) what in Galatians 1 God tells Paul, that the purpose of Paul’s calling is to bring God’s name before the Gentiles – a foreshadowing of the rest of Acts and of the great turning point of Acts 10.

The rest of Acts 9 fills in the picture for both our heroes – Paul and Peter. We see Paul’s increasing eloquence and power and at the same time (in the kind of action/reaction movement that drives both Luke and Acts) we see the increasing opposition to his eloquence on the part of the Jewish leaders (9:19b-31).

In Acts 9:32-43, we have two miracle stories where Peter shows forth Jesus’ promise just before his ascension: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” (1:8) The two healings, of Aeneas and Tabitha, move from the briefer to the longer and from the splendid to the truly sensational.

And now Peter is back at the center of our story and ready one of the crucial scenes in our drama – the interaction with Cornelius.

Remember the two themes of the story of Paul and Ananias – (1) God is in charge, and (2) the world gets turned upside down.

Acts 10 is constructed with the care of a good short story. We watch Cornelius, then we watch Peter; then we watch the two of them together. But it is God who provides Peter with the vision that brings him to Cornelius and it is God who provides Cornelius with the vision that enables him to welcome Peter.

Cornelius is, of course, a Gentile, which is the great point of our story. He is also a Gentile who is apparently aware of Israel’s story and sympathetic to Judaism. He is probably one of those figures Acts refers to as “God-fearers”—those who have not converted to Judaism but have learned monotheism from the Jewish faith. He may in fact be a kind of surrogate for Luke’s friend or patron or ideal reader Theophilus, a Gentile who is at the same time a friend of Israel’s God.

Notice that Luke, who loves visions, dreams and messengers in Luke 1 and 2, turns to messengers and visions again. Peter’s vision (10:9-16) is not exactly what it appears to be. The issue is not really about what Peter can eat. We get a version of that issue in Acts 15 and another version in Galatians 2. The issue is about who can be included in the community of the

Holy Spirit, in the family of Jesus Christ. Peter does not understand that this is the meaning of his vision until he comes to Cornelius, learns of Cornelius' word from God, and claims the fundamental meaning of the vision on the roof: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (Acts 10:34-35)

There is some evidence in Paul's letters that Peter and Paul may not always have agreed on the scope and requirements for bringing church to the Gentiles, but in the Book of Acts, Peter sounds like Paul before Paul does. Luke loves like-mindedness.

As at Pentecost and at Solomon's portico, Peter has a sermon to explicate and apply the narrative we have just heard (10:34-43). As in the other sermons the focus is on Christ as the one who went about doing good, who was crucified by human evil but raised by God's goodness and power. Here Peter calls less directly for repentance than he does in his other sermons, but the point of the sermon is clear enough: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins in his name." (10:43)

There follows a kind of second Pentecost when the Spirit who fell upon the Jews in Acts 2 falls upon the Gentiles, and they too are baptized.

Acts 11 and 12 forward the narrative of the church's growth and of the opposition to that growth. Peter reports back to the church at Jerusalem, the council of Jewish believers who profess Jesus as Messiah and tells them about his experience with Cornelius. They validate the mission to the Gentiles, an affirmation that will need to be repeated and modified in Acts 15 (11:1-18).

In 11:19-29, two characters we have met now meet each other. Barnabas is the man who generously sold his property and gave to the church. Paul is the man whose life was turned upside down on the road to Damascus. Together they become part of the community at Antioch where followers of Jesus are called "Christian" for the first time (11:26). Together they take up the task of gathering an offering for those in Judea who are suffering famine. Barnabas shows the concern for others we already noticed; Paul shows his concern for the poor in Judea that will also be evident in his letters. A partnership begins.

As the church grows, opposition grows. James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee, is killed by Herod; Peter is arrested (12:1-5). God is still in charge, and we meet another angel and see another divine light. Peter escapes, but the guards who should have prevented his escape are executed by Herod (12:6-19). Herod adds blasphemy to treachery, and since God is not mocked, "the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms, and died."

But despite opposition God continues to work, the gospel spreads, and the workers in the vineyard add other workers still: "Then, after completing their mission Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem and brought with them John, whose other name was Mark." (12:24)