

The Sequel

Jesus Continued in the Book of Acts

Pentecost – The Nativity of the Church

A Prep Guide for Session Two
with Dr. Allen R. Hilton

When we left our confused but determined apostles, they had discerned and then appointed Matthias, a proper successor for Judas and were praying together often. Acts 1 does not, however, seem to offer a full description of what must have been a lengthy time of waiting. What we don't see there is a transcript of their small talk – the words that filled the time between formal proceedings and prayers; but surely there must have been much of this. Jesus had, after all, left them with cryptic instructions that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,” but what in the world did he mean?

In this Thursday's session, we will open a window to the daily life of the earliest Christians in Jerusalem, from the moment of Pentecost (1.1-41), to the way they built community together (1.42-47), through their first forays into public ministry (ch. 3).

As always, preparation is entirely optional. Please do not stay away from our session because you haven't read ahead. However, if you have time and desire to prepare, I suggest these steps:

Bible Reading: As always, I suggest that you begin with a close reading of the pertinent scriptures.

1. Acts 1—3
2. Genesis 10—11

Prep Guide: Second, this Prep Guide is designed to introduce the narrative steps and offer resourced insights into their setting and possible meanings.

Additional Resources: Each week, I will recommend other readings that are there for you with more time and/or a desire to read around some scholarly and practical articles that support our inquiry. This week, I offer three additional readings, beyond the commentaries and articles I recommended in my initial e-mail to you. You may access them by clicking on the links.

1. Soal and Henry, [“The Reversal of Babel.”](#)
2. Olson, [Pentecostal Theology: A Brief Description](#)
3. Kamudzandu, The Working Preacher [“Commentary on Acts 3.1-10”](#)

God's Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures

What would the newly commissioned apostles have pictured when Jesus told them that “the Holy Spirit” would come upon them. We talked last session about the cameo appearances of the Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures. The full phrase appears only three times in scripture.

- In Psalm 51, David cries out to God “take not thy Holy Spirit (ruach kodshecha) from me!”
- In Isaiah 63.10-13 the term appears twice.
 - the prophet reports that the people of the Lord rebelled, “and grieved his Holy Spirit” (*ruach kodsho*)
 - when God’s presence consequently draws back, they ask. “where is he who set his Holy Spirit among [us]?”

Though the specific wording “Holy Spirit” only appears thrice, mentions of “the Spirit of the Lord” or “God’s Spirit” are plentiful – including familiar ones like,

- the second verse of the Bible, where the “spirit of God was hovering over the waters;” (Genesis 1.2),
- Isaiah 61.1-3, which Jesus connects the Spirit to himself in Luke 4: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...;” (18-19)
- the Book of Joel which Peter will quote in his Pentecost sermon: “in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.” (2.28)

Our space here is too limited for a full sweep through the whole Old Testament. God’s Spirit appears often in Hebrew Scriptures as a force or power that shows up briefly and for a specific purpose. Below are two of several patterned examples from the Book of Judges. The first concerns an obscure character called Othniel.

⁷The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord; they forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the Lord came on him, so that he became Israel’s judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died. (Judges 3.7-11)

The Spirit can also show up in less mission-critical moments. In a later episode of Judges, a young Samson is walking with his parents when “suddenly a young lion came roaring toward Samson. The Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat.” (Judges 14.5-6)

As the expectant and confused lot who waited in that Jerusalem room through Acts 1, they may have been throwing around Bible episodes like these.

The Pentecost Explosion

To say that what happened next surprised the apostles would be a vast understatement. There they were, biding their time together, when...

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2.2-4)

First came the sounds and sights – hurricane winds and fire. (Images of Elijah.) Then, for them, like their heroes from their scriptures, the Holy Spirit empowered them to go beyond their own abilities. But this was neither warfare nor self-defense. It was scarier! This was public speaking – perennially a fear people rank above death – and not just normal speech. They had to talk to people who speak other languages...and they did it. Power indeed!

We’ll talk about this familiar scene when we gather on Thursday. For now, jot down questions it prompts in you this time through.

A Ready-Made International Operation

Starting any organization is difficult. Anyone who has built a business, or even a club, from scratch knows this. Most start small and grow gradually. And most look for a specific market niche or audience. Aspirations to become multi-national usually come much later.

Watch how the early Christian church defied this model. After the apostles spilled out of their smelly upper room (more on that next session!) and into the streets of Jerusalem (more on that next time, too), Peter opened his mouth to speak. To this Galilean fisherman, only recently acquainted with the “big city” of Jerusalem, his audience must have looked like a doggone United Nations General Assembly meeting.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes,

Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” (Acts 2.5-11)

Resident in Jerusalem at the time of the Pentecost were people from “every nation under heaven”, says Luke.

These people are “Jews resident in Jerusalem” from all these nations, which means that they are a part of what we call “the diaspora” or “diaspora Judaism.” So how did the people of Israel become such an international presence? When the Assyrians took over the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E. Jews scattered abroad for safety. When Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army took down Jerusalem and Judea in 586 B.C.E., his soldiers marched the captive leaders of the people to Babylon (Mesopotamia) and others fled to other cities and villages in the near east. In fact, throughout the period from the 7th B.C.E. century onward, Jews left Israel/Palestine for the usual prompts for people: sometimes as refugees, sometimes to seek a better or different life for them and their families. The result, we call “the Jewish Diaspora”. That’s why, when Peter speaks his Pentecost sermon his audience looks like a UN General Assembly meeting – stocked with Jews from everywhere.

There’s a bit of hyperbole in Luke’s claim that they came “from every nation under heaven” – many nations are missing from the first-century map of the world – but look at the list:

- Parthians = Iran
- Medes = Iran
- Elamites = Iran
- Mesopotamians = Iraq
- Judeans = Palestine
- Cappadocians = Eastern Turkey
- Pontians = Central Turkey
- Asians = Central Turkey
- Phrygians = South Central Turkey
- Pamphylians = South Coast of Turkey
- Egyptians = Egypt
- Lybians = Lybia
- Cyreneans = Lybia
- Romans = Italy
- Cretans = Crete
- Arabs = Saudi Arabia, etc.

Here’s a map that captures the vast reach of Peter’s audience:

THE NATIONS OF PENTECOST ACTS 2:9-11

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When King Herod Agrippa I of Palestine wanted the Roman Emperor Gaius Caligula to know how expansive and peaceful the Jewish presence is throughout the Roman Empire, he sent the Emperor a list of all the places across the Empire where Jews lived. That list looked a lot like this one. (Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 283)

Some scholars have pointed out that astrology may have something to do with Luke's list. We should remember that ancient Greco-Roman culture deferred to the stars often. (E.g., the Magi in Matthew 2.1-11). Here's a chart that shows where the ancient mind might have gone with this list:

Zodiac Sign	Geographical Region	Peoples/ Countries in Acts 2
Ares	Persia	Parthians, Medes, Elamites
Taurus	Babylonia	Mesopotamia
Gemini	Cappadocia	Cappadocia
Cancer	Armenia	Pontus (?)
Leo	Asia	Asia
Virgo	Greece and Ionia	Phrygia and Pamphylia (?)
Libra	Libya and Cyrene	Parts of Libya down to Cyrene
Scorpio	Italy	Those living in Rome, Jews and proselytes
Sagittarius	Cilicia and Crete	Cretans
Capricorn	Syria	Judea
Aquarius	Egypt	Egypt

Pisces

Red Sea and India

Arabians

This division of the list into the twelve signs of the Zodiac seems alien to many of us, but it's very possible that the ancient ears of Luke's audience would have heard things this way.

The Purpose of the Place and Peoples List in Acts 2

So why does Luke name all these nations? We've pulled out a cool map of concentric circles and a zodiac chart to give broad context, but what is Acts up to?

A Table of Contents

Listen to the way one commentator describes Luke's purpose:

Theologically, Luke underscores the universal impact of the Spirit's arrival., What is reported at Pentecost may be located in Jerusalem, but it has universal implications. Encountering this broadly inclusive geographical list here, readers will not be surprised to experience the Acts story line gradually expanding outward geographically. In one sense, the Mediterranean region that converges in Jerusalem will diverge as the narrative of Acts unfolds. Hence this list of peoples and countries functions somewhat as a table of contents for Acts. (Carl Holladay, Acts)

A Table of Contents indeed! In our IMPActs study, you and I have worked our way backwards from Rome to Jerusalem, so some of these names sound familiar. And if we had read through the whole book of Acts, we would have tasted the local food in most of the places named.

- Judea (Acts 9.31)Rome (28.16-31)
- Pamphylia (Acts 13.13 and 14.24)
- Pontus (18.2)
- Phrygia (18.23 and 16.6)
- The Region of Asia
 - Miletus (20.15-38)
 - Ephesus (18.19-21 and 19.1-41)
- Egypt (Paul is mistaken for an Egyptian in 21.38)
- Crete (Acts 27.7-13)
- Cappadocia (in which is Cilicia...in which is Tarsus, Paul's home)
 - Cilicia (15.23, 41; 21.39; 22.3; 23.34; 27.5)

The very international audience for Peter's sermon stands together to hear his words on a plaza in Jerusalem. But the Christian apostles who take his gospel to the world will meet their family members very soon.

An Overdue Reversal of Babel

Do you remember the strange story of the Tower of Babel, from Genesis 11? When God blesses Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12.1-3, the last part of the blessing is this: “in you all the peoples of the earth will be blessed.” Before the Tower of Babel, humanity was one people. After it, there were many peoples, and God immediately hatched a strategy for blessing them all: start with one family.

Here, though, we need to revisit the Tower story from Genesis 11 for another reason. We call stories like this etiologies. They’re told to explain the way things are. This one explains why people speak in different languages. We could imagine a grandparent telling the Tower story to a grandchild who asks why she can’t understand the words another person is saying.

*Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse (Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew: *synechythe*) their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*

Can you see why someone might hear the Pentecost story and think immediately of Babel? In Gen 11, God throws the people’s language into confusion (*synechysis*). In Acts 2, Peter’s audience is confused (*synechythe*) because they can all understand Peter’s language as their own. This is one of those subtle clues Luke is so good at dropping – clues that point to the remarkable connectedness of God’s work on earth. Our narrative is whispering to us that Pentecost reverses the curse of Babel.

Peter’s First Sermon

The same Peter whom Jesus called in Matthew the rock on which Jesus would build his church, the one we call Saint Peter, the one with a lovely cathedral built in his name in the Vatican, the same Peter who is every joke-about-heaven-teller’s fabled guardian of the pearly gates – that Peter preaches his very first sermon ever, as far as we know, on Pentecost. All preachers have a first sermon, and most of us preach them nervously and with some

trepidation. This was Peter's first, and Luke doesn't tell us if the former fisherman was nervous. He just mentions the ridicule that precedes it:

"Others sneered and said, 'These guys are filled with new wine!'"

So Peter clarifies.

"Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2.14-18)

Peter essentially tells his polyglot audience (tough crowd for a first sermon!), that God has been planning the event they are experiencing for long ages, and that they're the lucky ones who get to see it firsthand. As Luke tells it, 3,000 of them found this news compelling and joined the group. (Acts 2.41)

We will look together at Peter's sermon more extensively on Thursday. As you read it, you might notice a few features.

1. Peter quotes Hebrew scripture extensively. In fact, a simple word count shows that more than half of the words in his speech are quotations from Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110. How do these passages serve Peter's purposes?
2. Peter reminds his audience that some among them participated in the judgment of Jesus that Luke chronicles in chapter 23 of his Gospel. What impact do you imagine the speaker hopes his accusations will have on the people to whom he speaks?
3. The sermon is not very long, but it ends with a recognition that our narrator is supplying excerpts, not full text. ("With many other words..." in Acts 2.40) The speeches of Acts have received a lot of attention from scholars who want to understand whether Luke fancies himself a historian or a storyteller or something else. As you read, ask what specific action Peter hopes to elicit from his audience?

The Practices of the First Christian Church in Jerusalem

One of the most beautiful (and oft-quoted) descriptions of intimate human community available comes from the end of Acts 2. Some have suggested that Luke is influenced here by sketches of the ideal philosophical community as it is imagined by Pythagoras and others. As

people who heard Peter’s sermon signed on to join the Way of Jesus, they met regularly in each other’s houses. Here’s how Luke describes that close-knit fellowship:

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (2.41-47)

The new Jesus people developed several rhythms as they met together.

- attention to the apostles teaching
- fellowship
- breaking bread (probably communion)
- prayers
- sharing of material goods with those who need
- Temple time together

We know that many of the first people to join Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem were internationals who spoke different native languages and came from very diverse cultures. These differences were undoubtedly both exciting and inconvenient. Somehow, though, they were knit together in close communities through these shared practices. The raw material of the very first gathering of Jesus people was decidedly multi-lingual and international, but they were “of one heart and mind.”

I wonder how this vast variety impacted those earliest Christian gatherings. In what ways was that variety and difference an obstacle, and in what ways was it an asset? We’ll use our imaginations and consider these questions as we read together.

Wonders, Then Words

The Pentecost event in Acts 2 feels singular. The church can, after all, have only one real birth day, and that is captured in those early verses. On the other hand, Luke will repeat this flow in chapter 2 from a miraculous and wondrous event (the ability of Galilean bumpkins to speak in languages they’ve never learned) to a speech that begins with a sort of “Now that I have your attention...” attitude. In fact, the template appears immediately in the story of a man healed at the Temple gate in Acts 3.

In preparation, consider both the healing itself, which features a lame man who ends up “walking and leaping and praising God.” Then look at Peter’s words to the crowd outside the Temple in 3.11-26. There is one distinct difference: if the miraculous event of Pentecost in Acts 2 happened TO Peter and John, this healing in Acts 3 is performed BY them. Because of this difference, we as informed readers get our first chance to take our First-Session insight about Acts 1.1 out for a spin. Do you remember it?

We were startled by the fact that Luke summarized his entire Gospel as “all that Jesus BEGAN to do and teach.” Now, in the context of their very popular healing of a lame beggar in chapter 3, Peter immediately clarifies the source of their power.

Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?...By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.” (Acts 3.12, 16)

Later in the book, we’ll see what happens when people want this power for their own gain. For now, notice that we have chosen an appropriate course title: “The Sequel – Jesus Continued in the Book of Acts.”

I’ll see you Thursday evening!

Peace.
allen

