THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

Acts 1-12

by

Daniel J. Lewis

THE JERUSALEM CHURCH
(Acts 1-12)

Introduction

Most Christians know that the one book in the New Testament that offers a history of the earliest church is the Acts of the Apostles. This document, the second of Luke's productions (cf. Lk. 1:1-4; Ac. 1:1-2),[1] carries the history of the Jesus movement[2] from the ascension of the Lord to Paul's arrival in Rome for his imperial hearing before Caesar Nero. Luke (Λουκᾶς), presumably, was a Greek. By vocation, he was a physician, and after his conversion he became a fellow-worker beloved by Paul (Col. 4:14; 2 Ti. 4:11; Phlmn. 24). In the later narratives of Acts, several "we" sections beginning in Acts 16:10 mark Luke as one of Paul's company for at least some of his travels (20:6; 21:1; 27:1).

The title "Acts of the Apostles", which goes back to the earliest Greek manuscripts (p74, ℵ, B, D, ψ, 1, 1175), can be somewhat misleading. One might suppose that this title implied that the book would narrate the careers of the Twelve, but in fact, it does not. Rather, two apostles primarily come into focus, Peter and Paul.

Because the book closes with Paul's arrival in Rome in about AD 60, it could not have been written any earlier. Further, since the first line of the book references the Gospel of Luke, it must have been composed later than the Third Gospel. Most scholars date Acts at about AD 80-85, but admittedly this is largely an educated guess based on speculation about the date of the Third Gospel rather than any hard evidence from Acts itself. Some factors may favor an earlier date, such as, the fact that Luke says nothing about the outcome of Paul's imperial hearing (which in turn implies it was composed before Paul's martyrdom), nothing about the Neronian

[1] While neither the Gospel of Luke nor the Acts of the Apostles names Luke specifically as the author, the early tradition of the church from Irenaeus (AD 180) and later clearly specifies Luke, cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.14.1. The title in the earliest copy of the Third Gospel (p75, c. AD 200) cites Luke as the author.

[2] The disciples of Jesus were not at this early date called Christians (cf. Ac. 11:26).

persecution (AD 64), nothing about the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), and nothing about any of Paul's letters (which suggests Acts may have been written before Paul's letters were widely circulated). If these factors are judged to be of sufficient weight, the book may have been composed in the 60s, possibly even the early 60s. Still, lacking any hard evidence, reserve is in order about the date of composition.

By all accounts, Acts was written in very excellent Greek, though Luke's style varies from the more formal literary rhetoric of his prologues to the normal style in which he wrote the bulk of his two works.[3] His Bible of choice seems to have been the Septuagint.[4] Luke's historicity is remarkably informed about Roman culture, practices and legal procedures.[5]

Purpose

By far the most important interpretive issue, even more germane than title, date and provenance, concerns the purpose of the work. Because Acts is a narrative, average readers tend to approach the book as though it were an objective account by a disinterested reporter. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Greater or lesser degrees of objectivity can be debated, but there is no reason to think that Luke was a disinterested writer. He was unabashedly Christian, wrote out of his concern and support for the Christian movement, and intended to tell the story of Christian origins with particular goals in mind. He was both a historian and a theologian.[6] His primary goal was to show how the good news about Jesus Christ and the Christian movement became international as a fulfillment of God's purpose. Marshall makes the cogent observation that in the opening of the book, Luke's description of "things brought to fulfillment" (Lk. 1:1; cf. Ac. 2:23) is in the passive voice, suggesting that it is not only the distant past, but also the present that is a fulfillment of what God intended.[7] What was true about the story of Jesus was equally true about the beginnings of the early church, for what Jesus "began to do and teach" is carried on through the apostles as directed by the Holy Spirit (Ac. 1:1-2). In fact, the opposition to Jesus (Ac. 4:27-29), the outpouring of the Spirit (Ac. 2:16-17), the mission to the Gentiles (Ac.

---

[3] Fitzmyer can say, "While the Greek of NT writers in general varies considerably from that of writers in the classical period, Luke's writings come closest and are more elegant in diction than most of the others," J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-XI [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), p. 113.

[4] Citations of Old Testament texts, for instance, seem to be from the LXX rather than the MT (e.g., Ac. 2:16ff.; 7:42-43; 13:41; 28:26-27).

[5] A. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

[6] Still one of the best works on Luke in this respect is I. Marshall's, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971).

[7] I. Marshall, *ABD* (1992) IV.397-403.

13:47), the expanding boundaries of God's people to incorporate non-Jews (Ac. 15:13-19), and the general refusal of the Jewish constituency to accept the Christian message (Ac. 28:25-28) all were fulfillments of the Scriptures as directed by God.

Luke's manner of approaching this history addresses a profound problem. How was it that God, who chose Israel to be his special people and gave them profound promises for the future, now had fulfilled those promises to those who were not from the Jewish community? Could God's promises be trusted, especially if the group to whom these promises were made ended up largely on the outside, while those who had no certainty of the promises from the start were on the inside? In one sense, at least, Luke's approach is very much along the lines of Paul's statement, the gospel is "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Ro. 1:16b; Ac. 3:26; 28:25-29). In his gospel, Luke intends to show how God indeed fulfilled his promises to Israel in the life and ministry of Jesus (Lk. 1:54-55, 68-75, 80; 2:25, 38), but especially, he wants to demonstrate how the fulfillment of these promises spilled over beyond the Jewish circle (Lk. 2:32, 34; 24:46-47). Similarly, in Acts he shows how the Jerusalem church, which was entirely Jewish at the first, through divine providence began to reach beyond its confined circle. Acts 1:8 is programmatic toward this end.

The first half of the book, chapters 1-12, describes the birth of the Jerusalem Church and its struggle to break out of the confines of Jewry and exclusive Judaism. Given the life, ministry and death of Jesus, the disciples of the Lord could never go back to "business as usual." They had been forever changed by the teachings of Jesus, and even more, by the atoning crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Still, there was both continuity and discontinuity between the past and the future. In the earliest period, Jesus' followers in Jerusalem made no attempt to break completely with Judaism nor reject their standing in the Jewish community. Some of the early Christians still claimed to be Pharisees, and to varying degrees they participated in the temple and Torah observation. On the other hand, the gospel of Jesus widened their scope, both theologically and ethnically, beyond anything they had ever experienced in their native Judaism. What the prophets had promised had now happened! The Messiah had now come, and this affected everything!

Continuity and Discontinuity

It is common to assume that after the Day of Pentecost the followers of Jesus made a sharp break and started a new religion over against Judaism. Several clues in the Book of Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament show

that this assumption needs considerable modification. In the first place, the followers of Jesus fully accepted the Hebrew Bible, whether in its Hebrew or Greek form. The constant appeal to the Hebrew Scriptures demonstrates this copiously, and in fact, the entire idea of fulfillment would not have been possible had it been any other way. The God of Israel was the God of Jesus and his disciples.

The basic symbolic structures—covenant, ethnicity, land and temple—seem to have remained deeply important to the earliest followers of Jesus, even though modified in light of his coming.[8] In the first place, the idea of a new covenant was a category derived from the Hebrew Bible (cf. Je. 31:31-34). When at the last supper Jesus spoke of the new covenant (Mt. 26:28//Mk.14:24//Lk. 22:20), his words would have implied an important fulfillment and transition, but they would not have signaled an anti-covenantal stance. In fact, quite the opposite, since Luke already had depicted the coming of Jesus as the event in which God "remembered his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham" (Lk. 1:72-73). Further, Luke asserts that Israel was the heir of the prophets and the covenant God made with the ancients (Ac. 3:24-25). The fact that the initial missionary outreach of Paul resulted in a meeting of the minds over circumcision could only mean that the covenantal framework was profoundly important (Ac. 15:1). Indeed, James bluntly pointed out that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were dedicated observers of the Torah (Ac. 21:20).

Second, the ethnicity of the earliest Christian community remained thoroughly Jewish and firmly rooted in Jerusalem (Ac. 6:7a). To be sure, pilgrims from other Jewish communities of the Diaspora had attended the pilgrim festival in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given (Ac. 2:5-12), and some of them accepted the faith and were baptized (Ac. 2:41), but there is no reason to believe that when they returned to their homes they did anything other than remain within the boundaries of the Jewish Diaspora. Some of the early converts may have been proselytes (Ac. 2:11a; 6:5; 8:27-28), but they still would have been firmly rooted within the traditional structures of Judaism. Even after the early Christians were forced out of Jerusalem due to persecution, they did not immediately leave the boundaries of Judea and Samaria (Ac. 8:1). When they shared the

[8] The questions N. T. Wright poses about Paul would have been to a large degree the same questions to be posed about *any* of the early Jewish Christians, namely, "What was their view of God? What was the meaning of election as the chosen people of God? How should they regard the Torah? How did the coming of Jesus modify their basic belief system? What critiques of Judaism were now appropriate in light of the Christ event?", cf. N. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 13-17.

message of Jesus with others, they restricted their preaching to Jews only (Ac. 11:19).

Third, the early Christians continued to treat the temple in Jerusalem as a sacred site. Here the Holy Spirit had fallen (Lk. 24:53; Ac. 2:1). They continued to use the temple for the daily hours of prayer (Ac. 3:1), they held their Christian assemblies in the temple grounds (Ac. 2:46; 3:11; 5:12), and they preached to the people in the temple courts (Ac. 5:20-21, 25, 42a). Many priests came to accept the message of Jesus (Ac. 6:7), but there is no suggestion that they immediately left the priesthood. At least some of the Jewish Christians came from the sect of the Pharisees, and it is clear that they did not immediately renounce their membership, though admittedly their loyalties to Pharisaic ideas raised some pertinent issues (Ac. 15:5). In fact, when Paul later was examined by the Sanhedrin, he boldly claimed, "I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee" (emphatic present indicative active construction, Ac. 23:6)! When James met Paul on his last trip to Jerusalem, he plainly laid out the character of the Jerusalem church: *You see, brother, now many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the Torah* (Ac. 21:20)! The rumor that Paul was anti-Torah (even though untrue), in fact, was a huge problem for the Jerusalem Christians (Ac. 21:21-24). It was on this final visit to Jerusalem that Paul completed a Nazirite vow (Ac. 18:18; 20:16), and along with several other Jewish believers, went to the temple to perform purification rites and offer the appropriate sacrifices (Ac. 21:23, 26; cf. Nu. 6:13-21). In addition, Christians still attended the synagogue. Stephen, for instance, seems to have been a member of a Greek-speaking synagogue (Ac. 6:9), and Paul's earliest sermons were in synagogues (Ac. 9:20). In his missionary travels, Paul regularly attended synagogues (Ac. 13:14; 14:1; 17:1-2, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8). In fact, it was because they attended the synagogue in Ephesus, even though they were Christians, that Aquila and Prisca encountered Apollos (Ac. 18:26).

Such continuity with Judaism notwithstanding, there was bound to be discontinuity as well. Initially, any Jews who remained opposed to Jesus were perceived as rejecting God's Messiah. The message to Israel was to "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah" (Ac. 2:38). Only by repentance and faith in Christ could they escape the penalty of their sins (Ac. 3:17-19), and anyone who refused would be cut off from God's people (Ac. 3:22-23). To reject Jesus was to reject the capstone in which all salvation rests (Ac. 4:8-12). Forgiveness of sins for Israel was to be found in him alone (Ac. 5:30-31). Such teaching was bound to bring Jesus' followers into sharp conflict with the Sanhedrin and the Temple. Indeed, it was not difficult to cast the Christian message as anti-temple and anti-Torah, and this

is precisely what happened in the case of Stephen (Ac. 6:11-14). Stephen did not exactly help his case by citing Solomon's words and indicting the Jewish Sanhedrin (Ac. 8:48-53), and his lynching should not have been a surprise (Ac. 8:54ff.).

Perhaps even more important was the relationship of the new Christian movement to the institution of temple sacrifice. While all sacrifices were not performed as an expiation for sin, many of them were. In particular, Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) was the national sacrifice in behalf of all Israel. In light of Jesus' sacrifice "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26:28), indeed for the life of the world (Jn. 6:51), to what degree could the followers of Jesus participate in such traditional sacrifical rituals? The Book of Acts makes no direct comment on this issue, but the Book of Hebrews certainly does! The latter pointedly argues that Christ has been offered "once for all" (He. 9:26-28; cf. 1 Pe. 3:18), and to go back to the old rituals is to go back to something that does not work (He. 10:1-2, 18, 26-32).[9]

Expanding the Boundaries

As the earliest Christians worked to sort out the issues of continuity and discontinuity between Judaism and Jesus, the Christian movement eventually found its self-definition to be international in scope. This transition seems to be the paramount issue in Luke's narrative history in Acts. Reading Acts in this way puts the emphasis in the right place. While interpreters have attempted to read Acts in other ways (e.g., that it was an apologetic to show that Christianity was innocuous to the Romans, that it was a book intended to show the steps to salvation, etc.),[10] none of these readings make as much total sense of the book as the view that Luke sought to show how Christianity pushed the boundaries of covenant, ethnicity, land and temple so as to include the Gentiles in the people of God. Further, this expansion was directly due to the messiahship of Jesus—in fact, to reject what God had done in Christ was to put oneself outside the covenant people of God!

The international scope of the message of Jesus was broadly hinted at in the Third Gospel. Simeon's blessing included the acclamation that the coming of Christ was "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Lk. 2:32a).

[9] The date of the writing of the Letter to the Hebrews is debated, but there is good reason to suggest that it was composed prior to the fall of the temple in AD 70, possibly in the early 60s.

[10] To be sure, Luke may have had such themes as minor themes in his book, but neither of these readings can be construed as comprehensive. At most, they make sense of limited portions of the book, and any attempt to do otherwise forces large blocks of material into a procrustean bed.

Luke's gospel closes with Jesus' forecast that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations (Lk. 24:47). The opening of Acts continues this trajectory, where just prior to his ascension, Jesus told his followers that they would be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Ac. 1:8). The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost with the accompanying miracle of international languages surely hinted at this broad, international scope (Ac. 2:5-11). Their question, "What does this mean?" (Ac. 2:12), is paradigmatic for the remainder of the book. When Peter delivered the first sermon on Pentecost, in his concluding remarks he may have spoken more than he knew: *The promise is for…all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call* (Ac. 2:39). Certainly the apostles connected their understanding of Jesus with the ancient promise that all peoples on earth would be blessed through the fulfillment of the covenant (Ac. 3:25), and the statement by Peter to his Jewish compatriots that God "sent him first to you" implies that after the Jewish mission the boundaries would be expanded (Ac. 3:26).

A small but important step toward this international scope was made in the selection of seven leaders to administer the daily assistance to widows. A likely longstanding tradition within normative Judaism was for Aramaic-speaking Jews to have status priority over Greek-speaking Jews,[11] and this favoritism reared its head among the Christian Jews (Ac. 6:1).[12] The decision of the apostles was to appoint seven leaders, and since all seven names are Greek (Ac. 6:5), we probably should assume they were from the Greek-speaking Jewish community. One, as is clearly stated, was a proselyte. This elevation of Greek-speaking Jews to positions of leadership demonstrates the first small crack in the old levels of cultural hierarchy.

One of these leaders, Stephen, was ultimately stoned to death after a confrontation with the Sanhedrin. His recitation of Israelite history, and especially his emphasis on ancient Israel's rebellion that mirrored the recent rebellion against Jesus, ended with his being dragged out and stoned (Ac. 7:57—8:1). The subsequent rise of intense persecution drove the Jerusalem Christians into the outlying regions of Judea and Samaria (Ac. 8:2), and everywhere they went, they told the message of Jesus (Ac. 8:4)—but to Jews only (Ac. 11:19).

---

[11] This one-upmanship seems to be implied in Paul's use of the term "Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:6; 2 Co. 11:22, cf. F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 42-43.

[12] Luke's terms Ἑβραίους (= Hebrews) and Ἑλληνιστῶν (= Hellenists) probably refer to differences between those who spoke only Greek and those who spoke primarily Hebrew or Aramaic, cf. C. Moule, "Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?" *Expository Times 70* (1958-59): 100-102.

Four events now followed in a cluster, each of them critical junctures in this widening of the Christian mission. In the first, Philip, one of the seven mentioned earlier, preached to some Samaritans, who accepted the message of Christ (Ac. 8:5, 12). This was definitely a crossing of ethnic barriers that no one anticipated. The Jerusalem church sent a delegation to investigate (Ac. 8:14). The upshot was that God gave the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans in the presence of Peter and John (Ac. 8:15-17). So impressed were Peter and John that they, also, began to preach Christ in many Samaritan villages (Ac. 8:25). The second event also concerned Philip, who baptized an African proselyte (Ac. 8:36-38). In the third, Saul, the arch inquisitor for the Sanhedrin, was converted by a direct confrontation with the risen Jesus. Most important was the direct statement by Jesus in a vision that Saul was now to become a "chosen instrument to carry my name to the Gentiles" (Ac. 9:15).[13] In later reflection, Paul also recounted that when he returned to Jerusalem, he experienced a trance in which Christ reiterated this commission (Ac. 22:21; cf. 26:17-18, 20). Once again, Luke records the basic rubric "to the Jew first, then to the Gentile" (Ac. 26:23). Finally, in the fourth incident, Peter was constrained by God to preach the message of Jesus to a Roman military officer at Caesarea (Ac. 10:1-43). The result was that while he was still speaking, God gave the gift of the Spirit to these non-Jews (Ac. 10:44). The Jerusalem Jews with Peter were stunned (Ac. 10:45-46), but they could not deny what they had seen, so Peter ordered that this family of Gentiles be given Christian baptism (Ac. 10:47-48).

Peter's experience in Caesarea did not go down well when it was reported in Jerusalem (Ac. 11:1-3). Samaria was one thing, even African proselytes another—but a raw Gentile? This was more than the Christian Jews in Jerusalem were prepared to tolerate. Peter was examined thoroughly when he returned, but when he had told the whole story, especially the part about not calling anything "impure that God has made clean" (Ac. 11:9-10) and the resulting gift of the Spirit to these Gentiles, a direct act of God (Ac. 11:15), the Jerusalem church made no further objection. They concluded, *So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life* (Ac.11:18)!

This entire series of events led to the establishment of the first interracial church in Antioch, Syria (Ac. 11:19-21). Once again, the Jerusalem church sent an investigative representative, Barnabas, who vouched for the legitimacy of the mission (Ac. 11:22-24). After finding Saul, Barnabas included him in a relief mission to the Jerusalem church in

[13] Whether after this event Paul preached to Gentiles in Arabia is not clear (Ga. 1:16-17), but he well might have done so.

which the Greek Christians in Antioch sent an offering to their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters to the south (Ac. 11:27-30; 12:25).

Now the stage was set for the expansion of the Christian mission to the Mediterranean world, a mission in which Antioch, as the sending church, and Paul, as the primary missionary, would take the message of Jesus to both Jews and non-Jews. Paul's work concludes in Rome, the very center of the empire.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH (1-2)

Jesus' Ascension and Commission (1:1-11)

If we are correct that the primary purpose of Luke in Acts was to demonstrate how the Christian movement became international, then it should be no surprise that the opening is paradigmatic for the whole book. Here, Luke will make the transition from the story of Jesus to the story of the church. Most importantly, he will show how the story of Jesus *continues* in the story of the church, even though the Lord ascended into the heavens. Further, he will confirm that the underlying cause motivating the church toward internationalism was the commission of the risen Lord himself.

The Prologue (1:1-5)

Luke's second volume commences with a reference to his first volume, his gospel. Both were written under the patronage of Theophilus, an otherwise unknown person and probably a well-to-do Christian (1:1a; cf. Lk. 1:3).[14] While some have suggested that the name Theophilus (= God-lover, Beloved of God) may have been a pseudonym for the church itself, most scholars agree that he probably was a real person, since the dedications of literary works in the Greco-Roman Period usually referred to real persons. The fact that his name was Greek may have hinted at the wider audience that Luke sought to address, in particular, his Gentile readership.

Especially suggestive is Luke's phrase "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (1:1b). The implied message, clearly, is that what happened in the earthly life of Jesus began what now was to be continued in the life of his followers. The verbs "do" and "teach" are an admirable summary of the life of Jesus, and they become an admirable summary of the history of the

[14] It was customary to dedicate literary works to a person whose generosity made possible their publication, cf. *ABD* (1992) VI.511.

church Luke records. The earthly ministry of Jesus concluded when he ascended into the heavens (1:2a), but most important, his parting act was to give his chosen apostles (cf. Lk. 6:13) instructions for the future through the Holy Spirit (1:2b). As the Messiah, Jesus was the bearer of the Spirit (cf. Lk. 4:1, 14, 18), so his commission to his apostles was "through" (διὰ) the Spirit. His passion and resurrection was followed by a forty day period during which he appeared numerous times (1:3a; cf. Lk. 24). These appearances to the ones Luke later will call "witnesses whom God had chosen" would become a major component in the apostolic preaching of the gospel (cf. 2:32; 3:15; 10:39-41; 13:30-31). It was an important factor in the choosing of a replacement for Judas Iscariot (cf. 1:22). The truth of the historical reality of Jesus' resurrection does not rest merely on a subjective spiritual impression derived from the empty tomb, but also on eyewitnesses who "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (cf. 1:4a; 10:41).

During these forty days, Jesus instructed his apostles about the kingdom or reign of God (1:3b). The language "kingdom of God",[15] which appears copiously in Luke's Gospel, was a way of describing Israel's eschatological hope that God would rule over Israel and the world in the way he intended—a reign in which the Torah would be fulfilled and the land cleansed.[16] In Acts, Luke shows that the idea of God's reign begins in the good news about Jesus (cf. 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31) and extends into the eschatological future (Ac. 14:22). Jesus' final instructions were for his apostles to remain in Jerusalem in order to receive the messianic gift of the Spirit the Father had promised (1:4; cf. Lk. 24:49b).[17] This gift had been announced by John the Baptist (1:5; cf. Lk. 3:15-16), but now Jesus indicated it would be given in the very near future.[18]

---

[15] The idea of a kingdom (βασιλεία) is concerned with the rule of God. It is not so much referring to a realm as to a reign, cf. G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 122-148.

[16] N. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 302-338.

[17] In the tragedy of the exile, Ezekiel saw the withdrawal of the Spirit from the 1st temple (Eze. 9:3; 10:4, 18-19; 11:22-23). However, he also predicted that in the restoration of Israel the Spirit would return (Eze. 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29; 43:4-5). Other prophets said much the same thing (Jl. 2:28-29; Is. 32:15; 44:3; 59:21; Zec. 12:10). Inasmuch as this promised return of the Spirit did not occur in the early years of the 2nd temple (cf. Mal. 3:1), and in view of the demise of the writing prophets, the Spirit was considered to have been quenched. The hope was that it would be poured out when the Messiah came, cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971), pp. 80-85. Luke, of course, pointedly shows the return of the quenched Spirit in the birth and life of Jesus (cf. Lk. 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:26-27; 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18).

[18] While in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity the term "baptism with the Spirit" is commonly used to describe the experience of individual Christians, Luke does not use it that way. Luke only uses the term "baptized with the Spirit" to refer to the message of John the Baptist and what happened at Pentecost (cf. 1:5; 11:16). Luke's consistent language for the individual Christian's experience of the Spirit is to be "filled" (πίμπλημι or πληρόω, cf. 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9, 52).

Final Instructions (1:6-11)

If Luke says that Jesus "gave instructions" to his apostles (1:2), here he offers the heart of those instructions during Jesus' final appearance. A word should be said about the timing of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Typically, Christians have supposed that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter, hung around for forty days, and then ascended a few days before Pentecost. However, there is much to commend the view that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter and ascended into heaven that same day. In the first place, Jesus' resurrected body was now unlimited by space-time restrictions, so there was no need for him to remain on earth. Second, the Letter to the Hebrews depicts Christ as offering his own blood in a heavenly sanctuary (cf. He. 9:11-12), and it seems more natural that this is envisioned as happening in one great act of exaltation from death to enthronement. Third, on Easter morning Jesus directly told Mary Magdalene that he was ascending to the Father (Jn. 20:17), and this statement reads most naturally as something in the near future. If this is the correct understanding, then we should think of Jesus as already exalted to the Father's right hand, but returning for brief periods in order to appear to this apostles. His final appearance was on the occasion forty days after his resurrection.[19]

On this final occasion, the disciples still were unclear about the reign of God. Popular Jewish expectations when God would be King were frequently couched in the images of holy war with Israel victorious over all her enemies.[20] There was a very real sense in which the Jewish community still understood itself to be in exile due to Roman occupation (cf. Lk. 24:21). Whether Jesus' disciples still wondered about this (Jesus, of course, had redefined holy war in spiritual terms and the enemy as Satan, not Rome) or had other questions is not detailed, but clearly they believed that the arrival of God's reign would be located at a specific juncture of time and that Israel's restoration to political autonomy would be the centerpiece (1:6). In light of Jesus' resurrection, they asked whether this were now the time![21]

Jesus redirected their attention to the coming of the Spirit. The issue of national restoration must be set aside (1:7), and the fact of it being set aside implies that the true nature of the kingdom of God was not to be

---

[19] P. Toon, *The Ascension of Our Lord* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), pp. 9-12, 125-126; M. Harris, *Raised Immortal: the Relation Between Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1983).

[20] N. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 448-449.

[21] Since the verb ἐρωτάω (= to ask) appears here in the imperfect tense, it is entirely appropriate to translate this as "they used to ask" (so Fitzmyer, AB) or some other construction that shows the repeated course of the action. The most characteristic use of the imperfect is to show progress in past time, cf. H. Dana and J. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955), p. 187.

defined merely by Jewish nationalism. As Jesus had said before his passion, humans were not privy to God's eschatological time clock (cf. Mk. 13:32). Instead, the disciples must concentrate on the coming empowerment by the Spirit that would motivate them to serve as Jesus' witnesses (1:8a). The geographical progression inherent in "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth" would become programmatic for the rest of the Book of Acts (1:8b), for this is exactly how the history plays out. The commission to be witnesses agrees in substance with the other accounts of what has come to be called Jesus' "great commission" (Mt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15; Lk. 24:47-48; Jn. 20:21).

Then, Jesus ascended into heaven for the final time (1:9). Two figures, apparently angels, appeared to instruct them that Jesus now had been "taken… into heaven", but he would "come back in the same way" (1:10-11). In his earlier volume, Luke described Jesus as ascending into heaven while in the very act of blessing them with outstretched hands (cf. Lk. 24:50-51).

The New Israel (1:12-26)

In both Luke and Acts the story of ascension concludes with the disciples returning to Jerusalem (1:12a; cf. Lk. 24:52), though the gospel adds that their location was in the temple (Lk. 24:53), and Acts indicates they spent their nights in an upstairs room (1:13). Perhaps this room was in the temple precincts, or perhaps it was near the temple facilities, and they merely spent their nights there but their daytimes in the temple courts.[22] Staying there were the eleven apostles—all except Judas Iscariot who was now dead by suicide (cf. Lk. 6:14-16). They were joined by Jesus' mother, the other women who had been last at the cross and first at the tomb as the initial witnesses of Jesus' resurrection (Lk. 8:2-3; 23:49; 24:1, 10), and Jesus' half-brothers (1:14; cf. Mk. 6:3). Together, they spent their time in prayer, presumably in the temple as Luke says in his gospel.

The first official decision by the gathered disciples, at that time about 120 in all, was to reconstitute the number of apostles as twelve. This decision has huge significance, since it shows that they considered Jesus' appointment of the original Twelve to be symbolic of the reconstitution of a

[22] Early Christian tradition associated the upper room with the Holy Zion Church, where it was believed also to be the site of the Last Supper, cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 7.4. Epiphanius recorded that when Hadrian destroyed Jerusalem, the church with the upper room survived, and archaeologist Bargil Pixner, who excavated the site, believes he has found the famous church where the apostles prayed after returning to Jerusalem, cf. B. Pixner, "Church of the Apostles Found on Mt. Zion," *BAR* (May/June 1990), pp. 16-35, 60.

new Israel.[23] The sanctity of the number Twelve, which went all the way back to the sons of Jacob, could hardly have been merely a coincidence. Peter actually tied the need for the replacement of Judas to a fulfillment of prophecy in two Psalms, both ascribed to David (1:15-20; cf. Ps. 69:25; 109:8). Parenthetically, Peter's leadership in this decision also included a brief description of Judas Iscariot's end, which offers different details than the account of Matthew (27:3-5).[24]

The reference to a "fulfillment" in these Psalms must be taken along the lines of a later recapitulation of the experience of an ancient person. Neither Psalms 69 nor 109 are set forth as predictions about the future *per se*, but rather, as prayers about the suffering of someone in ancient times. Nevertheless, the early Christians were not slow to see the striking parallels between the sufferer in Psalm 69 and the sufferings of Jesus (cf. Jn. 2:17//Ps. 69:9; Jn. 15:25//Ps. 69:4; Ro. 11:9-10//Ps. 69:22-23; Ro. 15:3//Ps. 69:9). The curse beginning in Psalm 109:6, which arose out of a betrayal of friendship (Ps. 109:4-5), in the Septuagint reads, "Set a sinner against him, and let the devil stand at his right hand." Such words seemed especially appropriate for Judas, whose betrayal of the Lord was considered to be the result of an alliance with Satan (cf. Lk. 22:3; Jn. 13:27).[25] Hence, when later the Psalm says that another will take his place of leadership, Peter took this as scriptural authority for the replacement of Judas.

The Twelve as the core community for a new definition of Israel were to serve as eyewitnesses of the life, ministry, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus as the Messiah (1:21-23). The prime qualification to be such a witness must have been an association with Jesus that went all the

---

[23] Even though there are some anomalies to be resolved between Luke's lists and the other lists of the Twelve Apostles (cf. Mt. 10:2-4; Mk. 3:16-19), clearly by all accounts the number twelve is sacrosanct. This probably means that the Twelve symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Mt. 19:28), cf. E. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 98-106.

[24] These differences, of course, are not irreconcilable. Judas indeed could have hung himself, the rope snapped, and he was disemboweled by the fall. Further, the field bought by "Judas" could simply be a circumlocution of the blood money used by the priests to buy the field, cf. I. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 64-65.

[25] Various efforts have been made to reclaim Judas on one ground or another. Most recently, the Gospel of Judas, a Gnostic text long known from secondary references to have existed in ancient literature (but no copy of the text was available until recently), was released by the National Geographic Society in May 2006. This text, for which the National Geographic Society paid more than a million dollars for the right to publish, portrays Judas as betraying Jesus at Jesus' own request, thus making it possible for Jesus to escape his physical body and go to heaven as pure spirit (a Gnostic ideal, since Gnostics believed the world of the flesh was created by an evil deity, and only by secret knowledge could anyone escape the material prison of the body). Though sensational, this text offers virtually nothing historical, and as James Robinson, the esteemed scholarly editor of the Nag Hammadi Texts (collection of Gnostic literature) put it, the newly released Gospel of Judas was a "dud". Hershel Shanks, the Jewish editor of Biblical Archaeology Review put it most pointedly: "The idea that this new gospel might be an accurate historical report of the reason for Judas's betrayal of Jesus is arrant nonsense," *BAR* (July/August 2006), pp. 4, 66.

way back to the period of John the Baptist. Peripherally, this qualification reflects upon the character of the four canonical gospels, which concern themselves with the messiahship of Jesus from his baptism by John to his resurrection on Easter and exaltation in the heavens. Later, Gnostic literature would seek to address the childhood of Jesus (e.g., Infancy Gospel of Thomas), but other than the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke and a short account about Jesus' first temple visit, extensive details about Jesus' childhood or young adulthood in Nazareth was not part of the gospel for the earliest Christians.

Candidates for the vacant office of Judas naturally were limited, for even among the 120 mentioned earlier (cf. 1:15) or the 500 mentioned by Paul (1 Co. 15:6), only a few would have had a history of close association with Jesus as far back as the ministry of John the Baptist. In the end, two candidates were offered, Joseph (Justus[26]) Barsabbas and Matthias.[27] After prayer, the group chose between them by lots, the method of choice used in ancient Israel for the apportionment of tribal land among the twelve clans (cf. Nu. 26:55; Jos. 14:2). The use of lots (גורל) presumes that the final decision would be left up to God, just as Moses commanded for the ancient Israelites, and as Gealy has said, "The number of the Twelve, the New Israel, could be made full only by the Lord Jesus himself."[28] The prayer to the Lord invited the final decision to be divine.[29] The lot fell to Matthias, and he was included in the Twelve.[30]

The Messianic Gift of the Spirit (Ac. 2)

[26] His Latin name

[27] Historically, little is known of either man. Neither is featured in any story from the four gospels, though Eusebius passes down a story apparently gleaned from Papias, who in turn heard it from the daughters of Philip the Evangelist (Ac. 21:8-9), that Joseph on one occasion drank poison but was miraculously unharmed by God's grace, cf. *Ecclesiastical History* III.39.9.

[28] F. Gealy, *IDB* (1962) 3.164.

[29] Some interpreters understand the vocative "Lord" (**Κύριε**) to be a direct reference to Christ, but it seems more likely, without any additional contextual explanation, that the title refers to God, which seems to be Luke's more typical pattern, especially for prayer (cf. Ac. 4:26, 29; 7:33; 8:22, 24; 10:14; 11:8).

[30] Some have suggested that this whole effort was a mistake, and the twelfth apostle actually was St. Paul. Such reasoning is specious, however, not only because Luke offers no such doubt (he speaks of "the Twelve" even prior to Paul's conversion, cf. 6:2), but also because Paul distinguishes himself from "the Twelve" (1 Co. 15:5). To be sure, Paul and others were apostles in the sense of missionaries—Luke makes this quite clear (4:4, 14)—but equally clear Paul and the others could not have belonged to the Twelve who were the primary witnesses of Jesus' earthly ministry from the time of John the Baptist (3:15; 5:29-32;10:39-41). Paul, in his sermon at Pisidian Antioch, speaks of the apostles who traveled with Jesus "from Galilee to Jerusalem" as the primary witnesses, and he does not include himself among them (13:30-31).

Luke heralded the returned of the quenched Holy Spirit early in his gospel (cf. Lk. 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:26-27), and more particularly, he heralded Jesus as the bearer of the Spirit in fulfillment of the ancient prophecies (Lk. 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18). Like the other synoptic gospels, he describes a critical component of John the Baptist's preaching as announcing that the Messiah would baptize his people with the Holy Spirit (Lk. 3:15-16). Just prior to his final ascension, Jesus recalled John's prediction, indicating that the fulfillment would happen in only a few days (Ac. 1:4-5, 8). The disciples were to return to Jerusalem and wait. John's Gospel echoes Luke's narrative by describing Jesus' promise that those who believed in him would have the Spirit flow in life-giving streams (Jn. 7:37-8). However, John adds the editorial comment that Jesus referred to the gift of the Spirit which as yet had not been given, since the passion and glorification of Jesus was not yet accomplished (Jn. 7:39).[31]

As it turns out, Pentecost would be the only occasion where waiting for the Spirit is enjoined. All other outpourings of the Spirit subsequent to the initial one would come without prior instruction, without waiting, and without forewarning.[32]

What Happened on Pentecost (2:1-13)

The baptism with the Holy Spirit occurred on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost (Weeks), the festival marking the end of the grain harvest (2:1a).[33] Though Luke does not draw attention to it, the harvest festival fits admirably with the theology that the Spirit was given to empower the disciples to "harvest" those who would come to faith in Christ Jesus (cf. Jn. 4:35-38). Pentecost was the second of the great Jewish pilgrim festivals (Lv. 23:15-16; Nu. 28:26-31; Dt. 16:9-12), and many pilgrims had traveled to Jerusalem to attend. The disciples still were in Jerusalem waiting together, just as Jesus

---

[31] This statement that the Spirit had not yet been given should be qualified to some degree, since Jesus also indicated a role of the Spirit in the ministry of the Twelve even before his passion (cf. Mt. 10:19-20). John's Gospel also describes a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus in which he "breathed in them (ἐνεφύσησεν) and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (Jn. 20:22). There seems no reason to doubt that John envisioned this occasion, sometimes called "the Johannine Pentecost", as a genuine endowment of the Spirit, cf. L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 846-847. Like Luke, John associates the gift of the Spirit with Jesus' commission that the disciples should become participants in the Father's mission to the world (Jn. 20:21).

[32] This observation raises a question about the common practice among Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians of waiting or "tarrying" for the gift of the Spirit (usually taking the form of special prayer services). There is no biblical precedent for such practice nor any historical precedent in Christian history until the early 20th century.

[33] The Grecianized term "Pentecost", which also is used by Josephus (*Antiquities* 3.10.6) and in the intertestamental literature (Tobit 2:1; 2 Maccabees 12:31-32), derives from the fact that the feast fell on the day after a "week of weeks" (49 days) from the Passover, hence fifty days.

had instructed them (2:1b). The "place" is not specified, other than it was called a "house" (οἶκον). Traditionally, this house has been supposed to be the upstairs room, where the disciples had been staying (cf. 1:13), but since Luke also specifies the temple (cf. Lk. 24:53), it may well have been some structure within or adjacent to the temple precincts.[34] Certainly a group of 120 disciples plus the large company of pilgrims who witnessed the event argues for a large space.

Abruptly, the sound of forcefully blowing wind filled the house (2:2). What appeared to be separated flames of fire rested on each of the disciples (2:3).[35] In a remarkable reversal of what happened in the Genesis account of the confusion of languages (cf. Ge. 11:7-9), all the disciples began to speak in the various languages of the Mediterranean, African and Mesopotamian world as the Spirit enabled them (2:4).[36] Luke's typical language is that the disciples were "filled" (πιμπλημι) with the Spirit (Lk. 1:15, 41, 67; Ac. 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9), an infusion of the Spirit empowering them to be witnesses of the Christ.[37]

The miraculous sign of languages erupted in the language of praise (cf. 2:11b). Again, this is typical for Luke, since on the two other occasions where tongues are described, the recipients were "speaking in tongues and praising God" (cf. 10:46) and "they spoke in tongues and prophesied" (cf. 19:6). Prophecy, also, is the language of praise for Luke (cf. Lk. 1:41-42, 67ff.), which in turn agrees with Paul (1 Co. 14:16-17). There seems to be no indication that these languages were used for preaching the Christian message.[38] Rather, Peter seems to address the crowd in a common language, probably Aramaic (2:14).

---

[34] W. Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 72.

[35] Some have supposed that the Holy Spirit fell only upon the Twelve apostles, but this interpretation flies in the face of the grammar. To be sure, Luke lists the apostles earlier (1:13, 26), but the dominant antecedent to the pronouns "they" and "them" (2:1, 3) is the group of 120 (1:15).

[36] That these were real human languages and not simply ecstatic gibberish is clearly indicated by the Greek terms διαλεκτος (= language, 2:6) and ἡμετέραις γλώσσαις (= our tongues, 2:11), the latter referring to the list of nations in 2:9-11.

[37] While Pentecostals usually treat the term "filled with the Spirit" as describing the initial gift of the Spirit, such an interpretation does not fit Luke's usage. Luke certainly envisions people being "filled" who already had the gift of the Spirit (cf. 4:8, 31; 7:55; 13:9), and his use of the term militates against the idea that being "Spirit-filled" is a single, initial experience. Rather, Luke's use of the term seems to refer to the occasional, sudden infusion of the Spirit enabling the recipient(s) to speak God's message.

[38] Some of the early Pentecostals believed that the gift of speaking in tongues would enable them to speak in other languages to preach the gospel in foreign countries without the hard work of actually going to language school. Between 1906 and 1909, more than a dozen of the early Pentecostals traveled to remote outpost missions, believing that when they arrived they would be able to preach to the nationals in the vernacular through the gift of tongues. To their disappointment, they discovered that their tongues were unintelligible to the nationals, and the Pentecostals soon gave up on this enterprise. The experience of A. G. Carr is illustrative, who, along with his family, left the Azuza Street mission and arrived in Calcutta in January 1907, expecting to be able to preach in Bengali. By October of that year, he and his wife had

The response of the Jewish pilgrims who witnessed this phenomenon was mixed. Some were bewildered and amazed (2:5-8, 12), others critical (2:13). How they discerned that the speakers were Galileans is unclear, though it may have been their accent.[39] In the list of nations, Luke demonstrates the wide representation of Diaspora Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the festival (2:9-11). Jews from Parthia, Media, Elam and Mesopotamia were from the Babylonian Diaspora. Jews from Judea were local residents. Jews from Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia were from the Diaspora in Asia Minor. Jews from Egypt, Libya and Cyrene were from the African Diaspora. Jews from Rome and Crete were from the Mediterranean. Jews from Arabia were from the middle-eastern deserts. While they all were Jews, as Luke indicates, their wide geographical distribution "from every nation under heaven" hints at what would come later—the gospel to the nations of the world.[40]

Peter's Sermon (2:14-36)

As spokesman for the other apostles, Peter addressed the crowd, defending his compatriots against the charge of drunkenness and citing the fulfillment of the prophet Joel's prediction (2:14-16). In the context of Joel's oracle that after judgment would come restoration, God promised "after this" he would pour out his Spirit "on all flesh" (**עַל־כָּל־בָּשָׂר**). Clearly, Peter understood the expression "after this" to refer to the eschatological climax, for he interprets Joel's expression as "in the last days". With the coming of the Messiah, the last days had arrived (cf. Lk. 24:25-27; 1 Co. 10:11; He. 1:2; 9:26).[41] Further, while in the context of Joel's oracle the expression "on all flesh" probably would have been taken to refer to all the people of Judah, in Peter's citation the implications are wider, given Luke's theological agendum for Acts. Peter may have said more than he knew, but Luke surely understood that "on all flesh" must include the Gentile world as well. The gift of the Spirit would cross gender barriers and age restrictions, resulting in visions, dreams, prophecies and the cosmic signs of the Day of Yahweh (2:17-21). Most important, "all" would be saved who called on the Lord's

---

moved to Hong Kong to enter language school. His later testimony was, "So far I have not seen anyone who is able to preach to the natives in their own tongue with the languages given with the Holy Ghost," cf. G. Wacker, *Heaven Below* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2001), pp. 45-50.

[39] The Galilean dialect apparently featured a difference in the pronunciation of gutturals, and this was noted by Matthew with respect to Peter's accent (cf. Mt. 26:73), cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Act [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 59.

[40] Some have suspected that the word "Jews" is an interpolation, but the textual evidence strongly favors its inclusion despite it not being found in Codex Sinaiticus, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 290-291.

[41] D. Lewis, *3 Crucial Questions About the Last Days* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 50-68.

name! Again, Peter may have said more than he presently knew, but for Luke the "all" (πᾶς) meant crossing ethnic barriers as well, and "calling on the name of the Lord" meant calling on Jesus.

From this text, Peter immediately began to preach the messiahship of Jesus. Many of those present—especially those from Judea—could attest personally to the character of Jesus' ministry and miracles (2:22). His trial and crucifixion in Jerusalem was not incidental to his ministry, but was predetermined by God (2:23), and Peter held his listeners personally responsible for Jesus' death.[42] His resurrection, an act of God, meant that the power of death had been broken (2:24), and Peter cited Psalm 16 to support his claim (2:25-28). This ancient Psalm speaks of the single-mindedness of having one's affections centered on God (Ps. 16:1-8), a focus that one day will be rewarded by rescue from death itself and the joy of being eternally in the presence of God (16:9-11).[43] As with many other Old Testament texts, this one, which voices the hope of an ancient person of faith, is taken as a double-entendre to refer also to Christ. David may have been speaking about himself, but he also spoke about "Him"! Especially the phrases about not being abandoned to Sheol nor decomposition,[44] but being rewarded with the "paths of life" and filled with joy "in God's presence", rang true for what had happened to Jesus on Easter morning.

David could not have exhausted the meaning of this psalm in his own life and death, since everyone knew he died, was buried, and his traditional tomb was near Siloam (2:29).[45] David, Peter asserted, was a prophet, and he knew that God had sworn on oath that his dynasty would survive so that one of his descendants would rise to sit on his throne (2:30; cf. Ps. 132:11; 2 Sa. 7:11b-16).[46] Hence, David's words about being rescued from Sheol were to be redirected toward Jesus (2:31). In Jesus' resurrection, attested by the

---

[42] Peter would have found inexplicable the modern effort, born out of a sensitivity to long-standing anti-Semitism, to lay blame for Jesus' crucifixion on the Romans alone. He equally would have found it strange to think that his own accusation was in itself in any way anti-Semitic (Peter, himself, was a Jew, as were all the apostles). Later Christians may inappropriately have developed an anti-Semitic mind-set out of such passages as these, but Peter does not hesitate to put the crucifixion of Jesus squarely upon the shoulders of his listeners without at the same time casting them in the light of racial slur.

[43] D. Kidner, *Psalm 1-72: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), pp. 83-86.

[44] Incidentally, this passage, along with Ro. 10:6-7 and 1 Pe. 3:18-20; 4:6, became the ground for the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into hell."

[45] It probably was on the site where later would be the Holy Zion Church, cf. J. McRay, *Archaeology & the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 201.

[46] For the kingdom of Judah, this promise generally was expected to continue perpetually in an unbroken series of Davidic sons, but Jeremiah predicted that Jehoiachin would be exiled and the dynastic succession broken (Je. 22:24-30). Out of this broken succession, Jeremiah anticipated a future king who would rule from David's throne in righteousness (cf. Je. 23:5-8; 30:8-9; 33:14-18), and this promise was confirmed by Yahweh's solemn oath (Je. 33:19-26).

apostles who saw him after he rose, and most of all in his exaltation to the right hand of God, which also was part of the promise to David's greater son (Ps. 110:1), these messianic ideals had been fulfilled (2:32, 34-35; cf. Lk. 22:69). From his session at God's right hand, Jesus, the messianic bearer of the Spirit, had poured out the messianic gift upon his disciples (2:33)![47]

With a final "therefore", Peter summed it up: God had confirmed Jesus, crucified and now risen, to be both Messiah and Lord (3:36)![48] As the Messiah, he was the hoped-for deliverer; as the Lord, he ruled as sovereign over all things. For Peter to apply the title Lord (κύριος) to Jesus was a bold initiative, since it was the common appellation in the Septuagint for Yahweh as well as generally in Judaism.[49] Peter's sermon, as would be true for all his speeches recorded in Acts (cf. 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43), focuses upon the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. The scope of Peter's preaching can be summarized as:[50]

1) The age of fulfillment has dawned.
2) This fulfillment has come through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.
3) By virtue of his resurrection, Jesus has been exalted to God's right hand.
4) The Holy Spirit is the sign of Christ's present power and glory.
5) The messianic age has been inaugurated.

The Appeal (2:37-41)

Peter's indictment struck home! His listeners, at least those from Judea, knew that he spoke the truth about their role in the death of Jesus, and they were convinced of the essential correctness of his interpretation of these events (2:37). Probably the entire group from whatever country would have understood the Sanhedrin's proactive role in Jesus' arrest and execution to have been performed representatively for them all. Smitten in conscience, they asked what they should do. The question, "What should we do?", is

[47] It is of general theological interest to observe the interplay between what later church theologians would call the "persons" of the Godhead: the exalted Son receiving from the Father the authority to bestow the Holy Spirit.

[48] Peter said that God "made" (ἐποιησεν) Jesus both Lord and Christ. However, this should not be taken to mean that his lordship and messiahship dated only from the resurrection. Rather, what Jesus had been born to be all along was now confirmed to be true by this climactic act of God. God had vindicated the claim (cf. Ro. 1:4)!

[49] O. Cullman, *Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. S. Cuthrie and C. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), pp. 199ff.

[50] The classical statement of this summary is in C. Dodd's, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 21-23.

similar to but not precisely the same as the question later to be asked by the Philippian jailor, "What must I do to be saved" (cf. 16:30). First, the context here is entirely Jewish, and all the Jews present would have assumed without debate their inclusion in God's chosen people. The idea that they were not yet "saved" probably did not enter into it. Rather, in view of their egregious participation in crucifying God's Messiah, the issue concerned what course of action lay open to them? Could their great error be remedied?

Peter responded emphatically: yes, it could! The path open to them was to change their viewpoint about Jesus, accepting him as God's promised Messiah (2:38a). This is the force of the term "repent" (μετάνοια), which carries its Hebraic nuance "to turn" or "to change one's mind" (שׁוּב).[51] Perhaps more to the point, this was the call of John the Baptist, who urged his listeners with a message of "the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk. 1:4). Peter now follows in kind. He directly connects repentance and baptism to the forgiveness of sins,[52] in particular, their corporate sin in the rejection and crucifixion of God's Messiah (2:38b).[53] They now should be baptized into the name of Jesus Christ, the very one they had rejected!

The question of baptismal formula has sometimes been raised, especially since Acts 2:38 ("in the name of Jesus Christ") contains a different phrase than Matthew 28:19 ("in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"). Several things should be noted. First, there is no reason to believe that the efficacy of Christian baptism depends upon

---

[51] Repentance or "turning" (שׁוּב) was the repeated message of the ancient prophets (e.g., Is. 31:6; Je. 3:7, 10, 14; 18:8; Eze. 14:6; 18:30; 33:11; Ho. 12:6; 14;1-2; Jl. 2:12-13; Zec. 1:3; Mal. 4:6).

[52] The preposition εἰς used with the accusative case (= into, toward) means "with a view toward". It cannot be understood as "because of" (as though it referenced a past event), but equally, it cannot be taken as causative (as though baptism were the effective agent of forgiveness). Rather, the preposition expresses purpose, and that purpose is linked both to repentance and baptism.

[53] The connecting conjunction "and" (καὶ) is important, since it links repentance and baptism—both of them—toward the end in view of the forgiveness of sins. There are not two steps here, as though repentance were disconnected from baptism, nor can one say that baptism by itself is for the forgiveness of sins as though forgiveness were mechanical. Rather, repentance is the inward change of mind toward God and his Messiah, and baptism is the outward ritual that expresses this inward change. Both because of the well-known practice of ritual immersions in Judaism as well as because of the baptisms conducted by John the Baptist, Peter's listeners would have understood the significance of the baptism ritual. Jewish ritual immersions were symbolic, not hygienic, and they pointed to ritual purification. They were required prior to entering the temple, before offering sacrifice, and after acquiring ritual impurity, cf. W. LaSor, "Discovering what Jewish Miqva'ot Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism," BAR (Jan/Feb 1987), pp. 52-59. Further, pagan slaves who entered a Jewish household were compelled to receive baptism into the household, and if emancipated, they were baptized "in the name of freedom". Jewish proselytes, also, were baptized as a ritual of incorporation into the Jewish faith community, cf. G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 90-91 and J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), p. 320. Hence, baptism was a rite of passage and it marked a new allegiance. That new allegiance was to Jesus, God's Messiah.

some precision in wording. In many baptismal occasions, Luke does not detail the wording at all (cf. 2:41; 8:36-38; 9:18; 16:15, 33; 18:8), and if this were important, we should have expected him to have done so. Where he does use formulaic type phrases (8:16; 10:48), the language is not identical.[54] By the end of the 1st century there seems to have been no demand for formulaic precision, since one finds both types of wording virtually side by side:

> *But concerning baptism, thus shall you baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water.*
>
> Didache 7

> *But let no one eat or drink this Eucharistic thanksgiving, but they that have been baptized into the name of the Lord.*
>
> Didache 9

Also, it may well have been that the shorter formula was especially appropriate for Jewish converts, since already they acknowledged Yahweh, the one true God. For them, the issue was to acknowledge Jesus as God's Messiah. Matthew's formula, which is given in conjunction with a worldwide commission to the nations, would have been especially appropriate in a Gentile context, where a disavowal of the Greco-Roman pantheon was required and where the understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit would have been germane (cf. 1 Co. 8:5-6).

The final phrase in Peter's charge was a promise. The gift of the Holy Spirit that had been poured out upon the 120 was equally available for all who accepted the messiahship of Jesus—to them, their children and all who were "far off" (2:38c-39).[55] Whether Peter at that time fully comprehended the implications of those "far off", Luke certainly did! Peter continued his

---

[54] He uses different prepositions (ἐπὶ in 2:38, εἰς in 8:16 and 19:5, and ἐν in 10:48); sometimes he says "Jesus Christ" (2:38 and 10:48) and sometimes simply "Jesus" (8:16; 19:5).

[55] It goes considerably beyond anything Luke says to contend that the sign of other tongues must necessarily accompany the gift of the Spirit. Certainly the violent wind and the flames of fire were not repeated elsewhere, and while the sign of tongues happened twice more in Luke's record (10:46; 19:6), possibly a third time (8:17-19), it seems not to have been some sort of indispensable phenomenon. When Peter recounted to the Jerusalem elders what had happened at the Gentile soldier's house, he had to go all the way back to the original Pentecost to find a parallel (11:15), which in turn suggests that this sign, while repeatable, was not ubiquitous. The question of the early 20th century Pentecostals was, "What is the distinctive manifestation of the Spirit?", and they concluded that it was the sign of other tongues, cf. J. Nichol, *Pentecostalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 27-28. James Dunn is exactly on the mark to say, *Luke was not asking this question; nor was he attempting to answer it* (emphasis his), cf. J. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 190. To be sure, Luke understands other tongues to be a manifestation of the Spirit, but he does not see it as *the* manifestation of the Spirit, Dunn, p. 191.

appeal to the end that some 3000 accepted the call for baptism (2:40-41). Facilities for the baptism of 3000 converts is likely to have included the various *mikva'ot* in the vicinity of the temple.[56]

The First Community of Christians (2:42-47)

Luke now summarizes the character and practice of the new community. They continued to by taught by the Twelve, and their fellowship included the Eucharistic meal and prayers (2:42).[57] The same authority to heal that Jesus had conferred on the apostles in their tours during Jesus' lifetime (Lk. 9:1-2; 10:9, 17) now continued in the life of the church (2:43). The new community also practiced a common life in which they pooled their resources and shared among themselves as the need arose (2:44-45). Some even sold property in order to donate to the common fund, but as would be made clear later, this was voluntary, not mandatory (cf. 5:4-5). They did not, however, abandon the temple, but they met there daily as well as in private homes (2:46). Later, Luke will designate the area of Solomon's Porch in the temple as their common meeting place (5:12b). Remarkably enough, they were not ostracized by their Jewish constituency, but were accorded popular good will, and their witness to Jesus' messiahship continued so that the community grew larger each day (2:47).

Luke now uses the phrase "the ones being saved" (**τοὺς σῳζομένους**) to describe the converts. Previously, he had used this same vocabulary in Peter's citation of Joel (2:21) and his Pentecostal sermon (2:40). In his gospel, Luke emphasizes the idea of salvation all way back to the birth of John (Lk. 1:69, 71, 77; 3:6) and Jesus (Lk. 2:30). In Acts, Luke will continue to use this vocabulary to describe those who come to faith in Jesus Christ (4:12; 11:14; 15:11; 16:17, 30-31). On the one hand, this wording reflects salvation from the "crooked generation" that had rejected Jesus (2:40), but probably there also is an eschatological motif—that in the final judgment, those who put their trust in Jesus Christ will be saved from destruction (cf. Lk. 8:12; 9:24-26; 13:23; 18:26).

---

[56] The Gihon Spring near the mouth of Hezekiah's tunnel, the Siloam Pool, and the Bethesda Pool are all other possibilities. However, the many water installations near the temple (about 40 have been excavated so far near the southern gates of the Temple Mount) were most likely Jewish ritual immersion pools called *mikva'ot*, and since they already were used for Jewish baptisms, it seems likely that they would have been used for Christian baptisms as well, cf. R. Reich, "The Great Mikveh Debate," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1993), pp. 52-53.

[57] Luke's term for the Eucharistic meal seems to have been "the breaking of bread" (cf. 20:7). Later, Paul will call this "the Lord's supper" (1 Co. 11:20), cf. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 83 and Bruce, *Acts*, p. 79.

THE JEWISH CHURCH IN THE CONTEXT OF JUDAISM (3-5)

Heirs of the Prophets and the Covenant (3:1-26)

Accepting the messiahship of Jesus did not constitute an immediate alienation from the Jewish community, nor for that matter, from Judaism itself. Luke concludes his summary of the initial Christian assembly in Jerusalem by saying that the disciples of Jesus "enjoyed the favor of all the people", by which he surely means the larger Jewish constituency (2:47). The practice of baptism would have been understood in a Jewish purification context much as had been the baptism of John (2:41), though now of course, the followers of Jesus baptized their converts in the name of Jesus the Messiah. They continued to use the temple courts as their primary meeting place (2:46), and in fact, it is not unlikely that they participated in the daily worship of the temple, which would have included the daily burnt offering and the offering of incense, morning and evening. Temple worship was conducted by the priests, of course, but worshippers were always standing nearby watching, participating in the prayers and receiving the priestly blessings. The new believers also continued to observe the Jewish hours of prayer (3:1).[58]

The Healing of a Crippled Man (3:1-11)

One day when Peter and John were entering the temple precincts for afternoon prayer, they were confronted by a cripple, who customarily stationed himself at one of the gates so as to beg from the worshippers (3:2-3).[59] The apostles fixed their eyes on him so that the man expected to receive alms (3:4-5). Instead, Peter commanded him to walk in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (3:6), and instantly, the man was healed of his affliction

[58] Prayer (*tefillah*) was said twice a day by observant Jews, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. The afternoon prayer, the ninth hour of the day (i.e., about 3:00 o'clock), was offered at the time of the whole burnt offering in the temple, cf. *Berakoth* 4.1; 1QS 10:11; Josephus, *Wars*, 2.8.5 and *Antiquities*, 3.10.1. The *tefillah* consisted of a series of benedictions eventually fixed at eighteen, cf. E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 446. Such prayer in the temple is probably also reflected in the morning and evening prayers each day at Qumran (4Q503). Since they were not necessarily composed by the community itself, but probably preserved from earlier times, they point to patterns of prayer that developed more widely in Second Temple Judaism, cf. J. Neusner and W. Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1996), pp. 497-498.

[59] Though Luke calls it the "Beautiful Gate", this name has not been passed down in other Jewish literature. Hence, its exact location is uncertain, cf. J. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles [AB]* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 277-278.

and began to leap and walk (3:7-8a). He followed them into the temple courtyard, loudly praising God and jumping about (3:8b). Doubtless, many of the worshippers had seen this man before and well knew his malady. To see him now completely whole was overwhelming (3:9-10)![60] The former cripple clung to Peter and John as they proceeded to the site where many believers met, Solomon's Colonnade (3:11; cf. 5:12).[61]

One wonders, of course, whether or not Jesus ever saw this same crippled man, since the man was stationed there every day, and Jesus visited the temple several times in his ministry (cf. 4:22). If so, his healing was postponed to this later occasion.

Peter's Sermon (3:12-26)

Luke now records the second of Peter's great sermons. It is to be supposed that Luke recounts the salient points of these sermons, though in all likelihood the actual length would have been much more than appears here. Still, the way the apostles proclaimed the good news about Jesus is highly instructive.

The structure of Peter's sermon, as at Pentecost, focused upon Jesus as the fulfillment of the ancient messianic prophecies. He began by disclaiming any personal power in the healing of the cripple (something that modern faith healers rarely do). For the apostles, a miracle, such as a healing, was rarely an end in itself. Rather, it was a bridge toward the gospel. Further, this was not a healing of someone no one knew was sick in the first place. It happened to a well-known figure whose misfortune was equally well-known (3:16a). Peter announced that God had fulfilled the ancient promises about the coming of the Servant of the Lord (3:12-13a). In the Book of Isaiah, the Servant of the Lord was heralded as a coming figure who would introduce the true knowledge of God to the ends of the earth (Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12). The so-called "songs of the Servant"

---

[60] Luke here uses a theme of wonder and amazement, a theme that began in the Third Gospel in his recounting the story of Jesus. In his gospel, Luke uses a cluster of words expressing marvel, astonishment, bewilderment, fear, and perplexity, and here, once more, he employs two of them, θάμβος (= astonishment) and ἐκστάσις (= bewilderment). In the gospel, such astonishment at the words, actions and miracles of Jesus implicitly produced the fundamental question, "Who is this?" (cf. Lk. 5:21; 7:49; 8:25; 20:2). Here, the response of amazement functions in much the same way, but the implicit question is, "How did they do this?"

[61] Solomon's Colonnade was part of the temple complex constructed by Herod the Great. It provided a place for folk to meet, discuss Scripture, and practice religious ritual. It was here that Jesus was nearly stoned at the Feast of Hanukkah, when he claimed that his sheep were given to him by the Father, and that he and his Father were one (cf. Jn. 10:22-30). Located on the eastern side of the temple complex, the colonnade, a double-columned portico spanning 49 feet, overlooked the Kidron Valley. The white marble columns were 38 feet tall and supported a cedar paneled ceiling, cf. R. Smith, *ABD* (1992) VI.113.

were understood by the early Christians to be messianic,[62] and both here (3:13) and later (4:27, 30), the title "Servant" will be used of Jesus. Peter's Jewish listeners, well-versed in the oracles of the prophets, would not have missed such a reference, especially the phrase, "God has glorified his Servant Jesus" (3:13a), which is a direct allusion to the Septuagint version of Isaiah 52:13, "My Servant…will be raised and lifted up and glorified".[63] Such language, as Jesus himself had indicated, referred to his resurrection and exaltation (cf. Lk. 24:26; cf. 1 Ti. 3:16; Jn. 7:39; 12:16).

As in his sermon at Pentecost, Peter lays the charge of rejecting God's messiah squarely upon his listeners in a series of emphatic second person plurals (3:13b-15a). Of course, Pilate, the Roman governor (AD 26-36), played his part, but the Jewish community was the driving force behind Jesus' condemnation and death. Three times Pilate pronounced Jesus innocent and tried to release him (cf. Lk. 23:4, 14-16, 22). Preferring Barabbas to be released instead (Lk. 23:18-19), the Jewish community in Jerusalem had insisted on the death of Jesus Lk. 23:21, 23).

The three titles that Peter gives to Jesus in rehearsing this history are significant. He is the "Holy One", the "Righteous One" and the "Author of Life". The first two point toward Jesus' role as specially set apart by God, but the final one is even more suggestive, since it calls Jesus the "prince/author/founder of life".[64] Presumably, it may refer to the same thing as Paul's later statement that Jesus was the "first to rise from the dead" (cf. 26:23), though if it harks back to the beginning of the universe, it heralds Jesus as the life-giving force in creation itself (cf. Jn. 1:4; 1 Jn. 1:1-2).

In spite of death, God raised Jesus to life, and his apostles were witnesses to the living Lord (3:15b). The healing of the crippled man was accomplished by faith in the name of Jesus—the faith that came through Jesus himself. This faith was the effective power for the man's healing (3:16). The description of faith "in the name" of Jesus is a synecdoche for Jesus himself. It is hardly that Luke suggests the name of Jesus to be a talisman. Rather, the Jesus who was rejected was, in fact, the Jesus who confers healing. Further, faith for a healing such as this was not drummed up by the apostles on their own. It was faith conferred, for it "comes through him". That such faith was conferred seems apparent in that Peter and John likely had passed this man on various other occasions when going daily into

---

[62] For a thorough discussion, see F. Bruce, *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 83-99.

[63] Observe the critical linguistic parallels:

ὁ παῖς μου…δοξασθήσεται (= my Servant…will be glorified), Is. 52:13, LXX

ὁ θεὸς…ἐδόξασεν τὸν παῖδα αὐτοῦ (God…has glorified his Servant), Ac. 3:13

[64] The title αρχηγος is used of Jesus in 5:31 as well.

the temple precincts, but at none of these other times did they pray for his healing. What made this occasion different from the others was the gift of faith conferred by Christ on his two apostles at this moment in time.

Peter's indictment of his fellow Jews must not be understood as an unmitigated condemnation, however serious their crime. They acted in ignorance, not in deliberate defiance toward God, and in fact, so did Israel's leaders (3:17; cf. Jn. 11:47-50; 1 Co. 2:8). The death of Jesus must be understood as a divine fulfillment of the prophetic word that the Messiah would suffer (3:18), and in fact, when Caiaphas urged the Sanhedrin to execute Jesus, he did so in words that expressed far more than he himself knew at the time (cf. Jn. 11:51-52). While Peter does not cite any specific prophetic oracles concerning the suffering of Messiah, his earlier reference to Jesus the Servant must surely have been foremost in his mind (i.e., Is. 53).[65]

The required response, as Peter also indicated at Pentecost, was repentance (3:19a; cf. 2:38). This response, and only this, would obliterate their sins. It is to be observed that Peter does not here enjoin water baptism as he did at Pentecost, though such may have been implied. Still, this absence suggests that baptism is not foremost nor does it stand alone; it is an expression of and linked to repentance (see comments on 2:38). Genuine repentance would result in "the times of refreshing" (3:19b-20), a unique reference to the second coming of the Lord.[66] The Messiah had been foreordained for Israel (προχειρίζω = to choose, select, appoint), and even though they had rejected him, he still would be sent by God, though this time after having spent the intervening time between his first and second advent in the heavenlies (3:21a). This second coming of the Messiah would not happen immediately, since there remained a considerable body of ancient predictions yet to be fulfilled. In the end, however, God would send the Messiah (again) in the time of the restoration of all things (3:21b), here probably referring to such predictions as the restoration of the heavens and the earth (Is. 62:1-5; 65:17-25; 66:22; Mal. 4:6; cf. Mk. 9:12//Mt. 17:11; Mt. 19:28; Ro. 8:18-23; 1 Co. 15:24-28; 2 Pe. 3:13; Rv. 21-22).[67] Even Moses

[65] The idea that the Messiah would suffer is uniquely a contribution of Luke in the New Testament (cf. Lk. 24:26, 46; Ac. 1:3; 17:3; 26:23). While there is no Old Testament passage that says this in such precise language (i.e., no passage directly says, "The Messiah must suffer"), there are plenty of passages about suffering that the early Christians, taking their lead from Jesus, understood as messianic (cf. Is. 52:14; 53:3-11; Ps. 22:6-8, 24; 69:4, 8-12, 19-21, etc.).

[66] The rabbis taught that if the whole of Israel repented even for a day, the Messiah would come. The Christians understood that the Messiah came even without the repentance of all Israel, cf. Neil, p. 86.

[67] The fanciful notion that this passage heralds some sort of universal salvation for all humans and possibly even the devil is based more on wishful thinking than exegesis. Such an idea would have sounded patently strange to a Jewish community that still placed great value in apocalyptic literature, which describes in

had predicted the coming of an eschatological prophet—one who must be heard and obeyed—and to reject this prophet was to cancel out one's standing among God's chosen people (3:22-23; cf. Dt. 18:15, 18-19).[68] Jews in the Second Temple Period expected an eschatological prophet to arise, and in fact, representatives from the temple directly asked John the Baptist if he considered himself to be this prophet (cf. Jn. 1:21).[69] Peter had no hesitation in declaring Jesus to be that prophet. To reject Jesus was to reject God's promised One, and thereby, to cut oneself off from the chosen people of God.[70] No warning could have been more trenchant than this!

In fact, not only Moses but also Samuel and all the prophets predicted the coming of the messiah era (3:24). Peter's statement here may be hyperbole, for one is hard pressed to find any messianic prediction in the recorded words of Samuel, but Samuel was the prophet who anointed David as Israel's king, and the Davidic kingship was intimately connected to the idea of a coming Messiah from David's line. Nathan, one of Samuel's contemporaries, predicted that David would have a house and kingdom that would last forever (2 Sa. 7:11b-13, 16), and Jews from the late Second Temple period understood this oracle to refer to the coming of the Messiah (cf. 4Q174).[71] Most important, the people of Israel were heirs to these promises made by the prophets as well as heirs of the covenant God made with the ancients (3:25). The covenantal promise God made to Abraham—that in his posterity all the families of the earth would find blessing (cf. Ge. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4)—comes to fruition in Jesus. Jesus is the promised offspring of Abraham (cf. Ga. 3:16), and he is both the "Prophet like Moses" (3:22) and the suffering "Servant" of the Lord whom God raised up (3:26a, cf. 13, 18). His mission was "first" to Israel (3:26b), and he was sent to give them blessing by turning them from their wickedness. (Peter's declaration that the gospel was "first" to Israel agrees with St. Paul, who says it is "first

---

vivid detail the state of the damned. Origen (ca. AD 185-254) originated the idea of universalism among Christians, and it has been followed by various others, but evangelicals have always rejected it, cf. B. Demarest, "Apokatastasis," *EDT* (1984), p. 67.

[68] The Qumran Community also understood Dt. 18:18-19 to refer to the coming of the Messiah (4Q175).

[69] The Samaritans, on the basis of Dt. 18:15ff., anticipated the coming of the *Ta'eb* (= the Returning One or the Restorer). For a more thorough discussion of the eschatological prophet in Judaism, see Cullmann, pp. 14-23.

[70] This warning about being "cut off" is clearly a repeated threat in the Torah (cf. Ex. 12:19; 31:14: Lv. 7:20-21, 25, 27; 17:4, 9, 10, 14; 18:29; 19:8; 20:3, 5-6, 17-18; 22:3 23:29-30; Nu. 9:13; 15:30-31; 19:13, 20).

[71] The so-called Florilegium among the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q174) is a thematic interpretation of various Old Testament passages with regard to their messianic significance, and 2 Sa. 7 is one of them, cf. G. Brooke, "Florilegium," *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. Schiffman & J. VanderKam (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000), I.297-298. The Qumran text indicates that the references to David's son refer to the "Shoot of David, who is to…[arise] in Zi[on in the La]st Days…", cf. M. Wise, M. Abegg, Jr. and E. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 227-228.

for the Jew", cf. Ro. 1:16b.) God had not reneged on the blessing offered to Abraham and his posterity!

This conception that the gospel must first come to Israel would have been deeply significant to the earliest Christians. The question has often been asked why the early Jerusalem Christians found it so difficult to move beyond their own ethnic circle—indeed, they did not do so until forced to do so by persecution—but their firm conviction that the gospel was "first" to Israel, the heirs of the prophets and the covenant, must have been a compelling factor.

Confrontation (4:1-22)

Judaism was by no means monolithic. It was composed of varying parties and strains of theological thought that emerged during the Persian, Hellenistic, Maccabean and Roman periods. While there was a continuing self-perception that linked pre-exilic Israel with second temple Judaism, the Jews in both Palestine and the Diaspora were divided into numerous sects and groups who followed various holy men and teachers.[72] According to Josephus, the four primary sects to emerge from the intertestamental period were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.[73] Though the emerging Christians were aligned with none of them, the Pharisees, who accepted the concept of resurrection (cf. 23:8), were probably those most compatible with the Jesus movement (cf. 15:5; 23:6-10). Jesus' discouragement of armed resistance to Rome left the Christians at odds with the Zealots (even though one of the twelve apostles was a zealot, cf. Lk. 6:15). The Essenes are not even mentioned in the New Testament, and while scholars have offered considerable speculation about how they may have influenced either John the Baptist or Jesus, this speculation has not resulted in anything definite.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, were a minority drawn from the Jewish aristocracy and priesthood. They maintained distinctive theological and social traits, such as, their belief in the sanctity of the written Torah while rejecting the binding authority of the oral Torah. To a large degree, the Sadducees were Hellenized.[74] Josephus indicates that they did not believe in the survival of the soul beyond death nor any punishment or reward in an afterlife, since these ideas were not part of the Torah (Mt. 22:23//Mk. 12:18//Lk. 20:27). They contended that humans have complete freedom to

[72] S. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, ed. W. Meeks (Philadelphia: Westminster 1987), pp. 24-26.
[73] *Antiquities* 18.1.2-6.
[74] D. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), pp. 51-52.

act for good or evil, rejecting entirely any concept of fatalism.[75] The New Testament adds that Sadducees did not believe in angels or spirits, either (cf. 23:8). Their rejection of both an afterlife and angels would mean that they took a dim view of the entire corpus of the Pseudepigrapha, which is replete with references to both. While all priests were not Sadducees, there was nevertheless a close association between the Sadducees and the temple through the priestly clan of Zadok, from which the Sadducees probably derived their Hellenized name.[76] The high priest and his circle were members of the Sadducees up to nearly AD 70 (cf. 5:17).[77]

The Arrest (4:1-7)

It is not surprising that the Sadducees, priests and captain of the temple police[78] interrupted Peter and John as they were discoursing with the people about the healing of the crippled man (4:1). Especially, they were incensed over the proclamation of resurrection in Jesus (4:2), an idea to which in principle they were adamantly opposed. To make matters worse, this was the same body that had arrested and condemned Jesus to death. Probably on the grounds of keeping the peace, they jailed Peter and John for the night (4:3) and brought them before the Sanhedrin for examination the next morning (4:5-7).[79] Two things, especially, are significant in this action. First, their confrontation with the apostles did not quell the interest of the people, and in fact, many more Jews now believed the Christian message (cf. 4:21).[80] From the 3000 at Pentecost, the number of believers swelled to 5000 and more (4:4). Second, the members of the Sanhedrin made no attempt to deny that the crippled man had been healed (cf. 4:16). He was a well known

---

[75] *Antiquities* 18.1.4 and *Wars of the Jews* 2.8.14.
[76] G. Porton, *ABD* (1992) V.892.
[77] Russell, p. 52.
[78] The temple police were made up of Levites serving in the temple, and the captain would have been second in authority only to the high priest himself, cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 297.
[79] The Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, was the highest legislative body and judicatory among the Jews in Palestine. Composed as an *ad hoc* committee by the high priest when occasion demanded, it served under the Roman occupation apparently with a good deal of autonomy in matters of internal jurisdiction, cf. Cohen, pp. 107-108. Luke specifically names Annas, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander . Though John and Alexander are unknown, the first two are known from the trial of Jesus and even earlier (cf. Lk. 3:2). Annas had been appointed high priest by Quirinius, the Roman Legate in Syria, in AD 6. After holding office for nine years, he continued to influence the Sanhedrin through his five sons, his grandson and his son-in-law, all of whom served as high priests in the decades prior to the first Jewish revolt. Caiaphas, specifically, was appointed high priest in AD 18, cf. J. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests After the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), pp. 420-453, 476-482, 487. Though Annas was no longer the high priest by the time of this narrative, Luke, following custom, still confers upon him the title (much as Americans do with presidents who no longer are in office).
[80] In any case, Josephus says that the Sadducees' influence was largely among the rich, and the common people refused to join them, cf. *Antiquities* 13.10.6.

figure who probably had frequented the temple for a long time (cf. 4:22). Rather, they asked, "By what power or what name did you do this?"

The Defense (4:8-22)

Luke purposely notes that Peter's response was prompted by the Holy Spirit, and in fact, he uses his favorite phraseology, "Peter…filled with the Holy Spirit…" (4:8a). Luke does not distinguish between first-time infillings and subsequent infillings, but his use of the term implies that such fillings were the momentary endowment of the Spirit for a special task, especially, the task of testifying to the gospel. Peter did not mince words: the healing of the crippled man was directly due to the power of the risen Christ Jesus—the very one this ruling body had condemned to crucifixion but whom God had raised from the dead (4:8b-10)! Again, it bears mentioning that the term "name" is here not being treated as a talisman but as a circumlocution for the authority of Jesus himself.[81] To be sure, some Jews would later attempt to use the name of Jesus as a magical formula but with disastrous results (cf. 19:13-16)!

Peter, however, did not stop with an explanation of the healing. Boldly, he indicted the Jewish leaders as the very ones who rejected God's capstone (4:11). He specifically cited Psalm 118:22, which depicts the "builders", a metaphor for Israel's men of power, as rejecting a stone that would become the most important building block of all. Isaiah, also, indicted Israel's leaders for taking refuge in lies instead of trusting in God's tested stone laid in Zion (Is. 28:14-16; cf. Is. 8:11-15). Of course, Psalm 118 does not identify the one who was despised and later brought to honor. Perhaps those words were in memory of David himself, who was rejected by the northern tribes but later installed as the king over the whole nation (2 Sa. 2:7-11; 5:1-3). In Isaiah, likewise, the covenant with death referred to the current political situation in the eighth century, the international maneuvering of Jerusalem's powerful elite in the hopes of averting Assyrian invasion. In such maneuvering, they ignored Yahweh's trustworthy Rock laid in Zion. In both instances, the stone rejected was the stone that became the most important in the structure. It was Jesus himself who first appealed to Psalm 118:22 in anticipating his own death (Lk. 20:17). In rejecting Jesus, the Jewish leaders had done the very same thing their ancestors had done!

[81] The expression **ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι** (= into the name) referred not so much to a repeated formula as to an action performed under the authority of the one named. To act "in the name of Jesus" was to participate in his authority and to act in his behalf, cf. R. Abba, *IDB* (1976) 3.507.

They had rejected the one in whom God's salvation was to be found, and in fact, salvation was to be found no where else except in Jesus (4:12).[82]

The boldness of Peter and John, men who were not professionally educated in theology or rhetoric, was astounding and probably not a little intimidating (4:13a). The Jewish leaders had found it impossible to win an argument with Jesus, and now they were no more effective with his followers (4:13b)! Still, they could not deny that a notable miracle had occurred, since the well-known crippled man who had been healed was standing there before them (4:14). Excusing the apostles temporarily, they conferred with each other, finally concluding that they would warn the apostles not to speak further by referencing Jesus (4:15-17). Yet even this warning had little effect. Peter and John bluntly fired back that they would submit to God's authority rather than human authority (4:18-20). The Jewish leaders could do little else than repeat their warning and release the apostles (4:21a). It would hardly have helped to punish them, especially in the face of their undeniable popularity with the people (4:21b-22).

The Commission Renewed (4:23-31)

When Peter and John returned to their friends and reported on the events of the hearing, the whole community joined in prayer (4:23-24). The fact that the prayer is recounted by Luke in such detail has raised the question of form. It seems unlikely that such a precisely worded prayer would have been spontaneous, particularly with the quotation from Scripture. Several thousand people all praying the same words might suggest a composed prayer, and indeed, some interpreters propose that the prayer must have been written out or at least memorized in advance.[83] Barring that, Luke simply might be summarizing the gist of the prayer with perhaps some of the apostles leading and the congregation assenting by "Amen".

In their prayer, the believers addressed God as "Sovereign Lord" (δέσποτα), the maker of heaven and earth (similar to the opening of the later Apostles' Creed). They cited Psalm 2:1-2, the royal psalm composed to celebrate God's dominion and the sovereignty of his Anointed One (Messiah).[84] Earthly potentates assembled to rebel against God's

[82] The attempt of Oneness Pentecostals to use this verse with reference to the baptismal formula must be rejected. The context of 4:12 is hardly water baptism.

[83] Marshall, Acts, p. 103. Certainly by the end of the century we know of composed Christian prayers for the whole congregation in order to celebrate the Eucharist, cf. *Didache* 9-10. In any case, composed pryaer would have been a familiar pattern from the synagogue.

[84] The Hebrew text of Psalm 2 is untitled, but the early believers were confident that it was a psalm of David. Their quotation is word-for-word from the LXX.

representative, and in this passage, the believers clearly linked this description with what had happened at the trial of Jesus. Herod, Pilate, the Gentile soldiers and the people of Israel collaborated in condemning Jesus to death—the one who was God's Servant and God's Anointed (4:25-27). The joining together of the two prominent messianic titles, Servant and Anointed, mark out the essential parameters of how the early Christians understood Jesus. He was the suffering Servant in Isaiah and the anointed Davidic King of the prophets, God's very own Son (cf. Ps. 2:7). Still, the conspiracy of Jesus' opponents had been predetermined by God (4:28; cf. 2:23a; 3:18). Jesus' death was no accident, even if it was a miscarriage of justice!

Like Hezekiah, who spread out Sennacherib's letter before God (cf. Is. 37:14), the believers entreated the Lord to consider the threats made against them. They prayed for courage to continue speaking the message of Jesus, and they interceded for God to confirm their message with miracles performed in the very name which the Sanhedrin sought to silence (4:29-30). When the prayer concluded, suddenly the place where they were assembled, presumably Solomon's portico (cf. 3:11; 5:12), began to shake, presumably from an earthquake (4:31). Earthquakes in ancient times accompanied the theophanies of God (e.g., Ex. 19:18; Is. 6:4; Ha. 3:6), and here the disciples once again were filled with the Spirit so that they were boldly empowered to proclaim the gospel. This infilling of the Spirit was a renewal of their commission to give witness to the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as the hope of Israel.

The Common Life (4:32—5:11)

Sandwiched between the prayer for authenticating signs (4:30) and the actual occurrence of such miracles (5:12ff.), Luke offers a brief glimpse into the community life of Jesus' followers. The Jerusalem believers produced a common fund in which they pooled their resources, dividing them among each other as needed (4:32; cf. 2:44-45). This practice, so far as is known, was never replicated by other Christian communities, but it is hardly to be doubted that a precedent had been set by Jesus and his apostles (cf. Mt. 5:42; Lk. 9:3-4; 10:5-9, 27; 18:22, 28-30). The generosity of the disciples was a huge factor in demonstrating the authenticity of their message (4:33), and some even sold property, donating the money to the common fund, which was administrated by the apostles (4:34-35).

Two incidents, one positive and one negative, illustrated the outcome of this common life. In the first, a Levite from Cyprus named Joseph sold a

field and donated the entire purchase sum to the common fund (4:36-37). Whether Joseph Barnabas[85] was one of the "priests" who accepted the faith is not known (cf. 6:7), but presumably the land he sold was in Palestine, not Cyprus.[86] Of course, not everyone in the Jerusalem church sold their property (cf. 12:12), and such an action was voluntary, not compulsory (cf. 5:4), but when it happened, it made a profound impression on everyone!

The negative example concerned a man and his wife who also sold property (5:1). Together, they conspired to keep part of the purchase price for themselves while implying to everyone else that they donated the entire sum (5:2). The real issue was not that they retained some of the money, for as Peter clearly said, the money belonged to them. Rather, the issue was that they deliberately left a false impression with the community, and in doing so, they lied to the Holy Spirit and to God (5:3-4). Peter's language that they had "kept" for themselves that which had been devoted to God is the same language used in the Septuagint's account of Achan (Jos. 7:1).[87] When Peter confronted Ananias with these facts, he suddenly fell dead in a paroxysm (5:5a). It is not hard to believe that the whole group was struck with awe at this public death (5:5b), for the man was wrapped in a shroud, carried out in full view of everyone, and buried (5:6)![88] Three hours later the same scenario happened to Sapphira, Ananias' wife. She, too, fell dead and was entombed beside her husband (5:7-10).[89] Once more, Luke says that "great fear" seized the whole church and everyone who heard (5:11; cf. 5:5).

Incidentally, in 5:11 is the first occasion in Acts of the word "church" (ἐκκλησία).[90] Though this word had a Greco-Roman usage, where it

---

[85] Nicknames seemed to have been popular among the disciples. Jesus had nicknamed some of his own disciples (Simon became Kephas; James and John became the Sons of Thunder), and the apostles gave Joseph the nickname "Son of Comfort". Incidentally, Joseph Barnabas should not be confused with Joseph Barsabas (Justius) mentioned earlier (cf. 1:23).

[86] Originally, Levites were not allowed to own land in the commonwealth of pre-exilic Israel (cf. Nu. 18:20; Dt. 10:9), though there were exceptions (cf. Je. 32:7). Barnabas, like Paul (cf. 23:16), seems to have had relatives living in Jerusalem (cf. 12:12; Col. 4:10).

[87] The verb in both passages is νοσφιζω (= to misappropriate), cf. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 110.

[88] To modern ears, this abrupt burial might seem to be nearly unbelievable, but burial rituals in the Second Temple period generally followed the practice of burial as soon as possible after death, most often before sunset on the same day. As soon as death occurred, the eyes were closed, the corpse was washed, wrapped and bound, and the deceased was taken to the family tomb, cf. B. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg/London/New York: Trinity Press, 2003), p. 31. Luke does not specify the time of Ananias' death, but if it occurred any time after midday, preparations for burial would have proceeded at a rapid pace.

[89] We should assume that the burial took place in a tomb, since tombs were customary, and each of the corpses would have been deposited in a *loculus* niche (a deep, excavated cavity perpendicular to the main walls of the burial cave), cf. McCane, pp. 32-35.

[90] In the KJV, the word "church" appears in 2:47, but virtually all textual scholars see this as a gloss, since it appears only in later manuscripts and is absent from all the most important early ones, cf. B. Aland, et al., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th ed (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 2001), p. 416, note 1 on 2.47—3.1.

referred to the assembly of citizens in a Greek city, here it follows the Jewish usage from the Septuagint, where it is used to describe the nation of Israel as a "congregation". Now, the community of believers was a "new" congregation of Israel!

Miracles and Persecution (5:12-42)

After their initial confrontation with the Sanhedrin, Peter and John returned to the believers who were meeting in Solomon's Portico. The whole group prayed that God would "stretch out his hand" to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus (4:30). This prayer was not a plea for sensationalism; rather, it was directed to the end that the message about Jesus would be confirmed to the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people so that they would come to faith (4:29, 31b). After the interlude describing the two incidents connected with the community's common life, Luke returns to the outcome of this prayer. God answered it, and the apostles, just as they had done during the lifetime of Jesus (Lk. 9:1; 10:9), became instruments through which many signs and wonders were performed (5:12). Indeed, the earlier tours of the Twelve (Lk. 9:1ff.) and the Seventy-two (Lk. 10:1ff.) had been the training ground for what was happening now, for as Jesus had made clear, whoever received his apostles received him, and whoever rejected his representatives rejected him as well (Lk. 10:8-16).

The public deaths of Ananias and Sapphira at the feet of Peter, as might be expected, created considerable awe among the people (cf. 5:5, 11). Luke says that even though the community of believers was "highly regarded" (μεγαλύνω), "the rest" did not dare to join them (5:13), presumably meaning the unbelievers who had not accepted the message about Jesus.[91] Still, conversions continued to happen (5:14), and notable healings occurred, not merely in the temple, but in the streets of Jerusalem (5:15-16). The idea that the shadow of a holy man could effect such a healing was a current belief of the times,[92] and it is not entirely clear whether Luke intends to say this was a means of healing or was simply a superstition demonstrating the esteem given to Peter. Still, miracles of healing not unlike this are recorded elsewhere (Mt. 9:20; 14:36; Ac. 19:11-12), so one should

[91] Luke's language is ambiguous. "The rest" (τῶν λοιπῶν) might have referred to the chief priests and elders, which were the antagonists (cf. 4:1, 5, 23), but Marshall is probably correct to say that the term, based on its usage in Luke's Gospel (cf. Lk. 8:10), came to have the idiomatic meaning of non-disciples, cf. Marshall, *Luke*, p. 115.

[92] P. van der Horst, "Peter's Shadow: the Religio-Historical Background of Acts 5:15," *NTS* 23 (1976-77), pp. 204-212.

not be too quick to discount the possibility that Luke intends even those who were under Peter's shadow to be among the ones cured.

The Second Interrogation by the Sanhedrin (5:17-33)

Marshall points out that in certain cases under Jewish law, first offenses were not punishable unless they were repeated after a warning.[93] If this was the case with the Sanhedrin and the apostles, the second arrest would have taken on a more ominous note. The Sanhedrin, under the direction of the Sadducean high priest, arrested the entire body of apostles (5:17-18). That night an angel opened the prison and released them, instructing them to return to the temple courts and to continue preaching (5:19-20). It must have given Luke a good deal of relish to recount this story, particularly since the high priest and his cohorts, all of whom were Sadducees, did not believe in angels in the first place! To heighten the irony, the message the apostles preached was the resurrection of Jesus, which again was a theological idea the Sadducees had categorically rejected. Return they did, and though it was early, the apostles began to teach the early worshippers who had gathered (5:21a).

Later that morning, the Sanhedrin assembled and sent to the jail to have the apostles arraigned (5:21b). Their chagrin must have been complete when they discovered that not only were the apostles not in the jail, even though it had been securely guarded, they were in the temple once again preaching the message of Jesus (5:22-25)! So, yet another arrest was ordered, though the temple police were careful to do so without a show of force due to the apostles popularity (5:26).

Now the apostles were examined directly by the high priest, the same one who had examined Jesus at his trial a few weeks earlier (5:27). His accusation was terse: the apostles had not heeded the earlier warning not to preach in the name of Jesus (5:28; cf. 4:17-18). Everyone in Jerusalem was now aware of the story of Jesus' resurrection, and if God indeed raised him from the dead, the corollary implication was that the Sanhedrin had acted in defiance of God in condemning him to death.[94] To this, Peter, once more acting as spokesman for the whole group, repeated his earlier bold contention, "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29; cf. 4:19)! God had indeed raised Jesus from the dead—the very one the Sanhedrin had

[93] Marshall, *Acts*, p. 97. See also the German work, J. Jeremias, "Untersuchungen zum Quellenproblem der Apostelgeschichte," *ZNW* 36 (1937), pp. 205-221.

[94] Nothing is said here of the rumor started by the chief priests about Jesus' disciples stealing the corpse (cf. Mt. 28:12-15), but one can only imagine the confrontation between those who may have believed the rumor and the apostles who bluntly claimed to have seen Jesus alive.

condemned to death by crucifixion (5:30)[95]—and even more, God had exalted him to his right hand, just as the ancient Psalm had predicted (5:31a; cf. Ps. 110:1).[96] The title "Prince" (ἀρχηγός) speaks of Jesus' exaltation as God's vice-regent. The title "Savior" (σωτήρ) speaks of his authority to give the gift of eschatological salvation (5:31). The purpose of this exaltation was in order to provide repentance and forgiveness for Israel, once again demonstrating that the gospel is "first" to the Jews (cf. 3:25-26). The truth of this message was validated externally by the apostles, who personally had seen the risen Christ, and it was validated internally by the gift of the Spirit, which the prophets had promised for the messianic age. (5:32).

Peter's response hardly mollified the Sadducees in the Sanhedrin! They were so outraged that they contemplated the death penalty, just as earlier they had condemned Jesus (5:33). However, a famous rabbi, Gamaliel,[97] stood to offer a more reasoned response (5:34). If what was happening among the followers of Jesus was derived purely from human ambitions, he argued that the movement would dissolve on its own. If, indeed, it was from God, as the apostles claimed, the Sanhedrin could hardly fight against the divine will! In fact, two other messianic uprisings already had come to nothing, the claims of Theudas[98] ending in death and dispersion

---

[95] The expression "hanging him on a tree" is a deliberate allusion to Dt. 21:22-23 with respect to capital punishment.

[96] Once more, as in 2:34, Peter appeals to Psalm 110, where the Davidic son was exalted to the right hand of Yahweh. It was Jesus himself who called attention to this Psalm as messianic when he posed the question, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? If David calls him 'Lord', how can he be his son?" (Mt. 22:41-45//Mk. 12:35-37//Lk. 20:41-44). To the English reader, Jesus' question may appear enigmatic. It is helpful to realize that in Psalm 110:1, two divine names are used, Yahweh and Adonai. The statement in the Hebrew text reads, "Yahweh (the LORD) said to my Adonay (my Lord), 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" Jesus' point, of course, was that if David, the writer of the Psalm, referred to someone as his Lord other than Yahweh himself, that figure must be superior to David, and therefore, must be God's Messiah, even though he was at the same time David's son. Peter, here, appeals to this same passage, asserting that when God raised Jesus from the dead, he installed him as his vice-regent at his right hand in the heavenly realms.

[97] Gamaliel was famous for two reasons. In the biblical record, he was the tutor of Saul of Tarsus (cf. 22:3). In the Talmud, Gamaliel was of such status that it was said, "When Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, the glory of the law ceased and purity and abstinence died," *Sota* 9.15.

[98] The reference to Theudas has created considerable discussion because of the timing of his revolt, which was about AD 44, cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.5.97. Reputed to be a magician, Theudas garnered a considerable following, led them to the Jordan River with the expectation that he miraculously would divide the river, like Joshua. The Roman procurator, Fadus, sent a detachment of cavalry after the group, killed many and captured the rest. Theudas was beheaded. The problem, of course, is that Theudas is far too late to have been mentioned by Gamaliel, whose speech must have occurred in the mid-30s, more or less. Further, Gamaliel says that the rise of Judas was "after this", i.e., after Theudas (5:37), when actually is was several decades earlier. This problem has not been resolved. Some have suggested, on the basis of a late dating for the composition of Acts, that Luke simply misread Josephus. The conservative rejoinder is that perhaps Luke refers to a Theudas other than the one mentioned by Josephus, and perhaps this "other" Theudas revolted in the series of uprisings surrounding the death of Herod the Great in about 4 BC, cf. R.

and the revolt of Judas the Galilean, which ended in the same way (5:35-39).[99] In the end, the Sanhedrin agreed to suspend any preemptory executions, and though they did punish the apostles by flogging[100] and once more forbade them to preach in Jesus' name, they released them (5:40). The apostles, for their part, were glad to participate in this persecution, for they knew that in doing so they shared in the suffering of their Lord (5:41). More to the point, this persecution did not intimidate them at all. They continued to preach and teach that Jesus was God's promised Messiah (5:42).

CROSSING THE FIRST ETHNIC BARRIERS (6:1—9:31)

To this point in Luke's narrative, the apostles had preached exclusively to the Jewish community. The converts all had been Jews or adherents to Judaism (2:41, 47; 4:4, 33; 5:14, 28). Peter's sermons were clearly aimed at Jews, as is evident by his addresses to his listeners as "fellow Jews", "Men of Israel" and "brothers" (2:14, 22; 3:17). Further, he clearly seemed to stress that the message about Jesus was first of all for the "heirs of the prophets and the covenants God made with the fathers" (3:25). God had raised up Jesus so that the gospel could go "first" to the people of Israel (3:26). Jesus had been exalted in resurrection and ascension so that he might give repentance and forgiveness "to Israel" (5:31). Within this tight circle of Judaism, however, there were variations, and since it is Luke's ultimate intent to show how the message of Jesus spilled over beyond this circle, he starts with the broadening of the message within the circle itself before showing how it spread to the outside.

Earlier, Luke said that the believers were "together" (2:44) and were of "one heart, one mind" (4:32). Now, this unity suffered a significant set-back, when the common life was disrupted by a cultural dispute.

Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9.322-323. If this hypothesis is true, it removes both the difficulties of dating and chronology. Admittedly, however, there is no known record of an earlier Theudas, so the question remains open.

[99] The tax revolt of Judas the Galilean in about AD 6 is well-known from Flavius Josephus, cf. *Antiquities* 18.1.1; 18:1.23; 20.5.102. A Roman census, at least for the Jews, was not merely an economic measure but also a theological one, because it implicitly conceded that the land and people were not sacred, cf. N. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, p. 173.

[100] This flogging would have been the thirty-nine lashes (cf. Dt. 25:3) using a whip of calf-skin on the bare upper torso, and in order to avoid breaking the Torah by miscounting, the rabbis set the number of lashes at thirty-nine instead of forty, cf. Neusner and Green, p. 230.

Internecine Tension (6:1-7)

The tension developed between the Hebrew-speaking believers and the Greek-speaking believers. As conversions continued, some of the converts were Greek-speaking Jews, probably from the Diaspora, who had settled in Jerusalem. The two terms Luke uses, Ἑλληνιστής (= Hellenists) and Ἑβραῖος (= Hebrews), delineated the difference between Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking Jews and Greek-speaking Jews,[101] and in all likelihood, the language difference also reflected a cultural difference. Probably, they belonged to different synagogues, such as, the synagogue of the Freedmen mentioned later, where the members were immigrants to Jerusalem from elsewhere in the empire (cf. 6:9). In the Christian meetings in Solomon's Portico, the language difference would have been sharply apparent, especially if any worship forms, such as the recitation of psalms or prayers, were conducted in unison. Further, though the believers still practiced the common life, an inequity developed in the distribution of food to those in need. The Greek-speaking widows complained that they were short-changed in the daily dole (6:1). Whether this was due to sheer prejudice (i.e., whether the Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking Christians harbored a cultural one-up-manship over the others) or perhaps can be set down to the difficulty of the language barrier is unclear, but what is clear is that there was unevenness.

The apostles, as would be expected, were preoccupied with their work of prayer and teaching.[102] Hence, it was in response to this complaint that the second group of early Christian leaders was formed. In addition to the "Twelve", now there would be the "Seven" (cf. 21:8)—seven leaders chosen by the apostles to oversee the distribution of food (6:2-4). While their primary task was to relieve the apostles of domestic responsibility, their credentials as men "full of the Spirit and wisdom" suggests that their sphere of service was more extensive. Two of them, Stephen and Philip, would have ministries far beyond waiting on tables! While the term διάκονος (= deacon) is not used here, it usually is assumed, probably correctly, that the Seven were the forerunners of what later would be called deacons. The apostles' proposal pleased the entire community, and together they chose the Seven. It is not without significance that the choice of the Seven was a congregational decision, for the apostles invited the whole community to participate in the choice (6:3). It also may be significant that all seven had

[101] *BDAG* (2000), pp. 270, 319.
[102] Here is the origin of the expression "service of the Word", the ministry of teaching Scripture (6:2, 4).

Greek names, which in turn might suggest that the Seven may have been chosen from the Greek-speaking sector, though admittedly, many Jews had Greek names, whether Greek-speaking or not. Still, at least some of them probably were from the Diaspora, and Nicolas from Antioch is specifically named as a proselyte—a non-Jew who had embraced the Jewish faith (6:5). Perhaps he had been among the proselytes who witnessed the original outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (cf. 2:11). Certainly this is the first hint of a non-Jew embracing the Christian faith. After the community had chosen the Seven, they were commissioned before the Apostles (6:6). It is not entirely clear who prayed and laid their hands on them, the apostles or the members of the community. The Greek text is ambiguous, and the antecedent for "they prayed…" could be either.[103] In any case, there is hardly here an suggestion of apostolic succession. The imposition of hands, a gesture from the Hebrew Bible, was used to express the commissioning of leaders (cf. Nu. 8:10; 27:18, 22-23).

Luke now offers another summary: many more converts joined the group of believers, and perhaps surprisingly, so did many priests (6:7)! It is of some interest to speculate about whether or not these priests continued their service in the temple. There is nothing in the text that implies an answer either way, but there is no reason to suppose that such would have been expected. The community of believers in Jesus were all Jews, they were clearly anything but anti-temple, and the presence of a large number of priests among them would simply have strengthened their ties with the temple, a link that seems to have continued for many years (cf. 20:20-26).

The First Martyrdom (6:8—7:60)

The amount of space Luke devotes to Stephen's confrontation with the Sanhedrin demonstrates how important he considered this event to be. His summary of Stephen's defense is the longest single speech in the Book of Acts, longer even than any of the sermons by Peter and Paul. This speech, which climaxed with the assertion that the temple was no longer the center of Israel's faith, without question was a watershed in the history of the Jerusalem church. It ended with the martyrdom of the young Hellenist, the

[103] To be sure, some translations fix the English syntax so that the apostles seem clearly to be the ones who laid hands upon the Seven (so NIV, NEB, NAB, JB, ESV). However, the Greek text is not nearly so precise, and other English versions retain the ambiguity (so RSV, NASB, ESV,KJV). If the action in Acts was in any way modeled after the commissioning of the Levites, which would seem to be an appropriate parallel, then the ambiguity should be resolved in favor of the imposition of hands by the whole community (cf. Nu. 8:10).

first name listed in the Seven chosen to serve the church, and he died virtually at the feet of Saul.

Stephen's Ministry (6:8-15)

The commissioning of the Seven was ostensibly to manage the daily food distribution in the context of the community's common life (cf. 6:2-6). However, it immediately becomes clear that "waiting on tables" was by no means the only or even the primary ministry of at least some of them. Stephen is commended in several ways: he was "full of faith", "full of the Holy Spirit", and "full of God's grace and power" (6:5a, 8a). While he is not accorded the title "apostle", he certainly functioned as nearly as possible to the others in this exalted position.[104] His ministry was attended by miracles similar to the ones performed by the apostles (6:8b).

In his evangelism, Stephen was confronted by members of a Diaspora synagogue made up of Jews from North Africa and southern Asia Minor (6:9).[105] Presumably, the members of this synagogue were Hellenists, and in fact, Stephen himself was likely a member.[106] Saul, also, may have had an association with them, since he was from Cilicia, as were many of the other synagogue members (cf. Ac. 21:39). Stephen and the synagogue members debated vigorously, though according to Luke, Stephen had the better of it (6:10). It is difficult to say along what lines the debate proceeded, but given what Stephen would say later to the Sanhedrin, it is not hard to imagine that the meaning of the temple figured significantly (cf. 7:47-50). In fact, this would be the particular point which his opponents would emphasize—that Stephen uttered blasphemy in that he "never stops speaking against the holy place and against the Torah" (6:11-13). Witnesses claimed that he said Jesus would destroy the temple and change the traditions Moses handed down (6:14).

It seems likely that Stephen indeed may have spoken openly about the destruction of the temple, since Jesus had clearly predicted such an event (cf. Mt. 24:2//Mk. 13:2//Lk. 21:6). Whether he actually said that Jesus

---

[104] Later in church history, Eusebius seems to include Philip among the apostles and may have thought of Stephen in the same way, cf. *Ecclesiastical History* III.31.5-6.

[105] The name of the synagogue, λιβερτίνοι (= freedmen) is a Greek transliteration of the Latin *Libertini*, the name of a group of Jews originally from Italy, and perhaps they are the same as the Jews mentioned by Philo who once lived across the Tiber in Rome but became emancipated Roman citizens, cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p.356. Archaeologists have excavated a Greek inscription on Mt. Ophel in Jerusalem about a synagogue built by "Theodotus…for the reading of the Torah and the study of the commandments, and the hostel and the rooms and the water installations, for needy travelers from foreign lands." While there is nothing that necessarily links this synagogue to the one mentioned in Acts, the Synagogue of the Freedmen must have been similar, cf. S. Carroll, *ABD* (1992) VI.448.

[106] F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James and John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 51.

personally would destroy it is unclear, but certainly his words were inflammatory.[107] The charge that Christ would "change the customs" is harder to identify. Did this charge refer to the oral law? Certainly Jesus had countermanded some traditions based on the so-called oral Torah (e.g., Mk. 7:1-5, 19), but such a charge would have had little force with the Sadducees on the Sanhedrin, since they did not treat the oral law as compulsory in any case. Could Stephen have been talking about Sabbath observance or circumcision? All Sanhedrin members would have been sensitive about these issues, of course. In the end, we simply do not know. During his arraignment, Stephen apparently remained calm, but all the Sanhedrin members could see that his face was illuminated as if by the glory of God (6:15).

Stephen's Speech (7:1-53)

Stephen's examination by the Sanhedrin began with the question, "Are these charges true?" (7:1). Instead of directly defending himself against the charges, Stephen launched into a lengthy recapitulation of Israel's history, which included the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and the building of the first temple. This history was not just a random survey, however. Several important themes emerge, themes that were more radical than anything the Christians had said to date.

1) First, Stephen's speech emphasized that God's presence was never confined to one place or even one country. God appeared first to Abraham in Mesopotamia and later in Haran (7:2, 4). He elevated Joseph to vizier while he was in Egypt (7:10), and in fact, the whole family moved to Egypt, where eventually Moses was born (7:20). God appeared to Moses at Mt. Sinai (7:29-32). He appeared to the ancestors in the Sinai desert (7:38), where the tabernacle was erected (7:44). Finally, Solomon built a temple in the Holy Land 7:47), but clearly, God was not confined to any single place or any single country. No house could contain him (7:48-50)!
2) Second, the people of Israel had been rebellious almost from the start. They sold their brother Joseph as a slave (7:9), and they rejected Moses repeatedly, turning to idolatry (7:23-28, 35, 39-41). In their national history, again and again they worshipped the Mesopotamian and Canaanite deities so that God sent them into exile (7:42-43). In

[107] The Romans oversaw all capital charges in Judea except one—crimes against the temple. For these, the Sanhedrin was allowed the authority to pronounce the death sentence, cf. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 6.4.124-126

the end, after persecuting the prophets for centuries, they now had murdered God's own Messiah (7:52)!

3) Third, the trajectory of worship that began with Abraham implied that even though forms of worship and an earthly sanctuary were appropriate, these forms suggested by their very nature that they were not ends in themselves. God promised to Abraham that after the slavery in Egypt, the people would "come out of that country and worship me in this place" (7:7). That form of worship resulted in the construction of the tabernacle in the desert (7:44), and eventually the temple built by Solomon (7:46-47). However, at each juncture, the Israelites strayed from true worship, preferring instead the gods and goddesses of the pagans (7:39-43; cf. Am. 5:25-27). They believed God could be localized in a temple, failing to realize that even the temple was not an end in itself, as the Book of Isaiah clearly indicated (7:49-50; cf. Is. 66:1-2). Solomon may have built a house for God: "However," as Stephen asserted, "the Most High does not live in houses made by men" (7:47-48)!

   This recounting of Israelite history leads to a broad implication: God's promise to David that he would have a Son who would build God a house was not exhausted in Solomon, who built the first temple. Stephen's speech implied that the coming of the Messiah was the event toward which all the ancient worship forms pointed. Just as Moses was rejected and the people's worship became blasphemous, so now God's Messiah now had been rejected, and temple worship became blasphemous![108] Therefore, to announce the destruction of the temple (or its supersession) was not blasphemy, because God was independent of any temple.[109]

The above themes were woven into the details of Stephen's speech. Abram first saw God's revelation in Mesopotamia, even before he moved to Haran (7:2). Here, God gave him the charge to leave Mesopotamia (7:3), and he settled first in Haran, then in Canaan (7:4).[110] Even in Canaan, however,

---

[108] For a larger discussion of this idea in Stephen's speech, see G. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), pp. 216-229.

[109] Bruce, *Peter*, pp. 54-55.

[110] The Genesis account indicates that Terah, Abraham's father, died at age 205 (Ge. 11:32) and that Abram was born when Terah was 70 (Ge. 11:26). If Abram left Haran when he was himself 75 (Ge. 12:4), then Terah was only 145 when Abram left Haran, which in turn would mean that Terah would have lived in Haran another 60 years after Abram departed. Stephen, however, says that Abram left "after the death of his father". This discrepancy probably should be put down to alternative texts, since both Philo and the Samaritan Pentateuch agree with Stephen. The Samaritan Pentateuch gives Terah's age when he died as 145, not 205, and Philo asserted that Abram left Haran after Terah's death, cf. *On the Migrations of*

Abram did not receive any permanent land inheritance—God's promise was that Abram's descendants would be the ones to inherit the land (7:5-7). Though at the time of this promise Abram had no child, in time Isaac was born, the covenant of circumcision was established, and eventually, Jacob and his sons were born (7:8).

The sons of Jacob were hardly paragons of righteous behavior. They sold Joseph, their brother, as a slave to Egypt, but even in Egypt, God was with Joseph, once more demonstrating that God's presence was not confined to a single place (7:9-10). During the famine, it was necessary for the sons of Jacob to travel to Egypt in order to find the sustenance that was not available in Canaan. Eventually, the whole family moved to Egypt, where they all died (7:11-15).[111] That Joseph was buried in Shechem (7:16), the sacred site of the Samaritans, could hardly be denied (cf. Ex. 13:19; Jos. 24:32), but it was a barbed truth, given the circumstances of Stephen's arraignment![112]

In Egypt, though the children of Israel multiplied, they were reduced to slavery (7:17-19). Moses was born during these tumultuous times, though by providence he was spared and brought up in the house of Pharaoh (7:20-22).[113] When grown, Moses sought to defend his fellow Israelites against their slave-masters, but his act of loyalty was disregarded with the retort, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Will you kill us like you killed the Egyptian yesterday?" Though Moses had hoped that his people would understand that he was chosen by God to deliver them, now in fear, Moses fled to Midian, where he married and fathered two sons (7:23-29). This hope by Moses, God's chosen deliverer who was rejected, will set up the climax of Stephen's speech, where God's chosen Messiah would be rejected in the same way.

Abraham, 177. To be sure, Luke generally follows the LXX, which also gives the age of Terah as 205 when he died, but apparently, Stephen was familiar with other textual traditions. Unfortunately, the copies of Genesis among the Dead Sea Scrolls shed no light on this problem, since they are fragmentary and do not contain the passages in Genesis 11 and 12.

[111] The Masoretic Text indicates that there were 70 persons who moved to Egypt, the 66 of Ge. 46:26 plus Jacob, Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh (Ge. 46:27; cf. Ex. 1:5; Dt. 10:22). As in 7:4, Stephen follows a different textual tradition in citing 75 persons in all, a figure that is corroborated by the LXX (Ge. 46:27). The LXX lists Joseph as having nine sons, and the total number of 75 is also given in the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QGen-Exod^{a} and 4QExod^{b} 1:5), cf. M. Abegg, Jr., et al., eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 25.

[112] Jacob was buried in the Cave of Macpelah near Hebron, not in Shechem (cf. Ge. 23:16-18; 49:29-32; 50:13). Stephen seems to have collapsed the two land purchases into one (Ge. 23:16ff. and Ge. 33:18-19), cf. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 149. This is the only reference to the idea that all the sons of Jacob were buried at Shechem. Other Jewish sources say they were buried at Hebron, cf. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 2.8.2; Jubilees 46:9; Testament of Reuben 7:2.

[113] The statement that Moses was "powerful in speech and action" is probably a deliberate play on Moses' own confession (cf. Ex. 4:10). It was a further testimony of what God could do in a foreign land!

After another forty years, Yahweh appeared to Moses in the burning bush at Mt. Sinai, where God promised to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian slavery (7:30-34). But when Moses had led them out of Egypt by God's power, Moses announced that there would be another prophet like himself (7:35-38). The Israelites rejected Moses, choosing instead to follow the deities of the pagans beginning with the golden calf and climaxing with the gods of the Canaanites (7:39-43). The rejected Moses became God's chosen deliverer, which a few short sentences later, Stephen will use as the parallel for the rejection of Jesus.

With respect to worship, Moses constructed the tabernacle just as God had directed, following the heavenly pattern he had seen on the holy mountain (7:44; cf. Ex. 25:40). This tent-shrine entered the land of Canaan with Joshua and the invading Israelites, and it remained as the central shrine until the period of David (7:45). David sought to build a "dwelling" for God (7:46; cf. Ps. 132:2-5), but instead, God promised to establish David's dynasty, and in the end, it was David's son Solomon who built the first temple (7:47). Stephen does not elaborate on Nathan's oracle to David (2 Sa. 7:11b-16), but he probably could assume that his listeners were well aware that there was a play on the words "house" (as referring to an architectural structure) and "house" (as referring to a dynasty of kings). Solomon may have built a "house" for God, but this house by no means exhausted the prophecy!

Now the speech turns abruptly on the adversative particle ἀλλά (= however).[114] Notwithstanding whatever David intended to do and whatever Solomon actually accomplished, the blunt fact was that God could not be confined to any humanly built structure, and the prophet Isaiah said so plainly (7:48-50; cf. Is. 66:1-2), not to mention Solomon himself (cf. 1 Kg. 8:27; 2 Chr. 6:18).[115] By implication, the notion that God was confined to the second temple, as important as it may have been, was absurd! Quickly, Stephen brought his speech to a biting climax. The leaders of Israel were just

[114] **Α**λλά indicates a difference with or contrast to what precedes, cf. *BDAG* (2000), p. 44.

[115] In the larger context of the oracle in Isaiah, the reader should note that the prophet earlier reinforces the idea that God's true temple is in heaven (cf. Is. 63:15). The earthly temple could at best only represent the invisible, heavenly temple and throne of God (Is. 66:1a), and Stephen hinted at this earlier when he said that Moses built the tabernacle "according to the pattern he had seen", presumably meaning the temple he had seen in the heavenlies (cf. He. 8:1-5). Further, Isaiah prayed that Yahweh would "come down" to make his name known to the nations (Is. 64:1-2). He even predicted that from among the Gentiles God would choose priests and Levites (Is. 66:18-21). One can only speculate, of course, about how many of these themes may have been implied in Stephen's speech, but certainly he quoted a text that contained all these things in its larger context. The Sadducees in the court, of course, could categorically discount any references to the prophetic literature, since for them only the Torah was binding, but any Pharisees seated with the Sanhedrin certainly would have had to take them into account!

like their ancestors—"stiff-necked, with uncircumcised hearts and ears" (7:51a; Ex. 33:3; Lv. 26:41; Dt. 10:16; Je. 4:4; 9:26b)! In using the term "uncircumcised"—which categorized the Jewish leaders with non-Israelite foreigners (cf. Eze. 44:7, 9)—Stephen could hardly have chosen more inflammatory language! What had happened in Israel's rejection of Joseph, Moses and the prophets was now happening in the rejection of the Holy Spirit's most important work of all—the coming of the Messiah, God's Righteous One (7:51b-52).[116] The very ones who had received the law from Moses, mediated through angels (Dt. 33:2; cf. Ga. 3:19; He. 2:2), and who had passed it down from generation to generation had refused to obey it (7:53)!

The Death of Stephen (7:54-60)

The climax of Stephen's speech was so inflammatory that the Sanhedrin erupted in fury. Quite literally, Luke says they were "sawed to their hearts' (διαπρίω), grinding their teeth in consternation (7:54). In the midst of this reaction, Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up and exclaimed, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (7:55-56). What Peter had preached at Pentecost (cf. 2:33) and later asserted to his fellow Jews (cf. 3:21), what the whole body of apostles had claimed before the Sanhedrin (cf. 5:31), now had been proclaimed in a heavenly vision. Jesus had been elevated to the right hand of the Father, Prince and Lord over all! Luke adds that in this vision Stephen say the "glory" of God, and in the context of Stephen's temple speech, this could only have meant that Stephen's articulation about the true temple being in the heavenlies, not on earthly Mt. Zion, had been vindicated!

There is no indication that the members of the council saw what Stephen saw. They simply covered their ears, yelling loudly, as they dragged Stephen outside the city to stone him. They deposited their outer cloaks at the feet of a young Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus (Cilicia), who was studying under the great Rabban Gamaliel (7:57-58; 8:1; cf. 22:3).[117] Later, this same Saul would confess that he "voted" against Christians that they might be

[116] The title "Righteous One" seems to have been a familiar designation for the Messiah. Intertestamental Jewish literature anticipates the time "when the Righteous One shall appear" (1 Enoch 38:2; cf. 46:3; 53:6), and this One would be "free from sin" (Psalms of Solomon 17:35).

[117] What seems to have begun as a formal trial ended in a lynching. Stoning was the penalty for blasphemy (Lv. 24:11-16, 23). If it be asked how the Sanhedrin was able to carry out such an execution under the shadow of the Roman occupation, it may be that it happened in the interval between Pilate's recall in AD 36 (he arrived in Rome on March 6, AD 37) and the arrival of Marcellus, the incoming acting Prefect, cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 391.

executed, and perhaps he did so on this occasion as well (cf. 26:10).[118] As Stephen was being stoned to death, he prayed that the Lord Jesus would receive his spirit and that he would forgive his executioners for their sin (7:59-60). This prayer, incidentally, is one of the very few in the New Testament addressed directly to Jesus Christ. (Most prayers are to the Father in the name of the Son.)[119]

The parallels between the death of Jesus and the death of Stephen are remarkable. Both were condemned by the Sanhedrin under Caiaphas. Both were killed outside the city. Both prayed in their final moments that God would forgive their executioners. In the end, Stephen died like his Lord.

The Samaritan Mission and the Ministry of Philip (8:1-40)

Stephen's death became a watershed for the Jerusalem church in that it forced the Jewish Christians out of their local environment. If the first church leaders other than the apostles could include even proselytes (cf. 6:5), and if Stephen, the Hellenist, could become the first Christian martyr who in the moment of his condemnation personally experienced a vision of the risen Lord at God's right hand, how far might the circle of believers actually stretch? Before his ascension, Jesus had said that his followers would be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth (cf. 1:8). Now, Luke intends to show the initial expansion beyond Jerusalem.

Judea, of course, was not in itself a problem, since it was populated by observant Jews. Samaria, however, was another matter. The Samaritans and the Jews had long-standing animosity. The Samaritans insisted that they descended from the northern Israelite tribes and that their separation from other Israelites began when Eli moved the tabernacle from Shechem (in their opinion, its rightful location) to Shiloh.[120] Hence, they claimed to be the true followers of the Torah and that the elevation of Jerusalem under David was a mistake. The alleged relocation of the tabernacle began the period of "divine disfavor", which would continue until the coming of the *Taheb* (Savior). The account in 2 Kings 17, to the contrary, claims that the Samaritans were the

---

[118] There is no indication that Saul ever was a member of the Sanhedrin, so his admission to "voting" against Christians might be a metaphor for his opposition to them or his testimony before the Sanhedrin against them.

[119] T. Smail, *The Forgotten Father* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 168-173.

[120] The Samaritan account presupposes the correctness of their version of the Torah with its copious references to Shechem. The account in Joshua 18:1, however, indicates that the tabernacle was pitched at Shiloh right after Israel's entry into the land and well prior to the time of Eli. Still, the Chronicles record indicates that the tabernacle moved "from one tent site to another, from one dwelling place to another" (1 Chr. 17:5), so it might well have been at Shechem at some point, especially if the reference to the "holy place" in Joshua 24:25-26 is taken to refer to the tabernacle.

descendants of the Mesopotamian colonists brought in by the Assyrians after the fall of the northern kingdom. At best they were of mixed blood and not true Israelites. The Samaritans, for their part, championed their own version of the Torah, the Samaritan Pentateuch, which contained passages commanding the building of an altar on Mt. Gerizim (an insertion following Ex. 20:17; also in Dt. 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26; 14:23-25; 15:20; 16:2, 6-7, 11, 15-16; 17:8, 10; 18:6; 26:2; 27:4; 31:11). According to the Jewish rabbis, if the question was asked, "When shall we take them [the Samaritans] back?", the answer was bluntly, "When they renounce Mount Gerizim and confess Jerusalem."[121] In the intertestamental period, John Hyrcanus, one of the Jewish Hasmonean priest-kings, destroyed the Samaritan sanctuary in 128 BC.[122] So vitriolic was the hatred between Samaritans and Jews that a century later some Samaritans slipped into the Jerusalem temple during Passover and scattered human bones in the porches and sanctuary in the middle of the night (bones would have desecrated the temple).[123] For Jews to call someone a Samaritan was a gross insult (cf. Jn. 8:48).

In his public ministry, Jesus had shocked his disciples by conversing openly with a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:27), and he had stayed in Samaria for an extra couple days to teach (Jn. 4:40-41). On another occasion, he healed a Samaritan leper (Lk. 17:15-16). When some of his disciples exuded the typical Jewish animosity toward Samaritans, Jesus rebuked them (Lk. 9:52-55), and on one occasion, the hero in one of Jesus' parables was a Samaritan (Lk. 10:33-35). Still, in his public ministry Jesus had instructed his disciples not to go into the Samaritan villages to preach, since their immediate mission was to be to Israel (Mt. 10:5-6). This fragmented relationship lay behind the reluctance of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem to reach out to the Samaritans.

The Scattering of the Christians (8:1-8)

For the second time, Luke directly mentions that Saul added his support to the execution of Stephen (8:1a; cf. 7:58b). Saul himself would later confess the same thing (cf. 22:20). The antagonism against the followers of Jesus now became so intense that they began to scatter, fleeing to the outlying areas of Judea and Samaria (8:1b). The apostles, apparently, stayed in Jerusalem, because of their central importance to the Jerusalem church. Stephen was honorably buried by his friends, but Saul now became the primary inquisitor for the Sanhedrin against Christians (8:2-3). Later,

[121] B. Waltke, *ABD* (1992) V.938.
[122] Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.9.1.
[123] Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.2.2

Saul would explain how he went from synagogue to synagogue, imprisoning and beating those who confessed Jesus as the Messiah (cf. 22:19). He was convinced that he should do everything in his power to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and in addition to imprisonment, he brought death to many, traveling both inside Palestine and even to other Roman provinces in his religious zeal to root out this heresy (cf. 26:9-11). His opposition to Christians was violent and ruthless, a fact he never forgot, even after accepting Christ (1 Co. 15:9; Ga. 1:13; Phil. 3:6; 1 Ti. 1:13). Why he did not attack the apostles directly, who stayed in the city, we are not told, but it seems that virtually everyone else was fair game!

The upshot of this persecution was that everywhere the Christians went, they spread the message that Jesus was the Messiah (8:4). Most startling, one of the Seven, Philip, went to a Samaritan city and preached about Jesus' messiahship there (8:5)![124] Crowds gathered to listen, for the Samaritans, whatever their differences with Jewish theology, certainly believed in the coming of the *Taheb*, the Messiah (cf. Jn. 4:25). Perhaps some of them had seen and remembered Jesus himself! When they observed Philip's healing miracles and exorcisms, they were elated (8:6-8)!

The Incident with Simon and the Investigation by the Jerusalem Church (8:9-25)

Two stories are now intertwined by Luke in his description of the Samaritan mission, the attempt by Simon to co-opt the power of Christ and the investigation of the Samaritan revival by the Jerusalem church. Sorcery and magic were the stock in trade of the ancient *theios aner* (divine-man),[125] and in Samaria there was one such person named Simon, who had been nicknamed "The Great Power of God" (8:9-11).[126] When the Samaritans heard Philip and saw what he did in the name of Jesus, they accepted that the time of fulfillment had come and that Jesus was the Messiah. Many were baptized, including Simon himself (8:12-13a).[127] It is not entirely clear

[124] Samaria, of course, was to the north of Jerusalem, but Philip went "down" to Samaria in the sense of elevation.

[125] Ferguson, pp. 306-307. A certain Chanina ben Dosa was purported to have healed Rabban Gamaliel's son as well as to have performed other miracles, cf. D. Cartlidge and D. Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 158-159.

[126] Lit., ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ καλουμένη μεγάλη (= the power of God, the one called 'great'). Later church tradition offers various information about Simon, but it is difficult to disentangle legend from fact. Justin Martyr, himself a converted Samaritan, offers the earliest reference in about AD 140. He describes Simon's teaching as "the wicked and deceitful doctrine of Simon of my own nation", cf. *Second Apology*, xv.

[127] Fitzmyer is quite correct to say that Luke's use of the phrase "in the name of Jesus" is not so much aimed toward a baptismal formula as to the fact that the orientation of baptism was toward Jesus, the Messiah, not some other ritual washing, whether Jewish or Baptist, cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 400.

whether or not their response was a genuine expression of Christian faith,[128] but it is clear from later events that they were not accorded the gift of the Spirit at this time (cf. 8:16). Simon, for his part, was fascinated by the miracles performed under Philip's ministry (8:13b), and the fact that he followed him everywhere suggests that he, at least, was motivated by sensationalism rather than genuine faith. It may well have been that Simon's own claim to fame had been based on sleight of hand and tricks, while the miracles attending Philip's ministry were inexplicable to him.

Word about what was happening in Samaria trickled back to Jerusalem. When the apostles heard about it, they sent a delegation to investigate (8:14). Apparently, if what was happening in Samaria was genuine, then the circle of Christians necessarily must be expanded beyond the confines of traditional Jewishness. When Peter and John arrived, they imposed hands upon the Samaritans and prayed that they might be given the gift of the Spirit, and in fact, the Spirit was now given (8:15-17).

This scenario recorded by Luke has raised a huge question. The normal pattern of conversion-initiation in the New Testament is that those who come to faith are immediately blessed with the gift of the Spirit (cf. Ga. 3:2, 5, 14; 4:6; Ep. 1:13; Ro. 8:9, 15-16; 14:17). There is no hint in the New Testament whatsoever that believers were divided into two bodies, those with the Spirit and those without it, for the very unity of the church presupposed that "all of us were given one Spirit to drink" (1 Co. 12:13; cf. Ep. 4:3-4). So then, why did the Samaritans not receive the Spirit under the ministry of Philip?

Four different answers have been advanced. The first is that this was an early example of baptism followed by confirmation, but such a position seems unduly anachronistic. The second is that of Dunn, who claims that the Samaritans did not actually come to genuine faith until the arrival of Peter and John, but this approach relies heavily on a questionable exegesis of the verb "believe" when used with the dative object. The third is the

---

[128] James Dunn has argued that Luke intends his readers to realize that the Samaritans' faith was defective at this early stage. He argues that the Samaritans originally responded to Philip just like they did to Simon, and in both cases (8:6 and 8:10), Luke uses the same verb προσέχω (= to pay attention to), which in turn suggests something less than true faith. He also argues that the verb πιστεύω (= to believe), when governing a dative object (8:12, 13), does not refer to genuine faith but merely to intellectual assent. That this response was superficial, he contends, is later clearly stated (8:20-23). Hence, what Luke really intends to convey by all this is, "Note carefully what I say, and do not miss the point: they all went through the form but did not experience the reality," cf. J. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), pp. 63-66. Dunn's thesis has not won widespread support, and other scholars are doubtful about his exegesis, cf. Marshal, *Acts*, p. 156, H. Ervin, *Conversion-Initiation and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1984), pp. 28-32 and C. Keener, *3 Crucial Questions About the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 56-59.

Pentecostal-Charismatic answer that the gift of the Spirit in 8:17 was a second work of grace, not the initial work of regeneration, but if this were the case, why then do not the other conversion-initiation accounts in Acts follow such a pattern? The fourth is that God sovereignly withheld the Spirit temporarily so as to allow Peter and John to confirm by first-hand experience that the Samaritans were true Christians. The issue was not with the Samaritans so much as it was with the Jerusalem church. Hence, the Samaritan situation was unusual, not usual, since it was the first occasion of conversions outside the Jewish community.[129] This latter explanation seems to fit well with the theological emphases in Acts and the theological point of this narrative in particular, since this was the first crossing of the Jewish nationalistic barrier with the gospel. The imposition of hands by Peter and John would have marked a continuity between the experience of the Jerusalem church and the Samaritans. There would not be two bodies of believers, but one.

Simon's true colors now became clear. He, also, wanted the ability to impose hands on people so that they might receive the gift of the Spirit (8:18-19). Though Luke does not say so directly, Simon's penchant for sensationalism and his desire to produce the same effect might suggest that when the Holy Spirit came upon the Samaritans they evidenced some outward sign, such as, speaking with tongues or prophecy (cf. 19:6). This suggestion is not unlikely, but the text is silent on the point. Peter, however, was incensed at Simon's obvious duplicity. He rebuked him sternly,[130] and his words indicated that Simon, at least, had not responded to Christ in genuine faith (8:20-23). Simon then asked for prayer so that Peter's sentence to perdition would not take place (8:24).

The Samaritan episode changed the outlook of the whole Jerusalem church. Philip's ministry was vindicated, the Samaritans were now included in the body of Jesus' followers, and Peter and John, on their way back to Jerusalem, took it upon themselves to preach in other Samaritan villages (8:25). That they did so demonstrated that they were convinced this new outreach had divine sanction.

Conversion of an Ethiopian (8:26-40)

Luke's narrative now continues with Philip, one of the Seven. He was instructed to go southward to the Gaza Road (8:26). Here he confronted an

---

[129] F. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 173-181.

[130] J. B. Philips translation, which he claims is "exactly what the Greek text means", is striking to say the least: "To hell with you and your money!", and he adds, "It is a pity that their real meaning [i.e., these words] is obscured by modern slang usage."

Ethiopian eunuch, an treasury official from the court of Queen Candace. The African had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship (8:27). Two questions immediately arise. Was this man a Jew, a proselyte, or an African Gentile? While in Jerusalem, might he have encountered any Christians prior to his encounter with Philip?

In answer to the first question, the fact that the man was from a kingdom south of Egypt in the upper Nile region, the area usually designated "Ethiopia", marks him as unique. The queens of the kingdom of Meroe (in the general area of modern Sudan) were traditionally called "Candace" (the transliteration of a Nubian word for "queen"). What is intriguing is the fact that the man was a eunuch, a description that might seem to disqualify him altogether from the faith of Judaism (cf. Dt. 23:1).[131] It seems highly unlikely, in any event, that he was a diaspora Jew. It also makes any identification as a proselyte questionable. Hence, one is left with the likelihood that he was an African Gentile. At the same time, he had been to Jerusalem to worship, and Philip found him reading an Isaiah scroll, presumably in Hebrew or Greek, which leaves him in the ambiguous state of having strong sympathies to Judaism, even if he had not fully been joined to Judaism. Luke's interest in him almost certainly derives from the fact that Ethiopia popularly was considered to be "the end of the earth"—and he certainly was from the end of Luke's world! His conversion would be a direct fulfillment to the Acts 1:8 paradigm, that the gospel would be preached to the ends of the earth. Further, even though eunuchs were ostracized by Mosaic law from the assembly of Israel, the Book of Isaiah, not very far from where this man actually was reading, held forth the promise that in the messianic future such people as foreigners and eunuchs would be accepted by God (Is. 56:3-8)!

About the second question one can only speculate. Given the intense persecution that had broken out in Jerusalem, it seems highly unlikely that the believers would any longer have been meeting publicly in Solomon's Portico. Hence, if the Ethiopian had been to Jerusalem to worship, even if he was able to enter the temple precincts as far as the Court of the Nations, he still might not have encountered any Christians, who probably were meeting in secret.

Urged by the inner voice of the Spirit, Philip approached the Ethiopian and found him sitting in his chariot reading from Isaiah (8:28-30a). In the dialogue that followed, Philip sat with the man, who was intrigued by the passage about the suffering Servant of Yahweh (8:30b-33;

[131] Josephus adds that eunuchs were to be driven out, cf. *Antiquities,* 4.8.40.

cf. Is. 53:7-8). Who was this figure who so willingly offered himself to humiliation and death in behalf of others (8:34)?[132] Philip did not hesitate. In that very passage, similar to Peter's words earlier (3:13, 26; cf. 4:27, 30), he interpreted the passage as referring to the sufferings of Jesus (8:35).

Along the road, they came to some water. Whether an oasis, a stream, a spring or some other type of installation is not mentioned, but it may well have been the spring at Ein Yael.[133] Apparently, Philip must have said something in their conversation about Christian baptism, for the eunuch asked why he should not be baptized, since he obviously was ready to accept what Philip had told him (8:36).[134] They stopped, and Philip baptized him. The phrase that they "went down into the water" and "came up out of the water" suggests that this may have been an immersion baptism (8:38-39a).[135]

After the baptism, Philip suddenly was transported away by the Spirit, and presumably, the Ethiopian continued on his way homeward (8:39b).[136] Philip was taken to Azotus, the next major town to the north of Gaza along the coastal road (8:40a). He continued his evangelistic preaching in the various coastal towns all the way to Caesarea, the provincial capital (8:40b), and later, he is said to have lived there (cf. 21:8).

BREAKING THE GENTILE BARRIER (9:1—12:25)

---

[132] Perhaps the man was aware of the three interpretive options current in Palestinian Judaism, that is, that the figure of the servant referred collectively to Israel, that it referred individually to the prophet Isaiah himself, or that it referred eschatologically to the Messiah, cf. J. Jeremias, *TDNT* (1967) V.684-700.

[133] While several sites have been suggested, in favor of Ein Yael is that it has abundant water, it is directly on the Roman road between Jerusalem and Gaza, there are indications that the Roman road was paved, which in turn would mean it was suitable for chariot travel, and the site was known and inhabited in the 1st century AD, cf. U. Rapuano, "Did Philip Baptize the Eunuch at Ein Yael?" *BAR* (Nov. Dec. 1990), pp. 44-49.

[134] Manuscripts in the Western Text include an extra verse (8:37) not found in the earliest manuscripts: *Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The official answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,'* cf. B. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, pp. 359-360. Because the earliest known textual manuscript with this passage dates no earlier than the 6th century AD, virtually all modern versions omit it (the KJV and NKJV are the notable exceptions). Nonetheless, whether part of Luke's original text or not, the statement surely reflects an essential truth.

[135] This text may not be as conclusive as some might like to think, since going down into the water and coming up from the water could be equally true of someone baptized by affusion (pouring). However, if the pattern of ritual immersion held true that seems to have been the method of Jewish baptisms, based on archaeological and Mishnaic evidence, then immersion is the more likely method, cf. W. La Sor, "Discovering What Jewish Miqva'ot Baptism Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1987), pp. 52-59.

[136] Later Christian tradition says that the Ethiopian returned to his home country and preached Christ there, cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.12.8.

The next major movement in Luke's account of the Jerusalem church concerns the final great ethnic barrier, the gospel to the Gentiles. Already, this direction had been hinted at in several ways. Jesus' commission to his disciples clearly was directed "to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost with the miracle of other languages representing people "from every nation under heaven" (2:5)—from the entire Mediterranean basin as well as Mesopotamia and Africa—surely suggested that the message of Jesus was not intended to be provincial (2:5). Peter's sermon at Pentecost that the promise of salvation was "for all who are far off…for all whom the Lord our God will call" hinted at an international scope (2:39). His charge to his fellow Jews did the same. To be sure, he confirmed that the message of Jesus should come "first" to the Jews, the heirs of the covenants and promises (3:25-26; 5:31), but the fundamental promise itself, given to Abraham, was that "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (3:25b).

A small step was taken when the apostles, in response to pleas by the Hellenistic Jewish widows, directed the believing community in choosing the Seven to oversee the common life of the Jerusalem church (6:1-6). All of the Seven, given their Greek names, may well have been from the neglected sector, and at least one of them was a proselyte (6:5b). Stephen, initially the most prominent among the Seven, confronted the entire Sanhedrin with the conclusion that God could not be confined to the temple (7:48ff.), and though his boldness resulted in his martyrdom, and though the resulting persecution against the believers drove them out of Jerusalem, they went everywhere telling the story of Jesus (8:4). Philip, another of the Seven, crossed the ethnic line by preaching to Samaritans (8:5). The Jerusalem church felt compelled to investigate this radical move (8:14), but Peter and John not only confirmed the legitimacy of the Samaritan mission, they joined it (8:25)! Philip, for his part, was instrumental in the conversion of an African, a person even further afield from the Jewish center (8:27, 36-38).

Now, Luke intends to show how the Gentile barrier itself was effectively broken. If relations between Jews and Samaritans had been difficult, it paled by comparison to relations between Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles were pagans, and they were as far away from the Jewish center as could be imagined. Only Jews with pure ancestry, it was believed, formed the pure Israel, the chosen people of God. Various stages of less-than-perfect ancestry were demarcated by the rabbis, but at the very bottom of all categories were the Gentiles. Jeremias puts it succinctly: "…from a social point of view the whole community of Judaism at the time of Jesus was

dominated by the fundamental idea of the maintenance of racial purity."[137] Outside the "holy land", everything was darkness and death. The very dust of a pagan country was defiling and to be regarded as contact with the grave.[138] Pagans, by definition, were calling down on themselves divine judgment because of their idolatry and immorality, and in Palestine, particularly, it was galling to be confronted with paganism in the holy land itself. Vitriolic uprisings abounded from the Hellenistic Period to the Roman Period against the recurrent efforts to "paganize" the Jews. To be occupied by pagan Rome was perceived as oppression at every level, and resistance to such pagan administrations not only erupted in major revolts, such as those by Judas Maccabaeus (166 BC), Simon ben Giora (AD 66) and Simon ben Kosiba (AD 132), but also in numerous smaller rebellions.[139] Hence, to say that the idea of carrying the gospel to Gentiles was the final, ethnic barrier is no overstatement!

The Conversion of Saul (9:1-31)

Saul of Tarsus, Cilicia, came from a Jewish family of the Diaspora (21:39). However, he had close family ties with Jerusalem (23:16), and he had moved there at an early age, presumably staying with his aunt, so that he might study under the great Rabbi Gamaliel (22:3; cf. Ga. 1:14). He never mentions whether or not he personally had ever seen Jesus of Nazareth, but he could hardly have been ignorant of Jesus' trial and execution as a blasphemer against the temple and an insurgent against Rome. He had listened to Stephen's radical speech to the Sanhedrin, and he fully supported the summary execution of this young Hellenist Jew (7:58b; 8:1a; 22:20). Subsequently, he became the arch inquisitor for the Sanhedrin, taking letters of extradition from the Sanhedrin to far-flung synagogues in order to bring Christians to trial, many to imprisonment and some to death (8:3; 22:4-5; 26:9-11; 1 Co. 15:9; Ga. 1:13; Phil. 3:6; 1 Ti. 1:13).[140] He had secured some of these same extradition letters from the high priest to the Jewish synagogues in Damascus, and he was on his way there, when suddenly he was struck to the ground amidst a blazing heavenly light and a voice in Hebrew/Aramaic, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (9:1-4;

[137] Jeremiah, *Jerusalem*, p. 270.
[138] A. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 14-15.
[139] Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 170-181.
[140] At this early period, the name for the followers of Jesus was simply "the Way" (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). From the way in which Luke uses this title, it seems likely that this was a self-designation of the Christians. Later, of course, they would be called Christians for the first time in Antioch (cf. 11:26b).

26:14). Later, in recounting this incredible event, he would report that his traveling companions saw the heavenly light but did not clearly hear the voice (22:9).[141]

The voice from heaven Saul presumably would have taken to be representing God.[142] His question, "Who are you, Sir (κύριε)?", could hardly have been given a more shocking answer. "I am Jesus…!" (9:5). Later, Saul would recount more fully what was told him—that he was destined to be a witness of Jesus to the Gentiles so that they might be forgiven and included among God's holy people (cf. 26:15-18). Saul was near Damascus when this occurred, and following the heavenly instructions, he continued on into the city, led by his companions as a blind man to the home of a certain Judas on Straight Street, where he waited without eating or drinking for three days (9:6-9). There, while praying, he had a vision of a man named Ananias coming to him and healing his blindness (9:10-11). What a three days it must have been!

Meanwhile, Ananias, a devout Christian Jew in Damascus, also was confronted by Christ in a vision. He was told where to find Saul and that he would be expected. His initial protests—he certainly knew who Saul was and what he was about!—were set aside, for the Lord indicated that Saul was a "chosen vessel", called to suffering and to carry Christ's name to the Gentiles and their kings as well as to Israel (9:13-16). In obedience, Ananias went to Saul, imposed hands upon him, and prayed for his healing and the infilling of the Holy Spirit (9:17). Instantly, Saul was healed and accepted Christian baptism (9:18). He spent several days with the Damascus believers (9:19), and even more to the point, he visited the Damascus synagogues, not to serve extradition papers against Christians but to proclaim that Jesus was God's very Son, the Messiah (9:20)! The tables had been turned. The bitterest enemy of Christians had become a Christian himself, and ripples of surprise and shock filtered throughout the whole Jewish community (9:21-22)! Eventually, some of the Jews determined that Saul must be silenced by death, but his friends learned of the threat and got him through a window and over the wall in a basket (9:23-25; cf. 2 Co. 11:30-33).[143]

---

[141] In 9:7, Luke says that Saul's companions "heard the voice but did not see anyone", while in 22:9, Saul reports that they "did not hear the voice". Presumably this means that they heard something but could not clearly make out what was said. In another recounting, Saul said, "We all fell to the ground…", but "I heard a voice". The NIV, accordingly, has translated 22:9 as "My companions did not *understand* the voice..."

[142] The rabbis identified the *bath qol* (= "daughter of the voice [of God]) as a heavenly echo of God's voice, cf. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 195.

[143] Later, Paul would recall his escape "over the wall" in an irony to the Corinthians (2 Co. 11:30-33). In Roman culture, a wall crown (a crown shaped like a city's encircling wall) was given by the emperor to the first soldier brave enough to make it safely over the wall into an enemy city. As an irony toward

In his Galatian letter, Paul adds some details that Luke does not recount about this period. First, Paul says that he went immediately into Arabia, probably the Nabataean kingdom, before later returning to Damascus (Ga. 1:17). This kingdom, which reached to the edge of Damascus, was ruled by Aretas IV (9 BC to AD 40). Aretas was an Arab, not a Jew, but his hostility to Saul, as recounted in 2 Co. 11:32-33, might imply that Saul spent his time in Arabia preaching Christ.[144] Presumably, this interlude must have taken about three years (cf. Ga. 1:18).

If the above scenario is correct, then when Luke describes Saul as returning to Jerusalem (9:26a), this trip would have been some three years after his conversion (Ga. 1:18). On this occasion, according to his Galatian letter, Saul went to get acquainted with Peter. However, the believers in Jerusalem, given what had happened in the case of Stephen and others, were understandably reluctant to welcome him, probably fearing that his reported conversion was an infiltration tactic (9:26b). In his Galatian reminiscence Saul says that he did not see the other Jerusalem leaders or any other Christians there (Ga. 1:22-23) except Peter and James, Jesus' half-brother (Ga. 1:18-19).

One man came to Saul's rescue, Barnabas, the Christian Levite from Cyprus who earlier had sold land and donated the money to the common fund (9:27a; cf. 4:36-37). Barnabas introduced him to the apostles (presumably Peter and James), explaining the circumstances of Saul's conversion, his encounter with the risen Jesus, and his boldness in proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah (9:27b). Saul stayed with them for fifteen days (Ga. 1:18), and thereafter he moved freely about Jerusalem, though apparently his reputation still made him suspect within the larger circumference of Judea (9:28; cf. Ga. 1:22). As had Stephen before him, Saul now debated vigorously with the Hellenist Jews, so much so that they threatened to kill him as they had Stephen (9:29). When the situation became too dangerous, the Christians hustled Saul out of Jerusalem and sent him to Caesarea Maritima on the coast, the provincial seat of Roman government, where he boarded a vessel bound for Tarsus, his home town (9:30; cf. Ga. 1:21). Saul would remain in Tarsus for some time until Barnabas would seek him out and bring him to Antioch (cf. 11:25).

Luke now offers another summary statement (cf. 2:42-47; 5:42; 6:7; 8:25, 40). The Christians in Galilee and Judea, now that their arch accuser

---

unwarranted boasting, Paul essentially said, "I went over the wall once—stuffed into a basket when I escaped the agents of King Aretas of Damascus!", cf. V. Furnish, "Corinth in Paul's Time: What Archaeology Can Tell Us," *BAR* (May/Jun 1988), pp. 20-21.

[144] Bruce, *Paul*, pp. 81-82.

had been converted, enjoyed a period of reprieve from persecution. Many more converts were added to their number as the Holy Spirit fortified them in their witness about Jesus (9:31). It also is to be observed that Luke here speaks of "the church (εκκλησία = assembly, congregation) throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria". The grammatical singular form implies the unity of the Christians in a single body. Luke, of course, uses the word "church" to refer to local congregations as well (8:1; 11:22; 13:1; 20:17, etc.), but here it is the church catholic that is in view.[145] Further, the specific mention of Judea and Samaria fills out the commission of Jesus except for one category, the final one "to the ends of the earth" (cf. 1:8).

Peter Begins an Itinerant Ministry (9:32-43)

One can only speculate about Saul's fifteen days with Peter, during which his vision of preaching to the Gentiles probably was shared by Barnabas (cf. 9:27), and how it may have impacted the big fisherman. However, Peter's role in breaking the Gentile barrier now began to take definite shape as he commenced an itinerant ministry along the coastal cities of Palestine (9:32). Earlier, Philip had preached Christ in these same cities (cf. 8:40), and now Peter, following in Philip's footsteps, began visiting the various Christians spread out along the Mediterranean coast. Lydda, a town in the ancient territory of Benjamin and about eleven miles southeast of the port city of Joppa, became the site for a notable miracle. A paralyzed man named Aeneas was healed, and everyone in the area was aware of the miracle, for Aeneas was a known figure. This healing became instrumental in many others accepting the messiahship of Jesus (9:33-35). Not far away, a Christian woman named Tabitha (= gazelle; Dorcas is a Greek form with the same meaning) had died, and since Joppa where she lived was nearby and Peter was close, a delegation was sent to entreat him to come (9:36-38). He went to her corpse laid out in an upstairs room, and after clearing the room of mourning widows, Peter knelt and prayed. Amazingly, when he commanded her to "get up", she sat up (9:39-40)! When he presented her alive and well to her friends, the news of a raising from the dead spread rapidly so that many more people accepted Jesus as the Messiah (9:41-42). Naturally, Peter would have remained there for some time in view of the

[145] William Stuart McBernie asserted that the idea of a church catholic was foreign to the early congregations and that the concept of the church must be limited only to individual assemblies, not Christianity at large, cf. W. McBernie, *The Search for the Early Church* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1978), p. 11. This assertion is patently mistaken.

mass conversions, but the shocking statement by Luke is that he stayed with a tanner (9:43)!

To the uninformed, the fact that Simon, Peter's host, was a tanner might seem as innocuous as if he were a baker or a stone mason—but not for observant Jews! Jewish tanners were people who had adopted a despised trade! Because tanning hides required contact with corpses and blood, contact that would have rendered the tradesman as perpetually ritually unclean,[146] such trades carried a decidedly negative social stigma.[147] Worse, such ritual uncleanness was contagious by secondary contact (cf. Hg. 2:13; Lv. 22:4-5; Nu. 19:14). For Peter to stay in such a place with such a person meant that already he had come some distance in understanding that God's approval trumped other considerations. If Simon the Tanner was a believer (and presumably he was), then God had accepted him. Peter's stay with an "unclean" tanner was preparatory for his visit to an "unclean" Gentile, the next episode in Luke's narrative.

The Conversion of a Roman God-fearer (10:1-48)

The trajectory of the Jerusalem Christians to expand their conception of God's "called out" people (the basic meaning of the term **εκκλησία**, cf. 5:11; 7:38; 8:1, 3; 9:31) was now approaching it highest arc. Already, the commission of Jesus pointed toward the "ends of the earth" (1:8). The miraculous languages at Pentecost clearly symbolized an international perspective (2:5-11). To be sure, the gospel was "first" to the Jew (3:25-26; 5:31), but it could not be confined to the tight circle of Hebraistic Judaism (6:1-7), nor could it exclude Samaritans (8:5-8, 14-17, 25) or Africans (8:36-39). The conversion and commission of Saul of Tarsus, with the specific directive that he would "carry my name before the Gentiles" (9:15), continued this trajectory.

Peter's role loomed large in this growing perception that the gospel could not be confined to the Jewish community. It was Peter, the spokesman at Pentecost, that announced the promise was "for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (2:39). Peter may have spoken more

---

[146] The impurity system of Israel was rather complex, and Leviticus 11 seems to suggest a large group of animals that caused impurity when eaten as well as a more limited group that caused impurity when merely touched or carried, cf. D. Wright, *ABD* (1992) VI.730-731. Impurity restricted the worshipper from coming near the sanctuary (Lv. 22:3).

[147] In later Jewish lists of repugnant trades, the trade of "tanner" was listed even below that of "dung-collector", cf. Mishnah Ketuboth vii.10, cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, p. 304.

than he knew at that time, but he also was part of the delegation sent from Jerusalem to investigate the Samaritan revival under Philip's ministry (8:14), and Peter, along with John, led the way in a more extensive Samaritan mission (8:25). After Saul's conversion, it was Peter whom the newly converted student of Gamaliel sought out in the early days (Ga. 1:18). Later, Saul's contact with the Jerusalem apostles was specifically so that in his Gentile ministry he would not be found "running…in vain" (Ga. 2:1-2). Finally, Peter's temporary residence with a tanner, a man with a despised trade (9:43; 10:6), became the initial setting for his revelation that he must not consider unclean anything (or more to the point, *anyone*) whom God had accepted (10:15, 28; 11:9). Later in retrospect, Peter would declare that God had determined that by him the opportunity for Gentiles to be saved had been revealed (15:7-9).

Peter's Vision (10:1-23a)

Luke's narrative now moves up the seacoast to Caesarea, the provincial seat of Roman government in Palestine.[148] Here was stationed a Roman officer named Cornelius (10:1).[149] As a God-fearer, he was a man deeply devout and highly sympathetic to the Jewish understanding of God (10:2).[150] While participating in the Jewish hour of prayer one day (10:3a, 30; cf. 3:1), he experienced a vision of an angel, who reassured him that his prayers and generosity to the poor had been accepted by God. He was now to send to Joppa for a man named Peter, who was a temporary resident with a tanner (10:3b-6). Immediately, he dispatched two servants and a soldier to Joppa, some 30 miles to the south (10:7-8).

---

[148] Between 22 and 10/9 BC, Herod the Great built the Caesarea of Jesus' and Paul's time, including a harbor with breakwaters, a theater, an amphitheater, a palace, an aqueduct, marketplaces and streets laid out in a grid. After AD 6, the Romans ruled Judea through a governor and an administration located in Caesarea. A Latin inscription from the theater specifically names Pontius Pilate, who dedicated a temple to Tiberius, cf. K. Holum, "Caesarea, " *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near* East, ed. E. Meyers (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997) I.399-404.

[149] As a centurion, he was a non-commissioned officer over a division of a hundred soldiers, one of 59 centurions in a legion. He belonged to a cohort (1/10th of a Legion comprising 600 men), probably the *Cohors II miliaria Italica civium romanorum voluntariorum*, a body of archers serving in Syria Palestina from 69 BC until into the second century AD, cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 449.

[150] God-fearers, those referred to by the Greek names φοβουμενος (= the fearing ones), σεβουμενος (= the worshipping ones), θεοσεβεις (= God worshippers) and μετευντες (= those who fear), are generally understood as Gentiles standing somewhere between Judaism and paganism. They frequented the synagogue, accepted monotheism, and observed some Jewish religious laws, though they had not fully accepted Judaism nor received circumcision. While there is some debate over their identity, Cornelius presumably fell within this general category of Jewish sympathizer, cf. L. Feldman, "The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers" and R. Tannenbaum, "Jews and God-fearers in the Holy City of Aphrodite," *BAR* (Sept/Oct 1986), pp. 54-63.

Meanwhile, at about noon the next day as these emissaries were approaching Joppa, Peter was praying on the rooftop of Simon the Tanner's house (perhaps getting a bit of sea breeze as relief from the smell). He became hungry, but before the midday meal convened, suddenly he had a transcendent experience (lit., ἔκστασις = an ecstasy).[151] From the heavens, he saw a large canvas (lit. "vessel") being lowered by its four corners. It was full of all sorts of animals, some of which were quite definitely non-kosher (10:9-12).[152] A voice said, "Rise, kill and eat" (10:13)! This direct countermand to the kosher laws was more than Peter could accept (10:14). Of course, already he had relaxed his scruples about secondary contamination by staying with a tanner in the first place, but the present command was not only for direct contact with a forbidden animal, but consumption! The voice responded, "Do not call anything impure that God has made pure" (10:15), and the same scenario was repeated twice more (10:16)! The point, of course, was that if the laws about kosher food were now obsolete so that it was no longer necessary to distinguish between ritually clean and unclean food, other distinctions, such as contact with Gentiles, must also be reassessed. Jesus had made the same point in another way (cf. Mk. 7:14-29), but presumably the implications of his teaching were not entirely grasped by his disciples until much later. Amazed at what he had seen and heard, Peter, prompted by the Holy Spirit, went downstairs to meet the emissaries from Cornelius. The Spirit instructed him that he should go with them (10:17-23a).

It is to the point that Peter invited these Gentiles into the home as his guests (10:23a). While such an invitation was only slight less radical as what would happen later—where Peter would go into a Gentile's home and eat there—it certainly marked the first outcome of the vision he had just seen.

Peter Goes to Caesarea (10:23b-33)

When setting out for Cornelius' home, Peter took along with him half a dozen Jewish Christian brothers (10:23b, 45a; cf. 11:12). One can only imagine what conversation may have attended the 30 mile trip up the coast, but when they arrived, they found that Cornelius was waiting, along with a coterie of friends and relatives—all, presumably, Gentiles (10:24). Now, Peter entered a Gentile's house, perhaps for the first time in his life! Though

[151] The word used here is the same as is used in the LXX for Adam's (Ge. 2:21) and Abraham's (Ge. 15:12) "deep sleep" .

[152] The animals are the three kinds listed in various Old Testament passages (e.g., Ge. 6:20). While it is not stated whether this assembly included kosher animals, it clearly included animals forbidden by Moses' law for consumption (cf. Lv. 11), for reptiles are specifically mentioned, and all reptiles were on the taboo list (Lv. 11:29-31a, 41-45).

Cornelius prostrated himself before Peter, the big fisherman pulled him, and his words, "I myself am [just] a man," hinted at the developing change in his theological world-view (10:25-26).

If anything, Peter was blunt in his opening words. Since Cornelius was sympathetic to Jewish ways, he would have known how unprecedented it was for Peter to even enter his home (cf. Lk. 7:6), and he certainly would have known that Peter was violating a sacred distinction that all Jews scrupulously observed (10:27-28a). But, Peter was quick to acknowledge that God had changed the rules! From the divine abolition of the rules about food distinctions, Peter understood clearly that he must now set aside the rules about racial distinctions (10:28b-29; cf. 15:9). Cornelius explained his vision and indicated that they all were now ready to hear whatever Peter would say (10:30-33).

Peter's Gentile Sermon (10:34-43)

The opening of Peter's sermon demonstrates how far he had come! God does not show favoritism (10:34), a theme that later would become foundational for the ministry of St. Paul (Ro. 2:6-11; cf. Ga. 3:26-29; Ep. 6:9b; Col. 3:11, 23-25). Instead, God accepts from every ethnicity (lit. "every nation") those who fear him and live righteously (10:35). The message of Jesus, which came first to the people of Israel, is a message of peace that erases the lines of partiality. Christ Jesus is Lord of all, not merely Lord of some (10:36).

As a God-fearer, Cornelius must have had considerable knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, but even more, as a soldier on duty in Caesarea, he must have know something of the life and death of Jesus, a knowledge that Peter could assume (10:37-38). Perhaps he knew of the other Roman centurion who had benefited from Jesus' ministry directly (cf. Lk. 7:1ff.), but even if he did not, the wonderful events attending Jesus' public ministry were the sorts of things that become widely known, especially by folk in the same geographical proximity. Peter describes Jesus' ministry as one empowered by the Holy Spirit and resulting in good deeds, healings and exorcisms, all of which demonstrated his authenticity. His apostles were personal witnesses of everything, including his execution in Jerusalem, his resurrection on the third day, and his post-resurrection appearances (10:39-40). That Jesus was now alive was validated by specially chosen witnesses who actually ate and drank with him after Easter (10:41; cf. 1:4).[153] The risen Christ had himself commanded that these witnesses proclaim him as

[153] These "chosen witnesses" included the women, the Twelve, and various other individuals and groups, not the least of which was Peter himself (cf. 1 Co. 15:5-8).

the heavenly Judge of the living and the dead (10:42; cf. Jn. 5:24-30; Ro. 14:9; 2 Co. 5:10; 2 Ti. 4:1; 1 Pe. 4:5). The ancient prophets of Israel also predicted the coming of the Savior and that all who put their faith in him would receive forgiveness of sins (10:43).[154]

The Gentile Pentecost (10:44-48)

Peter had not yet completed his speech, when suddenly he was interrupted by the descent of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his company (10:44). What happened at Pentecost now happened at Caesarea. The Gentiles who had heard Peter's sermon, eager to receive God's message, now began to speak in other languages and praise God (10:46).

Three points, especially, should be made about Luke's description of this event. Initially, this was the first occasion after Pentecost where the gift of languages was clearly given.[155] In fact, Peter would later say that the Holy Spirit "came on them as he had come on us at the beginning", and the way he expresses himself makes it unlikely that the gift of languages was a common phenomenon at conversion (cf. 11:15). He had to go all the way back to the original Day of Pentecost to find a parallel. Second, the phenomenon of other tongues is closely linked to praising God, that is, the expression of other tongues is the language of praise. This seems to have been the case at Pentecost (cf. 2:11), and it agrees with the way Paul describes it later. Paul speaks of tongues as a language of prayer (1 Co. 14:14-15), praise and thanksgiving (1 Co. 14:16). In fact, he will pointedly say that when speaking in tongues one does not speak to other men, but to God (1 Co. 14:2). This makes very doubtful the common practice among Pentecostals and Charismatics to use tongues as a sort of surrogate prophecy (i.e., a message from God to the congregation), and it makes doubtful the notion that speaking with tongues was a common experience in the congregational worship of the early Christians. Third, on this occasion the phenomenon of tongues played a profoundly important role, because it convinced the six Jewish Christian brothers from Joppa that these Gentiles indeed had been given the gift of the Spirit (10:46). They were shocked (4:45)! If Peter had been shocked by his vision on the rooftop at Simon the Tanner's home, these circumcised Jews were no less shocked by this act of God in a Gentile's home to accept and include uncircumcised non-Jews.

---

[154] It should be obvious from the larger context of Luke's work that the reference to "his name" refers simply to Jesus as the Messiah (cf. 2:38; 3:6, 16; 4:10, 17, 18, 30; 5:40; 8:12, 16; 9:14-16, 21, 27, 28, etc.). To reduce "the name" to a talisman or merely a verbal formula, as some would have it, flies in the face of this larger context.

[155] While this phenomena might have happened at Samaria when Peter and John were present (cf. 8:17-19), the text does not specify.

Luke's language, καὶ ἐπι τὰ ἔθνη (= even upon the nations!), expresses just how surprising this event was to these Jewish believers. Later, Peter would use the same six men as his bona fide witnesses to the Jerusalem church (cf. 11:12).

Given that the whole company had received the Spirit, Peter had no hesitation in urging Christian baptism to confirm their faith in Jesus as the Messiah (10:47-48a). Even more, Peter continued to stay with these Gentiles for several days afterward, a confirmation that his entire perspective had radically changed (10:48b)! Just as the Samaritan incident resulted in Peter and John joining the Samaritan mission (cf. 8:25), now the incident at Cornelius' home resulted in Peter accepting as full brothers in Christ these non-Jews.

Several issues have arisen subsequently among Christian thinkers due to some unanswered questions in Luke's narrative. One concerns the fact that the gift of the Spirit was given prior to Christian baptism. Another concerns the description that this was a household baptism, and did this fact imply that the group of candidates included children or infants? Yet another concerns the formula for Christian baptism. At the outset, it must be conceded that Luke was not trying to answer such questions, so anything that can be said must be offered with theological reserve.

The first issue, the apparent separation of the gift of the Spirit from water baptism, probably should not lead to some sort of two-step theology. Luke is hardly trying to show that regeneration or the gift of the Spirit must be separated from the act of water baptism, even though the two might occur separately as they did on this occasion. Rather, Peter's command that these converts be baptized was tantamount to ordering them to be received as Christians. If God had accepted them, how could anyone reject them? Jesus was the Messiah-Savior, not only for the Jews but for all who would believe, Jew or Gentile! The fundamental point of Luke's narrative, as he shows later, is that "God…showed he *accepted* them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us" (cf. 15:8). To be sure, baptism points toward forgiveness of sins (cf. 2:38), but it is not in itself the effective agent. Rather, as Peter clearly stated, on this occasion God "purified their hearts by faith" (cf. 15:9), and further, "we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (cf. 15:11).

The second issue, whether or not children and infants were baptized, is usually raised in the discussion of paedo-baptism (11:14).[156] The case of Cornelius is only one of several household baptisms in the New Testament

[156] D. Bridge & D. Phypers, *The Water That Divides: the Baptism Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), pp. 34.

(cf. 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Co. 1:16; 2 Ti. 1:16). The Greco-Roman concept of the **οἰκονομία** (= household) presumes a large, inclusive unit composed of many families, individuals, friends and clients,[157] and the likelihood of there being infants present is to be assumed if unstated. Still, it must be acknowledged that Luke describes Cornelius' household thus: "he and all his family were devout and God-fearing" (10:2a). Certainly Peter's message clearly specified forgiveness of sins as the benefit of "everyone who believes in him" (10:43), so whatever the conclusion one makes about who was or was not baptized, in the broader picture personal faith in Jesus the Messiah was required.

Finally, the contention by oneness Pentecostals that the shorter formula "in the name of Jesus Christ" must be used in order for Christian baptism to be valid must be rejected.[158] Luke's (and Peter's) emphasis surely is faith in Christ, not a technically worded formulae (cf. 10:43; 11:18; 15:9, 11). This is not to say that the shorter formula is invalid. Certainly any Christian baptism using a formula such as "in the name of Jesus Christ" cannot be rejected so long as it is received in the context of faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, to state that using the longer formula of Matthew 28:19 is heresy, and that Christians who use the longer formula are "in lockstep with ancient philosophers whose philosophies are as cold and brittle as their bones",[159] is arrant nonsense.

The Jerusalem Affirmation (11:1-18)

The news that Simon Peter had gone into the home of a Roman soldier to preach the message of Jesus made it back to Jerusalem before he did, sending a ripple of shock waves through the community (11:1). Already, the comfort zone of the Jerusalem church had been stretched considerably to fully accept Hellenistic Jews and even Samaritans. But raw Gentiles? By the time Peter got back,[160] he faced a groundswell of negative reaction from his Jewish compatriots (11:2-3).[161] Not only would his entry

---

[157] D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984), pp. 79-86.

[158] Oneness Pentecostals assume that all references to "the name" in Acts are formula-driven, and hence, the reference in 10:48 must refer to the spoken formula called out over the candidates as well, cf. D. Bryan and W. Copes, "Historical Development of the Trinitarian Mode of Baptism, *Symposium on Oneness Pentecostalism* 1986 (Hazelwood, MO: United Pentecostal Church International, 1986), pp. 199-213. Obviously, this assumption begs the question in the larger context of Luke's usage (cf. 2:38; 3:6, 16; 4:10, 17, 18, 30; 5:40; 8:12, 16; 9:14-16, 21, 27, 28; 10:48; 15:26; 16:18; 19:5, 13, 17; 21:13; 22:16; 26:9).

[159] J. Ensey, "Response," *Symposium*, p. 217.

[160] Once again (cf. 8:5), descriptions like "down" and "up" refer to elevation, not compass directions.

[161] Marshall has appropriately noted that the RSV's rendering "the circumcision party" is an over-translation, cf. *Acts*, p. 195. There is no hint of any "party" at this early stage, such as might have been true later, and in any case, the Greek text simply refers to them as "the ones of circumcision", i.e., Jews.

into a Gentile home have defiled him ritually, the fact that he ate there would have meant that the risk of consuming non-kosher foods specifically forbidden by the Torah would have been high. (It likely was popular to assume that Gentiles were great pork eaters!) In a word, the Jewish Christians were scandalized! Even more, this scandal threatened to precipitate a crisis for the unity and longevity of the church itself. If enough Jewish Christians reacted negatively to Peter's action, the potential was real for a rupture in the community, or worse, significant recidivism to traditional Judaism. How Peter would respond to this criticism was critical!

Peter simply told his story from beginning to end (11:4). He first of all explained his heavenly vision on the rooftop of Simon's house, and the heavenly voice telling him to "kill and eat" an animal from the presentation of non-kosher creatures (11:5-7). He frankly confessed his initial visceral resistance and the sharp response from heaven, "Don't call anything impure that God has made clean" (11:8-10)! Hence, at the Holy Spirit's direction, he accompanied the men from Cornelius back to Caesarea, taking with him six Jewish brothers (11:11-12). He recounted Cornelius' story of the angelic messenger, and especially, the instruction that through Peter he and his entire household would hear "a message through which you and all your household will be saved" (11:13-14). The climax of the story was the descent of the Holy Spirit, even before Peter had concluded his message (11:15). It is to the point that this outpouring of the Spirit had its most direct parallel with what had happened on the Day of Pentecost (cf. 2:1-4). The miracle of other tongues, which at Pentecost had implied an international scope, now had happened a second time—and this time it happened to Gentiles!

Peter recalled his initial reaction—a triggering of his memory that went all the way back to the preaching of John the Baptist. Peter, of course, had been a disciple of John before he was a disciple of Jesus (cf. Jn. 1:35-42), and he clearly remembered John's message that though he baptized with water, someone greater was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (11:16). They all knew that just before he ascended into the heavens, Jesus had predicted that John's words would be fulfilled in just a few days (cf. 1:4-5). It was Peter himself who on that initial day preached that the Jesus who had been crucified had been exalted to God's right hand, and it was none other than Jesus himself who was the giver of the Spirit (cf. 2:33). Now, the experience at Pentecost had been repeated, this time to pagans! Peter had not mentioned the gift of the Spirit to Cornelius. He only had told them the story of Jesus. No one had been coached, no one was expecting anything like this to happen, and when it did, it was a surprise—more of a shock, actually—to

Peter and to everyone else![162] Still, if God gave the gift of the Spirit to pagans—the very same gift he had given to the disciples at Pentecost—how could Peter possibly reject such a sovereign work of God (11:17)? (More to the point, of course, how could the Jewish church now oppose such a sovereign work of God?)

Previously, the Jewish Christians had heard only second-hand what had happened in Caesarea, and in all likelihood, the version they heard may have been somewhat distorted. Peter's first-hand explanation left them speechless (lit., ἡσύχασαν = they became silent), but in their hearts, his words carried the ring of truth. They now praised God with a tremendous affirmation, "So, then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life" (11:18)! Earlier, of course, they knew that God had granted repentance unto Israel (cf. 5:31), but now he had granted the same privilege to pagans! These were early days, so the broad implications of what had happened were still to be felt. Nonetheless, the Jerusalem church was now on a trajectory that fully harmonized with what Jesus had said: they would be witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (cf. 1:8), and the promise was even for those "far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (cf. 2:39). At this point, probably no one in the Jerusalem church had any knowledge of the special commission of Saul as a missionary to Gentiles (cf. 9:15; 22:15, 21; 26:17-18). They only knew that their former persecutor had accepted the faith and had become one of them (cf. 9:26-28).

The Greek Church in Antioch (11:19-30)

If Peter's trip to Cornelius' home signaled the possibility of Gentile pagans becoming part of God's holy people, what happened in Antioch, Syria clinched it. Antioch, on the Orontes River, was one of the three largest cities in the empire, along with Alexandria and Rome. The Jewish community had a long history at Antioch going back to the city's very beginning in about 300 BC. As one of his building projects, Herod the Great paved the main street with marble, and both the extant literature from the times and excavations demonstrate that the city was highly cosmopolitan.[163] Nicolas, one of the Seven, hailed Antioch as his home (cf. 6:5). It is not surprising, then, that when Jewish Christians fled Jerusalem because of the

[162] This surprise element remains one of the primary objections to the Pentecostal-Charismatic practice of "seeking" the gift of the Spirit, where the phenomenon of tongues is heralded as the authenticating sign, the seekers are coached, and the gift earnestly prayed for. In every occasion in the Book of Acts, the descent of the Spirit was unheralded and unexpected.

[163] G. Downy, *IDB* (1962) 1.145-148.

Sanhedrin's antagonism, some of them went to Syria and Cyprus, where thriving Jewish communities would have made room for them (11:19a). In their dispersion, they naturally took the message of Jesus; however, they shared it only with other Jews (11:19b).

At Antioch, however, something different occurred. Some of the Jewish diaspora Christians, originally from Cyprus and Cyrene in North Africa, also began to tell the story of Jesus to Greeks (11:20).[164] There is no indication that their action was prompted by Peter's visit to Caesarea or that they even knew about it. In fact, it seems more likely that their effort was independent. Barnabas, a Jew from Cyrpus, would later become a spearhead for this Gentile outreach (cf. 4:36).[165] The idea of Greeks being interested in Jesus goes back at least to the life and ministry of Jesus himself, who seemed to suggest they might be among the many "seeds" springing from his death (cf. Jn. 12:20-24). As the story of Jesus was told to these non-Jews, "the Lord's hand was with them", and many were converted (11:21).

At what point in relation to Peter's trip to Caesarea the news of an incipient "Greek" church reached the ears of the Jerusalem Christians we do not know, but reach them it did! As they had done in the Samaritan situation, the Jerusalem church sent a delegation to investigate, this time commissioning Barnabas as their representative (11:22). When he saw what was happening, he gave his approbation and joined them, for such a sincere response by Greeks could be nothing less than prompted by the outflow of God's wonderful grace (11:23)! Just as after their investigation Peter and John joined the Samaritan mission (cf. 8:25), Barnabas now joined the Greek mission. Under his ministry even more people were converted (11:24).

At some point in this evangelistic outreach, Barnabas determined to take time out to travel to Tarsus, Cilicia to look up Saul (11:25). Barnabas certainly would have known something of Saul's persuasive gifts (cf. 9:20, 22, 28), and especially, his demonstrated skill in debating Hellenistic Jews (cf. 9:29), who, after all, were so culturally similar to Greeks. He may even have known something of Saul's commission by Christ to evangelize Gentiles, since formerly he had close associations with Saul (cf. 9:27). Saul

---

[164] The early texts diverge in 11:20, some containing the word Ἕλληνιστας (= Hellenists) and others the word Ἕλληνας (= Greeks). Fitzmyer is correct to say that the former, if one takes it to mean Greek-speaking Jews, makes little sense in the context, and the latter fits better, cf. *Acts*, p. 476. However, Metzger's contribution that the former term could refer to anyone who cultivated Greek language and customs, whether Jewish or not, is worth noting, *Textual Commentary*, pp. 386-389.

[165] One is tempted to speculate about whether or not Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried Jesus' cross (cf. Mk. 15:21), could have been involved. That he may have settled in Palestine seems likely, since an ossuary naming both him and his son Alexander has been excavated in Jerusalem, cf. T. Powers, "Treasures in the Storeroom: Family Tomb of Simon of Cyrene," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2003), pp. 46-51. Of course, Diaspora Jews from Cyrene had been present at Pentecost, also (cf. 2:10).

seemed perfectly suited for the situation in Antioch. Locating him, he brought Saul back to Syria, incorporating him in the teaching ministry of the new church (11:26a). Here, the followers of Jesus were first dubbed with the long-standing name "Christians" (11:26b), which means "followers of Christ".[166] Here, for the first time, the followers of Jesus are distinguished from members of the synagogue.[167]

An important incident occurred while Saul and Barnabas were conducting their teaching and evangelism ministry in Antioch. A group of prophets arrived from Jerusalem (11:27), perhaps Peter among them (cf. Ga. 2:11). This is Luke's first mention of such a Christian ministry (cf. 13:1; 15:32; 21:9, 10), and if one follows the brief description offered by Paul, a prophet was a minister who, as gifted by the Spirit, specialized in strengthening, encouraging and comforting the believers (cf. 1 Co. 14:3, 4b). Such exhortations as prophets might give could also involve evangelism (1 Co. 14:24-25), prediction (21:10-11) and direct revelations for instruction and encouragement (1 Co. 14:29-31).[168] On this occasion, one of the prophets, Agabus, predicted an empire-wide famine, and Luke editorially indicates that just such a famine happened during the reign of Claudius Caesar who ruled AD 41-54 (11:28).[169] In anticipation of this time of hardship, the new Greek Christians began collecting funds to aid their brothers and sisters in Judea (11:29). No doubt the earlier practice of the Jerusalem church in creating a common fund was their model (cf. 2:44-45; 4:32-35), and Barnabas, who was now a leader in Antioch, had been singled out in Luke's record as one who sold a field and contributed the proceeds to the common fund (cf. 4:36-37). When the collection had been made, the

---

[166] The ending indicates that the term was a Latinism, cf. *TDNT* (1974) IX.536-537.

[167] Brief comment is in order about two connections that sometimes are made with the Antioch church. The first is the possibility that this church may have been the place where Matthew's Gospel was composed, cf. R. Brown and J. Meier, *Antioch & Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 11-86. The likelihood of this suggestion is still debated, since neither the New Testament nor any patristic literature offers corroboration. The second connection is about an artifact of Christian art, a chalice discovered in Antioch in 1910 with a plain inner cup and a gilded outer shell featuring twelve seated figures. Some have argued that the inner cup was used by Jesus at the Last Supper, though this view is rejected by most authorities. Still, the chalice, which probably dates to about the 4th or 5th century, is a fascinating example of early Christian art, cf. F. Filson, *IDB* (1962) 1.148.

[168] Within a few decades, some such ministries devolved into abuses, so that the church was compelled to regulate and restrict prophetic ministries. Traveling prophets must not stay more than a day or two, they must not ask for money under the guise of the Holy Spirit's influence, and they were to be provided only with their necessary food, cf. *Didache* 11, 13.

[169] Famine primarily denotes the situation created by grain shortage, which in turn would cause an abrupt rise in prices. Many of the major cities in the empire were located in areas where the surrounding agriculture could not support them, and hence, they relied upon commercial suppliers who brought grain in by ship or overland, cf. B. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 216-225.

Greek Christians sent Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem as their representatives to offer the gift (11:30).[170]

A residual effect was that Saul perpetuated a collection for the Jerusalem church from the Gentile congregations even after this initial relief mission. In his contact with Peter, John and James, he was encouraged to "remember the poor" (Ga. 2:10), and that Saul took this charge seriously is demonstrated by his collection efforts in the west (24:17; Ro. 15:25-28; 1 Co. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 8-9).

One other event should be mentioned with respect to the Antioch church. At some point Peter came to Antioch, and Saul faced him down over ethnic discrimination (Ga. 2:11-14). When did this confrontation occur? Psychologically (and to save Peter from gross inconsistency) it makes sense that it may have been early on, when some prophets from Jerusalem came to Antioch (11:27). Such a visit might even have been prior to his visit to Cornelius' home. Paul, however, describes this confrontation after his list of Jerusalem visits (Ga. 1:18, 2:1, 11). If the incident occurred later, then Peter's intimidation by the Jerusalem faction makes his action not only inexcusable but nearly inexplicable, given what had happened with respect to the household of Cornelius.

The Church and Herod (12:1-24)

The next episode in Luke's narrative may be the most difficult to account for in the larger scheme of his work. If, as has been argued, his primary goal was to demonstrate that the early church moved beyond its exclusive Jewish boundaries and became international, how does the narrative about the church and Herod further that goal? The answer probably lies in the repeated attempts by authorities to silence the church and the church's ongoing expansion in spite of persecution. Early on, it was the Sanhedrin that tried to silence the apostles (cf. 4:1-3), but the church continued to grow (4:4). Then, they warned the Christians not to preach in the name of Jesus (4:18), but the church prayed for the courage to continue boldly proclaiming the message (4:29), and they did so (4:31)! When the

[170] Considerable scholarly discussion has resulted in trying to coordinate Luke's record with Paul's own recollection of his Jerusalem trips, especially his reference to a trip in the company of Barnabas and Titus (Ga. 2:1). Some scholars contend that this was, in fact, the trip described in Acts 11:30, cf. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 244. Josephus, for instance, speaks of a great famine in Judea in c. AD 46 in which many people died, *Antiquities*, 3.15.3; 20.2.5. Other scholars connect the trip in Ga. 2:1 with Paul's later trip to the Jerusalem council over the question of circumcision (Ac. 15:2), cf. J. Martyn, *Galatians [AB]* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 180-182, 188ff. For a fair treatment of both sides by leaving the result ambiguous, see D. Guthrie, *Galatians [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 29-37.

high priest and his associates clapped the apostles in jail (5:17-18), an angel let them out and told them to go and preach in the temple (5:19-21). When again the temple authorities tried to silence them (5:27-28, 40), their threats did not deter the believers at all (5:52). Of course, the climax of this early persecution was the martyrdom of Stephen (7:57-58), which was the beginning of a widespread persecution, causing the Christians to scatter (8:1, 3), but everywhere they went they continued to share the story of Jesus (8:4). The risen Christ foiled the persecution efforts by directly revealing himself the Sanhedrin's arch inquisitor, Saul, while he was on his way to indict Christians in Damascus, and Saul then became a powerful spokesman for the new faith instead of its enemy (9:4-6, 20-22). The church then enjoyed a brief time of respite (9:31).

The narrative of the church and Herod fits into this larger picture of continued persecution and the courageous witness of the church. Where once it had been the Sanhedrin, now it was Herod who opposed the work of God. Yet, God's purpose would not be thwarted, and the advance of his church could not be deterred by persecution or even death (12:24)! Jesus had promised that even the realm of death (the gates of Hades) could not prevail against his church (cf. Mt. 16:18), and now Luke documents the truth of that solemn prediction.

The Death of James (12:1-2)

The "King Herod" in these narratives is Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great and the Hasmonean princess Mariamne. Agrippa I had inherited the tetrarchy of Antipas (who was deposed in AD 39 by Caligula) and the tetrarchy of Philip (who died in AD 33/4). In AD 41, he had assisted Claudius in his rise to power in Rome, who for his support gave him the province of Judea, thereby restoring the original domain of Herod the Great. Agrippa had been reared in Rome, so he was able to use his contacts with the imperial family to great personal advantage.[171]

Herod's attack upon the Christians (12:1) likely was an effort of political expediency to curry favor with his Jewish constituency, especially

[171] D. Braund, *ABD* (1992) III.174.

the temple authorities.[172] He arrested some, and he even had James bar Zebedee summarily executed (cf. Lk. 5:10).[173]

The Imprisonment of Peter (12:3-19a)

The execution of James pleased "the Jews", by which Luke intends the Jews who were antagonistic toward the Christians. (Obviously, this statement did not mean all Jews, since the Jerusalem Christians were themselves Jews.) He followed up his attack by arresting Peter during the Passover/Unleavened Bread festival week, doubtless with the full intent of executing him as well (12:3). He placed him under a heavy guard until after Passover (12:4).[174] Meanwhile, the Christians met for prayer (12:5).

The night before the Passover week concluded, Peter was awakened from sleep by an angel, who urged him to get up, get clothed, and to follow him (12:6-8). Peter's chains fell off, and it was not until he had passed both sentries and the iron outer gate, finding himself in the street alone, that he fully realized that what was happening was real, not simply a dream or vision (12:9-11).[175] He went immediately to the home of Mary, John Mark's mother, where the Christians apparently gathered regularly (12:12).[176] At his knock, Rhoda, a servant girl, immediately recognized him and ran to tell the others (12:13-14). They did not at first believe her, insisting that it must have been his "angel" (12:15).[177] Peter, however, kept knocking, and when finally

---

[172] Since Agrippa was partly Idumean (Edomite), his Jewish pedigree was tainted. On one occasion when he was to read the traditional passage at the Feast of Tabernacles, he came to the passage in Dt. 17:15, which says, "Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite," and he burst out in tears. The people, in response, cried out, "You are our brother! You are our brother! You are our brother!", cf. E. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), p. 189.

[173] James, the Greek form of the name Jacob, was a popular name. Two apostles had this name (cf. 1:13) as did also one of Jesus' half-brothers (Mt. 13:55; Ga. 1:19).

[174] To place one man under the guard of four sets of four soldiers each in relay seems extreme, but perhaps Agrippa had heard of what had happened earlier, when an angel released the apostles (cf. 5:17-19).

[175] The Western Text (Codex Bezae, 5th century) adds the odd phrase that he "walked down the seven steps". Perhaps this addition reflects a local knowledge in the retelling of the story to the church.

[176] John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10), but nothing further is known of his family other than that Peter may have had a close relationship with them if his reference to "my son Mark" is taken to refer to a spiritual mentorship of John Mark (1 Pe. 5:13).

[177] The reference to Peter's ἄγγελος (= angel, messenger) has created considerable discussion. Several options are available. The reference could have been to Peter's guardian angel, which some interpreters have suggested is like a spiritual double, cf. R. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 176. Alternatively, some suggest that the Jews had adopted the Persian concept of *fravashis*, the idea that all good men and women had eternally preexistent souls that could assume the bodily appearance of the person they protected, cf. D. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic [OTL]* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), pp. 259-260. Some suggest that the Christians may have thought Peter was already executed, and the figure at the door may have been his ghost, but this reading has little to recommend it. The least sensational option is that the term "angel" could be taken in the sense of simply a messenger, i.e., a human messenger presumably sent by Peter in Peter's name, cf. Matthew Henry, loc. cit. (similar to the use of "angel" in Lk. 7:24, 27; 9:52)

they let him in, they all were amazed (12:16)! It is ironic, of course, that while they were gathered there praying for Peter's release, they found it difficult to accept the materialization of the very thing about which they had been praying. Peter, for his part, explained what had happened (12:17), instructing his Christian friends to be sure to get word to James and the others (presumably the James who was the half-brother of Jesus and the other apostles, who by this time probably all were in hiding). Peter, understandably, did not linger in Jerusalem, but hurried to another location for safety.[178]

By morning, the soldiers were agitated and confused by Peter's disappearance (12:18), but a thorough search revealed nothing. Herod executed the guards (12:19),[179] but Peter was nowhere to be found!

The Divine Execution of Herod (12:19b-24)

Luke now offers one more episode in Agrippa's confrontation with the church—his death. While at Caesarea, the Roman provincial seat of government for Palestine, Agrippa consented to receive an audience from Phoenician representatives of the commercial cities of Tyre and Sidon. They and Agrippa had been in some dispute, and now they sought a reinstatement to Agrippa's favor, who was furiously angry with them. To this end, they had secured an ally in Blastus, the officer in charge of Agrippa's household (12:19b-20). On the day of the audience, which according to Josephus was during a spectacle in honor of Caesar,[180] Herod received them in his royal regalia, and when he had addressed them in a speech, they responded with the ingratiating hyperbole, "A voice of a deity, not a human!" Suddenly,

[178] There is no way of knowing, of course, where this "other" place was. Eusebius, the ancient church historian (4th century), evidently was convinced that Peter went to Rome, cf. *Ecclesiastical History* 2.14.5, and while this is possible, it seems unlikely since Peter appears again in Jerusalem in about AD 49(15:7ff.), and Peter's journeys as a traveling apostle are documented elsewhere (cf. 1 Co. 9:5; Ga. 2:11). Hence, it could have been to virtually any city in the empire, though more likely one in Syria-Palestina at this early stage.

[179] Under Roman law, guards who allowed prisoners to escape were sentenced to the same penalty due the prisoners, cf. Neil, p. 151.

[180] *Antiquities* 19.8.2. Josephus notes that Agrippa's royal robes were so resplendent (he wore a garment made entirely of silver thread that brilliantly caught the morning sun's rays) that people were struck with awe. He also confirms Luke's account that his subjects (Josephus says "his flatterers") cried out that he was a god but that Agrippa did nothing to refute the acclamation. At that very time, a violent pain arose in his belly, which he took as heralding his own death. He himself confessed, "I whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life." He was carried from the palace. Though he lingered on for another five days, he died at the age of 54.

Luke records that the angel of God struck him for his prideful arrogance (recalling a similar incident in Daniel 4), and he died.[181]

In spite of Agrippa's attacks, the Christians continued to preach the message of Jesus, aided by this direct intervention of God (12:24).

The Return of Barnabas, Saul and John Mark to Antioch (12:25)

Luke's final comment in this section prepares his readers for the great missionary journeys of Saul. The entire narrative about Agrippa's persecution of Christians happened at "about this time", that is, the time that the Antioch disciples sent Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem on the relief mission (cf. 11:30; 12:1a). Barnabas and Saul finished their task of delivering the gift of the Greek Christians to the Jerusalem church elders and returned to Antioch. They brought with them back to Antioch John Mark, whose family home had been a meeting place for Christians in Jerusalem (cf. 12:12), and later, Mark would accompany them on their first missions tour (13:5b).

[181] The reference to "worms" is intriguing. It could refer to a tapeworm or to roundworms, but it also was a stock phrase in antiquity describing the death of tyrants, cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts*, p. 491. A similar incident involving worms is described in 2 Maccabees 9:9.