

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (ESPECIALLY PAUL)

WILL DEAL WITH THREE CRUCIAL EPISODES:

1. THE STORY OF PENTECOST (CHAPTER 2)
2. THE CONVERSION OF PETER (CHAPTER 10)
3. THE CONVERSION OF PAUL (CHAPTER 9)
(also reported in chs 22:4-16 & 26:9-18)

All three episodes emphasize the primary theme of Acts, the growth of Christianity as a World Religion. Luke tells us that “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’.” (11:26) Acts tells how the new religion spread from Jerusalem throughout the Middle East and southern Europe as far as Rome. (Says little or nothing about Africa.)

Luke-Acts (now divided by the Gospel of John) is a two volume work. At the beginning of Volume II, now known as The Acts of the Apostles, Luke declares:

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

(1:1-5)

The opening of Acts tells about the **ascent** of Jesus into heaven (1:9) and the **descent** of the Holy Spirit in tongues of flame (Ch. 2):

The first episode, the story of Pentecost, tells about
THE GIFT OF TONGUES:

When the day of Pentecost had come, the [disciples] were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” . . .

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” (2:1-8, 12)

The Apostle Peter explains:

“Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. . . . [T]his is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.’” (14-17)

Although neither Luke nor Peter makes the point explicitly, this episode reverses the curse of Babel, when God “confused the language of all the earth” and scattered the people “abroad over the face of all the earth.” Now people are gathered from all over the earth and are able to understand one another through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

What other considerations make this episode important?

It empowers the Apostles to spread the word, baptizing and performing miracles in Christ’s name.

It marks the beginning of Christianity as a new World Religion, speaking to ALL PEOPLES.

The second episode is

The Conversion of Peter (Ch. 10).

Peter has been sent for (at God's instigation) by a Roman Centurion, "a devout man who feared God" (10:2). As Peter was approaching the Centurion's house, he went up on the roof to pray.

He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

(10:10-16)

At first Peter is puzzled by this vision, but when he comes to the home of the centurion, he “gets it”:

“You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?” (10: 28-29)

What is the significance of Peter’s “conversion”?

For him?

For Luke’s larger narrative project?

The transformation of the exclusive Jewish faith into the new, inclusive faith of those who now call themselves “Christians.”

The third crucial episode is even more dramatic and radical:

The Conversion of Saul, the persecutor of Christians,
into Paul, a leading Apostle of the new faith

The story is so important, from Luke's perspective, that it is told three times. And nearly two-thirds of Acts is taken up with telling the story of Paul's missionary journeys. From Luke's point of view, Peter represents the past—spreading westward toward Rome, but still tied to the Jerusalem church. Paul, the self-styled Apostle to the (un circumcised) Gentiles, represents the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman empire.

But it is also, perhaps more importantly?, a deeply moving narrative of spiritual transformation.

Paul is on his way to Damascus, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (9:1), in search of “any who belonged to the Way” (2).

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and

enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.

Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

(9:3-8)

After three days, Saul/Paul’s sight is restored, and he learns from Ananias that he has “an instrument whom [God has] chosen to bring my name before Gentiles” (15). And so, from having been a zealous persecutor of Christians, Saul becomes Paul, an Apostle of the Lord: “immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’.” (20)

Same old Saul? Same old zeal, certainly. What is the difference between Saul and Paul?

This story (not Peter’s) has become the primary basis for most “conversion” narratives ever since.

Why do you suppose that is? What features make it what we call “archetypal,” or constitutive of fundamental human experience?