



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

The Spirit Arrives, People Astounded!

Acts 2.1–13

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Pentecost – 2.1

1. The events in chapter 2 occur on “the day of Pentecost” (πεντηκοστή, *pentēkostē*).¹
 - a. This name was used by Greek Jews from as early as the late 3rd-early 2nd century BC (see Tobit 2.1; also 2 Macc 12.32). (Coogan 2010, 10).
 - b. It “was so-called because it fell on the fiftieth day after the presentation of the first sheaf to be reaped of the barley harvest, that is, the fiftieth day from the first Sunday after Passover” (Bruce 1988, 49).
 - 1) Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking Jews called it “the feast of weeks” (Exod 34.22a; Deut 16.10) and also “the day of the firstfruits” (Num 28.26; cf. Exod 23.16a) because on that day “the first fruits of the wheat harvest” (Exod 34.22a) were presented to God (Bruce 1988, 50).²
 - c. Though different theological connections have been suggested to explain why Luke referred to it, evidence indicates either that they are not relevant or originated too late to be historically viable, and Luke makes no effort to introduce them (cf. Barrett 1994, 111–112).
 - d. It is likely Luke had no theological motivation in mind (Barrett 1994, 112) and mentioned it as a way to indicate the size of the crowd that was present (Keener 2014, 322).

Attention! – 2.2–4

2. Luke’s main focus is on what occurred on the day: by means of both sound and sight, evidence was given that the Holy Spirit had come on the disciples and their witness to the world had begun (cf. 1.8).
 - a. Notice Luke’s use of the word “like.”
 - 1) Verse 2: “a sound [ἦχος, *ēchos*] like [ὥσπερ, *hōsper*] that of a violent rushing wind.”
 - 2) Verse 3: “They saw tongues like [ὥσεί, *hōsei*] flames of fire.”
 - 3) “With both the wind and the fire, Luke is careful to point out that the coming of the Spirit was *like* these two common natural phenomena. There was no actual wind or fire” (Arnold 2002, 231).
 - b. The wind is said to have “filled the whole house where they were staying” (v. 2). Whether it came from the sound like the wind or the sound of the disciples’ praise, verse 6 indicates that “sound” [φωνή, *phōnē*] got the attention of the crowd and caused them to “come together.”³
3. Luke’s main concern is that the actions originated “from heaven” (v. 2) and the phenomena were evidence that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 4).
 - a. Both wind and fire were used in the OT in association with the Spirit as “two symbols ... [of] the manifestation of the presence of God” (Arnold 2002, 231).

- 1) See Ezekiel's vision of the valley filled with dry bones where God's life-giving breath comes as a wind and makes the dead bodies live again (Ezek 37.1–14); note that the prophecy is linked to the covenant promise of the indwelling Spirit (v. 14).
- 2) Recall, too, that God appeared to Moses as fire (Exod 3.2–5) and that, on Mt. Sinai, the Lord descended on it in fire and gave the law to Moses (Exod 19.18).
- 3) In other words, “storm phenomena (cf. 2:2) and fire sometimes appear in theophanies in the Old Testament” (cf. Exod 40.34–35; 1 Kings 8.10–11; etc.) (Keener 2014, 322).⁴
4. F. F. Bruce (1988, 52–53) alerts us to an important takeaway from verses 1–4: don't focus on the spectacular nature of the phenomena and miss their point.
 - a. Other NT texts show that supernatural phenomena in themselves are not proof of God's presence or approval (cf. 1 Cor 12.3; 1 John 4.2).
 - 1) In fact, other texts use the terms “signs, wonders, and mighty works,” used to refer to Jesus' deeds (cf. Acts 2.22; Heb 2.3–4), with regard to false messiahs, false prophets, and even the lawless one under Satan's influence (Matt 24.24 = Mark 13.22; 2 Thess 2.9).
 - 2) This continues the emphasis we see in several OT texts, e.g., Deut 13.1–5.
 - b. We should weigh the implications of Bruce's conclusion: “*The matter is more important than the manner; the medium is not the message*” (my emphasis).⁵

Jews from every nation – 2.5–11

5. Verse 5: “Now there were Jews staying in Jerusalem, devout people from every nation under heaven.”
 - a. The word translated “staying” or “dwelling” (ESV) is κατοικέω (*katoikeō*).
 - 1) Some contend this refers only to permanent Jerusalem residents (Harris 2019, Acts 2.5 n. 10).
 - 2) But its meaning (“to live in a locality for any length of time”; Bauer 2000, 534) is broad enough to include the pilgrims who went to Jerusalem for one of the three main feasts to which Jewish men were commanded to attend (Tabernacles, Passover, Pentecost), especially since many who attended Passover remained (stay, dwell) for Pentecost (cf. Keener 2014, 322; Bruce 1988, 53).⁶
6. Verse 6 says “each one heard them speaking in his own language” [διόλεκτος, *dialektos*].
 - a. We'll review the various dialects momentarily, but should note first that “since the time of Alexander the Great, who spread Greek culture all the way to Mesopotamia and beyond, Greek was the official language. Official documents and letters were written in Greek from countries as far apart as Persia to Spain and North Africa to Gaul. Nevertheless, most people were multilingual and could also speak a local language. It was these local languages and dialects that the Holy Spirit enabled these believers to speak fluently, uttering praises to God” (Arnold 2002, 231–232).
 - b. This would suggest that the point of enabling the disciples to speak different languages was more about demonstrating the authenticity of the message than communicating per se.
7. Luke identifies fifteen countries from which the people gathered in Pentecost had come (vv. 9–11).⁷
 - a. Parthia – east of Jerusalem in the region of modern Iran and Iraq; Israelite exiles had been there since the time of the Assyrians (722 BC) and Babylonians (586 BC). Though the Persians liberated them to return to their homeland, many chose to stay; by the NT era, the numbers reached into the hundreds of thousand; local dialects included Aramaic, Parthian, and Iranian.⁸
 - b. Media – see the description for Parthia.
 - c. Elam – see the description for Parthia.
 - d. Mesopotamia – see the description for Parthia.
 - e. Judea – the Roman province that included Jerusalem and the surrounding villages and area; local dialects included Aramaic and Hebrew.

- f. Cappadocia – the following countries (items f–j) were all ethnic territories/provinces within the region of Asia Minor (modern Türkiye).
 - 1) Numerous literary texts and archaeological evidence illustrate an extensive Jewish presence from the 2nd century BC, with the earliest Jewish presence traceable to the late 6th or 5th centuries BC.
 - 2) Local dialects included Phrygian, Pisidian, Lydian, Carian, Lycian, Celtic, Lycaonian, and others.
 - g. Pontus – see the description for Cappadocia.
 - h. Asia – see the description for Cappadocia.
 - i. Phrygia – see the description for Cappadocia.
 - j. Pamphylia – see the description for Cappadocia.
 - k. Egypt – the largest Jewish presence in the world at that time; the largest community was in Alexandria (as many as 100,000 Jews); according to Philo, two of the city’s five wards were Jewish. The local dialect was Coptic.
 - l. Libya (Cyrene) – there is considerable evidence of a Jewish presence in North Africa, especially in the city of Cyrene; local dialects included Latin and Numidian.
 - m. Rome – a Jewish colony was present by the 2nd century BC; when Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 62 BC, he transported a large number of Jewish slaves to Rome. The first century AD population was as large as 20,000. It is likely that the first church in Rome was established by Roman pilgrims who had been at Pentecost. Dialect: Latin.
 - n. Crete – a large island with a sizable Jewish population, mainly in Gortyna [located in the south central part of the island]; facing persecution from Cretans in the 2nd century BC, the Jews received support from the Romans. Philo reports that a number of the islands “were full of Jewish colonies” [Philo, *Embassy*, 282]. Dialect: Greek.
 - o. Arabia – Nabatean Arabs east of the Jordan River and south of Palestine; the capital was Petra, ca. 50 mi. south of the Dead Sea; there were also good numbers in Hegra and the surrounding territory. Dialects included Nabatean (a branch of Aramaic), Aramaic, and Hebrew.
8. Verses 6–8 tell us the crowd was “confused,” “astounded,” and “amazed” that all the Galileans (who had their own distinctive dialect) were being heard in their own language (*dialektos* again; v. 8).
 - a. For insight into their reactions, see the comment by Louw and Nida regarding the word “astounded” (ἐξίστημι, *existēmi*; v. 7; “amazed” ESV, NIV): “to be so astonished as to almost fail to comprehend what one has experienced” (Louw and Nida 1989, 312). Sometimes we have difficulty wrapping our heads around things.
 9. Two things are worth noting about the hearers and what occurs here generally.
 - a. First, notice that the “devout people” (v. 6) in view were “both Jews and converts” (ESV “proselytes”) (προσήλυτος, *prosēlytos*), that is, native-born Gentiles who fully converted to Judaism.⁹
 - b. Second, the list of nations is reminiscent of the table of nations in Genesis 10, leading some to observe that what occurs here is the reversal of the Tower of Babel (Barrett 1994, 112).

Amazement and detractors – 2.12–13

10. Verse 12 indicates the wonder spread (Bruce 1988, 59): they were “astounded (*existēmi*) and perplexed” (διαπορέω, *diaporeō*; difficulty in dealing with information), wondering what it all meant.
11. Verse 13 shows a different reaction: derision and an accusation of drunkenness (cf. v. 15).¹⁰

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the CSB. Any emphasis in quotations is mine.

² Bruce (1988, 75 n. 3) adds that "the Sadducean party in the first century A.D. interpreted the sabbath in the phrase 'the morrow after the sabbath' (Lev. 23:15) as the weekly sabbath. While the temple stood, the Sadducean interpretation would be normative for the public celebration of the festival. Christian tradition accordingly has fixed the anniversary of the descent of the Spirit on a Sunday (the 'fifty days' of Lev. 23:15 being reckoned inclusively)" (he goes on to say that the Pharisees counted things somewhat differently).

³ Bruce (1988, 54) says that the sound the crowd heard (v. 6) was the sound of the loud praises of God uttered by the disciples. This is possible in view of verse 4's reference to their speaking in different tongues, and the word is different than the one for "sound" in verse 2. Also, verse 6 goes on to say that the crowd was confused because they heard them speaking in their own languages. Either way, the point is that the crowd's attention was arrested.

⁴ An additional issue re: verse 3 is the meaning of the separation of the tongues to rest on each of them. See the following from the NET Bible notes: "Or 'And divided tongues as of fire.' The precise meaning of διαμερίζομαι (*diamerizomai*) in Acts 2:3 is difficult to determine. The meaning could be 'tongues as of fire dividing up one to each person,' but it is also possible that the individual tongues of fire were divided ('And divided tongues as of fire appeared'). The translation adopted in the [NET] text ('tongues spreading out like a fire') attempts to be somewhat ambiguous" (Harris 2019, Acts 2.3 n. 6).

⁵ Bruce continues: "On the present occasion the content of the ecstatic utterances was 'the mighty deeds of God' (v. 11), and the range of the languages in which these were proclaimed suggests that Luke thought of the coming of the Spirit more particularly as a preparation for the worldwide proclamation of the gospel. The church of Christ still speaks in many tongues, and if her speech is not now normally of the supernatural order that marked the day of Pentecost, the message is the same the mighty deeds of God" (sic) (Bruce 1988, 53).

⁶ On this point, Arnold (2002, 231) writes, "The population of Jerusalem swelled from about one hundred thousand inhabitants to around a million during each of the three festivals. Many would stay in private homes and inns, but the majority would have camped in tents both within the city walls and in the vicinity of the city." He cites W. Reinhardt, ("The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the City," *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* [ed. Richard Bauckham] 262–63), and Joachim Jeremias (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 61) in support of these statements (Arnold 2002, 491 n. 24 and 25). Others are more reserved in their population figures, ranging during the Herodian-Roman period from minimalist estimates of 20,000 to higher numbers (75,000, 100,000, or 250,000) (see Shank 2016). There is general agreement that the population increased significantly for the feasts.

⁷ The information in the following is taken from a chart in Arnold 2002, 233.

⁸ Relative to the exiles, Bruce (1988, 55–56) comments, "They did not lose their identity as completely as has been traditionally supposed." See the reference to Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher" in Luke 2.36.

⁹ For a male Gentile to become a proselyte, he was required to (1) be circumcised, (2) perform a baptismal rite of purification, and (3) offer a sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. Only the latter two were required for women. "Most Gentiles attracted to the one true God preferred the looser requirement in obtaining the status of 'God-fearer,' especially the men, who could then avoid the rite of circumcision" (Arnold 2002, 232).

¹⁰ Note that "new wine" (γλεῦκος, *gleukos*) refers to the wine that had recently been stored and was beginning to ferment; the statement thus puzzles "since the vintage of the current year was still some months off" (Bruce 1988, 59). But there were ways to keep it sweet all years round, as Bruce documents, quoting the Roman writer Cato's advice: "'If you wish to keep new wine sweet the whole year round,' says the Roman writer Cato, 'put new wine in a jar, cover the stopper with pitch, submerge it in a pool of water, take it out after the thirtieth day; you will have sweet wine all the year round' (*On Agriculture* 120)" (Bruce 1988, 75 n. 57).