

# The Acts of the Apostles: With the Spirit to the Ends of the Earth

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The *Acts of the Apostles* is the “second volume” of a single work known as Luke-Acts. There are those who occasionally suggest that these two New Testament books may be by different hands.<sup>1</sup> But their prologues (Lk 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2), the shared dedication to Theophilus, the explicit reference to two books in that dedication (Lk 1:3; Acts 1:1-2), and the many literary similarities between the two books make it clear that a single (and very skillful) author wrote a long and unified story.<sup>2</sup> It recounts God’s saving action from the preparation for the coming of Jesus in the Old Testament (Lk 1-2), to the bold preaching of the Kingdom at the ends of the earth (Acts 28:23-31).<sup>3</sup> Across the stories that announce and document Jesus’ birth, Luke presents figures from the Old Testament era who usher in the story of Jesus (Zachariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna). John the Baptist, closely linked to these beginnings, also belongs to that era: “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the Kingdom of God is proclaimed”

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, M.C. PARSONS – R.I. PERVO, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1993.

<sup>2</sup> I will refer to the author of these biblical books as “Luke”, although we cannot be sure of the identity of the historical author. The name “Luke” was not associated with the Gospel until late in the second century and has been accepted in the Christian tradition ever since. See the concise and helpful discussions on this issue in J.T. CARROLL, *Luke: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY, 2012, 1-4; U. SCHNELLE, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, trans. M. E. Boring, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1998, 238-247 and 239-263.

<sup>3</sup> There are hints in Acts that Luke was aware of Paul’s death (see Acts 20:22-25, 37-38; 21:11, 13), but he has chosen to ignore a tragic ending. It did not suit his purpose, as there is no place for pessimism in a story of an unstoppable Spirit-directed march from Jerusalem to Rome, and beyond.

(Lk 16:16).<sup>4</sup> From those beginnings, the era of Jesus is told, highlighted by Jesus' initial journey from Nazareth (4:16-30) to His transfiguration on a mountain in Galilee, and its aftermath (9:28-50), followed by a further journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51-19:44).

The city of Jerusalem becomes the fulcrum of God's sacred history. Jesus takes possession of its temple, teaches there, and shares His final meal with the disciples. Jesus is arrested, crucified, and raised in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the accounts of Mark (16:7), Matthew (26:16-20), and John (21:1-25), the disciples do not return to Galilee. Jesus ascends to heaven from Jerusalem (Lk 19:45-24:52). Before ascending, He commissions his disciples to be witnesses of Jesus' message of repentance and forgiveness "to the ends of the earth". But they are to remain in the city of Jerusalem "until you have been clothed with power from on high" (24:46-49). The Spirit-directed journey of Jesus closes in the city of Jerusalem as He returns to His Father. Already in these concluding moments of the Gospel story of Jesus, however, it becomes clear that another 'era' will open with the *missio ad gentes* of the Apostles.

## 1. Jesus and the Holy Spirit

Anticipating the theme of the *Acts of the Apostles*, the Spirit-directed journey from Jerusalem "to the ends of the earth", the three eras of the Gospel of Luke depend upon the crucial and creative role the Holy Spirit plays as each era opens.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I use the traditional expressions "Old Testament" and "New Testament" to indicate their history. One is older than the other, but the expressions do not indicate relative importance. For a Christian, the two Testaments form the community's inspired Sacred Scriptures. On this, see S. BROWN – F.J. MOLONEY, *Interpreting the Gospel of John. An Introduction*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2017, 3-5. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation is used throughout, unless I offer my own version, indicated by AT (author's translation).

<sup>5</sup> On this, and especially the single "day" during which all the Easter events take place, from the discovery of the empty tomb till Jesus' ascension, see F.J. MOLONEY, *The Resurrection of the Messiah. A Narrative Commentary on the Resurrection Accounts in the Four Gospels*, Paulist, New York 2015, 69-99.

<sup>6</sup> For an assessment of reflection upon the role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts, see F. BOVON, *Luke the Theologian. Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)*, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX 2006, 225-272.

- *The Spirit's role in preparing for the coming of Jesus.* The Spirit comes upon Mary in the annunciation of the forthcoming birth of Jesus (1:35). The Spirit overcomes Zachariah's dumbness, and he utters the *Benedictus* (1:67). Simeon, "guided by the Spirit" (2:25-27), came to the temple and took the infant Jesus in his arms, announcing that the salvation for all peoples has come (vv. 29-32). John the Baptist announces that, unlike his baptism with water, Jesus will baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:15-17).
- *The Spirit in Jesus' ministry.* In John's baptism, the Spirit descends upon Jesus (3:31-32) and leads Him into the wilderness (4:1). In 4:14-30 Jesus begins His public ministry "filled with the power of the Spirit" (v. 14), announcing: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (v. 18). The stage has been set for a Spirit-filled and Spirit-driven ministry of Jesus (see 10:20-21; 11:13; 12:10), until He hands over His Spirit to the Father in death (24:46).
- *The Spirit promised to the Apostles.* The closing episodes of the Gospel and the opening passages in the *Acts of the Apostles* indicate a transition from one era to another. The promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit dominates these pages. In the Gospel, before He leaves the disciples on the day of the resurrection, Jesus promises the gift of the Spirit (24:46-49. See also 12:12). The disciples must stay in the city; there can be no return to Galilee for the Lukan view of God's saving presence. As the *Acts of the Apostles* opens, in Jerusalem the risen Jesus instructs His disciples: "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). The audience is aware that the Spirit who had directed Jesus' birth, ministry, and death will be 'handed over' to the 'witnesses'.

## 2. The Acts of the Apostles

The Book of Acts is a story that continues the journey of Jesus. Although Jesus is no longer physically present to His Apostles, they are not on a "different" journey. The "power from on high" directs their journey, as it directed the journey of Jesus. However, it is another "era", designed by Luke to be open-ended so that the audiences of Luke-Acts can rightly claim that they belong to what might be called a "fourth era" of an ongoing journey beyond Rome

“to the ends of the earth”. That element of the inspired Lukan message on mission is not found *within the text*. For audiences across the Christian centuries it is *implied by the text*. Not active agents within the narrative of Luke-Acts, believing audiences are the fruit of the ongoing Spirit-filled missionary Church, exemplified by Paul as Acts closes: “Proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:31).<sup>7</sup>

The narrative of Acts follows the founding Apostles, beginning in Jerusalem, where the earliest community lives the idyllic experience of its first days, united in heart and mind, although not without failures (Acts 1:1-8:3). It gradually moves away from Jerusalem (8:4-40), until the conversion of Saul leads to further journeys that dominate the narrative: the journeys of Paul, establishing the Christian Church, again not without difficulties and failures, across the Mediterranean world (9:1-28:31).<sup>8</sup> Luke’s literary skills are evident in his description of Saul, the zealous persecutor of Christians in 7:58-8:3, as the Jerusalem section closes. After a brief interlude, during which the Apostles make their first steps out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria (8:4-40), Saul, “still breathing threats and murder” returns to centre-stage, only to be “converted” in 9:1-19. An era dominated by his missionary activity begins.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As Richard Pervo puts it, Acts is “an assurance that ‘the ends of the earth’ is not the arrival at a boundary, but realization of the limitless promises of the dominion of God” (cited by M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2008, 367). Written by a third millennium Christian in Australia, the very existence of this essay is proof of a Lukan audience that is fruit of Luke’s spirit directed missionary journey “to the ends of the earth”.

<sup>8</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to focus upon the accounts of difficulties and failures encountered across the narrative of Acts, but they are important. They indicate that the power of God manifested in His Spirit eventually to overcome all opposition.

<sup>9</sup> It is regularly pointed out that Paul did not undergo a ‘conversion experience’ as we nowadays understand that expression. His passionate commitment to love and service of the one true God of Israel remained steadfast, but he ‘changed direction’ once he came to see that this God was no longer made known only in Israel and its Law, but universally in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Among many, see the (overly) dramatic presentation of this experience in N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, HarperOne, San Francisco, CA 2018, 41-59.

The Gospel of Luke and the *Acts of the Apostles* record three sacred “eras”: the period of Old Testament preparation, the time of Jesus, and the time of the Christian Church.<sup>10</sup> As Jesus has travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem, the Church will reach out from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 1:12-28:31). Only Mary, the mother of Jesus, plays a role in all three: before the birth of Jesus (Lk 1-2), during His ministry (Lk 8:19-21; 11:27-28), and in the early community in Jerusalem, after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension (Acts 1:12-14).<sup>11</sup> Many memorable incidents are found in this exciting narrative: earthquakes (16:26), shipwrecks (27:41-44), avenging angels (12:23), harrowing escapes (9:23-25; 21:30-36), riots (19:23-41), murder plots (9:23; 23:12-15; 15:1-3), political intrigue (16:35-39; 22:24-29; 24:26-27), courtroom drama (23:1-10), and much more.<sup>12</sup> But underpinning this ‘story’, so full of journeys, encounters, successes, failures, and temporary setbacks, is a ‘discourse’ about the action of God, through the steady intervention of the Holy Spirit in the life and mission of the Apostles.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The recognition of these ‘eras’ in Lukan thought owes much to the epoch-making study of H. CONZELMANN, *The Theology of St Luke*, trans. G. Buswell, Faber & Faber, London 1960. The title of the original German was *Die Mitte der Zeit*, identifying Jesus as the mid-point of history. His identification of the ‘eras’ is nowadays extensively criticized (see the discussion in F. BOVON, *Luke the Theologian. Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)*, 13-85). Nevertheless, Conzelmann uncovered an important feature of Luke’s theological perspective.

<sup>11</sup> For further reflection on this, see F.J. MOLONEY, *Mary: Woman and Mother*, St. Paul Publications, Homebush 1988, 15-29.

<sup>12</sup> M.A. POWELL, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Literary Survey*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2009, 191. For helpful recent commentaries on Acts, see B.R. GAVENTA, *Acts*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon, Nashville, TN 2003; L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina 5, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2006, and M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*. A fine study that traces Luke’s narrative and theological design across the Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles* is R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols., Foundations & Facets: New Testament, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1986-1990.

<sup>13</sup> The “story” is the way a narrative unfolds, moving chronologically from one event to another (with occasional flashbacks and hints of what lies ahead), the interaction among characters, along with all the adventures that mark the experience of the characters as time passes and a satisfactory conclusion emerges. The “discourse” is the author’s motivation in writing the story that s/he wishes to communicate to an audience. In the case of New Testament narratives, authors did not

Luke's dominant theological interest is to share his passionate conviction that the Holy Spirit drove the steady outreach of the 'witnessing' to what God had done in and through Jesus. Those who 'witnessed' Jesus' acts become 'witnesses' of Jesus "to the ends of the earth".<sup>14</sup> It begins in Jerusalem (1:8) and reaches the end of the earth (28:30-31), hinting that it must reach further. Luke wrote the Gospel and Acts to confirm and strengthen the belief of his Christians (see Lk 1:4).<sup>15</sup> This agenda for the narrative of the *Acts of the Apostles* was set as the Gospel closed. Jesus instructed the founding Apostles: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:46-48).<sup>16</sup>

### 3. The Promise of the Spirit

If the Gospel of Luke was a history of the Spirit-directed Jesus, then the *Acts of the Apostles* is a history of the Spirit-directed witness to Jesus by the founding Apostles, especially Peter and Paul. The messenger, Jesus (the central figure in the Gospel), has become the subject of a message of what *must* happen for God's design to be fulfilled.<sup>17</sup>

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simply wish to tell a story, but to convey a message about the action of God. On this, see S. CHATMAN, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1978.

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the theme of 'witness' in Acts, see A. TRITES, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, Society for New Testament Studies, vol. 31, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977, 128-153.

<sup>15</sup> Luke states this purpose explicitly in Lk 1:4, using a Greek word (*asphaleia*) to explain to Theophilus that he is writing that we "may have full confidence concerning the words in which you have been instructed" (AT). The word *asphaleia* is not about intellectual "truth", but "a mental state of certainty and security". See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 3, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 1991, 28.

<sup>16</sup> This promise has already been foreshadowed during the journey of Jesus and the disciples of Jerusalem. He instructed them that in their future difficulties: "The Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you are to say" (Lk 12:12).

<sup>17</sup> One of Luke's favorite words, in both the Gospel and the Acts is the Greek expression *dei* meaning "must" or "it is necessary". It was necessary that Jesus die

For this to happen, however, the Holy Spirit must come upon them (Acts 1:8a). The unstoppable urgency of the Apostles' witness to what God has done in and through Jesus Christ, "to the ends of the earth," is directed by the Holy Spirit.

The command of Jesus in Acts 1:8b drives the structure of the narrative of Acts. The story begins with the disciples in Jerusalem, forging a link between the Apostles and the risen Jesus.<sup>18</sup> He shares with them and promises a baptism with the Holy Spirit "not many days from now" (1:2-5). As they have no notion of their future mission, the Apostles wonder when the end-time will come, and Jesus warns them against such useless thoughts. The periods of sacred history depend upon the Father (vv. 6-7). In v. 8 Jesus sets the agenda:

- a) "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
- b) you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus departs, but they ignore the commission that will take them from Jerusalem into all Judea and Samaria, "to the ends of the earth". After the description of Jesus' departure, creating a new situation where he was "out of their sight" (v. 9), the disciples stand dumbfounded, gazing into the clouds (v. 10), until two men in white robes tell them to move on.<sup>19</sup> Gazing into the sky will achieve nothing.

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and rise from the dead (Lk 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 24:7, 26; Acts 17:3), that Judas be replaced (Acts 1:22), that Paul visit Rome (Acts 19:21; 23:11; 25:10; 27:24), for the Gospel to be proclaimed to the Jews first (13:46), for the Christians to suffer tribulation and suffer for Christ's name (14:26; 9:16). On the theme of God's dominant role in Acts, see M.A. POWELL, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Literary Survey*, 200-204.

<sup>18</sup> An obvious historical 'tension' exists between the ascension of Jesus reported in Lk 24:50-51, and its timing as after forty days appearing to the Apostles "speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). The number 'forty' is most likely determined by the passing of fifty days between the Jewish feast of Passover (Jesus' death and resurrection) and Pentecost (the gift of the Spirit). This is part of Luke's plan to show the passing of time as God works in and through Jesus and his disciples. See J.A. FITZMYER, "The Ascension of Christ and Pentecost", *Theological Studies*, vol. 45, 1984, 409-440; M.C. PARSONS, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts: The Ascension Narratives in Context*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, vol. 21, JSOT Press, Sheffield 1987.

<sup>19</sup> The "two men in white robes" in Acts 1:10 repeat the role of the "two men in dazzling clothes" who address the women at the empty tomb in Lk 24:4. On

They have a mission to complete in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth”. Only when that mission is completed will Jesus return (v. 11).

Before setting out on the mission, however, the group of the Twelve must be reconstituted. Based upon Jesus’ own choice of the Twelve (see 1 Cor 15:5; Mk 3:14) as a symbol of God’s establishment of a new people, this group also serves Luke as the fundamental symbol of the vocation to be apostolic.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Mark (3:14) and Matthew (10:1), Luke tells his audience that Jesus appointed Twelve, “whom he also named Apostles” (Lk 6:13).<sup>21</sup> They are not only “disciples” who learn at the school of Jesus (Mark, Matthew, and John), but also Apostles who will be sent out as witnesses to what they have learnt.

Peter recalls the Spirit-filled inspiration of David’s foretelling of the failure of one of that group (Acts 1:15-20). He asks the remaining eleven to seek the Lord’s guidance so that the fundamental apostolic group to whom the power of the most high has been promised, might be re-constituted: “and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven Apostles” (vv. 21-26). Although not explicitly linked with an action of the Holy Spirit, whose words were uttered through David’s mouth (v. 16), the casting of lots to choose between

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that occasion, in a fashion that parallels the instructions given to the Apostles in Acts 1:11, the women are told that they are looking in the wrong place for “the living one”, as they are in a place for the dead.

<sup>20</sup> On the historical and theological significance of “the Twelve” as a group and as individuals, see the comprehensive study of J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Anchor Yale Reference Library, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2016, 125-285.

<sup>21</sup> See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 38-40. Only Luke and Paul refer to the Twelve as “Apostles”. On the non-technical use of the expression in Mark 6:30, see F.J. MOLONEY, *The Gospel of Mark. A Commentary*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2012, 120-129. Paul regarded himself as an “Apostle”, even though he was not one of the Twelve (see especially 1 Cor 15:3-11; 2 Cor 10-12). The Greek word means “one sent out”. Luke and Paul are especially concerned with the outreach of the Christian message and the Christian community “to the ends of the earth”. The Lukan “Twelve Apostles” has become part of traditional Christian language. For Paul, it was possible to be an “Apostle” without being one of the Twelve. The title the *Acts of the Apostles* was added to this document late in the second century, but the “Apostles” of Luke 6:12-16 are rarely mentioned (1:2; 4:36-37; 5:12; 8:1). The central figures are Peter and Paul, rather than the Twelve.



two fine witnesses to the ministry of Jesus (Barsabbas and Matthias) (v. 26), manifest that the Spirit of the Lord has intervened (see v. 24).

Based upon the promise of the Spirit and the missionary charge of 1:8, the directions of the two men dressed in white in 1:9-11, and the re-constitution of “the Twelve” in 1:12-26, the Spirit-directed mission of the Church unfolds as follows:<sup>22</sup>

1. The gift of the Spirit of God and the mission in Jerusalem, under the leadership of Peter. This section closes with the presence of Saul the persecutor of Christians (2:1-8:3. See 1:8).
2. The mission spreads to all Judea and Samaria (8:4-40. See 1:8)
3. After an encounter with the Risen Jesus, the zealot Saul is baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter, experiences the gift of the Spirit to the Gentile Cornelius. He consequently baptizes him, his household and shares his hospitality (9:1-11:18).
4. The Church at Antioch and the initial association between Paul and Barnabas generates what develops into Paul’s mission “to the ends of the earth” (11:19-26:32. See 1:8).
5. The mission arrives at the center of the known world, Rome. This brings the message to the far reaches of the earth. The missionary agenda of 1:8b is achieved because of power of the most high, promised in 1:8a (27:1-28:31).

Each of these unstoppable geographical steps, from Jerusalem, to all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (v. 8b), is a consequence of the repeated direct intervention of God’s Holy Spirit (v. 8a).

#### **4. The Spirit of God and the Mission in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-8:3)**

The promises of Jesus (see 24:46-49) come true in the dramatic events that take place “when the day of Pentecost had come” (Acts

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<sup>22</sup> The critical role of the Holy Spirit within each literary section determines the following literary structure. Many other criteria are possible. See F. BOVON, *Luke the Theologian. Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)*, 511-515. Luke used sources for his account, and certainly regarded himself as a ‘historian’, but in the sense of his contemporary ‘historians.’ His objective was to record facts from the past in order to ‘persuade’ his audience of values and point of view. A dominant element in his point of view was the Holy Spirit as a major protagonist across the narrative.

2:1). The Spirit, “the promise of the Father” (see Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4), the “power from on high” (Lk 24:49), is given to the infant Church. The Apostles break free of their fears (see Acts 1:12-14). Their transformation from fear to enthusiasm is so impressive that they are thought to be inebriated (see 2:13). They proclaim what God has done in and through Jesus (2:1-36), leading to sorrow, repentance, and conversion of about 3,000 on that first Pentecost day (v. 41). The first action of the Spirit-filled Apostles in Acts fulfils Jesus’ promise in Lk 24:47: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed”.

The foundational nature of this event cannot be overestimated. Signs associated with the establishment of an original people of God at Sinai (see Ex 19:16-20: thunder, lightning, and fire) return at this first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).<sup>23</sup> The confusion of tongues that began at the Tower of Babel is overcome (see Gn 11:1-9), as many peoples, nations and tongues understand the disciples’ words (Acts 2:5-12). “The parallelism (between the Old Testament episodes and Acts 2:1-4) fits the pattern of Luke’s story: Jesus is the prophet who sums up all the promises and hopes of the people before Him; in His apostolic successors, that promise and hope (now sealed by the Spirit) will be carried to all the nations of the earth.”<sup>24</sup> This pattern of preaching that Jesus’ mission, death, and resurrection was part of God’s plan, already foretold in the Old Testament, and the subsequent response of conversion and baptism, already established in Peter’s Pentecost speech and its aftermath (2:14-42), is found across the many long speeches in Acts.<sup>25</sup> A community atten-

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<sup>23</sup> The Jewish celebration of Pentecost is the commemoration of the gift of the Law and of the establishment of a covenant between God and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. To this day, it is celebrated fifty days after Passover.

<sup>24</sup> L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 47. First parenthesis added, second parenthesis original.

<sup>25</sup> Comparisons between the speeches in Acts, no matter who delivers them (Peter, all the Jerusalem believers, Stephen, or Paul) show they are very similar. This does not mean that Luke ‘invented’ everything, but he has certainly shaped all the speeches so that they correspond to his theological idea of Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s will, already manifested in the Old Testament, and the need for everyone to have a change of heart, receive forgiveness and baptism. For a good summary, see R.A. SPIVEY – D. MOODY SMITH – C. CLIFTON BLACK, *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2013, 248-250.

tive to the teaching of the disciples, breaking bread and praying together, with one heart and mind, emerges as the founding model of the future missionary community (vv. 42-47).<sup>26</sup>

The witnessing of the Apostles and the Jerusalem community is related in 3:1-8:3. Highlighted by the power manifested in the Apostles' preaching and healing in the city (3:1-26 [Peter and John at the temple, and another speech from Peter], 4:1-37 [Peter and John before the Council, and the response of the community in another speech]), 5:1-42 [Ananias and Sapphira betray the community; signs and wonders are performed, the Apostles are persecuted, closing with Gamaliel's warning that these men may be doing a work of God]). Luke wants his readers and hearers to recognize that Christianity emerged from the very heart of Israel: Jerusalem and its temple. For Luke, God's design has not changed direction with the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus that climaxed in Jerusalem, nor in the beginnings of the community witness to Jesus, that had its origins in Jerusalem. "Christianity emerged from Israel's very heart and is, therefore, the true expression of that ancient faith."<sup>27</sup>

A further turning point of the story is the problem of the "Hellenists" that leads to the appointment of seven men to serve them (6:1-7). The existence of Greek-speaking Hellenists, and "the Hebrews" within the community, is a first indication that the Gospel is reaching beyond its origins in the small group of frightened disciples of Jesus (see 1:1-14).<sup>28</sup> The step into the choice of seven

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<sup>26</sup> Luke will regularly insert summary statements about the unity and peace that existed in the Jerusalem community (see 1:14; 2:43-47; 4:32-37). This is Luke's way of indicating the ideal Christian community. His rhetoric suggests to readers: it was like this in the beginning, and thus should always be like this. On the content of the summaries, see R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Doubleday, New York 1997, 285-289. However, as remarked above, Luke does not hesitate to report serious failures (Ananias and Sapphira) and opposition (the Apostles are persecuted, executed, and imprisoned), even in Jerusalem.

<sup>27</sup> R.A. SPIVEY – D. MOODY SMITH – C. CLIFTON BLACK, *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning*, 252.

<sup>28</sup> Similar to the story of Ananias and Sapphira, this is one of the several indications in Acts that there were divisions in the community. However, Luke makes nothing of this in his story of the unfolding of God's design for the Christian community. See R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 293-294, and M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 81-85.

“Deacons”, selected to serve the Hellenists, is necessarily marked by the presence of the Spirit. The whole community of disciples insists that the selection of these “men of good standing” must be based upon their being “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (6:2-3). One of those servants, Stephen, is singled out: “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (v. 5). They are delegated by means of an external sign that indicates the communication of the Spirit: prayer and the laying on of hands (v. 6).

Stephen, already described as full of the Holy Spirit (v. 5), takes center-stage, manifests the power, and signs that accompany God’s presence.<sup>29</sup> He may be one of the “servants,” but his ministry of power indicates that he continues the mission of the foundational Apostles. Falsely accused, he is arrested, and he delivers the longest speech in Acts (6:1-7:53). The speech does not deal with the charges against him, but by means of a long reflection on Israel’s history, points to the past disobedience of the chosen people, questions the relevance of the temple (see 7:47-50), and strongly denounces those who have betrayed and murdered Jesus (vv. 51-52). It closes: “You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (v. 53). Whatever of the accusations of 6:11-14, he is condemned to death because of his ‘witness.’<sup>30</sup> The theme of the Spirit, and the continuation of Jesus’ ministry in the Spirit mark his death. He prays as Jesus prayed: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (7:59; see Lk 23:46), and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60; see Lk 23:34). Those who die for Christ repeat the death of Christ.<sup>31</sup> As the episode closes, the reader is introduced to the hero of the second half of Acts: “And Saul was consenting to his death” (Acts 8:1a. See

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<sup>29</sup> The Greek word for “servant” is *diakonos*, and the Catholic tradition has long looked back upon Acts 6 as the beginnings of a sacramental Order called the Diaconate. Stephen is often presented in Christian art in the vestments of an ordained Deacon. Although there were certainly appointed people who had a ministry of ‘service’ in the early Church (see as early as Rom 16:1; Phil 1:1; Eph 6:21; 1 Tim 3:8), the sacramental Order appeared much later.

<sup>30</sup> M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 85-108, shows how this speech should be read through the lens of ancient rhetoric, to show that “Stephen is not pitting Christianity over against Judaism; rather he is aligning himself and his group with what he considers to be the ‘best’ in Jewish history” (108).

<sup>31</sup> See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 142-144. Here, and throughout his commentary, Johnson rightly points out that the Apostles are not only ‘witnesses’, but continue the ‘prophetic’ presence of Jesus.

7: 58). The hero of the latter parts of the *Acts of the Apostles* has been introduced, however enigmatically.<sup>32</sup>

## 5. The Mission to all Judea and Samaria (8:4-40)

The fruits of martyrdom are reported in 8:4-40. The Christians scatter as Saul persecutes them, proclaiming the Word as they scatter (8:1b-3). Scattering believers leads to an expanding Christian witness.<sup>33</sup> Philip makes converts in Samaria, including “Simon who had previously practised magic” (vv. 4-13. See vv. 9-13), but the report of the wondrous events of Philip’s ministry is interrupted by a description of the mission of Peter and John to those who had already accepted the Word in Samaria. The narrative has reached a turning point, as the Apostles move on from Jerusalem to bear witness in all Judea and Samaria as the risen Jesus had promised in 1:8. As they have already received the Spirit in Jerusalem, Peter and John pray that those Samaritans who were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ might also receive the Holy Spirit (v. 15). God answers their prayer: they lay hands upon the baptized Samaritan, and they receive the Spirit (v. 17). The report of the brief encounter between the Apostles and Simon the magician is not primarily interested in the historical figure of Simon,<sup>34</sup> but on the insistence of the Apostles Peter and John that nothing can “purchase” the Spirit. It is “God’s gift” (vv. 18-25. See v. 20). Only tragedy can follow those who think they can control the action of God by their worldly skill and financial means.

An angel of the Lord directs Philip to continue his movement away from Jerusalem “toward the south to the road that goes down

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<sup>32</sup> R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 296, comments: “Just as Jesus’ death was not the end because the Apostles would receive the Spirit to carry on the work, the death of Stephen is not the end, for observing is a young man named Saul (7:58). He consents to the death (8:1a), but in God’s providence he will continue the work of Stephen”.

<sup>33</sup> As early as the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke testifies to the truth later famously articulated by Tertullian (c. 155-c. 240): “The blood of Christians is seed”. See *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, Brepols, Turnhout 1954, 1:171: “Semen est sanguis Christianorum” (*Apologeticum* 50,13).

<sup>34</sup> Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the relationship between Simon, the magician of Acts 8:9-25, and the figure of the proto-Gnostic Simon Magus. For a summary of this speculation, see J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, New York 1998, 403-404.

from Jerusalem to Gaza” (v. 26). The well-known encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on that road south takes place through the intervention of the Spirit: “The Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it’” (v. 29). After having the Scriptures explained by the Spirit-directed Philip, the non-Jewish eunuch is baptized (vv. 27-38). “When he came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away” so that he might continue his mission in all Judea, passing through Azotus, all the region and all the towns, until he reached Caesarea (v. 40).<sup>35</sup>

The section of the narrative that deals with the second stage in Jesus’ promise commissioning his Apostles to bear witness in all Judea and Samaria (1:8) is relatively brief. Their presence in Jerusalem (2:1-8:3), the “Pentecost of the Gentiles” in Peter’s baptism of the Roman Cornelius, and its aftermath (9:1-11:18), Paul’s mission “to the ends of the earth” (11:19-26:30), and his preaching in Rome (26:30-28:31), are longer in the telling. Nevertheless, like other turning points in the fulfilment of the commission of 1:8b, it is dominated by the theme of the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:8a. See vv. 14-17, 19-21, 39).

## 6. Peter (and Paul) Reach out to the Gentile World (9:1-11:18)

The next stage in God’s plan to take the Gospel “to the ends of the earth” is prepared in the well-known account of Paul’s conversion (9:1-22). The encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road, his encounter with Ananias in Damascus, and his preaching there, which “confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus” (9:22), are recorded on two further occasions in Acts (see 22:3-21; 26:12-18).<sup>36</sup> Luke shapes this account around two major encounters. The first is Paul’s dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus (9:1-9). The second is his sojourn with Ananias in Damascus (vv. 10-19). During the latter, the Lord described Paul’s future mission: “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles

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<sup>35</sup> Philip’s contact points are on the road south, to Gaza, Azotus (further north on the coast), all the towns, finally arriving in the northern port city of Caesarea Maritima. The geography matches the commission of 1:8 (all Judea). Azotus is another name for port city of Ashdod (see 1 Mc 9:15).

<sup>36</sup> On the three-fold telling of Paul’s conversion, see L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 170; J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 141-144.

and kings and before the people of Israel” (v. 15). Before this mission can begin, as with all other major turning points in Luke’s story, Ananias “laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 17).

After being witnessed in Damascus, he is hunted for by some Jewish people, he escapes, and returns to Jerusalem, the cradle of Christianity (vv. 19b-30). From there, he is sent home to Tarsus (v. 30). The Lukan comment of v. 31 indicates that the agenda set by the commission of 1:8 is drawing to a close: “Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” Paul, who will follow the leadership of Peter to become the hero of the mission “to the ends of the earth” (11:19-26:30), has entered the narrative. He disappears in 9:30, but will return in 13:1-3. In the meantime, Peter takes center-stage in a further Spirit-filled turning point in the earliest Church’s mission (9:32-11:18).

Peter works wonders in the name of Jesus Christ (9:32-35: the healing of Aeneas; vv. 36-42: the raising of Tabitha/Dorcas). Most importantly, for the purposes of this essay, he is the key figure in the explicit acceptance of the mission to the Gentiles through the baptism of the Roman centurion, Cornelius (10:1-11:18). It is a complex, and somewhat repetitious account.<sup>37</sup> Cornelius has a vision at Caesarea, at this stage the frontier of the Gospel’s outreach (see 8:40), instructing him to summon Peter from Joppa (10:1-9a). Simultaneously, Peter has a vision insisting that what was once been regarded as “unclean” can no longer be so, as God has made all things clean (vv. 9b-16). The Spirit instructs a puzzled Peter that he must go meet the men from Cornelius, who has had a vision of a holy angel, sending for Peter (vv. 17-23). Cornelius’ servants bring Peter to Caesarea, where they have a moving encounter (vv. 17-29). Cornelius tells Peter of his vision (vv. 30-33).

Peter’s response is a missionary speech (vv. 34-43), dominated by the theme of his opening words: “Truly I perceive that God shows

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<sup>37</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this complex passage, see chapter 7 of this volume authored by Michael Trainor, and titled “A Pivotal Missionary Moment: The Embrace of the Gentiles (Acts 10-11)”.

no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (vv. 34-35). Luke’s Spirit-filled missionary agenda is stated and Peter tells Cornelius about Jesus, “anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power” (AT), his ministry, death and resurrection, and the role of the Apostles as his witnesses. “We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and Jerusalem. [...] He commanded us to preach to the people” (vv. 41-42). As Peter ends his words, *before* anything else happens, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who had heard the Word” (v. 44). All are amazed “that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (v. 45). The same phenomena that accompanied the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost reappear: “They heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (v. 46. See 2:5-11). As a *consequence* of the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter baptizes Cornelius and his company (vv. 44-48). “The gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on the Gentiles” (v. 45). The speech opened insisting that “God shows no partiality”, and closes asking a question that requires a negative response: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (v. 47).<sup>38</sup>

Peter returns to Jerusalem where he is criticized by the circumcision party. He should not have gone to an uncircumcised man and eaten with him. In response, Peter retells all the events that took place in Caesarea (11:1-18).<sup>39</sup> He repeats the news of the action of the Spirit in the coming of the messengers (v. 12), and the descent of the Spirit as he spoke to Cornelius and his household (v. 15). He concludes by recalling a promise of Jesus: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (v. 16), insisting that God’s gift of the Spirit to the Jewish disciples is now available to the Gentiles (v. 17). Peter’s report meets no opposition. It is received in silence as they glorify God, saying: “Then to the Gentiles

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<sup>38</sup> The Greek expression that generates the question (*mēti*) is rhetorical. It demands a negative response. See F.A. BLASS – A. DEBRUNNER – R.W. FUNK, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL 1961, 226 § 440.

<sup>39</sup> Peter’s retelling of the story in 11:1-18 is not entirely consistent with the earlier report of the events. However, the alterations only serve to emphasize Luke’s message about the inevitability of God’s design to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 180-202.



also God has granted repentance unto life” (v. 18).<sup>40</sup> Even though Peter’s Jerusalem speech in 11:1-18 repeats what has happened in Caesarea, it accentuates the theological importance of this moment: “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that could withstand God” (v. 17). God is the absent, but ever-central character Acts, shaping the lives of people and communities through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter will return to this moment in his defense of the Gentile mission at the so-called Jerusalem Council (see 15:7-9).

## 7. The Mission “to the Ends of the Earth” (11:19-26:32)

A series of episodes report the continued spread of the Gospel, as opposition is vanquished (11:19-12:25). Stephen’s mission as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus has produced converts who come to Antioch, preaching the Lord. The field is ripe for harvesting, so Barnabas is introduced, another key figure at a turning point of the narrative. Described as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (11:24), he goes from Antioch to Tarsus, seeking out Saul. It is at Antioch that “the disciples were for the first time called Christians” (11:26). Warned in a prophecy in the Spirit from a prophet named Agabus that suffering is near at hand, the disciples are determined to bring goodness to all who are suffering in Judea, through the ministry of Barnabas and Saul (11:27-30). Adventure, misadventure, and God’s presence continues as Herod executes James and puts Peter in prison (12:1-5), but Peter is miraculously released (vv. 6-19). Herod, who has no interest in the sufferings of the people of Tyre and Sidon (contrast the attitude of the Christians to the poor in Judea in 11:27-30), is smitten by “an angel of the Lord” and dies ignominiously (12:20-23). The Word of God “continued to advance” as Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark return to Jerusalem (vv. 24-25).

The scene is set for the fourth major section of the narrative, determined by the commission and the promise of the Spirit in 1:8. In

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<sup>40</sup> This is one of many occasions in Acts where Luke writes an account to show that God’s plan will broach no failure or opposition. We are aware from other early Christian literature, especially Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, that the passage into the Gentile world – especially the question of circumcision – was conflicted, and that even Peter (and Barnabas) were ambiguous about it (see Gal 2:11-14).

the Gospel of Luke, Jesus journeyed from Nazareth in Galilee, through Jerusalem, to his Father. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, the Apostles witness to the Good News about Jesus through Cyprus and Asia Minor (first missionary journey: 13:1-14:28), into Macedonia (second missionary journey: 15:36-18:22), consolidated in Ephesus and Greece (third missionary journey: 18:23-21:14). Jerusalem is not forgotten. The only interruption to this triumphant march, from Jerusalem to Ephesus, Athens and Corinth, is the Council of Jerusalem. After the success of the first formal mission to the Gentiles (13:1-14:28), the Church gathers to assess whether or not this mission is part of God's plan (15:1-35). Jerusalem, the fulcrum of God's saving history, remains an essential point of reference for a movement that has its roots in God's promises to Israel.<sup>41</sup>

Before this major journey begins, the Holy Spirit again intervenes. As the Church in Antioch is at prayer, "the Holy Spirit said: 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (13:2). "Sent out by the Holy Spirit" (v. 4), the first missionary journey *ad gentes* begins.<sup>42</sup> At Paphos, in Cyprus, they meet opposition from a Jewish false prophet. "Filled with the Holy Spirit" Paul strikes him blind, and the proconsul, Sergius Paulus believes (vv. 4-12. See v. 9). From Cyprus, they arrive in Asia Minor at Perga. Asked to preach in the Synagogue, Paul speaks as an Israelite to Israelites. Regularly across this section of Acts, Paul tries to show that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Jewish hopes (13:16-41). Some hear the message, others reject it (vv. 42-43). Rejection leads him to go to the Gentiles (vv. 44-49). The first stage of the missionary journey, however, fills the disciples "with joy and the Holy Spirit" (v. 52). Similar missionary activities and responses continue in Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and they return to Antioch via Iconium Pamphilia,

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<sup>41</sup> See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 225-227.

<sup>42</sup> For an engaging description of the events in Antioch and the first missionary journey, see N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 85-131. This interesting book suffers from an acceptance of the Lukan narrative as the backdrop for a presentation of Paul and his thought. It is riddled with questionable historical presuppositions (e.g., the imprisonment in Ephesus – for which there is no evidence – that determines the early dating of Philippians; the Pauline authorship of Colossians and Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles – 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Its value lies in Wright's marriage of the Pauline message with a vivid description of the Lukan "journeys".

Perga at Attalia (14:1-26). Despite the regular rejection and misunderstanding they have experienced, the Apostles are able to relate “all that God had done and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (v. 27).

The missionary journeys are put on hold, as a group of Christians from Judea insist that circumcision is essential for admission to their ranks (15:1-5). Another critical moment in the narrative emerges, and it is again dominated by the action of the Holy Spirit. The so-called Council of Jerusalem follows, opening with the intervention of Peter (vv. 6-11). He recalls his initiating role among the Gentiles: “And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith He has made no distinction between them and us” (vv. 8-9). He receives the support of the equally foundational figure of James (vv. 15-21). A decision is made in favor of Paul and Barnabas. A letter is sent insisting that circumcision is not required (vv. 22-29), because “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials” (15:28).<sup>43</sup>

After a dispute over the role of John, Mark, who had abandoned the first missionary journey (see 13:13), Paul and Barnabas separate. Paul attempts to resume his mission in Asia Minor, taking Silas with him (15:36-16:5). In a strange intervention, the Holy Spirit leads Paul across Asia Minor, into Macedonia. In fact, Paul and his companions are not active as they cross Phrygia and Galatia “having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak a word in Asia” (16:6). His journey takes him further west, to Troas, the sea-port on the western coast of Asia Minor that provides immediate access to Macedonia and Greece. During the night, a vision provides a reason for this prohibition. They are being driven elsewhere by the Spirit: a man of Macedonia appears in a dream saying: “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (v. 9).<sup>44</sup>

Paul arrives in Philippi, via the port of Neapolis, where he is immediately successful in his conversion of Lydia (16:6-15).<sup>45</sup> But his saving and curing presence of a possessed slave girl leads to his imprisonment, accused by the girl’s angry owners. As is now a familiar

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<sup>43</sup> Paul also records this meeting in Gal 2:1-10. See the vivid description of these events in N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 132-169.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-233.

pattern, Paul is miraculously freed; the doors are opened and he baptizes his repentant jailer (vv. 16-34). Subsequent discussion over the treatment of Paul and his companions leads to Paul's first indication to his oppressors that he is a Roman citizen. He receives the apologies of the authorities, visits Lydia, and leaves to continue their mission (vv. 35-40). Passage and preaching in Thessalonica and Beroea leads to the usual mixed response (17:1-15). From here, Paul journeys to Athens, where he not only uses his initial approach to the Jews, but also confronts the pagan culture and religion of the city. Set in the heart of Greek culture and religion, this passage is highlighted by Paul's speech on the Areopagus, a central point for public speech in Athens. Paul's speech does not use the Hebrew Scriptures, but cites Greek authorities (the poet Aratus) to point them to the unknown God, a man who has been raised from the dead.<sup>46</sup> As always, the response is mixed: "Some mocked, but others said: 'We will hear you again about this'" (vv. 16-34. See v. 32).

A parallel narrative pattern and theological message shapes Paul's ongoing journey through Corinth, where his rejection by the Jews leads to a definitive choice: "From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (18:7). But even here he meets conflict, and is eventually led to the Roman authorities by his Jewish enemies. Gallio, the Roman Proconsul of Achaia, dismisses them (18:1-17). Paul brings his second missionary journey to an end as he returns, via Cenchræ (the port of Corinth), to Ephesus, from where he sets sail, and Jerusalem, to the community in Antioch. While in Ephesus, he promises the Jews that he will return, if God so wills (vv. 18-22).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Across Acts there are a number of reports where the author uses 'we'. They begin at Troas, and are regularly (but not always) associated with sea voyages (see 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). For many, this shows the presence of the author of Acts, and thus an indication of a first-hand witness to the events reported, and evidence of the historical reliability of the book. However, not all agree. For a balanced study of the 'we-passages', see R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 322-327.

<sup>46</sup> In Athens the death of Jesus is not mentioned, only Jesus' being raised from the dead.

<sup>47</sup> The reference to Gallio as the Proconsul of Achaia is one of the fixed points for determining a chronology for Paul. There is archeological evidence (an inscription found in Delphi) that Gallio was the Proconsul some time across 51-52 CE. See J. MURPHY-O'CONNOR, *St. Paul's Corinth. Texts and Archaeology*, Good News Studies, vol. 6, Michael Glazier, Wilmington, NC 1983, 141-152.

The third journey begins immediately.<sup>48</sup> After initiating the final missionary journey in Galatia and Phrygia (18:23), Paul dedicates himself to a long and trouble-filled experience in Ephesus (18:24-19:41). The enigmatic figure of Apollos appears briefly (18:24-28). See further, 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4-6). Coming to Ephesus this eloquent Alexandrian preaches the “way of the Lord” and “the things concerning Jesus” with skill and passion (v. 6). But “he only knew the baptism of John”. No explicit mention is made of the Spirit, but his baptism is defective. This is corrected by Priscilla and Aquila. He is thus able to travel to Achaia and be welcomed among the brethren in Corinth (see 19:1), showing that “the Messiah is Jesus” (v. 28). Apollos serves as a model for the situation that Paul himself finds in Ephesus while Apollos is in Corinth (19:1-7). Some believers only know of the baptism of John. After due instruction, they are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. “When Paul laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them” (v. 6). The third missionary journey opens in Ephesus with two visible experiences of the power of the Holy Spirit, transforming Apollos and others in Ephesus who only knew the baptism of John.

In Ephesus, Paul preaches boldly in the face of many obstacles, but his journey to the ends of the earth intrudes. While in Ephesus, “Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then go on to Jerusalem. He said: ‘After I have gone there I must also see Rome’” (v. 21). The audience, hearing Paul’s Spirit-filled decision, are aware that he will indeed journey to Rome, and Luke’s account of his mission will end there.

Inevitably, Paul’s preaching against false gods leads to the riot initiated by the silversmiths who see that Paul’s preaching brings their trade to an end. After a resounding encounter between the worshippers of Artemis and Paul (vv. 34-41), Paul leaves Ephesus with the problem unresolved. He journeys through some of his earlier mission fields (20:1-6). Returning to Asia Minor he preaches at such great length at Troas that a young man sitting in a window falls to sleep and crashes to his death, but Paul restores him. Nothing can stop the spread of God’s Word (vv. 7-12).

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For a fine photograph of the inscription, see R.A. SPIVEY – D. MOODY SMITH – C. CLIFTON BLACK, *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning*, 277.

<sup>48</sup> See N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 235-349.

In a fashion that matches many ‘farewell speeches’ found in both biblical and classical literature, Paul sails from Troas to Jerusalem, stopping at Miletus so that he could address the leaders of the Church from Ephesus, assembled there (20:1-38). It is a moving speech, full of emotion and affection, and a commissioning that they persevere in their faith mission.<sup>49</sup> Paul looks back to what has been achieved, and courageously ahead to all that God may have in store for him. At the heart of his discourse, Paul indicates that everything that has happened and will happen is the result of the active presence of the Holy Spirit: “And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me” (20:22-23). He travels directly to Jerusalem (21:1-14). This is the first time that Paul’s journeys have not returned to his home-Church of Antioch. The God-directed cycle of Jerusalem to Rome must be accomplished (see 1:8). As he farewells a dedicated group in Caesarea, before the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem, he tells them, in a way that renders more explicit what he said at Miletus: “For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (21:13). The narrative stage is set for the final journey: the Word of the Lord will make its final journey from Jerusalem to Rome (see 1:8).

The voyage towards Jerusalem is governed by the Spirit who halts Paul’s travels at Tyre for seven days, until the Spirit allows Paul and his company resume the journey through Ptolomais to Caesarea (see 21:4). There the prophet Agabus takes Paul’s belt, binds his feet and hands with it, announcing: “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’” (21:11).

On arrival in Jerusalem, Paul visits James, the leader of the Jerusalem community, and shares with him the success of the Gentile mission. He can announce that what was decided at the Jerusalem Council in 15:1-29 has been put into effect among those received into Christianity without circumcision (21:15-26). Immediately following this episode, however, Jews from Asia, aware of Paul’s

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<sup>49</sup> For a study of farewell testaments, see W. KURZ, *Farewell Addresses in the New Testament*, Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament, Michael Glazier, Wilmington, NC 1990. See also L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 359-368.

work among the uncircumcised, create a disturbance in the temple, accusing Paul of “teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place; moreover, he has also brought Greeks into the temple, and he has defiled this holy place” (v. 28). Roman authorities arrest Paul (vv. 27-36). From this point on, the narrative is made up of a series of encounters between Paul and Roman authorities where Paul must answer the accusations of his Jewish enemies.<sup>50</sup>

He defends himself in Jerusalem by declaring himself as a “citizen of no mean city” (v. 39), reporting the account of his conversion and his mission to the Gentiles (21:37-33:21). None of this is of interest to the Romans. Discovering he is a Roman citizen, they send him back to the Jewish Council (vv. 22-29). His Jewish credentials impress some, but not others, and that night “the Lord stood by him and said: ‘Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so must you bear witness also at Rome’” (22:30-23:11. See v. 11). As Paul’s opponents concoct a plot to murder him, “the son of Paul’s sister” (v. 16) hears of it, informs Paul, held in the Roman barracks, and he is swept away by the authorities to the Governor Felix in Caesarea, the seat of Roman authority in Palestine (23:12-35).

From now on a series of different trials take place, at Caesarea, before Felix (24:1-27), Porcius Festus (25:1-12), King Agrippa and his wife Bernice (25:13-26:32). Paul fulfils the destiny promised by Jesus to his disciples: “And you will be brought before kings and governors in my name” (Lk 21:12). At each trial Paul’s defence is the same: he has done nothing to discredit the traditions of Israel, as he has been singled out by an act of the God of Israel to proclaim the saving effects of the death and resurrection of Jesus. “To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22-23. See Lk 2:31-32). At each stage across these trials, Paul is declared innocent (23:29; 25:25; 26:31-32). It is as an innocent witness to the truth

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<sup>50</sup> On the Lukan theological and rhetorical agenda across these encounters, see L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 399-400, and N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 349-371.

(like Jesus in the Lukan passion narrative, see Lk 23:47), that Paul sails for Rome (Acts 27:1).

## 8. Rome: The Centre of the Known World (27:1-28:31)

The perilous sea-journey, described as Luke's "literary *tour de force*,"<sup>51</sup> is reported in 27:1-28:10. After an initial easy journey at the right time of the year (27:1-8), a decision is made – against Paul's advice – to continue the journey in the winter (vv. 9-12). From that point on every possible peril is faced: storm at sea (vv. 13-20), starvation (vv. 21-25), and possible shipwreck (vv. 26-32). Paul advises correctly in every situation, and even miraculously provides food for everyone as they are starving (vv. 33-38). They come to land in Malta, where they experience dangers (28:3-6: the episode with the viper), again overcome by Paul. They are made welcome by the local people (27:39-28:10). They take a ship in Malta, and finally "came to Rome" (28:11-16. See v. 16). As throughout Acts, the Christian community, Peter, and Paul continually face danger and opposition, but it is overcome by the power of their miraculous activity and the persuasion of their proclamation of the Gospel.

In Rome, Paul tells his story of trial, and is asked to explain himself to the local authorities. As always, some believe, and some reject what Paul has to tell them (vv. 17-25a). Acts closes with Paul's final use of Israel's Scriptures to legitimate his message and his turning away from Israel as the fulfilment of the promise of the Holy Spirit made through the Prophet Isaiah: "The Holy Spirit was right" (v. 25b). "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (v. 28). Paul's mission to the Jews has come to a close, and from Rome the Gospel will be preached to the Gentiles. Luke tells of the relentless and unstoppable proclamation of the message of what God had done in and through Jesus. His second volume closes with the information that Paul remains in Rome for two years, courageously and openly "preaching the Kingdom of and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 30-31). This Spirit-filled Christian witness has not arrived at a boundary, but at a promise of a future.

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<sup>51</sup> L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 450. For a colorful description, see N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 375-397.



## 9. The Holy Spirit and the Missio ad Gentes Today

The commissions of Jesus in Luke 24:46-49 and Acts 1:8 have been fulfilled, thanks to the never-failing presence of the Holy Spirit who empowers and directs his Apostles, especially Peter and Paul, to take the Gospel from Jerusalem “to the ends of the earth”. Opposition emerges from the Jews who will not accept an uncircumcised Christian, as well as the Romans, who cannot understand what Paul represents, and do not want to know. Even the elements, storm, starvation, and shipwreck threaten this journey from Jerusalem to Rome. All opposition fails. Accompanied by signs and wonders that manifest the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles’ witness to the Kingdom reaches out to the ends of the earth (see Lk 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). Pope Francis has claimed that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of the *Acts of the Apostles*.<sup>52</sup> A close reading of the narrative indicates that he is correct:

- The promise of the Holy Spirit (1:5, 8);
- The Holy Spirit reconstitutes the Twelve (1:15-20);
- The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples at Pentecost (2:1-36);
- The Holy Spirit inspires the mission dedicated to the Greek-speaking people in Jerusalem (6:1-7);
- Stephen hands over his Spirit in martyrdom (7:59);
- The Holy Spirit directs the Samaritan mission (8:15-25);
- The Holy Spirit leads Philip to instruct and baptize the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29), and snatches him away on further mission (8:40);
- The gift of the Holy Spirit brings Saul’s conversion to conclusion (9:1-17);
- The Holy Spirit descends upon Cornelius and his household (10:1-11:18);
- The Holy Spirit singles out Barnabas and Paul for the Gentile mission (13:1-4; 15:8-9);

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<sup>52</sup> Addressing the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies, Pope Francis advised: “Your regular book for prayer and meditation should be the Acts of the Apostles. Go there to find your inspiration. *And the protagonist of that book is the Holy Spirit*”. Stress mine. See *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, 1 June 2018, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180601\\_pontificie-opere-missionarie.html/](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180601_pontificie-opere-missionarie.html/).

- The Holy Spirit inspires the decisions of the Jerusalem Council (15:8, 28, 29);
- The Holy Spirit directs Paul from Asia to Macedonia (16:6-9);
- Apollos and believers in Ephesus who know Jesus and the baptism of John are baptized into the Holy Spirit (18:24-28; 19:1-6);
- The Holy Spirit reveals Paul’s destiny (19:21; 20:22-23; 21:11,13);
- Paul’s final return to Jerusalem is directed by the Holy Spirit (21:4);
- Finally, in Rome, Paul can declare: “The Spirit is right” (28:25).

God, through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, is in control of history, and guides his “Apostles” of all ages through their difficulties, sinfulness, and rejection. A third generation Christian (see Lk 1:1-4), Luke was aware of ambiguities in his experience of Church. But Luke wants to proclaim to individuals and communities that, guided by the Holy Spirit, miracles *can happen*. God’s outreach “to the ends of the earth” *can be successful*. Our own experience of a fragile Church is an indication that, despite failure, the Gospel reaches out “to the ends of the earth”. Luke asks Christians, witnessing at the ends of the earth, to accept Luke’s view of *how things should be* in God’s Church. The call to mission continues, the Holy Spirit is present, and the saving power of God can be found. Luke’s two volumes call Christians *to be missionaries, witnesses* whose testimony fill the pages of a living *third volume*, telling what God and the Holy Spirit have done for us in and through Jesus Christ.