

Acts 2:1-21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 22 October 2020

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 2 verses 1 to 21. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.

And they were amazed and astonished, saying, Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear each one of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene.

And visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God. And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, What does this mean?

But others, mocking, said, They are filled with new wine. But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, Men of Judea, and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give ear to my words, For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.

But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel. And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

[1 : 44] Even on my male servants and female servants, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above, and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and vapour of smoke.

The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

The story of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 is one of the richest texts in the entirety of the Scriptures. It's filled with typological connections. In a few verses, a vast array of biblical background and a great many lines of biblical narrative converge.

Typology helps us to read the Scripture. It helps us to understand the significance of events. And it could be argued that Pentecost is a foremost example of this. Paying attention to the context of the story, the way the story is told, certain key details, and all these things will help us to see the way that the story of Pentecost fits into the far larger picture of the rest of the Scriptures.

Fifty days after the resurrection of Christ, the Spirit of Christ descends upon the disciples, preparing them for their mission. It is important to understand the story of Pentecost in its context within the wider story.

[3 : 04] The event of Pentecost is organically connected with the event of the resurrection, and with the event of the ascension that preceded it. The Spirit can descend upon the Church because Christ has ascended into the heavens.

We see connections then with the events that have immediately preceded, in the story of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. But we also see connections with the beginning of Luke's Gospel.

We have already noted the way that the book of Luke and the book of Acts have parallels. The book of Luke begins with a lot of references to the Spirit. The Spirit overshadows the Virgin Mary so that Christ is conceived in her womb.

In the same way, the Spirit will overshadow and the power of God will come upon the Church so that they, in a way analogous to Mary, will bear Christ within their midst as a new temple of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is also important in the story of the presentation. The Spirit leads Simeon into the temple, where he prophesies by the Spirit concerning this child that is presented there. Much as the presentation in the temple occurred on the 40th day, so Christ ascends into the heavenly temple on the 40th day.

[4 : 10] And then a man called Simeon, Simon Peter, bears witness to the Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is also an Anna who is praying constantly in the temple. After the ascension, the disciples are also characterised by constant prayer in the temple.

Like Anna, they recall the character of Hannah at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel. Much as Hannah was accused of being drunk by Eli the high priest, so they will be accused of being drunk by religious leaders of their own day, who also lack perception.

After the narratives of Christ's infancy, there is another important story concerning the descent of the Holy Spirit, and that is the story of Christ's baptism. There is a transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to the ministry of Christ, and the Spirit descends in the form of a dove in a theophanic manner, propelling him into his mission as the Son of God and the Messiah.

The beginning of Acts is another transitional story, the transition from the ascended Christ to the ministry of the Church. Once again, there is a passing of the baton at a baptism. The Church is baptised by the Spirit, the event foretold by John the Baptist.

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And when the Church is baptised by the Spirit, they go forward in the power of Christ and continue what he has started. In Christ's gift of his Spirit at Pentecost, we have the ground prepared for the continuation and completion of the ministry that Christ has begun.

[5 : 35] Christ's mission, and the Church's mission, is one unified mission. And here we find ourselves helped by reflection upon Old Testament parallels. The story of 2 Kings chapter 2, where Elijah ascends into heaven, and the Spirit of Elijah descends upon Elisha, who continues the ministry of Elijah, is a typological parallel that helps us to understand how the ministry of the Church continues from and completes the ministry that Christ has started.

From a sense of the scriptural background of what's taking place at Pentecost, an entire New Testament ecclesiology can be formed. We might see here themes of creation and new creation. In Genesis chapter 2, the Lord breathes into man the breath of life. And here he is breathing into a new humanity, the breath of his Spirit, so that this new humanity formed in knowledge, according to the image of him who created him, would be a place where there is neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised nor uncircumcised, slave nor free, but Christ is all in all.

And in this new creation, we see a restoration of God's people. In Ezekiel chapter 36 and 37, God promised to restore Israel. In chapter 37, we see the way that Israel was like a field of dead and whitened bones, representing its whole house, following God's judgment that had fallen upon it. However, as Ezekiel, according to the word of the Lord, prophesied to the dry bones, the wind of the Spirit comes, and the dead, whitened bones become a mighty, living army. In Acts chapter 2, God is establishing his people once more.

[7 : 08] 120 disciples are gathered together, under 12 apostles, an Israel that is the first fruits of a greater harvest in the future. Such themes of first fruits and harvest might also make us think back to the origins of the Feast of Pentecost, in an agricultural feast at the time of the wheat harvest.

The grain harvest began with the barley harvest at the time of unleavened bread, and it ended with the wheat harvest at Pentecost. The Feast of Firstfruits occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and this was the basis for the numbering of the Day of Pentecost.

Seven full weeks were numbered off, and then on the day after the Sabbath, they would celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. The two tenths of an ephra of flour that were presented at the Feast of Firstfruits became two leavened loaves that were waved before the Lord.

The attentive reader of the book of Leviticus will notice a parallel between the numbering of the Feast of Pentecost and the numbering of the Year of Jubilee. The Feast of Pentecost is a miniature jubilee.

In Luke chapter 4, Jesus' public ministry began with a sermon declaring the acceptable Year of the Lord, the Year of the Lord's Favor, the Year of Jubilee. And now, the beginning of the ministry of the Church occurs at a mini-jubilee, and the Feast of Pentecost.

[8 : 23] The Feast of Pentecost had another important association. It was associated with the time at which God gave the law to Israel. The day on which the law was given was widely considered to be 50 days after the time of the Passover.

It was considered to have taken place on the Day of Pentecost. At Mount Sinai, Israel was gathered together. God promised to make them into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. At Mount Sinai, the leader of the nation, Moses ascended into God's presence and received the law, which he brought down to the people of Israel.

Fire and God's presence came down upon the mountain. But the people rebelled against the Lord and against Moses, and 3,000 of them were killed. In Acts chapters 1 and 2, we see that Christ, the head of a new people, ascends into heaven, where he receives the Holy Spirit from the Father. On the day of Pentecost, the day on which the law was first given to Israel, Christ gives his Spirit to the Church. At Pentecost, God made his people into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Fire and God's presence come down, not upon a mountain, but upon a people. Whereas the people in Exodus were not fit to come into God's presence, the Spirit comes to dwell in the body of the Church at Pentecost.

[9 : 34] Whereas 3,000 rebellious Israelites were killed at Sinai, 3,000 rebellious people are cut to the heart by Jesus Christ at Pentecost. Recognising the parallels and also the contrasts, we can see something of the deeper New Testament theme of the juxtaposition of the law and the Spirit.

The Spirit is the gift of the law. The gift of the law that is written upon the heart. That was always the promise of the new covenant. And at Pentecost, this is where it begins. It's being written upon the heart of the people so that they might go forth in the power of the Spirit of Christ, bearing that law not just as an external testimony upon tablets of stone, but upon something that is born upon their hearts and in their witness.

The day of Pentecost then is a great turning point in the history of redemption. The law, which had only resulted in bringing people into death, was fulfilled as God gave his Spirit, which established people in the new life of Christ.

As Paul says in Romans chapter 8 verses 2 to 4, the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ has made us free from the law of sin and death. At Sinai, the tabernacle was established, and the church is established as a new temple at Pentecost.

In Exodus chapter 40, the glory cloud descended upon the completed tabernacle, establishing the tabernacle as the place of God's special dwelling. In Acts chapter 2, the Spirit descends not now upon a building, but upon a people set apart to be a living temple, a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.

[11 : 03] We should note the verbal ambivalence of the word that's used for tongues in Acts chapter 2. It refers to both speech and to flame. This explores a powerful conjunction of imagery that is found elsewhere in the Old and the New Testaments.

God's word comes down in the form of fire, and his word given to the church in such a manner enables the church to speak with the fiery power of prophets. The descent of tongues of flame upon the heads of the disciples might also recall other imagery from the temple and the tabernacle.

In the book of Revelation chapter 1, the church is described as a candlestick. The candlestick in the Old Testament is connected with the priest. It is also a means of giving light to dark places.

The church has been lit as a priestly body to give light to the darkened world, a light that is given by the power of the Holy Spirit that burns upon and within her. We should not quench the Spirit.

As the people of God, we should fan into a greater flame the Spirit that has been given to us.

Perhaps we're also to think of ourselves as new altars. We might recall the twelve stones that are brought together to form the altar on Mount Carmel by Elijah, and then that altar is drenched with water, and then the fire of God comes down upon that altar, upon those twelve stones, and burns up the sacrifices upon them.

[12 : 22] We are being created as living altars. Our lives and our actions being presented to the Lord as a living sacrifice. Beyond such themes of Sinai, tabernacle, and priesthood, we might also see kingly themes here.

In discussing Judas in chapter 1, we've already noted the similarities between 1 Kings chapters 1 and 2, and the book of Acts chapter 1, as the Davidic king is about to leave, and is giving instructions to his successor, who then has to establish the new regime.

Within that parallel, the event of Pentecost is framed in a particular way. It's framed as comparable to the event in which Solomon received the Spirit of the Lord to judge the people, the Spirit of Wisdom.

As the church is being established as a new ruling body, like Solomon, it is given the Spirit of Wisdom, by which it will act in a way that is prudent and good. Christ is establishing a new kingdom.

In the book of 1 Samuel chapters 9 and 10, the prophet Samuel anoints Saul as the one who's designated to be the king, and he tells Saul that there will be three confirming signs that he will receive on the way back.

[13 : 28] First of all, he will meet people telling him that the donkeys of his father have been found. Second of all, he will meet people on the way who are carrying items of food, bread and wine and a goat, and they will give him two loaves of bread.

And then finally, that he will meet prophets coming down from the holy place, and the Holy Spirit will come upon him, and he will prophesy and become a new man. As he goes into Jerusalem, Christ gives his disciples a number of similar instructions.

First of all, they will go into the village and find the donkeys. Then they will go into the city and follow a man carrying a water pitcher to the place where they will celebrate the meal, in which he will give them bread and wine, and they will celebrate the Passover.

And finally, they will wait in Jerusalem until power comes upon them from on high. Like Saul, when the Spirit comes upon them, they will become new men and will prophesy. A kingdom is being entrusted to them.

So we should not be surprised to find these signs of the kingdom befalling them. Having seen themes of priests and kings, we should not be surprised to find themes of prophets too. We have already observed some of the parallels between the story of Christ's ascension and the church's Pentecost, and the ascension of Elijah and Elisha's Pentecost in the book of 2 Kings chapter 2.

[14 : 40] That story of prophetic succession is one that provides a paradigm for understanding what this story means. We also observed the tongues of flame that descended upon them, that lit their speech to give their speech power, so that they might speak with different tongues, and speak with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Within the Old Testament witness, we have a number of examples of prophetic installation, where people are established as prophets of the Lord and empowered to speak in his name. We might think of Ezekiel's vision of the throne chariot in Ezekiel chapter 1, or Isaiah's temple vision in Isaiah chapter 6, or Moses' encounter with the Lord at the burning bush.

Such initiatory visions prepare the prophets for their missions in a number of different ways. They give them strength and resources for their tasks. They give them a firm awareness of their personal vocation, and they loosely sketch the contours of their mission.

The appearance of non-consuming tongues of flame resting upon the heads of the disciples might recall the miraculous fire of the burning bush. Fire is an element associated with the Holy Spirit and his ministers.

It being raised to participate in the divine council, prophets were elevated to share the status of the angels. The prophet operates within the element of the angels, appearing with them in the divine council, or moving rapidly and miraculously from place to place in the wind and the fire of the divine throne chariot.

[16 : 03] God's speech is like a consuming flame, and the mouth of the prophet has to be prepared and kindled to burn with the fire of God's word, as we see in places like Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14.

In Isaiah chapter 6 verses 6 to 7, the mouth of the prophet is cleansed and kindled with a live coal from the altar of the Lord. The connection between the tongues of flame and the tongues of speech of Pentecost might draw upon this sort of association.

The church is being lit as a witnessing lampstand and as a burning mouthpiece of the divine word. Here we might also think of events such as Numbers chapter 11 verses 16 to 30, where the Lord took of the spirit of Moses and empowered 70 elders of the people to exercise prophetic rule alongside him.

As the Lord descended in the cloud and placed the spirit of Moses upon the 70, they spontaneously began to prophesy in a remarkable but non-recurring manner. The desire that Moses expressed at that time, would that all of the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them, is alluded to in the promise of Joel chapter 2 verses 28 to 29.

And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

[17 : 24] Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my spirit. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter claims that this prophecy is arriving at its fulfillment.

