

Acts 1:1-14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 1 verses 1 to 14 So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?

He said to them, It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?

This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.

And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the zealot, and Judas the son of James.

[1 : 44] All these, with one accord, were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. The book of Acts begins in a transitional place.

Jesus is about to leave, and Pentecost is about to occur, but yet there are 40 days between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, and after that, 10 more days until Pentecost. Such a situation might remind us of the beginning of the book of 1 Kings.

The Davidic king is about to leave, and his appointed successor and his regime are being established. Luke introduces the book with a dedication to Theophilus, the same person to whom he had dedicated the third gospel.

As almost all scholars recognise, there is a very close relationship between the book of Acts and the book of Luke. They are two books by the same hand, and beyond that fact, they have deep thematic unity and structural relationships.

Rebecca de Nova remarks upon their structural similarities. The baptism of Jesus with water in Luke chapter 3 is paralleled by the community's baptism with the Spirit in Acts chapter 2.

[2 : 46] Jesus' message is rejected in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4, and the community's message is rejected in Jerusalem in Acts chapters 3-5. Herod Antipas intends to kill Jesus in Luke chapter 13, while Herod Agrippa attempts to kill Peter in Acts chapter 12.

Luke chapters 14-18 contains the gospel to the outcasts, and Acts chapters 13-20 contains a gospel that includes Gentiles. Chapters 9-19 of the gospel contain Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, and Acts chapters 19-21 contains Paul's journey to Jerusalem.

Both Jesus and Paul suffer a passion and four trials, Luke chapters 20-23 and Acts chapters 21-26 respectively. The death of Jesus in Luke chapter 23 is paralleled in Acts chapter 27 with Paul's death at sea.

In Luke chapter 24, Jesus is resurrected, and Paul is resurrected in Acts chapter 28. Beyond this, we should also note similarities in the emphasis upon the temple at the beginning of the story, the emphasis upon the Spirit, and then also themes of birth.

The first volume was about all that Jesus began to do and teach. Many have seen in this statement a suggestion of the fact that this following volume, the volume of Acts, concerns Jesus' continued work, that Jesus is working through his Spirit in the ministry of the disciples that he has chosen.

[4 : 13] We might see similarities between this and the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, where Elisha is the one who completes the unfinished ministry of Elijah. And as in the stories of Elijah and Elisha, there will be an ascension followed by a Pentecost, a gift of the Spirit, here and in the succeeding chapter.

Before Jesus is taken up, he gives commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He gives them directions for what they ought to do. The apostles are his chosen messengers.

They have been set apart as his special emissaries, the ones who represent him in a very particular way. They will be the foundation of the church, with Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone.

Their role is that of communicating his instructions and directives, and also bearing witness to what he has done, bearing witness most of all to the resurrection. And for that end, he presented himself alive to them after his death and resurrection on multiple occasions and with many proofs.

We have appearances to single individuals. We have appearances to a couple of people on the road to Emmaus. We have sustained lengthy appearances and short appearances. We have appearances in Galilee next to the sea, and we have appearances in Jerusalem.

[5 : 24] We have appearances to men. We have appearances to women. We have at least one appearance to over 500 people at a single time, as Paul notes in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. If the apostle Thomas accepted Jesus' invitation in the book of John, then the apostles touched Jesus' very wounds that proved that it was he who had come back from the dead.

Jesus walks with them. He talks with them. He cooks for them. He eats with them. They see him indoors. They see him outdoors. They see him in daylight. They see him at night. He is seen by members of his family and by some of his closest acquaintances, and then also by others that had slightly less familiarity with him.

The sheer range of resurrection appearances, and the many ways in which Jesus demonstrates that it is indeed he who has come back from the dead, all serve to ground the faith of the disciples and secure their witness to the resurrection.

He appears to them over a 40-day period. When we think of a 40-day period, we might think of certain parts of the flood narrative, or we might think of the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai, or Elijah going to Mount Horeb, or we might think of the time that Israel spent in the wilderness for 40 years.

Jesus had spent 40 days in the wilderness at the beginning of the book of Luke. But I think there's a different 40-day period that relates more directly to this, which is the 40 days after the birth of Jesus and before his presentation in the temple.

[6 : 45] According to the law of Leviticus chapter 12, After the birth of a male child, a woman would bring a sacrifice of a lamb for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or turtle dove as a sin offering, to the tabernacle or the temple.

Within Luke's Gospel, we see a number of symmetries between the beginning of Jesus' life and his death. Jesus is born with a Mary and Joseph. After his death, there are a number of Marys, and also a Joseph of Arimathea.

Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Jesus is wrapped in linen garments and laid in a tomb. When Jesus rises, he will be the firstborn from the dead. This is a new birth event, and here I think we see an extension of that parallel.

Luke is the only one of the Gospels to record the events of the presentation in the temple, and there there is a lot of emphasis upon the work of the Spirit. There is a prophetic declaration by a man called Simeon.

There is a woman called Anna, who's been constantly praying in the temple. And here I think we see parallels. Jesus, the firstborn son from the womb of the grave, is going to go into the heavenly temple, and his mother and his disciples will go to the earthly temple and continue in prayer.

[7 : 55] Perhaps we are even to associate Christ with the ascending sacrifice of the burnt offering of the Lamb, and to associate the Spirit that descends on the day of Pentecost with the dove of the sin offering that applies his blood to us.

Beyond giving them directives for their future mission, and giving them many manifestations and proofs that he was indeed raised from the dead, and not just some appearance, but a living body. Jesus also gave his disciples much teaching concerning the kingdom of God.

While he had taught them extensively within the Gospels, particularly in the form of parables concerning the kingdom of God, now they are prepared to hear much more. They have seen the resurrected Christ, they have some idea of what the cross meant, and now they are prepared to hear about the next stage, the mission that they will undertake, and what role that will have to play in God's purpose.

It might seem strange, after all the events of the death and resurrection, that Christ is leaving the scene. However, to think this would be to miss the significance of the ascension. Patrick Schreiner, in his book *The Ascension of Christ*, observed the way that the ascension is the culmination and completion of Jesus' ministry in each of its key aspects, its priestly aspect, its kingly aspect, and its prophetic aspect.

In the priestly aspect of Christ's work, he observes that while Christ sacrificed himself and offered his blood on earth, he interceded for his people on earth and gave them his peace and blessing, in heaven he presents his blood, opening up the way for his people to enter into the heavenly sanctuary.

[9 : 22] In heaven he constantly intercedes for us, and from heaven he bestows his spirit, which blesses his people, and gives them peace and confidence to draw near to God. All of these points are central in the book of Hebrews.

He discusses the kingly aspect too. On earth Jesus is designated as king, he conquers the forces of darkness, and he lays the foundation for his church. But at its ascension he is installed as king, he is enthroned over all spiritual beings, and he becomes the head of the church.

Finally, as the ascended prophet, Jesus was filled with the spirit while on earth, but as he's ascended, he pours out his spirit, and he empowers many witnesses to go forth.

Jesus, on earth, was the one who spoke the word of God, but after his ascension, he continues to declare his word of his gospel to the world through his messengers, through his apostles that he is appointed by the spirit.

Again, as a prophet, Jesus performs signs and wonders, but then as he becomes the head of the church as he ascends into heaven, he now performs signs and wonders through his bride, the church.

[10 : 27] The ascension, then, is not a strange epilogue to the story of Christ. It's the completion of the story, the point where it reaches its intended goal. This fact is borne out by studying the New Testament epistles, where again and again we see references to the ascension and its meaning and its significance.

Although he had appeared to them after his resurrection in Galilee, on a mountain where he had delivered the Great Commission, and next to the Sea of Tiberias or Galilee where they were fishing, he now instructs them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Spirit had already been foretold, not least in the ministry of John the Baptist, who baptized with water, but spoke about the one who had baptized with the Holy Spirit, the one who was his successor.

John the Baptist had spoken about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, and yet none of these things seemed to occur in the ministry of Christ on earth. It was not until after his ascension that those things could take place.

One key question rises in the minds of the apostles at this time though. Is this the time when the Lord will restore the kingdom to Israel? This was something that was long anticipated, mentioned throughout the works of the prophets, and now they're wondering, is it going to take place?

[11 : 38] Yes. Jesus does not deny that such an event is going to take place. Israel is going to have the kingdom restored to it. However, it is not for them to know the times or the seasons. It will happen in the Father's good time.

Much of the book of Acts that follows will be wrestling with this question. How is Israel going to respond to the message of the Messiah? How is this kingdom going to play out? Jesus does not answer their questions about the timing of the restoration of the kingdom.

What he gives them is a mission and the power to perform that mission. They are first going to be anointed with the Holy Spirit, and when they have the Holy Spirit upon them, they will be his witnesses, bearing his spirit and his message as they go to Jerusalem first, then all Judea, which probably refers to the entirety of Jewish Palestine, then to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.

The book of Acts roughly seems to follow this pattern. It begins in the city of Jerusalem, and it ends in the city of Rome. After he says these things to them, he's taken up, and a cloud removes him from their sight.

How we relate such an event to a modern cosmology has raised many questions. There is no reason why the ascension of Christ, however, need demand the idea that Jesus is physically located above us.

[12 : 51] The ascension of Christ is not just the ascension to a physically higher location. It is an ascension to a spiritually higher realm. It is perceived in our realm as a physical ascension into the sky, but the ascension is also a passing into a greater realm, a movement into heaven and God's special presence.

A similar event, of course, is seen in 2 Kings chapter 2, where Elijah is caught up in the whirlwind. Again, we might think of this as a cloud. We've seen clouds earlier in the work of Luke, both in the event of the transfiguration and also in the Olivet discourse as Jesus speaks about coming on the cloud.

That, of course, looks back to the book of Daniel, chapter 7, verses 13 to 14. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the ancient of days and was presented before him, and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. Jesus coming on the cloud is the son of man ascending to God's very presence, entering into his rule.

Gazing into heaven, they see him taken from them. We should probably recognise some visionary aspect to what they're seeing here. It might be similar to the event of Jesus' baptism, as the spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove, and the heavens are opened.

[14:15] That is seen by Christ, and it's seen by John the Baptist, but there is no reason to believe that it was seen by anyone else present. The same thing seems to be true of the ascension of Elijah. Elijah says, if Elisha sees him ascend, he will have the double portion of his spirit.

As the ascension is not just a physical ascension, but is a spiritual transition or translation between realms, it is not surprising that it should be seen only by those whose eyes are spiritually opened, to perceive not just regular terrestrial phenomena, but also spiritual ones.

As they are gazing into heaven, two men appear in white robes. These might remind us of the angels at the time of the resurrection, the two men in dazzling apparel who appear to the women and instruct them not to look for the living among the dead.

As the two men instructed the women there, the two men instruct the apostles here, giving them a further sense of how this fits into the larger picture. Jesus was taken up from them into heaven, and he's going to return in the same way as they saw him go up.

What this return will involve is not entirely clear. Perhaps our minds might be drawn to Zechariah chapter 14 verse 4. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall move northward and the other half southward.

[15:37] And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azel. And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah, king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost, and there shall be a unique day which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea, and half of them to the western sea.

It shall continue in summer as in winter, and the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one, and his name one. After the ascension, the twelve apostles returned to Jerusalem.

The ascension occurred on the Mount of Olives. In the final week of Jesus' life, the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount are set over against each other. This quite possibly was in the light of that prophecy from Zechariah.

It seems appropriate that the Lord ascended from the Mount of Olives, and now they will return to Jerusalem, which will be the staging ground for the first phase of the mission that they have to undertake. Entering Jerusalem again, they go to an upper room where they have been staying.

[16:46] They are probably not living there, certainly not the full number of them, but they are based there as they spend their time in prayer and conversation in preparation for the day of Pentecost. A room that would have accommodated 120 people would have been uncommonly large within the city of Jerusalem.

Here, in the ten days, the deep breath before the Spirit descends upon them and plunges them into their mission, the apostles are listed for us once again. After the apostasy and the betrayal of Judas, the twelve are only eleven.

They will have to restore their full number in the verses that follow. Here, they are listed in a very similar order to that which we find elsewhere in the Gospels. Peter begins the list as usual and is succeeded by the other two of the core three disciples, James and John.

[17:55]

The women here are probably not just their wives, but are probably the core women among the disciples of Christ who had followed him from the beginning. Luke had mentioned these prominent women in Luke chapter 8, verses 1 to 3.

She will be personally present for this second great Pentecost also. And while Jesus' brothers had doubted his mission earlier on in the Gospels, here they are present with the disciples. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 7, we read that Jesus appeared to James, presumably his brother, and seemingly alone.

How did the post-resurrection appearances of Christ differ from other sorts of miraculous appearances? How did they differ from the post-ascension appearances of Christ to figures such as Stephen in chapter 7 and Saul on the road to Damascus?

[19:10]