



PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-21

Joel B. Green

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Bewildered,” or “puzzled,” Luke writes, “and astonished” (Acts 2:12). These are responses characteristic of those who witnessed the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and why not? These are extraordinary events, after all—extraordinary when taken on their own terms, but even more so when heard as Luke presents the story, full of echoes and reverberations from Israel’s own history. The sound of winds raging; flame-like tongues, scores of them; an international, carnivalesque mixture of languages, some familiar and others belonging to an all-but-forgotten past—befuddlement and wonder may well be the anticipated responses to such phenomena as these! In fact, the entire passage that attracts our attention, Acts 2:1-21, pivots around the question posed in v 12, “What does this mean?”

Events do not generally come to us labeled, self-interpreting, so that biblical faith and biblical preaching funds a needed, hermeneutical enterprise: locating events within the larger mural of God’s work in order to give them meaning. As Luke makes clear in this text, essential to the work of faithful interpretation is a people formed by the Scriptures, Israel’s own story, and minds opened (or, better, inspired) by the Holy Spirit. The events of this day are quickly recited; the rest of Luke’s narrative is given over to the interpretive work of tying together the Scriptures of Israel and the coming of the Spirit.

First, the gift of the Spirit, together with its effects, demonstrates the central importance of charismatic hermeneutics. Although tongue-speaking leads to the indictment, “They are filled with new wine” (v 13), we should not imagine that this is because Jesus’ followers are speaking gibberish or otherwise behaving out of sorts. To those with the appropriate language repertoire, Pentecostal speech makes perfect sense: “*in our own languages* we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power” (v 11). Moreover, the rare word Luke uses of their inspired utterance, *apophthengomai* (v 4), is also found in Acts in 2:14, where it points to Peter’s prophetic interpretation of Scripture, and 26:25, where it is explicitly contrasted with “raving” or “being out of one’s mind” (*mainomai*). Not only is their speech intelligible, it is also inspired and doxological, taken up with relating the mighty acts of God in Israel’s history, “God’s deeds of power” (see Pss 106:2; 145:4, 12; Exodus 15).

Even more impressive are the ways Luke ties the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit into Israel’s history and hope. The Scriptures give meaning to Pentecost, to be sure, but Pentecost also shows how best to read and embody Israel’s story. Among these links to the Scriptures, the most explicit comes in Peter’s interpretive citation of Joel 2:28-32, but first we are driven back even further into the story, back to God’s purpose in Creation.

The ancient will of God is sounded in the important allusions to the story of Babel in Acts 2. In spite of periodic suggestions in the commentaries, we find no “reversal of Babel”

in Luke's story and, indeed, we would be mistaken to imagine that Babel needed reversing in the first place. Genesis 11 does not present the confusion of languages on the plain of Shinar simply as a punitive action on God's part. Instead, God's purpose from the beginning was for the human family to scatter across and to fill the whole earth, and this is the consequence of Babel (see Gen 1:28; 9:1; 10:32; 11:8). Pushing further, what has frustrated God's purpose in Genesis 11 is not merely the collusion of humanity against God's purpose. Rather, the wickedness of this idolatrous plan is betrayed in the opening of the Babel story, with its reference to "one language"—a metaphor in the Ancient Near East for the subjugation and assimilation of conquered peoples by a dominant nation. Linguistic domination is a potent weapon in the imperial arsenal, as people of Luke's world themselves would have known, living as they did in the wake of the conquest of "the world" by Alexander the Great and subsequent creation of a single, Greek-speaking, linguistic community. God's scattering the people at Babel was already an act of grace, therefore, and, in an ironic way, God's intervening in Genesis 11 to thwart humanity's common building project actually opens up again fresh possibilities for human community. These are realized in Pentecost.

If God deconstructs a coerced unity in Genesis 11, Acts provides no invitation to return to a single language as a divine blessing or gift. Pentecost is not the call to gather in a single place, the center of the earth, but the place of launching for a missionary movement to "the end of the earth" (1:8). What are we to make of the language miracle? When reading Acts 2, it is imperative that we remember that, for this missionary activity to commence, speaking in the old, native languages of those gathered was simply unnecessary. Had those disciples spoken in Greek, all would have understood; Alexander's march across the Mediterranean world guaranteed that! Like Babel, Pentecost is about the divine enabling of languages, but a key difference is signaled in the midst of simi-

larity. Acts 2 begins and ends with Luke's report of the unity of human community (vv 1, 42-47), but this *koinonia* is not the consequence of political domination, and unity is not instituted at the expense of distinctions among human communities. Pentecost does not reverse Babel but parodies it. With the outpouring of the Spirit, *koinonia* is realized, not as the consequence of a single, repressive language,

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nor by the dissolution of multiple languages, nor by the dissolution of social and regional distinctives in the formation of cultural homogeneity. Rather, *koinonia* results from the generative activity of the Spirit who is poured out by Jesus (v 33) and the location of a new rallying point of identity among those "who call on the name of the Lord," those baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ" (vv 21, 38).

Acts 2:5-11 functions as a kind of "echo chamber," then, within which the story of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost reverberates with the ancient account of Babel. Luke locates the outpouring of the Spirit in relation to other points in Israel's past, too, especially the tradition of Pentecost, a harvest festival celebrating God's provision and offering thanksgiving for God's good gifts. Closer in the memo-

ry of Luke's own readers would be the ways in which the Gospel of Luke itself has set the stage for anticipating and understanding this outpouring of the Spirit. John anticipated the messianic baptism with the Spirit and fire, and Jesus spoke of both the faithfulness of the Father who keeps his promise and responds graciously to the prayers of his people, and the promise of Israel's restoration and accompanying mission to all peoples (Luke 3:15-17; 11:1-13; 24:44-49; Acts 1:4-8). Operating even more in the foreground to bathe the Pentecostal events in meaning is Peter's citation of the prophet Joel in Acts 2:17-21.

Up to this point, Luke's report of the Pentecostal phenomena has been particularly spectacular and graphic. When Peter rises to deliver his speech, however, all activity comes to a standstill. The introduction to the speech is cumbersome, the language overly burdened (v 14), as Luke draws attention to the gravity of Peter's sermon and provides his audience with an opportunity to take stock of what has been happening. The prophet Joel is quoted as a "hermeneutical aside," interpreting these events in pictures borrowed from the Scriptures. It is worth remembering, then, that Jesus has already "opened" Peter's mind to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45), and poured the Spirit on Peter so that he might expound them faithfully.

Of course, Peter is not alone, even if he is the spokesperson. Like the prophets of old, who were associated with bands of prophets, so Peter appears in the company of other followers. This is important because it coheres with the terms of Joel's prophecy: God is forming a prophetic community. Dismissing the charge of drunkenness brought against the disciples, Peter substitutes his own interpretation. With his words, "this is what was spoken," he draws an analogy between biblical text and current events and people. How does Peter know to make this connection? Peter is empowered to discern the affinity of the Joel-text to his own community. He is a Spirit-inspired interpreter of Scripture, a charismatic hermeneut. As such, his citation of the biblical text is not word-for-word, but already interpretation. Four motifs are central:

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ONE: Joel is tasked with providing a timetable within which to make sense of recent events (from the crucifixion through the outpouring of the Spirit) and the mission set in motion by the reception of the Spirit. These are “the last days” (v 17), even if the “day of the Lord” (v 20) remains a future expectation. Pentecost does not fulfill Joel’s prophecy, then, but clarifies its meaning by separating chronologically the restoration and subsequent universal mission of God’s people from The End.

TWO: Premium is given to prophecy and divine revelation. In continuity with Israel’s history, this suggests that followers of Jesus comprise a community of prophets who (1) access the counsel of God (including “visions and dreams,” means of charismatic revelation) and (2) serve a destabilizing role in the larger world on account of their unrelenting faithfulness to God and their questioning rather than validating those habits of national and religious life that compete with God’s counsel.

THREE: The judgment of Judah’s enemies, emphasized in Joel, has been replaced with the universal mission and promise of salvation. The terms are emphatic, allowing for no restrictions whatsoever, apart from response to the call to discipleship itself: “all flesh,” “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.” This salvation, as Luke will show, is tied up with the restoration of God’s people through forgiveness, the reception of the Spirit, and incorporation into the community of God’s people through hospitality and baptism.

FOUR: Finally, if calling “upon the name of the Lord” bears this weighty significance, it is crucial to identify correctly who is this Lord! For readers of Joel, the answer is obvious: Yahweh. For the larger Roman world, the answer is equally transparent: the giver of divine blessings. For Acts, these two answers coalesce in Jesus, who, through his exaltation, has been

installed as God’s Co-Regent, who shares in God’s identity, and through whom divine beneficence is available (2:29-36).

In the logic of Pentecost, this is the claim that comes into sharp relief: the outpouring of the Spirit certifies that Jesus is the enthroned Lord and Christ, and this marks the decisive shift in history when God brings his ancient promises to fruition. Generated by the Pentecostal Spirit, the church now embodies and broadcasts the interpreted Scriptures.

It has been a long journey for Jesus’ followers. Lacking in their capacity to imagine the ways of God, they have repeatedly proven themselves incapable of making sense of Jesus’ message, even working at cross-purposes with him. Their metamorphosis

has now reached a critical juncture. Their minds having been opened by the Risen Lord to understand the Scriptures, and now, recipients of the Pentecostal Spirit, they are empowered by the Spirit both to fathom the significance of the dramatic events that have transpired at this Feast and to communicate their significance in ways that draw those events into the ancient purpose of God. They weave together Pentecostal phenomena, the story of Jesus, and the witness of Israel’s Scriptures. The result is a community generated by the Spirit, shaped by the proclaimed Word. □

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