

The Book of Acts Study Guide

Chapters 1-2

1:1

The author of the book identifies himself in the same way that Luke identifies himself in Lk 1:3. A number of theories exist regarding the identity of Theophilus. One of particular note holds that Luke was writing to Theophilus ben Ananus, the High Priest of the Temple from 37-41 A.D. He was a Sadducee, the sect that did not believe in the resurrection or life after death, and since Luke emphasized both issues in his gospel and in Acts, it is possible that he wrote both of these books as a testimony to him.

1:2-4

Verses 2-3 describe the time Yeshua spent with His disciples after His death and resurrection. It is a summary of the last chapters of each of the four Gospels. In v. 4 Yeshua warns the disciples not to leave Jerusalem. He says it was in order that they would be present when His promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit could be fulfilled. But it is also an affirmation that they were not to abandon their biblical cultural heritage. They still needed to be in Jerusalem for Shavuot (Heb.)/Pentecost (Gr.)/Feast of Weeks that was part of the Torah. So if the time had come to abolish the Torah, this would have been a good time to make that clear. But He didn't do that.

1:5

Yeshua affirms the coming promise of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. In order to understand this phrase, you have to deal with it in the original Greek language.

First, *baptizo* was transliterated into English and a new word, baptize, was created. But it has the sense of immersion, as in dipping into a body of water. The concept itself does not require water, but conveys the meaning of immersion or being surrounded by something. And that can include the Holy Spirit

Second, in each of the seven passages in the New Testament where the phrase "baptized with the Holy Spirit" appears, it is used either with the preposition "in" or using what is called the dative case, which generally marks the indirect object of the verb. Either way, that means it never refers to the subject of the baptism. Or to put it another way, it never means baptism *by* the Holy Spirit or *of* the Holy Spirit. Instead the only subject that is identified as doing the baptism/immersion is Yeshua (Mat 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:33). Each of those passages says that Yeshua baptizes believers *with* the Spirit. That rendering is true in the vast majority of English translations of the Bible. But when you consider the way that it is used in popular Christian culture, you see something very different. Generally you hear it phrased, "baptism *of* the Holy Spirit" As a simple illustration, if you Google these phrases, websites that use the inaccurate phrase, "baptism of the Holy Spirit" are 10 times as common as those that use the accurate phrase "baptism with the Holy Spirit." This error is, to a great extent, the result of a lack of understanding of the important role of prepositions in biblical Greek.

Third, the Greek verb used here in Acts 1:5 is a very precise one. "Shall be baptized" is in the punctiliar passive future tense. That means it will take place at a point in time but not continuing. There are other verb tenses that could be used that convey continuous action or starting at a point and then continuing, but that is not the case. So the point in time is identified here with the phrase, "not many days from now." It is a reference to what is described in chapter 2. But later

on, when you get to Acts 11:16, baptism with the Spirit is used in the sense of a fulfilled promise. And the last time it is used in 1 Cor 12:13, it is phrased in the passive aorist tense, which means that it was at a moment in time in the past. So it is used there in the same way that the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Yeshua are described as a moment in time in the past. There is no place in the teaching of Yeshua or the writings of Paul, Peter, James and John that the baptism with the Spirit is a recurring event for the future.

In 1 Cor 12:13 Paul also says it is a baptism/immersion into one body. And that is really what this phrase is communicating. It is all about a moment in history when the Spirit came and joined all believers into one body. So the context and the grammar show that the phrase, “baptism with the Holy Spirit” is not a description of something believers experience, but it is a historical accomplishment by Yeshua in which believers are immersed into one body with the Spirit.

This fact does not negate the empowering work of the Spirit and the giving of Spiritual gifts. That is a separate issue altogether, and should be addressed using biblical concepts besides the “baptism with the Holy Spirit.” But based on the use of Greek grammar and the greater context of Scripture, here in Acts 1:5 Yeshua is merely foretelling the next event in God’s plan of redemption—the coming of the Holy Spirit and the uniting of believers into one body.

1:6-8

The disciples ask “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” By asking that question, it expresses their belief in a literal restored kingdom. If there will be no physical Messianic kingdom, that would mean the understanding of the disciples was wrong. In that case this was the ultimate moment for Yeshua to correct their view. Moreover, He was just about to ascend into heaven, so this was His last opportunity to set things straight if they had it wrong about the kingdom. But He didn’t do that. Yeshua simply said they were not going to be told when it would happen. And if they couldn’t know when, He would give them a responsibility during that time of uncertainty. They were to be witnesses about salvation through Yeshua, so that the kingdom of God could be filled with citizens whenever the time came—a time that only the Father knew about.

In terms of our modern context, verse 8 is typically used metaphorically, where Jerusalem represents your immediate neighborhood and then you go outward from there. But the primary intent of the verse is a description of the need to act literally by taking the Gospel to the heart of the Jewish people in Jerusalem and to the rest of the Jewish people in the countryside, and to the half-Jewish people in Samaria, and also to the Gentiles in the remotest part of the earth. This kind of approach emphasizes not overlooking anyone. So rather than using this passage as a general motivation for missions that is relative to your metaphorical Jerusalem, it can serve as a motivation to be a witness to everyone, including people you are not comfortable reaching, like Muslims, for they would be the equivalent of Samaritans in biblical days.

1:9-11

Yeshua then ascended to the Father and two angels show up. Their question in the first part of verse 11 is a reinforcement of Yeshua’s commandment He had just made in v. 8 to be His witnesses. The answer of the angels to their own question in the second part of verse 11 indicates that Yeshua’s return will be a mirror image of His departure—His feet will return to the exact same spot in fulfillment of Zech 14:4—“And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east. . .”

1:12-14

The disciples' actions once they returned to Jerusalem were not formal and religious in nature. It was about being united in purpose and attitude ("one mind"), to prayer and breaking down barriers of separation (notice that the men and women functioned together). This is consistent with Paul's teaching in Eph 2:14 that when people are reconciled with God, it breaks down the barriers between one another.

1:15-26

The Apostles then address the loss of Judas from their ranks. They determined that a replacement had to come from among those people who accompanied the Twelve continually from the time of the baptism of John to the ascension of Yeshua, and who was a witness of His resurrection. That informs us that no one is qualified for the office of Apostle today.

At that time, two men were determined to be qualified. The Apostles prayed and drew lots, with the lot falling to Matthias. So that meant there were now two Matthews among the Twelve. Would this method be suitable for today? The objective was ascertaining the will of God. And there is no prohibition in Scripture against this method. However, we have to bear in mind that this act took place before the coming of the Holy Spirit. Today the enduring presence of the Spirit is able to give wisdom to the body of believers, and thus we are able to make the determination collectively. So drawing lots would not be necessary.

2:1-4

The large group of disciples of Yeshua (120 persons according to 1:15) was in one location on Shavuot/Pentecost/Feast of Weeks. This is the event foretold by Yeshua when the Holy Spirit for the first time fully indwelt believers (Rom 8:11). And the evidence of that occurrence was marked in three ways:

- v. 2 – The sound of the rushing wind. This is consistent with the meaning of the Greek word *pneuma*, translated as spirit, being derived from the root *pneo*, meaning a current of air. Both *pneuma* and the Hebrew equivalent, *ruach*, are onomatopoeia words—they sound like they are spelled. These terms communicate the nature of the Spirit. Like the wind, you cannot box the Spirit in, we need to give Him the freedom to move in ways that go beyond our restrictive preconceived notions.
- vv. 3-4 The other two evidences of the coming of the Spirit were the appearance of tongues of fire resting upon them and the people speaking other tongues or languages from their mouths that they did not previously know.

2:5-13

The next section deals with the reaction of other people in Jerusalem to the evidence of the coming of the Spirit. Who were these men who formed this large crowd in Jerusalem? Several commentators assert that the list of nationalities in vv. 9-11 refers to large number of Gentiles were present on that day. But that makes little sense for it implies that they just happened to be there, like you would have tourists from around the world visiting Jerusalem today. Arab Christians in particular make that claim because the Greek word *Arabes*, meaning Arabians, is used in v. 11. And today we think of the word Arabs in a particular way. But applying that way of thinking to Scripture is projecting modern circumstances back on biblical days. The "Arabs" mentioned in v. 11 should not be thought of as modern day ethnic Arabs but as Jews who lived in Arabia at that time. We know from historical sources that there were Jews who lived in

Arabia and spoke Arabic in addition to Hebrew. The Jews who lived in the other countries listed here would likewise speak both Hebrew and the local language.

The greater context of Scripture further explains that they were Jews because it was one of three times during the year that they had to be in Jerusalem for a biblical feast (the other two were Passover and Sukkot/Tabernacles). Verse 5 further clarifies it by saying they were “Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven.” All of these people described in this chapter are Jews, either by birth, or as Gentile proselytes by belief in the God of Israel and living Torah-observant lives (they were keeping the feasts by being in Jerusalem). But the proselytes would be by far in the minority. Most would be native-born Jews. So you have to think of this list as the places in the known world where Jews lived and had come they had come to Jerusalem in order to follow the commandments of Torah. All other explanations are inconsistent with the historical record and the context of Scripture.

Naturally these men would be perplexed by what they were hearing, as would all of us in a similar situation. Instead of accusing them of been intoxicated from drinking wine, we would probably suspect that they were high on drugs.

2:14-37

Peter then responds with a brief sermon explaining what had happened. He quotes Joel 2:28-32 as a prophecy that foretold this day. The first part of this prophecy dealing with divine manifestations of the Spirit is clearly relevant for the events of Acts 2. But the second part describing dramatic signs in the sky above were not involved in this episode. So how could Peter include them in his explanation?

Joel foretold that all of these things would happen in the last days, and Peter affirms the same point in his sermon. Scripture makes it clear that the last days had already begun with the coming of Yeshua: “in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Heb 1:2). And when you consider Yeshua’s teaching on the last days, such as in Matthew 24, He describes events that span from the time immediately after His resurrection and ascension all the way until His return. So the term “last days” spans an indefinite period of time that will culminate with the dramatic heavenly signs of Mat 24 and Joel 2/Acts 2.

Today we are in the midst of the last days, with signs pointing to an impending culmination. Paul describes the character of our current day very well and affixes it to the last days:

“But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power. . .” (2 Tim 3:1-5)

And again Peter writes in his second epistle: “Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking” (2 Peter 3:3). Truly that sounds like today as well.

So all of these aspects—the coming of the Spirit, the prevailing unrighteous character of people and dramatic heavenly signs—are indicators of being in the last days, and Peter was justified in quoting the entire prophecy from Joel that is dealing with the overall concept.

Having made the point that prophecy had been fulfilled regarding the Spirit, Peter then moves on

to show that Yeshua was also the fulfillment of prophecy by quoting David in Ps 16:8-11. David said in that God's Holy One would not be abandoned to the grave (Heb. *sheol*, Gr. *hades*) and to decay—the normal process for people who die. But David died and decayed in the grave, so the verse could not apply to him but to an ultimate holy one in the kingly lineage of David. And Yeshua is that one, for He alone rose from the grave, never to return there and never to suffer decay. In verse 32 Peter and his numerous colleagues were witnesses to that fact, which gives credence to their position.

vv. 33-36 – Peter's final argument is taken from Ps 110:1 which unquestionably describes God speaking to an exalted one in David's lineage, using the phrase "*Yahweh le Adon*" in the Hebrew of the Psalm. In Matthew 22:45 Yeshua referred to this same verse and asked "If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his son?" At that time, Yeshua's audience could not come up with an answer. But here in Acts 2:37 the audience from those many nations responded in a different manner. They were convinced that Yeshua was the Lord of David's proclamation. And they asked what they needed to do.

2:38-40

Peter states that they need to repent, be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, and receive the Spirit. It is easy to build a doctrine of salvation based on this verse in isolation, namely that baptism is the means of forgiveness of sins. But that ignores the greater context of Scripture and the use of the original language. In multiple places, the forgiveness of sins is separated entirely from baptism and is described as a result of faith. And in the phrase "for the forgiveness of sins," the word translated as "for" is *eis*, which can have the sense of "because" (we use the word "for" in the same two ways in English). So the reason for the baptism is *because* of their forgiveness of sins, not the *means* for it. That is consistent with the greater context of Scripture.

Moreover, it is important to note what is missing from the list in v. 38, most notably believing in Yeshua. That is undeniably at the heart of salvation. Yet, Peter omitted it. He could do that because they had already believed by virtue of their positive response to Peter's message. So there was no need for Peter to restate that crucial element. He was just telling them what they needed to do as a follow-up. But not having that understanding can lead to the danger of building faulty doctrines. We should never base our beliefs on an isolated verse dealing with the particular circumstances of a biblical occurrence, but on the whole counsel of Scripture.

Notice also that Peter did not include a requirement that they forsake their heritage and way of worship. He did not tell them they were no longer Jews. He did not tell them to stop observing God's commandments in the Torah or never again to come back to Jerusalem to observe the feasts. He was simply adding elements of righteousness to their cultural heritage.

2:41-47

About 3,000 people were saved on that day—all of whom were either Jews by birth or Gentiles who had previously converted to Judaism. They became the first Messianic community. Some of them would return to their homes and families in their countries far away, just as they had been doing for years after *Shavuot*. But this time would be different as they brought revival in Messiah Yeshua with them. And they would start their own Messianic communities there, like in Rome that Paul would later address in his epistle to the Romans. Others would have remained in Jerusalem, joining those who lived there throughout the year, plus the Apostles and other disciples.

For them it was the best of times, and the description in vv. 42-47 serves as an ideal model for any

congregation. They emphasized:

- Devotion to the teachings of God’s appointed leaders, which would be based on the existing Scriptures of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) and the words of Yeshua. This is the first time that we see in the New Testament an endorsement of teachers of biblical or religious principles. Previously Yeshua was very critical of the teachers of Torah who had formulated the Tradition of the Elders, which later became the Oral Law. But the teachings of the Apostles could be different from those of the Pharisees and other leaders of Israel because the Spirit had now come and was upon the Apostles, guiding them in their teachings. This aspect is underscored by the coinciding of the giving of the Torah and the coming of the Spirit on the same day of the Hebrew calendar (see Ex 19:1). And in God’s manner of communicating, patterns are always significant.
- Fellowship (*koinonia* – from a root meaning, “to share”).
- Breaking bread (this is not communion but a Hebrew cultural idiom meaning having meals together).
- Prayer.
- Feeling a sense of awe (through worship and being aware of God’s works in the world).
- Being together.
- Sharing things in common.
- Being of one mind.
- Maintaining attitudes marked by gladness, sincerity (*apholotes* – lit. “not stubbing toes,” having the sense of making things go smoothly), and praise.
- Having favor with the people of the greater community.
- Witnessing (their numbers were increasing).