

THE WORLD OF ACTS

The book that we call the Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel and, like that Gospel, is a work centered on a mission. Whereas the Gospel of Luke describes the mission of Jesus the Messiah, Acts carries forward the narrative by describing the mission of the Holy Spirit working in and through the apostles. Luke depicts the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles as inaugurating the New Covenant foretold by the prophets and thus restoring Israel from her exile. Far from being in discontinuity with the covenantal history of Israel, the New Covenant is a new chapter in that history.

For Luke, the fulfillment of prophecy does not merely serve as a source of apologetic proofs for the teaching of the apostles. Rather, the fact of such fulfillment lies at the heart of his message: What God had promised through the prophets to do for Israel, He has now done through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Luke sets forth this understanding of the New Covenant in the course of his narrative through his account of the apostles' ministry.

Covenantal History

To grasp the beliefs and intentions of the apostles, one must realize that almost all the leaders of the early Church were Jews. While Gentiles are converted beginning in Acts 10, not a single Gentile leader of the rapidly growing Church is mentioned throughout the whole of Acts. All the leaders of the early Church

were shaped by Israel's covenantal history. God dealt with mankind's sin by calling Abraham and eventually the twelve tribes of Israel to serve Him as an elect people through whom all the peoples of the earth would one day be blessed. Israel then violated her covenant and fell into sin, for which she was suffering the curse of Gentile domination (cf. Deut. 28:15; 30:1).¹ However, God promised through the prophets to send a royal descendant of David—the Messiah—who would lift the curse and restore Israel to covenantal relation with God, and thereby allow Israel finally to fulfill her appointed task of bringing covenantal blessing to all the peoples of the earth. The apostles believed that Jesus was this Messiah, vindicated as such by God through His Resurrection from the dead.² In like manner, God would vindicate all His people in the end through the resurrection of the dead, which would occur when Jesus manifested Himself in glory.

The Abrahamic Promise

The leaders of the early Church considered themselves the heirs of the Abrahamic covenant. This belief in the Abrahamic covenant was held as strongly by the most enthusiastic proponents of the Gentile mission, such as Paul (cf. Gal. 3:7-8, 14-16, 29; Rom. 4:13, 16), as by those who were more cautious toward the Gentiles. Indeed, God's covenantal oath to

¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 268-70.

² N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 126-27.

Abraham of blessing for all the nations (cf. Gen. 22:16-18) undergirded Paul's conviction that the Gentiles were to be incorporated into the People of God.

However, there was uncertainty—and at times sharp disagreement—about the ongoing status of the Mosaic covenant. Was the New Covenant brought about by Jesus superimposed on the Mosaic covenant, leaving the latter unaltered, or did it bring the Mosaic covenant to its culmination? This was the theological question at the heart of the dispute over whether Gentile converts should be circumcised and required to obey the Mosaic Law (cf. Acts 15:1-2, 5).

The Kingdom of God

In answer to this question, the apostles came to teach that the New Covenant was not an adjunct to the Mosaic covenant, but the miraculous fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant by the anointed heir of David, as promised in the prophets (cf. Acts 15:14-18). Through the prophet Nathan, God had promised David a descendant whose “kingdom shall be made sure for ever” (2 Sam. 7:16). Yet Israel had fallen into sin and been afflicted with the covenantal curses (cf. Deut. 28:15-68), the most prominent of which was exile. The temporal political power of the Davidic kingdom was destroyed. Thereafter, the great hope of Israel, resounding throughout the prophets, was for the restoration of the kingdom, understood not merely as a temporal political entity, but as God's rule on earth extended from heaven (cf. Is. 52:7). This restoration would be brought about by a new covenant in which God's promise to Abraham of blessing for all the nations would be fulfilled (cf. Jer. 31:31-34).

The apostles believed that Jesus had inaugurated this restored kingdom (cf. Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23). Jesus had proclaimed the good news of the kingdom's arrival, but even more, He had brought it about through His ministry. In His exorcisms and healings, He had shown that the restoration foretold by the prophets had indeed arrived. By demonstrating His power to forgive sins and thus restore Israel to covenantal relation with God, Jesus had shown that He possessed the authority previously reserved to the temple. Jesus is the son of David "greater than Solomon" (Mt. 12:42) who will build a new Temple for His kingdom (cf. Mt. 16:18-19). Jesus is the king, and the kingdom has been inaugurated by His works of power, culminating in His Resurrection and Ascension.

The People of God

Throughout history, covenants were the means God used to choose a people who would receive His revelation and serve Him in accordance with it. The New Covenant was no exception to this pattern. But what was the nature of the people elected by this New Covenant, and what was its relation to the existing nations of the world? The texts of the prophets are quite clear that the New Covenant was to be first and foremost with Israel: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31). Jeremiah's distinct references to the "house of Israel" and the "house of Judah" are significant (cf. Ezek. 34:21-22). The house of Israel refers to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom,

which in Jeremiah's day had already been conquered by Assyria and dispersed among the neighboring peoples, while the house of Judah refers to the two tribes of the southern kingdom, which were soon to be conquered by Babylon. The People of God must therefore gather the twelve tribes, most of which were scattered among the Gentiles.

Accordingly, Luke draws attention to the fact that the Church begins with Israelites gathered in "from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). He does not hesitate to use the term "Church" in reference to a period in which the New Covenant community consisted only of Israelites (cf. Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 9:31). Peter is similarly emphatic in identifying the New Covenant People of God with the restored Israel (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-10). Thus, the New Covenant does not create a second People of God alongside Israel, but encompasses all in Israel who would receive the Spirit.

Jew and Gentile United

Yet, during the course of their ministry, the apostles became increasingly aware of God's will to include also the Gentiles within the New Covenant. At the central turning point of Acts, James declares that God has drawn forth from the Gentiles new members of His chosen people (cf. Acts 15:14); no longer to be separated from Israel, the Gentiles have been brought into the "dwelling of David" as foretold by the prophets (Acts 15:16). This new union of Jew and Gentile was produced by the Holy Spirit, who established a spiritual kinship among all members of the People of God (cf. Acts 10:44-47; 15:7-8). Hence,

membership in the one People of God did not require submission to the Mosaic Law.

It should not be surprising that the teaching of the apostles met with intense opposition from many Jews, for it ran directly contrary to the theological agenda of the Pharisees, who were a major force within first century Judaism and whose influence extended into the Church (cf. Acts 15:5). The Pharisees sought to reinforce and intensify the Deuteronomic covenant as a bulwark against Gentile influence.³ They strictly interpreted and extended those precepts of the Mosaic Law that resulted in cultural separation from the Gentiles, believing that only through such separation could the People of God regain its holiness. The apostles' teaching not only undermined the Pharisees' quest for separation, but ultimately contradicted the principle of separation embedded in the Deuteronomic covenant itself.

The New Exodus

A major theme of Luke is that Jesus is the new Moses who leads a new exodus from the bondage of the covenantal curses. Implicitly in his Gospel and explicitly in Acts, Luke describes Jesus as the prophet like Moses foretold by Moses himself (cf. Deut. 18:15-19; Acts 3:22; 7:37). In the Transfiguration, the impending death and Resurrection of Jesus are described as "his departure [*éxodon*], which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:31). Jesus' Resurrection is the "first fruits" of

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 73-74.

the restored kingdom (1 Cor. 15:20-24), in which the "whole house of Israel" will be brought to life by the Spirit (Ezek. 37:11-14).

Luke continues and extends the new exodus typology in Acts, beginning with Pentecost. Because it occurs fifty days after Passover, Pentecost was associated with God's revelation of the Mosaic Law on Mount Sinai. In first century Judaism, the Sinai theophany was understood as God's greatest act of self-revelation. Philo, for example, describes the Sinai theophany as being marked not only by flames streaming from heaven, but also by articulate speech coming from the flames that all present could understand in a familiar language.⁴

Luke depicts the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as a new revelation parallel to but surpassing that of Sinai, for now the Spirit Himself is given to the People of God as the New Law of the New Covenant, a law inscribed not on tablets of stone but on the hearts of all who receive Him. The decision faced by each Israelite was whether he was willing to repent and receive the Spirit (cf. Acts 2:37-38). Just as the giving of the Mosaic Law was a covenantal test that led to Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness, so the giving of the New Law led to the testing of a new "wilderness generation."

The Wilderness Generation

The motif of the wilderness generation condemned to wander for forty years because of Israel's

⁴ Philo, *Philo in Ten Volumes (and Two Supplementary Volumes)*, trans. F. H. Colson, vol. 7 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), 23, 29.

repeated apostasy is prominent in the Book of Deuteronomy (cf. Deut. 1:35; 2:7, 14; 32:5, 20) and is perhaps best summarized in Psalm 95:10-11:

For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who err in heart, and they do not regard my ways." Therefore I swore in my anger that they should not enter my rest.

Jesus' frequent references to the wickedness of "this generation" (e.g., Lk. 7:31; 9:41; 11:29-32, 50; 17:25) allude to this Deuteronomic motif and thereby warn of impending judgment for those who reject His call to repentance. These warnings of judgment reach their climax in His prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple within "this generation" (Lk. 21:32).

The apostles carried out their ministry in the shadow of Jesus' prophecy, preaching salvation from "this crooked generation" (Acts 2:40) in a city and Temple they knew to be doomed. They stood at the center of covenantal history, in the calm at the eye of a storm: The sun had darkened, and the veil of the Temple had been rent in two (cf. Lk. 23:45), but still the Temple stood. The lightning had struck, but the thunder had not yet reached the ears of men.

The Last Days

The Book of Acts is set in the tense interval between the two great poles of Jesus' death and Resurrection and the coming destruction of the Temple, a period of which the forty years of the

wilderness generation was understood as a type. The New Covenant had been inaugurated, but the Deuteronomic covenant had not yet reached its visible end. Nevertheless, that end could not be far off, for it had been promised within “this generation.” The apostles saw themselves as living in the last days of the Deuteronomic covenant, which had shaped Israel’s cultural, political, and religious world for over a millennium. Those whose loyalties were centered on the Temple were the chief opponents of Jesus’ followers. Hence, Jesus’ prophecy of the judgment of Jerusalem undergirded the apostles’ hope for the imminent vindication of their faith in Jesus and in the promise of the Gentiles’ entry into the kingdom. In the face of persecution, they ceaselessly pursued this hope through the proclamation of the Good News of the kingdom, the baptismal gift of the Spirit, and the Eucharistic celebration of the “powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:5).

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Questions for Discussion

1. The New Testament describes Jesus as fulfilling the promises made to Abraham.

a. Read Genesis 22:16-18. What is the covenant God makes with Abraham?

b. Read Galatians 3:7-8, 14-16, 29 and Romans 4:13, 16. How does Paul describe the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant?

c. In what ways is Abraham a model for our lives as Catholics today?

d. How does the Catholic faith fulfill the promises God made to Abraham?

2. Read Deuteronomy 6:3-5; 10:11-12; 11:11-13; 26:15-16; 28:15 ff.; and 30:1.

a. What are the blessings of the Deuteronomic covenant?

b. What are the curses?

c. How does the Church bring covenantal blessings to all mankind?

3. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 34:22-31. What are the main features of the New Covenant foretold by the prophets?

4. How do the prophets describe the restoration of the kingdom to Israel in the following passages?

a. Isaiah 55:3-5

b. Micah 5:2-4

c. Jeremiah 23:5; 30:8-9; 33:14-15

d. Zechariah 3:8-10; 6:12

e. How does the Church fulfill these passages?

5. Read Hebrews 9:6-9 and 12:18-28. What is the connection between the destruction of the Temple, the end of Mosaic sacrifices, and the institution of the Church?

6. Read Catechism, nos. 781-82, concerning the apostles' teaching that the Church is the People of God.

a. How can this biblical teaching be easily misconstrued by interpreting it in a predominantly secular framework?

b. How does the concept of the People of God deepen our understanding of the Church when its scriptural roots (in both the Old and New Testaments) are taken into account?

7. Read Catechism, nos. 75-76, concerning the apostolic Tradition.

a. How does apostolic Tradition form the basis of our Catholic faith?

b. In what ways are our study and knowledge of both the Old and New Testaments dependent on apostolic Tradition?
