

PENTECOST

In a few weeks, we'll celebrate Pentecost, recalling the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and the beginning of their proclamation of the Risen Christ. The Jewish crowd listening to the apostles was stunned by the fact that each one heard the Galilean speakers in their own language. Nearly 3,000 were added to the community of believers that day, leading to it being called "the birthday of the Church." Pentecost also ends the Easter Season in our liturgical year.

While we think of Pentecost as a Christian feast related to the Holy Spirit, it is actually a very ancient festival, possibly originating as a Middle Eastern agricultural celebration. It is listed in Exodus as one of three annual pilgrimage festivals which the Israelites were to observe (Ex 23:14-17). It is referred to as the harvest festival, or the Feast of Weeks, in Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. It fell at the end of the spring grain harvest, 7 weeks after the first pilgrimage feast – Unleavened Bread – at the start of the harvest. (The third feast – the Ingathering – was a fall harvest festival.) The term "Pentecost" is from the Greek for "50 days" – Pentecost was 7 full weeks and one day after the Sabbath following Unleavened Bread (Lev. 23:15).

Later in Judaism, all three of these feasts were associated with historic events – Unleavened Bread with Passover, Pentecost with the giving of the Law at Sinai, and Ingathering with Tabernacles/Tents, recalling the desert dwellings of the Israelites during the Exodus. Pentecost's connection with Sinai did not become established in Judaism until the Second Century A.D. Since the Israelites arrived at Sinai after two months in the wilderness (Ex 19:1), the connection to Pentecost was timely. When Passover and Unleavened Bread were associated, the defined calendar date for Passover also set one for Unleavened Bread (the second day of Passover), which in turn set one for Pentecost, 7 weeks later. This ended Pentecost's "floating" date based on Unleavened Bread starting on the first actual harvest day each year.

The Pentecost-Holy Spirit connection is found only in the *Acts of the Apostles* – in John's Gospel, Jesus breathes the Spirit on the apostles on Easter evening, Luke's Gospel says Jesus will send "the promise of my Father" and the other two Gospels don't mention the Holy Spirit, just Jesus sending the disciples to proclaim His message.

The Pentecost narrative is likely a compilation of symbolic events. The outpouring of God's spirit recalls the bestowal of the spirit that God gave to Moses on the 70 elders (Num. 11:24-29). The tongues of fire are a reminder that God manifested himself to Moses in the bush and at Sinai as fire. Speaking in tongues, or prophetic ecstasy, was a sign of God's spirit on the elders, as well as for the selection of Saul as king (1 Sam. 10:6-13), and as protection for David when Saul tried to arrest him (1 Sam. 19:19-24).

In *Acts*, Luke presents an interval between the Resurrection and the Ascension of 40 days – a symbolic number for Judaism, recalling the 40 days of rain for the Great Flood (Gen. 7:12), the 40 days Moses spent on Sinai after the Covenant's ratification (Ex. 24:18), the 40 days of scouting the land of Canaan (Num. 13:25), and the 40 years of wandering in the desert as punishment for grumbling against the Lord (Num 14:34). The Synoptic Gospels all describe Jesus spending 40 days in the desert before he starts his public ministry. In *Acts*, Luke gives the same timeframe for Jesus' post-Resurrection ministry with His disciples. Thus a 40-day period becomes significant for the New Covenant, as it was for prior ones.

With the 40-day timeline set, Luke places the beginning of the Holy Spirit's action at the festival of Pentecost. Like several key actions in his Gospel's Infancy Narrative, the outpouring of the Spirit and the initial proclamation of the Good News occurs in Jerusalem, the religious center for Judaism. Similar to the way the astrologers from the East foreshadow the Gentiles' acceptance of Christ's kingship, the Jews from every nation who hear the Apostles foreshadow the expansion of the message of salvation throughout the Roman Empire.

Luke describes the Apostles as "speaking in tongues." Two different phenomena are associated with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. One is ecstatic speech (*glossolalia*), in which the speaker is understood only by those who receive the gift of interpretation of tongues (cf. 1 Cor. 14:1-19). That may be what's described in Acts 2:4 – "(they) began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enable them to proclaim." The other event is speaking intelligibly in a language that is "foreign" to the speaker (*xenolalia*). That seems to be what's described in Acts 2:5-12, as the people from various places heard the Apostles "in his own native language" (2:8) Scripture scholars are uncertain whether Luke may have blended these charisms from two different oral traditions into his Pentecost account.

Luke then shows the effects of the Holy Spirit, as Peter boldly expounds on Christ's messianic role and exhorts his listeners to accept baptism in Jesus' name for the forgiveness of their sins. This is the "kickoff" of the proclamation of the Gospel "to the ends of the earth," which for Luke means to Rome, the heart of the Empire. That work of the Spirit is the content of the rest of the *Acts of the Apostles*.

The Pentecost narrative concludes with a summary of the fruits of the Holy Spirit's action in the communal life of the believers.