

# Dreams, Visions, and Prophecies

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**Due to the outpouring of God’s Spirit “upon all flesh” at Pentecost, we expect Spirit encounters that resemble it in the rest of Luke’s story. What should we think when his reports of dreams, visions, and fulfilled prophecies in the believing community do not live up to those high expectations?**

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**T**he coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, in a dramatic scene that features wind and fire and multiple languages, is the primary text for Pentecost Sunday worship in Christian traditions. It is read as providing not only a guide for understanding the early Christian communities in the book of Acts, but a standard of experience for contemporary believers.

Peter interprets this marvelous event as fulfilling Joel’s prophecy of the coming salvation on the day of the Lord:

‘In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.’

*Acts 2:17-18*

Yet, as we watch events unfold in the remainder of Acts, this wonderful image of inclusivity – of God’s Spirit being “poured out upon all flesh” –

remains undeveloped, if not directly contradicted, by Luke's focus on the prophetic and visionary experiences of certain Judean, freeborn men.

Given this apparent gap between the promise of Pentecost and the reality of those early communities of believers described in Acts, can or should we regard this story as recording a standard of Christian experience, and if so, in what way? In other words, is God's Spirit really poured out on all flesh?

### **READING THE PENTECOST STORY IN CONTEXT**

The book of Acts continues the narrative that Luke began in his Gospel. "The first book," Luke explains to Theophilus, emphasized Jesus' life and teachings "until the day when he was taken up into heaven" (Acts 1:1-2a); this second one will recount the events subsequent to Jesus' ascension, with special attention given to the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit's arrival in Acts 2 marks a turning point in the story. It fulfills Jesus' promise that his disciples "will receive power" and "will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Thus, it is only after the Holy Spirit comes that the disciples are equipped to move forward from their place of "waiting" in Jerusalem (cf. 1:4).

The disciples only become Jesus' witnesses as they are imbued with this Spirit, who enables them to imitate Jesus' teachings, miraculous works, and manner of suffering and death. Just as Jesus' anointing with the Holy Spirit emphasized his divine appointment and access to God (Luke 3:21-22; 4:1), so it does for the disciples. Like Jesus, they experience greater access to discerning the divine will through visions, angelic visitations, dreams, and prophetic utterances that guide their ministry – both in bringing the message of Jesus to new contexts, and in teaching existing believers how to live with one another faithfully. In this way, the disciples show themselves to be faithful to their Lord and consistent to his commission.

The events of Acts 2, therefore, work in tandem with Jesus' instructions in Acts 1:4-8 to set the stage for the remainder of the narrative. The events recall John's baptismal teaching – that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" and "I baptize you with water; but.... He [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:6, 16) – as well as Jesus' promise that the disciples will receive "power from on high" in order that they might be "witnesses" to proclaim the Messiah's name to all nations (Luke 24:44-49). They also echo the guidance provided by the Holy Spirit at many other key points in Luke's Gospel (e.g., 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-26; 4:1; 10:21 and 12:12).

Yet the coming of the Holy Spirit not only fulfills all of these expectations established in Jesus' ministry, it also realizes the promise of Joel 2:28-29 (3:1-5 LXX).<sup>1</sup> Jesus' disciples are not a drunken rabble, but are filled with God's Spirit and caught up in a prophetic ecstasy; they retell God's mighty deeds in various languages to all present in Jerusalem. In a way that parallels other spiritual possessions in the ancient world, they seem taken over by

God's Spirit.<sup>2</sup> While they are not rendered unintelligible, their dramatic behavior attracts attention and is interpreted by Peter as an eschatological sign for those gathered, both believers and non-believers.

Peter tells the crowd that this event is the outpouring of God's Spirit "upon all flesh." Sons and daughters, old and young – *all* those who are "slaves" of God – are enabled to "prophesy" (*prophēteuō*, 2:17–18) because it is God's Spirit who speaks through them. In a way that transcends classic gender divisions in the ancient world – male, female, and slave – Peter proclaims that God chooses to speak through "all flesh" as a sign of God's ability to save.<sup>3</sup> Peter's version of the Joel passage actually places special emphasis on prophesy by adding a second "and they will prophesy" in Acts 2:18, which does not appear in either the Hebrew or Greek versions of Joel (Joel 2:28 or Joel 3:2 LXX). This addition creates the following parallelism:

- A. And it will be in the last days, says God,
- B. I will pour out from my spirit upon all flesh,
- C. and they will prophesy –
- your sons and daughters,
- and your young ones will vision visions,
- and your old ones will dream dreams,
- and even upon my male slaves and upon my female slaves.
- A.' In those days,
- B.' I will pour out from my spirit,
- C.' and they will prophesy.

The parallelism not only emphasizes prophesy with repetition, it also highlights the inclusive nature of this gift for "all flesh" by bracketing off the precise descriptions – sons, daughters, young, old, and slaves – in these two verses.

Peter claims, therefore, that Joel's words are dramatically actualized in the mixed gender gathering of Spirit-filled believers, as well as the diversity of the "Judeans and proselytes" who have been enabled to hear these words (1:12–15; 2:1–4, 6, 10).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Peter's emphasis on *these* components from Joel to be evidence of God's Spirit "upon all flesh" – that is, a variety of people seeing visions, dreaming dreams, and, above all, prophesying – provides cues for the audience of Acts to look for as they track the progress of the disciples' witness through the narrative. For example, noticing the variety of Diaspora Judeans and proselytes who have gathered for Pentecost in Acts 2, the audience of Acts is prepared for the welcoming of the Gentiles who will come, beginning in Acts 8 with Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, and in Acts 10 with Peter's baptism of Cornelius and his household. In this microcosm of the world's population, gathered at God's Temple in Jerusalem for Pentecost, is a foretaste of the nations whom Isaiah proclaimed would come to worship God.

Yet, if the audience of Acts is prepared for such inclusivity, the characters within Acts are not. In fact, it is *Peter* who needs repeated visions upon a

roof-top as well as a second “outpouring” of God’s Spirit (Acts 10:45) to convince him of Cornelius’s true acceptance by God. The contrast, then, between the Spirit-filled, prophetic Peter of Acts 2 and the conflicted, oppositional Peter of Acts 10 also prepares the audience of Acts for additional narrative twists – perhaps including the surprisingly un-inclusive narration of visions, dreams, and prophecy among *all flesh*.

### **UNREALIZED EXPECTATIONS IN ACTS**

Due to the crucial role of the Pentecost story, we expect Spirit encounters that resemble it in the rest of Luke’s story. In a number of instances our expectations are realized. Just as Joel makes an appearance in Acts 2, other Old Testament figures like Moses, David, and Isaiah repeatedly appear as “prophets” in the narrative, offering words fulfilled either in the past by Jesus’ own ministry or in the narrative present among the disciples (e.g., Acts 3:17-26; 8:26-39; 13:27-41; 15:15-18; 26:22-27; 28:23-30). In this way, Luke emphasizes that the Spirit that inspires these believers is the same Spirit active throughout Israel’s history.

Angelic visions and dreams occur at crucial plot points in Acts. Stephen’s vision of Jesus at the right hand of God (Acts 7:54-56) not only reinforces Peter’s interpretation of Psalm 110 offered in Acts 2:32-36, but also sets the stage for the disciples moving beyond Jerusalem in Acts 8. The well-known vision of Paul on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:3-7; cf. 22:6-11; 26:12-18), is paired with Ananias’s more detailed vision to heal and instruct Paul in spite of Ananias’s understandable resistance (9:10-16). Indeed, from chapter 16 onward, it is Paul who most regularly experiences dreams and visions, which guide his ministry and travels to Jerusalem and onward to Rome (16:6-10; 18:9-10; 22:17-21; 23:11). Cornelius and Peter’s visions in Acts 10 also feature prominently in Acts’ plot. These visions enable Peter to interpret properly the “Second Pentecost” scene in 10:45 – when the Holy Spirit is again “poured out” on Cornelius’s household – and later they act as divine proofs for others to verify God’s inclusion of the Gentiles in Acts 11:1-18 and 15:6-21.

These various visions and dreams, as well as the prophetic interpretations offered of them, remain consistent with the introduction of the Spirit’s activity in Acts 2. They continually point us back to Acts 2, reminding us of the realization of Joel’s words in the believing community. The visions, dreams, and fulfilled prophecies experienced by men like Stephen, Paul, and Peter anchor them firmly in the outpouring of God’s Spirit, thereby adding to the legitimacy of their ministry even in the face of frequent and often violent persecutions. Such signs and wonders lead us to agree that these leaders are following God’s will rather than the human authorities that threaten them (Acts 5:29).

Yet, in other ways these reports of the activities of God’s Spirit within the believing community do not live up to the expectations established by

Acts 2:17–18. In fact, the clustering of visions and dreams upon a select group of Judean, freeborn men appears to undercut the very promise of Joel on which their authority is built—namely, that God’s Spirit would not be limited, but would be “poured out upon *all flesh*” (2:17). The participation of prophetic women and slaves in Acts, therefore, is surprisingly sparse. For instance, there is nothing comparable to the lengthy Song of Mary, or *Magnificat*, (Luke 1:46–55) for the women and enslaved believers of Acts. Instead, when women and slaves do appear, they are either silent or silenced by the narrator and events of the narrative. Thus, the slave girl, Rhoda, is ignored and becomes an object of comic relief even when she reports accurately of Peter’s return from prison (Acts 12:12–17). Lydia of Philippi speaks only briefly and she does not have a visionary experience to inaugurate her conversion (16:11–15) as Cornelius did in chapter 10. When the unnamed slave girl possessed by a Pythian spirit proclaims Paul and his companions’ identities correctly as “slaves of the Most High God,” she is not credited with “prophesying” (*prophēteuō*, 2:17–18), but rather “divining” or “giving oracles” (*manteuomai*, 16:16). Moreover, “annoyed” by her behavior, Paul silences the Pythia within her (16:18). In so doing, he demonstrates the triumph of Jesus over other spirits, but nevertheless his actions show no regard for the slave; she is left without explicit reception of salvation *and* without value for her owners, the ones who remain firmly in control her physical fate. Even the one group of women noted for their prophetic gifts in Acts, the four “unmarried/virgin” daughters of Philip, never speak. Instead, Luke introduces the women and then abruptly recounts the words of the Judean male prophet, Agabus, who warns Paul of his impending arrest in Jerusalem (21:8–11). Is it any wonder, then, that Beverly Roberts Gaventa asks: “What ever happened to those prophesying daughters?”<sup>5</sup> We might also add, “and slaves?” If God’s Spirit has truly been poured out on all flesh as Peter claims, then why do we not see more consistent evidence of this in Acts?

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**The participation of prophetic women and slaves in Acts is surprisingly sparse. If God’s Spirit has truly been poured out on all flesh as Peter claims, then why do we not see more consistent evidence of this in Luke’s narrative?**

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## **DREAMS, VISIONS, AND PROPHECY BEYOND ACTS**

These observations raise larger questions regarding the role of the Bible for contemporary believers. What is the role of the Bible in guiding our own

experiences in the faith? Should we expect outpourings of the Spirit that are similar to Acts – and if so, in what ways? Can God’s Spirit be manifest in *any* believer – be they a son *or* a daughter, young *or* old – anyone who is a “slave” of the Lord as Peter’s quotation of Joel indicates, but Acts nevertheless leaves partially unrealized?

When engaging these questions with my students, we often find that the biblical books we study and hold dear are much more complex and open-ended than we first expect or acknowledge. Context matters when we interpret Scripture, both the ancient context and our own. It is important that we identify what we understand the Bible to be, and what we expect these passages to provide for believers today. Rather than a book of one-to-one correspondences that need only be mapped onto current conditions, these biblical books – Acts included – communicate messages rooted in ancient expectations that must be analyzed before they are applied to contemporary settings. While such a move may not – and indeed often does not – answer all our questions about a biblical passage, it does provide us a way to understand and appreciate these passages, even when they confuse, confound, and, yes, disappoint.

Returning to Gaventa’s work on Acts, she helpfully reminds us that when approaching Luke’s vision of the Spirit’s activities, it is important to compare Luke to his own context, and not only our own. In this way, she suggests that while Luke’s presentation of women and slaves is less than what we would hope for, his narrative does offer glimpses of women who operate in “relative independence” from male controls (e.g., John Mark’s mother, Jesus’ mother, Lydia, and Tabitha).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Lydia even “prevails” over Paul to convince him to stay with her while in Philippi (16:15). Women and slaves are never denied access to God’s Spirit in Acts. Thus, while Luke may not be explicit about the visions and dreams experienced by these and other women and slaves in Acts, he “does not go out of his way to depict male power over females” either, when compared to literature of his era.<sup>7</sup> The brief mention of the “daughters” of Philip in Acts 21, therefore, is not only a disappointment in contrast to the fuller report of Agabus’s words, but also a positive hint at the greater reality of their speech that falls outside the plot of Acts. Like Peter, who in Acts 2 certainly could not have fathomed the inclusion of Gentiles that was to come in subsequent chapters, perhaps Luke likewise would be surprised at the fuller realization of God’s declaration in Joel 2 in other chapters of the Christian tradition. Perhaps the confines of his narrative account or vision, or both, led him to emphasize God’s Spirit upon certain Judean, freeborn men. Nevertheless, in so doing, Luke leaves plenty of room for the telling of God’s involvement with humanity outside his own plot – which is, after all, only one story in the midst of so many others both inside the New Testament and beyond it.

Such a hopeful reading, however, should not prevent us from asking questions and indeed challenging the gaps in Luke’s narrative. Rather, tak-

ing Scripture seriously as believers means we must persist! This persistence encourages us to push against the seams, to find the gaps and plumb them in our Spirit-filled desire to understand God more clearly. Acknowledging the continued activity of God's Spirit even in this day, we too proclaim the reality of the last days when we offer witness and when we listen to the prophetic voices of those on the margins.

While such demonstrations of God's Spirit "upon all flesh" may have surprised Luke, they are faithful to God's all-inclusive message of salvation he reports. The freedom and inclusion granted by God's Spirit in this Pentecost time invites all of us to continue reading, reflecting, and even challenging passages like Acts 2, the larger narrative of Acts, and Scripture as whole. Without such questions we run the risk of divorcing these passages from their contexts and, therefore, missing the reality of God's interaction with human believers in the ancient world as well as in our time.

## NOTES

1 "LXX" is the abbreviation for the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament and some related materials), which is called the Septuagint. Luke's citations of Scripture in both his Gospel and Acts regularly correspond more closely to LXX versions rather than Hebrew versions, indicating that he worked with these Greek materials.

2 On expectations surrounding spirit possessions in the ancient world, see Pamela E. Kinlaw, *The Christ is Jesus: Metamorphosis, Possession, and Johannine Christology*, Academia Biblica, 18 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 41–67.

3 The ancients attributed a feminine status to slaves, who could not defend their own bodies or honor as freeborn men could. The inclusion of slaves (alongside "daughters") among the ones receiving God's Spirit demonstrates a full *gender* inclusivity beyond biological categories of sex. For more on this topic, see Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006 [2002]).

4 In agreement with the Venerable Bede (673–735), Mikeal C. Parsons suggests that the miracles of Pentecost are speaking *and* hearing (*Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008], 50).

5 Beverly Gaventa, "What Ever Happened to Those Prophesying Daughters?" in Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, eds., *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2004), 49–60.

6 *Ibid.*, 55.

7 *Ibid.*, 58.



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