

Interpreting the Pentecost story in Acts 2

WHAT THE STORY IS NOT ABOUT

1. **The “birthday of the church”:** Acts uses the Greek *ekklēsia* (“church”) 23 times. It is found in the Septuagint 103 times, translating the Hebrew, *qahal*, “assembly.” Thus, biblically, it is not a “Christian” word.
2. **The beginning of “Christianity”:** The label “Christian” (Greek, *Christianos*) is found three times in the New Testament: Acts 11.26; 26.28; 1 Peter 4.16. In all three, it is an accusation or descriptor made by someone outside the Jesus community.
3. **Denigrating Jews/Judaism to raise up “Christianity”:** There is not a single suggestion in Acts that the followers of Jesus are anything but “Jews.”
4. **The “descent of the Holy Spirit for the first time”:** For Luke/Acts, the Holy Spirit has always been present, e.g., Luke 1.26, 35, 41, 67, etc.
5. **“Speaking in tongues” (*glossolalia*):** What Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is about people speaking unknown languages that require interpretation. In Acts 2, listeners from many native languages hear Peter’s spoken Aramaic in their own languages.

INTERPRETATIVE OPTIONS FROM SCRIPTURE

1. **Joel 3.1-5 LXX:** the promised outpouring of the Spirit “in the last days” on “all flesh”: men and women, young and old.
2. **Psalms 16.8-11; 118.16; 110:** several points made by the words of “David” in Peter’s speech.
3. **Isaiah 40.3-5; 43.19; 61.1:** the “new exodus” out of empire and restoration as the people of YHWH.
4. **Isaiah 9.6-7; 11.1; 16.4-5; 55.1-5:** The “new exodus” to be led by the Davidic messiah (Luke 1.32) is about to begin.
5. **Genesis 10, Table of Nations:** a “universal” restoration under God’s reign
6. **Genesis 11, Tower of Babel:** a reversal of language dispersion so that peoples unite in hearing the Word of God.

INTERPRETATIVE OPTIONS FROM ROMAN CULTURAL CONTEXT

1. **Challenging Roman inscriptions and art that center Rome** and its conquered “nations” (*ethnōs*) against “outsiders” by decentering Rome AND Judea and centering God/Jesus.
2. **Redefining “Jews”/Judeans (*Ioudaioi*) in light of Roman anti-Judaism** and suspicion of “new” ideas/philosophies.