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“AND IT FILLED ALL THE HOUSE WHERE THEY WERE SITTING”

The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts record that after Jesus ascended to heaven, His followers remained in Jerusalem, with the temple at the heart of their activities (Luke 24:52; Acts 3:1). Luke recounts that on “the day of Pentecost” (the biblical feast of weeks, *Shavuot*, see Ex. 34:22; Lev. 23:15–16; Num. 28:26), the followers of Jesus gathered together (Acts 2:1), but he never specified the location of their gathering. Christian tradition came to identify the location for the disciples’ gathering on the day of Pentecost as the same place where Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with His disciples, within the upper city of Jerusalem. These traditions, however, do not predate the fifth century AD during the Byzantine period. Luke and Mark describe the location of the Last Supper as “a large upper room” (*ἀνώγειον; anagion*: Luke 22:12; Mark 14:15), which seems similar to Luke’s description of the place where the disciples gathered after Jesus’ ascension, an “upper room” (*ὑπερῶον; hyperoom*: Acts 1:13).

In spite of the general similarity between these locations, the Greek terms used by Luke to describe both are different, which doesn’t assume they were the same place. The Latin translation of the New Testament, however, translated the different Greek words with the same Latin word *cenaculum*.³³ Based, then, upon the Latin translation, Christians, beginning in the fifth century, identified the location

33 R. Steven Notley pointed this out to me.



FIGURE 17 The model of the Second Temple at the Israel Museum—the House of the Lord, which hosted Jewish pilgrims from all over the Roman world on the day of Pentecost.

of the Last Supper as the same place as the upper room in Acts 1. Even if the room of the Last Supper was the same “upper room” in Acts 1 where the disciples met, the narrative of Acts doesn’t suggest that the followers of Jesus remained in the upper room for the events recounted in Acts 2. In fact, the Greek syntax at the beginning of the second chapter of Acts preserves a Hebraic-styled narrative break, “And when the day of Pentecost came,” which separates what follows from everything that had previously occurred.³⁴ In other words, the narrative of Acts 2 indicates that the followers of Jesus had moved in time and location from the first chapter of Acts. So, where, then, did the events in Acts 2 take place?

34 F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975), 208.

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Luke’s mention of “the house where they were sitting” has suggested to many that the disciples gathered in the upper room mentioned in Acts 1:13. It seems more probable that Luke’s language reflects a manner of speaking within Judaism about the temple of Jerusalem, i.e., “house (בַּיִת; *bayit*) of the Lord.”³⁵ Within ancient Jewish sources, and even until today, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is referred to in Hebrew as הַר הַבַּיִת (*har habayit*; lit. “the mountain of the house”; see *m. Bikkurim* 3:4). Pilgrims in the first century entered the Temple Mount from the south. Remains of the southern gates used by pilgrims can still be seen in Jerusalem, outlined today by a Double and Triple Gate. The Triple Gate lies approximately 100 meters to the east of the Double Gate. The Mishnah described pilgrims entering and exiting the Temple Mount through these gates; it’s important to note how it speaks about the Temple Mount and the temple:

Whosoever it was that entered the Temple Mount (הַר הַבַּיִת; *l’har habayit*) came in on the right and went and came out on the left, save any whom aught befell, for he went round to the left. “What ails you that you go to the left?” “Because I am a mourner.” “May He that dwells in this House (הוּא בְּבַיִת הַזֶּה; *b’bayit hazeh*) give you comfort!” “Because I am under a ban.” “May He that dwells in this House (הוּא בְּבַיִת הַזֶּה; *b’bayit hazeh*) put it into their hearts to bring you near again!” (*m. Middot* 2.2)

In the first part of the book of Acts, Luke’s Greek narrative frequently preserves Hebraic-styled syntax and idiom; thus, the mention of the “house” in Acts 2:2 likely reflects his preservation of the Hebrew idiom that identified the temple as “the house.” The location of the

35 See Deut. 23:19; 1 Sam. 1:24; 3:15; 1 Kings 3:1; 6:37; 7:12; 9:1; Isa. 2:2; 37:1; 66:20; Jer. 7:2; 17:26; 19:14. Usually the Jerusalem temple is identified throughout the Old Testament as the “house of the Lord.”

events in Acts 2 upon the Temple Mount in Jerusalem seems certain in light of the festival of Pentecost, the crowds encountered by the disciples, and the ritual immersion of the large crowd that repented.

THE FESTIVAL OF PENTECOST

“Pentecost” which means “the fiftieth day” was the name used by Greek-speaking Jews for the harvest festival known in Hebrew as *Shavu'ot*, the Feast of Weeks (Ex. 23:16; 34:22; Deut. 16:9–10, 16; 2 Chron. 8:13). Originally, *Shavu'ot* was a “day of the firstfruits” (Num. 28:26) of the wheat harvest (Ex. 34:22). The festival occurred fifty days (hence Pentecost) after Passover. In the first century, the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes all differed in how they determined the fifty days, and thus, when the festival should be celebrated.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, His disciples remained in Jerusalem and “were continually in the temple blessing God” (Luke 24:52–53). Clearly, Jesus’ followers didn’t interpret any of His actions prior to and including His crucifixion as either rejecting the temple or rendering it obsolete. We should assume, then, that Jesus’ followers would have participated in the pilgrim festival of Pentecost in accordance with the commandment of God: “Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place which he will choose: at the feast of unleavened bread (Passover), at the feast of weeks (Pentecost), and at the feast of booths (Sukkot)” (Deut. 16:16; see Ex. 23:17; 34:23; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.69–70; and Acts 20:16).

During the first century, the yearly requirement to appear in Jerusalem for the festivals only applied to those living in the land of Israel (Josephus, *Ant.* 4.203) due to practical issues; however, many Jews living outside the land of Israel made the festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem (Josephus, *War* 5.199). The first-century Jewish historian Josephus mentions that the population of Jerusalem swelled at Pentecost as Jewish pilgrims came from all over the countryside (*War* 1.253; cf. 2 Macc. 12:31–32; *War* 2.42; *Ant.* 3.252–254; 13.252; and

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17.254). Luke also attests to the multitudes of Jewish pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome” (Acts 2:9–11). Peter addressed these crowds of pilgrims who were participating in the festival, which took place in the temple.³⁶

In later Jewish tradition, Jews identified the festival of Pentecost as the time when God gave the Torah to Israel on Mount Sinai (see Ex. 19:1; 2 Chron. 15:10–12). While it is unclear how widespread this tradition was in the first century, some Jewish communities identified Pentecost as a date for the renewal of the Sinai covenant (*Jubilees* 1:1; 6:17–19; 14:20; 22:1–6; 1QS 1:8–2:25; 4Q280; 4Q86; 4Q287). Within Luke’s description of the phenomena that occurred among Jesus’ disciples on the day of Pentecost, he drew strong connections with God’s appearance on Sinai (Ex. 19): noise, wind, and fire. The first-century Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria describes the event at Sinai as follows:

I should suppose that God wrought on this occasion a miracle of a truly holy kind by bidding an invisible sound to be created in the air more marvelous than all instruments and fitted with perfect harmonies, not soulless, nor yet composed of body and soul like a living creature, but a rational soul full of clearness and distinctness, which giving shape and tension to the air and changing it to flaming fire, sounded forth like the breath through a trumpet an articulate voice so loud that it appeared to be equally audible to the farthest as well as the nearest. . . . Then from the midst of the fire that streamed from heaven there sounded forth to their utter amazement a voice, for the flame became articulate speech in the language familiar to

36 Shmuel Safrai, “Religion in Everyday Life,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum)*, vol. 2; Van Gorcum: Assen, 1976), 810.

the audience, and so clearly and distinctly were the words formed by it that they seemed to see rather than hear them. What I say is vouched for by the law in which it is written, “All the people saw the voice.” [Ex. 20:18] (*On the Decalogue* 33, 46–47)

Philo’s description of God’s appearance on Mount Sinai shares further similarities with Luke’s account of the day of Pentecost, particularly the language and tongues of fire. Luke sought to make a connection between the event he described in Acts 2 and God’s appearance on Mount Sinai, and as Peter’s sermon to the crowd shows, the outpouring of the Spirit fulfilled Moses’ wish, “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put His spirit on them” (Num. 11:29), as well as testifying that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah promised by God.

So why did Luke draw a connection between the day of Pentecost and the theophany on Sinai? It was assumed within Jewish tradition that the first redemption, the Exodus from Egypt, prefigured the future redemption God would bring about for His people. Luke tied the events that happened on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) with God’s appearance on Sinai (the first redemption) to signal that with the ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God had begun the final redemption as proven through the outpouring of His Spirit, which testifies to the Messiahship of Jesus.

THE CROWDS OF PENTECOST

The crowds of Jewish pilgrims from all over the Roman world heard the disciples speaking in their own languages and were amazed (Acts 2:4–8). In response to their amazement, Peter stood and addressed the crowd (vv. 14–39) proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel and identifying what the pilgrims saw and heard as the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit. This signified the advent of the Messianic era, so Peter called upon the people “to repent and be baptized in the

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FIGURE 18 The steps used by pilgrims as they approached the temple from the south

located around the southern and southwestern portions of the Temple Mount offer the only place in Jerusalem able to accommodate the ritual immersion of so many people.³⁸ These ritual pools serviced the pilgrims entering the temple (see Luke 2:22; Acts 21:24) and could accommodate the swollen masses of pilgrims who converged on the temple during the festivals. The most practical setting for such a series

name of Jesus” (v. 38). Peter’s discourse and the events that precipitated it suggest a public location; moreover, the only place in Jerusalem where such crowds would have gathered on the day of Pentecost would be the Temple Mount.³⁷

THE RITUAL IMMERSION OF THE CROWDS

According to the book of Acts, those who responded to Peter’s call “to repent and be baptized” were about 3,000 people (v. 41). The ritual immersion pools (*miqva’ot*)

³⁷ See Rainey and Noltley, *The Sacred Bridge*, 370.

³⁸ In recent years, a large number of Jewish ritual immersion pools have been uncovered in excavations around the Temple Mount in Jerusalem; see Hillel Geva, “Jerusalem. The Temple Mount and Its Environs,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (ed. E. Stern, vol. 2; The Israel Exploration Society; Jerusalem 1993), 739–40. In 2004, the Pool of Siloam (John 9:7) was uncovered south of the Temple Mount. This large pool served as a ritual immersion pool for pilgrims during the Jewish festivals; see Ronny Reich, *Excavating the City of David: Where Jerusalem’s History Began* (Israel Exploration Society; Jerusalem, 2011), 225–44, 328–33.

of events on the festival of Pentecost would be in the vicinity of the temple in Jerusalem.

When the temple stood, the Jewish people identified it as the dwelling place of God's presence, i.e., His Holy Spirit, what rabbinic tradition called the *Shekhinah*. It makes perfect sense that the manifestation of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost would occur in relationship with the temple in Jerusalem (see Joel 3:5). Moreover, Jewish tradition believed that the Holy Spirit manifested itself among those sitting together (Acts 2:2) studying Torah (see *m. Avot* 3:2; and *b. Berachot* 6a). During the days of the Second Temple, the Temple Mount served as a center for the study of the Torah (see *Antiquities* 17:140–163; Luke 2:48–49, 21:37; *t. Sanhedrin* 7:1; *t. Hagigah* 2:9; *m. Yoma* 7:1; *m. Sotah* 7:7–8; and *b. Pesahim* 26a). That the disciples were seated indicates that they were studying the Torah, and possibly the words of Jesus (Matt. 18:20), as they gathered “together in one place” when they received the Holy Spirit (see *m. Bikkurim* 1:6; *t. Sotah* 15:12).³⁹ According to Jewish tradition, God gave Moses the Torah on the festival of Pentecost⁴⁰ (*Jubilees* 1:1),⁴¹ which explains the appearance of many of the Sinai motifs, e.g., fire, wind, and languages,⁴² in Luke's description of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. All the events of Acts 2 occurred in a public setting; given the date of Pentecost, the only natural location for these events to take place was the temple in Jerusalem—the House of the Lord.

39 The disciples would not have been praying as Jews prayed standing, not sitting. Sitting was the posture for Torah study.

40 Jewish tradition also identifies Pentecost as the day upon which David was born and died (*Ruth Rabbah* 1:17; *Beza'ah* 2, 61b; see Acts 2:29).

41 The book of *Jubilees* also connects the festival of Pentecost with the covenant God made with Noah in Genesis 9 (*Jub.* 6:17–19). The Qumran community annually renewed the covenant, in which they brought into the community new initiates, at the festival of Pentecost.

42 The school of Rabbi Ishmael interpreted the verse, “And like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces” (Jer 23:29) as, “Just as a hammer is divided into many sparks, so every single word that went forth from the Holy One (i.e., at Sinai), blessed be He, split up into seventy languages (i.e., the languages of the nations of the world; see Acts 2:5–11)” (*b. Shabbath* 88b).