

Fernando De Angelis

**FROM ADAM TO THE APOSTLES**

*An overview of the whole Bible based on the text itself*

Volume II

**RETURNING TO THE GOSPEL  
OF PETER AND PAUL**

**Notes on the Acts of the Apostles**

To the two "servants of God" who contributed the most to my birth and formation as a believer: one I would compare more to Peter (Angelo Zolfaroli) and the other to Paul (Alfredo Terino). Both families were involved in the service too

In the same series:

F. De Angelis, *RIASSUNTO DELL'ANTICO TESTAMENTO*

*Una base necessaria per comprendere meglio il Vangelo*

*(Summary of the Old Testament: A necessary ground to better understand the Gospel)*

March 2016.

Other work by the author and his email address:

F. De Angelis, *Cultura e Bibbia (Culture and Bible)*, Gribaudi, 2009.

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**RETURNING TO THE GOSPEL OF PETER AND PAUL**

Notes on the Acts of the Apostles

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In biblical citations, some separate the chapter from the verses by means of a comma (e.g., Luke 5,2); others separate it by a column, which we prefer because, when there are several verses to be identified, it makes the quotation clearer (e.g. Luke 5:2,7).

In quoting the various books of the Bible, as you can see below, we report at least the first three letters, but we will signpost some books less known, or with short name, in full; to those that begin with "Jo", being there five of them, we will add at least another letter.

Genesis	Gen	Isaiah	Isa	Romans	Rom
Exodus	Ex	Jeremiah	Jer	1Corinthians	1Cor
Leviticus	Lev	Lamentations	Lam	2Corinthians	2Cor
Numbers	Num	Ezekiel	Eze	Galatians	Gal
Deuteronomy	Deu	Daniel	Dan	Ephesians	Eph
Joshua	Joshua	Hosea	Hosea	Philippians	Phil
Judges	Joel	Joel	Joel	Colossians	Col
Ruth	Ruth	Amos	Amos	1Thessalonians	1Thes
1Samuel	1Sam	Obadiah	Obadiah	2Thessalonians	2Thes
2Samuel	2Sam	Jonah	Jonah	1Timothy	1Tim
1King	1King	Micah	Micah	2Timothy	2Tim
2Kings	2King	Naum	Naum	Titus	Titus
1Chronicles	1Chro	Habakkuk	Habakkuk	Philemon	Philemon
2Chronicles	2Chro	Zephaniah	Zephaniah	Hebrews	Heb
Ezra	Ezra	Haggai	Haggai	James	James
Nehemia	Nehemia	Zechariah	Zac	1Peter	1Pet
Esther	Esther	Malachi	Mal	2 Peter	2Pet
Job	Job	Matthew	Matthew	1John	1John
Psalms	Ps	Mark	Mark	2John	2John
Proverbs	Pro	Luke	Luke	3John	3John
Ecclesiastes	Eccl	John	Jn	Judas	Judas
Songs	Song	Acts	Acts	Revelation	Rev

N.B. In quotations, both from the Bible and other texts, *the italics* of some words have been added by us to highlight them.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *1. A path of publication opposite to that of reflection.*

I had my first direct encounter with the Word of God in Perugia, in 1968, as a 22 year old attending the Faculty of Agriculture: first, finding the Gospel text in the cathedral, then extending the interest to the whole Bible, after a lengthy journey within the 'Brethren' evangelical church (specifically with the help of Alfredo Terino's and Angelo Zolfaroli's families). The complex events of the following 40 years ultimately led me to focus on the relationship between Bible and culture, to an increasingly independent path and, at some point, without being any longer a member of a local church.

At the beginning of 2008, however, together with my wife Gilda, we were invited to join the evangelical church of Siena (now in Via Beccafumi), where I was included in the group of preachers, offering to make simple reflections on the Gospel of Matthew. On the first verse («Genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham») I lingered on for two years, considering that if Jesus continues the work of David and Abraham, then the Gospel must be framed in a perspective of continuity with the Old Testament, not the usual schema of discontinuity.

The advocates of discontinuity rely heavily on the Letter to the Hebrews, which I, therefore, went to revisit, realising that - if observed well - the letter supports more the continuity rather than discontinuity; on that Letter I then organised a small conference in my native village (Manigi di Cascia, July 2010), in preparation of which I considered it necessary to make a brief summary of the Acts of the Apostles, so as to place the Letter to the Hebrews in its New Testament context: in the end, the "brief summary", however, turned out to be 100 A4 pages long, developing into *Notes on the Acts of the Apostles*. In its apparent simplicity, the author of the Acts (that is, Luke) hides more complex messages, developing a "filigree design", such as the one seen in paper money, when observed in transparency.

On those *Notes* I then had a number of useful suggestions from some friends that I would like to thank: first Bruno Burzi, Daniele Garota, Stefano Gotta, Anna and Alberto Nuzzolo, Argentino Quintavalle, Antonio Sardone, Alfredo Terino; later, Antonio Sardone also involved Francesco Grassi, with whom I have developed an in-depth discussion and from whom I have received numerous suggestions in a constructive spirit, which have greatly improved my work, leading to a second draft in December 2010: this book is strictly derived from that draft, to which I have added only some of those *Links* placed in evidence on specific sheets. Finally Anna Sanna Nuzzolo, as usual, wanted to pay homage to the Lord, and myself, with an excellent, and very welcome, draft revision work. My overall view on Acts, however, remained divergent from that of Francesco Grassi, leading me to the conclusion that it is not possible to have a similarity of views on the New Testament without first having a convergence on the Old Testament. Hence, the decision to give a new beginning to my journey of reflection on the Bible, beginning... where one should start without much delay, that is, from Genesis. These *Notes on the Acts*, which represent *Volume II* of the series, are published after the *Summary of the Old Testament (Volume I)*. The following *Volume III* should deal with the book of *Revelation*, on which I have already prepared a first draft, in view of a special conference scheduled on October 1, 2016. Barring unforeseen circumstances, therefore, the Letter to the Hebrews should be the subject of *Volume IV*, with the hope of reaching eventually the Gospels. The path of publication, therefore, is converse to that of reflection.

### *2. The Gospels' incompleteness and the Acts' centrality.*

It may seem irrational to begin an examination of the New Testament from the Acts of the Apostles instead of the Gospels. I initially carried it out that way due to the necessity established above, but then that choice seemed to me increasingly appropriate. In fact, to define the meaning of a life it is necessary that it is concluded, therefore the overall meaning of the life of Jesus is clearer after the Gospels, that is, after his death, resurrection and ascension to heaven; the latter, incidentally, to which only Luke gets to, while the others stop at the resurrection. This applies particularly to the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) which focus on facts, while in the Gospel of John there are fewer facts, however accompanied by their meaning, and thus it has a greater completeness. It is precisely in the Gospel of John, however, that we find clear statements about a certain "incompleteness" of Jesus' work.



In fact, while Jesus fully accomplished his atoning sacrifice (cf. Jn 19:30 «It is finished»), there was still much to do to bring the disciples to maturity, and that work would successively be continued by the Holy Spirit: « I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come» (Jn 16:12-13).

Jesus did not consider the apostles ready even after being resurrected since 40 days, a time in which he deepened their knowledge of God's plan (Acts 1:3), inviting them not to act, but to wait (1:4-5). Only after the descent of the Holy Spirit (2:1-4) did the apostles begin that kind of preaching which summed up the overall meaning of Jesus' work, indicating the future that had to be expected (2:38-40; 3:19-21).

There is another reason that makes it appropriate to begin the analysis of the New Testament from Acts instead of the Gospels, and it concerns the fact that the Gospels are addressed more directly to the Hebrews, as Jesus explicitly declares: «I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel» (Mt 15:24). In the Acts of the Apostles, however, there is the adaptation of the Gospel's message to people of various conditions: the Apostles, for example, turned to the Jews who were at Jerusalem at Pentecost or to those of the synagogue of Antioch at Pisidia (Acts 2:14ff; 13:14ff); at the other extreme we find that the message is addressed to the pagan crowd of Lystra (14:8-18), to the Roman centurion Cornelius (10:34ff) and to the Athenian philosophers (17:22ff).

The Acts' importance further derives from their central position. If indeed we imagine the New Testament as a puzzle, where the various parts fit together and complete one another, Acts represent the "outer frame" of that puzzle, which thus defines the spot to be allocated to everything else, particularly to the most directly theological writings such as the Letter to the Romans and that to the Hebrews, which risk being misunderstood (as it indeed happens) without having in mind the clear context from which they emerge, and which is precisely defined by Acts.

I write specifically for those who have read the previous *Volume I (Summary of the Old Testament)*, but in a way that it can also include those who start from here. This means that I shall briefly mention the ideas expressed in *Volume I*, to which I shall refer later on for a more detailed discussion.

One way to dissolve the word of God is to read it "with a remote control": you dive every day in a page and the next day you do not take much account of what you learnt previously. An accurate study of the Bible, on the other hand, requires a systematic and comprehensive learning, a method that also pertains to the book of Acts, which, with a superficial analysis, appears to be a set of significant events, but not closely related to one another: The Acts of the Apostles, in brief, would be an "objective chronicle" of facts, which are reported there simply because they happened.

With a more careful analysis we note, instead, that Luke, the inspired author of Acts, under the more conspicuous account, traces another story 'in filigree', as we indicated previously. This design seems to me "objective", that is, not the result of a particular elaboration on my part, but which transpires only from a more careful observation. Luke traces it in a subtle and implicit way, thus new believers, and those who remain "children in Christ", do not notice anything (1Cor 3:1-2; Heb 5:11-14). The more mature believers, on the other hand, have generally already long-established their theological schemes: this makes it difficult and undesirable for them to reform themselves on a teaching of Luke that upsets much of the theology accumulated in two thousand years of Christian tradition.

Another analogy: mechanics have a panel where they hang their various tools, each in a very specific place. The "filigree design" outlined by Luke resembles that panel, in which all the other New Testament writings find their proper place.

In order to find in the Bible a book focused on discourses (Deuteronomy), we must first read four of them centred on facts (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers). Those who study the New Testament's doctrine often undermine the initial books focused on facts (four Gospels and Acts), directing their attention on those based on discourses (especially Romans and Hebrews). But if one hasn't first absorbed the message deriving from the facts, it's easy to mistake candles for lanterns when interpreting the discourses.

### 3. Some assumptions are an obstacle.

The assumptions whereby the understanding of a text is approached, whether they are explicit or implicit, guide and decisively delimit its understanding. Let us then highlight three points which are an obstacle to a better understanding of Acts.

1. Anyone who perceives the New Testament as a kind of "New Civil Code", in which coordinated rules are set out from the beginning, cannot grasp, in the description of Acts, the gradual and profound transformation of the Church. Better than "prescriptive" and "systematic", the New Testament is "historical" (as is the whole Bible after all), that is, it reports what has been done in certain circumstances and that we must certainly *apply* this to our own, however bearing in mind that ours are never identical and therefore do not allow for a "mechanical" application.

2. Anyone who conceives a Church with fundamentals opposed to the Old Testament will read the first 14 chapters of Acts as concerning a transitional time that prepares the complete maturation of the Church, which in Acts 15 would finally be rid of Moses. The trouble is that, without having first understood Moses well and, therefore, not even the first 14 chapters of Acts, the decisions made at the meeting in Jerusalem are often understood backwards, or nearly: there, in fact, Moses was not *abolished*, but *applied* (as we will see).

3. Another blinding factor is the "logic of belonging": for those well-established within a religious group, it is understandably painful to feel marginalised and therefore, when listening to some notion that is differing in respect to their environment, their mind becomes hindered and argue in a one-way manner like football fans; a true follower of Jesus, however, cannot make his own tradition prevail over the Word of God, nor love the glory of men more than that of God (Mt 23:5-7; Mk 7:9; Jn 12:42-43).

In these notes of mine the bibliographical references almost never appear, but there is actually a great number of them, because what I wrote is the result of dialogues, which I have been working on for forty years and which have also occurred with people very different from one another: from simple "regular readers" of the Bible to university or bible-school professors; from believers belonging to my own local church to others with a very diverse positioning (for example Adventists, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses); without excluding some non-religious or atheist friends.

There are other matters that need to be clarified, but it is better to dwell on them as we go along. When appropriate, however, we will open two series of 'worksheets': one concerning the 'Further insights' and the other concerning the 'Links' between Acts and the other parts of the Bible, so as to better understand the place of Acts within the general context of the revelation. *Further insights* and *Links* will be signposted both in the general *Index* and in a relevant list placed at its end.

.....

#### Link No. 1

### **THE OLD TESTAMENT AS THE FOUNDATION OF THE NEW**

We have already mentioned the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments in the *Introduction* and we will see it in several parts of the Acts; here we just want to add some specific considerations, which frame the issue in a broader perspective.

I listened to a preacher who boasted that he had brought "just the New Testament" to the pulpit, thus neglecting the fact that it begins by presenting Jesus as the 43rd representative of a dynasty begun with Abraham and passing through David (Mt 1:1), with the implicit meaning of introducing Jesus as a continuator of that story, certainly not as one who wants to replace it with another. When Jesus then repeats, «You have heard that it was said [...] but I tell you» (Mt 5:21-44), only those who know little of the Old Testament can imagine that Jesus is opposing Moses, when, actually, he wants to give a correct interpretation of that, in contrast to the distorted explanations that contemporaries had *heard* from scribes and Pharisees (5:20).

John too begins the Gospel in a manner similar to Matthew, showing that Jesus, by his birth, fits into a history that is much older; indeed, John immediately states that the world itself was created through him (1:3,10; cf. Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:2; 1Cor 8:6) and in 1Peter 1:20 is written that Jesus had been preordained by God «before the creation of the world».

Despite the belief of many Christians, in the New Testament the full validity of the Old Testament, which was the only Bible for the writers of a New Testament still in development, is continually reaffirmed. Paul, for instance, invited the Corinthians to apply to themselves the events that occurred in Exodus (1Cor 10:6); then writing to Timothy, who had been educated in the Old Testament, he invited him not to abandon those teachings, but to persevere in them, so as to be «complete and well prepared for every good work» (2tim 3:14-17).

To conclude, let us consider that, at the time of Jesus, there were different circumstances from those present at the time of Moses; Jesus and the apostles *adapted* the message to their circumstances but, for example, the Letter to the Hebrews reiterates that God had not become less severe (10:26-31;12:25) and Revelation stands in continuity with the Old Testament prophets (10:7). The New Testament, in short, is not to be considered in contrast to the Old, but as its development and follow-up.

Sergio Quinzio notes that, sadly, «the misunderstanding of the religion of Jesus has consisted in the negation of its apocalyptic and eschatological character, and therefore coincides with the uprooting of its Jewish roots», concluding with the remark that «Christianity is the dis-inherited religion of Jesus» (S. Quintus, Christianity of the beginning and the end, Adelphi, 2014, p. 118).

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## Link No. 2

### **THE REVELATION OF THE "KINGDOM OF GOD" BEFORE ACTS 1**

At the beginning of Acts we are told of the kingdom of God and, on the latter, ideas are often vague or imprecise, so it is necessary to dwell on it briefly. Let us begin by asking three questions, so as to guide the questions that arise.

1. Is "Kingdom of God" synonymous with "kingdom of heaven" and with heaven, where God is and where we believers will go immediately after death?
2. Are "the kingdom of God" and "the kingdom of Israel" two connected or separate realities?
3. Are the "Kingdom of Israel" and world evangelism two connected or separate realities?

As it often happens, "the kingdom of God" has a meaning already defined by the Old Testament. In Exodus 19:6 Israel is indeed called to be a kingdom of God. Later, in the time of Judges, God considered himself the "invisible king" of Israel (1Sam 8:7). The meaning that the "kingdom of God" has in the New Testament, however, derives more directly from Daniel, which in place of the kingdom of Israel now finished, announces a more glorious one for the future (as usual, when a plan of God seems to fail, God re-launches it higher).

Daniel saw before him five kingdoms (or empires, Dan 2:37-44; 7:17-27). The first was Babylon, which God initially considered to be at his service (Jer 27:4-11). The fourth empire would have been particularly wicked, for «the saints will be delivered into his hands», but then «the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the saints of the Most High» (Dan 7:25-27). The "saints", in the context of Daniel, are represented by a purified people of Israel, therefore "the kingdom of the saints", "the kingdom of God" and "the kingdom of Israel" tend to be synonymous.

Besides announcing this fifth universal kingdom of saints, Daniel also says something about his king, referred to as a "son of man", called by God to present himself in heaven to receive the investiture and to whom were given «authority, glory and sovereign power; that all nations and peoples of every language might worship him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away» (Dan 7:14).

In the "Messianic" Psalms, a "Son of David" (Messiah) similar to the "Son of Man" is outlined (cf. Ps 2:2-8; 18:43-50; 72:8-17; 89:19-37; 110:1-2). Solomon, Son of David and Son of God (1 Chronicles 28:6), in some way anticipates the type of kingdom of his descendant Jesus. Solomon ruled *politically* within, more or less, the borders of Abraham's Promised Land; with a universal *cultural* domain, as people from all over the world came to hear his wisdom (1 Kings 4:34); and with the Temple, which was conceived as a *religious* reference for all peoples (1 Chronicles 16:23-31; 1 Chronicles 8:41-43).

Isaiah, in 49:6, sums up this perspective: «It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob [...] I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth». Among the promises of the Father, which the apostles rightly awaited for (Acts 1:4), there was also that of rebuilding the "tent of David", that is, the kingdom of David, as reiterated in Acts 15:16. It is therefore not by chance that Jesus, after his resurrection, placed the teaching of the "kingdom of God" as central (Acts 1:3). Especially since, as expressed by the above passage of Isaiah and many others, restoration of the kingdom of Israel and universal evangelism were seen as interconnected and later inserted into a more direct presence of God on earth (kingdom of God). This makes Jesus' response in Acts 1:7-8 more understandable, whereby he confirms a restoration of the kingdom of Israel *sooner or later*, however prioritising the other aspect of God's work, namely world evangelism. National and world promises to Abraham were, after all, closely related (Gen 12:1-3); this double perspective is also present in Romans 11:25-26.

A biblical scholar told me that the question about the kingdom of Israel, posed in Acts 1:6, reflects a *negative Jewish mentality* that the disciples had not yet overcome. He believed to understand the kingdom of God better than the apostles chosen by Jesus and with whom the Lord had spoken for 40 days after he had risen (Acts 1:4). A way of thinking that shows the serious consequences of a *negative anti-Jewish mentality*, exposing the difference there is between reading the New Testament ignoring the Old, or reading it in light of the Old.

Further considerations on the kingdom of God will be placed at the end of the book.

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## Acts 1

### THE EXPECTATION

[1:1]. «*In my former book, Theophilus...*».

At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke declares that he proposed to tell Theophilus «an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us», but the Gospel alone would have to say very little about the Church and we would not know where the risen Jesus ended up, while the unity made by the Gospel of Luke and Acts constitutes a sufficient basis for understanding the essential parts of the whole New Testament.

[1:2]. «*Through the Holy Spirit*».

Luke is particularly attentive to the Holy Spirit. He describes him as the main character at the beginning of the Gospel, naming him a dozen times in the first four chapters, but then it is as if the Spirit was hiding when Jesus begins his public work «in the power of the Spirit» (Luke 4:14), thus leaving the entire scene to Jesus himself. Acts begin with the reverse process, that is, with Jesus leaving the scene to the Holy Spirit, as we shall see.

[1:3]. «*Appearing to them [the apostles] over a period of 40 days*».

As the twelve sons of Jacob had been the forefathers of God's people, so the twelve apostles shall constitute the central nucleus of the *renewed* people that is being prepared.

As Moses spent 40 days on Sinai in the presence of God (Exodus 24:18) to receive the Law, so the apostles spend 40 days with the risen Jesus on the Mount of Olives (v. 12), before beginning to teach the *renewed* Law: we say *renewed* and not *new*, but we'll see the reasons for this later. Without this information from Luke, those "appearances" of the risen Jesus would remain undoubtedly demonstrative, but very fleeting; whereas the fact that the apostles and other disciples remained on the side-lines at the school of the Risen-One for 40 days, makes us better understand the inimitable uniqueness of the Twelve Apostles and their indisputable standing.

[1:4-5]. *«He ordered them to wait for the baptism of «the Holy Spirit».*

For Thomas it was a turning point to touch the risen Jesus (Jn 20:26-28) and certainly it would be for us as well. Yet the true turning point for the apostles occurred after the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them, and Jesus himself had commanded them not to begin public ministry before they had received «power» (1:8) with the Holy Spirit.

The apostles were not satisfied with the teachings given by Jesus in the three years they lived together, nor with those given in the 40 days of cohabitation after being resurrected. There is not a particular formula to receive the Holy Spirit, but only *the expectation of those who recognise their own powerlessness.*

[1:6]. *«Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?».*

Someone might comment: «After being with the Risen One for 40 days, the apostles were still so unspiritual that they kept on believing in a political kingdom of Israel!». As we have seen in *Link No. 2*, however, the apostles' question is not as out of place as it might seem to us "modern" Christians. Jesus does not rebuke the apostles that they are waiting for such a kingdom; on the contrary, he confirms and validates that expectation (see below).

[1:7]. *«It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority».*

Jesus confirms that it is right to wait for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel and rebukes the apostles simply for their haste. This teaching of Acts was understood by most only *after* the effective re-establishment of a State of Israel in Jerusalem and in the Promised Land in 1948.

Others, to justify and perpetuate the error, stress how far the present state of Israel is from the Kingdom of God. It is true that the "glass" is almost empty, but this teaching of Acts convinces us that this glass will be increasingly filled, that is, it convinces us that there is an ongoing work of God in that State. We, therefore, trust that a believer should recognise it, also because it seems to us that there is an unequivocal sign: the great increase, within the State of Israel, of churches composed mainly of Jews who recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah.

[1:8]. *«But you will receive power ... and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth».*

After saying a "not" to the apostles, Jesus continues with a "but": between the two parts, there seems to be, therefore, an evident relationship. The new reign of the "Son of David" was to resemble that of the ancient son of David, Solomon, whose reign had certain political boundaries, but an unlimited cultural and religious influence (1 Kings 4:34; 10:24; Acts 15:16-18). God's power, however, would not be immediately manifested in a new political kingdom, but in extending the influence of God's people throughout the world: only after preparing that universal foundation, would God have made the new kingdom of Israel re-emerge into the Promised Land, as the fulfilment of His blessings announced to Abraham (Gen 12:3) concerning both the people of Israel and the other nations.

The formation of a multitude of nations who worship the God of Israel, in short, seems to follow that of the people of Israel. Between Abraham and Joshua, and thus between the promise of the Land and its actual possession, nearly five centuries had elapsed; the great promises of God need a great amount of time to be fulfilled. A large nation first grew in Egypt, but without that political freedom that it obtained only after a long time. Thus God is preparing in every nation faithful people who have no political autonomy (the various nations' Churches) in order to then make them reign politically when Jesus returns to sit on his glorious throne; then it will finally happen that the meek (not the wicked) will possess the Earth (Mt 5:5; 25:31-34; Rev 2:26-28; 21:1-3).

These words in Acts 1:8 are the last ones that Jesus uses to address the apostles and echo the so-called "Great Commission" to preach the Gospel to all nations (Mt 28:19). This new formulation, however, is no longer a command, but a certainty of what will happen: it is, therefore, the most evident mark of Luke's story.

[1:9]. *«he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight» (1:9).*

Poor Peter! When he was on the Mount of Transfiguration, he wished to remain there forever (Mt 17:4). It was so nice with the risen Jesus that he remained fixed with his nose up, in the hope that the one who should not have had to leave would reappear. It seems almost a cruelty, but we must consider

that Jesus asked the apostles the total sacrifice of themselves; it was then necessary for them to experience what they would find at the end of the journey, when they would have lived as RISEN WITH THE RISEN-ONE: it is with such certainty that they plunged into evangelism and struggle, with that determination and effectiveness that we will see.

[1:11]. *«This Jesus ... will come back in the same way».*

Often one imagines a generic return of Jesus "to the earth", but if he comes back «in the same way» and announced to those in Jerusalem that sooner or later they would see him again («you will not see me again until», Luke 13:35), then Jesus will not return generically "to the earth" but he has already chosen a specific place, and it is not surprising that it is Jerusalem, the city over which he wept (Luke 19:41).

Jesus had already hinted at his departure and subsequent return as a king in the "parable of the mines" (Luke 19:12-27), where "a noble man" went far "to receive the investiture of a kingdom": circumstances well understood by the audience of that land, since, when someone was appointed king, he would go to Rome to receive the investiture from the emperor. The parable goes on to say that "his fellow citizens hated him" and then they tried to prevent him becoming king, but they couldn't. "The noble man", thus, having returned to the place he had left possessing king's authority, began to evaluate the work of his servants, while his enemies were eliminated.

The "going up to heaven" of the Messiah in order to receive the royal investiture had already been announced by Daniel (7:13-14), in a prophecy which Jesus himself recalls (Mt 24:30; 26:64). Daniel had called him the "son of man", not surprisingly a way much loved by Jesus to refer to himself (for example, Mt 8:20: 12:8,32,40).

This return «in the same way» contrasts with the idea that in returning Jesus stops mid-air calling the Church to himself and then bringing her to heaven, as some infer from 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It is instead in agreement with the idea that Jesus, after calling the Church to himself in the air, will be accompanied by his faithful to sit on his glorious throne and thus take possession of the kingdom (Mt 25:31).

For some, "in the same way" refers to the way in which Jesus will return, not to where he will return; even if the expression does not impose a return of Jesus on the Mount of Olives, it does not exclude it either; precisely, we believe it because Jerusalem remains central even in Revelation (11:1-13; 21:10-27). Significantly, it is how Zechariah announced an advent of the kingdom of God that will begin with the feet of the Lord standing right on the Mount of Olives, with all the nations going to Jerusalem for the feast of Tabernacles (Zech 14:4,9,16).

[1:12-15]. *«Upstairs in the room ... They all joined together... a group numbering about a hundred and twenty».*

Luke places the Holy Spirit at the centre of Church's history, but he also shows great attention to numerical data. He does it to the point that the Book of Acts can be considered a series of "verses" interspersed with the repetition of a "chorus" on the growth of the Church: we start with these first 120 disciples, which then become 3,000 (2:41), then 5,000 (4:4), then add others «in large numbers» (5:14), with sequential *increase* including «a large number of priests» (6:7), followed by a *constant growth* (9:31); even the new church made up of Gentiles, in Antioch, to which «a large number of people» had joined themselves (11:26), as the number of Greek-speaking churches founded by Paul «grew daily in numbers» (16:5); in Corinth the joining of «a large people» (18:10) is foretold by God; at the same time, the growth of churches made up of Jews who had adhered to the faith by «tens of thousands», continued (21:20): the translation "thousands" is imprecise, because the Greek has "myriads", as the New Revised Version indicates in the footnote, the meaning of which is "tens of thousands".

In the beginning 120, the presence of Mary is also reported, but then in the New Testament she will no longer be spoken of and this shows how her public role ends here: her task was to give a body to Jesus to then give it to the world. Having finished her task, she withdraws from the scene, as those who truly love the work of God more than their own appearance.

We will see that other people, after having played a very important role, will then be asked to take a step back (Peter, Barnabas), because at the centre of God's work it is necessary that there is and remains God, not his instruments.

[1:16]. «*The Scripture... which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David*».

The Holy Spirit, whom Luke clearly indicates as the Church's guide, is therefore the same who inspired the prophets of the Old Testament (cf. 2 Peter 1:21) and who will then be poured out upon believers (2:17).

[1:17-23]. *Twelve «witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus».*

Matthias replaces Judas so that twelve witnesses of the public life of Jesus remain, particularly of his resurrection. The task of the Twelve is therefore delimited, as the subsequent unfolding of events will show and as we already see in this episode, in which the apostles direct the operations, but the choice is first made by the assembly and then, following the presentation of two candidates, the designation is assigned to lots (26).

If one reads the context of the Old Testament passages cited here, it is evident that the choice to replace Judas was not due to a precise prophecy contained there and to be put into practice, but once the opportunity to replace Judas was evaluated, a similar situation was sought in the Bible to be applied. It was a shared way of acting at that time and even today, usual readers of the Bible, often take a few verses that can indirectly guide them in their choices.

We preachers must, therefore, be careful not to deceive the less experienced, posing as "prophecies announced by the Old Testament" those that are simply applications. There are other similar cases in Acts, but we cannot delve into such a complex subject, so we will only mention them in *Link No. 3* just below.

[1:24-26]. «*You, Lord ... show us which of these two you have chosen*».

Since «the Lord Jesus» (21) was mentioned earlier, the following prayer to the "Lord" is to be considered addressed to Jesus. This is even clearer in Stephen's subsequent prayer (7:59-60), which begins with «Lord Jesus, receive my spirit», and then continue with «Lord, do not hold this sin against them».

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### Link No. 3

#### **THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE PROPHECIES ABOUT CHRIST**

In the more traditional sense, "prophecy" signifies an event clearly announced beforehand and whose fulfilment can then be checked objectively. *In this context*, it can be said that the Old Testament contains *no* prophecy about Jesus the Messiah. In Judaism, however, the concept of prophecy is much broader and one can come to see that in a story there is the fulfilment of a prophecy simply because they have in common a word!

Since the Gospels tell about stories lived within Judaism, we then find written (specially in Matthew) that in Jesus many Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled. However, when we go to evaluate those prophecies with our criterion of "rational objectivity", then *none of those* prophecies can be considered as such.

Jesus did not like to cheat, hence he sought to be recognised as the Messiah not so much on the vague ground of prophecies, but on that of objectively observable facts. In fact, he said, « If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin» (Jn 15:24; 10:37-38). To be brief, let us apply the above to two prophecies considered unequivocal: the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem and Isaiah 53.

It was clear to all that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem (Mt 2:3-6), but the prophecy did not indicate the day of his birth, nor the precise address; we find then the paradox of the prophecy analysers who had well understood the signals of the Word of God and hoped to see its fulfilment, but did not realise that the Messiah was born, while two people categories, which we could deem unsuitable, but who were open to receiving a particular revelation from God, noticed so: that is, the magi (or three-wise-men), who were priests-astrologers of the Persian religion, and shepherds, forced by their

profession to a sort of social isolation and a lack of familiarity with Scripture reading (Mt 2:1-12; Luke 2:8-18). Herod himself *believed* in the prophecy's fulfilment, but he could not benefit from it because he did not *love* it (Mt 2:3,16). As Jesus went to live far away from Bethlehem, that is in Nazareth (Mt 2:23), those who were against him argued that he could not be the Messiah, because «from Galilee there is no prophet» (Jn 7:41-52). In short, even when the interpretation of a prophecy is clear, it is not necessarily easy to apply it.

Reading chapter 53 of Isaiah makes a right impression: «one from whom people hide their faces he was despised [...] however [...] he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities [...] He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter [...] though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days [...] After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied». For US NOW the text is very clear, but before Christ it was not at all manifest that the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53 was the same *person* as the "glorious king" announced in many other parts (e.g. in Psalm 2). Indeed, it was so difficult to think that it was the same person that even the apostles could not understand it, despite the fact that Jesus himself explained it to them three times (Luke 9:22; 9:44-45; 18:31-34).

The prophecies about Jesus became comprehensible to his disciples particularly *after* his resurrection (Luke 24:25-32).

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## ACTS 2

### PENTECOST: THE BEGINNING OF THE WORK OF THE APOSTLES

[2:1]. «*When the day of Pentecost arrived*».

Every Jewish male had the obligation to present himself in Jerusalem «before YHWH» during three particular feasts (Ex 23:14-17; Deu 16; Lev 23): at Easter or the Feast of Unleavened Bread (around April), 50 days later at Pentecost or Harvest (end of May), finally at the Feast of Booths or Collection (mid-October).

For those who lived near Jerusalem it was easier to observe these rules, while it was in fact impossible for a "synagogue Judaism" now spread from the Persian Gulf to the entire Mediterranean basin. So some chose to go to only one of the three festivals, preferring that of Pentecost because the summer season aided travel.

For someone who wanted to spread news among the Jews of the world, therefore, the best way was to do it in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost: coincidentally, the very day chosen by God for the first proclamation of the Gospel!

[2:2]. «*Suddenly there was a sound from heaven as of a raging wind blowing*».

*Suddenly*: nothing suggested it (there was no storm).

*From heaven*: it was therefore not the result of any human activity.

*Impetuous sound*: it struck everyone, even the distracted as mentioned below (v. 6).

*Like the wind that blows*: spirit, breath and wind are almost synonymous (Gen 2:7; John 3:8).

[2:3-4a]. «*Divided Tongues appeared to them as of fire and rested on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit*».

The wind filled the *whole* house, and the fire divided itself and came upon *every man*; and they were all filled with the *same* Spirit. It was a work of God that united *all* believers, who were filled by the very fact of being believers and not because they were holier than others.



[2:4b]. *«And they began to speak in other languages».*

Those who spoke had not learned that language before, while those who listened perceived it as their mother tongue (v. 6). The miraculous aspect was immediately perceived, while only later it was understood that it was the sign of a great turning point.

In electing/choosing Abraham, God had also chosen the language of Abraham, that is, Hebrew, which was then used by Moses and the prophets. It was logical to expect that the Gospel would be announced in the language of the Jewish people, since Jesus had worked within that people and spoken Hebrew (Mt 15:24; Acts 26:14). Paul too would later use the Hebrew to address his people (Acts 22:2).

The miracle of making the Gospel heard in the various mother tongues, in short, was not foreseen and for this very reason it represented a sign of ensuing, though gradual, developments. The first great turning point would be the baptism of an uncircumcised (Cornelius, Acts 10:47), then there would be the first Church of predominately uncircumcised (Antioch, Acts 11:20-24), finally the spread of the Gospel in the heart of the Greek world (after Acts 16:9). All this would have meant that the final draft of the New Testament would not be in Hebrew, but in Greek. To make a comparison, it is as if the Qur'an continued with a new section written in English, that is, in the language of those who are perceived by many as "enemies" of Islam.

However, some signs of linguistic adaptation are also present in the Old Testament. In Genesis 31:47, for example, we are told both the Hebrew name given by Jacob to a certain place, and the Aramaic name given to it by Laban. Significant is that, in Jeremiah 10:11, the admonition to idolaters is made in the Aramaic spoken by them. More importantly, when events take place in the Babylonian area, where the Jews had been deported, whole chapters are in the language of that area, which is again Aramaic (Ezra 4:8 to 6:18; Dan 2:46 to 7:28).

Of course, every translation is a bit of a betrayal of the original, but this is compensated by two aspects: one is that, even if with a translation you understand worse, without translation you would not understand anything; the other is that a translation does not cancel the original, but rather enhances it: In fact, Christianity has been a means of spreading the Old Testament throughout the world, in some way promoting the study of Hebrew.

#### APPLICATION.

The fact that the Gospel was heard from the beginning in the mother tongue (2:6-11), sets us free from the duty of studying the original languages, studies that someone undertook to translate the Bible into our language and we are infinitely grateful, but we do not now consider it necessary that to understand the Word of God one must necessarily study Hebrew and Greek. We believe that our duty is to listen consistently to the Word of God that has been made available to us in our language, because even if it is true that sometimes scholars understand the Bible better, other times it is the faith of the less educated to make it better understandable. Scholars are welcome, in conclusion, but only if they place themselves and are placed at the side of other believers, not above.

[2:5-11]. *«Now there were devout Jews from every nation ... We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites ... as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism».*

Many theologians have a great need to define Israel in an ethnic sense, even to satisfy a Christianity that loves to feel different and superior to the Judaism of the time of Jesus. Christians generally think that the composite audience, being "of every nation" was not composed entirely of Jews, with a reasoning clearly wrong but to which they are very fond. The error comes from not wanting to acknowledge that EVERYONE COULD BECOME A JEW AND BE CIRCUMCISED, as everyone today can become a Christian and be baptized.

In Jerusalem, on the day of Pentecost, there could also be some sympathizers of Judaism not yet circumcised and referred to as "proselytes" (v. 11). Those who, however, accepted Peter's message and were baptized, that is, the first members of the Church, were all circumcised: it will be necessary to wait for Cornelius (Acts 10) to have the first baptism of an uncircumcised person. Peter's message, in short, certainly did not invite us to leave Judaism and the synagogues, but, following the example of Christ, the invitation was to be consistent with the Word of God represented by the Old Testament, to whose authority he was called to submit.

When Jesus invited all peoples to proclaim the Gospel (Mt 28:19), contrary to what is often thought, he did not teach anything very different from what the Jews had done, since the Old Testament was

already internationalist: Whether by the foundation of synagogues outside of Israel which all might attend, and of which the Gentiles also might become members, being circumcised, or by allowing even the uncircumcised to go to the Temple and present sacrifices (Num 15:14-16; see also Old Testament Summary, ch. 4/E and ch. 24/11/B). However, there is something more significant to which Jesus refers that, as "Son of David", relaunches the invitation that so many centuries before David himself had promoted: «Praise YHWH, call on his name; make known his deeds among the peoples [...] Give to YHWH, O families of the peoples, give to YHWH glory and strength [...] Bring to him offerings and come in his presence [...] Let it be said among the nations, " YHWH reigns"» (1 Chronicles 16:8-31).

[2:12]. «*Everyone was astonished and puzzled*».

It was evident that there was a "simultaneous translator" who acted between the mouths of those who spoke (simple people of Galilee) and the ears of those who listened. Since this took place in Jerusalem it was inevitable to attribute the phenomenon to the God who had chosen to "dwell" in that city (1 Kings 8:13). To some listeners, then, one may suppose that the episode in which God was able to make even a donkey speak came to mind! (Num 22:28).

[2:13]. «*But others mocked them and said "They are full of sweet wine"*».

In Acts the same reactions continue that we find in the Gospel (and in the Old Testament): even when God manifests himself in a convincing way, not everyone is convinced, since no fact *external* to man can automatically act *internal* to him. Very interesting is the accusation made in this case against the disciples, that is, to be drunk: an accusation that was so false, but plausible. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul makes this comparison: «Wine leads to debauchery. But be filled with the Spirit». Even Hannah, the mother of Samuel, while praying intensely was considered drunk (1 Sam 1:13-14).

[2:14a]. «*Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice*».

Earlier, Peter had stood up «among the brethren» (1:15). There are *formally* hierarchical systems of government, where there is one who commands and everyone else obeys, and *formally* democratic systems, where all are equal and where the majority decides. These episodes reveal something more complex, because there is both the assumption of responsibility on the part of those who have been called to exercise it, and the participation of the entire collective. Peter works in *harmony* with the other apostles, in ways that today we would call "responsible leaders". Evidently the example of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit had led the apostles a long way, compared to when they debated who the greatest was (Mk 9:33-35).

The road ahead was not finished, however, because it was unthinkable that Peter, after having effectively guided the Church (Chap. 1-5), would prove inadequate, if not even an obstacle. In fact, it would be others to carry on the "strategic plan of God" (Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Paul) and a decisive turning point would take place also through the anonymous "some" (11:20).

*Beyond and above human instruments, in fact, the Book of Acts shows that the true leadership of the Church is exercised by the Holy Spirit, who now uses one or the other according to actual needs: this is one of the "messages in filigree" that Luke transmits, but this will be clearer later.*

[2:14b]. «*Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem*».

Peter speaks as a Jew to the Jews, as is reiterated in vv. 22 and 36: «Men of Israel», «Know ... the whole house of Israel».

[2:15-21]. «*This is what was announced through the prophet Joel*».

The prophecy of Joel announced a spreading «above every person» of that same Spirit who worked in Joel and who would then operate in a generalized way.

[2:22-23a]. «*Jesus of Nazareth, man ... this man*».

The divinity of Jesus is taught in the New Testament gradually and starting from seeing Jesus as a man: the apostles themselves, at the beginning, considered him above all a "teacher". At the same time, there is no explicit mention of the divinity of Jesus in the preaching of Acts, which clearly would be better understood after having entrusted oneself to him for the remission of one's sins. In short, the divinity of Jesus was not taught "in Greek" as Christians have done, that is, with more or less

philosophic *discourses*, because the Jewish way of knowing is not separated from the *experience* and therefore *knowing* the divinity of Jesus is first of all the experience of it: Reflection is not forbidden, but is usually posterior. However, we resume this theme with the special *Connection No. 4*, placed at the end of the chapter.

[2:23b]. *Jesus «was given into your hands for the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God».*

The same concept is also reiterated by Peter in his later discourse, in which he states that what happened to Jesus was only what had been «foretold by the mouth of all the prophets» (3:18).

Sometimes believers have the impression that God is defeated or absent, while non-believers feel "smarter than God". In Acts, however, it is continually affirmed that it is God who directs history according to His precise objectives, even if human beings remain free and responsible for their actions. But Luke does not use complicated discourses to make it clear how God's sovereignty and human freedom can be reconciled, instead he shows how in practice the two realities come together. For a fisherman like Peter, equipped with a practical sense, this was not so difficult to understand.

[2:24-32]. *David «foresaw the resurrection of the Christ and spoke of it».*

Peter quotes Psalm 16, to show how the resurrection of Christ had already been *veiledly* announced by David: *veiledly* and not clearly, as we Christians at times want to make people believe. To this aspect of the prophecies about Christ we have already dedicated *Connection No. 3*, so now we limit ourselves to pointing out that the strength of the quotation that Peter makes is not so much in the clarity of the prophecy, but depends on many other factors, such as:

- part of the audience knew about Jesus and his miracles (v. 22);
- there had been a sign of that kind of thunder and an unusual wind (v. 2);
- there had been the miracle of hearing in one's own language (v. 8);
- it was clear, for those who wanted to understand, that the euphoria of those 120 people not different from them was given by the Spirit and not by wine.

Today, therefore, we cannot expect a Jew to accept the Messiah Jesus just because we quote him Psalm 16, whose effectiveness also today depends on the context in which he is quoted (starting with the credibility of those who cite him).

[2:33-36]. *«God has made this Jesus Lord and Christ».*

The Christ/Anointed/Messiah was the future king who was to restore the kingdom of David. "Lord" was a title with a broad meaning and that was attributed as recognition of some authority; it was certainly applied to a king, but it was also used for God himself. "Lord" was therefore a title perfectly suited to Jesus, because it indicated his humanity, but opening to the divinity, which in this case was not explicit and binding.

[2:37-38]. *Repent and be baptized, to receive forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.*

Preaching, conversion, baptism, forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit occur in Acts with surprising immediacy and in a simple, *very* simple, too simple way; if so, what end should we make of all the devised instruments to bring men to salvation? What would this simplicity make the handlers and managers of such complex instruments look like then? This is one of the reasons why the Church does not dwell too much on this book, with its calm tones, yet disruptive content.

[2:39]. *A promise for us too.*

The "simple solution" offered by the apostles was not only for those who were listening, but also for all those who were far away in space and time, «for those whom the Lord, our God, will call». It is therefore not God who has complicated things, but it is the web of our ties and the noise with which we surround ourselves not to make us hear his voice and make it difficult to obey him.

[2:40]. *«Save yourselves from this perverse generation».*

Peter did not have much confidence in the society in front of him and invited them to "get off the ship", climbing the "lifeboat" of salvation in Christ. It is not easy to leave the group and trust in Jesus but, now as then, his appeal is "follow me" (Mt 9:9).

[2:41]. «*That day were added to them three thousand people*».

Listening, repentance, baptism, community life: *everything was so fast and without problems, also because everything remained within Judaism*. The prophets had in fact systematically called for repentance (e.g. Isa 55:6-7) and washing themselves in water was an outward cleansing gesture well confirmed by the law of Moses (e.g. Lev 14:8). In the end, one continued on the path traced by John the Baptist (Mt 3:1-6) and one's baptism signified publicly declaring the desire to be a more coherent Jew, certainly not the abandonment of Judaism as it is perceived today.

It is very significant that there was not yet a specific name to indicate those who had been baptized ("Christians" will come in Acts 11:26, as we will see below), also because Jesus had placed himself as the *interpreter* of the law of Moses that he wanted to *apply*, not to abolish (Mt 5:17). The same name as "brothers" was typical of Judaism (1:16; 2:37; 7:2; 13:15,26; 22:1). Luke makes up for the lack of a specific name by remaining vague: starting by indicating the apostles (1:2-14), around whom we find a group of 120 people (1:15), to whom we "add" other 3,000 (2:41), but always as a current *within* Judaism.

Today an observant Jew says of himself that he follows "the halakah", which means "the way", that is, the way of walking in accordance with Jewish law, indeed a way, because within Judaism (as elsewhere) there are somewhat different ways of putting the same teachings into practice. The followers of Jesus, significantly, are defined by Luke as "followers of the way" (9:2; 19:9; 22:4; 24:14) and the name of "Christians" was not only of external derivation ("they were called"), but was necessary only when at Antioch the first church formed which was mainly composed of uncircumcised (11:26).

The name of "Christians" then ended up extending to all the followers of Jesus, but we must not forget that that name does not appear at the beginning of Acts, let alone in the Gospel! It seems paradoxical, but using words precisely, *neither Christ nor the apostles were Christians!*

The apostles preached a "life" (5:20) that contrasted with the "vain way of living" of tradition (1 Pet 1:18). They were accused of being a "sect", that is, of having separated themselves from others and of having caused a rift in the people of God, but Paul rejects this accusation, professing himself a believer «in all things which are written in the law and in the prophets» (24:14-15) and declaring their own Jewish consistency to the end (28:17-23).

In short, Luke describes a church that is born and grows in a fully Jewish context, so the Acts must be interpreted *within* this framework. Uncircumcised believers will eventually have the prevalence, but only *numerical* (28:28) and only as branches grafted into that olive tree that represents Israel (Rom.:17-24).

[2:42-43]. «*They dedicated themselves to the apostles teaching and to brotherly community, in breaking bread and in prayers*».

These activities did not in themselves constitute a break with Judaism, especially since separate places of worship were not established. The "communal breaking of the bread" took place "in the houses" (2:46), while for the rest they continued to be Jews attending the usual Jewish meetings (significant as they went every day in agreement to the Temple, 2:46). Over time, however, a "de facto separation" was being produced between the minority of Jews who followed the teacher Jesus and the majority who relied on the codified tradition. The beginning of a true separation occurred only after the stoning of Stephen (7:58) and the subsequent persecution of the disciples (8:1).

[2:44-45]. «*They had everything in common; they sold property and goods, and distributed them to all*».

This behavior of the disciples of Jerusalem is usually seen as an example that "should" be followed: but then no one follows it because it is unrealistic and so one is content with a vague desire. To have a correct understanding, their example must be seen in the immediate context, in the context of Acts, the New Testament and the entire Bible. The more general context of the New and Old Testaments makes us see that there is an invitation to be generous, especially with those who find themselves in difficulty not through their own fault, but private property is never seen as negative in itself.

Coming instead to the nearest context, selling one's goods was a spontaneous gesture and not an imposed rule, as Luke soon points out unequivocally (5:4). While the context of the entire book of Acts shows that nowhere else did they behave like this. It is then to be thought that, in Jerusalem, there was something specific that led us to do so and it is not difficult to imagine what it could be. In fact, Jesus had said that in the Temple there would not be left «one stone upon another»: this meant that Jerusalem

would be invaded by an enemy army. Even Judea would be devastated and all would happen within that generation (Mt 24:2,16,34; cf. Luke 19:41-44).

A first difficulty for the disciples of Jerusalem was that they had accepted Jesus, which automatically entailed strong opposition from the ruling class (Jn 7:13; 9:22; 12:42; 19:38). A definite need to escape was triggered by hatred towards Stephen (8:1), but what was disastrous for all was due to the Roman occupation, which occurred almost 40 years later (70 AD). With hindsight perspective, the choice of the believers in Jerusalem was therefore appropriate, because they sold estates which they would have had to forsake; and they used that money to be with the other believers, and to be strengthened in the faith; in order to be able to face the flight not only without discouragement, but even with the strength to give a turning point in the history of the Church, for they were the instrument used by God for the foundation of the first church composed of people from paganism (Antioch, 11:19-21).

But those of the other places also did well, who did not sell their possessions, administering their finances wisely, because then there would be material help for the believers in Jerusalem and Judea (1Cor 16:1-4; Acts 11:29; Rom 15:25).

[2:46-47]. «*Every day they went assiduously and in agreement in the temple ... praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people*».

In every religion there is a majority that feels lacking and therefore looks with sympathy at those minorities that apply the rules more strictly. The people with whom the early Christians enjoyed favor were the Jews (cf. also 4:21; 5:15,26) and indeed the first real persecution occurred not at Pentecost (Acts 2), but after the episode of Stephen (Acts 8:1): This is an unequivocal confirmation that the early Christians were and gave the impression of remaining Jews. In short, while Christianity generally imagines an emergence of the Church immediately in contrast with Judaism, Acts show us a birth of the Church entirely within Judaism, from which it separates itself at a later time, very slowly and never definitively.

Unfortunately, the Jewish people once again are manipulated by their ruling class, joining in the responsibility for the stoning of Stephen (6:12), just as not long before they had been persuaded to shout «crucify him» against Jesus (Mt 27:20-22).

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#### **Connection n. 4**

### **THE TEACHING OF THE DIVINITY OF JESUS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

#### *1. Foreword.*

In this *Connection* I mostly use parts of a larger study entitled *The Trinity between the Old and New Testaments*, in which I defend the classical doctrine shared by Christianity, but I negatively evaluate the way in which it has been and is often handled. The study is available online where no one would expect it, that is on a site run by a Jehovah's Witness, Roberto Carson, in which for special reasons I was given a special section, in which I could express myself in complete freedom. The collaboration started in September 2009 and lasted about a year, after which I decided to focus on biblical research. To find the complete study look for "fernando de angelis geova", or with the following link: (<http://tdgstoriasoctel.freeforumzone.leonardo.it/cartella.aspx?idc=684651>).

#### *2. A basic yet often confused doctrine.*

One *substantially belongs to Jesus* through faith in him, but one *formally enters the Church* through "trinitarian" baptism, that is, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). Trinitarian doctrine is therefore a foundation that unites Christianity and it would be necessary for there to be clarity about it, but often the ideas are uncertain and confused.

Leonardo De Chirico knows the evangelical world well for various reasons (birth, studies and type of commitment), but what he says can be applied to the generality of Christians: «In the life of the churches there are few sermons about the Trinity. Believers are not used to thinking in Trinitarian terms

because preaching is rarely Trinitarian» ... «churches can be formally Trinitarian, but you do not know what it means and what difference it makes» ... «The constant Trinitarian self-revision of Christianity is a vital necessity» (Dictionary of Evangelical Theology, edited by P. Bolognesi and others, EUN, 2007, pp. 757-758).

To create a minimum of clarity, let us begin by pointing out that the Trinitarian nature of God means a conception of God as "one and in three distinct persons". The following recommendation is known: "Do not unite people and do not separate nature". To simplify the problem, let us overlook the questions connected with the Holy Spirit, focusing on the twofold relationship between Jesus and the heavenly Father (whom we call "Duity"), which is most profoundly revealed in the Gospel of John, to which we will arrive after a brief overview of how Jesus is seen in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and how the apostles presented the divinity of Jesus.

### 3. *Extraordinary, but still human.*

Certain aspects of the extraordinariness of Jesus are regarded as a clear sign of his divinity, but in the Jewish context of the Gospel they did not necessarily mean a "superhuman" of Jesus. "Son of God", for example, was also Solomon, though only as adopted (1 Chronicles 17:13) and so, for Jesus, the title of "Son of God" acquired a deeper meaning only *after* it was known that he was not the son of Joseph.

When Jesus calmed the storm (Mt 8:23-27), he did no more than Moses, who also commanded the waters and the winds (Ex 14:21). Neither did the resurrection and the ascension into heaven qualify Jesus by himself as divine in nature, for something like this had also happened to Enoch and Elijah (Gen 5:24; Heb 11:5; 2 Kings 2:11). When Peter saw Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:1-9), he did not think that Moses and Elijah had become of a divine nature.

A good defense attorney is very selective when he has to gather evidence in favor of a thesis, not to offer easy criticism to the other side and not to discredit himself in the eyes of the judge. The mixture of good and doubtful evidence is also very damaging, because for the opponent it would become easy to focus on questionable evidence, thus devaluing the good. It is better then, to set aside initially all the doubtful proofs on the divinity of Jesus, which can, if anything, be fished out after the thesis is already demonstrated, and focus first only on the clearest biblical passages.

### 4. *The placement of the Trinity in the New Testament.*

It is necessary not only that a doctrine be biblical, but also that it be placed in the place assigned to it by the Bible and that it be expressed in biblical ways. I am convinced that the Trinity is a biblical doctrine, but I believe that Christianity sometimes speaks of it in an unbiblical way and, above all, that it places it in a very different position from that which it has in the New Testament. This discourse is complex, and one must view it in its entirety.

Today the Bible is easily found, and the four Gospels often travel together. At the beginning of the Church, however, the Gospel was oral and each of the four written texts was conceived of as autonomous and sufficient in itself. It is a common conviction that the preaching of the apostles was based above all on the parts common to the three "synoptics" (Matthew, Mark and Luke), while the Gospel of John would be later and for an internal use of the Church, rather than for the outside; In it, instead of many facts and few speeches (as in the synoptics), there are few facts but well commented.

Of the three synoptics, Mark is the shortest and most of what it contains is also found in the other two, so it can be considered as the essential expression of the Gospel... and in it *there is almost no clear trace of the divinity of Christ!* In the other two synoptics the most significant passage is that on the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary, a news that Mark skipped completely and of which, presumably, the apostles had knowledge after the resurrection of Jesus.

When Jesus asked the apostles what they thought of him, Matthew thus reports Peter's answer: «You are the Christ, the Son of the living God» (Mt 16:16). In Luke, "Son" disappears, with Peter answering, «The Christ of God» (Luke 9:20). Mark simplifies further and writes only: «You are the Christ» (Mk 8:29), where "Christ", in that context, indicated a particular-king descendant of David who would be "anointed" (which is the meaning of "Messiah" and "Christ") as king. That this king then would be "Son of God", was for a Jew implied, since God had adopted the "Son of David" Solomon (and therefore his descendants) as his son (1 Chronicles 28:6).

Of course, it is not trivial that all three Synoptics conclude their history with Jesus who, under pressure from the Sanhedrin, agrees to declare himself the Son of God. The episode is thus reported by

Mark: The high priest asked him and said, "Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus said, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One coming on the clouds of heaven". The high priest tore his clothes and said, "What do we need witnesses for? You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" All condemned him as deserving of death» (Mk 14:61-64). This passage in the Gospel of Mark is fundamental, but it should be noted that it is placed at the end and that the statement of Jesus was used above all as a pretext; for it was not for this reason that they had decided to kill Jesus, but they went in search of some justification after having decreed death for other reasons.

The conclusion seems inevitable, although it can surprise many: the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus is not a central part of the synoptic Gospels!

The history written in the Gospels continues in Acts of the Apostles and we have seen that *in Acts the divinity of Jesus is marginal and almost absent in the various preachings!* In fact, to the 3,000 Jews who were baptized on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41) and the other 2,000 who joined shortly after (Acts 4:4), as well as to the non-Jewish Cornelius and the many who were with him (Acts 10:24), it was simply announced that by accepting Jesus one was forgiven of one's sins (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 10:43). God did not regard this simple message as abridged and endorsed it by giving the Holy Spirit to those who received him, who were immediately baptized (Acts 2:41; 10:44-47), *thus entering the Church without presumably having heard of the divinity of Jesus*, which for them was then easily understood, having in themselves the Holy Spirit and having experienced the forgiveness of God the Father through the Son.

In short, as we know, a theory is more easily learned when it has been experienced and, for the first Christians, the experience of the Trinity came before the theology of the Trinity. In the New Testament, therefore, the Trinity tends to be discussed after conversion and we do not find that this doctrine was at the center of controversy among believers: we should therefore do the same.

It is not by chance that the Constantinian Church began to convene the Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea, 325) and to focus them on the Trinity, placing in a corner other aspects, such as the simplicity of forgiveness in Christ, for each one to be the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit and to welcome one another with love (Jn 13:34-35), avoiding to fighting over (or worse, to kill oneself!) a subtle and philosophical difference of opinion, as Paul also urged them to do (Rom 14).

Theological speculations about the Trinity abound, but when they aim to clarify what the Bible does not clarify, they also end up confusing what is clear in the Bible.

##### 5. The "Duty" in the Gospel of John.

**John 1:1:** «*In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the word was God*».

The Gospel of John already expresses the essential in the first verse, and then reiterates it throughout the entire Gospel; instead of insisting on the analysis of the first verse, then, it is better to clarify briefly the meaning and then continue with the other steps, after which it will be easier to realize what those initial words mean, which, objectively, are somewhat enigmatic.

John wants to transmit essentially three concepts and, as he will say later (v.14), "Word" (logos) means "Jesus".

1. Jesus was there "from the beginning".
2. Jesus was "near God" (or "with God"), therefore a person separated from God.
3. Jesus himself was "God" (not in the sense of a person, but of *substance*).

The first concept is widely shared, because in the New Testament it is repeatedly stated that all things were created *through* Jesus, who therefore was present *from the beginning* (e.g. Col 1:16 and Heb 1:2). Let us therefore dwell on the second and third concepts, which are at the heart of the Trinitarian doctrine and which may seem at odds with one another.

**John 10:30:** «*I and the Father are one*».

Besides reiterating the distinction between the two *persons* («I and the Father»), John also reiterates their *unity* of substance («we are one»), adding the reason for this unity, given by the Father-Son relationship. A relationship of fatherhood not *adopted* as that with Solomon (1 Chronicles 17:13), but *generative*; as John had already anticipated in the Prologue («We have contemplated his glory, glory as from the only begotten by the Father», 1:14) and as Luke makes very explicit (1:34-35).

The subordination of a wife to her husband and a child to his father (Eph 5:22 and 6:1) does not mean that there is a diversity of nature between them, all sharing human nature and being all the "image of God". Nor does the diversity of knowledge affect the unity of substance between a father and a son. The Trinitarian doctrine is therefore not denied when it is shown that Jesus is a different person from the Father, or noting that he is submissive to the Father and that he does not know some things that the Father knows instead (as obtainable from Jn 14:28 and Mt 24:36).

**John 5:18:** *«This is why the Jews sought more than ever to kill him, because he not only violated the Sabbath, but called God his Father, making himself equal with God».*

The Jews tried to kill Jesus because they interpreted his words as making himself equal to God (see also 8:58-59; 10:33). If Jesus had been an "antitrinitarian" he would have replied that they had misunderstood, but instead he reinforces that interpretation by stating that everyone must honor the Son, that is, himself, «as they honor the Father» (5:23), inviting them to recognize that the Father is in him and he is in the Father (10:38), concept later reiterated more directly to the apostles (14:9-10, see below).

**John 14:9-10:** *«Jesus said to him, "I have been with you such a long time, and you have not known me, Philip? Who has seen me, has seen the Father; how can you say 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me?"».*

It is true that the Jews were scandalized by the fact that Jesus declared himself the Son of God by nature, but not all; for even the apostles, the disciples and the crowds who followed Jesus were Jews, and they were not scandalized. In short, *it is a certain way of being Jewish which is incompatible with the Trinity, but from the beginning there were Jews who considered it compatible.*

The Apostles' Letters, as well as the Apocalypse, abound in direct and indirect references to the divinity of Jesus, but we shall go no further, for our purpose was to show that the divinity of Jesus was taught primarily to those who had already believed, while initially Jesus presented himself and was presented in his humanity (son of David, teacher, Lord in a generic sense, of Nazareth).

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## Acts 3

### PETER'S SECOND PREACHING

[3:1-11]. *«Peter said, I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!''».*

Peter and John went to the Temple not driven by a particular hidden motive, but for the ritual prayer of the devout Jews: it will then be the Holy Spirit to insert his "agenda". The healed cripple «entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God» (v. 8). Not only did Peter and John go into the Temple, but they also brought there those they had spoken to about Jesus.

Jerusalem was shaken by that plain miracle, which occurred to an infirm that everyone knew, and this prepared the scene for a second and powerful preaching. In order for the lame to understand in the name of whom he had been healed, it was not enough to say "Jesus" (a name that others also had) and not even to add "Christ" (the priests were also referred to as "Christs", that is, "anointed with sacred oil"): so they then added "the Nazarene" ("the one from Nazareth").

This saying can make us smile: "When the bishops were of gold, they had wooden chalices": it means that the chalices then became of gold and the bishops without power. Perhaps we no longer laugh, though, if we consider how far we ourselves have personally travelled.



[3:12-26]. *Second Gospel announcement by Peter.*

Peter preached to the "men of Israel" (v. 12), to the "sons of the prophets and of the covenant" that God made with Abraham (v. 25): these were the first recipients (v. 26) of a message that would then reach the ends of the earth. Peter used expressions that leave no doubt about his context of reference: "The God of Abraham", "by the mouth of his holy prophets", "Moses said", "all the prophets", "the covenant that God made with your fathers". All this cannot be reduced to Old Testament *citations*, because here the Gospel is immersed in the Old Testament and emerges from the Old Testament; indeed, in some way, it is the Old Testament!

This second discourse of Peter is similar to the first and therefore institutes a "well-established way" of proclaiming the Gospel, which will then be pretty much repeated later and by others. We report a sort of "common denominator" to the various preachings present in Acts, although each announcement has specific accentuations and variations. The message, therefore, generally follows this outline:

1. Jesus was a righteous "man" who has done a lot of good;
2. Jesus was unjustly killed;
3. Jesus is risen;
4. We are all sinners, but Jesus can blot out our sins;
5. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit;
6. Whoever believes must be baptized, establishing a bond with other believers;
7. Jesus will fulfil the promises made to Abraham and David, until the «restoration of all things».

While point 7 applies to the nation of Israel and to the whole world, the first 6 points relate to each individual and end with the synthesis of 3:19 (verse parallel to 2:38): «Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out». It's significant that, in the Gospel of the same Luke, it would be Jesus himself to summarise this essence of the message and the agenda of its announcement, described in Acts: «Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem» (Luke 24:46-47). However, when the Gospel came to the Gentiles, since they knew nothing of Abraham and David, God initially required to limit oneself to the first elements (as we will see later).

In order to understand the newness of Stephen's "disruptive style" (Acts 7) it is necessary to note the conciliatory attitude of Peter («I know that you acted in ignorance», v. 17), which offers the *nation* a forgiveness of God through which, if the *nation* repents, it will be able to experience the «restoration of all things» (David's reign, of course, but not only, vv. 20-25).

Peter's style here is very suitable for an initial approach and attracted many Jews. But to those who refused, and by refusing they hardened their heart, the prophets' typical and hard message had to be brought, as Christ had also done (Mt 23). But those who had done a first type of work (Peter) were not suitable for the next, so God roused the bright (and little understood) figure of Stephen (as we will see).

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## ACTS 4

### IMPRISONMENT OF PETER AND JOHN

[4:1-22]. *Effects of Peter's second preaching.*

The announcement of Jesus' resurrection irreparably delegitimized the ruling class and could create great confusion, so they began to take the first precautions, by arresting and putting Peter and John in prison, and subsequently there was a meeting of all the Jewish leaders to decide what to do. It is interesting how the events follow a similar pattern to that which occurred for John the Baptist and for Jesus, who began with a preaching that gathered popular favour (Mt 3:5; Luke 21:45-46; Acts 2:47), but not that of the leaders, who understandably wanted to keep the old system they had developed, thus

opposing the new course. In order not to antagonize the people, however, they did not oppose in a decisive way, showing an uncommon calmness and a wait-and-see tactic: they hoped that the new movement would deflate itself, while in the meantime, studying the situation to see if there was any favourable opportunity to exploit.

In the case of John the Baptist, Herod had managed to eliminate him (Mt 21:24-27), with leaders who had even tried to be considered as his disciples (Mt 3:7-9)! With Jesus, on the other hand, seeing time was playing against them, they discussed the danger presented by Rome, not being concerned with retaining their role but with saving the people (Jn 11:47-50).

Similarly with the apostles, seeing the popular favour, the Jewish leaders used a wait-and-see tactic and proceeded very carefully. After two brief arrests without particular consequences, the apostles were released precisely because of popular favour (Acts 4:21; 5:26). The occasion to solve the problem would be given to the leaders by some Jews who did not agree with Stephen, leading him before the Sanhedrin with false accusations, whereby they first cut everyone off from him (6:11-14), and then stoned him (7:57-58). The leaders did not miss the favourable opportunity, unleashing a persecution upon the whole Church, which drove believers away from Jerusalem (8:1).

Having neutralized John the Baptist, Jesus and the apostles, the leaders again became unchallenged masters of Jerusalem, but then the messianic expectations of those who rejected Jesus made the movement of the zealots flourish, and it came to pass that they, who also departed from that same Galilee from which Jesus departed, thought they might openly defy Rome, which brought the Jewish people to their greatest catastrophe.

It is interesting that the leaders asked Peter and John: «With what power or in whose name have you done this?» (v. 7). A sentence of their answer remains engraved: «Judge whether it is right, before God, to obey you rather than God» (v. 19). The apostles declared that they had acted «in the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene», adding that «there is no other name under heaven that has been given to men, through which we must be saved» (vv. 10-12). Also, in other parts of Acts the "name" of Jesus is exalted (3:6; 9:15; 16:18; 19:17; 21:13) and this brings Jesus closer to YHWH, whose "name" in the Bible is undoubtedly central (e.g. Ps 20:1; 54:1; Mt 6:9). The apostles, in short, avoid explicitly explaining the divinity of Jesus, which, however, is here and there veiledly implicit.

We are told here that Peter and John were «uneducated people» (v. 13), while we saw earlier that they were also without money (3:6): how many of us think that, in these conditions, one can do nothing? Peter and John, on the other hand, are unstoppable: «We cannot but speak of the things which we have seen and heard» (v. 20). Sometimes we think we should *talk* more, but perhaps we need to *see* more of the power of God and *listen to him* more.

#### [4:23-31]. *The prayer reaction of the Church.*

The prayers of 1:24 and 7:59-60, as we have mentioned, appear to be addressed to Jesus, while here it is clear that "Lord" refers to the Father, because Jesus is referred to as «His Christ» (v. 26) and His "holy servant" (vv. 27 and 30). Of course, the title of "servant" does not make us think of a Son, but here it is combined with "holy", which undoubtedly associates him with God. In the light of other biblical passages, however, the contrast between Jesus as a servant and Jesus as the Son of God is only apparent. For Jesus placed himself among men «as one who serves» (Luke 22:27), but that certainly did not mean that he was inferior. On the other hand, while he was washing the apostles' feet, he reiterated that he was «the Master and the Lord» (Jn 13:14). But It is a verse in Malachi that does the most for us (3:17), because it shows that a true *son* is one who *serves* the Father.

We would think that the apostles, being threatened, would pray for themselves, instead they asked God to grant them to continue to preach the Gospel in freedom (v. 29), even if this would still have exposed them to persecution. God liked that prayer, to the point of manifesting it with a small earthquake and filling all with the Holy Spirit (v. 31).

In v. 27 there is a description to note: «Against your holy servant Jesus, whom you have anointed, Herod and Pontius Pilate gathered together, together with the nations and with all the people of Israel». For the crucifixion of Jesus, some give all the blame to the "treacherous Jews" and so they forget their own betrayal. This verse shows us how hostility towards Jesus also involved «the nations» (that is, we) and the pagan authorities. Moreover, Luke himself, in his Gospel, had already pointed out that this hostility to Jesus could become a "unifying element": in fact, Herod covered

Jesus with ridicule, sending him back to Pilate, and it was precisely this complicity that made these two rulers pass from enemies to friends! (Luke 23:12). Anti-Christianism has unfortunately been also elsewhere, and in other times, a common glue.

Jesus asked Saul, «Why do you persecute me?» (Acts 9:4). If persecuting and killing Christians is equivalent to persecuting and killing Christ, in how many nations in the world have the followers of Jesus never been persecuted at least to the same extent as in Jerusalem?

[4:32-35]. «*Everything was in common among them*».

For this "communism" of Christians we refer to the notes on 2:44-45.

[4:36-37]. *The first "casual" mention to Barnabas.*

In these two verses it is told how a certain Barnabas also did what many others did, that is, he sold a field and gave the proceeds to the apostles. This positive example emphasizes the negative one of Ananias and Sapphira, reported soon after, but it was not necessary to mention the name of Barnabas, nor to describe any of his characteristics. The fact that the immediate context does not require certain clarifications, however, leads us to think that there are other objectives, as will become very clear afterwards.

In short, with these two verses on Barnabas, the "filigree design" to which we have alluded begins to emerge and which we will now begin to describe. To grasp the details, however, one needs to have an idea of the landscape in which they fit and free oneself from certain prejudices that prevent understanding. The questions to be raised are very complex and we certainly cannot deal with them in detail here, but it is essential to mention a few of them, which we are going to do with three specific *Further Insights*.

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### **Further Insight n. 1** **SUBJECTIVITY OF HISTORY**

The modern rationalist and scientist pride, with the self-elevation of historians, has spread the idea that History can be "objective", to the point of calling it "historical science" and thus give the impression that History is on the same level as Physics or Chemistry. One can argue whether it is appropriate to call historical research "science", but there is no doubt that - if it is science - it is not an "exact science" like Physics, therefore the use of the same term (science) for two different realities creates confusion and perhaps it is precisely the ambiguity that is wanted, so as to pass along a principle of "historical objectivity" that is absolutely unsustainable on the logical level. This is demonstrated by the two verses of Luke concerning Barnabas: many were those who sold their properties and shared the proceeds, so why then mention only Barnabas and dwell on him?

Every newspaper editor finds himself with a much greater amount of news than those that can enter the pages he has available; the first inevitable subjectivity is to choose *which* news to publish. Then there is to decide *how much space* to give to each, *where* to place it, the *title* to give it and the *frame* in which to insert it. This is why two newspapers, although reporting both the facts of the previous day, can also be very different from each other, showing with all evidence how to *tell the facts is an inseparable mixture of objective elements and subjective assumptions*.

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**Further Insight n. 2**  
**THE “PAULINE” POINT OF VIEW OF LUKE**

The fact that the Bible writers are inspired by the Holy Spirit does not erase their human dimension: to appreciate this, it is enough to compare the various prophets (for example, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jonah), but also the Gospel of Matthew with that of John. God obviously chose Luke to tell the story of the Church's beginnings, inserting it in the New Testament, but this does not alter the fact that Luke writes from a precise point of view, which is that of Paul, of whom he seems to have been the most intimate collaborator in the last period; this can be deduced from the fact that he was the only one left at his side, when he was about to suffer martyrdom in Rome (2 Tim 4:11).

Luke entered Paul's circle quite late, for it is from Acts 16:10 that he begins to use the "we", but he remained with Paul during the adventurous journey to Rome and the next two years of "house arrest" (Chap. 27-28). Luke therefore had all the time necessary to retrace with the apostle the meaning of the work of God in general and in particular the part entrusted to Paul thereof.

While today we speak of "Peter and Paul", placing them on the same level, in the context of the New Testament the emergence of Paul was *late and antagonised*: late because Paul entered the Church when it was already well under way (Chap. 9); antagonised because at the beginning the evangelist-apostle's gift could not be deployed, to the point that he was sent home by the Twelve (9:26-30), coming into play only later in the shadow of Barnabas (11:25-26). In short, the clear revelation of the task entrusted by God to Paul takes place only after his first missionary journey, for which Barnabas was primarily responsible (Chap. 13-14). Even after he had manifested the great abilities given him by God, however, he had to stand alone against Peter, Barnabas and all the others (Gal 2:11-14), receiving full legitimacy only when Peter, in the end, realised that Paul was like one of the ancient prophets, testifying it in writing to all (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Paul was not part of the Twelve Apostles, publicly chosen and commissioned by Jesus, who therefore had an undoubted function of direction; he therefore repeatedly had the need to defend the work entrusted to him by God and to justify his function as an apostle (Gal 1:11-12; 1 Cor 9:1-2; 15:8-10; 2 Cor 11:5; 12:11). He had a great desire to preach in Rome and had been preceded by his own substantial letter summarising his teaching, but if his authority had been challenged by a church at Corinth which he had given birth to and instructed (Acts 17:9-11; 1 Cor 4:18; 2 Cor 10:10), how much more could it be from those of Rome. Here, then, is a sub-trace of the book of Acts: making it clear to those of Rome who that prisoner with a mild appearance (1Cor 2:3; 2Cor 10:1) really was, to whom God had given the task of continuing the work begun by Peter and the Twelve.

For us all this is clear and a precondition for future comments. We only ask those who read to take note of it as a thesis to be verified and wait till the end to judge its validity.



**Further Insight n. 3**  
**INTRODUCTION TO THE IMPORTANCE OF BARNABAS**

Barnabas' statement in Acts 4:36-37 seems to have almost been placed there by chance, and we only talk of him again after almost five chapters, in another more significant, but not in itself decisive, passage, which shows how Barnabas immediately accepted and understood the value of Saul/Paul (9:27). These first two hints will be very important when Barnabas fully enters into action (11:22) and assumes the function of carrying forward God's strategic plan for a while.

The differences between Peter and Paul were many, starting with age: when Peter was already married (Mt 8:14), Saul was still a little boy (Acts 7:58); while Peter was aware that he was lacking before God (Luke 5:8), Saul was striving to observe the law of Moses in the most rigid manner, to be blameless (Acts 26:5; Phil 3:6); while Peter was one of the people (Mt 4:18; Acts 4:13), Saul was accustomed to high-level meetings, being at ease with both the high priest, with the Greek cultural environment and with the Roman political one (Acts 9:1-2; 17:18-20; 25:9-12). God took into account the differences between Peter and Paul, assigning them two distinct fields of action (Gal.:7-9), but in the end they came together in full harmony (as we shall see attested by Acts).

Barnabas' overall function was to act as a bridge between Saul and Peter. The first attempt failed (Acts 9:27-30), but he prepared the insertion of Saul into the church of Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).

The examination of the validity of the experience in Antioch, which was the first church of uncircumcised, occurred during the meeting in Jerusalem (Acts 15), in which it will be more Barnabas than Saul (as we shall see) to interact with Peter and James, in order to find an agreement that recognised the legitimacy of the new church, as well as the way of evangelising put in place by Barnabas and Paul.

Let us now analyse some details - seemingly random - that Luke introduces in his first quick presentation of Barnabas (4:36-37). First of all, one wonders why Barnabas is mentioned so soon, as his role will be highlighted much later. The probable reason is that, in nascent movements, "seniority gives rank", so the entry of Barnabas at that point qualifies him as one of "the first hour".

«*Nicknamed by the apostles Barnabas (which translated means: Son of encouragement)*» (4:36a). If the nickname with which he was called had been given to him by the apostles, it meant that he was their trusted collaborator (it therefore indicated the *position* of Barnabas). The *function* was instead clarified by the meaning of that nickname, which indicated a particular ability to be close to people, welcoming them and encouraging them: just what Barnabas would do with Saul.

«*Levite, Cypriot by birth*» (4:36b). The Levites were the helpers of the priests in the service of the Temple (Num 3:5-13). Being many, they were on duty according to particular shifts and therefore they could also live far from Jerusalem. As a Levite, Barnabas presumably knew better than others the law of Moses but having grown up in Cyprus (that is in the Greek area) he also knew well the world outside of Judaism, finding himself inevitably in the need to harmonise the two ways of living and thinking. A mixture not coincidentally similar to that of Saul, born in a Greek-speaking city (Tarsus of Cilicia, Acts 21:39) and a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-29), but educated in strict observance of the law of Moses (Acts 22:3).

«*Having a field, he sold it, and gave it up, and laid it at the apostles' feet*» (4:37). Not only had Barnabas entered the Church early, but he had done so in the best way possible.

All of this does not in itself have great relevance, but for Barnabas it constitutes a basis for subsequently playing that crucial role that we'll see later on.

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## Acts 5

### ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA. FURTHER ARREST OF THE APOSTLES

[5:1-16]. *The hypocrisy of the spouses Ananias and Sapphira struck with death.*

Many Christians think that the God of the Old Testament is substantially different from Jesus and, for them, the episode we are considering would be a "remnant" of the Old Testament. This interpretation has all kinds of holes, but it is not easy to move them away from their theological infantilism, because they are fond of a God who "has become good" like Jesus, while they can't stand the "terrible" one of the Old Testament.

We certainly cannot dwell on the relationship between severity and patience of God, between law and grace. Let us just say, briefly, that God has always been "slow to anger" (Exodus 34:6; Mt 21:33-45), that the law without grace would have immediately broken the relationship between God and man (sin of Adam in Gen 3, golden calf in Exodus 32), while grace without law makes no sense (For without the law there is no sin, and, therefore, there would be no need of grace, cf. Rom 7:7-13). From Adam onwards, God always dealt with man on the basis of grace, both before Moses (with Abraham) and after Moses (with David) (Rom 4:1-16). Indeed, the more God shows patience and openness to man, the more severe He is if that availability is not appreciated (Heb 10:28-29; 12:18-25). To conclude, not only can we draw a parallel between the law given by Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" (Mt 5-7), but also affirm that it is quite clear that Jesus is more demanding than Moses.

Coming to the text of Acts which we are examining, Peter made it clear that selling one's goods was not obligatory, nor was it obligatory to bring the proceeds to the apostles: only falsehood was not

admitted. Peter merely rebuked Ananias and was probably surprised to see him die immediately. All those present were shocked and it took some youthful unawareness to take the initiative to take away the body and bury it (vv. 5-6).

Did Peter share this severity of God or did he dissociate himself from it? The answer came three hours later, when his wife Sapphira arrived, who also fell into hypocrisy and to whom Peter announced, consciously and explicitly, the mortal judgment of God that would immediately fall on her too (v. 9).

In those days, God was working in the Church in an extraordinary way which aroused enthusiasm. Ananias and Sapphira appear as infiltrators who undermine the very foundations on which the new work was growing and this can help us to understand the severity of God who, through this episode, discouraged "others" (v. 13, i.e., those who did not give themselves completely to Jesus) from attempting to insert themselves in the Church incorrectly.

A Church (and a leader like Peter) so full of love for holiness, enjoyed the full trust from God, so not only were «many signs and wonders done among the people» (v. 12), but even Peter's shadow did miracles and «all were healed» (v. 16): «all», as Jesus had done (Luke 6:19); we should stop for a moment to think about, and remember, this when we ask ourselves why in the world diseases multiply.

The Church was exalted by the people (v. 13), that is, by those who did not believe! The crowds flocked (v. 16). The Church kept herself clean. Quite a big moment, which presaged, I wonder, what achievements. As when the sun is at noon, however, that maximum of light is preparing for its decline. Because (as we shall see) the Jewish leaders would then have behaved in a manner similar to Pharaoh, that is, hardening themselves and increasing rebellion to every new miracle they saw. The people themselves, as we have already said, would have let themselves be led astray again; after having forgotten John the Baptist and abandoned Jesus, they would have been complicit in the stoning of Stephen (chap. 7) and the removal from Jerusalem of precisely those believers who were enlightening it (8:1); those would have brought that light elsewhere, while darker times were being prepared for Jerusalem (destruction by the Romans in 70 AD).

*[5:17-42]. New arrest of the apostles.*

This section roughly repeated the script already seen in chapter 4 (vv. 1-21), with opposition to the apostles led by the Sadducees and with the final release of the apostles, also due to their popularity (v. 26). In this case not only Peter and John were arrested (as in chap. 4), but the whole group of apostles (vv. 18 and 29), who continued not to be intimidated (vv. 29-32).

In this episode we find the miraculous liberation from prison by an angel and it is significant how the angel himself tells the apostles to go and preach in the Temple (v. 20). Jesus also loved to preach in the Temple (Mt 26:55; Jn 18:20), which he called «the house of my Father» and therefore *his* house (Jn 2:16). It is natural that for the apostles, then, the Temple was "the house of Jesus", that is exactly the opposite of what many Christians think today, who are convinced that, when a Jew accepted Jesus, he automatically detached himself from the Temple and the various Jewish institutions! When these Christians read in Acts that the first disciples were "frequently" in the Temple, they suppose that the apostles had not yet understood well, giving, therefore, a wrong example (in short, they are convinced to understand Christianity better than the apostles!).

In the final part of chapter 5, there is a long insert (vv. 34-40) in which we see appearing «a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people», who began to suspect that, behind everything the apostles were doing, there could really be the hand of God. Taking into account the immediate context, it seems that this character has been given an exaggerated relevance, somewhat like in the case of Barnabas at the end of the previous chapter.

Even the name of Gamaliel (coincidentally!) will then re-emerge in the events of Saul, so the name was not so essential for the history of the Church, but it was useful to Saul, who, not surprisingly, prided himself before the Jews of having been educated «at the feet of Gamaliel» (22:3). Taking into account the insert in vv. 34-40, then, Saul's belief in Jesus appears almost as a natural development of the setting of the great wise Gamaliel. In short, Saul has not yet officially entered the scene, but these signs show that it is precisely towards Saul/Paul that Luke positions his story (as will be seen better later).

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## Acts 6

### THE SEVEN "TABLE SERVANTS" AND STEPHEN'S ARREST

[6:1-7]. *Question of assistance: beginning of the decline of Peter and the Twelve.*

Overview. After reading the first five chapters, we can imagine a continuation of the triumphal march of Peter and the Twelve. The murmur which is mentioned at the beginning of Chap. 6, instead, looks like those little pieces of snow that begin to roll and form avalanches. From that moment on, in fact, Peter would appear increasingly inadequate and so would pass from dragger to dragged. He would no longer be able, in short, to direct the new phase that was being prepared and so, after a period in which he would trudge and let others carry on the "strategic plan of God", he would disappear completely from the story told in Acts. Peter's decline does not coincide with the emergence of Paul, though Luke shows the preparation of the context suitable for the work of Paul, which would then be the instrument chosen to bring to completion the definition of the new phase of God's work in the world.

For the people of the apostolic time period, it was not easy to realise how the various episodes were linked by a precise logic, so sometimes they could have the impression that the work of God was drifting. Here, then, lies the singularity and value of the story of Luke, who was brought to understand that thread that the Holy Spirit has never lost and that connects seemingly separate episodes.

The Seven "table servants". As the number of believers grew, and as time passed, the selling of everything and being together began to be more difficult to manage. Thus, a bad atmosphere emerged among those of Greek (Hellenistic) language, who were disadvantaged in dealing with the community leaders, comprised mainly of Hebrew speakers. The apostles tried to solve the problem with the election of seven "table servants" and this was taken as a model by Christianity, but Luke subtly shows the failure of this strategy, and this will be better understood later.

As in the case of Matthias (1:15-26), the election of the seven "table servants" is not decided authoritarily by the apostles, but involving the whole community (vv. 5-6). While the apostles were referred to as the "Twelve" (Acts 6:2; Jn 20:24; 1Cor 15:15), these "table servants" are called the "Seven" (Acts 21:8). "Table servants" is the literal translation and also those who managed deposits and loans of money were called "tables", as you can see when Jesus «threw away the tables of those who exchanged money» (Mk 11:15, TILC). This harmonises much better with the context and suggests "the Seven" as "common money managers", rather than "waiters".

From this episode some draw the suggestion for a type of "hierarchical order", with the apostles at the top, then the deacons and then the common believers. Of course, this scheme has its own logic, but in the context of the Acts the designation of the Twelve and the Seven suggests groups formed for a specific purpose, whose members have therefore a restricted authority to the received assignment. It will be Luke's own story, however, that'll dispel any hierarchical idea of the Church whom, if faithful, rather than by human guides, is directed by the Holy Spirit, who now uses the one and now the other.

Among these Seven, only for the first two is then defined a role in the unfolding of the story: Stephen and Philip. Stephen is not only the first on the list, but he is also the only one to be explicitly praised as a «man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit» (v. 5): coincidentally, he can easily be framed as the forerunner of Paul (as we shall see below). For only one of them (Nicolaus) we are told that he came from Antioch and that he was a convert from paganism (proselyte): in Antioch, as it happens, would then arise the church of those consisting predominantly of believers from paganism, whom Paul would help to instruct (Acts 11:25-26) and from where he would go on his missionary tours (Acts 13:2; 15:35; 18:22). The one who begins to read a story does not know *the end*, but the one who writes it has *an end* before even taking up the pen! And Luke is no exception.

The wisdom of the Twelve and the unpredictability of God. As organisational problems emerged, the Twelve seemed to make the right decisions: since they had thus far evangelised very effectively, it seemed clear that they should continue in that task, without being distracted by those problems of providing assistance that also others could solve. The way forward is so sensible to be taken as a model by the generality of the Churches... *Yet God would have done the opposite of what the Twelve had predicted!* For the twelve said, «Brothers, seek to find among you seven men [...] to whom we will entrust this charge. As for us, we will continue to dedicate ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word» (vv. 3-4). Soon after, however, it will be just two of those "servants at the tables" to take charge of a new type of preaching (Stephen) and in new places (Philip).

God remains God, therefore his thoughts are higher than ours «as the heavens are high above the earth» (Isa 55:9): we know this well, but we tend to forget it. Between the intentions of the Twelve and subsequent developments, in short, there is such a stark contrast from which the lesson should be drawn *that not even his most faithful servants can cage God!*

Everything was going great, then Stephen got too zealous? The passage we are considering (6:1-7) ends by describing an excellent situation of the Church, in fact it «multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith». In such a situation, Stephen's trespassing outside the role assigned to him and his provoking the first generalised persecution easily appeared as a great trouble, even if caused by the best intentions. Stephen paid for his initiative by becoming the first martyr and it took many years (and a Luke enlightened by the Spirit) to better understand the value of what he had done, which emerged thanks to the very esteemed portrait painted by Luke immediately below.

[6:8-15]. *First part of the conflict between Stephen and the unbelieving Jews.*

We have seen that Luke had initially presented Stephen as «a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit» (v. 5); now he continues the praise by writing that «Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people» (v. 8), with the unbelieving Jews who «could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking» (v. 10). God gave a great sign of His approval to Stephen, because when he was brought before the Sanhedrin to be judged, «gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel» (v. 15).

There is now another tragic "switching of meaning" that sometimes is at work, which is to take to be true the false accusations made against Stephen. We, in fact, like those false witnesses who rose up against Stephen (vv. 13-14), affirm that, for those who had believed in Jesus, the Temple was now to be avoided and the customs established by Moses were no longer valid! Those who support this, often do so by quoting some passages from the Letter to the Hebrews, on which we cannot dwell here, reiterating, however, that *throughout the book of Acts, we see the description of a Church that is fully compatible with its remaining within Judaism.* On the Letter to the Hebrews, we will open up *Link N. 6* in the final pages, in which we will limit ourselves to asking some rhetorical questions, with the hope of arriving sooner or later at addressing this Letter in a separate book.

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## Acts 7

### SPEECH AND MARTYRDOM OF STEPHEN

Luke shows it to us in a covert way, but Stephen is overtly Paul's forerunner. And it is also for this reason that a large and bright portrait is drawn. There are two precise signs of the connection between Stephen and Paul: the presence of Saul at the stoning of Stephen and a discourse with a similar impact.

When Saul/Paul was so young that he could not participate in the stoning of Stephen, it is specified that he collaborated by taking into custody the clothes of those who stoned him (v. 58). The young are radical by nature and tend to identify themselves, so Saul identified himself with the persecutors and imitated them as soon as he was of age. Saul, however, listened to all of Stephen's speech and perceived the Spirit, so when Jesus appeared to him and decided to become his disciple, his model became Stephen. A model recognisable by a particularity: it aroused in the opponents a hatred addressed not only to the message, but also to that particular messenger. This hatred was immediately roused by Saul in Damascus (9:22-25), as well as in Jerusalem, where Peter was left relatively in peace by the Jews, who had not tolerated Stephen and would not endure Saul either later on (9:28-30).

In his speech to the Jews, Stephen, beginning in a roundabout way, relives the history of Israel, but re-counting it in contrast to the usual way. The Jews tended to exalt the superiority of God's people over other nations, placing an emphasis on God's promises to Abraham and the privilege of being governed by a law as perfect as that of Moses.

Stephen, instead, shows how, in the crucial moments, Israel had exposed how they had rejected those whom God sent them (Joseph, Moses). At the beginning he identified himself with the audience («Brothers and Fathers ... our father Abraham ...», v. 2), but in the end he dissociated himself from them by talking about «your fathers» (vv. 51-52). Stephen and the audience were equally Jewish, in short, but the "fathers" he referenced to were not always the same. Thus, Stephen comes to an unbearable conclusion for the proud audience: « You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit [...] Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? » (vv. 51-52).

It is easy to see the difference with the message that had so far been communicated by Peter, who also accused the audience of being responsible for the killing of the Messiah, but the error committed was for Peter remediable with a true repentance, which would have allowed the confident expectation of the « restoring of all the things» (3:19-21).

Was Peter's approach "more correct", or Stephen's? It is a wrong question, because both were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Through Peter, God had once again stretched out his hand to the people of Israel, and this led to the thousands of conversions we have seen. The ruling class, however, manifested a great closure and then the Spirit estimated that the time had come to challenge it openly, with a type of message that makes us think back to those of Ezekiel and Jesus.

In Ezekiel, in the Gospel and in Stephen we can trace a similar pattern. Ezekiel is an almost "resigned" prophet, who comes after an Isaiah in which there are much wider glimpses of hope. Jesus's harsh demands are placed by Matthew towards the end (chapters 23-25), while at the beginning there is an attitude much more open to dialogue. At the same time, Stephen's disruptive force (and then, similarly, Paul's) comes after the less rude Peter, confirming that God is always "slow to anger" (Exodus 34:6).

Stephen is accused by the Jews of repeating Jesus' devastating words about the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem (Mt 24:1-2; Luke 21:20-24); Stephen concludes his summary of Israel's history by referring to the Temple (7:48-50) and then embarks on his radical final accusation (vv. 51-53). Stephen states that «the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands» (v. 48) and so some come to consider the statement of Stephen as an overcoming of the Temple and Judaism, but this is inconceivable considering that Stephen takes up a concept expressed by Solomon during the very inauguration of the first Temple (1 Kings 8:27), then moving in the vein of Isaiah (66:1-2) and the other prophets who announced the destruction of the first Temple (Jeremiah, Ezekiel).

Others find Stephen's statement on the Temple as anticipating the content of the Letter to the Hebrews and this has its own reasonableness, even more so if one thinks about how the chapter of Isaiah quoted by Stephen continues; Isaiah in fact comes to say: "He who slaughters an ox is like one who

kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig's blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; I also will choose harsh treatment for them» (Isa 66:3-4). The Temple and sacrifices were instituted by God to educate in holiness, but if the same ones are used to justify a corrupt life, then God abolishes them. The letter to the Hebrews, in short, does say something new, however, the destruction of the Temple frequented by Christ fits into a framework similar to the destruction of the first Temple and, therefore, cannot in itself mean an exit from Judaism.

Peter was unable to enter into this new phase, but not because he was not zealous or because he suffocated the Spirit that was in him or because he somehow sinned: he was simply not humanly fit for the new task.

God assisted Stephen in a special way not only at the beginning, by making his face shine like that of an angel (6:15), but also at the end, when the heavens opened and the dying Stephen felt embraced by the Trinitarian God, since Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and saw Jesus at the right hand of the glorious Father (vv. 55-59).

Stephen's bitterness towards Israel was not dictated by hatred, but by the love of someone who knew what troubles would come, if there were no repentance. Stephen showed his immense love for Israel, when he was about to be overcome by stones and, in spite of that, he found the physical and moral strength to get down on his knees and shout his last words of forgiveness: «Lord, do not hold this sin against them» (v. 60).

Only after concluding the first draft of these notes on Acts I noted the importance of Stephen's speech for the comprehension of the whole Bible; however, we leave it for now in the final place for the explained considerations, so as not to open too wide of a bracket (see *Link No. 7*).

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## Acts 8

### **FLIGHT FROM JERUSALEM. PHILIP IN SAMARIA AND ELSEWHERE**

[8:1-3]. «*They were all scattered ... except the apostles*».

Not only did Saul approve of Stephen's killing, but he employed himself to «ravage» the Church, dragging believers into prison (v. 3); he fully participated in a «great persecution» that dispersed *almost* all, given that only the apostles remained in Jerusalem (8:1,14,25): why this attachment of the apostles to Jerusalem? The question is evidently "un-Jewish". Let us briefly say that this was the city where God had declared that he would live «forever» (1 Kings 8:13) and Jesus himself had said: «It cannot be that a prophet dies outside Jerusalem» (Luke 13:33).

Certainly, Jesus had also said to preach the Gospel to all peoples, but the apostles continued to hope that sooner or later Jerusalem, as a whole, would be converted, inaugurating the long-awaited "kingdom of God". Stephen's act might appear to be an imprudence or even an error, which had caused the mass flight of believers and so, at that point, in Jerusalem, the apostles had to start again, almost anew; but the hope was not over and God was powerful enough to remedy Stephen's "imprudence", committed certainly for noble reasons - but still an imprudence!

The above analysis is not explicitly made by Luke, who, however, specifies that Stephen was buried by anonymous «devout men», who «made great lamentation over him» (v. 2): for this burial and mourning the apostles are not mentioned and it is known that, sometimes, silence can be very eloquent. Another consideration that reinforces the thesis is that when, some time later, Saul offered the same style as Stephen, he was promptly sent away from the church in Jerusalem (9:30).

In remaining in Jerusalem, however, the apostles proved themselves to be courageous and held the importance of having that point of reference useful to everyone for the Church.

[8:4-25]. *Philip brings the Gospel to Samaria.*

Moving on from the question of the "table servants", Luke highlights two contrasting characteristics of the Twelve Apostles, which would have been at once *inadequate* and *essential*. Jesus, for example, had instructed them to be his witnesses, in addition to Jerusalem and Judea, also in Samaria and «to the ends of the earth» (1:8), but we have seen that they did not move from Jerusalem, even when the persecution had arrived there. Thus, God sent Philip to Samaria, another (after Stephen) who should have been in charge of providing assistance; and another (after Stephen) who impressed on evangelisation that *centrifugal* path desired by Jesus.

In Samaria there was something of the descendants of those tribes of Israel who had profoundly deviated from the right faith (2 Kings 17:24-41), but among whom Jesus himself had begun his work (Jn 4:39-42). The result obtained by Philip was exceptional, because, typically, minorities were converted, while in this case it seems that it was the region of Samaria as a whole that received the Word of God (8:6, 14).

Philip worked miracles and brought great joy, the crowds converted and were baptized, but there was no descent of the Holy Spirit like at Pentecost: this was manifested only when Peter and John arrived, who laid hands on those who believed; like at Pentecost, however, there was a "before" in which *no one* had received the Holy Spirit and an "after" in which *all* received him. The work of the Holy Spirit, in short, is to *unite* believers, not to separate them into two categories.

In this episode too, therefore, the apostles appear "inadequate" to bring the Gospel out of Jerusalem, but *essential* for its full manifestation and to maintain the unity of an increasingly diverse Church. The passage ends with Peter and John who, after the "inspection visit", return to Jerusalem again.

[8:26-40]. *Philip's unpredictability.*

One could understand who Paul was by what he did, while Philip was regarded by God as a "jolly": first a "table servant" (6:5), then an evangelist of crowds (8:5-6), then he was led into the wilderness for an important meeting (8:26-29), then as an itinerant evangelist, arriving at Caesarea (8:40). We find Philip at Caesarea after a long time, as if he had not moved from there anymore and we are also induced to think so since he had brought up a family, raising four daughters who were prophetesses (21:9).

Philip is a kind of arsonist, who starts the fire and then runs away. To evangelise Samaria, in fact, he moved north from Jerusalem, while to meet the Ethiopian minister he went south to Jerusalem; then the Spirit took him to the coast west of Jerusalem (Ashdod), from where he headed north, keeping close to the sea and evangelising the various cities, until coming, as stated, to Caesarea (about 100 km from Ashdod).

Caesarea was the Roman stronghold of the region, but presumably Philip will have testified primarily to the circumcised, although there were Romans who sympathised with the God of Israel. It was not known how important the church of Caesarea would be, because it was only then that God would begin systematically to pour out his Spirit on the uncircumcised (Cornelius and others, Ch. 10), but not through Philip (who probably later took care of it), because it was good that such a crucial novelty was initiated by the most authoritative believer, that is, by Peter.

Focusing on the overall figure of Philip, we neglected his famous meeting with the minister of the Queen of Ethiopia (called the eunuch). This minister had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and it is a sign of how much Judaism had already spread. A corroboration of this spread emerged around the 1990, when the Ethiopian tribe of the Falasha was recognized as substantially Jewish and transported by air bridge to Israel, where currently more than 100 thousands of these "black-skinned Jews" live.

It was an angel who directed Philip to the eunuch, who at that time was sitting on his chariot and reading Isaiah 53, a chapter suitable for Philip to proclaim Jesus to him. The eunuch received the message brought to him by Philip and, arriving at a place where there was water, asked to be baptised. Philip baptised him and presumably would have liked to stay in order to explain the eunuch many more things, but he was immediately taken away by the Spirit (in chapter 10 we will see how the Spirit will unexpectedly interrupt also Peter).

Significantly the eunuch did not worry about Philip's disappearance but rather continued his journey «rejoicing» (v. 39). A true evangelist, in short, does not speak of himself and does not bind to himself,

but speaks of Jesus and makes people meet with Jesus. Just as for a true evangelised it's the relationship with Jesus that which he cultivates and that which he is most fond of, even if he is obviously grateful to those who brought him the message.

Christianity brought to Ethiopia by the eunuch has somehow remained there as a majority to this day.

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## Acts 9

### CONVERSION OF SAUL. HEALINGS THROUGH PETER

[9:1-22]. *Saul meets Jesus.*

Let's begin with a statement that seems clearly false: «*Paul* never persecuted *Christians* and, after his conversion, it was *more dangerous* for them than before». To realise why this statement can be considered true, you have to pay attention to the beginning of the part we are dealing with: «But *Saul*, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the *synagogues* at Damascus, so that if he found any *belonging to the Way*, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem». (vv. 1-2).

The difficulty of understanding comes from imagining that those who followed Jesus separated themselves from Judaism, so one imagines that Saul went to Damascus to persecute "Christians": Saul instead went to the «*synagogues* of Damascus» to persecute *the members of the synagogue* who had recognised in Jesus the promised Messiah. There was not yet a specific name for the followers of Jesus, and, as we have considered in 2:41, "to follow the Way" simply meant to be an observant Jew, since the term "Christians" was necessary only *after* non-Jews were baptized (10:48) and referred initially only to them (11:26). Paul needed the authorisation of the high priest precisely because he acted *within* the synagogues and, since Damascus was not a Jewish city, to prosecute the "heretics" he had to forcibly take them to Jerusalem.

The Jew Saul, in short, did not like it if someone abandoned Judaism and let himself be convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, but the persecution (especially outside Judea) was triggered especially if "the heretic" remained in the midst of the Jewish people, who had to stay on the "straight path" according to Saul.

A few days after being baptised, Saul «immediately proclaimed Jesus *in the synagogues*» and «confounded *the Jews* who lived in Damascus» (vv. 20-22). After meeting Jesus, Saul remained a Jew who continued to regard the Gospel message as a "matter *within* Judaism": to become "apostle of the Gentiles", indeed, Saul would have had to make that somewhat complicated journey which is described by Luke in the next chapters. Paul's "dangerousness" to believers in Christ, *after* his conversion, will be seen a little later, commenting on 9:23-31.

Another detail concerns the two names of Saul/Paul: some think that the name Saul would become Paul with the "change of religion". That this approach is wrong is shown by the fact that Luke, even after his conversion, continues to call him Saul (a typically Hebrew name, which was the same as King Saul). Luke uses Saul as long as he is in a substantially Jewish context and the name change between Saul and Paul will take place in 13:9, when he begins his missionary tours in the predominantly Greco-Roman areas. Since Paul, from birth, had dual Jewish and Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28), it is not strange that he also had two names, to be used in the two different contexts.

Let us now look at some particular expression present in the story.

*Ananias* answered « "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul» (vv. 10-11).

Some people are reassured by the thought that Jesus went up to heaven and that, at least for the moment, he should not come back: besides, the place that he has left empty, people have found ways to fill it (with "vicars" of various kinds). That is why the story of this "incursion" of Jesus on Earth is not being paid much attention. The words of Jesus «I am with you always, to the end of the age» (Mt 28:20), in the light of this passage from Acts, acquire a new light. And Jesus only needs a few quick moves (such as speaking first to Saul and then to Ananias) to completely change the path of the Church. Shouldn't this *living* presence of Jesus be more reassuring than his supposed absence?

«*all who call on your name*», that is, of Jesus (v. 14).

This definition is an indirect affirmation of the divinity of Jesus, because it parallels a verse from Joel where Yahweh appears (Joel 2:32; cf. Rom 10:13 and 1Cor 1:2).

«*to carry my name before the Gentiles*» (Gk. 'ethnon' = 'nations/peoples'; v. 15).

When we read "peoples" it is easy for us to think of the "individuals" of those peoples (or 'nations'), but perhaps God has an interest not only for a certain number of Italians, but also for Italy as a nation, that is, for our collective life (language, culture, history). This "suspicion" led us to compile the *Further Insight n. 4 (Is the Gospel only for individuals or for the nations too?)*, placed at the end of this chapter.

Saul «*immediately began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "This man is the Son of God"*» (v. 20).

When Peter used the expression «you are the Christ, the son of the living God» (Mt 16:16) one can also look for its meaning in the Old Testament, given that God had adopted Solomon as his son (1Cr. 28:6) and that "Christ" meant for Peter "anointed as king". In short, Peter could also mean that Jesus was the "new Solomon". But after Paul had spoken to the risen Jesus, his pointing to him as the "Son of God" was more based on the present than on the past; however, the context of Acts 9 clearly shows that even for him that definition meant a break with Judaism, as will be much clearer in later chapters.

[9:23-31]. *Saul, more dangerous as brother than as persecutor.*

Saul immediately went from persecutor to persecuted in Damascus, but because he did not intend to flee, the brothers thought to lower him outside the walls of the city by means of a basket. The question is not easy to explain, because it is not that the Jews of Damascus wanted to kill all believers in Jesus, but *only* Saul (vv. 23-25) who, if he had continued to remain in the city, would have risked drawing persecution even on the other disciples.

In other words, before his conversion it was quite easy to avoid the persecution of Saul, because one could simply stay away from the synagogue; if, instead, you had him in the middle as a brother the persecution became inevitable and, thus, you were "forced" to get rid of him. The same thing happened then also in Jerusalem, but there the brothers did not content themselves to just drive him away from the city, but they accompanied him to Caesarea (that is, about 100 km away). There they embarked him for the destination that they considered more suitable for him, that is, Tarsus, his city. It seems clear that in this sending him home, in addition to the concern for Paul's safety, there was also the apostles' concern for the troubles that Saul could bring. This impression is confirmed by the fact that it would have been some time before the Church would remember Saul, going to look for him in Tarsus (11:25).

Saul had been chosen by Jesus to preach and suffer for him (9:15-16), so why didn't the apostles of Jesus understand him? Here it seems that everyone is right and wrong, but certainly the believers in Jerusalem had sensible reasons to try to avoid another case like that of Stephen, with the following related persecution.

Someone in Saul's place would have set out to reclaim his own vocation, to argue and to discourage himself, but Saul knew well the Word of God and knew that a long time can pass between the call of God and its realisation (for example for David, 1Sam 16:13; 2Sam 5:4). He knew that, in the time of waiting, God did not forget the word He spoke to us and, instead, prepares its fulfilment. Saul, therefore, accepted the events and agreed to stay at home, taking advantage of the time to refine his preparation and grow in the faith: that he did all this can be deduced from the fact that, when Barnabas went looking for him, he found him ready to go to Antioch and able to perform an excellent service, without his presence creating any kind of problem.

Luke concludes the passage in an encouraging way: «Then the church [...] had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied» (v. 31). Encouraging for the "neutralisation" of a great persecutor who would have matured becoming the most effective evangelist, as also should have matured that context of the Church in which he should have operated, as we will see more clearly. Of course, God would have then made sense of everything, but the story reported by Luke is far from those pious tales where everything goes smoothly. In any case, God immediately begins to prepare the suitable scenario for Saul, working indeed on an unwitting Peter, as we see immediately afterwards.

[9:32-43]. *Peter as unwitting forerunner of Paul.*

For the first time Luke describes a Peter who spontaneously moves from Jerusalem, going to visit the brethren. Hence we find him in Lydda, about 40 km in a north-western direction, on the road towards the Mediterranean coast. There Peter is still an instrument of a spectacular miracle, telling a paralytic to get up and make his bed, understandably stirring a mass conversion.

Knowing that he was in Lydda, those of Joppa (that is, Jaffa, next to present-day Tel Aviv) sent for him, because a young believer had died, whom Peter resurrected, remaining then in Joppa «many days». In other words, step by step, Peter arrived on the coast, unwittingly following a stretch of road towards the next destination that God would have called him to reach, that is, Caesarea.

That same Peter who at times had difficulty understanding the developments of God's plan, continued to have an extraordinary intimacy with Jesus, working powerfully for him. Precisely the fact that Peter knew so well *the voice* of God, would have led him to do what he considered absolutely conflicting to His written Word, initiating that revolutionary phase of the Church that begins in the next chapter 10.

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#### **Further Insight n. 4**

### **THE GOSPEL IS FOR INDIVIDUALS ONLY OR ALSO FOR THE PEOPLE?**

It is written that, in Abraham, «all the families of the earth» would be blessed (Gen 12:3), more than individuals. Jesus, son of Abraham (Mt 1:1), wants «all nations» (Mt 28:19) to be made disciples and not, as we can easily think, to make disciples "from all nations". It is clear that Jesus and the apostles have requested the adhesion of individual people, but this does not alter the fact that God wishes to save the nations as such, because he also wants to save the people of Israel as such.

This idea is reinforced by those passages in Revelation which describe the effects of the Gospel preaching throughout the world; for example, at the beginning Jesus is told: «by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation» (Rev 5:9); and the preaching to the various peoples will last until the end: «Then I saw another angel [...] with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people» (Rev 14:6; cf. 10:11). This competes with a diabolical action which is also directed towards various peoples and languages (13:7; 17:15).

In Acts 15 it is noted that God has chosen *a second people* among non-Jews (v. 14) and the *two* peoples that appear in the New Testament are undoubtedly the Hebrew-speaking and the Greek-speaking, taking into account that also the Letter to the Romans is in Greek language (Acts 18:4; 22:2; 26:14; Rom 1:16; Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14; 1Cor 1:22-24).

When God returns to dwell on earth in the New Jerusalem, he will be surrounded by «his people» (Rev 21:3), who will be not only two, but of every kind (Rev 7:9), as already outlined at Pentecost (Acts 2:8-11). It would not be a question, in other words, of taking individuals here and there and making them an indistinct stew, but it is as if the Gospel has to do with peoples too, saving also their language and, therefore, their cultural specificity as well.

It is substantially after the apostolic times that Churches developed in the various languages. For the Latin one, after Paul's powerful testimony (Acts 28:30-31; Phil 1:12-14), the work done by the

first great Christian writer in Latin, Tertullian, comes to mind; then the first translation of the whole Bible into Latin by Jerome, certainly not perfect, but authoritative and extremely useful.

Surely as Protestants we have many difficulties considering "ours" the history of Christianity before Luther, but if we consider the history of Israel told in the Bible, we see how God has constantly tried to guard, to valorise and develop what remained positive in his people (and at times there was very little left). Besides, the history of Protestantism is not so edifying as one might think. Certainly, the more recent and small movements are, the easier it is to feel "superior", especially if the members of that movement read only the history written by the leaders of the movement itself!

The thoughts of this *Further Insight* are more questionable than the others, but we wanted to express them with the main purpose of reflecting on perspectives often ignored.

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## Acts 10

### CORNELIUS, THE FIRST UNCIRCUMCISED TO BE BAPTIZED

[10:1-33]. *The Hebrew Peter forced to appear as a Pagan.*

Peter was in Joppa without being accompanied by other apostles, since they are not mentioned and since he remained there for «many days» (9:43): this would have facilitated his journey to Caesarea, a city also on the coast and well connected with Joppa (about 50 km).

The story told here revolves around Cornelius, chosen by God not by chance. Cornelius was a Roman centurion, an army officer in charge of a hundred soldiers, who actively operated in the region with authority. This allowed him to interact deeply with the Jewish environment in which he was inserted and from which he learned who God really was and the concrete way in which to relate to him (vv. 2-4); even among some of his soldiers there was widespread sympathy for Judaism (v. 7).

Cornelius had "adhered from outside" to Judaism, but it was not possible for him to be a full member while remaining a centurion: certainly not because the God of Israel was contrary to a sensible use of arms, but because he could evidently not abstain from the service on the Sabbath day, nor observe the alimentary rules commanded by Moses and exasperated by the Pharisees. Caesarea was a sort of "Roman capital" of the area and there a centurion was well placed among the ruling class.

In short, Cornelius was just the right person to receive the Gospel and spread it in his Roman environment: the parallel with the eunuch is evident (8:27ff) and the fact that Philip had ended up in Caesarea makes us suppose that he also took care of the Roman neo-converts.

That Cornelius was already prepared can be deduced from his understanding of the angel who spoke to him and from sending immediately some of his trusted men to seek Peter (vv. 3-8). As the men of Cornelius made the not-so-short journey, God began to prepare Peter with an enigmatic and unsettling vision, but without giving him time to think about it too much, nor the possibility of seeking the other apostles' advice (otherwise it would have been all more difficult, as can be deduced from the negative reaction reported in 11:2).

The vision that Peter had was an invitation to eat all sorts of animals: since this was forbidden by the written Word of God, how could that vision come from God? It was to be suspected that there was the paw of the diabolic "roaring lion", always ready to devour believers who turn away from God (1 Peter 5:8). And yet it seemed that the authentic voice of God, which Peter knew well, had spoken to him.

Peter could not solve his tangle of thoughts, but precisely in those circumstances the men sent by Cornelius arrived, who moved the problem from the theoretical to the practical (according to the style of the God of Abraham), inviting Peter to go with them to Caesarea without being clear about the reason, but knowing that there was also someone there who had received an equally enigmatic vision. Peter

agreed to go to Caesarea to try to understand it more, but the perplexities remained and then he was prudently accompanied by some brothers in faith (v. 23).

When Peter arrived at Caesarea and entered Cornelius' house, he did not find only a family in front of him, but a sort of assembly, for Cornelius had purposely invited his relatives and friends: on the whole they were probably not few, since at that time the families were numerous and given the social position of Cornelius.

As soon as he saw Peter (v. 25), Cornelius knelt before him in a way that Peter valued as worship; this is a sign that, although he was "God-fearing" (v. 2), Cornelius still had typical "pagan fears".

Peter began his speech with words that often seem strange to us and that therefore "we jump": «You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation» (v. 28). We instinctively reply: «But Peter what do you say! You are a Christian!». We have already mentioned that Peter was not a "Christian", but a Jew who had accepted the Jewish Messiah, from whom he had learned to live Judaism in a more faithful way to the Word of God, certainly not to transgress it!

Peter continues: «But God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean». We want to say: «It was about time, dear Peter! How did you not understand earlier the great novelties brought by Jesus!». Do we realize that those "great novelties" were not understood even by the other apostles? (11:1-3). Do we realize that those apostles, who in our opinion still had "blindness", were able to carry out the extraordinary actions told so far? We who feel "one step higher" than Peter, have we done more than him?

Peter ends his introductory speech by asking why they had sent for him (v. 29): he was there, in other words, without having understood first why. This is not strange, because we are not able to take on too many things and then God reveals them to us little by little: as to Abraham, when God invited him to leave without telling him where (Heb 11:8), as when Jesus invited his disciples to follow him (Mk 1:16-20).

[10:34-48]. *The "Gospel of Cornelius"*.

Verses 34-43 should be enlarged and framed, because they summarise what could be called "the Gospel of Cornelius", that is, the Gospel adapted for the first time to a non-Jew: let's then see what Peter said in more detail.

«*In every nation*» (v. 35a). The apostles expected the universal expansion of the Gospel to take place within a "Judaism"; the first surprise of Peter, then, is that God was at ease in a pagan house too. This attitude would have become one of the dearest flags for Christians *and it is right for it to be so*, what is not right is to *backproject* this realisation of Peter at the beginning of Acts or even at the beginning of the Gospel.

«*anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*» (v. 35b). Before meeting Peter, Cornelius was indeed pleasing to God (cf. v. 4), but it is only with the message of the Gospel that he would understand the forgiveness of sins, receiving the Holy Spirit.

«*the word that he sent to Israel*» (v. 36). The message that God addressed to Cornelius was "indirect", being the adaptation of something more complex, originally revealed «*to Israel*»: for Cornelius this was quite evident, but then we, his descendants, forgot him and demanded that the *true Gospel* be that which developed outside of Judaism!

The message that Peter brought to Cornelius was not substantially different from that preached before to the Jews, even if explicit references to the Old Testament (Abraham, Moses, David, prophets) are missing. Jesus is presented in his humanity («Jesus of Nazareth», v. 38), in his powerful life, death and resurrection, in his ability to forgive sins.

According to Old Testament prophecies, the Hebrews expected much more from the Messiah than what Jesus achieved in his first coming; that is why Peter also announced to the Hebrews what Jesus would do in the future («restoring all the things», 3:21). The message to Cornelius, however, ended with the *personal dimension* of salvation, not because Peter decided to stop there, but because it was the Holy Spirit who interrupted him at that point, suddenly descending upon *all* the listeners, who were «speaking in tongues and extolling God» (v. 46).

Peter recounted this unexpected interruption of the Spirit by saying that he had «began to speak» (11:15) and this is a sign that he wanted to say many other things, but God used with Cornelius that



"gradual method" which he often adopts, so that only a "first dose" would be revealed to him: for Peter it was a "small dose", but for Cornelius that little was already a total revolution.

The trouble, as mentioned before, is what then we, descendants of Cornelius, have made of it, stating that that *little* in reality would be the *totality*: in fact we Christians, not being able to understand them, often despise the broader horizons, considering them even harmful!

Faced with the evidence of the conversion of Cornelius and his friends, Peter found the courage to baptise *for the first time* an uncircumcised. All this opened up huge perspectives, but Peter was puzzled and troubled by what he had done and one can guess that by the fact he stayed there only a few days and only because of the insistence of the new converts (v. 48).

That of Cornelius, for Peter, remained an exception hardly understandable and he did not immediately get its logical consequences, which instead anonymous believers did (11:20-21), who from the episode of Cornelius drew the implicit rule, becoming an instrument for the formation of the *first church with the prevalence of uncircumcised*, which was the church of Antioch (here is another note "in filigree" of the arisen "inadequacy" of Peter).

Even when the newness of Antioch was consolidated by Barnabas and Saul (11:22-26), for Peter a "baptised and uncircumcised" remained an incomprehensible combination, to the point that later, just as he was visiting Antioch, he promoted a resounding turnaround, forcing Paul to a very severe public reprimand (Gal. 2:11-21).

The baptism of an uncircumcised as Cornelius, therefore, was the beginning of a great revolution *in* the Church and God began it with a *fact*, he then consolidated it with other *facts* (church of Antioch) and spread it with further *facts* (first missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul, Chap. 13-14): *only later* a first biblical frame will be sought (Acts 15), *only later* Paul will explain in writing all the consequences on the theological level (Letter to the Romans), *only towards the end of the New Testament* there will be the reflections contained in the Hebrews' letter. As usual then, God first produces the facts and then the talking: to better understand his work, we must then first reflect on the facts (*Acts of the Apostles*) and then on the discourses (*Letters of the Apostles*).

There will be a way to talk about it, but we anticipate a question: «The baptism of an uncircumcised like Cornelius, occurred *against, beyond or in line* with the Old Testament?» Our belief, as in some way already communicated, is that it happened *in line* with it, but we will see the reasons by commenting on Acts 15; for the moment we simply observe that even in the Old Testament, when human beings' salvation was at stake, God had asked one of his servants to eat very impure food... And Ezekiel had raised the same objection as Peter! (Ezekiel 4:14; Acts 10:14).

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## Acts 11

### ANTIOCH, THE FIRST CHURCH OF UNCIRCUMCISED

[11:1-18]. «*The circumcision party criticised him ... But Peter began and explained it to them*».

It may seem that this section contains unnecessary repetitions, but the importance of a fact is also the way it is relayed. Therefore, even if its content was more or less seen in the previous chapter, it is necessary to grasp some other aspect.

The episode of Cornelius aroused a vast echo precisely in what, at that time, was the heart of Christianity: that is, Judea and its capital Jerusalem, where the twelve apostles had their base. The "circumcision party" who contested Peter cannot be separated from the apostles, for the apostles as well were circumcised and had great influence on others.

Peter based his defence not on biblical quotations, but on the account of the events that occurred and that could be confirmed by the six brothers who had accompanied him (v. 12). The only appeal to the Word of God, certainly critical, was Jesus' sentence concerning the fact that his disciples would be baptised with the Holy Spirit (v. 16). So Peter concluded: «who was I that I could stand in God's way?» (v. 17).

When God works *facts* that do not fit into our *doctrinal schemes*, can we ignore those facts? Evidently not, but the temptation is very strong, because not ignoring them is often tiring and sometimes involves the restructuring of all our understanding of the Word of God; with the inevitable challenge on the part of our "travelling companions" who didn't make that effort.

Contrary to what some think, the believers of the circumcision party were not closed in their minds and became convinced, concluding with a few simple words that summarise well what had happened: «Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life» (v. 18).

Cornelius is therefore accepted as "brother in Christ", but his way of being a believer is seen as ADDITIONAL to what has happened so far, while then his descendants have willed to pretend that way as a SUBSTITUTE; thanks be to God who has preserved intact the light of his written Word: we must also thank the descendants of Cornelius, to whom I belong.

[11:19-30]. «So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul ... and [they] taught a great many people».

In the episode of Cornelius, Peter does not seem to have fared badly, although once again he does not have the typical role of the leader, but as that of one who adapts by necessity (as in the case of Samaria, Acts 8:14). For it is Cornelius who goes to seek Peter and not vice versa; Peter then goes to Caesarea without knowing the reason, on which he will ask Cornelius himself for enlightenment (10:29).

In Luke's "filigree drawing", the episode of Cornelius is an essential passage to arrive at the "apostle of the Gentiles", that is, at Paul. The need for a Paul is clearly and precisely seen by the inadequate behaviour that the Twelve had after understanding that «God has granted repentance to Gentiles».

The Twelve had the task of spreading the Gospel «to the ends of the earth» (1:8) and, after Cornelius, God facilitated the task by pouring out his Spirit even on those who had objective difficulties to submit to the law of Moses (observance of the Sabbath, rules on food and purity, etc.). This opened up immense prospects... but the Twelve continued in their previous commitments, as if nothing had happened!

Then the Spirit carried on his "strategic plan" by means of simple and anonymous believers (v. 20), who did nothing extraordinary but, having heard news that God had granted repentance even to gentiles (11:1), «spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus» (11:20).

To make a comparison, the boy who put five loaves and two fishes at Jesus' disposal certainly made a noble gesture, but the extraordinary happened when Jesus multiplied them, leaving them with 12 baskets of leftovers (Jn 6:9-13). In parallel, God extraordinarily brought to fruition the testimonies of those believers who came to Antioch in passing and there were so many conversions that the news reached Jerusalem.

In Samaria, the church in Jerusalem sent Peter and John, its chief exponents (8:14). But in Antioch not even any of the twelve went, but Barnabas. It seems evident that the Twelve did not fully understand the importance of the turning point, or perhaps they did not feel able to move effectively in that non-Jewish environment, while Barnabas was born among the pagans and, therefore, was perhaps considered more suitable (the Samaritans, on the other hand, were more like the Jews, and perhaps that is why the apostles went to them).

There is, however, a hint that suggests a particular reason that favoured Barnabas: among those who had evangelized Antioch, many were of Cyprus as Barnabas and had known each other while staying at Jerusalem (4:36; 11:20); so it is likely that the Cypriot evangelists, being in Antioch by way of passage, and not being very experienced, desired the collaboration of their countryman Barnabas.

Barnabas immediately placed at the service of the church his powers to encourage, his goodness, his faith, and the gift of the Spirit which he had received, contributing to great growth in numbers (v. 24). He realised, however, that the development of that community, composed mainly of uncircumcised, posed serious problems of understanding the Word of God, problems he found

difficult to face. It needed someone who not only knew the Word of God in depth, but who knew how to apply it to new circumstances, someone who... the profile gave an unequivocal result: SAUL. Barnabas would have thought, «I immediately saw that the young man was of value, but instead we sent him back home and now where will he be, what will he be doing, how will he feel? To go to Tarsus one would have to travel 150 km by sea, but I have to go looking for him».

Going to Tarsus, Barnabas found not only that Saul had remained there, but that he was ready for the task as when they had parted. Then they returned to Antioch and there they carried on a work which Luke describes with the verb "to teach" (or 'instruct'; v. 26), a verb which he had not used for the action of Barnabas alone (vv. 23-24); thus, making it clear which was the specific contribution of Saul, who recommended to Timothy what he evidently practiced: «Preach the word, be ready in season and out of season [...] with complete patience and teaching» (2 Tim 4:2).

For the pagans of Antioch, those who had believed in Christ were evidently no longer pagans, but they had not even become true Jews, even if they looked like them and among them there were some Jews (such as Barnabas, Saul and those who had begun evangelisation). Being a new reality, they invented a new name: "CHRISTIANS", that is, followers of Christ. Obviously we are not surprised by this name, but we should be surprised that it has not been used before. We have already mentioned this fact (see commentary at 2:41 and 9:1-22) and now wish to review the various ways in which Luke refers to Christians, without making them be perceived as a separate group from the Jews.

Luke begins the account by placing the apostles in the centre (1:2) and then continues with the pronoun "they" (1:4,9,10), presenting a list indicating them with "all these" (1:13-14). With the apostles there were also others and altogether there were 120, whom Luke calls "brothers" (1:15-16): a common term among the Hebrews (cf. e.g. 2:29,37).

The 3,000 converted at Pentecost are called "those who accepted the Word of Peter" (2:41), then generically "those who believed" (2:44). Their whole is referred to as "community" (2:47), while the two thousand that are added then (4:2) are referred to as those who "believed". In 4:32 they are defined as "the multitude of those who had believed" and we stop here, being now clear that *Luke does not fall into the "retro-projection", that is, in applying the name of "Christians" at a time preceding the actual appearance of that name.*

The chapter ends with two marginal episodes, but they have their importance. It is recounted of some prophets who came to Antioch from Jerusalem and of them only Agabus is mentioned (11:27-28), whose prophecy would have occurred punctually. Agabus, incidentally, sometime later would have prophesied specifically about Paul, therefore the episode recounted here, which also exalts its reliability, would then have given more value to the courage shown by Paul in deciding to go to Jerusalem nonetheless, despite the danger announced to him by Agabus (21:10-14).

The relations between the church in Jerusalem and that in Antioch were strengthened when Antioch, which until then had received primarily on the spiritual level, was concerned to bring economic help to the believers of Judea affected by the famine. This task was entrusted to Barnabas and Saul (11:30), who were increasingly seen as closely co-operating: this episode thus serves as a beacon for the account of their subsequent and explicit call from the Spirit (13:2).

The recording of the excellent relations between Antioch and Jerusalem is essential to legitimise the role of the "driving force" that Antioch will come to acquire, instead of a Jerusalem no longer able to carry it out. In Antioch, after the initial prevalent function of Barnabas, there will occur a gradual emergence of Paul, who will eventually continue in substantial autonomy (15:36-40).

Luke, in short, traces a "common thread of legitimacy" that passes from Peter and the Twelve to Barnabas and then to Paul, who is thus characterised as someone who continues the history begun by the Twelve, in the same Spirit. All this, however, will become clearer later.

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## Acts 12

### HEROD: A "SMALL ANTICHRIST" JUDGED BY GOD

The previous chapter ends with a flash on Agabus which is strongly reminiscent of some "raids" of the Old Testament prophets (e.g., 2 Chr 11:2-4). The "Old Testament" climate continues in this chapter 12, where God shows that he has not ceased to exercise control over political authorities, even if sometimes his choices are not easy to understand.

The chapter seems to interrupt Luke's "filigree drawing", because events that are relevant are introduced, but they have little to do with the story of Paul (which is close to Luke's heart). It can be discerned that Luke considers this chapter as a parenthesis, not only from the substance of the story, but also from the last verse, which seems to take up the discourse interrupted at the end of the previous chapter: at the end of chapter 11, in fact, we find that Barnabas and Paul are going to Jerusalem and there is a return to them at the end of chapter 12, as if the thread of the interrupted discourse was to be resumed for reasons of force majeure. In this chapter 12 we will look at the meaning in itself, then, without looking for an underlying filigree design.

Perhaps the "logical necessity" of this chapter and its meaning should be sought, as usual, in its simplest sense. Describing the *political* reality of their time from God's point of view was a typical activity of the prophets, who wrote about it much more than they cared about the future. Indeed, often glimpses on the future served primarily to illuminate *their* present. Thus the prophets of Israel came to write what happened in their time «upon Israel and upon *all the kingdoms* of the countries» (1 Chr 29:30).

In short, after leading us on the path of birth of the new "uncircumcised synagogue" (that is, the church of Antioch), as a good prophet, Luke also describes the political context in which God places it.

On the relationship between church and politics, we Christians often have confused ideas. Luke explains the matter in a simple and concise way, because those who had the background of the Old Testament understood it easily. In fact, the *new relations* between a politically non-autonomous people of God and the political authorities follow the *old relations*: well-described both before the formation of the State of Israel (from Abraham to the Exodus) and when this State falls apart. It is not by chance that the Bible dwells upon Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus (e.g., Isa 44:24 to 45:13; Jer 25:1-14; 27:1-11; Book of Daniel) because that is where it clarifies the new general political situation.

The Bible then speaks little of the relationship between believers/politics, but only because that approach remains valid, as Christ shows in his submission to imperial political authority, which Jeremiah had in his time invited [the Jews] to do (Jer 27:11). When Christ subtly warned Pilate that his power was a power derived from "Someone" who stood above him and to whom he would answer, he behaved very much like Daniel did with Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:24-25).

The Herod mentioned here is Herod Agrippa I, whose grandfather was responsible for the slaughter of the newborns (Mt 2:16). This Agrippa, who began to mistreat the Church, reminds us of pharaoh: as God let pharaoh manifest his wickedness, to then reaffirm His sovereignty (Ex 1-15), so Luke shows us that God let Herod kill the apostle James, but then He set up a barricade to defend the Church, and when the king's pride went beyond measure, «an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last» (23). All clear, then? Yes, it is all clear what God clarifies, but if we want to go beyond it, it all becomes confused.

- It is clear that God allows his people to be persecuted. Less clear is the reason: perhaps to show his power in letting us endure trials, perhaps to show his love to enemies. That God allows the "defeat" of his own is clearly stated by Daniel, Jesus, and Revelation (Dan 7:21; Luke 9:22; Rev 13:7).
- The prevalence of the wicked does not mean that God is distracted or powerless, and He later proves that by judging the persecutors (Dan 7:26-27; Mt 25:31-33; Rev 19:11-15).
- God allows the persecution of his people, but his "strategic plan" goes ahead. Today his "strategic plan" is the spread of the Gospel throughout the world, so God is very irritated when political

authorities (like Herod Agrippa) interfere with His purpose. Despite the evil power of the various Herods, Luke reiterates what we have defined as the "chorus": «The Word of God progressed and spread more and more» (12:24).

- Already during Israel's stay in Egypt, God had made it clear that he does not ask political authorities for favouritism (he does not need it!), but only that his people be left *free* to serve him (Exodus 7:16).
- The church in Antioch may appear as an "unexpected novelty", but God had begun to prepare it already in the time of Solomon. For example, there was the extraordinary conversion of Naaman, head of the enemy army of Syria (2 Kings 5), where Antioch is located! Through Solomon, then, «all the kings of the earth» were shown the wisdom that God had put in his heart (2 Chronicles 9:22).
- Why is James killed and Peter miraculously freed? It does not seem to me that God clarifies it, but it is certain that it *is not* because James was more of a sinner than Peter, as John the Baptist had not been killed because of some specific sin of his. From Abel on it was clear how, by faith, one can experience both extraordinary victories and endure extraordinary losses (Heb 11:30-40). It is not surprising that victories are more pleasing than the enduring, it is surprising that many Christians think that one can identify with the Risen One by separating him from the Crucified One, as if the apostles had only taught us the pleasant side of belonging to Christ.

The chapter ends with the "detail" that Barnabas and Paul, returning from Jerusalem, took with them Mark (also called John), son of a Mary who had made her house a church (v. 12). A detail that will prove important, because it will be Mark the point of separation between Barnabas and Saul (15:36-40).

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**Link n. 5**  
**ACTS 12, BETWEEN EXODUS AND REVELATION**

Reading Acts 12 we can see a connection with the beginnings and the end of the history of the people of God: it is therefore important to dwell on it.

The theme of political authority that persecutes the people of God, to the point of deluding itself of being stronger than the God of that people, we have already mentioned that it makes one think of the Pharaoh of Egypt described in Exodus 1:8-22 and who will then be judged by the return of Moses (Ex, Ch. 8-14).

Let's not dwell on the kings of nations enemy to Israel who were defeated in the time of the judges and kings (e.g. Judges 3:9-10; 7:9; 2 Chr 20:22; 32:20-21), so that we can immediately reach that "fourth kingdom" described by Daniel and resembling a terrible beast with four heads and ten horns (Daniel 7:6-7), who «shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High», but then will «be consumed and destroyed to the end. And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High» (Daniel 7:25-27). It is clear that Daniel is performing the function of pointing out to the people of God the seemingly contradictory ways through which the coming of the kingdom of God will occur.

Daniel describes a coming of the Messiah/Christ preceded by a period in which evil seems to prevail; this description of the *first coming*, Revelation will see it as prophetic of the *second coming* of the Messiah/Christ, since it will also be preceded by a terrible "beast" with ten horns, «drunk with the blood of the saints»; this beast and his allies will fight the Lamb Jesus, but «the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful» (Rev 17:3-14).

Very significant is to draw the connection between Acts 12 and 1 John 2:18, where it is written: «as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come». The coming of the Antichrist, therefore, is not seen by John as the bursting of something completely new, but the rush to the tip of a dynamic already present («the spirit of the antichrist [...] now is in the world already», 1Jn 4:3), in which "little antichrists" emerge, like Herod, who seem to prevail, but who soon are judged by what can be defined as "the little and secret returns of Christ", who for believers are unequivocal signs of his "great return" in which «every eye will see him» (Rev 1:7).

Even in the diversity of situations and in the advancement of God's plan, then, the dynamics remain similar, because the character of God does not change.

## Acts 13

### BEGINNING OF BARNABAS AND PAUL' MISSIONARY WORK

[13:1-13]. «The Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.».

In listing the five principal church leaders of Antioch, Luke places Barnabas first, while Saul is last. Even if he is appointed last, it was clear to me that *Paul* was the most important personality. Writing these notes, however, forced me not to neglect the details, including the reversal of appointment order that will follow (i.e., Paul before Barnabas, see below *Further Insight no. 5*). We have already mentioned that Luke uses the Hebrew name of *Saul* as long as the context remains predominantly Jewish, as it was still in the church of Antioch, introducing in this passage the more suitable name of *Paul* when he begins his service among the gentiles (v. 9).

One often imagines a *persecuting Saul* who, following conversion, immediately becomes *the apostle Paul*, while we have considered that getting to be inserted into a church (Antioch) was the result of not an easy path. Therefore, the *initial* phase of the relationship between Barnabas and Saul must be carefully considered, because what we call "the vice of backward projection" moves back the events that instead occur later, transforming a *historical path* into a reassuring *stable framework*.

Going back in part to what was already mentioned, we note that Saul was young when Stephen was stoned (7:58-60), while Barnabas had long since entered the Church and was well known by the apostles (4:36-37): Barnabas was therefore considerably more advanced in years than Saul.

When we then find Saul who was going to Damascus to persecute those of the "Way", obviously a few years must have passed, with Saul just having arrived at adulthood. Having become a believer and finding it difficult to integrate into the Church, Paul was welcomed by Barnabas with an attitude of the "paternal" type, Barnabas being the older of age and faith (9:26-28). But Saul cannot be considered a "disciple" of Barnabas, for various reasons: because Barnabas was not a teacher (rabbi) and in fact he did not have a circle of disciples; because Saul had already completed his biblical training «at the feet of Gamaliel» (22:3); because Saul showed that he knew immediately how to apply his biblical knowledge to faith in Christ (9:20-22).

In short, it can be said that Saul began his journey in the Church under the "protection" of Barnabas, who regarded him as a sort of "adopted son". This is corroborated by the fact that Saul arrived at Antioch precisely because he was brought there by Barnabas, who, having successfully managed the consolidation and expansion of the church on behalf of the apostles, enjoyed an undisputed prestige there.

If, therefore, we consider the previous facts without allowing ourselves to be conditioned by the subsequent ones (concerning Paul's *later* prestige), it is not strange that, among the leaders of the church of Antioch, Barnabas should be appointed first and Saul last. Significantly also the Holy Spirit, in calling them to service, will first place Barnabas and then Saul (v. 2).

Paying a little extra attention, it can be noted that in the group of five leaders of the church of Antioch (v. 1) there is already an *enriching diversity*, which goes beyond the complementarity between Barnabas and Paul. For example, there is *racial* diversity, since there is also a «Niger» (that is, a "black one") and one from Cyrene (the current Libya). Even social *diversity* was not lacking, as there was a «childhood friend of Herod the Tetrarch»; this Herod was the son of one who had the new-borns killed at the time of Jesus' birth (Mt 2:16) and had himself killed John the Baptist (Mt 14:1-11): it will have been very encouraging for those believers to see that the Gospel was entering even where they would not have thought.

Through Antioch, God would have started an extraordinary work, but not because that church was so particular. Certainly it showed a good attitude in disposing itself to prayer and to listening to the voice of God (v. 2), but the initiative is of the Holy Spirit, who gives a precise order («Set apart

for me Barnabas and Saul») without giving particular reasons («for the work to which I have called them»). Motivations are not infrequently absent in God's call (as in the case of Peter being sent to Cornelius, cf. commentary on 10:29).

Let's conclude with a military analogy. When there is a war, the roles are assigned primarily by headquarters, which are not in the centre, but the outskirts; in the fight between believers and the enemies of Jesus, the "strategic direction" of war has already in fact moved from Jerusalem (centre of resistance) to Antioch (expanding outskirts): formal ratification is still lacking, however form cannot but adapt to reality, as we shall see.

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**Further Insight n. 5**  
**FROM "BARNABAS AND SAUL" TO "PAUL AND BARNABAS"**

When making a list of leaders, the order in which they are appointed is an important clue; plus in this case Luke uses precise and meaningful criteria (13:1). Initially, Barnabas is first named («Barnabas and Saul»: 11:30; 12:25; 13:1,2,7). Then, immediately after the replacement of "Saul" with "Paul" (13:9), the order of appointment will also be reversed («Paul and Barnabas»: 13:43,46,50; 14:1,14). The greatest importance of Paul in the Greek context is immediately made clear by Luke with the formula «Paul and *his companions*» (13:13), where Barnabas is not even named, but placed together with the "companions" of whom at that time Paul had in fact taken over the leadership.

In chapter 15 there is a fluctuation in the order of appointment between «Paul and Barnabas» (vv. 2, 22 and 35) and «Barnabas and Paul» (vv. 12 and 25), but the context sufficiently clarifies the reason for Barnabas' momentary return to a prominent role. He was in fact very familiar with the apostles, who had initially considered Saul only because he had been introduced to them by Barnabas (9:26-27). Barnabas then had the role of the apostles' "special envoy" at Antioch, and it is only natural that, when the apostles wished to have a report on what was happening there, they would listen more to Barnabas than to Paul (15:12). Even when the apostles wrote to those brothers to whom they had sent Barnabas at the time, they referred to him more than Paul (15:25).

We have dwelt on these details not so much for their relevance in themselves, but as an encouragement to treasure even those details present in Scripture that often seem "random", but only because we have not paid sufficient attention to them. It is inevitable to remember that Jesus considered the smallest sign of the Word of God by no means negligible (Mt 5:18).

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[13:4-13]. *Launch of Barnabas and Saul's mission.*

Luke had already specified that the mission's initiative was not of the Church, but of the Holy Spirit (v. 2), even though the Church had the merit of hearing and welcoming it. This accords with the continuation of the story: «So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia» (v. 4). Their preaching began in the synagogues (vv. 5 and 14), but then it would increasingly involve the Gentiles (v. 46). Barnabas and Saul took Mark with them (v. 5), but he would soon return home (v. 13). A "filigree design" of Luke is to emphasize the similarities of Paul with Peter, in order to give Paul further legitimacy. Paul's judgment on the magician Elymas (vv. 8-11), in fact, recalls that of Peter on the magician Simon (8:18-24).

[13:14-52]. *Paul's exemplary speech in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia.*

Speaking of parallels, in this speech at the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, Paul begins with a style reminiscent of that of Stephen (7:2ff), but then ends in a less harsh way (cf. 7:51-53 with 13:40-41). One reason might be that Paul is addressing Jews who heard the message for the first time, while Stephen's audience was mostly composed of people who had previously rejected the message. In fact, when the Jews subsequently persevere in a hostile attitude, Paul's language tends to be harder (v. 46). There is also an obvious parallel with Peter's preaching, because Paul's exposition is also closely related to the Old Testament and aims at proclaiming the forgiveness of sins through Jesus (13:38 compared to

2:38). Paul's preaching, in other words, did not differ from the one previously practiced by the Church and the presence and approval of Barnabas is also a guarantee of this.

Antioch of Pisidia was in what is now Turkey, but then it was in a fully Greek cultural context. The synagogue, therefore, was also frequented by non-Jews, who participated in it at various levels: from the "fear of God", that is, from recognizing in YHWH the true God, up to a complete adherence and to being circumcised, thus becoming full Jews.

Significant is the description of the synagogue meeting, focused on the Word of God and where an unknown person like Paul is also invited to speak (vv. 14-15). Paul took the opportunity and addressed both categories of listeners: «Men of Israel and you who fear God» (v. 16, cf. also 26), arousing much interest both among the Jews and among those non-Jewish frequenters (proselytes; v. 43). A majority of the Jews, however, did not accept Paul's message and actively opposed him by joining the pagans, to the point of unleashing a real persecution (vv. 43-50). This created a new situation, which should be considered more closely.

There is first of all to note the great influence that Judaism also exerted in populations located in the Greek context, so much so that «almost the whole city» was intrigued by the novelties that emerged on the previous Sabbath in the synagogue (v. 44; see also 14:4).

Verses 45 and 50 begin with «But the Jews», meaning those Jews who did not accept the Gospel. The language is clearly imprecise, because even among those who had accepted the Gospel there were Jews who continued to feel as such, as Paul and Barnabas did too. In other words, since *the majority* of the Jews had not adhered to the Gospel, the synagogue remained under their control and therefore they represented the Jews. This change of meaning of the word "Jews" is not to be neglected, all the more so when one considers that Luke was a close associate of Paul and therefore reflects his approach. The meaning of the word "Jews" in the Epistles of Paul, then, is not always the same as in the Gospels, but this is generally not taken into account.

There is much discussion about what meaning to give to the expression "people of Israel" (which is equivalent to "Jewish people") present in Romans chapters 9-11 and many define it as "*ethnic Israel*". But this is unsustainable, because even Paul, Barnabas and the thousands of Jews who had believed were of Jewish "*ethnicity*". Once again, then, it is precisely the book of Acts that makes it clear, recording how *the apostles, with "Jews", tend to indicate the nonbelieving majority*.

The final message that Paul and Barnabas addressed to the Jews is the following: «It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles» (v. 46). It is not that from then on Paul will no longer speak to the Jews, because this scheme of "first to the Jews and then to the others" will continue to repeat itself in the other cities too, until the final destination of Rome (28:17-28).

At Antioch in Pisidia, as elsewhere, the preaching of the Gospel reshuffles the cards and thus two new blocks are formed that show solidarity within themselves: the division is no longer between Jews and Gentiles, but between those who have accepted the Gospel (partly Jews and partly Gentiles) and those who did not accept it (partly Jews and partly Gentiles). It is in this new situation that the word "Christians" acquires its full meaning, because the Jews who believe in Jesus are no longer in fact allowed to attend the synagogue: however, it should not be neglected that it is *the others* who consider them incompatible and who throw them out, they are not the ones to leave.

The new situation that has come about makes necessary the constitution of new "Christian synagogues" that welcome all those who have believed in the Gospel, both Jews and Gentiles. We use "Christian synagogues", because "church" and "synagogue" have the same meaning as "assembly" and because Christian churches are built on the model of synagogues (reading the Word of God, exhortation, prayer, leadership of the "elders", mutual assistance, climate of freedom, etc.). Of course, if you compare a Christian church with Temple-centred Judaism, the differences are sensitive, but the transition from synagogue-Judaism of the diaspora to a Christian church brought little novelty.

What we saw for Antioch of Pisidia is evidently representative of what Paul generally said in the synagogues and which Luke avoids reporting each time (cf. for example 13:5; 14:1; 17:1; 18:4; 19:8).

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## Acts 14

### CONCLUSION OF BARNABAS AND PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY TRIP

At Iconium too we find the usual alliance between «the Jews who refused to believe» and the Gentiles, directed against «the brothers», that is, those Jews and those Gentiles who had believed (v. 2). But those who had previously been called «the Jews who had refused to believe» are just called «Jews» (v. 5), since it is now understood that those who refused to believe were the majority (as we have considered earlier).

Luke calls the pair Paul and Barnabas «apostles» (vv. 5 and 14), but for us "the apostle Paul" is paired with "the apostle Peter", in a widely used formula: "The apostles Peter and Paul". Another sign that something's off is that it does not sound right to us to say "the apostle Barnabas". They seem unimportant details but, instead, they can be the sign of a deep distortion employed to change the vision of the Church that emerges from the Book of Acts; on this it is then appropriate to do the *Further Insight n. 6 (The apostles "Paul and Barnabas", not "Peter and Paul")*, placed at the end of the chapter.

Fleeing from Iconium to avoid persecution, the two apostles arrive at Lystra, where Paul heals a «cripple from birth» after «looking...at him» (vv. 8-9): to leave little doubt on the will of Luke to highlight the parallels of Paul with Peter, is that not only does Paul do something that is entirely similar to what Peter accomplished in 3:1-7, but even the same words are used (the ones above between quotation marks are the same in the two episodes).

But while Peter had worked in the Jewish context, Paul worked in a pagan context and then the spectacular healing induced the people to adopt an attitude of adoration towards Paul and Barnabas, who managed «scarcely» (v. 18) to make them desist, with a speech (vv. 15-17) which references the first chapters of Genesis; it is indeed emphasised that all human beings are of the same nature (drawing from the fact that Adam and Eve are parents of all), that the true God is not represented by idols, but is the Creator of all things (Gen 1) and it is that true God who had given them «food and gladness» in their hearts: this last expression refers to the blessing that God had pronounced to Noah and his descendants (Gen 8:22).

Paul and Barnabas were to teach Lystra the fruit of thousands of years of history to those who, of that history, had forgotten even the first pages! There was some justification for those Jews who reproached Peter for baptising the pagan Cornelius and fraternising with him (Acts 11:1-3), just as there was some justification for those Jews who, even if they tolerated that they should not be circumcised before baptism, demanded that it be done at least *afterwards* (15:5). *Inserting a pagan within the people of God immediately, then, looked like an admission to the university of those who had not even finished elementary school!*

Some define the Church as "an absurdity that stands miraculously". Others say that "the Church proves to be the work of God because human beings cannot destroy it". Finally, some Jews say that "the Church is made by active pagans converted by bad Jews". Each of these definitions grasps some truth and we Christians must recognise the Church's limits and weaknesses, because the more the Church lowers herself, the more the work of her God is exalted who sustains her. But it must be said that, if it is easy to speak ill of the Church, it is even more so of the other organisations, in comparison with which the Church shines like the moon at night: in fact, God always brings out, within his people, an urge to be renewed, while the degeneration of human organisations is irreversible (see Nazism, communism and various paganisms).

The crowd of Lystra who idolized Paul and Barnabas, was at the instigation of the Jews from Antioch of Pisidia and Iconium, soon transformed into an angry crowd, who stoned Paul to the point of believing him dead. But Paul was only unconscious and the next day, as if nothing had happened, he evangelised the next city of Derbe. Then he proposed to return to his church in Antioch of Syria, but instead of

going in that direction, he turned back and went back to those cities which he had evangelised and which had proved very dangerous (Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia): This is because there were new converts there who needed to be encouraged and the best way to do so was to show that you were not afraid.

Paul told them that «we must enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations» and it is evident that the apostles were waiting for that kingdom which would come with the *glorious* coming of King Jesus, which would finally reduce his enemies to be the footstool of his feet (Mt 25:31-33; Heb 10:13): Jesus also works in the present and God always remains sovereign, but Jesus' *present* way of reigning should not be confused with his *full reign* after his return.

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### **Further Insight n. 6** **THE APOSTLES “PAUL AND BARNABAS”, NOT “PETER AND PAUL”**

The work of God in the New Testament resembles to some extent the construction of a house, where the various craftsmen succeed each other roughly one at a time (scraper, bricklayer, electrician, plumber). John the Baptist is the initiator and Jesus is connected to his work (Mt 3:13-16; Jn 1:29-37), but when Jesus begins to act, John begins to disappear. Something similar happens between Jesus and the Twelve Apostles, who take on the utmost importance after Jesus has gone. Even between Peter and Paul a mechanism of "collaboration and succession" is established, so Paul must be seen as an operator who logically comes *after* Peter. The fact that they continue to operate at the same *time* is somewhat misleading, because it soon happens that they no longer operate in the same *space* (Gal 2:7-9).

The fact that not even the Twelve Apostles prove to be "steadily adequate" in carrying on the work of God, somewhat upsets those who work in the Church, because understandably they strive to be "adequate for life". In order to stay calm, we must then try to neutralise this "disorderly" emergence of Paul. One way is to make him a pair with Peter and this explains the fate of the expression "the apostles Peter and Paul", with which Paul is substantially considered as one of the Twelve Apostles. The expression "the apostles Peter and Paul", however, is misleading, because it wants to give the impression that Peter and Paul belonged to the same category. Since Luke uses the expression "the apostles Paul and Barnabas" (14:14), why don't we also put Barnabas in that group? In short, there is something wrong with the common way of thinking about the "apostles" and so it is good to deal with the subject in a more orderly fashion.

By "apostles" (which means "one who is sent off") in common language we mean those so defined by Jesus himself (Luke 6:13), who considered them most trusted and "special representatives" and who will act as missionaries-founders. Not only did Jesus appoint them to this special *assignment*, but he also *prepared* them in a special way and Mark clearly specifies the two sides of the medal: «He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach» (Mk 3:14-15). As the word "apostle" is generic, those chosen by Jesus are often referred to as "the Twelve" (e.g., Mt 26:14; Mk 11:11; 14:20; Luke 9:12; Jn 6:67; 20:14; Acts 6:2; 1 Cor 15:15).

Apart from the ambiguous case of Judas, which Jesus chose despite knowing his unreliability (Jn 6:64) and who was later replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:24-26), it can be said that this group succeeded in carrying out the tasks assigned to them by the Lord. In Acts, Luke made us see them full of the Holy Spirit (2:4), who stir up conversions by the thousands (4:4), healing all (5:16) and even raising up a dead person (9:40); under their direction «the word of God increased and multiplied» (12:24).

The shocking fact is that these Twelve, chosen by Jesus, instructed by Jesus, commissioned by Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, extraordinarily effective and without having sinned... they suddenly seem to be considered by God as inadequate to direct the Church in those new areas which they know little and for which they are therefore ill-suited. The appearance on the scene of Paul and the role he assumes at a certain point, in other words, certify that not even the early Church could have a "stable leadership".

Not finding in the New Testament a solid foundation for "normalising" Paul, some have the audacity to argue that the *true* substitute of Judas would not have been Matthias, having been chosen in a wrong way (that is, by lot, 1:26), but Paul, because he was instead chosen by the Spirit: as if Paul had been available since that moment and not several years later! As if the Spirit had not called Paul with Barnabas (13:2)!

Other ways to overcome the "Paul scandal" are the *glossing-over* and the *counterbalancing*: «Certainly, Paul did not belong to the Twelve, *but* he was also chosen by God to spread the Gospel throughout the world». These are understandable considerations, but they *dodge* the problem we are facing and *avoid* acknowledging it.

We come to the widespread expression "the apostles Peter and Paul", which seems undisputable and instead is substantially false. To make an example, it would not be correct to say «the two Italian singers Fernando De Angelis and Adriano Celentano», because it is true that I too sometimes hum, but *I am not in the same category* as Celentano; then to say "the two" and not "two" gives the impression that Celentano and I are the only Italians to sing. At the same time, Peter and Paul were *not* made apostles in the same *way* and their work cannot only be seen as *complementary* but, as we have said, also *succeeding*, in the sense that the new developments of God's plan will be increasingly entrusted to Paul; so much so that, after chapter 15, Peter is no longer named and everything revolves around Paul.

The fact that Paul acts *later* is relevant, because if Paul comes after Peter, someone else could come after Paul and then it is not possible to "embalm" Christianity and be quiet! To avoid misunderstandings, we are convinced that the apostolic times are foundational and unrepeatable. We are also convinced that the New Testament is the "universal Word of God", that is, always and for all. However, it is possible that the "universal history" traced in Acts can then continue with national histories. For example, did not the Spirit continue to work in Italy after the testimony given in Rome by Paul? Does not the New Testament itself say that History is moving towards its passing and towards the return of Christ? Is logic enough to interpret Revelation and apply it to our time or is the help of the Spirit, who caused its writing, necessary?

On the use of the word "apostle", however, Paul can be of help to us, who wrote that Christ appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once [...] Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God» (1 Cor 15:5-9). Three concentric circles of apostles are thus identified:

- 1) Peter and the Twelve;
- 2) James (Jesus' brother) and all the «other» apostles, that is, those outside the Twelve;
- 3) Paul, who therefore considered himself a "third-rank" apostle.

It is then not wrong to say that Paul was an apostle, but we must not believe and make believe that he was of the same category as Peter, because one is put at the top of the list and the other at the bottom. Nor should we forget that with the same "formal" qualification of apostle there were many of the level of Paul, whose rank was certainly not given by the title, but by the work accomplished. Incidentally, we will see then that in the government of the Church in place of Peter there will be the prevailing of James, which is another case of bypassing the Twelve.

In short, the book of Acts shows a living God, who continues to direct and work in the Church, a God who certainly did not go into retirement two thousand years ago.

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## Acts 15

### THE "APOSTOLIC COUNCIL" OF JERUSALEM

[15:1-35]. The "Apostolic Council".

The two most quoted chapters of Acts are Acts 2 (birth of the church at Pentecost) and this one (supposed "deliverance" of the Church from the law of Moses). It is therefore necessary to be very careful now, both because the way of understanding this chapter 15 influences the vision of the whole New Testament, and because we will propose an often-contrasting reading to the most indorsed ones.

The problem the apostles began facing was with «some men [who had] come down from Judea», who were teaching the brothers that «unless [they] are circumcised according to the custom of Moses», they cannot be saved. Of course, «Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them», but since the disagreement remained «Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question» (vv. 1-2). In other words, the church of Antioch was being disturbed by some who came from Judea and so a delegation goes to the church of reference of the disruptors, to try to solve the problem at the source.

At that time, the Church was an *indefinite* organism guided by the Holy Spirit in a humanly *indefinite* way. Only later will the emperor Constantine try to give it a form more suited to his imperial purposes and values. *Constantine served and liked a structure defined and guided by people he believed reliable*; for this he summoned in 325, at Nicaea, not far from the capital Constantinople, the first (alleged FIRST) Ecumenical Council, that is, the meeting of all the bishops of the world in order to discuss and make decisions valid for all.

Given the usual vice of "backprojection", it is thought that this way of proceeding is normal and that it has always existed; that is why the meeting described in Acts 15 is often called "the Council of Jerusalem". The meeting, however, was attended only by representatives of *two* churches and not of all, to find the solution to problems that arose *between those two churches*, not to give orders *to all*.

Of course, the question addressed and the solution given influenced the whole church at that time and the later one, but according to the power of the Spirit, not with the power of weapons which were then used to impose the decisions of the Council of Nicaea (and the subsequent ones). The "council" of Jerusalem was not therefore a "council" like those begun almost three centuries later, if we therefore call it the "Council of Jerusalem" we convey the idea that the difference with the "Council of Nicaea" is mainly the *place, time* and in the *topics* dealt with, while it would suggest that there would have been the same *method* that is expressed with the word "council". To avoid misunderstandings, some call that meeting the "Jerusalem Conference", but an appropriate way could be "Apostolic Council": because in fact the highest exponents of the Church of that time participated in the meeting (and so "council" might be acceptable); however, the characteristic element was not the *place*, but the presence of the apostles, which made that meeting *unrepeatable*.

Beginning to go into detail, it is striking that the problem was not addressed in the secret of the "high spheres"; in fact, the meeting was not reserved for a few, but there was also a participation of the people of believers. With Paul and Barnabas, for example, there also went «other brothers», who were accompanied for a while by the church (that is, by many); during the journey they recounted their experiences of evangelisation, bringing «great joy to all the brothers» (v. 3). Not only the apostles were involved in Jerusalem, but also the elders and «the whole church» (vv. 4 and 22).

The «lively debate» which took place in Antioch (vv. 2 and 7) also began in Jerusalem, because at the level of the Word of God and logic the supporters of the necessity of circumcision were well equipped.

Not being able to find an agreement, Peter pulled out his *strong weapon* which at this point was no longer secret, retelling how God had operated in Cornelius (7-9). Since some time had already passed from those facts, here Peter shows that he had already sketched a theological explanation "in retrospect" and it is good to dwell on the two main arguments with which he opposed the proponents of circumcision.

The *first argument* is as follows: «Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?». The Pharisees who recognised Jesus as the Messiah continued to observe the law of Moses more strictly than the others, and this was an honour (cf. Acts 26:5). When they said that it was necessary to circumcise believers «and to order them to keep the law of Moses» (v. 5) it was implied that they thought they were observing it, but the whole Old Testament testified to the continuous difficulty of the people of Israel in observing the law; this difficulty concerned also that generation, which was, amongst other things, subject to the political domination of the Gentiles too. Peter, therefore, contests the implied presumption that the Jews were truly and fully observing the law of Moses: and if they themselves, in fact, were not fully observing it, it made no sense to impose it on others.

This first argument of Peter is often understood by us Christians as an authorisation to abandon the law of Moses, but this is not so, because many Jewish believers continued to be «zealous for the law» (21:20). There are, however, two questions we would like to ask those who support this thesis: 1) Are we Christians bound to observe the Word of Jesus, such as the "sermon on the Mount" (Mt. 5-7)? 2) Could we carry the weight of the "law of Jesus"? The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that Peter challenges the Pharisees as to the *salvific value* of the law of Moses, but certainly not the *educational value* of that law and its being a *point of reference* for the Jewish people.

Peter's *second argument* is closely related to the first: since we Jews are also sinners (as he had recognised at once and spontaneously with Jesus, Luke 5:8), so we too can only be saved by grace (v. 11). In the Old Testament, on the other hand, one can see how God has *always graced* Israel. These words of Peter, surprisingly, are a sort of "theological framework" of Paul's Letter to the Romans. The fact that Luke quotes these "Pauline" words of Peter, produces a sort of "legitimation" of Paul (which seems to us the primary objective of Acts) and in any case means that, even though there was some momentary misunderstanding between the two (e.g., Galatians 2:11), they did not preach two different Gospels.

Peter's arguments confuse the protesters, perhaps unprepared to face the "friendly fire", opening them to listen to the "opponents", Barnabas and Paul (more Barnabas than Paul, as we have seen, because Barnabas was more 'of the house' in Jerusalem and with the Twelve). Barnabas and Paul also draw the *strong weapon* of what God has done (v.12) and so the victory of the "new course" is total.

James, brother of Jesus, then does what normally belongs to those who preside, that is, he draws conclusions and proposes a way out (vv. 13-21). The emergence of James in the church government in Jerusalem is noted in Acts 12:17, when Peter says, «Tell these things to James and to the brothers» (cf. also Gal 1:18-19); next we see clearly the pre-eminence of him in Acts 21:18, when Paul came to Jerusalem, that he went first to James, where all the elders were gathered together.

Since he is no longer named, it seems that Joseph died before the public ministry of Jesus, who therefore had to assume the running of the house as his eldest son. Perhaps then James had seen how Jesus had been able to manage a family, and perhaps that more intimate knowledge of Jesus had made him particularly effective. More than this conjecture, however, the reflection of Argentino Quintavalle was useful to me, who wrote to me as follows: «The reason why James, the last to arrive, took charge of the church in Jerusalem is that, being a brother of Jesus, he was of a real lineage and, therefore, in the absence of the king (Jesus), he was the nearest descendant: That is why he was respected by those who were waiting for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel and that is why James speaks of the restoration of the tent of David (a phrase apparently out of context)».

Let us return to the conclusion that James proposes. In recalling what Peter had done with Cornelius, James invites us to take note that God «first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name» (v. 14). This confirms that the setting of the church of Antioch, composed mainly of uncircumcised, is seen as *additional* and not as *substitute*. In other words, before there was *only one people* consecrated to YHWH, now this people has been joined by *another*, that of the "uncircumcised" in the general sense, but that in fact was of *Greek language*.

Paul writes that Christ «has made us both one» (Eph 2:14) and that «There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus» (Gal 3:28). If the book of Acts is not borne closely in mind, this can be interpreted as if the distinction between Jews and non-Jews had ceased, but evidently it is not so. The *unity of faith* between Jews and Greeks is similar to the unity of faith between male and female, which according to Paul certainly does not involve a "one-gender"!

All this is evident in Acts, where there are *two* churches which have *two* different settings, one based on the circumcised (Jerusalem) and the other on the uncircumcised (Antioch). But the two realities are so *united* that the formation of the uncircumcised is entrusted to the circumcised Paul and Barnabas. Even clearer is the scene of the Jewish Peter baptizing the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:47): two persons united by faith in Christ and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but the one remains Jewish and the other Roman.

James goes on (vv. 15-18) quoting one of the many passages of the Old Testament where the God of Israel is also the God of all nations (Amos 9:11-12) and that, therefore, all nations are called to worship. The chosen step is particularly suitable, because it shows that God's plan was not to raise up Israel *against* the Gentiles but *together with* the Gentiles. Like Peter's previous statement, this too is significantly a sort of "frame" of Paul's Letter to the Romans: in particular of chapters 9-11, where Paul frames God's mercy towards the Gentiles as a forerunner (not a replacement) of mercy toward "all Israel," because God's ultimate goal is to «have mercy on all» (Rom 11:26-32).

Acts 15 clearly shows how Peter, James and Paul did indeed perform different tasks, but with a doctrinal commonality that leaves no room for the hypothesis that there were "theses of Paul" contrasting with those of Peter and James. It is true that some wanted to impose circumcision on behalf of James (Gal. 2:12), but James in this chapter of Acts disavows that category of spokesman (15:1,5), stating that they had departed from Jerusalem without receiving any instruction from the church (v. 24). Generally the Epistle to the Galatians is much better known than the Book of Acts, but in the more general perspective of Acts, the contrast between Paul and Peter in Galatians 2 is reduced to a particular case, with limited and temporary effects: in other words, an exception that confirms the rule, even if you often take that exception to make it a rule!

James too, in conclusion and as Peter did earlier, sides with Paul and Barnabas, holding «that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God» (v. 19). However, he asks that the Gentiles «abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood» (v. 20). This request of James to the Gentiles is often interpreted as a need for compromise, which, while freeing the Gentiles from observing the *whole* law of Moses, safeguards certain aspects on which the Jews were particularly sensitive. We will see little below that, however, that James applies other criteria.

James then assures his fellow-countrymen that this openness to the Gentiles is not made at the expense of the law of Moses, a law that the Jews have honoured «from ancient generations» and that they would continue to honour in the synagogues of every city, with the reading that was made every Saturday (v. 21).

Acts 15 is often recounted as an "abolition of the law of Moses", but it is not true. In fact, Acts 15 *does not* oblige Christians *of pagan origin* to obey the law of Moses, but *invites the Jews to continue* to observe it. This is clearly seen by the fact that, several years later, tens of thousands of Jews who had believed in the Gospel were «all zealous for the law» (21:20); for them, in fact, believing in Christ gave *more meaning* to the rites of Moses, while it is erroneously held that believing in Christ rendered animal sacrifices in the Temple inopportune (on the contrary, even forbidden); to support this we rely on the Letter to the Hebrews, but if that Letter is read in the light of Acts, one can very well understand it in the light of the *continuity* between the Old and New Testament. The Hebrews Letter, however, is too complex to be adequately addressed in this context and therefore, as I said, we limit ourselves to asking some questions in the designated *Link n. 6*, placed in the final pages.

Returning to the conclusion of James, it not only does not abolish the law of Moses, but in preventing it from being made mandatory for the uncircumcised... paradoxically *applies* the law of Moses and the Old Testament in general. In fact, the law of Moses foresaw that among the people of Israel there could also be foreigners, to whom, however, discriminating legislation should not be applied («one rule for you and for the stranger», Num 15:16). The foreigner was obliged to circumcise himself only if he wanted to celebrate the Passover with the Jewish people (Exodus 12:48) and the Temple of Solomon was considered a place of prayer not only for the people of Israel, but also for foreigners (1 Kings 8:41-43). The stranger that sojourned *in the midst* of Israel was not obliged to observe *all* the law of Moses, but only *certain essentials*; but the stranger that was *outside* the people of Israel was not regarded as compelled to observe the law of Moses, a gift that God had

given specifically to Israel. Precisely the elasticity and openness of Judaism allow the apostles to deal flexibly with the question of the baptism of the uncircumcised.

I left with the idea that the decisions of the apostles were inspired by the rules given by Moses to foreigners *within* Israel, but the sensible criticism of a friend pushed me to reflect on it again... helping me to find a simpler perspective, and more in line with the whole Word of God, which presents the New Testament from in a new light and which we emphasise with a headline.

#### THE "NOAHTISM" OF UNCIRCUMCISED CHRISTIANS.

In authorising Noah to eat flesh, God had set a limit: «You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood» (Gen 9:4). This involved the duty to kill the animals by slicing (that is, by letting out the blood), because if killed in another way the flesh would be soaked in blood. Having said this, the four prohibitions for the gentiles decided by the apostles can be reduced to three, because the prohibition of eating suffocated animals is similar to not eating blood.

The other two prohibitions can also be traced back to the first chapters of Genesis. Abstaining «from sacrificed flesh to idols» had the meaning of not endorsing and encouraging idolatry (1 Cor 8:4-13) and idolatry is in clear contrast with the beginning of Genesis: since God *created* the heavens and the earth, the "Sun-God " and all idols (being part of *creation*) cannot be object of worship. Also for fornication there is an implied prohibition at the beginning of Genesis, where sexuality is seen as *within a monogamous relationship* (Gen 1:28; 2:24).

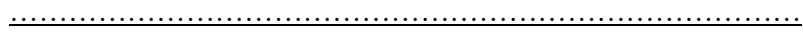
The prohibitions to the Gentiles are present in the law of Moses (see Lev 17:12 for blood, Lev 20:10 for fornication and Ex 20:3-6 for idolatry), however they are not imposed on this basis, but rather in reference to those universal values that underlie all the Word of God (and therefore also to the law of Moses) and are present in the first chapters of Genesis. In fact, while from Moses onwards the Word of God is addressed specifically to Israel, before Abraham the Word is addressed to all humanity and is usually reconnected with Noah, the last common ancestor of humanity. From Noah to before Abraham is sometimes called "Noahchism"; we prefer "Noahism", easier to understand, but in any case it seems that the apostles have decided to impose on the Gentiles to respect... THEIR "Noahic" law.

By imposing norms that can be linked to Noah, in summary, the apostles did not seek a political "compromise" between the demands of the Jews and those of the Gentiles: instead, they wished to submit to the Word of God, asking the Gentiles to do the same.

Precisely the harmony between the proposals of James and the whole of the Old Testament explain why those proposals are accepted unanimously, with James showing in these circumstances his good skills of leadership. Therefore, a letter was written, to be entrusted to Barnabas and Paul, to formalise the decisions taken. To avoid any suspicion of the letter's authenticity, Barnabas and Paul will be accompanied to Antioch by two authoritative believers of Jerusalem (Barsabbas and Silas, v. 22). The senders and the *official* recipients of the letter are specified at the beginning: «The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia». This is not an "encyclical letter", issued with authority by the apostles and concerning the *whole* Church, but the solution to a problem that arose with the Church of Antioch, whom the Church of Jerusalem addresses.

This expression is beautiful: «It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us» (v. 28): the Holy Spirit had respected the personality of those on whom he had acted and people take responsibility for the decisions they have taken, without shielding themselves behind the Holy Spirit.

The passage ends with Paul and Barnabas returning to Antioch, teaching and preaching together «with many others » (v. 35). In the final part of Acts, Luke will describe an almost solitary Paul, but before that time Paul showed a great ability to connect and bring himself into harmony with others, such as Peter, James, Barnabas and the church of Antioch.



**Further Insight n. 7**  
**OVERVIEW**

When proceeding on a somewhat complex itinerary, it is useful every now and then to make a panoramic summary of the route taken and of what is still to be done. The book of Acts can ideally be divided into two, with a first part in which the work of Peter prevails and a second part in which Paul emerges instead. But since the passage was gradual, then it is indeed quite clear that there is also an intermediate phase, in which Peter slowly leaves the centre of the scene, in which, at a certain point, Paul definitively breaks in.

**1. INITIAL PHASE OF FOUNDATION BY PETER (1-5).**

The Twelve in general, and Peter in particular, are extraordinarily effective in bringing about and growing the Church. In Jerusalem, thousands of Jews accept Jesus as their Messiah. The Church remains within Judaism, but closer relations develop between the disciples of Jesus.

**2. INTERMEDIATE PHASE OF PREPARATION FOR CHANGE (6-12).**

More and more the Twelve show deficiencies, shortcomings and, above all, difficulties in understanding the new stages of the "strategic plan of God". God will therefore use more and more people outside the Twelve, such as Stephen, Philip, Cornelius, the evangelisers of Antioch and Barnabas. Although the Church's progress seems a bit chaotic, in effect the conditions are gradually being prepared for the "final phase". Even for Paul there are events that are not easy to grasp, but that actually prepare the full industriousness: he appears first as a persecutor (7:58 to 8:3), then comes the conversion (9:1-22), the immature attempt to be a missionary (9:23-31), the eclipse (9:32-11:24) and effective return to the service of the church in Antioch (11:25-30).

**3. FINAL PHASE OF EXPANSION THROUGH PAUL (13-28).**

Here in the centre is the church of Antioch and Paul, of whom God, in the end, asks to proceed in "heroic solitude". The Twelve and the church of Jerusalem had effectively carried out God's work on the "quality" level, but there was also a "quantitative" work to be done: that is, to bring the Gospel «to the ends of the earth» (1:8). Antioch had at first appeared as an exception, and some hoped that it would soon arrive at the normality of a church composed only of circumcised; instead, it was a plant that was maturing and that would produce powerful seeds, able to take root in every part of the world. As usual, the initiative is taken by the Holy Spirit, who sends Barnabas and Saul on a mission, opening a new phase with countless developments. While inside the church of Antioch Barnabas and his gifts were more important, on the missionary battlefield Paul will immediately take over the direction of the operations, eventually proceeding in solitude.

After this "panoramic stop", we resume our comment.

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[15:36-41]. *Beginning of the second journey of Paul and separation of Barnabas.*

It was not only the questions connected with the "Apostolic Council" that created an interruption in Paul and Barnabas' work of evangelisation, because before they had remained in Antioch «no little time» (14:28) and the same is repeated at the end of the meeting in Jerusalem (15:36): all this warrants Paul's impatience in wanting to return to the evangelised brothers, while Barnabas seems to "be subjected" to Paul's initiative. Obviously the solidarity between the two had already cracked, otherwise Luke would have written: «Paul and Barnabas decided to return to the evangelised brothers». The suspicion that there was a crack already in place is reinforced by the reason of the separation (whether to bring Mark or not), which does not seem so important as to justify the rupture of the collaboration and which seems more a pretext than the real cause.

There are many who take the parts of the "more benevolent" Barnabas, pointing out how later Paul would have recognised Mark's usefulness (Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11). Indeed, one cannot disregard



that capacity of Barnabas to welcome and encourage, by which Paul had also benefited, but it seems that Luke (and God himself, if we consider Luke inspired) leaves no doubt in justifying Paul.

First of all because it is Paul, and not Barnabas, who continues to carry on God's "strategic plan".

Secondly, because the church aligns itself with Paul, who sets out again «having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord» (40); whereas the fact that Barnabas immediately leaves Antioch, that is, the church he built up, suggests that he clashed not only with Paul, but with the whole church.

Thirdly, at the time, the Holy Spirit had called to the work «Barnabas and Paul» (13:2), so there was perhaps already at the beginning an error of Barnabas, who wanted to bring with him his cousin (Col 4:10), certainly promising, but who had not been specifically called and who still needed to mature.

Perhaps Barnabas - because of his age, tiredness or family problems - had a desire or need to return to his Cyprus, so he takes the opportunity to detach himself from a work now brought to maturity.

Instead of Barnabas, Paul chooses Silas and the reason seems clear: Barnabas was the "trustee" of the Jerusalem church and so, to avoid suspicion and problems with that church (which continued to be a point of reference for all), Paul takes with him another believer highly esteemed by the apostles (15:22,40).

When God and his work are involved, however, the "true reason" is not perceptible by looking at the human horizon, because it is given by the needs of the plan that God is carrying forward. The Bible is full of stories in which it *seems* that everything takes place on a human level, while in reality it is under the will of God. Moving then in the perspective of the "strategic plan of God", Paul and Barnabas separated simply because Barnabas had finished his function, which was to enhance, legitimise and launch Paul.

Barnaba is then like a missile that carries into orbit the spaceship of Paul and then detaches itself from it. Of course, God would not have thrown Barnabas into the garbage as he would have not done so with Peter, but after asking them to move to the second row, I believe that these servants felt a nearness to God in a different, but presumably more fulfilling, way. After all, *staying* and *dwelling* with God should be better than *working* for God.

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## Acts 16

### PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

[16:1-5]. *Application of the decisions of the "Apostolic Council"*.

If the "Apostolic Council" of Jerusalem *forbade* circumcision, why did Paul circumcise Timothy? This embarrassing episode we tend to overlook and even more we overlook the fact that it is Paul himself to perform the operation in a Hebrew manner (v. 3). The fact is that circumcision was not at all forbidden, but only made *not-mandatory* for the Gentiles in order to belong to the Church, while the Jews were well pleased to continue to practice it for the purpose of belonging to the people of Israel.

Galatians is often quoted as saying, «If you are circumcised, Christ will be of no use to you [...] you have fallen out of grace» (3:2-4). In the Epistle to the Galatians, however, Paul does not condemn the *use* of circumcision, but *abuse*. In other words, he condemns the *necessity* of circumcision *for the purpose of salvation*, therefore considering the work of Christ as insufficient. If Cornelius would later have liked to be part of the *people* of Israel, he would have not been forbidden, as long as he did not consider that adherence necessary.

Whether to be circumcised or not, for Paul, had no value *in itself* (1 Cor 7:19) and for him the principles were important and stable, rather than their particular and temporary applications; he considered himself free from all (even the circumcised) to then become a servant to all (even the circumcised) (1 Cor 9:19).

He also considered food to be of no value *in itself* to eat or not to eat some of it, because «all things are pure», but afterwards he called to abstain from any food, if it offended a brother (Rom 14:13-23).

Paul's desire was to proclaim to the Jews the need for the forgiveness of sins in Christ, but if he had showed with an uncircumcised collaborator such as Timothy, they would have listened to him with more difficulty. In the matter of food, Paul writes «By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died» (Rom 14:15); one application is «Do not lose, because of circumcision, the one for whom Christ died». In summary, to communicate to the Jews that being circumcised did not save, Paul paradoxically circumcises Timothy.

Paul passed on to the various churches the decisions taken by the apostles in order for them to observe them (v. 4); this seems to contradict what is written just above, where we have essentially affirmed that those decisions were not binding on all and forever. It should be borne in mind, however, that the structure of the disagreement did not concern only Antioch, but also the churches that had derived from it. The apostles' decision, not by chance, is addressed to an entire region «to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia» (15:23) and it seems logical that the geographical indication was not to be understood in a restrictive sense, but extending to all those who were in similar conditions.

To hold that the Apostolic Council's decisions are valid for all with regard to the *principles*, but not necessarily in the *applications* that one can draw from them, the most important case is how Paul then tackled the problem of food. The most contested directive today is the one on abstaining from blood, which is linked to the one on animals that have been killed by suffocation, that is, without the draining of blood. If one takes into account that in the New Testament there is a progressive doctrinal revelation, as we have widely seen, then the Letter to the Romans should be more relevant to us than Acts 15: because it was written *after* the meeting in Jerusalem; because it reflects more our current circumstances; and because there the problem is dealt with more extensively.

In Antioch, as in the churches formed during Paul and Barnabas' first missionary tour, there was generally a strong Jewish presence and the Old Testament strictly forbids eating blood (Lev 3:17; 7:27). In order not to create unnecessary fractures between believing Greeks and believing Jews, then, it was logical to ask the Greeks for a small adaptation, also because the Jews were required an even stronger one, that is to consider a "brother in faith" someone who was not even circumcised. In Rome, however, the Jewish presence was less significant and then, as we have seen above (Rom 14:13-23), the call to not eat blood was always valid, but only if it scandalised someone, as happened in Antioch and surroundings (in short, the principles are the same, but the application adapts to the circumstances).

The above is reinforced by the fact that even the first Letter to the Corinthians (also written *after* the meeting in Jerusalem) treats the problem in a similar way to that of Romans: indication that it was necessary to specify the confined sense (in space and time) of the prohibition to eat blood. In 1 Corinthians we perceive even better the parallelism with the Apostolic Council's decisions (1 Cor 10:23-33) and incidentally it is written: «eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience - I do not mean your conscience, but his».

To some the problem of eating or not eating blood appears entirely secondary, but "Bible-practicing Christians" are roughly divided into three groups with a similar number of convictions, which each defends with a certain jealousy: 1) those that uphold the freedom to eat even blood (among which I count myself, but if possible I avoid it, also for hygienic reasons); 2) those who do not allow as church members those who believe they can eat blood; 3) those who do not even allow blood transfusions.

[16:6-10]. «...*having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia*»

Is it possible that it is the Holy Spirit himself who forbids to preach the Gospel? No, it is not possible, and in fact the Holy Spirit did not "forbid" in the general sense to preach, but forbade *Paul* to do so *in certain areas*, because he thought it more appropriate to send him *before* to other parts (vv. 6-10). Instead of having Paul continue to operate "like wildfire" in present-day Turkey, the Holy Spirit preferred to make him apply the "strategy of the arsonist", who ignites the fire in one forest

and then goes away to another, letting the fire advance by itself. Paul was thus directed into present-day Greece, that is, into the heart of that world which, at that time, had the cultural pre-eminence and which offered God the language to pass on the New Testament. In other words, it was more urgent for Paul to arrive early in Athens and Corinth than to linger in a Turkey in which the work had already begun and could be continued by others (presumably less suited to go to Athens).

What can be defined as "the geographical axis of the Gospel", therefore, will head west and not only up to Greece, because then Paul will get to Rome and, in the two millennia that have followed, has again continued to build his axis in the west direction (France, Spain, Germany, England, United States), with the overview of soon completing "the world tour".

There is, in this episode, an implication of a certain relevance: if Paul had insisted on continuing his activity in present-day Turkey, he would have disobeyed God while preaching the Gospel! From this we deduce that it is necessary not only to stick to the *general teachings* of the Word of God, but also to listen to the Holy Spirit, so as to be obedient even *in concrete applications*.

Another implication is *how* Paul could be sure that it was the Holy Spirit who guided him. There are no precise indications and there is nowhere described a *secure* system through which to know how to concretely apply the will of God. But since the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer (cf. Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:16; 2 Tim 1:14), everyone should learn as soon as possible to understand his messages, so that they are certain *for him* (or *her*). In short, the rule valid for all is that the Holy Spirit is given to us *together* with the forgiveness of sins (which we have through Christ); but then, concretely, the Holy Spirit establishes with each believer his particular ways of communication.

Paul was sure that the Holy Spirit was calling him to Macedonia (16:10), but to convince *others*, the most appropriate way is to show the results; results which at first were somewhat ambivalent, for there was at once the conversion of Lydia (v. 14), though the missionaries also took many beatings and were put in prison (v. 23). *In the long run*, however, the mission in present-day Greece would have been very fruitful.

In verses 6 and 7 we speak first of the "Holy Spirit" and then of the "Spirit of Jesus": the context leaves no doubt on the equivalence of the two expressions and this is another of the "small signs" on Jesus's divinity present in Acts.

Note how Luke introduces here the "we" (v. 10) and therefore his recommendation becomes that of an eyewitness (16:10-17; 20:5 till 21:18; 27:1 till 28:16). However, it is significant that Luke does not insert "we" in strategic or particularly important moments, because he wants to be an "eyewitness" without drawing attention to himself, but to what he saw.

[16:11-40]. *Paul at Philippi*.

It is impressive, in a negative sense, how demon-possessed people *sooner* and *more* than others understand the value of a believer (vv. 16-18). The evil spirit that acted in the fortune-teller woman seemed to just want to help Paul and the Gospel, but his collaboration was actually destroying the testimony, so Paul was forced to remove the misunderstanding by expelling that demon. The masters of that woman thus saw their ability to make a profit fade away and incited the crowd against Paul and Silas, who were significantly referred to as "Jews" (v. 20).

It is also impressive, but in a positive sense, that Paul and Silas, after having their clothes torn, after having taken loud beatings and being placed in the inner part of the prison, arriving at midnight they did not stand there to groan or even to sleep... but they sang hymns to God! One can imagine the astonishment of the prisoners, who certainly did not suspect that the greatest surprise was yet to come, because then there was a great earthquake and the chains of all were broken (vv. 22-26). This passage would lend itself to many reflections and applications, but we cannot dwell on them. We note only, continuing to follow our themes, how the miraculous deliverance of Paul from prison establishes another parallel with Peter (12:7-10).

Famous is the so-called "question of questions" of the jailer of Philippi: «Sirs, what must I do to be saved?»; with the consequent "answer of answers" given by Paul: «Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved» (vv. 30-31). After the conversion there was an immediate baptism (v. 33), and here too there is a close parallel between Paul's way of operating and that of Peter.

The passage concludes with a Paul who seemed over-elaborate, because he did not accept a simple exit from prison, but wanted the authorities to apologise personally, due to their having abused in public and for no reason Roman citizens (vv. 35-39). We believe, however, that Paul's request was not a

retaliation, but rather that the public shaming had negative repercussions on the Gospel's message and on those who had accepted it (Lydia and the jailer, among others): leaving the city in an honourable way (vv. 39-40) in other words, was more useful to the witness and witnesses who remained in that place rather than being Paul's personal demand.

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### **Further Insight n. 8** **JERUSALEM, ATHENS AND ROME**

After being in Macedonia (Acts 16), Paul would later enter the Greek cultural world, that is, Athens (Acts 17) and Corinth (Acts 18). The Greek-speaking world was the most prominent on the cultural level and Acts show us Paul who comes to witness in its most prestigious place (the Areopagus, 17:19). The Roman world, on the other hand, had the pre-eminence on the political level and Acts describes to us Paul interacting with those authorities, until he reached the emperor (from 23:11 to the end). Jerusalem, Athens and Rome are regarded as "the three capitals of the West" and we cannot now address the complex question of their relationships; however, since there are cultural bias that hinder the understanding of what is described in Acts, it is useful to give some guidance.

Athens is often opposed to Jerusalem: one would be the founder of true culture, while the other of religious fables. The reality is that the Greeks came to their present territory from the north and as barbarians. On the Mediterranean shores, they found the flourishing culture produced by the world where Abraham had moved, who came from Mesopotamia and arrived in Egypt, a world that can be called generically "Semitic" culture.

The Greeks would only be in a position to be culturally leading figures after spending centuries absorbing the Semitic culture; a clear indication of this is that their alphabet is an adaptation of the Semitic-Phoenician one. There was, therefore, a progressive alignment between the Greek world and the Jewish-Semitic world and it is as a result of this development that the Greek translation of the Old Testament was birthed (about 2 centuries before Christ), which is called the Septuagint and which would have greatly accelerated the process of alignment that had produced it.

One can understand at what point the mixing between Jewish and Greek worlds had stretched specifically through Acts, where in almost every city there was a synagogue open to the Greek population (proselytes) and able, at times, to involve the entire city (Acts 13:44; 14:4).

For Rome the question is less obvious, because the history of its origins is shrouded in myth. We know, however, that Rome arose as a river port in relation to the East and therein had settled themselves those "ethnic" villages typical of the ports, which then united to found the city.

Rome arose shortly after the dispersion of the Jews caused by the Assyrians (8th c. BC.) and it is likely that a group of fugitives arrived in Rome. Rather than these speculations, though, it is the cultural analysis of more ancient Rome (that is, Royal and Republican Rome) that suggests some Jewish influence. In the oldest Rome, for example, we find the centrality of the law, a substantial religious freedom and a perception of the stranger as a potential "brother-citizen". Incidentally, as the Etruscan culture is of Middle-Eastern origin and the Etruscans were very influential in royal Rome, also through them there was an infiltration of Semitic elements in Rome.

In any case, Paul, continuing in the line of Christ who submitted to the Roman Pontius Pilate, would act respecting the Roman authorities; also because, in addition to being a Jew, he was also a Roman citizen. All the more so because the Roman authorities often treated him much better than those Jews who had rejected the Gospel (Acts 16:35-40; 18:12-15; 21:30-40; 22:22-29; 23:12-25; 25:7-12; 28:16-31). So it is basically Paul himself who lays the foundations of an alliance between Christianity and Romanism, although then on this alliance (Constantine) there would be much to discuss, because there is no doubt that it went well beyond the framework that we find in Acts.

Apart from these complex questions, what we wish to emphasise is that Acts shows us a particular relationship of Christianity with three worlds: the *Jewish*, the *Greek* and the *Roman*. Today, after 20 centuries, we can see that Christianity has a Jewish *religious* connotation, but expressed in the *Greek* language and that it more easily *spread* both in what was the Roman Empire, and in the world which

was inspired by it (for example, Russia and England). Paul was a very suitable tool to achieve these goals, because he was of Jewish religion, knew Greek culture and had Roman citizenship.

Three languages came together on the cross, the Hebrew, the Greek and the Latin (Jn 19:19-20), because the message of that death and subsequent resurrection - without excluding anyone, of course - wanted to turn first to those three worlds.

For a less telegraphic exposition on History, see chapter 7 of my book "Culture and the Bible" (Gribaudo, 2009).

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## Acts 17

### PAUL IN BEREIA E ATHENS

[17:1-15]. *Paul at Thessalonica and Berea.*

Thessalonica was more than a thousand kilometres away from Iconium and in the middle there was the sea, and yet the same pattern is repeated: preaching in the synagogue, adherence of a significant minority of Jews, adherence also of numerous Greeks, violent reaction of unbelieving Jews, who promote an alliance with the unbelieving Greeks.

In Thessalonica and Berea, the Gospel reached even the highest social classes (vv. 4 and 12), showing that the whole of society was in a way ready to receive the message. Verse 6 contains an accusation to which every Christian aspires, that of having «turned the world upside down».

The attitude of those of Berea is defined as «more noble» and often the readers of the Bible declare themselves "Bereans", because they were not satisfied with listening, but personally controlled, «examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so» (v. 11). For the Bereans, of course, «the Scriptures» were represented by the Greek Old Testament.

Paul, faced with danger, as usual did not run away, agreeing to leave only to obey the worried brothers (vv. 10 and 14). As usual, the persecution was not towards Christians in general, but focused on the person of Paul, whose moving away from the situation caused it to calm down again.

Having to take Paul from Berea, the brothers «took him» (v. 15) to Athens, accompanying him for about 500 km of navigation.

[17:16-34]. *Paul in Athens.*

At the end of the previous passage, Paul seems to be one of those quarrelsome people that must be separated by force from the adversaries, while here he shows an extraordinary ability to dialogue with everyone: Jews, various people in the square, philosophers. The latter «took him and brought him to the Areopagus» (v. 19), which was an elevated place of the city suitable for philosophical debates. The two characteristics of meekness and quarrelsome seem to be contradictory, so let's try to resolve them. First of all, it was not Paul who was quarrelsome with others, but others who attacked him. He, like Stephen, did not put up a fight with his hands, but used words that pierced profoundly. It is precisely that ability to interact in a non-superficial way which enabled dialogue with everyone, but also stirred strong opposition from those who felt destabilised in their own foundations.

Paul stood in front of others in a humble way and speaking with modesty, but the meanings he expressed resembled earthquakes. We find a trace of this in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, where it was described as follows: «His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account» (2 Cor 10:10). Paul himself defined his preaching as one of those piercing aromas that cannot be ignored and that are perceived by some as very dangerous («a fragrance from death [which leads] to death»), while for others they are refreshing («a fragrance from life [which leads] to life») (2 Cor 2:15-16).

Paul's speech to the Athenian philosophers (vv. 22-31) is a model of dialogue that has inspired and still inspires countless Christians. Paul did not bring direct quotations of the Word of God (as he had done in the synagogue of Antioch at Pisidia, 13:16ff). He did not begin by emphasising differences, but sought to value what he saw as positive in the other speaker, *after* having thoroughly examined the world of the other. Here too, as at Lystra (14:15ff), Paul knows that he had to lay the first foundations of faith (Genesis), presenting «the God who made the world» and declaring the brotherhood of all human beings (vv. 24-26). The only quotation he reported is from a Greek author, because it would have been useless to rely on biblical authors who, for that audience, were not authoritative.

Having moved culturally to the world of the audience, Paul invited that audience to come where he was; and then he began to contend against idolatry openly (v. 29), calling all to a conversion and announcing that, sooner or later, all would be judged by *a man* who has risen from the dead (v. 31).

The resurrection was foolishness for the Athenians (as Paul himself writes, 1 Cor 1:23), and therefore it was a prospect they could not bear. In that world influenced by Plato, in fact, the body was conceived as *a prison of the soul*, so resurrecting meant returning to being prisoners: the Athenians, therefore, closed the dialogue there and politely left. As common, however, some accepted the message, going to form the first nucleus of Jesus' disciples in that strategic place.

We know that then, even in that Greek world, the number of Christians would have grown much and very important personalities would have arisen from that world, that is, the so-called "Fathers of the Church", who would have "adapted" the *Hebrew* concepts of the Word of God to the *Greek* mentality in which they were immersed, both them and their listeners. They would declare themselves continuators of Paul's work, but in reality they would "mix" *apostolic Christianity* with *Greek philosophy*. A clear sign of this operation is precisely the attitude towards the resurrection, which was the point of irreconcilability between Paul and the Athenian philosophers: officially Christianity has continued to believe in it, but in reality it has always marginalised the *resurrection*, placing *Paradise* at the centre as the substantially final goal of the path of salvation.

Resurrection and Paradise, however, are not only two different goals, but two different *doctrinal systems* and the deviation that has effectively been established, involving almost all Christianity, imposes on this issue an analysis not hasty, also because it involves other parts of the Bible: after having finished scrolling through the whole text of Acts, therefore, we will render it the subject of *Further Insight n. 17 (Paradise without resurrection, an "actual heresy")*.

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## Acts 18

### PAUL AT CORINTH. THEN, BEGIN OF THE THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY

[18:1-22]. *Paul at Corinth.*

By now we have outlined Luke's "filigree drawing", so we will focus on some new details. At Corinth the usual pattern repeats itself, with the variation that the head of the synagogue Crispus gets converted (v. 8), but is not followed by the majority of the Jews who indeed, after a year and a half (v. 11) tried in vain to have Paul arrested, and went to beat the new ruler of the synagogue Sosthenes (v. 17); evidently he too had become a believer and had kept the charge in the synagogue.

The Lord told Paul in a vision that no one would lay hands on him, because at Corinth there were many who were prepared to believe (vv. 9-11). In fact, Paul was able to stay at Corinth for a year and a half (v. 11) and then «many more days» (v. 18), without the hostility of the Jews to prevent him in any way, and then leaving of his own accord (v. 18).

A side reflection: if Jesus was in control of the situation and could protect Paul while he was at Corinth, he evidently did not see fit to avoid the beatings taken at Philippi (16:23). It is difficult for us to accept that God allows certain things; it seems that for Paul, instead, the two events went equally well, because he had first *lived* and then *written* the famous passage of Romans 8:28: «And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good». At Philippi he was not spared *from* the trial, but sustained *in* the trial and the fruits of his suffering were immediately visible. At other times the fruits of suffering ripen more slowly and it is more difficult to see them, but Paul's example and words are a great help, so as to not lose the way.

At this stage, the church of Antioch appears more and more in the background and Paul seems to act with great autonomy. For example, in bringing together new collaborators, as he did with Timothy (16:1-3), as he did with Aquila and his wife Priscilla (18:1-3), as he would shortly afterwards with Apollo and others (18:24 to 19:1; Titus 1:12). Even on the financial level Paul appears increasingly autonomous from Antioch, both working as a craftsman (v. 3, a good Jewish "rabbi" *had to* be able to sustain himself with work!), and *moderately* accepting gifts from the churches he had helped to establish (Philippians 4:15-20).

Reference is made to the expulsion of the Jews from Rome ordered by Claudius (v. 2) and this allows us to establish that we are in the year 52. It also allows us to reiterate a concept repeatedly expressed: the "Christians" Aquila and Priscilla were expelled from Rome because they were *Jews*!

Paul decided to return quickly from Corinth and so travelled by sea, finally arriving at the church of Antioch from which he had departed, thus ending his "second missionary journey" (vv. 18-22).

[18:23-28]. *Start of the third journey.*

Paul felt the weight of the missionary work entrusted to him and so, after having remained in Antioch «some time» (v. 23), he left again for his *third* missionary tour. He began by revisiting the evangelised area of the first tour (v. 23), and then landed at Ephesus (19:1), where meanwhile his collaborators Aquila and Priscilla had met and recruited a sort of "second Paul", who appears to be Apollo: «an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures» (v. 24) who, after further instruction by Aquila and Priscilla, «powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus» (v. 28).

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## **Further Insight n. 9** **OVERVIEW OF PAUL'S JOURNEYS**

Let us now summarise Paul's four missionary journeys, both to have a general picture of the work accomplished, and to orient ourselves better in the final part of Acts.

**FIRST JOURNEY (Chap. 13-14) AND "APOSTOLIC COUNCIL" (15:1-35).**

Paul and Barnabas depart from Antioch, focusing their action in a not distant and not wide region within present-day Turkey (Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derba). After returning to Antioch, they participate in the "Apostolic Council" in Jerusalem, in which the problems related to the spread of non-circumcised churches are resolved.

**SECOND JOURNEY (15:36 to 18:22).**

Separated from Barnabas, Paul departs from Antioch with Silas, but then gathers other collaborators (Timothy, Aquila, and Priscilla). After returning again to the area of his first trip, he wishes to evangelise the surrounding areas, but the Spirit guides him to Greece, which he travels from the north (city of Philippi, region of Macedonia), to then target specifically the capital Athens and the very important Corinth. He returns in haste by ship, finally arriving again at Antioch.

**THIRD JOURNEY (18:23 to 21:17), ARREST AT JERUSALEM (21:18 to 23:22).**

According to his custom, Paul revisits the areas evangelised previously, but Luke is fast-paced in describing these returns, focusing on the most significant work: that in the city of Ephesus, the capital of a region then called Asia, which was the seat of the cult of Diana. Before returning to Antioch, Paul

wants to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost, despite being aware of the danger: indeed, he is arrested, thus concluding this journey.

#### FOURTH JOURNEY (23:23 to 28:31).

Paul as a prisoner, departing from Jerusalem and remaining more than two years in Caesarea (24:17), undertakes the adventurous journey that will take him to Rome, where Luke ends his story, but where it is known that Paul - after having resounded the Gospel - will die a martyr (2 Tim 4:6).

#### CONCLUSION.

Before Paul, Christianity was a "niche" religion, while with Paul it is rooted in many Jews of the diaspora and in the various layers of Greek culture (people, nobles, philosophers, worshippers of Diana), until it breaches into the very heart of the empire, in Rome (Philippians 1:12-14). In short, Christianity after Paul would have been a widespread and consolidated fire by now, which would continue to spread with great force.

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## Acts 19

### PAUL AT EPHEBUS

At that time, Asia was a coastal region of present-day western Turkey, with Ephesus as its capital. At the beginning of the second missionary journey, the Holy Spirit had forbidden to go to Asia at that time (16:6), while at the end of the same journey the apostle had happened to land there in passing and had found a good reception by the Jews, but he did not stay long, intending to return with more tranquillity (18:19-21), a purpose which he then accomplished with his third journey.

At the beginning of the chapter (vv. 1-7), Paul describes his meeting with twelve disciples of John the Baptist, whom he asked: «Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?». The teaching we draw from here is one already seen at Pentecost (chap. 2) and in the evangelisation of Samaria (8:14-17), namely, that every true Christian *must* be the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

It seems, however, obvious that Luke is not so interested in reaffirming what has already been said about the Holy Spirit, but since in Samaria it seemed that the faculty of receiving the Spirit by the laying on of hands was exclusive to Peter and the Twelve, here Luke points out that Paul is on the same level. Another clear parallelism is between Peter's extraordinary miraculousness, emanating even from his shadow (5:15), and Paul's equally extraordinary one, which also made his handkerchiefs miraculous (v. 12). Later, with *Further Insight n. 12* placed before chapter 21, we will summarise the parallels between Peter and Paul highlighted by Luke.

The good welcome given to him by those in the synagogue as in the first time at Ephesus was confirmed, and so Paul was able to work there for three months (v. 8). As usual, however, the unbelieving Jews proved to be quarrelsome, and so Paul «took the disciples with him» and continued to teach in a private school. It is the first case reported of a place of encounter other than private homes and this is a sign that, in the three months of intense preaching, the number of disciples was already such that they could not enter a house.

An example worthy of note is the episode in which Paul, seeing that the conflict in the synagogue is not modular, avoided unleashing a war to throw out the others, retiring and thus leaving a free field to the adversaries, in obedience to what Jesus taught: «if anyone would sue [quarrel with] you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well» (Mt 5:40).

Also at Ephesus there was a re-shuffling of cards, with a part of Jews and a part of Greeks who united in Christ (disciples), effectively provoking an alliance between those Jews and Greeks who had rejected the Gospel. The "first phase" of Paul's sojourning at Ephesus lasted two years (v. 10),



but then he returned for another year, as the apostle would later recount how he had devoted himself to teaching «night and day» for three years (20:31).

Luke again marks the conclusion of his "expository series" with what we have defined as a kind of chorus: «So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily» (v. 20). Then the program that is set before Paul is drawn: to go through the areas of Greece previously evangelised (from Macedonia to the North, from Achaia to the South), and then to be in Jerusalem at Pentecost (cf. 20:16), to finally achieve a goal that felt increasingly urgent: evangelise in Rome (19:21; 20:16; cf. Rom 1:9-13).

The chapter ends with the revolt promoted by the craftsmen who lived producing shrines of the «great goddess Artemis [...] whom all Asia and the world worship» (v. 27). The crowd dragged into the open-air theatre two collaborators of Paul, who, as usual, sensing battle wanted to jump into the fray, but this time the disciples and the magistrates prevented him (vv. 30-31). The unbelieving Jews, meanwhile, collaborated with the idolaters, pointing to them the believer Alexander, who tried to speak to defend the Gospel, but when the Ephesians realised that he was... *Jewish*, they kept in mind the Jewish rejection of idolatry and began to cry «Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!» (v. 34). This time, in short, the covenant between unbelieving Jews and pagans did not work, but the episode shows well how *the believer in Jesus appeared to be a Jew to the Gentiles and a Pagan to the Hebrews!* (cf. 16:20; 18:2).

The crowd calmed down only when it was reassured that the greatness of Diana and the proof of her image «fallen from the sky» were indisputable (vv. 35-36). Also contributing to the pacification was the fact that Paul had not set his preaching "in negative", that is *against* the cult of Diana (v. 37), but exalting in positive «the name of the Lord Jesus» (v. 17) and his work of salvation, allowing for the "anti-idolatrours" consequences to mature spontaneously (v. 19).

That unquestionable goddess whom the whole world worshipped, we know that it was all a frame and Paul did not really think to propose to those craftsmen to make different statues, which he would have then thought to give a "Christian" meaning (on the model of what Aaron had done in his time, who came to "sanctify" nothing less than the golden calf, Ex 32:5). As in the case of Paul's contrast with the Athenian philosophers on the resurrection, however, his opponents would have later taken some revenge, to the point that Christian churches would become full of statues (and then back to being absent in the Protestant churches).

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### **Further Insight n. 10** **THE BINOMIAL ACTS-ROMANS**

Paul's desire to go to Rome (Acts 19:21; Rom 1:9-13) was delayed because of his arrest. On that very occasion Jesus assured him that he would bear witness even in the empire's capital (Acts 23:10-11), but then Paul would spend at least two more years in prison (Acts 24:27), during which he would have certainly fret.

To begin to satisfy his desire to evangelise Rome, Paul thought of writing his most precious Letter, that is, to the Romans, on which we now spend a few words because it seems to us that Acts and Romans form a whole.

The Acts show how it was Paul who gave Christianity its final form, but Acts only reports the conversion and teachings which Paul imparted *at the beginning* of preaching in the various environments (for example, synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia, pagans of Lystra, philosophers of Athens). The Acts tells us little or nothing, instead, of that *systematic* teaching that Paul communicated during his stay in some place (in the two years of Corinth and in the three years of Ephesus, for example).

Certainly, we find traces of Paul's thought in those Letters written to the churches formed from his preaching, but in them Paul tends to overlook what has already been taught in person, focusing instead on specific circumstances and questions. Precisely the fact that he had not been in Rome, thus, urges him to anticipate to those believers a synthesis of his overall vision of the Gospel and how unity in Christ is possible between Jews and Gentiles.

In summary, not only are Acts and Romans indispensable to a better understanding of the New Testament, but *these two books complement each other and one requires the other*. For example: the Acts show the importance of the Letter to the Romans exalting its author; Acts provides the "reading

key" of Romans, placing that letter in its appropriate context of church history; as aforesaid, the Letter to the Romans fills the gap in Acts on the systematic teaching of Paul, a gap that Luke evidently did not see as such, taking for granted the knowledge of the Letter to the Romans. In fact, Acts, with all evidence, was written *after* the Letter to the Romans, because the latter was written *before* the arrival of Paul in Rome, while the Acts recount his arrival (cf. Rom 1:10 with Acts 28:16).

Since Luke accompanies Paul on his journey to Rome (Acts 28:16) and assists Paul during his imprisonment (2 Tim 4:11) which lasted at least two years (Acts 28:30), then it seems evident that Luke wrote Acts during his forced sojourning in Rome; from this we can deduce that, in addition to a general purpose, Luke should also have had a contingent one: to make the Roman believers understand well the importance and authority of that prisoner who could appear of little account.

In addition to the believers of Rome, however, it seems that Luke also thinks of the authorities that in Rome are preparing to judge that Jewish prisoner unknown to them. The Acts in fact emphasise that Paul is not only a Roman citizen, but is by birth (16:37; 22:28); it is very significant that Paul asks for the protection of Rome against those "barbarians" of Jews who would kill him without cause (25:10-12).

From this perspective, Luke's dwelling on the reasons for Paul's arrest and his judicial affairs with the Roman authorities of Judea is also justified, from which Luke brings out the inconsistency of the accusations and the fact that Paul is taken prisoner to Rome not because he is found guilty, but because of the opportunism and lack of courage of the local authorities (23:10; 24:22-27; 25:24-27; 26:32). The importance of the juridical aspects, which Luke emphasises in the last eight chapters (that is, from 21:27), is also very present in the Letter to the Romans, in which the juridical aspects of the relationship between God and man, such as the law, guilt, the condemnation, the atonement, and the deliverance (Chap. 1-8): a much less prominent view in the other parts of the New Testament.

The details of the journey to Rome, then, show Paul's good relations with the Roman centurion in charge of his custody (27:3,43), with Paul who makes himself an instrument of salvation for all the occupants of the ship (27:44), without taking advantage of the confusion to flee.

In short, some people think that the Acts were also written as an instrument to be given to Paul's defence lawyer in the trial before the emperor: certainly it is not the only reason, but there are good reasons to believe that Luke had also this purpose.

Acts and Romans, in summary, form an inseparable couple, as much as Luke wanted to be inseparable towards Paul: his teacher and his friend, to whom he wished to build a majestic memorial, although using those subtle tones of those who know that it is not necessary to emphasise and embellish what the reality of the facts makes in itself unequivocally clear.

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## Acts 20

### PAUL HEADED FOR JERUSALEM. DISCOURSE TO THE ELDERS OF EPHESUS

Since waters at Ephesus were stirring, and since he had stayed there long enough, Paul went on his way to Macedonia and to actual Greece. He then wanted to sail to reach Antioch directly by sea, but the hostile Jews were waiting for him at the port and so he was forced to stretch the route, going by land to Macedonia (v. 3), with an unforeseen delay that he had to make up for later, in order to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

Italian parents want to spend Christmas with their children and their children usually please them that way. Similarly, God wanted every Israelite to go to "his house", that is, to the Temple in Jerusalem, three times a year, one of which was at Pentecost (as we have seen in commentary 2:1):

that is why Paul, since he continued to live as a Jew, did everything possible to be in Jerusalem on that day, renouncing to pass through Ephesus (v. 16).

On his journey, Paul was accompanied by seven collaborators from five different churches (vv. 4-5); this goes to show Paul's strategy, which can be summarised in three stages: 1) generalised proclamation of the Gospel; 2) return in later times for a strengthening of the disciples; 3) selection of people suitable to remain close to him and who could then continue the work. A strategy basically similar to that of Jesus: and how could it be otherwise?

Despite a certain haste, as a good Jew, Paul lets Passover (Unleavened Bread) end before returning to his journey (v. 6).

In verse 7 we begin with the account of an episode that took place «on the first day of the week, while we were gathered together to break bread». It seemed clear to me that this was the so-called "Lord's Supper", not only in remembrance of his death, but above all of his resurrection, which took place on the «first day of the week» (Jn 20:1-19), that is, on the day after the Sabbath and which we now call *Sunday*. Some comments of a friend, however, have led me to better frame this episode, which fits into the question of the relationship between the Jewish Sabbath and Christian Sunday: a complex question, on which we will dwell in *Further Insight No. 11* right below.

In commenting on 19:1-5 we have already mentioned, and will not dwell further, the parallels between the resurrection of the young man by Paul (v. 10) and the resurrection of Tabetha by Peter (Acts 9:40).

Paul began to teach «until daybreak» (v. 11), and it was not an exception (cf. v. 31). It is then understood that he had little time to reflect on himself, despite needing it a lot, because he perceived an uncertain future, in which there would still be «imprisonment and afflictions» (v. 23). Perhaps it is precisely to reflect calmly that he chose to make a stretch of road on foot, sending the others by sea (vv. 13-14).

But he considered it important to see for one last time the elders of Ephesus and then he sent for them, addressing them with a very dense and moving speech, on which, however, we must limit ourselves only to a few details. Paul announced that they would never see him again (v. 25) and therefore entrusted them «to God and to the Word of his grace» (v. 32); I was struck by the comment of Cardinal Martini, who stressed that it is the Church that is entrusted to the Word of God, not vice versa. Paul had no illusions and saw before him a degeneration of the Church that makes us think of the farewell words spoken by Moses to the elders of Israel (Deuteronomy 31:28-29).

Those themselves called first «elders» (v. 17) in reference to their *position* as government of the community, are then called «bishops» (v. 28) in reference to their *function* as overseers: there was, nonetheless, no clear distinction between *elders* (or *presbyters*, from which we derive *priests*) and *bishops*, because there was no *institution* above the local church, even though some brothers (the Twelve Apostles first of all, but not only them) were highly esteemed and, like Paul, performed a more *general* service as well as *more transitional*. We go no further in examining this discourse, but we invite you to read it and reread it with great attention (vv. 17-38).

We quickly note other "hints" on the divinity of Jesus, even if Acts does not put it in the foreground. One is given by this expression of Paul: «testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance *toward God* and of faith *in our Lord Jesus Christ*» (v. 21). The invitation to «to care for the church of God, which he obtained *with his own blood*» (v. 28) is also significant.

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### **Further Insight n. 11** **IS IT NECESSARY TO OBSERVE THE SABBATH OR THE SUNDAY?**

Almost everyone is convinced that the last day of the week is Sunday and therefore Monday would be the first. A minimum of investigation, however, is enough to understand that the seventh day of the week is Saturday and therefore Sunday is *the first* day of the new week. This widespread error arose because of the license that Christianity took to replace the Sabbath with Sunday: a license that tastes like manipulation of the Bible and which any scholar realises, but from which almost no one

returns. "Almost" nobody, because in reality there are some (mostly the Adventists) who wanted to restore the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship, but also on this choice we will express some perplexity.

The "seventh day" is already mentioned at the beginning of the Bible and the interpretation of that first mentioning conditions all the vision that is developed later, including the current one. In Genesis 2:3 it is written, «So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation». One is easily led to think that the institution of the Sabbath takes place in Genesis already, which would therefore concern all humanity and not only the people of Israel.

Looking more closely, however, in Genesis it is said that *God* rested, not that he commanded man to rest, and therefore in Genesis we find a *basis* for the eventual fourth commandment, not the commandment itself. This interpretation finds decisive confirmation in the fact that before Moses we find no example of Sabbath observance. We are told many things about Noah, Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, but we are not told that any of them kept the Sabbath. For Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then, there is a decisive argument: they cared for large flocks of sheep, which necessitated pasturing every day and, in some periods, even milking every day!

If one accepts that the Sabbath was specifically given to Israel, the question of its observance in the New Testament is quite simple. Since Jesus was born a Jew, was circumcised on the eighth day and then presented at the Temple (Luke 2:21-22), since he lived as a Jew among Jews and died as a Jew, in the Gospels there is no "overcoming" of the Sabbath observance. It is true that many mistake Jesus' criticism of the way the Pharisees observe the Sabbath as if he taught the *abolition* of that commandment (Mt 12:1-14), but it is the usual "anti-Jewish interpretation of the New Testament" which has no serious foundation: in fact, Jesus challenges the Pharisees not by declaring the overcoming of Moses, but by quoting the Old Testament, with the Gospel in which we find, at the end, "pious women" who go to the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week, that is, after having scrupulously observed the Sabbath, as evidently encouraged by their Master (Jn 20:1).

Even the birth of the Church took place in a strictly Jewish environment and, before Cornelius (Acts 10), you could not be baptised if you were not already circumcised. The Jews who received the preaching of the apostles continued to, «day by day, attending the temple together», be perceived as *fully Jews* to the point of enjoying the favour «of all the people» (Acts 2:46-47).

It is quite a different matter for Cornelius (Acts 10), who is the first case of a baptised person without being circumcised and to whom the observance of the law of Moses is certainly not then imposed; the new situation that came to be created the apostles discussed later (Acts 15) and, among the requests made to the Gentiles who have become Christians, there is no observance of the Sabbath.

Unfortunately, we often refuse to acknowledge that in the New Testament there are TWO WAYS of living faith in Christ: either as Jews or as non-Jews. When you want to forcibly seek THE WAY taught by the New Testament you end up privileging one at the expense of the other; or you make a mixture of contradictory elements and that, thus, makes little sense.

The TWO WAYS are clearly taught by Paul: «*One* person believes he may eat anything, while the [*other*] weak person eats only vegetables», «*One* person esteems one day as better than another, while *another* esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind» (Rom 14:2,5).

And again, «Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a *Sabbath*» (Col 2:16).

*Christian worship is therefore not bound to a specific day*, but the time when to do so falls within the field of freedom: it is therefore not *obligatory* to do so on the Sabbath, but neither *forbidden*. What is instead forbidden is to take the freedom to move the Saturday to the next day (Christian Sunday) or the day before (Muslim Friday).

It is true that in the New Testament there are two references to the "first day of the week" (Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor 16:2) and I have long thought that they were a sign of the consolidation of a *praxis* (certainly not of a law given by the apostles). But then I was offered an *internal* explanation of Judaism that it's also consistent in the general context of the New Testament: I now report the two passages above, being followed by the explanation of Argentino Quintavalle. In any case, whatever

interpretation is given to the two passages, they do not fix any *rule* and therefore the *rule of freedom* set out earlier remains valid.

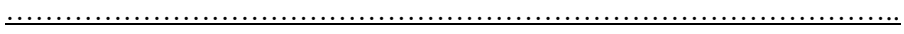
In Acts 20:7 we read, «On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight».

Argentino Quintavalle: The way in which the Jews have always observed the Sabbath for centuries, and which they maintain even today, is that the day begins on Friday evening at sunset with the lighting of candles, a prayer and the meal. The Sabbath ends with a special service called "separation", which serves to distinguish the holy Sabbath (the seventh day) from the other six days of the week. This service begins at sunset on Saturday and includes prayer followed by a meal. The above verse explains that Paul and the believers had gathered for their regular Sabbath meeting and were breaking bread for the closing of the Sabbath. Since they were already gathered and Paul would leave the following day (Sunday), he continued to speak until midnight, remaining there until dawn on Sunday, when he left for the next phase of his journey (Assos)».

In 1 Corinthians 16:2 we read, « On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come».

Argentino Quintavalle: Neither meeting nor holy supper is spoken of here. The first day of the week was the first day after the Sabbath and in which, even before spending for themselves, the Jews had to set aside that which was to be given on the next Sabbath. First, they decided the amount to give and then they set it aside, because if they had waited for the end of the week, they would have given only what was left».

It is perfectly possible to do on Sundays what is commanded for the Jews on the Sabbath day, provided that this is not sold as obedience to the fourth commandment. If the substitution of Saturday with Sunday is arbitrary, why was it effected and is it still maintained? The reason is all too well known and goes back to Constantine (4th century), when Christianity came to power and took de facto possession of vast imperial territories, with the connected strategy of bringing to completion a clear separation from Judaism, not only of Jesus, but of the entire New Testament.



### **Further Insight n. 12**

#### **SUMMARY OF THE PARALLELISMS BETWEEN PETER AND PAUL**

Luke clearly wants to highlight Paul's parallels with Peter, to show that Paul has a *substantial* authority that is not inferior to that of Peter. Therefore, Luke not only reports several similar facts, but often brings out the resemblance in the manner he reports these facts as well. For example, in recounting that Paul heals a «cripple from birth» after «looking intently at him» (14:8-9), Luke uses the same quoted words previously used for Peter (3:4-6).

N	Topic	Paul	Peter	Notes
1	Directly commissioned by Jesus	9:15; others	1:8; others	1
2	Against the sorcerers Elymas and Simon	13:10	8:18-24	
3	Preaching to the Jews based on Old T.	13:17-41	3:12-26	
4	By grace alone, Greeks and Jews	13:39; 16:31	15:7-11	2
5	Healing of a cripple	14:8-9	3:4-6	3
6	Beat with rods	16:22	5:40	
7	Miraculous escape from prison	16:25-26	12:7-10	
8	Simple message and baptism	16:31	10:38-48	4
9	Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands	19:6	8:15	5
10	Miraculousness of the person itself	19:11-12	5:15	6
11	Young resurrected (Eutychus and Tabitha)	20:9-10	9:40	
12	Refusal to be worshipped	14:14-15	10:24-26	

#### NOTES.

1. It is first in the Gospels that we see how Peter was indicated by Jesus as the leader of the disciples (e.g. Mt 10:2; Luke 22:32; Jn 21:15-17), then the first five chapters of Acts are an applied confirmation. With respect to all this, Paul is totally external, and so here Luke emphasises that Paul,

even though in another way, was given a mission directly by Jesus, who appeared to him several times (9:5,15; 18:9-10; 22:17-21; 23:11; 26:14-18); the centrality for Luke of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus can be seen in the fact that it is narrated three times (9:1-22; 22:3-20; 26:9-20).

2. Peter's words in Acts 15:7-11 represent the plan put in action by Paul: this is seen not only in the whole of the book of Acts, but even more so in the Epistle to the Romans and in that to the Galatians.
3. For parallelism in language, see the paragraph above the table.
4. Paul's simple message to the jailer of Philippi, who is then immediately baptised, is justified in Peter's behaviour with Cornelius (but also in that of Philip with the eunuch, 8:26-39).
5. Certain disciples of John receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of Paul's hands (19:6). Before that episode, it seemed that only Peter and John were given this option (8:15).
6. That Peter's shadow itself was miraculous (5:15) is an extreme limit, as extreme is the fact that even the handkerchiefs touched by Paul became miraculous (19:11-12).

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## Acts 21

### PAUL'S ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM AND HIS ARREST

[21:1-20a]. *Paul's last dramatic journey to Jerusalem.*

Many tried in various ways to dissuade Paul from moving towards definite martyrdom (vv. 4 and 11-14), but Paul did not even consider such a possibility: «I do not account my life for any value [...] if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus» (20:24). «What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus» (21:13). It is clear how this last journey of Paul impressed those who listened to him, making them understand more deeply the value of a "servant of Christ" unlike any other.

Paul stayed at Philip's «many days», while had been only one day with the brothers he had met before there (vv. 7-10): a sign that between Paul and Philip there was a deep friendship, which honoured Paul, and perhaps for this reason Luke make a note of it. It takes little to imagine how "explosive" the house of Philip was. We have seen that he (ch. 8) had been used by God in the most disparate circumstances. Now in the house there were four unmarried prophetess daughters and, as if that were not enough, other prophets like Agabus made an entry, finding very active groups like that of Paul at their ease.

Philip, at one point, had been God's chief instrument for advancing his "strategic plan" (expansion of the Gospel in Samaria, Ethiopia, and the Mediterranean coast). Then it is as if God had set him aside, calling in the work other characters (Barnabas, Paul). It may seem that God treats people like they are lemons, that are first squeezed and then thrown away, but that's not the case. In fact, Philip first experienced exceptional *service to God*, followed by a long period in which he enjoyed an extraordinary *presence of God* in his home. Let us ask ourselves: do we serve God to have human glory or to please him? Do we love more to *work* for God or to *be* with God?

Having arrived in Jerusalem with his collaborators, Paul was welcomed by believers «gladly» (v. 17) and this undoubtedly rewarded him for the difficulties he had encountered the first time he had landed there (9:26-30). Paul immediately went to James, clearly considered as the main point of reference; this is confirmed by the fact that it was at James' that *all* the elders of Jerusalem also gathered. In the story, Peter is not even mentioned, and it is even more evident, compared to Acts 15, how James was now entrusted with the functions of government of the church. James and the elders also rejoiced over all that God had done through Paul, who was now related with them on equal terms and without the guardianship of Barnabas.

[21:20b]. *The Jews who had become believers practiced the law of Moses even more.*

These verses are difficult to accept and therefore to understand; they begin with the description of reality, which is presented to Paul in this way: «You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law» (21:20). In Christianity there is a widespread and deeply rooted idea that when a Jew believed in Christ *automatically* began to distance himself from the law of Moses, that is, from the sacrifices of animals, from the rites and from the Temple: the more he understood, in other words, the less Jewish and the more Christian he would become. The above verse says exactly the opposite of what Christianity believes, indeed it says something that terrifies Christianity, to which the few words of explanation that we will try to offer will certainly not be enough.

For a Jew, understanding that the Passover lamb was a representation of Christ, made the Passover ritual *more precious* to him, not less. If we are rightly attached to bread and wine as symbols of Christ, why did the Jews have to repudiate those symbols that God himself had given them? Circumcision was a cleansing of the exterior that, *as Moses had taught*, was to be *the symbol* of an inner cleansing: «These words that I command you today shall be on your heart»; «Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart»; (Deu 6:6; 10:16).

For Jesus the Temple was the house of his Father, therefore his house (Luke 2:49). A house of God that had been distorted by a perverse use (Mt 21:13) that would destroy it (Mt 24:1-2). A house that needed to be cleaned and used according to God's will, but certainly not to be abandoned. Indeed, just as when a family member is sick we feel we ought to be closer to him (or her), the Jews who had become Christians became even more attached to a Temple of which they understood the great value in itself (the dwelling of God in the midst of his people) and its great value as forerunner of Jesus: the true Temple. Those who are fond of a person are also fond of what resembles them, so believing in Christ brought them *closer* to the Temple.

But it is now an unquestioned and unquestionable conviction that the *New Covenant* abolished the *Old Covenant*, as would be written in Hebrews 8:13. On the Letter to the Hebrews there is *Link No. 6*, so we do not dwell on it here, pointing out only that it does not compare two opposing things, as one being good and the other being bad, or one right and the other wrong; Instead, he compares two things both good and from God: one good and the other better, one inferior and the other superior (Heb 8:6).

Let us introduce another perspective with an example. A man had a machine that he was very fond of, but that he destroyed in an accident. One tried to console him by telling him that it was much more important that he had not been hurt and that, after all, a car is not a person! This is to say that, if the Letter to the Hebrews, as everything suggests, was written shortly before 70, and so shortly before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, then it had the central purpose of preparing the Hebrews (even those who had believed in the Gospel!) to the great loss of the Temple and Jerusalem, consoling them of the destruction of a reality to which deep hopes and memories were connected.

With these reflections we certainly do not exhaust the problems that arise in wanting to reconcile Christianity with Moses, but we wanted to indicate the method by which we try to overcome the apparent conflicts between various parts of Scriptures. It has been pointed out at other times, however, that God speaks first of all with facts and then with discourses based on those facts. Whether or not the explanation convinces us, everyone who says they believe in the Bible should take note that, towards *the end* of the apostolic time, **THE JEWS WHO HAD BELIEVED IN THE GOSPEL WERE ALL ZEALOUS FOR THE LAW OF MOSES**, both moral and ritual, as you can see below.

[21:21-26]. *The FALSE accusation against Paul, however sustained by Christians!*

It is a widespread and deeply rooted opinion that Paul taught the Jews to put aside the law of Moses and he himself had by now abandoned it. It is argued that the *moral* law was certainly still valid, but the *ceremonial* (priests, sacrifices, and various rites) was now regarded by Paul as a "rubbish" to be thrown away in order to gain Christ (Phil 3:8). The present passage of Acts says instead that in this widespread and deeply rooted conviction **THERE IS NOTHING TRUE: NOTHING** is a huge word and it means that it is a completely wrong concept. The disturbing consequence is that, when in Christian theology there is *NOTHING* true in some of its "supporting concepts", then the whole structure cannot only be *revised*, but must be deeply *restructured*.

Placed in these terms, the stakes are not small, but let's now focus on the content of the FALSE rumour about Paul: «and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs» (21:21). The whole book of Acts shows instead that Paul (like Peter) asked the Jews to accept Jesus as Messiah, *continuing to remain Jews*.

Paul, in harmony with what Peter did with Cornelius and with the decisions of the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), taught that *non-Jews* who accepted the Gospel were not obliged to observe the law of Moses. But since the pagan converts were *in fact* more numerous than the believing Jews, then in the new group of Gospel believers a situation was being created that would result in the absolute pre-eminence of Christians of pagan origin, a category to which Christianity *now* belongs. The new *factual situation*, however, cannot be transformed into a *theology by right*.

To refute the *false* accusation of no longer observing the rites, Paul agreed not only to perform a rite himself, but also to show himself as one who taught them to four other Jews (vv. 23-24). Of course, when living as Paul among pagans and caring for their salvation, one tends to neglect what is *less important*, as Peter did when he went to Cornelius, but for Paul, as for Peter, the Hebrew precepts remained important and, as far as possible, he tried to put them into practice and thus keep their being Jewish.

Jesus had said, «If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother [...] he cannot be my disciple» (Luke 14:26). Did it mean that those who followed Jesus had to throw their parents in the garbage? That hatred of parents had the meaning of a "lesser love" and had to emerge only if they placed themselves as an obstacle to following Jesus. Jesus himself gave the example when his mother and other relatives wanted him to stop his public commitment and he exclaimed before the disciples: «Who are my mother and my brothers?» (Mk 3:21-33). But this did not prevent relations with that mother and with those brothers from lasting to the cross and beyond (Jn 19:26-27; Acts 1:14; Gal 1:19).

Paul went so far as to use language that seems "excessive" when everything interposed not only between him and Christ (Phil 3:8-9), but also between those he had evangelised and Christ (Gal 2:11-14; 5:12). So even the law of Moses, if used improperly, had to be set aside (Gal 3:15-18; 5:2-4). It was not, however, the law of Moses *in itself* that was negative (to the one who says he believes in the Bible should this not appear *obvious?*), but the abuse of considering it as a means of salvation: a function that it had *not* performed even *before* Christ (Gal. 3:15-18). The *whole* of the Old Testament was edifying and useful, if seen with the eyes of Jesus, as the two disciples well understood on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:25-32).

Some object that Paul practiced these rites because he tried to adapt himself to everyone, making himself «a Jew with the Jews» and «to those outside the law [...] as one outside the law» (1 Cor 9:19-23). It is true that, as far as possible, Paul sought to meet each [in their circumstances], but not to the point of encouraging practices that he believed to be wrong and contrary to the work of Christ. To draw a parallel, he certainly did not go to make a sacrifice in a pagan temple in order to please the pagans!

Some Jews who had believed in Christ disapproved of Paul only because they had been misinformed (21:20-24) and should not be confused with other Jews who, instead, had not believed in Christ and slandered Paul in search of excuses; those people, above all, did not bear the extension of God's work to the Gentiles, a question on which they would then stop listening to Paul, trying to kill him (22:21).

[21:27-40]. *Begin of the final rupture between Paul and the Jews of Jerusalem.*

The strategy put in place to dismantle the *false* accusations against Paul seems to proceed in the right direction, then some Jews lit the fuse with *false* but credible accusations. Luke points out that they were «Jews of Asia», that is, of the region with Ephesus as its capital and in which, in order to oppose the Jewish brothers who had recognised Jesus as Messiah, the accusers had not hesitated to ally themselves with idolaters, worshipers of the goddess Diana (19:8-33).

In summary, all the crowd hurled at Paul with the intention of killing him, but the arrival of the Roman soldiers saved Paul who, as usual, did not avoid the clash and asked permission to speak to the people.



Once again, on the political level, it is noted that the Roman authorities were better than a people of God who was increasingly degenerate and easy prey to unjustified murderous impulses (as, after all, it had been for Jesus).

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## Acts 22

### PAUL'S DISCOURSE TO THE JEWS IN JERUSALEM

Paul spoke to the people in the Hebrew language, an indication that it was still understood (though probably with Aramaic variants), and chose not to make a theological discourse, as he did on other occasions (13:14ff), but to give his testimony. It began with a «Brothers and fathers [...] I am a Jew» (vv. 1-3). He does not say that 'I was a Jew', because for Paul to accept Jesus as Messiah was to *remain a Jew* in all aspects and, if anything, *it was others* who were no longer in line with the Jewish faith.

And so, are Christians «the true Jews», as many claim on the basis of Philippians 3:3? Yes and no and, as usual, half-truths are very devastating. However, we postpone the matter to the *Further Insight n. 13* below.

In his speech, Paul described a Christian faith entirely internal to Judaism, because it was communicated to him by an Ananias who was a «devout man according to the law» (v. 12) and who brought him a message from the «God of our fathers» (v. 14). The bystanders remained to listen to Paul even when he told of a vision of Jesus, which he had while in a trance in the Temple (v. 17), but what they could not bear was that Jesus had told Paul that he would send him not to them, but «far away to the Gentiles» (v. 21).

As the resurrection was inadmissible for the philosophers of Athens, so for the Pharisees the coming of a Messiah who would not place Israel *above* other peoples was inconceivable: the Pharisees had emerged and were characterised precisely by their resistance to enemies who were of Greek language, in expectation of a new Moses-David, through whom God would treat their Greek-Roman enemies as he had treated Pharaoh and the Philistines. They therefore immediately ceased to listen to Paul and wished him to be killed, but the soldiers protected him by taking him to prison, where Paul was treated well because he declared to be a Roman citizen (vv. 25-29).

The next day, the tribune brought him before the Sanhedrin to try to understand why he was hated so much, but this is reported in the next chapter.

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#### **Further Insight 13**

#### **ARE CHRISTIANS THE "TRUE JEWS" AND THE "REMNANT OF ISRAEL"?**

Peter and Paul could say, «We are the [true] *circumcision*» (Phil 3:3), but certainly not Cornelius, nor the "Cornelian" Christianity of today. Certainly, Cornelius' faith in Christ was more important than circumcision, but this did not nullify the ETERNAL COVENANT made by God with Abraham and which implied circumcision. For God said to Abraham, «This is my covenant [...] let every male among you be circumcised [...] I will establish my covenant with him [Isaac], AS AN EVERLASTING COVENANT FOR HIS OFFSPRING AFTER HIM» (Gen 17:19b). Cornelius, in the figurative sense, could also be considered a "true circumcised", but the offspring of Isaac, who inherits the eternal covenant, must also be *genetic* (although, this is not enough to ensure blessing and salvation). Certainly it is Christ, as part of this offspring, to "take upon himself" the burden of a final fulfilment of what was promised to Abraham (Gal 3:16), as Joseph took it for his brothers; whereas I do not believe that Christ,

as Abraham's offspring, "took for himself" the inheritance expropriating effectively all his "brothers in Abraham".

To be circumcised and to be Abraham's descendants, then, is not the same, for the circumcision of Abraham's slaves (Gen 17:27) *associated* them with Abraham, but certainly did not make them *direct* heirs of the promise (meaning ancestors of the Messiah). For this reason, it was necessary to *have been born* of Abraham (Gen 15:4).

A "true Jew" in the strict sense, then, has to evidently *be* at least a Jew, as a preliminary condition; if, instead, it is a "non-Jew" to define himself as a "true Jew" it is clear that we are dealing here with a "false Jew".

Another definition that Christianity makes its own, based on Romans 9:27-29 and 11:5, is to be the "remnant of Israel" (that "good" part that remains and is saved, after eliminating the "false" part). The image comes from agriculture: when sheaves are beaten in the threshing floor, a pile of chaff and grains of wheat is formed, on which the wind acts: being light, the chaff flies away, leaving the precious grain as a residue.

The twelve tribes of Israel began to deteriorate, so God worked a "scattering", then returning to the Promised Land "a remnant". Many Christians claim that the Church would be the new "remnant", comprised of that people of God that continues to follow the Word of God, while the other Jews, without value, were dispersed by the Romans. It must be recognised that this framework has its own logic, but since it seems to be in contrast with other passages of Scriptures, we will seek its weaknesses first, and then propose another biblical framework that we consider more appropriate.

The first objection follows what has already been said: only those who are already Israel can be a "remnant of Israel": that is, Peter and Paul, but not Cornelius. The objection that «there is no longer any Jew or Greek» by being «one in Christ» (Gal 3:28) is not valid, because being «one in Christ» does not eliminate the differences, otherwise there would not even be male and female, therefore Christ establishes a common ground on which *two distinct people groups* meet and remain distinct. Among other things, the verse of Galatians says «there is neither Jew nor Greek [*here*]», making it even clearer that there is no difference *in the method of salvation*. It is true that, immediately after (Gal 3:29), Paul states that «if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise», but this must be understood in the context of all the Word of God. In the time of Joshua, when Abraham's descendants took possession of the Promised Land, each family of the 12 tribes was assigned a portion of it, considered inalienable. When Cornelius received the forgiveness of sins through Jesus, he became, yes, "son of Abraham", but *adopted* son and, therefore, he could certainly not go to the elders of Israel to claim a piece of land, because his inheritance was another.

God has brought forth for *two millennia* a project with Abraham focused *also* (though not *only*) on the Promised Land: we do not believe that he then closed everything by making a New Covenant that *cancel*s the previous one. If God did not, and will not, carry out the "ancient covenant" with Abraham and the "old" one on Sinai, how can we hope that it will bring to completion the New Covenant without replacing it "during the work" with a "new covenant"? After describing, in the first eight chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, the plan of salvation in Christ, both for the Gentiles and for the Jews, Paul goes on to specifically state that the participation of foreigners in the promises of Abraham will not lead to the exclusion of Abraham's descendants, but to the salvation of all Israel, that is, of Israel as a nation (Chap. 9-11). Certainly, the details of how God will carry out His plans are not revealed to us, but *those who believe in the Bible cannot help but believe that God will carry out ALL His covenants and ALL His promises*.

The second objection is more specific: if the remnant is what remains, then the Jews who believed in Christ lack the fundamental characteristic, because they are not the ones who *remained* in Jerusalem; those were the other Jews, who first killed Jesus and then cast out his disciples. Even in the synagogues of the diaspora, as Acts shows, those who accepted the Messiah Jesus were a minority that had to leave; for this reason, already *in Acts* the term 'Jews' is understood as referring to those who did not accept the Gospel. On the biblical level, the matter presents some problems, because Paul states: «So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace» (Rom 11:5), unequivocally identifying the "remnant" with the Jews who accepted Jesus. Immediately after, however, it is written: «Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it» (11:7), where "Israel" means those who did not accept Jesus. For two thousand years, as a matter of fact,

'Jews' means those who did *not* accept Jesus as Messiah because, since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. onwards, the others have increasingly lived "as gentiles", ending up being assimilated.

The Church, in other words, having been formed on the "faithful remnant", could also be called "true Israel", but this does not take away that "Israel" is then the other; similarly, Cornelius can also be regarded as a "true circumcised", but then as "circumcised" one also continues to mean the others.

Today there is still a Jewish people that remains the holder of the *territorial* promises made to Abraham and that has already partly returned to the Promised Land, regaining control of Jerusalem. The embassies of the various States of the world are all in Tel Aviv, because no one wants to consider Jerusalem as the "eternal capital of the State of Israel". Then, precisely to show their support for the State of Israel and to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of the Promised Land, a "Christian Embassy" was founded in Jerusalem, to which Christians from all over the world adhere.

One way to show the State of Israel the affection shared by many Christians for it is to participate in the annual Feast of Tabernacles, when thousands of Christians from all over the world (Koreans, Brazilians, Africans, Italians and others) parade through the streets of Jerusalem as a sign of solidarity with that people.

We Christians feel descendants of those who have been killed (Jesus, Stephen) or expelled from Jerusalem, but we do not want to return to it by force. We recognise, however, that this is our *origin*, without which we lack something. Let us therefore stretch our arms to the people of Israel as it is, unconditionally, assured that sooner or later it will be God Himself who will bring about in them a change of heart that will lead them to dissociate from those who killed Jesus and Stephen.

We wait for the prophecy of Zechariah (12:10) to be fulfilled: «They [will] look on me, on him whom they have pierced». We wait for the plea anticipated by Jesus, who told her: «you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'» (Luke 13:35).

In conclusion, the Church without Israel is without a true identity, while for an Israel without Christ a future of blessings cannot be opened.

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## Acts 23

### PAUL'S FAREWELL TO JERUSALEM

From the very beginning of his journey to Jerusalem, Paul knew that he would find great difficulty (20:22-25; 21:4-13). He also found there, however, a great intimacy with Jesus and just as he prayed in a place that, according to many Christians, a follower of Jesus should no longer attend: the Temple. Right there he was raptured in a trance, as we have already mentioned, and Jesus told him to hurry away from Jerusalem, because they would not receive his testimony (22:17-21).

But Paul's love for his people of Israel was extreme (Rom 9:3) and we saw that he did not want to give up on a last and risky attempt at dialogue (22:1ff). But when he came before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling class of which he had been a part of and which he therefore knew well, he already had little hope left in him, and that that had remained disappeared as soon as he saw their reaction to his first words. Therefore, he abandoned all attempts to persuade them and set the goal of saving himself, so that he could reach the desired destination, Rome (19:21).

To prevent that thick gathering from overwhelming him, he then adopted the classic technique of dividing your opponents, placing them against one another: he succeeded in claiming his belonging to the current of the Pharisees (thus placing Christianity as a development of Phariseism, in opposition to the Sadducees), thus triggering a contrast between the Pharisees, who took to the defence of the Pharisee Paul, and the Sadducees (vv. 6-7). As hoped, the confusion produced, enabled the Roman tribune to take Paul away and rescue him into the fortress. During the night the Lord (Jesus) appeared again to Paul to encourage him and to confirm his goal of bearing witness to him also in Rome (v. 11).

Meanwhile, the hatred of the Jews was so strong that forty men were ready to do anything to kill Paul (vv. 12-13), but if it pleases Him, God requires just a small move to fail plans. It happened then that the son of Paul's sister heard of the plot and informed the Roman tribune Claudius Lysias, in charge of the order in Jerusalem, who secured Paul by sending him to Caesarea, seat of the Roman political authorities in that area, where at that time was the governor Felix, who kept Paul in custody until his accusers arrived from Jerusalem.

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## Acts 24

### ACCUSATIONS AGAINST PAUL AND HIS DEFENSE BEFORE FELIX

Paul's accusers brought a lawyer to speak on their behalf, whom, as those who have no proof do, focused on flattering praise addressed to the governor Felix and on the invitation to immediately save time by condemning Paul, trusting the accusations as expressed by friends of the governor, as they were. Paul is defined as «a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world» (after all, a beautiful compliment!), being pointed at as «a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes» (v. 5).

Paul, unperturbed, replied only at the governor's request; by contrast to the pompous eloquence of that skilled lawyer, Paul shifted the confrontation to the concreteness and substance of the problem, emphasising that the accusations were without evidence. Paul knows that Felix was able to understand the nature of the issues well, especially since his wife Drusilla was Jewish (vv. 10,22,24).

Paul's main objective should have been self-defence, instead he (should we be surprised?) took the opportunity to explain once again about his faith: he did not make substantially new statements, but since Acts often repeats them, we also re-summarise what Paul said. First of all, the apostle wouldn't accept to be defined as one who had departed from Judaism: «I worship the God of our fathers», «believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets» (v. 14). Like every good Jew, he considered the most suitable place to worship to be the Temple of Jerusalem (vv. 11,18). Of the law of Moses, Paul did not seek to observe only the *moral* aspects, according to a logic foreign to Judaism but very popular among Christian theologians, but instead also continued to be attentive to the norms of *ritual* purification (v. 18).

But the aspect that we want to reiterate more is the centrality of the resurrection in the New Testament in general, in the Acts in particular and in the very *life* of Paul, who in this case stated: «having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man» (vv. 15-16).

We have already noted how Christianity has *in effect* replaced the "resurrection system" with the "Paradise system", thus arriving at a religiosity far from the apostolic one. The matter is so significant that we decided to dedicate to it the *Further Insight n. 17 (Paradise without resurrection: an "actual heresy")*, placed in the final part.

Back to governor Felix, he appears as those politicians who try to maintain popularity by pleasing everyone (particularly themselves), giving a bump here and there. So he sent the Jews back to Jerusalem without delivering Paul to them, *but* under the excuse of postponing the decision; he kept Paul in prison, *though* granting him some freedom.

It appears that through his wife Drusilla's urging, Felix sent for Paul to be more informed about faith in Jesus. Paul, however, focused his exposition on the righteousness and judgment of God, in order to produce in Felix a change of life: instead, he produced only a fright, which reminded Felix of his many commitments, and so he dismissed Paul. Sometime later, however, he called him back

to talk with him, but only because he supposed that Paul, or his friends, would be willing to give him money.

So Paul was held prisoner in Caesarea for two years "awaiting trial". It is quick to say "two years", but for a very active person like Paul these would have been very long and would have appeared nearly useless; given the freedom to receive visits, he surely spent them even writing some of his letters, later useful across time to millions of people. Felix did not deliver Paul, lest the Jews should be displeased, and so delivered him to his successor Porcius Festus.

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## Acts 25

### PAUL BEFORE FESTUS

The prophecy that Paul would bear the name of Jesus «before the Gentiles and kings and children of Israel» (9:15) had little effect on the political authorities, while it becomes central in this final part of Acts, where Paul has the opportunity to be face to face with two governors (Felix and Porcius Festus) and with King Agrippa: great opportunities to train in a task to be carried out then even in the capital of the empire.

While in his witness «to the Gentiles» and «to the children of Israel» Paul always reaped some fruit of conversion, in his preaching to the political authorities it seems that it was a failure every time. But God says that His Word always produces the effect for which He sends it (Isa 55:11) and so what was the achieved purpose of Paul? There is no answer directly available from Luke's story, but it seems to me that it is possible to glimpse a short-term fruit and one in prospect.

The short-term fruit is that these political authorities come to know Christianity through its most suitable person, as Paul was; even if there are no conversions, we can see that Paul is able to make himself heard and even to intimidate them (not an easy target for a prisoner). Since the authorities had much power over the whole population, the fact that Paul had roused esteem for Christianity would have been very useful to all believers.

To reap another fruit we must move on to the historical level. For a politician of that time, conversion was much more problematic than for any citizen, so the seed sown by Paul found it difficult to sprout readily. Even the initial seed that Stephen had sown in the young Saul found difficulty to be immediately accepted, but the Spirit of God did not allow Paul to uproot it and so, after some time, it blossomed on the surface. Those Roman authorities to whom Paul spoke seemed to remain indifferent, but in the meantime something pierced them and their environment. According to historian Domenico Maselli, Christianity was already the majority among the ruling class in Rome in the 200s!

Coming more directly to this chapter, with the new governor Festus roughly the same script repeats itself as with Felix, but to avoid being handed over to the Jews, this time Paul appeals to Caesar, and so, he asks to appear before the emperor in Rome. On the occasion, Paul makes the wonderful declaration of having respected everything and everyone: «Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense» (v. 8).

Paul reiterates that «there is nothing true» in the accusations made against him by the Jews: accusations that however (as we have seen commenting on 21:24) are unfortunately considered true by many Christians!

Festus too, like Felix, in the face of a new situation and its unclear boundaries, adopts the strategy of not deciding: thus «some days [had] passed» (v. 13), which to the prisoner Paul will have seemed very long.

As usual when a new authority arrives, the notables of that area go officially to pay homage to him. So, after some time, Agrippa, king of a small neighbouring territory, accompanied by Berenice, shows up. Festus tells Agrippa the story of the prisoner Paul in order to have some advice, uttering

words that make it clear how much the Roman courts were at that time superior to those of Jerusalem: «it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him» (v. 16). «But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore, I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him» (vv. 26-27).

Agrippa had evidently heard of Paul and manifests the desire to listen to him, so it happens that Paul appears before the beautifully dressed royal couple (Agrippa and Berenice), with the intervention of the highest authorities of the city, attracted by this special event: for Paul a significant opportunity to witness was thus being prepared, which is explained in the next chapter.

But before seeing what Paul will say to Agrippa, it is interesting to know a little more about this king and his dynasty, which was the one sadly known as of the Herods (*Further Insight n. 14*), with another small note to try to understand why Paul and the Baptist behaved in a different way towards their own "Herod" (*Further Insight n. 15*).

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#### **Further Insight n. 14** **HEROD AGRIPPA AND THE OTHER "HERODS"**

We did a little survey beyond the "Sola Scrittura" ('Only Scripture'), appreciating for once who writes biblical dictionaries. We obtained some information that could be known to Luke's readers and that was useful (*useful* yes, but not *essential*, otherwise goodbye to "Scripture Only").

Concerning the governor Felix (Acts 24), Luke writes that he had come «with his wife Drusilla» (24:24), while he gives no qualification to that Berenice who accompanied King Agrippa (25:13,23). A small note on the *New Revised (Italian Bible Translation)* informs that Drusilla, Agrippa and Berenice were brothers; Felix and Agrippa were therefore brothers-in-law and this is not surprising: those in power tend to marry others of the same rank and this is a reason for the formation of a "caste", in which the one is linked to the other (this also makes individual conversions more difficult).

It is surprising, instead, that Agrippa took his sister in the capacity of queen, and not his wife; why does Luke then not call her "sister"? The *New Biblical Dictionary* by R. Pache (Edizioni Centro Biblico, 1981) clarifies why Luke remains vague, since Berenice was actually the "sister-wife" of Agrippa, called by historians *Herod Agrippa II*.

Due to Herod being a famous name, we went to rebuild (through the Dictionary) some of that family tree, but do not worry, we will only give you the gist of it...though a very disturbing one.

The *great-grandfather* of our Herod Agrippa II was that *Herod the Great* who, to try to kill the newborn Jesus, was stained with the notorious massacre of children (Mt 2). Of the *grandfather* of Herod Agrippa II we did not find the name, but he was one of the brothers of Herod *Antipas* the Tetrarch and these brothers were "very fond" of the (female) grandchildren. John the Baptist had his own head cut off by Herod *Antipas*, who took Herodias as his wife, the daughter of one of his brothers and formerly the wife of another of his brothers (Mk 6:14-29; Luke 3:1; 9:7-9; 23:6-12); in short, Herod *Antipas* was an uncle, the brother-in-law and husband of Herodias, whose daughter Salome will then be married to a fourth brother; therefore, if Herod the Great had made a big mistake, in the next generation the behaviour has not improved much. *Herod Agrippa I*, *the father* of our Herod Agrippa II, killed one of the Twelve (i.e., James, Acts 12:2), but this time a heavy judgment of God is reported on him (v. 23). In summary, to speak to the representative of such a lineage of Herods, for Paul it was certainly not easy and there was much to fear.

We have to ask ourselves why Paul speaks with a friendly tone to Herod Agrippa II, while the Baptist harshly rebuked Herod Antipas, giving up his life, but to this we prefer to dedicate a separate *Further Insight*.

**Further Insight n. 15**  
**DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PAUL AND THE BAPTIST**  
**WHEN FACED WITH “THEIR HERODES”**

The reason for the difference between how John the Baptist treats Herod Antipas the Tetrarch and how Paul treats Herod Agrippa II is that we believe that it does not reside in a diversity of character or strategy between the Baptist and Paul, but rather in a *diversity of circumstances*.

What Mark said is very important: «Herod [Antipas] feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he kept him safe; When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and *yet he heard him gladly*» (Mk 6:20). It is not, therefore, that John went to Herod Antipas to reproach him for taking his sister-in-law as his wife; John had not even started to reproach Herod publicly and in his absence (as one might get the impression). It is likely, on the other hand, that it was Herod Antipas who went to John, with an attitude similar to that of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who wanted in some way to be associated with the movement of John the Baptist (whom all considered a prophet, Mt 21:26) but without translating it into renewed behavior. The Baptist therefore severely rebuked Herod in the same way as he did with the Pharisees (Mt 3:7-9). On the other hand, the curious, fearful, vague and treacherous character of Herod Antipas is also attested elsewhere (Mt 14:1-2; Luke 9:9; 23:8-11).

Paul, instead, is invited to speak not as a prophet, but as a prisoner called to defend himself (26:1) and therefore does not consider it his task to evaluate the personal conduct of Herod Agrippa II, even if he does not renounce to admonish him and to an *implicit* reproof, for example, when he says that there is a need for «forgiveness of sins» and that «works worthy of repentance» must be done, making a final appeal so that Agrippa and all the others become Christians *as* he himself was (vv. 18, 20 and 29).

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**Acts 26**

**PAUL BEFORE KING AGRIPPA**

While the Jewish ruling classes met with a *communal* attitude and therefore sometimes vitally disordered, in this meeting at the presence of King Agrippa we perceive a *hierarchical* disposition; this reflected the Roman mentality, with the "landlord" Festus giving the first seat to those who, like Agrippa, are of higher rank (vv. 24-27). Agrippa thus takes over the presidency and it is, therefore, he who gives Paul the floor to speak (26:1) and whom Paul addresses first (v. 2).

Paul's choice to address Agrippa alone may seem inappropriate, but it will prove necessary, because the audience was of a composite nature and, in order for everyone to understand, one had to limit oneself to the most superficial aspects. Agrippa, on the other hand, can be regarded as a Jew (vv. 3 and 27) and therefore Paul can tell him his testimony in detail, that is, in a manner similar to how he had addressed the Jewish crowd (22:1ff).

As usual, Paul presents his faith not as a novelty, but as the consistent way of being a Jew: «I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers» (v. 6); «saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass» (v. 22). As usual, emphasising the resurrection (v. 8).

Jesus is initially presented as «of Nazareth» (i.e., "Nazarene", v. 9) and of Hebrew-language (v. 14), but then he is called the «Lord» (v. 15), through whom one receives the forgiveness of sins (v. 18): it was to this, as usual, that Paul wanted to get to, insisting on the need for a conversion that profoundly affects one's own behavior (v. 20).

In addition to the forgiveness of sins, Paul mentions Jesus' promise of a «place among those who are sanctified by faith» (v. 18): an expression that appears vague, but that takes on a particular meaning in the Jewish context. At the time of Joshua, the various families had each received a portion of the Promised Land (Joshua, Rev. 13-22); so the risen ones in the new Kingdom of God would receive a portion of it as well, as a gift: Jesus himself had also stated that the meek people «shall inherit the earth» (Mt 5:5).

Festus, who appears to be of Roman culture, poorly tolerated this kind of talking, but tries to remain calm in reverence to Agrippa's function of presidency; at some point, however, he loses his temper and interrupts Paul by shouting: «Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind» (v. 24). The prisoner Paul is unperturbed even before those who, officially, hold his fate in their hand and replies in a way that we "transliterate" so: 'Dear Festus, it is you who does not understand, but I am not surprised, because I have turned to Agrippa, who, in this matter, is more competent than you and with whom I would like to finish the speech, if you would please continue to stand aside' (vv. 25-27).

Festus seems to be taking the hit and goes quiet, so Paul can conclude with an appeal to conversion extended to all (as it's fitting in an authentic evangelistic preaching!), feeling fully free despite being in chains, and showing to those who thought they were free with what invisible chains they were held captive! There is, thus, a complete reversal of roles and, even if conversions are not recorded at the time, Paul leaves the trial with a sentence of full acquittal: «this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar» (v. 32).

Was the appeal to Caesar "a small mistake with serious consequences"? No, because it was in God's will that Paul arrived in Rome, as we have seen (23:11). Wouldn't it have been better if he went free, and not in chains? But we saw that being in chains had allowed Paul to speak with great freedom to the *entire* ruling class of that area and we are led to believe that this was a "general test" of what could have happened in Rome, before Caesar's court; an event which Luke did not have the time to tell us about and which we then allow ourselves to imagine, based on what we witnessed above.

Let us imagine then that, in the majestic Roman court of Caesar, crowded with high officials and noble idlers, it's the turn of a prisoner of humble manners, pitied by those who see him and in the indifference of those who prefer to look elsewhere. But when this "little man" begins his speech, soon the silence spreads and everyone is involved by his words. The "little man" thus appears more and more like a giant and those who pitied him feel increasingly small, while no one can look away anymore or remain indifferent, being only able to choose whether to soften or become irritated: just as no one could remain indifferent before Stephen (chap. 7).

We would have preferred to send Paul to Rome fully free, but we must recognise that God had his reasons, reasons that Paul understood and appreciated, as he so wrote to the Philippians from the prison of Rome: «I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ [...] Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice»; concluding the letter with the greetings of «those of Caesar's household (Phil 1:12-18; 4:22), indicating how the Gospel had now infiltrated even the emperor's dwelling place.

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## Acts 27

### THE STORMY JOURNEY TO ROME

Compared to the overall story outlined in Acts, it seems that this chapter has only to say that God wanted Paul to arrive in Rome and, therefore, saved him from the shipwreck: it seems little to justify this detailed story, we will therefore try to grasp other aspects of it.

The story begins with: «When it was decided that *we* should sail for Italy». This means that there was also Luke on the ship, who presumably was there as Paul's assistant, and since Luke saw God at work on that trip, this itself is a good reason to tell the story.

The manner in which Luke recounts the facts allows him to make a close parallel with Joseph who, like Paul, found himself unjustly imprisoned (Gen 39:20; Acts 26:31), but was immediately well-liked by the jailer (Gen 39:21; Acts 27:3), receiving from God the solution to serious problems concerning the community (Gen 41:25ff; Acts 27:21-24), being prompted to assume responsibility for conducting operations (Gen 41:41; Acts 27:31-38), so God's blessing was enjoyed by all (Gen 42:6; Acts 27:44).

Paul, unlike Joseph, would remain formally a prisoner, but in essence free, since he could evangelise Malta (28:1-10), stay seven days with the brothers of Puteoli (28:14) and wait for the trial not in prison, but in a home and being able to receive all (28:16,30).

Paul gave a first warning with modesty (27:10), but the centurion trusted more the expert, the owner, the majority and an encouraging fact, represented by a slight wind in the right direction (vv. 11-13): who of us would not do as the centurion did? Paul had to intervene again and with more authority, with the risky announcement that an angel of God had spoken to him and that, as God wanted him to appear before Caesar, he would save everyone, even though the ship would have been lost for not having listened to him the first time (vv. 21-25).

The fulfilment of the prophecy, however, would not have been automatic and outside the freedom of those to whom salvation had been promised. Indeed, the emergence of gestures of distrust towards the promise of God made Paul say that (prophecy or no prophecy), if they would not manifest concretely a confidence in the word that God had addressed to them, that promise would not have been realised. The soldiers understood the message well and deprived themselves of the lifeboat, which represented the "plan B" guarantee, in the event that the "plan A" announced by Paul would prove ineffective (vv. 30-32).

Another "gesture of faith" that Paul invited to make, setting an example, was to eat (vv. 33-38), in order to be ready to make the personal effort necessary to reach salvation on the beach.

The 276 people on board were all saved: was it by faith or by works? By decree of God or by making use of their freedom? I believe that the whole Bible teaches us that these are wrong questions, that arise from our limited point of view, because when God works, He does it with complexity (which brings together prophecy and freedom) and not in obedience to one or the other theological scheme, within which we may be tempted to lock the Bible up in, which instead reflects the complexity of God.

A secondary aspect of this story is that it makes one perceive an "internal evidence", and so that this is a lived chronicle and not a fictional story. Therefore, it is as if with it Luke had placed a "stamp of authenticity" that enhances the whole work.

We will dwell separately (*Further Insight n. 16*) on a possible purpose of Luke in telling this journey in detail: to make the Romans understand how much God wanted Paul to preach in Rome.

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## Acts 28

### THE END TO AN UNFINISHED STORY

In the first part of the chapter (vv. 1-16) the journey to Rome reported in the previous chapter resumes and ends. The shipwreck survivors barely made it to the shores of Malta and the island's inhabitants, evidently pagans, welcomed the survivors with «unusual kindness» (v. 2).

Paul was bitten by a viper as he was gathering wood for the fire, but he remained unscathed; then God gave him the opportunity to work many healings. All this amazed the Maltese, who let the shipwrecked depart, providing them with «whatever [they] needed» (v. 10).

After a few months they arrived by ship in Syracuse, then in Rhegium, finally in Puteoli (Naples), where the journey by sea ended. At Puteoli there was already a Christian church, which welcomed Paul and begged him to stay for a few days, after which the group set off towards Rome along the famous Appian Way.

A large group, like the one in which Paul was, moved slowly, not being able to leave behind the weakest. When in sight of the arrival, one would try to warn those whom they were going to, so as to not catch them unprepared: one way to do it was to send someone forward on horseback, or some young man skilled in riding fast. The guest was not expected while staying at home, but someone would go meet him to welcome him, bringing him a drink and taking over some luggage. All this helps us understand v. 15: «The brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us», a place not quite near Rome, since a note in the New English Translation states that the Appius Forum was located sixty-two kilometres from Rome, while the Three Taverns at forty-nine!

Going to meet those who were coming was a common way of doing things in those days and it is this kind of return of Jesus that Paul has in mind when he speaks of the coming of the Lord and of our going to meet him in the air (1Thes 4:15-17). But we will deal with this in more detail in *Further Insight n. 17* placed later on.

Right after arriving in Rome, as usual, Paul wanted to first meet those of his NATION, the Jews, summoning to his house the most prominent. Paul totally identified himself with them and declared that he had been arrested « though [doing] nothing against [their] people or the customs of [their] fathers» (v. 17). There are those who define Israel as an "ethnic group" (a group united by *blood* ties) and some as a "religion" (united by a particular *faith*): two definitions that capture only one aspect; why then not adopt that of "NATION" used by Paul also in 24:17? Another point is that Paul had also respected «the customs of [the] fathers»: yet it is universally insisted that for Paul only the *moral* part of the law of Moses was valid, no longer the *ceremonial*!

The Jews of Jerusalem had unjustly accused Paul and wanted to kill him, forcing him to appeal to Caesar, but Paul made a point of clarifying that, as a good Jew, he wanted to bring «no charge» against his «NATION», indicating as the reason for his life «the hope of Israel», then trying to convince them «from the law of Moses and from the Prophets» (vv. 19-23).

Some say that there would have been a *transformation* of the "Gospel of Jesus and Peter for the Jews" into the "Gospel of Paul for the Gentiles"; Luke, though, tells us that it was through Peter that the first *adaptation* for the Gentiles took place (Acts 10), spread through the anonymous evangelisers of the Gentiles of Antioch (11:20) and established by Barnabas' moulding work (11:22-24). *Paul, therefore, only brought to maturity, and spread, an approach begun and established by others already.* When Peter and Paul talked to the Jews, their approach was quite similar, closely anchored to the Old Testament (cf. Acts 2:22-40 with Paul's preaching to Antioch of Pisidia, 13:16-41). Paul reaffirms the Gospel's connection to the Old Testament not only in Antioch of Pisidia and in this last chapter (vv. 19-23), but also elsewhere (22:12-15; 24:14-21; 26:22).

As per usual, some Jews were persuaded, but the majority remained in unbelief. So Paul reaffirmed what he had previously stated (cf. 3:26; 13:46; 18:6) but which, reported by Luke now at the end of his story, is like its final seal: «Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen» (v. 28).

In brief, a story *begun* by a Jew who had lived as a Jew (Jesus), (a story) to which only Hebrews were initially called to join (Chap. 1-9) and to which also a people of un-circumcised was joined (Chap. 10-28); it is announced that this *will end* being welcomed, in the majority, by non-Jews. A real "somersault", a reversal of roles, a change of direction that Luke describes in its very gradual development, capturing the "hows" and "whys", otherwise the "somersault" can leave one confused. Sadly, Luke's story is poorly studied (with the excuse that it would be "a transitional period now outdated") and so the confusion and misunderstandings on the transition between the Old and New Testaments have become the norm.

It is interesting how Paul, after having so openly identified himself as a Jew, quotes to his fellow-countrymen Isaiah, the prophet addressing «*your fathers*» (v. 25). Perhaps he still remembered that even Stephen, after beginning the speech identifying himself with the audience (7:2), ends it with a warning in which he also uses the expression «*your fathers*» (7:52).

The overturning narrated by Luke posed to a Jew disturbing questions about the meaning of the Old Testament and God's promises, but we have already said that for the answers to these questions Luke relies on a Letter to the Romans that was already in circulation.

We have already mentioned the fact that the book of Acts does not have a "closing formula", appearing as one of those diaries in which one would have liked to continue writing, without having had the opportunity. This appears as an indication that, for Luke, the work of the Holy Spirit does not end after the two years that Paul was in Rome awaiting trial; indeed, Paul is there precisely because God wants to work powerfully in that strategic place, so that the Gospel may then echo throughout the Empire. What ends, however, is the *story of the origins* of the Church, which is an objective premise to the history of all the churches that originated thereafter.

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## FINAL NOTES

*Wanting to follow Luke's train of thought, we chose to place at the end the Further Insights and the Links that were more demanding, leaving the honour of closing to Stephen, since we believe that his work is generally underestimated.*

### Further Insight n. 16

#### THE ACTS AS "PREFACE" TO ROMANS AND WRITTEN FOR THE ROMANS

It is a thesis matured during the drafting of these notes and that we'll state reasons for schematically, summarising also something already considered in the *Further Insight n. 10 (The binomial Acts-Romans)* and elsewhere.

It is well known that a book is first written and then its *Presentation* is asked to be made. The book also features a note on the author, which highlights his qualifications and academic titles. The *Introduction* and the note on the author are clearly *written after* the work, but are conceived to be *read before* the work.

The matured conviction is that *Acts are a kind of Presentation to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, written later but to be read beforehand. Luke, in short, seems to assume the role of "publisher-sponsor" of Paul, helping the reader understand the content of the Letter to the Romans and the importance of its author. Whilst writing for everyone, however, *Luke seems to first have a Roman reader in mind* and, therefore, the Acts would be a sort of "*Second Letter to the Romans*" in a chronological sense and a "*First Letter to the Romans*" in the logical sense.

Let's list some of the reasons that led us to these conclusions.

*1. Acts is written by Luke while in Rome.*

Although Luke's main purpose was achieved (describe the spread of the Gospel in the world), Acts does not present itself as a "finished history", lacking a closing formula as the spread was continuing. Being an "interrupted story" (see comment on ch. 28) leads us to think that it is written at the time of the interruption, and so when Paul and Luke are there in Rome, stationary for two years. If Acts was written in Rome, it reinforces the idea that it was written especially for the Romans.

*2. Luke remains in Rome for two years almost inactive.*

In Rome, Paul cannot lead that usual hectic life in which he was involved, because he is under house arrest awaiting trial (28:30). Luke seems to be the one who keeps himself most faithfully at Paul's side (2Tim 4:11), so it is reasonable to think that during that time Luke wrote Acts, also with the intention of helping the Romans understand Paul's value and the divine nature of his mission.

*3. Paul arrived in Rome as a "criminal".*

When Paul arrived in Rome, he did not have a reputation comparable to that which he has today. Of course, in Rome he already knew several believers (Rom 16) and his letter had made known his doctrinal depth; but for the many unbelieving Jews, as for the Romans in general, Paul was complete stranger, formally arrived as a prisoner, indicted for matters so serious that they must be brought to the emperor's direct attention. The necessity to write a defence and a praise of Paul, therefore, seems obvious.

*4. Presence of non-essential "details" which are however appreciated by the Romans.*

In Acts 19:21, it is stated that Paul had for a long time publicly expressed his conviction that it was necessary for him to go to Rome: «I *must* also see Rome». It seems that he happens there "by misfortune" (as a prisoner), however, Jesus himself affirms a divine plan behind it: «As you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome» (23:11).

Paul appeared as a "Jewish missionary", and we saw that the Jews had no easy life in Rome, since they had recently been driven out of the city (18:2), let alone if they envisioned to teach something. Luke informs and reaffirms that Paul is also a Roman citizen and «of birth», a particularly significant qualification (16:37;22:28), and which undoubtedly placed him in a position to be better listened to in Rome.

*5. Excessive details as to why and how Paul arrived in Rome.*

The last seven chapters seem to go too long in recounting Paul's trial events and the details of his miraculous journey to Rome. Looking at the more concise style used in other parts, Luke could very well summarise it all in one or two chapters; for a Roman, however, those chapters were very significant.

A Roman was, in fact, particularly interested in what relations Paul had with the imperial authorities of his area of origin; Luke, thus, shows the esteem and respect of Paul towards the Roman laws and authorities, with an increasingly marked detachment from his fellow countrymen. Luke also shows the Roman authorities' respect for Paul, whom they consider innocent (23:29). Paul is therefore introduced not as "a stranger who creates problems", but as "a Roman citizen to whom Jewish foreigners create problems" (22:25-29; 23:29; 24:23;25:25-27; 26:31-32; 27:3). It was also very important to introduce Paul as one who had saved many Romans from the shipwreck! (27:23-24).

Then it must be considered that, if someone arrives in a miraculous way, there is much interest in knowing the details; Luke, therefore, might have elaborated on the details that brought Paul to Rome precisely to show how the hand of God was perceived in that journey, thus qualifying Paul as "God's messenger".

To realise the "extreme" elaboration of the final chapters, it's enough to consider that the initial phase, which focused on Peter's work, has only five chapters, falling short by two compared to the final seven.

6. "Romanism" is described more positively than "Judaism".

Acts describes the Roman world as more tolerant and characterised by orderly rules compared to a Jewish world that is seen as spontaneous, without real rules, ready to murder without justified reasons. Paul, therefore, despite being a Jew and preaching a Jewish faith, is portrayed as one who distances himself from that "barbarian" way of doing things, fully adhering to Roman values. To draw a parallel, the majority of Italians would be more willing to listen to a Muslim knowing that he is an Italian citizen by birth, that he is persecuted by Muslim extremists and that he seeks protection by the laws of an Italy, which he feels he belongs to.

Among the Athenian philosophers, Paul had taken on the role of a philosopher and it is natural that in Rome he takes on that of a Roman citizen: it was not, though, fiction, but rather the product of a complex history that God had produced in Paul.

In summary, after reading Acts, a Roman saw in Paul a "fellow citizen" with whom, although being of a different religion, he shared some fundamental values and could, therefore, dialogue.

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### **Further Insight n. 17**

## **PARADISE WITHOUT RESURRECTION: AN "ACTUAL HERESY"**

### *1. Introduction.*

The resurrection is a common thread that permeates and connects the whole book of Acts: it begins with the risen and therefore living Jesus (1:1-3), with the apostles' preaching that focuses on Jesus' resurrection and the final resurrection of the dead (1:22; 2:24,31; 3:15;4:2,10,33; 5:30; 9:3-5; 10:39-40; 13:28-37;17:3,18,31; 22:6-8; 23:6; 24:15-16,21; 26:6-8,23).

Significantly, the word "Paradise" is entirely missing from the Book of Acts, while today's Christianity makes it the centre of its hope, mostly neglecting the resurrection, so much so as to sometimes even be confused between Paradise and resurrection. It is therefore necessary to examine the issue further, taking into account not only Acts but the general context of the Bible; we will, therefore, focus on those New Testament passages which seem to justify the common Paradise concept, but only because they are not read carefully, and because their immediate or wider context is not considered.

### *2. Blessed forever in Paradise?*

Almost all Christians identify themselves with the profession of faith of the "Apostolic Creed", which ends by affirming the «resurrection of the *flesh*» and the «eternal life». In reality, though, what happened is that the doctrine of the resurrection was gradually marginalised and placed in the attic, with a concurrent development of the "Paradise" concept. A place where one would feel good even without the body and where one is thought to be forever blessed in the presence of God.

The devaluation of the resurrection and the portrait of a "bliss without body" is clearly due to the prevalence of Greek culture in the Church, a process in which the so-called "Church Fathers" (Origen, Augustine and others) were main characters; these interpreted the Gospel by trying to align it with Plato's philosophy, with the concurrent development of an anti-Jewish reading of the New Testament, to the point of turning the contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees into a conflict between Jesus and the Old Testament.

The reaction to these Platonic intrusions was mainly driven by some minority groups and individual personalities from larger settings. Minority groups include Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Among the individual personalities, however, in the Catholic context we limit ourselves to point out Sergio Quinzio, who lived dramatically the hope in the resurrection and on which he wrote a number of pages in his various books (e.g., in *Mysterium iniquitatis*, Adelphi, 1995). The theme then continued to be dealt with by his disciple Daniele Garota (e.g., in *Fame di Redenzione*, Paoline, 2005, pp. 301-332). Some Protestant authors have also highlighted the problem (e.g., Oscar Cullmann,

*Immortality of the Soul; or, Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament*, Paideia, 1986). On the whole, however, *for many Christians, the hope in the resurrection is nearly absent*, while that of Paradise remains central.

In evangelical circles, for example, we have browsed a few issues of a monthly publication (from November 2009 to February 2010), in which also deaths are reported and commented on. In the fifty or so obituaries reported, the word "resurrection" is NEVER found, while the most frequent expression is that the dead brother «has reached the heavenly house», or similar. The word Paradise is mentioned only once, perhaps to not sound like the Catholics, but the substance is the same, because the «heavenly house» is seen as a «stable dwelling»: a concept explicitly affirmed with the conviction of «seeing one other together in heaven *forever*». After death, in short, one imagines that the believer is in the presence of God in a totally satisfying and stable way, as can also be seen from the following expressions: «Blessed hope he now enjoys», «he is at rest in the kingdom of God». Two other expressions are also very significant: «In view of meeting the Lord soon in the clouds», «he took possession of the heritage preserved in heaven».

It is clear that the above expressions of the evangelical monthly issue refer to specific passages of the New Testament, but we believe that these are interpreted badly, outside the general context of the whole Bible, of the specific biblical author and of the immediate context of those verses. Let us begin by seeing how the Bible views the human body.

### 3. *The body is not a negligible accessory.*

When God created man, he began with the body. Then he breathed in us his «vital breath» (Gen 2:7). Whether we have a "bi-valent" vision of man (body plus soul), or if we have a "tri-valent" (body plus soul plus spirit), the body is an essential part of a human being.

The fact that Jesus wanted to take back his body, precisely the one with the wound in his side (Jn 20:27), leads us to think that it was *essential* for him to go to heaven *with the body* (Acts 1:9). We can see how difficult this was to be digested by Greek mentality precisely by the fact that, on the matter of the resurrection, the dialogue between Paul and the Athenian philosophers came to a halt (Acts 17:32). Even in the Greeks who had become Christians, their cultural roots emerged again, and so Paul, despite teaching them for about two years (Acts 18:11, 18) was faced, at Corinth, with the spreading of a doctrine that denied the resurrection (1Cor 15:12), which was he was forced to oppose with a long chapter; here he stated that, «if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ was raised» (v. 13).

The Corinthian *believers* did not give importance to what they did "with the body", confining faith to the "spiritual" level. Paul is then forced to write them that our bodies are part of Christ and that, therefore, believers could not join a prostitute thinking that what their body did had little "spiritual" importance. Paul thus concludes the passage: «Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you? [...] Glorify God *in your body*» (1Cor 6:13-20).

While he could, Paul opposed the "spiritualist" trends inherent to the Greek Platonic culture, but those cultural roots remained, though there was no longer a Paul to act as their barrier. This is why we find a Christianity that devalues its "material" behaviour and tends to confine faith to the world of feelings and pious intentions. Since it does essentially no longer believe in the resurrection, then what Paul foresaw happens: essentially not even Christ is seen as Risen. After all, if we'll be blessed in the presence of Jesus despite not having a body, then also the body of Jesus has little meaning, because how would a real fellowship be possible between a Risen and non-risen ones? Besides, is the current presence of Christ in heaven imagined with a *real* body?

### 4. *The resurrection already introduced by the "eternal life" of Daniel.*

Paul testifies his faith to the governor Felix this way: «this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers [...] having a hope in God [...] that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust» (Acts 24:14-15). These words of Paul closely recall the first clear and extensive revelation of the resurrection found in the Bible, namely that of Daniel: «Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to *everlasting life*, and some to shame and everlasting contempt» (12:2). «Everlasting life» has a very simple meaning here, but it is often misrepresented, as we shall see in point 5 below.

Sometimes the doctrine of the "survival of the soul" is confused with that of Paradise, but to believe that after death "something" of us (soul) *survives* is far different from believing that that "something" can be *in itself* a wholeness. A soul that survives, according to the New Testament, can only be waiting for a restitution of its body, without which it can also *survive*, but not really live.

##### 5. Paradise, eternal life, resurrection: the overturning of words.

PARADISE. On the original meaning of "Paradise" there is no doubt, because it comes from a Persian word that means "enclosed place", which then, in Greek, took the more specific meaning of "garden". The first "garden" that we find in the Bible is that of Eden (which in Hebrew means "delights"), where God placed Adam and Eve (Gen 2:8): yes, there was the presence of God, but it was a very tangible and... earthly place! Then the term signified a place outside of the Earth (Luke 23:43; 2Cor 12:4), but it should not be confused with God's dwelling place, and so, with the "highest" place where Jesus is now, at the right hand of the Father's throne (Luke 22:69; Acts 7:55; Heb 1:3,13; 10:12; 12:2).

For a broader explanation, see my *Summary of the Old Testament* (La Pietra angolare, 2016), where there is *Further Insight n. 4 (The Afterlife between the Old and New Testaments, pp. 141-43)*. Here we limit ourselves to quoting again some statements of Nicola Martella, taken from his *"Escatologia biblica essenziale"* ('*Essential biblical Eschatology*'), volume 1, ch. 6.

«It is clear that the resurrection of the body will take place only at the return of Jesus [...] Confusing paradise with heaven leads to see a contradiction. Jesus assured the repentant thief that he would be with him in paradise that same day (Luke 23:43). Some, thinking that paradise is heaven, see this as an inconsistency, since Jesus ascended into transcendence (Acts 1:3-9) only 40 days after his death» (p. 195).

«Some infer that after death the spirit of the believer goes directly before God, where his throne and the heavenly sanctuary are present. Here [*in Philippians 1:23*], though, Paul did not speak of God but of the Messiah [...] After the death of Jesus, his spirit arrived in paradise along with that of the thief who was crucified next to him. It is wrong to say that here they found themselves in the presence of God, because this contrasts with what the Bible says about the state of the dead and with Jesus' own words to Mary Magdalene, according to whom he had not yet ascended to the Father (Jn 20:17)» (p. 194). «After death, believers find themselves in an "intermediate state" without body. They are by the Messiah and in paradise (not in actual heaven), but still without the resurrection body and therefore not yet complete» (p. 195).

ETERNAL LIFE. It's often used in the New Testament, especially by John. In Mark it's brought into focus when the "rich young man" asked Jesus: «What must I do to inherit eternal life?». The young man did not do what was then said; however, it was done by the apostles, to whom Jesus assured: Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers... or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time... with persecutions, and in the age to come *eternal life*» (Mk 10:17-31). Jesus also works «in this time», showing some signs of his sovereignty, but the presence of persecutions makes it clear that his enemies are not yet made powerless, which will happen «in the age to come», that is, in the new world, on his return (Mt 24:30; 25:31-32; Heb 2:8; 2The 1:7).

The *eternal life* is therefore a kind of promissory note that Jesus signs for the disciples: they already have it, but they will be able to collect it truly and fully only at the resurrection (Luke 14:14; Titus 3:7). The "rich young man" and the apostles showed that they already understand the meaning of "eternal life" (cf. Jn 5:39; Acts 13:46), understanding which undoubtedly was given to them through Daniel (Dan 12:12): the life that, in this world, has been given to us through our parents is temporary, because it will end with death, while the life that will be given to us with the *final* and *collective* resurrection will be an "endless" life, "eternal"; however, it'll be realised in another *time*, not in another *place*.

For brevity, we signpost only other significant passages that speak of eternal life, because their meaning can be framed within the framework outlined above (Mt 25:46; Jn 3:16; 6:47; Rom 6:22-23; 1Jn 5:13).

RESURRECTION. The concept seems clear, but we are able to darken even the sun! Indeed, in the apostolic time, already some believed that the resurrection had already taken place (2Tim 2:8), or that it was not necessary to take it literally, because in reality there would not be one (1Cor 15:12). Certainly, the resurrection poses many problems which Paul tries to tackle as much as possible (1Cor 15);

however, it is clear that the risen Christ had regained his body that had been crucified, a body that could be touched and in which he lived forty days with the apostles, chewing and swallowing food even as Risen (Luke 24:39-43; Jn 21:9-13; Acts 1:3).

The resurrection, as we have mentioned, will be *final* and *collective*, with an act of God that will affect not only human beings, but also *our world*, which will finally cease to groan and be troubled (Rom 8:18-25). It will not even be limited to the Earth alone, because together with it *heaven* will also be renewed (2Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1). We stop here, because little is needed for those who want to understand, while for those who want to know more than they need or do not want to understand, the teaching of Paul was not enough.

ASCENDING OR DESCENDING. The original meanings of "Paradise", "eternal life" and "resurrection" refer to *tangible* and *earthly* meanings. When in churches we read "eternal life" we usually think of Paradise, and the resurrection is also placed somewhere there. Everything in heaven, in other words, in a Paradise conceived in an ever-increasing manner, up to identifying it with the place where the throne of God is placed, where there would be nothing *tangible* and *earthly*. Christianity, therefore, has acquired an *ascending* mentality, that is, of *ascension* from Earth to Heaven.

The biblical vision, though, is *descending*, because God *descends* into the Garden of Eden, *descends* to Sinai, *descends* into the Temple, *descends* with the Incarnation of Christ, *will descend* again with the return of Christ to the new Earth.

#### 6. Without the context, the text becomes a pretext.

Let us now examine those references usually quoted by those who wait to go "blessed and forever" to Paradise, without feeling any need of resurrection. We'll begin with the Letter to the Philippians, because there are three passages concerning our subject, from which we can derive a general framework that helps to better understand also the other verses of the New Testament that we'll consider.

PHILIPPIANS. In Philippians 1:23-24 Paul writes unambiguous words, which clarify a doctrine less covered in other parts of the Bible: «My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account». «To depart and be with Christ» and «to remain in the flesh» clearly indicate that Paul did not think that, with death, his *whole* being would cease to exist, but that, at his death, *something* of himself (soul or spirit, we do not dwell on the most appropriate name) would come out of his body to go with Christ. I avoid mentioning other passages because I think this is enough to believe in the "survival of the soul".

Paul's statement that he prefers to depart to be with Christ, rather than remain in the body, is, in any case, to be understood in Paul's context and in the Bible's general context. The Letter to the Philippians was written when he was a prisoner in Rome (1:13-14) and with the prospect of suffering martyrdom, conscious of having completed the task assigned to him by God (2Tim 4:6-8). The whole Bible exalts living and sees death negatively, so that exceptional passage in which Paul speaks of himself in specific circumstances cannot be raised to the norm for all.

Later on, however, Paul clarifies that being with Christ right after death is not his "final goal", because he wants to «know him and the power of his resurrection ... that by any means possible [he, *Paul*] may attain the resurrection from the dead» (Phil 3:10-11). In short, the "survival of the soul", for Paul, was not the "self-sufficiency of the soul" and *the whole of his Letter* shows how he harmonised the two aspects.

Further on still, there is another sentence of Paul that is often quoted outside its context and in which he affirms that «our citizenship is in heaven»: it seems precisely a confirmation of a blessed dwelling of believers "in heaven". But Paul goes on to write «from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body» (Phil 3:20-21). Paul is in accord with the whole teaching of the Bible, whereby A DESCENDING AND TANGIBLE DYNAMIC is continuously expressed; however, we have succeeded in distorting it into an essentially *ascending* and *immaterial* dynamic. Regarding that «citizenship in heaven», the Apostle Paul was waiting to fully enjoy it when it would be brought to earth with Jesus' return and when it



would be redeemed from the humiliation of being without body. All this, however, is also confirmed by the other passages that we will look at.

JOHN 14:2-4. It is the most beloved passage of those who wait for Paradise: «In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?» Then usually you skip a few words, to get to the consoling and confirming statement: «I will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going».

We must first consider that the apostles, at that time, were able to understand very little of God's overall plan. For example, they understood «nothing» even after Jesus tried to make them understand, *for the third time*, his crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 9:22; 9:44-45; 18:31-34): what could they understand, then, about Jesus' ascension into heaven and his return? Jesus himself would soon have made it clear that many things were not yet within their reach (Jn 16:12); therefore, at that moment, Jesus' revelation could only be *vague* and *partial*, even though it was certainly not *false*, as one can understand by paying attention to those words in verse 13, which are usually skipped and which we now report in italics: «In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I WILL COME AGAIN* and will take you to myself» (Jn 14:2-3). After all, it was clear for the apostles that Jesus would return to have dinner with them and drink a good glass of wine together once more (Mt 26:29), as good as the one he had been able to do at Cana (Jn 2:10).

The picture Jesus sketches here does not look like the boyfriend who goes to America to prepare the place to welcome his girlfriend in after the wedding. Instead, he looks like the boyfriend who, after an earthquake, goes to prepare a caravan which he comes back with to welcome the bride. Since Jesus has not yet returned, obviously THE «MANY DWELLINGS» ARE NOT YET READY, and when they are, *they will descend* from heaven to the Jerusalem that is heavenly as a manufacturing location, but made to be inhabited on earth, where God *will* permanently *return!* (Rev 21:3,10).

To these findings and evidence within the text others can be added, taken from a wide-ranging context. For example, it is by no means self-evident that, in saying «my Father's house», Jesus and the apostles meant the *heavenly* abode of God, since, with the same expression, Jesus had clearly meant the *earthly* abode of God, namely the Temple, when he replied to his human parents: «Did you not know that I must be *in my Father's house?*» (Luke 2:49).

Jesus himself, a few verses later in the same text, suggests that there is a way to begin to live, in the here and now, that life with God announced for the future: «If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him» (Jn 14:23).

Already in the Psalms, moreover, reference is often made to a dwelling with God which, in the context, clearly refers to the Temple, even though Christianity abuses it without limit. In my *Summary of the Old Testament* 45 Psalms that refer to the Temple are listed (ch. 24/11/A); in Psalm 27:4, for example, it's written: «One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may  *dwell in the house of the Lord* all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to *inquire in his temple*».

Someone will object that it is written that Jesus, on his return, will abduct us and we will go to meet him in the air, to be then taken to heaven and to be with him always. Let's, then, look at this passage.

1THESSALONIANS 4:15-17: «We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself... And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive... will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord».

Also in this case a *descending* movement that is twisted in its opposite is described, making it look as *ascending*. In those days, people travelled mostly on foot and there was a habit of meeting those who were coming. We have seen that those in Rome did so at the arrival of Paul, whom they met in order to go with him the last 50 km or so (see comment on Acts 28:15). This behaviour is also described in the Gospel, when Martha goes to meet Jesus (Jn 11:20), when the father goes to meet the prodigal son (Luke 15:20), when the crowd goes to meet a Jesus who is entering Jerusalem (Luke 12:12-13).

Even more significant is the parable of the ten virgins, clearly referred to the return of the "bridegroom": when the wise virgins go to meet him, it is not the bridegroom who comes back, but they are the ones who return to the starting point, to escort the groom in the last part of his journey.

Paul takes up the subject discussed in 1 Thessalonians again in the following 2 Thessalonians too, therefore *the two texts should be seen together and unified*. The passage in 2 Thessalonians begins as follows: «Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him» (2:1); a clear reference to what is written in 1 Thessalonians (in 2 Thessalonians it is omitted that the meeting will be «in the air», however, it is clearly implied). Then later it's written: «The mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming». At the "coming" of Jesus, in short, the antichrist will be present on earth, whom Jesus «will bring to nothing», clearly coming all the way down to earth, not remaining in mid-air to then go back.

We reaffirm, in conclusion, that Paul speaks of the COMING of the Lord and of our going to meet him in the air *to join him in the last part of his journey*. A COMING on Earth that the Platonic frenzy often overturns in an expectation of being raptured and then continue towards heaven!

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4: «Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory».

It is true that our life «is hidden with Christ in God», but we will not take possession of it by going up there, but rather when Christ «appears» in a glorious way and we will share in his glory; that is, on his return to earth, when we too will be resurrected.

MATTHEW 6:19-20. Jesus invites us not to make treasures on earth, where thieves steal, but to make treasures in heaven, where thieves cannot steal.

These verses seem to contradict what we have been saying, but it does not seem so difficult to reconcile them with others. We have already mentioned another similar teaching of Jesus, who invited us to do good to those who cannot repay us, so that the reward may be given to us by God «at the resurrection of the just» (Luke 14:12-14). The invitation to make treasures in heaven, in other words, appears similar to one of not accumulating money under the mattress where the thieves get to easily, but to keep them safe in the bank (heavenly); not to enjoy them inside the bank though, but to withdraw them at the appropriate time.

2CORINTHIANS 5:1-2: «For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling».

When a believer, TODAY, reads these two bible verses, he is reassured that there is ready for him, "in heaven", an "eternal dwelling", which he will take possession of right after death. It is difficult to deny this interpretation, but one gets a different understanding when keeping in mind not only the context of the whole Letter, but also the somewhat wider context represented by what Paul had already communicated to the Corinthians (both during his stay of a couple of years - as seen from Acts 18:11,18 - and with 1 Corinthians). Finally, we must consider the context of the whole New Testament and the Old Testament' "frame" in which the New is inserted.

For example, in the previous letter, Paul had already specified that we will be made alive in Christ «at his coming», not right after death (1Cor 15:22-23). Scrolling through 2 Corinthians in a similar way, later, we see that Paul had already expressed twice his faith in the resurrection (2Cors 1:9; 4:14), which was not conceived as individual and right after death, but rather as collective and at the return of Jesus: as the Corinthians also knew well from the preaching received from Paul (see 1Thess 4:15-17, examined above). The very expression «on the day of our Lord Jesus», contained in 2 Corinthians 1:14, is a clear reference to the time of his long-awaited return. Right below these verses we are examining, Paul makes clear that «we groan, longing...not that we would be unclothed», that is, to be platonically "freed" from the body, but to «be further clothed» (2Cor 5:2-4).

In summary, the context of the two letters to the Corinthians, the analysis of other New Testament passages conducted in this paragraph, and the whole commentary on Acts, I believe, should prevent justifying the common view of Paradise using 2 Corinthians 5:1-2, verses on which we will now make some further consideration.

If our «earthly home» that «is destroyed» is our body (not the apartment we live in), then our house, «not made with hands, eternal» can only be our risen body: it is not therefore a *new place* (according to the Greek sacredness, which is made of "places"), but of a new *condition* at the end of *time* (according to the biblical sacredness, which is expressed *over time*). Our risen body is «in heaven», in the sense that it has already been prepared for us and is there as if set aside and waiting to be given at the coming of the Lord (as can be better seen in the passages of Col 3:1-4 and Jn 14:2-4, which we have examined earlier).

In 2 Corinthians 5 it's not specified *when* we shall «put on our heavenly dwelling», and, therefore, when we shall put on our new body, but the thought that it will be right after death clearly contrasts with other biblical passages and, if we believe that the whole Bible is inspired, we have a duty to try to reconcile its many parts.

The new body is described as «heavenly» not because it's "immaterial" (according to the usual Greek assumptions), but because it's more suitable for our full fellowship with God (1Cor 15:35-49).

#### 7. *Paradise and resurrection as opposing systems.*

Having as hope Paradise or Resurrection is not only two different *doctrines*, but also two different *attitudes* and *systems*. Indeed, more than *different*, they are *opposed*.

- Because Paradise is part of a system of *elevating* that which is earthly, while the resurrection is the *descending* on Earth of a heavenly reality.
- Because in Paradise one thinks to enter right after death and individually, while the resurrection will be accomplished by God *at the end of time* and *collectively*.
- Because in Paradise *we, but not the world*, would be saved, whereas at the resurrection the *redemption of nature and the world will be wrought*, where there would be not only a new Earth, but also new heavens (Rom 8:19-21; Rev 21:1).
- Because Paradise is asking God to "*wait for us in heaven*", while with the resurrection we say to God "*Your kingdom come*" (Mt 6:10).
- Because the concept of Paradise *devalues* the body in general and, as a paradoxical consequence, the *incarnation, resurrection and return* of Christ. In fact, if in Paradise the body is not essential, then neither is that of Christ and his incarnation would be essentially temporary. The final resurrection of believers, on the other hand, *makes the incarnation, resurrection, ascension and return of Christ consistent*.

The biblical God not only created the world, but from the very beginning *He desired to be on Earth with man*. When Adam sinned, God removed him from Eden, however *He continued to engage in person with men on Earth*. During the Exodus he adapted to stay even in a tent, to be close to his people. Then, in their midst, he had a house of stone built for Himself and, after he had to destroy it for the bad use that men did of it, shortly later he had it built again. Then he becomes incarnate and thus becomes "man among men", eventually accomplishing a dwelling on Earth in harmony with His "images", namely, us men (Rev 21:3).

The common hope of Paradise, and so to be fully blessed in heaven right after death and forever, in conclusion, profoundly distorts the biblical teaching and is, therefore, to be regarded not only as an *error*, but essentially as *an actual heresy*.

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Link No. 6  
**QUESTIONS ON THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS**

*Here we resume with some questions which were arranged for a small conference, held in July 2010 in Manigi of Cascia (Perugia), my native village. These are "rhetorical questions", and thus, they already hint at the answer.*

CHAPTER 1

1.If it is always God who speaks, both before Christ and with Christ, is it possible that there are differences between the two periods? (Hebrews 1:1-2).

2.If through the Son the worlds have been "created" (beginning), if he "sustains all things" (intermediate stage), if all his enemies are reduced to being his "footstool" (end), is it possible that in this unified plan there are contrasts between the various parts? (Hebrews 1:2-13).

3.If through the Son He has "created the worlds," then does the beginning of the appearance of the Son coincide with the beginning of the Gospels or the beginning of Genesis? (Hebrews 1:2).

4.Is the Letter to the Hebrews one of the first New Testament writings or one of the last? (Hebrews 5:12). If it is among the last, can its revelation be presumed from the beginning of the Gospel?

5.If the Letter is "to the Hebrews," should we not take for granted our difficulty in understanding it correctly?

6.Jesus is «as much superior» to angels (Heb 1:4), but does superiority imply contrast? Or is superiority *within* the complexity of the work of a God who sees the end from the beginning? (Isa 46:10).

CHAPTER 2

1.Does God call us to answer the word spoken to us through Christ *equally* as He called to answer His word before Christ, or does He now act *differently*? (Hebrews 2:2-3).

2.After Christ, is God more severe or is he less severe? (Heb 2:2-3; 10:26-31; 12:25).

3.If Jesus came to help «the offspring of Abraham» (Heb 2:16), can his work be completed with the destruction of that genetic offspring? According to the Bible, could "Abraham's offspring" be only "spiritual" or should it have *also* been genetic? (Gen 15:1-6).

CHAPTER 3

1.In Hebrews 3:2-6 Is Jesus seen as *opposed* to or *similar* to Moses? Working *in the same project* as God or in a "house of God" different from Moses?

2.The glory of Jesus is "greater" than that of Moses (Heb 3:3): does this entitle us to *despise* Moses or does it require us to see in him an *anticipation* of, and a *preparation* for, Christ?

3.Does the comparison with the people of God at the time of Exodus (Heb 3:7-19) presume a *similarity* or a *contrast* between the people of God before Christ and that after Christ?

CHAPTER 4

1.«GOOD NEWS came to us JUST AS to them» (Heb 4:2,6). Since "Gospel" means "good news", wouldn't it be more correct to translate "A GOSPEL came to us JUST AS to them"? Was the "Gospel of Moses" not a preparation to the "Gospel of Jesus"?

2.Could believers before Christ (Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah and others) draw near «with confidence...to the throne of grace»? (Heb 4:16).

CHAPTER 5

1.Is the Levitical priestly system considered to be *preparatory* or *non-educational* compared to the priesthood of Christ? Is highlighting the differences a denial of a "common ground"? (Heb 5:1-5).

2.Is the «new priesthood» of Jesus, being «after the order of Melchizedek», more modern or older than that of Aaron? (Heb 5:6-10; 7:1-10).

## CHAPTER 6

1. Should our faith be *similar* to that of Abraham, or has the New Testament lowered its cost? (Heb 6:11-15).

## CHAPTER 7

1. The laws of the Italian Republic continuously change to adapt to changing circumstances, but they must all be in accord with the principles of the Constitution: are the differences between the Old and New Testaments (Hebrews 7:12) not united by the same basic principles? (Mt 7:12; 22:36-40; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14).

2. When a commandment is «set aside» (Hebrews 7:18) and it is no longer mandatory to observe it (Hebrews 10:18), does it mean that it is *forbidden* to continue to observe it or that, instead, it becomes optional? In Acts 15, was it decided to *forbid*, from that moment on, the observance of the law of Moses or to make it *non-compulsory* for Christians of pagan origin? (Acts 15:19-21; 21:20). Was not the law of Moses for the Hebrews a precious gift of God to keep? (Deu 4:5-6).

3. Moses' law «made nothing perfect» (Heb 7:19): have two thousand years of the Gospel made at least the Church perfect (cf. Heb 5:11-12)?

4. «A *better* hope is introduced», «Jesus [...] the guarantor of a *better* covenant» (Heb 7:19,22). The comparison is non between “good” and “bad”, and neither between “positive” and “negative”, but rather between “good” and “better”. The word *better* indicates a change, but *not a contrast* between what was before and what comes afterwards.

## CHAPTER 8

1. The «true tent» (or *tabernacle*) was not that set up by «man», but that present in heaven (Heb 8:1-2). Was it not that «man» Solomon who built the sanctuary? And did he not build it according to God's instructions? And did God not tangibly dwell in that sanctuary made by the hands of man? (1Chr 28:6; 1Kings 8:10-11). Of course, Jesus is *more excellent* and *better* (Heb 8:6), but to despise Jesus' "standards of comparison (Levitical priests and sanctuary), is it not despising Jesus himself?

3. The Levitical cult was «a *copy* and *shadow* of the heavenly things» (Heb 8:5): do the copy and shadow of a reality *conflict* with that reality or do they *begin to reveal it*?

4. The "first covenant" (Hebrews 8:7) clearly refers to the one on Sinai at the time of Moses. Is the law of Moses the *essential* part of the Old Testament? If that is so, then Abraham is not part of the Old Testament because he comes before Moses.

After the destruction of the first Temple, one could certainly not perform the rites prescribed by Moses: does that mean that, at that time, there was only an Old Testament in part? Isn't the basis of the Old Testament Abraham instead? (Gal 3:15-17). If it is so, then the law of Moses is *contingent* (cf. Deu 18:15:18) and ultimately Jesus could also be seen as a "return to Abraham" (in other words, a "moving towards the origins", as we have already noted).

5. Since the New Covenant is the full execution of the "first covenant" (the law of Moses written on the hearts, Heb 8:10), how can there be any conflict between the two covenants? Should there be more emphasis on continuity or discontinuity?

6. Christians are often restating that *today* we are in that New Covenant so described: «For this... declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts [...] they shall not teach, each one his neighbour [...] for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest» (Heb 8:10-11). I don't know churches where there is no longer any need to instruct children and where all have the whole law of God on their heart. Do you know of them?

7. Not even the churches described in the New Testament had fulfilled the New Covenant (we limit ourselves to Hebrews 5:11-12; 10:32-39). Do the exciting conversations on the New Covenant, then, concern the present reality or are they a prophetic hope? Do not certain exaggerations about the New Covenant being in force today risk being a mythology and an illusion?

8. «I will remember their sins no more» (Hebrews 8:12): does that «their» not refer in a special way to Israel (cf. 8:10a)?

9. Two thousand years ago the first covenant was *close to vanish away* (Heb 8:13): does it mean that it has now vanished? Two thousand years ago Jesus' return was also *near* (Gia 5:7-8; Rom 13:11-12; Phil 4:5), a return which in Hebrews is even expected in «a little while» (10:37): does it then mean that Jesus has already returned?

#### CHAPTER 9

1. The high priest entered the most holy place of the Temple only once a year, to make atonement for the people's sins (Heb 9:6-7): Did the law of Moses and its ritual system settle especially God's relationship with *the people* or with *individuals*? With *individuals*, had God not already clarified the way he wanted to relate to Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Deborah, Anna, Abigail and others?

2. It is said that ritual sacrifices cannot perfect the one who offers them (Heb 9:9; 10:1,4,11): Is it that "they cannot" in themselves or "they can *no longer*" after Christ's coming? Was the effectiveness of sacrifices automatic, and so, magical? Or were they effective for what they represented and because the offeror believed in God's promise which encouraged to present them?

3. «The way into the holy places is not yet opened» (Heb 9:8). Of course, the Temple's holy place was accessible within the limit (only to priests and with certain rules) and even less so was the "holy place": to these *ritual* boundaries and to the people's *generalisation*, wasn't there also a possibility of *individual* access to God? (1Sam 15:22; Ps 50:12-15). And *today*, whereby the way of the sanctuary (Jesus) has been manifested, do we think we see God "face to face"? (1Cor 13:12). If our relationship with God is *radically* different from that of the Old Testament believers, why do we identify ourselves with so many stories described there? Maybe that Joseph, Daniel and the Psalms, for instance, are part of the New Testament?

The Old and New Testaments of which theology talks about, are they *the real ones* or are they a *theoretical frame* far from the *letter* and the *Spirit* of the Word of God?

4. «Greater and more perfect», «how much more will the blood of Christ», «the copies of the heavenly things», «copies of the true things» (Heb 9:11,14,23,24). The Levitical system was an imperfect way of anticipating, to some extent, the immense reality of God: is it a system to admire and study or is it right to belittle it?

#### CHAPTER 10

1. David knew that for the forgiveness of God above all the confession of sin and humbling oneself was necessary: only *after* this did the sacrifices make sense (Psalm 51:4,16-19). God had already warned of a distorted use of the rites (Psalm 50:12-15; Isaiah 1:11-20; Hosea 6:6). Could not the Letter to the Hebrews aim precisely at an undue importance that was given to sacrifices? With this in mind, could the Letter to the Hebrews be an *applying* of the Old Testament, rather than an opposing to it?

#### CHAPTER 11

1. Today God asks us above all to have faith, and so, to believe in him (Jn 6:28; Acts 16:30-31). When did this stage begin? If this has always been the case (Heb 11:1-39), then how can there be a contrast between the Old and New Testaments?

2. «Since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect» (Heb 11:40). Does our arrogance and our biases go as far as to hold that *today, here and now*, any Christian would have a deeper relationship with God than Abraham and Moses did? (Ex 33:11; James 2:23; Isa 41:8; Gen 18:17-33). Have we *already* come to perfection? (1 Jn 3:2). Or will *all* believers of *all* times attain perfection in the city that is to come (Heb 13:14), *after* Jesus' resurrection and return? (1Cor 15:22-23).

#### CHAPTER 12

1. The second part of this chapter (12:18-29) is a sort of concluding summary of the whole discourse presented in the Epistle, and here again there is a comparison between the two covenants: do the differences that emerge nullify the fundamental similarities? We quote some expressions: «You did not come (*to the mountain*) [...] a blazing fire [...] *But you have come* [...] to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a *better* word than the blood of

Abel [...] if they did not escape [...] *much less* will we escape [...] "Yet *once more* I will shake not only the earth" [...] let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God *is* a consuming fire». Today we are invited to approach a Jesus who has clothed himself with humility, but does this mean that God has ceased to be a consuming fire? Will not Jesus, on his return, resemble a consuming fire? (Rev 1:12-16; 6:12-17).

2.«Heavenly Jerusalem» (Hebrews 12:22). Previously, the Letter to the Hebrews had talked about a *heavenly* home better than the earthly one and sought by the witnesses of the faith (11:16). Does "heavenly" mean the *place* where this homeland is, or its *characteristics*? To go to the "heavenly home", must one move *in space* (i.e., go to Paradise after death), or is it *time* that separates us from the "heavenly home" and we can enter it only after the resurrection, when the heavenly Jerusalem will come down to earth? (Heb 13:14; Rev 21:2).

## CHAPTER 13

1.Bearing in mind that Jesus is closely associated to the Father (Jn 10:30; 14:9), that God «is [*always*] the same» (Ps 102:27, significantly referring to Jesus in Heb 1:12), that Jesus existed and was pre-ordained before the creation of the world (Jn 17:5,24; 1Pet 1:20), how should we understand Hebrews 13:8, which says that «Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever»? Does *yesterday* mean that Jesus is the same from the incarnation, or before the foundation of the world? Is it right to separate Jesus from a pre-existing "Logos" (Jn 1:1), which some consider "ontologically different"? If God is always the same, if Jesus is always the same, can there be "incoherence" between Genesis and Revelation?

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### Link No. 7

#### STEPHEN'S SPEECH (ACTS 7) AS COMPASS TO THE WHOLE BIBLE

*Stephen's speech seems a simple summary of the Old Testament, but under the most noticeable meaning there is another, which places Christ in strict continuity with the whole history that precedes him. If Stephen's speech is well understood, then the supposed contrasts between the Old and New Testaments or within the New Testament tend to fade away.*

#### *1. Background and strategy of Stephen's speech.*

Among the seven "table servants", Luke not only opens the list with Stephen, but defines him first as a «man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit», then as «full of grace and power» finally, as gifted with a wisdom and a Spirit which his adversaries could not oppose (6:5,8,10): if Luke introduces Stephen this way, it is clear that he will then attribute a correspondingly high value to his speech. For example, if a great philosopher tells a simple story, it's obvious that it hides a deeper meaning.

At the end of Luke's Gospel, it is told how Jesus, to two disciples on the way to Emmaus, «beginning with Moses and all the Prophets...interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself» (Luke 24:27). It's natural to regret to not have been at that wonderful biblical lesson, but then those two disciples went back to Jerusalem to the apostles and, evidently, shared what Jesus had told them. However, Jesus had, in any case, time and a way to deepen that discourse well during the 40 days, which he spent as Risen with the Twelve and another hundred disciples (Acts 1:3,15). It is likely that Stephen was part of this original nucleus of disciples and the esteem of which he was surrounded, in any case, suggests that he knew Jesus' teachings better than others. We began from the lesson to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, because even Stephen's speech focuses on highlighting what in the Old Testament is about Jesus: there is, therefore, to consider that in Stephen's speech some of the teachings of Jesus after his resurrection are reflected.

The false witnesses, instigated by those who refused to believe in Jesus, obviously brought false accusations to the high priest, however, false accusations are generally half-truths and the dispute is nicely summarised in v. 14: «We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us». Since Stephen was moving in the footsteps of Jesus, it is not difficult to assume what the Jews could not bear. And the Jews considered themselves disciples of Moses and custodians of the Temple, where the presence of God was; Jesus, on the other

hand, accused them of having made void the word of God with their tradition, and of having made the temple a den of robbers; to the extent that they no longer had to think themselves as children of Abraham, having become even children of the Devil, an accusation that the Jews themselves then turned on Jesus (Mk 7:13; 11:17; Jn 8:33-48; 9:28). For Jesus, the degeneration of God's people was similar to that when the first Temple was destroyed, with the related dispersion of the people, things which therefore would soon happen again (Mt 24).

Called to defend himself, Stephen adopts a two-stage strategy: 1) prepare, first, a shared ground with the audience, so as to then make them listen to what they would not want to listen to; 2) introduce Jesus in the end, the Just One, whom they «betrayed and murdered» (7:52). Since Stephen is accused *due to being a follower of Jesus*, he places at the centre of his defence not himself, but Jesus: thus placing the accusers on the same level as those who had rejected Joseph and Moses (7:52).

## 2. Abraham and Joseph as forerunners of Christ.

The facts cited by Stephen are certainly present in the Old Testament, but selecting certain aspects and framing them in a particular perspective is a subjective operation: since the facts cited by Stephen are known, we tend to not grasp the meaning of that choice and its application.

It seems clear that Stephen, concerning Abraham's history, is interested in what foresees Christ (7:2-8); it is indeed highlighted that Abraham was made by God to go through the Promised Land, giving him «no inheritance in it», but promising to give it «to his offspring after him». Stephen seems to expect the audience to grasp the application: why be surprised if the Messiah Jesus, Abraham's son and heir (Mt 1:1), passed through this Promised Land as Abraham did, postponing its possession to when he would return? (Mt 25:31-34).

Even the recalling of Joseph's story has a similar purpose (7:9-14). Joseph was loved by God, but his brothers hated him and wanted to get rid of him. But then they had to turn to Joseph to be saved from famine. Implicit application: why then be surprised that the patriarchs' descendants rejected Jesus? Why not understand that Jesus, as Joseph did, wants to respond to hatred with love and is now the only hope of salvation even for his persecutors? Incidentally, on the way to Emmaus it seems that Jesus begins with Moses (Luke 24:27), instead of Abraham as Stephen, but the Jews meant by "Moses" all the first five books of the Bible (including Genesis), so it is plausible that even Jesus, in highlighting what was about him, began from Genesis.

## 3. Jesus AS Moses, not opposed to Moses.

Since, for the Jews, it was Moses who filled the most important place in the Word of God, then it is on Moses that Stephen dwells (7:20-42a), but at this point the similarities with Jesus are increasingly clear.

Moses could stay in the splendour of the most magnificent court of that time, but his love for his oppressed brothers led him to visit them, with the desire to free them. He «supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand»: so Moses had to leave his people as it had happened to Joseph before. God, though, «sent» precisely him, as «ruler and redeemer», giving him the power to perform «wonders and signs» (vv. 35-36). Moses had announced the coming of one LIKE him (v. 37), so one should not be surprised that God now wants to deliver Israel through Jesus, whom God also endorsed with wonders and signs, even though he was rejected by the offspring of those who rejected Moses.

Moses gave to the people «living oracles» (or 'words of life', v. 38), however from the beginning the people gave themselves to idolatry and continued to do so until the time of the prophets, forcing God to exile the people to Babylon and to destroy the first Temple (vv. 39-43).

Stephen thus arrives at a first conclusion, accusing them of having insulted the law of Moses. In brief, he wants to show that the Jews are not the descendants of those who have *always been faithful* to the law of Moses, but of those who have *always been unfaithful* and who are now reaching the point of compelling God to destroy the second Temple, scattering them among the nations again.

Besides Stephen, even Peter (3:22) and Jesus himself (Jn 5:45) had emphasised a Messiah *in continuity* with Moses, but on this many have come to think the opposite, describing a Jesus *opposed* to Moses.



The continuity that Stephen sees between Moses and Jesus is also expressed in the use he makes of the term "church" (ekklesia), applying it to the people of Israel during the Exodus (v. 38), but in this case, it is the translators that think to avoid similarity, translating here with "congregation".

#### 4. *The hidden meaning of Isaiah's quotation.*

Stephen then goes on to consider more closely (vv. 44-50) the question of the Temple and starts from the Exodus, when the dwelling place of God was not a building made of stone, but a tent that moved with the people. Stephen shows how it is not very important for God to have a house made of stone, which he had Solomon build only after many centuries.

He concludes in a way that places his listeners in a corner, to then attack them no longer covertly, but in an explicit and disruptive way: «You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit» (7:51). This accusation seems a "change of tone", which does not strictly relate to the sentences immediately preceding. Looking more closely, however, one can see a "crescendo" that those listeners perceived, but that for us is not easy to grasp: we will therefore see more closely verses 48-51.

«*Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands*» (v. 48a). God's various names do not have the same meaning, although they visibly refer to the same person. While *Yahweh* indicates the God who relates to his people Israel (more or less as the name which a father relates to his son with), the *Most High* is the universal name of God, which He relates to all men with. In Daniel, for instance, as the book is set in the pagan court of Babylon, we find no *Yahweh*, but *Most High* (in Dan 4:24-34 and elsewhere); significantly, Mary was told by the angel that Jesus would be called the "Son of the *Most High*" (Luke 1:32). Using *Most High*, then, Stephen reminds his audience that God, even if he has a special relationship with Israel, cannot be "taken prisoner" and reduced to "tribal property" by his people, because His essential and original characteristic is that of being Creator and Lord of Heaven and Earth, that is, He has always been and will always be a universal God, a concept that Jesus has *revived* and not *introduced*.

«*As the prophet says*» (v. 48b). Solomon's statements come to mind (1 Kings 8:27-30), which, in inaugurating the "house of the universal God", had grasped its paradoxical aspect: «But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!». Solomon continues: «When they pray *toward this place*...listen in heaven *your dwelling place*», realising that God's earthly dwelling in the Temple was only a *reflection* of the true dwelling of God in heaven. For the Judaic ruling class, the exaltation of the Temple beyond measure meant exalting those who had control of it, that is, themselves. Instead of Solomon, however, Stephen quotes (vv. 49-50) a passage from Isaiah which contains similar thoughts: why does Stephen choose Isaiah?

When we read the reference of Isaiah that Stephen makes, we only think of the verses that are quoted, all the more so that, for some, only the Old Testament quoted in the New remains fully valid. The listeners, instead, knew the context of that quote and were terrified by how Isaiah continues his speech... which is very much in tune with the continuation of Stephen's speech! Quite different, then, from the "change of phase" that is perceived, because it is as if Stephen, after *quoting* the first two verses of Isaiah 66, would proceed by *paraphrasing* the following verses: precisely the fact that the audience feels accused not by Stephen, but by the indirectly recalled words of Isaiah, forces it to suffer without being able to react («when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him», 7:54).

It is, therefore, appropriate to report not only the verses of Isaiah *quoted* by Stephen, but also those *evoked* by him. Through Isaiah, God says: «Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made [...] But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. “He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig's blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; I also will choose harsh treatment for them» (Isa 66:1-4a). The Pharisees regard themselves as heirs to a *holy tradition*, while Stephen reminds them that they are heirs to a *perverse tradition* that had already led to the destruction of the Temple and the abolition of sacrifices. The Temple would have been destroyed, not due to those who announced its end (Isaiah, Jesus, Stephen), but because of those who, like them, had essentially defiled it.

Stephen, thus, closes his opponents' mouths in a masterful way, but when opponents can no longer use their mouths, they then begin to use their hands (as it had been with Jesus and as it'll be with Paul).

Precisely on similar grounds, and so seeing the imminent catastrophe, Jesus had spared the Samaritan woman from going to Jerusalem, affirming that worship requires an appropriate "*inner place*" rather than a suitable *physical place*: «the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth» (Jn 4:23). Faced with these words, Christianity often exults as if this were a revolutionary novelty brought by Christ, forgetting that worship "in any place, and therefore, without a place" begins with Adam, goes through Abraham, includes David and goes beyond Isaiah. And it did not cease even when the Temple was up and running!

##### 5. Outline of three applications of Stephen's speech.

Stephen's speech has at least three aspects of great significance, which we shall now mention concisely.

1) Stephen shows the Messiahship of Jesus by seeing the prophecies *within the story* of God's people, even more so than in the prophetic books, because the story guided and told by God has always a prophetic value (this reinforces the importance we have given to the Acts of the Apostles).

2) Stephen sees in Abraham, Joseph, and Moses "foreshadowings" of Christ, and their history as foreseeing that of Christ. We believe that David can also be added to the three, since Christ is primarily defined as the "Son of David" (Mt 1:1). All this shows how much the mentality of the New Testament Church was anchored to a Kingdom of God understood not in heaven, but of heaven, that is, a Kingdom in which it is not humanity that moves "into heaven", but it is God who returns permanently to Earth, as it was at the beginning with Adam, as it was during the Exodus and the time of Solomon, as it will be in the new earth (Rev 21:3).

3) That of Stephen may also be seen as an example of *evangelism of the Jews*, which does not begin with the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity, nor even with those prophecies which are clear especially *after* one has believed. An evangelism that centres not on the contrast between Christ and the Old Testament, but rather on the fact that Christ *continues* the work of Abraham, Joseph, Moses and the prophets. Another method is that of Peter, who addresses the Jews by placing the *meaning* of Jesus' work at the centre (Acts 2-4), while Paul will focus on his *personal testimony* (Acts 22). All three methods are important, but Stephen's is perhaps the least practiced.

##### 6. Abraham, Joseph and Moses as the past, present and future of Jesus

Stephen wants to show that Abraham, Joseph and Moses were foreshadowings of Christ; from this stems that Christ brings to completion the works that God made those forerunners of his begin. However, they did not work *at the same time*, but in stages that followed not only with regard to time, but also according to a "design" logic: in fact, for example, Moses could not give shape to a people *before* Abraham's offspring had formed and increased.

From this it follows that Christ could not fulfil what was foreshadowed by Abraham, Joseph and Moses *all at the same time*. In the Gospel, in the *past*, we see that Jesus resembles above all Abraham, because as Abraham, he travels the Promised Land without even having where «to lay his head» (Mt 8:20); even though, like Abraham, Jesus becomes the custodian of God's promises for all humanity.

At the end of the Acts, however, Jesus seems more like Joseph, because being the object of homicidal hatred by his brothers, found some better welcome from us gentiles (Acts 28:26-28), whilst his Jewish brothers no longer recognised him as one of their own.

After the apostolic times, the picture became complicated, because while on the one hand the majority of Jews continued to not recognise Jesus as the Messiah, on the other hand we Gentiles have increasingly changed the Jesus of the Gospels. It seems, however, that we see now re-emerge times similar to when Joseph found his brothers and began a process of alignment that would soon lead to full mutual recognition. For there are more and more Christians who recognise their Jewish roots and the debt they owe to that people; while more and more Jews – regardless of their becoming or not becoming disciples - recognise the Jewishness of Jesus and establish friendly relations with Christians, who show themselves to be friends.

One of the reasons why the similarity between Jesus and Moses is not clear is that it will be manifested above all *in the future*. Today, in fact, Jesus is comparable to the Moses in the wilderness, from which he shall depart to return unto his people and deliver them from the oppression of Pharaoh; while the Jesus described in Revelation will come down from heaven to destroy idolatry and impose on Earth the holiness of God, performing a work similar to that of Moses. In fact, Jesus will no longer return as he did in his first coming, and therefore, as the Lamb who gives his life, but by manifesting his power with an unequivocal order: «Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood» (Rev 22:15).

One wonders why Stephen excluded David, on whom Peter's first preaching had centred (Acts 2). Compared to what we have observed, David stands as a combination of Abraham (keeper of great promises), Joseph (hated by his brothers and forced to take refuge with the pagans) and Moses (also political authority). The picture outlined by Stephen is complete, and including David would not have meant improving the whole, but rather adding another picture that would have distracted from noticing the completeness of the one already exposed.

In summary, many "paintings" of Jesus can be obtained from the Old Testament, but that of Stephen is of great linearity and completeness.

#### *7. Stephen as a bridge between John the Baptist and Cornelius.*

Summing up and concluding in a concise way what we have set out in this *Link* - and to some extent in the whole book - we can see Stephen's martyrdom as the closing of one perspective, after which God opened another. In *Link n. 2* we saw that Daniel announced that there would be a "fifth universal kingdom of the saints" (Dan 7:13-14), in which dominion over every people would be given to a «Son of Man», identifiable with the "Messiah Son of David" outlined in several so-called "messianic" Psalms (e.g. Ps 72:8-17).

In the time of John the Baptist people were expecting this "fifth kingdom" (Mt 3:10-12; Luke 1:51-56; 67-71). Jesus inserted himself in the footsteps of his forerunner (cf. Mt 3:2 with 4:17 and 10:7), but since much of Israel rejected him (Mt 11:20-24), he began to shift the political fulfilment of God's kingdom to his second coming (Mt 13:37-43).

This, however, does not take away the fact that in Peter's preaching there is still the hope of God's forgiveness that will prevent the destruction of Jerusalem and allow the coming of the Kingdom of God (Acts 3:17-26). The hope of a coming of God's Kingdom that would prevent Jerusalem's destruction was only definitively closed with Stephen's preaching and martyrdom, resulting in the flight of Christ's disciples from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1).

When that prospect was definitively closed, God began to accomplish in another way his work towards «all the families of the earth» (Gen 12:3). The evangelisation of Samaria (Acts 8:5), the baptism of the first uncircumcised (Cornelius, Acts 10:47) and the formation of the first "church of uncircumcised" (Antioch, Acts 11:19-21) did not happen by chance after the martyrdom of Stephen and are an explicit consequence thereof (8:4-5; 11:19-20).

With Cornelius, thus, God began anew from an *individual* and *collective* dimension of the faith, as in the time of Abraham, making it possible for believers to increase and spread «to the ends of the earth» (Acts 1:8), to then bring to effect that "universal salvation" which shall be reflected on the whole of creation: a prospect which Peter and Paul had not forgotten and which will begin at the return of Christ (2Pet 3:13; Rom 8:19-21; 1Cor 15:22-28); a return of Christ which will resemble in part the return of Moses to Egypt, by which the world of that time was judged, and a mass of slaves became a people, in the midst of whom God chose to place His tent (Exodus 33:7; 40:34; cf. Rev 21:3).

Fernando De Angelis



DA ADAMO AGLI APOSTOLI

Panoramica di tutta la Bibbia basata sul testo in sé

**RIASSUNTO  
DELL'ANTICO TESTAMENTO**

Una base necessaria per comprendere meglio il Vangelo



LA PIETRA  
ANGOLARE

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