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Acts 1:6–8, ESV.

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

A Branch of Temple Judaism: *The Way*.

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, also known as the Acts of the Apostles, are both anonymously written. Both books are dedicated to an unknown person named Theophilus; the name is Greek and it means “Loved by God” or “Friend of God”. Theophilus might have been a patron of the early church, someone to whom the author feels indebted. Acts begins with a dedication to Theophilus, which itself appears to begin with a reference to the Gospel of Luke:

¹In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Further, the vocabularies and writing styles of the two books are identical, and they both refer to theological issues in a similar fashion. While there is no

argument against the two books having the same author, the identity of that author is not as obvious. Luke, the companion of Paul mentioned in one letter that we are sure Paul wrote, Philemon, has been identified as the author of the Gospel since the year 180 A.D., but not before this. There are also passages in Acts that are called “*we passages*”, meaning that the author puts himself as a traveling companion of Paul. Though the argument is not definitive, there is some good reason to conclude that Luke wrote the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

Another question about the Acts of the Apostles is the name itself. Only beginning in the late second century, a hundred years after it was written, was the book associated with this title. We have no idea if it had a title before that. This title is interesting, because the second half of the book is about Paul the Evangelist, whom we do not consider an Apostle today, not one of the Twelve. The first half of the book focuses on the Apostle Peter, but also on Stephen, Philip, and James, none of whom were Apostles in the formal sense. We do read about the Apostle Mattias replacing the Apostle Judas. And the Apostle James gets one line in the book. John gets a bit more attention. But Paul does refer to himself as an Apostle in multiple letters of his, and early Christians did consider people like James and Paul to be Apostles in some sense. So, the title of the book isn't wildly inappropriate. Acts begins with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the

Apostles and then continues with those who have been energized by the Spirit as they found the Church in Jerusalem and then as they courageously move outward from Jerusalem. But while the book does tell us much about the formation of the early church, it does conflict with the history told in Paul's letters, suggesting that the author of Acts wasn't primarily concerned with giving an accurate history. A different way to view the book is to look at a handful of theological themes. The theological foci of the book are diffuse. The author does not pause periodically, like Paul does in his letters, and deliver concise theological material. But it is there – and it is important to consider this more abstract spiritual material if we want to truly understand the Book of Acts. This is why some people say that the Acts of the Apostles should have been called the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

We'll look at just one of the book's theological aspects. First, though, I want to tell you about a young boy named Yaakov. Some years ago, I was in Jerusalem for an academic conference. I stayed in Israel for a couple of weeks to see the country, to see the places where Jesus had walked. I had a detailed paper map of Jerusalem, and I was riding public busses. Early one day, I was standing on a bus, looking down at my map and then up at the neighborhood we were driving through, trying to figure out where to get off to see the next site on my list. A boy, who turned out to be twelve years-old, walked up to me, and asked me if I

was an American. I said yes. He said, me too, that he lived in New York City, but spent his summers with his grandparents who were Israelis. He offered to show me around Jerusalem. I told him that I appreciated the offer, but that his grandparents would probably not approve of him spending the day with an adult stranger. He smiled and asked me why I was in Israel. I told him that I was a professor and that I was sightseeing after a conference. He said that as long as we only went to public places, his grandparents wouldn't mind at all. As it turns out, Israelis, even in the biggest of their cities, have traditionally felt far safer than Americans do in our cities. This boy and I got off the bus and walked to his grandparents' house, and sure enough, once they saw my U.S. faculty ID, they were happy letting Yaakov show me around Jerusalem. So, there I was, with a personal guide who knew the city inside out – because that is what Yaakov did in the summer: he explored Jerusalem. So, Yaakov took me to the Western Wall and the Temple Mount, and, knowing I was a Christian, to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which was built in 326 A.D. on the site where it is believed that Jesus died on the cross. He took me to Via Dolorosa, the famous route that Christians follow as they trace the path of Jesus as he carried his cross. He showed me the famous stain glass windows that Marc Chagall created for a synagogue. There are twelve of them and Yaakov explained that they depict the twelve sons of the

patriarch Jacob. Jacob's Hebrew name was, of course, Yaakov, Yaakov proudly told me.

Yaakov was a guide in more than just a physical way. He was a spiritual guide, too. He talked to me about some aspects of Judaism and Jewish history which, at the time, I was unaware. Remember that the first Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 or 586 B.C. by the Babylonians at the start of the exile, and the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. There has never been a third Temple. Also note that there is a big difference between Temple Judaism and post-temple, often called Rabbinic or Synagogue Judaism. Before the destruction of the second Temple, religious life was focused on the Temple. The teachers in the Temple were priests. It was a largely a hereditary office, and they were not rabbis. People came to the Temple to pray and to offer animal sacrifices. The central religious text was the Torah, the first five books of the Christian Old Testament. But during the late Temple period, specifically during Roman rule, the synagogue system was expanding. It would later form the model for Christian Church organization. When the second Temple was destroyed, all religious practice shifted to the synagogues. The teachers in the synagogues were rabbis. Since animals could be sacrificed only in the Temple, sacrifices stopped when the second Temple was destroyed. A major shift began. Temple Judaism

gave way to Rabbinic Judaism. Jews began to focus on the Torah and the emerging Talmud, which wasn't completed until the 6th century A.D. The Talmud is a vast library of books containing ethnical teachings, folklore, history of the Jewish people, and very importantly, detailed interpretations of the Torah. The Torah is considered delivered by God, while it is understood that the Talmud was written by humans. The emergence of Rabbinic Judaism, which happened after 70 A.D., was focused on understanding and applying the Torah to everyday life. The Talmud is central to the practice of Judaism after Temple Judaism.

Yaakov explained all of this to me. As it turns out, this is critical to understanding the Acts of the Apostles. After the dedication of the book to Theophilus, the book begins with Jesus commissioning the Apostles:

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

We see that the Book of Acts begins with the Holy Spirit inspiring a group of people to begin in Jerusalem and then to move outward to the "*end of the earth*".

But they are not being commissioned to begin a new religion. In Chapter 24 of Acts, near the end of the book, what the evangelists are building is still not being called a "church" in the sense of a new religion. Paul stands before Felix, a

local Roman governor, on trial for his evangelistic work. Here is part of what Paul says to the court, in particular, to Tertullus, the prosecutor of Paul:

¹⁴ But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, ¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

Notice that what Paul is promoting he calls “the Way”. This is how the emerging Church is referred to in Acts. “The Way” refers to Jesus’ teachings. Remember that in the Gospel of John, after Jesus predicts that Peter will become afraid and deny that he is a follower of his, Jesus is quoted as saying:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Jesus himself refers to his teachings as “the Way”.

The early evangelists, all those people in the Book of Acts that we associate with the founding of the church, while they did indeed begin a new Church, a new faith, were not trying to do so. The early evangelists, like Peter in Jerusalem and Paul as he walked through the Roman Empire, saw “the Way” as the fulfillment of the hopes of Judaism. Jesus was the Messiah that the Old Testament prophets spoke of. Here are the words of Isaiah from Chapter 11:

***11** There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*

² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,

*the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

- ³ *And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,*
- ⁴ *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*
- ⁵ *Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.*

We see that the author of Acts, Luke, makes sure that we see Jerusalem as the center of “the Way”. Just as the work of Jesus takes place in and around Jerusalem, the early chapters of Acts are centered in Jerusalem. In fact, much of the action takes place in the Temple. This is during the time of Temple Judaism. Peter and Paul were Temple Jews. Even as Paul moves outward to “*the ends of the earth*”, Paul is regularly brought back to Jerusalem. It is the Jerusalem representatives of “the Way”, including Peter, who end up giving their approval of the fashion in which Paul and his associates are spreading the faith outward into the Roman Empire. Paul himself seems to model his activities after those of Peter in Jerusalem; Paul even sees himself as an Apostle to give legitimacy to his efforts.

The point is that the early evangelists were mostly Jews rooted in Temple Judaism. Paul never stopped calling himself a Jew. Neither did Jesus nor Peter. Paul, rather than telling Gentiles that he had a whole new religion for them,

simply tells them that the God of the Jews is their God, too. The only difference is that they do not have to focus on all the laws that the Jews must follow. Here is what he says in Chapter 3 of Romans, his most influential surviving letter:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

“There is no distinction” he tells us. All of us, Jews and Gentiles, have sinned. But through Jesus, we Gentiles can now take part of the righteousness of God.

What happened after the death of Jesus was the slow emergence of two new outgrowths of Temple Judaism. The first was Rabbinic Judaism, with its abandonment of animal sacrifice and the interpretation of the Torah by Rabbis using the Talmud. The second was “the Way”. We see the first use of the term “Christian” in the Book of Acts in chapter 11 when the leaders of the Jerusalem movement send Barnabas to Antioch, which is in modern Turkey:

²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

But note that they are called Christians because this new church follows Jesus, the Way, not because they are members of some new, recognized religion. It was

during the second and third centuries that Christianity was finally crystalized as a separate religion. During this same period, Rabbinic, or what we would call modern Judaism, emerged. With the destruction of the second Temple, monotheism was sent into a two-pronged age of evolution. God led Jewish people to Rabbinic Judaism and followers of “the Way” to Christianity. For us, the Book of Acts makes it very clear that the Holy Spirit is directing the entire mission. The Holy Spirit is the guide of the early evangelists.

It was young Yaakov who guided me through Jerusalem, including several Christian sites. He was also the one who guided me down the path of understanding the parallel emergence of Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. I think it’s a powerful thing to put our faith in its proper historical context. We call Jesus “the Christ” because in Greek “*Christos*” means “the Anointed One”. This is a translation from the Aramaic and Hebrew word “*Meh-shee-kha*” which means Messiah. We should see ourselves as following the Messiah, the person who Isaiah predicted would be “*the Spirit of wisdom and understanding*”, and “*the Spirit of counsel and might*.” The authors of the New Testament, and specifically, the author of Acts, was trying to teach us that one simple fact. We are a branch of Temple Judaism; we are the people who have accepted Jesus as our Messiah. “The Way” is the way of the Messiah who brought us hope and inspiration.