

Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:24-35b
Romans 8:14-17
John 14:8-17 (25-27)

Notes on the Lesson from the Acts of the Apostles

The Festival of Shavuot, or Festival of Weeks, commemorates the giving of the Torah to the children of Israel. As it occurs fifty days after Passover, the Greek name for the festival, Pentecost, came into common usage. It is one of the three festivals which the Torah commands Jews to celebrate in Jerusalem if at all possible (the other two being Passover and the Festival of Booths). This explains the large crowd of diverse people that appear in the biblical text.

We do not know where the disciples were staying at this time. One tradition holds that they were still in the room borrowed for Passover seven weeks before although this seems unlikely, especially considering that they had spent a part of the period since Passover in Galilee. It is also possible that they were residing in Bethany, where Jesus had stayed with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. This, too, seems improbable. Most likely, an unnamed disciple who lived in Jerusalem had offered the use of his home to the group.

It would have been quite easy for the disciples to have communicated with the large crowd of pilgrims in Jerusalem for almost everyone who lived in the Roman Empire spoke Greek as well as their local language. What is remarkable about this Pentecost event is not that the people heard the message but that they heard it in their individual regional languages and not in Greek. If you have ever been in a foreign country where all around you are speaking in another tongue and then you hear someone speaking English, you have most likely experienced a sense of relief or of familiarity. It is this individual, personal experience that would have made a strong impact on the pilgrims in Jerusalem.

On the southern end of the Temple Mount stood a huge staircase that was the primary entrance for the Temple. Known as the “Rabbis’ Teaching Steps” or the “Steps of the Elders”, this was a place where teachers would come to speak any message they might have to offer. (Almost certainly, Jesus’ final sermon - found in Matthew 23 - took place on these same steps.) People were accustomed to individuals coming to these steps to teach so it is most likely that this was the place where Peter gave his Pentecost sermon. The steps were uncovered in excavations in the late 1960s and a portion can be seen in the photo to the right. There are also over fifty ritual baths in the area so there was plentiful water to baptize the three thousand who became disciples on that day.



For Jews, Pentecost recalls the giving of the Torah following the redemptive event of the Passover. For Christians, it remembers the giving of the Holy Spirit following the redemptive event of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.