

Pentecost
Cycle B RCL

Acts 2:1-21

The word “spirit” in Greek (*pneuma*) also means “wind.” The speech of John the Baptist in Luke 3:16 promised that the one who came after John would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The author of Luke-Acts combined all these images (spirit, wind, fire) in this account of the Day of Pentecost. The Hebrew Bible’s association of the Spirit with the speech of the prophets provided an explanation for the ability of the apostles to speak in many foreign tongues. This gift of tongues, however, differs from the gift of tongues that divided the Corinthian Christians from one another (1 Corinthians 12). The strange utterances of the Corinthians were taken to be in the language of heaven (1 Corinthians 13:1), whereas the “tongues” of Acts 2 are actual human languages.

We find the festival of Pentecost (Hebrew: *shavuot* “weeks”; Greek: *pentekoste* “fiftieth”) described in Exodus 23:16; 34:18-24; Leviticus 23:15-21; Deuteronomy 16:9-16; and 2 Chronicles 8:13. It occurs under its Greek name in Tobit 2:1 and 2 Maccabees 12:32. Pentecost was originally an agricultural festival, but by the first century of our era, people had forgotten the agricultural meaning of the holy day. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus counted the fifty days of Pentecost from Passover rather than from the beginning of the spring wheat harvest as commanded in Deuteronomy 16:9, illustrating the development of the celebration away from its roots in biblical law. By the time of the events described in Acts, the festival had become a celebration of the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

or

Ezekiel 37:1-14

This vision had to do with the Jews in exile in Mesopotamia, not with the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead that emerged long after Ezekiel’s lifetime. Comparing the exiled Jews to skeletons, God asked Ezekiel the seemingly absurd question: “Can these bones live (37:3)?” To restore the fortunes of Israel once more in the land of promise would be akin to the miracle of making dead people rise and live again.

Psalms 104:25-35, 37b

This *hymn* particularly celebrates God’s creative act and was, perhaps, part of the New Year’s celebration in the Temple of Jerusalem. The role of “wisdom” (*soxmah*) in creation in 104:25 anticipates the role of Dame Wisdom in Proverbs 8, Job 28, and Sirach 24. The dreadful sea-monster Leviathan, who, at the beginning of creation, suffered defeat at the hands of the Lord in some Hebrew myths (*cf.* Psalm 74:13-14, Job 3:8; 26:12-13; 41:1-34), is in this psalm only a figure of comic relief and a creature like other creatures. (Readers may note that the *Book of Common Prayer* has renumbered the verses of this psalm by dividing verse 14 into two separate verses and by turning the last verse into two. The result is a psalm of 37 verses instead of the 35 verses in the Hebrew, Greek, and English Bibles.)

Romans 8:22-27

Paul uses the figure of labor pains here and in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 to describe the tribulations of the end of the present age. The image is an old prophetic image (Isaiah 13:6-8) for the Day of Judgment. Christians used it to describe the woes of the end times (Mark 13:8 and the *Similitudes* of Enoch [1 Enoch 62:4]). Although Paul's concentration is understandably on the human involvement in the culmination of the ages, he reminds his readers that the end time is one of cosmic importance as well. Ultimately, our hope is for adoption into God's kingdom as children, resurrected from the dead body of flesh. The reference to the Spirit's "unspeakable groanings" (vs. 26) may be a reference to the language of angels (1 Corinthians 13:1) many thought they were speaking when they spoke in tongues during worship. The Spirit's intercession for us with God is in a language only God understands (vs. 27).

or

Acts 2:1-21 (above)

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-16

By the time of Jesus, the Greek word *parakletos* ("advocate," so New Revised Standard Version) found its way into both Hebrew and Aramaic (*paraqlit* and *paraqlita'*, respectively) to refer to a professional solicitor in court or to a spokesperson in almost any matter. The Paraclete, then, will be an advocate more than a "comforter" (King James Version), or "counselor" (Revised Standard Version).

The Dead Sea Scrolls imagine human beings divided between those allied with the Spirit of Deceit or Belial and those allied with the Spirit of Truth or the Holy Spirit (*War Scroll* 13.9-12). The expression "Spirit of Truth" in verse 13 has convinced several commentators that the author of this Gospel received some inspiration from the apocalyptic community at Qumran. The important difference, however, is that in Qumran's theology we have no choice as to which group we belong. God has made us walk in one spirit or in the other. In John, on the other hand, the disciples have chosen to follow Jesus and so will find comfort by the coming of the Paraclete, who is the Spirit of Truth. In other words, the ideas are similar but not identical.

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