

Tongues of fire

Pentecost was one of the three great pilgrimage festivals of Judaism (the others being Passover and the autumn feast of Tabernacles). It was a harvest festival. Farmers would bring the first sheaf of wheat from their crops as an offering to God. By the first century the festival had grown to be associated with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, which was assumed to have taken place fifty days after the exodus from Egypt. And there were other traditions and stories as well which attached themselves to the festival. One tells how, originally, God issued the Torah – the law – in all the seventy languages of the world. Philo, writing in the first half of the first century AD, tells how, when the law was given on Sinai, a fire streamed from heaven and, to the utter amazement of the listeners, from the midst came ‘a voice, for the flame became the articulate speech in the language familiar to the audience’.¹²

These traditions and ideas seem to feed into Luke’s account. The first Christian Pentecost, in Luke’s description of it, centres on the giving of a new message, a new power, as a fiery lava flow

of words streaming down from heaven, flowing out in the ordinary language of the people around.

If Passover in AD 33 was on 3 April in our modern reckoning, then Pentecost should have begun at sundown on 22 May AD 33 – fifty days later.¹³ We can't be exactly sure, though, because the reference in Leviticus says that Pentecost should be celebrated fifty days 'from the day after the Sabbath' (Lev. 23.15–16) and different 'Judaisms' took different views on how this should be reckoned. The Essenes calculated it in a different way from the Sadducees, who calculated it differently from the Pharisees.

And, in fact, it may not be this 'Pentecost' at all. It's always assumed that this event equates to the Jewish feast of Weeks, but the Qumran community celebrated several Pentecosts – and one, in particular, might be linked to this story. The Temple Scroll found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, talks about three Pentecost feasts:

- ▷ **The feast of New Grain.** Held on the fifteenth day of the third month. This is the biblical Pentecost; the Temple Scroll says, 'It is the feast of Weeks and the feast of Firstfruits.'
- ▷ **The feast of New Wine.** Held fifty days after the New Grain festival, on the third day of the fifth month.
- ▷ **The feast of New Oil.** Held fifty days after the New Wine festival, on the twenty-second day of the sixth month.

The second of these festivals is the most interesting, because it may well explain the mocking comments of the onlookers who think that the disciples have been knocking back too much new wine. One of the things which has perplexed scholars for years is why this accusation would surface when the new wine and the new grain were not harvested together. But it makes more sense if they are accusing the disciples of drinking the new wine – wine which they should have been offering as a sacrifice.

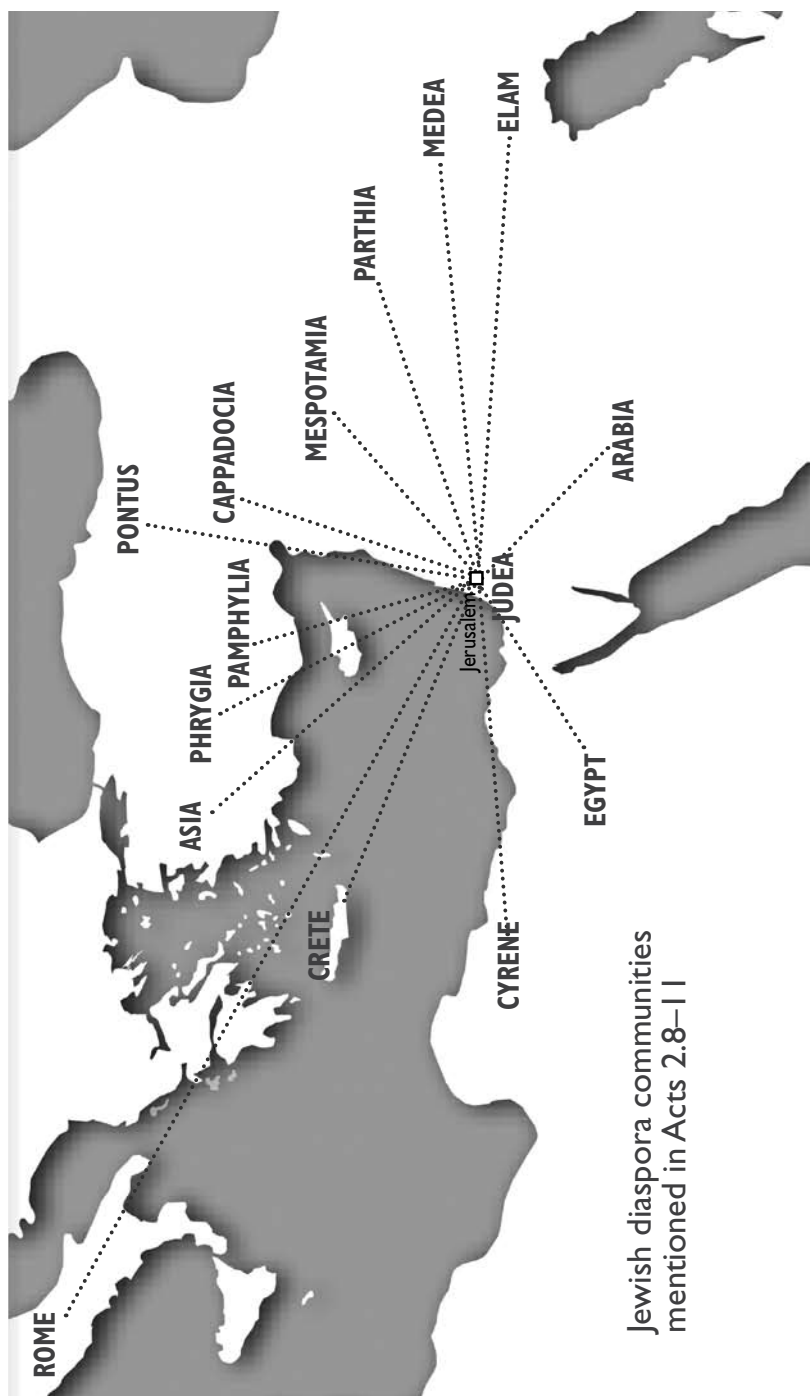
So this may not be the main traditional festival of Pentecost, but fifty days later, when the New Wine was celebrated. If that's the case, then we have been celebrating Pentecost at the wrong time for centuries.¹⁴ Perhaps the best we can say is that the event took place sometime between the last week in May and the second week in July, AD 33.

Where were they? Not, apparently, in the Upper Room. The word Luke uses for that in Acts 1.13 is *huperōon*, meaning ‘upstairs room’. It’s a private place: the same word is used for the room where Dorcas’s body is laid and where the small group of Christians in Troas meet (Acts 9.37, 39; 20.8). But the word used here is *oikos*, which means ‘house’ or ‘household’. Now it’s conceivable that it’s the same building, but there does seem to be a change of scene here. And it’s a much more public event than the election of Matthias. The word *oikon* can be used to refer to the temple.¹⁵ It seems to me much more likely that they were either in the temple, or in a building near to it.

The thing about this event is that it draws a large crowd. There is a violent, rushing wind and the participants see something like tongues of fire resting on each of them. And then, without any noticeable scene change, the disciples are surrounded by a huge crowd of people. The temple was really the only public space in Jerusalem where ‘thousands’ could gather like this – and Peter’s statement that it was nine o’clock in the morning (Acts 2.15) implies that the disciples and the people may have gone there for morning sacrifice. As the fire of the Spirit descends on them, the apostles find themselves talking in different languages – languages heard with amazement by the international, cosmopolitan crowd:

And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power. (Acts 2.8–11)

The people speaking here are a mix of resident, immigrant Jews and pilgrims.¹⁶ By this time Jews could be found throughout the Græco-Roman world. Within the borders of the Roman Empire, there were Jewish colonies in all major cities. Jews were particularly numerous in Alexandria and Rome, but they could be found throughout Greece and Asia Minor and North Africa as well. But they had also settled beyond the Empire, far to the east – in Parthia and Medea, in the cities of Susa and Babylon. It was known as the Jewish diaspora, or dispersion.



Jewish diaspora communities mentioned in Acts 2:8–11

The list which Luke gives us reflects places with significant Jewish diaspora populations. But there are two other categories in the list which we should note. The words are heard both by natural-born Jews and by proselytes. Proselytes were Gentile by birth, but had converted to Judaism. There were also *Romaioi* – ‘visitors from Rome’. Elsewhere in Acts when Luke uses this word, he means not ‘visitors’, but Roman citizens (Acts 16.21, 37–38; 22.25–26). So these may have been proselyte Jews who were also citizens of the Empire: people with status.

Many diaspora Jews never lost their links to the ‘homeland’. They would send money back in temple tax, to pay for the temple in Jerusalem. They would try to visit for one of the festivals. And a great many would return to Jerusalem, to settle there, to live out their final days and be buried in the holy city.¹⁷ These people didn’t speak Aramaic (the local language) or Hebrew (the language of the Scriptures). They spoke the common language of the Empire, Greek; and they brought with them their own local language or dialect.

That is what is so remarkable to those present on that morning in Jerusalem. They hear words not in Aramaic or Hebrew, not even in common Greek, but in their own multitudinous native tongues. And the people speaking are ‘Galileans’ who, to the sophisticated Jerusalemites, are mere uncultured northerners.

Hearing is not the same as understanding, however. Some mock and jeer the apostles and call them drunk; others want to find out more. So Peter attempts to defend and interpret what they have all just experienced. Luke gives us a summary of Peter’s speech: he admits that Peter used ‘many other arguments’ (Acts 2.40). He begins by quoting from the prophet Joel (Joel 2.28–32). It’s a quote which establishes the experience of these Galileans as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. It also identifies this event as a sign of the promised age to come: the outpouring of the Spirit is the sign of the kingdom of heaven on earth. And it universalises the experience. This gift is not just for the select few. It’s not reserved for the pure Jews, the temple elite or the learned rabbis: it’s for young and old, men, women and children.

The rest of the message focuses on one main topic: the resurrection of Jesus. Peter describes him as a wonder-worker, a man

of miracles, who was killed by the Romans – ‘by the hands of those outside the law’ as Peter terms them (Acts 2.23). But this was all part of the divine plan and Jesus was ‘freed from death’ (Acts 2.24). It is this resurrection which proves Jesus to be the Messiah (Acts 2.31). The message is summed up in the concluding sentence: ‘Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified’ (Acts 2.36).

When people ask how they should respond to this message, Peter tells them to ‘repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’ The other part of his message which Luke records – almost as an afterthought – is the exhortation to ‘save yourselves from this corrupt generation’.

The power of the Spirit is evident in the confidence of the message. Peter talks of Jesus of Nazareth – no attempt to hide the very un-messianic origins of their claimed Messiah. No attempt to deny the manner of his death by crucifixion. And no attempt to placate the authorities. If Peter is, as I have suggested, in the temple courts for this speech, then this message is extremely pointed. Statements about corrupt generations are bad enough, but the ‘you’ in Peter’s speech would have been aimed not at Jews *en masse*, but at the people who were running the place where they were standing. He is talking about the temple elite who orchestrated the death of Jesus. He clearly states that Jesus was killed by those outside the law: Gentiles. *Romans*.

So from the start, this message has darker and more political undertones. This is a movement which is not going to kowtow to the establishment. This movement of the Spirit is for everyone, no matter what their class or status: men, women, children, *Romaioi*, whoever. And the Spirit is going to empower them, fill them, inspire them to lives which run entirely counter to the political, social and economic culture of the day.

No wonder, then, that when the establishment get to hear about it, they are immensely concerned.