

## AN ANALYSIS OF PETER'S SPEECH IN ACTS 2 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITY

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### Abstract

This paper examines Peter's Pentecost speech in Acts 2, focusing on its structure, rhetorical strategy, theological message, and implications for humanity within the Lukan narrative. It argues that the speech is not a later literary construction shaped merely by circumstance, but an authoritative expression of early Christian kerygma grounded in Scripture. Drawing on scholarly perspectives, the study highlights the coherence and unity of Acts 2:14–40, showing how Luke integrates judicial rhetoric, refuting the accusation of drunkenness and indicting the audience for Jesus' death, with deliberative rhetoric that calls for repentance and immediate response. Central to the analysis is Peter's use of Old Testament texts, particularly Joel 2 and Psalms 16 and 110, which are interpreted as fulfilled in the events of Pentecost, the resurrection, and the exaltation of Jesus. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is presented as a sign of the inauguration of the "last days" and as evidence of God's gracious initiative rather than divine wrath. The repeated emphasis on "all flesh" and "whoever calls on the name of the Lord" underscores the universal scope of salvation, breaking down ethnic and religious barriers between Jews and Gentiles and anticipating the later Gentile mission in Acts. The paper further demonstrates that Peter's proclamation of Jesus as the risen and exalted Lord and Messiah forms the theological centre of the speech and of Acts as a whole. By confronting the audience with responsibility for Jesus' death and offering forgiveness, the gift of the Spirit, and inclusion in God's redemptive plan, Peter's speech affirms the inclusive, eschatological character of the Christian message and its enduring implications for all humanity.

**Keywords:** Humanity, Pentecost, Eschatology, Soteriology, and Rhetoric.

### Introduction

Acts of the Apostles contains remarkable speeches that change the configuration of the entire universe. One of such speeches is Peter's speech at Pentecost. It is a unifying speech for both Jews and Gentiles. It sets the pace that destroys the dichotomy that existed between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Unlike the position of some form critics who suggest that speeches can be crafted to fit particular circumstances, which Thucydides acknowledged. Luke's speeches in Acts and by extension the NT are "distinct from some secular speeches in that they reflected early Christian kerygma and perhaps used a testimonia source."<sup>1</sup> Burleson

cited F.F. Bruce when he states that Luke's overall purpose with his citations of the OT prophecies in Joel and Psalms was to demonstrate that Christianity was the fulfillment of the OT and that Christians were no threat to Rome.<sup>2</sup>

Soards aptly captures the structure of Pentecost speech when he outlines Acts 2 as follows: Verses 1-13 locate the early Christian community in time and place and recount the Pentecost miracle; vv 14-40 contain the speech by Peter on Pentecost day (with some interaction with the crowd). Verse 41 rounds off the speech scene by providing a conclusion, and verses 42-47 summarize the situation of the "embryonic

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1. Doug Burleson, "Beyond Peter's Quote: The Resignification of the Book of Joel in Acts 2" (paper presented at F. Furman Kearley Conference, Faulkner University, Montgomery, AL, 2013), 3.

2. Burleson, "Beyond Peter's Quote," 4.

church” in the earliest days.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Mikeal Parsons suggests that Acts 2 speech consists of two species of rhetoric. First, is the judicial which has to do with a refutation of the charge of drunkenness against the apostles (Acts 2:14–21) as well as an indictment of the Jews for their participation in Jesus’ death (Acts 2:22–36) and the second, being the deliberative which deals with the end of the speech (Acts 2:37–40) that subsequently persuaded and demanded a decision that requires immediate action to be taken by his hearers.<sup>4</sup> For Owen, the speech of Peter in Acts 2:14–36 is a very carefully constructed periscope, and of little doubt the reason for the citation of Joel is to connect the events of Pentecost, the apostles’ receiving the power to give witness to Jesus (Acts 1:8), with the glorification of Jesus as Lord and Christ.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Richard F. Zehnle states that Acts 2 can be seen as the finest mission discourse composed by Luke and a rhetorical masterpiece, giving the theological explanation of Lukan themes which is evident throughout the book.<sup>6</sup> To Parsons, “Luke said that Peter said that Joel said that God said” – this reinforces the utterly reliable and authoritative character of the speech.<sup>7</sup> Hence, this speech is an inspired and authoritative word of God.

Soards maintains that the entire speech is unified and coherent, despite its complexity, by how the closing line briefly echoes the language and thought of the material from Joel in the first part of the address.<sup>8</sup> He further admits that Peter’s speech at Pentecost is longer and more complex,<sup>9</sup> but its coherent nature stands out. He notes three pairs of complementary elements as cited in Schneider which give the speech a real coherence:

firstly, to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (v.38) refers to the need “to call upon the name of the Lord” (v.21). Secondly, the promise of receiving the Holy Spirit (v.38) is supported by the promise of verses 17–18. Lastly, the imperative formula in verse 40b expresses the conclusion of the Joel quotation (v.21).<sup>10</sup>

On that day of Pentecost, Peter takes his position by standing to address the crowd that gathered. First, he addresses the situation of misunderstanding. Peter refutes the claim that the apostles are drunk based on time and perhaps also custom. People especially Jews don’t drink at this hour of the day except in the worst cases of debauchery.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, Peter quotes Joel freely from the Septuagint (LXX) tailored to fit the act of Christian proclamation at Pentecost.<sup>12</sup> Soards maintains that the ambiguous declaration οἱ πάντες ἑκαστος τῶν κλησσάντων τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσονται (‘‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’’) quoted in Joel emphasizes the universal character of the gospel and thus anticipates the incorporation of the Gentile race into the Christian community in the dramatic episodes of the remaining sections of Acts especially in the speeches of Acts 10–11 and 15.<sup>13</sup>

Burleson opines that Peter’s emphasis on the power of the Spirit during this speech also aids in understanding the reference to the prophecies, dreams, and visions that would result from this pouring out of the Spirit (Joel 2:28; Acts 1:8). Just as the rains were poured out on the land in Joel, so also the pouring out of the Spirit in the days of Joel and Peter was a product of the graciousness

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3. Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 31.

4. Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 41.

5. Owen J. Lafferty, “Acts 2 14–36: A Study in Christology” *DunRev* 6 (1966), 239.

6. Richard F. Zehnle, review of *Peter’s Pentecost Discourse: Tradition and Lukan Reinterpretation in Peter’s Speeches of Acts 2 and 3* by Everett Ferguson, *RQ* 15 (1972), 117.

7. Parsons, *Acts*, 42.

8. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts*, 31.

9. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts*, 31.

10. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts*, 31.

11. Parsons, *Acts*, 42.

12. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts*, 32.

13. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts*, 33.

of God.<sup>14</sup> He maintains that the cosmic and ecstatic events witnessed at Pentecost served as validation for the pouring out of the Spirit and also an assurance that rather than God's wrath being poured out upon all flesh, the recipients of the Spirit had been greatly blessed.<sup>15</sup> He also notes that the reference to "all flesh" balanced by the same reference to "your sons and daughters" found in Acts 2:17 leaves open the question as to whether the pouring out of the Spirit would be available to those outside of Israel.<sup>16</sup> Of course, this prophecy was fulfilled with the events that mark the conversion of Gentiles in Acts 10. Barton and Muddiman state that the promise is inclusive of age, gender, and social class (vv. 17-18). The Spirit is poured out on "all flesh" (v. 17), and salvation is offered to "whoever calls on the name of the Lord" (v.21).<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Soards thinks that several specific items in this part of the speech deserve one's attention. First is the reference made to Jesus as "a man" (ajnhvr) and second is the fact that the speech states explicitly that Jesus was attested to those hearing Peter by the mighty works, wonders, and signs that God did through Him. Again, Peter stresses Jesus' resurrection, the point to which Peter's previous address said that the apostles were to be witnesses (Acts 1:22).<sup>18</sup> Peter's speech is interrupted by the audience which is cut to the heart and asks Peter and the rest of the apostles, "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37). Parsons states that the question is an exact verbal parallel to the question the crowds put to John the Baptist (Luke 3:10) and the interruption by the audience is a common device in the speeches in Acts 7:54; 22:22; and elsewhere in ancient literature.<sup>19</sup> This occasion provides Peter with the opportunity to offer a soteriological

conclusion to his sermon: "Repent, and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38a). His invitation echoes the preaching of John the Baptist, who preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). He also promises that they too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38b). This promise could likely be referring to the diaspora Jews living in areas beyond Jerusalem and Judea, or, more likely, an ethnic designation referring to Gentiles who will soon be included in God's scheme of salvation.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Contribution of the Speech to the Immediate Context and Acts as a Whole**

Assessing the contribution of Peter's speech at Pentecost and especially the quotation from Prophet Joel, Burleson states that not only do these quotations, allusions, and echoes of Joel occur throughout the text of Acts 2, but also the overall structure of Acts 2 is remarkably similar to the structure of Joel. The quotation of Joel in Acts 2:17 and 39 serves as an inclusio which is reflected in the entire book of Acts.<sup>21</sup> The gospel was proclaimed to both Jews and Gentiles as could be gleaned from Paul's missionary campaigns as well as his trip to Rome. The speech in Acts 2 impacted more to the understanding of God's redemptive plan highlighted in this text, the entire book of Acts as well as in the rest of the New Testament. All the speeches in Acts focus on or to some extent largely connected to the life of Jesus, his suffering, death, and resurrection, and his return in glory for the final judgment.<sup>22</sup>

Horner quoted Knowling when he argues that the variant oiJ uiJoi ajtw`n kaiV aiJ qugatevre~ ajtw`n, "their sons and their daughters" found in the Western text or codex

14. Burleson, "Beyond Peter's Quote," 9.

15. Burleson, "Beyond Peter's Quote," 10.

16. Burleson, "Beyond Peter's Quote," 10.

17. John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1032.

18. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts*, 33.

19. Parsons, *Acts*, 47.

20. Parsons, *Acts*, 47.

21. Burleson, "Beyond Peter's Quote," 11.

22. Thor Strandenes, "The Missionary Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles and their Missiological Implications" *SMT* 99 (2011), 347.

Bezae (D) (the fifth century CE manuscript) instead of oij uiJoiV uJmw`n kaiV aiJ qugatevre~ uJmw`n, “your sons and your daughters,” is primarily meant to exclude all nationalism from the prophecy and to stress that the promise is to the whole world. “The universalism of the gospel is an inseparable aspect of the eschatological emphasis in the entire New Testament. This universalism, therefore, embraces the whole of mankind and is geographically without bonds.... The whole world is taken up into the eschatos concept.”<sup>23</sup>

In the second part of Peter’s speech, David takes the center stage. Peter thereby quoted Ps 15 and 110 to argue that David prophesied the resurrection of Christ. David foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of Christ and without doubt, God raised this Jesus (Acts 2:32a). These verses also point in the other direction with the link of exaltation language of sitting at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33, 34).<sup>24</sup> The resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes the pivotal point of the apostles’ preaching in Acts and the New Testament. Corroborating this, Aaron White states that the quotations in Psalm serve to support Peter’s overall proposition that Jesus is not dead, despite the ignorant actions of the Jews (Ps 16) and that He is the Spirit-effusing Lord who is the Lord of the last days (Ps 110).<sup>25</sup> Pentecost speech is a clarity about the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth, and that Jesus is Lord and Messiah of Israel. “Peter’s goal is to identify Jesus as Lord of Israel, but, as is clear from the presentation of his speech that identification must follow upon other elements presumably so because they are important to this ultimate identification and are part of the argument that Jesus is Lord.”<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

Peter’s concluding remarks confront his hearers with a decision that will either make or mar their

eternity. They were to know for certain (aJsfalw`~ ouJ`n ginwskevtw) that they were guilty of killing Jesus, the one whom God had made both Lord and Christ.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore worthy of note that Peter’s speech at Pentecost is an affirmation that “the new age” which is “the last days” is a reality in the life of the church. It is a period of all-inclusiveness where God is beginning to fulfill His plan of redemption that is meant for all mankind irrespective of gender, age, race, and/or nationality. The indwelling Spirit is poured upon “all flesh” as long as they enter into a covenant relationship with Christ.

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23. Jerry Horner, “The Credibility and the Eschatology of Peter’s Speech at Pentecost” *Pneuma* 2 (1980), 29.

24. Parsons, *Acts*, 46-47.

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7-19.