

Acts

Lesson #1

Prologue

“Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Acts 1: 1-26).

Preview

The *Gospel according to Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles* comprise two parts of a single, unified literary work. At the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus' spends forty days with his disciples, teaching them what they need to know to take the gospel message to the world on his behalf, and he commissions them as "Apostles" for that specific job.

At the beginning of Acts, Jesus gives his Apostles their final instructions, telling them to wait in Jerusalem "*for the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak*" (Acts 1: 4). He then ascends into heaven from the Mount of Olives.

The wait lasts ten days.



In our study of Luke's Gospel we learned that his prologue (1: 1-4) is a single, carefully-structured and balanced sentence consisting of 42 words in Greek, arranged in a 2-part symmetrical fashion.

1. *Protasis (vv. 1. 2)*

In as much as many

have undertaken

- a. *to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us,*
- b. *just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word,*

2. *Apodosis (vv. 3,4)*

it seemed good to me also,

having carefully investigated everything from the beginning,

- a. *to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,*
- b. *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

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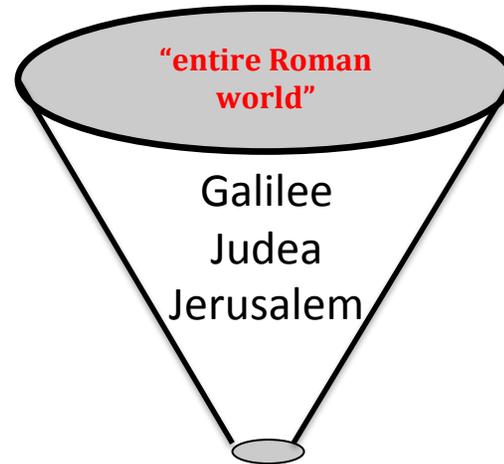


In like manner, Luke's overall 2-part narrative—the *Gospel according to Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*—is also carefully structured in a 2-part symmetrical fashion.

Schematically, it looks like this:

Luke

Narrative movement

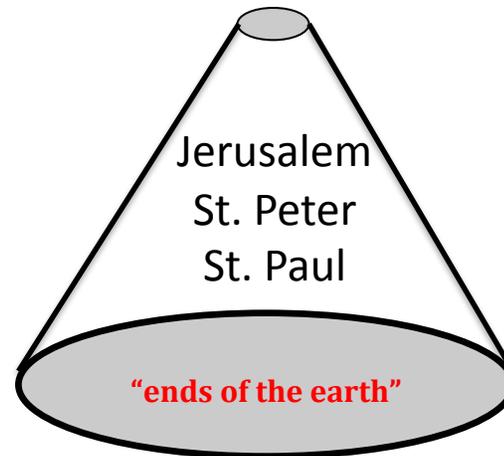


Acts

Narrative movement



TRANSITIONAL BRIDGE (Acts 1: 1-26)





Our author moves effortlessly from his single-sentence prologue in the Gospel to his opening sentence in Acts, deftly knitting the two together:

“In as much as many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us . . . it seemed good to me also, having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught . . .

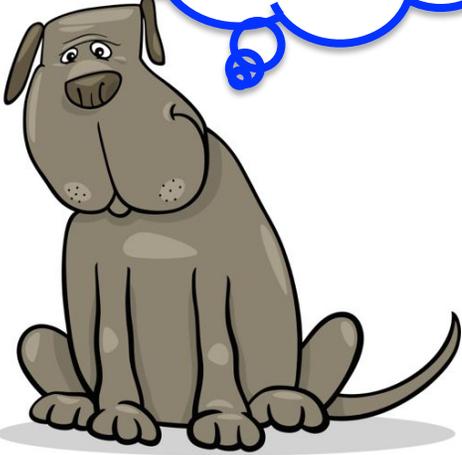
“[Since] in my first book, Theolophus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up . . . [here I present the rest of the story].

(Luke 1: 1-4; Acts 1: 1-2, my translation)

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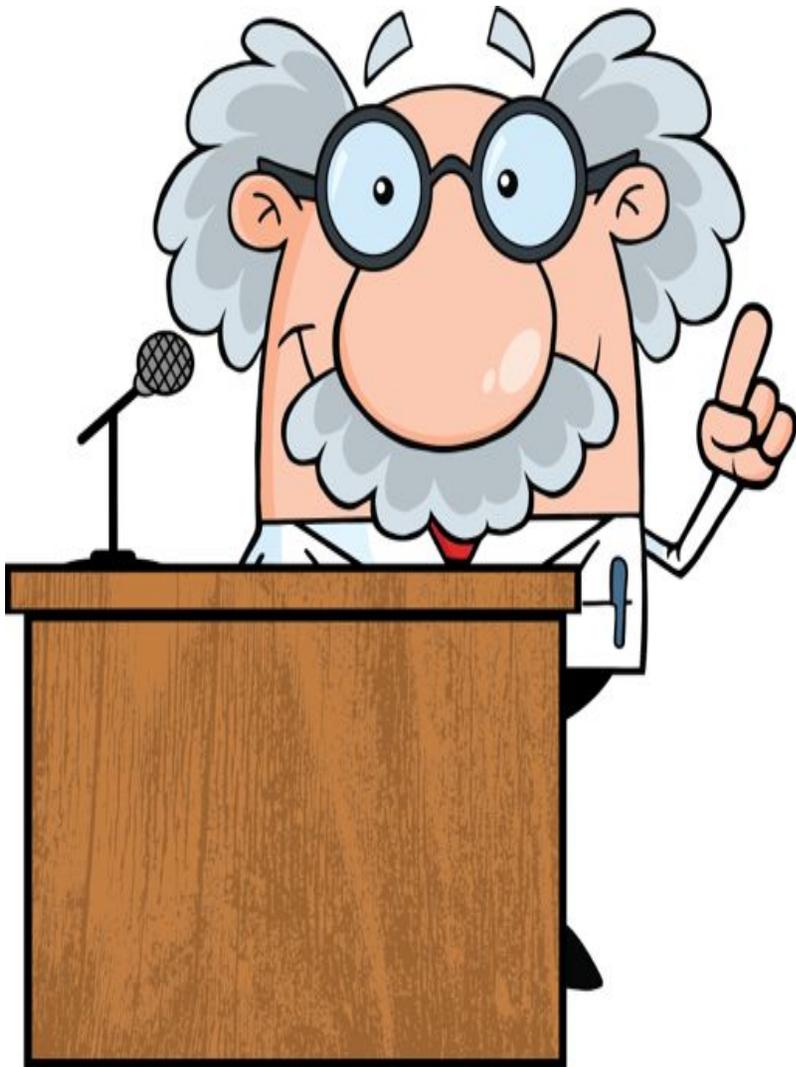
A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical black line on the left side of the page. He has a thoughtful expression, with his hand to his chin.

So, Luke planned a 2-part work from the very beginning, with part 2 a mirror image of part 1, the two halves linked together by a transitional bridge. Nicely done, Luke!

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting down. It has a thoughtful expression, with its hand to its chin.

That's very clever!

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The *Acts of the Apostles* addresses four major topics that span A.D. 32-60:

- 1. The 40-day interval between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension;**
- 2. The arrival of the Holy Spirit 10 days later, and the "birth of the Church" on the Jewish feast of Pentecost;**
- 3. The growth of the early Church, primarily among the Jews of Jerusalem, under the guidance of St. Peter; and**
- 4. The spread of the Church to the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire, primarily under the guidance of St. Paul.**

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The 40-day interval between Jesus' resurrection and his Ascension (Acts 1: 1-26)

“In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for ‘the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the holy Spirit.’”

(1: 1-5)



During the 40-day interval between Jesus' resurrection and his Ascension, Jesus taught his disciples what they needed to know, equipping them for the task at hand, the task of taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

1. We read in Luke 24: 44 that during those 40 days Jesus taught his disciples "everything written about [him] in the law of Moses, and in the prophets and in the psalms"; that is, the entire Hebrew Scriptures.
2. And we noted in John 20: 19-22 that before he began teaching them, Jesus breathed on them, opening "their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24: 45).
 - One example might be Genesis 22;
 - another, Psalm 22.



**Rembrandt. *The Angel Prevents the Sacrifice of Isaac* (oil on canvas), 1635.
Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia.**



**Salvador Dalí. *Christ of St. John of the Cross* (oil on canvas), 1951.
Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.**



**Duccio. *Christ Taking Leave of His Apostles* (tempera on wood), c. 1308-1311.
Museo dell'Opera Metropolitana del Duomo, Siena.**



Acts 1: 3 tells us that “he presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days”

1. He appeared first to Peter (1 Corinthians 15: 5).



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2. He appeared to the women at the tomb (Luke 24: 1-12).



**Peter Paul Rubens. *The Holy Women at the Sepulcher* (oil on panel), c. 1611-1614.
The Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.**

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1. He appeared first to Peter (1 Corinthians 15: 5).
2. He appeared to the women at the tomb (Luke 24: 1-12).
3. He appeared to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35).



Rembrandt. *The Supper at Emmaus* (oil on panel), c. 1648.
Louvre Museum, Paris.

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1. He appeared first to Peter (1 Corinthians 15: 5).
2. He appeared to the women at the tomb (Luke 24: 1-12).
3. He appeared to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35).
4. He appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24: 36-42).



**Caravaggio. *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (oil on canvas), 1603.
Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam, Germany.**

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1. He appeared first to Peter (1 Corinthians 15: 5).
2. He appeared to the women at the tomb (Luke 24: 1-12).
3. He appeared to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35).
4. He appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24: 36-42).
5. He appeared “to more than 500 brothers at once” (1 Corinthians 15: 6).



**Domenico Ghirlandajo. *Calling of the Apostles* (fresco), 1481.
Sistine Chapel, Vatican.**

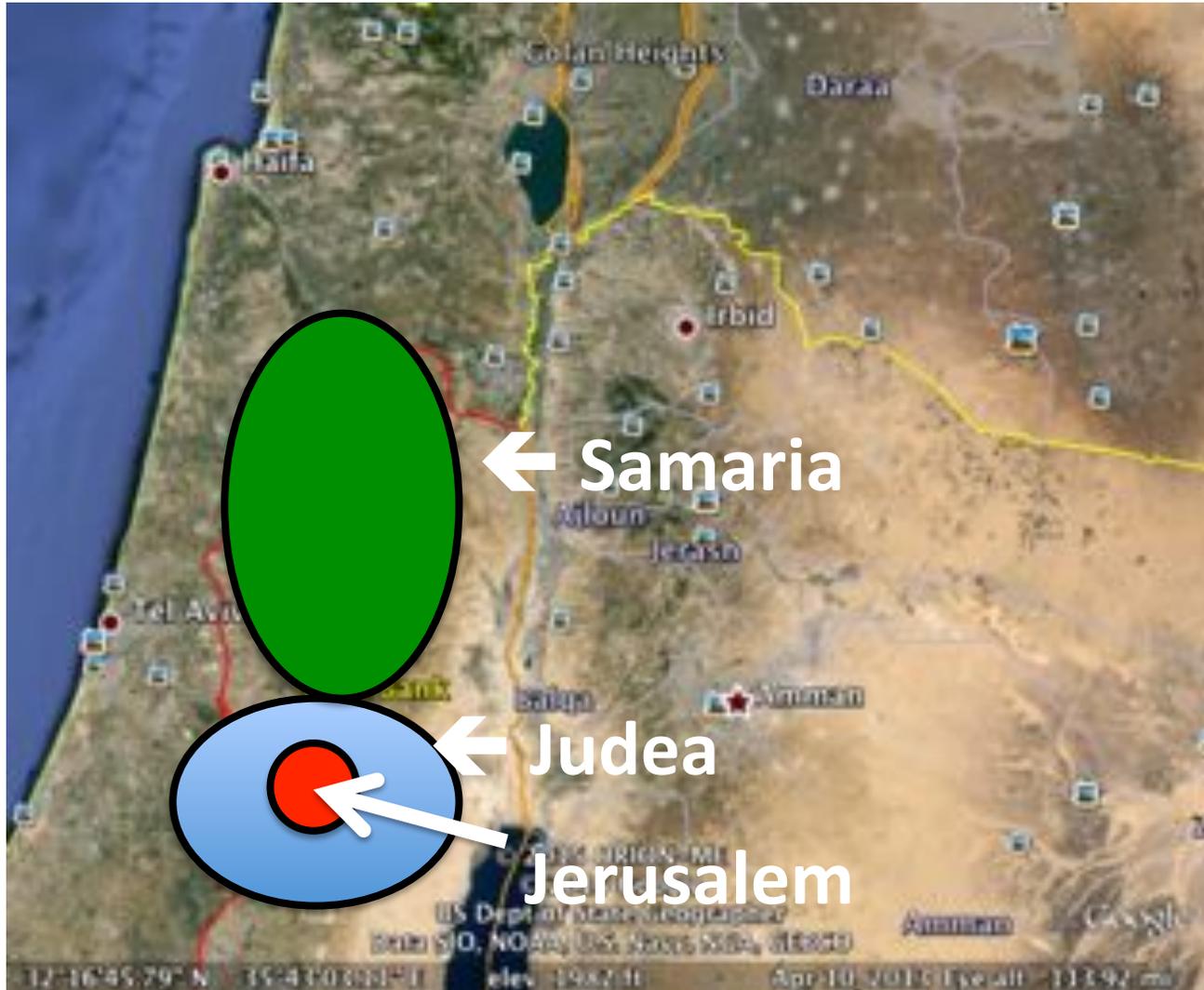
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“When they had gathered together they asked him. ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He answered them, ‘It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

(1: 6-8)



1. Jesus' disciples clearly believed that he was the Messiah, a leader like David who would restore the kingdom to Israel during his earthly ministry. Since this did not happen during his lifetime, they ask if the time now.
 - Jesus' response implies that it will, indeed, happen, but it will happen at some point in the future, according to God's timetable.
2. In the meantime, the Apostles will receive the Holy Spirit, and their task will be to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth (e.g., for them, the entire Roman Empire), starting in Jerusalem and moving outward—which is exactly what happens in Acts.





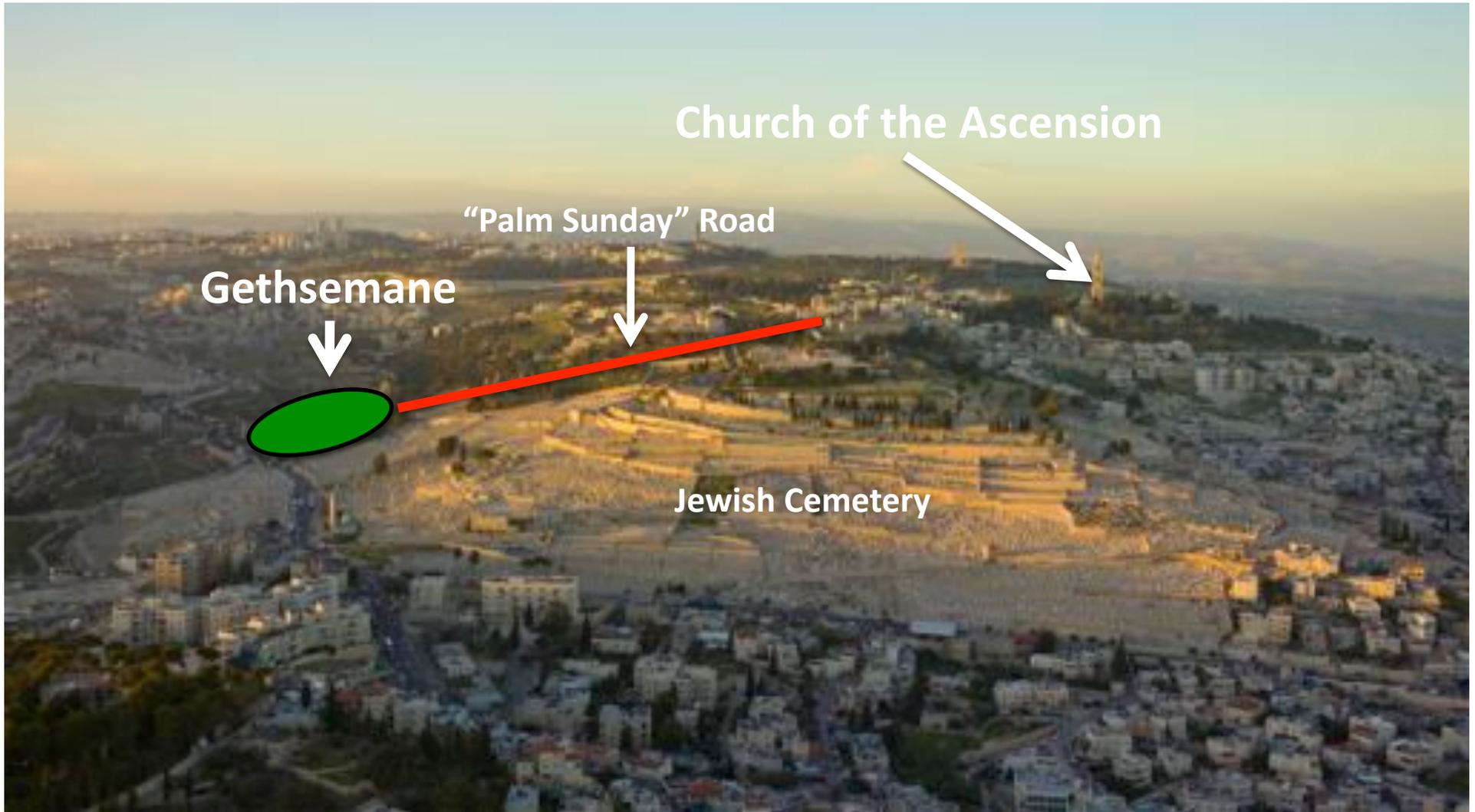
The ends of the earth

Israel → 

“When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.’ Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away.”

(1: 9-12)

Mount of Olives





Rembrandt. *Ascension* (oil on canvas), 1636.
Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

“When they entered the city they went to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.”

(1: 13-14)

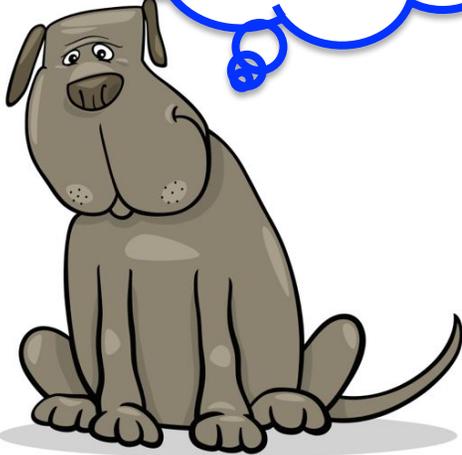


Luke's list includes four categories of people in the upper room:

1. The eleven remaining Apostles;
2. Some women (one would presume those Luke mentions as being at the empty tomb: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James—and perhaps some others);
3. Mary, the mother of Jesus; and
4. Jesus' brothers.



“Jesus brothers” must be the ones mentioned in Matthew 13: 55—*“Is he not the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother named Mary and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas?”*”



I didn’t know Jesus had brothers!

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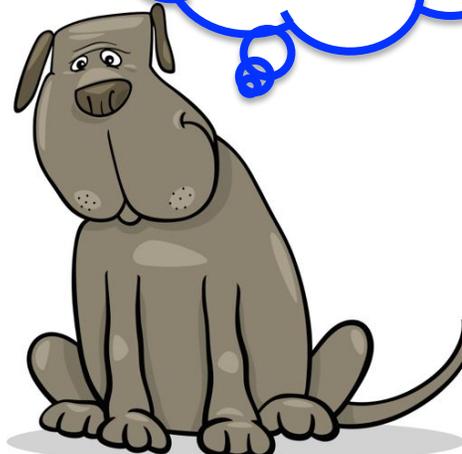
There are only three possibilities regarding “the brothers of the Lord”:

1. They are Jesus’ cousins in the larger extended family, as St. Jerome proposed (Roman Catholic position);
2. They are Jesus’ step-brothers, presuming Joseph was a widower, and they are his sons by his deceased wife (Orthodox position);
3. They are Jesus’ blood brothers, other children of Mary and Joseph (Protestant position).



The *Gospel according to John* tells us that during Jesus' public ministry in Galilee "*his [own] brothers did not believe in him*" (7: 5).

Well, now they do!



I'll bet!

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“During those days Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (there was a group of about one hundred and twenty persons in the one place). He said, ‘My brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled which the holy Spirit spoke beforehand through the mouth of David, concerning Judas, who was allotted a share in this ministry. He bought a parcel of land with the wages of his iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out. This became known to everyone who lived in Jerusalem, so that the parcel of land was called in their language, ‘Akeldama,’ that is, Field of Blood. For it is written in the Book of Psalms: ‘Let his encampment become desolate, and may no one dwell in it.’ And: ‘May another take his office.’”

(1: 15-20)

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Peter and the other Apostles are about to make a very important decision: replacing Judas.

1. First, we must ask: "Should they be doing this?" Before Jesus' Ascension he told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit;
2. Matthew states explicitly that in deep despair Judas hanged himself (27: 3-5); yet, here we read that "falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out" (1: 18);
3. Lesson #17 in our study of Luke's Gospel we examined Judas in-depth, and we explored the possibilities of how he died.



Death of Judas Iscariot (fresco), 1510.

Église Saint-Sébastien de Plampinet, Névache, Provence et Côte D'Azur, France.

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In any case, Peter and the Apostles
decide to replace Judas,
reconstituting the full set of twelve
Apostles, paralleling the twelve tribes
of Israel, the full number of
Jacob's sons.



How did they go
about that?

“Therefore it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection.’ So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed, ‘You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place of this apostolic ministry from which Judas turned away to go to his own place.’ Then they gave lots to them, and the lot fell upon Matthias, and he was counted with the eleven apostles.”

(1: 21-26)



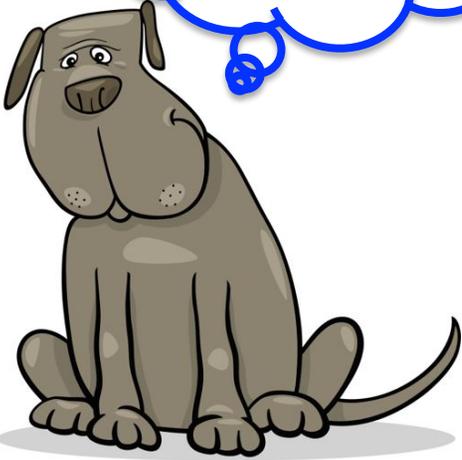
Notice the criterion for being nominated as an Apostle: the person had to have been an eyewitness to Jesus entire public ministry, from his baptism by John through his death, burial, resurrection and Ascension. Peter stresses the importance of being an eyewitness in 2 Peter 1:16.



“We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him from the majestic glory, ‘This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain.”

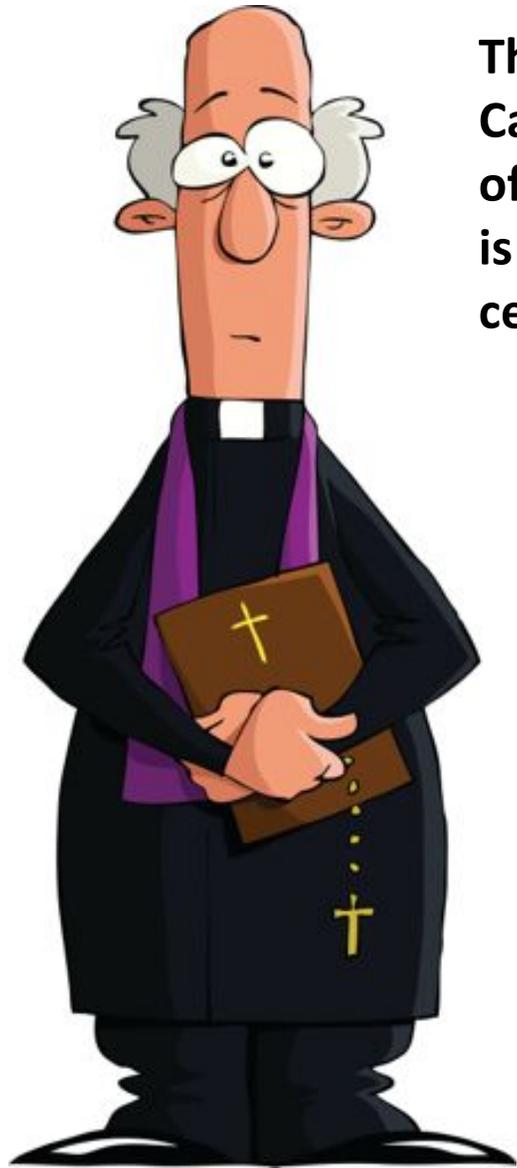


So, they choose Matthias. But perhaps they jumped the gun! When Paul encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus, Jesus says to Ananias, *“this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles, kings, and Israelites”* (9: 15).

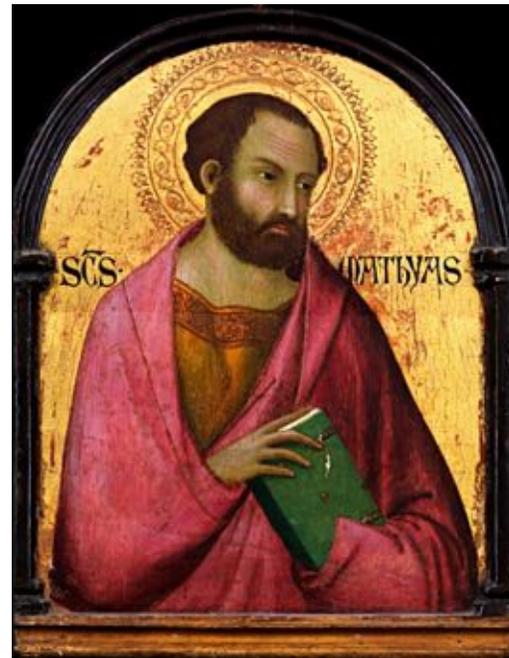


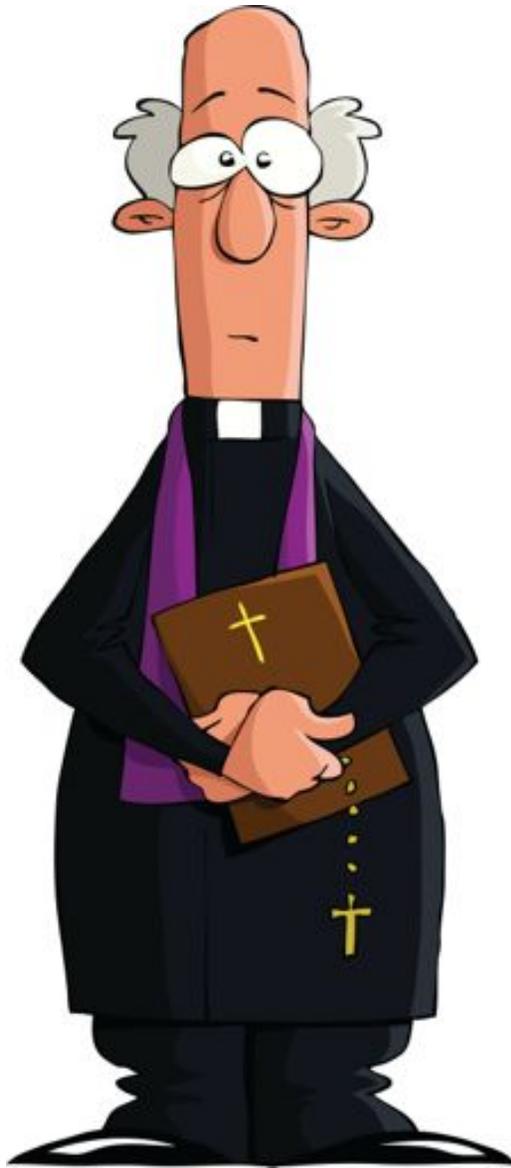
So, is it Matthias or Paul?

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The feast of St. Matthias was included in the Roman Calendar in the 11th century, and after the revision of the General Roman Calendar in 1969, his feast day is celebrated on May 14th; the Orthodox calendar celebrates his feast on August 9th.





And yet . . .



Narthex of Varlaam's monastery in Meteora, Greece.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. What did Jesus do with his Twelve during the 40 days between his resurrection and his ascension?
2. What is the difference between a “disciple” and an “Apostle”?
3. How did Judas die?
4. After Jesus’ Ascension, his Apostles and his disciples met together. What were they doing?
5. Did St. Peter and the other Apostles do the right thing in selecting a replacement for Judas?

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