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Divine Sovereignty in Acts: Divine Guidance in Acts: Dream–Visions as Pointers to the Gentiles

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Introduction

The history of the early church as presented in Acts can be understood as being in complete accord with the God's plan God. God is believed to have intervened in human history in many ways and divine communication is pervasive throughout Acts. How does the narrator show that God's plan is being worked out in the

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narrative? How apparent is God's sovereignty in the book of Acts? Divine programming of the events appears overly forceful in the book's dream–visions. In this contribution I examine their revelatory potential as divine interference in human affairs and the function these dream–visions serve.

A. Defining Dream–Visions

In antiquity dream–visions were often considered a reliable form of divine communication. The use of the hyphenated expression “dream–visions” instead of the separate application of the two components, “dream” and “vision”, may at first appear somewhat awkward since it suggests a fusion of two visionary phenomena: the one while asleep (dream) and the other while awake (vision). However Greco–Roman literature including New Testament writings uses these terms interchangeably. In most cases it is impossible to distinguish between a “dream” and a “vision”. For example, in Acts 10:3 the centurion Cornelius sees a vision ($\overset{\circ}{\rho}\alpha\mu\alpha$) at “about the ninth hour of the day.” The next day at “about the sixth hour” Peter fell into a trance ($\varepsilon\kappa\sigma\tau\alpha\sigma\iota\varsigma$) in 10:10 which is termed a “vision” ($\overset{\circ}{\rho}\alpha\mu\alpha$) in 10:17.19. Both events occurred in broad daylight. In Acts 16:9, however, it appears that this same word “vision” may refer to a dream as well: “And a vision ($\overset{\circ}{\rho}\alpha\mu\alpha$) appeared to Paul in the night.” It is suggested that Paul was asleep and saw an apparition. The Codex Bezae lends support to this impression in 16:10. While most authoritative handwritings read here: “And when Paul had seen the vision”, the Codex Bezae has: “when he had waked up, he told the vision ($\overset{\circ}{\rho}\alpha\mu\alpha$) to us”. In 18:9 a nocturnal appearance is called a “vision” as well. All this evidences points to the fact that we cannot apply our modern distinction between “vision” and “dream” to Acts. At that time the semantic boundary between the words was still fluid and imprecise.

A similar difference in historical and cultural perspective also prevents us from characterizing certain events in Acts as dream–visions when these are perceived by the senses and not with an “inner” ear or eye. Once again this can be illustrated with examples from the book of Acts. During the persecution by Herod (12:1) Peter was put in prison (v5). His miraculous deliverance by an angel of the Lord is then described (v8–10): “And he (= Peter) went out and followed him” (the angel). “He did not know that what was being

done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision ($\delta\sigma\alpha\mu\alpha$).” One might translate the latter clause also as: “he thought he was dreaming.” According to the narrator of Acts this event does not belong to the category of visions because it was real and embedded in the real world. A dream–vision is assumed to be an extrasensory perception which does not match a measurable, objective reality. For the same reason the other liberation story in Acts about an angel rescuing the apostles from prison in 5:19–21 should not be considered a vision either. After all, the apostles are in actual fact freed and have returned to the Temple by the next morning. Had this been a dream–vision it would have belonged to a different invisible world.

In Acts 9:1–9 Saul (later called Paul) is travelling to Damascus on the orders of the high priest to arrest Christians there and have them brought to Jerusalem. In 9:3–6 Jesus reveals himself to Saul in a blaze of heavenly light. This incident is retold subsequently in Paul’s own words in Acts 22:6–11 and 26:12–18. The first two reports of Paul’s call (sometimes named “conversion” as well) do not illustrate the normal form of a dream–vision since the writer of Acts located these reports in the real, tangible and physical world. In 9:3 and 22:6 a light from heaven shines around Paul and its radiance partially blinded him, a condition which is not healed until the next scene by Ananias. Ananias lays hands on Saul so he might regain his sight (9:12.17; 22:13). Clearly this event does not merely take place on the level of dreams. Yet when Luke has Paul recount his call in Acts to Agrippa and Festus in 26:12–18, the retelling is almost unrecognizable compared to the prior stories in Acts 9 and 22. Paul is no longer crushed down by the light—now brighter than the rays of the sun (26:13)—but is empowered to become God’s witness. He is neither physically dazzled nor temporarily deprived of sight. This Christophany and the focus on the dialogue between Paul and Jesus matches the progressive fading of Ananias’ role who is completely absent in Acts 26. Initially also Ananias himself is seeing an apparition in Acts 9:10–19 and this epiphany interrupting Paul’s story has all the marks of a dream–vision.

In short, dreams or visions in Acts are spiritual perceptions which take place either awake or asleep. The passages in Acts dealing with a dream–vision might therefore be limited to the following:

9:10–19	Recording the dream-vision to Ananias
10:1–11:18	Cornelius and Peter
16:6–10	Appeal to Paul to come to Macedonia
18:1–17	Paul's stay in Corinth
22:17–21	Paul in the Temple
22:30–23:11	Paul before the Sanhedrin
26:12–18	Third narration of Paul's call (conversion)
27:21–26	Paul's encouraging speech on the ship

B. The texts

I shall focus first on the dreams and visions experienced by Peter and Paul, the two most important preachers in Acts. We will hark back to Ananias' vision in 9:10–19 later.

1. Acts 10:1–11:18

The passage makes up the longest account of any single subject in the whole of Acts and represents a basic turning point in its history of early Christianity. It begins with a description of an officer in the Roman army, Cornelius, who, though a Gentile, was a deeply religious man. In composing the narrative of the encounter between Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18), Luke highlights the pivotal role of the dream-visions in Acts. The episode begins with a dream-vision to God-fearing Cornelius. He is instructed by an angel of God to send to Joppa and bring Peter back to Caesarea (v1–8).

The story continues with a second scene (v9–16) describing Peter's complementary vision. We are told that Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray. He experienced a dream-vision as well; this time however the vision does not make sense and requires interpretation. Apparently he is instructed about food. Peter beheld an object "resembling a big sheet" coming down from heaven carrying representatives of the entire animal world classed according to the usual categories in the Hebrew Bible. He is ordered to make a meal of the animals he sees in his vision without taking notice of whether they are pure or impure. The Torah lists the animals a Jew is not supposed to eat (Lev 11:1–47; Deut 14:3–20). The ostensible aim of the vision was to show that the distinction between impure and pure foods was of no significance. Yet the celestial voice declaring, "What God has made clean, you are not to call profane" (10:15) did not convince Peter. He refused and stood by his opinion. Before being dismissed, the angel's message was repeated twice.

Initially Peter perceived this vision literally, but its metaphorical significance dawns on him in the next scene of the narrative (v17–23). At the beginning of this passage the Peter and Cornelius episode are connected. Peter's initial opposition turned to confusion as he wondered what his vision might mean. While he was pondering its implications, Cornelius' messengers appeared at the door. The spirit made known to Peter that he must go along with these men. Peter learns about Cornelius' vision as the messengers declared that a holy angel revealed to Cornelius that he would listen “to what you (= Peter) have to say.” Peter “invites them in to be his guests” (10:23a) and this hospitality toward the messengers may already be considered an indication of his new attitude toward Gentiles.

The next day Peter arrived at Caesarea, some 50 km (30 miles) north of Joppa, and entered Cornelius' house. This is remarkable since Gentile homes were considered unclean to Jews and they entered Gentile dwellings only reluctantly (see, for example, John 18:28). In order to account for his decision, he gives a surprising explanation of the divine instructions contained in his dream-vision:

You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. (10:28)

Peter now perceives the symbolism. His vision of Heaven's instruction to slaughter and eat unclean animals God has shown him not to regard people as unclean. There is no longer a difference between Jew and non-Jew (v23b–29).

Cornelius' speech (v30–33) about what he had seen and heard is a Lucan repetition of v1–8 and leads to Peter speaking to the people assembled in Cornelius' house (v34–43) who were eager to hear “all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (v33). The discourse addressed to a Palestinian Gentile and God-fearing man reflects Peter's interpretation of his vision. He expands the concept of God's universality to God's impartiality, sending the Word that was preached to Israel to others as well. “In every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him” (v35). The speech develops Peter's understanding of his dream-vision in which “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (v28). He offers information about Jesus' earthly career, his suffering, death and resurrection, and he concludes by saying that “everyone

who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v43).

When Peter reaches this climax the Spirit falls upon all listening to him (v44–48). Like the disciples at Pentecost in Acts 2 they speak in tongues (v46), an event which Peter explains as the sign of the Spirit authorizing their baptism. Cornelius’ people share in the gifts of the first Pentecost community. Peter legitimizes the baptism of the Gentiles at Cornelius’ house by saying: “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (v47)? When he returns to Jerusalem, however, he is confronted with Jewish Christians who condemn his consorting with non-Jews. Peter is required to justify his actions and he recapitulates all the events inaugurating his mission to the Gentiles (11:1–18). The account he gives closely follows the initial version of the story as told in chapter 10. It is a defensive speech summarizing all the events reported thus far. The repetition of his and Cornelius’ epiphanies in this account indicates their pivotal role. God’s will had been made known through dream–visions and thus God had authorized the Gentile mission (11:18).

Naturally we cannot examine every detail of the story. How Peter interprets his vision and the descriptions of both his and Cornelius’ dream–visions deserves attention however. We have called Peter’s explanation of his vision “surprising”. This is only partly true. If we return to the scene in which Peter meets Cornelius’ messengers (v17–23), we observe that Peter’s initial reaction of perplexity to his epiphany is connected twice to another incident: “Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold (*ἰδού*), the men who were sent by Cornelius, ...” (v17) and “And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘behold (*ἰδού*), three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.’” (v19–20). The imperative “behold” is found (at least in the Greek text) once again in v21 when Peter presents himself to the messengers: “Behold (*ἰδού*), I am the one you are looking for.”

Just as this “behold” identifies Peter in v21, so it also introduces the solution to the puzzle of Peter’s dream–vision in v17 and 19–20. The sudden presence of Cornelius’ (non–Jewish) messengers functions as an eye–opener. Instead of attempting to disqualify Jewish

purity laws, the episode in v9–16 is interpreted as having a metaphoric significance: Gentiles are no longer unclean. This symbolic meaning is especially evident in what the Spirit says: “accompany them without hesitation [“without distinction” might be preferable in this context] for I have sent them” (v20b). God manifests his guidance of events not only through dream–visions but via their correct interpretation as well. By adding the verse concluding this scene in v23a (“So he invited them to be his guests”), Luke implies that Peter had understood the deeper meaning of his dream–vision at that very moment. His invitation shows the first effect of the vision for it was not an easy gesture for a law–obedient Jew to treat Gentiles as guests in a Jewish house.

As mentioned above, the repetition of Peter’s and Cornelius’ epiphanies undergirds their pivotal role in the long narrative of Acts 10–11. Of particular interest is how the repetitions differ. Limiting ourselves to a single element of Cornelius’ dream–vision, one ascertains that in the retellings new information has been added. First, in 10:1–8 it is not clear why Cornelius is instructed to send for Peter from Joppa. In 10:22 it says however: “to hear what you have to say” and in 10:33 we find: “Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord”. While Peter’s dream–vision exerts crucial influence on his turn to the Gentiles, it is his counterpart’s dream–vision that opens Cornelius and his household (representing part of the Gentiles) to Peter’s message.

2. Acts 16:6–10

Having left the towns in southern Galatia, Paul traveled with Silas and Timothy north through Phrygia and Galatia as they were prevented by the Holy Spirit from speaking in Asia. They arrived in Mysia, but when they tried to go further north into Bithynia the Spirit of Jesus stopped them. The Spirit had an active role in the spread of the Gospel; he guided the direction of Paul’s missionary journey. As they were prevented from entering Bithynia, Paul and his company went to Troas (v6–8) where, in a nocturnal vision, a Macedonian called for the help of the apostles “urging him and saying: Come over to Macedonia and help us”. Although the vision occurred only to Paul, he and his companions concluded that this was a divine initiative. All three of them immediately went looking for a ship in order to sail to Macedonia (v9–10). Apparently the help sought by the

Macedonian consisted of evangelization. The two intrusions of the Spirit blocking Paul, Silas and Timothy's road are to be understood in light of v9–10. God's intervention involving the transition of the Gospel from Asia to Europe leads to an expansion of the missionary territory.

3. Acts 18:1–19

After his speech on the Areopagus in Acts 17, Paul left for Corinth. He began his proclamation among Jews and Gentiles, but since Corinthian Jews opposed his preaching he turned to the Gentiles. Paul had no reason to be depressed as the Lord appeared to him in a dream–vision encouraging him to continue his testimony despite any hostility: “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you for I have many in this city who are my people” (v9–10). This vision serves the important role of a divine directive supporting Paul's change of mission to the Gentiles in Corinth. It evidently inspired him as he remained in Corinth for some time thereafter proclaiming the Gospel to Gentiles.

4. Acts 22:17–21

These five verses are part of the defensive speech Paul addressed to the crowd assembled before the fortress Antonia in Jerusalem. Paul is accused of having desecrated the Temple by bringing Greeks (Gentiles) into its inner courts, a crime punishable by death. The tribune grants Paul permission to address the crowd. Interestingly, Paul makes no reference to the charge against him but describes his historical past, his Jewish background, education at the feet of Gamaliel and his persecution of Christians (v3–5). He retells the account of his call on his journey to Damascus, his encounter with Jesus (v6–11; cf. 9:3–9) and the subsequent reception by Ananias (v12–16; cf. 9:10–19). As compared to the first account in Acts 9:1–19, his own version of the commission story in this speech shows many differences and variations.

The most dramatic departure from the first narration of events occurs when he describes the ecstatic vision he had while praying in the Temple (v17–21). In chap. 9 Paul's commission is mediated by Ananias and also in the second report (22:6–16) it is still Ananias who phrases Paul's commission in terms of giving testimony to all people.

In 22:17–21, however, Paul fell into an ecstasy while praying in the Jerusalem Temple. He saw the Lord who told him that the people of Jerusalem would not listen to his testimony and he was therefore being sent to the Gentiles. Paul’s call to be a missionary to the Gentiles is no longer located in Damascus, but in the Jerusalem Temple. At this point the first and second stories have been entirely modified. Paul’s rescue by the Jerusalem believers in 9:29–30 was recast in 22:17–21 as a visionary experience in which God directed him to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles.

In 22:17–21 Paul objects to the divine commission and replies that he had once taken an active part in the prosecution of Jewish Christians at the time of Stephen’s death. He was therefore sure that the Jerusalem Jews would accept his testimony. The situation recalls Peter’s unwillingness to associate with what is impure. Yet the order is repeated here as well: “And he said to me: ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles’” (22:21). In 9:29 the impending assault on his life caused Paul to leave Jerusalem. Here Luke appears to shut out all historical vicissitudes: Paul’s assignment to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles is attributed to direct instruction by the Lord through a dream–vision in the Temple, the preeminent center of Jewish life.

5. Acts 22:30–23:11

It is obvious that Paul’s defensive speech evoked a violent reaction from the crowd. They could not believe their ears. In the very heart of Judaism’s religious cult, in their Temple, he would have us believe that God spoke of the obstinacy of the Jews to Paul—someone who was accused of trampling their Jewish beliefs and practices—and instructed him to bear witness to the Gentiles! The angry mob took the dream–vision as a serious provocation. The Roman tribune subsequently decided to intervene and ordered Paul to be arrested and lashed. Once Paul had declared to be a Roman citizen, however, he was brought before the Sanhedrin (22:22–30). Paul maintained his innocence before the assembled Jewish authorities and showed his fidelity to the law (23:1–5). By stating he was a Pharisee on trial for his belief in the resurrection of the dead he cleverly played the Pharisees and Sadducees off against each other (v6–9). Once returned to Roman custody, however, he experienced a dream–vision at night. The Lord appeared to him and said: “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in

Rome” (v11). The statement contains three indications. First, Paul has no reason to be fearful. On the contrary, the risen Lord supported him. Second, whatever happens to Paul is guided by the necessity of God’s plan. Third, his behavior before the Jerusalem authorities anticipates Paul’s bearing witness in Rome.

6. Acts 26:12–18

This pericope belongs to Paul’s apologetic defense before Agrippa and Festus and summarizes his mission in term which again highlight the providential dimension. After an introduction to induce a friendly hearing, Paul gives first (v4–11) a summary of his life. He defends himself against Jewish plaintiffs by giving more details of his Pharisaic upbringing. Within this framework the account of Paul’s pivotal experience on his way to Damascus is retold (v12–18). Although the event’s description suggests an even more glaring and sharp light, the dazzle and cure are missing. Paul experiences a dream–vision.

In Acts 22:14 it was Ananias who informed him that God had chosen him to be a witness. This account deviates from the other two in not mentioning Ananias. After the second report of his conversion (22:17–21) and now in 26:16–18, it is the Lord himself who appoints Paul “as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (v16–18). When Paul retells his call to Agrippa and Festus he highlights the reason of the dream–vision, namely to send him to convert the nations. Departing from the two former Damascus reports, these verses describing Paul’s mission to the Gentiles are grounded in very Christophany itself. It displays divine activity guiding history in a very specific direction empowering and protecting Paul as God’s witness.

7. Acts 27:21–26

Paul made known that as a Roman citizen he wanted to stand trial before Caesar. He was transferred from Caesarea Maritima to Rome by ship which was caught in a fierce storm. The howling storm and

thundering sea were threatening shipwreck but Paul encouraged his fellow travelers telling them that no lives would be lost and he told them how he knew this. He relied on a dream–vision he had experienced that night. An angel of the Lord had reassured Paul by saying: “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you” (27:24). This verse marks a turning point in the chapter as a whole. The apathy of the crew, the pounding ship and the blustering wind were predominated by divine intervention. The vision functions as a confirmation of God’s power over the forces of nature: there would be no loss of life among the threatened seafarers. At the same time this vision indicates the continuing divine guidance Paul enjoys, for he is told he will stand before Caesar (27:23–24). Because Paul’s journey to Rome is in accordance with God’s plan, Gentiles aboard the ship can rest assured they will be saved even if the ship itself is wrecked.

Conclusion

It is not especially remarkable that the fascinating and varied dream–visions in Acts function as a mode of divine communication. In antiquity these phenomena were often accepted as divine in origin. They were frequently considered meaningful and significant although sometimes their reliability was explicitly disputed and their outcome deceptive.

It is striking, however, that all the dream–visions found in Acts are connected to the Gentile mission. In 23:11 Paul is encouraged by the divine decree that he “must” testify also in Rome and later he is in a position to comfort his fellow sea–going passengers with reference to the heavenly decision that he must stand before Caesar (27:24). In chapter 10 a dream–vision causes Peter to recognize the Gentiles; in 16:9 Paul’s dream opens up new missionary territory; and the divine prophecy in 18:9–10 encourages Paul to stay in Corinth for a long time. These dreams and visions highlight that the Christian mission to the Gentiles was not a human, but a divine undertaking. It relies not on human, but divine authority.

These supernatural interventions are also clearly evident in those passages which are directly or indirectly linked to Paul’s experience on the Damascus road (9:10–19; 22:17–21 and 26:12–18). I have not yet discussed Ananias’ dream–vision following the scene depicting the revelatory Christophany to Paul (9:1–9). Ananias perceives Paul

as a dangerous persecutor but the Lord instead counters that Saul is a “chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (9:15). He will bear witness on behalf of Christ “to the end of the earth” (1:8). A further epiphany in Acts 22:17–21 is added to the first (re)telling of Paul’s Damascus experience in which Paul himself (no longer Ananias) had a dream–vision in which the Lord instructed him that the people of Jerusalem would not listen to his testimony and therefore he was being sent “far away to the Gentiles.” This experience, however, was not yet part of the portrayal of the Damascus event itself. It appears only in the second retelling (in Acts 26:12–18) which simply reports the apostolic call and the divine commission to Paul to go to the Gentiles. Paul’s call on the road to Damascus is not identified with his mission to the Gentiles until the event has been transformed into a dream–vision.

How are we to explain that all the dreams and visions in Acts are interpretive keys to the mission to the Gentiles? Why are other programmatic points not made known by dream–visions as well? An answer to these and similar questions may be found in the Joel quotation in Acts 2:17–21 where Greek synonyms of “dreams” and “visions” are found for the first time. In his Pentecostal speech Peter explains the outpouring of the Spirit as a fulfillment of Joel 3:1–5 (2:28–32). The alteration of the “Day of the Lord” into “in the last days” at the beginning of the Joel citation underscores the eschatological emphasis. It implies that a new age has dawned. The words “this is what was spoken” in Acts 2:16 mean that the quotation primarily interprets the events that were described previously in Acts 2:1–13. Peter counters the mockery of some in the crowd by replying that this outpouring of the Spirit is what God meant when the prophet Joel uttered these words. A biblical prophecy is fulfilled there and then within the community to which Peter is preaching:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit

on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams;

even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

.....

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:17–18.21)

On one hand, the citation places the preceding events (Acts 2:1–13) in their true perspective: Peter explains the outpouring of the Spirit as fulfilling Joel's prophecy; on the other, it serves as a starting point for extensive commentary (Acts 2:22–40). The Joel quotation is important given its programmatic nature for the chapters of Acts that follow. It contains words and themes that appear again and again in its sequel. The "Spirit" (2:17) keeps displaying its miraculous activity in favor of the new movement (10:19–20; 16:6–7, etc.). In view of the task trusted to them, the apostles consider themselves "servants" (2:18) of the "Lord" (4:29) or of the "Most High God" (16:17). The invocation of the Lord (2:21) is made when the Christians are named "all who call on your name" (9:14.21; 22:16). Also the "name" to be invoked takes tangible shape in the course of the narrative. In his Pentecost sermon Peter, with help of evidence from the Psalms, attempts to convince his audience that the "name" dealt with in Acts 2:21 is no other than that of the crucified Jesus (see 2:36). In Acts the name "Jesus Christ" is found at least ten times (2:38; 3:6; 4:10; 8:12; 9:34; 10:36.48; 11:17; 15:26; 16:18; 28:31) whereas it does not appear even once in the Gospel of Luke.

Joel's prophecy thus plays a strategic role in the narrative of Acts. Keeping this in mind, the slight alterations made to its citation highlight the author's intention. In Acts 2:21 the quotation ends with Joel 3:5a: "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Joel 3:5b continues: "For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be the one who is being saved, as the Lord has said, and the ones who hear the good news – whom the Lord had called." By excluding Joel 3:5b from the Pentecost speech the "salvation" in Joel's prophecy is couched within a universal setting at its beginning ("all flesh") and close. His global perspective prevented Luke from relating salvation to Mount Zion and Jerusalem exclusively. In addition to Israel the Gentiles are also to be saved.

Dreams and visions were common in non-Jewish, Greco-Roman culture and they were often taken as significant. In Acts a new

meaningful dimension is added to these visions as they are invariably linked to the preaching of the Gospel among Gentiles. The universal orientation of Acts 10–11 (the “Pentecost of the Gentiles”) was already prepared in Acts 2. The other dream–visions in Acts also give evidence of God’s acceptance of non–Jews who respect the Deity and seek to conduct themselves with righteousness. Here God is perceived fulfilling the promise described in the Joel quotation: “and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams”.

The “visions” and “dreams” accompanying descriptions of the Day of the Lord in Joel 3 are no longer just symptoms of the “last days” in Acts but vehicles of divine communication, which help realize the prophecy that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” They assist in the unfolding of God’s plan. The author of Acts transforms the tenor of Joel 3. He adopts terms and phrases from the Joel passage, but confers on them a different meaning and function: he subordinates Joel 3:1–2 to Joel 3:5a. The dreams and visions in the various segments of Acts represent stages in the ongoing realization of God’s plan: “in the last days” the Gentiles too will share in Israel’s salvation. This divine will has such compelling force that all protests must be stilled: no objection by Ananias (9:13–14), opposition by Peter (10:14), resistance from Paul (22:19–20), charges of having violated Roman law (18:12–17), arrest (23:11) or even shipwreck (27:13–20) can modify this course mapped out by God.

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Conclusion

