

## Acts 6-9 CFM Ep 210



In this outline are a few links to some of my favorite books that have really helped me understand the context and content of the scriptures. [Click here to see all of my favorite books on Amazon](#). As an Amazon Affiliate, I do earn a small commission from qualifying purchases (at no extra cost to you).

1. Choosing the Seven (Acts 6.1-15).
2. Stephen's Defense (Acts 7.1-53).
3. Stephen put to death (Acts 7.54-60).
4. Saul persecutes the Christians (Acts 8.1-3).
5. Philip in Samaria (Acts 8.4-24).
6. An Ethiopian Receives a Witness of Jesus (Acts 8.25-40).
7. The Conversion of Saul (Acts 9.1-19).
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9. Peter's Missionary Efforts (Acts 9.32-43).

### 1. Choosing the Seven (Acts 6.1-15).

#### "It is not reason that we should... serve tables" (Acts 6.2).

Elder Maxwell taught:

"The original Twelve were counseled that they were not to "serve tables" (see Acts 6:1-4). Actually, serving tables is easy. It is visible, measurable, and do-able-compared to opening up the nations of the world to missionary work or to keeping wolves out of the flock. But if the Twelve were drawn away from their scriptural and constitutional duties, the whole Church would suffer. Being drawn away can happen to all of us, almost without our knowing it."<sup>1</sup>

#### Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicaor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas (Acts 6.5).

Tomb inscriptions show that some Jerusalemites had Greek names whether or not their parents or grandparents had lived outside Judea. But even in Rome, under forty percent of Jews had any Greek in their name, and only one or two of the apostles had a Greek name. That all seven of these men have Greek names suggests that they are obvious Hellenists (6:1), first-or second-generation Jewish immigrants to Palestine—hence members of the offended minority. One is even a proselyte—a former Gentile who had converted to Judaism; many of these lived in Antioch (cf. 11:19).<sup>2</sup>

#### Libertines, Cyrenians, Alexandrians (Acts 6.9).

<sup>1</sup> Elder Neal A. Maxwell, "Wisdom and Order," *Ensign*, June 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Keener, [The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament](#), IVP Academic, 2014, p. 334-335.

Stephen's fellow Hellenists were debating new ideas more than the church's Hebrew faction. Jerusalem had many synagogues (though not the 480 of later tradition), including some of those mentioned here. Freedpersons (Λιβερτῖνος)<sup>3</sup> constituted a particular class in Greco-Roman society in the first generation; later rabbis ranked freedpersons just below proselytes, but they were probably not thinking primarily of Roman freedpersons. The specific term here is the Latin loanword *libertinus*; the synagogue was established by freed slaves of Roman citizens, who were therefore Roman citizens themselves. Most were probably Judeans enslaved by the Roman general Pompey in the first century B.C., afterward freed by Roman Jews; as Roman citizens, those who returned to Jerusalem would have high status, a status maintained by their descendants so long as they continued to marry and bear other descendants of citizens (cf. 22:28). Archaeologists have found an inscription (the "Theodotus inscription") from a Greek-speaking Jerusalem synagogue from this period; Theodotus's father, Vettenos, was probably a Jew from Rome and, given the name, probably a freedman. Later sources attest the synagogue of the Alexandrians and that of the Cilicians; the capital of Cilicia was Tarsus, Paul's hometown. Other ancient cities with large Jewish immigrant populations also sported diverse synagogues. Luke's description here may be a single synagogue of freedmen constituted by those who have returned from the various locations where they or their ancestors settled for a time after being freed.<sup>4</sup>

#### **"His face as it had been the face of an angel" (Acts 6.15).**

On certain occasions, the influence of the Holy Spirit can be so profound that it transforms an individual into a radiant source of light. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the stones that emitted light on the Jaredite ship when touched by Jehovah (Ether 3.1-6), and the luminous countenance of prophets who are filled with the power of God. Examples of such transformation include Moses, whose face shone after conversing with the Lord (Exodus 34.29), and Nephi and Lehi, who experienced a similar radiance while conversing with angels, causing their faces to "shine exceedingly, even as the faces of angels" (Helaman 5.36). Additionally, Abinadi, whose mission paralleled that of Stephen, became so full of the Spirit that "his face shone with exceeding luster" (Mosiah 13.5).

Joseph Smith was observed to radiate a transcendent glow on his countenance when he was exceptionally filled with the Spirit. The subsequent testimonies are from those who bore witness to this magnificent transfiguration:

Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner: "They sang and prayed. Joseph got up and began to speak to us. As he began to speak very solemnly and very earnestly, all at once his countenance changed and he stood mute. Those who looked at him that day said there was a search light within him, over every part of his body. I never saw anything like it on the earth. *I could not take my eyes off him; he got so white that anyone who saw him would have thought he was transparent. I remember I thought I could almost see the cheek bones through the flesh. I have been through many changes since but that is photographed on my brain. I shall remember it and see in my mind's eye as long as I remain upon the earth.* He stood some moments. He looked over the congregation as if to pierce every heart. He said, "Do you know who has

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<sup>3</sup> Λιβερτῖνος - Libertine, denotes Jews (according to Philo) who had been made captives of the Romans under Pompey but were afterwards set free; and who although they had fixed their abode in Rome, had built at their own expense a synagogue at Jerusalem which they frequented when in that city, The name Libertines adhered to them to distinguish them from free born Jews who had subsequently taken up their residence at Rome. Evidence seems to have been discovered of the existence of a "synagogue of the Libertines" at Pompeii.

<sup>4</sup> Keener, [Background](#), p. 335.

been in your midst?" One of the Smiths said an angel of the Lord. Martin Harris said, "It was our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." Joseph put his hand down on Martin and said: "God revealed that to you. Brethren and sisters, the Spirit of God has been here. The Savior has been in your midst this night and I want you to remember it."<sup>5</sup>

Emmeline B. Wells: "The power of God rested upon him to such a degree that on many occasions he seemed transfigured. His expression was mild and almost childlike in repose; and when addressing the people, who loved him it seemed to adoration, *the glory of his countenance was beyond description*. At other times the great power of his manner, more than of his voice (which was sublimely eloquent to me) seemed to shake the place on which we stood and penetrate the inmost soul of his hearers, and I am sure that then they would have laid down their lives to defend him."

Mary Ann Winters: "I stood close by the Prophet while he was preaching to the Indians in the Grove by the Temple. *The Holy Spirit lighted up his countenance till it glowed like a halo around him*, and his words penetrated the hearts of all who heard him and the Indians looked as solemn as Eternity."<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Stephen's Defense (Acts 7.1-53).

**Table 5. Old Testament Parallels Between Joseph and Moses**

Joseph	Moses
Brothers sold him into slavery	Family, who were slaves, saved him from slavery
Midianites sold Joseph into Egypt	Midianites welcomed Moses when he fled Egypt
Joseph became Pharaoh's "father" (Gen 45:8)	Moses became a son to Pharaoh's daughter
Joseph was abruptly exalted from slavery, made a prince over Egypt	Moses abruptly lost his Egyptian royalty by defending slaves
Joseph made all Egypt Pharaoh's slaves (47:19)	Through Moses God freed slaves
Through Joseph God delivered Egypt during famine	Through Moses God devastated Egypt's economy
Joseph, exiled in Egypt, marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest	Moses, exiled from Egypt, marries the daughter of a Midianite priest
The name of Joseph's first (of two named) sons evokes Joseph's sojourn in a foreign land	The name of the first (of two named) sons evokes Moses' sojourn in a foreign land
Future deliverer's leadership initially rejected by brothers	Future deliverer's leadership initially rejected by his people

Table 5 is adapted from Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2014), 2:1363.

Stephen delivers a recollection of Israel's history to the Sanhedrin, a group already familiar with this chronicle. The reason for Stephen's repetition of the narrative might be queried. To address this inquiry, it is important to note that Stephen's charges by false witnesses were that he spoke "blasphemous words against Moses, and against God" (Acts 6.11). To refute these accusations, Stephen aims to establish that he believes in the same God and Moses as the council, with the exception that he believes in Jesus as the fulfilment of the types that he sees woven as a beautiful tapestry throughout the Hebrew Bible. Because of Jesus, Stephen sees the Hebrew Bible with new eyes. His account of Israel's history is an illustration of his belief in the same religious tradition as the council, with the addition of Jesus as the Messiah.

Moreover, it is typical for great teachers to provide the background and historical significance of crucial events. Similar to the necessity of establishing the doctrine of Apostasy before preaching about the Restoration, Stephen wants to lay the groundwork of Israel's history before accusing them of the murder of Israel's Holy One. His primary message is that the Messiah prophesied by Moses has already been crucified and it is Jesus of Nazareth. His explanation of Israel's history concludes with the most startling

<sup>5</sup> Mary E. Rollins Lightner, "Joseph Smith, the Prophet," *Young Woman's Journal* 16 (December 1905): 556-557.

<sup>6</sup> Truman Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, pp. 89-90.

of allegations - that the Sanhedrin is guilty of killing the Messiah (Acts 7.52). Stephen establishes his own legitimacy and then accuses the Sanhedrin of religious illegitimacy.

### **3. Stephen put to death (Acts 7.54-60).**

After speaking like the prophets and noting that prophets get martyred (7:52; cf. 7:9, 35), Stephen experiences a prophet's martyrdom. Romans did not permit subject peoples to execute capital punishment, but Stephen's hearers are so enraged that they lynch him according to their own Jewish law. Stephen's death proves his point, laying the theological groundwork for the expansion of the Jesus movement outside Palestine; it also leads to further persecution and thus the direct spread of the faith (8:1); and it sows a seed in a certain Saul (7:58)—a seed whose fruit would later be reaped on the road to Damascus (9:3-4; cf. the similar themes shared by Stephen's and Paul's preaching in Acts).

Ancient writers sometimes paralleled figures, and disciples often imitated their teachers; Stephen's death follows the example of Jesus: compare Acts 7:56 with Luke 22:69; Acts 7:59 with Luke 23:46; and Acts 7:60 with Luke 23:34. Luke may also reverse the charges in his portrayal. Such reversal of charges was standard in forensic rhetoric; ancient thinkers also sometimes spoke of unjust courts (such as the one that condemned Socrates) being those really on trial before truth or world opinion.<sup>7</sup>

#### **"I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7.56).**

"Peter and Stephen testify that they saw the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God. Any person that had seen the heavens opened knows that there are three personages in the heavens who hold the keys of power, and one presides over all."<sup>8</sup>

"I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods."<sup>9</sup>

#### **"They stoned Stephen" (Acts 7.59).**

"Stephen was stoned, not for his preaching, nor even for his scolding of the people, but for saying he had had a vision of the Father and the Son. He was stoned for proclaiming that he had received revelation. Stephen foreshadowed the work of Paul and is the earliest person mentioned in the New Testament to imply that the law of Moses was fulfilled and that its rites and customs should come to an end."<sup>10</sup>

### **4. Saul persecutes the Christians (Acts 8.1-3).**

"Among the disputants who, when defeated in discussion, conspired against Stephen and brought about his death, were Jews from Cilicia. Associated with them was a young man named Saul, a native of the Cilician city of Tarsus. This man was an able scholar, a forceful controversialist, an ardent defender of what he regarded as the right, and a vigorous assailant of what to him was wrong. Though born in Tarsus he had been brought to Jerusalem in early youth and had there grown up a strict Pharisee and an aggressive supporter of Judaism. He was a student of the law under the tutelage of Gamaliel, one of the

<sup>7</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 340.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, p. 312.

<sup>9</sup> *Teachings*, p. 370.

<sup>10</sup> Robert J. Matthews, *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 6: Acts to Revelation*, ed. by Robert L. Millet, Deseret Book, 1987, 30.

most eminent masters of the time; and had the confidence of the high priest. His father, or perhaps an earlier progenitor, had acquired the rank of Roman citizenship, and Saul was a born heir to that distinction. Saul was a violent opponent of the apostles and the Church, and had made himself a party to the death of Stephen by openly consenting thereunto and by holding in personal custody the garments of the false witnesses while they stoned the martyr."<sup>11</sup>

### 5. Philip in Samaria (Acts 8.4-24).

#### “The city of Samaria” (Acts 8.5).

“The city of Samaria” could refer to the Old Testament site of Samaria, now a pagan Greek city called Sebaste, dedicated to the worship of the emperor and full of occult influences. But the bulk of Sebaste’s people were Greeks rather than Samaritans, so the phrase probably refers to the main Samaritan town of the district of Samaria, later called Neapolis, on the site of ancient Shechem (cf. Acts 7.15-16).<sup>12</sup> This was the religious center of the Samaritans. Inscriptions from Mount Gerizim show that at least many Samaritans knew Greek, and in this urban center the Hellenist Philip could preach in his first language.<sup>13</sup>

#### Unclean spirits came out of the possessed (Acts 8.6-8).

Signs were accorded high evidential value in antiquity. That the modern Western educated elite tends to denigrate them is more a commentary on our culture than on theirs; most cultures in the world today (virtually all cultures not influenced by Western deism or atheism) accept some forms of supernatural activity. People often respected exorcisms that included outward signs of the spirit coming out, as here.<sup>14</sup>

### The Difference Between Evil and Unclean Spirits

#### Evil Spirits

In order to distinguish between evil and unclean spirits, it is important to first define evil spirits as best we can with the direction provided us in our literature and statements from prophets. It is believed that during our premortal life, one-third of all of Heavenly Father’s spirit children chose to follow Satan and were subsequently cast out of Heavenly Father’s presence along with him (as referenced in D&C 29.36 and Rev. 12.4). These spirits are considered to be the group known as evil spirits. It is worth noting that the term “a third part” does not equate to “one-third”, which is a common misconception among some LDS members.<sup>15</sup> Another way of reading this is that this “third” refers to a group, and according to Abraham chapter 3, there were three distinct premortal groups: the noble and great ones, the general population, and Satan’s followers. It is important to be open to the idea that the size of the group of evil

<sup>11</sup> James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, p. 340.

<sup>12</sup> Shechem was one of the great cities of its area in ancient times; its 4,000 years of history were its ruins are under the stratified mound of Tall al-Balāṭah, just east of Nablus, which shows evidence of settlement from the Middle Bronze II period (c. 1900–c. 1750 BCE), generally associated with the time of the biblical patriarchs. When it flourished during ancient Egyptian and Biblical times, it occupied a strategic position at the eastern opening of the pass between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerazim. [Britannica, Shechem](#), accessed 3.13.23.

<sup>13</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 342.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Most that I have discussed this with are of the understanding that 1/3 was the ratio of those that rebelled, taking this text literally. I will say that the text does say this. καὶ ἡ οὐρὰ αὐτοῦ σύρει τὸ τρίτον τῶν ἀστέρων τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἔβαλεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν γῆν literally reads, “And his tail drew the third of the stars of heaven and he threw them into the earth” (Rev. 12.4a).

spirits who followed Satan is not necessarily specified in the scriptures and remains undetermined, at least in my view.

According to the teachings of our sacred texts and the latter-day prophets, Satan exercises authority over all evil spirits and commands them to carry out his will of tempting and tormenting humans on Earth. These spirits are organized in a formidable arsenal with the purpose of afflicting humankind. With this in mind, we can see some of Brigham Young's teachings regarding evil spirits being present here on earth:

Brigham Young:

I know very well that, whether we are active or not, the invisible spirits are active. And **every person who desires and strives to be a Saint is closely watched by fallen spirits that came here when Lucifer fell, and by the spirits of wicked persons who have been here in tabernacles and departed from them, but who are still under the control of the prince of the power of the air. Those spirits are never idle; they are watching every person who wishes to do right, and are continually prompting them to do wrong.**<sup>16</sup>

We may enquire where the spirits dwell, that the devil has power over? **They dwell anywhere, ... on this continent; it is full of them. If you could see, and would walk over many parts of North America, you would see millions on millions of the spirits of those who have been slain upon this continent.** Would you see the spirits of those who were as good in the flesh as they knew how to be? Yes. Would you see the spirits of the wicked? Yes. Could you see the spirits of devils? Yes, and that is all there is of them.<sup>17</sup>

**There are millions and millions of spirits in these valleys, both good and evil. We are surrounded with more evil spirits than good ones, because more wicked than good men have died here;** for instance, thousands and thousands of wicked Lamanites have laid their bodies in these valleys. The spirits of the just and unjust are here. The spirits that were cast out of heaven, which you know are recorded to have been one-third part, were thrust down to this earth, and have been here all the time, with Lucifer, the Son of the Morning, at their head.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that Brigham is combining both types of beings in this quote: those that have lived on earth (both the righteous and the wicked), and those that were cast out of Father's presence in the Grand Council.

### Unclean Spirits

Those who go to spirit prison are temporarily stuck from enjoying the peaceful happiness that comes from accepting Christ and obtaining His forgiveness for our sins. We know that all imprisoned spirits can

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<sup>16</sup> Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. [London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-1886], 7:239. September 1, 1859.

<sup>17</sup> Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:368. June 22, 1856.

<sup>18</sup> Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:133-34. Funeral sermon by Brigham Young on the death of President Jedediah M. Grant. December 4, 1856.

go to paradise; Joseph Smith taught that all spirits in prison “can be ferreted out and saved,” with the exception of perdition spirits who have denied the Holy Ghost.<sup>19</sup>

Within the concept of spirits in the spiritual realm of what we today call “spirit prison,” there are at least two types of spirits: those who are waiting to learn the gospel and those who are categorized as unclean or foul spirits due to their unhappy or wicked nature. The distinction between evil spirits and unclean spirits is as follows: evil spirits have never possessed a physical body and are under the control of Satan (as they were cast out of the presence of God in the Pre-Earth Life [Rev. 12.4]), and unlike these beings, unclean spirits have lived on Earth and experienced a mortal body at one time, but are now in a state of spiritual imprisonment after death and are also under the influence of Satan. Early leaders of the Church, including Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball,<sup>20</sup> and Parley P. Pratt had a deep understanding of the nature of unclean spirits and wrote extensively on the topic.

Parley Pratt, an apostle in the LDS Church from 1835 to 1857, gave his own definition of unclean spirits and some of their influence on mortals:

**Many spirits of the departed, who are unhappy, linger in lonely wretchedness about the earth, and in the air, and especially about their ancient homesteads, and the places rendered dear to them by the memory of former scenes.** The more wicked of these are the kind spoken of in Scripture, as “foul spirits,” “unclean spirits,” spirits who afflict persons in the flesh, and engender various diseases in the human system. **They will sometimes enter human bodies, and will distract them, throw them into fits, cast them into the water, into the fire, etc.** [see Mark 9:14-29, Matt 17:14-21, Luke 9:37-43] **They will trouble them with dreams, nightmare, hysterics, fever, etc., and will sometimes compel them to utter blasphemies, horrible curses, and even words of other languages.** If permitted, they will often cause death.

**Some of these spirits are adulterous, and suggest to the mind all manner of lasciviousness, all kinds of evil thoughts and temptations.** ... There are, in fact, most awful instances of the spirit of lust, and of

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<sup>19</sup> King Follett Discourse, *History of the Church*, Vol. 6, p. 302-317.

<sup>20</sup> Most Latter-day Saints who are familiar with this experience will know the latest account published in Orson F. Whitney’s *Life of Heber C. Kimball* in 1888. According to that account, on June 30, 1837, Apostles Heber C. Kimball and Orson Hyde were awakened when Isaac Russell charged into their room shouting, “I want you should get up and pray for me that I may be delivered from the evil spirits that are tormenting me to such a degree that I feel I cannot live long, unless I obtain relief.” The two laid their hands on his head to give him a blessing, when Heber C. Kimball himself was “struck with great force by some invisible power; and fell senseless on the floor.” Hyde and Willard Richards then laid their hands on Heber’s head, and he was revived enough to kneel for a prayer and then moved to the bed. It was then that both Kimball and Hyde began to witness that “a vision was opened to our minds, and we could distinctly see the evil spirits, who foamed and gnashed their teeth at us.” The experience was timed by Willard Richards, who noted that they were in vision for ninety minutes. See: Orson F. Whitney, *The Life of Heber C. Kimball: An Apostle; the Father and Founder of the British Mission* (Salt Lake City: Kimball Family, 1888), 143–44. The experience of Orson Hyde, Heber C. Kimball, and Isaac Russell with evil spirits while residing on Wilfred Street in Preston, England, remains a powerful moment in Latter-day Saint history. It was through this spiritual assault and its corresponding vision that Kimball “learned the power of the adversary, his enmity against the servants of God, and got some understanding of the invisible world.” See: Christopher Blythe, “[Heber C. Kimball and Orson Hyde’s 1837 Vision of the Infernal World](#),” *An Eye of Faith: Essays in Honor of Richard O. Cowan*, ed. Kenneth L. Alford and Richard E. Bennett (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City, 2015), 175–87.



bawdy and abominable words and actions, inspired and uttered by persons possessed of such spirits, even though the persons were virtuous and modest so long as they possessed their own agency.<sup>21</sup>

### **Discerning the Spirits**

Everyone that I have really talked with about this idea has eventually in some way expressed to me this thought: that at times we have noticed something “not right” about certain individuals. It does not always mean that these are “bad” people, but from my experience, it is wise to listen to that voice when it speaks to you. If you get a feeling or prompting that something “isn’t right” about something or someone, I would encourage you to listen to that voice.

George Q. Cannon put it this way:

Every properly constituted person can feel the influence of the various spirits that are in the world and that seek to bring us in subjection to them. To some it is given to see these influences, but all can feel them . . . . You will see a man all at once seized with a spirit of anger; another time you will see a person seized with a spirit of jealousy or some other evil influence infuriated sometimes, so much so that he or she is transformed. You have seen people’s faces completely changed by the spirit that takes possession of them. They cannot see that power; but it is undoubtedly a spiritual entity. **We may not be conscious of it, but it takes possession of us if we yield to it.**<sup>22</sup>

If you could see yourselves, you would find that there is not one of you but what carry a spirit and influence with you—a **spirit and influence, whether good or evil, which can be sensibly felt by all who come in contact with you, especially if they have the gift of discernment. Did you ever feel, when you were in the presence of people who possessed a bad spirit, uncomfortable and an unwillingness to associate with such?**<sup>23</sup>

**“Simon... used sorcery... he had bewitched them with sorceries” (Acts 8.9-11).**

Judaism allowed that Gentile sorcerers could perform signs; many Jews attributed this to Belial (Satan). The Old Testament taught that pagan sorcerers could duplicate some of God’s signs on a small scale (Ex 7:11, 22; 8:7), but that their power was definitely limited (Ex 8:18-19; 9:11).<sup>24</sup>

**Simon, converted, wishes to have the power to bring the gift of the Holy Ghost (Acts 8.12-23).**

James E. Talmage ties this man to the beginning of the term simony:

"The attempted grafting of foreign doctrines on the true vine of the gospel of Christ was characteristic of the early years of the apostolic period. We read of the sorcerer Simon, who professed belief and

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<sup>21</sup> Parley P. Pratt, [Key to the Science of Theology](#) [Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1891, 5th edition], 120–21, 122, 123.

<sup>22</sup> George Q. Cannon, [Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon](#), Deseret Book, 1987, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>24</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 342.



entered the Church by baptism, but who was so devoid of the true spirit of the gospel that he sought to purchase by money the authority and power of the priesthood. This man, though rebuked by Peter, and apparently penitent, continued to trouble the Church, by inculcating heresies and winning disciples within the fold. His followers were distinguished as a sect or cult down to the fourth century; and, writing at that time, Eusebius says of them: 'These, after the manner of their founder, insinuating themselves into the Church, like a pestilential and leprous disease, infected those with the greatest corruption, into whom they were able to infuse their secret, irremediable, and destructive poison.' This Simon, known in history as Simon Magus, is referred to by early Christian writers as the founder of heresy, owing to his persistent attempts to combine Christianity with Gnosticism. It is with reference to his proposition to purchase spiritual authority that all traffic in spiritual offices has come to be known as simony."<sup>25</sup>

**“For as yet he (the Holy Ghost) was fallen upon none of them” (Acts 8.16).**

Why do these people not yet have the Holy Ghost? It seems as if perhaps Philip does not hold the Melchizedek Priesthood. At least this is a possibility. Elder McConkie seems to take this position. He wrote, “Philip-saintly, valiant, a powerful preacher, a mighty worker of miracles- **held only the Aaronic Priesthood!** Peter and John must yet come from Jerusalem to Samaria to confer the Holy Ghost upon his baptized converts. (Acts 8:14-17.) And yet Philip, magnifying his calling, casts out devils, commands the lame to leap and the sick to rise from their beds of affliction. Miracles are wrought by the power of faith, and a righteous man need not hold the Melchizedek Priesthood to have power and influence with his Creator. As Joseph Smith said, 'If a priest understands his duty, his calling, and ministry, and preaches by the Holy Ghost, his enjoyment is as great as if he were one of the Presidency.' (*Teachings*, p. 112.)”<sup>26</sup>

**6. An Ethiopian Receives a Witness of Jesus (Acts 8.25-40).**

Luke devotes nearly as much space to the conversion of this one foreigner, who can function as an indigenous witness in his own culture, as to the mass conversion in Samaria. Because Samaritans were not considered fully Jewish, this is the first fully Gentile convert to Christianity (probably unknown to most of the Jerusalem church—11:18).

**“The angel of the Lord spake unto Philip... go toward the south unto the way that goes down from Jerusalem unto Gaza” (Acts 8.26).**

Two roads led south from near Jerusalem, one through Hebron into Idumea (Edom) and the other joining the coast road before Gaza heading for Egypt, both with plenty of Roman milestones as road markers. Old Gaza was a deserted town whose ruins lay near the now culturally Greek cities of Askalon and New Gaza. Philip might have no one to preach to on a little-traveled road that would lead by a deserted city, and after the revival in Samaria this command must seem absurd to him; but God had often tested faith through apparently absurd commands (e.g., Ex 14:16; 1 Kings 17:3-4, 9-14; 2 Kings

<sup>25</sup> James E. Talmage, [The Great Apostasy](#), Deseret Book, 1958, p. 97.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, DNTC 2:81, emphasis added.

5:10). The term translated “south” can also mean “noon”; traveling at noon was very rare, so this detail, if intended, would make the command seem even more absurd.<sup>27</sup>

### **“A man of Ethiopia (Acts 8.27).**

The Greek term *Aithiopia* (“Ethiopia”) referred not specifically to modern Ethiopia, but to Africa south of Egypt. Ethiopia figured in Mediterranean legends and mythical geography as the very end of the earth.<sup>28</sup>

### **“How can I, except some man should guide me?” (Acts 8.31).**

“The question asked by this Ethiopian man is a reminder of the divine mandate we all have to seek to learn and to teach one another the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, in the context of learning and teaching the gospel, we are sometimes like the Ethiopian—we need the help of a faithful and inspired teacher; and we are sometimes like Philip—we need to teach and strengthen others in their conversion.”<sup>29</sup>

### **“Philip was found at Azotus” (Acts 8.40).**

The Judean Azotus, about four kilometers from the Mediterranean sea, had been the Old Testament’s Philistine city of Ashdod. It was twenty to twenty-five miles northeast of Gaza (about a day’s walk) and about thirty to thirty five miles west of Jerusalem, situated roughly halfway between Gaza and Joppa. Caesarea Maritima (the coastal Caesarea, not Caesarea Philippi) was over fifty miles to the north of Azotus, just off the same coastal road; this city, Judea’s Roman capital, will become significant for Acts in 10:1 (cf. 21:8). Although Jews also lived in Gaza, Azotus and Caesarea, these cities all included large numbers of Gentile residents; Philip foreshadows the mission of other Hellenists (11:20).<sup>30</sup>

## **7. The Conversion of Saul (Acts 9.1-19).**

### **“Saul... went to the High Priest” (Acts 9.1).**

"Paul represented the Sanhedrin's inner circle, as he said of his power as persecutor 'in Jerusalem'-and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests . . . and I punished them oft in every synagogue' (Acts 26:10-11). Years before, the Savior warned his first apostles of the misplaced zeal of oppressors: 'The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God' (John 16:2, RSV). That is just how Paul explains himself-he carefully concluded that duty required persecution of Jesus' disciples (Acts 26:9); out of 'zeal' for God, he persecuted Christians (Philip. 3:6)."<sup>31</sup>

### **“What will you have me do?” (Acts 9.6).**

<sup>27</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 343-344.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Elder Soares, [“How can I understand?” April 2019 Conference](#).

<sup>30</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 345.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Lloyd Anderson, [Understanding Paul](#), p. 25.

"The persistent asking of that same question can also change our lives. There is no greater question that we can ask in this world...'Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?' (Acts 9:6) God's will for us can be determined from three sources:

"The scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon, of which the Prophet Joseph Smith said, 'a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.' (*History of the Church* 4:461.)

"Inspired words from the Lord's anointed-counsel from prophets, seers, and revelators. Local Church leaders likewise are entitled to give inspired counsel for those over whom they preside.

"The people of the world have the light of Christ to help guide them, but members of the Church are entitled to the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the Holy Ghost to be fully operative in our lives, we must keep our channels clear of sin. The clearer our channels, the easier it is for us to receive God's message."<sup>32</sup>

**“Hearing a voice, but seeing no man” (Acts 9.7 – compare to Acts 22.9).**<sup>33</sup>

The JST renders the idea that they (those accompanying Saul) see a light but do not hear the voice of the speaker.

**Saul’s blindness (Acts 9.8).**

God sometimes struck people with blindness to stop them from an evil purpose or as a temporary measure to get their attention (Gen 19:11; 2 Kings 6:18-20; note also the contextual play on spiritual blindness and sight in 2 Kings 6:17).<sup>34</sup>

**“The street which is called straight” (Acts 9.11).**

Cities built before the Hellenistic era, like Damascus, would have many narrow, winding streets. Damascus, however, was reconstructed on the Greek grid pattern, with fairly evenly spaced east-west and north-south streets. Many scholars believe that Straight Street is the long, main east-west street through Damascus, where tradition still places Judas’s ancient home (near the street’s west end). This important street ran parallel to the Barada River, which passed through Damascus, and was fifty feet (fifteen meters) wide, with colonnades on either side. (We cannot be certain that this was the street, however.) Once one found a street, one normally asked neighbors for directions to the house (although according to local tradition, Ananias’s house was near the same street, albeit near the eastern end).<sup>35</sup>

**Ananias beholds the Lord in a vision and is told to go to Saul (Acts 9.10-17).**

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<sup>32</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, "In His Steps," Church Educational System Devotional, Anaheim, California, 8 February 1987. See: Ezra Taft Benson, "Gospel living," *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, Bookcraft, 1988.

<sup>33</sup> In the story of Saul's conversion as told in Acts 9, Luke tells us "the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice (φωνῆς, genitive case), but not seeing anyone" (Ac. 9:7). But in Acts 22, Luke records Saul's recounting of the story, and in verse 9 Saul says, "they that were with me saw the light, but they did not hear the voice (φωνήν, accusative case) of the one speaking to me." So did they hear the voice or not? In both cases the verb for *hear* is a form of ἀκούω but the case of the word φωνή is genitive in one and accusative in the other. It appears that Luke is making the old classical distinction; they heard the sound (the genitive case in Acts 9:7) but did not comprehend the meaning (the accusative case in Acts 22:9). [New Testament Greek, lesson 6](#)

<sup>34</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 346.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

Ananias is naturally less eager to obey his orders (9:10) after he finds out what they are (but he does obey, 9:17). Even after saying, “Here I am” (9:10; cf. Ex 3:4) one might voice objections (e.g., Ex 4:10; see also Acts 10:14).<sup>36</sup>

### **The Lord informs Ananias that Saul will suffer (Acts 9.16).**

Paul later recounted some of the ways in which he suffered:

'Of the Jews five times received I forty *stripes* save one.  
 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;  
*In* journeyings often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils by *mine* own countrymen, *in* perils by the heathen, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, *in* perils among false brethren;  
 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.' (2 Corinthians 11.24-27)

### **Saul is baptized, and scales fall from his eyes (Acts 9.17-18).**

Saul would know the popular Jewish story of the healing of Tobit's blindness, in which white film and scabs (the same language in Greek as here) were removed (Tobit 3:17; 11:11-13); the analogy might underline for Saul the miraculous character of his own experience. Damascus had plenty of places available for baptism (e.g., the river Barada, running through Damascus near what may have been “Straight Street”).<sup>37</sup>

## **8. Saul begins preaching (Acts 9.20-31).**

### **The plot to kill Saul (Acts 9.23-24).**

Saul's Jewish opponents plan to assassinate him, not to execute him legally; but his own account in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 indicates that they had secured the cooperation of the (Gentile) Nabatean ethnarch. Saul's preaching in other cities under the control of Aretas IV of Nabatea (9 b.c.–a.d. 40) for as long as three years (Gal 1:17) had possibly aroused such opposition. The collusion of such interests made Paul's situation in Damascus politically impossible. A city's gates Acts 9:25 348 would be closed at night, though individuals might be able to exit with permission.<sup>38</sup>

### **“The disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket” (Acts 9.25).**

Houses were sometimes built into city walls; Saul's escape method has biblical precedent (Josh 2:15; 1 Sam 19:12). A pre-Arabic, Roman-period tradition claims that Ananias's house was built on the wall; if the tradition is early (by no means certain; it could simply reflect on Paul's experience), the house might have even been that of Ananias. That he has gained disciples there suggests that he has worked like a

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<sup>36</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 347.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347-348.

Christian rabbi, or teacher, and that he has the requisite training to present himself as such (cf. 22:3; but contrast Mt 23:8).<sup>39</sup>

### **9. Peter's Missionary Efforts (Acts 9.32-43).**

Peter's personal transformation was highlighted in his raising of Tabitha, which is considered his greatest recorded miracle. This event occurred a relatively short time after Peter had witnessed the Savior raise Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mark 5:22-24, 35-43). Despite his lack of formal training and occasional impulsiveness in his earlier days, Peter had now become a man with the power to wield life and death, much like his Master. In keeping with Jesus' example, Peter cleared the room of all distractions before exercising his faith in raising Tabitha from the dead. As a result of this remarkable demonstration of faith, many people came to believe in the Lord (Acts 9.42). This account serves to highlight Peter's personal transformation and his growing resemblance to his powerful and revered Master.

#### **"There was at Joppa, a certain disciple named Tabitha" (Acts 9.36).**

Joppa, modern Yaffa, now joined with Tel-Aviv, was a profitable port city, about eleven miles from Lydda. It was about 30 miles south of Caesarea Maritima (8:40; 10:1, 5), and controlled one of Judea's administrative districts. It was under Jewish control for about forty years until it came under direct Roman authority in A.D. 6. Tabitha is a Semitic name and Dorcas a Greek one (both meaning the same thing, "gazelle"). Jewish women were active in charity projects. In Greco-Roman culture in general women were sometimes patrons, and it has been suggested that Tabitha may have been a patron or benefactor of the widows mentioned in verse 41. But whether officially (as a benefactor) or unofficially, she was looking out for their interests.<sup>40</sup>

#### **Tabitha's body is washed (Acts 9.37).**

Jewish dead were always washed before burial. Only women prepared women's bodies for burial. The upper room may evoke 1 Kings 17:19, 23; 2 Kings 4:10-11, 32 (although on other occasions also bodies were kept in upper rooms).<sup>41</sup>

#### **Peter raises Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9.40).**

At the first manifestation of life, we are told that "she opened her eyes." What her surprise upon seeing the Chief Apostle by her side instead of her nearer friends—what exchange of greetings were made—what expressions of gratitude, we cannot tell; but "he gave her his hand, and lifted her up, and when he had called the saints and widows, presented her alive." As a result of this miracle, which became known throughout all Joppa, "many believed in the Lord."

Up to this time the Apostles preached only to the Jews because being Jews themselves, they thought the Messiah was their Savior but not the Savior of other nations, especially of those nations who worshipped idols. All peoples not Jews were called Gentiles and were considered by the Jews to be "common" or "unclean."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> David O. McKay, Lesson 15 "At Lydda and Joppa," [Ancient Apostles](#).

**Peter tarries many days in Joppa with Simon the tanner (Acts 9.43).**

It was customary to name people by their occupation or parentage. Tanning was a despised trade; because of the odors associated with animal carcasses (perhaps less offensive to a fisherman), tanneries usually existed only outside towns. Strict observers of Pharisaic opinions likewise avoided tanners whenever possible, because their stripping of animal hides continually involved them with unclean carcasses. Second-century rabbis reported that tanners were forbidden in cities, especially Jerusalem (many rabbis were more lenient if the tannery were near water, as Simon's house is—10:6). They even insisted that a tanner must allow his wife a divorce if she could not endure the smell!<sup>43</sup> But Judaism stressed hospitality, and Peter, who probably never followed Pharisaic opinions anyway, is happy to receive it.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Tanners in ancient times used urine in the work of tanning hides. Prior to the ability to synthesize chemicals in the lab, urine was a quick and rich source of urea, a nitrogen-based organic compound. When stored for long periods of time, urea decays into ammonia. Ammonia in water acts as a caustic but weak base. Its high pH breaks down organic material, making urine the perfect substance for ancients to use in softening and tanning animal hides. Soaking animal skins in urine also made it easier for leather workers to remove hair and bits of flesh from the skin. Mohi Kumar, ["From Gunpowder to Teeth Whitener: The Science Behind Historic Uses of Urine,"](#) *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 20, 2013. Accessed 3.13.23.

<sup>44</sup> Keener, *Background*, p. 349.