

The Geography of Pentecost

Because Easter Day this year fell on 21 April, which is almost as late as it can be, we celebrate Pentecost, fifty days later, on 9 June. It is the day when we hear the story from Acts chapter 2 of how, after receiving the Holy Spirit, the Apostles are able to go out into Jerusalem and speak eloquently to people from all nations. It's a foreshadowing of the spread of the gospel throughout the eastern Mediterranean – a story that the Acts of the Apostles goes on to describe. The reading makes a powerful point about the range of those who heard that first message: speakers of many different languages, coming from a roll-call of regions, tribes and places. Even if we are rather hazy about where all these places were, we respond to the list appropriately: it speaks of the cosmopolitan nature of Jerusalem at that time, and it conveys the sense that those present came from 'everywhere' as far as that part of the world was concerned.

But why pick on these names? Is there any reason for the list being as it is? Or is it just a random list to convey (as it certainly does) a general sense of 'all sorts of people'? In fact, if you look more closely it very quickly becomes clear that it's highly organised and circles tightly around the Roman frontier province of Judaea, within which Jerusalem was situated. The names listed fall into several geographically defined groups. The first of these — Parthians and Medes, Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia — refers to the peoples east of the Roman empire, often hostile neighbours, located broadly in the region of modern Iran and Iraq. Then we have the reference to the Roman province of Judaea, roughly corresponding to modern Israel, Syria and Jordan. This moves us westwards and within the boundaries of Roman Empire and it gives us the name of the region around which the various other names are organised. Next in the list comes Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. The first two and last two in this group were major regions within what we call Asia Minor, with 'Asia' (the Roman name for Asia Minor) being included as a catch-all for the several smaller areas not specifically named. In the main this is an area lying to the west of Judaea, but in the east part of it lies to the north of Judaea and meets with the western extremity of the region defined in the first group of names. Next in the list is a group lying to the south: Egypt, Libya and Cyrene (in what is now eastern Libya, bordering Egypt as we know it). There is then a general reference to strangers, both Jews and proselytes. After that Cretans are named, coming from the island of Crete, often yoked by the Romans with Cyrene for administrative purposes (there was at one time a province of Creta et Cyrenaica). Finally, as a last catch-all, there is a reference to Arabians. This brings us full circle in an anti-clockwise fashion because the region known as 'Arabia' lay east of the southerly part of the province of Judaea and the south of the Parthians, Medes and Elamites, with which the list began. So what we have is a systematic list, which works its way around Judaea, putting Jerusalem, the place of the apostles' preaching, at the centre of its world.

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