Chapter Five

Dream-Visions in the Acts of the Apostles

In both the Gospel and Acts, the primary focus of Luke’s story is God and what God is doing in the human realm. In the Gospel, Luke emphasizes the role of Jesus as the Anointed One of God. In Acts, the emphasis shifts to the followers of Jesus, and how they understand what God is doing in their midst. Luke’s use of dream-visions in Acts mirrors this larger shift in the two-part narrative. Whereas all of the visions in the Gospel have something to do with Jesus, the visions in Acts are more disparate. The risen Lord is directly involved in some of these encounters (Acts 1:10; 7:56; 9:3–6; 18:9–10; 23:11). In others, one finds an “angel of the Lord” (Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7, 23), or an “angel of God” (10:3; 27:23). Still others feature the Holy Spirit (2:1–4; 8:29; 10:19; 13:2; 19:21; 21:4, 11). Variety similarly marks the character responses to these visionary experiences.

In some cases, characters respond to their visions with some confusion and later offer dramatic interpretations of these experiences (e.g., Saul and Peter). These interpretations in turn permit the reader a glimpse of the characters’ perception of God’s will as it relates to their visions. In other instances, characters may respond so automatically to divine commands that the reader is left without any picture of the process of discernment (e.g., Philip). Still other passages reveal even more subtle elements of perception, particularly those that feature the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the way that this guidance is understood differently by different characters in the narrative.

This chapter will examine the salient features of each dream-vision in Acts and its role in the narrative context. The discussion will focus on character reactions and responses to dream-visions as indications of the

---

1 In the context of this assertion I am referring not only to the mention of “God” (θεός) in the text, but also to the activity of both the Spirit and Jesus.

2 There are two dream-visions in Acts that do not fit neatly within these categories, but instead feature human intermediaries. As noted in chapter 3, Paul’s dream-vision at Troas contains no divine, or otherworldly, figure. Along these lines, Ananias’ vision in Acts 9 includes a statement from the Lord that Saul is having a concurrent vision—a vision in which a man named Ananias lays hands on Saul so that he might regain his sight (9:12).
perception of God’s will. Because they occupy the most narrative space, the repeated accounts of Saul’s conversion/call and the Cornelius–Peter episode will also occupy the bulk of this discussion.

Dream-Visions and the Early Witness in Jerusalem

The Angelic Message to the Apostles (Acts 1:10–12)

10 καὶ ὡς ἀτενίζοντες ἦσαν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν πορευομένου αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἵνα ἄνδρες δύο παρειστήκεισαν αὐτοῖς ἐν ἐσθήσει λευκαίς, 11 οἱ καὶ εἶπαν ἄνδρες Γαλιλαίοι, τί ἐστιν ἐν ἐσθήσει λευκάς αὐτὸν πορευομένου εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν ἄνθρωπος. 12 Ὁτέ ὑπέστρεψαν εἰς Ἱεροσολύμων ἀπὸ ταῦτα τὸν ἐλαίων ἀγώνος, ὅ ἐστιν ἐγγὺς Ἰεροσολύμων, ὅ ἐστιν ἐγγὺς Ἰεροσολύμων, ὁ ἐστιν ἐγγὺς Ἰεροσολύμων, ὁ ἐστιν ἐγγὺς Ἰεροσολύμων, ὁ ἐστιν ἐγγὺς Ἰεροσολύμων.

As they were gazing into heaven during his ascent, behold two men stood near them in shining garments. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking into heaven? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way you saw him depart.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mountain called the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem—just a Sabbath day’s journey away.

Along with other features of Acts 1, this passage creates a strong connection between the end of Luke’s Gospel and the beginning of Acts. In both Luke 24 and Acts 1, characters encounter two angelic messengers (cf. Luke 24:4). The messages of the angels are also remarkably similar. In each case, they question what the human characters are doing (“Why are you seeking the living among the dead?” [Luke

---

3 Some ancient witnesses (e.g., P 56, 8C, A, C) read ἐμπλήσατες. I am following, instead, Codex B and the original reading of Codex 8.

4 On regarding these characters as angels, see the discussion of Luke 24:4–7 in chapter 4. Based on scriptural statements like Deut 19:15 and John 8:17 (both of which highlight the importance of having the testimony of two [or more] witnesses), Talbert suggests: “The promise, moreover, is made not by one but by two angels, insuring its truthfulness” (Reading Acts, 28). Although one should indeed question why two figures appear in Luke 24:4–7 and Acts 1:10–11, it is highly doubtful that Luke is here doubling witnesses to show what is really truthful. Such a reading casts the appearances of Gabriel in Luke 1 and the multiple appearances of “an angel of God/the Lord” in Acts in a very dubious light. It is perhaps more helpful to think in terms of the two figures mentioned in the transfiguration scene (Luke 9:28–36 [so Johnson, Acts, 31]).