

THE PLAUSIBILITY OF LUKE'S GROWTH FIGURES
IN ACTS 2.41; 4.4; 21.20

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Scholars have often expressed skepticism regarding Luke's numerically quantified reports of the church's growth (Acts 2.41; 4.4; 21.20). Nevertheless, periods of intensive growth attested for new religious movements throughout history and today render the general portrait of expansion in Luke's reports more plausible. Indeed, far from being absurd, Luke's figures appear modest in comparison with significant growth rates even in much of global Christianity today. Granted, Luke may have preferred higher estimates where available, and it is doubtful that the Jerusalem church kept careful statistics even in its heyday. Nor is Luke against hyperbole where it fits the bounds of normal historiographic speech (cf., e.g., Lk. 2.1). But concrete arguments against the plenitude suggested in Luke's estimates are not compelling, so if we have other reasons to respect Luke's historiography, we do not need to question that the size of the early Christian movement that he reports was significant.

Luke's Figures

Luke offers two estimates of the initial growth of the church (Acts 2.41; 4.4), comparable to his Gospel tradition's estimate of those present for a feeding (Lk. 9.14). He provides a much higher estimate for the size of the church nearly three decades later, after persecution under Agrippa I has waned (Acts 21.20). These figures often surprise modern scholars.

It is not difficult to understand why Luke would include such a report. Ancient writers might cite such dramatic conversion reports to indicate the success of their protagonist's preaching; such reports are known, for example, about Pythagoras.¹ Luke's inclusion of these reports (especially

1. Pieter W. Van der Horst, 'Hellenistic Parallels to the Acts of the Apostles', *JSNT* 25 (1985), pp. 49-60 (58), notes the two thousand converts in Porphyry, *Vit.*

the first two cases) matches Luke's style; after each evangelistic sermon in Acts, Luke also reports people's acceptance or rejection (Acts 2.41; 4.4; 5.33; 7.54; 8.6, 36; 10.44; 13.44, 48-50; 17.32; 22.22; 28.24, 29).²

Precision in such estimates cannot be expected. Unless the mass conversions and baptisms were more organized than the spontaneous 'revival' meeting³ that Luke appears to envision for the day of Pentecost, it may have been difficult to make a precise count of the converts on that occasion. Nevertheless, as we shall note below, many settings exist today where the numbers of conversions recorded on a single occasion are far higher than those noted here, and movements often experience sudden growth spurts on particular occasions (not least the experiences that birth them).

In Acts 21.20, Luke reports the leaders of the Jerusalem church claiming ten thousands of Judean Christians. Luke elsewhere expresses his expectation of a significant Judean church in this period before Jerusalem's fall (Lk. 21.21; presumably addressed to disciples, in view of Lk. 20.45; 21.7-8). For Luke, the Jerusalem church already had thousands in Acts 2.41 and 4.4 (cf. 5.14; 6.7; 9.31); although the number declined significantly for a period (8.1), Luke now has his apologetic opportunity to reemphasize the message's success in Israel.⁴ Moreover, other Judean Christians would have increased the Jerusalem counts considerably.⁵ Some thus believe that Luke intends the number literally.⁶

Others argue that James or Luke uses the figure hyperbolically simply

Pyth. 20 and Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 30. These are from so long after Pythagoras's time that we can no longer ascertain the extent to which these depend on tradition.

2. M.D. Goulder, *Type and History in Acts* (London: SPCK, 1964), p. 84.

3. I borrow language from US religious history, but it has already been widely applied to global contexts; see, e.g., Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

4. Cf. Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), p. 45. Luke's apologetic includes grounding his story in Israel's heritage, but this of course makes his historiography fictitious no more than Josephus's apologetic makes his historiography fictitious.

5. For the many towns and villages the apostles could have readily evangelized even within a 15-mile (25-km) radius around Jerusalem, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (2 vols.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Leicester: Apollos, 2004), I, pp. 739-44; he plausibly argues that the figures in Acts 21.20 include all of Judea and Galilee (p. 745).

6. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP, 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 374.

to signify a very large number;⁷ the point is simply, ‘You see how strong the Jewish-Christian community is.’⁸ After all, even 10,000 is higher than some estimates for the total number of believers in Jesus in this period.⁹ Luke certainly does use hyperbole elsewhere, especially in his use of ‘all’ (including in this verse, where ‘all’ of them are zealous); Luke can use an unspecified ‘myriads’ simply to designate a great number (Lk. 12.1).¹⁰ Further, ‘tens of thousands’ (and sometimes ‘thousands’) were employed in hyperbole, like our ‘millions’ today (e.g. 1 Sam. 18.8; 21.11; 29.5; Ps. 3.6; 1 Cor. 14.19).¹¹

While offhanded hyperbole is certainly possible and even likely in

7. I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 343-44 (tentatively); James D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 285; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 693; Stanley E. Porter, *Paul in Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), p. 176 (also listing various views); Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 544.

8. Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 608-609, citing ancient exaggerations. Even ancient historians often inflated their statistics (or perhaps guessed high), though the generosity of such calculations could subject them to other historians’ critique (Polybius 12.17.1–12.22.7), and very careful historians might explain what factors rendered an estimate impossible (Thucydides 5.68.2).

9. Arthur G. Patzia, *The Emergence of the Church: Context, Growth, Leadership and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 142, thinks one low estimate of 7,530 by the end of the first century is probably closer to correct (though perhaps on the low end) than an earlier high estimate of a half million, noting that the lower estimate model accounts for growth to about six million, i.e., 10 percent of the Empire, by the time of Constantine. Yet the growth rate would not have been constant, and the revival fervor of the first generations probably yielded a more rapid early growth rate, as in the history of most subsequent revival movements.

10. Luke elsewhere uses it only for a specified number, in Acts 19.19. Early Christians applied it to angels, but probably genuinely believed them innumerable (Heb. 12.22; Jude 14; Rev. 5.11).

11. See further, e.g., Euripides, *Med.* 965; Musonius Rufus 1; Diogenes Laertius, *Vit. phil.* 6.7.98; Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 16.70; 28.135; Philo, *Abr.* 1, 64; Lev. 26.8; Deut. 32.30; 1 Sam. 18.7-8; 21.11; 29.5; Josephus, *Ant.* 19.1, 67; *Apion* 1.38; Justin, *Dial.* 115; perhaps Lk. 12.1 (though this is unclear); a huge but indefinite number in Dio Chrysostom, *Avar.* (*Or.* 17) 4, 20; on deliberately losing count, see Catullus 5.7-13; 7.3; for other clearly hyperbolic numbers, see, e.g., Catullus 48.3. Cf. also Galen O. Rowe, ‘Style’, in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 BC–AD 400* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), pp. 121-57 (125).

the passage (*many* myriads is dramatic, especially if Jerusalem alone is meant), the traditional reason for insisting on it is open to question. Munck, for instance, doubted the possibility of 50,000 believers (the minimum he believed qualified for 'many myriads'), given an estimate of 25,000 to 30,000 residents in Jerusalem and half a million for all Judea.¹² But as we shall note in greater detail below, newer estimates of Jerusalem's population suggest that it may have doubled from as many as 40,000 in Herod the Great's time to perhaps 80,000 by the time of Agrippa II.¹³ Others put the figure much higher (over 100,000) and suggest that the count (which could then include Judean pilgrims from outside Jerusalem) would be even higher at Pentecost.¹⁴

Enough Water for 3000 Baptisms in 2.41?

Many scholars doubt that all three thousand converts that Luke reports could have been baptized in a single day.¹⁵ Barrett, for example, notes that 'Mass baptisms would have been easy at a river..., but there were no natural large-scale supplies of water in the city.'¹⁶ While one could wonder about the precision of Luke's information source here, Barrett's argument against it is ill-founded, as we shall see below, in view of Jerusalem's water resources. Luke's 'in that day' could be hyperbole, but in this case Luke probably knew the available resources of the temple mount better than do most of his modern critics. Scholars have often noted his accuracy with respect to aspects of the temple's topography

12. Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), p. 241.

13. David A. Fiensy, 'The Composition of the Jerusalem Church', in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting, 4; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 213-36 (214) (noting also the claim in Pliny, *Nat.* 5.70 that it was the 'most illustrious city in the east'); Wolfgang Reinhardt, 'The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church', in Bauckham (ed.), *Palestinian Setting*, pp. 237-65 (241-43); John Wilkinson, 'Ancient Jerusalem: Its Water Supply and Population', *PEQ* 106 (1974), pp. 33-51, plates VII-XII; Magen Broshi, 'La population de l'ancienne Jérusalem', *RB* 82 (1975), pp. 5-14.

14. Reinhardt, 'Population Size', pp. 237-38.

15. E.g. J.H.E. Hull, *The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles* (Cleveland, OH: World, 1968), p. 93.

16. C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994-1998), I, p. 159.

(e.g. Acts 21.32, 35, 40), not too surprising in the likely eyewitness ‘we’ material.

Critics underestimate Jerusalem’s water resources. To accommodate the thousands of worshipers the temple hosted daily, the temple mount must have afforded plenty of baptismal pools.¹⁷ Despite lack of complete excavations, it appears that some, apparently many, *miqvaot* on the temple mount were used before people entered the temple area.¹⁸ A number of *miqvaot* appear in what may be a bath complex for ritual bathing south of the temple.¹⁹ Even the Roman historian Tacitus was familiar with the claim that the temple held many pools as well as cisterns for rainwater (*Hist.* 5.12). (When flowing water was unavailable, *miqvaot* normally depended on rainwater.²⁰)

Nor should we suppose that such use would risk exhausting the water supply for *miqvaot*, even if (and this is not the case) many people’s use depleted the pools significantly more than disuse would have.

17. With, e.g., Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 63; Yonathan Adler, ‘The Ritual Baths near the Temple Mount and Extra-Purification before Entering the Temple Courts: A Reply to Eyal Regev’, *IEJ* 56 (2006), pp. 209-15 (interpreting the baths differently from Regev). Cf. Eric M. Meyers and James F. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis, and Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), pp. 25-26.

18. See Ronny Reich, ‘Two Possible *Miqwa’ot* on the Temple Mount’, *IEJ* 39 (1989), pp. 63-65; Benjamin Mazar, ‘Excavations near Temple Mount Reveal Splendors of Herodian Jerusalem’, *BAR* 6 (1980), pp. 44-59 (52); Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology*, pp. 25-26, 55; Eyal Regev, ‘The Ritual Baths near the Temple Mount and Extra-Purification before Entering the Temple Courts’, *IEJ* 55 (2005), pp. 194-204; in later literary sources, cf. *m. Tam.* 1.1; *m. Mid.* 1.9; *m. Neg.* 14.8. Other *miqvaot* apparently appeared en route to Jerusalem, or at least nearby (e.g. Ronny Reich, ‘A *Miqweh* at ‘Isawiya near Jerusalem’, *IEJ* 34 [1984], pp. 220-23; *m. Par.* 3.7). For the tradition of officers over water resources in the temple, see Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 171, 174.

19. John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), p. 106.

20. See *m. Ter.* 5.6; *m. ’Ed.* 1.3; 7.3-4; *m. Miq.* 2.3-5; 3.1-4; 4.1-5; 5.1-6; *t. Miq.* 2; *t. ’Ed.* 1.3; *Sifra Shemini* par. 9.118.1.1; *b. Šab.* 16b; 65a; 144b; *b. Pes.* 17b; 34b; *b. Beṣ* 18; *b. Giṭ.* 16a; *B. Bat.* 66a; *b. Mak.* 4a; *b. Bek.* 55b; *p. Ter.* 4.12, 5.7; cf. CD 10.12; more fully, Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), I, pp. 510-11. Even most homes in Herodian Jerusalem had underground cisterns for collecting drinking water (McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, p. 125).

Archaeologists have excavated thirty-four cisterns near the temple mount; 'the capacity of some of these is as much as 8,000-12,000 cubic metres'.²¹ If one includes pools²² like Bethesda and Siloam (and subsequent tradition designates at least Siloam as useful for ritual immersion before Jerusalem's fall),²³ the amount of water available for baptism is among the least problems for the narrative's plausibility. With a total of 150 *known* immersion pools in Jerusalem, the immersion of three thousand persons in the span of a few hours would not have been difficult.²⁴

Likewise, against those who doubt that the one hundred twenty disciples of 1.15 could baptize three thousand people,²⁵ these baptisms

21. S. Safrai, 'The Temple', in S. Safrai and M. Stern (eds.), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions* (2 vols.; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), II, pp. 865-907 (884). Some estimate that the subterranean reservoirs beneath the temple mount functioned as cisterns holding up to ten million gallons (McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, p. 123). Proper *miqvaot* would not use drawn water (see Keener, *John*, pp. 510-11), but the cisterns would accommodate the temple's other needs; I am not aware whether conduits existed between some cisterns and *miqvaot* here, but some did elsewhere (cf. Nahman Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980], p. 139; Moshe Pearlman, *The Zealots of Masada* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967], pp. 180-81; Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand* [New York: Random House, 1966], p. 166; Rachel Hachlili and Ann Killebrew, 'The Saga of the Goliath Family', *BARev* 9 [1983], pp. 44-53 [44, 46]).

22. On these other pools in Jerusalem, see, e.g., McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, pp. 122-24; R. Reich and E. Shukron, 'Brykt hsylywh mymy hbyt hsnv byrwslym', *Qadmoniot* 38 (2005), pp. 91-96.

23. *m. Zab.* 1.5; *p. Ta'an.* 2.1, §8; Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, p. 320.

24. See Bill Grasham, 'Archaeology and Christian Baptism', *ResQ* 43 (2001), pp. 113-16. Pools also apparently occurred on roads en route to Jerusalem for pilgrims (David Amit, 'A *Miqveh* Complex near Alon Shevut', *Atiqot* 38 [1999], pp. 75-84). Such accommodations proved particularly important just before festivals (cf. Jn 11.55; for early arrivals for purification, see e.g., Safrai, 'Temple', pp. 876-77, citing, e.g., Josephus, *War* 1.229; esp. for corpse-impurity, cf. David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000], pp. 274-75; E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE* [Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992], pp. 134-35).

25. E.g. Barrett, *Acts*, p. 159. He is also skeptical that the women among the 120 would have participated; but only women would supervise women's immersions, at least insofar as such immersions would have been done in the nude (cf. Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983], p. 151) as with *miqvaot* on the temple mount.

would not have been formal ceremonies analogous to modern baptisms (with baptismal records, family gatherings and so forth) or even individual ancient proselyte baptisms. ‘Baptizing’ in this period involved mainly supervision while the people coming for purification immersed themselves; the disciples could, like John, supervise mass baptisms without individual attention (Lk. 3.3, 7, 12, 16, 21). Even if only the apostles and a few of their colleagues, say a total of thirty, ‘performed’ the baptisms in thirty *miqvaot*, they could have completed their task in a few hours. Indeed, even this view of matters probably assumes more organization than actually occurred in the excited atmosphere of mass conversions;²⁶ once verbal instructions were issued, mass immersions in response to Peter’s command could have occurred with very little supervision at all.²⁷

Inflating Numbers in Antiquity

None of this is meant to deny that Luke or his sources could have preferred higher estimates if they lacked more specific ones. Because Luke lacks such estimates in his accounts of Paul’s Diaspora ministry (even in the undoubtedly eyewitness ‘we’ material), however, it is unlikely that Luke invents the numbers here, so any exaggeration probably would belong to his source.

It was common to exaggerate numbers, for instance, of enemies slain in battle (Xenophon, *Hier.* 2.16; Livy 3.8.10); or one might exaggerate enemy numbers to mitigate the shame of one’s own defeat.²⁸ Pliny the

26. Conversion could also include emotion in a philosophic setting (cf. the desired response in protrepsis in Plutarch, *Aud. (On Lectures)* 37F-38D in Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* [Library of Early Christianity, 4; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986], pp. 71-72).

27. Though by analogy with John’s baptism and various passages claiming that the apostles ‘baptized’ people, some sort of supervision probably remained the norm (cf. Lk. 3.7; 7.29-30; Acts 1.5; 8.38; 10.48; 11.16; 19.4).

28. So defeated soldiers in Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.61. Cf., e.g., high enemy numbers in Velleius Paterculus 2.23.3; 2.30.5; 2.47.1; 2.110.3 (though Velleius was himself an officer in this war—2.111.3—he would not have compiled the statistics himself). Cf. 150,000 dead in Diodorus Siculus 14.76.2. Few rivalled the rabbis in numerical hyperbole, with 80,000 myriads (i.e. 800 million) slain at Betar (*p. Ta’an.* 4.5, §10); 150,000 schoolchildren slain there (*Lam. R.* 3.51, §9); the blood flowing to distant lands (*p. Suk.* 5.1, §7; *Lam. R.* 2.2, §4); and Gentiles fertilizing their vineyards for seven years with Jewish blood (*b. Git.* 57a). Cf. the growth in Philistine numbers

Younger, who otherwise emphasizes historians' high standards for facts, jests that one correspondent boasts like historians of numbers too great to count (Pliny, *Ep.* 9.16.1). Lucian complains that one particularly ridiculous historian so reduces Roman casualties, and so inflates those of the enemy, that no one will take him seriously (*Hist.* 20). Thus Dunn, commenting on Luke's figures, remarks, 'Numbers in ancient historians tended to be more impressionistic (or propagandistic) rather than to provide what we today would regard as an accurate accounting.'²⁹

Some ancient figures would be more concrete (like estimates based on the number of men lost if a Roman legion were destroyed); but many were estimates based on less evidence. On the whole, historians were not careless, but even the best of them often had only approximations.³⁰ Sometimes numbers that historians cited did not fit other known data, in which case later historians might critique them (Polybius 12.17.1–12.22.7) or prefer to blame the scribe rather than the historian (12.4.4–6).³¹ Thucydides also complains that he could not provide the numbers for one battle because one side would not reveal them and the other side clearly exaggerated their numbers (Thucydides 5.68.2).³²

At the same time, strikingly large numbers do appear frequently in documented historical times;³³ in the most costly war of which Polybius

between Judg. 16.27 MT and *Ps.-Philo* 43.8.

29. Dunn, *Acts*, p. 34.

30. Catherine Rubincam, 'Numbers in Greek Poetry and Historiography: Quantifying Fehling', *CQ* 53 (2003), pp. 448–63 (evaluating, among others, Thucydides). Thus Quintus Curtius 4.16.26 (LCL 1.319), reports the number of Persian casualties, 'so far as the victors could determine their number' (and even here does not match all other sources). Suetonius, *Aug.* 30, lists higher values for one donation than *Res gest. divi Aug.* 4.21 (which would not underestimate) lists altogether, but in addition to the real possibility that Suetonius misinterpreted his source, his value estimates might account for inflation by his day, or perhaps Augustus may not have calculated the gems and pearls in equivalent sesterces (gold appearing later in the passage).

31. Sometimes scribes did miscopy numbers (e.g. reading VIII as CIII in Livy 3.3.9; see LCL 2.251, n. 1). Authors today similarly know that some copyeditors are more reliable than others.

32. Even Roman legions provided a higher paper strength than their real force; thus a century contained no more than eighty troops; see J. Brian Campbell, 'Centurio', in *Brill's New Pauly*, III, pp. 127–28 (127); *idem*, 'Centuria: Military', in *Brill's New Pauly*, III, pp. 126–27.

33. Some large figures must have depended on genuine sources despite their propaganda value; see, e.g., *Res gest. divi Aug.* 1.3; 4.21; *Res gest. divi Aug.* summary.

knew (1.63.4, 8), the Romans lost about seven hundred quinqueremes and the Carthaginians about five hundred (1.63.6). No less dramatically, Polybius estimates that about 70,000 Romans died in the battle at Cannae (3.117.4). Lest anyone question his accuracy, Polybius emphasizes that he is not (like some historians) merely interested in numbers that are ‘plausible’; he discovered an actual bronze tablet where Hannibal made a list (Polybius 3.33.17-18). We may choose to think that Polybius invented the tablet list or, more probably, that his Carthaginian source did. But given the stakes involved in the war, these numbers likely bear some semblance to what took place. Similarly, even in the process of Lucian’s denouncing one historian’s overestimates, noted above, Lucian inadvertently attests that firsthand records were available. This historian contradicts the officers’ reports, which Lucian apparently knows (*Hist.* 20), though of course even firsthand reports are often estimates.

Josephus’s estimates are routinely inflated;³⁴ where we can test him most clearly, he can inflate numbers in the biblical text.³⁵ He estimates that over one million in Jerusalem died during the war (*War* 6.420), though he concedes that most were Jews from elsewhere trapped inside (*War* 6.421). Although he attributes the information to a census of the high priests in the time of Nero, few take literally his claim that 2,700,000 people showed up for Passovers (*War* 6.423-425); increasing the numbers was to Josephus’s advantage.³⁶ Some, however, adjust the figures too far in the opposite direction; Josephus is at least internally consistent.³⁷ Pliny, after all, calls Jerusalem the east’s ‘most illustrious city’.³⁸ Where we can compare their estimates on some concrete points, however, Josephus’s estimates appear higher than Luke’s (see, e.g., *War*

34. As is widely acknowledged (e.g. Louis H. Feldman, ‘Introduction’, in Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata [eds.], *Josephus, the Bible, and History* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989], pp. 17-49 [45-46]).

35. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 6.203 with 1 Sam. 18.27 MT (though the LXX, if derivative, actually decreases the MT number!)

36. Cf., e.g., F.J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, ‘Background of Jewish History’, in F.J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), I, pp. 1-34 (1 n. 3); Michael Avi-Yonah, ‘Historical Geography of Palestine’, in Safrai and Stern (eds.), *Jewish People in the First Century*, pp. 78-116 (109).

37. See Anthony Byatt, ‘Josephus and Population Numbers in First Century Palestine’, *PEQ* 105 (1973), pp. 51-60 (but most think that Byatt estimates too high).

38. Pliny, *Nat.* 5.70 (Fiensy, ‘Composition’, p. 214).

2.261 vs. Acts 21.38).³⁹

Jerusalem's Population Estimates

While estimation and even exaggeration would not therefore have removed Luke from the company of ancient historians, not all estimates were bad estimates. The specific reasons for which scholars accuse Luke of inflating the numbers are not compelling.

Most scholars reject Luke's figures because the scholars depend on Jeremias's now outdated estimates for Jerusalem's population (25,000-30,000) instead of on newer estimates that range much higher.⁴⁰ Jerusalem had expanded beyond its walls in this period,⁴¹ but Jeremias's biggest mistake was his underestimation of population density,⁴² which was much greater than the early-nineteenth-century Palestinian settlements on which Jeremias based his estimate.⁴³ Magen Broshi has noted that Roman Jerusalem enclosed some four hundred and fifty acres, and estimates about 80,000 inhabitants.⁴⁴ More recent density and area estimates also

39. Where Luke lacked any incentive to inflate; Josephus may have had some, but may simply have a habit of estimating high. Commentators address this discrepancy in greater detail; see discussion in my forthcoming Acts commentary.

40. Reinhardt, 'Population Size', pp. 237, 240-41 (suggesting 60,000-120,000 in the 30s CE); Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision: (Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship)*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 173, suggests 40,000-70,000. Even much earlier, F.C. Grant's estimates (Bruce cites F.C. Grant, *The Economic Background of the Gospels* [Oxford, 1926], p. 83) were triple Jeremias's; moreover, this estimate may refer to all of Palestine. Estimates were, as some scholars (e.g. F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972], p. 39; Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 125) note, difficult. Foakes Jackson and Lake, 'Background of Jewish History', p. 1, estimate 50,000.

41. Reinhardt, 'Population Size', p. 243.

42. Reinhardt, 'Population Size', p. 245. Population density in Ostia (435 per hectare) was much higher than in Pompeii (125-156 per hectare; Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995], p. 166); Jerusalem was probably analogously heavily populated compared with Galilean towns.

43. Reinhardt, 'Population Size', p. 250.

44. Magen Broshi, 'Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem', *BAR* 4 (1978), pp. 10-15 (14) (close to double his estimate for the Herodian period, p. 13); cf. also Broshi, 'Population de l'ancienne Jérusalem'. Earlier, *Ep. Arist.* 105 estimates a compass of 40 stadia.

usually suggest 80,000 or higher.⁴⁵ Herod so increased the city's water supply that the city could have doubled its population⁴⁶ and supported at least 70,000 (though some think that the temple complex consumed so much water that the population remained around 40,000).⁴⁷

At feast times like Pentecost, Jerusalem might swell to as many as half a million people, with an estimated 30,000 from the Mediterranean Diaspora.⁴⁸ The temple mount was large enough to hold tens of thousands at one time; estimates run as high as 200,000⁴⁹ or 400,000.⁵⁰ Modern Western interpreters, underestimating population density, tend to dismiss high numbers,⁵¹ but checks exist on our skepticism today. For example, the Sacred Mosque at Mecca, which is 180,000 square meters (i.e. just 36,000 square meters more than Jerusalem's temple mount), holds 500,000 in prayer.⁵² Mecca hosted only about 108,000 pilgrims annually before the First World War, but due to modern transportation, now hosts over two million. Nevertheless, Mecca is smaller and less accessible than Jerusalem was.⁵³

As we have suggested, the estimate later, in Acts 21.20, likely refers not only to Jerusalem proper, but to all Judean believers in Jesus. Luke speaks of 'Judeans' here, so there is no reason to limit the number to

45. Reinhardt, 'Population Size', pp. 241-43. Wilkinson, 'Ancient Jerusalem', estimates over 70,000 for this period.

46. See, e.g., McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, pp. 122-23.

47. John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The New Testament in its Social Environment* (Library of Early Christianity, 2; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 97. Some have even suggested that Rev. 11.13 provides one ancient estimate of Jerusalem's population at around 70,000 (cf. George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974], p. 177; David E. Aune, *Revelation* [3 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1997], II, p. 628), though it is difficult to know how accurate Revelation's guesses would have been.

48. Fiensy, 'Composition', p. 233 (also citing archaeological evidence for the community centers that housed many of them, including the Theodotus inscription). Pervo's denial that Luke could include Diaspora hearers would seem to ignore 2.5-13, but he may mean this objection only to Diaspora hearers in 4.4 (Pervo, *Acts*, pp. 86-87 n. 115).

49. Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 156.

50. Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 126.

51. Ancients sometimes did the same with ruined cities (a practice to which Thucydides objected in 1.10.1-2).

52. Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 126.

53. Sanders, *Judaism*, p. 127.

Jerusalem proper. Counting all Judeans would swell much further the total population from which the estimate of Christians at that time would be taken.

Are Rapid Growth Rates Feasible?

Given such estimates, thousands of hearers and a rapid mass movement of three thousand conversions need not be deemed implausible. A stronger reason that modern Western readers often find Luke's portrait of a dramatic multiplication of the church (especially to tens of thousands in 21.20) implausible is because it violates our usual experience today,⁵⁴ but it stands well within the experience of global renewal movements. While movements can start small, the history and sociology of movements demonstrate that some can also multiply at a tremendous rate after a major revival experience like the one suggested in this chapter.⁵⁵

Rodney Stark insists that sociology supports gradual growth rather than mass conversions,⁵⁶ but applying that approach uniformly to all periods of early Christianity does not take into account rapid people movements often noted in current missiological literature. Richard Pervo cites Stark's estimate against Luke's accuracy here.⁵⁷ Addressing a later period, Ramsay MacMullen argues for a much lower proportion of Christians in the Empire (especially actual church-attending ones) than is usually thought,⁵⁸ but his estimates reflect archaeological remains (which

54. Cf. the older romantic notions that earliest Christianity's converts were necessarily few (Shirley Jackson Case, *The Social Origins of Christianity* [New York: Cooper Square, 1975; reprint of 1923 ed.], p. 79).

55. The modern history of revivals readily illustrates the possibility of rapid growth (John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007], pp. 57-62; cf. Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009], p. 111), as does the rapid proliferation of Christianity (and its particular branches), Islam, and other movements in various parts of the world in the twentieth century.

56. Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 65-70.

57. Pervo, *Acts*, p. 87, citing Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 7-13.

58. Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200-400* (Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series, 1; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), p. 112.

are always incomplete), more space between worshipers than I would extrapolate from my observations of typical Majority World churches today, and, what really matters for our considerations, his figures apply only to a much later period, c. 400 CE.⁵⁹ Movements often begin rapidly and then slow in their growth rate.

One can offer various examples of rapid early growth, many in cases where explicit records do exist. Thus, for example, early Methodists in the United States (who kept records) grew roughly a thousand times over in four decades. Under the leadership of Francis Asbury, they grew from three hundred in 1771 (when Asbury arrived) to 300,000 forty years later, i.e., one thousand times over.⁶⁰ This growth was exponential, possible if the growth rate is sustained over time; thus, in 1780, they had 8,500 members; by 1790, they had more than 50,000.⁶¹ Rates of growth fluctuated, rising during times of revival, with the largest numerical influx toward the end of this period. Less dramatically yet noteworthy, Methodism in England grew from 22,000 in 1767 to 96,000 by 1800 to 518,000 (over twenty times over in about eighty years).⁶²

59. His distinction between the faith of the elite and that of the masses, however, is well-taken. Literary sources provide higher estimates; see David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 184-86, 192.

60. E.g. Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 190. More conservatively, John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 10, notes 'more than two hundred thousand' at his death in 1816, but (p. 402) more than 250,000 by 1820 and nearly 500,000 by 1830 (nearly three million by 1876). Kenneth Cracknell and Susan J. White, *An Introduction to World Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 45-46, note a few thousand in 1784; about a quarter million by 1820; half a million a decade later; over a million 13 years later, in 1843. For rapid Methodist growth in the USA and Great Britain, see also Wolffe, *Expansion*, pp. 40-41, 70.

61. Noll, *Rise*, p. 216; Wigger, *Saint*, p. 139. For a chart showing the growth to over 70,000 in 1791, see Noll, *Rise*, p. 218. Note figures showing variations in the growth rate in Wigger, *Saint*, pp. 10, 165, 185 (578 percent increase in the 1780s, but only 11 percent in the 1790s), pp. 303-304 (nearly threefold increase from 1800 to 1810); numbers of those who attended services were far higher than those on these membership rolls (p. 196).

62. David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 51. For more restrained yet comparable statistics from about 1800-50, see Wolffe, *Expansion*, p. 70

Similarly, a Holiness denomination grew 300 percent in five years after what it viewed as its 'pentecost' experience;⁶³ earlier, Jesuits multiplied five hundred times in their first sixteen years.⁶⁴ In Korea, northern Methodists grew 118 percent in one year (and Presbyterians 34 percent) during the Korean revival of 1907;⁶⁵ more recently, one Korean church grew from five to 720,000 members in 40 years (i.e. it multiplied by 144,000).⁶⁶ Indonesia's Nias church grew from five hundred to 135,000 (i.e. 270 times the original number) in forty years; other Indonesian Christian groups multiplied in the 1960s, with the Timor church baptizing 200,000 in two years.⁶⁷ In South Africa, African Indigenous Churches grew from 32 groups in 1913 to over 3,500, accounting for over 27 percent of the black population, 71 years later.⁶⁸ One recent revival movement in India

(about eighteen-fold increase in the USA and five-fold in Great Britain); for growth from 14,000 to over a million between 1784 and 1844, see Robert Bruce Mullin, *A Short World History of Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp. 182-83; one thousand to nearly half a million from 1770 to 1830 in Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), p. 64. For some factors, see Wolffe, *Expansion*, p. 41; but apart from immigration, such factors could have applied equally to the Jerusalem church as a renewal movement within Judaism.

63. Vinson Synan, *The Old-Time Power: A History of the Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Franklin Springs, GA: Advocate Press, 1973), p. 123.

64. Mullin, *History*, p. 138.

65. Young-Hoon Lee, 'Korean Pentecost: The Great Revival of 1907', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 4 (2001), pp. 73-83 (81).

66. David S. Lim, 'A Missiological Evaluation of David Yonggi Cho's Church Growth', in Wonsuk Ma, William W. Menzies and Hyeon-sung Bae (eds.), *David Yonggi Cho: A Close Look at his Theology and Ministry* (Baguio, Philippines: APTS Press and Hansei University Press, 2004), pp. 181-207 (182-83); with a generally '20-30% annual growth rate', Young-Hoon Lee, 'The Korean Holy Spirit Movement in Relation to Pentecostalism', in Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang (eds.), *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia* (Oxford: Regnum; Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2005), pp. 509-26 (518); in South Korea generally, cf. also Young-gi Hong, 'Social Leadership and Church Growth', in Ma *et al.* (eds.), *David Yonggi Cho*, pp. 221-51 (233-34).

67. Ted E. York, 'Indigenous Missionaries—A Fruit of Revival: Lessons from the Indonesian Revival of 1965 to 1971', *Journal of Asian Mission* 5 (2003), pp. 243-58 (249).

68. G.C. Oosthuizen, S.D. Edwards, W.H. Wessels and I. Hexham, 'Introduction', in G.C. Oosthuizen *et al.* (eds.), *Afro-Christian Religion and Healing in Southern Africa* (African Studies, 8; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1989), pp. 5-8 (5); cf. Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, 'Indigenous Healing within the Context of African Independent

grew 3000 percent in a two-year period.⁶⁹

Although absorbing elements of some earlier movements (including many Holiness groups), Pentecostalism (with charismatics) grew by perhaps *half a billion* in one century. As a movement that values the revival exemplified by the church's first Pentecost, it strongly values growth. Some church historians have described Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity as 'the fastest-growing form of Christianity ever'.⁷⁰ Estimates of global figures for these charismatic and Pentecostal Christians vary by definition but are in the hundreds of millions.

Defining 'charismatic' broadly, David Barrett originally estimated over 600 million by 2000, or nearly 30 percent of world Christianity,⁷¹ though he revised his estimate downward closer to 2000 (roughly 524 million).⁷² Yale scholar Lamin Sanneh estimated almost 590 million for 2005 (and projected nearly 800 million by 2025).⁷³ In 1994 Harvard scholar Harvey

Churches', in Oosthuizen *et al.* (eds.), *Afro-Christian Religion*, pp. 71-90 (73-74); for 35 percent of the indigenous population, see *idem*, *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), p. 1.

69. Abraham T. Pothen, 'Indigenous Cross-cultural Missions in India and their Contribution to Church Growth: With Special Emphasis on Pentecostal-Charismatic Missions' (PhD Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 1990), p. 187 (on the Filadelfia church movement, see more fully, pp. 174-94); as in Acts, miracle reports are a major factor in the growth (pp. 189-90). From a single mother church in 1981, the Filadelfia movement grew to 450 churches (40,000-50,000 people, all from non-Christian backgrounds) in 1991, to some 1,200 churches with over 150,000 adherents by 2006; see Joy Punnoose, 'Filadelfia Fellowship Church of India', *Cross & Crown* 36 (Nov. 2005), pp. 32-33 (32); Finny Philip, 'The Thomas Mathews Revolution', *Cross & Crown* 36 (Nov. 2005), pp. 18-23 (21); personal correspondence with Finny Philip, Sept. 21, 2006.

70. Stephen Tomkins, *A Short History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 220.

71. David B. Barrett, 'Statistics, Global', in Stanley M. Burgess, Gary B. McGee and Patrick H. Alexander (eds.), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 810-29 (813).

72. David B. Barrett, 'The Worldwide Holy Spirit Renewal', in Vinson Synan (ed.), *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901-2001* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), pp. 381-414 (388); cf. 460 million in Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. ix, 281, for 1995; 530 million in *idem*, 'Streams of Renewal at the End of the Century', in Synana (ed.), *Century of Holy Spirit*, pp. 349-80 (372), for 1999.

73. Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 275.

Cox already accepted a then-current estimate of 410 million,⁷⁴ and a few years later suggested that 'Pentecostals' could 'equal Catholics in number by' 2030.⁷⁵

Although the wider definition of these labels would surprise some believers so classified, according to high estimates, as of the year 2000 there were 126 million Pentecostal/charismatic Christians in Africa, 134.9 million in Asia and 141.4 million in Latin America (with 79.6 million in North America), whereas there were almost none a century earlier.⁷⁶ The newest figures estimate some 614 million Pentecostals, charismatics and neocharismatics for 2010 (out of roughly two billion church members, or 1.5 billion church attenders, in the world), with an estimate of nearly 800 million for 2025.⁷⁷ These estimates make the charismatic branch of Christendom second in size only to Roman Catholicism (with which it overlaps).⁷⁸

Again, keep in mind that virtually all of this growth has occurred in

74. Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), p. xv.

75. Harvey Cox, 'Into the Age of Miracles: Culture, Religion, and the Market Revolution', *World Policy Journal* 14 (1997), pp. 87-95 (88). Cf. the breakdown of figures in Vinson Synan, *The Spirit Said 'Grow': The Astounding Worldwide Expansion of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches* (Monrovia, CA: MARC [World Vision], 1992), pp. 5-11 (though note the many inactive 'postcharismatics'). The figure of 'two billion' (attributed to 'some estimates' in Mullin, *History*, p. 272) is plainly impossible.

76. Noll, *Shape*, p. 22, cites these figures (as 'best estimates', p. 23) from David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2001).

77. Todd M. Johnson, David B. Barrett and Peter F. Crossing, 'Christianity 2010: A View from the *New Atlas of Global Christianity*', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34 (2010), pp. 29-36 (36). Given on the same page, the comparable figures for evangelicals more traditionally defined are about 263 million for 2010 and 348 million for 2025. By these figures charismatics broadly defined thus comprise roughly 28 percent of global church membership (estimated as closer to 31 percent by 2025), and perhaps closer to 40 percent of church attenders (closer to 45 percent by 2025). Pentecostals proper account for an estimated 94,383,000; charismatics for 206,579,000; and Third Wave for 313,048,000 (Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross [eds.], *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910-2010* [Edinburgh: Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2009], p. 102). The growth rate does appear to be slower today than during some previous estimates.

78. Johnson and Ross, *Atlas*, p. 102, estimate that 'renewalists' comprise 22.4 percent of Protestants and 22.7 percent of Catholics.

roughly one century. Even if these estimates are wildly exaggerated (and I suspect that they may need to be nuanced), they are phenomenal, reflecting a one-century growth from the movement's beginning to nearly 10 percent of the global population. Thus even if we force these estimates considerably downward, they easily exceed the rate of growth envisioned in the church's first few decades in Acts.

Another shift in one century, probably even better documented, has been no less dramatic, although not unrelated to this Pentecostal shift. Whereas fewer than 18 percent of Christians in 1900 lived outside Europe and North America, today over 60 percent do, and an estimated 70 percent will by 2025.⁷⁹ As the center of world Christianity has shifted to the global South, the dominant Christian perspectives in the world have shifted with it.⁸⁰ Although far from the only groups involved in this shift, charismatic and Pentecostal forms of Christianity have been in the forefront of the recent expansion of Christianity, reportedly growing six times over in the three decades from 1970 to 2000.⁸¹ All these figures should provide some perspective to models that emphasize slow but steady church growth between Pentecost and Constantine, especially with respect to the movement's beginning. Far from being absurd, Luke's figures are modest in comparison with significant growth rates in much of global Christianity and other mass movements today.

Growth spurts and People Movements

79. Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), p. 121 (noting also that by 2050 'only about one-fifth of the world's Christians will be white'). The shift of Christianity especially to the global South is now too widely documented (and regularly noted, e.g., Samuel Escobar, *Changing Tides: Latin America and World Mission Today* [American Society of Missiology Monograph Series, 31; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002], pp. 84-85; Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009], p. 13) to require much comment.

80. Mark Laing, 'The Changing Face of Mission: Implications for the Southern Shift in Christianity', *Missiology* 34 (2006), pp. 165-77 (165). The label 'global south' is not very precise geographically; in employing the title, I am deferring to a current usage.

81. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, p. 121; on Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity (including Catholic charismatics) leading Christian expansion today, see also Noll, *Shape*, p. 115.

We have examined patterns of rapid expansion over the course of decades, but faster growth (such as appears in Luke's conversion summaries of 2.41 and 4.4) is also attested. On the first day of an unexpected revival movement in Suriname, in November 1994, perhaps eight hundred residents of Nieuw Nickerie, Suriname, were converted—reportedly more than ten times the number of local conversions over the previous century. More dramatically than in Jerusalem, these conversions involved an open change of religious affiliation, challenging centuries of inherited tradition. One dramatic and unsolicited healing of an elderly nonbeliever late on that first day impacted subsequent growth among his people group. This initial explosion of growth quickly led to a mass people movement (from less than 1 percent of the population) that over the following decade converted perhaps 35 percent of the population.⁸² That Luke should emphasize both immediate conversions (2.41) and continuing conversions (2.47) fits the sociological pattern reflected in this modern account.

Larger mass conversions occur in various biblically saturated parts of the world today, often with less clear incidents to prompt them than what Luke reports in this narrative. For example, although the retention rate is not documented, one campaign of the German Pentecostal evangelist Reinhard Bonnke in Nigeria claimed one million 'decisions for Christ' on the first night (Nov. 2000).⁸³ Even allowing for significant exaggeration or misunderstanding, the numbers dwarf any figures in early Christianity. Admittedly these Nigerian conversion reports occurred in a culture already familiar with Christianity; but the Jerusalem church also worked in an environment familiar with the Jewish piety that it claimed to epitomize.

It is also relevant to point out that rapid people movements (such as appear in Acts 9.35) are well-attested in Christian history and today.⁸⁴ As

82. Douglass Paul Norwood, 'A Reconciliation Colloquium for Church Leaders in Suriname' (DMin Project, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, MO, 2001), pp. 24-26; also my interview with Dr. Douglass Norwood, June 6, 2006. Norwood was an eyewitness of the initial revival, including the initial conversions and the healing of a skeptic who had previously had the disability for decades.

83. The popular work by James Rutz, *Megashift: Igniting Spiritual Power* (Colorado Springs: Empowerment Press, 2005), pp. 25-26, also claiming 'hundreds of thousands' of healings.

84. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 31, 235, 257, 364, 405, 446, 479-81; Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), pp. 365, 371; Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, pp. 87-

examples, one may cite cases from Myanmar,⁸⁵ India,⁸⁶ and Indonesia.⁸⁷ They appear in non-Christian movements as well.⁸⁸

The Real Historical Problem

It seems to me that the real problem with Luke's large numbers for Christians is an argument from silence, in this case Josephus's silence.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, some arguments from silence are weightier than others; we would expect Josephus to mention a movement of this magnitude, and his silence therefore calls for comment. Josephus is the one non-Christian source we might expect to mention such matters; instead he divides his nation into three sects (Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes; sometimes he further adds Zealots), none of which have even 10,000 members (even though Josephus is prone to amplify figures!)⁹⁰

Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that the Jewish Jesus movement provided mass martyrs in Neronian Rome in the mid-sixties (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44), yet (against Luke) proved completely marginal numerically in Judea and Galilee. There can be no doubt that churches existed in Judea (1 Thess. 2.14; Gal. 1.17-19, 22; Rom. 15.25-26, 31), yet Josephus

89; Noll, *Shape*, pp. 34-35.

85. Chin Khua Khai, *The Cross among Pagodas: A History of the Assemblies of God in Myanmar* (Baguio City, Philippines: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, 2003), pp. 130-31; among Karens, Saw Doh Say, 'A Brief History and Development Factors of the Karen Baptist Church of Burma (Myanma)' (ThM missiology thesis, Fuller School of World Mission, 1990).

86. Samuel Devadason, 'Indian Missionary Societies' (DMiss dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1978), pp. 224-30 (esp. p. 228; cf. pp. 22-23); among the Nagas, Puthvail Thomas Philip, 'The Growth of the Baptist Churches of Tribal Nagaland' (MA missiology thesis, Fuller School of World Mission, 1972), pp. 162-64; H. Longkumer, 'A Study of the Revival Movement in Nagaland' (MTh thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1981).

87. Gani Wiyono, 'Timor Revival: A Historical Study of the Great Twentieth-Century Revival in Indonesia', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 4 (2001), pp. 269-93 (276).

88. Cf., e.g., David J. Hesselgrave, *Dynamic Religious Movements: Case Studies of Rapidly Growing Religious Movements around the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

89. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 45, avers, 'Since he barely mentions it we may suppose he did not think it of much importance.'

90. E.g. Josephus, *Life* 10.

is silent about their existence altogether. There thus seems something more suspicious about Josephus's silence than about Luke's claim of many Christians. Moreover, even what Josephus is not silent about appears suspicious. There can hardly have been only three sects,⁹¹ their total numbers constituting less than 0.5 percent of Palestinian Judaism,⁹² or of Josephus's figures for Jerusalem's Passover.⁹³

That is, Josephus's 'sects' do not account for the religious practice of most Judeans (who belonged to no sects or to movements that Josephus regards as less relevant, important or useful to emphasize). Perhaps Josephus found less reason to emphasize the apolitical Nazarenes, who had far less appeal to the elite than Sadducees or Pharisees and far less malleability for philosophic comparisons than the Essenes. (By

91. For example, Josephus mentions two varieties of Essenes; later rabbis mention Boethusians as very close to, yet distinct from, the Sadducees (*AR N* 5A; *AR N* 10B), though they might simply be Essenes (cf. *t. Suk.* 3.1; *t. Yom.* 1.8; Adiel Schremer, 'The Name of the Boethusians: A Reconsideration of Suggested Explanations and Another One', *JJS* 48 [1997], pp. 290-99; for one study, see, e.g., John Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973], pp. 53-76). Cf. Martin Goodman, 'A Note on the Qumran Sectarians, the Essenes and Josephus', *JJS* 46 (1995), pp. 161-66 (though I still believe that Essenes authored the sectarian scrolls).

92. Avi-Yonah, 'Geography', pp. 109-10, argues for a population of about 2,800,000 for pre-70 Jewish Palestine; some estimate at about two and a half million (James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999], p. 213) or three million (Stambaugh and Balch, *Environment*, p. 83). But estimates vary between one and six million (McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, p. 123); some estimate 200,000 (Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* [SNTSMS, 17; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972], pp. 291-95) or 300,000 (Martin Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee, A. D. 132-212* [Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies; Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983], p. 32) for Galilee (for some calculations, cf. Horsley, *Galilee*, pp. 166, 193). Even at the lowest population figure, Josephus's sects account for not much more than 1 percent of the population.

93. Josephus's figures for Passover are inflated, but the same may be true for the 'sects', who may have liked to inflate their own numbers. Some estimate the Passover figures at about 40 percent of Josephus's figures (Byatt, 'Population Numbers'); most other estimates are much lower still (35-40 percent of Byatt's figures). Most regard Josephus's estimates as unreliable (Zeev Safrai, 'The Description of the Land of Israel in Josephus' Works', in Feldman and Hata [eds.], *Josephus, the Bible, and History*, pp. 295-324, esp. 320-21), although later rabbinic estimates of the Judean population depart even from a plausible order of magnitude (*Cant. R.* 1.16, §3).

comparison, the earliest Christian documents are completely silent about the Essenes.) Further, the Christian movement was known in Rome, hence could neither be idealized like Pharisees and Essenes, nor made relevant to the war like Zealots.

Further, conflicts over the Christian movement in Rome in the time of Claudius,⁹⁴ plus outright persecution of Christians in Rome under Nero,⁹⁵ may have made them a liability to a Jewish apologist.⁹⁶ Unlike the strictly Judean sects, the Christian movement was gathering strength throughout the Empire. As one earlier writer suggests, it was difficult for Josephus to address the Christian movement ‘shorn of its Messianic element’, so Josephus avoided the topic to avoid further incriminating Judaism with an unnecessarily ‘compromising connexion with a movement which was already hateful in the eyes of the ruling classes’.⁹⁷ Some argue that Josephus toned down David’s revolutionary activity and ancestry for the Messiah out of concern for the same Roman audience.⁹⁸ Although Josephus admits Judas the Galilean’s pursuit of kingship in *Ant.* 17.271-272, he tones down this picture to what could be construed as mere banditry in *War* 2.56.⁹⁹

Josephus does mention Jesus’ brother James, and likely does mention Jesus himself.¹⁰⁰ His silence about Jesus’ followers (except the possibly

94. See Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4 and my forthcoming Acts commentary at Acts 18.2.

95. Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.

96. Thus Robert Eisenman, *Maccabees, Zadokites, Christians and Qumran: A New Hypothesis of Qumran Origins* (SPB; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), p. 1, suggests quite plausibly that the Christian movement was unpopular and Josephus omits reference to it because he wanted ‘to avoid certain potentially incriminating facts’. On Josephus wishing to dissociate Judaism from the Christians, see James Carleton Paget, ‘Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity’, *JTS* 52 (2001), pp. 539-624; Josephus could not suppress mention of the Sicarii or Zealots, but he could minimize mention of Christians (but then why mention Jesus favorably, as he apparently does?) Certainly they were controversial in Rome, especially after their expulsion under Claudius and persecution under Nero.

97. Maurice Goguel, *The Life of Jesus* (trans. Olive Wyon; New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 82. (By contrast, connection with Sicarii and other revolutionary groups was unavoidable.)

98. See, e.g., Louis H. Feldman, ‘Portrait of David’, *HUCA* 60 (1989), pp. 129-74.

99. Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990), p. 83.

100. On his likely mention of Jesus, see, e.g., H. St J. Thackeray, *Josephus: The*

authentic 'tribe of Christians' in *Ant.* 18.64 (this is not typical Christian language) cannot be explained by ignorance, since he would have to know the significance attached to Jesus' followers in the Diaspora (especially the events in Rome just noted).¹⁰¹ He portrays neither Jesus nor John as

Man and the Historian (New York: KTAV, 1967), p. 125; Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), p. 79; André-Marie Dubarle, 'Le témoignage de Josèphe sur Jésus d'après la tradition indirecte', *RB* 80 (1973), pp. 481-513; Joseph Klausner, *Jesus: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (trans. Herbert Danby; New York: Menorah, 1979), pp. 55-57; James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1988), pp. 90-98; *idem*, 'Jesus, Early Jewish Literature, and Archaeology', in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus' Jewishness: Exploring the Place of Jesus within Early Judaism* (New York: American Interfaith Institute, Crossroad, 1991), pp. 177-98 (189-92); John P. Meier, 'Jesus in Josephus: A Modest Proposal', *CBQ* 52 (1990), pp. 76-103; *idem*, 'The Testimonium: Evidence for Jesus outside the Bible', *Biblical Review* 7 (1991), pp. 20-25, 45; E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1993), p. 50; Alice Whealey, 'Josephus on Jesus: Evidence from the First Millennium', *TZ* 51 (1995), pp. 285-304; *idem*, 'The Testimonium Flavianum in Syriac and Arabic', *NTS* 54 (2008), pp. 573-90; P.A. Gramaglia, 'Il Testamonium Flavianum. Analisi linguistica', *Henoch* 20 (1998), pp. 153-77; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 64-74; Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 59-62; Robert E. van Voorst, *Jesus outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 81-104; Paget, 'Observations'; A.E. Martínez, 'Reevaluación crítica del 'testimonio' de Flavio Josefo acerca de Jesús', *Apuntes* 25 (2005), pp. 84-118; Casey Elledge, 'Critiquing Sources for Jesus: Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius' (paper presented on April 20, 2007, at the Second Princeton-Prague Symposium on Jesus: Methodological Approaches to the Historical Jesus); Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 190-98; David Flusser with R. Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 12; C. Niemand, 'Das Testimonium Flavianum. Befunde, Diskussionsstand, Perspektiven', *Protokolle zur Bibel* 17 (2008), pp. 45-71. The Arabic version tends to confirm the thesis of a redacted original (e.g. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, 95-96; *idem*, 'Jesus, Literature, and Archaeology', pp. 191-92). Less plausibly, a few have tried to defend the passage as authentic without interpolations (see Jakob van Bruggen, *Christ on Earth: The Gospel Narratives as History* [trans. Nancy Forest-Flier; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], pp. 30-37).

101. Presumably he also recognizes Jesus' significance partly because a movement grew up around him, but this argument is weakened by his parallel attention to John

a revolutionary, in contrast to many popular leaders of whom he writes. However we explain Josephus's silence, he paid less attention to the Jesus movement than we would expect, whatever their numbers were. Of course, either Luke or the Jerusalem church's elders would also have reason to inflate the Nazarenes' statistics as much as the other groups had reason to inflate theirs (and perhaps more so, because their strength lay particularly in their populist support). But we do not need to suppose that exaggerations changed orders of magnitude, and we cannot argue against their estimates based on Josephus's silence.

Historically, Luke's view of the Jerusalem church is probably fairly accurate—certainly praising the Jerusalem church (mixed with suspicion of Paul) is not a later Greek Christian construct! Luke is clearly partial to Paul, but James, whom he (or his source) would have met at least on this occasion (21.18), obviously made a favorable impression on him, and he seems to trust James' motives even while writing in retrospect.¹⁰² Given the likelihood that Luke was Paul's traveling companion (or at least depended on one), his positive view toward the Jerusalem church is telling; whereas tensions existed (as Luke himself recognizes, especially in 21.21), the old Tübingen approach is excessive. Luke probably praised the Jerusalem church because he found something worthy of praise, just as he also seems concerned about some problems in that church (as again in 21.21).

Conclusion

Such observations do not constitute proof that Luke's report is accurate, but they do challenge the grounds on which many commentators tend to dismiss them. Of course, it is unlikely in the revival atmosphere described in Acts 2 that the apostles and their colleagues made an exact count of baptisms; numbers rounded to the thousands belong to the sphere of estimates, and Luke's sources are more likely to have estimated high than low. But if we accept the description in the narrative that follows Luke's first estimate (2.42-47), the earliest Christians seem to have had a sense of their enormous numbers, suggesting that the estimate is not only realistic but in the general range. The subsequent growth of the church (indicated in 21.20) matches statistics from revival settings today.

(whose movement does not seem to have attained such magnitude).

102. For my argument supporting Luke as the eyewitness of the 'we' narratives, see my forthcoming Acts commentary at Acts 16.10.

If these figures are realistic, they suggest an extraordinary explosion in the earliest church's membership. To offer a sense of proportion, Josephus, never known to play down numbers, numbers the Essenes at 'over four thousand' (*Ant.* 18.20). Three thousand converts in one day, and eventually tens of thousands of adherents, suggests a remarkable movement within first-century Judean Judaism. Because the vast majority of these adherents did not belong to the elite, some of their contemporaries could afford to ignore them. Perhaps they warrant more attention from us today.