

# True Freedom

## *The Miraculous Release from Prison in Light of an Ancient Pagan Story*

- Acts 5:12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico.
- <sup>13</sup> None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.
- <sup>14</sup> And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, 4:4 many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand
- <sup>15</sup> so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them.
- <sup>16</sup> The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.
- <sup>17</sup> But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy
- <sup>18</sup> they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. (4:3) They arrested them and put them in custody
- <sup>19</sup> But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said,
- <sup>20</sup> "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."
- <sup>21</sup> And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.
- <sup>22</sup> **But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison,** so they returned and reported,
- <sup>23</sup> "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside."
- <sup>24</sup> Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, 4:13 perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished wondering what this would come to.
- <sup>25</sup> And someone came and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people."

- <sup>26</sup> Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.
- <sup>27</sup> And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them,
- <sup>28</sup> saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” 4:18 So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.
- <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.” 4:19 Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge,
- <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. (4:10a) let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified.
- <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, 4:10b: whom God raised from the dead to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 4:12 there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved
- <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things 4:19b for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard., and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”
- <sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.
- <sup>34</sup> But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.
- <sup>35</sup> And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men.
- <sup>36</sup> For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing.
- <sup>37</sup> After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.
- <sup>38</sup> So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail;
- <sup>39</sup> but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” So they took his advice,

<sup>40</sup> and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 4:21 And when they had further threatened them, they let them go.

<sup>41</sup> Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 4:23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God.

<sup>42</sup> And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. 4:31 and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

### Acts 5:12-42

## Holy People, Be Careful

**Dionysus Eleutherius** (“**The Liberator**”). In some accounts, he was born a son of Zeus and *Persephónē*, the queen of the underworld after Hades abducted her. On the other hand, Hesiod says he was the son of Zeus and Semele, a mortal woman who died before giving birth to him. As such, it was never truly known if he was a god or a demigod, and it shows in his stories.

The Romans called him **Bacchus**, *Liber Pater* (“**Free Father**”), and his untethered worship shows you just **how “free” such freedom is** from both a pagan and Christian

point of view. For Dionysus was the patron god of viniculture, wine, festivity, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, theatre, and male fertility. He is the one who gave [king Midas](#) his touch of gold. His worship dates in (Mycenaean) Greece to at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC and he was associated with weddings, death, sacrifice, and sexuality. Often accompanied by a retinue of sex-crazed [satyrs](#) (men whom he had metamorphosized into wild demi-beasts of nature) and female dancers called Bacchae or the [maenads](#) (“[to rave, to be mad; to rage, to be angry](#)”), they are usually depicted in a state of other-world ecstatic frenzy of lewd dance and intoxication, and who feed the dead through blood-offerings. These maenads were evil, as used to go from town to town raping and murdering men by seducing and drugging them.

Dionysus’ festival was called the [Bacchanalia](#), and was viewed as so subversive by the Romans, due to the free mixing of classes and genders who transgressed all traditional social and moral constraints, that its celebration apart from the careful oversight of the state became a capital offence (let that sink in). Sounds like an everyday parade in 2020’s Portland to me. It’s maniacal dancing to the sound of loud music

and crashing symbols saw the revelers whirling and screaming and becoming drunk and inciting one another to greater and greater states of ecstasy in order to *free themselves* from their earthly bodies and commune with Dionysus to gain a glimpse and a preparation for what they would someday experience in eternity. Another festival to Dionysus, called the **Agrionia**, saw the female followers chased by a priest who would hunt them down with a sword and kill one as a human sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

When he was born, Zeus' wife Hera was enraged, for her husband had committed adultery. Agan. She hated the child from birth and at one point drove him mad (hence, some of the origin of the other parts of his myth). He eventually met Cybele who cured him of his madness after which Dionysus established his cult and rites of worship. It's into this that we find what are called "**Resistance Myths**" connected with Dionysus—in fact, there are more of them connected to him than any other god or goddess. In part because he claimed to be a god while his mother was clearly a mortal, but also because his cult was so perverted, even for Greek

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<sup>1</sup> Most of this comes from the *wikis* on "**Dionysus**" and "**Maenad**." Some from **Jessica Mellen-thin** and Susan O. Shapiro, "**Dionysus or Bacchus**," in *Mythology Unbound: An Online Textbook for Classical Mythology*, UEN.

and Romans, few believed his claims and thus resisted his worship. But in such stories, as the Borg might say, “**Resistance is futile.**” It always ends badly.

One we are interested in today concerns **Pentheus**, son of Agave the sister of Semele (in other words, his cousin), who was given the throne of Thebes, Dionysus’ hometown, by king Cadmus, since no one believed Dionysus was divine and Cadmus had no sons. When Pentheus was around 20 years old, Dionysus came back to Thebes after much time away, for he wanted to introduce his worship to his homeland. But Pentheus forbade any of the women to worship him, for he not only did not believe Dionysus to be a god, but he did not think this man was even him.

In return, Dionysus **caused all the women of Thebes to go mad** and run away from home. These women thus became the insane religiously crazed maenads, whom Pentheus hunted down and **arrested and put in prison**. He then tried to imprison Dionysus, whom he thought was a sorcerer and conjuror from another land. But after a short time, **suddenly, all the women were out in the countryside** playfully yet ecstatically in otherworldly trances invoking their god, **free from prison**. Dionysus himself had also escaped from

prison. The only explanation was that the god (Dionysus himself) had set them all free, but no one understood how it happened.

As I said, this **wasn't going to end well** for the king. For not accepting that he was in fact a god, Dionysus caused *him* to go insane. He tricked Pentheus into dressing like a woman and going out in the forest to look for the women. But when he got there, they, led by his own mother, attacked the king and, sparing you the gory details, brutally dismembered him, leading to a **mythical revolt against the authority all in the name of a new religion**.

For our story today, several lines found in **Euripides'** (480 – 406 BC) play *Bacchae* (Βάκχαι), which tells this particular story, are worth hearing. Several times throughout the play the language “**who fights against (the) god(s)**” appears (45, 325, 540-4, 635-6, 788, 1255-6).<sup>2</sup> Pentheus takes “**those whom I have seized**” and “**hold safely in a public jail**” (226-27). In the same story, “**Without a mortal hand, the bars of the door were undone**” (448). So a subordinate sent to arrest Dionysus reported back to the king, “**The Bacchant women**

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<sup>2</sup> On this connection see **Neil Godfrey**, “[Jesus and Dionysus in \*The Acts of the Apostles\* and Early Christianity](#),” *Vridar* (8-26,2013). He makes several other connections to later stories in Acts including other prison-release stories (Acts 12:1-10; 16:23-30), Paul’s conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26), and Pentecost (being filled with wine).

you shut up—those you arrested/and bound in chains at the public prison--/they have fled, freed!/They are leaping around the meadows calling on their god” (443-46).<sup>3</sup> So what could any of this have to do with our study of Acts?

## Acts 5:12-42—Context and Structure

**Acts 5:12-42**, coming on the heels of the story of Ananias and Sapphira’s untimely demise, tells two related tales. The first (**5:12-16**) are the **many signs and wonders** that continued to be done by the apostles in the early days of the church, especially at the temple. The second (**17-42**) tells of their **subsequent arrest and imprisonment** by the high priest and Sadducees, their **miraculous escape** from prison, a **wise word** from the famed Gamaliel, and how the disciples **con-**

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<sup>3</sup> On these see **Dennis R. MacDonald**, *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature*, The New Testament and Greek Literature Vol. II (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 39-41. Found this from Michael Kochenash, “[The Scandal of Gentile Inclusion: Reading Acts 17 with Euripides’ Bacchae](#),” *Classical Greek Models of the Gospels and Acts Studies in Mimesis Criticism*, Claremont Studies in New Testament and Christian Origins 3, ed. Mark G. Bilby et al (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2018), 135 n. 20. 125-44. For an Evangelical Christian assessment of the Dionysus myth and Acts see **Craig S. Keener**, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1-14:28* (Vol. 2) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1210-12, including a summary from **John B. Weaver**, *Plots of Epiphany: Prison-Escape in Acts of the Apostles* (New York: de Gruyter, 2004), 22 and rest of book. The summary: 1. Arrival of the New God/Cult. 2. Conflict with Impious Ruler(s). 3. Epiphanic Deliverance from Prison. 4. Death or Repentance of oppressor. 5. Establishment of Cult. Keener says, “**If Luke hopes his audience will infer such a suggestion, however, it would be for Christ as a rival, rather than an imitator, of Dionysus.**”



tinued unincumbered by the threats and arrests of the politician-priests. Huh. Sounds a lot like Dionysus and Pentheus—as *many* scholars have pointed out.

From a contextual point of view, it is helpful to see that Acts 4-5 has actually been written in a large chiasmic manner.<sup>4</sup>

- A. The apostles, the Sadducees, the council of elders, and arrest (4:1-31)
- B. Multitude of believers, one heart and soul, great power the apostles witnesses (4:32-33)
- C. Barnabas sold his land and laid it at apostles' feet (4:34-37)
- C'. Ananias and Sapphira sold land and laid it at apostles' feet (5:1-11)
- B'. Through the apostles, many signs done; multitude of believers with one accord increase daily (5:12-16)
- A'. Apostles, Sadducees, council of elders, arrest and miraculous escape (5:17-42)

Centering on the Christians selling their possessions and giving to anyone in need, and the repercussions for those who lie to God about it, those stories are actually surrounded by two short statements about the moral quality and single-minded Spirit-empowered love they had for everyone. These in turn are surrounded by **two imprisonment stories** and the continual work that the apostles did in spite of them.

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<sup>4</sup> Modified from **Christine Miller**, “[Acts 5](#),” *A Little Perspective* (May 11, 2016).

The second of these imprisonments is our long story today. Continuing several chapters of **conflicts with religious leaders (4:1-8:3)**, which **parallel the events of Jesus' early ministry in Galilee (Luke 5:29-6:11)**, it's occasion is that, **"Many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles"** who were all together **in Solomon's Portico (Acts 5:12)**, that is the temple. This is very interesting, because this is the place Satan takes Jesus and tempts him with all the kingdoms of the world. **A complete political temptation of power and control.** But Jesus commands him **not to test God (Luke 4:1-13)**. In an ironic parallel, the apostles are preaching at the Temple but will be commanded not to preach in Jesus' name. The priests have become the human embodiment of Satan. Meanwhile, the wise Gamaliel intercedes and warns the priestly rabble that if the thing is from God, they won't be able to stop it.

## Acts 5:12-16—Christianity Keeps Growing

As just seen, our story begins, **"Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands**

of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Por-tico" (Acts 5:12). Clearly, some amount of time has now passed since Pentecost, but it is impossible to know how much. Peter and John's first arrest was a little while ago. There has been enough time for many people to sell their property. Ananias and Sapphira have died and great fear spread among the church. And now many more signs and wonders are being done regularly in public at the great Second Temple. This was an age of signs and wonders and they were performed by the apostles, and the fact that Luke tells us this many decades later shows you just how unique it truly was. For even by his day of writing this was no longer a regular happening.

Then it says, "*None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem*" (13). It is difficult to know who Luke is talking about here. The most popular opinion is that, "*Because of the sudden judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, the unbelievers ["none of the rest"] are afraid to join them [the Christians]. Yet the Jewish people ["the people"] who love God continue to hold the Christians in high esteem (4:21).*"<sup>5</sup> So you have two main groups of unbelievers: those

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<sup>5</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 17, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 192.

who are totally skeptical and those who are willing to hear. What happened to the married couple combined with the continual miracles has created fear such that **none of the skeptics dare draw near**. Yet, this explains the next verse, “**And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and woman**” (14). While the fear terrified some, **others it actually drew closer to God**, for they knew him to be holy and they presumed that such evidences as they were seeing could only be from God himself. Keener has a great observation about this, one that I wish the church today would learn better, “**Although outsiders feared to join the movement hypocritically, the insistence on sincere converts led to greater long-range growth (5:14).**”<sup>6</sup>

But then vs. 15 comes in, and in the ESV, it is still part of the **same sentence** as **vs. 14**. “**... so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them**” (15). The first half reminds us of Jesus healing the paralytic who was lowered through the hole in the roof (**Luke 5:18-19**). But the second half seems downright superstitious. Is Luke giving his consent to this idea that **Peter’s shadow**

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<sup>6</sup> Keener, 1200.

would heal people, or is he only mentioning that people thought that it would?

It seems to me that Luke does not chastise the people for superstition that wouldn't work, and the idea in context is consistent with faith, for the previous verse says they are “believers” who were “added to the Lord,” meaning that they were trusting by faith in Christ. Meaning, as Kistemaker says, their faith was not contingent upon God performing a miracle first.<sup>7</sup> Rather, they came to the apostles because they already had faith.

This is important in helping you understand that there was no “magic” going on here. Peter's shadow didn't heal people as some kind of incantation or formula that was followed. And yet, this idea is very very strange. One article written on this attempts to delve into the way people thought of the shadow back then. He shows that all over the world, much like you hear of some people groups who won't let their picture be taken because it will trap their soul, people believed that the shadow of a person contained the soul of that person,<sup>8</sup> just as when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and she conceived the Christ-child. In other words, the

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<sup>7</sup> Kistemaker, 193.

<sup>8</sup> P. W. van der Horst, “Peter's Shadow: The Religio-Historical Background of Acts v. 15,” *NTS* 23 (1977): 204–12.

shadow was as good a Peter himself. In the words of the old weekly radio show, “*The Shadow knows.*” Henry Alford writes, “Cannot the ‘Creator Spirit’ work with any instrument, or with none, as pleases Him? And what is a hand or a voice, more than a shadow, except that the analogy of the ordinary instrument is a greater help to faith in the recipient? Where faith, as apparently here, did not need this help, the less likely medium was adopted.”<sup>9</sup>

The point of bringing this up is to show **the incredible power of God** that was being unleashed through Jesus’ Apostles in those early days. Even Peter’s shadow was bringing healing! **Vs. 16** sums it up. “**The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.**” This also connects us for the first time **back to Jesus healing those possessed by demons.** Truly, the apostles are doing greater works than he did (as he told them would happen)—by the power of the Holy Spirit whom he sent to testify that the word they were preaching was true. And now, for the first time, we see that **the word is spreading to many towns** around Jerusalem. It’s the first outward expansion of the

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Alford, *Alford’s Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, 7th ed., 4 vols. (1877; Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1976): 2.53.

Gospel beyond Jerusalem in the book of Acts, with obviously much more to come.

## Acts 5:17-42—Jesus is Greater than the gods

**Vs. 17** begins the new section. The ESV titles it, “**Apostles Arrested and Freed.**” That’s fine, but I don’t think this gets to the heart of why this episode happened. Rather, I’m going to title this section, “**Jesus is Greater than the gods,**” for I think that’s something Luke has in mind, though we will have to look closely at the text to see it.

Vs. 17 reintroduces **the high priest** and those who were with him (i.e. the party<sup>10</sup> of the Sadducees). We saw Annas back in **4:6** when he had Peter and John arrested, and there will be a lot of parallels to that story that Luke will draw out. But here Luke tells us that they were all “**filled with jealousy.**” **Why?**

These were the spiritual overseers of Israel. Indeed, the job of the priests was to some degree to oversee *the healing* of the people. Yes, they generally did that through the carrying out of the law. But these apostles are doing **things they could**

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<sup>10</sup> **Going Deeper.** Curiously, the word “party” is the Greek *hairesis*, from which we get heresy or heretic. In Acts, it can have a positive or negative connotation. Here, it is not being used as a “heretic,” but of the ruling party of Israel. Yet, clearly, Luke views them negatively.

never dream of doing. This is attracting crowds which in turn is gaining—especially in the eyes of the priests—a powerful and potentially *political following*. Could these apostle’s become a threat to the ruling priestly establishment? (Keep in mind that Luke has the whole idea of a “priestly nation” never far from the surface in these chapters.)

Their jealousy is so full of zeal to protect themselves (not God, as priests should care about), that “they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.” This very much parallels what happened in 4:3 to Peter and John, but this time, it appears it is all twelve of them. Remember here, however, what we said about king Pentheus arresting the followers of Dionysus—the maenads?

The very next words tell us, “But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out” (5:19). Remember how in that same story, it was the power of the god Dionysus himself who freed the women from Pentheus’ prison! Here, however, it is an angel. It calls it “an angel of the Lord.” “Angel of the Lord” (without the definite article) actually begins the sentence: *Angelos de kyr-iou...* This is almost certainly meant to convey one of the many angels of heaven and not The Angel of the LORD



from the OT, who is the Second Person of the Trinity.<sup>11</sup> However, this cannot be entirely ruled out, especially if Luke did have the Dionysus' story in mind, for Dionysus is no mere angel. He is a god.

I tend to think it is just an angel though, and we read next that he said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life” (20). “This life” (“life” with the demonstrative pronoun) is a rather strange idea. But it seems to recall Jesus' own words in places like **John 6:68**, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” The words of the Apostles are indeed living and active words, words that convey the very life about which and whom they speak in their nature. Jesus has been raised from the dead and is now eternally alive. **He lives!** And this “life” becomes the symbol of the freedom that the apostles now have in being miraculously released from prison by the angel. It's the diametrical opposite idea of the Dionysus' myth in which the wicked women were released to go back

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps further showing the possibility, Luke has Stephen talk about “[an] angel of the Lord” (no article) in **7:30**, but in the OT, this is clearly **THE** Angel of the Lord. Therefore, the lack of the article is not proof that it is not in fact The Angel.

into fits and trances and discombobulations and other-worldly ecstatic drug-induced trances in an attempt to commune with Dionysus.

Indeed, what do the apostles do upon receiving *their* freedom? They *serve* Jesus. “**And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach**” (21). It truly is astonishing to think about this against **the backdrop of pagan story**. The disciples go back to the place they were just arrested, in public, and start teaching the gospel that has brought so many to new life in Christ all over again.

Meanwhile, “**Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel...**” (21b). This arrest was a big deal. You don't arrest 12 men with such a large following, while so many others are afraid of their power, much less do it in the temple, without having made up your mind to **make a serious example out of them**. That's my guess as to why the angel interceded and freed them. It very well could have been that Annas and company were going to have them executed. But that's getting ahead of ourselves.

As the council is convened, “**They sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, they did**

not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ‘We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.’” (21c-23). This also parallels king Pentheus’ subordinates who are sent to arrest Dionysus. But when they seek to put him in prison, they find the women gone and they must report back to the king the bad news.

As with that story, everyone is greatly puzzled. This is similar to what we read about in 4:13 when they were perplexed at how eloquent Peter and John were when they were uneducated me. But this one greatly tops that. How could this possibly be? The guards are still there? But the prisoners, all twelve of them, have escaped? This makes all that work Steve McQueen, James Garner, and Charles Bronson and their gang did to get out of the German POW camp through a tunnel system they kept secret for months in *The Great Escape* look downright silly. Why not poof out of the prison, guys? Why all that work when all you need is one good angel? But that’s not possible, right? That kind of thing can’t happen.

At this point, the two stories diverge. Pentheus actually starts questioning Dionysus, though he doesn’t realize that’s

who he is talking to and this ends in his eventual brutal demise. But God didn't see fit to have our story work out historically like that one. Indeed, it is precisely for this very reason that it is so interesting to actually compare and contrast these two stories.

Luke tells us that as they were “wondering what this would come to...” precisely the question anyone who knew the Pentheus story would have been asking had they seen or read Euripides' play. Indeed, this to me is the critical moment and it makes all the sense in the world that Luke has structured the story so closely parallel to that one up to this moment. It creates a fantastic amount of epic tension. And it is tension that he doesn't release all at once, either.

As they are wondering what this would come to, “Someone came and told them, ‘look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people’” (Acts 5:25). Ah, this is both parallel with the crazed women, but also 180° divergent. It is parallel in that the messenger communicates in both places where they are and what they are doing. But it diverges in *what they are doing*. The women are self-absorbed, “leaping around the meadows calling on their god, Clamor.” But the apostles are selflessly teaching

and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus to others in all peace and calmness. You couldn't get any similar parallel yet different responses if you tried.

The priests knew they had to **proceed very carefully** at this point. Luke tells us, “**The captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people**” (26). Curiously, in the other story, the king goes himself out to the women but ends up being most diabolically slaughtered by them.

“**And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them**” (27). They are right back where they just were. They **were free men**, and now they are ... not quite prisoners, but also not quite free either. Luke repeats what we say in **Acts 4:18**. “**We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us**” (5:28). Ah! They know full well how this all started. **They murdered Jesus**, just as Peter has continually reminded them, and will again shortly.

Now, you have to think here about what was going through the minds of the priests. They **knew they were guilty** of killing Jesus. They knew what they had done. And

their own guilt is causing them to **project** onto the disciples motives that they actually never even had, though they surely would have been right to have had them. Why? Because that's what *they* wanted to do to Jesus; that's what *they* now want to do to the apostles. Projection is perhaps the single greatest psychological defense mechanism human beings use. We displace our own feelings onto others, attributing to them our own unacceptable urges and evils. It is as Paul says, “You who in passing judgment condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things” (Rom 2:1).

At first, Peter and the apostles simply say, “We must obey God rather than men” (29), also reminding us of what was said in 4:19, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge.” Then, they do in fact remind this brood of vipers what they did, but also what God has done. “The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree” (5:30; again reminding us of 4:10, “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified”).

They continue, “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior (see 4:10b: “whom God raised from the dead”) to give repentance to Israel and forgives of sins” (31;

and again 4:12: “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”). “And we are witnesses to these things (again, 4:19b: “for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard”), and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (32).

In my view, this is one **seriously remarkable movement of true defense**. On one hand, it could sound **profoundly politically subversive**. That’s the tension with the Dionysus story. Is that what they are going to do, usurp the priests? We must not obey men. You killed him. Jesus is now Leader and Savior and the military right hand of heaven. The Holy Spirit knows what you did. Those who obey him, which clearly isn’t them. This could all be taken as an act of political subversion.

On the other, **there’s nothing subversive about it**. It’s just historical fact. We are simply obeying God. God raised Jesus from the dead. He exalted him to bring repentance to Israel and forgives of sins. We saw it all happen with our own eyes. God will do this for any who obey him.

Which way do you suppose the Sadducees decided to interpret it? You guessed it. “**When they heard this, they were**

enraged and wanted to kill them” (33). Because of their own projecting hypocrisy, they couldn’t see what the apostles were actually doing. They project politics onto the gospel and they can’t help it, because that’s what they do. They can’t see any other thing. They don’t understand the kingdom of God. In case you don’t think they were thinking this would lead to a political uprising and the usurping of their own power, you need to keep reading.

This is where a new character enters the story. “But a Pharisee [notice, not a Sadducee] in the council named Gamaliel, a teaching of the law held in honor by all the people...” (34a). Gamaliel. This man was very well known. The Talmud says that he was called Nasi (“Prince”) and Rabban (“Our Master”), and that he was the president of the Great Sanhedrin. The Mishnah describes him as one of the greatest teachers in all the annals of Judaism. “Since Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, there has been no more reverence of the law, and purity and piety died out at the same time” (*Sotah* 9:15), it teaches. He also happens to have been the teacher of Saul-Paul (*Acts* 22:3).

He then gives a long speech. It is a sober warning. He “stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little



while. And he said to them, ‘Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!’ (34b-39).

There is one major point of contact with Dionysus here. Over and over again in that story, they say that *you are opposing God*. Of course, that god is Dionysus. Gamaliel is no pagan and he means the One True God. But the parallel remains.

We need to say a word about the history here. As most commentaries will explain, it *appears that Luke messed up his history*. There’s really only two places skeptics go to in Luke to really attack him as an historian. We dealt with the census problem when Jesus was born, explaining that Luke knew

full well about this census that took place in 6 AD with [Judas the Galilean](#), and yet he says there was a census that we clearly don't know about when Jesus was born. Skeptics want to say that silence, or what we don't know, proves that Luke was wrong. Nonsense.

[Josephus](#) makes it clear that there was a [Theudas](#) who rose up exactly like Gamaliel here says happened prior to 6 BC, and yet he says it happened around 44 AD. So again, Luke is wrong they say. Or, [perhaps Luke and Gamaliel knew of a different Theudas revolt](#) decades earlier. Or, perhaps Josephus is the one who got it wrong rather than our doctor who even the most fervent skeptics will admit Luke only has these two points wrong in all his writing about history. Josephus was wrong about a lot of things. Luke knew what he was doing and there are plenty of other options than just defaulting automatically because you hate God's word to say that Luke blew it and the Bible can't be trusted.

At any rate, both of these men were basically [messianic figures](#) in their own eyes and in the eyes of their followers. Both also lead *political* rebellions, exactly what the present Sadducees were afraid the apostles were about to do, exactly like Dionysus *was* doing. Everyone knows even to this day

that other than a couple of good-eggs like Gamaliel, the Sanhedrin of the first century was the definition of a hive of scum and villainy. Everyone wanted them taken down. True evil, precisely because it is evil, is always terrified that it will lose its power and constantly projects that onto its perceived or actual enemies.

But Gamaliel was right. If this is from God, nothing can stop what's coming. Amazingly, he was so much more right than he knew, as today there are billions who take the name of Christ and uncounted myriads who truly believe in him. Nothing did stop it. And Gamaliel's speech was used by God to put an end to this earliest potential end to the Christian movement. "So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go" (39b-40). This again reminds us of 4:21, "And when they had further threatened them, they let them go."

The story ends with the apostles leaving "the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (5:41; even this reminds us of 4:23: "When they were released ... they lifted their voices

together to God”). What a very different response to suffering than most Christians have today. You do well to linger on it. “And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (5:42). This matches up with 4:31, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” This is the story of God’s providential sovereign involvement during that first great crisis that threatened to end the Christian movement then and there. He wouldn’t let that happen. For it had been planned from all eternity.

## Luke’s Subversive Genius

But now, I said that [this story is truly more than this ending](#), so much of which just repeats what was found in ch. 4. As amazing as all this is, and it is worthy by itself of ending on, I’ve decided to take a deliberate look at a myth and compare it to our story. Clearly, Luke was familiar with the [Dionysus’](#) myths, and there are many other connections we could look at that scholars have pointed out throughout Luke and Acts. And we’ve seen how Luke isn’t afraid to form

his stories after other ancient writers such as [Virgil](#) and [Plato](#). But a myth? That's different, and it scares many people.

So I need to say a word about this, lest someone immediately runs out of the sanctuary, yelling “[Heretic!](#)” at me for daring to compare a Bible story to a Greek myth. There is a very important lesson here that many Christians are all but oblivious to, to the great detriment of not only their own sanctification, but our own world's [present collapse back into this very paganism](#) so embodied by a truly evil god: Dionysus. Look around. Our present world has come undone, both morally and religiously. Christianity no longer holds the sway on the minds of people that it once did. And most think this is great! The myths (and morality) of the pagan gods are captivating the attention of ever growing numbers of people. And they have no early idea the slavery they are subjecting themselves to all over again—[the slavery of the maenads who thought they were so free](#). Their worship is waxing, while the worship of the One True God is hindered by the church's oblivion to what is happening around them. But it doesn't have to be.

[Plato](#) supposedly once said, “[Those who tell the stories rule society.](#)” The most enduring stories human beings have

are myths. **But what are myths?** Are they synonymous with fiction, fables, and tall-tales? No. They are simply **supernatural stories**,<sup>12</sup> usually about origins. Since you could make something up or be telling actual history, there's nothing inherently fictional or non-fictional about any of them. But since none of them meet the standards of today's elites in academia (how could they; they are supernatural!), they are *all* thrown aside as works of fantasy. The reality is, they endure because they are great stories, enduring stories, stories that change people, stories that, however perverted, are usually rooted in truth and even history.<sup>13</sup>

For example, the Bible tells us about a character named **Satan**. A "*satan*" is simply an accuser, and this is probably not his actual name. But **Revelation 2:13** links **Satan directly to Zeus**, via Zeus' throne that was in Pergamum. It also links **Satan to Baal** in the Beelzebub story, and **Baal and Zeus are**

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<sup>12</sup> Heiser has a great explanation at **Michael Heiser**, "[The Bible: The Myth That Is True How Can Something Be Mythos and Still Be True?](#)" *Facebook* (Aug 30, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> I've made this point before, for example with the city Troy which no one thought was a real place, until one day a guy taking the myth as actual history, went out and found it. Francis Schaeffer writing on Gen 6 captures the idea when he said, "**More and more we are finding that mythology in general, though greatly contorted, very often has some historic base. And the interesting thing is that one myth that one finds over and over again in many parts of the world is that somewhere a long time ago supernatural beings had sexual intercourse with natural women and produced a special breed of people.**" **Francis Schaeffer**, "Genesis in Space and Time," in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), p. 89.

the same god in the ancient world—the storm god. How could it do this if Satan was real, but Zeus and Baal weren't?

Something all cultures do is a thing called **subversion**. Hollywood Screenwriter, Christian historical fantasy writer, and all around Reformed good guy Brian Godawa explains, “Subversion is the act of retelling a story through the prism of a different worldview or philosophy or theology or politics or take your pick. The nature of subversive storytelling is to work within the cultural memes and received narrative that people are familiar with, but to infuse that narrative with new definitions.”<sup>14</sup> A great example is Aronofsky's *Noah* movie that came out in 2014. Setting the story firmly in the biblical world of Noah, the movie actually completely reimagines Noah to be a slightly psychotic environmentalist rural shaman vegan hippy-like herbalist Ninja warrior. While the names remain the same and there is a flood, just about everything else is completely rewritten after the modern religion of environmentalism and the worship of Gaia. In this way, the movie subverts the biblical story by using the basic characters and setting but in a com-

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Godawa, “The Subversion of God in Aronofsky's Noah,” *Thus Spake Godawa: God, Movies, Culture, Blah Blah Blah* (April 2, 2014), <http://godawa.com/subversion-god-noah/>.

pletely different way. That's how you capture the imagination of a new generation. You do it through the retelling of old stories.

In my estimation, this is precisely what Luke does throughout his two volumes, as his masterful knowledge of Greek and Jewish literature is used subversively to show in truly powerful ways, though amazing stories, the truth. Now, he isn't taking old names and given them new meanings, but this is because his stories actually happened. His subversion comes in the circumstances and events, which take place basically in the same order and same way, but with different outcomes. He does this to set off the Jesus "myth," that is Jesus' *supernatural story*, as the greatest story ever told, precisely because it is, as C. S. Lewis said, the **true myth**.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Arthur Greeves, he explains, "What Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself, I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere except in the Gospels. The reason was the in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even though I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant.' Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened." C. S. Lewis, "Autobiography: The Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves," in *The Essential C.S. Lewis*, ed. Lyle W. Dorsett (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 56. For a deeper dive, see C. S. Lewis, "[Is Theology Poetry?](#)" (Samizdat University Press, 1944, 2014).



That is, it actually happened in recorded, eye-witness history to real people, many of whom gave up their lives to spread the Gospel. Why would Luke do this? Godawa again,

In the Bible the dominant means through which God communicates his truth is visually **dramatic stories**—*not* systematic theology, or doctrinal catechism or rational argument. A survey of the Scriptures reveals that roughly 30 percent of the Bible is expressed through rational propositional truth and laws. While 70 percent of the Bible is story, vision, symbol and narrative. Sure, God uses words, rationality and propositions to communicate his message [in a note, he says they are necessary]. But modern evangelicalism has not always recognized how important visual imagery, drama and storytelling are to God.<sup>16</sup>

**God wants you to be swept up in the story**, and it is a major way he communicates to us theological and historical truth—even as it happens through subversion in the retelling of actual, historical events through mythic lenses. In crafting our story today with so many echoes that would not be missed of Dionysus, Luke builds tension even as he tells

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<sup>16</sup> **Brian Godawa**, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment*, second ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 12.

the story in an edgy way. How is this going to end? Is he trying to say that Jesus is just Dionysus? Are the apostles going to overthrow the Sanhedrin with this insane power they have and start a new political kingdom to rival Rome?

No. **It is precisely the opposite.** Jesus' followers are as opposite the satyrs and maenads as you could possibly get. They are sane, rather than raving lunatics. They are self-controlled rather than frenzied. They live in this world, rather than seeking ecstatic other-worldly experiences. They teach the gospel of love and forgiveness and repentance, of God's coming to us, rather than our attempting through *pharmakia* and magic and manipulation to find a god that will be what we want him to be.

And this follows **the utterly different God himself.** Dionysus is a true scoundrel, who murdered people if they didn't worship him. Jesus is the suffering servant who was murdered, willingly, so that he would through the gracious power of God, be worshiped not just for his power, but his love and grace. Dionysus was a violent, self-centered, narcissistic ego-maniacal murderous spawn of Satan (literally). Jesus is gentle and his burden is light.

To see the differences in the stories and then recognize that our story was seen by **eyewitnesses who could not help telling people what they had seen** because it had changed them is to know truth on a profound level. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. His freedom is not to sin and do more evil, that's actually bondage and slavery and death. His freedom is to serve the living and true God, because that God is and gives life itself. Jesus isn't revolting against the powers of heaven and earth, usurping them. He is defeating them by being obedient to his Father in heaven, bringing about a different kingdom that will last for eternity.

**Be swept up in the story anew** and see the power of God that can once again be found in the world of men, if we will only believe what God has told us in his word about such a great salvation. What an incredible story of miracles and power! And it really happened. Yet, we don't even need such miracles, for it has already all been shown to be true. To believe this and know the Son, **to be released from sin's prison and the captivity of Satan, that's true freedom.** Not addiction and losing your mind or going into trances to worship a god who couldn't care less about you. Not fear of losing your power and constantly projecting your own sins

onto others. But sobriety and seriousness and learning and realizing who you are and what God has done for you in Christ and what his kingdom from heaven truly is and where it comes from.

That's why the apostles were let out of that prison. So they could continue to communicate a message like that. For you.

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