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F **faith and Theological Knowledge in the Book *Acts of the Apostles***

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Abstract

This study explores the topic of knowledge of God in the Book of Acts. God reveals Himself in the Old Testament but in order to understand it correctly we must read it in the light of Christ's Passion and Resurrection through the guidance of the Spirit. Intellectual study is not enough; it must be supplemented by faith, love and participation in the Holy Mysteries of the Church.

Keywords

Acts of the Apostles, knowledge of God, revelation, faith, love, Sacraments

The two sources of Divine Revelation - the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition - reveal God to man as triune in persons: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. When Adam the first man led away from his Creator, this created a state of crisis in the divine-human bond, but also in his faith and knowledge of God. People have come to faith and knowledge of God in many ways: the innate consciousness that mirrors the existence of God; the

personal experience; the natural and supernatural revelation; through the Incarnation of the Son of God and through the Church.

The Old Testament contains the account of many communication-dialogues between God and men, links that lead to the strengthening of faithfulness in the Almighty and to the desire to know Him.

Here we mention Moses, who brought the people of Israel out of the Egyptian bondage, and led them for forty years to the promised land, and to whom God revealed many teachings (Exodus 3, 6; “The Ten Commandments”, Exodus 20, 1-11, etc.). Moses had this question: what shall I say to the children of Israel about God?, “What is His name?”, and he received the following answer from God: “*I am Who I am (...)* *I am* has sent me to you!” (Exodus 3: 13-14). Therefore, in the Old Testament, God’s knowledge is progressive, and He reveals Himself to the righteous and virtuous men in stages (Job 32, 6).

The expectations of the people of Israel, his faith and patience were rewarded at the fullness of time (Galatians 4, 4), through the Messiah’s coming, the incarnation of the Son of God from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. God is all-knowing and calls upon man to know and share His glory.

With all the revelations of God in the Old Testament, St. John the Evangelist points out and highlights some very important aspects of God’s revelation to men: “For the law was given through Moses, (but) grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1, 17-18).

The knowledge of God is achieved through Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, whom God the Father has sent to the world (John 17, 18-26).

In the context of the Gospel proclamation, the Saviour Jesus Christ signals the importance of faith and knowledge of God to Philip and the other disciples: “Have I been so long time with you, and yet do you not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me? The words that I tell you I do not speak from Myself: but the Father who dwells in Me, accomplishes His works. Believe Me that I *am* in the Father, and the Father is in Me: or else believe Me on the account of the works themselves” (John 14, 9-11).

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The Lord still speaks to His disciples of the communion between God the Father and the Son: “If you had known Me, you would have known my Father also. From henceforth you know Him, and have seen Him” (John 14,7). We notice that God created men capable of knowing Him, through His image in man on one hand and then through their kinship with Him when He descended and took human flesh. His knowledge is accomplished in man’s meeting with God, in His love open to humanity, and in the will of man to know Him and to share His glory.

In fact, during all the Messianic activity Jesus Christ prepares His disciples just like at school: first to believe in Him that He is God, and to know Him through His divine work and will, and then to consider their mission in the world, that is, to proclaim the Gospel of salvation.

Therefore, we see from the Gospels that during the years of Messianic service Christ took His disciples on the way to God, discovering His mysteries, that is of the Incarnate Word, and the meaning of His redemptive work, as He did on his way to Emmaus, when He accompanied Luke and Cleopas: “Were not our hearts burning within us, while He spoke to us along the way, and while he opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24, 32). What Jesus Christ revealed to His disciples first had to be received and understood by faith, casting away human reasoning.

When He did the miracles (healings, resurrections from the dead, etc.), and then during *Transfiguration, Passion, Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection*, the apostles were carried by the Lord through different soul moods; then He considered they are ready and available for mission in the world: “...and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1, 8), “Go therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. Behold, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the age. Amen” (Matthew 28, 19-20).

By analyzing the state of the Lord’s disciples in the presentation of the Gospels, we notice the difference in faith and knowledge before and after the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon them, when life, the power of faith, and knowledge received new valences in their ability to confess faith in Christ God: “And, behold, I send forth the promise of my Father upon you: but wait in the city of Jerusalem, until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24, 49), for “the Holy Spirit will teach you in that same hour what you must say” (Luke 12, 12).

Thus, the disciples reached the condition of existential freedom in the confession of the word of God, according to the doctrine “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8, 32).

In the spirit of Christian freedom we see how communion is strengthening in Christian communities because “in the New Testament, God Himself encounters man within the history, in the person of His consubstantial Son; and this is done in such a way that He becomes the object of human senses”¹.

That is why the Apostle John expressed himself in front of the people and the challengers of Christ as follows: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we saw, and our hands touched, (this is our message) concerning the Word of life (...) What we have seen and heard, this is what we proclaim to you, so that you also may have communion with us: truly our communion *is* with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (I John 1, 1-3).

The apostles believed in Christ and followed Him (Luke 5, 8-11: “... And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything, and followed Him” - v. 11; “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people alive” - v. 10), and “He gave them power *against* unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kind of disease and sickness” (Matthew 10, 1), and after His Resurrection, He gave them the power to forgive sins: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive one’s sins, they are forgiven; *and* if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained” (John 20, 22), power that was perfect at the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them (Acts 2, 1-4). This was a revealing manifestation of God to the elected ones, as St. Basil the Great interpreted it.

God rewarded the faith, love and sacrifice of the Apostles, endowing them with many gifts and especially with “the power to become the sons of God” (John 1, 12).

“To believe means to be connected to God just like vision is the access to colours, imagination is the access to images, and reason is the access to computing. God is the one who can be touched only in faith”².

¹ Christos Voulgaris, *Studii de Teologie Biblică*, vol. I, Editura Sfântul Gheorghe-Vechi, trad. și cuvânt introductiv de pr. prof. Ion Buga, București, 2000, p. 268.

² Rémi Brangue, *Dumnezeul creștinilor-câteva clarificări*, traducere de Cornelia-Maria Ică jr, Deisis, Sibiu, 2017, p.181.

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The Acts of the Apostles - the work of Saint Luke the Apostle - reveals to the readers the fruits of the seeds sown by the Saviour Jesus Christ in the field worked for three years and then cultivated by the Holy Spirit.

“However in the text of the *Acts*, tradition demonstrates the extraordinary connection between the historical and the supernatural elements as mystery impossible to understand by empirical methods if the factor of faith is a priori excluded from the supernatural element of divine Revelation. The reason why the Primary Church preached and recorded the historical events of divine revelation is due to the fact that she gave a very special importance to these events for her salvation and of the whole universe”³.

However, we must bear in mind that the Apostles were men who had overcome the human infirmities by faith, grace and will, as St. Isaac the Syrian points out when he speaks of the relationship between human nature and the power of God:

“On true knowledge and on temptations, and on how one ought to know clearly that not only certain lesser, weak and untrained men are tempted, but also those are tempted who have been accounted worthy of dispassion for a time, who have achieved perfection in their manner of thought, and have in part draw near to the purity that is conjoined with mortification, and have been raised above the passions in so far as this is permitted by God while men are in this world, under the yoke of life conjoined to the passionate flesh (...)”⁴.

After moments of fear, doubt and sorrow, the Holy Apostles had the certainty that Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent by God the Father (John 5, 17-27).

The disciples believed and knew the Son of God, therefore “according to John, ignorance is the result of unbelief; the result of faith was called by Peter: «and we have come to believe and know that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God» (John 6, 69)”⁵. Thus, a personal connection was established between the divine-human person of Jesus Christ and the

³ Christos Voulgaris, *Studii....*, pp. 99-100.

⁴ Sfântul Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte pentru nevoie*, Ediția a II-a revăzută, Edit. Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2017, p. 488.

⁵ Christos Voulgaris, *Studii....*, p. 274.

apostolic human persons, experience and real living in history, communion and knowledge, as St. Maximus the Confessor said later: *God is the place of the saved ones, and communion with God is participation to the eternal life.*

The faith of the disciples in Jesus Christ and the recognition of His divinity and of the work of the Holy Spirit grace led them to God's knowledge because in a different state, "the proud knowledge nourishes selfishness and puts into it the conviction that it can rely on its own powers, and the result is «to wander from faith»; in this case knowledge is a false knowledge (I Timothy 6, 20-21)"⁶.

Saint Luke the Evangelist confesses that before His ascension to Heaven, Jesus Christ told His disciples: "...you shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth" (Acts 1, 8).

Although Christ revealed many mysteries to His disciples, He drew their attention, saying: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath set by his own power" (Acts 1, 7), but He gave them power to accomplish their mission through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1, 8).

The strong faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit guided the Holy Apostles in their holy and difficult mission of Christianizing the world. But they did not lack prayer as a form of connection with their Master, the Son of God (John 15, 7 and 16).

In this respect there are several relevant aspects of the apostolic work reported by St. Luke the Apostle and Evangelist, among we mention *The healing of a beggar at the temple gate (The Beautiful Gate)* by the Apostles Peter and John (Acts 3, 1-16), a miracle in which both the apostolic prayer and faith is revealed, and that of the healed person: "And by faith in his name this man whom you see and know was made strong: yes, the faith which comes through Jesus has given him this perfect soundness as you all can see" (Acts 3, 16).

The faith gives birth to obedience, as we see from the attitude of the apostles: "Then Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5, 29).

The faith of the Holy Apostles was transmitted to all who received Jesus Christ and His Gospel: "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a large

⁶ Christos Voulgaris, *Studii.....*, p. 277.

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number of (Levitical) priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6, 7). Through the apostles’ word, many Jews, Gentiles and Greeks believed and were baptized in the name of the Saviour Jesus Christ (Acts 14, 1; 22-23; chapter 11), the most eloquent example being the conversion, faith and baptism of the Roman centurion Cornelius and those with him (Acts 10). Therefore, obedience to the word of God transmitted through the confession of the apostles gave faith to men in the work of divine grace: “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the word” (Acts 10, 44), because “by him everyone who believes is justified” (Acts 13, 39), “and when the Gentiles heard this, they rejoiced and glorified the word of God: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed” (Acts 13, 48).

At the centre of the *Acts* is the great conversion of Saul who became the Apostle Paul (Acts 9), whom the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed to on his way to Damascus, when he heard His voice, he believed, and then he received Baptism. From persecutor of Christ’s disciples, he became a confessor and defender of the Son of God’s Gospel (Acts 9, 15-20), urging others to believe in Christ, to receive baptism, and also ordaining some of them: “Confirming the souls of the disciples, *and* exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed” (Acts 14, 22-23).

The same testimony and faith of St. Paul is also found in Chapters 24-26 of the *Acts of the Apostles*, when he gives testimony among the Jews and the Romans about the revelation received from Christ-God, and what urges him to believe in the Resurrection of Christ in the revealed truth and divine wisdom.

Even if he was not a direct disciple of Jesus Christ the Saviour, St. Apostle Paul taught people through revelation that we can know God here on earth but partly: “...for now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (I Corinthians 13, 12).

Joining the Church of Christ was a great problem for those who were not Jews; according to some people, those of other nations should be first circumcised, fulfil the Law of Moses, and then be received into the Christian community by baptism (Acts 15, 3-29).

What is really wonderful is that the faith of the converts to Christ revealed many miracles through the grace of God (Acts 16, 14-15, 31; 18, 4; 19, 18; 20, 21; 28, 23). Of course, the apostolic faith and testimony bore fruits among the Gentiles; numerous Christian communities were formed, receiving pious and zealous pastors through ordination.

The knowledge of God and that of men about God have each their respective connotations and dimensions in the way the Holy Apostles tell about the Divine work in His Church. But let us not forget that the Apostles knew God through His Son, who prepared them for perfection and deification, states which Saint Gregory of Nazianzus wrote about.

The wonderful deeds done by God through the Holy Apostles reveal the knowledge they had about the confirmation of Christ's presence, the Risen One from the dead: "Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, *even* by him doth this man stand here before you whole" (Acts 4, 10); here is presented the healing of the lame by St. Apostle Peter.

It is also known that God was revealed to the martyrs in a special way, strengthening them in faith, patience and sacrifice, as it happened during the martyrdom of the First Martyr and Archdeacon Stephen: "But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7, 55).

The revelation-knowledge of Saul on the road of Damascus reveals the mysterious work of Jesus Christ (Acts 9), who through the grace of the Holy Spirit transforms men from evil into good, from persecutors to confessors, from sinners to saints. In this respect the account of St. Paul before the Jews is relevant (Acts 22). This miracle can be correlated with what St. Peter said when the Gentiles received the faith and the Holy Spirit descended upon them: "Men *and* brethren, you know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knows the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as *he did* unto us. And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith" (Acts 15, 7-9).

God opens the heart and minds of men to know Him when they believe in Him (Acts 16, 14). This is how it happened with the testimony of St.

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Apostle Paul in Athens when he spoke to the Athenians about the unknown God whom they honoured: “For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore you ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwells not in temples made with hands...” (Acts 17, 23-30).

We must bear in mind that evil spirits know Christ too as the Lord reveals them (Acts 19, 15-18).

Then also speaking about knowledge, the work of the Holy Spirit is shown that illuminates and prepares the Apostles to receive the passions of the mission to proclaim the Gospel of Christ (Acts 20, 22-24).

As for the people of Israel, though Jesus Christ the Saviour did many miracles among them, they only knew Him little as God and Man; rather, the pagans believed in Him and knew Him through his work of salvation in their lives: “«For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with *their* eyes, and hear with *their* ears, and understand with *their* heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them»». Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and *that* they will hear it” (Acts 28, 27-28).

In conclusion we can say that God is made known to those who believe in Him, who pray and are entrusted to God’s help.

We must believe that what we have known is truly existent, just as the Saviour Christ tells us about Himself: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14, 6). If we know the truth that is God, because He is the Truth, the Way, and the Life, then we will understand this path of knowledge to eternal life towards Him.

Knowledge is necessary, but if this knowledge is not based on faith and love, we cannot have its fullness, as we understand from the example of Thomas, who had to see in order to know and to testify the truth about the Resurrection of Christ. The Saviour tells him: “*Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed*” (John 20, 29). In other words, we do not necessarily need to see something in order to know and believe. But it is about an understanding through faith, and to believe that what really has been revealed to us is the revelation of God in our lives, the revelation made to the world, His revelation and, implicitly, the revelation about us. If we do

not understand and know ourselves, it will be difficult to understand and know those from the outside. And the beauty of man's existence lies in this: the knowledge, understanding and sharing of God through the Body and Blood of Christ the Saviour who is partaken to us for the *remission of sins* and the *attainment of eternal life*. Why? Because He is the Life, He is the source of life and He works in us to live beautifully, to live in communion with God and to acquire the eternal life which we were created for: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being..." Acts 17, 28).

By reading the Holy Scripture and participating at the Holy Mysteries and Church services, we strengthen ourselves in the faith in God and in the knowledge from revelation, as Saint Paul the Apostle says: "How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words. Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Ephesians 3, 3-6).

Man's thirst for knowledge can be quenched from the incessant springs of our Church, which are the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition, springs that prepare us for the glory of the kingdom of God. Therefore, we must remain anchored in the Mysteries of the Orthodox Church, that is, within the love of Lord Jesus Christ (*the Way, the Truth and the Life*), to divine knowledge and the joy of acquiring holiness.