

# Arts & Faith

Art and Commentary for The Day of Pentecost by [Hovak Najarian](#)

## Introduction

On Sunday, June 5th, we celebrate the Day of Pentecost. An account of this event is given in Sunday's First Lesson [Acts 2:1-21].

El Greco's painting, The Pentecost, with my comments is attached. Also attached is a wood engraving of this event by Gustav Dore. With Dore's Pentecost is an item from my series, Armenian Connections. ~Hovak Najarian

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## Acts 2:1-21 Common English Bible

<sup>1</sup> When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. <sup>5</sup> There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. <sup>7</sup> They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them?" <sup>8</sup> How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!" <sup>12</sup> They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup> Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!" <sup>14</sup> Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! <sup>15</sup> These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! <sup>16</sup> Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams. <sup>18</sup> Even upon my servants, men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. <sup>19</sup> I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke. <sup>20</sup> The sun will be changed into darkness, and the moon will be changed into blood, before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes. <sup>21</sup> And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

*The Pentecost*, Oil on Canvas, c.1600, El Greco, 1541-1614

Commentary by Hovak Najarian



In Acts of the Apostles an account is given of the day of Pentecost when the twelve apostles, as well as Mary and people of many nationalities were gathered in one place. All at once the sound of a mighty rushing wind came from heaven and filled the room: “And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they all were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:2-4)

El Greco's *The Pentecost*, (now in the Prado Museum, Madrid) was painted to be an altarpiece for an Augustinian Seminary. Its height above floor level would place the seminarians at the lower part of the painting and they would see the subject matter increase in complexity as their gaze moved upward toward Mary, the apostles, and the plumes of fire. A dove at the top of the painting represents the Holy Spirit; its wings are spread and the light that surrounds it is radiating downward over the gathering. The two men in the foreground at the bottom of a short flight of stairs have lifted their arms and are leaning back slightly in order

to look at the dove. Mary (dressed in red and blue) is seated at the center of



the painting with apostles gathered around her; two other women are included in this painting. The woman at Mary's left shoulder is thought to be Mary Magdalene and the fourth person from the left side may be Martha. [The Book of Acts states

that when the apostles prayed, they did so with "...women and Mary."] El Greco also included himself in this painting. His face is second from the right; he is the man with a white beard who seems to be in deep thought and is not looking up toward the dove.

Although the term, "Expressionism," did not come into use until the twentieth century, it is an apt term for El Greco's late paintings. Expressionism is the result of an artist's effort to project emotional intensity and inner feelings into a work. The people in El Greco's *The Pentecost* are not posing for a formal group portrait. They are an animated informal mix of people who in their body language and facial expressions are reacting individually, and yet they are part of the collective experience. They are responding with awe and excited emotional involvement as they take part in this miraculous event.

Domenikos Theotokopoulos, a Greek native of Crete, first studied Byzantine art with the intention of becoming an icon painter. Crete was a Venetian colony at that time and at about age twenty, Domenikos went to Venice to study the paintings of masters such as Titian. Following his studies in Venice, he worked and taught in Rome, and then moved to Spain where he became known simply as "El Greco" (The Greek). Spain became his home for the remainder of his life and by the time *The Pentecost* was painted his style was different dramatically from his earlier work. In this late style, El Greco's paintings have elements of expressionism and often are described as having a sense of mystery.

## ARMENIAN CONNECTIONS: Languages Spoken at Pentecost



Gustav Dore, Pentecost, wood engraving, 1879

In the second chapter of the New Testament Book of Acts, an account is given of the day of Pentecost when the disciples “were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the spirit gave them utterance.” The speakers were all Galileans but they were among a multitude made up of different nationalities. On that occasion, the people who were gathered all heard what was being said in their own language. Among the multitude were “Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and dwellers of Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia.” [Many other regions were named.]

Tertullian (Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, (A.D. 160?-230?), Latin Church father and scholar, believed *Judea* was incorrectly listed among the people of other lands due to a copyist’s error. Instead, he believed, Armenia should have been in its place. Judea was not a foreign land and was not in geographic sequence with the others as one would travel northward from Mesopotamia to Asia. [The

geographic sequence would be, Mesopotamia, *Armenia* (instead of Judea), Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia.] St. Augustine agreed with Tertullian in his belief that Armenia was the intended nation, not Judea. During this period, the Armenian population was widespread. Thus it would be reasonable for them to have been at the gathering during Pentecost.

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