

# Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies

“Initial Evidence, Again”

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“IF IT IS A SIGN”:  
AN OLD TESTAMENT REFLECTION  
ON THE INITIAL EVIDENCE DISCUSSION

Wonsuk Ma

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the “initial physical evidence” of baptism in the Spirit is increasingly under scrutiny, first by Evangelicals and now by younger Pentecostal scholars. McGee’s edited book, *Initial Evidence* and articles in Pentecostal journals epitomize this on-going discussion.<sup>1</sup> The need for this new reflection is well justified for two reasons: 1) to re-examine the validity of the doctrine from a proper hermeneutical perspective; and 2) to re-articulate the belief in a changing socio-religious environment. The globalization of the age and Pentecostalism particularly calls for this new reflection. Asian thought processes are different from traditional western logical process. This needs to be considered when communicating in areas related to belief or matters of faith. Several scholars have pointed out the unique religious context from which the doctrine of “initial evidence” was born,<sup>2</sup> and this further justifies attempts to re-articulate the significance of the belief utilizing expressions with which the hearers can personally identify.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspectives on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*, ed. Gary McGee (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) and eight articles published in *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1:2 (1998) on the subject.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Russell P. Spittler, “Maintaining Distinctives: The Future of Pentecostalism,” in *Pentecostals from the Inside Out: A Candid Look at One of America’s Fastest Growing Religious Movements*, ed. Harold B. Smith, Christianity Today Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), pp. 121-34 (132). Also Robert P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p. 253.

One modified proposal characterizes tongue-speaking as an/the “accompanying sign.”<sup>3</sup> For a variety of reasons, this alternative is favored by younger Pentecostals. Being both a reference to, and a symbol of, the Spirit’s presence, Macchia considers advantages of using the term “sign”: 1) it “avoids the impression of a modernistic (positivistic) preoccupation with empirical proof,” and 2) this avoids “the negative result of formalizing...or proving” an experience such as baptism in the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> The very term “sign” is certainly a biblical expression, especially in comparison with the “evidence” which is a heavily western, scientific term. Indeed, the US Assemblies of God has used “sign” almost interchangeably with “evidence” in its highest doctrinal expression called Fundamental Truths. The eighth section reads:

The baptism of believers in the Holy Ghost is witnessed by the initial physical *sign* of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance (Acts 2:4). The speaking in tongues in this instance is the same in essence as the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:4-10, 28), but different in purpose and use.<sup>5</sup>

This leads us to further explore the biblical implications and appropriateness of using the term “sign.” In this brief study, several OT passages are investigated, first because the OT has been systematically ignored by Pentecostal scholarship when it comes to any Pentecostal doctrine, and secondly, the OT provides a surprisingly rich pattern for the current subject. One should be reminded that all the NT writers, including Luke and Paul, took OT developments for granted, and the S/spirit tradition is no exception.




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<sup>3</sup> E.g., William W. Menzies, “Reflections of a Pentecostal at the End of the Millennium: An Editorial Essay,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1:1 (1998), pp. 1-14 (5).

<sup>4</sup> Frank Macchia, “Groans too Deep for Words: Towards a Theology of Tongues as Initial Evidence,” *AJPS* 1:2 (1998), pp. 149-173 (153).

<sup>5</sup> Approved as the official statement by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God on August 18, 1981. This and other position papers can be found at <http://www.ag.org>. Italics are mine.

## SIGN IN THE OT


A good place to begin is to examine the general meaning of "sign" in the OT. The most common term for "sign" is . This is often translated as "sign," but also "mark," "testimony," "omen," "good omen," "token" and the like.<sup>6</sup> Serving to convey a particular idea or meaning, this term often refers more than a mark or symbol such as a road sign: it potentially implies that the sign itself sometimes contains certain elements of the reality to which it attempts to point. As  often appears as a pair word with  "wonder" (Exod 7:3; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 13:2,3 [Eng vv. 1, 2]; 26:8; 28:46; 29:2[3]; 34:11; Isa 8:18; 20:3; Jer 32:20, 21; Ps 78:43; 105:27; 135:9; Neh 9:10), it "denotes...signs of confirmation, of warning, of fear, and of prognostication."<sup>7</sup> Here, what we see is a "sign" that is more than just pointing.

Another significant implication we find is that, as with Gunkel, what is important is "not the sign itself or its execution, but its function and its meaning."<sup>8</sup> A sign varies from one period to another or from one place to another, as a sign is, first of all, just a sign, pointing to a true reality. Thus, a sign is culturally and historically conditioned.


## SIGN PASSAGES

Now as we are going to select spirit<sup>9</sup> passages with explicit references to the sign, it is necessary to establish a working set of criteria as far as the sign is concerned. First, the sign should be distinguished from the intended consequence. For instance, the manifestation of Samson's supernatural power after the spirit of God came upon him (e.g., Judg 14:6; 15:14) is not viewed as a sign of the spirit's presence, but as

<sup>6</sup> W. S. McCullough, "Sign in the OT," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, pp. 345-46 (345).

<sup>7</sup> F. J. Helfmeyer, ", " *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. John T. Wills (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), I, pp. 167-88 (168).

<sup>8</sup> Herman Gunkel, *Genesis: Übersetzt und Erklärt*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Handkommentar zum Alten Testament 1. Abt., Bd. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> For this point, the OT reference to the  of God is written in a lower case, that is the "Spirit," since OT writers did not have an intention to refer to the third person in the Godhead.

the intended consequence of the spirit's coming.<sup>10</sup> Second, the sign, therefore, tends to be temporary in nature. It accomplished a function concurrently with the coming of the spirit so that it will signify the presence of the spirit. Third, the sign by nature should be external and demonstrable to be able to function as a sign.

After applying these criteria, we come up with an extremely small number of passages among the passages containing a reference to the spirit of God in the OT. So far, three can be identified: Num 11, 1 Sam 10 and 19. We will discuss the nature and role of the sign in each passage. This small number raises a question as to whether or not it is possible to deduce a pattern out of them. This study is intended to shed light on our initial evidence discussion, but never to prescribe what the NT or modern sign of the Spirit's presence should be.

#### Num 11:25

This wilderness narrative is commonly considered to have come from the northern E tradition during the 8 to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, BCE. Although the exact motive for the selection of the seventy elders is debated, it is clear that they were to assist Moses administratively. As commanded and promised by God (11:17), "Yahweh came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses, and took some portion of the spirit which was upon him and place it upon the seventy men of the elders" (v. 25).<sup>11</sup> The presence of the spirit itself becomes the critical mark of divine approval for Moses' selection of the seventy. Although they were chosen by Moses to assist him, the choice must be ultimately divine. To make the human choice a divine one, their choice needed to be authenticated by God himself.<sup>12</sup> This was achieved by taking some of the spirit which was upon Moses and putting it upon the seventy (v. 25). At what point Moses had received God's spirit is beyond the range of the present discussion. As a result of the spirit's coming, the seventy prophesied (v. 25).

Now we need to examine the sign itself and for whom it was given. When the seventy prophesied at the Tent of Meeting, the holy presence of Yahweh is presumed. Joshua's dismay at the prophetic demonstration

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<sup>10</sup> As the work of the spirit of God is more temporary in the Old Testament era, especially in earlier periods, the spirit's "presence" and "coming" are used more synonymously.

<sup>11</sup> NRSV is used unless stated otherwise.

<sup>12</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 338, "... God ratifies Moses' choice!"



prophesied (10:5). The spirit of the Lord would come to Saul mightily and he would prophesy with them (10:6). He would also “be turned into a different person” (v. 6). These were later fulfilled as predicted by Samuel, although the Masoretic Text reads that “God gave him [Saul] another heart” (v. 9) as soon as he left Samuel.<sup>15</sup> This makes the role of the spirit uncertain in the change of heart, and the exact nature of the change is also unclear.

In this passage, “prophesying” was the sign of the spirit’s presence upon Saul. Although the presence of the spirit itself was a sign, prophesying in turn became a sign for the spirit’s presence. As Wilson argued forcefully, the Hithpael form of the verb  $\text{פָּרַס}$  has its primary emphasis on the state or behavior of prophesying, rather than on any specific oracular aspect of prophesying.<sup>16</sup> This more demonstrable element is well reflected by the surprises people expressed: “When all who knew him [Saul] before saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, ‘What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul among the prophets?’” (10:11). This unusual prophetic behavior, often called ecstasy, is caused by the possession of an individual by the divine spirit. A good ancient Near Eastern parallel is found in the story of Wen Amon.<sup>17</sup> The ecstatic nature of this behavior is also supported by the presence of music among the “sons of the prophet,” which is known to induce a spiritual experience (v. 5).

It seems obvious that the role of the spirit has to do with the emergence of leadership. More specifically, the spirit’s presence authenticated the divine election of Saul over Israel. The affirmation was, first, for the sake of Saul himself. The series of events surrounding the lost donkey (1 Sam 9 and 10) might have raised questions in Saul’s mind. In fact, the anointing took place in a rather private setting, and Samuel’s

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<sup>15</sup> This prompts Hans William Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library, trans. J. S. Bowden (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), pp. 77-78 and many scholars to move the clause to the end of v. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Robert R. Wilson, “Prophecy and Ecstasy: A Reexamination,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98:3 (1979), pp. 321-37 (329-33), and also idem, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 137-38.

<sup>17</sup> James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New Haven, Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 25-29.

explanation was not clear.<sup>18</sup> His low self-image expressed later (10:21-24) further reinforces a clear need within Saul for God's affirmation. The problematic sign of becoming a new man or having a new heart also attests to the inward impact, which could be sensed only by Saul himself. Second, the sign is also for Samuel, affirming not only what the Lord had asked him to do, but also his prophetic authority.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the sign is for the public who should later understand the full implication of this incident.

#### 1 Samuel 19:18-24

This is another passage in which Saul and his army experienced the spirit of God. The entire context set Saul in an extremely negative position where he was seeking his political rival David's death. On three occasions, Saul sent his army to capture David, but the spirit of the Lord came upon them as they met the sons of the prophet in Ramah (19:20-21). Consequently they "prophesied" and became incapacitated to capture David who was under the protection of Samuel and his prophets. Finally, Saul himself set out, after these three unsuccessful attempts, with his own army. Then "... the spirit of God came upon him. As he began traveling, he fell into a prophetic frenzy, until he came to Naioth in Ramah" (1 Sam 19:23). Consequently, "He too stripped off his clothes, and he too fell into a frenzy before Samuel. He lay naked all that day and all that night" (v. 24).

Again, the sign of the spirit's presence was prophesying (𐤔𐤌𐤁𐤏𐤍𐤁𐤏𐤍𐤁𐤏𐤍𐤁𐤏𐤍), the same expression we had for the seventy elders and Saul at the anointing. The primary emphasis is placed on the phenomenon. The ecstatic behavior became almost a stereotype of the spirit's presence. The radical behavior was clearly identified by the people as prophesying (v. 24). Some scholars argue that the evil spirit that had plagued Saul on many occasions caused his unusually radical and almost destructive behavior (e.g., 1 Sam 18:9-10).<sup>20</sup> However, this spirit is not a "bout of his maniacal, homicidal frenzy," but an experience

<sup>18</sup> The potential confusion during the ritual meal and the prophetic behavior is noted by Diana Vikander Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah*, JSOTSup 121 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 60.

<sup>20</sup> Wilson "Prophecy and Ecstasy," pp. 334-35.



of Yahweh's presence and power.<sup>21</sup> Also, there is no reason to believe that the spirit upon Saul is different from that upon Saul's army. Then the spirit upon the army must be the same spirit as that upon the "sons of the prophet (Samuel)" which caused them to prophesy (19:20).<sup>22</sup>

This passage may not fit neatly with any existing spirit traditions of the OT. The closest may be the spirit traditions of leadership and prophets. The best way to solve this question is to ask, "What is the spirit doing?" The passage consistently reveals the spirit's presence to immobilize Saul's soldiers as well as Saul himself, so that David will not be harmed. For this reason, the "prophesying" functioned as an intended consequence rather than as a sign. At the same time, it is not entirely convincing to view the spirit's coming negatively. In fact, the experience of Saul and his soldiers must have been as genuine as the prophets' experiences, that is, providing an opportunity to encounter God's reality. Finally, as in the previous two passages, the prophetic manifestation was temporary and not intended to transform the recipients into prophets. The prophetic phenomenon, as popularly perceived by the society as a typical sign of the spirit's presence, convinced them, as well as people surrounding them, of the spirit's coming upon them. However, the experience does not seem to have any further function than to provide an ecstatic experience with the spirit. Saul had been a leader by this time, but the soldiers were not chosen to carry out any leadership function. Nor did the experience have an empowering function to fulfill a God-given task. Rather, we see through the experience a "depowering" effect. Therefore, we can conclude that, even if there was no intention for them to fulfill a prophetic role, their experience provided them a prophetic experience with the spirit.

## OBSERVATIONS

From the foregoing discussion, several important features emerge. They can be summarized below under a few questions.

1. On what occasions did signs appear?

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<sup>21</sup> John Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971), p. 144.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, "Prophecy and Ecstasy," pp. 329-33; *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, pp. 137-38.

First, one can ask, "Why did signs occur on only a limited number of occasions?" Basically, this question is an argument of silence. That is, the absence of any reference to a sign does not warrant the assumption of the absence of any sign for the spirit's presence. In a sense, one can assume the presence of some kind of external and discernible signs even when there is a casual report of the spirit's presence (e.g., Judg 3:10).

Two (Num 11 and 1 Sam 10) of the three passages refer to the emergence of leadership, and hence, belong to one particular spirit tradition of the OT: the leadership spirit tradition.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps this is the only category where a sign plays a significant role, unlike other spirit traditions such as the spirit in creation. This argument is further reinforced by the fact that the two passages, and in fact all three for that matter, occur within the context of the pre-monarchical period. Since God elects a leader Himself, bypassing any human process, a confirmation to the people through a supernatural and yet recognizable sign becomes essential in their acceptance and recognition of the leader.

We concluded that the third passage (1 Sam 19) belongs to the prophetic spirit tradition. Both leadership and prophetic spirit traditions are categorized as charismatic, in the sense that the recipients are *equipped* to perform a God-given function. In addition, a sign is found only in these traditions.

## 2. What was the sign?

In all three cases, prophesying was the sign of the spirit's presence. In Num 11:25, the chosen elders "prophesied...." The emphasis of the passage on the behavioral display, rather than upon any pronounced oracle, is well established. The ecstatic state of the seventy "for the day" (v. 25) was perceived as the unmistakable sign of the spirit's presence, and consequently as God's authentication of the seventy chosen by Moses.

In 1 Sam 10, prophesying is again the primary sign for the spirit's presence, although the "turning into a new man," which we may call "renewal" (vv. 6, 9), is also mentioned. One can say this is a consequence or even purpose of the spirit's coming, rather than a sign. The matter is further complicated by the fulfillment of this prediction, which preceded the actual experience with the spirit according to the Masoretic Text.

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<sup>23</sup> For other Spirit traditions, see a detailed discuss in Wonsuk Ma, *Until the Spirit Comes: The Spirit of God in the Book of Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 29-32.

That is, unlike Samuel's prediction (v. 6), Saul had his renewal *before* he experienced God's spirit and prophesied, which gives a strong impression that the spirit accomplishes the renewal.

If one can establish a connection between the renewal and the spirit, the question remains whether the renewal served as a sign. By nature, this kind of experience lacks objectivity and concrete demonstrability, hence may be less qualified as an objective, identifiable and convincing sign for the spirit's presence. However, one needs to remember that Saul also needed a confirmation that all the series of events were truly God's design, thus confirming God's call as genuine. If the sign is going to serve Saul alone, then there was no need for an externally discernible one, but a sign that would impact his inner being, to assure him of God's presence. The "change of heart" would have been sufficient. Thus we can conclude that the renewal served as a sign primarily to Saul.

### 3. What role did the sign play and for whom?

The presence of the leadership spirit served two basic roles: authentication and empowerment. In the first passage, the primary role of the spirit's presence was to authenticate the choice of the seventy. It was particularly necessary because Moses did the actual selection. The spirit came upon them, as God's sign of approval, and prophesying was in turn the sign of the spirit's presence. Whether the spirit also performed the empowering role is not clear.<sup>24</sup> In this case, the sign, the spirit's presence itself and prophesying, was given for the sake of Moses, who had chosen them as the human agent of God, for the seventy, who had been chosen, and for the people over whom the seventy would perform their administrative roles.

1 Samuel 10 also shows a similar role of the spirit. The spirit's presence itself was one of three signs the Lord provided after Samuel's anointing of Saul. Along with the "change of heart" the first two signs were private in nature, that is, primarily serving Saul. As the series of events, which had transpired with the climax of anointing, were entirely unexpected, Saul most needed a clear and repeated confirmation. The third sign, the coming of the spirit, is the most elaborately recorded, and has more public elements: the witness of the "sons of the prophet" (10:5, 10) and town people (vv. 11-12). The primary role of the spirit's coming

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<sup>24</sup> Norman H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers*, NCBC (London: Nelson, 1967), p. 230 seems to be overly assuming when he sees the presence of "a supra-human power."

was again, like the first two signs, to affirm and authenticate the divine election of Saul as Israel's king. The prophesying, as the sign of the spirit's presence, served the prophets and the people who witness the spirit's coming upon Saul. It is assumed that this sign served Saul as well. The people and perhaps the prophets as well, except Samuel, witnessed the spirit's presence without fully comprehending its meaning. In this sense, the sign also affirmed the prophetic authority of Samuel. Unlike 1 Sam 11:6-11, there is no indication of an empowering role.

First Samuel 19 is more difficult to assess. First, being in the prophetic spirit tradition, there is no one to whom a proof of the spirit's presence is required or intended. Only indirectly, could Saul and his army have been convinced of God's divine favor and protection afforded to David and secondarily Samuel, through the immobilizing effect of the spirit. This would have also reminded Saul of David's election as much as God's grace shown to Saul through his spiritual experience. Implicitly, it is not difficult to assume that the sign had the same effect on the prophetic guild including their head, Samuel. More explicit is the effect of the spirit's presence among the people. Their reaction is almost identical to 1 Sam 10:12, and this indicates how unmistakably prophesying was as the sign of the spirit's presence.

#### 4. Why prophesying?

As all the three passages show prophesying as the primary sign for the spirit's presence, then it is helpful to ask why prophesying served as the sign. In all three occasions, the sign served all three parties: the recipients (the seventy and Saul with his army), and bestowal agents (in this case, Moses, Samuel and the "sons of the prophet") and the populace. For the recipients, an internal and subjective sign would be sufficient to affirm God's election. However, for the public affirmation, a more objective, external and demonstrable (in this case visible as well as audible) sign was required, and the sign should be something that the culture could readily recognize as a sign of the spirit's presence or possession. This cultural relevancy provides possibility that different signs could appear as long as the conditions of a sign are met.

Prophesying, which is beyond the human realm in nature, thus provides a clear sign of divine control or possession. In that sense, this sign is more than a signpost. Rather, it contains certain elements of the reality to which it points.

### AS A WAY OF CONCLUSION

From the outset, I made it clear that this study is not intended to set any prescription to the modern initial evidence discussion, but to shed light to the issue in debate. Then, what can we glean from the OT data?

On the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel 2 to explain the coming of the Spirit upon the 120. Here, Peter was not referring to the tongue-speaking alone, but the advent of the Holy Spirit upon all the flesh, represented by the hundred twenty. In the Joel passage, prophesying was to be the ultimate purpose of the spirit's coming, but not a sign. At the same time, we recall that prophesying had served as a prime sign for the spirit's presence.

Modern Pentecostal movement is often accused of majoring in a minor, that is, tongue-speaking. One may ask, "Who needs a proof?" Yet, the OT passages clearly demonstrates the need for a sign, especially for the primary individual involved, the divine agent who facilitated the experience of the spirit, and the public.

To constitute a sign, it must be temporary in occurrence, objective, demonstrable and supernatural in nature, and culturally perceived as a sign for the spirit's presence. Also it has to include an element of divine control or possession, hence radically other-worldly. The consequence of the public appearance of the sign is not only the acknowledgment of the spirit's presence upon an individual, but also the spontaneous response of awe. The same effect is found in Acts 2. For this reason, it is legitimate to expect a sign.

Having argued the legitimacy of a sign, it will be helpful to stretch our thoughts to the question, "What fulfills the qualifications for a sign?" First, the consistent occurrence of prophesying in the OT implies a defined parameter for a sign. Then, "What are some prophetic phenomena the scriptures show?" Joel 2:28 catalogues "prophesying" (presumably in its narrow sense), dreaming or seeing visions. Of course, these candidates are legitimate only when two other criteria are met: demonstrability and cultural acceptability. For these reasons, tongue-speaking could have been one of the best candidates for the first century Christians and modern day Pentecostals.

Still a fundamental question remains: "Can the OT experience of the spirit be equated with baptism in the Spirit in the Book of Acts?" This question needs to be considered in order to apply the present study to the

modern tongue issue. However, this question has to be dealt with in another place.

Then, we have a more contextual question open to twentieth century Asian Pentecostals: "Can other phenomena, within the prophetic boundaries, function as a sign for the Spirit's presence?" For instance, Korean Pentecostals, as well as non-Pentecostals, tend to accept other spiritual phenomena such as uncontrollable shaking of the body, a visionary experience and so forth as legitimate signs for their experience with the Spirit or their "baptism in the Spirit." If we do not find a good ground for these experiences in the Bible, the traditional religious traditions, or "cultural acceptability" as argued above, may provide another valid ground.

Through this brief reflection on OT evidence, we were able to affirm several issues: 1) the need for a sign of the Spirit's presence, 2) a pattern of the sign emerging in the OT, 3) its elements and function, and 4) its primary role for diverse groups. This may strengthen the Pentecostal emphasis on the sign of the Spirit's presence. At the same time, however, there seems to remain some open-endedness issues regarding NT and modern issues such as: 1) Is the Spirit's presence in the OT equated with baptism in the Spirit in the NT, 2) Is tongue-speaking the only physical initial evidence" or [DB1] simply one "accompanying sign" for baptism in the Spirit, 3) Is there a room for other signs in a different historical and cultural setting? If prophesying was a cultural phenomenon used handily by the OT world, this may challenge Asian Pentecostals to give a more serious look at the issue.