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# The Understanding of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament with Particular Reference to the Acts of the Apostles

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The subject, "The Understanding of the Holy spirit in the New Testament with particular reference to the Acts of the Apostles" is a critical issue in ecclesio-theological research today. The manifestations and causes of contemporary interest in the subject, aside from the stimulus provided by the Charismatic renewals worldwide, today, at the close of the twentieth century, are perhaps more theological, ecumenical and sociological than in the periods prior to the second Vatican Council. A more dispassionate assessment of this Biblical material is today in Christian circles gradually overcoming the previous polemical polarities which reflected primary interest in denominational self justification.

The many materials produced by Biblical Scholars and the interest and concern shown by the different episcopal conferences, the clergy in Holy Spirit Ministries, the near mushrooming of Christian Charismatic renewal groups, and maddening multitude of evangelical and Pentecostal groups are altogether a welcome sign of this trend. There is a realisation and acknowledgement of diversities rather than uniformity regarding various New Testament theologies (Christology, ecclesiology, pneumatology) and rationales and forms of the Holy spirit Ministry. This shift from more absolute to more relative and pragmatic categories, consistent with a more rigorous application of the historical nature of the Christian Church has raised a-new the question of norms and criteria regarding the unchanging apostolicity and divine nature of the Church in its totality as well as its parts. Recent interest in the subject of the Holy Spirit as said earlier illustrates this point. What hermeneutical stance does today's interpreter assume in treating diverse traditions once assumed to be homogeneous? What criteria are operative in his critical judgement? In regard to the question of the Holy spirit as posed by the 'early Church', how if at all, are some forms of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit more or less evangelical, more or

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less faithful reflections of the Christological and eschatological nature of the Church?

Furthermore, the theological process at and since the Second Vatican Council not only has prompted a rethinking of ecumenism, salvation, pneumatology and ministry, but also has encouraged the exploration of these issues on the basis of a renewed examination of the manifestations and functions of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Despite some modest progress towards a new consensus on the issue of the Holy Spirit Ministry especially in the Acts of the Apostles, however, some crucial information remains yet outstanding. Philological research has provided better understanding of some important terms such as "*ruah*" (Heb.) and "*pneuma*" (Gk). But their points of origin and influence which the religious—historical milieu has exerted upon their Judeo-Christian usage is still under debate. Does, for example, the term "*pneuma*" represent a Hellenistic Christian incorporation, or can its roots be traced, at least in part, to the terminology of pre-New Testament period?

Theologically, the central and formative role of eschatology and apocalypse in the early Church is universally acknowledged today. But the extent to which eschatological thought, and later the delay of the parousia, has affected the manifestations and functions of the Holy spirit is yet to be adequately determined. The historical as well as geographical influence upon the varieties of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles is generally acknowledged. But the lines of contact as well as the types of historical influence require more precise examination.

Form-critical analysis is, or should be, by now an assumed process in the development of an embracing picture of tradition in the New Testament period. But aside from the few suggestions of the manifestation and gifts of the Holy Spirit primarily in the Acts of the Apostles, our understanding of the forms in which the Holy Spirit Ministry tradition might have been transmitted and preserved is minimal. Related to this is the growing interest in redaction criticism and advance in our comprehension of the use and interpretation of tradition particularly in the Gospels and Acts.<sup>1</sup> The content and shape of tradition on the Holy spirit Ministry, links between Acts of the Apostles and other New Testament literature, the redactional stages of development, expansion and alteration, however, require much closer attention.

The task before us, the application of the understanding of the Holy Spirit in a Christian tradition to be specific, (the origin, development, expansion, interpretation and manifestation), is still only in its initial stages. More data are needed on all points mentioned above. Previous Christian prevailing assumptions require re-

examination. In addition, the texts showing the Holy Spirit at work in the early Church must be re-examined in the context of prevailing contemporary socio-ecclesial situations.

Such an understanding necessarily exceeds the confines of this brief study. Our purpose here can only be to sketch the dimensions of the task with reference to some specific texts in the acts of the Apostles to illustrate the direction which a brief and modest approach to the aforementioned questions might take. The tentative character of our conclusions will be signaled as much by the question they raise as well as the answers they proffer.

### The Holy Spirit in the Bible

The word "Spirit" in the Bible is rendered in Hebrew as "*ruah*" and in Greek as "*pneuma*" and mean 'wind or breath'. Both thoughts are in the word as applicable to the Holy Spirit (Gen. 2:7; Ps. 104:30; Jn 3:6-8; Jn. 20:22). To be very specific *ruah* or even *pneuma* "does not admit translation by any single English word; nor is it entirely correct to say that it sometimes means breath, sometimes wind, sometimes spirit, etc. It is a single word with a single basic meaning; to grasp its meaning we must examine what is said of it"<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the full import of the words "*ruah*" or "*pneuma*" as applied to the Holy Spirit may not be immediately clear to us.

The word, Spirit, is used in the Bible in very many and different ways: The Spirit of God, the Spirit of Man, the whole realm of Spirits—good and devil. Our Chief concern here is with the spirit as one of the most distinctively Biblical means of expressing the outgoing activity of God. It is therefore necessary for us at this stage to highlight the necessity of this search:

1. It is important from the standpoint of worship for us to find out whether the Holy Spirit is a divine person worthy of adoration, faith and love.
2. It is also necessary that we find out whether the Holy spirit is simply an influence or a power that God imparts to us.
3. It is necessary that we find out whether the Holy Spirit is a power that we in our weakness and ignorance are somehow to hold and use or whether the Holy Spirit is a personal being infinitely wise, infinitely holy, and infinitely tender, who is to get hold of and use us. One conception I must observe, is heathenism while the other is Christian. One leads to self-humiliation, self-emptying and self-renunciation; the other leads to self-exaltation.
4. Lastly, it is experimentally important that we discover the Holy spirit as a person. In the Holy Spirit, many have testified to his

ever-presence in their lives as a loving friend, helper and power in various areas of the apostolate.

### Holy spirit in the O.T

The concept of spirit occupies a prominent place in the theology of the Old Testament. It is rendered as "ruah" in the O.T. and thus signifies to breath or to smell. Thus the primary signification of "ruah" appears to be air in motion, as wind or breath. It occurs 378 times in the Old Testament and can be classified under four headings:

1. Physically (131 times): Here it signifies air in motion, the wind in all its moods and phases; whether gentle or stormy, hot or cold. It serves to denote direction, the quarter from which the wind may blow (e.g. Gen. 3:8; 8:1; Ex. 15:10; Jer. 49:36).
2. Physiologically (39 times): Here it denotes the breath in the bodies of men and animals. It can be considered as the vehicle of life and even as life itself, in such a way that when "ruah" leaves the body death takes place (e.g. Ps. 104:29f. Ps. 31:5; Gen. 2:7-19; Eccles. 12:7).
3. Psychically (74 times): Here the word signifies the visible index of man's stronger emotions. Thus, it expresses the inner life of man in his emotional and mental aspects. It is also used as a synonym for anger in both God and man (Mic. 2:7; Impatience Jdg. 8:3; Job 4:9). Thus, it is used to denote the energy of the personality in particular manifestations.
4. Supernaturally (134 times): Here "ruah" includes agencies operating upon man whose source is outside man or above him. It relates itself with the idea of anointing whereby is imparted the divinity to man (1 Sam. 10:1, 16:14; Is. 61:1). It can also be put into a person (Is. 63:11, Eze. 37:14; 2 Kgs. 19:7) so that he is filled with it (Ex. 31:3). It can also be taken away (Ps. 51:13) and distributed upon others (Num. 11:17, 25).

In summary, spirit in the O.T is conceived as divine dynamic entity by which Yahweh accomplishes His ends. In other words, it is power controlled and directed by God for the furtherance of Salvation history and creation. It thus becomes the mysterious and irresistible power of which avails himself in the execution of his designs in Salvation history and creation.<sup>3</sup>

In the O.T. also Spirit is seen as the principle of life and vital activity. It is therefore a creative force which has unique effects upon man. In this sense, it becomes a charismatic spirit when it is imparted to those who are appointed to responsible posts in the society (Jgs. 3:10; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6; 19; 15:14; 1 Sam. 11:6; 16:13f; Is. 42:1; Ex. 31:3; 35:31. Thus, "the spirit not only confers upon

those who receive it the qualities necessary to fulfil their mission, but also inspires them to deeds above and beyond the expected and their normal habits and powers; and this is the true sign of the Spirit, that a man rises above his habits and attainments".<sup>4</sup>

Spirit here also is seen as activity, as disposition, temper and courage. In short, it is equivalent to an overwhelming and mysterious power, which people honour as divinity of nature and value as an instrument for putting into effect God's purposes in Salvation history. It represents a force of nature, of which God avails himself at all critical turning-points in the tempestuous history of salvation for carrying out his plans.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of Spirit in the O.T. will be seen to have had an effect and in fact colours the N.T. understanding of Spirit.

### Holy spirit in the N.T.

For practical purposes, we shall only discuss here the Holy Spirit in the synoptic Gospels and thereafter in some details discuss or analyse a few texts on the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles which is actually our area of concentration.

The word, Spirit, is rendered in the N.T. as "*pneuma*" as we saw earlier on. That word like *ruah* has no proper English equivalent. However, it has always been signified as the movement of the air, primarily either breath or wind.

### Holy Spirit in the Synoptics

The common tradition in the synoptics (Q) presents the Holy Spirit in the O.T. conceptions and refers mainly to the messianic endowments of Jesus and his teaching concerning the reign of God. A few aspects illustrate this:

- a) At the baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit is manifested in bodily form as a dove (Mk. 1:10 Mt. 3:16; Lk. 3:22).
- b) The anointing of the Holy Spirit is claimed by Jesus as indicating the nature of his mission (Lk. 4:18).
- c) The Holy Spirit is regarded as the moving cause of the moving cause of the ecstatic impulse which drove him to the temptation (Mk. 1:12 = Mt. 4:1 = Lk. 4:1).
- d) The Holy Spirit is the extraordinary energy, tension, enthusiasm and exultation which marked his Ministry (Lk. 4:14; 10:21; Mk. 3:21, 30).
- e) The manifestation of the Holy spirit's power in the expulsion of demons is proof of the presence of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 12:28).

## Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles

The Acts of the Apostles is in every sense the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. It is the historic development of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the Society. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles all allusions to the Spirit is to something divine. It is considered as a personal divine person. It is manifested in many different ways and circumstances.

- a) It comes upon the disciples and they are given power to become witnesses of Jesus throughout the world (Acts 1:8).
- b) It is shown forth in new courage (Acts 2:3ff), Liberty of Speech, skill in debate, keen insight into and wise use of scripture (Acts 6:3; 11:28); 13:9), sound judgement of human character, business aptitude and comfort in suffering (Acts 9:31).
- c) It is shown forth in ethical qualities of repentance, obedience and faith (Acts 6:15) which are needed for its reception and it belongs to every believer (Acts 2:38; 10:44; 1:17; 13:52).
- d) In the Acts of the Apostles, the Church is seen as the possessor of the Spirit and is in turn empowered to confer it upon her members (Acts 2:38; 4:8; 31 6:8; 9:17; 11:24).
- e) The Spirit is manifested in such phenomena as the gift of tongues and prophecy. These manifestations testify to the presence of God in the Church (Acts 2:3ff; 11:17; 15:8).
- f) It inspired in the common life of the Ecclesia (Church), mutual service, generous self-sacrifice, joyous fellowship, thus transforming and socialising human nature (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32, 37).
- g) It supervised every stage of the Ecclesia's advance (1:26; 8:17, 29; 10:39, 44; 11:15; 13:2-4; 15:8, 28; 16:6-10; 20:22).
- h) It is a gift which God gives or the Son out-pours (Acts 11:17; 15:8; 2:33, 38) more usually as power (Acts 1:8). In other words, Jesus Christ is the dispenser of the Spirit to the Church.
- i) It speaks, bears witness, separates for service, approves a conciliar decision (Acts 15:28) and appoints overseers.
- j) It comes from God and is present and operative within the Church.

Summarily, therefore, the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles is the outbreathing of God, with the sole intention of energising humanity. The Holy Spirit, like the wind, is sovereign, invisible, inscrutable, indispensable life giving and irresistible. It is seen as the vital energy of the divine nature and the creative and vitalising force of the world and as the source in men of abnormal skill or strength or wisdom or prophetic ecstasy or inspiration and of moral purity. A.W.F Blunt, thus says that "this energy they (the early

Christians Fellowship) ascribed to the continuous living activity of Jesus, and called by the name 'Holy Spirit', which was thus the link between the Messianic Community and its Head. The basis, let us note, was a fact of experience; the enthusiasm was actually there and became theirs; and the phrase 'Holy Spirit' was their interpretation of the fact".<sup>6</sup>

### **Specific Instances of the Operation and Manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles**

Since the Acts of the Apostles is the book for special consideration in this search, we shall, to throw more light on our subject, look more intensely on a few passages dealing with special manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

#### *a) Acts 2:Aff: The Pentecost Passage:*

Pentecost is the Hellenistic name for the Hebrew Feast of Weeks, the institution of which is described in Lev. 23:15-21.<sup>7</sup> It was the feast of thanksgiving for the wheat harvest.

On Pentecost day, the Holy Spirit descended and rested on each disciple in the form of tongues of fire. It became as it were, the disciples' baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit. Because of their baptism with fire and the Holy spirit, the disciples became conscious of a new inward power which completely transformed their whole outlook; and this they attributed to the possession by the Spirit of God. It is indeed this new sense of power that is the significant factor in the experience of Pentecost. The most central fact in the experience is that it marked the beginning of their active missionary work (Acts 4:31). Since the scope of this search is, limited, we shall concern ourselves here with just one aspect or import of the descent of the Holy Spirit, namely the speaking in tongues (glossolalia).

#### **The Pentecost Glossolalia**

From available New Testament evidence it seems that there were two types of the gift of tongues: There is the gift of the ability to speak in foreign languages and there is also the gift of being to speak ecstatically. The later consists in charismatic acclamations in response to the stirring of the spirit in the soul of the believer.<sup>8</sup> The Pentecost phenomenon in all probability included both types.

The speaking in tongues, or if we may put it differently glossolalia, is the outpouring of inarticulate sounds under the stress of an overpowering religious emotion. This phenomenon has many parallels in

the history of all religious revivals down to our own day. In short, the speaking in tongues were "outbursts of largely unintelligible speech under the influence of deep religious excitement."<sup>9</sup>

Luke's version of the happenings at Pentecost is that the Church received the miraculous gift of preaching in available languages. There are indications that Luke has added his own interpretations upon a traditional understanding of glossolalia. We are not here concerned with questions of pure historical criticism, but it is necessary to explain a few ideas: namely, the picture given in 1 Cor. 12 and 14 of the phenomenon of glossolalia is irreconcilable with the Lukan idea of speech in foreign languages. In the young Corinthian Church, speaking in tongues was a regular feature of worship that the leaders had to apply to Paul for advice. Paul did not condemn the practice but recommended that there be an interpreter, otherwise let the speaker "keep silence in the Church and speak to himself and to God" (1 Cor. 14:28).

However, the speaking in tongues in the Corinthian context was evidently regarded as supreme proof of possession by the divine spirit, and as such was earnestly coveted. But it is a gift to which Paul gives no very high place in his list of Charismata (Cf 1 Cor. 12:4-11 and Ch. 14) because it did not edify unbelievers, but tended to disorder, and could be easily counterfeited. It is among the "Childish things" which are to be put away while we "earnestly desire the higher gift" (1 Cor. 13:11; 12:31). And, there is no hint elsewhere to show that the apostles ever made use of such a gift in their missionary labours; nor would it have been necessary in a world where the Greek Koine was almost universally understood as was the situation in the Pentecost era.

On the happenings at Pentecost, Peter used the situation to demonstrate the dawn of the promised Messianic age. There are a few problems posed by the episode. For example, if everyone understood what was being said in his own language, what is the necessity of Peter (Luke's) observation that the phenomenon could give the impression of drunkenness to the crowd or listeners? (Acts 2:15). There are also strange contradictions in Luke's account of the different reactions in the minds of the spectators. In Acts 2:6, the multitude were bewildered in mind because each heard them speaking in his own language; and in Acts 2:12 and 13, they were amazed and perplexed and asked what the phenomenon might mean, while others in mockery said that the disciples were filled with new wine. This later would be a natural reactions on the part of the crowd to an outburst of glossolalia in the Corinthian context.

We can explain these discrepancies by the hypothesis that Luke himself was unfamiliar with the phenomenon of glossolalia and to

impress Theophilus imposed his own interpretation on the traditional story. However, the *raison d'etre* of the phenomenon was that the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit with the accompanying glossolalia was a positive proof that the Messianic era has arrived. And the gift of the Spirit to all classes of people was a supreme testimony of the Messianic gift. With this gift, the disciples were unusually fearless. Their passionate conviction conveyed the power of their message even to the men who did not understand their language. They were amazingly effective, and the Church thereby received the power to preach to every nation of the world.

*b) Acts 5:3ff—Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit:*

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira can best be understood within the context of Christian accountability and integrity. The story contains allusions to the sin of Achan (Josh. 7) who committed sacrilege by keeping back for himself the booty which had been dedicated to God. Their sin is basically that they deceived the Holy Spirit who now rules the post-Pentecostal Community in an attempt to gain the regard due to generosity without suffering the discomforts involved.<sup>10</sup> Homer A. Kent thus observes that 'the fact of lying to the Holy Spirit is more easily understood of *Christians indwelt by the spirit* than of unbelievers who have no relationship to God and certainly have no special relationship to the Holy Spirit.'<sup>11</sup> The incident authenticates the fact that the disciples possess the Holy Spirit who bears testimony within them to the truths of their words (Acts 5:32).

*c) Acts 8:14ff—the Confirmation of the Samaritans by Peter and John:*

Since the reception of the Holy Spirit with strong visible effects such as the gifts of tongues and prophecies had become visible signs of one's acceptance to the Community of believers, Peter and John are sent to confirm Philip's missionary work. They laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. This episode tells of a rite supplementary to baptism, *conferred by one with special authority through prayer and the imposition of hands and effecting a fuller communication of the Holy Spirit.*<sup>12</sup>

*d) Acts 13:1-14; 27—The Holy spirit selects Saul and Banarbas for Mission:*

The text narrates the first missionary journey. The mission is attributed to the initiative of the Spirit but through the Community. It is the Spirit who chooses the missionaries. We also find in this

text that the spirit speaks during a solemn Community Liturgy. They are led off by the Spirit. The Community's charismatic ministers are listed and it is probable that the Spirit's revelation came as a direct inspiration to one or more of the prophets mentioned. The gesture of imposition of hands constitute the missionaries representatives of the Community and also signifies the passing on of authority. Thus, they did not act unilaterally, apart from the Church's knowledge and blessings.

*e) Acts 15:28—The Spirit in the Council of Jerusalem:*

The context is the proceedings of the Council of Jerusalem. The phrase "For the Holy Spirit and we have decided. . ." is a statement of the apostolic church expressing firm belief in the guidance of the Spirit. Down through the centuries the Church has continued to retain this same firm belief. It should be observed that the letter mentioned in verse 23 traced the unanimity of the decision to the action of the Holy Spirit, even though the spirit was not mentioned previously as intervening in the proceedings. This is the way in which the Holy Spirit usually works in the Community of the faithful. There need not be a repeat of the Pentecost episode to indicate his direction. Spirit-filled people can always detect His presence when harmony prevails among people who are responsive to his will.<sup>14</sup>

*f) Acts 19:1-6—The Half Christians at Ephesus:*

This is an interesting passage concerning the half-Christians whom Paul discovered at Ephesus. Because of the non-reception of the Holy Spirit when they became believers, they were considered as retarded Christians. Thus when Paul eventually baptised them and imposed hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit. The signs of speaking in tongues and prophesying accompanied their new experience.

A close study of the texts we have briefly sketched above shows that there is no doubt that the overall teaching of the Acts of the Apostles presents the Spirit as a divine person whose unique task it is to enlighten and guide the Christian Community or the ecclesia. The Spirit in all the texts is distinguished from the Father, whose promise he is (Acts 1:4; 2:33), as well as from the son, to whom he is given and who pours out the Spirit on the Church (Acts 2:33).

## **Conclusion**

In all, we have seen that the Old Testament conception of Spirit colours and influences the New Testament conception of Spirit,

especially that of the Acts of the Apostles. In the Acts of the Apostles, therefore, the Holy Spirit is the source of Christian character. The Spirit appears as a mysterious wonder-working power (*dunamis*) which enables the disciples to speak in foreign languages.

The Holy spirit in the Acts of the apostles descends or is received in answer to prayer (4:31). The imposition of hands by the apostles is the outward sign or means of the reception of the Holy Spirit (8:17). The reception of the Spirit is democratised (2:17–18) and is poured out by the exalted Jesus (2:33). Thus the Holy Spirit is for all who are in need and request for Him.

The continued but yet steadfast growth of the Church in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship is made possible by the Holy spirit (2:42). In other words, fellowship denotes the presence of the Holy spirit in the Community. It describes the quality of the relationship within the Community itself created by the Spirit. The Community of goods (Acts 2:44; 4:32) is the spirit of fellowship in action. It is the putting into practice the kind of Community life which Jesus sought to create and foster among his disciples during his Ministry on earth although it was so often marred by petty jealousies and personal ambitions. Fellowship most importantly is listening to Christ when said 'be not anxious for your life', and again, 'Sell all that you have and give to the poor'. Johannes Weiss' words are in place here: "Every word of Jesus contained in the Old collection of saying is thus a witness to some ideal or conviction of the Community. This applies with double force to the saying which can only with some uncertainty, or perhaps cannot at all, be assigned to him. Such sayings record decisions made by the group in the Spirit and guided by the will of Jesus, as they understood him . . . The fact that these words were preserved and collected is proof of the purpose that was dominant in the primitive Community".<sup>14</sup> It is in this context that the Spirit makes an ethical demand of accountability and integrity on the Church.

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