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THE APOLOGETIC ASPECT OF ACTS 2:1-13

The second chapter of Acts narrates the descent of the Holy Ghost. It is a complex and strange story, and the alignment of the facts and their interpretation presents several problems. For one thing, the stupendous event itself of the descent of the Holy Ghost is dealt with in three verses, not even fifty words all told. Much more is made of the direct consequences: the reaction among the people outside, even to the detail of enumerating eighteen different groups; the lengthy explanation of the event, given by St Peter, embodying the longest quotation from the Old Testament in Acts; eventually the mass-conversion consequent on St Peter's address. Then there are the various problems such as the 'speaking in strange tongues' even before the crowds had gathered; or the fact that each of the pilgrims heard the Apostles 'talking his own native tongue' (v. 8), yet seemed to know that they were 'Galileans speaking' (v. 7). Again, that St Peter should be concerned more with answering those 'who said, mockingly, they have had their fill of new wine' (v. 13) rather than with discussing the miracle of the languages for those 'who asked one another, What can this mean?' (v. 12). Or again, what are these 'other tongues'? Just foreign languages or perhaps strange expressions? And apart from these difficulties, to which could be added the 'strong wind blowing' (v. 2), 'the tongues of fire' (v. 3), there is the further complication that we are faced with a speech made by St Peter, but very much epitomised by St Luke ('he used many more words besides,' v. 40), and used by him for attaining the end for which he wrote his Acts. Have we to invoke Petrine theology in order to understand the meaning of Acts 2, or have we to interpret the address in the light of St Luke's aims?

I

In order to understand Acts 2 properly, and to give a satisfactory answer to these and other difficulties, it is good to recall a few points. First of all, it is generally agreed that St Luke does not alter any quota-

tions substantially. We do not here mean the more than forty quotations or references in his Gospel and the still greater number in Acts, taken from the Old Testament, but words, spoken by his contemporaries, e.g. the Magnificat, Benedictus, Nunc dimittis, the speeches of St Peter, St Paul and St Stephen in Acts. Secondly, St John and St Paul are original, in the sense that they develop ideas or interpret thoughts which are only latent in the Synoptics.¹ St Peter is not. He depends for the most part on what he has read or heard, whether that source be St Paul or the Old Testament. Not only are his ideas on the Christian Faith clothed in Hebrew words and forms, but they also depict Christianity as the true Israel, keeping and guarding the privileges of the flesh and the promise.² If then St Luke does not change these words or ideas substantially, we have for a starting-point of our exegesis St Peter's thoughts on the Church, in a framework constructed by St Luke. The one is as important as the other. Now, it is certainly part of St Peter's teaching that the economy of salvation will be realised in periods, known to the Father (1 Pet. 1:1-2, 4-5), a gradual realisation in time, until the whole of the universe will be transformed into 'a new heaven and a new earth to look forward to' (2 Pet. 3:13). This doctrine of St Peter is used to the full by St Luke, in order to emphasise the theme of his Acts. The universal realisation of God's plans in time (Acts 3:25-6) is worked by the Holy Ghost (1 Pet. 1:2; 3:17-19; 4:14). But, whereas St Peter would seem to be satisfied with focusing the attention more analytically on the New Israel, sprung from 'the precious blood of Christ' (1 Pet. 1:19), constituting a universal 'brotherhood' (1 Pet. 5:9), 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people God means to have for himself' (1 Pet. 2:9), 'God's own household' (1 Pet. 4:17), 'a spiritual house' (1 Pet. 2:5), whose 'chief stone at the corner' (Acts 4:11) is Christ, St Luke, more synthetically, integrates these ideas into the function of the Church as such. St Luke in Acts is not so much concerned with sundry aspects of the Church as the expression of the eschatological reality; his concern is the eschatological reality as such. This point is absolutely basic for the understanding of Acts. And its headlines are illustrated in the second chapter. Thirdly, why should it have been necessary for St Luke to add Acts to his Gospel? His Gospel explains to Theophilus the mercies of our Redeemer; in Acts he shows that this work of salvation is continued, and that the Holy Ghost makes it bear fruit. 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will receive strength from him; you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and throughout Judea, in Samaria, yes, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). But why this

¹ G. Thils, *De leer van den H. Petrus*, Bruges 1946, p. 11

² *ibid.*, p. 23

treatise on the history of the early Church? A truth does not become truer because it is shown to work in practice. The synoptic Gospels, and for that matter the last Gospel as well, seem to have an unsatisfactory ending. All of them finish up with the story of the empty grave and a series of apparitions. Christ, then, had given the final proof that he was the divine legate. Was that the end? 'For ourselves, we had hoped that it was he who was to deliver Israel; but now, to crown it all, today is the third day since it befell' (Luke 24:21).

Christ may have, and indeed had, convinced the Apostles that he was the divine legate. But that had not yet given them a deep enough insight into the nature of his mission after his death. The Apostles had not at all understood what was meant by the Kingdom to come. They were still steeped in the Old Testament idea of the 'Day of Yahweh,' 'That Day' or 'The Day.' For them the 'Day of Yahweh' was the chronologically indifferenced 'now.' The disciples had asked him about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of time in one breath (Matt. 24:3). They believed in the eschatological reality, but were not aware of its depth. The knowledge of that reality had prompted them to ask Christ just before his ascension: 'Lord, dost thou mean to restore the dominion to Israel here and now?' (Acts 1:6). Such a question, despite the fact that 'throughout the course of forty days he had been appearing to them, and telling them about the Kingdom of God' (Acts 1:3) 'and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem' (Luke 24:47), shows that they had evidently failed to grasp where the Kingdom came in, and how it could come about. For the Day of Yahweh was there, now! And yet, Christ had told them that the Kingdom was to be preached to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:17; Acts 1:8). But it is St. Luke alone who mentions that their minds needed enlightenment on that point (Luke 24:47). In other words, it is not so much their faith in Jesus that needed strengthening, it was their Old Testament concept of the Day of the Lord that needed correcting. And that is why St. Luke wrote his Acts: to prove that the eschatological era had indeed come, but that it was not just a moment of time. It was to be an indefinite period. It would mean readjusting the notion not only of the Day of the Lord, but also of Israel's place in the economy of salvation, Israel's election. Of course, we know now that that is tantamount to explaining the true nature of the Church, not so much the Church as a monarchical society, although that aspect must also enter, but rather the Church as the continuation of Christ's mission, indeed of Christ himself.

The idea of Israel's election had always been prevalent in the Old Testament. From childhood on, the Jew had been made familiar with the doctrine of Yahweh's intervention in history for the sake of His elect, of His punishing justice for the sake of protecting His elect. The Israelite had always gloried in being Yahweh's 'peculiar property' (Ex. 19:5), and the bearers of revelation and messianism. But they had also realised that eventually only a 'remnant' would form the Kingdom of the Messias. That final transformation would take place on the awful Day of Yahweh. On that day the 'remnant' would be placed at the head of all nations, assimilate them and become the Messianic Kingdom, the spiritual Israel. The Day of Yahweh, then, was all-important. However, neither pre- nor post-exilic prophets had ever laid bare the full meaning of 'that day.'¹ It was St Luke who, after finishing his Gospel, and taught by St Paul and by the experience gathered from long years of oral instruction, set himself the task of explaining that the Day of Yahweh was co-extensive with the universal mission of the Kingdom. However, St Luke's exposé is not confined to the logical conclusions drawn from, and the authoritative interpretations of, the Founder's own doctrines; it is, of course, all that. But not in the way of a Pauline epistle or of an historical essay, composed to prove his assertions. It is rather the other way about; historical facts are aligned in such a way that they have not only a value in themselves, but also a transcendent value as signs. And as such they contain in themselves all the arguments for proving a thesis, which need not be formally expressed. In that sense, St Luke is a true disciple of the Old Testament authors of the historical books. But then, it is not only the words that matter, the whole build-up has to be taken into consideration. We have to pay great attention to the apologetic aspect.

II

The second chapter of Acts has three main themes, dealing with three characteristic qualities of the Kingdom of God, which link up with three Old Testament doctrines, but which had been largely misinterpreted, even by Christ's closest friends; they are the outpouring of the Spirit, the Apostles' testimony in the strength of that Spirit and its universalism. This theological lesson is taught in such a way that from the array of many facts is distilled both a correction of possibly mistaken Old Testament notions, and their true interpretation. The Old Testament had been abundantly clear on the fact that the Spirit of Yahweh would dominate the eschatological era.

¹ W. K. Grossouw, *Bijbelse Vroomheid*, Utrecht 1955, pp. 181-2

The commencement of the new era would be marked by the outpouring of the Spirit. It is this doctrine that holds a key position in both St Luke's Gospel and Acts. St Luke took that doctrine into account when he planned his books. Not only does he refer to the activity of the Spirit of God in Christ's life and teaching (the Holy Ghost occurs thirteen times in the Gospel) and in the life of his Kingdom (fifty-three times in Acts), he gives a predominant place to the Spirit in his pivotal chapters. The first public appearance of Christ is given great relief in the Gospel story (Luke 4:14-30). St Luke dedicates seventeen verses to it, prefacing the event by the remark that 'Jesus came back to Galilee,' the starting-point of his mission, 'with the power of the Spirit upon him' (Luke 4:14). St Mark has two verses on the same event (Mark 4:14, 15). Likewise the public appearance of the Church has the same presence of the Spirit (Acts 2; John 20:22; Acts 4:31). This is not just a matter of planning, it is also symbolic. Symbolic in the sense that these *facts* signify a *doctrine* by reason of a *presupposed relationship*. The *facts* are the presence of the Holy Ghost marking all the great beginnings: the virginal conception (Luke 1:35), the nativity of the precursor (Luke 1:69), the prophecy of Simeon (Luke 2:27), Jesus' baptism preparatory to his mission (Luke 3:22; 4:1), his first public appearance (Luke 4:14). And just as the new era had started, so it was to continue: 'The holy spirit has made you bishops in God's church' (Acts 21:28). He decides missionary enterprises (Acts 13:14; 8:29-39; 16:6). He lives in them that follow the new way (Acts 5:32; 6:5; 8:18). And so the expansion of the Church (Acts 2:41; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24) comes about by the encouragement of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:31). The *doctrines*, which these events teach both as facts and as symbols, can conveniently be summed up in the manner in which the theology on the Mystical Body has later phrased it, viz. that the Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church, or—from another angle—that Christ after his glorification brought to perfection the Church which he had instituted. The *presupposed relationship* between the facts of the presence of the Holy Ghost and the doctrine concerning his being the soul of the Church, is not one of efficient causality but of analogy. The many historical events describing the activity of the Spirit of God relate isolated facts; but the reality signified by these events is the doctrine that the Church in all her activities, lives and works by the presence of the Holy Ghost. In other words, St Luke uses a series of historical facts to illustrate the characteristic features of the Church. And just because the pivotal place and structure of Acts 2 is meant to bring into relief the doctrine of the presence of the Holy Ghost in the Church, whose task it is to witness to Christ, and whose embrace

is universal, its narrative need not and cannot be offset by other passages dealing with the descent of the Holy Ghost (John 20:22, the Johannine Pentecost; Acts 4:31). Doing that would mean stopping short at the historical facts as facts and losing sight of their significative value. This contention invites the question: 'Does St Luke strictly adhere to the historical events and their order?' Provisionally we can only answer that the years which elapsed between the events and the writing, years of experience in the active ministry, imposed on St Luke the necessity of choosing and presenting the events, so that they would manifest these basic doctrines. Hence, to grasp their apologetic meaning we have to consider the time and circumstances to which they belong.

III

It must first be made clear that St Luke speaks of facts, which are at the same time symbols of a deeper reality. The descent of the Holy Ghost on the disciples is said to have taken place on Pentecost day. Leaving aside what historical value may be attached to the Old Testament chronology of the Passover and the promulgation of the Law on Mt Sinai, the Scriptures present the promulgation as taking place fifty days after the Pasch (Exod. 12:18; Lev. 23:16). Although the feast of Pentecost was a harvest feast, the very consciousness of the Jews of their election, of the lawgiver Moses, of their constitution as an independent God-governed nation, would seem to suggest that the commemoration of the promulgation of the Law can never have been absent, even though as an official celebration it may be very late. Some say that there are no traces before the second century A.D. J. D. Eisenstein¹ maintains that Pentecost as a festival of the birthday of the Torah was the sole celebration after the exile. For one thing, it is hard to see how a harvest feast should attract so many people from such remote districts to Jerusalem, if the feast has not at the same time something of a national significance. And even if it were not officially so, one could hardly explain the introduction of a totally new feast in the second century A.D., especially in Jewish circles, if it had not been preceded by a long tradition of some sort. But in either hypothesis, the non-Jew St Luke could well see the parallel between the constitution of the theocratic Kingdom and the first manifestation of the eschatological Kingdom. And if we maintain with J. Calès² that Ps. 68, the glorious epic of Israel's grandeur, was chanted on the feast of Pentecost, then there is

¹ *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, IX, London 1905, c. 593; cf. I. Beaufays, *Aux Premiers Jours de l'Eglise*, Bruxelles 1944, p. 93

² *Le livre des Psaumes*, I, Paris 1936, p. 650

no doubt whatever that the constitution of the theocratic Kingdom was in the minds of those who witnessed the events (wind, fire, languages) that by their very nature were a reminder of the Sinaitic theophany. And for these reasons we think that St Luke's very representation of the facts was meant to suggest the advent and the external manifestation of a Kingdom which was to last.

If then an extraordinary event could suggest the manifestation of a new Kingdom, because it took place whilst a historic day was being commemorated, the very nature of the event itself would call up certain features by which the commencement of this new era would be made known. It would also greatly relieve St Peter's task, when trying to explain to those who lived by the Old Testament doctrines, that these phenomena did mean what they symbolised. For now the old economy would, as the marvellous results have proved, serve as the natural stepping-stone for the acceptance of the new economy. Secondly, in the Old Testament Yahweh's presence had on the one hand been indicated by fire (Exod. 3:2 ; 19:16 ; 20:18 ; 40:38 ; Num. 10:34 ; 11:4 ; Judges 13:20 ; Is. 6:4 ; Ezra 1:13) and wind (Gen. 1:2 ; 2:7 ; Exod. 15:8 ; 2 Sam. 5:24). It does not matter in the least that the idea ' Spirit of Yahweh ' gained in precision as revelation proceeded. The very dynamism and evolution in revelation would dispose the hearers more readily to accept further developments, much as they had been announced in the Old Testament. And on the other hand, the equivocation in the statements that the Messiah would be filled with the Spirit of Yahweh (Is. 11:2), that the sinners afflict the Spirit of his Holy One (Is. 43:10) and that the Spirit of the Lord was the leader of the just (Is. 43:14) would but prepare their minds for the complete concept and activity of the Spirit. In some vague way it was known that the new era would be dominated by the fire and the Spirit. It is this idea that was taken up by St Peter in order to explain what had happened and to call attention to what was contained in the old ideas in an inchoative and imperfect way. He does so by reminding his hearers of Joel's prophecy : ' He has poured out that Spirit as you can see and hear for yourselves ' (Acts 2:33). But St Luke goes a step further. It was left to him to show that this ' Day of Yahweh ' is but the beginning of the end. He neatly distinguishes between ' the sound as of a rushing mighty wind (*pnoe*) ' and the presence of the *pneuma*. Wind and fire do not consume what comes in their way on this Day of Yahweh, but they symbolise a divine force and inspiration.¹ The momentary and compact representation of the Day of Yahweh in the Old Testament is given perspective and duration. The outpouring of the Spirit is there, without the universal judgment.

¹ C. Lattey, ' The Mighty Wind at Pentecost, ' *Scripture*, IV (1949), p. 58

The Spirit is no longer a divine attribute but an independent reality. But if this reality is to dominate the new era, it is to remain for ever. And this, in turn, is further postulated by the effects of the presence of that Spirit. But these effects would fail to deliver St Luke's message to us if we were to stop at analysing them according to their factual value.

IV

First of all, why does St Luke not state clearly on whom the Holy Ghost descended? Who are the 'all' of verse one? Are they the 'Twelve' or the one hundred and twenty of 1:15? Or are they all the believers in Jesus Christ? Since the whole of Acts is written in order to prove that the Church is the continuation of Christ's message and the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies on the new era, St Luke wrote from his threefold knowledge: Old Testament teaching, Christ's doctrine and an experience in the apostolic ministry. He knew that in the Old Testament the Spirit of Yahweh had been seen at work in a few elect in a transient way; that there had been some sort of a permanent presence in the anointed ones; that this presence, localised and limited in the earlier books, had been understood in a more spiritual way after the captivity; and that eventually the new era was to be marked by a universal presence of the Spirit. Secondly, the beneficial effect of this presence was not to be limited to the 'remnant' of Israel only; the New Kingdom was, according to Ezechiel (40-7) and Jeremias (33) to start from the new Jerusalem, from the Spiritual Temple. This new glory was, according to Isaia (49:6; 60), to be communicated to Jews and non-Jews alike. But his years in the ministry had taught him that this universalism was a notion but slowly acquired. Whereas Acts abounds in passages in which the universal expanse of the Church is shown, it also contains the story of the limited view of St Peter, who needed a special revelation before he accepted the pagans. And St Luke even adds that those with St Peter 'were astonished to find that the free gift of the Holy Spirit could be lavished upon the gentiles' (10:45). In fact, a long apology seems to be necessary to show that this universalism was indeed God's plan (ch. 11)! St Luke realised all this when he was planning Acts. He knew that on Pentecost day St Peter had addressed the 'men of Israel' (Acts 2:22), 'all the house of Israel' (2:36). He knew that at the council of Jerusalem, where the authorities had gathered, there had been grave dissension about the equality of the non-Jews. And that is why St Luke does not want to specify his 'all.' The impression must be 'all,' without limits, though, of course, it could actually be but a certain number. That is why

it is said that all were gathered together, that all were filled with the Holy Spirit. And to give further emphasis to this premeditated universalism, which it was evidently difficult to grasp, he appends that table of nations. Unless we keep in mind that this enumeration is meant to symbolise and teach the Church's universality, we are bound to end in a deadlock, when trying to solve the difficulties. The point is that all these eighteen groups, whether they were residents or pilgrims—either view finding support in the text—the point is that they all seem to be genuinely astonished at hearing the praise of God's wonders in their own languages. Evidently St Luke is not at all worried about inserting the Judaeans, who seem to be out of place, if the accent is on the foreign or strange languages. Nor is he concerned with the languages as such, or with the problem whether the miracle is in the speaking or in the hearing. Did the hearers gather around St Peter and the eleven (v. 14) or around the 'all' of v. 4? Did whoever spoke, speak several languages at the same time, so that more than fifteen languages were heard? Or did they speak the four languages—Zend, Semitic, Greek and Latin—that would cover the native tongue of each? These are the questions which we ask, and not the problems which St Luke meant to solve.

His problem was of a totally different nature: to show the vivifying workings of the Holy Ghost, the task of the Church as a witness and her universalism. And then we see that St Luke mentions the nations according to their territorial division, starting from the North-East and going to the West and South, with a more detailed enumeration of the Hellenistic world, better known to him than the purely Roman provinces. They hailed from 'every country under heaven' (Acts 2:5). And that addition is not meant as a hyperbole, as e.g. in Acts 19:10 where it is said that during St Paul's two years at Ephesus 'the Lord's word came to all those who lived in Asia, both Jews and Greeks.' But here the meaning is that God's new message right from the very start went out to and was understood by this representation of all the nations of the world. That that is his message is further corroborated by the description of the charism of glossolaly. St Luke wrote his Acts possibly less than ten years after St Paul sent his first letter to the Corinthians. It cannot prudently be doubted that St Paul's travelling companion was fully informed about this charism of glossolaly which St Paul discusses in 1 Cor. 14. St Paul teaches quite clearly that 'talking with a strange tongue is a sign given to unbelievers.' True enough, those who heard the miracle of speech (in Acts 2) were all God-fearing Jews or proselytes. But the accent is on the fact that they represent the whole world. Moreover, much stress is laid on the hearing of the languages, as several exegetes remark.

Evidently the miracle is worked for them, i.e. for the whole world. And so St Luke covertly announces a doctrine, to which he will return time and again in the rest of his work. If we ask why St Luke should have preferred this veiled way to a clear statement, then the answer would seem to be, firstly because in so doing he followed a method particularly dear to the Eastern mind, secondly because it would bring to mind so many allusions to relevant passages in the Old Testament, and thirdly in deference to St Peter. A plain statement would have formed a painful contrast to St Peter's address, his subsequent interests and his reversion to previous views, even though he had been corrected by a special revelation. As is also clear from his Gospel, St Luke avoids hurting people. His writings suggest the perfect gentleman, whose sole aim is the truth, but who will never hammer it into shape on the backs of others, if he can avoid it.

The whole world then, hears. But this hearing had a special meaning for the Old Testament Jew. The Hellenistic mystics and the gnostics stressed the visual aspect in revelation, whereas in the Old Testament religion, revelation came mainly by listening. If, therefore, it is correct to say, as some do, that in our passage the hearing is prevalent, it may well be that St Luke purposely stressed that aspect of the miracle, in order to create the subconscious conviction that this message must be listened to, because it is Yahweh who speaks. This would explain the difficulty that 'other tongues' were used, though only believing Jews were present, who as a matter of fact would have understood Greek or Aramaic. But it does not solve the question of whether the 'other tongues' are foreign languages or strange expressions; in other words, whether the miracle is one of languages or the charism of glossolaly.¹ We have explained it as a miracle of languages, without having recourse to the theory that these were the languages necessary for the Apostolic teaching. On the other hand, the aim of the 'tongues' does not seem to be preaching, but the telling of God's wonders. Moreover, the miracle starts before any people had gathered. So, not languages but glossolaly? It would seem that St Luke purposely avoids saying what precisely took place. Writing so many years after the event, and knowing from the practice of the ministry, as is very clear from the rest of Acts, that the omnipresence of the Holy Ghost in a universal Church must be made clear, he arranged the facts to stress that doctrine. All were united: one united fire parts into many 'tongues,' and many 'tongues' tell all 'tongues' about God's wonders. This they could do only because of the dynamism of the fire. At the same time an interpretation is necessary (as in glossolaly), and it is provided by St Peter. But his explanation

¹ B. Haensler, 'Zu Apg 2, 4,' *Biblische Zeitschrift*, xii (1914), pp. 35-44

is not an interpretation of what the disciples had uttered, as is the case in glossolaly, but of the fact as such. St Peter's explanation has the same effects as were known to be consequent on glossolaly. That is why St Luke could present the miracle as glossolaly, but in such terms that the historical fact is not misrepresented. And this was best expressed by 'other tongues' as the 'other' can allude to both glossolaly (strange expressions) and multiple languages.¹ But then, the speaking in languages before the crowd had gathered need no longer constitute a difficulty. For, apart from the fact that St Luke sometimes finishes one section of his story and then reverts to a detail of it, as in Zachary's *Benedictus*, the event may well have been inserted there to suggest glossolaly, whereas it need not necessarily have preceded the coming together of the pilgrims.

V

The narrative of the descent of the Holy Ghost is therefore far more than a historical account. St Luke has, of set purpose, availed himself of all the possible links with the Old Testament, which the historical facts have or could be made to suggest. Thus the great events of the day, explained by St Peter, would serve a double function: they would cast light on many a dark problem of the Old Testament, and at the same time show that this same Old Testament, in which they so firmly believed, was being fulfilled now. Therefore this new development must be believed with the same faith with which they had accepted the teachings of the Old Testament. But it took years of experience in the ministry to bring St Luke to write his apologetic tract and to write it 'in order' (Luke 1:3).

And thus the whole planning of the story, the terminology used and the many implicit references to the messianic character of the Old Testament are in themselves signs that would be understood by the people of the time, and a bridge linking the old economy with the new. The obscure words and imagery in which the old was veiled would invite those of goodwill to avail themselves of the light, the one light that was offered, and whose rays were sparks, shot off from the one great fire, symbolised by the tongues on that day.

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¹ J. Weterman, 'Het Pinksterfeest naar Haud 2,' *Nederlandse Katholieke Stemmen*, III (1956), p. 106