

# Birthing and the Holy Spirit in the Writings of Luke

## Introduction

Birthing<sup>1</sup> is both a mystery and a history. It is a *mystery* since it is God's design and it is above and beyond all human ingenuity. Hence the psalmist cries out in wonder: "You have indeed formed my inmost being, you knit me in my mother's womb... in mysterious ways you fashioned me in secret" (Ps. 139:13-16: cf. also Is. 49:1, 5; Jer 1:5; Gal 1:15-16 etc.). It is a *history* in so far as it is an outburst of chaos into cosmos (Gen. 1:1-4), of dust into a human form (Gen. 2:7). It is the emergence of something new in space and in time. It is saying goodbye to a life in the world of the womb which has been warm, cosy and familiar and entering into a life in a world which is unknown and unfamiliar, and may be even hostile!

Behind the unfolding of this great secret which is both mystical and historical stands the power of God, the *Holy Spirit*, the third person of the Trinity. It is he who, according to the Bible, brings about the splendour of birthing. In the following study we examine the birthing of a prophet (John the Baptist), the birthing of the Messiah (Jesus) and the birthing of a new people (The Church) as portrayed in Luke, and the role of the Spirit in the birthing of each of these respectively and their relevance for our lives.

1998 is dedicated to the Holy Spirit by the holy Father in our preparation for the Great Jubilee year 2000.

1. I am using the term 'birthing' in preference to the word 'birth' since the former does not limit itself to just the emergence from the womb into the world, but the whole process that precedes as well as accompanies the event called birth and it includes that birth as well.

"One of the first tasks required of the preparation for the Jubilee, says the holy Father, is the rediscovery of the presence of the Spirit and his action" (Tertio Millennio Adveniente : 45). This article is a small attempt to fulfil the task laid down by the holy Father.

### **1. The Birthing of a Prophet**

All through his Gospel and in the Acts Luke underlines the presence and activity of the Spirit. Much especially does he stress his role in the birth narratives (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25, 26, 27). Since John the Baptist is a typical representative of the period of preparation for the Messiah, his birthing is introduced very solemnly (1:10-25).

After the examples of Samson (Jud. 13:4-5) and Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11), John will be consecrated by Nazirite vow and will be set apart for the service of the Lord. As in the cases of Othniel (Jud. 3:10), Gideon (6:34), Jephtha (11:29) and the other Judges "the spirit of the Lord would come upon (envelop) him" for the task assigned, namely to be a messenger of the Lord (Mal. 3:1-2), and to be a fiery reformer like the prophet Elijah (Mal. 3:23) in order "to prepare a people fit for the Lord" (Lk 1:17).

John is said to "be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb" (Lk 1:15). While in the OT the Spirit is said to fill particular people at a particular time temporarily, for a particular task and departed from them once the task was over, in the case of the Baptist he is filled with the Spirit permanently from the very commencement of his life.<sup>2</sup>

The birthing of the Baptist may be considered from two points of view. The expression "from his mother's

2. Geldenhuis, N., The Gospel of Luke, W. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1979, pp. 64-65.

womb" could mean either *from his birth*, that is, from the time of his emergence from his mother's womb (Ps. 22:11; 71:6; Is. 48:8)<sup>3</sup> or from the time he was still *in the womb* (Jud 13:3-5; Is 44:2). From Lk 1:41 we may rightly presume that it is the latter which is meant here although the former also could be implied. Even before the actual birthing a prenatal sanctification of John is implied; "even before he was born, the hand of God was on him to prepare him for his work. Thus in the strongest possible way the divine choice of John for his crucial task is stressed".<sup>4</sup> We could also affirm that the whole existence of John has been graced by the Spirit.

Instead of the drink from which he abstains (Num 6:3), he is now *filled* ("plesthesetai") with the Spirit by YHWH himself. Exclusively a Lukan expression (1:41, 67; Acts 2:4; 4:8; 9:17 etc.), the term "*pimplemi*" ("to fill") denotes the gift of God's creative or prophetic presence. As a Jewish reform-preacher John plays a transitional role to prepare the way for the kingdom-preacher, Jesus.<sup>5</sup> For this unique role he is gifted and graced with the Spirit from his very birthing.

The question may now be posed as to the identification of the Spirit. Though the use of the term "Holy Spirit" without the definite article here as well as in 1:35, 41, 67; 2:2-5 may be translated as "a holy spirit", yet we may hold without doubt that christian reflection on the Holy Spirit by the time Mt and Lk wrote their Gospels would imply the

3. The term "koilia" (womb) may mean stomach or belly or internal organs.
4. Marshal, I. H., *The Gospel of Luke*, The Pater noster Press, Exeter, Devon 1978, p. 58; Fitzmyer, J., *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, the Anchor Bible 28, Doubleday, NY, 1981, p. 326.
5. Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-185, 326.

trinitarian concept and hence the reference may safely be attributed to the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

The birthing of the Baptist through the Holy Spirit with the meaning of his being still in the womb and also his emergence from the womb, is associated with *his call to be a prophet* in the line of Saul and David. Of Saul it is said that "The spirit of God rushed upon him (Saul) so that he joined them (the band of prophets) in their prophetic state" (1 Sam 10:10). And David says of himself: "The spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue" (2 Sam 23:2).

We may safely presume then that the Spirit that filled the Baptist is not the Spirit that is associated with the baptism of Jesus (Lk 3:16) but the one that filled Saul and David and also Elijah and Elisha (2 Kgs 2:9-16), namely the Spirit that accompanies the prophets. In fact in the Gospel of Lk "John the Baptist is presented as a prophet, indeed greater than any other prophet".<sup>7</sup>

The prophetic ministry of the Baptist is also associated with a call from God (3:1-2), a call similar to that of Jeremiah (Jer 1:1; cf. Is 38:4; Jer 13.3) to proclaim the word of God. The literal phrase "*a word of God was (directed) to John*" (Lk 3:2) is parallel to "he will be filled with the *holy Spirit*", since both the Spirit and the word stand for the same reality. They are different ways of expressing the birthing of the prophetic career *in the womb*

6. Brown, R., *The Birth of the Messiah*, Doubleday, NY, 1979, p. 261.
7. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 274. In foot note 39 Brown refutes the implication that there are two Holy Spirits. He contends rightly that to the idea of the Spirit of God taken over from Judaism, Christianity has made its own contribution. The Spirit poured out at Pentecost after the resurrection is described as having both aspects, prophetic and baptismal (Acts 2:17, 38).

through the Spirit (Lk 1:15; cf. Is 61:1; Ez 11:5; Joel 3:1) as well as *in the world* through the Word (Lk 3:1-2; cf. Jer 1:2; Is 2:1; Joel 1:1).<sup>8</sup>

Thus we may conclude that as a man of God, a messenger of God, a prophetic voice of God, John was graced with the Spirit from the moment of his birthing to "go before the Lord" (Lk 1:17; Mal 3:1) in order to convert Israel from her estrangement from God (Jer 3:7, 10; Ez 3:19) and "prepare a people fit for the Lord" (Lk 1:17; 2 Sam 7:24; Mal 3:24). The forerunner needed to be filled with the Spirit, the author of every new beginning.

## **2. The birthing of the Messiah**

The birthing of the Messiah by the Holy Spirit is recorded in both Mt (1:18, 20) and Lk (1:35).

In Mt the conception of Jesus (1:18) and his birth (2:1) are narrated only indirectly. The consequences however, namely, the embarrassment of Joseph (1:19) and that of Herod (2:3) are expressly stated. The reason is to clarify the doubts in the mind of the readers with regard to the birth place of Jesus and thus to forestall the attacks on Jesus' dubious birth out of wedlock.<sup>9</sup>

More to our concern is the mention of the Holy Spirit twice in Mt (1:18-20) in connection with the birthing of Jesus. In the first, the readers are put on guard by Mt not to entertain the same suspicion which assailed Joseph (1:19). In the second, it is the angel who gives the same message to Joseph (1:20b-21). Mt does not say that "the child is through the Holy Spirit" implying that the Holy Spirit is the father of the child. The literal translation of

8. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 274-275.

9. Schweizer, E., *The Good News according to Matthew*, S.P.C.K., London, 1975, p. 30.

the text reads, "she was having in the womb through a holy spirit". The Holy Spirit is denoted by a feminine word "Ruah" in Hebrew and a neuter word "pneuma" in Greek. Hence the birthing of Jesus is not associated in any way with a sexual connotation but carries implicitly a *creative significance*.<sup>10</sup> This is also confirmed from 1:25 where we are told that Joseph was not responsible for the birthing of Jesus.

In the Matthaean account the presence of the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20) has to be viewed in conjunction with the genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17) where "he highlights Jesus' lineage through the recipients of the messianic promises, especially Abraham and David".<sup>11</sup> In this background he portrays "a new beginning, a new genesis for the human race through the creative action of the Holy Spirit in Mary". "A Spirit of God" that was at the root of the creation of the world (Gen. 1:1-2; Ps. 104:30), which produces life (Ez. 37:9-10), "a breath of life" that was blown into the nostrils of the humans (Gen 2:7), "the Spirit" which moved the prophets to speak (Mt 22:43), "the Spirit of God" that anointed Jesus for his ministry (Mt 3:16), "the Holy Spirit" given to the disciples to start their new spiritual life (Jo 20:22; Acts 1:8) - all denote *the same Holy Spirit* that has descended upon Mary unleashing a creative force in her bringing about a new beginning. Thus Jesus' birthing is linked both to the human race at the beginning of the world and to the new messianic people at the beginning of the Church: "The Church is being shaped at the annunciation. The Messiah and the church are 'born of the Spirit'. Mary is already seen as the New Eve, the Mother of the new people of God".<sup>12</sup>

10. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125, 132.

11. Maloney, G. A., *Mary: The Womb of God*, Dimension Books, NJ, 1976, p. 73.

12. Maloney, *op. cit.*, p. 73-74.

Luke's portrayal of Jesus' birthing however is conceived from a different angle. Here the angel speaks to Mary, not to Joseph (cf. Lk 1:35 and Mt 1:20). The first thing to be noticed in the angel's speech is the use of sense rhythm or parallelism which in the Hebrew language "indicates the expression of sublime sentiments and poetical style..." and its use here denotes that the author is "dealing with one of the deepest and holiest of mysteries".<sup>13</sup> The parallelism is formulated thus :

*"The Holy Spirit will come upon you*  
*The power of the Most High will overshadow you"*

Typically a Lukan word the term "*eperchesthai*" ("will come upon") is used 7 times in Lk-Acts (Lk 11:22; 21:26; Acts 1:8; 8:24; 13:40; 14:9) and only twice in the rest of the NT (Eph 2:7; Jam 5:1). In Acts 1:8 it is used to refer to the descent of the Spirit on the apostles. Isaiah (32:15) uses it with reference to the fertility of the land Carmel in the context of a just king who will reign over Israel. In the context of these and similar parallels (1 Sam 16:13 etc.), we may safely affirm that the birthing of Jesus was something unique and has nothing to do with any sexual union.<sup>14</sup>

The parallelism or the combination of Spirit and power is typically Lukan (1:17; 4:14; Acts 1:8; 6:5; 10:38) and it points out that both are synonymous and hence the one stands for the other. The Spirit is the power and Viceversa.

In parallelism to "*eperchesthai*" ("will come upon") Lk uses now "*episkiazein*" ("will overshadow"), a term which is used in the OT to denote God's presence and glory

13. Geldenhuis, op. cit., p. 76.

14. Marshall, op. cit., p. 70; Brown, op. cit., 290, 314; Fitzmyer, op. cit. 351; Maloney, op. cit., pp. 75-76 opines that Ez 36:25-36 and 37:5-7 refer to a new beginning and new life and these do not and cannot have any reference to things sexual.

in the form of a cloud over the desert tabernacle (Ex 40:35). Since it is also used metaphorically as a sign of protection over the people (Ps 91:4; 140:8) we can presume that its use here may not have any evidence again for the sexual or biological sense or divine begetting. "God's powerful presence will rest upon Mary, so that she will bear a child who will be the Son of God".<sup>15</sup> He will be holy namely, he will be set apart and consecrated for the service of Yahweh (Lk 2:23; cf. Is 4:3). It is the coming of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35a) which explains why the child will be *holy* and will be called Son of God (1:35d). We may say then that through the use of highly figurative expressions like "*eperchesthai*" ("come upon") and "*episkiazein*" ("overshadow") Lk points out to a mysterious intervention of God's Spirit and power over Mary in the birthing of the Messiah as the holy one and the Son of God. He has made use here of the existing tradition of the early Christians of their belief in the virginal conception of Jesus. At the same time the Pauline christological kerygma that Jesus was born of the seed of David according to the flesh and constituted *Son of God* in power according to the Spirit of *holiness* (Rom 1:3-4) has also come to his aid in formulating his own statement about the birthing or origin of Jesus. In this way he reads back the christological affirmation about the risen Lord to the conception of Jesus. Naturally, it is the reflected and contemplated understanding of the early Church with regard to the identity of Jesus that had shaped the Lukan portrayal. It was a growth in awareness that led both the early church and Luke to affirm that Jesus was the holy Son of God not only at his birthing but through his birthing.

In conclusion we may say that the narratives of both Mt and Lk about the birthing of Jesus present the Holy Spirit in the role of a *creative force* so that Jesus at his very

15. Marshall, op. cit., p. 71.

birthing is separated and consecrated for the service of his Father, which is service for his people.

### 3. The Birthing of a New People

As in the birthing of the Messiah, so too in the birthing of the messianic people the Church, the Spirit plays a vital role. Luke uses the same term "*eperchesthai*" ("to come"- Acts 1:8; Lk 1:35) proleptically of the Holy Spirit who will come upon the disciples at Pentecost. We may not read then the incident of the overshadowing of Mary by the Spirit in the Gospel (Lk 1:35) without aligning it at the same time with the Holy Spirit's descent upon the disciples in the company of Mary as portrayed in Acts (1:8, 14; 2:4). The similarity may be seen thus :

"The *Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*" (Lk 1:35)

"You will receive *power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you*" (Acts 1:8)

In both cases the Holy Spirit comes, but in the first, in Mary alone; in the second, in Mary and the disciples. "In Nazareth, Mary is the first Christian who through the power of the overshadowing Holy Spirit gives birth to Jesus. In the Upper Room, she is joined by other believers, men and women, all of whom again experience the coming upon them of the Holy Spirit".<sup>16</sup> In the first the Spirit was given for the birth of Christ; in the second He was given for the birth of the body of Christ.

This verse (Acts 1:8) which "is the key verse to the whole book and a compendium of its contents"<sup>17</sup> points out

16. Maloney, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

17. Walker, T., Acts of the Apostles., Uregel Publications, Michigan 49501, 1984, p. 41.

the role of the Spirit as *sine qua non* in the birthing of the Church as twopronged: first he will be the mediator of a marvellous miraculous *power* ("dynamis") which will provide primitive christianity with the decisive sign of its legitimation (2:22; 2 Cor 12:12), and second, he will make them "witness" to Jesus' resurrection (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39 etc.). By this utterance which is both a command and a promise, the world-mission, the birthing of the Church is inaugurated and given an authentication. The geographical sequence given here provides the rough outline of the birthing of the Church, namely its universal dimension.<sup>18</sup>

The descent of the Holy Spirit which is pointed out by the word "*eperchesthai*" ("will come upon") in the case of Mary (Lk 1:35 above) is the same used here (Acts 1:8), though the author would make use also other terms such as "*ekheo*" ("pour forth"-2:17-18, 33) "*epi pipto*" ("fall upon"-8:16; 10:44; 11:15) elsewhere. All these different expressions denote the same idea that at the root of this birthing was the Holy Spirit as an indispensable element in the beginnings of the community of the new messianic people.

The actual coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples (Acts 2:4) is described in terms of the theophany which marked the gathering of Israel and the nations as portrayed in Isaiah (Is. 66:15-21). Strong wind and Fire denote the heavenly origin of the Spirit (Ex 19:16; 1 Kgs 19:11ff). Parted tongues signify the destination of the Spirit in each individual member who was present in the Upper Room (2:3). "As the divine presence or "*Shekinah*" rested on the pious Jew studying the Law, and as Paul hoped that the power of Christ would rest on him (2 Cor 12:9), so the purifying and

18. Haenchen, E., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Basil Blackwell, 1985, pp. 142-143; Thomas, D., *Acts of the Apostles: Expository and Homiletical*, Kregel publications, Michigan 49501, 1980, pp. 9-10; Johnson, L.T., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1992; pp. 26-27.

consuming flame of the Holy Spirit rested on each apostle".<sup>19</sup>

Through the sound of wind from heaven and the fiery tongues the author provides an auricular as well as visual evidence of a theophany (1 Kgs 19:11-12; Ex 3:2; 13:21-22). The combination of "sound" and "fire" (Ps 28:7) also leads us to think of the "Holy Spirit and fire", the origin of their baptism (Lk 3:16).<sup>20</sup>

The actual outpouring of the Spirit is expressed by the term "*pimplemi*" ("to fill") which term is also used in the Birth Narratives (Lk 1:15,41,67) and elsewhere in the Acts (4:8; 9:17; 13:39) and is used in the context of the fulfilment of the promise of Jesus (Lk 24:49).<sup>21</sup>

The effect of the gift of the Holy Spirit was "speaking with other tongues" which was given as "a special gift for a special purpose and on special occasions".<sup>22</sup> The phrase "*heterais glossais*" ("in other tongues") has been tendentiously interpreted in the exclusive sense of ecstatic worship, by some, wishing to harmonize the strange phenomenon of "*glossalalia*" of which we read in the church of Corinth (1 Cor. 14:1-19). But surely it is quite different from an ecstatic dimension of speech. It was quite solemn or inspired ("*apophthegmai*" = "to declaim, to hold a discourse") by which the sententious character and the mean-

19. Williams, C.S.C., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Adam and Charles Black. London, 1964, pp. 62-63; Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-60; Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-18.

20. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 42; Haenchen, *op. cit.*, p. 168; Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

21. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

22. Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

ingfulness of the proclamation is insinuated.<sup>23</sup> It further means that this discourse reached the audience in the native dialects (2:8) of the countries from which they came and served the practical utility of all the hearers. Hence it is entirely different from "glossalalia" or "speaking in tongues" about which Paul speaks, which according to him, is "not uttering intelligible speech" (1 Cor 14:9ff) and hence it needs to be interpreted by some one else (1 Cor 14:26-28), which is not the case here in the narrative in Acts.

Thus through a slender and spare account the momentous event of the outpouring of the Spirit and the birthing of the new community is delineated by the author. Yet behind all this terseness and brevity the author hides allusive symbolism such as the giving of the Torah at the theophany at Mount Sinai (Ex 19:16-18), and the Moses typology as expressed elsewhere in Acts in the speech of Stephen where Moses is said to have "received living utterances to hand on to us" (7:38) and Peter telling the people gathered at Pentecost that the Messiah, the risen Jesus "received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father to pour it forth" on them (2:33) as representatives of all the lands (2:9-11). We may not also overlook the clear literary parallelism between the genealogy of Jesus (Lk 3:23-38), and the gift of the Spirit in Jesus' baptism (Lk 3:21-22), and the "baptism in the Spirit" of the apostles and the presence of many nations. In both all the Jews are intended, in the former, the generations of Jews are traced back to Abraham and even to Adam, in the latter all the lands from which Jews have gathered are mentioned. "The parallelism fits the pattern of Luke's story: Jesus is the prophet who sums up all the promises of God and hopes of the people before him; in his apostolic successors, the promise and hope (now sealed by the Spirit) will be carried to all the nations of the

23. Johnson, op. cit., p. 42; Haenchen, op. cit., 168.

earth".<sup>24</sup> The birthing of Jesus is the forerunner to the birthing of the 'Jesuin'-community. The Spirit as portrayed in Acts is the agent of witnessing to the world that Jesus is the Son of God and his message is the Good News which we are called to proclaim to the ends of the world.

### Conclusion

The influence of the Spirit on the birthing of Jesus the Messiah has a backward looking, taking us to the birthing of his forerunner, and a forward looking, leading us to the birthing of the messianic people. The Spirit, as in all the important moments of Jesus' life (Lk 1:35; 3:16; 3:22; 4:1; 4:18; 10:21; 12:12) as well as in the life of the disciples (Lk 11:13; 12:10-12; 24:49), and in the life of the early church (Acts 2:4; 8:29; 10:19; 13:2-4; 15:28) has played an indispensable role. It is the same Spirit who dwells in us leading us to continuous birthing of love, joy and peace etc. (Gal 5:22-26). Hence it is that Paul is challenging us with the words: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (1 Cor 3:16).

The Holy Father in his encyclical "Tertio Millennio Adveniente" is reminding us too of this same reality. "For our times too the Spirit is the principal agent of the new evangelization. It is therefore important that we rediscover the Spirit as he *who constructs* the Kingdom of God in the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, by *inwardly animating* men and women and *nurturing the growth*, in their lives, of the seeds of the definitive salvation which will come to pass at the end of time" (TMA 45).

24. Johnson, op. cit., pp. 45-47.

John the Baptist, Jesus and the early Church are beckoning each one of us and challenging us that by the indwelling of the Spirit in us we become *prophets* (with John), *co-workers* in the service of the Kingdom (with Jesus), and *witnesses* to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (with the early christian community). "Because we live by the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit" (Gal 5:25).

**R. J. Raja, S. J.**

The indwelling of the Spirit in us is the first step towards the Christian life. It is the beginning of a new life, a life of love, joy and peace. It is the beginning of a new relationship with God, a relationship of love and trust. It is the beginning of a new relationship with the Church, a relationship of unity and fellowship. It is the beginning of a new relationship with the world, a relationship of service and witness. It is the beginning of a new life, a life of love, joy and peace. It is the beginning of a new relationship with God, a relationship of love and trust. It is the beginning of a new relationship with the Church, a relationship of unity and fellowship. It is the beginning of a new relationship with the world, a relationship of service and witness.

The Holy Spirit is the divine presence of God in our hearts. He is the one who leads us into all truth, who teaches us, who comforts us, who empowers us. He is the one who makes us holy, who purifies us, who transforms us. He is the one who makes us witnesses of the Kingdom of God. He is the one who makes us love, who makes us joy, who makes us peace. He is the one who makes us the people of God, who makes us the Church, who makes us the world.