

The Lukan View of the Holy Spirit

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Introduction

The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles are full of narratives concerning the activity of the Holy Spirit. Luke as a disciple and companion of St. Paul, has inherited the Pauline line of theological thought about the Holy Spirit. For him, the Holy Spirit is the basis and source of the whole economy of salvation. It is through the Holy Spirit that Jesus was conceived. It is with the power and guidance of the Spirit that he has preached the good news of salvation, and worked out miracles. Through his suffering, death and resurrection, he has won the right to confer the Holy Spirit to his disciples. He wanted that the divine power of the Holy Spirit which was manifest in his own life, be made manifest in the life of every Christian. It is through the activity of the Holy Spirit that the kingdom of God is to be realized on earth and be spread to the ends of the world. In this article we shall make a brief survey of the Lukan narratives that refer to the Holy Spirit, and thus try to understand the Lukan view of the Holy Spirit.

“Filled with the Holy Spirit”

This is an expression often found in the Lukan writings.¹ It indicates the basic Lukan understanding of the function and nature of the Holy Spirit. For Luke, the Holy Spirit is the one who acts as the

1 Lk 1:15,41,67; 4:14; Acts 2:4; 4:8,31; 7:55; 9:17; 13:9,52.

supernatural power of God that effects extraordinary things in human history and thus fulfills the will of God.²

In the Infancy Narrative, Luke reports that John the Baptist and his mother Elizabeth were 'filled with the Holy Spirit' when Mary greeted Elizabeth.³ Here probably Luke had in mind a comparison between the story of Samson and that of John the Baptist. In Judg 13:3-6, an angel announces the conception of Samson which requires that his mother not 'drink wine or strong drink' for 'he shall be a Nazirite to God from birth'. He is later empowered by the Spirit of God (Judg 14:19). Similarly, John is set apart to God even before his conception, and filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born. Just as Samson's mother abstained from wine and strong drinks, so too John had a life of abstinence. Luke seems to see a connection between this kind of abstinence and being filled with the Holy Spirit. Probably Luke was aware of the mind of Paul who exhorted: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18). The phrase 'filled with the Spirit' indicates a continuous state of being empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist, even when he was in his mother's womb, was empowered and authorized by the Spirit for his prophetic role. In fact John was a prophet 'with the spirit and power of Elijah' (Lk 1:17). Elisha had also received the spirit of Elijah.⁴ John is not less than these prophets. Even though he did not work miracles as they did he was bold in proclaiming the word of God.⁵ Luke sees this boldness as the power of the Spirit.

Lk narrates that Elizabeth was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' and began to prophesy 'with a loud cry' (Lk 1:42). This loud cry is characteristic of solemn prophecies.⁶ Elizabeth began to speak with the special inspiration of the Holy Spirit. With the assistance of the Spirit she could recognize the significance of the movement of her baby in her own womb. She could know for certain that the unborn

² Cf. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, p.22.

³ Lk 1:39-45.

⁴ Cf. 2 Kgs 2:9-15.

⁵ Cf. Lk 3:1-20.

⁶ Cf. Isa 10:30; 13:2; Jer 20:8.

baby in Mary's womb is the 'Lord', and that Mary is the 'Mother of the Lord'. The leaping of John in his mother's womb signifies a state of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The fact that John was filled with the Holy Spirit even while he was in his mother's womb indicates that he was specially set apart to be a prophet of God. For in the past history of Israel as well as in the early Church of Acts, the filling of the Holy Spirit was for the purpose of prophecy.⁷

Luke narrates that Zechariah, the father of John was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to prophesy (Lk 1:67). The prophets were announcing the word of God. Now Zechariah, being filled with the Holy Spirit, was making known the significance of the extraordinary events from God's point of view.⁸

In the event of Simeon prophesying at the presentation of Infant Jesus in the temple, Luke recognizes the activity of the Holy Spirit. For he states: "The Holy Spirit was upon him" (Lk 2:25). The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before he could see the Lord's Christ (2:26). It was being inspired by the Holy Spirit that he came to the temple (2:27).

Luke places Simeon among those who acted in unexpected ways (e.g. Anna Lk 2:36-37; Joseph of Arimathea 23:50-51; Stephen Acts 6:3,5,8; Cornelius 10:1-2,22; Barnabas 4:36-37; 11:24; Ananias 22:12). This becomes clear from the fact that Luke introduces Simeon as 'righteous and devout' (Lk 2:25). The evangelist further states that Simeon was 'looking for the consolation of Israel' (2:25). Here this consolation is to be understood in the Isaiahic sense of restoration under the reign of God (as in Isa 40:1-2; 49:13; 51:3; 57:18; 61:2; 66:13). The word 'consolation' in this sense is used only here in the whole of Luke-Acts. So for Luke, the activity of the Holy Spirit is mainly to restore God's reign of peace on earth. In the whole incident of the presentation of Jesus, Luke shows that God is bringing consolation to his people. For this both the Law and the Spirit acted together. It was through the force of the Law that the parents of Jesus brought him to

7 Cf. Num 11:26-27; 2 Sam 23:2; Hos 9:7; Jub 25:14; 31:12; Josephus Ant. 4.5.119; Acts 2:17-18; 11:27-28.

8 Cf. Lk 1:68-79.

the temple just at that exact time and place. It was by the guidance of the Spirit that Simeon came to the temple at just the right time and place. The prophetess Anna was also inspired by the Holy Spirit to be present there and to speak well of the Infant Jesus (Lk 2:36-38). Thus the divine purpose is fulfilled by the free obedient actions of the human actors. This shows that salvation is realized ultimately when human beings are ready to act under the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit as the Overshadowing Power

Luke writes that in the annunciation the angel said to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; consequently, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Lk 1:35). Considering the parallelism involved in this statement, we can easily understand that for Luke the Holy Spirit is the power of God. This, however, does not mean that the Holy Spirit acts here as a sexual partner of Mary.⁹ Luke sees the 'power of God' displayed at the Pentecost already anticipated at the conception of Jesus.¹⁰ This reminds us of the prophetic promises that at the end-time the spirit will be poured upon us (Isa 32:15; Joel 2:28). The 'overshadowing of the power of the Most High' of Lk 1:35 reminds us of Jesus' transfiguration scene (Lk 9:34), and of the manifestations of God's glory in the OT (e.g. Ex 40:35; Num 9:18,22).¹¹

Luke sees Jesus as 'Son of God'. For him, Jesus is Son of God, not as a consequence of his assuming the throne of David as in Ps 2:7, but because of his virginal conception which is the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. Even when Luke narrates the public ministry of Jesus, he draws a close relationship between Jesus' identity as Son of God and the activity of the Holy Spirit.¹² Here Luke is moving towards a more ontological understanding of Jesus' divine sonship.¹³

9 Cf. Joseph A Fitzmeyer, "The Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament", in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies*, New York, Crossroad, 1981, p. 56.

10 Cf. Acts 1:8; 2:1-4.

11 Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 90.

12 Cf. Lk 3:21-22,38; 4:1,3,9,14,18.

13 Cf. J.B.Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 91.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit and Fire

John's baptism was different from that of Jesus. The nature of John's baptism is explained in Lk 3:3-14. It is a repentance-baptism. It is a cleansing by which one's life is oriented anew towards God and fellow-human beings. It integrated one to the authentic community of Abraham.

Jesus' baptism is superior to that of John. About that John testified that Jesus "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Lk 3:16). It is in fulfillment of prophetic promises as that of Ezek 36:25-26: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you". Now this time of the baptism with the Spirit has come with the arrival of Jesus the Messiah. John's baptism was only a preparation for Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit.

However, the coupling of 'the Holy Spirit' and 'fire' is puzzling to many scholars.¹⁴ Luke sees the Holy Spirit as the manifestation of eschatological blessing foretold by the prophets.¹⁵ Cleansing and purging also belong to the eschatological salvation.¹⁶ Purification by fire is mentioned in Mal 3:2-4. In this background Jesus' baptism is to be seen as one of refinement and empowerment. The words "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk 3:16) are to be understood in parallelism with Acts 1:5 and 11:6 "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit". Luke sees the fulfillment of John's promise of Lk 3:16 in the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who descended on the Apostles in the form of 'divided tongues, as of fire' (Acts 2:3). The symbolism of fire may also include the idea of judgement and division. For Jesus said: "I came to put fire on earth... Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. . ." (Lk 12:49-53; see also 3:9-17; 9:54; 17:29).¹⁷

14 Cf. James D.G. Dunn, "Spirit and Fire Baptism", *NovT* 14 (1972) 81-92; Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study*, JSNTSup 62, Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1991, pp. 289-295.

15 Cf. Isa 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 18:31; Joel 2:28-30; see also 1QS 4:20-21.

16 Cf. Isa 4:4; 1 QS 3:7-9; 4:20-22.

17 Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, pp. 181-182.

In the context of the baptism which Jesus received in Jordan (Lk 3:21-4:13) Luke emphasizes the identity of Jesus as Son of God (3:22,38; 4:3,9) as well as his experience of the Holy Spirit (3:22; 4:1,9). In the details of the scene of baptism Luke stresses three points: 'the heaven was opened', 'the Holy Spirit descended', and 'a voice came from heaven'. The opening of heaven is often mentioned in the apocalyptic literature to indicate a very solemn revelation.¹⁸ The voice from heaven is also found in such literature.¹⁹ In the baptism scene Luke shows that through the heavenly voice God himself expresses his own view of Jesus, which agrees with the earlier voices of Gabriel, Elizabeth etc. that affirmed the divine sonship of Jesus. In the OT, the monarchs of Israel or Israel as a people are considered as raised to the status of God's son because of their covenantal relationship and obedience.²⁰ But according to Luke Jesus is Son of God, not in that adoptionistic sense but in the ontological sense due to the special activity of the Holy Spirit in his conception. Now in Jesus' baptism, this truth was only declared and he was specially empowered by the Holy Spirit for his mission of saving humanity.²¹

Luke reports that after the baptism while Jesus was at prayer, "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove" (Lk 3:21-22). No exact symbolic equation of Spirit and dove is found in the OT.²² The Church Fathers have suggested here a reference to Gen 8:11. There the dove that came back to the ark of Noah represented the reconciliation and peace that Jesus' redemptive work brings to the world. Another possible reference is Gen 1:2, where the hovering activity of a mother bird is attributed to the Holy Spirit. In that sense the dove symbolizes the creative power of the Holy Spirit to form a new people of God. In the OT, dove symbolizes God's people.²³ So the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus in the form of a dove indicates that Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, is now going to found the new people of God. However, in the Lukan perspective, it is ultimately the

18 Cf. e.g. Ezek 1:1; Rev 4:1; 19:11.

19 Cf. Ezek 1:25,28-2:1; Rev 4:1; 10:4.

20 Cf. Ps 2:7; 89:26-27; 2 Sam 7:14; Ex 4:22; Jer 3:19; Hos 11:1.

21 Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, pp. 184-187.

22 Cf. Leander E. Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove", *NTS* 17 (1970-71) 41-67; Max Turner, "Jesus and the Spirit in Lukan Perspective", *TynB* 32 (1981) 3-42.

23 Cf. Hos 11:11; Isa 60:8; Ps 68:13; Cant 2:14.

power of the Holy Spirit that brings about the existence of the new people of God.²⁴

Public Ministry in the Spirit

Jesus began to proclaim the good news in the synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:14-44). The references to the Holy Spirit in 4:14 and 18 are interpretative throwbacks to the anointing of Jesus (3:21-22) and testing in the wilderness (4:1).²⁵ In Luke's view, the starting of Jesus' public ministry is only the natural development of his being anointed by the Holy Spirit and tested in the wilderness (3:21-4:13). As Jesus read Isa 61:1-2 in the synagogue and put forward his programme of action, he stressed on the 'release' of his people. This was immediately exemplified in the narratives of exorcism and healing (4:31-41). Thus Luke shows that it was under the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus undertook his public ministry. For Luke, 'the power of the Lord' is the same as 'the Spirit of the Lord'.²⁶

That Jesus' public ministry was under the power of the Holy Spirit is confirmed in Lk 7:18-35. When the disciples of John came to Jesus with a basic question concerning his identity, he answered them telling them to go and report what they have seen and heard then and there. He describes his ministry as a festival of salvation, drawing on Isa 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:18; 43:8; 61:1. As he had affirmed the fulfillment of Isa 61:1-2 in himself (Lk 4:18-19), here now he shows himself as the one who has been anointed by the Holy Spirit 'to give sight to the blind' and 'to bring the good news to the poor' (Lk 7:22).

Consciousness of Power

In the story of healing a woman with haemorrhage (Lk 8:43-48), Jesus says: "Someone has touched me; for I perceive that power has gone forth from me" (8:46). This implies that Jesus is the bearer of

²⁴ Cf. Acts 1:8; 2:1-47.

²⁵ Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 204.

²⁶ Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 240; Max Turner, "Spirit and Power of Jesus: Miracles in the Lucan Conception," *VE* 12 (1981) 45-63; James B. Shelton, *Mighty in Word and Deed: The Role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 1991, pp. 75-77; William H. Shepherd Jr., *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 147, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1994, p. 137.

divine power and that he is able to discern when it is conveyed to others. It is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit and Prayer

Once Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and praised the Father (Lk 10:21-24). Here Luke sees the Holy Spirit as the one who inspires prayer of praise. Rejoicing is the effect of the Holy Spirit. This text is closely related to 10:17-20 in which Jesus speaks of the activity of Satan. Thus in the whole passage 10:17-24 we see the contrast between the activity of Satan and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit marked early on in Luke.²⁷ The things which the heavenly Father had kept hidden from the wise and revealed to the little children are what angel Gabriel had revealed to Mary (1:32-35), and a voice from heaven disclosed to Peter, John and James (9:35), and the filial relationship between God and Jesus, and between God and the believers.

In Luke's view, analogous to the Spirit-anointing of Jesus (Lk 3:21-22; 4:18-19), the disciples also will be anointed by the Holy Spirit.²⁸ For this, however prayer is essential. Jesus assures that the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit as his supreme gift to those who pray.²⁹

Sin against the Holy Spirit

Jesus says: "Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven" (Lk 12:10). This blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is to be understood as apostasy in the face of persecution.³⁰

27 Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 421; Robert L. Brawley *Centering on God: Method and Message in Luke-Acts*; LCBI, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1990, p. 82; Shepherd, *Narrative Function*, p. 138; Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Luke: Jesus, Authorities, Disciples*, Minneapolis, Fortress 1991, pp. 11-14; Susan B. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1989, p. 58.

28 Cf. Lk 10:21-22; 11:2,13; 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4.

29 Cf. Lk 11:13.

30 Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 484; Brawley, *Centering on God*, p. 115; Shelton, *Mighty in Word*, p. 105; Robert P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts*, JPTSUP 6, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1994, pp. 165-6; Dennis M. Sweetland, "Discipleship and Persecution: A Study of Luke 12:1-12," *Bib 65* (1984) 61-79, p. 73.

Inspired Witness

Luke sees the Holy Spirit as the one who empowers persons for inspired witness even at the critical moments of persecution.³¹ In fact the disciples have borne witness with the power of the Spirit in the midst of persecution.³² The Holy Spirit will give them not only the power, but also an irresistible wisdom as in the case of St. Stephen (Acts 6:10). The whole ministry of Jesus was the exercise of divine power.³³ And Jesus gives this power to his disciples.³⁴ Thus in the Lukan perspective, it is the power of the Holy Spirit that establishes the kingdom of God on earth as in the public ministry of Jesus and in the mission of the Apostles.

The Promise of the Father

According to Luke, the Holy Spirit has been promised by the heavenly Father, and therefore, every believer can receive him. The risen Lord, before his ascension, says: "And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49). Here it is clear that the reference is to the Holy Spirit, and that the witnessing of the disciples is intimately connected with their reception of the Holy Spirit.³⁵ This, however, does not mean that the gift of the Spirit is only for the empowerment of witness.³⁶ Jesus taught his disciples to address God as "Father" and to pray for the Holy Spirit as his greatest gift (Lk 11:1-13). At another occasion he taught: "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk 12:32). By this Luke establishes that it is through the gift of the Holy Spirit that the Father is going to give us the Kingdom.³⁷ Already in Joel 2:28-29 there is a solemn promise of the Holy Spirit; and 'the promise of my Father' of Lk 24:49 may be also a reference to

31 Cf. Lk 12:11-12; 21:12-19.

32 Cf. Acts 4:1-22; 5:12-42; 6:8-8:2.

33 Cf. Lk 4:14,36; 5:17; 6:19; 8:46; 10:13; 19:37; 24:19.

34 Cf. Lk 9:1; 10:19; 24:49; Acts 1:8.

35 Cf. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 858; Shelton, *Mighty in Word*, pp. 116-7.

36 Cf. M. Turner, "Spirit and Power"; idem, "The Spirit of Prophecy and the Power of Authoritative Preaching in Luke-Acts: A Question of Origins", *NTS* 38 (1992) 66-88; Shepherd, *Narrative Function*, p. 149.

37 Cf. John H. Sieber, "The Spirit as the 'Promise of My Father' in Lk 24:49," in *Sin, Salvation and the Spirit*, ed. by Daniel Durken, pp. 271-8, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1979, pp. 276-7.

it.³⁸ The nature of this promise becomes clearer in Acts 1:4,5,8; 2:33. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers the disciples for their mission.

Conclusion

Thus for Luke the Holy Spirit is the ultimate agent behind the realization of God's plan of salvation. He manifests the tremendous spiritual power of God. In the incarnation mystery as well as in the birth and growth of the Church the miraculous activity of the Holy Spirit is evident. All the important persons connected with the mystery of Christ and the Church were filled with the Holy Spirit. When a person is filled with the Holy Spirit, he/she will experience a boundless joy, courage, devotion, prayer of praise, spontaneous outburst in prophecy, inspiration to co-operate with God's plan of salvation, etc. All throughout his life Jesus was under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the risen Lord, wants to impart the same Spirit to all his disciples. He assures that everyone who prays will obtain the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the 'promise of the Father'. Only with the power of the Spirit a Christian can effectively bear witness to Christ.

38 Cf R. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness*, pp. 171-2.