EVOLUTION OF THE PERCEPTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTS

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INTRODUCTION

For the Jews, their God is one. It is unthinkable for them to have any supreme being besides HIM.

(Deuteronomy 6:4)

Angels (Genesis 6:2; Job 1:6); Messiah (Psalm 2:7); kings (2 Samuel 7:14) and even Israel as a people (Exodus 4:22) have been variously called ‘son(s) of God’ בֵּן-יְהוָֹה in the Hebrew Scripture. But they would never be able to claim equal status with God, nor taking part in His glory. Therefore, it was blasphemous for Jesus to claim to be the ‘Son of God, sitting at His right hand, and coming with the clouds of heaven’. Naturally, he was condemned to death by the Jewish Sanhedrin. (Matthew 26:63-66; Mark 14:61-64; Luke 22:70-71). God was sacred and no other supreme beings were allowed besides HIM.

The Jews tended to attribute all human actions in history to God’s work, to God’s power. For example, God hardened the heart of Pharaoh so that he would not allow the Israelites to leave Egypt, thus inviting 10 plagues to destroy the Egyptians (Exodus 4:21). In the Hebrew Scripture, ‘the spirit of God/the Lord’ רוחַ אלהים usually means His power. For example, it overcame chaos (moving over the face of the waters) in creation (Genesis 1:2); it gave wisdom and understanding to individuals (Exodus 31:3, Isaiah 11:2); physical strength to heroes to deliver the Israelites from their enemies (Judges 3:10, 6:34, 11:29 and 13:25) and ability to prophesize (Numbers 24:2, 1 Samuel 10:10). The prophets were empowered by the spirit and the word of God was put into their mouths. God was speaking through them (2 Samuel 23:2, Ezekiel 11:5). God was powerful. But His power was NOT a person and did not possess a personality. God was still one. There was no other supreme being besides HIM.

Therefore, it was the revelation of God and the pure ingenuity of the New Testament authors to outgrow the Hebrew Scripture and bring about a new understanding of the nature of God. God is a Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is still ONE but He is not alone. He is leading a communal life internally.
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Acts has been called the ‘Gospel of the Holy Spirit’. Luke, her author, was one of those New Testament authors responsible for transforming the Holy Spirit from a pure power to a person and from an object to a subject. This little essay will explore the changing perception of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated in Acts.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Before we deal with the evolution of the perception of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts, it will be enlightening to see how Luke dealt with the Holy Spirit in his gospel.

The ‘Holy Spirit’ occurs 17 times in 16 verses of the gospel. (It appears 52 times in 51 verses in Acts.) The most typical verse representing an Old Testament understanding of the Holy Spirit is put into the mouth of the archangel Gabriel. It is the power of the Highest.

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

When John the Baptist talked about the superiority of the baptism of Jesus over his, he talked of the Holy Spirit in the same breath as he talked of fire (3:16). Thus in the mouth of John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit is power.

People being filled with the Holy Spirit is another Old Testament theme. For example, baby John the Baptist (1:15); Elizabeth (1:41); Zechariah (1:67); Simeon (2:25-27) and Jesus himself (4:1, 14, 18 and 10:21). The Holy Spirit is a most precious gift the heavenly Father shall give to His children when they pray for it (11:13). In all these verses, the Holy Spirit is an object. It has not yet acquired a personality.

Readers have to wait until Luke 12 to have a glimpse of the Holy Spirit as a person. In Luke 12:10, Jesus warned people against blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Had the Holy Spirit merely been a force, a power, it would have been difficult to imagine how people could be able to blaspheme a power. You can only blaspheme a person.

And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven. (Luke 12:10)
Two verses later, in Luke 12:12, Jesus encouraged his disciples not to be worried about how to bear witness for him in front of hostile authorities. The Holy Spirit would teach them what to say. Again, it would be difficult to imagine how a force could be a teacher to tell people what to do, what to say, unless the verse is to be understood figuratively (e.g. Job 12:7-8). But such is not the case here.

And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say. (Luke 12:11-12)

Of course, Jesus, not the Holy Spirit, is the main character of the gospel. Therefore, we do not expect Luke to give a full treatment of the Holy Spirit there. He would tackle this task in Acts. So, let us turn to Acts now.

**THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTS**

In the following discussion, I will use the pronoun ‘it’ to represent the Holy Spirit, not because of any disrespect, but of grammatical considerations. I follow the Greek usage in which the Spirit (πνεῦμα, πνεύματος and πνεύματι) is neuter.

**The Ascension**

The Holy Spirit very quickly makes its appearance in Acts 1:2, whereas in Luke, it first appears in 1:15. Acts 1:2 is significant because it brings home several theological considerations in Acts. Consider the KJV translation of Acts 1:1-2:

The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen:

Two theological points are made:

1. The Holy Spirit would start its work after Jesus’ ascension.
   - Does ‘after’ mean that the Holy Spirit started its work immediately or that it had to wait until Pentecost? The present author opts for the former interpretation. It will be further explained below when we discuss the choosing of Judas’ replacement.
• Does ‘after’ mean that the Holy Spirit was not working before Jesus’ ascension? This is true so far as Luke is concerned, at least in the case of Luke’s gospel. The last time this gospel mentions the Holy Spirit is in Luke 12:12. Therefore, Luke had all the intention to treat the topic of the Holy Spirit thoroughly in Part II of his masterpiece.

2. Jesus would give instructions to his apostles through the Holy Spirit.

• Does it mean that Jesus would work exclusively ‘through’ the Holy Spirit? It is obviously not true. In the story of the conversion of Saul, the commission of Ananias to baptize Saul (Acts 9), and the story of Paul in Corinth (Acts 18), we read that Jesus appeared to them in visions. He did not work through the Holy Spirit. In fact, the word ‘Jesus’ appears 67 times in Acts and the person Jesus did not vanish from the scene until Acts 26 where Luke, for the third time, repeats the story of the conversion of Saul!

• Was Ananias, only a disciple, not ‘qualified’ enough to receive instructions through the Holy Spirit, because he was not one of the Twelve, chosen by Jesus and therefore Jesus had to appear to him directly? It is reasonable to be affirmative in this speculation. Luke seemed to be describing a tradition in the early church in which only the apostles or their successors were ‘qualified’ to lay hand on the believers to give them the Holy Spirit (Acts 8).

However, Acts 1:2 is ambiguous as to the personality of the Holy Spirit. The preposition in the phrase ‘… through the Holy Spirit …’ (διὰ πνεύματος ἀγίου) has a wide range of possible meanings. In conjunction with genitives (such as in this case), διὰ can be used modally, denoting manner (e.g. εἶπεν διὰ παραβολῆς in Luke 8:4); or causally, denoting the intermediate agent of an action (e.g. οὐκ ἀπʼ ἀνθρώπων οὔδὲ διʼ ἀνθρώπου in Galatians 1:1).¹ It is impossible to decide for sure if Luke wanted διὰ to mean modally or causally here. But if we consider Acts as a whole, we are confident to speculate that Luke was hinting that the Holy Spirit was a person. It was

too early at the beginning of the book for Luke to state the personality of the Holy Spirit explicitly. He would elaborate on these points in the rest of the book.

**Finding a Replacement for Judas**

Most people remember David as a great king of Israel and the author of the book of Psalms. However, New Testament authors found in his psalms prophecies about the life and salvific work of Jesus as well as a lot of evidences that supported their kerygma. It was because they believed that the Holy Spirit inspired David, just as what the spirit of the Lord used to do in the Old Testament on the prophets. Therefore, passages from David’s psalms were looked upon as prophecies and had been collected and used in their proclamation to prove that Jesus was raised from the dead (Acts 2:25-28, 31); that Jesus had ascended into heaven (Acts 2:34-35) and that he was the Messiah promised by God (Acts 4:11). They were also able to find in Psalms a prediction of persecutions suffered by them (Acts 4:25-26).

Keeping the number Twelve was a very serious matter for the early church in Jerusalem. The believers looked at themselves as the new Israel and there were twelve tribes in Israel. Therefore, it was important for the early church in Jerusalem to fill up the place left vacant by Judas. Again, New Testament authors were able to find passages in the book of Psalm that predicted Judas’ downfall.

In Acts 1:15-22, we find an eloquent and knowledgeable Peter standing up in the midst of the disciples, arguing, from passages found in the book of Psalms, for the need to find someone to replace Judas, thus completing the number Twelve. Unlike the impulsive Peter the fisherman portrayed in the gospels, this Peter the fisher of men, demonstrated a rare spiritual leadership even before the descent of the Holy Spirit!

Probably, Luke was anachronistic here. In his scheme, Peter was going to be one of the two heroes in his book. It was natural for Luke to put Peter in more favourable lights. For example, while Peter was usually the speaker for the ‘college of apostles’ in the gospels, his name was not mentioned when the apostles came together and asked Jesus a ‘stupid’ question in Acts 1:6. Normally, we would expect Peter to speak in their behalf (e.g. in the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah and the Transfiguration) but Luke did not arrange it this way. Later, Peter’s name comes, as usual, at the top of
the list of 11 apostles in Acts 1:13. Naturally, in Acts 1:15, it was Peter who stood up to address the community.

However, in this pericope, Peter’s leadership shone through. Once again, he resumed the role of the speaker of the ‘college of apostles’ to address a community of 120 believers. He quoted the Psalm (Where did this fisherman learn it?); described vividly the punishment suffered by traitors (Good leadership, warning off potential traitors!); put forth qualifications for potential candidates. The criteria he put forth also defined the content of the gospel they were going to proclaim in the future. Now, Peter had successfully reduced the number of qualified candidates to only two, Barsabas and Matthias. Remember that most characters in the gospels and Acts are nameless. So, Barsabas and Matthias must have occupied very prominent positions in the early church. They probably represented two factions within the church in those days. Peter was facing a possible schism if he failed to handle the situation properly. Once again, his leadership radiated through. They prayed and cast lots to seek God’s will. Had they resorted to popularity voting, the early church would have been split up immediately. Skillfully Peter was able to steer the early church away from schism. Most likely, the prayer they said before casting lots would be Peter’s.

Luke might have been anachronistic in his story. But the present author thinks that it is more likely that the Holy Spirit was working immediately after Jesus had ascended into heaven. It had already started working through Peter, just like what the spirit of God had done with the judges and prophets in the Old Testament.

After showing how the Holy Spirit had empowered Peter even before Pentecost, let us read more closely Peter’s, or rather Luke’s perception of role of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:16. The KJV translation is not very satisfactory here. It reads:

Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled,
which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before
concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus.

The subject of the word ‘spake’ is obviously the Holy Spirit. However, the Greek word is not simply ‘spake’, but foretold (προε/ uni1FD6πεν, aorist active indicative 3rd person singular). The Holy Spirit was playing a traditional Old Testament role of Yahweh to speak through prophets. In the Hebrew Scripture, the Jews understood that it was
Yahweh whose words were spoken through the prophets. Yahweh did it by giving them the spirit of god רוח נבואה אלוהים (1 Samuel 10:10). Now, in the New Testament, Christians understood such prophecies, predictions, not so much the words of Yahweh, but the words of the Holy Spirit. Through the mouth of the prophets, the words of the Holy Spirit were revealed to us. In Acts 1:2, it was still the words of Jesus. The Holy Spirit was only a medium through which the commandments of Jesus were passed on to the apostles. It may or may not have a personality yet. However, as early as Acts 1:16, Luke had already raised the status of the spirit of the Lord to an independent being on a par with Yahweh. Yet, we have to wait further until the Holy Spirit spoke for itself.

The Pentecost

As expected, the Holy Spirit appeared as a pure power of the elements (winds, fire and loud noise) in Acts 2:2-3. In 2:4b, it assumes a personality. It gives (το πνεύμα έδιδο) the disciples the abilities to speak in alien tongues. The word give (δίδωμι) can take persons, things or events as its subject². When we search its usage through the Lukan corpus, we find the following. The word occurs 60 times in 54 verses in the gospel and all of them involve people. In Acts, it occurs 35 times in 34 verses. Let us suspend judgment on 2:4b for the time being. We see that all the remaining 33 verses except one involve people. The only exception is Acts 3:16b in which Peter was explaining why the lame man was healed. It was the lame man’s faith which healed him.

... the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all (και η πιστις η δι αυτο αξωκεν αυτω την ολοκληριαν ταυτην απεναντι παντων υμων).

From the statistics above, it is reasonably safe to treat the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:4b as a person rather than a thing. This interpretation agrees well with the main theme of Acts. That it was the Holy Spirit which gave the disciples the abilities to speak in strange tongues in Pentecost shows that Luke was painting a picture of the Holy Spirit as a person. So far, the Holy Spirit was still silent.

² Ibid pg 114
The story of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira

This story comes after that of Joseph Barnabas (which means ‘the son of encouragement’ υ/uni1F31/uni1F78ς παρακλήσεως), a Levite (Acts 4:36). Luke told an edifying story to build up a contrast in the church life, one that was receptive and open to God, the other hypocritical. Readers are rather clueless when they read Luke 12:10. Why will people be forgiven for blasphemying the Son of Man and not for blasphemying the Holy Spirit? Unlike the other gospels (e.g. Mark 3:28-30), no context is provided in Luke. Readers have to wait until Acts 5:1-10 to know the answer.

Again, we have names here. Ananias and Sapphira had chosen to cheat the apostles to gain entry into and praises in the church community. They must have been well known in the early church and had they not died an undignified death, they would have been one of the leaders in the early church like Barnabas.

Let us look at the KJV translation of Acts 5:3-4.

But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?

Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.

According to Peter’s (or rather Luke’s) understanding, Ananias had not lied to the apostles (but he did!), but to the Holy Spirit. Of course, lying to the Holy Spirit was a more serious charge than simply lying to men. Only did such a serious charge warrant a death sentence. Once more, the personality of Holy Spirit was confirmed. Had the Holy Spirit not been a person but a power, a force of the elements, it would have been meaningless to accuse Ananias of lying. You can only lie to a person, not to a power, a force.

Not only did Luke confirm the personality of the Holy Spirit, he had also confirmed its status as God in Acts 5:4. In 5:3, Ananias had been accused of lying to the Holy Spirit. In 5:4, he was accused of lying to God! So, Luke has confirmed in Acts 5:4 that the Holy Spirit is God.
Not knowing the death of her husband Ananias, Sapphira was invited to repent by Peter\(^3\) (*Acts 5:8*). However, she had chosen to stick to their lies, to ‘… tempt the Spirit of the Lord’ (*Acts 5:9*). For Christian readers, ‘the Lord’ is the Risen Jesus. The Holy Spirit is closely related to the risen Jesus who has ascended into heaven. It is the full agent of Jesus on earth. That explains why and how Jesus would instruct his apostles *through* the Holy Spirit (*Acts 1:2*). It is because the Holy Spirit is the spirit of the risen and ascended Jesus. This is further illustrated at the death scene of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

> But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,  
> *Acts 7:55*

Here, we have the Holy Spirit, which is Jesus’ agent on earth where Jesus has spent his days and finished his mission. Now that Jesus has returned to the right hand of God in heaven, it is the job of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and to comfort the churches on earth (*Acts 9:31, 13:52*). Incidentally, Luke has painted the first picture of the Blessed Trinity, in *Acts*, at the death scene of the first Christian martyr. Probably, he was trying to tell the readers that in order to enjoy the bliss of seeing God’s glory, they must be prepared to suffer like Stephen.

**The Holy Spirit Speaks**

At long last, the apostles were able to hear, not just the words of Jesus, but that of the Holy Spirit. In *Acts 10:19*, the Holy Spirit told the praying Peter that three men came to seek him. *Acts* does not explain how Peter was able to discern the difference between the words of Jesus and those of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the message is clear. The church had to open her door to receive the Gentiles. Christianity began to outgrow her Jewish root and become catholic.

While *Acts 10:19* was a private revelation to an apostle, *Acts 13:2* was public to the church community.

> As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said,  
> Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

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Though the Holy Spirit spoke much through other human agents, it did not speak much on its own. Acts 13:2 is the last time Acts recorded the Holy Spirit speaking on its own. Nevertheless, it was actively helping the church to expand, to seek Gentile converts and to become universal.

**The Church was bound in the Holy Spirit**

Through miracles, internal conflicts and external persecutions, the early church saw the Holy Spirit more and more her God. The Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) was recognition of the missionary nature of the church. The Holy Spirit had accompanied them all along: in the case of Cornelius (Acts 10) and of the Gentiles in Asia Minor (Acts 13-14). The Council was an attempt to deal with the problem of integrating Gentiles into a church rooted in Judaism. In the end, they sent a letter to the Gentiles, confirming their freedom from Jewish customs (Acts 15:23b-29). It is important to take note of their perception of the role of the Holy Spirit. It has taken over the place once occupied by the Jewish God. Throughout the whole letter, there is no mention of Yahweh. There are only Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Of course, we may argue that this letter was for the consumption of Gentile Christians and therefore, there was no ground for mentioning Yahweh of the Old Testament. But it was unthinkable for these Jewish believers to have written the following lines!

> For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; (Acts 15:28)

Where was their God? Where was their Yahweh, the Lord? What was the Holy Spirit for these Jews? For these Jewish Christians, the Holy Spirit was their God. Jesus was their Lord. They (or Luke) saw themselves more Christians than Jews. Now that Jesus had ascended into heaven, they had the Holy Spirit to accompany their missions on earth, not knowing their final destiny. In the words of St. Paul:

> And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there (Acts 20:22)

In Luke’s perspective, the Church would go where the Holy Spirit urged (Acts 13:4), would not go where the Holy Spirit prevented (Acts 16:6-7). She was fully committed to and bound by the Holy Spirit.
Evolution of the Perception of the Holy Spirit in Acts
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Conclusion

Luke had, in his mind, the Holy Spirit as a person when he began Part II of his masterpiece, the *Acts of the Apostles*. As early as Acts 1:2, Luke has already declared that the Holy Spirit is Jesus’ agent on earth. Not waiting until Pentecost, it started working immediately in the community of 120 Jewish believers whose perception at that time was still largely that of the Hebrew Scripture. Empowered by the spirit of God, David proclaimed God’s words, predicted future events. But there had already been a Christian twist here. The words were not just God’s, but those of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 1:16*).

When Pentecost came, the Holy Spirit took the centre stage, giving believers the abilities to speak in alien tongues. It gave them power to work miracles. It fully revealed itself as a person through the giving out of different powers. In the story of Ananias and Sapphira, the early church saw more and more that the Holy Spirit was a person and their God. At length, the early church was able to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit, different from that of Jesus. In her own evolution, the church was able to advance their perception of the Holy Spirit, her God.

Bibliography


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