

6.1 The Beginning of Acts and the Role of the Holy Spirit

In its literary form as well as its content the Book of Acts is unique in the New Testament. It is the only New Testament writing which provides an account of the activities of the apostles after Jesus' ascension, the creation of communities of Christ-followers in Jerusalem and beyond, and of the travels of Paul and his colleagues.

The beginning of this writing can be described as the end of one story, that of the earthly life of Jesus, and as the beginning of another story, that of the mission of the followers of Christ after his ascension, and it is at the same time the continuation of a story – the continuation of the message and mission of Christ in the life of the activities and communities of his followers. In fact the book is characterized by all three aspects. It tells the story after Jesus' death and resurrection, it tells the story of the beginning of the Christ-movement which is the continuation of Jesus' ministry during his life-time. The driving force in and through all the events narrated is the Holy Spirit. The French exegete Eugene Jaquier thus called the Book of Acts the Gospel of the Spirit. Luke does not explain or discuss the Spirit, he seems to presuppose that the Spirit as such does not need any introduction, characterization or explanation. Rather than describing or defining the Spirit he shows him/her at work in the lives and activities of the Christ-followers. No elaborate pneumatology can be found in the Book of Acts; since Luke is not a systematic theologian but a narrator he presents theology in narrative form. Even statistically the word Spirit is present very prominently in Acts – almost 30% of all occurrences in the New Testament are found in this book.

The Prologue: Acts 1.1-4

The introduction to this book is parallel to the introduction to the Gospel of Luke which is taken as a strong indication by most scholars that the two books are related to each other and intended to be a unity in the form of a first and second volume. The key linking terms are the name Theophilus and the mentioning of 'the first book' (1.1).

Some elements found in these opening verses are also found at the end of the Gospel:

- The command to stay in Jerusalem Lk 24.49 is repeated in Acts 1.4
- References to the 'promise of the father' (Lk 24.49 and Acts 1.4), the 'power' the disciples will receive (Lk 24.49 and Acts 1.8)
- The role of Jesus' witnesses (Lk 24.48 and Acts 1.8)
- The universal scope of the mission (Lk 24.47 and Acts 1.8)
- The reminder of the importance of the hope for Israel (Lk 24.21 and Acts 1.6)
- The commissioning of those who will carry on the Christ's work (Lk 24.46-47 and Acts 1.8)

The reminder of the significance of the hope for Israel is not refuted in these passages which clarify the mission of the disciples. Jesus' answer in Acts 1.6 reminds his followers that the coming of the kingdom and the restoration of Israel will not happen in the immediate future and is not something which can be known by the disciples nor is it relevant to be known by them. Christ refuses to attribute any significance to insights into the timing for the mission with which the disciples are entrusted. This should not be mistaken as a refutation of the hope for Israel which is not abandoned, nor superseded or replaced by the inclusion of the people of God from among the nations. The hope for the coming of the kingdom includes Israel, and the command to proclaim the message from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the entire world does not imply that the first three regions are abandoned! The universal scope of the mission does not imply that the particular focus on the Jewish people is given up in Luke-Acts. Gentiles are called to share in the benefits of God's messianic rule of peace – but the messianic reign has not lost its significance for Israel.

The Coming of the Spirit: Acts 2

The narrative of Pentecost, the pouring out the Spirit in Acts 2.1-13 is characterized as the founding event of the church or the 'ekklesia', the word frequently used by Luke to name the group of Christ-followers. This group is presented as born from and inspired, and moved by, the breath of God. (The word 'ekklesia' used by Luke and also particularly in the letters of Paul is a word which had no 'religious' overtones in antiquity, it simply refers to an assembly of people, a gathering, or community).

The coming of the spirit had been promised by the risen Christ as the inspiring and empowering act of God. God acts to empower the disciples to follow the command of the risen Christ to become witnesses to the end of the earth. The events happen in the context of the Jewish harvest festival, identified in the Hebrew bible as the Feast of Weeks (Ex 23.16; 34.22; Lev 23.15-21; Num 28.26-31; Deut 16.9-10). In some texts contemporary with Acts, (the book of Jubilees and other texts from Qumran), this festival is associated with the renewing of the covenant and the giving of the Torah at Sinai (cf. Ex 19.8, 16-19). The latter event is associated with the elements also found in the narrative of Acts, sound of tempest, flames of fire, and an atmosphere of awe and joy. The context of this festival which is celebrated fifty days after the festival of Passover explains the presence of Jews from all over the world as this was one of the major pilgrimage festivals in the Jewish calendar.

The coming of the Spirit in the context of a festival which is associated with the revelation at mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah draws this event close to the Spirit tradition of the Scriptures (Num 11.29; Ez 39.29; Joel 3.1). In the speech of Peter which follows the narrative of the events this is explicitly referred to. It should be noted that in these scriptural traditions as well as in the events of Pentecost the Spirit is not a purely inwardly sensation but is present as having visible and audible effects such as a strong wind. The Spirit does not merely 'trigger' an inward transformation in the disciples but rather it is a power which initiates an activity, it activates and enables them to become witnesses of Christ from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

The movement which is born here through the life-giving Spirit of God has with three distinctive features;

- It is a missionary community by definition, that is, it is not a means in and for itself (cf. Bonhoeffer's characterization: the church only church when it is there for others!)
- Every member of the community receives the Spirit in order to testify, that is, not just for anything. The gift of the Spirit is clearly related to a specific function in the context of the community and its task in the world.
- The community of Christ-followers (Christ-movement) is embedded in Jewish tradition and cannot understand itself without Israel.

Present at the event in Acts 2.1-13 are Jews from every nation under heaven – and they are amazed when they hear the mighty acts of God being spoken in their own languages by Galileans. They are not offended, nor do they reject what they hear – they are amazed. The long list of peoples and lands underlines the diversity of the audience but both audience and language miracle indicate the intended scope of the mission – the entire world. But the author does not lose sight of the fact that the entire audience consists of pious Jews.

Peter's Speech 2.14-41 – Speeches in Acts

In the scene following the outpouring of the Spirit among the disciples Peter reacts against the interpretation by some witnesses of the events. He explains that these events are not what they might seem to be from an outsider's perspective. It is an inaugural speech at the beginning of the mission of the disciples, similar to Jesus' inaugural speech in Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry (Lk 4. 16-21). Peter's speech addresses Jews only. He talks to them about their hopes and the promises concerning the Messiah. It is not a general missionary speech but an explanation of the events from within the Jewish tradition for people who are embedded in this tradition.

A number of characteristics of this first of the speeches of Acts are worth noting:

- 2.14b-21: this passage begins with a reference to the prophet Joel, and Peter makes a solemn declaration that the events bystanders just witnessed are caused by the Spirit, which indicates that the present time is the beginning of eschatological time.
The contemporary events are interpreted via Joel. The scriptural references do not serve as proof texts but they relate the present events to the traditions of the ancestors and only with reference to these is it possible to illuminate and understand them. In and of themselves they do not make sense.
- 2.22-36 relates the events experienced as the outpouring of the Spirit to Jesus' life and death and resurrection and refers in particular to the involvement of the Jews of Jerusalem in the events which lead to his crucifixion. In disclosing to the people addressed that through these events Jesus was resurrected by God and that 'the Christ, is this Jesus whom you crucified' (2.36) Peter proclaims Jesus' authority and reveals the intolerable situation of their sharing in the responsibility for this man's crucifixion. The preceding references to the Scriptures illuminate the events past and present and characterize them as part of God's plan of salvation. The speech thus has a strong prophetic dimension and what Peter discloses here is not an accusation against those Jews who were involved in the events which led to Jesus death but it is an invitation to repentance and a call to join the movement. The enthronement of Jesus as the Christ is the fulfilment of promises to Israel.
- 2.37-40 The question of the people interrupts the speech and provides the occasion to move the speech to its final appeal to the people to repent, a pattern often to be found in Acts. It is interesting to note that the people here ask the same question they asked John the Baptist (Lk 3.10), and Peter's answer echoes John the Baptist's by calling people to repentance and baptism (Lk 3.3,8; Acts 10.47-8; 16.15; 19.5). Although baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit are mentioned here in one verse (2.38), the two are not inherently linked. Receiving the Spirit is not an automatic result of baptism. The Spirit is independent of a strict link to baptism as can be seen e.g. in Acts 8.14-17 and 10.44-48. Also the gift of the Spirit expresses itself in more than a single manifestation, *glossolalia* is only one among these; the Spirit is at work in a variety of ways (cf. Acts 4.8; 8.29; 13.9; 16.6).
Towards the end of the passage we find an extension of the promise over generations and distance, that is, a reference to the universal scope of the mission (2.39), a final call to repentance (2.40) and the confirmation that this first public proclamation of the gospel by the disciples of Jesus was a great success and Jews joined the movement in great numbers (2.41).

The Holy Spirit is introduced here as the important driving power within the movement of Christ-followers after Christ's ascension. His role remains central throughout the Book of Acts. This relates this book of the New Testament closely with the traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures, where the Spirit is found as the significant driving power in many events. In fact, according to the Scriptures there is no life without the Spirit (Gen 2.7) Throughout Israel's history the Spirit guides, moves, empowers people (e.g. Num 11.16-30; Judges 310; 11.29; 1 Sam 10.10, 19.23). The empowerment of the disciples by the Spirit thus confirms for them that their ministry as part of God's activity for his people is now extended to a ministry to the gentile nations.

Essential Readings

- ** Gaventa Beverly, *Acts*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon 2003, pp. 25-59.
- ** **6.1** Gilbert Gary, 'The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response' in *JBL* 121/3 (2002), pp. 497-529.
- ** **6.2** Wedderburn Alexander J.A., 'Tradition and Redaction in Acts 2.1-13' in *JSNT* 55 (1994), pp. 29-39.

Further Readings

Tannehill Robert, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* Vol.2 Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1990....

Fitzmyer, Joseph, *The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday 1998, pp. 191-267.

Walton, Steve, 'Where Does the Beginning of Acts End?', in Verheyden Joseph, ed. *The Unity of Luke-Acts*. Leuven: Leuven University Press 1999, pp.447-67.

Shepherd William H., *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character in Luke-Acts*. Atlanta: Scholars Press 1994.

Fitzmyer Joseph A., 'The Role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts' in Verheyden Joseph, ed. *The Unity of Luke-Acts*. Leuven: Leuven University Press 1999, pp. 165-83.