

The New Testament Origins of the Baptism of the Spirit

Elliott Johnson

Introduction

The church was born at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit. When Peter used *Joel* to explain what was happening to the Jews gathered for the Feast of Weeks, it appears that Peter claimed that the Old Testament promises to Israel found fulfillment in the church. Since this conclusion appears to be self-evident, the proposed argument will be summarized before it is considered in detail.

Peter used the message of *Joel* (2:28-32) to explain to the Jewish worshippers gathered what the Spirit empowered *prophecy* meant. It was a warning of pending judgment on Jerusalem—the day of the Lord. This was about to happen because Jerusalem had crucified Jesus Christ. Since God reversed Jesus’ condemnation, Peter declared that the coming of the Spirit was what the resurrected Lord had promised (*Acts* 1:4, 5). Jews of that generation were to follow John the Baptist’s admonition and then they would receive the gift of the Spirit (*Acts* 2:38). This experience was later identified as Spirit-baptism (*Acts* 11:16) which would be further explained by Paul as the formation of the church, the body of Christ (1Cor. 12:13).

This thesis will be considered under two broad questions:

What was Peter’s message to Israel?

What is Spirit-baptism?

What was Peter’s message to Israel?

Peter rose to address “the Jews living in Jerusalem and devout (worshippers) from every nation” (*Acts* 2:5). He spoke to them as “men of Judah and residents of Jerusalem” (2:14). He was answering the question: “*What could this be?*” (2:12). The “*this*” was what they “heard them speaking [about] the magnificent acts of God in their own languages” (2:11).

Peter rejected their explanation, but “*this* is what was spoken through the prophet Joel” (2:14). As Joel had spoken to “the people who would inherit the land” (Joel 1:2), as “residents of Zion” (Joel 2:1), so Peter spoke to “residents of Jerusalem” as heirs to Joel’s message. And Peter’s introduction, “*this* is *what*” speaks of fulfillment.”¹ The same phrase appeared in the Qumran literature as a way of speaking of fulfillment.

While Peter quoted the full text of *Joel* (2:28-32), he only made reference to portions of the text that applied to the experience at Pentecost. The emphasis is upon the consequence of the “pouring out of My Spirit.” *What* they heard of the magnificent acts of God was spoken of by Joel as “they shall prophecy” (2:18). No mention is made of the heavenly signs (2:19, 20).

¹ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971) 178.

Yet the passage in Joel is used as a warning by Peter because the Jews dwelling in Jerusalem had crucified Jesus the Nazarene (2:22, 23). God had different plans for Jesus (2:24-36): to be raised as Messiah and to be ascended as Lord (2:36). So what they see and hear comes from the resurrected Jesus and the Spirit was received by Jesus as the promise of the Father (1: 4,5; 2:33). So the immediate source of the gift of the Spirit is attributed to the first advent accomplishments of Jesus, the Messiah and the Lord.

Then some in the crowd asked a second question: *What must we do?* (Acts 2:37). Peter's answer combines elements from John the Baptist's ministry to that generation ("a baptism of repentance," Luke 3:3) and what Jesus had promised the apostles (Acts 1:4, 5).

"Repent,
be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of your sins,
and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

This answer is not found in *Joel*. This answer is not the Gospel (*John* 20:31). Rather, this answer is historically particular for that generation of Jews who crucified Jesus. The first two lines in part reflect John the Baptist's message to that generation who would crucify Jesus. This is now adopted by Peter who spoke to the generation who had crucified him. Following Jesus death, it was now a response in the name of Jesus Christ who would bring forgiveness. Saul, as a Jew of that generation, also was baptized in water (Acts 9:18), after he arrived in Damascus and he was filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). In the third line, Peter added what Jesus had promised (Acts 2:38c). Peter explained that this promise is to those in Israel, whom the Lord would call (Acts 2:39), but it would be extended to Cornelius and to the Gentiles (Acts 11:15, 16).

Then Peter concluded alluding to the final promise in Joel 2:32 (Acts 2:40). He called to that generation to "be saved from that corrupt generation." The salvation promised in Joel from the judgment in the coming day of the Lord was applied by Peter to the judgment coming on that particular historic generation.

What is Spirit-baptism?

The Father's Promise (Acts 1:4, 5)

"The Lord himself explains the promise *as baptism in the Holy Spirit* Such Baptism had hitherto been impossible, for 'the Spirit was not yet because Jesus was not yet glorified' (Jn. vii 39), i.e. he had not yet ascended to heaven and in his glorified humanity received the gift for men."²

Racham's explanation is straightforward and clear. The promise of the Spirit was being given since Jesus was glorified. It is a Messianic ministry during his heavenly session. The gift is described as the "promise of the Father." This is Johanne language in which God is Father and Jesus is Son. No reference "fits the present allusion so well as the five well-known passages in John 14-16."³ The gift that fathers promise to sons is commonly understood to be an inheritance. Thus Jesus speaks of the gift of the Father to

² Richard B. Racham, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Methuen and Co. LTD, 1901) 5.

³ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 36.

His Son, the Heir, as a portion of his inheritance. And his inheritance as the Son he shares with believers as sons of God. This understanding corresponds both to what Peter says and Paul:

Peter's explanation; "God has resurrected this Jesus. We are all witnesses of this. Therefore, since He has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, *He* has poured out what you both see and hear" (Acts 2:32, 33).

Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as related to our inheritance in Christ: "We have also received an inheritance in Him . . . when you believed in Him, you were also sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. He is the down payment of our inheritance" (Eph. 1:11, 13, 14). Believers, coincidental with their faith, are baptized in/with the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:16).

John the Baptist's Ministry

John the Baptist's message about Spirit-baptism was addressed to Israel and concerned Messiah's ministry (Matt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Lk. 3:16; John 1:33). James D. G. Dunn has advanced an intriguing comprehensive interpretation of passages mentioning baptism in/with the Holy Spirit.⁴ Charles Ryrie teaching on the doctrine of Spirit Baptism⁵ shares a number of conclusions in common with Dunn.

The conclusion that both writers share is that the revelation of Spirit-baptism does not appear in the Old Testament. Thus the ministry of Spirit baptism was not promised to Israel and fulfilled in the church. Dunn further concludes that Jewish tradition prior to John the Baptist does not have an expectation of the Spirit as a gift from Messiah.⁶ While Saucy agrees, he does not view that as significant.⁷ Both do agree that John the Baptist gave birth to the metaphor, "baptized in Spirit."⁸ If the image involved in the metaphor is "immersion" rather than merely "poured out," then what John the Baptist announces is *new*.

Defining Messiah's Ministry

The direct translation of John's words, as recorded in Matthew and Luke, is straightforward:

"I baptize you in/with water
But he will baptize you in/with the Holy Spirit and fire."

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 2 *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 93—117.

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: SP Publications, 1986) 362-367.

⁶ Dunn, 99-101.

⁷ Robt. L. Saucy *The Case for Progressive Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) "while the Old Testament prophecies depict the Spirit as coming from God and never expressly from Messiah . . . it is not difficult to see how John could look upon the means of the coming Spirit." 176-177. After John had languished in prison, he sent messengers to question Jesus. Jesus' answer pointed out the many miraculous signs that the Spirit had accomplished through him (Lk. 7:18-30). It is not clear that John did fully understand Messiah's ministry.

⁸ Dunn, 103-117.

The history of interpretation of John's message has usually settled on one of four options – two ancient and two comparatively modern. Dunn draws three conclusions of note:

first, “we must beware of so conforming a man like John to his background and environment that we refuse him any originality.”;

second, “as a prophet . . . John himself had a part in the creative molding of the eschatological hopes to which he fell heir.”;

and third, “John first spoke of the Messiah's bestowal of the Holy Spirit under the powerful figure, drawn from the rite which was his own hallmark, of a baptism of Spirit-and-fire.”⁹

Therefore the metaphor speaks of Messiah's ministry “*as immersion* in a river”¹⁰ of fire and the Holy Spirit. The use of the preposition *en* can mean either *location*, “in a river” or *instrument*, “with cleansing.” But *immersion* is a fresh image in either case, as Jesus's ministry was to be with two fresh prophetic baptisms.

Baptism in fire

Fire speaks of *judgment* in John's message to his generation (Matt. 3:10, 12 and Luke 3:9, 17). And John the prophet is the first to announce imminent eschatological *judgment* against that generation (“His winnowing fan is in His hand” . . . “the ax is laid to the root of the trees.”)

This is the same theme and the same imminence of judgment that Peter later proclaimed on the day of Pentecost when he quoted Joel 2:28-32. Both are claiming that Messiah will bring eschatological judgment and that eschatological judgment is imminent against that generation. While not textually specified, it seems probable that the judgment that both intended to speak about was AD70 judgment, at the hand of Rome.

Jesus both accepts what John pronounced and adds to it. Davies and Allison conclude that, “. . . the influence of the Baptist's conceptions upon Jesus is almost certainly to be discerned in . . . Luke 12:49-51.”¹¹ Dunn explains that conclusion: “Not only does Jesus accept the Baptist's expectation as an aspect of his ministry. But he sees also that the purgative judgment which the Baptist predicted must first be experienced by himself.”¹²

Thus reading Luke 12:49, he depicts himself as the eschatological dispenser of fire as the prophet John had predicted. In addition, in 12:50 he himself will be baptized with a consuming judgment. And that baptism will not be finished until it consumed him.¹³

⁹ James D. G. Dunn, “‘Spirit-and-Fire’ Baptism” in *The Christ and the Spirit* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1998) 102.

¹⁰ Dunn, 107. *emph. mine*

¹¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1988) 312.

¹² Dunn, 110.

¹³ Jesus does *not re-interpret* what John prophesied, but accepted the fact that he will be a baptizer and *added* that he would be baptized by fire.

If we were to relate what Jesus has just said, it would refer to his own death in AD33. He was judged by Rome as a substitutionary death on the cross. He further amplified the imminent baptism with fire on that generation as he prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem (AD70; Luke 21:20-24). It would also be at the hand of Rome. Finally, he predicted the ultimate baptism with fire against the Temple and Jerusalem (Matt. 24:15-31 and Luke 21:25-28). That judgment will coincide with the second coming of Messiah.

Baptism in or with the Spirit

The metaphor of Spirit-baptism was created by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:11 and Luke 3:16). After Jesus bore the baptism in fire on behalf of believers, he *only* promised baptism in/with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4, 5 and 11:15, 16). In the progress of revelation, when baptism in fire had been fulfilled in Jesus' own experience, he is free to promise only the blessing of baptism in the Spirit on those who accepted Him.

But there is an alternative way to see baptism in/with the Holy Spirit, as a fulfillment of some of Israel's promises. Saucy is one such dispensationalist. He says, "The context of John the Baptist's statement (the expectation of the coming Kingdom as near) suggests that we must look to the Old Testament prophecies for the meaning of Spirit baptism."¹⁴ Then he lists relevant Old Testament passages. A few speak of the Spirit's ministry coming upon Messiah (Isaiah 11:2; 42:1; 61:1). These are clearly fulfilled in Messiah's first advent (Lk. 4:21). But the others are all related to Messiah's second advent which was difficult to recognize when only considering the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵ So Spirit-baptism does not arise from the Old Testament as Saucy claimed except for the possibility of Joel 2:28. This has been addressed already as referring only to the Spirit's ministry of prophecy.

Paul's Synthesis of Spirit-baptism

"Paul has given it [the original metaphor] a significant new dimension . . . of being baptized in *one Spirit into one Body*."¹⁶ The ascended Lord is the baptizer. The Spirit refers to both the *location* "in one Spirit" and the *agent* who forms "into one body" (1Cor. 12:13). Such *immersion* also involves the *indwelling* of the Spirit as "we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

Paul experienced this reality before he understood it. On the road to Damascus, Jesus disclosed that Paul's persecution of Christians was also the persecution of the ascended Jesus (Acts 9:4, 5). This is only possible because the Spirit united believers together and united them to Christ. He would refer to this as "baptism into Christ" (Gal.

¹⁴ Saucy, 176.

¹⁵ Isa. 32:15, Grand arrival of Kingdom
Isa. 44:3, Israel's identity restored
Ezek. 36:27, Yahweh's holiness disclosed
Ezek. 37:14, Israel comes alive as a nation
Ezek. 39:29, after the disposal of Gog and Magog
Joel 2:28, before the great day of the LORD
Zech. 12:10, mourn over One they pierced

¹⁶ Dunn, 114. Clarification and emphasis mine

3:27). In water baptism, the water may be viewed as the *agent* of cleansing, so the Spirit may be considered as an *agent* of forming Christ's body.

Being united to Christ as a body also has historical dimensions. Ryrie explains, "Being associated with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection establishes the basis for realizing our separation from the power of indwelling sin and our walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:1-10; Col. 2:12)."¹⁷

While believers await their bodily resurrection from the dead (1Cor. 15:22, 23), believers already share in Christ's resurrection in the Spirit. As each believer shares in his body, so they share his history making it possible to walk as resurrected from the dead in the Spirit's power.

Conclusion:

This is a period of *transition* in the progress of revelation between dispensations. This is a better approach than to attempt to divide the progress into two dispensations as Ultra-dispensationalism does. Rather there is revelation from the *Old Testament* (Joel). There is *added* revelation from Christ (Acts 1:4, 5) and Peter speaking of Christ's resurrection of which they are witnesses (Acts 2:32, 33). The *old* revelation is not *transformed* nor *expanded* to include the church. The revelation addressed to Israel is stable. The pouring out of the Spirit was received by the 120 Jewish believers, but Peter didn't promise that to the dwellers in Jerusalem. Rather the Spirit prompted that remnant to prophecy which warned these Jews in Jerusalem of pending judgment. This is true in Joel and in Acts as fulfillment. But there was more that Joel prophesied that wasn't fulfilled. So "*this is what*" speaks of fulfillment in part.

In this transition, *additional* revelation came. Messiah was specified as the source of the pouring out of the Spirit (Acts 2:33). The ministry of the poured out Spirit was both filling the remnant to prophecy (Acts 2:4 and 11) and baptism. The "speaking the magnificent acts of God" is interpreted by Joel as prophecy (Acts 2:18). The ministry of Spirit-baptism is introduced by the Lord (Acts 1:4, 5). It had been identified as immersion in/with the Spirit by John the Baptist (Luke 3:16). This ministry is in addition to prophecy. Paul will develop the scope of this ministry as the Spirit is the Agent of forming the body and of relating the believer to the history and potential of Christ-like life in resurrection.

¹⁷ Ryrie, 364.