

Book Review

Ritual Water, Ritual Spirit: An Analysis of the Timing, Mechanism, and Manifestation of Spirit-Reception in Luke-Acts

David J. McCollough
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How do you become a Christian? Is it instantaneous or a process? What do you need to do, or have done to you, and how do we know whether or not it 'worked'? The origins and nature of Christian initiation have been a source of fascination and debate since the very beginnings of the Church, and the birth and rapid growth of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in the last century have given new impetus to exploring questions of Spirit reception and associated experiences, especially that of speaking in tongues. In this study, the published version of a PhD completed at the London School of Theology, David McCollough addresses the questions of how and when the Spirit is received — and how this shows itself — in Luke's two volumes in the New Testament. Noting the diverse elements in portrayals of initiation across Luke and Acts (belief; baptism; handlaying; prayer; intervention of an authorised/ gifted individual; reception of the Spirit with the accompanying signs of wind, fire, tongues, and prophesy), many scholars have been content to describe the process as inconsistent, not to say incoherent. McCollough disputes this by taking a literary approach, which suggests that the observed variety is variation *from a standard pattern*, one of which is progressively established as the narrative develops.

McCollough employs several theoretical constructs from discourse analysis and literary theory. The first is narrative progression, which posits that the implied

reader has expectations of coherence and a sense of normality which enable him or her to build a picture through a sequential reading as elements are confirmed or excluded. What is built here is a presupposition pool or Entity Representation ('ER', an acronym which more conventionally evokes either the Royal Seal or part of a hospital, depending on one's location with respect to the Atlantic): a mental construct developed by the accumulation of data through the narrative. McCollough compares these to the technique of *auxēsis*, amplification, as defined by ancient rhetoricians. He also highlights focalisation, whereby an author emphasises a particular aspect in the discourse, as equally important and effective as repetition for foregrounding. The approach here is cumulative, both in how McCollough reads Luke-Acts, and in his own accumulation of methodological considerations that support this kind of reading. Narrative critical approaches have increasingly become important for the study of biblical texts, and readers of this journal will particularly appreciate the interdisciplinary nature of this approach.

In the remainder of the book McCollough walks — sequentially, of course — through key passages involving Spirit reception. Chapter III explores the baptism of Jesus in Luke 3. The presence of prayer is often overlooked, and it is the combination of baptism and prayer that is associated with Spirit reception, not baptism alone. The connection of prayer with the Spirit is reinforced by Luke 11, whereby Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, and in speaking about perseverance in prayer states 'how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (v. 13).

Chapter IV addresses Pentecost in Acts 2, where the gift of the Spirit is manifested by wind, fire, and speaking in tongues. McCollough argues here and throughout that this is intelligible speech, a miracle in the speaker not the hearer, and therefore uses the term 'xenolalia', *foreign-speech*, to denote it (rather than the more common 'glossolalia', *tongues-speech*). Because xenolalia is focalised, the reader expects it to be associated with Spirit reception in a way that is not the case with the wind and flames of fire. In Peter's speech to the three thousand, we have a clear association of repentance and baptism with the gift of the Spirit, although no explicit description of these new believers either receiving the Spirit or speaking in tongues, or any other mechanism or manifestation. While Acts 2 is paradigmatic, it offers only a general association of forgiveness, baptism, and Spirit reception; that is to say, it

leaves the emerging picture of initiation open to a number of possible confirmations or developments.

In Chapter V, McCollough turns to Acts 8, both the events in Samaria and Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. The key elements in the Samaritans' reception of the Holy Spirit here are prayer and handlaying, administered by 'gifted individuals' (the apostles); this is not to suggest that these elements were certainly absent from their baptism, though they may well have been. Instead, Luke identifies a problem (not receiving the Spirit) and a resolution (handlaying and prayer).

Next the argument addresses Saul and Cornelius and their 'conversions'. While for Saul in Acts 9 the focus is on his specific call and the removal and then restoration of his sight, there is still a process of initiation that recognisably echoes the pattern to date, incorporating belief, handlaying, the Holy Spirit, and baptism. In Saul's case the 'gifted individual' is Ananias, not an apostle, widening the scope of those who can be instrumental in Spirit-impartation whilst confirming an expectation established by Acts 8. Cornelius' experience is likewise mediated by Peter, and there are explicit connections in Acts 10 and 11 with the events of Pentecost, including the presence of tongues and the metaphor of 'being baptised with the Holy Spirit'. McCollough rightly notes that the noun phrase 'baptism of/in the Holy Spirit' is not used by Luke, and his work pushes against the Pentecostal model of Spirit baptism as a subsequent and fuller experience following conversion.

The closing Chapter VII takes on what is perhaps the most difficult and contested passage, spanning Acts 18 and 19 and involving the initiation of Apollos and the Ephesian dozen. Both parties know only John's baptism, but receive rather different treatment: a little remedial instruction for Apollos, as opposed to (almost) the full works in the case of the Ephesian believers: baptism, handlaying, Spirit reception, xenolalia, and prophesying. McCollough resists any suggestion that either case is typical, but equally holds both cases to be instructive. Along with the experience of Samaria, this passage suggests that it is possible for full initiation to be missed or stalled, and notes the clear and strong association of Spirit reception with baptism and with handlaying. This latter is not simply an emergency procedure, but is at least a supplementary and possibly a full, regular part of a wider rite of initiation.

McCullough makes his argument clearly and is thorough in his scholarship, engaging with a large number of other writers. At times his own voice is slightly lost in the chains of quotations from scholars, though this is partly a reflection of the layers of commentary that build up in biblical scholarship (itself a sign of the value and importance of these texts). This does raise the question of how to do justice to existing work without becoming lost in it; nevertheless, those working on initiation in Luke-Acts will find the footnotes and bibliography a valuable resource. Reading this book sparked a number of questions and I share a few here briefly.

First, I wonder whether Luke's own programmatic statement (witness spreading from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth, Acts 1.8) should play a larger role in any discussion of narrative sequencing, particularly because it is precisely at these points that we find lengthier explorations of how initiation happens — and how it is validated. McCullough discusses this, but to my mind too briefly: while geography does not override an interest in initiatory process, the correlation of the two is not accidental and Luke might give greater attention to initiation precisely as a means of focalising a spatial dynamic that is crucial for him. Linked to this, I wonder whether greater focus might have been given to Babel, especially given McCullough's emphasis on the intelligibility of the miraculous tongues which, if correct, would sharpen the connection (and contrast).

Secondly, I am left wondering what the ultimate contribution of sequential reading is: McCullough rightly discusses all the key passages, and it makes sense to do this in order. Yet events such as the baptism of Jesus and Pentecost can be seen as paradigmatic and weight-bearing for reasons other than their appearance earlier in the narrative, and expectations established earlier can — even on a narrative reading — be subject to later emendation. I wonder whether a non-linear approach (for example, applying the Wittgensteinian concept of family resemblances) might yield similar results.

Thirdly, and perhaps of most interest from the perspective of this journal, McCullough suggests at a couple of points that the narrative patterns he explores do impose a kind of normativity, though the scope of his study precludes exploration of what that might mean for the Church (and I make no criticism of this necessary delimitation). This is nevertheless an important point, and one that Christians

wrestle with — particularly, it seems, in reading Acts. If the pattern McCollough identifies does have a degree of normativity (within the kind of flexibility that the evident variations allow), what might this mean for aspects that are not (or not everywhere) practised today? Handlaying might be one example, as might baptism ‘in the name of Jesus’ (throughout Acts, as opposed to the now universal and early practice of baptism in the Trinitarian name, cf. Matt. 28.19). A further example would be the fact that in Acts there is no clear exclusion of rebaptism (indeed, Acts 19 offers apparent sanction for this practice); again, despite the clear prohibition of this among Christians from at the latest the end of the second century onwards. This may simply point towards the need to draw our theology and practice from the whole of Scripture, with theological reflection and construction; this study at least raises these questions, and offers the prospect of Acts making a coherent contribution to the practice of Christian initiation today.

In this connection, McCollough offers us an overarching picture: ‘[Initiation] is a “complex”, not a “moment”. It is a process.’ (p. 177). By reading Luke-Acts in this way, we uncover a ‘standard framework within which there is a limited amount of variety’ (p. 216). At the risk of a caricature, it is easy for more sacramentally-minded Christian readers to focus on water baptism, and more Pentecostal readers to focus on Spirit reception — and it has proved easy for scholars to focus on the variety more than the pattern. McCollough draws our attention to this wider pattern: in its centred and stable core of a number of key elements; its flexibility and openness in terms of timing, order, and other more peripheral elements; and to its status as a *process* not a singular event. Moreover, McCollough emphasises the layered, experiential nature of what the one being initiated undergoes. In this biblical studies monograph there is not space to draw out the ministerial implications of these findings, but this portrayal is suggestive of a number of fruitful ways forward.