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A New Paradigm for Spirit Possession

MATTHEW R. ANDERSON

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and all were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4.23–31).¹ This is only one of the many instances of the Holy Spirit’s activity in Acts. Most commenters on the text of Acts focus on the function of prayer in the coming of the Holy Spirit or the response of the early believers to duress in this passage. However, this passage offers one of the clearest pictures of one of the most important functions of the Holy Spirit in the narrative of Acts: enabling believers to speak reasonably.

Using a social-scientific model of spirit possession, let us compare the work and nature of the Holy Spirit with the work and nature of other spirits in the book of Acts.² I propose that the Holy Spirit is placed over and against the other spirits as representative of a new paradigm of spiritual influence: the role of reasoned speech-enabler. My analysis is based upon the social science research available into the various expressions of spirit possession among African religions in the past century as well as reflections from a discussion of key texts with Burundian refugees.

An Overview of Spiritual Activity in Acts

The Holy Spirit plays a major role in the book of Acts, appearing fifty-six times throughout the narrative.³ The Holy Spirit gives gifts, speaks instructions, enables miraculous signs, and reveals prophecy to the early Christians in Acts. Luke obviously wants his readers to consider the work of the Spirit in the lives of the pioneers of the Christian faith. However, the Holy Spirit is not the only spiritual power that figures heavily in the narrative of Luke-Acts. Both works focus more than any other NT writing on the use of magic and evil spirits in the Greco-Roman world.⁴ Both contain numerous references to malevolent spiritual forces.⁵ In Luke, Jesus begins the work of a “ministry of release” that lives on in the work of the early believers in Acts who continue to battle the devil and the forces of evil, which hold humans captive.⁶

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

2. This study is inspired by a similar work by Stuart Love, “Spirit Aggression in the Gospel According to Luke,” in *To Set at Liberty: Essays on Early Christianity and its Social World in Honor of John H. Elliott*, ed. S. K. Black (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2014). I wish to thank Professor Love for sharing a prepublication copy of his essay with me.

3. Forty-one times as *pneuma hagon*: 1.2, 5, 8, 16; 2.4, 33, 38; 4.8, 25, 31; 5.3, 32; 6.5; 7.51, 55; 8.15, 17, 19; 9.17, 31; 10.38, 44, 45, 47; 11.15, 16, 24; 13.2, 4, 9, 52; 15.8, 28; 16.6; 19.2, 6, 21; 20.23, 28; 21.11; 28.25. Context suggests that *pneuma* is synonymous with *pneuma hagon* another fifteen times: 2.4, 17, 18; 5.9; 6.3, 10; 8.18, 29, 39; 10.19; 11.12, 28; 16.7; 20.22; 21.4.

4. Kenneth L. Cukrowski, “Demons, Magic, and the Occult,” in *Fanning the Flame: Probing the Issues in Acts*, ed. M. E. Moore (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2003), 80.

5. For the phrase *akatharton pneuma*, see Luke 4.33, 36; 6.18; 8.29; 9.42; 11.24; Acts 5.16; 8.7; 10.14, 28; 11.8. For *daimonion/daimōn*, see Luke 4.33, 35, 41; 7.33; 8.2, 27, 29, 30, 33, 35, 38; 9.1, 42, 49; 10.17; 11.14, 15, 18, 19, 20; 13.32; 17.18. For *ponēron pneuma*, see Luke 7.21; 8.2; Acts 19.12, 13, 15, 16. For *pneuma pythōna*, see Acts 16.16.

6. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 277.

Acts takes on this realm of the spiritual forces in a different way. As the Holy Spirit becomes more prominent in the story of Israel's salvation, Luke begins to develop a pneumatology that champions the Holy Spirit over and against the other spirits. One obvious way in which Luke sets out this competition is the complete lack of the word *demon* (*daimonion/daimōn*) in Acts. This shows a definite change in diction from Luke's gospel in which he employs these terms twenty-two times.⁷ This suggests an attempt on Luke's part to heighten the comparison between the malevolent spirits and the one true Holy Spirit. As the modern Western worldview does not necessarily include a spiritual dimension in the same way as the Greco-Roman atmosphere of the Ancient Near East, a social-scientific model of spirit possession offers a view into such passages that is not immediately clear to the modern Western reader.

A Social-Scientific Model of Spirit Possession

"Spirit possession research has been characterized by a fundamental tension between reductive, naturalizing or rationalizing approaches on the one hand and contextualizing, more phenomenological approaches on the other."⁸ That is, research into spirit possession in the modern era, especially conducted by post-Enlightenment Western peoples, has been marked by an effort to explain away spirit possession through rationality.⁹ The task of this present paper is not to dispute the factuality of incidents of spirit possession in either African religions or the New Testament. Both sources take the factuality of such phenomena seriously and the present study aims to draw insight from the points of contact between the two that can help inform a skeptical Western mindset when approaching the biblical text.

Linguistic Connections

At the outset of this comparative study of the spiritual worlds of modern Africa and the Mediterranean region in the first century, the terminology used by both cultures plays an important role. The language used for possession by a spirit is similar. African tribal cultures employ the language of *filling* much like the accounts in Acts (*plērēs, plērōō,* and *pimplēmi*). The word *pneuma* means "breath, wind, spirit, immaterial being" and other related terms.¹⁰ Likewise, similar vocabulary is used in African languages to speak of the spirit within a person, spirits with their own forms, and the movements of the wind.¹¹ Kramer highlights the similarities in understanding:

The animation of spirit seems logical where that which can move independently is considered to be endowed with spirit, but it also reflects the fact that the spirit of a phenomenon is seen to be that which touches or moves a person.¹²

Likewise, *spirits* can refer to the life forces of living beings (Luke 23.46, Acts 7.59) or the spiritual beings that exist in their own right aside from humanity (i.e. the Holy Spirit and evil/unclean spirits in Acts¹³). These linguistic links hint at a shared (or at least comparable) understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and physical worlds.

Symptoms of Possession

The manifestations of spirit possession among African tribal cultures take the form of unusual behaviors:

7. See footnote 5.

8. Janice Boddy, "Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 410.

9. Ibid., 407-34; Tony Perman, "Awakening Spirits: The Ontology of Spirit, Self, and Society in Nda Spirit Possession Practices in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 41 (2011): 61.

10. LSJ, 1424.

11. Fritz Kramer, *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa*, trans. M. R. Green (New York: Verso, 1993), 67; Love, "Spirit Aggression," 6; Perman, 68.

12. Kramer, 67.

13. See footnotes 2 and 6.

a sudden transformation to bestial behavior, deep sleep, raging, uncanny, barbarian sounds and bestial cries, appalling grimaces and great agitation, such that the person concerned is unable to remain in one place and goes in search of solitude, etc.¹⁴

Possessed persons no longer behave as themselves, but take on violent and belligerent characteristics.¹⁵ This description is similar to descriptions of possessions in Luke-Acts, most clearly seen in the behavior of the Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8.26–33). However, some of these symptoms are evident in the servant girl with a Python spirit (Acts 16.16) and the possessed man who attacks the sons of Sceva (Acts 19.14). We shall return to these connections later, but for now it is sufficient to say that there are similar symptoms of spirit possession in both cultures.

These symptoms are indicative of a particularly severe form of possession. There is also possession-like language used to speak of severe emotional reactions. Thus, the idea of being *filled* or *moved* by an emotion is also a participation in the larger cultural understanding of spirit possession.¹⁶ This same language that is present in traditional African religions appears in the language of Acts.

Speech

A change in speech pattern, speech content, or even the identity of the one speaking is common in many instances of spirit possession. One man who experienced Dodo possession related that the spirit had communicated to him what he needed to know when he spoke to and healed others.¹⁷ The *Nya* spirits of Mali tribal religion are directly connected to speech: when a spirit possesses a person, it is referred to as “taking a mouth” (*da minè* or *nyu co* in the Hamana and Myankamara languages, respectively).¹⁸ The possessed person does not speak for him/herself; rather, it is the voice of the *Nya* who speaks through the mouth of the person.¹⁹

Speaking in different languages can also be a sign of spirit possession among some African tribal religions. One of the most notable reports of this is the *kiaburu* spirits in the Swahili coastal towns. Such spirits impart to possessed persons “a competence with [Arabic] that they do not possess under normal circumstances.”²⁰ This ability to speak in a previously unknown language seems strikingly like the speech of the believers in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit first fills them.

Spirits are also known to prophesy and make predictions about future events. This is especially clear among the Kamba people in the plains of Ukambani, southeast of Nairobi.²¹ Among these people, seers (*athani*) are enabled by spirits to see future events.²² However, spirits are not simply givers of prophetic vision: spirits carried the capacity to possess Kamba people, occupying a person’s body and usurping the person’s psychological and affective states for the spirit’s own purposes. Both men and women were capable of becoming mediums, articulating the desires or even the prophecies of the possessing spirit.²³ Thus, the speeches given by the possessed are the discourse of spirits, overshadowing and even replacing the voice of the individual being possessed.

14. Kramer, 61.

15. Perman, 60.

16. *Ibid.*, 67.

17. Masquelier, 41.

18. Jean-Paul Colleyn, “Horse, Hunter & Messenger: the Possessed Men of the *Nya* Cult in Mali,” in *Spirit Possession: Modernity & Power in Africa* (Oxford: James Curry Ltd, 1999), 69.

19. *Ibid.*, 72.

20. Linda L. Giles, “Spirit Possession & the Symbolic Construction of Swahili Society,” in *Spirit Possession*, 150.

21. Katherine Luongo, “Prophecy, Possession, and Politics: Negotiating the Supernatural in 20th Century Machakos, Kenya,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 45 (2012): 192.

22. *Ibid.*; Kennel Jackson, “An Ethnohistorical Study of the Oral Traditions of the Kamba” (PhD thesis, UCLA, 1972), 332–33.

23. Luongo, 194.

The Holy Spirit in Acts

The Voice of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is not a spirit that needs to borrow (or steal) a human mouth in order to speak. There are spirits that seem to take the mouths and bodies of the humans who receive them. The horde of demons infesting the Gerasene demoniac takes his mouth (Luke 8.26–33). Also, the Python spirit of the slave girl who follows Paul and his companions around shouts through her mouth (Acts 16.16–18). Much like the *Nya* spirits discussed previously, these spirits do not speak from mouths of their own bodies, but through the borrowed mouths of their human hosts. The Holy Spirit, however, speaks for itself (see table below).

Speech Attributed to the Holy Spirit in Acts	
8.29	The Spirit instructs Philip to catch up to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch.
10.19	The Spirit commands the appointing of Barnabas and Saul to begin their missionary work.
13.2	Paul reports the Spirit's speech to inform him of the dangers he will face in his travels.
20.23	Agabus reports the Spirit's speech informing him of the impending imprisonment of Paul.
21.11	The Spirit tells Peter of the arrival of Cornelius' envoy. (Reported by Peter in 11.12.)

The examples in 13.2 and 20.23 do not make it clear how such a message was received. The Holy Spirit may or may not have spoken directly in these instances. However, in the other three examples the person is alone and the Spirit speaks directly to them in its own voice.

The Speech Enabled by the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit not only speaks for itself, but it allows others to speak in their own voices with boldness. With the exception of Acts 1.16, 4.25, and 28.25, the person filled with the Holy Spirit is seen still speaking in his or her own voice. Acts 1.16 refers to a quotation of Scripture: "Men and brothers, it was necessary that the scripture which the Holy Spirit spoke before through the mouth of David be fulfilled." This seems to be a special case in which the prophetic interpretation of Scripture is considered to be the speech of the Spirit through a human vessel. It is the same in 4.25, but there the speech is twice transmitted: the Father through the Spirit, then the Spirit through the mouth of David. Paul uses the same language in 28.25 to quote Isaiah. Thus, this seems to be a characterization more of prophetic speech than of the direct activity of the Holy Spirit.

The speech acts that are enabled by the Holy Spirit do not take the form of an oracle or divine voice through a human conduit. Those filled with the Spirit speak out in well-reasoned discourse. There are three terms used throughout Acts to denote the action of the spirit filling a person: *plērēs*, *plēroo*, and *pimplēmi*. A brief survey of the uses of these words shows the connection between being filled with the Spirit and speaking.

<i>plērēs</i>	
6.3	Select for yourselves, brothers, seven men testified from among you, full of the Spirit and wisdom
6.5	And they selected Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit
7.55	Being full of the Holy Spirit he looked to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus stood at the right hand of God
11.24	He was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit

The first three instances of *plērēs* describe Stephen (or will come to describe him, as he is one of the seven men selected). Shortly after he is introduced into the storyline, he gives a well-reasoned speech to a crowd before he is stoned to death (Acts 7.54–60). The last instance is a description of Barnabas whose actions bring many to the Lord (11.24) and who teaches a great many alongside Paul (11.26).

<i>plēroō</i>	
13.52	The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit

This is both the only instance of this verb used in this way and the exception to the direct connection between being filled with the Holy Spirit and speech. However, it is bracketed by Paul speaking alone (13.16–47) and then with Barnabas in synagogues (14.1).

<i>pimplēmi</i>	
2.4	And all were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave to each to speak
4.8	Then Peter, having been filled with the Holy Spirit , said to them
4.31	And all were filled with the Holy Spirit , and began speaking the word of God with boldness
9.17	[Ananias speaking to Saul] so that you may see and be filled with the Holy Spirit
13.9	Saul, also called Paul, having been filled with the Holy Spirit looked at him and said

With the exception of 9.17, the uses of *pimplēmi* are immediately followed by an instance of Spirit-enabled speech. However, 9.17 can hardly be said to be evidence against the case for the Spirit as speech-enabler, because Saul/Paul is the most prominent speaker in the entire work.

The Holy Spirit does allow some speech that seems in line with the types of speech-enabling spirits among some African tribes. Like the *kiaburu* spirits of the Swahili coastal tribes (section 2.4), the speaking in tongues (*glōssolalia*) of believers on Pentecost is evidence that the Spirit imparted the ability to speak previously unknown languages (Acts 2.1–13). However, the majority of the speeches given by those who have been filled by the Holy Spirit present a different kind of speech than what one would expect from a person possessed by a spirit. The believers instead speak with boldness (*parrēsia*, Acts 2.29; 4.13, 29, 31; 28.31; and *parrēsiazomai*, 9.27, 28; 13.46; 14.3; 18.26; 19.8; 26.26).

Applying the Model to Other Spirits in Acts

The main activity of the Spirit in Acts is to serve as an enabler of speech. In fact, the only time the Spirit is portrayed in an activity outside the realm of speech is when it snatches up Philip after his interaction with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.39). While Christians understand the Spirit's function more broadly than this (Gal 5.22–23; 1 Cor 12.1–11), Luke presents this picture of the Spirit in contrast to the other spirits in Acts (see table below).

Other spirits in Acts	
5.16	A multitude from the surrounding cities of Jerusalem used to gather bringing sick people and those afflicted by unclean spirits , who were all healed.
8.7	For many unclean spirits of those having them cried out in a great voice and came out of them, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed
16.16	It happened as we were going into the place of prayer that a certain slave girl who had a Python spirit , who brought to her masters much gain by fortune-telling, met us
19.12	so that even his sweat cloths or kerchiefs were carried away to the sick and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them
19.16	And the man in whom was the evil spirit leapt upon them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them so that they fled naked and wounded out of that house

The examples in 5.16 and 19.12 show the same link between sickness and spirit possession that we observed in the traditional African religions. When the crowds show up to take advantage of the healing offered by those who have been filled with the Holy Spirit, the sick and the possessed come together.

The other examples exhibit behaviors similar to the symptoms of possession among African tribes (see table). The other spirits in Acts do not speak calmly nor allow their hosts to do so, but rather they make a commotion by shouting (Acts 8.7; 16.17). The possessed man confronted by the sons of Sceva shows the rage characteristic of possession by a malevolent spirit, leaving the sons naked and beaten.

The Holy Spirit is not a spirit who takes the unwilling by force into its control. Each time the Holy Spirit exerts its influence over a person, it is someone who has already professed faith in Jesus Christ.²⁴ Hence the sons of Sceva were unable to exorcise spirits in the name of Jesus: since they had not come to believe in Christ and become part of the Way, they had not received the Holy Spirit and were thus unable to employ the gifts of the Spirit.

Testing Observations: Reflections from Burundian Testimony

In the course of my research I sought out the opportunity to lead a reading group of predominantly Burundian refugees. Since most of the group is from one geographic location, the insights that can be drawn from these reflections must be tempered by an admission of their limited scope. Also, the members of the ten-person group had all been living in the United States for three to five years. While taking all of this into account, I believe there are important lessons to be drawn from their experiences. The group was led through Acts 19.13–17 and then Acts 4.23–31 twice—once in English from the Common English Bible and once in Kirundi from the *Bibliya Year*.

Acts 19.13–17 and the Behavior of Spirits

Once we had read the text, I asked the group, “Is this normal behavior for a spirit possessing a person?” Several members of the group responded in the affirmative, so I posed another question: “Is it common for spirits to speak through their hosts, or take their voices away?” One of the men told of people possessed by spirits suddenly speaking in a much deeper and harsher voice, especially women. He said that often a woman possessed by a spirit would have the voice of a man. A woman spoke up at this point and said that the Holy Spirit also makes changes in the voice of a person. The group agreed with her, asserting that one could tell when the Holy Spirit was speaking through a person. This will be discussed further in section 5.2.

Other encounters described by the group involved a spirit tormenting a woman with visions of serpents, spirits causing violent behavior, spirits delivering prophecies through individuals, and a spirit causing inexplicable, unstoppable pain and bleeding during a birth. This last story was resolved when the soon-to-be mother and her own mother began to sing worship songs. This is reminiscent of Paul and Silas singing in prison in Philippi when the place was shaken (much like the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 4) and they were freed.²⁵

Acts 4:23–31 and the Behavior of the Holy Spirit

As previously discussed, the Spirit is sometimes described as speaking through a person (like David in 4.25), complicating the view that the Spirit is a giver of voice, not a taker. The group agreed that the Holy Spirit, not just evil spirits, can change a person’s speech. However, when pressed for clarification, one young man provided an example that had occurred during the worship service before class. The church member who had given a few reflections before communion had been choked up at several points throughout his speech. The young man in the reading group characterized this surge of emotion as the Holy Spirit welling up inside the man and speaking through him. Thus, the Holy Spirit does not supplant a person’s voice with its own, but rather augments it.

24. French L. Arrington, “The Indwelling, Baptism, and Infilling with the Holy Spirit: A Differentiation of Terms,” *Pneuma* 3 (1981): 6.

25. This passage does not specifically mention the Holy Spirit, but the use of the same verb for *shaking* (*saleuō*) here and in Acts 4—coupled with the signs and wonders associated with the power of the Holy Spirit throughout Acts—suggests that the Holy Spirit is coming to the aid of Paul and Silas.

Acts 4.23–31: The New Paradigm

Based upon this understanding of the Holy Spirit as a transition away from the old ways of interacting with the spiritual realm, a fresh reading of Acts 4.29–31 reveals the expression of this new paradigm of spirit possession.

And now, LORD, look upon their threats and give your servants the ability **to speak your word with all boldness** while you stretch out your hand so that there will be healing, signs, and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and **all were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.** (Acts 4.23–31, emphasis added)

The believers, when faced with persecutions, do not invoke some form of spiritual punishment on their enemies. They do not attempt to curse anyone with a disease or malady of any sort by magic or spiritual possession. One might expect them to ask for punishment or even death for their enemies. Instead, they ask only for the ability to speak with boldness and perform the deeds necessary to continue to be witnesses of Jesus. Then, the Holy Spirit answers their call, empowering them to do that which it is most well-equipped to do: speak.

The Holy Spirit in the pericope comes upon the gathered Christians in response to a request to speak boldly. As we have seen, this is the primary way in which the Holy Spirit manifests possession of an individual. Thus, this passage is more than an instance of Christians responding to duress by crying out for strength from God. It is an indication of a new spiritual power, a spirit that does not take the voice and humanity away from its host, but enhances the effectiveness of that voice to accomplish God’s mission.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit, as presented in Acts, does participate some in the Greco-Roman (and larger preindustrial) world of spirit possession. However, it also presents a new spiritual reality that has the power to banish the old order of spirits. It does not take a mouth to speak, but imparts speaking ability to the mouths of others. It does not work toward its own end through human bodies; rather, it partners with the believers as they attempt to carry out the final instructions of Jesus and tell the world the good news.

Although many of us do not live in a world populated by spirits that can possess human beings, we live in a world in which the Holy Spirit moves and works. Also, we live in a world that is becoming smaller by the day. That is, I can attend a church service in Abilene, Texas, and hear Bible readings in English and Kirundi in the same service. I can hear stories of spirit possessions and other experiences of a culture and worldview far removed from my own yet held by those who live down the road from me. The interpretation of the Bible in our communities ought not to be solely in the hands of those of us who comprise the majority. Rather, we ought to have all things in common—even our claims to understanding scripture.

Perhaps, if we were to take on this new paradigm for understanding the Holy Spirit, we could join in the work of the Way as well. If we were to open dialogue with all members of our communities of faith about how each of us understands the work of the Spirit, we might find the world presented in the text more accessible to our congregations as a whole. Let us, then, pray alongside the early Christians in Acts 4. May we speak with boldness by the power of the only true speech-enabler, the Holy Spirit.

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