

# Jesus and the Spirit

GEOFFREY N. SHAW

---

IN HIS BOOK *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (SCM 1970), James Dunn argued convincingly from New Testament evidence that in the final analysis it is the possession of the Holy Spirit which gives anyone the right to the title of Christian. On the final page of that book he prophesied that in a subsequent study he would take the matter further. This he has now fulfilled in *Jesus and the Spirit* (SCM Press 1975, 515 pp., £9.50) a courageous, fascinating and fully documented attempt to analyse and assess the religious experience of first-generation Christians.

This is a heavyweight contribution to the present charismatic discussion. What impact it will make remains to be seen. Certainly it will cause professional scholars to reconsider some of the sparking points of New Testament exegesis: important passages are discussed with a ruthless thoroughness and often, even when canons of literary-, form- and redaction-criticism would appear to support his thesis, Dunn puts forward his view with caution and sensitivity. The book together with its chapter notes (these notes take up nearly one fifth of the book and in all consist of 1,613 separate items), a bibliography restricted to 500 titles (!) and comprehensive indexes, is a veritable mine of information dealing with New Testament scholarship. One fears that its erudition and its price will prevent it from reaching the grass roots of contemporary church life.

Part one examines the religious experience of Jesus. Dunn readily recognises the problems which beset any 'quest of the historical Jesus' but finds a satisfactory point of contact in the prayer life of Jesus. Leaning heavily on Jeremias' discussion of 'Abba' terminology he explores Jesus' experience of the Fatherhood of God and sees in this consciousness of sonship a unique relationship 'out of which His other basic convictions about Himself and His mission arose' (p. 39).

The other main factor in Jesus' experience is His consciousness of Spirit. This is seen in the fact that Jesus is aware of the eschatological power of God's Spirit upon Him enabling Him to exorcise demons, heal the sick and proclaim the Kingdom.

In reply to the question, 'Was Jesus a Charismatic?' Dunn would answer, *yes*, in that He displayed the *dunamis* of a miracle-worker and the *exousia* of one who had authority, but, *no*, in the sense that 'the key marks of ecstatic religion are completely lacking in his case' (p. 87). In a perspicuous account of the nature of Jesus' miracles Dunn issues this warning: 'Until we know more from research into telepathy and psychical phenomena the prudent scholar would do well to keep an open mind on many features of Jesus' charismatic "mighty works" '.

In part two, Dunn turns to the religious experience of the earliest Christian communities. This involves a detailed appraisal of the resurrection appearances, the significance of Pentecost, and the life of the early church as recorded in Acts. Luke does not emerge too well from this section. In evaluating first generation Christian experience he is 'only of marginal help' (p. 156), he has 'ignored or suppressed' the eschatological dimension (p. 158), he has had to use a grosser concept of miracle (p. 167), he 'tries to camouflage' the divisions between Hebrews and Hellenists (p. 181), his concept of Spirit 'can only be described as fairly crude' (p. 190) and wherever he can he materialises the spiritual. The result is that Luke describes in a purely haphazard way enthusiastic charismatic beginnings without even showing awareness of, let alone asking, the pertinent theological questions. This is why 'his treatment provides no lasting paradigm or norm for Christian experience individual or corporate' (p. 359).

It is in the third part—the religious experience of Paul and of the Pauline churches—that Dunn comes to the heart of his subject. The background to Paul's correspondence reflects the same charismatic fervour of the Christians in Acts, but unlike Luke, Paul is only too conscious of all the relevant problems—the foundation of Christian experience, the nature of charisma, what are the charismata, and what is their value in the Christian community: do the charismata need controlling and if so by whose authority: is there such a thing as a distinctively Christian experience and if so what tests can be applied. Dunn devotes three chapters to Paul's treatment of these subjects. The Charismatic Spirit deals with the nature of charisma and it is emphasised again and again that 'charisma can only be understood as a particular expression of charis'. Chapter nine, 'The Body of Christ,' discusses 'the charismata as a threat to community' and sees apostolic authority being exercised only by a founding apostle, otherwise authority is vested in the whole local Christian community and is recognised by self-authenticating charisma (in prophecy, teaching, healings etc.) and the more objective criteria of kerygmatic tradition, love and 'building up' (*oikodomē*). The final chapter in this section—'The Spirit of Jesus'—recognises the ambiguity of charismatic experience (examples are furnished from Judaism and pagan sources), and expounds Paul's insistence of 'Jesus as the definition of the Spirit', 'the power of God is determined by its relation to Jesus' and 'that for Paul the character of

the Spirit has taken its "shape" from the uniqueness of Jesus' own relationship with God'.

The conclusion to this book (Chapter 11) takes 'a glance across the second generation of Christianity' with a brief survey of the Pastoral Epistles and the Johannine literature. Dunn suggests that the experience assumed by the Pastorals indicates that the spontaneous vibrant charismatic community of the main line Pauline letters proved to be a pipe dream—hence charisma is tied down to an office, grace becomes sacramentalised and the whole ethos of the community is institutionalised.

Dunn sees in the Johannine corpus a reaction to the Pastorals back in a Pauline direction. This is especially brought out in the Paraclete teaching and the anointing of each individual Christian by the Spirit which obviates the necessity of teachers. The main differences between Paul and John are the virtual disappearance in John of the eschatological tension which is such a key feature of Paul's theology and the fact that Paul's charismatic vision was essentially in terms of community whereas for John the Spirit is essentially an individual affair.

There are bound to be queries set against certain types of exegesis in a work so comprehensive as this. A large question mark needs to be placed against the idea that 'Paul has almost as much claim to the title "Servant of Yahweh" as Jesus, or to be more precise, Paul completes the role of the servant which Jesus left incomplete. This is obviously true of the Servant's mission to the Gentiles. But it is true too of the Servant's suffering; for in bold language Paul does not hesitate to claim that his own sufferings fill up what is lacking in Christ's (Col. 1: 24). Jesus and Paul together fulfil the eschatological role of the Servant' (p. 113). There seems to be no distinction made here, or in other parts of the book where suffering features (e.g. p. 326ff.) between suffering which is bound up with God's judgment upon man's sin, suffering which is the common lot of man in belonging to a deteriorating nature, and suffering which results from holding to one's convictions. In interpreting suffering almost exclusively as eschatological messianic woes Dunn minimises the 'suffering for sin' dimension which is at the centre of the Servant of Yahweh concept. The ramifications of this criticism are far reaching and this is not the place to pursue them. One comment must suffice. If Paul saw himself as fulfilling the role of the Servant, since the original servant identikit stressed the servant's *innocence*, a stress which Paul himself echoes (2 Cor. 5: 21) in common with other New Testament writers, would he then have taken his place alongside the rest of sinful humanity and, if 1 Timothy 1: 15 represents true Pauline tradition, even called himself the chief of sinners?

The strictures against Luke need balancing by an appraisal of Luke's Gospel. True, Dunn deliberately avoids proceeding to the period reflected by the Synoptics, but, since on any reckoning 'Acts' followed 'Gospel', is this a viable objective and is it not bound to present Luke

in a 'lopsided' (p. 191) fashion?

As an alternative to Dunn's treatment of the Pastorals is it not possible to see here a legitimate outworking of Paul's own criteria for maintaining and encouraging genuine authentic Christian experience? If, to quote Dunn's conclusion (p. 358) the distinctive essence of Christian experience lies in the relation between Jesus and the Spirit—and surely this is 100 per cent right—surely it is the Jesus of "the 'sound teaching/doctrine' and 'the faith'" (p. 349). I cannot help feeling, too, after reading a book like this and many another modern treatment, that, if I am to test religious experience by its Jesus content, it will be a Jesus discovered and presented to me by critical scholarship and not a Jesus revealed to me in the pages of Scripture by the power of His Spirit.