

THE 'SEAL' OF THE SPIRIT: THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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One of the accusations that has occasionally been levelled against the book of Revelation is that it has an inadequate pneumatology; R.H. Charles provocatively suggested, as far back as 1920, that “there is no definitely conceived doctrine of the Spirit,” while David Aune has more recently ascribed the personified Spirit to a ‘Second Edition’ of the Apocalypse.¹ However, to suggest that the Spirit is not present within the book is to miss a key aspect of John’s theological scheme.² In this paper I will suggest that a renewed attention to the Spirit can shed new light on both the universal scope of the love of God, and the role of the church as those entrusted with a part to play in the salvation of the nations.³

There are four specific instances in Revelation of John describing himself as ‘in the spirit’. The first two of these are associated with his initial entry into his visionary trance. “I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, ‘Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches’. At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!” (Revelation 1.10-11; 4.2).

The practice of spirit-possession leading to visionary activity was not unknown within Jewish religious practice, and is found both in the Old Testament, and in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts. So, for example, in Ezekiel we find: “He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me... Then the spirit lifted me up.” (Ezekiel 2.1-2; 3.12).

While the Ascension of Isaiah offers an interesting parallel to this from the early centuries of the Christian tradition, “And while he was speaking with the Holy Spirit in the hearing of them all, he became silent, and his mind was taken up from him, and he did not see the men who were standing before him. His eyes were indeed open, but his mouth was silent, and the mind in his body was taken up from him. But his breath was (still) in him, for he was seeing a vision.” (Asc. Isa. 6.10–12).⁴

¹ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1—5*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52A (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 36; R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), vol. 1, cxiv.

² Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 150–73; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit in Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries and Today* (London: SPCK, 2013), 156–61; Robby Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation*, ed. John Christopher Thomas, Rickie Moore, and Steven J. Land, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series, vol. 30 (Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, 2006), 36–7; Simon Woodman, *The Book of Revelation* (London: SCM, 2008), 81–83.

³ A shorter version of this paper was published in Johnson Lim, ed. *Holy Spirit, Unfinished Agenda* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 2015). Reproduced here with permission. All Biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

⁴ Translated by M.A. Knibb in James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Volume 2*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 165. See also D.S. Russell, *The Method & Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964), 166–9.

Similarly, John is carried away 'in the spirit' to witness both the judgement of the great whore and the arrival of the bride of the Lamb. "He carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast... in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven." (Revelation 17.3; 21.10).

At issue in these passages is exactly whose 'spirit' it is that John is 'in'? It is possible that John is speaking about his own spirit ascending from his body into heaven, in a similar manner to the author of 1 Enoch who describes, "(thus) it happened after this that my spirit passed out of sight and ascended into the heavens" (1 Enoch 71.1).⁵

However, while this may account for the first two references, it is a less satisfactory explanation of the latter two, because if 'spirit' is understood as the Spirit of God, then John's language becomes a description of the Holy Spirit entering into him in order to facilitate his visionary journey.

Another repeated reference to the Spirit is found in the concluding sections of each of the seven letters, where it is stated: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2.7, 11, 17, 29; 3.6, 13, 22; NRSV). This has the effect of casting the content of each of the letters as comprising both the words of the Spirit and the words of the Christological 'son of man' (cf. 2.1, 8, 12, 18; 3.1, 7, 14). In this way, the Spirit is the one conveying the message of Jesus through John's writings to those in the seven churches. John is thus seen as prophet whose words are Spirit-inspired, communicating the words of Jesus.

In a similar manner, the Spirit is heard agreeing with the blessing spoken by the voice from the throne over those who have died in Christ, prophetically confirming to John that the words of Jesus are trustworthy and true, "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.'" (Revelation 14.13; cf. 21.5; 22.6).

This function of the Spirit as conveying the 'testimony of Jesus' is therefore described as being 'the spirit of prophecy': "Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19.10).

The final direct mention of the Spirit in Revelation is found in the concluding chapter, where the Spirit joins with the bride of the Lamb to issue a call for everyone who is thirsty to 'come' and take the water of life. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." (Revelation 22.17; cf. John 7.37-8)

This passage in Revelation parallels the water of life discourse from the Fourth Gospel, where it is Jesus who issues the invitation to drink the water of life, although even in the gospel it is clear that there is a link between the invitation to drink water and the activity of the Spirit. "On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living

⁵ Translated by E. Isaac in James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Volume 1*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 49.

water.” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (John 7.37-39).

The form that this invitation to drink living water takes in the Apocalypse forms the conclusion to the main drama of the work, with the final act of the Spirit being to sound a note of universal summons. So, if the bride is understood as the Church, the first fruits of the great harvest (14.4), then it is an act of supreme theological theatre for John to close in this liturgical way:

[Cantor] The spirit and the bride say ‘come.’

And let everyone who hears say,

[7 Congregations] Come.

[Cantor] And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. (Revelation 22.17).

By this reading, the Church and the Spirit join their voices in calling the nations of the world, those beyond the gates of the new Jerusalem (cf. 22.15), to enter in and drink from the river of life which runs through the city; this is those who have been through the lake of fire and have emerged purified, purgated of their sins: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 22.1-2).

The Abrahamic covenant thus finds its fulfilment as the people of God become a source of blessing to all the nations, drawing them from the ruins of Babylon to their eternal destination in the new Jerusalem. In this way, the role of the Spirit in the present becomes that of inspiring the prayerful response of the Church, just as it has been to inspire the prophetic words of John throughout the Apocalypse. Bauckham observes that, “traditionally the inspiration of Scripture had as its corollary the inspiration of the reader of Scripture or the reading community. The Spirit who inspired the Scripture also inspires its believing readers to accept it as God’s message and to understand it.”⁶

And Bauckham goes on to suggest that the seven spirits of God found in Revelation should also be understood as the Holy Spirit. “Grace to you and peace from ... the seven spirits who are before his throne. These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God. In front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God. I saw ... a Lamb ... having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” (Revelation 1.4; 3.1; 4.5; 5.6).

Bauckham identifies these seven spirits with the seven horns and the seven eyes of the Lamb, seeing these functioning together as representing the Spirit of Christ at work in the world.⁷ However, it may be more likely that the seven spirits function as a characterization of the omniscient nature of the one seated

⁶ Richard Bauckham, “Scripture and Authority,” *Transformation* 15, no. 2 (1998): 6.

⁷ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 162–6.

on the throne, in a similar manner to the eyes of the four living creatures: "Around the throne are twenty-four thrones ... and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God ... Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind." (Revelation 4.4-6)

Boxall suggests that these seven spirits should be understood as the "angels of the presence," or the Archangels, who are before the throne of God in Jewish mythology.⁸ One further intriguing allusion to the Spirit may be found in the divine seal with which the redeemed are marked.

I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, saying, "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads." ... They were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. (Revelation 7.2-3; 9.4)

These 'servants of God' receive a mark on their foreheads from the angel with the seal of God (1.1; 7.3f; 10.7; 22.3, 6). This mark indicates their allegiance to God in heaven rather than to the forces of evil in the world (9.4; 13.16; 22.4). In view here is the practice of marking slaves or prisoners of war with a brand or tattoo to denote ownership.⁹ The nature of this 'seal of God' with which the redeemed are marked is left undefined, although it is described as the name of both the Lamb and the Father, in language which evokes the words of Ezekiel. "With him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ... they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." (Revelation 14.1; cf. 22.4). "Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it." (Ezekiel 9.4)

An explanation of this 'mark' may be found in the Pauline language of being sealed with the Holy Spirit. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, significantly one of the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 1.11; 2.1), Paul twice speaks of the Spirit as God's seal on believers. "In him you also ... were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. ... And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption." (Eph. 1.13-14; 4.30; cf. 2 Cor. 1.21-22).

This is contrasted with the seal of Judaism, which Paul equates with the practice of circumcision:¹⁰ "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith." (Romans 4.11)

By this understanding of John's imagery of the 'seal of God', it is the presence of the Spirit in believers that marks them as the people of God. The seal of the Spirit is thus, for John, the new circumcision; those sealed by the Spirit are the new Israel, and they are also therefore the heirs to the Abrahamic covenant,

⁸ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Continuum, 2006), 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁰ Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005), 184.

“And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel.” (Revelation 7:4).

They are the light to the nations for the salvation of the world (cf. Isa. 42.6; 49.6). The 144,000 who are heard to be sealed become the vision of great multi-national multitude (7.9) in fulfilment of the divine promise to Abraham that his inheritance was a people too great to count (Gen. 22.17; 32.12). The first fruits of the redeemed (14.4) become the great harvest of the world, with the Spirit’s voice heralding the transition:

"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them." Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand! Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, "Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped. (Revelation 14.13-16).

Thus it can be seen that the presentation of the Spirit within the Apocalypse is more complex than a mere facet of the presentation of Jesus, something which has implications for those seeking to explore the origins of Trinitarian theology, as well as those seeking an understanding of the scope of God’s love expressed in the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Although the Spirit in Revelation is not enthroned alongside the Father and the Son, nonetheless the Spirit fulfils a distinct function as the presence of the divine among the people of the Lamb, drawing the nations of the world to himself in universal acceptance.