

Acts of the Apostles – Acts of the Holy Spirit

New Testament Survey – Lesson 14 (Part 2)

Last week we began our study of the Holy Spirit in Acts by concentrating on promises Jesus gave about the “coming” Spirit as John recorded in his Gospel. Our efforts focused on the final discourse between Jesus and his apostles that we find in John 14, 15, and 16. In nice 21st century Western fashion, we made a checklist, and wrote out the various promises and assurances Jesus gave about the coming Spirit and what the Spirit would do.

Our full intention was to take that checklist as a reference while examining each reference to the Holy Spirit in Acts. From this, we could see whether or not the Spirit in fact did those things that Jesus assured us he would do. That is still our intention, but first, we need to take one step further back, prompted in part by consistent class reader and contributor, Old Testament scholar Dr. John Monson.

Dr. John (a label to distinguish him in these lessons from the apostle John) repeatedly pummeled me with questions and comments over last week’s lesson about my failure to insert what the Old Testament said about the Holy Spirit. While my initial reaction was to defer that discussion for an Old Testament lesson, or perhaps a series dedicated to the Holy Spirit, his persistent prodding ultimately changed my mind. Dr. John is right. We cannot fairly understand or put John’s Gospel into context on these issues if we do not understand the background behind the “Holy Spirit” at the time Jesus taught. That requires a backwards glance, as well as a bit of a sideways glance! Backwards, we glance into the Old Testament. Sideways we glance at more contemporary Jewish thought in the time between the Old Testament and the Gospel of John. Our “sideways” information is gleaned from the Dead Sea Scrolls, a group of Jewish writings that date around 250 years before Christ until about 70AD as well as from other Jewish writings from the Pseudepigrapha. (These were writings that are generally composed between the Old and New Testament time frame. They get their name from the fact that most use a dubious name for their alleged authorship.)

This will help us understand better, not only the promises and teachings of Jesus about the coming Spirit, but also the understanding of the people who experienced the events of Acts. We always must remember the importance of understanding Scripture first for its initial audience, before then understanding it and applying it in our own lives. For example, with the Holy Spirit, we have ideas in our minds that were shaped over centuries of church history, doctrines, and creeds. The church’s understanding is firmly rooted in Scripture, but we need to approach the Scriptures historically to best understand how the church arrived at its conclusions. We can affirm the Apostles Creed in English (“I believe in the Holy Spirit”), in

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Latin (“*Credo in Spiritum Sanctum*”), or even in Greek (“Πιστεύω εις το Πνεύμα”), but that Creed was written after the New Testament.¹ What do we find of the “Holy Spirit” in our Bibles, especially the Old Testament?

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Some might be surprised to find that there are only three places in the Old Testament where we read the full term “Holy Spirit.” The Psalmist prays to God,

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me (Ps. 51:11).

In Isaiah 63:10 and 11, we read the other two usages.

But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them. Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit?

Does this mean the Holy Spirit makes an appearance in the Old Testament only thrice? Of course not! Many times we read of the “Spirit of God,” as early as Genesis 1:2.

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

This is similar to what we read in John. Interestingly, as recorded by John, Jesus did not simply call the Spirit, “the Holy Spirit.” Jesus used a term that John translated with the Greek word “*paraklete*” (“helper”) four times. Jesus spoke of “the Spirit of truth” three times, in addition to his one usage of the term “Holy Spirit.”

The Spirit and People in the Old Testament

¹ The affirmation of belief in the “Holy Spirit” is found in the “old Roman” version of the Apostles’ Creed, which is our oldest version. James Orr asserts, “The Old Roman Form of the creed was, as said above, certainly in use by the middle of the 2nd century, in Rome; probably a considerable time before” “Apostles’ Creed,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans 1995). We have the Latin Version preserved by Rufinius in 390AD. Marcellus, of Ancyra, provides our oldest copy of the Greek version dating from the 4th century.

We read of the LORD speaking of his Spirit in passages like Exodus 31 where the LORD calls Bezalel by name and fills him with the “Spirit of God” so that he has the necessary ability and intelligence to build the Ark of the Covenant. Sometimes we simply read of the “Spirit,” even though it is obvious that the passage means the Spirit of God. For example, in Numbers 11, we read of God taking some of the “Spirit” he had put upon Moses and placing it on the seventy elders set aside to help Moses.

As we work through the Old Testament, this is common to read of the Spirit of God on selected people who had a special dispensation to achieve a special purpose of God. In addition to Moses and the seventy elders, we read of Joshua being full of the Spirit (Dt. 34:9). The Spirit of the LORD would come upon certain people at times of battle (Jdg. 3:10; 11:29, etc.). While he was obedient, King Saul had the Spirit, but that Spirit departed from him in his disobedience and came to rest on David (1 Sam. 16).

Ezekiel and many of the prophets noted that their prophecies came forth from “the Spirit of the LORD” (Ez. 11:5, 24, etc.).

The Spirit and the Messiah

In the Old Testament prophets, we read of prophetic promises about the Spirit in relation to the coming Messiah. In the well-known Messianic passage in Isaiah 11:1-2 we read,

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Here we see not only the fullness of the Spirit that would be upon the Messiah, but we see a panoply of titles to the Spirit, “Spirit of the LORD,” “Spirit of wisdom and understanding,” “Spirit of counsel and might,” and “Spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.” It is similar to the Messianic prophecy in Is. 42:1,

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

This passage likely echoed in the ears of people who witnessed Jesus’ baptism when the Spirit descended like a dove and the people heard from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:16-17). Similarly we see the prophetic promise of the Messiah who could rightly proclaim,

The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound (Is. 61:1).

This was the passage Jesus chose to read in the synagogue, finishing by rolling up the scroll, handing it to the attendant and informing the listeners,

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:16-21).

The Spirit in the Coming Days

Isaiah also prophesied of a time where “the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.” This would be marked as a time when “the Spirit is poured upon us from on high” (Is. 32:15). One of the most prominent passages about this coming pouring out of the Spirit is found in Joel 2:28-29,

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

These Old Testament passages give us insight into the idea that God’s Spirit was working; that it did not have some particular “title” or name; and that it was selectively given to certain people in certain times. This could be temporary, and was not typically seen as permanent in their eyes or experience. Further, the Spirit was closely associated with the Messianic promises and times. And the Spirit was going to come forth in a manner quite different. It would be poured out on all God’s people, not simply the select few.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN JEWISH WRITINGS

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain many references to the Spirit (capital S) as well as spirits (little s). The scrolls reflect a terming of the angels as “spirits,” something also found in other contemporary Jewish documents.² Like the Bible, the “spirit”

² See, the pseudepigraphal book of *Jubilees* 2:2; *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* (Oxford), Vol. 13, at 23: “[For on the first day he created the heavens] that are above , the ear[th,] [the waters, and all the spirits who serve before him: the angels] of the presence; the angels of holiness;] and the a[ngels of the spirits of fire ; the angels of the winds that blo]w, the angels of the spirits of the [clouds].”

often refers also to an aspect of a person. Yet we find in the scrolls something interesting and possibly quite relevant to our discussion of the “Holy Spirit.”

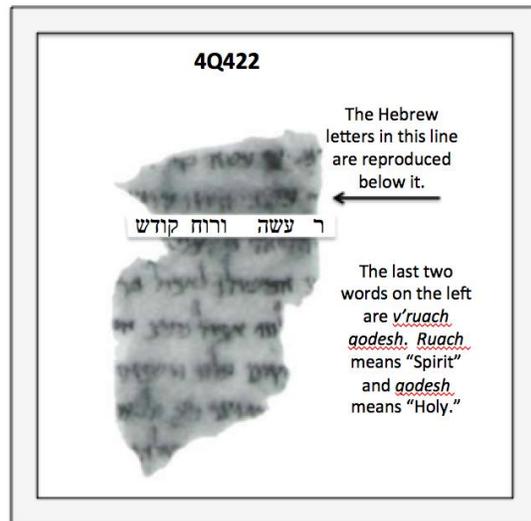
As we mentioned earlier, neither John’s Gospel, nor the Old Testament routinely refer to the Holy Spirit with those terms. It is used, but infrequently compared to other terms. The Scrolls might give us a bit of insight into that.

Now, in the 21st century, I have a number of Jewish friends that will write to me about God, but are always careful to write G-d. They do not fill in the vowel, and are reticent to say the word. They certainly never would try to pronounce YHWH, or the name of God (commonly translated LORD). Exactly when this practice began is lost in the pages of history, but it is apparent that there was already hesitancy at the time of the scrolls. In places, we find the writers wrote “YHWH” in a Hebrew script that predates the script used in the scrolls by multiple centuries. In other places, the scribe would simply place four periods instead of writing “YHWH.” There was also an aversion to writing God, as evidenced in a number of places.

We see this clearly in Scroll 4Q422.³ This scroll is a paraphrase of Genesis and Exodus. It is generally dated to just before the time of Christ (the “Hasmonean period” roughly 135 to 37BC). Whereas the Biblical Genesis account explains creation as an act of God and the “Spirit of God,” 4Q422 does not use that same phrase. The scroll instead substitutes “Holy Spirit” as the phrase for God’s Spirit acting in creation. The scroll reads,

And He rested on the seventh day from all His work, which He had been doing and His Holy Spirit.⁴

While this does not mean that the scribes refused to use the title “God,” it does shine insight into the idea that the “Holy Spirit” was a familiar label for referencing God’s Spirit. It was a way of saying God’s Spirit without having to say “God.” It fits in well with the



³ The numbering system for the Dead Sea Scrolls is based on the cave where the scroll was found, this one being Cave 4 at Qumran (“4Q”). The last letters refer to the number assigned the scroll. Number 422 is that of the Paraphrase of Genesis and Exodus, so labeled out of cave 4. It also carries the alternate title “4QParaGen-Exod.”

⁴ 4Q422, line 7.

Scrolls using the word “Holy” as a substitute in places for “God.” We find this usage of Holy Spirit in a number of places in the scrolls. The Holy Spirit, simply, was the Spirit of God. Hence we read a blessing over God,

[Blessed are you, God Most High, that] you have spread your Holy Spirit upon your servant⁵

This interchange between “Spirit of God” and “Holy Spirit” is found also in the New Testament writings of Paul. If we look at 1 Cor. 12:3 we read Paul using the terms interchangeably,

Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

The Scrolls also indicated that God’s Holy Spirit was a key to understanding God. This we find in passages like,

I know from the understanding that comes from you that through your goodwill toward a p[er]son you mul[tiply his portion] in your Holy Spirit. Thus you draw him closer to your understanding.⁶

The mysteries of God’s glory, a “spirit of flesh” cannot “understand.”⁷ Paul explained this same spiritual truth to the Corinthians, using the phrase “Spirit of God” rather than “Holy Spirit.”

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual (1 Cor. 2:10-13).

These passages are mere samples of many that help us understand that the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is one and the same. This is an integral reason the church

⁵ 1QHODAYOTI_a, Col. IV, line 38.

⁶ *Ibid*, at Col. VI, lines 23-24.

⁷ *Ibid*, at Col. V, line 30.

placed the Holy Spirit as God in the Creed we noted at the start of the lesson. As the church grew to realize the revelation of Scripture, the early Church Fathers understood that the Spirit of God was and is God, a full part of the Trinity.

CONCLUSION

There was an understanding and expectancy of the Holy Spirit that was present at the time of Christ awaiting further explanation and arrival. When we read the promises and teaching of Jesus in John 14-16, we should see that he was not speaking in a vacuum. There were definite ideas that set the stage for Jesus' instructions. The Holy Spirit was the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Truth, of Wisdom, of Power. It was God's mighty working Spirit that brought forth Creation and gave understanding into insight. It was this same Spirit that selectively indwelt some special people in the times of the Old Testament, giving power and insight not commonly available. It was into this mindset and understanding that Jesus made some incredibly profound, exciting and even challenging promises. Jesus promised the Spirit would come upon the apostles, would *indwell* the believers, would instruct and teach them bring forth memories into what *Jesus* said and did. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, was coming to glorify Jesus, witnessing to him as the Spirit convicted the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, all of which would be understood in light of what Jesus did and who he was.

This opens the door to something most profound. If John dared to make this up, he was a man who must have had no belief in a God or afterlife, for such statements were the boldest ones one a Jew could have made. John ascribed words to Jesus that placed Jesus into glory beyond comprehension. The Spirit of God was going to be sent *by Jesus* and by the Father to glorify Jesus! God's very Spirit was in service to the work of the Messiah. Amazing then, and amazing now. In this vein, we can next unfold the teaching of Acts!

POINTS FOR HOME

Because this is an abbreviated lesson, to be followed by a Question and Answer session with Dr. D. A. Carson, we withhold our normal Points for Home awaiting discussion on these with Dr. Carson.