



THE WORK OF THE

Holy Spirit

A BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

By John Polhill

IN JOHN 16:7, Jesus spoke of sending the “Counselor” (or “Helper”) to the disciples after His departure from this earth. The text uses a Greek word (*parakletos*) that is often rendered in English as “Paraclete.” Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit, as His reference to the “Spirit of truth” in verse 13 makes clear. This unusual term Paraclete summarizes some of the main functions of the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

Meaning of the Word “Spirit”

The Old Testament uses the Hebrew word *ruach* to refer to God’s Spirit; in the New Testament the corresponding Greek word for the Holy Spirit is *pneuma*. Both *ruach* and *pneuma* have a similar range of meanings. Both can mean “wind.” The wind (*ruach*) from God parted the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21). Likewise, Jesus contrasted the free movement of the Holy Spirit with the wind (*pneuma*) that blows where it pleases (John 3:8). *Ruach* and *pneuma* can also refer to the “breath” of life, as in Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones coming alive when God breathed upon them (Ezek. 37:9-10), and Jesus’ giving up His dying breath on the cross (Matt. 27:50).

Right: Wall beside the Ishtar Gate in Babylon built during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar II. Tile-covered brick walls decorated with various symbols of lions, bulls, dragons, made up this wall. Nebuchadnezzar II was the great builder of ancient Babylon and the one who led exiles from Jerusalem into

captivity in 598-597 B.C. Ezekiel was among those taken captive. Amazingly, at least to Ezekiel, God revealed Himself to the prophet, at the Chebar canal, which was in a foreign land of Babylon. God’s Spirit filled Ezekiel as the Lord called him to be His spokesman to the Israelites (Ezek. 2:2).

The main meaning for both *ruach* and *pneuma* is “spirit.” This can be the human spirit, which is the characteristic usage in Proverbs (see 16:18; 17:22; 29:23). The reference can also be to a spirit in the sense of “ghost,” as when the disciples first encountered the risen Jesus and concluded that they had seen His ghost (Luke 24:37). Most often, however, the reference is to the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit, whom the Old Testament usually designates as the “Spirit of God” or the “Spirit of the Lord.”

In the Old Testament

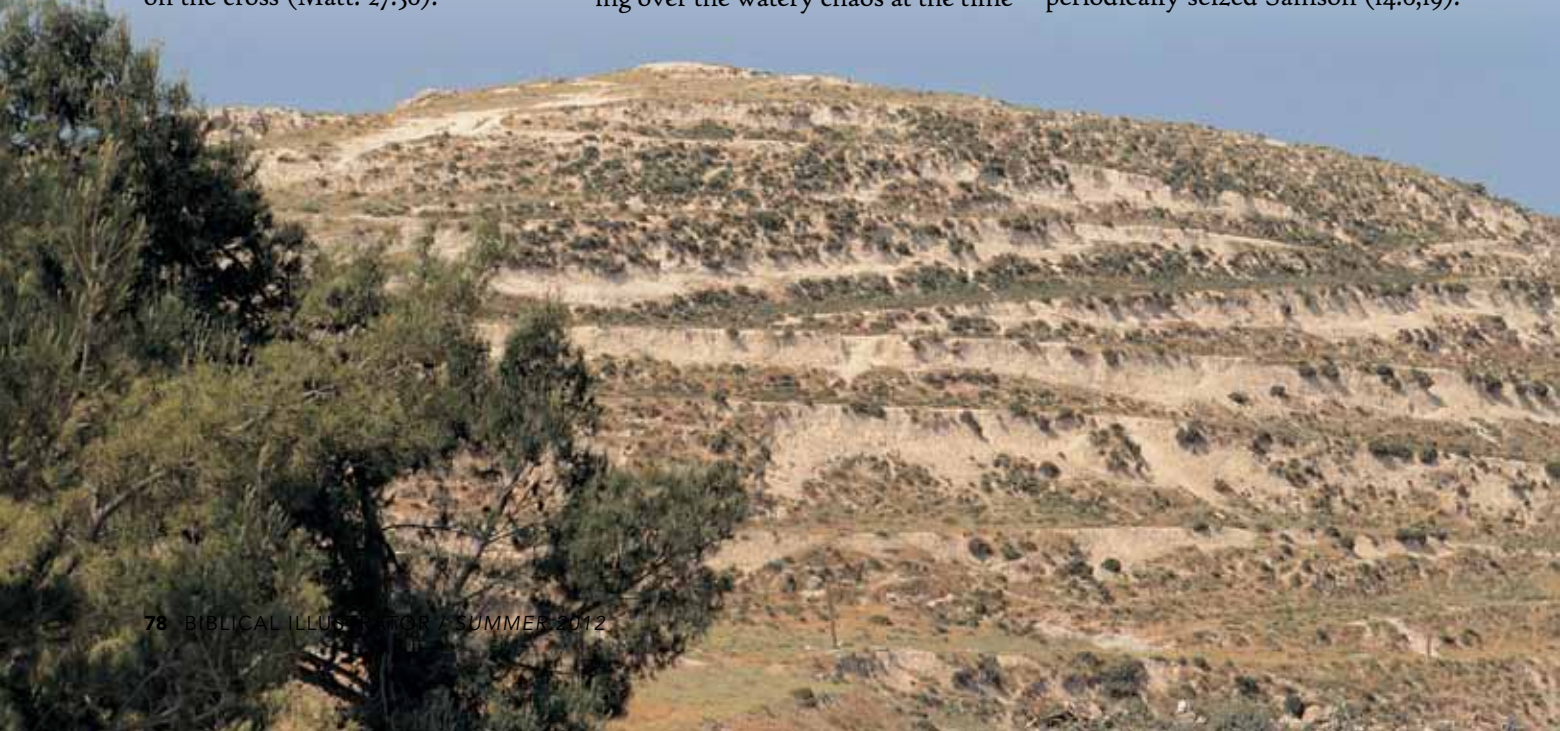
Put simply, the “Spirit of God” refers to the presence and power of God.¹ This is the meaning implicit in the reference to the Spirit hovering over the watery chaos at the time



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of creation (Gen. 1:2). The Spirit of God is often shown to be active upon nature, as when God sent His stormy wind to divert Jonah’s flight (Jonah 1:4).

Of more relevance to the study of the Holy Spirit is when God’s Spirit worked directly on individuals. The Spirit rested upon all sorts of people. He was behind the skill of the craftsmen who constructed the tabernacle (Ex. 31:1-5). He endowed the various judges for leadership, such as Gideon (Judg. 6:34) and Jephthah (11:29). He lay behind the bursts of strength that periodically seized Samson (14:6,19).



God both gave and took away His Spirit. Thus, the Spirit endowed Saul with the power of prophecy and of strength (1 Sam. 10:10; 11:6), but the Lord removed His Spirit from Saul when He became displeased with him, replacing it with an evil spirit of torment (16:14).

The Spirit of God was particularly associated with prophecy. The Spirit could inspire anyone—as evidenced in the messengers of Saul (19:20) and in David (2 Sam. 23:2). The “double portion” of spirit that Elisha requested from Elijah was almost surely the Spirit of God that rested upon the elder prophet (2 Kings 2:9).

The prophets rarely spoke directly of God’s Spirit inspiring them. More characteristically, they spoke of the “word of the LORD” coming upon them. This phrase is frequent in Jeremiah (see Jer. 1:4,11; 2:1,4). The exception is Ezekiel, who often talked of the Spirit coming upon him. He came at Ezekiel’s call (2:2), and frequently “lifted him up” and carried the prophet away in his visions (see 3:12; 8:3; 11:24).

Isaiah connected the coming of the Spirit with the Messianic times. He predicted that the Spirit would rest upon the Messianic descendant of Jesse (Isa. 11:1-2) and that the Servant of the Lord would be anointed with the Spirit (42:1). Joel likewise spoke of how the time would come when God would place His Spirit not only upon a chosen few but upon all who would call upon the Lord (Joel 2:28-32).

In the New Testament

With the last of the prophets, many in Israel concluded that God’s Spirit had ceased working in their land. This all changed with the coming of Jesus. In Him, Isaiah’s prophecies of the Spirit’s resting upon the Coming One were fulfilled. Upon Jesus’ appearance, the visions of Joel

“In the Old Testament, the Spirit’s coming was restricted to a few individuals. Now the Spirit would come upon all who called upon the Lord Jesus, not only in bursts of momentary inspiration, but as a permanent endowment from God.”

Right: When the Spirit came upon Samson, he chased the Philistines to Ashkelon and slew 30 of them. Shown, ruins at Ashkelon.

Lower left: Ancient Gibeah was located on this hill and was Saul’s hometown. After he became king, Saul made Gibeah Israel’s capital city. The Spirit of God came upon Saul as he and his attendants arrived at Gibeah—after Samuel had anointed him king (1 Sam. 10:10).



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were realized. In the Old Testament, the Spirit’s coming was restricted to a few individuals. Now the Spirit would come upon all who called upon the Lord Jesus, not only in bursts of momentary inspiration, but as a permanent endowment from God.

The Spirit in Luke—The early chapters of Luke describe how the coming of Jesus was accompanied by the activity of the Spirit. Jesus’ virginal conception was the work of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). John the Baptist, Jesus’ forerunner, was to be filled with the Spirit (v. 15). Through the Spirit, both John’s mother and his father prophesied concerning the birth of Jesus (vv. 41,67), as did the elderly Simeon at the dedication of the baby Jesus (2:25-32).

At Jesus’ baptism, John contrasted his own water baptism with the Spirit-baptism that Jesus would bring (3:16); and when Jesus was baptized, the Spirit descended upon Him proclaiming that He was God’s Son (v. 22). Jesus confirmed His Messianic status in His sermon at the Nazareth synagogue, applying Isaiah’s prophecy of God’s Spirit-anointed deliverer to Himself (4:18). The Spirit’s presence marked, therefore, Jesus’ entire ministry—in both His words and works.

The Spirit in Acts—Acts relates the story of Jesus’ gift of the Spirit to all His subsequent followers. Before His final departure from the earth, Jesus directed His disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they



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Left: The theater is one of the most impressive remaining structures at Ephesus. The church at Ephesus was the first of seven addressed in the Book of

Revelation. To each of the seven churches, John wrote, "Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, HCSB).

had received the Spirit, who would enable their witness (Acts 1:8). This anointing with the Spirit came upon the entire community of 120 believers at Pentecost about a week later (2:1-13). As the Spirit-filled believers witnessed to the "mighty works of God," Peter explained to the bewildered Pentecost crowd that this was the fulfillment of God's outpouring of the Spirit on all believers that Joel had predicted (vv. 16-21).

The role of the Spirit is so prominent in Acts that some have suggested renaming it "the Acts of the Holy Spirit." Although the Book of Acts describes many facets of the Spirit's work, two details are of special importance. First, the Spirit is the possession—the hallmark—of every Christian believer. Although moments of special inspiration might occur, as with Stephen (7:55), the Spirit is God's gift to every follower of Christ (2:38). Second, in Acts the main work of the Spirit is enabling believers to bear witness to the Savior. Empowered by the Spirit, believers are to witness (1:8). In a real sense, no event in the progress of the Christian witness as

related in Acts ever occurs without the express mention of the Spirit's enabling power.

The Spirit in Paul—No New Testament writer speaks of the Spirit's work in the life of the believer more than Paul, and in no place does he treat it more fully than in the eighth chapter of Romans.² There Paul stated that the Holy Spirit is the mark of one's belonging to Christ (Rom. 8:9). The Spirit alone can enable us to deal effectively with sin and to live in accordance with God's will (vv. 1-4). Paul contrasted living by the Spirit with living by the flesh. The Spirit-lived life is one directed to God; the fleshly-directed life focuses on self-centered, earthly matters, with no attention to God. In this sense, the Spirit is the life-bringing ethical basis for all Christian living, while the flesh brings death (vv. 5-8, 12-13). The Spirit is thus our assurance that we will share in the resurrection (v. 11; see also 2 Cor. 5:5). The Spirit also helps us in our suffering and weakness and intercedes for us before God (Rom. 8:26-27). Elsewhere Paul discussed how the Spirit is the ultimate source of our

wisdom and knowledge of God (1 Cor. 2:9-16). He cleanses us from sin and sets us right with God (6:11). He alone is the source of fruitful Christian living (Gal. 5:16-26).

Paul often contrasted the Spirit with the law, particularly in 2 Corinthians 3:3-18, where he spoke of God's two covenants, the old law-based covenant written on stone tablets and the new Spirit-based covenant written on the heart. The people of this new community of Christ each possess the Spirit, are gifted by the Spirit, and find their unity in working and accepting their diversity of the Spirit's gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-11). The Spirit is the binding force that unifies and enables the effective work and witness of the entire body of Christ (Eph. 2:18-22; 4:3-13).

The Spirit in John 14-16—The fullest treatment of the Spirit in John is in Jesus' teachings to His disciples following the Last Supper. Some scholars have entitled these teachings as Jesus' "farewell discourses." In these discourses, Jesus spoke of His coming departure but promised the disciples that He would not leave His followers "orphans" but would send them the Paraclete, the "Spirit of truth," who would be in them (John 14:15-18). The word *Paraclete* is a rich term for denoting the Spirit's work in the believer. It means literally one who "calls alongside" another, one who assists another.³ This assistance can be as comforter, intercessor, helper, or encourager. John especially associated the Paraclete with teaching and reminding the disciples of Jesus' teachings (v. 26). In this sense, He is the "Spirit of



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Above: In front of the wooden observation stand is a hill, which, according to tradition, was the spot where Elijah ascended into heaven. The site is just west of the Jordan River and adjacent to the traditional site of Bethany Beyond the Jordan, where John baptized Jesus. After Elijah's ascension, the Spirit came upon Elisha. Likewise, at Jesus' baptism, the Spirit descended upon Him.

Left: The Jordan River at Bethany Beyond the Jordan, the traditional site of Jesus' baptism.

truth" (v. 17; 15:26; 16:13). He will bear witness to Christ and will enable the disciples for their own witnessing work. This echoes the emphasis in Acts of the Spirit's work in empowering Christians for their mission.

The Spirit lies behind the Christian message, which seeks to convict the world of its sin and of the coming judgment and to lead to a right standing with God (righteousness) that comes through Christ (16:8-11).

In many ways this empowerment for witness constitutes the pinnacle of the biblical teaching about the Spirit. This is confirmed in John 20:22, where Jesus "breathed" the Spirit upon His disciples in anticipation of the definitive outpouring yet to take place at Pentecost. The gift of the Spirit lies behind the divine forgiveness that comes through the Spirit-empowered witness of faithful Christian disciples (20:23). This gift of the Spirit is thus both an endowment of power and a mandate to witness for all true followers of Christ. **B**

1. Steve Bond, "Spirit" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1527.

2. Paul K. Jewett, "Holy Spirit" in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney, rev. ed. Moises Silva, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 196.

3. Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit" in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 618-19.

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