

Tracing the Spirit through Scripture

BY DALEN C. JACKSON

The four books reviewed here examine how the Holy Spirit is characterized in various biblical sources—the Old Testament, the Gospels, and Pauline letters—when viewed through the lenses of the traditions and questions that shape these modern interpreters.

The Gospel of John points to the mysterious nature of the Holy Spirit: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). There is much we long to know about the Spirit and much value in learning to listen for the Spirit moving in our midst. Too often, though, our traditions have failed to be mindful of the role of the Spirit. The four books reviewed here examine how the Spirit is characterized in various biblical and historical canons, viewed through the lenses of the traditions and questions that have shaped these modern interpreters.

Christopher J. H. Wright addresses what he perceives to be the “widespread lack of awareness among many Christian people of the identity, presence, and impact of the Spirit in the Bible before Pentecost” (p. 9). In *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006, 159 pp., \$16.00) he presents a response that he originally delivered in a series of popular lectures. Wright is the author

of a number of books on Old Testament topics, including corresponding works on *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (1992) and *Knowing God the Father through the Old Testament* (2007).

Wright treats five major themes: The Creating Spirit, The Empowering Spirit, The Prophetic Spirit, The Anointing Spirit, and The Coming Spirit. He draws from the opening chapters of Genesis as well as from the psalms, prophets, and other writings to illustrate the creative activity of the Spirit. He emphasizes God's hovering over and speaking into existence the entire universe – heavens, sea, and earth – through the Spirit. Also a part of God's creative activity are the sustaining and renewing functions of the Spirit, suggesting both that science is a gift from God and that we should share God's concern for sustaining the earth. In a final emphasis on creation, Wright turns to a focus on the Spirit as a gift of intimacy with God, God's withdrawal of the Spirit from rebellious humans, and its subsequent restoration through Christ.

In addressing the "empowering" Spirit, Wright focuses on characters in the Old Testament upon whom the Spirit is said to have come. These include Bezalel and Oholiab, who were inspired to artistic craftsmanship by the Spirit, the judges who were inspired to courageous and bold leadership – although sometimes out of control, King Saul, from whom the Spirit was later withdrawn, and Moses.

Over against prominent images of false prophecy in Scripture, Wright demonstrates the role of the "prophetic" Spirit in compelling God's prophets to speak the truth and giving them courage to stand for justice. He traces the work of the "anointing" Spirit in the stories of King Saul and King David, and then turns to Isaiah and especially the servant songs of that prophetic book to develop a vision of the coming Messiah, or anointed one. This vision encompasses the mission of God through Israel, through the "Servant," and ultimately through Christ and the Church.

Finally, Wright finds the "coming" Spirit in the eschatological vision of the Old Testament, which sets in the future the word of promise that draws people to repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. In all of these themes, Wright's vision is shaped by a desire to maintain a unified voice of Scripture in an evangelical tradition of interpretation.



Theologian Amos Yong brings his Pentecostal-evangelical roots to an investigation of the Holy Spirit as portrayed in Acts. In *Who Is the Holy Spirit? A Walk with the Apostles* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011, xiv + 221 pp., \$16.99) Yong follows the prominent influence of the Spirit through the book of Acts, drawing moral and theological lessons from the narrative. Yong frequently goes back to the Gospel of Luke to demonstrate the continuity

between the life of Jesus and the lives of his followers in the early church, both empowered by the Spirit. Yong's purpose in exploring these biblical stories is to raise questions about "how to see the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in our churches, and in our world today" (p. xiv).

Yong's conclusions generally reflect a mainline, scholarly tradition of interpretation. Nonetheless, he frequently charts a middle ground between this progressive tradition and the more conservative, Pentecostal tradition of his past and finds a thoughtful medium between various extreme stances. For example, he understands the Kingdom of God as something between a purely spiritual reality and a call to Christians to become revolutionaries out to overthrow earthly kingdoms (p. 11). He emphatically denies that the early community of Christians in Acts represents either Marxist communism or free-market capitalism (pp. 30-31). He often explores political, economic, and social dimensions of issues such as healing and Christian freedom, and especially of theological themes like repentance, salvation, and resurrection.

Among the progressive themes that he sounds are emphases on the Spirit's work in global and multicultural contexts and in peacemaking, as well as criticisms of patriarchalism, ableism, and other oppressive systems. A "Leader's Study Guide" containing small-group discussion questions at the end of the book offers a fairly rich supplement to each chapter by giving gentle provocation to thoughtful discussion.

Much of Yong's exegetical analysis of Acts reflects the kind of information one would expect to find in an introductory New Testament course – a distillation of broadly accepted scholarly insights. For the vast majority of churchgoers who will never take an academic course on the New Testament, Yong's treatment integrates this material in an accessible way with a challenging and lively reading of Acts.



Another work on the Holy Spirit comes from New Testament scholar Gordon D. Fee, whose heritage is also Pentecostal. In *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996, xv + 208 pp., \$16.99), Fee presents a careful examination of the Spirit in the writings of Paul. While his approach is methodical, his goal is ultimately pastoral, and the volume is intended to be an accessible guide for churches to nurture a life of the Spirit among its members. Fee is the author of numerous works on New Testament topics, including *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (1994), in which he compiled more than seven hundred pages of exegesis on this same topic.

Fee's approach is topical, as he explores the characterization of the Spirit throughout the corpus of the Pauline letters (which he defines

broadly). The Spirit fulfills the Old Testament promise of a new covenant by being the presence of God not only in individual believers, but even more importantly in the local church as a whole. Fee emphasizes the personhood of the Holy Spirit, as well as the relational nature of the Spirit within the Trinity – especially the vital role of the Spirit in bringing about salvation. This Trinitarian emphasis is crucial, Fee argues; while the mystery of the Trinity is not explained explicitly in Paul’s letters, Paul “*experienced* God, and worked out that experience in a fundamentally trinitarian way” (p. 38).

The Spirit also plays an important role in the eschatological vision of the early church by providing a guarantee of God’s future redemption and empowering Christians to live into that promise. Fee seeks to correct an individualistic emphasis on the role of the Spirit, and the consequent overly individualistic notions of salvation, by demonstrating the work of the Spirit in making a family of all those who come to faith, joined in one diverse body and gathered as God’s temple.

Fee develops a broad understanding of salvation, showing that the Spirit is involved in bringing persons to hear the gospel, in their experience of “receiving the Spirit,” and in enabling them to live the ethical lives to which God has called them. The Spirit bears fruit in the lives of Christians and empowers them in the ongoing struggle to resist worldly desires. The Spirit provides power in the midst of human weakness and suffering, and aids believers when they pray. The presence of the Spirit is vital in believers’ worship, including their singing. And the Spirit builds up the body of Christ by giving gifts to the individual members that are to be shared with all.

In all, Fee provides a scholarly but impassioned overview of the many important roles the Spirit plays in the life of individual Christians and even more importantly, the gathered church. He offers a mature perspective that calls for a balanced understanding of the Spirit, noting the weakness of focusing too exclusively on either the fruit or the gifts of the Spirit, on either the ethical life empowered by the Spirit or spirit-inspired worship. Most of all, he calls for Christians to return to Paul’s writings again and again for inspiration, to learn more of the fullness of God in the Holy Spirit alive in our communities of faith.



Anthony Thiselton’s *The Holy Spirit – In Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013, xii + 565 pp., \$46.00) provides a comprehensive treatment of the Holy Spirit, not just from the biblical evidence, but from the whole history of theological reflection in the classical Christian tradition. Thiselton, who has published

extensively over the years on topics of New Testament interpretation, develops this study in conversation with perspectives that have developed in Pentecostal movements and in charismatic “renewal” movements within mainline traditions. He contends that “the sheer size and growth of the Pentecostal churches on a global scale suggest that we urgently now need to aim at constructive mutual dialogue” (p. 328).

Thiselton begins with a summary of the evidence for the Holy Spirit in both testaments and the intertestamental Jewish literature. Next he briefly treats the writings of the Church Fathers and various theologians through the Reformation and early modern period. Then nearly half of the book charts the development of perspectives on the Holy Spirit in the theologies from the nineteenth century to today. While Thiselton addresses a vast range of issues related to the Holy Spirit in this massive survey, the focus often returns to particular issues raised by the Pentecostal traditions, such as whether the receiving of the Spirit constitutes a “second baptism” and how to interpret the gifts of the Spirit.

Still, the cumulative effect of this survey of so many theologians is the demonstration of mutual agreement across virtually all of the traditions on a number of important topics, such as the self-effacement of the Spirit in always pointing to Christ and the consistent role of the Spirit in prayer and prophecy. Thiselton offers a summary of “fundamental themes” that emerge in his study. These include insights concerning the personhood and transcendence of the Spirit, and the Spirit’s role within the Holy Trinity. He emphasizes the sharing of the Spirit as a common possession of the whole people of God, the holiness of the Spirit as an extension of God, and the danger of misattributing phenomena as effects of the Spirit. Finally, he reminds of the importance of worship that appropriately balances glorification of the Spirit and the other persons of the Trinity.

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As a compendium of Christian reflections on the Trinity, this volume is an almost inexhaustible resource for any reader desiring to learn of the Spirit not only from Scripture, but also from the vast cloud of interpreters in the Church. The diversity Thiselton explores among these Christian

interpreters is valuable, and he presents their views with both clarity and a charitable grace. From Montanists and mystics to scholastics and reformers, Thiselton introduces us to passionate seekers of the experience of God's Spirit. And he does not leave their debates in the past, but introduces us to contemporary voices who take up the conversations and keep them vital in the context of global Christianity.



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