

KNOX THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE FOUR PURPOSES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN HEBREWS

HEBREWS EXEGESIS

BY

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JULY 2013

In the *exordium* or the introductory verses of Hebrews, the author makes clear that the entire exhortation focuses on Jesus Christ. The opening verses teach that not only does Jesus share the same attributes as God, but Jesus accomplishes what no one else could. Jesus takes the center stage as the “radiance” and “exact representation” of God (Heb. 1:3). As the exhortation continues, it becomes evident that Jesus Christ is the primary subject, or the primary focal point, meant to be considered.

That being the case, readers of the New Testament may be left to wonder about the role of the Holy Spirit, considering the importance of the Holy Spirit throughout the rest of the New Testament. Very few scholars have written on this subject, and for that reason, it is worth further exploration. This paper will explore the role of the Holy Spirit in Hebrews, and in particular, it will be argued that the Holy Spirit serves four primary purposes: supporting the Son, speaking for God, inspiring and interpreting Scripture, and encouraging perseverance.

Initial Observations of the Spirit References

In Hebrews, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in several verses. Because there are only a handful of references to the Holy Spirit, it will be helpful to review these verses, so that the overall picture of the Spirit is in view. These verses include Hebrews 2:4, 3:7, 6:4, 9:8, 9:14, 10:15, and 10:29. It is worth observing that compared to Jesus who is mentioned 142 times in Hebrews, the Spirit is specifically named only 7 times.

An initial examination of these verses reveals a few important facts. First of all, the Holy Spirit is mentioned throughout the exhortation. Although the Spirit does not take the “center stage,” it would be unfair to say that the Spirit is in any way

deemphasized. It is important to note that despite the limited references, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in various places throughout Hebrews. Notice the placement of these references. There is a continual presence of the Spirit in the text, revealing the author's awareness of the Spirit and also reminding the reader of the Spirit on multiple occasions.

An everyday occurrence helps illustrate this. A child is told to clean his room, and after being told, his mother checks at regular intervals to make sure that he is cleaning his room. She is not always in the room, but returns frequently enough to ensure that he is cleaning. The point is that even though the boy's mother may not be visible, she is still active and participating in the event.

Of course, this illustration has obvious limitations (namely, the Spirit works continually and does not "leave" in a physical sense), but the simple point is that the Spirit does not "vanish" or "lose importance" when He is not mentioned for a few chapters. The Spirit is continually at work, even when Jesus is the one that we see emphasized in Hebrews. Throughout Hebrews, the occasional references to the Spirit underscore this point.

In these seven verses, the Holy Spirit is depicted as one who enables, speaks, relates, reveals, facilitates, testifies, and broods. The Spirit is not described in a narrow sense, nor is the Spirit attributed with a single action. Instead, each verse further expands the description of the Spirit's role. The Spirit, while mentioned less than the Son, does not stay reserved or idly sit on the sidelines. Instead, Hebrews presents the Holy Spirit as a vibrant and active part of the Trinity.

Four Primary Purposes of the Holy Spirit

Many scholars overlook or neglect the Spirit's role in Hebrews. This is evident in the literature by blanket summaries and a general lack of detail when describing the Holy Spirit in Hebrews. As it has been stated previously, the Spirit in Hebrews "has always been treated as a kind of gravely neglected theological 'stepchild'" (Emmrich 2003, xi). Because other themes in Hebrews have received so much attention, this topic has largely been overlooked.

For example, the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* only uses seven sentences to describe the Holy Spirit in Hebrews. In that brief summary, Ellingworth states that "Hebrews accepts, but does not develop, traditional Christian teaching about the Spirit" (Alexander and Rosner 2000, n.p.) Of course, it is agreed that Hebrews assumes a certain degree of understanding – not only of the Old Testament, but of the Holy Spirit. The recipients of this exhortation are expected to know about the Holy Spirit rather than to claim ignorance (contra those in Acts 19:2). Beyond that basic point of agreement, however, it would be inaccurate to state that Hebrews does not develop the doctrine of the Spirit. Statements such as this imply that Hebrews adds nothing to our understanding of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast to the majority of scholars, Martin Emmrich has contributed many helpful insights on the subject. In his article "Pneuma In Hebrews: Prophet and Interpreter," Emmrich summarizes the work of the Holy Spirit in a two-fold sense ("oration" and "interpretation"). However, after considering all of the references to the Holy Spirit in Hebrews, as well as the overall theology of Hebrews, "oration" and "interpretation" seem insufficient. As it will be demonstrated, the work of the Spirit has much more breadth than this two-fold sense.

Emmrich goes further in his 2003 treatise *Pneumatological Concepts in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. In this longer work, Emmrich summarizes the Spirit's role in Hebrews as the anointer, prophet/interpreter, and guide. Most significantly, this work draws attention to the Spirit's role as the enabler of Christ's priestly work and as the "guide of the wandering people of God" (Emmrich 2003, 85). To his credit, Emmrich reaches these conclusions by considering Judaic literature and by interpreting the Spirit references within the larger theological context of Hebrews. This approach is not only impressively thorough, but it provides a model for additional pneumatological research in Hebrews.

Considering what Emmirch has already written, this paper seeks to go beyond his contributions and suggest another framework that takes in even more of the biblical data. In order to fully understand the Spirit's role, it is necessary to consider all of the evidence, as well as the full theological concerns of Hebrews. For these reasons, this paper argues the Spirit's work can be best summarized in a four-fold manner. Building upon and going beyond the helpful contributions of Emmrich, what follows is a summary of the Holy Spirit's four primary purposes in Hebrews.

Purpose 1: Supporting the Son

The Holy Spirit supports the work of the Son. This may not be immediately obvious, but it becomes quite evident when considering Hebrews as a whole and comparing Hebrews with other New Testament books. While Emmrich contributes much, he does not fully address the Spirit's supportive role. To illustrate this point, we must first briefly consider the authorship of Hebrews and the Pauline epistles.

Of course, many scholars do not believe that Paul wrote Hebrews. One reason for this is that “there are different theological emphases between Hebrews and the Pauline letters,” and less mention of the Holy Spirit would be one of these differences (O’Brien 2010, 5-6). Over the centuries, it has been suggested that Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, or even an unknown author may have written Hebrews. Regardless of who the author may have been, we can be fairly certain that it was not Paul based on the author’s “second-generation” status in Hebrews 2:3 (O’Brien 2010, 9).

In addition, consider the contrast between the Pauline epistles and Hebrews. In Pauline writings, there is a definite emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Fee states this point by noting “*the absolutely crucial role the Spirit plays in Paul’s Christian experience and therefore in his understanding of the gospel*” (Fee 2005, 897). As Fee summarizes:

In the final analysis, there is no aspect of his theology – at least what is fundamental to his theology – in which the Spirit does not play a leading role. To be sure, the Spirit is not *the* center for Paul – Christ is, ever and always – but the Spirit stands very close to the center, as the crucial ingredient of all genuinely Christian life and experience (Fee 2005, 897).

In contrast to Paul, the author of Hebrews mentions the Holy Spirit on several occasions, but a reader would be hard pressed to say that the Holy Spirit plays a “leading role” in Hebrews. This is a significant difference between the Pauline epistles and Hebrews.

Stated another way, throughout the Pauline epistles, the Holy Spirit plays an essential part in Christian theology. As Fee states, “For Paul the Spirit, as an experienced and living reality, was the absolutely crucial matter for Christian life, from beginning to end” (Fee 2005, 1). Hebrews mentions the Holy Spirit seven times, of course, but this is a small number when compared to the Pauline epistles.

Assuming that Paul did not write Hebrews, it makes perfect sense that a unique author would present a unique depiction of the Holy Spirit. Not only does the author *assume* that readers possess a thorough knowledge of the Spirit, but when compared to Pauline writings, it is clear that Hebrews presents the Holy Spirit in a narrower or more thematic role. Examining these editorial decisions can shed further light on the identity of the Holy Spirit and the purpose of the Holy Spirit for today.

Even a cursory reading of Hebrews gives the impression that Jesus Christ is the central character in the exhortation. Whereas in Ephesians, believers are told to “be being filled by the Holy Spirit” (Eph. 5:8), here in Hebrews, believers are told to “look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1-3). In Hebrews, with no mention of the Spirit’s indwelling, it is Jesus Himself who “extends his hand to us, and supplies us with strength and energy” (Calvin, 311-312). This being the case, we must recognize the central role that Jesus plays in Hebrews.

Throughout Hebrews, it is assumed that Holy Spirit’s work is congruent with the Son’s work. This is a necessary implication of the author’s overall view of God’s work. There are not multiple plans, but a continuous plan that began in the past, found fulfillment in Christ, and continues in the present. As Emmrich states, “the author seems to view the Hebrew Scriptures as a monolithic and authoritative whole.” (Emmrich 2002, 56) This unity “connects” the Spirit who was active in the Old Covenant and the Son who remains active in the New Covenant. Stated another way, the Spirit supports the work of the Son.

Purpose 2: Speaking for God

The Holy Spirit speaks on behalf of God. In fact, in this exhortation, the Father, Son, and Spirit are all said to speak, but the Spirit speaks in a unique sense. In Hebrews, we see the Holy Spirit serves a distinct role in the act of communicating with men and women.

For instance, Hebrews 3:7-11 uses a present tense verb which communicates that the Holy Spirit did not only formerly speak, but does so in an ongoing sense. As Emmrich notes, “God speaks *through* the Spirit as his agent of speech” (Emmrich 2002, 57). In other words, the Spirit is depicted communicating God’s message in a direct, immediate sense.

This “presentness” of the Spirit’s voice is in contrast to voices in the Old Testament. While David and Moses are described as speaking in the past, the Spirit speaks in the present as the *viva vox* that directly addresses the readers (Emmrich 2002, 57). When the Spirit speaks, there is an immediacy that cannot and should not be ignored.

Because the Holy Spirit speaks in the present, the Spirit not only permits, but directs a “change of wording” on God’s behalf. This is evident in the alteration from the LXX version of Psalm 94:9b-10a (Emmrich 2002, 58-59). As Emmrich summarizes, “The words of the LXX text are reused and changed in such a way as to create a “new word from God” (Emmrich 2002, 60). Emmrich goes so far as saying that “the recycling of the text creates a new oracle” (Emmrich 2002, 66). The word “recycling” may express the point too strongly, as if the message can be transformed into anything new. However, the fact remains that the Spirit can take an old text, slightly modify it, communicate it afresh, while at the same time, remain faithful to the original text.

In Hebrews, the Spirit is employed when making slight textual alterations. The author believed that the Holy Spirit directs the usage of Old Testament texts to directly address contemporary readers. All of this is kept within boundaries, of course, as the original meaning is applied within a New Covenant context.

Lest we think this is insignificant, Hebrews 10:15 also refers to the Spirit in the present tense. This is not a one-time event, but a continual speaking on behalf of God. Some church traditions may shy away from this, but it is essential that we wrestle with the Scriptural assertion that the Spirit speaks in the present tense.

To make sense of this, it is important that we consider the speech of the Spirit in light of the entire New Testament. One scholar has noted that we must determine whether Hebrews is “consistent with or distinctive from the nature and purpose of sign gifts as established elsewhere in Scripture” (Burns 1975, 246). In other words, any interpretation of the Spirit’s speech must take place within the larger context of the New Testament.

With the larger context in perspective, it is worth observing that while the Holy Spirit speaks currently, He also speaks with finality. Hebrews 2:2-4 serves as an example of this, and it also fits with the “sign nature” of Spirit’s work seen elsewhere in the New Testament. According to Hebrews 2, the Holy Spirit not only speaks but signifies, yet does so without changing the original message.

The consistent, unchanging message is evident when we consider the tradition or the “golden chain” of revelation described in Hebrews 2. As verses 3 and 4 summarize, “It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the

Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” The importance of this progression cannot be underemphasized. The author does not envision the Holy Spirit communicating a new, untested, or foreign message. Quite the contrary, the Holy Spirit confirms the same message that was first declared by Jesus Christ and then passed down by human witnesses. The Spirit’s present speech does not open the door for an expanding canon or new, contradictory revelation.

Therefore, even with present tense verbs, this finality can be seen in Hebrews. Even if we accept charismatic gifts today, we should be able to agree with the dispensationalists that “these verses contain all essential elements of the non-Pentecostal emphasis: subject (new revelation), scope in time (Christ and the apostles), and purpose (authentication)” (Burns 1975, 245). Because this “present tense speaking” takes place within the bounds of inspired Scripture, the apostolic era, and the use of signs, there is a sense of finality with the Spirit’s speech in Hebrews.

Purpose 3: Inspiring and Interpreting Scripture

The Holy Spirit remains active in the written words of Scripture. The author of Hebrews assumes the Holy Spirit was working throughout the Old Testament, and because of that, Hebrews assumes that the Holy Spirit is continuing His work of inspiration and interpretation. The Spirit is not an ancient phenomenon, but a present participant in the inspiration and interpretation of Scripture.

While this may seem surprising to some of us, viewing the Holy Spirit in this manner was not new. There was precedent for this view of the Holy Spirit in intertestamental literature. Emmrich goes into this with further detail (Emmrich 2002, 66-

68). At this point, it is worth noting because if there is any doubt about the Holy Spirit's role, we can compare the teachings of Hebrews with previous texts and observe that this was not a new concept. For Jews during the intertestamental period, the Holy Spirit would have actively guided the interpretation of the Scriptures.

Obviously, the New Testament takes this even further because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Church. There is now much greater clarity regarding the Holy Spirit and His role. As Emmrich points out, Hebrews' pneumatology does, in fact, go beyond common Judaic thought (Emmrich 2003, 38). But the point here is that the Spirit guides us along the way as we encounter the message of Scripture.

In three different passages in Hebrews, the Holy Spirit speaks through the text of Scripture. This happens three times: in two cases citing the LXX and in one case interpreting Scripture (Emmrich 2002, 55). The Spirit's voice, it should be noted, is heard through Scripture.

Although it may be surprising to some of us, the author of Hebrews feels at liberty to change and/or interpret Scriptural texts. Assuming that the Holy Spirit currently speaks, the author of Hebrews does not attempt a kind of "historical revisionism," but holds a strong belief that the Spirit was working in Psalm 95 and the rest of the Old Testament. The author also feels the liberty to omit some parts of Israel's history as led by the Spirit to do so (Thiessen 2013, 367-368).

This freedom to alter the text, however, was rooted in the belief that the same Spirit spoke then and now. From the author's perspective, the same Spirit inspired both then and now. The Holy Spirit brings one singular message, so there is continuity between the Testaments and not discontinuity.

In the perspective of Hebrews, the Holy Spirit illumines our interpretation of the Old Testament, so that we can understand the purpose of the “shadows” that preceded Christ. In Hebrews 9:8, the author claims that the Spirit revealed what is true because of the Son. The Spirit has “inside knowledge” in a sense and communicates to individuals what is true of the Son. As Emmrich states, “on the basis of Christ’s coming... the secret has been divulged” (Emmrich 2002, 64). Just as Jesus promised that the Spirit would guide believers into truth, so here in Hebrews, the Spirit is depicted as the “revealer of interpretive secrets” (Emmrich 2002, 66). According to Hebrews, the Spirit does not add, but reveals what was already there.

Purpose 4: Encouraging Perseverance

The Holy Spirit encourages the perseverance of the saints. Hebrews emphasizes the importance of persevering faith, so it is no surprise that the Holy Spirit would play a part in this sense.

To begin with, the Spirit initiates and calls to repentance. Speaking of the Spirit’s previous work, Hebrews 6:4 makes it clear that the Holy Spirit introduces unbelievers to the realm of salvation – i.e., “[enabling] the unsaved who come under the hearing of the gospel to have a certain appreciation of the blessedness of salvation” (Wuest 1962, 48). Then, the Holy Spirit continues to call prior to salvation as evidenced by the fact that the fallen “had been led into repentance by the Holy Spirit” (Wuest 1962, 49). In light of Hebrews 6:4-6, there is no denying that the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in calling men and women to repentance.

Furthermore, the act of listening serves as a motif throughout Hebrews, and the Holy Spirit speaks at crucial moments – namely, when a decision needs to be made. As mentioned previously, the Spirit calls believers in an active and present sense (Hebrews 3:7-11), and considering the overall argument of Hebrews, we must consider why this ongoing speech matters. In other words, to understand the purpose of the Holy Spirit, we must remember that the voice of the Spirit fits within the overall theology of Hebrews.

The Holy Spirit speaks through the use of Scripture and directs this speak to the “brothers” who are receiving this exhortation. In other words, the Spirit speaks from the Scriptures in order to help the believers to persevere in the faith. Emmrich makes a similar point when he states, “the ultimate purpose for this use of Scripture is to achieve an unmediated impact on the addressees.” (Emmrich 2002, 58). Said another way, the Holy Spirit does not speak for the sake of oration itself, but to call believers to a persevering faith.

This idea of “encouraging perseverance” has further support when we consider Hebrews 9:11-14. In what be “the central thought of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” we find a reference to the “eternal Spirit” who enables Christ in His journey (Emmrich 2002, 17). Christ did not offer Himself to God on His own, but through the Holy Spirit (διὰ πνεύματος αἰωνίου). Significantly, this is the only time in the New Testament that we observe the Holy Spirit’s involvement in the atonement (Emmrich 2002, 22-23).

In explaining this phrase within its surrounding context, Emmrich argues that the author of Hebrews draws upon the traditional Jewish view “that linked the office of the high priest with the Holy Spirit” (Emmrich 2002, 32). Emmrich demonstrates – through the use of the Old Testament and other Jewish literature – how the Jews viewed the Spirit

as sustaining the high priest “in the execution of his most critical cultic appointment” (Emmrich 2002, 32). In other words, it is *through* the Holy Spirit that Jesus is able to persevere in His task as High Priest.

In a similar manner, Holy Spirit enables and empowers believers. What is true of Jesus – that He was enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit – is also true of believers. The Spirit’s activity is neither an uncertainty nor a beckoning without any effectual power. The Spirit brings the result. In the context of Hebrews as a whole, therefore, the Holy Spirit works in order to enable believers in their journey.

In regards to perseverance, the Holy Spirit speaks with the end in sight. As mentioned, God and the Son speak elsewhere, but the Spirit is employed when delivering “direct speech to the audience.” For that reason, the Spirit can be considered an “eschatological orator” (Emmrich 2002, 61). The Holy Spirit does not speak to encourage a narrow sense of personal piety; the Holy Spirit speaks to ensure that believers stay faithful until the end.

Conclusion

As believers and as readers of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit should matter to us. As we read Hebrews, there are several reasons why we should pay attention to the Holy Spirit and His role in the exhortation to the Hebrews. Rather than overlooking the Holy Spirit in Hebrews, the limited and less descriptive references should cause us to investigate this subject even *more* than we currently do. As this paper concludes, it is important to note why all of this matters.

First of all, we must be able to read Hebrews within the context of the entire canon. Within church history, there have been some who have doubted the canonicity of Hebrews, and this is partly due to the anonymity of the author and the uniqueness of the subject matter. However, if it can be shown that the teachings of Hebrews share similar convictions as other New Testament texts, then we not only have further reason to accept Hebrews, but we can understand Hebrews more clearly.

Second, Hebrews provides a unique insight into the role of the Holy Spirit, especially when compared to other New Testament writings. Luke-Acts, for example, focuses on the ideas of baptism, salvation, and mission. Paul's epistles discuss the empowerment, fulfillment, and edification of the Holy Spirit.

In Hebrews, we see the four significant emphases of supporting the Son, speaking for God, inspiring and interpreting Scripture, and encouraging perseverance. This is not to say that these are different or incoherent from the rest of Scripture, but these purposes are very clearly in Hebrews. By studying these four aspects, we can increase our understanding of the Spirit and His activity in our lives.

For these reasons, we should not disregard Hebrews' contributions to pneumatology. Inspired by God, the author of Hebrews offers greater insight and further refines our understanding of the Holy Spirit, and for that reason, we should listen.

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