

Who is the Shepherd in Acts:
The Holy Spirit or Messiah Yeshua?

“Brother Saul, the Lord Yeshua has sent me.”
(Acts 9:17)

by Paul Sumner

In popular Christian writings, we sometimes see time divided into three eras. Each one is supervised by a different member of the Godhead:

God the Father: the Old Testament Era
God the Son: the New Testament Era
God the Spirit: the Present Era, to the End

A trinitarian model of historical time like this was taught by Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), founder of the Spiritual Franciscans. He said the age of the Father signified Law, that of the Son signified Grace, and that of the Spirit, “Spiritual Understanding.”

Some Protestants today see three ages superintended by the three members of the Trinity: Law (Father), Grace (Son), Church (Spirit). Some teachers call the New Testament book of Acts “The Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit.” They do so because in the first few years after the death and resurrection of Yeshua of Nazareth, it is “the Spirit” who guides the Yeshua-is-Messiah movement.

However, this isn’t sufficient, for when we look mindfully into Scripture, we read that Yeshua called himself “the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11,14). After his death and resurrection, he continued in the role: Peter called him “the Chief Shepherd” and “Shepherd and Guardian” of his people (1 Peter 5:4; 2:25).

¹ Supportive links to material on the hebrew-streams.org website are contained throughout this paper.

Noticeably, the Spirit is never called “shepherd” in the NT.

This study urges reading Acts with balance. Imbalance means extrapolating and gathering verses into a selective list that leads to misleading conclusions.

Consider evidence that the Holy Spirit is the shepherd of Acts.

- The Spirit said to Philip (8:29)
- The Spirit said to [Peter] (10:19)
- The Spirit told me (11:12)
- The Holy Spirit said (13:2)
- Sent out by the Holy Spirit (13:4)
- Forbidden by the Holy Spirit (16:6)
- The Holy Spirit has made you overseers (20:28)

These action verbs (said, told, sent, forbade, made) would indicate that the Holy Spirit has a will of his own and is directing the activities of his people. He is evidently the prime mover in Acts. Yet, if we build a Spirit-is-Shepherd doctrine on this list alone, we’d be imbalanced.²

Let’s assemble another list from Acts and consider what it tells us.

- Yeshua...[gave] orders [by the Holy Spirit] to the apostles (1:2)
- Saul...heard a voice...”I am Yeshua” (9:4-5)
- The Lord [Yeshua] said to [Ananias] in a vision (9:10)
- Brother Saul, the Lord Yeshua...has sent me (9:17)
- The Spirit of Yeshua did not permit them (16:7)
- The Lord opened [Lydia’s] heart to respond (16:14)
- The Lord said to Paul...”I am with you” (18:9)
- The Lord stood at his side and said, “Take courage” (23:11)

² See “The Holy Spirit (Pneuma Hagion) in the NT” in Ruach Studies portal at hebrew-streams.org.

Based on this list of action verbs, we see Yeshua communicating, directing, opening the hearts of and encouraging his followers. At times, he appeared materially, but also non-materially through his “Spirit” (Phil 1:19; 1 Peter 1:11).

In other words, it is the resurrected Messiah who is the shepherd. Using this list alone, we could name the volume “The Book of the Acts of the Risen Messiah.”

Honest Questions

- How many shepherds are there?
- Does the Holy Spirit communicate with disciples in a way unique from Yeshua?
- Does the Spirit have his own program he is furthering, which is distinct from Yeshua’s?
- Do the Spirit and Yeshua consult together and decide who will speak to whom, and when and why?
- Do they ever work in tandem?

The NT confronts us with a paradox.

We heard Yeshua say, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:14). But he did not say, “I am one of *two* good shepherds.” Further, he told us that the Spirit “will not speak on his own initiative [literally, speak from himself]” (John 16:13). The Spirit does not have a second divine voice, Yeshua says.

How do we reconcile the evidence for two shepherding voices? The Hebrew Scriptures provide principles for interpreting Acts and the rest of the NT.³

³ See “[Synonyms of Ruach](#)” and the concordance list “[Ruach in the Hebrew Scriptures](#)” in the Ruach Studies portal.

The Ruach before Messiah Arrived

In the Hebrew Bible, the Spirit of God (ruach elohim) is a descriptive term for his invisible and active presence. Ruach denotes moving air: breath, wind, storm; invisible, expressive power. God's ruach may operate in the physical world like divine wind or the invisible hand of a Potter who shapes his creation (Gen 1:2; Isa 44:3; Job 33:4).

His ruach is also his *communicating* presence within human beings, moving their souls, minds or wills to do his will (Ps 143:10).

Several times ruach is a synonym for lev (mind, heart). Lev can signify God's holy mind (what we might call his nature). A godly lev-ruach is what he wants to implant in everyone, in place of our native rebellious nature (Ezek 11:19; 36:26-27; Ps 51:10). Second Peter 1:4 says God wants us to "become partakers of the divine nature (theias phuseos)."

Whether the ruach is reshaping the external, material world or entering into and soaking the inner world of human psyches, the ruach elohim is a descriptive way to depict the active and near reality of God himself. It is synonymous for God being "with" someone (Exod 3:12; Isa 41:10; Ps 46:7).

Scripture also speaks of God's "Hand" (yad) working for him (Exod 15:6; Isa 59:1; Ps 80:17). His hand is an extension of himself, as a man's hand is his working, plan-implementing servant, or expressor of his will. In the same way, God's ruach is an extension of his creative and communicating word-forming-breath.

Ezekiel received spoken instructions from the Hand (3:22, 24). Nehemiah said the Good Ruach instructed and admonished the Mosaic generation in the wilderness (9:20, 30). David wrote of a triad of guiding "shepherds": ruach, panim (presence) and yad, all of whom "belong" to the LORD:

Where can I go from *your* Spirit?
Or where can I flee from *your* Presence?
Even there *your* Hand will lead me. (Psalm 139:1, 7, 10)

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The witness of the Hebrew Bible is that God's Hand and Spirit are himself, not separate beings.

The Ruach–Anointed Messiah

Following prophetic messianic patterns in Isaiah (11:2; 42:1; 61:1), the NT says, “God anointed [Yeshua] with Holy Spirit and power” (Acts 10:38; 4:27; Luke 4:18; John 3:34). The ruach was poured upon and soaked into him so that he bore the title “anointed one”: Mashiach (Hebrew), Messiah (Anglicized Aramaic), Christos (Greek).

His title-name *Christos* is used over 500 times in the Greek New Testament. This emphasis tells us he isn't merely the messiah, but is the “**Anointed–with–God's–Spirit–One.**”

Yeshua, in turn, conveys the Spirit his Father gave him to his followers *when he speaks*. “The words I have spoken are Spirit” (John 6:63). “He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive Holy Spirit’ ” (John 20:22).

Afterward, the Spirit “falls” or “comes” upon people when they *listen* to words of Yeshua or to Scripture or when they pray together (Acts 2:1–4; 10:44; 11:15). The conceptual interplay between breath and words, spirit and presence is Hebraic (Ezek 2:2; Isa 63:9,11). This brings light to our diverse passages in Acts.

Three Roles for the Resurrected Messiah

(1) Yeshua as Revealer–Teacher

The uniform depiction in the NT is that after his resurrection, Yeshua was “exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33) and now resides “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3; 8:1), where he “always lives to make intercession” for his followers (Heb 7:25).

This doesn't imply that after his ordeal on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of humankind, he entered into a well-deserved Shabbat rest. Just the

opposite. To sit next to God means to assume governing authority as God's prince, right-hand lord (cf. Ps 110:1; Matt 26:64; Acts 7:55-56).

Far from being absent, out of touch, or uninvolved with the development of the pan-national Messianic Body, Yeshua continued to be its guide.

I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you. (John 14:18)

He is frequently addressed as "Teacher (Hebrew, Rabbi)."

Yeshua promised he would "reveal" the Father to those whom he chose (Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22). To anyone who loved him, he promised, "I will disclose myself to him" (John 14:21). He makes known (exegesato, John 1:18b) both God and himself, as the Revealer.

Confirming this promise, Paul said he was "taught" the gospel "by revelation from Yeshua Messiah" (Gal 1:12). He likewise reminded fellow believers that they too "have been taught by [Messiah Yeshua]" (Eph 4:21). Peter testified that he knew his death was imminent because "the Lord Yeshua Messiah has made [it] clear to me" (2 Pet 1:14).

Among the apostles the resurrected Yeshua continued as their Teacher.

But what about the Spirit as Teacher? Yeshua said, "The Holy Spirit...will teach you...and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). Let's proceed.

(2) Truth and His Spirit

Yeshua boldly said that he was "the Truth" (John 14:6). He then linked himself with "the Spirit of truth" when he said of the Spirit,

You know him because he *abides* with you [*right now*]
and will be in [or, among] you. (John 14:17)

This he said in their presence before he died and rose from the dead.

In knowing Truth in the flesh the disciples would also know him as “Spirit” in days to come. John later alludes to this Truth= Spirit link when he writes: “the Truth who abides in us...will be with us forever” (2 John 2).

After Yeshua left physically, he, as “the Truth,” was living within his people and would walk among them henceforth.

(3) The Son Has All Authority

The records of Yeshua’s shepherding work in Acts rest on the fact that God gave him “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18).

This in turn is rooted in the Hebraic ideology found in passages such as Daniel 7, where the Ancient of Days (God) gives the “Son of Man” dominion to judge and rule “all peoples, nations, and men and women of every language” (vv. 13-14; Rev 5:9; 14:6).

Since his resurrection and enthronement “at the right hand of God” (1 Peter 3:22), Yeshua has been co-ruling with God. He does this both in heavenly realms and among humans on earth. Some future day, after he defeats his enemies (preeminently, death) he will “hand over the kingdom” to the God and Father (1 Cor 15:23-28; Ps 2:8; 110:1).

The gospels know of no one else who received such authority from God.

Matt 11:27a – All things have been handed over to me by my Father.

John 3:35 – The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

Matt 18:20 – Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst.

John 17:2 – You have given [your Son] authority over all mankind.

Rev 12:10 – The kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah have come.

Since the gospels and Revelation tell us about the Son’s bestowal with authority, it’s fair to connect Acts’ message that the holy, energizing Spirit the early messianic congregations experienced was the living presence of “Yeshua the

Nazarene,” the risen one (Acts 2:22-24). As he said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20).

Acts pointly contrasts Simon the Magician who wanted occult Spirit-Power, not the holy spirit of Yeshua (Acts 8:19). We learn that any miracle-working, revelation-giving “Spirit” that does *not* emboss the ownership mark – “belonging to Yeshua” (2 Cor 1:22) – on people is a counterfeit. It is “another Spirit,” Paul says (2 Cor 11:4), who will not (as John puts it), move humans to confess Yeshua is from God (1 John 4:3).

Influence or Person?

Orthodox Christian theologians object to calling the Spirit a divine power or an influence from God. They insist the Spirit is a “person,” with all the traits of personality. Acts validates this, but *not* the incomplete conclusion interpreters have drawn, that he is *another* person beside God and the Son.

For in the NT the Spirit is never an object of worship or prayer, as are God, the Father, and his Son. Yeshua doesn’t praise or speak to the Spirit (Matt 11:25-26), only to his Father. And angels praise only God and the Lamb (Rev 5:13).

The personality and shepherd role of the “Spirit” must be viewed using the entire contents of the NT. And we must note Paul’s statements:

“The Lord is the Spirit... We all...are being transformed...from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17, 18). ☞

“Communicators” in the Book of Acts

Philip Encounters: Angel, Spirit

8:26 – An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.”

8:29 – The Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.”

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8:39, 40 – The Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away...Philip found himself at Azotus.

In the Hebrew Bible a divine or heavenly “angel” [malakh] usually has a physical, often human-like, form. Angels can also be called “spirits” (1 Kgs 22:19-23; Ps 148:2). The angel of God’s “Presence” (malakh panim) in Isaiah 63 seems equivalent to his “Holy Spirit” (ruach qodesh, vv. 9-14).

Saul of Tarsus: Heavenly Voice, Yeshua

9:3-4 – Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Yeshua whom you are persecuting, but rise and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do.”

In the Hebrew Bible, it is common that when people see God’s angel they address him as “Lord” (Heb, Adon). This is a term of honor and reverence, not necessarily a sign the person knows it is God’s own physical manifestation (Josh 5:14; Judg 6:13; Dan 10:16; Rev 7:14). So too Paul does not, at this stage (9:4), know the identity of the “Lord” (Grk, kurios) he is talking with.

Ananias: Lord Yeshua

9:10 – Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Behold, here am I, Lord.”

9:17 – “Brother Saul, the Lord Yeshua, who appeared to you on the road...has sent me.”

Recaps of Paul’s vision: Yeshua

22:8 – “I am Yeshua the Nazarene.”

22:17-19 – “I fell into a trance, and I saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about

me.’ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in you.’ “
26:15-27 – “I am Yeshua...I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness...also to the things in which I will appear to you...I am sending you to open their eyes.”

Cornelius: Angel, Lord, Man

10:3-4 – About the ninth hour of the day [Cornelius the Roman centurion] saw in a vision an angel of God....And fixing his gaze upon him and being much alarmed, he said, “What is it, Lord?”
10:30 – Cornelius said, “Four days ago at this hour...a man stood before me in shining garments.”

Peter: Voice, Lord, Spirit

10:13 – A voice came to him, “Arise, Peter, kill and eat!” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord.”
10:19-20 – And while Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you. But arise, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings; for I have sent them myself.”

Peter: Angel, Lord’s Angel, Lord

12:7 – An angel of the Lord suddenly appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and roused him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And his chains fell off his hands.
12:11 – When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I know for sure that the Lord sent forth his angel and rescued me.”
12:17b – He described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison.

The Apostles: Spirit of Yeshua=Holy Spirit

1:2 – [Yeshua] had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom he had chosen.

16:6-7 – They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Yeshua did not permit them.

Paul & Fellow Apostles: Spirit, Lord Yeshua

13:2 – The Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

13:4 – So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia.

18:9-10 – The Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you.”

23:11 – On the night immediately following, the Lord stood at [Paul’s] side and said, “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to my cause in Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.”

Herod & the Pagan Sailors: The Angel of the Lord & of God

12:23 – Immediately an angel of the Lord struck [Herod] because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died.

27:21, 23 – Then Paul stood up in their [pagan sailors’] midst and said... “This very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me,” saying, “ ‘Do not be afraid, Paul...God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.’ ”

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