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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

The Role of the Spirit in the Apocalypse by Richard J. Bauckham

Since the Apocalypse is the one book in the New Testament which expressly claims to be a prophecy, a study of the leading part which it gives to the Spirit is bound to be of special interest and importance. Some years ago Dr. Bauckham read a paper on this subject to the New Testament Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research; we are glad to publish this revised version of it. Dr. Bauckham has been, since 1976, Lecturer in the History of Christian Thought in the University of Manchester.

The prominence of the Spirit is one of the characteristics which marks the Apocalypse out from the category of apocalyptic works in which its literary genre places it. The Spirit also plays an important role in the eschatological perspective of the book. The subject therefore merits some detailed study. We shall first consider the references to the Spirit in each of the three easily distinguishable categories into which they fall: the Spirit of vision, the Spirit of prophecy and the seven Spirits.

I. THE SPIRIT OF VISION

66 Under this heading we shall consider the four occurrences of the phrase "in the Spirit" (ἐν πνεύματι) (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). Though in each case the reference is to John's experience as a prophetic visionary, we shall find that the precise meaning is not the same in each case.

In early Christian literature the phrase ἐν πνεύματι commonly means "in the Spirit's control", with various connotations. Frequently it denotes temporary experience of the Spirit's power in prophetic speech or revelation,¹ without specifying any particular mode of the Spirit's operation. When Polycrates writes that one of the prophetess daughters of Philip "lived in the Holy Spirit"² and that Melito "lived entirely in the Holy Spirit",³ he presumably means that they enjoyed a life-long experience of prophetic inspiration. In *Didache* 11:7-9, however the phrase ἐν πνεύματι would seem to be a theologically neutral term for ecstatic speech, for the prophet who speaks ἐν πνεύματι must be assessed as true or false by other criteria than this. It may be that through indiscriminate use the phrase had lost the theological assessment originally implicit in it and become merely phenomenological in this

¹ Mt. 22:43; Lk. 1:7; 2:27; Acts 19:21; perhaps 2 Cor. 12:18; cf. also prayer in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18; Jude 20); worship in the Spirit (Jn. 4:23f.). Note also Acts of Paul 11:1 (Hennecke-Wilson II, p.383): "perceiving it in the Spirit". The phrase can be used of the Christian's permanent experience of the indwelling Spirit: Rom. 8:9.

² *Ap. Euseb., H.E.* 5:24:2.

³ *Ap. Euseb., H.E.* 5:34:5.

context, or it may be that the false prophet who speaks in ecstasy is considered inspired, but not by the Spirit of God (cf. I Jn. 4: 1-6). In either case the primary reference is here not to the source of inspiration but to the phenomenon of ecstatic speech.

It has sometimes been thought that ἐν πνεύματι in Revelation refers to John's human spirit (cf. Rev. 22:6): it would then indicate that his rapture into heaven (4:2) and transportation (17:3; 21:10) were "in the spirit" rather than "in the body". The phrase would be equivalent to Paul's ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος (2 Cor. 12:2) and John's experience similar to that in the *Ascension of Isaiah* (which will be discussed below).⁴ But we shall see that this cannot be the sense in Rev. 17:3; 21:10, and reference to the divine Spirit in 1:10; 4:2 therefore makes John consistent both with his own and with early Christian usage.

In 1:10; 4:2, the expression γενέσθαι ἐν πνεύματι, though not precisely attested elsewhere, is best understood as a technical term for the visionary's experience of "rapture" by the Spirit. It is probably to be taken as both phenomenological and theological, denoting both the visionary experience as such and the Spirit's authorship of it. For visionary experience Luke prefers the more strictly phenomenological γενέσθαι ἐν ἑκστάσει (Acts 22:11; cf. 10:10), with its opposite, γενέσθαι ἐν ἑαυτῷ (Acts 12:11), although Luke certainly understands the Spirit to be the agent of visions (Acts 2:17; 7:55). When a man ceases to be ἐν ἑαυτῷ and becomes ἐν ἑκστάσει he loses his outward consciousness. Instead the Spirit takes control of his faculties: he becomes ἐν πνεύματι. Thus Josephus describes Balaam prophesying as one who was no longer ἐν ἑαυτῷ but overruled by the divine Spirit (τῷ θεῷ πνεύματι νενικημένος).⁵ Similarly, according to Pseudo-Philo, "the holy Spirit which dwelt in Kenaz leapt upon him, and took away his bodily sense (*extulit sensum eius*), and he began to prophesy."⁶ Such language may suggest a kind of involuntary possession more readily associated with those pagan prophets of antiquity who became in a trance the totally passive mouthpieces of the god. Perhaps this is what Josephus intends, but it need not be the meaning of Pseudo-Philo. Certainly it was not John's experience: he remains a free individual agent throughout his

⁴ Cf. also 1 En.71, where Enoch's *spirit* is translated into heaven, and 1 Cor.5:3f.; Col.2:5 for metaphorical use of the idea that the spirit may be where the body is not. For examples of translation both in and out of the body, see D.S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London, 1964), pp.166-168. Acts 12:7-11 recounts a visionary experience ἐν πνεύματι (cf.12:11) which is no mere vision (12:9) but the medium of transportation in the body; cf. also Acts 8:39.

⁵ *Ant.* 4:118.

⁶ *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 28:6.

visions. But the visionary experience is nonetheless necessarily a suspension of normal consciousness. John was ἐν πνεύματι in the sense that his normal sensory experience was replaced by visions and auditions given him by the Spirit.

This experience of trance-like suspension of normal consciousness is vividly described in the Christian *Ascension of Isaiah*, a work which may date from only shortly after John's time:

While (Isaiah) was speaking by the Holy Spirit in the hearing of all, he (suddenly) became silent and his consciousness was taken from him, and he saw no (more) the men who were standing before him. His eyes were open, but his mouth was silent and the consciousness in his body was taken from him. But his breath was (still) in him, for he saw a vision. And the angel who was sent to make him behold it belonged neither to this firmament nor to the angels of the glory of this world, but had come from the seventh heaven. And the people who were standing around, with the exception of the circle of prophets, did not think that the holy Isaiah had been taken up. And the vision which he saw was not of this world, but from the world which is hidden from all flesh.⁷

68

This may be taken as an accurate phenomenological account of the kind of visionary experience John intends by the expression γενέσθαι ἐν πνεύματι. The *Ascension of Isaiah* goes on to interpret the prophet's experience as a real translation of his spirit out of the body through the seven heavens, thus opting for the latter of the two possibilities suggested by Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2. But such an interpretation is only possible of a vision which, like Isaiah's, can be understood as a realistic sight of the heavenly realms. In John's case, not only is he silent as to the bodily or spiritual nature of his translation to the heavenly court (Rev. 4), but also his visions are clearly not intended to be realistic: they are symbolic representations of happenings present and future, heavenly and earthly. In many cultures trances and also dreams have been understood as the absence of the spirit from the body, and this interpretation of visionary rapture is to be found in other apocalyptic works besides the *Ascension of Isaiah*,⁸ but there is no need to attribute it to John.

The expression γενέσθαι ἐν πνεύματι is used in somewhat different ways in Rev. 1:10 and 4:2, and it is difficult to find a translation which fits both occurrences. "I fell into a trance" (Caird) is the sense of 1:10, though it misses the agency of the Spirit. But this cannot be the sense of 4:2. The technical terminology of vision in 4:1 shows that 4:2 cannot be

⁷ Asc. Isa. 6:10-15, translated in Hennecke-Wilson II, p. 652.

⁸ See p. 67, n. 4 above. Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 167 n. 1, understands "Come up hither" (Rev. 4:1) as indicating a translation of the spirit; but in Rev. 11:12 the same words refer to bodily translation.

the beginning of a second trance: John is already ἐν πνεύματι. The context requires that 4:2 refer to John's rapture to heaven. This is an experience which the apocalyptic seers commonly described in more elaborate terms,⁹ and it may be significant that John prefers an expression which attributes it to the agency of the Spirit. "I was caught up by the Spirit" (NEB) is perhaps the most adequate translation. The two remaining occurrences of ἐν πνεύματι in Revelation (17:3; 21:10) are instances of transportation "in the Spirit", and will be discussed further below.

We must first enquire into the precedents in Jewish literature for John's understanding of the Spirit as the agent of visionary experience. His extensive use of Old Testament language and imagery and his writing within the literary genre of Jewish apocalyptic vision make such precedents particularly relevant. The idea of the Spirit of God as the agent of visionary experience is occasional in the Old Testament (Num. 24:2; cf. vv 4, 16f.), though probably implied in general references to ecstatic prophesy (Num. 11:24-29; I Sam. 10:6, 10). More important are the prominence of the Spirit (/wind) in Ezekiel's experiences of visionary rapture,¹⁰ and the specification of dreams and visions as the manifestation of the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit in Joel 2:28. In postcanonical Jewish literature the Spirit inspires prophetic speech¹¹ more commonly than visions (Sir. 48:24).¹² This is despite the frequency of visions in the Jewish apocalyptic works, but in line with the rarity of references to the Spirit in these works.¹³ But the apocalyptists do occasionally mention the Spirit as the agent of visionary transportation (2 Bar. 6:3; Hebrew Apocalypse of Elijah) and possibly once as the agent

⁹ E.g. 1 En. 14:8; 39:3; Test. Abraham 10; 2 En. 3:1; 3 Bar. 2:2.

¹⁰ Ezek. 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5; cf. also Elijah in 1 K. 18:12; 2 K. 2:16.

¹¹ 1 En. 91:1; Jub. 25:14; 31:12; Ps.-Philo, LAB 18:11; 32:14; 4 Ezra 14:22.

¹² Cf. also the Spirit inspiring dreams: Test. Abraham 4; Ps.-Philo LAB 9:10 (= Chron. Jerahmeel 42:8); perhaps Test. Levi 2:3. The Rabbinic expression "see by the Holy Spirit" (e.g. Leviticus Rabbah 9:9; 21:8; 37:3; other examples in J. Abelson, *The immanence of God in rabbinical literature* (London, 1912), pp. 259, 263, 265f.; W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1948), pp. 211, 213) seems to mean "perceive" mentally, by the inspiration of the Spirit, not literally to see a vision.

¹³ This rarity of allusion to the Spirit in intertestamental apocalyptic is probably to be attributed at least in part to the idea of the absence of the prophetic Spirit since the end of the Old Testament line of prophets. This restraint is not logical, since by their pseudonymity the apocalyptists placed their works fictitiously within the prophetic period, but it may nevertheless reflect a hesitancy to claim prophetic inspiration.

of translation into heaven (1 En. 70:2)¹⁴ — these are the ideas which recur in Rev. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10.

John's translation into the heavenly court (4:3) was the common experience of apocalyptic visionaries, but in the extant Jewish literature the only possible reference to the Spirit as the agent of such a translation is in reference to Enoch's final assumption: "he was raised aloft on the chariots of the Spirit" (2 En. 70:2, R. H. Charles's translation). It seems likely, however, that we should read "chariots of the *wind*". The terminology recalls Elijah's translation in a chariot of fire and a whirlwind (2 K. 2:11), and reflects the fact that on the basis of Elijah's experience the chariot of fire and the whirlwind had become common means of translation to heaven in the intertestamental literature.¹⁵ The two are probably identified in Sir. 48:9, and the chariot also became identified with the "chariot of the cherubim". It was on this chariot, God's own chariot, that Abraham (Testament of Abraham 9f.) and Adam (*Vita Adae* 25:3) experienced temporary raptures to heaven, and on this chariot Job's soul was taken up to heaven after his death (Testament of Job 52:9). *Vita Adae* 25:3 calls it "a chariot like the wind".¹⁶ These parallels make it probable that 1 En. 70:2 should be rendered "chariots of the wind". At the same time the ambiguity of wind/Spirit and the association of Spirit and fire might well have suggested the agency of the Spirit in translation to heaven, as they did to some early Christian writers.¹⁷ It may therefore be only an accident of survival that we have no such Jewish parallels to Rev. 4:2. What is certainly clear is that most apocalyptists preferred more picturesque descriptions.

Parallels to transportation ἐν πνεύματι (Rev. 17:3; 21:10) are

¹⁴ It should be noted that 2 Baruch is roughly contemporary with Revelation, the Hebrew Apocalypse of Elijah considerably later, and the Similitudes to Enoch quite probably contemporary or later. They may, however, be allowed as evidence of Jewish apocalyptic tradition not in this respect influenced by Christianity. I am not impressed by arguments for the Christian origin of the Similitudes of Enoch.

¹⁵ Whirlwind: 1 En.39:3f.; 52:1; cf. also 1 En.14:8, and G. Widengren, *Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets* (Uppsala, 1948), pp.108-10, with the passage there cited from the *Ginza*: "Winds, winds led away Shitil the son of Adam; storms, storms led him away, made him ascend . . ."

¹⁶ Cf. also 3 En.24; Apoc. Moses 38:3. Chariot, cherubim, winds, clouds were all associated on the basis of such texts as Pss.18:10; 68:4; 104:3; Ezek.1.

¹⁷ Asc. Isa.7:23: Christians "at their end ascend" to heaven "by the angel of the Holy Spirit"; Odes Sol.36:1: "I rested on the Spirit of the Lord and she lifted me up to heaven"; Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cant.* 10: "Like Elijah, our mind is taken up in the chariot of fire and carried through the air to the glories of heaven — by fire we understand the Holy Spirit."

somewhat easier to find. While Elijah's translation provided the model for descriptions of translation to heaven, Ezekiel's experiences were the model for accounts of visionary transportation from place to place. The language of Rev. 17:3; 21:10 should be compared with the following passages from Jewish and early Christian writings:

Ezek. 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5.

Bel 36 (Theodotion): "The angel of the Lord took Habakkuk by the crown of his head, and carried him by his hair, and with the blast of his breath (ἐν τῷ ῥοίῳ τοῦ πνεύματος αὐτοῦ) set him down in Babylon above the pit."¹⁸ 2 Bar. 6:3: "And lo, suddenly a strong spirit raised me and bore me aloft over the walls of Jerusalem."

Hebrew Apocalypse of Elijah: "The Spirit took me up and bore me to the South . . ."¹⁹

Gospel of the Hebrews (Origen, *In Joann.* 2:6): Jesus says: "Just now my mother the Holy Spirit took me by one of my hairs and carried me off to the great mountain Tabor." Hermas, *Visions* 1:3; 5:1: "a spirit took me and carried me . . ."²⁰

It should be noticed that, while in some of these passages it is by no means clear whether it is *the Spirit of the Lord* that is intended, in no case is the reference to the human spirit of the prophet. We must therefore dismiss that interpretation of Rev. 17:3; 21:10. The closest parallels to these verses of Revelation are Ezek. 37:1 and Bel 36, and these suggest that ἐν πνεύματι may be instrumental in Rev. 17:3; 21:10 (as it clearly is in Ezek. 37:1 LXX: ἐξήγαγέ με ἐν πνεύματι Κύριος). John's usage is seen to be the conventional terminology for visionary transportation, though again it might be significant that in 21:10, obviously modelled on Ezek. 40:2, he prefers ἐν πνεύματι to ἐν ὁράσει Θεοῦ, which is found in that verse of Ezekiel. His stress on the Spirit's agency in his visionary experience is a little stronger than appears to have been normal in the Jewish apocalyptists, but the terminology itself is stereotyped and unremarkable. It might even be thought that by introducing the interpreting angel in 17:3; 21:10 he has permitted apocalyptic stylistic conventions to mar the more expressive image of the wind which caught up Ezekiel, the sudden gust of mysterious divine power sweeping the prophet off his feet. But John's language probably conveyed as much to his readers, as did Bel 36, which appears almost comic today. John's language affirmed economically the divine source of his visions; but that

¹⁸ The reference to the angel's πνεῦμα is not in LXX.

¹⁹ M.R. James, *The Lost Apocrypha of the Old Testament* (London, 1920), p.60; for the full text see M. Buttenweiser, *Die hebräische Elias-Apokalypse* (Leipzig, 1897).

²⁰ The *Visions* of Hermas may be contemporary with Revelation: see Bauckham, "The Great Tribulation in the *Shepherd* of Hermas", *JTS* n.s.25 (1974), pp.28f.

this was more specifically the Spirit of Jesus appears not from the phrase ἐν πνεύματι alone but from its context in the Apocalypse as a whole.

John is much less interested than many other apocalyptists in describing psychologically his visionary experience.²¹ His purpose was not so much to describe how he received the revelation as to communicate it to his readers. Certainly that there are these particular four occurrences of ἐν πνεύματι and no others has literary rather than psychological significance. The parallel formulae of 17:3 and 21:10, reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision of the new temple, are clearly intended to highlight the antithesis of Babylon and Jerusalem: they are strategically placed for literary effect and theological significance, rather than to show that the Spirit played a special role at these points and not others. For the purpose of passing on the revelation John needed only to indicate that the whole revelation came to him ἐν πνεύματι — which was a theological claim as much as a psychological statement.

72

The claim must certainly be taken as indicating that real visionary experience underlies the Apocalypse, but should not be taken to mean that the Apocalypse is a simple transcript of that experience, as a man might recount his dreams on a psychiatrist's couch. That would be to take no account of John's evident literary skill or of his writing within the literary conventions of apocalyptic. Out of his visionary experience John has produced a work which enables the reader not to share the same experience at second-hand, but to receive its message transposed into a literary medium. For in distinction from such purely personal experiences as that of Paul (2 Cor. 12) who heard unutterable words in paradise, John's visions were *prophetic* experience. What he heard and saw was "the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place". Experiences of rapture to heaven and visionary transportation were not uncommon in Jewish apocalyptic mysticism,²² and the authentication of John's message therefore lies not in the experience as such but in the claim that it took place under the control of the Spirit and came to him through Christ from God.

In primitive Christianity prophetic vision ἐν πνεύματι was a manifestation of the outpouring of the Spirit in the last days (Joel 2:28):

²¹ For details of the apocalyptists' "psychic experience" see Russell, *op. cit.*, chap. 6. For the character of John's visionary experience, it may be noteworthy that, again unlike most apocalyptists, he does not speak of dreams or visions at night or waking from sleep (cf. Dan. 7; Zech. 1:8; 4:1; 2 Bar. 53:1; 4 Ezra 3:1; 1 En. 83:90).

²² See especially the unpublished Cambridge Ph.D. thesis by C.C. Rowland, "The influence of the first chapter of Ezekiel on Jewish and early Christian literature" (1975).

it is itself an aspect of the church's living in the age of eschatological fulfillment.²³ But like all the Spirit's activity it is also eschatologically directed; it orientates the church's life towards the *parousia*. Purely personal experiences like Paul's rapture to heaven do this on a personal level. John's visions were to do so for the seven churches of Asia in their specific historical circumstances in the reign of Domitian. They were to show the meaning in those circumstances of living towards the coming of Christ.

II. THE SPIRIT OF PROPHECY

In post-biblical Judaism, as is well known, the Spirit of God is especially the Spirit of prophecy, the Spirit which speaks through the prophets.²⁴ In Revelation also, the commentators commonly observe, the Spirit is almost exclusively the Spirit of prophecy. This observation, however, is not especially helpful without an understanding of the meaning of "prophecy" in Revelation. We shall see that it carries probably rather broader connotations than might at first be thought.

Parts of the Apocalypse are explicitly said to be the words of the Spirit: the seven messages to the churches; 14:13b; and 22:17a. The seven messages are "what the Spirit says to the churches", equated with the words of the exalted Christ.²⁵ The significance of 14:13b would seem to be that the words of the Spirit are the Spirit's response, speaking through John, to the heavenly voice. As John obeys the command to write the beatitude, the Spirit inspiring him adds an emphatic endorsement of it. In 22:17a **Ερχου* is certainly (*pace* the majority of commentators) addressed by the Spirit and the Bride not to him who thirsts but to Christ. It is the response to Christ's promise in 22:12, just as the same promise and response recur in 22:20. Again in all probability "the Spirit" is equivalent to the inspired utterance of the Christian prophets, here in the form of Spirit-inspired prayer.

Thus the Spirit of prophecy speaks through the Christian prophets bringing the word of the exalted Christ to his people on earth, endorsing on earth the words of heavenly revelations, and directing the prayers of the churches to their heavenly Lord. These are the special functions of

²³ On visionary experience in primitive Christianity, see J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London, 1975), pp.177-179, 213-216.

²⁴ See e.g., Sjöberg in *TDNT* VI, pp.381f.; D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings* (Cambridge, 1967), pp.227f.

²⁵ The refrain "He who has an ear, let him hear" (also in 13:9) would seem to be a prophetic catch-phrase, taken over by Christian prophets in imitation of Jesus' usage (Mark 4:9 etc.); cf. also Ezek.3:27.

the Christian prophets, whom Revelation certainly distinguishes as a special group within the churches,²⁶ and it has sometimes been appropriately noted that they bear comparison with the function of the Johannine Paraclete.²⁷ The doctrine of the Spirit in the Apocalypse has been held to be deficient in that the Spirit is *only* the Spirit of prophecy, rather than moral or life-giving power in Christian lives. There is a real distinction here from many other New Testament writers, but it should be remarked that the Spirit of prophecy is envisaged as having life-giving and life-changing effects. For the Spirit brings to the churches the *powerful* word of Christ, rebuking, encouraging, promising and threatening, touching and drawing the hearts, minds and consciences of its hearers, directing the lives and the prayers of the Christian communities towards the coming of Christ.

The living voice of the Spirit speaking once more through prophets marked out the Christian churches as the eschatological community in which the age to come was dawning; but Joel 2 promised that the prophetic Spirit in the last days was not to be the endowment of the select few only. It seems probable that the prominence of the prophets in the Apocalypse reflects not only the important role of those specially called to be prophets within the churches but also a conviction that the vocation of the church as a whole is prophetic.

In Rev. 19:10 we are told that "the witness of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy". The phrase μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ and related expressions are frequent in the book.²⁸ The "witness of Jesus" is the content of the Apocalypse itself (1:2), that is, the word of God attested by Jesus (22:20), by the angel who communicates it to John (22:16), and by John himself (1:2). In essence this word is also the word to which Jesus bore witness in his earthly life (1:5) and to which his servants now bear witness in the world (1:9 etc.). Witness in Revelation is primarily verbal (see especially 11:7; 12:11), though its *consequence* is expected to be martyrdom (2:13; 6:9; 17:6; 20:4). Those who bear the witness of Jesus are not just the prophets (19:10) but Christians in general (12:17). In 11:3, however, prophesy and bearing witness are equated; and "the witness of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy" (19:10). The characterization

²⁶ Rev. 11:18; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:9; cf. 17:6.

²⁷ E. g. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London, 1974), p. 76

²⁸ The phrase μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ occurs six times (1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10 *bis*; 20:4). Twice with ἔχω (12:17; 19:10) and three times linked with ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (1:2, 9; 20:4). Note also 6:9 ("the word of God and the witness they bore"); 12:11 ("the word of their witness"); 11:7 ("their witness"); μαρτυρέω in 1:2 (John "witnessed the word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ"); 22:16, 20; and five occurrences of μάρτυς (1:5; 2:13; 3:14; 11:3; 17:6).

of the Christian community as “those who bear the witness of Jesus” seems therefore to attribute a prophetic vocation to the whole community.²⁹

It may well be that a distinction is to be drawn between the special vocation of the Christian prophets to declare the word of God within the Christian community, and the general vocation of the Christian community as a whole to declare the word of God in the world.³⁰ The former will then subserve the latter. The spirit of prophecy speaks through the prophets to the churches and through the churches to the world. The use of the term “prophecy” in this latter sense is seen in 10:11, and especially in the story of the two witnesses (11:3-13), who represent the vocation of the whole church in its missionary role in the world. The whole church in the Apocalypse is endowed with the Spirit of prophecy, so that it may bear the witness of Jesus in the world.

III. THE SEVEN SPIRITS

The seven Spirits are the third and last category of references to the Spirit in Revelation: 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6. The question of their identity — angels or the Holy Spirit? — has been much discussed.³¹ On balance it seems probable that they are symbolic of the Spirit of God. In that case it is especially noteworthy that the relation of the Spirit to Christ is conveyed in 3:1; 5:6. In fulfillment of Isa. 11, a favourite messianic text in Revelation, Christ is endowed with the Spirit of the Lord,³² which is

²⁹ For the argument of this paragraph in more detail, see the excellent discussion in D. Hill, “Prophets and Prophecy in the Revelation of St John”, *NTS* 18 (1971-2), pp.411-414. Hill argues that μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ in Revelation always means “the witness which Jesus bore”, but since Christians cannot bear this witness without also bearing witness to Jesus, it may be that John intends the genitive to be sometimes objective as well as subjective.

³⁰ Hill does not make this distinction, but it clarifies his rather unsatisfactory discussion (*art.cit.*, pp.413f.) of the distinction between prophets and Christians in general. I am not wholly convinced by Hill’s argument that John’s prophetic role is unique, while the role of the church prophets would be to mediate his message to others (*ibid.*, pp.413f., 417f.): 1:3 surely implies that the Apocalypse was simply read aloud in the church meetings, without any need for mediation, and the natural sense of οὐαίν (22:16) is not the prophets but the hearers of the prophecy, the members of the seven churches addressed in 1:4, 9.

³¹ G. Dix, “The Seven Archangels and the Seven Spirits”, *JTS* 28 (1926); P. Joüon, “Apocalypse, 1, 4”, *RSR* 21 (1961); A. Skrinjar, “Les sept Esprits”, *Biblica* (1935); F.F. Bruce, “The Spirit in the Apocalypse”, in B. Lindars and S. Smalley (ed.), *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1973).

³² Later Christians exegetes found a “sevenfold” Spirit in Isa. 11:2, but this exegesis depends on LXX which John probably did not use. For the Messiah’s possession of the Spirit, cf. also Ps.Sol. 17:37; 1 En.49:3; 62:2; 1QSb 5:25; Targum Isa.42:1-4.

henceforth therefore the Spirit of Christ. Accordingly "the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole world" (Zech. 4:10) have become the eyes of the Lamb (Rev. 5:6).

Close attention must be given to John's somewhat varied use of the imagery of the vision of Zech. 4. The seven-branched golden lampstand (Zech. 4:2) becomes the seven golden lampstands of Rev. 1:20: the seven churches. The two olive-trees appear in Rev. 11:4 identified with two lampstands "which stand before the Lord of the earth" (cf. Zech. 4:14): the two witnesses. The seven eyes (Zech. 4:10) become the eyes of the Lamb. Probably also the seven torches which represent the seven Spirits in Rev. 4:5 are intended to recall the seven lamps (Zech. 4:2).

John seems to have taken the "seven" of Zech. 4:10 to refer back to the seven lamps (Zech. 4:2) and also to have taken Zech. 4:11-14 to imply that the Lord himself (for John, the Lamb) is the lampstand beside which the two anointed ones, the olive-trees, stand. The lampstand with its seven lamps is the Lord with his seven eyes.³³ And since the lesson of the vision is, "Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit" (Zech. 4:6), the lamps of the lampstand, the eyes of the Lord, are his Spirit. To reinforce the lesson of the Spirit's power John adds the additional figure of the seven horns.³⁴ Probably the ambiguous phraseology of Rev. 5:6 means that both the horns and the eyes represent the seven spirits.³⁵

76

But how are the "seven Spirits of God" with which the Lamb is endowed "sent into all the earth"? In heaven they burn before the throne of God (1:4; 4:5), like the seven-branched lampstand which burned "before the Lord" (Ex. 40:25) in the earthly temple. But as the horns and the eyes of the Lamb, they are active through the Lamb's followers, those in whom the Spirit of prophecy maintains the witness of Jesus in the world. They too are not only olive-trees, anointed with the Spirit, but also lampstands (1:20; 2:1, 5; 11:4) burning with the light of the Spirit in the world. The reference to the seven Spirits in Rev. 5:6 is therefore not to Christ's omnipotence independent of his church; it is rather through those whom his death ransomed for God (5:9) that the Spirit of God goes out into all the earth. We should notice again that the

³³ The major reason why this interpretation is not commonly followed today is that it seems natural to suppose that the olive trees are the source of the oil for the lamps: but 4:2 is hardly clear and the interpretation I suppose John to have adopted is understandable especially in view of 4:10.

³⁴ For the Spirit's power in Zechariah is opposed to the horns of the nations (Zech. 1:18), and the Lamb's power in Revelation is opposed to the horns of the dragon and the beasts (Rev. 12:3; 13:1, 11). For the horns of the Messiah, cf. also 1QSb 5:26; 1 En. 91:38.

³⁵ Cf. Bruce, *art. cit.*, p. 334, n. 6.

ministry of Christ by the Spirit in the churches (“walking among the lampstands”, 2:1) is directed towards their effectiveness as his witnesses in the world (11:3f.). The messages of the Spirit speaking through the Christian prophets to the churches are intended to give the churches themselves “power to prophesy” (11:3).

IV. THE SPIRIT AND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

So we see that the varied terminology of the Spirit’s activity in Revelation reflects the various aspects of “prophecy” broadly understood. The Spirit mediates the activity of the exalted Christ in and through his church, declaring Christ’s word to his people in vision and prophetic oracle, leading the prayers of his people, inspiring his people’s missionary witness to the world. In all of this the Spirit’s role is eschatological, constituting the Christian churches the community of the age to come. As it is from the victory of Christ in his death and resurrection that this eschatological outpouring of the Spirit into the world derives (Rev. 5:6), so it is towards the fulfillment of this victory in the eschatological future that the Spirit’s activity in and through the churches is directed.

77

This eschatological role of the Spirit in Revelation is not simply that of predicting the events of the End. The purpose of John’s prophecy was to enable the Christians of the seven churches to bear the witness of Jesus, and this could only be done by directing their sight and their lives toward the coming of the Lord. The point was not so much to enable them (or us) to foresee the future as to enable them to see their present from the perspective of the future.³⁶ The implications of this may be illustrated from an examination of two passages in which the Spirit is specifically mentioned.

(a) *Rev. 22:17*

To understand this verse we must be careful about identifying the Bride. John’s images are rarely simple allegories, standing for empirical historical entities easily identified (Babylon = Rome, Bride = Church etc.). The Bride is not the sum of the Christian congregations observable in the world at the end of the first century: the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and the rest. The Bride is the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from God (21:2), the church at the End. The Bride is the church which the Lamb when he comes will find ready for his marriage, arrayed in the fine linen of righteous deeds

³⁶ Cf. E.S. Fiorenza, “The eschatology and composition of the Apocalypse”, *CBQ* 30 (1968), pp.561-563.

(19:7f.). The Bride is the church seen from the perspective of the *parousia*.

Very different were the seven churches addressed in the Apocalypse. The "soiled garments" of the Christians at Sardis (3:4) and the "nakedness" of the Christians at Laodicea (3:17) contrast with the pure linen of the Bride. The general unpreparedness for the Lord's return at Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis (2:5, 16; 3:3) contrasts with the Bride's ardent prayer for the Bridegroom's coming (22:17). The contrast is not between "visible" and "invisible" churches; it is not that those few at Sardis who had not "soiled their garments" belonged to the Bride while the others did not. The contrast is between present and eschatological reality, between the churches as they are and the churches as they must become if they are to take their place at the eschatological nuptial banquet. Every hearer of the prophecy is "invited to the marriage feast" (19:9); all the churches are summoned by the voice of prophecy to become the Bride.

78 The church which prays for the Lord's coming in 22:17 is therefore the eschatological church, the church which will be at the *parousia*. In this prayer it is led by the voice of the Spirit speaking through the prophets, for the function of the Spirit is to direct the church towards their eschatological reality. The hearer of the prophecy is then invited to join in this prayer of the Spirit and the Bride, and as he joins his own voice to that of the Spirit the eschatological church is becoming present reality already — in the congregations at Ephesus, Smyrna or wherever. By eliciting this response the Spirit is making ready the Bride for the Bridegroom's return.

The prayer for the *parousia* is at the heart of Christian living according to the Apocalypse. Christian life must be lived under the Spirit's direction towards the eschatological future out of which the Lord is coming. Commentators have great difficulty with 22:17, for if the "Come" of the first two clauses is addressed to Christ, the transition to an invitation to the thirsty to come, in the third clause, is thought painfully abrupt. It is in fact a natural progression of thought.³⁷ The

³⁷ H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London, 1907), p. 310, speaks of "a remarkable change of reference". But in any case Didache 10:5 supplies good evidence of the early church's ability to set side by side a prayer for the Lord's coming and an invitation to the believer to "come". This is true whether or not Didache 10:5 is dependent on Rev. 22. If, as some think, both passages reflect common liturgical tradition, then this is possible evidence, almost the only tangible evidence, for those who argue that Rev. 22 presupposes a eucharistic context. This is quite appropriate — the Eucharist symbolizes the orientation of Christian life towards the *parousia* — but ultimately not provable.

man who joins the Spirit's prayer for the Lord's coming is directing his life in faith towards that promise. The invitation to the thirsty is also a call towards the eschatological future. For the promise of the water of life without price³⁸ belongs in the new creation (21:6): the river of the water of life flows through the street of the New Jerusalem (22:1f.). There is no taking the water of life without a turning towards the eschatological future.

There can be no question that 22:17c really does mean that the water of life, the life of the new creation, is available to men in the present. But it is nonetheless the life of the new creation, coming to men from the future. Entry into the New Jerusalem is not a possibility with which a man's past provides him; with his first taste of that city's water he is beginning to live out of the new possibilities of the future which the pure promise of God opens before him. The focus of that promise is the Lord's "I am coming soon", three times repeated in this epilogue to the Apocalypse (22:7, 12, 20), and the promise is also the Lord's invitation into the New Jerusalem.

(b) *Rev. 11:3-13*

The reference to the Spirit here is in 11:8, where πνευματικῶς does not mean "allegorically" or "figuratively", the usual translations. Rather it refers to Spirit-given perception (cf. J. B. Phillips' translation: "by those with spiritual understanding").³⁹ The great city is called Sodom and Egypt through the Spirit of prophecy, who thus makes plain its real character as a city ripe for judgement and a land from which God's people are redeemed.

The story of the witnesses is to be read neither as simple prediction (history written in advance) nor as allegory (history of future history written in code symbols) nor even as parable. Rather it is a story through which the churches are to perceive imaginatively, through the perspective granted them by the Spirit, their vocation and their destiny. Like 22:17, the story functions as a summons towards the eschatological future. It is not so much a story which predicts the future as a story which creates the future.

Scholars have commonly been too preoccupied with source analysis

³⁸ Rev. 22:17c is parallel to Jn. 7:37f., and the evangelist in 7:39 identifies the living water as the Spirit; but since the author of the Apocalypse does not make such an identification, I have restricted my discussion of the Spirit in the Apocalypse to the author's own use of the term.

³⁹ Cf. E. Schweizer in *TDNT* 6, p.449 n.819.

and with finding individual identities for the witnesses,⁴⁰ and in so doing have obscured the wide-ranging reference of the story to many Old Testament situations of prophetic witness and of conflict between God's witnesses and the world. The following figures have all contributed to the imagery:

Joshua and Zerubbabel, standing for the hope of a New Jerusalem amid the ruins of the city which the Gentiles had trampled;⁴¹

Elijah, who procured three and a half years of drought and called down fire from heaven to consume his enemies, and whose prophetic ministry ended in assumption;

Moses, who turned the Nile to blood and smote the earth with every plague, and according to first-century belief was taken up to heaven in a cloud;⁴²

Jeremiah, in whose mouth God's word was a fire to devour the people, and traditionally a martyr;⁴³

Isaiah, traditionally martyred by his own people because he "called Jerusalem Sodom";⁴⁴

the Maccabean martyrs, on whom the "beast" Antiochus made war.⁴⁵

The story therefore provides a paradigm of faithful prophetic witness. Echoing many a real historical precedent it portrays the power of the true prophet's message, his rejection and martyrdom, and his hope of eschatological vindication issuing both in judgement, and also, more prominently, in salvation for the world which rejected and triumphed over him (11:13). This is the pattern for the churches, who are called to the prophetic ministry of the last days. Or perhaps we should express the message as an *a fortiori*: how much more is this the pattern for those whose witness is a greater thing even than Moses' or Elijah's and against whom the beast musters forces worse than those of Antiochus? The story functions as a call to the churches to fulfill this pattern in their own witness. It is not so much prediction as potential prediction, fulfilled to

80

⁴⁰ This is not the place for detailed argument with other interpretations of this much discussed passage. M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St John* (London, 1940), pp.174-188, 191-206, remains one of the most useful expositions.

⁴¹ Rev.11:2, 4; cf. Zech.4.

⁴² Moses and Elijah do not here, as commonly alleged, represent the law and the prophets; Moses appears as prophet. For Moses' assumption in a cloud, see Josephus, *Ant.* 4.8.48. For the 3½ years traditionally assigned to Elijah's drought, see Lk. 4:25; Jas.5:17.

⁴³ Rev.11:5; cf.5:14. According to *Paralipomena Jeremiou* 9:14, Jeremiah was martyred and rose again after three days, but this is probably a Christian elaboration. The tradition of Jeremiah's martyrdom, however, was well established in first-century Jewish tradition: C. C. Torrey, *The Lives of the Prophets* (Philadelphia, 1940); J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* I (London, 1971), p.280, n.2.

⁴⁴ Rev.11:8; cf. Asc. Isa. 3:10 (probably pre-Christian Jewish); Isa. 1:9f.

⁴⁵ Rev. 11:3, 7; cf. Dan. 7:21, 25; 4 Macc. 11:8.

the extent that it secures the churches' identification with the witnesses of the story. It is primarily a summons and a promise, which belong inseparably together, a dramatized version of the Lord's word to the church at Smyrna: "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (2:10).

The role of the Spirit in directing Christian life towards the *parousia* and the role of the Spirit in inspiring those who bear the witness of Jesus come together in this story which crystallizes one of the major lessons of the prophecy. Bearing the witness of Jesus is a matter of sharing "in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance" (1:9): it leads to suffering, rejection and death. To a citizen of Pergamum who viewed σαρκικῶς the martyrdom of Antipas, this way was merely the way to death; and so according to the beast's way of seeing the world the death of the witnesses was his victory (11:7). But viewed πνευματικῶς from the perspective of the *parousia*, it is the way to life.⁴⁶ Faithful bearing of the witness of Jesus depends upon an outlook formed by the hope of the *parousia*, in the light of which martyrdom is called the *martyr's* victory (12:11; 5:2). The eschatological perspective alone creates the paradox in which the invitation to new life is also, so it must have seemed in Asia in the 90s of the first century, a summons to death.

81

There is also a further dimension to the story of the witnesses. It is clear that it follows not only precedents from Old Testament history but also rather more closely the history of Jesus, who shared the fate of the prophets before him. The witnesses' resurrection after three and a half days (an apocalyptic modification of "on the third day") and their ascension in a cloud deliberately recall Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The phrase "where their Lord was crucified" (11:8) is a strikingly matter-of-fact historically specific statement, quite uncharacteristic of this or other visions of the Apocalypse.⁴⁷ It resembles the equally specific reference to the martyr Antipas (2:13).⁴⁸ Despite appearances, John's prophetic imagination does not really carry him away from the world of concrete human existence, or at least does so only to bring him back to it with new Spirit-given perception. The story of the witnesses is rooted in the specific historicity of Jesus' crucifixion and is intended to take root in the lives of those who bear the witness of Jesus in the streets of the cities of Asia.

In this way the story permits a vivid representation of the faithful witness's identification with Jesus in his witness and his death, and also

⁴⁶ Rev. 11:11 quotes Ezekiel's vision of resurrection: Ezek. 37:10.

⁴⁷ Cf. Rev. 5:5f. for a symbolic version of Jesus's death.

⁴⁸ Jesus and Antipas are the only post-Old Testament figures (apart, of course, for himself) to whom John refers by their personal names.

in his vindication. The pivotal role which the history of Jesus plays in the Apocalypse does not detract from, but rather reinforces, the eschatological outlook of the book. If there were Jewish apocalyptists for whom the corollary of eschatological hope was the meaninglessness of present existence, John betrays no trace of affinity with them. The present takes its meaning from the redemption already accomplished (1:5f.; 5:9) which guarantees the future hope, defines its content (the coming Lord is Jesus who was crucified) and also provides the model for positively living towards the Lord's coming meantime. The followers of the Lamb must follow his way through death to life, and in so doing they may know that it is the way through death to life primarily because it was so for him. In their knowledge of the risen and exalted Jesus they have a preview of the perspective from the *parousia*.

Finally we must ask about the "great city" which the Spirit identifies as Sodom and Egypt (11:8). The phrase "where their Lord was crucified" identifies it as Jerusalem, as does also the size of the city (11:13).⁴⁹ Yet the "great city" is John's otherwise consistent terminology for Babylon.⁵⁰ The commentators are consequently often perplexed.

82

We need to remember again that the Spirit's identifications are not simple allegories, but define present situations seen in eschatological perspective.⁵¹ In its rejection of Jesus Jerusalem forfeited its role as the holy city (11:2), which John therefore transfers to the New Jerusalem, and called down judgement on itself. But as the pattern of Jesus' witness and rejection is extended across the empire in the person of his witnesses, so the cities of the empire and especially Rome herself played Jerusalem's role — not her true vocation as the holy city, which she forfeited, but her more characteristic role as the harlot city (Isa. 1:21) and Sodom (Isa. 1:9f.). Jerusalem where the Lord was crucified behaved in that action just as every other city in the world was to behave, became in a sense the model for the rest. So on Jerusalem, the murderer of the prophets, came "all the righteous blood shed on earth" (Mt. 23:35); while in Babylon the great city "was found the blood of prophets and

⁴⁹ Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1:22.

⁵⁰ Rev. 14:8; 17:18; 18:2, 10, 16, 18f., 21. The term "the great city" is only very occasionally used of Jerusalem outside Rev. (Sib. 5:154, 226, 412; cf. Testament of Abraham 2, of the heavenly Jerusalem; Coptic Apoc. Elijah 3:31 is almost certainly dependent on Rev. 11). These instances can hardly count against the force of John's own usage. I think that in 11:8 the great city is Jerusalem, but that John has deliberately used this term because it was his term for Babylon.

⁵¹ In relation to this chapter the point is well argued by P.S. Minear, "Ontology and Ecclesiology in the Apocalypse", *NTS* 12 (1965-6) pp. 89-105.

saints, and of all who have been slain on earth'' (Rev. 18:24). In this way the judgement of Jerusalem (11:13) and the judgement of Babylon (16:18f.) can be assimilated in the imagery of the Apocalypse.

The identification of the city therefore belongs to the pattern set out by the story of the witnesses. It is set in Jerusalem because Jerusalem's treatment of the prophets and especially of Jesus is paradigmatic: this is what the witnesses of Jesus may expect from the world. Any and every city in whose streets the corpses of the witnesses lie is *thereby* identified, its character seen in the Spirit, as Sodom and Egypt. The value of this identification as part of the Spirit's message to the churches is that it enables them to characterize situations of conflict in their true perspective, to distinguish appearances from underlying reality, to see through the apparent success of the hostile world and the apparent failure of faithful witness. This somewhat detailed study of one passage in Revelation may serve to illustrate how the apocalyptic imagery of the book functions as a vehicle of the eschatological perception which the Spirit imparts through the prophets.