

THE PNEUMATOLOGY OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

CONFUSED, CARELESS, CAVALIER OR CAREFULLY CRAFTED?¹

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Dissertation Summary

It is the majority position that Hebrews has little to add to NT pneumatology (see the thesis section §1.1). However, that is far from the case. Indeed, on all seven occasions that the author of Hebrews refers to the Spirit (2:4; 3:7; 6:4; 9:8; 9:14; 10:15; 10:29), he does so using language and concepts that are unique in the NT. For instance, the phrase ‘Spirit of grace’ (10:29) is a NT *hapax* and ‘eternal Spirit’ (9:14) is a biblical *hapax*.

While exploring these seven texts it became apparent that our author must have had a rich and developed understanding of the person and work of the Spirit to be able to write as he did. This underlying pneumatology was discoverable by a ‘back reading’ of his divine-*πνεῦμα* texts and is revealed to be at least as significant as that found anywhere else in the Scriptures.

To demonstrate this, it was necessary to show that Hebrews’ divine-*πνεῦμα* texts are neither incidental nor accidental. To that end, the discussion in §1, particularly §§1.4.5; 1.5, is important in showing that the author is not only creative but also careful, precise, and deliberate in his use of language (including in his use of *πνεῦμα*). The thesis demonstrates that, statistically, the word *πνεῦμα* itself is a significant term in the letter. However, it is important to recognise that, as distinctive and/or unique as Hebrews is, nonetheless, the author and letter stand within the mainstream of early Christianity. This is

¹ Alan K. Hodson, ‘The Pneumatology of the Letter to the Hebrews: Confused, Careless, Cavalier or Carefully Crafted?’ (PhD thesis, University of Chester, 2019). Supervisor: Revd Dr Keith Warrington.

demonstrated in §2. Specifically, in the same way as Paul and the other NT writers seek to interpret the OT in the light of the Christ event, so too our author reads the OT Christologically (§§2.3–2.6). Furthermore, his many OT ‘echoes’ would suggest that author and congregation ‘had studied the Old Testament together’.² Consequently, the import of §§1–2 is in showing our author to be deliberate in his choice of language, part of the mainstream of early Christianity and theologically creative, distinctive, and astute.

Since our author draws much of his ‘raw material’ from the OT, §3 addresses various themes or issues relating to the Spirit in the OT and intertestamental ‘Judaisms’ which impinge on more than one of Hebrews’ divine-πνεῦμα texts. (This prevents unnecessary repetition when the individual ‘Spirit texts’ are discussed.) These issues include the Spirit as ‘proof of presence’ (§3.2), ‘bringer of revelation’ (§3.3), and the perceived or actual ‘cessation of the Spirit’ in the intertestamental period (§3.4).

§§4–7 comprise the exegesis of the seven divine-πνεῦμα texts. In these chapters it was necessary to lay a detailed foundation before examining the text of Hebrews. Many commentators fail to see the significance of Hebrews’ pneumatology, dismissing the Spirit texts as ‘traditional’ or ‘incidental’ (§1). The amount of preliminary discussion in each of these sections varies according to the degree to which commentators dismiss (or disregard) the pneumatological significance of the text(s) under discussion.

§4 is a discussion of the Spirit and Scripture. The Spirit both speaks (λέγω) words of Scripture (3:7) and testifies (μαρτυρέω) from Scripture (10:15) using words elsewhere described as God’s words to the congregation. Elsewhere in the NT, when the Spirit ‘speaks’, he does so through human agents (§§4.3–4.4). However, in Hebrews he speaks directly to the hearers without the need for an intermediary (§4.5). Furthermore, the Spirit interprets (δηλώω) Scripture (9:8), and this is the only place in the NT where the Spirit is said to function as hermeneut (§§4.5.3; 8.3.1). Indeed, the thesis shows that, as the ‘speaking hermeneut’ who reveals the significance of the OT texts for the new covenant people, the Spirit speaks not only *for* God but *as* God.

² T. F. Glasson, “‘Plurality of Divine Persons’ and the Quotations in Hebrews 1:6ff”, *NTS* 12 (1966): 272.

§5 examines the two phrases ‘distributions (μερισμός) of the Spirit’ in 2:4 and becoming μέτοχοι of the Spirit (6:4). Both the concept of believers becoming μέτοχοι of the Spirit (6:4) and the description of God validating the gospel message by ‘distributing’ (μερισμός) the Holy Spirit to the followers of Christ (2:4) are unique to Hebrews. The Pentecost narrative in Acts 2:1-4 and the distribution of the Spirit in Hebrews 2:4 are closely parallel in both language and emphasis. In Hebrews 2:4 the Holy Spirit is the gift who is distributed in accordance with the will of God as part of his validation of Christ and the gospel message. The presence of the Spirit, therefore, authenticates both the new covenant and each member of the new covenant community. However, as 6:4 shows, the Spirit acts towards the followers of Christ not simply as authenticator but as an enabling and close presence throughout life. A close examination of the word μέτοχοι shows that it is best translated as partners. The word is used in Hebrews to describe the relationship that believers enjoy with one another (we are partners with one another in a heavenly calling, 3:1) and with Christ (3:14). The thesis argues that the intimate, tangible, and complete partnership that believers enjoy with Christ is also the experience that believers are to enjoy with the Holy Spirit.

§6 discusses 9:14, showing that the designation ‘eternal Spirit’ refers to the Holy Spirit. In Hebrews ‘αἰώνιος’ always has the idea of ‘now and not yet’ – the blessings and/or life of heaven breaking into time. However, ‘eternity’ is properly an attribute of God alone and it is shown that the designation ‘eternal Spirit’ points to the Spirit’s ‘Godness’. Furthermore, the context of 9:14 indicates that the Spirit is Christ’s eternal partner in the drama of redemption. This too is unique in the NT.

§7 focuses on 10:29 and the phrase ‘the Spirit of grace’. The word ‘grace’ is important in Hebrews and not only occurs in the NT *hapax* ‘Spirit of grace’ but in the unique designation ‘throne of grace’ (4:16). It is by the grace of God that Christ ‘tasted death for everyone’ (2:9) and those who belong to him can approach the throne of grace to receive ongoing strengthening for their pilgrimage (4:16). The Holy Spirit of grace applies to believers all the initial and ongoing benefits won by Christ’s sacrificial death. Furthermore, the parallelism in 10:29 puts ‘the Son of God’, ‘the blood of the covenant’, and ‘the Spirit of grace’ on the same footing and is, therefore, a powerful pneumatological designation.

After undertaking a close examination of all seven divine-πνεῦμα texts in Hebrews this thesis concludes that Hebrews has a significant, developed, and unique pneumatology (§8). The author portrays the Spirit as personal, eternal, and divine. He is actively involved in the atonement and the new covenant, showing the need for such a covenant and providing a partnership with each member of the new covenant community such that the Spirit enables that which the covenant requires. The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in Hebrews. Both author and congregation experienced him as God, co-equal with the Father and the Son. In fact, Hebrews' underlying pneumatology displays what might be called 'Trinitarian coinherence'.