Who is Shepherd: 
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, until the End

The church father Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390) outlined this chronological trinitarian model of doctrinal development. In the Middle ages, Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), founder of the “Spiritual Franciscans, promoted this pattern. He said the age of the Father signified Law, that of the Son signified Grace, that of the Spirit, “Spiritual Understanding.” Some Protestants today propose a similar triadic pattern: Law (Father), Grace (Son), Church (Spirit).


However, when we look closely into Scripture, 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). The Holy Spirit is never called a shepherd.

What we find is that the “Spirit” who is doing the guiding and gathering of the Messianic assembly is the “Spirit of Yeshua” (Acts 16:7). Yeshua as Spirit, in his Spirit, among his people by Spirit.

This study illustrates how to read Acts with balance. In contrast, imbalance means extrapolating and gathering verses into an exclusive list that leads to misleading conclusions.

Consider, for example, the 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) suggests that the Holy Spirit has a will of his own and is directing the actions of people. He is (evidently) the prime mover in Acts. But if we built a doctrine on this list alone, we’d be imbalanced.

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

• 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 (23:11)

Based on this list, we see Yeshua communicating, directing, opening the hearts of and encouraging his followers. 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.”

But would that not be imbalanced, if we ignored the Holy Spirit list? How do we reconcile this mixed report and gain balance?

Honest Questions

How many shepherds are there?

Does the Holy Spirit communicate with disciples in a unique way 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?

These questions are logical—if we presume the two lists represent two distinct shepherds. That is, if we think Yeshua and the Spirit are two different persons in the Godhead. (This is the orthodox Christian view.) But is it the view of the author of Acts?

Yeshua said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:14). He didn’t say, “I am
one of two good shepherds.” He also said the Spirit "will not speak on his
own initiative [or, of his own accord, or, his own authority]" (John 16:13).

How do we reconcile the evidence for Two Shepherding Voices? The
Hebrew Scriptures provide torot (principles) for interpreting Acts, and the
rest of the NT.

(See the supporting material in Synonyms of Ruach and the concordance
list Pneuma in the N.T.)

Ruach before Messiah

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, powerful.

God’s ruach may operate in the physical world like divine wind or the
invisible hand of the Potter who shapes his creation. His ruach is also his
presence within human beings, moving their souls, minds or wills to do his
will.

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). [Note 2 Peter 1:4: “…that you might
become partakers of the divine nature (theias phuseos).”]

Whether the ruach is reshaping the outer world or entering and soaking
into 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 often speaks of his “Hand” working for him (Exod 15:6; Isa
59:1; Ps 80:17). His hand is an extended part of him, as a man’s hand is his
working servant. In the same way, God’s ruach is an extension of himself:
his creative and communicating breath. The Spirit is God himself, not
someone other than God.

The Ruach-Anointed

Fulfilling prophecies from Isaiah (11:2; 42:1; 61:1), the NT says, “God
anointed [Yeshua] with Holy Spirit and power” (Acts 10:38). The ruach
was poured upon and soaked into him so that he bore the title “anointed
one”: Mashiach (Hebrew), Messiah (Anglicized Aramaic).

The “Anointed One” in turn is closely identified by his “Spirit” (Grk,
pneuma). He anoints his followers with the Spirit he received from God. He conveys it to them primarily when he speaks ("My words are Spirit"; John 6:63).

Frequently, the Spirit "falls" or "comes" upon people when they listen to words of Yeshua or to Scripture or when they pray together (Acts 10:44; 11:15). The conceptual interplay between breath and words, spirit and presence is a very Hebraic one, and it puts light on the Messiah-Spirit (PDF) link in Acts.

At this point it’s important to look at two elements of NT teaching about Yeshua.

(1) Yeshua as Revealer

The uniform view of the NT is that after his resurrection, Yeshua was "exalted to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33).

This didn’t imply that he had entered into a well-deserved Shabbat rest. Just the opposite. To sit next to God means to assume office as God’s prince or right-hand CEO. [See At the Right Hand (PDF).] Far from being absent, out of touch, uninvolved with the development of the pan-national Messianic Body, Yeshua continued to be their guide.

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

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). Messiah makes known both God and himself.

Confirming this promise, Paul said he was “taught” the gospel “by revelation from Yeshua Messiah” (Gal 1:12). And he 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).

So among the apostles the resurrected Yeshua was 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).

Truth and His Spirit

Yeshua boldly said that he himself 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 you. (John 14:17)

This was before Yeshua left. In knowing Truth in the flesh they also knew him in the spirit. John later alludes to this link, but he switches terms and verbs: “the Truth who abides in us…will be with us forever” (2 John 2). After Yeshua left, the Truth was living in his people and would walk with them henceforth.

(2) Yeshua Has All Authority

The records of Yeshua’s communications in Acts rest on the assumption 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 of every language.”

Since his resurrection and enthronement “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3), Yeshua has been ruling as God’s governing Lord. At some future day, after he defeats his enemies, including death, he will “deliver up the kingdom” to God (1 Cor 15:23-28; Ps 2; 110:1).

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.

The gospels know of no one else to whom such authority was given. We assume therefore that the statements about the directing, guiding, and shepherding “Spirit” in Acts are actually references to activities of the Lord Messiah himself—not to another agent of revelation.

Acts apparently wants readers to know that the supernatural Spirit that moved in the early days was the living presence of “Yeshua the Nazarene,” the risen one.

In contrast, Acts tells us about Simon the Magician who wanted occult Spirit-Power, not the holy spirit of Yeshua (Acts 8:19). Any miracle-
working, revelation-making Spirit that does not have the proper “Yeshua ID” is a counterfeit Holy Spirit (“another Spirit,” Paul calls it; 2 Cor 11:4).

Many interpreters and theologians object when the Holy Spirit is called divine "power" or an "influence" from God. They insist the Spirit is “a person,” with all the traits of personality. Acts proves this is true. But the interpreters fail to make the complete Hebraic link.

Following patterns in the Hebrew Bible, the “Spirit” in the NT can refer to God the Father’s personality or to that of the risen Messiah. The Holy Spirit in the NT is never an object of worship or prayer. The people of God don’t look to Yeshua for guidance then go next door and ask for the Holy Spirit’s opinion. The Spirit, in other words, is not another personality.

The Agents of Communication

- Yeshua often appears to or speaks with his followers “in a vision” (9:10; 11:5; 16:9; 18:9). At times, the narrator simply says Yeshua spoke (9:4-5; 23:11).

- When Yeshua interacts with people in alien (non-Israelite) territories or when he impacts the physical world, the narrator attributes this to Yeshua’s hologram “Angel” or to “the Angel of the Lord” (8:26; 10:3-4; 12:7, 11). Not everyone at first recognizes the Angel as the risen Messiah, but we know his identity.

- The Spirit does not “appear” or have visionary form. In the unique case of Philip being “snatched away,” the Spirit acts upon the material world (8:39). This echoes an ancient Hebrew belief from the days of Elijah and Elisha that the Ruach-powered Chariot of God could whisk people to heaven (2 Kgs 2:3, 11; cf. Ezek 1:20).

The Spirit seems to speak inwardly (that is, inaudibly)—either directly to the apostles or through the prophets in the congregation (13:1; 15:32; 21:10). In the Hebrew Bible prophets are the usual transmitters of the Breath of God. At the Council of Jerusalem, the apostles and elders make a decision that “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). But they don’t say how they discerned the Spirit’s will.

Supporting Texts

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.”

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

In the Hebrew Bible an “angel” 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) is, in Isaiah 63, equivalent to his “Holy Spirit” (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 respect and reverence, not necessarily indication that the person knows it is God’s own physical manifestation (Josh 5:14; Judg. 6:13; Dan 10:16; cf. Rev 7:14). So too Paul does not at this stage know the identity of the “Lord” (Grk, kurios) he is addressing.

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:
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…” [cf. Rev 1:1—God sent Yeshua, and Yeshua sent his angel]

12:17b—He described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison.

**The Apostles: Holy Spirit, Spirit of Yeshua**
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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