

The Nature of Yeshua in the General Epistles

- Ben Witherington III: “Peter refers to Father, Spirit and Christ, in that order. The implication is clear that all three are in some sense God, and involved in the divine choosing.”¹⁶

It certainly goes too far so as to suggest that “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, set apart by the *Ruach* for obedience and for sprinkling with the blood of Yeshua the Messiah” (1 Peter 1:2, TLV) presents a comprehensive view of the composition of God to Bible readers. Likewise, the order present of Father, Spirit, and Son should prompt readers to recognize that there is no neatly packed formula present in the Holy Scriptures of God revealing Himself to mortals. Indeed, as is immediately seen in what Peter communicates following, the Holy Spirit is actually referred to as “the Spirit of Messiah” (1 Peter 1:11), an indication that the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity does have various limitations, and there may indeed be more overlap in the functions and roles of the Godhead than is customarily understood or approached.

1 Peter 1:3-12

“The Spirit of Messiah”

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah from the dead, to *obtain* an inheritance *which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away*, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Yeshua the Messiah; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Messiah within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Messiah and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.”

The Apostle Peter lauds the great redemption that the members of his audience have experienced via Yeshua the Messiah, as he not only praises God the Father, but details how those encountering his letter have been “born again” (1 Peter 1:3a). The salvation provided in Yeshua is hardly independent of the activity of God the Father, who is noted to be the causal agent of Yeshua’s resurrection from the dead (1 Peter 1:3b). The salvation provided in the Son does not just cleanse people of their sins, but provides them with an inheritance in Heaven (1 Peter 1:4), and vindication in the future eschaton (1 Peter 1:5). The multiple dimensions of the salvation of Believers were to provide encouragement for the various trials experienced by Peter’s First Century readers (1 Peter 1:6). Difficulties experienced on behalf of the good news or gospel, were to properly refine the genuineness of faith, similar to the refinement of gold (1 Peter 1:7).

It is quite significant, as Peter testifies, that members of his audience were suffering for a Messiah that they had not seen in person. Yet, in spite of not having seen Yeshua in the flesh—

¹⁶ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1-2 Peter* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 68.

unlike Peter—they still love and serve Him: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8, NIV). The audience’s firm steadfastness in their faith, will lead to their complete salvation (1 Peter 1:9) anticipated in the future Kingdom.

The Apostle Peter informs his audience of how serious the salvation that they possess actually is, detailing the activity of the ancient prophets of Israel. He says, “The prophets, who prophesied about this gift of deliverance that was meant for you, pondered and inquired diligently about it” (1 Peter 1:10, CJB/CJSB). In a general sense, although empowered by the Lord God to speak words about the future Messiah to come, many of the Prophets did not know what they were speaking. In a more specific sense, the example of the Prophet Daniel struggling to understand the word of the Prophet Jeremiah, regarding the captivity in Babylon (Daniel 9:1-3, 22-23; cf. Jeremiah 25:11-14; 29:10), proves how the Prophets were often limited. The Prophets certainly had the Holy Spirit functioning in and through them, in order to declare significant words from God, but the Prophets were also mortal.

In 1 Peter 1:12 the Apostle is clear that even though the Prophets did not fully understand what they were speaking of, they did have enough revelation that they were speaking to a future generation. This would namely be those who would first witness the arrival of Israel’s Messiah onto the scene of history, which for Peter’s purposes was his generation and the succeeding generation of his audience. As Peter concludes, “It was revealed to them that they were providing these messages not to themselves but to you. These messages have now been announced to you through those who proclaimed the Good News to you by the *Ruach ha-Kodesh*, sent from heaven. Even angels long to catch a glimpse of these things” (TLV).

One statement which can really catch some readers off guard, is how Peter indicates, “They were trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of the Messiah in them was referring in predicting the Messiah’s sufferings and the glorious things to follow” (1 Peter 1:11, CJB/CJSB). Here, it is certainly witnessed how Peter says that the prophets of Ancient Israel spoke by “the in them spirit of Christ” (Brown and Comfort),¹⁷ *to en autois pneuma Christou* (τὸ ἐν αὐτοῖς πνεῦμα Χριστοῦ). Admittedly, it would be more natural for readers to encounter, “seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of God within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Messiah and the glories to follow” (NASU modified). Instead, it is clearly witnessed how Peter used “Spirit of Messiah.” This does have some bearing not only on the nature of Yeshua, but how rigidly people approach the manifestations of a plural *Elohim* Godhead in Son and Spirit.

Ben Witherington III presents a number of options to the interpreter, on how to approach 1 Peter 1:11:

“The reference to the Spirit of Christ may be a reference to Christ’s preexistence rather than the Holy Spirit. However, it is more likely that this is simply a reference to the Holy Spirit, which Christians, since they believe Christ sent the Spirit, can call the Spirit of Christ; or perhaps it means the Spirit, who knows about and reveals Christ (see 1 Peter 1:12c).”¹⁸

It is to be fairly recognized how there are interpreters who hold to a high Christology of Yeshua the Messiah being God, integrated into the Divine Identity, but in 1 Peter 1:11 take *pneuma Christou* to be something akin to the Holy Spirit *sent by* the Messiah, or the Holy Spirit *testifying to* the Messiah. Davids thinks that the Apostle Peter “wishes to underline that the Spirit is not only from Christ but witnesses to Christ, whom he represents...The identification

¹⁷ Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, trans., *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 808.

¹⁸ Witherington, *1&2 Peter*, 84.

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‘Spirit of Christ,’ then, shows that it is the Spirit’s witness to Christ in the OT that is the focus of interest, not the actual preexistence of Christ (as in John 1:1 or 1 Cor. 10:4).¹⁹ Wayne Grudem agrees with this approach, stating, “*The Spirit of Christ within them* refers to the Holy Spirit but with a title which suggests that predicting the coming Messiah...was the primary focus of his activity in the Old Testament prophets—so much so that Peter calls him the ‘Spirit of Messiah’ or the ‘Spirit of Christ’.”²⁰ From these theologians, at least, *pneuma Christou* is not to be taken as a direct reference to a pre-existent Yeshua in Heaven, but instead to the Holy Spirit moving upon the Prophets of Ancient Israel, who were to declare of the Messiah to come.

There are other commentators, to be sure, who see *pneuma Christou* as a reference to a pre-existent Yeshua the Messiah. J. Ramsey Michaels reasons with how “The question remains whether *πνεῦμα Χριστοῦ* should be regarded as a reference to the Holy Spirit (called ‘spirit of Christ’ because the Spirit was testifying of him) or to Christ himself in his preexistence (cf. 1 Cor 10:4; Heb 11:26). From Peter’s standpoint it is a false alternative because for him the two amount to the same thing.”²¹ J.N.D. Kelly more forthrightly concludes, “the writer evidently means, not the Spirit which the NT describes as descending on, belonging to or sent by Jesus, but Christ Himself conceived of as a divine spirit (2 Cor. iii 17f.). Christ is for him pre-existent (see also i.20), and he presupposes a Spirit-Christology of which traces appear elsewhere in the NT (e.g. Rom. i.4; 1 Tim. iii.16; Heb. ix.14).”²² To catalogue the different passages he references,

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

“For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you” (1 Peter 1:20).

“who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Yeshua the Messiah our Lord” (Romans 1:4).

“By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” (1 Timothy 3:16).

“[H]ow much more will the blood of Messiah, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:14).

It is very inviting to take “the Spirit of Messiah within them was indicating,” in 1 Peter 1:11, to be a pre-existent Yeshua in Heaven, actually directing the Prophets of Ancient Israel—drawing them to some of the future realities of His ministry, sufferings, and death. However, referring to Yeshua as “the Spirit of Messiah” can disrupt some of the tightly packaged theological constructs of those who are rigid Trinitarians, thinking that God can *only* reveal Himself via Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While the Godhead can perhaps be plural, one need not be found placing limits on how God chooses to be revealed to humans.

¹⁹ Davids, *1 Peter*, 62.

²⁰ Grudem, 69.

²¹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Peter*, Vol 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 44.

²² J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 60.