

The "Seven Spirits" and Isaiah 11:1-3

These comments are based on an e-mail response regarding a suggested connection between the phrase "seven Spirits" in the book of Revelation and Isaiah 11:1-3.

Periodically, I hear someone express the view that Isaiah 11:1-3a explains the meaning of the phrase, "seven Spirits," in the book of Revelation. This passage mentions the "Spirit of the LORD," followed by three pairs of characteristics, and reads as follows:

- ¹A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
- ²The Spirit of *the LORD* will rest on him--
the Spirit of *wisdom* and of *understanding*,
the Spirit of *counsel* and of *power*,
the Spirit of *knowledge* and of the *fear of the LORD*--
- ³and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

The word "fear" in verse 3 comes from the same Hebrew word as is found at the end of verse 2, and most translations use the word "fear" in both places.

This view tends to take the reference to "the Spirit of the LORD" as the first of seven characteristics, and adds to it the six descriptive terms that follow (three pairs of two), to get a total of seven. Then they make the connection between this passage and the phrase "seven Spirits" in the book of Revelation.

To me, the phrase "Spirit of the LORD" does *not* parallel the other six terms. So when I look at the passage, I see *six* characteristics (3 pairs) describing *one* "Spirit of the LORD," rather than a reference to "seven Spirits." Also, the Isaiah passage uses the singular form of the word, "Spirit," indicating *one*; whereas the book of Revelation consistently uses the plural form of the word, "Spirits," in reference to *seven*, not one. So this leaves me wondering why people would view the Isaiah passage as having any relevance to the interpretation of the "seven Spirits" mentioned in Revelation.

In order to see how others have interpreted the phrase "seven Spirits," I glanced through a number of commentaries and other reference books. Most made *no* connection between the Isaiah passage and the phrase "seven Spirits." One commentary, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," a commentary by John F. Walvoord, described it as one of the interpretations held by some people (page 37).

Another commentary ("Revelation," by F.F. Bruce, part of "The International Bible Commentary," edited by F. F. Bruce) said something I thought was interesting, about the origin of this view:

"At an early stage in the exegesis of this book the expression was associated with the seven designations of the Spirit of the LORD in Isa. 11: 2, LXX: *the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and godliness, the spirit of the fear of God...*" (page 1598).

To me, this explains how this interpretation came into existence. When it first became popular, it was during a time that the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, abbreviated as "LXX") was in use. In that translation, the passage in Isaiah has *seven* characteristics describing *one* "Spirit of the LORD" (instead of *six*), because the Hebrew word "fear" (which occurs twice in the passage) was translated by *two* different Greek words. They translated the word as "godliness" at the end of verse 2, and as "fear" in verse 3. So they did not have to add the phrase "Spirit of the LORD" to the six characteristics, to get seven!

Personally, I have no objections if a person looks to the Isaiah passage as a potential explanation, but I would not necessarily consider it as the best view. But what other alternatives do we have?

One suggestion could be to let it remain undefined, and realize that we will find out in the future! This is often a good choice, when we don't understand something of this nature. There are certain things in prophecy that we *don't* need to know right now - example: Revelation 10:4.

Another possible suggestion is this: In the early chapters of Revelation, we read about *seven* "churches" - though in many other New Testament passages, the "church" is described as being *one* entity. Perhaps the phrase "*seven* Spirits" parallels this. Though Scripture normally refers to *one* Spirit, perhaps in the book of Revelation it refers to seven different ways the Spirit reveals himself within the context of these seven types of churches. Each "revelation" would be a unique (different) manifestation of the Spirit - like "seven Spirits." (It may be of interest to note that a few translations have marginal notes that suggest an alternate way of saying this: "the sevenfold Spirit.")