
THE PROGRESSIVE MYSTERY: TRACING THE ELUSIVE SPIRIT IN SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

A Book Review
Presented to
Dr. John Wilsey
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for *SBJT*

by
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*I affirm the honor code.*
Myk Habets presently serves in several educational and leadership roles at Carey Baptist College in Auckland, New Zealand, and has written and edited works on various subjects of systematic theology, including Trinitarianism (Trinitarian Theology after Barth), Spirit Christology (The Anointed Son), and Pneumatology (Third Article Theology, The Spirit of Truth). The author intends for the present volume, The Progressive Mystery, to serve as a “concise introduction” on the person and work of the Holy Spirit throughout the biblical canon and church history (4). This book’s unique contribution to the field includes Habets’s frequent mention of Christological implications vis-à-vis Pneumatology—typically, from a Spirit-Christology perspective—and his championing of a third article theological method—that is, “a systematic and considered attempt to do theology by starting with questions of the Spirit” (183; cf. 178n22).

Habets divides the book into four parts. In parts 1–2, he highlights the progressive revelation of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments in order to avoid common caricatures and misapplications of Pneumatology (1). In the Old Testament survey (part 1), Habets follows a thematic—rather than canonical—approach, focusing on the Spirit of God’s role in creation, the OT community of faith, and the consummation of God’s covenantal plans through the coming Messiah redeemer. The author does, however, employ a canonical approach in the New Testament survey (part 2), covering the Spirit’s portrayal in Matthew–Mark, Luke–Acts, the Johannine corpus, and the general epistles.

In parts 3–4, Habets wrestles with how the church has sought to understand God’s revelation on the Spirit and apply it to matters of faith and practice in history and today (4). In

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the historical survey (part 3), the author traces the gradual establishment of pro-Nicene orthodoxy concerning Trinitarianism and Pneumatology through the relevant contributions of— and obstacles faced by—Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Augustine. In the contemporary survey (part 4), Habets explores the influential contributions to modern Pneumatology by “Reformed” thinkers (Calvin, Schleiermacher, Barth, Moltmann), Roman Catholics (Congar, Rahner, Vatican II), the Pentecostal and Charismatic renewal movements, and contemporary Evangelicalism (or “orthodox conservative Protestantism” [173n1]). The book ends with the author’s synthesis of what a well-balanced Pneumatology looks like as well as his recommendations for how “Spirit talk” should progress moving forward.

**Critical Evaluation**

Habets has combined sharp biblical, theological, and historical insights to produce a thorough survey of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in Scripture and tradition. Though intended as an introduction on the subject, this book features in-depth treatments of the relevant primary and secondary literature; it is not a perfunctory perusal of various Pneumatological topics. In fact, it often reads as more intermediate than introductory. Furthermore, the author utilizes the appropriate method for the biblical surveys, examining, first, the relevant texts in isolation to see how they portray the Holy Spirit on their own terms and only then connecting the various presentations of the Spirit in canonical union. Indeed, the book’s greatest strength lies in Habets’s treatment on the biblical theology of the Holy Spirit. Finally, Habets does not simply provide cursory acknowledgements and affirmations of various Pneumatological developments in the historical and contemporary surveys; he also offers fair critiques when appropriate, pointing out wrong turns, deficiencies, or over-emphases. Consequently, the surveys challenge the introductory (i.e., intended) reader not to accept the historical developments at face value but to reflect thoughtfully upon their strengths and weaknesses.

The Progressive Mystery is not without weaknesses of its own, however. First, while Habets maintains the themes of the “mystery” and “elusivity” of the Spirit in parts 1–2, those
themes are virtually absent in parts 3–4. The book would have exhibited greater and more perceptible internal coherence if the author maintained those themes consistently in the latter parts. Second, Habets omits the Pneumatological developments in the Medieval era from his historical survey. He does admit that this decision was arbitrary (for the sake of space; 5n4) and he points readers to several sources on the subject (136n5). But, the Holy Spirit in the Middle Ages merits greater treatment than only a few statements such as “I deem [Thomas Aquinas] to be following through on Augustine’s pneumatology” (5n4) and the “Middle Ages certainly were ‘dark’ concerning reflection on the Holy Spirit” (136). Even one brief chapter would suffice, perhaps on the contribution of Thomas Aquinas. Third, Habets makes an awkward leap from Augustine—in the historical survey—to John Calvin and the Reformation—in the contemporary survey. Furthermore, he includes Schleiermacher, Barth, and Moltmann alongside Calvin in the chapter on “Reformed Theology” (chap. 20). Though Habets argues that “today all Protestant theology is somehow a reaction against or a development of [Calvin’s] basic pneumatological programme” (143; see also 143n24), he connects Calvin more strongly to contemporary Evangelicalism (chap. 23) than to the nineteenth and twentieth-century Protestant theologians that follow Calvin in successive sections (chap. 20).

Despite these thematic and structural concerns, the book achieves its intended aim as an introductory survey of the biblical, theological, and historical data and developments on the Holy Spirit. While critical readers may fuss over some of the author’s decisions in organizing the book’s contents as well as occasional small-scale judgments, they likely will not, however, dispute many of the author’s large-scale treatments and conclusions—all except one. In the end, the author proposes that the best way forward for Pneumatological investigation lies with Spirit Christology pursued from a third article theological method. While I agree with his concerns (see, e.g., 178–79; namely, an overemphasis on Christological implications), I suggest, on the contrary, that the best way to address those concerns is to balance proper and fitting Christocentric emphases with a classical Trinitarian framework in order to produce a robust, well-adjusted Pneumatology.
Conclusion

The Progressive Mystery is an extremely helpful and ultimately successful introduction to the revelation of and reflection on the Holy Spirit in Scripture and tradition. However, it is not a book for complete beginners. Though an introductory survey, the book is best suited for readers with at least some theological background, especially concerning Trinitarian discourse. It will serve as a good supplement and refresher for students, ministers, and laypersons across the theological spectrum who already possess some degree of theological education or familiarity.

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