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Ruach Elohim: *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament*

What do the Hebrew Scriptures teach about the Holy Spirit?

R. A. Torrey once wrote, “Before one can correctly understand the work of the Holy Spirit, he must first of all know the Spirit himself.”¹ With this admonition in mind, my intention is to glean some insight from the Hebrew Scriptures to understand a little more of the Person of the Holy Spirit. In so doing, I will avoid imposing New Testament structures upon the Hebrew Scriptures, but let them speak for themselves.² The Holy Spirit is referred to more than 100 times in the Hebrew Scriptures in a number of ways: the Spirit of God (*Elohim*),³ the Spirit of the LORD (*YHWH*),⁴ and, simply, the Spirit.⁵ We find it interesting to note that they all pursue similar themes.

The Spirit of God (*Elohim*)

Associated with Creation. We first encounter the Hebrew word for Spirit, *ruach*, in the phrase *the Spirit of God* in Genesis 1:2. Here the Spirit of God hovers or flutters over the surface of the waters in the process of creation. Thus, the Holy Spirit is linked with Creation—the one event that separates God from all other gods worshiped in the ancient or modern world. In addition, the action of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters places the Holy Spirit not only in the context of

Creation but of salvation also. The verb *rachaf* is in the intensive (*Piel*) form of the root that means to flutter.⁶ The only other instance in Scripture that uses the verb in this way is as a metaphor of God redeeming His people from Egypt in the form of an eagle stirring up its nest and hovering over its young (Deut. 32:11). This picture of nurture, and ultimately of salvation in the Exodus story, introduces the Holy Spirit in the context of two main functions of divinity—creation and salvation.

Empowering leaders. Other uses of the expression *Spirit of God (Elohim)* are in the context of empowering leaders: eight references to Saul, the first Israelite king; twice to Bezaleel, the craftsman chosen to execute the fabrication of the sacred objects of the tabernacle in the wilderness; and once each to Joseph, Balaam, Azariah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah.

Saul’s connection with the Holy Spirit is quite interesting, maybe even bizarre. Soon after the prophet Samuel anoints Saul as Israel’s first king (1 Sam. 10:1), Saul meets up with a group of prophets and starts prophesying with them (v. 10), just as Samuel had predicted (v. 6). This experience at the beginning of Saul’s reign is parallel to another near its end. After David’s wife Michal (Saul’s daughter) lets David escape Saul’s murderous intent (1 Sam. 19:11–17), Saul sends out a group of

soldiers to arrest David, but in meeting a group of prophets who are prophesying, the Spirit of God “came upon” the soldiers and they start prophesying too (v. 20).⁷ Evidently this prophetic activity neuters their aggressive plans, and on hearing this, Saul commissions another group to capture David—with the same outcome (v. 21). After a third attempt with the same results, Saul sets out in person; but he, too, is overpowered by the Spirit of God, and, instead of murdering his nemesis, he prophesies with the other prophets (vv. 21–23).

However, Saul does not stop at mere prophecy; he strips naked, continues prophesying in Samuel’s presence, and ends up laying prostrate on the ground for the rest of that day and all night (v. 24). Again, the Holy Spirit neutralizes a man’s murderous intent, endowing him with an overtly religious experience. This seems in character with Saul. He swings from an insane desire to murder David to fervent devotion to God.⁸ That phenomenon may be better understood by noting that other mentions of the Spirit of God in association with Saul are in connection with a “distressing spirit”—literally a “bad spirit of God” (1 Sam. 16:15, 16, 23; 18:10).

Bezaleel is twice described as being “filled . . . with the Spirit of God”; on both occasions, this is specified as being manifest “in wisdom

and understanding, in knowledge, and all manner of workmanship' ” as he crafted the intricacies of the wilderness sanctuary (Exod. 31:3; 35:31). Similarly, Pharaoh extols Joseph for his meticulous care with details and chooses him as his prime minister (Gen. 41:38). Being filled with the Spirit in these instances has to do with being equipped with skills to lead out in creative leadership; in the case of Bezaleel, this leaves the legacy of a beautifully furnished and equipped sanctuary, and in the case of Joseph, Spirit-inspired leadership not only ensures the survival and continuity of his family but also ensures the coming of the future Messiah.

The remaining uses of the phrase *Spirit of God* are applied to various prophets who were “moved” by God. Ezekiel describes the way that the Spirit of God picks him up and takes him in vision to Chaldea to see the captives there (Ezek. 11:24). Balaam, the reluctant non-Israelite prophet, feels compelled to go against the wishes of the king who pays him to prophesy doom to the Exodus wanderers and, instead, blesses them when the Spirit of God “came upon him” (Num. 24:2). Azariah spoke words of hope to the discouraged King Asa, urging him to be strong and rid the land of idolatry (2 Chron. 15:1–7). Zechariah (the son of Jehoiada the priest, not the author of the book) also spoke bravely to the people during a dark part of their history when the Spirit of God came upon him (2 Chron. 24:20).

The Spirit of the LORD (YHWH)

Empowering leaders. Another expression that is used, the Spirit of the LORD (YHWH), is more common. The first few occurrences describe God’s empowerment of the judges to deliver God’s people. When the Spirit of YHWH comes upon them, Othniel prevails against the Mesopotamian king Cushan-Rishathaim (Judg. 3:10); Gideon, son of an apostate people,

summons a large army from among them, but uses only 300 to defeat the Midianites (Judg. 6:27–30, 34; 7; 8); Jephthah defeats the Ammonites convincingly (Judg. 11:29–32); and Samson receives great strength to defeat the purposes of the Philistines (Judg. 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14).

The prophets also speak of the Spirit of YHWH empowering people. Isaiah speaks of the Spirit of YHWH empowering the “Rod from the stem of Jesse” (the Messianic “Servant of YHWH”) with the sevenfold spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might,

under threat (1 Sam. 10:6; 2 Chron. 20:14–17). And after Samuel anoints the insignificant shepherd boy David to be king, the Spirit of YHWH comes upon him from that moment forward (1 Sam. 16:13). For the rest of his life, David recognizes that “ ‘The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue’ ” (2 Sam. 23:2).

The Spirit

The word *ruach* (“Spirit”) just by itself—or prefixed with “my,” “his,” “your,” or simply “the”—occurs 378 times in 348 verses. When used this

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knowledge, the fear of the Lord, and of righteous judgment (Isa. 11:1–5). Micah parallels this when he asserts that he is empowered by the Spirit of YHWH with “justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (Mic. 3:8). The whole point of the action of the Spirit of YHWH in these contexts assures the people of deliverance, and of rest and security in the face of what threatens them (Isa. 59:19; 63:14).

We also observe that the Spirit of YHWH moves upon people, giving them a prophetic voice (e.g., Ezek. 11:5). Even the young King Saul prophesies, and an otherwise unknown Levite, Jahaziel, is chosen and empowered by the Spirit of YHWH to give an oracle of encouragement and victory to a nation

way, the word follows the pattern of the other biblical uses of *ruach*, describing divine attributes, defining what God does, and outlining ways that people are empowered to serve Him.

Divine attributes. *Ruach* may sometimes be described as having divine attributes, for example, “good” (Ps. 143:10), “generous” (Ps. 51:12), facilitating what “ ‘might’ ” and “ ‘power’ ” cannot (Zech. 4:6), is everywhere (Ps. 139:7), is grieved by human rebellion (Isa. 63:10), and remaining among God’s people as He promised at the Exodus (Hag. 2:5). Foremost in all this is God’s role as Creator. Psalm 104 describes God’s activity in Creation and His role in upholding creation: “You send forth Your Spirit, they are created;

and You renew the face of the earth” (v. 30). Job recognizes this instrumental role of the Holy Spirit when he says, “By His Spirit He adorned the heavens” (Job 26:13).

What God does. The *ruach* references to God’s activity include the Holy Spirit striving with people before judgment, then in judgment, then in restoration. The first reference to the Holy Spirit’s striving is in the context of the Flood—“My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Gen. 6:3). The divine concern for human rebellion can also be seen in the prophetic oracles: “For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples” (Neh. 9:30, NIV; see also Zech. 7:12).

David reinforces the connection between the Holy Spirit and judgment in Psalm 106—the people “rebelled

against the Spirit of God,” resulting in God handing “them over to the nations” (vv. 33, 41, NIV). When judgment finally came as an act of cleansing (as described by Isaiah), it was “by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire” (Isa. 4:4, NIV)—a poignant description of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.⁹

Consistent with the pattern observed in the Hebrew Scriptures is the restoration that God promises after judgment. We find it significant that the Holy Spirit is linked to that process as well. Isaiah champions this aspect of divine action. He states that there would be limits to the judgments to come; judgment would continue “till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest” (Isa. 32:15, NIV).

The Spirit demarcates the limits of divine judgment by being instrumental

in restoring the land. Isaiah continues in a later chapter, repeating the assurance of a restored land, “I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground,” and adds “I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants” (Isa. 44:3, ESV). This Spirit, placed upon His people, “shall not depart” from the mouths of the people and their descendants “from this time and forevermore” (Isa. 59:21). Restoration after judgment, therefore, becomes a divine action of re-creating and restoring God’s people by God putting His Holy Spirit within them again.

We find this same idea repeated in the biblical wisdom literature. Wisdom calls to the young with the assurance “Turn at my rebuke; surely I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you” (Prov. 1:23). The hint suggests that a life of foolishness

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can be turned around and become a life of success from the moment the Spirit is poured out on someone. The same principle is at work in the later prophetic statements that speak of judgment and restoration.

People empowered. The third way biblical writers use *ruach* is in connection with the empowerment of leaders—both political and prophetic. The 70 elders that were to assist Moses were given of the same Spirit, enabling them to “bear the burden of the people” along with Moses (Num. 11:17). When this was done, the elders “prophesied,” but only on this one occasion (v. 25). Reports came to Moses that two of the elders who were not able to attend the special ceremony also prophesied because “the Spirit rested on them” as well (v. 26). Commenting on this, Moses declared that he wished God would put His Spirit upon all of His people (v. 29). Later, the prophet Joel prophesies that God would, in fact, do just that—He would pour out His Spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28). In the context of the Exodus, this universal gift of the Spirit was to instruct and nurture His people (Neh. 9:20).

In the same way that the elders are empowered by the Spirit that had rested on Moses, Joshua, too, is empowered by that same Spirit (Num. 27:18). Similarly, Elisha is empowered by the Spirit that enabled Elijah (2 Kings 2:9, 15). Isaiah develops that concept further with the Servant of YHWH motif—the One who would both free His people from the Babylonians and bring justice to the Gentiles because of God’s Spirit on Him (Isa. 42:1; 48:20).

Ezekiel adds interesting dimensions to this discussion. In his vision of the moving throne of God, the Spirit directs where the wheels should go (Ezek. 1:20). And the Spirit physically directs Ezekiel in his movements as well. The Spirit sets Ezekiel on his feet

(Ezek. 2:2; 3:24) and lifts him up (Ezek. 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5). In another of his visions, the Spirit of YHWH took him and set him down in a valley filled with dry bones (Ezek. 37:1).¹⁰

A similar physical manifestation of the Spirit may be observed in the account of the God-fearing servant of the idolatrous King Ahab. He was afraid that Elijah would be spirited away from him before he had a chance to return with the king (1 Kings 18:12), and later the sons (i.e., students) of the prophets went looking for Elijah after the Spirit of YHWH took him from them (2 Kings 2:16).

Conclusion

The Hebrew Scriptures are very rich in descriptions of the Holy Spirit. We see Him associated with Creation, and active in redemption—described in terms of an eagle nurturing its young. Along with these divine attributes we are told that the Spirit is “good” and “generous,” achieving what “might” and “power” cannot. One unique example of this is the rendering harmless of hired assassins who prophesy under the influence of the Spirit, rather than carrying out their murderous intentions.

When the Hebrew Scriptures describe the Spirit’s activity, they cover the themes of teaching, warning, pleading, and striving in order to prevent the dire consequences of human rebellion. When those warnings are ignored, the writers also picture the Spirit as being present during judgment; but, in the same breath, descriptions are given of the restoration that comes. It seems that the Spirit actually limits the effects of judgment, metaphorically raining upon the dry ground, bringing judgment to an end, and nourishment and restoration to the land and the soul of the people.

Finally, the Spirit is heavily involved in empowering people to

do the impossible: shy people are enabled to be fearless leaders (e.g., Moses, Joshua, Saul, and David), and artisans are given extra ability in building and designing (e.g., the sanctuary). In addition, when times become tough and political or religious leaders are not giving clear enough leadership, then God empowers men and women to become His mouthpieces in giving an otherwise bewitched population a healthy dose of reality (e.g., the 70 elders, Elisha, Ezekiel, and Isaiah), wooing a disenchanted people back to the only One who can save them. What could be more relevant to the twenty-first century than that? 

- 1 R. A. Torrey, *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 9.
- 2 For a helpful summary of various traditional approaches, see Gary Fredricks, “Rethinking the Role of the Holy Spirit in the Lives of Old Testament Believers,” *Trinity Journal* 9, no. 1 (March 1, 1988): 81–104.
- 3 Gen. 1:2; 41:38; Exod. 31:3; 35:31; Num. 24:2; 1 Sam. 10:10; 11:6; 19:20, 23; Job 33:4; Ezek. 11:24; 2 Chron. 15:1; 24:20.
- 4 Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam. 10:6; 16:13, 14; 2 Sam. 23:2; 1 Kings 18:12; 22:24; 2 Kings 2:16; Isa. 11:2; 40:13; 59:19; 63:14; Ezek. 11:5; 37:1; Mic. 2:7; 3:8; 2 Chron. 18:23; 20:14.
- 5 Gen. 6:3; Num. 11:17, 25, 26, 29; 27:18; 2 Kings 2:9, 15; Isa. 4:4; 30:1; 32:15; 34:16; 37:7; 42:1, 3; 48:16; 59:21; 63:10, 11; Ezek. 1:20, 21; 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5; Joel 2:28, 29; Hag. 2:5; Zech. 4:6; 6:8; 7:12; 12:10; Mal. 2:15; Pss. 51:11, 12; 104:30; 106:33; 139:7; 143:10; Job 26:13; 33:4; Prov. 1:23; Neh. 9:20, 30; 1 Chron. 28:12.
- 6 The description of the Spirit of God in this account is not to be confused with other accounts where the context clearly shows a powerful ripping wind. For example, when Elijah was at the mountain of God, hiding from Jezebel, and saw the Lord passing by, not in the strong wind (literally “the Spirit of YHWH,” 1 Kings 19:11) breaking rocks in pieces, nor the earthquake, nor fire, but in the “thin sound of silence.” The theme of spirit paralleling wind is not surprising as *ruach* means spirit, wind, or breath. Elijah sees the mountain of God torn apart by the Spirit of YHWH flinging rocks in all directions (1 Kings 19:11). Isaiah contrasts the transience of human existence, paralleling it with grass that withers when the *ruach* of YHWH blows on it (Isa. 40:7). Similarly, Hosea, in delivering a judgment oracle, warns of the *ruach* of YHWH that would blow as the east wind to dry up springs and fountains (Hos. 13:15). In contrast, the context of Genesis seems to indicate a gentle, nurturing fluttering or hovering—hardly the thing to expect in the midst of a mighty tearing wind.
- 7 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.
- 8 Mowinckel suggests that the reason the classical prophets did not mention the Spirit much was in reaction to the “embarrassment about the excesses or abuses experienced” by these earlier manifestations. S. Mowinckel, “The Spirit and the Word in the Pre-Exilic Reforming Prophets,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 53, no. 3 (1934): 199–227. See also Richard J. Skiba, “‘Until the Spirit From on High Is Poured out on Us’ (Isa 32:15): Reflections on the Role of the Spirit in the Exile,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (January 1984): 10.
- 9 Richard J. Skiba observes that the people of Israel lost their land when they violated the covenant that originally made possible the gift of that land. Skiba then outlines a number of exiles in the post-Babylonian era, each contributing to an understanding of the Spirit. Skiba, “‘Until the Spirit From on High Is Poured out on Us’” 3–9.
- 10 The New Testament describes something similar in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. After Philip finished conversing with the Ethiopian, the “Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away” and he “was found at Azotus” (Acts 8:39, 40).

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