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The Spirit of God

by David Tasker

IF THE OLD TESTAMENT LAYS THE FOUNDATION FOR all biblical teaching, then what does it teach about the Holy Spirit? In answering this question we should remember the classic words of R A Torrey: "Before one can correctly understand the work of the Holy Spirit, he must first of all know the Spirit himself."¹ Let's see what the ancient Scriptures say to help us understand a little more of the Person of the Holy Spirit. In so doing we must avoid imposing philosophical structures upon the Hebrew Scriptures, but let them speak for themselves². The Holy Spirit is referred to more than 100 times in the Old Testament in a number of ways: the Spirit of God (*Elohim*)³, the Spirit of the Lord (*YHWH*)⁴, and simply, the Spirit (*Ruach*)⁵.

It's interesting to note that they all pursue similar themes. I will focus on what we can learn from the *Elohim* and *YHWH* formulation for the Holy Spirit in my next article. In this piece, I focus exclusively on instances where the word *Ruach* (Spirit) is used by itself—or prefixed with "my", "his", "your" or simply "the". These various expressions occur 56 times in 49 verses, and they describe divine attributes, define what God does and outline ways that people are empowered to serve Him.

Divine attributes

The Spirit (*Ruach*) may sometimes be described as having divine attributes: "good" (Psalms 143: 10), "generous"

(Psalms 51:12) and facilitating what "might" and "power" are unable to achieve (Zechariah 4:6). The Spirit is everywhere (Psalms 139:7), is grieved by human rebellion (Isaiah 63:10) and remains among God's people as He promised at the Exodus (Haggai 2:5). Foremost in all this activity is God's role as Creator. Psalms 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" (Psalms 104:30 NKJV). Job recognises this instrumental role of the Holy Spirit when he says, "by His Spirit, He adorned the heavens" (Job 26:13 NKJV).

What God does

The *ruach* references to God's activity include the Holy Spirit "striving" with people before judgement, then in judgement, 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" (Genesis 6:3).

The divine "concern" for human rebellion is also 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 neighbouring peoples" (Nehemiah 9:30 NIV; see also Zechariah 7:12).

The connection between the Holy Spirit and judgement is reinforced in Psalms 106:33—the people "rebelled against the Spirit of God", resulting in God "[handing] them over

to the nations" (verse 41). That judgement finally came as an act of cleansing "by a spirit of judgement and a spirit of fire" (Isaiah 4:4) when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians⁶.

Consistent with the pattern observed in the Hebrew Scriptures is the restoration that God promises after judgement. It's significant that the Holy Spirit is linked to that process as well. Isaiah champions this aspect of divine action when he states that there will be limits to the judgements to come, and that judgement will 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" (Isaiah 32:15 NIV).

The "Spirit" would define the limits of divine judgement 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" (Isaiah 44:3 ESV). This Spirit, placed upon His people, "shall not depart" from the mouths of the people and their descendants "from this time on and forever" (59:21). Restoration after judgement is therefore a divine action of recreating and restoring God's people by Him putting his Holy Spirit within them again (Zechariah 12:11).

This same idea is 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" (Proverbs 1:23 NKJV). The hint is that a life of "foolishness" can be turned around and become a life of success from that moment the Spirit is "poured out" on someone. The same principle is at work in the later prophetic statements that speak of judgement and restoration.

People empowered

The third way in which *ruach* is used is in connection with the empowerment of leaders—both political and prophetic. The 70 elders who were to assist Moses were given of the same "Spirit" enabling them to "bear the burden of the people" along with Moses (Numbers 11:17). When this was done, the elders "prophesied" but only on this one occasion (verse 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 (verse 26). Commenting on this, Moses declared that he wished God would put His Spirit upon all of His people (verse 29). It's interesting that 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 to nurture them (Nehemiah 9:20).

In the same way that the elders were empowered by the Spirit that had rested on Moses, Joshua too was empowered by that same Spirit (Numbers 27:18). Elisha was similarly empowered by the Spirit that empowered Elijah (2 Kings 2:9, 15). Isaiah develops the 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 (Isaiah 42:1; 48:16).

Ezekiel adds interesting dimensions to this discussion. In his vision of the moving throne of God, it's the Spirit that directs where the wheels should go (Ezekiel 1:20). And it's the Spirit that physically directs Ezekiel in his movements as well. The Spirit sets Ezekiel on his feet (2:2; 3:24) and lifts him up (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 (Ezekiel 37:1)⁷.

A similar physical manifestation of the Spirit may be observed in the account of the God-fearing servant of 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 description of the Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures is very rich. As we will see in the second half of this piece, the two other names for the Holy Spirit are similarly associated with the powerful working of God. From creation through redemption, the Hebrew Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the lives of humanity. Let us all open our hearts to His leading as we need His indwelling now more than ever. ➤

. . . the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the lives of humanity

1. R A Torrey, *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (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; 16:15, 16, 23; 18:10; 19:20, 23; Job 33:4; Ezek 11:24; 2 Chr 15:1; and 24:20.
 4. Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam 10:6; 16:13, 14; 19:9; 2 Sam 23:2; 1 Kgs 18:12; 19:11; 22:24; 2 Kgs 2:16; Isa 11:2; 40:7, 13; 59:19; 63:14; Ezek 11:5; 37:1; Hos 13:15; Mic 2:7; 3:8; 2 Chr 18:23; and 20:14.
 5. Gen 6:3; Num 11:17, 25, 26, 29; 27:18; Num 27:18; 2 Kgs 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; Ps 51:11, 12; 104:30; 106:33; 139:7; 143:10; Job 26:13; 33:4; Prov 1:23; Neh 9:20, 30; and 1 Chr 28:12.
 6. 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, Richard J, *Reflections on the Role of the Spirit in Exile*, 3. Skiba then outlines a number of exiles in the post-Babylonian era, each contributing to an understanding of the Spirit, *ibid.*, 3-9.
 7. The NT 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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