



## *The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments*

### *Some Implications for Today*

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#### The Meaning of Ruach and Pneuma

The two biblical words for Spirit are the Hebrew ruach, and the Greek pneuma. Ruach occurs approximately 380 times and translated in general terms means “wind” or “breath.” It comes from the root word meaning “to breathe out through the nose with violence.” In other words, air or breath that moves.

In the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), the Hebrew ruach is translated with the Greek word pneuma approximately 260 times and roughly 50 times as merely wind. Depending on the context, ruach has many connotations including natural wind, breath of life, temper, disposition, courage, strength, life-giving energy, creating power, overpowering tempests, strength that is beyond the human, special power of inspiration or enablement. It often portrays an idea of violence and power, indicating anything from an impersonal force to a particular person.

Since we are dealing primarily with the Holy Spirit, however, (the divine emphasis of ruach when it is combined with Yahweh, or elohim or when the context clearly connects the word with God’s Spirit), it indicates a powerful or forceful action of God upon (1) the cosmos, (2) an individual, or (3) a group of people (such as the nation of Israel, or the Church-the body of Christ).

In the New Testament, pneuma also occurs approximately 380 times. It, too, portrays the general idea of wind, breath, human emotions and thought, the life-force of the person, or great power. It comes from the Greek root pneu, meaning a dynamic movement of air: to breath out, to breath in, to breath on, to blow air, blow out, to blow a musical instrument, to inspire, steam, evaporate, radiate, anger, have courage, benevolence, emit fragrance, etc.

In any case, pneuma implies that the air is set in motion-there is action — hence the stress on its inherent power, particularly in the spiritual realm. Again, when referring specifically to God’s Spirit (approximately 250 times), it indicates an activity or action of God or the manifestations that result from the move of God’s Spirit.

#### The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

From the beginning of Genesis, the Spirit is moving.<sup>1</sup> The Spirit’s activity is inseparable from the work of God. It is an extension of God himself. Spirit is involved in creation, in bringing order, and preventing chaos. The Spirit gives life to humanity. The Spirit communicates God’s will and Word through the prophets. The Spirit equips craftsmen and artisans (such as Bezalel in Exodus 31:3; 35:30-35 and the skillful women who make priestly garments in 38:3). The Spirit brings wisdom for leadership (Numbers 11), equips for service (1 Samuel. 16:13,14; Numbers11:24-30), and brings good insight (Isaiah 11:1-5; 42:1-4). The Spirit even protects God’s people through feats of strength and daring that can hardly be imagined.

The Spirit cannot be controlled or predicted. See how the wind dries the land and divides the sea (Genesis 8:1; Exodus 14:21). It comes with force and power. In Judges (3:10 and 11:29) the Spirit [literally] “clothed itself with Gideon” or “took possession” (RSV) of him. The Spirit grants Samson extraordinary strength (Judges 14:6) and overwhelms Saul (1 Samuel 10:5-11; 19:18-24). The Spirit is sovereign. Look at Balaam — the reluctant prophet who blesses God’s

people because the Spirit forbids him to curse them. See how the Spirit controls the last words of David in 2 Samuel 23:1,2.

The Spirit is mysterious and comes in strange ways—like dreams (Genesis 41:38,39) and visions (Genesis 15:1; 46:2; Ezekiel 1:1; Daniel 1:17), guerrilla warfare of Gideon, and wild dances! In 1 Samuel 10:7-13, King Saul becomes “a different man.” In fact, so strange is the Spirit that Amos (7:14-16) tells the people, “I’m not a prophet!” But, God invades the world, not to scare us (although sometimes that could be the case), but primarily to communicate. The prophets, for instance, are there to communicate the will of God not to manipulate people or pad their pocketbooks. Frequently, a definite link exists between the “Spirit of the Lord” and the “Word of the Lord” [Hebrew *dabar* (word) and *ruach* — see Psalm 33:6; 1 Samuel 15:26; 2 Samuel 23:2]. The true Spirit is not purposeless, useless, empty words or knowledge [literally “windy words,” “windy knowledge” — Job 15:2; 16:3]. It is not nothingness. False prophets are full of hot air, not because they have no words, but because they are without the Word from the Spirit of God (Jeremiah 5:13).

In the Historical Books, the Spirit gives power for service and wisdom for leadership. Joshua (Numbers 27:18) is raised up to lead the people. The Judges (Judges 3:10) settle disputes, answer questions, solve problems, comfort the people, and lead them to victories (all in the power of the Spirit). The Scripture describes the activity of the Spirit as one of “rushing into” (Judges 14:6,19; 15:14) or “putting on as clothes” (Judges 6:30; 6:34; and 1 Chronicles 12:18). There is an outward sign that God’s presence is there. God is at work. But as spectacular as all this is, the Spirit is only temporary and occasional.

In the Wisdom Literature, the Spirit is again seen as “God-at-Work” within the world—giving life (Job 27:3; 33:4; 34:14,15), bringing wisdom (Job 28:12-18; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10), prompting to action (Job 32:18), bringing judgment (Job 4:9; 34:14), coming in power (Job 26:12,13) and making holy (see Psalm 51:11 and Isaiah 63 where the holiness of God is in sharp contrast with the unholiness of His people).

In the Prophets, the activity of the Spirit turns from the outward sign and witness to the real content of God’s message — the redemption of His people. The work of the Spirit is especially seen in connection with prophecy of the Messiah (the Anointed One). In Isaiah, the Spirit anoints the Servant of God (11:1-5; 61: 1-4). The seven-fold Spirit speaks of a complete and unlimited giving of the Spirit. This anointing leads to the fulfillment of the new covenant, the restoration of God’s people, and judgment on the unbeliever (Isaiah 42:1-9; Isaiah 61:1-11; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-28; 39:25-29).

But, all of this only points the way to when God will bring a new heart and spirit to a revived people of God (Ezekiel 36:26,27; 37:14); a time when “old men will see visions, and young men will dream dreams” and the Spirit will be poured out upon “all people” (Joel 2:28). The prophetic hope is that a new Spirit will be given (Jeremiah 31; 31ff; Ezekiel 36:25ff).

### The Holy Spirit in the New Testament

In the Old Testament, the supernatural activity of God is seen in creative acts of the Spirit — the creation of the earth (Genesis 1:2), and engraving the tablets on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 24:18; 40:34,35), but now the ultimate creative act is to be seen when God becomes incarnate and “in the fullness of time, God sent forth His son” (Galatians 4:4), born of a virgin. And the Spirit-filled prophets are there “waiting for the consolation of Israel,” the comforting of God’s people, the restoration of the Messianic Age, the salvation through the Messiah, the Anointed One (Luke 2:25,38). And so — Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simon, Anna, Mary — none are surprised that one born, not of flesh, but “by the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18,20; Luke 1:35,41,46-55,67-79; 2:25-36) comes on the scene!

John the Baptist, the prophet who links the old and new declares, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11,12; Mark 1:7,8; Luke 3:15-18). Salvation has come. Judgment has come. The Spirit, as a dove, descends. The sacrifice for the poor is now paid. What is predicted in the Old is now fulfilled in the New.

In John, the Paraclete (the Intercessor, Interpreter, Comforter, Mediator, the “one called along beside”) appears. The “Spirit of truth” comes who makes known the things of Christ and glorifies Jesus, who teaches us of God and convicts

the world of sin (14:16). Here, the breath of God regenerates human souls (3:5,6), leads to true worship (4:24), gives life (6:63), and promises greater things to come (7:38,39) for “out of your innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.” John 14:26, “the Holy Spirit will teach you [about me]” and will “abide with you and be in you” (14:17).

### The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments

In Acts 1:5-8, an unprecedented coming of the Spirit is witnessed as the promise of Jesus and the prediction of the prophet (Joel 2:28) is fulfilled. The followers of Christ see “wonders” in the sky and “signs” on earth. They “receive” the Spirit, are “filled with the Spirit,” are “baptized” in the Spirit. They prophecy, speak in tongues, bear fruit, are given “gifts” to share with the Church.

At Pentecost, the age of the messianic Spirit dawns — the prophetic proclamation now becomes the power for witness and service. After each occurrence of the baptism in the Spirit, the “mighty works of God” are declared and many are converted. A holy community develops that reverences God’s Word (Acts 2:44,45; 5:11; 6:3,4; etc.) but brings indictment against those who “resist” or “lie to” the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:5; 7:51-53).

The Spirit impels a worldwide mission from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the world. The Spirit enables the believers as witnesses for Christ. The Spirit empowers them to speak words they would otherwise be unable to speak and to perform miracles and mighty deeds that would lie beyond their abilities if not for the Spirit’s empowerment.

Paul’s letters continually emphasize the activity of the Spirit and the necessity of living a Spirit-filled Christian life (both individually and corporately). The underlying assumption in the Early Church seems to be that the Spirit would be manifested in power through transformed lives, empowered service and witness, preaching accompanied by “signs and wonders,” and ability to live out the Christian life in love and unity. The Spirit is a spirit of Power, so much so, that sometimes the two words are used interchangeably by Paul.<sup>3</sup>

The Spirit is a sign that the messianic age has arrived and evidence that guarantees a final but future consummation (1 Corinthians 2:6-16; Galatians 3:14; Ephesians 1:13,14). The Holy Spirit makes already present in the believer the glory that is yet to be. The Spirit marks the beginning of the end of life “according to the flesh” (Romans 8:9-11; Galatians 5:16-25). The three metaphors Paul uses — (1) seal (2 Corinthians 1:21,22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30), (2) earnest (2 Corinthians 1:21,22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:14), and (3) firstfruits (Romans 8:12-27) — are marks that God has only begun to act. The Holy Spirit is only a partial reflection (“signs”) of the eschatological completion that is to come (1 Corinthians 13:8-13; 14:20-22).

But, the Spirit is not just for individual behavioral change (i.e. “walking in the Spirit” — Galatians 5:13; 6:10), but also for corporate change and the benefit of the whole Body. The “gifts of the Spirit” (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14; Ephesians 4) are charismata (i.e. “gifts of grace”) not to glorify any individual, but to be recognized as freely given from God for the good of His people: the Family (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15); the Temple (1 Corinthians 3:16,17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22); the Body (Romans 12:4,5; 1 Corinthians 10:16,17; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Timothy 3:15,16).

The rest of the New Testament also speaks of the active moving of God in the believer and the Church in atonement, cleansing, obedience to God’s Word, love for one another, manifestations of the miraculous, and in confession of the Lordship of Christ. The Holy Spirit guides through persecution and suffering; heals diseases; forgives sins; enables worship; intercedes in prayers; builds unity in the Body; and testifies to the presence and continual activity of God.

### Implications for Today

#### God is at Work

So, what does all of this quick panorama of the Spirit in the Old and New Testament mean today? Well, first of all, we need to recognize that God is at work. Even today, the Spirit still moves, although sometimes mysteriously.

We expect the Spirit to speak in a gentle whisper, a still small voice, but it comes as a roaring wind. Sometimes God breaks in through the violent and unexpected, the alien and unusual. Remember: The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness (Mark 4); the Spirit grabbed Ezekiel by the hair and lifted him to his feet (8:3-4); Philip was removed from a flourishing evangelistic campaign to preach to only one man and was supernaturally transported from one place to another (Acts 8:9-40).

You may not control the Spirit: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8, NIV). You may not control the Spirit, but you do well to let the Spirit take control of you. Sometimes it’s unpredictable, even unbelievable—healings that can’t be explained, supernatural intervention and protection, baptism in the Spirit and speaking of unlearned languages. These mean that the Spirit of God is still at work!

### The Spirit is Beyond Comprehension

Second, I think we need to realize that the Spirit is beyond description or comprehension. It is only a foretaste of the future glory. The symbols of the Spirit—fire, wind, water, oil, wine, dove, seal, firstfruits, adoption—what do these mean? They mean the Spirit is so great you can’t use one metaphor or picture to describe it.

But when the Spirit comes, He purifies, illumines, cleanses, refreshes, fills, marks you out as a child of God, heals, soothes, strengthens, anoints, gives peace, and love, and joy that nothing on earth can duplicate. No amount of oil smeared on your body or poured on your head (even if it is from Jerusalem) can imitate the true Spirit of God! You can’t drink enough water to fill you like the Holy Spirit fills you!

### The Spirit is Sovereign

Third, we need to realize that we cannot manipulate the Spirit or put the Spirit in a box. The Spirit of God is sovereign. The ability to pass around rattlesnakes without being bitten or drink poison without getting sick is no proof of the power or infilling of the Holy Spirit. Too often, we hold up tongues-speaking as a prize, or idolize the prophet as some infallible being. God has always moved, and always will move through people — in spite of the people. The Spirit moves because God is sovereign and the gifts are through His grace, not because anyone deserves them. “Therefore, ... be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:39-49, NIV).

There will always be shysters and extremists who seek to manipulate the Spirit to their own benefit—from Balaam in the Old Testament to Simon Magnus in the New Testament; from Montanists to Irvingites; from the Latter Rain to the Kingdom Now. There will always be someone who prays longer, shouts louder, jumps higher, rolls faster. But God, through His Spirit, will still move, because He is sovereign.

It is not ecstasy that makes one a prophet. The Old Testament test is straightforward: “If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken” (Deuteronomy 18:22, NIV).<sup>5</sup> Despite extremists, Paul admonishes, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire. ... Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, NIV).

### The Spirit of God is Real

And fourth, the Spirit of God is real. The Spirit is no impersonal “it.” To call the Holy Spirit a ghost is a misnomer. “Ghost” is the Old English word that corresponds today to the word “Spirit.” The outpouring of the Spirit is not like the pseudo-Pentecost reproduced during the Reformation Era by drilling a hole in the ceiling of the Church on Pentecost and throwing flowers down. The work of the Spirit cannot be computer-simulated or designed. It cannot be reproduced through robotics or 3-D images, surround-sound or laser lights.

The Spirit doesn’t communicate through a satellite or a cellular phone but to individuals listening to His Word. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him — but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9,10, NIV). When you have been transformed from death unto life,

when you have been made into a new creation, when the Word of God comes upon you and you cannot control yourself because of the power of the Spirit, you know what is real.

You can sing with fervency, “Let it Breathe on Me,” “Let Thy Glory Fill the Temple,” “Pentecost in My Soul,” “Send the Fire,” “Cleansing Wave,” “The Comforter Has Come,” “Where Healing Waters Flow,” “Old-Time Power,” “Pentecostal Fire is Falling,” “Fill Me Now,” or “Come Holy Spirit,” but these are just substitutes for the real thing. The Holy Spirit is not a psychological crutch for emotional well-being, nor a “Gospel piggy-bank.” God is at work in saving and healing, in purifying and cleansing, in praying, in evangelism, in service and in sacrifice.<sup>6</sup>

The Spirit is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, and holy. The Spirit teaches, testifies, judges, witnesses, intercedes, reveals, speaks, and glorifies Jesus. The Spirit has will and feeling. Negatively, the Spirit can be blasphemed, lied to, resisted, and grieved.<sup>7</sup> But the Holy Spirit is the way in which God (the Trinity) touches and transforms the human. God becomes immanent. The Spirit is active and moving today!

#### Notes

1. For an in-depth study of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments consult the following: Donald Guthrie, “The Holy Spirit,” 510-572, in *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981); Stanley M. Horton, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1976); Edgar Krentz, “The Spirit in Pauline and Johannine Theology,” 47-65, and Gerhard Krodel, “The Functions of the Spirit in the Old Testament, the Synoptic Tradition, and the Book of Acts,” 10-46, in Paul D. Opsahl, ed., *The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church: From Biblical Times to the Present* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978); Harold Lindsell, *The Holy Spirit in the Latter Days* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983); and Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint, 1976).

2. Here, the removal of the Spirit removes the basis for life.

3. For example, see Romans 15:13,19; 1 Corinthians 2:4; and Galatians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:5, etc.

4. The Spirit is seen frequently transporting Ezekiel from place to place. See Ezekiel 2:1,2, 3:12,14; 8:3, etc. Whether these occurrences are literal or figurative is not the focus here. For further study consider the standard scholarly commentaries.

5. Michael Green offers sound practical advice concerning charismatic manifestations in the church in “What Are We to Make of the Charismatic Movement,” 197-218 in *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

6. See Psalm 139:7-10; Matthew 19:16-26; John 16:13; Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 2:10,11; and Hebrews 9:14.

7. See John 14-16; Acts 5:3,4; 7:51; 16:6,7; Romans 8:26; 1 Corinthians 12:11; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 4:30; 2 Peter 1:21; Rev. 2:7.

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