

Ezekiel, Prophet of the Spirit: רוּחַ in the Book of Ezekiel¹

LEONARD P. MARÉ (NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY)²

ABSTRACT

Numerous texts refer to the activities of the spirit of God in relation to the life and work of the Old Testament prophets. This is the case for both the former prophets as well as the latter prophets. The focus of this paper will be the book of Ezekiel. The noun רוּחַ occurs 52 times in Ezekiel. A selection of these texts that refer to רוּחַ will be analysed. Various issues regarding the Spirit's function in Ezekiel will be discussed as they arise from the texts. The purpose of the article can be formulated as follows: What is the role and function of the רוּחַ in the Book of Ezekiel?

KEYWORDS: Ezekiel, prophet of the Spirit, Spirit of God

A INTRODUCTION

Numerous texts refer to the activities of the Spirit of God in relation to the life and work of the Old Testament prophets. This is the case for both the former prophets as well as the latter prophets. A variety of manifestations resulted from the influence of the Spirit on the prophets, such as prophesying, the reception of revelations (both auditory and visionary), the proclamation of God's word and ecstatic experiences.

The focus of this article will be the book of Ezekiel. The noun רוּחַ occurs 52 times in Ezekiel,³ covering the full semantic range signified by the word throughout the Old Testament.⁴ A selection of these texts where רוּחַ seems to

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¹ This article is dedicated to Willie Wessels, a scholar of the Spirit

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³ Daniel Block, "The prophet of the Spirit: The use of *rwh* in the Book of Ezekiel," *JETS* 32/1 (1989): 29 has indicated that רוּחַ is scattered throughout the first part of Ezekiel (1-24) and the last part (33-48). The middle section (25-32) containing the oracles against the nations contain only one nontheological reference in 27:26. This is probably due to the nature of these prophecies.

indicate some working of the spirit, will be investigated. The function and role of the רוח will be discussed as they arise from the texts. The purpose of the article can thus be formulated as follows: What is the role and function of the רוח in the Book of Ezekiel? Issues that will be explored include the following: What role did the רוח play in the calling of the prophet? How was the prophet empowered by the רוח? Did the רוח indwell the prophet or did he experience the presence of the רוח sporadically?

B ANALYSIS OF EZEKIEL

1 Chapter 1: רוח, creatures, and wheels

The opening vision of Ezekiel begins by providing a context to the prophet's experience. The date, location, and nature of the vision are stated. Ezekiel was among the exiles, away from his home country, along the river Chebar in Babylon on the fifth day of the fourth month of the thirtieth year⁵ when he received visions from God (Ez 1:1). The fact that God appears to him while in a foreign land, underlines the fact that YHWH, Israel's God, was not confined just to one place as gods were understood to be, but He is active wherever He pleases.⁶ The first verse is written in autobiographical style, pointing to the very personal nature of Ezekiel's experience. Block⁷ even argues that this description of the prophet's calling was probably not meant for the public eye. It is interesting that verses 2 and 3 are then written in the third person, probably indicating a later addition by an editor.⁸ The Chebar river was located near the city of Nippur.⁹ The vision itself was highly unusual. The phrase “the heavens

⁴ Wilf Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 187. For an overview of the possible meanings of רוח in the Old Testament, cf Wil Vosloo, “Ruah/Gees in die Ou Testament,” *SK* 4/2 (1983): 40-68; cf also Pieter de Vries, “The relationship between the Glory of YHWH and the Spirit of YHWH in the Book of Ezekiel – Part One,” *JBPR* 5 (2013): 110-112.

⁵ Cf Leslie Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19* (WBC 28; Dallas: Word, 1994), 20-21 for an overview of the possible explanations for the phrase. The most probable explanation is that it is a reference to Ezekiel's age. Margaret Odell, *Ezekiel* (SHBC; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 16 supports this proposal, arguing for the significance of the age of 30. It was the age when Levites started their service in the sanctuary (Nm 4:3, 23, 30). Cf also Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel chapters 1-24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 82 who offers the same proposal.

⁶ Cf Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 83.

⁷ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 82.

⁸ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 82. For a discussion of the discrepancies in the dates between verse 1 and 2-3, cf Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 80-82.

⁹ Cf Odell, *Ezekiel*, 14 for a short overview of the history of the city.

were opened" appears only here in the Old Testament. It seems that Ezekiel saw directly into the heavenly throne room, where he had an intimate encounter with YHWH.¹⁰

Ezekiel's vision brings to mind a storm theophany.¹¹ A stormy wind (רוח) comes from the north along with a great cloud, accompanied by fire, surrounded with brightness, and in its midst, gleaming metal. Duguid¹² argues that this image of YHWH riding on a storm, by fire and lightning, should be understood as a description of the coming of the divine warrior (cf. Ps 18:9-14; Nah 1:3). The wheels suggest a chariot, also a characteristic feature of the image of divine warrior.

The text presents a very vivid and graphic picture of Ezekiel's encounter with YHWH.¹³ The vision begins with Ezekiel seeing four different living creatures, each having four faces, four wings, human bodies and calves' feet. Each creature had the appearance of coals of fire with lightning flashing from them. The faces of the creatures are of four types: human, lion, ox, and eagle. This is a quite unique feature to have four faces combined in one creature. The human face was at the front; the eagle at the back, and the ox and lion on the sides. These four faces speak of the most exalted creatures: the human amongst all creatures, the lion amongst wild animals, the ox amongst domesticated animals and the eagle amongst birds. They represent and express divine power, omnipotence, and omniscience.¹⁴

Each creature was accompanied by a wheel, sparkling like chrysolite and resembling a wheel within a wheel. The wheels moved with the creatures. Ezekiel 1:12 states that the four living creatures went where the רוח went (cf. also Ez 1:20-21. The movement of the wheels were bound to the movement of the creatures, because the רוח in the wheels was the same as in the creatures. The רוח thus empowered the creatures to move. Kinlaw¹⁵ points out that the רוח here does not come from without as a wind, but it empowers the wheels to movement from within. It is also significant to note that רוח, although a feminine

¹⁰ Odell, *Ezekiel*, 14-15.

¹¹ Cf further De Vries, "Relationship," 116.

¹² Iain Duguid, *Ezekiel* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 58; cf also Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 24.

¹³ B.J. Parker, "A vision of hope and fear: Creative research and Ezekiel 1," *R&E* 111/4 (2014): 390-400 has published a fascinating study on how the creation of visual art can contribute to the research on Ezekiel 1.

¹⁴ Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 31; cf also Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 96.

¹⁵ Pamela Kinlaw, "From death to life: The expanding רוח in Ezekiel," *PRS* 30/1 (2003): 165.

noun, in verse 20 controls a masculine form of the verb (יהוה), indicating that it does not have the meaning “wind” here, but “spirit”, almost as an “independent entity”.¹⁶

Greenberg¹⁷ maintains that רוח refers to the “animating impulse that moved and directed the creatures, originating in him who sat enthroned above them”. Horton¹⁸ argues that רוח here refers not to the breath of God, but to “the Spirit”. He concludes that the text presents us with a symbolic picture of God moving by his Spirit within creation to realize his intentions. Allen¹⁹ points out that רוח may refer to “the manifestation of God in his omnipresence (Ps 139:7), roaming to all points of the compass”. This seems to be indicated here. It reinforces the emphasis on God’s power, already indicated by the four creatures and the wheels.²⁰ A similar idea is maintained by Block²¹ when he interprets רוח here as “the life-giving, energizing power of God”.

It seems that רוח is here more than just breath, or an animating impulse, but it should also not be fully equated with the Spirit of God in the sense of the Holy Spirit as third person in the trinity.²² The idea of רוח as a manifestation of YHWH, indicating his omnipresence and his life-giving power, seems to fit best in the context.

2 Chapter 2: רוח entering the prophet

Following the extravagant visionary experience of the prophet in chapter 1, his encounter with God now turns to the auditory. This pattern, of a vision followed by God verbally appointing the prophet is also found in 1 Kings 22 and Isaiah 6.²³ The prophet is still lying prostate on his face (1:28) when he hears God

¹⁶ De Vries, “Relationship,” 117.

¹⁷ Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20* (AB 22; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 45-46.

¹⁸ Stanley Horton, *What the Bible says about the Holy Spirit* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 2005), 67.

¹⁹ Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 32; cf also Odell, *Ezekiel*, 26 who argues that although רוח is not explicitly here identified with God’s spirit, the frequency of the word’s occurrence indicates a profusion of power.

²⁰ For the potential of power of the wheels, cf Odell, *Ezekiel*, 29.

²¹ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 101; cf also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Int; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 24.

²² De Vries, “Relationship,” 112 has suggested that in certain cases a development in the direction of רוח as an independent personality, is hinted at. The New Testament though, has a much stronger emphasis on the Person of the Holy Spirit.

²³ Cf Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 111.

speaking to him, telling him to stand on his feet for the purpose of a conversation. The רוח then enters him and lifts him to his feet (2:2). This indicates that Ezekiel was filled with the spirit – ותבא בִּי רוח. Greenberg²⁴ argues that רוח here refers to vigour, or courage.

Allen²⁵ counters this argument by pointing out that the next verb, ותעדני (the third person feminine singular refers to רוח) indicates an independent power "that stands on the divine side of reality". He then connects this power to the empowering of the living creatures and the wheels in Ezekiel 1:12, 20-21. Block²⁶ states that the simultaneity of the voice speaking, and Ezekiel being raised to his feet indicates that the רוח probably is the source of the energizing power of the spoken word.²⁷ This suggests that the רוח entering Ezekiel is the same רוח that empowered the wheels to movement; namely God's spirit as an expression of YHWH. Therefore Kinlaw's²⁸ assertion that it is רוח as wind that enters the prophet cannot be supported.

As a result of the רוח entering him, Ezekiel received important instructions concerning his work. Without the רוח יהוה he couldn't do anything. This plus the other references to the רוח in Ezekiel indicates that he was continuously and consciously empowered by the spirit. Pentecostals often maintain that the presence of the spirit of God in people's lives in the Old Testament was intermittent and transitory. The רוח only sporadically came over someone when they began to prophesy or perform some miraculous act, after which the רוח again departed. It was only after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost that the רוח came to dwell permanently within believers.²⁹ This assumption has been challenged more recently by other Pentecostal scholars.³⁰ It seems to me that Ezekiel's experience here of the רוח

²⁴ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 62.

²⁵ Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 38.

²⁶ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 115, cf also De Vries, "Relationship," 119.

²⁷ Gn 1:2 underlines this connection of רוח with God's spoken word in creation.

²⁸ Kinlaw, "From death to life", 165.

²⁹ Francois Möller, *The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers* (Words of Light and Life Volume 6; Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1997), 8.

³⁰ Horton, *Holy Spirit*, 29, 30-31, 46, 49, 57; Leonard Maré, "Some remarks on the spirit of God in the life of David," EP 88 (2006): 30-41; Leonard Maré, "Psalm 51: 'Take not your Holy Spirit away from me,'" AT 28/1 (2008): 93-104; Leonard Maré,

entering into him (cf. also 3:24) can also be offered as a counter argument. The text seems to indicate a more permanent presence of God’s spirit in his life and ministry. Wood³¹ has indeed argued that most of the prophets were filled continuously by the spirit.

3 Chapter 3: Eating scrolls and transported by the רוח

Chapter 3:1-3 provides a description of Ezekiel eating the scroll. By doing so, he takes the fate of his people inside himself, identifying himself with them.³² The previous chapter has ended on an admonishment that Ezekiel should not be rebellious as his people. Immediately thereafter the prophet is tested whether he will be different by obeying God’s word and serving Him. Ezekiel passes the test: he eats the scroll, finding it sweet as honey. The sweetness cannot refer to the contents of the message – lamentation and woe. It therefore probably refers to his encounter with the word, and more specifically to his obedience to God’s word.

Thereafter he is sent to his people to proclaim the word of God to them (Ez 3:4-11). Ironically, God says that although he is being sent to his own people who will understand his words, they will not listen to him. Foreign peoples might have listened to him (3:6). But Israel, God’s people, the prophet’s countrymen, are too stubborn and hard-hearted to accept the word of God through the prophet. However, Ezekiel receives the promise that he will be ready to face this challenge: his face, and his heart, will be as hard as theirs (3:8-9).

In order to bring the message, he is then transported by the רוח (3:12). This is the first of seven passages where Ezekiel speaks of the רוח transporting him to other places (cf. also 3:14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5). Greenberg³³ understands רוח here as “wind”. The fact that the רוח is acting from the outside, not the inside, and the definite article that is missing, might suggest that YHWH here commands a wind to do his bidding. However, this is not just a regular wind. Ezekiel 11:24 refers explicitly to the רוח אלהים transporting him back to Jerusalem. It is therefore quite possible to understand רוח in the same sense of the word as spirit here in 3:12 & 14. De Vries³⁴ even asserts (to my mind,

“‘Twice as much of your spirit’: Elijah, Elisha, and the Spirit of God,” *EP* 91 (2009): 72-81; Lee Roy Martin, “Power to Save!?: The Role of the Spirit of the Lord in the Book of Judges,” *JPT* 16 (2008): 30-31.

³¹ Leon Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 44-49, 58.

³² Odell, *Ezekiel*, 45.

³³ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 74.

³⁴ De Vries, “Relationship,” 122

correctly) that the explicit reference to רוח in 11:24 can be offered as an argument that the transporting activity of the רוח should therefore in all cases be understood as the activity of God's spirit.³⁵ The presence of the living creatures and the wheels, as well as the reference to the hand of the LORD being upon him (Ez 3:13-14) seems to me to reinforce the idea that the reference here is to the spirit, and not just a wind. It thus indicates a manifestation of God's empowering presence, as it did in chapter 1.

After sitting amongst the exiles for seven days (3:15) the word of God came again to the prophet. He is then told that God has appointed him as watchman. There is however, no explicit mention of the רוח in this episode. In 3:22 the hand of the LORD is again upon him. He is told to go into the valley. Block³⁶ states that it refers to the broad Mesopotamian plain in Babylon, an area that was a wilderness, and therefore quite suitable for a personal meeting with the LORD. He goes there in his own power, where he encounters the glory of the LORD, the same as he faced at the Chebar river. He is so struck with the experience that he finds himself again prostrate on his face. Again, the רוח entered into him and set him on his feet (3:24). This implies that the רוח took possession of Ezekiel, enabling him to complete his mission. The רוח thus has a function of empowerment to accomplish the call of God in the life of the prophet. רוח is here once again an indication of the life-giving, energizing and empowering presence of YHWH.

4 Chapter 8: Transported by the רוח

Ezekiel 8:1-4 concerns the introduction to the first of the prophet's temple visions. The historical context is provided: the fifth day of the sixth month of the sixth year. The scene is Ezekiel's house; the elders of Judah were with him. They probably came to see him to enquire of the Lord (cf. Ez 14:1; 20:1).

Ezekiel then experiences the hand of God falling on him. Then he saw a figure, human in form, but with the appearance of extreme brightness above the waist and fire below the waist. This figure then stretches out his "hand" and grabs him. Thereafter Ezekiel is again lifted up and transported in visions to the temple in Jerusalem by the רוח. Ezekiel's experience of being transported by the רוח is unique amongst the prophets. The closest to his experience would be Elijah being carried about by God's spirit (1 Kgs 18:12; 2 Kgs 2:1-12, 16-18).³⁷ רוח here

³⁵ cf also the discussion on Ezekiel chapter 8.

³⁶ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 153.

³⁷ Block, *Ezekiel 1-24*, 280.

refers to God’s spirit; the same רוּחַ that transported him in 3:12 & 14. Block³⁸ points out that the temple vision is framed by the conveying activity of the רוּחַ (8:1; 11:24).³⁹ In chapter 8, after Ezekiel observing the first scene of the atrocities committed in the temple, the subsequent scenes are all introduced with “he brought me to ...”. Block⁴⁰ argues that “in the absence of any possible intervening antecedents we should have expected a feminine form of the verb agreeing with the nearest subject”, which is of course, רוּחַ. However, the verb is in each case, masculine (:7, 14, 16). This suggest that the one transporting him and speaking to him are one and the same: YHWH, which is the closest masculine antecedent. This seems to indicate that the interpretation of רוּחַ here as spirit, as expression of YHWH himself, is to be preferred.

The empowerment function of the רוּחַ occurs here as well. Here, it is not only the Spirit at work, but also “the hand of the LORD” (cf. 1:3; 3:22; 37:1; cf. also 1 Kgs 18:46; 2 Kgs 3:15; Is 8:11; Jr 15:17). The hand of the LORD is an indication of God’s power upon a human being (cf. Ex 9:3; Dt 2:15; 1 Sm 5:9; Is 41:20). When this happens, the prophet will either be filled with uncommon strength “or with that supreme tension outwardly manifest as a trance brought on by consciousness of being addressed by God”.⁴¹ Ezekiel utilizes it in the latter sense.

5 Chapter 10: רוּחַ, cherubs, and wheels

In Ezekiel chapter 10 we find a description of the reappearance of the living creatures, now identified as cherubim, accompanied by the wheels within wheels. Ezekiel recognizes them to be the same living creatures he saw at the Chebar river in chapter 1 (10:15, 20-22). A major difference is found in the description of the faces. Chapter 1:10 followed the sequence human-lion-ox-eagle, whereas in 10:14 we find cherub-human-lion-eagle. Why the face of the ox was replaced by that of a cherub is just about impossible to determine. The text critical notes of BHS propose that כְּרוּב be replaced by שׁוּר to match it with 1:10.

The movement of the cherubim and the wheels happen simultaneously (10:16-17, 19). Of significance for the present study, is the reference in verse 17 that the movement of the wheels is attributed to the רוּחַ. רוּחַ should therefore be

³⁸ Block, “Prophet,” 34.

³⁹ I have already indicated the importance of 11:24 in the interpretation of רוּחַ here as spirit.

⁴⁰ Block, “Prophet,” 34.

⁴¹ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 41-42.

interpreted the same as it was in chapter 1: the spirit that gives movement; the energizing power of God. Levison⁴² describes the significance of this image as follows:

This stunning image of the spirit of life as that which bustles within the wheels that accompany the cherubim multi-directionally throughout the world marks a turning point in Israelite interpretations of the spirit within. No longer does the spirit merely give life, as it had to *adam* and as it does to all animals and all of humankind; now the spirit gives *movement* to life.

6 Chapter 11: A heart and spirit transplant

Ezekiel was initially put at the north gate of the inner court (8:3). Now the רוח lifts him up again and transports him to the east gate (11:1) from where he sees a new scene involving the presence of twenty-five men. Some of them he recognizes; they are identified as the men who are responsible for the iniquity happening in the city. Wood⁴³ argues that the phrase "the spirit lifted me and brought me to the Lord's house" seems to indicate that the prophet made a distinction between the spirit and God. He thinks that this implies that the spirit has personality, thus referring to God's spirit in the New Testament understanding of Holy Spirit as the third person in the trinity. This argument does not seem convincing. Another possibility would be to understand רוח as wind, as Greenberg⁴⁴ does. However, to my mind, רוח functions here exactly the same as it did in 8:3, as the energizing power of God that gives movement and transports the prophet.

In Ezekiel 11:5 the רוח יהוה then falls (נפל) on him. Simultaneously, God speaks to him with the command to prophesy to the house of Israel. There can be no doubt that רוח here refers to the spirit of God inspiring and empowering the prophet to bring the message of God.⁴⁵ The prophet's role as the spokesperson and representative of God through the inspiring presence of his spirit, is thus underlined. Ezekiel does not speak out of his own spirit or his own intellect; he needs the empowering inspiration of the רוח to speak the word of God. This stands in sharp contrast to the indictment of the false prophets in Ezekiel 13, where they are exposed as following their own spirit (:13:3) even

⁴² John Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 98.

⁴³ Wood, *Holy Spirit*, 19.

⁴⁴ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 185

⁴⁵ Cf Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 160-161. He compares the רוח falling on Ezekiel as an inducement to prophesy to Jeremiah's experience of the burning fire that compelled him to prophesy (Jr 20:9); cf also Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 187.

though they claim that they are speaking the word of God (13:6-8).⁴⁶ Ezekiel though, is inspired by the רוח. The message he brings here is a devastating word of judgment. The end result was that Pelatiah, one of the men responsible for the iniquity in the city who was mentioned in verse 1, died, indicating the fulfilment of God's judgment. Pelatiah's death foreshadows the fate of all the leaders of iniquity in the city. The text does not provide detail on the manner of his death, but the effect on the prophet is overwhelming: he falls on his face, crying out to God, fearing the destruction of the remnant of his people (11:13).

The answer to Ezekiel's anguish is provided in chapter 11:14-21: from amongst the exiles God will draw the remnant of his people. Even though He abandons those in Jerusalem, He has been a sanctuary for those in exile (:16). Out of these He will gather his people and return them to the land of Israel (:17). When they are there, they have the responsibility to rid the land from its pollution (:18). God then promises a heart and spirit transplant. Their hearts of stone would be removed and replaced with a heart of flesh; and a new spirit will be put inside them. This will enable them to live in obedience to God's word as God's people. This promise brings Jeremiah 32:39 to mind. It is thus clear that God's ultimate goal is the restoration of his people and the renewal of his covenant with them. The prophecy also anticipates Ezekiel 36:25-28 as well as 37:1-14 where the רוח is mentioned explicitly as the one who would bring new life to God's people and restore them to their relationship with God.

Chapter 11:22-25 provides the conclusion to Ezekiel's first temple vision. The attention is returned to the cherubim and the wheels beside them, with the glory of God above them. The רוח then lifts Ezekiel up again and takes him in the vision by the רוח back to the exiles. This indicates the רוח not only as the animating power from God that transports him back, but also as the inspiration for the vision. This underlines the fact that the רוח was not just a wind that carried him around but that it refers to the spirit of God functioning as the energizing power of God providing movement and inspiration to fulfil the mission of God.

7 Chapter 36: Restoration by the רוח

Ezekiel 36 focuses on the restoration of Israel. The prophet proclaims a positive message of hope for the future, depending though on the resolution of the former problems. The prophecy begins with a denunciation of the nations (36:1-2), followed by a description of YHWH's position toward the nations (36:3-5), and their sentence (36:6-7). The promise of a new day for the land (36:8-11) and for

⁴⁶ Cf further Block, "Prophet," 41-43.

the people is given (36:12-15).⁴⁷ The rest of the chapter (36:16-38) then deals with the restoration of the honour of God. The message is explicit: God's concern is for his holy name (36:16-21). Israel defiled the land through their impure actions; therefore, they were judged and scattered among the nations (36:16-19). But even there, among the nations, they profaned God's Name (36:20-21). The removal of Israel from their land had negative consequences for YHWH in the eyes of other peoples. As Israel's God, YHWH had certain obligations; including the defence of the land and its people. The exile would lead to the conclusion that YHWH had either abandoned his people, or even worse, that He was unable to defend them against the might of the Babylonians and specifically, against Marduk, the god of Babylon. YHWH's reputation was on the line – his credibility and integrity, and his sovereignty. Israel's defilement of the land resulted in the defilement of YHWH's Name.⁴⁸

In verse 22 YHWH explicitly states that the primary motivation for the restoration is not Israel, but He will act for the sake of his Name. His reputation, his honour must be restored. Then the nations will know that He is indeed YHWH, the supreme and only God before whom no other god can stand. Then YHWH tells what He will do for Israel in order to sanctify his name. He promises that he will bring them back to their land, purify them, and give them a new heart and spirit. He will deliver them and they will dwell again in the Promised Land where they will experience prosperity (36:24-30).

Christopher Wright⁴⁹ describes this restoration process profoundly:

It begins ... on the plane of anticipated history. But it moves quickly beyond anything that ever perfectly characterized the returned exiles in their postexilic history. It speaks of spiritual reality with ethical results. It speaks of cleansing and moral transformation, of radical inward change and radical outward obedience.

Their internal renewal begins with an external act – the sprinkling of water, which symbolizes purification (cf. Lev 14:52; 22:4-6). "The symbolic cleansing with water is not just a routine ritual act. It signifies the end of a period of disorder (dirt) and the beginning of a new phase of existence".⁵⁰ The external ritual will only be effective if inner transformation takes place.

God promises a renewal of his people by putting a new spirit and heart inside them (cf. 37:14; 39:29; cf. also 11:19). Their stony, cold heart will be replaced by a heart made of flesh, the same substance as their bodies. Greenberg

⁴⁷ Cf Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel chapters 25-48* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 327-335 for this division.

⁴⁸ Cf Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 347-348.

⁴⁹ Christopher Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 128.

⁵⁰ Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 167; cf. also Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 415.

points out that Israel’s current inner condition is at odds with its earthly, human physique.⁵¹ Even more, He will place his רוח inside them, which will enable them to live a new life of obedience to his word and fulfilment of his commandments. This new life would be a manifestation of God’s spirit within them, which would result in their lives fulfilling the terms of the covenant in their expression of YHWH’s nature and will.⁵² The רוח thus brings about transformation and renewal and empowers the people to live a new kind of life; a life of obedience to the precepts of God. The text also suggests a continuous indwelling of God’s spirit - God will place his spirit inside them. This again refutes the viewpoint of some Pentecostals (referred to earlier in the article) that the spirit of God only came upon certain people in Old Testament times to equip them for specific tasks, whereas in the New Testament period he indwells the believer.

8 Chapter 37: Many, many bones

Ezekiel 37 is probably the best known prophecy in the Book of Ezekiel. The chapter itself consists of two literary units – verses 1-14, and verses 15-28. The first of these, Ezekiel 37:1-14 is of importance for the present study. This section can be further divided into chapter 37:1-10 where the focus is the vision itself, whereas verses 11-14 contain the interpretation of the vision.

The vision begins with a narrative description of the setting. Ezekiel again experiences the hand of the LORD⁵³ upon him before being brought out by the רוח into a valley filled with bones. רוח thus functions as the means by which the prophet is transported to the valley. Duguid⁵⁴ points out the significance of the vision taking place in a valley. The location was not just random, but in the light of 3:22-23 it becomes clear that it is a valley in exile; a place of death. Israel must be delivered from this place of death. Only thereafter will they enter the land of life, the new life that God brings about through the Spirit. In this valley of death, Ezekiel will discover hope for the future, brought about by the presence and power of the רוח.⁵⁵ Levison⁵⁶ points out that this theme of Ezekiel looking at life from a position of death and disappointment, occurs regularly in the book:

⁵¹ Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21-37* (AB 22A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1997), 730.

⁵² Cf Leslie Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48* (WBC 29; Dallas: Word, 1990), 179.

⁵³ Cf 1:3; 3:22; 37:1; cf. also 1 Kgs 18:46; 2 Kgs 3:15; Is 8:11; Jr 15:17. I have earlier mentioned that the hand of the LORD is an indication of God’s power upon a human being (cf Ex 9:3; Dt 2:15; 1 Sm 5:9; Is 41:20).

⁵⁴ Duguid, *Ezekiel*, 426.

⁵⁵ Cf Levison, *Filled*, 95.

⁵⁶ Levison, *Filled*, 98.

Ezekiel gazes ... upon the spirit of life as he sits disconsolately by the river Chebar, or as he watches with chagrin the cherubim's departure from the temple, or as he is led around a valley of death, filled with very many, very dry bones. Ezekiel peers into a world that is teeming with the spirit of life from a perspective that is permeated by disappointment and grief, from static locales in which he is surrounded by the remnants of death. He discerns the spirit of life, in short, in the shadow of death.

Ezekiel is then led back and forth among the bones. It was an amazing sight. A valley, filled with a huge number of bones. The bones lying on the surface of the valley suggest the remains of corpses denied an appropriate burial.⁵⁷ The bones are also described as being very dry, suggesting that they have been there for a long time. The image of death is further underlined by this extreme dryness. It is death in all its dreadfulness and irrevocability, not a flicker of life is left. This image stands in sharp contrast to the life that is brought about by the רוח further on in the passage.

In verse 3 God addresses Ezekiel directly, asking him a very strange question: "Can these bones live?" Although there are examples in the Hebrew Scriptures of people coming back to life (cf 1 Ki 17:17-24; 2 Ki 4:18-37; 2 Ki 13:21), none of those people have been dead as long as the people of Ezekiel's vision have been. There aren't even bodies left – only bones! So it seems impossible. Ezekiel though, doesn't completely discount the possibility. So, he puts the ball back in YHWH's court – "Lord God, You know". His response indicates that he feels completely helpless in the face of this image of total despondency.⁵⁸

However, God doesn't let him off so easily. He must do something. In verses 4-6 God tells him to prophesy to the bones.⁵⁹ He should address them with God's word as if they were a live audience. Ezekiel is of course no stranger to the unconventional (cf. Ez 4:1-15; 5:1-4). Ezekiel is to tell the bones that God will cause his life-giving רוח to enter them, and then they shall live again. He will put sinews on them and cover them with flesh and skin. However, the sinews, flesh, and skin will not bring life. It is only when the רוח enters them, that they will live. רוח here clearly indicates the animating power of God, without

⁵⁷ Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 374 points out that Ezekiel, as a priest, would have been well aware of the correct treatment of human corpses. The situation described here, would certainly have filled him with dismay.

⁵⁸ Jacqueline Grey, "Acts of the Spirit: Ezekiel 37 in the light of contemporary Speech-Act Theory," *JBPR* 1 (2009): 74

⁵⁹ Grey, "Ezekiel 37," 69 has argued that YHWH directs the prophet to speak the words that will effect the change. Ezekiel's words create a new reality. The speech of the prophet does not simply provide information, but effects transformation.

which life is impossible. Wright⁶⁰ argues rightly that this picture brings the creation of humanity to mind (cf. Gn 2:7). When Israel live again, they will know that YHWH is LORD. Knowledge does not refer here to cognitive knowledge, but to experiential knowledge. Their experience of the life-giving power of the רוח will bring them to the knowledge of God. It is thus clear that YHWH's purpose is not so much to bring back biological life, but it is the spiritual renewal of his people. He wants them to live in a new relationship with Him.⁶¹

The fulfilment of the prophecy proceeds in two stages. In verses 7-8 Ezekiel is obedient and begins to prophesy. While he was prophesying there was a rattling sound as the bones came together; then sinews and flesh came on them, and they were covered with flesh. At this stage, they were just a lot of corpses, because there was no רוח in them. The stage is thus set for the second step. Ezekiel now has to address the רוח to come from the north, east, south, and west and infuse the corpses with life. It probably refers to the animating power of God, his life-giving רוח (breath) "that blows in every corner of the earth, giving life to all creatures".⁶² Ezekiel then witnesses something extraordinary: the רוח entered the dead bodies, and they became alive and stood on their feet. The רוח is thus again identified as the one that brings life.

The attention now turns to the interpretation of the vision in verses 11-14. The bones represent the house of Israel (37:11), including those who were exiled by the Assyrians, more than 130 years earlier. YHWH's restoration has the entire twelve-tribe house of Israel in mind, as the sequel to this prophecy in chapter 37:15-28 will also underline.⁶³ YHWH then informs the prophet of a saying amongst the Israelites: "Our bones are dried up, our hope has vanished, we are cut off". Clearly, they are completely despairing and feeling rejected by God. They experience abandonment; YHWH has forsaken them; they are like the dry bones, without life. Exile does not only entail removal from their land, in reality it involves their death.⁶⁴

Ezekiel therefore has to prophesy to his fellow exiles (37:12-14). God will open their graves and raise them from the dead and he will return them to their land in a new exodus. The image has thus changed from a valley of dead bones

⁶⁰ Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit*, 133.

⁶¹ Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 376 puts it as follows: "...Yahweh's goal in reviving these bones is not simply the biological-chemical reconstitution of the body or even the restoration of physical life. He desires spiritual revival: a new recognition of and relationship with himself".

⁶² Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 377.

⁶³ Cf Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 379-380.

⁶⁴ Grey, "Ezekiel 37," 75.

to a graveyard of buried corpses. The intention though is clear: YHWH will bring new life and restore his people. Verse 14 explicitly states that YHWH will place his רוּחַ inside them. Then they will live with a new knowledge of God that will result in a new relationship. רוּחַ is thus clearly identified as the spirit of God; and it is the spirit of God that will bring new life to God's people.

9 Chapter 39: The רוּחַ poured out on the house of Israel

Ezekiel 39:21-29 forms the concluding section of the prophecy against Gog of the land of Magog. Verses 21-24 focus on God's just judgment of his people. All the nations will know that Israel did not go into exile due to the weakness of Israel's God, but because God hid his face from them due to their unfaithfulness. Verses 24-29 then pick up again on the theme of restoration. God will have mercy on them, returning them to their land where they will live securely. God's holiness will be vindicated and the people will know that He is God. He will no longer hide his face from them, but will pour out his רוּחַ upon the house of Israel. Block⁶⁵ points out that Ezekiel here converts a formulaic warning of judgment "I will pour out my wrath" (cf. Ez 7:8; 9:8; 20:8, 13, 21, 33, 34; 30:15; 36:18) into a message of good news "I will pour out my spirit".⁶⁶ The spirit poured out functions as symbol and seal of the covenant, indicating YHWH's ownership of his people (cf. Is 32:15; 44:1-5; Jl 2:28 [Hebr 3:1]; Zec 12:10).⁶⁷ It serves as guarantee of the new life and new relationship with God that Israel will now enjoy; a life of blessings, peace, and prosperity. It portrays "metaphorically the blessings brought by the Spirit just as the rain brings about the fructification and fertility of the earth".⁶⁸

C CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have focused on the role and function of רוּחַ in the Book of Ezekiel. I concentrated on the occurrences of the רוּחַ where the text seems to indicate "spirit".

⁶⁵ Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 488.

⁶⁶ Johan Lust, "The spirit of the LORD, or the wrath of the Lord? Ezekiel 39.29," *ETL* 78/1 (2002): 148-155 has proposed an interesting thesis on the possibility that an early Hebrew *Vorlage* might have read "I poured out my wrath". He bases his argument on the reading of LXX. If this is true, the editor of the MT then deliberately changed the text to present a more positive conclusion to the Gog section. The pouring out of the spirit matches the theme of restoration, which is prevalent in verses 25-29. The outpouring of the spirit rather than wrath seems to fit better in the context. Kinlaw, "From death to life," 171 rightly calls it the zenith in this narrative of Israel's salvation.

⁶⁷ Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 488; cf also Block, "Prophet," 46-48.

⁶⁸ Hildebrandt, *Theology*, 92.

1 In chapter 1 the same רוח was in the wheels as well as the four creatures, and it empowered the wheels and the creatures to move. The emphasis is on רוח as the manifestation of God in his omnipresence and his omnipotence, highlighting God's power. רוח here should be interpreted as the life-giving, energizing power of God. The same function of the רוח as the one who provides movement as the energizing power of YHWH is found in chapter 10:17 where the movement of the wheels is also attributed to the רוח.

2 In chapter 2:2 the רוח enters the prophet and lifts him to his feet. This indicates that Ezekiel was filled with the רוח. The simultaneity of the voice speaking and Ezekiel being raised to his feet suggests the רוח being the source of the energizing power of the spoken word. As a result of the רוח entering him, Ezekiel received instructions concerning his work. Without the רוח he couldn't do anything. Thus the רוח is the source of inspiration for the prophet to accomplish his mission. The same role of the רוח is found in Ezekiel 11:5 where the רוח יהוה falls on Ezekiel while God simultaneously orders him to prophesy to the house of Israel. רוח here refers to the spirit of God inspiring and empowering the prophet to bring the message of God. The prophet's role as representative of God through the inspiring presence of his spirit, is thus accentuated. The empowerment function of the רוח is emphasized through "the hand of the LORD" coming upon him (cf. 1:3; 3:14, 22; 8:1; 37:1). The hand of the LORD denotes God's power coming on someone.

3 In chapters 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1 the text informs us of the רוח transporting him to other places. It has been suggested that רוח in these passages should be understood as a gust of wind picking him up and carrying him about. However, we have seen that this is not just a regular wind, but an activity of God's spirit, a manifestation of God's empowering presence, an expression of YHWH himself, providing energizing to bring about movement and inspiration to fulfil the mission of God.

4 In chapter 36 the רוח will be put inside the people, enabling them to live a new life of obedience. The רוח thus brings about transformation and renewal. This function of the רוח is developed in chapter 37 where God's life-giving רוח will enter his people, bringing them to new life. The entrance of the רוח creates

life. רוח here clearly indicates the animating power of God, without which life is impossible. Chapter 37:14 explicitly states that YHWH will place his רוח inside them, enabling the people to live in a new relationship with God. רוח is thus clearly identified as the spirit of God; and it is the spirit of God that will bring new life to God's people. Chapter 39:29 the רוח poured out functions as symbol and seal of the covenant, and serves as guarantee of the new life and new relationship with God that Israel will now enjoy.

5 On a few occasions (2:2; 3:24) the text states that the רוח enters the prophet. This indicates that he was continuously and consciously empowered by the spirit. These texts serve as counter-argument to the typical Pentecostal viewpoint that the presence of the spirit of God in people's lives in the Old Testament was sporadic and temporary. The text seems to indicate a more permanent presence of God's spirit in Ezekiel's life. In chapter 36:27 and 37:14 it is stated that the רוח will be put inside the people, bringing about renewal and empowering them to a new life of obedience. The text also suggests a continuous indwelling of God's spirit in his people.

6 None of the texts analysed presented a clear indication of רוח in the sense of the New Testament understanding of the Holy Spirit as the third person in the trinity. At the most, we might say that the texts present hints of the eventual understanding of רוח as an independent personality. It is clear that in the Book of Ezekiel, at least, רוח was not understood as an independent persona, but as a manifestation of YHWH himself.

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Leonard Maré, Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Email: lpmare@gmail.com. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6460-110X>