

Who's Afraid of the Holy Spirit?



An Investigation into the Ministry of the Spirit of God Today

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The Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Bible and Its Connections to the New Testament



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Understanding the OT terms “Holy Spirit” and “the Spirit of God (or the LORD)” and the theology associated with them depends on grasping the significance of the fact that, in about 40% of its occurrences, the Hebrew word “spirit” (*ruakh*) basically means “wind or breath,” not “spirit.” The NT word (*pneuma*) is also used in this way on occasion. And when these Hebrew and Greek words mean “spirit,” the reference is often to the human “spirit.” Furthermore, certain passages draw out the correspondence between the Spirit of God and the human spirit, and the importance of God’s work through this correspondence (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:10-12). The Spirit of God is the person of God that vivifies the spirit of people to God (Ezek 37; Rom 8:16). The baptism of the Spirit shifts the metaphor from “wind” to “water,” the point being that physical purification by water has a corresponding reality in the purification of the human spirit through the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:11; John 1:32-34; Ezek 36). Similarly, like physical water, one can drink of the Spirit as water that gives life to the human spirit (e.g., John 7:37-39). The Holy Spirit did all of these things for both Old and New Testament believers, so in this sense the Holy Spirit not only indwells NT believers, but also did something similar in the lives of OT believers.

The goal of this essay is to examine the foundations of the biblical teachings about the Holy Spirit in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Although along the way I will mention most of the important ways the term “spirit” (Hebrew רוּחַ, *ruakh*) is used in the Hebrew Bible, it is not my intention to provide an exhaustive or even comprehensive review of the uses of the term. There are a number of good surveys of various kinds already available to the reader.¹ Instead of that, I intend to highlight and investigate certain expressions and specific contexts in which the term “spirit” occurs in the Old Testament and their importance for expressions and patterns found in the New Testament, specifically as it relates to our Christian understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit. The focus will be on the Old Testament patterns of expression and some of the most important passages in which they occur, but we will also follow them through into the New Testament to the degree that is possible in this short paper.

“Holy Spirit” in the Old Testament

The term “Holy Spirit” actually occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible. The expression itself is literally “your (God’s) Spirit of holiness” (רוּחַ קְדוֹשׁ, *ruakh qod’shkha*), but the Hebrew language often creates adjectival expressions by means of what is known as the construct genitive relationship between words (i.e., the construction “the...of...”; so the “Spirit of holiness” = “the Holy Spirit”). In these three instances, therefore, the LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) renders this expression with the same combination of Greek words that the New Testament uses for what we translate as “Holy Spirit” in the English versions (i.e., in Greek the noun πνεῦμα [*pneuma*] “Spirit” with [it is usually only followed by the adjective in anarthrous constructions] the adjective ἅγιον [*hagion*] “Holy”).

The first occurrence is in Ps 51:11[13], when David prays in penitence to the Lord, “Do not reject me! Do not take your *Holy Spirit* away from me!”² The two other occurrences are in Isa 63:10 and 11, where the Lord refers to the Israelites as those who had grieved his Holy Spirit by rebelling against him even though he had so graciously delivered them in the days of old:

But they rebelled and offended his [*H*]oly Spirit,

so he turned into an enemy
and fought against them.

His people remembered the ancient times.

Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea,
along with the shepherd of his flock?

Where is the one who placed his *[H]oly Spirit* among them...

Isaiah 63:14 then refers back to the “[H]oly Spirit” in vv. 10–11 as “the Spirit of the LORD” who had given them rest in the days of old. The latter expression and its interchangeable counterpart “the Spirit of God” (compare, for example, 1 Sam 10:6 with 10:10) occur a total of about 94 times in the Hebrew Bible;³ that is, if one includes instances where “the (my, your, his) Spirit” clearly refers to “the Spirit of the LORD/God” in the context.

Of course, in the Jewish tradition the Holy Spirit referred to in the Hebrew Bible is not taken to be the third person of the “Trinity,” so in such passages the Hebrew word is translated “spirit,” not capitalized “Spirit.”⁴ In general, the Jewish view is that “the spirit of God referred to in the Bible alludes to His energy (Isa 40:13; Zech 4:6).”⁵ Accordingly, it is recognized that “the divine origin of the spirit” is implied by the term “his (the LORD’s) spirit of holiness” (קָדְשׁוֹ, *ruakh qad’sho*), “Yet this does not mean that the holy spirit was regarded as a hypostasis distinct from the divine presence (*sh’kina*).”⁶ In other words, according to the Rabbis, although the “spirit of God” is of divine origin, this does not mean that there is a “Holy Spirit” as a divine person. On the contrary, the holy spirit is a mode of the one and only God’s self-expression in word and action.

As Christians we insist that we too believe in only one God (we are monotheists), but articulate this in terms of the tri-unity of the one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Trinity (see, for example, the baptismal formula in Matt 28:19, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”). This is as it should be, but that does not mean we have no difficulties with our understanding of the “Trinity.” Specifically with regard to the Holy Spirit, there has been no small debate in two areas that are of special concern in the present essay: (1) the degree of revelation of the *person and divinity* of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament as compared to the New Testament

(compare, for example, the Jewish view outlined briefly above), and (2) the *work* of the Holy Spirit *in the life of the believer* in the Old Testament as opposed to the New Testament, regarding the Holy Spirit's "regenerating" and especially "indwelling" of believers in the Old Testament.⁷

Wind, Breath, and the Spirit of God and People

Any meaningful understanding of the Holy Spirit of God in the Bible will need to begin with an understanding of the term "spirit." The various ways *ruakh* ("spirit") is used in the Hebrew Bible contributes a great deal to our understanding of the revelation of the person and divinity of the Holy "Spirit" in the Old Testament and in the New. To begin with it is important to realize that out of the 378 occurrences of the term "spirit" in the Old Testament it actually means "wind" or "breath," not "spirit," about 140 times (the exact number depends on how one reads certain passages). Thus, almost 40% of the time *ruakh* refers to the literal *movement of air* in: (1) natural weather (e.g., Gen 3:8; 1 Kgs 18:45; Ps 1:4; Eccl 1:6, 14, etc.; note also the "four winds" for the four compass directions, Jer 49:36), which is, of course, under the control of God and sometimes a means through which he acts in the world (e.g., Gen 8:1; Exod 10:13; Num 11:31), or (2) "air-breathing" animate beings, mankind and animal (e.g., Gen 6:17; 7:15), or (3) even metaphorically for God's "breath" as expressed through the "wind" of nature (e.g., Exod 15:8; cf. 14:21-22, 29).

Wind, Breath, and the Human Spirit

The connection between "wind" and "breath" seems natural to us even today and appears, for example, in our common expression for having the "wind [actually the 'breath'], knocked out" of a person (through a physical "blow" of some kind). The link between "wind/breath" and "spirit," however, is not so transparent to us. The linguistic data suggest that *in the Bible the link between "wind" and "breath" clearly extends also to "spirit."* In other words, it is easy for us to see the connection between wind and breath simply by reference to the "movement of air" that they have in common, but in the Hebrew Bible both wind and breath are just as closely related to "spirit." This is apparent from early in the canon, extending all the way through it; it is also extremely important to our understanding of the nature of "spirit" and, therefore, the Holy "Spirit." The

connection to Greek *pneuma* is there for us in such words as “*pneumonia*,” and even for English “spirit” we have words like “*aspirate*” and “*aspirator*” (cf. also “*aspiration*,” etc.), but it is not explicit to us on the surface of our language as it is in the Bible.

Compare, for example, Gen 2:7 “the LORD God formed the man from the soil [אֲדָמָה, ‘*afar*’] of the ground and breathed into his [i.e., the man’s] nostrils the breath (רוּחַ, *n’shamah*) of life...,” with Genesis 7:22b, where all mankind and land animals “in whose nostrils was the breath [*n’shamah*] of the spirit [*ruakh*] of life, died” (NASB) in the flood (except those on the ark of course). The former verse refers only to man and links “breath” (*n’shamah*) to “life,” but the latter refers to both man and air-breathing land animals and, above all, links “breath” to “spirit” (*ruakh*) and then to animate “life.” Moreover, according to Eccl 3:19–21, both animals and people “have the same breath [or ‘spirit,’ *ruakh*]” (v. 19), and “Who really knows if the spirit [or ‘breath,’ *ruakh*] of man ascends upward, and the spirit of the animal goes downward to the earth?” (v. 21). By and large, the English versions translate *ruakh* as “breath” in v. 19, but, for example, NET, NIV, and NRSV switch to “spirit” in v. 21 while NASB retains “breath.” Whatever one makes of the theology in this passage (i.e., the relationship between people and animals), it is not sound method to shift from one translation to the other in these verses when the same word is being used and the topic has not changed. The point is that we have trouble with this in the English versions precisely because in our language we do not see the natural link between “wind/breath” and “spirit” in the same way and to the same degree as the ancients did when they used the term *ruakh*.

Hebrew *ruakh* is often used for elements of the human “spirit” in scripture (ca. 120 times). As such, it refers to vitality of life (e.g., Gen 45:27; Josh 5:1; 1 Kgs 10:5; Isa 38:16), moral and spiritual character (e.g., positive: Isa 26:9; Mal 2:16; and negative: Isa 29:24; Ezek 13:3), capacities of mind and will (e.g., Exod 28:3; Job 20:3 lit. “the spirit of my understanding”; Pss 51:10 [12], 12[14]; 77:6 [4]), and various dispositions or states of the human person and personality (e.g., Num 5:14 “spirit” = feelings, suspicions; Judg 8:3 “spirit” = anger, resentment; Prov 16:18–19 “low of spirit” = humble, but “high spirit” = prideful; 17:22 “a

crushed spirit" = discouraged, depressed; Eccl 7:8 "long of spirit" = patient; Prov 14:29 "short of spirit" = quick-tempered; etc.).

Toward the end of Ecclesiastes, at the climax and conclusion of the book, we find the same term used for the immaterial component of a person as opposed to the material in terms that recall Gen 2:7 (cited above): when a person dies "*the dust* [*afar*] returns to the earth as it was, and *the spirit* [*ruakh*] returns to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7; cf. Ps 146:4; Isa 42:5). Similarly, but in a context where we once again see the close connection between "spirit" (*ruakh*) and "breath" (*n'shamah*), Elihu says, "If God were to set his heart on it, and gather in his *spirit* and his *breath*, all flesh would perish together and human beings would return to *dust*" (Job 34:14–15). God is the one "who forms *the human spirit* within a person" (Zech 12:1), so it naturally returns to him at death.

Breath, Spirit, and the *Person* of the Spirit of God

On at least one occasion David expressed his trust in God in the midst of life-threatening circumstances by exclaiming, "Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth" (Ps 31:5[6] [NIV]). David was entrusting his spirit to God for deliverance from death. Jesus drew upon this expression at the point of death on the cross, entrusting his spirit to God in death, "Father, into your hands I commit *my spirit* [*pneuma*]" (Luke 23:46).⁸ Here Jesus, like David before him, was referring at least to his human spirit (if not also the Holy Spirit), so we have the Old Testament concept of the "human spirit" coming into the New Testament even in regard to the Son of God himself. Jesus was as fully human as he was divine. The parallel passages in Matthew and John simply refer to the fact that at this point Jēsus "gave up his spirit" (Matt 27:50; John 19:30). Interestingly, Mark 15:37 puts it this way: "And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and *breathed* his last" (Greek ἐξέπνευσε *[exepneusen]*; note the root *pneuma* ["spirit"] in this verb).

This shows that, as in the Old Testament, in the New Testament also there is a close connection between "spirit" and "breath" or "breathing." When the "spirit" of a person departs their physical body dies because it no longer "breathes." The same idea appears, for example, in Jas 2:26, "For just as the *body* without the *spirit* is dead, so also faith without deeds is dead." Even in life one

can refer to the combination of “body” (*soma*, or “flesh” *sarx*) and the “spirit” (*pneuma*) as making up the whole person (e.g., 1 Cor 7:34; 2 Cor 7:1; Col 2:5, and the combination of body, flesh [as embodied sin], and spirit in 1 Cor 5:3–5), although other combinations can also be used (see, e.g., “soul and body” in Matt 10:28 and “spirit, soul, and body” in 1 Thess 5:23). Moreover, like in the Old Testament, the “spirit” is the seat of human character: as well as capacities and dispositions. For example, it can be treated as the seat of intuition (Mark 2:8), discouragement or internal despair (Mark 8:12), joy (Luke 1:47 // with “soul” in v. 46), intense affection (John 11:33), an internal sense of being in one form or another (2 Tim 1:7, a spirit of fear, as opposed to a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline), and so on. When referring to the human spirit, therefore, *ruakh* (“spirit”) can refer either to an immaterial element of the human person or personality, or to the whole of the immaterial person.

The point is that there is a great deal of continuity from the Old Testament on into the New Testament in regard to the concept of “spirit” (including “breath” and “wind,” see more on the latter below). For purposes of our discussion here, it is absolutely essential to observe that this continuity extends also to “the Spirit of God.” Perhaps one of the best places to see this is in 1 Cor 2:10b–12:

For the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the things of a man except the man’s *spirit* [lit. *the spirit of the man*] within him? So too, no one knows the things of God except *the Spirit of God*. Now we have not received the *spirit* of the world, but *the Spirit who is from God*, so that we may know the things that are freely given to us by God.

The grammatical structure of the expression “the spirit of man” in v. 11 corresponds to that of “the Spirit of God” later in the same verse.⁹ This correspondence provides one of the most obvious, simple, and helpful ways of approaching the subject of God’s Spirit in the Old Testament in relation to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. *Just as people have a “spirit,” so does God.*

We will discuss the activities of the Spirit of God in the next major section of this essay. For now our concern is with the nature and divinity of the God’s Spirit. As noted above, the expression “the Spirit of God/the Lord” and its pronominal equivalents (e.g., “my Spirit”) occur many times in the Hebrew Bible,

while “Holy Spirit” occurs only three times. In the New Testament the situation is very different, almost reversed. “The Spirit of God/the Lord” occurs only about 25 times, but “(Holy) Spirit” over 150 times. At least on one level it seems most natural that since “the spirit of man” fits his nature as human, similarly, “the Spirit of God” fits God’s nature as divine.

This may seem simplistic, but the New Testament actually sets the precedent for it in certain passages, one of the most important being 1 Cor 2:11 in its context (cited above), where the very point of the argument depends on seeing the correspondence and relationship between the Spirit of God and the spirit of man. The “spirit” of the man knows the deep things of the man, that is, his thoughts (v. 11a). Similarly, the “Spirit” of God knows the deep things of God (v. 10b), that is, his thoughts (v. 11b). Moreover, the way we come to understand “the things that are freely given to us by God” by his grace through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 12b; cf. vv. 1–9) is by receiving the Spirit of God in our human “spirit” (v. 12–13; cf. v. 10a). Having the Spirit, we are “spiritual” and “have the mind [νοῦς (*nous*)] of Christ” (v. 16b).

Compare also, for example, Rom 8:16, where we again find that “The *Spirit* [of God; see the context] himself bears witness to *our* [human] *spirit* that we are God’s children.” Moreover, in both the Old and the New Testaments God has set his Spirit “in” and “among” his people for guidance and empowerment (see the New Testament passages just cited and compare Gen 41:38; Num 27:18; and note esp. the term “Holy Spirit” in Isa 63:11–12 with “the Spirit of the LORD” in v. 14). This makes it possible for us to “grieve the Holy Spirit” of the LORD/God through various forms of rebellious misbehavior (Isa 63:10; cf. esp. Eph 4:30). As a human person’s spirit can be grieved, so can the Spirit of God who dwells in our human spirit and among us (see more on the matter of “indwelling” later in this essay).

So it seems we can think about our subject in the following way from the point of view of certain passages in scripture. The spirit of a human person is distinguishable from his or her body. The spirit is the person whether embodied or not. If in this sense the spirit of a person is the person, then the Spirit of God is God. If the human spirit separates from the body, the body dies (to be resurrected later), but you still have the person in the form of his or her spirit.

The Spirit of God is God, one of the divine persons of the Godhead. Moreover, if and when the Spirit of God occupies the human spirit of a person, that person is made alive to God on the level of her or his spirit. The close relationship between “breath” and “spirit” as translations of the same Hebrew word suggests that if a person has “breath” they are alive physically and if they have the Spirit of God they are alive spiritually. The Spirit of God is the person of God who vivifies the spirit of people to God. The analogy is not perfect, of course. For example, the scriptures are not suggesting by this analogy that God the Father somehow corresponds to our physical body. “God is spirit, and the people who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Nevertheless, on certain points at least we can reason back by analogy from a biblical understanding of the human person as a way of approach to a good biblical understanding of the person of God, especially in terms of the “Spirit” of God as a divine person, the Holy Spirit.

Wind, Spirit, and the Nature of the Spirit of God

If one of the explicitly biblical perspectives from which to approach an understanding of the Holy Spirit of God is through comparison and contrast with the human spirit of people, then another is through the nature and effects of “wind.” We have already referred to several passages in the Old Testament where *ruakh* means “wind.” Conceptually, “wind” is closely related to “breath,” since they both involve the movement of air, and both of them are closely related to “spirit” because if a person stops “breathing” their life “expires” and the person’s body gives up their “spirit.” In turn, “spirit” also sometimes refers to that which constitutes the unique nature of a particular person—their individual personal vitality and personality, character, dispositions, and so forth. In the latter sense, the term also applies to the Spirit of God. I am not suggesting that Hebrew *ruakh* always means all these things, but that it can potentially mean any of them.

The close connection between “wind” and “spirit” comes to the forefront immediately at the beginning of the Bible. In Gen 1:2b we read that the “the Spirit of God אֱלֹהִים רִוַח, *ruakh ’elohim*] was moving over the surface of the waters” before the beginning of God’s creative words in verse 3 (see “And God said...” through the chapter). Some have treated *’elohim* here as an adjective

(i.e., its superlative use) meaning “mighty” or “terrible” so that the whole expression means “a mighty wind” or “terrible storm.” However, there is no other instance in the Old Testament where *rûah ’elohim* or any of its equivalents mean anything other than “the S/spirit of God/the LORD” or “the wind of God/the LORD.” Moreover, the adjectival use of *’elohim* is foreign to this chapter where the term is used so many times to mean “God,” and, in fact, serves as the primary focus throughout the chapter both conceptually and structurally. See Gen 1:1a, “In the beginning God ...,” and recall the repeated formula, “And God said...,” beginning in verse 3 and running through the whole chapter as the common introduction to each creative movement of God.

The NRSV translates “a wind from God swept over...” rather than the NIV “the Spirit of God was moving over...,” reflecting both the ancient Near Eastern background in which cosmologies sometimes include wind in the creative process, and some translations and discussions in the history of interpretation of Gen 1:2.¹⁰ The rendering “wind of God” finds support in Gen 8:1b, where God “caused a wind to blow over the earth and the waters receded” after the waters of the flood had covered the earth. The context is similar to Gen 1:2 where waters are also covering the earth and God intends to cause them to recede in the following verses so that the dry ground might appear (later, on the third day of creation). Consider also the watery context in Exod 14:21–22, 29 where the Lord enabled Israel to cross the Reed Sea on dry ground by sending a strong east “wind” (*ruakh*) to drive the waters back. The poetic account in Exod 15 refers to this wind as a “blast” (*ruakh*) from the Lord’s nostrils that piled up the waters (v. 8) and then he “blew” again with his “breath” (*ruakh*) to drown the Egyptian army with the same waters (v. 10). There are also a few instances in which the expression “the *ruakh* of the LORD” refers his “breath” or “wind” (e.g., Isa 40:7; 59:19). Moreover, the next occurrence of *ruakh* in the canon after Gen 1:2 is 3:8 in reference to the Lord God “walking in the garden in the cool [lit. ‘to the wind’] of the day.”

However, we also need to take seriously the fact that the vast bulk of occurrences of “the *ruakh* of the LORD/God” in the Old Testament refer to God’s “Spirit” understood as the person of God that corresponds to the human “spirit” in people (see the reflections on this biblical analogy in the previous

section above). Consider, for example, the third occurrence of *ruakh* in the canon (after Gen 1:2 and 3:8), where the Lord says, “My Spirit will not contend with man forever” (Gen 6:3 [NIV]). “Wind” would make no sense as an English rendering for *ruakh* in this context, and there are many like it. This must be taken into consideration in the translation and interpretation of Gen 1:2. It is especially significant that this is the third and last of the three clauses of verse 2 describing the condition of the earth before God’s repeated pronouncement of creative words beginning immediately in verse 3. Some have argued that since “the Spirit of God” does not appear anywhere else in this chapter, therefore, translating “the wind of God” suits the focus on forces of nature throughout the chapter. However, translating “the Spirit of God” corresponds to the focus on God “speaking” (i.e., “breathing out” his pronouncements) throughout the chapter. In other words, the latter rendering would provide a more natural lead into the “And God said...” sequence of the chapter, beginning immediately after this clause.¹¹

In any case, it seems to me that our problem in handling Gen 1:2 arises in the first place because we tend to think that “wind” and “Spirit” are mutually exclusive. In my opinion, there is no reason that *ruakh* in Gen 1:2 cannot be a reflection of the power of God present and ready to work through “wind” in this watery environment (cf. Gen 8:1 and Exod 14:21–22 and 15:8–10 cited above) as well as the work of the “Spirit” of God in shaping the creation through pronouncements (Gen 1:3ff), both at the same time (i.e., an instance of double entendre). As I have already explained and illustrated above, there is a very close connection between *ruakh* as wind/breath (i.e., the movement of air) and *ruakh* as (human) “spirit” or “Spirit” of God in the Hebrew Bible.

The Old Testament passage in which this stands out most clearly is Ezek 36–37. The well-known vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezek 37:1–14 begins with “the Spirit of the LORD” transporting the prophet to the valley (v. 1).¹² Of course, the dry bones represent the house of Israel as a whole, and the real question is whether or not there was any hope for Israel in the future (v. 11). A valley of dry bones suggests not, but God has something to say about that. As the vision goes, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy that God “will make breath (*ruakh*) enter” them so that they “will come to life” (v. 5). Ezekiel prophesies as

he has been instructed and the bones rattle, come together, and receive from the Lord flesh and life-giving “breath” (*ruakh*) from “the four winds” (i.e., the four *ruakh*; vv. 7–10).¹³ Note the link between “breath” and “wind” here. Finally, in the interpretation of this vision in vv. 11–14 God says that he will bring the people of Israel back to the land (i.e., out of their graves, vv. 12–13) in accord with the promise that, “I will put my Spirit (*ruakh*) in you and you will live” (v. 14). So here the “Spirit” of God is identified with the “breath” and the four “winds” of the vision. The oracle begins with “the Spirit of the LORD” transporting the prophet to the valley of dry bones and ends with the “Spirit” reviving the people (i.e., the dry bones) to bring them back from exile (i.e., the valley of dry bones) into the land of Israel.

This combination of wind, breath, and spirit extends also into the New Testament where its importance for understanding of the Spirit of God is maintained. For example, in his well-known “born again” (or perhaps better, “born from above”) encounter with Nicodemus in John 3,¹⁴ Jesus uses the wind/spirit correspondence to explain the nature of spiritual birth: “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v. 6), and especially, “The *wind* [*pneuma*] blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is *born of the Spirit* [*pneuma*]” (v. 8). We will say more about this passage below. What concerns us presently is the fact that Jesus rebuked Nicodemus for being “Israel’s teacher” and not understanding the significance of the nature of “spirit” and the “Spirit” of God in spiritual birth into the kingdom of God (vv. 9–10). Later in the same Gospel we read that Jesus “breathed on them [i.e., his disciples] and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). It is as if his breathing on them was the means by which he passed the Holy Spirit over to them.

The dependence on the Ezek 37 imagery of wind, breath, and Spirit is hard to miss in John 3 and 20. Similarly, in Acts 2, “the blowing of a violent *wind*” accompanies the filling of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (vv. 2–4). Again, in 2Pet 1:21b, Peter affirms that the Old Testament prophets “*carried along* by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” when they articulated the word of God we now know as the Old Testament. As many have observed, the verb “carried

along” (Greek φερόμενοι [*pheromenoi*] from the verb φέρω [*pherō*]) is the same verb as that used for a boat being “driven along” by the wind in (Acts 27:15). The main point is this: God’s Spirit is like the wind.

We need to take this biblical analogy seriously in both understanding the nature of God’s Spirit and in welcoming and engaging with his work. Wind is a mysterious and powerful force. We cannot always predict what it is going to do, and it is not under our control. The same is true of God. We cannot always predict what he is going to do, and he is not under our control even if he has told us what he is going to do. He is God. We are not. All this is true also of the Spirit of God. However, although we cannot completely understand and control the Holy Spirit, we can draw upon his power. Using the analogy of a ship driven by the wind (see above), we can “put up the sails” in our lives and thereby take advantage of the blowing of the Spirit in and through our lives. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit as long as we have our sails up.

Putting up the sails begins, above all, with being “born” of the Spirit into the kingdom of God (John 3). It continues through continuing attentiveness to God in our lives on various levels and in all sorts of ways, including, for example, the serious study of the scriptures that the Spirit himself “inspired” (see 2 Tim 3:16, “Every scripture is inspired by God [*God-breathed* (θεόπνευστος, *theopneustos*)]”; cf. 2 Pet 1:21 cited above), the practice of “unceasing” prayer (1 Thess 5:17), loving involvement with other believers (see, e.g., the fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5:16, 22–24), giving witness in the world to the truth and effectiveness of the gospel (Acts 1:8), and so on. The more we are attentive to God in all the various dimensions of our lives, the more we invite the Holy Spirit to empower us by “putting up our sails,” to the degree these things are true of us, to that degree we live our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Water, Spirit, and Transformation by the Spirit of God

Another whole set of biblical images associated with the Holy Spirit are those that in some way have to do with water. The vision of Ezek 37 is actually an extension of the previous oracle in Ezek 36:22–38, in which the Lord promised to respond to the rebellious defilement of the nation and their profaning of his holy name among the nations. This is his promised response:

I will *sprinkle you with pure water* and you will be clean from all your impurities; I will purify you from all your idols. I will give you a new heart, and I will *put a new spirit within you*; I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. *I will put my spirit within you*; I will take the initiative and you will obey my statutes and carefully observe my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave to your fathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God (Ezek 36:25–28).

Three points in this passage are especially important to our present discussion. First, the Lord promised to “cleanse” the nation from their all their “impurities” and “idols” by sprinkling (actually “splashing”) the people with “pure water.” Second, the Lord promised to change their human spirit by putting within them “a new spirit.” Thus, he will change their “heart” from being hard like stone (non-responsive) to being soft like human flesh and, therefore, responsive to God’s touch. The third point is actually closely related to the second. The Lord promised to put his “spirit *within* [the midst of]” them and thereby move them to follow the Lord’s covenant law (v. 27). This, of course, is the essence of putting “a new [human] spirit *within* [the midst of]” them (v. 26).

Water Purification and Baptism with the Spirit

It is important to observe the close pattern of parallels between this passage and what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:5–6, “I tell you the solemn truth, unless a person is born of *water* and *spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the *Spirit* is *spirit*.” The combination of water, spirit, and Spirit here recalls the same elements in Ezek 36:25–27 (cited above) and the relationship between them. Water is mentioned first because purification from impurity and infidelity is the necessary environment for revival of the heart and spirit of people by the work of God’s Spirit. Ezekiel was both born as a priest and called to be a prophet (Ezek 1:1–3), and the two offices come together here. In Ezekiel’s day Israel needed both purification by water and vivification by the Spirit. John the Baptist was also both born a priest (Luke 1:5, 57–66) and called to be a prophet (Matt 3:1–4; 11:7–15; note especially the quotations from Isa 40:3 in Matt 3:3 and Mal 3:1 in Matt 11:10, and compare John’s lifestyle with Elijah, Matt 3:4; 11:7–8; and 2 Kgs 1:8).

The connection of John 3 back to John 1 is important here. John the Baptist came to prepare the people for the Messiah, and he did this through water

purification, a baptism of repentance (John 1:24–28; cf. Matt 3:2, 8, 11; Mark 1:4–5; Luke 3:3, 8). But the Son of God himself would be the one who would “baptize with the Holy Spirit” (John 1:33b). The Jewish leaders had sent “priests and Levites” (v. 19) to question John about who he was (vv. 19–23) and the purpose of his baptismal water purification practices (v. 25). Of course, this would be natural since priests and Levites were the ones responsible for such purifications in Israel (cf., e.g., Lev 14 with Matt 8:4). John’s ministry continued along this line of “ceremonial washing,” over which disputes sometimes also arose between John’s disciples and other Jews (see, e.g., John 3:25).¹⁵

John the Baptist made the connection between his own ministry and that of Jesus through a theologically creative metaphorical parallel between his own baptism “with water” (John 1:31) and Jesus’ baptism “with the Holy Spirit” (John 1:33). I am aware of no precedent for this analogy (water baptism > Spirit baptism) in the Old Testament or intertestamental literature.¹⁶ John seems to have coined the term as a graphic image that would serve to both compare and contrast his own ministry with that of Christ. People of the day were accustomed to ritual washings with water, but “washing with the Holy Spirit” was another matter. Even if the expression itself derives from John the Baptist, nevertheless, the idea behind it is Ezekiel’s prophecy of the Spirit of God transforming the spirit of people from death to life in the same context as God cleansing his people by washing them with clean water (Ezek 36:25–27 with 37:13–14). This is clear from the correspondences between John 3 and Ezek 36:25–27 outlined and explained above.

The metaphorical image of “baptism with the Holy Spirit” caught on in the New Testament and came to serve as a pivotal theme of continuity from the Gospels into Acts and the Epistles. *The metaphor takes the idea of purification of the human body through physically washing with water and extends it to purification of the human spirit through spiritual washing with the Holy Spirit.* This constitutes the pivotal shift from the water baptism of John to the Spirit baptism of Jesus that John the Baptist was so concerned to emphasize (see, e.g., Matt 3:11 and John 1:32–34). Similarly, when Jesus himself met with the apostles immediately before his ascension (Acts 1), in anticipation of the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), he once again called their attention to the importance of the link between John’s baptism with water and his own baptism with the Holy Spirit: “John baptized with water, but

you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5), and "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Although the term "baptism of the Holy Spirit" is not used in the record of Philip's ministry in Samaria, nevertheless Acts 8 emphasizes the importance of maintaining a direct connection between baptism "into the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:16) and receiving "the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:15, 17). Peter recalled Jesus' baptismal teaching in Acts 1:5–8 when he was asked to explain and justify the water and Spirit baptism of the first gentiles (Acts 11:15–16; cf. 10:44–48). Similarly, Paul came to the believers in Ephesus when they had been baptized with John's "baptism of repentance" (Acts 19:4) but not yet "into the name of the Lord Jesus." Therefore, they had not received the Holy Spirit (vv. 2, 6). In fact, they had not yet "even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (v. 2b). The phraseology here recalls John 7:39. Jesus had once again used a water motif to speak of "the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive." John adds further, "For the Spirit had not yet been given [lit. 'for (the) Spirit was not yet'], because Jesus was not yet glorified."

Pouring, Drinking, and the "Indwelling" of the Holy Spirit

This brings us to the Holy Spirit's "indwelling" of believers. Clearly, according to Paul there is no being a Christian without being "baptized by the Holy Spirit." As he puts it in 1 Cor 12:13, "for in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Whether we are Jews or Greeks or slaves or free we were all made to drink of the one Spirit." In Acts 19 Paul immediately led the Ephesian disciples (v. 1) to faith in Jesus, "baptized" them "into the name of the Lord Jesus," and laid his hands on them so that "the Holy Spirit came on them" (vv. 4–6). We have already observed that, as a motif, "baptism" in (with, or by) the Holy Spirit is new in the New Testament, but we have also seen that it is based on the combination of divine promises in Ezek 36:25–28. God promised that he himself would purify Israel with clean water (cf. the water baptism of John the Baptist) and, in association with that, put a new (human) spirit in them by putting his Spirit in them to vivify their spirit (see also Ezek 37:14; cf. the Spirit baptism of Jesus).

Paul's other image of the Spirit in 1 Cor 12:13 calls up another whole set of expressions in the Old Testament that serve as background for the New Testament teaching of the indwelling Holy Spirit. He writes: "we were all made to drink of the one Spirit." There is a very real difference between using water for purification (i.e., baptism) and drinking it. Likewise, baptism in (with, or by) the Holy Spirit is quite another thing from "drinking" of the Holy Spirit. We have already discussed the person(ality) of the Holy Spirit based on the comparison to the human spirit (he is personal and manifests the divine nature of God). We have also investigated the nature of the Holy Spirit as (life-giving) "breath" and mysterious yet empowering "wind." Furthermore, we have already begun our discussion of the Holy Spirit as "water" with the remarks above on the Spirit's baptism that cleanses the human spirit.

On the latter point the connection back to Ezek 36–37 binds cleansing from impurities with vivification of the human spirit by God putting his "Spirit" there (Ezek 36:25–27 and 37:14). This combination of divine activities constitutes the regenerating and renewing of peoples' hearts and lives about which both the Old and New Testaments speak.¹⁷ In Ezekiel's terminology it changes the heart from a "heart of stone" to "a heart of flesh" (Ezek 36:26). Jeremiah refers to the same essential thing with a different image when God speaks through him, "I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts and minds" (Jer 31:33). Again, this is what Moses means when he says, "Circumcise then your heart, and stiffen your neck no more (Deut 10:16 [NIV]; cf. 30:6, Lev 26:41; Jer 4:4; 6:10 [lit. "ears are uncircumcised"]; 9:25–26; Ezek 44:7). Paul applies this to saving faith in Rom 2:28–29, where he refers to "circumcision is of the heart *by the Spirit*" (see also Phil 3:3; Col 2:11; and implied elsewhere, e.g., Eph 2:11). There is no "circumcision of the heart" without the work of the Spirit of God in the heart/spirit of the person involved. This is true no matter whether we are talking about the Old Testament or the New.

God has always wanted the same thing from everyone and, according to passages like those cited just above, his resources have always been available and at work to bring this about in the lives of believers whether in Old or New Testament days. The scriptures talk about this in all sorts of different ways and illustrate it through various kinds of metaphors, a few of which are listed above. Therefore, when God spoke through Ezekiel looking forward to a future day

when this would take place in Israel, he was not suggesting that this kind of work in the hearts of people had never been seen before in anyone's life. What he was saying is that there was a day coming when God will restore Israel as a nation, bringing them back from exile to reoccupy the land. This would require a work of the Spirit of God changing their hearts and, historically, it took place when they were restored to the land after the Babylonian exile.

This is not the place to deal with all the historical and spiritual factors that bear on Israel's restoration from their captivity in Babylon and the work of Holy Spirit in that instance (see, e.g., Hag 2:5 and Zech 4:6). The point is that this kind of work of the Holy Spirit took place before the time of Ezekiel and at the time of the restoration that Ezekiel predicted. It also continued after the restoration into New Testament times when John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, and others drew upon Ezekiel's words to explain and illustrate the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. Consider, for example, all the background concepts Paul draws upon in Titus 3:5–6, where he writes that God “saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of his mercy, through the *washing* of the new birth and the *renewing of the Holy Spirit*, whom he *poured out* on us in full measure through Jesus Christ our Savior” (cf. also Eph 5:26–27). There is no regeneration anywhere or anytime without the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we come to the matter of the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments, about which there has been no small amount of disagreement. This is especially the case regarding whether or not the Holy Spirit indwelt Old Testament believers like he does New Testament believers (for the latter see especially Rom 5:5, 8:9; 11, 1 Cor 2:12; 6:19–20; Gal 4:6; 1 John 3:24; 4:13). On the one hand, it seems difficult to suggest that regeneration could take place in the Old Testament without the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer. On the other hand, some passages in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, seem to suggest that indwelling began in the New Testament at Pentecost. For example, as Jesus put it to the apostles in John 14:17, the Holy Spirit “resides *with* you and will be *in* you.” There are several difficulties in this verse even on the text-critical level,¹⁸ but as the NET reads it there appears to be a suggestion that there will be a shift from

the Holy Spirit being “with” them while Jesus was still with them to the Holy Spirit being “in” them after he leaves.

This accords well with the normal understanding of John 7:37–39:

On the last day of the feast, the greatest day, Jesus stood up and shouted out, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. Just as the scripture says, *‘From within him will flow rivers of living water.’*” (Now he said this about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were going to receive, for *the Spirit had not yet been given* [lit. ‘for [the] Spirit was not yet’], because Jesus was not yet glorified.)

The context is the “Feast” of Tabernacles, at which there was traditionally a water-pouring ceremony (cf. Zech 14:8, 16–18).¹⁹ Jesus took the opportunity to pronounce that the one who believes in him will have “streams of living water” flowing “from within him” (cf. Jesus with the woman at the well in John 4:10, 14). John the apostle, in turn, explains that Jesus was referring to the Spirit of God, whom such believers would later receive. The reason they had not yet received the Spirit was because this was to happen only after Jesus had been glorified, which is the point of John 14:17 (cited above), and, in fact, “the Spirit was not yet” (a literal translation).

Now, John could not mean by this explanation that there was no Holy Spirit in existence yet because he had already made much of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work earlier in his Gospel (see especially John 1:32–34 and 3:5–8, and the discussion above), and had even recorded Jesus’ rebuke of Nicodemus for not knowing about these things (John 3:9–10). Even if John was not fully aware of and did not understand the Old Testament background of the Holy Spirit at the time Jesus made this statement, certainly by the time he wrote his Gospel and made the explanatory comment we are considering here, he had experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in his own life (see especially Pentecost) and learned of the Spirit’s activities in Old Testament days. By that time he knew that it is not true that the Holy Spirit “was not yet” in existence in Jesus’ day, so that cannot be the correct interpretation of John 7:39. The same may be true of the similarly-worded remark in Acts 19:2, when the disciples at Ephesus said, “we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,” although at that time they may have been functioning at the same level of ignorance about the Holy Spirit as Nicodemus was in John 3.

The most natural way to understand the intent of these passages is to say that in the days of Jesus the Holy Spirit was not yet active in the lives of believers in the way that he would be after Jesus was glorified, starting on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Some would extend the argument back to the whole Old Testament period as well, although it is difficult to understand how this makes sense in light of Ezek 36:27, "I will put my Spirit within you," unless one makes it to be entirely eschatological into the future beyond the restoration from the captivity (see the problem with this approach discussed above), or exclusively collective, referring to God putting the Holy Spirit "in the midst of" Israel as a nation, not "within" individuals. It is true that the pronoun "you" is plural in Ezek 36:27, but the same is true of the whole passage, including the references to changing their heart (v. 26) and so on. One can hardly speak of changing the heart of a nation without changing the heart of the people who make it up. Moreover, the New Testament writers did not read the passage this way. They allude to it on both communal and individual levels (see, e.g., 2 Cor 3:3-6 and, again, the personal individual remarks of Jesus to Nicodemus which so clearly draw upon Ezek 36).

In reality, there is probably a combination of things going on here. First, there is the Jewish tradition about the cessation of the time of prophecy with the last of the Old Testament prophets.²⁰ There is evidence for this tradition of "the quenched Spirit" in intertestamental and rabbinic literature, as well as Josephus, perhaps based on Old Testament passages such as Ps 74:9, Zech 13:2-3, and Mal 3:1, 4:5-6. This suggests that, at least in part, the point of the passages about the lack of the indwelling work of the Spirit in the days of Jesus arises from the fact of the cessation of prophetic activity since the Old Testament prophets. This does not necessarily mean that there was a complete lack of prophetic activity (see, e.g., Luke 1:67 and 2:25-32), but perhaps the time from the last Old Testament prophets to the time of Jesus was like the time of Eli's decline: "Word from the LORD was rare in those days; revelatory visions were infrequent" (1 Sam 3:1; contrast vv. 19-21).

The second point is related to the first. The fact of the matter is that, from Pentecost forward, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is closely tied to his prophetic work. Peter explained the activities of the Spirit at Pentecost by citing

Joel 2:28–32a (3:1–5a in Hebrew). Peter’s quotation of the first two verses reads this way (Acts 2:17–18):

“And in the last days it will be,” God says, “that I will *pour out my Spirit* on all people,
and your sons and your daughters *will prophesy*,
and your young men will see visions,
and your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my slaves, both men and women,
I will *pour out my Spirit* in those days, and *they will prophesy*.”

“Pouring out” of the Spirit (like water) is associated, therefore, with the prophetic activity of the Old Testament. In Ezek 39:29, the last verse of the section that includes Ezek 36–37, God uses the same expression to refer to his commitment to transform and restore Israel: “I will not hide my face from them any longer, *when I pour out my spirit* on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.” There are other expressions used for the same thing, but they all associated this kind of Spirit-activity with the institution of prophecy. Consider especially Num 11:29b, where Moses says, “Oh that all the LORD’s people were *prophets*, that the LORD would *put his Spirit* on them!” (cf. also 1 Sam 10:10–13 and many other places).

The point of Joel 2 as well as Peter’s quotation of it in Acts 2 is that there will be a difference in the last days (i.e., the days since Pentecost). Namely, Moses would have his wish come true. The Lord did “put his Spirit on” all his people, and they all became prophets. The same has been true of all born-again (from above) Christians since that day until now. We have all received the Holy Spirit into our lives by whom we have been cleansed (i.e., baptism of the Holy Spirit, 1 Cor 12:13a) and of whom we drink as he wells up within us (1 Cor 12:13b). All believers are called to be prophets and, therefore, proclaimers of the gospel. This is indeed new in the New Testament. Jesus even hinted at this early in his ministry: “Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of me. Rejoice and be glad because your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way” (Matt 5:11–12).

That brings me to a third point. The coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives today brings with it the accomplished work of Christ in his life, death, burial, and

resurrection. This also is new compared to Old Testament believers. The indwelling of the Spirit is, of course, metaphorical. If we cut open our bodies we will not find the Holy Spirit visible there. He inhabits our human spirit, which is immaterial by nature, just as God is (John 4:24). This means that what he brings with him into our lives is the full force of “the things freely given to us by God” in Christ Jesus (1 Cor 2:12). Yes, there is “indwelling” in the Old Testament, but not in this way and to this degree of the fullness of God’s salvation plan accomplished. The Holy Spirit now can bring all this to bear upon us, and that is his very purpose as Paul observes in 1 Cor 2:12.

Summary and Conclusion

There are some things that are completely new about the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament compared to the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit as the agent of Jesus’ conception through Mary springs to mind immediately. But much of what is there in the New Testament already has its roots sunk deep into the soil of the Old Testament. What I have written here is something of a phenomenology of the Holy Spirit based in the Old Testament. It is true that the term “Holy Spirit” only occurs three times in the Old Testament, but “the Spirit of God” occurs many times and we see the latter pattern in other terminology as well, for example, “the Spirit of Christ.”

Our understanding of the person(ality) of the Holy Spirit finds its base in the comparison to the human spirit (he is personal and manifests the divine nature of God). The nature and power of the Holy Spirit is based in the fact that he is (life-giving) “breath” and mysterious yet empowering “wind.” Like water, he is also the one who cleanses our hearts (baptism of the Holy Spirit) and constantly provides water for us to drink as we carry out our prophetic ministry in the Church and in the world. Some of this is new in some ways in the New Testament, but the foundations for them are laid in the Old Testament. The implications of all these images are not always clear in the Old Testament, and sometimes not even in the New Testament in certain places, but they are there nevertheless.