

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT. *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament.* Christian authors have written extensively about the Holy Spirit, and yet the theology of the Holy Spirit has, over the centuries, become an insurmountable problem in ecumenical dialog. The present text aims to explore, in a synthetic way, what are the first textual and theological references when speaking about the Spirit of the Holy Trinity. What is the relationship between the Spirit and the Prophets, between the Spirit and the Messiah? These and many other questions we will try to answer in this article.

Keywords: Holy Spirit, Old Testament, Holy Trinity, Holy Scriptures, Prophets, Messiah.

Cuvite cheie: Spiritul Sfânt, Vechiul Testament, Sfânta Scriptură, Profeții, Mesia.

Etymology and Occurrence

When addressing the complex theme of the Holy Spirit, we encounter the interplay and intersection of two cultural and spiritual worlds that may, at first glance, appear irreconcilable: the Jewish and the Greek worlds of antiquity.

Long before the Holy Scriptures named the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of God and before humanity became aware of the real inner transformation brought about by the Spirit, the Old Testament texts affirmed the human being's capacity to

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recognize God's work in their heart, to listen to His Word, to embrace His Will - in short, to lead a spiritual life¹.

The faith of Abraham and Joseph, Moses' obedience, are less visible or tangible interventions through which God manifests His Holy Will in human history. Through the lives of faith led by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses, a world of inner attentiveness and intention is revealed - a world of direct communication between God and humanity. The spiritual life, the human life in the Spirit, is, in fact, lived and described through human actions long before Scripture acknowledges its source as the Holy Spirit².

When referring solely to Spirit - *rûah* - in the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament, 380 passages can be identified that mention this term. In these numerous texts, *rûah* can be translated as wind or storm, breath of life, vital energy, mind, spirit and will, creative spirit, or divine power³. The broad sense, which could serve as a true unifying thread of all Old Testament meanings of *rûah*, relates to the idea of a wind that moves through space, simultaneously breath and life-giving force⁴.

Etymologically, the words forming the idea of the Holy Spirit originate from the union of the term *holy* (in Hebrew, *qōdeš*, and in Greek, *haghios*) with *spirit* (in Hebrew, *rûah*, and in Greek, *pneuma*). This juxtaposition of *holy* and *spirit* does not appear anywhere in the history of non-Christian Greek literature. However, in the Old Testament, as will be seen shortly, it appears in only two instances and even then, in late texts of the Old Testament. Based on the etymology of these two terms, one could argue that the juxtaposition of *qōdeš* and *rûah* is oxymoronic, as the concept of a dynamic, uncontrollable force (*rûah*) is coupled with a term seemingly static in character (*qōdeš*)⁵.

The two words—Holy Spirit—are found, as mentioned above, in two biblical passages of the Old Testament, namely in Isaiah⁶ and Psalms:

¹ M. Viller, F. Cavallera, J.de Guibert SJ, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, Ascétique et Mystique, Doctrine et Histoire*, Tome IV, IIeme Partie, Paris, Beauchesne, 1961, p. 1247

² *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, p. 1247-1248

³ H. D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. I, Louisville (Kentucky), Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, p. 160

⁴ *Old Testament Theology*, p. 160

⁵ D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. III, New York, Doubleday Publishing Group, 1992, p. 260-261

⁶ On Isaiah's proto-trinitarian teaching: "Isaiah is the first and greatest of the prophetic books in the Church's canon, unrivaled in its theological and liturgical influence except by the Psalms and Gospel. (...) Isaiah's Servant Songs, his celebrated poetic descriptions of an eschatological savior figure, constitute a sort of proto-

“But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; so he turned to become their enemy and warred against them. Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses, his servant: Where is the one who brought up out of the sea the shepherd of his flock? Where is the one who placed in their midst his Holy Spirit?”⁷

“Do not drive me from before your face, nor take from me your Holy Spirit.”⁸

In these two passages, which belong to the post-exilic period, the notion of an imminent descent of the gift of the Holy Spirit becomes increasingly apparent. This idea is further confirmed by the prophet Ezekiel⁹, who speaks of the Holy Spirit as a personal, individual gift. Such an understanding is also reflected in many other passages of the Septuagint, not solely in the Hebrew text: Psalm 142:10, Daniel 5:12, Wisdom 1:5 and 9:17, and Sirach 48:12¹⁰.

Manifestations of the Spirit in the Old Testament

The identity of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is not immediately defined. Instead, a series of human experiences and encounters precede the understanding and embracement of the existence and work of God’s Spirit. The earliest testimonies of humanity’s encounter with the Spirit of God date back to the period of the Judges¹¹.

In the oldest biblical texts, the Spirit manifests itself in humans through ecstatic trances as well as through a profound elevation beyond the initial human and social condition of the prophets, who become temples of the Spirit of God.

A series of ecstatic experiences of the prophets¹² allude to the presence of God within them through the Spirit:

Christology; his prophetic descriptions of restored Zion, inhabited by the redeemed remnant of Israel and the nations, constitutes a proto-ecclesiology; and his visions of a messianic feast and the outpouring of God’s Spirit like water constitute a proto-pneumatology”, J. Bergsma and B. Pitre, A Catholic Introduction To The Bible, Vol. I, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2008, p. 777

⁷ Isa 63: 10-11 NRSVCE. In the following, all scriptural references shall be to the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition

⁸ Ps 51: 13

⁹ Ezek. 36:26-27

¹⁰ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 260

¹¹ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, p. 1248

¹² In Hebrew: *nabi, roeh, hozeh*

“Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.”¹³

“Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him and took some of the Spirit that was on Him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp.”¹⁴

“Then the Spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person.”¹⁵

This last passage vividly describes how the Spirit of God descends upon a person, transforming not only their mind, thoughts and intentions but also their entire personality and even their being.

It is not solely mystical trances that signal the presence of a Spirit beyond this world. The surpassing of one’s human and social condition also points to the existence and action of the Spirit of God. This is seen when ordinary sons of farmers, agricultural workers, and shepherds—such as Samson, Gideon, or Samuel—become liberating heroes of God’s people:

“But the Spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him.”¹⁶

“When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him; and the Spirit of the Lord rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands.”¹⁷

“When they were going from there to Gibeah, a band of prophets met him; and the Spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them.”¹⁸

“And the Spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled.”¹⁹

¹³ Ex 15: 20

¹⁴ Num 11: 25-26

¹⁵ 1 Sam 10: 6

¹⁶ Jud 6: 34

¹⁷ Jud 15: 14

¹⁸ 1 Sam 10: 10

¹⁹ 1 Sam 11: 6

Whether referring to mystical trances or the profound elevation beyond social status and human condition, as seen in the examples above²⁰, it is evident that the Holy Scriptures attribute these events to the Spirit of God²¹. This spontaneous and internal force neither originates from the human being nor from any natural agent. Instead, it produces effects desired by God Himself²², effects aligned with His Old Testament promises and requirements: the liberation and faith of His people²³.

The Spirit and the Prophets

The encounter between the prophets and the Spirit of God leaves profound and irreversible marks on their lives. Following their initial encounter with God, the prophets of the Old Testament live with the awareness that they belong to God²⁴. They recognize that they must and desire to constantly and fully listen to God's voice, yearn to align their minds and actions with Divine Revelation and understand that their lives only gain meaning if lived in and for God²⁵.

“Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets”²⁶.

“But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin”²⁷.

“Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out. Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying: Whom shall I send and who will go for us? And I said: Here am I; send me!”²⁸.

²⁰ W. Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, Peabody (Massachusetts), Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, p. 151-192

²¹ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 263

²² P. J. Achtemeier, *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, San Francisco, HarperCollins Publishers, 1996, p. 432

²³ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, p. 1248

²⁴ *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, p. 432

²⁵ 1 Kgs 17: 1-5

²⁶ Amos 3: 7

²⁷ Mic 3: 8

²⁸ Isa 6: 6-8

“The Lord said: Surely I have intervened in your life for good, surely I have imposed enemies on you in a time of trouble and in a time of distress. Can iron and bronze break iron from the north?”²⁹.

“Then the Spirit lifted me up and as the glory of the Lord rose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of loud rumbling; it was the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against one another and the sound of the wheels beside them, that sounded like a loud rumbling. The Spirit lifted me up and bore me away; I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being strong upon me”³⁰.

All these prophetic texts, which speak of the encounter between the Spirit and the person chosen by God, emphasize, among other things, a specific characteristic of the prophets: although God takes the initiative and offers the grace and power to prophesy, the human being who embraces God’s revelation does not vanish in the act of prophecy. The person does not dissolve or disappear under the veil of divine intervention. Instead, the individual - the prophet - remains fully present in the act of speaking and bearing spiritual testimony. They remain themselves, but purified, elevated, and divinized³¹.

The Spirit of God and the Messiah

From the texts analysed thus far, it is evident that God - Yahweh - speaks to His chosen people through His Spirit. The dynamic interaction between the Lord’s chosen ones and the Spirit is a captivating theme, particularly when examining the relationship between the Spirit of prophecy and the prophets within the chronology of Old Testament texts:

“In the time of the patriarchs, all pious and upright men had the Spirit of God. When Israel committed sin with the golden calf, God limited the Spirit to chosen prophets, high priests, and kings. With the death of the last writing prophets—Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—the Spirit was quenched because

²⁹ Jer 15: 11-12

³⁰ Eze 3: 12-14

³¹ *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, p. 60-61; *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, p. 1248

*of the sin of Israel. After that time, it was believed that God still spoke only through the echo of His voice, a diminished substitute. Therefore, the key ingredient to divinely inspired prophecy was considered to be the Spirit of God.*³²

The voice of God's Spirit, therefore, diminished over time due to human limitations. The heavenly Creator allowed people to glimpse, inevitably, the coming of a Chosen One, an Anointed by the Spirit, who would deliver God's message faithfully and without the corruption of sin. The Chosen and Messenger of God would inherit the liberating Spirit of Israel, bring justice to the poor and oppressed, eradicate evil from the earth, and fulfill God's divine work in a way no one before Him had been able to. The Anointed One would be endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit, which would descend upon Him and remain with Him eternally³³:

*"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what His eyes see or decide by what His ears hear; but with righteousness, He shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips, He shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around His waist, and faithfulness the belt around His loins."*³⁴

This passage, which describes the descent and abiding presence of God's Spirit upon the Divine Chosen One, forms the foundation for the theology of the gifts of the Holy Spirit so cherished in Christian theology.

Furthermore, the words of the prophet Isaiah project onto the Messiah - the One to come - all the gifts and graces of God that were sent to the inspired individuals who preceded Him: the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of David, the knowledge and fear of God embodied by Moses and the prophets. The Messiah, therefore, is envisioned as a national hero, a consummate political leader, and a divine emissary—

³² *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God*, p. 205

³³ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, p. 1248-1249

³⁴ Isa 11: 1-5

all these roles necessarily rooted in the Spirit of God³⁵. A series of texts from the prophet Isaiah outline this image of the Divine Anointed One³⁶.

The Messiah will be a person deeply immersed in the Spirit of God, whose gaze remains steadfastly focused on the poor and the afflicted. However, He will possess the wisdom and power of One whose strength is drawn from patience³⁷, suffering³⁸, and profound compassion³⁹.

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³⁵ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, p. 1249

³⁶ Isa 42: 1-7

³⁷ Isa 50: 7-8

³⁸ Isa 52: 13-15, see also Isa 53

³⁹ Isa 61: 1-3