The background of the cover is a painting of a vast field of tall grasses, possibly wheat or barley, under a blue sky. The grasses are rendered with visible brushstrokes, showing a mix of green and golden-brown hues. A single bird is seen in flight in the upper left quadrant of the sky. The overall style is impressionistic and textured.

JACK LEVISON

# A Boundless GOD

THE  
SPIRIT  
*according to the* OLD  
TESTAMENT

# A Boundless G O D

THE SPIRIT  
*according to the*  
OLD TESTAMENT

JACK LEVISON



**Baker Academic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

# Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Abbreviations xiii

Introduction 1

1. Spirit Blowing and Breathing 15

2. Spirit Coming Upon 33

3. Spirit Resting Upon 53

4. Spirit Passed On 73

5. Spirit Poured Out 89

6. Spirit Filling 105

7. Spirit Cleansing 123

8. Spirit Standing and Guiding 139

Conclusion 157

Scripture and Ancient Sources

Index 183

Subject Index 189

# Introduction

## Wordplay

The Jewish Scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament, include some evocative words. Words like *shalom* and *Sabbath*. *Torah*. *Covenant* or *testament*. *Blessing* and *mercy*. These are more than mere words. They are ciphers, signifiers, pointers to a consequential world apart that becomes a part of Israel's world. Words such as these are like old-fashioned keyholes through which you could peek and see a hidden room. In our parlance, they function like hyperlinks, opening to a reservoir of meaning. These key nouns punctuate the pages of the Jewish Scriptures:

- *bārākā*: blessing, occurs 71 times
- *šabbāt*: Sabbath, occurs 111 times
- *kābôd*: glory, occurs 200 times
- *tôrâ*: Torah, teaching, or law, occurs 223 times
- *šālôm*: *shalom*, peace, well-being, or simply *hello!*, occurs 237 times
- *ḥesed*: mercy or covenant faithfulness, occurs 249 times
- *bərīt*: covenant or agreement, occurs 287 times
- *rûah*: breath, wind, or spirit, occurs 378 times in Hebrew and 11 times in Aramaic<sup>1</sup>

1. These numbers are based upon Accordance software, although I also have consulted Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*

Of these nouns, the one that occurs most frequently is *rûah*: five times more often than the word for *blessing*, three times more than *Sabbath*, nearly twice as many as *Torah*.

You will not see this huge number in English Bibles, where the Hebrew word *rûah* is translated by different words. In English, the 389 occurrences of *rûah* tend to be subdivided into *breath*, *wind*, *spirit*, and *Spirit*; sometimes *rûah* is not translated by any of these words, such as when the Hebrew phrase *spirit of wisdom* is translated simply as *skill*.<sup>2</sup> Not so in Hebrew, a language in which the word *rûah* has much broader shoulders than any one of these English words. *Rûah*, simply put, carries more weight than English translations can communicate.<sup>3</sup>

We can illustrate the dominance of *rûah* with a simple bar graph, where the occurrences of the word *rûah* eclipse other significant words in the Jewish Scriptures (fig. 1). A more dramatic illustration

---

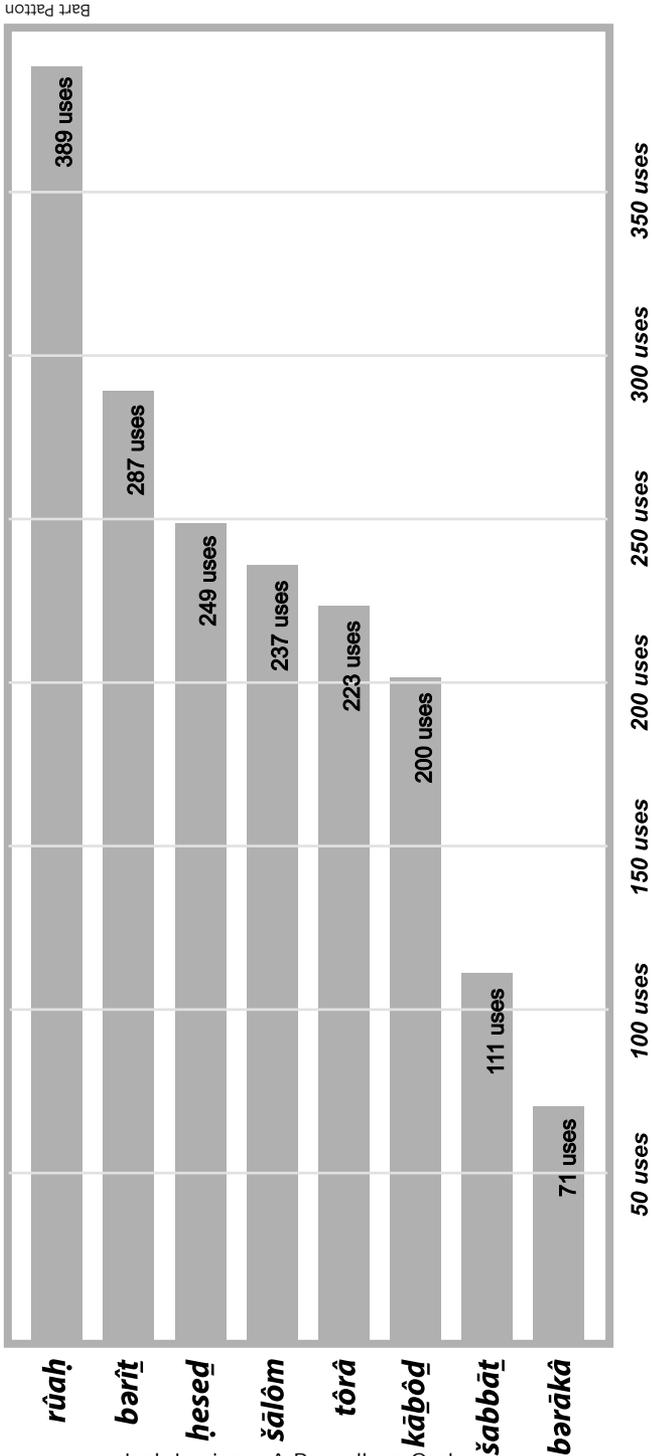
of the *Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994). Though relatively secure, there may be slight variations because of differences among the manuscripts. I've used English translations from the NRSV throughout the manuscript, though I modify this translation when necessary.

2. This occurs in the NRSV translation of Exod. 28:3. The NIV translates the phrase with *wisdom* and the CEB with *special abilities*.

3. You will notice that the word *spirit* is typically not capitalized in this book. The primary reason is that the Jewish Scriptures are full of surprises, making an easy decision about capitalization impossible. For example, you will see right off the bat in chap. 1 how a “wind from the LORD” comes from the sea. Should *wind* be capitalized because it is from the Lord? Or what about the breath? If every breath is from God, should *breath* be capitalized? Along the same vein, *rûah*, because it is such a powerful word, defies neat dichotomies between divine and human, spiritual and physical. Therefore, rather than choosing to capitalize some references, presumably because they refer to God's Spirit, and leaving others uncapitalized, presumably because they refer to the human spirit or breath or the wind, I have chosen the path of consistency. This allows you as the reader—rather than me as the translator—to make your own decision about the meaning of *rûah*.

This much will become clear: in the Old Testament, *rûah* shatters—perhaps a better word is *transcends*—the feeble dichotomies with which it is so easy otherwise to operate. The nearly four hundred references to *rûah* in the Old Testament cannot easily be sliced and diced into breath, wind, spirit, and Spirit. You need not take my word for it; much of the territory ahead of us will make this case, starting with chap. 1. If you would like to read more about this decision, I have discussed it in much more detail in *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 36–41. Particularly if you are prone to disagree with my decision not to capitalize *spirit*, I highly commend that discussion to you.

# The Dominance of *Rûaḥ*



Bart Patton

Jack Levison, *A Boundless God*

Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2020. Used by permission.

includes some of the world's iconic landmarks (fig. 2). If each occurrence of *rûah* were calculated to equal slightly more than three feet in height, then the 389 occurrences of the word *rûah* would rise to the height of the Empire State Building. The Hebrew word for *covenant* would be as tall as the Eiffel Tower, while the Hebrew word for *mercy* would reach to the tip of the Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco. The seemingly ubiquitous word *shalom* reaches only to the top of the Golden Gate Bridge—high enough but not nearly as high as the Empire State Building. *Torah* is the height of the St. Louis Gateway Arch, while *glory* reaches to the top of the Space Needle in Seattle, *Sabbath* to the flame of the Statue of Liberty, and *blessing* to the highest peak of the Taj Mahal.

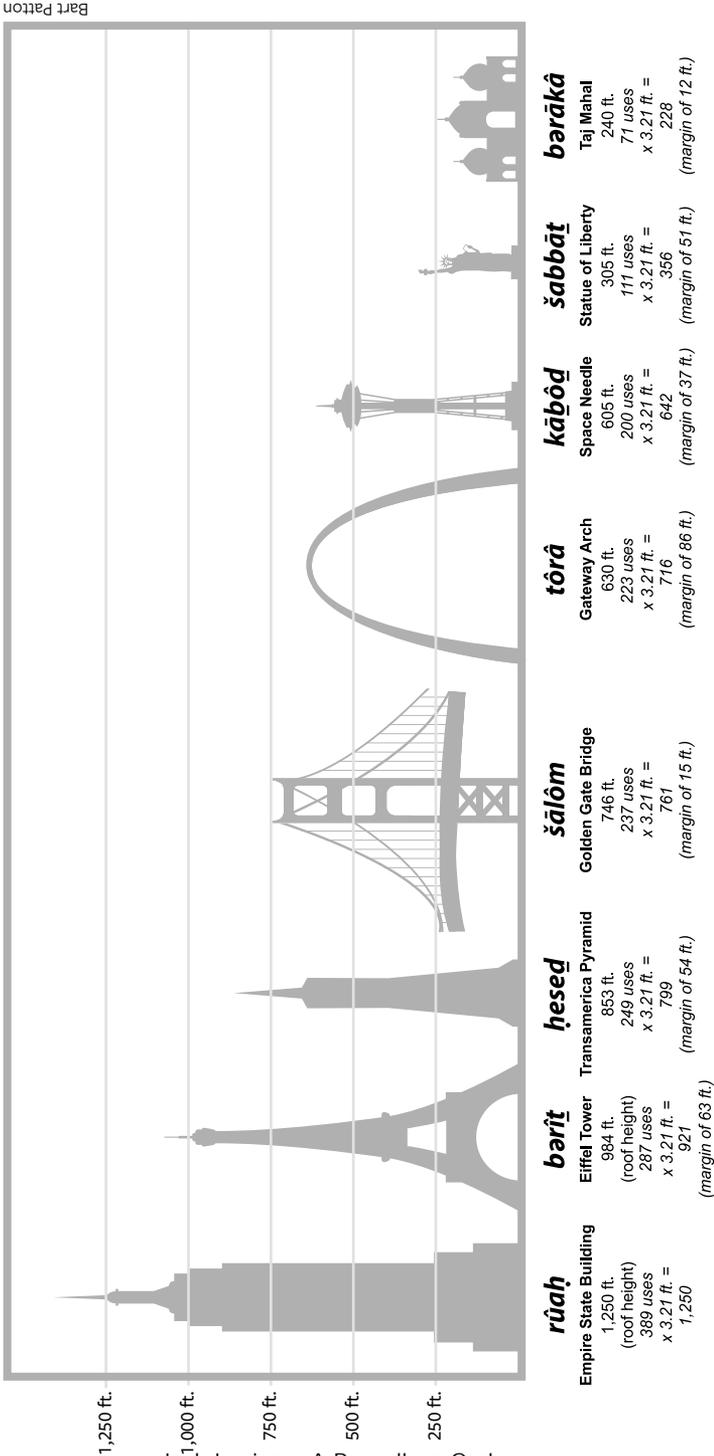
The 378 occurrences of the Hebrew word *rûah*, plus another eleven Aramaic instances in the book of Daniel, render *rûah* a dominant—*imposing* might be an even better description—noun, overshadowing other momentous nouns in the Hebrew Bible. Trying to understand the Old Testament without the dominance of *rûah* is like trying to imagine New York City without the Empire State Building. Yet *rûah* should be more than dominant; it should be *iconic*. Still, in an ironic and unfortunate state of affairs, there is actually a disconcerting disparity between the prominence of the word *rûah* in the Old Testament and the near absence of the Old Testament in studies of the spirit. The effect is a truncated study of the spirit, whose contours are too easily shaped by later literature, such as the New Testament, without serious and sustained consideration of the nearly four hundred references to *rûah* that lie at the base of the Jewish Scriptures.

## Hostile Territory

Trying to understand the spirit as if the word *rûah* did not occur 389 times in the Jewish Bible makes no sense. Starting anywhere other than the Jewish Scriptures, in fact, makes no sense in light of the foundational role these Scriptures play in the formation of Judaism and Christianity. Yet many Christian studies of the spirit<sup>4</sup> begin with only a quick

4. Christian theologians call study of the holy spirit *pneumatology*, based upon the Greek word for *spirit* or *breath*: *pneuma*.

# The Dominance of Rûah



Bart Patton

Jack Levison, A Boundless God

Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2020. Used by permission.

glance at the Jewish Scriptures,<sup>5</sup> and the spirit in the Jewish Scriptures is the topic of only a handful of books in English.<sup>6</sup> The neglect of *ruah* in studies of the Jewish Scriptures is nothing short of tragic.

It is also dangerous. Let me illustrate this with a cautionary tale. During the 1930s, under the sway of national socialism, a cadre of German scholars and theologians—and many of the German people with them—detached Christianity from its Jewish heritage. The Godesberg Declaration, published in 1939, portrayed Christianity as “the unbridgeable religious opposition to Judaism.” On all sorts of levels, Jesus was stripped of his Jewishness. For example, some professors appealed to the diverse population in Galilee in Jesus’s day to argue that his parents could not have been Jews by race. Popular authors, too, joined the fray. One allegory, which sold more than a quarter of a million copies by 1944, with translations into forty languages, reconceived Jesus as a savior born in Schleswig-Holstein. Even artists bent to the will of Nazi ideology. At the 1937 Nazi exhibit of “Degenerate Art,” Christ’s anguish on the cross was considered unacceptable. He was to be portrayed as aggressive and masculine; even on the cross, he was to be a strong Aryan. For example, in a wall mural in the Lutherkirche in Offenbach-Bieber, Jesus has Aryan features while the thief next to him is hunched over with exaggerated features as a European Jew.<sup>7</sup>

What happened when scholars, authors, artists, and pastors jettisoned Jesus’s Jewishness? We know the answer to this question. We understand the cultural captivity of Christ and where it led.

5. For example, Yves Congar devotes a dozen pages to the Old Testament in his massive *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 3–14; Sergius Bulgakov devotes four to the topic in his dense and long *The Comforter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 156–59.

6. Lloyd Neve, *The Spirit of God in the Old Testament* (Cleveland: CPT, 2011); Wilf Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995); Christopher Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006). Some books on the spirit analyze both testaments. For example, George Montague, *Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1976); Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Levison, *Filled with the Spirit*. David Firth and Paul Wegner have edited *Presence, Power, and Promise: The Role of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011).

7. Susannah Heschel includes this mural in *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 51, with a close-up on p. 54.

Along the same lines, to understand the holy spirit as an exclusively *Christian* entity, known principally from the New Testament and independent of the literature of Israel, is to enter dangerous territory. It opens the door to a spirit—and spirituality—that stands to serve a contemporary cultural goal, maybe even a sinister one. Without the perspective of an entire landscape, which the Jewish Scriptures provide, it becomes too easy, too *tempting*, to be altogether too selective in the dimensions of the spirit one chooses to emphasize or experience.

Developing an understanding of the spirit without the Jewish Scriptures is like living in a beautiful mountain range but only in a small, narrow, dark valley. That valley, rather than expanding the horizon, eclipses it; paradise, or what could be paradise, becomes an ideological and experiential prison, even if the occupants of that valley are unaware of their limitations.

We can put this more positively. To understand the spirit through the Jewish Scriptures is to garner altogether new insight that is otherwise inaccessible to us. The results will be enlivening; we rise through valleys and hillsides and hairpin turns at sunset. The results may even be alarming for their unfamiliarity and freshness. But one thing is sure. Our grasp of the spirit, by the time we arrive at the last page of this book, whether invigorating or disquieting—or both—will certainly be *biblical*, and perhaps even *boundless*.

## Shared Legacy

This study can function as a foreground to the New Testament, though it is not intended as such. The spirit in the Jewish Scriptures is not merely a precursor to the spirit in the New Testament. It is not merely a shadow, or foreshadowing, of realities to come. A study of the spirit in the Jewish Scriptures offers insights and challenges in its own right.

New Testament authors did in fact cull from the Jewish Scriptures in order to clarify their own understanding of the spirit, and it is essential for Christians to consider the influence the Jewish Scriptures had on the New Testament. For example, Jesus's platform in the

Gospel of Luke begins with Isaiah 61:1–2, which he reads when he arrives at the synagogue in Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19).<sup>8</sup> It is not possible to understand Jesus, as Luke portrays him, without setting Jesus’s vision within the context of this pivotal text from the Jewish Scriptures.

When Peter, in the book of Acts, attempts to explain the events of Pentecost, he turns to the prophet Joel’s vision that the spirit would be outpoured: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17–18).<sup>9</sup> Just as it is not possible to understand Jesus without key texts in the Jewish Scriptures, it is not possible to understand the early church as Luke portrays it without setting its inaugural experience within the context of this pivotal text from the Jewish Scriptures.

The Jewish Scriptures, therefore, prove essential for understanding the New Testament. They compose an indispensable foreground to the New Testament. *But that is not all they are.*

The Jewish Scriptures are also the foreground of Judaism itself. While the early church busied itself with understanding its experience of the spirit in light of the Jewish Scriptures, Jewish writers were occupied along a parallel vein. Alongside Christians, Jews laid claim to these same ancient Scriptures—and the spirit embraced within them. Hundreds of references to *rûah* punctuate the pages of early Jewish literature.<sup>10</sup> For example, in Jewish scrolls found in

8. The quotation is not exact; Jesus omits a reference to the brokenhearted. The omission of the only words in Isa. 61:1–4 that could be construed as individualistic and emotional underscores the economic and societal dimension of Jesus’s platform.

9. Joel 2:28–29 (MT 3:1–2). The quotation is not exact. Peter, in this sermon, actually adds a second reference to prophesying, presumably for emphasis.

10. Peter Schäfer offers the best study of the spirit in rabbinic Judaism, though it is in German: *Die Vorstellung vom heiligen Geist in der rabbinischen Literatur* (Munich: Kösel, 1972). A useful collection can be found in Gary Cage, *The Holy Spirit: A Sourcebook with Commentary* (Reno, NV: Charlotte House, 1995). The

caves alongside the Dead Sea, scrolls composed before the rise of the early church, a description of the inspired ruler of Isaiah 11 is applied to the leader of the congregation that probably met at Qumran over half a millennium after Isaiah 11 was written: “May He<sup>11</sup> give [you ‘the spirit of coun]sel and may eternal might [rest upon you], the spirit of knowledge and the fear of God.’ May ‘righteousness be the belt [around your waist, and faithful]ness the belt around your loins.”<sup>12</sup> In a different set of Jewish hymns—these are *not* from the Dead Sea—we discover again the language of Isaiah 11, not to portray a leader already alive, as at Qumran, but to describe a hoped-for ruler who would “not weaken in his days, (relying) upon his God, for God made him powerful in the holy spirit and wise in the counsel of understanding, with strength and righteousness.”<sup>13</sup>

It is inaccurate, therefore, to view the Old Testament primarily as a precursor to the New. It exists in its own right, a testimony to the vitality of Israel’s varied and long-held convictions about *rûah*. Equally important, the Hebrew Scriptures are the inspiration for countless Jewish claims to *rûah*. Belief in the spirit, even the holy spirit,<sup>14</sup> therefore, is a shared legacy of both Jews and Christians.

## Key Dates

The empires that loom large in Israelite history are Assyria (especially during the 700s BCE), Babylon (especially at the start of the 500s BCE), Persia (from the end of the 500s into the 300s BCE), and Greece

---

best collection of Dead Sea Scrolls texts, with commentary, are in Eibert Tigchelaar, “Historical Origins of the Early Christian Concept of the Holy Spirit,” in *The Holy Spirit, Inspiration, and the Cultures of Antiquity: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Jörg Frey and John R. Levison, with Andrew Bowden (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).

11. God.

12. *Rule of the Blessing* (1QSb) 5.25–26. Allusions are to Isa. 11:2, 5. Translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls are from Martin Abegg, Michael Wise, and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New English Translation*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2005). Brackets signify places where a text is damaged or missing and in need of reconstruction.

13. *Psalms of Solomon* 17:37. Translation from James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 2:668.

14. This phrase occurs in Ps. 51:11 (MT 51:13) and Isa. 63:10–11.

and Syria (particularly during the 100s BCE). When you hear about seventh-century prophets, think Assyria. About exile, think Babylon. About restoration, Persia. About the Maccabean rebellion, Greece and Syria. Five events, which go hand in hand with these empires, are also essential for perspective.

- In 722/21 BCE Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and threatened the Southern Kingdom.<sup>15</sup>
- In 597 BCE Babylon deported many Israelite leaders, including the prophet Ezekiel; ten years later, in 587/86 BCE, Babylon destroyed Jerusalem entirely.
- Nearly fifty years later, in 539 BCE, the new Persian ruler Cyrus authorized the exiles to go home and rebuild. Some Israelites in exile did just that; they returned to Palestine determined to rebuild Jerusalem.
- The perennial inability to get the job done leads to our next date, 445 BCE, and the mission of Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem.
- Finally, in 175 BCE a horrible ruler terrorized the Jews, prompting what turned out to be a surprisingly successful Maccabean rebellion in 167 BCE.

Beginning a book on the holy spirit with dates from Israelite history may seem odd. But doing this reflects the genius of the Jewish Bible, where tradition, confession, and theology—pneumatology even—combust in the context of human history.<sup>16</sup>

15. According to 1 Kings 12, the kingdom had split two hundred years earlier, after the death of Solomon.

16. Perhaps now is the right time to say that this study is based on the literature of Israel rather than on a reconstructed history of Israel. This is not, in other words, a quest for historical Israel's experience of the spirit. Certainly there is overlap between history and literature; it is important to grasp the nature of Babylonian exile, for example, to understand the oracles of Isa. 40–55 and to ascertain the challenges of reconstruction during the Persian era to appreciate Haggai's promise about the spirit. Yet, for the most part, my analysis is of the literature of Israel. When I discuss Joseph or Moses, I mean the figures portrayed in literature and not their putative historical selves, about whose existence there is simply too much scholarly disagreement. There are many excellent studies of Israel's history for those keen to explore it, of which I will list just a few: Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960); John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John

## Imperfect Rows

Not long ago, songwriter Nichole Nordeman reflected eloquently on the challenge inherent in a study of the spirit. The spirit, she mused, is “wild and growing in imperfect rows.”<sup>17</sup> A look at the passages about the spirit in the Old Testament, jagged as they are, suggests that she has captured the character of these imperfect rows.

It is even difficult to know, right from the start, what to call this Jewish Bible. *Old Testament*, a Christian term, can repel Jewish readers; it is also not entirely accurate, since different Christian churches include different books in their Old Testaments.<sup>18</sup> *Jewish Scriptures*, on the other hand, may come across as alien to potential Christian readers. *Hebrew Bible* is a good descriptive term—it excludes the Apocrypha, for example, and accurately describes the language of all but a few chapters—yet few contemporary readers, with the exception of scholars, would find it familiar or comfortable.<sup>19</sup>

Nor is there a flawless way to organize a book on the spirit in Israelite literature. Lloyd Neve chose chronology, though any reader who has dipped a toe in scholarship knows there is barely an ounce of consensus on the dating of Israelite literature. Tracing progression—or retrenchment, for that matter—in hundreds of passages that are so hard to date is notoriously difficult. Wilf Hildebrandt selected prominent themes based upon the spirit of God in creation, in God’s people, in Israel’s leadership, and in prophecy; this works well overall, although the subtopics for each theme are slightly haphazard. This,

---

Knox, 2000); John Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Megan Moore and Brad Kelle, *Biblical History and Israel’s Past: The Changing Study of the Bible and History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); and Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

17. She wrote this in an endorsement for my *Fresh Air: The Holy Spirit for an Inspired Life* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2012).

18. The Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, for example, include apocryphal books (e.g., Tobit, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon) that mainline and evangelical Protestant churches typically do not include. This book, by the way, does not include a study of apocryphal texts. Montague’s *Holy Spirit* does, and I analyze swaths of this literature in my books *The Spirit in First-Century Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) and *Filled with the Spirit*.

19. I have no strong preference and will refer to Israelite literature variously as the Hebrew Bible, Jewish Scriptures, and Old Testament.

of course, is the nature of the beast: probing a dominant component in a diverse collection of literary texts from nearly a millennium of a community's existence. Christopher Wright's study is topical too: the creating, empowering, prophetic, anointing, and coming spirit. These are broad categories—perhaps too broad. Empowering, for example, suits all of the other categories, since power is inherent in creation, prophecy, divine anointing, and the spirit promised. They are also so broad as to include texts that should not be grouped together, such as the artisans who constructed the tabernacle in the desert alongside the judges who led Israel before Israel had kings; both types of Israelites were empowered—but in extremely different ways. Artisans were *filled* with the spirit of wisdom; the spirit *rushed* or came upon or clothed the judges. The ends differed too; skilled artisans built a tabernacle, while judges liberated Israel with armies.<sup>20</sup>

I have organized this study around verbs associated with the spirit. This principle has flaws too, not least of which is how difficult it is to cover all 389 occurrences of *rûah* in the Jewish Scriptures, though I intend those I cover to be representative of many, if not most, of what I do not cover.

Despite the challenges posed by a study of the spirit in the Jewish Scriptures, our knowledge of the spirit can flourish by rekindling the understanding that Israel, in various guises and places and eras, embraced. If we retrace our steps, which in a way is what these chapters do, and recapture Israel's tenacious sense of the *rûah*'s presence, we can expect our grasp of the spirit to be informed, even supple,

20. In his section on the Old Testament, George Montague adopts an eclectic approach that evinces no dominant principle of organization. Chaps. 1 and 7 are chronological: the earliest traditions and voices of the restoration (pre-539 BCE). Chap. 2 looks at the book of Deuteronomy and various passages in Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings, which seem to be edited from the perspective of Deuteronomy. Chaps. 3 and 4 analyze prophetic literature, divided chronologically between preexilic prophets (pre-597 BCE), prophets of exile (597–539 BCE), and prophets of restoration (post-539 BCE). Chap. 5 explores what scholars have come to call the priestly tradition: a literary source from the period of restoration that includes several passages featuring the spirit (Exod. 31:3; Num. 16:22; 27:18; Gen. 1:2). Chaps. 8 and 9 are identified principally by literary genre. Chap. 8 examines apocalyptic literature; chap. 9 explores the wisdom tradition (e.g., Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Sirach [Ecclesiasticus], and Wisdom of Solomon). Chaps. 10 and 11 deal with postbiblical Judaism: rabbinic literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

like the spirit blowing, breathing, coming, resting, passing, pouring, filling, cleansing, leading, and guiding. This may not always be neat and tidy, despite my best effort, but, as Nichole Nordeman has said, we have occasion to study the spirit in order to “unearth its complex root system, and then marvel at the beauty that blooms above. Wild and growing in imperfect rows.”<sup>21</sup>

21. Endorsement, Levison, *Fresh Air*.

# 1

## Spirit Blowing and Breathing

Before reading this chapter, explore these texts:

- » Genesis 1:1–2
- » Numbers 11:10–35
- » Job 12:7–10
- » Job 32:8–9
- » Psalm 104:27–30
- » Psalm 146:1–4
- » Ezekiel 37:1–14

Just seventy-two hours removed from Mount Sinai, on their dramatic and prolonged trek from Egypt to the promised land, the Israelites complained. They complained a good bit on this journey, but just seventy-two hours removed from the site of intense revelation seems a bit much. Their complaints appear to be the epitome of ingratitude, but their anxiety was not unfounded. The threat of desert sandstorms, only one of the perils they faced, can turn seventy-two minutes, let alone seventy-two hours, into a maelstrom of disorientation—and death. In 2012, twenty-three vehicles were involved in a series of crashes that killed one person and injured seventeen people near Lubbock, Texas, when a dust storm blanketed

the region. “It was a white-out,” claimed Corporal John Gonzalez. “You couldn’t see past the hood of your vehicle.”<sup>1</sup> During the blizzard of 1888, famously called the children’s blizzard, boys and girls dismissed early from school perished while making their way home in the Dakotas and Minnesota. Some Scandinavian immigrants, hardly strangers to snowstorms, died walking from their back doors to their barns, so strong were the winds and severe the snow.<sup>2</sup>

Wind—*rûah*—can be a relentless enemy and a fickle friend. Some scholars may tell us that the imperceptible physical movements of the palpable wind, of *rûah*, metamorphosed over centuries of Israelite reflection into the movements of the invisible spirit, but this simple equation belies the unpredictability and menace of wind, which can turn a pleasant sojourn into a fatal expedition. Spirit, from this vantage point, is not a benign companion but a fierce escort, able to turn on a dime from breeze to blast. If wind is a force of nature, then spirit is a force of faith. Both, in the end, are *rûah*.

Seventy-two hours removed from Mount Sinai, then, the Israelites had reason for concern, so they complained about the food. I am reminded by their complaint of a moment, toward the tail end of my days at Cambridge, when famed historian Owen Chadwick, master of Selwyn College, invited me to his rooms to tender a decision about a five-hundred pound travel grant I had applied for to study German in Münster. As we chatted, he said, “Students will always complain about something, so we make sure the food is not very good so that they will complain about something insignificant.” The Israelites, like so many college students, complained about the food and yearned for the cuisine of home, even the fleshpots of Egypt. (By the way, I did not receive that grant. “We feel you can do this just as well,” quipped Professor Chadwick memorably, “with a good grammar and a transistor radio.”)

God reacted to Israel’s grievance in a sequence of three acts. God countered first with a fire that spread—fire expands only through the agency of wind—around the outskirts of the camp (Num. 11:1–9).

1. “Snowstorm Causes Problems for Travelers in West,” *Tampa Bay Times*, Dec. 20, 2012.

2. David Laskin offers a chilling narrative of this blizzard in *The Children’s Blizzard* (New York: Harper, 2004).

This did nothing to assuage their hunger, so God took another tack, this one to allay the pressure on Moses by distributing the *rûah* that was on Moses to seventy elders, who prophesied, along with two other elders, Eldad and Medad, who had not joined the seventy but prophesied anyway (making a total of seventy-two, like the hours since their respite at Sinai). A remarkable story to be sure, this relentless spread of *rûah*. Yet this divine response failed again to ease their hunger (Num. 11:10–30), so finally, in a third scene, a *rûah* “from the LORD” brought an unimaginably robust harvest of quail “from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground” (Num. 11:31). The *rûah* did the trick this time: hunger satisfied.

Three divine acts. A fire that spread implicitly through the agency of *rûah*. A *rûah* from Moses that caused a controlled epidemic of prophesying. And a *rûah* that brought a waist-high delivery of meat. Elemental to all of these divine initiatives is *rûah*, yet only one would normally attract the attention of a study of the Spirit in the Old Testament. Only one allegedly is spiritual. Only one inspires prophecy. Yet all of them are integral, each of them important, each an instructive and essential component for comprehending *rûah*.

Together these stories communicate the incapacity of human beings to control *rûah*: fire rips throughout the fringes of the camp, prophesying spreads from the outskirts to the camp, quail spread from the sea to encircle the camp. Over none of these experiences do human beings exercise control; they could not, even if they tried, forestall the fire or the prophesying or the nourishment.

There is also a fierceness to *rûah* in this sequence of stories. Not so much in the first scene, where even a breeze could have made the fire spread. But in the second scene, *rûah* had to leap past the wide ribbon of land that separated the two elders from the tent of meeting, where the seventy other elders prophesied in the presence of Moses. The third scene is also fierce: so many quail driven from the sea and deposited in such a swath of land! This is not a temperate breeze.

Something else arises from these stories: the presence of *rûah* is lavish. The fire would have continued spreading had Moses not intervened to stop its spread. The *rûah* was so plentiful that two elders

far removed from the group of seventy began to prophesy; there was so much *rûah*, in other words, that more than the intended seventy experienced the impact. And the quail, which *rûah* transported from the sea, filled a day's journey from the camp, three feet deep. The image of Israelites wading waist-high through quail is almost comic. There is, again, more than enough *rûah*—less like a breeze than a tornado. In each of these episodes, there is a surfeit of *rûah*.

To these insights we may add an observation: any effort to subdivide *rûah* into breath, wind, spirit, or Spirit is doomed to abject failure. In this story, or sequence of stories, *rûah* defies categories and overruns tidy edges. The implicit presence of *rûah* in the spread of fire, the advent of *rûah* in communal prophesying, the arrival of dinner in a commanding display of *rûah*—not one of these is any more or less *rûah* than the other.

These stories throw into disarray efforts to slice and dice *rûah* into breath, wind, spirit, and Spirit. There are elsewhere clear instances where *rûah* is a wind—we might say merely a wind—or where *rûah* is what keeps people alive—we might say merely breath—but the genius of the Jewish Scriptures is their ability, on the whole, to fuse these realities. When one scholar talks about *trifurcation* (that is his word), he means to distinguish the spirit of God from the wind and the spirit in creatures.<sup>3</sup> This will not do. Bifurcation or trifurcation is a violation of *rûah*.

The mysterious world of the *rûah* defies easy classification. The *rûah* on Moses, we might think, is definitely God's spirit, given how closely *rûah* is associated with prophesying. But to say this with certainty would also be ill-advised, because *rûah* is not in this scene depicted unequivocally as God's spirit. God does not refer to *rûah* as “my spirit, which is upon you,” but more tersely—and ambiguously—as “the spirit that is on you” (Num. 11:17). This scene, then, which seems on the surface to feature unmistakably God's spirit with a capital S, proves more elusive; it is difficult to say with confidence that God distributes God's spirit to the elders. It may be that God distributes Moses's spirit, Moses's charisma, Moses's capacity to

3. Lloyd Neve, *The Spirit of God in the Old Testament* (Cleveland: CPT, 2011), 3–4. Neve's appeal to trifurcation is actually an effort to reduce the categories from four (wind, breath, spirit, Spirit) to three (wind, spirit in creatures, spirit of God).

prophesy to the elders so that they can help him manage his recalcitrant people.

The next scene, by contrast, seems to have nothing to do with God's spirit, since *rûah* is clearly a wind, a force of nature, a material element sweeping in from the sea. Yet this *rûah* is the only one in this sequence of events identified without a doubt as a *rûah* "from the LORD." A wind from the sea is no *less* divine than a power that compels prophesying. By the same token, the power to prophesy is no *more* divine than a gale that supplies quail. To put this essential point another way, it is not the *rûah* prompting prophesying but the *rûah* dumping a boatload of quail around the camp that has exclusive rights to being named—to use traditional capitalization—the *Spirit* from the LORD.

Neat and tidy categorization, as natural as it may seem, does not do justice to the mysterious world of *rûah* in the Jewish Scriptures. A penchant for clear categories, for bifurcation or trifurcation, may mislead us as we attempt to grasp this ancient reality. We might just overlook some essential texts, like the quail-infested *rûah*-wind from the sea, or neglect the ambiguity of other texts, like the case of the prophesying elders.

With this perspective, we are ready to proceed in this study of the spirit in the Old Testament. What will drive our approach is not a proclivity for taxonomy but the tenor and tones of the stories, oracles, and poems through which a reader encounters *rûah*, with its inexorable defiance of categories and classification.

## Wind

Having said that, more than a third of the nearly four hundred references to *rûah* in the Jewish Bible are to *rûah* understood as a wind or breeze. The wicked are like chaff that the wind drives away (Ps. 1:4). A great wind causes Job's house to collapse (Job 1:19). The north wind brings rain (Prov. 25:23). Much of life is vanity and chasing after wind (Eccles. 1:14, 17). The east wind blows fiercely and frequently (Ezek. 17:10). Sin, like the wind, carries people away (Isa. 64:5). While wind can be a light breeze, a cool respite in a garden (Gen. 3:8), it is

typically strong enough to carry chaff or, more impressively, to scatter ships (Ps. 48:7; MT 48:8).

Still, whatever the magnitude of this wind, we would be remiss to distance it from God. When clouds, wind, and rain fill the sky in Elijah’s line of sight following a devastating drought, they are *God’s* doing (1 Kings 18:45). Perhaps for this reason the winds are God’s heavenly chariot. In a poetic stanza, in which the earth reeled and rocked, in which smoke ascended from God’s nostrils and fierce fire from God’s mouth, God “rode on a cherub, and flew” and “was seen upon the wings of the wind” (2 Sam. 22:8–11). The psalmist, too, portrays the clouds as God’s chariot and the winds as God’s angels or messengers, while fire and flame are God’s servants or ministers (Ps. 104:3–4). *Rûah* can, then, be wind, but we should not take that to mean *mere* wind.

We need look no further for more of this in Scripture than the sixteenth and seventeenth words of the Hebrew Bible: *rûah* ’*ēlōhîm*. Right at the beginning of the Bible, these words defy translation. The NRSV translates them as “a wind from God.” The NIV translates them as “the Spirit of God.” *The Message* reads, “God’s Spirit.” In the context of creation, a wind from God brooding over the abyss makes perfect sense. In fact, a parallel between darkness and spirit suggests the likelihood that two *material* presences are active prior to creation:

and darkness      covered      the face of the deep,  
and *rûah* of God   swept over   the face of the waters.

This first appearance of *rûah* in the Bible is indispensable for a robust understanding of spirit. Understood even as an elemental wind, akin to primeval darkness, this wind is God’s *rûah*, like the wind that delivered quail to the famished Israelites in the wilderness. If it is wind, it is *God’s* wind. This first appearance also illuminates the strength of ambiguity: spirit is wind, wind is spirit. To divide natural from supernatural, material from spiritual, is to ignore the cue in the first words of Scripture. Wind and spirit are indistinguishable from each other in this first appearance of the word *rûah*.

Wind and spirit *and breath*, in fact, are indistinguishable from one another in these early lines of Scripture. *Rûah* will shortly play an

implicit role as the breath of God, who will form powerful words that divide darkness from light, sea from land, night from day: *and God said* (Gen. 1:1–2:4). *Rûah* in its debut is a strange but not accidental alchemy of Spirit (it is explicitly *rûah* of *God*), wind (it spans the waters, just as darkness covers the abyss), and breath (in the next line, God will begin to bring order to the chaos of the abyss with well-spoken words).

## Breath

The understanding of *rûah* in the sense of breath occupies many corners of the Jewish Bible. In the first flood, for example, humans and animals with the breath of the spirit of life<sup>4</sup> in them perish under the swells of unruly water (Gen. 7:22).

This understanding of *rûah* runs through the prophets. According to Isaiah, for instance, the messianic ruler will kill the wicked with the *rûah* of his mouth (11:4). God, claims a prophet of the exile, gives breath<sup>5</sup> to people on the earth and spirit to those who walk on it (Isa. 42:5). The prophet of Isaiah 57:16 speaks for God, who promises,

For I will not continually accuse,  
nor will I always be angry;  
for then the spirits would grow faint before me,  
even the breaths<sup>6</sup> I have made.

God’s relentless anger would cause human beings to faint, breathless before divine wrath.

The presence of breath permeates the wisdom tradition as well. The author of Lamentations describes the intimacy with which the messiah, the anointed, “the breath of our life,”<sup>7</sup> was held (Lam. 4:20). Job complains that his breath, “my spirit,” is loathsome to his wife (Job 19:17).

Elsewhere in the book of Job, *rûah* is breath but not *mere* breath. Job tells his companions to ask the animals, birds, plants, and fish,

4. Hebrew, *nišmat-rûah hayyim*.

5. Hebrew, *nəšāmā*.

6. NRSV “souls;” Hebrew, *ūnəšāmōt*.

7. Hebrew, *rûah ’appênû*.

and they will declare that in God's hand "is the life<sup>8</sup> of every living thing and the *rûah* of every human being" (Job 12:7–10). He then raises the protest that he will have integrity "as long as my breath<sup>9</sup> is in me and the *rûah* of God is in my nostrils" (27:3). This is the bare-bones expression of the spirit in the valley of the shadow of death. Breath is spirit, and spirit is the source of integrity. With a gasp, Job claims that only truthful words will come from his mouth as long as *rûah*, the spirit-breath of God, can roll over his parched tongue.

Job is not alone, surrounded as he is by men who are trying, if unsuccessfully, to wrest meaning from his situation. Job, in agony, grabs hold of a truth that young Elihu, who has stood by and listened impatiently to his elders, claims to grasp as well:

But truly it is the *rûah* in a mortal,  
 the breath of the Almighty,<sup>10</sup> that makes for  
 understanding.  
 It is not the old that are wise,  
 nor the aged that understand what is right. (Job 32:8–9)

Breath is not *mere* breath. Spirit is never *mere* spirit. *Rûah* is not *mere rûah*. The spirit in a mortal is no less than the breath of the Almighty; the spirit-breath in a human being, in other words, does not belong to the mortal but to God. Centuries later, the Jewish author of the Wisdom of Solomon would appeal to the Greek notion of a borrowed soul that has to be given back to God at death (15:7–13). That is not exactly what Elihu means, but there is a baseline truth that my spirit, my breath, my spirit-breath, my *rûah*, is *God's*. It is not *mere* spirit-breath.

Admittedly, Elihu grasps this truth but does not execute it well. He may have the spirit-breath of God in him, producing words that roll over his tongue, but when he speaks, he crushes a battered Job with tactless and thoughtless words (as so often happens in the face of suffering). Elihu is insensitive to the core, hardly wise, and hardly able to understand, as he puts it, what is right. Nonetheless, he reckons,

8. Hebrew, *nepes*.

9. Hebrew, *nišmāti*.

10. Hebrew, *wənišmat šadday*.

with Job, that breath is not *mere* breath but a font of wisdom, even if he does not yet know how to tap that wisdom.

With Job, Israelite worshipers preoccupied with praise of God express a tension between the bane of bereavement and the lavishness of life. This concern wriggles its way into Israel's book of worship in two climactic expressions of individual praise:

I will sing to the LORD *as long as I live*;  
I will sing praise to my God *while I yet live*. (Ps. 104:33)

I will praise the LORD *as long as I live*;  
I will sing praises to my God *while I yet live*. (Ps. 146:2)<sup>11</sup>

Song and praise punctuate these refrains and suggest nothing other than an unabashedly positive affirmation of life. Yet the words *as long as* and *while*, as in Job's protest, hint at the limits of life that circumscribe praise. In light of what we have discovered so far in Israel's stories and wisdom literature, it comes as no surprise that Israel's poetry also expresses the keen awareness that life's end is concurrent with the loss of God's spirit-breath.

Because the shadow of death draped itself heavily over the destinies of countless unnamed Israelite individuals, the first of these psalms contains a poignant glimpse of the power that the spirit was believed to hold. This power was not exclusively in the world of miracles, in the immense power of a Samson or Saul but, even more profoundly, in the wrestling match with death.

For several stanzas of Psalm 104, harmony reigns. The winds are God's messengers. The earth is set firmly on its foundations. Springs and streams satisfy the earth. Cattle eat grass. Humans drink wine. Trees are watered. Birds and goats and storks have suitable homes. The sun and moon mark time. People labor until evening. Ships sail the seas. Even Leviathan sports in the water! God, in the end, can be trusted to provide: "These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open

11. Though the Hebrew is the same in both poems, NRSV translates the final words of Ps. 104:33 with "while I have being" and the final words of Ps. 146:2 with "all my life long." The portion in italics, which represents my translation, reflects the similarity in Hebrew.

your hand, they are filled with good things” (104:27–28). All is indeed right with the world, leading to untrammled praise: “May the glory of the LORD endure forever. . . . I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I yet live” (104:31a, 33). All is indeed right, except for death, which enters this poem discreetly in the words “as long as I live” and “while I yet live.” Praise, even unbounded praise, is bound by death.

Death disrupts and dismays even the animals that have learned to expect good things from God’s hand. The poet delicately shapes this ambivalent conviction about the spirit, life, and death through mirror imaging:

When you hide your *face* [*pānīm*], they are dismayed;  
 when you take away their *spirit* [*rûah*], they die  
 and return to their dust.  
 When you send forth your *spirit* [*rûah*], they are created;  
 and you renew the *face* [*pānīm*] of the ground. (Ps.  
 104:29–30, italics added)

Along with powerful poetic symmetry—*pānīm* at the start matches *pānīm* at the end, while *rûah* taken matches *rûah* sent—a concentrated cluster of allusions to the creation and curses of *adam*<sup>12</sup> informs these few lines. This is not surprising, as the psalm in its entirety consists of praise of God as creator, and creation in Genesis is marred quickly, almost immediately, by the possibility (Gen. 2:17) and then the inevitability (3:19) of death.

The poet knows that death is no benign passing from one sphere of existence to another. Death is divine absence—the hiding of God’s presence-face.<sup>13</sup> The hiding of God’s presence-face in this poem con-

12. Technically, this word should be transliterated *ʾādām*, but I’ve left it *adam* throughout for easier reading.

13. I will use the phrase *presence-face* throughout this book because I do not think either *presence* or *face*, though both are viable translations, captures the resonance of the Hebrew word *pānīm*. *Pānīm* is more than the abstract notion of presence and other than God’s face. Think of the intense negotiation between God and Moses at Mt. Sinai, where Moses presses God to accompany Israel. God relents: “My *pānīm* will go with you, and I will give you rest.” Moses, still uncertain, seals the deal: “If your *pānīm* will not go, do not carry us up from here” (Exod. 33:14–15). Moses here wants more than a general sense of divine presence and something other than God’s

tains a haunting reminiscence of Genesis 3:8, the moment at which “the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence [*pānīm*] of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” Death also portends spiritless or breathless existence. God had, in the beginning, pressed God’s face intimately against *adam*’s to breathe life into lifeless dust. Now God’s face turns away and takes away the spirit, prompting disintegration into dust and fulfilling the curse of Genesis 3:19: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

If the pendulum of Psalm 104 swings toward divine hiddenness and loss of spirit in its reimagining of Genesis, it also swings toward the creative impulse of God. What characterized *adam* in Genesis 2:7 is expanded to encompass the entirety of the animal world. Animals are not merely objects of human hunger but subjects who have a relationship with God. They live in God’s presence, God’s face; they possess God’s spirit; and they return to the dust. What Genesis said about human beings, the poet says about animals as well.

This is not an image of new creation in any simple sense nor the end of one era and the beginning of another. This is rather a realistic image of hope intertwined with the inevitability of despair. What this poet grasps with remarkable acuity is that a life abounding in praise and song is possible within the boundaries of disintegration and death. The poet will sing to the Lord *as long as* he lives; he will sing praise while he *yet* lives. Praise and song persevere despite the inevitability of death. The poet reckons with the tension that exists between death and creation, the suspension of life between the face of God and the face of the earth.

Pivotal to this perception is God’s spirit. Its absence brings a world of dismay, of God’s hiddenness, of death and dust. Yet its presence brings life, creation, and renewal of the ground. The pendulum does indeed swing in this song between death and life, life and death, but it swings more widely toward life than it does toward death. The spirit

---

face. In the end, Moses’s uncertainty is justified, as there is a certain intractability to divine denial. “But,” God says, “you cannot see my *pānīm*; for no one shall see me and live” (33:20). In light of biblical texts such as this one, I prefer the combination *presence-face* as a translation to capture the richness of *pānīm*. If you want to learn more about the fascinating conception of God’s *pānīm*, you will find a detailed discussion in my book *The Holy Spirit before Christianity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 21–25, 167–70nn110–46.

may be taken away, but it will also be given. And the earth will be refreshed along with it. Death—dearth of God’s spirit—cannot have the final say; life—creation by God’s spirit—comes along to renew the lifeless earth. The poet can sing in the brief span of a lifetime not because he ignores the harsh realities of existence but because he knows that the hiding of God’s face in death can be undone, unraveled, by the giving of God’s spirit-breath, by which the face of the ground is rehabilitated.

The second of these psalms, this one in praise of God’s reign over prisoners and the oppressed, evokes an inescapable but ambiguous association of spirit and death. In this particular psalm, the familiar refrain, “I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I yet live,” leads to the command not to trust in princes. No mortal is reliable; to trust in a son of *adam* is futile because his thoughts or plans, prince though he may be, will die when his spirit goes out of him:

Put not your trust in princes,  
     in a son of *adam*, in whom there is no help.  
 When his *spirit* [*rûah*] departs, he returns to his earth;  
     on that very day his plans perish. (Ps. 146:3–4 alt.)

This portion of the psalm, like Psalm 104, is filled with allusions to the early chapters of the book of Genesis, though with different creative twists. The psalmist puts rulers in their place by referring to them as nothing more than “sons of *adam*.” Like the first *adam*, their father, they come from the earth. Further, the phrase *he returns to his earth* recalls Genesis 3:19, though death is personalized in the psalm. It is not *the* earth in general that the prince returns to but *his* own earth, *his* own plot of ground. This is a fascinating detail, particularly in light of Psalm 104:29, in which animals are said to return to *their* dust as well: “When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their spirit, they die and return to their dust.” Death is personal. Deeply personal. Finally, the poet includes the spirit-breath in his description of a prince’s death: “When his spirit [*rûah*] departs, he returns to his earth.” With this description of death, the psalmist has replaced the original breath of life (*nišmat*

*ḥayyîm*) of Genesis 2:7 with spirit (*rûah*), although the meaning seems to be much the same.

No simple, salubrious portrait of the spirit as a creative and life-inducing element of existence is in this psalm. There is only the negative image of the spirit's withdrawal at the moment of death, of a return to earth, of an immediate destruction of plans. This is due no doubt to the effort of the poet to put princes in their place and to commend a life of trust in God, who reigns, unlike the sons of *adam*, "forever" (Ps. 146:10).<sup>14</sup>

### Wind as God's Breath

Whether in Torah, Prophets, or Writings, the spirit can be breath—not necessarily *mere* breath, never simply breath as physical existence but a reservoir of hard-earned and easily forfeited vitality and sagacity, just as wind is not necessarily *mere* wind but a chariot on which God rides with a bird's-eye view of the earth.<sup>15</sup>

The ambiguity of *rûah* emerges at the center of Israel's memory of the exodus in descriptions that could just as easily refer to God's breath or God's wind. A poetic reflection of the escape across the sea from the marauding Egyptians in Exodus 15:8 and 10 describes the event in this way:

With the spirit-breath [*rûah*] of your nostrils<sup>16</sup> the waters  
were piled up. . . .  
You blew with your spirit-breath [*rûah*], the sea covered  
them.<sup>17</sup>

*Rûah* must be the wind that caused the waters to divide on either side of the escaping band of slaves. Yet it is not merely wind. It must also be God's breath: what came from God's nose, what God blew.

14. I have devoted an entire chapter of *Fresh Air: The Holy Spirit for an Inspired Life* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2012) to the spirit-breath of God. See pp. 20–41.

15. Often, too, it is said that idols have no breath in them. God possesses what idols do not: *rûah* (e.g., Hab. 2:19; Ps. 135:17).

16. Or anger.

17. This is my translation. NRSV reads: "At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up. . . . You blew with your wind, the sea covered them."

This intersection of wind and divine breath is apparent elsewhere in the Jewish Scriptures. The prophet of the exile claims that

The grass withers, the flower fades,  
 when the *rûah* of the LORD blows upon it;  
 surely the people are grass.  
 The grass withers, the flower fades;  
 but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isa. 40:7–8)

A scorching wind, of course, causes grass to wither and flowers to fade, but the wind is also God’s breath blown over them. This intersection of wind and breath, along with the association with God’s word, emerges again in Psalm 147:18:

He [God] sends out his word, and melts them;  
 he makes his *rûah* blow, and the waters flow.

This psalm, like Isaiah 40:7, understands wind as God’s breath blown over the waters; the pairing of *rûah* with God’s word makes it clear that the wind that blows is nothing other than God’s breath, with which God speaks. So wind and breath are one and the same *rûah*. The breath of God that forms God’s word functions as a wind, which withers grass, melts hail, and causes waters to flow. Similarly, in Psalm 33:6–7:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
 and all their host by the *rûah* of his mouth.  
 He [the LORD] gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;  
 he put the deeps in storehouses.

Again, word and *rûah* from God’s mouth are the winds that move the waters, holding them in their heavenly treasuries. Psalm 18:15 (MT 18:16) is comparable:

Then the channels of the sea were seen,  
 and the foundations of the world were laid bare  
 at your rebuke, O LORD,  
 at the blast of the *rûah* of your nostrils.<sup>18</sup>

18. Though translated in the NRSV as “blast,” the Hebrew reads *nišmat rûah* *ʾappekâ*—“the breath of the spirit of your nose.” The same phrase occurs in 2 Sam. 22:16.

In this reflection upon Genesis 1:1–2:4, coupled with an allusion to the parting of the sea in Exodus 15:8–10, the breath of the *rûah* of God’s nostrils produces the threatening word that causes the waters to part during the creation of channels and land masses. Word and wind are one.

In another reflection on creation, God is said to hang the earth on nothing, bind the water on thick clouds, cover the face of the moon, describe a circle on the face of the waters, rebuke the pillars of heaven, still the sea by God’s power, strike down Rahab by God’s understanding, and pierce the fleeing serpent with God’s hand. In this context, it is said that by God’s *rûah* “the heavens were made fair” (Job 26:7–13, esp. 13). In such a context, which catalogs God’s activities, this *rûah* is not only wind but the breath God blows in the form of creative wind. God hangs, binds, covers, rebukes, stills, strikes down, pierces, and blows *rûah* into the heavens to make them beautiful.



Arguably the most dazzling fusion of wind, breath, and spirit—all of them *rûah* in Hebrew—occurs in Ezekiel’s grand vision of very many, very dry bones. The vision begins once the Lord, with a heavy hand on Ezekiel, brings him to rest by (or in) the *rûah* of the Lord in a valley. At first blush, the *rûah* looks like an actual wind that transports Ezekiel to a distant valley: “The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the *rûah* of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones” (Ezek. 37:1). This is probably not an actual wind. The advent of this *rûah* likely signals a visionary experience that recalls Ezekiel’s first vision, when *rûah* lifted him up in the context of his initial calling:

Then the *rûah* lifted me up, and as the glory of the LORD rose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of loud rumbling. . . . The *rûah* lifted me up and bore me away; I went in bitterness in the heat of my *rûah*, the hand of the LORD being strong upon me. I came to the exiles at Tel-abib, who lived by the river Chebar. And I sat there among them, stunned, for seven days. (Ezek. 3:12, 14–15)

Ezekiel's experience of *rûah* is visionary rather than physical. The beginning of the book makes this crystal clear: "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and *I saw visions of God*" (1:1).

Ezekiel's other experiences of *rûah* are also visionary. Ezekiel spots a human-looking figure with fire below its waist and gleaming amber above.

It stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head; and the *rûah* lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me *in visions of God* to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, to the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. And the glory of the God of Israel was there, like *the vision* that I had seen in the valley. (Ezek. 8:3–4, italics added)

Ezekiel's subsequent experience is visionary as well: "The *rûah* lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the house of the LORD, which faces east" (11:1). This experience concludes, "The *rûah* lifted me up and brought me *in a vision* by the *rûah* of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then *the vision* that I had seen left me" (11:24). The work of the *rûah* in this conclusion is visionary transport. What the rest of the book of Ezekiel means for Ezekiel 37:1 should be clear: Ezekiel's experience of *rûah* is visionary rather than physical. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of Ezekiel's language blurs the border between physical and visionary; this is certainly not the language of body versus spirit. Recall Ezekiel's first experience, when he went "in bitterness in the heat of my *rûah*, the hand of the LORD being strong upon me" (3:14). *Rûah* may not be an actual wind, but *rûah* does create an experience that is upsetting, unnerving, and transporting.

This initial ambiguity is only the start of the vision of very many, very dry bones coming back to life. In this strange and riveting vision, Ezekiel is instructed to prophesy to the bones: "I [God] will cause *rûah* to enter you, and you shall live" (Ezek. 37:5). The bones rattle; sinews and flesh grow. But there is no *rûah* in the bones. So again, Ezekiel is instructed, "Prophesy to the *rûah* . . . : 'Come, *rûah*, from the four *rûhôt*.'" As a result, "*rûah* entered them," and the bones

“came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army” (37:9–10). Here, in a magnificent vision of a revitalized nation, ambiguity strains to the breaking point: *rûah* as *breath* enters into the bones only when it comes from the four *rûhôt*, the four *winds* at the corners of the earth. Wind is breath. Breath is wind. All of this, begun when *rûah* transported Ezekiel in a vision to a valley of very many, very dry bones, is life beyond limits, hope beyond dreams.

The result is a luscious promise: “I will put my *rûah* within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD” (Ezek. 37:14). The intensity of this promise is evident only in light of the ambiguity of *rûah*. Though translators are forced to opt for *spirit* or *Spirit* in this final reference to *rûah*, the promise gains traction only in view of the reality that God had filled the bones with *rûah* when the winds, the four *rûhôt*, converged on a valley of very many, very dry bones. *Breath. Winds. Spirit.* What God promises, God has already accomplished—except to bring those bodies back to the promised land from exile in Babylon.

It is impossible to capture in English translation the drama of the original Hebrew, where all three English words—*breath*, *wind*, and *spirit*—are one: *rûah*. Ezekiel repeats this word in order to emphasize that the one and only *rûah* of God inspires the resurrection of Israel—a resurrection that is at once a creation like *adam*’s (*rûah* as breath), a rush of vitality (*rûah* as winds), and a promise of fidelity in their homeland (*rûah* as life-giving spirit). The beating of the drum of *rûah* is simultaneously personal, cosmic, and national; to subdivide this word, as translators are compelled to do, is to lose the power of ambiguity, by which Ezekiel piles up the connotations of *rûah* to pound resurrection into Israel’s deadened psyche.

The intimate connection between God’s breath and wind, then, came to a resplendent climax in the experience of Ezekiel, during the ominous decade following the deportation of Judah’s leaders in 597 BCE, followed by the wholesale destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. When hope was at its lowest ebb and Israel chanted the threnody, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” (Ezek. 37:11), Ezekiel imagined the highest intensification in Israelite literature of *rûah* as breath, wind, and the source

of national restoration. Not affluence and ease but communal crisis yielded literature of unsurpassed hope in the power and potential of God's *rûah* to breathe new life into a defeated and dislocated community.<sup>19</sup>

19. If you would like to learn more about this *rûah* in Ezekiel's vision, you will find a scholarly analysis in my *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 87–103, 202–17, as well as a more popular discussion in my *Fresh Air*, 141–65.