

The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

It is often difficult to identify the Holy Spirit within the Old Testament, which reflects the earliest stages of progressive revelation. In fact, the term “Holy Spirit” is rarely employed here. Rather, the usual expression is “the Spirit of God.” Hebrew is a concrete language with a relative scarcity of adjectives. Where in English we might use a noun and an adjective, Hebrew tends to use two nouns, one of them functioning as a genitive.¹ For example, where in English we might speak of “a righteous man,” what we typically find in Hebrew is “a man of righteousness.” Similarly, most Old Testament references to the Third Person of the Trinity consist of the two nouns *Spirit* and *God*. It is not apparent from this construction that a separate person is involved. The expression “Spirit of God” could well be understood as being simply a reference to the will, mind, or activity of God.² There are, however, some cases where the New Testament makes it clear that an Old Testament reference to the “Spirit of God” is a reference to the Holy Spirit. One of the most prominent of these New Testament passages is [Acts 2:16–21](#), where Peter explains that what is occurring at Pentecost is the fulfillment of the prophet Joel’s statement, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people” ([2:17](#)). Surely the events of Pentecost were the realization of Jesus’s promise, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” ([Acts 1:8](#)). In short, the Old Testament “Spirit of God” is synonymous with the Holy Spirit.³

There are several major areas of the Holy Spirit’s working in Old Testament times. First is the creation. We find in the creation account a reference to the presence and activity of the Spirit of God: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” ([Gen. 1:2](#)). God’s continued working with the creation is attributed to the Spirit. Job writes, “By his breath [or spirit] the skies became fair; his hand pierced the gliding serpent” ([26:13](#)). Isaiah looks to a future outpouring of the Spirit as a time of productivity within the creation: there will be desolation “till the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest” ([32:15](#)).

¹ A. B. Davidson says, “The genius of the language is not favourable to the formation of adjectives and the gn. [genitive] is used in various ways as explicative of the preceding noun, indicting its material, qualities, or relations” (*Hebrew Syntax* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902], [32](#)).

² J. H. Raven claims that the Old Testament references to the “Spirit of God” do not pertain specifically to the Holy Spirit: “There is here no distinction of persons in the Godhead. The Spirit of God in the Old Testament is God himself exercising active influence” (*The History of the Religion of Israel* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 164).

³ For the view that passages like [Ps. 104:30](#) are personal references to the Holy Spirit, see Leon Wood, [The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 19–20.

Another general area of the Spirit's work is the giving of prophecy and Scripture.⁴ The Old Testament prophets testified that their speaking and writing were a result of the Spirit's coming upon them. Ezekiel offers the clearest example: "As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me" ([2:2](#); cf. [8:3](#); [11:1](#), [24](#)). The Spirit even entered such unlikely persons as Balaam ([Num. 24:2](#)). As a sign that Saul was God's anointed, the Spirit came mightily on him and he prophesied ([1 Sam. 10:6](#), [10](#)). Peter confirmed the testimony of the prophets regarding their experience: "For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" ([2 Pet. 1:21](#)). In addition, the book of Acts gives witness that the Holy Spirit spoke by the mouth of David ([Acts 1:16](#); [4:25](#)). Since the Holy Spirit produced the Scriptures, they can be referred to as "God-breathed" (θεόπνευστος—*theopneustos*—[2 Tim. 3:16](#)).

Yet another work of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament was in conveying certain necessary skills for various tasks.⁵ For example, we read that in appointing Bezalel to construct and furnish the tabernacle, God said, "and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts" ([Exod. 31:3–5](#)). It is not clear whether Bezalel had previously possessed this set of abilities or whether they were suddenly bestowed upon him for this particular task. Nor is it clear whether he continued to possess them afterward. When the temple was rebuilt by Zerubbabel after the Babylonian captivity, there was a similar endowment: " 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty" ([Zech. 4:6](#)).

Administration also seems to have been a gift of the Spirit. Even Pharaoh recognized the Spirit's presence in Joseph: "So Pharaoh asked them, 'Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?' " ([Gen. 41:38](#)). When Moses needed assistance in leading the people of Israel, part of the Spirit was taken from him and given to others: "Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied—but they did not do so again" ([Num. 11:25](#)). Here the gift of administration was accompanied by or involved the gift of prophesying. While it is not clear whether Joshua's capacity for leadership was especially related to the working of the Spirit of God, there does seem to be an allusion to that effect: "Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses" ([Deut. 34:9](#)).

In the time of the judges, administration by the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit was especially dramatic.⁶ Much of what was done was accomplished by what we would today call "charismatic

⁴ Eduard Schweizer, [The Holy Spirit](#), trans. Reginald H. and Ilse Fuller (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 10–19.

⁵ Wood, *Holy Spirit*, 42–43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

leadership.” Of Othniel it is said, “The Spirit of the LORD came on him, so that he became Israel’s judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him” ([Judg. 3:10](#)). There is a similar description of the call of Gideon: “Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him” ([Judg. 6:34](#)). The Spirit’s working at the time of the judges consisted largely of granting skill in waging war, for example, with Othniel and Gideon. Gideon’s soldiers proved unusually effective, out of all proportion to their numbers. Similarly, Samson was filled with extraordinary strength when the Spirit came upon him, and he was able to perform supernatural feats: “Then the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon him. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of everything and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle” ([Judg. 14:19](#)).

The Spirit also endowed the early kings of Israel with special capabilities. We have already noted that Saul prophesied when the Spirit came upon him ([1 Sam. 10:10](#)). David’s anointing was likewise accompanied by the coming of the Spirit of God: “So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David” ([1 Sam. 16:13](#)).

The Spirit is seen not only in dramatic incidents, however. In addition to the qualities of national leadership and the heroics of war he was present in Israel’s spiritual life. In this connection he is referred to as a “good Spirit.” Addressing God, Ezra reminded the people of Israel of the provision made for their ancestors in the wilderness: “You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst” ([Neh. 9:20](#)). The psalmist beseeches God: “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground” ([Ps. 143:10](#)). The goodness of the Spirit is seen also in two references to him as a “holy Spirit.” In each of these instances there is a contrast between sinful human actions and the holiness of God. Asking that his sins be blotted out, David prays, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” ([Ps. 51:11](#)). And Isaiah refers to the people who have “rebelled and grieved [the Lord’s] Holy Spirit” ([Isa. 63:10](#)).

The good and holy quality of the Spirit becomes clearer yet in light of the work he does and its results. He is described as producing the fear of the Lord and various qualities of righteousness and judgment in the promised Messiah ([Isa. 11:2–5](#)). When the Spirit is poured out ([Isa. 32:15](#)), the result is justice, righteousness, and peace (vv. [16–20](#)). Devotion to the Lord results from outpouring of the Spirit ([Isa. 44:3–5](#)). [Ezekiel 36:26–28](#), a passage that adumbrates the New Testament doctrine of regeneration, speaks of a careful obedience and a new heart as accompaniments of God’s giving his Spirit.

The foregoing considerations from the Old Testament depict the Holy Spirit as producing the moral and spiritual qualities of holiness and goodness in the person upon whom he comes or in whom he dwells. In cases in the book of Judges, his presence seems to be intermittent and related to a particular activity or ministry.

The Old Testament witness to the Spirit anticipates a coming time when the ministry of the Spirit is to be more complete.⁷ Part of this relates to the coming Messiah, upon whom the Spirit is to rest in an unusual degree and fashion, as noted in [Isaiah 11:1–5](#). Similar passages include [Isaiah 42:1–4](#) and [61:1–3](#) (“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners ...”). Jesus quotes the opening verses of [Isaiah 61](#) and indicates that they are now being fulfilled in him ([Luke 4:18–21](#)). There is a more generalized promise, however, not restricted to the Messiah. This is found in [Joel 2:28–29](#): “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” At Pentecost Peter quoted this prophecy, indicating that it had now been fulfilled.

⁷ George Smeaton, [The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit](#) (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), [33–35](#).