

The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament/Derek Kidner

THE BIBLE LOSES no time in broaching the subject of the Spirit of God: the phrase meets us as early as the second verse of Genesis. At once, too, we are confronted with an important peculiarity of the term, since the translator has to decide whether it means at this point 'the Spirit of God' or merely 'a mighty wind'. The doubt hardly ever arises, but it does highlight the fact that the word 'spirit' is an impersonal one, neuter in the New Testament, and feminine (which serves for neuter) in the Old, with the everyday meaning of 'wind' or 'breath'.

This is not the drawback that it may seem, for the Bible makes use of this fact in a number of ways. In the first place it uses it to convey something of the word's theological sense. All three of the terms 'breath', 'wind(s)' and 'Spirit' are needed in English to translate the Hebrew *ruach* in Ezekiel 37, where the lifegiving 'breath' is summoned from the four 'winds' to raise the dead, and God then promises a comparable revival to Israel when 'I will put my Spirit within you' (verses 9, 14). Animating as breath, ubiquitous as the wind, the Spirit is also as untrammelled and unobservable as the latter: the Old Testament's implied comparison in Ecclesiastes 11: 5 (see text and margin in RV or RSV) becomes explicit in Jesus' words 'The wind blows where it wills . . .' (Jn. 3: 8) when He speaks of the Spirit's way with men. And the Old Testament corrects our ideas of spirit as something tenuous and barely real, by the fact that *ruach* largely brings to mind the thought of the wind's tempestuous energy, like that of Acts 2: 2; 4: 31 in the New Testament.

But the advantage of this way of speaking goes deeper than this. By starting with impersonal terms the Bible makes us appreciate, first, that the Spirit is not a second God or an angelic power, for where the Spirit acts it is clearly God Himself who acts; and secondly, that in His Spirit God deals with His creation not from far away but from within.

The first of these points can be illustrated from Elihu's words in Job 33: 4, 'The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life'. This conjures up no picture of a semi-divine agent, as some such title

as 'the Paraclete' might have done, for it is a fuller way of expressing the truth of Genesis 2: 7, that 'God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life'. When the giving of the Spirit has been shown in this way to be God's self-giving, it will be time enough to stress that this Self is fully personal.

The second point, the inwardness of the Spirit's work, emerges largely from the Old Testament's use of *ruach* to express the spirit of man in its many aspects, and to derive it from God. Even physically, our life and breath are regarded as our own and yet His: cf. Job. 27: 3, '. . . my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils'; and this is true of all creatures, as Psalm 104: 29, 30 affirms: 'When thou takest away their *ruach*, they die . . . When thou sendest forth thy *ruach*, they are created.'

But the word is predominantly used of us psychologically. In the realm of the emotions one reads for instance of a hasty, sorrowful or wrathful spirit (Pr. 14: 29; 1 Sa. 1: 15; Ezk. 3: 14), and when God moves people towards decisions He is said to stir up their spirit, as He stirred both Cyrus and the exiles in Ezra 1: 1, 5. Feeling and willing, then, are activities of a man's spirit; so, too, is thought. Rightly directed, thinking is a God-given process; according to Job 32: 8, 'It is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that make him understand'. Aesthetic and technical capacities are no exception, for God 'filled with a spirit of wisdom' the craftsmen who furnished the tabernacle (Ex. 28: 3, lit.), and the gift is described more explicitly in relation to Bezaleel their leader, in the words, 'I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability . . . and all craftsmanship' (Ex. 31: 3).

In other words, at every level of us, spirit, soul and body (or however else we describe ourselves) the Spirit of God is relevant, constitutive and accessible. His accessibility is made still more vivid by the quasi-physical verbs

that are used from time to time: to 'fill' (Ex. 28: 3; Mi. 3: 8), to 'pour out' (Joel 2: 28, 29), and even to 'take some of the spirit' which is upon one person and 'put it upon' others (Nu. 11: 17; cf. verse 29 which identifies this spirit as the Lord's). In this way we are saved from drawing the wrong inference from knowing that God is personal: the inference that He can only deal with us (as human persons can) from outside. The fact that He can penetrate and energize us needs to be expressed by some analogies that by-pass the categories of personal relations.

The dominant Spirit

But this is only one side of the picture. The other is strongly coloured with active and personal terms which leave no doubt of the Spirit's will and initiative. At the creation the Spirit dominates the emergent world, like a mother bird with its young (Genesis 1: 2), an image which God takes up again in Dt. 32: 11, and Jesus in Lk. 13: 34. In the life of individuals, He takes hold of Gideon and others, like a man putting on a garment; He leaps upon Samson, Saul and David to fit them for their exploits; He bears away Ezekiel, as though picking him up by the hair, for his visions. And the divine epithets are fully His: He is 'holy' and 'good', 'grieved' by man's rebelliousness (Ps. 51: 11; 143: 10; Is. 63: 10); He is omnipresent (Ps. 139: 7) and all-wise, for He needed no 'counsellor' for the work of creation (Is. 40: 13). Whatever the Old Testament predicates of God, in fact, it can predicate of the Spirit, subject only to the distinction between the Sender and the Sent (e.g. Is. 48: 16).

To turn more specifically to His activity, in the world at large, He is seen as Creator and Sustainer, as in the passages already cited from Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 (cf. Jb. 34: 14) where God is seen at close quarters with His creation; perhaps Isaiah 40: 13 implies also the Spirit's role in the direction of history, if it is taken in the context of verses 12-24 (cf. the context in which Paul cites it in Rom. 11: 34). As to His work of sustaining life, it is worth noting here that the statement in Psalm 104: 29, 30 is part of a longer unit

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which shows God's preservation of us through material means such as sun and rain, food and drink; and these are not alternatives to the Spirit, but the means He employs. This seems an important indication of His normal method of work, which is to use the means — *His* means — that are matched to different realms of being. The craftsmen such as Bezaleel, already mentioned, need not be thought to have had their skill ready-made, nor the prophets and sages their visions and insight without thought and spiritual nurture. Jeremiah and 'the Preacher', to name no others, are standing reminders of this (e.g. Je. 12 : 1ff; Ec. 12 : 9). The boundaries between innate gifts, acquired abilities and special promptings of the Spirit are impossible to draw; what matters is that the whole field is His, and Scripture properly fixes our attention on the divine doer.

The Spirit's work among God's people

Among God's people the Spirit is seen at work chiefly in three ways: guiding them collectively, as at the Exodus (Is. 63 : 10-14), regenerating the individual (the particular mark of the last days : Ezk. 36 : 26f.), and enduing picked men with special gifts. The last of these is the predominant Old Testament phenomenon. These enduements chiefly took the form of inspired leadership or of prophecy.

Early in Israel's history we also read of a special kind of 'prophesying' marked by excited behaviour, apparently without any verbal message. There is a description of it in the story of Saul at Naioth (1 Sa. 19 : 20-24) when his men tried to arrest David in the midst of a company of prophets. Overpowered by the Spirit of God, they had to join in the 'prophesying', Saul himself stripping off his clothes and lying on the ground through the rest of the day and night. But the same word is used in the previous chapter (18 : 10) where Saul 'raved' under the power of an evil spirit (cf. the prophets of Baal who 'raved' on Mount Carmel, in 1 Ki. 18 : 29); it could therefore be a sign either of God's Spirit or of derangement by frenzy or an evil spirit.

It is perhaps significant that this accompaniment of the Spirit's presence becomes less noticeable once the inaugural stage of the régimes of judges, prophets and kings is left behind, so that after the time of David it is hard to find firm evidence of it among the true prophets. It had attested the call of the seventy elders in Numbers 11 : 25, but only briefly ('they did so no more'), for the Spirit was given them for their work of judgment, not for display. It had also authenticated Saul as the Judges' successor (1 Sa. 10 : 11), and had marked the spiritual primacy of prophets over kings in the incident at Naioth (1 Sa. 19 : 20ff.). But David was given no such sign, though the Spirit 'came mightily' upon him from the day of his anointing (1 Sa. 16 : 13). In fact, ecstasy is never presented as an experience to be sought, nor is any comment made on its meaning. It is a startling phenomenon, but the heart of the matter is elsewhere, in the fear and love of God which the prophets tirelessly expounded, and in the fact to which the sign bore witness: that true leadership, kingly and prophetic, is conferred by the Spirit at His will.

Meanwhile the Old Testament looked on to the time of fulfilment, of which the Spirit-endued leaders were only first fruits. On the Messiah and Servant the Spirit would rest abundantly (Is. 11 : 2; 42 : 1; 61 : 1), and on the rank and file the same Spirit would be poured out not only in regenerating grace (Ezk. 36 : 27) but with gifts that only prophets had hitherto enjoyed (Joel 2 : 28f.). The very land would blossom, for the Spirit brings righteousness, and righteousness peace (Is. 32 : 15ff.).

If this was a hope to live for, it was also seen as a faith to live by, in the day of small things in which the Old Testament breaks off. One of the last of the prophets (Zc. 4 : 6) sums it up in a motto for the Christian age as much as for the pre-Christian: *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.* If it had given us no other saying than this, the Old Testament would still have bequeathed us much more than a 'background' to the New.