

Meet the Spirit of God

In the first verse in *Genesis* we learned that a god existed before the process of creating began. No name was given for this god, but we are told that “this god is the creator of the heavens and the earth.” In my previous email, we learned from *Enuma Elish* that “Marduk, a god, created the heavens and earth.” Marduk did not exist before the creation process began. As a matter of fact, *Marduk was a fourth-generation god in the story.*

The Hebrew word translated “create” is “bara” and it means “to change things that exist.” The second verse in *Genesis* reveals the things that are available for the Creator to change are *darkness* and *deep water*. The second verse also reveals something else about the Creator:

“ . . . the ruach of god hovered above the surface of the deep waters . . . ”

The book *Scripture and Translation* by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (translated into English by Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox) is a classic in the art and science of translation. Martin Buber (1878–1965) was one of the most influential figures in the study of philosophy and religion in the twentieth century. Below are insights from Buber about the meaning of the Hebrew word “*ruach*.”¹

Biblical teaching often does not so much present its highest truths as it lets them be opened up — opened up not by breaking a code or deciphering an allegory, but by these arcs of significant repetition, linking passage to passage in a manner perceptible to every openmindedly attentive reader.

The second verse of the Bible says of the “*ruach of God*” — or the “*God-ruah*” — that it “*hovered above the face of the waters.*” What sort of ‘hovering’ this was? we learn only later (if at all) from the only passage of the Bible where this rare verb recurs in the same form: Deut. 32:10-12.

*“He found him in a desert land and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness,
He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye.
As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young;
spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings.
So the LORD alone led him, and there was no foreign god with him.”*

God, who takes Israel from among the peoples and bears it into the promised land, is in that passage compared with the eagle, who with softly beating wings hovers over its nest to quicken it, i.e., to agitate its fledgling young to flight, but who then spreads its wings wide, takes up one of its young, and “bears it on its pinions” (cf. Exod. 19:4).

EXPLORING OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

*We may presume that the waters correspond to the nest
and that the creatures whom God will call into being
correspond to the eagle's young.*

But how are we to understand **ruach**? Why **ruach** and not God himself should be the subject becomes clear when we see that the spreading of wings is spoken of here not, as in the song of Moses, metaphorically, but quite literally. What, however, does **ruach** mean? Opinion has been divided from the beginning between "**wind**" and "**spirit**." Both interpretations rest on the notion that we have to choose between them. But we do not.

The dynamic meaning of **ruach**, which alone enables us to comprehend the passage — a passage, by the way, which even radical source critics have judged "very old" and "very ancient" — is the meaning of a "**breathing**," a "**blowing**," a "**surging**," a "**rushing**." But here, in its first appearance, **Ruach of God**, the breathing, blowing, surging phenomenon, is neither natural nor spiritual but both in one:

*It is the creative breathing of this God
that brings both nature and spirit into being.*

Ruach of God stands as a great, unformulated, latent theological principle, expressed only by implication: that God is to be assigned neither to the realm of nature nor to the realm of spirit, that God is not nature and is not spirit either, but that both have their origin in him. We should note that God's **ruach** is named only at the beginning of the creation story — it is the undivided intentional totality of the work of creation that is assigned to ruach.

Ruach of God, Spirit of God and Holy Spirit are references to the same thing. They all indicate the "presence of the Creator." In my earlier email, "*In the Beginning God*" ([click here to read](#)), I discussed the first thing God created. Now let's add the above information about the ruach to that act of creation.

*God spoke and His breath/spirit flowed/surged/rushed
into the darkness on the surface of the deep water –
and the light of life existed.*

In the next article we will discuss the second and third acts of creation – *the creation of the heavens and the earth*.

¹ *Scripture and Translation* by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (translated into English by Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox) © 2019 by Indiana University Press; pp. 14-17.