

# The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

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## Introduction

The work of the Spirit in the Old Testament reveals God's nature in many different ways. The Spirit reflects God's presence (Pss 51:11, 139:7) and power (Ps 104:30, Mic 3:8). The Spirit not only conveys divine revelation through the prophets (2 Sam 23:2, Ezek 11:5) but also imparts gifts of wisdom, knowledge and understanding that enable God's servants to accomplish their tasks (Exod 31:3, Isa 11:2). The Spirit displays God's sovereignty by ordaining, directing and counseling Israel's leaders (Num 11:17, Judg 13:25, Neh 9:20). The Spirit manifests God's holiness by convicting the world of sin, regenerating the repentant, and sanctifying believers in godliness (Neh 9:30, 1 Sam 10:6, Ps 143:10).

Although the work of the Spirit is remarkably diverse, the activity of the Spirit appears to be directed toward the common goal. The purpose of this paper is to examine the major sections of the Old Testament to determine the central purpose behind the work of the Spirit in this period.

## The Pentateuch

While the Spirit is first associated with the power of creation (Gen 1:2), the role of the Spirit quickly shifts towards leading, guiding and empowering God's servants. The Spirit is seen striving with sinful humanity before the Flood, presumably trying to lead them to repentance (Gen 6:3). Joseph, Moses, Joshua and seventy elders of Israel are ordained and empowered to lead, rule and judge through the working of God's Spirit (Gen 41:38, Exod 31:1ff, Num 11:17ff, 27:18). In addition, Joseph, Bezaleel, Aholiab and Joshua are imbued with wisdom to facilitate God's plan (Deut 34:9). There is also an early association with prophetic revelation as well (Num 11:25, 24:2); through the direction of the Spirit, the prophet is under God's strict superintendence (Num 22:18).

These activities are not random events but are related to God's overall plan for humanity. The Creation prepared the earth for the establishment of God's kingdom through Adam and Eve. When they rejected God's rule, the Spirit worked through key individuals to establish God's theocratic kingdom through Israel.

## The Judges

After the death of Joshua, the Spirit continues to be associated with the leadership of God's people during the period of the Judges. Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson are ordained, inspired and empowered by the Spirit to fight the Lord's battles against the enemies of God's theocratic kingdom (Judg 3:9-10, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25). The power of the Spirit comes to the fore in Samson's life most prominently (Judg 14:6, 19, 15:14).

This period ends with Samuel, the last of the Judges, ordaining and anointing both Saul and David by the working of the Spirit (1 Sam 10:1ff, 16:13). These early kings are lead by the Spirit as the Judges were (1 Sam 11:6) and also exhibit prophetic gifts (1 Sam 19:23, 2 Sam 23:2, 1 Chr 28:12). However, after Solomon's death, the Spirit speaks indirectly to the monarchy through the prophets rather than directly to kings as prophets.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that the prophets are now organized as a group with Samuel as their leader (1 Sam 19:20). Until this point, the Spirit is usually associated with individual leaders who are implementing or facilitating God's rule on the earth, but this group

appears to hold no civil office or authority. Thus, the revelatory work of the Spirit now begins to become more prominent.

By the time of David's death, the theocratic kingdom is finally secured. Throughout the period of the Judges and the early monarchy, the Spirit continues to work through key individuals to establish Israel in the Promised Land. When this leadership is lacking, the people quickly revert to the idolatrous practices of the neighboring nations. With Solomon's inauguration and the establishment of the temple, God's kingdom is secure both militarily and religiously.

### The Evil Spirit from the Lord

Before leaving this period, it is important to consider the question of the evil spirit sent by the Lord on King Saul (1Sam 16:14ff, 18:10, 19:9). Since God is perfect in holiness and righteousness, it is inconceivable that the Spirit would be associated with evil in any form. How is this passage to be understood?

When people stray from God, as Saul and Abimelech did, they become vulnerable to demonic powers (Judg 9:23). A similar situation is seen in the New Testament when Paul excommunicated certain wayward souls with the hope that the punishment would encourage a change of heart (1 Cor 5:1-5, 1 Tim 1:20). Being close to God means being far from Satan and vice versa (Jas 4:7-8). Having lost God's favor, the mind can have no peace (Phil 4:6-7, Heb 10:26-27) and this was certainly true for Saul.

This evil spirit is not the Holy Spirit. In the book of Job, spirits both holy and fallen are summoned into God's presence from time to time (Job 1:6). Satan in particular appears to have continual access to God until the return of Christ (Rev 12:7-10, 20:1ff).

### Wisdom and Poetry

The books of wisdom and poetry focus mainly on the power of the Spirit. In the book of Job, there is frequent mention of the giving and sustaining of life (Job 27:3, 33:4, 34:14). In Psalms, the Spirit is associated with God's presence (Pss 51:11, 139:7), creative power (Ps 104:30) and direction (Ps 143:10). These works tend to praise and exalt God for His mighty deeds; therefore, it is not surprising that the creative nature of the Spirit is seen here.

### The Latter Kings

After the death of Solomon, the last of the prophet-kings, the Spirit works only through the prophets and is associated with revelation and mighty works. From Abraham until David, God's purpose was to establish His theocratic kingdom upon the earth, and the Spirit is seen facilitating that purpose. Once this is achieved, Israel strays from God on an inevitable path to destruction and exile. The Spirit now works through the prophets to call Israel to repentance.

In First and Second Kings, the Spirit is associated with the mighty deeds of Elijah (1 Kgs 18:12, 2 Kgs 2:16). Elisha seeks a double portion of this spirit of power, and the sons of the prophets recognize that the authority of Elijah is conferred upon Elisha by the parting of the Jordan as Elijah had done (2 Kgs 2:9, 15).

In First and Second Chronicles, the Spirit is associated with revealing God's council and direction by prophetic utterance to the king and his people. While some of these prophets are part

of the religious establishment (2 Chr 20:14, 24:20), others are not (1 Chr 12:18, 2 Chr 15:1-2, 18:23). Their backgrounds appear to be diverse and there is no clear reason why the Spirit would select them for this role except it be for personal, spiritual reasons (1 Sam 16:7).

### The Lying Spirit from the Lord

In both Kings and Chronicles, there is a pericope about a lying spirit sent from the Lord (1 Kgs 22:1ff, 2 Chr 18:1ff). As in the case of the evil spirit sent by God upon Saul, this spirit appears to be a fallen angel who is willing to facilitate Ahab's death sentence (Job 1:6ff). And as in Job's case, Satan and his demons can do only what God allows. Therefore, while God does not tempt anyone with evil (Jas 1:13), He permits free moral choice so He can judge each of His servants (Deut 13:1-3, Ps 7:9, 1 Tim 4:1, 1 John 4:1).

It should be noted, in Micaiah's defense, that Ahab was not fooled for one instant by his favorable prediction (1 Kgs 22:8, 16). Words on a page cannot convey the tone and facial expression of this incident, and an element of sarcasm or contempt seems indicated. Given that Ahab saw through this deception so easily, it is to God's great glory that He foresaw that Ahab would be so enraged at Micaiah as to fall into this obvious trap.

### Pre-Exilic Prophets

As the exile draws ever closer, the work of the Spirit becomes associated less with a call to repentance and more with a future redemption expressed in eschatological terms. Because the weakness of the old covenant is fully demonstrated in Israel's failure to obey, the Spirit now becomes associated with the messianic and regenerative elements of the future new covenant.

As Dunn observes, "The most striking feature of the pre-exilic period is the strange reluctance (as it would appear) of the classical prophets to attribute their inspiration to the Spirit. . . . perhaps already emerging was the conviction that the work of God's [Spirit] would be primarily eschatological."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Jeremiah does not mention the Spirit at all; revelation comes by the word of the Lord (Jer 1:2, 11, 13) and power is found in the hand of the Lord (Jer 6:12, 15:6, 25:15).

God's plan for establishing His rule upon the earth is not thwarted by Israel's failure; instead, it occasions the announcement of a plan for Israel's redemption in the latter days. The Spirit is associated with several messianic prophecies (Isa 11:2, 42:1, 61:1) and will be poured out on all flesh when the earth is restored as well (Isa 32:15, 44:3, Joel 2:28-29). The Spirit will also thwart the enemies of God's theocratic rule (Isa 59:19-20).

### The Exile and Beyond

During and after the Exile, the Spirit is once again associated with the revelation of God's message. The Spirit transports Ezekiel in visions (Ezek 2:2, 3:12ff, 8:3, 11:1ff, 37:1) and puts God's word into his mouth (Ezek 11:5). In Daniel, the wisdom and indwelling presence of the Spirit enables him to interpret dreams and visions for the king (Dan 4:8ff, 5:11ff). Zechariah and Nehemiah also mention the revelatory work of the Spirit (Zech 7:12, Neh 9:20, 30).

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<sup>1</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, "Spirit, Holy Spirit" in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed.

In addition, the eschatological work of the Spirit is also refined. The Spirit is associated with the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of Israel (Ezek 37:14). The future outpouring of the Spirit is described in distinctly regenerative terms (Ezek 11:19, 36:26-27, Zech 12:10).

### Conclusion

Throughout the Old Testament, the work of the Spirit of God is extensive and varied. The Spirit reflects God's omnipresence and omnipotence. The Spirit conveys divine revelation through the prophets and imparts gifts of wisdom, knowledge and understanding. The Spirit demonstrates God's sovereignty by ordaining, directing and counseling Israel's leaders. The Spirit manifests God's holiness by convicting the world of sin, regenerating the repentant and sanctifying believers in godliness.

Throughout the Old Testament, the activity of the Spirit is directed toward the common goal of revealing, facilitating and implementing God's rule upon the earth. The Creation prepared the earth for the establishment of God's kingdom through Adam and Eve. When they rejected God's rule, the Spirit worked through key individuals to establish God's theocratic kingdom through Israel. When Israel failed in their mission, the Spirit was instrumental in revealing and implementing the new covenant that would enable Israel to succeed.

From beginning to end, the Spirit can be seen working out God's plan to establish His divine kingdom upon the earth. The Old Testament opens with a garden paradise containing the tree of life and humanity rejecting God's rule. The New Testament closes with a new paradise containing the tree of life and humanity finally accepting God's rule.