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The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

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In 1967, Geoffrey W. Grogan¹ wrote “The Experience of Salvation in the Old and New Testaments” (*Vox Evangelica* 5, 4-26), which became one of those awakening moments for my research in the older testament. In many ways this was a landmark essay to me, for among many other fine contributions raised in that same article, I was particularly struck by his treatment of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Old Testament believers. In that article, Geoffrey Grogan had wisely commented: “[T]he same Spirit of faith” in 2 Corinthians 4:13 means that Paul claims that our faith is the product of the same Holy Spirit who was at work in the author of Psalm 116:10, whence the apostle Paul derived the quotation in 2 Corinthians 4:13 (13).

Few in the twentieth century, up to that point, had wrestled with this key question as he had, though it remained as an important question for all who undertook the exposition of the older testament.

However, more recently in the twenty-first century, James M. Hamilton, Jr., has extended that conversation in his book *God's Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006).² Despite the growing number of contributions to this issue, Grogan's 1967 article seemed to point more adequately to a better solution, whereas most were satis-

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- 1 It is indeed a pleasure to celebrate with Geoffrey Grogan the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday. I am indebted to him for his several exegetical contributions that have made a real impact on my life and my research in the older testament over the years.
 - 2 In between these two writers, mention should be made of: Charles A. Briggs, “The Use of ריח in the Old Testament”, *JBL* 19 (1900), 132-145; Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Spirit of God in the Old Testament”, in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1029; Sidney H. Hooke, “The Spirit Was Not Yet (John 7:39)”, *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963):372-80; Lloyd Neve, *The Spirit of God in the Old Testament* (Toyko: Seibunsha, 1972); W. J. Dumbrell, “Spirit and Kingdom of God in the Old Testament”, *Reformed Theological Review* 33(1974), 1-10; Leon J. Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Gary Fredricks, “Rethinking the Role of the Holy Spirit in the Lives of Old Testament Believers”, *Trinity Journal* 9 (1988), 81-104; John Goldingay, “Was the Holy Spirit Active in Old Testament Times?” *Ex auditu* 12(1996), 14-28; Daniel I. Block, “Empowered by the Spirit of God: The Holy Spirit in the Historiographic Writings of the Old Testament”, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1 (1997), 42-61.

fied to reserve the special experience of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer until New Testament times, as Hamilton also went on to argue.

To be sure, there was general agreement on the Spirit's work in an individual's regeneration, for the incident of Nicodemus in John's gospel, chapter 3, seemed to easily secure that conclusion, especially since it took place in a time before the death, burial and resurrection of Messiah. Where the agreement stopped, however, was over the question as to whether the Old Testament believer had an abiding experience of the Holy Spirit's presence in the believer's life. The most that many would allow was that the Holy Spirit would come upon special individuals for special times, such as the seventy elders (Num 11:24-30), or on the writing prophets of the Old Testament for their work in Scripture.

However, this conclusion immediately raises an objection: How could all of these old covenant persons have believed and been enabled to live sanctified lives if the Spirit of God did not dwell in them? Must we say that an Old Testament believer was able to please God spiritually and to be sanctified in the presence of God without the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit? Did not Enoch please God (Heb 11:5)? Was not Noah one who walked with God and who was righteous and blameless (Gen 6:9)? Did not Joseph resist temptation (Gen 39:9)? Was not Job one who turned away from evil, one who feared God and was blameless and upright (Job 1:1)? Did not David pray, do not 'take your Holy Spirit from me?' (Ps 51:11). Did not the prophet Isaiah teach that the people 'rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit' (Isa 63:10), the same Lord who had 'set his Holy Spirit among them?' (Isa 63:11). Moreover, when the Lord chose Bezalel to be the chief craftsman on the tabernacle, did he not 'fill him with the Spirit of God' (Ex 31:3; 35:31). Was not John the Baptist 'filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth' (which was also during Old Testament times, Lk 1:15), just as Elizabeth was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Lk 1:41). Likewise, John the Baptist's father Zechariah was 'filled with the Holy Spirit and [he] prophesied' (Lk 1:67).

But on the other hand, if they were indwelt, then what are we to make of John 7:39 and 16:7? These two texts would appear to contradict the claims just cited from the Old Testament.

Defining the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit

The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is defined as the abiding and on-going work of the Holy Spirit of God, in which he resides within the believer to bless or to judge each, as determined by the standard of God's covenant and will. This is to be distinguished from God's omnipresence and his work in the physical realms, or even in his occasional presence when he was 'with' one such as Ishmael (Gen 21:20), which does not carry the full benefits of his presence as it did, for example, with Isaac (Gen 26:3), the person of promise.

Once again we must ask: If the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit enabled Old Testament persons to believe, as most appear to readily agree, how were these old covenant saints maintained and established in their faith if they were not indwelt by God's Spirit? Does not Scripture teach that it is the work of the

Holy Spirit that frees us from the power of sin (Rom 8:1-17)? Did not the apostle Paul emphasize that same power in Galatians 5:16-25? If so, how then were men like Enoch, Noah, Joseph and Job able to live righteous lives? The requirement for righteousness is just as strong in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament, for the apostle Peter quoted from Leviticus 11:44 in 1 Peter 1:15-16 to prove that we should be as holy as the Lord is. There is nothing in Scripture that suggests that New Testament believers were enabled to live on a higher plane or to experience holiness and righteousness more than their Old Testament counterparts.

The answer that many give is that the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these old covenant individuals was to be found in the fact that God himself dwelt in the tabernacle and then in the temple.³ This linkage is made usually because believers in the New Testament are said to be the temple and dwelling place of God (1 Cor 3:16). But will that suffice as an answer to this problem, even if it is assumed that the locale of God's presence was formerly limited to the place of worship in the Old Testament, but it is now universal in the lives of all who believe? We do not think it will suffice. Attention must be given to the question: how many new things appear in the 'New Covenant' and will that covenant supersede the older Abrahamic-Davidic Covenant? It is to that covenant, then, that attention must be given.

What is new in the New Covenant?

Some complain that if old covenant believers are individually regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, then what is so 'new' about the promised interiority of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34? Why call this promised word in Jeremiah something that was 'new'?

First of all, notice that the majority of the substance of the 'New Covenant' is already found in the Abrahamic-Davidic covenant. For example, the items of its continuity include: (1) the same covenant-making God, (2) the same law'/Torah, (3) the same divine fellowship ('I will be their God'), (4) the same 'seed' or people ('They shall be my people') and (5) the same forgiveness ('I will forgive their wickedness'). Many of the features of the New Covenant's inwardness, fellowship, individualism, and forgiveness had already been expressed in the earlier form of this same covenant in Deuteronomy 6:6-7; 10:12; 30:6; Psalm 37:31 and 40:8. But the question still persists: why call this a 'new' covenant if the majority of its features have already appeared?

The second answer is that the Hebrew word for 'new' (*hadash*) also is used for 'renew,' thus making it in effect the 'Renewed Covenant,' with strong continuity with the Abrahamic-Davidic Covenant. Also, it is only called 'new' in Jeremiah 31:31-34, but elsewhere it is known as the 'everlasting covenant' in seven

3 J. M. Hamilton, Jr., 'God With Men in the Torah', *WTJ* 65 (2003), 113-133.

passages, in three or four passages it is also called a 'covenant of peace,' a 'new heart' and a 'new Spirit,' or simply just 'my covenant' or 'a covenant.' Thus in the progress of revelation, it continued what God had described in the Edenic promise (Gen 3:15), the 'Semite Promise' of God's 'dwelling' in the tents of Shem (Gen 9:27), the Abrahamic Promise (Gen 12:2-3) and the Davidic Promise' (2 Sam 7:16-19) that perpetuated the promise of a 'Seed,' the Gospel (see Gen 12:3; 2 Sam 7:19 and Gal 3:8).

Moreover, that 'New Covenant' was not made with the Church, but it was specifically made with 'the house of Israel and the house of Judah!' (Jer 31:31). Therefore, without the olive tree-roots of the promises made to the patriarchs and the trunk of the olive tree, all of which were made 'irrevocably' (Rom 11:29) with Israel, the body of New Testament believers and their Church really floats in thin air and has no history or past, which leaves the story of God's work through over three-fourths of his revelation in the Old Testament hanging in mid air and unfinished. Thus, there must be elements of continuity or else New Testament believers are left unsupported and rootless.

Therefore, the argument shifts away from the New Covenant, which does not mention the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit anyway, to two New Testament passages in John's Gospel that are the most difficult for the view that the Old Testament believer was indeed indwelt by the Holy Spirit: John 7:37-39 and John 14:16-17.

John 7:37-39

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not yet been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

This text is commonly (or at least traditionally) understood to mean that the permanent indwelling of the Spirit in all believers did not come until after Pentecost. This has become a central tenet for many who claim that John's distinctive contribution was that the Holy Spirit's work of indwelling could not be expected until after Jesus was glorified. But is the reception spoken of in John 7:39 to be identified as the granting of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?

First of all, the word 'given,' in the phrase 'the Spirit had not yet been given,' does not appear in the best, earliest, or majority Greek texts. Instead, the Greek text literally (and woodenly) reads: 'for it was not yet Spirit.' Of course, this cannot mean that the Holy Spirit had not yet come into existence, for that would deny the eternity of the Godhead. While the added word 'given' was meant to clarify, actually it ended up suggesting for the most part that the Holy Spirit was not 'given' before Pentecost. Instead of asserting that the Spirit was absent prior to Pentecost, as the addition of this word 'given' suggests, John meant to point to the new coming age of the Spirit, when the outpouring of the Spirit would come like streams or rivers of water.

Pentecost was as necessary an event as was the event of the cross of Christ itself. Up to that first Easter Sunday morning, men and women could truly be forgiven, regenerated and made part of the people of God on the promised basis that Christ would later personally come and retrospectively atone for those sins he had already forgiven by his death on the cross. If Christ had not given his life as a ransom on that first Good Friday, and been raised from the dead, those who believed in the Old Testament would have believed in vain. They needed the death and resurrection of the Messiah to complete what they had come to experience by faith, based on the word of God.

In like manner, it was also necessary that the Holy Spirit have a visible, actual coming in state, just as the Suffering Servant had experienced at Calvary. Therefore, Pentecost was that outward demonstration that all that had been promised in the Old Testament would be validated on that day. Accordingly, T. Goodwin correctly commented: '[The Holy Spirit] must have a coming in state, in a solemn and visible manner, accompanied with visible effects as Christ had.'⁴ Thus, what happened at Pentecost was both climactic and effusive – words that conveyed a completion to what had been promised and an abundance of a down-pour, as opposed to a previous scarcity in spotty showers here and there.

The prophet Joel has also chosen to describe the Spirit's arrival as a 'pour[ing] out,' or a downpour (Joel 2:28), which would easily link up with Jesus' reference to 'streams/rivers of living water in John's gospel. It is correct, then, to see something dramatically enacted and unique to the ministry of the Holy Spirit as it first occurred at Pentecost, Samaria, and Caesarea in the book of Acts (2, 8, 10). Now a believer was not only regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but from the time after Christ was glorified, all who believed were also simultaneously 'baptized by the Holy Spirit' and incorporated into one body (1 Cor 12:13).⁵

Six of the seven New Testament passages that refer to the 'Baptism of/in/with/by the Holy Spirit,' (Mat 3:11-12; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16-17; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16) contrast John the Baptist's baptism with water with Jesus' future baptism in the Holy Spirit. The seventh one is from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:13. All seven, however, use the preposition en, 'in, with, by.' In four of these references in the Gospels, the form of the verb always was 'I will baptize...' But by the time we get to Acts 1:4-5, 'the gift my Father promised, which you heard me speak about, will come 'in a few days,' when you 'will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If the gospels looked forward to this event, and Luke places it in the book of Acts as 'not many days hence,' then the apostle Paul interprets it as the formation of the one body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13).

4 T. Goodwin, *Works* (Edinburgh:1861), 49 as cited by G. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (London:1958), 49 and Grogan, 'Experience,' 14.

5 See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 94-100; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., 'The Baptism in the Holy Spirit as the Promise of the Father: A Reformed Perspective', in Chad Owen Brand (ed.), *Perspectives on Spirit Baptism: five views* (Nashville, TN.: Broadman and Holman, 2004), 15-37.

John 14:16-17

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

These verses in John 14:16-17 also exhibit a textual problem. Most translations, such as the NIV, NASB, and the AV, use the future tense, ‘and *will* be in you.’ However, the United Bible Society’s Greek text concludes that the future tense (*estai*) has ‘a very high degree of doubt,’ despite the fact that the future tense also has some good manuscript support. However, the present tense reading, ‘he abides/lives with you and *is* in you’ was adopted by the *New English Bible*, which also had a number of key Greek scholars as its translators. Furthermore, if the present tense is used of he ‘abides/lives with you’ in the accompanying phrase, then it would be strange indeed if the text went on to switch to the future tense of the same action by the Spirit, as if it said: ‘He lives/ abides with you and he will be in you!’

The present tense reading of ‘he is in you,’ therefore, can be sustained by two additional arguments: (1) all agree the text does claim the Spirit already ‘lives/abides’ in those pre-cross believers, and (2) the preposition ‘with’ (*para*) is the same word used in the close context of John 14:23 of the Father and the Son’s abiding in the disciples, which preposition speaks in that case of a non-fluctuating relationship.⁶

There is no doubt that both of these Johannine texts are difficult, but it is for that reason that it would not be the wisest course of action to base a doctrine on such shaky textual grounds. Accordingly, this text does not wish to make a distinction between the Holy Spirit merely being ‘with’ believers prior to Pentecost, whereas after Pentecost the Spirit will be ‘in’ believers, as many have argued. For that leads to the further question: Why did Jesus use two different prepositions if he did not wish to make a distinction between the Spirit being ‘with’ believers previously, and ‘in’ them now? The answer may be that as L. Morris suggested, John loved a variety of expressions.⁷ In fact, John 14:16 taught that the Spirit was ‘with’ (*para*) the disciples forever. But why would Jesus promise an eternal ‘with-ness’ if he were going to introduce an eternal or permanent ‘in-ness’ after Pentecost? John does not appear to intend a clear distinction between these pronouns, for this would be most awkward indeed!

The future work of the Paraclete

Four times in the Upper Room (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) and once in 1 John

6 I have developed this point in my article, ‘The Single Intent of Scripture’, in Kenneth Kantzer (ed.), *Evangelical Roots* (Nashville: TN: Nelson, 1978), 133-34.

7 L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 650.

(2:1), there is the promise of a coming Paraclete who could be called on to help by our Lord's disciples. In the 1 John 2:1 passage, this 'Advocate' with the Father is none other than Jesus, who defends us when we are accused of sin. But elsewhere in John's gospel it points to someone other than Jesus; in those instances it appears to be directed towards the Holy Spirit.

In three of the four references in John's gospel, this Paraclete is also called 'the Spirit of Truth' (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13) and is thereby linked with the concept of revelation. But the context of this promise of revelation from the 'Spirit of Truth' specifies that our Lord is talking explicitly to his eleven disciples, some of which will be called upon to be the agents to write the New Testament Scriptures. This can be seen from the following phrases:

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and *will remind you* [or: '*bring to your remembrance*'] *of everything I have said to you...* (John 14:26, emphasis mine).

When the Counselor comes,... the Spirit of truth,... he will testify about me. And you also will testify, *for you have been with me from the beginning* (John 15:26-27, emphasis mine).

I have more to say to you, *more than you can now bear*. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.... *In a little while you will see me no more*, and then after a little while you will see me (John 16:12-16, emphasis mine).

These portions of the Upper Room Discourse provided for a future appearance of the New Testament writings. Jesus had testified to the fact that the previous thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were those that spoke about him (John 5:39; Lk 24:27), and therefore were to be trusted as the authoritative bases for all teaching. More revelation, in addition to the Old Testament was to be expected, Jesus taught, and it would come through the hands and agency of those who had been discipled personally by our Lord. These disciples would teach doctrine (the 'things that are mine,' John 16:14-15), future events ('what is to come,' John 16:13), and recall what Jesus had said to them while they were with him ('will remind you of everything I have said to you,' John 14:26 – perhaps an answer in part to the synoptic problem of the gospels). In this didactical setting, there is no guarantee that the Holy Spirit would personally lead all believers into *all truth* (John 16:13), for almost every aberration, or anti-Christian cult that went into a heretical mode, has claimed this text as the basis for their exotic forms of doctrine, when judged against the tenor of Scripture itself. This is not to say that there is no room for the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in the believer's interpretive process, for 1 John 2:20 taught that '...You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth.' But this was not the same claim as saying that believers were in possession of 'all truth,' or that it was truth in addition to what had been revealed in Christ or the Holy Scriptures. John went on in 1 John 2: 24 to show this connection as he warned, 'See that what you have heard remains in you,' for '...the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you' (1 John 2:27, emphasis mine).

Summary

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a most significant work wherein the Spirit arrived in state, visibly and dramatically, thereby showing in time and space what had been experienced all along in the Old Testament was not unreal, but was fully part of the whole plan of God. His arrival was not meant to mark a distinction between those Old Testament saints who were devoid of the indwelling of the Spirit and his empowering them for living holy lives. But what Pentecost signaled was the ancient promise of the Baptism of the Spirit, in which God would so effusively pour out his Spirit that it would be more like a downpour and like rivers of water flowing in the land, as understood by an inaugurated eschatology – a ‘now’ and a ‘not yet’. The factor that was new was the fact that all believers would now be incorporated into one body of Christ, regardless of their denominational identities, as they were baptized into one body and were given one Spirit to drink (1 Cor 12:13).

We conclude, then, that the Holy Spirit did indwell Old Testament believers. The promise of the Spirit that was new was their incorporation into the universal Church, the Body of Christ. There also was the promise of the New Testament revelation that was coming as the Spirit of Truth called to mind all the Lord had taught the eleven during those years when they walked and talked with him. The Father would take what was his, his doctrine, and he would show them things to come. These would be the new works the Holy Spirit would perform, but as he had regenerated and indwelt in the past, so he would continue to do in the New Testament times.

Abstract

Against the common view that the Holy Spirit did not indwell Old Testament believers it is argued that the opposite was the case. What was new about the New Testament promise of the Spirit was the incorporation of believers into the universal Church, the Body of Christ and the function of the Spirit of Truth in calling to mind all the Lord had taught the eleven during those years when they walked and talked with him. These would be the new works the Holy Spirit would perform, but as he had regenerated and indwelt in the past, so he would continue to do in the New Testament times.