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# Scripture

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## THE SPIRIT OF GOD

If the essence of religion can be summed up in one phrase, it is this: the union of God with man. This was God's plan for mankind from the beginning, when He walked in the garden with our first parents, until they hid themselves from Him by sin. The rest of the history of the world as the Bible gives it, the history of the Redemption, is the process of restoration of this state of harmony, until it was achieved in an even more perfect form than at first, in the Redemption by Our Lord. It is this which God signified to His people by the concept of 'covenant'—the act of union, act of alliance. And inside the covenant relationship, God's presence among His people was realised in various ways. It was realised by the Law—this is an aspect of this institution which is often overlooked, that 'There is no other nation which has its God so close to it as our God is to us; for what other nation has statutes and precepts like all this law which I, Moses, put before you now' (Deut. 4:7). It was realised in Temple and Tabernacle ('Tent of Meeting'), where God personally came down and dwelt in their midst. And it was realised still more perfectly in the gift of God's 'Spirit.'

In order to appreciate all that 'the Spirit of God' means in the Old Testament, it will be necessary to begin further back than our English word; in fact it will be as well to forget for the moment the connotations of the English term—soul, ghost, disembodied spirit, and so on. The Hebrew word (*rūah*) means first of all 'wind.' It is the word used in Genesis when God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool breeze of evening. It is the word for the wind which dries up the flood. It is the word for the mighty gale which smashes up great ships, in Psalm 47:8. Next, it can mean breath: the psalmist (134:17) scoffs at idols which can neither see nor hear nor breathe—they have not 'spirit' in their nostrils.<sup>1</sup> Both meanings can be seen

<sup>1</sup> It is doubtful which of these senses comes first: is the breath thought of as a little wind whistling through man's nostrils? or is the wind thought of as a breath of God? The latter is suggested by several texts (for example, Ps. 17:16): 'The foundations of the world are laid bare by the blast of the breath of God's nostrils.' But the evolution of sense suggested above—from wind, a movement of air to breath—seems probable; and in any case it does not affect the next and more important step in the argument—from breath to breath of life.

in Psalm 103 : verse 4 speaks of God making the winds ('spirits') His messengers ; and verse 29, He takes away the breath ('spirit') of His creatures and they cease to exist. And in both of these verses we see the danger of reading the text with preconceived, non-Biblical, ideas : reading the Latin version, or the Latin commentators, in verse 4, for example, we would be led to think that it meant that God used 'spiritual beings' as messengers, or angels ; and in verse 29, we would be inclined to take it simply in our sense of 'soul.'

It is true, however, that from this last sense of 'breath,' it is an easy step to the meaning 'breath of life'—breath being that which is most obviously characteristic of a living being. Ecclesiastes, lamenting the inevitability of death, says : 'Man cannot retain his spirit, he has no power over the day of his death.' God sends the flood 'to destroy all that possessed the breath of life'—that is, every living thing. In passages like these, it is tempting to translate the word simply as 'soul.' But Hebrew uses another word for 'soul,' which it uses to denote the thing which is living ; when it uses this word 'spirit,' *rûah*, it has in mind rather the 'livingness' of a thing : not, however, conceived in an abstract way, but on the contrary thought of in a very physical, concrete, way—the breath which shows that a thing is living.

Man is living because he draws breath, because he has 'spirit' in him. And God also is living, because of *His* spirit. His spirit, like the spirit of man, is His 'livingness.' God is thought of—or rather is spoken of—as if He drew breath like a man ; and as in man, this breath, this spirit, is the sign of His life. Now when God creates, He communicates His own infinite power of life ; and the Bible portrays this for us in an extremely graphic manner as God 'breathing into the nostrils of man' so that man becomes a living being. God 'sends' forth His spirit and all things are created' (Ps. 103:30). That which is, breathes : and its breath is a breath of God. Man depends on God's breath for existence ; if it is withdrawn he dies. Job, for instance, protests his life-long innocence 'as long as there is breath in me, as long as God's spirit is in my nostrils.' So truly is it breath of God's breath that Ecclesiastes says that at death 'the dust shall return to the earth as it was, and the spirit to God who gave it.'

Our idea of spirituality, then—that is, immateriality—is not the main impression we are to take from the 'spirit of God.' It is true that there are texts where this might seem to be the sense. Isaias, for instance, warns Israel against trusting Egypt, for 'Egypt is a man and not God ; their horses are flesh, not spirit.' The contrast, however, is not between the corporeal and the spiritual, but between the weak and the powerful ; 'all flesh is grass, and the glory thereof is like the

glory of grass' which fades with the first heat of summer; 'flesh' is man in so far as he is weak and transitory and corruptible. What Isaias is saying, then, is that man and all his strength are weak and incapable of resistance against the strength and vitality, the 'spirit,' of God. The 'spirit of God,' therefore, means, not the spiritual, immaterial nature of God; but His strength, His vitality. It means 'God the living'; it means 'Jahweh'—He who is. And the sacred writers are not concerned with insubstantial metaphysical definitions. Life for them is a dynamic quality. It implies vital and vigorous action. If Jahweh is He who is, He is also He who acts: He is the Lord of life, Creator, Omnipotent.

We have seen that it is by God's spirit breathed into man that man lives. Now the same spirit can give him a share of the divine activity also. It descends on Othoniel and Jephthé, it clothes Gedeon, it rushes upon Samuel and Saul, to urge them on to the work which they had to do. It may manifest itself in quite prosaic ways, as when the craftsmen in charge of the building of the tabernacle are given God's spirit. It may be given to pagans even, like the prophet Balaam, or foreign kings invading Israel as the agents of God's vengeance (2 Kings 19:7). But in every case we notice that it is directed to the furtherance of the covenant, the union of God and man. It descends on Moses, that he may found God's nation: it descends on the Judges that they may fight God's battles and deliver His people; on the kings, that they may rule God's people in God's name; on the prophets, that they may direct His people by God's own word. This is the people among whom He has desired to dwell, through whom He will be present on earth; and He forms and moulds them to that privilege with preparatory and partial manifestations of it—as we light a fire with fire.

It is sometimes said that the 'spirit of God' is no more than a figurative way of expressing God's action—like the 'arm of the Lord,' or the 'hand of God.' There is certainly some truth in this; but the very comparison with such phrases brings out the difference—'spirit' indicates something much more internal and vital than 'hand' or 'arm'; it suggests God Himself acting in a person, not merely moving him by external assistance or compulsion.

The internal and even moral efficacy of God's spirit becomes more and more evident as the history of Israel progresses.<sup>1</sup> It is the spirit which guides our steps (Ps. 142:10), thus performing the work of the

<sup>1</sup> This is not to be taken as implying that there is any attempt to establish the chronological succession of the texts which follow; it is meant only in the most general sense—that in an earlier stage of the Biblical literature the spirit seems to be looked on particularly as the source of 'superhuman' acts, while in a later stage the stress is on the moral activity of the spirit.

law. In the book of Wisdom, it is the spirit of wisdom, identified with the gift of wisdom, infused into us to show us God's will and to help us to perform it: 'For who can know thy counsel unless thou givest wisdom, and sendest thy holy spirit from above . . . that it may work with me and lead my actions wisely' (Wis. 9:17, 10, 11). In Psalm 50, it is even the principle of moral life: just as God created man by breathing His spirit into him, so it is by His spirit that the sinner recovers from his sins and lives anew: 'Create a clean heart in me, O my God, put a new and upright spirit within me; take not away Thy holy spirit from me.'

The description of the spirit in this last text as God's *holy* spirit is significant. A covenant with a holy God demands holiness in the people: 'Be ye holy, as I the Lord your God am holy.' But the people have sinned, they have broken the covenant, rendered it null and void. So God prepares a new and more perfect covenant: 'Behold the day is coming, says the Lord, when I shall make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Juda: not like the covenant which I made with their fathers, the covenant which they have made void; but I shall write the law in their hearts, and they shall be my people and I shall be their God.' And just as it was by His spirit that God formed and moulded the people for the first covenant, so His spirit will work the spiritual reformation necessary for the new covenant—His spirit, and in particular, the spirit of His holiness. God's holiness is often represented under the figure of fire, burning away all that is opposed to it: 'The light of Israel shall be the fire, the Holy One of Israel shall be the flame which shall burn down the lofty trees of the forest of Assyria' (Is. 10:16 f). And so also God's holy spirit, like a burning wind, shall sweep away the impurity of the people to prepare them for the new covenant. 'On that day all those who are left in Sion shall be called holy: for the Lord will wipe away the filth of the people by the spirit of judgment, a burning spirit' (Is. 4:2-4).

And just as we have seen that Moses, judges, prophets and kings were invested with the spirit of God for the perfection of the first covenant, so he who is to usher in the new covenant is to be filled most perfectly with this spirit. 'Behold my servant, he whom I have chosen to be the covenant of the people—to him I have given my spirit' (Is. 42:1, 6). On him the manifold gift of the spirit comes to rest—it does not merely rouse him like a sudden gust of wind; it imbues him, it becomes his permanent possession (Is. 11:2). But although the Messiah has the fulness of the spirit, it is not an exclusive possession; from him it flows over the whole land and transforms it: 'The spirit is poured out on us, and the desert becomes a garden and

the garden an orchard ; and justice will dwell in that desert, and righteousness in that garden ; and justice will bring peace ' (Is. 32:15-18). This transformation is in fact a new creation ; that is the point of Ezechiel's vision of the valley filled with bones ; at God's command, bone is joined to bone, becomes clothed in sinews and flesh, and then, with the sound of a mighty wind the spirit of God enters into them and those utterly dead things stand up as living men. So in the new age God will give new life to men. But it will be a spiritual recreation : ' A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put in you. I will take away your heart of stone and give you my spirit, and you shall walk according to my law ' (Ezech. 36:23-8). In fact, Jeremias has told us, this law will be written in their hearts. When the first covenant was given, Israel humbly expressed their gratitude that God should be so close to them, guiding them by His law (Deut. 4:7-8) ; now, how much closer is He, when His own spirit is in them to guide them. Before, they had prophets to teach them God's will and exhort them to do it. Now each of them is to possess that spirit of prophecy himself : ' I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophesy : young and old, maid and servant, shall receive my spirit ' (Joel 2:28 f).

The new age dawned. ' There came a sound like the rushing of a mighty wind, filling the whole house where the apostles were. And parted tongues like flames settled on each of them ; and they were filled with the Holy Ghost, and they began to speak with the utterance that the Holy Ghost gave them ' (Acts 2:2-4). God has kept His promise ; St Peter proclaims that this is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel. The Spirit is poured forth in wind and flame, the breath of God's life and the fire of His holiness.

The terminology, the symbols and the action they signify, are the same as in the Old Testament. But between the end of the Old Testament and the writing of the New, a most important step in revelation has been made. It has been revealed that God's life is so great that it needs three Persons to contain it ; and that the ' spirit ' which they had looked on as being an aspect of the divine activity is in fact a Person. Not that this revelation abolished all previous ways of thought and expression. In the synoptic gospels particularly it is often difficult to decide whether ' spirit ' refers to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, or whether the author is using it in its Old Testament sense, of God's energising action. When Simeon is directed to the temple ' by the spirit,' or when Our Lord is led out into the desert ' by the spirit,' there is no very obvious difference from the spirit which took Ezechiel to Chaldea (Ezech. 11:24). In fact, when Matthew says that Our Lord cast out devils by the ' spirit of God,'

Luke in the parallel passage says that it was due to the 'finger of God,' that is to say, simply by God's power. But the fact remains that the revelation has been made (for instance, it is in the name of the Spirit, as well as in the name of the Father and Son, that the apostles are to baptise). Therefore, even when the word spirit is used in a sense not very different from that of the Old Testament, it seems safe to say that the New Testament revelation would not be far from their minds. They realise that the 'Spirit of God' is not merely a synonym for God, even a particularly expressive one; it does not merely indicate a modality of the divine action: it is in fact the divine nature itself expressed in one of a Trinity of Persons.

All that has been said of the spirit of God in the Old Testament, then, is now transferred to this Person. God breathed His spirit into man so that he became a living being, created 'in the image and likeness of God.' Now the Holy Spirit comes down on a Virgin and the result is not a man in the likeness of God, but God Himself incarnate. In the Old Testament, we have seen, the infusion of the spirit of God was a partial manifestation of that union between God and man which God desires: here, that union is perfected—God becomes man.

But Our Lord is not alone: He is the 'only-begotten of the Father,' but he is also 'first-born among many brethren.' To all who believed in him he gave power to be like himself, sons of God. And how does he do this? By giving them a share in this same Spirit. Isaiah had said that God would 'pour out the spirit on parched ground, His spirit upon all flesh.' And Our Lord cries out: 'If any man thirsts, let him come to me. If anyone believes in me, living waters shall flow in him'—the living water, St John explains, of the Holy Spirit. But this Spirit was not to be given till he himself had gone. Just before his death, Our Lord consoles his disciples by telling them that it was better that he should go, for if he went then he would send the Holy Ghost to them. During his life, he would only be with the men of his time as a friend is with a friend; but when he has died he will make possible a much closer union—they will be joined to him, and his Spirit will be their Spirit. And that is what does happen; we are baptised into Christ Jesus, and 'the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' becomes our Spirit also. That perfect union between God and man which was achieved in Our Lord's Incarnation is realised also in all those who are one with Christ. Just as God signified His presence among Israel by descending into the temple, so now the Christian himself is the temple of God and the Holy Ghost dwells in him (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). 'We know that we are in Him and He in us, because He has given us His Spirit' (1 John 4:13). The Holy Ghost

is in fact God giving Himself—He *is* the gift, the ‘donum.’ St Peter exhorts his first converts to be baptised, ‘and you will receive the gift of the Holy Ghost’: not merely a gift from the Holy Ghost, but the Holy Ghost himself, who can be defined as the ‘gift,’ the self-giving of God. Similarly, Simon Magus is rebuked because he wanted to buy the power to give the Holy Ghost: ‘he thought the gift of God could be bought with money.’

The New Testament revelation allows us to go even a step further in this mystery of God’s own giving of Himself. The Old Testament knew God as Creator, Almighty, source of all life; they even knew that He was loving. But it is the final step of New Testament revelation concerning the nature of God to tell us that He is not only loving, but that He *is* love. ‘God is love.’ When God gives us Himself, therefore, He does so not merely by breathing into us the Spirit of life—it is also the Spirit of love. ‘The Love of God is diffused in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us.’ God gives us Himself—His own love for Himself, and His own love also for men: ‘Brethren, if God has so loved us, we ought to love each other. And if we love each other, God dwells in us—dwells in us, because He has given us His Spirit’ (1 John 4:11–14). The Holy Ghost, then, is not only the principle of union between God and man, but also between man and man. The same life flows in all those who are one body with Christ, and this life is the life of love. So St Paul ends his second epistle to the Corinthians with the blessing that ‘the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all.’ He begs the help of their prayers ‘through the charity of the Holy Ghost’ (Rom. 15:30). He urges them to charity for each other ‘through the communion of the Spirit.’ They should be anxious ‘to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace—one body and one Spirit’ (Eph. 4:3).

They are one body animated by one Spirit. They are sons of God, as Our Lord is Son of God, because they are directed by the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:14). The Spirit descended on individuals in the Old Testament to direct them to activity in God’s cause; and so it does in the New Testament. It is by the Holy Spirit that the first deacons are selected; it is by the Holy Spirit that Philip is directed to his contact with the Ethiopian. Saul and Barnabas are picked out for the work God has for them by the Spirit; and the same Spirit also directs Paul continually in his work, leading him across Asia to Greece, and finally back to Jerusalem for the last trial. The Spirit in the Old Testament filled the rulers of God’s people, and fills the rulers of God’s people in the New Testament. ‘The Holy Spirit has appointed you overseers to rule the church of God,’ Paul tells the elders of Ephesus.



And just as the heroes of old were given strength by the Spirit of God to do wonderful deeds, so 'the gospel message has been confirmed by the signs and wonders and manifold deeds of power and gifts of the Holy Ghost' (Heb. 2:4). The various extraordinary charisms which graced the church at Corinth are the overflow of the life of the Spirit in the community, giving to each according to his will.

The New Testament has its judges, heroes, kings: it also has its prophets. There were prophets of the same kind as those of old—like Agabus, who foretold by the Spirit that there was to be a famine (Acts 11:28); and who told Paul, with a symbolic gesture which recalls those of Ezechiel, that the Holy Ghost wished him to know that prison was waiting him in Jerusalem. But the New Testament gift of prophecy is much more far-reaching than this. The Old Testament prophets spoke in virtue of the knowledge which the Spirit infused into them for that purpose. But now that Holy Spirit is the permanent possession of the Christian; it is God in us knowing Himself. 'I will ask the Father and He will send you another Paraclete who will remain with you for ever, the Spirit of Truth . . . you know him, because he is staying with you, he will be in you' (John 14:16 f). All that Christ has been to his own during the years of his earthly career, that the Holy Ghost will be to the Church for ever. Our Lord revealed God to the world: the Holy Ghost takes this revelation and deepens it, allows them to see all that it contains and involves: 'I have spoken thus while I have been among you; but the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, will teach you everything, and bring back to your minds all that I have said.' He is to be 'another Paraclete.' Our Lord is the first paraclete, advocate: 'We have as advocate, paraclete, with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Just' (1 John 2:1). He stands by us, fights our cause, pleads our case. What more effective advocacy could we have than God Himself praying for us: 'We know not what to ask for nor how to ask it; but the Spirit himself prays for us with wordless petition. And God who searches hearts knows what the Spirit desires' (Rom. 8:27). But the Holy Ghost is not only in us pleading our cause with the Father—he is in us pleading Christ's cause to the world: 'I will send you the Paraclete, and he will convict the world of sin and justice and judgment.' He will show them that sin consists essentially in the failure to accept Christ. He will show that Christ's death, which was not an ignominious defeat but a victorious reunion with the Father, has established him as the Just One; and that moreover he has thus established a new principle of justice—not one depending on the fulfilment of the law, but one which attains union with God through union with Christ. He will show them that the judgment they passed on Christ, condemning him

to die, was actually judgment on themselves and on the devil who prompted their actions: 'Now is the hour for the Son of Man to die, now is the Prince of this world cast out.' Christ's work, his role as revealer of the Father and guide of mankind, 'the way, the truth and the life,' is not ended with his death but is continued by his Spirit. And so it is that the Church gives fearless testimony to the Truth, through the Spirit. Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit to address the crowds after the curing of the lame men; the deacons are 'full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom'; St Stephen spoke with wisdom and the Spirit so that he could not be resisted. They are giving testimony to Christ; they have no need to be timid or afraid, for 'it is not they who speak, but the Holy Spirit which is in them.'

Spirit of action, Spirit of prophecy; and we saw that in the Old Testament the Spirit was also the source of a new spiritual life. And so it is in the New Testament. The adjective 'Holy,' with which the Spirit was qualified in the Old Testament occasionally (not more than half a dozen times in all), is now the regular attribute of the Spirit of God. For this Spirit unites them really to God, gives them a real participation in the Divine Life, and therefore gives them a share in the holiness of God. They are the temples of the Holy Ghost—a sanctified, consecrated dwelling for God. We possess this principle, this seed of holiness; and the rest of our lives should be the development of this seed. St Paul begs his converts not to grieve the Spirit by any imperfection in their lives. Our vocation gives us holiness and lays the obligation of holiness on us: 'If you despise this, you are not despising man but God who put His own Holy Spirit in you' (1 Thess. 4:8).

So finally we come to that which is the most characteristic effect of the Holy Ghost's dwelling within us: joy and peace. These words abound in the Acts of the Apostles, the 'gospel of the Holy Ghost.' The disciples of St Paul and Barnabas are filled with joy and the Holy Ghost (Acts 13:52). The Christian has a source of rejoicing, not in drunkenness, but in the new wine of the Holy Ghost (Eph. 5:18). The Thessalonians receive the word of God 'with the joy of the Holy Ghost' (1 Thess. 1:6). Even in persecution we should see not a cause for sorrow but for further rejoicing, because the Holy Ghost is with us (1 Pet. 4:14).

This last note brings us back to Christ and to the key to the whole doctrine. Our Lord told his own apostles that suffering and persecution were to be the mark and characteristic of their apostolate; and that when they met opposition they were to rejoice, because it was the guarantee of their apostolate: 'The servant is not greater than his master—if they have persecuted me, they will persecute you; and

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rejoice and count yourselves blessed when men persecute you, for so they persecuted the prophets' and so must suffer all those who bear witness to the truth. The union between God and man reached its climax and fulfilment in Our Lord. He is the true temple of God, he is the Holy One of God. In his every action and every word he revealed and showed God to men. In so doing, he met with opposition and hatred, which led finally to his death; but by that very death, he achieved the work he had come to do. Now, the role of the Holy Ghost is to make the church the continuation of Christ. They, like him, live with the life of God. They are the temple of God. The church is holy, the spotless bride of Christ. And like Christ it revealed God to men; in fact, not only like Christ—it is the continuation of Christ's witness. 'The Paraclete will bear witness to me and you will bear witness.' Christ reveals God to the world, and the church with the Holy Spirit displays Christ to the world. In so doing, the church will meet opposition; but the Spirit is in the church reassuring them, infusing them with the peace which Christ left them, giving them joy in the following of Christ.

'Rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven.' The Christian rejoices to follow the road of Christ, knowing that this road does not end with the cross but continues to resurrection and new life with the Father. The Spirit is the pledge of this new life—not merely promise, but initial possession. 'You are signed with the Holy Spirit of promise, the pledge of our inheritance' (Eph. 1:13). 'We wait with confidence for the resurrection of our bodies, knowing that God will do this 'who has given us the pledge of the Spirit' (2 Cor. 5:5). We who have the first-fruits of the Spirit long for the completion of our adoption, the resurrection of our bodies (Rom. 8:23).

We end as we began. We began with the spirit of God being breathed into the face of man; we end with a new breath of life from the Holy Spirit of God giving us a life which is supernatural and eternal. St John also ends by taking us back to Genesis and putting the life-giving action of the Spirit in a new perspective. The whole of St John's gospel is a new interpretation of the meaning of creation. He begins with the opening words of all revelation: 'In the beginning . . .'; and at the end we have the echo of those other words of Genesis, when Our Lord breathes on his apostles and says: 'Receive ye the Holy Spirit . . .' To them henceforward is entrusted not merely the life of the Spirit but the perpetual power of conveying that Spirit to others.

L. JOHNSTON

*Ushaw*