

The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament

When we think about the work of the Holy Spirit we usually think about His work in the New Testament. Specifically, His work with the apostles. But our knowledge of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the New Testament. Today's article will look at the concept of spirit in Hebrew and the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament.

There are two Hebrew terms which can be translated "soul" or "spirit". The first is *neh-fesh*. This term can be translated as living creature, soul or life. This is that which man and beasts have in common – "the animating principle". This term is used of God three times – cf. Leviticus 26:11; 26:30; Isaiah 42:1. It is also used of an animal in Leviticus 24:18. The second term is *ru'ah*. This term can be translated a number of different ways – i.e. breath, wind, spirit, air, and strength. Its translation is highly dependent on the context.

The Pentateuch

We read of the spirit of God in Genesis 1:2 hovering over the face of the waters. In 2:7 God breathes into man the breath of life. And in Genesis 6:3, we read of God's spirit striving with man. In Exodus 28, 31, and 35 the Spirit comes upon various individuals in order to help them prepare the tabernacles and garments for the priests. In Numbers 11:17 the Spirit is given to the seventy elders who were to aid Moses. The Spirit comes upon Balaam as he blesses the children of Israel in Numbers 24:2. We are told that the Spirit is in Joshua in Numbers 27:18 and Deuteronomy 34:9.

The Book of Judges

The book of Judges is one of my favorite in the Old Testament. It is exciting and never dull. Part of its excitement comes from the Holy Spirit working through various leaders of Israel. In Judges 3:10 we read that the Spirit was on Othniel as he judged the people and led them into battle. The story of Gideon portrays him as a timid man. Hebrews 11 says that he was made strong out of weakness. I love the description of the Gideon's relationship with the Spirit in 6:34 – "the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon." The Spirit was on Jephthah as he went to war against the Ammonites in 11:29. But the closest relationship anyone seemed to have with the Spirit of God was Samson. Judges 13:25 says that the "Spirit of the Lord began to stir in him." In 14:6 the Spirit "rushed upon him" as he killed the lion with his bare hands and again in 14:19 as he kills 30 men of Ashkelon. In 15:14, Samson had been bound by ropes, but the "Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him" and the bonds "melted off his hands". In Judges 16:20, we read one of the saddest verses in all the Old Testament when Samson went out to fight the Philistines again but "he did not know that the Lord had left him." While the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in that verse, we can assume that without a relationship with God one cannot depend on the gifts provided by His spirit.

We will continue this theme next week...