

# 'Merahefet' (Genesis 1:2) The Dynamics of the Spirit in the Old Testament

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**Summary** *The author analyses the place and role of the Holy Spirit in creation on the basis of Genesis 1:2, where in the important prologue to the actual act of creation, we find an interesting situation, in which the Spirit of God makes an appearance, then completely disappears from the scene of God's creative act. Why? The author attempts primarily to outline the place and role of the spirit and the Spirit of God in the Old Testament generally, then moves on to analyse and propose some reasons for the 'disappearance' of the Spirit of God from the creative act.*

*Keywords: spirit, breath, soul, wind, existence, creation, Spirit of God, hover*

## Where did the Spirit of God go?

The prologue to the first creation account in Genesis 1 is the first two verses of the chapter, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." (Genesis 1:1-2).

This introductory text is immediately followed by the beginning of God's creative act. It describes briefly (i) the existing state of affairs; "the earth was formless and empty" (הָאָרֶץ וּבְהוֹלֵהוּ) and the darkness "was over the surface of the deep" and then goes on (ii) to mention briefly, almost incidentally, the Spirit "hovering" (merahefet) over the deep. There is nothing more about the Spirit or his role in creation in the verses and chapters which follow.

It is true that the Spirit appears in various places in the Old Testament as the divine bearer of life (Ps 104:29), or the life-giver (Ez 37:5), while in the New Tes-

tament the Spirit is the one who animates, while the body is worthless (John 6:63) and “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6). But here, in Genesis 1:2, the Spirit seems to be given an undefined, secondary role in creation, somewhat incidentally. The Spirit appears to be God’s observer on the chaotic scene, without actually participating himself in creation. So the question remains open – what exactly is the Spirit’s role in creation? For the creation of the world was not a minor, accidental cosmic event, the result of God or gods at play. It was the sovereign intent of God. The creator’s sovereignty is not only denoted by his infinite creative power, for creation takes the form of dialogue, as the Creator calls creation into being (Brueggemann, 1982:16). Brueggemann calls this ‘grammatical creation’ and cites part of the Heidelberg Catechism in which the response of the creature to its creator is expressed in confessional form (Brueggemann, 1982:21). In this text, and within the context of Genesis 1:2, our understanding of sovereignty includes the absence of chance. The Spirit of God was not present at the scene of creation by chance. The fact that the Spirit was ‘hovering’ indicates his dynamic presence in the biblical text. But what was his role?

The situation we find described in Genesis 1:2 awakes a certain curiosity about the dynamics and role of the Spirit, not only in creation, but in the rest of the Old Testament. The theme of the dynamics of the Spirit in the entire Old Testament is too wide for the scope of this essay, so we will concentrate on the dynamics and role of the Spirit in creation and examine these more closely, not eisgetically, reading into the text the Christian Trinitarian perspective, but exegetically, discovering the role and dynamics of the Spirit on the basis of Genesis 1:2.

So what is meant by the Spirit ‘hovering’ or ‘moving’ over the waters? What is this actually about? Does it refer to a sort of divine ‘potential energy’ which preceded and initiated God’s creative big bang? Is the Spirit of God a bystander, a personification, an onlooker observing a scene of chaos and perhaps offering advice as God intervenes to create the world? Or is he just an emanation of God? All this is speculation, for the fact is that the Spirit disappears from the scene as creation begins and does not reappear during the following chapters. The next time we find the word ‘spirit’ (רוּחַ) is in Genesis 3:8, where it refers to a wind, or in Genesis 6:3, 6:17 and 7:15, where it is God’s life-giving breath/spirit.

## **The Spirit and creation in other texts**

### ***Basil the Great***

During patristic times, along with disputes about metaphysics and Trinitarian issues, the interpretation of Genesis 1:2 and the role of the Spirit in creation became a stumbling block. It could be said that the pneumatology of Trinitarian disputes largely originated in expositions of the role of the Spirit in creation. At

the time of the Council of Nicea in 325, great debates were carried out on the full divinity of the Spirit, his role and place. Arguments about the divine nature of Christ were followed by denials of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Then came the Pneumotomachi (literally ‘spirit-fighters’, followers of the Byzantine Bishop Macedonius), who disputed the divinity of the Spirit and therefore rejected any notion of his participation in creation. Their principal spokesman was Eustathius, a close friend of Basil of Caesarea. The friendship of these two men foundered on the rocks of the topic of the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the role of the Spirit in creation. Bishop Basil, known as the Great (born around 330), Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa staunchly opposed the ‘spirit-fighters’ and Basil the Great paid particular attention to the question of the Spirit in his work *De Spiritu Sancto*.<sup>1</sup>

Since God created the world by his Word, it seemed that the Spirit was left in the shadows, a non-participant. But in order to confirm the role of the Spirit in creation, Basil the Great turned to Psalm 33:6 “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth,” which he used as a basis for claiming that the Spirit was an equal participant in God’s creative act.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, according to Basil, the Spirit is the seal of all creation. Basil says this of the psalm, “You are therefore to perceive three, the Lord who gives the order, the Word who creates, and the Spirit who confirms”. (XVI,38). For Basil, the Spirit cannot be ignored in creation, for he brings it to perfection.

“Moreover, from the things created at the beginning may be learned the fellowship of the Spirit with the Father and the Son. The pure, intelligent, and supermundane powers are and are styled holy, because they have their holiness of the grace given by the Holy Spirit. Accordingly the mode of the creation of the heavenly powers is passed over in Silence, for the historian of the cosmogony has revealed to us only the creation of things perceptible by sense. But do thou, who hast power from the things that are seen to form an analogy of the unseen, glorify the Maker by whom all things were made, visible and invisible, principalities and powers, authorities, thrones, and dominions, and all other reasonable natures whom we cannot name. And in the creation bethink you first, I pray you, of the original cause of all things that are made, the Father; of the creative cause, the Son; of the perfecting cause, the Spirit; so that the ministering spirits subsist by the will of the Father, are brought into being by the operation of the Son, and perfected by the presence of the Spirit”. (XVI,38)

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<sup>1</sup> During the history of the Christian church there have been other times of fierce Trinitarian disputes.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that only the Vulgate renders this word as ‘spirit’ (*et spiritu oris eius omnis virtus eorum*) while most other translations give ‘breath’.

### **Augustine**

Not long after Basil, St. Augustine (born in 354) also pointed out the role of the Spirit in creation in many of his writings, particularly in his unfinished commentary on the book of Genesis, *De Genesi ad litteram*. It is true that he takes as his starting point in interpretation the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity. For Augustine the Spirit is a dynamic personification and his divine nature is not in question. Augustine interprets creation in two phases. The first is the formation of a shapeless, fluid substance, terra informis (De Gen III,13), consisting of the heavens and the earth (coelum et terra), followed by the formless deeps (incomposita et abyssus) and the waters (aqua). After this first phase, the substance is shaped into what Augustine calls *materia informis*, becoming, complete, perfect creation. It was the Spirit's task to give specific forms to the *materia informis*, according to Augustine, who uses the term 'Holy Spirit Creator'. The Spirit creates and gives shape to everything over which he moves or hovers (superferebatur). Thus Augustine adds divine creativity to the dynamic presence of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

### **Judaism**

From the earliest times of Judaism and rabbinism until the present day, the Holy Spirit of God has had an important place in the Jewish faith and rabbinic tradition. The Talmud says that on the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkoth, see John 12:12 and Lev 23:39), held five days after the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) in the month of Tishri, pilgrims would dance in ecstasy, 'feeling uplifted by Ruah HaKodeš, the Holy Spirit' (Domash, 8).<sup>4</sup>

A particularly important place is given to the Spirit in meditative and mystic Judaism, especially in the Kabbalah. The Kabbalah emphasises God's work through his emanation. The breath or spirit belongs to the highest sphere of God's creative activity, the crown of all (Keter).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of Augustine's interpretation of the Spirit in creation see Grabowski, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (10/1, 1948)

<sup>4</sup> The month of Tishri, which corresponds to September, became the first month of the Jewish year during the Babylonian captivity. Previously, the month Nisan or Abib was the first month of the year (Ex 13:4; Est 3:7; Neh 2:1).

<sup>5</sup> Kabbalistic thought is based on the so-called *sfirot*, or various aspects of God's revelation. There are ten forms of *sfirot*: Keter (crown), Binah (understanding), Hokma (wisdom), Gvura (God's judgment), Tiferet (God's beauty), Necah (eternity), Hod (majesty), Jesod (foundation) and Malkhut (kingdom).

## General concepts of the spirit

### ***Spirit, ghosts, spirituality***

When we say ‘spirit’, what associations come to mind? There are various concepts and meanings attached to the word, depending on whether it is used colloquially or within a specific context. There may be widely differing uses of the word ‘spirit’ and its derivatives. Someone may be described as ‘spirited’, because they are full of energy, or ‘spiritual’ because they are guided by their personal spiritual experiences. We also speak of the spirit of an age or place. Among all these interpretations, the Old Testament concept of the spirit, its role and dynamics, are of greatest interest to us in this study. But first let us look briefly at how the word ‘spirit’ is understood in different ways.

In colloquial, everyday use, a spirit may be understood as a ‘ghost’, a non-material, intangible ‘being’ closely related to ‘breath’ and ‘breathing’.<sup>6</sup> Ghosts can pass through walls and doors and are not limited by natural laws. Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, in the room where they were gathered, “stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you“. They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.” (πνεῦμα). Jesus then encouraged them by saying, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” (Luke 24:36-39). In this sense, a ghost is the opposite of matter. A spirit is also the breath of life, and the words ‘spirit’ and ‘breath’ in Hebrew are closely related etymologically. When Jesus died on the cross, it says that he “cried in a loud voice and gave up his spirit” (ἀφῆκεν τὸ πνεῦμα) (Matt 27:50), literally ‘expiring’, as Mark says, (ἐκπνέω) (Mk 15:37). On the other hand, in the New Testament, in the theological and ethical sense, the ‘spirit’ is often opposed to the body and physical existence. Paul writes that “the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature,” (Gal 5:17). Luke says that the “spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”.

We should also differentiate the concept of the spirit in Hellenistic thought, in the sense of the human mind or ability to think (νοῦς), from the use of the concept spirit (πνεῦμά), which is much more than intellectual activity and is associated with God’s workings in people. In Paul’s instructions to the church in Corinth, he says, “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit (πνεῦμά) prays, but my mind (νοῦς) is unfruitful.” (1 Cor 14:14). Among other things, here it is clear that the two should be linked, not separated into the esoteric spirit and the rational mind. A sharp distinction between the mind and spirit is not typical of Holy Scripture.

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<sup>6</sup> The prefix ‘spiro-’ in linguistic usage refers to breath and breathing, etymologically related concepts.

In Christian thought, particularly at the level of pastoral theology, we often find a lack of clarity in dealing with the Holy Spirit, whom we regularly confess to be a person of the Trinity, yet most often treat as an impersonal, divine force. The Spirit discerns, it is he who moves, as at the beginning of the Bible. The concept of 'spirituality' comes from one spirit or another, in all traditions and religions, as an expression of supernatural, personal faith experience, not to be confused with religiosity.

## The concept of the spirit in the Old Testament

### *Spirit, breath and soul*

In the Old Testament the words 'spirit' (רוּחַ), and 'breath' (נְשָׁמָה) are associated with heavenly and angelic beings, and sometimes with demonic influences or disorders in the state of a man's spirit. In the Book of Numbers the procedure for dealing with a man who has been overcome by a 'spirit of jealousy' (רוּחַ-קִנְיָאָה) are described (Num 5:14). Yet the Spirit is primarily associated with God, for God is Spirit (πνεῦμα ὁ θεός), as the New Testament writer says. The rudiments of life are in the Spirit of God, which is why we call the Spirit the life-giver.

A person's state of existing in the Old Testament is expressed in his 'breath', 'spirit' or 'soul'. Each of these terms is equally associated with life (חַיִּים) or existence (הֵיָה), whether a 'living soul' (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה), 'breath of life' (נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים) or 'spirit of life' (רוּחַ חַיִּים). These terms are not synonymous, though 'spirit' and 'breath' are to a certain extent used interchangeably in the biblical text, and both 'spirit' and 'breath' may refer to man or God. Yet 'breath' is more limited and specifically used for the breath of living beings people and animals. Man's breath, though vital, is shown to be fragile and weak. On the other hand, 'spirit' is more often associated with God, although it is also used to indicate a person's condition. Nonetheless, although we find the term 'Holy Spirit' many times in the Bible, we never find the term 'Holy Breath'. True, the term 'breath of God' occurs, but this is mostly in the context of God's warning, anger or power, "The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at the rebuke of the Lord, at the blast of breath from his nostrils." (בְּנִעַרְתָּ יְהוָה מִנְשָׁמַת רוּחַ אָפוּ) (2 Sam 22:16).

### *Soul*

In the biblical text the soul (נֶפֶשׁ) is shown as a particular 'organ' of life, as an almost physiological part of a person. It is always associated with the body. That is why we speak of God's spirit, but not of God's soul. Man's soul is also often associated with his moral and ethical development. Thus we describe a person who shows little mercy as 'soulless' while a good person is also known as a 'good soul'.

The soul is the seat of the emotions, a person's desires and decisions, and is the initiator of his actions. It is the 'organ' which feels pain, as Job explained to his friends, "And now my soul is poured out, days of suffering grip me," (Job 30:16). Jonah's soul weakens and falters, "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord", (Jonah 2:7). The soul may be downcast (Ps 42:5) or bitter (1 Sam 1:10). Of course, in all these descriptions, the soul does not represent a physiological organ of the human body, but rather indicates the state of a person's spirit or mind.<sup>7</sup>

### **Spirit**

A person's existence is also denoted and expressed in the Old Testament by the words 'breath' and 'spirit'. Etymologically, this word (רוּחַ) is close to (רִוּחַ), which means 'spacious', as in the sense of a breathing-space, a place in which to breathe and live. One can breathe more freely in such a place of freedom and living-space, or as Job says, "I must speak and find relief," (אֲדַבְרֶה וְיִרְוַח־לִי) (Job 32:20).

Within a person's basic existence, expressed in his 'spirit' and 'breath', the spirit and soul denote his general state of being, whether disturbed, bitter, discouraged or fearful. A person's soul may be embittered, as was Hannah's, for example, in 1 Sam 1:10 (בְּמַרְתָּ נַפְשִׁי – in bitterness of soul). A person's spirit may be desperate or cast down (פָּעַם). Esau's wives caused bitterness in the spirits (מַרְתָּ רִוּחַ) of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26:35). A person's spirit is also reflected in his psychological and physical state. The elderly Jacob is confused and grieved by the disappearance of his son Joseph. He experiences physical problems, particularly heart problems. The text says that he was 'stunned' (וַיִּפַּגַּם לְבָבוֹ) on hearing that Joseph was still alive and did not believe them.<sup>8</sup> But as he was persuaded of the truth, "the spirit of their father Jacob revived" (וַתְּחַיֵּי הָרוּחַ) (Gen 45:27). This is the only example of the phrase in the Old Testament. The news that the 'dead' are alive is a cause for rejoicing, as in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, who was "dead and is alive again" (Luke 15:32).

Just as a person's soul can be desperate or tormented, so a person's spirit can reflect his emotional condition, whether negative, in terms of varying levels of stress, or positive, in terms of excitement or delight. When the Queen of Sheba saw Solomon's wealth and wisdom, she was amazed and delighted, "overwhelmed" (NIV) or as the Authorised Version puts it, "there was no more spirit in her" (2 Chr 9:5). A person has the will or volition to do something at the prompting of his spirit, whether an intellectual or mental activity, as for example the 'spirit of

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Wolff, 'Anthropology'.

<sup>8</sup> From פָּגַם (stun, deaden, numb).

wisdom' (נִתְחַיֵּי הַרוּחַ) (Gen 45:27), or the 'spirit of decision' (נִדְבָרָה רוּחֹי) (Ex 35:21).

Although it is not typical of the Old Testament, we do find the term 'Holy Spirit', as in the well-known Psalm 51:3 (רוּחַ קָדְשְׁךָ). As in Isaiah 63:10, the holiness of the Spirit of God is overshadowed by his life-giving characteristic. As far as Psalm 51 is concerned, we should agree that the term 'holy' indicates the merciful nature of God's spirit, rather than insisting that this text provides the grounds for forming a view of the Holy Spirit as a person in a Christian, Trinitarian sense (Delitzsch, vol.V, p.140). On the other hand, we cannot entirely ignore the personal, intimate note in Isaiah 63:10, which says that the Israelites "rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit". One can grieve a person, but not a thing. However, most commentators make a full identification of 'spirit' with the person of God, and the term 'Holy Spirit' as a manifestation of God himself, in which case the text can be translated "they grieved the Lord". In a similar context, the word 'ruah' is used to describe an abandoned woman, "distressed in spirit" (יִעְצֹבֶת רוּחָ) (Is 54:5, cf. Goldingay 2001:357). Delitzsch interprets Is 63:10 in terms of full recognition of the person of the Spirit (Delitzsch vol.VII, p. 456).

Yet in the text from Psalm 51, the Holy Spirit is indirectly linked to the creative spirit which hovered over the waters. The language of 'creation' is used of the Spirit's creative powers, as in Genesis 1:2, "Create (בְּרָא) in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." (Ps 51:10-11).

Finally, 'spirit' in the Old Testament can indicate atmospheric movement, air or wind. This natural phenomenon, which, with its "mysterious source and unpredictable effects, has always fascinated people" (Rebić, 1996:56), has been assigned divine attributes. In the Old Testament the 'ruah' wind is God's instrument, which he causes and uses for his purposes, as a sign of his presence, a theophany. The Psalmist describes this in the image of God „riding on the wings of the wind“ (עַל־כַּנְפֵי־רוּחַ) (Ps 104,3). In this sense, the wind itself is a faceless, impersonal force controlled by God.

Genesis 3:8 gives an anthropomorphic image of the Lord God walking in the Garden of Eden "in the cool of the day" (לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם). True, the 'ruah' wind in the biblical text is often more than an air current caused by atmospheric changes, but has its source in God and his intentions. In the Book of Jonah, God "sent a great wind" (רוּחַ־גְּדוֹלָה), which caused a storm, leading to the sinking of the ship in which Jonah was travelling. After the Flood, God raised up a wind (רוּחַ) to halt the flood waters (Gen 8:1) and another 'ruah' wind originating with God brought a plague of locusts to Egypt (Ex 10:13).

### **Breath**

In the Old Testament, breath as a general concept is primarily a basic sign of



life. The Psalmist says, “Let everything that has breath (כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה) praise the Lord,” (Ps 150:6), in other words, everything that lives.

Along with the soul and the spirit, descriptions of man’s existence include his breath (נְשָׁמָה), or the “breath of life” (נְשַׁמַּת חַיִּים), and this breath of life is the lamp of life to man (Prov 20:27). Sometimes, as in Gen 7:22, ‘spirit’ and ‘breath’ occur together in one syntactic phrase (נְשַׁמַּת-רוּחַ חַיִּים) which literally means ‘breath of spirit of life’. God is the one who gives spirit and breath to a person, “This is what the Lord says – he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath (נְשָׁמָה) to its people and life (רוּחַ) to those who walk on it,” (Is 42:5). Spirit and breath are connected in that both comprise life, existence and strength, attributes which statues, idols and man-made images do not have, or as the prophet Jeremiah says, “they have no breath in them,” (Jer 10:14), or as Habakkuk says, “Woe to him to says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’” (Hab 2:19).

But there is also a breath of God which is the opposite of creative and life-giving. This is the destructive, fiery breath of God’s wrath, poured out like a “stream of burning sulphur” (Is 30:33).

## **Merahefet**

### ***The Spirit who hovers and moves***

As we have already seen, the Spirit moves, though often invisibly and incomprehensibly, as Jesus said to Nicodemus, “The wind (πνεῦμα) blows where it pleases. You hear its sounds, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.” (John 3:8). This is the source of much religious mysticism.

The Spirit of God is also his life-giving ‘breath’, as can be seen in Ezekiel’s image of the valley of bones, completely dry, (יְבֵשׁוּת מְאֹד), i.e. without life.

Yahweh asks the prophet rhetorically whether these bones can be revived and immediately gives the answer, “I will make breath enter you and you will come to life,” (הִנֵּה אֲנִי מְבִיא בְּכֶם רוּחַ וְחַיִּיתֶם) (Ez 37:5). Similarly, in Psalm 104, all creatures long for the life-giving breath/spirit of God, for, “When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath (רוּחַ), they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit (רוּחְךָ), they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.” (Ps 104:29-30).

Just before the final, definitive divine fiat lux in Genesis 1:2, it is written that the “Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם). The Hebrew word ‘merahefet’ comes from the verb רָחַף, meaning to hover, or move above something. Another example of the use of the word is in Deuteronomy 32:11, describing an eagle hovering over its young. But the same verb can also

mean ‘to flutter’ as in the fluttering of wings, or ‘to tremble’. When Jeremiah is distressed, he says, “My heart is broken within me and all my bones tremble.” (צָמַחְתִּי (רָחַפוּ בְּלִיַע (Jer 23:9). We could say that the Spirit of God was ‘trembling’ over the waters (von Rad, 1972:49). The Septuagint renders καὶ πνεῦμα θεοῦ ἐπεφέρετο ἐπάνω τοῦ ὕδατος φρομ ἐπιφέρω, meaning to bend over something. But this loses the sense of a wind, for wind does not bend over anything (assuming that we render רִיחַ אֱלֹהִים as ‘wind of God’). In that case, the wind would be something which God had previously created, or the Spirit of God would be a mere instrument in God’s future actions (Jansma, 1970:21).

The Hebrew word ‘merahefet’ is in this instance the piel participle. From what we know of the complexity of piels and participles, we may conclude that the hovering Spirit is not without immediate issue, in the transitive sense, in relation to the chaos and deeps over which he hovers. The Hebrew piel is usually used as an intensively active verb form and the participle suggests consequential, resulting, transitive meaning. Thus in Ezekiel 37:28 we find ‘be holy’ שָׁבֵה in the piel form שָׁבַח carrying the transitive, consequential meaning ‘make holy’<sup>9</sup>. The creative fiat lux which follows in Genesis 1 is mediated by the Spirit, who is here the complete opposite of chaos and darkness. The murky depths are irreversibly altered by the intervention of the fluttering, hovering Spirit of God, hovering over the deep<sup>10</sup>. On the basis of this grammatical clue, we may conclude that the Spirit of God was neither a divine errand-boy nor a passive observer of the scene of chaos, but an active participant and co-creator. We maintain that the role of the Spirit was in fact the decisive act of extracting the murky deeps from chaos at the beginning of creation.

But we have not wholly resolved the question of the role of the Spirit in creation. In considering the position and role of the Spirit in the process of creation, we may posit three further alternatives regarding the status of the Spirit and his creative role. Should we conclude that the Spirit is free, in terms of personality, and relatively independent in moving over the waters? Should we allocate him an observatory, advisory role (personification)? Should we regard the Spirit during creation as God’s tool (instrumentalisation), or simply identify him with God himself in this text (identification)?

If we opt for personification, to what extent is the Spirit of God here a mere

<sup>9</sup> Ferebatur super aquas (Vulgate), “hovered over the face of the waters (JPS). The verb ‘to hover’ or ‘to tremble’ occurs only in the piel form. See Juon, para. 52, p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> There is disagreement about whether to translate רִיחַ אֱלֹהִים as “Spirit of God” or “mighty wind”. In the context of verses 1-3, which describe waters, chaos, the deeps and darkness, some think that the reference to the Spirit of God is inappropriate. Since אֱלֹהִים can be used to express the superlative, the translation ‘great wind’ is preferable’ (Wenham, 17).

emanation of God himself, and to what extent is he independent in his action of hovering over the waters? Indeed, to what extent are we justified in reading into the text a Christianised personification of the Spirit? If we opt for instrumentalisation, then the spirit (force, wind) is a mere instrument or instance of force by which God began the process of creation. Finally, if the Spirit is the same as God himself, then we might as well render the text “God was hovering over the waters”.

### **Genesis 1:2 – storm, wind or spirit?**

In this text the expression אֱלֹהִים רִיחַ ‘Spirit of God’ can be interpreted in different ways, grammatically and theologically. Some follow von Rad’s rather unconventional interpretation. He suggests that the phrase ‘ruah Elohim’ should be read as a superlative. Thus it means a ‘great storm’, or ‘storm of God’. Von Rad bases this interpretation on several similar compounds in which the word ‘Elohim’ features, which also indicate the grammatical superlative. He makes use of J.M.P. Smith’s discussion on the topic of the grammatical superlative in *Old Testament Essays* (1972), where the device is shown to refer to majesty or great riches, the exaltation of God, etc. Using the interpretation ‘mighty storm of God’ in fact describes the general chaos of the primordial scene. But Wenham thinks that this compound is not intended as a superlative, because the phrase ‘ruah Elohim’ is not used anywhere else in the text of Holy Scripture in this way (Wenham, 1987:17).

If this interpretation does not seem acceptable nor exegetically or hermeneutically convincing, in spite of its potential attraction, what alternatives remain? Some think it is impossible to define Gen 1:2 exactly, choosing one word without hesitation from the spectrum of ‘wind’, ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’ to translate the Hebrew ‘ruah’ (Wenham, 1987, 17). Yet Wenham thinks that since the word ‘ruah’ is accompanied by the verb ‘hover’, the expression ‘wind of God’ is a better solution than ‘spirit’ or ‘breath’.<sup>11</sup> He argues the case by citing Deuteronomy 32:11, in which the verb רָחַף means ‘flutter over’. As the eagle flutters over her young on the wind, so the ‘ruah’ flutters over the chaos as a wind. But we are still faced with the problem that wind itself does not flutter or hover, rather it ‘darts’, ‘catches hold of’, ‘penetrates’ or ‘blows through’.

Wenham is incorrect in noting only one other use of this verb (Deut 32:11), for it is found again in Jeremiah 23, where it means ‘tremble’, as we have already

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<sup>11</sup> Wenham mentions other possibilities based on translations of the verb ‘rahef’, in the sense of incubation or sitting on eggs, before they hatch. In this sense, the Spirit is a sort of incubator, sitting on the ‘nest’ of the world/egg before it hatches, coming into being as a full, complete creature. This element is also found in some Phoenician cosmological myths (Wenham, 1987:17).

seen. In this sense, it could be said that the ‘vibrating’ Spirit ‘breaks out’ into the world, as water ‘breaks out’ (2 Sam 5:20), through every pore and saturates the earth in its chaotic state, immediately prior to God’s decisive fiat.

## Conclusion

The experience of creating and the experience of life (existence) are inseparable and undoubtedly within the scope of the Spirit of God. We might say that there are incontrovertible indications that the Spirit of God in the Old Testament takes on some aspects of personification.

He is a ‘good Spirit’ רוּחַ טוֹב, שׁוֹבֵה in Psalm 143:10, and a ‘holy Spirit’ רוּחַ קְדוֹשׁ in Psalm 51:13. If we take ‘ruah Elohim’ in Gen 1:2 as a wind or mere manifestation of God’s activity, then we cannot at the same time interpret it as a personification of the Spirit. Further, from the perspective of theological grammar, in which this phrase is certainly theologically loaded, it is not altogether clear what a completely impersonal ‘wind of God’ means – God’s presence, action or activity?

We therefore opt for limited personification of the role of the Spirit in the creative process, rather than sheer manifestation or instrumentalisation, in spite of the fact that in the further text the Spirit does not appear in any active, co-creative role.

In the immediate literary and grammatical context, Gen 1:2 and Gen 1:3 stand as two independent sentences, indicating the introduction of a new episode on the general scene of the drama of creation. As one protagonist appears on the scene and intervenes, the other actors do not necessarily withdraw or relinquish their significance in the drama thus far. In just such situations the participle is used (as here in 1:2) as a means of showing continuity and the further development of the plot (see Anderson, 1974:79 ff.)

Yet it is not entirely clear why the Spirit of God takes no further active part in creation after Gen 1:2, neither does he not appear in this capacity in the chapters following the creation accounts.

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**Sažetak** *Autor ovdje analizira mjesto i ulogu Duha Božjega u stvaranju, i to na temelju teksta Post 1,2 gdje nailazimo u tom važnom prologu - pred sam čin stvaranja - zanimljivu situaciju u kojoj se pojavljuje Duh Božji, a potom sasvim nestaje sa scene kreativnog Božjeg djela. Što je tome razlog? Autor nastoji prije svega iznijeti mjesto i ulogu duha i Duha Božjega uopće u Starom zavjetu da bi potom prišao analizi i mogućim prijedlozima rješenja 'nestanka' Duha Božjega sa stvaralačke scene.*

