



The Spirit of God | The Spirit in the Old Testament

Lesson 2

If you were to sit down with an Israelite who lived before Christ and asked him what he thought about the Holy Spirit, there would be much that the two of you would agree about. But if you started sharing how you thought about the Holy Spirit, you would likely see a puzzled and perhaps even concerned look spread across his face.

What would the two of you agree on?

What would you think about the Spirit that would be different from what your Israelite friend thought?

In theology, we talk about progressive revelation. Essentially this means that God didn't explain everything to His people all at once. Instead, He told people a little at a time until they were ready for more revelation. We know more now about how God works than Abraham or Jacob would have. We know more now about the work of the Holy Spirit now than Daniel did. Yet as we study these doctrines today, one helpful way of studying these issues is to go back and trace how it is that God gave us this revelation over time. In this lesson, we will study what the Old Testament teaches about the Holy Spirit. This will give us a helpful launching pad from which to talk about the Spirit's work in the New Testament in the following weeks.

Why do you think God gave His revelation a little at a time, rather than all at once?

One thing your Israelite friend would understand is that the Spirit of God in the Scriptures was active in three main activities: creation, empowerment, and revelation. As a New Testament believer there is much about these topics that you would understand more clearly, but most of what the two of you believe would overlap. We will look at each of these categories, and then conclude by looking at some of the ways the Old Testament prepared the way for the coming of the Spirit in the New Testament.

The Spirit's Work of Creation

The Holy Spirit first shows up in Genesis 1:2, the second verse of the Bible. God's initial work of creation begins in verse 1, where the heavens and earth are created. But that initial work of creation would require further refining over the following six days as light, dry ground, plants, and animals would be added. In

Genesis 1:2 we read that Spirit is “hovering” over the waters after God initially created the universe while the world is dark, formless, covered in water, and empty. Here at the opening we see God speak creation into existence, but it is the Spirit that is actively energizing and maintaining that creation from the very start.

Other passages in the Old Testament also make it clear that the Spirit was involved in creation. Psalm 104:30 and Job 33:4¹ both connect the Spirit of God with creation. God’s Spirit is seen as the activating and empowering agent that carries out the work of creation as planned by the Father. We see here a pattern that will carry on throughout the rest of Scripture – the Father plans, the Son executes, the Spirit continues and sustains. This will be true for creation, as well as redemption. In fact, in Deuteronomy 32:10-11 the imagery of creation is used concerning God’s redeeming and protecting Israel. The same Hebrew words for “formless” and “hovering” are in these verses translated as “waste” and “fluttering.” These word pictures from the creation account are now used to describe God’s care over the young nation of Israel.

What difference does it make that the Holy Spirit is involved in the work of creation?

How else are God’s works of creation and redemption connected?

The Spirit’s Work of Empowerment

One of the main functions of the Spirit in the Old Testament was the work of empowering specific people for specific tasks. The Spirit would “fill” someone or “come upon” someone, or it would be recognized that someone had the Spirit of God upon them. This is different from the New Testament where the Spirit comes on all believers at the moment of salvation, but we’ll talk more about that in future lessons.

Empowerment for Construction

The Holy Spirit empowered those who built the tabernacle. In fact, the first person on whom it was said that he was filled with the Spirit was Bezaleel the son of Uri who did the work of a craftsman on the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-3). While this not specifically stated of all those who would help him, it does seem reasonable that others enjoyed this same help in preparing the tabernacle (cf Exodus 28:3).

Why do you think the Spirit came upon those building the tabernacle? Why was it so important that the temple be constructed well?

The tabernacle and later temple were designed to be the place where God would specially dwell with his people. It was supposed to be a slice of heaven come down to earth so that the people of God could draw near to the presence of God. From a New Testament perspective we may be surprised at this, since God is everywhere. But even for us, although God is everywhere, He is in us as believers in a special way and He is with us when we gather in a special way. Similarly, although God was omnipresent in the Old Testament

¹ Some argue that Job 33:40 alludes to Genesis 2:7 where God breathes the breath of life into Adam. While this is true for the second half of the verse, the first half likely addresses the broader issue of creation and alludes to Genesis 1:2.

times, His special presence rested over the tabernacle and later temple as the place where He would meet with His people.

How can understanding the role of the Spirit and the tabernacle/temple in the Old Testament help us better understand the work of the Spirit today?

Empowerment for Strength

We also read of how the Spirit empowered some people to accomplish super human feats of strength, most notably Samson. We read of Samson destroying a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:6), taking out thirty men at once (Judges 14:19), and breaking the ropes he was tied up with (Judges 15:14). As the supernatural enabling power of God, the Spirit could empower people to do things for God, including great feats of human strength.

Empowerment for Ruling

But one of the main tasks which the Spirit empowered individuals for was exercising leadership. During the period of the judges and into the monarchy, we repeatedly see that the Spirit would come upon rulers to equip them to lead the people. This is true for Joseph (Genesis 41:38), Moses and the 70 elders (Numbers 11:17), Joshua (Numbers 27:18), and later kings such as Saul (1 Samuel 10:6, 10; 11:6) and David (1 Samuel 16:3), and later Daniel who functioned as a royal advisor (Daniel 5:11, 14). In fact, one of the signs that God was done with Saul as king was that He took the Spirit away from Saul and put it on David.

Why do you think that the Spirit is especially associated with the work of rulers? How might this still be applicable today?

Part of the reason for this is that in many of these passages, the Spirit of God is associated with wisdom (Genesis 41:38-39, Exodus 31:3, Daniel 5:11, 14). It's not surprising, then, that in the New Testament the work of the Spirit is often closely connected with wisdom, as in 1 Corinthians 1-2, or that the Holy Spirit is even called "the Spirit of wisdom" (Isaiah 11:12, Ephesians 1:17). God's Spirit would come upon special individuals to give them the wisdom and the ability to do the things that they needed to do in service to Him.

Why do you think Scripture repeatedly makes the connection between God's Spirit and wisdom?

The Spirit's Work of Revelation

One of the main functions of the Holy Spirit in both the Old and the New Testament is the bringing of God's truth. As mentioned before, giving revelation is in many ways a subcategory of empowerment. The Holy Spirit empowered people to share God's Word with people. This is one of the most common references to the Spirit in the Old Testament (and, as we will see, in the New Testament as well). David is one of the clearest examples of this when he states, "The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, And his word was in my tongue." (2 Samuel 23:2) Other passages make it clear that the Spirit is the one who empowers

prophesying (Ezekiel 11:5; 2 Chronicles 18:23; 24:30; Zechariah 7:12), even if it is the selfish, corrupt prophet Balaam (Numbers 24:2).

The New Testament makes clear what the Old Testament is already hinting at – that the Spirit of God is responsible for *all* the Scriptures. Peter specifically makes this point (2 Peter 1:21), but others echo this thinking as well (Acts 1:16; Matthew 22:43). Sometimes this means that people are given divine visions, as with Ezekiel (Ezekiel 8:3). Sometimes this means that there are more specific messages that come (2 Chronicles 24:20). But when the Old Testament prophet speaks, the Spirit speaks. And when the Spirit speaks, God is speaking. The prophets knew this which is why we read repeatedly in the Old Testament “thus saith the Lord”! God’s revelation was crucial for people, which is why we read in Proverbs that where there is no vision [special revelation from God], the people perish! (Proverbs 29:18)

How can the message that the Holy Spirit gave to people thousands of years ago still be His Word for us today?

How should we respond to the Word of God?

The Spirit’s Coming Work

The Holy Spirit is active throughout the Old Testament. He is creating, empowering, and revealing. Yet He is less directly involved in the lives of everyday people. His presence is primarily at the tabernacle or temple, and His empowering work is normally temporary and for a specific purpose. But within the Old Testament there was a promise that in the end times the Spirit would be poured out in a new and more comprehensive way. This sets the stage for the New Testament and the new work that the Holy Spirit begins in the New Covenant era.

The Spirit’s Coming Work of Empowerment

Joel 2:28-29 includes the promises that in the end times, God’s Spirit will be poured out on all people. It will not just be the prophets, but it will be sons and daughters, old men and young men, even the servants will have the spirit poured out upon them. Peter ties this to Pentecost and the work the supernatural gift of tongues as evidence that the Spirit is being poured out. This does not mean everything Joel prophesied had come to pass, it hasn’t yet. But it does mean that with Jesus some of those prophecies are beginning to come true, and when He returns they all will be. Yet even now, the Spirit has been poured on everyone, as was supernaturally demonstrated at the start of the church.

Why do you think God waited until Jesus for the Spirit to be poured out on everyone? Why not simply pour the Spirit out on everyone at the beginning?

The Spirit’s Coming Work of Sanctification

Ezekiel prophesies a time when the Spirit will come and will transform the hearts of the covenant people (Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26-27). When God makes a new covenant with Israel, this will result in Him putting His Spirit in them so that they obey His laws. In New Testament language, we would call this sanctification. Even in the Old Testament it was recognized that God’s covenant with Israel did not work, but there was

nothing more God could have done. The problem was with Israel and their inability to keep the covenant. God's response was to send His Spirit into the heart to produce change from the inside out.

Why would God have given the Old Covenant in the first place if His final plan was to set up the New Covenant which worked more directly on the heart?