

The Spirit and the “Spirits” in the Old Testament

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In the ancient world of which Israel was a part, reality was singular, not plural. Yet not all reality was perceivable. There was, in fact, an unseen but no less real part of the world in which gods and demons operated and from which they controlled the world that was seen. Kimberly Stratton puts it this way: “Nature itself was understood to be under the control of both gods and demons. Thus, no genuine separation existed between the natural world and activities of the divine.”¹

Yet while Israel lived and moved in such a world, her understanding of that world differed significantly from that of her neighbors in any number of ways, two of which we want to explore in this study. First, for Israel there was one divine Spirit that carried out God’s good will in this world, always acting in accord with God’s nature and intentions. Second, while the existence of lesser spirits was not denied, such spirits were neither to be sought nor entreated, for good or for ill. God alone was to be the object of both inspiration and veneration.

God’s Spirit in the Old Testament

The spirit of God² appears sparingly but significantly in the OT. Many details concerning the Spirit which we would like to know are simply not given. There is no description of the Spirit, no speculation about the Spirit. Perhaps the best definition of the Spirit is “the active presence of God.” The very first appearance of the Spirit in the OT—in Genesis 1–2—would certainly fit that definition. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen 1.1–2).³ Here and elsewhere the Hebrew word for *Spirit* is *ruach*, which can also be translated “wind” or “breath,” as in Genesis 2.7: “then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath [*ruach*] of life, and the man became a living creature.” In one sense, “the Spirit of God is none other than God himself.”⁴ But in another sense, the *ruach* is the powerful, active, invisible agent by which God accomplishes his marvelous will.

In Genesis 8.1, at the end of the great Flood, “God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind [*ru’ach*] blow over the earth, and the waters subsided.” At Israel’s crucial moment in Egypt, with the army of Pharaoh behind them and the Red Sea in

1. Kimberly B. Stratton, “Magic, Magician,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 3:767.

2. In the phrase *spirit of God* the word *spirit* is not capitalized according to *The SBL Handbook of Style, For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, 8th ed. (eds. Patrick H. Alexander et al; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), the reference guide we follow at *Leaven* regarding such stylistic matters. However, within this article there are a number of direct quotations in which *spirit* was originally capitalized and therefore we left the word capitalized in those quotations. We apologize for any confusion that *spirit* vs. *Spirit* may cause you. —S. Low, *Leaven* copy editor.

3. All translations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

4. Rick Marrs, *Embracing the Call of God: Finding Ourselves in Genesis* (Webb City, MO: Covenant Publishing, 2003), 27.

front of them, “Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind [*ruach*] all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided” (Exod 14.21). Much later—in a scene patently reminiscent of Gen 2.7—as Ezekiel looked out over a valley of dry bones, God said to him, “Prophecy to the breath [*ruach*]; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath [*ruach*], Thus says the LORD God: Come from the four winds, O breath [*ruach*], and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” Whether *ruach* in all, or any, of these passages should be understood as the “Spirit” of God is debatable; but the passages do have in common the notion of an unseen divine force that impacts the world in an extraordinary way.

Other OT passages speak of God’s Spirit at work in and through specific individuals. Those persons and passages include the following:

- Joseph. “And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the spirit of God?” (Gen 41.38)
- Bezalel. “[A]nd I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship” (Exod 31.3; also 35.31).
- Balaam. “And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. And the Spirit of God came upon him” (Num 24.2).
- Saul. “When they came to Gibeah, behold, a group of prophets met him [Saul], and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them” (1 Sam 10.10).
- David. “Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam 16.13; cf. 2 Sam 23.2).
- Azariah. “The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, and he went out to meet Asa . . .” (2 Chron 15.1).
- Zechariah. “Then the Spirit of God clothed Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he stood above the people, and said to them . . .” (2 Chron 24.20).
- Isaiah. “The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor . . .” (Isa 61.1; cited by Jesus in Luke 4.18).
- Ezekiel. “And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me in the vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles” (Ezek 11.24; cf. 8.3).

What all of these (mostly prophetic) individuals have in common is the unsought incursion of God’s Spirit into their lives—an incursion meant to accomplish some beneficent divine purpose. More troubling are those passages in which God’s Spirit is said to enter someone for some malevolent purpose. Three such passages stand out.⁵ The first, 1 Sam 16.14–23, begins with the notice that the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a “harmful spirit”⁶ from the LORD tormented him.

And Saul’s servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well. (1 Sam 16.14–16)

With Saul’s permission, the servants found David, a skilled musician, and brought him to Saul. Sure enough, “whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him” (1 Sam 16.23). The comments of Bruce Birch on this passage are quite helpful:

5. There is a fourth, terse account in Judges 9.23, where “God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech.”

6. Other translations, such as NRSV and NIV, read more literally “an evil spirit.”

The notion of an evil spirit “from the Lord” is disturbing to us. Does this simply make Saul a victim of God’s anger? We must remember that seldom does the biblical story recognize secondary causation. All things ultimately come from God. This does not absolve Saul from responsibility for his own behavior. . . . That this evil spirit is attributed to God indicates that, for the author, Saul’s condition has a spiritual dimension. He is alienated from God and from the power of God’s Spirit for his well-being. All things come from God, but the preceding chapters help us to understand that Saul’s actions have cut him off from the well-being that would be available to him in relationship with God.⁷

One other important thing to note is that this harmful or evil spirit is *not* the “Spirit of the LORD” (v. 14a). Whatever else this evil spirit might be, it is temporary; and it is not independent of God’s will but is subservient to it.

Much the same can be said of the “lying spirit” in the second difficult passage, 1 Kings 22.19–23. Here the prophet Micaiah ben Imlah was being pressured to tell Ahab what Ahab wanted to hear (and what the false prophets had already told Ahab) about going to war. Micaiah refused and instead told Ahab what God had shown him:

I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left;²⁰ and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another.²¹ Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’²² And the LORD said to him, ‘By what means?’ And he said, ‘I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.’²³ Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.”

As was the case with the evil spirit sent to torment Saul, this lying spirit is sent by God, not to tempt a loyal follower of God to sin, but to confirm one who was resisting God’s will in that resistance. Furthermore, here, as elsewhere, we hear that this emissary is a member of God’s heavenly court—the “host of heaven”—composed of those more-than-human-but-less-than-divine agents who wait to do God’s bidding.⁸

The third difficult text is 2 Samuel 24.1, which reads, “Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, number Israel and Judah.”” There is no evil spirit here, no lying spirit, and certainly no spirit of God; but there is the discomfiting notion that God would “incite” David to do evil. Thus the Chronicler would later put it this way: “Then Satan [or, a satan] stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel” (1 Chron 21.1). Do we have here—for the first time—an evil Spirit, quasi-divine, separate from and independent of Yahweh God? In a word, no.

Recall that in Job 1–2 and in Zechariah 3 a figure identified as “*the satan*” appears and functions as an “accuser” on behalf of God and the heavenly court (“sons of God”). While the reading in 2 Sam 14.1 is simply *satan* (without the article), leading some to take it as a proper name, it is better to understand it as “*a satan*” who again acts at God’s behest. In support of this understanding, note that (a) God still holds David, not satan, accountable for his actions, and (b) this satan is never independent of God and never acts contrary to God’s will. The conclusions of Edgar Conrad are both sound and cogent:

Since the OT provides only limited glimpses of the divine beings surrounding the Lord and of angels who acts as his messengers, the function of these “supernatural” satans is sketchy. It is clear that they carry out the role of a satan only with the Lord’s approval. . . . [T]here is no

7. Bruce Birch, “First and Second Samuel,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), II:1102.

8. Cf. Jer 23.18–22 and, most notably, Job 1.6–12.

suggestion that a divine satan embodies evil opposing God's intentions for humankind. Indeed, in the OT God's power is without rival. Notions of Satan as the personification of evil opposing God's rule as his adversary or enemy are ideas about Satan's identity not found in the OT.⁹

Other Spirits in the Old Testament

If the concept of the spirit of God is not altogether clear, even less clear is the OT concept of other immaterial, sentient, vibrant beings who might be labelled *spirits* or *demons*. In popular culture there was a clear belief in—and even worship of—these spirits. However, such worship was consistently condemned, as were those individuals who had anything to do with these spirits—which in itself attests to a popular belief in such spirits. Thus, for example, Psalm 106 says, of the conquest generation, “They sacrificed their sons and daughters to the demons” (Ps 106.37; cf. Deut 32.15–19). Nor did things get any better with time. Of the residents of the northern state of Israel it was later said, “And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger” (2 Kgs 17.17) And what of the southern kingdom of Judah? The seeking out, and worshiping, of the spirits went right on and even accelerated. Thus Jeremiah warned King Zedekiah, “So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, ‘You will not serve the king of Babylon.’ They prophesy lies to you that will only serve to remove you far from your lands; I will banish you and you will perish” (Jer 27.9–10).

Unfortunately, such warnings went unheeded. At the very end—the end of Jerusalem and Judah—God showed Ezekiel the abominations, the monstrosities being perpetrated in the Temple itself: “[P]ortrayed all over the walls [were] all kinds of crawling things and unclean animals and all the idols of Israel” (Ezek 8.10), to which the elders of Israel were offering incense. At the north gate of the Temple, women were sitting and weeping for Tammuz, a dying/rising deity worshiped in Mesopotamia (Ezek 8.14–15). In the inner court of the Temple, twenty-five men bowed prostrate to Shamash, the sun-god of Mesopotamia (Ezek 8.16–18). It is all but impossible to define or categorize the various types of spirits in the OT and the spiritists who sought to interact with them. The most common term for *spirits* was the Hebrew *shed* (plural *shedim*). It is regularly translated “demon(s)” and appears in such passages as Deuteronomy 32.17 and Psalm 106.37, as cited previously. Less common is the Hebrew *se'irim*. It basically means “he-goat,” as in Genesis 37.31. But it could also denote a “goat-demon,” as in Leviticus 17.7; Isaiah 13.21, 34.14; 2 Chronicles 11.15.¹⁰ Also appearing with the goat-demon in Isaiah 34.14 is another demonic creature variously identified as the “night monster” (NASB), “night-bird” (ESV), “night creature” (NIV), or “Lilith” (NRSV).¹¹

The range of names for individuals who sought to interact with such demons was equally broad. A list of such persons in Jeremiah 27.9 includes prophets, diviners, dreamers, sorcerers, and fortune-tellers (in ESV; the last is translated as “mediums” in NIV and “soothsayers” in NRSV). We might further identify these persons along the following lines (while noting that the Hebrew terms for these specialists often overlap):

Prophets. According to the popular understanding, prophets were those individuals who had special powers enabling them to predict future events. For example, when considering whether or not to go into battle—and after having been told by four hundred “prophets” that it would be safe to do so—Ahab was asked by Jehoshaphat if there are any other prophets who might be consulted. Ahab replied, “There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil” (1 Kgs 22.8). There, of course, was the rub: was the prophet telling his patron the truth or not?

Dreamers and dream-interpreters. Both Joseph (Gen 44.14–16) and Daniel (Dan 2.36) had this power and used it positively. Others did not:

9. Edgar Conrad, “Satan,” *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 5:113.

10. Many equate the goat sent away “to Azazel” by the high priest on the Day of Atonement to be the equivalent of this goat-demon; see Leviticus 16.6–10. However, this remains problematic.

11. Lillith was a female demon in Akkadian literature. Both Lilith and Azazel were expanded in post-OT writings. See Graham H. Twelftree, “Demon,” in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) 2:92.

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams.” (Deut 13.1–3)

Diviners or omen-readers. These individuals purportedly could also predict the future by manipulating and reading various objects. Thus, for example, God tells Ezekiel how Nebuchadnezzar will do this: “He shakes the arrows; he consults the teraphim; he looks at the liver. Into his right hand comes the divination [lots, NRSV] for Jerusalem . . .” (Ezek 21.21–22). Such divination often came at a price (Num 22.7) and was regularly condemned, as Samuel said to Saul: “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry” (1 Sam 15.22). On the other hand, the use of Urim and Thumim on the priestly breastplate to determine God’s will was certainly acceptable (Exod 28.30; cf. 1 Sam 14.41 and Ezra 2.63).

Sorcerers or mediums. “Sorcerer” is perhaps the broadest and most common designation for those persons who could get in touch with spirits in the otherworld. And not only could sorcerers learn secrets of the future from the spirits: sorcerers could also manipulate the spirits so as to constrain, even destroy, selected victims by casting a spell or pronouncing a curse on them. Sorcery was widespread in Israel’s world, as the following passages show:

- Moses and Aaron confronted, and eventually bested, Pharaoh’s sorcerers in Egypt (Exod 7.11, 22; 8.7, 18–19).
- Balaam, summoned (and paid) by Balak to curse Israel, was from Pethor on the Euphrates (Num 22.1–6).
- Jezebel was noted for using sorcerers, perhaps from her native Sidon (2 Kgs 22.9).
- Nineveh, “who enslaves nations through her debaucheries and peoples through her sorcery,” was condemned by God through Nahum (Nah 3.4–5, NRSV).
- Babylonia likewise was known for its sorcerers (Isa 47.12–13), and both King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2.2) and King Belshazzar (Dan 5.7) were said to have consulted them.

But sorcerers, mediums, and magicians were known not only in the nations surrounding Israel, but within Israel as well—known, but never accepted. Sorcerers faced the death penalty if tried and found guilty: “A man or a woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them” (Lev 20.27; cf. Exod 22.18). Likewise anyone who sought out such sorcerers could be banished from the community: “If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people” (Lev 20.6; cf. 19.31). Finally, sorcery could be grouped together with other forms of spirit contact, as well as with idolatry, and was always condemned:

and I will cut off sorceries from your hand,
and you shall have no more tellers of fortunes;
and I will cut off your carved images
and your pillars from among you,
and you shall bow down no more
to the work of your hands; (Mic 5.12–13; cf. Deut 18.10; Isa 19.3)

Necromancers. Necromancers had the power, or so it was believed, to summon up the spirits of departed humans who could reveal otherwise unknowable information. “The spirit or ghost was only visible and fully audible to the professional necromancer; all the consulter heard was chirping and muttering (Isa 8.19–20a; 29.4).”¹² As with other magical practices listed above, necromancy was forbidden in Israel (Deut 18.10–12);

12. Joel M. Lemon. “Necromancy,” in *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 4:248. See this article for further Mesopotamian backgrounds.

but it went on nevertheless—as the ironic and pathetic narrative of Saul’s visit to the witch of Endor shows (1 Sam 28.3–5). The visit was ironic because Saul himself “had put the mediums and the necromancers out of the land” (1 Sam 28.3). But Saul was in distress following the death of Samuel, particularly in the face of a renewed threat from the Philistines. Saul had tried other standard means of discerning God’s intentions, but “the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets” (1 Sam 8.6). Saul thus turned to necromancy as a last resort, securing the services of an unnamed female necromancer from the nearby town of Endor. What is startling is that the woman was able to summon up Samuel—described as a god or divine being—although only she was able to see Samuel clearly. However, Samuel did speak directly to Saul; but he brought Saul no good news—the battle with the Philistines would be lost. Saul fell “at once full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night” (1 Sam 28.20).

Conclusion

While much remains unclear about Israel’s concept, and use, of the spirits, some conclusions can be drawn: (1) In popular culture there was a clear belief in—and even worship of—immaterial spirits or demons. (2) Such spirits could be otherwise unknown beings, or they could be the spirits of departed humans. (3) Such spirits could, under certain circumstances, both communicate with and influence the lives of the living. (4) Certain individuals were capable of communicating with these otherworldly spirits—through visions, auditions, divination, or direct conversation. (5) The spirits and their messages were generally malevolent, not benevolent. (6) Contact with the spirits, by whatever means, was regularly condemned.

The notable exception to all of this is the Spirit (breath; *ruach*) of God. The Spirit is God’s active agent in this world—from Creation to the abatement of the Flood, from the Exodus to Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones. The Spirit is always under God’s control and always acts beneficently in the lives of God’s people—not only in the OT, but in the NT and even today.

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