

The Spirit of God

Genesis 1:2 says that *Ruach 'Elohim*, “the Spirit of God,” moved upon the face of the waters during the Creation. Let us study the meaning of the words *Ruach 'Elohim* as a reference to this member of the Godhead.

THE MEANING OF THE WORD RUACH

Depending on its context, the word *ruach* can have different meanings. Most translations render *ruach* as “Spirit” in Genesis 1:2. The word is derived from a verb meaning “to breathe.” The noun form sometimes means “breath” (Genesis 6:17; Psalm 146:4¹), sometimes “air” (Job 41:16), sometimes “wind” (Genesis 8:1), and sometimes “spirit” (Psalm 31:5).

The New Jewish Version renders Moses’ phrase *Ruach 'Elohim* as a “wind from God.” This was done not because the word “Spirit” is an inaccurate translation, but because the Jews and others do not believe that

¹The KJV has “breath” in Psalm 146:4.

the Holy Spirit shares “with Father and Son the unity of the Godhead,” according to Harry M. Orlinsky, editor-in-chief of the translation. The word “Spirit” was rejected, said the editor, as being a “Christian interpretation”; and it was rejected because “the ancient Near Eastern background of the biblical account of creation” is construed to favor the use of the word “wind.” However, ignoring biblical usages of the phrase *Ruach 'Elohim* in favor of the myths of the Near East does not seem to be the most scholarly approach to finding the correct translation.

When one examines the context of the word *ruach* in Genesis 1:2, he finds that *ruach* is tied to the word *'elohim*, making a correct relationship “the *ruach* of God.” If merely “wind” was meant, why was the phrase “of God” attached? Upon examining the ninety-four occurrences of the phrase *Ruach 'Elohim* in the Old Testament, one would find that Genesis 1:2 is the only place where the translation “wind of God” could possibly be right.²

Other Old Testament verses (Job 26:13; KJV; Psalm 104:30) indicate that the Spirit of God had something to do with the creative work, which points to “the Spirit of God” as the correct translation. In addition, Genesis 1:26, in the immediate context of the phrase *Ruach 'Elohim*, indicates that God had a partner or partners in His creative work: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.”

Since no reason appears in the biblical text for the translation of *ruach* as “wind” in Genesis 1:2,

²See, for example, Exodus 21:3; Numbers 24:2; 1 Samuel 10:10; 2 Chronicles 15:1. “My Spirit” (Genesis 6:3) could be “the breath of God” (Job 27:3).

and since both the immediate and general scriptural contexts favor the meaning "Spirit," it appears that *Ruach 'Elohim* in Genesis 1:2 ought to be rendered "the Spirit of God." Accordingly, the phrase *Ruach 'Elohim* may be considered a description of Deity.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PHRASE "THE SPIRIT OF GOD"

As a phrase descriptive of Deity, "the Spirit of God" has at least six significant meanings.

1. *The Godhead.* The phrase "the Spirit of God" in Genesis 1:2 is the first intimation of more than one member of the Godhead. Actually, no one can fully explain how there can be only one God yet three "Persons" who make up that one God. Unsearchable are His qualities; only the Spirit of God knows the deep thoughts of Deity (1 Corinthians 2:10, 11). How faint a word do humans hear of Him (Job 26:14)!

What humans do know about the Spirit of God is precious. Though He is present everywhere, He is a Person. He has a mind (Romans 8:27); He hears and speaks (John 16:13) and feels deeply (Ephesians 4:30). The Spirit lives in Christians (Galatians 4:6), and in heaven He prays for them (Romans 8:26, 27). He invites sinners to become children of God (Revelation 22:17).

2. *The Nature of Deity.* The phrase "the Spirit of God" depicts the very nature of Deity: He is a spiritual Being (John 4:24), not flesh and bones (Luke 24:39), not flesh and blood (1 Corinthians 15:50). As a spirit, He is invisible to human eyes (Colossians 1:15).

Since a spirit does not have flesh and bones, it is clear that language attributing nostrils, a face, a back, feet, arms, hands, ears, eyes, eyelids, and wings to

Deity (Exodus 15:8; 33:23; 24:10; Deuteronomy 33:27; Isaiah 59:1, 2; Psalms 11:4; 91:4) can only be understood in a figurative way. It is sad that religious teachers could so mistake the nature of Deity as to write that He has “flesh and bones as tangible as man’s.”³

3. *Seen and Not Seen.* The use of the phrase “the Spirit of God” explains why no man has seen God at any time, and why no man can see Him (Exodus 33:20; John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16). A spirit is invisible (Colossians 1:15); therefore, human eyes have never observed the essence of Deity.

All things are possible for God, however. It is a small thing for Him to show Himself in a physical way: as a man to Abram in his tent door (Genesis 18:1), as a fire to Moses (Exodus 3:2), as a thick cloud to Israel (Exodus 19:9), as a voice to Elijah (1 Kings 19:13), and as a human being in the Person of the One called “Immanuel” (Matthew 1:23; John 14:9). Human eyes have seen God in these physical forms, but the essence of Deity—*ruach*, spirit—is not seeable by humans.

4. *Not Mortal.* Another significant meaning in the phrase “the Spirit of God” is that Deity is not mortal. If God were in essence flesh and blood, He would be mortal; therefore, He could die. Since His nature is spirit, He is imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:50). He alone possesses immortality (1 Timothy 6:16).⁴

5. *Not Local.* The Spirit of God cannot be localized. Manifestations of Him can and have been located in space (Genesis 18:33); but the essence of God, being

³Joseph Smith, Jr., *Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974), 130:22.

⁴In one sense, animals have a *ruach* (Ecclesiastes 3:21), probably meaning “breath” or “life,” but they do not possess immortality.

spirit, cannot be confined to one place. No mountain or temple—not even the highest heaven—can contain Him (1 Kings 8:27). No place exists where it may be said that God is not there (Psalm 139:7–12).

6. *Explanation of Man's Nature.* The words “the Spirit of God” help to explain how man is made in God's image. If God is spirit, then His image in humans is also spirit. Our bodies come from our parents, and ultimately from the ground; but it is God who forms the *ruach*, the spirit, in each of us (Zechariah 12:1). He is the Father of our spirits; from Him our spirits come, and to Him they go (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Hebrews 12:9). Though man's body is important and sacred as long as he has it (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20), it is not man's real nature, that which is made in God's image.

The flesh profits nothing; it is the Spirit who gives life (John 6:63). “Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body” (1 Corinthians 6:13). Only man's spirit abides, that part of him made like God's Spirit.

The phrase “the Spirit of God” helps to clarify the Godhead by depicting the essential nature of Deity. It explains how the Bible can say that God has been seen and yet that He has not been seen. The fact that God is “spirit” tells us why He cannot die and why He cannot be localized, and it shows what part of man is made in God's likeness.

The Spirit of God is seen as part of the Creation, both of the universe (Genesis 1:2; see also Job 26:13; Psalm 104:30) and of man (Genesis 1:2, 26; Job 33:4).