

## Spirit

The common word for spirit in Hebrew is *ruach*. The primary meaning of the root of this word is ‘breath’ ‘to breathe’. Since breath was regarded as the most obvious sign of life in a human or animal the ancient Hebrews associated breath with the power or force that brought about life. In Genesis 2:7 God brings the ‘*adam* to life by breathing or more exactly, *blowing*, the divine life force into it. A precise translation of this is ‘and he blew into his nose the breath of life’. The word used here is *neshamah*, which is breath, with the added connotation of heavy breathing and panting. So, in many uses *ruach* and *neshamah* are synonyms for breath and spirit.

### God’s breathing life into the ‘*adam* highlights connection and intimacy

The difference between the two is that *neshamah* is more narrowly associated with breath and spirit, whereas *ruach* has the wider connotations of breath, spirit and wind. The author of Genesis 2 has purposely highlighted the relational aspect of God’s act of breathing life into the ‘*adam* in order to affirm the intimacy that humanity has with the divine. We all share in the very life force of God.

It is easy to read the second chapter of Genesis as solely a creation story and overlook the details that point to the role of relationship. For instance, God shares the divine life with humanity by breathing into the ‘*adam*. God then places the human into the garden and thus enabling it to sustain itself. God sees the incompleteness of the human living alone, without compatible relationship, and sets about resolving this situation. So, God creates the animals and brings them to the human for the sole purpose of establishing connection. According to the rabbis the text implies that the animals were brought to the human in pairs. The animals were complete in that they each had a partner. But the experiment did not work, and God did not find for the human a helper as his counterpart (2:20). The literary tension set up by the writer is still unresolved. In fact, the rabbis wrote in *Breshit Rabbah*<sup>1</sup>:

He (God) made them pass by in pairs. He (*adam*) said, ‘Everything has its partner but I have no partner.’

The resolution of the partnership problem occurs when woman is created as bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh – another sign of intimacy and relationship (2:23). The man finally has a companion that he can relate to physically, spiritually, emotionally. She completes the partnership story and the writer concludes his account by pointing out how marriage is the ideal relationship between woman and man because they form the core of the family unit that is the basis of society (2:24).

The above ideas give us a minute glimpse of how a literal reading of Scripture can fail to take us to the depth of meaning that is conveyed by the inspired literary artistry of the writer.

### God’s holy spirit is an inner power or gift (=grace) that God bestows on humans

Where the Hebrew Bible mentions the spirit of the Lord the expression is *ruach YHWH* or *ruach elohim* the spirit of God. These expressions generally refer to that aspect of God that comes as a gift enabling individuals and groups to function with divine inspiration and to be at one with God. For example, the prophet declares, ‘The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,’ (Isaiah 61:1) and the psalmist prays, ‘and do not take your holy spirit from me.’ (Ps 51:11). In these and so many other instances the reference is to the sustaining and inspiring presence of God. However, nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is it mentioned or even implied that the spirit of God, or God’s holy spirit, is a spiritual being. Rather, it is an inner divine power or gift (=grace) that God bestows on humans.

The conferring of God’s spirit is often coupled with the metaphor of pouring: ‘I will pour my spirit upon your descendants.’ (Isaiah 44:3); ‘I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.’ (Joel 3:28). The power of the pouring metaphor is that the gift of the spirit of God is permanent and granted with extraordinary generosity. Manifestations of the spirit of God in humans is the presence of spiritual sensitivity and charismatic vision. The spirit of God ignores petty human prejudices and inequalities.

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions. Joel 2:28

Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit. Joel 2:29

Working with the gift of the spirit of God humans can truly live, ‘I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,’ (Ezekiel 37:14). Their goodness will bring peace, calm and confidence (Isaiah 32:17). The gift of the spirit of God establishes a direct connection between the human and the divine.

<sup>1</sup> *Breshit Rabbah* is a midrash containing rabbinic interpretations of Genesis written (between 300 and 500 AD) in the style of homilies.