THE JEWISH ORIGIN OF CHRISTIAN PNEUMATOLOGY

October 5, 2017
Power Center Ballroom
Pittsburgh, PA

FEATURING SPECIAL GUEST

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“The Spirit in the New Millennium: The Duquesne University Annual Holy Spirit Lecture and Colloquium” was initiated in 2005 as an expression of Duquesne’s mission and charism as a university both founded by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and dedicated to the Holy Spirit. It is hoped that this ongoing series of lectures and accompanying colloquia will encourage the exploration of ideas pertaining to the theology of the Holy Spirit. Besides fostering scholarship on the Holy Spirit within an ecumenical context, this event is intended to heighten awareness of how pneumatology (the study of the Spirit) might be relevantly integrated into the various academic disciplines in general.

Past lectures, as well as the present text, may be accessed online at www.duq.edu/holyspirit. You can contact us at holyspirit@duq.edu. Radu Bordeianu, Ph.D., serves as the director of the Holy Spirit Lecture and Colloquium.
2017 Colloquists

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BIOGRAPHY OF LECTURER

Jack Levison holds the W. J. A. Power Chair of Old Testament Interpretation and Biblical Hebrew at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. The author and editor of more than a dozen books and a featured blogger for the Huffington Post, Dr. Levison is an authority on the Holy Spirit in Jewish and Christian scripture. Included among his books on the Spirit, several of which have been translated into Korean, German, and Spanish, are The Spirit in First Century Judaism (1997), Filled with the Spirit (2009), Inspired: The Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith (2013), and, for a popular readership, Fresh Air: The Holy Spirit for an Inspired Life (2012) and Forty Days with the Holy Spirit (2015). He received a BA from Wheaton College, an MA from Cambridge University, where he was awarded the Fitzpatrick Prize for theology, and a PhD from Duke University. The recipient of numerous grants from the National Humanities Center, the Lilly Fellows Program, the Louisville Institute, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Rotary Foundation, the International Catacomb Society, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, Dr. Levison has been a visiting fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and Ludwig-Maximilians Universität, Munich, Germany.

ABSTRACT

Pneumatology is by and large a Christian enterprise. From a theological perspective, this may be acceptable; from a biblical perspective, it is not. The agency that Christians would attribute to the Holy Spirit arose, not with Christian doctrine and experience, but five hundred years earlier, when two Israelite prophets imputed agency to the Holy Spirit. Prior to the return from Babylonian captivity in 539 BCE, the spirit was deemed to be active—but not an agent acting on God's behalf. This scenario changed when post-exilic prophets Haggai and the author of Isaiah 56-66 accomplished something unprecedented: they introduced the Holy Spirit into the traditions of the exodus, in which God had rescued Israel from Egypt through a cadre of divine agents-pillars, an angel, clouds. Now, claimed these prophets, the Holy Spirit took on the role of those agents by standing in Israel's midst and guiding them to the promised land. This observation traces the essence of Christian pneumatology deep into the heart of the Hebrew scriptures. Taking this point of origin as our guide, Christian pneumatology is less about an exclusively Christian experience or doctrine and more about the presence of God in the grand scheme of Israel's history—and Christianity as ancient Israel's heir.
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I. WORD PLAY

The Jewish Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament, includes some crucial words. These words are like old-fashioned keyholes, through which you would peek and see another room. These words, in our parlance, are like hyperlinks, opening to a reservoir of meaning. Key nouns in the Hebrew Bible include:

- **Berakah**—blessing, occurs 71 times;
- **Shabbath**—sabbath, occurs 111 times;
- **Torah**—teaching or law, occurs 223 times;
- **Shalom**—peace or well-being or just “hello!” occurs 237 times;
- **Hesed**—mercy or covenant faithfulness, occurs 251 times;
- **Berith, covenant or agreement, 289 times;**
- **Rûaḥ**—breath, wind, or spirit, occurs 378 times in the Jewish Bible.

Among these nouns, the one that occurs most frequently is **rûaḥ**, translated as breath, wind, or spirit. And yet, pneumatology, the study of the spirit of God, is considered a **Christian** enterprise.

The impact of these numbers can be illustrated further by looking at the Pittsburgh skyline. At a ratio of 2.29 feet for every word occurrence:

- **Berakah**—(blessing) is the Fulton Building (Renaissance Hotel)
- **Shabbath**—(sabbath) is the Wyndham Grand Pittsburgh Downtown
- **Shalom**—(peace, well-being) is the Citizen’s Bank Tower
- **Torah**—(teaching, law) is the Koppers Tower
- **Hesed**—(mercy) is the Gulf Tower
- **Berith**—(covenant) is One PPG Place
- **crowning** Pittsburgh’s skyline, **rûaḥ**—breath, wind, or spirit, is the US Steel Tower (UPMC Building).

Trying to understand the Old Testament without the dominance of **rûaḥ** is like trying to understand Pittsburgh without the steel industry—or the Steelers themselves! Imagine the Pittsburgh skyline without the UPMC Building. That’s the Jewish Bible or Old Testament without **rûaḥ**.
By the same token, trying to understand pneumatology as if the word *rûaḥ* did not occur 378 times in the Jewish Bible makes no sense. Starting anywhere other than the Old Testament makes no sense, given the prominent role of *rûaḥ* in the Old Testament.

Yet studies of pneumatology tend to start elsewhere than the Jewish Bible or the Old Testament. There are several reasons for this, but I will suggest only one for the time being. Theologians argue the point that pneumatology is a *Christian* discipline by suggesting that *rûaḥ* in the Old Testament is an impersonal force. It comes on the judges—Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson—like the rush of a wind. It is promised to Israel in an outpouring, like a torrent of rain. But in the Old Testament, it is argued, *rûaḥ* is not a person. Not ever. So the study of the spirit as a person or a hypostasis—pneumatology proper—finds no place, it is argued, in the Old Testament. That development, understanding the spirit as a person, took place only in the New Testament era and afterwards.

That line of argument I hope to dispute—actually to dismantle—in three stages. First, I will set up the necessary background. Second, I will offer an analysis of two pivotal texts from the Jewish Bible. Third, I will suggest how this analysis ought to influence the future of pneumatology.

**II: BACKGROUND**

I have organized this section of the lecture as a countdown: 3, 2, 1. I will address three key dates, two key biblical traditions, and one thesis.

**A. Three Dates**

Three dates frame our discussion. In 587 BCE, Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and deported many of its leading figures, including the king, far away into exile. Forty-eight years later, in 539 BCE, after Persia conquered Babylon, the new Persian ruler Cyrus allowed the exiles to go home and rebuild Jerusalem, and, as a result, some Israelites in exile returned to Palestine. They faced drought, famine, and confrontation with the people who had been left in the land in 587 and now laid claim to the ancestral land the exiles’ grandparents had left. The inability to get the job done due to drought and other challenges leads to the third date, 445 BCE, and the mission of Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem.

It is important to begin a lecture on the holy spirit—a theological topic—with three dates from Israelite history, reflecting the genius of the Jewish Bible, where tradition, confession, and theology—pneumatology, even—combust in
the context of human history.

**B. Two Traditions**

Two Israelite traditions, the spirit and the exodus, proved indispensable for what occurred in Haggai 2 and Isaiah 63. The first of these traditions is that of the Spirit of God. We can say for certain that by the eighth century BCE, prophets referred to the spirit of God or הָרוּחַ. The prophet Micah claimed that he was filled with הָרוּחַ of the LORD, knowledge, power, and might (Micah 3:5-8). His contemporary in the Southern Kingdom, Isaiah, depicted a coming inspired messianic figure (Isaiah 11:1-9), upon whom the הָרוּחַ would rest. Hosea, an eighth century BCE prophet in the northern kingdom quotes his opponents, who claim:

“The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad (מַשְׁגַּגָּה †'ִּשׁ הַחָרוּךְ)!”

(Hosea 9:7).

These eighth-century prophets believed that הָרוּחַ was in full force. This keen interest in הָרוּחַ continued for six centuries, into the book of Daniel, probably the latest in the Old Testament to be written, in the mid-second century BCE. For three chapters, foreign rulers acknowledge הָרוּחַ as an exceptional divine spirit within Daniel. Thus, the tradition begun in eighth-century writings spanned over six hundred years, extending to the book of Daniel.

There is another way to look at this tradition. The first reference to הָרוּחַ Spirit of God (הָרוּחַ †'ֶלֹהִים) occurs in the Bible’s second verse: in Genesis 1:2, הָרוּחַ †'ֶלֹהִים hovers over the abyss. At the end of the Jewish Bible, in 2 Chronicles 24, the phrase occurs for a last time. From the beginning to the end of the Jewish Bible, הָרוּחַ Spirit of God (הָרוּחַ †'ֶלֹהִים) is mentioned consistently. Whether we look at it chronologically (700s to 100s BCE), canonically (Genesis to 2 Chronicles), or numerically based upon the 378 occurrences throughout the Jewish Bible, הָרוּחַ features prominently. The tradition of the spirit is substantive, its impact inexorable.

The second tradition that provides our background for reading Haggai 2 and Isaiah 63 is that of the divine agents of the exodus. From stories in the earliest traditions of Exodus to the Persian era prayers of Nehemiah, from the recollections of Deuteronomy to the reminiscences of the psalms, from the pedestrian prose of Numbers to the elevated poetry of Isaiah 40-55, with almost indiscriminate devotion, Israel hung its fate, like harps on exilic willows,
on the conviction that God was present through various agents during the exodus from Egypt.

The memory of God's presence was persistent, but certainly not static. Sometimes God is present at the exodus in pillars of cloud and fire. Sometimes God is present just in fire or a cloud. Sometimes God is present through an angel. Sometimes God is present in God's presence, God's face—panim. And sometimes these agents are thrown into a theological blender and combined, as in Numbers 14:13-14, where Moses, his back against the wall, pleads, “for you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.”

All of this is confusing … and enlivening. No one sat down during the void of Babylonian exile and ironed out the creases. No one returned to Palestine in 538 BCE and excised alternative traditions. No one wrote, “It wasn’t a pillar; it was a cloud.” No one contended, “It wasn’t a cloud; it was God’s panim, God’s presence.” All of these agents jockeyed for attention in Israel's memory. All of these thrived, not just on the surface, but in the marrow of Israel's memory, as we shall see when we return to discuss them.

C. One Thesis

These two swaths of tradition merged during the Babylonian and Persian eras—between 587 and 445 BCE. Prior to 587 BCE, the spirit was deemed to be active, but not an agent acting on God's behalf. This scenario changed when Haggai and the author of a lament in Isaiah 63:7-14 accomplished something unprecedented: they introduced the holy spirit into the traditions of the exodus, in which God had rescued Israel from Egypt through a cadre of divine agents—pillars, an angel, clouds, and God's presence or panim. Now, claimed these prophets, the holy spirit took on the role of those agents by standing in Israel's midst and guiding them, once again, to the promised land.

The implications of this development are stunning. The agency that Christians eventually attributed to the holy spirit arose, not with Christian doctrine and experience, but five hundred years earlier, when two Israelite prophets imputed agency to the spirit. The essence of Christian pneumatology, therefore, should be traced deep into the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures. Taking this point of origin as our guide, Christian pneumatology becomes less about an exclusively Christian experience or doctrine and more about the presence of God in the grand scheme of Israel's history—and Christianity as ancient Israel's heir.
To help you grasp the significance of this early merging of spirit and exodus traditions, let me tell you a story. Back in 1989, Priscilla and I travelled to Scotland’s Orkney Islands. The route from the Scottish mainland to the Orkney Islands took us directly into the path where the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean collide. We sailed along that seam where these two great forces meet. The meeting of the Atlantic Ocean and North Sea is akin to what happened pneumatologically during the Babylonian and Persian eras of Israel’s history, when spirit and exodus—two great swaths of tradition—met. This marks the birth of the holy spirit or, in more acceptable theological terms, the origin of pneumatology as we know it.

Let me illustrate again. Priscilla and I just celebrated our thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. During those years, two strong personalities have blended. There is no clear line between our values, commitments, and vocations. The two, in practical ways, have become one. The merging of spirit and exodus is similar: characteristics of each remained, though they merged, too, into something unique.

III: ANALYSIS

The Babylonian and Persian eras, particularly the years 587-445, were disheartening and disorienting for the people of ancient Israel. We could forgive them for jettisoning their traditions, dismissing them as unrealistic, unattainable, entirely forgettable. But they took another tack by reinventing them in the teeth of disappointment, even despair. For example, the author of Isaiah 40-55, sometime during exile, recast the exodus tradition by combining it with vivid creation imagery in order to inflame hope for a new exodus (Isaiah 51:9-11). Haggai and the author of Isaiah 63, we will now see, breathed new life into the exodus tradition as well by blending it with belief in the spirit of God. The consequent transformation proved to be both unprecedented and unparalleled.

A. Haggai 2:5

Haggai 2:4-5 reads,

Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts—the word that I cut with you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit stands among you; do not fear.
This text can be dated not long after the return from exile in 538 BCE and probably before the initial restoration of the temple in 515 BCE. In the twenty-five years after the decree of Cyrus in 539 BCE, Haggai urged his countrymen and women to get on with the task of reconstructing the temple with the promise, “My spirit stands among you.”

The memory of divine agents emerges, like a butterfly from a chrysalis, with singular clarity in Haggai 2:5 with the choice of the verb, ‘amaḏ “to stand,” to depict the spirit’s presence at a particularly threatening moment in Israel’s distant past—the exodus from Egypt. Pinned between the Egyptian army and the Sea, Israel faced annihilation even before they became a nation. Yet pillars of cloud and fire accompanied them. All of sudden, as evening set and peril reared its head,

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. (Exodus 14:19-20a)

The pillar of cloud stood between Israel and the Egyptian army, hot in pursuit, and protected them, on the cusp of escape, for one more necessary night. In fact, the very word, pillar, is built from the same verbal root, to stand or to take one’s place. “And stood” is wayya’ēmōḏ; “pillar” is ‘ammūḏ. When, therefore, Haggai promises that the spirit stands (‘ōmeḏeṯ) in Israel’s midst, he does not choose a verb cavalierly; Haggai 2:5 evokes both the verb, ‘amaḏ (stand), and the noun, ‘ammūḏ (standing pillar), in the exodus story. The equation is a simple one: as God protected Israel from the Egyptian army when the pillar of cloud stood behind them, so now will the rūaḥ stand in their midst, as they return from the Babylonian exile and confront enormous challenges ahead. What the pillar once did, the spirit now does. There is, Haggai assures his people, no need to fear.

There may be another historical point of reference as well. Subsequently in the exodus tradition, the cloud appears at a tent outside the camp, where Moses would customarily meet God:

When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent.
Again, the pillar (‘ammūḏ) would stand (we‘āmaḏ) at the tent’s entrance at the tent’s entrance. When the people saw the pillar of cloud standing there, they bowed down at their own tents. The pillar, in short, signaled the presence of God in Israel’s midst, while Moses and God talked face to face.

For Haggai, there is no palpable pillar to which he can point during the early years of rebuilding after 539 BCE, no corporeal cloud that exists to signal God’s presence. But there is something else that can stand in Israel’s midst and signal God’s presence. There is spirit, rûaḥ. Again, the equation is a simple one: just as God was present when the pillar of cloud stood at the tent of meeting after Israel’s escape from Egypt, so now is God present, after their escape from Babylonian exile, not through a visible pillar, but when the invisible spirit stands in their midst. No, there is no need to fear.

B. Isaiah 63:7-14

Haggai was not alone in speaking of the spirit in this way. A lament in Isaiah 63:7-14 contains one reference to an angel, followed by three references to the spirit in close succession, two of them to the holy spirit:

In all their distress, the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved [or rebelled against] his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them. Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant. Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit, who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble. Like cattle that go down into the valley, the spirit of the Lord gave them rest [or guided them] Thus you led your people,
to make for yourself a glorious name. (Isaiah 63:7-14)

The line about the angel is notoriously difficult in part because the Hebrew text and the Greek translation differ from one another. The Hebrew can be translated like this:

*In all their distress, the angel of his presence saved them.*

The Greek translators opted for this:

*It was no ambassador or angel but the Lord himself that saved them*

The Greek translators took exactly the opposite interpretation of the Hebrew—it was *not* an angel that saved Israel—perhaps because they were reluctant to attribute salvation to an angel rather than to God.

For theological reasons, then, as well as some real difficulties with the Hebrew wording, the Greek translators interpreted this text differently from the Hebrew. This is not unusual. For example, Genesis 2:4 in the Hebrew says that God *completed* God’s work on the seventh day. This implies that God violated the sabbath by working on the seventh day—God completed the work on the seventh day. The Greek translators solved this problem with a tweak, by simply changing seventh to sixth: God completed God’s work on the *sixth* day, the Greek translation says. Then God rested on the seventh.

This scenario becomes significant when we glance at English translations of Isaiah 63:9. Some English translations straightforwardly follow the Hebrew. The *New International Version*, for example, reads: “and the angel of his presence saved them.” The *New Revised Standard Version*, on the other hand, follows the Greek: “It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them.”

When we work with the Hebrew text of Isaiah 63:7-14—and I am prone to think the Hebrew represents the original text—we see immediately that it is rife with allusions to the exodus tradition. Verses 11-14 read:

Then they remembered the days of old,
of Moses his servant.
Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea …
Who divided the waters before them …
who led them through the depths … (Isaiah 63:11-13)
Into this setting the prophet inserts one reference to an angel and three to God’s rūaḥ:

- The angel of God’s presence saved them;
- But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit;
- Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit,
- Like cattle that go down into the valley, the spirit of the Lord gave them rest [or guided them]

In order to appreciate the pneumatological innovation in this passage, we need to take it apart bit by bit.

B.1. The angel of God’s presence

First, the angel of God’s presence. We saw already that the angel and the pillar inserted themselves between Israel and the Egyptian army, according to Exodus 14:19. Later, after passing through the Sea, God issues a promise and a warning:

I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him. But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes. When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites ... (Exodus 23:20-23).

Later still, in the midst of a terrifyingly blunt negotiation between God and Moses, the angel seems to be supplanted by God’s presence or face—panim. Initially, God reiterates the promise that an angel will lead Israel, according to Exodus 32:24: “But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you” (32:34). Then, a few moments later, God promises Moses something else: “My presence [panim: pānāy) will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14).

These two traditions—God’s angel and God’s presence—which compete in the book of Exodus—become one and the same agent in Isaiah 63: the angel of God’s presence. This in itself is a significant theological innovation. But it is not the sole innovation. Creativity continues with the introduction of the holy spirit. The author shifts imperceptibly from the angel of God’s
presence to the holy spirit, suggesting that the angel and the spirit are one and the same:

The angel of God’s presence saved them … but they rebelled against God’s holy spirit.

Angel and spirit are the same divine agent.

B.2. The spirit

But that is not all. From where does the conception of rebellion against God’s holy spirit in the next couple of verses arise? The exodus tradition has none of this. On the other hand, there is a strong warning about rebellion against God’s angel in Exodus 23:21: “do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him.”

What has happened? Precisely what we saw in Haggai 2:4-5. The spirit has taken on the role of an agent in the exodus tradition. For Haggai, this agent is the pillar, which stood in Israel’s midst; now the spirit stands there. For Isaiah 63, this is the angel of God’s presence, against which Israel was warned not to rebel; now Isaiah 63 says Israel rebelled against God’s holy spirit. The angel of God’s presence and the holy spirit are one and the same.

A similar shift occurs in the last reference to the spirit in this communal lament. The spirit of the LORD gave them rest (or guided them—the Hebrew is difficult to determine)—leads full circle to God’s presence, face, or panim in Exodus 33:14, in which God promised, “My panim [presence] will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

What has happened? Yet again, the spirit has taken on the role of a guiding agent in the exodus tradition. In the exodus, God’s presence or face or panim would give Israel rest; now Isaiah 63 says the spirit of the LORD gave Israel rest. The presence or panim of God and the spirit of the LORD are one and the same. This otherwise ordinary communal lament, tucked inconspicuously into the final chapters of Isaiah, contains a remarkable and unprecedented pneumatological innovation in four steps:

1. The author merges two distinct agents of the exodus: the angel and God’s presence. In Isaiah 63, the two have become one: the angel of God’s presence.

2. The author then shifts nearly imperceptibly from this angel to the holy spirit: “The angel of God’s presence saved them … but they rebelled against God’s holy spirit.”
3. The holy spirit takes on the role of the angel: rebellion against the angel in Exodus 23 becomes in Isaiah 63 rebellion against the holy spirit.

4. The spirit of the LORD takes on the role of the *panim* or presence of God: the rest God’s presence or *panim* would give in Exodus 33 becomes in Isaiah 63 the rest the spirit of the LORD gave.

**Summary**

For more than half a millennium, from eighth century prophets Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah, to the book of Daniel, written around 160 BCE—six full, rich centuries—many Israelites embraced the presence and power of *rûaḥ*. Prior to the composition of Haggai 2:4-5 and Isaiah 63:7-14, however, Israel’s poets, prophets, and storytellers deemed the spirit to be active—but not an agent acting on God’s behalf. This scenario changed when the author of an otherwise typical communal lament, at some point after 587 BCE, and the prophet Haggai, at some point after 539, accomplished something unique. Drawing on the exodus tradition, in which a pillar had stood in Israel’s midst, Haggai encouraged his compatriots with the claim that now, centuries after the exodus, the spirit stood in their midst. Drawing as well on the exodus tradition, in which Israel had been warned not to rebel against the angel, the author of Isaiah 63 charged them with rebelling against God’s holy spirit. Drawing yet one more time on the exodus tradition, in which God’s presence or *panim* would give Israel rest, the author of Isaiah 63 claimed that the spirit of the LORD had given Israel rest.

These innovations took place sometime between 587 and 445 BCE. To put an exclamation point on this chronology: these prophets spoke of the spirit as standing, giving rest, and being rebelled against more than five centuries before Jesus’ feet touched the earth or the apostle Paul sailed the Mediterranean, more than 800 years before the Christian Council of Nicea in 325, and more than nine centuries—nearly a millennium—before the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

**IV: IMPLICATIONS**

I am not the first to notice the significance of Isaiah 63 for the study of pneumatology. Joseph Blenkinsopp, for example, noted that:

The association of the Spirit with the Presence or the Face of God (also in Ps 139:7) indicates that the Spirit (*ruah*) has now become the object of
theological reflection, a kind of hypostasis similar in that respect to the Face (panim), the Angel (mal’ak) and, later in the Targum, the Word (memra’). We are at the beginning of a development that will eventuate, on the one hand, in the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit and, on the other, the rabbinic concept of the ruah haqqodes as the spirit of prophecy (ruah hannebu’a).

Renowned Old Testament theologian Walter Eichrodt introduced his discussion of spirit in the post-exilic or Persian era in this way:

It almost seems as if in Judaism everything which earlier generations had learned and enunciated about the working of the spirit of God came alive more than ever before, and exerted a direct influence on the conduct of daily life. … This may be seen first of all in the development by which the spirit of God is made markedly independent, so that it can now be portrayed as a so-called hypostasis, that is to say, a separate entity which acts of its own motion, and is of itself concerned with human affairs.

While this lecture is not the first occasion on which someone has noted the significance of Isaiah 63, though its connection to Haggai 2:4-5 seems to have gone largely unnoticed, it may be the first time someone has analyzed Isaiah 63 and Haggai 2 in detail, with an eye toward understanding its significance for Christian pneumatology. To explore its significance, I would like to offer several suggestions for the future of pneumatology, based upon an origin during the Babylonian and Persian eras of Israel’s history.

A. Pneumatology and hypostasis

Tangled up in theology in general and pneumatology in particular is the perennial challenge of vocabulary. How to identify the Spirit? Invariably, scholars and theologians adopt the language of hypostasis. Joseph Blenkinsopp and Walter Eichrodt both did this. But the conception of hypostasis, worked out in relation to the spirit, stems principally from the fourth-century Christians known as the Cappadocians—Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. To put this in the simplest of terms, these influential Christian theologians espoused what can be summed up in the Trinitarian formula, “Three Hypostaseis in one Ousia,” that is, three persons in one being. Each person of the Trinity, which share a common ousia with one another, is an hypostasis by virtue of what differentiates that person from the other two. For instance, the Son shares ousia with the Father but is a
separate hypostasis because he was begotten, while the Father begets. This is a far cry from Haggai 2 and Isaiah 63. Separated from the Cappadocian fathers by dint of language (Hebrew versus Greek), chronology (more than eight centuries), empires (Persia versus Byzantium), and theological commitments (monotheism versus trinitarianism), there is a great deal that distinguishes the Cappadocian fathers from Babylonian and Persian era prophets. So there is little to commend introducing a term brought to currency by the Cappadocians into a discussion of Israel's prophets. It is an anachronism to interpret either Haggai 2 or Isaiah 63 as instances of the hypostatization of the spirit.

Theologians must discover other categories that take the Jewish origin of Christian pneumatology seriously. I have opted for divine agency because the spirit takes on the role of divine agents in the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Pneumatology arose less from an interest in clarifying the theological category of an hypostasis than from what we might call an inner-biblical or exegetical move. The birth of pneumatology resulted from the amalgamation of two specific biblical traditions—the exodus and the spirit.

**B. Pneumatology and history**

Pneumatology grew first in the soil of history. This is history experienced, confessed, and adapted—history as a concoction of politics, tradition, and theological reflection. Pneumatology, in other words, should not start from a standpoint outside of history. Pneumatology may eventually be about the divine economy in the Trinity, the inner logic of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but it cannot begin there. Why? Because it did not begin there. If contemporary pneumatology is to be faithful to its point of origin, then it must have as one of its central loci the relationship of the Holy Spirit to history.

Pneumatology arose, for the first time in history, then, in reflection upon God, of course, but not God in the abstract. The understanding of the spirit as a divine agent took root in the relationship between God and the long history of a concrete community—Israel's longstanding community, from exodus through exile all the way to the excavation and rebuilding of a temple.

**C. Pneumatology and tradition**

Haggai and the author of Isaiah 63 reached back into the exodus tradition in order to discover a way of encouraging Israel so that they could move ahead into the uncharted terrain of exile and reconstruction. They did not invent a theological concept de novo. They did not create the spirit ex nihilo. They knew
their tradition, engaged it with theological sophistication—it is hard to miss this in Isaiah 63—and modified it by allowing the spirit to take on the role of divine agents during the exodus.

Haggai delivered a promise that simultaneously recalled the pillar’s strategic presence in their venture from Egypt and, in his own day, the spirit’s strategic presence in their adventure in Persian Palestine. The lament in Isaiah 63 engaged the exodus tradition even more deeply. The prophet affirmed that nothing had negated the holy spirit’s presence as a divine agent among the people of the exodus, so nothing could now, in his own day, annul the spirit’s presence in the years that would follow Babylonian exile.

D. Pneumatology and community

If we take our cue from Haggai and Isaiah 63, then we are compelled to affirm that spirituality is not primarily an individual affair. These two texts, buried deep in Israel’s bowels, suggest something else. The origin of pneumatology—the first expression of the spirit as an agent—occurs in a context concerned explicitly with communities rather than individuals. Isaiah 63:7-14 is, in fact, a communal lament, like many communal laments in the Psalms. The words of Haggai 2 are addressed to the community as a whole, from its governor to the people of the land. Pneumatology, at its point of origin, was communal. Contemporary pneumatology, therefore, should retain a keen interest in the work of the holy spirit in communities—not just individuals within them.

E. Pneumatology and crisis

Haggai addresses a haggard community, fresh from exile, daunted by the challenges ahead. The command, “Do not fear,” along with the promise, “the spirit stands among you”—command and promise alike address their crisis. The lament in Isaiah 63 is equally crisis-oriented. Though it begins in a positive vein by recounting God’s gracious deeds done “for us,” including salvation by the angel of God’s presence, the poem turns quickly to communal lament. Twice the community asks, “Where is?” Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit? Why, they wonder, is God in absentia?

Crisis—not joie de vivre—is the crucible of pneumatology. Catastrophe is the birthplace of reflection on the holy spirit. In both prophetic texts, the spirit, understood here for the first time in history as a divine agent, confronts the fear and disappointment of fledgling communities that face an uncertain future.
There is a place for joy in the holy spirit, for peace, for robust worship, too. But the birthright of those who claim to experience the spirit is first and foremost the ability to look ahead with confidence—not necessarily to success but to divine accompaniment. The pillar. The cloud. The angel. God’s panim. And now, for Haggai and the author of Isaiah 63, the spirit accompanies Israel in dark times. A pneumatology that effaces this reality, a pneumatology that ignores the crisis orientation of this origin, can never be a full-throated expression of the holy spirit.

F. Pneumatology and Judaism

In an unfortunate but entrenched move, scholars have tended to characterize the post-exilic era as pedantic and legalistic—a falloff from the high ethical and theological apex associated with Israel’s great prophets, such as Hosea, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. After the return from exile, Israel cast its vision, the argument goes, from theology to casuistry, from imagination to legalism, from prophet to Pharisee.

The post-exilic era, with its rigid legalism and shrill monotheism, it is often argued, gave birth to Judaism, which understood itself to be void of the holy spirit. Renowned patristic scholar Geoffrey Lampe, for example, wrote this in the influential *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*: “the Spirit continues to be thought of as being, pre-eminently, the Spirit of prophecy, manifested in the distant past in such great figures as Elijah (Ecclus. 48.12) or Isaiah (vs. 24), but which was now no longer present in Israel.” Pioneering Pentecostal scholar Gordon Fee wrote, “Noticeably missing in the intertestamental literature … is the sense that the Spirit speaks through any contemporary ‘prophet’. This is almost certainly the result of the growth of a tradition called ‘the quenched Spirit’, which begins in the later books of the Old Testament and is found variously during the Second Temple period.”

This characterization of Judaism as sterile and legalistic served aptly as a foil for the rise of Christianity as a grace- and spirit-filled movement. The present study of Haggai 2:4-5 and Isaiah 63:7-14 puts the lie to this characterization—caricature, really—of earliest Judaism. These prophets do not represent the end but the beginning of an era of remarkable creativity, when exodus and spirit could combust to create something fresh, something old but also entirely new. This pneumatology was kinetic, even explosive—new ways of comprehending the spirit formulated from longstanding traditions.

It will not do, therefore, to contrast the demise of Judaism, through tedious legalism and an absence of the spirit, with the rise of a grace- and spirit-
filled Christianity. It will not do because it is not true, however convenient it may be for Christians to contrast death and life, law and grace, Judaism and Christianity.

**CONCLUSION**

When I look back at photos from my childhood, I do not easily recognize myself. I have lived now 61 years. But there is a resemblance, despite crows’ feet and grey hair. The ears are the same. The nose has the same contours, too. What I was then, a little blonde boy with Brylcream in my hair—a little dab’ll do ya’—and a leather schoolbag walking down Lantern Road on my way to Fork Lane elementary school, isn’t so far from who I am now. The “child,” as William Wordsworth said, “is the father of the Man.”

I conclude along this vein by suggesting that contemporary pneumatology—whether of the sacramentalist in grand cathedrals or purveyors of ecstasy in Appalachian arbors—ought to resemble the newborn pneumatology of the Babylonian and Persian eras. If pneumatology in the years ahead is to bear a keen resemblance to the child born in Israel, then it must be historically relevant, steeped in ancient traditions, communal in character, crisis-oriented, and, without putting too fine a point on it, Jewish. Pneumatology began in ancient Israel with a burst—a big bang—of creativity. If we retrace our steps, recapture that creativity, and rekindle that intensity, perhaps we can expect the future of our pneumatology to be robust, ample in resources for embracing the challenges that lie ahead.
Endnotes

1 These numbers are based primarily upon the software Accordance, as well as a variety of lexicons.

2 The last book in the Christian Old Testament is Malachi; the last book in the Jewish Bible is 2 Chronicles.

3 My translation.

4 The same verb is not used in Isaiah 63 as in Exodus 23—but nearly so. The verb in Exodus is mrr, which was easily confused with the verb used in Isaiah, mrh, which means “to rebel.” The Septuagint translators understood this verb in Exodus as rebellion (mrh), ἀπειθεῖ.

5 The Hebrew verb could be interpreted in either of two ways. Perhaps it is a promise of rest: “I will give you rest.” Perhaps it is a promise to lead: “I will lead you.” The form in Isaiah 63:14, tənîḥennū, could be translated either give rest or lead, since the verbs in this form are nearly identical.


2017 COLLOQUIUM READINGS


Levison, Jack, “The Exodus and Ancient Israel” (draft chapter)

Idem. “The Spirit and Ancient Israel” (draft chapter)


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