

Who is the Holy Spirit?

Lesson 1: The Spirit in Hebrew

Vocabulary:

force	ox	to devastate (adj., devastating)	tendon
mist	ax	horrendous	tissue
ghost	to farm (n. farming)	to overwhelm (adj., overwhelmed)	exile
to construct (adj., constructed)	abstract	to strengthen	desperate
B.C.E	metaphor	to originate	slain
Canaan	to invade (n. invasion)	to adopt (adj., adopted)	passion
ancient	captive (adj., captive)	curse	to guide (n. guidance)

Discussion:

What comes to your mind when you think of the “Holy Spirit?” Some people may think of the Holy Spirit as a powerful **force**, a source of miracles, a **mist** that moves through the air, a voice inside our minds, the voice of God, or even a mysterious idea that we don’t really understand. Is the Holy Spirit a person, a thing, a **ghost**, God himself? You may have many ideas about the Holy Spirit and many questions as well. Perhaps the idea of the Holy Spirit is completely new to you! This lesson will explore the word “Spirit” as it is found in the Old Testament Hebrew, so that you can grow in your understanding of what God means when he says, “Spirit.”

Who is the Holy Spirit to you?

Spirit in Old Testament Hebrew

In the Old Testament, we see three definitions for the term “spirit” in Hebrew, one of the two languages used in the Old Testament. To understand these definitions, we must first understand a little about the Hebrew language. The earliest form of Hebrew was possibly **constructed** during the time of Moses (c. 1500-1300 **B.C.E**) in the land of **Canaan**, an area now including modern Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. The earliest form of Hebrew consisted of 30 symbols and was built upon a 22-letter alphabet that had evolved from pictures.¹ These earliest letters were made from pictures of man, animals, nature, and **ancient** tools: an **ox** head, a house, an **ax**, a door, a man worshipping, a snake, an eye, a valley, etc.² The early Hebrews spoke and wrote about what they could see, touch, hear, smell, or taste with images and expressions related to **farming** and nature.³ The language of the ancient Hebrews lacked many **abstract** concepts and terms we use to express emotion today. Instead, these people wrote in **metaphors**, comparing their thoughts and emotions to commonly used concrete images: “Your teeth are like a flock of sheep (Song of Songs 6:6, NIV).

¹ Hoffman, Joel M., *In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language*, New York, New York Press, 2004. (21, 29)

² Hooker, J.T., *Reading the Past: Ancient Writing from Cuneiform to the Alphabet*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990. (131); Walker, C.B. and John Chadwick, 131, *The Proto-sinaitic Inscriptions*, Romain F. Butin, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Published New York, Cambridge University Press, 1932 on behalf of Harvard Divinity School, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1507943> (138-151)

³ Saenz-Badillos, Angel. *A History of Hebrew Language*. Department of Hebrew and Aramaic Studies, Universidad Complutense, Madrid. Translated by John Elwolde. Cambridge University Press, 1993. (16, 74-75)

Imagine that you're an ancient Hebrew. You need to define the God's Spirit using words or metaphors that relate to man, animals, nature, or tools. What words or metaphors would you use?

Now you are beginning to think like an ancient Hebrew! By the sixth century B.C.E., almost 1000 years after Moses, we see a beautiful picture of three Hebrew definitions of the word "spirit," written in a single passage found in the book of Ezekiel [eh-ZEE-kee-uhl]. These definitions include two metaphors, one from nature and one from man. Yet, to understand this passage, we must first understand a little bit of Jewish history.

Ezekiel and the Spirit

By 1000 B.C.E, the Hebrew people were living in the kingdom of Israel that was later divided into two parts: the Kingdom of Israel in the north, and Judea in the south. By 722 B.C.E. the Assyrians living north/northeast of Israel had taken over the northern kingdom. By the mid-fifth century, Judea was facing a serious threat of **invasion** by the armies of Babylon (now modern Iraq), east of Judea. By 597 B.C.E., the Babylonians had destroyed the Jewish temple of worship in Jerusalem and had taken **captive** the Jewish leaders and highly skilled men of Judea, a period known as the Babylonian captivity.⁴

Just prior to this **devastating**, historical event in Jewish history, we meet the Jewish prophet Ezekiel (622– 570 B.C.E.) living in Jerusalem. He is prophesying against Judea for their idolatry and **horrendous** disobedience to God's commands, and he predicts their captivity under the Babylonians as God's punishment for their sins (Ezekiel 4). Along with the other Jewish men, Ezekiel is captured by the King of Babylon in 597 B.C.E. and lives among the Jewish prisoners while he continues to bring them messages from the Lord.

Imagine that your country is being **invaded**. Your place of worship is destroyed and you, along with your friends, have been taken captive and placed in enemy territory. Describe how you feel.

Can you think of words or metaphors related to man, animals, nature, or tools to describe your feelings?

Separated from their homeland, the people feel depressed, **overwhelmed**, hopeless, and spiritually dead because of God's punishment for their sins. Yet, God sends them a vision of hope through his prophet Ezekiel, a name that means "God will **strengthen**."⁵ In this vision, Ezekiel sees himself standing in a valley full of dry human bones. In the ancient Hebrew world, a field filled with human bones that had never been properly buried was a metaphor for historic battle scenes of a people who had been destroyed, never to be remembered. This metaphor **originated** from ancient Mesopotamia, Assyria, and Egypt and was **adopted** into Hebrew culture.⁶ Even a dead, unburied body left lying in public view was considered a

⁴ The Chronicles of Chaldean Kings held in the British Museum records Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem in March 597 B.C.E. in accordance with biblical Jewish history, while tablets dated ca. 595–569 B.C.E. displaying rations given to Jews during captivity serve as archeological evidence of their exile in Babylonia during that time. See Donald J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626–556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1956), 33–34.

⁵ "3168. Yechezqel," *Brown-Driver-Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon*, unabridged, electronic database (BibleSoft, 2006), <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3168.htm>.

⁶ John X. Walton, Victor X. Matthews, Mark W. Chavales, «The book of Ezekiel», in *Biblical Cultural and Historical Commentary - Part 1: The Old Testament*, ed. Tatyana G. Batukhtina (SPb.: Mirth, 2003), <https://ekzeget.ru/bible/kniga-proroka-iezekiila/glava-37/stih-1/tolkovatel-kulturnoistoriceskij-komentarij/>.

curse in ancient Middle Eastern culture.⁷ This vision represented the physical and spiritual death of God's people.

Yet, in the middle of this vision of hopelessness, God commands Ezekiel to tell these bones to live. As Ezekiel stands before this valley, the bones begin joining together to form human figures. They are then covered with **tendon tissue**, flesh, and skin. God then orders the prophet to call the wind to breathe life into these people, and they became a large army.

What do you think God is telling Ezekiel through this vision?

What does this vision say about God in the Old Testament?

God reveals to Ezekiel that the bones are the Jewish people in **exile**, and he tells him that he will raise his people from spiritual death and bring them back to their homeland. This event was not only a powerful symbol of the future restoration of Israel but also a prophecy of the full transformation and true life that God would later send through his Son and Savior, Jesus. The vision of Ezekiel reveals the richness of God's wisdom, strength, grace, and love for his children and his heart to provide a way out of impossible and **desperate** situations.

The Spirit as *Spirit, breath, and wind*

Within this ancient, prophetic vision, we find the three definitions for the Hebrew word for "spirit" [Heb. רוּחַ, *ruach* (ROO-akh)]⁸:

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the *Spirit* [בְּרוּחַ] of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. (37:1, NIV)

This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make *breath* [רוּחַ]¹⁰ enter you, and you will come to life. (37:5, NIV)

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four *winds* [רוּחוֹת]¹¹ and breathe into these **slain**, that they may live.'" (37:9, NIV)

As we can see from these passages, the definitions of the Hebrew word "ruach" are *spirit, breath* and *wind*, but the translation of the word "ruach" depends on the context of the sentence. While each word is formed by variations of letters, the root of the Hebrew word is the same: "ruach."

What is the role of the Spirit for the Jewish people in Ezekiel 37:1? What does the Spirit have the power to do in our lives?

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "7307. ruach," *Brown-Driver-Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon*, unabridged, electronic database (Biblesoft, 2006), <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7307.htm>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

What is the role of the Spirit for the Jewish people in Ezekiel 37:5? What does he have the power to do in our lives?

What do you think the term “four winds” means in Ezekiel 37:9? What does this verse teach us about God’s desire for the Spirit in our lives? Why do you think God desires this?

From the definition “ruach” as *Spirit*, we see that the Spirit has the power to move us into a place and reveal his will for ourselves and others. He can reveal God’s heart about the people around us, their sins, and their spiritual condition. From *breath*, we learn that God can make us spiritual alive, even though we are dead. From *wind*, we learn that God doesn’t just want to restore our relationship with him, but he wants to fill us completely with his Spirit so we can have **passion** for him and live for him as a people committed to serving in his kingdom, as an army serves a nation.

Conclusion

As you consider the Hebrew definitions for “ruach,” and all that God wants us to understand through these definitions, we can each examine our own spirit and ask ourselves some important questions for our lives. Take a minute to quietly answer the questions you feel the Lord wants you to answer. Then share your answers with your group or with a Christian friend. Take time to pray one for another.

Have you ever felt captive by sin and unable to change? How has sin been destroying your life or hurting your spirit?

Do you feel spiritually dead or alive? Are there areas in your life or relationships that you need the Spirit to bring to life? Explain.

Are you experiencing an impossible situation where you need the Spirit’s help? Explain.

What would it look like in your life to be filled with God’s Spirit?

How has God been speaking to you about the spiritual condition of people around you? What do you think he wants you to do for them? What would that look like?

This Week:

Write in your journal:

1. Spend time in prayer this week asking the Spirit to help you the needs you shared above. Ask the Spirit to fill you. Ask the Spirit to reveal sins in your life that are keeping him from leading you. Ask the Spirit to remove any sins or situations that he knows are moving you in the wrong direction. Pray for your heart to be open to his **guidance**.
2. Ask the Spirit for wisdom and guidance over situations in your life. Then open the Word of God and allow him to show you the wisdom he has for you.
3. Ask the Lord to lead you to understand more deeply the spiritual condition of the people in your life or in a place he wants to lead you. Ask the Spirit to open doors for you to share true life with these people.