

The Meanings and Uses of *Ruach* in the Hebrew Bible

by Paul Sumner

Understanding the Hebrew word **ruach** (and its Greek counterpart **pneuma**) is central to understanding why Yeshua is called "Messiah" (Mashiach, Christos).

It's also important to know what Scripture teaches about "spirit," in order to discern and avoid deceptions done in the name of and by a Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost. There is a counterfeit "different Spirit," "who is now working in the children of disobedience" (2 Cor 11:4; Eph 2:2).

In the Hebrew Bible the word **ruach** occurs 378 times. Its base meaning is "moving air" – whether in the form of breath, a breeze, or violent storm winds.

Kohlenberger & Swanson, *Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament* (1998), p. 1461 entry #8120.

In about 100 places in English Bibles, the word is rendered "wind." Notice Yeshua's play on the Greek word **pneuma** in John 3 and the parallel in John 20:

That which is begotten of the flesh is flesh; and that which is begotten of **pneuma** is **pneuma**.... The **pneuma** blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So is every one who is begotten of the **pneuma** (Jn 3:6,8).

When he had said this, he **breathed** on them and said to them, "Receive holy **pneuma**." (Jn 20:22)

Most often in English Bibles **ruach** is translated either as "spirit" or "Spirit" (the difference is explained below). This is the immaterial dimension of a human being or of God. Immaterial angelic or demonic beings are called "spirits" (**ruchot**).

A few times, **ruach** is translated "mind" in the sense of someone's thoughts, convictions, disposition, drive, even courage. God's **ruach** is his soul-etched characteristics. (At the end of this introduction is a fuller list of the range of definitions.)

Ruach can denote divine power over the spirit world. Note the two versions of Yeshua's statement. Matthew's version seems to be an interpretation of the original metaphor recorded by Luke.

If I cast out demons by the **Spirit of God**, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. (Matt 12:28)

If I cast out demons by the **Finger of God**, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. (Luke 11:20)

In the days of Moses, the "Finger of God" obliterated the supernatural powers working through Pharaoh's magicians (Exod 7:5).

Because the root meaning of **ruach** denotes moving air it's important to not always translate it "SPIRIT," which is only one possible meaning. For example, a survey of the many ways Isaiah uses **ruach** adds breadth to his references to the **Ruach of God**. This is especially true in his prophecies of the Mashiach, the one anointed with God's **Ruach**. (See "[Ruach in the Hebrew Scriptures](#)" in the "Hebrew Bible Studies" portal of [hebrew-streams.org](#).)

As is common in Hebrew thought, many passages with parallel lines of thought reveal interconnected dimensions of **ruach**:

1) **Ruach** is often translated **breath**, and breath comes from the mouth. God's creative power is shown whenever his mouth speaks words: "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1:3).

By the **Word** of the LORD the heavens were made,
And by the **Ruach** of his mouth all their host. (Psalm 33:6)

Isaiah says the future Anointed One "will slay the wicked...with the Ruach of his lips" (Isa 11:4), and Paul says Yeshua "will slay...the Lawless One...with the Pneuma of his mouth" (2 Thess 2:8).

2) Since words express one's mind, God's Ruach/Breath can denote his inner thoughts or **mind**. The usual Hebrew word for "mind" is **lev** or **levav** (literally "heart"), and it's often parallel to Ruach.

I shall give them one **Lev** and put a new **Ruach** within them. (Ezek 11:19)

Note how the Jewish translators of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the Septuagint) rendered a line from Isaiah 40, and how the apostle Paul later validated their translation:

Who has directed [measured] the **Ruach** of the LORD? (Isa 40:13 Hebrew)
Who has known the **Mind** [nous] of the Lord? (Isa 40:13 LXX)
Who has known the **Mind** [nous] of the Lord? (Rom 11:34)

After quoting this same verse in 1 Cor 2:16a, Paul reminds his listeners that "we have the **Mind** of Messiah [*nous Christos*]" (v. 16b). Later, to the same group he affirms the wisdom of his counsel to them: "I think that I also have the **pneuma** of God" [on this issue] (1 Cor 7:40). Paul's interchangeable usage of Mind (nous) and Spirit (pneuma) has a bearing on his exposition on the Spirit in Romans 8.

3) God's Ruach/Heart/Mind could be called his resident disposition, character, or **nature**. This nature he wants implanted in Israel (and all human beings) to remold them, rebirth them, recreate them with his "new" character, in his image. In his "image" was the original intent (Gen 1:26).

I will give you a new **Lev** and put a new **Ruach** within you.
And I will put my **Ruach** within you. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

After David's great sin involving Bathsheba, he expressed his fear that God would "hide His face" from him. He was afraid the Lord would no longer look at him, hear his cries, or speak a word of forgiveness to him. (The Hebrew word for "face" is **panim**.) David thought God might totally withdraw his Panim and thus abandon him, or like a king, dismiss him from His court. So he begged God not to remove his Ruach, but hopefully "restore" it to him (Ps 51:10-12).

David used a rare Hebrew expression, "Holy Ruach" [ruach qodesh] to form a parallel: God's Nature // Presence-Panim.

Renew a steadfast **Ruach** within me.
Do not cast me away from your **Panim** [presence],
And do not take your **Holy Ruach** from me. (Ps 51:10b-11)

(In rabbinic documents and many Messianic writings, *ruach qodesh* is alternately printed **Ruach HaQodesh** or **Ruach HaKodesh** or **HaRuach HaKodesh**. The "ha" prefix denotes the article "the." This indicates the phrase is to be rendered "the Holy Spirit." But this spelling—with the "ha" prefix—does not occur in the Hebrew Bible.)

4) Ruach is another way of describing God's presence because when he comes invisibly near human beings and speaks to them, his Breath and spoken words convey his Presence. If you can hear someone breathing or talking to you, they are present with you. We've all experienced how someone's character or spirit fills the room and draws everyone's attention.

Where can I go from your **Ruach**?
Or where can I flee from your **Panim**? (Psalm 139:7)

5) God's Ruach or Presence is God himself. Just as a person's spirit is himself (1 Cor 2:11), God's Ruach is God. His Spirit is not another personality or being.

The Egyptians are men, and not **God**,
And their horses are flesh and not **Ruach**. (Isaiah 31:3)

God...(is)...**Ruach**. (Isaiah 31:3)
God is **Pneuma**. (John 4:24)

6) Other Synonyms of Ruach

Hand [*yad*]:

The LORD **spoke** to me with a mighty **Hand**. (Isa 8:11)
I was strengthened according to the **Hand** of the LORD my God upon me. (Ezra 7:28)

The **Hand** of the Lord YHVH fell on me there...
He stretched out the form of a **Hand**...and the **Ruach** lifted me up.
(Ezek 8:1, 3)

David gave to his son Solomon...the plan of all that he had by the **Ruach** with him
[David said]. "All this, the LORD made me understand in writing by his **Hand** upon
me." (1 Chron 28:12, 19)

Where can I go from your **Ruach**?
Or where can I flee from your **Presence**?
Even there your **Hand** will lead me. (Ps 139:7, 9)

Glory [*kavod*]:

Messiah was raised from the dead by the **Glory** of the Father. (Rom 6:4)
The **Pneuma** of [God]...raised Yeshua from the dead. (Rom 8:11)

The word cluster Ruach/Lev/Panim is key to understanding the concept of "Messiah" (the Anointed One), in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. For God's **ruach** underlies the deeper meaning of biblical anointing:

[The LORD says],
Behold, my Servant, whom I uphold;
My Chosen One in whom my soul delights,
I have put my **Ruach** upon him;
He will bring forth justice to the Goyim [nations]. (Isa 42:1; cited in
Matt 12:18)

The **Ruach** of the Lord God is upon me,
Because he has anointed me. (Isa 61:1a; cited by Yeshua in Luke 4:18)

It's important to raise the question of why Yeshua of Nazareth is called "Christos" 529 times (*Messiah* in Greek). Why so? Because to decide whether Yeshua was a messiah or the Messiah depends on how we understand his anointing with God's Holy Ruach/Pneuma.

As the Ruach-Anointed one, Yeshua often associates himself with the Spirit. Not only did he breathe forth the Ruach before his death ("Receive Holy Ruach"; John 20:22), he said the Ruach will "be" the Spirit/divine Presence in the future, after his departure. He also said he himself would be with, accompany, teach, guide his disciples.

The **Spirit** of Truth...will be with you forever. **You know him** because
he abides with you [now]. (John 14:16, 17)
I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt 28:20)

They...were forbidden by the **Holy Spirit** to speak the word in Asia...
The **Spirit of Yeshua** did not permit them [to go into Asia]. (Acts 16:6, 7)

It is not you who speak, but it is the **Holy Spirit**. (Mark 13:11)
I myself will give you utterance and wisdom... (Luke 21:14-14)

[See "Who is the Shepherd in Acts: The Holy Spirit or Messiah Yeshua?" in the "Ruach Studies" portal of hebrew-streams.org.]

A major, artificial barrier to understanding Yeshua's messiahship was created by Christian Bible translators who operated with doctrinal beliefs that don't exist in Scripture.

Medieval English theologians believed the Holy Spirit (the Third Person of the Holy Trinity) was unknown to the Hebrews and Jews of the Old Testament era. They believed he first appeared at the festival of Pentecost recorded in Acts chapter 2.

This belief created a dilemma for them.

For if the Third Person was unknown prior to his appearance, who or what was the **Ruach** mentioned in the OT? And if the Holy Spirit did not "come" until Pentecost, what Spirit came upon and anointed Yeshua at his immersion and which he spoke of in the synagogue in Luke 4?

To solve the problem and prevent conflicting interpretations, these theologians and their printers created **two distinctions**.

First

They coined the phrase "**Holy Ghost**" to designate the Third Person of the Trinity. **John Wycliffe's** version of **1380** was the first major translation to use the phrase. Later Bible editors followed his example and used "Holy Ghost" only in their NT portions, never in the OT.

Over two centuries later, the **King James Version** of **1611** followed the tradition and has the phrase 90x in its NT. It never uses the phrases "the Ghost," "Ghost of God," "Ghost of Jesus," or "the Ghost of your Father." Instead, we find "the Spirit of...," even though the same Greek word **pneuma** lies behind "ghost" and "spirit."

The traditional coined phrase "Holy Ghost" denotes an independent, coequal member of the Godhead.

The "Holy Ghost/Holy Spirit" distinction was abandoned in most English Bibles in the late 1800s, in favor of "Holy Spirit" throughout both portions (OT, NT).

Second

In the 1500s, Bible printers introduced the convention of **capitalizing** the word "Spirit" when they believed the word stood for the Third Person. If it didn't, they lower-cased "spirit." In early English versions, "Spirit" was used only in the NT.

Capitalization of "Spirit" in English Bibles began in the 1500s. Its use or non-use is solely the opinion of the editors. Ancient Hebrew and Greek do not have capital and small letters.

Even today, "spirit of God/of the Lord" and "holy spirit" are found in Jewish, Catholic, and liberal Protestant translations of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. [See the article "[From holy spirit to Holy Ghost](#)" in the "Ruach Studies" portal of hebrew-streams.org.]

Distinguishing the biblical data from later Christian interpretations helps to clarify what the Bible means for us to understand about the Spirit of God and of Yeshua.

As mentioned above, **we want to know why** the NT emphasizes over and over that **Yeshua is the Anointed** (529x) – anointed with God's Ruach/Pneuma. Does this mean he was anointed with the Third Person of the Godhead or with God's own Spirit, as defined as his power, mind, heart, nature?

Another question is *why* God the Father is called "father," if the Holy Ghost/Holy Spirit (the Third Person) is the *actual* father of Yeshua, according to the NT writers (Matt 1:20; Luke 1:35).

Another question arising from the Text is why the Holy Spirit is never prayed to or

worshiped by Yeshua himself or his Jewish followers, or by the angels and martyrs in the heavenly court. On this point, early Christian creeds conflict with the Bible.

"We believe...in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, that proceeds from the Father, who with Father and Son is worshipped together and glorified together."

[Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, mid-to-late 300s AD]

Concordance and Lexical Data

Related to God, we find: **ruach YHVH** (spirit/Spirit of the LORD); **ruach elohim** (spirit or Spirit of God); **ruach qodesh** (holy spirit/Spirit); **ruach tovah** (good spirit/Spirit). The phrase "(the) Spirit" with no modifiers occurs some 76x.

רוח אֱלֹהִים – ruach elohim

ruach elohim [13x]: Gen 1:2; 41:38; Exod 31:3; Num 24:2; 1Sam 10:10; 11:6; 19:20, 23; Ezek 11:24; Ps 106:33; Job 33:4; 2Chron 15:1; 24:20

רוח יהוה – ruach YHVH

ruach YHVH [26x]: Jud 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1Sam 10:6; 16:13, 14; 19:20; 2Sam 23:2; 1Kgs 18:12; 22:24; 2Kgs 2:16; Isa 11:2; 40:7, 13; 59:19; [61:1 Adonai YHVH]; 63:14; Ezek 11:5; 37:1; Micah 2:7; 3:8; 2Chron 18:23; 20:14

רוח קֹדֶשׁ – ruach qodesh

ruach qodesh [3x]: Isa 63:10, 11; Ps 51:13 (Eng. v. 11)

רוח טוֹבָה – ruach tovah

ruach tovah [2x]: Ps 143:10; Neh 9:20

Ruach also denotes other entities:

angelic beings ["spirits"]: Jud 9:23; 1 Sam 16:14-16, 23; 1 Kgs 22:21-24; 2 Kgs 19:7; Job 4:15

ghosts of dead people: 1 Sam 28:8, 13; Isa 14:9; 26:14, 19

Ruach is defined in the following Hebrew lexicons:

Brown-Driver-Briggs, **Hebrew and English Lexicon** (pages 924-26): breath; wind (kinds of winds, quarters or directions of heaven); spirit (temper, disposition, vivacity, vigour, courage, impatience, etc.); seat of emotion (desire, sorrow, trouble); the will (=lev, heart); spirit of God (activity in inspiring prophets, the ancient angel of the presence and later Shekina, divine presence).

William Holladay, **A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament** (pages 334-35): air in motion, blowing; wind, what is empty or transitory, spirit, mind; breath; directions; spirit of man; mind, disposition, temper; spirit of God.

Samuel Tregelles, **Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon** (pages 760-61): spirit, breath, air in motion, breeze, wind; direction or quarter of heaven; life, the vital principle; animus, rational mind, seat of affections; disposition (thinking), will and counsel, intellect; Spirit of God, Holy Spirit, divine Spirit: peculiar endowments of mind.

Alexander Harkavy, **Students' Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary of the Old Testament** (pages 661-62): air; wind, breeze; vanity; side, quarter (of heavens); breath; vital breath (spirit, life); spirit (versus flesh, invisible power of God, of inspired prophets); mind, purpose; courage.

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