

On Ruach Elohim *The Wind, Breath and Spirit of God*

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This is an excerpt from a larger and ongoing exegetical project on Genesis 1 and other creation texts. I'm using the translation of Genesis by Everett Fox as my starting point.¹ For a fuller discussion on the Holy Spirit, see my "Life in the Spirit."²

Introduction

My focus here is on *rûah Elohim* in Genesis 1:2, but I will be sharing what I've done so far with 1:1–3.

You'll notice that (after thinking long and hard) I'm following Fox in his rendering of 1:1 as a dependent clause. For the best defense and explanation of that reading, see Robert D. Holmstedt's syntactic analysis in "The Restrictive Syntax of Genesis i 1"³ where he suggests something like this: "*In the initial period that/in which God created the heavens and the earth...*"—a rendering very much in line with that of Fox.

Now, this choice doesn't imply that rendering Genesis 1:1 the traditional way is incorrect. The text does say that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." It just doesn't seem to say it *that way* in the Hebrew. It says it more like this: "At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth..." Which *means* and *implies* that "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Abraham Tal even suggests that "all ancient versions... establish the independent status" of Genesis 1:1 by treating the verb "create" in that verse "in the absolute state, with an adverbial sense."⁴ I'm sure that statement is debatable, but either way, rendering this verse as an independent clause is accurate and appropriate—depending on the aims of the translation, or course. We can also render it closer to how the Hebrew *literally* has it, which has its own advantages—like revealing the parallelism between Genesis 1:1–3 and 2:4b–7, as can be seen in translations like the NRSV (see below).

You will also notice that I've rendered *tôhû wābôhû* "barren and vacant." My only issue with it is I wish I had found *nouns*, as is the case in the Hebrew, rather than adjectives. Victor P.

¹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York: Schocken, 1995).

² José Soto, "Life in the Spirit," Wayfinders, December 25, 2020, <https://www.wayfinders.quest/holy-spirit.html>.

³ Robert Holmstedt, "The Restrictive Syntax of Genesis i 1," *Vetus Testamentum* 58, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 56–67, http://individual.utoronto.ca/holmstedt/Holmstedt_GenesisRelative_VT2008.pdf.

⁴ Abraham Tal, *Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Genesis* (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2015), 77.

Hamilton, for example, translates it “a dessert and a wasteland.”⁵ Fox has “wild and waste” and later revised it to “confusion and chaos” (in his audio recording of Genesis 1 on his personal website).⁶

“Barren and vacant,” is an adaptation of Tsumura’s “unproductive and uninhabited” in his “The Doctrine of Creatio Ex Nihilo and the Translation of *tōhū wābōhū*.”⁷ See that essay by Tsumura for good reasons not to associate *tōhū wābōhū* with “chaos.” In his article on *tōhū wābōhū* in NIDOTTE,⁸ A. H. Konkel challenges Tsumura’s position. I’m obviously not convinced, except that with all the *separating, differentiating* and *ordering* going on in Genesis 1, “chaos” is certainly part of the picture before 1:3. But there are issues with the associations of the term “chaos” in other ancient cosmogonies, and Tsumura *as a linguist* sees no “chaos” in *tōhū wābōhū* itself.

Surprisingly, IVP’s *New Bible Commentary* actually treats Tsumura’s rendering and the traditional “formless and empty” as synonymous: “The earth immediately after creation was formless and empty, i.e. unproductive and uninhabited.”⁹ Perhaps, or not so much?

The sense of “unproductive and uninhabited” also fits very nicely with the sense of Genesis 1 as a whole as the account of the beginning of *life itself*, and of the building of the cosmos as God’s temple-palace: it was barren and vacant at the beginning, and by the end of the chapter it’s full of life, inhabited by God’s fruitful creatures. For the best discussion I’ve found on the cosmos as God’s home, see “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel” by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen.¹⁰

See also Genesis 2:4b–7, which parallels 1:1–3 (though you might want to read it on the NRSV, for example, to see the parallel), and notice the state of creation before God’s first

⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 103ff.

⁶ Everett Fox, “Audio Clips – Everett Fox,” accessed October 15, 2020, <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/efox/resources/audio-clips/>.

⁷ David T. Tsumura, “The Doctrine of Creation ‘Ex Nihilo’ and the Translation of ‘Tōhū Wābōhū,’” in *Pentateuchal Traditions in the Late Second Temple Period: Proceedings of the International Workshop in Tokyo, August 28-31, 2007*, ed. Akio Moriya and Gohei Hata (Boston: Brill, 2012), 3–21, https://www.academia.edu/1481246/David_Toshio_Tsumura_The_Doctrine_of_creatio_ex_nihilo_and_the_Translation_of_t%C5%8Dh%C3%BB_w%C4%81b%C5%8Dh%C3%BB_in_Pentateuchal_Traditions_in_the_Late_Second_Temple_Period_Proceedings_of_the_International_Workshop_in_Tokyo_August_28_31_2007_Supplements_to_the_Journal_for_the_Study_of_Judaism_158_Leiden_E_J_Brill_2012_pp_3_21.

⁸ A. H. Konkel, “*tōhū wābōhū*,” in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1: 597. Henceforth NIDOTTE.

⁹ Gordon J. Wenham et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary*, 21st Century ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1994), 60.

¹⁰ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel,” in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny, *Alter Orient Und Altes Testament* 366 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 399–421, https://www.academia.edu/234230/Cosmos_Temple_House_Building_and_Wisdom_in_Ancient_Mesopotamia_and_Israel.

creative act: “when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground” (v 5). “Barren and vacant,” it seems to me.

The Meaning of *Ruach Elohim*

The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew shows that the range of meanings for the Hebrew word רוּחַ (*rûah*) is thus: 1. wind, 2. breath, 3. spirit. Each, of course, has its own nuances or sub-senses.¹¹

“Ruach has a range of meanings, from “wind” to its metaphorical extensions as “breath” and, at a greater distance, “spirit” (which itself has a range of meanings)” (Naomi Seidman).¹²

So the ancient Near Eastern background of the word strongly suggests *wind* or even *breath* as the first sense:

“The Heb. nom. רוּחַ [*rûah*] occurs 387x in the OT. **‘It is best considered a primitive nom., related to an ayin-vowel root רוּחַ “to breathe”** ... Similar roots are accounted for in the Ugar. *rh*, Phoen. *rh*, and the Arab. *rîh*, wind, and *rûh*, spirit, which are both derived from *râha*, to blow; cf. Eth. *rôha*, make a slight wind” (M. V. Van Pelt, W. C. Kaiser, Jr., and D. I. Block).¹³

Thus, “one may safely say that the basic concept in *rûah* is ‘breath’” (Hamilton),¹⁴ so that “the *ruah* of God is the very breath of God” (William P. Brown).¹⁵

“The LXX [the Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, used by the apostles in the New Testament] renders this word as πνεῦμα (G4460), wind, spirit, 264x and as ἄνεμος (G449), wind, 49x” (M. V. Van Pelt et al.).¹⁶ As for the sense intended in the LXX at *Genesis 1:2*, Robert Hiebert would suggest “the sense of ‘wind’ rather than that of ‘spirit.’”¹⁷

¹¹ David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 416.

¹² Naomi Seidman, “Translation,” in *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods*, ed. Ronald Hendel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 158.

¹³ M. V. Van Pelt, W. C. Kaiser, Jr., and D. I. Block, “רוּחַ,” in *NIDOTTE*, 3:1,070 (emphasis mine).

¹⁴ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, Kindle loc. 2169.

¹⁵ William P. Brown, *Structure, Role, and Ideology in the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Genesis 1:1-2:3* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1993), 77.

¹⁶ M. V. Van Pelt et al., “רוּחַ,” *NIDOTTE*, 3:1,070.

¹⁷ Robert J. V. Hiebert, “In the Beginning: A Commentary on the Old Greek Text of Genesis 1.1–2.3,” in *The SBL Commentary on the Septuagint: An Introduction*, ed. Dirk Büchner (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 24.

We Christians have been rendering *rûah elohim* in Genesis 1:2 as “the Spirit of God,” and this is appropriate given what the rest of the Scriptures tell us about what this “wind” in Genesis 1:2 might be. Even Everett Fox, a Jewish scholar, can render it “spirit.” It is clear by the context that this isn’t just any wind: “certainly the *ruah elohim* is not the third person of the Christian Trinity. But neither is it a wind in the meteorological sense” (Michael DeRoche).¹⁸

One solution is to go with *wind*, as does the NRSV, but then to nuance it, immediately, with “the breath of God...” so that “*we rûah elohim...*” is rendered “*and a wind, the breath of God...*” This way we capture more of what the original audience would have heard, and I think it still carries the rhythmic cadences of the Hebrew, as represented in Fox’s rendering.

NRSV: *while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*

Fox: *rushing-spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters*

Potential rendering: *while a wind, the breath of God, swept over the face of the waters*

So far, so good. The only issue is that the Hebrew verb rendered “swept” in the NRSV—*מְרַחֵף* (*merachefet*)—doesn’t actually mean to sweep but more like “to hover.” The only other instance of this word in the Old Testament in this particular form is in Isaiah 32:11, where God describes his relationship to Israel as that of an eagle “hovering” over its young.

So why would the NRSV and others render it “swept”? Hamilton explains that how we understand and render *merachefet* in Genesis 1:2 depends on how we understand and render *rûah* in that text, because the former obviously has to correspond to the latter. So that “translations like ‘swept,’ ‘sweeping,’ ‘swirled’ are dictated by the choice of ‘wind’ for *rûah*.”¹⁹ Well, that explains that. But we can also reason the other way around, letting the semantic possibilities of *merachefet* put parameters around our understanding and rendering of *rûah*. Hamilton is helpful here too:

"The only other use is in Deut. 32: 11 (in the Piel stem as in Gen. 1: 2): ‘like an eagle that stirs up [‘*ûr*] its nest, that hovers [*râhap*] over its young.’ Scholars have traditionally supposed that this verse concerns how a bird teaches its young to fly, specifically how the parent provokes the young to flight. The parent bird drives the young eagle from the perch by intimidation, by rushing at the young while vigorously flapping its wings. ... But this interpretation may be called into question by the possibility that ‘*ûr* in Deut. 32: 11 does not mean ‘to stir up,’ but rather ‘to watch over, to protect,’ as in Ugar. *gyr*.”²⁰

¹⁸ Michael P. Deroche, “The *rûah* ’*elôhîm* in Gen 1:2c: Creation or Chaos?,” in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Essays in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, ed. Lyle Eslinger (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 317 (quoted in Brown, *Structure, Role, and Ideology*, p. 77).

¹⁹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, Kindle loc. 2180ff.

So it looks like the intended sense of *merachefet* in Genesis 1:2 is most likely “hovering,” as in “watching over” or even “brooding” (from Ugaritic usage). If this is the case, then even if the first sense of *rûah* in classical Hebrew is “wind” or “breath,” the fact that this *rûah* “hovered” calls for qualification in our rendering; and as such, only the “spirit” sense of *rûah* works.

But here’s the thing. This exegetical conundrum was no issue for the church at the beginning, because the Greek language also has a word that “binds together” the three senses of wind, breath and spirit: *pneuma*.²¹

“Translation into Greek was not difficult because *pneuma* has a similar range. The Latin *spiritus*, however, begins to foreground the abstract and immaterial secondary meanings of the Hebrew term, leaving behind the more tangible significations of wind and breath; this process was institutionalized and reinforced by Christian theological developments that - privileging abstraction and "spirituality" over more concrete imagery - ultimately left behind the meanings of wind or breath altogether” (Seidman).²²

Translating *Ruach Elohim*

So what can we do in our rendering to recover and preserve the original nuances in the phrase *rûah Elohim* in Gen 1:2? Here’s what I’m doing:

*At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth,
the earth—still barren and vacant,
darkness on the face of a primeval ocean,
and a wind, the breath and spirit of God, hovering on the face of the waters—*²³

²⁰ Ibid., Kindle loc. 2185 ff. Cf. NIDOTTE: “The etymology is debated. An Egyptian original for the expression in Gen 1:2 has been proposed. In Ugar. *rhp*, applied to a winged goddess, means to honor. The Syr. *r^hep* means to brood, protect” (3:1,095).

²¹ Samuel L. Bray and John F. Hobbins, *Genesis 1-11: A New Old Translation For Readers, Scholars, and Translators* (Wilmore, KY: GlossaHouse, 2017), 69. Bray and Hobbins, however, say that both Greek and Latin have a word that binds together the three senses, and they reference Naomi Seidman as their source. However, Seidman’s point was that translation difficulties began precisely when we had to translate *rûah Elohim* into Latin, because it doesn’t have a word that captures all three senses. I take it they read her in a rush at that point, but I’m grateful they brought up this important point.

²² Naomi Seidman, “Translation,” in *Reading Genesis*, 158.

²³ I could have gone with Spirit also (capital S), since it would be appropriate in a canonical reading of the text—and, except for some modern innovations, Scripture has always been read canonically—that is what makes it “Scripture.” However, a canonical reading also allows for a lowercase spirit, since this is the first instance of *rûah Elohim* in a story that’s just beginning—we need the rest of the Story to fill the picture before we recognize *rûah Elohim* in Genesis 1:2 as “the Spirit of God.” There’s more to it than that, of course, but that’s the gist of my perspective on this. For more on the development of *rûah Elohim* in the biblical Story, see the section on “God’s Story and His Spirit” in my “Life in the Spirit,” <https://www.wayfinders.quest/holy->

God said: Let there be light. And there was light.

Biblical Precedent and Echoes

Here's some biblical precedent for the association of the Spirit of God with his wind *and* his breath.

Genesis 2

First of all, if we compare Genesis 1:1–3 with 2:4b–7, which is an intentional parallel in the Hebrew and has a similar structure, the *breath* on 2:7 (Heb. *neshamah*) would suggest the sense of *breath* as also intended in the *rûah* of 1:2. Not exclusively so, because a breath doesn't "hover," but the suggestion is certainly there and on the surface of the text.

1:1 At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth

2:4b At the time of YHWH, God's making of earth and heaven

1:2 the earth—still barren and vacant...

2:5 no bush of the field was yet on earth / and there was no human...

1:2b darkness on the face of a primeval ocean

2:6 but a surge would well up and water all the face of the soil

1:2c and a *rûah*, **the breath and spirit of God**, hovering on the face of the waters...

2:7 and **YHWH, God, formed / blew** into his nostrils **the breath of life**...

1:3 And God said: Let there be light. And there was light.

2:7 and YHWH, God, formed / blew... and the human became a living being.

It's obviously not a perfect correspondence, but there's enough correspondence to make them parallel texts, one *intentionally* echoing the other, not only structurally but also thematically.

[spirit.html](#). For the best treatment I've found on the nature of Scripture, see Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

Now hear the echoes in the Scriptures (NRSV):

- You **blew with your wind** [*rûah*], the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters (Exod 15:10).
- As long as **my breath** [*neshamah*] is in me and **the spirit** [*rûah*] **of God is in my nostrils** (Job 27:3).
- The **spirit** [*rûah*] **of God** has made me, and **the breath** [*neshamah*] **of the Almighty** gives me life (Job 33:4).
- When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their **breath** [*rûah*], they die and return to their dust.

When you send forth your **spirit** [*rûah*], they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. (Ps 104:29–30)

- Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the **breath** [*rûah*] **of your nostrils** (Ps 18:15).
- Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives **breath** [*neshamah*] to the people upon it and **spirit** [*rûah*] to those who walk in it... (Isa 42:5).

And it goes on in the New Testament:

- And the **Holy Spirit** [*hagios pneuma*—the Greek *pneuma* translates *rûah*] descended upon him in bodily form **like a dove** [which *hovers*]. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22).
- The **wind** [*pneuma*] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the **Spirit** [also *pneuma*, but now clearly the capital “S” Spirit of God!] (John 3:8).
- When he had said this, he **breathed** on them and said to them, “Receive the **Holy Spirit**” [*hagios pneuma*] (John 20:22).

*At the beginning of God's creating of the heavens and the earth,
the earth—still barren and vacant,
darkness on the face of a primeval ocean,
and a wind, the breath and spirit of God, hovering on the face of the waters—
God said: Let there be light. And there was light.
(Gen 1:1–3)*

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