THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD

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THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL is unsurpassed for its ability to hold in delicate balance the belief in God as a person, in continual communication with mankind, and God as an infinitely superior being, free of all human limitations. The tension, in fact, is very fruitful. Whenever Israel's experience of God, articulated in strongly anthopomorphic language, threatened to obscure the utter difference between God and man and to subject him to human shortcomings, there was the counter-experience of God's otherness, his remoteness from all that is human and imperfect. In Isaiah we frequently meet this polarity in the understanding of God; intense awareness of divine transcendence without diminishing in any way the immediacy of encounter which meets us in this prophet and elsewhere in the Old Testament. No one enjoyed a deeper personal relationship with Yahweh than Isaiah. Yet he has perfectly expressed the abyss between the living God and all that is perishable and human.

> The egyptians are men, and not God;
> their horses are flesh, and not spirit.[1]

Israel is summoned to have courage in the face of Pharaoh's armies. In the ringing challenge of his couplet the poet, almost contemptuously, set *'adam* (man) and *basar* (flesh) against 'el (God) and *ruach* (spirit). Yahweh is the living God and no other formulation so emphatically sets him apart from this illusory and imperfect world. As the living One he is the inexhaustible source of life; his *ruach* is the gift of life, a limited share in that divine vitality which sets Yahweh totally apart from the gods whose very being was tied up with the pattern of life and death in nature.

It should be noted that there is no single word which we use exclusively to translate *ruach*. We think of it, rather, as that power emanating from God which both grants and sustains life. To get as the basic idea underlying *ruach* it may help to look at some of the uses of the word. The hebrew was more interested in the activity

[1] Isai 31, 3.

of God than in his nature; the emphasis was on power, not essence. The spirit, *ruach*, of the Lord, while dissolving in no way the mystery of God, brought the divine into dynamic relation with creation. By this means the problem referred to above, viz. the reconciliation of divine transcendence and immanence, was at least partially solved. In addition to alleviating the tension between the wholly other God and the God who acts through men and events, it seems that the notion of the divine *ruach* provided a forthright reminder of human inadequacy in accomplishing the work of God. The donation of the Spirit equivalently affirmed that unless a man were empowered from above the great saving acts would remain undone. This does not mean that God dispenses with the human factor; if this were so there would be no memory of Moses, Joshua and the other leaders of Israel. But the human is not enough. Man, left to his own poor resources, was incapable of bringing about the great moments of Israel's history. Without the purifying and sustaining intervention of Yahweh Isaiah would be only the man of unclean lips as Jeremiah would be the stammering youth instead of the man set over nations and over kingdoms.

Israelite history was, by and large, a sad record of man's weakness, built into the very structure of his being. Man was flesh, *basar*, not just in the sense of being vulnerable to evil impulses, but in the frailty and powerlessness which were the consequences of his creaturehood. Flesh, *basar*, in the Old Testament denotes the weakness of man, only rarely his corruption. If man was to be victorious against the overwhelming forces which threatened him on every side, this could only come from God; only the power of God saved man from destruction. In the early accounts of Israel's struggles with her foes the hebrew writer dwelt especially on God's power which delivered the people from hostile armies. But it was only a short step from this, given the limitations inherent in man, to the conviction that man was unable to save himself in any sphere of life. Apart from God he was doomed.

One way in which God saved man was through his Spirit. The movement of the Spirit was unpredictable, to be sure, but not without a sense of direction. In giving life to a clod of dust the Spirit was both creative and purposive; the action had a finality which would be unfolded in history. Endowed with this power man became a whole person, a responsible totality with his own identity as well as special relations to God and his fellowman. The spirit of the Lord, like his word and wisdom, provides the hebrew theologian with a

means of describing God's initiative in the creation, providential ordering, and redemption of the world as a whole and of Israel in particular. The spirit is also a reverential way of referring to his presence, especially in the psalms.[1] Of course, in the Old Testament, spirit is not yet envisaged as a person in any true and full sense; but the groundwork has been laid for the future revelation of the christian mystery.

To provide some kind of a framework for our remarks we will examine the outpouring of the spirit in relation to the threefold division of time which can be said to emerge from the Old Testament. I do not mean that the hebrews thought of time in any such categories, as we will note later. But we look at things differently and, provided that we do not distort the hebrew perspective, it is permissible to approach time from a somewhat different standpoint. I believe that we may legitimately speak of primeval time, historical time, and eschatological time, the first and last of which escape the control of the historian who deals with recoverable events as they occurred in time and place. As Fr A.-M. Dubarle has pointed out:

> Thus, as a mean between history in the usual sense of the word and myth, which implicitly connotes timelessness, the bible offers us a review of the whole course of time, of which the central part is properly historical and the extremities have recourse to means of knowledge other than testimony: for the future, prophetic anticipation; for the beginnings, the utilisation of purified symbolic traditional stories. The knowledge of past or future gained in this way cannot claim to attain the concrete detail of events as known to those who experience them, but only the part they play in the drama of salvation.[2]

Primeval time[3]

The primeval history is a broadly conceived preface to the story of salvation. It sets the stage for God's first historically attainable intervention, the call of Abraham. Sacred history, beginning with Abraham, is enacted against the backdrop of universal history; the God who called Israel is the creator of the world, who punishes sin yet graciously saves the just man. In this primeval time the Spirit

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[1] Ps 51, 11; 139, 7. Note the parallelism in the latter psalm.
[2] 'Original Sin in Genesis', *The Downside Review* 76 (1958), p 235.
[3] Gen 1–11.

of God is active, beginning with the hovering or soaring of the Spirit over the undifferentiated, formless waste. Through word and spirit, anthropomorphisms which express the extension of divine control to all creation, God not only creates but brings our world into the orbit of his power and designs. Without the Spirit-filled word the universe would be nothing but a chaotic emptiness. Theological reflection over the centuries has refined the idea of creation but the basic datum of revelation is there – the total dependence of the visible world upon God acting through spirit and word. In both creation accounts the origin of man is the climactic event and it is by the same *ruach* of Yahweh that the gift of life is bestowed. The Lord breathed into man's nostrils the breath, *ruach*, of life and he became a living being, *nephesh*, fundamentally and organically one in the unity of his person. One can detect a certain evolution in the meaning of *ruach*. At one stage it is a breath of air or wind usually manipulated by God to further some saving action.[1] Then *ruach* stands for the breath as a sign of life, and eventually as the vital principle of life itself, bestowed by God. The latter can be seen in Hezekiah's canticle, a liturgical composition of thanksgiving for recovery from an illness.

> O Yahweh, with you are the days of my life;
> yours alone is the life of my spirit.[2]

In the obscure passage of Genesis, chapter six which uses the mythological story of the birth of the Nephilim to show the increase of wickedness on the earth, Yahweh determines that man will not escape the burden of his mortality. Only for a fixed time would the spirit of Yahweh remain in man, as if the spirit would not take up a permanent abode in a creature signed with the weakness of flesh, *basar*. Again there is the opposition between the power of the divine Spirit and the infirmity of man, symbolized by his flesh. We may conclude that, in primeval time, the *ruach* of Yahweh appears as the manifestation of divine power in the creation of the world and man. Both facets of creation are taken up and developed in the historical and poetic works describing God's continuing salvific action in historical time. And this brings us to our second division, the age of Israel as the people of God.

Historical time

The action of the Spirit has not been experienced with the same

[1] Gen 8, 1; Exod 14, 21; 15, 8.

[2] Isai 38, 16.

intensity throughout Israel's history. At certain moments, usually of great peril, the Spirit dramatically intervenes by empowering a hero to deliver Israel or by summoning prophets to assume leadership as God's spokesmen. But crisis or no crisis, the belief persisted that the Spirit was directing events in Israel's history, guaranteeing her survival and preparing her for a future only imperfectly comprehended by prophets, kings and wise men. As early as the time of Moses the hebrew tradition recalled the temporary grant of the spirit to the seventy elders; they shared not only the authority but the spirit which Moses had received. It is almost as if the Spirit were conceived as some kind of divisible substance.

> Then Yahweh came down in the cloud and spoke to him (Moses), and took some of the spirit which was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did so no more.[1]

The incident which immediately follows, that of Eldad and Medad, shows that the spirit is not restricted to those who had officially taken up their positions at the holy tent; the spirit does not always respect our idea of what is proper and correct. We might be inclined to take the side of Joshua who was alarmed at this irregularity and begged Moses to forbid them to prophesy. With a deeper insight into the mysterious divine ways which escape our classification and control Moses answered: 'Would that all the people of Yahweh were prophets, that Yahweh would put his spirit upon them'![2]

The period of the Judges, in the century following the exodus, is marked by sudden and powerful manifestations of the Spirit. The initial success of Joshua in Canaan did not mean that Israel could peacefully settle down and enjoy the land. Joshua's conquest was neither as sweeping nor as permanent as might appear at a first reading. Much of the heroic age still lay ahead, an age marked by daring exploits and spectacular deliverances against the heaviest odds. But unlike other national traditions which love to recall the heroism of the past to glorify the nation and build up national esteem, the israelite tradition acknowledged that it was not by their own hand but by the spirit of the Lord that Israel had been saved. The daring exploits of the judges, from Othniel to Samson, are credited to the sudden but temporary outpouring of the spirit upon

[1] Num 11, 25. [2] Num 11, 29.

these men; thus they became charismatic figures capable of performing feats far beyond their ordinary capacities.[1] The giving of the spirit did not make new men of them in the sense of transforming them into models of virtue. They were not holy men but men of power, thanks to the gift of the spirit which, against all expectation or presentiment, had transformed them into saviours of Israel. The coming of the spirit was spontaneous but it was not without direction, as Fr J. Guillet has observed:

> These actions are not simply marvellous feats; they are all liberating actions. Isolated exploits of local heroes, scarcely going beyond the boundaries of one tribe and occasionally of its neighbours, they nevertheless are part of the same history, and mark stages in the progressive march which led Israel to independence. It is this liberating movement which constitutes their unity. The interventions of Yahweh's spirit at these different stages under-scores one of the focal points of the divine action in the Old Testament. The spirit of God is at the source of the national community of Israel.[2]

Shortly after the judges we meet other charismatic figures who were the forerunners of the prophetic movement. While the judges performed mighty deeds in war these strange ecstatics, caught up by the spirit of Yahweh, sought to keep Israel faithful to the religion of Yahweh. There are undoubtedly similarities in external behaviour to pagan ecstatics of the same period and earlier. But the comparison stops at that point; the early israelite prophets were violently opposed to canaanite ecstaticism whose excesses revolted these simple but devoted followers of the God of Sinai. Their activity is attested from the time of Samuel and the movement gained in strength, probably in direct proportion to the menace of the depraved canaanite cults. A stirring climax is reached in the ninth century B.C. with the victory of Elijah over the priests of Baal. Small wonder that his disciple Elisha prayed that he would inherit a double share of his spirit.[3]

While the great rhapsodic prophets of the eighth century B.C. and later, beginning with Amos, are generally identified as men who have received the word rather than the spirit, a prophet was still known as a man of the spirit.[4] With the prophet Ezekiel the

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[1] Jg 3, 10; 7, 34; 11, 29; 13, 25; 14, 6, 19; 15, 14.
[2] *Themes of the Bible* (Notre Dame, 1964), p 251.
[3] 2 Kg 2, 9.
[4] Mic 3, 8; Hos 9, 7.

phenomena of early israelite ecstaticism appeared with unparalleled force. They are seen in the visions and ecstasies of this strange figure who, energized by the spirit of God, brought faith and hope to a people crushed by the experience of defeat and exile. Time and again Ezekiel says, The spirit lifted me up and took me.[1] As a servant of the spirit and docile to its movement, Ezekiel proclaimed that the success of the prophetic mission depended not upon eloquence of speech but upon the power of the spirit.

The communication of the spirit is particularly clear in the institution of kingship. The anointed king received a permanent rather than a temporary charism. As the ancient military heroes owed their might and the first prophets their ecstatic fervour to the outpouring of the spirit, so the king, through his sacramental anointing, was invested with the spirit of the Lord. The king's authority rested neither on military prowess nor the gifts of the statesman, nor the wisdom of the lawgiver; he was a man of the charism, filled with divine power. He ruled under God but was qualitatively different from the ruled. Saul, the first king, is a clear example of the man marked by this special, transforming character. The institutional takes second place to the charismatic. Even as the rejected leader, lost in tragic darkness, Saul remained the anointed one, always liable to a new outpouring of the spirit. Among the signs which Samuel gave Saul to impress him with the meaning of his anointing was the imminent meeting with the ecstatic prophets. Saul was told that the spirit of Yahweh would come mightily upon him and he would join the prophets in their strange frenzy and be changed into another man.[2] Saul was soon called upon to use this new power when the men of Jabesh-gilead were contemptuously humiliated by the ammonite king. We are told that the spirit of Yahweh came suddenly (the literal meaning is leap) upon Saul and, in the power of the spirit, he mustered Israel and annihilated the ammonites.[3]

The transfer of kingship from Saul to David is vividly told in the hebrew story as a passage of the spirit of Yahweh from one to the other. In successive verses of the narrative we read that, at the moment of David's anointing by Samuel, the spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon him from that day forward; then, as if to complete the picture, the narrative adds that the spirit of Yahweh left Saul,

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[1] Ezek 2, 2; 3, 12, 14; 8, 3; 11, 1 etc.
[2] 1 Sam 10, 2–6.
[3] 1 Sam 11, 11.

and an evil spirit from Yahweh continually tormented him.[1] The power for good had been withdrawn and in its place there was a power for evil. Saul's downfall was only a matter of time. His collapse is described theologically, in terms of the two spirits, according to the Old Testament's deep insight that the hand of God had mysteriously touched this man for good and evil. Summarily, it is possible to conclude that judges, prophets and kings, the instruments chosen by God to carry out his designs, had one thing in common – they were men of the spirit, charged with a mission which exceeded their natural strength.

Eschatological time

Old Testament eschatology is a blend of the assured and the incalculable. Assurance, because it rests on the profound faith that the God who had entered their history at many points would eventually come again to judge and save; incalculability, because the time and manner of his coming were completely outside the knowledge and control of man. They belonged to the sovereign decision of the Lord of history. When we take a closer look at israelite eschatology we find that the picture is anything but clear. The difficulty comes largely from terminology, the failure of scholars to agree on any single meaning of the term, coupled with sharp differences of opinion as to the content of Israel's hope for the future.

The problem is not made any easier when we consider the development of eschatological expectation and the various forms it assumed. For example, does the hebrew conceive of time and its divisions as we do or does he not rather look upon time as a totality, prescinding from our analyses which compartmentalize time? In fact, does the Old Testament provide any more than a basis for our proposed division of time into primeval, historical, and eschatological? Will the Old Testament permit us to draw a sharp line between the historical and the eschatological? Finally, does eschatology necessarily imply the destruction of the world, i.e., is it actually outside the framework of time? It seems preferable, when dealing with the prophetic expectation of salvation, to use the word eschatology in a very broad sense. This points to a new kingdom, the realized reign of God, even when there is no question of a cosmic upheaval and the passing away of this world. All may transpire within the historical order created and ordered by God.

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[1] 1 Sam 16, 13–14.

Since it is he who dominates the hebrew vision of history, the Olp Testament resists a clearcut demarcation between various kinds of time. All is viewed as one; the Spirit which hovered over the primeval waters was operative in Israel's history and would renew the world at the end-time. It would be misleading, of course, to think that prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel thought of a future renewal in terms which are simply historical in our understanding of that word. They envisioned this renewal as taking place within history but through the intervention of forces which transcend history. It was the work of God whose spirit would create a new Israel in a renewed world.

In Isaiah[1] the messiah-king was described as one empowered with the spirit of Yahweh to bring about peace and justice as the characteristic signs of the messianic kingdom. The final part of the oracle[2] portrays a radically changed situation. Through his spirit-filled ruler God would restore a disordered world to that harmony and acknowledgement of God's claim which would make the world a Paradise regained. Isaiah carried his teaching on the Spirit a step forward when he described an outpouring of the Spirit, not only upon the king, but upon all the people in that future age for which a harassed nation so fervently longed.[3] In the prophecy of Joel a similar promise took form as a vision whose realization Peter and the apostles proclaimed on the first Pentecost.[4] The Servant of Second Isaiah is introduced by a divine oracle assigning him as a mediator of God's justice to the nations. In the strength of the conferred Spirit he would not falter until justice had been established on the earth.[5] Texts could be multiplied. There are many passages in the prophets and later judaism which describe the Spirit in terms of Yahweh's power to strengthen, illuminate and save, some referring to the present time and others to the future age of messianic regeneration.[6] From the more primitive images of wind and vital breath the Old Testament gradually revealed more and more clearly the Spirit as that mysterious inbreaking of divine power which would both judge and save; judge those who wilfully rejected the gifts he offered man, and save those who, quickened by the same Spirit, opened their hearts to the overtures of divine love.

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[1] Isai 11, 1–9. [2] Isai 11, 6–9. [3] Isai 32, 15–17.
[4] Joel 2, 28–29. See Acts 2, 16–17. [5] Isai 42, 1–4.
[6] Ezek 37, 14; 39, 29; Zech 12, 10; Prov 1, 23; Job 32, 8.