***Pneuma* (“Spirit”)**

The word “spirit” has many meanings. This is true in English, and also true in Hebrew (*ruach* [#07307, רוּחַ] = spirit) and Greek (*pneuma* [#4151 πνεῦμα] = spirit). The Greek noun *pneuma* comes from the verb *pneō*, “to blow or breathe.” Thus, to the ancient Greeks, *pneuma* was “breath,” and it came to be associated with invisible things that exerted a force or power. Although *pneuma* is a noun, it is a “verbal noun” (a noun that has the inherent characteristics of a verb or is grammatically related to a verb), so *pneuma* is always associated with the invisible power exercised by it. The word “wind” is a good example of an English noun that inherently is associated with action, although “wind” in English is not technically a verbal noun. There is no such thing as “wind” without action, even though “wind” is a noun—wind without action would be just “air.” Similarly, *pneuma* is associated with its action or power. In fact, a good basic definition of *pneuma*, “spirit,” is something invisible that exerts a force. That is why some of the things that are called “spirit” in the Greek language are: God (John 4:24); the gift of God known as holy spirit (Acts 2:38); angels (Heb. 1:14); demons (Matt. 8:28); “breath” or “life” (Luke 8:55); wind; and attitudes, thoughts, or emotions (Matt. 26:41). All of these things are invisible but exert force or power.

The Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, also has a basic meaning of air in motion, but has a very large semantic range and can refer to many different things depending on the context, including God in motion (“the spirit of God moved…”); wind; breath; the gift of holy spirit God put upon some people in the Old Testament; good spirit beings, evil spirit beings, the natural life of our fleshly bodies that is sometimes referred to as “soul;” the life force that will animate resurrected bodies; and the activities of the mind including people’s thought, attitudes, and emotions.

Since *pneuma* and *ruach* can refer to so many different things, the way to tell what the word is referring to in any given verse is by the context, and that is not always an easy task, in fact, sometimes the word can refer to more than one thing and give the verse a couple different possible meanings.

**1. *Pneuma* is used of an immaterial “substance.”**

John 4:24 says, “God is spirit.” Not only does the Bible teach that God is an immaterial substance, but philosophically, God must be something immaterial because he had to exist outside of and before the material world, in order to create the material world.

**2. *Pneuma* is used for “wind.”**

This was certainly true in the secular Greek writings, but it is not used that way in the New Testament, although Hebrews 1:7 may be an example. The more common word for “wind” in the New Testament is *anemos* (#417 ἄνεμος), which occurs 31 times in the New Testament and always refers to wind (cf. Matt. 7:25; 8:26; 14:24; Eph. 4:14; Rev. 6:13).

The Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, is also used of the wind (cf. Gen. 8:1; Exod. 10:13; 1 Kings 18:45; Job 21:18; Ps. 1:4; 18:42; Prov. 25:14; Isa. 17:13; Jer. 2:24).

**3. *Pneuma* is used for “breath.”**

It was common in Greek writings for *pneuma* to be used of breath, but it is uncommon in the Bible. Revelation 11:11, speaking of God’s two witnesses, says, “the breath of life” entered them (the Greek text reads, *pneuma zōēs*; “spirit of life,” or “breath of life”). The same phrase is used in the Septuagint in Genesis 6:17, which says that when the Flood came, God would destroy “all flesh in which was the breath of life.”

The Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, is also used for the breath (cf. Job 7:7; 19:17; Ps. 135:17; Isa. 30:28; 33:11).

**4. *Pneuma* is used as a name for God.**

Since God is “spirit” (John 4:24), it is natural that He would be called “the Spirit.” Yahweh is called “the Spirit” in Ezekiel 1:12, 20; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; and 11:1, 24 (see commentary on Ezek. 8:3). John 3:8 speaks of being born of “the Spirit,” i.e., of God; and Matthew 12:31 says that blasphemy against “the Spirit,” i.e., God, would not be forgiven. The Bible has many names that refer to God. Because God is holy (Isa. 6:3; John 17:11), He was also known as “the Holy,” which usually gets translated as “the Holy One” (2 Kings 19:22; Job 6:10; Ps. 71:22; 78:41; 89:18; Isa. 1:4; 29:23; Luke 1:49; John 17:11).

Sometimes “Spirit” is combined with “holy,” and God is called “the Holy Spirit,” *pneuma hagion*. In fact, holiness and “spirit” are so essential to God that it would be strange if “the Holy Spirit” were not one of His names. Thus, in Acts 5:3, Peter told Ananias, “You have lied to the Holy Spirit,” whom he identified in verse 4 as “God.” Every name of God emphasizes a different aspect of His character. Since “spirit” is used of invisible power, when God is called “the Spirit,” or “the Holy Spirit,” it emphasizes His invisible power at work. The Gospels say Mary was impregnated by “the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35), because that name emphasized God’s power at work. That “the Holy Spirit” is a name for God and not a separate being explains why Jesus is always called “the Son of God” and never the Son of the Holy Spirit.

There is no reason to make “the Holy Spirit” into a separate “Person,” as Trinitarians do. We do not make any of the rest of God’s names into other “Persons.” There is one God, and He has many names. Every use of “the Holy Spirit” and “holy spirit” can either be explained as being a name for God or the name of the gift of God.

**5. *Pneuma* is used as a name of Jesus Christ in his resurrected body.**

Just as there are many names for God in the Bible, there are many names for Jesus, and one of them is “the Spirit.” Luke 24:39 makes it clear that Jesus had flesh and bone and was not a spirit being like an angel. However, Jesus’ resurrected body was animated and empowered by spirit, and God has given him immense spiritual power, so the name “the Spirit” is appropriate. 1 Corinthians 15:45 says that Jesus Christ became a “life-giving spirit” [*pneuma*]. Jesus refers to himself as “the Spirit” many times in the book of Revelation (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 14:13; 22:17).

**6. *Pneuma* is used of the gift of holy spirit that God put upon certain believers, such as prophets, before the day of Pentecost.**

The original man, Adam, was a body made from the ground that was animated by *nephesh*, usually translated “soul” (Gen. 2:7). Adam was the pattern of all humans ever since, and each of us has a physical body that is animated, made alive, by “soul.” Although God can communicate in various ways with the natural human of body and soul, in order to communicate with the natural person more directly, in the Old Testament and Gospels, God put “spirit,” His nature, upon certain people. This can be seen quite clearly in Numbers 11:16, 17, 24, 25.

Before the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), when God gave His gift of spirit to people, He:

1. Gave it to only some people.
2. Gave different measures to different people.
3. Did not give it to every believer.
4. Could take it away from those people to whom He had given it, just as He did with King Saul.

Examples of the spirit of God coming upon Old Testament people include: Exodus 31:3; 35:31; Numbers 11:17, 25; 24:2; 27:18; Judges 3:10; 1 Chronicles 12:18; Isaiah 42:1; and Ezekiel 2:2. The “spirit” that God put upon some people is more fully referred to as the “holy spirit” (Ps. 51:11; Isa. 63:11). Some New Testament believers who had holy spirit upon them before the Day of Pentecost were Elizabeth (Luke 1:41), Zechariah (Luke 1:67), Simeon (Luke 2:25), and John the Baptist (Luke 1:15).

The gift of holy spirit was “upon” certain people in the Old Testament. Being “upon” people, it was not permanent. God could take it from people, as He did with Samson and King Saul; and after David sinned with Uriah and Bathsheba, he prayed that God would not take the holy spirit from him (Ps. 51:11). Also, as He had done with the prophets of the Old Testament, God put holy spirit upon Jesus Christ (Luke 3:22), something that had been foretold in the Old Testament (Isa. 11:2; 61:1; cf. Matt. 12:18; Luke 4:18).

Jesus Christ knew from the Old Testament prophecies that God was going to give the gift of holy spirit in a new way as part of the New Covenant, so in accordance with prophecies such as Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26-27; and 37:14; Jesus taught that the holy spirit that was upon them (“with them”) would be “in” them (John 14:17).

[For more about the gift of holy spirit being “upon” in the Old Testament and “in” after the Day of Pentecost, see commentary on Eph. 1:13, “promised holy spirit.”]

**7. *Pneuma* is used of God’s gift of holy spirit that has been given to every believer since the day of Pentecost.**

God put His gift of holy spirit upon only certain select people in the Old Testament, but after the day of Pentecost, God gave the “holy spirit” to every believer. The gift of holy spirit we have today is different from the gift of holy spirit God gave to some believers in the Old Testament and Gospels. John 7:39 says, “Now he said this about the spirit, which those who believed on him were going to receive, for as yet there was no spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” John is specifying that the holy spirit had not yet been given as a covenantal sign to all believers.

Under the new covenant, believers are born again when they receive a new spirit—the holy spirit (1 Pet. 1:23; Eph. 1:13) which is the down payment of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). Indeed, it is the presence of the holy spirit inside a person that, in God’s sight, makes that person a Christian (Rom. 8:9). The gift of holy spirit is mentioned many times in the New Testament (cf. Acts 2:33, 38; 8:15, 17, 19; 9:17; 10:45, 47; 15:8; 19:2; 1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 1:13; 1 Thess. 4:8).

**8. *Pneuma* is used of good spirit beings.**

Good spirit beings are referred to as “spirits.” There are different types of “spirits.” Angels (divine messengers), are one type of spirit. Hebrews 1:14 says, “Are not all angels ministering spirits*.*” (cf. Heb. 1:7)*.* Revelation 1:4; 3:1; 4:5 and 5:6 are examples of good “spirits” that are apparently not angels, and the cherubim and seraphim mentioned in the OT are spirit beings but apparently not angels.

The Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, is also used of good spirit beings (cf. Ps. 104:4).

**9. *Pneuma* is used of evil spirit beings.**

Evil spirit beings are referred to as “spirits.” At least some of these evil spirits are “demons” (cf. Matt. 4:24; 10:8; 12:22). Matthew 10:1 says, “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits [*pneuma*] and to heal every disease and sickness.”

Like the Greek, the Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, is also used of evil spirit beings (cf. Num. 5:14; Judg. 9:23; 1 Sam. 16:16; 1 Kings 22:23; Job 4:15; Isa. 19:14; Hos. 5:4; Zech. 13:2).

**10. *Pneuma* is used of the natural life of the body, often called “soul.”**

We generally think of the natural life of the body as being “soul,” which is the Greek word *psuchē* (#5590 ψυχή, pronounced psoo-'kay). However, the *psuchē*, “soul,” that animates the body is invisible and exerts a force that can be seen, so it is a kind of *pneuma*, “spirit,” and therefore “soul” is sometimes referred to as “spirit.” Luke 8:55 says that Jesus raised a little girl from the dead, and “her spirit [*pneuma*] returned, and at once she stood up.” James 2:26 also uses *pneuma* to refer to the life of the body when it says “the body without the spirit [*pneuma*]*,* is dead,” meaning the body without the life is dead.

[For more on “soul” see Word Study: “Psuchē.”]

Some people do not understand the many meanings and applications of “soul” (*psuchē*) and “spirit” (*pneuma*) in the Greek language, so they read verses such as James 2:26 and think that there is something they call “the spirit of man” that is part of a person’s natural body. This theology makes the natural man a being with a physical body, an invisible animating force (soul), and an invisible spiritual essence (spirit). However, Genesis is clear that when God created mankind, He made a physical body and then gave it life when He animated it by “soul” (Gen. 2:7; Lev. 17:11). The few times mankind is said to have a “spirit” can all be easily explained when we understand that “soul” is a kind of “spirit.” There is no need to make the natural man a being of body, soul, and spirit, and the saved individual a being of body, soul, spirit, and holy spirit. Also, the Hebrew words *nephesh* (soul) and *ruach* (spirit) have the same kind of flexibility that the Greek words *psuchē* (soul) and *pneuma* (spirit) do, so Old Testament verses about soul and spirit can be explained in the same way as verses in the New Testament.

The Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, is also used of the natural life of the body (cf. Gen. 6:17; 7:15, 22; Job 12:10; Ps. 104:29; 146:4\*; Eccl. 3:19\*; Hab. 2:19\* (\* These could also be “breath”).

**11. *Pneuma* is used of the “spirit” (the invisible life force) that will animate the resurrected bodies of those who are saved.**

Our human bodies are now animated by a kind of spirit that the Bible calls “soul.” However, when dead people are raised at the resurrection, or when people are changed at the Rapture, we will no longer be animated by “soul” but will be animated by a new kind of life. That life will be a kind of spirit, just like the life force that we now call “soul” is a kind of “spirit.” Thus, Ezekiel 37:5-14 refers to God putting *ruach*, “spirit,” into people and making them come alive. Unfortunately, most versions translate the Hebrew word *ruach* as “breath” and not “spirit,” but some versions, such as the Douay-Rheims, NAB, Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible, and YLT, say “spirit” in these verses. While “breath” is a legitimate translation of *ruach* in some contexts, “breath” is what happens after the person is alive. A study of the whole Bible on this subject shows that God puts *ruach*, spirit, into the dead bodies, which then come alive and begin to breathe as a result of the life God put in them. (see commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:44).

**12. *Pneuma* is used by metonymy for manifestations of holy spirit that are produced by God’s energizing of the gift of holy spirit, particularly prophecy.**

This can be confusing to readers who are not used to the figure of speech metonymy, but in the Bible, the effect of holy spirit, e.g., prophecy, is called “spirit.” That is why, for example, the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 14:12, when translated literally, says that people are to be “zealous for spirits.” We are not to be zealous for angels and demons, we are to be zealous for manifestations produced by the gift of holy spirit, that is, zealous for “spiritual utterances,” such as prophecy or the interpretation of tongues, which are things spoken by the power of the gift of holy spirit. (See commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:12).

**13. *Pneuma* is used of attitudes, emotions, etc.**

The word *pneuma* can refer to a person’s emotions, attitudes, thoughts, desires, or will.

* Matthew 5:3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit [*pneuma*]*...*” The phrase “poor in spirit” does not refer to the amount of holy spirit one has received from God, but rather refers to an attitude of meekness in the mind. Blessed are those who are humble in attitude.
* Matthew 26:41 (REV): “Stay awake and pray, so that you do not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” The “spirit,” the thoughts and intentions of a person, are willing, but the flesh (body) is weak, and in this case, gets tired.
* Acts 18:25 (HCSB): “This man [Apollos] had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught the things about Jesus accurately.” Apollos was fervent in his attitude and emotions when it came to the things of God.
* Galatians 6:1: “Brothers, if a person gets overtaken in some trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of meekness.” Here, “a spirit of meekness” means an attitude of meekness.
* 2 Timothy 4:22: Paul wrote to Timothy: “The Lord be with your spirit.” In other words, may the Lord be with you and keep your attitude and emotions positive (cf. Phlm. 1:25).
* Romans 12:11 (HCSB): “Do not lack diligence; be fervent in spirit; serve the Lord.” In other words, be fervent in your attitude.

The Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, is also used of people’s thoughts, attitudes, and emotions (cf. Gen. 26:35; 45:27; Exod. 6:9; Deut. 2:30; Josh. 2:11; 5:1; Judg. 8:3; 1 Sam. 1:15; 1 Kings 10:5; 21:5; Job 6:4; 7:11; 17:1; 21:4 (KJV); Ps. 32:2; 34:18; 51:17; 77:6; 78:8; 143:4; Prov. 16:18, 19, 32; 29:23; Eccl. 1:14; Isa. 54:6; Ezek. 11:5; and Hag. 1:14).

*Pneuma* can also be used to intensify an emotion. The Greek text of Mark 8:12 is literally translated, “And he sighed in his spirit [*pneuma*].” The word *pneuma* shows that Jesus’ sigh was an action of the mind, from the heart of Jesus’ emotions. Thus, the NIV translated the verse “He sighed deeply and said...” “Sighed deeply” is exactly what Jesus did, represented in the Greek text as “sighed in his spirit.”

**14. *Pneuma* is used as a part of a person put in place of the whole person, via the figure of speech synecdoche*.***

In *Figures Of Speech Used in the Bible,*[[1]](#footnote-17824) E.W. Bullinger gives many excellent examples of synecdoche in the Bible. Under the category, “The Part for the Whole,” Bullinger has 17 pages of examples.

There are places in the Bible where a person’s spirit, *pneuma*, seems to be used for the whole person. In Luke 1:47, Mary says, “...my spirit [not just her spirit, but her entire being] rejoices in God my Savior.” (It is possible but less likely that this is a use of spirit as “attitude or emotion”).

**15. *Pneuma* is used by the figure of speech metonymy for a related noun.**

Metonymy is a figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated. A good example of the word “spirit” being used in a metonymy is John 6:63, when Christ said, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.” The words themselves were not spirit, they were words, but Jesus referred to them as “spirit” because they produced spiritual life in all those who believed.

1. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids MI, reprinted 1968, pp. 613-656. [↑](#footnote-ref-17824)