

"The Spirit of God In the Old Testament"

**by
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In passing from the Old Testament to the New, the reader is conscious of no violent discontinuity in the conception of the Spirit which he finds in the two volumes. He may note the increased frequency with which the name appears on the printed page. But he would note this much the same in passing from the earlier to the later chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. He may note an increased definiteness and fulness in the conception itself. But something similar to this he would note in passing from the Pentateuch to Isaiah, or from Matthew to John or Paul.

The late Professor Smeaton may have overstated the matter in his interesting Cunningham Lectures on *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*. "We find," he says, "that the doctrine of the Spirit taught by the Baptist, by Christ, and by the apostles, was in every respect the same as that with which the Old Testament church was familiar. We nowhere find that their Jewish hearers took exception to it. The teaching of our Lord and his apostles never called forth a question or an opposition from any quarter--a plain proof that on this question nothing was taught by them which came into collision with the sentiments and opinions which, up to that time, had been accepted, and still continued to be current among the Jews." But if there be any fundamental difference between the Old and the New Testament conceptions of the Spirit of God, it escapes us in our ordinary reading of the Bible, and we naturally and without conscious straining read our New Testament conceptions into the Old Testament passages.

We are, indeed, bidden to do this by the New Testament itself. The New Testament writers identify their "Holy Spirit" with the "Spirit of God" of the older books. All that is attributed to the Spirit of God in the Old Testament is attributed by them to their personal Holy Ghost. It was their own Holy Ghost who was Israel's guide and director and whom Israel rejected when they resisted the leading of God (Acts 7:51). It was in him that Christ (doubtless in the person of Noah)

preached to the antediluvians (1 Pet. 3:18). It was he who was the author of faith of old as well as now (2 Cor. 4:13). It was he who gave Israel its ritual service (Heb. 9:8). It was he who spoke in and through David and Isaiah and all the prophets (Matt. 22:43; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 28:25; Heb. 3:7; 10:15). If Zechariah (7:12) or Nehemiah (9:20) tells us that Jehovah of Hosts sent his word by his Spirit by the hands of the prophets, Peter tells us that these men from God were moved by the Holy Ghost to speak these words (2 Pet. 1:21), and even that it was specifically the Spirit of Christ that was in the prophets (1 Pet. 1:11). We are assured that it was in Christ, upon whom the Holy Ghost had visibly descended, that Isaiah's predictions were fulfilled that Jehovah would put his Spirit upon his righteous servant (Isa. 42:1) and that the Spirit of the Lord Jehovah should be upon him (Isa. 61:1; Matt. 12:18; Luke 4:18, 19). And Peter bids us look upon the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the accomplished promise of Joel that God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:27, 28; Acts 2:17). There can be no doubt that the New Testament writers identify the Holy Ghost of the New Testament with the Spirit of God of the Old.

This fact, of course, abundantly justifies the instinctive Christian identification. We are sure, with the surety of a divine revelation, that the Spirit of God of the Old Testament is the personal Holy Spirit of the New. But this assurance does not forestall the inquiry whether this personal Spirit was so fully revealed in the Old Testament that those who were dependent on that revelation alone, without the inspired commentary of the New, were able to know him as he is known to us who enjoy fuller light.

Whether this be so, or, if so in some measure, how far it may be true is a matter for separate investigation. The Spirit of God certainly acts as a person and is presented to us as a person, throughout the Old Testament. In no passage is he conceived otherwise than personally--as a free, willing, intelligent being. This is, however, in itself only the pervasive testimony of the Scriptures to the personality of God. For it is equally true that the Spirit of God is everywhere in the Old Testament identified with God. This is only its pervasive testimony to the divine unity.

The question for examination is, how far the one personal God was

conceived of as embracing in his unity hypostatical distinctions. This question is a very complicated one and needs very delicate treatment. There are, indeed, three questions included in the general one, which for the sake of clearness we ought to keep apart. We may ask, May the Christian properly see in the Spirit of God of the Old Testament the personal Holy Spirit of the New? This we may answer at once in the affirmative. We may ask again, Are there any hints in the Old Testament anticipating and adumbrating the revelation of the hypostatic Spirit of the New? This also, it seems, we ought to answer in the affirmative. We may ask again, Are these hints of such clearness as actually to reveal this doctrine, apart from the revelation of the New Testament? This should be doubtless answered in the negative. There are hints and they serve for points of attachment for the fuller New Testament teaching. But they are only hints, and, apart from the New Testament teaching, would be readily explained as personifications, or ideal objectifications of the power of God.

Undoubtedly, side by side with the stress put upon the unity of God and the identity of the Spirit with the God who gives it, there is a distinction recognized between God and his Spirit--in the sense at least of a discrimination between God over all and God in all, between the Giver and the Given, between the Source and the Executor of the moral law.

This distinction already emerges in Genesis 1:2; and it does not grow less observable as we advance through the Old Testament. It is prominent in the standing phrases by which, on the one hand, God is spoken of as sending, putting, placing, pouring, emptying his Spirit upon man, and on the other the Spirit is spoken of as coming, resting, falling, springing upon man. There is a sort of objectifying of the Spirit over against God in both cases; in the former case, by sending him from himself, God, as it were, separates him from himself; in the latter, the Spirit appears almost as a distinct person, acting *sua sponte*. Schultz does not hesitate to speak of the Spirit even in Genesis 1:2 as appearing "as very independent, just like a hypostatis or person." Kleinert finds in this passage at least a tendency toward hypostatizing--though he thinks this tendency was not subsequently worked out. Perhaps we are warranted in saying as much as that: that there is observable in the Old Testament, not, indeed, a hypostatizing

of the Spirit of God, but a tendency toward it--that, in Hofmann's cautious language, the Spirit appears in the Old Testament "as a 'somewhat' distinct from the 'I' of God which God makes the principle of life in the world." A preparation, at least, for the full revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament is observable; points of connection with it are discoverable: and thus Christians are able to read the Old Testament without offense and to find without confusion their own Holy Spirit in its Spirit of God.

More than this could scarcely be looked for. The elements in the doctrine of God which above all others needed emphasis in Old Testament times, were naturally his unity and his personality. The great thing to be taught the ancient people of God was that the God of all the earth is one person. Over against the varying idolatries about them, this was the truth of truths for which Israel was primarily to stand; and not until this great truth was ineffaceably stamped upon their souls could the personal distinctions in the Triune God be safely made known to them. A premature revelation of the Spirit as a distinct hypostatis could have wrought nothing but harm to the people of God.

We shall all, no doubt, agree with Kleinert that it is pragmatic in Isidore of Pelusium to say that Moses knew the doctrine of the Trinity well enough, but concealed it through fear that polytheism would profit by it. But we may safely affirm this of God the Revealer, in the gradual delivery of the truth concerning himself to men. He reveals the whole truth, but in divers portions and in divers manners; and it was incident to the progressive delivery of doctrine that the unity of the Godhead should first be made the firm possession of men, and the Trinity in that unity should be conveyed to them only afterward, when the times were ripe for it.

What we need wonder over is not that the hypostatical distinctness of the Spirit is not more clearly revealed in the Old Testament, but that the approaches to it are laid so skilfully that the doctrine of the hypostatical Holy Spirit of the New Testament finds so many and such striking points of attachment in the Old Testament, and yet no Israelite had ever been disturbed in repeating with hearty faith his great Sch'ma. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4).

Not until the whole doctrine of the Trinity was ready to be manifested in such visible form as at the baptism of Christ--God in heaven, God on earth, and God descending from heaven to earth--could any part of the mystery be safely uncovered.

The temporary withholding of exact information as to the relation of the Spirit of God to the Godhead did not prevent, however, a very rich revelation to the Old Testament saints of the operations of the Spirit of God in the world, in the Church and in the individual soul. Least of all could it prevent the performance by the Spirit of his several functions in the world, in the Church, and in the soul throughout the whole Old Testament dispensation. That too was a dispensation in which the Spirit of God wrought.

What then is meant by calling the new dispensation the dispensation of the Spirit? What does John (7:39) mean by saying that the Spirit was not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified? What our Lord himself, when he promised the Comforter, by saying that the Comforter would not come until he went away and sent him (John 16:7); and by breathing on his disciples, saying, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22)? What did the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost mean, when he came to inaugurate the dispensation of the Spirit? It cannot be meant that the Spirit was not active in the old dispensation. We have already seen that the New Testament writers themselves represent him to have been active in the old dispensation in all the varieties of activity with which he is active in the new. Such passages seem to have diverse references. Some of them may refer to the specifically miraculous endowments which characterized the apostles and the churches, which they founded. Others refer to the worldwide mission of the Spirit, promised, indeed, in the Old Testament, but only now to be realized. But there is a more fundamental idea to be reckoned with still. This is the idea of the preparatory nature of the Old Testament dispensation.

The old dispensation was a preparatory one and must be strictly conceived as such. What spiritual blessings came to it were by way of prelibation. They were many and various. The Spirit worked in providence no less universally then than now. He abode in the Church not less really then than now. He wrought in the hearts of God's

people not less prevalently then than now. All the good that was in the world was then as now due to him. All the hope of God's Church then as now depended on him. Every grace of the godly life then as now was a fruit of his working. But the object of the whole dispensation was only to prepare for the outpouring of the Spirit upon all flesh. He kept the remnant safe and pure, but it was in order that the seed might be preserved. This was the end of his activity, then.

The dispensation of the Spirit, properly so-called, did not dawn, however, until the period of preparation was over and the day of outpouring had come. The mustard seed had been preserved through all the ages only by the Spirit's brooding care. Now it is planted, and it is by his operation that it is growing up into a great tree which shades the whole earth, and to the branches of which all the fowls of heaven come for shelter. It is not that the work is more real in the new dispensation than in the old. It is not merely that it is more universal. It is that it is directed to a different end--that it is no longer for the mere preserving of the seed unto the day of planting, but for the perfecting of the fruitage and the gathering of the harvest. The Church, to use a figure of Isaiah's, was then like a pent-in stream; it is now like that pent-in stream with the barriers broken down and the Spirit of the Lord driving it. It was he who preserved it in being when it was pent-in. It is he who is now driving on its gathered floods till it shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. In one word, that was a day in which the Spirit restrained his power. Now the great day of the Spirit is come.

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