

Spirit and Word

By Vernon G. Wilkins

Spirit and Word in the Old Testament

A notable passage in the Old Testament about the Spirit of God is Ezekiel 37, concerning the valley of the dry bones, coming to life as the Spirit of God, or the breath of God, or the wind, breathes on the dry bones.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (ESV)

*The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the **Spirit** of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones **live**?” And I answered, “O LORD God, you know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “**Prophecy** over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the **word of the LORD**. ⁵ Thus **says the LORD** God to these bones: Behold, I will cause **breath** to enter you, and you shall **live**. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put **breath** in you, and you shall **live**, and you shall know that I am the LORD.” ⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no **breath** in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, “**Prophecy** to the **breath**; **prophecy**, son of man, and say to the **breath**, Thus **says the LORD** God: Come from the four **winds**, O **breath**, and **breathe** on these slain, that they may **live**.” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the **breath** came into them, and they **lived** and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. ¹¹ Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.” ¹² Therefore **prophecy**, and say to them, Thus says the LORD God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And I will put my **Spirit** within you, and you shall **live**, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have **spoken**, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”*

Ezekiel 37:1-14 connects **Spirit**
and **Life**
and **Breath**
and the **Winds**
and the **Word**

This is not surprising, as in the original languages:

Breath = Spirit = Wind
(in both Hebrew and Greek)

And throughout the chapter, the work of one of these is the work of any of the others. But what is particularly noteworthy is that **Spirit** and **Word** are closely connected here, and

throughout the bible. And this includes in the Old Testament, which does have a theology of the Holy Spirit! When God speaks, or (equivalently) when one of God's prophets prophesies, the Holy Spirit is at work. Note the following OT texts in particular starting with the biblical notion that God spoke his creation into being:

Psalm 33:6

*By the **Word of the LORD** the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.*

cf. Genesis 1:1-31

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²... And the **Spirit of God** was hovering over the face of the waters ...*

*³And God **said**, "Let there be ..." ... and there was/it was so/So God created. (8 times in 6 days!)*

Note, then, that God created the world by the power of his Word; furthermore, this was a Trinitarian Word act – so see the following two NT texts, for example, for a reference to Christ and his Word in creation, both at the time of creation itself (John), and in his sustaining his creation throughout history (Hebrews):

John 1:1-4

*In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was **life**, and the **life** was the light of men.*

Hebrews 1:1-3a

*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by **his Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the **word of his power**.*

Then also, the OT attributes the word ministry of the prophets to the power of the Holy Spirit:

Isaiah 59:21

"And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD:

*"My **Spirit** that is upon you, and my **Words** that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the LORD, "from this time forth and for evermore."*

Isaiah 61:1

*The **Spirit of the Lord God** is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

This is reflected in the NT's view of the prophets, as well as of the apostles:

1 Peter 1:10-12

*Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the **Spirit of Christ** in them was indicating when **he** predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by **the Holy Spirit** sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.*

Spirit and Word in the New Testament

These verses show how the NT links **Word** and **Spirit** together:

John 3:34

*For he whom God has sent utters the **Words** of God, for he gives the **Spirit** without measure.*

John 6:63

*It is the **Spirit** who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The **Words** that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*

John 20:22

*And with that he **breathed** on them and said, “Receive the **Holy Spirit**”.*

When Jesus speaks of the Spirit as the “Spirit of truth”, in what way does he (the Spirit) do his work?

Compare John 15:26,27...

*But when the **Helper** comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the **Spirit of truth**, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.*

... with John 16:13,14

*When the **Spirit of truth** comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

So where do we find the truth about Jesus? The answer is in the Spirit-ministered Word of God in Christ – the gospel. And we remember that the gospel is the gospel of life, and that the Spirit is the Spirit of life, just as in Ezekiel 37. No surprise, therefore, to see the constant connection and interplay between the Word, the Spirit, the message, and life, as in the following texts:

John 5:24

*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my **Word** and believes him who sent me has eternal **life**. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to **life**.²⁵ “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the **voice of the Son of God**, and those who hear will **live**.”*

Acts 4:31

*And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the **Holy Spirit** and continued to speak the **Word of God** with boldness.*

Acts 13:46,48

*And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the **Word of God** be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles” ... And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the **Word of the Lord**, and as many as were appointed to eternal **life** believed.*

Philippians 2:16

*... holding fast to the **Word of life**.*

1 John 1:1,2

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the **Word of life**—² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.*

2 Timothy 1:10

*... and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought **life** and immortality to light through the **gospel**.*

2 Timothy 3:16

*All **Scripture** is **breathed out by God** and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*

2 Corinthians 3:6

*... who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of **the Spirit**. For the letter kills, but the **Spirit** gives **life**.*

Romans 8:11

*If the **Spirit** of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give **life** to your mortal bodies through **his Spirit** who dwells in you.*

Reprising three texts already noted ...

John 3:34 (again)

*For he whom God has sent utters the **Words** of God, for he gives the **Spirit** without measure.*

John 6:63 (again)

*It is the **Spirit** who gives **life**; the flesh is of no avail. The **Words** that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*

Isaiah 59:21 (again)

“And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD:

*“My **Spirit** that is upon you, and my **Words** that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from this time forth and for evermore.”*

and adding Matthew 4:4

*It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every **Word** that comes from **the mouth of God**.*

... we conclude that the Bible is both

(1) **Words from God**

and

(2) **the Word of God**

The importance of this is that we cannot say simply that the bible is the Word of God in some vague, generalised sense, divorced from the additional reality that God has been careful with the actual words spoken and written into scripture. Our doctrine of the authority of scripture is not that the bible somehow contains God’s Word, or becomes God’s Word, or conveys God’s Word in some mystical sense when I read it, but that it is the very Word of God because it is very words from God.

At the risk of deluging the reader with scripture texts, there is a huge wealth of NT references to the Word of God which connect it with the work of the Spirit, the message of the apostles, the teaching of Jesus, the gospel, and the Spirit-given life which is in the gospel of Christ. Here is a sample:

Hebrews 4:12

*For the **Word of God** is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

Ephesians 6:17

*... take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the **Spirit**, which is the **Word of God**.*

1 Peter 1:10-12 (again)

*Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the **Spirit of Christ** in them was indicating when **he** predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by **the Holy Spirit** sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.*

1 Peter 1:23

*... you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the **living** and abiding **Word of God**.*

Philippians 1:14

*And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the **Word** without fear.*

Colossians 1:25

*I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the **Word of God** fully known.*

1 Thessalonians 2:13

*And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the **Word of God**, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the **Word of God**, which is at work in you believers.*

Hebrews 13:7

*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the **Word of God**.*

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

*And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my **message** were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the **Spirit** and of **power**, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the **power of God**. ⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the **Spirit**. For the **Spirit** searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who*

knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the **Spirit of God**.¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the **Spirit** who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.¹³ And we impart this in **Words** not taught by human wisdom but taught by the **Spirit**, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of **the Spirit of God**, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.¹⁶ "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

cf. Acts 6:2,4

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, It is not right that we should give up preaching the **Word of God** to serve tables... But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the **Word**.

Acts 4:31 (again)

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the Word of God with boldness.

Acts 6:7

And the **Word of God** continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 12:24

But the **Word of God** increased and multiplied.

Acts 13:5,7

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the **Word of God** in the synagogues of the Jews... He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the **Word of God**.

Acts 13:46-49

And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the **Word of God** be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the **Word of the Lord**, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the **Word of the Lord** was spreading throughout the whole region.

Acts 17:13

But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the **Word of God** was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds.

Acts 18:11

And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the **Word of God** among them.

Note the huge (not exaggerated!) emphasis on the Word of God throughout the Acts of the Apostles: following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Spirit, we are told in many ways and using a variety of vocabulary (such as follows) that the Word of God spread, multiplied, increased – meaning of course that God’s Word in the power of the Spirit did its work in growing God’s Church.

The vocabulary of Acts – just a sample:

Proclaim
Preach
Teach
Declare
Set forth
Speak
Testify
Present (verb)
Word
Message
Ministry (the)

Acknowledgement

This paper has been peer-reviewed by a variety of colleagues. The finished result owes much to these contributors, and I humbly acknowledge with gratitude their help. Nonetheless, the views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and he and he alone accepts responsibility for them – particularly for anything inexact or unclear, any obvious omissions, faulty logic and other follies and defects. All Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version except where noted.

Latest Version

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