

Is “Spirit of God” the Correct Translation in Genesis 1:2 After All?

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“The earth was without form and void, and darkness
was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God
was hovering over the face of the waters.”
Genesis 1:2

Although for centuries the Hebrew *rūah* *’elōhīm* of Genesis 1:2 was translated into English as “Spirit of God,” Harry M. Orlinsky published an article in 1957 proposing the translation “a wind from God.”¹ This was a possible translation because the Hebrew word *rūah* can mean either “spirit” or “wind.” Orlinsky pointed out that his translation accorded with the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, where the chief god, Marduk, uses the wind as a weapon to slay Tiamat, another divine being, whose carcass then becomes the earth. “Tiamat” is cognate with the Hebrew word *tēhōm* (“deep”), which is also found in Genesis 1:2. (For comparison, the English name “Smith” is cognate with the German “Schmidt.”) Orlinsky further claimed that the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, rendered the Hebrew as “wind,” using the Greek word *pneuma*. However, I would dispute this claim. According to two authoritative dictionaries,² *pneuma* means “spirit” (of God) in the ancient Greek translation of Genesis 1:2. We would also expect a different verbal construction with *pneuma*, contra to Hiebert’s translation and argument.³ If the subject was “divine wind,” one would expect a corresponding verb that would be expressed as “to blow.” A “divine wind,” in that case, would not be understood verbally to “hover” or “be borne over” the water. Thus, Hiebert’s suggestion that *rūah* should be translated as “divine wind” is completely inadequate. For example, compare our text to Isaiah 40:7, which uses the verb “to blow” (*nāšāḇāh*) while speaking poetically of YHWH’s “breath” or “wind” shriveling flowers. This clarified understanding also invalidates the assertion within Orlinsky’s thesis where he states that the translation “spirit” originated very late in the history of Bible translation. His assertion, therefore, is undoubtedly without a sound foundation.

However, Orlinsky’s proposal was widely adopted by many commentaries, such as E. A. Speiser’s influential Anchor Bible commentary on Genesis,⁴ and by translations such as the NJPS and NRSV. The ESV, NIV, and NASB, however, stuck with “Spirit.”

There are texts from Ras Shamra, Syria (ancient Ugarit) that were written in a cuneiform (wedge-shaped impressions into clay) alphabet around 1400 BC. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of a Ugaritic creation story. However, there is a Ugaritic mythic text that at first glance seems unpromising for our subject but in my judgment contains an unexpected passage that sheds light on the wording of Genesis 1:2 (KTU 1.108, lines 6–8).⁵ Scholars G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín translate this passage, which describes the goddess Anat, in their Ugaritic dictionary as follows:

Lady of royalty, Lady of power, Lady of the High Heavens,
Lady of the firmament, who flies winged, who hovers [in the
high heavens]....⁶

The Ugaritic passage translated above has at least two good biblical parallels. The cognate of the Ugaritic verb translated as “who flies winged” is found in Psalm 18:10 (cf. 2 Samuel 22:11): “[God] rode upon a cherub and flew; [God] swooped on the wings of the wind” (my translation).⁷ The verb translated here as “swooped” (following P. Kyle McCarter) has the same root letters as the Ugaritic verbal construction “who flies winged.”⁸ Already we have an image of Anat echoed in the Bible, with God in place of the goddess Anat. In the Ugaritic passage rendered above, the verb “swoop” is followed by the same root as the Hebrew root in Genesis 1:2 that is usually translated as “hover.”

Now, the parallels just translated are important in the light of Mark Smith’s observation in his book *The Early History of God* that imagery associated with the Hebrew God YHWH in the Bible is sometimes found in association with Anat in Ugaritic texts.⁹ The imagery of the goddess Anat flying

and hovering (in the high heavens) found in a Ugaritic text supports, in my opinion, the idea that we should translate Genesis 1:2 as God's spirit hovering rather than finding here a reference to a divine wind.

Furthermore, the same verb also appears in a slightly different form in the Ugaritic Aqhatu myth as "to fly about," "to hover," with Anat as the hoverer. The Ugaritic verb, in fact, appears twice in the legend of Aqhatu in regard to Anat (KTU 1.18 IV 21, 32), each time with the phrase "[fly] among eagles."¹⁰ In both instances, the writer used the same stem of the root *r-h-p* as in Genesis 1:2, which also uses the verb *r-h-p*. In Semitic languages, verbs appear in different stems, and there are often changes in meaning according to the stem used. For our purposes, the use of the Ugaritic verb *r-h-p*—again with the goddess Anat as subject—in the same stem that is used in the Hebrew of Genesis 1:2 lends support to the idea that the Hebrew there means "Spirit of God," not "wind."

I suggest that it be understood in the same way as it is found in Psalm 139:7: "Where can I get away from Your Spirit [*rūah*]? Where can I flee from Your presence?" Or Job 33:4: "God's Spirit [*rūah*] made me; Shaddai's breath helps me live" (author's translations). The ESV is similar: "The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (of course, "Almighty" is a conventional rendering of Shaddai, the precise meaning of which is obscure). By using "Spirit" in a context of creation, the Job verse is by itself strong evidence that in Genesis 1:2 the intention is for "Spirit."

Before we view "Spirit of God" as a settled conclusion, however, we should look at a recent challenge to this conclusion: "*Ruah* 'Elohim in Genesis 1:2 in Light of Phoenician Cosmogonies: A Tradition's History," by Guy Darshan.¹¹ In this article Darshan propounds the theory that ancient Phoenician cosmogonies featured the wind as a creative force. I think he does a good job of establishing that, even though his evidence is indirect. Yet he simply assumes from this premise that Genesis 1:2 should be translated as "a wind from God" even though the role of the putative wind in

Genesis 1:2 bears no resemblance to the role of the wind in the Phoenician myths. Nor can he explain why his "wind" appears so prominently at the beginning of the Creation story and then fades away and is never mentioned again; nor does he notice that a wind cannot "hover,"¹² or that an exactly synonymous expression clearly meaning "spirit of God" appears in Job 33:4 (see above). If, however, the Hebrew is translated as "spirit of God," there is no problem; the spirit of God "hovers," and God is the actor throughout Genesis 1. The comparative method can be enlightening, but it can also be misused.

In short, when it comes to Genesis 1:2, Orlinsky's "wind" is by no means preferable to "Spirit." The ESV's rendering is fine: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."



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