

# The Holy Spirit's work in the Old Testament

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## Introduction – the Holy Spirit's work within OT believers

Were Old Testament believers regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, or is that a blessing reserved for post-Pentecost believers? In this paper, my aim is to reflect on this question by focussing on evidence in the Old Testament regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of everyday believing Israelites.

Michael Green in his book *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* presents a rather common view. “On the whole you had to be someone rather special in Old Testament days to have the Spirit of God. A prophet, a national leader, a king, perhaps some specially wise man (Prov 1:23) or artistic person (Exod 31:3) – in which case you would be beautifying the Lord's Tent of Meeting or enunciating the Lord's wisdom. But the Spirit of God was not for every Tom, Dick and Harry... The gift of God's Spirit was on the whole to special people for special tasks. It was not generally available, nor was it necessarily permanent.”<sup>12</sup> This common view says that OT believers were not indwelt by the Holy Spirit and that OT believers did not experience the active, internal, personal ministry of the Holy Spirit. These blessings came as a result of Pentecost.

Of course, the position outlined by Michael Green is only one view; many other views have been held over time. Almost directly opposite is the view that B.B. Warfield expressed when he said, “He abode in the church [the OT church] not less really then than now. He wrought in the hearts of God's people not less prevalently then than now... Every grace of the godly life then as now was a fruit of His working.”<sup>13</sup> There are several other views.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Spirit of God in the Old Testament,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (ed. Samuel G. Craig; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 155.

So were OT believers regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit or not? What follows aims to shed some light on that question. I will also briefly consider what my conclusion to this question implies for our preaching. But first, a brief review of some OT data.

## A. OT data on the Holy Spirit

### a. Vocabulary

The OT uses the term “Holy Spirit” (*ruach qadosh*) only three times (Ps 51:11; Isa 63:10-11); the expression is used about 90x in the NT.

The noun *ruach* occurs 391x in the OT. The NIDOTTE entry on *ruach* suggests there are six categories of meanings of *ruach*: (1) wind, (2) compass point, (3) breath, (4) disposition, (5) seat of cognition and volition, and (6) spirit.<sup>15</sup> Of these the term seems to refer to God’s Spirit about 105x. Of these, the term *ruach elohim* (“Spirit of God”) is found 15x in Hebrew and its equivalent 5x in Aramaic, while the phrase *ruach yahweh* (“Spirit of the Lord”) occurs 27x.

### b. What about the Spirit’s work in the “everyday believer” in the OT?

The OT record of the work of the Spirit in creation and as a life-giver, his work to equip “special” people for particular tasks, and his work in revelation through the prophets is familiar. I’m simply going to skip over these and come immediately to our focus: What can we say about the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of everyday believers in the OT?

The conclusion I wish to defend in this paper is that we must affirm a regenerating and indwelling work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of everyday believers in the Old Testament. It is impossible to account for godliness and belief and trust in God apart from the renewing and continuing indwelling

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<sup>14</sup> See the useful survey of opinions in James M. Hamilton, *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments* (NAC Studies in Bible and Theology 1; Nashville Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2006), 9-24.

<sup>15</sup> Miles V. Van Pelt, et al., “*Ruach* (H8120),” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997).

work of the Holy Spirit, and this is true in the OT as much as in the NT.

To begin with, let us “circle in” on the question through a couple of other observations.

## **B. The sinfulness of God’s people in the OT**

In a survey of the whole OT, perhaps the most prevalent anthropological theme that forces itself upon us is the sheer sinfulness and almost constant rebelliousness of the people God deals with.

God creates the universe and it is good, very good. But human beings, made in the image of God, want to insist that they are the centre of the universe and that they know better than God how to live their lives, and so in Genesis 3 the universe comes under the curse of the fall. The second generation practices fratricide as Cain kills Abel. Things spiral downwards, until Gen 6:5-6 records, “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” (Gen 6:5 NIV) God sends the judgment of the flood, but eight people are saved from the flood and are given a new start.

But Noah gets drunk and things spiral down again until the tower of Babel, when God must again step in with judgment against mankind. In his mercy God intervenes and raises up Abraham. But Abraham’s family is none too impressive.

Jacob’s life is full of deception, and the disease is passed on to his children. They send their younger brother into slavery, only because they don’t kill him first. After centuries of slavery in Egypt God sends a redeemer, Moses. Israel is brought out of the land through the mighty deeds of God and his outstretched arm, but within three days they are complaining and longing to go back to Egypt and within three months they are dancing around the golden calf.

Ten out of the twelve spies don’t believe God can bring them into the land, and they have to spend 40 years wandering in the wilderness before the next generation is able to enter. Again the nation spirals downwards. God sends

judges to deliver the people, but by the end of the Judges period everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes because there is no king in Israel.

Fast-forward to the ministry of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Both are given the painful task of announcing God's final judgment against Israel. Israel and the kingship must die, Jerusalem and the temple must be razed and the land must be lost. But the people do not believe the prophets, until their prophecies come true in their own lifetimes.

The general picture is plain. Stable faithfulness to God appears to be impossible for Israel. We say this about Israel, but really we say it about ourselves too. Stable faithfulness to God seems to be impossible for human beings. This is not just the witness of the OT; the NT agrees. The conclusion of Romans 3 is true; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

### **C. The existence of faithfulness in Israel**

And yet, in spite of this pervasive record of Israel's sin, unbelief and unfaithfulness to the Lord, the Old Testament also contains a record of people who were obedient to God in striking ways.

Abram is commanded by the Lord to do the most difficult thing imaginable – to believe that he will be the father of offspring as numerous as the stars. Genesis 15 tells us that he “believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Later Abraham is commanded again to do the most difficult thing imaginable in that later day – this time to sacrifice Isaac his only son. Again Abraham obeys, and the Lord commends Abraham and reiterates his promise to him (Ge 22).

Prominent people do prominently obedient things and believe and trust the Lord – Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Gideon, Jephthah, Samuel, David, Jonathan, Solomon, Hezekiah, Josiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Esther – the list goes on. None of these people are perfect, and we often have detailed accounts of their failures. But in the midst of their imperfection, they are also credited with faith and obedience. And for Hebrews 11, they are heroes of the faith.

But not only the faith and obedience of prominent people is displayed in the Old Testament story. “Normal” everyday people are also shown to be

faithful, even in the most depraved times. The Book of Ruth is set in the times when the judges ruled; the opening words of the book place the book in what is depicted as one of the most chaotic and degenerate periods in Israel's history. And yet it is the story of some everyday people who are simply obedient to the Lord. Ruth, the Moabite convert, expresses her new-found faith in the most eloquent terms. Boaz is simply a faithful Israelite farmer who obeys the gleaning and kinship laws of the Lord.

Even in the last days of Judah's existence before the exile, when Ezekiel is made to witness the abominations that are going on in the temple and is given a vision of the glory of the Lord filling the temple once again, but not this time in blessing but in dramatic judgment (Ezek. 9), even then, the Lord still has his faithful people, and before the destruction is symbolised Ezekiel is given a vision of a man in linen putting a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things being done in the temple and in Jerusalem.

So even in the darkest days, when the sin of God's people reaches high watermarks and the Lord is compelled to judge his people, even then the Lord still has his faithful ones, his remnant who do not bow the knee to false gods, those who continue, in spite of their imperfections, to trust in the Lord.

Now the question is: How was this possible? Given the consistent and pervasive presence of sin, rebellion and unbelief throughout Israel's history, how is it that some were enabled to continue to believe and trust and obey the Lord?

It is plain that such people had a profound faith in the Lord. Hebrews 11 pictures these OT saints in powerful words. Hebrews 11:35ff –

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and

mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

These were OT people of faith, many of whom we do not know at all, but who are commended in Hebrews 11 and who are known to God.

How was it possible for some to be faithful in these ways? My case is that it was possible only because the Holy Spirit regenerated them and made them new, and because the Holy Spirit indwelt them and enabled them to stand firm in their faith.

#### **D. Main objection to this view**

A number of authors have strong objections to the view that the Holy Spirit's work in OT believers was fundamentally the same as is his work in believers today. The best statements of the contrary case that I have found appear in the work of James Hamilton, and I'd like to outline his case. Hamilton has stated his case in his 2003 PhD dissertation, in an article in *WTJ* in 2003 entitled "God with Men in the Torah"<sup>16</sup> and an article in *Themelios* in 2004 entitled "Were Old Covenant Believers Indwelt by the Holy Spirit?"<sup>17</sup>

Hamilton's answer to his question about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is "No". Old covenant believers were not indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God did not **need** to dwell **in** his people in the OT, because he dwelt **with** them, says Hamilton.

##### ***a. Hamilton's argument that OT believers were regenerated but not indwelt by the Holy Spirit***

When Hamilton set out on his study, he initially intended to argue that Old Covenant saints were indwelt by the Spirit, but he writes that the evidence

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<sup>16</sup> James M. Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65(2003).

<sup>17</sup> James M. Hamilton, "Were Old Covenant Believers Indwelt by the Holy Spirit?," *Themelios* 30, no. 1 (2004). More recently his work has appeared in a book: Hamilton, *God's Indwelling Presence*.

forced him to change his mind.<sup>18</sup> He does feel the force of the central question about OT saints we have been raising. “The question that plagues those who have a healthy respect for the crippling effect of sin is: If Old Covenant saints were not indwelt by the Spirit, how did they live faithfully?”<sup>19</sup>

Hamilton’s solution is two-fold – first God discloses himself, so initiating the covenant with his people, and then God maintains that covenant through his favourable presence with his people.<sup>20</sup>

Hamilton does hold that it is God’s work that enabled believers in the OT to believe and to be faithful. “...it was God who enabled Old Covenant believers to have and maintain faith”.<sup>21</sup> But Hamilton says that the way God did that was different in the Old Covenant from what it is now. He writes that “the means God employed to preserve his remnant were his word (i.e. his self-revelation) and his presence.”<sup>22</sup>

At first sight that seems uncontroversial, but Hamilton argues that God’s word and God’s presence were not mediated by the Spirit’s **indwelling** work in the lives of individuals but were instead mediated through God’s **presence** with his people in the tabernacle and the temple. God was not present with his people by dwelling **in** them but by dwelling **with** them.

Hamilton sees that as one of the striking differences between the old covenant and the new. He closes his *Themelios* article with the following words: OT believers

...became faithful by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit which the OT describes as a ‘circumcision of the heart’ (Jer 9:25) rather than a new birth from above (cf. John 3:3). They remained faithful not by the Spirit dwelling in them, but by the Spirit dwelling in the temple (Ps 73:17) where they longed to be (Ps 116:18-19) ...Under the old covenant, the Spirit gave life and was

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<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 113, fn 2.

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 115.

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 122.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 114.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 114.

with God's people as he dwelt in the temple. Under the new covenant, the Spirit gives life and dwells in God's people; they are his temple.<sup>23</sup>

Hamilton's argument distinguishes between an **internal** work of the Holy Spirit in the new covenant, by which the Holy Spirit transforms individuals and enables them to persevere, and a **proximate** work of the Holy Spirit in the old covenant, by which the Spirit was very near but not **in** believers. In the old covenant, God dwelt **with** his people but not **in** them. The glory of the new covenant is that God dwells **in** his people through the internal transforming work of the Holy Spirit. This glorious new work began at Pentecost with the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

We need to give attention to some of the details of Hamilton's argument. In writing about the first generation of Israel led out of Egypt, Hamilton says, "some Israelites who saw the fire and heard the voice were hardened like the Egyptians (cf. Exod 14:19-20; Num 11:1). Others, perhaps most, experienced a temporary desire to obey (Deut 5:23-27) but had not been given a heart to carry through on their earnestness (5:29; 29:4)."<sup>24</sup>

Hamilton argues that some were given a heart to perceive and eyes to see, but the majority were not. He regards those who were given this "circumcised heart" as regenerate.

This much can be granted, and it can even be granted that this circumcision of the heart was wrought by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 2:28-29). There is, however, nothing to indicate that we should regard them as indwelt by God's Spirit.... The reality of sin's effect upon humanity renders regeneration a theological necessity, and the New Testament does not deny that Old Covenant believers were regenerate. The New Testament does deny, on the other hand, that Old Covenant believers were indwelt by the Holy Spirit (John 7:39).<sup>25</sup>

To briefly summarise so far, Hamilton does agree, largely by theological

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<sup>23</sup> Hamilton, "Old Covenant Believers Indwelt?," 22.

<sup>24</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 124.

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 125.



inference, that OT believers were regenerated, that this work of regeneration is called a “circumcision of the heart” and that this work was wrought by the Holy Spirit. However, even though this work changes the heart, Hamilton wishes to maintain a proximate work of God by which God does not dwell **in** believers but only **with** believers. Hamilton does not give us an account of how the Holy Spirit works proximately (with but not in) to circumcise believers’ hearts.

The next step in Hamilton’s argument concerns how OT believers continued in faith and exercised obedience. Hamilton openly recognises the difficulty of arguing against indwelling. He asks, “How could regenerate people who were not indwelt by God’s Spirit be maintained in faith?”<sup>26</sup>

This is the crucial step in Hamilton’s argument. He writes that God maintained the regenerate remnant in the OT through his covenant-sustaining presence. He surveys the ways in which God’s presence with his people is presented in Exodus-Deuteronomy and concludes, “One significant way in which God’s presence with his people is *not* [emphasis in original] communicated is through his Spirit dwelling in each of them individually.”<sup>27</sup> Yahweh dwells *with* his people in the tabernacle and in the temple, but he is not present *in* each individual believer. He argues that there is no evidence in the OT for indwelling.

Hamilton mentions that a necessary conclusion of his thesis is that “the usage of *ruach* (Spirit) in the Old Testament is not the key to understanding the sanctification of the Old Covenant remnant.”<sup>28</sup> Hamilton is right to conclude, **in the logic of his argument**, that the sanctification of believers in the OT was not a work of the Holy Spirit. Rather, as Hamilton puts it, the means that God used to preserve his remnant were his word and his presence.

Hamilton reinforces his argument by focussing on a number of NT passages. John 14:17 is especially important to him. Jesus is talking about the “Spirit of truth” and he says, “The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

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<sup>26</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 125.

<sup>27</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 126.

<sup>28</sup> Hamilton, "God with Men in the Torah," 114.

Hamilton's thesis is called "*He is With You and He Will Be In You*"; the title shows how much weight he gives to this passage. He argues that only theological inference, not exegetical evidence, can argue that OT believers were indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and that John 14:17 and several other passages forbid this inference.<sup>29</sup> He argues that in John's gospel regeneration can be separated from indwelling, just as they can be separated (and in fact, in his view, **are** separated) in the Old Testament.

*b. Summarising Hamilton's thesis*

1. The OT does not teach that "everyday" OT believers were indwelt by the Spirit of God. The idea that OT believers were indwelt by the Holy Spirit can be arrived at only by theological inference, not on the basis of exegetical evidence.
2. Various NT passages forbid the inference.
3. Thus, "normal" OT believers were not indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They benefitted from a proximate work of God rather than an internal, indwelling work of God.

Note that Hamilton is prepared, by theological inference, to allow that the Holy Spirit regenerated OT believers, but he is not prepared to take the further step by theological inference that the Holy Spirit indwelt OT believers. This is because he believes that various NT passages forbid the further inference. Further, he does not explain how the Holy Spirit's proximate work (**near** but not **in**) circumcised the hearts of OT believers, thus regenerating them.

*c. Evaluation of Hamilton's thesis*

I'd like to make the following points in questioning Hamilton's argument.

- 1. The NT passages Hamilton cites do not forbid the inference that the Holy Spirit indwelt believers in the OT.**

I really cannot go into the NT passages that Hamilton cites in any detail

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<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, "Old Covenant Believers Indwelt?," 18.

because I want to focus on the OT evidence. I will simply consider one passage with a bit of detail; it is the main NT passage Hamilton bases his argument on and names his PhD thesis after, namely John 14:17. Jesus is talking about the “Spirit of truth” and he says, “The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.”

To start with, the verse has a number of textual problems, not least of which is that the textual evidence for the word *estai* (future tense – “will be”) in you is finely balanced with the textual evidence for the word *estin* (present tense – “is”) in you. Should it read, “The Holy Spirit is with you and will be in you”, or “The Holy Spirit is with you and in you”? Many English versions have a footnote indicating the uncertainty.

Even if the future tense reading is accepted, there are other problems with the understanding that this passage is talking about a rigid distinction between the Spirit being “with” the disciples now but “in” them after Pentecost. As Fredricks has pointed out, a rigid distinction between the prepositions “in” and “with” is simply not sustainable in this passage.<sup>30</sup>

What about all the other passages in the NT that might suggest that the Holy Spirit was not given until after Pentecost? There are a number of such passages: Mt 3:11 & parallel passages, John 1:33; 7:37-39; 15:26; 16:7-15; Acts 1:4-8; 11:15-16; 15:8. All these passages show that Pentecost was indeed a crucial event in the life of the church; something different was happening after Pentecost and we mustn’t underestimate how important that is. But without going into all the arguments,<sup>31</sup> none of these passages forbid the inference that the Holy Spirit already regenerated and indwelt believers before Pentecost.

Hamilton is willing to concede, by theological inference, that the Holy Spirit regenerated OT believers, but his conclusion about the NT passages causes him to resist further inference that the Holy Spirit indwelt OT believers. But

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<sup>30</sup> Gary Fredricks, “Rethinking the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Old Testament believers,” *Trinity Journal* 9, no. 1 (1988): 93-96.

<sup>31</sup> See Geoffrey W. Grogan, “The Significance of Pentecost in the History of Salvation,” *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 4, no. 2 (1986).

if his conclusion about the NT passages is wrong, which I think it is, then that further inference is acceptable. Besides all this, there is good exegetical evidence for the Holy Spirit's work of indwelling in the OT, to which we will come soon.

## 2. Hamilton's thesis has insufficient explanatory power.

Hamilton argues that believers in the OT were regenerated by what the OT calls "circumcision of the heart" rather than "new birth from above". He concedes that no doubt this was a work of the Holy Spirit, but only through a "proximate work" (my words) by which God dwelt **with** the people on Mt Sinai at first and then in the cloud and in the tabernacle and in the temple, but not **in** the people through the Holy Spirit. God's work was proximate in that he dwelt **close to** but not **in** believers. Further, believers were kept faithful by God's proximate work. God sustained his people through his word and his presence with them, not through an indwelling work of the Holy Spirit.

Hamilton argues that God's word and presence were not activated for the regeneration and sustenance of **most** of the people in the first generation, but that nevertheless **some** were given eyes to see and ears to hear and the ability to believe in God, and were further sustained in their faith through God's presence with them in the tabernacle and the temple, but **not** through his presence in individual believers.

In Hamilton's thesis, despite what he says to the contrary, the difference between Israelites who believed and those who did not appears to lie in the Israelites themselves. All should have believed; most did not. God gave them all they needed to believe and to persevere in faithfulness by being **with** them (he was with, near but not in, them all), and some took advantage of the "right conditions" God had provided and believed and persevered. Some were regenerated, and "no doubt" the work of regeneration was a work of the Spirit. But Hamilton says we cannot take the additional step to say that OT believers were indwelt by the Spirit.

In doing so, Hamilton removes from consideration the only feasible explanation for the difference between faithful and unfaithful Israelites – the internal transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Hamilton's argument gives to

OT believers a power that no NT believer possesses – the power to believe and to continue in faith without the indwelling sustaining work of the Holy Spirit. Assuming that OT believers had such power is granting them too much. It is too optimistic about the ability of the OT remnant to believe and to persevere in faithfulness.<sup>32</sup>

### **E. Is there evidence for the Spirit’s indwelling of OT believers?**

Apart from the arguments already noted, I would like to present seven additional, separate lines of evidence for the Spirit’s indwelling of OT believers. There are many “whispers” of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence in the OT.

#### ***a. The NT compels us to read OT references to the Spirit of God as referring to the Holy Spirit.***

In Acts 7:51 Stephen shows that it was God’s Holy Spirit who was Israel’s guide and whom they resisted when they rejected God’s leading. 2 Corinthians 4:13 suggests that the Spirit of God is the author of faith in the OT as well as now. Hebrews 9:8 affirms that it was the Holy Spirit who gave Israel the ritual worship of the OT. The NT affirms in several places that the Spirit of God spoke in and through David and Isaiah and the prophets; 1 Peter 1:11 even calls the Spirit by whom the OT prophets spoke the Spirit of Christ. Perhaps this is an obvious point, but it is basic to everything else – the Spirit of God in the OT is the Holy Spirit of the NT; the NT categorically compels us to affirm that conclusion.

If that is the case, then the NT’s presentation of the work of the Spirit in regeneration and sanctification, all of which involves his internal indwelling work, could easily be read as a **continuation** of his work from the OT, and this appears to be the **expectation** of the NT. For example, in Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus was surprised that Nicodemus did

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<sup>32</sup> Further to the brief argument here, Daniel Block outlines seven serious difficulties faced by Hamilton’s thesis in Daniel I. Block, "The View from the Top: The Holy Spirit in the Prophets," in *Presence, Power and Promise: The Role of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament* (eds. David G. Firth and Paul D. Wegner; Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2011), 197-201.

not understand the meaning of new birth and the connection of new birth with the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' words in John 3:10 unquestionably imply rebuke. As a well-qualified religious teacher, Nicodemus should not have found Jesus' words about the necessity of and Spirit's role in new birth strange. Jesus implies that the Spirit's work of regenerating and transforming believers should have been plain to an OT scholar.

***b. The Bible draws a close association between the word of God and the Spirit of God***

The OT often makes a strong connection between the word of God and the Spirit of God. The connection goes all the way back to creation. Genesis 1:2-3 "The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." Vss 2-3 immediately forge a strong connection between the Spirit of God and the word of God, by which he made the heavens and the earth. God spoke and things came to be. As he spoke he used his "breath" – speech and breath are impossible to separate.

English does not have a word that can incorporate both "breath" and "Spirit," but of course in Hebrew the word "*ruach*" means both. The Spirit or the breath of God is strongly connected with his creative word. The connection is born out in several psalms. E.g. Ps 33:6 "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth."

The Spirit of God is connected with the Word of God throughout the OT. David says in 2 Samuel 23:2 "The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue." Or consider Isa 59:21 "As for me, this is my covenant with them,' says the LORD. 'My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and for ever,' says the LORD."

The logic of these passages is that where the word of God is active, at work, there is the Spirit of God. So we are not surprised when this connection flows into the NT as well. The word of God is said to be the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17). Jesus says in John 6:63, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts

for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”

For the Word of God to be powerful and effective the Holy Spirit must be active. Whenever the word is effective, it is only effective because of the Spirit’s work. And yet, from the very beginning of Israel’s existence, the key element of their identity was that the word of God came to them.

Right through the OT, the word of the Lord comes to Israel through their leaders and prophets. It is the defining characteristic of Israel – their identity is distinct because the word of the Lord comes to them.

But if it is true that the word of the Lord is strongly associated with the Spirit of the Lord, then whenever we read of the word being at work we can read that the Spirit is there making the word effective. Granted, this does not prove that the Holy Spirit indwelt OT believers. But when Moses says to the people in Deuteronomy 30:14, “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it,” there is every hint that the Spirit is at work in the hearts of believing Israelites.

### *c. The uses of the phrase “Holy Spirit”*

As already mentioned, the phrase “Holy Spirit” occurs only three times in the OT, twice in Isaiah 63:10-11, and once in Psalm 51:11. On each occasion the use of the word “holy” (*qadosh*) is not incidental. The passages refer to a grieving of the Holy Spirit, a rebellion against the **holiness** of the Lord. It is the Spirit of holiness that has been offended in each case.

The references in Isaiah are found in an intercessory prayer that occupies 63:7-64:12, probably on the lips of Isaiah himself.<sup>33</sup> The cry at the centre of the prayer is in 64:1 “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down!” Isaiah sees no alternative but that help come from the Lord in another mighty act of judgment and redemption, just as he did in setting Israel free from Egypt. There is no hope in the strength of the people themselves.

Isaiah develops a lengthy list of all the blessings the Lord poured out on Israel during their redemption from Egypt – he was distressed about their

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<sup>33</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles’ Wings* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 241.

distress in Egypt, the angel of his presence saved them, in his love and mercy he redeemed them, he lifted them up and carried them, he brought them through the sea, and by his Spirit he gave them rest. In this long list Isaiah includes the words of vs 11 “...where is he who brought them through the sea with the shepherd of his flock? Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them, who sent his glorious arm of power to be at Moses’ right hand?”

Two of the many things the Lord did for his people is that he set his Holy Spirit among them (vs 11) and he gave them rest by his Spirit (vs 14). So why did things go so badly for Israel? Vs 10 “Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them.” The Hebrew word translated “grieved” is only used 14x in the OT; it is used in the same way in Psalm 78:40 “How they rebelled against him in the desert and grieved him in the wasteland!” The same word is used in Genesis 6:6 “The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” This is just after God has said in Genesis 6:3 “My Spirit will not contend with man forever.”

The way the word is used in the OT makes it clear that only a person can be grieved; the Holy Spirit is personal. Grieving the Lord means grieving the Holy Spirit of the Lord. Isaiah 63 says that by grieving the Holy Spirit the people made the Lord their enemy; he fought against them. He became what he was not before – their enemy. He took it “personally” – rebelling against God was not just failing to obey the Law, it was a personal rejection of a personal Spirit who had been put amongst God’s people.

In Psalm 51 David feels that in his rebellion against God he has grieved this personal God, and he pleads that God not take his Holy Spirit from him. David refers to *ruach* three times in vss 10-12 with three different adjectives in the following way:

10 A clean heart create (bara) in me, and a steadfast spirit (*ruach*) renew within me.

11 Do not cast me from your presence, and your Holy Spirit (*ruach*) do not take from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of my salvation, and a willing spirit (*ruach*) to sustain me.



David is praying about the work of God within him by which he is enabled to rejoice in his salvation and willingly walk in God's ways. In confessing his sin in Psalm 51, David pleads with God to not remove that work of his Holy Spirit in him, which would be the same as God removing his presence from him.

The word "create" (*bara*) in vs 10 is used 45x in the OT, and it is only ever used of God's activity. It is especially prominent in the creation account in Genesis and in passages that reflect on the creation account, and also in Isaiah 40-55, where God's creating activity involves doing a "new thing" by the power of his Spirit through the work of his Servant. In Psalm 51 David is asking God to use his creative power to create in him a clean heart, which involves the continuing work of his Spirit in him.

The word *ruach* is used once more in Psalm 51, in vs 17:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit (*ruach*);  
A heart broken and crushed, O God, you do not despise.

David here appears to be referring to his own spirit, crushed and broken, assured that such a spirit is acceptable to God. The relationship between the spirit of David and the Spirit of God in Psalm 51 is such that humility before God is the pleasing reversal of David's hubris that originally endangered his relationship with God. But the work of God's Spirit in David's spirit is what has produced the change in his spirit.

Is this a prayer that OT believers could pray, that the Lord not take his Holy Spirit from them, and that the Spirit of God work in the spirit of the believer to change it? David is a king of whom it is said that the Holy Spirit came upon him permanently (1Sa 16:13), and it could be argued that Psalm 51 cannot be applied to "normal" OT believers. But it must be remembered that David gave Psalm 51 to "the director of music" for use in the worship of Israel. The prayer of David was designed to become the prayer of every Israelite.

Further, it can be argued very cogently that the king was supposed to be an example to his fellow-Israelites. The king was supposed to write out a copy

of the law and meditate upon it all the days of his life so that he might be careful to obey and not consider himself better than his brothers (Dt 17:18-20). The call to meditate upon the law of the Lord day and night becomes the opening call of the Psalter in Psalm 1. The activity required of the king is required of every Israelite. The king is to be an example to his fellows, an example for them to follow. This implies that the words of David in pleading that the Lord not take his Holy Spirit from him are designed for every Israelite to pray.

Furthermore, Paul quoted from Psalm 51 in Rom 3:4 as part of an argument for the universality of sin. Paul's argument in Romans will lead on to his discussion of justification by faith, and result in his call to offer our bodies as living sacrifices of praise in response to God's work of salvation (Rom 12:1-2). It is striking that David already anticipates this response at the end of Psalm 51 when he speaks of righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight the Lord. The sacrifice includes a contrite spirit that has repented of grieving God's Holy Spirit. The work of response for God's salvation in Romans is clearly for every believer. The implication seems to be that Psalm 51 is also suitable for the prayer of every believer.

All in all, we can say that the use of the phrase "Holy Spirit" in the OT, though rare, encourages "average" believers in the OT to see themselves as personally related to the personal Spirit of God in an intimate way, a relationship that can be blighted by personal rebellion against God and that can be repaired if the Spirit of God does a work of transformation in the spirit of the believer. Again, this does not "prove" that OT believers were indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, but it does give a strong indication to that effect.

#### ***d. Other references to ruach in the Psalms***

Taking a lead from the way *ruach* is used in Psalm 51, how is *ruach* used in the rest of the Psalter? The Psalms were written by Spirit-filled people and were written originally for the people of Israel to pray and sing. The word *ruach* is used 40x in the Psalter; 10x it refers to the Spirit of God and 10x to the spirit of the praying person. Israel is encouraged to confess that these ancestors rebelled against God's Spirit in the wilderness (Ps 106:33), to admit that it is impossible to flee from the presence of the Spirit (Ps 139:7) and to

pray that God’s good Spirit would lead them on level ground (Ps 143:10). Apart from Psalm 51, the Psalter elsewhere encourages God’s people to confess that the Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit (34:18), and to look confidently to the Lord when the human spirit fails (142:3; 143:4, 7). Although the references are not plentiful, the psalms clearly encourage believers to confess the need for and to pray for the work of God’s Spirit in providing salvation.

*e. Covenant blessings are mediated by the Spirit*

The word *ruach* appears 52x in Ezekiel, more often than in any other book in the OT; Ezekiel has been called the “prophet of the Spirit.”<sup>34</sup> Ten uses of the word are clustered in Ch 37, which contains the famous dry bones vision; it is the Spirit of the Lord who brings life to the dead bones of Israel. The same Spirit of the Lord is promised in the previous chapter, in Ezekiel 36. There are some strong similarities between the account in Ezekiel 36-37 and Jeremiah’s description of the new covenant.

**Jer 31:31-33**

I will make a new covenant...

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts...

I will be their God, and they will be my people

**Eze 36:26-28**

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you...

I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees...

you will be my people, and I will be your God

**Eze 37:26-27**

I will make a covenant of peace with them...

I will be their God, and they will be my people

These passages are describing the same phenomenon. Jeremiah speaks of

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel I. Block, "The Prophet of the Spirit: The Use of *RWH* in the Book of Ezekiel," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, no. 1 (1989).

putting the law on the hearts of God's people; Ezekiel ascribes that to the infusion of the Spirit and the making of an eternal covenant of peace. In all cases the result is the renewal of the covenant relationship.<sup>35</sup>

The establishment of a new covenant, by which the Lord operates internally, writing the law on the minds and hearts of the people so that they desire to obey the law of the Lord, is a work that is accomplished by an internally transforming work of the Spirit of God.

The blessings of the new covenant can properly be called the blessings of the covenant relationship in a more general sense. For example, having the law of the Lord on the heart, experiencing fellowship with the Lord, knowing the Lord and receiving forgiveness of sins, all of which are promised in the new covenant, were blessings received by some in the Old Testament. We could speak of people in the old covenant experiencing new covenant blessings, or we could call them covenant blessings that were experienced under the old covenant and that would be experienced more intensively and extensively in the new covenant.

Examples of these covenant blessings being experienced under the old covenant abound. For example:

- In Psalm 32 David rejoices, and OT believers are encouraged to rejoice over the forgiveness of their sins: "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit there is no deceit" (Ps 32:1-2).
- In Psalm 103 believers under the Mosaic covenant are encouraged to praise the Lord who forgives all your sins – "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps 103:12).
- In Psalm 37:31 the righteous man is characterised as someone for whom "The law of his God is in his heart; his feet do not slip." In Psalm 40:8 people are encouraged to sing "I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

The examples could be multiplied many times. The blessings associated with

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Block, "Prophet of the Spirit," 39.

the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, **which are the result of the work of the Holy Spirit**, are experienced by believers already under the old covenant. If the connections between the granting of covenant blessings and the Holy Spirit hold, and I think they do, then the blessings could only be experienced by OT believers because of an internal work of transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit. A proximate work in which the Holy Spirit is **close to** but not **in** OT believers does not sufficiently explain the true experience of covenant blessings that many enjoyed in the OT. The parallels between the giving of a new covenant and the giving of the Holy Spirit to do an internal work of transformation make the connection plain and crucial.

*f. Some other suggestive lines of evidence*

- Psalm 119 is an extended heart-felt cry of a person who loves the Lord for the ability to obey the law of the Lord. Vs 18 “Open my eyes, that I may see wonderful things in your law.” Vss 10-11 “I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” The love of OT believers for God’s law and the frequency with which they express a desire to obey the Lord point to a work of the Holy Spirit to transform motivations and attitudes amongst OT believers.
- When we first meet the Spirit of God in the OT, he is said to be “hovering” over the waters. This verb is used only once more in the *Piel*, in Deuteronomy 32:11, which speaks poetically of the Lord accompanying the people of Israel through the wilderness like an eagle now hovering over, now carrying its young on its pinions. The Lord reinforces the picture in Exodus 19:4 where he says from Mt Sinai that he has brought Israel from Egypt and has carried them on eagles’ wings and brought them to himself. Many years later Ezra is enumerating the blessings the Lord gave to Israel on their wilderness journey, and he includes the gift of God’s Spirit. “You gave your good Spirit to instruct them” (Neh 9:20). Is this the “hovering Spirit?” Add these small glimpses to what we have already seen from Isaiah 63 about the Lord giving his Spirit to his people in the wilderness, the Spirit they grieved when they rebelled against God, and we begin to get a picture of the Spirit of God being given to Israel from the beginning.

- In Haggai 1 the prophet brings God’s word to the people; see the result. “Then Haggai, the LORD’s messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: ‘I am with you,’ declares the LORD. So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God.” (Hag 1:13-14) What does it mean for the Lord to say, “I am with you”? And what does it mean for Haggai to report that the Lord stirred up the spirits of the Israelites?
- In the next Chapter Haggai brings a message to Zerubbabel: “‘But now be strong, O Zerubbabel,’ declares the LORD. ‘Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘and work. For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.’” (Hag 2:4-5) Prophesying at the same time, Zechariah also has a word for Zerubbabel: “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.” (Zec 4:6) References to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit appear to be crucial for these prophets.

It seems to be the case that references to and promises of the work of the Holy Spirit are concentrated in post-exilic times in the OT. Ezekiel and Jeremiah were exilic prophets, Haggai and Zechariah are post-exilic prophets, Nehemiah is post-exilic. Even the words of Isaiah 63 are in part directed to the post-exilic generation. Did the people of Israel need the experience of the exile to heighten their sense of dependence on and need for the work of the Spirit? Psalm 80 breathes the same kind of prayer for revival and restoration after the destruction and burning of the vine the Lord planted in the land; it can easily be read as a prayer for the renewing work of the Holy Spirit amongst God’s people.

### ***g. Conclusion***

Apart from the arguments about the inadequacies of Hamilton’s thesis that OT believers were not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, I have presented seven

additional lines of evidence for the Spirit's internally transforming work in OT believers. Some of this evidence is strong, some is merely suggestive. Not one line of evidence proves conclusively that the Holy Spirit indwelt OT believers, but I hope that the accumulation of what I have described as "whispers" of the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence in the OT will at least present this view as a strong possibility. The situation of OT people is similar to our situation in several ways. Everyone is called to faith and obedience, everyone must respond to God, but not a single one can respond, none have the ability. Only if the Spirit of God brings life can people respond to God. Faithful Israelites existed because the Spirit of God was actively at work regenerating people, stirring their spirits, circumcising their hearts and transforming their lives.

### **F. So what is the significance of Pentecost?**

If the Holy Spirit regenerated and indwelt believers in OT times, what is the significance of Pentecost? Geoffrey Grogan's article on this topic<sup>36</sup> is very helpful. He suggests that when understood in a whole Bible context, Pentecost has elements of continuity, reversal, fulfilment, uniqueness, newness and normality, and anticipation. Grogan suggests that "in many ways the experience of the Spirit which the disciples had then was continuous with what had been before."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, after Pentecost the Holy Spirit has been given in ways which are qualitatively different from the way he worked in the Old Testament. Pentecost is the fulfilment of several OT passages, most notably the promise in Joel 2 which Peter used to explain what happened on the Day of Pentecost.

How is the Spirit's work different since Pentecost? Grogan suggests that the Spirit's work is both broader and deeper than before. It is broader than before in that now the Spirit is poured out on "all flesh", including those who are near and those who are far away, including both Jews and Gentiles. People from all races and tongues are now bound together in the one body of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>36</sup> Grogan, "Significance of Pentecost."

<sup>37</sup> Grogan, "Significance of Pentecost," 97.

The work of the Spirit is also deeper than before. Now the facts about the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit have been revealed. Now the Spirit baptises people into the church, into union with Christ, and shapes people's lives so that they become more like Christ. The disciples are given power through the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. The Christian life is meant to be a life lived in the fullness of the Spirit and in the fellowship that the Spirit creates with all who are united with Christ.

In terms of the discussion in this article, perhaps the significance of Pentecost can be expressed in the following way:

**Since Pentecost, God is doing throughout the world and in a deeper and clearer way what he had been doing by his Spirit in Israel before Pentecost.**

One day, when all the Gentiles have been gathered in and all of Israel has been saved, that work will be complete.

## **G. So what effect does this have on our preaching?**

### *a. Interpret signals that point to the work of the Spirit*

Just as we understand many different OT expressions and ordinances as messianic, as pointing to Christ, so there are also OT themes and experiences that point to the work of the Holy Spirit. Just as we can point out of the shadows to Christ, we can point out of the shadows to the work of the Holy Spirit.

- Moses commands the people in Dt 6:5-6 “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.” He commands in Deuteronomy 10:16 “Circumcise your hearts and do not be stiff-necked any longer.” But then he says in chapter 30:6 “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”

Ezekiel presents a very similar pattern of demand and provision. In



Ezekiel 18:31 the impossible is demanded: “Rid yourselves of all the offences you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit.” In Ezekiel 36:25-26 the Lord promises to give what he has demanded: “I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you...” The promise in Ezekiel is, significantly, immediately connected with God’s promise to put “my Spirit” in Ezekiel’s audience.

In commanding heart-change, Moses and Ezekiel are commanding the impossible if OT believers were left on their own, but the Lord will provide for those who are his own through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we see a demand for heart work we must see an implicit prayer for Spirit work.

- In a similar way we can interpret a record of the Lord stirring the hearts of his people or causing revival and renewal or a desire for obedience or records of repentance and godly sorrow over sin as pointing to the work of the Holy Spirit.

***b. Obedience is never possible without the Spirit being at work***

OT believers did not have a special power to obey and believe that is denied to NT believers. Stable faithfulness to the Lord was impossible for OT believers just as it is for us without the work of the Holy Spirit. Living during the days of the Exodus and personally seeing God’s mighty acts of redemption did not of itself empower obedience. Within three days of the crossing of the Red Sea the people were complaining and wishing to return to Egypt. Even the disciples, living with the Lord himself, were told that it was better for them that he go away, so that the Counsellor could come. Faith and obedience have always been Spirit-empowered responses to the Lord, never anything else.

***c. The Spirit of the Lord did empower certain people for certain tasks in the OT, perhaps even people who did not acknowledge the Lord, but all OT believers were “spiritual” people in the sense that the Spirit gave them faith***

Saul was empowered by the Spirit to prophesy and to lead his people in battle, but he appears to have ended his life apostate. Cyrus is described as

the Lord's "anointed one" in Isaiah 45 even though the Lord affirms twice that Cyrus did not acknowledge him. Nebuchadnezzar is inspired to praise and magnify the Lord in the Book of Daniel, though we doubt he was "regenerate". It is easy to be impressed with these "spectacular" examples and lose sight of the work the Spirit was doing in other people. We must not overlook the significance of "ordinary" faithful ones in Israel who believed the Lord and trusted him even in the most difficult of circumstances.

*d. In our application, "Israel" can point forward in various ways, but these applications depend upon the remnant in Israel being Spirit-indwelt*

- **Sometimes Israel points to Jesus.** Jesus is presented not just as the Saviour of Israel but also as an embodiment of all that Israel was supposed to be.<sup>38</sup> Matthew makes this point in his early chapters in various ways, most pointedly perhaps in that it is Jesus on whom the Spirit descends, as a foretaste of the outpouring on all Israel that the prophets expected. What Israel often fails to be, Jesus is perfectly because he is empowered in a perfect way by the work of the Spirit. We can often point from Israel to Jesus. But the application is weakened if Israel was only subject to a proximate work of the Spirit that did not change hearts.
- **Sometimes Israel points to the church.** The Spirit has been poured out on Jews and Gentiles alike; God has abolished the distinction between Jews and Gentiles in the church and all are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. The church consists of those people in whom God is acting by his Spirit, just as he acted in Israel in the past.
- **Sometimes Israel points to the world.** God is now doing in the world what he did by his Spirit in Israel in the past. Sometimes Israel, in her antagonism to God, in her enmity against him, and also in her submission to him can stand for the world's response to God's work by his Spirit.
- **Sometimes Israel points to individual believers.** Is it valid to extend an application from Israel to the individual believer? Yes,

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Motyer, "Israel (Nation)," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Leicester: IVP, 2000), 584.

because Israel consisted of individuals, some of whom were subject to the regenerating and indwelling work of the Holy Spirit. If there were no indwelling, transforming work in the OT, then the heroes of the faith are no less than superhuman individuals who have an amazing power to believe and obey apart from the Spirit's work, a power that is not available to us. Just as it is sometimes valid to point from Israel to individuals, so it is at times valid also to extend an application from the king as a representative of and example to Israel to the individual believer who is responsible to respond to the work of the Spirit.

- **Sometimes Israel points to Israel.** When someone enters into a covenant relationship with the Lord through the work of the Spirit, Israel's destiny and hope has been realized, not set aside.<sup>39</sup> The argument in Romans 9-11 sets out a hope that this destiny will eventually be realized within ethnic Israel as well.
- e. *Never lose sight of the fact that obedience and rebellion are responses that God takes "personally"*

I have been arguing for an internal work of the personal Spirit of God in the personal spirit of OT believers. I have been trying to provide evidence that a proximate work by which the Spirit only dwells **with** his people but not **in** his people in the OT cannot sufficiently explain the existence of true faith and obedience in the OT. If this is true, we can always speak about both faith and obedience on the one hand, and rejection and rebellion on the other hand, as **personal** responses to a **personal** God. Sin does not only break the commandments of God, it also breaks the friendship and fellowship we have with God as it grieves the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. Faith and obedience do not only fulfil the commandments of God, they also bring delight to God who dwells in us by his Spirit.

## H. Conclusion

By necessity of space I have skipped over much of the work of the Holy Spirit in the OT, and only presented some suggestive pointers to one aspect of that work – the regeneration and indwelling of OT believers by the Holy

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<sup>39</sup> Motyer, "Israel (Nation)," 586.

Spirit.

May we give due honour to the work of the Spirit of Christ in the Old Testament, wherein he enabled “ordinary” believers to maintain their hope in the One True God.

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