

Hebrew Streams

Synonyms of *Ruach*

(A Study in Hebrew Metaphors)

by Paul Sumner

The ancient Hebrews were not Westerners. Their imagination and forms of expression were rich, earthy, and wide-ranging—as rich as the One who created them and nurtured them as his People. The Hebrews didn’t say something just one way. They’d describe an object, action, or person using one expression, then in another place talk about it some other way.

An obvious example of this is God himself. He has numerous names and titles in Scripture. He is “God,” but there are three Hebrew words for “God.”¹ And he is not merely “God”—he is **King** (Isa 6:5), **Lord** (*Adon*, Ps 35:23), **Potter** (Isa 45:7), **Shepherd** (Ps 80:1), **Fountain** (Jer 2:13), **Fear** (Gen 31:42), **Fire** (Deut 4:24), **Hope** (Jer 14:8), **Rock** (Deut 32:4), **Man of war** (Exod 15:3), **Husband** (Isa 54:5), **Guardian of covenant love** (Deut 7:9)—to mention only a few. God also has a personal name: YHVH: Yahveh. But who can adequately define what the Name of Four Letters actually, fully means?²

When we Westerners come to the Hebrew Bible, we best come looking for circles of meaning; fluid circles whose borders are not always crisp and static. These circles overlap with other circles. I call these *zones of synonymity*. They extend our perception of words, and give us clues to how the Hebrews comprehended God’s world and God himself.

Fluid, overlapping circles make systematic theologians cringe. And not a few Christian thinkers have given up on the Hebrews as a source for crafting crisp-edged doctrines. Some attribute their lack of helpfulness to a lack of spiritual enlightenment that could only come from faith in Messiah and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But we don’t do the Scriptures honor with that attitude. The apostle Paul apparently felt the Hebrew Bible was a sufficient source of Christian truth: he said it was inspired, profitable for doctrinal instruction, and able to adequately equip followers of Yeshua to be servants of God (2 Tim 3:16-17). Paul lived in that Hebrew world and navigated its rich seas of floating circles of truth.

¹ *El*, *Elo’ah*, *Elohim*. The Aramaic *Elah* and its plural *Elahin* are used in the books of Daniel and Ezra.

² For an extensive study on the meaning of YHVH see [HaShem—The Name](#).

Overlapping circles is what this paper is about, particularly as they involve the word רוּחַ (*ruach*), the word often translated “spirit.” I will point out commonly overlooked connections between *ruach* and other words, in order to extend the borders of our thinking about this word, as it’s used in the Bible.

(1) Mind

Let me begin with Paul.

When Paul twice quotes from Isaiah 40, he endorses a translational interpretation found in Diaspora Judaism that sheds light on how some Jews in the first century understood the Hebrew word *ruach*. In Romans 11:34 and again in 1 Corinthians 2:16, Paul reads Isaiah 40:13 as follows: “Who has known the mind of the Lord?” In both verses, he quotes the Septuagint version, not the Hebrew text.

The Hebrew is different. It reads: מִי-תִכֵּן רוּחַ יְהוָה — “Who has measured the spirit of Yahveh?”

The verb difference is not too significant. To *know* the mind of the Lord is not far in meaning from *measuring* it or *putting it in order*, or making sense of or comprehending it. The significant difference between the Greek and Hebrew is the nouns:

Greek: Who has known the **mind** of the Lord?

Hebrew: Who has measured the **spirit** of the LORD?

Are the words *mind* and *spirit* interchangeable? Based on Paul’s validation of the Septuagint rendering of Isaiah 40:13, we can answer, “*Sometimes*; the circles do overlap.”

The Greek word for *mind* in these passages in the Septuagint and Paul is νοῦς (*nous*), which denotes the faculty of thinking, understanding or reasoning. Only one time did the Septuagint translators use the noun *nous* for the Hebrew *ruach*—that’s here in Isaiah 40:13. Normally they use *nous* in place of καρδιά (*kardia*, *heart*).

The Hebrew “Mind”

There is no word in Hebrew for *brain* or *mind* as such. Both the organ of thinking and the internal faculty of thought is the *heart* (either לֵב, *lev*, or לִבָּב, *levav*). In the Bible there is no dichotomy between heart and mind, contrary to Western cultural usage. All thought processes, including reason, imagination, and emotion, occur in the heart.

For example, God sent the Flood because, “the *intent* of man’s *heart* is evil from his youth” (Gen 8:21). Yet the heart is also where God wants his *torah* to dwell, and he said so from the very beginning. The famous *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6 includes the command: “These words shall be on your **heart**” (v 6). Many centuries later, Jeremiah reminded his generation of this original purpose and foretold a time when it would achieve its end. Speaking

for God, the prophet says, “I will put my *torah* within them and on their **heart** I will write it” (Jer 31:33). Jeremiah says this would be the era of the “new covenant,” when finally everyone lives by the mind of God.

NT “Heart-Mind”

New Testament use of the word “heart” follows the Hebrew pattern. Yeshua says, “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and slanders” (Matt 15:19). People “think” (Luke 9:47) or “understand” (Matt 13:15, Isa 6:10) or “love” (1 Tim 1:5) in their hearts. Human hearts can be hardened (Mark 3:5, 6:52), uncircumcised (Acts 7:51; cf., Deut 10:16, 30:6; Jer 4:4), or unbelieving (Heb 3:12). But they can also believe with it. As Paul says, “If you confess with your mouth Yeshua as Lord, and **believe in your heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9).

Biblically speaking, the heart is not the center of emotions and sentimentality, represented by heart-shaped Valentine cards covered with Cupids. It is the center of the *whole* human being, where all inner life takes place—whether emotional, rational or spiritual.

Given that, let’s return to Isaiah 40:13 and the two circles labeled “mind” and “ruach.”

Greek: Who has known the **mind** of the Lord?

Hebrew: Who has measured the **spirit** of the LORD?

New Heart-New Ruach

As shown, the Hebrew equivalent for *mind* is *heart*. And frequently, the word *heart* (*lev, levav*) is used in parallel with *ruach*. Now, *ruach* is frequently translated “spirit.” But I don’t want to use the word “spirit” yet, because *ruach* doesn’t mean “spirit.” “Spirit” is just one of the words English translators use for *ruach*. Note the parallel thoughts in the following:

The LORD your God hardened his **ruach**
and made his **heart** obstinate. (Deut. 2:30)

The **heart** of the Egyptians will melt within them . . .
the **ruach** of the Egyptians will be demoralized within them.
(Isa 19:1)

Create in me a clean **heart**, O God,
and renew a steadfast **ruach** within me. (Ps 51:10)

In the prophet Ezekiel, we especially find this *heart/ruach* parallel connected to the future Restoration:

I shall give them **one heart**,
and shall put a **new ruach** within them.
And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh
and give them a heart of flesh. (Ezek 11:19)

. . . make yourselves a **new heart** and a **new ruach**. (Ezek 18:31)

I will give you a **new heart** and put a **new ruach** within you . . .

I will put **my ruach** within you and cause you to walk in my statutes. (Ezek 36:26, 27)

Father-Son Heart

The divine will is that Israel receive a new center of being: new imaginations, new motives, new purposes: in other words, another *heart-ruach* from God—God’s very own *ruach*. Only then will Israel as a nation live up to the title “son” of God (Exod 4:22; Deut 14:1; Hos 11:1). For a son must act like his father; he must have his father’s nature. If he does not have the *ruach* of his father, he isn’t his child (cf. Rom 8:9—“If anyone does not have the *pneuma* of Messiah he does not belong to him”). Only one who has the Father’s *ruach* dwelling in him has known, measured, comprehended, or plumbed the depths of God’s *ruach*.

Two men in Scripture who are called God’s “son” fulfilled this expectation, though in different degrees. King David was “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). It also says Yeshua was once “in the bosom of the Father” (NASB) or “close to the Father’s heart” (NRSV) (John 1:18b). This suggests he knew God’s mind better than anyone. (See the section on “John” in the article [Visions of the Heavenly Council in the Hebrew Bible](#).)

(2) Breath and Presence

The basic lexical meaning behind *ruach* is air in motion. Blowing air, wind, breath. Your breath is invisible, moving air. If it continues to move you’re living. If it stops, someone calls for an ambulance. Our English word “spirit” comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which simply means “breath.”

Breath is an apt physical emblem of our inner life, and a very helpful translation of *ruach*.

We express what we think with our breath, when our breath forms words. Our words come from our mouths. Our mouths are part of our face. And, using the figure of speech known as *metonymy*, our face stands for our presence. If we can see someone’s face and especially hear their breath, we’re in their presence. In fact, the Hebrew word normally translated “presence” is *panim*, literally *face*.

In the famous [Aaronic Blessing](#) in Numbers 6, the Hebrew says: “The LORD make his *panim* shine on you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his *panim* on you and give you peace” (vv 25-26). When we are in God’s presence, we are face-to-face with him. If his face *shines* toward us, it beams with love, acceptance, invitation. But if he turns his face away, in effect he withdraws his presence. We can no longer see his face. We can’t hear his mouth, his words, his breath, his *ruach*.

This is the image behind two famous passages in Psalm 51 and Psalm 139.

Do not cast me away from your **panim**,
and do not take your holy **ruach** from me. (Ps 51:11)

Where can I go from your **ruach**?
Or where can I flee from your **panim**? (Ps 139:7)

When God's face breathes words, he expresses his will. His mind is revealed. God's Presence is not some ghostly cloud mysteriously filling the room. His *panim* is ever communicating with his people his will. But if they can't hear him because of sin, they're separated from life, in exile, dying.

The prophet Ezekiel makes a hopeful promise to his fellow exiles in the sixth century. God says, through him, "I will not hide my *panim* from them any longer, for I shall pour out my *ruach* on the house of Israel" (Ezek 39:29). That is, when the Lord turns toward repentant, *listening* sinners, his face beams and his mouth pours out words of life, and they receive the holy *ruach* in their ears and deep in their souls—and they revive.

(3) Hand

Now the third and last circle that overlaps the word **ruach** is the word "hand."

We don't often think about it, but our hands speak all the time. They express what we're thinking or they communicate our will to others. (Consider how your hand conveys your mind to family, friends, co-workers, pets.)

In the Hebrew Bible, the word *hand* can symbolize God's communicating powerful presence: "I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me" (Ezra 7:28). Hand can denote acts of grace: an *open* hand, if you will: "The hand of our God is gracious to all who seek Him" (Ezra 8:22).

Being under the Hand is a metaphor for inspiration or revelation.

The LORD spoke to me with a strong **hand** and **instructed** me . . .
(Isa 8:11)

The **word** of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel the priest . . .
there the **hand** of the LORD came upon him. (Ezek 1:3)

We find that God's hand is often mentioned in parallel with his *ruach*. Of King David, it says God gave him plans for the Temple "by the *ruach* with him" (1 Chron 28:12), and "by his *hand* upon" him (v. 19). Ezekiel said of himself,

The **hand** of the LORD has been upon me,
and he brought me out in the **ruach** of the LORD. (Ezek 37:1)

In Psalm 139 we find an intersecting collection of familiar circles:

Where can I go from your **ruach**?
 Or where can I flee from your **presence**? . . .
 If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
 Even there your **hand** will lead me,
 And your **right hand** will lay hold of me. (vv. 7, 9-10)

In typical Hebrew fashion, the psalmist here overlaps and heaps up diverse ways of describing the same reality. God's powerful, rescuing, communicating nearness: breath, face, hand.

In the New Testament, we find a precise illustration of this interconnected Hebraic metaphor. In Matthew 12:28, Yeshua says,

If I cast out demons by the **spirit** of God,
 then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

In Luke 11:20, the same statement reads:

If I cast out demons by the **finger** of God,
 then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

God's finger is part of his hand; his hand and spirit are interchangeable terms here. Power, sovereignty over creation, unveiling of the holy will (God's finger wrote the Torah on the rock tablets, Exod 31:18). This is Hebrew tapestry at its finest.

Summary

Let's review these circles of synonymy.

Ruach is a word rich in meanings, not merely meaning. As it is used in the Hebrew Bible, it can denote the inner life or mind: that is, the thoughts, intents, purposes of humans and of God. *Ruach* also denotes the character or nature of those purposes. People can be filled with an unclean *ruach* of disobedience and idolatry. Or they can be filled at any moment with God's holy *ruach*—holy because it is his own.

Ruach—as breath—comes from the mouth. It forms words, which express the mind, will, or character. God's *panim* or Face is never a ghostlike presence. It is always the communicating, discerning Nearness of the Lord; a nearness that brings life, and whose absence produces exile and leads to death.

Thirdly, **ruach** is like the hand of God. It signifies power. But it also conveys *meaning-filled* experiences of power. The *Ruach-Hand* of God denotes inspiration and revelation of divine purposes. It accomplishes his will by exercising judgment or by showing grace.

These three circles of meaning are insightful for reading the NT.

- For example, let's go back to Paul's Septuagint quotation of Isaiah 40:13 and assume the word "mind" is one synonym for "spirit." Then let's open

Romans 8 and insert “Mind”—with a capital M, in the sense of God’s holy Mind—in place of “Spirit,” and see what dimensions it adds to Paul’s message.

- Or elsewhere Paul speaks of being “one spirit” with the Lord (1 Cor 6:17), or “one spirit” with fellow believers (Phil 1:27; cf. 2:2, 5, 20). In light of our **Ruach** study, could we rightly suppose that Paul is referring to sharing the mind, character, or nature of God or of Messiah?³
- Or, lastly, consider a rather basic question of New Testament faith: Why is Yeshua called “Messiah”—the Anointed One, the *Mashiach*? With what did God anoint him? Did he pour upon Yeshua the third member of the Godhead? Or did he pour his *mind-heart-nature* on him so that the Son is just like his Father?⁴

The Hebrew Scriptures were the Bible of Yeshua and the apostles. This fact opens wellsprings when fully explored while interpreting the New Testament.

■ [Paul Sumner](#)

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³ Compare these “Hebraic” passages: **Gal 4:6** —“God sent forth the **ruach** of His Son into our hearts.” **1 Cor 12:13** — “In one **ruach** we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks . . . and one **ruach** we were all given to drink.” **Eph 1:18** —“through the Anointed One we both [Jews and Greeks] have our access in one **ruach** to the Father.” **Eph 4:4** — “There is one body and one **ruach**.”

⁴ Consider the evidence of how English Bible translations have mislead readers regarding the Holy Spirit:: [From Holy Spirit to Holy Ghost \(Evolution in the Godhead or Theological Bias?\)](#)