

The Holy Spirit

The Elusiveness of the Spirit

George Hendry wrote, "The true doctrine of the Holy Spirit will always be one that recognizes the inherent subtlety and complexity of the subject and is most conscious of its inadequacy to grasp the mystery after which it gropes."

By "mystery" Hendry means two things. First, he means that God is not openly available to be examined like a beetle in a bottle. What we know of Him, He has revealed, and what He has not revealed remains hidden. Secondly, he means that because God is infinite and we are finite, He can never be fully understood. Finitude is a "problem" that cannot be avoided any more than it can be overcome.

So God remains a mystery in two ways: (1) He cannot be observed or analyzed beyond what He has revealed about Himself; and (2) understanding what He has revealed is limited by our inability to comprehend the transcendent.

This picture of a "hidden God" does not change in the New Testament. Though God was in Christ (II Corinthians 5:19), and through Him we see the power and glory of God (John 1:14, 18), the Scriptures also say that "He had no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him" (Isaiah 53:2). Philippians 2:7 says that the Son took the form of a bond-servant and was made in the likeness of men. When Philip said to Jesus "Show us the Father" Jesus replied "'Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father. . . "(John 14:9). Two observations must be made: Jesus claimed to be the full, accurate, and complete revelation of God to man (cf. Hebrews 1:1-3). At the same time, His divinity still remained a mystery to Philip even after he had been with Jesus for so many years. God can be known, yet He is incomprehensible. He is "seen," yet He is hidden.

- Thus, "Theology distinguishes between a comprehensive (exhaustive) knowledge of God, which we cannot have, and an apprehensive knowledge, which is the limited, finite, creaturely knowledge that we can have. Apprehensive knowledge admits to degrees, so we can know God, more or less, in this human framework." (R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: Vol. 1*, p. 41-2)
- "To say that God is incomprehensible is to say that our knowledge is never equivalent to God's own knowledge, that we never know Him precisely as He knows Himself." God knows as the Creator, and we know as creatures." (Frame, John, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publ. Co., 1987) p. 21.)
- "It is necessary for salvation that God is knowable; it is necessary that God is incomprehensible, or He would not be God. If we could define God, search Him out to exhaustive perfection, say everything about Him that could be said, God would not be God. God would be no greater than

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we are, and we would be equal to Him. But God must be, and is, infinitely greater than the creature.” (Kuiper, The Knowability of God)

IN SUM:

The mystery of God stems from the transcendence of God. No matter how much God reveals Himself, there will always be a hiddenness about Him.

This mystery is especially apparent in the study of the Holy Spirit. In John 3:3-8, Jesus compared the Holy Spirit to the wind. No one knows where the wind comes from and they can't see where it is going. So it is with the Spirit – the movements of the Spirit are a mystery. They cannot be anticipated or predicted.

From this we can make a number of applications:

1. We realize that humility is the appropriate attitude in studying God.
2. We must accept that some of the questions we may have about the Holy Spirit cannot be answered. We should temper our inquisitive minds with the reality of the mystery of God.
3. Lastly, it makes us remember that God is God and we are not.

The Meaning of Ruach (רוּחַ) in the Old Testament

A great difficulty we face when we study the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is found in the ambiguity of the Hebrew and Greek languages themselves. In Hebrew, the word for “spirit” is ruach (רוּחַ). In Greek it is pneuma (πνεῦμα). In both Hebrew and Greek the word can mean “breath” or “wind” as well. In addition, it can refer to a “spirit” other than the Holy Spirit. It is used of the human spirit, demonic or angelic spirits, and God's Spirit. With the poetic nature of Hebrew, and the lack of clarity of some texts, it can be quite a challenge to determine what the reference in the text is.

For example, in John 3:5 it says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." The NAS version interprets pneuma (πνεῦμα) as the Holy Spirit as indicated by the capital "S." But not all agree. A stronger argument can be made that pneuma (πνεῦμα) is not the Holy Spirit but the principle of life which comes from God. It is the impartation of God's nature as spirit that signals a new birth. The total phrase is the same as the “new heart” in Ezekiel 36 which also signifies inner renewal.

This type of problem could be multiplied many times over.

A brief word on grammatical gender:

In Hebrew, the word for “spirit” is feminine which has led some (particularly feminists and cults) to claim that the Holy Spirit is the “feminine” part of God.

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Such claims, however, are based on the ignorance of language.

Words appear in “genders” in most other languages. “Gender” in languages is merely a grammatical marker that normally requires some sort of grammatical agreement in the sentence. When we speak of grammatical “gender” we are not necessarily speaking about the sex of something. For example, in Greek, ἀλήθεια (“truth”) is feminine and θάνατος (“death”) is masculine. But native speakers did not therefore conclude that “truth” was literally female or “death” male. The grammatical forms were merely the convention of language.

Unlike Greek which has three “genders” – masculine, feminine, and neuter - Hebrew has only two, masculine and feminine. Grammatically speaking, therefore, everything in Hebrew is either a "he" or a "she." Generally nouns referring to instruments, such as tools, body members, weapons, natural forces, names of countries and towns and titles are feminine in Hebrew. Therefore, the fact that ruach (רוּחַ) is feminine has nothing to do with the actual “gender” of God.

Is God male?

God is primarily viewed patriarchally in the Bible. Scripture uses masculine titles for God, such as Father and Son, masculine pronouns, such as “He,” and many other masculine concepts. But there are also feminine images used of God. For example, He is said to give birth to a people (Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 49:14–15; 66:13) and to be a midwife (Isaiah 66:9). His judgment of Israel is likened to that of a mother bear robbed of her cubs (Hosea 13:8).

All such images are not intended to imply that God is a sexual being (male or female), but are anthropomorphisms or personifications that reveal God to us in ways we can understand. Significantly, however, feminine terms are never used when God is worshipped (Cole, *He Who gives Life*, 81). “Not once in the Bible is God addressed as mother, said to be mother, or referred to with feminine pronouns (Scobie, *Ways of Our God*, 119).

“A similar story pertains to the New Testament presentation. Jesus likens God to a woman searching for a coin and Himself to a hen wanting to gather her chicks when they are in danger (cf. Luke 15:8-10 and 13:31-35). But He teaches disciples to pray “Our Father” and prays himself to God as “Father” (cf. Matt. 6:9 and John 17:1)” (Cole, *He Who gives Life*, 81-82).

We see from this that there is a problem that exists when we talk about God. We discover that when God reveals Himself to man He does so in language that stoops to our level so that our minds have something to compare God to, but God does not perfectly fit within the confines of language and imagery understandable to us. Therefore, when we refer to God as “father,” “wise,” or “loving”, we need to realize that these terms are *not* being used of God in exactly the same way that they are used of people. Rather, they are being used analogically. That is, they involve an analogy. The difficulty is in determining how far the ordinary meaning of a word applies to God.

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Mitchell says,

“The answer would seem to be that a word should presume to carry with it as many as the original entailments as the new context allows, and this is determined by their compatibility with other descriptions which there is reason to believe also apply to God. That God is incorporeal [without a body] dictates that “father” does not mean “physical progenitor,” but the word continues to bear the connotation of tender protective care” (Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, 19).

Since language about God is analogical, feminine imagery may also be used of God without any intention of expressing actual gender. However, it needs to be stressed that this does not mean that all feminine imagery is acceptable. For example, to speak of the Holy Spirit’s motherly role in the “new birth” has good biblical grounding in John 3, but to address the Holy Spirit as “Our Mother” or “she,” steps beyond the bounds of the biblical analogy. This is where Scripture becomes the guide in helping us know what is appropriate and what is not.

IN SUM:

The feminine word ruach (רוּחַ) has nothing to do with the actual gender of the Holy Spirit any more than it would suggest that “wind” is a female (remember it can mean either). Likewise, the Greek “pneuma” (πνεῦμα) does nothing to prove that the Holy Spirit is “neuter “. Rather, God used the vocabulary that was in the Hebrew and Greek languages to reveal Himself to Hebrews and Greeks. Words, such as ruach (רוּחַ) already had meaning before they were used as a medium for God’s self-disclosure and the specialized use of terms did not immediately displace the larger semantic range of the terms employed. In other words we learn what is meant by the words “Holy Spirit” as we observe how they are used in Scripture.