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Have you ever felt sorry for Nicodemus? He ventured out in the dark to talk with Jesus, in the hope that the man he called ‘Rabbi’ could answer a few pressing religious questions. He found Jesus, who guessed the perplexed man’s questions before they were asked and then left him more confused than ever. We can imagine Nicodemus trudging home, shaking his head, muttering to himself: “Re-born? Born of the Spirit? And what’s the wind got to do with it?”

Do you feel sorry for him? Well, we shouldn’t. For the full story, we need to begin reading at John 2:23, rather than chapter 3. Jesus doesn’t entrust himself to Nicodemus or anyone else who had believed in him because of his miraculous signs. Nicodemus was a member of the council of Israel, a teacher of God’s people, who was attracted to Jesus because of the miracles. As a ruler of Israel, he should have known about spirit birth. The knowledge he needed to understand Jesus’ comments was written in the Hebrew Scriptures. Nicodemus did not understand his Old Testament, so he was left in the dark.

This article is for modern-day Nicodemuses.

Spiritual Hopes

When people are discussing the Holy Spirit today, the actions and characteristics of the Spirit as expressed in the Old Testament are regularly neglected. A newcomer to Christianity could be excused for assuming that the Holy Spirit did not come into existence until Pentecost. Those who have read the Scriptures will know that God’s Spirit has been active since creation. But how have we come to this realization? How does the Old Testament prepare our minds to understand the Holy Spirit in the New Testament?

The Old Testament is in many ways a book of hopes and expectations. These hopes arise because God has made promises – the promise of redemption, of a Messiah who will rescue the nation, of a time of peace and prosperity, of a Sabbath that will last forever. Permeating these hopes is an expectation of the coming of God’s Spirit, who will bring God’s promises to fulfilment. We can see this expectation of the Spirit in some of the key passages which describe the hopes of Israel.

The Spirit King (Isaiah 11)

This passage inspired a line in All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name which has confused hymn-singers for generations. The “stem of Jesse’s rod” is a description of Israel’s ruler in King David’s line, who will come to judge the world with justice and righteousness. He will overturn the worldly order so that the poor will be championed and the weak and the powerful will peacefully co-exist: “The wolf will live with the lamb” (Isa 11:6). His kingly character will be the work of the Spirit of the LORD who will rest upon him:

the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD

(Isaiah 11:2)

Israel longs for a king who is empowered by the Spirit of God and will therefore rule like God

rules.

The Spirit Servant (Isaiah 42-53)

These chapters, a series of songs about the 'servant of the LORD', contain many of the prophecies and images which readers of the New Testament see fulfilled in Jesus. The famous 'suffering servant' prediction begins in Isaiah 42:1, where the prophet declares that this servant will be anointed with the Spirit of the LORD and faithfully establish justice on earth:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

Like the Spirit king, the servant of the LORD will bring justice to the nations. Like that king, he comes under the power and influence of the Spirit of God. But, unlike the king, his ministry requires suffering, personal rejection and sorrow.

The Spirit Prophet (Isaiah 61)

A third figure is prophesied, one who proclaims the coming year of God's mercy and favour. A prophet is coming who heralds good news for the poor, healing for those with broken hearts and release for those imprisoned in darkness. A time is coming when God will fill his people with everlasting joy, making them all priests of the LORD. Continuing our theme, the prophet is equipped to bring this great message by the Spirit of the Sovereign LORD (Isa 61:1). This prophet could also be called an 'evangelist' – he is anointed by God's spirit for the task of bringing good news.

These three characters embody the hopes of Israel – her longing for a king with the wisdom and power to bring justice to his nation, a prophet with good news, and a servant who would suffer for the sake of the people. Each of these figures comes with a special endowment of God's Spirit.

In the New Testament, we see the fulfilment of these hopes. Christians realize that all three promised characters exist in the one person – Jesus, the servant king who proclaims (or prophesies) the kingdom of God. But in the Old Testament there are other expectations of the coming of God's Spirit which we have not yet mentioned.

The Spirit People

Throughout his dealings with Israel, God continues to promise that a time will come when his people will be enriched and renewed with the Spirit of God.

In Deuteronomy 5:29, Moses informs Israel of God's deep desire that people have hearts that are obedient and respectful towards him and spirits that are after God's own heart. In another passage, Moses expresses his wish that God would make prophets of all people by putting his Spirit on them (Num 11:29).

God promises to satisfy these desires in Jeremiah 24:7:

I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.

God will recreate a people who are thoroughly committed to him since they will have "a heart to know him", a heart in which his Spirit dwells. Joel focuses more sharply upon this regeneration of

God's people. In the midst of declaring horrendous judgement and calling for repentance, God promises to pour out his Spirit with unprecedented generosity:

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

(Joel 2:28, 29)

In this new age, everyone will exhibit the characteristics of being Spirit-filled: speaking God's words, hearing God's voice. Even servants – further, female servants – will share this special spiritual relationship with the LORD which belongs to a prophet. The church of God will be filled with people who are not socially distinguished from each other, but are distinguishable as a group by their experience of the pouring out of God's Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:13).

The pouring out of the Spirit can be understood as a sign of the agreement, or covenant, between God and his people. God has always been a rescuer. He delivered Israel from Egypt, as recorded in Exodus. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God promises to again rescue the nation, this time from Babylonian captivity. When God led Israel out of Egypt, he wrote a covenant on stone tablets; this time, the covenant will be written within those who are saved, a spiritual agreement written upon individual hearts:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

(Ezekiel 36:26)

God promises that a time is coming when people will be inwardly transformed so that, by nature, they will seek to obey God. Even more astonishing is the famous prophecy which follows this promise. In chapter 37, God presents Ezekiel with a bizarre vision of a valley filled with bones. The prophet is commanded to preach to these dry bones, declaring that God will breathe life into them. As Ezekiel faithfully carries out God's somewhat unusual command, the bones grow tendons and flesh. These new bodies are filled with breath and rise to become a mighty army. God breathes life into the dead.

Technical medical arguments aside, we normally call someone who is breathing, 'alive' and someone who is not, 'dead'. The Old Testament understands that the concepts of breath and life are very closely related. Living people breathe and dead people don't. The English translations 'breath' and 'spirit' come from the same Hebrew word. The Ezekiel 37 army is brought to life by God's breath, that is, his spirit. Raised to new life, they breathe the breath of God! The dry bones prophecy demonstrates strikingly that God keeps his promise to rescue a nation through the pouring out of his Spirit into human hearts.

The new age will be blessed with a righteous king, a prophet of good news and a sacrificial servant, and it will also see a Spirit people, all inspired by God, given new hearts, washed clean, forgiven, moved by God to obey him and to walk in his ways – a people who are spiritual.

When?

These are the expectations that first century, Scripture-reading Jews should have had. They could anticipate that the law of God would one day be inscribed upon their very being so that they would be inclined to do God's will without finding his commandments burdensome. They could expect to each enter the special spiritual relationship with God which only prophets had experienced. Furthermore, they could even know when this spiritual gift would be bestowed: a wise and powerful king would be ruling with righteousness, a prophet would be declaring the good news of release for those who are captive in darkness, and a servant would be laying down his life for his people. During this great age, the Spirit of God would be given to the people of God.

Are we claiming for ourselves the fulfilment of these prophecies? Do we live in that great spiritual age? Do we recognize the signs of the times? Or are we still Nicodemuses? The Jewish teacher should have been looking for the Spirit to come. He should have expected God to inspire a man. But Nicodemus' expectations were still limited within the covenant of stone. He should have been looking for the Spirit to be poured out upon God's people. He would then have understood what Jesus meant by saying, "You must be born of the Spirit".

Enter the Spiritual Man

One man who did understand his charter of spiritual history was the last and greatest Bible prophet John the Baptist (see Matt 11:11). As the crowds came to him to receive a baptism and to enquire what they should do to repent, John told them of the 'Spirit-baptizer' (Matt 3:11). Unlike John, or any prophet before him, Jesus would pour out upon people the Spirit of God. Every gospel reports John's introduction to Jesus, the Spirit-baptizer, because it is such a significant claim. Jesus would do what had never been done – he would install the Spirit of God in human flesh, raising up mortals to be spiritual, sinners to be prophets of God. He had the authority to do this, because he was the Spirit-filled servant, prophet and king whom the Old Testament had promised.

Further reading: <http://phillipjensen.com/articles/the-spirit-filled-man/>

Adapted by Greg Clarke from an address by Phillip Jensen.