

The *Ruah* of Eloim: A Prolegomenon to a Salesian Theology of the Word¹

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Nature and the Elements

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) had a great love for nature and creation. He saw creation essentially as a manifestation of the wonder, power and love of God.² Anyone who has ever visited Annecy with its lake and majestic mountains can readily understand the reason. It is one of the most beautiful places on the European continent.

With such magnificent scenery, one can easily appreciate why the people of Annecy would feel very close to nature. They are especially conscious of the wind. The north wind is so well-known that it has a special name. Many of the people living in Annecy speak of their illnesses and discomfort as being caused by *la bise*, the north wind. In the south, it is the sirocco or *le vent du midi* which blows constantly, especially in the summer. Anyone who has been at the Avignon summer festival can readily attest to this.

The Holy Spirit and the Elements

Like St. Francis de Sales, the people of biblical times were very close to nature and to the elements. They attributed the awesome power in nature, especially of the elements – wind, fire, water and storms – to be the direct actions and interventions of God. If we view nature the way the people of the Old Testament did, then we might get a less elusive understanding of God, of the Holy Spirit, and of a theology of the Word. For most of us, it is very difficult to get a handle on anything concrete when we speak of the Holy Spirit since the word ‘spirit’ in our language generally connotes something very ethereal and elusive.

¹ This brief study assumes the legitimacy of constructing a theology of the Word and eschews a discussion of the problems associated with the very possibility of a theology of the Word as noted by E. La B. Cherbonnier, “The Theology of the Word of God,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Jan. 1953):16-30.
² “The world, made by the word of God, feels its effects in all of its aspects. All of its parts sing the praises of its Maker,” *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, édition complète, 27 vols. (Annecy: J. Niérat et al., 1892-1964), 12:307. Hereafter OEA. “Creation says something about the Word itself. It is its expression....This Word having taken on the most concrete meaning possible – must be considered as the spoken word (*parole*) of the Word, the work always speaking of the worker and the work of art of the artist,” Michel Tournade, *La nature dans l’oeuvre de François de Sales*, thèse de doctorat d’État en littérature française, sous la direction de Jacques Hennequin, Université de Metz, 1987, p. 787. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated. See also G. Letonnellier, “L’Histoire naturelle dans l’oeuvre de S. François de Sales,” *Revue littéraire Savoisienne*, Numéro Spécial, (1951):63-68. G. Letonnellier, “Le génie littéraire de S. François de Sales et la part de la nature dans son oeuvre,” *L’Écho de la Savoie*, xxxv, 139-140 (nouv. série) (1954):1-7. Henri Lemaire, *Les Images Chez St. François de Sales* (Paris, A. G. Nizet, 1962). Cecilian Streebing, *Devout humanism as a Style: St. François de Sales’ Introduction to a Devout Life* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1954).

Although the Ancient Israelites had no concept of the Spirit as a separate person, how they conceived of God and his Spirit can help us get a better grasp of the nature and activity of the Holy Spirit.

Primitive man viewed natural phenomena as manifestations of God so much so that for pagan religions nature was deified. “Nature itself was understood to be under the control of both gods and demons. Thus, no genuine separation existed between the natural world and activities of the divine.”³ The sun, the moon and the stars were gods in their eyes. Although the Ancient Israelites rejected this deification, for them there were no secondary causes in nature. Everything in nature was viewed as directly caused by God and was a manifestation of God and his power. For example, they envisioned thunder as the voice of God and the wind as “the breath of the nostrils of Yahweh.” (Ps 104:7). It is the wind or the breath of Yahweh that parts the waters of the Red Sea: “At the breath of your anger, the waters piled up, the flowing waters stood like a mound... When your wind blew, the sea covered them.” (Ex 15:6). The same idea is contained in Ps. 17:

Then the bed of the sea appeared,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare,
at the rebuke of the Lord,
at the blast of the wind of his wrath.

The wind for the Hebrews came directly from God. In all ancient accounts of the Exodus events and the desert, the wind is produced immediately by God:

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and
the Lord swept the sea with a strong east wind throughout
the night and so turned it into dry land. (Ex 14:21).

For the prophets, the wind was the instrument of God’s justice. “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased. Upon him I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations” (Is 42:1; Lk 4:). It is described as a wind for the desert to dry up the harvest of Palestine. The wind is actually the great symbol of the sovereign power of God which laughs at human pretenses charged with the mission of chastising sinners:

When we breathe upon them [the princes of the earth]
they wither, and the storm wind carries them away
like straw. (Is 40:23-24).

³ Kimberly B. Stratton, “Magic, Magicians in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 3:767, as cited by Paul Watson, “The Spirit and the ‘Spirits’ in the Old Testament, *Leaven*, vol.22, Iss.3 (2014): 146.

The expression, the “four winds,” represents the outer limits, the extremities of the world, the confines of the world in which the whole divine power is unleashed. The wind was viewed as a divine force. It symbolizes this not only because of its enormous strength (tornadoes, hurricanes, cyclones) and its ability to overcome all resistance, but also because it has lightness and docility and is from on high, from heaven.

It is the wind that makes the word of God effective. In Ps 148:7-8, we read: “Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all depths, fire, hail, snow, and mist, storm winds that fulfill his word.” It is the wind that reaches to the end of the earth to see that God’s word is carried out, to impose his word. It is through the agency of the wind that God governs nature:

He scatters his hail like crumbs
before his cold the waters freeze.
He sends his word and melts them;
he lets his breeze blow and the waters flow. (Ps. 147:17-18)

In the last verse, the word and the wind have the same mission.

The Mission of the *Ruah* (Wind) of Eloim⁴

It is interesting to note that the wind is not part of the work of the six days of creation. It comes from God and plays a very active role. One may paraphrase St. John’s gospel that “In the beginning was the wind” or the “Spirit” (*ruah* of *Eloim*). The wind is closely linked to the role of the word. In a sense, it is the breath that carries the Word, which in turn gives meaning to the breath. The mission of God’s breath or spirit then is to bring these words to the world. This is clearly stated in Ps 33:6:

By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made
by the breath of his mouth all their hosts.

We cannot receive his word without, at the same time, receiving his breath, his Spirit.

The wind, the breath of the Lord, is the privileged instrument of divine power. Because of its mobile and dynamic power, it is disposed for the mission of bringing life. In Ps 104, we see that the *ruah* of the Lord has a twofold mission. 1) to be the courier and bearer of the Lord – “You travel on the wings of the wind; you make the winds your messengers and

⁴ “Every creature, including humans, breathe in only because Yahweh’s Spirit (*ruah*) has been breathed out into them as the Spirit of life (Gen 6:3; Isa 42:5; Job 27:3; 33:4; 34:14-15; EcclII2:7). In this sense, the most common OT designation for “spirit” is *ruah*. Although its semantic range covers breath, wind, direction, spirit, and mind, with almost 400 occurrences in the OT that are broadly distributed, *ruah*. carries important theological weight,” Craig Bowman, “The Spirit of God in the Ministry of the Old Testament Prophets,” *Leaven*, vol. 12 (2004), iss.3, article 3. See also Harry M. Orlinsky, “The Plain Meaning of *Ruah* in Gen. 1.2,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 48, no. 2 (Oct, 1957:174-182. Sabatino Moscati, “The Wind in Biblical and Phoenician Cosmogony,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 66, no. 3 (Sep.1947):305-310.

flaming fire of your ministers.” (Ps. 104:3-4), it becomes the spirit of life which animates every living thing:

If you take away their breath, they perish
return to their desert.
When you sent forth your spirit, they are
created and you renew the face of the earth. (Ps104:29-30)

Throughout the Old Testament, the wind remains a creature apart; it remains the instrument of the power and mystery of God.

In view of what we have noted above, the Pentecostal manifestation becomes all the more understandable. A violent wind accompanied by tongues of fire sweeps through the house where the apostles and the other disciples were gathered. (see Acts, 2:2-4). In the Old Testament, fire from heaven and wind were the messengers and the bearers of the Lord. Interestingly, it is not the most spiritual passages but the most primitive pages, the naïve and popular aspect or vision of Ezekiel (37:1-4) which gives the Spirit of Yahweh personal characteristics.

Francis de Sales and the Holy Spirit

The primitive, poetical and naïve concept of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament had a particular impact and influence on the ways in which Francis de Sales pictures the Holy Spirit. He seems to have found the “unknown God” more accessible, more knowable in some ways through the pages of the Old Testament interpreted in the light of the New Testament.

He conceives of the Holy Spirit primarily as the breath of God and the sigh (*soupir*) of love that emanates from the Father and the Son:

For the divine love of the eternal Father toward the Son is expressed in one sole sigh (*soupir*), uttered reciprocally by the Father and the Son....The Father breathes (*souspire*) this love and the Son breathes (*souspire*) it also....Yet this sigh of love (*soupir amoureux*) is only one sigh (*soupir*), or one sole spirit uttered by two who sigh or breathe (*souspirants*)....In as much as this love is produced by way of sighs (*souspirs*) or inspirations, it is called the Holy Spirit.⁵

What is notable here is the saint’s use of the word *souspire* to sigh or to breathe rather than the verb *respirer* to express the most ineffable love affair, the inexhaustible source of all authentic love. Various English translations of this chapter in the *Treatise on the Love of God* do not capture the intensity and uniqueness of this love relationship by translating *souspirs* as spirations, a rather abstract and technical theological term.⁶ Even a very recent

⁵ OEA, 4:206-207.

⁶ See *St. Francis de Sales Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. with and intro. by Rev. Henry B. Mackey, OSB (Westminster, MD.: Newman Book Store, 1942), 159, 160; *Saint Francis de Sales Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. and ed. by Anthony Mookenthottam, et al. (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2012), 183; *Treatise on*

French translation of the *Treatise* uses the French word “*spiration*” instead of *soupir*, sigh.⁷ It is particularly in this passage that we note the “affective style” which so characterizes his writings and which he recommended to a theologian of the Sorbonne who sought his opinion on his *summa theologica*.⁸ Given De Sales’s training in the Latin language, while reflecting on the nature of the Holy Spirit, he no doubt was considering the multiple meanings of the Latin word *spiritus* as spirit, breath and wind.⁹ Having studied Hebrew with the noted hebraist Gilbert G n brard (1535-1597),¹⁰ he also understood the three similar meanings of the Hebrew word *ruah*.

The elements of wind, fire, thunder and rain as seen by Sacred Scripture are related to God’s Spirit, especially at Pentecost:

Before it rains, it thunders and is windy. And so today [Pentecost] it thunders and is windy to show that [God] wants to rain down upon us a shower of the consolations of the Holy Spirit, as it is written: “His Spirit will blow and the waters will flow.” [Ps. 147:18].¹¹

It is well-known the great admiration that De Sales had for the *Canticle of Canticles* and how it shaped his conception of God and aided him in developing his ideas on love.¹² There is one verse (4:16) in this great love poem that speaks of the north wind and the south wind. As I mentioned above, the north wind (*la bise*) was viewed as something harmful. It is a dry, destructive kind of wind. The north wind contrasts sharply with the wind from the

the Love of God, St. Francis de Sales (Stella Niagara, NY.: De Sales Resource Center, 2007),195 (originally published by Doubleday in 1963).

⁷ *Saint Fran ois de Sales Trait  de l’amour de Dieu mise en fran ais contemporain* par Didier-Marie Proton (Paris: Du Cerf, 2011),272,273.

⁸ See OEA,15:118-20,

⁹ See Albert Delplanque, *Saint Fran ois de Sales, Humaniste et Ecrivain Latin* (Lille: B. Berg s, 1907), <http://gallica2.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k66501c.image.r=Francois+de++Sales.f2.langEN>.

¹⁰ See E.J. Lajeunie, *Saint Francis de Sales: The Man, The Thinker, His Influence*, trans. R. O’Sullivan, OSFS, 2 vols (Bangalore: SFS Publications, 1986), I: 62-63.

¹¹ OEA,7:8. If we look closely at the Latin versions of this Psalm verse (147:18) and its various English translations, we see the interplay of the Latin word *spiritus* with the notion of wind or breath. In this sermon, De Sales quotes the Clementine version of the Vulgate: “*Flabit spiritus ejus et fluent aquae* which the editors translate: “*Son esprit soufflera et les eaux couleront*.” Obviously, here he wants to emphasize the action of the Holy Spirit, and my translation reflects this. The Douay-Rheims and King James version have: “His wind shall blow, and waters shall run (*spirabit spiritu suo et fluent aquae*). The word “*spirabit*” is the future of the verb *spirare* which means also to breathe. So the phrase “*spirabit spiritu suo*” could also be translated “he breathed forth his spirit.” *The New American Bible revised edition* has: “He raises his winds and the waters flow.”

¹² See Andr . BRIX, *Fran ois de Sales commente le Cantique des Cantiques* (Crapponne, France: n.p., 1985). Also Thomas Dailey, “A Song of Prayer: Reading the Canticle of Canticles with St. Francis de Sales,” *Studia Mystica*, 15/4 (1992):65-82, <http://web1.desales.edu/assets/salesian/PDF/DaileyStudiaMystica.pdf>. (This paper was originally presented in the Salesian Studies section of the Fifteenth International Conference on Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Studies, held at Villanova University in September of 1990).

south which De Sales likes to equate to the Holy Spirit. In a letter to St. Jane de Chantal, he paraphrases this one verse of the *Canticles*:

Away with you north wind (*vent de bise*) and come O south wind and blow in my garden, and the perfumes will come forth in abundance. O my dear daughter, how I desire this gracious wind which brings the south wind of divine love, this Holy Spirit who gives us the grace to aspire to him and breathe for him.¹³

This idea appears several times in his writings.¹⁴

The wind also signified for De Sales the voice of God. Commenting in his first sermon on the manifestation of the Spirit at Pentecost, he observes that God made himself heard by the voice of a great wind that encouraged and comforted the hearts of the apostles.¹⁵ In a very characteristic fashion, he advises us not to look for God so much in the loud and violent wind, but in the gentle breeze, reminding us that he is also present there: “God wants to talk to us among the thorns and bushes as he did to Moses, and he speaks to us as he did to Elijah.”¹⁶

Pentecost helped the saint understand the relationship between the wind, fire and thunder: “But on our own, we could give birth to these things only after this fire, this wind, this thunder, only after the promulgation of this Good News began”¹⁷ It must be remembered that for him the Holy Spirit is the hot breath of love which has come to cast fire on earth in all hearts. In his first sermon written for the feast of Pentecost, he contrasts the waters of chaos fructified by the Holy Spirit at creation with the tongues of fire fructified by this same Spirit: “It should not be surprising then if the Holy Spirit, after having made fertile the waters for the creation of the world, wanted to make this fire fertile to restore the world.”¹⁸

In a very penetrating commentary in another sermon on the feast of Pentecost, the saint enlarges upon the significance of the breath of love appearing as tongues of fire:

The Holy Spirit very fittingly was sent under the form and symbol of tongues and of tongues of fire because all the Church’s power is in her tongue. Everyone knows that she works all of her mysteries by means of the tongue. In holy baptism...it is necessary that the tongue intervene to give water the power to wash away our sins and iniquities. Likewise the holy sacrifice of the Mass can only be celebrated by the ministry of the tongue.¹⁹

Here we certainly have the basic principles of a theology of the word and of the Spirit.

¹³ OEA, 15:61-62; see also 26:28 and 12:138.

¹⁴ See OEA, 26:28; 3:328; 12:138.

¹⁵ See OEA, 7:16-17.

¹⁶ OEA, 14:121.

¹⁷ OEA, 7:19.

¹⁸ OEA, 7:15.

¹⁹ 9:318.

Conclusion

For all its power and awesomeness, the *ruah* of Elohim, the breath, the wind of the Lord is essentially the creative, unifying power of love. The Spirit of the Lord that hovers over the chaos of creation brings order, goodness, peace and harmony within our own souls and then in our relations with others:

God is neither in the strong wind, nor in agitation, nor in these fires, but in the mild and tranquil wind that is almost imperceptible.²⁰

The Holy Spirit is love. He is found only in a place of concord. He flees all quarrelling and delights with simple and mild mannered souls. This is why he once appeared in the form of a dove.²¹

The Holy Spirit is the creator of unity. This was the essential point he made in his first sermon on Pentecost: “I exhort you to friendship and to benevolence among yourselves, to peace with all. For if we have charity among us, we would have peace; we would have the Holy Spirit.”²² This is for De Sales the fundamental goal of God’s word. The most striking truth for our saint was the inextricable relationship between God’s spoken word and the breath of God. The Word is breathed by the breath of God. No breath, no spoken word. This means that the word of God always comes with the breath or the sigh of divine love. Every word of God is a word of love – of kind, merciful, forgiving, and yes, even chastening love because it is spoken or uttered by God’s breath, God’s Holy Spirit, whom De Sales speaks of as “Holy Love.”²³

²⁰ OEA, 12:166.

²¹ 7:181.

²² OEA, 7:20.

²³ OEA, 7:5.