

Ruach in Genesis 1:2

Francesco Arduini

 [0000-0002-6592-682X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6592-682X)

Genesis 1:2 is the first occurrence where the Hebrew word *ruach* appears. Almost all the biblical versions translate it with "Spirit".

According to the Masoretic text, the word *ruach* appears 11 times¹ throughout the book of Genesis, with different meanings like "S/spirit, breath, breeze, wind".

The above verse has the unique characteristic of being the only occurrence in the whole Old Testament in which the "spirit" is described in action inside an abiotic context. This verse has too often been theologically translated in anachronistic ways. What is the best choice for translating *ruach* in this specific verse?

It is undeniable that Trinitarian orthodoxy guides the translation of this word suggesting to hypostatize it through the use of capital first letter. Leaving aside the dogma, I suggest focusing our attention on the parallel verses of Isaiah 40:26 and Jeremiah 32:17. These writings have been dated by critical method to the same peri-exilic period.

Examination of texts

Genesis 1:1,2

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the **Spirit** of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (NKJV)

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ
וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתְּהָ תוֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ
אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם
(MT)

Isaiah 40:26

Lift up your eyes on high,
And see who has created these *things*,
Who brings out their host by number;
He calls them all by name,
By the greatness of His **might**
And the strength of His **power**;
Not one is missing (NKJV)

שְׂאוּ-מַרוֹם עֵינֵיכֶם וּרְאוּ מִי-בָרָא אֱלֹהִים
הַמוֹצִיא בַמִּסְפָּר צְבָאָם לְכֹלֵם בְּשֵׁם יְקָרָא מְרַב אֲוִנִים
וְאֹמֵץ כֹּחַ אִישׁ לֹא נִעְדָּר
(MT)

Jeremiah 31:17

'Ah, Lord GOD! Behold,
You have made the heavens and the earth
by Your great **power**
and outstretched **arm**.
There is nothing too hard for You. (NKJV)

אָהָה אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הִנֵּה אַתָּה עֹשֶׂית
אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ בְּכֹחַ הַגָּדוֹל וּבְזְרֹעַ הַנְּטוּיָה
לֹא-יִפְלֵא מִמֶּךָ כֹּל-דָּבָר
(MT)

¹ Gen 1:2; 3:8; 6:3; 6:17; 7:15; 7:22; 8:1; 26:35; 41:8; 41:38; 45:27.

In Isaiah we read the word 'ōn. It is used as synonymous parallelism for the word kōah. Both terms mean "strength" or "power". In the verse of Jeremiah's book, the writer uses the word kōah first, and then he uses another synonymous parallelism, z^{er}ōa', which means "arm" as a rhetorical figure to indicate an "act of force".

If, as it seems, the concepts expressed in all three passages (Gen 1:2; Is 40:26; Jer 32:17) are indicating the same creation event, then we are authorized to identify the ruach hovering over the abiotic waters as the divine power ('ōn, kōah, z^{er}ōa') which acts by dabar in following verses.

There are numerous and renowned commentaries supporting this rendering. For example, the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* states:

in Gen 1,2 the ruach exists before creation (as an element of chaos or, more likely, as a creative force of God)².

According to *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, in Gen 1:2 ruach owns the meaning of "energy of life"³. McKenzie defines ruach like the "Yahweh's creative force"⁴

Psalms 89 is also worthy of note, despite there is no unanimity about its dating. We can read some verses that are parallel to those previously examined:

Creation of heavens and earth	The heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours; The world and all its fullness, You have founded them. The north and the south, You have created them;	לָךְ שָׁמַיִם אֶרֶץ תִּבְלִי וּמְלֵאָה אֶתָּה יְסֻדָּתָם צִפּוֹן וַיְמִין אֶתָּה בְּרֵאתָם
mighty force	You have a mighty arm; Strong is Your hand, and high is Your right hand (NKJV-Ps 89:11,12a,13)	לָךְ זְרוּעַ עִם־גְּבוּרָה תִּעַז יָדְךָ תִּרוֹם יְמִינְךָ (MT-Ps 89:11,12a,13)

Once again, the God's creation is linked to a concept of acting "force/arm" (z^{er}ōa') and "strength/to be strong" ('āzaz).

Conclusion

The doctrine of Trinity has become the standard by which Genesis 1:2 is translated. However, scholars who are trained in historical-critical methods can help us to reveal the original meaning despite any later dogma.

² Botterweck G. J., Ringgren H., Fabry H.J., *Grande Lessico dell'Antico Testamento*, Paideia, Brescia 2006, ad vocem.

³ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford University Press, London 1962, p. 926.

⁴ McKenzie L., *Dizionario Biblico*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi 1990, p 947.

Let apart any “hypostasis prejudice”, I am here to support what, in my opinion, could be a translation of Genesis 1:2 more suitable with the intentions of the writer:

וְהָאָרֶץ
And the earth

הִיְתָה תְהוֹ וְבֵהוּ
was formless and empty

וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם
and there was darkness above the abyss

וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים
and the **energy*** of God

מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם
moved above the waters

*from Greek *ἐνέργεια* that means "activity"

The true meaning and definition of *ruach* in Gen 1:2, which frequently remain relegated in footnotes of few Bibles or inside the pages of some Bible commentaries only, must be moved in the main text in order to make clear the intention of the writer and to avoid any misunderstanding concerning a Christian theology that was imposed only in the 4th century being completely unknown to Old Testament scribes.

Such a choice is corroborated by the parallel passages of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Psalms here examined.

Francesco Arduini
info@francescoarduini.it

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