

IV *The Holy Spirit and Israel*

Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them... they were given rest by the Spirit of the LORD.

(ISAIAH 63:11, 14)

In the previous chapter I referred to this passage from Isaiah 63. We noted the use of the verb to set. This indicates a permanent position. Also under the old dispensation, the bride (Israel in this case) was never to be without the Spirit. Spirit and Bride belong together in close-knit unity.

This passage, however, struggles with the very opposite. The question is asked: where is he? This is undoubtedly a reference to God's abandoning of his permanent dwelling among his people. This would indicate that also the Holy Spirit has removed himself and is no longer among the people of Israel. To use the language that some of the prophets employ: the bride that has become a harlot, no longer has the LORD or the Spirit of the LORD. We may think here especially of the prophet Hosea who was to take an adulterous wife "because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery." (1:2) Israel's apostasy is called adultery, a breaking of the holy covenant of the LORD.

The Holy Spirit in Israel

In Isaiah 63 the Holy Spirit is mentioned three times. In verse 10 we read about the grieving of God's Holy Spirit. The same expression is used in the New Testament, as we will see later. In verse 11 the question is asked, "Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them?" Finally, in verse 13 we read that the Israelites were "given rest by the Spirit of the LORD."

In each of these verses the Holy Spirit is presented as a Person. If we may see in the expression "the angel of his presence" a reference to the pre-

incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, and note that in verse 16 the Father is specifically mentioned, we have here in Isaiah 63 a clear revelation of the work of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit⁴.

Isaiah 63 is important in this respect because in no other chapter in the Old Testament is the relation and cooperation between Father, Son and Holy Spirit so explicitly made clear. The expression *Holy Spirit* is found in the Old Testament only in one other place, Psalm 51:11, "Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me." But from Isaiah we learn that the Holy Spirit was actively present in Israel from the time of their formation as a people throughout their entire history, leading them from bondage, through the Red Sea (verse 12) to the promised land (verse 14).

It would therefore be wrong to conclude that in Israel the emphasis was on the physical and the natural, while in the New Testament this emphasis has become spiritual and celestial. Also from the Old Testament we learn that the Holy Spirit is always present in and among God's people. The Spirit and the bride are together in every dispensation.

The Holy Spirit set among them

Isaiah speaks about the fact that the Holy Spirit was *set* among Israel. Apparently the text can be translated differently to state that the Holy Spirit was given to Israel within Moses. Then the emphasis is not on Israel's receiving of the Holy Spirit, but it lies on Moses' special ordination and qualification as leader of God's people. In this passage the prophet twice mentions Moses by name, and therefore our attention is indeed focused on the work of the Holy Spirit through Moses and other office bearers.

While the emphasis in the Old Testament falls on the presence of the Spirit through chosen office bearers, this does not do away with the fact that all the Israelites were aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit may have manifested himself in certain persons, but by their authority he worked among all Israel.

Isaiah's prophecy does not cover only the time of Moses. In chapter 63 Isaiah speaks of the longing that the Israelites will have in their exile for the time when they lived close to the LORD, when he worked miracles of deliverance, and led them to the promised land where they enjoyed rest and peace. The days of old are all the days from the time of Abraham (verse 16)

⁴ See J. Ridderbos, *Het Godswoord der Profeten*, Tweede Deel, Jesaja, Kok, Kampen, 1932, page 434 and 435.

up to the present exile, and these days are characterized by the dwelling of the Holy Spirit among Israel.

While we do not speak here of an indwelling of the Spirit in each and every Israelite, it is clear that the history of Israel is unthinkable without the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. No one can on his own serve God; the power of the Holy Spirit is needed for faith and obedience. The verb to set has the strong implication of constancy and permanence. Israel is the covenant nation of the LORD in whose midst the Spirit lives and works. The manner of the Spirit's presence may differ from that in the new dispensation, especially in degree and effect, but the reality of his work under the old dispensation is undisputable.

The tabernacle and temple, built under the strict supervision of the Holy Spirit, with their special liturgy were a constant reminder that God lived in Israel's midst in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Herman Bavinck has written that "the doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit is the same in all the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. Although this doctrine is more clearly revealed in the New Testament, it is present in principle in the Old Testament. The same Spirit who spoke by the prophets, testified in Noah's days, was resisted by Israel, and worked faith, would descend upon the Messiah, and lives in the congregation."⁵

The Shepherd of his flock

It is true, as is evident from this passage in Isaiah 63, that the Holy Spirit worked mightily in Israel through specially appointed and anointed office bearers. In the case of various office-bearers, this is specifically mentioned. Moses is mentioned here by Isaiah, and we may think also of the seventy elders upon whom the Holy Spirit rested and they prophesied (Numbers 11:25). It is reported by Moses of Bezalel, who is appointed as the chief designer of the tabernacle, that God has "filled him with the Spirit of God..." (Exodus 35:30).

When Moses is about to die, he asks the LORD to appoint a man who might properly guide Israel, so that they will not be like sheep without a shepherd, and the LORD replies, "Take Joshua, the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit and lay your hand on him (Numbers 27:28)." (Numbers 27:18) In Deuteronomy 34:9 it is reported that "Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands upon

⁵ *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek 2*, Kok, Kampen, 1967 ed., pages 217 and 218).

him.” In both passages most Bible versions translate with spirit, and it is not made clear why the rendering Spirit is not followed. Is there any other spirit meant here than the Holy Spirit?

It is reported of Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Saul, and David, to mention some examples that the Spirit of the LORD came upon them in power. In the case of Saul it is specified, “Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.” (I Sam 16:14). From these accounts we receive the impression that the Holy Spirit did not always remain on these persons with the same power and intensity, but took hold of them from time to time whenever this was needed for their work. Of Samson it is mentioned at least four times that the Spirit came over him with power (Judges 13:25, 14:6, 14:19, and 15:14). Samson’s strength was not physical; it was spiritual.

While the failures and sins of these men are not left unmentioned in Scripture, the mighty works of these men are consistently ascribed to the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit protected Israel in times of danger and peril.

The temporal and restricted working of the Holy Spirit in these imperfect office bearers directs us to the great Shepherd of the flock, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the good Shepherd, the true office bearer. Elsewhere we will take a closer look at the relation between the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus Christ, but it is evident that what was spiritually powerful in the lives of these men from time to time for certain tasks finds its glorious fulfillment in the perfect ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, of whom Isaiah may prophesy, “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me because the LORD has anointed me....” The ministry of the Lord Jesus will never end, as he is “a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” (Psalm 110:4; see also Hebrews 7)

They were given rest

Isaiah mentions the fact that the people of Israel were given rest by the Spirit of the LORD. This occurred through the service of Moses and others, although we note that Moses did not accompany Israel into the promised land where the rest was enjoyed.

What is the meaning of the verb *to give rest*? We find this verb also in Exodus 33:14 where the LORD assures Moses, “My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest.” Rest means here that there is safety from enemies. In the context of Exodus it means that the LORD will accompany his

people and be with them until the time they come to the promised land and receive this land as their inheritance.

In Joshua 11:23 we read, "So Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war." Here the promise of Exodus 33 is fulfilled. The rest is rest from war and is a living in security and peace in the place which the LORD had given them. This rest would be lost in the exile and restored only in the safe return of the remnant of Israel.

I find no rest

The word rest, however, does have further meaning and significance. Just as the word peace (*shalom*) means more than the absence of war, so the word rest also means more than physical security and safety. There is a spiritual dimension to the idea of rest which explains why in this connection the prophet Isaiah specifically mentions the Holy Spirit, "They were given rest by the Spirit of the LORD."

We may think here of what is written in Psalm 22:2, "O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night and am not silent." The RSV has a different translation, "...and by night, *but find no rest.*" The two translations are similar: David continues to cry out and even at night he does not cease to call upon God, because he receives no response which will remove his fear and give him rest.

Is this rest not the inner peace of the soul, the knowledge that the LORD is present and is near? Is it not in this light that we understand David's petition in Psalm 51:11, "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." David knows that this rest is crucial, for he has first prayed, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

The spiritual aspect of rest is indicated also in Jeremiah 6:16, where the LORD says, "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." The true rest is given to the people that live by the Word of God in his covenant of love. They may know that sin is forgiven and that life is secure in the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

It is no wonder that our Lord Jesus Christ, when dealing with the harsh and hard doctrine of the Jewish scribes, quoted from this passage of Jeremiah 6, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and

humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Our Lord himself would have to pay for our rest by his fathomless agony on the cross and his utter loneliness in the darkness of hell.

Where is he?

The question in Isaiah 63 about the presence of God has to do with the Person and character of the Holy Spirit. When God set his Spirit among his people, Israel had to understand that this Spirit is *holy*. The Father and the Spirit cannot live where sin is practiced and condoned. After constant grieving of the Spirit and the people’s stubborn refusal to repent, the Holy Spirit withdraws.

Then, also, God has withdrawn himself. Where is he? Israel discovers that the LORD has left his people in righteous anger. Therefore the land is no longer safe. There is no rest from enemy attacks. The LORD is no longer a refuge for his people, where they can safely hide.

If the demand, “Be holy because I am holy,” which underscores the spiritual nature of Israel’s relationship with God, is not met, the LORD departs and in the process also his Holy Spirit is removed from the midst of Israel. Recognizing the holiness of God, evident in the presence of the Holy Spirit, is of fundamental significance in Israel’s service of the LORD (Lev 19:1; I Pet 2:13).

When the Spirit withdraws, prophecy ceases and uncertainty sets in. The people become more and more victimized by false prophecy. Humanism replaces true spirituality.

The fact that the Holy Spirit does withdraw from God’s disobedient people who refuse to repent, is a warning to the church of all ages. The working of the Holy Spirit under the Old Testament in Israel may have been more corporate and less personal than in the New Testament, but the bottom line is the same. Where there is no Spirit, there is no rest.

The word rest comes close to the word peace in Isaiah 48:22, “‘There is no peace’, says the LORD, ‘for the wicked.’” The same expression is found in Isaiah 57:2, preceded by these words, “But the wicked are like the tossing of the sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud.” (Isaiah 57:20).

The Spirit and the Remnant

The active presence and the governing power of the Holy Spirit are decisive for the being and well-being of God's people in both the old and new dispensation. The Spirit is never separated from the Bride, except when God himself departs from his people. Even in this extreme measure the LORD still seeks and preserves a remnant to whom he gives his Holy Spirit. "Once more a remnant from the house of Judah will take root below and bear fruit above. For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors." (2 Kings 19:30, 31)

The notion of a remnant in the Old Testament is significant because it is messianic. God will preserve a remnant, not because the people are worthy, but for the sake of his name and covenant, so that out of this remnant the Messiah may come forth. God's work of redemption in Christ must come to its fulfillment

When Isaiah may prophesy of this remnant, about the shoot from the stump of Jesse and the Branch that will bear fruit, the work of the Holy Spirit is specifically mentioned, "The Spirit of the LORD 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 – and he will delight in the fear of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:2, 3). The Bridegroom who seeks the Bride shall do so in the love of the Father and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the formation and the reformation of Israel, the Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son.

The valley of dry bones

The element of spiritual restoration comes very clearly and strongly to the fore in the well-known prophecy concerning the vision about the valley of dry bones, recorded in Ezekiel 37. The prophet is taken into a valley filled with bones that were very dry. There were many bones, but all were bleached by the sun, so dry that one would never expect any life to enter these bones again.

The Lord then asks Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" (verse 3). Ezekiel does not want to answer positively or negatively, and simply answers, "O Sovereign LORD, you know." God is able to bring the driest bones to life, but the prophet does not know yet what will happen and how things will unfold.

The LORD tells Ezekiel that the bones will receive muscles, tendons, and flesh, and be covered with skin. Physically the bodies were reassembled. But “there was no breath in them.” They are still lifeless bodies. (verse 8). Ezekiel must then prophesy to the breath, the four winds, so that these bodies come to life. This happens, “So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; and they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.” (verse 10)

Breath and wind which are common expressions for the Holy Spirit are also identified in this manner, “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land” (verse 14). The people will be brought to life by the Holy Spirit and they will again enter the rest that God gives them in the land of promise.

This vision shows us that only the Holy Spirit can give the restoration that is needed, and that he must dwell in Israel to assure that they will live and function as God’s covenant people. The expression, “...and I will put my Spirit *in* you...” may refer to what happens later at Pentecost, where the indwelling becomes a reality, but already in the days of the exile, Israel knows what it takes to be fully the people of the LORD. Having the Holy Spirit, the breath of the LORD, is indispensable for life.