

The Spirit of God Hovered Over The Waters

by Jim Schicatano

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. – (*Gen. 1:2 NIV*)

Over the waters was only darkness, and the Spirit of God brooded over them preparing the earth and the waters for the production of life. – (*A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*¹)

The prevalence of life on planet Earth is a wondrous mystery that no scientist working in a research laboratory has ever been able to duplicate or explain. Life seemingly exists everywhere on our planet. It has been found in the thin air atop the peaks of the highest mountains, in deep oceanic trenches where the sun's rays cannot penetrate, in the boiling water of hot springs, and even in the most barren, desolate deserts of the world. Virtually everywhere that we search, we find life teeming on our wonderful planet.

Some believe that the Earth itself is, in a sense, alive, and that the complex web of life here is maintained through a "life force" that emanates from our mother planet. The existence of a divine Being is not necessarily required in such a concept. In this theory, the life force may have originated by a series of natural accidents or by pure chance. Science, too, has sought to understand how life began on our planet. Scientists have attempted to duplicate the conditions that existed on the Earth billions of years ago, and the mechanisms involved that created the building blocks of life. Some type of natural process is largely recognized as initiating a sustaining life cycle that has successfully perpetuated for billions of years.² The exact details of that process has so far eluded science. After all of the incredible advancements and discoveries made by science through the centuries, today we are still puzzled by the origin of life on planet Earth.

The passage "*and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters*" is an enigmatic phrase. What was God's Spirit doing, hovering over the waters of the Earth? Why would such a phrase be included in the Creation story? Some translations replaced "*the Spirit of*

God” with *“the Wind of God.”* The word *“hovering,”* which is in the NIV, is sometimes interpreted as *“moved”* or *“moving.”* The King James Version translates this phrase as:

“And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”

One of the pertinent words in question here is the Hebrew word *“ruah.”*³ This is translated as *“wind”* or *“spirit.”*⁴ With this in mind, here are some possible explanations for the intended meaning of this passage.

1. THE WIND ⁵

Is this phrase merely reporting God’s creation of the wind and possibly the seas? Light and darkness were also introduced on the First Day, so the purpose of the text may be to demonstrate that God created the natural elements, like the wind and the sea. However, there is little evidence that this was the objective of the author. If the purpose of this phrase was to announce the creation of such elements, the author probably would have phrased the words differently. When you read the verse, it is not at all apparent that God is creating the wind or the sea.

2. GOD’S SPIRIT

Many scholars believe that this word is better translated as *“spirit”* than *“wind.”*⁶ This passage may be describing an action that has less to do with chaos (or a natural element such as a powerful wind) and more to do with God’s creative ability.⁷ However, we are then left with the image of the Spirit of God mysteriously hovering or moving over the waters.

3. THE HOLY SPIRIT ⁸

Some Christian sources maintain that the Spirit of God in this phrase is a reference to the Holy Spirit, the third Godhead of the Trinity. While it may be possible to interpret this from the text, such a translation is indirect and not necessarily warranted. Still, such an interpretation is plausible and should not be dismissed just because the word is located in the Old Testament.

“HOVERED” OR “MOVED”

As we continue to gain a deeper insight into this passage, let us examine God’s activity – that of *“hovering”* or *“moving”* over the waters. *“Hovered”* or *“moved”* is the translation of the Hebrew

word, “*merachefet*.”⁹ This word occurs only one other time in the Bible, in Deuteronomy (as “*hovers*”).¹⁰

like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions. – (*Deut. 32:11 NIV*)

The action being described in Deuteronomy is that of an eagle protecting or caring for her young as she hovers over them.¹¹ In the same way, God is described in Genesis 1:2 as hovering over the waters of the Earth. This could be a metaphorical phrase, indicating God’s care for His creation of our planet. It also could be describing God’s actual interaction with the water. Although the text is not more specific, God may be creating or fostering life in the Earth’s global ocean.

THE ELUSIVE MEANING

It is not clear what is happening in this phrase or why it was included in this story. One common theory is that this phrase may be leftover from an earlier draft of the Creation Story, where the God of the Bible conquers a god of the sea. Most of the ancient civilizations associated specific gods with the various natural elements, such as the wind, water, fire, the sun, the moon, and even the stars. In the mythologies, the gods often battled among themselves for supremacy. If this phrase was leftover from an earlier text, it may have been included to display God’s supremacy, by hovering over a defeated god of the sea.

This argument is unlikely, however, since throughout the Creation Story the author appears to be very careful to acknowledge the existence of one and only one God. It would have been uncharacteristic of the author to introduce another, lesser god.

Another theory is that God is described here preparing the Earth for the life that He would soon create.¹² It is not known specifically what it is that God is doing, but the fact that His Spirit moved over the Earth’s surface must indicate some action of great significance and concern. God’s creation of life would be a significant event.

During the Earth’s early history – over 3.8 billion years ago – simple, single-celled forms of life appeared in the seas. Before that time, science believes that some natural process was slowly creating the building blocks of life.

There are many theories that attempt to explain how life first

originated on our planet. But what I find interesting is that this mysterious phrase in the Bible is describing an act of God that takes place very early in the history of the Earth – around the time that life first appeared.

God may be hovering above the water in order to seed the world with the first forms of life. I acknowledge that this theory is not clearly explained in the text, nor is it a commonly held view.

Nevertheless, it is certainly within the realm of possibility, from both a theological and scientific perspective. Was God creating the mere building blocks of life, such as amino acids? Or did God begin with single-celled organisms? We may never know the answer to either question. The process that God used to create life from lifelessness may never be found. Most Biblical scholars would disagree with the scenario that I am suggesting, and many scientists would prefer a natural mechanism for life's origin. However, God certainly did something with the water at about the time that life first appeared there. This is either an interesting coincidence or an intriguing answer to the origin of life on planet Earth.

NOTES:

1. Bernard Orchard, Edmund F. Sutcliffe, Reginald C. Fuller, and Ralph Russel, eds., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1953), p.182
2. It is possible that life began and failed several times before it was able to maintain itself. However, such a scenario would not seem likely in the context of this chapter.
3. Harry M. Orlinsky, ed., *Notes on the New Translation of The Torah* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), p.52
4. Ibid.
5. *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol.1 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), p.122
6. Bernard Orchard, Edmund F. Sutcliffe, Reginald C. Fuller, and Ralph Russel, eds., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1953), p.182
7. P.R. Ackroyd, A.R.C. Leaney, and J.W. Packer, eds., *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: Genesis 1-11* (Cambridge: At The University Press, 1973), p.16
8. Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Holy Bible, One-Volume Edition*, abridged from original six-volume work by Ralph Earl (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1967), p.16

9. Torah Portions, World Ort Union, "Navigating the Bible", 1996, April 16, 1997
10. J.H. Hertz, ed., 2nd Ed. The Pentateuch and Haftorahs (London: Soncino Press, 1960), p.2
11. Ibid.
12. Bernard Orchard, Edmund F. Sutcliffe, Reginald C. Fuller, and Ralph Russel, eds., A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1953), p.182