

Dissertation Project

Pursuing the Wind: The Meaning of *Rûah* in Biblical Wisdom Literature

In the Hebrew Bible, the word *rûah* commonly translates as *wind*, *breath*, and *spirit*, but it can also express an assortment of related concepts and idioms pertaining to human volition, temperament, disposition, cardinal directions, and transience. The word *rûah* also occurs at a high frequency throughout Israelite wisdom literature, particularly in the books of Ecclesiastes, Job, and Proverbs. Its multivalent meanings, however, often complicate discerning a specific meaning of the word in the context of these sagely discourses. Indeed, *rûah* can contain multiple senses of meaning in a single utterance, much like the diverse interpretive layers found in the various discourses of the wisdom texts.

Using primarily historical critical methods, this dissertation also draws upon cognitive linguistic semantics as a supplementary analytical tool. Cognitive semantics posits that meaning does not inherently reside in words themselves but in the mental conceptualizations and lived experiences of the human mind. A word's meaning is more than its lexical meaning or its translation but also entails the word's broader cognitive associations drawn from a person's cultural context. These cognitive associations are then compartmentalized in a multitude of overlapping domains that possess differing degrees of centrality to the core concept, one or more of which become mentally triggered depending on the context encountered. In this manner, cognitive semantics can account for the multivalency of *rûah* while also providing a means for evaluating the discursive use of *rûah* in Israelite sapiential literature.

The project asks how sapiential authors use *rûah* in discourse in Israelite wisdom literature and how this meaning compares and develops across texts. The verses and discursive contexts in which *rûah* occurs in the individual wisdom texts are examined exegetically, with particular attention paid to the contextual meaning(s) of *rûah* and how the alternate meanings impact the textual interpretations. The work explores not only the meaning of *rûah* in these contexts but also the cognitive domains and discursive topics that Israelite sapiential authors bring into association with *rûah*. These various discursive topics ranging from human privilege/status, divine power and human limitation, physical/mental health, futility, the afterlife, to character-building ethics, etc., all draw upon the various meanings of *rûah* while also extending beyond them to generate sapiential thought.