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A *HOSAH* SCIENTIFIC-CULTURAL THEOLOGY OF SACRED AIR

Science, Simalungun Culture, and Christianity in Constructive Trialogue

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Abstract

This study aims to develop a constructive theology of *hosah* through an interdisciplinary approach. The research involves a scientific understanding of air, the Simalungun cultural concept of *hosah*, and Christian theology of the Holy Spirit. It employs a trialogical method consisting of two stages, namely, descriptive-comparative and normative-constructive. The first stage explains the concepts of air, *hosah*, and Spirit from scientific, cultural, and theological perspectives, respectively. The second stage focuses on constructing a theology of *hosah*. The results of this trialogue critically analyze, enrich, and revise these concepts. Overall, the study concludes that air is more than just a gaseous compound; it is a sacred altar of life.

Keywords: *hosah*, myth, trialogical method, constructive theology, Simalungun, air, Holy Spirit, science

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TEOLOGI SAINTIFIK-BUDAYA *HOSAH* TERKAIT SAKRALITAS UDARA:

Sains, Budaya Simalungun, dan Kristianitas dalam Trialog Konstruktif

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk membangun teologi konstruktif tentang *hosah* melalui pendekatan interdisipliner. Penelitian ini melibatkan pemahaman ilmiah tentang udara, konsep budaya Simalungun tentang *hosah*, dan teologi Kristen tentang Roh Kudus. Metode yang digunakan adalah metode trialogis dengan dua tahap, yaitu deskriptif-komparatif dan normatif-konstruktif. Tahap pertama menjelaskan konsep udara, *hosah*, dan Roh Kudus dari sudut pandang ilmiah, budaya, dan teologis. Tahap kedua bertujuan untuk membangun teologi *hosah*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa trialog ini mengkritisi, memperkaya, dan merevisi konsep-konsep tersebut. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa udara lebih dari sekadar senyawa gas. Udara merupakan suatu altar sakral kehidupan.

Kata-kata Kunci: *hosah*, mitos, metode trialogis, teologi konstruktif, Simalungun, udara, Roh Kudus, sains

Introduction

Tracing the discursive interplay of theology, culture, and science demonstrates a history of tension and conflict where one of these is portrayed as a stranger, even an enemy, to the others. Dynamics among them frequently prioritizes one and diminishes the others. Yet the advancement of science calls for theology to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue and embrace scientific involvement. Science plays a crucial role in influencing modern policies and is even regarded as a nexus of “belief” by some post-Enlightenment generations. While science might consider traditional culture as outdated, backwards, or old-fashioned on the one hand, and religion as naïve or irrational on the other, science itself is criticized for de-spiritualizing nature and destructively exploiting the planet. According to religion, science often crosses ethical boundaries, especially with recent advancements in post-human AI (artificial intelligence) and gene-editing technologies. Those who follow scientism may be regarded as “gods” with the ability to create their own civilizations.

Given all these challenges, there is little theological research that comparatively and constructively engages theology, culture,

and science from an Indonesian perspective. In view of this, the present study argues that God's self-communication involves theology, culture, and science in particular ways—such that the work of God can be found within them.

Taking up a trialogical method, this study argues that the notions of air, breath, and spirit within a triologue of science, Simalungun culture, and Christianity can be used to construct a theology of *hosah* that ecologically positions air as a sacred altar of life. Heup Young Kim regards the trialogical method as “a viable future paradigm” for working out the relationship among theology, culture, and science in the pluriversal context of Asia.¹ According to Kim, the method consists of two stages: descriptive-comparative and normative-constructive.² This method emphasizes “a humble approach” that includes “an attitude of respect, epistemological modesty, humility, open-mindedness, and a willingness to rethink or revise one's previous concepts.”³ In this article, the descriptive-comparative stage explores the notions of air, *hosah*, and spirit in a descriptive (not prescriptive) way. In the normative-constructive stage, a theology of *hosah* is developed from the previous comparison. My central argument is that a theology of *hosah* will re-spiritualize air as a sacred altar of life and contribute theologically to addressing climate change.

Climate change is a highly concerning issue affecting the world today. Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the problem of air, water, and soil pollution, including from theological perspectives. In Indonesia, there have been studies that developed a theology of the land (by Zakaria Ngelow and Lady Mandalika⁴) and theologies of the sea (Margaretha Apituley⁵; Elia Maggang⁶). The main idea of their research is the affirmation of the elements of land and sea as integral subjects of theology, the preservation of land and sea, and the appreciation of their essential functions for sustaining life. Their proposed theology of land and

¹ Young Heup Kim, *A Theology of Dao* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 197.

² Ibid, 195.

³ Ibid, 195-197.

⁴ Zakaria Ngelow dan Lady Paula R. Mandalika, eds., *Teologi Tanah: Perspektif Kristen terhadap Ketidakadilan Sosio-Ekologis di Indonesia* (Jakarta: BPK GM, 2022).

⁵ Margaretha M. A. Apituley, *Teologi Laut: Mendialogkan Makna Laut dalam Keluaran 14-15 Berdasarkan Kosmologi Masyarakat Titawaa, di Pulau Nusalaut Maluku dengan Kosmologi Israel Kuno* (Jakarta: BPK GM, 2021).

⁶ Elia Maggang, “Menampakkan Corak Biru Kekristenan Indonesia: Sebuah Perspektif Ekoteologi,” *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2019): 162-88, <https://doi.org/10.46567/ijt.v7i2.149>. See also his other related works on an Indonesian maritime theology.

sea also emphasizes political, economic, and theological critiques of systems of thought that objectify nature. Turning to the air, this study extends those ecological efforts, with the intention of developing a new ecological perspective based on the notion of air.

This study is a qualitative research using a literature review approach. The outline begins with a scientific exploration of the elemental composition of air, comparing its significance with the philosophical metaphor of *hosab* in Simalungun culture and the theological doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Upon engaging in this dialogue, the metaphor of *hosab* is elaborated as a constructive-contextual theological approach to respecting nature, in affirmation that *hosab* serves as a sacred altar of life. For this reason, this study endeavors in an initial stage to compare those elements and a subsequent stage to integrate or hybridize them through constructive approaches.

Air, Hosah, Ruah in Descriptive-Comparative Dialogue

Hosah, Ruah, and Air: Similarities in Dissimilarities

While *hosab* (language: Batak Simalungun), *ruah*⁷ (language: biblical Hebrew), and air (language: modern English) share similarities, they are not the same. *Hosab* is the divine breath. In Simalungun mythology, it is believed to have the power to create. *Ruah* is the Spirit of God. And air is an elixir of life. Their formal similarity connotes that element which is crucial for terrestrial life, signifies a material portrait of immaterial vitality, describes the manifestation of the creedal life bearer, and defines the most important aspect of breathing. Yet differences persist. Air is a gas compound, which is neither *ruah* nor *hosab*—even as *ruah* and *hosab* may manifest through air. Both *ruah* and *hosab* are spiritual as well as physical, whereas air is merely physical. At this level, the notion of *panentheism* is relevant and meaningful, as argued by a North American Wesleyan philosopher, John Culp:

Panentheism considers God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world.... Panentheism seeks to avoid either isolating God from the world as traditional theism often does or identifying God with the world as pantheism does.⁸

⁷ The word *ruah* that I am using here has a broad meaning in Hebrew literature. In the following use of the word *ruah*, I refer to *Ruah Elohim*, which describes the Holy Spirit.

⁸ John, Culp, "Panentheism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive*, Fall 2023 Edition, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/panentheism/>.

Peter C. Hodgson avers that these spirit metaphors represent a “fluid, pervasive, intangible-mysterious energy whose fundamental quality is vitality and freedom and whose fundamental purpose is to create, shape and enliven.”⁹ Moreover, Hodgson suggests that the image of wind, moving air, breath, or breathing demonstrates the linguistic root of spirit in the biblical context. While this resonates with the notion of *hosah*, not all wind or air defines the Holy Spirit. In these dialectical entities lie the ambiguity and multiple meanings of these pneumatic metaphors—a point also emphasized by Finnish systematic theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen.¹⁰ Instead of focusing on this ambiguity, it is worth considering the uniqueness and strength of these multiple meanings: wind, breath, air, soul, and spirit, as these provide a potential resource for re-spiritualizing the air.

Grace Ji-Sun Kim states that “the word *ruah* has its etymological origin in air, which manifests itself in two distinctive forms: that of wind in nature and that of breath in living things.”¹¹ Wind symbolizes the power of life in nature, in harmony with certain other accounts, while breath symbolizes the power of life in the living.¹² Furthermore, by evocatively asking, “Does the (Holy) Spirit belong to Christianity or She belongs to the world?” Kim insists that the Spirit is not owned by anyone.¹³ The Spirit is God, and She is totally free. The Spirit is present in nature but simultaneously transcends space, time, culture, science, and religion. From this standpoint, a *hosah* paradigm moves against the *despiritualization* of air, just as Joel Kovac describes how a “despiritualization of culture and nature has caused the destruction of nature, the loss of a sense of sacred, and the breakup of organic wholes into isolated fragments.”¹⁴

⁹ Peter C. Hodgson, *Wind of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 277.

¹⁰ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 25.

¹¹ Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Holy Spirit, Chi, and the Other: A Model of Global and Intercultural Pneumatology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 5.

¹² Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology*, 26.

¹³ Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Reimagining Spirit: Wind, Breath, and Vibration* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 2.

¹⁴ Joel Kovac, *History and Spirit: An Inquiry to the Philosophy of Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 2-13.

Scientific Concept of Air: Conditions for Life

From a scientific point of view, air is a compound of gases. Under normal conditions, it is transparent, without smell or color. It cannot be seen, but it can be felt. It has mass and weight, but no specific volume or shape. It fills the Earth's atmosphere. Animals, humans, and plants survive by "breathing" air in various ways. The most abundant particles in the Earth's atmosphere are nitrogen (N₂), oxygen (O₂), argon (Ar), water (H₂O), and carbon dioxide (CO₂).¹⁵ One of the most important components of air for life is oxygen. Oxygen is derived from the Greek word meaning "acid-former." Oxygen is produced by plants through the process of photosynthesis. Humans and animals breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide, which in turn sustains the life of plants. In this light, we can see that breathing in oxygen and breathing out carbon dioxide is a profound cycle of life-giving relationships among humans, animals, and plants.

In terms of elemental origins, there is evidence of oxygen being derivative.¹⁶ Malcolm Dole suggests two possible pathways for how oxygen initially emerges in the observable universe. The first is by means of a "hydrogen-burning nuclear reaction."¹⁷ The initial energy of the stars is obtained by the fusion reaction of hydrogen into helium. Therefore, it can be argued that the fusion process contributes to the formation of what we now recognize as oxygen, even as scientists agree that the most prominent elements in the observable universe are now hydrogen (still by far), helium, and oxygen at a distant third.¹⁸ The second, non-exclusive pathway Dole mentions is through "photochemical reaction."¹⁹ For instance, water can absorb ultraviolet radiation at a wavelength of 2000Å or lower, which through several reactions can release oxygen. He summarizes the ultraviolet dissociated water vapor process:

According to the reaction $\text{H}_2\text{O} + h\nu \rightarrow \text{H} + \text{OH}$. The hydroxyl radical, OH, produced in reaction above can also absorb at even longer wavelengths than the water molecule itself and undergo further decomposition according to the reaction $\text{OH} + h\nu \rightarrow \text{O} + \text{H}$. Atomic oxygen formed in this reaction can unite with another atom of oxygen in the

¹⁵ John M. Wallace and Peter V. Hobbs, *Atmospheric Science: An Introductory Survey* (New York: Elsevier, 2005), 8.

¹⁶ Malcolm Dole, "The Natural History of Oxygen," *The Journal of General Physiology*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1965), 5.

¹⁷ Lawrence H. Aller, *The Abundance of the Elements* (New York: Interscience Publishers, 1961), 240.

¹⁸ D. P. Mellor, "Origin and Evolution of Chemical Elements," *Chemistry*, Vol. 37, No. 4, (1964): 12.

¹⁹ Malcolm Dole, "The Natural History of Oxygen," 9-10.

presence of a third body such as a nitrogen molecule to form molecular oxygen. $O+O \rightarrow N_2 \rightarrow O_2$.²⁰

Plants serves as the other source of oxygen, which addresses the known problem that the amount of oxygen in water is less than in the atmosphere. Yet for millions of years, there was still not enough oxygen in the air to support large-scale of life on Earth.²¹ According to Dole, the discovery of living algae in 30-meter-deep stagnant bays, as noted by L. V. Berkner and L. C. Marshall, indicates the accelerated production of oxygen through photosynthesis.²² John M. Wallace and Peter V. Hobbs estimate that 99% of the Earth's biosphere energy comes from the Sun, which through photosynthesis results in a plentiful supply of oxygen.²³

Even the earliest plants may have relied on microorganisms such as *Cyanobacteria*, which are assumed to be the first form of life on earth. Donald E. Canfield regards *Cyanobacteria* as introducing "the biological production of oxygen to Earth for the first time."²⁴ This microorganism appears to be the first among terrestrial life to have produced oxygen in significant quantities through photosynthesis.²⁵ Burkhard and colleagues argue that the evolution of *Cyanobacteria* serves as the starting point of a verdant Earth, bringing plentiful life to the planet.²⁶

Nick Lane goes so far as to claim oxygen as *the elixir of life*.²⁷ His reasons go beyond the contribution of oxygen to the air in Earth's atmosphere, to include its significance for medical interventions, treatments, and therapies.²⁸ Insisting on the importance of oxygen, Lane cites the Polish alchemist Michael

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Ibid., 16.

²² L. V. Berkner and L. C. Marshall, "The History of Oxygenic Concentration in the Earth's Atmosphere," *Discussions of the Faraday Society*, Vol. 37 (1964): 37, 122.

²³ Wallace and Hobbs, *Atmospheric Science*, 45.

²⁴ Donald E. Canfield, *Oxygen: A Four Billion Year History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 40.

²⁵ Ibid., 40.

²⁶ Burkhard Büdel, Bettina Weber, Michael Kühl, H. Pfanz, D. Sültemeyer, and D. Wessels, "Reshaping of Sandstone Surfaces by Cryptoendolithic Cyanobacteria: Bioalkalization Causes Chemical Weathering in Arid Landscapes," *Geobiology*, Vol. 2 (2004): 261-268, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1472-4677.2004.00040.x>.

²⁷ Nick Lane, *Oxygen: The Molecule that Made the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.

²⁸ Ibid., 1, 5, 7. Michael Sendivogius, a Polish alchemist, even argued that oxygen is the aerial food for life.

Sendivogius (1566-1636) who regarded what would come to be known as oxygen to be more than food, even being a “spirit” vital for life.

Just as Lane relies on Sendivogius to posit that oxygen is the foundation of life itself, the whole of the scientific investigation concerning terrestrial life reveals that, within the air, oxygen is the most important element for life. As such, air is indeed constitutive for the elixir of life—to paraphrase Lane. Humans can survive for a month without food, for weeks without water, yet only minutes without air.

Simalungun Cultural Concept of Hosah: Divine Creating Power

According to an ancient legend recorded in *Pustaka Ahar Mulajadi*,²⁹ at the beginning of this universe, three gods reigned in heaven (*nagori atas*), namely Lord Sahine-hine, Lord Tobal Dunia, and Lord Naga Padokahni Aji. They agreed to create humans to inhabit the earth. Lord Sahine-hine began by forming a human figure out of the earth. After the statue was formed, a messenger was asked to bring *hosah bagoluban* (breath of life) to Earth to be placed under the nose of the statue. *Hosah bagoluban* was secured in the palm of the messenger's hand, and the messenger was reminded not to open his grip until he arrived on earth. On the way to earth, the messenger wanted to see the shape of *hosah bagoluban* in his hand. When he opened his grip, at that very moment the *hosah bagoluban* came out and immediately transformed into a celestial body. This is the beginning of the sun, moon, and stars.

The messenger regretfully returned to heaven and reported his failure to Lord Sahine-hine, who benevolently forgave the messenger. He was again assigned to bring *hosah bagoluban* to earth. But like the first trip, in the middle of the journey, the messenger opened his grip and immediately the *hosah bagoluban* changed into air (*logou*) and fire (*apuy*). A third time, the forgiven messenger loosened his grip on his way to earth, with *hosah bagoluban* changing form into the sea, as well as animals, mountains, and plants. Lord Sahine-hine then no longer pardoned the envoy, expelling the unworthy messenger from heaven.

The task of carrying *hosah bagoluban* was now left to another envoy named Aji Adil Moradil. Being an honest and obedient messenger, *hosah bagoluban* reached the earth. He opened his hand under the nose of the statue, and the *hosah bagoluban* entered the statue's nose. The statue immediately changed into a brave man

²⁹ *Pustaka Ahar Mulajadi* is an ancient Simalungun text, traditionally written on tree bark and alternatively known as *Pustaka Lak-lak*.

who would be called the first person on earth.³⁰ This myth elucidates that *hosab* is the energy of the divine that creates the world. *Hosab* is an integral part of Simalungun's god.

Historically, the mythic concept of *hosab* can be traced back to the literature and mantras of shamans in the highlands of Sumatra. It is not known exactly where the myth originated, but the word *hosab* itself is found in the languages of the Simalungun, Karo, Toba and other tribes in northern Sumatra. In pre-Christian societies, shamans served as priests, teachers, royal advisors, healers, protectors, and intermediaries between humans and the gods. The shamans' advice and teachings were important in shaping the life and beliefs of the Simalungun people. The *Hosab* myth concerning the origin of the world is widely taught and believed by the community.

This myth, in turn, has shaped the thoughts, beliefs, and cultural way of life of this indigenous society. For example, the Simalungun people have a spiritual ceremony called *Ondos Hosab*, which means "submission of breath/life." This communal ceremony is practiced to prevent calamity with the whole village participating. They typically bring offerings, and a shaman leads an incantation accompanied by traditional music and perhaps dances. In instances when an accident happens or children stumble and fall, the parents would breathe on (*marbosab*, to blow out *hosab*) wherever the child feels bodily pain and traditionally pray for their wellness. For all practical purposes, they believe *hosab* (breath) has the power to relieve pain and heal sickness. When a shaman as the traditional spiritual teacher concocts herbal medicines and casts incantations, they blow their *hosab* onto these traditional remedies before handing them to the patient. Even the establishment of a new village relates to the concept of *hosab*. The shaman might advise against building a village along the angles of a river, which is sacred due to the breath of the river (*hosab ni binanga*) flowing in that area. If the people build their houses or village near that area,

³⁰ This legend has been continuously told by the senior elders of Simalungun such as Mr. Rasiyam Saragih Garingging, Mr. Dading Purba Sidasuha, Mr. Kamen Purba Sidasuha, Mr. Djariaman Damanik, Mr. Josep Sipayung (a former shaman who became an Evangelist), Mr. Kadim Morgan Damanik Tomok, Mr. Nurdan Purba Sidasuha, and Mr. Guru Raya Amat Purba Sidasuha. Compare also with the doctoral dissertation of Jan Jahaman Damanik (STT Jakarta, 2009), the ThM thesis of Juandaha Raya Purba Dasuha, and the ThM thesis of Richard Siboro, and the writings of Taralamsyah Saragih. See Juandaha Raya Purba Dasuha, *Zending dan Kolonialisme: Studi Historis Teologis Perjumpaan Raja-raja Simalungun dan Zending RMG, 1903-1942* (Medan: STT Abdi Sabda, 2008).

the breath of the river will swallow them and cause sickness in the future.³¹

Such cultural and mythological practices define *bosab* as the spirit or soul of life. *Hosab* has cosmic, religious aspects suggestive that the divine is immanent in nature. It emphasizes interconnectedness and interdependence, taking a posture of humility before the awesome cosmos. The *bosab* paradigm radically contrasts with the human-centeredness of the West by insisting on a cosmic-centered approach that is inclusive of the divine-human interplay in nature. Rather than a dualistic, hierarchical worldview, it takes on an ecological perspective. The *bosab* paradigm rejects the supposed inferiority of non-Western cultures, embracing a liberative socio-cosmic interconnectedness, and indigenous wisdom.

According to Simalungun mythology,³² *bosab* is regarded as a divine creative force. *Hosab* unites, while being greater than nature. From this communal wisdom and practice, we can see that the notion of *bosab* appears in various ceremonies and daily life, alike. As a paradigm, the embrace of *bosab* affirms the interdependence of all forms of life, while positing harmony among God, human beings, and nature. *Hosab* has much to contribute to environmental sustainability, including the preservation of trees, distribution of water, sustaining the ecosystem of the forest, and protecting the quality of oxygen in the air. *Hosab*, akin to life itself, is the origin of a universe comprised of sacred things—the sea, animals, mountains, plants, wind, and breath. Its very character is that of life, namely, to heal, to relieve pain, and to prevent disaster.

Theological Concept of Holy Spirit: Breath of Life

We turn now to biblical scholars for lexical perspectives on God's Holy Spirit. According to D. A. Tappeiner, the Hebrew term for Holy Spirit—*ruah*—means breath, wind, and spirit.³³ Alasdair I. C. Heron describes its root meaning as the movement of the air, which developed to become wind, breath, and life.³⁴ According to

³¹ Bungaran Antonius Simanjuntak, *Arti dan Fungsi Tanah Bagi Masyarakat Batak Toba, Karo, Simalungun*, Edisi Pembaruan (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2015), 35.

³² See, *Pustaka Ahar Muljadi*. This book is one of the oldest books of mantras explaining the concept of local beliefs of the Simalungun people. The myth of the *bosab* itself, as explained in footnote 31 above, has been taught and spread throughout the Simalungun community for generations.

³³ D.A. Tappeiner, "Holy Spirit", in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia – New Revision*, ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979). electronic edition.

³⁴ Alasdair I. C. Heron, *The Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit in the Bible, the History of Christian Thought and Recent Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 4.

David T. Williams, *ruah* was described as that power at the very beginning which hovered over the waters (Gen. 1:2). This power, then, was breathed into the formed dust, and the dust was enlivened as God breathed into it (Gen. 2:7).³⁵ The book of Ezekiel also depicts the power of the Holy Spirit where *ruah* was breathed into the reassembled corpses to enliven them. Ezekiel 37 draws a clear distinction between the formation of matter and its enlivening. First, God *formed* a man from the dust; second the Spirit *breathed* the lifeless bodies alive.³⁶ Williams further argues that animals and plants also have spirit or *ruah* (Eccl. 3:19–21), while at times the connotations of “spirit” and “breath” are interchangeable (Psa. 104:29–30).

The New Testament also describes the life-giving power that is the Holy Spirit as wind and breath. The metaphor of the Holy Spirit as wind (*pneuma*) can be seen in John 3:8, which states, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going (NIV).” Nearer to the end of John’s gospel, as he breathes onto his disciples, Jesus makes the post-resurrection pronouncement, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” (John 20:22).

The Holy Spirit sustains our life as if God functioned as the oxygen within our cells. As the third person of the triune God and the one who gives deep meaning to the apophatic unseen, *ruah* may also be categorized as the Third Person of the Trinity. Rather than the first and the second Trinitarian Persons being greater than the third, following Christopher R. J. Holmes we see the notion of the Third Person of the Trinity as the unity of the triune God from eternity when he points out that the Spirit is “consubstantial and one essence with the Father and the Son.”³⁷ The Spirit that is *ruah* does not tend to Herself but binds the human (and the universe) to Jesus and leads us to God the Father through Christ.³⁸ For Holmes, according to the Triune *perichoresis*, God is known through God’s economy, and God’s revelation within that economy defines who God is. Thus, God’s essence and existence are one and inseparable.³⁹ Augustine of Hippo describes “the Father, the Son,

³⁵ David T. Williams, “The Spirit in Creation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2014): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003693061300029X>.

³⁶ L. Neve, *The Spirit of God in the Old Testament* (Tokyo: Seibunsha, 1972), 73.

³⁷ Christopher R. J. Holmes, *Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 24.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 21.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 21.

and the Holy Spirit are the Trinity, but they are only one God.”⁴⁰ Presaging Augustine, Gregory of Nazianzus rejects any concept of superiority or inferiority between the Person of the Trinity.⁴¹

Ruah, in Hebrew, is a feminine word denoting the Holy Spirit.⁴² Heup Yong Kim argues that within the notion of a “trinitarian family” from an East Asian perspective, *ruah* is understood as the feminine member of the Trinity. She is the *Mother* who complements the Father.⁴³ Jung Young Lee also confirms the deep relation of wind, breath, and *ruah*: “While wind brings nature to life, breath makes the living alive.”⁴⁴ Here the feminine character that nurtures life is asserted.

Ruah is also an apophatic being. Panikkar argues that what the Father is “the Absolute...*is not*.”⁴⁵ He/She has no existence, even Being; His Being is in Non-Being, and in Him, the apophaticism of Being is real and total.⁴⁶ The apophatic mystery is important for situating *beyondness* as the locus of discourse for this comparative dialogue. As culture and science cannot account for their own origins, the meaning of their essence, or their purpose, *ruah* may enrich and fill such gaps from a religious point of view.

While we know the economy of *ruah*, we will never know its essence. John of Damascus says, “Neither are all things unutterable nor all utterable, neither all unknowable nor all knowable.”⁴⁷ This is the unique relation in the concept of *Ruah*, where She is totally unreachable on one side, yet She is known on another side. Dionysius The Areopagite argues it well:

God [*Ruah*] is known through knowledge and through unknowing. God is not known, not spoken, not named, not something among beings, and not known in something among beings. God is all in all, nothing in none, known to

⁴⁰ Augustine of Hippo, *Letters Vol. 2, (83-130)*, trans., Wilfred Parson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 311.

⁴¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oratio 39.11,” *The Later Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Cyril of Jerusalem to St. Leo the Great*, ed., Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 118.

⁴² J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 32-35, 50, 121.

⁴³ Kim, *A Theology of Dao*, 68.

⁴⁴ Compare to the story of creation Genesis 2:7, Jung Young Lee, *Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 96-97.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 152. See also Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and Religious Experiences of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 1973), 46. The text in italics is based on the original text.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁷ John of Damascus, “On the Orthodox Faith 1.2” in *Church Fathers: An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, Book I* (John of Damascus), <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/33041.htm>, accessed March 23, 2023

all in reference to all, known to no one in reference to nothing.⁴⁸

From the preceding, we see that the Holy Spirit is God who gives life. As *ruah* and *pnuema*—wind, spirit, breath—She is apophatic, present in the world, yet transcends the world and “blows wherever it pleases (John 3:8 NIV).” Holy Spirit is the cosmic breath of life.

Toward A Constructive Theology of *Hosah*: Reimagining Air as a Sacred Altar of Life

The theological metaphor that I offer is *hosah*. *Hosah* in Simalungun cultural wisdom signifies divine energy. It is the divine catalyst that creates the universe. According to the origin myth of Simalungun, *hosah* is the vital force that caused the first human to breathe. Even the Karo⁴⁹ Bible translates the Holy Spirit as *Hosah* (*Kesab Si Badia*), which means the Holy Breath. This metaphor connotes God as the Spirit who is immanently present in air. In addition to *hosah*, the Simalungun word *logou* is similar in meaning, though not the same as *hosah*, and denotes the air itself. *Logou* is created by the divine force of *hosah*. *Hosah* is then a vitalizing, spiritual energy that comes from the gods. *Logou*, on the other hand, is the air that moves freely on the earth. *Logou* and *hosah* as created and creator, respectively, are inextricable. As a divine power, *hosah* creates the air and takes a form like the air. The Simalungun people distinguish between *Hosah* and *Logou* in the same way that modern people distinguish between breath and wind. *Logou* blows cosmic life, while *hosah* blows human life. *Hosah* and *logou* are inseparable. In Christian theology, breath and wind are biblical representations of the Holy Spirit, connoting an understanding of God who is Spirit, air, and wind (Gen. 1:2, 2:7; John. 3:8, 4:24, 20:22; 2 Cor. 3:17). Here I claim that *hosah* within the Simalungun cultural mythos can signify the Spirit of God.

Theologically speaking, *hosah* considers air as a sacred altar of life. God, humans, and nature indwell a shared, rooted life,

⁴⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, trans. J. D. Jones (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 178-180.

⁴⁹ There are hundreds of ethnic groups in Indonesia. One of them is the Batak tribe. The Batak tribe consists of six sub-tribes, namely Simalungun, Karo, Toba, Pakpak, Mandailing and Angkola. The Karo tribe is a neighbor of the Simalungun tribe. Geographically, the people of this tribe are very close and live in each other's territory. These tribes also intermarry. This has led to various exchanges of language, culture, beliefs and social systems. Todung Panjaitan, *Dalihan Na Tolu, Sistem Kekerabatan Suku Batak* (Jakarta: CV. Sumber Agung, 2022).

relating to one another through the metaphor of air. A theology of *bosab* further affirms God's presence in nature. Kwok Pui-lan argues that the immanence of God is more emphasized in Asian experiences than the transcendence of God.⁵⁰ Marlene Perera, a Sri Lankan theologian, claims that "God is not up above but deep down. God is within: within me, within humanity, its aspirations, struggles, strivings, and history and we need to touch this life-giving Spirit to find liberation."⁵¹ Perera's notion that God is "within...its [humanity's aspiration]" as "life-giving Spirit" resonates with what I argue as a theology of *bosab*. *Hosab* is within what humanity aspires to be, and it defines life. *Hosab* is even the beginning of the sun, moon, and stars, air and fire, the sea, animals, mountains and plants and the breath of life to the human.⁵²

The openness of the concept of *bosab* resonates with aspects of other Asian theologies. Heup Young Kim argues that Asian theology "should be not only emancipatory but also open-ended, dialogical, ecological, holistic, and inclusive."⁵³ As a paradigm, *bosab* embraces and comparatively dialogizes culture, theology and science to foster a deeper understanding of life. As a broadly accessible metaphor, it rejects dualism, hierarchy, domination, sexism, racism, patriarchy, exclusivism, and superiority. *Hosab* embraces a holistic view, a mindset of inclusivity, and a dialogical approach that attends to our ecological welfare in an open-ended commitment to the future.

On the one side, for scientists who may not recognize either *bosab* or Holy Spirit, they nonetheless affirm the element of "spirituous air" that becomes the elixir of life.⁵⁴ As oxygen nurtures life on the earth—in the forms of carbon dioxide (CO₂), water (H₂O), and oxygen (O₂)—the pollution of the air threatens earthly life. Scientists can inadvertently despiritualize the air itself when simply regarding it as collateral damage in the march toward progress. It is a poorly kept secret that science has destructively contributed to the pollution of our air, a lamentable fact worsened by Western Christian theology that justifies the objectification of nature as that which humans must dominate, subdue, and rule over (cf. Gen. 1:28).

Nevertheless, we observe that *bosab* or the breath that carries oxygen is the elixir of life, which Nick Lane affirms:

⁵⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 75.

⁵¹ Marlene Perera, "Towards a New Humanity: Christianity and Buddhism in Dialogue," in *AWRC* (1991): 209

⁵² *Pustaka Ahar Mulajadi*. See footnote 39.

⁵³ Kim, *A Theology of Dao*, 12, 16.

⁵⁴ Lane, *Oxygen*, 1-2.

Oxygen is about life or death. Oxygen is important. After all, if we stop breathing it, we will be dead in minutes. Our bodies are beautifully designed to deliver oxygen to each of our 15 million cells. The presence of oxygen in a planetary atmosphere is the litmus test of life: water signals the potential for life, but oxygen is the sign of its fulfillment.⁵⁵

We recall too that Michael Sendivogius asserts, “Man was created of the Earth, and lives by virtue of the air; for there is in the air a secret food of life...whose invisible congealed spirit is better than the whole Earth.”⁵⁶ We note how Cornelius Drebbel wondrously, if also mysteriously, assumes that there must be “a certain quintessence” or “spirituous part of the air” that makes it fit for respiration.⁵⁷ These thinkers inspiringly called it “an invisible congealed spirit,” a “spirituous part,” and even a “food of life.” Here we can see the rich interrelatedness of how the Holy Spirit, *hosah*, and air source life.

This study not only shows the mutually enriching relations among these domains but also the cross-disciplinary critiques and revisioning engagements of the above paradigms. Culture critiques science, which has deconstructed nature. Culture also critiques Christian theology, which has historically underestimated culture as inferior and even demonic. Science critiques both traditional-cultural myths and Christian theology as irrational, naïve, old-fashioned, and incapable of contextually relating to the needs of today. Christian theology interrogates science on the ethical justification and moral responsibility for the damage caused by scientific advancements. Christian theology also criticizes culture for its violent and degrading aspects. Culture, especially Simalungun culture, as a product of the mind corrupted by sin, often dehumanizes humanity, especially in terms of irrational beliefs and gender equality. Thus, a scientifically informed theology of *hosah* cuts across these traditioned paradigms while enriching each of them. It is a constructive paradigm that invites environmental repentance concerning the theological and scientific biases that, in turn, objectified nature, thereby calling all to respect our environment as reverence owed to the Divine. Positioning nature as *subject*, even as a cosmic mother who abundantly shares life with the whole cosmos, *hosah* retrieves the subjecthood of cultural wisdom and shows preference for the environmentally impoverished. For the Simalungun people, who strive to live in

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1-2.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 4.

harmony with nature, living in communion with creation is part of their cultural religiosity. From these convictions, trees, forests, rivers, mountains, and the whole of nature are regarded as sacred. If they are considered sanctified because they are inhabited by spirits, then the destruction of nature is tantamount to resisting the divine who through *bosab* created and organized the universe from the beginning. Any damage to nature and all the elements of environmental pollution are considered a violation of customary conduct and can invite the wrath of the gods—a point that resonates in Christian theology (Eph. 2:1-10; Isa. 24:4-6; Hos. 4:1-3; Job 12:5-10).

Finally, this study of *bosab* constructs the character of air to be a sacred altar of life, as it defines a pneumatology that materializes through the cultural notion of *bosab* and the scientific precision of breathable air. *Hosab* emphasizes humility, interconnectedness, and interrelatedness among God, humanity, and the cosmos. By doing theology from within a Simalungun cultural frame of reference, *bosab* critically embraces Western theological and scientific method to foster an enculturated appreciation for the harmonious gift of life. It proposes that a Simalungun-Christian spirituality depicts the immanency of God who is in nature, in the wind, and even in our very breath. Upholding the significance of Simalungun cultural wisdom, which posits the air as a divinely sacred element, a theology of *bosab* stresses that the air is to be respected and preserved as the divine altar of life. Air becomes the trinity of life where the three subjects of the Holy Spirit, *bosab*, and oxygen can *breathe* freely, so to speak, as the winds may move where they please (John 3:8) to give life to the lifeless.

Conclusion

This study shows that a triologue among air (science, specifically environmental), *bosab* (culture, specifically Simalungun), and Holy Spirit (theology, specifically Christian) can be used to construct a theology of *bosab* that ecologically positions air according to divinely assigned roles—as a sacred altar, elixir of life, secret food. *Hosab*, as revealed by the Simalungun cultural myth, possesses divine creative power that gives life to humans and has created the universe from the beginning. The Holy Spirit is attested in the Christian tradition as being the source of life, manifesting in and over nature and transcending space, time, culture, science, and religion. The findings of this triological method I have prosecuted prompt us to conclude that the air is sacred and crucially important for life. Its environmental harm calls for repentance, even as the divinity of *bosab* urges that we re-spiritualize the very air we need to live.

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