

4. LOST IN TRANSLATION: The S/spirit?

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We began this little series by asking the question, ‘Are Modern Bible Versions Misleading Millions?’ Sadly, we have had to answer in the affirmative. In this final **LOST IN TRANSLATION** article we highlight another area where we will again arrive at the maxim that **translation is the subtlest form of commentary**. This time, we look at “the Holy Spirit”. (¹)

Readers may be surprised to learn that ***the actual phrase “holy spirit” occurs only twice in the Old Testament*** (OT)! The first is in **Psalm 51:11**. It’s after the prophet **Nathan** exposed **King David’s** sin with **Bathsheda** and the murder of her husband **Uriah**. In anguish of soul **David** pleads with Yahweh; **Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your holy spirit from me** (Ps. 51: 11 NRSV).

The only other place where the phrase “holy spirit” is found in the OT is in **Isaiah 63: 11-12**; **Where is He who put His holy spirit within them, who led them by the right hand of Moses?** Both verses describe the “holy spirit” as belonging to Yahweh God. The “holy spirit” is **Your holy spirit** and **His holy spirit** — the spirit possessed by God. Both verses use the literary style called Hebrew parallelism and connect God’s **holy spirit** with His presence and leading.

The New Testament (NT) by way of contrast, uses the phrase **holy spirit** 87 times! (Nearly always our Bible versions capitalise it — **Holy Spirit**.) What’s going on here? Doesn’t the OT know much at all about the ‘Christian’ doctrine of the person of the Holy Spirit? How is it that ‘He’ suddenly and ubiquitously appears in the NT as the Biblical data would suggest?

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND FIRST

The first mention of the word ‘S/spirit’ (**ruach**) is in **Genesis 1:2** where we read, **And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters**. Again we note it’s God’s spirit, **the Spirit of God**. Most Bible versions capitalise the **Spirit** in **Genesis 1: 2** but some don’t (e.g. **ESV, Douay-Rheims, JPS Tanakh 1917**).

The word **ruach** is a *feminine noun*. Hebrew Lexicons are in unanimous agreement that the basic idea behind **ruach** is that of the breath in the nostrils, with the cognate idea of air or wind in motion. So, whilst **S/spirit** is a reasonable translation, it’s not the only possible translation, nor even necessarily the best translation.

Some translate this verse as a Hebrew reader naturally would. For instance, the **NRSV** has it that **a wind (ruach) from God swept over the face of the waters**. Others read **the breath (ruach) of God** (**Holy Bible in Modern English**), **a mighty wind (NAB)**,

¹ For my fuller treatment of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit see my book *They Never Told Me This in Church!* There is a whole chapter dedicated to *Another Spirit*.

a divine wind (New Jerusalem Bible), an awesome wind, or even the power of God (TEV footnotes) swept over the waters.

The essential meaning of Genesis 1:2 then, is that the ruach of, or from, God is associated with His creative breath / activity. Creation arises out of God's operational presence and superintendence over our world. Translator convention has been to capitalise "Spirit" for the obvious reason that it's from God Himself.

Here in this first mention of the ruach of God we are told that His Spirit moved, hovered or fluttered over the waters. This is a Hebrew metaphor which likens the Spirit or Breath of God to a brooding hen or to a bird hovering in flight. The idea is that the ruach of God is His personal and operational power in creation. (Cf the Spirit's descent in the form of a dove upon Jesus at his baptism.)

Later God breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul (Gen.2: 7). Adam, as it were, inhaled life-giving sacred breath, holy Spirit from his Creator. Therefore, Adam received "God consciousness" as well as "soul" or "self-consciousness". Thus, as a living soul, Adam enjoyed the fellowship of God as well as interacting with all the physical sensations of the world around him.

This idea is expressed well when Job knew that, as long as my breath (ruach) is in me, and the Breath / Spirit (ruach) from God in my nostrils, then I will plead my cause (Job 27: 3).

We understand then, that the root meaning of the word ruach / spirit / wind / breath in the OT denotes the creative and powerful life-energy which emanates from God Himself towards His creation.

Thus, when David pleads with Yahweh; Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me he is asking for at least two or three things. In the anguish of his wickedness he has lost all sense of fellowship with God. He wants the joy of his salvation restored. He wants to once again know the conscious presence of God. He has also lost all sense of the power of God in his life necessary for him to perform his kingly calling, so he is probably also asking that God not disqualify him from being the "LORD'S anointed" — as had previously happened with King Saul's elimination. And thirdly, I think, he is perhaps so depressed and physically sick by guilt, that he feels he might die. So he may also be asking for God not to take away his very life's breath in death. (Cf Ps. 31: 10; 102: 1ff)

THE SPIRIT AND INSPIRATIONAL TRUTH

Whilst I am breathing I have life, I am moving, I can speak, I have "spirit"! By extension we understand that ruach came to refer to certain human emotions. Just as the air may be felt in quiet breathing, in a gentle breeze or in a cyclonic wind, so a man's "spirit" may be peaceable or violently angry — as seen in gentle, grieved, broken, or agitated emotions.

No wonder then, that the Hebrews regularly connected the **Ruach Yahweh** with the interchangeable concepts of S/spirit / air / breath / wind / word / truth and the like ...

To whom have you uttered words? And whose spirit was expressed through you (Job 26: 4). Words / spirit / breath / speech.

For as long as life is in me, and the breath of God is in my nostrils, my lips certainly will not speak unjustly (Job 27: 3-4). Breath / spirit / words / speech.

But it is a spirit (**ruach**) in man, and the breath (**ruach**) of the Almighty gives them understanding (teaching Job 32: 8). Spirit / breath / understanding.

The Spirit (**ruach**) of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue (2 Sam. 23: 2). Spirit / word / speech.

Behold, I will pour out my spirit (**ruach**) on you; I will make my words known to you (Prov. 1: 23). Spirit / words / knowledge.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath (**ruach**) of the LORD blows upon it ... the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever (Is. 40: 7-8). Spirit / breath / wind / word.

Now we understand why, when the Spirit of the LORD came upon the prophets, that they inevitably were moved to speak Yahweh's words ... **For prophecy did not come by the will of men, but by men who were pushed along by the holy Spirit (breath / wind) spoke from God ... (2 Pet. 1: 21) (My translation).** God's mind / breath became their inspirational words!

It is also said of Jesus that he was **speaking the words of God, for God does not give [him] the Spirit** (Greek = πνεῦμα / **pneuma**) **by measure** (Jn. 3: 34). The OT prophets spoke in limited portions by the motivational breath of God, but at last the Son speaks with final and complete truth, for God carries him along in the unlimited supply of His Spirit (cf **Heb. 1: 1**)! (²)

Ruach can mean a powerful, or even violent movement, resulting from the "breath" or "wind" of Yahweh in motion. When 'the Spirit of Yahweh' came upon an individual, he or she rose up to accomplish some important deed, if not a supernatural feat (e.g. **Judges 14: 6**).

PERSONIFICATION

The Hebrew was certainly not unaware that God's breath or Spirit was mysterious *in its operations*. Jesus himself said, **the wind (pneuma) blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes** (Jn. 3: 8). That's Jewish thinking! The wind is likened to a person who can choose to come or go as he pleases. All we can do is listen and watch which way it goes by its effects.

² Cf. **2 Tim. 3: 16** where the holy Scriptures are said to have been **given by the inspiration of God**. God expired His word (His breath) and the prophets inspired (breathed in) His spiritual words and wrote them down.

However, the line between metaphor and **personification** became a problem for the post-apostolic churches when thinking about the Spirit of God.

Kagan Chandler explains how the process happened: In the New Testament, because the Holy Spirit is a personal influence, the literary technique of personification is sometimes employed in its description. The spirit speaks (Jn. 16: 13), teaches (Jn 14: 26), can be outraged (Heb. 10:29), can be blasphemed against (Matt 12: 32), can be lied to (Acts 5: 4), and intercedes (Rom 8:26). But trinitarian apologists have chosen these personifications as their prime battlefield, and most arguments follow this line of reasoning:

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit” is Paul’s instruction to the Ephesian believers (Eph 4: 30). If the Holy Spirit were simply a power or a force, and not a person, he could not be grieved.

What they are really arguing is that because the Holy Spirit is presented as a thing both distinct from God and Jesus, and sometimes in personal terms, it must be a separate person who is not the Father or Jesus. **But the truth is that other persons’ spirits are described in the Bible using the literary technique of personification, and no distinct person is implied.** For example, in the OT we read:

But he would not grieve the spirit of Amnon his son, for he loved him ... (2 Sam 13:21).

Well might we ask; **Is Amnon’s spirit another person?** Not at all. As **Chandler** rightly observes, this kind of language is simply Hebrew idiom.

Another OT example will suffice to prove the point. In **2 Samuel 13: 39** we are told that *the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom*. **David** wished to personally comfort his son! There is no thought that *the spirit of the king* is a second David.

Grieving and longing are the same examples provided by Trinitarians as absolute proof that God’s spirit must be a distinct person. But *the spirit of Elijah* is not a separate person from Elijah (*Cf 2 Kgs 2: 15; Lk 1: 17*). Neither is *the spirit of the Father*. It is simply **not a biblical argument** that stands up under scrutiny. (³)

These examples prove that when modern day Bible versions propose the Holy Spirit is a separate Person from God the Father, they are haphazard to say the least, and just peddling plain disinformation at the worst! Greek thinking has transposed Hebrew personification into literal personhood.

GRAMMATICAL GENDER: IS THE ‘HOLY SPIRIT’ HE OR IT, WHO OR WHICH?

³ **THE GOD OF JESUS** In Light of Christian Dogma: *The Recovery of New Testament Theology*, Restoration Fellowship, 2016, pp 507 -509. (Boldface mine).

An astute reader may still observe, ‘But my Bible calls the Holy Spirit “He”. What do you say to that?’

Once again, this is a matter of proper translation. It comes down in large part to what we call “grammatical gender”. In the Greek language some nouns are ‘masculine’, some are ‘feminine’ and some are ‘neuter’. Personal pronouns referring to their nouns must be in the same grammatical gender and number.

So, the pronoun “she” may describe a biological person or an impersonal thing. For example, the Greek word for “road” is grammatically feminine, so the pronoun “she” is used — the road, she is long. Calling a road “she” does not mean the road is a person! (There are vestiges of this practice in English, for example, when sailors speak of a beautiful ship as “she” ... “Isn’t she beautiful?” ... when all along they are speaking of an “it”!).

So, gendered pronouns are not necessarily describing biological gender. This is a crucial translation matter for, in Greek, **a noun in the neuter *always* describes something impersonal** — an object, a force, an abstract principle, any *thing*. Putting that the other way round, a neuter noun is never a “he” or a “she”!

All we need to know for this exercise is that, ***in Greek, ‘neuter nouns’ are used only for impersonal things ... not for persons!*** That’s an inviolate rule. So the only question we need to ask is, what grammatical gender is ‘the holy Spirit’? The answer will hugely determine translation and doctrine. Is the Spirit “he” or “it”, “who” or “which”?

As Greek scholar **Jason Bedouhn** explains ; This is a case, then, where the importance of the principle of following primary, ordinary, generally recognized meaning of the Greek when translating becomes clear. **To take a word that everywhere else would be translated ‘which’ or ‘that’, and arbitrarily change it to ‘who’ or ‘whom’ when it happens to be used of ‘the holy spirit,’ is a kind of special pleading. In other words, it is a biased way to translate. And because this arbitrary change cannot be justified linguistically, it is also inaccurate.**

That’s a devastating observation concerning the way our modern Bible versions (mis)treat “the Holy Spirit”! **Bedouhn** illustrates his point from **Acts 5: 32** where your Bible probably reads, **we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.** **Bedouhn** correctly shows why this is an **inaccurate translation, cannot be justified linguistically, is arbitrary, biased, and is a case of special pleading.** It *should* be translated, **we are witnesses of these things, and so is the holy Spirit which God has given to those who obey him.**

Which faithfully translates the neuter relative pronoun for its antecedent is the neuter noun **S/spirit** — and remember, in Greek, nouns which are neuter are never persons! However, if you read a version such as the **KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, NLT, ESV, BEREAN STANDARD and LITERAL BIBLE, AMPLIFIED, etc., etc.,** you must realise the translators are **guided in this choice solely by a theological bias**

about the nature and character of the 'Holy Spirit' that **overrides accurate translation** when they call the Spirit "who". (⁴)

MANY EXAMPLES

Many examples of this inaccurate — **Bedouhn's special pleading!** — translation custom may be cited.

Romans 8: 15 ... For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father" (NKJV). A number of translation 'suggestions' here are inaccurate:-

First, there is no definite article before S/spirit. It reads that we have not received **a spirit of bondage** but we **have received a spirit of adoption**.

Second, why capitalise **the Spirit** in one instance and not the other? Were the translators to be consistent, they would also capitalise the Spirit of slavery! But of course, that's plain nonsense. **The spirit of slavery** is contrasted with **the spirit of adoption** or **sonship**. Two different modes of existence, two contrasting attitudes and conditions are being compared – not a Person with a condition.

Third, the Spirit did not adopt us into the family of God. Our Father did.

Fourth, there is **no by whom**. In the Greek it reads **by which** or **in which** (ἐν ᾧ ... a dative singular neuter relative pronoun (to agree with the neuter 'spirit') which as we have seen, cannot refer to a person, cannot be a 'He'! Remember, neuter nouns always refer to non-persons.) This leads us to the next example.

Romans 8: 26 ... We do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered. Now he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God (NASB, NKJV, etc.)

Again, the phrase **the Spirit himself** is a case of translator 'commentary' — my euphemism for **Bedouhn's theological bias**. The apostle wrote in good Greek, **the S/spirit itself**. But, even so, the question remains; Is Paul referring to the Spirit of God or to our own human spirit when he talks about the mind of the Spirit? Perhaps a comparison with **1 Corinthians 2** might shed needed light ...

THE SPIRIT AS MIND

Here is a passage of Scripture which draws all of this together by comparing the enlightenment of the Spirit of God with the spirit (or the mind) of man:

Just as it is written, 'Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him.' For to us God revealed them through the Spirit (**pneuma**); for the Spirit (**pneuma**) searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit (**pneuma**) of the man, which is in him? Even so, the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have

⁴ **TRUTH IN TRANSLATION**, pp 140-141 (Boldface mine and thanks to **Patrick Navas** for his outstanding book **DIVINE TRUTH OR HUMAN TRADITION? A Reconstruction of the Roman Catholic-Protestant Doctrine of the Trinity in Light of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures** for this quote on p 486).

received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which (to agree with the Greek neuter and not “Who” as you probably read in your Bible version) is from God that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit ...

For, ‘Who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ (I Cor. 2: 9-13).

The Spirit of God and the spirit of man are analogous. Just as your mind is not another you, so God’s mind is not another God-person! The same word “spirit” (*pneuma*) is used for both the mind of God and the mind of man.

Dr. Moule in his *The Holy Spirit* observes; ... the divine Spirit touches (or even coincides or coalesces with?) man’s spirit. God’s self-consciousness, if one may venture the term, becomes man’s self-consciousness, so that man is enabled to think God’s thoughts after him ... For the moment, comparison of Ps. 51 and 1 Cor. 2 has shown that Hebrew and Christian monotheism, for all its recognition of God’s transcendence and majesty ... required the recognition of an analogy between God’s ‘self-knowledge’ and man’s, between God’s Spirit and man’s spirit. (⁵)

We conclude that just as “the spirit of man” is not a separate person within a man, but represents the animating principle of his mind, just so, God’s Spirit is not a separate person within the Being of God, but His Self-consciousness, His mind.

So, in Romans 8 the S/spirit’s intercessions from deep within our hearts is the wonderful interaction of God Himself with our own minds and so the groanings which result in deep intercessory prayer are according to the will of God. There is no teaching here about a so-called Person of the Holy Spirit praying.

Have you known, do you know, this ‘deep calling to deep’? Oh, there is nothing like it. To know that your spirit is in tune with the very Breath / Spirit of the Living God! You are breathing in harmony with the Father and the Son. You know, as Jesus said it would be, the Father and the Son dwelling with you by the inspiration of the Spirit of truth. You have the mind of Christ!

Another example. Jude 20 exhorts us to build yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit (NKJV). Again, we ask, why capitalise the Holy Spirit? In context, Jude is contrasting the attitude of believers with those he just pointed out who are mockers of God, complainers, full of lustful passions, people who flatter with their words to gain profit from others. They cause divisions and are devoid of the Spirit. These folk do not have the mind of God ... But you beloved ... praying in a spirit of holiness ...

Jude is telling us that we are to pray in a spirit / mind that is sanctified. It’s the old question the Psalmist once posed: LORD, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in your holy hill? Answer: He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; He who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbour, nor does he take up a reproach against his

⁵ p. 9-10, and once again I am indebted to Patrick Navas, Op Cit. p490.

friend. In whose eyes a vile person is despised, But he honours those who fear the LORD ... (Ps. 15).

In other words, **Jude** says we are to pray with a life, a mind, a heart, that is pleasing to God ... **praying in a spirit of holiness and sanctification!** One thing is for sure. Nowhere are we exhorted to pray **to** the Holy Spirit! It's always in or by a holy spirit in ourselves that is in tune with the Spirit of the LORD our Father.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE “OTHER COMFORTER”?

But didn't Jesus say that he would give us **another Comforter** who would be our Helper ... “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper that **He** may be with you forever, **even** the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him, but you know him for he dwells with you ...” (John 14: 16-17 NKJV, NASB, NRSV, NIV, etc.)?

By now you should be properly able to address this. It boils down to a matter of translation. You already know that the noun **Comforter / Helper** in Greek is a masculine noun. Therefore, the pronouns which follow this noun must agree in gender and number. “**Whom**” and “**he**” correspond grammatically with the masculine **παράκλητος / paraklētos**, the **Comforter**.

However, Jesus himself tells us that he is personifying the S/spirit as the Helper. He explains, **And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another helper** (masculine noun), **that he** (masculine pronoun to agree with masculine antecedent) **may be with you forever, that is, the S/spirit** (neuter noun) **of truth** **which** (neuter relative pronoun to agree with Spirit) **the world cannot receive because it does not behold it or know it but you know it because it remains with you and will be in you** (Jn. 14: 16-17). (⁶)

Jesus is using a regular Hebrew idiom where the Helper is a personification of the spirit of truth. Helper is a grammatical masculine noun but not necessarily a male person. Other factors must be taken into consideration.

What Jesus said here accords perfectly with the requirement of grammatical grammar! It has nothing to do with the theological construction of a third person within a Triune God. It is the risen Jesus whose truth will be mediated by the Father's **ruach / Spirit** which fortifies and comforts.

It's no different to where the **spirit of truth and the spirit of error** are contrasted (1 Jn 4: 6). No translator capitalises **the Spirit of Error** for the obvious reason that there is no such person! Consistency demands the same for **John 14:16-17**.

To possess the Spirit then, is to be controlled by the mind of Christ — God's truth. It is to have the life, the hope, the power, and the truth of Christ's gospel operating within us.

⁶ “It” (αὐτό) is the correct translation agreeing with the neuter noun “S/spirit”. τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας ὃ ὁ κόσμος οὐ δύναται λαβεῖν ὅτι οὐ θεωρεῖ αὐτό οὐδὲ γινώσκει· αὐτό ὑμεῖς δὲ γινώσκετε αὐτό, ὅτι παρ’ ὑμῖν μένει καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν ἔσται.

CONCLUSION

We have come full circle. The **Ruach Yahweh** is God's operational power and presence in this world, right from the 'Law of First Mention' in **Genesis 1: 2**. From the very beginning in **Genesis 1: 2** translators face the issue as to whether the **ruach** is best translated as S/spirit / breath / air / wind. And it's always "the Spirit of God" or "God's holy Spirit" and only twice in the OT is it **Your holy Spirit** or **His holy Spirit**. We search in vain for the term "God the Spirit"! "He" is not there!

That said, Hebrew idiom is not afraid to use metaphor or even personification when the Spirit of God is in operation. The Spirit is Yahweh God Himself in action.

Sadly, our translations in some key texts in the NT don't follow the hermeneutical guidelines where grammatical gender does not necessarily indicate biological gender. Translation biases have been imposed for the sake of theological special pleading.

In this way, our modern Bible versions break the clear foundational nexus between the OT and NT when it comes to the doctrine of the Spirit of God.

Translation is the subtlest form of commentary!