

The Holy Spirit and Translation Bias

A Smoking Gun of Trinity Mischief (1)

by Sean Finnegan

Translators have historically held incredible power to influence millions of Bible-readers over the eons. Many impressive developments have occurred in the field of textual criticism and lexicology over the last century. Today we can access dozens of English translations, Greek interlinears, and lexical aids online for free. In no other age have Christians had better access to biblical tools for personal study than today. Even so, rather surprisingly, many Bibles contain wild distortions, especially on texts related to dogmas long ago etched in the stone of infallible tradition. The uninformed Christian walking into a local bookstore sees dozens of Bible translations lining the shelves and picks the one that best meets his or her needs—the Green Bible, the Extreme Teen Bible, the American Patriot’s Bible, the Catholic Holy Bible, the Archeology Study Bible, the Life Application Study Bible, and so on. The number of translations produced in the last sixty years is even more impressive. Here are some of the major ones in chronological order.

Name	Abbr.	Date(s)
New World Translation	NWT	1950, 1960, 1984
Revised Standard Version	RSV	1952
Tanakh	JP	1963
Amplified Bible	AB	1965
Jerusalem Bible	JB	1966
New American Bible	NAB	1970
New English Bible	NEB	1970
Living Bible	LB	1971
New American Standard Bible	NASB	1971, 1995
Good News Bible	TEV	1976, 1992
New International Version	NIV	1978, 1984, 2011
New King James Version	NKJV	1983
New Jerusalem Bible	NJB	1985
Tanakh	JPS	1985, 1992, 2003
New Revised Standard Version	NRSV	1989
Contemporary English Version	CEV	1995

New Living Translation	NLT	1996
Complete Jewish Bible	CJB	1998
English Standard Version	ESV	2001, 2007, 2011
Message	MSG	2002
Holman Christian Standard Bible	HCSB	2004
New English Translation	NET	2005
Today's New International Version	TNIV	2005
Orthodox Study Bible	OSB	2008

Although most of these Bibles stay relatively true to the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in most places, nearly all of them still have significant blind spots that subtly lean readers towards a Trinitarian theology. In what follows I intend to expose one of the smoking guns of text tampering as it relates to the holy spirit. I want to delve into the world of how translators go about their task, of how Greek grammar translates into English, and how theology consciously or unconsciously gets injected into translations. In particular, I am interested in exposing one of the most flagrant (mis)translation practices found in virtually all English Bibles: rendering impersonal Greek pronouns as personal in English when referring to the holy spirit. What I present here is neither sectarian nor ground breaking. Anyone who can read Greek can verify what I am saying. I will cite mainstream Trinitarian scholars to backup these very points. Yet, since one cannot grasp the issue at hand without some cursory knowledge of Greek grammar, we will begin with a brief overview of the basics.

Gender and Pronouns in Greek Grammar

In English nouns do not have gender. For example the word “table” is neither masculine nor feminine. It is a thing not a person, an “it” not a “he” or a “she.” However, in Greek, as with many other languages, nouns do have gender. The Greek word for table “τράπεζα” (trapeza) is feminine. Thus, when employing a pronoun to refer back to “table” in Greek, one would say “she” rather than “it.” This has nothing to do with how masculine or feminine the table in question might be. One could have a rustic, manly picnic table, and we would still refer to it as “she” in Greek. However, when translating a sentence into English, we would change the word “she” to “it” since that is how English works. Here is an example.

Ἡ τράπεζα ἐστὶν ἀγαθὴ ὅτι **αὐτὴ** ἐστὶν ἰσχυρά.

The table is good because **it** (lit. “she”) is strong.

Even though the word “αὐτὴ” (afte) really means “she” we translate it as “it” in English because English does not use personal pronouns for things. So even if we usually translate gender out from most pronouns, we generally preserve the grammatical gender for neuter words. So if something is an “it” in Greek, it remains an “it” in English, but if something is a “he” or “she” in Greek, we change it to an “it” in English if the antecedent is a thing rather than a person. However, just like any language, Greek allows for breaking the rules in certain situations.

One such case occurs when a neuter noun is used for a person or a group of individuals.¹ In the following example Paul uses the grammatically feminine word “head” for Christ, yet when he uses a pronoun to refer back, he chooses a masculine one.

Colossians 2.19

καὶ οὐ κρατῶν **τὴν κεφαλὴν**, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαζόμενον αὖξει τὴν αὔξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ.

and not holding to **the head** (feminine), from **whom** (masculine) the whole body being supplied and held together through joints and ligaments grows the growth (which is) from God.

The words τὴν κεφαλὴν (the head) are feminine, yet the relative pronoun, οὗ (of whom), is masculine rather than feminine. It would have been grammatically correct to use the feminine word ἧς (of whom), but since the antecedent, “head,” refers to a person (i.e. Christ), Paul broke the rules of grammar to communicate more naturally—after all Christ is not a “she.” This phenomenon occurs many times throughout the New Testament.² Here is one more example:

Matthew 25.32

καὶ συναχθήσονται ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ πάντα **τὰ ἔθνη**, καὶ ἀφορίσει **αὐτούς** ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων, ὡς περὶ ὁ ποιμὴν ἀφορίζει τὰ πρόβατα ἀπὸ τῶν ἐρίφων,

and all **the nations** (neuter) will be gathered together before him, and he will divide **them** (masculine) from one another, as the shepherd divides the sheep from the goats,

Here the phrase “τὰ ἔθνη” (the nations) is neuter, but Matthew refers to them using the masculine αὐτούς (them) rather than the neuter αὐτά (them). He does so because “the nations” are groups of people, not things, and it sounds more natural to refer to nations as masculine rather than neuter.

So, if the New Testament writers could bend gender from impersonal to personal when neuter words referred to persons, then we should expect the same sort of anomaly in reference to the spirit—if they really did believe the spirit was a person.

Key Texts Analyzed

What follows is a collection of key texts in which the holy spirit is referenced using pronouns in English translations. Every one of these texts is an example where one of the very best and most literal English versions—the NASB—chose to use personal pronouns to refer to the spirit. Yet, in *every* case the Greek words are actually neuter!

John 6.63 [NA27]

John 6.63 [Literal]

John 6.63 [NASB]

τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν **τὸ** ζωοποιῶν, ἡ σὰρξ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ οὐδέν...

the spirit is **that which** gives life, the flesh does not benefit anything...

It is the Spirit **who** gives life; the flesh profits nothing...

¹ For much of this discussion I am indebted to Daniel Wallace’s fine treatment of pneumatology in his article “Greek Grammar and the Personality of the Holy Spirit,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13.1 (2003) 97-125, Institute for Biblical Research, 2003.

² i.e. Matthew 28.19; Mark 9.26; Acts 21.36; Galatians 4.19. See *ibid.* for a much more extensive list.

John 7.39 [NA27]

ταῦτο δὲ εἶπεν περὶ τοῦ πνεύματος ὃ ἐμελλόν λαμβάνειν οἱ πιστεύσαντες εἰς αὐτόν...

John 7.39 [Literal]

but this he spoke concerning the spirit **which** those who believed on him (were) about to receive...

John 7.39 [NASB]

But this He spoke of the Spirit, **whom** those who believed in Him were to receive...

Acts 5.32 [NA27]

καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν μάρτυρες τῶν ῥημάτων τούτων καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ὃ ἔδωκεν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς πειθαρχοῦσιν αὐτῷ.

Acts 5.32 [Literal]

and we are witnesses of these words and the holy spirit **which** God gave to those who obey him

Acts 5.32 [NASB]

And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey Him.

Acts 8.15-16 [NA27]

ἄτινες καταβάντες προσήξατο περὶ αὐτῶν ὅπως λάβωσιν πνεῦμα ἅγιον· οὐδέπω γὰρ ἦν ἐπ' οὐδενὶ αὐτῶν ἐπιπεπτωκός...

Acts 8.15-16 [Literal]

who, having come down, prayed for them so that they may receive holy spirit; for **it has** not yet **fallen** upon any of them...

Acts 8.15-16 [NASB]

who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For **He had** not yet **fallen** upon any of them...

Romans 8.16 [NA27]

αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα συμμαρτυρεῖ τῷ πνεύματι ἡμῶν ὅτι ἐσμεν τέκνα θεοῦ.

Romans 8.16 [Literal]

the spirit **itself** testifies together with our spirit that we are children of God.

Romans 8.16 [NASB]

The Spirit **Himself** testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,

1 Corinthians 2.12 [NA27]

ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ...

1 Corinthians 2.12 [Literal]

but we did not receive the spirit of the world but the spirit **which** (is) from God...

1 Corinthians 2.12 [NASB]

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit **who** is from God...

1 John 5.6 [NA27]

..καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ἐστὶν τὸ μαρτυροῦν, ὅτι τὸ πνεῦμα ἐστὶν ἡ ἀλήθεια.

1 John 5.6 [Literal]

...and the spirit is **that which** testifies, because the spirit is the truth.

1 John 5.6 [NASB]

...It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

As we can see from these texts, the Bible employs neuter (not masculine) pronouns to refer to the holy spirit. However, due to an ambiguity in the Greek language, there are some instances where the neuter and masculine forms of a word are the same. Here are some relevant examples:

Romans 5.5 [NA27]	Romans 5.5 [Literal]	Romans 5.5 [NASB]
ἡ δὲ ἐλπίς οὐ κατασχύνει, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκέχυται ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου τοῦ δοθέντος ἡμῖν.	but the hope does not put to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the holy spirit which/whom has been given to us.	and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.
Ephesians 4.30 [NA27]	Ephesians 4.30 [Literal]	Ephesians 4.30 [NASB]
καὶ μὴ λυπεῖτε τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἐν ᾧ ἐσφραγίσθητε...	and do not grieve God's holy spirit, by which/whom you have been sealed...	Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed...
2 Timothy 1.14 [NA27]	2 Timothy 1.14 [Literal]	2 Timothy 1.14 [NASB]
τὴν καλὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου τοῦ ἐνοικοῦντος ἐν ἡμῖν.	Guard the good deposit through holy spirit which/who is dwelling in you.	Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to <i>you</i> .
1 John 3.24 [NA27]	1 John 3.24 [Literal]	1 John 3.24 [NASB]
...καὶ ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκωμεν ὅτι μένει ἐν ἡμῖν, ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος οὗ ἡμῖν ἔδωκεν.	...and by this we know that he abides in us, from the spirit which/who he gave to us.	...We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

Each time the bolded word(s) could be translated “who” rather than “which” since masculine and neuter forms are identical in these cases. However, all we need to do is look at the noun to which the pronoun or participle refers to find out which is intended. In every instance, the noun is πνεῦμα (spirit), itself neuter, and this easily determines which gender the other word is. So, translators should render each of these in English as “which” in keeping with grammatical consistency. We will return to see how English Bibles translate these unambiguous texts in a moment. First we need to consider what the translation committees themselves set for standards.

Translator Standards

Since most people do not have any way of testing how trustworthy a Bible is, they depend on what the translation committees say they intended to accomplish. Here I will quote from just a few of the most popular Bibles in current bookstores to show what their translation philosophies are:

The Lockman Foundation (NASB)³

The *New American Standard Bible* translation team adhered to the literal philosophy of translation. This is the most exacting and demanding method of translation, and requires a word-for-word translation that is accurate and precise, yet easily readable. This philosophy of translation follows the word and sentence patterns of the original authors so that the reader is free to understand God's message as the Holy Spirit leads....

First published in its complete form in 1971, the *NASB* is excellent for Bible study because it aims at a precise translation of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. As such, it renders, where practical, the original order of words and phrases. In passages where this literalness produces unacceptable English, the translators used modern English idioms and indicated the literal renderings in marginal notes.”

The Biblical Studies Foundation (NET)⁴

The NET Bible is a completely new translation of the Bible with 60,932 translators’ notes! It was completed by more than 25 scholars – experts in the original biblical languages – who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. Turn the pages and see the breadth of the translators’ notes, documenting their decisions and choices as they worked. The translators’ notes make the original languages far more accessible, allowing you to look over the translator’s shoulder at the very process of translation. This level of documentation is a first for a Bible translation, making transparent the textual basis and the rationale for key renderings (including major interpretive options and alternative translations). This unparalleled level of detail helps connect people to the Bible in the original languages in a way never before possible without years of study of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It unlocks the riches of the Bible’s truth from entirely new perspectives.

Committee on Bible Translation (NIV)⁵

...the translators were united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God’s Word in written form...The first concern of the translators has been the accuracy of the translation and its fidelity to the thought of the biblical writers. They have weighed the lexical and grammatical details of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts.

National Council of Churches (NRSV)⁶

Many of us pay scant attention to the Bible translation we use, and yet we all want the most accurate and readable translation available for our study and devotional use. That Bible translation is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Widely recognized by scholars and religious authorities as the most accurate translation, it is also the direct successor of the beloved King James Bible, following in that Bible’s tradition of elegant, readable prose. As a

³ <http://www.lockman.org/nasb/nasbprin.php>

⁴ <http://bible.org/article/preface-net-bible>

⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1995), p. xi.

⁶ <http://www.nrsv.net/about/about-nrsv/>

literal translation rather than a paraphrase, the NRSV leaves interpretation in the hands of the reader.

Notice how they are all committed to accuracy of translation. None of them indicates that their commitment is first to a creed or tradition over and above reliable translation. As a result, we should see these versions rendering the texts I listed above using impersonal pronouns, since that is what the Greek says. Let's see how they do.

Putting the Translations to the Test

Imagine someone jumps online and accesses the most popular and well received translations to investigate the meaning of Acts 5.32 and they check fifteen translations:

NA27⁷

καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν μάρτυρες τῶν ῥημάτων τούτων καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ὃ ἔδωκεν ὁ θεὸς τοῖς πειθαρχοῦσιν αὐτῷ.

NJB

We are witnesses to this, we and the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey him.'

KJV

And we are his witnesses of these things; and *so is* also the Holy Ghost, **whom** God hath given to them that obey him.

NRSV

And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NWT

And we are witnesses of these matters, and so is the holy spirit, **which** God has given to those obeying him as ruler."

CEV

We are here to tell you about all this, and so is the Holy Spirit, **who** is God's gift to everyone who obeys God.

RSV

And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NLT

We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, **who** is given by God to those who obey him."

AB

And we are witnesses of these things, and the Holy Spirit is also, **Whom** God has bestowed on those who obey Him.

CJB

We are witnesses to these things; so is the Ruach HaKodesh, **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

⁷ The Nestle Aland 27th edition is the standard Greek text translators use for the New Testament (same as the United Bible Societies' fourth edition).

NAB

We are witnesses of these things, as is the holy Spirit **that** God has given to those who obey him."

ESV

And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NASB

"And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey Him."

MSG

And we are witnesses to these things. The Holy Spirit, **whom** God gives to those who obey him, corroborates every detail."

TEV

We are witnesses to these things—we and the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to those who obey him."

HCSB

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey Him."

NIV

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NET

And we are witnesses of these events, and so is the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

NKJV

"And we are His witnesses to these things, and *so also is* the Holy Spirit **whom** God has given to those who obey Him."

TNIV

We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, **whom** God has given to those who obey him."

After seeing that eighteen of these nineteen translations personalize the holy spirit by capitalizing Spirit (most capitalize Holy as well) and that seventeen out of the nineteen use "who" or "whom" to refer back to holy spirit, what would someone conclude? Of course, they would go with the majority. Besides, the only translations that differ on this point are the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Translation and the Roman Catholic's New American Bible—the very two sources that evangelicals and Protestants are trained never to trust! In fact, the New World Translation does not even appear on major Bible websites (or in BibleWorks), so access to it is limited. What is so shocking is that the Greek very clearly reads "the holy spirit **which** God gave..." There is no ambiguity or confusing grammar to cloud the question. It is as plain as day, and any first year New Testament Greek student could easily verify it.

The most frustrating aspect of this chicanery is that these translations mislead honest-hearted men and women who simply want to read and understand the Scriptures. What is more, most Bible readers implicitly trust the scholars who produce translations in the same way that most people trust doctors or school teachers. This is partly due to the impressive verbiage we saw above in their translation philosophies. The NASB team “adhered to the literal philosophy of translation” and required “a word-for-word translation that is accurate and precise,” yet, they literally did not translate the word “ὃ” as “which.” The NET boasts that its nearly 61,000 translators’ notes enable readers to “look over the translator’s shoulder” and make “transparent the textual basis and the rationale for key renderings (including major interpretive options and alternative translations).” However, when I look at the footnotes on Acts 5.32, I see nothing whatsoever indicating they flat out changed a word to make their translation more palatable. Ironically, Daniel Wallace was one of the primary scholars involved in the NET and his paper on this subject exposes this very issue. The NIV committee stated that they were committed “to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God’s Word in written form,” yet they corrected the infallible Scripture in their translation to read “whom” instead of “which.” Isn’t a correction the result of an error? But, if Scripture is infallible, why is the NIV correcting it? Lastly, the NRSV claims it is “the most accurate and readable translation” and that it “leaves interpretation in the hands of the reader.” Yet, in this verse (and many others like it), it obscures the meaning of the text and does not so much as leave a footnote indicating their decision.

So if the Greek is clear, why do nearly all of these translations get it wrong? Why do all of these translations think the simple word ὃ (which) is really ὃν (whom)?

How This Works in Our Favor

The fact that nearly all modern translations change the text so that it supports their doctrine about the third person of the Trinity is actually evidence that the Bible does not teach that the holy spirit is a person. This whole issue smacks of anachronism. Of course neither Jesus nor Paul would say something like, “God the Spirit” or “the third person of the Trinity” or “three persons in one essence” because this kind of language did not yet exist! Pneumatology slowly evolved into full blown Trinitarianism over centuries of reflection. It was not until a.d. 381 that some Christians officially recognized the holy spirit as an equal person of God in the Constantinopolitan Creed. Since the theologians cannot find any of this terminology in Scripture, they tweak the translation to ensure compliance with their beliefs. This dastardly act needs to be exposed so that doubt can be cast on the doctrine of the personhood of the holy spirit. These mistranslated pronouns are like make-up covering a large pimple. If we can help people see through this deception, they just may turn away from the dogmatic deception that has held sway for so many centuries and instead simplify their piety and come to worship the true God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, rather than some three-headed Cerberus.