

The Spirit Speaks and the Wind Blows: The Primary Meaning of Πνεῦμα in John 3:8

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Abstract

This paper addresses the double-meaning of Spirit and wind in John 3:8 and argues that the verse should be translated in terms of the Spirit. The study begins with an analysis of the Greek text of John 3:8. It is demonstrated that even though a double-meaning is present, the more appropriate interpretation is the Spirit reading. Arguments in favor of the wind interpretation of John 3:8 are also addressed. Following this, the study surveys all usages of John 3:8 in the early church writings. It is concluded that in the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, the text was interpreted with the Spirit. It is also concluded that the vast majority of Nicene and Ante-Nicene church fathers understood John 3:8 with the Spirit. Therefore, it is suggested that the recent preference of the wind meaning, which is evident in many current English translations, should be revised such that the Spirit reading becomes primary.

Keywords: Πνεῦμα, Pneuma, Spirit, Translation, Wind

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas makna ganda dari Roh dan angin dalam Yohanes 3:8 dan berpendapat bahwa ayat tersebut harus diterjemahkan dalam istilah Roh. Studi dimulai dengan analisis teks Yunani Yohanes 3:8. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun makna ganda terlihat, penafsiran yang lebih tepat adalah Roh. Argumen yang mendukung interpretasi angin dari Yohanes 3:8 juga dibahas. Kemudian, penelitian ini juga mensurvei semua penggunaan Yohanes 3:8 dalam tulisan-tulisan gereja mula-mula. Disimpulkan bahwa dalam tulisan-tulisan para Bapa-bapa *Ante-Nicene*, teks tersebut ditafsirkan dalam hubungannya dengan Roh. Juga disimpulkan bahwa sebagian besar bapa gereja Nicea dan Ante-Nicene memahami Yohanes 3:8 dalam hubungannya dengan Roh. Oleh karena itu, disarankan bahwa preferensi terbaru dari arti angin, yang terbukti dalam banyak terjemahan bahasa Inggris saat ini, harus direvisi sedemikian rupa sehingga pembacaan Roh menjadi yang utama.

Kata-kata Kunci: Angin, Πνεῦμα, Pneuma, Roh, Terjemahan.

Introduction

It is well-known that the author of John's Gospel employed a number of expressions of double-meaning.¹ One such example of a text with a double meaning is John 3:8, in which there is a wordplay on πνεῦμα and several other words, such that the verse could be translated as describing the actions of the "Spirit" or the "wind". There is little doubt that both meanings are present in the text. John's gospel routinely describes the Spirit's work by means of several metaphors,² and so there is little doubt that the play on words is intentional. Indeed, some commentators have even categorised the verse as a parable.³

The question of how the text should be translated, however, requires some consideration, given that the nuances of the Greek text are not present in the English language. In recent decades, there has been near unanimity that the verse should be translated primarily in relation to the wind.⁴ While there have been some dissenting voices,⁵ the vast majority of recent scholarship has supported that the "wind" translation of John 3:8.⁶ This paper challenges this view, and instead argues in favour of the text being translated in terms of the Spirit.

¹ For a brief survey of some literature pertaining to this subject, see E. Richard, "Expressions of Double Meaning and Their Function in the Gospel of John," *NTS* 31 (1985): 96-97.

² Silva lists these as birth from above (John 3:5-8); new creation (John 20:22), life-giving bread (John 6:63) and life-giving water (John 4:14; 7:38-39). Further examples are also seen in other Johannine writings. See Silva, *NIDNTTE* 3:820.

³ See, for example, Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* (Kent: Burn & Oates, 1982), 1:373 and Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 176.

⁴ Modern translations which translate the verse in terms of wind include: the *New International Version*, the *New Living Translation*, the *English Standard Version*, the *New English Translation* and the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁵ Most notably J. D. Thomas, "A Translation Problem—John 3:8." *RQ* 24 (1981): 219-224.

⁶ See, for example, George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2nd ed.; WBC; Dallas: Word, 1999), 43, 49; Borchert, *John 1-11*, 176-177; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 197-198; Joseph Dongell, *John: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997), 70; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:555-558; Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004) 124-125, Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 110; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 2005), 146; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, (NICNT; Grand

Method

For the purposes of this study, the historical-grammatical approach has been adopted for the analysis of John 3:8 (and its immediate context). Following this, the translation history of the text in question has been examined, with particular attention given to the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene writings.

Results and Discussion

The Text of John 3:8

The text of John 3:8 reads: τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις, ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδας πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει· οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος.

As mentioned above, the text can be translated in (at least) two ways:

- 1) The wind blows where it wants, and you hear its sound, but you do not know from where it comes or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.
- 2) The Spirit breathes where he wants, and you hear his voice, but you do not know from where he comes or where he goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

The differences between these two translations center on how one interprets τὸ πνεῦμα (the wind/the Spirit), θέλει (it wants/he wants), πνεῖ (blows/breathes), τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ (its sounds/his voice), ἔρχεται (it comes/he comes) and ὑπάγει (it goes/he goes). Each of these terms requires some discussion.

The word which seemingly exerts the most influence over how John 3:8 should be translated is πνεῦμα, which, as mentioned above, has a substantial semantic range. Indeed, there are at least seven meanings

Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 187–188; Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (BST; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 76; Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary* (trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 129; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 220; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 33 and Merrill C. Tenney, “John,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 47.

that can be attributed to πνεῦμα in the New Testament and other early Christian literature,⁷ though in the case of John 3:8, there is little question that the context dictates that the word be either translated “Spirit” or “wind”.

Significantly, of the 24 times πνεῦμα appears in John’s gospel, it usually refers to the Holy Spirit (17 times), and it never refers to wind.⁸ Similarly, when one examines the 379 occurrences of πνεῦμα throughout the New Testament, it becomes clear that the word is usually used in relation to the Holy Spirit (over 250 times).⁹ It is never used in relation to wind, except in the case of one quotation from the Septuagint (Heb 1:7). While this does not in itself demonstrate that πνεῦμα in John 3:8 must be translated “Spirit”, it does mean that there must be a significant weight of evidence if one is to use a translation that is almost never seen throughout the remainder of the New Testament (and never in John’s writings). Thomas’ study supports this contention; he notes that “... by NT times the meaning of *pneuma* had changed away from *wind*, and so we would expect any occurrence in the NT of the meaning as *wind* to be very unusual and in need of explanation.”¹⁰

Additionally, the context itself seems to dictate that “Spirit” is the more appropriate translation. The topic under discussion is that of being born of the Spirit. There are five uses of πνεῦμα in John 3:5-8 – more than any other single passage in John’s gospel – and two of these occurrences are seen in verse 8. A consistent and logical approach would be to translate πνεῦμα in the same way. Indeed, as Bernard has observed, “πνεῦμα at the beginning of the verse must refer to the same subject as πνεύματος at its close, and in vv. 5, 6.”¹¹ The subject under discussion is the Spirit, and as such it is difficult to see why the text should be translated differently.

There are some scholars who do not see the Holy Spirit in view at all in John 3:5-8, and instead argue that πνεῦμα references are “... probably not to the person of the Holy Spirit but to the spiritual (rather

⁷ Walter Bauer, “πνεῦμα,” *BDAG* 832-836.

⁸ See John 1:32-33; 3:5-6, 8, 34; 6:63 (x1); 7:39; 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; 20:22. The word is used for other meanings in John 4:23-24; 6:63 (x1); 11:33; 13:21; 19:30.

⁹ Silva, *NIDNTTE* 3:807.

¹⁰ Thomas, “A Translation Problem—John 3:8” 220.

¹¹ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (ICC; edited by A. H. McNeile; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), 1:107

than material) nature of the birth required for entrance into God's kingdom."¹² Thus, the reference to being born again in 3:3 should be understood as being "born of water and spirit" (rather than the Spirit).¹³ While this is a minority position, it is relevant for this study since if it is to be preferred, it makes little sense to read John 3:8 as anything but a reference to the wind.¹⁴ It does, however, seem likely that the Holy Spirit is in view in John 3:5-8, particularly when one considers that the Old Testament background to John 3:5 is Ezekiel 36:25-27, which "presages God's cleansing of human hearts with water and their inner transformation by his Spirit."¹⁵ The Ezekiel text explicitly describes divine action in which God promises to "put my Spirit in you" (Ezek 36:27). It therefore seems likely that "Spirit" rather than "spirit" is a more suitable translation. It is also notable that all previous references to πνεῦμα in John's Gospel have referenced the Spirit (John 1:32, 33), so the reader is inclined to attribute this meaning to John 3:5-8. Finally, as is apparent in the following survey of the early church literature, the overwhelming understanding of the text throughout the early church was that it was a reference to the Spirit. It is difficult to imagine how the myriad of references to John 3:8 could have all missed the point.

The use of πνεῦμα in conjunction with ἔρχομαι is also noteworthy. When πνεῦμα refers to the Holy Spirit, the two words are rarely seen together outside of John's gospel.¹⁶ That is, John's gospel in particular describes the activity of the Spirit in terms of the verb ἔρχομαι.¹⁷ Significantly, there are no New Testament references to wind coming (ἔρχομαι). Similarly, one sees a number of references to divine "going" in

¹² Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (NSBT; edited by D. A. Carson; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 94.

¹³ Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*, 94.

¹⁴ That is, it makes little sense to translate John 3:8 as "the spirit breathes where it wants, and you hear its voice, but you do not know from where it comes or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit."

¹⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger, "John," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 434.

¹⁶ Mat 3:16; Acts 19:6. See also Luk 2:27.

¹⁷ See John 15:26 and John 16:13, as well as the verse under discussion.

John's gospel (ὑπάγω),¹⁸ though one never sees ὑπάγω used in relation to wind, either in John's gospel or the entire New Testament corpus.

In contrast to this position, Carson argues that the "... mention of origin and destination are ... more appropriately applied to the wind."¹⁹ He does not, however, provide any substantiating arguments for his position, so it is difficult to know in what sense wind can be "appropriately" described as having an origin and destination, particularly since this type of description is more consistent with John's portrayal of the Spirit (see above). In any case, the language of John 3:8 points more to coming and going (ἔρχομαι and ὑπάγω) rather than "origin and destination," which most certainly "appropriately" characterizes the nature of the Spirit.

The word θέλει (it wants/he wants) also seems to support the contention of this study. Interestingly, the word θέλω is never used in the New Testament with πνεῦμα as its subject outside of this verse. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the fundamental meaning of θέλω (which centres on desiring/wanting)²⁰ makes the most sense when read in relation to the person of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who desires/wants. It makes little sense to characterize wind as desiring/wanting anything, and so it makes little sense to translate the verse this way.

Some commentators argue that the phrase τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ makes better sense if it translated in terms of the sound of the wind ("its sound") rather than the Spirit's voice ("his voice"). Michaels, for example, argues that φωνή is "far more easily understood as the sound of the wind than as the 'voice' of the Holy Spirit."²¹ He does not, however, offer any supporting arguments. The present study takes the opposite view; it makes far more sense to interpret τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ in relation to the voice of the Spirit. There are several reasons for this:

1) The word φωνή is never used to describe the sound of wind, either in the New Testament or the Old Testament, even though the sound of

¹⁸ John 7:33; 8:14, 21, 22; 13:3, 33, 36; 14:4, 5, 28. Admittedly all of these references are to Jesus, though this is unsurprising given John's emphasis on the sending of the Spirit (rather than his going).

¹⁹ Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 197.

²⁰ Bauer, "θέλω," BDAG 447-448.

²¹ See, for example, Michaels, who argues that φωνή is "far more easily understood as the sound of the wind than as the 'voice' of the Holy Spirit." Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 187.

wind is at times described,²² and even though there are at least 35 explicit New Testament references to wind.

2) There is textual support for the use of φωνή in relation to the Spirit (πνεῦμα), both in the New Testament (see, for example, Heb 3:7) and in the Septuagint (see Jud 16:14; Eze 3:12).

3) Throughout John's gospel, the Spirit is clearly portrayed as speaking (Joh 14:26; 15:26; 16:13).

4) John 3:8a is a description of those who are born of the Spirit (John 3:8b – "So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit"). That is, one must ask the question: Are those who are born of the Spirit better described as speaking (as the Spirit does), or making sound (as wind does)? The answer is quite obvious, and once again supports the position of this study.

The word πνέῖ (blows/breathes) is perhaps the most difficult word to reconcile with the translation of John 3:8 in terms of the Spirit. The verb is never used in relation to the Spirit in the New Testament (except, of course, in this verse), and is always used in relation to wind in its other New Testament occurrences. While this observation alone would seem to support the argument that John 3:8 be translated in relation to "wind", there are several other factors to be considered. Firstly, πνέω is not a particularly common word; it is only used 7 times in the New Testament (Mat 7:25, 27; Luk 12:55; John 3:8; 6:18; Act 27:40; Rev 7:1). It is therefore not overly surprising that of those seven occurrences, it is only used in relation to πνεῦμα (Spirit) on this one occasion. Because of its rare usage, it is also difficult to draw the conclusion that the word cannot be explicitly used in relation to the Spirit. Secondly, even though the word is used even less commonly in the Septuagint (it is only used in Psa 147:7 and Isa 40:24), in one of those two texts (Isa 40:24), it is God himself who blows (ἐπνευσεν). That is to say, πνέω can be used in relation to the action of God (or in John's text, the action of the Spirit of God). Thirdly, it seems that the Old Testament background to John 3:8 is Ezekiel 37.²³ As has already been mentioned, there is strong support for

²² A more appropriate term, it would seem, for the sound of wind is ἤχος (Acts 2:2). See also Jer 51:16.

²³ It seems particularly likely that there are Old Testament allusions in John 3:5-8 given Jesus' response to Nicodemus in verse 10: "You are the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" Indeed, as Keener has noted, "Because a potential association between God's Spirit and wind in Ezek. 37 follows directly upon an

seeing an allusion to Ezekiel 36:25-27 in John 3:5.²⁴ It is therefore unsurprising that some commentators believe that John 3:8 may be an allusion to the following text in Ezekiel (namely Ezek. 37:1-14); a text in which God's breath (πνεῦμα) comes upon a valley of dry bones, and those bones receive new life (they are revived – akin to being reborn).²⁵ If one does indeed accept this Old Testament allusion, it becomes increasingly clear that the life-giving breathing of the Spirit is the picture of the text (rather than a blowing wind). Finally, it must be reiterated again that the argument of this paper is not that the "wind reading" of John 3:8 is not present. Rather, this study contends that it should not be the *primary* reading of the text.²⁶

The use of ἀκούω in this verse is also noteworthy.²⁷ In fact, Morris argues that it is precisely because ἀκούω is directed towards a non-believer that one must translate the verse in relation to wind, since "it is more than difficult to see how the man who cannot comprehend the Spirit or him that is born of the Spirit can be said to hear 'the voice' of the Spirit."²⁸ Indeed, Morris views this problem as being "impossible" to overcome, which is precisely why he argued that the verse had to be translated in terms of wind (something which a non-believer can still hear).²⁹ Morris' reading of the text, however, assumes that Jesus is indeed speaking to a "man who cannot comprehend the Spirit". The text does not have to be understood this way.

association between God's Spirit and purifying water in Ezek. 36, a biblically literate teacher of Israel like Nicodemus should have caught both allusions by the time Jesus finished the second one; but he did not." Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 558.

²⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, "John," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 434.

²⁵ Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 197–198 and Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 557.

²⁶ In support of the "wind" meaning of the text, Borchert has noted that "the secrets and hidden forces of the wind became a theme of apocalyptic writers; cf. Rev 7:1; 1 Enoch 41:3; 60:12–13 and 2 Bar 48:3–5." Borchert, *John 1–11*, 177. Given that John's Gospel is not an apocalyptic work, however, it is difficult to see how relevant Borchert's observations are in relation to how the text should be translated (particularly when compared with John's explicit pneumatological emphases). His work does, however, supporting the notion that there are literary and theological layers to the text.

²⁷ Aside from the reason given in the body of this study, ἀκούω is also noteworthy in this verse since, according to Bernard, its presence with the genitive implies "hearing with appreciation and intelligence." Keener sees this understanding as somewhat simplistic, though admits there is a definite pattern. See Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 2:313 and Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 557.

²⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 220.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

John 3:7-8 records Jesus' words to a specific individual, namely Nicodemus. John's gospel seems to point in the direction of Nicodemus eventually becoming a believer (see John 7:50-52, and particularly John 19:38-42). That is to say, Jesus' words in John 3:8 are directed towards a man who does not yet – but will – comprehend the Spirit (or, it could be said, will hear the voice of the Spirit). Support for this position is found in the language of John 3:7: Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again' (μὴ θαυμάσης ὅτι εἶπόν σοι· δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν). The singular negative subjunctive (μὴ θαυμάσης) is directed towards Nicodemus himself (you – Nicodemus – do not marvel). Similarly, in the ensuing verse, the singular indicative use of ἀκούεις ("you hear") is directed towards Nicodemus (you – Nicodemus – hear his voice). That is to say, these are not universal statements. While there are more general (that is, plural) statements in John 3:7-8 (δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν and οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος), the person who "hears his voice" (that is, the voice of the Spirit) in John 3:8 is a person who will later himself be born of the Spirit.³⁰ That is to say, Morris' argument does not stand; one can quite appropriately refer to Nicodemus as being one who would hear 'the voice' of the Spirit.

Finally, Michaels believes that Jesus could have simply said "so it is with the Spirit" in the final part of John 3:8, however since the final section of the verse reads "So it is with everyone *who is born* of the Spirit", one can know that the end of the verse is indeed a reference to the Spirit again, since one cannot be born of the wind.³¹ That is to say, Michaels believes that the presence of the words "who is born" (ὁ γεγεννημένος) shows that the subject in 8b must have changed from 3:8a.³² His argument, however, seemingly ignores the immediate preceding context: the entire exchange in John 3:3-8 is focused on new birth. Indeed, the word γεννάω is used in verse 3, 4 (twice), 5, 6 (twice) and 7. Its use in verse 8 is not predicated on a subject change from verse 8a to verse 8b; the word is used because the very topic under discussion is new birth.

In fact, when one takes John 3:8b into consideration, it makes even more sense that John 3:8a should be translated in relation to the Spirit. John 3:8b is a description of those born of the Spirit, based on the

³⁰ Contra Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 557.

³¹ Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, 187.

³² *Ibid.*, 187.

preceding text in John 8:3a. That is to say, the point of John 3:8b is to say: “those born of the Spirit are like what has just been described in John 3:8a.” One should therefore consider which better describes those born of the Spirit – are they more aptly described in terms of a noisy blowing wind, or in terms of the Spirit who speaks and breathes? It would seem the primary interpretation of the text would be: those born of the Spirit will be like the Spirit Himself – one who speaks and breathes in mysterious ways.

Thus, while the text of John 3:8 can be translated in more than one way, it seems that the weight of evidence supports the reading of the text in terms of the Spirit. This is true from both an analysis of the text itself, as well as a consideration of the purpose of the text (in order to explicate those born of the Spirit). Additionally, it makes little sense to prioritise the “wind reading” of the passage given that it introduces a meaning for πνεῦμα which is otherwise never seen in John’s Gospel (and, except for one brief quotation, never seen in the entire New Testament).

The History of Interpretation of John 3:8

In examining a textually ambiguous verse such as John 3:8, another relevant consideration is how the text was understood in the early church. Did early church writings interpret understand the text in relation to the Spirit or the wind? Similarly, when the text of John 3:8 was translated into other languages, was it translated in terms of the Spirit or the wind? The following survey addresses these questions.

Ante-Nicene Fathers

References to John 3:8 in the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers are found in the works of Tatian, Ignatius, Origen, and an anonymous writer. As might be expected, Tatian included the text of John 3:8 in his *Diatessaron*, however the word for “Spirit” in Syriac has a similar semantic range to its equivalent in Greek and Hebrew, and as such the *Diatessaron* can be translated in relation to be wind or Spirit.³³ That is, it is impossible to know whether Tatian understood John 3:8 in relation to the Spirit or wind, particularly since he did not provide any explanatory commentary for the text. The other three references to John 3:8 in the

³³ Tatian, *Diatessaron* 32.34 (ANF 9:93).

works of Ignatius, Origen and the anonymous author, however, are significantly clearer.

In the *Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians* (written around the end of the first century or the beginning of the second), Ignatius wrote: "For though some would have deceived me according to the flesh, yet the Spirit, as being from God, is not deceived. For it knows both whence it comes and whither it goes."³⁴ The text is clear; Ignatius understood John 3:8 as being a reference to the Spirit. His reference could not have been translated "wind", since wind is not able to be deceived. While Ignatius may have seen the wordplay on πνεῦμα, he evidently did not see the wind as being the primary reference.

Similarly, in Origen's *First Principles*, he writes: "We must understand, therefore, that as the Son, who alone knows the Father, reveals Him to whom He will, so the Holy Spirit, who alone searches the deep things of God, reveals God to whom He will: 'For the Spirit bloweth where He listeth.'"³⁵ It makes no sense to understand Origen's words as "the wind alone searches the deep things of God," which is why the text has been translated in relation to the Spirit.³⁶ That is to say, Origen evidently read John 3:8 in relation to the Spirit; he did not reference the wind in his use of the text.

The final reference to John 3:8 in the Ante-Nicene writings is in *A Treatise on Re-Baptism*, written by an anonymous author sometime in the third or fourth century. The text reads: "And the Spirit, indeed, continues to this day invisible to men, as the Lord says, 'The Spirit breathes where He will; and thou knowest not whence He cometh, or whither He goeth.'"³⁷ Once again, the reference is clear: John 3:8 was read in relation to the Spirit rather than the wind. Indeed, the text prior to this passage references the baptism in the Spirit. It is the Spirit who is being discussed, not the wind.

Thus, while Tatian's work is inconclusive, the remaining three references to the John 3:8 demonstrate quite convincingly that the text was interpreted in relation to the Spirit. If the wordplay on wind was

³⁴ Ign. *Phld.* 7 (ANF 1:83).

³⁵ Origen, *Princ.* 3.4 (ANF 4:253).

³⁶ This argument is not dependent on the fact that this portion of the text comes from a later Latin translation of Origen's work. It is clear from the context that Origen meant "Spirit", regardless of whether the text is written in Latin or Greek.

³⁷ Anon., *De Rebapt.* 18 (ANF 5:677).

understood, there is no evidence that it was the primary interpretation in the earliest period of the church.

Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers

As one might expect, there are many more references to John 3:8 in the Nicene and Post-Nicene writings than in the Ante-Nicene works. There are nine authors who reference the Johannine text, and the interpretation of many of them is quite clear. All nine writers and the relevant texts are briefly surveyed below.

Gregory of Nyssa, writing in the mid-fourth century, directly quoted John 3:8 on four occasions.³⁸ On all of these occasions, it is very clear that he understood the text in the relation to the Spirit. One example is in his *Dogmatic Treatises*, in which he wrote:

But here in the case of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, inasmuch as Their power resides in Their nature (for the Holy Spirit breathes ‘where He listeth’ and ‘worketh all in all as He will,’ and the Son, by Whom all things were made, visible and invisible, in heaven and in earth, “did all things whatsoever He pleased,” and ‘quickeneth whom He will,’ and the Father put ‘the times in His own power,’)...³⁹

John 3:8 was evidently understood by Gregory as being a key text in understanding the nature and work of the Spirit. The above quotation clearly refers to the Spirit himself; the text was not understood in relation to wind. The text is used in a similar way in a different section of the same document:

For as the spirit of man that is in him, and the man himself, are but one man, so also the Spirit of God which is in Him, and God Himself, would properly be termed One God, and First and Only, being incapable of separation from Him in Whom He is. But as things are, with his addition of his profane phrase, “surpassing all the creatures of the Son,” he produces turbid confusion by assigning to Him Who “breatheth where He willeth,” and “worketh all in all,” a mere superiority in comparison with the rest of created things.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Dog. Treat.* 2.6 (NPNF² 5:107); *Dog. Treat.* 2.14 (NPNF² 5:130); *Dog. Treat.* 2.15 (NPNF² 5:133) and *Ora. Works.* 3 (NPNF² 5:519).

³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Dog. Treat.* 2.6 (NPNF² 5:107).

⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Dog. Treat.* 2.15 (NPNF² 5:133)

While much might be said about this text, the pertinent point for this study is that John 3:8 was interpreted in relation to the Spirit. The two final references to John 3:8 in Gregory of Nyssa's writings are similarly clear.⁴¹ Thus, while it is quite possible that the wordplay was known to Gregory, there is no evidence of the wind interpretation in his works; he translated the text in relation to the Spirit.

Gregory of Nazianzus, who was a contemporary of Gregory of Nyssa, also employed John 3:8 as a clear reference to the Spirit. In writing about the Spirit coming at Pentecost, he wrote: "As to the things of the Spirit, may the Spirit be with me, and grant me speech as much as I desire; or if not that, yet as is in due proportion to the season. Anyhow He will be with me as my Lord; not in servile guise, nor awaiting a command, as some think. For He bloweth where He wills and on whom He wills, and to what extent He wills. Thus we are inspired both to think and to speak of the Spirit."⁴² Since there is no repetition of πνεῦμα (that is, Gregory wrote "For He bloweth" rather than "for the Spirit/wind bloweth"), the subject remains unchanged from the surrounding context, which is the Spirit. Thus, it seems clear that the text was read in relation to the Spirit.

The third Greek writer who understood John 3:8 in relation to the Spirit was John of Damascus, who wrote almost four centuries after Gregory of Nazianzus. One of his two references to John 3:8 is a full quotation of John 3:7-8, and so it is not immediately clear whether the text was interpreted in relation to the wind or the Spirit.⁴³ The second reference, however, is more explicit. In his work *De Trinitate*, John wrote:

⁴¹ The first reference reads: "... the Lord makes manifest the Spirit's independent power and operation in His discourse with Nicodemus, when He says, 'The Spirit breatheth where He willeth.'" Gregory of Nyssa, *Dog. Treat.* 2.15 (NPNF² 5:133). The second reference reads: For "the Spirit breathes where He wills, and thou hearest His voice, but canst not tell whence He cometh or whither He goeth." Gregory of Nyssa, *Ora. Works.* 3 (NPNF² 5:519).

⁴² Gregory of Nazianzus, *De. Pent.* 5 (NPNF² 7:381).

⁴³ See John of Damascus, *De Trin.* 7.55 (NPNF² 9:233). The text reads: But I cannot describe Him, Whose pleas for me I cannot describe. As in the revelation that Thy Only-begotten was born of Thee before times eternal, when we cease to struggle with ambiguities of language and difficulties of thought, the one certainty of His birth remains; so I hold fast in my consciousness the truth that Thy Holy Spirit is from Thee and through Him, although I cannot by my intellect comprehend it. For in Thy spiritual things I am dull, as Thy Only-begotten says, *Marvel not that I said unto thee, ye must be born anew. The Spirit breathes where it will, and thou hearest the voice of it; but dost not know whence it comes or whither it goes. So is everyone who is born of water and of the Holy Spirit.*

“The Holy Ghost, descending from above, hallowed the Virgin’s womb, and breathing therein (for *The Spirit bloweth where it listeth*), mingled Himself with the fleshly nature of man, and annexed by force and might that foreign domain.”⁴⁴ This reference is unambiguous: John 3:8 is used to explicate the work of ‘the Holy Ghost’. The wind meaning is absent.

Aside from these three Greek writers, there are two Latin writers who evidently viewed John 3:8 primarily in terms of the Spirit. The first of these, Leo the Great, briefly referenced John 3:8 in a sermon for Whitsunday, writing “No interpretation is required for understanding, no practice for using, no time for studying, but the Spirit of Truth blowing where He wills, the languages peculiar to each nation become common property in the mouth of the Church.”⁴⁵ To allow for the wind meaning of the text, one would have to entertain the notion of the “wind of truth”; a meaning which is self-evidently inappropriate. The text was clearly intended to be translated in relation to the Spirit.

The second Latin author, writing many years before Leo, was Ambrose, who employed John 3:8 on five occasions, three of which are quotations of the Johannine text.⁴⁶ Ambrose’s understanding of these three texts is unclear, since the Latin word *Spiritus* could be translated “Spirit” or “wind” (in a similar way to Greek).⁴⁷ The two other references to John 3:8, however, are less ambiguous. In the first of these, in his work *On the Holy Spirit*, Ambrose wrote “We know, then, by the testimony of the Son that there is no loss in the division of spiritual grace; for He Who breathes where He wills is everywhere free from loss.”⁴⁸ While the allusion is less clear than in some other texts, the interpretation is beyond doubt: Ambrose primarily read the text as a reference to the Spirit rather than the wind. This becomes even more clear in the second of the two references:

Let us now, for the present, explain more fully why our Lord said, “If it be possible,” and so call a truce, as it were, while we show that He possessed freedom of will. Ye deny—so far are ye gone in the way of iniquity—that the Son of God had a free will. Moreover, it is your wont to detract from the Holy Spirit, though you cannot deny that it is written: “The Spirit doth breathe, where He will.” “Where He will,” saith the Scripture, not “where

⁴⁴ John of Damascus, *De Trin* 2.26 (NPNF² 9:59).

⁴⁵ Leo the Great, *Serm.* 75.2 (NPNF² 12:190).

⁴⁶ See Ambrose, *Spir.* 2.7.63 (NPNF² 10:122); *Spir.* 1.11.118 (NPNF² 10:109) and *Spir.* 3.10.63 (NPNF² 10:144).

⁴⁷ Though it must be noted that the primary meaning of *Spiritus* is “breath”.

⁴⁸ Ambrose, *Spir.* 1.3.49 (NPNF² 10:99).

He is ordered.” If, then, the Spirit doth breathe where He will, cannot the Son do what He will? Why, it is the very same Son of God Who in His Gospel saith that the Spirit has power to breathe where He will. Doth the Son, therefore, confess the Spirit to be greater, in that He has power to do what is not permitted to Himself?⁴⁹

The likening of the Spirit to the Son in this text makes the possibility of the “wind” reading impossible. This is even more the case when one considers Ambrose’s point regarding the Spirit going where he wills rather than where he is ordered; a point which makes no sense when viewed in relation to wind.

While the above five Church Fathers explicitly affirm the Spirit interpretation of John 3:8, there are also a number of authors whose works are less clear. More specifically, there is one Greek writer (Cyril of Alexandria) and two Latin writers (Jerome and Augustine) whose works remain somewhat ambiguous in relation to the topic of this study.

Writing in the early fifth century, Cyril of Alexandria employed John 3:8 on two occasions to support two different arguments. On the first occasion, in his *First Catechetical Lecture*, Cyril used the Johannine passage as part of a larger argument addressing the change which occurs in one’s life when new birth occurs.⁵⁰ While it seems that the Spirit understanding is more appropriate for the context (since it makes little sense to support the begetting anew of one’s soul through faith by referencing the wind), the text is nonetheless inconclusive. The second reference in Cyril’s writings comes as part of a wider discussion regarding the events of Pentecost.⁵¹ The text seems to indicate that the more likely reading is the Spirit interpretation, since the issue under discussion is not the substance of the wind. Nevertheless, there remains an element of ambiguity, and as such one cannot be certain as to how Cyril understood πνεῦμα in John 3:8. Indeed, the fact that John 3:8 is used in relation to the events of Pentecost is itself notable, since Pentecost was a time in when “a violent wind came from heaven” (Acts 2:2). Thus, perhaps this use of the Johannine text is evidence of an awareness of the wordplay in John 3:8.

⁴⁹ Ambrose, *Fid.* 2.6.47 (NPNF² 10:229).

⁵⁰ Cyril, *First Cat. Lect.* 2 (NPNF² 7:6).

⁵¹ Cyril, *Cont. Disc. H. Ghost.* 17 (NPNF² 7:128).

There are also two Latin writers who use John 3:8 without definitively pointing to either the wind or Spirit meaning. The first of these is Jerome, who translated John 3:8 into Latin in the Vulgate (see the following section), and also used part of the verse in a letter he wrote to Paulinos of Nola. The relevant section of the letter reads: “The true worshippers worship the Father neither at Jerusalem nor on mount Gerizim; for ‘God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.’ ‘Now the spirit blows where it wants,’ and ‘the earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof.’”⁵² It is not immediately clear from the context how Jerome understood John 3:8, though it seemingly makes sense to interpret the text in relation to the wind. Nevertheless, the citation remains unclear.

The second Latin writer whose works are ambiguous is Augustine, who employed John 3:8 more than any other early church writer. On the majority of these occasions, it is clear that the Spirit meaning is intended. For example, in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, he cites John 3:8, before writing, “None sees the Spirit; and how do we hear the Spirit’s voice? There sounds a psalm, it is the Spirit’s voice; the gospel sounds, it is the Spirit’s voice; the divine word sounds, it is the Spirit’s voice.”⁵³ His explanation is unmistakable: The voice/sound in John 3:8 is none other than the voice of the Spirit, who speaks through a psalm, the gospel and through the divine word. The wind meaning is clearly not present in the text.

There are four other references in Augustine’s works which similarly demonstrate the Spirit meaning of the text.⁵⁴ That is to say, the majority of times one sees John 3:8 referenced in Augustine’s works, the Spirit meaning is very clear. There are, however, two occasions where either the meaning of the text is unclear,⁵⁵ or the reference to John 3:8 is uncertain.⁵⁶

There are therefore five church fathers from the Nicene and Post-Nicene period who primarily interpret John 3:8 in relation to the Spirit, and three whose works are less clear. There is also, however, one writer,

⁵² Jerome, *Epist. LVIII*. 3 (NPNF² 6:120).

⁵³ Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 12.5 (NPNF¹ 7:82).

⁵⁴ See Augustine, *Serm.* 21.26 (NPNF¹ 6:327); *Pecc. Merit.* 32 (NPNF¹ 5:27); *Pecc. Orig.* 28.24 (NPNF¹ 5:246) and *C. du. ep. Pelag.* 4.11 (NPNF¹ 5:422).

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Enchir.* 119 (NPNF¹ 3:275).

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 134.8 (NPNF¹ 8:625).

namely John Chrysostom, whose two citations of John 3:8 explicitly interpret the Johannine text in terms of wind.

In the first usage of John 3:8, Chrysostom writes:

For as concerning the Father, the Son saith that “He raiseth up the dead and quickeneth;” in like manner also, concerning Himself, that “He quickeneth whom He will:” thus also of the Spirit, in another place, that He doeth all things with authority and that there is nothing that hinders Him; (for the expression, “bloweth where it listeth” though it be spoken of the wind is apt to establish this;) but here, that “He worketh all things as He will.”⁵⁷

It is clear that the double-meaning is understood; Chrysostom applies the text to the Spirit, however is quick to point out that the expression ‘blows where it will’ is in fact a reference to the wind.

The second reference is even more explicit. In his *Homilies on John*, Chrysostom elucidates John 3:7-8, writing that Jesus sought to explain his teaching on the Spirit by using:

... something between what is and what is not body, namely, the motion of the wind ... He saith of it, “Thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth.” Though He saith, “it bloweth where it listeth,” He saith it not as if the wind had any power of choice, but declaring that its natural motion cannot be hindered, and is with power ... The expression, “bloweth where it listeth,” is also used to establish the power of the Comforter; for if none can hold the wind, but it moveth where it listeth, much less will the laws of nature, or limits of bodily generation, or anything of the like kind, be able to restrain the operations of the Spirit. That the expression, “thou hearest its voice,” is used respecting the wind, is clear from this circumstance; He would not, when conversing with an unbeliever and one unacquainted with the operation of the Spirit, have said, “Thou hearest its voice.”⁵⁸

Chrysostom’s argument is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, he demonstrates an awareness of the double-meaning in John 3:8. Secondly, he is the first and only writer in all of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers who explicitly interprets the text in relation to the wind. Thirdly, the fact that Chrysostom so vehemently denies the Spirit translation of the text suggests that he is trying to argue a point that is, at the very least, not accepted by all interpreters of John’s gospel, or else

⁵⁷ Chrysostom *Hom. 1.Cor.* 29.6 (NPNF¹ 12:173).

⁵⁸ Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 26.1-2 (NPNF¹ 14:90)

there would be little point in writing so polemically. Fourthly, it is significant that his interpretation of the text is primarily based on a theological understanding of the Spirit's nature and work, rather than an appeal to the text itself. That is, Chrysostom's argument gives some insight into his hermeneutical methodology.

Thus, while the majority of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers read John 3:8 in relation to the Spirit, there was an apparent awareness amongst some writers of the double-meaning, and there was at least one Church Father who believed the text should be interpreted in reference to the wind. Finally, it is notable that there is no split between the Greek and Latin writers. While one Greek writer (John Chrysostom) supported the wind reading, three other Greek authors (Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and John of Damascus) explicitly interpreted the text in terms of the Spirit. Similarly, while some Latin writers were somewhat unclear in their interpretation (Augustine and Jerome), others clearly supported the Spirit meaning (Leo the Great and Ambrose).

Other Translation

While a full study into how John 3:8 has been translated into various languages lies beyond the scope of this study, a survey of some ancient translations and the history of the English text provides some light on how the text has been understood throughout the history of some parts of the church.

Significantly, when one reads ancient translations of John's gospel, the text has either been translated with a word as ambiguous as πνεῦμα, or been translated in terms of the Spirit. For example, the Syriac and Latin versions both employ words in John 3:8 which can be translated as either Spirit or wind (in a similar way to Hebrew and Greek). Other ancient translations, such as the Armenian and Coptic versions, translate the text as "Spirit."

When one examines various English translations, the middle English text of Wycliffe's translation (written circa. 1382) also interprets the text in relation to the Spirit: *The spirit brethith where he wole, and thou herist his vois, but thou wost not, fro whennus he cometh, ne whidir he goith; so is ech man that is borun of the spirit.* During the period of the Reformation, however, the verse was seemingly understood primarily in terms of the

wind. Tyndale's version (written in circa. 1534) reads: *The wynde bloweth where he listeth and thou hearest his sounde: but canst not tell whence he cometh and whether he goeth. So is every man that is boren of the sprete.* Many other English versions followed Tyndale's translation,⁵⁹ though it is notable that the early English Catholic New Testament (the Douay-Rheims Version, produced in 1582) returned to the "Spirit" translation.⁶⁰

Thomas argues that the change from "Spirit" to "wind" was a response to theological developments. He writes:

As we look at history of the translating of this verse, it appears to this writer that the change from *spirit* to *wind* was brought about under the influence of the Augustinian and Calvinistic doctrines which claimed that a sinner is converted by a direct operation of the Spirit upon him without the word, and the translators were giving in to the current trend in theology. The fact that *pneuma* was translated *wind* only once in all the NT definitely lends to this suspicion.⁶¹

This study would suggest that labelling the theological changes "Augustinian" does some disservice to Augustine's interpretation of the text, since the majority of his usages were references to the Spirit (see above). Similarly, Tyndale's formative translation was completed long before Calvin's theology was formulated. Nevertheless, Thomas's wider argument regarding the translational developments is quite cogent, particularly given Chrysostom's misgivings regarding the Spirit meaning, which are evidence of how theological interpretation can affect the interpretation of the text. Regardless of whether or not theological reasons lay behind the developments of how John 3:8 was translated in the English language, however, there is little doubt that nearly all modern versions have translated the text in a similar way to Tyndale.⁶²

⁵⁹ See, for example, The Coverdale Bible (1535), the Matthew Bible (1537), the Great Bible (1539), the Bishops Bible (1568), the Geneva Bible (1560) and the King James Version (1611).

⁶⁰ The text reads: *The Spirit breatheth where he will and thou hearest his voice: but thou knowest not whence he cometh and whither he goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

⁶¹ Thomas, "A Translation Problem—John 3:8" 223.

⁶² Indeed, over the course of this study, only three English version exceptions were noted: *Young's Literal Translation*, the *Common English Bible*, and *The Passion Translation*.

Conclusion

While the double-meaning in John 3:8 was evident in the Greek text of John's gospel, its translation into languages such as English have seen one translation (wind) preferred over the other (Spirit). The findings of this study, however, suggest that the primary meaning of the verse is Spirit. Support for this position is found not only in the Greek text itself; it is also found in the history of interpretation of the verse. Indeed, the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers support the Spirit meaning of John 3:8. The significance of this should not be underestimated; the reading of Church Fathers closest to the writing of the Johannine text was the Spirit meaning. The wind reading is not evident. Similarly, the vast majority of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers viewed the text in relation to the Spirit. Of the nine Church Fathers who referenced John 3:8, five of them explicitly viewed the text in terms of the Spirit, three were unclear, and one argued in favour of the wind meaning. Finally, ancient translations also support the Spirit meaning of John 3:8. English translations, it seems, have largely departed from the more ancient reading of the text, possibly for theological reasons. This study would therefore suggest that translations of John 3:8 that prioritise the wind reading should be revised, perhaps in a way similar to: "The Spirit breathes where he wants, and you hear his voice, but you do not know from where he comes or where he goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

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