

## “GLIMPSES OF THE SPIRIT” *A Brief Linguistic Reflection on the Divine Person of the Holy Spirit*

By Leandro J. Velardo

In his well-known work *The Coming of the Comforter*, LeRoy E. Froom expresses the following thought when speaking about the personality of the Holy Spirit: “This is not a mere technical, academic, or impractical question. It is of utmost importance and highest practical value. If He is a divine person, and we think of Him as an impersonal influence, we are robbing a divine person of the deference, honor, and love that is His due.”<sup>1</sup>

Although there are several lists of biblical texts that deal with different aspects of the personhood of the Holy Spirit, the methodology behind their elaboration is often not clear and, as the selection of some passages shows, the criterion for their compilation at times seems to be extremely subjective. In view of this, we suggest here a more linguistically sensitive methodological approach when producing a list of biblical texts that, in this case, shed light on the Holy Spirit as a divine person. In doing so we aim at a greater and more precise linguistic and theological understanding of the biblical testimony about the Holy Spirit. It is of particular interest to trace passages in the New Testament where the Greek word *pneuma* (“spirit”) functions as the agent of actions or situations connected to the semantic domain “Communication.” The reasoning behind this inquiry is simple: this semantic domain groups words, such as verbs of saying and verbs of thinking, that denote cognitive capacity and, therefore, connote personhood. In order to carry out such a methodological proposal, we have used the *Cascadia Syntax Graphs of the New Testament* database, which allows us to carry out complex syntactic searches in the Greek New Testament, and the semantic domains established in the lexicon of Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida.<sup>2</sup> Both resources are fundamental tools in the path towards a more inductive interpretative methodology—that is, a method that constructs its theological reflection from the internal mechanics of the original language.

The following are some of the results obtained:

### Writings of Luke

Luke 12:12 (“for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say”).

Acts 1:16 (“Brothers and sisters, the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas”); 8:29 (“The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it’”); 10:19–20 (“While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them’”); 11:12 (“The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them”); 13:2 (“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’”); 20:23 (“I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me”); 21:11 (“The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’”); and 28:25–26 (“The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ‘Go to this people and say, ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving’”).

### Writings of Paul

Romans 8:26 (“We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans”); 1 Timothy 4:1 (“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons”); Hebrews 3:7 (“So, as the Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, . . .’”); and 10:15, 17 (“The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says. . . . Then he adds: . . .”).

## The Book of Revelation

Revelation 14:13 (“Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them’”).<sup>3</sup> From this brief linguistic reflection, the natural conclusion emerges that it is legitimate to affirm that the Greek New Testament preserves a clear testimony in relation to the divine person of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the inspired authors did not see any theological problem in the fact that the word *pneuma* (“spirit”) operates as the subject of verbs that, in light of their respective contexts, reveal the authoritative and sensitive personhood of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> LeRoy E. Froom, *The Coming of the Comforter: Studies on the Coming and Work of the Third Person of the Godhead* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1928), 36.

<sup>2</sup> On the grammatical approach behind *Cascadia Syntax Graphs of the New Testament*, see Carl Pollard and Ivan Sag, *Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar*, Studies in Contemporary Linguistics (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Concerning the Greek words that conform the semantic domain “Communication,” see Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 1:387–444.

<sup>3</sup> All biblical quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Since in some contexts *hypo* + genitive denotes agency, such a construction is another valid linguistic argument in favor of the divine person of the Spirit; e.g., Matt 4:1 (“Jesus was led by the Spirit”); Luke 2:26 (“It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit”); Acts 13:4 (“sent on their way by the Holy Spirit”); 16:6 (“having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia”); 2 Peter 1:21 (“spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”). As is well known, there are other important elements—like grieving, comforting, guiding, teaching, etc.—that also describe the Spirit’s personhood.