

2C: *The Holy Spirit & Personification*

Personification & the Early Church Fathers

Reasoning from the Scriptures states:

Jesus also referred to the holy spirit as a "helper" (Greek, *pa·ra·kle·tos*), and he said that this helper would "teach," "bear witness," "speak," and 'hear.' (John 14:16, 17, 26; 15:26; 16:13) It is not unusual in the Scriptures for something to be personified. For example, wisdom is said to have "children." (Luke 7:35) Sin and death are spoken of as being kings. (Rom. 5:14, 21) While some texts say that the spirit "spoke," other passages make clear that this was done through angels or humans. (Acts 4:24, 25; 28:25; Matt. 10:19, 20; compare Acts 20:23 with 21:10, 11.) At 1 John 5:6-8, not only the spirit but also "the water and the blood" are said to 'bear witness.' So, none of the expressions found in these texts in themselves prove that the holy spirit is a person.¹

Later, Reasoning from the Scriptures, continues by saying:

Some individual texts that refer to the holy spirit ("Holy Ghost," KJ) might seem to indicate personality. For example, the holy spirit is referred to as a helper (Greek, *pa·ra·kle·tos*; "Comforter," KJ; "Advocate," JB, NE) that 'teaches,' 'bears witness,' 'speaks' and 'hears.' (John 14:16, 17, 26; 15:26; 16:13)... texts cited here employ a figure of speech personifying wisdom, sin, death, water, and blood.²

What is personification?

E.W. Bullinger defines it as:

A figure by which things are represented or spoken of as persons; or, by which we attribute intelligence, by words or actions, to inanimate objects or abstract ideas.

The figure is employed...when anything (*e.g.*, a country) is addressed as a person.³

As indicated by the WTBTs, personifications are used in the Bible of wisdom, sin, death, water and blood. None are personal beings, yet all of the aforementioned are given human attributes or behaviors. Do these personifications indicate that verses that identify the personality of the Holy Spirit are personifications as well? A deeper study of the personifications listed by the WTBTs sheds light on the question.

[1] Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. "Entry for 'Spirit.'" Reasoning from the Scriptures, 1985. Pp. 380, 381.

[2] Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. "Entry for 'Trinity.'" Reasoning from the Scriptures, 1985. Pp. 406, 407.

[3] Bullinger, E.W. "Entry for 'Prosopopoeia; or, Personification.'" Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated, 1898. P. 861.

A careful examination of each occurrence of wisdom, sin, death, water, blood and Jerusalem⁴ reveals a pattern of literal versus figurative usage in the Bible that differs significantly from that which would be demanded of the Holy Spirit should those verses that indicate his personality denote personification only.⁵ For instance, death is spoken of figuratively (inclusive of **all** general figures of speech, see preceding footnote) once out of every five references (approximately) in the Old and New Testaments. Sin is spoken of figuratively once out of every four references (approximately). The literal usages obviously and overwhelmingly dominate the figurative language in each of the cited examples. One finds a far larger pool of references to blood, water, sin, death, wisdom and Jerusalem spoken of literally rather than the minority of figurative references. This far greater preponderance of literal usage bears out with all instances of personification. All.

How does this bear on our consideration of the WTBS claim of personification of the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is spoken of figuratively in the New Testament as noted in previous sections. He fills, anoints. We are baptized with him, etc. Generally speaking, figurative language is used in a ratio of approximately one to every four or five references (if not more) when referring to water, sin, death, etc. The figurative language used to describe the Holy Spirit as filling, etc., also occurs once to every four literal references (approximately) and therefore adheres to the general pattern established above. The pattern, however, becomes distorted beyond all reasonable proportions when one adds WTBS instances of alleged personification of the Holy Spirit to the figurative language pool. Instead of an overwhelming preponderance of literal usage – as seen in **EVERY** personification in the Bible – the figurative usage of the Holy Spirit becomes (approximately) a one to one pattern, meaning the Scriptures would speak of the Holy Spirit equally in both figurative and literal terms.

Crunching the numbers, the WTBS position of a personified Holy Spirit simply does not bear out.

[4] Jerusalem is not included among the examples provided by the WTBS in either Reasoning from the Scriptures or Insight on the Scriptures, Volume 2. I included Jerusalem in my study only because I felt a study of the personification of Jerusalem as an adulterous woman might make a better case for the WTBS position than the case the WTBS has presented. Where wisdom is personified as a woman in the book of Proverbs, for instance, that personification is generally focused in the first nine chapters of Proverbs and seen much less so outside those nine chapters. Jerusalem, at least, is spoken of as an adulterous woman outside of a single book. The personifications of Jerusalem as an adulterous woman are so concentrated in the prophetic books, however, that I discovered the comparative infrequency of the personification outside that division of books lent no strength to the WTBS position. Jerusalem is spoken of as an adulterous woman in the prophetic books, true. But the WTBS demands that the Holy Spirit is spoken of as a personification throughout **all** the books of the Bible, not just an isolated division of books. I still contend that personified Jerusalem makes a better case for the WTBS position than personified wisdom. But it's still a weak and ultimately unsupportable case.

[5] The study I pursued should **not** be considered exhaustive. I searched the Old and New Testaments for each occurrence of "wisdom" (229 times), "sin" (268 times, as a noun), "death" (367 times), "blood" (443 times) and "water" (387 times, as a noun). I then determined which usages were obviously literal and which usages could be considered figurative in nature. Please note: I did **not** limit this study to personifications alone, but included all generic figures of speech. (Though not **all** figures of speech. E.W. Bullinger, in his book, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated, listed some 200 figures of speech, several with 30 – 40 varieties – Introduction, P. ix. For the sake of simplicity, I omitted the more rare and/or esoteric figures of speech as well as those involving repetition, etc., that would not bear on my study. For instance, for the purpose of this study, it would not matter if a word was repeated and paired with a similar literal word, i.e. "Jerusalem" and "city.") If any occurrence was at all questionable as to category, I checked various commentaries and E.W. Bullinger's Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated for guidance, but I included that occurrence in the figurative category if I remained at all doubtful. I then calculated the usage of literal and figurative language against the total occurrences in the Old Testament, New Testament, and both Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament occurrences, I further calculated literal and figurative usage against totals by division of books: the Pentateuch (Genesis - Deuteronomy), historical books (Joshua – Esther), poetic books (Job – Song of Songs) and prophetic books (Isaiah – Malachi). In the New Testament, I further calculated literal and figurative usage against totals by division of books as well: the Gospels (Matthew – Acts), Pauline Epistles (Romans – Hebrews) and General Epistles (James – Revelation).

I wholly admit this study, though extensive, has a great many weaknesses in regards to process. For instance, any verse in which the subject (sin, death, wisdom, etc) was not specifically named would not appear in that subject's search list. A more detailed study must necessarily include these other occurrences. However, barring a more detailed study, my work is, though not exhaustive, adequate to reveal **general patterns** of figurative language use. As such, **the results should be considered as indicative of general patterns only.**

Furthermore, if we limit our focus to the distribution of figurative language alone, unsurprisingly, we find the bulk of figurative references in divisions of the Bible in which one can reasonably expect to find a concentration of figurative language: the poetic books (Job – Song of Songs) and the prophetic books (Isaiah – Malachi).⁶ Of all figurative references in our pool of examples, nearly half occur in those two divisions of books. Does figurative language carry over into the New Testament? Yes. Taking all figurative uses of our examples as an aggregate, roughly 10% are found in the Gospels + Acts and roughly 13% are found in the Pauline Epistles. However, breaking figurative language distribution down by Bible division, one finds a general pattern of the majority of figurative language within the poetic and prophetic books. Figurative language, of course, is found in the New Testament. These references, however, are lightly salted throughout the New Testament books.

Again, crunching the numbers, the WTBS demand of personification of the Holy Spirit does not bear out.

There are, of course, many other arguments against the personification of the Holy Spirit.

1. Personification has a purpose. Abstract concepts are personified to stir the emotions, to create empathy, to illustrate a greater truth.⁷ Why is Jerusalem personified as an adulterous woman? Jerusalem (or rather, its inhabitants) betrayed Yahweh God in idolatry. Adultery stirs immediate emotion in us: hurt and revulsion, outrage, perhaps fury. The personification helps us understand God's righteous and just anger at the faithlessness of Israel, his bride. The personification helps us grasp the greater concept.

Since personification has a purpose...What purpose does the alleged personifications of the Holy Spirit serve? What greater truth is being illustrated? For instance, the Holy Spirit is said to teach us (John 14:26). Human teachers are people who have a greater breadth of knowledge about a particular subject and instruct us on that subject. So...God's active force has a great breadth of knowledge? The Holy Spirit is also called our Comforter/Helper (John 14:16, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7). A human being who would comfort us offers support, empathy and understanding, compassion. A human helper guides, teaches, and mentors us. How can these roles reflect on the Holy Spirit as a personification? God's active force is compassionate? An active force, described as radio waves by the WTBS, mentors us? The Holy Spirit is also said to intercede for us (Romans 8:26). What can the greater truth to this alleged personification possibly be? God's active force, likened to electricity by the WTBS, is **from** God and intercedes for us **with** God without a shred of personality attributed to the purported force? So God is sending this impersonal force out of himself...To himself?

Makes no sense.

Thus far, the WTBS and the JW I studied with have failed to answer what purpose any of these alleged instances of personification serve.

2. The subjects of personification are easily discernible as impersonal. No one, to my knowledge, has ever confused sin or death with an actual person. No one has ever thought Jerusalem was a literal woman. The subjects personified are obviously and explicitly impersonal. Not so the Holy Spirit. One must first *presume* impersonality.

3. In the examples listed by the WTBS, none of the subjects of personification is said to possess all of the necessary attributes of personality and certainly not with the frequency of which **all** of those attributes of personality are ascribed to the Holy Spirit. Sin is said to reign, but does the Bible say sin has an independent will, intelligence, emotion? Does sin speak? Is sin quoted? Does sin speak of itself using personal pronouns like "I" and "me" (see 2H: The Holy Spirit Speaks...Or Does He? section for more information)? What about blood? Blood is said to bear witness, but does Scripture show that

[6] I performed the same statistical analysis after removing Jerusalem from the pool of examples, since the WTBS does not present Jerusalem in its argument, with similar results.

[7] Bullinger, E.W. "Introduction." Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated, 1898. P. vi.

blood has intelligence, too? Is blood quoted as speaking? Is blood shown to have its own will? The answers to these questions are a resounding no. The subjects listed by the WTBTs are personified, true, but they are not given all of the essential attributes of personality, certainly not with the same frequency those attributes are evident in the Holy Spirit.

4. According to the WTBTs both wisdom and the Holy Spirit are personified and lack personality. This subject will be covered in much greater depth in later chapters, but the WTBTs also insists that wisdom personified in Proverbs 8:22-31 is none other than our Lord, Jesus Christ. According to the WTBTs personification demands a lack of personality, yet Jesus (who IS a person) is personified wisdom in Proverbs 8. Again, makes no sense.

5. What is the theme to the alleged personification of the Holy Spirit? Personifications, in my experience, can be concisely defined. Jerusalem is an adulterous woman. Wisdom is a woman. Sin and death are kings.⁸ Of course, sin is said to reign and elsewhere is described as crouching at the door (Genesis 4:7), but even then, in the same verse, God cautions Cain to not let sin be his master so the basic theme remains. If the Holy Spirit is being personified, what is the theme? He is a teacher, a comforter, he guides us, he intercedes for us...The list could go on and on. But is there a concise theme? No.

6. If the Holy Spirit isn't a person and the many, many references to his personality merely a figure of speech, the early church fathers must've been in on it because they spoke of him in personal terms and as a personal being without once indicating the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force. Ignatius lived 30 – 107 A.D. Justin Martyr lived 110 – 165 A.D. Irenaeus lived 120 – 202 A.D. They, among the other Ante-Nicene fathers, give us the best approximation of the beliefs of the Post-Apostolic church, of what had been passed down to them from the disciples of Jesus. If Jesus had taught that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force rather than a person, we would expect to see that in the early church writings. We do not.

The early church fathers spoke of the Holy Spirit in personal terms and as a personal being. In the Ante-Nicene writings, the Holy Spirit proclaims/preaches (Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, VII), reproaches (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, CXXIV), designates both Father and Son as God (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book III, VI, paragraph 1), answers men (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, VII, paragraph 2) and foreknew the doctrine of evil teachers (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, XXI, paragraph 9).⁹ These statements, of course, all indicate personality.

Justin, in *Dialogue with Trypho* (Chapter XXXVI), further stated:

“...And the Holy Spirit, either from the person of His Father, or **from His own person**, answers them...”¹⁰ (emphasis mine)

Justin Martyr very obviously believed the Holy Spirit is a person.

Tertullian, who lived 145 – 220 A.D., was even more precise in speaking of the Holy Spirit's personality:

“...Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete¹¹, produces three coherent Persons, *who are yet distinct* One from Another.”¹²

[8] Sin and death are said to reign in the passages cited by the WTBTs. It should be noted, for clarity's sake, that neither sin nor death, however, is specifically called a “king.”

[9] Roberts, Rev. Alexander & Donaldson, James (Editors). Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1, Reprint 1997.

[10] Roberts, Rev. Alexander & Donaldson, James (Editors). Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1, Reprint 1997.

[11] *Paraclete* is Greek for the Comforter/Helper Jesus promised to send in John 14:16 and was fulfilled in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

[12] Roberts, Rev. Alexander & Donaldson, James (Editors). *Against Praxeas*, Chapter XXV. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 3, Reprint 1997. P. 621.

The above examples are only a few among **many** statements in the early church writings that indicate the personality of the Holy Spirit. One cannot realistically expect a figure of speech to consistently, without fail, carry over such a wide variety of writers in such wildly different circumstances and diverse times – from Old Testament times into the end of the third century. Yet, that is precisely what the WTBS insists: every writer who spoke of the Holy Spirit in personal terms or as a personal being, from the Old Testament through the end of the third century used the same exact figure of speech (personification) without ever even **once** making a single declarative statement that the Holy Spirit is **not** a person at all. Yet, dozens of writers over many centuries **did** write of the Holy Spirit in personal terms, as a personal being, and directly stated that the Holy Spirit **is** a person.

Insight on the Scriptures, Vol. 2 states:

Not until the fourth century C.E. did the teaching that the holy spirit was a person and part of the "Godhead" become official church dogma. Early church "fathers" did not so teach; Justin Martyr of the second century C.E. taught that the holy spirit was an 'influence or mode of operation of the Deity'; Hippolytus likewise ascribed no personality to the holy spirit.¹³

One wonders if the WTBS has read or studied the writings of the Ante-Nicene fathers at all. Having read – and studied – the writings of Justin Martyr, I can unequivocally state that the partial quotation attributed to Justin in Insight on the Scriptures, Vol. 2 above does not exist in the body of his work.¹⁴

The WTBS summation of Hippolytus' writings remains a complete mystery to me as well. I've certainly never found any hint or indication of the WTBS assertion in Hippolytus. Hippolytus speaks of heretical beliefs in regards to the Holy Spirit, to be sure (see *Refutation*, Book 7, Ch X for an example of Hippolytus' description of heretical beliefs that include the Holy Spirit), but I've found **no** assertion of such beliefs by Hippolytus himself. Hippolytus frequently speaks of the Holy Spirit in personal terms and as a personal being. In his writings, the Holy Spirit refutes (*Refutation*, Book 1, *The Prooemium*, paragraph 2); can be insulted (*Refutation*, Book 7, IV); Hippolytus proposes that Rachel is a type of the Holy Spirit (*Fragments from Commentaries, On Genesis*, Chapter III) which makes no sense if the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force (Rachel, very much a person, prefigured a force?); indicated the Holy Spirit should be worshipped (*Fragments – Dogmatic and Historical, Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, paragraph 12); speaks of the Holy Spirit with masculine pronouns...¹⁵

Another example:

For the Father indeed is One, but there are two Persons, because there is also the Son; **and then there is the third, the Holy Spirit.** (*Fragments – Dogmatic and Historical, Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, paragraph 14)¹⁶ (Emphasis mine.)

The Father and the Son are "two Persons" according to Hippolytus and he indicates the Holy Spirit is the third. The third what? The third **person**.

[13] Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. "Entry for "SPIRIT."" Insight on the Scriptures, Volume 2, 1989. P. 1019.

[14] This fact can be quickly and easily confirmed by downloading the Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes into E-Sword and using the topic notes search function. My own search in Volume 1 (which contains Justin's writings) of the complete phrase quoted yielded no results. Subsequent searches on the individual words "Deity," "mode," and "influence" yielded several hits, but none matching the exact phrase, nor did any of these hits in any way or manner reflect the assertion proposed by the WTBS that Justin believed the Holy Spirit an influence or mode. Since the partial quotation is not properly referenced, I cannot hazard to guess where this phrase came from. I can only say that it did **not** come from Justin Martyr.

[15] Roberts, Rev. Alexander & Donaldson, James (Editors). Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 5, Reprint 1997.

[16] Roberts, Rev. Alexander & Donaldson, James (Editors). Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 5, Reprint 1997.

How the WTBS can claim that Hippolytus ascribed no personality to the Holy Spirit boggles the mind since it completely contradicts what Hippolytus wrote. Nor can one begin to fathom why the WTBS reached its baffling conclusion because the WTBS fails to cite so much as a single reference (or even an unreferenced fragment of a quote as seen in the alleged Justin Martry quotation above) as supporting evidence to its claim.

Whatever the case may be, the Ante-Nicene fathers definitely spoke of the Holy Spirit in personal terms, as a personal being and spoke directly of his personhood. The WTBS claim that the personhood of the Holy Spirit was not taught by the early church fathers is absolutely without merit. Demanding consistent personification by writers who spoke of the Holy Spirit in personal terms as a personal being from Old Testament times through the time of the Ante-Nicene fathers is also without foundation and patently ridiculous.