

„Blessed are the poor in spirit”,
or
„Blessed are who [became] poor under the influence of the Spirit”? (Mt 5,3)
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I checked every occurrence of πνεῦμα [spirit] in the **Gospel of Matthew**. The results:
19 occurrences, out of which:

- **5 times** it is accompanied by the adjective ἅγιον [sacred, holy]: „Holy Spirit” (1,18.20; 3,11; 12,32; 28,19);
- **4 times** it occurs in a possessive structure with *God* as possessor: (twice πνεῦμα θεοῦ, „the Spirit of God”: 3,16; 12,28; once πνεῦμα τοῦ πατρὸς, „the Spirit of the Father”: 10,20; once πνεῦμά μου, „my Spirit”: 12,18);
in these 5+4 = **9 instances** the term clearly denotes „*the Spirit of God*” or „*the Holy Spirit*”;
- **4 times** it stands *without either an adjective or a noun in genitive* (4,1; 5,3; 12,31; 22,43), but again in **three of these instances** it clearly denotes „the Spirit of God” / „the Holy Spirit” (with the exception of the controversial passage in 5,3). Here we need to remark that:
 - the *parallel* of Mt 4,1 in Lk 4,1 *clearly* names „the Holy Spirit”;
 - in two adjacent passages (12,31 and 12,32) we first find „the Spirit” alone, immediately followed by „the Holy Spirit” in an *identical* meaning.
 - the *parallel* of Mt 22,43 in Mk 12,36 *clearly* names „the Holy Spirit”.
- 2 times it denotes *human spirit* (26,41; 27,50),
- 4 times it denotes *impure spirit(s)* (8,16; 10,1; 12,43; 12,45).

The phrase (ἐν) (τῷ) πνεύματι [= „in spirit” or „by the Spirit”] occurs 4 times,

- once with the adjective ἅγιον [sacred, holy] (3,11),
- once in a possessive structure with θεός [God] as possessor (12,28),
- and twice without either an adjective or a noun in genitive (5,3 and 22,43).

My question is:

If πνεῦμα positively means „the Spirit of God” or „the Holy Spirit” **12** times out of (5+4+4=) **13** occurrences that come into play, then what is the actual reason to understand the only remaining passage, i.e. the contested Mt 5,3 (πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι = „*poor in spirit*” or „*poor by the Spirit*”) not as referring to „the Holy Spirit”? (With special regards to the parallels mentioned above: „Here we need to remark that...”)

We can also confirm the above by checking all occurrences of πτωχός [poor] in the four gospels. We find **24** instances: 5 in Mt, 5 in Mk, 10 in Lk, and 4 in Jn.

If we leave out Mt 5,3, the remaining **23 passages** *always* use this term for poverty in a material sense. (This might be doubtful in the case of Mt 11,5, Lk 4,18, and 7,22 by referring to the underlying Hebrew *anavim*, which in the contemporary use also meant „the gracious” or „the pious”, thus we could say: „poor in spirit”. However, the context in all three passages is about the blind, the lame, the deaf..., or about prisoners and the oppressed! *In this list*, how could πτωχοὶ possibly mean „the pious” or „the poor in spirit”?)

Consequently, if the other 23 passages are about the poor materially, then why would πτωχοί denote „poor in spirit” in Mt 5,3 – especially considering that there is a reasonable justification for τῷ πνεύματι meaning „by the Spirit”?

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„τῷ πνεύματι” in translations

Mt 5,3

| | |
|-----|--|
| LUT | <i>geistlich arm sind</i> |
| MOD | <i>die ihre Armut vor Gott erkennen</i> |
| JER | <i>les pauvres en esprit</i> |
| TOB | <i>les pauvres de cœur</i> |
| NEW | <i>those who know that they are poor</i> |
| DIS | <i>the poor in spirit</i> |
| WTB | <i>quelli che si rendono conto del loro bisogno spirituale</i> |
| VAT | <i>i poveri in spirito</i> |

Mt 22,43

| | |
|-----|--|
| LUT | im Geist |
| MOD | durch den <u>Heiligen</u> Geist geleitet |
| JER | sous l’inspiration |
| TOB | inspiré par l’Esprit |
| NEW | by inspiration |
| DIS | by the inspiration of the <u>Holy</u> Spirit |
| WTB | per ispirazione |
| VAT | sotto ispirazione |

Lk 2,27

| | |
|-----|----------------------------------|
| LUT | aus Anregen des Geistes |
| MOD | vom Geist <u>Gottes</u> geführt |
| JER | poussé par l’Esprit <u>Saint</u> |
| TOB | poussé par l’Esprit |
| NEW | guided by the Spirit |
| DIS | by the Spirit |
| WTB | potere dello spirito |
| VAT | mosso dallo Spirito |

Lk 4,1b

| | |
|-----|------------------------------|
| LUT | vom Geist geführt |
| MOD | der Geist hatte ihn gedrängt |
| JER | conduit par l’Esprit |
| TOB | conduit par l’Esprit |
| NEW | led by the Spirit |
| DIS | led by the Spirit |
| WTB | e fu condotto dallo spirito |
| VAT | e fu condotto dallo Spirito |

| | |
|-----|---|
| LUT | Luther (rev. 1956) |
| MOD | modern: Bibel heute (2010) |
| JER | La Sainte Bible de Jérusalem (1961) |
| TOB | Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible (1983) |
| NEW | New English Bible (1964) |
| DIS | discover revelation (2016) |
| WTB | Watchtower Bible ... Inc. (1987) |
| VAT | La Sacra Bibbia, Vatican (2003) |

The above comparison reveals that *all translations* of **Mt 5,3** interpret τῷ πνεύματι as „in spirit”, while *in the other three examples each of them* translates πνεῦμα as „the Spirit” (i.e. of God). Moreover, three translations add the adjective „Holy” (even the Jerusalem Bible!), and another adds „God” as possessor, even though these are not present in the Greek text.

It is worth highlighting the two most important translations of the eight mentioned above:

| | τῷ πνεύματι TOB | τῷ πνεύματι NEW |
|----------|----------------------------|--|
| Mt 5,3 | <i>les pauvres de cœur</i> | <i>those who know that they are poor</i> |
| Mt 22,43 | inspiré par l’Esprit | by inspiration |
| Lk 2,27 | poussé par l’Esprit | guided by the Spirit |
| Lk 4,1b | conduit par l’Esprit | led by the Spirit |

To say the least: it is interesting that

- the Greek term (τῷ πνεύματι) is understood as „in spirit” *only* in Mt 5,3; and that
- the *same* Greek term in these four lines is translated *in four different ways*.

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The data on the first page of this paper is exceptionally revealing, if we also consider that πνεῦμα occurs **36 times in Luke**, and:

- **in 13 instances** it stands with the adjective ἅγιον to denote „the Holy Spirit” (1,15.35.41.67; 2,25.26; 3,16.22; 4,1; 10,21; 11,13; 12,10.12),
- **once** it stands in a possessive structure with the Lord as possessor to denote „the Spirit of God” (4,18),
- **in 3 instances** it stands *without either an adjective or a noun in genitive*, but it clearly denotes „*the Spirit of God*” or „*the Holy Spirit*” in all three cases (2,27; 4,1; 4,14),
- in 5 instances it means *human spirit* (1,17; 1,47; 1,80; 8,55; 23,46),
- in 12 instances it denotes *impure spirit(s)* (4,33.36; 6,18; 7,21; 8,2.29; 9,39.42; 10,20; 11,24.26; 13,11),
- twice it means *a spirit without a body* (24,37 and 24,39).

In Luke, the phrase (ἐν) (τῷ) πνεύματι occurs again 4 times,

- twice with the adjective ἅγιον (3,16; 10,21),
- twice *without either an adjective or a noun in genitive* (2,27; 4,1b),

and in every instance it denotes „the Spirit of God”!

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I am increasingly convinced that there is – perhaps unconsciously – a *psychological* or even *ideological* reason behind the adherence of translators and exegetes to understand πνεῦμα **in Mt 5,3** as the spirit of man (and not as „the Spirit of God” or „the Holy Spirit”): it is very *convenient*, because if we say „blessed are the poor in spirit”, i.e. those „who are humble”, „who stand in front of God empty-handed”, „who do not attribute anything to themselves”, „who expect everything from God”, etc. – then these „poor in spirit”, besides this attitude, **have actually nothing to do**; if, however, this phrase means that „blessed are those who under the inspiration of the (Holy) Spirit voluntarily and consciously undertake actual material/social poverty” – then it has **hard consequences on us**, and it **demands action** (conscious renunciation of enrichment, bearing the burden of poverty, and giving to those in greater need)...

Translated from Hungarian by Daniel Bajnok