# The AGNT Project Report—Q4 2022

As a licensee or friend of AGNT or ANLEX, we would like to update you once a quarter about our continuing work to enhance and perfect these databases and about our plans for the future.

**The Project.** *The AGNT Project Report—Q3 2008* introduced the team, outlined ongoing tasks, and discussed potential tasks.

## Generic Reference in the Greek New Testament

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Language is living, always in flux, probably because it represents underlying culture and thought, both surely living and always developing in an important sense. Our native language is not now what it once was for our grandparents nor is it what it will become for our grandchildren.

The recent seeming enshrining of the plural pronouns (*they, their, them, themselves*) as indicating generic reference for even singular referents in popular written English has since about year 2000 overrun the marketplace, so to speak, all but replacing the traditional masculine singular pronoun set (*he, his, him, himself*) in that role. It would have been noticed, perhaps, and commented on by more people had "the plural as indefinite singular" not already been present in oral forms of English for hundreds of years in that function. In fact "the struggle" between *he* and *they* for supremacy as the English generic pronoun predates the King James Version of the Bible. And it may very well be that the jostling isn't over yet.

Talking about Bibles, what was the generic reference pronoun in use during the days of Koine Greek? Was there also a struggle for supremacy between singular and plural pronouns then? Not generally. The use of the masculine singular pronoun in Koine Greek was virtually without competitor.

There are a number of different ways to express reference to mixed audiences in the world's languages, but Koine Greek and traditional English both used the masculine singular pronoun to represent generic reference for mixed or indefinite sexes. Languages that use the plural are understandably well represented in the treasury of the world's languages. Abraham may point to a male and Sarah to a female, but "they" is indefinite and indistinct enough to meet the end of designating both males *and* females or even indefinite males *or* females.
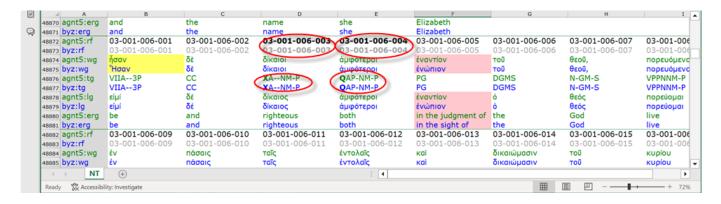
New Testament translators, at very least, need to know what is represented in a given Greek word. Does the genitive plural pronoun αὐτῶν refer to an exclusively male referent set, to an exclusively female set, or a mixed setting? Almost six years ago I began to look at the situation in Koine Greek, as exhaustively as possible, but on a hobby-time scheduling. I am currently on my last pass through the text, having processed thousands of candidate vocabulary, whether pronouns or nouns, before hopefully issuing a beta version of the project. It has been highly instructive as well as exhausting.

Though above I mentioned the possibility of exclusive groups of females, they are relatively rare in the Greek New Testament. The main task to determine is whether a mixed group of males and females is intended by the referent pronoun or an exclusively male group. But exclusive female groups are not overlooked.

My method was to commission a horizontal spreadsheet made of both the critical text of the Greek New Testament (for our purposes, GNT5) and the Byzantine Textform (instrument source: Mark Nodine with gratitude). This contained a typical AGNT spread of information, including reference identifier, Greek reflex, AGNT tag, underlying lemma, and the AGNT English reference gloss (ERG) (and possible complex ERGs, known as PERGs). When a case of generic reference was encountered I marked the reference identifier as bold, whether only GNT or only the Byzantine or both (each text had its own reference identifier).

Further, I prefixed the AGNT tag with a character also identifying the reflex as generic reference. This was either an upper case, bolded **Q** in the normal case where the referent of the reflex was taken as real life, generic reference, or it was an upper case, bolded **X** where the reflex was a predicate statement made about a generic reference, real life object. This double marking aids in both visual inspection of the vocabulary being highlighted and in a possible search of all its occurrences.

In particular, note the following screenshot from an Excel spreadsheet from Luke 1.6.1 through 1.6.8:



Odd-numbered lines of data are from or about the GNT; even-numbered lines represent the Byzantine Textform. Red-shaded cells indicate a formal difference between the two Greek versions, while yellow highlighting indicates minor differences (punctuation, capitalization, or accenting) between them. The circled information is in the first instance the reference identifiers,

whereas in the second instance it is the prefixed AGNT tags, pointing to real-life references in the case of **Q** and predicate modifiers in the case of **X**. In particular for this display the Greek reflex ἀμφότεροι ("both") points to Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth and is thus clearly generic reference in its scope. Δίκαιος ("righteous") is a predicate adjective of the referent ἀμφότεροι, also generic in its scope.

I included the predicate references especially to accommodate egalitarian scholars of the New Testament, who really wanted to see the predicate modifiers of 1Timothy 3 and Titus 1 marked as generic reference. For the record, though I may have missed some, I have tried to mark as generic reference or to reject it as such according to the discussion of the commentaries. But be assured, I took no broad, much less exhaustive sampling of the commentators.

The project also contains a running parallel Word file with thousands of comments, sequentially organized by reference identifier, either justifying why a given reflex is acceptable as generic reference or why it is not. It will help some users but not everyone will agree with its comments. But note this, this is a huge project with thousands of words weighed for their generic reference or not. I will be very happy, when I finally post the beta version, to have input from users regarding why this omission or why that inclusion. Hopefully this will become a database useful at very least to Bible translators, where it will probably be refined over and over again.

There are many nouns that are potentially generic reference, for example, ὄχλος ("crowd"), λαός ("people"), πόλις ("city," in some contexts). These will also be marked when contextually appropriate. Some nouns like μαθητής need special attention. Is the referent Jesus's inner circle of twelve males, or it the wider circle of his followers comprising both males and females? But pronouns grab most of our attention.

Most personal pronouns are easily ascertained in context as being of generic sense or not. Normally the "whoevers" of the Greek New Testament are generic, even though their form is (usually) masculine singular. A general rule of thumb is that historical accounts rarely contain generic reference (but "never" is too strong a conclusion), whereas teaching passages frequently contain them.

What about Jesus's parables? I find that parables are usually framed as stories and as such they are historical and thus pronouns are not generic reference in the general sense. In the early stages of this project, I had some interesting interactions with a number of scholars as to whether the sower in Matthew 13 (also Mark 4; Luke 8) is a generic referent or simply a male. Linguistic analysis requires its being taken as male reference.

Except in those languages where the same singular pronoun is employed for both male and female referents, in languages that distinguish between the two (English, German, Koine Greek), a story cannot be told without indicating the sex of the (main) character. (Try telling one withholding the sex of the main character—it is next to impossible or it quickly becomes evident that the author is playing games with his readers!) Indeed I take it as a linguistic universal that in narration, all characters are named as either specifically male or female. The New Testament in Koine Greek presents almost all characters as male (perhaps culturally so determined). In the few narrations where it is clear that the referent is female, it is clearly specified, usually by γυνή

("woman"); see, for example, Luke 15.8. In Matthew 24.41 indeclinable *two* introduces a plural subject, but in the next clause *one*, which is declinable, is unambiguously named as feminine.

A good rule of thumb for determining generic reference is to determine where the referent lies on a continuum of specificity. Specific references are less often generic reference; nonspecific references are more often generic. Further, singular references are more generally not generic in their sense, whereas plural references tend to be generic.

Generic reference should be thought to be natural and frequent in human communication. Indeed there is nary a chapter in the GNT where some referent in the discussion is not generic.

My hope at the present time is to make a beta version of this project available in late 2023. It is also my hope that its appearance will generate discussion and correction.

Now, back to work.

As always, we remain open to developing AGNT and ANLEX in ways that are most useful to the needs of students and readers of God's Word.

Thank you for your continued support of *The AGNT Project*, for faithfully marketing the AGNT and ANLEX databases, and for making these state-of-the-art tools for studying the Greek New Testament available to students, scholars, pastors, translators, and laymen worldwide.

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