

Theology Matters

Vol. 28, No. 2

Spring 2022

Theological Implications of Inclusive Language in Biblical Translation

by Bruce M. Metzger

Editor's note: Bruce M. Metzger (1914–2007) was a well-known biblical scholar. The following are notes for an address written by him and delivered on Alumni Day, May 29, 1984, at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. A recording of the address shows some extemporization in some areas of the talk. The notes are published here for the first time, with permission. © Estate of Bruce M. Metzger 1984.

Since the time of the Tower of Babel problems of translation and communication have plagued individuals and nations alike. Not only does the work of translating a piece of literature require the utmost in concentrated effort, but the result will seldom please everyone—least of all the conscientious translator. In rendering a piece of literature one must give attention not only to the content (what is said) but also to the form (how it is said). The aim is to convey to the modern hearer or reader the same understanding and appreciation that the original author provided for his or her contemporaries. In attempting to reach this aim, the translator experiences what Ortega y Gasset described as the misery and the splendor of the translation process.

The translation of the Scriptures presents special difficulties. Since the Bible is a source of both information and inspiration, translations of it are required to be accurate philologically and pleasing aesthetically. They must be suitable for rapid reading as

well as for detailed study. Ideally they should be intelligible and even inviting to readers of all ages and of all degrees of education. And always, from first to last, the rendering must be faithful to what the author intended. To put into the translation what is not in the original, or to suppress part of what the author wrote is not only unscholarly but is an affront to the author, who is not allowed to say in the translation what he or she had originally written.

We may not agree with an author but that is no reason for altering what was written. Aristotle, for example, held that the institution of slavery is not only right but is a necessary part of society as a whole. If one were to remove from a translation of Aristotle all such references to slavery, the result could not by any stretch of the imagination be called the works of Aristotle. Again, if a translator were to remove from Hitler's speeches all anti-Semitic slurs, the resulting text would be far from giving a correct idea of what the Fuehrer said. In short, it is the first duty of a translator to respect the text and the historical realities presupposed within it.

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The twentieth century has seen an abundance of English translations of the Bible. Since 1900 at least one hundred fifteen English translations and revisions of part or all of the English Bible have been produced. Some of these were produced for special interest groups, and contain unjustified additions and deletions. Such a rendering, for example, is the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* produced in 1950 by the Jehovah's Witnesses. In order to give support to their own theological orientation, this rendering unjustifiably introduces into the New Testament 237 instances of the word "Jehovah," and deliberately alters other passages which bear witness to the deity of Christ.

Another idiosyncratic version, published in 1981, is *The Sacred Scriptures*, Bethel Edition, issued by the Assemblies of Yahweh, Bethel, Pennsylvania. This is an adaptation of the King James Version, and is characterized by the introduction of Semitic words and terminology into the traditional language. In the New Testament, for example, instead of translating the Greek word *theos* by God, sometimes the Hebrew word El or Elohim is substituted, sometimes Yahweh. Jesus becomes Yahshua, and Elijah is spelled EliYah. A typical salutation in the Pauline Epistles is, "Grace to you and peace from Yahweh our Father and the Sovereign Yahshua the Messiah. I thank my Elohim always concerning you, for the grace of Yahweh which was given you in the Messiah Yahshua, ..." (I Corinthians 1:3-4). On the whole, this version is not so much heretical as eccentric.

In the case of *The Living Bible*, produced in 1971 by Kenneth Taylor, we have an expanded, paraphrastic rendering, with the elements of a commentary introduced throughout the text, and then all of it homogenized together. For example, instead of the first sixteen words with which the Book of Amos begins in the King James Version, Taylor expands the sentence into forty-six words by elaborating in rather obvious and pedantic ways upon the concise statement of the original. Instead of saying, as the Hebrew does, that Amos was among the herdsmen of Tekoa, Taylor expands as follows:

"Amos was a herdsman living in the village of Tekoa. All day long he sat on the hillside, watching the sheep, keeping them from straying."

The title page, however, warns the reader that the volume is a paraphrase and not a literal translation of the Bible.

Other translations have been made by various translators who have had in mind a special reading public. Such, for example, is the *Good News Bible* (1976), issued originally for those for whom English is a second

language. Here the vocabulary is restricted and the syntax is simplified—but the translator is intent to provide a dynamic equivalent (as it is called) and to say no more and no less than the original text allows. There is also now on the market a translation of the New Testament for the deaf (1983). In this edition, in order to facilitate presenting the Scriptures in sign language, the pronouns are often replaced by the appropriate nouns, and the sentence structure is greatly shortened.

In all such renderings made by faithful translators, the sense of the original is conveyed in one style or another. While one might on occasion and for good reason translate a word meaning "red" by using some synonym such as scarlet, crimson, vermilion, or even maroon, obviously one could not use the word "blue." The translator must constantly be aware of linguistic and historical constraints involved in the translation process. In the words of Bishop Butler, "Everything is what it is, and not another."

Modern Trends in English Style

A new set of problems has recently confronted translators in America. Concern over so-called "sexist" language has led a growing number of women—and men—to question the adequacy of the traditional use of the word "man" in referring to both men and women. This concern is merely part of a wider dissatisfaction over the use of what has come to be recognized as masculine-oriented language (as, "Let him who has ears to hear ..."). In fact, for some persons such language has become highly offensive, and during the past several years a wide variety of steps have been taken to attempt to introduce what is called "inclusive language." For example, several major publishers (including Macmillan; McGraw-Hill; Ginn; Holt Rinehart and Winston; Houghton Mifflin; Random House; Scott, Foresman and Co.) have prepared guidelines for prospective authors who plan to submit manuscripts for consideration.

Among quarterly periodicals the editors of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and *Theology Today* have declared that, if articles are submitted which do not use inclusive language, they will be adjusted so as to remove masculine-biased language. During the tenure of the late Mrs. Ella Grasso as Governor of the State of Connecticut, its constitution was revised to make equal references to men and women. Several Protestant denominations (including Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and the United Church of Christ), as well as groups within Roman Catholic orders and in Reformed Judaism, have undertaken to re-phrase their psalter, liturgy, hymns, and a variety of standards, such as the Form of Government, Book of Discipline, and other constitutional documents. Naturally these kinds of

concerns also face the translator of ancient documents, secular and sacred alike.

Recently a symposium was held at the University of Toronto in order to discuss problems that confront a panel of translators of the works of Erasmus. The University of Toronto Press has begun the publication of *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, which eventually will include forty volumes embracing the chief works of that prolific Dutch humanist and churchman. At the symposium we discussed some of the difficulties of rendering into English the ornate and baroque style of Latin which Erasmus delighted to use in his paraphrases and annotations on the New Testament.

In addition to matters involving alliteration and rhetorical figures of speech, we also discussed masculine-oriented language. It was agreed that ordinarily when Erasmus used the Latin word *vir* he meant an adult male, but that when he used the Latin word *homo* (or plural *homines*) his meaning might often be conveyed by the English word "person" or "people." Nothing, however, was said about changing Erasmus's language pertaining to the Deity—and this for a very good reason: the panel is intent upon giving a faithful rendering of what Erasmus himself intended to convey. It was taken for granted that to make changes in language about God would betray the author and deceive the reader.

The Revised Standard Version

Already in 1946 when the New Testament of the Revised Standard Version was first published, the Committee had begun to correct some of the over-masculinization of language that is present in the King James Version of 1611. For example, in Revelation 3:20, instead of the traditional rendering, "Behold I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door ...," the RSV literally follows the Greek (which has the indefinite pronoun) and renders "... if any one hears my voice and opens the door ..." There remain, however, many other such passages that still need such correction as well as other passages on which recent textual and archaeological studies have thrown additional light. The continuing Committee which is responsible for introducing changes into the text of the RSV has been meeting in January and June every year in order to consider and vote upon proposals to make necessary improvements of all kinds. We have now nearly completed our work on the New Testament, and hope to be able to finish the Old Testament by about 1990.

Besides having abandoned the use of the archaic second-person pronouns and verbs in passages addressed to the Deity, we have also eliminated a wide variety of masculine-oriented language when referring to persons.

Of primary concern are those instances where the traditional English rendering has inserted "man" without support from the Greek or Hebrew original. That these should be changed goes without saying. A few examples from the book of Psalms include 37:35, "a wicked man overbearing" becomes "the wicked oppressing"; 54:3 "insolent men" and "ruthless men" become "the insolent" and "the ruthless"; 66:6 "men passed through" becomes "they passed through"; and similarly in 106:16; 119:136; 141:5; 142:4; 143:2.

In other cases, where the Hebrew *'ish* ("man") occurs in the passage, we have taken into account the possibility that the word may be used in an inclusive sense. For example, in the first Psalm we have replaced "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked" with "Blessed are those who do not walk in the..." The frequently occurring expression, "children of men" or "sons of men" (Psalm 11:4; 12:1, 8; 14:2; 21:10; 31:19; 33:13; 36:7; etc.) has been replaced by a variety of expressions, including "humankind," "all people," "everyone."

In the New Testament typical instances that required adjustment include the following. In the account of the wedding at Cana of Galilee, the King James Version reads, "Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse" (John 2:10). Because the Greek text of this verse has no word for "man" or "men," we propose to translate more literally, "everyone serves good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk." In the Letter to the Romans we are suggesting the following changes:

"He who through faith is righteous ..." / "The one who ..." (1:17).

"Wickedness of men who ... suppress the truth" / "Wickedness of people who ..." (1:18).

"Exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man" / "... glory of the imperishable God for images resembling perishable humanity" (1:23).

"He will render to every man according to his works" / "... repay according to each one's ..." (2:6).

"God judges the secrets of men" / "... secrets of human beings" (2:16).

There is, of course, a limit to which such changes can be made by responsible translators. In Old Testament times, in a family of sons and daughters only the male children inherited from their father. Again, a man would marry a wife, but a woman was given or taken in

marriage. In order not to falsify historical documents such historical customs must be conveyed in the translation.

An Inclusive Language Lectionary

In October, 1983, the National Council of Churches issued *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*.¹ This presents the RSV text rather extensively modified, both with respect to language for human beings as well as for the Deity. It is not too much to say that some of the changes introduced in this lectionary are down-right silly. For example, instead of the statement in John 11:1, "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany," the Committee has changed it to read, "Now a certain person was ill, Lazarus of Bethany." Again, at John 9:1, the "man blind from birth" has been changed to "person blind from birth," and throughout the chapter all references to him as a man and as the son of his parents have been removed—despite the use in the Greek of masculine forms. Why has this been done? In a footnote the Committee explains that, because the one born blind "is never identified by name, masculine pronouns have been omitted in order to invite women as well as men to hear their condition addressed in this passage." One or two comments are in order.

The attitude represented in the footnote certainly implies that women have a very limited capacity to exercise imagination and empathy with characters in a narrative. In other passages, however, which present unnamed women as principal characters, the Committee has not neutralized the account but preserves the feminine pronouns; examples include the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4:8–16, and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:22–28. Why have these narratives not been altered so that men might identify with the situations described? Does not the Committee inadvertently demean women by supposing that they are less able than men to empathize with a narrative involving someone of the other sex?

In striving to avoid the use of masculine pronouns, at many places the Committee has mangled the English language, and at times reduced it to pidgin English. Not only is there excessive use of the expression "the one" (for example, Daniel 7:13 has "one like a human-one!"), but the repetition of a noun in order to avoid using a masculine pronoun produces monotonous and contrived English. The familiar cadences of John 3:16f. have been altered so as to read, "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Child, that whoever believes in that Child should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent that Child into the world, not to condemn the world, but that through that Child the world might be saved."

Here the fact that Jesus was a male human being is muffled, and the term "Son" is replaced by the far less appropriate word "Child." Aversion to the use of the pronoun "himself" is carried to the ludicrous extreme of saying "Christ humbled self" (Philippians 2:7).

God as Father and Jesus Christ his Son

The most serious challenge to Christian theology that has come from the current trend focuses on the Bible's use of Father in speaking to or about God. Disliking the sex-discrimination that some think is implied in the term "father," this criticism may take extreme forms, as the refusal to use the address in the Lord's Prayer, or in the wilder counter-discriminatory substitution of Mother for Father.² It is argued that since the Bible was written in a patriarchal culture, the biblical authors are somehow prejudiced by that culture against women's rights.

It is, of course, true that in Scripture God is presented as caring for his people with the tenderness of a mother as well as of a father. For example, Isaiah represents God as saying to Israel, "As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you" (Isaiah 66:13; cf. 49:15). Again, in speaking of God's intervention in history, the prophet declares, "For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in travail" (Isaiah 42:14). Elsewhere Isaiah even likens God's care to that of mother birds hovering to protect their young (Isaiah 31:5).³

Yet nowhere in the Bible is God described as a mother-goddess or addressed as Mother. In Old Testament times Israel was surrounded by peoples who worshiped female deities, such as Astarte and Ashtoreth. But the biblical God is totally different from such goddesses of Near Eastern fertility cults. Even in the metaphor of Deuteronomy 32:18, "You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth," the controlling idea is not gender (masculine forms are used throughout), but that the paternal and maternal responsibility for Israel's existence belongs to God alone.

The New Testament has two passages that are sometimes appealed to as suggesting the feminine element in the divine. One is Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). The other is the parable of the woman who swept her house to find the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10). But the point of both passages concerns God's relationship to the lost and has nothing to do with the sexuality of God. All language about God is metaphorical, for the infinite being of God must be expressed to finite minds by means of analogues, such as shepherd, potter, vine-dresser, and many others.

In assessing, now, the significance of passages such as those that have just been mentioned, it is important to keep them in proper perspective. First of all, every book of the New Testament (except the brief Third Epistle of John) refers to God as Father, whereas not once in either Old or New Testament is God ever called Mother. With regard to the paternal and maternal imagery mentioned earlier, there is a difference between saying "God is our Father" (describing the person of God) and saying "God comforts his people as a mother comforts her child" (describing an action of God). In the former, God is identified ("is") by a noun, "our Father." In the latter, an action of God is compared to ("as") an action performed by mothers.

The upshot of these considerations is that there is no justification for the Lectionary Committee's re-writing the Bible by adding the words "and Mother" (within square brackets)⁴ whenever God is referred to as Father. This unwarranted addition changes the whole orientation of the writers of Scripture. They knew, and all readers of the Bible should know, that God has no sexuality. According to the book of Genesis, male and female are structures of creation, while God is totally other than his creation.

Furthermore, no metaphor applies literally to God. Thus, when Hosea speaks of God as "husband" to Israel (Hosea 2:2), the prophet does not mean that God performs the conjugal functions of a husband. Such crude anthropomorphism was part of ancient Greek polytheism, but was totally abhorrent to the Old Testament prophets. Yet the National Council's lectionary committee has imposed sexuality upon God by interpreting "Father" sexually and then adding the female "Mother." Thus, instead of recognizing that God transcends sexuality, being neither male nor female, people will be led to think of God as bi-sexual.

Besides adding the words "and Mother" whenever God as Father is mentioned, the lectionary committee has also made a great number of other changes, very few of which are brought to the attention of the reader of the passage. For example, whenever the pronoun "he" is used in referring to God, the pronoun is replaced by repeating the word "God." It does not matter to the committee that this results, at times, in a dozen instances of the word "God" within the space of three verses (e.g. Romans 8:28-30). The masculine "Lord," of course, cannot be allowed to stand, and so the Lord's supper becomes "the Sovereign's supper" (I Corinthians 11:20). Then the Apostle Paul's statement that, as often as we participate in the communion, we do "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Corinthians 11:26) becomes "you proclaim the Sovereign's death until Christ comes." But this introduces a disjunction between Sovereign (Lord) and the Christ, as though they were

different persons. Even "kingdom of God" is too sexist and is replaced by "realm of God"—though of course this expression is somewhat ambiguous. Some changes are made silently and without footnotes. In the account of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, she is not allowed to address him as "sir" or "lord"; the Committee has simply dropped the Greek word *kyrie* of John 4:11 without so much as a footnote. The climax of such appalling distortions imposed upon the biblical text is that, when these mutilated passages are read from the pulpit as the Scripture, people will attribute the nonsense they are hearing to the biblical authors themselves!

Finally, one of the greatest dangers in using the new lectionary is the inevitable erosion of the Church's understanding of the Trinity. This doctrine has its basis in the Church's reflection on the content of Scripture, including such key passages as the baptismal formula at the close of the Gospel according to Matthew: "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This passage now reads in the lectionary: "... baptizing them in the name of [God] the Father [and Mother], and of Jesus Christ the beloved Child of God and of the Holy Spirit." It is not hard to see that this language may come to be taken as referring not to the Trinity, but to a quaternity in the Godhead.

Conclusion

The Bible as canonical Scripture is the normative standard for the Church. Now a special interest group has ventured to introduce grotesque changes into the metaphorical language about God as Father and Jesus Christ as Son. Such alterations of the basic thought-patterns of biblical authors are, at the very least, acts of gross disrespect for those biblical authors—to say nothing about correcting the Word of God! The ancient authors should be allowed to speak as was natural and customary for them to do.⁵

Those who prepared the new lectionary version of the Bible confuse the work of translators with the task of Christian educators. It is the latter who have the responsibility of instructing young and old alike that God is never to be thought of as "the Man upstairs." He is Father in a sense above and different from all earthly fathers. But the term itself is validated by Jesus Christ and is pervasive in the documents that have imposed themselves as canon upon the Church.

If the lectionary committee had confined its attention to adjusting language about humans, so as to ensure that where the Hebrew and Greek original involves both men and women the English translation faithfully reflects such texts, there could be no objection. It is, however, an altogether different matter to meddle with Christian

theology and to tinker with texts that bear on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.⁶

Many ancient religions worshipped male and female deities, but to conclude that the Bible is merely the produce of its contemporary culture is invalid. That its references to God as Father are not just a reflection of ancient patriarchal customs can be seen from the refusal of the Old and New Testament authors alike to adopt the sexual references to the Deity that were prevalent in contemporary cultures. In the Bible, God transcends masculinity and femininity within the mystery of the Godhead. At the same time, in communicating to the writers of Scripture God has chosen to employ masculine imagery very much more often than feminine imagery. To refuse to use any reference to God as “he” and to use only such expressions as “the divine being” or “the Deity” is to depersonalize God. In the entire Judeo-Christian tradition God is referred to as who and

not which. In the simplest terms we call God our Father because Jesus has taught us to do so, and to cease so to call him, is to cease praying as Jesus enjoined us.

In making a final estimate of the overall quality of the National Council’s *Inclusive Language Lectionary*, one must say that, instead of its being a legitimate version, it is a monstrous perversion of the holy Scriptures. If and when it is read publicly from the pulpit the lector owes it to the congregation to introduce the pericope with some such statement as: “The lesson is from the Gospel according to Matthew as modified by the Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee of the National Council of Churches.”

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¹ *An Inclusive Language Lectionary. Readings for Year A.* Prepared for experimental and voluntary use in churches by the Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee appointed by the Division of Education and Ministry, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Published for The Cooperative Publication Association by John Knox Press, Atlanta; The Pilgrim Press, New York; The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1983.

² Sometimes, with a show of spurious scholarship, it is argued that, since the Hebrew word for “Spirit” is feminine (*ruach*), there is somehow a female element in the Old Testament concept of the Deity. But this is to confuse grammatical gender with sexuality. That there is no necessary correspondence can be seen from the fact that in southern European languages the words for “sun” and “moon” are masculine and feminine respectively, whereas in northern European languages they are feminine and masculine.

³ In order to increase these very few Old Testament female metaphors for God, the Introduction to the lectionary pretends to offer several others: “God is compared to a mother suckling her children (Num. 11:12); a seamstress making clothes for Israel to wear (Neh. 9:21); and a midwife attending a birth (Job 3:12).” Not one of these, however, refers to God, as anyone can see who looks them up. Is this typical of the biblical scholarship represented on the committee?

⁴ The insertion of square brackets is merely for the eye and not the ear, because when a passage is read from the pulpit in a service of worship the lector certainly will not mention the presence of each bracket.

⁵ What historian of the Reformation worthy of the name would contemplate “translating” Luther’s or Calvin’s references to

God as Father/Mother in the way the Lectionary committee has done with John, Peter, Paul, and other first-century authors? How much of the vast amount of Christian literature is to be rewritten so as to make the writers use inclusive language with reference to God?

⁶ While the present article focuses upon the use of inclusive language in the translation of the Bible (which belongs to the whole church) and has no quarrel with those who compose bisexual prayers, liturgies, hymns, and other such private expressions of personal preference, it should be pointed out that the increasingly-used modern alternative of “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” for “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” substitutes functional language (three things that God does) for personal language (three *personae* that God is). The difficulty is that the functions that can be attributed to God are vastly more than creating, redeeming, and sustaining. Furthermore, none of these three can be exclusively linked with one of the *personae*. For example, the Bible does not equate the function of creating with the Father; the Son is also involved in the creative process. The Fourth Gospel, speaking of the Word, says, “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made” (John 1:3), and in Colossians the writer states “In him [Christ] all things were created” (1:16). Likewise one of the most venerable liturgical treasures of the Church, the ancient hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*, explicitly refers to the Spirit as creator. Orthodox Trinitarianism has therefore held to a doctrine of *perichoresis*, or interpenetration of the three *personae*. The currently popular substitute for the Trinitarian formula, by appearing to equate a discrete function to each of the Persons, destroys this important insight about the richness of God’s activity and the interpenetration of God’s *personae*.