

Mutuality

A Publication from CBE International

Lost in Translation

How Understanding Translation
Helps Us Understand the Bible

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Kissing: How Translation
Really Works
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A “Plain Reading” of Scripture

Many people hold a hierarchical view of the relationship between women and men because they understand that to be the clear position of Scripture. They believe a “plain reading” of passages like 1 Timothy 2:12, 3:2, and Ephesians 5:22–32 (to name a few) establishes a universal and eternal order in both ministry and household contexts. They may accuse egalitarians of twisting Scripture or even throwing it out altogether, abandoning biblical authority in order to support a position which goes against these mandates. Those who hold a hierarchical position often say things like “I am just reading what the Bible says,” applying an Occam’s Razor¹ approach to the (often English or other modern translation) text. The suggestion is that there is no interpretive work required in approaching the Bible, and that anyone who engages in such interpretation does so with the intention of contorting Scripture to support their desired position.

In fact, the opposite is true. It is precisely *because* of our very high view of Scripture and its authority that we believe in the biblical equality of women and men. In both our name and throughout our work, we intentionally use the phrase “biblical equality” in part to highlight that the source for our beliefs on this issue is the Bible.

What is the disconnect? How can something seemingly so clear be understood any other way?

The answer lies in the difficult work that is translation and exegesis.² Though most readers of the Bible are familiar with the existence of different translations of the Bible (the New International Version or the King James Version, for example), many may not know just what makes those translations different from each other. The whole subject of translation and work in the “original languages” (Greek and Hebrew) may seem obscure or even intimidating to those not familiar with it.

Those who have experience in more than one language (contemporary or otherwise) know that translation is complex work that involves more than swapping words from one language to another. Idiomatic expressions like “quitting cold turkey” make sense to North American English speakers but leave the non-English speaker wondering what cold poultry has to do with giving up a habit. Translating this phrase requires understanding what it means in its original context, correctly interpreting it, and communicating it in a new language. If this is already an intricate, nuanced process between two contemporary

languages, how much more so is it when you bring in ancient Greek or Hebrew—languages separated from us by thousands of years, miles, cultures, and contexts, each with their own expressions, ideas, and worldviews?

In the middle of all of that is the tricky question of interpretation. Contrary to what many believe, interpretation is not a manipulation of the text, but an inescapable part of reading. Even modern-day texts require interpretation, something we often engage in without even thinking about it. We would consider it absurd to treat the instructions of a cookbook with the same weight as a book of legislation, and we easily differentiate a television script for a popular law show from an actual legal court transcript, for example. The question is not whether we interpret the texts we read, but how we are interpreting them and if we are doing so correctly.

The passages mentioned above may seem straightforward in specific modern day English translations, but what did the original languages say? Does a “plain reading” refer to the passages as we have received them in contemporary English, or as they were originally written? What was the context and purpose behind their original writing? A number of questions begin to come up as we consider all that goes into the art of translation.

In this issue of *Mutuality*, we hope to bring the subject of Bible translation out of the seminary classroom. Articles featuring a case study on how translation can affect a community, an examination of translator bias, as well as a new look at a biblical passage that has been used to restrict women, provide practical examples that demonstrate the critical importance of getting it right when working with God’s word. When coming to the biblical text, we must carefully and faithfully navigate complex issues involved in Bible translation and study. We hope this issue will help you come to a deeper understanding of what the Bible teaches about the relationship between women and men.

Notes

1. Occam’s Razor is a philosophical principle that the simplest explanation is most likely the correct one.
2. Exegesis is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially Scripture. Some consider translation to be a subset of exegesis, while others argue that they are intertwined, if not synonymous. For simplicity, we will be using the term *translation* throughout the issue.

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Naps, Lasagna, and Kissing

How Translation Really Works

by Julie R. Frady

If you have taken a foreign language class, at some point you had to “translate” vocabulary for a test. If so, you might understand translation to mean seeing the word “nap” in English and replacing it with the word “siesta” in Spanish. That is exactly what many people think: “translation” of a document is simply a matter of finding a good dictionary (or Strong’s Concordance) and switching out the words.

Knowing how translation *actually* works will help you understand why there are so many translations of the Bible, and why it’s okay that they don’t say exactly the same thing. It will also help you avoid seeing how an interlinear text¹ or Strong’s Concordance renders a word and mistakenly thinking that’s exactly and always what it means.

Translation is a complex process that requires more than a bilingual dictionary or knowing two languages. It involves things like training, natural talent, knowing methodology and grammar, understanding the culture, identifying context, and discerning tone. In translation, the *Target Language* (TL) is the language you translate *into*, while the *Source Language* (SL) is the language you translate from.

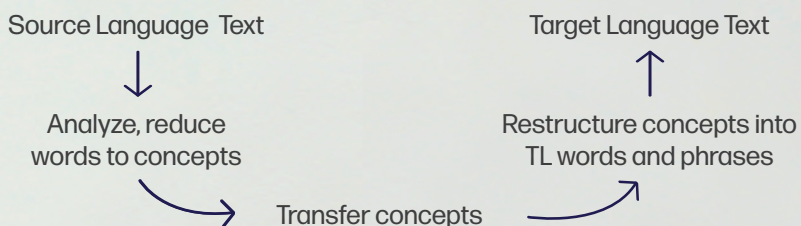
Why can’t we just “switch out words”? Because every language is interwoven with its culture; you can’t separate language from



Many people think translation works like this:

Source Language Text → Switch out words → Translated Text

But what a translator really does is illustrated by the following diagram, based on one created by Eugene Nida,² a respected biblical languages translator:



its culture any more than you could separate a hurricane from its wind. Culture affects how we perceive the world, so the world in which each language exists is actually a unique perspective on reality.

Words are like Tupperware® containers. Imagine three identical-looking containers full of lasagna. Container one's lasagna has cottage cheese and mushrooms, container two's lasagna is made with ricotta and spinach, and container three's lasagna has cottage cheese, spinach, and ground chicken. All of these containers look the same and all contain lasagna, but the *flavor* of these lasagnas will be different because they have differing ingredients.

The same is true of languages. Words are containers which hold meaning, and the contents will differ from language to language.³ For example, if we look up the word “nap” in a Spanish/English dictionary, we’ll find “siesta” as its definition or “equivalent.” However, a siesta is not really a nap. In the United States, we can take a short sleep anywhere, any time of the day and call it a “nap.” In Spain, a “siesta” specifically refers to resting or quiet activity at home during the afternoon, which may not involve sleep at all. The containers “nap” and “siesta” both hold lasagna, but they don’t taste the same.

What does this mean for Bible translation?

“Nap” and “siesta” are just single words (not entire paragraphs) from languages that exist in the same historical era. The books of the Bible, on the other hand, were written in ancient languages with metaphors, idioms, and cultural references foreign to speakers of modern languages like English (as my expertise is in Spanish and English, I will be focusing on these). Some of the original ingredients (meanings, connotations) of a Greek or Hebrew word are often not found in its English “equivalent,” and that modern language word often adds new ingredients that were

not in the original recipe. No translation can be 100 percent identical to the original SL text. As we take a concept from one culture and context to another, inevitably, something will be lost and something else will be added. The Jewish poet Hayim Nahman Bialik is often credited as saying that reading the Bible in translation is like kissing through a veil, with the implication being that we are not able to fully connect with our beloved.

Does this mean we can't trust Bible translations?

That said, the accuracy of most of the commonly used major English Bible translations is very high. Even secular academia recognizes the overall quality and accuracy of biblical translation. In a graduate level course at a state university, we learned that Bible translation played a key role in the development of translation methodology, and that historically, the Bible translation processes have often been of very high quality. Our text attributed this accuracy to the fact that “in an age when the choice of a pronoun could mean the difference between life or condemnation to death as a heretic, precision was of central importance.”⁴ Since some of these translators were condemned simply for daring to put Scripture into the everyday language of the people,⁵ I believe that Bible translations were often of such high quality because translators were motivated by their respect for Scripture and fear of God, not by fear of human authorities.⁶ The Holy Spirit also played a significant role. Our Bibles are not perfect, but they are accurate. Envision a bullseye for target practice. No translation will have fifteen holes in the center (perfection). Rather, a good translation will have fifteen holes clustered near the center (accuracy).

There is no simple answer to which modern Bible translation is the “most accurate.” Though some translations are better than others, “most accurate” depends on how you define “accurate.” Does it mean

“more literal” or “better at communicating meaning”? Does it use gender-inclusive language where the original languages do? Does it have easier vocabulary or is it something geared toward academic study? How you answer these questions determines whether you gravitate toward “formal” or “dynamic” translations. What do those terms even mean?

In spite of what you may have heard, a true “word-for-word” or “literal” translation of the Bible does not exist. Words rarely have 100 percent correlations of meaning between languages, as we saw with *nap/siesta* and our containers of *lasagna*. Even an interlinear gloss—which is as close to a word-for-word translation as we can get because it has dictionary definitions in English written below the SL text—is not exact in meaning. Furthermore, since different languages also use different sentence structures, an actual word-for-word translation would be unreadable, as this word-for-word rendering of Mark 4:1 illustrates: “And again he began to teach by the sea and was assembled to him crowd a very large, so as him in a ship having entered to sit in the sea, and all the crowd toward the sea on the land were.”

All languages have *form* (grammatical structure, vocabulary, etc.) and *dynamism* (meaning). Since no language can exactly replicate both the structure and meaning of another language, translators must choose to prioritize or even sacrifice parts of the form or meaning of a SL text to make the translation readable in the TL.

Some Bible translations that are described as “word-for-word” or “literal” are actually *formal* or *formally equivalent* translations. They try to preserve as much of the SL’s form (like vocabulary and sentence structure) as possible, at the cost of some of the meaning. This approach makes it easier to do word studies⁷ and can

reveal important details or trains of thought that the original authors intended. Most seminaries and universities require students to use a formal translation in their coursework. However, formal Bible translations don’t sound very “natural” in English, and they are more difficult to read, requiring readers to put more effort into understanding the text. Older English Bible translations are typically formal, and these have the additional hurdle of archaic language.⁸ The New American Standard Bible (NASB) is an example of a formal translation.

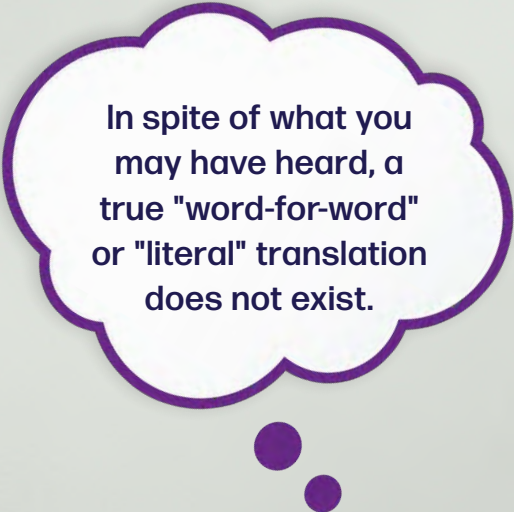
Dynamic or *functionally equivalent* translations prioritize transmitting meaning into the target language (TL) without focusing on the sentence structure or vocabulary choices of the Hebrew and Greek authors. They sound “natural” in English and are easy to read and understand. However, it’s difficult to do word studies and academic work with them, and translators’ interpretations and/or biases are more pronounced.⁹ The New Living Translation (NLT) is an example of a dynamic translation.

Some translations are *blends*. They balance following the form or structure of the SL with communicating meaning, and they vary widely in where they fall on the formal vs. dynamic spectrum. While the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is a blend, it leans so far toward the formal side that many seminaries and universities accept its use. The Common English Bible (CEB) is also a blend, but leans toward the dynamic side. The New International Version (NIV) (2011) is in the middle of the spectrum.¹⁰ Blends provide a good middle ground, taking the best of the formal and dynamic approaches while avoiding many of their worst characteristics. Blends usually have a US middle school¹¹ reading level, though ease of understanding and adherence to form can vary widely even within a single translation.

Paraphrases are an informal re-wording of the text and should not be confused with translations. While paraphrases like *The Message* and *The Living Bible* can be useful during personal devotions, they should not be your main Bible, nor used to figure out hard-to-understand or controversial passages. They are usually done by one person—not a group of translators—and do not follow all the criteria that translations use.

Putting It All Together

Now, let’s use the Spanish phrase *¿Cómo te llamas?* to illustrate these differences between formal, dynamic, and blended translations. Pay attention to how each Bible translation might handle choices of vocabulary vs. easily communicating meaning. What are potential problems



In spite of what you may have heard, a true “word-for-word” or “literal” translation does not exist.

Methodology	Sentence	(Hypothetical) Bible Translation
Original (or SL)	¿Cómo te llamas?	
Gloss	How yourself call [you]	Interlinear text
Formal (w/ archaic language)	How dost thou call thyself?	KJV (King James Version)
Formal	How do you call yourself?	NASB (New American Standard)
Blended (leaning formal)	What do you call yourself?	NRSV (New Revised Standard)
Blended (middle ground)	What name do you go by?	NIV (New International Version)
Blended (leaning dynamic)	What is your name?	CEB (Common English Bible)
Dynamic	What's your name?	NLT (New Living Translation)
Paraphrase	Yo! What's yo' name, Bro? or What's your handle, Good Buddy?	The Message The Living Bible (1970's)

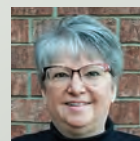
with being “too literal”? Could a word study of the verb “call” send us off in a direction the original text never intended? What might be lost by being too dynamic?

As we learned from looking at naps and lasagna, no translation can be perfect. So, don't restrict yourself to just one! It's important to use a good blend, along with a good formal, and a good dynamic translation, being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each. In this way, you can get closer to what the original languages meant to convey. Reading the Bible in translation may be like kissing through a veil, but using multiple translations thins that veil. And though kissing our beloved through a veil is not as nice as kissing without one, we are still getting to kiss!

Notes

1. An interlinear text inserts words in English (or some other language) between the lines of a text's original language. For example, an interlinear of the New Testament book of Mark would have Mark's original Greek text with English definitions above or below each of the Greek words.
2. Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (London and New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd. and Routledge. First edition, 1980. Revised edition, 1991), 16.
3. Even within the same language the contents (meanings of a word) can change over time.
4. Bassnett, 49.
5. “Archbishop Thomas Arundel's Constitutions against the Lollards.” n.d. www.bible-researcher.com. <https://www.bible-researcher.com/arundel.html>.

6. John Foxe, John Milner, Ingram Cobbin, and The Library of Congress. 1856. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: A Complete and Authentic Account of the Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Primitive and Protestant Martyrs in All Parts of the World, with notes, Comments, and Illustrations. Internet Archive*. London: Knight and Son. 288. <https://archive.org/details/foxesbookofmarty00fo/page/n9/mode/2up>.
7. A “word study” is closely examining a specific word in a given passage, especially (though not always) looking at the various meanings and connotations of the original Hebrew or Greek word it was translated from, as well as considering context, and other places in Scripture that particular Hebrew or Greek word is used. The goal is to better understand the thought processes behind the author's choice of that word in the passage in question.
8. For example, the KJV's use of “peculiar” people in 1 Peter 2:9 means a “special possession,” not “odd” or “strange.”
9. If translators have patriarchal beliefs, their dynamic translations will more readily reveal that bias. The NLT renders 1 Tim. 3:2 with “so a church leader must be a man” although the Greek uses gender-neutral terms. And though many scholars recognize that *kephale* does not mean “authority,” dynamic translations such as *The Good News Translation*, *God's Word*, *EasyEnglish Bible*, and *Names of God Bible* render it as “authority” or “supreme over” rather than “head” in passages such as 1 Cor. 11:3.
10. I use the NIV for casual study, the CEB to teach and preach, and the NRSV for academic study. These all generally also use gender-inclusive terms where the original languages do.
11. Generally ages 11 to 14 years old.



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by Kimberly Dickson

WORDS MATTER

HOW A CORRECTED TRANSLATION TRANSFORMED A COMMUNITY

We were under pressure! We had agreed to participate in a UNICEF grant that expanded our normal community health work in rural northern India from several dozen villages to several *hundred*. Our director had to triple the size of our community health team to reach these villages as quickly as possible. It was up to the three of us: our director (a physician with a Master of Public Health [MPH]), our gifted community organizer, and myself—the only foreigner, with just one year of language study and my own newly-earned MPH. We were tasked with training our new staff in community survey techniques, the principles of sanitation and hygiene, record keeping, and—most importantly—community organizing in just a few short weeks.

In order to train our team effectively, we modeled community development techniques by facilitating discussions where they created their own interventions and methods of reaching the community. The newly hired young men joined these discussions with enthusiasm, ideas, and humor, but the young women pulled their shawls closer around their faces and refused to say a word.

We needed their input; these young women were crucial to our success. Most of our work would be with women's groups, since women were the ones who fed and cleansed their families. We intended these newly hired women who refused to talk to become the group facilitators. If they did not understand and embrace community organizing, then this UNICEF contract, a first of its kind for our organization with the potential to dramatically change the health reality for a large portion of our district, would fail. We cajoled, we lectured, and as the weeks for training disappeared, we begged for their participation. Finally, one young woman said, "Why are you so desperate for our input? We are just feeble-minded women." The rest of the women nodded in agreement.

I was dumbfounded. Where had this view of themselves come from? I was used to illiterate women in the villages, raised under the curse of the societal caste system, saying nearly the same thing: "Why are you working with us, we are just dumb water buffalo." However, the women on our team were different. They were not illiterate. They had all completed secondary school, and some had additional training and experience. They were not Hindus nor Muslims with their varying degrees of caste.¹ No, they were Christians. Didn't they know they were made in God's own image, that we wanted their involvement because we truly valued their contributions to the project?

GENESIS 3 TRANSLATION

While we puzzled over this, I began leading a very small Bible study with four of the young women from my team. We were looking at how God saw women, so we started at the beginning, with creation (Genesis 1–2). They read their Hindi language Bibles, I read my English language Bible, and between the five of us with our varying degrees of language ability, we managed to get to the heart of the passages.

Genesis 1 and 2 were beautiful. I had the opportunity to explain the meaning of the Hebrew word *ezer* used to describe the first woman in Genesis 2:18. Then we looked at Psalm 121, where God acts as an *ezer*—demonstrating *ezer*'s meaning as one who rescues those facing insurmountable odds. God intended women to be rescuers opposite of men.² We next studied Genesis 2:24, in which a man leaves his father and mother to cling to his wife. In India the bride's family pays a dowry to the husband's family. She then belongs to his family, not the other way around. In the Indian context, a man leaving his family to cleave to his wife was a radical biblical idea.³

But it was with Genesis 3 that everything fell into place. As I read aloud from my English Bible about the serpent's words to the woman, the women in the study stopped me and had me read it again, astonished. They explained, "Our Hindi version says that the serpent spoke to the woman because she was feeble-minded—but you're not reading that in English." The four of them gathered around my Bible to read it for themselves.

Suddenly the struggles we were having with our community development team clicked! Our team of women had refused to engage in our well-intentioned efforts to involve them in leadership because of their sincere faith. They understood the stakes of this new project, and they did not want to risk its success by adding their "feeble-minded" ideas.

There was more. They continued comparing my Bible translation in English to their translation in Hindi, discussing among themselves at a level of Hindustani that my one year of language study could not understand.⁴ Finally, they let me in on what they were seeing: my translation described Adam standing right there with Eve while the serpent tempted both of them. In their Bibles, Adam was missing. That clinched it: *both* Adam and Eve were guilty. The Fall was not solely Eve's fault because she was feeble-minded, as they had always been taught.

MY TRANSLATION DESCRIBED ADAM
STANDING RIGHT THERE WITH EVE
WHILE THE SERPENT TEMPTED
BOTH OF THEM. IN THEIR BIBLES,
ADAM WAS MISSING.

EVERYTHING TRANSFORMED

Nothing was the same again. Our women teammates now came to our planning meetings with their heads held high and their shawls relaxed around their shoulders. They shared their brilliant ideas and delighted in the growth of our team. They learned to ride mopeds to reach remote villages. Their self-confidence and competence inspired the village girls in what women could do. They internalized all the excellent training from our community organizer—how to disregard caste strictures and relate to people at their own level,

to live in the villages if the opportunity arose, to trust that people can and will change, and how to facilitate groups so that each group determined how to solve its own problems.

Their work transformed. One of the women's groups realized that the government had distributed funds for clean water, but the funds had been diverted by a local government official. Instead of making the well available to the village, he had the well drilled in his own private residence. These women—who no longer considered themselves "dumb like water buffalo"—decided together that they would just sit in his private yard until he was so embarrassed that he paid for a deep well for the village out of his own funds. And it worked! They got their clean water. Waterborne disease declined, which meant that malnutrition and death also declined. Without malnutrition, the children could study well in school. In short, thanks to good Bible translation and study, four women learned of their God-given value and an entire village was transformed for generations.

INDIAN BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Years later, while studying for my Master of Theological Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, I wrote a paper on Bible translation in India based on this experience. I was shocked to discover that most Indian translations did not rely on the original Hebrew and Greek biblical languages, but instead depended on the English 1885 Revised Standard Version (RSV).⁵ This version was plagued with errors. One glaring error that had hobbled my teammates was its omission of the Hebrew word *immah* "with her," in relation to Adam standing *with* Eve while she ate the fruit after the serpent gave his deceptive speech in Genesis 3:6. This omission allowed the inference that Eve was more susceptible to deception. A diverse team bringing different perspectives to the text usually identifies these types of errors or omissions,

but the 1885 translation team was critiqued for its lack of diversity. As Bible translator and missionary Dr. Katharine Bushnell said of the team, “These men may have done the best they could,” but it was not “the best that could have been done.”⁶

William Carey started the trend of relying on a secondary source document like the 1885 RSV for modern Indian translations. With Hindu scholars, he created a Sanskrit translation. He then used the Sanskrit translation as the basis for all other Indian language translations, neglecting the original Greek and Hebrew source documents. Using local cultures and ideas to communicate spiritual truths is as ancient as our faith. However, as Indian Bible scholars like Pandita Ramabai have long noted, in the Indian context, this practice entrenched Hindu patriarchy where it did not belong.⁷

This is still the case. Like Ramabai, Dr. Boaz Johnson, a Hebrew Bible scholar at North Park University in Chicago, contends that the Indian Bible’s use of Hindu deities for the name of God results in endorsing hierarchy and abuse.⁸ In addition to his academic argument, he also cites his experience as a boy and young man growing up in the slums of New Delhi. There he saw the Bible’s Hindu influences perpetuate the same caste abuses against the marginalized that occur among Hindus.

Furthermore, William Carey’s work has long been critiqued for “unwarranted additions of words not in the Greek text (added) for theological reasons.”⁹ It does not take much imagination to deduce where my teammate’s Bibles’ additional word “feeble-minded” came from. This was a commonly held belief about women throughout most of history. During Carey’s era, even men who believed women should be involved in ministry thought that the serpent deceived the woman because of her “feeble mind.”¹⁰

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

My heart weeps at the millions of people over the centuries and up to our very own day who could have been saved if only they had good Bible translations. Jesus said he came to bring life and life abundantly (John 10:10), which was happening in these villages through my teammates’ work. Not only was their physical and educational health improving, so too was their spiritual health. Every six months our project asked the staff if they had seen any spiritual changes in the villages where they worked. The teammate who originally challenged why we were asking for their feeble-minded input responded, “Well, my groups have taken down their Hindu gods and now only pray to Jesus.”

Notes

1. Islam in India is unique in that it incorporates part of the Hindu caste system—something not inherent to the Muslim religion. However, it is more gentle than Hindu caste, with only five distinct castes rather than Hinduism’s approximately 3,000 castes and 25,000 subcastes. See Wikipedia’s Caste in India.
2. The Hebrew term *kinēdo* in Genesis 2:18 follows the word *ezer*, and means “in front of” like sitting opposite/in front of me.
3. To better understand the countercultural power of Adam considering Eve kin in this passage, listen to Dr. Havilah Dharamraj, professor at South Asia Institute for Advanced Christian Studies in India, explain this in *Mutuality Matters*, see Mimi Haddad and Havilah Dharamraj, “Women and Words: Translating the Old Testament Part One,” September 1, 2023, in *Mutuality Matters*, produced by CBE International, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://mutualitymatters.podbean.com/e/women-words-translating-the-old-testament-part-one-with-dr-havilah-dharamraj/>.
4. Hindustani is the *lingua franca* of India spoken by most North Indians. It is the combination of Sanskrit Hindi and Urdu (the language spoken by the Muslims in India).
5. T. Johnson Chakkuvarackal, “Important Issues in the Translation of the Bible in the Indian Context,” *Bangalore Theological Forum*, 34 no. 1 (June 2002), 163, 164 169, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/important-issues-in-the-translation-of-the-bible-in-the-indian-context/>.
6. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *A New Gospel for Women: Katharine Bushnell and the Challenge of Christian Feminism*, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2015), 17.
7. Arun Jones, “Ramabai, Pandita,” in *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Marion Ann Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2012), 417.
8. Boaz Johnson, “Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), India and the Pandemic, Plight of Women 1896-1918.” 2021 CBE Conference London, 2021, video: *Pandita Ramabai India and the Pandemic, Plague, Plight of Women with Boaz Johnson*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjVYLhBMMAA&list=PLtcLHT-MtlpfxKsT8h9l0aTdY8WotUwDV&index=27>.
9. John Carman, “Protestant Bible Translation in India: An Unrecognizable Dialogue?,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 4 no. 3 (January 1991), <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1041>.
10. Priscilla Pope-Levison, “Five Women in Ministry Articles Transcribed from Tongues of Fire,” *Wesley and Methodist Studies*, 11 no. 1 (2019), 76-79. An example of this can be seen in the written work of Richard Reader Harris, editor of *Tongues of Fire*, who espoused the prevalent belief “that it was Eve, not Adam, who fell prey initially to Satan’s temptation in the Garden of Eden” because Adam was not there. Then he attributes Eve’s easy deception to “the feminine mind.” Yet, in 1893 he wrote an article outlining why women should be preachers, largely influenced by the writings of Catherine Booth. Reader Harris, “Female Ministry,” *Tongues of Fire*, 3/35 (November 1893), 7–8.

MY HEART WEEPS AT THE
MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ... WHO
COULD HAVE BEEN SAVED IF
ONLY THEY HAD GOOD BIBLE
TRANSLATIONS.



Kimberly Dickson, Masters in Public Health (MPH), has studied and worked in the Middle East, East Africa, India, and in her home state of California. She has seen the welfare of entire communities transform when those who are traditionally marginalized are brought into the center of community decision making. She hosts the “Women in Scripture and Christian History” theme on CBE’s podcast, *Mutuality Matters*. In the fall of 2024 Kimberly will begin PhD work in Old Testament and Hebrew studies at the University of Edinburgh.



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LOST IN TRANSLATION

Female Elders in Titus 1-2

by Marissa Franks Burt

The pastoral epistles are often presented as prescriptive guides for leader or “elder” qualifications. Around this time last year, I happened to notice, to my great astonishment, that the New Testament Greek word for the “older women” in Titus 2:3 is *presbytidas*.¹ The English cognate *presbyter* jumped out at me. Variations on the same root word *presbuteros* also appear three times in this short book: in verses 1:5, 2:2, and 2:3, but when reading an English translation, you would never know that the words (and concept!) are related.

I have studied the Bible for thirty years in various formal contexts and have heard countless talks on the “Titus 2 woman.” Yet, I have never heard serious consideration of whether the supposedly male-only “elder” qualifications in chapter one relate to the “older men and older women” qualifications of chapter two. As I explored further, it became clear to me that this connection remains veiled to the English reader because of interpretive translation



decisions. There are three key points to note when reading this passage. First, when we read “elder,” we unintentionally have a specific modern notion about “church elders” in mind. Second, Paul’s short letter is broken up with artificial chapter subheadings that frame our reading. Third, the lack of clarity ends up impacting application.

CONTEMPORARY NOTIONS ABOUT CHURCH ELDERS

Many of us have denominationally informed understandings of who a church elder is and what a church elder does. The early church, however, did not have a formal institutional structure or crisply defined vocational ministry roles.² The book of Acts describes the budding church in action: believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42–47). They provided for one another’s needs and became renowned for their acts of service. As the church grew, the unity of

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the Holy Spirit displaced dividing lines of social class, ethnicity, gender, and economic distinctions. This was an exciting and chaotic time. Groups of missionary-apostles went from community to community to preach the gospel, baptize new converts, and disciple people. Sometimes the leaders stayed for months or years; sometimes they had to flee overnight, leaving fledgling churches behind.

Problems arose, false teaching threatened, and the new churches had questions which were answered through the instruction and correction of the epistles. This included concerns about church leadership, which the New Testament interchangeably refers to as *presbyteros*, *diakonos*, and *episkopos*.³ In the latter half of the first century, we begin to see emerging leadership constructs, though roles are not crisply defined.⁴ Titus 1:5–9 provides an example of this, when Paul indicates the purpose of his epistle:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders (*presbyterous*) in every city as I directed you, *namely*, if any man is beyond reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of indecent behavior or rebellion. For the overseer (*episkopon*) must be beyond reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not overindulging in wine, not a bully, not greedy for money, but hospitable, loving what is good, self-controlled, righteous, holy, disciplined, holding firmly the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.⁵

The churches in Crete—a society notorious for its treachery, greed, drunkenness, and violence⁶—needed sound teaching and healthy conduct, both within individual households and in the household of God.⁷ So Paul tells Titus to appoint *presbyterous* and immediately pivots to giving qualifications for the *episkopon*, who will be a manager in God’s house.⁸ Titus 1 catalogs godly character qualities alongside a description of the tasks entrusted to the kind of leader needed for every *polis* or community. While most English translations render these qualifications for church leaders with masculine pronouns, **there are no gendered pronouns in the text.** Instead, 1:6 opens with the sweeping neuter “anyone” (tis)!⁹

Might these qualifications speak to the need for male **and** female *presbyterous* in each community? Not one or the other, but both? Paul opens his letter with the clear instruction to appoint presbyters and then goes on in chapter two to clarify that the male and female presbyters of Titus 2 are to be sober, sensible, not addicted to wine, and teachers of the good, all repeats of qualities that define the *presbyterous* and *episkopon* of chapter one. Imagining that chapter one is about a group of vocational church leaders doing this in a specific way and chapter two is about lay people doing it in a different way shortsightedly envisions a large church community rather than the much more likely small and intimate church body. What precisely would the “elder” in a church of thirty or fifty people be doing while the older men and older women were teaching sound doctrine and modeling godliness? It is our contemporary eyes that imagine Titus is organizing congregations of several hundreds with tiered leadership and designated tasks. Furthermore, Greek-English dictionaries indicate that the multiple senses for these related terms include both age and community leadership.¹⁰ Indeed, there is often overlap, though translation decisions do not highlight this reality.¹¹ Instead of maintaining the connection

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ARTIFICIAL SUBHEADINGS

Most English Bibles include a subtitle at the end of chapter one and before chapter two.¹² But the New Testament Greek, which does not have headings or chapter breaks, suggests that Paul's discussion in Titus 2 is a continuation of the qualifications and job descriptions of a church leader. Here we see that the men and women of 2:2–3 will be doing work that includes some of the tasks assigned to the appointed leaders of 1:5–7.¹³ The flow of thought goes like this: "Titus, you were/are to appoint elders.¹⁴ The male elders are to have these qualities and be prepared for the work of modeling and imparting sound doctrine. The female elders are to have these qualities and be prepared for the work of modeling and imparting sound doctrine."

This fits with both the cultural and grammatical sense of the root word I mentioned at the beginning: *presbyterous*. This word is used in classical and Koine Greek¹⁵ to describe both the aged in general and the aged people who would have led in various ways in communities. Why? Because in such cultures, **leaders would invariably be the aged people.**¹⁶ The chapter headings blur the way these terms are related and leave us wondering: Did Paul write a brief, forthright epistle to Titus with directives about appointing leaders for a church in crisis at Crete only to sandwich a few unrelated verses about the moral conduct of elderly men and elderly women in the middle of it? This kind of reading relies on our contemporary designations between lay and ordained people as well as the modern idea that an "elder" could ever be a young leader.

I believe that Paul's original instruction for local church leadership was meant to be immensely practical. In a community with disrupted household life, cultural confusion, and threats from problematic Judaizer influences, the new Christians needed grounded, wise people who could offer sound teaching and a healthy example and who also had the life experience to teach the "novices"—both the young women (*neas*) and young men (*neoterous*) of Titus 2:4, 6. Cretan Christians needed to learn how to be sensible, to stop drinking, and to care for their households. These weren't add-on Bible studies or topics for women at ladies' retreats. This was the primary work in that moment for the church in Crete, and the *presbytas* and *presbytidas* were the ones assigned to do it. We retain this idea even in complementarian churches, where in Titus 2 older women are told to train younger women. But that is only half the story. What women are not told is that the original Titus 2 women were female elders in the churches in Crete—right alongside the male elders.

Titus 2 women were female elders in the churches in Crete—right alongside the male elders.



THE IMPACT ON APPLICATION

If you've ever tried to learn another language, you already know that translation relies on art as well as precision—something even more important when translating across thousands of years. Perhaps English translators want to make sure readers catch the point of age in chapter 2 and so opt for “older men/women.” But why then remove the sense of age from 1:5? Why not have Paul instruct Titus to “appoint older people” or “older leaders?” This would at least indicate that the concept is connected. Alternatively, if translators carried the sense of “presbyter” or “elder” into 2:2–3 and translated this as “male elders/presbyters” and “female elders/presbyters,” the grammatical and structural cohesiveness of the text would be clear. It would also introduce baggage that comes with the word *presbyter*. It wasn't until the second and third centuries that the title of *presbyter* became formalized and connected to a precise church office. “Elders” in 1:5 is another term that has taken on its own meaning over the centuries. Translator teams must do the best they can, but it's worth noting that our preconceived understandings about the pastoral epistles and the function of church offices can affect how we read these words.

The impact of this is huge, because the pastoral epistles are referenced to determine what women are permitted to do in churches. But are we reading them correctly, or are we putting on modern glasses fitted with lenses tinted by a youth-oriented leadership culture and formalized ministry structures—both of which were absent from the early church? Take those glasses off, and you discover collaboration between ordinary men and women—indeed, the kind of “co-laboring” that Paul frequently references.

If the “elders” Titus appointed included “elder men” and “elder women,” this isn't a list that excludes women,

If the “elders” Titus appointed included “elder men” and “elder women,” this isn't a list that excludes women, but **one that makes room for them.** This isn't a list that positions men above women, but **alongside them.**

but **one that makes room for them.** This isn't a list that positions men above women, but **alongside them.** This isn't a list that supports our own favored notions of church organization, but predates them.

When I first stumbled across this and began digging, I didn't find cases being made for or against how *presbytidas* should be translated. **It simply wasn't discussed at all.** Most commentators skipped right over this, presenting Titus 1 as a passage about church leadership and qualifications of the *episkopos-presbuteros* and Titus 2 being an addendum for lay people. The evolution of formal church leadership over the past two thousand years has varied widely across denominations, but ordination often has been limited to men only.¹⁷ But this concept of mutual eldership in Crete, alongside a narrative approach to women in the New Testament, suggests women and men led together.¹⁸

Jesus's way of leading has always been about serving. The “elders” that were to be appointed in Crete were to teach, yes, but also to serve and disciple, to do the kind of work that has never been limited to any one gender. The time is short, and, despite Jesus's disciples' insistence on debating who was greatest, the Spirit continues to insist on gifting men and women equally:

And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.¹⁹

The church in Crete did not have the luxury of limiting women while assigning all the work to men, and neither has any church throughout history. I suggest that neither do we.

Notes

1. See New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition, s.v.v. "πρεσβύτερος presbuteros," "πρεσβύτες presbutēs," "πρεσβύτες presbutis."
2. For further reading, see Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church* (IVP Academic, 2023), particularly chapters 5–6.
3. See David Campbell, "Opening up Titus," *Opening Up Commentary* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2007), 25–26, and "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to Titus," in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. James Tweed and Philip Schaff, vol. 13, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 524.
4. "The basic biblical pattern for New Testament church organization appears to be that the leadership was (1) to come from within the church (i.e., local in nature), (2) to meet certain standards of behavior (i.e., qualified), and (3) to be plural in composition (i.e., not a leadership dominated by one personality)." Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, "1, 2 Timothy, Titus," vol. 34, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 276–278.
5. I have chosen the NASB translation here, because it attempts a literal rendering of the Greek.
6. The Bible Project, "Book of Titus Summary: A Complete Animated Overview," Dec 21, 2016, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/titus/>.
7. Paul uses derivations of ὑγιαίνω (*hygiaino*) when he talks about the kind of teaching and conduct the elders and overseers in Crete should offer. This word carries the sense of soundness, wholeness, health, and that which brings well-being. It is used twelve times in the New Testament; three times by Luke the physician, once by John in his final epistle, and the other eight times by Paul, four of which we find in Titus: 1:9,13; 2:1,2. The repetition draws attention to the fact that things were not sound and needed to be put in order.
8. οἰκονόμον (*oikonomon*), used to describe the work of a church leader/*episkopon*, means "one who manages a household." The parallel with Titus 2:5's "workers at home" οἰκουργοῦς (*oikourgos*), which has been narrowly defined for many women, should not be overlooked. Paul is using household words to describe individual families **and also** churches as the household of God. See LSJ, s.v. οἶκο-νόμος."
9. See Philip B. Payne, "The Bible Teaches the Equal Standing of Man and Woman," *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 1 (January 21, 2015): <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/bible-teaches-equal-standing-man-and-woman/> and Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Zondervan Academic, 2009).
10. See the cognates noted in footnote 1.
11. Consider the way a parallel usage of this appears in 1 Timothy, where Paul again overlaps the concepts of *episkopon*, *presbyterous*, and older Christians. See also 1 Peter 5:5, where BDAG notably indicates "though here the πρεσβύτεροι are not only the older people, but at the same time, the 'elders.'" BDAG, s.v.v. "πρεσβύτερος," For further reading, see Kristin Caldwell, "Translation Differences Every Woman Minister Should Know (Part 2)," *Mutuality* (August 30, 2014): https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/translation-differences-every-woman-minister-should-know-part-2/#_ftn1.
12. E.g. *Conduct Consistent with Sound Teaching* (NET), *Doing Good for the Sake of the Gospel* (NIV), *Duties of the Older and Younger* (NASB), *Promote Right Teaching* (NLT).
13. For further reading, see, Aída Besançon Spencer "Leadership of Women in Crete and Macedonia as a Model for the Church," *Priscilla Papers* 27, no. 4 (October 31, 2013): <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/leadership-women-crete-and-macedonia-model-church/>.
14. Paul's opening terms of endearment paired with the pointed: "as I directed you" of 1:5 indicate that Paul is correcting Titus and reminding him of work that should have been done. This also hints at a reality that always is the case when we read epistles: the sender and recipient have a previous relationship and details known between them may not be available to us.
15. Koine Greek is the language of the New Testament, written in the common language of that time and location.
16. Consider 1 Timothy 4:12, where Timothy might be looked down on because of his youth; young leaders were the anomaly.
17. For further consideration of the evolution of holy orders and the ways women occupied them across history see Darrell Pursiful, "Ordained Women of the Patristic Era," *Priscilla Papers* 15, no. 3 (July 31, 2001): <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/ordained-women-patristic-era/> and this multipart blog series from Marg Mowczko, "Women Elders in Ancient Christian Texts," *Marg Mowczko Blog*, 2002, <https://margmowczko.com/women-elders-ancient-presbyteress/>.
18. See Marissa Franks Burt, "The Women of the New Testament: Considering What Women Were Doing in Early Church," *Marissa's Substack*, January 22, 2024, <https://mburtwrites.substack.com/p/the-women-of-the-new-testament>.
19. Ephesians 4:11–13, NASB.

For the full list of footnotes, please see this article on the CBE website.

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Presumption, Bias, and Gender Accuracy in Bible Translation

by John Kohlenberger III

Editor's note: This article was originally published as a two part post on the Mutuality blog, August 20 and 27, 2014.

“She is really cool.”

How many ways can you understand that short statement? Is it referring to someone's temperature as below average? Is it referring to someone's attitude as aloof and impersonal? Is it referring to someone doing well under pressure? Is it referring to someone's popularity? All of these are common understandings of the word “cool,” but only one would be the correct understanding in a specific situation. To determine which was correct, you would need to know something about the situation and the subject to determine the speaker's intended meaning.

Bible translators face choices like this on a regular basis. As with many words in English, words in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek can have more than one meaning, and only careful study of the context can determine the correct English word choice. For instance, the very common Hebrew word *elohim* can refer to the one true “God,” as in Genesis 1:1 and more than 2,300 other verses. But it can also refer to pagan “gods,” as in Genesis 31:30 and more than 200 other verses. There is no built-in meaning to the Hebrew word *elohim* that is correct in every context.

The same is true of words that refer to individuals and groups of people in the Bible. Hebrew feminine nouns like *ishah* (“woman”), *em* (“mother”), *bat* (“daughter”), and *achot* (“sister”) almost



always refer to female persons. But Hebrew masculine nouns can be used of male individuals, as well as mixed groups of males and females, and even of generic individuals without specific reference to gender. So, the grammatically masculine words *ish* and *adam* can refer to a male individual, an adult male, or a group of males, but they can also refer to a human being, male or female, with no age reference, as well as (in the plural) to a group of people, including both women and men. Similar, *ab* can refer to a father or male ancestor, as well as to a parent of either gender and any generation. *Ben* can refer to a son or male descendant of any generation, as well as to a child, children, or descendant(s) of either gender and any generation. And *ach* can refer to a brother or a male member of one's community, as well as to any sibling or member of the community without specific reference to gender. The counterparts to these words in the Greek New Testament (*anthropos* and *aner*, *pater*, *huios*, and *adelphos*, respectively) have the same range of meaning.

Most English Bible translations of the mid-twentieth century followed patterns set by the mechanically literalistic English Revised Version of 1881–1885 and its counterpart, the American Standard Version of 1901.

These versions tended to translate grammatically masculine words with masculine English words, even when those words referred to mixed groups of women and men.

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the English word is read or heard as referring only to males, instead of males *and* females, the intended meaning is lost or distorted.

The earliest Bible translators understood this to some degree. When William Tyndale in 1526 published the first English New Testament translated from the Greek, he rendered Matthew 5:9 as “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” Every translation of the sixteenth century, culminating in the King James Version of 1611, followed Tyndale in using the phrase “children of God.” Although the Greek word *huioi* is grammatically masculine, the gender-inclusive translation “children” is more gender-accurate than the mechanical masculine translation “sons,” since peacemakers can be male or female. But most versions of the twentieth century read “sons of God” in Matthew 5:9, following the Revised Version. And, as mentioned above, this grammatically equivalent translation is not accurate in meaning, because “sons” in English usually refers to males only.

Late twentieth-century translations like the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the New Living Translation (NLT), as well as twenty-first century translations like the revised New International Version (NIV), have returned to the more gender-accurate renderings of Tyndale and the KJV. But they have been more systematic in rendering gender-oriented language so that “men” refers to males (1 Tim. 2:8), while “people” is used for both genders (1 Tim. 2:1, 4); “brothers” refers to males (Matt. 4:18) and “brothers and sisters” to both genders (see the NIV footnote at Rom. 1:13); “sons” refers to males (Matt. 20:20) and “children” to both genders (Matt. 5:9).

Men do not cease to be male, nor are they excluded from the community of faith when they are referred to as “people,” “parents,” or “children.” But when women are referred to as “people” instead of “men,” as “parents” instead of “fathers,” and as “children” instead of “sons,” how much more must they feel included in the community of equals (Gal. 3:26–29)?

Perhaps this helps demonstrate why Bible translators have to actively fight presumption and bias, as do preachers and teachers, to be sure they communicate what the Bible actually says, rather than what they presume it should say. Many examples of such bias have obscured significant statements about women in leadership in the New Testament.

Well-known are two words used to describe Phoebe, who delivered Paul’s famous letter to the church at Rome. Paul introduced her as a *diakonon* “of the church at Cenchreae” (Rom. 16:1). Tyndale in 1526 followed the Latin Vulgate in translating the Greek word as “minister,” but starting with the Geneva Bible of 1560 and up to the present, translators have assumed that Phoebe could not have had an official church position. Instead, she is called a “servant” (King James Version [KJV], New American Standard [NASB], New International Version [1984 NIV], English Standard Version [ESV] and Holman Christian Standard, among others). But the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the mid-twentieth century returned to the earlier understanding of Phoebe by transliterating *diakonon* as “deaconess,” followed by the New Revised Standard (NRSV), New Living Translation (NLT), and the 2011 New International Version (2011 NIV), among others, which use “deacon” of both women and men.

In Romans 16:2, Paul uses another Greek term to describe Phoebe as a *prostatis* “of many people, including me.” Early English translations variously rendered this word as “succourer,” “helper,” “assistant,” and “hospitality giver,” probably because Phoebe was a woman. But *prostatis* when used of a male is usually translated as “benefactor,” “protector,” or “patron,” as in the NRSV, 2011 NIV, and even in the ESV. According to Dunn’s excellent commentary on Romans (Word, 1988), Paul’s readers would have been familiar with women in this powerful position of leadership and “perhaps a tenth of the protectors and donors that *collegia* sought out were women” (comment on Rom. 16:2). Certainly, the person who led the delegation that delivered Paul’s important

Paul also encouraged believers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Eph. 5:21)

communication to the capital city of the Roman Empire had to be a person of stature, significance, and respect. I wonder how many interpreters have realized that the first person to read the letter to the Romans aloud in a church meeting was probably a woman!¹

Similarly, in Romans 16:7, although the Greek name *Iounian* was translated as the feminine “Junia” from Tyndale through the KJV, commentators eventually came to believe the name was a shortened form of the masculine name “Junianus,” though that name is not attested in any Greek document yet discovered. Thus, from the English Revised Version through the New King James Version (departing from the original KJV!) it is “Junias” who, with Andronicus, is noted as a “prominent” or “respected apostle.” Junia’s gender was restored later in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the NRSV, NLT, 2011 NIV, and even the ESV. However, the ESV does not refer to Andronicus or Junia as apostles; it prefers an alternate translation that they “are well known to the apostles,” which seems to be another way of removing Junia from church leadership.

Jesus said it was a pagan practice to demand lordship over others, but believers should follow his example and become great through serving others (Matt. 20:25–28). Paul also encouraged believers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). In the same way, we must submit to the text of Scripture and serve its meaning, working daily to remove the presumption and bias that can distort God’s message.

Notes

1. In the Greco-Roman world, letter-carriers were also often tasked with reading and interpreting the letters to their recipients. For more, see: <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/what-can-we-say-about-phoebe/>.



John Kohlenberger III published over sixty study Bibles and reference books. Serving CBE as a board member and advisor, John contributed to our scholarship, vision, and CBE’s “egalitarian speak” for more than fifteen years. A leader in Bible translation, John’s burning passion was to help people understand God’s word, especially as it addressed gender and power.

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Rosalie Brown is a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend. She earned a Master of Arts in Church History and Theology from The Bible Seminary in Katy, Texas, and is preparing to enter a Doctor of Ministry program. She loves studying the word of God and sharing what she's learned with others.

Our 2024 Student Paper Competition Winners will present their papers at this year's conference "Tell Her Story: Women in Scripture in Mission" on July 26, 2024.

An Update on CBE's Translation Project

by Jeff Miller

As some readers of *Mutuality* may know, CBE is engaged in a Bible translation project. The initial task was to identify passages that, due to poor or even biased translations, have been used to bolster the silencing and even abuse of women. This resulted in a select, representative list of texts totaling approximately 500 verses. From 2019 to 2024, a team of nine scholars has been translating these passages with an eye to addressing any bias against women that has accrued over time. Each entry includes a fresh translation that faithfully communicates its meaning today. These translations are accompanied by notes that explain the translation choices and make extensive comparisons with various modern Bibles.

Below are two examples, given here as they appear in the project itself. First, we see the new translation, followed by the explanation for that translation choice and comparison with other translations.

El Shaddai, "God Almighty"

GENESIS 49:24–25

- 24 Yet his bow remained steady,
And his arms were made skillful,
By the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob,
By the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.
- 25 Because the God of your father helps you,
Shaddai blesses you,
With blessings of the heavens above,
and blessings of the deep that lies below,
Blessings of the breasts and of the womb.



Significant in this text is the wordplay between the name of God and feminine imagery. God is called *Shaddai* or *El Shaddai* in about fifty places throughout the Old Testament, including here in Genesis 49:25: “Shaddai blesses you.” *Shaddai* is usually rendered “Almighty.” Other renderings of *Shaddai* are equivalent in meaning: “God-All-Powerful” (CEV) or “Sovereign God” (NET). *Shaddai* is retained as such in a handful of lesser-known English translations.

The theme of the verse is a blessing for fruitfulness. In an agrarian economy, fertility is evident in three areas—in the field, in the barn, and in the home. Of these, the most precious is fertility in the home, resulting in children. So, when Jacob, here in his deathbed blessing, speaks of “blessings of the breasts and of the womb,” he is referring to infants being

birthed and suckled. The Hebrew word *shadayim* can be rendered “breast” (NIV) or more commonly, “breasts.” That is why NIV translates: “He blesses you with children and with a mother’s milk.”

The biblical author’s choice of *Shaddai* for God in a verse which also uses *shadayim* (“breasts”) brings up motherly images for Israel’s God. What Israelite mothers are to their babies, God is to Israel. This is startling, especially since the previous verse includes masculine imagery. There, God participates in battle, steadying the hands of the archer. The two contrasting images taken together complete the experience of God. So, retaining the word “Shaddai” highlights the wordplay and invites the reader to picture God’s provision in both masculine and feminine terms.

Wife or Spouse? Brothers or Siblings?

1 CORINTHIANS 9:3–5

This is my defense to those who are criticizing me: ⁴ Don't we have the right to receive food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to travel with a **spouse** who is a believer, like the other apostles, the Lord's **siblings**, and Cephas do?



This passage is included in our work for two reasons. First, it uses the double description “a sister a wife” (*adelphēn gunaika*), which calls for explanation. Second, it shows that Simon Peter and certain other early Christian leaders traveled and ministered as husband-wife teams.

Concern with personal rights or authority runs through this section of 1 Corinthians (see 7:37, 8:9, 9:12, 9:18). Here Paul defends “the right to receive food and drink” and “the right to travel with a spouse who is a believer.” The first issue, food and drink, is about receiving hospitality as gratitude and compensation for the work of ministry. We have seen in Romans 16, for example, that Paul receives hospitality from his host, Gaius, and that he expects the Christians of Rome to extend the same to Phoebe.

Concerning the second issue, “a spouse who is a believer” is the New Testament Team’s translation of “a sister a wife.” In the New Testament, “sister” is a common way to refer to a Christian woman (as in Romans 16:1, for example), reflecting the strong sense of family among early believers. Most translations, including ours, do not use the word “sister” here because a phrase such as “sister wife” could easily be misunderstood. Common options are “a believing wife” (CSB, ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSVue) or something similar, such as CEB’s “a wife who believes.”

Paul is unmarried; he says so two chapters earlier, in 7:8. We use “spouse” rather than “wife” to avoid the implication that he is arguing for his own rights, or only for men’s rights, as opposed to advocating for all members of his missionary team.

To understand our choice of “spouse,” recall the apostles Andronicus and Junia in Romans 16:7. Each of them has the right to travel and minister with the other. Paul’s wording here in 1 Corinthians 9:4 is prompted by the question he is answering and the way he answers, which includes using Cephas as an example. His word choice here does not mean that Junia or Phoebe, for example, would not have the right to take a believing husband on their ministry travels. “Wife” is overly restrictive and doesn’t account for all the people included in Paul’s explanation (“the other apostles, the Lord’s siblings, and Cephas,” verse 5), but “spouse” covers them all.

“Siblings” in verse 5 translates *adelphoi*, and we have explained earlier that this word can mean “brothers” or “siblings” depending on context. We know from Matthew 13:55–56 and Mark 6:3 that Jesus had four brothers and also sisters (probably more than two, since Matthew refers to “*all* his sisters”). Matthew 12:47–48 twice mentions Jesus’s *adelphoi*. Because we know Jesus had sisters, and because Matthew himself makes that clear in the following chapter, *adelphoi* in this passage should be translated “siblings,” or “brothers and sisters,” or “sisters and brothers.” Then, in Matthew 12:49, Jesus changes to a metaphorical use of *adelphoi* in reference to his disciples. Again, because we know that Jesus’s disciples include women, *adelphoi* in 12:49 should be understood and translated to include both sexes.

As noted above, Paul mentions Cephas, the Aramaic equivalent of “Peter” (both words mean “rock”). Cephas—that is, Simon Peter—travels with his wife, who is a believer. That Peter has a wife is clear also from mention of his mother-in-law in Matthew 8:14, Mark 1:30, and Luke 4:38.

The examples above are among the shorter texts in the project. Longer passages, such as the controversial 1 Timothy 2 and Ephesians 5, are also included. Watch for further updates on CBE’s website and the *Mutuality Matters* podcast.

The translation team, together with the leadership of CBE, hopes that reading these translations and their accompanying commentary will be “like seeing a familiar picture after it’s been cleaned” (quoting C. S. Lewis upon reading Colossians from J. B. Phillips’s *The New Testament in Modern English* in 1943).



Jeff Miller is a former editor of CBE’s academic journal, *Priscilla Papers*, and active New Testament scholar. He holds bachelor’s degrees in pastoral ministry and church music, an MDiv, and a PhD in biblical interpretation. Since 1999 he has taught biblical studies at Milligan University in eastern Tennessee. He is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and has published articles in journals such as *The Bible Translator*, *Leaven*, *Restoration Quarterly*, *Stone-Campbell Journal*, and CBE’s *Mutuality*. He and his wife Dana have two adult daughters and two grandchildren.



Women and Words: Why Bible Translation Matters

Created in God's image (Gen. 1:26) and as *ezer*—a strong rescue (Gen. 2:18)—women enjoyed shared rule with Adam (Gen. 1:26–28) before sin entered the world. Yet woman's God-given identity and purpose has been “lost in translation” as Bible translations portray women as moral inferiors, unsuitable for shared leadership with men.¹ That's why CBE's Bible translation team has completed their recommendations to improve over 500 Old and New Testament verses. It's also why our new podcast thread, “Women and Words: Why Bible Translation Matters” interviews Bible translators on why these edits (and more) are needed. Here's their logic:

Diverse translation teams working beside regional language experts are the best practices in avoiding bias. However, this poses challenges for teams working in rural areas in the majority world. These translators serve at a great personal cost and with conflicting priorities: they must squeeze in time for Bible translation while planting and harvesting crops, caring for their families, and serving churches and ministries.² Given limited resources, they rely heavily on prominent US Bibles, where diverse teams have only recently become a priority. For decades, the majority world “inherited” biased translations from the West. That's why US translation teams must faithfully guard against bias by adding more women—especially women on the ethnic margins—to translation teams.

It's also crucial to understand the differing goals of each translation. Some translations are “formal” and try to preserve the syntax and words of Bible cultures—“word for word” translations. In contrast, “functional” translations convey a “meaning for meaning” translation.³ Some translations are commissioned by individuals who share a specific theological view of male authority, like the ESV. What is more, Bible translation is a very “conservative enterprise.” Readers want Bibles that say the same things as everyone else's translation. Correcting errors is challenging, it takes time and requires help from denominational and organizational leaders to become convinced that errors need fixing. Readers should therefore use different Bible translations side by side as the best way to discern bias on topics like women's leadership.

On a new episode of the “Women and Words” podcast, Rev. Dr. Marlon Winedt discusses the importance of culture and context in the translation process, remembering that Scripture is always humanizing and emancipatory. For this reason, translators carefully consider best words for husband wife relations in cultures where abuse is rampant. Winedt notes it is crucial to observe when Scripture challenges patriarchal expectations for women, such as in the story of Tamar and Judah (Gen. 38). Given that her survival was a stake, Tamar is the hero of her story. In seeking life, she becomes the Mother of life. Even Judah declares she is more righteous than he, Genesis 38:26. While some translations objectify Tamar, many verbs indicate she is active and not the recipient of action.

It's important to also observe the many feminine words used to align women with negative qualities, whereas masculine language embraces positive characteristics.

In Scripture, women are more often subjects, not objects, of leadership and discipleship. Priscilla precedes her husband in four of six references in the earliest, most reliable manuscripts.⁴ Likewise, Mary and Martha are portrayed as disciples and welcomed at Christ's feet and thus released from domestic work to prioritize their spiritual leadership. Yet, women are frequently marginalized via numerous male pronouns used in English translations but not present in the original texts. It's important to also observe the many feminine words used to align women with negative qualities, whereas masculine language embraces positive characteristics.⁶ And while Paul uses legal language to declare our adoption as God's “sons” (Eph. 1:5), the best translations emphasize how salvation is accessible to all, including women. Finally, we must challenge misrepresenting women when translating *ezer* (Gen 2:18) as a “helper” or inferior rather than—as the Hebrew word implies—as a “strong rescuer,” since *ezer* is most often used for God's rescue of Israel!

Given women's legacy as church planters, evangelists, and custodians of language, culture, and faith, it's significant that women are often the heroes in Scripture's narratives. While three texts are used to exclude women's leadership, remember that 1 Timothy 2:11–15 addresses "childbirth" with its Gnostic influences on Christians in Ephesus; that Paul addresses wives specifically versus all women in 1 Corinthians 14:34–36; and that Paul's use of "head" in Ephesians 5:21–33 is best translated as "source," retaining his emphasis on mutual submission. Overall, Acts 2 is the most revolutionary text for Christians, as it reinforces women's prophetic calling—speaking for God in both the Old and New Testaments. It's the Spirit that equips women of all ages and ethnic groups for

leadership. It's women who often confront racism and sexism. Galatians 3:28 follows this pattern, and Harriet Tubman often cited this text, showing how women are their own subculture. As such, they help translators interpret biblical texts through women's experiences, in proximity to those who suffer—helping us enter the text and empathize with those at the margins.

I hope these examples inspire you to dig further into Scripture. Take advantage of our many resources on translation through CBE's website, radio shows, resources, and our podcast series, "Women and Words: Why Bible Translation Matters."

Notes

1. <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/correcting-caricatures-women-and-bible-translation/>.
2. "Women and Words: Exploring Women's Biblical Equality Through Bible Translation" with Dr. Roy Ciampa - CBE International. See also "Women and Words: Translation Bias and How to Read the Bible Well" with Dr. Roy Ciampa - CBE International.
3. <https://godsword.org/blogs/seed-planters/contrasting-closest-natural-equivalence-to-functional-equivalence>.
4. https://www.biblestudytools.com/acts/18-26-compare.html#google_vignette.
5. <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/correcting-caricatures-women-and-bible-translation/>.

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Praise

- The impact of CBE's Spanish radio spots. For the thousands who visit our radio landing page for additional resources.
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- Our African partners as they continue their work and plan new initiatives for this next year and that God would give us all clear direction and needed funding.
- Wisdom for the transition of CBE's online bookstore from a co-branded online store to an affiliate online store. Pray for staff as they navigate this transition to meet the needs of CBE's audience.
- The stories of women on Christian radio to encourage women and men to learn more on CBE's website and step into the plans God has for them.
- Attendees at CBE's conference, "Tell Her Story: Women in Scripture and History," that they will be transformed by the lectures and workshops.

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CBE International (CBE) is a nonprofit organization of Christian women and men who believe that the Bible, properly translated and interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of women and men of all racial and ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all ages, based on the teachings of Scriptures such as Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (NIV 2011).

MISSION STATEMENT CBE exists to promote the biblical message that God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world. CBE’s mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

- We *believe* in one God, creator and sustainer of the universe, eternally existing as three persons equal in power and glory.
- We *believe* in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- We *believe* that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
- We *believe* the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
- We *believe* the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally created in God’s image and given equal authority and stewardship of God’s creation.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally responsible for and distorted by sin, resulting in shattered relationships with God, self, and others.
- Therefore, we *lament* that the sins of sexism and racism have been used to historically oppress and silence women throughout the life of the church.
- We *resolve* to value and listen to the voices and lived experiences of women throughout the world who have been impacted by the sins of sexism and racism.



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CORE VALUES

- Scripture is our authoritative guide for faith, life, and practice.
- Patriarchy (male dominance) is not a biblical ideal but a result of sin that manifests itself personally, relationally, and structurally.
- Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from women and girls what God has given them: their dignity, freedom, and leadership, and often their very lives.
- While the Bible reflects a patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy as God’s standard for human relationships.
- Christ’s redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.
- God’s design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a woman and a man, celibate singleness, and mutual submission in Christian community.
- The unrestricted use of women’s gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel worldwide.
- Followers of Christ are to advance human flourishing by opposing injustice and patriarchal teachings and practices that demean, diminish, marginalize, dominate, abuse, enslave, or exploit women, or restrict women’s access to leadership in the home, church, and world.

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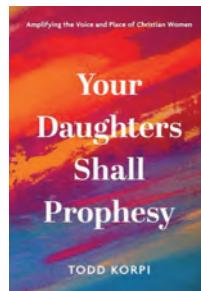
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the Voice and Place of
Christian Women***

Todd Korpi

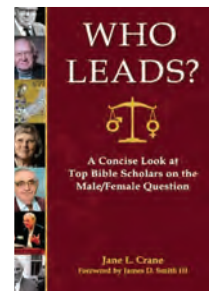
Korpi charts the course for what it means to come alongside female pastors and leaders to move beyond being a passive supporter to being a passionate advocate for Christian women. Drawing from theology, leadership studies, practical experience, and the testimonies of women in ministry, he addresses some of the most pressing issues in egalitarian churches and organizations today.



***Head of the House: Is It a
Sin for Women to Lead?***

Merelyn Webber

In *Head of the House*, Webber addresses the question: is it a sin for women to lead? She contends that the issue of equal opportunity for women and men to rule needs to be examined soberly by all and not left to the experts to decide. Written to women and for women, this book is designed to help them understand for themselves what God says about their roles.



***Who Leads? A Concise
Look at Top Bible
Scholars on the Male/
Female Question***

Jane L. Crane

Academically sound but written for the average reader, *Who Leads* is a concise, updated summary of top Bible scholars on male/female leadership. Focusing on facts rather than theories and leaving conclusions to the reader, it includes a fascinating look at ancient texts, Bible translations through the centuries, and early church actions on women leaders.

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