

Presumption, Bias, and Gender Accuracy in Bible Translation

by John Kohlenberger III

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“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.

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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

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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.