



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.

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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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