

Justifying the Retention of Sexism in a Translation of the Psalms

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(This was originally printed in *RUACH*, vol. 3, summer 1982, Episcopal Women's Caucus, Inc., under the title "Deliberate Sexism in the Psalter". Here the 1982 typographical errors have been corrected, and some 2006 comments have been added, shown in a different typeface.)

The Psalter in the **BCP** 1979 is also printed in the 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship and by itself as **The Psalter**, "A New Version for Public Worship and Private Devotion" with an introduction by C. M. Guilbert. Pages xiv-xv of the Introduction explain weakly how the translating committee dealt with generic usage of masculine words in reference **to people**. (When the original Hebrew did not indicate maleness they tried to use inclusive words and constructions.) The problem is that in doing one group of psalms the committee introduced a new and sexist principle in their work, based on a distorted view of the doctrine of the incarnation.

The committee properly tried to reduce or eliminate sexist mistranslation in reference to people, but Guilbert explained that they made an exception for the psalms which Christians have traditionally considered messianic (such as 8 and 22) which they left with sexist translations undisturbed. Did that they decide that customary English language Christian interpretations shouldn't be disturbed, even if erroneous? Perhaps they thought that the use of inclusive language in messianic psalms would be a denial of the maleness of the incarnation. They apparently believe that the maleness of God's Incarnation should affect how certain psalms (composed centuries before that incarnation) should be translated from Hebrew into modern English! (They used selected 16th century words to make the Hebrew clear to **modern** Americans.)

The maleness of Jesus the messiah, God incarnate, is not being questioned. But the **significance** of the maleness is under discussion and the liturgical presentation of the matter deserves attention.

The New Testament authors neither denied nor emphasized the maleness of the incarnation, but, instead, emphasized Christ's **humanity**. Linguistically they usually chose to use masculine-gender words in reference to Jesus, it has been noted, and they rarely used male words. Following the Scriptural pattern, the Nicene Council approved the Creed which uses the Greek word **anthropos** to describe the incarnation: God became a **human being**. Unlike pagan deities, God did not become incarnate as a female or male animal, or a human-animal combination, but God became incarnate as a person, a human being. We all share in that humanity. The important fact is not that "God became man" or male, but that "God became a human person."

The retention of sexist mistranslations in messianic psalms misrepresented the Hebrew. The customary wording has been allowed to remain in a way which erroneously conveys the idea that the maleness of the incarnation was important enough to have been

predicted in certain psalms which were subsequently “fulfilled” by the man Jesus. (The idea of Christian fulfillment of Jewish promises should be treated cautiously to avoid anti-Semitic misrepresentation.) The committee apparently believed that the maleness of the incarnation was more important than either the New Testament writers or the Nicene Councilors believed it to be, and more important than an accurate translation of the meaning of the original Hebrew.

The translators apparently used the principle, “A Christian understanding of the incarnation should affect the translation of certain psalms from Hebrew to English” together with the idea that “the maleness of the incarnation is quite significant” in order to justify a different treatment of the messianic psalms. (This problem is reminiscent of those surrounding the rendering of “young woman” in Isaiah 7:14 in the Septuagint as virgin, apparently quoted in Matthew 1:23, and affecting subsequent translations from Isaiah by Christians.)

This treatment of the messianic psalms is part of an extensive pattern of disproportionate (over-) emphasis on the maleness of the incarnation. It is of particular concern in liturgy and liturgical documents because liturgy both reflects and shapes theology, and an overemphasis on maleness can contribute to—and even reflect—idolatry of maleness, consciously and/or unconsciously. Such over-emphasis on maleness has the obvious corollary of a de-emphasis on the importance of God’s creation of female people. People have already noted that the committee tolerated some sexism in reference to people which Hebrew doesn’t require, and that it maintained the custom of male language in English in reference to God to translate masculine gender words. This Psalter also shows an assumption that messianic psalms should receive separate treatment, and it reflects a distorted doctrine of the Incarnation by its deliberate retention of customary sexist mistranslation in the messianic psalms.

An even more extensive problem of sexism in translation appeared in relation to the Tetragrammaton, the holy unpronounceable Name of God. The committee continued to use the miniature capital letters, (LORD), which are a typographical convention in English, to indicate the Tetragrammaton, but the members apparently felt that they did not need to justify, defend or even mention their decision to retain the customary male word to substitute for it, or their related decision to use masculine gender pronouns to refer to it. As has been common for centuries, these pronouns referring to the Tetragrammaton do not have typographical indications to show that they are an interpretive substitution.

Both the messianic psalms and the Tetragrammaton present problems of sexism in translation because linguistic gender functions differently in Hebrew and in English. Masculine gender in Hebrew does not necessarily communicate male sex, and to add it to an English translation where the meaning is not at all present in Hebrew, or is only a weak possibility, is a sexist translation error. This does not tell us the original biblical witness to the truth about God.

2006 NOTE: A number of reduced-sexism versions of the Psalms have been published in English in the last few decades, based on various translation principles. Of those I have examined, the one I like most is *The St. Helena’s Psalter*.