

Non-Sexist Psalms?

A review of some aspects of The Saint Helena Psalter and some other Psalters described as inclusive or non-sexist

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When the words of our worship teach children that God is more like a boy than like a girl, more like a man than like a woman, more like light and white than like dark and black, is that accurate? Is it just? What if the words, images, and examples in our worship teach that God likes white people and boys and men more than people of color and girls and women, that they are better and more important than people of color and girls and women? Is that accurate and just? The “halo effect” of the language of our worship means that what happens in worship services and religious education programs seems (especially to children) to have God’s stamp of approval. Sometimes we teach unintended lessons. Do we want to teach white boys attitudes of superiority over everyone else? I don’t. Nor do I want to teach attitudes of inferiority to others. The years of childhood are called the formative years for good reason. I do not want the language of our worship to alienate people who stopped using sexist language in their personal speech over thirty years ago, and who notice virtually every word of it that occurs in hymns and Bible translations. I do not want sermon illustrations or saints’ pictures that are imbalanced or stereotyped. Use of such imagery and language is unjust. It may seem that these things are mere words or “just words,” but words of injustice are cumulative and powerful. We must speak with just words to effectively communicate a liberating message about the God of Justice, and we must worship the God of Justice in ways that promote justice and motivate us to seek justice, and which sustain us in justice making.

The Saint Helena Psalter is a 2004 revision of the translation of the Psalter, or book of Psalms, which was printed both in the 1979 American Episcopal

Book of Common Prayer (BCP) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's 1978 *Book of Worship*. It has a considerable reduction of sexism and the elimination of "all references to God as masculine." It was developed by an order of Episcopal religious sisters, the Order of St. Helena, for use in chanting their four daily services. Their translation principles are explained in their Preface. This is an invaluable resource for isolated Christian feminists who need reduced-sexism worship aids. It also has potential for congregational use.¹ I will not hazard a guess as to what use this Psalter might or might not be to Jewish feminists. Perhaps some Jewish feminists will address this on the website, and I will certainly consider expanding this article if they wish to have input. This Psalter is a small, 4½" by 6" hardcover book published by Church Publishing (NY: 2004, ISBN: 0-89869-458-2). It is also included in *The Saint Helena Breviary: Personal Edition* (NY: Church Publishing, 2006, ISBN: 0898695163), and in the monastic edition of the breviary.

In this article I will make some comparisons of this Psalter to half a dozen other non-sexist and/or inclusive Psalters listed below with publication data, but I am not attempting a comprehensive assessment. I will compare types of translations, describe what can appropriately be called a translation and what cannot, mention types of inclusivity, and list ways of translating Psalm 51:8 for comparison. I will explain what the Tetragrammaton is and issues around its translation, what the Septuagint is, tell how the word Jehovah was invented and why it is not a good translation option, and explore the translation of *Shaddai* as a name of God that occurs in two psalms and sometimes has a female meaning. Translators of inclusive and non-sexist Psalters face decisions about sexism which is present in the original content of the psalms, sexism that is added to psalms by translation customs, and translation decisions to make about the psalms which have female images of God or a possible female name of God. Peoples' emotions often affect their decisions, and these receive some mention. Liturgists can use Psalters like these seven with the idea of retaining some male images of God in worship and balancing female and male images of God in worship, as well as balancing references to female and male people. However, I believe that sex role stereotyping (a type of sexism sometimes used for people and/or for God) is present in the Psalter and needs further attention. Positive and

¹ In the Episcopal Church it may be used at the daily offices or Holy Eucharist when these are derived from *BCP* p. 400-1, at other services derived from those pages (which may be called Ante-Communion), and at any other time with the bishop's permission under canon law II.2 about authorized Bible translations for "readings."

negative light and dark imagery in liturgy also receives mention, and this needs further attention in liturgy. I also discuss the fact that over a third of the psalms have male language remaining after revisions even in the best translation, and I identify two different ways that could be addressed for those who consider it a problem, and I offer brief conclusions. Each of these seven Psalters was prepared for use in Christian Churches.

As a Christian, the idea of liberating or liberative or emancipatory liturgy has a deep appeal to me. Most Christians would agree that we find the Gospel itself inherently liberating. But it is certainly obvious that aspects of worship services can contradict and counteract the Gospel message, and such aspects can speak louder than the words of a preacher trying to proclaim the Gospel. These aspects could be as varied as the stairs that keep wheelchair users out of the Church building, to the rude behavior of an usher, to people who move *away* from visitors in nearby pews, to sexist language in hymns, to jokes in the sermon made at the expense of one group or another. Such things can prevent people from hearing the Gospel. Liturgical sexism is among the things that can alienate people, and sexist language is a major way that happens, although not the only way.

Efforts to have non-sexist Christian liturgy in English in the early 1970's in the U.S. usually focused first on avoiding generic usage of male language for people, and then avoidance of male words for God, and worship planners did this by avoiding certain hymns and re-phrasing other hymns and selecting Bible readings carefully, by thoughtful wording in sermons, and by having lay and ordained women worship leaders when possible. (At that time the possibility of using female images of God was usually seen as a distraction in public worship, a threat to Trinitarian orthodoxy, and/or too funny or distracting to gain general acceptance in worship settings.) But "changing the Bible" is a hot potato; which changes translators can and cannot justify will be discussed briefly below. It is my impression that today while some groups find it easiest to totally eliminate all sex-specific language from worship services, other people trying to address the problem of liturgical sexism are likely to drastically reduce (but not totally eliminate) male language and imagery for people and for God, and to retain or add female language and imagery for people and for God, working toward the time when a balance can be achieved by using Bible readings, hymns, sermon illustrations, visual art, liturgical dance, etc. Some people know that the Bible itself has female images of God, and of each *persona* of the Holy Trinity. Some others who do not happen to know this about the Bible

nonetheless use female imagery for the Trinity and for each *persona* of the Trinity from time to time. I am among the many who have no trouble maintaining Trinitarian orthodoxy while using female images of God liturgically. I carefully distinguish female and male on the one hand from feminine and masculine on the other, though I know others do not always share my precision in usage and analysis.² This is the context in which I live in hope, and in which I use *The Saint Helena Psalter* in my private devotions.

Before any of the Psalters examined in this study were published I used only brief passages from the *BCP* Psalter in my daily prayer, because, as the Reverend Katrina Swanson pointed out to me many years ago, in the *BCP* Psalter only Psalm 65 is free of sex-specific language. In 1977 and 1979 I arranged these snippets for eight weeks of daily readings, and shared them with others, along with four months of RSV Bible reading snippets I had arranged in lectionary leaflets 1976-1979. These lists of citations were coordinated with the Mother Thunder *daily office* canticles. This left me with a meager devotional diet, so I welcomed Psalters with reduced sexism when they began to appear, though none of them satisfied me. I have listed several of them below. Each has its own translation and editing principles, not always described but sometimes explained in considerable detail, and each reflects the struggle to come to terms with substantive issues. Each has advantages, disadvantages and value. I have only compared several aspects of the contents of each, and have not made a comprehensive evaluation. I happen to like *The Saint Helena Psalter* best, and believe that it is the best one available among those reviewed here for devotional and liturgical uses. However, that is a subjective decision, some versions listed here are no longer available, and there are other versions which are not listed here. Besides, it must always be asked, “Best for which uses for which people in which context?” It will certainly be unacceptable in some Churches, that is, in some congregations and in some denominations, as will each of the other

² I believe that the concepts of feminine and masculine are cultural constructs rather than biologically based realities, and I hope to see the very concepts destroyed. However, I do not expect to see this occur in my lifetime. Nonetheless I feel obligated to work toward it. Equating female and feminine (erroneously) suggests or claims that the gendered cultural rules, roles and stereotypes of femininity are part of being female, that they are known to be inborn and natural, maybe even God-given, instead of being exclusively or largely socially constructed learned behavior, which differs from one culture to another. Similarly, male and masculine should not be equated because of the inaccurate messages the equation conveys. Sometimes it is not known to what extent, if any, a behavior is biologically based in sex differences in general or in a particular person, and it is dishonest in such cases to claim knowledge implicitly or explicitly.

Psalters, because of disagreements about which translation decisions are justifiable and desirable, and which are not.

A Bible translation made for liturgical uses will properly be different at certain points from a translation for historic uses, or one made for literary purposes or for scholarly purposes. *The Saint Helena Psalter*, like the one of which it is a revision, (and like versions a and c, below), was designed for liturgical usage, with particular attention to the fact that the text would need to be easily chanted. Psalm 51:8 illustrates why liturgical translations are needed. It was and sometimes still is commonly translated (literally) as “white as snow,” but the *BCP* 1979 liturgical translation rendered that “clean indeed,” a metaphorical translation, because the literal translation had distracted worshippers, offending some and angering others and embarrassing still others in our contemporary racist social context. It probably reinforced in some white worshippers an idea of the superiority of the whiteness of their race, and in others at least a reminder that some people hold that erroneous and racist opinion. This example of Ps. 51:8 is a reminder that inclusive translation is appropriately concerned with more than just sexism, although sexism is the focus of this article. The 1979 *BCP* translators did not say, and I am not saying, that Bible translations should never be distracting, offensive or angering, but I believe that they should certainly not casually reinforce oppression, which the psalms so clearly show God is against, and this metaphoric translation conveys notable cleanliness, just as the original literal wording did. As I demonstrate below, other translators dealt with this verse in several ways.

I like truth in advertising, and if a passage has been altered beyond what a translation can justify, I believe that the result should not be described as “a Bible translation,” but rather it should be described as something “based upon” or “adapted from” the Bible, or as “a biblical paraphrase.” (However, it can be a matter of legitimate scholarly difference of opinion as to just where this line lies. That is one of the reasons why there are so many inclusive versions; translators differed as to where the line could or should be drawn.) The resulting text may be just as liturgically usable as the biblical one, or usable in more situations or in different situations or congregations. In my opinion, in some instances in some Psalters the translators made inept choices, occasionally some of them made choices that I believe went too far to be called translations, I believe some went in the wrong direction occasionally, and some other choices did not go nearly far enough. But each Psalter certainly made a valued contribution to the

conversation about how to best translate the Psalter, and doubtless many people found and find each effort to be an answer to prayer.

Some of the Psalters with reduced sexism

Here are publication details and comments on half a dozen of the other inclusive language or reduced sexism versions of the Psalter that have been published in the last twenty years, in addition to *the Saint Helena Psalter*, arranged in order of publication:

a) *The Grail Psalms: An Inclusive Language Version*. London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1986, ISBN: 0-00-599994-4. This 1986 revision of the 1963 Grail³ translation from the Hebrew retains male language for God and has both Hebrew and Septuagint verse numbering. It can be sung to the melodies of Joseph Gelineau, S.J. It uses *Lord* for the Tetragrammaton, and male pronouns referring to it, at least some of the time. Psalm (50) 51:9 uses the literal “whiter than snow.” (The terms “Septuagint” and “Tetragrammaton” are explained in the next section.)

b) *Psalms Anew: in inclusive language* by Nancy Schreck and Maureen Leach, Winona, MN: St. Mary’s Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 1986, ISBN: 0884891747, spiral binding with flap bookmark and back blurb, it claims to be “free from patriarchal bias,” yet over 33 psalms have sexist wording or balancing problems. This was prepared by two Roman Catholic nuns. Ps. 51:7 uses “whiter than snow.”

c) *Psalter for the Christian People: an inclusive language revision of the Psalter of the Book of common prayer 1979*, ed. by Gordon Lathrop and Gail Ramshaw, Liturgical Press, 1993, ISBN: 0814661343. The Psalter in the Episcopal *BCP* is also identical with the one in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. This inclusive version prepared by Lutherans retains male language for God, but not masculine pronouns. It has other reductions of sexism as well, and explains its translation principles. This uses *Yahweh*, and it uses the noun *God* instead of pronouns to refer to Yahweh. Psalm 51:8 says, “clean indeed.”

³ The Grail is an eighty year old international ecumenical women’s organization currently working in social development training. It is indigenous in at least eighteen countries.

d) *The Psalms in Inclusive Language* by Joseph A. Arackal, V.C., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993, ISBN: 0-8146-2024-8. In the brief preface the author says that inclusive language is wider in scope than gender-fair language. Ps. 51:7 is rendered as “purer than snow.”

e) *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* edited by Victor Roland Gold, *et al.* Oxford University Press, 1995, ISBN: 0195284186. This adaptation of the NRSV has an extensive introduction with a discussion of the translation principles for the entire work, although some apply only to the New Testament and not to the Psalter. It usually substitutes GOD (using miniature capital letters) for the Tetragrammaton, sometimes *Most High*, etc. It pays attention to light and dark imagery, and renders Psalm 51:7 as “purer than snow.”

f) *The Inclusive Psalms* by Priests for Equality, W. Hyattsville, MD: Priests for Equality, 1997, ISBN: 0964427923, (also printed in *The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures* by Priests for Equality, a Roman Catholic group, 1999, www.quixote.org/pfe/books.html) The translation principles are explained in detail in the introduction. Although it addresses class issues, it does not discuss royalty aspects, but seems to consider that simply a class issue. The way it deals with class issues seems to me to flatten the social structures and deny oppressive inequities that needed to be addressed then and today. It uses the word *Adonai* (Lord) instead of the Tetragrammaton, and Psalm 51:7 is rendered “purer than new-fallen snow.”

g) *A New English Translation of the Septuagint, and other Greek translations traditionally included under that title, The Psalms*, translated by Albert Pietersma. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, ISBN: 0-19-529753-9. The Septuagint is a Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, made around the third century BCE. Because this Psalter translation makes some use of the New Revised Standard Version it has some inclusive features.⁴ It is not fully reviewed here because it does not identify inclusivity as one of its goals. It has a twenty page introduction discussing the history of the Septuagint, the International Organization for the Septuagint and Cognate Studies, translation principles set by the committee, etc. The translator teaches at the University of Toronto. Ps. 51:8 >50:7 is rendered “I shall be whiter than snow.” The word derived from the Tetragrammaton is rendered *Lord*, and in Ps. 68:14 and 91:1 Shaddai is

⁴ See p. xxvi, also.

rendered as *Heavenly One* and *Almighty*, and Baal-peor in Ps. 106:28 > 105:28 is rendered *Beelphegor*. The Septuagint receives further discussion below.

In addition to separately published Psalters, several lectionaries have revised the Psalter portions they published each week in leaflet format as part of revisions of all the weekly readings they published, until they had complete or virtually complete revisions of the Psalter and the other readings.

Sometimes these were subsequently published in lectionary format available as bound books. The Rev. George G. Swanson, assisted by the Rev. Katrina Martha Swanson, participated in such a project revising the "Good News for Modern Man" version, which had been published by the American Bible Society, over a period of years (1970 to 1978) for Sunday bulletin leaflets for *The Propers*, published in Kansas City, MO, but the resulting psalm revisions were not published separately.

Female and male images of God in the Bible in English

Female and male images of God can occur in English language Bibles in several ways.

1) Masculine linguistic-gender pronouns such as *he*, *his*, *him*, and *himself* in English necessarily form male images when used in reference to God. Similarly, although rarely seen in English Bible translations, especially commercially published translations, feminine linguistic-gender pronouns, such as *she*, *her*, *hers*, and *herself* when used in reference to God necessarily form female images in English.

2) The use of certain male and female words or body part words, such as *hen*, *she-bear*, *womb*, etc.

3) Metaphoric descriptions of certain actions can also form unmistakable female and male images of God. "I gasp like a woman in labor;" "as a hen gathers her brood;" "As a father pities his children..." This category can overlap with either of the previous two categories.

4) Names and titles of God in Hebrew, like other nouns, have linguistic-gender, and sometimes a mix of genders, but this does not always communicate or indicate a specific sex because sex and gender are related differently in Hebrew and English. But some names of God are sex-specific. One biblical name of God *Shaddai*, for example, discussed below, can be a female name meaning (female) Breasted One. (Yes, men have breasts, but this God of ours has women's breasts with this name.) Another biblical title

of God, *Adonai* is a male title. The human title *Adoni* in Hebrew, meaning *lord*, is male. Titles like *Lord* in English are similarly unmistakably male. 5) Sometimes in Christian usage, in practice these combine so that an analogy of action in practice becomes a title and functions as a name, *Father*. (In the Hebrew Bible the father image of God is about as frequent as the mother image of God; that is, they are each infrequent.)

Thoughtful translators with a critical understanding of linguistic gender typically believe that any name of God which is not clearly male should not have masculine linguistic-gender English pronouns used with it, because this would constitute adding male imagery (in English) which is not there in the original Hebrew, and that any name of God which is not clearly female should not have feminine linguistic-gender pronouns used with it either. Instead of gendered pronouns in English it is easy to use a non-gendered noun such as *God*. (A certain number of people do experience the noun *God* as gendered by custom. The fact that one can buy T shirts with the slogan “God is not a boy’s name” reflects the strength of the tradition of using masculine linguistic-gender pronouns with divine names. Yet the fact that Churches and theologians have consistently denied over the centuries that God is really male, and the fact that Psalter c uses *God* as a responsible translation for masculine linguistic-gender pronouns in Hebrew demonstrate the strength of official teaching.) Using *God* to replace pronouns also helps a little to weaken the customary automatic association of *God* and male imagery. Yet linking God and female wording (such as she, her, hers, herself) is much more effective in weakening the automatic association of *God* and male imagery, and it is even more effective in teaching, as the Bible does, that God is like females, like males, and like many other aspects of Her creation. To the best of my knowledge none of these Psalters use feminine gender pronouns with *God*.

A small minority of translators take a different approach and say that while any name of God that is not clearly male should not have masculine linguistic-gender pronouns used in reference to it in English, some feminine linguistic-gender English pronouns should be used instead at least sometimes, because this could be part of a tactic to move toward pronoun balance in Bible translation, or at least toward weakening the customary automatic association of male imagery with the word God. However, none of those translators’ preferences influenced the translations of the Psalters reviewed in this paper. A few people prefer use of the word *goddess*, along with feminine pronouns because female imagery is unavoidably associated

with it, but there are two major problems with using the word *goddess*. One is the tradition in the Hebrew Bible of contrasting the God of the Jews with both foreign “gods and goddesses.” The other is that words in English with feminine endings are inherently sexist, implicitly conveying the idea that males are the standard to which females should be compared, (and not vice versa), certainly a biased view! (Such words as poetess, executrix, spinster, actress, aviatrix, and waitress spring to mind, and seamstress, with its two feminine endings.) Nonetheless, the Bible does have female images of God, as described above, and a name of God that has a female meaning among its meanings.

Some types of sexism in Psalters in English

The Psalter in the original Hebrew, is not, of course, a book balanced in sex and gender references for people, or for animals, or free from sex role stereotypes, because it reflected its cultures. So reducing sexism is not just a matter of eliminating translation errors, (although that is where revisers generally start), because the very content of the Psalter is male dominated and role stereotyped, too. These types of sexism in the Psalter receive further discussion in sections below.

Translators who have added sexism have typically not been aware that they were adding sexism, because of a number of factors interacting in a complex way. First, all translation inevitably involves interpretation and decision making, including Bible translation. Second, few Bible translators have been trained in linguistics and socio-linguistics, which would help them have a nuanced understanding of the relation between culture, linguistic gender, and biological sex, and fewer have been trained in cultural anthropology and gender studies. The very concepts of sexism and linguistic sexism have only been available to Bible translators in recent decades. Third, all or virtually all Bibles routinely have sexism added in translation, and translators are already so deeply familiar with sexist translations that (whether they consider it sexism or not) they are apt to think that the sexism is there in the original Hebrew in numerous places where it is not. Fourth, the textbooks the translators used for learning Hebrew virtually always had (and many still have) errors of sexism, as do the dictionaries and reference books. Fifth, as English usage and meanings have changed through time, archaic English usage, such as the generic usage of masculine gender words for people, functions in a demonstrably sexist manner and its use is no longer justifiable

in translations, even when those who use it intend it to be inclusive. Consequently even Bible translators who wish to avoid sexism may make errors of sexism in their psalm translations into English, and many translators have no particular motivation to avoid sexism in translation. The major resulting group of errors has to do with how linguistic gender and biological sex are related differently in the two languages, such as when translators relate collective nouns and gender, and assume that a masculine plural group is a group only of males, when it might be mostly females. Another example of errors occurs when English does not have a gender-neutral (or sex-unspecified) equivalent to translate an original term, regardless of its original gender, that did not specify sex.

There are more male images of God in the psalms in ordinary English editions than there are female images of God, and this is a problem of a sexist imbalance. However, it is nowhere as big a problem in the Hebrew original as it is in traditional English translations, because most of the instances in traditional English translations have been added by translators, particularly masculine gender pronouns in English referring to God, that necessarily constitute male images in English, but which did not do so in the original Hebrew because biological sex and linguistic gender are related to each other differently in the two languages.

Significant problems arise with how to deal with the Tetragrammaton and with pronouns referring to it. The Tetragrammaton is the English name for a particular four letter Hebrew word that is a name of God (יהוה), a word that was eventually considered too holy to pronounce, so that nobody today actually knows exactly how it was pronounced. This is because at that time only the consonants of Hebrew words were written, so we can only guess at what the vowels would have been. “Yahweh” is a common modern guess at how it was pronounced. By 538 BCE Jews decided to verbally substitute an entirely different name of God for this written word when they read the Bible out loud, which is how they ordinarily read it then. According to *the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*,⁵ since the Hebrew Bible has several names and titles for God, at first several different words were substituted, with *Adonai* (Lord) becoming the most common choice. By the sixth to seventh century CE when it became routine to add (written) vowels to all the written words, it became common to write the vowels for *Adonai* with the consonants for the Tetragrammaton. Although the meaning of the

⁵ Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962, vol. 2, p. 817.

Tetragrammaton seems to be close to the verb “cause to be,” (or, “the one who causes to come into existence,” according to alternate Psalter e, p. xxi) and is not primarily a male or female noun image, the choice of *Adonai*, is one of the male names or titles for God in the Bible, not one of the female ones, or one of the other ones. As a reminder to pronounce another name of God instead of the Tetragrammaton, Jews customarily write the vowels of the chosen name, *Adonai*, with the consonants of the Tetragrammaton, but today pious Jews pronounce or say “ha Shem,” meaning “The Name.” They do not typically try to pronounce either the Tetragrammaton or *Adonai*.

According to the *I.D.B.*, Christian Bible translator Petrus Galatinus invented the word Jehovah in about 1520 when he mistakenly tried to combine the consonants of one word with the vowels from another word! A minority of Christian translators in the last few centuries have either used *Jehovah*, or, more recently, *Yahweh*. But *Jehovah* is mostly avoided today out of a realization that it is an erroneous sixteenth century invention, and, especially in the last fifteen years many translators into English have avoided using *Yahweh* out of respect for Jewish sensibilities, as Christian translators have learned more about living Jews and their customary ways of showing respect to God.

In contrast to that minority position which still uses the invented word Jehovah, the majority of English Bible translators have customarily dealt with the Tetragrammaton translation history by doing three things: 1) they translate *Adonai* (Lord), the alternate or substitute word for God for which Jewish scribes decided to write the vowels; 2) to indicate that it is a substitution, and not what the Hebrew says at all, English Bible translators customarily arranged for printers to use miniature capital letters to show that this substitution has been made (LORD); and 3) they routinely use masculine gender pronouns (He, His, Him) to translate pronouns referring to the Tetragrammaton, but they do not customarily use miniature capital letters for these pronouns. (If you would like to sound impressive you may call these three choices “the English typographical secrets of the Tetragrammaton!” They are not really secret, if you read the introduction to a Bible which uses them, and notice the typeface distinctions, but few people do that. These choices are commonly used throughout English translations of the Hebrew Bible, including the Psalter.) Some people who do not know all this think the typeface distinction means that God’s name or title is very important, and then they are apt to use capital letters for any name of God!

Translation choices 1 and 3 for dealing with the Tetragrammaton and its pronouns have sexist effects, and 2 often does also, and alternate choices are not only justifiable but, I believe, are preferable in terms of translation accuracy. (Choice 2, because it is usually unrecognized for what it is, a signal of a substitution, usually functions to make the male name seem more impressive, which is hardly beneficial.) Since it is acceptable to substitute one name of God, why not another one of the names of the same God? That was done when substitutions started. If substituting is a tradition, let's be traditional! Alternative Psalter (b), described above, used *Yahweh*, and used the noun *God* instead of pronouns; and alternative Psalter (c), described above, did not change choice 1, but by eliminating masculine pronouns referring to God it changed choice 3. *The Saint Helena Psalter* changes 1, 2 and 3.

The Septuagint is the Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek made in stages around the third century BCE. It was made because by then many Jews knew Greek but not Hebrew, and they wanted to be able to read their Bible. It was made to encourage them to read it in Hebrew. The Eastern Orthodox Churches base their English Psalter translations on the Greek Septuagint rather than on the Hebrew original. Only two translations of the full Septuagint into English have been published, each made over 150 years ago, and several Psalter translations from the Septuagint have been made in recent years. The same types of problems of sexism arise in translation of the Greek Septuagint into English as arise when translating from Hebrew into English. However, a new translation is underway, the New English Translation of the Septuagint, (NETS), being published by Oxford University Press, and the psalms have been published as the first part of the project. While this translation does not identify inclusivity as one of its goals, because it makes some use of the New Revised Standard Version it has some inclusive features, so details of this edition of the Psalter are listed above with the inclusive editions, under g, above. Churches that use or once used the Septuagint as the basis for their Psalter translations have a somewhat different psalm chapter and verse numbering system than those which are based on the Hebrew Bible. When there is a difference in chapter numbering, the Septuagint chapter numbering will only be one number prior to the Hebrew numbering, but verse numbering in different Psalters can be more variable.

The psalms are often called the Psalms of David, although David, in fact, did not write most of them. Many, perhaps most, psalms were group

compositions that evolved or developed. The editors of this *SHP* decided to retain use of the word *king* when it was clearly a reference to David, as they mention on page iv,⁶ because David was male.⁷ Given the reasoning of those who made the *BCP* version they were working from,⁸ I wonder to what extent (if any) this decision was (unconsciously) linked to and may function to reinforce Christian readings of certain psalms as Messianic, Jesus the Messiah as the son of David, a subject raised in another paper of mine posted on www.katrinasdream.org website, under “Just Words,” (“Justifying the Retention of Sexism in a Translation of the Psalms.”) Even though that was not the purpose of retaining the use of the word *king* when it was clearly a reference to David, the decision may function that way. (Few Christians know that there were several Jewish women monarchs, so royal rulers were not exclusively males in the Jewish tradition, nor were all royal Jewish women merely politically secondary consorts or temporary regents, and this may justify the use of regal terms that are not sex-specific.) While this translation decision may not have been made for any reason concerned with sexism, and it raises a question unrelated to sexism (the possibility of unintended functional Christian anti-Semitism⁹), it also has an effect of maintaining male language and contributing to a sexist imbalance in the translation, because David’s maleness could have been de-emphasized by the choice of a word like monarch.¹⁰

⁶ Other Psalter revisers have made the same decision.

⁷ Personal communication, Sister Cintra Pemberton, OSH, “because he was certainly male.” The sisters were most anxious to be clear that they “were not against either masculinity or femininity.”

⁸ See *The Psalter: A New Version for Public Worship and Private Devotion*, introduced by Charles Mortimer Guilbert, NY: Seabury Press, 1978, p. xiv-xv. This Psalter is exactly the same as the 1979 *BCP* Psalter, bound separately. In a 28 page introduction Guilbert explains the principles used by the revisers of the Psalter.

⁹ If it suggests that the truest, the best, readings of psalms are those that reveal Jesus Christ as the culmination of the Jewish tradition, and as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies, it denies to the texts of the Hebrew Bible their own integrity and validity. Unfortunately this easily functions to promote and/or maintain anti-Jewish attitudes and potentially anti-Jewish behavior which the Episcopal Church, along with many other Churches, has denounced in principle but has not always avoided in practice.

¹⁰ I am not saying that they absolutely ought to have used a word like monarch that is not sex-specific, because of the complexity of the issues, but I do find it disappointing to have the issues raised in the two prior footnotes overlooked. Yet because those working on revising the *BCP* Psalter to make the *SHP* were starting with the *BCP* Psalter as printed, they may not have seen any of the issues discussed by its revisers. This is also relevant, presumably, to their retention of *Almighty* for *Shaddai*, discussed below.

**If male images of God are not inherently sexist,
why would anyone eliminate them from the Psalter?**

Basically, some people want to eliminate most male images of God from the Psalter because most of them are not there in the original Hebrew and adding them in English translations causes liturgical problems of imbalance (in worship services). (A few male images of God, such as Psalm 123:1-2, remain in the Hebrew Psalter when the prior translators' additions have been removed.) In addition, eliminating them from the Psalter makes it easier to have liturgies that have a balance of male and female imagery in the other parts of the liturgy. Furthermore, for a few people virtually all male language for God in worship is problematic because they are acutely sensitive to it, often as the result of abuse, though sometimes only with an interest in achieving justice by eliminating sexism from worship. Simply because some people have one or more of these three goals does not make male language or imagery for God or people in worship either sexist or wrong, nor does it mean that all male language and imagery for God or people should be eliminated from the Psalter or from worship. However, people with one or more of these three goals who wish to compare inclusive Psalters should be able to find helpful information here, and they may also find ideas that lead them to consider more than just one possible solution to various liturgical problems they identify. For instance, the idea of balancing female and male material may give them more options than they had previously considered.

Some of the inclusive language Psalters retain all or some of the male language for God, notably Psalters a and c. The Preface of *the Saint Helena Psalter* does not claim that masculine or male images of God are sexist, although it does say that it eliminates masculine references to God, and I firmly believe that male images are not *inherently* sexist, but I also believe that any congregation's pattern of worship is *functionally* sexist if it has an over-emphasis on male images of God (compared to female images of God), or vice versa. A congregation's worship could be sexist in other ways, too. I am glad that this Psalter does not eliminate the few female images of God that occur in the Psalter, and these are discussed below.

Sexism and sexist language in other situations, along with an overabundance of male language for God in the Bible and in worship services has led some people to become so sensitive to male language for God that such language at least distracts them from worship and may prevent effective evangelism,

especially when male language for God predominates, as it does in traditional psalm translations. Some worship services are so overloaded with male language for God that they seem to some people like idolatry of maleness. Many people with feminist values would (or in principle do) find sex-specific language for God acceptable if it could be balanced between the sexes, with equal numbers of female and male images of God in a congregation's long term pattern of worship, and if role stereotyping would be avoided. Others are insistent on the need for inclusiveness to go beyond the matter of addressing sexism, and I agree that it absolutely needs to do that, too.

As a tactic toward having a balance of sex-specific divine imagery in worship services, a number of liturgists for several decades have tried to eliminate as much male imagery for God as possible, and later to add as much female imagery for God as possible, as mentioned above. Female imagery for God tells some of the truth about God, as does male imagery for God, and as do other types of imagery for God. This Psalter is a fine resource from the category of items responsibly reducing male imagery, a great aid toward achieving balance in daily prayer. I am delighted to see and use it.

The issue of sex role stereotypes in divine imagery also needs attention, and these stereotypes can be blatant or subtle. A hymn well known to some older Episcopalians from the *Hymnal 1940* was inclusive but had a blatant sex role stereotype in the line, "strong men and maidens meek." For an example of more subtle sex role stereotyping, one could look at most of the nineteenth and twentieth century Christian hymns with female images of God. These used many maternal images, but the hymns with male images had a greater diversity of images, not primarily paternal images of God, so that was a sex-role stereotype in the *pattern of imagery*, something relatively subtle. Each hymn with male or female imagery for God was likely to seem OK when examined by itself, that is, in isolation, out of context, (if generic usage of masculine gender language for people was avoided), but in the context of liturgies of actual congregations, the comparative pattern was problematic. Because the female images of God in the Bible are largely (though not exclusively) maternal while the male images are more diverse, worship planners need to draw on more sources for female images of God than just Scripture if they wish both to go on using male images of God and wish to balance them with female images of God while avoiding stereotypes. Otherwise the pattern teaches implicitly that females are naturally more

mother-like than males are father-like, that it is natural for men to be many other things than just fathers but that it isn't natural for women, that God doesn't want that for women, etc. I believe the Church needs to retain and carefully use some male images of God in its worship on a regular basis, perhaps weekly, or perhaps in most services. Because so many of us have our heads stuffed with so many valid, vivid, and useful male images of God, I am not sure if we should have a goal of first having a full balance of female and male imagery for God, or if we first need a remedial period with more or stronger female images before moving to balance. Unfortunately no parish with which I have ever been associated has ever approached this level of commitment (to balanced liturgy) or deliberation (about how to achieve it), and unless our present rate of progress accelerates, since I am 57 my home parish will not get there in my lifetime. The result is that to some extent liturgy feels to me and a number of others tiresomely like spiritual assault, a form of domestic violence in our spiritual homes. This is true even when the liturgy is led by lay and ordained women as well as men, and even when the liturgical art features saints of both sexes, and when the choir features both women's and men's voices.

A list of Psalm verses in *The Saint Helena Psalter* which have references to male animals or people or to tribes named after them

The first list below is of psalm verses with male references (to male animals or male people or tribes named after men), whether or not these male references are in parallel constructions with female words. The second list is of female words, and this is obviously a much shorter than this first list of verses with male words. These lists may contain minor errors, and other people might have made the tabulations slightly differently. The compilation of these lists is not an attempt to tell anyone what sort of feelings they should have about these lists, nor what they should do about them. The two lists are offered as a guide for those who may find them useful in various ways, and to show that what may well be the best liturgical version of the Psalter now available in English, (although that is a matter of opinion), nonetheless has remaining sex-specific imbalance in content.

List one:

2:7

14:7

18:50

19:5

20:1

21:1-7

22:12, 20, 22

24:6

27:14

35:14

44:4

45:1, 2, 6, 11-12, 15-17

46:4, 8, 12

47:4, 9

48:10

50:9, 13

53:6

59:15

60:7

61:6, 7

66:13

68:27, 30

69:33, 37

72:1, 2, 4-9, 11-15, 17

74:5

76:1, 6, 12

77:15, 20

78:5, 9, 21, 51, 63, 67-68, 70-72

79:7

80:1-2

81:1, 4, 5

83:6-11

84:7

85:1

87:1

89:3, 20-30, 33, 35-36, 38-45, 49

92:9

94:7

99:4, 6
103:7
105:6, 9-10, 17-23, 26-7, 42
106:16, 19-20, 22-23, 30-33, 37-38
107:40
106:17
107:40
108:8
109:8, 11
110:4
114:1, 2, 7
115:10, 12
118:3
120:5
122:5
132:1, 2, 5, 10-12, 18, 19
133:2, 3
135:4, 9, 10-11, 19-20
136:15, 17-20
144:10, 13
146:4
147:20
148:12

References to Israel and to having been born are not counted, but giving birth, parents and widow are counted; there were no uses of “the widowed.” Whoring is not counted because in English today it can refer to persons of either sex hiring sex workers of either sex. *Princes* is counted as a male word because it is for most readers, although *princesses*, which was not used, is an inherently sexist word because of the feminine ending; (*official/recognized*) *royal offspring* would have been one better translation. Superscriptions were not counted—these are the directional notes at the beginnings of psalms. Each psalm marked by a ✓ on the second list also appears on the first list. The six verses underlined on the second list appear on both lists.

Here in the second list are the citations for female references:

7:15
✓22:9-10
✓27:14

✓35:14
✓45:10, 11, 14
✓48:6
✓50:20
51:6
58:3
68:5, 25
✓69:9
71:6
✓78:63, 64
✓84:2
86:16
✓94:6
✓106:37, 38
✓110:3
113:8
116:14
123:2
127:4
128:3
131:3
139:12, 15
✓144:13
✓146:8
✓148:12

A comparison of the two lists shows that 61 psalms out of 150 are on the first list, which amounts to 40%. 28 psalms are on the second list, but the second list only adds 13 psalms because most of the psalms with female words also have male words, (although the reverse is not true.) Thus 74 psalms have male or female language for people or animals, half the psalms. Yet because there are 184 psalm verses on the first list and 35 psalm verses on the second list, there are over five times as many psalm verses with male language remaining as there are verses with female language remaining. Thus there is quite a contrast in the number of female and male wording remaining. **Half of the psalms, 50%, have male or female words, but the proportion is over 5 to 1 male to female wording. That is quite an imbalance. It is not basically a translation problem, but a matter of original psalm content.** Many people have no problem with this. I am not saying that every parish needs to pay attention to this at this time.

Some people like sexist language and imagery, while others hardly notice it, and often people do not notice the absence of sexist language or imagery. But the question is not whether or not people like it, their emotional response, but rather what it does, how it functions, in conjunction with other aspects of our society, to teach and reinforce sexist attitudes and values, and thereby to help maintain oppressive structures, including sexism. It is probably particularly powerful with children and in liturgical settings, where the “halo effect” implicitly suggests that it has God’s approval. It also has an effect in religious education classes both for children and for adults. In our social context these effects are cumulative, interacting and compounding. How they count depends on with what they are counted.

Sometimes people say that certain things, such as references to male animals, shouldn’t bother anybody. They suggest that something is wrong with people who object to references to such things as male animals, or to a Psalter or lectionary having more references to male animals than to female animals, saying that the objectors are overly sensitive or that they shouldn’t have such feelings, or that *they* have a problem or that they must be lesbians or man haters, as if either is a terrible thing! I would agree that there is a problem and that the objectors are sensitive. They have been sensitized by massive social sexism, and some of them have been irreparably harmed by it as victims of major crimes. It is not true that “they shouldn’t have such feelings,” because no feelings are ever morally wrong (or right) to experience, (unlike some actions, based on feelings, which may be right or wrong to do.) Nobody can control what kind of feelings they have anyway. While it is possible that they are man haters, in my experience that is quite unlikely, although it would certainly be understandable after encounters with violent women-haters; rather it is highly likely that they are sexism haters and justice lovers, and quite possibly women-lovers. (Hate is an emotion and it is not sinful to feel, and although it can lead a person to sinful action, it can also motivate a person to act for justice.) It is also true that feelings alone do not automatically justify certain actions: simply because I like orange does not justify painting the Church orange, even if I volunteer to donate the paint.

Those who feel annoyed at the idea that the Church might have to be much more careful about wording are equally entitled to their feelings of annoyance. Feelings on either side of these language matters, however, do not determine what constitutes action for justice. I tell people that I am not

going to tell anyone how they should feel, which would be useless, anyway. All feelings are morally neutral. Yet I do believe there are some right and wrong actions for the Church to take in its corporate life. However, while I certainly do not believe that I know what every parish should do in every situation, I believe that not working on these issues is the wrong choice, a sin of omission. I also believe that the Holy Spirit is available to guide those parishes which ask the Spirit for help.

Female images of God in the psalms and in this Psalter

As described above, there are potentially several types of female images of God, names of God that are unmistakably female, and images of God as giving birth or nursing or as being like one who is female or is doing something specifically female, and (in English) feminine linguistic-gender pronouns referring to God also form female images.

Several Psalms have female images of God, explicitly or implicitly, and both maternal and non-maternal female images occur in the psalms and elsewhere in the Bible. Psalm 27:14 presents God as better than either parent, and so as implicitly better than either mother or father, an implicit female image parallel to an implicit male image. Psalm 123:2b has a head woman of the household image of God, not specified as maternal, an explicit male image parallel to an explicit female image. Psalm 131:3 explicitly compares God to a mother who rests her (weaned) child at her breast.

Female imagery in the following three psalms is a matter of interpretation, with Christian interpretations differing from Jewish interpretations for Psalms 110, 90, and 101. Psalm 110:3 was often cited by the Doctors of the Church as a uterine image of God the Father generating God the Word before time, and Psalm 90:2 received some related use. In the Vulgate (Christian Latin translation) Psalm 101:7 (Ps. 102:6 in *SHP* numbering) mentioned a pelican, which was understood for centuries as a mother pelican image predicting Christ, due to inaccurate knowledge of the behavior of mother pelicans, and the custom of typological interpretation. (Actually, while it could have been a pelican in the original Hebrew, it was more likely a vulture!) Naturally Jews did not regard this bird as a divine image.

Two psalms that do not have inherently (necessarily) female images, but which functioned as if they did for centuries in the context of cultures with

midwives, are Psalms 22:9 and 71:6, which were interpreted as having midwife imagery, (you took me out of my mother's uterus), which is non-maternal because while midwives were women, they did not have to be mothers and sometimes were not mothers. (Some other translations of Psalm 71:6 show this image more clearly.) Also, let me just note here that the divine names *Shaddai* and *Baal-Peor* will be discussed in the next section below.

This *Saint Helena Psalter* preserves the female imagery for God in Psalms 27:14, 90:2, 123:2b, 131:3, and 110:3, and Psalms 22:9 and 71:6 are just as open to the midwife interpretation as the prior *BCP* version. Psalm 103:13 is now rendered with *parent* instead of *father* (as in Ps. 27:14), so it adds one implicitly female (and parallel male) image. (Any little tidbit helps some readers, who are so starved for feminist liturgy that they feel as if they are sustained on crumbs!) *Parental* wording is also used in alternate Psalters: a, b, d, e and f for Ps. 103:13.

I would have preferred to see Psalm 123:2 translated with a closer literary parallel and without the feminine ending in English, “-ess,” (which I consider always sexist, as discussed above), perhaps something closer to: “As the eyes of the male servant look to the hand of the head man of the household, as the eyes of the female servant look to the hand of the head woman of the household...” I realize that a literary parallel did not mean social or power equality, but I am glad to see the female image clearly evident. Only alternate Psalter (b), edited by Gold *et al*, has a better translation than the *BCP* 1979 and the *Saint Helena Psalter* translation, even though it uses an odd word form, (a combination of singular and plural): “As the eyes of manservants look to the hand of the man for whom they work, as the eyes of womanservants [look] to the hand of the woman for whom they work,”... Alternate Psalter version (f) by Priests for Equality totally slaughters the parallel female and male divine images in Ps. 123:2 by rendering it as a parallel between a dog and an attendant! (One might, of course, picture them both as male images, or both as female images, or either one as either one, or one could be vague and equally picture neither as a female or male image, which seems to me to be a more likely result of this wording. However the image of God as a bitch, as literally a female dog, is not likely to gain popularity as a reasonable version, even if accompanied by a female attendant!) The retention of the above several female images of God in *the Saint Helena Psalter*, compensates or balances, at least a tiny bit

for some readers, for some of the male language about people and animals in some of the other psalms.

**The discussion of sex-specific names of gods
and the translation (or non-translation)
of Shaddai and Baal-Peor**

Psalter (f) has an unusual and interesting discussion of sex-specific associations with the names of God in the Psalter on p. xvii of its introduction, although it does not otherwise discuss female imagery of God in the Psalms. For example, in commenting on the name *Elohim*, a common Hebrew name for God in the Psalter, it explains that it is the cognate of a masculine (singular) El, combined with a feminine plural ending, used to refer to a single (as in singular, not plural) god, so that the name “actually balances the feminine and masculine elements of God” (p. xvi). While this suggests a common confusion or equation of biological sex and linguistic gender, apparently suggesting that masculine and male are the same, and that feminine and female are the same, and/or perhaps suggesting Jungian influence, it raises interesting ideas.¹¹ Their translation choice into English is not sex-specific.

There are two Psalm verses (68:14 and 91:1) that use a Hebrew name for God, *Shaddai*, that has, or can have, a female meaning, God of the Breasts, or the Breasted One. It is routinely translated into English as Almighty or God of the Mountains, (the shape of a female breast and some mountains being similar), and these are also legitimate translations. I consider the first/best translation choice to be *The Breasted One*, the *Breasted God*, (or God of the Breasts, though perhaps not on linguistic grounds.) Most English readers do not know the meaning of the Hebrew, but for the few who do, use of the Hebrew *Shaddai* may be a second choice. *Almighty* and *God of the Mountains* rate only a distant third choice in my opinion. Here is how the alternative Psalters deal with the verses: none of these Psalters used my first choice. Most of them used my third choice: b, c, and e use *Almighty* for both psalms, and (a) uses *Almighty* for Ps. 91:1 and simply omits that part of verse 68:14, and *The Saint Helena Psalter* retains the *Almighty* usage of the *BCP* Psalter for both psalms. Two Psalters used my second choice: Psalters

¹¹ See footnote 2.

(d) and (f) use *Shaddai* for both psalms, but only Psalter f discusses the issues, in its introduction, and that is progress.

Alternate Psalter (f) seemingly explained (on page xvii) their reason for leaving *Shaddai* untranslated by saying, “Unfortunately, the two places where *Shaddai* appears in the Psalms are rife with overtly masculine imagery, and using ‘the Breasted One’ in those contexts would simply be too jarring, so we have left the word untranslated.” But why should that preclude what they apparently otherwise consider the proper translation of *Shaddai*? The “overt masculine imagery” seems to be two things: first, Jewish military victory (led or supported) by a Breasted God, and second, safety with (this Breasted) God even from overwhelming military danger. Why did they decide that the “masculine” imagery of male military might was jarring when juxtaposed with a Breasted God, and that it was “too” jarring? Too jarring for whom, or for what? Too jarring to juxtapose with sentimental stereotypes of women’s breasts as nurturing, perhaps? Or maybe too jarring to combine a God who was powerful in a military way with a female Breasted figure? Was it sexually threatening or scary, jarring, for them to picture a Breasted God as powerful in an aggressive military and presumably violent way, when they were used to thinking of women’s breasts as safe, sexy, and/or nurturing and possibly passive? Were they inadvertently perpetuating sex role stereotypes in their decision not to translate this name of God? If they had a conscious or unconscious maternal stereotype associated with a Breasted God, could they not extend it to a maternal God protecting and assisting an army of Her grown sons through military might, an army protecting the rest of Her people probably not present on the battlefield, the women, children, and elderly men? (Perhaps Psalm 68 has allusions to the women who played a role in military victories described in Judges. Compare Judges 5:1 with Psalm 68:11, and Judges 5:30 with Ps. 68:12. Perhaps the psalmist was alluding to Jael’s slaying of Sisera, when the Jewish army was led by Deborah and Barak, but now explicitly supported by a Breasted God!)

Another consideration has to do with how the translation of *Shaddai* may function in regard to women who are victims of violence around the English speaking world. (I am mentioning only the English speaking world because I am commenting on English translations.) Women are far more likely to be victims of violence than to be perpetrators of violence. Will failure to translate the name in a female-identified way, and to render it *Almighty* instead, (as a, b, c, e and the *St. Helena Psalter* did) actually be more likely

to function in English to reinforce familiar power patterns (God customarily seen as male and Almighty, male imagery for God unchallenged, and men as more violent than women)? Would the proper translation help empower women, and help men reconsider customary power arrangements? Will or would male readers interpret God of the Breasts as a male God with power over women's breasts? (Would they in an inclusive language Psalter?) The writers of the introduction to Psalter f probably thought their reasoning was self-evident, but they did not fully explain it. We are left wondering about their presumptions and reasoning.

In addition to all this, virtually all the female images of God in the Bible are close to male images of God, some in literary parallels, and are often close to references to male people, as is the case in the two psalm references to *Shaddai*, and that has not prevented the use of female images of God. Why not translate the name? In fact, nobody considers it too jarring to translate Isaiah 66:12-16 where in verses 12-13 God describes Herself as breasted and promises to nurse comfortingly, and in verses 14b-16 She uses imagery of male military might in promising how S/he will judge. If people have been able to tolerate the juxtaposition of God's breasts and military imagery there, I cannot believe that it would be too jarring to translate *Shaddai* as *Breasted One* in the Psalms. It is interesting that of these seven Psalters two use *Shaddai* untranslated (d and f), and none translate *Shaddai* in the way I consider ideal, but I think it is progress for it even to be under discussion, and Psalter f did do that in its introduction.

Not all of the male images of God in the psalms or elsewhere in the Bible are comfortable images, and the female images of God do not all have to be comfortable, either. Male images of God are not all aligned with our images of either justice or masculinity, and female images are not all aligned with our images of femininity. (This is doubtless for the best, because femininity and masculinity are social constructs and utilize sex role stereotypes, and thus function in inherently sexist ways.) Similarly, a mighty God who slaughters one's foes is fearsome. Places where we are uncomfortable with the behavior or images attributed to God may provoke reflection or insight, and may be helpful in recognizing God's otherness. This reflection may also help us seek the courage to change our own inclinations to maintain stereotypic behavior.

Psalm 106:28 mention a male god named *Baal-Peor* or *Baal of Peor*, though some readers will not know from the name that this is a male or even a god.

Other readers know that the *Baals* were all male gods of Israel's neighbors, just as *baals* were all human (male) lords. Thus a number of readers know at a glance that *Baal-Peor* is a male god. How interesting that it was left untranslated in the *SHP*, a, b, c, d, e and f, and in a form that communicates to a number of readers that it is the name of a male god, but that in five of these seven Psalters *Shaddai* is always translated in a way that hides the possible female meaning, and when left untranslated in two Psalters it is virtually unknown to readers as a female name. That does not look to me like equal treatment, or equal application of a translation principle. Perhaps *Baal-Peor* in Psalm 106:28 should have been rendered *a foreign god (of/from Peor)* instead, or perhaps the equivalent in more readily chanted wording. Though, again, we must recognize that *god* will be interpreted by many readers as a male word.

**A previously unaddressed proposal
for dealing with the imbalances of various sorts
remaining in the content of the inclusive language Psalters**

I have come to believe that the task of using an inclusive language Psalter involves addressing the imbalances of various sorts remaining in Psalter content when the work on inclusive language translation has gone as far as it can. Individual readers and congregations and denominations have choices about how to deal with remaining imbalances. Of course, among these seven Psalters the amount of remaining imbalance varies widely, since Psalter (a) does not alter male God language, either nouns or pronouns, and the other Psalters do to different degrees. As far as I am aware none of these Psalters suggested or addressed this type of responsibility that users have for dealing with these issues of remaining content imbalance or sex role stereotypes, or gave examples of how it could be done. For instance, I do not think the Psalter introductions mentioned the possibility of reading some parts of the Psalter more (or less) frequently than other parts. This would affect a reader's or a congregation's exposure to particular material. An example of this principle of controlled exposure is the well known practice in many liturgical lectionaries of skipping the imprecatory psalms, passages such as Ps. 137:9, not because they are sexist, but because many people find

they inhibit worship with their raw demands for vengeance.¹² These psalm passages are optional omissions in the *BCP* lectionaries.¹³ I like to read the passages with female images of God more frequently than I read other passages because I treasure them, and this is also an example of controlled exposure. Many Church groups have prided themselves on reading the whole Psalter or the whole Bible on a regular cycle and then starting over, just as Jews do, but maybe it is time to relegate that custom to study groups, and to have different expectations for worship groups. It seems appropriate to look at the overall pattern of imagery used by a congregation over a year, or over a three year cycle of readings, and not to just look at how the readings fit together for each service by itself, although some will wish to take that approach. If desired, the whole Psalter might still be read over a specified period, but some passages might get triple readings during that period, while other passages might get read only once, or only on leap years.

This could be done by suggesting a pattern of personal devotional reading and/or one for communal liturgical reading, ideally related to the seasons of the Church year, which seeks to achieve balance by having some passages used more frequently, and others less frequently, maybe with certain passages used together to balance each other. This is a development which could be applied in one ambitious study to one or more of the Psalters identified in this paper. It is an application of the principle of balance to, potentially, a number of aspects of worship at once: sex-specific divine imagery, sex-specific language for people, positive (and negative) light and dark imagery, social class matters, etc. (Mary Jo Campbell, who appreciates puns, says that this could be one method among several used to deal with the fact that the Psalter is peppered with material which, in our social context, needs addressing by such methods as balancing, preaching, education, etc. But that is such a silly pun that I would hesitate to use it myself; however she spices her conversation with such observations.) Maybe it would be fruitful to draft a preliminary paper outlining working principles in detail, before applying them to a particular Psalter and a particular group of potential users, such as users of the *Revised Common Lectionary*—or has this already been done? But such a Psalter lectionary by itself would not be

¹² *Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice* by Paul Westermeyer, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998, p. 35-36, says that Isaac Watts omitted imprecatory psalms, and John Wesley left out 34 Psalms and verses from 58 more, and that the *Lutheran Book of Worship* leaves out some of the psalms that Watts left out.

¹³ The word lectionary can refer either to a chart or schedule of citations of Bible readings or to a book with the readings printed out. I am not suggesting that the psalms need to be re-printed this way, but only that a chart of citations be produced with an explanation of principles used by the compilers and which Psalter(s) it refers to. People other than the translators and editors of the Psalters could prepare lectionaries.

enough for an individual to have non-sexist and inclusive devotions, or for a congregation to have inclusive non-sexist liturgy, because there are so many more aspects of worship than just the Psalter.

Alternate Psalter (e), is unusual in extending its understanding of inclusivity beyond the sexes to also discuss light and dark imagery with its implications for racial and ethnic identity. Yet even Psalter (e), in its reasonable reduction of negative uses of darkness, failed to go the next corollary steps. Just as none of the introductions to these Psalters discussed the concept of balance in liturgy, and the consequent need to have more female images of God in liturgy, even (e) did not mention the need to have fewer positive images of light/bright/white/day and more negative images of light/bright/white/day and more positive images of black/dark/night, either in the Psalter or in liturgy. But it did discuss and work on 25% of the solution, (fewer negative black/dark/night images), which is at least a start.¹⁴ Historic research shows that the association of black/dark/night with evil, danger, and negativity (and light, bright, white and day with safety, God, and positives such as knowledge, things seeable in the light) predates racism based on skin color.¹⁵ Nonetheless, although establishing and maintaining racism were not the original or conscious purposes of this imagery, it seems to function to help maintain racism in our cultural context, so it needs attention. Attention to a lectionary in this regard, and to careful selection of which canticles and hymns are used with Psalter passages could balance the imbalanced Psalter material. In theory that sounds easy, but in practice it is difficult because of the rarity of hymns with negative light/bright/white/day language or imagery and/or positive black/dark/night language or imagery.¹⁶

Individuals and congregations each have choices about how to deal with imbalances remaining once they have selected a Psalter:

¹⁴ *The Saint Helena Psalter* was produced by the Order of Saint Helena to be used by the sisters in their liturgies, and their breviary has a number of canticles emphasizing women, and other canticles with female images of God. However, because I have only begun to use this breviary I cannot say how far along they are toward achieving a balance of sex-specific imagery for God either in their printed texts, or in the liturgies that result when they use it with whatever Bible translation and lectionary they customarily use. I do not know if a balance of sex-specific divine imagery was even a goal they sought. It is not a goal they identify in their explanatory material.

¹⁵ See Eulalio R. Baltazar, *The Dark Center: A Process Theology of Blackness*. NY: Paulist Press, 1973. The pre-racism association of dark and evil is presumably based at least partly on the dangers of nighttime attack from animal and human raiders, and on fears projected into the unknowable night darkness.

¹⁶ In one hymnal I examined 25% of the hymns had light and/or dark imagery, and in all cases it was positive light/bright/white/day imagery and/or negative black/dark/night, except that one of those hymns also had some positive black/dark/night, but not enough for even that hymn to be balanced.

- 1) They might try to have the overall pattern of Psalter readings they use balanced in regard to each dimension of imbalance they recognized and wanted to counteract, such as male and female divine imagery, human female and male references, light and dark imagery, etc. by preparing a lectionary that was balanced.
- 2) They might ignore the imbalances, maybe deciding that they are counterbalanced elsewhere in the liturgy, or that they are relatively insignificant. Or, readers who recognize the massive improvement in the *SHP*, for example, might ignore the imbalances, being quite grateful for what it has achieved and may not be bothered by the remaining imbalance, or may not be bothered enough to draft a personal lectionary, which might seem like an overwhelming task. For example, they might value a lectionary, including psalm citations, which they were already using because of its co-ordination with their calendar of saints and daily offices. Their personal or parochial calendar of saints might have already been adjusted to de-emphasize men saints, such as those Apostles about whom virtually nothing is known, and to give greater emphasis on women saints and holy women previously lost in obscurity.
- 3) They might try to have their overall pattern of liturgical language in a congregation balanced in regard to each dimension with which they were concerned, paying attention to wording in hymns, Bible readings, psalms, sermons, etc., while also trying to have other dimensions of liturgy balanced, such as the sex of lay and ordained liturgical leaders, the sex of saints depicted in visual arts, etc. Ideally this will be co-ordinated with the educational program and other aspects of congregational life. If they cannot immediately achieve this overall balance, they might set goals and a timetable to work toward achieving it.
- 4) They might move toward the third choice by setting a timetable of detailed specific achievable goals. This might mean ignoring Psalter imbalance for the moment, postponing attention, while gaining acceptance of the revised Psalter translation. Regular evaluations of experience as the congregation moved toward its goals would promote accountability and develop and maintain trust. Even in denominations with rigid restrictions and requirements around liturgical language, much progress can be made in local congregations, when lay people and clergy discuss issues and set agreed-upon goals and seriously evaluate every opportunity, even minor things that hardly seem to matter, because they add up.
- 5) Sometimes individuals pencil changes into their personal copies of Psalters, Bibles, and hymnals, crossing out words they do not like and writing in substitutes. This solution could be combined with solution 2,

above, by penciling in wording alterations for devotional use, and then ignoring any remaining imbalance.

In conclusion

My personal favorite of these Psalters when I began this paper was *The Saint Helena Psalter*, because after using it for two years I respected the translation decisions, the best I had seen. To me they seem intellectually responsible, pastorally appropriate, and liturgically reasonable. I also liked the handy size. In my view alternative Psalters (a), (b) and (c) do not go far enough for me, yet alternative (f) goes too far in some of its decisions and it oversimplifies other decisions and is sometimes clumsy. (Alternative g, being the Septuagint Psalter, is not what I want both because it is too sexist and because by its nature it is too far from the Hebrew original, even though it may be the highest quality English translation from the Septuagint ever produced.) However now that I have examined alternatives (d) and (e) I recognize the strengths of these Psalters, so I will be reconsidering which of these two, with *The Saint Helena Psalter*, are best for which uses. However, it must be noted that (d) and (e) are out of print at this time, though used copies may be available.

Altogether *the Saint Helena Psalter* is a valuable gift to the Church, with grace and poetic beauty. It helps people praise God, it reduces isolation among Christian feminists, it may both attract people to the Christian faith and help people retain and develop their Christian faith.¹⁷

In the Episcopal Church *the Saint Helena Psalter* may be used without a need for the bishop to authorize it at any Holy Eucharist or daily office derived from the *BCP* p. 400 *ff*. The diocesan bishop may freely authorize its use in other services in specific parishes, or throughout the diocese, under canon II.2, with or without restrictions.

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¹⁷ The isolation of Christian feminists is addressed in part in William Seth Adams, *Moving the Furniture: Liturgical Theory, Practice, and Environment*. NY: Church Publishing, 1999, pages 29-30.

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