



Quaker Universalist Voice

Why a Bible Translated for Children?

by J.M. Spears

Parents and grandparents want their children to know the Bible and its wisdom at an early age. English Bibles available today have been translated for adults. Children need Bibles that have been translated at readability and vocabulary levels of children.

For 300 years, it has been widely recognized that the Bible should be translated into the thousands of languages of the peoples of the world. At the same time, there has been a general acceptance of giving our children only Bible paraphrases, or retold Bible stories based on English versions of the Bible translated for adults.

Too often, translations for adults have been given to children in third or fourth grades during a ceremony that is intended to tell the children that the book given to them is of special value. Yet, these Bibles are translated at a reading and vocabulary level beyond the child's level. Children are immediately disappointed and frustrated because they cannot understand the Bible. Too often, they conclude that the Bible is not relevant to their lives.

We do not expect our children to read or understand Shakespeare in fourth grade. Yet, we expect children to benefit from a Bible at that age, which has a readability level above their own. As long as parents, teachers, Meetings, and Churches want young children to have the Bible, we should find a way to give them a translation prepared especially for children.

Translations are not rewritten Bible stories. Rewritten Bible stories always carry a greater amount of the teller's personal theology than does a translation. Bible stories are usually rewritten to make a particular point, too often a particular moral point, rather than the theological point of the original author. These story tellers rarely reflect the work of Biblical scholars. These stories lead children to believe they know all there is to know about the Bible. They become accustomed to paraphrases and condensations and have no desire to study the actual Bible. If they do study the Bible from this background, they come to the Bible with preconceived ideas about what it says and, therefore, never actually understand the Bible as theology, as it was written.

Why inclusive language for Bible translations?

Non-sexist language is not gender biased. It is inclusive language that includes both males and females equally when referring to people who are not specifically identified by sex.

Inclusive language translations are more accurate.

The first and primary reason for an inclusive language translation of the Bible is that it is the most accurate way to translate the Bible into English.

Current scientific research is demonstrating, as graphic artists have long shown by depicting an overwhelming majority of Biblical characters as male, that the masculine words “he”, “him”, “his”, and “man”, although often meant by writers and translators to be generic and inclusive, are today imaged by virtually all persons of all ages as specifically of the male sex.

Sex-biased translations distort Biblical reality.

Because translators of the Bible have traditionally used the masculine gender as the generic, or inclusive gender, English speaking people throughout history have depicted Biblical characters with male images as the rule and female images as the exception. The frequent use of capital letters on male imaged words “he”, “him”, “his”, when referring to God or Christ add to the concept that maleness is of greater importance.

Children’s first concepts of God and their religious heritage are formed before they are able to distinguish between generic and sexual use of nouns (e.g. lord, king, man, men) and pronouns (e.g. he, his, him). Children’s first experiences of the Bible should be inclusive because this is the most accurate understanding of the Bible. If their deepest understanding of their religious tradition is to accurately include an inclusive God who cares for and relates to female and male persons equally, and an inclusive religious heritage that includes strong women and men and weak men and women, attention to translation accuracy is essential.

Religious sexism harms social structures.

To address the sexism in our religious symbols is one way to improve our social structures. There is a need for a greater awareness of the interrelatedness of our social structures and our religious symbols. People increasingly recognize the destructive nature of sexism. Today, the scope and depth of the effects of sexism are becoming clearer. We need a clarified understanding of God and of our religious heritage as inclusive, one that values male and female people equally. This can be accomplished by more accurate translation of the Bible into English.

There is a danger of religious symbols being abandoned, if they are not inclusive.

Our children, boys and girls, are growing up in a world with a new awareness of the sexism that has infected our culture. Children growing up in and out of the Church or Meeting will learn that the deepest symbols infected by sexism are religious symbols. Since the Bible is the primary source of powerful religious symbols of our culture, an effective way to help young children is to provide inclusive, not gender-biased, Biblical and religious symbols for them as they grow in their awareness of the world around them.

Our language shapes our understanding of life. No matter what our religion is, it is the basis for our actions. When our religious language gives greater importance to males, our understanding of life will also include an understanding of males as having greater importance. Our current religious language is unfair to boys and men by leading them to feel themselves to be superior. Our current religious language is unfair to girls and women by leading them to feel themselves to be inferior.

When inaccurately male-imagined religious language dominates our religious understanding, women and girls feel inferior. When God is imaged as male, then male is believed to be superior to all that is female. These inaccuracies in religious language distort our understanding of God and the Biblical message.

The Language We Use for God

The English word “God” is a nonsex-specific place holder for the Hebrew word “*Yahweh*”. The word “God” should accurately reflect the nonsex-identified nature of *Yahweh*. However, the use of the English male pronouns (e.g. he, him, and his), which are used to refer to God are sex-specific pronouns in modern English. Sex-specific English pronouns are inaccurate place holders for “*Yahweh*”. This use of masculine pronouns gives the antecedent, God, unwarranted male aspects. Readers and hearers come to believe that God is male and masculine in a way in which God is not female and feminine.

Advocates for the use of the male pronouns as placeholders for “God” argue primarily that these pronouns are generic and do not imply sex-specific male images. These advocates also make the artistic argument that accurately repeated use of the word “God” in a sentence to avoid male pronouns (e.g. he, him, his) is awkward. They argue that the use of the male pronouns permits the writing to flow more naturally.

It only seems awkward to our ears to repeat the use of the word “God”. Because the Church has acquiesced in inaccurate Biblical translations for so long. It is not basically an aesthetic argument, but an argument from habit and familiarity.

English lacks a third person singular personal pronoun that is not imaged as sex specific. Other languages have these words. English is poorer for this lack. Therefore, accurate translation into English requires translators to repeat the word “God” rather than use inaccurate pronouns. Custom and familiarity should not balance the scale to permit use of masculine pronouns when their use is not accurate.

In the translation of the creation stories here, we find two of the Hebrew words used for God. They are *Elohim* and *Yahweh*. The Hebrew words have been retained in these translations because children easily learn and understand words that are unfamiliar to adults. Since the Hebrew authors and editors chose to use different names, we should use different names for God in English translations of the Bible. By retaining these Hebrew words, we learn about the way these authors and editors understood God.

Elohim is translated into English as “God”. *Elohim* is used 2,230 times in the Old Testament. It has been assigned a masculine gender in Hebrew. The grammatical masculine does not refer to maleness in the sexual sense, just as a grammatical feminine word does not refer to femaleness in a sexual sense. The French word for “table”, which has been assigned the feminine gender, does not make the table sexually female.

Elohim is a masculine plural form of a word that is believed to have originally been a feminine singular word. When *Elohim* has been translated into English, it has been translated consistently as a singular word “God” and followed by masculine singular pronouns that are imaged as male by readers and hearers.

The use of masculine pronouns as place holders for *Elohim* is inaccurate and denies the plural dimension of the Hebrew word *Elohim*. The plural word *Elohim* reflects the understanding of the Hebrews that their God included both masculine and feminine characteristics. For example, Genesis 1:26-27, “And *Elohim* said, ‘Let us make people in our image according to our likeness and let them rule...and *Elohim* created people in the image of *Elohim*...created male and female...created them.’”

Psychologists have long known that the way we refer to ourselves, to one another, and to God, and how we understand and interpret these references, has critical importance for our thoughts and actions. The inaccuracies in present Bible translations distort the text and wrongly communicate that we are all, regardless of our sex, called to be sons of a father God, brothers in the faith, to be saved by a male Christ, and to be led by a male Spirit. These false ideas of male centeredness due to the wrong use of English masculine pronouns are not supported by an accurate translation of the Biblical texts themselves.

We are all Adam.

Unless it is the name of a specific person and is translated as the proper noun *Adam*, the Hebrew word “adam” should be translated into English using a generic and non-sex-specific word. Here, it has been translated as “earthling.” This key Biblical word is frequently translated inaccurately into English as “man”. However, *adam* means “earthling”—one created from the earth. *Adam* is a generic noun that does not indicate the sex of the earthling.

The root of *adam* is *adamah*. *Adamah* means “soil”—the soil from which the food that gives life is created. In ancient Hebrew, the word *adam* was assigned the grammatical masculine gender and *adamah* was assigned the grammatical feminine gender.

All ancient Hebrew nouns were given a grammatical gender. As modern readers, we must tell, from the context and from the theology of the original authors, which words are meant to be sex-specific when translated into modern English.

Adam is used 540 times in the Old Testament and has consistently been mistranslated as “man”. The consequence of this inaccuracy in English translations of *adam* as “man” is magnified by our masculine pronouns that are used as place holders for *adam* and are imaged male even though they refer to the generic word *adam*.

There is a sex-specific male Hebrew word “lysh”, which is used by Old Testament authors and editors when they wanted the reader to image a sex-specific male person. “lysh” is frequently used in the Old Testament and is properly translated as “man”.

Read these translations slowly and decide if the impact for you is different than it has been when you have read the same verses in any other translation.

These translations are prepared with the hope of correcting some of the translation errors of the past and of making the Bible easier for children to read and hear.

These translations of the Bible for children use inclusive language. The Bible is a primary source of powerful religious symbols. The first experience of the Bible often forms the deepest images in a child’s spiritual life. Therefore, it is important that children first receive the Bible in a form they can understand and with a translation that is as accurate as possible. Their first experience of the Bible needs to be inclusive if the deepest understanding of a child’s religion is to be of an inclusive God and if the Biblical message is to be equally available to girls and to boys. It should accurately reflect the roles of men and women in the Biblical record. It should be accessible to a child’s ability to read and to understand the language used in the text.

These translations are expressly for children, not paraphrases. They incorporate research findings regarding readability levels.