

# *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*

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The past few decades have seen the publication of a bewildering number of English translations of the Bible. Three versions which have recently appeared, however, differ from their predecessors in that they are inclusive language translations. These were produced in response to the significant changes taking place within the English language in regard to gender (and other equality) issues, especially the perceived sexual bias in some of the earlier versions. The first was the *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)* which appeared in 1989. The second is the *Inclusive Language Edition of the New International Version (NIV)* which contains the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs and was published at the end of 1995. The third, and most thoroughgoing, appeared simultaneously when the Oxford University Press released *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*, a translation which, its editors claim, goes far beyond earlier limited attempts in its level of inclusiveness. This version sets out to revise language on a broad range of agendas, and it reflects views of equality on issues of race, gender and ethnicity. Its editors claim that 'it speaks directly to today's social concerns, especially the move towards universal inclusiveness, with the result that it can be truly said to "speak to all people"'.

Let us look at these claims under the following headings:

## **1 Inclusive Language and Human Relationships**

Along with both the *NRSV* and the *NIV Inclusive Language Edition*, the Oxford version eliminates the perceived sexual bias inherent in the English language, whenever the reference is to people generically, or to people not gender specified. So the generic 'man' becomes a plural 'those' (Ps 1:1), 'fathers' becomes 'ancestors' (Heb 1:1), while 'brothers' becomes 'brothers and sisters' (Col 1:2). Many of these changes are quite appropriate, given that the original 'generic' language of the Scriptures

was intended to include both men and women: note, for example, Matthew 5:11: 'Blessed are you when people [rather than *men*] revile you' (also v15).

But not all these substitutions are equally apt either stylistically or theologically. 'People' would have been preferable to 'humankind' at Mark 2:27 ('The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath'), while the change at Galatians 4:4-7 from 'sons' to 'children' as applied to Christians loses something of the connection with Jesus as Son. The Oxford version tries to get round this problem by referring to Jesus as 'God's Child', but this raises other difficulties: Jesus was a man, and thus 'Son'. 'Child' is not specific enough. Similarly, the change in 2 Corinthians 5:17 from 'If anyone is in Christ, *he* is a new creation' (*NIV*) to 'So if anyone is in Christ, *there* is a new creation' not only removes the exclusive language, but also reinterprets the verse.

The Oxford inclusive version goes beyond other contemporary translations in relation to issues of race and ethnicity. So, for example, in order to avoid the problem of anti-Semitism it renders 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15 as 'for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from *those* [instead of the 'the Jews'] who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets'. It is right to oppose anti-Semitism, and particularly an anti-Semitic reading of the New Testament, but to drop the reference to Jews here either downplays or rewrites history. And within the immediate context of encouraging the Thessalonians, Paul points out that Gentiles *as well as* Jews persecuted the infant Christians.

Other texts have been revised by the translators to remove perceived notions of abuse and servitude. So wives are to be 'committed' to their husbands, rather than 'subject' to them (Col 3:18). But 'committed' is not an accurate rendering of the Greek and, anyway, the word 'subject' does not necessarily introduce notions of abuse or servitude. Is the new translation at odds with itself when it asserts that Christ is 'subjected to God' (at 1 Cor 15:28)? Does this text imply that God enslaves Christ?

The Oxford version has revised some language in order to avoid personifying individuals by their afflictions. So instead of the 'blind' receiving their sight, the 'lame' walking and the 'lepers' being cleansed (so *NRSV*), the new version has '*those who are blind* receive sight, *those who are lame* walk, *the people with leprosy* are cleansed' (Matt 11:5). While this change might be regarded as a sensitive one, it needs to be remembered that the focus of the biblical text is on the great need of these people which Jesus met, not on their being personified by their affliction.

## 2 Inclusive Language and God

Since God is beyond gender, the new translation refuses to use masculine language about him. If God is thought of as male, it is claimed, then many find it difficult to relate to him or think of themselves as made in his image. So the terms 'Father' and 'King' are replaced, while no personal pronouns (masculine or otherwise) are used of 'God'.

Instead of 'Father' God is called 'Father/Mother' in the Oxford version whenever the Greek word *pater* is so used. The address in the Lord's Prayer is to 'Our Father/Mother in heaven, hallowed be your name' (Matt 6:9), while at Matthew 11:27 Jesus is reported as saying: 'All things have been handed over to me by my *Father/Mother*, no one knows the *Child* except the *Father/Mother*.' Since this hybrid designation cannot be understood literally, the editors claim that the metaphor allows the mind to oscillate between the two images of God, so presenting both fatherly and motherly qualities.

But this compromises our understanding of the personal nature of God. God is not a neuter, hybrid or two-sided being to which we can relate personally. Scripture presents God overwhelmingly in masculine terms, with masculine names, titles and pronouns. He is called Father more than two hundred times in the Bible, and although some aspects of his character or activity are *like* those of a mother (Is 42:14; 49:15), he is never called 'Mother'.

Further, to call God 'Father' does not imply that he possesses a male body.

The Fatherhood of God is a prominent theme of the New Testament: it comes from the lips of Jesus (note his use of 'Abba' at Mark 14:36), who taught his disciples to call upon God as their heavenly Father, and this was taken up by the apostles (Rom 8:14-17). The use of 'Father' cannot be abandoned or modified lightly, since the revelation of God as Father is central to the revelation of God in Christ ('Language, Gender and God; A Report of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission' 1993 *Year Book of the Diocese of Sydney* p 452).

Indeed, the Fatherhood of God is basic to our understanding of the Trinity. Jesus revealed fundamental truths about the persons of the Trinity, eg their essential unity, their mutual love, the obedience of the Son to the Father, in terms of the relationship between the 'Father' and the 'Son'. To speak of God as 'Mother' is to introduce new and inappropriate ways of thinking about God, while to call God 'Father/Mother' is less personal and

more abstract. The presentation of God as Father in Scripture must be retained.

But it is crucial to recognize that the masculine presentation of God in Scripture should not be interpreted so as to disenfranchise women spiritually or imply that they are inferior or that their salvation is not complete. Men and women are equal in creation and redemption. Both are the objects of God's mercy and care.

### **3 Language and Jesus Christ**

Finally, a word needs to be said about the maleness of Jesus in relation to this new version. His humanity is clearly taught in the New Testament (at Philippians 2:7 the inclusive word *anthropos*, meaning 'human', appears). But his humanity is not presented at the expense of his maleness. Jesus fits into God's salvation-historical plan as the Messiah, who was a man. At the incarnation Jesus became a man not a woman; he was a Jew not a Gentile, an ancient not a modern ('Language, Gender and God' p 453). This is what has been called 'the scandal of historical particularity'. But the Christ/Adam typology of Romans 5:12-21 makes it clear that Christ was representative of female as well as male, of Gentile as well as Jew. The New Testament presents Jesus as the complete human being. He is clearly male, but he is 'also the one with whom the women of his day and ever since have been able to identify' ('Language, Gender and God' p 453).

To conclude: the new Oxford version cannot be recommended as an accurate, modern translation of the New Testament and Psalms. Although it has made (along with the *NRSV* and the *NIV Inclusive Language Edition*) appropriate changes where the original generic language of the Scriptures was intended to include both men and women, it is not what its editors claim: a 'stunning example of the exciting and challenging changes in our society through language'. In fact, it even retains *archaic* expressions apparently derived from the *NRSV* (cf Phil 1:1; 2:15)!

By its rejection of the scriptural understanding of the Fatherhood of God, the new version compromises our understanding of God's personal nature. And since the revelation of God as Father is central to the revelation of God in Christ, the abandonment of the former leads to a rejection of the Christian understanding of the Trinity. Finally, to understand Jesus as human but not truly man strikes at the heart of his Messiahship and the significance of his place in God's saving plan.

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