

THE DEBATE OVER GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE*

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The third change in the climate [of discussion about translation theory] springs from debates on gender-related issues in Bible translation. The debates have become over-heated and highly politicized, primarily, I think, not because many on the linguistically conservative side insist that those who disagree with them are wrong (after all, that is what debaters do, and each side thinks the other is wrong), but for two other reasons: (a) many on this side insist that their opponents are not only wrong in their linguistic judgments, but that they are compromising the truthfulness of Scripture, and inevitably that gets a lot more attention; (b) the same people are organizing politically, inviting many high-profile evangelical leaders, whether or not they know anything at all about Greek, translation theory, or any language other than English, to sign on to the agenda. Entire denominations have been torn asunder in debate. In quieter moments, one wonders if any conceivable damage that could be done by the NIV or TNIV could be any worse than the division, bitterness, and strife stirred up by those who have made this a dividing issue.

The history of the debate is now so well known that it need not be repeated here. Moreover, some contributions from all sides have been thoughtful and informed, and have advanced the discussion. From the linguistically conservative side, the volume by Vern S. Poythress and Wayne Grudem¹ patiently explains its authors’ position, and deserves careful reading – as do some of the most thoughtful reviews.² On the other hand, those who are, theologically speaking, complementarians (like Grudem and Poythress), but who are convinced, on linguistic grounds, that some revisions of contemporary English translations are mandated by changes in contemporary English, are well represented by Mark Strauss.³

¹ Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000).

² See especially the insightful review by Heinrich von Siebenthal, *Trinity Journal* 23 (2002): 111-118; and the review by Craig L. Blomberg in *Denver Journal*, available at <http://www.gospelcom.net/densem/dj/articles01/0200/0204.html>

³ I am thinking not only of his earlier book, *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), but also the article in the present volume, “Current Issues in the Gender-

This is not the place to re-hash all of the issues that have been raised. My purpose here is to mention a selection of translation issues that the gender-issues debate have put on the table. This is only a small sampling. I include them because they have in some measure changed public perceptions as to the legitimacy of functional equivalence, and so some of them should be aired again before turning, finally, to a review of the limitations of functional equivalence.

(a) One of the themes of the volume by Poythress and Grudem (to which reference has already been made) is that linguistics teaches us that texts carry not only large-scale meanings but countless fine “nuances” (one of their favorite words). In particular, of course, they are interested in the “nuances of meaning” that are lost, they aver, in inclusive translation. They speak of four different levels⁴ on which people approach translation: (i) The “naïve approach,” adopted by the general public (at least the monolingual general public), which assumes that translation is nothing more than a matter of replacing words in one language with words in another language, *ad seriatim*. It assumes that the structures of language are identical, and the semantic ranges of both the source word and of the receptor word are identical. Poythress and Grudem rightly assert that such a view of translation is simply wrong. (ii) The “theoretically informed approach” displays a basic understanding of linguistics with respect to form and function. People working at this level will recognize, for instance, that one Hebrew word in Ezekiel 37 must variously be rendered “breath,” “wind,” and “Spirit” (37:5,9,14 respectively). And it is at this level, Poythress and Grudem assert, that their opponents in the gender-inclusive language debate are operating. (iii) Their third level is the “discerning approach: using native speakers’ intuitive sense of the subtleties.” Here, the native speaker would recognize the three different meanings of the Hebrew word in Ezek. 37, but would also recognize the subtle interplays between them that a reader of a translation will miss. (iv) The fourth and highest level is the “reflective approach,” which analyzes and makes explicit all the subtleties and complexities that the native speaker might well intuit.

Much of this, of course, is correct. But the question is whether an ordinary translation normally *can* get much beyond the second level. If the *meaning* of the one Hebrew word in the

Language Debate: A brief response to Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem,” and several recent papers circulating on the web: “The Gender-Neutral Language of the *English Standard Version* (ESV); “Examples of Improvement in Accuracy of the TNIV over the NIV When Following the Colorado Springs Guidelines.” For these latter see <http://biblepacesetter.org/bibletranslation/files/list.htm>

⁴*The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, the excursus on pp. 82-90.

different verses is variously wind, breath, and Spirit (in English!), those are the words that the translation will have to use (second level). A translation could, doubtless, preserve one English word for the one Hebrew word (say, “wind”), but the preservation of formal equivalence would entail an indefensible semantic loss. Footnotes can of course draw attention to the presence of one Hebrew word behind the three English words (drawing attention to the third level), but most translations will not resort to such niceties except in cases where the meaning is totally lost unless the word-play is grasped. As for analyzing and explaining the subtle connections and complexities (fourth level), that is what commentaries and preachers do.

Of course, it is possible to construct a Bible with various layers of footnotes, which in effect lift the translation pretty close to level 3, with occasional insight at level 4. That is now being done in the rather remarkable NET Bible.⁵ But observe that it is not the translation *per se* that is being lifted to a higher level. Rather, it is the complex system of notes that lifts the discussion. In other words, the NET Bible is not simply a translation, but a translation-cum-explanation-cum-commentary. It is, in effect, a fine crib for those who don’t know their Hebrew and Greek very well. But so far as the actual translation goes, although the notes explain a little more of what goes into the decisions, one is still left with level 2, occasionally rising to level 3.

In other words, Poythress and Grudem rightly explain some rudiments in linguistic theory, and then abuse their own theory by not admitting that basic translations really cannot frequently rise much beyond level 2. While the goal is certainly to preserve as much meaning as possible, translation is an inexact discipline, and something is invariably lost in any basic translation. One is constantly forced to make decisions. That is one of the fundamental reasons why there are commentaries and preachers. But somewhere along the line, Poythress and Grudem start referring to any loss of any meaning at any level as a “distortion” and an “inaccuracy,” finally challenging the integrity of those who admit such things. But *all* translators, including Poythress and Grudem, are inevitably bound up with making choices about the “nuances” they get across. In that sense, *all* translations are driven by choices, and presuppose interpretation, and an assumed grid of what is most importantly preserved.

⁵It is available online at www.netbible.org.

Wallace provides an interesting example of the complexity of competing principles, of the difficulty of making decisions.⁶ While working on the NET Bible, he and his co-translators struggled with the sentence, “I will make you fishers of men” (KJV, RSV, NIV, and many others). The Greek rendered “fishers of men” is *halieis anthrōpōn* and, unwilling to give the impression, to some contemporary readers, that the disciples were to be fishers of adult males only, they were unsatisfied with “men.” Further, although “fishers of men” is a common expression among many church-goers, in fact the word “fishers” is archaic. It is no longer used except in that expression. The NRSV resolves these two problems by rendering the clause, “I will make you fish for people.” But Wallace rightly points out that this sounds as if Jesus will *force* his disciples to “fish for people,” which is scarcely what is meant. Moreover, the shift from noun to verb (“fishers” to “fish”) might be thought to signal a shift from a new occupation to merely a new activity. The NLT and the TEV avoid the first problem, but not the second, with, respectively, “I will show you how to fish for people” and “I will teach you to catch people.” But both “show you” and “teach you” introduce nuances that are not quite faithful, either – and still we are left with verbs. Some have suggested, “I will make you fishermen of people,” which solves several problems, and removes the archaism, though most would acknowledge that the expression sounds thoroughly awkward and cumbersome. Still, it is better than “I will make you fishers of mankind” or “I will make you fishers of humankind,” since these renderings give the impression that the mission includes Gentiles, which is certainly not what the disciples would have understood at that point in redemptive history, and probably not quite what Jesus himself meant at that point in redemptive history either. As Wallace comments, “This text illustrates the clash of translational objectives of accuracy, readability, and elegance. At bottom, we believe that the great value of the NET Bible is its extensive notes that wrestle with such issues, for the footnotes become a way for us to have our cake and eat it too.”⁷ The NET scholars finally opted for “I will turn you into fishers of people,” thus choosing to stick with the archaism because the alternatives struck them as worse.

The point of this discussion is not to commend or condemn the NET decision. It is to point out that the NET scholars implicitly agree with Poythress and Grudem when they

⁶Daniel B. Wallace, “An Open Letter Regarding the Net Bible, New Testament,” *NOT* 14, no. 3 (2000): 1-8, esp. 2-3.

⁷*Ibid.*, 2-3.

acknowledge that translation is an inexact discipline that involves compromise, give and take, and that there are subtleties in the source text that demand the most careful evaluation about how best to preserve them without introducing too many extraneous notions. The difference, of course, is that the NET scholars, recognizing these tensions, work them out the best they can, and by their system of notes provide some indication of their wrestlings and reasonings. By contrast, Poythress and Grudem articulate reasonably sound theory, but every time a decision goes against their favored “nuance,” they accuse their opponents of distorting Scripture and introducing inaccuracies. At some point, one begins to suspect that it is *their* argument that is ideologically driven.

(b) Part of the debate turns on whether there has been sufficient change in English usage in the West, especially in America, to warrant more sensitivity in our translations to gender-inclusive issues. The Foreword to the book by Poythress and Grudem, written by Valerie Becker Makkai, an associate professor in linguistics at the University of Illinois (Chicago), devotes no small part of her space to arguing that the large-scale empirical studies have not been done to provide the hard evidence that would answer such questions. Doubtless she is correct: large-scale empirical studies have not yet been done. But that does not mean that large-scale changes have not taken place; it means, simply, that the large-scale empirical studies have not yet been done to prove with hard numbers that such changes have (or have not) taken place. Rather more scathingly, in their sixth appendix Poythress and Grudem argue for the continuing usability of generic “he.” Certainly it is easy enough to find sectors of society where inclusive language has made relatively little impression. For various reasons I move in quite different sectors, and, although I am relying on what I personally observe rather than on large-scale empirical studies, I cannot help noting that generic “he” is more acceptable in culturally conservative sectors of the country than in culturally liberal sectors. But I have been doing university missions for thirty years, and in such quarters inclusive language dominates. Not to use it is offensive.

Implicitly, of course, Poythress and Grudem recognize that English usage *is* changing, since even the Colorado Guidelines, to which they subscribe, allow for some accommodation in this regard. In fact, a recent essay by Mark Strauss documents how many inclusive-language changes the ESV has introduced to the RSV.⁸ Some are changes from “men” to “people” (e.g.

⁸See his “The Gender-Neutral Language of the *English Standard Version* (ESV)” (note 46 above).

Matt. 5:15). Sometimes, however, the ESV changes “men” to “others”: e.g. Matt. 5:11-12 RSV: “Blessed are you when *men* revile you . . . for so *men* persecuted the prophets who were before you”; ESV: “Blessed are you when *others* revile you . . . for so *they* persecuted the prophets who were before you.” To change “men” to “others” is entirely acceptable to me; it is a bit strange to find it in a translation prepared by those who argue that translation should rise to what they call the third and fourth level. There is certainly some change in “nuance” from “men” to “others” – not least in contemporary culture where the word “others” is increasingly taking on an “overtone,” a “nuance,” of outsider that is not found in “men” (unless, I suppose, written by some “women”!). This change is far from rare: e.g. Matt. 5:16 RSV: “Let your light so shine before men”; ESV: “let your light so shine before others.” Other changes: Matt 7:9 RSV: “what *man* of you”; ESV: “which *one* of you”; Matt. 16:24 RSV: “If any *man* will come after me”; ESV: “If *anyone* will come after me.” Matt. 19:11 RSV “Not *all men* can receive this saying”; ESV: “Not *everyone* can receive this saying.” Matt. 22:16 RSV: “care for no *man*”; ESV: “you do not care about *anyone’s opinion*.”

I am not arguing that any of these translated phrases is wrong, still less wicked; some are better than others. But I am certainly saying that there are changes of “nuance” in such pairs as men/you, any man/anyone, men/others, and so forth – and the presence of such changes in the ESV, where Grudem has had such a strong hand, show that there is an implicit recognition of a change of English usage in the land, and that in countless passages they themselves implicitly recognize that translators *ought* to be aware of contemporary usage, and that in basic translations (i.e. translations without cumbersome footnotes) it is difficult to operate beyond the second level, with occasional forays into the third. They are making such changes – I would not call them “distortions” or “inaccuracies” – all the time, and the changes certainly carry slight differences of “nuance.” But when others make similar changes with respect to the pronoun “he,” Poythress and Grudem condemn them for distorting the Word of God.

(c) In a rather heated review, Poythress insists that Strauss and Carson are not sensitive enough to the fact that “feminists pay attention to generic ‘he’ and load it with connotations because they can thereby use it as a means of detecting ideological resistance. Once offenders are located, they are persuaded to conform, or else labeled insensitive or chauvinistic.” He adds:

They [Carson and Strauss] could not frankly discuss the ideological connotation of generic “he” because it represents a landmine capable of exploding the illusion

that the issue is merely clear communication. The central issue is ideology. It is a modern ideology that makes generic “he” unacceptable even though it is intelligible. Ideological influence heats up the whole issue. Mssrs. Carson and Strauss want people on all sides to cool down. The desire for peace and sanity is admirable. But the ideological conflict will not go away. And God’s Word does not change in order to appease modern feminists’ ideas about language.⁹

Reviewers should be careful about what authors could or “could not frankly discuss,” because they are extending a challenge that constitutes an invitation. I am more than happy to discuss it. Such a discussion could easily take up a chapter, but I shall restrict myself to the following points.

(i) I acknowledge that much of the demand for reform of the English language on this point is from active feminists. Much of the push for change is ideologically driven. I don’t think all of it is, but certainly much of it is.

(ii) But would Poythress want to say that *everything* that feminists and their forebears have introduced is bad? Would he like to disavow, say, universal suffrage? Granted that a fair bit of feminist rhetoric is over-heated and mean-spirited, is it not fair to say that there have been countless abuses of women, and that anything Christians can do to rectify injustice is a good thing, so long as we adhere to biblical perspectives on what justice is? I think that Dr Poythress would agree. But that means, surely, that it is important, in the face of feminist demands, not to tar the entire movement with one broad brush. One must try to assess where, in the light of Scripture, feminist agendas make telling points, where their demands make little difference (from a biblical point of view), and where they seem to fly in the face of Scripture. That is why I (and Strauss too, for that matter) are complementarians and not egalitarians. But that is a far cry from saying that there is nothing to be learned from feminist cries, from feminist writings. It is never wise to build a fence around Torah and try to become more righteous than Torah; it is always wise to discern where one should draw a line, and where one should not draw it. By contrast, linguistic conservatism in the name of warning people against the “slippery slope”¹⁰ discourages Christians from thinking through where the real issues are.

⁹Vern Poythress, “Searching Instead for an Agenda-Neutral Bible,” *World* (21 Nov 1998): 24-25.

¹⁰So Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral*, 186-87.

(iii) Although (as we have seen) the matter is disputed, my best guess is that, regardless of the motivations driving at least a good part of the push for reform of English usage, increasingly that push will prove successful. If so, increasing numbers of people who themselves will not be driven by an active feminist agenda will take on the English usage that was in substantial measure fomented by feminists. In other words, regardless of the reasons for change in the language, the language is changing.¹¹ Implicitly, even ESV acknowledges the point by allowing some changes that accommodate inclusive-language concerns.

(iv) It is true that “the ideological conflict will not go away,” as Poythress puts it. But that is merely another way of saying that the confrontation must take place at the right points. There is, for example, a growing and admirable literature that gives many good reasons why it is inappropriate to change the language of Scripture so as to address God as “our heavenly Mother” or the like. Meanwhile I know not a few complementarians who are becoming unwilling to stand up for their beliefs, not because they are intimidated by feminists, but because they do not want to be associated with the increasingly shrill polemic that so roundly condemns fellow complementarians for not drawing linguistic lines where Poythress and Grudem do!¹²

(v) I entirely agree with Poythress’s last sentence, that “God’s Word does not change in order to appease modern feminists’ ideas about language.” God’s Word, after all, was given in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, and it does not change. But the *translations* change as the receptor languages change, *regardless of the motivations that some entertain for those changes*. The proof, as we have seen, is the ESV itself. Where the line must be drawn is where a translation is domesticating God’s Word such that the truth of Scripture is distorted. Translators may sometimes differ as to when that is happening; certainly we need one another so as to foster honesty and integrity in debate. But the countless minor accommodations and choices that *every* translator has to make in just about *every* sentence, demanded by the fact that the source

¹¹I cannot help remarking, rather wryly, that in the light of the ESV, the argument of Poythress and Grudem sounds a bit like this: “The language is not changing, so we do not need to respond to the demands of inclusive language. But if it is changing, the changes are driven by a feminist agenda, so they are wrong and must be opposed if we are to be faithful to Scripture. Because of the changes, we will make some minor accommodations in our translations, but if others make any other changes, they are compromisers who introduce distortions and inaccuracies, and should be condemned, because changes aren’t necessary anyway!”

¹²I am tempted to say that I have not seen Poythress and Grudem address this point, but I would never be tempted to assert that they “could not frankly discuss” the matter. I’m quite sure they could. And probably will.

language and the receptor language are different, should not be confused with such matters of substance.¹³

(d) In my book on inclusive-language translation, I devoted quite a bit of space to outlining the gender systems of various languages, showing how different they are, in many instances, from the conventions used both in the biblical languages, and in English for that matter. Poythress and Grudem dismiss the argument:

The underlying assumption in this objection is that *only what can easily be conveyed into all languages is worth conveying in English*. When we draw this assumption out into the open, it refutes itself. . . . Of course, we agree that some languages in the world may not have all the capabilities for expression that English does, and in those cases translators will have to do the best they can with those languages. . . . But all of those considerations are simply changing the subject, which is how to translate the Bible into English today.¹⁴

But Poythress and Grudem are ascribing to me views I have never held, and not listening fairly to what I actually wrote. I have never held the view that “only what can easily be conveyed into all languages is worth conveying in English.” Nor did that notion form any part of my assumptions. Rather, my discussion was responding to constantly repeated arguments to the effect that where we have the masculine pronoun in Hebrew, the English must have a masculine pronoun or else we are betraying the Word of God. By showing how varied are gender systems around the world, I demonstrated that in some receptor languages preservation of a masculine pronoun may not even be an option, and that even in the move from Hebrew (or Greek) to English there are differences in their respective gender systems that make this sort of appeal to

¹³The FBA (Forum of Bible Agencies), whose members account for 90% of all Bible translation, has in response to this controversy recently issued a statement about the TNIV: “It is the consensus of the FBA that the TNIV falls within the Forum’s translation principles and procedures” (<http://www.tniv.info/resources/forumrelease.php>). (This, the Forum has been quick to insist, does not constitute an endorsement of the TNIV, not least because the Forum does not endorse any translation.) Similarly, Ellis Deibler, a leading Bible translator and linguist working with Wycliffe, offers a penetrating review of the Colorado Springs Guidelines (<http://www.tniv.info/resources/evaluation/php>). Among other things, he writes, “The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) has issued a paper entitled ‘Translation Inaccuracies in the TNIV: A Categorized List of 904 Examples.’ I should like to make a few comments on its contents. First of all, the word *inaccuracies* is totally misleading. Every one of the examples cited is a case of *differences in opinion on how a certain term ought to be translated in English*, but none of the examples is an inaccuracy. Calling them *inaccuracies* is a gross distortion of the truth. . . .”

formal equivalence not only impossible (in some contexts), but nonsense. I provided many examples. Poythress and Grudem tackle none of them. That is not to say that preservation of formal equivalence is *always* a bad thing, of course; it is to say, rather, that appeal to loyalty and faithfulness toward the Word of God as the ground for preserving formal equivalence is both ignorant and manipulative, precisely because the significance and range of use of a masculine pronoun in Hebrew are demonstrably not the same as the significance and range of use of a masculine pronoun in English. A great deal depends on the gender systems of the respective languages, and then on the individual contexts. Poythress and Grudem appear on occasion to have taken the argument on board, and then when someone disagrees with them over the exact force of a particular context, very quickly they resort to an appeal to Scripture's truthfulness and authority, as if the other party were abandoning it. Popular journalists have merely followed their lead, sometimes with even more inflated rhetoric. This stance, more than anything else, is what has heated up this debate.

(e) Although the ESV (which Poythress and Grudem favor) introduces, as we have seen, hundreds of changes (such as the change from "men" to "others") to accommodate the concerns of inclusive language in our changing culture, Poythress and Grudem are especially resistant to certain *kinds* of changes. They do not seem troubled by changes in nuance or the failure to meet "fourth level" translation theory when it comes to *their* approved changes, but their wrath knows few bounds when the TNIV deploys a plural instead of a singular. For instance, in Revelation 3:20 NIV has, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." The TNIV has: "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in with them and they with me." In one circulated email, Grudem comments, "The *TNIV* mistranslates the masculine singular pronoun *autos*, substituting plural pronouns, thus losing the teaching that Jesus has fellowship with the individual believer. This type of change was made frequently (e.g., Luke 9:23, John 14:23, Romans 14:7)."

What shall we make of this reasoning? Certainly in some passages, the distinction between the singular and the plural is crucial, and should be preserved: that is why generic solutions to translation problems must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. But the significance

¹⁴Poythress and Grudem, *Gender-Neutral*, 202.

of the plural, in many contexts, must not be overstated, or the comprehensiveness of the Greek generic *autos* overlooked. That is one of the reasons why they can sometimes be put in parallel: e.g. “You have heard [plur.] that it was said, ‘Love [sing.] your neighbor and hate [sing.] your enemy [sing.]’ But I tell you: Love [plur.] your enemies [plur.] and pray [plur.] for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:43-44). Jesus’ quotation takes over the singular form used in the LXX, but precisely because that singular form is recognized from the context to have generic force, we recognize that the OT command was not restricted to an individual, but extended to everyone to whom the command applied. Even the singular “enemy” does not mean that believers only have one enemy: the utterance has a proverbial ring, with the force “your enemy, whoever that enemy may be.” Jesus’ commands, in the plural, certainly do not mean that he is removing the responsibility of the individual, mandating only corporate love, without regard for the obligation of the individual disciple to love.

In other words, a plural command or a plural prohibition *may* signal a group activity, but it may not: the context must decide.¹⁵ A prohibition against lust, written in the plural, certainly does not mean that the only thing that is prohibited is group lust (whatever that is). It means, rather, that all within the group addressed face the same prohibition. If the prohibition had been in the singular, but written in a context of moral constraints for a general audience and not to a named individual, then the singular form nevertheless applies to all who fall within the general audience. Yes, there is a small shift in “nuance,” but the application in the two cases is exactly the same.

As in the case with “I will make you [?] fishers [?] of men [?],” decisions have to be taken as to how best to get things across. Grudem prefers “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with *him*, and *he* with me”; TNIV offers “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with *them*, and *they* with me.” But with the best will in the world, it is difficult to see how this change loses “the teaching that Jesus has fellowship with the individual believer,” precisely because the preceding “anyone” is preserved

¹⁵The tendency to read too much into a plural is not restricted to linguistically conservative translators. It is fairly common, and is often theologically driven. For example, many commentators insist that Phil. 1:6 (“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”) says nothing about the security of the individual believer, since the “you” in the quotation is plural: the one who began a good work in them will continue it in the group *as a whole*, without saying anything about the individual Christian (similarly in 2:13).

in both instances.¹⁶ And meanwhile, if for the envisaged readership of TNIV the pronouns “him” and “he” have the effect, whatever the ideology that has produced such changes in linguistic associations, of excluding approximately half of humanity, one could responsibly argue that the TNIV is, for such a readership, a *more accurate, more faithful* translation than the NIV or the ESV. As Blomberg puts it in his review, “It is doubtful if most modern American listeners will interpret ‘blessed are those who . . .’ (whether in the Proverbs or the Beatitudes) as a corporate reference that excludes individual application, but on more than one occasion I have add [*sic*] well-educated adults in churches that use the NIV ask me why the Proverbs were only addressed to men or sons and not applicable to women or daughters.”¹⁷

(f) Other theological errors have been ascribed to the TNIV. For convenience, it may be useful to focus on two passages from the Epistle to the Hebrews.

(i) Hebrews 2:6: NIV: “What is *man* that you are mindful of *him*, the ‘son of man’ that you care for him?”; TNIV: “What are *mere mortals* that you are mindful of them, *human beings* that you care for *them*?” The charge is made that the TNIV obscures the quotation from Psalm 8:4, mistranslates three words by turning them into plurals, and loses the messianic application of “son of man” to Jesus Christ. I have probably said enough about the use of the plural. Whether the TNIV obscures the connection with Psalm 8:4 will depend a bit on how it translates Psalm 8:4, which has not yet been published. The serious charge, in my view, is that this loses the messianic application to Jesus Christ. Yet here, too, the charge is less than fair. The expression “son of man” in the Old Testament *can* have powerful messianic overtones, of course (see Daniel 7:13-14), but that is far from being invariable: about eighty times it is used as a form of address

¹⁶English purists may object to the move from the singular “anyone” to the plural pronouns. Those of us who love the cadences and structures of older English entertain an innate sympathy for that perspective—in precisely the same way that we still prefer “It is I,” preserving the nominative pronoun, even though popular usage has driven the experts to concede that “It’s me” is now grammatically acceptable. On the long haul, usage shapes grammar, whatever the purists say. And in the present case, current usage is increasingly sanctioning the usage of the TNIV in this regard. The examples are legion, but not to be missed is the example provided by Scott Munger in his letter to the editor of *Christianity Today* 46, no. 6 (12 May 2002), 8: “Shaking a baby can cause brain damage that will affect them the rest of their lives”—an example drawn from James Dobson, who, presumably, did not phrase himself this way because he was succumbing to feminist ideology, but because he is in touch with current English usage. Munger’s original letter, though not the CT edited form of it, provided the reference: “Child Welfare and Parental Rights,” CT284/24848, copyright Focus on the Family, July 18, 2000. As Blomberg points out in his review, “[Poythress and Grudem] say nothing about the fact that in spoken English only a tiny handful of people ever still complete a sentence like ‘No one brought _____ book to class’ with any pronoun other than ‘their,’ and that the Modern Language Association has since the late 1980s authorized such usage for standard printed materials” (see n. 45).

¹⁷See n.45.

to the prophet Ezekiel, without any messianic overtone whatsoever. So whether the expression has messianic content or not must be *argued*, not merely asserted. In Psalm 8, the overwhelming majority of commentators see the expression as a gentilic, parallel to the Hebrew for “man” in the preceding line. (Incidentally, in Hebrew gentilic nouns are often singular in form but plural in referent – which may also address the indignation over the shift to the plural.) In the context of the application of Psalm 8:4 to Jesus in Hebrews 2, one should at least recognize that the *nature* of the application to Jesus is disputed. Scanning my commentaries on Hebrews (I have about forty of them), over three-quarters of them do not think that “son of man” here functions as a messianic title, but simply as a gentilic, as in Psalm 8. If this exegesis is correct (and I shall argue elsewhere and at length that it is), Jesus is said to be “son of man” not in function of the messianic force of that title in Daniel 7:13-14, but in function of his becoming a human being – which all sides recognize is one of the major themes of Hebrews 2. If one wishes to take the opposite tack – that “son of man” here is a messianic title – there are competent interpreters who have taken that line. But it is *not* a matter of theological orthodoxy, since understanding the text one way does not mean that the translator (or the commentator) is *denying* the complementary truth, but is merely asserting that the complementary truth is not in view here.

One could even imagine a more subtle argument, one with which I would have some sympathy: it is possible to see in “son of man” in Psalm 8:4 a gentilic, rightly preserved in Hebrews 2, and then wonder if, owing to the frequency of “son of man” as a messianic title in the Synoptic Gospels, early Christian ears might have picked up an additional overtone, without reading a messianic interpretation into the entire passage. That is possible, though hard to prove. The possibility could be accommodated by a footnote cue after “human beings” in the TNIV, the footnote itself reading “Lit. *son of man*.” But at the level of actual translation, it is difficult to find legitimate reasons for condemning the TNIV rendering in such absolutist terms.

(ii) Hebrews 2:17: NIV: “For this reason he had to be made like his *brothers* in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people”; TNIV: “For this reason he had to be made like his *brothers and sisters* in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest. . . .” This, it is said, is doubly bad: in this context, the Greek word cannot mean “brothers and sisters,” since Jewish high priests were exclusively male, and of course Jesus

himself is male; and worse, the notion that Jesus was “made like his . . . sisters in every way” is unthinkable, or conjures up the specter of androgyny, which the text certainly does not support.

Once again, however, the charges are easy to make, yet not quite fair.

First, even the NIV’s translation, “brothers in every way,” must be read in its context. This does not mean that Jesus must be like each “brother” in every conceivable way: as short as all of them, as tall as all of them, as old or young as all of them, as married or unmarried as all of them, as heterosexual or homosexual as all of them, and so forth. The context imposes a couple of strong foci. Already verse 14 states, “Since the children [mentioned in the previous verse] have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death. . . .” In other words, Jesus must become thoroughly human; he must take on ‘flesh and blood,’ and in that sense be like his “brothers in every way.” But if the focus is on being human, then for Jesus to become “like his brothers and sisters in every way” is not contextually misleading. The second constraint is found in verse 16. There we are told that “it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants.” It is surely a cause for wonder and praise that there has arisen a Redeemer for fallen human beings, though not for fallen angels. But now the human focus becomes narrowed by the historical context of Jesus’ incarnation: he did not become a generic human being, but a descendant of Abraham. The purpose of his coming was that “he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (2:17) – which surely shows that his identification is with “the people,” and not only with males (unless we are prepared to argue that only the males had atonement made for them?).

Second, all sides recognize now, I think, that sometimes Greek *adelphoi* can refer to a crowd of both men and women, making the rendering “brothers and sisters” *in some contexts* admissible, especially if being read by some who think that “brothers” automatically excludes women. But despite the connections with all of humanity, and then with all of the Jewish race (and not males only) that the context affords, it remains true that Jewish high priests were invariably men. The TNIV expression does not deny that point, of course, but it does not clarify it, either. Jesus is not like a Jewish high priest in *every* respect, anyway: this epistle will go on to show many parallels between Jesus and Jewish high priests (e.g. 8:3ff.), but also quite a few differences. The point here is not that Jesus is like a Jewish high priest “in every way” but that he is like those he comes to redeem “in every way.” Still, the TNIV is vaguely awkward – though

whether that awkwardness is worse than the awkwardness that is felt by those for whom “brothers” is a restrictive expression may be debated.

Third, in any case the charge that the TNIV text says Jesus is “made like his . . . sisters in every way,” opening up the possibility of androgyny, is inept. The dots of the ellipsis are important, because the expression “brothers and sisters” is a unified pair that must be taken together, like “flesh and blood.” Verse 14 should not be rendered, “Since the children have . . . blood, he too shared in their humanity” – for it is the *paired* expression “flesh and blood” that indicates humanness.

Other passages have been highlighted by Poythress and Grudem and by journalists who have followed them, but they are, quite frankly, no more convincing than these. I am not always persuaded that the TNIV has taken the best option. But that is rather different from saying that the TNIV is theologically compromised.¹⁸

There is an array of other matters that could be raised. Most of them have little to do with translation theory in general or functional equivalence in particular, so I must not pause long to explore them here. Still, I am uncertain why such animus has been raised against the NIV/TNIV, and not against, say, TEV, NLT, and a host of others. *World* magazine has invested a lot of

¹⁸Perhaps I should mention one more criticism of the TNIV. I relegate it to this footnote, because it has nothing directly to do with the inclusive-language debate, which is the subject of this section, though it illustrates the kind of criticism that is at issue. In a circulated e-mail, Grudem criticizes the TNIV for its rendering of John 19:12: NIV: “Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but *the Jews* kept shouting, ‘If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar . . .’”; TNIV: “Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but *the Jewish leaders* kept shouting, ‘If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. . . .’” The charge is that by inserting the word “leaders” the TNIV arbitrarily absolves other Jews from the responsibility for Jesus’ death (with a lot of references then provided). But it has long been shown that in John’s Gospel, the word *Ioudaioi* can variously refer to Jews generically, to Judeans (i.e. to Jews living in Judea), and to Jewish leaders. A great deal depends on context. That is not how *we* use the word “Jews,” but it was how the first-century word was used, at least at the hands of some authors. Again, then, Poythress is appealing to formal equivalence. But in this case, no less than in the debate over inclusive language, there is a cultural component that has arisen during the past century. We live this side of the Holocaust, and a great deal of sensitivity has arisen regarding anti-Semitism. Some of the literature goes over the top, trying to make out that *no* Jew had *any* responsibility for the death of Jesus, that it was all the plot of nasty Romans (who aren’t around to defend themselves). But thoughtful Christians will admit, with shame, that more than a few Christians *have* been guilty of anti-Semitism (in the same way that, even when feminist literature goes over the top, thoughtful Christians will admit that more than a few Christians *have* been guilty of abusing women). Most emphatically this does *not* give us the right to change what the Bible actually says, as if the agendas of contemporary culture could ever have the right to domesticate Scripture. But this *ought* to make us eager to avoid miscommunication, to appear to be saying things to some readers and hearers that we do not intend to say, and which the text is certainly not saying (whether misogyny or anti-Semitism, or anything else). Some of the clarifications will be in the hands of the preacher and teacher, of course. Nevertheless, I would argue robustly that precisely *because* I am committed to accurate translation, to render *Ioudaioi* invariably by “Jews” is to translate poorly, both because there is a great deal of evidence that the referent is often more restricted than that, and also because the failure to make some of those

polemic in critical comments about the money that is involved in the NIV and TNIV – but that is true, of course, of all Bible publishers, and even of the publishers of *World*, who doubtless sell more copies when a debate heats up.¹⁹ Would it not be good to recognize that there are people of good will on both sides of this debate? Both sides are trying to be true to Scripture, and to make their understandings known; and both make money in the process.²⁰

restrictions clear (as they were, implicitly, to the first readers) is to invite charges of anti-Semitism that are as unfair as they are unnecessary.

¹⁹It is possible that some of the ire directed against the publishers of the NIV and the TNIV stems from two related facts: (1) The NIV is the closest thing to a “standard” English Bible for Evangelicals, so any modifications have the potential for upsetting a huge number of people. (2) Some journalists are claiming that by publishing the TNIV the publishers are going back on the promise *not* to change the NIV. Without being privy to private discussions, I would make two observations. *First*, since its initial publication the NIV has undergone many minor changes. An ongoing committee assesses criticisms, changes in contemporary linguistic usage, and charges of mistakes. An updated NT appeared in 1978 (when the OT was added to the 1973 NT) and a revised edition of the whole Bible was released in 1984. Earlier editions were no longer printed. That is one of the reasons why the NIV has retained a contemporary feel. *Second*, it was the anticipation that the next round of changes would include more sensitivity to inclusive-language issues that propelled the eruption a few years ago. The Bible of forty million people was being “changed,” and it was easy to rally indignation. Realistically (in retrospect!), doubtless the changes being contemplated were more numerous and more substantive than earlier changes, so the outrage, though largely misinformed, was understandable. *Third*, as far as I am aware, the publishers, under pressure, eventually promised to make no more changes to the NIV, including changes of an inclusive-language sort. What this means, of course, is that the NIV will eventually become dated. But nowhere did the publishers promise, so far as I am aware, never to produce *any* translation that would be sensitive to issues of gender in contemporary usage. I do not see how they could. But I thought at the time, when I read the published reports, that the careful wording of the publishers, which left them plenty of room to publish inclusive-language versions under some rubric other than the NIV, was going to raise hackles when they did so, and many charges of deceit. And that, of course, is exactly what has happened: see, for instance, the article “Hypocritical Oath,” in *World* 17, no. 9 (9 Mar 2002), and related essays in *World* 17, no. 7.

²⁰Because my views have been repeatedly dismissed on the grounds (it is said) that I was a translator for the NIV, and therefore benefit financially from my arguments, I suppose I had better set the record straight. I did a bit of *pro bono* consultation for the NIV, making comments on the translation of one New Testament book, about thirty years ago, at the request of Dr Palmer. I was not paid a cent. I have worked on a couple of other (non-NIV-related) translations. Why this should invalidate my arguments any more than the fact that Dr Grudem worked on the ESV should invalidate his, I have no idea.