

Introduction

By Rev. Joseph Dearborn

If there is one word to describe the process of developing inclusive language readings, it is transformational. The transformation we have experienced in our work on these readings challenged us to confront the limits of our language and to ask what baggage is attached to our proclamation scripture. We have been challenged to consider how we think and speak about God and how our concepts influence the way we treat other people. We also have had to consider whether modern renderings of sacred scriptures present modern sexist biases, in addition to biases of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean cultures. In the course of our work, we developed new ideas about the role of sacred scripture in liturgy.

The comments and criticisms of those who have used the Inclusive Lectionary texts have greatly benefited us. For example, in September 1991, we sent a questionnaire to everyone who has used the Inclusive Lectionary Texts, asking for information on use, content, and presentation. We received more than 200 written responses. We considered the feedback carefully and the improvements in these volumes reflect the dialogue.

We are frequently asked whether, after changing the language, we can still call what we are producing “scripture.” Our answer is that we are not changing scripture. We are developing ways to proclaim sacred scripture in a nonsexist, nonclassist manner within the context of the Liturgy of the Word. To do this, we change the forms of language that reflect and perpetuate sexist, heterosexist, and classist concepts.

We challenge the traditional ways of speaking about God. Traditional Western religious language calls God “Father” and Jesus “Lord.” Our intention is to recover the sense of the text and express that sense in a manner that facilitates immediate application of the Word to the experience of the listener. To that end, we correct our own interpretations by referring them to what scripture scholars have to say about the texts.

This process begins with looking through the standard translations of scripture for sexist and classist forms and attitudes. We compare translations, consult commentaries, and go back to the Hebrew and Greek to uncover meanings. Realizing that any translation is an interpretation, we do not limit ourselves to the standard translations, but also look at other inclusive language texts and style forms to understand how others have worked through the problems of sexism in scripture. We go over each text line by line in order to ensure a faithful, yet nonsexist rendering in both content and style.

The most difficult problem we address is what can be done about the sexism in scripture without destroying the actual text. Several guiding principles have emerged from our work on this problem. One principle is to determine whether it is the linguistic convention used that expresses a sexist bias, or whether the text itself is sexist in its meaning. In all circumstances, we seek to recover the expression’s meaning within the context in which it is written, without perpetuating the sexism. To accomplish this, we rely on the Greek text as well as commentaries.

An example of the way we recover meaning from a sexist phrase is in our rendering of “Whore of Babylon” or “Great Prostitute” in the book of Revelation (Rev.

17:1-18). In the standard translations, the word “prostitute” is used to translate a word that, to the culture of the Mediterranean world of the time, was closely related to idolatrous defilement. In our culture, the term implies sex for sale, and is usually associated with women. The sense of the term in scripture has more to do with the idolatry of emperor worship and cultic practices than with prostitution. We believe “Great Idolater” comes closer to the actual sense of the text.

Another principle we use is to distinguish between passages that exclude women and passages that actively villainize them. Each of these instances has been handled on its own terms. The role of women in the economy of salvation has long been relegated to the sacristies of salvation history. By attending to recent feminist scripture scholarship, we attempt to recover women’s active participation in salvation history. In genealogies, for example, we include both spouses to emphasize that ancestral lineage is not merely passed on by the male. Thus, we speak of Sarah and Abraham instead of Abraham alone; we pair Rebecca and Isaac; and we recognize Leah and Rachel as well as Jacob. When this cannot be done, we stress the actual lineage instead of the male role in the lineage. We also emphasize those times when scripture employs feminine imagery for divine or spiritual beings. In Wisdom literature, we retain the ancient feminine images.

Scriptural language specifically referring to God presents a major problem. Our approach is to try to maintain a personal form. Personal references in common speech have constant recourse to gender-specific words—necessarily so, and for the most part, inoffensively. In the case of scripture, we make our choices as the occasion warrants.

Where the usage is descriptive, we use “*Most High, Most High God, Almighty* and *Sovereign One* in place of the sexist and classist form *Lord*. Where *Lord* is a form of address, we use *YHWH* in Hebrew Scripture readings and either *Rabbi* or *Teacher* in Christian Scripture readings about Jesus’ public ministry. We use *Abba* for *Father*, where it expresses a close, familial relationship. We also used the phrase *Loving God* as a substitute for *Father*. There are several other options that we discussed but did not use. In the text of the “Our Father,” *Imma God, Our Mother, Our Father, or Loving God* can be used as substitutes for our rendering of *Abba God*.

In referring to Jesus, we use *Only Begotten, God’s Own, and Eternally Begotten* in place of *Son of God*. *Son of Man* is a difficult problem because it has so many different shades of meaning. We try to capture the prophetic or apocalyptic connotations of the phrase. We use *Chosen One* when it seems to refer to Jesus’ self-understanding of his prophetic mission, and *Promised One* when Jesus appears to be speaking about his self-identity as an apocalyptic figure. Another instance of *son of man* is found in the book of Ezekiel. In this book, God is addressing humankind, so we use *mere mortal*.

The title *Lord*, especially when it refers to Jesus, is hard to replace because it is confessional—that is, to call Jesus Lord is to both recognize in him a divinity and to make a commitment to him. To confess that Jesus is Lord is to confess, for example, Caesar is not Lord. To avoid sexist and classist connotations, we use substitutes for *Lord* that are meaningful in our own confessing of Jesus, such as *Sovereign, Savior, and Jesus Reigns*.

Throughout the readings, we have changed “kingdom,” which has classist connotations, to refer simply to government and its rulers. In the case of kingdom of God, however, there is more than one meaning; thus, several translations are needed. In the gospel of Matthew, *kingdom of God* means an active state of being, and we use reign of

God or reign of Heaven. Other than its use in Matthew, *kingdom of God* is a state of relationship, so we use *kindom of God*.

Thank you for using these texts, and for all your efforts to make the church a community that welcomes diversity while witnessing that in Christ, all are one. We recognize that any rendering of scripture should be undertaken with the utmost discretion and humility. Beyond that, our only defense for our errors or arbitrary decisions—whether detectable or hidden—is that the texts to which our labors are addressed speak of mysteries beyond the reach of any translator. We hope that we are respectful of these mysteries, which will outlast any attempt to capture them in words.

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