

*Personhood and the translation
of sacred texts by women:
Theology, culture, cooperation*

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person(hood)
translation
sacred texts
women

Translation and religion

The biblical story of the tower of Babel, in the Book of Genesis 11:1-9

Sacred texts, or holy texts, have traditionally embodied core values of cultures, guiding beliefs and behavior and influencing not only the lives of isolated individuals but also of very large numbers of people, shaping the history of entire nations and continents, redrawing boundaries of states, and influencing cultural production.

‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ / ‘religious’ (of, relating to, pertaining to, or devoted to religious beliefs or observances; Latin etymology, *religio*, from *religare*, which means ‘linking’ or ‘binding fast’ BUT, according to Cicero, from *relegere*, ‘read again’)

Translation is a means to generate religious knowledge.

“Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.”

“The Translators to the Reader”, preface of the King James Bible (1611, reproduced in Burke 2009: 224)

The translation of sacred texts raises a number of sensitive issues; it questions the nature of translation itself, and even its possibility.

Sacred text translation has accompanied the development of reflection on translation throughout the ages, challenging scholars and practitioners.

According to Ladmiral (1990: 122), biblical translation—and, by extension, the translation of holy texts from all religions—functions as a paradigm for translation in general.

Women, translation, religion

Who translates religious and, especially, sacred texts? For whom?

While translation has often been associated with the feminine (Chamberlain 1988), throughout the centuries very few women have translated within the realm of the holy. Why?

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- why didn't / do / don't (more) women translate or retranslate religious and, especially, sacred texts?
- experiences of translation, collaborative translation, editing, publication, teaching, researching
- challenges and opportunities
- translation strategies (including the question of language)
- conceptualisations of the divine
- experiences translating texts from different religions and working in different parts of the world and periods
- translation and the body, the body in translation
- the reception of translations by women
- translations by women and the advent of contemporary media

Conceptualisations of the divine within Judaism and Christianity

- personal God
- predominantly male imagery
- the Creation story
- from a theological perspective: the divine is unfathomable, indescribable, beyond categories such as 'male' or 'female'

Person

- human, individual
- the body of a human being (*archaic*) or its appearance
- the personality of a human being (the self)
- an assumed character (a mask)
- one that is recognised by law as the subject of rights and duties
- in grammar, one of the relations a subject may have to a verb
- in Christianity, one of the three members of the Godhead
- the unitary individuality of Christ, uniting the divine and human natures

Translators, translations

Mary Phil Korsak, *At the Start: Genesis Made New*, 1993

YHWH Elohim made a swoon fall upon the groundling (adam)
it slept

He took one of its sides
and closed up the flesh in its place

YHWH Elohim built the side

he had taken from the groundling (adam) into woman (isha)

He brought her to the groundling (adam)

The groundling (adam) said

This one this time
is bone from my bones
flesh from my flesh

This one shall be called wo-man (isha)
for from man (ish)

she has been taken this one (2,21-23)

Smith, Julia. 1876. *Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments: translated literally from the original tongues*. Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company.

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. 1985. *The Woman's Bible*. Introduction by Dale Spender, Part 1 first published in 1895, Part 2 published in 1898. New York: European Publishing Company, and Edinburgh: Polygon Books.

Margaret Moers Wening and Naomi Janowitz , the *Siddur Nashim*, 1976

Let the immense Name of G-d become great and holy in the world which She has created. May She establish her Kingdom, give birth to salvation, and bring near Her Messiah, within your life and within your days and within the life of all Israel—suddenly and soon, and say, Amen.

Let Her great Name be blessed in this world and in the world of worlds.

Blessed and glorified, exalted and honored, magnified and praised is the Name of the Holy Blessed One, whose glory transcends all praises, songs, and blessings that can be rendered unto Her. And say, Amen.

Concluding remarks

The discussion is about much more than “old terms” (Plaskow 1987: 39).

A deeper dimension about the nature of the divine and about human life and interrelationships has opened up and involves the recording, the passing down of the experiences of women *to complement* those of men while, in the process, continuing to shape a living spirituality and theology.

There need be no resentment or trying to get the upper hand.