

From the marvels of the universe (yesterday's post) to the use of inclusive language in Bible translations (today's post) - easy! All in one step.

The Psalm I quoted yesterday presents a problem to Bible translators who want to render the text to include both men and women. Here is what Psalm 8 says in the (non-inclusive-language) King James, as quoted yesterday:

³When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

⁴What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

⁵For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

⁶Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:

When the New Revised Standard Version came out in 1989, it altered the translation by making it more inclusive, as follows:

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

As is true of all things biblical, different readers will have (and did have!) different reactions to the new translation. I actually rather like it, but some of you may not. You'll notice that in v. 5 they have changed humans' elevation to a status slightly lower than "angels" (King James) to a status slightly lower than "God." That's a bold change. But in fact...

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But in fact the Hebrew word is indeed the standard word ELOHIM, which is normally rendered "God." It could mean "gods," though (it's a plural word), and if that's what it means here, then it would mean something like "divine beings," i.e., angels. Translators could reasonably go either way with it.

My main interest, though, is with the inclusive language - which I think is done pretty well. The BIG problem is one you might not expect. It is that the verses get quoted much later in

the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, as referring specifically to Christ (the “man” and the “son of man”), in the context of an argument that next to God, Christ is superior to all things, including the angels. Here is the passage from Hebrews 8 in the King James Version.

⁵ For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak.

⁶ But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that thou art mindful of him? or the son of man that thou visitest him?

⁷ Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honour, and didst set him over the works of thy hands:

⁸ Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him.

⁹ But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.

¹⁰ For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

The NRSV translators wanted to render the passage inclusively, as was their wont, and so revised it to read as follows.

⁵ Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. ⁶ But someone has testified somewhere,

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,^[b]

or mortals, that you care for them?^[c]

⁷ You have made them for a little while lower^[d] than the angels;

you have crowned them with glory and honor,^[e]

⁸ subjecting all things under their feet.”

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹ but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

This inclusive rendering more or less “works,” just as it did in the Old Testament passage, but with one rather major problem. In fact, it’s an enormous problem, that for some reason the NRSV translators didn’t see or at least didn’t have adequate concern for. In the book of Hebrews the Psalm is being taken as a messianic prophecy, a reference specifically to Christ. Not to all humans/mortals. When Psalm 8 says “what is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him” and indicates that “man” was made for a little while “lower than the angels” - the book of Hebrews takes this to refer specifically to Jesus, who was, as an incarnate being, made lower than angels for a little while.

That’s what Hebrews is trying to say. But the NRSV mistranslates the passage so that the reader can’t see (very easily) that this is what it is trying to say. By rendering “man...son of man” as “human beings...mortals” - as was done in the Old Testament (where the rendering was appropriate because it really was referring to humans in general) - the NRSV translators have robbed the passage of its Christological significance (since now it no longer refers just to the one man who was made lower than angels, Christ, but - as in the OT - to humans in general). The NRSV translators have in effect undermined the Christological point of the entire passage, through their inclusive rendering.

Translation is an incredibly hard job, and on the whole I think the NRSV translators have produced a superb translation. But in this instance I’m afraid they have come up short.[/private]



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