

ISSUES OF RACE AND GENDER IN BIBLE TRANSLATION: INTERFACING WITH SPIRITUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

In expressing his profound dis-ease or discomfort back in the early third century A.D. with concerted efforts by some in his day to blend the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its roots pointing to Jerusalem and centered in Jesus, the Jew and Christian Messiah, with the various Greek philosophical traditions of Plato, Aristotle and others centered in Athens, Tertullian (ca. 195-220 AD), the Afro-Roman Latin-speaking lawyer-turned-Christian theologian, wondered out loud: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

And that’s a question, perhaps, which my title, when seen within the context of our Symposium today, might generate as well, to wit, What have issues of race and gender in Bible translation to do with spirituality and professionalism—and within a Caribbean context at that?

Well, in terms of gender, I think that it can readily be established that, indeed, there is a profound relationship since, in my considered opinion, Lorna Daniel is correct in pointing out in her article which appeared in an earlier issue of *Caribbean Perspectives* that: “The Caribbean Community can be viewed as a Christian community”—a community which, by its very nature, attaches great importance to the Bible and, therefore, to issues of spirituality. Daniel continues by observing, and rightly so, that: “The issues of gender are quite obvious in all our churches” (page 11).

In addition, I can readily lay hold of four excerpts, two of which are derived from a 2005 publication, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. On page 2, Sandra Schneiders, one of the contributors to that volume, observes that:

“The contemporary understanding of Christian spirituality differs significantly from that which preceded it in the modern period. First, the emphasis is on the *holistic* (emphasis hers) involvement of the person in the spiritual quest which is itself understood holistically. Thus, the body as well as the spirit, gender and social location as well as human nature, emotion as well

as mind and will, relationships with others as well as with God, sociopolitical commitment as well as prayer and spiritual practices, are involved in the spiritual project.”

And on page 5 of the same source, she continues:

“Spiritualities have long been distinguished by state of life or vocation, for example, marital/religious or clerical/lay....In recent years the determining influence of gender (masculine/feminine) and/or sexual orientation (hetero-/homosexual) has become a focus of particular attention.”

As for the third and fourth excerpts, allow me to turn to two relatively recent publications of Fortress Press—one published in 2007, namely, *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* and the other in 2010, to wit, *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora*.

As a contributor to the former volume, Mitzi Smith, an African-American woman, writes:

“An African American [biblical] hermeneutic [or interpretation] will interrogate texts and interpretation by asking, ‘How does this text speak directly or indirectly to the struggle of being black in America?’” She continues: “God’s intervention in history, through God’s Spirit and through Jesus, reminds us that ...God stands firmly on the side of the oppressed....This does not mean that we erase the history of our [enslaved] ancestors. But challenged and ignited by that history, we embrace the present possibility of full emancipation in Jesus Christ without the stigma of color prejudice, biases, and shackles of the past” (pages 18-19).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Smith goes on to declare that “black men must learn to treat black women as equals in every aspect of black life” (page 19). And that would include the churches as a domain as well. In fact, Carter G. Woodson, the late great Professor of History at Howard University, along with others, reminds us that the oldest and most influential institution in the African diaspora is not the family or the academy *per se* but the Black church. As an institution, the Black church has helped many of our displaced, dispersed, despised and dispossessed ancestors hone their leadership skills and improve their levels of literacy. It is little wonder, then, that the early providers of education in the Caribbean, before governments became fully

involved in the business of schooling, were the mission schools themselves. Such “FBI’s” (or Faith-based Institutions) would include Northern Caribbean University in Jamaica where I am currently working or the University of the Southern Caribbean in Trinidad from which I graduated some years ago. Others which I chose to mention in the article which appeared in January of this year in *Caribbean Perspectives* include the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology in Jamaica and the Jamaica Theological Seminary. And further afield, we can readily include some of the more “Ivy League” schools on the North American mainland as well such as Duke, Harvard, Princeton, Yale and the University of Chicago—all of which, to repeat, started off as “FBI’s” themselves.

And finally, let me refer to the last source which I mentioned above, to wit, *The Africana Bible*. In that volume, I had reason to declare, as one of the contributors, that:

“At the height of missionary activity among slaves in the Caribbean, it was not uncommon to use the King James Version [celebrating its 400th birthday this year, incidentally] to teach and preach a self-submissive [spirituality and] piety meant to keep the slaves accepting of their lot in life. This version derived further authority since it spoke in the language of the slave master and reflected the cultural tendencies of colonial society” (page 4).

In light of the foregoing, it is hardly surprising, perhaps, that Sugirtharajah, the Sri Lankan biblical scholar teaching at the University of Birmingham, UK, refers to the KJV (also known as the King James Bible or the KJB in Britain) as: “England’s greatest cultural product” (see *The Postcolonial Bible*, Sheffield Academic Press, page 18.)

BIBLE TRANSLATION: A COMPLEX ENDEAVOUR

As an interdisciplinary exercise, Bible translation is a complex academic endeavor and articulates with disciplines such as biblical studies, linguistics, cultural studies, feminist/womanist studies, translation studies, studies in orality/aurality, studies in performance and theater, and studies in postcolonialism. And as an exercise which, heretofore, has been dominated by those who have tended to be both male in gender and Caucasian in colour, it is not in the least surprising, perhaps, that there have been, especially of late, clarion and consistent calls for a much greater sensitivity to issues of both sexism and racism as two somewhat related pathologies which, sometimes unwittingly, have tended to mark and mar the work of Bible translation.

Interestingly, an article of mine which appeared in 1995 in the *Journal of Religion and Theology*—published by the University of South Africa—and dealing with issues of racism comes right after one by Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza of Harvard University Divinity School dealing with

sexism. And as a foremost authority on feminist biblical studies worldwide, perhaps it is not surprising that, in her article, Schussler-Fiorenza calls for a much more anti-sexist reading and interpretational appropriation of Scripture.

And for those of us who share a common African ancestry, be we Africans by birth or hailing from the globally dispersed and diverse African diaspora, our settled conviction is that there is a dire need, as well, to abandon the dominant eurocentric paradigm and, as Ngugi wa Thion'go, the eminent Kenyan writer contended some years ago, embrace even more fully the afrocentric alternative. Reflecting on his own experience in his 1993 publication, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, for example, he writes:

“I was horrified when I returned [from the University of Leeds, England] to Kenya in 1967 to find that the Department of English [at the University of Nairobi] was still organized on the basis that Europe was the centre of the universe. Europe, the centre of our imagination? Ezekiel Mphahlele from South Africa, who was there before me, had fought hard to have some African texts introduced into the syllabus. Otherwise the department was still oblivious to the rise of new literatures in European languages in Africa let alone the fact of the long existing tradition of African-American literature and that of Caribbean peoples. The basic question was: From what base did African people look at the world? Eurocentrism or Afrocentrism” (page 8)?

And writing from the diaspora, we have, among others, Cain Hope Felder, Professor at Howard University Divinity School, making mention of afrocentrism or afrocentricity (used interchangeably) in some of his own writings as well. Author of the 1989 groundbreaking volume, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family* and editor of a collaborative work with other African American biblical scholars, namely, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Felder contributes a chapter to the 1993 volume entitled, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, volume 2. In his chapter, “Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism, and Biblical Interpretation”, he writes:

“An examination of the term Afrocentricity will make clear what I and other Black Biblical scholars have found helpful in correcting the effects of the cultural ideological conditioning to which we have all been subjected. Afrocentricity is the idea that the land mass that the ancient Romans routinely called Africa and the peoples of African descent must be understood as having made significant contributions to world civilization as prospective subjects within history rather than being regarded as merely passive objects of historical distortions. Afrocentrism

means reestablishing Africa as center of value and source of pride without in any way demeaning other people and their historic contributions to human achievement. The term...refers to a methodology that reappraises ancient biblical traditions, their exegetical history in the West, and their allied hermeneutical implications..., [demonstrating] that we have arrived at a new stage in biblical interpretation.”

In light of what I have just said, then, perhaps it is appropriate that I now pose the following question, namely, what are biblical scholars saying and suggesting these days in so far as a more gender-sensitive and afrocentric focus and fixation on Bible translation is concerned?

In response and by way of illustration only, I will make use of three passages drawn from the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament and three drawn from the New. From the latter, I will deal with issues as they relate to the whole pathology of sexism and from the former, with those as they relate to the whole pathology of racism—and in that order.

THE PATHOLOGY OF SEXISM

1) **Romans 16: 7**

In this text, the apostle Paul, writing in Greek, makes mention of Andronicus and a fellow woman apostle by the name of Junia. However, in a number of the early Greek manuscripts, we find that a number of the male scribes responsible for copying and transmitting the biblical text changed Junia into *Junias*, supposedly a shortened form of the male name, Junianus . As far as we can tell, however, this gender change was effected because of the implausible assumption made by the male scribes that there couldn't have been a female apostle in Paul's time—during the mid-first century AD when he wrote to Christians in Roman at the seat of Empire. Therefore, Paul must have been referring to a man. Rather than transmitting the text, as is, male scribes allowed their patriarchal and chauvinistic assumptions to cloud and color their judgment. Further research has shown, however, that the female name, Junia, occurs more than 250 times in Greek and Latin inscriptions which have been found in Rome alone and that the male name, Junias, has never been found there! It is for this reason, then, that a number of reputable scholars of the New Testament now concede that the most natural way to interpret the two names within the phrase in question is as husband (Andronicus) and wife (Junia)—thus identifying Junia, a woman, as one of the apostles and, therefore, one of the leaders in the early church.

2) 1 Corinthians 14: 34-36

In this passage, the apostle Paul, again writing in Greek, had reason to call for better decorum in the gathered assembly of the church. And to do so, he counsels the *gynaikes* (from which we derive, gynecology, in English, for example) to remain silent in church so as not to disturb or be unduly disruptive of the flow of the liturgy or the church service itself. Semantically, *gynaikes* can be translated as either women or wives depending on the context within which the word is employed. When used within the context of husbands, for example, the word clearly must be translated as wives. This is what we find in Ephesians 5: 21-33 where the word is correctly translated in all English Bibles as wives—as it is also in Colossians 3: 18. Remarkably, however, all translations of the Bible in English and other Western languages such as Dutch, French and Spanish (languages all spoken in the Caribbean) have the apostle Paul counseling all women (*gynaikes*) to keep silent in church. In some circles, this injunction is then used by not a few (conservative) churchmen as justification for imposing a “gag order” on all women in church—especially when it comes to the exercise of their God-given leadership gifts and responsibilities therein. However, a more careful perusal of the passage clearly indicates that Paul is addressing his counsel only to wives or *married* women—not to all women! This means that neither singles nor widows, for example, are in his purview. In 1 Corinthians 14:35, the apostle clearly advises such silenced women to confer with their husbands at home. And one does not have to be a “space shuttle scientist” to figure out that it’s only *wives* or married women who have husbands with whom they can consult or confer at home. It therefore means that the passage should be translated to refer only to wives or married women—not to *all* women. And having done that, the challenge then is to refrain, in our contemporary setting, from insisting that all unmarried women are to be allowed to express freely their leadership and other gifts in the church but to exclude married women from doing so under the pretext that “the Bible says so”. We ought to be reminded that God has given us not only a heart with which to love but also a mind with which to think. That is, we are to critically appropriate Scripture in ways which will further enhance and facilitate full human and spiritual flourishing of both genders—both women and men. In our time, both women and men should be allowed to share, to a much greater measure, in both the joys and the duties of the church. After all, especially for those of us who are of African descent, we do not uncritically subscribe to the view that slavery is still in keeping with the divine will for us simply because “the Bible says so”—

as recorded in the New Testament where we find slaves being admonished to be obedient to their masters. That is what we find, for example, in both Ephesians 6: 5-9 and Colossians 3: 18. Incidentally, being a reference to slaves within the larger first century multiracial and multicultural Greco-Roman world of Paul and others and given the *modus operandi* associated with the ongoing slave trade within the Empire at the time, it would have meant that the mention of slaves in these two letters (i.e., Ephesians and Colossians) would clearly have been referring to *Caucasian* slaves as well and not only to slaves of either African or Asian extraction.

3) **I Timothy 2:9**

In the New Testament, this text, along with 1 Peter 3:3, more than any other, has been used as justification for insisting that Christian women should dress modestly—especially in church. For some (especially ultraconservative) male translators, interpreters and preachers, the text is understood to be counseling and cautioning modest Christian women against all manner of things—be it against displaying braided hair, wearing fancy clothes, parading mini-dresses, sporting outfits with seductively suggestive slits at their sides or elsewhere or donning showy jewelry such as ear rings, broaches, bracelets or, in some cultures, nose plugs and anklets as well. A closer reading of the text in question, however, indicates that a better and more defensible translation of the text would suggest that the author is not referring to the woman's outfit in general at all but simply to her coiffure or hair-style in particular. That is, the counsel is really directed against those Christian women who were donning elaborate hairstyles or coiffures generally associated with contemporary non-Christian women who were readily identified in the Greco-Roman world as *hetairai* or prostitutes. Such non-Christian women were known to parade elaborate hairstyles in which braids, lengthened with shiny ribbons and decked out with nuggets of glittering gold and shimmering silver were the order of the day. The author (perhaps, the apostle Paul) was simply counseling the Christian women not to allow themselves, by their hairstyles, to be mistaken for such immodest and morally questionable women in society at large. And in our contemporary setting, our notions of Christian modesty—be it in terms of dress or hair-do and be it in relation to either *men* or women-- should be dictated, as was the case in the early church, by what is considered culturally appropriate and acceptable. Again, we must be guided by the conviction that God has given us both a mind with which to think and a heart with which to love as we seek to experience full spiritual and human

flourishing, as women and men, in our own time—including in our own churches.

THE PATHOLOGY OF RACISM

1) **Genesis 2:10-14**

In this passage, mention is made, in the Hebrew, of two countries and four rivers as follows: Cush and Havilah (countries) and Hiddekel, Euphrates, Pishon and Gihon (rivers). Most likely, and within its context, both countries refer to African countries—Cush to ancient Ethiopia (encompassing modern-day Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan) and Havilah to Egypt which has always been (and still is) in Africa. This, incidentally, is contrary to the eurocentric tendency of some to take Egypt out of Africa entirely and to locate it in the so-called “Middle East”—without further explaining how a place can be located both “middle” and “east” at the same time! What is also quite instructive is that there is a questionable hesitation on the part of a vast majority of biblical scholars (mostly Caucasian in color) to concede that the rivers of Pishon and Gihon are in fact references to the two Branches of the Nile—the White and the Blue Nile in Egypt. What we find, in stead, is a readiness and a willingness on their part to situate both Hiddekel and Euphrates in Mesopotamia (and rightly so)—where countries like Assyria and Babylon once stood and where places like Iraq now stand. However, there is a tendency to express uncertainty as to the location of the Pishon and the Gihon. And when they are forced to “make an intelligent guess”, invariably they opt for a location other than in Africa. They tend to go either for Saudi Arabia or for Mesopotamia itself. What they do not point out (as I had reason to discover, some years ago, from an Ethiopic or Ge’ez scholar who was trained as a priest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Ethiopia itself), is that even today, the word for the Nile in the Ethiopic or Ge’ez language is Geon. Linguistically, Geon is a clear lexical echo of, and has a “family resemblance” with, Gihon, in the Hebrew of Genesis 2--Hebrew, as a language, being a member of the Semitic family of languages along with Ethiopic or Ge’ez itself.

2) **Jeremiah 13:23**

As was the case with our previous examples, the problem here is how best to translate and then interpret the text in question. In all our English translations, for example (along with those in the other “Caribbean languages” of Dutch, French and Spanish), we find the rhetorical question translated as follows: “Can a leopard change its spots or an Ethiopian change his skin?” For most of us with an African heritage, the implication is that if the Ethiopian could have changed his skin, he would have readily done so—further implying that he is quite dissatisfied with his colour and complexion which is to be considered negative in some sort of self-hating way. However, a careful reading of the Hebrew in which prophet Jeremiah initially wrote would indicate that the Hebrew word, *yakal*, which is to be correctly translated as, *can*, does not in fact appear in the text at all. In stead, what we find at the onset of the rhetorical question is (in technical Hebrew grammar) a Hiphil imperfect which can best be translated as, *would*. That is, the rhetorical question should really be translated as: “Would a leopard change its spots or an Ethiopian change his skin?” And as a rhetorical question, the implied response would then be: “Of course not! Why would either the leopard or the Ethiopian want to change its or his appearance? They are quite happy the way they are already!” That is, this text provides no substantiation for the implication that there is some self-hating desire on the part of both leopard and Ethiopian to change themselves in order to become something or someone else—and presumably for the better. Rather, prophet Jeremiah, in no uncertain terms, goes on to declare to Judah, the ancient people of God, that just as there is no desire on the part of either the eye-catching leopard or the black and beautiful Ethiopian to change either spot or skin, so is there no desire on the part of Judah to change from her sinful ways and, for that very reason, God’s punitive judgment will be both soon and certain. Nothing more and nothing less!

3) **Psalms 51:7**

Based on the influence of the Bible, many of us instinctively assume that the expression, “as white as snow” is always meant to be positive in connotation. This positive depiction is also communicated in some of our more popular church hymns in which we find language such as, “Wash me, and I Shall be Whiter than Snow.” Well, the truth is, the expression, “as white as snow”, may or may not be positive. It depends on the context within which the expression is used in the Hebrew Bible or the Old

Testament. In Psalms 51:7, for instance, the expression is clearly positive in tone, tenor and thrust in that the Psalmist David, in a period of deep penitence for having connived to deprive Uriah of his beautiful wife, Bathsheba, pours out his heart and soul in anguish to the God of heaven. And to do so, he petitions God to move him from the state of the carnal to the spiritual by washing him with hyssop and thereby making him as white as snow. However, in Numbers 12:9, we encounter an entirely different meaning of the self-same expression. There, we find Miriam, the sister of Moses, being carried away with her own ethnocentric prejudices in taking umbrage to her brother marrying a beautiful African woman. Not being a respecter of persons and as one who, of one blood has made all the nations of the earth (See Acts 17), God intervenes immediately by punishing Miriam for her racist narrow-mindedness. And to do so, he makes her hands turn “as white as snow”—or, in other words, leprous in appearance. And this clearly is not meant to be a positive use of the expression. Incidentally, colors do have very different connotations in different cultural contexts. For example, in some African cultures (such as among the Luos in Kenya), funerary and burial rites dictate that the mourners vertically paint half of their bodies in black, as a sign of life, and the other half in white, as a sign of death!

CONCLUSION

In the words of Qoheleth, the Preacher, or more familiarly known in the church as the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, here then is the conclusion of the whole matter: Historically, Bible translation has not been an innocent and value neutral academic enterprise but, in stead, has been laden with gender and race-induced presuppositions. The interdisciplinary exercise of Bible translation has been driven by various ideological assumptions that are only now being subjected to strict academic scrutiny. In the words of Edward Said and other postcolonial writers such as Frantz Fanon of the Caribbean who preceded him, sub-alterns or those of us who have been situated at the margins and away from the mainstream—be we women of all colors or men of color—are now insisting that full human flourishing, including *spiritual* flourishing, must entail our critiquing of the received tradition which sometimes masks itself as objective scholarship. However, it is a scholarship which, as we are now coming to a greater realization, has been touched and tarnished by certain eurocentric, chauvinistic and hegemonic assumptions about the world in which we live—including the Christian world—and a world in which the vast majority of us are existentially situated in the Caribbean which, for Lorna Daniel and others of us, is still, to a large extent, a Christian community.

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