

## Translation Matters: A Fem/Womanist Exploration of Translation Theory and Practice for Proclamation in Worship

Wil Gafney

God may sing soprano—borrowing from the title of Marcia Dyson’s forthcoming work—but most folk in black churches hear double bass. By this I mean that church folk hear the androcentric biblical text through the filter of masculinist translation. The end result is the reification of a thoroughly masculine god-construct and the relegation of women and girls to second-class citizenship in the divine-human οἰκουμένη (household). I am not going to address the gender imbalance in African American pulpits except to say that there is virtually no parity between pulpit and pew. Rather, I want to focus on the translations most church folk hear, because translation matters.

Rabbi Michael Lerner (of Beyt Tikkun synagogue in San Francisco and editor of *Tikkun* magazine) raised the issue of biblical translation in a conversation on religious fundamentalism in the United States with three African American bishops; the conversation was moderated by Tavis Smiley on National Public Radio.[1] Lerner’s comment formed the impetus for this presentation:

It’s funny to learn of these Christian fundamentalists who tell us that they have to stick with the word of the bible but they have never read it in Hebrew. They don’t even know what the bible actually says. In fact there are many wild mistranslations in the King James Version of the bible. They have no clue.[2]

I would like to respond to Lerner’s comments by engaging in this dialogue with those who do, are interested in, and/or are affected by African-American biblical hermeneutics. Lerner noted that African Americans claim that the biblical text is central to their recognition and formulation of moral values, yet most read it in translation, and problematic translations at that—and I agree with him. I would like to offer some reflections on translation theory and practice, focusing on the African American worshipping community. I will use some of the translations I have worked on as a black feminist hermeneut. I began my own gyno-centric practice of translation with Isa 54 for many reasons, including its inspiration of the well-regarded gospel song, “No Weapon” by Fred Hammond.[3]

Lerner’s critique of English-based reading practices, particularly the use of the KJV, resonates with my experience as a catechumen in the AME Church and as a preacher and pastor in the AME Zion Church. My experience as a scholar of the Hebrew Bible has demonstrated that all of the published translations of the biblical text that I have encountered in the context of worship have predominately male translators. This includes the KJV, RSV, JPS, NIV, NAB, NASB, NEB, JB, NJB, NJPS, NRSV, and Everett Fox’s Schocken Bible. Even when women serve on translation committees, the translators of these familiar versions of Scripture faithfully

preserved masculine language about the deity, but scandalously failed to preserve feminine biblical imagery depicting God and humanity.

This presentation asks the question, What might the gathered people of God hear if black women translate the Scriptures with attention to gender—human and divine—and attention to the cultural context and implications of the text? (This is more than a rhetorical question because when I preach, the gathered people of God hear a black feminist’s translation of the sacred text, whether they know it or not; as an Episcopalian, I translate all of the assigned lectionary texts every time I stand behind the sacred desk.) This presentation responds to that question with a brief discussion of my translation practices, followed by my own feminist translations of selected texts framed in African American religious discourse.

This is what I call a fem/womanist hermeneutic; that is, one that lies at the intersection of feminist and womanist hermeneutical practices. I am a black feminist who works and worships in solidarity with my womanist sisters. My location in feminist space rather womanist space reflects my intent to participate in the redemption of a radically egalitarian ethic from the pale hands of those who infected it with racism and classism. (In the same way, I am comfortable as an African American Christian in the Anglican communion of all spaces, not allowing Western Christianity to keep me from the religion of Jesus, to use Howard Thurman’s terminology.[4])

This fem/womanist hermeneutic as a theological project articulates the reality of living in relationship with divinity and humanity as a woman and as a person of color. In broad terms, it affirms the full personhood and divine image of all humanity and combats oppressions—racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, elitism, imperialism—on multiple fronts in response to the presence and activity of God in the cosmos.

The following translation principles were derived with the African American worshipping community in mind, as opposed to the academic or discursive communities.[5] For example, I translated Gen 46:26, the accounting of Jacob/Israel’s sixty-six biological children, as “Those who went out of his male member...” for a sermonic proclamation. (Loins—<sup>אֲנָשֵׁי</sup> —is usually translated with a plural; here it is singular specifying the male procreative organ.) In the rather informal discourse of my classroom, I translated “those who passed through his penis.” Context shapes translation.

### **One Black Feminist’s Translation Principles[6]**

1. Take the biblical text seriously in all its plurality. Black folk, particularly in the African-Atlantic diaspora, have valued the biblical text as talking book, signifying text and locus of revelation, since it was introduced to our enslaved ancestors and withheld on pain of death if they dared learn to read it themselves.

Taking the biblical text seriously does not mean elevating it to divine status; bibliolatry is as much a sin as any other form of idolatry. “In the beginning was the Word” does not mean that the sixty-six book Protestant canon, in a beloved but antiquated translation, was preexistent before the dawn of creation. Taking the biblical text seriously in all its plurality means valuing the rarified Samaritan canon with its unique renderings closed after the revelation of Torah and also valuing the expansive canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo church, which never published a Bible just in case God has not finished revealing Godself to humanity, and includes readings from Enoch and Jubilees in its liturgy. Taking the biblical text seriously means not stopping with the Masoretic Text, but consulting the Qumran biblical materials and the Septuagint (Alexandrinus and Vaticanus when they cannot be reconciled) and checking the Targumim—Onkelos, Neophti, Yonathan and Pseudo-Jonathan. What qualifies this approach as a black feminist practice is its radical inclusion of marginalized voices and its suspicion of the dominant voice. In this way, neither God nor God’s revelation is constrained. This point was surely lost on the translators of the Gospel into Gullah. As reported in the *Los Angeles Times* on 29 December 2005, the translation was made from the KJV as the primary source, with the Greek text secondary.[7] Beyond the scope of this paper are the notion of canon, its arbitrary and putative closure, and ongoing loci of revelation.

2. Attend to the orality of the text. Remembering that the text in written form came into existence in order to preserve oral traditions frees a translator and hermeneut from being hobbled by the text. Translating for speakers/hearers rather than readers preserves the original context of the sacred stories and facilitates their transmission to peoples who value oral discourse as a means of revelation. Attending to the orality of the text means not sacrificing form for function or meaning.

“Peter the flute-player collected salad vegetables preserved in vinegar” is markedly different from “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.” The NRSV’s “Terror, pit, and trap” are not useful translations of פָּחַד וְפִתְחַת וְכָפַח in Jer 48:43, nor is their “Everyone who flees from the terror shall fall into the pit, and everyone who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the trap” a useful translation of the alliterative portions of verse 44:

הַנִּיִּס מִפְּנֵי הַפָּחַד יִפֹּל אֶל־הַפִּתְחַת וְהָעֹלָה מִן־הַפִּתְחַת יִלְכַּד בְּפִתְחַת.

But “flee from terror, trip into the trench. Trek out of the trench, tilt into a trap” preserves both form and function. This concern for the whole text blends the art of word-craft and the science of translation, honoring the gifts and abilities of the whole person. Dividing rational discourse from creative expression is characteristic of a lack of integration and wellbeing; it is also characteristic of the disordered dominant culture and antithetical to cohesive individual and community values embraced by black feminists and womanists.

3. Use comparative philology and semantic range to determine meaning. To put it more plainly, “Tradition” and traditions about gender do not affect lexical meaning in

Semitic languages. My formation as a feminist translator and exegete began when I read for myself:

...בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים...

and

...וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת...

“When beginning, He, God created...

while the Spirit of God, She was fluttering...”

When I discovered that God revealed Godself as male and female in the first two verses of the Scriptures and that, by tradition, God’s masculine self-revelation is preserved in translation and God’s feminine self-revelation is obscured in neutral terms or subject to gender reassignment (thank you Saint Jerome), I became a feminist biblical translator. It was my first year in seminary.

The emphasis on philology in the present methodology is a result of encountering the same word translated by different terms when it is applied to persons of different genders in the text, contrary to Semitic philology. For example, טוֹב in Gen 1-2 means pristinely good and is so translated. Yet, in Gen 6, the human women are not pristinely good but just “pretty” in the hands of translators (“fair” in NRSV and “beautiful” in NJPS).

A more pernicious example is חַיִל, which means warriors, warrior strength, or warrior conduct as in כָּל חַיִל פְּרַעֲוֵה (all Pharaoh’s warriors) drowned in the Red Sea. Yet Ruth and the prospective spouse of King Lemmuel are traditionally removed from the ranks of warriors and re-configured as “virtuous” (NRSV) and “capable” (NJPS) in Prov 31, and “worthy” (NRSV) and “fine” (NJPS) in Ruth 3:11.[8] In my translation of Prov 31, “Who Can Find A Militant Feminist?,” I translate the woman of חַיִל as “warrior-hearted woman.” This translation is supported by the several martial metaphors in the text. The woman who is a suitable partner for the warrior-king is a warrior who brings home the spoils of war (שָׁלַל) in verse 11, a term that is unfortunately frequently mistranslated as mere “food.” She should also be a hunter who can take her own prey. In verse 15 טֶרֶף means “prey” and is usually provided by wild animals for their young; this word too is frequently mistranslated as “food.” Again, according to verse 17, she should be prepared to go to war at a moment’s notice: the activity of “strengthening one’s arms” is a martial one; it is preparatory for combat or hunting.

4. Translate for all of God’s people from each perspective present (or hidden) in the text. Without entering into arguments about the authority of the Scriptures, I will acknowledge that the Scriptures hold authority in a variety of ways for those who receive them as sacred texts. Religious readers—and this paper is focusing on translation practices for African American worshipping communities— need to hear the divine proclamation addressed to them in their many, multifaceted, intersecting, and overlapping realities.

When an African-American male student challenged me on using inclusive language, I used my feminist biblical hermeneutic for pedagogical purposes. I asked him not What would Jesus do?, but What did Jesus do? And I took him to the gospels of Matthew and Luke, where Jesus told the parable of God searching for the lost and rejoicing over their return with God as a male shepherd and as a female householder in the same discourse (although the lectionary bifurcates this lesson). The parables on God the Creator of the heavens as a male farmer planting a mustard seed and as a woman baking bread make the same point.

Particularly because of my experiences as a girl and woman in African-American churches, I have a keen interest in how the text speaks to women and in the question “Does God speak to women in and through the biblical text?” As a black feminist translator, exegete, and hermeneut, I began to track divine speech using the second person feminine. When the God of the Hebrew Scriptures engages in what I call “God-girl talk,” with whom is the Deity in conversation? According to post-biblical commentators and some canon-framers, God is speaking to Jerusalem (or occasionally some other city) as a feminine entity, not to an individual woman or women in general. Translating for all of God’s people revealed, hidden, and obscured in the text means decentering Jerusalem (and other ancient communities) as the chief focus of YHWH’s affection and affirming divine concern expressed in continued proclamation of these ancient texts to a diasporic people clustered on a double-continent that the biblical authors did not know existed.

Consider this translation of Isa 51:12, in which I use “daughter” to make patent the hidden feminine singular pronoun in the text: “Why daughter are you afraid of mortal men who will die, Earth’s children who fade like grass?” This practice affirms that God’s voice speaks to all of God’s people—past and present—through the Scriptures in addition to other matrices.

Using the ancestral practice of employing the exegetical imagination, I can visualize Miryam L’Natzeret in her peculiar and fragile pregnancy meditation on Zeph 3:14-19 as God’s word to her:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice daughter and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
The *Judge of All Flesh* has taken away the judgments against you daughter,  
and has turned away your enemies daughter.  
The sovereign of Israel, the *Sovereign of the Heavens and Earth*,  
is in your midst daughter; you shall fear disaster no more daughter.  
... Do not fear daughter, O daughter of Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.  
The *Ever-Present One*, your God, is in your midst daughter, a warrior who gives victory;  
Who will rejoice over you with gladness daughter, and will renew you in love daughter;  
Who will exult over you daughter with loud singing as on a day of festival.  
I will remove disaster from you daughter, so that you will not bear reproach for it daughter.  
I will deal with all your oppressors at that time daughter.

And I will save the lame and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.

5. Recover and proclaim ontological blackness. Ontological blackness includes being of African descent and/or allied with diasporic African peoples and/or other peoples marginalized by the dominant discourse.

In this black feminist practice of translation, the Afro-Asian continental context of the Hebrew Scriptures is taken seriously. This notion of an ontological blackness requires the recognition that African Americans are not the only black folk, our pain is not the only pain, our struggle is not the only struggle. We are victim and victimizer, oppressed and oppressor, privileged and imperiled. We cannot lift up Egypt as archetypal and prototypical African (and wider world) civilization and culture—Black Greeks—and then read ourselves as Israel in the Exodus narrative relinquishing the burden of blackness because we want to be identified with the people who take land rather than those who have their land taken from them.

6. Recover women obscured by masculine grammar. It is my contention that unless there is a specific identification of all the prophets represented by the masculine plural **נְבִיאִים** as men in a biblical narrative, there is no reason to presume that only male prophets are the intended reference. We will never be able to identify all of the female prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures because of the rules attendant upon the masculine plural, in which one male entity transforms a plurality of any number of women into a group described with masculine grammar. [9]

I am certain that references in the Latter Prophets to “to all of the prophets who prophesied before” must be translated inclusively, based on the established presence of female prophets in each phase of Israelite history—Miriam in the ancestral period and the Exodus, Deborah during the settlement of Canaan, Huldah and Isaiah’s child’s mother during the monarchy, the discredited female prophets in Ezekiel during the Exile, Noadiah during the Restoration, and countless more in the days to come, as promised in Joel. More than that, I am presuming the opposite, that all plural references to prophets include women and men unless there is specific language limiting the group:

Saul answered, “I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by *female or male prophets*.” (1 Sam 28:15b)

YHWH warned Israel and Judah by *every female and male prophet* and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants, *every prophesying person*.” (2 Kgs 17:13)

“Surely the Sovereign GOD does nothing,  
without revealing God’s secret to God’s women-servants and men-servants,  
the prophets.” (Amos 3:7)

“Do not touch my anointed ones;  
do my *women-prophets and my male-prophets* no harm.” (Ps 105:15)

Using this argument, I also proclaim that the Messiah is the Son of Woman and not the Son of Man, in spite of the old translations. Since sons are not the only kind of children God makes and since anthropology is the study of all human beings, male, female, beige, brown, black, gay, straight, and crooked, the translation “son of man” fails to account for half the people on the planet. And since we confess that the Messiah got his humanity on his mother’s side, I specify, he is the Son of Woman.

7. Put an end to the mediation of the Hebrew Scriptures through German in this post-Holocaust world. In translation, teaching, and preaching, I use the names by which biblical characters were known in their own time and space, given by their parents, in their language, and not those imposed upon them by later European scholarship.

Who can forget the image of Levar Burton as Kunte Kinte refusing the slave name Toby, in spite of the violence with which it was imposed on him? Memories of similar experiences in African American history mean that in some contexts the worst thing you can do to someone is to call them outside of their name. Language is of course a colonizing agent, a tool of subjugation. Ngugi wa Thiongo writes that his teacher in colonial Kenya taught that “Both Jesus and Shakespeare used very simple English.”

The Scriptures preserve several examples of colonial name-calling, whose perpetuation, I contend, we are ethically compelled to reject: The woman we know as Hagar is not remembered by her own Egyptian name; they called her “foreign thing,” חֵרָה, not even “foreign woman,” אִשְׁתֵּי חֵרָה, even though it was her female body, her womb, that would be colonized to gestate the hope of patriarchy. Daniel was renamed Belteshazzar; Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were renamed Shadrach, Meshach and Aved-Nego; Hadassah was renamed Esther. The Lukan evangelist translated Tavitha into Dorcas for his Greek readers.

Abandoning Germanic norms in translation means abandoning the anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism inherited by the Western biblical critical enterprise, indicated by (but not limited to) the abuse of the Divine Name, which even the Messiah never dared to pronounce. Εγώ εἰμι is not יהוה (YHWH) in either Hebrew or Aramaic. Those of us who self-identify as Christian can never allow ourselves to forget that the Shoah, Holocaust, was perpetrated in Christian lands by baptized hands.[10]

## Examples of God-Girl Talk

Using nouns like “woman,” “sister,” and “daughter,” I will make plain for English hearers what would have been plain to Hebrew hearers, and contextualize these translations in African American worshipping communities.

For all my sisters who have been told that God did not call them to shepherd God’s people, hear God saying in Song 1:8: “Woman, pastor your flock woman!”

To all of the black women who have had to use their bodies to secure financial security for themselves and their families but have prayers on their hearts that no one knows but God, hear God saying in Ruth 3:11: “And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all gathered in the gates of my people know that you woman are a warrior-hearted woman.”

For all of the black, brown, and beige women who have been told that they were unloved and unlovable by parents, extended families, media and the world at large, hear God saying in Jer 31:3: “The I AM appeared to her from far away. I have loved you daughter with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithful love to you daughter.”

For all of God’s children, male and female, who have been left feeling like a motherless child because of the masculinist language that twists our prayers, deforms our liturgies, and obfuscates our Scriptures, I remind you that the verb **אָמַן** expresses the feelings that pour from the **אִמָּה**, the womb. These feelings have regularly and inappropriately been translated “compassion,” “mercy,” and even “pity.” The translation “mother-love” preserves the semantic range of the term and reveals God’s mother-love for her children:

Can a woman forget her nursing child,  
or show no mother-love for the child of her womb?  
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (Isa 49:15)

YHWH said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you from within the Name, ‘YHWH’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will mother-love whom I will mother-love.” (Exod 33:19)

YHWH your God will restore your fortunes and mother-love you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom YHWH your God has scattered you. (Deut 30:3)

And I will betroth you to me woman, forever;  
I will betroth you to me woman, in righteousness and in justice,  
in faithful love, and in mother-love. (Hos 2:19 [21])



To all who feel like a motherless child, a long way from home, Hosea proclaims:  
In you God, the orphan finds mother-love. (Hos 14:3b)

I close with excerpts from my translation of Isa 54. Virtually every line of this magnificent poem contains feminine singular prefixes and suffixes. There are feminine singular nouns, feminine singular adjectives, feminine singular imperatives, feminine singular participles, and verb stems from *qal* to *hiphil*, all feminine singular. In order to preserve the form of this piece in translation, I used the word “woman” for each word in which a feminine marker appears in the text. One of my white male students told me that he found my translation repetitive and redundant. I asked him to pose an argument for suppressing the female gender-identity of YHWH’s conversation partner in an androcentric canon that regularly marginalizes women and silences their voices. He did not. He could not.

Each verse in Isa 54 has at least two feminine markers; some have as many as eight, with one exception. In one of God’s speeches, occurring in verse 16, God speaks in the first person, without gender. All of this is more than an exercise in the feminine grammar of biblical Hebrew poetry. It is a poem in what I like to call mother-tongue. Using tender images of maternal love, God communicates through the prophet her deep and abiding love for her people, particularly her daughters. I do include verses 9-10, but I am still wrestling with God’s promise never again to let the waters go over the earth, in light of the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and their impact on black women worshippers.

**1** Sing childless woman, never-given-birth-woman;  
Woman, break out a song and rejoice, woman, never-in-labor-woman.  
For more are the children of the devastated woman than the children of the espoused woman,  
says Yah.

**2** Woman expand the place of your tent, woman  
and the curtains of your sanctuary, woman, extend them ~ do not hold back woman!  
Woman, lengthen your ropes, woman, and woman, secure your stakes, woman.

**3** For right and left you will break through, woman  
and your seed woman, will inherit nations, and in devastated cities they will dwell.

**4** Do not fear woman for you will not be ashamed woman;  
do not feel humiliated woman for you will not be disgraced woman.

For the shame of your youth woman, you will forget woman,  
and the stigma of your widowhood, woman, you will never remember, woman.

**5** For your spouse woman, is the One who made you woman.

Yah-Sovereign of Women Warriors is God’s name.

And the Holy One of Israel will redeem you woman ~ who is called God of all the earth.

**6** For like a wife abandoned and abject in spirit ~

Yah has called you woman ~ For you were a rejected young bride,  
says your God, woman.

**7** For a brief space I abandoned you woman,  
but in great mother-love I will gather you woman.

8 For a minute moment I hid my face briefly from you woman.  
But in eternally bonded love I will mother-love you woman.

Your Redeemer, Woman, has spoken.

9 For these waters are like the waters of Noah to me which I swore ~  
the waters of Noah will never again flood the earth.  
Therefore I have sworn I will not be angry with you woman;  
neither will I rebuke you woman.

10 For the mountains may depart and the hills may be shaken,  
but my bonded love will never be removed from you woman;  
neither will my covenant of well-being ever be shaken,

says Yah who mother-loves you woman.

11 Afflicted woman, stormy-weather-woman, uncomforted woman,  
Look! I will set your stones with ornamentation woman  
and lay your foundation in sapphires woman.

12 I will give you ruby sunshine woman and for your openings woman, jewel stones  
and for your boundary woman, precious stones.

13 And all your children, woman shall be disciples of Yah  
and great will be the well-being of your children, woman.

14 In righteousness will you be established, woman; you will be far from oppression woman  
so you will not fear woman from terror for it will not come on you, woman.

15 Surely none can oppose I will put an end to it.

Who opposes you woman? They will fall because of you, woman.

16 Surely I, I created the smith who blows on the coal-fire  
and brings out a weapon for its purpose; so I, I create the destroyer to ravage.

17 No weapon formed against you woman, will succeed,  
and every tongue that rises against you woman for judgment, you will condemn woman.  
This is the heritage of the servants of Yah, and their righteousness is from me,

An oracle of Yah.

Translation matters.

**Wil Gafney**, The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

### Endnotes

[1] Bishops Vashti McKenzie, Harry Jackson, and Noel Jones, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Hope Christian Church in College Park, and the City of Refuge Church in Gardena, respectively. The interview occurred on the now discontinued *Tavis Smiley Show* on 2 December 2004, on National Public Radio (NPR).

[2] The transcript is my own, made by replaying the webcast of the program from NPR's archives, available at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

[3] There are at least sixteen other versions of this contemporary classic available at the iTunes Music Store accessible from [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com).

- [4] See the discussion in *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 15-21.
- [5] My work here has been influenced by Kwok Pui-Lan, "Racism and Ethnocentrism in Feminist Biblical Interpretation," in *Searching the Scriptures*, Vol. 1 (ed. Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1994), 101-16.
- [6] All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
- [7] Stephanie Simon, "Gospel According to Gullah," *Los Angeles Times* (29 December 2005).
- [8] Thanks to Leonard Greenspoon for pointing out that the 1917 JPS translation is "woman of valor."
- [9] Irmtraud Fischer, *Gotteskunderinnen: Zu Einer Geschlechterfairen Deutung Des Phanomens Der Prophetie Und Der Prophetinnen in Der Hebraische Bibel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 18.
- [10] Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Making Wise the Simple* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), xviii.