

Lost in Translation: Jesus' Women Disciples
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What are Bible translations for? As a feminist and a member of the Church of Scotland, I'm interested in a translation that highlights the role of women in the early church, one that champions their contribution and creates a useable past for Christian women today. As a historian, however, tasked with teaching these texts to students in the classroom, I'm a little more wary. The Christian Scriptures are deeply patriarchal texts that see the world through an androcentric lens, and I worry that adding a thin veneer of inclusion might only obscure the problem. When Edinburgh's School of Divinity decided to invest in a set of inclusive NRSV Bibles around 15 years ago, I campaigned hard to keep onto the old (and uninclusive) RSVs for use in my *Women and the New Testament* class. How could I explain to students that the text was thoroughly patriarchal, I argued, if students could open up their Bibles and find Paul speaking to 'brothers and sisters' at every turn? Who are these ghost 'sisters' who are scattered about the text, and would it not be better to highlight the rare moments when the texts really are inclusive (eg Mark 3.35)? Different contexts clearly call for different translations. But what all translations in the twenty-first century need to ensure is that they don't inadvertently *mask* women, either by a poor translation of the Greek or by a breakdown in imagination.¹

In her classic study, *In Memory of Her*, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza pointed out almost 40 years ago that translations can hide women. Finding appropriate equivalences in two different languages is always difficult. Greek – unlike English – has grammatical gender, so everything is automatically masculine, feminine, or neuter. And, as with French, a mixed crowd is referred to as masculine, however many women might have been present. Sometimes finding a good translation is easy. A useful example here is the Greek word *anthropos* or human being. Greek has a perfectly good word for man – *aner* – and so when *anthropos* is used we need to make sure that we capture its inclusive nature. And since women no longer feel included by terms such as 'man' or 'mankind', human or even person is by far the better translation. No one nowadays would have any difficulty in translating Jesus' promise to his first disciples to make them 'fish for humans' or 'people' rather than the traditional 'fishers of men' (Mark 1.17). It's obvious from the ensuing story that they are commissioned to take the message to women as well as to men, and so the inclusive translation is quite apt.

Less clear cut is Jesus' favoured self-reference, the 'Son of Man', where the word 'man' is similarly *anthropos*. Strangely, perhaps, the phrase 'Son of Man' has proved remarkably resilient. It resisted the inclusivity of the NRSV, and in a comparison of a number of Bibles I found very few alternatives: 'man's Son' (Wycliffe Bible), 'Messiah' (Living Bible), or more promisingly 'the Human One' (Common English Bible). In its first century context, the title stresses Jesus' humility and lowliness (Mark 8.11-13, 10.35-45, Matt 8.20//Luke 9.58), but it also connects with the vision of the human figure in Daniel 7.13-14, now referring to Jesus' later exaltation (see Mark 8.38, 13.26, 14.62). And, however we translate 'Son of Man', it needs to be the same in both the gospels and Daniel so that readers pick up on the connection.

¹ For further discussion, see Ross S. Kraemer and Jennifer Eyl, 'Translating Women. The Perils of Gender-Inclusive Translation of the New Testament' in Susan Ackerman, Charles E. Carter, and Beth Alpert Nakhai (eds.), *Celebrate Her for the Fruit of Her Hands. Essays in Honor of Carol L. Meyers*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015, pp. 295-318.

It might be argued that the definite pronoun here (*‘the Son of Man’*) makes it clear that Jesus is speaking about himself, a first century male. In this case, the reference to being the ‘Son’ is entirely appropriate and we might want to translate the phrase as something like ‘the son of humanity’. For modern readers, however, who have been influenced by centuries of creeds and Christian doctrine, the phrase ‘Son of Man’ tends to underscore Jesus’ *humanity* in distinction to his *divinity* (the latter captured by the title ‘Son of God’). And so it seems to me that a better translation might be the CEB’s ‘the Human One.’ The very strangeness of the phrase would force us to question what it means. Why did Jesus refer to himself in this way? And how does this stress on our shared humanity affect the way both women and men relate to him?

At other times, it’s imagination that we need. Although English does sometimes supply feminized versions of occupations – actress, manageress, poetess and so on – these are falling into disuse nowadays. Most women prefer the more neutral actor, manager, or poet. Luckily, perhaps, our language has never distinguished between male and female *disciples*, or male and female *apostles* - the same word does for both genders. This is probably a good thing (as the feminized and therefore belittled use of ‘deaconess’ in Romans 16.1 demonstrates), but then the challenge is to avoid lazy ways of thinking that contribute to covering up women’s participation.

For example, Mark’s gospel distinguishes between ‘the Twelve’ (an all-male group that, certainly within the historical ministry of Jesus, seems to have represented the 12 tribes of Israel, and a concern for national renewal), and a wider group that he calls ‘disciples.’ It’s only right at the end, at the crucifixion, that we learn that this wider group includes many women who have followed Jesus from Galilee (Mark 15.40). But this means that our mental picture of the group around Jesus should surely be a mixed one from the start, perhaps even including children and other dependants. So if a modern translation wanted to note early in the gospel that Jesus was on the road with his ‘disciples, both male and female’, I for one would have no problem with that. It’s clearly what the gospel is telling us, and reinstating women at the very heart of Jesus’ ministry has profound implications for women today. (Interestingly, Luke does exactly this, moving his note about the women to a much earlier stage in his gospel, Luke 8.1-3, so that their participation in the early part of Jesus’ ministry is clearly in view).

As a general rule, we need always to ask whether grammatical gender has covered up women’s participation. One small example: Jesus sends out two disciples to prepare the Passover meal for him in Jerusalem (Mark 14.12-16). We’re told that he comes later with the Twelve (14.17), so these two disciples are not part of that group. The plural pronoun referring to this couple is masculine, but we need to resist automatically assuming that *both* disciples are necessarily men. It’s quite possible that Jesus sent out a man and a woman to prepare the Passover; missionary pairs became standard practice later on (we need only think of Prisca and Aquila, or Junia and Andronicus), and it seems to me very likely that one or other of Jesus’ hosts in Bethany, Martha and Mary (John 12), would have played some personal role in helping him to organise the Passover feast in Jerusalem. And contrary to da Vinci’s famous painting, it would be very strange if these extra disciples didn’t also stay to eat the Passover. None of this speculation would, of course, show up in a translation, but we should be ready to allow our mental images to incorporate women’s discipleship to the full (and this is perhaps where art, film and TV can help).

I want to end with one last translation, and this is the name Mary Magdalene. Mary (Maria in Greek, Miriam or Mariamme in Aramaic) was the most common woman's name amongst first century Palestinian Jews. Tal Ilan estimates that almost a quarter of women were called Mary in this period, so we shouldn't be surprised to find that most women bearing this name would have needed further identification.² Many would have been known by the name of significant men in their lives – first a father, then a husband, and later on by their sons. It's usually assumed that this particular Mary is identified by her geographical origin, and that she came from the fishing town of Magdala on the western shores of the Sea of Galilee.

There are, however, two difficulties with this very common assumption. First, there is no evidence that a town called 'Magdala' actually existed in the first century. The word translated Magdala comes from the Aramaic/Hebrew *migdal*, meaning 'tower' or 'fortress.' Nowadays there's a small village called Migdal on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, 3 miles to the North of the city of Tiberias. In later centuries, the Jewish Talmud refers to the site as Migdal Nunaya (tower of fish), but there is no mention of the town of Magdala in the gospels.³ Even more curiously, the Jewish historian Josephus doesn't mention Magdala. This is significant as he was sent as a general to that part of Galilee in the Jewish-Roman war, and he gives a detailed account of its conquest by Vespasian and Titus. Instead, he mentions a fairly large Hellenistic city (of 40,000 inhabitants), complete with a hippodrome, named Taricheae (which translates as 'salted fish', presumably referring to the town's major industry). Jesus would probably have given such a town as wide a berth as he gave Tiberias and Sepphoris, the other major cities of Antipas' Galilee. Of course, it's possible that the town was known by both names – Taricheae and Magdala - with the latter referring to a prominent feature at the site, perhaps a tower which allowed fisherfolk to see shoals of fish in the sea.⁴

The second difficulty with the usual translation is Mark's grammar. He simply refers to her as Mary *the* Magdalene (*Maria he Magdalene* in Greek).⁵ Curiously, though, when he wants to tell us that Joseph came from Arimathaea he uses a different construction (using the preposition *apo*, hence *Ioseph [ho] apo Harimathaias*). Interestingly, Jerome - a native

² Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, 330 BCE to 200 CE*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002.

³ It is, however, found as a variant in Matt 15.39 (which most likely reads 'Magadan') and Mark 8.10 (which most likely reads 'Dalmanoutha'). These two cities remain unknown, which perhaps explains why later scribes identified them as Magdala. See further Ken R. Dark, 'Archaeological evidence for a previously unrecognised Roman town near the Sea of Galilee', *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 145 (2013), 185–202.

⁴ For fuller discussion, see Joan E. Taylor, 'Missing Magdala and the Name of Mary "Magalene,"' *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 146 (2014), 205-223. Also Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament: the Life of Jesus and the Beginning of the Christian Church*. Rev. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

⁵ In 8.3, Luke introduces her as 'Maria called the Magdalene,' the same construction he uses elsewhere to indicate a nickname – Simon called Zelotes (Lk 6.15, Acts 1.12, distinguishing him from another Simon), Judas called Iscariotes (Lk 22.3, distinguishing him from another disciple called Judas), and Simon called Peter (Acts 10.18, 11.13). See Mary Ann Beavis, 'Reconsidering Mary of Bethany,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2012), 281-297; here 286-287.

Greek speaker - took Mary's name to be derived from the Aramaic *migdal*, or tower. This raises the intriguing possibility that Magdalene was a nickname given to this woman by Jesus. That would put her alongside Peter the Rock, Simon the Zealous, or James and John the Sons of Thunder.

How would recasting this woman as Mary the Tower alter our mental image of her? Jerome interpreted the nickname as a reference to the earnestness and radiance of her faith, presumably shining from her as from a tower (*Letter to Principia* 127, 255). But maybe he was missing a trick. We might want to supplement Jerome's image by thinking of her as a tower of strength, a fortress of faith. We might see her as the head of a mission to women, a very necessary form of female outreach in a patriarchal world where the male disciples could hardly infiltrate female spaces, and a counterpart to Peter the Rock. Clearly in this case, how we translate Mary's name could have a huge bearing on how we imagine early Christian history.