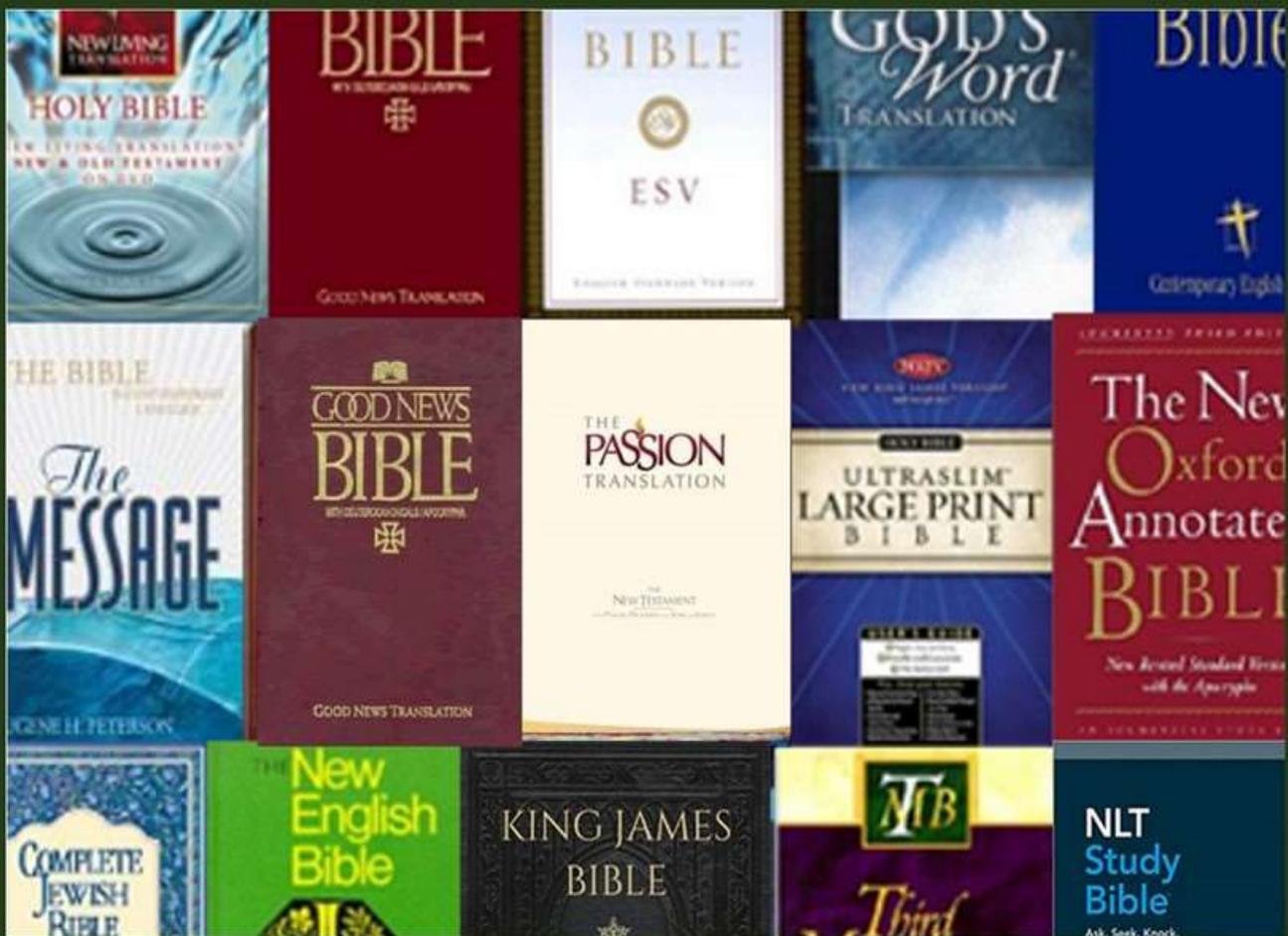


How Sexist is your Bible?



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How Sexist is your Bible?¹

Paul Ellis, Ph.D.

In my research for *The Silent Queen*, I was often amazed at how a single word in the Bible could be translated different ways leading to radically different conclusions. Here's an example from 2 Timothy 2:2:

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful **men** who will be able to teach others also. (NIV 1984)

Note the word in bold: men. It sounds like Paul is saying that only men can teach, but this is not what the apostle said at all. The word he used was *anthrōpos* which means a human being or a person, regardless of gender. A more accurate translation of this passage is as follows:

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful **people** who will be able to teach others also. (NIV 2011)

Man or people; it's a subtle difference, but an important one. The first translation gives the impression that faithful women can't teach, while the second translation says they can.

Here's another example from 1 Timothy 3:1:

If a **man** seeketh the office of a bishop... (RV)

This is part of a list of qualifications for church leadership and the first qualification, apparently, is your gender. Only men can be leaders. Problem is, Paul never said it. The Greek word for man is *anēr* and Paul never uses this word when discussing who can and can't lead. Instead, he uses the indefinite pronoun *tis* which is gender neutral, so a more accurate translation of this passage is as follows:

Whoever aspires to the office of bishop... (NRSV)

Different translations lead to different conclusions. The 19th-century Revised Version uses the gender-specific *man*, while the New Revised Standard Version of 1989 does not. Read the first translation, and you'll think women can't be church leaders. But read the second translation, and you'll think they can.

The NRSV is a revised version of the Revised Version, and the newer version lacks the male bias of the older version. This suggests that modern translators are dispensing with gender-

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specific terms that were inserted into older Bibles. Here's another example of how translations change over time, this one from 2 Timothy 3:17:

...so that the **man** of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (NASB 1995)

Again, the word which appears here as man has been translated from *anthrōpos*, a word that means person. Paul is not talking about men but people, and this comes out clearly in the latest version of the New American Standard Bible:

...so that the **man or woman** of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work. (NASB 2020)

The translators working on the NASB in the 1990s opted for *man*, but on the next pass they went for the more accurate phrase *man and woman*. The earlier version introduced a male bias into the text, but the later version removed it.

These examples led me to wonder, how many other times have translators added gender-specific words to the Bible? In particular, I wanted to learn how often scriptures had been altered in a way that was detrimental to women.

Not politically correct but scripturally correct

“Sheesh, Paul. Don't tell me you're one of those political correctness freaks.”

This has nothing to do with being PC and everything to do with being SC – scripturally correct. If translators have added, removed or changed words in the Bible, I want to know about it, particularly if those changes alter the original meaning of the text.

I understand that in certain circles there is a trend towards gender-inclusive language. This is not about that. Most people understand that when the Bible says “God wants *all men* to be saved,” it means “God wants *all people* to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4). Even though the second translation is more accurate (again, the underlying word is *anthrōpos*), I don't think the first translation is particularly harmful to women. Anachronistic? Sure, but not hugely misleading.

Nor do I wish to alter gender-specific words that are actually in the Bible. For instance, when Paul writes, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,” (Gal. 3:26), he meant *sons* not *sons and daughters*, because in those days sons enjoyed rights that daughters did not. “Sons of God” means all of us – men and women – are coheirs with Christ with all the rights and privileges that entails.

Similarly, when the New Testament writers refer to the church as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2, Eph. 5:25, Rev. 19:7), they mean *bride* not *bride and groom*. In the same way that believers are sons of God, the church is the bride of Christ.

If the Bible uses gender-specific language, that's fine. But if translators introduce gender-specific language where there was none to begin with, that's a source of bias, and bias can be harmful. How many women have been told they can't teach or lead because the word *man* was added to 2 Timothy 2:2 or 1 Timothy 3:1? How many women have been told they can't minister because the word *woman* was left out of 2 Timothy 3:17?

If the Bible says "all can prophesy" and a translator rewrites it as "men can prophesy," a door is opened for sexual discrimination. This sort of discrimination hurts everyone. It hurts the woman who has something to say, and it hurts those who don't get to hear it.

If we are to be Biblically-accurate, we need to identify and excise any male bias that has been introduced into the Bible. As a first step, I decided to rate different translations by calculating a Sexism Score.

How to calculate a Sexism Score

In my research I found thirteen New Testament verses that are sometimes masculinized in ways that are detrimental to women. These scriptures are Acts 18:26, Romans 12:6, 16:1, 7, 1 Corinthians 14:36, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Colossians 4:15, 1 Timothy 2:11, 3:1, 5, 2 Timothy 2:2, 3:17, and 2 Peter 1:21.

To assess the extent to which a gender bias has been introduced into our Bibles, I examined the thirteen verses in 25 popular Bibles to calculate a "Sexism Score" for each translation. Specifically, I scored each Bible by how accurately it translated each of the thirteen verses.

Any translation that introduced gender-specific language (where there was none to begin with) or which altered the text in a way that was detrimental to women, scored a point. Low scores near zero meant the translation was faithful to the text; high scores near thirteen meant the translation had been biased by the introduction of sexist language. (Appendix 1 outlines the full method; Appendix 2 shows the coding for each translation.)

Below is a summary of the results.

Bible Translation (Publication Date)	Sexism Score
Pure Word* (2016)	11
King James Version (1611)	10
New King James Version (1982)	10
American King James Version (2009)	10
Webster's Bible (1833)	10
American Standard Version (1901)	9
Douay-Rheims Bible (1582)	9
New American Standard Bible (1977)	9
Revised Version (1881)	9
New American Standard Bible (1995)	8
World English Bible (2000)	7
New International Version (1984)	7
Amplified Bible (1965)	6
Christian Standard Bible (2017)	5
English Standard Version (2001)	5
New American Standard Bible (2020)	5
Good News Translation (1992)	5
Message Bible (2018)	4
New Jerusalem Bible (1985)	3
Common English Bible (2011)	2
New Living Translation (1996)	2
New Revised Standard Version (1989)	2
The Passion Translation* (2018)	2
Contemporary English Version (1995)	2
New International Version (2011)	1

* New Testament only

As you can see from the table, some Bibles exhibit more gender bias than others. The Pure Word translation along with the KJV and its derivatives, the AKJV and the NKJV, were found to be the most biased Bibles in the study. At the other end of the scale, the 2011 version of the NIV were found to be the least biased.

No translation is perfect, but any Bible with a Sexism Score of two or less can be considered a fairly decent translation, at least in the very limited terms of gender bias. In my study, six Bibles met this standard: the 2011 version of the New International Version, the Contemporary English Version, the Passion Translation, the New Revised Standard Version, the New Living Translation, and the Common English Bible. However, nineteen Bibles in this study, more than three-quarters of the total, failed to meet this standard. The inescapable

conclusion is that the majority of English Bibles have been tainted by the introduction of gender-specific language.²

Should you ditch your King James Bible?

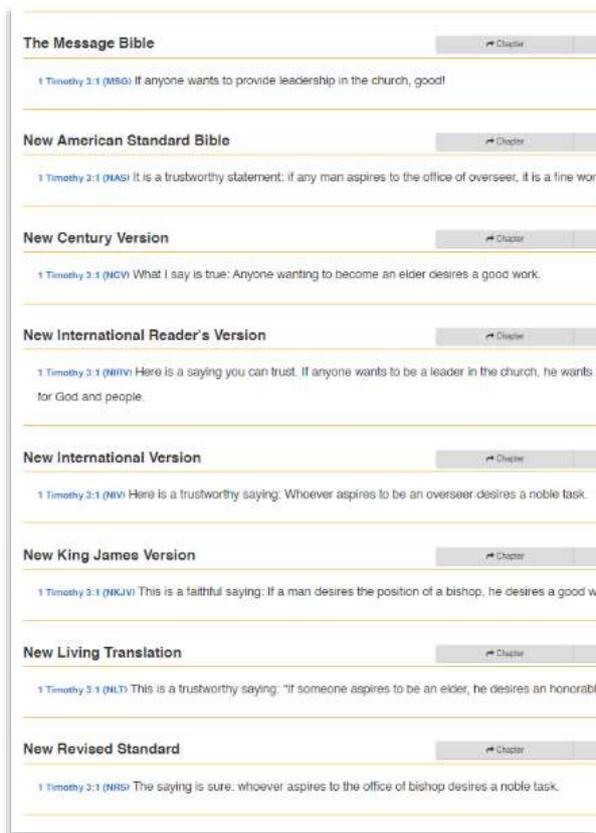
Do the results of this study mean you should trade your sexist Bible for a less sexist alternative? Not at all. The KJV, which scored poorly, is a masterful translation filled with some of the greatest phrases in the English language. It would be criminal to dismiss a book that has helped countless people encounter the love of God. But KJV readers need to be aware that it contains gender-specific language not found in the original text.³

Christians believe what they read in the Bible. After all, the Bible is Holy Scripture and God’s Word. Many churchgoers have the attitude, “If the Bible says it, I believe it and that settles it.” The problem is, what the Bible says and what specific translations say are often very different things.

If your Bible is sexist, there’s a danger you’ll be sexist too. The remedy is to recognize that no translation is flawless and to read more than one translation. Where translations disagree, an examination of the original languages will reveal which English translation is more accurate.

These days it is a simple matter to read multiple translations of a scripture using an app such as [e-Sword](#) or free websites such as [Bible Hub](#), [BibleGateway](#), or [Bible Study Tools](#). Typically these sites allow you to read several versions of a verse side by side making it easy to compare translations (see the screenshot to the right). These tools also provide useful information on the meaning of the original words.

Jesus came to set people free from all forms of bondage including sexual discrimination.



Source: Bible Study Tools

² In my small study I was not attempting to assess the overall accuracy of different translations. A translation which rated poorly in my limited test, might otherwise be a good translation. Conversely, a translation which rated highly, might otherwise be a poor one. The focused nature of my study meant I could make no judgments regarding the overall quality of any particular translation.

³ English Bibles written in the 16th and 17th century typically relied on gender-specific language when translating 1 Timothy 3:1. “If any man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.” Were the translators of that time masculinizing scripture in a manner consistent with cultural norms, or did they understand that *any man* meant *any one*? If it was the latter, their sexism was unintended.

Because Jesus took a stand against patriarchy, the women of the New Testament church enjoyed unprecedented freedom. They spoke, they prophesied, they led, and along with the men, they changed their world. If you have ever wondered why Saul the Pharisee arrested both men and women (Act 8:3, 22:4), this is why. The Christian women of the first century had found their voice.

Sadly, it didn't last.

Within a few hundred years, the Church Fathers pushed women back into the patriarchal box of silent servitude. Theologians with Greek mindsets began introducing Aristotelian concepts of subservient womanhood into the church, while translators added them to the Bible. The damage was catastrophic.

The time has come to confront our sexist heritage. One way to undo the damage is to challenge those traditions and translations which are contrary to the liberating Gospel of Jesus.

A good place to start is to find out what the Bible actually says about women, their value to God, and their place in the world.

Appendix 1: How the sexism scores were calculated.

Thirteen verses were compared across 25 popular Bible translations. A translation scored one point for each verse that was translated incorrectly. The lower the score, the more accurate the translation.

1. Acts 18:26

Incorrect: When Aquila and Priscilla heard him... (e.g., KJV)

Better: When Priscilla and Aquila heard him... (e.g., NASB 2020)

The Bible lists Priscilla's name first, but some translations list her second giving the impression that Priscilla was merely an appendage to her husband's ministry:

2. Romans 12:6

Incorrect: If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith (e.g., NIV1984)

Better: If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith (e.g., NIV2011)

There are no gender-specific words such as man in the original language. Translations that add such words convey the impression that women can't prophesy (cf. 1 Cor. 14:5, 31, 39).

3. Romans 16:1

Incorrect: I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church... (e.g., ESV)

Better: I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church... (e.g., NIV2011)

Best: I have good things to say about Phoebe, who is a leader in the church... (e.g., CEV)

Some translations describe Phoebe as a servant rather than using the ministerial term Paul gave her (*diakonos* or deacon). Dismissing Phoebe as a mere servant reinforces the sexist belief that women can't minister.

4. Romans 16:7

Incorrect: Hello to my cousins Andronicus and Junias (e.g., MSG)

Better: Greet Andronicus and Junia (e.g., NLT)

Paul said Junia was outstanding among the apostles, but some translations turn her into a man (Junias) undermining the notion that women can lead.

5. 1 Corinthians 14:36

Incorrect: Did the word of the Lord originate with you? (e.g., CEB)

Better: What! Did the word of the Lord originate with you? (e.g., AMP)

Best: Utter rubbish! Did the Word of God come originally from you! Utter rubbish!
(Source NT)⁴

Also good: Do you actually think that you were the starting point for the Word of God going forth? ... I don't think so! (TPT)

The Corinthians wondered whether women should be silent in the church in accordance with the regulations of Greek and Jewish assemblies. Paul responded with an incredulous “What!” before encouraging them all to prophesy in church. However, [some translations omit Paul's exclamation](#), reinforcing the false impression that Paul did not want women speaking or participating in church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7, 14:5, 26, 31, 39).

6. 2 Corinthians 5:17

Incorrect: If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature (e.g., KJV)

Better: If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation (e.g., CEB)

There are no gender-specific words such as man in the original language. Translations that add such words convey the impression that women are excluded from the new creation or that they have not been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18).

7. Colossians 4:15

Incorrect: Nymphas and the church in his house (e.g., NKJV)

Better: Nympha and the church in her house (e.g., NASB 1995)

Paul recognized a woman called Nympha who led a church in her home. However, some translations turn Nympha into a man (Nymphas) undermining the notion that women can lead.

8. 1 Timothy 2:11

Incorrect: Let a woman learn in silence (e.g., NRSV)

Better: Let a woman learn in quietness (e.g., ASV)

Some translations incorrectly say a women should learn “in silence” reinforcing the misperception that women are to be silent in church. The Greek word for silence is *sigē* (G4602). However, in 1 Timothy 2:11 Paul uses a different word (*hēsuchia*; G2271) which means quietness. Paul is talking about the value of stillness, as in “Be still and know the

⁴ Although *The Source New Testament*, translated by Ann Nyland, returned a low sexism score of 0, I excluded it from my study as it did not meet my definition of a popular Bible translation (e.g., it is not freely available online).

Lord.” We learn from the Lord when we quiet ourselves and submit to his word. Paul is not telling women to be silent in church.

9. 1 Timothy 3:1

Incorrect: If a man is eager to be a church leader (e.g., GNT)

Better: If someone aspires to be a church leader (e.g., NLT)

There are no gender-specific words such as man in the original language. Some translations add gender-specific language reinforcing the sexist notion that women can’t lead churches.⁵

10. 1 Timothy 3:5

Incorrect: If a man does not know how to manage his own household, (e.g., NASB 2020)

Better: If someone does not know how to manage their own household (e.g., NRSV)

There are no gender-specific words such as man in the original language. Some translations add gender-specific language reinforcing the sexist notion that men are the sole breadwinners for their families.

11. 2 Timothy 2:2

Incorrect: Entrust these to faithful men (e.g., NASB 1995)

Better: Entrust these to faithful people (e.g., NIV 2020)

There are no gender-specific words such as man in the original language. The word Paul used was *anthrōpos* which means a person or people. Translations which add gender-specific language reinforce the sexist notion that women can’t lead.

12. 2 Timothy 3:17

Incorrect: So that the man of God may be complete, equipped (e.g., CSB)

Better: So that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped (e.g., NRSV)

⁵ Read Paul’s list of leadership qualifications in a translation such as the American King James Version and you will find eleven gender-specific words: “This is a true saying: If **a man** desire the office of a bishop, **he** desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the **husband** of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; one that rules well **his** own house, having **his** children in subjection with all gravity. (For if **a man** know not how to rule **his** own house, how shall **he** take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride **he** fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover **he** must have a good report of them which are without; lest **he** fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:1–7). Ten of these masculine words have been added by translators. Paul never said church leaders must be male, but they must be monogamous. Writing at a time where men sometimes had multiple wives and mistresses, Paul insisted that married men could not be considered for leadership unless they were “[the husband of \(just\) one wife.](#)”

There are no gender-specific words such as man in the original language. The word Paul used was *anthrōpos* which means a person or people. Translations which add gender-specific language reinforce the sexist notion that women can't be active in ministry.

13. 2 Peter 1:21

Incorrect: Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (e.g., NASB 2020)

Better: Men and women led by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (e.g., CEB)

There are no gender-specific words such as men in the original language. The word Peter used was *anthrōpos* which means a person or people. Translations which add gender-specific language reinforce the sexist notion that only men can be prophets.

Appendix 2: Sexism scores for 25 Bible translations*

	AKJV	AMP	ASV	CEB	CEV	CSB	ESV	GNT	KJV	MSG	NASB 77	NASB 95	NASB 20	NIV 84	NIV 11	NJB	NLT	NRSV	NKJV	Pure	RHE	RV	TPT	WBT	WEB
Acts 18:26	•								•										•	•				•	
Rom 12:6														•											
Rom 16:1	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•					•	•		•		•	•
Rom 16:7		•	•		•					•	•	•		•		•					•	•			
1 Cor 14:36				•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•				
2 Cor 5:17	•		•						•		•									•		•		•	
Col 4:15	•		•						•										•	•	•	•		•	•
1 Tim 2:11	•							•	•	•								•	•	•	•		•	•	
1 Tim 3:1	•	•	•					•	•		•	•	•						•	•	•	•		•	•
1 Tim 3:5	•	•	•					•	•		•	•	•			•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•
2 Tim 2:2	•	•	•			•	•		•		•	•		•					•	•	•	•		•	•
2 Tim 3:17	•	•	•			•	•		•		•	•		•					•	•	•	•		•	•
2 Pet 1:21	•	•	•			•	•		•		•	•	•	•					•	•	•	•		•	•
Total	10	6	9	2	2	5	5	5	10	4	9	8	5	7	1	3	2	2	10	11	9	9	2	10	7

* The lower the score, the more accurate the translation across the thirteen verses

AKJV = American King James Version, AMP = Amplified Bible, ASV = American Standard Version, CEB = Common English Bible, CEV = Contemporary English Version, CSB = Christian Standard Bible, ESV = English Standard Version, GNT = Good News Translation, KJV = King James Version, MSG = The Message Bible NASB = New American Standard Bible (3 editions), NIV = New International Version (2 editions), NJB = New Jerusalem Bible, NLT = New Living Translation, NRSV = New Revised Standard Version, NKJV = New King James Version, Pure = The Pure Word Translation, RHE = Douay-Rheims Bible, RV = Revised Version, TPT = The Passion Translation, WBT = Webster's Bible Translation, WEB = World English Bible.

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Author bio

Dr. Paul Ellis is the author of award-winning books such as [The Hyper-Grace Gospel](#) and [Letters from Jesus](#). His best-selling [Gospel in Ten Words](#) has been translated into ten languages. His website, [Escape to Reality](#), has been rated one of the world's top Christian blogs. Formerly a pastor and a business school professor, Paul writes full time on the gospel of grace. His current project is [The Grace Commentary](#). Paul lives in New Zealand with his wife Camilla and their four children.

