

BOOK REVIEWS

Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem. *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000. xxix + 377 pp. \$19.99.

Since the 1980s, an increasing number of new Bible translations (or revisions of existing ones) have been published that, because of their characteristic approach to (grammatical) gender, are often called "gender-neutral" translations (other terms are "gender-generic," "gender-inclusive," "inclusive language," or, more sympathetically, "gender-accurate"). The approach to gender characteristic of these versions essentially amounts to something like this: whenever the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek original uses a masculine expression to refer to one or more persons that are meant to be understood as being either male or female, gender-specific expressions are to be avoided in the English translation. In order to achieve this, various (lexical and grammatical) strategies are employed: "humankind," for instance, is generally preferred to "mankind," "person" (when contextually appropriate) to "man," "children" to "sons," "brothers and sisters" to "brothers," "they" or a semantically equivalent passive construction to gender-neutral "he," etc.—a type of usage that has established itself widely outside the field of Bible translation, especially among writers and editors of academic prose who are particularly serious about avoiding gender bias (thought to be connected with the older usage). A point to be carefully noted is that in none of these (major) Bible translations has there been any changes in Scripture's male-oriented references to God and Jesus.

Whereas the earlier gender-neutral translations such as the *New Century Version/International Children's Bible* (1986/1987), the *New Revised Standard Version* (1990), or the *Contemporary English Version* (1995) went largely unnoticed or received only minor criticism, the situation changed in 1997 when it became clear that the publication of a gender-inclusive revision of the *New International Version*, the most widely used Bible translation, was imminent (a corresponding anglicized edition already being available in Great Britain). Sparked off by the cover story of the March 29, 1997 issue of the weekly news magazine *World* ("The Stealth Bible: The Popular *New International Version* is Quietly Going 'Gender-Neutral'"), a major controversy started among evangelical Christians in North America involving many of the most respected leaders. A number of personalities—among these the theologians J. I. Packer, W. A. Grudem, R. C. Sproul, and John Piper—challenged the gender-neutral approach (to be adopted in the revised NIV) as definitely problematic, maintaining that the accuracy and thus the trustworthiness of Bible translation were at stake. In fact, many critics suspected that the revision was determined by a feminist or egalitarian agenda and demanded that the publication of the gender-inclusive revision of the NIV be stopped. It was indeed stopped—temporarily at least, a corresponding, but more restrained edition called

Today's New International Version now being announced (NT for spring 2002; full Bible expected 2005; see www.TNIV.info)— apparently as a direct result of discussions held at a meeting convened by James Dobson (Focus on the Family) in Colorado Springs on May 27, 1997, between representatives of the NIV publishers (Zondervan and International Bible Society) on the one hand and leading critics of the revision (including the authors of the title being reviewed here) on the other. This meeting *inter alia* led to a statement of gender-relevant translation principles signed, it seems, by all participants: the “Colorado Springs Guidelines for Translation of Gender-Related Language in Scripture.” Subsequently—particularly after pertinent discussions in the October 27 issue of *Christianity Today*—many evangelical Christians, leaders and others, signed the Colorado Springs Guidelines in support of the unequivocal (though in many respects moderate) disapproval of the gender-neutral approach expressed in the document. While those responsible for the Colorado Springs Guidelines have no doubt made every effort to be as objective and fair as possible in their criticism of the approach and to be as irenic as possible in expressing it, many other critics resorted to varying forms and degrees of polemics (for the more extreme ones, see D. A. Carson’s publication mentioned below, chap. 1 on what he calls “Bible Rage”).

Many of those who signed the Colorado Springs Guidelines appear to have done so primarily because of their concern to maintain complementarianism, which they think is seriously jeopardized by an adoption of gender-neutral translation principles. Those defending these principles, however, are not confined to egalitarian ranks. Important members of the complementarian camp have spoken out against linking too tightly the issue of complementarianism to that of gender-neutral Bible translation, D. A. Carson being among the most prominent of these. In his *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) he offers a careful analysis of the complex issues involved in the debate. In the light of both linguistic and biblical considerations, he maintains that basically the gender-neutral approach to Bible translation is unobjectionable (including the replacement of generic “he” by “they” and other suitable constructions, which he gives special attention to in his treatment of the subject). At the same time, he points out that in order to ensure optimal accuracy and clarity, great care must be taken not only to find adequate translation principles but also to apply them judiciously when dealing with the individual contexts concerned. Thus, when evaluating the gender-neutral renderings contained in the revised NIV (or in the NRSV), in a significant number of cases, he accepted the criticisms voiced by Colorado Springs Guidelines scholars such as Grudem as well-founded, though usually not for the reasons adduced by the latter, but because the revisers had applied the accepted, basically adequate, translation principles poorly in the contexts in question.

As leading members of the team responsible for formulating the Colorado Springs Guidelines, the two authors of the volume being reviewed here feel that much more is involved in the many infelicities encountered in the revised NIV and other gender-neutral Bible translations. They see the accuracy of the Bible translation(s) clearly at stake and thus undertake to present the reader with an examination of “gender-neutral translations and the thinking that lies behind them” (p. 6). They are not prepared to let people dismiss the problematic renderings in question simply as “a few minor lapses in accuracy, due to general human frailty” (p. 298). On the

contrary, in their judgment, the "omissions and alterations in gender-neutral versions are systematic in character and line up with [the feminist] program" (p. 298).

In the foreword to the book Valerie Becker Makkai, Associate Professor of Linguistics, University of Illinois-Chicago, points out a number of linguistic insights about language changes relevant to the discussion, some of which suggest that gender-neutral Bible versions may not be as urgently called for as many think ("We do not yet know . . . what the ultimate fate of generic *he* will be, and we probably will not know for years. It is not the job of the Bible translator . . . to lead the charge in such a case" [p. xxi]). The authors' position is set out and explained in a series of fifteen chapters dealing with a variety of themes and sub-themes.

Chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-99) have chiefly a preliminary function. Chapter 1 briefly introduces the gender-neutral controversy and the objectives of the book. In chap. 2 we are told in considerable detail the history of the controversy. Chapter 3 carefully sets out the major reasons for the authors' belief in the divine authority and inerrancy of the Bible and some of the implications such a belief, in their view, is expected to have generally and particularly when translating the Word of God. Chapter 4 informs us about basic principles of Bible translation and the various complexities facing translators, *inter alia* the "tension between preserving form and explaining meaning." The authors believe that while more paraphrastic versions may be useful for evangelistic purposes, the "more mature Bible student will want to have a translation with more preservation of form" (p. 80), the NIV being "a good 'middle of the road' compromise that can simultaneously serve many needs" (p. 80).

In chaps. 5-13 (pp. 101-289) a variety of gender-related aspects of Bible translation are discussed; the authors' focus, however, is clearly on generic "he," which they insist is still fully appropriate in today's English and which, in the interest of accuracy, should be retained in Bible translations such as the NIV. Chapter 5 lists "permissible changes in translating gender-related terms" (e.g., replacing "man" and "men" by "people" when the original includes women), while chap. 6 lists "unacceptable changes that eliminate references to men" (e.g., in historical passages and parables). Chapters 7-11 are wholly devoted to generic "he." In chap. 7 the authors define generic "he" and explain why in their view it is indispensable. They maintain that replacing it, e.g., by "they" or "you" as encountered in gender-neutral versions, could easily entail a loss of "implicated meaning" (e.g., starting point of generic "you" as opposed to generic "he") or "distortions in meaning" (e.g., preferring "they" to "he" resulting in a shift of focus from an individual to a group). Chapter 8 reviews the history of feminist opposition to generic "he." The authors think that though many supporters of the gender-neutral approach are well-meaning people and many of them are complementarians, "they have unwittingly supported part of the agenda of the feminist movement and have compromised accuracy for the sake of fitting in with feminist-influenced cultural preferences" (p. 161). In chaps. 9 to 11 the authors seek first to refute "arguments for avoiding generic 'he' for the sake of acceptability" (e.g., the argument that "Bible translations should avoid controversy where possible" or that they "need to be sensitive to women"); second, to answer "other objections against generic 'he'" (e.g., that "people will misunderstand generic 'he'"); and finally, to show that "ordinary people can understand generic 'he.'" We are warned of "the slippery slope," i.e., the danger of translators more and more "sacrificing

accuracy because certain expressions are thought to be offensive to the dominant culture" (p. 187). The authors conclude that "the 'problem' with generic 'he' is not with a single occurrence but with [a] pattern of thought in the Bible . . . a translator is not free to change or tone down in translation" (p. 232). Further issues in translating gender are addressed in chaps. 12 and 13 (e.g., "man" for the human race, "Son of Man," "fathers," "brother," "son") taking the reader through a sizable number of relevant passages to demonstrate to what extent "changes" may be regarded as acceptable (generally opting for a fairly literal approach).

In the concluding chapters 14 and 15 (pp. 291-98), the authors address a number of "practical application questions" (e.g., "Isn't this controversy for experts only?" "What can I do to help?") and finally present us with their conclusion. They maintain that the "integrity of the meaning of the Word of God has been compromised in the process" of producing gender-neutral Bible translations with their systematic omissions and alterations in deference to feminist dogma (p. 298), and they challenge us to "follow the Bible alone, submitting to all its teachings and all its nuances" (p. 298).

A variety of additional supporting material is presented in six appendices (e.g., a fairly lengthy one reproducing the Colorado Springs Guidelines and assessing their significance, and one on "the relation of generic 'he' to third-person generic singulars in Hebrew and Greek"). Finally a Scripture index and an index of persons are added to make the volume more accessible.

Reading the book left me with somewhat mixed feelings (I am a European linguist of evangelical [basically complementarian] persuasion with a special interest in questions of contrastive linguistics and translation theory). The authors have no doubt produced a careful, informative, and well-documented study on this complex subject. I have found both their motives (as described on pp. 6f.) and their irenic tone very appealing. I am pleased with the restraint and balance in evidence throughout, particularly in chap. 5 listing "permissible" gender-neutral "changes" (e.g., Rom 3:27 "a man" to "a person" [p. 96] or, when both sexes are in view, "brothers" to "brothers and sisters" [pp. 99 and 263ff.]). I enjoyed reading what the authors say about the authority and inerrancy of the Bible in chap. 3 (I wish we would read more of this kind of writing over here). Many, perhaps even the majority, of the criticisms voiced against problematic renderings in gender-neutral versions, seem acceptable to me, though usually not for quite the reasons adduced by the authors—which leads me to highlight certain aspects of the book I would definitely see in a less favorable light. I will concentrate my comments on the core theme of the book, viz. generic "he" (in other respects the book seems to be much less open to criticism).

Before turning to a more linguistically-oriented evaluation of the authors' position, let me make a brief comment as a disciple of Christ. Should we not, as Bible believing Christians, be committed to maintaining a proper balance between taking God's Word seriously down to "the smallest letter" (Matt 5:18) and avoiding "quarreling about words" (2 Tim 2:14)? I wonder whether in dealing with the gender-neutral controversy, particularly as it seems to boil down to discussions on generic "he," we have sufficiently been keeping this in mind.

I agree with the authors that the "integrity of the meaning of the Word of God" (p. 298) must never be compromised when translating the Bible. Translators are not free to omit or alter anything communicated by the original, either systematically or unsystematically, in deference to feminist

or to any other (extra-biblical) dogma. The authors, however, have failed to convince me that Bible translators adopting the gender-neutral approach, such as those behind the revised NIV, have indeed exceeded the limits in question to any significant extent. It is true that there are a number of passages—gender-related ones and others—where the translators could have done a better job (cf. the infelicitous or problematic renderings referred to earlier, which the authors and Carson, as well as the present reviewer, are similarly critical of). But it would hardly be denied by anybody that fairly sizable lists of imperfections could be drawn up for other versions, too. In my view, the authors have not really proven that the gender-related infelicities in the revised NIV, for instance, are more than “lapses in accuracy, due to general human frailty” (p. 298). Of course, at least some of these may be attributable to a somewhat over-enthusiastic commitment to adjusting the language of the NIV to what the revisers regard as normative usage in today’s English regarding gender. Yet there is simply not sufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion that the revisers of the NIV have been determined by an egalitarian or feminist agenda (prominent members of the Committee on Bible Translation are complementarians!).

Whereas the revisers of the NIV along with a great many Christian and non-Christian native speakers of English regard the avoidance of generic “he” as normative usage in today’s English, the authors disagree, one of the main points of their book being that generic “he” is still wholly adequate today. Whether or not this is actually the case in fact seems to be a (if not the) crucial question. We need to know to what extent the unacceptability of generic “he” is part of today’s English. Should it prove to be no more than a norm upheld by a small group of ideological extremists trying (basically unsuccessfully) to impose it on the rest of the language community, Bible translators may safely ignore it. If, however, it became clear that this usage has already become part of the linguistic code of a significant segment of the English speaking community, Bible translators cannot afford to disregard it, whether or not we agree with the original reasons for its appearance (NT authors similarly do not hesitate to use established expressions—of theologically doubtful origins—such as *eudonymos*, literally “with a good name/honored/fortunate,” originally introduced as a euphemism for *aristeros* “left [side]” [itself possibly an early euphemism], the left side superstitiously being regarded as the unlucky side. Once a mode of expression is established in a language, native speakers are normally unaware of its origin when using it). What would be a significant segment of the English speaking community? I would have thought of something like the majority of college graduates under thirty, as this appears to me the core target group of linguistically updated Bible translations. Only broadly based empirical studies can show to what extent the unacceptability of generic “he” has actually become part of which code or register in today’s English (according to the Douglas Biber et al., *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* [New York/Harlow [UK]: Longman, 1999], 317, it definitely seems to be established among writers and editors of academic prose; as pointed out above, for linguist Valerie Becker Makkai [p. xxi] the ultimate fate of generic “he” is uncertain).

But what about the authors’ insistence that replacing generic “he” entails a loss of accuracy, undermining scriptural teaching, particularly the one on male-female relations? Though I applaud the authors’ concern for accuracy and for upholding scriptural teaching, from a linguistic point of view, I regard such insistence as inappropriate, mainly for reasons such as

these: (1) Generic "he," by definition, is used with reference to a class ("genus") of persons whose sex is unknown or irrelevant; it is not a gender-specific, but a dual gender reference pronoun (cf. *Longman Grammar*, p. 316). Because it typically refers to more than one person, semantically or notionally (as opposed to grammatically) it has to be viewed as a plural expression. This is one reason why it can be replaced by "they" (very often connected with the same type of reference) usually without affecting in any perceptible way the content of the utterance in which it occurs. If in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek utterance there is reference to a class of persons whose sex is unknown or irrelevant, either generic "he" or "they" (or some other functional equivalent) would seem acceptable. Linguistically it would, therefore, seem inappropriate to insist on opting exclusively for generic "he" on the grounds that this preserves any male-female distinctions found in the original—after all, in the original utterance concerned, no such distinction is communicated (in virtue of the expression in question)! Scriptural contexts that do communicate teaching on male-female relations in no instance depend on the use or non-use of generic "he," a fact anyone can check out for himself with the help of a concordance or appropriate electronic tools. This, of course, is due to the fact that utterances communicating thought (including biblical teaching) are much more than simple concatenations of items of vocabulary (information and messages being conveyed above the word-level through propositions, coherently combined; cf. e.g., Talmy Givón, *Syntax: An Introduction*, vol. 1 [Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2001], 9-11). (2) The authors, to some extent agreeing with what has just been said, claim that the Hebrew and Greek modes of expression behind generic "he" do have a "male component of meaning" and that they "carry an orientation toward thinking in terms of male examples" (p. 192). It is not impossible that these modes of expression were connected with something of a "male component of meaning." If so, it was probably of minor communicative significance. I suspect (though as a non-native speaker I cannot be sure) that even in English it was of fairly minor communicative significance, traditionally, people normally not being aware of it when using generic "he." Greater awareness of it probably arose along with the spreading concern to avoid sexual bias (critics of gender-neutral versions claiming that in generic "he" a "male component of meaning" is perceptible could then be seen as unwittingly witnessing to its obsolescence!). However that may be in the case of English generic "he," the "masculinity" of the corresponding Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek constructions is demonstrably less pronounced than suggested by the authors.

There are important differences between these three languages and English regarding the way the linguistic category of grammatical gender is related to the extra-linguistic category of human gender. In modern English (unlike in Old and Middle English) grammatical gender distinctions are found only with third person singular personal pronouns ("he/him/his"; "she/her/hers"; "it/its"), the masculine and feminine items regularly being used to refer to male and female persons respectively (dual gender personal reference [generic "he"] and non-personal reference to pets, countries, ships and the like being comparatively minor exceptions). In Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, on the other hand, there are grammatical gender distinctions determining not only the third person singular personal pronouns, but also many other parts of the grammatical system: the third person plural ("they"); in Hebrew and Aramaic even the second person singular and

plural ("you" ["thou" and "ye"]); in all three languages also the demonstrative and other pronouns ("this", "that," etc.); the nouns (e.g., "king") and adjectives (e.g., "great") including participles (e.g. "broken," "breaking"); in Greek also the (definite) article ("the"). And what is more, in these languages masculine and feminine expressions are not used exclusively (as is virtually the case in modern English) with reference to male and female persons, not even to male and female animals, but also to entirely sexless entities such as houses, tables, chairs, windows, love, hatred, work, rest, etc. In Hebrew and Aramaic (like in French, Italian, etc.) things are referred to by either masculine or feminine expressions, similarly in Greek, where, however, in many cases things are referred to by neuter expressions (though these in other instances may refer to male or female persons).

This should be sufficient to demonstrate that in the original languages of the Bible: a) the linguistic (grammatical) category of masculine is much more widely distributed and thus less conspicuous and therefore semantically less weighty than in English (with gender distinctions being restricted to the third person singular personal pronoun); and b) the connection between the linguistic (grammatical) category of masculine and the extra-linguistic category of maleness is considerably less pronounced than in English (with the masculine generally referring to male persons). In the light of these facts it would seem rather inappropriate to insist that in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek expressions behind English generic "he" there is a "male component of meaning" carrying "an orientation toward thinking in terms of male examples" and that, because of this, replacing generic "he" entails a loss of accuracy. In light of these same facts (and some others), the possible shift of focus from an individual to a group in some contexts when generic "he" is replaced by "they"—though in some respects deplorable—should not be overrated either. The original languages themselves (particularly in Deuteronomy, as pointed out by Carson) quite often switch between the singular and the plural apparently without any change of reference. Moreover neither in these nor in any other instances do modern English Bible translations usually mark the difference between the singular and the plural in the second person (without people normally being worried about a shift of focus).

Let me finish with an observation that is somewhat more supportive of the main thrust of the book. Though from a linguistic point of view I regard core arguments presented in it as less than satisfactory, I believe that there is one aspect to this study that promoters of gender-neutral Bible translations may have not sufficiently taken into account: The strong reaction (in my view over-reaction) against these versions from the authors and other signees of the Colorado Springs Guidelines (by no means just a fringe group) demonstrates that the revised NIV, in spite of its high quality from a purely exegetical and linguistic point of view, might score more modestly if evaluated with reference to a criterion whose importance is often underestimated. It is the criterion of taking audience expectations seriously (some call it the criterion of "perceived authenticity," others prefer the term "acceptability," cf. *Notes on Translation* 12 [1998, 3]: 1-15, and 15 [2001, 1]: 40-53). What is the use of producing a methodologically perfect translation if the target audience refuses to accept it? I do not know whether or not the opposition to the revised NIV is momentous enough that it would be legitimate to speak of unacceptability. Still, if this criterion had been taken more seriously, the translators might well have exercised greater restraint

when preparing their controversial “inclusive language” revision. The *Today’s New International Version*, intended to replace it shortly, seems more moderate regarding gender-related aspects, and will prove hopefully more acceptable, too.

Let me summarize my evaluation. It is true that empirical studies will still have to establish to what extent the unacceptability of generic “he” is normative in today’s English. Still, the authors’ insistence on retaining generic “he” in Bible translation for fear of losing the “male component of meaning” thought to be connected with the corresponding original language expressions needs to be regarded as inappropriate from a linguistic point of view because: a) By definition generic “he” refers to a class of persons whose sex is unknown or irrelevant and is thus notionally plural and in many cases functionally equivalent to (generic) “they.” In utterances using these pronouns (in virtue of these) no male-female distinction is communicated, nor in the original language utterances behind them. b) In Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek the connection between (grammatical) masculinity and (human) maleness was considerably less pronounced and semantically less weighty than in English. The “male component of meaning” of (non-generic) “he” in English should therefore not be projected simplistically into corresponding (non-generic) original language expressions, let alone those with generic function.

On the other hand, promoters of gender-neutral Bible translations would do well to take audience expectations seriously (keeping in mind the criterion of “perceived authenticity” or “acceptability”).

Heinrich von Siebenthal
Freie Theologische Akademie
Giessen, Germany