



The Myth of the Creation of Woman in Genesis 2: 18–23 and its Possible Translations – the Consequences for Christian Anthropology

Aleksander Gomola

UNESCO Chair in Translation Studies and Intercultural Communication
Jagiellonian University in Krakow

Abstract

This article discusses selected examples of English and Polish translations of the myth of the creation of man in Genesis 2, 18–23. Its purpose is to present various translations of the Hebrew text resulting from the polysemic character of the Hebrew terms *adam* and *ezer kenegedo* and how they may lead to different versions of the Christian anthropology and male-female relationships. The article presents the feminist interpretations of Genesis 2, 18–23 as well as its two different contemporary Polish Catholic translations resulting in two different versions of the Christian anthropology. In the conclusions, the author points to the role of translation as a factor inevitably modifying (warping) the original text.

Key words: myth, creation, woman, translation, Bible, feminism

Słowa kluczowe: mit, stworzenie, kobieta, przekład, Biblia, feminizm

The ancient nature of myths involves their being passed down through generations and across cultures. The transfer of myths, especially between cultures and civilisations, is achieved mainly by the translation process and everything that goes with it, namely various forms of interpretation, adaptation or even distortion. Names of mythical heroes are changed, as in the case of Greek and Roman mythologies, narratives are adapted to local needs, some are expanded, others censored. Since much of the mythical tradition of the world, including Western civilisation, goes back to pre-historic times, before the invention of writing, mythical stories and narratives were passed down and spread orally, undergoing various changes and modifications. Yet even with the advent of writing and the translation process proper (i.e. rendering a text into another language), distortions and interpretations of the original text and its contents did not end. The aim of this paper is to show some elements of the myth

translation process in the past and present, taking as an example the biblical myth of the creation of woman, and to show how specific, translation-related factors may have a strong effect on the way the myth is used as either a foundational or a buttressing element of a concrete anthropology. The other aim is to demonstrate how two very different modern Polish translations of the same Genesis text coexist, both with the formal approval of the Catholic Church in Poland, while at the same time leading to entirely different anthropological conclusions.

Biblical myths of creation

Unlike, for example, Hindu myths of creations, presenting various scenarios of the origin of the world, the Judeo-Christian Western civilisation associates the mythical origins of the world with the biblical book of Genesis, which was (has been?) the foundational religious/ideological text shaping the worldview of Western societies for many centuries. According to the most popular translations of the Hebrew original (Gen 2: 18–23), the text presents the creation of woman from man and defines woman's role as subordinate to man. The myth of creation of woman from man was also a crucial component of Western anthropology, until modern times being the cornerstone of relations between the two sexes and a justification of the inequality between them for Christians, sanctioned by God.

Interestingly, the Bible proposes two, radically different, accounts of the creation of humankind: one in which it is presented as the final act of creation of the universe and in which no hierarchy or inequality between the sexes is presupposed; and the other, more familiar to us, in which, as it seems most often, woman is made from man and God seems to attribute different roles to men and women, proclaiming the latter to be “helpers” of men (Gen 2: 18–23).

The first biblical myth of the creation of humankind presents humans as the crown of creation and underlines the complementarity and equality of men and women:

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen 1: 26–28¹).

If Western civilisation were to inherit only this account of creation of humankind, (or – to put it in terms of biblical historical criticism – if we were to be left only with the Priestly source of Genesis, as the first book of the Bible is actually a result of an editing process comprising many different and much older sources), Western anthropology might have looked entirely different. Yet another source of the Genesis text – the Yahwist – presents a longer account of the creation of human beings in Gen

¹ Bible quotes, if not indicated otherwise, from *New American Standard Bible*, Nashville 1995.

2: 18–23: a myth we are all familiar with, in which Adam, the first male, cannot find anyone like him among other creatures, so God decides to give him a companion, and thanks to this woman appears – born from man. This myth, thanks to its narrative structure and internal dynamics (Adam’s loneliness, his sleep, God’s “surgical operation” involving Adam’s rib), appeals more strongly to readers of the Bible and, overshadowing the Priestly source recorded in Gen 2: 18–23, has become an integral part of the collective mythical memory of the Judeo-Christian world.

Gen 2: 18–23 may be approached from various perspectives, and it has been the focus of interest of as many various disciplines as anthropology, sociology, psychology or, most recently, gender studies. However, in most cases whenever the text is quoted or some of its elements are used to illustrate one thesis or another, those who employ it seem to ignore the fact that it originated in ancient Hebrew culture, distant from ours in time and space, and reached the Western world not as the original text but as a translation: first the Greek one (the Septuagint), then the Latin one (the Vulgate), and later on in the form of translations into various modern Western and non-Western languages in modern times. And since an act of translation is always an act of interpretation or even a betrayal of the original text, (*traductor traditor est*, as the old Latin adage goes), it is worth considering to what extent the original ideas of the myth are present in its translations into various languages in their non-distorted forms.

Indeed, it turns out that the story in Gen 2: 18–23, conveying the secondary character of woman compared to man in the chronological, ontological and practical order – as virtually all translations of the narrative into Western languages suggest – is not as obvious and unproblematic as it seems to be.

Gen 2: 18–23 and its possible meanings

The problem with Gen 2: 18–23 is that the narrative presented in it may be interpreted and understood differently depending on how one translates the crucial term occurring there several times, namely *adam*² – a polysemic term with various meanings. According to the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, “*adam* means ‘human’ and can be used either collectively (‘humankind’) or individually (‘a human’). When used in contrast to a word for woman or female, it can also indicate a specifically male human. In Gen. 1–5 the word is used to refer to the first human, Adam. This word is used in contexts that play upon all of the different senses of the word – collective, individual, gender nonspecific, and male.”³

² For the sake of convenience I am using the simplest possible version of transcription of the Hebrew terms.

³ *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, D.N. Freedman, A.C. Myers (eds.), Grand Rapids 2000, p. 18. St. Jerome was also aware of this ambiguity, as he wrote in his treatise on Genesis: “He made them man and woman, and blessed them, and called their name Adam, that is, mankind. So the designation ‘man’ is applicable both to man and to woman”, *Jerome’s Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, C.T.R. Hayward (ed.) Oxford 1995, p. 35.

This ambiguity of *adam* cannot be retained easily in translation, which the following rendering of the original text into English demonstrates:

“Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one [*adam*] to work the ground ... Then the LORD God formed a man [*adam*] from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man [*adam*] became a living being” (Gen 2: 4–7). (...) “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man [*adam*] to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’. Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man [*adam*] to see what he would name them; and whatever the man [*adam*] called each living creature, that was its name. So the man [*adam*] gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam [*adam*] no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man [*adam*] to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s [*adam*] ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man [*adam*], and he brought her to the man [*adam*]. The man [*adam*] said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called »woman« [*ishshah*] for she was taken out of man [*ish*]’” (Gen 2: 18–23).

First of all, it is worth mentioning that Gen 2: 4–7 is a modified repetition of a myth that is much older than the Genesis narrative, namely the Babylonian *Epic of Atra-hasis*, written down in the mid-17th century BCE, but probably much older, as it had been passed down through oral transmission. According to this epic, humans were created because the gods were too tired to till the ground.⁴

The Genesis version seems to be “aimed at younger audiences,” as *adam* is simply formed from the dust, while in *Epic of Atra-hasis* one of the gods is killed first and his flesh, blood and intelligence are added to clay before humans are formed from it. This adaptation of a much older narrative by those who compiled the Hebrew Bible with many crucial mythical narratives of Western civilisation is yet another example of how myths spread among cultures and peoples and how they change during that transfer from one culture to another.

The New American Standard Bible (NASB), quoted above, is regarded as one of the most literally translated of 20th-century English Bible translations. Yet, as we can see, this literalness does not reflect the polysemy of *adam*. Conversely, we are left with the false impression that the original uses at least four distinct terms in the passage above – “a man,” “the man,” “no one,” and “Adam” – while in fact all of them are translations/interpretations of the same term.

The necessity of reduction of polysemy of terms in a source language to one specific interpretation in a target language is part and parcel of the translation process. While in literary translation this may result in impoverishing the original and decreasing its aesthetic values, in a religious and normative text like the Bible this

⁴ *The Legacy of Mesopotamia*, S. Dalley (ed.), New York 1998, p. 65–66; *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, G.F. Bromiley, E.E. Harrison (eds.), Grand Rapids 1979, s. 94.

may create a specific paradigm through which the text and other sacred texts will be perceived, interpreted and created.⁵ This is the case here.

The protean character of *adam* allows for two radically different interpretations of the original text of Gen 2: 18–23: the traditional one, stressing the primary character of man (male); and a non-traditional one, in which man (male) does not appear until woman is created and thus the equality of sexes is maintained, like in Gen 1: 26–28. As it almost always happens, this possible duality of interpretation is lost in translation, as the polysemy of the original *adam* has to be rendered in one (and only one) specific way. In other words, an act of translation becomes (as usual) an act of interpretation; however, in this case the result is an interpretation with serious ideological consequences.

Another crucial phrase in Gen 2: 18–23 is *ezer kenegedo/kenegdo*, usually translated as “a suitable helper” and referring to the role of woman with regard to man, as planned by God. Like *adam* this “multiinterpretable”⁶ phrase may be rendered in more than one way, presenting her as either equal or subordinate to man. Also in this case, decisions made by translators, even today, may strengthen the traditional pattern of relations between the sexes in Christianity or – proposing a new translation – break with it, opening up a new perspective also rooted in the sacred text.

The traditional reading and rendering of Gen 2: 18–23

The translation of Gen 2: 18–23 taken from the NASB and quoted above is a good example of the traditional reading and rendering of the Hebrew text. We learn as early as in Gen 2, 7 that the first human created by God was male (“the man [*adam*] became a living being”). This perspective is maintained consistently throughout the text, through both the same phrase (“the man”) and the third person singular masculine pronoun (“helper suitable for *him*”). It is the man that gives names to all animals (thus being the one above them) and when *he* falls asleep, God creates a woman from *his* body. So according to this perspective, woman is secondary to man, and this chronological and ontological order of relations between the sexes is underscored in the very last sentence of the passage, containing an etymological explanation of the Hebrew terms for them from which we learn that the Hebrew term for woman (*ish-shah*) may be explained by the fact that she comes from man (*ish*).

The phrase “helper suitable for him” that appears in the translation is also not as obvious as it may seem, which will be demonstrated below. For now, let us just say that it reinforces the general tone of the text. Not only is woman created from man and later than he was, but also her role is precisely defined as that of a “suitable helper” for man, which suggests her lower status.

⁵ Cf 1 Cor. 11: 7–9 where Paul refers to Gen 2: 18–23 to justify the supremacy of man: “A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.”

⁶ L. Teugels, *The Creation of the Human in Rabbinic Interpretation* [in:] *The Creation of Man and Woman: Interpretations of the Biblical Narratives in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, G.P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), Boston 2000, p. 121.

Having read Gen 2: 18–23 as it was translated above, therefore (and this translation is more or less identical in most modern English translations of the Bible), we must come to the conclusion that the creation myth presented in it defines unambiguously relations between the sexes and the status of women in Judeo-Christian tradition. It is this androcentric interpretation of the creation myth, continued later on in the Bible, that was part of the Western world for centuries. As late as 1862, in a divorce case where a wife accused her spouse of domestic violence, an American court used the following argument to justify the rough-mannered husband: “Unto the woman it is said: ‘Thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee’” (Genesis 3: 16). It follows that the law gives the husband power to use such a degree of force as is necessary to make the wife behave herself and know her place.⁷ But is this really the only possible meaning of Gen 2: 18–23? It seems that it is not, since biblical scholars point to the ambiguity of *adam*, arguing that “Adam before the creation of woman is in a sense ‘not yet’ specifically male, and can be seen as both an individual and collective human.”⁸

A non-traditional reading/rendering of Gen 2: 18–23

The other, much less androcentric translation/interpretation of the text was proposed almost half a century ago by feminist thought. For example, Phyllis Trible, one of the most prominent feminist scholars, follows the definition proposed by the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (“Adam is in a sense not yet specifically male”) arguing that in Gen 2, 7 “the earth creature here is precisely and only the human being, sexually undifferentiated.”⁹ What is more, as Kawashima remarks, in her earlier study of the creation myth in Genesis Trible prefers the term “androgynous” to “sexually undifferentiated.”¹⁰ Carol Myers also observes that “the concept of an androgynous first person [Adam – A.G.] resonates with its ancient Near Eastern context,” adding that it is similar to the Mesopotamian concept of humanity originating with one androgynous being, called *amilu* and contrasted with deities and animals.¹¹ Thus we have another example of myth translation resulting in transferring and reinterpreting certain ideas from one culture into another. The androgynous character of *adam* also makes us think of the third androgynous sex mentioned in Plato’s *Symposium* as existing at the beginning of the world. Trible’s interpretation might therefore lead us to even deeper layers of the collective memory of humankind common to the Greek and the Mesopotamian culture.

⁷ P. Korsak, *Translating the Bible: Bible Translations and Gender Issues* [in:] A. Brenner, J.W. van Henten (eds.), *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century. Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion*, London 2002, p. 142.

⁸ *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible...*, p. 18.

⁹ P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Philadelphia 1978, p. 80.

¹⁰ R.S. Kawashima, *A Revisionist Reading Revisited: On the Creation of Adam and Then Eve*, „*Vetus Testamentum*” 2006, No 56 (1), p. 46, n. 2; P. Trible, *Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation*, „*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*” 1973, No 41, p. 35.

¹¹ C. Myers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, New York 2013, p. 72–73.

Only through the appearance of woman, Tribble argues, does the androgynous Adam receive his sexuality, saying that “the old creature transformed [when the rib is taken from its body – AG] is male, similarly receiving identity in a word that is new to the story, *ish*”¹². Other scholars support Tribble’s interpretation. In his work on mythopoetic role of the Bible, Batto argues that even the Hebrew term usually translated as “rib” is semantically broader and may mean also “side.” In other words, God is “reshaping the whole [*adam* – A.G.] into two complementary halves.”¹³

Yet another interpretation of Gen 2: 18–23 is proposed by Mary Daly, who claims that the whole intention of the text is to deny the tradition of a female creator and the original supremacy of the female sex, adding that the fact that Eve was born of Adam is an example of “the first among history’s unmarried pregnant males who courageously chose childbirth under sedation rather than abortion, consequently obtaining a child-bride.”¹⁴

The consequences of these and other feminist readings of Gen 2: 18–23 are obvious: man cannot be superior to woman, because before woman there was no man, and thus the chronological and ontological primacy of man is eliminated. Such a radical interpretation of the biblical myth may of course lead to controversies. Some researchers, like Kawashima, reject it altogether, regarding it simply as a “misreading” of the original text and “a minority opinion.”¹⁵ Others remind us that the feminist interpretations of Gen 2: 18–23 represent a postmodern literary criticism approach questioning one, intrinsic and stable meaning of any text.¹⁶ Yet one does not have to be a proponent of postmodernism in order to reinterpret the text looking for its new meanings. Even in the Christian tradition, definitely a patriarchal and androcentric one, it is possible to find such interpretations of the key elements of the myth that aim to rescue the status of women and introduce more equality between the sexes. For example, referring to creation of woman from a rib, the medieval scholastic scholar Peter Lombard wrote in his *Sentences* (1, 2, 18): “Eve was not taken from the feet of Adam to be his slave, nor from his head to be his lord, but from his side to be his partner.”¹⁷ Peter Abelard, another medieval thinker, highlights the anatomical role of the rib, saying that “woman was formed from the rib of man to be strong as bones.”¹⁸ Other Christian thinkers pointed out that the rib is a superior material to clay, which meant that even if man was created first, God’s second creation, that of woman, surpassed the first one.¹⁹ Lombard, Abelard and other thinkers may be called medieval “spin doctors,” as their aim was to reinterpret the foundational myth of the Christian culture in such a way as to decrease

¹² P. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality...*, 98.

¹³ B.F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon. Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*, Louisville 1992, p. 54.

¹⁴ M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Boston 1973, 195.

¹⁵ R. Kawashima, *op.cit.*, p. 48, 46.

¹⁶ J.J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel. Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, Grand Rapids 2005, p. 79.

¹⁷ W.E. Phipps, *Genesis and Gender: Biblical Myths of Sexuality and Their Cultural Impact*, New York 1989, p. 107.

¹⁸ J.M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women’s Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts*, Bloomington 1997, p. 63.

¹⁹ *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe. An Encyclopedia*, M. Schaus (ed.), London 2007, p. 196.

its misogynistic connotations. Modern feminist thought follows them, since Phyllis Trible also claims that “to call woman ‘Adam’s rib’ is to misread the text which states carefully and clearly that the extracted bone required divine labor to become female, a datum scarcely designed to bolster the male ego. (...) Throughout the myth she is the more intelligent one, the more aggressive one, and the one with greater sensibilities.”²⁰ Such reinterpretations of the original text might also be seen as, broadly speaking, an act of translation, giving the creation myth new meanings and new cultural tasks.

Modern feminist thinkers also wish to recuperate the text for women, pointing out that another problematic term in Gen 2: 18–23 apart from *adam* is *ezer kenegedo*, translated most often as a “suitable helper.” *Ezer* may mean “helper” in Hebrew. *Kenegedo* is a prepositional phrase that may be translated literally as “corresponding to” or “on a par with.” So, as Carol Myers suggests, the phrase may be translated as “suitable partner” or “helper as a partner” as “the two people will be neither superior nor subordinate to each other; the phrase connotes a nonhierarchical relationship.”²¹ *Ezer*, on the other hand, does not have to mean “helper” in the sense of a secondary agent. Contrarily, it may be derived, as Myers explains, from a Hebrew root meaning “to be strong, powerful,” rather than the one meaning “to help,” which leads to the conclusion that the phrase may mean both “helpful” and “powerful” counterpart.²² What is more, *ezer* is also used in the Hebrew Bible with reference to God, who helps Israel in a powerful way. So, as Mollenkott concludes, “If God is ezerlike, then being man’s *ezer* is godlike!”²³

Needless to say, the subtleties of the original text connected with *ezer kenegedo* are lost in translation. If we look at modern English translations of the Bible we will rarely be able to notice the complexity of the original phrase, and will be left with the impression that the main role of woman is to help man in the most suitable way. Here are selected examples:

King James Version: “help meet for him.”

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)²⁴: “a helper as his partner” – this translation corresponds better with the original meaning, because the NRSV was intended as a gender-neutral translation of the Bible.

New Jerusalem Bible (NJB):²⁵ “I shall make him a helper” – this translation is outrageous, as *kenegedo* was ignored altogether, and woman is reduced simply to a man’s helper.

Today’s New International Version (TNIV):²⁶ “but for Adam no suitable helper was found” – the TNIV is also promoted as a gender neutral translation, yet as we can see, the equality of woman as man’s partner (cf. NRSV) is lost.

²⁰ P. Trible, *Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation...*, p. 36.

²¹ C. Myers, *op.cit.*, p. 73–74.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 74.

²³ V.R. Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, New York 1994, p. 76.

²⁴ *New Revised Standard Version*, New York 1997.

²⁵ *New Jerusalem Bible*, London 1995.

²⁶ *Holy Bible. Today’s New International Version*, London 2005.

Bible in Basic English:²⁷ “one like himself as a help” – interestingly, this translation of the Bible in Basic English renders the equality of woman and man much better than some other more sophisticated translations.

Douay Rheims:²⁸ “a helper like himself” – although this 17th-century Catholic translation of the Bible was made from the Latin Vulgate, it presents woman’s status as man’s counterpart better than some modern translations from the original Hebrew text.²⁹

This “canonical” translation of *ezer kenegedo* as “man’s helper” was interpreted in the Christian tradition in such a way that it degraded women altogether, depriving them of any value for men. Thus Augustine, who did not know Hebrew and based his interpretation of the Scripture on its Latin translation, claims, “I do not see in what other way the woman was made to be the helper of the man if procreation is eliminated, and I do not understand why it should be eliminated. Woman was created as a helper to the man. If the man had needed a help to till the earth, another man would have been more useful; if he needed comfort, male friendship would have been more agreeable. (...) God was surely able to create another man from Adam’s rib. Consequently, I do not see in what sense the woman was made as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children.”³⁰ Similarly, Thomas Aquinas, who also did not know Hebrew and based his theology on the Latin translation of the Scripture, reduced woman’s role as “helper” in his *Summa Theologiae* (I 92,1) to procreation alone: “It was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scripture says, as a ‘helper’ to man; not, indeed, as a helpmate in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works; but as a helper in the work of generation.”³¹ We can therefore see how reduction of the variety of meanings of the original text accompanying the translation of a myth strengthens its single, adopted and accepted interpretation.

²⁷ Bible in Basic English, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/bbe> [accessed 27.10. 2014].

²⁸ Douay Rheims Bible, <http://www.drbo.org/> [accessed 27.10. 2014].

²⁹ Interestingly, in *Paradise Lost*, John Milton also captures this equal status of woman suggested by *ezer kenegedo*, as in his epic poem God promises Adam to make for him “Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self” (*Paradise Lost* VIII. 450).

³⁰ H.S. Benjamins, *Keeping Marriage out of Paradise: The Creation of Man and Woman in Patristic Literature* [in:] *The Creation of Man and Woman: Interpretations of the Biblical Narratives in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), Boston, p. 105.

³¹ *Basic Writing of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, A.C. Pegis (ed.), Indianapolis 1997, p. 879. Another famous error made by Aquinas and other medieval scholastic scholars who did not know the original Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible was to interpret the name of Jahweh (I AM THAT I AM – Exodus 3: 14) through the prism of its translation and to separate it from the cultural environment of the text. As Von Rad observes “nothing is farther from what is envisaged in this etymology of the name of Jahweh than a definition of his nature in the sense of a philosophical statement about his being – a suggestion, for example of his absoluteness, aseity, etc. Such a thing would be altogether out of keeping with the Old Testament” (G. Von Rad, Gerhard, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions*, Louisville 2001, p. 180). Since I AM THAT I AM as it was interpreted by Aquinas became the most fundamental element of his philosophy on which his whole system rests, this misinterpretation of the original Hebrew Bible is another classic example of how a translation act may shape further developments of a certain thought system.

The flattening of the original and reduction of its possible various meanings is of course an inseparable part of the translation process. However, in the case of translation of (a) myth(s) regarded as foundational and normative one(s) for a specific religion (e.g. Christianity) the consequences of such flattening/reduction are much graver. As Christianity is a multicultural, global religion based on sacred texts that were created within a distant, ancient culture and are constantly retranslated, each new translation of the mythical contents of the Bible poses a risk of such flattening/reduction, turning a religion more and more into an ideology. As demonstrated below, all modern English translations quoted earlier follow the traditional interpretation of *adam* as male, eliminating the ambiguity of the original Hebrew text:

NRSV: “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.”

NJB: “Yahweh God said, ‘It is not right that the man should be alone. I shall make him a helper.’ Then, Yahweh God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And, while he was asleep, he took one of his ribs and closed the flesh up again forthwith. Yahweh God fashioned the rib he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man.”

TNIV: “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.”

As we can see, even the translations declared to be gender-neutral (i.e. NRSV and TNIV) do not suggest that the original Hebrew text may have a much less androcentric bias. In other words, all the translations quoted above propose the traditional, petrified interpretation of one of the crucial myths in Christianity, not allowing Christians to go beyond the borders of the apparently God-sanctioned ontological order and hierarchy of the sexes.

Two modern Polish Catholic translations of Gen 2: 18–23 and their different anthropological consequences

Interestingly, it may be the case that even within the Catholic Church there co-exist two translations of Gen 2: 18–23 that lead to different anthropological consequences. The most popular Polish Catholic translation of the Bible, the so-called *Biblia Tysiąclecia* (Millennium Bible),³² does not differ too much from the traditional translations of the passage in question quoted above, as it renders the Hebrew *adam* as “a male”:

“Nie jest dobrze, żeby mężczyzna [a male/man] był sam” – Gen 2: 18a
 [It is not a good thing for a man to be alone]
 and consequently a woman is presented as a “help suitable to *him*”

³² *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu. Biblia Tysiąclecia*, Poznań, Warszawa 1998.

“uczynię mu zatem odpowiednią dla niego pomoc” – Gen 2: 18b [I will make a help suitable to *him* – my italics – A.G.]

Yet at the same time Polish Catholics may use another biblical translation with the Church *imprimatur* that retains to some extent the ambiguity of the original text and androgynous character of the first human as presented in Gen 2: 18–23, the so called *Biblia Poznańska* (Poznań Bible)³³:

“I rzekł Jahwe Bóg: niedobrze by człowiek [human being] był sam; uczynię mu pomoc, jak gdyby jego odpowiednik”.

[The Jahweh God said, ‘It is not good for the human being to be alone; I will make a help for him³⁴ as if his counterpart’].

It therefore turns out that it is after all possible to render in translation the androgynous character of the Hebrew *adam*, and it seems that languages that possess a gender-neutral noun for a human being are more suitable for that task. If so, we might say that a lot depends on whether translators wish to express the ambiguity of the original myth of creation of woman or simply to strengthen how the myth is traditionally presented. What is also interesting is that a translation that meets the expectations of feminist thinkers, i.e. *Biblia Poznańska*, modifying traditional biblical anthropology and its interpretation, is available, with the Catholic Church *imprimatur*, in a country whose society still holds relatively conservative views concerning gender roles and the social position of women.

Conclusions

The final conclusions of what was presented above might be as follows. Translation is an integral part of myth transfer both in the prehistoric past and in the present. As myths by their nature carry with them ideas and notions that date back to ancient and distant cultures, translation of myths is always an act of interpretation, and usually one specific interpretation becomes so dominant that it excludes in time other possible renderings of the text. In this very way, Christianity based its understanding of the relations between the sexes, among other things, on the specific translation/interpretation of the Hebrew text. Arguing that a different translation of the biblical myth of creation of woman would have changed altogether women’s social status in Christianity is of course a too far-reaching statement, yet we may safely say that having shed some light on the translation process of a specific myth, we could see, to quote T. S. Eliot, a “passage which we [in this case our Western civilisation] did not take.”³⁵

³³ *Pismo Świąte. Stary i Nowy Testament w przekładzie z języków oryginalnych. Biblia poznańska*, Poznań 2007.

³⁴ As nouns in Polish are inflected for gender, “him” “his” in the English translation of the Polish text do not presuppose the sex of the human being, but rather the masculine gender of the Polish noun “człowiek,” similar to the Greek *anthropos* or the German *Mensch*.

³⁵ T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, London 1941, p. 9.

References

Biblical translations

- Bible in Basic English: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/bbe/>.
 Douay Rheims Bible: <http://www.drbo.org/>.
Holy Bible. Today's New International Version, London 2005.
New American Standard Bible, Thomas Nelson 1995.
New Jerusalem Bible, London 1995.
New Revised Standard Version, New York 1997.
Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu. Biblia Tysiąclecia, Poznań 1998.
Pismo Święte. Stary i Nowy Testament w przekładzie z języków oryginalnych (Biblia poznańska), Poznań 2007.

Other sources

- Batto B.F., *Slaying the Dragon. Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*, Louisville 1992.
 Benjamins H.S., *Keeping Marriage out of Paradise: The Creation of Man and Woman in Patristic Literature* [in:] *The Creation of Man and Woman: Interpretations of the Biblical Narratives in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), Boston 2000, p. 93–107.
 Bromiley G.W., Harrison E.E. et al. (eds.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia – Vol. 4*, Grand Rapids 1979.
 Collins J.J., *The Bible after Babel. Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*, Grand Rapids 2005.
 Dalley S. (ed.), *The Legacy of Mesopotamia*, New York 1998.
 Daly M., *Beyond God the Father*, Boston 1973.
 Eliot T.S., *Burnt Norton*, London 1941.
 Ferrante J.M., *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts*, Bloomington 1997.
 Hayward, C.T.R. (ed.), *Saint Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis*, Oxford 1995.
 Kawashima, R.S., *A Revisionist Reading Revisited: On the Creation of Adam and Then Eve*, "Vetus Testamentum" 2006, No. 56 (1), p. 46–57.
 Korsak P., *Translating the Bible: Bible Translations and Gender Issues* [in:] Brenner A., van Henten J.W., (eds.), *Bible translation on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century. Authority, Reception, Culture and Religion*, London 2002, p. 132–146.
 Mollenkott V.R., *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, New York 1994.
 Milton J., *Paradise Lost*, London 2003.
 Myers C., *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, New York 2013.
 Pegis A.C. (ed.), *Basic Writing of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Indianapolis 1997.
 Phipps W.E., *Genesis and Gender: Biblical Myths of Sexuality and Their Cultural Impact*, New York 1989.
 Schaus M. (ed.), *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe. An Encyclopedia*, London 2007.
 Teugels L., *The Creation of the Human in Rabbinic Interpretation* [in:] G.P. Luttikhuisen (ed.), *The Creation of Man and Woman: Interpretations of the Biblical Narratives in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Boston 2000, p. 107–127.
 Triple P., *Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" 1973, No. 41, p. 30–48.
 Triple P., *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Philadelphia 1978.
 Von Rad G., *Old Testament Theology: The theology of Israel's historical traditions*, Louisville 2001.