

The Vocative Singular in the Greek New Testament: An Exploration of Its Expression in North American English

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Abstract

Scholarship devoted to the manner in which the vocative singular has been translated from ancient Greek texts to modern English is lacking. The address toward a man in the vocative singular, ἄνθρωπε, while rare in the New Testament, is often translated as “man” within the context of a rebuke and appears to be accurately translated. However, when a woman is addressed as γύναι, the general interpretation of its Greek usage in the New Testament is that it is an address of respect, while its frequent translation into English as “woman” does not capture this aspect. Non-biblical Greek literature contemporary to the New Testament uses this address in the same way, with the implication of respect. More research is needed to determine how the meaning of this term can be accurately expressed in English.

Keywords

biblical Greek, γύναι, ἄνθρωπε, Greek literature, vocative, translation

Scant attention has been given to the use of the vocative singular in the Greek New Testament for addressing a man or a woman. This use of the

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vocative, ἄνθρωπε for a man¹ and γύναι for a woman, appears only nineteen times in UBS GNT⁴, and most concordances and commentaries ignore the terms completely. This scant attention perhaps trivializes any efforts to determine if translation of the vocative singular from its original Greek to North American English, using modern linguistic expression to preserve the Greek meaning, is deserving of further attention.

Let us first examine the vocative used to address a man. This form appears nine times in the New Testament: four in Luke, four in Pauline literature, and once in the letter of James. The Greek ἄνθρωπε, the vocative of ἄνθρωπος, is generally used contemptuously as an address toward a man (Liddell and Scott 1968, 71). This is apparent in most of the citations where the term is found. For example, in Luke 12.14, when the man asked Jesus to advocate for him regarding a dispute over an inheritance, Jesus addressed him as ἄνθρωπε, rebuking him for trying to make Jesus an arbiter of his claim. The address is described as condescending (Johnson 1991, 198). The Jerusalem Bible (JB) renders the translation as “my friend.” However, a contemporary English translation might be correctly rendered “man,” and read as, “Man, who appointed me your judge?” This is also the case in Luke 22.58, 60, in which Peter denies even knowing Jesus to the man that accused him (Reiling and Swellengrebel 1993, 708). JB also renders ἄνθρωπε as “my friend,” which could easily be read as having a sarcastic tone.

Another example is found in Paul’s letter to the Romans (2.1, 3) as part of a diatribe that begins with a criticism of the act of judging others. JB does not render the vocative at all, although the Greek reads ὦ ἄνθρωπε (you, sir) in a reproachful tone, typical of the haranguing style of a popular preacher (Dunn 1994, 1:79). The term is used again in Rom 9.20, putting a man in his place for making demands on God (Cranfield 1980, 2:490), although JB again does not render the vocative, as in Rom 2. The term also is found in Jas 2.20 in a similar harsh tone to that already discussed, this time with a modifier to intensify the rebuke, ὦ ἄνθρωπε κενέ, empty, deficient, or foolish man (Ropes 1991, 216). JB renders “senseless man,” which may be as accurate as “foolish man.”

Table 1 compares six translations of all instances of the vocative for a man: JB, NAB, GNB, RSV, NRSV, and NIV. The lack of uniformity is apparent when the six translations are compared in this way.

In all examples found, non-biblical Greek literature always uses the term in a disrespectful way. In Plato’s *Apology*, written about 399 B.C.E., ὦ ἄνθρωπε is the form of address toward a man being rebuked for not

¹ All translations from Greek to English are cited directly from the resources used and are not mine.

Table 1. Six translations of the vocative for “man”

Verse	JB	NAB	GNB	RSV	NRSV	NIV
Luke 12.14	my friend	my friend	man	man	friend	man
Luke 22.58	my friend	my friend	man	man	man	man
Luke 22.60	my friend	my friend	man	man	man	man
Rom 2.1	none	none	my friend	none	whoever you are	none
Rom 2.3	none	none	my friend	O man	whoever you are	none
Rom 9.20	none	none	my friend	man	none	O man
Jas 2.20	senseless man	you ignoramus	you fool	shallow man	senseless person	foolish man
Luke 5.20*	my friend	none	my friend	man	friend	friend
1 Tim 6.11	none	man of God	man of God	man of God	man of God	man of God

*These last two examples are exceptions.

speaking well: “You do not speak well, sir” (28B). Plato also uses the term in *Gorgias* in a dialogue between Socrates and Gorgias. Hypothetical opponents are addressed (one in particular—“Who are you, sir?”) using the term ἄνθρωπε (452B). Contemporary to Plato, Xenophon used the term in *Cyropaedia*, written in the fourth century B.C.E., as part of a rebuke of a soldier marching out of line: “Fellow, what are you doing?” (2.2.7). Plutarch also used the term in his *Moralia*, written in the latter part of the first century C.E., as part of a question: “What is wrong with you man?” (553F).

The generally disrespectful use of the term has two exceptions in the New Testament. In the healing of a paralytic in Luke 5.20, Jesus addressed the man as ἄνθρωπε, translated as “my friend.” This is clearly not used as a reproach (Reiling and Swellengrebel 1993, 241). It has been asserted that ἄνθρωπε was not inherently derogatory and could be used in neutral and positive contexts (Dickey 1996, 150). There is also a second instance in 1 Tim 6.11 in which Timothy is addressed as ἄνθρωπε θεοῦ or man of God (“man dedicated to God” in JB) in the context of advice from Paul. This term identifies Timothy as a spiritual leader, like a pastor (Kelly 1998, 139), and is used in the Greek Old Testament as an address towards a prophet (Arichea 1995, 152). While there is a consensus in biblical and non-biblical Greek literature that addressing a man using ἄνθρωπε was customarily understood as a rebuke, the term was not universally used in such a manner.

In the Septuagint, the term ἄνθρωπε is found seven times: five in Kings, once in Micah, and once in Psalms (Hatch and Redpath 1954, 98-100; Brenton, 1986). However, all its uses in Kings appear as part of the expression ἄνθρωπε τοῦ θεοῦ (man of God), four times addressing Elijah (1 Kgs 17.18; 2 Kgs 1.9, 11, 13) and once addressing Elisha (2 Kgs 4.40). Use of the term in Micah is part of a rebuke against Israel by the Almighty: “What is good has been explained to you, man,” (Mic 6.8). Also, in Psalms, the prayer of persecution expresses an understanding of being insulted by an enemy but not by a close friend: “But you, a man of my own rank” (Ps 55.13). Thus, although the expression “man of God” occurs in the vocative singular, this does not imply rebuke. Overtones of rebuke seem to be present only when the term ἄνθρωπε is used alone. The translation of this term as “man” seems correct with regard to preserving the meaning as intended by the Greek author. It is usually used within the context of a rebuke and a man can be rebuked using the same term in North American English.

Having discussed the use of the vocative with regard to a man, we now proceed to its use in addressing a woman. The vocative γύναι, addressing a woman, is found in both biblical and non-biblical Greek literature. Since it is the vocative of γυνή, it is exclusively used as a form of address to a woman in some kind of dialogue (Young 1994, 15-16). The form is found ten times in the New Testament. In English, it has historically been translated as “woman,” which, in modern usage, is not considered a courteous address for a woman. Nevertheless, Brown claimed that there was no equivalent term that adequately expressed the meaning of γύναι in English translation. Translating γύναι as “lady” or “madam” is also problematic since those forms of address can carry negative meanings when used alone (Brown 1970, 172).

While the translation “woman” may sound belittling in normal English, the contexts where it is used in English translations suggest that the woman concerned is being addressed with respect or affection. In JB, Matt 15.28 is rendered, “Woman, you have great faith. Let your desire be granted.” Jesus’ form of address implies praise (Bruner 2004, 104). In Luke 13.12, Jesus’ form of address seems comforting: “Woman, you are rid of your infirmity.” This is also found in the denial by Peter when he is first accused of being an associate of Jesus by a female servant in Luke 22.57. He addresses the woman as γύναι, which is unusual in the context of Peter becoming defensive. The only comment found on this instance suggests that Peter was so rattled by the accusation that he responded with a formality not characteristic of addressing a female slave as a means of deflecting attention away from himself (Osiek 2010, 75-79).

There did exist a form of address that was considered disrespectful of a woman, γυναικάριον, translated as a weak or silly woman (Abbott-Smith 1999, 96). However, this may not be a good example since it is only used once in the New Testament (2 Tim 3.6) and does not appear anywhere in the Septuagint.

This manner of address, γύναι, is used most frequently in John's Gospel, first appearing in 2.4: "Jesus said, 'Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not come yet.'" Jesus is addressing his mother after she tells him that the wine has run out at a wedding. He does not refer to her as mother and the context implies Jesus may be rebuking her. However, Jesus' question is neither a refusal nor a rebuke (Vanhoye 1974, 157-67), and is even an address of tenderness (Westcott 1962, 36). The term γύναι has also been acknowledged as an appropriate address for a woman either related or unrelated to the speaker (Dickey 1996, 200). Also relevant is John 4.21: "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." This is from Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well who is acknowledged for speaking the truth. Multiple commentaries agree that γύναι is a polite form of address and the translation "woman" should not be understood as a rebuke or reproach (Newman and Nida 1993, 121; Bernard 1993, 75). The same can be concluded from the other times that John uses γύναι: in 8.10, addressing the woman caught in adultery, in 19.26, addressing Jesus' mother, and in 20.13 and 15, addressing Mary Magdalene (Bulembot 2007, 55-73).

Table 2 compares the same six translations of all instances of the vocative for a woman. Unlike the case of ἀνθρώπε, γύναι is consistently translated as "woman," with the noted exception of Paul's letter, in which γύναι is translated as "wife." The use of "wife" is found within the context of an instruction for married couples, with the wife being a believer while the husband is not, or vice versa. The commentaries do not address this term directly other than in discussion of the verse as a diatribe (Collins 1999, 272).

Use of the form γύναι was not limited to the New Testament and there are some examples of its use in Greek literature over a long period of time. Homer used the term in the *Odyssey*, written 800–600 B.C.E., specifically in a dialogue between Odysseus and his wife Penelope: "Lady (γύναι), in no way is it possible to bend this dream aside and give it another meaning" (19.555). The following paragraph refers to her as "wise Penelope." This is certainly within the context of addressing a woman with respect.

Aeschylus also used the term in *The Persians* (472 B.C.E.) within a similar context. In praising King Darius of Persia, Atossa also acknowledged his spouse, mother of Xerxes, addressing her as γύναι (156). In Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (fourth century B.C.E.), a woman who was guarded while her

Table 2. Six translations of all instances of the vocative for “woman”

Verse	JB	NAB	GNB	RSV	NRSV	NIV
Matt 15.28	woman	O woman	none	O woman	woman	woman
Luke 13.12	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman
Luke 22.57	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman
John 2.4	woman	woman	none	O woman	woman	dear woman
John 4.21	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman
John 8.10	woman	woman	none	woman	woman	woman
John 19.26	woman	woman	none	woman	woman	dear woman
John 20.13	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman
John 20.15	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman	woman
1 Cor 7.16	none	wife	wife	wife	wife	wife

husband was in battle was taken to meet Cyrus of Persia, likely after her husband was killed. She also was addressed as γυναίκα (“Have no fear, lady”; 5.1.6). Much later, Cassius Dio Cocceianus used the term in *Roman History* (229 C.E.) in describing a formal meeting between Caesar Augustus and Cleopatra. With a bowed head, Augustus addressed Cleopatra as γυναίκα: “Be of good cheer, woman, and keep a stout heart; for you shall suffer no harm” (51.12.5). With regard to alternative forms of address to an adult woman, the vocative of γυναίκα had no alternative and was understood as a polite form of address toward a woman (Louw and Nida 1989, 1:108-9; see also Liddell and Scott 1968, 171).

The form γυναίκα is used in the Septuagint three times, first in Judith 11.1: “Woman, be of good comfort, fear not in thy heart” (Charles 1913, 1:260). It is also used in 4 Macc 15.17 (“O woman [γυναίκα], who alone among women brought perfect piety to birth”) and 16.14 (“Mother, soldier of God in piety’s cause, elder and woman [γυναίκα] withal”) (Charlesworth 1985, 2:560-61). In Rahlfs’s Septuagint (1935), γυναίκα appears all three times but in Brenton’s Septuagint, γυναίκα only appears in Judith. Four Maccabees is rendered in Brenton as γυναίκα.

The most important challenge for the translator is to transfer the meaning of this vocative, with its connotations, from one language to another (Tabalaka 2002, 453-61). Although the vocative for “woman” is used so few times in the New Testament, it should not be regarded as unimportant, since this form is used strictly in direct address and demonstrates the speaker’s attitude toward the woman being addressed as one of respect (Young 1994, 15-16). While Brown wrote that no appropriate translation exists (Brown

1970, 172), Power wrote earlier that the term should be translated as “lady,” specifically in John 2.1; 19.26; 20.13; and 20.15 (Power 1940, 70). While Power has limited his suggested translation to specific cases, the whole purpose of this study is to suggest an acceptable translation for all cases and Power appears to have offered a beginning on which to build.

The question remains, what is the most accurate translation of γύβαι in North American English? The lack of scholarship that directly analyzes use of the vocative presents a challenge. A purely speculative interpretation might be the address “my lady” (Matt 15.28; Luke 13.12; 22.57; John 4.21; 8.10; 20.13, 20.15) or “dear lady” (John 2.4; 19.26) as a substitute for “woman.” An exception may be 1 Cor 7.16, since the male counterpart of husband is used in the same verse. While the aforementioned suggestions are not common in North American English, they may serve to clarify the meaning of γύβαι as intended by the author and as understood by the intended audience. Translators, scholars, professors, and students of sacred Scripture may find it useful to devote some attention to this aspect of translation.

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Abbreviations and Bible versions cited

GNB	Good News Bible (1978)
JB	Jerusalem Bible (1966)
NAB	New American Bible (1970)
NIV	New International Version (1978)
(N)RSV	(New) Revised Standard Version (1952, 1989)
UBS GNT ⁴	UBS Greek New Testament, 4th ed. (1993)