

Teen slang: Issues in Bible translation

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

Pity Bible translators who try to keep up with changes in language. For example, Today's New International Version Bible has changed "stoned" to "stoned to death" because otherwise readers might think the text is about smoking dope. The New Revised Standard Version made that change a few years ago.

The really controversial word among Bible translators and publishers is "man." To render it as "human," which is what the original text often meant, is to rouse the furies and risk losing the dollars of those suspicious of feminist influences.

We have noticed efforts to turn out trendy Bibles. Thomas Nelson sells *becoming*, a "zine formatted for young people," and Zondervan publishes *true identity*, which packages "biblical wisdom for women in their 20s and 30s, single or married." (Some tulip-and-pink covered Bibles for women do use capital letters.) These versions highlight women in the Bible, but don't touch pronouns. A human woman is still a "man."

Back to stoning. Teen Bibles should have Acts 7:58 read "they began to stone him [Stephen] to death." However, Paul's confession in 2 Corinthians 11:29 that once he was stoned cannot mean "stoned to death" because he lived to talk about it. Teens would say, "Once I was baked," which adults are likely to think of as sunstroke.

Why stop with that, if you want to reach teens? Go up the alphabet from "stoned" to "stoked" and expect to hear Matthew 5:5, "Happy are the meek," redone as "Stoked are the meek."

Women buy more than 80 percent of the Bibles sold, so let's not neglect teen translations for Old Testament texts featuring women. Start with two sisters. Rachel, in Genesis 29:17, is described as "graceful and beautiful." In other words, a hottie. As for her sister, Leah, while her eyes were lovely (Gen. 29:17), she appealed less to Jacob, so she must have been something of a pigeon or a skeezer.

Teens are into wheels. They'll respond to a mention in 1 Samuel 13:5 of 60,000 vagues, which means wheels for 30,000 chariots mustered by the Philistines. Samson and Goliath both had swolles, which we oldsters call muscles. Samson was hurt (that is, dumb) enough to give the secret of his strength away to Delilah. Samson in effect said his easy, which means his goodbye, to his hottie, and got even when (see Judges 16:29) he went to the house or temple of the idol Dagon. There he grasped the two pillars on which the crib (that is, the house) rested and pulled the whole crib down.

Some meanings really get twisted out of shape. In teen talk, to understand is to "feel"—as in, Do you feel me? When David went out to Goliath he found that the armor wasn't sexy, which in teen talk means it didn't fit (1 Sam. 17:38-39). One problem with teen translations is that by the time the ink is dry, the slanguage has already changed. That's a problem for publishers aiming for a specialized market. The one thing they have all learned, however, whether dealing with young or old is this: you can change almost anything as long as you don't translate "man" as "human." Feel me?