

Do “brothers” in the New Testament include women?

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Do groups of “brothers” mentioned in the New Testament include women?

In the ancient world, the Greek word *adelphoi* was used to talk about biological “brothers” – male siblings in a family – and also about people who were not biological relations. In New Testament texts such as the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, the word *adelphoi* is used in reference to Christ-followers. Those same texts suggest that there were often women who participated in local Christ-following communities – so when the authors of these texts spoke of Christ-followers as *adelphoi*, were they actually thinking of men *and* women?

And what are the implications for modern Bible translations? Should *adelphoi* be translated into English and other modern languages with a gender-inclusive phrase such as “brothers and sisters” or “believers”? Are translations that say “brothers” effectively “translating women out” of the story?

I will not provide definitive answers to these questions, but I will share a few initial thoughts.

In Acts 16, is Lydia one of the *adelphoi*?

In the book of Acts, a woman named Lydia is baptized together with her household (Acts 16). Near the end of the vignette, the apostle Paul and another Christ-follower named Silas visit Lydia’s house, where they speak with a group of *adelphoi*. Here is what happens according to the English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV):

“[Paul and Silas] visited Lydia. And when they had seen the **brothers** (*adelphoi*), they encouraged them and departed.” (Acts 16:40 ESV)

The ESV translates the Greek word *adelphoi* as “brothers.” Other English translations that read “brothers” or “brethren” include the New King James Version (NKJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the 1984 edition of the New International Version (NIV).

Other translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the 2011 edition of the NIV read “brothers and sisters”:

[Paul and Silas] went to Lydia’s home; and when they had seen and encouraged the **brothers and sisters** (*adelphoi*) there, they departed.” (Acts 16:40 NRSV)

The New Living Translation (NLT) reads “believers”:

[Paul and Silas] returned to the home of Lydia. There they met with the **believers** (*adelphoi*) and encouraged them once more. Then they left town.

These translations raise an intriguing question: When the author of Acts used the term *adelphoi* in this story, was he thinking of a group made up of both men and women – including Lydia? If so, English translations that say “brothers” rather than “brothers and sisters” could be seen as translating Lydia out of the story. Or was the author of Acts himself leaving Lydia out? Despite knowing that women participated in the early Christian movement, did the author still tend to think of the core group of Christ-followers as made up of men, and is that reflected in his use of the word *adelphoi* in this scene?

In Acts 18, is Priscilla one of the *adelphoi*?

Later in the book of Acts, a woman named Priscilla helps to instruct a man named Apollos. Apollos then decides to go to Achaia, with the support of some *adelphoi*. According to the NRSV:

“[Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the **believers** (*adelphoi*) encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.” (Acts 18:26-27 NRSV)

The NRSV says that “the believers encouraged Apollos.” Some other English translations read “brothers” or “brethren” instead (e.g., ESV, NKJV, NASB, NIV 1984). Others have “brothers and sisters” (e.g., NLT, NIV 2011).

Was the author of Acts thinking of both men and women – including Priscilla – when using the word *adelphoi* in this case? If so, English translations that say “brothers” could potentially be translating Priscilla out of the story. Or was it the author of Acts who was leaving women out? When he wrote about the *adelphoi* who encouraged Apollos to go to Achaia, was he imagining a group of men?

Is the prototypical “brother” in Acts male?

These questions are ultimately unanswerable, because there is no way to peer inside the mind of the author of Acts to verify what he was imagining while he was writing, and the text does not provide conclusive evidence one way or another. In other words, when the author uses the word *adelphoi* for groups of Christ-followers, it is *possible* that the picture he had in his mind involved both men and women. However, it is *also* possible that he was actually thinking of male “brothers” and not of “brothers and sisters” at all. His idea of a prototypical “brother” could simply have been male.

Female Christ-followers thus certainly seem to be getting “translated out” of the story of the early Church at some points in the book of Acts, but it is not immediately obvious who has been doing the translating out: English Bibles that say “brothers” rather than “brothers and sisters” or “believers,” or the author of Acts himself. In the latter case, modern gender-inclusive translations of the word *adelphoi* would actually be restoring women to the story in places where the ancient author himself had somewhat lost them from view.

Is the prototypical “believer” in modern Bible translations male?

Before concluding, it is important to note that modern translations of *adelphoi* as “believers” can still end up constructing the prototypical Christ-follower as male. Here’s an example from 1 Corinthians, a letter written by the apostle Paul. Paul is talking about divorce, and explains what he thinks male and female Christ-followers should do in certain circumstances. According to the ESV:

“If any **brother** (*adelphos*) has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any **woman** has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.” (1 Cor 7:12-13 ESV)

The ESV translates the Greek word *adelphos* as “brother.” The NRSV opts for “believer” instead:

“If any **believer** (*adelphos*) has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any **woman** has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.” (1 Cor 7:12-13 NRSV)

Paul’s own phrasing is asymmetrical in this remark: in the Greek text, Paul speaks of a “brother” in the first statement and a “woman” in the second, rather than matching “brother” with “sister.” Moreover, Paul uses the Greek word *adelphos* here specifically for a *male* Christ-follower, rather than in a gender-neutral sense. Since he is referring to a person with a wife, Paul is clearly thinking about a man.

And what about the NRSV? By translating *adelphos* as “believer” in this remark, the NRSV ends up constructing the prototypical “believer” as a man. In the NRSV’s rendering of Paul’s words, there are two different types of people: “believers” and “women.” “Believers” are people who might have wives, which implies that they are men in the context of a first-century text.

I doubt that the translators of the NRSV intended to construct “believers” as prototypically male, but this example illustrates how challenging it can be to translate the Greek word *adelphoi* in New Testament texts.

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