

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE NECESSITY FOR RETAINING FATHER AND SON TERMINOLOGY IN SCRIPTURE TRANSLATIONS FOR MUSLIMS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary covers the three main sections of the paper:¹

- The Necessity for Retaining Father and Son Terminology in Scripture Translations: Missiological Implications
- The Language of Sonship in Intertestamental Literature: The Dead Sea Scrolls and Rabbinic Texts
- Familial Language and New Testament Christology

The Necessity for Retaining Father and Son Terminology in Scripture Translations for Muslims: Missiological Implications

The past two decades have witnessed the birth and proliferation of specialized Scripture translations for Muslims that remove from the text and/or redefine the divine familial terms Father, Son, and Son of God with the substitution of alternative terms such as “Guardian” for Father and “Caliph of God” or “Beloved of God” for Son. While this is not the only feature of such “translations” it is the feature to which this paper is confined. Of special concern are the consequences this practice sets in motion, especially regarding textual corruption and the promotion of heterodox views regarding the nature of God, the deity of Jesus, and the Trinity.

Based on Scriptural, theological, and missiological considerations, Assemblies of God World Missions and Assemblies of God U.S. Missions have expressed their disagreement with this practice.² Our position is rooted in an unwavering commitment to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, as reflected in official Assemblies of God belief statements.³

The biblical witness of saving faith in Jesus Christ is inextricably tied to the belief in and confession of Jesus *specifically being the Son of God*. We further understand that the witness of the Holy Spirit within the believer, the presence of God in the believer’s life, overcoming the

¹ Note that in the full paper, sections two and three, stated here as “The Language of Sonship in Intertestamental Literature: The Dead Sea Scrolls and Rabbinic Texts” and “Familial Language and New Testament Christology”, due to their extensive and detailed nature, are placed as Appendixes A and B.

² Representatives from Assemblies of God World Missions and Assemblies of God U.S. Missions expressed disagreement with Wycliffe Bible Translators and Summer Institute of Linguistics leadership in meetings held on August, 2011 and November, 2011. An article entitled “Essential Scriptural Integrity” appeared in the March 4, 2012 edition of the *Pentecostal Evangel*. Author Randy Hurst, communications director of Assemblies of God World Missions, states “AGWM missionary leaders, missiologists and scholars have met twice with leaders of Wycliffe and its partner ministry, Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), to deal with the increasing disagreement concerning Bible translation practices.”

³ The Scriptures Inspired (Statement of Fundamental Truths) and The Inerrancy of Scripture (Position Paper).

world, having genuine belief in Jesus Christ, possessing eternal life, and enjoying a relationship with God the Father are all contingent on the belief, acceptance, and confession of Jesus Christ *as the Son of God*.⁴

Muslims, due to false teaching from their holy book the Quran⁵, reject Jesus as the “Son of God.”⁶ Proponents of specialized “translations” argue that the phrase “Son of God” and the related terms of “Son” and “Father” must not be literally translated in the Bible, since to do so conveys incorrect and inaccurate meaning to Muslim readers. Instead, “meaning-based equivalents” from their “natural or heart language” must be substituted in order to communicate the accurate, or properly intended meaning behind this terminology. There are a number of errors with this argument, of which we highlight the following:

- It denies that Father and Son terminology are divinely inspired. This is related to the linguistic fallacy that meaning is not and cannot be communicated by specific words.
- It presupposes that the text of the Bible does not provide sufficient context for a person to understand the meaning of Father and Son terminology within its pages.
- It implies that Muslims are intellectually inferior people who cannot understand language in its context.
- It ignores the role of God the Holy Spirit to give proper understanding of Scripture.
- It makes relative all biblical doctrines drawn from Father and Son terminology, such as the adoption of believers as sons and children of God.

In the sub-section entitled *Practical Ramifications*, we have first discussed the lack of uniformity regarding what constitutes non-literal equivalents that “accurately convey” the meanings of Father and Son terminology and the ensuing confusion for Muslims. Will Muslims see Jesus as “Caliph” – which for them is the historical representative of Islam entrusted with its promotion and defense by physical force, or will they see Jesus as the “Beloved Messiah”?

Other practical missiological ramifications include:

- Exposing Christians to the charge of being deceitful.
- Damaging the reputation of Christians for having corrupted the Word of God.
- Bringing confusion on numerous levels to both Christians and non-Christians.
- Confirming the mistaken views that Muslims have about “Son of God.”
- Strengthening the Islamic view that Christianity (i.e. the message of the Bible) is false, that Christians cannot be trusted, and that Islam is true.

Thus, specialized Scripture translations that remove Father and Son terminology ultimately hinder evangelism among Muslims.

In the sub-section entitled *Why Has This Happened: Two Contributing Factors*, we first discuss the influence of postmodern literary hermeneutical biases on Scripture translations for

⁴ John 20:31; 4:15; I John 5:10-12; 2:22-23.

⁵ All Quranic quotations and/or references are from *The Koran Interpreted*, A.J. Arberry, Simon and Shuster, 1996.

⁶ Cf. Sura 2:116; 4:171; 9:30; 10:68; 19:88-93; 21:26; 23:91.

Muslims. In recent years deconstructionists have argued that meaning, like beauty, is very much “in the eye of the beholder” and thus it is important to shift the authority for determining the meaning of a text from the author to the *reader*. Second, we discuss the implications of syncretistic accommodations in Muslim evangelization which may include providing “natural language” Scripture translations for Muslims who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and may be encouraged to identify themselves as Muslims, consider the Quran as authoritative, and practice the five pillars of Islam, including the affirmation that “There is no deity except Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.”

Appendix C provides the full *SIL International Best Practices for Bible Translation of Divine Familial Terms* statement in which permission is granted to substitute non-literal equivalent terms for the divine familial terms of Father and Son. Appendix D provides an extensive table of 34 examples of passages from specialized Scripture “translations” for Muslims in which non-literal equivalents have been used in place of Father and Son terminology.

An increasing number of national constituencies, Bible Societies, and former Muslims have expressed alarm about the proliferation of specialized Scripture “translations” for Muslims in their countries. Especially given our privilege to partner with national churches around the world, it is our belief that their position on this issue should be honored.

In conclusion, Assemblies of God World Missions and Assemblies of God U.S. Missions affirm that the practice of replacing “familial” terms such as “Father” for God or “Son” for Jesus is unfaithful to God’s revealed Word. Consequently, we will not endorse any “translations” that do not literally translate Father and Son, and believe them to be unfaithful to the Biblical manuscripts in their original languages. We, therefore, urge all believers to reject these and any other Scripture translations, whether for Muslim or non-Muslim audiences, for both public and personal use, that do not literally translate Father and Son terminology.

Assemblies of God World Missions and Assemblies of God U.S. Missions are indebted and grateful for ministries that have faithfully and sacrificially translated the Holy Scriptures. We affirm that we will gratefully use accurately translated Scripture that contains literal translations of Father and Son terminology in agreement with Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek biblical manuscripts.

The Language of Sonship in Intertestamental Literature: The Dead Sea Scrolls and Rabbinic Texts

At Qumran, a number of passages clearly refer to a coming figure that is stunningly close to what we see in later NT texts. These texts have revolutionized our understanding of pre-Christian Palestinian Jewish messianic speculation and spells the death of the thesis that Jesus’ filial/divine messianic identity derived from Hellenistic Christian borrowing from Greco-Roman paganism.

Among the terms that appear in the Dead Sea Scrolls is “the Messiah of Israel” who is “begotten” by God (1Q28a). Elsewhere, He is referred to as “your [David’s] seed,” as the “Branch of David” of whom God says, “I will be a father to you and you will be a son to me” (4Q174). In 4Q246 He is called “Son of God” (cf. Lk 1:35) and “Son of the Most High” (cf. Lk

1:33). 4Q369 declares, “You [God] made him for you a first-born son...to be a prince and a ruler in all [the] inhabited world” upon whom is placed the “divine/heavenly crown.” In 4Q534, it is possible that the Messiah is described as omniscient and as “the elect of God” from whom is “His birth and the spirit of His breath.” Lastly, the Melchizedek figure is presented in 11Q13. He is a priestly-messiah who comes from heaven in the last days to defeat Satan, judge the wicked, and exalt the righteous. He is further identified as “The Anointed/Messiah of the Spirit about whom Daniel spoke an anointed, a prince” who announces “the year of God’s grace,” and who is declared divine three different times. As noted in the discussion, although the specific term “son” does not appear here, the context of sonship is clearly in view, as evidenced by the appearance of “inheritance” twice and by His status as leader of the “sons of the Most High.”

This evidence demonstrates that the ideas of Messiah as son and as divine have developed far beyond their OT moorings. It also demonstrates that various apocryphal and pseudepigraphical texts employing similar language which were previously dismissed as later Christian interpolations should now be considered as legitimate parallels with the Qumran material and as precursors to NT usage. Lastly, it is quite evident that the Bousset-Bultmann thesis of paganistic origins for Jesus’ divine sonship should be abandoned.

Rabbinic evidence is scant, but Qumran has made clear that the rabbis were not unfamiliar with the concept of divine sonship. Probably in reaction to Christian interpretation, near-complete avoidance of language suggestive of sonship and deity is obvious, including contexts where interpretation where OT texts provide ample opportunity (e.g., 2 Sam 7; Ps 2; 110, etc.). Nevertheless, at least one text has survived (*Midrash Tehillim* 2:9) explicitly weds messianic, filial, and divine language. Other rabbinic texts clearly identify specific individuals who enjoy especially intimate relationship with God as “son”.

That the Qumranic and rabbinic materials did not come into existence in a vacuum is evident from similar language in the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, Philo, the NT, and even Josephus. Messianic speculation was diverse in the period preceding the advent of Jesus and Christianity, but can clearly be said to have included messianic sonship *and* messianic deity in at least some circles. These ideas were neither new with nor restricted to the authors of the NT. Therefore, to better understand the person of Jesus of Nazareth, we must be willing to do three things: 1) embrace the titles ascribed to him in their original contexts; 2) recognize their textual origins in the Hebrew Bible; and 3) be willing to follow the development of these messianic concepts throughout the relevant literatures that connect the two Testaments.

Familial Language and New Testament Christology

Careful study of the New Testament makes abundantly clear that the familial language of “Son/Son of God” and “Father” is not only pervasive but inextricably woven into the fabric of New Testament Christology. In fact, familial language demands our theological reflection because of its strategic placement alongside and interconnection with the doctrines of God, the Messiah/Christ, and salvation itself.

The doctrine of Christ, as we have seen, is an eschatological advancement in the revelatory self-disclosure of God (Heb. 1:1). To be precise, we can declare in concert with the Apostle

John, that we cannot truly know God apart from the revelation he has given in the person of His Son Jesus, the Christ (I Jn. 5:20; cf. 2:13). This revelation, as Hebrews states (1:1) is the culmination of salvation history, and this culminative expression is conveyed through one whom God identifies as His “Son.” Therefore, sonship is not incidental or peripheral, but an essential feature of that eschatological revelation. While the titles, “Son” and “the Son of God” find location in messianic contexts they are not simply equivalent and alternative references to the title of “Messiah.” That is, identifying Jesus as the Son of God says something more about the Messiah than Judaism understood or expected from their reading of the Old Testament. That *something more* came through a special revelation of God – the incarnation of the Word (Jn. 1:1, 14). This revelation is presented and interpreted throughout the New Testament. The corporate witness of the New Testament establishes that Jesus, the Christ of God bears a unique filial relationship to God, His Father. That relationship is without precedent or true analogy. He is uniquely the Son of God!

Moreover, our examination of the New Testament has shown that this identity is indispensable to the gospel. To preach the true apostolic faith (Jude 3) is to preach the divinely revealed identity of Jesus Christ. To repeat the sobering assessment of Bruce Waltke, “It is inexcusable hubris and idolatry on the part of mortals to change the images by which the eternal God chooses to represent himself.”⁷

While the ecumenical councils and succeeding generations of church fathers would hammer out the *dual nature* of Christ and his *eternal* relationship to the Father, their theological legacy demonstrates clearly that they grounded their formulations in the witness of the Scriptures and especially the apostolic writings of our canonical New Testament.

The issue at hand is much more than a translation strategy with missiological implications. The practice of removing from the text and/or redefining the divine familial terms of Father, Son, and Son of God with the substitution of alternative terms in specialized Scripture translations for Muslims (or non-Muslims) changes the very substructure of the gospel itself. We ask the Holy Spirit to be powerfully at work in our outreach and ministry. Are we so presumptuous to think that we can implore Him to anoint our preaching of a defective gospel? Paul warns in Gal. 1:6-9 that preaching a defective gospel is to invite the judgment of God.

⁷ Comments supplied at http://knoxseminary.edu/instructors/instructor_waltke/php.