The Terms of Translation

A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible

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In "A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms," appearing in this issue, we stated that the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible express divine familial relationships by using general and social familial terms rather than biological terms. In what follows we offer a more detailed analysis of familial terms in the biblical languages. We will begin with a review of biological and social kinship terms, then move into an explanation of absolute nouns, relational nouns, and terms of address. We will then look at filial and paternal terms, as well as terms for generation in the Bible. Through these examples, we will show that Hebrew and Greek use social terms for the divine familial relations, arguing that modern Bible translations should follow the Hebrew and Greek by using expressions in the target language for general or social familial relations.

Categories of Familial Terms

The ideal in translation is to find target-language expressions that match the original-language terms in scope of meaning. With regard to terms that describe familial relations, there is a need to distinguish between terms that signify a biological familial relationship and ones that signify a social familial relationship or more generally a familial relation of any kind. These categories are summarized in Table 1.

Terms for biological family members signify kinship relations based on procreation, such as *biological child* in English, while terms for social family members signify ongoing familial relations whether they are biological in origin or not. English words like *father* and *son* cover the whole range; hence they denote both

Table 1: Categories of familial relations

General familial relations (broad scope)		
	Social relations	
Biological relations		
biological, non-social	biological, social	non-biological, social

biological sons and adopted sons or stepsons, biological fathers and adoptive fathers, parenting (social) fathers and absentee fathers. Anthropologists use the terms *genitor* and *genitrix* for a biological father and mother, and *procreator* for both, and the terms *pater* and *mater* for a social father and mother.

Relational Nouns Versus Absolute Nouns and Terms of Address

Languages make a distinction between absolute nouns like *man*, which signify a property of something, as in *John is a man*, and relational nouns like *friend*, which signify a relation between two things, as in *John is a friend of Jack*, or *Jack and John are friends*. Languages commonly derive relational nouns from absolute nouns, with an accompanying change of meaning. In English the absolute noun *child* (*Sammy is a child*) signifies a human less than 14 years old, whereas the relational noun *child* signifies a familial relationship irrespective of age, as in *Sammy is Gertrude's child*.

Languages also derive terms of address from relational nouns, as when someone addresses another person as "friend." Terms of address usually express politeness or social distance rather than a relationship, as when one addresses a stranger as "friend," "son," or "sir." Thus they are used more broadly than their relational noun counterparts.

In a semantic analysis of nouns, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that absolute nouns (e.g., "look at that *child*"), relational nouns (e.g., "this is my *child*"), and terms of address (e.g., "Yes, *child*?") have different scopes of meaning, even where they have the same form (i.e., *c–h–i–l–d*). So one cannot assume the meaning of a noun in one class is exactly the same as a noun of the same form in another class, unless there is clear evidence for such usage. For example, a term of address like "my son" is used in Greek and He-

brew to address people who are merely friends or even just strangers seeking help; this does not entail, however, that the meaning of the relational noun *huios*, as in "he is my *son*," can also mean "friend" or "supplicant," because it is a different class of noun, with different meanings. One has to investigate how a relational noun is actually used and not assume it is the same as its counterparts in other classes, because usually it is different.

Filial Terms in Hebrew and Greek

There are multiple terms to consider with regard to familial relationships. In Biblical Hebrew, the absolute noun *yeled* (pl. yᵉlâdîm) signifies a male child or youth, but as a relational noun *yeled* (same spelling) signifies a kinship relation of biological son (e.g., 2 Kings 4:1). Another word from the same root, *môledet*, can signify offspring of any gender (Gen. 48:6) or other consanguineous relatives (Gen. 24:4). The absolute Hebrew word *bên* signifies a boy, and the plural form signifies children (Isa. 13:18) or youth (Prov. 7:7), while context can add a familial meaning (Gen. 3:16). As a relational noun *bên* (ben) signifies a social son, who is usually biological. Unlike the relational noun *yeled*, which signifies a biological relationship to a biological father (genitor), the relational noun *ben* signifies any kind of filial relationship, whether biological in origin (Gen. 4:17) or not (Exod. 2:10), but usually it involves an active social relationship to parents, with rights to inheritance. Since a *ben* is a social son, his sonship and rights can be transferred from a biological father to a non-biological father (Gen. 48:5).

Beyond the family *ben* signifies sonlike subordinate relations to an authority figure. Examples of *ben* with the meaning of a close subordinate include "disciples of the prophets," (2 Kings 2:3) "followers of a fortune-teller" (Isa. 57:3), "officials of the king," "people of God" (Deut. 14:1), "nation of God" (Exod. 4:22), "God's man" (on the

throne) (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7; 89:27). There are additional usages as well, in which Hebrew uses *ben* "son of" where English would use "man of" or "person of," such as "people of the east" (1 Kings 4:30), "people of Zion (Jerusalem)" (Lam. 4:2), "people of a foreign country" (Isa. 56:6), "people of Israel" (Exod. 1:7), "members of the choir" (Neh. 12:28), "man of malice" (Ps. 89:22), "man of forty years (old)" (Gen. 25:20), etc. According to Strong's Concordance, the King James Version, in spite of being a "literal" translation, translates *ben* over a hundred different ways in English.

The usage of *huios* in Judeo-Greek often followed that in Hebrew, so we find *huios* where Jesus would have used the word *ben*, or its Aramaic counterpart *bar*. Examples are when he mentioned "attendants of the bridegroom" (Mark 2:19), "members of the Kingdom" (Matt. 8:12), "officials of the king" (Matt. 17:25), "people of this age" (Luke 20:34), "people who belong to the evil one" (Matt. 13:38; cf. 1 John 3:10), and "disciples of a teacher" (Matt. 12:27), all of which translate Greek *huios*. Adam is presented as God's son, evidently because God created him (Luke 3:38). In the wider Greek context, writers used *huios* for non-biological relations as well. According to Irenaeus (180 AD), "when any person has been taught from the mouth of another, he is termed the son of him who instructs him, and the latter [is called] his father."[1] In this vein Peter refers to Mark as his son (1 Pet. 5:13), and Paul refers to Timothy in similar terms (1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; cf. 1 John 2:1; ; cf. 3 John 4), using *teknon*.

When *ben* is used in reference to a social son, that sonship could have been generated by procreation (Gen. 11:31), adoption (Exod. 2:10), levirate law (Ruth 4:17), or marriage (1 Sam. 26:17-25). Children can also be inherited from deceased relatives (Esther 2:7). A clear example of the distinction between biological and social sonship occurs in the book of

Ruth, in which Naomi's biological sons are each described as her *yeled* "biological son" (Ruth 1:5), but Obed, her levirate son whom Ruth bore for her, is described as Naomi's *ben* "social son" (Ruth 4:17). In the same way, when the Bible says that Isaac was Abraham's *ben yachîd* "only son" (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16; Heb. 11:17), it means his only social son, because Abraham had another biological son, his *yeled* Ishmael, but he had sent Ishmael away with his mother when he divorced her (Gen. 21:14). When the Hebrew Bible talks of people being "sons of God" it uses *ben*, not *yeled*, and *ben* is obviously the suitable word for people who are social sons of God but not his biological sons. When the Greek Bible talks of people being "sons of God" it uses *huios*, the broad word for son, not *gennêma* "offspring." Jesus is described as God's *huios* "son", but with regard to his biological ancestors he is often described as their *sperma* "offspring" (Gal. 3:16, 19; 2 Tim. 2:8; Acts 3:25; 13:23; cf. Gen. 3:15). To his stepfather Joseph he is described, not as Joseph's *sperma* "offspring," but as his *huios* "social son" (John 1:45). Again, in a normal biological family, the fathers and sons are both social and biological at the same time, but in some cases they are not related biologically, and if they have been disowned or abandoned, then they are no longer related socially.[2] These are shown in Table 2.

There are some additional sonship terms worth noting. The Hebrew relational noun *zera'* means the same as English "*offspring*"(Gen. 3:15; 4:25), but it can also denote heirs (Ps. 89:29). Hebrew *yachîd*, from the word for "one," usually means "only son" and is so translated into English (Gen. 22:2; Prov. 4:3; Jer. 6:26; Amos 8:10). In the Greek Old Testament this was translated as *agapêtos* "beloved one," which as a masculine relational noun means "only son." Sometimes it was translated as *monogenês* "only child" (Judg. 11:34), which is derived from roots meaning "one of a kind." One

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finds both words in the New Testament with the meaning of an "only son" (Luke 9:38; Heb. 11:17; Mark 12:6). More importantly, however, the Greek New Testament uses both *monogenês* "the One-and-only (Son)" (John 1:14) and *ho êgapêmenos* (=*agapêtos*) "the Beloved (Son)" (Eph. 1:6; cf. Col. 1.13; Matt. 12:18) to signify the unique divine sonship of Jesus. It also signifies the uniqueness of his sonship by using the article of uniqueness: "the Son" (of God).[3] This is used alongside *ho agapêtos* "the Beloved" in a number of passages (e.g., Matt. 3:17). Similarly Hebrew *bᵉchôr* and Greek *prôtotokos* "firstborn (son)" are used for a unique filial relationship that often included authority over the father's household. In Psalm 89:27 it signifies the preeminent authority of the Davidic king—and by extension his descendent and heir, the Messiah—over all other kings. In Colossians 1:18 this is made explicit of Christ as the firstborn. All of these terms signify a unique filial relationship without entailing procreative generation. Yet they do not exclude generation, and they are compatible with both eternal and incarnational generation, which a biological term would exclude.

Like many other languages, Hebrew and Greek derive terms of address from familial terms and use them far outside the scope of familial relations. In 2 Samuel 8:22, for example, when Joab wanted Ahimaaz the son of Zadok to hearken to his well-meaning advice, he addressed him in a friendly way as *bnî* "my son." When Jesus addressed the paralytic who had been lowered through the roof, he no doubt used *bnî* or *brî*, which Mark translated as *teknon*, ESV "son," RSV "my son," but Luke translated it as *phile*, ESV "friend." There is no evidence of a previous social relationship between the paralytic and Jesus, so the term of address expresses Jesus' compassion for the man. Elisha addresses his mentor Elijah as *âbî* "my father" (2 Kings 2:12). Later, when the king of Israel asks Elisha for guidance, he addresses him as *âbî* "my father" (2 Kings 6:21). Similarly Greek uses *patêr* as a respectful term of address for older men (Luke 16:27; Acts 22:1; translating Hebrew or Aramaic). It expresses politeness rather than a relationship, although a father-son relationship is often the basis of the politeness.

In summary, Hebrew and Greek have relational nouns that signify a biological son, but they are not used in the Bible to express divine sonship. The commonly used filial terms, Hebrew *ben* and Greek *huios*, signify a son, usually social, whether generated by procreation, by marriage, by inheritance, by adoption, by teaching and mentoring, by patronage, or by faith and grace (Gal. 4:19). These are the terms used in the Bible to express divine sonship, along with the terms for an only son and a firstborn son. These are social as well, because they signify an ongoing relationship

Table 2: Categories of filial relations and corresponding Greek and Hebrew terms

General filial relations (Greek *huios*)		
	Social filial relations (Hebrew *ben*)	
Biological filial relations (Hebrew *môledet, yeled*; Greek *gennêma*)		
biological, non-social	biological, social	non-biological, social

regardless of its manner of origin. In translation, if the target language has a filial expression for social sonship or general sonship, i.e., one that does not entail procreative generation when used to express divine sonship, then this would be the closest semantic equivalent, whether it consists of one word or a phrase. The use of strictly biological terms to express divine sonship is therefore inaccurate.

Paternal Terms in Hebrew and Greek

Biblical Hebrew has three words for father: (1) The word *yōlēd* (Prov. 17:21; Dan. 11:6) signifies "genitor, biological father" and corresponds to *yeled*, which means "biological son" in relational constructions. (2) The word *hôr* (Gen. 49:26) signifies "procreator, biological parent." (3) The word *âb* signifies "father" in the general sense, including "paternal figure" (Gen. 45:8), and it is by far the most commonly used of these terms. *Âb* is often used to describe a paternal relation based on procreation (Gen. 20:12), but the term can extend to a grandfather (Gen. 28:13), an ancestor (Gen. 10:21; Deut. 26:5), or a progenitor (Gen. 36:9). So it can extend to biological ancestors with whom there is no active social relation. It can also extend socially to God as the one who created Israel and continues to nurture them (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 64:8).[4]

Biblical Greek has the word *goneus* for "biological parent" (John 9:2), but the commonly used term is *patêr*, which signifies a father in general, whether biological or not. It corresponds to Hebrew *âb* in the Old Testament and has the same scope of

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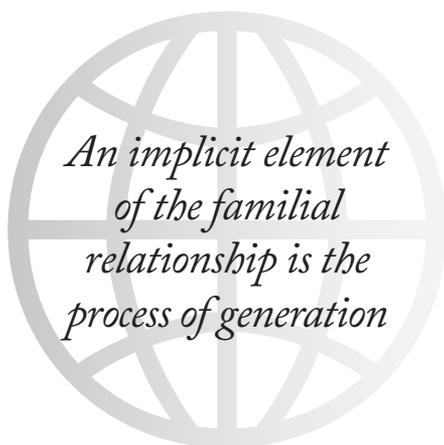
meaning. The paternal relationship can result from marriage rather than procreation, as when Mary calls Joseph the "father" of Jesus (Luke 2:48), meaning his stepfather.[5]

Both the Hebrew *âb* and Greek *patêr* can signify a nurturing father, as opposed to one who merely procreates children, and often it is the paternal nurture itself that is in focus.[6] When the text says that Esther "had neither father nor mother" (Esther 2:7), it does not mean the young woman had no procreators but that she had no parents taking care of her, since they had died, so she was "raised" by her uncle Mordecai "as his own daughter." This paternal relationship can extend beyond strictly familial contexts, as when Job says he is a "father to the needy" (Job 29:16), and when Eliakim is appointed by God to be "a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah" (Isa. 22:21). These terms are shown in Table 3.

With regard to Jesus, the Messianic king is said to be an "eternal father" to his people (Isa. 9:6), and indeed Jesus addressed his followers as "my

son" (Matt. 9:2), "my daughter" (Matt. 9:22), and "children" (John 21:5, said to the apostles). God is described in caring terms as "father of the fatherless" (Ps. 68:5) and "father to Israel" (Jer. 31:9), which includes being their protector (Isa. 63:16). He is "father" to his "people," and they are his "sons and daughters" (2 Cor. 6:16, 18). The nurturing aspect of divine fatherhood is explicit in several passages: "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him" (Ps. 103:13). This nurture includes discipline, for "the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:12).

The social scope of *âb/patêr* "father" extends to mentors and masters, just as the social scope of *ben/huios* "son" extends to their disciples and close subordinates. God made Joseph *âb* "father" to Pharaoh, guiding both his household and his kingdom. The king of Syria appeals to Elisha in filial terms (2 Kings 8:9), treating Elisha as his spiritual father. King Ahaz appeals to his patron the king of Assyria in similar terms (2 Kings 16:7), acknowledging his subordinate dependency. Paul describes himself as "father" to the believers in Corinth (1 Cor. 4:15), and he describes Abraham as "father" to all who believe (Rom. 4:11, 16).

When God appoints a king over his people, God himself is father to the king (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26), and that king is his son (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7) and first-born (Ps. 89:27). It is clear from all this that God's fatherhood is both social and non-biological. At the same time God does generate sons non-biologically through creation, namely Adam (Luke 3:38; cf. Gen. 5:1–3) and Israel (Deut. 32:6; Mal. 2:10) and through the spiritual rebirth of adoption (John 3:3–8; Rom. 8:15). God's eternal Son was generated in eternity, outside of time, as light from light (Heb. 1:3; see next section). The primarily social nature of

Table 3: Categories of paternal relations and corresponding Greek and Hebrew Terms

General paternal relations (Greek *patêr*; Hebrew *âb*)		
	Social paternal relations (Greek *patêr*; Hebrew *âb*)	
Biological paternal relations (Hebrew *yōlēd*, *hôr*; Greek *goneus*)		
biological, non-social	biological, social	non-biological, social

âb/patêr is evident when Jesus says, "And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 23:9).

In summary, Hebrew and Greek have relational nouns that denoted biological sons or fathers, equivalent to English *biological son* and *biological father*. Hebrew and Greek also have relational nouns, similar in meaning to English *father* and *son*, that denote a range of familial relationships, many of which do not involve a biological generation. So in translating such terms, if the original context excludes procreative generation, then it is inaccurate to use target-language expressions that imply it as part of their meaning.

Terms for Generation in Hebrew and Greek

An implicit element of the familial relationship is the process of generation. Hebrew uses the verb *yālad* for this. The first instance is found at Genesis 5:3, which says, "When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered [*yālad*] a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth." Although *yālad* is related to *yeled* in origin, it is not restricted in meaning to procreating offspring but can signify the generation of filial relationships by other means as well. God is said to have fathered the people of Israel (Deut. 32:18), who are therefore his (non-biological) sons and daughters (v. 19). He fathered his anointed king (Ps. 2:7), who is his son, by empowering him to be king, and this verse finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ (cf. Acts 13:33; Heb. 5:5; 1:4-5; Isa. 9:6). The Jews of Jesus' day were awaiting the time when God would "generate the Messiah" in this sense (Dead Sea Scrolls 1Q28a, using the verb *yālad*). Going beyond the family, godless men are said to generate trouble (Job 15:35), while no one knows what events a day will generate (Prov. 27:1).

The corresponding Greek term is *gennaô*, and like the Hebrew, it is not restricted in meaning to procreative

generation (as in Matt. 1:2). It can signify any form of generation, even the generation of quarrels (2 Tim. 2:23). Jesus described the new world as a "regeneration" (Matt. 19:28). Paul says he fathered [*gennaô*] the Corinthian church through the Gospel, and they are therefore his (non-biological) children (1 Cor. 4:14–15). He speaks similarly to the churches in Galatia (Gal. 4:19). Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus is now his child because he fathered [*gennaô*] him in prison, meaning he led him to faith in Christ. More importantly, those who believe in Christ are "regenerated" (Titus 3:5) and born [*gennaô*] of God and become his children (John 1:12–13; 1 John 5:1; James 1:18). Paul said "you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15). So believers become non-biological sons to God.

The Bible reports two additional and unique forms of generation. The first is the eternal generation of God's Word/Wisdom/Son (Prov. 8:22–26; Mic. 5:2), who is Christ (1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:3), through Whom he created all things (Prov. 8:27–31; Ps. 33:6; John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2) who is the radiance of God's glory (Heb. 1:3; 2 Cor. 4:6). The second unique form of generation is the incarnation (John 1:14; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:6–7; Heb. 2:14; 1 Tim. 3:16), which involves a biological generation from Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), without sexual procreation, and without a biological relation to God. Both generations are mentioned in the Nicene Creed, and the fifth ecumenical council (553 AD) ruled that to be orthodox one must "confess that the Word of God has two nativities" (Canon 2).

> *Both the Hebrew âb and Greek patêr can signify a nurturing father, as opposed to one who merely procreates children*

Conclusion

The Hebrew and Greek terms used in expressions for divine fatherhood and divine sonship signify social familial relations and do not require an interpretation of procreated generation. The challenge for translators is to find expressions in their target languages that have a similar scope of meaning. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.41.

[2] Biological sonship was no guarantee of social sonship in the ancient world, nor was non-biological sonship a lessor bond. Under the law of the Roman empire, a biological son could be disowned, but an adopted son could not be disowned. See William M. Ramsay, *Historical Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1997) p. 102.

[3] When a form like *the* is used to indicate that something is one of a kind, it is called an article of uniqueness, e.g., *the sun* or *the current president of the USA*.

[4] See the entry for אָב in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr, and Bruce K. Waltke (eds.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980). They write, "*âb* may designate any man who occupies a position or receives recognition similar to that of a father."

[5] David addresses his father-in-law Saul as *âbî* "my father" (1 Sam. 24:12), but that is a term of address and might signify politeness to an elder or to a king as well as to a father-in-law.

[6] See the entry for πατήρ (*patêr*) in Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1889), which begins by saying the word is "from the root, pa; literally, nourisher, protector, upholder." In other words, it originates as a description of a paternal social role rather than a biological begetting role. A striking example of the term's use for paterfamilias is noted in in Moulton, James Hope and Milligan, George, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) in which a man calls his eldest brother *patêr* because his brother is the head of the family.