

Scripture in Context

59 From the Editor's Desk Brad Gill
Context matters.

61 Articles

61 A Further Look at Translating "Son of God" Michael LeFebvre and Basheer Abdulfadi
An irenic call for patience in the midst of swirling controversy.

75 Living Letters: The Arabic Script as a Redemptive Bridge in Reaching Muslims
Murray Decker and Abdu Injiiru
Does "script" really affect Scripture impact?

83 Bible Translation and Small Languages in the Pacific: Ten Years Later Karl J. Franklin
Are Bible translation ministries in need of a new paradigm?

91 Part I: Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots: Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today
Larry W. Caldwell
Did Paul play fast and loose with the Old Testament?

102 Book Reviews

102 Searching for Heaven in a Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World ∞ **104 The Necessity of Field Research**

106 In Others' Words

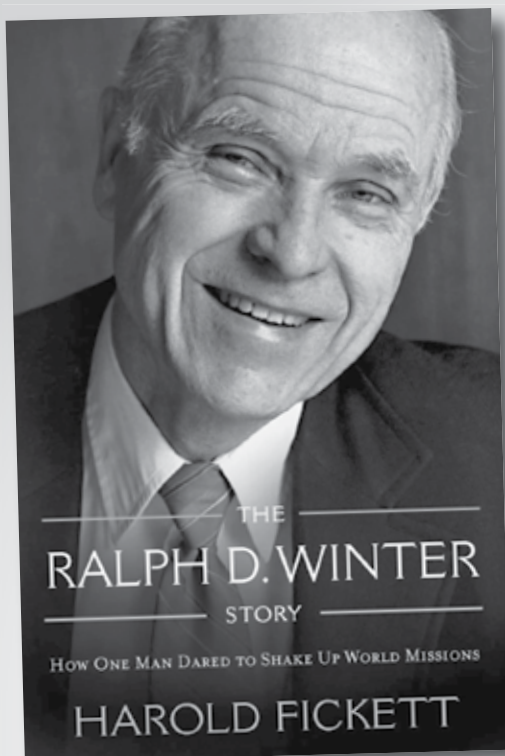
106 Ethnê to Ethnê ∞ **Global Network of Mission Structures**

April–June 2012

29:2

WILLIAM CAREY LIBRARY

NEW RELEASE



The Ralph D. Winter Story

How One Man Dared to Shake Up World Missions

Legendary American missionary strategist Ralph D. Winter always provoked strong reactions, one way or another. The U.S. Center for World Mission and William Carey Library are bringing us an important biography, *The Ralph D. Winter Story: How One Man Dared to Shake Up World Missions* (William Carey Library, 2013), by renowned author Harold Fickett. This long overdue book captures both the genius and the controversy of a self-described “social engineer,” named by *TIME* magazine as one of the 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.

Winter’s honor was well deserved. An engineer by training, he asked fresh questions and came up with innovative answers no one had ever considered. Winter’s work redefining the missionary task to focus on unreached or “hidden” peoples was revolutionary. His dogged determination to find a better way to train local Christians resulted in the powerfully effective Theological Education by Extension movement (TEE).

The book shows how Winter grappled with the theological meaning of the bone-marrow cancer that eventually killed both Roberta and himself. His tentative answers on “evil intelligent design” provoked new ways of thinking, fresh controversy, and

a unique initiative—the Roberta Winter Institute, which focuses on the wide open field of disease eradication for the glory of God.

The Ralph D. Winter Story: How One Man Dared to Shake Up World Missions, published by William Carey Library, provides an outstanding look at the life, ministry, and continuing influence of one of the true giants of the evangelical missionary movement, and indeed of contemporary evangelical faith.

Harold Fickett is a critically acclaimed author of novels, biographies, and works of spirituality, including “The Holy Fool,” “The Living Christ,” and “Dancing with the Divine.” He was a co-founder of the journal “Image,” was president and editor-in-chief of “Catholic Exchange” and co-wrote “The Faith” with Charles Colson. He currently serves as managing editor USA of “Aleteia”, an international website for truth-seekers, published in six languages.

Go to www.RalphDWinter.org for further information.

Ralph Winter was one of the most important and creative mission thinkers of the late 20th century. He was also a fervent supporter of the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world. This biography will be inspiring and challenging.

— Lon Allison, Executive Director, Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College

ISBN: 978-0-87808-496-8

Harold Fickett

Pages 192 | Paperback 2013

List Price: \$15.99

Our Price: \$12.79

3 or more: \$9.59



www.missionbooks.org | 1-800-MISSION

Context Matters

Context always complicates the culture-bridging journey of Scripture. Hopefully we've gotten smarter about it in our mission efforts over the past twenty centuries. The emerging emphasis on orality, Scripture relevance, indigenous translators and the de-Westernization of theology betray an increasing acuity. Each of these articles reflects some aspect of Scripture in context.

The importance of *context* was crystal clear in a pair of dialogues that came across my desk earlier this year.¹ Both discussed the translation of familial terms ("Father"/"Son") among Muslim populations. As you probably know, this whole debate surrounds a contextual problem: Muslims can be repulsed when Scripture uses familial terms that trigger connotations of divine sexual activity (see Brown 2011, 105-125).² Whatever one's opinion on terminology, this pair of articles illustrated how linguistic contexts vary across the Muslim world.

The first dialogue from the Arabic context discussed a new term being considered in the translation of "father." It was not the usual term used by a son for his father, and it seemed to fail the test of filial relation we expect for this term in Scripture. It carried the idea of patriarch, provider, guardian and protector, and not an immediate sense of parental intimacy. But this debate from the Arabic context sparked another discussion in the Indonesian context. Apparently there is a choice of three terms for "father" in Indonesian. Two of these terms are used by children for their father, but the third term has more the idea of a royal fatherly overseer (a little like the meaning of the Arabic term being proposed). And wouldn't you know it, this third term is the term chosen for "father" in over 350 years of Indonesian Bible translation. Note that the very criteria held by some to be absolutely-absolute in the Arabic context (i.e., that Scripture must deploy the most familiar term) was never the case in Indonesia, even though God as Father seems to be effectively comprehended today by those who read the Indonesian Bible.

These still unpublished dialogues encourage at least three important perspectives on this matter of *context*. First, the *context* in *contextualization* requires that our missiology be more anthropological, not less.³ Any necessary critique of older and insufficient social science concepts must not cause us

Editorial *continued on p. 60*

The views expressed in **IJFM** are those of the various authors and not necessarily those of the journal's editors, the International Society for Frontier Missiology or the society's executive committee.

Editor

Brad Gill

Editor-at-Large

Rory Clark

Consulting Editors

Rick Brown, Gavriel Gefen, Herbert Hofer, Rebecca Lewis, H. L. Richard, Steve Saint

Graphic Design

Jennifer C. Swain

Secretary

Karen Watney

Publisher

Bradley Gill, representing the student-level meeting at Edinburgh 1980.

2012 ISFM Executive Committee

Greg Parsons, Brad Gill, Rory Clark, Darrell Dorr

Web Site

www.ijfm.org

Editorial Correspondence

1605 E. Elizabeth Street
Pasadena, CA 91104
(734) 765-0368, editors@ijfm.org

Subscriptions

One year (four issues) \$18.00
Two years (eight issues) \$34.00
Three years (twelve issues) \$48.00
Single copies \$4.00, multiple copies \$3.00

Payment must be enclosed with orders.

Please supply us with current address and change of address when necessary.
Send all subscription correspondence to:

IJFM

**1605 E. Elizabeth Street
Pasadena, CA 91104**

Tel: (626) 398-2119

Fax: (626) 398-2337

Email: subscriptions@ijfm.org

IJFM (ISSN #2161-3354) was established in 1984 by the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions. It is published quarterly.

COPYRIGHT ©2012 International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions.

PRINTED in the USA

to retreat in theological reaction, but provoke us to find better anthropology and better theology.

Secondly, any real missiological understanding will demand more serious research *in the actual context*. In this issue, Greer speaks to the inferiority of our logical and “motivated reasoning” when it fails to include voices from the actual context (p. 104). My friend Dwight Baker said it succinctly: “There’s a big difference between a contextualization done *FOR* a people and a contextualization done *BY* a people.” Field experience and anecdotal observations will not suffice where we need disciplined and grounded research among unreached populations.

Thirdly, we need to analytically distinguish between an understanding of *culture* and *context*.⁴ This is especially crucial in handling Scripture in the Muslim world. The selection of terminology (LeFebvre and Abdulfadi, p. 61) or the selection of orthography (Dekker and Injiiru, p. 75) will determine whether Muslims “listen to” or “take in” Scripture. Deeply ingrained historical prejudices could booby-trap

the effective transmission of Scripture. But there’s more that contributes to these prejudices than simply the culture or worldview of a Muslim people. Each Muslim *context* is loaded with issues of *power, religious identity* and *geo-politics*. With the pressures of globalization, war and migration, Muslims are being forced to renegotiate their identities or to express new religiosities in order to cope with deep insecurity. Katherine Kraft captures a lot of this dynamic in her new book on conversion and identity among Arabs (p. 102). It’s *the context* that can skew how Muslims hear and understand the Scriptures. [As a point of comparison, the selection of Hangul script did not carry a Buddhist or Confucian association in the Korean context (p. 78) And these Muslim contextual factors also seem to disappear when you read Franklin’s article on the tribal languages of the Pacific region (p. 83).]

Well, enjoy the reading. And know that we are quickening our pace of production in order to catch up in early 2013. Because we are committed to providing you with fresh reading (despite delays), some “future” material

from November 2012 appears in the book review and *In Others’ Words* sections of this April-June 2012 issue. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Editor, IJFM

Endnotes

¹ These dialogues were lifted from a small forum called “Bridging the Divide,” which is presently discussing issues of Muslim contextualization.

² Rick Brown, L. Grey, and A. Grey. 2011. “A New Look at Translating Biblical Familial Terms.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28 (3):105f.

³ Robert Priest makes this appeal for new anthropological theory in the “Afterword” of Howell and Zehner (eds.), *Power and Identity in the Global Church* (William Carey Library: Pasadena, CA, 2009), 185.

⁴ Ibid., 1-26.

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: *The World Consultation on Frontier Missions* and the *International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions*. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate “A Church for Every People.”

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, “to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.” (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.

A Further Look at Translating “Son of God”

by Michael LeFebvre and Basheer Abdulfadi

Introduction

A controversy has emerged in recent years over the best way to translate certain New Testament terms for Muslim cultures, terms like “Son of God” for Jesus and “Father” for God.

Many Muslims believe that when Christians call Jesus the “Son of God” it means that God physically (sexually) sired Jesus by Mary. Such an idea is so repugnant to Muslims that when they encounter it in the Bible, some refuse to read further! Christians of course vigorously deny this idea. Nevertheless, this misunderstanding is widespread in Muslim societies.

Because of this and other concerns, some translators concluded that using a word-for-word translation for “Son of God” and “Father” in Muslim languages communicates a wrong meaning. In a series of articles from 2000 to 2007, Rick Brown documented alternate ways in which some translators have avoided the connotations sometimes evoked by traditional approaches.¹ At that time, he suggested meaning-based (rather than form-based) translations would provide accurate meaning and avoid offensive connotations. In particular, at that time Brown proposed the use of synonyms like “Christ of God” or “Christ sent from God” along with an explanation in the translation’s introduction about the meaning of divine familial terms.² As translations using non-traditional terms or phrases for “Son of God” began to appear, many missionaries, national church leaders and other Christians reacted with alarm.³ Subsequent writings refined the approach and addressed criticisms,⁴ but the controversy continued and intensified.

Due to public pressure over the issue, Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL have agreed to submit to a binding external and independent review of their translation policies regarding divine familial terms.⁵ This step, now underway, represents a pivotal opportunity for progress toward the resolution of these

Michael LeFebvre (PhD, Old Testament, University of Aberdeen) is the pastor of Christ Church (RPCNA) in Brownsburg, Indiana. Basheer Abdulfadi is a Western tentmaker who has worked in evangelism and discipleship in the Arabian Peninsula for 19 years.

questions. As Wycliffe and SIL submit to this review, we believe it is important for all connected to this conflict to step back and assess where the controversy stands and what key issues remain unresolved.

We approach this issue as a missionary (Basheer Abdulfadi) with nineteen years of experience in evangelism and discipleship in the Middle East and a pastor (Michael LeFebvre) with a scholarly background in Old Testament studies and ancient Near Eastern law.⁶ We appreciate the missiological goals that prompted the use of non-traditional translations for "Son of God" and "Father," and at the same time are aware of the importance of the word-for-word forms for bringing out the theological significance of these terms. We offer perspectives on some of the key issues to affirm what we believe is best, explain what is not, and call all sides to engage with renewed hope for resolution.

We understand that the present controversy is much larger than the focused issues taken up in this paper. For instance, the controversy is no longer just about translation issues. The personal affronts and charges of ungodliness concerning the way various efforts have been pursued are matters of moral offense that need to be resolved (Matt. 18:15–20). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to address allegations of sin, we do not wish to whitewash or minimize such concerns by not dealing with them here. Furthermore, we understand that this debate is related to another, larger controversy concerning what are commonly called *insider movements*.⁷ Many advocates of insider movements will also advocate for non-traditional, meaning-based translations of "Son of God" and "Father." But there are also proponents of meaning-based translations who are not proponents of insider movements. Our paper focuses on this controversy as it relates to traditional missionary

approaches without taking up the issues surrounding insider movements. We are not ignoring the importance of that other debate, nor are we denying the overlap between these two controversies; it is simply not the focus of this paper.

We have labored to give as fair a representation as possible of the various parties with whom we interact in this article. We solicited feedback on an earlier form of this paper from an extensive circle of persons from all sides of this controversy. We are grateful for the criticisms and corrections we have received. Hopefully we have adequately taken those criticisms into account, as we



earnestly desire to represent others' positions accurately. We recognize there will always be points where we have fallen short. For these shortcomings we ask forgiveness in advance and assure all involved that we genuinely desire to deal accurately and charitably in these proposals.

Summary of Recent Progress and Evaluation

It is ironic that the present translation debate has become increasingly polarized at the same time that significant progress has occurred. A timeline of key events will provide perspective both to those who are familiar with the controversy and those who are new to it.

In February of 2011, *Christianity Today* published an article on the controversy.⁸ This was followed by articles in *World Magazine*.⁹ These articles effectively moved the debate from the confines of Muslim mission circles into the wider Christian public.

In early June 2011, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) approved an amended overture (Overture 9) from the Potomac Presbytery. This overture called on the PCA to declare as unfaithful those translations that "alter" the filial relationship between God the Father and God the Son.¹⁰ The overture was concerned primarily with the missiology of "insider movements" and perceived the new translation policies as motivated by the philosophy behind those movements. Additionally, a study committee was formed to further examine the issue; their report was adopted by the General Assembly of the PCA of June 19–20, 2012.¹¹

In late June 2011, a consultation called Bridging the Divide brought together missionaries, missiologists and theologians to attempt to reduce the escalating tension between critics and advocates of insider movements and to discuss the current translation controversy. To the surprise of many, the participants agreed to a statement that included an affirmation to "practic[e] fidelity in Scripture translation using terms that accurately express the familial relationship by which God has chosen to describe Himself as Father in relationship to the Son in the original languages."¹² Furthermore, there was a growing realization that non-traditional translations for "Son of God" are not always motivated by insider movement philosophies. Many had assumed that the move toward meaning-based translations of divine familial terms was an aspect of "insider movements," and that the two trends occur together. It became clear at the 2011 Bridging the Divide consultation that some translators were adopting

meaning-based translations to divine familial titles without any connection to insider movement ideas, but simply out of a desire to communicate *meaning* that they believed was not achieved by traditional, form-based translations.

Then in early August 2011, SIL convened a meeting of its personnel with invited observers¹³ to determine best practices for translation of key familial terms. The resulting “Statement of Best Practices” affirmed the importance of retaining familial terms, stating, “Scripture translations should promote understanding of the term ‘Son of God’ in all its richness, including his filial relationship with the Father.”¹⁴ The statement further confirmed the importance of the word-for-word forms by requiring SIL translators to present and explain “Son of God” and “Father” in the paratext—marginal or footnotes—if synonyms, similes, or other meaning-based translations were used. To quote the SIL statement, “... non-literal options for the text may be considered which conserve as much of the familial meaning as possible, provided that the paratext includes the literal form.”¹⁵ Not all parties to the controversy are satisfied that these Best Practices statements say enough, but they represent progress.¹⁶

The September 2011 issue of *IJFM* published a pair of papers by Rick Brown, Leith Gray and Andrea Gray that affirms the importance of the familial nature of the titles “Son of God” and “Father” and reassesses the translation of the titles in Muslim contexts. The papers contain many important insights, some of which will be considered below. Most significantly, the authors strongly affirm the need to retain the familial nature of the titles and *discourage the use of “Messiah” to translate Son of God*. They wrote,

We now believe it is ideal to express the familial component of meaning in the text ... and that terms like

T*his statement represents a positive shift in emphasis. Some, however, have greeted the change with suspicion and skepticism.*

“Christ/Messiah” should be used only to translate *Christos/Meshiach* and should not be used to translate *huios/ben*. We would discourage anyone from doing this.¹⁷

This statement represents a positive shift in emphasis and demonstrates further progress. Some, however, have greeted the change with suspicion and skepticism. In particular, both the SIL Best Practices statement and the new articles by Brown et al. give *priority* to the word-for-word translation of “Son of God” and “Father” where they do not communicate wrong meaning (especially the implication of sexual behavior on God’s part), but some insist that word-for-word translations of these terms be used *exclusively*.

In early January 2012, an online petition called on Wycliffe and SIL “not to remove *Father, Son* or *Son of God* from the text of Scripture.”¹⁸ As of October, 2012, over 14,000 people have signed the petition, calling for an absolute commitment to literal word-for-word translations that preserve the form of divine familial terms without exception. This petition effectively changed the nature of the conflict from an intramural dispute to a public controversy. One consequence of publicizing the debate in the form of a petition has been to raise doubts in the minds of donors about the biblical integrity of Wycliffe and SIL, discouraging their further support. The resulting financial pressure has impacted the work of Bible translation worldwide, not just work in Muslim contexts.

The increasingly public criticism led Wycliffe and SIL to issue a series of statements reaffirming their commitment to the authority of

Scripture and the deity of Christ. Further, Wycliffe and SIL committed their organizations to the outcome of a commissioned global and independent review, and agreed to slow the publication of affected translation projects until the review is completed.

While this summary of events shows the increasing polarization that has taken place, we want to highlight the significant progress that has also occurred. Furthermore, although the crisis threatens Wycliffe and SIL translation projects in Muslim contexts and beyond, it also represents opportunities. Scholars and missionaries have been forced to re-examine important theological and missiological issues. The result of the increased study has the potential to greatly enrich our understanding of Christ.

Key Issues

The debate over translating Son of God terminology is complex and multidimensional. The debate involves more than linguistic questions; it also involves socio-religious, philosophy of ministry, and other kinds of issues. To make progress, it is important to respect the complexity and unravel the many layers involved. We identify five distinct issues: two involving biblical linguistics, one involving linguistic issues in target languages, one involving Islamic theology, and one touching on philosophy of ministry issues. This list is not exhaustive, but these are topics at the core of the crisis.

1. The Multi-faceted Nature of the Title “Son of God”

Rick Brown’s 2000 article “The ‘Son of God’: Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus” was the ground breaking argument for meaning-based rather than form-based

translations of "Son of God." While the article proved controversial in its conclusions, some components of his argument drew on widely accepted characteristics of the title, including its *multi-faceted meaning*.

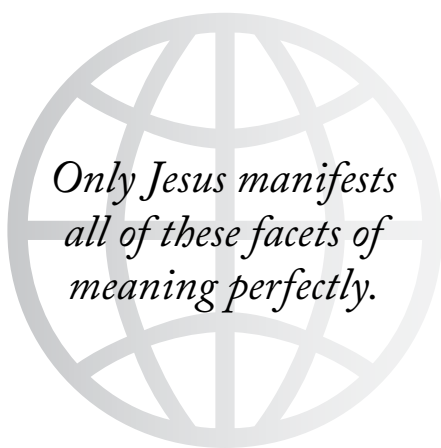
The term "Son of God" has many facets of meaning. It expresses *love*—the close relationship of God to the one he calls "son." It also speaks of *authority*—the delegation of power from God to one he makes his agent. The title underscores a person's *work*—the "son" carries out God's mission among humankind. It communicates *holiness*—the "son" bearing God's likeness manifests his righteousness. And in addition to these and other facets of meaning, the title conveys *identity*—the "son" is one who embodies the presence of God among humanity.¹⁹ The meaning of Son of God is rich and multi-dimensional.

Only Jesus manifests all of these facets of meaning perfectly, so that we rightly speak of Jesus as *the* Son of God preeminently. Nevertheless, Jesus is not the only person in Scripture who is called by this title. This brings us to a second point, generally acknowledged, which was a key component of Brown's early articles: the title "Son of God" is used for many persons in Scripture. It is used chiefly for Jesus, but it is also used for Adam (Luke 3:38), David and his heirs (Pss. 2:7; 89:26–27; 2 Sam. 7:14), the whole nation of Israel (Exod. 4:22; Hosea 11:1) the church (John 1:12; Gal. 3:26; Rom. 8:14–16), and others (e.g., Gen. 6:4; Job 1:6; Matt. 5:9).

These two points—namely, that the title has many facets of meaning and has been used for several persons in Scripture—enjoy general agreement, but the implications Brown drew from them proved controversial. More recent articles by Brown and others have qualified those early conclusions. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to revisit the two basic insights Brown

raised about the nature of the title "Son of God" in order to clarify what we believe their implications for translation ought to be.

Let's revisit these basic points about the title "Son of God" by means of two questions. First, does the title's multi-faceted nature indicate multiple meanings for the term or multiple emphases of a single meaning? Second, only Jesus perfectly fulfills this title, but to what extent does the meaning of *divine identity* attach to others when Scripture calls them by the same title? We now take up the first of these questions, leaving the second to be addressed under point two below.



The title "Son of God" has often been treated as though it produces different meanings in different contexts. In some passages it is the facet of *love* that is recognized, while in other passages the facet of *mission* (doing the Father's work) is drawn out, and so on.²⁰ If the title takes on different meanings in different contexts, it becomes important to determine *which* of the title's meanings is intended in a given passage in order to translate its meaning.

For example, Romans 9:25–26 quotes this promise of God to his "sons":

Those who were not my people I will call "my people," and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved." And

in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they will be called "*sons of the living God*." (ESV)

In this passage, the title "sons of the living God" brings out God's love. Therefore some have suggested that an alternate translation expressing belovedness would be appropriate: "[To avoid procreative connotations,] translators ... sometimes use similes, as in 'God will say they are like children to him,' 'God will consider them as if they were his children,' or 'God will have a relationship with (or, will care for) them like a father with his children.'"²¹ Notably, these similes emphasize the loving relationship expressed by the term. But does a simile focusing on certain facets of the term's meaning really convey the meaning adequately?

Rather than seeing the nuances of the title as a catalogue of meanings to choose from, we argue it is more accurate to see them as multiple facets of a stable, single meaning. Like a diamond, even though one facet of this title might be prominent in a given passage, the luster and color are a result of the light from all its facets. In the title "sons of the living God" in the Romans passage above, God's love for Israel is on the surface. However, the *holiness* God desires for his people, their faithful service in his *work* and their status as *heirs* are still important parts of the loving relationship that is on display. Furthermore, the term "sons of the living God" communicates more than paternal love: it promises *all the privileges and qualities that go along with restored sonship*, such as moral transformation, restoration to God's service, and the blessing of God's presence.

We believe that the many nuances of "Son of God" should not be treated as distinct meanings that depend on the immediate context. The supposition that one aspect of this title's meaning is adequate to substitute for the whole

in translation needs to be corrected.²² While a given nuance may be prominent, it never excludes the other meanings. The practical import of this is to highlight the importance of the *form* of the title “Son(s) of God” for its meaning. An attempt to translate the meaning of the term by focusing on one or another of its nuances rather than translating its form actually leads to a loss of meaning. Thankfully, as noted earlier, there is a growing awareness of the importance of the form of familial terms to understand their meaning; these insights further affirm that direction.

2. The Divine Implications of the Title “Son of God”

Among the many facets of the title “Son of God” discussed above, we will argue that the most significant is the idea of *identity*: the son is *one who manifests God’s presence*. Muslims react to this implication of the title’s meaning—namely that Jesus is divine—as well as to its perceived sexual implications. This aspect of the title’s meaning can also make Christians uncomfortable when ascribed to persons other than Jesus. Is Scripture really saying, for instance, that Adam was in some sense an embodiment of deity when he is called “son of God” in Luke 3:38? If “Son of God” implies the deity of Jesus, why doesn’t it imply the same for Adam?

We believe a resolution to this question about the divine implications of this title requires understanding that central to the term “Son of God” *in all its uses* is the idea of one who embodies (or incarnates) God’s presence. Certainly such embodiment occurs in many different ways. Jesus alone *fully and perfectly* fulfills this qualification; but even in its other uses, the title always expresses the idea, in some sense, of a human embodiment of God’s presence.

The question of the divine implications of “Son of God” was the early focus of

Rulers throughout the ancient world bore the title “son of god.” In Egypt, pharaoh was given a “Horus name” upon coronation.

the current controversy. The debate now encompasses a constellation of familial terms for a variety of relationships with God and within the Godhead. We return to a focused look at the divine implications of the term “Son of God,” but not in order to minimize the importance of other terms. It is our sense that the controversy has moved on to other terms without adequately clarifying the divine implications of “Son of God.” This lack of resolution contributes to the continuing impasse where some see Son of God as primarily *functional* while others see it as primarily *ontological*.²³ We believe that to break the impasse, it is essential to understand the divine implications of “Son of God.” We can see this feature of the title both in its use throughout the ancient Near East and in its biblical usage.

Rulers throughout the ancient world bore the title “son of god.” In Egypt, pharaoh was given a “Horus name” upon coronation. This name was part of an elaborate myth wherein the god Osiris begat a divine son Horus, ritually identified with the new pharaoh. Jarl Fossum explains, “The enthronement was the definitive act of begetting or deification in Egypt.”²⁴ An inscription from Horemhab’s coronation includes the pronouncement from the sun god Amun-Ra: “You are my son and my heir who has come out of my members.”²⁵ Thutmose III confessed on his coronation, “[I am Ra’s] son, whom he commanded that I should be upon his throne ... and begat in uprightness of heart.”²⁶ It was specifically upon enthronement that pharaoh “received ... all the magico-religious consecrations which transform him into a living incarnation of Rā, the sun-god, creator of the world.”²⁷

In Mesopotamia the picture is more varied. Kings in the Fertile Crescent were sometimes regarded as divine, sometimes as men filled with the “seed” or spirit of the gods, and sometimes as stewards of the gods.²⁸ When the gods created Gilgamesh king of Uruk, they made him “Two thirds ... god and one third man.”²⁹ In Sumer, “kings ... had their names prefixed by the determinative for divinity.”³⁰ Gudea, king of Lagash, declared to the goddess Gatumdu, “My seed [i.e., the seed of my Father] You have received; in the sanctuary You have begotten me.”³¹ The literature is replete with such examples, so that scholars conclude: “in the entire Near East, the king could be called ‘Son of God’ or even ‘God.’”³² And there is a reason for this widespread connection between kingship and deity.

In Egypt, for example, the principle duty of the king was “to maintain *maat* ... [which means] ‘right order’—the inherent structure of creation ... Thus the king, in the solitariness of his divinity, shoulders an immense responsibility.”³³ The entire creation order—not just political order—was on the king’s shoulders. In the modern world, we conceive of civic power (politics) as distinct from natural power (e.g., the seasons and agriculture) and supernatural power (religion). Such distinctions were unknown in the ancient world. Kings were expected to uphold all aspects of right order so the gods would be pleased, the rains would come at the right times, crops would flourish, and justice would prevail.³⁴ In short, kingship required superhuman power. The ancient myths of divine begetting are repulsive to Christians for many reasons. But they represent

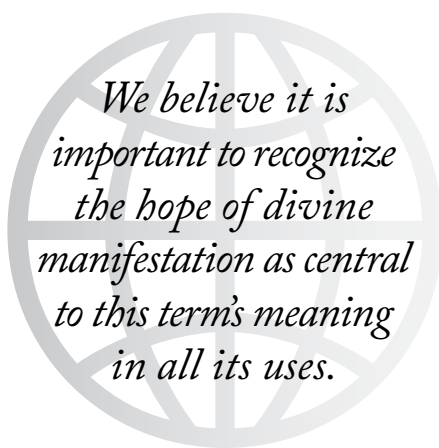
a widespread conviction that a society achieves righteous order only when a king who is in some sense divine is on the throne.

The Old Testament exhibits similarly lofty expectations of kingship, though strikingly without myths of divine copulation.³⁵ When David was identified as the next king of Israel, Samuel anointed him "and the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward ... [and] the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul ..." (1 Sam. 16:13–14). Like the coronation professions of other lands, the Davidic coronation includes the announcement of divine begetting (Ps. 2:7). We must hasten to add that, unlike the kings of the surrounding nations, the "begetting" of the Davidic king was by divine *covenant* (Ps. 2:7a, 2 Sam. 7:8–16), not by divine copulation.³⁶ Nevertheless, David was endowed with the Holy Spirit in a manner that set him apart as an embodiment of God's presence in Israel, expressed in the title "son of God." David feared the consequences for Israel should he ever quench the Spirit by his sins and thus be abandoned to rule without God's presence as had happened to Saul before him (Ps. 51:11; cf., 2 Sam. 7:14–15; Ps. 89:20–34). As one who bore the title "son of God," David was not "very God incarnate" like Jesus. Nevertheless, by means of the Spirit's infilling, David imperfectly yet actually embodied God's presence in Israel.³⁷

Not only kings, but judges (who served as extensions of the king's justice) were sometimes called "gods" in the Bible (e.g., Ps. 82:1, 6; Exod. 4:16; 7:1). One should not read too much into this usage, but neither should it be ignored. These judges were not deified, but they needed the presence of God's Spirit to administer justice (e.g., Num. 11:11–30; cf., Prov. 16:10–11; 2 Sam. 14:17, 20). For this reason judges also bore a divine title. And all Israel (Exod.

4:22) and all the church are granted the profound wonder of being called "sons of God" *because of God's presence manifested through them* (Gal. 4:6).

Those called "son of God" embodied God's presence in different ways and in varying degrees. The term does not apply to Adam in exactly the same way as it does to Jesus, but the core meaning is the same in each instance: God manifests his presence among humanity through the ones he designates as "sons." In fact, other facets of the term's meaning—beloved of God, holiness, authority, and so forth—are secondary ideas that flow from the term's central concept: *God's manifest presence*. In Jesus, one who is



not just Spirit-filled but fully divine perfectly fulfilled the title.³⁸ But in every case, the term expresses the same basic idea of one who embodies God's presence.

Some have argued that the title has little or no reference to divine embodiment except as ascribed to Jesus. For instance, in a 2000 article, Brown wrote concerning Egypt's use of this title: "This was more a functional than ontological title—though a few kings became arrogant and actually claimed divinity for themselves."³⁹ He then went on to suggest that the title, when used for Israel's kings prior to Jesus, refers to their belovedness and God-given

mission, not to a divine manifestation. Brown was not (as some have claimed) denying the deity of Christ nor was he denying the importance of the title "Son of God" when ascribed to Jesus as a witness to his deity.⁴⁰ However, Brown and others did overlook the idea of divine embodiment, which is present in some sense in all uses of this term, not just in reference to Jesus. We believe it is important to recognize the hope of divine manifestation as central to this term's meaning *in all its uses*. Translating the term with a meaning-based expression that lacks or obscures this sense of divine embodiment hides a vital aspect of its meaning.

There is merit to Brown's statement that "son of God" was "more a functional than ontological title" in the ancient world. But this claim anachronistically projects the modern distinction between *function* and *ontology* onto the term and thereby obscures the divine expectation inherent even in "functional" uses of it.⁴¹ In many cases, the ancients recognized that their kings were still men (ontologically) who functioned in their kingly office with divine authority. But rather than asking whether kings were seen as *ontologically* divine, we should ask whether they were believed to be *really* divine.⁴²

There was, after all, *real* power conferred during the king's enthronement. And that power, which continued with the king throughout his reign, was perceived as *really* divine. *Following modern distinctions*, we might say that kings of the ancient world were men (ontologically) who took on divine functions. Israel did not see in King David an incarnation of Yahweh. But there was *real* spiritual power, and by ancient perceptions *real* divine presence, conferred upon kings at their enthronement. This was the significance of the Holy Spirit's presence first with Saul, then later

with David. Inherent in this royal title is the expectation, made explicit by the prophets, that a more perfect king than David would even more perfectly manifest God's presence. Even though the Old Testament saints may not have universally imagined the divine Word himself becoming flesh to fill that office, the title "Son of God" always involves the hope of some manner of divine manifestation in the king.⁴³

When Brown distinguishes the ontological deity of Christ from the functional deity of other ancient kings, he is theologically correct. But to impose that distinction of function versus ontology upon the term "Son of God" obscures the real, divine expectations inherent its biblical usage, even in its *functional* appearances.

In summary, throughout the ancient world *and in its many uses throughout Scripture*, "Son(s) of God" always included the concept of real divine presence. As scholars frequently note, the ascription is often more functional than ontological by modern terms. Nonetheless, the form "Son(s) of God" captures the idea of a real embodiment of God's presence. For this reason we urge translators to use the word-for-word form "Son of God." It is *part* of the biblical witness to Israel's need for a king who manifests God's presence and the fully divine King Jesus who perfectly does so.

This leaves us with one further question under this topic. Recognizing that this title is part of Scripture's witness to Christ's deity, should we conclude that simile and other meaning-based translations that replace the sonship *form* are implicit denials of Christ's deity or that they undermine the doctrine of the Trinity? Some critics have made such charges⁴⁴ and there are grounds for concern that something is lost. While we concur with those who see the form "Son of God" as an important *part* of the biblical witness to Christ's deity, we

We would caution against impugning the motives of those who have advocated non-traditional translations for "Son of God."

also caution against the presumption that translators are *trying* to obscure the deity of Christ when they use alternate translations for "Son of God." God's Word teaches us to carefully distinguish between those who are well-intentioned but (in our judgment) wrong, and those who ill-intentioned and wrong.⁴⁵ In both cases, error needs to be corrected, but how such correction takes place is different where an opponent's motives are honorable. Even when the doctrinal stakes are high—*especially* when the doctrinal stakes are high—"the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but ... able to teach ... correcting his opponents with gentleness ..." (2 Tim. 2:24–25).

Those who have promoted alternate translations for "Son of God" report that they have done so to bring out what they have understood to be the primary meaning of the title: "God's Messiah" or "like children to God." Their intentions are to be faithful to the Word, even if critics deem the resulting translations unfaithful. Good intentions never excuse one from responsibility, but they do compel those who criticize to do so with patience in hopes of winning a brother or sister and not just winning an argument.

We would caution against impugning the motives of those who have advocated non-traditional translations for "Son of God." Alternate translations do not necessarily undermine the title's witness to Christ's deity if the word-for-word form is provided in the paratextual material (as Rick Brown advocated in his 2005 articles⁴⁶ and the Best Practices statement now requires).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, based on the above evidence that divine expectations are *primary* in the title's meaning and

expressed by its form, we advocate word-for-word translations of "Son of God" in the text.

3. The Use of Biological and Social Terms for "Father" and "Son"

With the consensus that it is important to retain the familial nature of the titles "Father" and "Son," the question arises: *which* familial terms? In some languages, there are terms for a *biological* father/son relationship (e.g., physical offspring) and other terms that indicate a *social* relationship, encompassing both biological and non-biological relationships (e.g., adoption). This issue is the major focus of Brown et al. in their recent articles entitled "A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible" and "A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms." So rather than non-familial alternatives for "Son of God" and "Father" (like "the Christ from God"), the discussion is now re-focusing around which familial terms to use. "Things have changed," Brown et al. explain, "We (the authors) now believe that the familial-relational component underlies the other components of Christ's sonship and is the most important one to express in the text, as also for God's fatherhood and the adopted sonship of believers."⁴⁸ While issues still remain, we believe it is important to acknowledge the progress that this shift in focus represents.

In these articles, Brown et al. offer an extensive analysis of various Hebrew and Greek familial terms. They identify terms that express exclusively biological relationships and terms that express social relationships, which may or may not be biological. Their finding is that whenever Scripture expresses *divine* sonship, the terms used carry

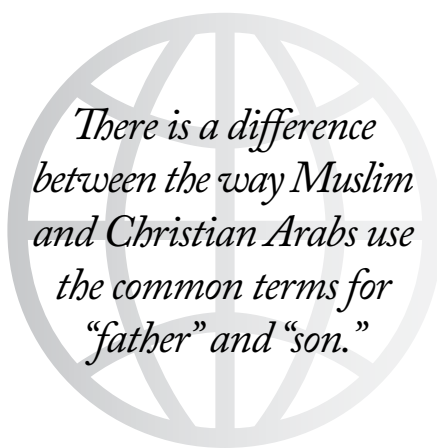
in them the possibility of social sonship and do not *demand* a biological relationship.⁴⁹ Even where typically biological terms are used, they never *demand* a biological meaning. From this analysis of the apparent kinship system underlying biblical language, the authors conclude that when translators use terms which are exclusively biological to express divine sonship, their translations "*are inaccurate because they add a procreative meaning that was absent from the original...*"⁵⁰ There is much to unpack in the reasoning laid out in these articles.

Based on the conclusions just quoted, Brown et al. urge that "the divine sonship of Jesus should be expressed in the text using ... *social* filial expressions that do not demand a biological meaning involving sexual activity by God, yet still *allow* for the filiation derived from the Son's eternal generation and incarnation."⁵¹ There is a catch-22 here, and Brown et al. have taken a categorical decision about how to resolve it. On the one hand, a translation that unequivocally expresses the Son's shared essence with the Father typically requires using a biological term. On the other hand, an alternative social term or phrase that avoids a procreative connotation may *allow* for shared essence but *does not make explicit* the idea of shared essence. When faced with tradeoffs like these, the guidance from Brown et al. is to always give priority to avoiding the implication of divine sexual activity.

For example, Brown et al. explore phrases like "the Son *from* God," which signifies "a relationship that is filial ('Son') and not necessarily biological, yet ... is compatible with eternal generation *from* the essence of God ..." ⁵² In some languages, such a phrase does not trigger a negative reaction. But what if a given text (e.g., Ps. 2:7) needs a translation that is not merely compatible with eternal generation but *expresses* that shared essence? It is not obvious that the

priority of avoiding biological connotations should always outweigh the priority of expressing shared essence. When translating in Muslim contexts, the position taken by Brown et al. is understandable. But there is loss of meaning where this is done, especially when it is done systematically. Typically it is biological sonship language that most clearly brings out the idea of shared essence between Son and Father.

We do not raise this critique to contradict the authors' conclusions, simply to qualify them. There is certainly no intention on the part of Brown et al. to obscure the divine nature of Jesus Christ. Where target languages offer



social familial terms, we agree that it is prudent for translators to consider them. But we question whether biological terms must be systematically avoided as Brown et al. seem to insist (compare topic number 4, below). In some passages, the Son's shared essence with the Father is at the heart of the text's meaning, so meaning is lost when biological terms are avoided.

By and large, we are in agreement with the overall thrust of Brown et al.'s recent articles. We affirm their basic point that translators in Muslim contexts should give preference to "social" familial terms that do not exclusively imply procreation. But we think they overstate their case when

they categorically argue that translations that do use biological terms "are inaccurate because they add a procreative meaning that was absent from the original."⁵³ Bringing out the shared essence of the Son of God with the Father is arguably one reason some biblical passages use biological sonship terms in the first place.⁵⁴ So while we appreciate what Brown et al. are recommending, we caution against categorically denying the legitimacy of biological sonship terms.

Having offered this critique, we are also concerned that the thesis of Brown et al. has been misunderstood, particularly in the context of Arabic, and that these misunderstandings have contributed unnecessarily to the escalation of the crisis and the polarization that has ensued. Many linguists have observed that *Christian* Arabs use the common Arabic words for "father" and "son" in a way similar to the biblical usage, while *Muslim* Arabs typically use the same Arabic words for "father" and "son" for strictly procreative relationships. Christian Arabs involved in the debate, particularly those active in Muslim evangelism, have understandably bristled at being told by non-native speakers what their language means. However, there really is a difference between the way Muslim and Christian Arabs use and perceive the common terms for "father" and "son."

The Muslim Arabic usage of "son" (*ibn*) as exclusively procreative arose in connection with the Qur'an's teaching on adoption. The practice of adoption was overturned in the Qur'an in *Sura 33 (Al-Ahzab)* which was recorded when Muhammad married Zainab, the divorced wife of Zaid, Muhammad's adoptee. In connection with that case, the Qur'an introduced a distinction between adoptees and sons: "[Allah] has not made your adoptees your sons" (33:4). Building on this doctrine, the Qur'an specifically sanctioned Muhammad's

marriage to Zainab, which would not have been permitted if Zaid had been his biological son. The Qur'an permitted an adoptive "father" to marry the divorced wife of his adoptee (33:37) and expressed it by limiting the use of the common words for father (*ab*) and son (*ibn*) to literal, procreative relationships. So in Islamic Arabic, the commonly used words for father and son are not "social" in the sense defined by Brown et al. This is in contrast to the broader social use of *ab* and *ibn* by Christian Arabic speakers, who acknowledge and practice adoption and whose kinship system aligns more closely to that of the Bible. Muslim misunderstanding can usually be cleared up with a brief explanation, but the difference in usage is certainly there and arguing over it is not fruitful.

A more useful discussion is whether alternatives for the commonly used words for "father" and "son" will both remove the linguistic offence and communicate the richness of the Bible's use of father and son terminology. However, the misperception of divine procreation is not the only issue Muslims react to when they encounter divine familial titles.

4. What Really is the Muslim Objection to Divine Familial Titles?

The previous three topics dealt with linguistic issues. This next topic moves us into Muslim theology. The reason for the present controversy is that Muslims from some language groups perceive sexual behavior on the part of God when they read or hear the titles "Son of God" and "Father." However, this perception is not the only reason why Muslims reject divine familial titles. Failure to account for the full spectrum of reasons behind the reactions of individual Muslims may lead to oversimplification of the problem and its solutions. Indeed, there has been insufficient attention to the role of Muslim beliefs in this discussion.

Some Muslims, especially Salafists, react to the title "Son of God" because they see that it places Jesus on an unacceptable level of intimacy with God.

The conceptual heart of Muslim reaction to the title "Son of God" is their doctrine of *tawhiid*, the absolute, undifferentiated oneness of God.⁵⁵ This belief automatically excludes the Trinity. It is the root of Islamic refusal to even consider distinctions within God and to reject out of hand the divinity of Jesus.

Closely related to the absolute oneness of God is his utter uniqueness and transcendence. Christians likewise confess the transcendence of God, but in Islam transcendence excludes the idea of someone, even Muhammad, knowing God or even communicating directly with him; the Qur'an is entirely a first-person address to Muhammad *through the medium of Gabriel*. Some Muslims, especially Salafists, react to the title "Son of God" because they see that it places Jesus on an unacceptable level of familiarity and intimacy with God. This is the essence of *shirk*, associating "partners" with God, which is the worst sin in Islam.^{56,57} So there are more reasons why Muslims react to "Son of God" and "Father" than the perception of carnal behavior.

In addition, the perception of divine sexual behavior is neither universal nor uniformly serious. Islam is not monolithic. Many Muslims are poorly educated about Islam itself and are even more ignorant about what the Bible says. In the collective experience of missionaries in one Arabian Peninsula country (including one co-author of this article), while some Muslims do react negatively upon encountering divine familial terms, it is not uncommon for others to hear or read "Son of God" and "Father" and continue to read without any negative reaction. And when the traditional

translations of "Son of God" and "Father" raise the question of divine procreation, as they frequently do, a brief explanation is enough to dispel their concerns.

One of the authors (Basheer Abdulfadi) recently started a study of Mark with a seeker who has had limited exposure to the Bible. Since Jesus is called the Son of God in Mark 1:1, the issue came up immediately. After hearing that it doesn't mean that God had sexual relations to beget Jesus, as many say, the seeker responded that this was evidence that Muslim scholars were lying about what Christians believe! Other missionaries and believers active in sharing their faith relate numerous similar stories.⁵⁸

While such evidence is admittedly anecdotal, it illustrates the fact that the perception of sexual activity in the divine familial titles "Son of God" and "Father" is not universal—even in the case of Arabic. Furthermore, the oft-stated claim that this misperception is universal (or nearly so) leans heavily on anecdotal evidence, and anecdotes can always be countered with other anecdotes. We do not deny that many Muslims react strongly to "Son of God" terminology,⁵⁹ but we caution against universalizing such experiences as a basis for translation policy. We also warn against the danger of generalizing experience in one Arabic context to the rest of the Muslim world; how people react to "Son" and "Father" in one context may not apply to other parts of the Muslim world or even other parts of the Arab world.

To summarize, the reasons for Muslim perception that "Son of God" and "Father" imply sexual activity on God's part include differing uses

of common familial terms within a language group, basic Muslim beliefs, and misunderstanding of Christian teaching. The misperceptions can often be cleared up with a brief explanation. Muslim reactions to this title based on our different understanding of God's oneness (as triune) and the real possibility of nearness to him in Christ are points of conflict that cannot be avoided. Muslim objections will necessarily continue even if alternate words or phrases remove the perceived sexual implications of the title. It is unrealistic to expect any translation of the "Son of God" titles to express the multi-faceted meaning of that term and at the same time to overcome the many obstacles to understanding that are present within a Muslim context! In solving one problem, others appear, and it seems that the matter comes down to choosing which problems to solve.⁶⁰ As we will explore more fully under the next topic, translators can make an important contribution toward clarifying the meaning of "Son of God"; but, in light of the complexity of the problem, even the best translation will not solve all of the difficulties. However, as we explain under the next heading, this is not as serious a problem as it might initially appear.

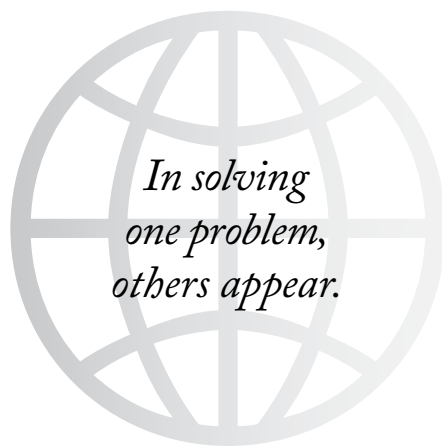
5. Clarifying the Translator's Role

This next topic follows on the previous one and moves us into another subject area: philosophy of ministry. What is the role of the translator? More specifically, when there is a culture-wide point of confusion (e.g., the meaning of the term "Son of God"), to what extent should the translator *interpret* that term *in the translation itself*? The question we pose is not absolute, as though a translator either should or should not take such misunderstandings into account. The question is one of extent: To what extent is the translator responsible for resolving those interpretation problems in the translation?

Acts 8:26–40 is an important model to consider. In this text, we are told

about an official from Ethiopia who was reading a scroll of Isaiah. He was struggling to understand what he was reading: "Does the prophet say this about himself or about someone else?" (v. 34). Then the Holy Spirit miraculously carried Philip to his side to explain the passage to him: "Beginning with this Scripture, [Philip] told him the good news about Jesus" (v. 36). Here is one example of a biblical norm, that is, an inquirer struggling to understand the written Word finds help from a human witness.

The passage in Acts is not teaching us *how* the Spirit typically brings such witnesses to inquirers. Even in New Testament times, evangelists



like Paul traveled by ordinary means, just like everyone else. But this text does teach us *how important it is* that an evangelist would serve as the normal interpreter of Scripture. The Spirit went to great lengths to ensure that the Ethiopian traveler had a witness by his side as he struggled to understand the written Word. The biblical pattern of witness illustrated here leads us to expect that the written Word will normally require a human witness to explain its difficult teachings. This is not just an isolated example. The Acts 8 pericope is illustrative of a biblical pattern.

In fact, in all the New Testament there are no examples of unbelievers com-

ing to faith by private reading of the Scriptures. The story of the Ethiopian official is the closest Scripture comes to a private conversion account. Certainly, the Spirit does sometimes bring people to faith in this way, and it is a marvelous testimony to God's grace when that happens. But private conversion is not what Scripture teaches us to expect. The New Testament emphasis is on commissioning witnesses who carry and explain the Word (e.g., Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 10:2; Rom. 10:14–15).⁶¹

We believe a significant factor in the current crisis is the unspoken assumption⁶² that a translator should translate "Son of God" in ways that convey its biblical meaning (translation) *and* that overcomes culture-wide misunderstandings (interpretation). This is a noble goal, but it potentially confuses the roles of translator and interpreter. Translators should exercise sensitivity to potential misunderstandings as they translate, but they should not labor under a burden to resolve every misunderstanding *at the translation level*.

There are statements in the SIL Best Practices guidelines that indicate some progress in recognizing this distinction, but we believe these guidelines need to be strengthened. In that statement, the following two-part explanation of paratextual material is given: "The primary purpose of the paratext is to help the reader to infer the intended meaning from the text. It also presents more literal translations of phrases used in the text." The guidance that accompanies this definition urges translators to preserve literal translations in the text wherever possible, using the paratext for further explanation. Where preserving the form of the titles in the target language communicates wrong meaning, the statement recognizes the use of non-literal translations in the text with the literal word-for-word rendering in the paratext. We appreciate the order of emphasis in that guidance. The text is the preferred place for the word-for-word form.

As far as it goes, the Best Practices statement offers helpful guidance in this regard. What it lacks is attention to the fact that, even with excellent translations, *witnesses in the field are still necessary* to explain the written Word. Surely this is assumed,⁶³ but without acknowledging this point as part of translation policy, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that a good translation is a crucial *tool* of missions *but it is not the missionary*. Translators might be left with the sense that full clarity ought to be achieved in the translation itself, rather than recognizing that their work is to provide a tool for others who will serve as witnesses. Full clarity in the face of culture-wide misunderstanding is simply not going to be possible. But that is okay. Translators do not need to produce self-interpreting translations. It sounds reverent to say that “the Bible is its own best missionary,” but *by God’s design* the Bible is not its own missionary.

In light of the insights drawn together under the previous topic (number 4) and this one (number 5), we conclude that even if “Son of God” cannot be *fully explained* in the translation itself, it does not need to be.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that “Son of God” has multiple nuances that center around the core meaning of divine presence. Those rich expectations inherent in every use of this title were perfectly fulfilled only in Jesus, who is fully divine. We further argued that Muslim objections to “Son of God” go beyond the perception of sexual activity by God and stem from their doctrine of the absolute oneness and transcendence of God. These objections are so deep-seated that they cannot be resolved completely in translation; indeed, translators should not take on the burden of resolving all these objections since God’s plan is to use witnesses to win people to Christ.

We must continue to engage those with whom we disagree directly (and face-to-face when possible), rather than taking preemptive steps.

The many points that have been raised in this article lead to two primary conclusions. First, wherever possible, the form “Son of God” should be preserved in translation. The term is too rich and theologically important to be substituted with meaning-based translations where some facets of the title’s meaning are substituted for a formal equivalent of the title itself. The goals which led some to suggest non-traditional translations—namely to bring out what was assumed to be its primary meaning (beloved) and to avoid Muslim reactions—were worthy motives. We commend those two goals as marks of missionary love and zeal. But it is now apparent that divine presence is at the heart of this title’s meaning. We believe that much is lost theologically, exegetically and evangelistically when word-for-word form of “Son of God” is not preserved.⁶⁴

Some might go so far as to argue that no exceptions to a literal word-for-word treatment of “Son of God” should be allowed. As a point of principle, such a strong commitment is appealing to many. However, languages are complex and a uniform policy cannot be expected to address every conceivable problem; blanket prohibitions often result in unforeseen problems down the road. There may be instances where an idiomatic translation in a certain passage is prudent, and critics of the Best Practices statement should acknowledge that reality. But we also urge translators to appreciate anew the importance of the word-for-word form “Son of God” to communicate its core meaning of divine presence.

We have argued that translation policies for divine familial terms should give greater weight to formal

equivalence. But more important than policies on paper is the education of our own hearts as translators, pastors, missionaries, and other Christian workers. Policies on paper should reflect the consensus of a community’s heart convictions. What is most needed is a strengthened and shared conviction concerning the importance of the form “Son of God” in communicating the meaning of that title, especially its central idea of manifesting divine presence.

The second conclusion is the need for *continued* patience and direct engagement between the parties involved in this controversy. After engaging in the debate for several years, some critics have made a direct public appeal in the form of an online petition to influence events. In a document explaining the reasons for that petition, the author said, “[...T]he petition was started only after every effort had been made to call Wycliffe, Frontiers and SIL to biblical faithfulness.”⁶⁵ In light of the progress shown above and the fact that the sponsors of the petition were themselves parties to discussions with the leadership of Wycliffe and SIL that were taking place *as the petition was launched*, the insistence that “every effort had been made” was inconsistent and made it difficult for others to continue the discussion. It is crucial that we continue to engage those with whom we disagree on this issue directly (and face-to-face whenever possible), patiently appealing to one another reasonably and charitably rather than taking preemptive steps to bring external pressure upon those whose opinions differ from our own.

Furthermore, a new window of opportunity is opening as an external and

independent commission organized by the World Evangelical Alliance is reviewing Wycliffe and SIL translation policy. Now is the time for counterparts to engage in order to identify outstanding issues. We especially appeal to critics of Wycliffe and SIL not to prejudge the work of the commission before it is completed. Finally, we urge those concerned with this controversy to commit themselves to prayer and fasting for God's blessing on the formal and informal dialogue surrounding these matters in the coming months.

The progress achieved thus far is a testimony to the fact that God's Spirit has already been at work. We must not deny him glory by ignoring the progress with which he has blessed us. Let us continue to trust the Spirit to work as we persevere in the patient task of Christian debate. The Lord is doing something unusual in the Middle East in our generation. May he be pleased to use us, sharpened by the present controversy, to show his great love through his Son to the Muslim world. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Rick Brown, "The 'Son of God': Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17(1) (2000); "Part I: Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts." *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 22(3) (2005); "Part II: Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts." *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 22(4) (2005). But see later in this paper the discussion of Brown's revised position.

² E.g., Brown, "Part I: Translating," (2005), p. 139.

³ Roger Dixon, "Identity Theft: Rethologizing the Son of God," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 43(2) (2007). Basheer Abdulfadi, "Modern Arabic Translations and Their Witness to Christ," *Seedbed* XXII (Fall, 2008).

⁴ Rick Brown, "Part I: Translating" (2005); "Part II: Translating" (2005). Brown, Rick, Leith Gray and Andrea Gray, "A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms" *International Journal of Frontier*

Missions, 28(3) (2011), pp. 105–120; Brown, Rick, Leith Gray and Andrea Gray, "A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible" *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 28(3) (2011).

⁵ <http://www.wycliffe.org/SonofGod/PreviousResponses.aspx>, <http://www.wycliffe.org/SonofGod.aspx>.

⁶ Michael LeFebvre, *Collections, Codes, and Torah: The Re-characterization of Israel's Written Law*. LHBOTS 451 (New York: Continuum, 2008).

⁷ For an introduction to insider movements, see Rebecca Lewis, "Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 26(1) (2009). Available from http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/26_1_PDFs/26_1_Lewis.pdf. See also the response by Dick Brogden, "Inside Out: Probing Presuppositions among Insider Movements," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 27(1) (2010). Available from http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/27_1_PDFs/27_1_Brogden.pdf.

⁸ Collin Hansen, "The Son and the Crescent," *Christianity Today*, 55(2) (February, 2011). Available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/february/soncrescent.html>.

⁹ Emily Belz, "Holding translators accountable," *World Magazine*, 26(20) (2011). Available from <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/18687>. Emily Belz, "The Battle for Accurate Bible Translation in Asia," *World Magazine*, 27(4) (2012). Available from <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/19184>.

¹⁰ The text of the overture is available from <http://www.pcaac.org/2011GeneralAssembly/Overture%209%20Potomac%20Faithful%20Witness%203-11.pdf>.

¹¹ The PCA Study Committee report is available from <http://www.pcaac.org/Ad%20Interim%20on%20Insider%20Movements%20Report%205-17-12.pdf>.

¹² The text of the Bridging the Divide conference statement is available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/octoberweb-only/missions-muslims-critisms.html?start=3>

¹³ One of the authors (Basheer Abdulfadi) was an observer at the consultation. See also the comments of another observer and participant, Stephen Taylor, at http://www.wrfnet.org/c/portal/layout?p_l_id=PUB.1.48&p_p_id=62_INSTANCE_XnIU&p_p_action=0&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_pos=1&p_p_

[col_count=3&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_struts_action=%2Fjournal_articles%2Fview&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_groupId=1&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_articleId=472&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_version=1.0,%20](http://www.wrfnet.org/c/portal/layout?p_l_id=PUB.1.48&p_p_id=62_INSTANCE_XnIU&p_p_action=0&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_pos=1&p_p_col_count=3&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_struts_action=%2Fjournal_articles%2Fview&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_groupId=1&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_articleId=472&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_version=1.0,%20)

¹⁴ The text, with commentary, of the SIL statement of Best Practices for Bible Translation of Divine Familial Language is available from http://www.sil.org/translation/divine_familial_terms_commentary_full.pdf.

¹⁵ We struggled to find the right word or phrase to indicate what is meant by translation that preserves the word-for-word form with the common equivalents for "son" and "father." "Literal" is what a non-specialist would say, but there are too many ideas about what literal means for this to be helpful. Except when quoting other authors or documents, we will use the phrase "literal word-for-word" and sometimes add to it the phrase "preserving the form."

¹⁶ Collin Hansen, "Wycliffe, SIL Issue Guidelines on Translating 'Son of God' Among Muslims," *Christianity Today*, 55 (Web Only), (2011). Available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/octoberweb-only/son-of-god-translation-guidelines.html?start=1>.

¹⁷ Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," p. 116.

¹⁸ The petition was posted on www.change.org on January 4, 2012.

¹⁹ For a catalogue of concepts expressed by this title, see, Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," pp. 110–111.

²⁰ For example, Brown says: "An examination of the passages where Paul uses [the term 'Son'] shows that in most cases he is focusing on the dearness of Jesus to God ... In John, on the other hand, 'Son' occurs mostly in contexts emphasizing ... perfect obedience." (Brown, "Son of God," p. 46.) Also, "The phrase Son of God refers to Christ, sometimes in respect to his eternal sonship and sometimes in respect to his mediatorial sonship as the Messiah." (Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," p. 110.)

²¹ Barclay Moon Newman and Philip Stine. *Helps for Translators. A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (London: UBS, 1988) p. 113. Cf. Brown, "Son of God," p. 40.

²² We are not suggesting that translators have been *explicitly* arguing for the approach here critiqued or that it is currently an issue in translation practice; but the assumption here critiqued is *implicit* if a search for meaning allows immediate

context to obscure the wider context of "Son of God."

²³ For representative defenses of the case for primarily ontological meaning for son of God, see David Abernathy, "Jesus Is The Eternal Son Of God," *St. Francis Magazine*, 6(2) (2010); David Abernathy, "Translating 'Son of God' in Missionary Bible Translation: A Critique of 'Muslim-Idiom Bible Translations: Claims and Facts'," by Rick Brown, John Penny and Leith Gray," *St. Francis Magazine*, 6(1) (2010); Scott Horrell, "Cautions Regarding 'Son of God' in Muslim-Idiom Translations of the Bible: Seeking Sensible Balance," *St. Francis Magazine*, 6(4) (2010). For a very recent defense of the position that son of God did not "attribute deity," see Bradford Greer, *St. Francis Magazine*, 8(2) (2012), p. 188.

²⁴ Fossum, "Son of God" (1995), p. 1488. Jarl Fossum, "Son of God." In: Karel van der Toorn, et al., eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) pp. 1486–98.

²⁵ Fossum, "Son of God" (1995), p. 1488.

²⁶ James H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906), pp. 2.59–60 (§138).

²⁷ Georges Foucart, "King (Egyptian)." In: James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethic* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908–1926) pp. 7.712. Some scholars would say the one crowned had been divine from birth, and that "his coronation was not an apotheosis but an epiphany." Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) p. 5.

²⁸ W. G. Lambert, "Kingship in Ancient Mesopotamia" in John Day, ed. *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*. JSOTSup 270 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) pp. 54–70.

²⁹ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, N. K. Sanders, translator (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970) p. 59.

³⁰ Fossum, "Son of God" (1995), p. 1486.

³¹ Ibid., 1488

³² Jarl Fossum. 1998. "Son of God." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, pp. 6.128.

³³ Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 51.

³⁴ Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (esp., pp. 3–12); Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*

(Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967); John Baines, "Ancient Egyptian Kingship: Official Forms, Rhetoric, Context," pp. 41–46 (in Day, *King and Messiah*, pp. 16–53). Cf., 2 Sam. 21:1–14; Ps. 72.

³⁵ Note Ezekiel's critique of the divine claims of Tyre's king in Ezekiel 28.

³⁶ David was made a "son of God" by adoption with the Holy Spirit filling him upon his anointing. Not surprisingly, one of the early Christian heresies conceived of Jesus as similarly a mere man "adopted" when the Holy Spirit filled him (this adoption usually being identified with his baptism; e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas* 6:5). This heresy (commonly called "Adoptionism") illustrates an early awareness that some of those called "son of God" in Scripture were so designated by the infilling of the Holy Spirit "adopting" them. But Jesus' sonship involved much more than that, as orthodox apologists affirmed in the early Creeds and Councils.

³⁷ John Day, "The Canaanite Inheritance of the Israelite Monarchy," pp. 81–6 (in Day, *King and Messiah*, pp. 72–90); Fossum, "Son of God" (1998), pp. 6.128–9; Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1967).

³⁸ Note how Paul, preaching to a synagogue of Jews in Pamphylia, applies Psalm 2 to Christ's resurrection. "We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'" (Acts 13:32–33; cf., Rom. 1:4; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). Though Jesus is eternally God, it was not with his birth or his baptism that he fulfilled the "this day I have begotten you" of Psalm 2, but on his victorious resurrection (cf., Php. 2:6–11; see Brown, "Son of God," pp. 46–7).

³⁹ Brown, "Son of God," p. 42. For a recent similar argument see Bradford Greer, "Revisiting 'Son of God'" (2012).

⁴⁰ Even as long ago as his 2000 paper, Brown affirmed, "The Scriptures ascribe divinity to Jesus in a variety of ways, but not by merely calling him 'the Son of God,'" thereby affirming this title as one of Scripture's witnesses to Jesus' deity. Brown, "Son of God," p. 46. See also the list of misperceptions that Brown, Gray and Gray specifically denied in Brown, "New Look..." pp. 117–18.

⁴¹ Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Di-*

vine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) pp. 2–9, 204.

⁴² Baines explains that, in Egypt, it was recognized that only "full deities" existed in the divine domain, sometimes taking manifestations in the human realm, while the reigning pharaoh was only earth-bound with no concurrent existence in the divine realm. Thus, according to Baines, Egypt's pharaohs were a "lesser deity." Nonetheless, as "a token of the divine in this world," pharaoh's divinity was still regarded as a *real* "manifestation of the world of the gods" on earth. (Baines, "Egyptian Kingship," pp. 16–24.)

⁴³ On a few occasions, Old Testament and inter-testamental writers even use intensely divine expressions—even more exalted than "Son of God"—for the awaited Messiah (e.g., Isa. 9:6; Ps. 45:7).

⁴⁴ See for example the charge in the online petition, <http://www.change.org/petitions/lost-in-translation-keep-father-son-in-the-bible>.

⁴⁵ Cf., Exod. 21:33–22:15; Rom. 14:5–10.

⁴⁶ Brown, "Part 1: Translating" (2005) and "Part II: Translating" (2005).

⁴⁷ The final point (#4) of the guided process in the Best Practices states, "If no possible option [for a literal rendering] has been identified through this process, non-literal options for the text may be considered which conserve as much of the familial meaning as possible, provided that the paratext includes the literal form."

⁴⁸ Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," p. 117.

⁴⁹ "It is important to realize that to express divine familial relationships, the Bible uses Greek and Hebrew social familial terms that do not necessarily demand biological meanings." (Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," p. 107. Emphasis original.)

⁵⁰ Ibid., emphasis original.

⁵¹ Ibid, 109, emphasis added.

⁵² Ibid, 115, emphasis original.

⁵³ Ibid, 107.

⁵⁴ This is especially true where the title is used for Jesus, but might also be understood in reference to others. The bestowing of the Spirit upon God's people is a real bestowing of God's presence, so that 1 John 3:9 even speaks of believers in the profoundly biological language of having "God's sperm" in them.

⁵⁵ The Arabic word *tawbiid* is an infinitive of the intensified form of the verb that means "to be one."

⁵⁶ See in this vein Matthew Carlton, "Jesus, The Son of God: Biblical Meaning, Muslim Understanding, and Implications For Translation and Bible Literacy," *St. Francis Magazine*, 7(3) (2011), especially pp. 10–17, available from <http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/Matthew%20Carlton%20August%202011.pdf>, and Fred Faroukh, "Is the Scandal for Muslims the *How* or the *Who?*," *St. Francis Magazine*, 8(2) (2012) pp. 213–24 available from <http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/7-SFMFred%20Farrokh.pdf>.

⁵⁷ The Qur'an calls *shirk* the unforgivable sin. See for example Suurat Al-Nisa (4), verses 48 and 116.

⁵⁸ One colleague highlighted the role of deceptive Muslim apologists in stirring up negative reactions. "I have met many [for whom Son of God] is not an issue, and it seems mainly because they have not been taught the negative reading." Private communication, 14 May 2012.

⁵⁹ See the examples documented in Rick Brown, "Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term 'Son of God,'" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 2007). Even these examples raise the question of whether the response was genuinely spontaneous or was fomented by Muslim religious leaders who seized on "Son of God" for other purposes.

⁶⁰ It is clear that the different concerns and priorities of translators and field workers result in divergent translation choices. This reiterates that translation is not solely a linguistic matter.

⁶¹ By witnesses we do not mean foreign missionaries exclusively or even primarily. God is raising up witnesses from the Muslim world for the Muslim world.

⁶² We are not suggesting that anyone is explicitly arguing for self-interpreting translations that will not require a human witness. To our knowledge, no one in this controversy is making that case *explicitly*. However, we believe there is an implicit effort to make translations less dependent on a human witness by trying to resolve more at the translation level than possible or necessary. It is that implicit effort which we seek to address.

⁶³ The Best Practices statement does allude to this point in its opening line: "Bible Translation is an integral part [of] the worldwide Church's participation in God's mission."

⁶⁴ By extension, "Father" for God should also normally be translated by the

common word for "father." We have not dealt with "Father" directly in this article, but the translation of "Son of God" is intimately related to the translation of "Father" in relation to "the Son."

⁶⁵ <http://biblicalmissiology.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/LostInTranslation-FactCheck.pdf>

Living Letters: The Arabic Script as a Redemptive Bridge in Reaching Muslims

by Murray Decker and Abdu Injiiru

Abdullah, a 45 year-old African man with a wife and two children, comes from a completely Muslim family. He was an Islamic leader among his people, and well supported financially by an organization from a strongly Islamic Asian nation. One day last year as he was studying the Qur'an, he read about the Prophet Isa (Jesus) and felt prompted to ask God to show him the truth. By God's sovereign grace, Abdullah had a dream in which he was running away from a fire. As he came to a wall he could not climb, he could see Christians on the other side of the wall. Through that dream he realized that God was answering his prayer.

In the days that followed Abdullah committed himself to Jesus Christ as Lord. He left his employment as an Islamic preacher and moved his family to the capital city, where he sought out several Christian workers he knew. These workers showed him 35 pages of Scripture selections in his own language, a West African tongue spoken by several million people written in the only form he could read: Arabic script. Although the translators had already translated a great deal of Scripture into Abdullah's native African language, they had done it in Roman script and had, for testing purposes, only just recently transliterated these 35 pages into the appropriate script, the right-to-left cursive calligraphy that Abdullah knew from his Qur'anic studies. Thankfully, a newly developed computer program would help them morph the English ABCs of the text into the "Abjad" of the Arabic alphabet. After reading more Scripture in the familiar Arabic script, Abdullah was baptized and moved back to his hometown to spread the good news about Jesus. The critical catalyst in this story was a Scripture fragment, translated into this man's heart language, and equally significant, one he could read in his heart script.

Murray Decker, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Cook School of Intercultural Studies, Biola University. He has served in West Africa and most recently in the Middle East, training nationals for ministry in least reached contexts. Abdu Injiiru (pseudonym) has been involved in Scripture engagement across multiple countries of West Africa for 26 years.

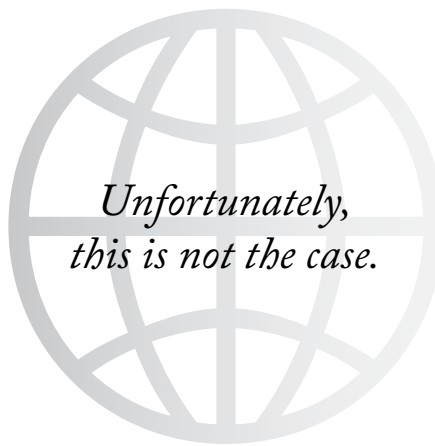
Introduction

Over 100 years ago, missionaries to the Sahel region of West Africa arrived to discover that in many Muslim peoples there were already some individuals who had been trained to read the Qur'an in Arabic. As is true in much of the Muslim world today, they found people who could reproduce—with phonetic perfection—the sounds of the Arabic language text without understanding a single word they were reading. But what if the text had been in their language? Because there are no practical limits to what can be written using Arabic script, those early workers began translating the Bible into African mother tongues using the Arabic letters the local peoples already knew how to read. Today we use the term “Ajami” to refer to indigenous languages written in Arabic script.¹

The use of Ajami in mother tongue translation was not unique to Africa. History is replete with examples of enterprising workers who found that using a script people already knew made it much easier for them to learn to read their own language. In the nineteenth century, Englishman Henry Martyn chose Ajami for his translations of Scripture into Persian and Urdu. Had he chosen the Roman script used back home, Persian or Urdu speakers wanting to read the Scriptures in their own language would have had to learn their ABCs first. Now, as in Martyn's time, it makes sense to utilize a script that people already know, thus avoiding the long, tedious labor of doing literacy just so people can read *their* language using *our* letters.²

As we fast-forward to today, one might expect that cross-cultural workers are already using the Ajami script so widely known throughout the Muslim world. Further, one might expect that Bible translators, church planters, development workers, and others are harnessing this socio-linguistic phenomenon to advance their work,

taking advantage of the literacy efforts of Islamic scholars across the centuries. In the area of Bible translation, dozens of translation projects have been completed and hundreds of others are in process. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone (from Senegal to Somalia and down the eastern coast), there are over six hundred Muslim Majority Languages (hereafter called MMLs). Additional MMLs exist in northern Africa, the Middle East, and across Asia, bringing the total to over one thousand worldwide. Local people, if given a tract or Scripture portion written in Arabic letters, could read it in their own tongue. Surely these completed translations and new works all utilize Ajami.



Unfortunately, this is not the case. The early use of Ajami in the Sahel was discontinued for various reasons, including: colonial political pressure, ethnocentric linguistic bias, the difficulty of learning to write and type the Arabic alphabet from right to left, and the desire to provide a “Western-style” education. Subsequent work was completed using Roman script, which has been the situation with MMLs for decades.

This article will explore the critical importance of Ajami in communicating God's love to Muslims. We outline six primary reasons why those involved in Bible translation and other literature programs among Muslim peoples should strongly consider using

“these strange letters” of the Arabic alphabet—this sacred script—in their work. We also highlight hindrances to adopting Ajami. The authors are convinced that using Ajami has far-reaching missiological implications for Scripture use, discipleship, and church-planting movements.

Reasons for Using Ajami Among Muslim Peoples

1. Many Muslims are already literate in the Arabic script.

In Muslim Africa, literacy rates in Ajami are significantly higher than in Roman script. In many MMLs, 30 to 50 percent of the adult population is already literate in the Arabic script. Because most countries measure literacy only in their official European Roman script language (predominantly French or English), accurate statistics for Arabic or Ajami literacy are hard to come by. When a census worker enters a village and asks, “How many people know how to read?” the question is understood to mean, “How many of you can read French (or English)?” Ironically, villagers may report that no one in the village can read, even as a group of children sits under a tree practicing their Arabic letters on a board.

This constitutes a blind spot within the statistical data. For example, *Operation World* (2010 ed.) appears to underestimate how widespread Ajami literacy actually is within MMLs.³ For example, the entry on the Republic of Mali reports a 19 percent literacy rate for that country (p. 564). Yet on the next page we read that more than three thousand Qur'anic schools—taught by individual “marabouts” (Islamic teachers)—enroll some 40 percent of the children in Bamako, the capital (thanks to funding from Libya and Saudi Arabia). In missiology we speak of *hidden peoples*; can we not also speak of millions of *hidden literates*?

Teaching these people to read their own language in Ajami requires almost

no effort. It takes only minutes to show them the few letters they may not be familiar with, then they are off and running, reading in their own tongue. Mik Enoch,⁴ cross-cultural worker with the Evangelical Free Church, notes that there is always someone in every village who can read Ajami. He says: “Historically in Africa, we had to teach reading before we could hand out a Bible. But to my astonishment, I suddenly realized that using Ajami script meant Islam had already done this onerous task for us.”⁵

Numerous Islamic organizations and governments are funding extensive Arabic-script literacy work. Al-Ahzar University in Egypt—reportedly the largest Islamic school in the world—sends students throughout the world, and to Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, to start Qur’anic schools and teach the fundamentals of Islam. Nothing, of course, is more foundational to this endeavor than teaching children to read Arabic. And Al-Azhar is only one institution among many that supplies teachers. Libya and Saudi Arabia use their considerable oil wealth to fund such schools and missionaries, while Pakistan and other Asian nations also offer funding and personnel.

Travel anywhere in Muslim sub-Saharan Africa and you will find these Franco-Arabic or Anglo-Arabic schools. In Nigeria, the fundamentalist Izala movement has built hundreds of schools to propagate Islam. In county after county, village after village, you will find children learning to read and memorize the Qur’an, again often with no understanding of what they are reading. Is there a gift from God in all this? In the sovereignty of the Lord, many children in Muslim people groups are being taught to read. Are we willing to walk through this “wide door for effective work” that has been opened to us? (1 Cor. 19:9) Will we put the good news into the hands of these newly literate populations in a form that they can already read?

Historically in Africa, we had to teach reading before we could hand out the Bible. But to my astonishment, I suddenly realized . . .

2. The Ajami Bible is considered sacred.

Contrary to what many believe, most Muslims do not hate the Bible. The *Tawrat* (Torah), *Zabur* (Psalms) and *Injil* (New Testament) are recognized within the Qur’an as holy books. When a Fulani, Hausa, Chadian Arab, or Wolof reader receives a copy of Genesis, the Psalms or the Gospels, he regards it as sacred literature, given by God as absolute truth. The tremendously warm and receptive response to the Bible in Ajami goes far beyond the fact that they just like the look of the letters. They attribute these books to the very hand of God, divinely scripted and sacred in all they teach.⁶

One man tells the story of a Muslim friend who came to his home for a visit.⁷ Lying on the coffee table was an Ajami copy of Luke in his guest’s language. As the host began to share the story of the Prodigal Son, his Muslim friend interrupted him. “I know this story,” he said. “Our imam told us this at the mosque last Friday.” Curious, the man asked, “So how does he know this story?” Pointing to the Ajami book lying on the table, his friend explained, “He is preaching to us from this holy book.”

Introducing Ajami to a New Community

When you bring the Ajami Scriptures into a MML community, we suggest that you first formally approach the local leaders and present them with a copy. Most leaders will graciously accept the gift with great fanfare and appreciation. Often they will make a public speech, expressing words of gratitude. As opinion leaders, their acceptance of these books gives permission to the rest of the community to purchase their

own copy, if they wish. It is rare to encounter hostility when one presents the Scriptures in a culturally appropriate manner. Workers usually do not have to sneak around as though they have something to hide or are doing something subversive. Even if the rest of the community cannot read Ajami, the leaders most likely will be literate or know someone in the village who reads well. In African culture it would be rude to refuse such a gift.

After the distribution ceremony, the rest of the village will often line up and wait patiently for their turn to purchase a portion of Scripture for themselves and their family. Far from being resistant to the Bible, they eagerly want to own one. You will often sell every piece of literature you bring. As you walk through the village at night, you will see, in home after home, people gathered to read the Bible in their own language for the first time. Of course, anyone who has worked in the Muslim world knows that there is no one “golden key” that will open the hearts of Muslims. However, many recognize the power of the Word of God, put into a form that people can read, as *one of the keys* that God is using to bring many to faith.

3. Muslim Majority Language populations highly respect Ajami writing.

Arabic script is held in high esteem throughout the Islamic world. When a Muslim looks at the Arabic script, he views it with reverence and deep affection. It is for him a holy script—the very script handed down from heaven to Muhammad in the Qur’an.⁸ In essence, it is God’s font; God writes from right to left.

To illustrate the esteem people have for this script, a woman once approached us to show us how she had memorized an AIDS tract produced by a local language committee. She memorized it, not for its content or message, but because it was written in the holy script. Word for word, she proudly recited the brochure from memory. More significantly, even those who do not follow Christ regard Scripture memorization from Ajami texts to be highly valuable. Some men who receive an Ajami copy of, say, Genesis or Psalms will memorize the whole book!

Contrast this with the strong, negative feelings that Muslims often have toward Roman script. Parents may not even want to send their children to a school that teaches this script, believing that anyone using an immoral script must himself be immoral (in fact, the Fulani call the Roman alphabet *karfeji kefero* “pagan script.”) How, they ask, could anyone take something as sacred as the word of God and print it in those ugly, disdainful Roman letters? One Muslim leader crudely put it this way: “We use paper with Roman script on it for toilet paper, but we would never do that with something printed in Ajami.”

Such negative reactions to our Roman script should be easy for North Americans to understand, for we see the opposite taking place in our culture. Look at this sample text in Arabic script. What emotions do we experience?

عَدَسْ لَوْدُ ثَ وَزَلْدُ.

Where Muslim peoples see comfort, beauty and blessing, many Westerners experience confusion, suspicion and fear. North Americans often see Arabic writing and associate it with radical Islam, terrorism and violence. While the above Ajami sentence is simply the transliterated *English* phrase “God so loved the world,” some

may become anxious just looking at these unfamiliar letters. Indeed, something as innocuous as a “No Parking” sign in Arabic script can become a subversive religious message. Putting the shoe on the other foot, if we want people to willingly read the Scriptures or other literature, why use a script that they essentially distrust and find objectionable?⁹

Is Ajami Too Islamic?

One concern that deserves careful consideration is that Ajami is too Islamic and that using it amounts to tacit acceptance of Islam. It is fair to ask, however, whether a script can be by its very nature Christian, Islamic or Hindu. For example, the Korean



language is mainly written in *Hangul*, a syllabic alphabet promulgated in 1446 by Sejong the Great. Although Sejong was not a Christian, few see 예수는 주님 이시다 and associate this script with the spread of Buddhism or Confucianism. Korean language Bibles, hymn books, theology texts, and children's literature all use the above phrase in *Hangul* without fear of communicating anything other than “Jesus is Lord” (as the above text proclaims). *Hangul* is seen as neutral, not Buddhist, and is equally appropriate for writing Scripture as for writing restaurant menus or billboards.

The church has wrestled with matters of contextualization since the earliest

chapters of Acts. Paul's letters to the Corinthians, for example, tackle one contextual issue after another. The question whether some indigenous cultural forms are too tainted by the culture to be used by the church is one that Christians have wrestled with for centuries and have often answered in the affirmative. Throughout mission history “pagan” drums and other instruments have been burned, dance or other expressions of art forbidden, and Western forms substituted for the arts, architecture, celebrations and lifestyles of emerging Christ-following communities in “foreign” cultures.

Not surprisingly, we love and cherish our cultural expressions of the faith. Sadly, too many churches split over issues that others would dismiss as relatively inconsequential cultural preference. Some Christians find it difficult to believe that the gospel can be communicated in any form other than the one they hold most dear. The argument that Ajami is too Islamic (or that using it suggests tacit approval of Islam) comes, in our view, from a faulty premise. This premise is based more on cultural preference than on objective evidence that Ajami encourages syncretism or helps strengthen Islam. While Ajami is clearly a new form for many, it has actually been in use for hundreds of years in the Sahel and elsewhere.¹⁰ In our experience, Ajami is a powerfully useful contextual form that does not change the message in any inappropriate or syncretistic way. When Muslim Background Believers gather to study the New Testament in Ajami and read about the life of Isa (Jesus) in their mother tongue, they do not think, “This will lead me back into Islam,” but rather, “Jesus is amazing! I must know more about him. Thank God I have this information in a form that I can understand!”

4. Ajami is perceived as “blessed” and powerful.

Many Muslims believe that simply being in the presence of the Arabic

script is inherently valuable. They ascribe an intrinsic mystical power to the very letters of the Arabic alphabet and believe that one is blessed by merely holding the text and looking at it. From their perspective, one does not have to understand the words to receive a blessing. We believe that blessing comes from understanding and doing what the Scriptures say (James 1:25), but we need to start where our Muslim friends are.

Striking examples of this common Muslim view can be seen throughout sub-Saharan Africa. When children begin Qur'anic school, they obtain a small wooden board upon which they will write their lessons for the first few years of study. These lessons include verses from the Qur'an. After years of use, this Qur'anic board, which is often kept for life, becomes a talisman whose power derives from all of the sacred Arabic letters that have been written on it.

But it is not just the boards themselves that are considered powerful. Some years ago, during our first encounter with children writing on their Qur'anic boards, we saw a man take a board, wash the ink off of it, catch the run-off, and then drink the murky liquid like one would drink medicine. This "liquid Arabic" is actually sold in the markets, where it is bought for its healing and protective properties.¹¹ Among Muslim peoples who engage in animal husbandry, Arabic blessings, which are frequently written on edible leaves and fed to cattle or other animals, serve as medicine or a protective charm.

The flowing calligraphy of the Qur'an—which is often used as a border along the top of the wall of a room—decorates homes, businesses, and mosques. More than mere ornamentation, you receive a blessing every time you walk through that room and see those letters and words, which protect your home and children. Again, you don't need to

We saw a man take a Qur'anic board, wash the ink off of it, catch the run-off, and drink the murky liquid like medicine.

know what these words mean; you are blessed just being in the presence of this sacred script.

Because of this belief, it is important to distribute Ajami literature wisely. Our goal must be to get it into the hands of those who can actually read it, and not just treat it as an amulet. Once, while getting into a taxi in a predominately Muslim city, I (Abdu) noticed the Ajami book of Luke taped to the ceiling of the cab. "Can you read this?" I asked the driver. "No," he replied. "Then why do you have this book taped to the ceiling of your car?" I continued. "Baraka (blessing)," he responded. Somehow he had gotten his hands on this portion of Scripture and was using it to ward off evil and to attract blessing to his car. Since we do not want the Bible to be reduced to a good luck charm, we will have to show discernment in how we distribute it.

Even if some do treat the Ajami Scriptures in this way, is this a reason not to use it? Will we be guilty of promoting a mystical regard for the script beyond what is associated with the actual translated verses themselves? In our opinion, the danger of this is no greater than the reverence some might feel in the presence of a first-edition Gutenberg Bible. If the danger of creating a "Nehush-tan"¹² develops (Num. 21:4-9, 2 Kings 18:4), church leaders will need to address this concern directly. But this does not override the many excellent reasons for adopting this script.

5. Governments and international Islamic organizations are promoting Ajami.

Many African nations are increasingly showing support for native language translation using Ajami. Niger, Senegal and Chad all have governmental

departments promoting Ajami, and are working to standardize its use in their respective countries. Not only are government officials and agencies endorsing the script, but international Islamic organizations as well. ISESCO (the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) actively promotes the Qur'an in several languages using Ajami. ISESCO recognizes what many Christian agencies have been slow to accept—Ajami is the most powerful tool they have to encourage literacy and to communicate effectively with MML peoples.

Beyond merely promoting literacy, ISESCO also seeks to advance Islam. Wolof, Fulfulde, and Swahili editions of the Qur'an were recently released in Ajami.¹³ This is a relatively recent phenomenon in Africa, one that is likely to grow in the future.

Islam is not a religion that readily embraces contextualization; often the opposite is true. Sacrosanct Arab forms and doctrines from the Middle East are stressed in cultures where they don't fit. For this reason, it is stunning to see these Ajami translations of the Qur'an now coming off the presses. ISESCO, which functions in the genre of UNESCO, is involved in influencing Sub-Saharan governments toward certain forms of Ajami. This organization, or some other, might become the premier Qur'an translation society of the Muslim world. They value the importance of Ajami, if only to lead people to the most important language from their perspective: Arabic.

6. Significant social prestige is associated with Arabic and Ajami literacy.

In MML cultures, tremendously high social regard is given to those

who are literate in Arabic (and therefore can read Ajami). You cannot be an opinion leader in most Muslim societies without being able to read the Qur'an in Arabic. In these status conscious cultures, even basic literacy in Arabic is critical if you are to be perceived as a person of significance. A young man can have a PhD from a prestigious "pagan" university, but if he cannot read the Arabic script, he will be deprived of status among his people and his spirituality will be suspect.

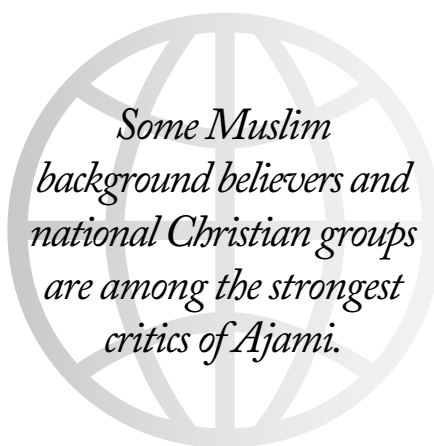
Often the first Christ-followers in a new people group are precisely these educated young men (rarely women) who attend such schools and universities. By getting exposed to the world outside of Islam they become open to hearing the good news and following Christ. If they do not know how to read Arabic, however, they will struggle to influence others when they return to their societies. Thus it is especially critical for believers from MMLs to learn to read Ajami in order to maximize their influence in their home culture. In fact, a workshop and primer have been developed for this very purpose.¹⁴

In light of this crucial social factor, we believe that church-planting movements among MMLs are significantly hindered without Ajami.¹⁵ This statement may strike some as extreme, but we have witnessed this reality in Muslim cultures across Africa. The credibility needed to fuel these kinds of movements must not only be embedded in the Scriptures we distribute, but in the reputations of the messengers. Therefore we would urge every Christian college seeking to prepare students for ministry in the Muslim world to offer Arabic. Because of the importance of Arabic in the Muslim world, all such students should take at least one semester, even if they do not plan to work among Arabic speakers. Messengers need to be equipped to use the alphabet

and phonetically read the script. We consider this an essential investment in their credibility.

Resistance and Hindrances

Muslim background believers and national Christian groups have proven to be the strongest critics of Ajami. For many, Ajami isn't a "neutral" script, but is so tainted with the Islam they knew prior to following Christ that they do not believe it should be used. Where did they acquire such a perspective? Western workers have taught new followers of Christ to leave behind their old ways, including, often, the writing system they were taught as Muslim children. Today, some of the



greatest resistance to Ajami comes from national believers and their church organizations. New "pro-Ajami" workers should be prepared to take criticism from fellow followers of Christ as much as from Muslims.

Ajami is a widely used writing system. Advances in categorizing the languages that need Ajami can be found at sites such as www.ScriptSource.org. Over 150 languages that use the Arabic script are listed at this site. The history, use, fonts, keyboards and several other needs related to each language's script are also noted. We are grateful for these tools, which are useful for the mission enterprise.

As a rule, national Bible societies will not publish a Bible unless someone is willing to dedicate it and use it. If church planters, mission organizations or national Christian groups are not going to use it, why publish it? The historic resistance to Ajami described earlier can still be found within some mission organizations and national denominations, or more accurately, among certain leaders who still hold these fears and reservations.

One final hindrance to more widespread use of Ajami among unreached MMLs is the fact that mission organizations do not emphasize the importance of learning Arabic when it will not be the worker's language of ministry. Naturally, workers who don't know any Arabic cannot read Ajami. We are not saying they need to learn to *speak* Arabic; they just need to be able to read and write in Ajami,¹⁶ critical skills that can normally be acquired, at a most basic level, in a one-week seminar. But agencies need to make sure their workers have the time and resources required to become equipped with these skills. And when veteran workers are resistant—"I don't need to learn Ajami; I've been doing this for 20 years!"—they should be encouraged to see the tremendous potential in this old "new" tool.

Summary Thoughts

I (Abdu) first realized the significance of Ajami in 1995. Fatima (a woman from the people group we serve) had come to faith and strongly desired to read the Scriptures. The Bible had been translated into her language in Roman script, and so my wife began the arduous process of teaching her to read her ABCs. After twenty-six hours of instruction, Fatima was still only at an elementary level. Then one day (while my wife and Fatima were struggling through yet another long session), I visited some colleagues, who gave me the book of Luke in Ajami. Returning home, I approached

the weary pair as they labored over their lesson and asked Fatima if she had been taught to read Arabic as a girl. "Yes," she stated proudly, "during four years of school." I handed her the Ajami book of Luke and asked, "Can you read this?" Without a moment of hesitation, she picked it up and began reading aloud.

"This is in my language!" she cried.

My wife turned to me and said (in English), "What have I been wasting my time for?" Frustration soon yielded to rejoicing as we celebrated with Fatima, who was thrilled to be reading God's word in her own tongue, and began to explain to her the meaning of the text. Now instead of needing to teach her Roman script, we needed to learn Ajami.

For the past 15 years, we have shifted more and more of our attention toward producing Ajami literature for the growing church in the people group we are serving. Our hearts are still in the village, but the work of transliterating Bible translations into the Ajami script is so significant that it now demands most of our time. And we are beginning to see unprecedented fruit among this strategic people group—God is moving among them.

As members of a generation influenced by Don Richardson's concept of *redemptive analogies*,¹⁷ we have been slow to recognize that one way God has placed eternity in the hearts of MML peoples is through their profound regard for Arabic orthography. We might call it a *redemptive script*. The implications for Bible translation, intercultural training, field practice and publishing are significant. Further research into the use of Ajami is critically necessary. We believe that reaching hidden literates is a key pathway to reaching hidden peoples, as faith comes by hearing (but also reading) the Word of God. May God grant us the wisdom to maximize

My wife turned to me and said (in English), "What have I been wasting my time for?" Frustration soon yielded to rejoicing ...

the benefit of this redemptive script for His glory among those who wait to read the good news for the first time.

If you are interested in learning more about Ajami transliteration, please contact Abdu Injiiru at s2c@eurasiamail.com to find a workshop where you can learn to read and use this script. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Ajami is a term primarily used in Africa. However, historically Arabic script was used to write mother-tongues in many countries, including Spain (called Aljamiado), Bosnia, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and even China. For the purposes of this article, we use the term Ajami in reference to the use of Arabic script in African contexts. For a historical overview of this script in Africa see: Warren-Rothlin, Andy. 2009. "Script Choice, Politics, and Bible Agencies in West Africa." *The Bible Translator: Technical Papers* 60(1):50-66.

² On the larger subject of linguistic history and scripts, the Old Testament illustrates the significance of this cross-cultural communication factor, as it records how letters and decrees were often sent to different groups in their own languages *and scripts* (see, for example, Ezra 4:7 and Esther 1:22, 3:12, and 8:9).

³ Jason Mandryk, ed. 2010. *Operation World*. Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing. We deeply respect the work done by *Operation World's* editors. In no way is this observation a criticism of this well written and thoughtfully compiled prayer guide.

⁴ All personal names cited in this article are pseudonyms used for their protection.

⁵ Private correspondence, used with permission.

⁶ Granted, some Muslims contend that these texts have been corrupted. In our experience, when these same people are asked if God would allow His word to be changed, most will strongly deny that this is possible.

⁷ Personal communication.

⁸ Some Muslims attribute the Arabic alphabet and the actual verses of the

Qur'an to the very hand of God, divinely scripted. Most believe the Qur'an was dictated to Muhammad, and since Muhammad was said to be illiterate, the Scriptures were written down by others as he recited to them.

⁹ The socio-linguistic issues here go far beyond the script and involve such issues as the color of sacred books, page layout, etc. Hill and Hill state: "Finally, [Muslims] feel that since Scripture is holy, it shouldn't have illustrations on the cover or inside. The cover itself should be elegant, not black, and not made of paper. The text of Scripture should be on off-white paper surrounded by a frame, and the introductions, footnotes, section headings, and cross-references should be outside the frame" (2008, 173). Since many cultures regard black as a color of death, what message is received when the Bible is printed with a black cover? Those elaborate borders that take so much space on the pages of the Qur'an are actually a critical part of the presentation. The beauty of the book should foretell the beauty of the message found therein.

¹⁰ See Ajami Scripts in the Senegalese Speech Community by Fallou Ngom www.lancs.ac.uk/jais/volume/index.htm

¹¹ For many of the scholars who teach Arabic to children, this becomes an important source of income.

¹² Nehushtan was the name given to Moses' old bronze serpent, ascribed with talismanic powers years after it had served its purpose. King Hezekiah ultimately broke it to pieces rather than let it remain an object of veneration.

¹³ <http://www.isesco.org.ma/english/news/news.php?n=1341>

¹⁴ See contact information at the end of this article regarding this primer or how to attend an Ajami workshop.

¹⁵ Perhaps we should soften this statement since a) nothing is outside the power of God, and b) some Islamic peoples in Africa are largely illiterate as no Qur'anic training exists among them. God can work when and where He wishes, but we minimize the deep social significance of Ajami literacy among these people to the detriment of our ministries.

¹⁶ See Awede, Nicholas, and Putros Samano. 1986. *The Arabic Alphabet: How to read and write it*. New Jersey: Lyle Stuart Inc. This is an excellent way to learn the Arabic system quickly.

¹⁷ Richardson, Don. 1999. "Redemptive Analogy." In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 285–289. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.

References

Heibert, Paul G.

- 1985 Anthropological Insights for Missionaries. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. See sections on "Cultural Differences and the Message, and Critical Contextualization," 61–110.

Hill, Harriet, and Margaret Hill

- 2008 Translating the Bible into Action: How the Bible can be relevant in all languages and cultures. Carlisle, UK: Piquant Editions. See section on "How Muslims use the Bible."

Johnstone, Patrick

"Bible Translation and the Cross Cultural DNA of the Church." <http://www.worldview.edu.au/?p=62>.

Philips, J.

- 2000 "Spurious Arabic: Hausa and Colonial Nigeria." University of Wisconsin African Studies Center.

Smith, Donald

- 1992 Creating Understanding. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. See section on signal systems, 144–165.

Warren-Rothlin, Andrew

- 2009 "Script Choice, Politics, and Bible Agencies in West Africa." *The Bible Translator: Technical Papers* 60(1):50–66.

Anonymous

- 2010 "West African Ajami Orthographies in Socio-Political Context." Paper presented at The Arabic Script in Africa: Diffusion, Usage, Diversity and Dynamics of a Writing System (a Workshop funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung), University of Cologne, Germany, April 6–7.

Mumin, M., ed.

"West African Scripts and Arabic-Script Orthographies in Socio-Political Context." In *The Arabic Script in Africa*. New York: Brill, f.c.

Blench, R., and S. McGill, eds.

- 2009 "Arabic Script in modern Nigeria." In *Current Research in Nigerian Languages: Papers from the Jos Linguistic Circle*. Cambridge: Kay Williamson Educational Foundation, f.c.

Operation World:

The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation

ISBN-13: 978-1-85078-8621

Author: Jason Mandryk

Publisher: Biblica

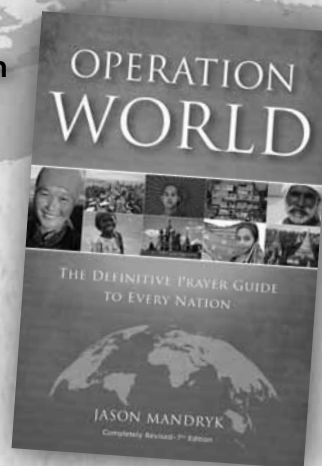
1024 pages

Paperback 2010

CARTON of 10

Our Price: ~~\$119.90~~ \$100

~~(11.99 each)~~ (\$10 each)



Our Price: ~~\$12.49~~ \$10.00



Our Price: ~~\$29.99~~ \$26.95

www.missionbooks.org • 1-800-MISSION

Bible Translation and Small Languages in the Pacific: Ten Years Later

by Karl J. Franklin

According to SIL International in Papua New Guinea (PNG),¹ there are about 850 distinct languages in that country alone, as well as a multitude of dialects in many of the languages.² In addition, there are 200 languages on the Indonesian side of the island of New Guinea, as well as hundreds of languages in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu with the majority of them being very small. The most complete record of the languages can be found in Ethnologue, a catalogue of the world's languages, where each separate language is given a three-letter identifying code.³

We, therefore, have a reasonable record upon which to base our observations about the status of small languages in the Pacific. Note, as background, that most of the world's authorities on the linguistic viability of a language say that one with only 10,000 speakers is in the "endangered" category. Since the average size of a language in PNG does not approach 5,000, I have concluded that a group with 500 speakers or less is indeed endangered.⁴

My conclusion, then, is much the same as it was almost 10 years ago: For the most part, full Bible translation efforts are impractical for small language groups, particularly as an initial project, and therefore Bible stories should be the default starting strategy.

Do the Math

I started thinking about the problem in 1999, the year that the executive director of SIL International proposed a bold goal that was adopted by delegates at an international conference, namely, that every language "that needs one" (the necessary and essential caveat) would have a translation program started by 2025.

In November 2000, I wrote a paper called "Reaching small languages in northern Papua New Guinea," and a month later I expanded the paper as "Proposing an alternative strategy for small languages groups in the Pacific." I provided data showing that 27% (236) of the languages in PNG had fewer

Karl Franklin is a Senior Anthropology Consultant with SIL International, with graduate degrees in linguistics (MA, Cornell University; PhD, Australian National University). He is also an Adjunct Professor of Linguistics at the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics in Dallas, Texas. He and his wife, Joice, worked in Papua New Guinea for over 30 years and were involved in the translation of the New Testament into West Kewa and East Kewa.

than 500 speakers, 20% of those spoken in the Solomon Islands were in the same category, and over half of those spoken in Vanuatu were similar. I did not address the question of translation or Bible storytelling for the languages on the Australian continent because so many languages there had less than 100 speakers or were nearly extinct. I did note that in the year 2000, of the 255 historically documented languages on the Australian continent, only 12 were still spoken by more than 1000 people.⁵

In my most recent examination of the Ethnologue (November, 2010), I note that the number of speakers for small languages has declined in every population category and that the overall number of small languages has declined by 54. This may be the result of some languages moving into the category of “above 500 speakers,” but it is more likely that the populations in each small-language category have simply decreased.

In 2000, the Provinces in PNG (20 at the time) that had the greatest number of small languages were Madang (86), East Sepik (35), Sandaun (30), Morobe (21), Western (14), and Milne Bay (11). The remaining Provinces each had less than 10 small languages. However, the survey and population figures for many of the languages are at least 25 years old for these Provinces. The following table outlines comparative figures from three Ethnologue editions (Figure 1).

A Different Strategy

A new or different strategy does not mean that others are wrong or misguided. But, as indicated and according to my research, little translation work has been done in very small languages (even with “cluster projects,” which I shall mention later) and, given the way personnel are available and assigned to programs, there is not likely to be much more translation work done among very

small languages. On the one hand, this might argue for the assignment of more personnel to PNG and the Pacific; on the other hand, it may call for some alternative approach to how people are trained and deployed. In the ten years since I have become interested and involved in the project a number of Bible storytelling programs and strategies have been in use, but none of them are of the nature outlined here.⁶

An important aspect of my suggested strategy requires an initial agreement with leaders in the particular language group (or some recognized segment thereof) so that the program is understood from the onset as deliberately restricted to Bible storytelling. As such, it will require a different kind of training than the traditional translation training that expatriates are familiar with.

In some cases, experienced storytelling consultants have been training nationals to re-tell certain stories from the Old and New Testaments.⁷ Depending upon the interest of the people, the policies of the mission organizations, the emphasis of the church(s), the projected viability of the language, as well as the availability of trained national speakers, a “fuller” program may develop. Such long term goals, however, depend upon the decisions of leaders in the language group and trained personnel.

However, a Bible storytelling program would differ from most “traditional” translation ones in a number of

respects. First of all, the retold stories would not be based exclusively upon the canonical text (the Greek or Hebrew), but instead upon an approved derivative source text that is well known by the vernacular speakers, such as a church or trade language. For example, in PNG the base text for many of the languages would be the Tok Pisin translation or some equally understandable English translation (such as the Contemporary English Version). Secondly, the retold stories would not need to be chronological, but could be synoptic, or thematic and without verse numbering—these are stories, not texts. Thirdly, they could be in audio or visual format, rather than printed, although some combination of the output mode would be possible. Finally, but as a major point, retold stories should fit the cultural style of oration and discourse that is present in traditional stories in these societies. This point can be easily glossed over because it insists that Bible story trainers be familiar with the vernacular cultures and the structure of their languages.

The retold stories should, of course, represent the approved source texts as clearly and accurately as possible. In this respect, they would be similar to the genre of popular translations such as *Philips Modern English*, F. F. Bruce’s *Letters of Paul*, or *The Living Bible*. In terms of idiomatic style, they might be more like *The Message*. Eugene H. Peterson explains why he felt an

Figure 1. Ethnologue Numbers for Small Languages

Category of Speakers	Ethnologue 14 (2000)	Ethnologue 15 (2005)	Ethnologue 16 (2009)
01-50	13	21	22
51-100	32	24	25
101-200	61	42	36
201-300	47	38	42
301-400	56	43	36
401-500	41	31	35
Total Number of languages	250	209	196

informal idiomatic translation in the “street language” was needed:

The version of the New Testament in a contemporary idiom keeps the language of the Message current and fresh and understandable in the same language in which we do our shopping, talk with our friends, worry about world affairs, and teach our children their table manners. The goal is not to render a word-for-word conversion of Greek into English, but rather to convert the tone, the rhythm, the events, and the ideas, into the way we actually think and speak (Peterson 1995, 10).

We have added that the stories should be in the same cultural style and persuasive discourse as one would use to tell any good story (Maguire 1998, Sawyer 1942). Of course the goal of retelling Bible stories in the vernacular is the same as for any modern idiomatic translation, namely, clarity and understanding, as Peterson has forcibly reminded us. Similarly, Taylor, in his introduction to the Living Bible, recounts that his purpose was “to say as exactly as possible what the writers of the Scriptures meant, and to say it simply, expanding where necessary for a clear understanding of the modern reader.”

If a synoptic retelling was chosen, stories could parallel something like Christianson’s continuous narrative harmonizing of the four Gospels and Acts. However, the style would be different because our goal is retold stories, not paraphrases of a full translation.

The “Language Cluster” Strategy

A strategy that is now widely promoted in SIL International and other Bible translation agencies (such as The Seed Company and Pioneer Bible Translators)⁸ is the so-called “cluster” tactic. This approach is a conceptual one, where speakers from a number of languages agree to work collectively on Bible translation projects. They may have certain social and linguistic com-

As one translator told me, “If the people change their language in 25 years, it will simplify our task by not having to deal with those languages.”

monalities based on their interaction and therefore provide a “natural” unit for a cluster. The project may focus on a particular book of the Bible or have “just in time” training. Trainers examine aspects of the phonology (orthography solutions), grammar, and culture, but their main emphasis is on the exegesis of the Scriptures. A consultant, usually trained in the biblical languages, assists with such exegetical and, to some (often minor) extent, linguistic or anthropological problems. Projects of this sort are going on in a number of locations on various continents. However, decisions about translation clusters need to address issues such as

- What are the features used to consistently determine the constituent members of a cluster? For example, are the languages represented in the cluster formally related and, if so, upon what features are their degrees of likeness determined?
- What background information (cultural, grammatical, etc.) is available on the languages and how it is disseminated to the translators in the cluster?
- What are the competencies of the translators and consultants in the cluster? How are they evaluated and by whom?
- How do consultants determine the degree of relationships between various linguistic and cultural aspects of the languages? If the languages are documented, how will the consultants pass on information to the translators?
- What are the specific goals and outcomes of the cluster project? Who determines them?
- How are the cluster projects financed and who keeps the records?

- What infrastructure (technical, transportation, communication, etc.) is necessary to sustain the cluster project?

Cluster projects would be appropriate for Bible storytelling as well, although the constraints may prove to be less rigorous.

Some Objections to Bible Storytelling as a Primary Strategy

There are a number of potential and real problems with my proposal:

Choosing Size as a Criterion

While it is true that the size of a particular group, such as the figure of 500 as a cut-off point, is in some sense arbitrary, additional sociolinguistic research is fundamental and crucial for decisions about translation viability. And of course “small” does not always mean that a language is “dying.” Bilingualism or multilingualism has or will take place in the small groups, and there often seems to be no approved strategy that takes into account such circumstances, except in the traditional manner.⁹

Choosing Time as a Criterion

The very notion of trying to enter each language group in a certain length of time may not be appealing to many people. What is the hurry? As one translator told me (I hope with tongue in cheek), “If the people change their language in 25 years, it will simplify our task by not having to deal with those languages.” On a more positive note, another person said, “If people are dying without access to the Scriptures in their own tongue, then why not adapt this strategy for all languages.” In addition, as sociolinguists have noted, many languages may disappear, but the people don’t. They merely shift to using another language.

Choosing Something Other Than the Canonical Text as the Base Text

Some translators and linguists may have trouble with the notion of retelling Bible stories, instead of providing a translation or paraphrase of the biblical text. They most often cite the cause and concerns of accuracy, implying or stating that stories soon become hearsay. Remember, however, that the tellers or re-tellers are getting their stories initially from a Bible text and the stories can always be checked against that text.

Which Set of Bible Stories?

The decision about the particular set of Bible stories used may also be a problem. The essential component of the strategy given here allows the trained vernacular speaker to retell the Bible story in a clear and natural way and to choose which stories they want to retell. But retelling Bible stories does include many of the same concerns that idiomatic translations do, only in a different manner. This difference is because the trained native speaker compiles the “translation” in a story format. It follows that the native speaker (not the translator) is the best judge of what stories to choose.

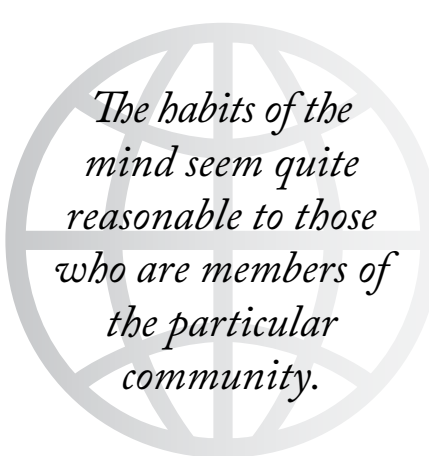
Choosing an Already Existing Exegesis of the Stories

Other concerns may be about exegesis because this strategy assumes that an acceptable and satisfactory exegesis of the passages for the stories exists. Will it lower the quality of the story, as some claim, by retelling the Bible stories rather than translating them directly from the Greek, Hebrew, (or some national language) text? If the stories are retold naturally and accurately (a task that preachers and expositors perform at every Bible study or church service), why should this be a problem? Historically, it has often taken years for an expatriate translator to properly exegete and translate the Bible. The strategy proposed here bypasses this long-term commitment or requirement for exegesis because it assumes an adequate and reliable underlying text. It also gives ethnic groups the Bible stories in a

language they not only understand easily but, in some cases, can also read. It, therefore, complements the concomitant goals of literacy and Scripture use.

The Problem of Checking and Assuring Quality Control

To highlight further a concern about accuracy, note that a verse-by-verse translation of Scripture requires considerable exegetical preparation, meticulous attention to every detail, back translations for the consultant to read, and other procedures. However, retold Bible stories would not require the same linguistic or exegetical detail of checking. Although they would be checked for the accuracy, naturalness and overall discourse cohesion, just as



The habits of the mind seem quite reasonable to those who are members of the particular community.

in any translation project, the checking procedure would not require a literal adherence to the proposition-by-proposition content of the original text.¹⁰

The Problem of Adequate and Appropriate Training

In our strategy of retelling Bible stories, coordinators or facilitators need to train native speakers who are culturally recognized storytellers. Although the native speaker should retell the Bible story with naturalness and clarity, we emphasize that these are not scientifically defined terms. In retelling a story there is a certain art form that emerges because the teller uses the vocabulary and style that is most effective for the particular audience. Translation efforts

assume a generic audience; storytelling assumes particular audiences.

The Problem of Knowing One's Own Language

Most English speakers know little formally about their own language, although they know a great deal intuitively. Vernacular speakers need to learn to use their own languages—a goal that is similar in literacy programs where national writers are trained to write in their languages. The goal is necessary because many translators do not have a facility for writing their own language well or for expressing themselves clearly. By adopting this alternative strategy for small language groups, nationals can be trained in a different way. This approach should significantly reduce the necessary time to provide Bible stories for a group, as compared to the time now spent in a typical translation program.

Of course accepting a retelling approach in communicating the Bible's message is only possible as an entity adopts it as a legitimate project. By doing so, they provide some assurance that the task can be completed within a time frame that excludes a moribund state of the language.

A New Paradigm

Howard Margolis (1993) wrote that habits of the mind can block out what later come to be almost irresistible solutions. This is because certain ways of talking about things, for example, views on translation and paraphrase, bind together (or separate) certain educational and intellectual communities. The habits of the mind seem quite reasonable to those who are members of the particular community. Traditional translators and consultants represent such a community and an old paradigm.

How might we determine what constitutes a translator's or consultant's habit of the mind? Let us assume that one habit is to consider a translated text as essential. We can contrast this

by examining some alternative view, as in Pikean terms by noting the essential components that demonstrate differences. Comparing retold Bible stories with translating the canonical text can be helpful and instructive. We note, for example, that exegesis controls the translation task, and naturalness controls the retelling. The default paradigm is that the translator (and consultant) must adhere closely to the original text. Such a habit can be a barrier to an alternative way of thinking about retelling stories. Another barrier may be our terminology. We call something a translation when it is judged as accurately representing the canonical text but it is a paraphrase if it moves somewhat further from the source text towards a freer form of expression. It is therefore generally rejected as a “true translation.” By employing Bible storytelling, the gridlock over what is acceptable in translation theory and practice may possibly be broken.¹¹

In a traditional paradigm, Bible stories are often considered something less than what a mature Christian would want or enjoy. One of my critics said that “Bible stories are for children,” implying that Bible stories are baby food and that only the full translated text is adult food. But, as C. S. Lewis said:

... a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good ones last. A waltz which you can only like when you are waltzing is a bad waltz (Lewis 1982:59).

Adopting the strategy proposed here attempts to award retold Bible stories with a status that enhances them beyond what is “merely for children.”

As Philip Sampson (2000, 157) recounts, “Narratives are not just gripping accounts. They may also have profound cultural power... The biblical narrative has deeply marked the development of Western societies.” Storytelling is one of the most important and widely accepted method of communicating in any culture. In fact storytelling societies abound

One of my critics said, “Bible stories are for children,” implying that Bible stories are baby food and that only the full translated text is adult food.

(there are hundreds of sites that can be found on the Internet) in many cultures around the world. In addition, stories are the fabric through which moral and religious meanings flourish (Murphy 2000, Coles 1989, Rodari 1996). Any person who has spent time living in another culture has learned the importance of the people's stories. People love to hear stories and people who can read love to read them. They are Scripture-in-use at its most practical level.

However, to think differently about the Bible translation task for small languages, in any radical sense, requires a paradigm shift. The shift proposed here does not provide full canonical translations, but encourages trained nationals to retell selected Bible stories naturally in their own languages. The strategy focuses upon finding good storytellers in the culture, acquainting them with Bible stories, training them, and then allowing them to retell them in their own languages. The paradigm does not require a written translation for the output because it acknowledges that 70% or more of the people in an oral society never learn to read.

For a new paradigm to be adopted, administrators will need to re-assess the linguistic viability of small language groups, then assist the language groups in making some difficult decisions. They will have to decide, “Do we have the time and capacity to warrant (not deserve) the efforts of a full translation project?” Given the limited resources available, particularly in terms of trainers and consultants, Bible retelling projects need to be seriously considered as a strategy. The approach can become part of cluster language programs in some instances.

However, if storytelling is simply conceived as one of a number of possible

strategies and the default strategy is always a partial or “full” translation project for every language, then retelling Bible stories will not be given a serious hearing. Rather, as I have emphasized repeatedly, retelling Bible stories must be seen as a legitimate strategy in its own right. And because I have had small and often endangered languages in mind, linguistic salvage would be an accompanying strategy. This aspect would require further study to define what can realistically be recorded within the “retelling” strategy.

Elson (1977) wrote the following: “Perhaps by the turn of the century, SIL will have wound down much of its field programs and members will be involved in teaching, practical training and consultant work, both at home and abroad.” Elson's predictions would support a new paradigm for small languages, but the way things are progressing it will not be in the century he had in mind.

Conclusion

I have not carried the matter of the new paradigm as far as it can go, but I have raised some important questions and issues. To sum up, this proposed paradigm was initially proposed for very small language groups. It did not and does not assume a church with a historical structure of pastors, commentators, nor a fixed denominational exegesis of certain passages. However, in cases where the predominant national language is also the language of the source text, the preaching and teaching emphasis is already based upon retelling the message, so “interpreters” already exist. They may intuitively know how to best retell the story.

A retelling of a Bible story has some of the technical aspects as a Bible

translation project because the meaning of the source text must still be clearly understood and conveyed. However, it is not as technical in the sense of claiming a detailed analysis of the target language (although present translations often also reflect limited linguistic analysis). The trained national translators, in either case, judge decisions about style.

Although there are technical decisions to be made in Bible storytelling, just as in a “normal” translation programs, the emphasis is upon common language and naturalness. It is not about back translations and exegetical checking. As Newmark says

for the vast majority of texts, you have to ensure: (a) that your translation makes sense; (b) that it reads naturally, that it is written in ordinary language, the common grammar, idioms and words that meet that kind of situation (1988, 24).

There is a mixture in the goals between retelling the message on the one hand and a literal translation of a text on the other. For example, the use and translation of idioms, rearrangement of the text, interpretation of obscure text, making clear implied information, and so on, takes place in the “normal” translation task by means of introductions, cross-references, pictures, section headings, indexes, maps, footnotes, and so on. However, telling stories have fewer constraints because it includes the introduction of background information, foreshadowing the conclusion, flashbacks, and so on, to provide a free flow of the story without adhering as closely to the source text forms. The story checkers spend their time ensuring that the source text is retold naturally, not literally. Only a native speaker can judge a story’s naturalness, so insertions and interpretations are always directed toward the audiences’ understanding.

The checking procedures would therefore change, first of all, in degree. At present, in most situations, a translation consultant examines an

episode by embarking upon a word-by-word, phrase by phrase, and sentence by sentence checking of the vernacular text for exegetical accuracy. In retold story form, spot checks of known difficult key ideas would be adequate.

As already indicated, retelling stories would allow, for example, the synoptic narratives to be harmonized to eliminate redundancies, even recasting or restructuring information along certain lines, e. g., chronology, topic, author.

The present and continuing arguments about how much freedom the translator can take by inserting implied information would be a moot point



in this paradigm. The problem would not be in focus because the insertion of implied information is considered a natural and necessary part of the storytelling task.

To briefly summarize—the Bible translation task is at first, etic; the storytelling task is emic. This is because outsiders control the former, insiders the latter.¹²

Ten years after I first wrote about Bible storytelling there is a plethora of agencies involved in the activity, using various strategies and techniques.¹³ None of them, however, exist solely to meet the needs of endangered language communities. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ See <http://www.sil.org/pacific/png/index.asp> for details of the languages, including a list of publications online, a bibliography (by author, language, series, province, and subject), as well as maps for each province. According to their website, SIL in PNG is now (2010) working in about 200 different languages, having already carried out research in almost 400 languages. The research varies from full grammars and dictionaries to abbreviated descriptions of parts of particular languages, but almost always the phonology.

² The practical problem of distinguishing languages vs. dialects is an on-going discussion but SIL considers the feature of intelligibility as its main criterion. For example, the classification of language or dialect is summed up in Ethnologue (2005, 8) by noting inherent intelligibility and common ethnolinguistic identity.

³ The code is called ISO 639-3 and defines all known human languages with a three-letter identifier. Its website (<http://www.sil.org/iso639-3/default.asp>) processes requests, applications, or changes in order to register all language codes.

⁴ According to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered_language#cite_note-K2007-0), an endangered language is one that is at risk of falling out of use and upon losing all its native speakers, becomes a dead language. Krauss (1992) estimated that there are about 6000 languages in active use and defined languages as “endangered” if children will probably not be speaking them in 100 years (approximately 60-80% of languages fall into this category). Languages are “moribund” if children are not speaking them now. The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) established a Committee on Endangered Languages and Hale and others published key articles (1992) that addressed the problem. Following Hale’s death, a Professorship was established in his name “to document endangered languages and work with communities toward their preservation” (<http://www.lsadc.org/info/inst-past-profs.cfm>, accessed February 14, 2011). There are various agencies that support efforts to preserve endangered languages and to gather linguistic materials. See, for example <http://www.sil.org/sociolx/ndg-lg-home.html> and <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices/> (both accessed February 14, 2011).

⁵ I formally presented a version of my paper at the International Language Assessment Conference IV in Chiang

Mai, Thailand, Sept. 5-12, 2001, although the basic idea was first presented to the SIL International Vice Presidents/Area Directors meetings in Dallas, April 28, 2000. I appreciated comments received from participants in those meetings, as well as from a number of SIL linguistics and translation consultants over the years. However, I should add that most of the early comments were objections or reservations to the idea of substituting Bible stories for translations—regardless of the population size of the language group.

⁶ I have not carefully examined the policies of other agencies that are involved in Bible translation in PNG and the Pacific, such as New Tribes Mission (NTM), although I have talked with some of the leaders. NTM does work with very small groups and does Bible translation, even in cases where the Scriptures are available in closely related dialects.

⁷ For example, The Seed Company is also now involved in Bible storytelling and training in PNG. Jim and Janet Stahl, storytelling consultants for TSC have held several workshops at Alotau, in the Milne Bay Province.

⁸ See <http://www.theseedcompany.org/project/vital-ig-cluster> (accessed February 14, 2011) for a description of the “VITAL cluster of Papua New Guinea.” The claim is that “This project represents a strategy to accelerate Scripture translation for 15 languages. The VITAL program (Vernacular Initiative for Translation and Literacy) successfully and efficiently trains PNG translators in Milne Bay Province. VITAL conducts workshops for teams of translators from many languages, not only to leverage the help of consultants and trainers between translation teams, but also to promote healthy teamwork among translators of related languages.” On the roots of the Pioneer Bible Translators (PBT), see http://www.pioneerbible.org/cms/tiki-view_blog.php?blogId=2 (accessed February 14, 2011).

⁹ Entities of most translation organizations do have, of course, certain policies on whether or not to translate for a particular group (but not necessarily on documenting the language and culture). For example, Lewis and Stalder (2009, unpublished) have written a paper providing a conceptual framework in which they discuss the concept of clustering and the administrative decisions that are associated with it. Although they do not give specific directions on working with the size of groups that I am discussing, their study is very helpful.

¹⁰ For some specific suggestions on examining and checking stories, see Chapter 8 of my online book called *Loosen your tongue: An introduction to storytelling*: <http://www.gial.edu/specpubs/loosen-your-tongue.pdf>.

¹¹ Note, however, that we have Bible storytelling organizations that apply strict constraints to what is an acceptable Bible story. They are very “literal” in their approach, while other agencies allow more “freedom,” such as interjecting or substituting cultural analogies, conflating stories that have similar important points, and so on.

¹² These two terms were coined originally by the linguist Kenneth L. Pike to convey two perspectives: the insider, who is naturally familiar and acculturated in the language and culture (the emic view), and the outsider, who studies a language from an outside cultural and scientific perspective (the etic view).

¹³ New Tribes Mission (NTM, see <http://www.ntm.org>) is sometimes considered the originator of Bible storying as a mission strategy. Their set of 48 lessons studying the Bible chronologically is called “Firm Foundations” and can be purchased from their website. The Southern Baptists mission (IMB) uses the “Chronological Bible Storying” method (see http://www.oraltystrategies.org/strategy_detail.cfm?StrategyID=1, this and those that follow, accessed February 14, 2011). Note also the OneStory Partnership, with four “managing partners”—Campus Crusade for Christ, Trans World Radio, Wycliffe USA, and Youth With a Mission (see <http://www.onestory.org/Partners/PartnersDefault.aspx>). Some other agencies that either endorse or practice Bible storytelling methods are, for example: Scriptures in Use (<http://www.sittraining.org/>); Chronological Bible Storying (http://www.oraltystrategies.org/strategy_detail.cfm?StrategyID=1); Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int’l (<http://www.nbsint.org/>); and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (<http://www.nobs.org/>).

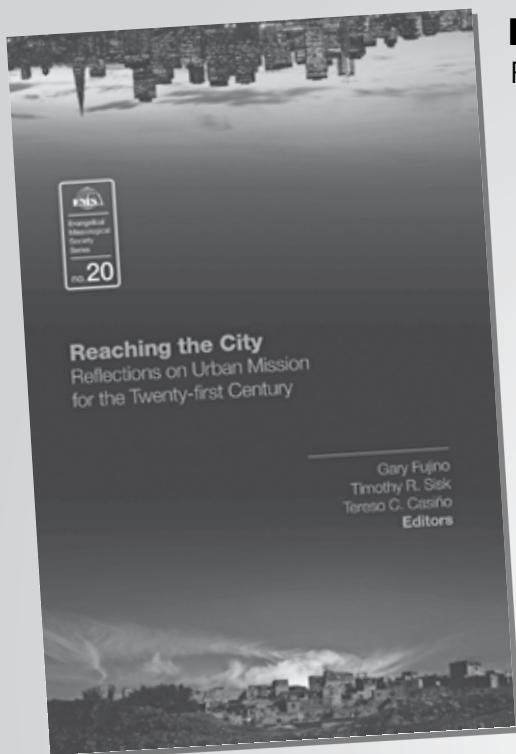
References

- Bruce, F. F.
1965 *The Letters of Paul: An expanded paraphrase*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Christianson, Christopher J.
1973 *The Concise Gospel and Acts*. Plainfield, NJ: Logos International
- Coles, Robert
1989 *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the moral imagination*. Houghton Mifflin.

- Elson, Benjamin F.
1977 “SIL’s future: plans and prospect,” in *The Summer Institute of Linguistics: Its works and contributions*, edited by Ruth M. Brend and Kenneth L. Pike. The Hague: Mouton.
- Hale, K, M. Krauss, L. Watahomigie, A. Yamamoto, C. Craig, L. Masayeva Jeanne, and I. N. England
1992 “Endangered languages.” *Language* 68:1-42.
- Krauss, Michael E.
1992 “The World’s Languages in Crisis.” *Language* 68(1):4-10.
- Lewis, C. S.
1982 “Three ways of writing for children,” in C. S. Lewis on *Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, edited by Walter Hooper. NY: Harcourt Brace Javanovitch.
- Lewis, M. Paul, and Jürg Stalder
2009 “Clustering: A conceptual framework and its implications.” Unpublished manuscript.
- Maguire, Jack
1998 *The Power of Personal Storytelling: Spinning tales to connect with others*. NY: Penguin Putnam.
- Margolis, Howard
1993 *Paradigms and Barriers: How habits of mind govern scientific beliefs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Murphy, G. Ronald
2000 *The Owl, the Raven, & the Dove: The religious meaning of the Grimm’s magic fairy tales*. Oxford: Oxford U. Press.
- Newmark, Peter
1988 *A Textbook of Translation*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Peterson, Eugene H.
1995 *The Message: The New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs*. Colorado Springs: NavPress.
- Rodari, Gianni
1972 *The Grammar of Fantasy: An introduction to the act of inventing stories*. (translated by Jack Zipes, 1996) NY: Teachers & Writers Collaborative.
- Sampson, Philip J.
2000 *Six Modern Myths about Christianity & Western Civilization*. Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Sawyer, Ruth
1976 *The way of the storyteller*. NY: Penguin Books.
- Taylor, Kenneth
1971 *The Living Bible*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers.

WILLIAM CAREY LIBRARY

NEW RELEASES



Reaching the City

Reflections on Urban Mission for the Twenty-first Century

Rapid urbanization and globalization processes worldwide have changed the landscape of our times. In Asia and Africa the number of urban dwellers increases by an average of one million per week, according to the United Nations. More than half of the globe's seven billion human beings now live in cities. These realities have far reaching implications for mission in urban contexts at the start of the third millennium. *Reaching the City: Reflections on Urban Mission for the Twenty-first Century* seeks to address the missiological challenges associated with this new world order.

Each author in this collection respectfully builds upon the significant contributions of seminal writers such as Ray Bakke, Jacques Ellul, Basil of Caesarea and others, while making new and creative proposals for urban mission in our world today. Beginning with the bigger picture of the global challenges of urbanization, and moving through theological, historical, and educational perspectives, this volume concludes with a rich bevy of case studies engaging these new realities of both North American and international cities to encourage a missional thrust to reach these communities.

ISBN: 978-0-87808-039-7

Gary Fujino, Timothy R. Sisk, Tereso C. Casio

WCL | Pages 304 | Paperback 2012

List Price: \$14.99

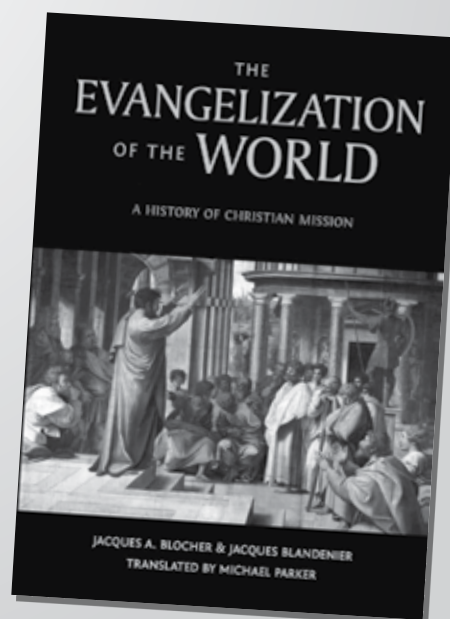
Our Price: \$11.99

3 or more: \$8.24

The Evangelization of the World

A History of Christian Mission

Written in an engaging style and intended largely for a lay audience, *The Evangelization of the World* tells the remarkable story of how Christianity grew from an insignificant Jewish sect in the first century until, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, it had become the world's first truly global religion. The book is careful to explain historical context and mission theory, but the foci of the narrative are the great personalities of mission—the Apostle Paul, St. Martin of Tours, St. Patrick, St. Francis Xavier, John Eliot, Count Von Zinzendorf, William Carey, Robert Morrison, David Livingstone, Mary Slessor, Albert Schweitzer, and many others—who make this account of the expansion of the church a fascinating and often dramatic tale. In addition, the book does not neglect the great mission conferences of the twentieth century, nor does it avoid the controversial aspects of mission that, in many instances, continue to vex the movement today.



ISBN: 978-0-87808-017-5

List Price: \$49.95

Jacques A. Blocher, Jacques Blandinier, Michael Parker (translator)

WCL | Pages 770 | Paperback 2013



www.missionbooks.org • 1-800-MISSION

Part I: Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots

Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today

by *Larry W. Caldwell*

Introduction

The interpretation of Scripture runs silent and deep across the frontiers of mission. As evangelicals we value the role of hermeneutics in the mission of the church, and we expect the Bible to be read and interpreted properly as the gospel gains new ground. It's no surprise that our differences over belief and practice in mission settings force us back to our hermeneutical assumptions, for we know that one's interpretive compass will direct what one believes to be correct practice in church and mission.

While this evangelical priority may seem obvious we might fail to see the particular assumptions that inform our largely Western interpretative enterprise. These assumptions are especially crucial when our mission interacts with churches and movements emerging in new cultural settings. When we confront difficult questions of contextualization in these settings, are we aware of the cultural influences that shape our hermeneutical orientations? In this article I want to explore these underlying cultural influences on hermeneutics through a study of the apostle Paul. If we can see the unique cultural influences on Paul's hermeneutical perspective, influences that were quite distinct from our Western heritage, might we then acknowledge the place of cultural preferences in all hermeneutical activity across cross-cultural and multi-cultural mission settings?

The Western "Two Step"

Over the past few decades both the Western and non-Western (Global South or Majority World) church has been bombarded with a plethora of hermeneutical methodologies or approaches: philosophical hermeneutics, minjung hermeneutics, structuralism, feminist hermeneutics, canonical criticism, theological hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of liberation, semiotics, and even queer hermeneutics, to name but a few. For most evangelicals worldwide the

Larry W. Caldwell (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) was Professor of Missions and Hermeneutics at Asian Theological Seminary for 20 years, five of those years serving as Academic Dean, and directed the Doctor of Missiology program at the Asia Graduate School of Theology-Philippines. He was editor of the Journal of Asian Mission for many years, and has written and presented numerous papers in journals and forums across Asia and the Western world. He recently returned to the USA to become Director of Missionary Training and Strategy for Converge Worldwide, and serves as Visiting Professor of Intercultural Studies at Sioux Falls Seminary.

hermeneutical methodology that has dominated the discussion is one that has two simple steps.

Step One involves the Bible and is concerned with the question: *How is a particular Bible passage to be best interpreted?* Through an analysis of the original context of the Scripture passage—often using the tools of the grammatical-historical (or historical-critical) process—the interpreter attempts to ascertain, what the Bible passage first meant to its original hearers, to understand what the passage meant *then*.

Step Two follows on the heels of this first step. Here the interpreter attempts to answer the question: *How is that Bible passage to be best interpreted for today?* In Step Two the interpreter applies the results of the first step to the particular audience that the interpreter is ministering with *now*, usually being careful to make sure that the second step closely approximates the results of the first step. These two major steps make up what is known as the “Two Step” approach to Bible interpretation.¹

The methodology of the Two Step approach to biblical hermeneutics has dominated Western evangelical hermeneutics over the past fifty years and continues to prevail even today. And, because of the success of Western evangelical missionary efforts, this approach also dominates much of the non-Western evangelical world. It is as if the current Western approach is to be universally applied in all cultures, as illustrated in Figure 1.

But *should* the Two Step approach have gained such international dominance and acceptance among evangelicals worldwide? Several related questions follow:

- Should the Two Step approach be so universally used?
- Should a hermeneutical method that arose out of the cultural milieu of the Western world

be presumed to be appropriate for use in the multiplicity of hermeneutical milieus of the non-Western world?

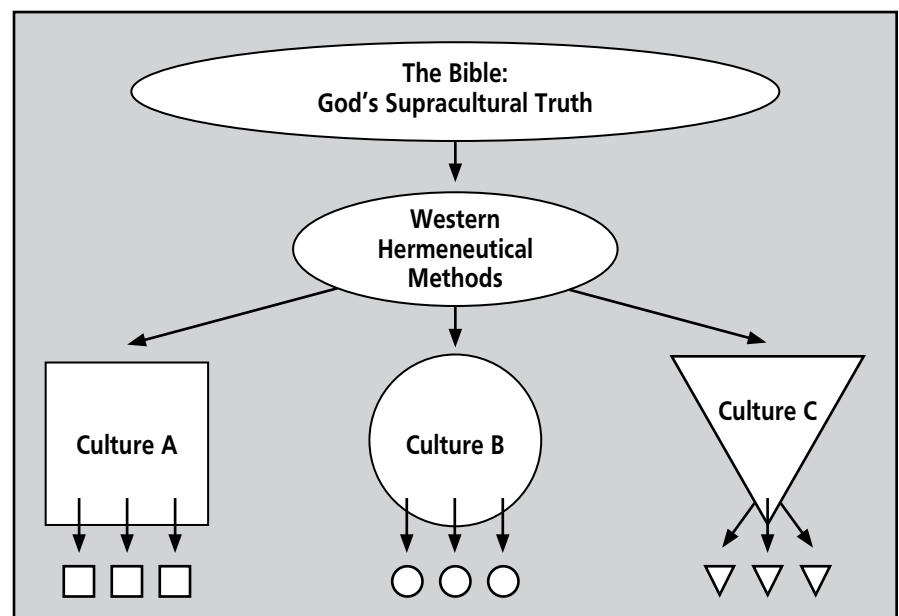
- Would it not be better for those from other cultural contexts to search for indigenous hermeneutical methods by which the biblical message can best be understood in their own unique cultural settings?
- And, finally, is the Two Step approach, as good as it is, the *best* approach for the whole church in the 21st century, especially for the majority of the whole church—both Western and non-Western—that is predominately made up of pastors, lay leaders and lay people who will not have the luxury of learning the Two Step approach in evangelical training institutions worldwide?

Kevin Higgins has hinted at the crucial role that indigenous hermeneutics might play in his recent IJFM article on translation and relevance theory.² Here Higgins highlights relevance theory and its understanding of cognitive environment, especially its implications for communication.

Higgins, following the work of Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, describes cognitive environment as “merely a set of assumptions which the individual is capable of mentally representing and accepting as true.”³ Higgins continues: “Thus cognitive environment includes a person’s current and potential matrix of ideas, memories, experiences and perceptions.”⁴

I was particularly intrigued by Higgins’ desire to understand “how people process the meaning of the Biblical text from within their own cognitive environment” . . . “how cognitive environment shapes meaning and frames questions that are brought to the text.”⁵ Building on Higgins, I would like to argue that any hermeneutical method, including the Two Step approach, is highly shaped by the cognitive environment of the reader/hearer/interpreter. As such, any hermeneutical method must pay close attention to both the interpreter’s own cognitive environment and its influence on the interpretation of a biblical text, as well as to the reader/hearer and his/her interpretation of that same text. This is not to imply that the reader’s/hearer’s interpretation of the text takes

Figure 1. *Presupposition: Western Hermeneutical Methods Work for All Cultures*



precedence over what the biblical text itself is saying (always the danger of reader-response criticism); the Bible always takes precedence over any reader/hearer and that person's cognitive environment. Despite this disclaimer, we do well to examine carefully the cognitive environment of ourselves as interpreters, as well as the cognitive environment—including their indigenous hermeneutical methods—of the audiences with which we do mission.

Higgins speaks of cognitive environment especially in terms of Bible translation. I would like to take his discussion down to the foundational level of Bible interpretation and the hermeneutical assumptions that affect that interpretation, for, in my view, all Bible translation is founded upon pre-existing hermeneutical assumptions.⁶ As a result, I believe that we can gain great insight into “proper” Bible interpretation today—whether done by Western or non-Western Bible interpreters—by first examining closely the cognitive environment of the New Testament, in this case the hermeneutical milieu and methods of the apostle Paul. Such an examination will help guard against the previously described tendency of Western missionaries to assume that Western Bible interpretation methods are universal methods that will, by default, work in any cultural context. This article will show that the apostle Paul's own hermeneutical methods—which he used when he interpreted the Old Testament—defy this Western assumption.

By examining Paul's hermeneutical methods from an anthropological standpoint, this article will show that Paul's interpretation methods in regards to the Old Testament were methods arising directly out of the cultural milieu of the first century AD, i.e., his cognitive environment. As a result, the use of such culturally-specific Bible interpretation methods

The apostle Paul's own hermeneutical methods—which he used when he interpreted the Old Testament—defy this Western assumption.

by Paul should give both Westerners and non-Westerners greater freedom in attempting to use interpretation methods that reflect their own cultural contexts and cognitive environments, and a greater confidence to interpret the Bible with more relevancy for their own specific cross-cultural and multi-cultural situations. There will be a new recognition that such culturally specific interpretation methods may, in the final analysis, be more authentically biblical than using the Two Step approach.

So why should Bible interpreters try to use culturally appropriate Bible interpretation methods that reflect their own cognitive environment—like those of the apostle Paul that reflect his cognitive environment—rather than relying exclusively, or primarily, on the Two Step approach? I will attempt to answer this question in four sections across two articles. *Section 1* will first give a brief background of the hermeneutical milieu out of which Paul's hermeneutical methods arose, especially looking at the method known as *midrash*. *Section 2* will examine several examples of Paul's first century hermeneutical methods found in his speeches in Acts. *Section 3* will continue in this vein, focusing on examples from Paul's letters. *Section 4* will give examples of non-Western approaches to the biblical text that, like Paul's, have arisen out of their own hermeneutical contexts and cognitive environments and thus work well in their own cultures. The article will conclude with practical suggestions to help evangelical Bible interpreters better use hermeneutical methods—in both Western and non-Western contexts—that are more culturally appropriate and, in the final analysis, possibly more biblical.

Part One of this article, comprising Sections 1 and 2, will continue below. Part Two of this article, comprising Sections 3 and 4, will continue in the next issue of *IJFM* (29:3, July–September 2012).⁷

Section 1: One First Century AD Hermeneutical Method—Midrash

There were several hermeneutical methods used immediately prior to and during the time of the writing of the New Testament. Consequently, the New Testament writers had, as it were, a vast hermeneutical smorgasbord of methods from which to choose: literal historical, allegorical, *midrash*, typological, *pesher*, and theological, to mention some of the most significant. In this article I have chosen to investigate in more detail the hermeneutical method of *midrash* because I believe that it offers perhaps the most parallels and insights for biblical interpretation today, for both Western and non-Western multi-cultural and cross-cultural interpreters of the Bible.

Midrash: Towards a Definition

Midrash (מִדְרָשׁ) is simply the Hebrew word used to describe exegetical principles developed by the Jewish rabbis over the centuries prior to the writing of the New Testament. The overarching purpose of *midrash* is to better interpret the Old Testament text. What are some of the essential principles of *midrash*? Richard Longenecker succinctly describes them:

Midrashic interpretation . . . takes its departure from the biblical text itself . . . and seeks to explicate the hidden meanings contained therein by means of agreed upon hermeneutical rules in order to contemporize the revelation of God for the people of God. It may

be briefly characterized by the maxim: "That has relevance to This"; i.e., What is written in Scripture has relevance to our present situation.⁸

Longenecker's reference to the present contextual situation of the audience as the primary motivational component underlying the midrashic technique was first developed by Renée Bloch.⁹ She viewed the genre of *midrash* as "the most characteristic and yet the least understood of the Bible."¹⁰

Bloch cites five "essential and fundamental characteristics" of *midrash*. First, its point of departure is Scripture. This is what contributes to its exclusive use within the overall confines of Judaism:

This is its fundamental characteristic, which already excludes any possibility of finding parallels to this literary genre outside of Israel. Midrash is therefore a genre which is peculiar to Israel, like prophecy, but perhaps even more unique. Midrash cannot occur outside of Israel because it presupposes faith in the revelation which is recorded in the holy books. It is a reflection, a meditation on the sacred texts, a "searching" of Scripture.¹¹

Second, *midrash* is homiletical; its purpose is to make the results of the "searching" of Scripture by the rabbis accessible to the people. In her words . . . those who "search" the Scriptures are not "ivory tower" theologians. Midrash is not a genre of the academy; it is rather a popular genre, and above all it is homiletical. Its origin is certainly to be sought for the most part in the liturgical reading of the Torah for Sabbaths and Feasts.¹²

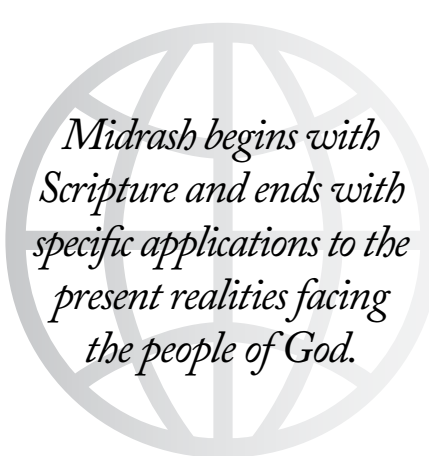
Third, *midrash* is a method which is attentive to the text in context:

This is a natural corollary. Since the sacred text was read in the synagogue and had to be commented upon in a homily relating to it, attempts were made to understand it better. Because of this it was studied diligently, that it

might be understood and its obscurities made clear. This concern of the rabbis meant that they often began their inquiry by asking the question: why? . . . The principal method by which the rabbis clarify the sacred text and probe its depths is by recourse to parallel passages. The Bible forms a unit; it comes from God in all of its parts and it therefore offers a broad context to which one should always return.¹³

Bloch's fourth point is particularly crucial to this study; the primary goal of *midrash* is to be practical, to be adapted to the present.

If midrashic exegesis consists primarily in attentive study of the texts, it does not stop there. Its aim is not



*Midrash begins with
Scripture and ends with
specific applications to the
present realities facing
the people of God.*

purely theoretical. Its goal is primarily practical: to define the lesson for faith and for the religious way of life contained in the biblical text . . . This practical concern led midrash to re-interpret Scripture, to "actualize" it. This characteristic . . . along with the close relation and constant reference to Scripture, is the essence of midrash. These two characteristics, which are constant, are the very soul of the midrashic method.¹⁴

This "actualization" of the Old Testament occurs, in Bloch's opinion, because it "corresponds to the way in which Israel—and later the Church—has always understood Scripture as the word of God." She continues:

It always involves a living Word addressed personally to the people of God and to each of its members, a Word which makes clear the divine wishes and demands and calls for a response, never theoretical, and a commitment: the fidelity of a people and each of its members to the demands which the Word makes manifest. Revealed at a specific point in history, this Word is nevertheless addressed to men of all times. Thus it ought to remain open indefinitely to all new understandings of the message, all legitimate adaptations and all new situations. These things are the foundation and the *raison d'être* of midrash. So long as there is a people of God who regard the Bible as the living Word of God, there will be midrash; only the name might change.¹⁵

How is all of this worked out in the New Testament? Bloch maintains that the genre of *midrash* was "already completely formed at the time of the birth of Christianity."¹⁶ As a result she concludes:

Nothing is more characteristic in this regard than the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament: it always involves midrashic actualization. The newness resides in the actualization itself, in the present situation to which the ancient texts are applied and adapted.¹⁷

Bloch's fifth point concerns the practical working out of *midrash* into the specific literary genres of *halakah* and *haggadah*. *Halakah* refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the legal material of the Old Testament while *haggadah* refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the non-legal material: history, prophecy, psalms, and the like.

In summary, *midrash* is a hermeneutical method that begins with Scripture and ends with specific applications to the present realities facing the people of God. But how did the midrashic interpreters arrive at their specific applications? In other words, what did

they do with the biblical text in order to arrive at their actualized interpretations? The answer to these questions cannot be fully understood apart from briefly reviewing the historical and cultural climate out of which midrashic interpretation initially arose. To that topic we turn next.

The Historical and Cultural Climate from which *Midrash* Developed

People of the Book

From the time period during and especially after the Captivity in Babylon (587 to 538 BC) the ways in which Jews understood their sacred Scripture changed dramatically. Once Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed the Jewish people were no longer a people with a centralized religious worship center or a people with a centralized worship cultus. All that had once represented the Jewish people and their religion now lay in ruins. What, then, was to replace it? This was the worst crisis that the Jewish faith had yet faced. How would these now scattered and captive peoples hold on to their Jewishness? Their response was deceptively simple: they became the people of the Book.¹⁸

Of course Scripture (*Torah*) had always played an important role in the Jewish people's religious identity prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The importance of the twice daily recitation of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9) is evidence enough of this. But Scripture was not always at the apex of the Jewish religious life prior to the Captivity. While the importance of the *Torah* was clearly recognized early on, the fact that much of the rest of Jewish Scripture was still at various stages of composition, collection and canonization—not to mention that some of it had not even been spoken or written yet—helped account for the relatively secondary position which Scripture, in fact, occupied. In contrast, it was the geographical center of Jerusalem and the physical structure of the

T*his was the worst crisis that the Jewish faith had yet faced. How would these now scattered and captive peoples hold on to their Jewishness?*

Temple—especially the latter—which stood in ascendancy, though even this cultic center was occasionally neglected. Indeed, King Josiah even had to rediscover the “Book of the Law” (commonly thought of as the book of Deuteronomy) during the course of the repairing of the Temple (621 BC), some 30 years before the ultimate destruction at the hands of the Babylonians (2 Kgs. 22:8-10; 2 Chron. 34:8-18). Obviously their Scripture, even the *Torah*, was not always important to the Jews.

The Captivity changed all of that. Now the only threads of commonality and corporateness in the lives of the Jewish people were the words of Scripture. As a result, a whole new way of handling Scripture began at this time, that is, writing down the various oral traditions that were not yet written down, collecting the various traditions, beginning the complicated canonization process, and so on.¹⁹ Going hand-in-hand with all of this was the placing of more emphasis upon the “correct” interpretation of the Scripture they already had, now for a new generation of exiled Jews with little understanding of the religious cultus prior to the Exile. Moreover, the role of the religious professional—one who could best offer the “correct” interpretation—subsequently took on increasing importance. One individual who represented this new religious role was Ezra.

Ezra was “a teacher [*sofer*] well versed in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6; cf. 7:11) who “had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Once back in Jerusalem he and his Levite associates “instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing

there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.” (Neh. 8:7-8; cf. 8:1-18)

By making the Scripture clear and giving it meaning, Ezra and the Levites were, in Bloch's words, actualizing the Law for the new immediate situation of these returned Jews.²⁰

Halakah and Haggadah

What Ezra and the Levites did in Jerusalem merely reflected what was being done to Scripture in other locations where Diaspora Jews lived: Scripture was being read and interpreted so that hearers could better understand what was being read in the context of the realities of their new living situations; this became a widespread practice. Eventually the oral handling of Scripture in this way led to the development of two different written collections of these oral interpretations: *halakah* and *haggadah*. Again, *halakah* refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the Old Testament legal material while *haggadah* refers to a discussion and/or commentary on the non-legal material.

Over the course of the centuries following the Captivity, collections of various *halakah* and *haggadah* sayings were made, collated, and eventually incorporated and expanded into the midrashic commentaries known as the Mishnah. Thus, by the first century AD, the interpretation of the Old Testament had become a crucial element of Jewish intellectual life, as Donald Juel notes:

Scholarly interpreters of the written tradition had largely replaced the priests as guardians of the heritage and experts on legal matters. They

had developed an elaborate hermeneutical mechanism with which to make sense of sacred texts, to fit them into a harmonious whole, and to apply them to the realities of life in the Greco-Roman world. Specific interpretive traditions had grown up, some with roots far back into the postbiblical era and beyond. Exegesis had become a primary mode of intellectual discourse.²¹

Why is the above discussion of *halakah* and *haggadah* relevant to the midrashic interpretation of the Old Testament by the writers of the New Testament? Precisely because some of the hermeneutical rules eventually underlying *halakah* and *haggadah* were also reflected in the hermeneutical methodology of *midrash*. That is why Bloch, in her fifth essential characteristic of *midrash*, mentioned earlier, speaks of *midrash halakah* and *midrash haggadah*. There was oftentimes overlap between *midrash* and *halakah* and/or *haggadah*.

While the final forms of the written collections of *halakah* and *haggadah* were actually collected and collated during the first five centuries of the common era, the actual rules guiding the formulations of the *halakah* and *haggadah* existed and were being revised during the years just prior to and/or during the writing and compiling of the New Testament corpus. Therefore, the rules that were formulated to guide *halakah* and *haggadah* were also known by the New Testament writers.

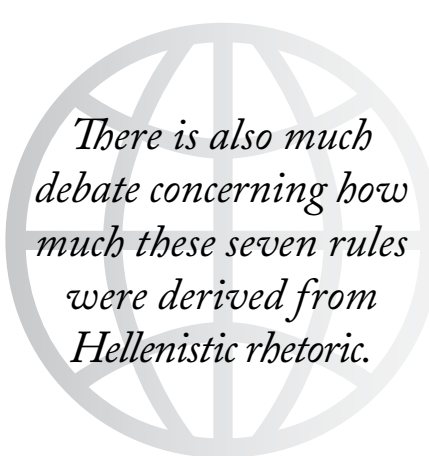
The Middoth

What were these interpretation rules? These exegetical rules, or *middoth* (*middot*), were instituted by the rabbi Hillel (60 BC to 20 AD?) around the year 30 BC. We do not know whether Hillel established these rules or merely transmitted them from someone else.²² There is also much debate concerning how much these seven rules were derived from Hellenistic rhetoric found in Alexan-

dria in the first century BC.²³ Some maintain that the *middoth* arose from the practical need of the Pharisees for authority. Since they lacked automatic religious status because of no proper heredity or professional training, the Pharisees had to develop their authority from some other means, in this case through elaborate interpretation rules.²⁴

Whatever their origin, Hillel's seven *middoth* had wide influence in Judaism in the first century AD and beyond.²⁵ These seven exegetical rules were as follows:²⁶

1. An inference drawn from a minor premise to a major and vice versa (*Kal wa-homer* = "light and heavy"). [In other



There is also much debate concerning how much these seven rules were derived from Hellenistic rhetoric.

words, what has been previously applied to a less important matter will certainly be applicable to a more serious matter.]

2. An inference drawn from analogy of expressions, that is from similar words and phrases elsewhere (*Gezera Shawa* = "an equivalent regulation").
3. A general principle established on the basis of a teaching contained in one verse (*Binyan Av mi-katuv 'ehad* = "constructing a leading rule from one passage").
4. A general principle established on the basis of a teaching contained in two verses (*Binyan Av mi-shenei ketuvim* = "con-

structing a leading rule from two passages").

5. An inference drawn from a general principle in the text to a specific example and vice versa (*Kelal u-ferat* = "general and particular" and *perat u-khelal*). [In other words, this is an attempt either to expand or to limit the inference.]
6. An inference drawn from an analogous passage elsewhere (*Kayotse bo mi-makom aber* = "something similar in another passage"). [In other words, an attempt to solve more difficult problems by comparing them with another passage in Scripture.]
7. An interpretation of a word or passage from its context (*Davar balamed me-inyano* = "explanation from the context").²⁷

The implications of these *middoth* for the apostle Paul's hermeneutical methods, as well as New Testament examples of their use, will be discussed in Sections 2 and 3. The purpose of including them here is again to attempt to identify a bit more clearly the overall historical and cultural climate out of which *midrash* developed. Having done this I want to briefly investigate the use of *midrash* in the speeches and letters of Paul. The apostle Paul's use of the Old Testament is especially important to analyze since he interpreted Scripture for both Jewish and Gentile audiences in the early Christian churches. We turn first to some examples of the use of *midrash* in the speeches of Paul found in the book of Acts.

Section 2: The Use of Midrash in the Speeches of Paul in Acts

Since the publication of H. St. J. Thackeray's *The Relation of St. Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought* in 1900, biblical scholars over the last one hundred years or so have observed that Paul's hermeneutical methodology was highly influenced by the

rabbinical interpretative techniques of his time.²⁸ By now this observation should not be surprising. These biblical scholars discovered what this article is trying to demonstrate: the apostle Paul was a product of the overall hermeneutical milieu of his day and age. As E. Earle Ellis notes concerning Paul and his Jewish hermeneutical background:

Without a doubt the apostle's understanding of the Old Testament was completely revolutionized after his conversion; nevertheless his Jewish heritage remained of fundamental importance for his understanding and use of the Bible. His reverence for and study of the Scriptures long preceded his knowledge of Christ. Reading habits, methodology, and hermeneutic norms were firmly implanted by his parents, his synagogue and most of all, his teacher of rabbinics—Gamaliel.²⁹

Paul is an excellent example of these Jewish hermeneutical influences for several reasons. First, the number of extant letters and writings of Paul that are found today in the New Testament contain a vast amount of material to examine. Second, Paul's writings were penned before the Gospels and Acts were written and, as a result, give good evidence of the hermeneutical methodology at use in the early Christian church. Third, Luke records several of Paul's speeches in Luke-Acts, still earlier evidence of Paul's use of the Old Testament. For these reasons the apostle Paul's use of the Old Testament in the New is critical to this study. His speeches and writings are especially good evidence for the use of *midrash* in the New Testament.

At the outset of this discussion of Paul's use of the Old Testament it must be stressed, once again, that Paul used many hermeneutical techniques in his speeches and writings. *Midrash* was not his sole choice. From the evidence to be presented shortly, however, it will be seen that Paul was intimately

Paul was intimately acquainted with several of the various facets of midrashic interpretative techniques used during the first century AD.

acquainted with several of the various facets of midrashic interpretative techniques used during the first century AD. What follows is a brief analysis of five examples of Paul's use of the Old Testament. In this first part, three examples are taken from Luke's record of Paul's first missionary speech recorded in Acts, and in the following article, two are taken from the writings of Paul himself.³⁰

Midrash in Paul's First Missionary Speech: Acts 13:16-41

In the thirteenth chapter of Acts, Luke recounts the beginnings of what is known today as Paul's first missionary journey. Here in 13:16-41 is found the first recorded missionary sermon delivered by Paul at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. After "the reading from the Law and the Prophets" had occurred the leaders of the synagogue invited Paul and Barnabas to give "a message of encouragement for the people" (13:15). Paul responds to the invitation with a message to these gathered "men of Israel and ... Gentiles who worship God" (13:16). In his response he includes several allusions to specific Old Testament events as well as several direct quotes.

Acts 13:22

After a lengthy summary of the mighty acts of God in the history of Israel from the time of the Exodus to the establishment of David as King (13:15-22), Paul ties it all together with words concerning Jesus. In Acts 13:22 he emphasizes the truth of his message with his first quote from the Old Testament:

After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'

In this Old Testament quotation Paul combines Psalm 89:20—"I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him"—with a phrase from the words spoken by the prophet Samuel to King Saul found in 1 Samuel 13:14: "But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him a leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command."

The original Scriptural contexts of both of these passages to which Paul refers would have doubtless been familiar to those present in the congregation that day. The context of the Psalm quote, observes F. F. Bruce, would have gotten their special attention:

These words of Ps. 89, recording the promises made by God to David, were written in a day when disaster had overtaken David's house, and the psalmist was bewildered by the contrast between the divine promises and the sorry sight that met his eyes—the crown of David profaned and cast to the ground. . . . In later days, however, when the sovereignty of the house of David seemed to have passed away for ever, so far as human agency was concerned, it came to be recognized that the promises made to David would be completely fulfilled in a ruler of David's line whom God would Himself raise up As the post-exilic centuries passed, and especially after the brief space of national independence under the Hasmoneans was followed by the Roman conquest, the longing for this messianic deliverer became more intense than ever.³¹

Thus, Paul here is quoting from these familiar contexts to build up to his preliminary conclusion in this first part of his speech.³² This conclusion immediately follows in 13:23: "From this man's

descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised.”

What kind of midrashic exegesis is Paul employing here? He is applying the familiar “that” of these biblical texts—especially Psalm 89—to the “this” situation of the coming of Jesus. Here Paul actualizes the biblical texts he quotes to clearly show that they are fulfilled in the person of Jesus, the Messiah.

Acts 13:32-36

The remainder of Paul’s speech to the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch centers on this person Jesus. After giving some historical background about Jesus, especially concerning his death and resurrection, Paul again quotes from the Old Testament, this time with explicit introductory statements. The text of Acts 13:32-36 reads

We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

‘You are my Son, today I have become your Father.’

The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words:

‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’

So it is stated elsewhere:

‘You will not let your Holy One see decay.’

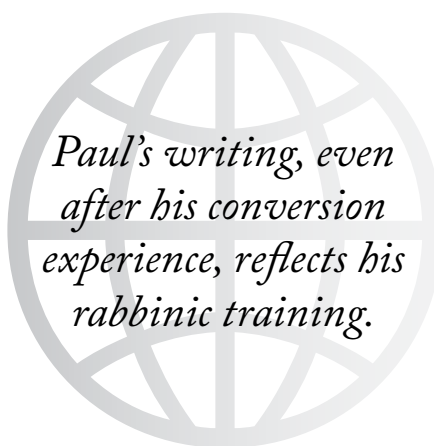
For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

This string of successive Old Testament quotes is taken from Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3, and Psalm 16:10, respectively. The two quotes from the Psalms are exact translations of the Masoretic text, while that from Isaiah is in a form similar to that found in the Septuagint.

What are the midrashic elements in this series of verses? These three Old

Testament quotes are being used according to the seven *middoth* of Hillel examined in Section 1. Since Hillel was either the father or grandfather of Gamaliel, Paul’s rabbinical teacher,³³ it is not surprising that Paul’s writing, even after his conversion experience, reflects his rabbinic training. As J. W. Doeve (1954, 175) comments:

... in the argument of Acts 13 the work of a schooled rabbi is quite perceptible. If one is familiar with the working methods of a rabbinic expositor and able to assess the value of this exegesis, then one can hardly deny that Acts 13 offers a sound and well-built argument, arresting by its exegetical ingenuity.³⁴



The exegetical rule of *Kal wa-homer* (light and heavy) is being used by Paul here in this section of his sermon. He does this by combining the Isaiah 55:3 phrase with the Psalms 16:10 passage by means of their common adjective ὁσιος. In its substantival form this word “can mean either “divine decrees” (τά ὅσια) as in Isaiah 55:3 or “holy one” (τον ὁσιον) as in Psalm 16:10.”³⁵ Thus, the first reference from Isaiah 55:3 is the “light” aspect of the *Kal wa-homer* exegetical rule and the reference from Psalm 16 is the “heavy” because of this common adjective. What has previously applied to a less important matter (Isaiah 55:3) will certainly be applicable to a more serious matter (Psalm 16:10). In other words, if it is

indeed true (as Paul has already clearly given evidence) that God raised Jesus from the dead, and this raised one without doubt has been given the holy and sure blessings previously promised to David, then it naturally follows that this Holy One will never see decay since this promise has also been clearly stated in God’s Word.

The other Old Testament text quoted earlier here in this section, Psalm 2:7, also gives evidence for the use of the *middoth* exegetical rules, but in this instance as *Gezera Shawwa* (an inference drawn from analogy). This exegetical rule makes the connections between Old Testament texts less obvious than the more explicit examples just examined. In this particular case Paul is most likely joining, by means of analogy, this Psalm 2:7 text with that found in 2 Samuel 7:14a: “I will be his father, and he will be my son.” As Longenecker explains it:

... 2 Samuel 7:6-16 undoubtedly formed the biblical basis for Paul’s historical résumé in Acts 13:17-22. And in Acts 13:33, the first explicit citation following that recitation of God’s dealings with his people, the apostle quotes from Psalm 2:7 Probably their union was originally based on the fact that they both portray God as speaking of “my son,” and on that basis (*gezerah shawah*) it was considered appropriate to treat them together (1975, 98).³⁶

Though this exegetical rule of analogy is not nearly as obvious as one might like it to be, there seems to be sufficient evidence for its use by Paul here relative to this quote from the second Psalm.³⁷

Acts 13:38-41

The last quotation used by Paul in his Pisidian Antioch synagogue speech is found in Acts 13:38-41:

Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of

Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'

Here Paul's reference to "the prophets" is actually a quotation of Habakkuk 1:5, taken from the Septuagint.³⁸ The original context of the Habakkuk quote concerns the imminent rise to world power of Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans as God's answer to the tyranny of the world by the Assyrians. The Chaldeans will deliver the world from Assyrian tyranny and all the nations of the world will be amazed.

The hermeneutical method underlying Paul's use of this quotation from Habakkuk is the "this is that" understanding inherent to the midrashic *pesher* style.³⁹ Paul pays scant attention to the details of the original Habakkuk context except for the theme of deliverance inherent in it. Paul, however, does not totally divorce the Habakkuk quotation from its original context. For the "this" is found in the overall deliverance context of Habakkuk 1:5, but now it is more completely revealed in light of the "that" context of the deliverance offered through Jesus Christ. According to Bruce, Paul applies Habakkuk 1:5 "to the new situation in which God is offering deliverance through the greatest of all His mighty works. Great as was the disaster that overtook those who ignored the warnings of the prophets, an even greater disaster will fall upon those who refuse the gospel."⁴⁰ It is imperative, then, for Paul's audience to realize that the deliverance now offered through Jesus Christ be given the hearing it justly deserves.

Preliminary Summary

These first two sections have attempted to show, however briefly, that the hermeneutical milieu of the first century AD was one that significantly influenced the apostle Paul and his own cognitive environment. It is not

The "two step" method we are so familiar with in our modern milieu was not the primary lens through which Paul interpreted Scripture when he preached.

surprising, then, that Paul used the methods from his own hermeneutical milieu in his speeches in Acts. The "two step" method we are so familiar with in our modern milieu was not the primary lens through which Paul interpreted Scripture when he preached. It's clear from Acts 13 alone that Paul's interpretive lenses were drawn from his hermeneutical milieu, in this case from *midrash* and the seven rules that guided Hillel, Gamaliel and the Pharisaic tradition. I hope this initial look at Paul's milieu will cause us to reconsider our assumptions about biblical interpretation as we use Scripture cross-culturally across our world today.

In Part Two I will continue this exploration of Paul's hermeneutical milieu by looking at some passages from his letter to the Romans. I will also introduce a few modern-day examples of non-Western indigenous Bible interpretational approaches that likewise arise directly from their own cognitive environments. I will then conclude with some practical applications for all Bible interpreters today. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ The strengths of this Two Step approach are several. This approach takes the Bible seriously and allows the biblical text to always take precedence over the world of the interpreter and his/her culture. The approach deals honestly with the context of the original text and attempts to understand as much as possible the original author's intended meaning. This approach looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the interpretation of the Bible throughout church history and learns from it. This approach takes the best of evangelical scholarship and uses it for better understandings of the biblical text and its context. The weaknesses of this Two Step approach are also several. This approach assumes the universal nature of western hermeneutical methods that may not necessarily be

applicable in all non-western contexts. This approach has grammatical-historical roots with a possible anti-God and anti-Bible bias. This approach is costly to implement and maintain (requiring books and libraries and/or access to them) and thus is oftentimes limited to more wealthy cultures. Furthermore, this approach is very complicated to learn; it assumes a high educational level and takes years of advanced training to effectively handle the approach. For a more thorough analysis of the weaknesses of the Two Step approach, especially in non-western cross-cultural situations, see my "Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context." *Journal of Asian Mission* 1:1, (1999), 21-43.

² Kevin Higgins, "Diverse Voices: Hearing Scripture Speak in a Multicultural Movement." *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 27:4, (Winter 2010), 189-196.

³ Cited in Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Second edition (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995), 46.

⁴ Higgins, "Diverse Voices," 190.

⁵ Higgins, "Diverse Voices," 191.

⁶ Higgins essentially agrees when he says that the reality is "that translation is itself an iterative, interpretive process," 191.

⁷ Note that what follows in Sections 1 through 4 is simply an attempt to paint in very broad strokes both the hermeneutical milieu of the first century AD as well as the apostle Paul's use of *midrash*. It does not presume in any way to be exhaustive. See the bibliographical references for more thorough discussions.

⁸ Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 37.

⁹ See Renée Bloch, "Midrash," trans. by Mary Callaway. In *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, ed. W. S. Green (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978). This major article by Bloch appeared posthumously in French in 1957. Bloch was one of the first proponents for studying *midrash* as a hermeneutical method.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹² Ibid., 31.

¹³ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32–33.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸ Again, what is described here has been greatly simplified. In actuality the answer of the Jewish people was simple but the process underlying the answer was incredibly complex.

¹⁹ Cf. Ibid., 34–36.

²⁰ Allowance, though, must be made for the possibility that this “making it clear and giving the meaning” may not have involved midrashic interpretation at all, but rather translation from Aramaic to the local dialect; cf. Geza Vermes, “Bible and Midrash: Early Jewish Exegesis,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible. From the Beginnings to Jerome*. Vol. 1, eds. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 201. The entire context of this passage, however, along with the several times it appears the interpretation was given—“making it clear,” “giving the meaning,” “so that the people could understand”—seems to imply more than mere translation. For a thorough analysis of the influence of Aramaic on Jesus and the New Testament church see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament*. Combined edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

²¹ Donald Juel, *Messianic Exegesis. Christological Interpretations of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988), 32.

²² Cf. J. W. Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics in the Synoptics and Acts* (Assen, NL: Van Gorcum, 1954), 61.

²³ 23. Cf. Daniel Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975), 112–115.

²⁴ Cf. Vermes, “Bible and Midrash,” 221. Possibly the *middoth* were the result of attempts to put some kind of limits upon the freer midrashic hermeneutical forms in vogue around this time period.

²⁵ Hillel’s seven *middoth* were later expanded by others to total a standardized 32 *middoth* by 160 AD.

²⁶ Quoted from Earl E. Ellis, “Biblical Interpretation in the New Testament,” in *Mikra, Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity. Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Assen, NL/Philadelphia, PA: Van Gorcum/Fortress, 1988), 699; bracketed

explanations are my own. For more details as well as numerous examples see Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, 66–75.

²⁷ Interestingly enough, this seventh *middoth* is a hermeneutical method that parallels to some extent some modern historical-critical hermeneutical techniques. Note, however, that though this *middoth* was readily available to the New Testament writers they seldom chose to use it.

²⁸ For a historical chronicling of various scholars’ understandings (since 1900) of this relationship between Paul and the rabbinical hermeneutical methods of his time see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, “Paul and Rabbinic Exegesis,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1981).

²⁹ Earl E. Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 38.

³⁰ With regard to the examples from Acts, while the probability of Luke’s redaction of these Pauline speeches to reflect Luke’s own overall theological agenda must be acknowledged, nevertheless the overall tenor of Paul’s hermeneutical methodology in these speeches is easily discerned.

³¹ F. F. Bruce, *The New International Bible Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 273–274.

³² Paul’s additional phrases, “son of Jesse” and “he will do everything I want him to do,” are inconsequential. They may merely be targumic comments upon the Old Testament texts or they could reflect the possibility that Paul (or the Pisidian Antioch congregation) had a text that included these phrases. Note that the longer phrase occurs in the Targum of Jonathan; cf. F. F. Bruce, “Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Acts,” in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne with Otto Betz (Grand Rapids, MI/Tubingen, WG: Eerdmans/Mohr, 1987), 72.

³³ See Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 33–34, n. 50, concerning sources for further debate over this issue. It is interesting to note that Paul’s teacher, Gamaliel—according to H. E. Dana and R. E. Glaze, Jr., *Interpreting the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1961), 19—“was broad-minded and considerate in his interpretation of the Law, having been characterized very much by the spirit of his grandfather. The remarkable liberality of his attitude may be seen in the fact that he studied and taught Greek literature and contended for the inherent rights and privileges of the Gentiles. He was, nevertheless, held in high regard by the Jews of his own and later generations . . .”; cf.

Henry M. Shires, *Finding the Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1974), 55–56.

³⁴ Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, 175.

³⁵ Concerning this linking of these two passages, Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 97, n. 63, observes that “Paul’s sermon in the synagogue to Diaspora Jews was probably delivered in Greek, so that such a play on the word ὁσιος would be midrashically understandable and fitting,”

³⁶ Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 98, following Doeve, *Jewish Hermeneutics*, 172.

³⁷ Note that this same text from Psalm 2:7 is used differently in the Synoptics, where it refers to the experience of the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus at the Jordan river (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; and Luke 3:22; cf. also Heb. 1:5, 5:5). This example underscores the fact that each New Testament interpreter’s own contextual situation determined his use of specific Old Testament texts.

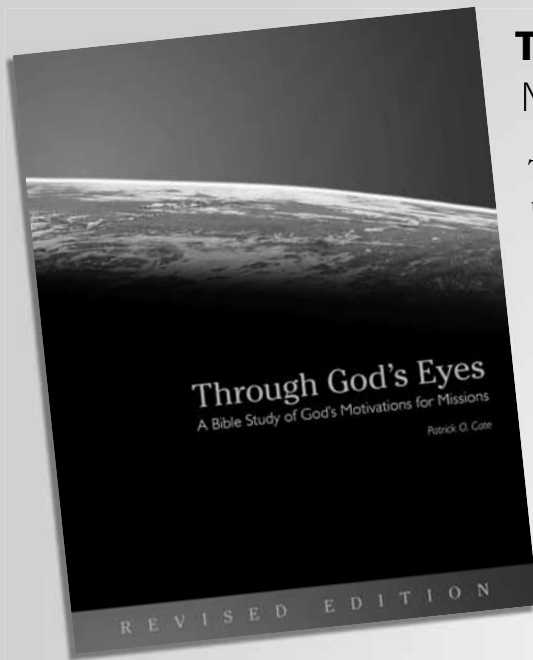
³⁸ The Septuagint differs from the Masoretic text when it substitutes “you scoffers” for “the nations” and adds “perish” (ἀφανίσθητε). However, the fact that Paul omits the phrase, which the Septuagint includes, may mean that Paul is using a text closer to the Masoretic text than is commonly thought (cf. Gleason L. Archer and G. C. Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament: A Complete Survey* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1983), 159. But note that the Qumran text of 1QpHab 2:1–10 presupposes the above substitution, thus offering further support for the Septuagint translation.

³⁹ Though not strictly following the ordinary *pesher* structure—in other words, the technical moniker, *pesher*, is not used by Paul—the context surrounding the use of this Habakkuk text clearly places the text in the realm of the theological purpose of midrashic *pesher*: a text which can now only be fully understood in relation to the present context.

⁴⁰ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 279.

WILLIAM CAREY LIBRARY

UPDATED CLASSICS



Through God's Eyes

Newly revised and updated edition!

This classic workbook features updated resources to help readers better understand the needs and growth of missions today. It also includes revised questions and suggestions for further reading for deeper reflection and understanding.

Through God's Eyes is an invaluable resource for those seeking to investigate God's passion for His world. This study guide is designed to bring us into the Word personally, help us discover inductively what God is saying, and gain a better sense of His direction for our lives. It can function as a personal Bible study, or as part of an introduction to missions or a biblical theology of missions course for a small group, Sunday school, college or seminary class.

ISBN: 978-0-87808-395-4

Patrick O. Cate

WCL | Pages 168 | Paperback 2012

List Price: \$18.99

Our Price: \$15.19

3 or more: \$10.44

On Being A Missionary

Newly revised and updated edition!

Dr. Hale's practical wisdom is here freely offered to the missionary-to-be and others interested in missions—wisdom hard-earned in Nepal on everything from calling to raising a missionary family to cross-cultural communication. Now revised to include perspectives on the realities of the changing missionary force and the challenges of bonding with a new culture in an increasingly globalized and technologically connected world, this edition of *On Being a Missionary* addresses current issues while maintaining the wit and warmth of the man who first challenged us with his perspectives on being a missionary.

ISBN: 978-0-87808-398-5

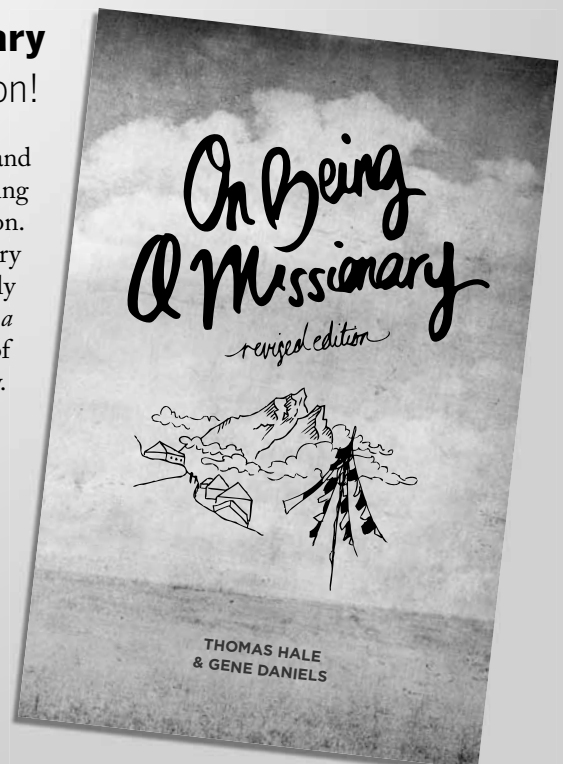
Thomas Hale and Gene Daniels

WCL | Pages 522 | Paperback 2012

List Price: \$21.99

Our Price: \$17.59

3 or more: \$12.09



www.missionbooks.org • 1-800-MISSION

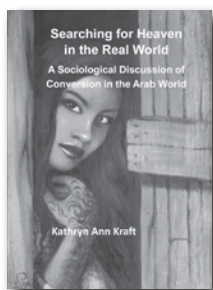
Book Reviews

Searching for Heaven in a Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World,

by Katherine Ann Kraft (Regnum Studies of Mission, Regnum Books International: Oxford, England, 2012)

—Reviewed by Brad Gill

Editor's note: Kraft's book was published in November 2012. It is appearing in the Summer 2012 issue due to production delays here at IJFM. We apologize for any inconvenience.



The last decade has seen a crescendo of studies on the nature of conversion, especially as it relates to Muslims who turn to Jesus.¹ Katherine Kraft's *Searching for Heaven in a Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World* adds one more voice to this discussion. Using the tools and methods of sociology

she explores the particular struggle of conversion in the countries of Lebanon and Egypt. Her analysis of over 30 individual narratives offers a more discerning look at the issues of identity faced by those who must negotiate the historic boundary that divides Muslim and Christian.

Kraft examines the contested and emotionally-laden term "conversion" in her first chapter. The academic paradigms of sociology, and all its technical jargon, cannot rescue her from employing the term "convert" as a term of designation for those within her study.

The phraseology of how to refer to [those in this study] is problematic. I have chosen thus far to use the most controversial of terms, convert, to refer to the group of people that has been the focus of this research, because of its basic definition of being a break with something about one's past, a turning. I have used this term with the awareness that many readers of this book may deeply dislike it, but I recognize that there is no label that will please all groups. It remains that convert is the most theoretically descriptive word to use (p. 97).

She realizes that underneath the term convert is a broad range of meanings, and her objective is to reveal the deeper nuances of meaning and identity that emerge when Muslims embrace the Christian faith in an Islamic context. On page after page, she offers conversion narratives that blend the rational and the relational, the emotional and intellectual, the passive and the active. Some converts think it requires a complete break with Islam, while for others it

could never mean a total break with their Islamic context. Amidst the diversity Kraft locates general tendencies that many have long suspected to be the case, for example the observation that "most converts gave up on Islam long before considering an alternative faith." She balances the diversities and similarities of these narratives, seeing patterns in how they reject the old and embrace the new. Those in ministry among Muslims may find these narratives familiar, but it's Kraft's sociology that brings a new order to the range of meanings in conversion.

Kraft spends an early chapter on her methodology ("The Perfect Researcher"), and anyone serving cross-culturally could learn much from her approach. This is one of the first studies to make public what has been a very sensitive and security-ridden subject (she withholds names except for the countries of Lebanon and Egypt). The reader can see how her qualitative and "open-ended narrative interview" style fits such a context. She recognizes the position of power she has as a Westerner, and the greater degree of access granted her as a woman. Her approach requires reflexivity, collaboration and the trust of her interviewees if she as an "outsider" is going to hear clear voices on such a difficult personal subject. Her approach is a warm and refreshing escape from the more cerebral Islamic-Christian apologetics that typically surround our discussion of conversion. The value of her "co-producing fieldwork" and "collaborative advocacy" is not confined to research but would benefit anyone serving in the Muslim world.

Each section of the book is organized around a "piece of heaven" that these converts are searching for when they turn to Christ. Chapters 3 and 4 develop the world they are coming from, that is, the mindset and values that have rooted them in an Islamic setting. Chapters 5 and 6 deal more with the expectations of the convert, "the preexisting image of Christianity that they bring into conversion, the community they are looking for, and the identity they are seeking to develop" (p. 16). Kraft spends a lot of her book illustrating how these personal dreams of following Christ are negotiated, tempered, disappointed, adjusted and reformulated. It's a dizzying variety of personal narratives around very common dreams and expectations. They're "searching for heaven in a real world," a world in which they must negotiate a new identity for themselves, with their spouse, with their family and in their community.

Faces kept coming to mind as I read. I was forced again and again to reconsider the journey of Muslims I had known who had turned to Jesus. Kraft was able to capture how they sifted and sorted their place in an Islamic context quite distant from her sample. Whether a convert chooses to remain inside or to face the painful realities of expulsion, Kraft helps us appreciate that each and every one is working

I have used this term with the awareness that many readers ... may deeply dislike it, but I recognize that there is no label that will please all groups. It remains that convert is the most theoretically descriptive word to use. (p. 97)

unceasingly to fashion a new identity; there's nothing automatic about it. Obtaining a piece of heaven is tough in their real world. She forced me to recall the nervous energy of those young believers I had known who had to carefully navigate the straits between two historic monotheisms.

Kraft handles her tools of sociology with refreshing deftness. The reader is almost unaware of how academic departments of sociology might mock such an innocent study of evangelical conversion. She's gone where angels fear to tread, but in so doing, she's been able to bring a new vantage point for understanding the complexity of *religious identity* (or "socio-religious" identity). I first heard Kraft present these perspectives at a consultation this past summer. It immediately became evident how helpful her sociological applications were to a wide spectrum of contexts across the Muslim world. While Kraft's book operates within the sociology of religion, she gets her points across without any of us gagging on technical jargon.

In chapters 3 and 4, Kraft introduces what she believes are the two most influential socio-religious concepts that shape how Muslims map out their new identity in Christ. *Tawhid* (unity) and *Ummah* (religious community) are distinct yet complimentary Islamic notions that shape converts' views of where they are from and where they are going in their conversion experience. Their Islamic experience establishes certain expectations that then shape how they approach their new identity with the community of Christ (read 'church'). They can idealize a "perfect community" (*ummah*) that integrates their lives in "perfect unity" (*tawhid*) as new followers of Christ. This is where Kraft begins to introduce *cultural* notions that hide silently in the mind of a new convert, worldview notions that map their expectations, notions that are not immediately eliminated as new identities are formed in Christ. This cultural (religious) lag may be hard to admit for those of us with an evangelical sense of "new creation," that the old ways must completely pass away; yet, Kraft's more objective sociological approach frees her to honestly "call a spade a spade," to isolate those cultural and religious notions that indeed do get dragged along in conversion.

Kraft includes other cultural notions from the Arab world in her study (i.e., kinship/blood relations, honor/shame, *dhimmitude*/minority and gender/sexuality). She maintains that family, tribe and society are the primary audience of these converts, and she skillfully incorporates the insights

of social anthropology so that we can appreciate how culture influences their conversion experience. As an example, she states that

While indeed many factors are at play in addition to honor, honor is nonetheless of key importance. This may be more true for converts than for other citizens, since they want to present a good image of who they are in their new identity. Pierre Bourdieu reflected that an honor-based sentiment is mostly found in societies where relationships with others take precedence over relationship with oneself. While this may not be true about converts, most of them are eager that they at least continue to demonstrate respect for the community, both for their own reputation and for the good of the community (p. 85).

At times I felt she was dealing with these themes too quickly and without any real anthropological depth. But, admittedly, there's already an abundance of anthropological studies on the Arab world, and specifically on negotiating identity,² but almost nothing on this subject of conversion. Enter Kraft, whose work is able to synthesize cultural insights around conversion. Her social models, like Goffman's treatment of ambivalence and stigma, or Durkheim's classic study of anomie, provide a new catalyst for cultural themes. Admittedly, she's woven her study around the interpersonal, the social dynamic. She expects you'll need to go elsewhere if you demand a comprehensive study of the worldview and culture of these Arab converts.

Her final chapter on "Perfect Identity" is the prime objective of her entire study, that "actually, all of the issues discussed thus far are part of the complicated processes of identity negotiation." Her entire book has made it very clear "that religious identity is not one single concept," and it's in this concluding chapter that she introduces new conceptual categories for understanding how identity is organized in the life of a convert. She basically divides identity into three dimensions, namely, the *core*, the *social* and the *collective*. Each new believer will move between these three dimensions as they try to walk with integrity, but it's the latter, the collective, which receives much of her focus. This collective sense of belonging is where she believes *tawhid* and *ummah* play such a vital role, but she's careful to suggest that "religious affiliation is not the same as collective identity." Her sample makes it clear that religion "does not mean the same thing to everyone affiliated with the same religion." It could mean "a sense of the divine, beliefs, ritual, community involvement, family, and atti-

tude towards co-religionists in the rest of the world.” Her research captures this individualized parsing of religion as each convert brokers a new sense of belonging.

And she doesn’t ignore the present influence of globalization in how converts shuffle core, social and collective identity. It’s getting tougher and tougher to hold to stable and singular identities as pluralism increases across these Islamic societies. She deploys a theory (symbolic interactionism) that provides “a model for how someone can simultaneously hold and maintain more than one identity, especially in a globalized context where people are balancing more and more roles at a given time.” But she admits that this theory hits the wall with Islam, for it “rarely assumes that different roles might exclude each other, or be in direct conflict with each other.” Conversion in the Islamic world seems to defy theory. In the end, Kraft expects converts to share that modern tendency to “want to individually choose their collective identity and how they will individually associate to it.”

Kraft ventures further in organizing all her data. She doesn’t leave us with a fragmented array of different conversion narratives. She offers three additional strategies that converts use to weld an identity in the interface between Muslim and Christian. Using recent insights from immigrant studies, she moves us beyond the idea that a convert is simply assimilating new aspects of another religious world. She likes the concept of “adhesion” and the way it pictures a new believer gluing different aspects of the old and new around a newfound faith. I won’t steal her thunder, because I want you to buy the book, so I’ll leave any further description to her.

Suffice it to say, this final analysis will be helpful for any and every religious and cultural context, not just a Muslim one. Having watched Kraft interact with Muslim background believers, I’m convinced that Kraft offers a new framework in which believers from very difficult religious contexts can begin to discuss how to authentically walk “in Christ.” And she’s given us a spectacular tool for opening up fruitful discussion among those with hardened opinions concerning “insider movements” and how new believers handle their religious context. This is a “must read” in frontier missiology.

Endnotes

¹ See David Greenlee’s edited compendium of contributions from across the Muslim world on this subject of conversion, *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way: Journeys of Faith* (Authentic Books, 2005).

² For an excellent study of how identity and culture interact in a Muslim context, I’d recommend Lawrence Rosen’s *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community* (University of Chicago, 1984).

The Necessity of Field Research

—by Bradford Greer, PhD

Editor’s Note: In the paragraphs that follow, Bradford Greer builds and expands upon his review (IJFM 28:4) of Doug Coleman’s PhD dissertation (A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives), and especially Coleman’s response to that review (IJFM 29:1). Readers would do well to read Greer’s comments with this earlier interaction in mind.

Doug Coleman’s response to my review of his dissertation (IJFM 29:1) appears to validate my fundamental concern that he carried into his research certain assumptions of which he was, and apparently, remains incognizant.

I find the assumption that one can enter into a meaningful missiological-theological discourse about the theological positions of insiders when only working from articles—and not from data derived from interaction with actual believing communities)—problematic. Theology is supposed to be done in context. It is all too tempting to be Platonic in one’s approach to doing theology. At such a vantage point it is easy to develop an intricate, well-crafted, theological system. Coleman has done an excellent job in doing this, crafting a well-thought through theological position with intricate nuances. However, what the church has seen over and over again is that well-crafted systems of theological thought do not necessarily transfer well into real contexts.

This is why I initially was surprised at Coleman’s lack of interaction with hermeneutics in his dissertation. Whether Coleman realizes it or not, he reads and interprets Scripture from his cultural vantage point, not the cultural vantage point of insiders. Therefore, his analysis is not a dialogical engagement with insiders in how they contextualize their theology because he has not interacted with them. Thus, his analysis is more of an internal dialogue with those believers who share his contextual experiences of the world.

Coleman feels that his life experiences as a missionary qualify him to engage in the discussion; however, this is a flawed assumption. Field research fills in the gaps of one’s experiences because one’s experiences are often filtered through one’s own cultural grid. Field research provides data that enables researchers to challenge or validate their assumptions and perspectives. Without field research, missiological analysis often yields to circular reasoning or “motivated reasoning.” Motivated reasoning is crafting an argument to support a viewpoint to which one has a prior commitment. Thus, Coleman’s analysis is potentially ideological rather than missiological.

Without field research, missiological analysis often yields to circular reasoning or “motivated reasoning,” rather than providing informative missiological analysis.

Coleman's lack of engagement with hermeneutics and the impact of culture and context on theologizing reinforces my assertion that he adopts a naive realistic epistemological approach to his theologizing. He may, as he asserts, take a critical realistic approach to culture, but this critical realism doesn't seem to have crossed over and impacted his approach to theologizing.

With regard to essentialism, Coleman asserts that in his ten years on the field he noticed diversity among Muslims with regard to beliefs and practices, and the meaning of those practices. However, it appears that he has failed to recognize the significance of this diversity. I too failed to recognize this for many years. This is where one's essentialist assumptions impact perspective and theologizing. In the West, South, and East, we see a remarkable diversity in beliefs and practices and the meaning of these practices among those who identify themselves as Christian. If believers in Jesus can remain as yeast within traditionally non-evangelical socio-religious communities, such as Roman Catholic or liberal Protestant, then why can Muslim insiders not remain as yeast within their socio-religious communities as followers of Jesus? And if they potentially can remain within their socio-religious communities, then how do they remain? In what religious practices do insiders actually participate? What do they believe about these practices? How do they view these practices in the light of Scripture? These questions are left unanswered because Coleman's analysis is based upon articles and not upon the actual beliefs and practices of a community of insiders.

Therefore, when Coleman asserts in his dissertation and in his response that Muslims and insider believers are likely praying to another god if they pray at a mosque, this is because his essentialist view of Islam has already defined to whom they are praying and pre-ascribed meaning to their praying. Muslims and insider believing communities apparently cannot have a different understanding of God than his essentialist understanding of Islam has ascribed to them. Now, this does not mean that Coleman is inaccurate in his perception. He may well be right. However, the IMP articles assert otherwise. The conundrum that I as a missiologist face is that I cannot know if Coleman is right without actual data collected from insider communities. This is why field research is an integral component of missiological analysis. The way I see it, with his dissertation and this response, the discussion is reduced down to his

viewpoint over against the viewpoint of the IMP articles. This doesn't appear to me to advance the discussion.

This leaves me where I began before I read his dissertation or his response. I remain ill informed as to what actually is happening within insider movements and as to what they actually believe. Dr. Coleman's theologizing was good; yet, it was non-contextual. Therefore, I see it as circular reasoning. It appears that he ended in his thinking where he began because he did not interact with any additional cultural contexts. Field experience does not qualify as field research. Field experience can strengthen one's field research, but it does not qualify as a substitute.

Please allow me to clarify my position. I am not an insider proponent. I did not write any of the articles that Coleman analyzed in his dissertation. Unlike Dr. Coleman, I am open to insider ideas because the missiological theory behind them makes insider activity appear viable and there *appears* to be theological justification for such activity as long as it remains within given biblical boundaries. I cannot know any of this for sure without actual data from the field. Thus, I am simply a missiologist in search of solid information that helps the discussion move forward. **IJFM**

In Others' Words

Editor's note: In this section, we report on two meetings that occurred in November 2012, which would not be possible in a Summer 2012 issue were it not for production delays. We hope you enjoy the fresh report and we apologize for any inconvenience.

Ethnê to Ethnê

Ethnê to Ethnê is the only global forum focused on frontier missions, and they hold a gathering every three years (the first two took place in 2006 and 2009 in Indonesia and Columbia respectively). In November 2012, around 400 from the network met in Seoul, Korea. Most of the delegates were practitioners from various frontier mission contexts. A unique contribution of the Ethnê gathering is that indigenous believers from frontier fields were invited to participate and speak into the network. The focus of the 2012 meeting was on a new strategy to develop what are being called "Ephesus Teams" for major unreached peoples and people clusters. The idea behind these teams is to create a virtual hub for cooperation—a landing place, so to speak, where new players can be brought in who are committed to the same vision. In contrast with a network or partnership, which may have a more general purpose and are usually more relational in nature, these teams have the singular focus of working together on an ongoing basis to see a church-planting and disciple-making movement take place. They are nonetheless "virtual teams" with no direct "command and control," though they may have one or more facilitators. The strength of the concept is that it allows a common strategy to be developed and owned across multiple ministries. The weakness is obviously that virtual teams tend to struggle in areas of communication and accountability. One answer to this is that some teams are beginning to use social-networking software with a project-management component. Examples of such software are Podio and Wrike. For more information on Ethnê to Ethnê, see www.ethne.net.

Global Network of Mission Structures

Following the Ethnê meeting, the Global Network of Mission Structures held a roundtable discussion to look at priorities for 2013. The purpose of the GNMS is to be a global-level forum for cooperation between mission sending agencies. The following projects were proposed for the next two to three years:

1. **Resource Sharing Survey**—An annual online survey of 2,000 mission agencies, looking at what agencies have to offer to one another and what their needs are.
2. **Global Directories Project**—A crowd-sourcing online tool that will enable mission agencies, mission

training programs, mission leaders and mission resource providers to update their information.

3. **Global Strategy Study Groups**—15 strategy evaluation task forces that will annually review global progress in particular areas of mission work and make recommendations to the mission community.
4. **Global Engagement Survey**—An annual survey of missionary engagement among 4,000 indigenous unreached peoples and 30,000 population segments, conducted by regional and national engagement task forces/committees.
5. **Global Mission Journal**—An online professional mission journal and international committee of editors that will assist non-Western mission leaders in articulating in English their perspectives on current global mission trends and strategies.
6. **Light the Window Prayer Campaign**—Coordination of prayer updates from the field among unreached peoples in the 10/40 Window, and crowd-sourcing the translation of those updates.
7. **Virtual University Consortium**—An online virtual university that will enable mission training programs to upload their courses into a common system for use by missionaries and missionary candidates around the world.
8. **Agency Management Tool**—Development of an online tool that will feature modules for financial accounting, donor management, ministry tracking, etc.

Beyond these collaborative projects, one of the primary purposes of the GNMS is to assist emerging mission structures, including both national and regional mission associations, as well as non-Western denominational mission departments. In this connection, several projects were discussed, including a special meeting in Ghana for developing national mission associations in Africa. More information about the GNMS can be found at www.gnms.net. **IJFM**

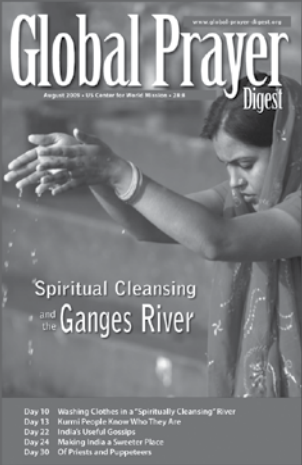
IJFM
Perspectives
 On the World Christian Movement

Whether you're a Perspectives instructor, student, or coordinator, you can continue to explore issues raised in the course reader and study guide in greater depth in **IJFM**. For ease of reference, each **IJFM** article in the table below is tied thematically to one or more of the 15 Perspectives lessons, divided into four sections: Biblical (B), Historical (H), Cultural (C) and Strategic (S). *Disclaimer: The table below shows where the content of a given article might fit; it does not imply endorsement of a particular article by the editors of the Perspectives materials.* For sake of space, the table only includes lessons related to the articles in a given **IJFM** issue. To learn more about the Perspectives course, visit www.perspectives.org.

Related Perspectives Lesson and Section

	Lesson 4: Mandate for the Nations (B)	Lesson 5: Unleashing the Gospel (B)	Lesson 7: Eras of Mission History (H)	Lesson 9: The Task Remaining (H)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
A Further Look at Translating "Son of God" Michael LeFebvre and Basheer Abdulfadi (pp. 61-74)	X				X		X
Living Letters: The Arabic Script as a Redemptive Bridge in Reaching Muslims Murray Decker and Abdu Injiiru (pp. 75-82)			X	X	X		
Bible Translation and Small Languages in the Pacific: Ten Years Later Karl J. Franklin (pp. 83-89)				X	X	X	
Part I: Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots: Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today Larry W. Caldwell (pp. 91-100)		X			X		

Articles in IJFM 29:2



Today **73,000**
people around the world will
pray for a specific
unreached
people group.

you
can join
them!

Have You Heard of the U.S. Center for World Mission's **Global Prayer Digest (GPD)**? The same organization that produced the *Perspectives* class has also produced a daily prayer guide for unreached people groups and strategic mission efforts.

It's in four different languages, and used by 73,000 people. The smallest language edition is English, followed by Spanish and Chinese. The largest edition is in Korean.

For free downloads, go to:
globalprayerdigest.org

For subscription: (626) 398-2249 or subscriptions@uscwm.org
 \$12/year for 12 issues within the United States.

*Immerse yourself
in the MENA region*

- MRel -

Master of Religion

in Middle Eastern
and North African Studies

Master of Religion in Middle Eastern and North African Studies (MRel in MENA Studies). A program for global Christian leaders from inside and outside the Arab world.

**Launching October 2012 in
Beirut, Lebanon!**

The **MRel** in MENA Studies is firmly established in Bible and theology, addressing the most pressing issues of the MENA region. Its flexible, distributed-learning model (combining both distance and residential components), is ideally suited for full-timers in work, ministry or language learning.

The MRel will provide an excellent entry into relief and development work, interfaith and inter-church engagement, and advocacy and peace-building.

The program will equip you with the skills for cultural analysis and needs assessment, project design, peace-building, constructive interfaith and inter-church engagement, and the development of culturally-appropriate frameworks of ministry.

The MRel in MENA Studies is a program of the Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES), at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Beirut, Lebanon.



MRel@abtslebanon.org

+961 4 400250/ ext. 287

P.O. Box 60 Mansourieh

Maten - Lebanon