

‘with’.” The other grammatically possible meaning, “committing adultery against the second woman” is almost nonsense, since there is nothing in the context to show whether the second woman was married or single. What is certain is that the idea of a man committing adultery against his wife has no parallel in ancient Jewish writings. Jesus’ teaching at this point seems to be revolutionary. Modern translations are therefore right to make the phrase clear by adding some such phrase as “against his wife” (GNB) or (especially in languages which have the same word for “wife” and “woman”) “against his first wife” (German common language translation).

As far as they go, these samples confirm the tendency of all but the most detailed commentaries (and sometimes even these!) to ignore points which matter to translators, so that translators still need handbooks designed to meet their particular needs. The pioneer Handbook on Mark contains some features which later Handbooks have rightly discarded (especially the division between exegetical and textual notes), but it remains a valuable and practically useful tool. Some problems, however, remain unsettled; there are points on which even experts continue to differ; and more recent translators have come up with ideas which might be more widely shared. There may therefore be a case, some day, for a revised edition of the Handbook on Mark. It is not likely, however, to be a high priority, as long as so many books, especially of the Old Testament, have no handbook at all. Meanwhile the Mark Handbook has recently been reprinted, and will continue to be well used. It is not worn out yet!

JESUS, SON OF GOD—A TRANSLATION PROBLEM

SOME FURTHER COMMENTS

The article “Jesus, Son of God—a translation problem” which was published in the October 1977 issue of The Bible Translator invited readers to let us have their comments in response to the suggestions made in it. We have received comments from two people, which we are happy to print here.

The fullest comments have come from Mr. Matt Finlay, who has spent some 25 years working as a missionary in the Singapore–Malaysia–Indonesia region. Commenting on the original article (in which he is quoted) he writes: I have read this article with interest, and see it as an honest attempt to deal with a very difficult problem. Yet I feel that it raises new problems in trying to solve old ones. I would like to set out my thoughts on several important points.

1. Every Muslim from the Grand Mufti to the most ignorant peasant knows that the Bible calls Jesus “the Son of God”. To produce a version in which this most controversial term has been removed would create an uproar. One of the most common accusations against Christians by Muslims is that we

have corrupted our Scriptures. Ahmadiyah writers have made astonishing claims that the many changes in the RSV were made because Muslim writers had exposed deliberately false translations in the AV (KJV). Thus to delete SON OF GOD from our New Testament would lay us open to further charges of changing our Text because we know and now admit that the Bible is corrupt.

2. In dealing with the Malay term *Anak Allah* the writers state that *anak* means "child" in the sense of a very immediate physical relation to the parent. This is not necessarily so. In Malay usage there are many cases where a special relationship is meant, rather than a literal child-parent relationship. Instances which spring to mind are *anak panah* ("son of the bow" meaning "arrow"), *anak perahu* ("son of the boat" meaning "sailor"), *anak Shaitan* ("son of Satan" or "wicked person"), *anak roda* ("son of the wheel" meaning a "spoke"). These and many others refer to a connection of one kind or another, and in this usage the addition of the "male" term is not required, as stated in the article under consideration.

3. However these two points are not the basic problem. The *real* problem is not *Anak*, but *Allah*. The two words by definition are opposed to each other, and cannot be used together. The writers of the article are doubtless correct in their quotation from the Koran (Sur 112) where *Allah* is defined as One Who cannot have children or enter into any relationship with anything or anyone which would conflict with His essential oneness. Because *Allah* is the Arabic name of the God of Islam, Muslims have every right to insist on its being used in accordance with Islamic theology. For this reason, I personally cannot agree that Allah is the God I worship.

Having said that, we all admit that every previous and existing translation in Malay has used *Allah* and it would now be a very difficult thing to change. So, as in many other languages and cultures, the strife goes on over the basic term for the God of the Bible. *Allah* means one thing to a Christian but a very very different thing to a Muslim; and of course it is *their* word, and we have no right to try to re-mould their words to suit our theology—which to the most learned as well as the most ignorant Muslim, is quite impossible to understand. For this reason, I was bold enough to suggest very early in the present Malay translation project, that we abandon the word *Allah* and introduce a new term. For instance, to use *Elohim* (or one of the other Hebrew names) would be an attempt to break the deadlock on the basis that a word which means nothing is preferable to a word which carries the wrong meaning. To say to a Muslim that Jesus Christ is the *Anak Elohim* might well bring the response, "Who is Elohim?". To this our reply could be "He is the God revealed in the Bible, and He Himself used the term to describe the relationship between Himself and Jesus". If such an idea were to be introduced, we would have a situation where our terms invite a question, and do not immediately offend because *Anak* and *Elohim* are not opposed to each other. Being free from direct offensive values, we might find that the words which mean nothing would stimulate discussion, giving the Christian the opportunity of explaining our understanding of the term, which is far removed from the "father-mother-son" idea which is as offensive to Christians as it is to Muslims.

4. The alternative suggested by the writers of the article, "One who is like Allah", is, I fear, as offensive theologically as "Son of Allah". Again, by Muslim definition, Allah cannot be likened to anything. Al Ghazali's treatise on this subject could be summed up by saying that if there is anything that human minds can think of, then Allah is definitely *not like that!* How then can we tell the Muslims that Jesus is "like Allah"?

5. The suggestion made by the writers, that a term like *Abdi Allah* could be used, does not commend itself to me for the following reasons:

- (a) It could be easily misunderstood as a simple personal name, common in Islamic lands. (Abdullah is the name frequently given to a convert to Islam.)
- (b) Even if it were understood as a title, it has such a broad meaning that it would fail to convey the quality of a special relationship which we associate with the Biblical term "Son of God".

6. Even if some equivalent could be found to translate the meaning of the term, we would still find a problem in dealing with associated terms like "the Son" and "The Father".

7. So I do not think we can dismiss the basic issue simply as a "translation problem". It is really a matter of theology. The Muslim glories in the fact that "Islam has no mysteries". By contrast, the N.T. presents the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and so on, which Christians do not understand, but accept by faith because they are revealed in Scripture. Thus, however difficult it may be for us in meeting Muslims, keeping terms like "Son of God" and "Son of Man" is a lesser danger than eliminating them. To explain them away by using sub-Christian terms does nothing to help the Muslim; and it might do damage which cannot be repaired by making the deepest mysteries of the Faith seem to be nothing more than a use of words to describe Jesus as one of the best of men who entered into a special relationship with God. Since God, in His infinite wisdom, took the "calculated risk" of revealing these mysteries in His Word in very inadequate language, can we expect to evangelise Muslims in words which reduce the basic content without overcoming the problem? The problem simply stated is that the Christian tries to convey ideas which are hard to understand in totally inadequate language. I personally feel, that whatever form of words we use, we can never explain clearly the mystery of the nature of Christ. This must remain a matter for faith through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. While I would not want to argue with scholars on the origin and background of the terms "Son of Man" and "Son of God", it seems clear to me that, whether in the setting of Hebrew or Greek thought, they were originally and they still are open to serious misunderstanding by Jews, pagans and Muslims. Thus I suggest that both terms should be kept as literally as translation permits, as part of the biblical revelation, leaving it to the Holy Spirit to give enlightenment to the reader.

8. I fully endorse the view put forward by the writers of the article, that we can and should be very selective, in presenting to Muslims those portions of

Scripture which make the greatest impact upon the mind of the reader concerning who Christ is, without focussing attention on the difficulties, until the sense of wonder grows into a willingness to learn the mystery of Christ.

Some further comments, which relate as much to Finlay's comments as to the original article, have come from Dr. Lamin O. Sanneh, Lecturer in Islamics at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, who was formerly a Muslim himself. He says: I think it would be wrong to produce one Bible for the Muslims and another for the Christians. There is only one Bible, which comes in many languages, and which God has used to give people a knowledge of Himself. There was a time when people had access to the Bible only through their own language, but an increasing number are now able to read it in one or other of the Western languages. This means that a translation which has been "adjusted" to appeal to a particular group is likely to be noticed a little bit more now than it was before.

Translating into Arabic would involve as many problems, I would have thought, as translating out of Hebrew (with which it is related). Furthermore, some of the most important Arabic linguists were themselves Christians who used Arabic as a *lingua franca* (a means of communicating with people who speak a different native language). Today these Christians in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, and other countries lead a rich devotional life based on the use of Arabic. And their word for God would be *Allah*.

I am moved but not entirely convinced by Finlay that the main issue is one of theology. Theology is language, or at least it cannot be separated from language. The distinction should be made elsewhere, I think, namely between language for *evangelization* and conversion and principles of *translation*. The requirements for good translation are not necessarily those which make for sound conversion. Furthermore Scripture serves a much wider group of people than just those who are enquirers. Its rich and unique description of God's encounter with his people has both won people who did not know him and sustained those who do already know him. The greatness of the Bible is proved both by its evangelizing power and by its strengthening power, as is shown in the tradition of study and worship it has sustained throughout Christian history.

NOTES

Hebrews 7.11 and 8.6: a suggestion for the translation of *nenomothetētai epi*

Perhaps the most important theme in the letter to the Hebrews is its comparison between the old order and the new order, the old covenant and the new covenant, the old priesthood and the new priesthood, the old promises and the new promises. With Jesus Christ, a new and better order has begun. He is the new high priest, who has arranged a new covenant which is better than the old one made between God and his people at the time of the exodus.