

EDITORIAL:

CHURCH PLANTING AMID THE DIVERSITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

On Easter Sunday this year I had the privilege of participating in four gatherings of believers, in Morocco. Each gathering brought back precious memories of the decade we spent living and ministering there. They also brought together, *in one day*, many of the themes and issues covered in *Seedbed* in this issue.

Arriving just before dawn Easter morning, I joined some fifty members of the International Church, believers from numerous nations, who gathered together outside the ancient walls of a ruined citadel to worship together and celebrate the resurrection. Then, most of us joined others in the pastor's home to have breakfast and fellowship for a couple of hours before the formal service later that morning. Then, I joined perhaps 200 worshippers from more than twenty-five nations for a joyous Easter service with the International Church. Shortly after, I joined perhaps a hundred local Moroccan believers as they gathered together in a park to celebrate Easter for most of the day.

Though I had been part of both church groups more than a decade ago, I knew surprisingly few people in either group. In the case of the International Church, this was because most of the people I had known had long since left the country. In the second case, the gathering of Moroccan believers was full of children, youth and adults who were not yet believers when we left the country in 1998, and so I knew only perhaps a dozen of the believers gathered in joyous celebration.

My Easter Sunday illustrates the experience of church planters who live in large cities across the Arab world. Part of their week is spent with Christians from around the world that belong to the local International Church, and the rest of their week is spent living and working among locals and expatriates at work and in their neighbourhoods. In various ways, each of the articles in this issue of *Seedbed* explores how church planting actually works. Some of the writers call for more integration between International Church believers and expatriate church planters, while others suggest that such integration is either extremely difficult to pull off, or irrelevant to our central church planting task.

It is my hope and prayer that this issue of *Seedbed* will renew your vision and help sustain your faith. May you continue with joy in the various tasks that God has called you to as you help see healthy churches reproducing among the Muslim peoples of the Arab world and beyond.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: A CRITIQUE OF ABDULFADI'S 'MODERN ARABIC TRANSLATIONS'

(Abdulfadi's article was published in Seedbed, 2008, Vol. XXII, No. 2, 7-20)

By Sharon Warner

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Ambitiously addressing issues that pertain to many disciplines including theology, exegesis, and linguistics, Abdulfadi uses a theological lens 'to consider the various translations on the basis of their clarity in communicating the deity of Christ,' by 'review(ing) the main passages in both the Old and the New Testaments that bear witness to the deity of Christ, and consider(ing) carefully what each translation communicates.'

I appreciate and share Abdulfadi's strong concern that translations of scripture clearly communicate the deity of Christ. Additionally, some of the questions he raises regarding how key Biblical terms are rendered in Arabic are excellent questions to ask. However, the usefulness of his article and the validity of its conclusions are limited by his strong theological lens, atomistic methodology and lack of expertise in linguistics and translation theory. Additionally, he repeatedly overstates his case, overemphasizing the importance of specific passages and not mentioning even commonly held alternatives to his interpretations.

Abdulfadi refers to the five OT and five NT passages he examines as 'the key Christological passages' in Scripture, stating that some ways of translating these passages could in themselves 'obscure' the deity of Christ. Only in his conclusion does he briefly mention what many current evangelical scholars consider to be the most powerful biblical witness to the deity of Christ, i.e., the witness to his deity as NT writers apply words and concepts – previously used uniquely of God – to Jesus. Recent research, especially into Judaism around the time of Christ and early Christianity,¹ has given the evangelical community resources such as *Putting Jesus in His Place: the Case for the Deity of Christ*. Here, Komoszewski and Bowman cite over 3500 (!) Bible passages, and introduce the acronym HANDS, to help readers remember scriptural bases for how Jesus shares the unique Honours, Attributes, Names, Deeds and Seat of God.² With this wealth of biblical evidence to use in ministry, the exact translation (or interpretation) of any particular verse becomes less crucial.

1. Bauckham's *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity*, (2008) is an expanded, revised edition of *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (1999), which has been strongly influential in redirecting scholarly discussion of early Christology.

2. Kenneth Bailey takes another approach, arguing that from a Middle Eastern perspective, a high Christology can be clearly seen in Jesus' parables (not generally considered as being Christological by Western post-enlightenment thinkers). A list of resources can be found at www.shenango.org/bailey.htm.

Abdulfadi's assumptions and viewpoint pervasively influence his observations and conclusions, particularly in the areas of (1) the theological lens through which he interprets, (2) the methodology of atomistic proof-texting and demanding OT passages be translated to match the NT,³ (3) the locus of who decides that an Arabic text is clear in its communication (apparently himself), and (4) preferred translation type.

Since for Abdulfadi, the theological issue of seeing the deity of Christ in the cited verses appears to be of more importance than anything else, he does not examine exegetical issues such as whether the verses necessarily (or exclusively) address the deity of Christ (or the translation issue of whether the words he advocates would communicate this idea to Arab Muslims). For example, Psalm 2 is a 'Royal' or 'enthronement' Psalm that, as he mentions, applied to Davidic kings and was understood as Messianic by the time of Christ (but not referring to deity). NT references to Psalm 2:7 refer to the Lordship or exaltation of Christ, but not to deity.⁴ An optimal translation of this (or any other passage) should not eliminate or distort the original meaning, in the interest of bringing out a theological point, or matching the OT with the NT.

Abdulfadi tends to disregard context, both historical and scriptural, in his preference for theological interpretation. For example, he interprets Micah 5:2 'one whose origins are in the distant past' as implying Messianic pre-existence. In the OT, however, this Hebrew phrase is used primarily to refer to early periods in history, often specifically to Davidic times.⁵ The mention of Bethlehem in the verse, and the context of the verse in Micah, implies a clear reference to a Messiah of the Davidic line.⁶

Abdulfadi's lack of knowledge of some aspects of Hebrew, Greek and the LXX results in inaccurate and misleading statements on which he bases arguments and draws conclusions. One example is Psalm 110, the LXX version of which is cited heavily in the NT. The pertinent Hebrew *ne'um YHWH la-'adoni*, is literally 'utterance of Yahweh to my lord.' The prophetic noun phrase, 'utterance of Yahweh,' is followed by 'to my lord,' where 'my lord' is *adoni*, a word always in the OT used of a human being, usually a king.⁷ The related Hebrew word, *adonai* 'Lord,' is used over 700 times in the OT and is reserved for God alone. The LXX quoted by the NT makes no distinction between these two words, using *kyrios* for both: 'the lord said to my lord.'⁸ Translating *adoni* in this

3. Most evangelical scholars suggest exegesis should be contextual, both historically and literarily.

4. Many commentaries support this contention; particularly useful are the many articles in Beale and Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 2007

5. Esp. later writings such as Malachi 3:4, Amos 9:11

6. In *Jesus Divine Messiah: NT Witness*, Reymond (p. 61) mentions this verse only as declaring the Messiah would be in the lineage of David. The additional interpretation is possible, just not obligatory or obvious, whereas other verses DO show the eternal nature of Jesus the Messiah.

7. Incidentally supporting the TAV translation Abdulfadi is troubled by.

8. This is consistent with LXX and NT Greek usage for people and God, despite Abdulfadi's claims about first century Greek speakers. See any study on the use of this word such as BDAG, Thayer, or an interlinear NT.



passage as 'lord' or 'master' is an accurate reflection of the meaning of the Hebrew, which does not, as Abdulfadi claims, 'require... a systematic denial of the New Testament use of the passage.' Instead, it requires us to struggle with the fact that the NT quotes a translation of the OT which does exactly what Abdulfadi condemns the Kitaab al Shariif (KS) for: it is inconsistent in translating even the names of God, and uses the same word for multiple concepts.

Although Abdulfadi argues that the KS translation should translate *elohim* 'God' and YHWH (God's proper name) by different words (rather than *allah*), the LXX, uses *kyrios* for at least seven different Hebrew words/phrases for both God and men: *adonai*, *eloah*, *elohim*, *yhwah*, *ya*, *adonai yhwah*, and '*adoni*.

Abdulfadi has an inadequate understanding of what terminology is understandable to a Muslim audience,⁹ and shows a preference for a particular Arabic cultural tradition over commonly accepted language use. For example, he supports the Arabic term *al-rabb*¹⁰ to translate Hebrew *adonai*, YHWH, (*adoni* from Ps 110), and Greek *kyrios*,¹¹ as implying deity. In most of the Arabic speaking world,¹² *rabb* is found only in *idaafa* or possessive constructions such as the vocative *ya rabbi* 'O my lord.' Although non-Christians can be taught that in the Bible *al-rabb* refers to God, they don't use it (or easily understand it) on their own. If Abdulfadi's intention is to sit with individuals as he goes through the Bible with them, then a translation with Christian ecclesiastic terminology such as *al-rabb* can be used.¹³ However, for a person unacquainted with terms such as *al-rabb*, it will be a barrier to understanding.

Abdulfadi does not acknowledge that different styles of translation are useful for different purposes.¹⁴ For in-depth Bible study, comparing passages, syntactical and lexical items, an inter-linear Bible or very formally-equivalent translation is useful. However, for understanding the meaning of scriptures in the absence of commentaries or educated Christians, meaning-based translations are a powerful tool.¹⁵

Just as we are fortunate to have many translations in English, so the Arab world is fortunate to have an increasing number of translations available, although so far, only one (KS) specifically attempts to use words Muslims can understand

9. Also, he asserts that the TAV makes an effort to choose neutral or Muslim terminology.

According to the TAV introduction, however, this translation was produced by an interdenominational team of Christian Arab leaders and scholars who wanted a more easily read Arabic, with no reference to choices having been made with a Muslim audience in mind.

10. Used in SVB/TAV/KH but not KS

11. Presumably not when *kyrios* is used of other people

12. Outside of Christian ecclesiastical terminology (Christian Arabs and Muslim Arabs use different religious terminology).

13. This method has some potential negative consequences, such as Arab believers not knowing that they can read the bible themselves for understanding. I have seen the results of such an approach multiple times.

14. See Warner and Warner, 'Choosing an Arabic Bible Based on comprehensibility and translation philosophy,' *Seedbed* 2008 22(2) wherein Fee and Strauss 2007 are cited.

15. Or they can serve as an auxiliary even for the educated reader, when a primary translation makes no sense.



without significant assistance. It can be hoped that future Arabic translations will improve in clarity, accuracy, accessibility and elegance.¹⁶ Most Arabs easily understand that translations do not convey the exact meaning of the original. Having several different translations can be very useful to those studying the Bible, especially as differences in translations (whether Arabic or English) often highlight textual, exegetical, or translation issues. We can be assured, however, that the message of the Gospel, including the deity of Christ, is redundantly present in the Scriptures, regardless of the translation used, and that multiple translations offer further opportunities to communicate God's Good News.

ABDULFADI'S RESPONSE TO WARNER'S CRITIQUE

I will limit my response to Sharon Warner's comments concerning the methodology used in the article, principles of interpretation and the role of meaning-based (functionally equivalent) translations.

Warner expresses her opinion that the passages chosen for review were limited. The verdict: 'guilty by design'. A thorough comparison of the 3500+ indirect (and powerful) references to the deity of Christ would be of great value, and I look forward to reading *Putting Jesus in His Place*. But that is hardly a workable strategy for a short, practical article addressed to field colleagues.

I compared the translations for the passages discussed in detail by Robert Reymond in his work, *Jesus, Divine Messiah*. Besides those passages on which I made detailed comments, I listed a number of both OT and NT passages whose treatment in the four translations was reviewed but did not require significant comment. It was this larger body to which I referred when I wrote 'The SVDB, the KH and the TAV give clear translations of the key Christological passages, with some failures of varying degrees as noted...' and it is a misrepresentation to say that 'Abdulfadi refers to the *five* OT and *five* NT passages he examines as 'the key Christological passages' in Scripture.' (Emphasis added)

More serious is the concern expressed by Warner that a 'theological lens' (trying to find the deity of Christ) limited the usefulness of the comparison. It is true that each passage was approached as if its relevance to the deity of Christ was an already established fact.¹ The magnificent exegetical work and scholarly conclusions of Robert Reymond's *Jesus, Divine Messiah* were, as stated, the basis and starting point for evaluation. Reymond extensively examines the relevance of the passages to the deity of Christ and weighs the mass of scholarly work on them, something far beyond the scope of the article.

16. A new meaning-based non-ecclesiastical Arabic translation, *Al-ma'naa as-sabiib li-injiil al-masiib* is a further edition to the Arabic alternatives.

1. I am puzzled by Warner's contention that the NT applications of Psalm 2:7 are concerned with the lordship of Christ, but not his deity, as if they are unrelated.



Warner also takes exception to my concern that OT Christological passages quoted in the NT not be translated in such a way as to compromise their application in the NT. Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:1 are particularly in view here, but the issue is relevant to many other passages. I agree wholeheartedly with Warner's concern to take into account historical and scriptural context and not to simply mindlessly force agreement with the NT. But a proper concern for scriptural context must accommodate the hermeneutical principle of the Christ-centeredness of the Old Testament taught by Jesus in Luke 24. Fortunately, the problem can often be resolved if the translator does not over-explain (like adding 'the king' in Psalm 110:1, as the TAV does). Then the New Testament applications, showing that a 'higher David' was ultimately intended, are not compromised.

This last point leads us to consider the complaint that I do not acknowledge the usefulness of meaning-based translations. I do, but with conditions. A meaning-based translator will clarify meaning based on his or her exegesis of the passage. The clarification inevitably limits the richness of meaning in the text, often because of the departure, however slight, from the words and the form of the text. Vern Poythress says it this way: '(O)ne must resist cutting the Gordian knot of difficulty by always preferring immediate clarity and intelligibility, even to unbelievers, at the expense of richer representation of original meaning. Constant preference for immediate clarity falsifies the depth and richness that belongs to the word of God.'²

So what is acceptable clarification? In cases of idiom and unfamiliar cultural references most field workers would applaud a meaning-based approach. Warner and Warner's article gives many examples. But for words, phrases and titles that fall into the area that Warner and Warner helpfully call 'worldview differences', extensive clarification will limit the original meaning and also necessarily reflect the theological viewpoint and ideology of the translator. As new ministry trends come onto the scene, proponents call for translations that accommodate their agenda. The insider movement has called for translations that accommodate the Muslim worldview, and some have openly questioned in that context the importance of the deity of Christ for evangelism and the health of the church. The field worker deserves to know both the translation policy and *the details* of the translations. Meaning-based treatments of specific passages that mute, either deliberately or unintentionally, any witness of the Bible to the deity of Christ should not be defended with the justification that the Bible gives redundant testimony to the deity of Christ.

The problems discussed in my article do not mean that the KS is without value; they do show real issues in the important area of the Bible's witness to the deity of Christ. Field workers should be aware of the problems in all four translations. Finally, the problems could be addressed in future editions.³

2. See 5th paragraph of: http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/2005Bible.htm.

3. I note again that many of the passages discussed were very different in the editions of the KS NT published before 2000.

