

2007

# The Language of Scripture (The Associate Editor's Page)

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### Recommended Citation

Hasel, Frank M. (2007) "The Language of Scripture (The Associate Editor's Page)," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol12/iss2/5>

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Frank M. Hasel

Adventists encourage the reading of Scripture. The living and speaking God of Scripture has chosen to reveal Himself through ordinary human words, using His own gift of language to tell humankind about Himself. Thus, the Bible is treasured as the living Word of God, given through human writers in human language. These biblical words are translated into different languages around the world. While a number of Adventist scholars have given valuable input to various Bible translations, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has not produced its own unique Bible translation or sanctioned only one Bible translation that is officially supported. Hence, Adventists welcome new translations and studies of the Bible, for these can help foster an interest in the Bible and help the reader become more familiar with the biblical message and the only true God, who wants to save us.

Some recent Bible translations, however, use new, inclusive language

## THE LANGUAGE OF SCRIPTURE

that is believed to be more politically correct than the biblical text. Some theologians deliberately change the words of Scripture to make them more gender neutral. Thus, some propose that Jesus Christ no longer be thought of as Son of the Father, but instead as “the Child of God.” Rather than addressing God as “almighty Father,” other scholars promote calling God in non-sex-specific words like “companion,” “friend,” “nurturer,” “Holy One,” “Sustainer,” etc. Or they avoid male imagery by using references of both masculine and feminine pairs such as “father-mother,” “he and she,” or simply address God as “parent” or even more general as “the depth or ground of being.”

These approaches reflect insights from historical-critical exegesis with particular input from feminist hermeneutics and liberation theology. Many of those liberal scholars seek to correct what they perceive as a sexist slant in much of the biblical material. They aim to replace the

idea of God as our heavenly Father with a new feminist spirituality that is geared toward the specific needs of women who are marginalized and oppressed. Some feminist theologians even identify the maleness of God as a major problem for the liberation of women in the church and claim that Jesus cannot be the redeemer of women and cannot represent women adequately because He is male.

This poses some serious questions about the ideological presuppositions behind such an approach and its implications for theology. The debate over gender-neutral language is intricately connected to one's understanding of the revelation-inspiration phenomenon and ultimately is a debate concerning the nature of God. To change the biblical references to God by calling God "father-mother" in effect challenges the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, since God is not a biunity or duality but a triune living God. When God is re-imaged in new language it also affects many other Christian teachings.

We should be aware that when we begin to tamper with the biblical text, it is no longer the biblical text that is the guiding norm for our theology. We as interpreters of God's Word then subtly assume this authoritative role. When we begin to change the inspired text of Holy Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16), it is no

longer the Bible that shapes our thinking about God, but it is rather our own ideas and presuppositions that begin to shape the content of Scripture and our theology. The Bible then no longer is the final norm for faith and practice.

Reading the biblical text carefully, we notice that in those few passages in Scripture where feminine analogies are used about God, they are used as a comparison in which one aspect is compared with another (cf., for instance Isa. 42:14; 49:15). God is neither male nor female. God is Spirit and transcends any sexual nature. In these analogies, various aspects of the divine nature are illustrated in human language. We must not abandon the human language of the Bible, however, because the divine message is not given to us except in this human form. Apart from this medium, there is no biblical message. Furthermore, we have to remember that the Bible uses the terminology of God as Father and Lord. This is the language in which God has chosen to reveal Himself. "Father" is not just a metaphor that human beings project upon God. It is a fixed term of address that God Himself uses through His own Son Jesus Christ. God is not simply like a father, he *is* the Father. Christ is not merely like a Lord, He *is* the Lord; and Jesus Christ is not like a son, he *is the* Son of God. If we do not abide by divine revelation as communi-

cated in divinely inspired Scripture, we will project our own image of God that shapes our faith into our own liking. But it will no longer correspond to the normative Word of the triune God as given in Scripture.

Therefore Adventists do not feel free to correct God's revealed and divinely inspired written Word at our own will because we have no mandate to modify the biblical text. Instead we are called to translate faithfully the words of God's revelation so that they correspond to what God has originally revealed to us in human words. We believe that the Bible is not historically conditioned and thus relative. Instead, we affirm that God has historically constituted His written word by revealing Himself to us as Father and Lord. Therefore we are not at liberty to change and adapt God's own witness to Himself in Scripture. Instead of revising the biblical language and

thus also the meaning of the biblical witness, we must confess this witness in the language that is given to us in the Bible. Hence we are not free to change the Lord's Prayer into "our mother who is in heaven." Instead, we pray with Jesus who spoke: "Our Father which art in heaven" (Matt. 6:9, KJV).

To let the Bible unfold its meaning to the reader on its own terms (*sola scriptura*), more literal Bible translations are suited best because they help to make the reader familiar with the thought patterns and wording of the biblical writers. May we be faithful students of God's Word. And may we be doers of the Word, imitating the words and deeds of Jesus, who is our prime example—for we do not know Jesus and God except through the Bible. Hence, the Bible is our only link with apostolic Christianity and the only sure means to guide us in our spiritual journey today.

