MEANING AND THE SON OF GOD

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Category: Bible Translation

If I were to say the word "beach" to you and then asked you to close your eyes and think about the word, what images would come to mind? Perhaps a palm-fringed beach at sunset, or a wild storm on the North Sea. Maybe you would think about ice-cream on a hot sunny day, or playing volley-ball with friends. I don't know what images would come to your mind, but I do know that the one word "beach" could give rise to all sorts of associations in your mind. One simple word can lead to us thinking all sorts of different things.

Actually, this is perfectly normal; it is the way language works. Words communicate far more than their simple dictionary definitions. This is why perfectly rational British people (such things do exist) can look at a clearly unoccupied chair and ask; "is anyone sitting there?".

These simple examples illustrate a complex issue that is a problem for Bible translators and that is that translating is not simply a matter of finding the words in one language that match the words in another. Words can be sneaky little things and they worm their way into all sorts of situations that you didn't expect and the associations that are created by a word or phrase in one language will not be the same in another language.

Take the simple phrase "Son of God". Most English speaking Christians understand this as a title for Jesus Christ that in some way communicates his relationship to God the Father as the second person of the Trinity. If we are honest, we probably haven't given much thought to how all the details work out. However, in some contexts, especially in the Muslim world, the phrase "Son of God" is a horrible blasphemy because it implies that God had sex with Mary. The associations created by the phrase in one language are completely different in another. So, what is the translator to do? Should they translate the phrase as it stands because they are the right words, or should they find some way to avoid the mental associations created by the phrase?

As you can imagine, a huge amount of time, effort, study and prayer has gone into answering this question. If you would like to see some of the debate, Christianity Today has an interesting (though flawed) article on the subject. However, if you read the CT article, make sure that you read the follow up from Vern Poythress at Mission Frontiers, from which I will quote the conclusion.

> *We should rejoice that we are seeing Muslims who are reading the Bible. And we should rejoice that Bible translators are paying close attention to what a variety of expressions mean in a target language, and are trying hard to convey meaning accurately for the sake of the gospel and the salvation of souls. This process can help to overcome barriers of misunderstanding among Muslims, without compromising the message of the Bible.*

If you'd like to know more about the way in which words take on different associations, listen to our friend Sue Pearson's lecture on How Not To Do Word Studies.