

SIL International Statement of Best Practices for Bible Translation of Divine Familial Terms

with commentary

April 30, 2012

Introduction

The “SIL International Statement of Best Practices for the Translation of Divine Familial Terms” was produced at the Consultation organized by SIL International in Istanbul, Turkey in August of 2011. This Consultation was organized to discuss issues concerning the translation of Divine Familial Terms—with specific focus on the Son of God. The consultation began by considering translation issues, followed by exegetical and hermeneutical considerations, as well as theological and missiological perspectives. This discussion acknowledged the fact that the issues involved in the accurate translation of Father-Son terminology are not merely linguistic in nature. So, even though the Istanbul Statement focuses primarily on best practices for *translation*, it was drafted in the context of this broader discussion.

The Istanbul Consultation was a very significant “coming together of hearts and minds,” as colleagues with divergent perspectives on the issues worked together to draft the statement. There was a genuine spirit of openness to listening to other views and concerns in the interest of addressing the issues at hand and arriving at the best consensus possible. During the days of the Consultation, the participants met in five working groups and then came together to compile the Statement of Best Practices. Istanbul was a very important step in the process of dealing with the issues concerning appropriate ways to translate the Son of God. The phrase “Divine Familial Terms” is used here to refer to the terms or expressions for God *as Father* and Jesus *as the Son of God* and is not intended to suggest anything beyond Father-Son terminology.

Prior to the Istanbul Consultation, it was being debated whether God’s Messiah or Word of God are acceptable as translation alternatives for Son of God in the text, together with Son of God explained in the paratext. One of the main outcomes of the consultation was that neither God’s Messiah nor Word of God adequately conveys the “divine familial” meaning of Son of God. The purpose of the Istanbul Statement is to present a set of guidelines or best practices to ensure that the “divine familial” components of meaning are communicated well in the translated text itself, not just in the paratext. This, however, should not be misunderstood as a claim that this is the only possible meaning in every occurrence of the term Son of God.

The Istanbul Statement was not intended to exhaustively or comprehensively address every issue related to possible translations of Father and Son terminology. Likewise, the document that emerged from the Istanbul Consultation was drafted as a set of principles, not as an exhaustive statement that explicitly discusses the acceptability or non-acceptability of every possible translation variant. The purpose of the Istanbul Statement was not to authorize undue freedom in translation, but rather to provide a process for determining acceptable translations for Father-Son terminology. The

hope, then as now, is that this Statement would provide SIL with a process and a set of principles to promote the accurate translation of these terms in challenging situations.

This commentary on the Istanbul Statement is another step in the process of communicating the “spirit” of the in-depth discussions at the Consultation. In order to capture as much as possible of the actual wording of each working groups, much of the content of the statement was composed in series of terse bullet points rather than smooth prose. From feedback received since the Consultation, it has come to our attention that there is a degree of ambiguity in some sections of the Statement. It is our hope that this commentary will help clarify the intent of the statements and the practical applications for translation that emerged from the Consultation.

The Istanbul Statement is reproduced in its entirety below, identified by section headings. The commentary is identified in the same way. The only change to the Istanbul Statement is the addition of section numbers to allow easier reference to points within the Statement.

Istanbul Statement

0.0 Preamble

0.1 Bible Translation is an integral part of the worldwide Church’s participation in God’s mission.

0.2 Our desire is for Scripture in the language that people understand best.

0.3 Scriptures need to be accurate, clear and natural and in a form that is appropriate in the language community.

0.4 The host community plays a key role in translation decisions, including the translation of key terms.

0.5 While no translation can completely communicate the whole meaning of the original text, the translation must be as accurate as possible, and sufficiently accurate to be accepted by the community as authoritative.

0.6 We affirm the eternal deity of Jesus Christ and require that it be preserved in all translations. Scripture translations should promote understanding of the term “Son of God” in all its richness, including His filial relationship with the Father, while avoiding the implication of sexual activity by God as much as possible.

0.7 Given the richness of meaning in the Scriptures and the diversity of audiences, SIL supports various styles of translation. Translations should be evaluated in light of their intended audience and context.

Commentary: Preamble

The purpose of the preamble is to establish a frame of reference for reading the statement that follows. Some of the critical points in the preamble are:

A. In SIL, we strongly affirm the eternal deity of Jesus Christ and require that both his deity *and* humanity be clearly communicated in all translations. Scripture translations of the term Son of God must promote an understanding of all its richness, including Jesus' relationship as Son with God the Father. Without reservation, SIL's Scripture translation practice is to use wording which promotes accurate understanding of the relationship of Father by which God chose to describe Himself in relationship to His Son, Jesus Christ, in the original languages of Scripture.

As stated above, *both* the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ must be clearly communicated in translation. Care must be exercised to avoid any translation strategy that would inaccurately communicate or misrepresent either His deity or humanity. Possible terms must be carefully researched and tested in order to determine which ones will be most effective.

B. Bible translation is an integral part of the global Church's participation in the mission of God in the world. In this mission, SIL is committed to translation that is accurate, clear, and natural in the language that is understood best by the people of the language communities where translation is being done.

C. SIL's commitment, along with the other member agencies of the Forum of Bible Agencies International (FOBAI), is to work in partnership with representatives of language communities and other agencies for the translation of Scripture in the language(s) that people understand best. A Scripture translation needs to be accurate, clear and natural and in a form that is appropriate in the language community.

As expressed in the FOBAI statement, "Basic Principles and Procedures for Bible Translation," SIL is committed to

translate the Scriptures accurately, without loss, change, distortion or embellishment of the meaning of the original text. Accuracy in Bible translation is the faithful communication, as exactly as possible, of that meaning, determined according to sound principles of exegesis." (FOBAI statement, #1).

Along with this concern for accuracy, we are also committed to translation that communicates as clearly and naturally as possible in the receptor languages. Translation must be done with attention to "the sensitivities and experience of the receptor audience" (FOBAI statement, #11). This involves careful study of and extensive interaction with the worldview and conceptual framework of the receptor audience in order to ensure that the original meaning of the biblical text will be communicated as faithfully and appropriately as possible in their context.

The goal of faithful and appropriate communication requires careful analysis of the specific linguistic, cultural, or religious factors that may cause potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the biblical text. As stated in point #5 of the FOBAI statement, every effort is made to "ensure that no political, ideological, social, cultural, or theological agenda is allowed to distort the translation" Our translation personnel and the translation consultants who advise

them are trained to analyze these factors and work with translation teams as they seek to express the meaning of the biblical text in the clearest way possible.

The accurate translation of key theological terms must always be undertaken with special care to avoid theological bias, and to also provide sufficient depth and integrity to allow for theological reflection. While no translation can completely communicate the full meaning of the original text, best practices are established in order to produce translations that are as accurate as possible.

D. The Istanbul statement says that host communities play a key role in translation decisions, including the translation of key terms. The term “host communities” refers to the full range of possible participants, including churches and individual believers from the community. This includes the formal involvement of translators, reviewers, and other members of the translation team as well as the informal involvement of others who provide occasional input to the translation process. This input is critical for the translation team in order to allow them to test that the translation is exegetically accurate and communicates clearly. This is not a matter of adapting the meanings of the Scriptures to the culture and worldview of host communities, but rather a matter of expressing Biblical meaning as accurately and clearly as possible in the host language.

Istanbul Statement

1.0 What are the principles for choosing between different renderings in translation of divine familial terms?

1.1 Comprehension in the target language determines the choice between renderings, and the rendering used must be in conformity with scholarly, exegetical consensus within Christian orthodoxy.

1.2 Avoid theological bias, but have sufficient depth and integrity to allow for theological reflection.

1.3 The form or forms used should make it possible to build up the full range of meaning of this term in the source text by observing their use in the various contexts in Scripture.

1.4 The proposed terms should be carefully researched, tested extensively and evaluated over time as the translation product goes into use.

Commentary: Principles for choosing between different renderings

Translation typically involves choices; there is seldom only one possible rendering for a given term. This requires a principled basis upon which to select the best or most appropriate rendering, especially when translators are dealing with terms of special theological significance, such as the Son of God. The selection process involves careful research of the biblical term and the proposed translation options. The full range of a term’s uses in different contexts of Scripture must be analyzed as part of this research.

Translation teams, working closely with consultants, seek to determine that the renderings chosen avoid theological bias and conform to scholarly, exegetical consensus within Christian orthodoxy. The proposed renderings should make it possible to build up the full range of biblical meaning of the term in the source text and should also allow for theological reflection.

Extensive testing and evaluation of critical terms must be carried out with as wide a variety of representatives from the language community as is possible in the specific socio-political situation, to ascertain whether they are being accurately understood. This testing is crucial not only when a new translation is first introduced, but over time as the translation is being used in the community. The purpose of this testing is to determine that the renderings chosen express the intended familial relations better than any other alternative, without introducing unbiblical meanings.

Before the next section, it is important to define *paratext*. It refers to any supportive or explanatory material included along with the translated text in order to aid in understanding. For example: footnotes, side-notes, introductions, glossaries, section headings and illustrations. Also, in this document, “literal” translation refers to the nearest possible word-to-word lexical equivalent of the words in the source text and “non-literal” translation refers to the use of other renderings which accurately reflect the original intended meaning of the words in the source text.

Istanbul Statement

1.5 There should be a guided process, by the following steps, for working through the rendering options:

- 1.5.1 Consider the literal rendering for the text and add necessary paratext, then test (text + paratext) in the local community, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses.
- 1.5.2 Consider clearly familial, but non-literal options for the text (e.g. “God’s one-and-only” [Son implied]) and find several options. For each of these add the necessary paratext, test with community, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses.
- 1.5.3 Review all options from steps 1&2 and then choose the one with which is most effective in communicating meaning, is most economical, and respects the preference of the intended audience of the translation product.
- 1.5.4 If no possible option 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.

1.6 Throughout the process there should be consultation with other local partners, and the translation consultant needs particular sensitivity not to impose his or her own preferences.

Commentary: Guided Process

First of all, it is important to emphasize that all the points in this “guided process” allow only familial terms. One of the most significant developments of the Istanbul Consultation was the

determination that *the phrase Son of God must be translated with phrases that have familial meaning*. The discussion of translation alternatives, leading up to and including the Consultation as stated above, had focused primarily on whether terms like Messiah or Word of God were viable alternatives for Son of God. One of the main outcomes from Istanbul is that neither Messiah nor Word of God adequately convey the necessary relational components of meaning. With specific reference to Messiah, this does not mean that Son of God has no Messianic components of meaning; the point, rather, is that in many contexts, Messiah does not adequately convey the Father-Son relational meaning. Messiah and other renderings may also prove inadequate because a suitable translation for Son of God must be compatible with the translation of other familial terms such as sons of God and Father. Note also the key role of the paratext in providing supportive information for the renderings chosen for the translated text.

The guided process expressed here is similar to the process used in the selection of any translation options. In some cases, languages have adequately corresponding words that allow translation to proceed without any reason to look further. In many other cases, however, one-to-one correspondence or equivalence in meaning between words is very limited, requiring the translation to convey the meaning through expressions which may not be the direct, lexically-corresponding words. There are many cases where the word-for-word “dictionary equivalents” do not match up to communicate the correct meaning, so other options must be considered. Even translation philosophies which strive to directly reflect the exact words of the original are at times forced to translate with words that communicate the correct meaning. For example, in the ESV, 1 Cor 7:39 says:

*A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband **dies**, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.*

Where the ESV has translated “if her husband dies,” the Greek says ἐὰν δὲ κοιμηθῆ ὁ ἀνὴρ, *if the man sleeps*. In order to properly communicate the conditions under which a woman is free to remarry, English versions do not use the lexically-corresponding verb *to sleep* in this verse, but rather they use a verb which expresses the intended meaning. This is an example of what de Waard and Nida discuss in *From One Language to Another*, that changes of “form” or wording should be done in translation when “*a literal rendering would give an entirely wrong meaning*” (1986, 38).

It is true, of course, that sleeping or dying in 1 Cor 7:39 do not have the same theological weight as Son of God. De Waard and Nida also discuss specific *theological* terms such as Lamb of God, cross, and sacrifice, stating that they “need to be preserved, but often with explanatory marginal notes” (1986, 38). Preserving theological terms is a valid principle, but in some cases it may be in tension with the previous principle that permits a change of form when the “*literal rendering would give an entirely wrong meaning*” (1986, 38). The sole purpose of the “guided process” in the Istanbul statement is to guide translators in the selection of terms that accurately communicate the Father-Son relationship in Scripture. The implication of this is that terms that do not clearly communicate the close interpersonal Father-Son relationship between God and Jesus are excluded from consideration as viable translation options.

In the “guided process,” the goal of 1.5.2 is accurate communication of the meaning of son and the avoidance of wrong meanings. 1.5.2 states that translators are to consider “clearly familial, but non-literal options for the text.” In cases where research has determined that a word-for-word translation of Son of God communicates a wrong meaning, this allows the translator to explore options that preserve Father-Son relational meaning, but the renderings chosen may not necessarily be the immediate one-to-one, word-for-word equivalents of “ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ.” For example, “God’s one-and-only” would be considered an acceptable non-literal rendering if, in a specific language community, clearly means a unique son, as it does in Greek, and communicates a close interpersonal relationship without communicating wrong procreative meaning.

When possible renderings and accompanying paratext have been drafted, each option is tested extensively with a variety of speakers in the language community in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each text + paratext combination. When the testing is complete, the rendering is chosen that most effectively communicates the accurate meaning, is most economical, and respects the preference of the intended audience of the translation product. A critical guideline in this process is that the literal rendering of Son of God will always be either in the text or in the paratext that accompanies a non-literal rendering. This process is always carried out in consultation with other local partners and translation consultants who are trained to exercise special care to not impose their own preferences.

The translation of Father follows parallel guidelines, namely, that the renderings chosen for πατήρ must accurately communicate to the intended audience God’s relationship as Father to His Son, Jesus Christ and His relationship as Father to those who believe in Christ, as revealed in Scripture.

The main goal of the guided process in the Istanbul Statement was to limit translation alternatives to terms which (1) properly convey familial meaning, but (2) are not limited to a procreative relationship. The fourth point of the guided process has unfortunately led to confusion and misunderstanding of its intended purpose. In the interest of avoiding this confusion, the essence of the guided process is restated here:

Based on careful research, translation teams should begin with the likely nearest equivalent for both son and father. If this results in wrong meaning, other renderings for son and father that preserve familial meaning may be considered. For example, “God’s one-and-only” would be considered an acceptable non-literal rendering if, in a specific language community, it refers to a son, without communicating wrong procreative meaning. When the necessary paratext has been drafted for each rendering, each option is tested extensively in the language community in order to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. When the testing is complete, the rendering is chosen that expresses the intended familial relations better than any other alternative, without introducing unbiblical meaning. A critical guideline in this process is that the literal rendering of Son of God will always be either in the text or included and explained in the paratext that accompanies a non-literal rendering.

One of the most challenging aspects of the discussion and evaluation of possible translation options for Son of God is that the *English translation* of proposed alternatives often seems inadequate,

whereas the words or phrase in question in the local language may actually convey the meaning well, better than any available alternative. Without a full description of the context in which the translation will be used, it is nearly impossible to determine the adequacy or inadequacy of proposed renderings. It is, therefore, incumbent upon translation teams to document the process of selecting and testing familial terms for Father-Son. For all literal and non-literal renderings, a full description must be made of their uses and meanings in order to effectively build a case for their consideration as viable alternatives. This description must include not only the linguistic and sociocultural factors, but also the exegetical and theological considerations that informed the selection process. This information will be of critical importance to translation consultants who work with these teams.

It is also incumbent upon anyone involved in the evaluation of proposed terms to study all the available documentation in order to avoid either acceptance of or dismissal of possible renderings solely on the basis of an English or other major language translation. The evaluator must develop as complete an understanding as possible of the terms being proposed in order to make the best decision regarding their suitability. If questions remain or if further information is needed, the translation team's leadership should be contacted to facilitate consultation with the team.

Istanbul Statement

2.0 What are best practices for making exegetical decisions?

2.1 Exegetical decisions should be made by translation teams in dialogue with their communities, partner organizations, and respected ecclesial authorities, on the basis of thorough Biblical-theological understanding of Scripture, which includes use of original texts, versions, credible commentaries, and respected Biblical scholarship, both local and global.

2.2 Translation consultants play an important role in supporting the translation process and are expected to operate according to best practices. SIL will hold its consultants accountable for operating in such a manner.

Commentary: Best Practices for making exegetical decisions

Translation teams are trained to make exegetical decisions using the best scholarly resources available to them. In many cases, members of a translation team who have the most training will assist other team members in the areas of their expertise.

Translation decisions should never be made by one person or one agency acting unilaterally; rather, they should always be made in consultation with all of the partners stated in 2.1 above. SIL is committed to involvement in translation where decisions are made in partnership with others, thereby avoiding the imposition of any decision by any one party.

The importance of 2.2 must be underscored. SIL translation consultants are responsible to act according to the organization's statements of best practices, including the present document. SIL, at the International and Area level will hold its consultants accountable for operating accordingly.

Istanbul Statement

3.0 What are the best practices for establishing concordance with regards to ‘Son of God’ and familial terminology?

3.1 If necessary the introduction may explain terminology used for ‘Son of God’ and related familial terminology or direct the reader to the place where such explanations may be found.

3.2 Recognizable concordance (i.e., similarity of rendering in all passages) for the term ‘Son of God’ and related familial language should normally be maintained in the text but should not be insisted upon at the expense of comprehension.

Commentary: Best Practices for establishing concordance

Concordance refers to the practice of always translating a particular term with the same expression in the new translation. Translation philosophies differ as to the degree of concordance desired, but the principle expressed in the Istanbul Statement is that recognizable concordance should normally be maintained in the text of Scripture where it is contextually appropriate. However, rigid concordance of form should not be insisted upon at the expense of comprehension.

It is important to clarify that in 3.2, “related familial language” refers also to terms for “Father.” The discussion in Istanbul focused on the Son of God and the wording of 3.2 reflects this focus. A revised 3.2 would read as follows:

3.2 Recognizable concordance (i.e., similarity of rendering in all passages) for the terms ‘Son of God’ and ‘Father’ should normally be maintained in the text but should not be insisted upon at the expense of comprehension.

Especially in cases where full concordance is not possible, it is advisable for the introduction to the translation to explain the terminology used for Son of God and related familial terms. The introduction should also direct the reader to other places where such explanations can be found.

Istanbul Statement

4.0 Principles for Paratextual Information

4.1 Assumptions:

4.1.1 A translation of Scripture usually includes a text and paratext. The paratext consists of essential conceptual and background information needed by the readers to understand the translated text. It is produced by the translators with the expectation that the text will not be published without it. Paratextual information may be provided in a variety of ways including glossaries, footnotes, side-notes, mini-articles, section headings, introductions, cross-references, illustrations, and maps. In audio and visual scriptures, necessary paratextual information would be delivered in segment introductions.

Commentary: Principles for paratextual information

As stated above, the paratext is any **supportive** or **explanatory material** included along with the translated text as an *aid for understanding*. During the translation process, research often reveals crucial information that will help readers or hearers better understand the translated text. It is important that the translators themselves capture these insights so that this paratextual information can be published together with translation.

It is important, however, to maintain a clear distinction between the **text** of the translation and the **paratext** that supports it. Even though the paratextual information may be considered essential, the paratext does not have the authoritative status of Scripture itself. This must be kept in focus when deciding what to put in the text versus the supportive information in the paratext. See the following section for best practices or principles that should be considered regarding paratextual information.

Istanbul Statement

4.2 Best practices for the paratext

4.2.1 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.

4.2.2 The text and paratext should be crafted and tested together to achieve maximum understanding of the biblical meaning.

4.2.3 When a key term is translated in a literal form in the text, the role of the paratext is to clarify its biblical meaning. When a key term is translated less literally in the text, the role of the paratext is to present a literal form of the key term as well as clarify its meaning.

4.2.4 The paratext may also present common understandings for the reader's consideration, but not teach them as doctrines and practices.

Commentary: Best Practices for the paratext

The preceding points, 4.2.1 - 4.2.4, are some of the main considerations that need to be kept in mind for the creation of paratextual information. From these points, it is evident that paratext can be used for different purposes. A translation team's philosophy or style of translation will determine the preferred purpose for various kinds of paratextual information. As much as possible, this philosophy should be implemented consistently. For example, if a translation team chooses a more meaning-based translation style, the paratext will typically be used to present a word-for-word rendering of particular terms in the original text. If a more form-based style is preferred, the paratext will typically be used to clarify the meaning of particular terms in the translation. In the latter case, the importance of 4.2.2 cannot be overstated: it is critical to test the proposed paratext with the text it accompanies in order to ascertain whether it accomplishes its intended purpose.

A comment regarding translation philosophy is in order here. A translation team's philosophy should always be developed in consultation with representatives of the language community and other partners so that decisions about translation style are based on the broadest possible consensus.

The type of paratextual information anticipated in 4.2.4 is of a more general, background nature than the type of note that gives a word-for-word rendering of a specific term. It should also be tested together with the text it accompanies to ensure that it is properly understood as additional information for the reader's consideration. 4.2.4 again highlights the critical distinction that must be maintained between the text of Scripture and the supportive information provided as an aid to the reader.

Paratextual information plays a significant role as an aid in understanding the translated text, but it cannot be expected to solve all potential problems for readers or hearers of the translation. There is still a need for explanation of and teaching from the translation as individuals and communities seek to effectively understand the translated text.

Istanbul Statement

5.0 Principles for different translations for different audiences and purposes

5.1 Where there are two (or more) socio-cultural communities within the same language group, we recognize that multiple translations may be needed.

5.2 The decision should be made on the basis of the widest degree of agreement possible among the stakeholders, ensuring that there is a significant voice from the language community.

5.3 We recognize the concern that multiple translations following different policies may cause confusion among local sub-communities. Therefore, through an appropriate forum, concerned groups should identify and agree on a strategy for adequate Scripture access for all parties concerned.

Commentary: Different translations for different audiences and purposes

In many languages, it is unlikely that there will be more than one translation, at least for the foreseeable future. In some language situations, however, distinct socio-cultural communities have developed which may call for different styles of translations. Certain established ecclesiastical communities may prefer a more form-based translation, whereas the style of a translation being done in a setting where there is no well-established church may be less form-based. The same standards of accuracy apply to whatever style of translation is deemed appropriate.

The decision to work on a new translation where one already exists should not be made without significant representation of the local community and of all the parties involved in the translation project. The ultimate goal is adequate access to Scripture for all, but strategies for multiple translations need to be developed in ways that minimize the potential for confusion.

Istanbul Statement

6.0 Additional considerations

6.1 For the sake of clarity, transparency and good relationships—any translation that SIL supports needs to be clearly identified as to its nature (literal, transitional, audience specific, etc.).

6.2 When working in complex situations, it is especially important to give careful consideration to many significant parameters when a project is initiated, including project *skopos* (i.e. intended purpose of the translation), organizational relationships and power structures.

Commentary: Additional considerations

The final section of the Istanbul Statement, 6.0 Additional Considerations, captures two important points for all translation projects. First of all, the term *skopos* in 6.2 has to do, as stated, with the purpose of the translation, but it also includes the overall project design and plan. It is important for any project to have clearly defined parameters and goals, but this is of particular importance in projects that involve various partners. All partners need to be involved in making decisions that impact the project, including the type of translation that will be produced as stated in 6.1. Transparency and clarity in all aspects of translation are important factors in establishing and maintaining good relationships with all potential partners.

Afterword

This commentary on the Istanbul Statement of Best Practices for Bible Translation of Divine Familial Terms is an important step in responding to feedback and addressing concerns that have been raised about SIL's translation principles and practices. This commentary is an invitation for others to engage with us as we continue to define the best practices for translation of these critical terms. In this ongoing process, priority is being given to further research and reflection on the complex exegetical, hermeneutical, theological, missiological, and ecclesiological considerations that inform these best practices.