

Context Matters

Context always complicates the culture-bridging journey of Scripture. Hopefully we've gotten smarter about it in our mission efforts over the past twenty centuries. The emerging emphasis on orality, Scripture relevance, indigenous translators and the de-Westernization of theology betray an increasing acuity. Each of these articles reflects some aspect of Scripture in context.

The importance of *context* was crystal clear in a pair of dialogues that came across my desk earlier this year.¹ Both discussed the translation of familial terms ("Father"/"Son") among Muslim populations. As you probably know, this whole debate surrounds a contextual problem: Muslims can be repulsed when Scripture uses familial terms that trigger connotations of divine sexual activity (see Brown 2011, 105-125).² Whatever one's opinion on terminology, this pair of articles illustrated how linguistic contexts vary across the Muslim world.

The first dialogue from the Arabic context discussed a new term being considered in the translation of "father." It was not the usual term used by a son for his father, and it seemed to fail the test of filial relation we expect for this term in Scripture. It carried the idea of patriarch, provider, guardian and protector, and not an immediate sense of parental intimacy. But this debate from the Arabic context sparked another discussion in the Indonesian context. Apparently there is a choice of three terms for "father" in Indonesian. Two of these terms are used by children for their father, but the third term has more the idea of a royal fatherly overseer (a little like the meaning of the Arabic term being proposed). And wouldn't you know it, this third term is the term chosen for "father" in over 350 years of Indonesian Bible translation. Note that the very criteria held by some to be absolutely-absolute in the Arabic context (i.e., that Scripture must deploy the most familiar term) was never the case in Indonesia, even though God as Father seems to be effectively comprehended today by those who read the Indonesian Bible.

These still unpublished dialogues encourage at least three important perspectives on this matter of *context*. First, the *context* in *contextualization* requires that our missiology be more anthropological, not less.³ Any necessary critique of older and insufficient social science concepts must not cause us

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Subscriptions

One year (four issues) \$18.00
Two years (eight issues) \$34.00
Three years (twelve issues) \$48.00
Single copies \$4.00, multiple copies \$3.00

Payment must be enclosed with orders.

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IJFM (ISSN #2161-3354) was established in 1984 by the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions. It is published quarterly.

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PRINTED in the USA

to retreat in theological reaction, but provoke us to find better anthropology and better theology. Secondly, any real missiological understanding will demand more serious research *in the actual context*. In this issue, Greer speaks to the inferiority of our logical and "motivated reasoning" when it fails to include voices from the actual context (p. 104). My friend Dwight Baker said it succinctly: "There's a big difference between a contextualization done *FOR* a people and a contextualization done *BY* a people." Field experience and anecdotal observations will not suffice where we need disciplined and grounded research among unreached populations.

Thirdly, we need to analytically distinguish between an understanding of *culture* and *context*.⁴ This is especially crucial in handling Scripture in the Muslim world. The selection of terminology (LeFebvre and Abdulfadi, p. 61) or the selection of orthography (Dekker and Injiiru, p. 75) will determine whether Muslims "listen to" or "take in" Scripture. Deeply ingrained historical prejudices could booby-trap

the effective transmission of Scripture. But there's more that contributes to these prejudices than simply the culture or worldview of a Muslim people. Each Muslim *context* is loaded with issues of *power, religious identity* and *geo-politics*. With the pressures of globalization, war and migration, Muslims are being forced to renegotiate their identities or to express new religiosities in order to cope with deep insecurity. Katherine Kraft captures a lot of this dynamic in her new book on conversion and identity among Arabs (p. 102). It's *the context* that can skew how Muslims hear and understand the Scriptures. [As a point of comparison, the selection of Hangul script did not carry a Buddhist or Confucian association in the Korean context (p. 78) And these Muslim contextual factors also seem to disappear when you read Franklin's article on the tribal languages of the Pacific region (p. 83).]

Well, enjoy the reading. And know that we are quickening our pace of production in order to catch up in early 2013. Because we are committed to providing you with fresh reading (despite delays), some "future" material

from November 2012 appears in the book review and *In Others' Words* sections of this April-June 2012 issue. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹These dialogues were lifted from a small forum called "Bridging the Divide," which is presently discussing issues of Muslim contextualization.

²Rick Brown, L. Grey, and A. Grey. 2011. "A New Look at Translating Biblical Familial Terms." *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28 (3):105f.

³Robert Priest makes this appeal for new anthropological theory in the "Afterword" of Howell and Zehner (eds.), *Power and Identity in the Global Church* (William Carey Library: Pasadena, CA, 2009), 185.

⁴*Ibid.*, 1-26.

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: *The World Consultation on Frontier Missions* and the *International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions*. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.