

THE Missing Father

Living and Explaining a Trinitarian Concept of God to Muslims

By Leith Gray

“...In the West there is a ‘missing Father.’ When I go to the U.S. and I am around Christians...it bothers me because [they are] always talking about ‘Jesus,’ often with no reference to God—only Jesus. Even when quoting the Scriptures, there is no reference to the Father.” So observes Mazhar Malouhi, a follower of Christ from a Muslim heritage, in the recently-released book about his life, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road* (p.183).

Mazhar further notes, “...the Heavenly Father is not there in our conversation. When our Lord taught us how to pray, He said, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name.’...We too often are not seeing the Father through Christ. We stop with Christ...Often it seems when Christians talk with Muslims they put Jesus in the place of God the Father. Yet, we read that Jesus continually focuses us on God and gives glory to Him....I find Christians even praying to Jesus in the name of Jesus.” (ibid)

While God the Father is often missing from the thoughts and speech of Christians, when they do speak of Him to Muslims, they run into an enormous roadblock. A Sudanese Muslim friend who has been a follower of Jesus for many years observed: “In my experience, the term ‘Father’ as used for God is not acceptable to Muslims, and they react negatively to it, to the point of insulting Christians, threatening them, and persecuting them. Only about 1% of Muslims will accept this term, and they are those who are very open-minded and educated.”

Muslims are taught to pray the following words from *Surat al-Ikhlās* in the Qur’an seventeen times a day:

Say he is God, the One and Only;
God the Eternal, Absolute;
He did not father, nor was he fathered;
And there is none like unto Him.

These words reflect a serious misunderstanding among Muslims of the kinship and begetting language of the Bible, language that is rejected as a reference to physical procreation. The shocked reaction Muslims feel to kinship or begetting language is the same shock we feel when we hear stories of Zeus or Krishna taking physical form, ravishing virgins, and these women then giving birth to godlike offspring.

Those of us brought up in Christian settings normally have warm and positive associations with the term “Father” as used to refer to God. It is hard for us to understand, but Muslims in general do not have the same understandings that we do. A short publication “Questions and Answers on Islam” produced by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought in Jordan was recently distributed at a major gathering of Muslim and Christian leaders. In this book, they pose the following question:

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Leith Gray and his wife Andrea work in West Asia, where Leith has been since the late 1980s. They train local and cross-cultural co-workers on how to present the message of Christ creatively and incarnationally in local contexts.

Does Islam believe that God is male?

No. The Quran never refers to God as 'Father'. Muslim thinkers of all ages have agreed that God, as the Creator of all being, is the author of gender but is not gendered. While English translations of Arabic texts generally refer to Allah as "He," this only reflects the absence of a neuter pronoun in Arabic, and does not indicate that God is 'masculine.'

The above quotation shows that Muslims view the term "father" in its primary biological and physical sense. Many Muslims are actually fearful of God's wrath if they even hear or utter kinship language in reference to God, since the Qur'an says that such claims are so repulsive that the earth might even split open from the horror. On the basis of this Qur'anic verse, some Muslims actually fear the earth cracking open and swallowing them if they utter these words (See the Qur'an, *Surat Maryam*, 19:90-91).

The term "father" appears in the Bible to refer to genetic relationships, but it does so in a much broader sense than in English or other languages.

It is not just the use of the term "Father" for God that confuses Muslims, however. In Luke 2:48, for example, Mary and Joseph return to the temple courts in Jerusalem to find Jesus deep in discussion with religious scholars. Mary reproves the

young Jesus saying, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your *father* and I have been anxiously searching for you." One educated Syrian Muslim woman was quite upset when she read this passage. She saw it as contradicting other parts of the Bible that clearly state that Jesus had no human father and was born of a virgin, and proof that the Bible was corrupted and unreliable. This underscores the fact that for Arab Muslims, the term "father" means biological father. That is why they do not use the term in reference to foster fathers and step fathers.

Understanding the Biblical Usage of "Father"

Of course, the biblical text does not intend to communicate sexual concepts with the use of kinship language for God and Jesus. If that is not the intended meaning, then what does this kinship terminology mean? Here is where careful biblical research and exegesis is important, since we want to communicate the biblical message and not our own traditions or cultural understandings of the term.

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broader sense than in English or other languages. So the Bible uses the term "father" for any **progenitor**, even for a great-grandfather or more distant ancestor. (1 Kings 15:11; Genesis 15:15; Matthew 1:1-17).

Beyond this, however, the term "father" is used with a very wide metaphorical sense. It can be used to mean a **founder or inventor** (Genesis 4:20), a **benefactor or protector** (Job 29:16), a **patron** of those under a leader (Isaiah 22:21; Isaiah 9:6).

This word is **used by subordinates** to those to whom they owe honor and allegiance. (1 Samuel 24:11; 2 Kings 2:12) The word is also used for those who take the role of **teacher or counselor** to others. (Genesis 45:8; 2 Kings 6:21) The term father, as we noted above, can also be **used by worshippers** to address their god or gods. (Jeremiah 2:27)

It is widely acknowledged among Evangelical scholars that kinship language was used in the Ancient Near East to describe non-biological relationships, especially those of **patron and client**. As D.A. deSilva notes in the Dictionary of New Testament Background,

The relationship between human and divine beings, cosmic inferiors and superiors as it were, was expressed in terms of the closest analogy in the world of social interaction, namely patronage. . . . This holds true. . . for the way [New Testament] authors give expression to the relationship between the one God and the people of God. (p. 769)

This terminology was used for kings and those lesser kings that they controlled. It was also used for relationships of worshippers to their gods, and of the Israelites to the one true God.

How Do We Respond?

There is a yawning chasm of confusion and misunderstanding between Muslims and the message of the Bible. Therefore, we must consider not simply how to teach Biblical doctrines better, but how to live our lives in a way that shows the reality of God the Father in our lives. As Jesus taught, "Now this is eternal life: *that they may know you*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3) One way we can do that is to make our prayers more Trinitarian.

Modeling Biblical Prayers

When we offer to pray for our Muslim friends in the name of Jesus the Messiah, whom our friends recognize as a great healer, we have the opportunity to model appropriate Trinitarian prayers. One Muslim woman our family knows came to us shortly after deciding to follow Christ. She had heard some of the local Christians praying and was confused, "Why do people begin their prayer

with ‘O Jesus’ and end their prayer with ‘in Jesus’ name?’” The confusion this Muslim woman and many others like her have with our language reflects the unitarian nature of many prayers and the need to be more Trinitarian.

A useful resource for model prayers is the wonderful heritage of Bible-based prayers that are used in certain denominations. For example, in the Anglican tradition there are many prayers and intercessions that call upon God in the name of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. There has been a tremendous upsurge of interest among Evangelicals in recent years in this heritage, and what is called the Daily Office (daily, set prayers at morning, midday, and evening). These are Trinitarian in a variety of ways. Sometimes people assume that to be Trinitarian, a prayer must end with the formula “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” as in Roman Catholic prayers, but this wording appears only once in the Bible, in Matthew 28:19. On the other hand, out of the over sixty passages in the New Testament that mention the three persons of the Godhead, we can find formulations such as “God, our Lord Jesus, and the Spirit” (Acts 20:21-22) and “God, Christ and His Spirit” (2 Cor. 1:21-22). One can also draw Biblical terms together into phrases like “God, His Word, and His Spirit.” These expressions are more acceptable to Muslims because the words do not involve biological language.

The Psalms of David and other Biblical prayers and songs of praise provide a model for honoring God the Father. There is a selection of worshipful Psalms rendered as Arabic poetry and set to Arab music at www.sabeelmedia.com, and these have proven to be quite popular with Muslims.

Some Possible Explanations

In addition to modeling the use of Trinitarian prayers and politely avoiding language that sounds biological, we need to be prepared to explain “Father” language to our Muslim friends when they ask. It is important to remember that many Muslims are interested in the Bible and Jesus, but they do not have the Biblical background to make sense of church terminology. Our aim should be to help Muslims get past the linguistic stumbling blocks so that they can understand the message of the Bible, and follow Jesus as Lord of all. Following are a few approaches that Christians have found useful when speaking to Muslim friends.

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Old Testament Explanations

Since the kinship language of the Bible is being used in these passages metaphorically, it is very important that we explain this to our Muslim friends.

We can do so by starting in the Old Testament and introducing stories where the term “son(s)” is used for God’s people, with them using “father” in response. For example, we find in Isaiah 1:2:

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! This is what the LORD says: “The children I raised and cared for have turned against me.”

Other useful passages are Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1-3; Isaiah 63:15; Malachi 1:6 and 2:10.

We also find God describing the relationship between himself and the anointed king by using the imagery of a father and a son, as in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 9:6.

Similes or Other Parts of Speech

Some Muslims will accept the use of a comparison to explain the kinship metaphors. This is the approach found in some Jewish texts, especially the ancient translations. In the ancient Aramaic interpretive translation of the Psalms, called the Psalms Targum, Psalm 2:7 is rendered as follows: “I will tell of the covenant of the Lord. He said: “You are *as dear to me as a son to a father...*”

Expressing the concept using adjectives or verbs could also be helpful.

Some ways we might communicate fatherhood language about God:

- God who cares for his people as/like a father
The fatherly God
- God who fathers/protects/cares for his people
- God the spiritual Father
- God our guardian/caretaker/protector

Useful Terms or Vocabulary

Sometimes it is possible to use the family imagery about God, but using words that are not seen in a physical or sexual sense. For example, while the term “children of God” is often very objectionable, to say “people of the household of God” has been found to be acceptable, as well as “household of God” and even “family of God,” if the right word for “family” is used (such as Arabic *ahl*).

Several of the so-called “Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God” found in Muslim tradition communicate aspects of God’s fatherly nature. One of the most useful terms in Arabic is the word *rabb*.

This word is often translated by Muslims into English as “cherisher and sustainer.” It is derived from the Arabic root r-b-b which has the sense of “raising, caring for (especially children).” Some related words from the same root are *murabbi*

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“one who brings up a child” and *raab* “foster father.” Muslims feel that the word *rabb* has a sense of intimacy and closeness without physical or sexual connotations.

Another of the “Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God”

is *al-waliyy*. The term *waliyy*, according to the Hans Wehr dictionary, has the following senses: “near, nearby; neighboring, adjacent; close;—(pl. *awliya*) helper, supporter, benefactor, sponsor;

friend, close associate; relative; patron, protector; legal guardian, curator, tutor....”

These are the normal terms used in Arabic to explain non-biological patronage relationships, and are used in this way in an ancient Arabic translation from the 9th century called *The Elegant Gospels*. In English we can use terms like those above to explain what it means for God to be Father. Of course it is essential to explain that the term Father has no sexual or procreational meanings when used for God.

Conclusion

Most of us already have or will soon encounter opportunities to befriend Muslims and speak about our faith. When we take the time to explain kinship terms and Trinitarian concepts in understandable ways, we open the doors for our Muslim friends to encounter the gripping story of Jesus and begin a journey of following him in faith and obedience. 🌐

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