

Wycliffe Sees Opposition to New Bible Translation

Medieval pastor John Wycliffe continues to cause a stir among churches—even in the 21st century—as his Bible translation ideas upset Christian leaders once again.

In the 14th century **Wycliffe** used indigenous language to convey Scripture. He angered church leaders with radical moves like replacing the Latin *Deus* with the English *God*.

Today's **Bible translators** follow in his footsteps, using alternative terms for the Trinity and heavenly beings to reach new audiences—and they're encountering the same resistance Wycliffe did.

The most recent controversies surround an artistic retelling of the **New Testament** by Thomas Nelson, *The Voice*, and an Arabic Scripture linked to Wycliffe Bible Translators and Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). The two separate initiatives use different words to convey Scripture to their audiences.

Written in a screenplay format, Thomas Nelson's version uses *the Voice* instead of *the Word*; sometimes *Eternal One* when it refers to *God*; and *messenger of the Lord* instead of *angel*. Meanwhile, the Arabic text uses *Allah* instead of *Father* and *Messiah* in place of *Son of God*, to connect with readers in Muslim cultures.

Fierce opposition has come from the Assemblies of God USA and Presbyterian Church in America. The Presbyterian Church has condemned removing references to God as *Father* or Jesus as *Son*.

"Our colleagues in SIL are taking a brave step in suspending the publication of Scripture in parts of the world where

controversy has been stirred up,” says Eddie Arthur, executive director of Wycliffe Bible Translators, noting that the headline-making translations are a “tiny fraction” of Wycliffe’s 1,400-plus programs. “We look forward to the outcome of their period of global consultation.”

In the meantime, scholars from both sides of the Atlantic have expressed concern about these controversies. They’re challenging Christians to grasp the issues and consider the challenges facing translation teams.

“There are many issues in Bible translation,” says Nick Ellis, managing editor of BibleMesh Biblical Languages. “We are communicating an ancient text into a new culture. It’s not an easy job.”

For example, the argument supporting the Arabic text is that *father* and *son* imply a sexual relationship with Jesus’ mother. Yet these tensions aren’t new; they reflect an old debate of how to describe the first and second Person of the Trinity.

“It’s not just a problem of translation, it’s a theological problem,” Ellis says. He encourages these questions to lead to “contemplation and medication” on key issues like the Trinity with a spirit of love. Ellis’ prayer is that fundraising for the translation community will spike in the wake of this type of debate.

Jon Riding, leader of the linguistic computing team at Bible Society, agrees that the translation community is a set of people honestly trying to do their best—and they need prayer support.

Focusing on the general issues surrounding translation, Riding says the word *Allah* comes from the Semitic group of languages. Close to Hebrew and Syriac, it is the equivalent of *theos* in Greek.

“If you’re going to translate Scripture for a culture that has

a strong Arabic influence, you need a really good reason to give God a different name from the one He has. Otherwise, you're importing a foreign god," Riding says. "And that's potentially unhelpful."

Similar challenges can be seen in conveying Psalm 23 to Eskimos. "The Lord is my shepherd" has no meaning for a culture that better understands "the Lord is my husky team handler."

The scholarly view is that there could be unnecessary alarm over particular issues taken in isolation. "People want a conspiracy," warned Ellis. "They want a smoking gun. We need to be working together as a church."