

## On Capitalizing ‘Son’ in Psalm 2

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Over at the [ketuvim](#) blog, Jim Getz [posted](#) on the need for a translation that is as true to the Hebrew text as possible. He objects to the practice of translations like NIV, ESV, and NASB which capitalize ‘Son’ in Ps 2:7, 12. For some back and forth on the issue, go [here](#) on the [Better Bibles](#) blog.

But what if one holds, as I do, that Ps 2 is ultimately to be read in light of the entire sweep of divine involvement in the history of the people of Israel? What if one believes that Ps 2 is fulfilled and will continue to be fulfilled in unexpected ways by Jesus of Nazareth?

Capitalization in translation is still objectionable, because it obscures the historical sense the psalm has, and replaces that sense with its christological sense.

Translations like NIV, ESV, and NASB all claim to be accurate and faithful to the Hebrew text as they understand it. It is natural to expect on the basis of these claims that the historical sense of the text will be the one translated.

NIV, ESV, and NASB translate the historical sense in most instances. This makes the few times they don’t stand out like a sore thumb (Ps 2:7, 12; 110:1; Isa 7:14; Zech 9:9; readers are welcome to point out others).

To be sure, if translators want to provide the *sensus plenior* of the text as they understand it, the choice is theirs and I for one will not challenge it. But they ought to do so consistently, and say something like this in a preface: “The Old Testament is translated in accordance with the interpretation given it in the New Testament.” That would be truth in advertising.

In that case, other capitalizations are in order. For example, Hosea 11:1 ought to be translated “Out of Egypt I called my Son.” The fact that it isn’t by the translations in question reveals the arbitrariness of their approach.

### Christian Interpretation of Inherited Jewish Literature

Let me clarify. In my view, a hermeneutic that interprets Ps 2 and Hos 11:1 christologically is essential to Christian theology. It is especially important that the Hosea passage be so interpreted, because the feature of Matthean christology it reflects, namely that Jesus is true Israel, not only the true Messiah, is often overlooked. The failure to grasp this christological

dimension is just as serious as overlooking the affirmation in Johannine christology that Jesus, besides being true God, is true man.

But the best Christian exegetes are capable of distinguishing a text's historical sense from the sense it has in light of the one they know to be their Lord and Savior. Exegetes who fail to do so are not being conservative. They are being obtuse.

A both/and hermeneutic is a defensible framework for Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. A both/and<sup>2</sup> hermeneutic is more helpful still. That is, the approach I appreciate more than any other is one which describes both the original sense of a text (what it meant once upon a time, before rabbinic Judaism and Christianity got hold of it) and the derivative senses it came to have in rabbinic Judaism on the one hand and among Christians on the other.

The best model for this kind of commentary is the [volume](#) by Brevard Childs on *Exodus* in the OTL (1974). A simple both/and framework is more usual. Two examples may illustrate.

#### Craigie and Alonso Schökel

Peter Craigie, an evangelical exegete, understands the historical sense of Psalm 2 to refer to the newly crowned king of the dynasty of David. He dates the psalm to the First Temple period, and does not capitalize 'son' in v. 7 or v. 12. He fully accepts the christological reading of the Psalm, but does not import that reading into his translation.

According to Craigie, a christological reading of the Psalm has two dimensions. (1) A past reference, to the rebellion of "Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel" against God's anointed (Acts 4:27): nonetheless, "their violence was not confronted by other violence, but accepted by Jesus in his death" (Craigie, 69). (2) An ongoing and future reference, to the rebellion of the powers that oppose the reign of the "Child" who is "to rule all nations with a rod of iron" (Revelation 12:5, cited by Craigie, 69). According to the apocalypse, the wrath of the Messiah which works itself out in history is terrible indeed, but nonetheless aims at a positive conclusion and will culminate in the creation of a new heavens and a new earth.

Luis Alonso Schökel, a Catholic exegete, argues that the psalm dates from a subsequent age in which Israel had no king at all. On this reading, the psalm is messianic in origin. But he still does not capitalize 'son' in v. 7 (he reads otherwise in v. 12), though he does capitalize "Anointed" in v. 2.

For Alonso, the language of sonship in the psalm does not imply that the Anointed was coessential with Yahweh who adopts him, despite language in v. 7 which might be and was so interpreted. Alonso believes as much as anyone in orthodox Christology, but he does not import that belief into his translation.

Alonso rehearses the history of Christian interpretation of Ps 2 with sensitivity. He quotes at length from Gregory of Nyssa. Here is an excerpt:

*“Called to the kingdom that dominates all kingdoms, those who formerly lived without God become God’s heirs through faith in the one who is ‘begotten today’ and ‘consecrated’ for the purpose of reigning over them. They too are reborn as kings.*

*“With his rod of iron, i.e., with his invincible power, he smashes what in them is earth and clay and transforms them into an incorruptible nature.”*

For Alonso, the psalm admits an “eschatological projection,” but he opts to highlight that of 1 Cor 15:24-26, 28, not that of the Apocalypse.

#### Summary

Acute interpreters of scripture distinguish between the historical sense of a text and subsequent interpretation of it, no matter how persuasive the latter might be.

Future editions of ESV and the soon-to-be-released ISV would do well to do likewise by not capitalizing ‘son’ in Psalm 2. TNIV has already taken the plunge and translated ‘anointed’ and ‘son.’ But honesty, as the song says, is a lonely word.

#### References

Luis Alonso Schökel and Cecilia Carniti, *I salmi* (2 vols; tr. Antonio Nepi; commenti biblici; Roma: Borla, 1992 [1991]) 1:155-79.

Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (suppl. Marvin E. Tate; WBC 19; Nashville: Nelson, <sup>2</sup>2004 [1983]) 62-69.