

Should We Capitalize Divine Pronouns?

BY BILL MOUNCE

[In this article, Greek scholar Bill Mounce, addresses a question that I have been asked on occasion. His answers are interesting and helpful.]

I am often asked why the ESV and NIV don't capitalize "divine pronouns," pronouns referring to God. For example, "For we are *His* workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:10, NASB).

There seems to be at least four reasons why not.

1. The originals did not mark divine pronouns. Hebrew letters are all the same height (אבגד), and the original Greek manuscripts would have been all capitals (ΑΒΓΔ), or what is called majuscules (uncials are a form of majuscules). Capitalizing what we believe to be divine pronouns adds an extra layer of interpretation on the translation, something translators shy away from (some more than others).

2. Capitalizing divine pronouns is a recent and sporadic practice. You don't find it in the KJV (1611), the ASV (1901), or the RSV (1952). It appears that the first translation to do so was the NASB (1971, 1995). I do not have a copy of the original 1960 version of the NASB but I assume the 1971 is following the same style. The NKJV (1982) also capitalizes divine pronouns. The HCSB (1999) did capitalize divine pronouns, but the practice was stopped in the CBS revision (2017). In other words, there is no real historical precedence as to why this practice should be followed.

The Facebook group on translations have pointed out that some relatively unknown translations do capitalize divine pronouns: Francis Kenrick (1860s); Concordant Version (1927); Francis Spencer (1937); and as you might expect, the Amplified Bible (1954). But none of these determine precedence.

3. No English stylesheet says to do this. While the Chicago Manual of Style does not tell me how to respect God, their styles (and others like them) are important to follow.

4. Why is capitalization a sign of respect? We capitalize proper names and specific places and things not out of respect but for the sake of clarity of identification. It seems to me to be artificial to assign "respect" to a style sheet. Why not all caps? Wouldn't that be even more respectful? Italics? Bold and italic? Red ink? You get the point.

It is interesting that "heaven" and "hell" are generally not capitalized by most publishers' style sheets when the rule says that the names of people ("bill" vs. "Bill"), specific places ("north" vs. "North Pole") and things (e.g., "bridge" vs. "Brooklyn Bridge") should be capitalized (see www.scribendi.com).

For me the primary argument is that the original Hebrew and Greek did not distinguish pronouns referring to God from other words, and so it would be improper for us to add an additional layer of interpretation onto the text.

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His website, www.billmounce.com is a user-friendly resource for study of New Testament Greek.