

AN ESSAY
ON THE
PROPER RENDERING
OF THE WORDS
ELOHIM AND THEOS
INTO THE
CHINESE LANGUAGE.

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[*Reprinted from Chinese Repository, Vol. xvii, 1848.*]

SHANGHAI:
AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN MISSION PRESS.
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MDCCCLXXVI.

ESSAY ON THE TERM FOR DEITY.



A KNOWLEDGE of the Being and attributes of God must be regarded as the foundation of all acceptable worship. Without this knowledge the worshiper, instead of adoring the true God, may, when addressing his Deity, be worshipping a mere creature of his own imagination.

The chief object for which a revelation was given, we may suppose, was to supply this knowledge: to reveal the true God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to make known to man the gracious plan which this Triune God had adopted for his restoration and salvation. The word *God* is thus the most important that occurs in the Sacred Scriptures; for with this word is connected all the knowledge which is most important for man to know. “This is life eternal,” says our blessed Lord, “that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.”

From these considerations, we are led to attach much importance to the term by which the word *θεος* shall be rendered in the revision of the translation of the New Testament, into the Chinese language, now preparing. We all know the importance of a name; the great influence it exercises either to aid or hinder us in forming correct conceptions of an object; and may, therefore, easily conceive how much the propagation of correct views of the true God may be furthered or hindered, in China, by the selection that may be made of the term to render *θεος*. We must, however, guard against expecting too much from this source; among a heathen people no word can be found which will convey, by the meaning which its previous *usus loquendi* has given it, just ideas of the true God. These ideas can be derived alone from the revelation He has made of Himself. This, as I have said above, is the most precious knowledge a translator communicates to the heathen in rendering the Word of God into their language, and he must not expect to find this knowledge stored up in some word ready for his use. The possession of a correct knowledge of God is not, what the Christian teacher can expect to find among the heathen, at the commencement of his instructions; it is rather the goal, which he can only expect to reach after many days of painful labor. This being the case, the translation of the Scriptures, into the language of the Chinese, may be regarded as having for its highest aim the making them acquainted with the

true God and the relations they sustain to him. It becomes then a matter of much importance to decide what their knowledge on this subject is, and what are the chief errors into which they have fallen: above all, to inquire, whether they are monotheists or polytheists? To this question there is but one response. The Chinese have been polytheists from the highest ages to which their history extends: the great enemy to be here beaten down is polytheism: the first great truth, with respect to the Divinity, to be taught them is, the Unity of the Godhead. Therefore,—

In rendering Θεός, a translator, whilst he endeavors, in the selection of the term he makes, to take advantage of all the knowledge of Divinity in general that may exist among the Chinese, will be extremely careful lest Jehovah may be confounded with any one of their numberless Deities, and especially anxious to avail himself of the term that will prove most efficient in assailing polytheism.

Unhappily great difficulty has always been felt by Christian missionaries, in China, to agree upon a word by which to render *Elohim* and *Θεός*. The Romish missionaries had formerly much controversy on this point; and now, alas, the Protestant missionaries find themselves divided in opinion on the same point. These facts would lead us to suppose that there must be some inherent difficulties in the case, arising either from the theology of the Chinese or from some peculiarity of their language. We shall see in the sequel, perhaps, to which to attribute it.

The decision which was made of this controversy, in the Romish church, is considered by Protestants rather a cutting of the knot than the untying of it; and, for reasons which will appear in a subsequent part of this Essay, none of them are disposed to unite with the Romanists in the term they have adopted.

The chief reason, that the inquiries on this point have not led to a result commanding general concurrence, appears to the writer to be the neglect, on the part of the various inquirers, to come to a definite understanding on the general question, how the difficulty, arising from polytheism, is to be met. In consequence of the neglect to settle this previous question, they have wandered in the wide fields of Chinese literature without a definite object; the results of their several inquiries, though clashing, have not led to any distinct issue, and the question has remained undecided.

It is, however, surely of the utmost importance, in a case of this kind, at the very outset, to determine definitely *what* we shall seek for, before our minds become engaged in the examination of the multifarious evidence that may be submitted.

If it be admitted that the Chinese do not know the true God, (which we understand is admitted by all the Protestant missionaries,) then it appears to us one of two terms must be sought for: viz. either the name of the chief God of the Chinese, or the name by which the whole class of Gods is known in their language. We must either seek the name of the Being to whom they have ascribed the most glorious attributes; or, discarding this, we must use the generic

name for God, i. e. the name of the highest class of *Beings* to whom the Chinese are in the habit of offering *religious worship*. There is no middle course between these two points: which of these two terms shall be sought for, is the previous general question, which should be definitely settled, if we wish our discussions to lead to a direct issue. It is manifest that two parties, the one of which is seeking for the name of the highest Being known to the Chinese, the other for the name of the highest *class* of Beings to whom the Chinese offer religious worship, are not likely to agree upon the same term as the result of their inquiries.

We shall, therefore, first discuss this general question. In translating the Scriptures into the language of a polytheistic nation, should the name of their chief God, or the generic name for God in their language, be used to render *Elohim* and *θεος*?

The following considerations have convinced us, that, in such a case, the generic name for God should be used; and that the use of the name of the chief Deity of any polytheistic nation to render *Elohim* would be wholly inadmissible.

1. *Elohim*, in the Old Testament, is not a proper name of the true God, but is a generic term, applied to heathen Deities as well as to Jehovah. It must therefore, be rendered by a generic term and not by a proper name.

2. In using the generic name for God, under the circumstances we are considering, a translator follows the example of the inspired men, who wrote in the Greek and Latin languages. The Grecians and Romans were polytheists: the inspired writers of the New Testament, and the Apostles who preached the gospel to the Greeks and Romans, were precisely in the same circumstances in which we are now seeking for a general rule to guide us in our inquiries. The question, then, how did they act under these circumstances, is one of great interest to us. It is well known that the Septuagint translators used *θεος* and not Zeus to render *Elohim* into Greek, and that the Apostles used the same term in the New Testament. The same course was pursued at Rome; the generic name was preferred to the name of the chief Deity: Deus was used, not Jupiter. If then a translator, engaged in rendering the Sacred Scriptures into the language of a polytheistic people, desires to follow the example of inspired men, he must employ the generic name for God used by them, and not the name of the chief Deity.

3. It is necessary to use the generic term for God, in order to render correctly the First Commandment, and many other parts of Scripture which forbid polytheism.

The First Commandment reads as follows: "I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other Gods but me." Let the reader substitute Jupiter, or the name of the chief God of any polytheistic system with which he is acquainted, for *God* in the first clause and *God* in the second, and he will see how completely the bearing of this Commandment, on polytheism, is nullified.