

Capitalization of Pronouns for God

1) Our preference: No capitalization of pronouns for God

Our synod's publications stopped capitalizing pronouns for God in 1979. If we used a Bible with the pronouns capitalized, this Bible would look different from the rest of our publications. Here are the stylistic reasons that have been stated in our synod's official periodical for not capitalizing the pronouns:

- “First, it is the style that is most commonly used by writers both inside and outside the church.
- Second, it is the style used by the most common Bible translations, such as the King James Version (KJV); the New International Version (NIV); the Revised Standard Version (RSV); and the English Standard Bible (ESV), first published in 2001. Yes, there are other translations that do capitalize the pronouns, but the most common do not.
- Third, because the capitalization of pronouns and other words was the predominant style in the 19th and 20th centuries, using the same style for current books gives them a dated feel. Some suggest that it may even make the books irrelevant to modern readers. That's something we would not want to do with the Word of Life for the ages” (*Forward in Christ*, Dec. 2010, p. 6).

Our seminary's Old Testament department has also gone on record as preferring an English translation without capitalization for pronouns for God. They agree with the above stated stylistic concerns, but they more importantly have interpretive concerns. They recognize that there is no capitalization in Hebrew or in the Greek. So if a translation is striving for “optimal equivalence” with the original, it could be argued that the translation should not include capitalization. Capitalizing represents an interpretive insertion.

Especially problematic are the messianic prophecies. Capitalizing the pronouns for God necessitates that the translation make decisions about which Old Testament prophecies are “direct” prophecies referring only to Christ and which prophecies are “typical” prophecies that refer to some other human or humans in addition to Christ. Direct prophecies should have capitalization, and prophecies with an intermediate referent should not. This often results in an interpretive dilemma, because there is no solid agreement among evangelical scholars on which passages are direct prophecies and which are not.

The HCSB, for example, capitalizes all of the pronouns in Psalm 110 without any footnotes. It capitalizes all of the pronouns in Psalm 2, but includes footnotes with lower case pronouns. It does not capitalize any pronouns in any other psalm. It can be debated: Why capitalize in Psalm 2, and not Psalm 16, Psalm 22, or others? Why are there footnotes in Psalm 2, but not Psalm 110? There are differences of opinion here, and a policy like this is going to be unsatisfactory to many. In this regard we also noted that the HCSB did not capitalize the pronouns in the Protoevangelium in Genesis 3:15 and in one of the “Servant Songs” (Isa 49:1-7)—places where we would definitely have expected it.

With this capitalization policy, we also have a concern that readers will get used to thinking that if there is no capitalization, then the passage must not refer to Christ. This could be detrimental for readers, because they may miss Christ in the many passages that are considered “typical” by the translators—even when these passages are explicitly quoted in the New Testament as messianic. For example, readers will be led to think about Christ in Psalm 2:7 because of the capitalization: “He said to Me, ‘You are My Son.’” But they very likely will not think about Christ in Psalm 16:10: “You will not abandon me to Sheol.” Non-capitalization can easily become a signal that Christ is not included, and readers can thereby miss Christ when they should be thinking about him.

In our opinion, it is best to have no capitalization. Then readers can be trained to look for Christ everywhere, not only where the editors have inserted capitalization.

2) Another option: If you continue to capitalize the pronouns that refer to God, you could keep the current HCSB capitalization arrangement in the messianic passages. But you could add footnotes to the Old Testament passages that are quoted in the New Testament as referring to Christ, in order to alert readers to the messianic content of these passages.

As the HCSB stands now, the New Testament clearly identifies Old Testament quotations with bold print. However, there is nothing in the Old Testament to indicate the passages that are quoted in the New Testament. The biggest drawback for Old Testament readers occurs in the typical prophecies that are quoted in the New Testament as messianic. There is nothing in these Old Testament passages to suggest to readers that they should think about Christ. The lack of capitalization may actually lead them to assume that Christ is not included.

Perhaps a footnote like this could be added to every Old Testament passage that is quoted in the New Testament in reference to Christ: “^aquoted in John 13:18 in reference to Christ.” This would help readers to see Christ in the Old Testament.

These footnotes could also be added with our first option—if you used no capitalization for any divine pronouns. It could be a nice way to help Old Testament readers to see Christ and to tie together Old Testament prophecies with their New Testament fulfillments. For the pool of verses, you could simply use the passages in bold print in the HCSB New Testament that refer to Christ.

3) Another option (preferred less by us): If you continue to capitalize the pronouns that refer to God, you could change your policy in regard to Old Testament messianic prophecies. You could capitalize pronouns in the following circumstances:

- a) When there is widespread agreement that the prophecy is a direct prophecy of Christ, and/or**
- b) When the New Testament specifically quotes the verse as finding fulfillment in Christ.**

This would mean that some passages that Bible scholars agree are typical (such as 2 Samuel 7:14) would have capitalization. But, the policy for determining when to capitalize would be objective and not be something open to disagreement since it is established by the New Testament. There would be less interpretive judgment by the translators.

The major benefit would be that readers would for sure see Christ in those passages that are explicitly quoted in the New Testament as messianic. One could argue that it is better to err on the side of being generous with capitalization rather than skimpy, if a translation wants to help readers see Christ fully in the Old Testament.

Following this policy, you could keep all the capitalization that is currently in the HCSB. But you should add capitalization in these verses because of NT quotations:

- Deuteronomy 18:15-19
- 2 Samuel 7:14
- 1 Chronicles 17:13
- Psalm 8:4-6
- Psalm 16:8-11
- Psalm 22:1
- Psalm 22:18
- Psalm 22:22
- Psalm 34:20

- Psalm 40:6-8
- Psalm 41:9
- Psalm 45:7
- Psalm 69:4,9
- Psalm 118:26
- Isaiah 7:14
- Isaiah 8:18
- Acts 2:25-28
- Hebrews 2:5-8

We would also recommend that capitalization be added in the following passages, even though they are not quoted in the NT, because they have been commonly regarded as direct prophecies:

- Genesis 3:15
- Isaiah 49:1-7 (to make it consistent with the other “Servant Songs”)

Of course, the drawback to this policy would be that it would make some passages more difficult to understand in their original Old Testament context. Imagine translating Hosea 11:1 with “Out of Egypt I called my Son.” The next verse goes on with Israel worshiping the Baals and burning incense to carved images. The reader could be confused. Is “Son” a proper name of “Israel?” Will the Messiah worship the Baals?

Also, some Bible sections that refer to Christ would look inconsistent in their capitalization. For example, verse 18 in Psalm 22 would be capitalized because it is quoted in John 19: “They divided My garments among themselves, and they cast lots for My clothing.” But verse 16 of the same psalm would not be capitalized because it is not quoted in the New Testament: “They pierced my hands and my feet”—even though the language leads one to think about Christ equally as much as verse 18.

As stated above, the difficulties associated with capitalizing pronouns lead us to prefer no capitalization of pronouns. The New Testament uses the Old Testament in complex ways. If there is no capitalization, then today’s readers can sort things out in the text in the same way that the original readers did, without being steered in one direction or another by the interpretive judgments of the translator.

4) Whatever you decide to do, it may be good to add a few sentences in the “Introduction to the HCSB” at the beginning of every Bible—speaking specifically about what your capitalization policy means for messianic passages.

If you have no capitalization of pronouns, state that you want people to be looking for Christ everywhere. The non-capitalization of pronouns in an Old Testament verse should not be construed as a denial that the passage has Christological content or importance.

If you maintain the current capitalization arrangement, state that you still want readers to think about Christ in the typical psalms and prophecies.

If you add capitalization to the typical passages that are quoted in the New Testament, state that these passages have an intermediate referent in addition to Christ.

You can see what our main concern is. We want to make sure that readers are guided to look for Christ in the Old Testament. Jesus said, “The Scriptures ... testify about Me” (John 5:39).