

# EXEGETICAL BRIEF

## Man or Servant in 2 Timothy 3:17?

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I like to try do-it-yourself projects around the house except when it comes to plumbing. With plumbing jobs, what appears to be a simple slow running drain can turn out to be rotten pipes full of tree roots decaying secretly behind recently painted walls.

This same phenomenon occurred as I was taking on this exegetical brief. Read the NIV2011's translation of 2 Timothy 3:17: "so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Focus on the phrase, "servant of God." Did this translation surprise you? It surprised me. NIV1984's familiar, "so that the **man of God** may be thoroughly equipped for every good work," was so familiar—so often read, reflected upon and recited—that I could not anticipate a revision. My initial assumption was that "servant of God" was an example of the NIV2011 translation team's commitment to inclusive language.<sup>1</sup> The slow-running-drain task was: my assumption that a translation philosophy that prefers inclusive language lay behind the translation "servant of God" and the resultant question: is "servant of God" an adequate translation of 2 Timothy 3:17's ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος?

Even if "servant of God" is an example of the NIV2011's translation philosophy<sup>2</sup> "servant" is more of an interpretation of ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος than an inclusive term we might expect like "person of God" or "believer." Had I encountered in the NIV2011, "so that the believer may be thoroughly equipped for every good work," I would have just read on and in so doing would have missed the rotten pipes. The larger task of this brief has become this: In view of the broader context of both of Paul's letters to Timothy as well as the broader context of Old Testament usage, is "servant of God" an adequate translation of ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος?

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<sup>1</sup>As expressed in their own terms: "People" and "humans" (and "human beings") were widely used for Greek and Hebrew masculine forms referring to both men and women. <http://www.niv-cbt.org/niv-2011-overview/>

<sup>2</sup>I did not interview any of the NIV2011's translation team on this point and did not find commentary in print on how they arrived at the translation, "servant of God." I would like to know their rationale for their decision.

## “Man of God” in the Old Testament

A Logos search of the phrase “man of God” (אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים) in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* will produce approximately eighty matches.<sup>3</sup> “Man of God” appears to be a formulaic description for:

- Moses (Dt 33:1; Josh 14:6; 1 Ch 23:14; Ezra 3:2; Psalm 90 title);
- Samuel (1 Sam 9:6,7,8,10);
- Elijah (1 Ki 17:18 and approximately six additional references);
- Elisha (2 Ki 4:7 and approximately twenty-nine additional references);
- David (2 Ch 8:14; Ne 12:24,36);
- Unidentified prophets (1 Ki 13:1 and approximately twenty-two additional references);
- And, finally and arguably, a possible reference to the pre-incarnate Christ as “a man of God” speaking to Samson’s parents (Ju 13:6, 8).

This is just a snapshot but conservative conclusions are available. The phrase, “man of God,” is in the Old Testament usually attributed to a prophet. If we stretch just a little our understanding of the term “prophet,” we could say that the phrase always refers to a prophet.<sup>4</sup> We can also say that the phrase “man of God” is a title. People living in the culture and context of the Old Testament—before and after the Babylonian exile—heard the phrase “man of God” and thought something similar to “a prophet sent by God to reveal oracles from God.”

## “Man of God” in the LXX

In a search of the LXX for the phrase (ὁ) ἄνθρωπος (τοῦ) θεοῦ, we find that in every occurrence, the word order is article (if the author used one) followed by ἄνθρωπος followed by an article (except in very few cases) followed by θεοῦ. In other words, the LXX is consistent with its translation of the phrase אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים. The word order is the same: (ὁ) ἄνθρωπος (τοῦ) θεοῦ. Before you decide whether this is important or not, keep reading until you see what the Apostle Paul does with this phrase.

## “Man of God” in the New Testament

The phrase “man of God” occurs only two times in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul is responsible for both usages. In 1 Timothy 6:11, we read:

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<sup>3</sup>In all of its cases and attached prepositions.

<sup>4</sup>For David as prophet, cf. 2 Sa 23:1-7; Acts 2:30. For Moses and Jesus as the prophet, cf. Dt 18:15-18; Acts 7:37.

Σὺ δέ, ὦ ἄνθρωπε θεοῦ . . .

Note how Paul chose to call attention to this phrase with the strong pointers Σὺ δέ as well as the vocative ὦ ἄνθρωπε. Consider also how the lack of articles may be Paul's way of drawing attention to the godly quality of the man whom Paul is addressing, namely, Timothy.

Then in 2 Timothy 3:17:

ἵνα ἄριστος ᾖ ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος . . .

Note here how Paul tucks τοῦ θεοῦ inside of ὁ . . . ἄνθρωπος. Assuming that Paul's readers were more likely to be relying on the LXX for their devotional reading of the Scriptures rather than a Hebrew text, and assuming that Paul himself was familiar with the LXX,<sup>5</sup> we can see that Paul's arrangement of the phrase differed from that of the LXX. A translation that captures this word order might go like this: "so that the *godly* man might be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Why did Paul rearrange what was to faithful readers of the LXX Bible a familiar phrase and word order? We will pick this discussion up below.

### The Placement of the Phrase "Man of God" in 1 and 2 Timothy

In the chart below, consider how Paul's two letters to Timothy mirror a vocabulary and an order and arrangement. Our thesis is that this repeated vocabulary and outline sets up a dramatic, powerful, rich, and multi-faceted "man of God" reference in both letters. Consider:<sup>6</sup>

1 Timothy	Function	2 Timothy
1:2 To Timothy <i>my true son</i> in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.	A fatherly and affectionate "my son" greeting that sets an initial tender tone.	1:2 To Timothy, <i>my dear son</i> : Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.
1:18-19 Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command . . . so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, holding on to faith and a good conscience	A spiritual father's appropriate encouragement to his "son" to be steadfast.	2:1-2 You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say . . . entrust to reliable people.

<sup>5</sup>This assumption is based on the fact that Paul's use of the Old Testament in his letters seems often to come from the LXX.

<sup>6</sup>All quotes from NIV2011.

1 Timothy	Function	2 Timothy
2:1-3:16	General instructions (1 Ti 3:15) and reminders (2 Ti 2:14) that Paul wanted Timothy to share with God's people.	2:3-26
4:1 The Spirit clearly says that in later times (ἐν ὑστέρισ καιροῖς) some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.	A reference to how God's truth will be opposed in the last days.	3:1 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days (ἐν ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις).
6:11 But you, man of God, (Σὺ δὲ ὁ ἄνθρωπε θεοῦ) flee these things (love of money, etc.)	"man of God" reference.	3:17 [All Scripture is inspired and useful] so that the servant of God (ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος) may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
6:12-14 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life . . . I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the <i>appearing</i> of our Lord Jesus Christ	With similar vocabulary, Paul encourages Timothy in his first letter and then encourages himself in his second letter. But also in the second letter, Paul here holds out his own model as one for his "son" to follow: faithful to the end!	4:7-8 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his <i>appearing</i> .

In 1 Timothy 6:11, Paul says, "But as for you, O man of God, flee these things (namely, love of money, etc)."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, Paul is speaking directly and only to his dear and true son in the faith, Timothy. Paul gets to this very dramatic climax<sup>8</sup> in his first letter to Timothy by confirming and celebrating his unique spiritual father relationship with Timothy. Then the rugged and faithful Apostle to the Gentiles, who has suffered much carrying out his apostleship, lays out for Timothy a

<sup>7</sup>I use here the English Standard Version because it translates the vocative case in the Greek.

<sup>8</sup>The "climax" probably is the selection from 1 Ti 6:11-16 that includes the doxology.

ministry of teaching and preaching that will surely bring opposition and suffering upon him just as it did for the mentor, Paul.

As if teaching God's truth and rebuking God's people were not dangerous enough, Paul furthermore warns Timothy that the last days will produce severe challenges for those who preach and practice God's truth. Paul had required much of Timothy in this letter. Repeatedly in this first letter,<sup>9</sup> Paul issues strong commands and solemn charges to Timothy to follow Paul's instructions without fail. Is all this too much? No! Because Timothy is, in Paul's eyes—in his spiritual father's eyes—a true “man of God” in the same exact sense and from the same stock as Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Elisha, and all of God's faithful Old Testament prophets. This is powerful encouragement!

A son wants to know that his father is both devoted to him and also has a strong confidence in him. Sons want to know that their fathers believe with conviction that their sons have all the tools and every bit of courage and grit and resolve to carry out every difficult and dangerous task. When Paul addresses Timothy with the phrase, “But as for you, O man of God,” Paul is confirming and affirming his own confidence in Timothy to accomplish everything that Paul had solemnly charged him to do. Paul is now speaking to Timothy not as a son but as a peer and a colleague and as a full partner in the ministry of the gospel.

Now consider Paul's outline in his second letter to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 3:17, Paul's reference to Timothy as a man of God will have this same tremendous impact upon Timothy—but not only Timothy. Pointing back to the same Old Testament references to “man of God,” and following the same broad outline and mirroring previously established vocabulary, Paul carefully sets up his “man of God” reference to refer to Timothy. Yet, there is a broader application here. This verse does not refer only to Timothy.

In his second letter, Paul is even more concrete asserting the uncomfortable truth that Timothy's ministry of preaching the truth and requiring God's people to live according to that truth would bring suffering: “Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Ti 2:3). But this encouragement is for all those who serve as “prophets” and teachers of God's truth in these last times. Every spiritual leader who must hold his ground in these dangerous times wants and needs that Spirit of power, love, and self-discipline (2 Ti 1:7). Every spiritual leader and teacher of God's truth wants and needs the inspired Word of God that is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting

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<sup>9</sup>Paul uses παραγγέλλω in 1 Ti 1:3; 1:18; 4:11; 5:7; 6:13. He uses Διαμαρτύρομαι in 5:21.

and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Access to the Greek phrase ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος is especially rich and precious here. Paul uses it once again to make a powerful connection for Timothy to his peers and colleagues Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Elisha, and all of God’s faithful Old Testament prophets. But Paul adds more impact to this phrase by surprising Timothy with the word order. The point of this surprising word order was to suggest how critical it would be for Timothy and every preacher/prophet of truth to live a distinctively “godly” life as a distinctively “godly” man who must hold out God’s truth in a wicked and depraved world. Timothy had encountered the phrase ἄνθρωπος τοῦ θεοῦ many times in his reading of the LXX Scriptures. That was not Paul’s word order. Paul made a different translation choice. Paul chose to characterize Timothy not only as a prophet “man of God” but, because the Scriptures are so powerful and useful, as a prophet “godly man.”

Timothy is truly the man/servant of God in 2 Timothy 3:17. But he is not the only man/servant of God to take courage and comfort from this verse. Paul did not limit his “man/servant of God” reference to Timothy in this second letter as he did in the first letter.<sup>10</sup> So now Paul is encouraging us. We are also Paul’s spiritual sons because we have all sat at Paul’s feet for doctrine, ministry tactics, teaching style, and gospel determination. We have also all received a challenging mission to preach truth and to require obedience fairly and evangelically. And we do this in the last days when people are less inclined to tolerate the truth. But we are not the Lord’s boys. We are God’s men by grace and through the power only of his Spirit (2 Ti 1:7).

Pastors and elders and teachers and all who must handle rightly God’s truth (2 Ti 2:15) are directed by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:17 to find themselves within the ranks of previous prophets before them who in spite of danger and persecution completed their God-given vocations. We know from whom we have learned God’s Word. We know that God’s Word is inspired, powerful, and true. It will completely equip all of us to remain true and to call for truth because it is so wonderfully useful for teaching, correcting, and rebuking.

Is “servant of God” an adequate translation of ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος? In my opinion, “servant of God” is better than an inclusive “believer” or “person of God” because such translations miss the broader context of

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<sup>10</sup>Paul did not preface “man of God” with “but you” and he did not set the phrase into the vocative case. The context also in my opinion prefers a broader application. Others see the context surrounding 2 Ti 3:17 requiring the reader to limit this use of “man of God” also only to Timothy. I have made my best case above for a more general reference to any prophet who must rightly handle God’s truth (2 Ti 2:15).

Paul's two letters to Timothy and to the Old Testament use of the phrase "man of God." The translation "servant of God" does tip its hat to a bigger project than a simple stopped-up sink. But in the final assessment, "servant of God" fails to deliver the strong comfort by clearly connecting Timothy and subsequent generations with the bold prophets of old.<sup>11</sup> The LXX carefully maintained its translation of the Hebrew phrase "man of God" as a title. The consistent LXX translation affirms this. Our translations can better capture the broader context and cultural weight by also maintaining "man of God" in the translation of 2 Timothy 3:17.

There is a broader application to "so that the man of God might be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Every Christian, male and female, young and mature, called worker or not will want to study deeply God's inspired Word to equip them for sharing truth and living according to the truth. The preacher will apply the phrase "man of God" broadly across generations and genders. The preacher will make this application whether his translation reads "man of God" or "servant of God." When we preach on this passage, we will take the time to provide our audience with the cultural literacy required so all of our people can be comforted and encouraged by Paul's imagery. Ultimately, however, no translation can teach or convey the rich implications and powerful encouragement that Paul extends to his gospel-preaching partners in that phrase ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος. We preachers get to do that.

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<sup>11</sup>This statement assumes, of course, that the reader possesses that context that reaches back to the Old Testament usages of the phrase "man of God" and perhaps also the context of the LXX's consistent translation of that phrase.