

TRANSLATING “SON OF GOD” FOR MUSLIM CONTEXTS, PART 1: TENSIONS AND THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE

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ABSTRACT

Those who translate the Bible into Muslim-culture languages must wrestle with the phrase “Son of God,” given that a literal translation may have non-biblical implications in the target language. This two-part article argues that Muslim-culture Bible translations must make the deity of Christ unambiguously clear. After introducing background issues, Part 1 makes the exegetical argument that “Son of God” in the New Testament reveals eternal divine relationships that cannot be captured by nonliteral translations. At the same time, the article asks whether concerns raised by Muslim-idiom translation linguists call for exceptions in certain cultural-linguistic situations.

SIGNIFICANT CONTROVERSY HAS STIRRED recently regarding translation of familial terms for God into Muslim idioms, most pointedly, regarding the Christological phrase “Son of God.” Several events highlight its importance: (1) a *Christianity Today* cover story¹ with follow up articles reflecting a growing body of other writings; (2) Bridging the Divide symposiums at Houghton

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¹ Collin Hansen, “The Son and the Crescent,” *Christianity Today*, February 2011, 18–23; C. Hansen, “The Problem ‘Son’: Debate Continues over Translating Son of God for Muslims,” *Christianity Today*, April 3, 2012, online, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.christianity-today.com/ct/2012/april/problem-son.html>.

College (2011–2014);² (3) denominational concern about perceived lack of fidelity to Scripture in certain recent translations; (4) a March 2012 appeal by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) International and the Wycliffe Global Alliance to the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) for evaluation of their translation policies for divine familial terms; and (5) the WEA independent committee’s response (April 2013) with ensuing adjustments by Wycliffe and SIL to conform to the recommendations.³ The fairly tense differences between opposing voices are partially eased by a sense of progress as translators and biblical-theological scholars seek to ensure accurate communication of God’s Word.⁴

Questions revolve around how best to translate biblical terms such as “father,” “son,” and “sons of God” (i.e., believers) when a target language may not have words that communicate the meanings intended in Scripture—particularly if the target audience is Muslim. In the process, one must ask whether a word-for-word (or formal) translation is, in fact, a true translation? Whereas the Greek, Latin, and English terms for Jesus as “the Son of God” carry multiple dimensions of meaning useful for conveying Christian faith, other languages may not have terminology capable of this level of complexity—or so it is alleged. In Christian confession, the divine person who assumed a human nature as Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal “Son” of the “Father.” He is not a biological offspring, yet he does share the identical divine nature, or DNA, so to speak. As the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed states, Jesus Christ the Son is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.”⁵

² The Bridging the Divide website (<http://btdnetwork.org/>), courtesy of Dave Coles, makes available dozens of articles about translation and outreach, especially in the Muslim world.

³ The WEA Global Review Panel, “Report to World Evangelical Alliance for Conveyance to Wycliffe Global Alliance and SIL International, April 15, 2013 (Finalized April 26, 2013),” accessed August 8, 2014, http://www.worlddea.org/images/wimg/files/2013_0429-Final%20-Report%20of%20the%20WEA%20Independent%20Bible%20Translation%20Review-%20Panel.pdf.

⁴ “Important Facts about Wycliffe and Bible Translation,” accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.wycliffe.net/aboutus/positionstatements/tabid/86/Default.aspx?id=2396>.

⁵ “The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed,” the International Consultation on English Texts version (1975), in *Ancient Christian Doctrine*, ed. Thomas Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), frontispiece to each of the five volumes in the series. Whereas sometimes the names “Jesus” (Heb. 13:8), “Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:3–5; Phil. 2:5–6), and “Christ” (Rom. 9:5) refer proleptically to the preexistent Son,

The purpose of this two-part article is to give primary arguments for why the deity of Christ must be unambiguously clear in the translation of the Bible into Muslim-culture languages. The issue is approached from three perspectives: exegetical, historical, and theological. The approaches may be stated in three questions: (1) Exegetically, in the translation of the Bible, does a “nonliteral” rendering of “Son of God” when referring to Jesus omit too much? (2) Historically, should “Son of God” terminology that is central in classical Christianity be set aside because of non-Christian, religious-cultural misunderstanding and opposition? (3) Finally, theologically, what does it mean to declare that Jesus is the “Son of God,” and how does this relate to translation?

In some languages a literal word-for-word translation can, in fact, contradict intended biblical meanings. Functional (or social) equivalents in Muslim-friendly translations are not always sensitive, however, to the greater canonical significance of the designation “Son of God” and its centrality to the New Testament message. As a result, highly sympathetic Muslim-idiom translations cause concern about whether Jesus Christ is adequately communicated as the eternal Son of God and consequently whether Muslim background believers will be able to join in the Nicene confession of God as Holy Trinity. This article contends that the words “Father” and “Son” are not mere metaphors or even titles but the revealed *names* of the Persons of the Godhead with deep significance. Part 1 of this study addresses background issues and the exegetical question regarding translation of “Son of God,” particularly in light of Islam. Part 2 responds to historical and theological translation questions with application for today, again, especially in Christian interface with Islam and other world religions.

MUSLIM-IDIOM TRANSLATION AND LITERALNESS

The phrase “Muslim-idiom translation” at face value describes any translation into languages of cultures where Islam is prevalent, yet the expression has taken on the meaning of a *highly contextualized* translation of the Bible for Muslims. While debates regarding these translations employ an array of technical terminology, the SIL International [Extended] Statement defines the terms “literal” and “nonliteral” in simple terms for nonlinguists: “‘literal’ translation

theologically the eternal Logos-Son assumed a human nature only at the Incarnation to become Jesus the God-man. As such he fulfills the role of the promised Messiah, the “Christ,” the title also becoming a proper name (much as “holy” is assimilated as the proper name for the Holy Spirit).

refers to the nearest possible word-to-word lexical equivalent of the words in the source text[,] and ‘non-literal’ translation refers to the use of other renderings which accurately reflect the original intended meaning of the word in the source text.”⁶ These definitions guide the present discussion.

On the side of literality, historical translations of the Bible have almost unanimously translated the terms “Father” and “Son” in kinship, common-meaning terminology—that is, literal translation. Quite remarkably, every language in the world has words for “father” and “son”—reflecting a phenomenon ubiquitous to humanity. That the triune God is revealed in this universal language is itself astonishing. In short, literal translation entails formal correspondence, common meaning, hence direct kinship terminology.

Nonliteral translation constitutes a second category, that of dynamic meaning-to-meaning equivalence. While similar in meaning, familial terminology is not necessarily univocal between receptor audiences and the biblical text,⁷ especially with the layered meanings of “God the Father” and “Son of God.”⁸ Although the con-

⁶ “SIL International [Extended] Statement, April 30, 2012,” p. 5. While the Statement has in certain respects been superseded by the “SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms” of May 2013, the 2012 definitions of “literal” and “nonliteral” serve the purpose of this article (accessed August 12, 2014, <http://www.sil.org/translation/sil-standards-translation-divine-familial-terms>). Linguists often complain that to speak of literal translation is strictly speaking incoherent; all translations deal with concepts and meanings not fully equivalent between two languages. Translation theories lie between the two poles of literal and nonliteral equivalency.

⁷ In some contexts a word-for-word translation conveys no meaning at all, while at other times it might contradict the actual biblical meaning. Some Muslims presume that “Holy Spirit” (*Ruhul Qudus*) denotes the angel Gabriel. Thus in Luke 1:35, when Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive a child when the Holy Spirit comes upon her, the interpretation is disastrous. Translators favoring dynamic equivalency argue that a parallel phrase such as “Spirit from God” may more accurately convey the *meaning* of the biblical text. Conversely, literal translators argue against modifying the text, since the Qur’an elsewhere suggests that the Spirit is not synonymous with Gabriel, rather Allah breathed the “Spirit” into Mary in order for her to conceive (Suras 21:91; 66:12). Georges Houssney discusses this at http://www.answering-islam.org/Quran/Contra/gabriel_spirit.html (accessed May 5, 2014).

⁸ This is the point of Rick Brown, Leith Gray, and Andrea Gray, “A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28:3 (Fall 2011): 105–20; and “A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28:3 (Fall 2011): 121–25. The articles argue that both Hebrew and Greek paternal language may be used of *biological* (or *genitor*) relations and the more *social paternal* relations, as when used of divine familial relations. Therefore an accurate translation of “Father” and “Son” would favor relational terms over biological kinship vocabulary.

text of a term ordinarily clarifies its meanings (and to some extent the biblical canon interprets itself), nevertheless discerning precise meanings of “Son [or son] of God” is not always easy even in the original languages. Thus, nonliteral translation centers on the perceived intended meaning (or function) of the original text rendered in similarly meaningful constructs in the target language. Clearly this level of translation involves significantly more knowledge of both the original text and the target language and culture than does literal translation. Even with multiple tests and checks in place, this nonliteral translation entails more choices and more subjectivity on the part of the translation team. Nonliteral translation requires heightened discernment regarding linguistic technicalities and also culture, sociology, religion, and theology in order to express the meaning of the original text in functionally equivalent terms.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSLIM-IDIOM TRANSLATION

At first glance, a debate over translation of two or three words in the Bible appears to be a negligible intermural debate among Christians. Yet the tension goes deep to the core of Christian faith and witness in the world.

From a broader perspective the issue of Son-of-God translation sits within a global tension that can hardly be overstated. Today, fifty-five percent of the world population professes either Christianity or Islam. At this writing, among the 7.325 billion people that populate our globe, 2.42 billion claim Christian faith and 1.7 billion adhere to the teachings of Muhammad. Meanwhile, the worldwide Muslim population is projected to increase thirty-five percent over the next two decades.⁹

Moreover, tensions between Christianity and Islam appear to be rising. Few would deny that conflict between the two faiths constitutes the most widespread religious tension of the twenty-first century. Clashes between Christianity and Islam seem all too frequent across Africa, the Middle East, central and south Asia, Indonesia, and the Indian Ocean. Photos of churches blown apart by

⁹ Population estimates for mid-2015 in Todd M. Johnson, Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing, “Status of Global Christianity, 2015, in the Context of 1900–2050,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39:1 (January 2015): 29; and “The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010–2030,” January 27, 2011, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population/>.

suicide bombers, Christians nailed to crosses, or charred bodies of Christians burned alive are reminders of increasing widespread violence.¹⁰ The strained relations between the two faiths, to say the least, are challenging—exacerbated by some and, sadly, inescapable for others.

Miroslav Volf sets forth what he deems are similar beliefs shared between the two theistic faiths and contends that in broad contours “Christians and Muslims worship one and the same God, the only God”¹¹ and that the two “civilizations” need not clash.¹² While there is not agreement on the specifics, the beliefs of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam coalesce around concepts of the creator God as transcendent, omnipotent, just, and merciful.¹³ With regard to Jesus of Nazareth and contrary to Judaism, Islam affirms Mary’s purity and the virgin birth, Jesus’s many miracles, his place as a true prophet, and his ascension into heaven. In the widely held Sunni tradition, Jesus (not Muhammad) will return to judge the earth—albeit to break the crosses and to punish Christians for their misplaced worship of him.

¹⁰ Common perception in the West is that Muslim antipathy if not violence against Christians is deliberate and widespread. But Islamic perspective focuses on European colonialization, Serbian massacres of Muslim countrymen, and the U.S. “war on terror.” However, in contrast to Jesus Christ, Muhammad himself fought in at least nine battles, participating in human slaughter and taking women and children as slaves. In virtually all traditional Islam, Muhammad is the supreme example.

¹¹ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 5, cf. 14. Later he discusses the two differences that “concern the very core of the Christian faith—the Christian claims that God is the Holy Trinity and that God is love” (p. 124).

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³ Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland, in *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 60–72, contest Volf’s assertions that in both Christianity and Islam “God commands that we love God with our whole being” and that “God commands that we love our neighbors as ourselves” (Volf, *Allah*, 110). Neither is explicit in the Qur’an nor in most authoritative Islamic teaching. See also Imad Shehadeh, “Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (January–March 2004): 14–26; and “The Predicament of Islamic Monotheism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (April–June 2004): 142–62. He concludes pointedly, “The two systems of monadic monotheism and Trinitarian theism are theological concepts in opposition to one another. They represent two parallel lines that can never meet. The monadic oneness concept of God means that He does not exist in relationship within Himself. This means that His attributes stem from His will and not from His nature. It then means that He is essentially capricious. Thus in the final analysis a monadic God cannot be known or trusted” (p. 162).

Differences soon widen sharply around Jesus Christ regarding his teaching, crucifixion, resurrection, and most of all his divine identity. As John Stringer observes, “It is not unfair to say that Christianity and Islam are defined by their opposing views of Jesus.”¹⁴ Specifically, the pivotal contention is whether or not Jesus is “the Son of God.” One’s response to Jesus’s identity in many respects defines one’s response to three other central theological issues: Who and what is God? How do we know about this God? And how is one made right with God? In the midst of these questions, the theological center—the absolute, categorical difference between Christianity and Islam—is whether the Messiah Jesus is the eternal “Son of God.” In both religions as classically defined, one’s faith response regarding Jesus’s identity determines one’s eternal destiny in paradise or in hell.

But what does the Muslim understand when hearing that Jesus Christ is “the Son of God”? Many Muslims assume that to declare that God has a “Son” would mean that God literally had sexual relations with Mary and produced a biological offspring. Indeed, the faithful Muslim prays seventeen times a day the words from the Sura al-Ikhlās, “Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is he begotten; And there is none like unto Him.”¹⁵ That Allah would physically sire a God-child is spoken against sharply in the Qur’an and directly related to Jesus.¹⁶ Muslims deem such belief in a divine physical offspring as “ludicrous and blasphemous”¹⁷—ironically, as do Chris-

¹⁴ John Stringer, “Of Straw Men and Stereotypes: Reacting to Rick Wood of Mission Frontiers,” *St. Francis Magazine* 6:3 (June 2010): 587.

¹⁵ Sura 112.1-4. All texts taken from *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, by Abdulla Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 2005). Note Leith Gray, “The Missing Father: Living and Explaining a Trinitarian Concept of God to Muslims,” *Mission Frontiers*, November 1, 2008, 1, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.mission-frontiers.org/issue/article/the-missing-father>.

¹⁶ Sura 4:171, “Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an Apostle of God, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in God and His Apostles. Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better for you: for God is one God: (far exalted is He) above having a son.” Cf. Imad N. Shehadeh, “Reasons for Islam’s Rejection of Biblical Christology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (July–September 2004): 274–88, on one of the historically last Suras (5) with distinct polemic against Christianity.

¹⁷ Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2008), 108; see Rick Brown, “Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term ‘Son of God,’” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 43 (October 2007): 422–29.

tians themselves, indeed, far more adamantly. The connotation is vulgar and decidedly contrary to Scripture and Christian belief. But the anathema (*shirk*) against even pronouncing the words “Son of God” remains in force and has shaped the thinking of Muslims for nearly 1,400 years.

In light of linguistic confusion and Islamic misunderstanding of the phrase “Son of God,” some Bible translators over the last several decades have favored rendering the Greek phrase $\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\upsilon}\iota\omicron\varsigma\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ (lit. “the Son of God”) with alternative terms that would not be perceived as blasphemous.¹⁸ Such versions intend to clarify the phrase’s biblical *meaning* regarding Jesus’s sonship within varying semantic contexts in the Muslim world.

But just how should the traditional phrase “Son of God” be adapted when referring to Jesus Christ? Is it licit to substitute terms such as “Messiah,” “Spiritual Son,” or “the Beloved Son who comes [or originates] from God”? If the direct, physical idea of “Son of God” in a Muslim idiom is perceived as blasphemy, then what else is available?¹⁹ Are not other familial terms such as God as “Father,” or Christian believers as “children,” “sons of God,” and “adopted sons” all equally offensive to Muslims?²⁰ How far should translation of Scripture bend in accommodating linguistic if not religious dissimilarities? For many Christians in the Muslim world,

¹⁸ Eugene Nida and Charles Kraft developed the concept of *dynamic* (or *functional*) equivalence in the translation of the Christian message. See Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964); and Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

In 1977 the United Bible Society’s Arie de Kuiper and Barclay Newman directly addressed the question for Muslim contexts: “It may well be that the phrase ‘Son of God,’ as it applies to Jesus, is the most misunderstood term in the entire New Testament” (Arie de Kuiper and Barclay Newman, “Jesus, Son of God—a Translation Problem,” *The Bible Translator* 28 [1977]: 432, cf. 432–38). Far too indebted to non-orthodox Christology, the authors suggest that the phrase “Servant of God” replace “Son of God.”

¹⁹ See Brown, Gray, and Gray, “A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms,” 105–20; idem, “A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible,” 121–25; Rick Brown, “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” Part I, *International Journal of Foreign Missions* 22:3 (Fall 2005): 91–96 and Part II, *International Journal of Foreign Missions* 22:4 (Winter 2005): 135–45.

²⁰ Widespread Islamic rejection of all “adoption” relates to Muhammad’s revoking the adoption of his son Zayd bin Harith then to marry his beautiful daughter-in-law Zaynab bint Jahsh—this by “the command of Allah.” Critics observe that Allah’s will seemed often to favor the prophet’s inclinations.

a Bible that replaces “Son of God” with nonliteral readings is itself blasphemous.²¹

With these background matters and definitions in mind, what may exegesis, history, and theology contribute to the discussion of translation choices?

EXEGESIS: DOES NONLITERAL TRANSLATION OF “SON OF GOD” OMIT TOO MUCH?

All agree that translation has especially to do with *meaning*, and all agree that the phrase “son(s) of God” communicates multiple meanings in Scripture, as in all the ancient Near East.²²

In the Old Testament and Jewish literature, “son(s) of God” may designate supernatural agents such as angels, the divine council, the heavenly hosts, and perhaps fallen angels that cohabitated with “the daughters of men” (Gen. 6:2). In a human sense the same phrase can be used of kings and rulers, charismatic individuals, and even Israel as the people of God. In a specific sense the phrase “son of God” came to define the messianic son of David, one adopted in a particular way by Yahweh and deemed the “anointed one,” or *messiah*.²³

In the New Testament, the Greek term for “son” occurs 379 times.²⁴ Adam is described as “son of God” (Luke 3:38), and believers themselves are made “sons” by being born of God (John 1:12–13) or adopted into filial relationship to God (Eph. 1:5). Thus the

²¹ One Middle Eastern theological educator exclaimed that a Bible without the Arabic words “Son of God” is unthinkable among evangelicals in his region. Such Bibles are completely rejected. In the words of John Stringer, editor of *St. Francis Magazine*, strong aversion toward such Muslim-idiom translations “is true for all churches in the Arab world, including congregations of converts from Islam to the Christian faith” (personal correspondence, April 11, 2011).

²² Chrys C. Caragounis, “יָדָבָר,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [NIDOTTE], ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:676–77.

²³ 2 Sam. 7:12–16; Pss. 2:1–3, 7; 89:3–4, 20–29, 35–36; Isa. 9:2–7. Caragounis notes that the Israelite king, being God’s son, became connected with Yahweh’s kingship over Israel; the human king was understood to reign as Yahweh’s visible representative (*ibid.*, 676).

²⁴ Ferdinand Hahn, “υἱός,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* [EDNT], ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:382, cf. 381–92.

description “son(s) of God” does not necessarily evoke the meaning of biological sonship, much less innate deity.²⁵

JESUS AS SON OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The phrases “the Son” (in relation to the Father) and Jesus’s self-designation as “the Son of Man” occur dozens of times in the Gospel narratives, so much so that they define Jesus’s understanding of his identity.²⁶ That Jesus referred to himself throughout the Gospels as “Son” stands in stark contrast to his use of the term “Christ”—a titular role that Jesus, so to speak, approached sideways. Repeatedly the question of whether he was “the Christ” whirled around him, but rarely did Jesus directly embrace the title as his own.²⁷ There is little doubt that Jesus’s self-identity locates in being “the Son”—the Son of the Father, hence “the Son of God.” This in itself is evidence that replacing the phrase “Son of God” with terms like “Messiah” is unjustified and sometimes obscures the meaning of the text.²⁸

SYNOPTIC USE OF “SON OF GOD”

The Gospel of Matthew uses “Son of God” sparingly but tellingly. First, the heavenly voice declared the baptized Jesus to be “my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Second, Satan tempted Jesus by twice taunting, “If you are the Son of God” (4:3, 6). Third, demons cried out, “What do you want with us, Son of God?” (8:29). Each of these first “Son of God” occurrences in Matthew records a supernatural declaration. Fourth, when Jesus walked on water and calmed the tempestuous sea, the disciples in the boat “worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (14:32). Later as Jesus died on the cross, with the sky black and nature itself trembling, the Roman centurion declared, “Surely, he

²⁵ See the extensive studies by Georg Fohrer and Eduard Schweitzer, “υἱός,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament [TDNT]*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–74), 8:340–92.

²⁶ Hahn, “υἱός,” *EDNT*, 3:382, cf. 381–92. In varying configurations the phrase “the Son of God,” ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, is used of Jesus, according to Hahn, some eighty times in the New Testament.

²⁷ John 17:3; and at the Sanhedrin trial (Matt. 26:63–64; Mark 14:61–62; cf. Luke 22:67–68).

²⁸ D. A. Carson, *Jesus the Son of God: A Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), explores “son” and “Son of God” terminology in detail.

was the Son of God!” (27:54). Matthew’s use of “Son of God” is similar to that of Mark and Luke. Whereas certain New Testament contexts might allow alternative phrases for “Son of God,” in *other* passages one struggles to discern just what could substitute for the literal translation of “Son of God” without obscuring crucial meanings intended by the biblical authors. The phrase “Son of God” appears theologically intentional on the part of the Gospel writers to lead post-resurrection readers to trust this “Son of God” who is himself divine.

In the unfolding historical revelation of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, one should not expect pre-Easter understanding such as the centurion’s confession to equal post-resurrection or post-Pentecost comprehension of Jesus as the Son of God. Nevertheless, the Gospels themselves were largely written *after* certain high Christological statements were already in place and recorded in the Epistles (e.g., Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–19).²⁹ This is to say, the post-Easter Christological *meaning* of Jesus as the high “Son of God” is deliberately packed into the pre-Easter narratives of the Synoptic Gospels.

JOHANNINE SON OF GOD

Even more forcefully, the Gospel of John begins with the eternal “Godness” of the Logos and describes the Word as the one who became flesh as “*the only Son* from the Father” (John 1:14, ESV), and “*the only God*, who is at the Father’s side” (v. 18).³⁰ So when John the Baptist declared (v. 34) that God testified to him that the one on whom the Spirit would come “is the Son of God,” the meaning of “Son of God” is already in place from the prologue in chapter 1, even if the Baptist at the historical event could not have known all that signified. That is, Jesus is the Son who “was with God and is God” (vv. 1–2). When Nathanael declared that Jesus is “the Son of God . . . the King of Israel” (v. 49), he surely at the time had limited perception of who Jesus is as the Davidic Messiah, but the writer

²⁹ See Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 134–35; and in a similar sense, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 127–51.

³⁰ In John’s Gospel and Epistles the word λόγος is limited to the introduction of the Gospel. Together Jesus is termed the “Son” 34 times, “Son of God” an additional 15 times, “Son of Man” 13 times, “one and only [Son]” 5 times, and “son of Joseph” twice (Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 380).

John is infusing Nathanael’s words with the theology of the entire Gospel. Later Martha confessed, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world” (11:27), and John’s theme is equally apparent there: Jesus is both the anointed Son of David and the pre-existent, heavenly Son of God who has come into the world. Theologically, John’s use of “Son of God” repeatedly denotes “God the Son.”³¹

JESUS’S OWN INTERPRETATION OF “SON OF GOD”: A KEY PERICOPE

In the Gospels, when Jesus most directly alluded to his deity, paradoxically, it was in the teeth of those who rejected him and sought to kill him. At these times the antagonists understood all too well that Jesus presented himself as God (John 10:30–31; cf. 8:58). This led to the Sanhedrin’s accusation at his trial.

The high priest insisted, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,” and Jesus answered, “Yes, it is as you say” (Matt. 26:64; or Mark 14:62, “I am/I Am”). But then Jesus shocked them with a further response. He took on the title “Christ, the Son of God” by defining it as the all-glorious figure of Daniel 7:13–14: “In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64; cf. Luke 22:69–70). Jesus stepped well beyond the high priest’s understanding of the “Son of God” as merely an anointed national savior. Jesus declared himself “the Son of God” who is equally the heavenly “Son of Man”—a divine claim that the Sanhedrin seems not to have anticipated, for they exploded with accusations of blasphemy. Jesus interpreted the title “Son of God” with the highest possible meaning—Daniel’s celestial “Son of Man” who receives an everlasting kingdom and is *worshiped* by all peoples. Here in the climax of the Synoptic accounts the two titles coalesce. In Jesus’s self-understanding, the titles “Son of God” and “Son of Man” reinforce each other with the strongest possible meanings: “the Son of Man” is “the Son of God,” fully human and fully divine.

OTHER NEW TESTAMENT AFFIRMATIONS OF JESUS’S DIVINE SONSHIP

Nearly all translators agree that Christ’s deity is attested in various ways in the New Testament. Far more than a few dogmatic statements, the plenitude of the Savior’s divine reality expands as one reads page after page of the New Testament. In John’s Gospel,

³¹ John 1:1–3, 14, 18. On this point see Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 229–30.

Jesus repeatedly claimed to be “from above” (John 3:31; 6:29–51, 62; 8:23, 42; 10:36) and that he would ascend to where he had been before (3:13; 6:62; 14:2) to receive the glory he had with the Father from before the creation of the world (17:5). Paul’s letter to the Philippians includes what traditionally is known as the *Carmen Christi*, attesting that Jesus was “in the form of God” prior to the *kenosis* of the incarnation (Phil. 2:6)—likely a confessional formulation predating the Gospels.³² Other high Christological passages also establish the deity of Christ as Logos and Son (John 1:1–18; Col. 1:15–19; 2:9; Heb. 1:1–14;³³ and Rev. 22:13). With the vantage point of careful text criticism, at least eight passages in the Greek Testament explicitly state that Jesus is God, *θεός*.³⁴ And always the Logos or Son of God exists as the Son in relationship to the Father.

Lest the case be overstated, scholars agree that in affirming the deity of Christ the earliest Christians were developing in their understanding that Jesus is Lord and Son of God. All recognize that no one in those early years had the linguistic categories to articulate Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity.

SON-FATHER RELATIONSHIP AS DIVINE SELF-REVELATION

In the New Testament some 126 passages bring together all three persons of the Holy Trinity.³⁵ Terminology and order for the members of the Godhead vary among biblical authors (e.g., God, Christ, Counselor), with John’s Gospel widely perceived as the apex of Christological and Trinitarian revelation. The New Testament designates God as “Father” (*πατήρ*) some 254 times, and nearly half of those occurrences (120) are in the Gospel of John. The divine ascription of “Son” for Jesus occurs about 41 times in John’s Gospel

³² Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 106; also Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology*, 227–91, esp. 289.

³³ See Carson, *Jesus the Son of God*, 44–62, for fresh insights on Hebrews 1:1–14 as high Christology.

³⁴ Brian J. Wright, “Jesus as ΘΕΟΣ: A Textual Examination,” *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence*, ed. Daniel B. Wallace (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 229–65. Looking at textual variants, readings deemed indisputably original are John 1:1; 20:28; Titus 2:13; and 2 Peter 1:1; those of high probability, John 1:18; Romans 9:5; Hebrews 1:8; 1 John 5:20.

³⁵ A list of the 126 passages is to be published in J. Scott Horrell, *The Center of Everything: The Trinity in Scripture, History, and Life Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017).

(24 times in the Johannine epistles). The full literal phrase “Son of God” occurs 9 times in John’s Gospel and Letters.³⁶ Once again it is noteworthy that much of the Son language is ascribed to Jesus himself speaking of his own relationship with the Father.

What can be concluded? Both “Father” and “Son” for God are repugnant to Muslims. Yet in the Bible and Christian faith these words take on more meaning than mere titles. They become the divine *names* that most disclose the divine relations. To speak of Jesus as Messiah or Wisdom or Word does not adequately address the eternal relationality within the Godhead. In the developing theology of the New Testament, the names “Father” and “Son” assume the force not merely of *economic* descriptions of God’s self-revelation in salvation history but of intrinsic descriptions regarding God’s deepest reality as *immanent* Trinity (God’s own being).

Therefore, translators in Muslim cultures must ask themselves, if nonliteral phrases replace “Son,” “Son of God,” and even “Father” in Muslim idiom translations, then how will this substitute language bring the reader to comprehend the eternal Father-Son reality? The designation of Jesus as the Son of the Father is rejected by the Qur’an in explicit opposition to Christian faith. What can serve as legitimate alternatives to Father-Son language without losing that which orthodoxy deems the theological center of Christian confession—and, for that matter, without losing that which distinguishes Christian theism from Islam?

REJOINDERS FROM TRANSLATORS

Having considered exegetical reasons for using literal sonship terminology, several objections by Muslim-idiom Bible translators should be aired—responses not always considered by those outside the discipline of translation.³⁷ As a preface to this discussion, it is important to recognize that few if any Bible translators intend to

³⁶ In Revelation 2:18 Jesus specifically calls himself “the Son of God.” While not usually referring to himself in those specific terms, Jesus presumed deity when speaking of his Sonship and intimacy with the Father (cf. Matt. 16:16; 26:64). For more on this, see Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 600–601.

³⁷ See Martin Parsons, *Unveiling God: Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 185–249; Rick Brown, “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” Part I, 91–96; and Part II, 135–45; less explicitly, Rick Brown, “Muslim Worldviews and the Bible, Part I: God and Mankind,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 23:1 (Spring 2006): 5–12; “Muslim Worldviews and the Bible, Part II: Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Age to Come,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 23:2 (Summer 2006): 48–56.

hide the deity of Christ or his eternal place as the Son of God. Nearly all translators affirm Trinitarian doctrine and seek to convey the deity of Christ in translation.³⁸ What, then, constitute their primary concerns?

1. *Imposed dogmatic interpretation.* Nicene Trinitarian theology, some insist, must not be the matrix by which biblical translation is determined. It is illicit to impose fourth-century dogma on the meaning of the original text and its translation. As counter-argument, many Christians opposed to translations that adopt alternative familial language argue that the theology of the eternal deity of the Son is not merely the theology of the fourth century, rather it is the essential theology of the New Testament itself.

Yet Muslim-idiom translators assert that the Bible is not a doctrinal treatise. SIL's "Statement of Best Practices for Translation of Divine Familial Terms" states, "The accurate translation of key theological terms must always be undertaken with special care to avoid theological bias, and to also provide sufficient depth and integrity to allow for theological reflection."³⁹ In reading the Synoptic Gospels, some have argued, the deity of Jesus *gradually* unfolds and the deeper meaning of Christological terms gains force. They maintain that if it took time for the earliest church to mature in comprehending the risen Savior, then Muslims background believers and other non-Christians today must be allowed the same.

2. *Naiveté of literal language translation.* As any lexicon demonstrates, almost all words have multiple meanings and rarely does a word in one language exactly correspond with a word in another language. The common Hebrew term for "son" (בן)—like the Greek υἱός—carries over a dozen meanings. Replicating a single dictionary meaning of "son" in another language does not mean that its particular meaning is communicated. Rick Brown and Leith and Andrea Gray observe that around the world various languages have specific terms for *biological* sonship that differ from

³⁸ Nearly all major U.S. translation organizations have explicitly Trinitarian doctrinal statements to which members subscribe. Only the United Bible Society does not, as it attempts to coordinate various translation entities in different regions of the world that themselves have their own doctrinal confessions.

³⁹ "SIL International [Extended] Statement, April 30, 2012," 4. As noted previously, the Statement is complemented and in some respects superseded (but not on this point) by the "SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms," May 2013.

the words for *social-relational* kinship.⁴⁰ They argue that translating ἰῷ or υἰός with biological terms in some languages renders God as having sexual relations and producing physical offspring, therefore relational familial language is sometimes preferable.

Linguists observe a similar translation dilemma with Jesus’s self-appellation as “the Son of Man.” Muslims often declare that such a title proves he is only a human, not divine. In certain non-Arabic languages a literal translation of this title denotes a child of an unnamed man, thus an illegitimate child, literally a “bastard”—like the Latin *filius publicae* (“son of the public”). Brown speaks of the difficulty of trying to give a new biblical meaning to an existing phrase that has contrary connotations; merely explaining its true biblical significance does not always free it of its unwanted semantic and affective meanings.⁴¹ Therefore a parallel phrase such as “the Man from heaven” based on Daniel 7:13 might serve as a functional equivalent. That the title “Holy Spirit” is sometimes interpreted in Islam to connote the angel Gabriel is a similar problem.⁴² If “Son of Man” and “Holy Spirit” might call for non-word-for-word translation in certain language settings, then how can critics insist on literalism regarding the phrase “Son of God”? If the word-for-word rendition, it is argued, is not comprehended by readers as the Bible intends, or if a phrase transgresses a cultural taboo suggesting that Allah has offspring, then it fails as true and accurate translation.

One regional translation leader writes, “The consistent feedback we hear from Muslim readers is that the reason they reject word-for-word traditional renderings [i.e., of ‘Son of God’] is not because these communicate Jesus’ eternal deity, but rather because they communicate biological reproduction.”⁴³ Various languages, it is argued, have no figurative sense of “father” and “son,” hence nonliteral, dynamic translations alleviate the target culture reader’s misunderstanding of the biblical text.

⁴⁰ Brown, Gray, and Gray, “A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms,” 105–20; and “A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible,” 121–25. They further suggest that both Hebrew and Greek Testaments evince a similar distinction in the use of divine familial terms.

⁴¹ Brown, personal correspondence, October, 25, 2013.

⁴² See footnote 8.

⁴³ Leith Gray, personal correspondence, July 2010 and March 23, 2011, used with permission.

In reply, “literal” translators and national workers in Muslim contexts insist assumptions that divine titles such as “Father” and “Son” cannot be understood metaphorically by the Muslim reader are premature. Director of the Reconciliation Program at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Joseph Cumming sets forth a collection of Arabic sayings from the Qur’an and Hadith that use the familial language of “son,” “daughter,” and “father” with analogous meanings. Common phrases such as “son of the nation” (*ibn al-wa’an*) and “son of the road” (*ibn al-sabīl*) describe those closely identified with their homeland or with constant travel.⁴⁴ From a doctrinal perspective, opponents of Muslim-idiom translation allege that replacing “Son of God” with nonliteral and social-relational terms for Jesus falls short of affirming that he is of the same divine essence as the Father. Furthermore, relational language alone obscures the distinction between the eternal Son who is God by nature and Christian believers who are made sons and daughters by adoption. As a consequence, nonliteral translation of “Son of God” in the Bible becomes a significant barrier to new believers affirming the deity of Christ and ultimately the doctrine of the Trinity.

One might further reiterate what was argued earlier: the largely pre-Easter gospel accounts are dense with post-Easter Christological significance. Faithful translation of the Gospels must render as closely as possible the literal phrase “Son of God” to preserve the biblical writers’ theological meanings that otherwise may be obscured. Muslim-idiom and other dynamic equivalence translations are not always sensitive to the greater *canonical* significance of the designation “Son of God” and its centrality to the New Testament message. On this issue, Carson writes, “The richest theological loading of the expression ‘Son of God’ as applied to Jesus springs from passages that deploy the expression *to cross-pollinate distinctive uses*. This fact constitutes a driving reason to translate ‘Son of God’ and ‘Father’ expressions consistently, for otherwise these crucial intracanonical links will be lost to view.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Joseph L. Cumming, “What Is the Meaning of the Expression ‘Son of God’?” Yale Center for Faith and Culture, accessed May 5, 2014, http://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/son_of_god-arabic-english.pdf. Whereas the Qur’an’s term for Jesus is usually *waled* (“son”), normally meaning physical offspring, Sura 9:30 uses the term *ibn* (“son”) for Jesus with its broader range of meanings. Traditional Arabic Bibles employ *ibn* with clear metaphorical meanings. While generally encouraging dynamic equivalence translation, Cumming holds the line on the traditional Arabic phrase “Son of God” (*Ibnu’llah*), reasoning that too much is at stake in forsaking classical translation.

⁴⁵ Carson, *Jesus the Son of God*, 107.

And so, in light of the exegetical cautions earlier set forth, is nonliteral translation of “Son of God” in Muslim idioms omitting too much? Some will say vociferously “Yes” (and for additional reasons developed in Part 2). But others aware of the weight of concerns raised here will say, “Almost always Yes”—that is, there may be cultural-linguistic situations for careful exception.

Commendable efforts have been made toward closing the gap in the Muslim-idiom translation debate. The WEA Global Review Panel recommendations on translation begin by stating “when the words for ‘father’ and ‘son’ refer to God the Father and to the Son of God, these words [will] always be translated with the most directly equivalent familial words.” Yet it then gives some latitude for exceptions.⁴⁶ This qualified literalness (“directly equivalent familial words”) in translation will be further explored. Suffice it to say that the positive response of the new “SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms” affirms the panel’s recommendations.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, much more lies behind the complicated issue of translation of divine familial language. The historical tensions and precedents as well as the difficult theological-conceptual issues in the translation of God as “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” will be further explored in Part 2.

⁴⁶ “Report to World Evangelical Alliance for Conveyance to Wycliffe Global Alliance and SIL International, from the WEA Global Review Panel, April 15, 2013,” 6.

⁴⁷ “SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms,” May 2013, 1, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.sil.org/translation/sil-standards-translation-divine-familial-terms>.