TRANSLATING "SON OF GOD" FOR MUSLIM CONTEXTS, PART 2: HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

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ABSTRACT

Those who translate the Bible into Muslim-culture languages must wrestle with the phrase "Son of God," which may have unbiblical implications in the target language. Part 2 of this two-part article explores how Christians have historically approached the eternal divine sonship of Christ in cultures where that sonship could have been misconstrued, with special attention on how Eastern Christians in Islamic contexts have dealt with the question. Theologically, "Son of God" language, though analogy, conveys rich and essential truths about the inner personal reality of the Trinity. The article agrees with recommendations that Bible translators should use the phrase "Son of God" wherever possible, but take care to clarify its meaning through paratextual material and in apologetic discussions with Muslims.

G IVEN THE GLOBAL EBB AND FLOW OF WORLD EVENTS, tensions between Christianity and Islam appear to be rising. The global Muslim population is projected to grow twice as fast as the non-Muslim population, from 1.6 billion in 2010 to 2.2 billion by 2030.[1] The need is urgent for communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to Muslims in ways accurate and contextually coherent—the translation of the Bible being paramount.

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[1]   Pew Research, Religion and Public Life Project, "The Future of the Global Muslim Population," accessed August 8, 2014, http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population.

In the midst of both loving and contending with Muslim peoples, Christians have differed regarding the translation of "Son of God" and other divine familial terminology. Based on the Qur'an, Islamic dogma rejects all such Christian language as blasphemous, maintaining that it suggests that God condescends to sexual activity and the begetting of a son. In spite of longstanding Islamic accusations, the great Christian traditions—Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxies, Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and conservative Protestantism—continue to present God literally as "Father" and Jesus as "the Son of God." In recent decades, however, various translators, missionaries, and church-planters have preferred non-literal translations that communicate what they perceive as the intended meaning of divine familial language, whether in the context of predominantly Muslim cultures or elsewhere.[2] Debate came to a head in 2012 when the Wycliffe Global Alliance and Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) International asked the World Evangelical Alliance to review their translation principles for divine familial language.[3] This two-part article observes key background issues and seeks positive response.

Part 1 addressed background issues to translation conflicts and asked whether, exegetically, nonliteral translation of "Son of God" omits too much. The article concluded that the New Testament phrase "Son of God" carries multiple canonical meanings that direct toward and amplify the meaning of Jesus Christ as God and man, and therefore maximum effort must be made to preserve a literal translation.

Part 2 responds to historical and theological translation questions with application for today. Should the phrase "Son of God" be circumvented for cultural and/or religious reasons? And, theologically, what does it mean to say Jesus is the "Son of the Father," and how does this relate to translation? It is contended that the

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[2]   As in part 1, this article adopts the definitions of "literal" and "nonliteral" from the "SIL International [Extended] Statement, April 30, 2012": " 'literal' translation 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," 5 (accessed August 12, 2014, http://www.sil.org/translation/sil-standards-translation-divine-familial-terms).

[3]   See 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.worldea.org/images/wimg/files/2013_0429-Final%20Report%20of%20the%20WEA%20Independent%20Bible%20Translation%20Review%20Panel.pdf. The Bridging the Divide website (http://btdnetwork.org) provides dozens of articles from various viewpoints on issues of translation and outreach in the Muslim world.

divine names "Father" and "Son" lead as deeply into the Holy Trinity as revelation allows and therefore should be carefully guarded.

HISTORICAL AND RELIGIO-CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Some Muslim-idiom translators maintain that since clarity regarding the magnitude of the incarnation of the Son of God took decades and centuries to unpack, then Nicaean and even later classical Christology need not be forced onto Islamic background readers who are simply trying to read the New Testament. Such an argument has some merit. Muslim-background believers need not comprehend the Trinitarian language of Nicaea or sign the Nicene Creed in order to be reconciled to God.

On the other hand, neither should Muslim converts reject that confession. The doctrine of the Trinity is not merely an attempt to reconcile a body of facts about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Understanding God as Trinity unpacks a worldview in which human beings are created in the image of God for relationship not only with fellow humanity but with God himself—a truth radically unlike Islam. Because God is One and Three, there is a real place for personal diversity and, to a certain extent, freedom under divine sovereignty. And because God is Trinity he is able to be both the Just and the Justifier of all who believe (Rom. 3:26).

EARLY CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY OF THE SON'S PREEXISTENCE

The early church's trajectory toward understanding the full implications of Jesus Christ as the eternal "Son of God" is well documented—albeit mingled with controversy. From the beginning the Christian church sought to unfold the implications of Jesus identified as the Logos and "Son of God." Bishop Ignatius of Antioch speaks of Jesus as "God" at least eleven times.[4] Writing *To the Magnesians* he exhorts them to "run together as to one temple of God, as to one altar, to one Jesus Christ, who came from one Father and remained and returned to the One."[5] His last words to Polycarp were, "I bid you farewell always in our God Jesus

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[4]   Thomas Weinandy, "The Apostolic Christology of Ignatius of Antioch: The Road to Chalcedon," in *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76.

[5]   *To the Magnesians* 7.2. All quotations from the apostolic fathers are taken from *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

Christ."[6] Steenberg comments, "Such passages, along with a host of others, demonstrate Ignatius' firm conviction that the Father and the Son abide in eternal unity."[7] Michael Svigel observes, "Ignatius assumed his recipients in Asia Minor and Rome held to the same incarnational narrative, suggesting that this same christology was closely associated with early catholic self-identity in diverse regions of the world by 110 C.E."[8]

The confession that Jesus is "the Son of God" remains explicit in the earliest postbiblical history. The *Shepherd of Hermas* repeatedly emphasizes "the Son of God" and declares "no one will enter the kingdom of God unless he receives the name of his Son."[9] In the first-century church manual *Didache*, baptism is repeatedly accompanied with "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). In the second century, the same Trinitarian formula emerges as a primary template for expositing the faith. A primitive version of the Apostles' Creed dating to about AD 150 proclaims, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ *His only Son* our Lord."[10] In his *First Apology*, Justin sets out to prove "[That we reasonably worship Christ,] having learned that he is the Son of the true God himself, and holding him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third."[11]

That Jesus is the pre-existent divine Son is increasingly expounded. Patristic testimony sharpens with Athenagorus, Theophilus, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian.[12] Jesus is confessed, prayed to, and worshiped as the one and only "Son of God" and himself "God." Repeatedly in all mainstream Christendom, the designation of Jesus as "the Son of God" is said to be essential to true doctrine and genuine faith.

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6   *To Polycarp* 8:3.

7   M. C. Steenberg, "God," in *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham (London: Routledge, 2010), 243.

8   Michael J. Svigel, "Second Century Incarnational Christology and Early Catholic Christianity" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), 44.

9   *Shep. Simil* 9:12.2, 4 [=89:2].

10   Following Rufinus and Hippolytus in *Paradosis* (ca. 215), in J. A. Buckley, *Second Century Orthodoxy: The Trinity Doctrine in the Teaching of the Second Century Church Fathers* (Cornwall, UK: printed by author, 1978), i.

11   *First Apology* 13.

12   For an excellent summary see Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 56–73.

CHRISTOLOGY AND TRANSLATION

How does early witness to the preexistent Sonship and deity of Christ relate to contemporary translation? It means that alternative terms such as "Messiah," "Spiritual Son," "One sent from God" (as could be any angel), or even "Word of God" and "Spirit of God," while helpful as explanations, fall short as accurate translations of "Son of God."

Gerald Bray synthesizes the beliefs of the patristic fathers on the relationship of the Father and the Son:

> The Father has always been the Father, which is one reason why the Son must be regarded as eternal (Tertullian, Origen, Alexander, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa). However, the Father is unbegotten, whereas the Son is begotten from him (Novatian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, Hilary). . . . The Father is not identical to the Son (Justin Martyr, Tertullian) although they are united to one another (Novatian, Hilary) and cannot exist without each other (Tertullian). They work together in harmony (Hippolytus, Hilary), sharing the divine monarchy (Irenaeus, Tertullian) and creating the universe together (Athanasius, Basil), but are not interchangeable (Athanasius, Ambrose) because each person of the Godhead has his own unique properties (John of Damascus).
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> . . . The Father is greater than the Son (Tertullian, Origen, Alexander), but nevertheless, the Father and the Son are equal (Clement of Alexandria) because they share the same substance (Lactantius, Dionysius). The difference between them is one of order or relationship, not one of nature (Basil) and none of the persons in God is anything other than fully divine and eternal (Origen, Athanasius).[13]

CLASSICAL TRANSLATIONS IN EASTERN CHURCH HISTORY

As the New Testament writings spread into non-Greek speaking cultures, early translations rendered ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ literally as "the Son of God." Greco-Roman and other pagan pantheons all had offspring called "sons of gods," yet translations of the Bible did not adjust the language so that pagans better understood. To the contrary, the phrase "the Son of God" seems to accumulate power.

Syriac, the Aramaic dialect of Edessa, was commonly used throughout Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia from the first century AD through the Middle Ages and later. The Syriac edition of Tatian's *Diatessaron* (a harmony of the four Gospels) dates from around AD 170 and became widely distributed in the East. The Syriac-Aramaic Bible, the *Peshitta*, dates from the fourth century and parallels in influence and longevity the Latin Vulgate in the

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[13] Gerald L. Bray, ed., *We Believe in One God*, vol. 1, *Ancient Christian Doctrine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009–10), 62.

West.[14] The Syriac wording for "Son of God" (*bareh d'alaha*) in both the *Diatessaron* and the *Peshitta* directly translates the Greek υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ.[15]

This fidelity in word-for-word rendering of Jesus as the "Son of God" has continued for over 1,300 years not only in Syriac but also in Arabic, Farsi, and a multitude of other biblical translations within Muslim cultures. The earliest extant Arabic Bible, Vatican 13, dates from the eighth century and demonstrates a conservative translation of divine familial terms, as does the Arabic Codex Sinaiticus 151 dated in the ninth to eleventh centuries.[16] When referring to Jesus Christ, such literalism continues in both traditional and recent Bibles honored and memorized by Christian believers across Muslim-dominant cultures today.[17] The attitude has been that God's inspired Word stands; it does not change. If Islam rejects or readers deny the teaching of Scripture, the problem is theirs and not the translation of the Bible.

IN THE MIDST OF ISLAM

With the rise of Islam and the Qur'an's acrid repudiation of God having a son, Christian confession in the Muslim world has been tested. While several theories have been suggested concerning Islamic rejection of Jesus's deity, likely Muhammad was most familiar with a heterodox understanding of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity. He appears to have thought that Christians espouse a trinity of God, Mary, and their child Jesus—a probable teaching of heretical sects on the Arabian peninsula.[18] In any case, certain

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[14] The *Peshitta* appears dependent on the *Diatessaron* as well as the Hebrew and Greek Bible; the Syriac *pᵉŝiṭṭa* denotes "simple," likely meaning a "straight translation without interpretive expansions" (Robert J. Owens, "Peshitta," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson [New York: Garland, 1990], 718–19).

[15] Here I am indebted to Syriac scholar and colleague Richard Taylor.

[16] Imad Shehadeh, personal correspondence, May 26, 2012. Also Hikmat Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels: The Manuscripts and Their Families* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

[17] Arabic translations include the classic Van Dyke translation and various forms of the *New International Bible* (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 1998–2011).

[18] Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 22. Tarif Khalidi notes that early Muslims may not have had an accurate understanding of the Bible: "If one begins with the Qur'an, one finds that apart from its general conceptual and revelatory affinities with Jewish and Christian scriptures, traditions, and lore, verbatim quotations from the Old and New Testaments are very infrequent" (Tarif Khalidi, ed. and trans., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001], 19–20). Alister E. McGrath asserts that Muhammad's understand-

statements in the Qur'an aggressively reject Sonship language: "They do blaspheme who say: 'God is Christ the son of Mary.' But said Christ: 'O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.' Whoever joins other gods with God,—God will forbid him the Garden, and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrong-doers be no one to help. They do blaspheme who say: God is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them . . . Christ, the son of Mary was no more than an apostle" (Sura 5:72–73, 75).[19]

Whereas the Qur'an affirms Mary's virginity, Jesus's miraculous birth, and certain stories from his childhood, any form of his deity is flatly rejected, as is his death on the cross and resurrection.[20] As Tarif Khalidi puts it, the "Qur'an tilts backward to his miraculous birth rather than forward to his Passion."[21] At least twenty-nine passages speak of "Jesus" by name. Most frequently he is referred to as "son of Mary" (33 times), but the point is also made that he is *only* an "apostle" (4 times)—not the Son of God (Suras 4:171; 9:30–31; 72:3) and most certainly not God (3:59–62; 5:17, 72–75).[22] "Here, then, is the true Jesus, 'cleansed' of the 'perversions' of his followers, a prophet totally obedient to his Maker and offered [to] us as the true alternative to the Jesus of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Redemption."[23] Not surprisingly, the callig-

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ing of the Christian Trinity reflects a fifth-century Collyridian sect on the Arabian peninsula (*Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* [New York: HarperOne, 2009], 213–29).

[19] All passages including parentheses are from *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, by Abdulla Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2005); cf. 5:116–17; 6:101; 9:30–31; 19:16–40; 43:59, 63–64; and 72:3–4. With focus on Sura 5, see Imad N. Shehadeh, "Additional Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (October–December 2004): 401–8.

[20] A. H. Mathias Zahniser, *The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), esp. 15–78.

[21] Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus,* 14.

[22] Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam: Introduction, Survey of Research, Issues of Dialogue* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1999), 22–41; also Chawkat Moucarry, *The Prophet and the Messiah: An Arab Christian's Perspective on Islam and Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 175–83.

[23] Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus,* 19–20. Christ's death on the cross is almost unanimously denied by Muslims today, but Joseph Cumming demonstrates historical variations within Islam that include Jesus's crucifixion (Joseph L. Cumming, "Did Jesus Die on the Cross?," Yale Center for Faith and Culture, May 2001, 1–40, accessed August 8, 2014, http://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/did_jesus_die_on_the_cross-english.pdf).

raphy of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem includes every Qur'anic passage that mentions Jesus. "In fact," asserts Stephen Prothero, "the purpose of the Dome of the Rock's inscriptions is to assert the truth of *tawhid* [divine oneness] over against the falsehood of [the deity of Jesus and] the Trinity."[24]

Even as Bible translations in the Islamic world continued to employ the literal phrase "Son of God," Eastern leaders knowledgeable of Islam often chose other titles for Christ when publicly defending Christian faith. In the eighth and early ninth centuries, with Islam's boot on the neck of Christianity, the Orthodox theologian John of Damascus (ca. 655–ca. 750) and the Nestorian patriarch Timothy in Baghdad (ca. 728–823) could not directly challenge the Islamic regimes under which they labored, although Timothy's discourse with caliphs was extensive. Attentive to Muslim beliefs (which John termed "heresy"),[25] both John Damascene and Timothy avoided the phrase "Son of God" when they publicly defended the incarnation and the Holy Trinity, preferring to speak of Christ as the "Word of God" or even "Word and Spirit of God."[26]

The Coptic Bishop of Old Cairo Bulus al-Bushi (ca. 1170–ca. 1250) wrote a systematic theology that was oriented to the Islamic context. Written as a dialogue with a Muslim interlocutor, *On the Incarnation* consistently speaks of Christ as "God the Word."[27] Bulus does so with no compromise of the Coptic Orthodoxy he vanguards, openly declaring that God became man. His work is not a Bible translation but an apologetic, and this pattern of Muslim sensitivity continues today. In Coptic and Eastern churches, there seems to be no hesitancy to speak to fellow Christians of Jesus Christ as the "Son of God," but considerable more caution occurs in conversation and apologetic with Muslims.

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[24] Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 37.

[25] *De Haeresibus*, 100:6977; to deny the Word and the Spirit of God is to be a "mutilator" of God. John of Damascus believed Muhammad foreshadowed the Antichrist. See Andrew Louth, "Late Patristic Developments on the Trinity in the East," *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 149.

[26] I. Mark Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims: A Critical Analysis of Christian Presentations of Christ for Muslims from the Ninth and Twentieth Centuries* (Milton Keyes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), 12–20, 200–3.

[27] Stephen J. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 240–45.

A LONG HISTORY OF SUFFERING

No doubt politics and ethnic conflict have accentuated if not often driven religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians over fourteen hundred years. Yet in broad terms, as a consequence of Islam's decidedly anti-Christian view of Jesus, millions of people have suffered discrimination and martyrdom for their profession that Jesus is "the Son of God."[28] Therefore, when discovering that the term "Son of God" in their older Bibles is replaced with "dynamic equivalents" in recent translations, traditional Christians are taken aback and offended. They feel that to omit the word-for-word "Son of God" betrays the very faith for which the church has suffered and whole communities of Christians have died. Equally disturbing is that Islamic polemicists, who insist that the Qur'an never changes, accuse Christians of changing the Bible to appease Muslims and to gain converts. In contrast, widely affirmed Asharite doctrine contends that the Qur'an is the *eternal* word of God, ever existent with Allah before creation. Thus to change the New Testament seemingly to placate Islamic readers appears beggarly to Muslims while traditional Christians see it as treason to their faith.

REAFFIRMING DIRECTION

Should the sacred name "Son of God," so central in church history, be set aside for religio-cultural concerns because another religion misunderstands and appears to reject what it denotes? Answers are not simple. A historical vantage point cautions against modifying literal familial terminology in Scripture. Early Christian writings, creeds, and translations all uphold Jesus's title "Son of God." Meanwhile, altering the wording of Scripture raises charges of deceptive tampering from Muslims and of offensive betrayal from Christians who have suffered for their confession.

These cautions are potent and need to be more adequately addressed by contemporary Bible-translation linguists. On the other hand, these reasons alone should not prohibit fresh Muslim-idiom translations designed to better communicate God's Word to those who have never heard or understood the gospel. Archaic Christian terminology that stands outside normal language within a given culture becomes a barrier to people understanding the saving grace and power of God.

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[28] See Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 139–246.

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND TRANSLATION

Having considered in Part 1 exegetical and now historical reasons for caution against employing nonliteral wording of "Son of God" in Muslim-idiom or other translations, the question remains, What does it mean theologically to say that Jesus is the Son of God? And how is that meaning most faithfully communicated in translation?

ANALOGOUS LANGUAGE AND GOD

In one sense, all language about God, even biblical language, is analogy—this by theological necessity. The church fathers understood that finite creatures can know only what God has revealed of himself in categories and images that we comprehend. Such realization does not impugn the great doctrines of the faith or the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. God makes himself known because he loves us and invites us to know him. Yet language about God always remains bound by limitations of the finite before the infinite.

Thus the transcendent God graciously reveals himself by way of metaphors and analogy in semantic categories that humans can comprehend. As metaphor, "God is my fortress" highlights the protection of God's presence before adverse powers, but God in no other sense is a bastion of stone. As analogy, "God is my Redeemer" reveals several aspects of divine grace in both payment and freeing the captive.[29] What God-language signifies analogically is made clearer within progressive revelation and the broader canon of Scripture. Yet our infinite Lord always stands beyond us. The Spirit-inspired analogies of Scripture are *true* to who God is but never all that God is.

ANALOGOUS YET REVELATORY LANGUAGE OF "FATHER" AND "SON"

If the highest terminology for describing the divine Being is analogy, then when Scripture speaks of God as "Father" and "Son," what is intended and what is not?

Beginning with the negative, what is *not* intended is that God the Father gave birth to or somehow created the Son. Based on the Qur'an and Islamic teachings, most Muslims unwittingly argue against not a Christian but an Arian view of the Son as a created

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[29]   "Metaphor" and "analogy" describe otherwise unlike subjects in terms of a correspondence or similarity between the two. Generally a metaphor is a figure of speech that contains a one-dimensional comparison, whereas several dimensions are often present in analogy. "Analogy" is not a preferred word in contemporary linguistics. For translators even the simplest metaphors reveal unexpected complexities and multiple associations from language to language.

offspring—a theology categorically rejected as heretical by the Council of Nicaea three hundred years before Muhammad's supposed revelations.

What is intended? First, the language of Father and Son in its biblical-theological development denotes a genuine relationship of equally personal beings. A parent's son or daughter is every bit as human as the mother or father. But unlike parent and child, God the Father and God the Son exist in filial relationship that transcends time; there is no beginning or end. Thus the human understanding of God as Father and Son must adapt to additional divine revelation that qualifies the meaning of such terms. Equal in deity and eternal in filial relationship, the Son has ever co-existed with the Father.

Second, God is one, therefore divine familial language transcends that of two or three separate persons. Once again familial analogy both illumines and falls short. "In reply to those who taunt us with tritheism," wrote Basil of Caesarea, "let this be our answer: we confess that God is one, but one in nature, not in number."[30] All that constitutes the divine essence of the Father also constitutes that of the Son and that of the Spirit. The one true God eternally exists as three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, equal in nature, equal in glory, and distinct in relations.

Third, the church fathers discerned that the biblical language of the Son as *begotten* (Ps. 2:7; Prov. 8:25–26; Heb. 1:5) and the Spirit's *procession* (John 15:26) may be understood analogically to describe the relationships between the Father, Son, and Spirit outside of time, *ad intra*, that is, within the divine Being. Humanity has no access to the internal relations of the Trinity apart from God's directly inspired words of Scripture. The concept of the Son's eternal begottenness captures various implications of Scripture regarding the relatedness and distinction of the Father and the Son.[31] The Creed speaks of "the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."[32] Christian

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[30] *Epistula* 8.2.

[31] Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 61–171, provides persuasive biblical and patristic evidence for the creedal confession of eternal *begottenness*, not as a translation of the Greek μονογενής ("one-of-a-kind," John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18) but as its logical and theological derivative. If the Son is the "one and only Son" of the Father, and if both are in eternal relationship, then the term "begotten" (from γεννάω) theologically approximates the same idea.

[32] "The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed," the International Consultation on English Texts version (1975) adopted in the Ancient Christian Doctrine series, frontis-

faith affirms that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who make themselves known in human history (i.e., the *economic* Trinity) reveal who God is beyond time and space (i.e. the *immanent* Trinity)—the One who always has been and always will be triune God.

Fourth, the term "perichoresis" constitutes another uniqueness of the Godhead. Members of the Trinity indwell one another without diminishing their own personal consciousness. Jesus declares, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," yet in the same passage he speaks of his personal distinction from and relationship with the Father (cf. John 14:8–11). The Holy Spirit is described as the Spirit of the Father, of the Son, of Christ, and of Jesus, yet he is "another Advocate" (John 14:16), who is sent from the Son and "goes out from the Father" (15:26). In Scripture, the Father, Son, and Spirit manifest reciprocal indwelling, each present in the other without confusion of persons.[33] In an analogous sense a Christian can grasp something of the Trinity's eternal perichoresis because each believer has God living within. Yet the believer indwelled by God does not become God; the divine and the human remain distinct. In perichoresis, whether in the Godhead itself or within a Christian believer indwelled by God, persons are neither diminshed nor confused.

FATHER AND SON AS ETERNAL NAMES

Although descriptions of infinite God are ultimately analogies, the words "Father" and "Son" (and "Spirit") lead as close as possible to the inner personal reality of the Trinity. Other divine names and titles highlight the working of the Godhead toward creation—terms such as Creator, Christ/Messiah, and Comforter. In Muslim settings, Christian apologists often prefer the term "Logos" or "divine Word" rather than "Son." Indeed, "Logos" does refer to the absolute beginning when "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1; cf. 1:14; Rev. 19:13; note Sura 4:171). Nevertheless, "Logos" is not a relational term in itself. If Logos terminology dominates Christian-Muslim discussion, then only with difficulty does one avoid modalism or the unorthodox view that the Logos was

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piece to all five volumes; see patristic quotations regarding begottenness in *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ,* ed. John Anthony McGuckin, Ancient Christian Doctrine (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 2.29–42, 60–67.

[33] Whereas Gregory of Nazianzus in *Epistula* 101 first appropriated the term "perichoresis" to explain the relationship of the deity and humanity of Christ, Maximus the Confessor expanded the use to describe the mutual interiority of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. John of Damascus further developed the doctrine of Trinitarian reciprocal indwelling. The concept was accepted into the Latin church ("circumincession") but with less primacy.

merely latent in God coming forth to create the world.

In summary, the idea of Jesus Christ's Sonship entails multiple layers and meanings in Scripture, but the relationship of the divine Son with God the Father carries ultimate consequences. John's Gospel seven times records that the Father loves the Son[34] and, again, that the Son loves the Father (14:31). The Father honors the Son (5:23; 12:26) and the Son honors the Father (5:23; 8:49), such that their honor and glory are inextricably bound up with one another. Beyond all other terms of divine revelation, "Son" and "Father" lift the reader above incarnation into the heart of the transcendent Trinitarian relations.

For these reasons the words "Father" and "Son" were embraced not only as descriptors or titles but as proper *names* of the divine persons. Each name mutually depends on the other: "The Father is always the Father. He is the Father because the Son is always with him, which is why he is called the Father. Therefore, because the Son is always with the Father, he is always complete in himself, lacking nothing good."[35] As testified in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, the Trinitarian names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit stand as the acme of divine revelation. Therefore the translation of these most sacred names assumes monumental significance in the history of the church and in the world today.

TRANSLATION AS INTERPRETATION

In spite of occasional disclaimers, translation of Scripture always involves interpretation from one linguistic context to another with its social, cultural, and religious peculiarities. In every case far more than dictionary comparisons are at work. The use of literal as well as nonliteral equivalents requires substantial exegesis, interpretation, and adaptation to communicate the original meaning.[36] It is never a purely scientific, exegetical, or personally neutral endeavor. In general, conservative translations that adhere closest to the wording of the original biblical text are the least subjective on the part of the translator and arguably the kind of translation that will in the long run least confuse Christian converts as they grow in doctrinally sound faith. This literal or conservative approach reflects the normative translation methodology of historic Christianity, especially regarding the divine names.

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[34]   John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9; 17:23–24, 26.

[35]   Alexander of Alexandria, *Epistle on the Arian Heresy* 1.7.

[36]   See Martin Parsons, *Unveiling God: Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 198–203.

Nevertheless, with over seven thousand languages in the world, linguists rightly argue that Bible translation demands "attentiveness to how words for 'father' and 'son' work in different languages. For example, in some languages there may be one word for 'father' and one for 'son' that can each include a wide range of meaning, from biological to social to adoptive relationships. Other languages use different specific words, terms or expressions to describe each of those kinds of 'father-son' relationships."[37] The task of Bible translation regarding the divine familial names is not easily reduced to singular formulas. Given the delicate reality that divine familial language is both analogy and the most revelatory terminology concerning the Being of God, the translation task demands both balance and caution.

POSITIVE GUIDELINES FOR TRANSLATION OF DIVINE FAMILIAL TERMS

Conflict regarding Muslim-idiom translation pushed Bible-translation giants Wycliffe Global Associates (WGA) and SIL International to turn to the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) for resolution. In response to the WEA Global Review Panel Report,[38] the Executive Director of SIL Freddy Boswell expressed full commitment to implement the panel's ten recommendations.[39] The document "SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms" responds by implementing almost verbatim the WEA panel's first four recommendations.[40] The first of these states, "When

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[37] Richard [Rick] Brown, Andrea Gray, and Leith Gray, "Translating Familial Biblical Terms: An Overview of the Issue," linked at "Important Facts about Wycliffe and Bible Translation," accessed August 9, 2014, www.wycliffe.net/about-us/position-statements/tabid/86/Default.aspx?id=2396.

[38] The Global Review Panel was an independent subcommittee of the WEA. See the full report, accessed August 9, 2014, http://www.worldea.org/images/wimg/files/2013_0429-Final%20Report%20of%20the%20WEA%20Independent%20Bible%20Translation%20Review%20Panel.pdf; and "An Abridgment for the Bridging the Divide Consultation 2013," David Hackett, accessed August 12, 2014, http://btdnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/WEA-Panel-Report-Abridged-for-BtD2013.pdf.

[39] "SIL Executive Director Thanks Translation Panel for Their Report," April 29, 2013, accessed August 9, 2014 (and September 12, 2015), http://www.sil.org/about/news/sil-executive-director-thanks-transl-ation-panel-their-report.

[40] The WEA Global Review Panel's recommendations five through ten are adopted in SIL's "Processes for Accuracy and Accountability in Bible Translation of Divine Familial Terms" and especially relate to checks and balances that ensure that Bible translations prove contextually appropriate as well as acceptable to various constituencies. See "Processes for Accuracy and Accountability in Bible Translation of Divine Familial Terms," accessed August 12, 2014, http://www.sil.org/sites/de-

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 within the given linguistic and cultural context of the recipients."[41] The second recommendation makes special note of the "significant potential for misunderstanding of the words for 'father' and 'son," especially in "languages shaped by Islamic cultures." The document therefore suggests using clarifying or qualifying phrases along with the literal translation, "e.g. 'heavenly Father,' 'divine Son,' 'eternal Son,' or 'heavenly Son.' " The second recommendation also encourages translators to use "paratextual material" such as footnotes, sidebars, and the like as a further guard against misunderstanding.[42] The third directive extends the recommendation of qualifying phrases or paratextual material to the different nuances of "Son of God" in its various contexts. For instance, a translator might use "*anointed* Son of God" or "*royal* Son of God" in a context of Messianic kingship.[43]

Finally, a fourth directive of the SIL Standards observes that "disagreement over the translation of the word for 'father' and the phrase for 'Son of God' has resulted from overloading translation by attempting to address too many possible meanings and misunderstandings."[44] Translators should consider additional paratextual means of communicating the message of Jesus to Muslim readers through customary forms of commentary. "But these should not be considered or presented as biblical translations unless they abide by the first three recommendations."[45]

In light of exegetical, historical, and theological concerns, what can be deduced from the "SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms"?

First, while both SIL and Wycliffe Global Alliance have long required Trinitarian confession, the recent controversy has prompted renewed commitment to classical Christology and Trinitarianism. Alternative translations of "Son of God" such as "Messiah" and "Word of God" are rejected. SIL's reaffirmation of historic orthodoxy puts to rest suspicions that maverick translators might

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fault/files/files/2_processes_for_accuracy_and_accountability_in_bible_translation_11-24-2013_final.pdf.

[41] "SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms," accessed August 12, 2014, http://www.sil.org/translation/sil-standards-translation-divine-familial-terms.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

hold—for instance, that the Logos only became "Son" at the incarnation, that Jesus only functions as God, or that the doctrine of the Trinity is merely a fourth-century interpretation of biblical data. Whereas the larger umbrella of the United Bible Society does not have a doctrinal standard,[46] the SIL and Wycliffe official documents assert their commitment to historic Christian faith.

A second positive is the SIL Standards' emphasis on *literal* divine familial language translation. Critics complain that SIL and Wycliffe allow exceptions and that such latitude can continue to be abused. Yet SIL's additional "Process for Accuracy and Accountability" declares, "If a language has several widely used words for expressing 'father' or 'son', terms should be chosen that do not obscure the uniqueness of Jesus as God's only son and that communicate the ideas of 'son by nature,' i.e., that son is derived from his father, has a shared identity with his father, is in intimate relationship with his father, and has unique status in relation to his father."[47] While allowing in certain contexts the addition of modifiers ("*heavenly* Son"), the biblical text itself is elevated and preserved, a safeguard all the more important in contexts where the Qur'an is venerated. Such fidelity in translation bodes well for the orthodoxy of a maturing national church and its union with the global Christian communion.

Third, the translation practice of *text* plus *paratext* steps beyond the impasse of employing a single expression to satisfy a plurality of meanings. When no semantic silver bullet is discovered, the paratext can elaborate a term's exegetical, theological, and context-specific meanings while preserving faithful translation of the text itself. Once again, the Bible is properly elevated as the authority, with the paratext amplifying its intended meaning.

Finally, notable among other positives, the new SIL Standards document develops a process of safeguards in the translation of divine familial language. A few earlier SIL and Wycliffe associated projects were criticized for nonliteral translations of "Son" and "Father" that shocked and offended related people groups. The new SIL directives include an ever more thorough system of vetting Bible translations, concluding with an independent evaluation by a

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[46] Simon Crisp, Director of Translation Services, UBS World Service Center, personal correspondence, April 11, 2011. Because of the commitment of the United Bible Societies to serve all churches, neither the UBS Fellowship nor individual national Bible societies have doctrinal statements of faith.

[47] "Processes for Accuracy and Accountability," 2.

Divine Familial Terms Oversight Group.[48] With these guidelines, SIL and the Wycliffe Global Alliance require full compliance of all translation involvements with the ten WEA Global Review Panel's recommendations.[49]

In the end, therefore, what is the meaning of "Son of God" and how does this relate to translation? All language about God is to some extent analogical, including the words of the Bible itself that bridge from the infinite to the finite "in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words" (1 Cor. 2:13). However, the *names* of God as "Father" and "Son" carry us to the heart of the eternal Trinitarian relations. Therefore, as the WEA Global Review Panel and SIL/Wycliffe directives bring to the fore, more than any other New Testament terminology the translation of "Son of God" and God as "Father" must precisely adhere to the language of divine self-disclosure in Scripture.

CONCLUSION

The invitation to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, *the Son of God*, and . . . by believing . . . have life in his name" (John 20:31) is essential to the Christian faith. However, ingrained in the Muslim mind is the Qur'an's accusation that Christians believe Jesus to be God's physical offspring. For both religions, faith or denial that Jesus is the Son of God determines one's destiny in paradise or hell.

This two-part article addresses three questions: First, exegetically, are nonliteral translations of Jesus as "Son of God" omitting too much? The response is that replacing literal Sonship language detracts from the canon's holistic testimony of Jesus's deity. Indeed, the Father-Son terminology of the New Testament becomes the essential bridge to understanding the eternal Trinitarian relations.

Second, historically perceived, should the centrality of "Son of God" terminology in both Eastern and Western Christianity be set aside for non-Christian religious and cultural concerns? Early second-century witnesses give strong place to describing Jesus as the "Son of God"—this in the midst of Jewish, Roman, and pagan misinterpretations. The Nicene Creed (325) later codified the full deity of Christ as God's Son—the fundamental doctrine of all major Christian traditions. Muslim-idiom translations replacing the literal phrase "Son of God" are often perceived by traditional Chris-

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[48] Ibid., 1, 4.

[49] "SIL Standards," 2; and "Processes for Accuracy and Accountability," 1.

tians as not only accommodating Islam but also betraying the church that has endured centuries of oppressive regimes.

Third, theologically, what does it mean to confess Jesus as the "Son of God"? All God-language is in some sense analogy. The names "Father" and "Son" transcend this world's significance to allow glimpses into the immanent Trinitarian relations; thus, extreme care should be exercised lest the rich meanings of the deity of Christ and his eternal relationship with the Father be subverted. Responsible biblical translation not only bridges from the text to the receiving culture, but also invites readers to know the heavenly Father through faith in his Son. The 2013 recommendations of the WEA Global Review Panel and the "SIL Standards for Translation of Divine Familial Terms" rightly point in this direction and happily these in turn orient the entire Wycliffe Global Alliance.

In summary, the exegetical, historical, and theological arguments contend for literal translation of divine familial terms. However, just as excessive freedom in dynamic equivalency has abused deeper meanings of terms like "Son of God," so excessive rigidity in literal translation can obscure the Bible's true meaning. Professional linguists observe the existence of target languages, albeit relatively rare, in which meaningful translation of the divine names requires significant adaptation rather than word-for-word literalism. Room for exceptions to literal translation simply must exist but with extreme caution—lest readers fall short of honoring the Son just as they honor the Father (John 5:23).