NO OTHER NAME:
MUSLIM IDIOM TRANSLATIONS OF "SON OF GOD,"
CAUTIONS AND BALANCE

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Often left to the periphery of theological and church concern, the subject of Bible translation is no longer relegated to the jungle hut or a linguist's coffee table. And not all is well.

Much is brewing in these months regarding the translation of familial terms for God into Muslim idioms, most pointedly regarding the Christological phrase "the Son of God." Several events highlight its increased importance: (1) recent Bridging Translation and Bridging the Divide symposiums at Houghton College (2011, 2012); (2) a mid-August 2011 international consultation in Istanbul with ensuing SIL/Wycliffe clarifications for the translation of familial terms[2]; (3) a *Christianity Today* cover story[3] and follow up articles reflecting a growing body of other writings; (4) rising denominational concern about perceived lack of fidelity to Scripture in certain recent translations, notable in studies within the Presbyterian Church of America[4] and the Assemblies of God World Missions and U.S. Missions[5]; and (5) Wycliffe and SIL International's appeal to the World Evangelical Alliance for evaluation of their Statement regarding translation policies of divine familial terms.[6] From my vantage, oddly enough, the current fairly

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[2] See "Wycliffe Bible Translators, Inc. Statement on Doctrinal Beliefs and Translation Standards," (Wycliffe Bible Translators, 2012), http://www.wycliffe.org/TranslationStandards.aspx.

[3] Collin Hansen, "The Son and the Crescent," *Christianity Today*, Feb 2011, 18–23; etc., including C. Hansen, "The Problem 'Son': Debate Continues Over Translating Son of God for Muslims," *Christianity Today* online, April 3, 2012, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/april/problem-son.html.

[4] Within the Presbyterian Church of America, see "A Call to Faithful Witness: Part One. Like Father, Like Son: Divine Familial Language in Bible Translation. A Partial Report (Part One of Two Parts) of the Ad Interim Study Committee on Insider Movements to the Fortieth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America," May 14, 2012.

[5] Hansen, "The Problem 'Son'"; and multiple authors, Assembly of God World Missions and US Missions, "The Necessity for Retaining Father and Son Terminology in Scripture Translations for Muslims," April 2012, http://www.fatherson.ag.org/download/paper.pdf (accessed May 26, 2012), esp. p. 16.

[6] "SIL International [Extended] Statement of Best Practices for Bible Translation of Divine Familial Terms with Commentary," April 30, 2012; and "WEA Announces Dr. Robert E. Cooley as Chairman of Wycliffe and SIL Review Panel," May 9, 2012, http://worldea.org/news/3978 (accessed May 26, 2012).

tense differences being aired accompany a sense of progress as translators and biblical-theological scholars seek to ensure accurate communication of God's Word.

Questions revolve around how best to translate biblical terms such as "Father," "Son," and "sons of God"(i.e. as believers) when a target language may not have words that communicate analogous meanings intended in Scripture—particularly if that target audience is Muslim. If a listener's immediate understanding of familial language for God is biological and sexual, i.e., that a divine "Father" procreated divine sons, then is a word-for-word (or formal) translation in fact a true translation? Whereas the Greek, Latin and English terms for Jesus as "the Son of God" carry multiple dimensions of meaning for Christian faith, other languages may not have language 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. Rather, Jesus Christ the Son is "very God from very God, begotten, but not made."[7]

The purpose of this 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. After surveying the backdrop to the discussion, I approach the issue from three perspectives: exegetical, historical, and theological. I ask: (1) Exegetically, in the translation of the Bible, is a "non-literal" rendering of "Son of God" when referring to Jesus omitting too much? I argue that functional (or social) equivalents in Muslim-friendly translations are not always sensitive to the greater canonical significance of the designation "Son of God" and its centrality to the New Testament message. (2) Historically, should "Son of God" terminology so central in classical Christianity be set aside because of non-Christian, religio-cultural misunderstanding and opposition? My sense is that Muslim-idiom translations sometimes have deemphasized the unanimous, historical Christian confession that Jesus is the eternal God the Son. (3) Finally, theologically, what does it mean to declare that Jesus is the "Son of God" and how does this relate to translation? I recognize that in some languages a literal word-for-word translation can, in fact, contradict intended biblical meanings. Nevertheless, highly sympathetic Muslim-idiom translations are reason for concern as to whether Jesus Christ is adequately communicated as the eternal God the Son and consequently whether Muslim background believers will *ultimately* be able to join in the Nicaean confession of God as Holy Trinity. Without biblical terms such as "Father" and "Son" rightly translated in

[7] Whereas sometimes the names "Jesus" (Heb. 13:8), "Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:3-5; Php. 2:5-6) and "Christ" (Rom. 9:5) refer proleptically to the preexistent Son, 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). With the Incarnation, the Son assumes and retains forever his human nature; yet the Son's taking up a human nature in no way restricts his transcendent plenitude as God—in the famous words of Athanasius, "the finite cannot contain the infinite."

the biblical text, there is no adequate bridge to arrive at an understanding of the eternal, tripersonal God. I further contend that "Father" and "Son" are not mere metaphors or even titles but the *names* of the Persons of the Godhead; these take us as deep into the Trinity as we are allowed to go.

Two further clarifications are in order. My approach is dialectical. Professional linguists have insights, knowledge and experience that I lack, and I suspect others like myself criticize so called "Muslim-idiom translations" because we are naïve. Zealous for truth, yes, but we are uninformed concerning the complexities of translations into extremely diverse language-cultures of the world. We pontificate out of ignorance. Much of the content in this article is from dialogue with Rick Brown, Leith Gray, Barry Evans, Dick Grady and others, as well as David Alexander, John Stringer, Imad Shehadeh, Joseph Cumming, and others—some deep within in the Muslim world. I try to include the best arguments from both sides, most of all from those with whom I disagree.

Second. The phrase "Muslim idiom translation" (MIT), which at face value describes any translation into languages in cultures where Islam is prevalent, has taken on the meaning of a highly contextualized translation. That is, MIT denotes a translation distinguished by "non-literal," "functional equivalent" or "social-relational" language rather than "word-for-word," "formal," "kinship," "biological," "common meaning equivalent" or "literal" translation. Linguists remind me that to speak of "*literal* translation" is a faux pas of such magnitude that not even an aging professor can be forgiven. Professional translators, of course, have a dictionary of highly refined terminology. My terminology is for the rest of us.

Essentially two translation categories are in mind: *literal* and *non-literal*.[8] Historical translations of the Bible have almost unanimously translated the terms "Father" and "Son" in literal, kinship, common-meaning terminology. By the way, how extraordinary that the infinite Creator reveals his innermost personal being, his most sacred triune reality, in two of the simplest, most universal of all human words. Our earliest speech as children identifies "Daddy" and recognizes our relatedness as son or daughter. While conceptual variations in father-son language surely exist, it is hard to imagine more basic words as personal descriptives—often an infant's first intelligible words. Wherever there is language—fundamental to our humanity—there are words for "father" and "son." This is quite astonishing in the grace of God. In short, the first category defines *literal* translation entailing formal correspondence, common meaning, or direct kinship terminology.

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[8] The debates around MIT translations use an array of terminology, none particularly consistent. Surprisingly, *literal* and *non-literal* are the terms used in the advanced edition of the "SIL International [Extended] Statement, April 30, 2012, p. 5: "in this document, '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."

Non-literal translation constitutes the second category, that of dynamic meaning-to-meaning equivalence in non-biological terminology. Familial terminology is not necessarily univocal between receptor audiences and the biblical text,[9] all the less with its layered meanings of "Father" and "Son of God."[10] Of course in one sense the context of a passage clarifies a term's meanings, and the Bible is to some extent self-interpretive. But discerning precise meanings of "Son (or son) of God" is not always easy even in the original languages. Thus, non-literal translation centers on the perceived intended *meaning* (or *function*) of the original text rendered in similar meaningful constructs in the target language. Clearly this level of translation involves significantly more knowledge of both the original text and the target language-culture. Even with multiple tests and checks in place, this category entails significantly more choices and to some extent more subjectivity on the part of the translator team. Non-literalist translations require heightened discernment not only regarding linguistic technicalities but also culture, sociology, religion, and theology. In brief, non-literalist translations seek to express the meaning of the original text in functionally equivalent terms.

BACKGROUND TO THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSLIM IDIOM TRANSLATION

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

From a broader perspective the issue of Son-of-God translation situates within a global tension that can hardly be overstated. Today, fifty-five percent of the world population professes either Christianity or Islam. Among the seven billion people that populate our globe, 2.35 billion claim Christian faith and 1.6 billion profess the teachings of

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[9] In some contexts a word-for-word translation conveys no meaning at all, while other times it can contradict the actual biblical meaning. For example, in certain Muslim-idiom settings the literal translation of "Holy Spirit" is taken to mean the angel Gabriel. When Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive a child when the Holy Spirit comes upon her (Luke 1:35), the interpretation is disastrous. A parallel phrase such as "Spirit from God" thus conveys the *meaning* of the biblical text, whereas a literal translation in fact undermines what the Bible is saying. Through dynamic equivalency, the translator chooses the cultural idiom that best communicates the *impact* (or function) of the phrase within its biblical context.

[10] 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," *IJFM* 28:3 (Fall 2011) 121-25. They argue that both Hebrew and Greek paternal language may be distinguished between genitor or procreator relations (biological) and the more normative social paternal relations (*ben* and *pater*) used of divine familial relations. Therefore a *literal* translation of "Father" and "Son" would favor relational terms, not biological kinship.

Muhammad. Indeed, the worldwide Muslim population is projected to increase 35 percent over the next two decades.[11]

Moreover tensions between Christianity and Islam appear to be rising. Few would deny that the conflict between the two faiths constitutes the most widespread religious tension of the 21st century. Clashes between Christianity and Islam seem all too frequent across Africa, Europe, the Middle East, central and south Asia, Indonesia, and the Indian Ocean. Photos of dozens of charred bodies of Christians burned alive in church by Boko Haram in Nigeria are but one reminder of the potential for widespread violence. The relationship between the two faiths, to say the least, is challenging—welcome for some and inescapable for others.

In *Allah: A Christian Response*, Yale theologian Miroslav Volf sets forth what he deems are similar beliefs between the two theistic faiths. He contends that "Christians and Muslims worship one and the same God, the only God" [12] and that the two "civilizations" need not clash.[13] While there is not agreement on the details, the beliefs of the "people of the Book"—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—surely do coalesce around certain concepts of God such as divine transcendence, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. This God is transcendent, holy, and merciful. In regards to Jesus of Nazareth and contrary to Judaism, Islam generally affirms Mary's purity, the virgin birth, certain of Jesus' miracles, that he is a true prophet, that he ascended into heaven, and in widely held Sunni tradition that Jesus (not Muhammad) will return to judge the earth—albeit to break crosses and to punish Christians for their misplaced worship in him.

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' 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? (That is, what is the fundamental source of our knowledge?) 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

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[11] "The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010–2030," January 27, 2011, online http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Newsletters/27jan11.htm.

[12] Miraslov 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." (124) See Imad Shehadeh's review of Volf's work in *Themelios*, 36:2 (Aug 2011) 374-76.

[13] Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 6.

[14] John Stringer, "Of Straw Men and Stereotypes: Reacting to Rick Wood of Mission Frontiers," *St. Francis Magazine* 6, no. 3 (June 2010) 587.

the eternal "Son of God." In both religions as classically defined, one's faith response regarding Jesus' 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. That Allah would physically sire a God-child is spoken against sharply in the Qur'an and directly related to Jesus.[15] Muslims deem such belief in a divine physical offspring as "ludicrous and blasphemous"[16]—ironically, as do Christians themselves, indeed, far more adamantly. The connotation is vulgar and decidedly contrary to Scripture and Christian belief. Muhammad should have known better. But the anathema (*shirk*) against even pronouncing the words "Son of God" remains in force and has shaped the thinking of Muslims for nearly 1400 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 *ho huios tou theou* (lit. "the Son of God") with alternative terms that would not be perceived as blasphemous.[17] Such versions intend to clarify the phrase's biblical *meaning* regarding Jesus' Sonship within varying semantic contexts in the Muslim world.

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[15] 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…"; 5:72–73 "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." Also Suras 5:17, 74–76; 9:30–31; 72:3–4; 112:1–4.

[16] 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: 4 (October 2007) 422–29.

[17] Eugene Nida and Charles Kraft developed the concept of *dynamic* (or *functional*) equivalence in the translation of the Christian message. (Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964); Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); Kraft, "Dynamic Equivalence Churches in Muslim Society," in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. Don M. McCurry (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1979), 114–22).

In 1977 the United Bible Society's Arie de Kuiper and Barclay Newman directly addressed the question for Muslim contexts in their brief article "Jesus, Son of God—a Translation Problem." They comment, "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." Far too indebted to non-orthodox Christology, they unwisely suggest that the phrase "Servant of God" replace "Son of God." Arie de Kuiper and Barclay Newman, "Jesus, Son of God—a Translation Problem," *The Bible Translator* 28, no. 4 (1977): 432, cf. 432–38.

But just how should the traditional phrase "Son of God" be adapted when referring to Jesus Christ? Is it licit to substitute "the Son of God" with terms such as "Messiah," "Spiritual Son," or "the Beloved Son who comes (originates) from God"? If the direct, physical idea of "Son of God" in a Muslim idiom is perceived as blasphemy, then what else is on the table for re-translation?[18] Are not other familial terms such as God as "Father," or all Christian believers as "children" and "sons of God," also offensive to Muslims? How far should legitimate translation of Scripture bend in accommodating linguistic if not religious dissimilarities? For many Christians in the Muslim world, a Bible that replaces "Son of God" with non-literal readings is itself blasphemous.[19]

We arrive, then, at the three primary questions to be addressed in our study: (1) Exegetically, in the translation of the Bible, is a "non-literal" rendering of "Son of God" when referring to Jesus omitting too much? (2) Historically, should "Son of God" terminology so central in classical Christianity be set aside because of non-Christian, religio-cultural misunderstanding and opposition? And (3) theologically, what does it mean to declare that Jesus is the "Son of God" and how does this relate to translation?

EXEGESIS: IS THE NON-LITERAL TRANSLATION OF "SON OF GOD" OMITTING TOO MUCH?

All agree that translation has especially to do with the *meaning*, in this case, of the biblical text. When asking the question, what does "son of God" signify in Scripture, answers can vary considerably. The phrase "son(s) of God" has multiple meanings in Scripture as in all the Ancient Near East.[20]

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 likely the 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 Isra-

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[18] See Brown, Gray, and Gray, "A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms," 105-20; "A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible," 121-25; Rick Brown, "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Part I: God and Mankind," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 23: 1 (Spring 2006): 5–12; "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Part II: Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Age to Come," *IJFM* 23: 2 (Summer 2006) 48–56; Brown, "Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts," Part I, *IJFM* 22: 3 (Fall 2005) 91–96 and Part II, *IJFM* 22: 4 (Winter 2005) 135–45.

[19] 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, strong aversion against such Muslim-idiom translations "is true for all churches in the Arab world, including congregations of converts from Islam to the Christian faith." (John Stringer, editor of *St Francis Magazine*, personal correspondence, April 11, 2011).

[20] Chrys C. Caragounis, "בֵּן," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [*NIDOTTE*], ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1.676–77.

el 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*.[21]

In the New Testament, the Greek term *huios*, "son," occurs 379 times.[22] 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 description "son(s) of God" does not necessarily evoke the meaning of biological sonship, much less innate deity.[23]

Jesus as Son of God in the New Testament

The phrases "the Son" (in relation to the Father) and Jesus' self-designation as "the Son of Man" occur dozens of times in the Gospel narratives, so much so that they define Jesus' understanding of his own identity.[24] That Jesus refers to himself throughout the Gospels as "Son" stands in stark contrast to the term "Christ"—a titular role that Jesus, so to speak, approached sideways. Repeatedly the question of whether he is "the Christ" whirled around him, but very rarely does Jesus directly embracing the title as his own.[25] There is little doubt that Jesus' self-identity locates in being "the Son," and that above all meaning "the Son of God." This in itself is evidence that replacing phrase "Son of God" with terms like "Messiah" is not justified and sometimes betrays the meaning of the text.

Particular Synoptic Use of "Son of God"

The Gospel of Matthew uses "Son of God" sparingly but tellingly. First, the heavenly voice declares Jesus to be "my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased"

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[21] 2 Sam. 7:12–16; Pss. 2:1–3, 7; 89:3–4, 20–29, 35–36; Isa. 9:2–7. Caragounis, "בֵּן," *NIDOTTE*, 1.676, notes, that the Israelite king being God's son became connected with Yahweh's kingship over Israel. … the king was understood to reign as Yahweh's visible representative.

[22] Ferdinand Hahn, "υἱός," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3.382, cf. 381–92. The articular phrase "*the* Son" occurs 41 times, most referring to Jesus Christ. In varying configurations, the phrase "the Son of God" *ho huios tou theou* (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) and similar forms are used of Jesus, according to Hahn, some 80 times in the New Testament; the explicit formula about 44 times.

[23] 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; Brown, Gray, and Gray, "A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible," 121-25.

[24] Hahn, "υἱός," *EDNT,* 3.382, cf. 381–92. The articular phrase "*the* Son" occurs 41 times, most referring to Jesus Christ. In varying configurations, the phrase "the Son of God" *ho huios tou theou* (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) and similar forms are used of Jesus, according to Hahn, some 80 times in the New Testament; the explicit formula about 44 times.

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

(Matt. 3:17). Second, Satan tempts Jesus by twice asking, "If you are the Son of God …" (4:3, 6). Third, demons cry out, "What do you want with us, Son of God?" (8:29) Although multiple meanings of Son of God might be affirmed in each instance, each occurrence records a supernatural declaration. Fourth, in Matthew when Jesus walks on water and calms the tempestuous sea, the disciples in the boat "worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (14:32). Later as Jesus dies on the cross, with the sky black and nature itself trembling, the Roman centurion declares "Surely, he was the Son of God!" (27:54) Matthew's use of "Son of God" is similar to 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 can substitute 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.

The immensely important point is this. On the one hand, we should not expect pre-Easter understanding to equal post-resurrection/Pentecost comprehension of Jesus as the Son of God. On the other hand, we should recognize that the Gospels 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).[26] This is to say, post-Easter Christological belief is packed into the pre-Easter accounts of the Gospels.

Johannine Son of God

The Gospel of John begins with the eternal "Godness" of the Logos and describes the Word as One who became flesh as "*the only Son* of the Father" (John 1:14 ESV), and as "the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is at the Father's side" (1:18 NIV 2011).[27] So when John the Baptist declares yet in chapter one (1:34) that God testified to him that the one on whom the Spirit comes "is the Son of God," the meaning of "Son of God" is already in place from the Prologue—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" (1:1–2). When Nathanael declares again in John 1 (vs. 49) that Jesus is "the Son of God … the King of Israel," while he surely at the time had limited perception of who Jesus is as the Davidic Messiah, the writer John is infusing into Nathanael's words the theology of the entire Gospel. Later as Martha confesses, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (11:27), John's theme is equally

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[26] Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 134–35; 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.

[27] In John's Gospel and Epistles, while the word *Logos* is limited to the introduction of the Gospel, 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.

apparent: 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 "Son of God" is "God the Son."[28]

Jesus' Own Interpretation of "Son of God": A Pericope

In the Gospels, when Jesus most directly alludes to his deity, paradoxically, it is in the teeth of those who angrily reject him and seek to kill him. At these times the antagonists understood all too well that Jesus "made himself God" (John 10:30 ESV; cf. 8:58). This leads to the Sanhedrin's accusation at his trial.

When the High Priest adjures, "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God," Jesus responds "Yes, it is as you say" (Matt. 26:64; or Mark 14:62 "I am/I Am"). But then Jesus, so to speak, pulls the pin and the grenade rolls forward. He defines the title "Christ, the Son of God" by citing 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 goes well beyond the High Priest's understanding of the Son-of-God as a divinely anointed national savior. He is the heavenly "Son of Man"—a divine claim that the Sanhedrin seems not to have anticipated. Jesus interprets the title "Son of God" with the highest possible meaning—Daniel's celestial "Son of Man" who receives an everlasting kingdom and is *worshipped* by all peoples. Here the two definitions coalesce in the climax of the Synoptic accounts. In Jesus' self-understanding, the titles "Son of God" and "Son of Man" reinforce each other with the strongest possible meanings.

Other New Testament Affirmations of Jesus' 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 the New Testament. In John's Gospel, Jesus repeatedly claims to be "from above" (John 3:31; 6:33ff, 62; 8:23, 42; 10:36) and that he will 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). If as many scholars believe this was already a known Christian hymn at Paul's writing, then its formulation would have predated the writing of the Gospels.[29] Other high Christological passages

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[28] 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.

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

also establish the deity of Christ as Logos and Son: Colossians 1:15–19 and 2:9, and Hebrews 1:1–14, and John's Prologue (1:1–18). From a text-critical vantage, at least eight passages in the Greek testament explicitly state that Jesus is *theos*.[30] And always the Logos or Son of God exists as the Son in relationship to the Father.

In affirming the deity of Christ, all scholars agree that the earliest Christians grew in their understanding of their confession that Jesus is Lord and the Son of God. No one in those early years could articulate Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity.[31]

Son-Father Relationship as Divine Self-Revelation

In the New Testament about 117 passages bring together all three persons of the Holy Trinity.[32] Terminology and order for the members of the Godhead vary among biblical authors (e.g., God, Christ, Counselor), yet John's Gospel is widely perceived as the apex of Christological and Trinitarian revelation. The New Testament designates God as "Father" (*pater*) some 254 times, and nearly half of those occurrences (120) are in the Gospel of John. It is not too forced to say that our pattern of speaking of God as "Father" derives especially from John. The ascription of "Son" for Jesus occurs about forty times in John's Gospel (and twenty-two times in the Johannine Epistles). The full literal phrase "Son of God" occurs nine times in John's Gospel.[33] Once again it is worthy of note that much of the Son language is ascribed to Jesus himself speaking of his own relationship with the Father.

What therefore can be concluded? Both terms "Father" and "Son" for God are repugnant to the Muslim. Yet in the Bible and Christian faith these words take on more meaning than mere titles, rather they become the divine *names* that most disclose the eternal divine relations. To speak of Jesus as Messiah, or Wisdom, or Word, does not adequately address the eternal relationality of 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 description as to God's deepest reality (i.e., the *immanent* Trinity).

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[30] 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), 229-265. Insofar as textual variants: indisputable, John 1:1, 20:28; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:1; authenticity of high probability, John 1:18; Rom. 9:5; Heb. 1:8; 1 John 5:20.

[31] While I do not agree at points, James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville: WJK, 2010), 146, concludes "If he [Jesus] was worshipped it was worship offered to God in and through him, worship of Jesus-in-God and God-in-Jesus." Dunn affirms that the NT presents a hierarchical order of worship to Yahweh first, then in and through the Son.

[32] A conservative listing of the 117 passages to be published in my forthcoming *The Center of Everything: The Trinity in Scripture, History, and Practical Living* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013).

[33] Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 600–1, notes that Jesus does not specifically call himself "the Son of God," although this is often assumed as he speaks of his Sonship and intimacy with the Father (cf. Matt. 16:16; 26:64).

Therefore, translators in Muslim cultures must ask themselves, if non-literal phrases replace "Son," "Son of God," and even "Father" in Muslim idiom translations, then how will this substitute language allow the reader access into 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. We must ask, what can serve as licit alternatives to Father-Son language without losing what orthodoxy deems the theological center of Christian confession? —and, for that matter, without losing that which distinguishes Christian theism from Islamic theism?

Translator Rejoinders

Having considered the exegetical case for direct Sonship terminology, in fairness to Muslim-idiom Bible translators, several responses should be aired—responses not always considered by those outside the discipline of translation. To reinforce a point before discussion, few if any Bible translators have the intention of hiding the deity of Christ or our Lord's eternal place as the Son of God. Nearly all translators affirm Trinitarian doctrine and seek to convey the deity of Christ in translation.[34] The central questions are, first, what is the meaning of "Son of God"? And secondly what words adequately communicate that *meaning*?

What constitute the primary concerns of MIT linguists?

1. *Imposed Dogmatic Interpretation.* Nicene Trinitarian theology with its technical meanings, they 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. In response, many traditional Christians affirm that the theology of the eternal deity of the Son is not merely the theology of the fourth century, it is the theology of the New Testament itself.

Yet Muslim-idiom translators agree. Their assertion is that the Bible is not a doctrinal treatise. As 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."[35] In reading the Synoptic Gospels, it is argued, the deity of our Lord gradually unfolds and the deeper meaning of Christological terms gain force. If it took time for the earliest church to mature in comprehending

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[34] Parsons, *Unveiling God*: *Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 185–249; Brown, "Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts," Part I, 91-96; and Part II, 135–45; less explicitly, Brown, "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Part I: God and Mankind," *IJFM* 23: 1 (Spring 2006) 5–12; "Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Part II: Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Age to Come" 23: 2 (Summer 2006) 48–56; Brown, "The 'Son of God'—Understanding the Messianic Title of Jesus," *IJFM* 17: 1 (Spring 2000) 39–52.

[35] "SIL International [Extended] Statement," 30 April 2012, p. 4.

the risen Savior, then we must allow the same for Muslim background believers today.

2. *Naiveté of Literal Language Translation.* As any lexicon demonstrates, almost all words have multiple meanings and rarely does the dictionary meaning of a word in one language directly correspond with a word in another language. The common Hebrew term for "son" (*ben*)—like the Greek *huios*—carries over a dozen meanings. Simply because *ben* or *huios* occurs in the original text does not mean that its particular meaning is communicated through replicating a single dictionary meaning of "son" in another language. Rick Brown and Leith and Andrea Gray note that various languages have a specific terms for biological sonship that differ from the words for social-relational son. They further affirm that both Hebrew and Greek Testaments evidence the same even in the use of divine familial terms.[36] To translate *ben* or *huios* with biological language renders God having sexual relations and producing physical offspring.

MIT linguists observe a similar dilemma with Jesus' self-appellation as "the Son of Man." In certain Muslim idioms, a literal translation of this title denotes an illegitimate child, literally a "bastard."[37] Therefore a parallel phrase such as "the Man from heaven" based on Daniel 7:13 can serve as a functional equivalent. We have seen earlier the same problem in the name "Holy Spirit" sometimes understood in Arabic to connote the angel Gabriel. If "Son of Man" and "Holy Spirit" virtually require non-word-for-word translation in certain Muslim-idiom settings, then why the insistence regarding the phrase "Son of God"? If a word-for-word rendition 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 [of 'Son of God'] is not because these communicate Jesus' eternal deity, but rather because they communicate biological reproduction."[38] Various languages, it is affirmed, have no figurative sense of "father" and "son," hence non-literal, equivalent meaning translations are essential.

In rejoinder, multiple translators and national workers in Muslim-idiom contexts insist that assumptions are premature as to whether or not the divine titles "Father" and "Son" can be understood metaphorically by the Muslim reader. Many claim this is not definitively not the case.[39] From a doctrinal perspective, opponents of MIT allege that

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[36] 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.

[37] Brown, personal correspondence, March 24, 2011, used with permission.

[38] Leith Gray, personal correspondence, July 2010 and March 23, 2011, used with permission.

[39] Joseph Cumming sets forth a collection of Arabic sayings using son, daughter, and father. Common phrases such as "son of the nation" (*ibn al-waṭan*) and "son of the road" (*ibn al-sabīl*) describe those closely identified with their homeland or with constant travel.[39] Whereas the Qur'an's term for Je-

non-literal and social-relational terms for Jesus' Sonship fall short of affirming that he is of the same essence as the Father. Distinction is obscured between those "made sons and daughters" and the eternal Son who secures our redemption and adoption. Such translation becomes a significant barrier to affirming the eternal deity of Christ.

In this section my additional observation is that the largely pre-Easter gospel accounts of the Gospels are dense with post-Easter Christological meaning. Therefore faithful translation of the Gospel accounts will render as close as possible the literal "Son of God"—without repugnancy—to protect biblical writers' theological meanings that otherwise may be obscured. Muslim-idiom translations are not always sensitive to the greater *canonical* significance of the designation "Son of God" and its centrality to the New Testament message. Therefore we must ask, in light of the exegetical cautions earlier set forth, is non-literal translation of "Son of God" in Muslim idioms omitting too much? Some will argue vociferously yes, for reasons traced in the following section. From my vantage, depending on the cultural-linguistic context, *almost* always yes. But commendable efforts are moving toward closing the gap in the MIT debate.

HISTORY: SHOULD THE WORDS "SON OF GOD" BE SET ASIDE FOR RELIGIO-CULTURAL CONCERNS?

Some Muslim-idiom translators maintain that, if clarity regarding the magnitude of the Incarnation of the Son of God took decades and centuries to unpack, then why force Nicaean and even later classical Christology on Muslim 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 nor sign on 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. As the first statement of faith of the universal church, the theology of Trinity is intended to help the understanding. It serves as a good and proper lens through which to see the Scriptures. Understanding God as Trinity unpacks a wondrous biblical worldview where human beings are created in the image of God for relationship not only with fellow human beings but with God himself (unlike Islam).

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sus is usually *waled* ("son") meaning physical offspring, Sura 9:30 uses the term *ibn* ("son") for Jesus with its broader range of meanings. Traditional Arabic Bibles employ *ibn* which has clear metaphorical meanings. While generally encouraging dynamic equivalence, 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. Joseph L. Cumming, "What Is the Meaning of the Expression 'Son of God'," Yale Center for Faith and Culture, 1-6, n.d., http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/rp/Son%20of%20God-Arabic-English.pdf (accessed May 28, 2012).

Because God is Trinity he can be both the Just and the Justifier of those who believe (Rom. 3:26). Because God is One and Three, there is a real place for diversity and freedom, as well as unity under divine sovereignty. And all this begins with Thomas' simple confession to Jesus, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

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.[40] In searching the Scriptures, from the beginning the Christian church sought to unfold the implications of Jesus Christ being called Logos and the "Son of God." Bishop Ignatius of Antioch speaks of Jesus as "God" at least eleven times.[41] Writing *To the Magnesians*, Ignatius 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."[42] He urges them to grow "in faith and love, in the Son and the Father and in the Spirit."[43] His last words to Polycarp were, "I bid you farewell always in our God Jesus Christ."[44] M. C. Steenberg comments, "such passages, along with a host of others, demonstrate Ignatius' firm conviction that the Father and the Son abide in eternal unity. … Jesus as Son is the *eternal* Word of the Father; he has *come forth* from him and returned to him; he is '*joined*' to him…"[45] 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 di-

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[40] Among many, recent works include Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 80-151; Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 49-84; Thomas C. Oden, series. ed., *Ancient Christian Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), esp. Vol. 2, *We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin; and J. A. McGuckin, "Christ: The Apostolic Fathers to the Third Century," in *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham (London: Routledge, 2010), 256–70.

[41] 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 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 76.

[42] *To the Magnesians* 7.2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 207.

[43] *To the Magnesians* 13.1, ibid., 211.

[44] *To Polycarp* 8:3, ibid. 217.

[45] M. C. Steenberg, "God," in *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought*, 243; Steenberg was immediately referring to *To the Ephesians* 5, "Jesus Christ is with the Father, so that all things may be harmonious in unity."

verse regions of the world by 110 C.E."[46]

The confession that Jesus is "the Son of God" continues explicit in the earliest post-biblical history. *Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, repeatedly emphasizes the name "the Son of God" and declares "no one will enter the kingdom of God unless he receives the name of his Son."[47] The baptismal formula "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19) appears multiple times beginning with the first century *Didache* and in the second century emerging as a template for expositing the faith. A primitive Greek version of the Apostles' Creed dating about A.D. 150 proclaims, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ *His only Son* our Lord…"[48] 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."[49] Later in his *Dialogue with Trypho* the Jew (ca. 160), he argues at length that one of the three angels visiting Abraham was "God," but not the invisible God, rather a second who is both God and yet not identical to the Father.

That Jesus is the pre-existent divine Son is increasingly well established. Patristic testimony sharpens with Athenagorus, Theophilus, and Irenaeus. Jesus is confessed, prayed to, and worshiped as the preexistent "Son of God" and "God." Repeatedly and unanimously in all mainstream Christendom, the designation of Jesus as "the Son of God" is said to be essential to true doctrine and genuine faith. For most in Christian history, outside this confession—that is, outside the fundamental *meaning* of this confession—there is no salvation.

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" are not accurate translations of "the Son of God." Such phrases may be helpful explanations, for example, in a Muslim idiom translation paratext. However they are illicit substitutes.

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

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[46] Michael J. Svigel, "Second Century Incarnational Christology and Early Catholic Christianity" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), 44.

[47] *Shepherd of Hermas*, 89:2 (*Similitudes* 9:12.2, 4).

[48] According to Rufinus of Aquileia 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: by author, 1978), i.

[49] *First Apology* 13.

> 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).
>
> …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).[50]

Classical Translations in Eastern Church History

As the New Testament writings spread into non-Greek speaking cultures, early translations rendered *ho huios tou theou* literally and repeatedly as "the Son of God." The phrase was conservatively translated into various languages, in spite of cultural misunderstandings that may have interpreted Jesus as a god or a semi-divine ruler (as Caesar himself). Greco-Roman and other pagan pantheons all had offspring called "sons of gods," yet biblical translation did not adjust the language so that pagans better understand. To the contrary, the phrase "the Son of God" seemed to accumulate power.

Syriac was the Aramaic dialect of Edessa and commonly used throughout Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia from the first century through the Middle Ages and later. The Syriac edition of Tatian's *Diatessaron* (a harmony of the four Gospels) dates from around A.D. 170 and became widely distributed in the East.[51] The Syriac-Aramaic Bible, the *Peshitta*, dates from the fourth century and parallels in influence and longevity the Latin Vulgate in the West. The Syriac wording for the phrase the "Son of God" (*bareh d'alaha*) in both the *Diatessaron* and the *Peshitta* directly translates the Greek *huios tou theou*.[52]

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

[51] The *Peshitta* translation appears dependent on both the *Diatessaron* and Hebrew and Greek texts.Robert J. Owens, "Peshitta," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 718–19; and "Diatesseron," *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 3d ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 477–78.

[52] Here I am indebted to my colleague, Syriac scholar Richard Taylor. Philip Jenkins notes that the *Diatessaron* demonstrates the early authenticity of the four Gospels against the so-called "lost Christianities." "The deep conservativism of these churches, so far removed from papal or imperial control, makes nonsense of claims that the church bureaucracy allied with the empire to suppress unpleasant truths about Christian origins." 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), 88.

This carefulness in translation marks other early Bibles as well. Indeed, we would hardly expect otherwise, especially after the fourth-century Ecumenical Councils' pronouncements. As the *Peshitta* retained its literal translation, so fidelity in word-for-word rendering of Jesus as the "Son of God" has continued for over 1300 years not only in Syriac but also in Arabic, Farsi, and a multitude of other biblical translations within Muslim cultures. Located in the Vatican Library, the earliest extant Arabic Bible (Vatican 13) dates from the eighth century and demonstrates a conservative translation of divine familial terms as does the Codex Siniaticus 151, dated in the ninth to eleventh centuries.[53] When referring to Jesus Christ, such literalism continues in traditional and recent Bibles[54] honored and memorized by Christian believers across Muslim cultures today. The attitude has been that God's inspired Word stands, it will not change. If Islam refutes or readers deny the teaching of Scripture, the problem is not the Bible.

In the Midst of Islam

With the rise of Islam and the Qur'an's 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' deity, likely Muhammad was most familiar with not an orthodox but a heterodox understanding of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity. The case is not clear. Muhammad had contact with Christians.[55] Yet 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.[56] In any case, certain statements in the Qur'an, as we have seen, aggressively reject Sonship language: "Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He

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[53] Imad Shehadeh, personal correspondence, May 26, 2012. Vatican 13 contains parts of the Synoptics, all of Paul's letters, and the Epistle of Hebrews (attributed to Paul); although within two centuries of Islam and using Qur'anic expressions, it remains literal in its translation of divine familial terms.

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

[55] Tarif Khalid, ed. and trans., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 21, denies that Jewish and Christian scriptures had a direct role in the forming of the Qur'an. On the other hand, by one popular account, the Qur'an mentions Jesus 97 times, as well as Zechariah, John the Baptist, Mary, and Jesus' disciples. The Law, Psalms and Gospel are referred to in 131 passages. Sometimes deliberate contradiction of the Christian message is obvious. Sir Lionel Luckhoo, "Christianity or Islam," *Decision*, June 2010, 26–29.

[56] Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 22. Alister E. McGrath, in *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 213–29, asserts that Muhammad's understanding of the Christian Trinity reflects a fifth-century Collyridian sect on the Arabian peninsula; Muhammad's view of the Christian Jesus parallels the Gnostic Christology of the Great Seth. General background material is found in Joseph E. Brockopp, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

begotten; And there is none like unto Him" (Sura 112:1–4).[57]

Whereas the Qur'an strongly affirms Mary's virginity, Jesus' miraculous birth and certain stories from Jesus' childhood, any form of Christ's deity is flatly rejected. Christ's death on the cross, too, is deemed a Christian belief almost unanimously denied today, although Joseph Cumming has demonstrated certain historical variations within Islam that include Jesus' crucifixion.[58] Likewise, Islam unanimously rejects Christ's incarnation, atonement, and resurrection.[59] As Tarif Khalidi puts it, the "Qur'an tilts backward to his miraculous birth rather than forward to his Passion."[60] At least twenty-nine passages speak of "Jesus" by name. Most frequently he is referred to as "son of Mary" (33 times), but also 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).[61] Khalidi adds, "In sum, the Qur'anic Jesus, unlike any other prophet is embroiled in polemic."[62] "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."[63] Perhaps not surprisingly, the calligraphy 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."[64]

With Christian civilization under the boot of Islam, John of Damascus (ca. 655–ca. 750) believed that Muhammad foreshadowed the Antichrist and that Islam was an ominous power of the last days. As he addresses the "heresy" of Islam, John insists on both

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[57] *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, by Abdulla Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2005).

[58] Joseph L. Cumming, "Did Jesus Die on the Cross? The History of Reflection on the End of His Earthly Life in Sunni Tafsir Literature," Yale Center for Faith and Culture, 2001, pp. 1-40, http://www.yale.edu/faith/rc/rc-rp.htm, (accessed May 28, 2012).

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

[60] Khalid, *The Muslim Jesus*, 14.

[61] 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.

[62] Khalid, *The Muslim Jesus*, 12.

[63] Ibid., 19–20: "How much of the Bible was accurately known to early Islam? And in what form? 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."

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

the unity and innermost plurality of God and further accuses Muslims of being "mutilators" of God should they deny it.[65] Later the mystic theologian Joachim of Fiore (1132–1202) viewed the Muslim empire much the same.[66] Another three hundred years later, as the Turks laid siege to Vienna, having conquered southeast Europe, Martin Luther believed Islam was sign of the apocalypse and God's "ferule for the backs of a wayward church."[67]

Although traditional Bible translations in Islamic contexts continued to use the literal phrase "Son of God," esteemed Eastern leaders knowledgeable of Islam chose other titles of Christ as primary when defending the Christian faith with Muslims. In the eighth and early ninth centuries, John of Damascus (Orthodox) and the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy in Seleucia (ca. 728–823) could not directly challenge the Islamic regimes under which they labored, although Timothy's discourse with caliphs was extensive. Sensitive to Muslim beliefs, when they publically defended the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity, both John Damascene and Timothy avoided the phrase "Son of God" preferring the title "Word of God" or "Christ is Word and Spirit of God."[68] Moreover, one Bible translation, the ninth-century *Elegant Gospels*, did employ equivalent terms of kinship language alongside traditional texts, as did the Lectionary of Bishop Abdyeshua of Nisibis (ca. 1399). [69] But such translations were never normative for the church.

The thirteenth-century Coptic theologian Bulus al-Bushi, Bishop of Old Cairo, wrote a systematic theology that was oriented to the Muslim context. Written as a dialog with a Muslim interlocutor, *On the Incarnation* consistently speaks of Christ as "God the Word."[70] Bulus does so with no compromise of the Coptic Orthodoxy he vanguards,

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[65] *De Haeresibus*, 100:69-77, based on Jesus being described in the Qur'an as "the word and spirit of God," in Andrew Louth, "Late Patristic Developments on the Trinity in the East," *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, 149. John of Damascus listed Muslims as *Hagarenes* (Ismaelites) and included them as a Christian heresy. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It? A Short History of the Scriptures* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 138.

[66] Uwe Siemon-Netto, "Tariq Ramadan, Point Man of the Caliphat," The Northampton Seminar, online http://northhamptonseminar.com/?s=Siemon-Netto, accessed February 5, 2011.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims*, 12–20, 200–3. See Suras 3:45; 4:171; 5:110. John of Damascus provides the first extant written defense of Christian belief to Muslims, beginning with biblical prophecy, then using the Qur'anic analogy that the Word is in God.

[69] Leith Gray, personal comment, July 2010, used with permission. The *Elegant Gospels* substitute language albeit inconsistently for "Son," "Son of God," and "Father": e.g., Matt. 8:29 ("Isa"); 11:27 ("a son," *ibn*); often *Allah* for "Father" (5:16, 45; 6:4, 8; etc.); various verses are missing in the text.

[70] Stephen J. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 240–45. Bulus (ca. 1170–ca. 1250) develops Cyril of Alexandria's analogy of the burning bush, now seen as God the Son incarnate in the womb of Mary. Interestingly, Bulus appropriates the same *al-kalam* tradition of argument as the famous Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135–1204), who moved from Spain to become the leader of the Jewish community in Old Cairo.

openly declaring that God became man—although his work is not a Bible but an apologetic. This pattern of Muslim sensitivity continues today. In Coptic and Eastern churches, when addressing fellow Christians, there seems to be little hesitancy in speaking of Jesus Christ as the "Son of God." However, considerably more caution occurs in conversation and apologetic with Muslims.

A Long History of Suffering

No doubt politics and ethnic conflict have accentuated if not often driven religious conflicts over fourteen hundred years between Muslims and Christians. Yet in broad terms, as a consequence of Islam's decidedly anti-Christian view of Jesus, millions of people have suffered discrimination if not martyrdom for their profession that Jesus is "the Son of God." Philip Jenkins' account of the eradication of Christianity in North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia is bold and disturbing. It begins in the mid-seventh century and continues to the present recounting Islamic pressures against Christians in Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Turkey, Armenia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Palestine. Jenkins' major point is that the church has ceased to exist because of persecution in formerly Christianized regions of the world: "For all the reasons we can suggest for long-term decline, for all the temptations to assimilate, the largest single factor for Christian decline was organized violence, whether in the form of massacre, expulsion, or forced migration."[71]

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, insisting that the Qur'an never changes, Islamic polemicists accuse Christians of changing the Bible to appease Muslims and to gain converts. Local believers caught in the tension between their traditional Bibles and new Muslim-idiom translations find it difficult to respond. To change the New Testament seemingly to placate those hostile to its central truth appears to many Christians as an act of betrayal.

Reaffirming Direction

We return to the question, then, 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.

I suggest that from a historical vantage several important cautions arise against modifying the so-called "literal" biblical terminology. First, for early Christians as for those in Eastern churches today, "The Bible was a seamless whole in which all pre-

[71] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 141.

figures Christ."[72] Canonically conservative translations of "son of God" keep the linguistic bridge strong between the two Testaments and from the Epistles to the Gospels. The Old Testament Son of David and heavenly Son of Man are the New Testament Son of God. Second, immediate post-New Testament writings already affirm the phrase "Son of God" as core to true Christian faith not merely as an incarnational title but as the *name* of the preexistent Christ. Third, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan affirmation of the deity of Christ and the Holy Trinity were declared the cornerstones of Christian truth and defended unanimously by mainstream traditions in both East and West. Believers have stood their ground around the terms "Father" and "Son" because these most reflect the eternal relationship within the Holy Trinity; no other words are adequate. Fourth, in nearly all translations of the Bible throughout Christian history a literal, objective translation of "Son-of-God" has been guarded and maintained, even amidst cultures where the phrase was misinterpreted or polemically rejected. The primary reason that Muslim idiom readers misinterpret "Son of God," especially as related to Jesus Christ, is because the Qur'an sharply rejects the concept and has indoctrinated its followers against such belief (or against a distorted meaning of that belief). Fifth, when translators and publishers provide Bibles with alternative renderings of "Son of God" this fuels the accusation that Christians change their Bibles to accommodate Islam and to attract Muslim converts. Islamic dogma boldly asserts the absolute immutability the Qur'an as the eternal word of God. Sixth, millions of believers in Islamic contexts have suffered for their belief that Jesus is the Son of God. Innovative translations of Scripture that appear to compromise Nicene Christological confession can bewilder and prove highly offensive to national believers.

These cautions are potent and, in my judgment, need to be more adequately addressed by contemporary MIT 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 Christianized terminology outside normal language within a culture becomes a muted voice if not a barrier to people understanding the saving grace and power of God. The particular question remains, how is the meaning of "Son of God" most faithfully communicated.

THEOLOGY: WHAT IS THE MEANING OF "SON OF GOD" AND HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO TRANSLATION?

Having considered exegetical and historical reasons for caution in using alternative wording of the literal "Son of God" in Muslim-idiom translations, it helps to consider the issue from a doctrinal vantage. Theologically, what does it mean to say that Je-

[72] Ibid., 90.

sus is the Son of God? And what is the role of translation?

Analogous Language and God

In one sense, all language about God, even biblical language, is analogy—this by theological necessity. What we can comprehend of God is sufficient, by his grace, to truly know him—know him personally, experientially, wondrously. But as the fathers understood, as finite creatures we can only know what God has revealed of himself in categories and images that we can comprehend. What he has revealed is absolutely true and authentic to who God is. Yet words all fall short of the infinite. Even the statements of Scripture revealing the most astonishing metaphysical realities of God come to us in phonemes of language—sound bites that have meaning only within our very conditioned language structure. Such realization does not impune the great doctrines of the faith or the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. Our statements of faith are true to God, as much as we can fathom. But we recognize our limitations. Beyond the blazing light of knowledge is the darkness of unknowing.

The term "analogy" derives from the Greek *ana-*, meaning "according to," plus *logos*, "word." The meaning originally denoted "in due ratio" or "in proportion." Analogy came to describe otherwise unalike subjects in terms of a correspondence or similarity between the two.[73] For example, we may say that "Solomon is wise" and that "God is wise." Although the *ratio*, so to speak, between the two "wisdoms" is incalculable, there is correspondent similarity. Solomon's wisdom, in part, resembles and points toward God's otherwise indescribable, infinite wisdom.

Thus, in analogous terms, the transcendent God graciously reveals himself in categories that finite beings can comprehend—as Creator, Judge, Savior, Shepherd, and Reconciler. We speak of God as masculine "he" because this is the language of revelation, even though with the church fathers we surmise that God transcends gender. John the Baptist announces Jesus is "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29, 36), an image drawn from the rich teaching about Passover and the sacrifices in the Pentateuch and Prophets (Isa. 53:7). In the Book of Revelation, the heavenly Jesus is entitled "the Lamb" (27 times) by whose "blood" he "purchased men for God" from every people (Rev. 5:9, 13), and God and the Lamb will reign forever (22:1, 3). More than mere metaphor (for the heavenly Christ is seen to assume this form), the Lamb serves as an analogous image that corresponds with what the Son has done through his death on the cross. In the Lamb we un-

[73] The term "analogy" draws a stronger level of correspondence between two subjects than "metaphor." Generally a metaphor is a figure of speech that contains a one-dimensional comparison, whereas several dimensions are often present in analogy. "God is my *fortress*," as metaphor, highlights the protection of God's presence before adverse powers. However, "God is my *Redeemer*" is amplified in the NT as descriptive of both God and Christ describing several aspects of divine grace in freeing the captive. *Analogy* is not a preferred word in contemporary linguistics; and even the simplest metaphors usually reveal unexpected complexities and multiple associations of concepts.

derstand the soteriology of heaven and earth. The Spirit-inspired analogies of Scripture are *true* to who God is but never all that God is. What God-language signifies analogically is made clearer within progressive revelation and the broader canon of Scripture. Yet always our infinite Lord stands beyond us.

Thus, God comes to us in finite categories of acts and words, and finally through Incarnation so that we might know him deep within human reality. In so doing, the divine "him" is further revealed as the divine "they." This is not tritheism. "Trinity" is a theological term that unifies the biblical witness. The one true God eternally exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each equal in nature, equal in glory, and distinct in relations.[74] Trinity does not connote three *separate* persons or Gods, as this would be tritheism. Nor does it describe a *single* personal being manifest outwardly in three ways, as this would be modalism. Rather in classical Christian faith the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always been and always will be God—God in transcendent otherness, God in entering into creation. Therefore, the Christian God, so to speak, is big enough to be God precisely because this God is tripersonal—each person indwelling the other, holy, dynamic, communicating, loving, and together all-glorious. The triune God is utterly self-sufficient within. And in relating to believers this God is active above, beside, and within us.

Analogous yet Revelatory Language of "Father" and "Son"

If our highest terminology for describing the divine Being is analogy then when the New Testament speaks of God as "Father" and "Son," what is intended and what is not?[75]

Beginning with the negative. What is *not* intended is that God the Father gave birth to or somehow created the Son. Too often, however, as some translators argue, the very terminology of traditional translations seems to strongly suggest physical offspring as the primary meaning. Arian insistence that the Son is a created being—thus not eternal—is rejected by all Christian orthodoxy. 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 offspring, a theology categorically rejected as heretical by the Council of Nicaea three hundred years before Muhammad.

What is intended?

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[74] No single model adequately describes the triune God—neither the so-called "social model" traced to the Cappadocian fathers (esp. Gregory of Nyssa) nor the "psychological model" (both misnomers) often assigned to Augustine's *De Trinitate*. Although both ascriptions are to some extent misnomers, each recognizes the limitations of their perspective of the Godhead.

[75] I easily admit that "Father" and "Son" do not always carry the meaning of the divine names in a primary sense; we earlier observed multiple meanings of "Son of God," and occasionally the divine term "Father" is related to Israel and angels. Nonetheless, the way in which Jesus as Son speaks concerning the Father points beyond incarnational language to eternal Trinitarian relations.

First, the language of Father and Son in its biblical-theological development denotes genuine relationality of equally personal beings. My daughters are every bit as human as I. But different from my daughters and me, God the Father and God the Son exist in filial relationship that transcends time; there is no beginning or end. In equality, in filial relationship, the Son has ever co-existed together with the Father.

Second, because God is one, divine familial language far transcends that of three separate people. "In reply to those who taunt us with tritheism," wrote Basil of Caesaria, "let this be our answer: we confess that God is one, but one in nature, not in number."[76] All that constitutes the Godness of the Father also constitutes the Godness of the Son. Basil's friend Gregory of Nazianzus determinedly held threeness and oneness together: "The Son is not the Father, for there is only one Father; but he [the Son] is what the Father is; the Spirit is not the Son, because he proceeds from God, for there is only one unique Son; but he is what the Son is. One are the three in divinity; three are the one in those characters [*sic.*] which are peculiar to them."[77] Different from human kinship, the Godhead exists in a mysterious unity of essence outside our conceptual categories. The central dogma of the Nicaean confession is made conceivable through analogy.

Third, the patristic fathers discerned that the New Testament language of *begottenness* and *procession* can be understood analogically to describe the relationships between the Father, Son and Spirit outside of time. Humanity has no access to the internal relations of the immanent Trinity apart from the words of the Bible. As Kevin Giles demonstrates, the term *begottenness* sweeps in an entire panorama of biblical evidence reflective of the Son's relationship to the Father not only in time but also beyond time.[78] Yet the words of Scripture could not be taken in a univocal sense—that the Father gave birth to the eternal Son—rather the language of begottenness is analogy for a profound eternal distinction.

Fourth, yet another uniqueness of the triune God comes to the fore, that of *perichoresis*.[79] Each person of the Trinity indwells the other without diminishing the distinctness of each. Jesus declared, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," yet in the

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[76] *Epistula* 8.2.

[77] *Oration* 5, *On the Holy Spirit* 9.

[78] Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), esp. 63-90. Giles offers able defense of this Nicaean doctrine. Scholars agree the Greek *monogenes* denotes "one and only" (John 1:18) whereas *gennao* ("beget"), as in Ps. 2:7 quoted in Acts 13:33 and Heb. 1:5; 5:5, alludes to Jesus' resurrection or exaltation. Giles observes "for the Nicene fathers [the Son] is *monogenes* ('unique') because he alone is eternally begotten" (66).

[79] 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 (ca. 580–662) expanded the use to include the mutual interiority of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By the eighth century in the Greek church, John of Damascus further developed the idea of reciprocal indwelling within the Godhead, and the concept was also received in the Latin church but with less primacy.

same text he continues to speak 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 the "other Paracletos" (John 14:16). In Scripture, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit manifest a reciprocal interiority. Every person of the Trinity is present in the other without confusion of persons. Moreover, divine *perichoresis* is analogous to God's indwelling believers: we are "God's temple" (1 Cor. 3:16–17); Christ is in us (Gal. 2:20) and we are "in Christ" (1 Cor. 1:30); the Holy Spirit lives within us (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). Yet by God's indwelling us we do not become God, anymore than the Son becomes the Father. Our personal human consciousness is distinct from the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, while experiencing God's indwelling and fellowship. Thus, again, by analogy I can understand something of the Holy Trinity's eternal perichoresis because I have "Jesus in my heart"—consonant with the testimony of all the church down through the centuries.

Father and Son as the Eternal Names

Although all descriptions of the infinite God are ultimately analogies, the words "Father," and "Son" (and "Spirit") draw us as close as possible to the inner personal reality of God. Other names and titles of God highlight the "economic" working of the Trinity within creation—such as Creator, Christ/Messiah, and Comforter.[80] Particularly in Muslim settings, many favor the *Logos* or "Word," rather than "Son," as the preferred language in speaking about the Godhead. And it is true that the *Logos* refers to the absolute beginning when "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Nevertheless the reference to Jesus Christ as the Logos occurs in only two other verses in all the New Testament (1:14; Rev. 19:13). Nor is Logos a relational term. When Logos terminology dominates discussion only with difficulty does one avoid modalism or the unorthodox view that the Logos was merely latent in God, then coming forth to create the worlds.

On the other hand, Jesus describes himself as "Son" or is so described by others over one hundred times in the Gospels.[81] Whether by human onlookers, by demons, by angels, Gabriel, or God himself (Matt. 3:17), Jesus is identified as the "Son" and "Son of God." Sonship Christology has multiple layers and meanings in the New Testament, but the relationship of the Son with the Father particularly in Johannine writing is of definitive, ultimate importance.

In Jesus' own revelation of his relationship to God, it is the language of "Son" and "Father" that transcends economic revelation to speak of a pre-creational glory and

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[80] Occasionally, even these descriptions are proleptic in their use, e.g., "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8)—although the God-man Jesus was properly conceived only in the Incarnation.

[81] Hahn, "υἱός," *EDNT*, 3.382.

reciprocal love (John 17:5, 24). The Father *knows* the Son (John 10:15) and the Son *knows* the Father: "You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me" (7:28–29).[82] The Son knows the Father not because the Son is the Father but for precisely the opposite reason, the Son enjoys relationship with the Father. John's Gospel records seven times that the Father loves the Son[83] 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. As with no other language, the terms "Son" and "Father" carry us above Incarnation and economic revelation to the heart of Trinitarian relations.

For these reasons the words "Father" and "Son" were embraced not only as descriptions or titles but as proper names of the divine *personae*. As church fathers insisted, each name mutually depends on the other. Bishop Alexander of Alexandria expressed this eloquently: "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."[84] Interpreted within the entirety of the biblical canon, to speak of God as "Father" and "Son" draws us as close as possible to the eternal divine relations. And, again, even these names are finally analogous to something greater in the infinite God. Nevertheless, "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" genuinely reveal each person. The patristic fathers concluded that there is no greater, revelatory terminology than the Trinitarian names Father, Son, and Spirit. The translation of the most sacred divine names, therefore, assumes immense importance in the history of the church and today.

Translation as Interpretation

The task of faithfully communicating God's inerrant Word within the understanding of another religious culture is arduous and imperfect. In spite of occasional disclaimers,[85] the translation of the Bible always involves interpretation of and adaptation to another worldview that includes idiom, culture, and religion. In *Unveiling God: Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture*, Martin Parsons sets forth multiple evidences for presenting to Muslims the supremacy and deity of Christ from the Bible. Perhaps ironically, at the same time, in biblical translation he supports replacing

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[82] See also John 8:55; 10:15; 17:25. "Like all true knowledge (according to John) the knowledge Jesus has of God is based on relation." C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), *323.*

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

[84] *Epistle on the Arian Heresy* 1.7.

[85] Rick Brown, John Penny, and Leith Gray, "Muslim-Idiom Bible Translations: Claims and Facts," *St Francis Magazine* 5, no. 6 (December 2009) 91–93, deny such efforts are "Muslim compliant translations" or that they "try to hide the sonship-terminology." But philosophically such interplay in translation is inescapable and not necessarily wrong.

phrases like "Son of God," "Word of God," and "image of the invisible God" with non-offensive dynamic equivalents.[86] John Travis suggest a variety of options for "Son of God" in MIT: (1) a target-language term that means son in a figurative or metaphorical sense; (2) a wooden, literal translation ("regardless of how it offends the sensibilities of a Muslim reader"); (3) if without a suitable term for a non-biological son, employ phrases like "the Spiritual Son of God" or "the Beloved son who comes from God"; or (4) utilization of dynamic equivalents that convey the meaning of "Son of God."[87] More recently Rick Brown, John Penny, and Leith Gray reject the idea of mere substitution of literal terms and suggest that Sonship texts might sometimes best be actually *translated* as "spiritual Son of God" within a Muslim idiom culture to avert Islamic misperceptions of God having a physical son by sexual union.[88] Brown and Leith and Andrea Gray distinguish between *biological* sonship and *relational* sonship, emphasizing that the latter better communicates the biblical as well as the classical Trinitarian Father-Son relationship.[89]

A May 2012 official SIL International directive states:

> The goal of faithful and appropriate communication requires careful analysis of the specific linguistic, cultural, or religious factors that may cause potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the biblical text. While no translation can completely communicate the full meaning of the original text, best practices are established in order to produce translations that are as accurate as possible.
>
> This is not a matter of adapting the meanings of the Scriptures to the culture and worldview of host communities, but rather a matter of expressing biblical meaning as accurately and clearly as possible in the host language.[90]

The latter paragraph regarding translation as "*not* a matter of adapting the meanings of

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[86] Martin Parsons, *Unveiling God: Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 198–203; cf. 183–226.

[87] John Travis, "Producing and Using Meaningful Translations of the Taurat, Zabur and Injil," *IJFM* 23: 2 (Summer 2006) 75.

[88] Brown, Penny, and Gray, "Muslim-Idiom Bible Translations," 90. In that the phrase "son(s) of God" carries a plurality of meanings in the New Testament, Brown in the past favored a mixture of biblical synonyms and "the *sense* approach" within a given passage; thus he sometimes substituted the word-for-word "Son of God" with terms like "Christ," "the Word of God," and "the Beloved of God" Brown, "Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts," 139–40; etc. My understanding is that today he and other SIL MIT linguists would make every effort to clarify the meaning of divine familial terms including the deity of the Son, if not in the text then in the paratext.

[89] 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.

[90] "SIL International [Short] Commentary on the Best Practices for Bible Translation of Divine Familial Terms," May 2012, p. 1.

the Scriptures to the culture and worldview of host communities" is an admirable but philosophically difficult aspiration. Language, culture, and religion are inextricably intertwined.[91] Muslim idiom linguists can be less than fully attuned to the religious implications of their word choices and, conversely, their critics from the outside can be unaware of how thoroughly enmeshed religion and language are in every culture.

In every case, when translators choose what they deem the best of multiple translation possibilities, far more than dictionary comparisons are at work. The use of literal as well as non-literal equivalents requires substantial exegesis, interpretation, and adaptation to communicate the original meaning to the target language culture. This is an inescapable methodological reality in all translation.[92] It is never a purely scientific, exegetical, or personally neutral endeavor. For these reasons, one can fairly deduce that conservative translations that adhere closely to the wording of the biblical text are the *least* subjective or prone to misinterpretation or misleading. Moreover, this "literal" or conservative approach reflects the translation methodology of historic Christianity.

Positive Movement Toward MIT Resolve

Disagreement and dialogue regarding Muslim idiom translation through recent years have served to forge innovative solutions. From my vantage, two primary affirmations stand out.

First, SIL/Wycliffe has forcefully reiterated commitment to historic Christology.[93] This, of course, is not innovation. SIL/Wycliffe like most North American translation organizations maintains a long history of requiring Trinitarian confession together with the doctrine of inerrancy. SIL further clarifies: "both the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ must be clearly communicated in translation. Care must be exercised to avoid any translation strategy that would inaccurately communicate or misrepresent either His deity or humanity."[94] The Statement repeats the Istanbul Consultation decision that terms like "Messiah" and "Word of God" are *not* viable alternatives for "Son of God,"

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[91] See Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), esp. 71–104.

[92] "The SIL International [Short] Commentary," p. 1, continues: "Translation typically involves choices; there is seldom only one possible rendering for a given term. The full range of a term's uses in different contexts of Scripture must be analyzed as part of this research." How to more fairly express the complicated task of translation escapes me. Translation is interpretation.

[93] Ibid. Reflecting the Istanbul Statement (August 2011), the SIL opening paragraph states: "In SIL, we strongly affirm the eternal deity of Jesus Christ and require that both His deity and humanity be clearly communicated in all translations. Scripture translations of the term Son of God must promote an understanding of all its richness, including Jesus' relationship as Son with God the Father. Without reservation, SIL's Scripture translation practice is to use wording which promotes accurate understanding of the relationship of Father by which God chose to describe Himself in relationship to His Son, Jesus Christ, in the original languages of Scripture."

[94] SIL International [Expanded] Statement," April 30, 2012, p. 3.

and that "the phrase Son of God must be translated with phrases that have familial meaning."[95] The SIL reaffirmation of basic historic orthodoxy puts to rest accusations of a functional Christology—that the Logos only became "Son" at the Incarnation, or worse that Jesus only functions as God for us. Whereas the larger umbrella of the United Bible Society does not have a doctrinal standard,[96] the recent SIL public and internal documents reassure their organizational commitment to historic Christian faith.

Herein lies part of Wycliffe/SIL's tension as the largest entity within the UBS. "SIL is committed to involvement in translation where decisions are made in partnership with others, thereby avoiding the imposition of any decision by any one party."[97] SIL/Wycliffe will need to develop more explicit policies about joint translations that transgress the current guidelines of the organization. If certain published SIL/Wycliffe related Bible translations have veered too far toward Muslim compliance in the past, the Istanbul and more recent official statements have done much to correct the course.

A second positive advance in translation methodology entails the use of *text* and *paratext*. Whereas the *text* denotes the actual translated body of Scripture, the *paratext* "refers to any supportive or explanatory material included along with the translated text in order to aid in understanding"—including "footnotes, side-notes, introductions, glossaries, section headings and illustrations."[98] In short, the translation practice of *text* plus *paratext* steps beyond the impasse of employing a single literal or dynamic equivalent term for complex concepts such as divine familial language. The text-paratext coupling allows explanation of a complex term. For example, if the literal phrase "Son of God" stands in the text of a Muslim idiom translation, the paratext explains that such a term is not meant to be biological or procreational. In rarer situations if a familial term not identical to "Son of God" must be employed (see footnote 95 below), then the par-

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[95] Ibid., p. 5. The directives and parameters of translating "Son of God" are further elaborated on pp. 5-8, worth noting from p. 7: "Based on careful research, translation teams should begin with the likely nearest equivalent for both son and father. If this results in wrong meaning, other renderings for son and father that preserve familial meaning may be considered. For example, 'God's one-and-only' would be considered an acceptable non-literal rendering if, in a specific language community, it refers to a son, without communicating wrong procreative meaning. When the necessary paratext has been drafted for each rendering, each option is tested extensively in the language community in order to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. When the testing is complete, the rendering is chosen that expresses the intended familial relations better than any other alternative, without introducing unbiblical meaning. A critical guideline in this process is that the literal rendering of Son of God will always be either in the text or included and explained in the paratext that accompanies a non-literal rendering."

[96] Simon Crisp, Director of Translation Services, UBS World Service Center, personal correspondence, April 11, 2011. Because of the UBS commitment to serve all churches, neither the UBS Fellowship nor individual national Bible Societies have doctrinal statements of faith. The UBS goal is one of partnership and cooperation with all Christian churches.

[97] SIL International [Shorter] Commentary, May 2012, p. 1.

[98] Ibid.

atext elaborates its intended meaning including the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. The SIL statement continues: "Even though the paratextual information may be considered essential, the paratext does not have the authoritative status of Scripture itself. This must be kept in focus when deciding what to put in the text versus the supportive information in the paratext."[99] Thus, whether for the Muslim reader or any other, the biblical text is properly placed as the supreme authority with the paratext amplifying or clarifying the meaning of complex terms. This step forward in translation methodology functions to resolve problems created with dynamic equivalency as well as more literal historical translations that confounded some readers.

Mission and the Spiritual Engagement of Translation

Every culture is a place of God's merciful working, yet Scripture also teaches that the whole world is at enmity with and hostile to God (Eph. 4:17–19). Every nation has been usurped and every people controlled by the Evil One (John 12:31; 2 Cor. 3:3–4). As vanguards of global missions, Bible translators work on the frontlines of spiritual battle. We cannot ignore that Muslim perception of phrases such as "God the Father," "Son of God," "Son of Man," and "Holy Spirit" owe heavily to the Qur'an and the Hadith and/or Sunna's teachings explicitly directed against Christian faith. No doubt, over generations a multitude of influences mold a particular language and culture. It surely is not the "fault" of indigenous Muslim-idiom readers that they interpret as blasphemous certain terms central to biblical faith. Nevertheless, it is the "fault" in significant part of a dominating religion with an agenda to undo primary Christian truth claims as articulated at Nicaea and Chalcedon. To circumvent literal translation precision because of repugnant misunderstandings within a hostile culture may overstep a translator's prerogative and hurt the mission of the church. In every case, Bible translation purposes an invitation to believe. Translation is mission.

When relating Christian belief to other religions the question of God is primary. What is God like in himself (or itself)? Is this God infinite? Is God personal? What is God like before and outside of all finite existence? Can God be truly personal yet alone in transcendence? Does God need creation in order to be glorified? Does one's understanding of God allow unity and diversity within this God's very being? All world religions admit analogy when referring to God or another ultimate Reality. Once beyond Qur'anic anathemas a Trinitarian apologetic can be remarkably persuasive.[100]

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[99] Ibid.

[100] Although Volf generally defends a "soft" social model of God, his recent interaction with Islam establishes at length a commonality with Islam regarding the single divine Being, then developing the intraTrinitarian dynamic of the Christian God. Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 79–200. In an earlier work he writes, "if unity and multiplicity are equiprimal in him, then God is the ground for both unity and multiplicity," *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998),

So, what is the meaning of "Son of God" and how does this relate to translation? All language about God is to some extent analogical, even the words of the Bible itself. These are Spirit-breathed analogies that bridge from the infinite to the finite, "not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words"(1 Cor. 2:13). Most penetrating of all are the names of God as "Father" and "Son." Divine familial words carry us to the heart of the Trinitarian relations. Therefore, more essential than any other New Testament language, the translation of "Son of God" and "Father" must precisely adhere to what God has given us—the very words of divine self-disclosure. This for the salvation of a dark and hostile world.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental to this entire enquiry stands the question: how can fidelity to Scripture and classical confession of Jesus as "Son of God" be held together with Muslim-sensitive translations? Ingrained in Islamic cultures, the words "Son of God" elicit the Qur'anic accusation that Jesus is said to be God's physical offspring. Conversely, central to Christian faith is the invitation to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

I have addressed the following questions:

First, exegetically, are non-word-for-word renditions of Jesus as the "Son of God" omitting too much? My response is that the multi-layered meanings of "Son of God," as in the Gospels, often point beyond the limited concepts of hearers in Jesus' immediate world. Replacing literal Sonship language—as uttered from heaven at the baptism and the Transfiguration, by Satan in the temptations, and by demons as early testimonies to Jesus's supernatural origin—can detract from the canon's holistic post-Easter testimony. Yet even in John's Gospel, Jesus' own Father-Son language reaches the deepest levels of divine self-disclosure.

Second, should the traditional 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 such as Ignatius, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and Justin give strong place to describing Jesus as the "Son of God"—this in the midst of Jewish and pagan misinterpretations. The Nicene Creed (325) later codified the meaning of the "Son of God" as "from the substance of the Father…true God from true God." The full deity of Christ as God's Son is the fundamental doctrine of all major Christian tradi-

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193; see also, Volf, "Being as God Is: Trinity and Generosity," *God's Life in Trinity*, ed. Volf and Michael Welker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 3–12. The strengths of these earlier works seem muted in *Allah.*

tions. In that name millions have faced discrimination and martyrdom. For that reason, Muslim-idiom translations that replace literal "Son of God" terminology are often perceived by long-standing national Christians in such cultures not only as accommodating another religion but also as betraying the church that has endured under oppressive regimes.

Third, from a theological perspective, what does it mean to confess Jesus as the "Son of God"? And how does this relate to biblical translation? We first observed the analogous nature of God-language, yet how the names "Father" and "Son" (more than any others) transcend merely this-world significance to allow us glimpses into the Trinitarian relations. To confess Jesus as the "Son of God" is finally to recognize both his essential equality with the Father and his eternal filial relationship. As for translation of the "Son of God," all translation is unavoidably interpretation. Biblical translation carries the special responsibility of bridging not just from the text to the receiving culture. It further functions as an invitation to enter the Christian faith—the faith of the church. Therefore, especially in regard to the phrase "Son of God" when related to Jesus, extreme care should be exercised lest the rich meanings of the deity of Christ and his eternal relationship with the Father be subverted.

In summary, from my perspective, these exegetical, historical, and theological perspectives contend for *literal* translation of "Son of God" as with other divine familial terms. Moreover the development of translation methodology that couples the text with paratext appears significantly helpful in clarifying divine familial terminology.

Having said this, however, among the 6,600 languages of the world, grammatical constructs, lexical understandings, and semantic domains vary enormously. As of this writing, only 2,527 languages possess some part of the Bible.[101] As professional linguists have tried to say to the rest of us, target languages exist in which non-literal meaning equivalents rather than word-for-word literalism are the only reasonable pathway. Room for exceptions to word-for-word translation simply must exist. Just as excessive freedom in dynamic equivalency abused deeper meanings of terms like "Son of God," so excessive rigidity may obscure the Bible's true meaning. In a Muslim-idiom language in Indonesia a leading linguist translates the term for "Son" in Hebrews 1:2-3—which alone would imply physical offspring—as "the royal Son who comes forth/originates from within God."[102] Though non-literal the phrase elucidates the meaning of Christ's eternal Sonship far more eloquently than a single word.

Furthermore, if faithful to the original text, multiple Bible translations within a culture should not be offensive. As in English, so a multiplicity of translations creates certain problems. Yet such Bible variations often target subcultures (as in MIT) or levels

[101] United Bible Societies, http:www.unitedbiblesocieties.org/sample-page/bible-translation, accessed May 29, 2012.

[102] Dick Grady, personal correspondence (March 2011), used with permission.

of understanding and literacy. Established Christian traditions should be sensitive to readerships largely outside of their patterns and customs.

Amidst rather jagged correspondence with one Muslim idiom translation advocate, he asked me "Do you love Muslims?" I didn't respond. It was too indicting to respond, because a lot of times I don't. I hate Islam. And I often see the Muslim as my enemy.

May we love the Lord our God with all our hearts. May we honor the Son as we honor the Father. May we love his Word, the Holy Bible. May we love our neighbor as ourselves. May we love our enemies, as Christ loved us.