**Meaning Discrepancy in Terminology between Christians and Muslims.**

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**Introduction**

This paper is based on almost forty years of involvement in Bible translation in various Middle Eastern languages.[1] My career as a Bible translator began in 1973 when I embarked on a tour of the Arab countries trying to understand the distinct dialects and how they relate to each other and to the classical/formal Arabic taught in schools. I was searching for an answer to this puzzling question: **"How can I produce an Arabic Bible that communicates the Christian message to the majority of Arabs, namely Muslims?"**

In addition to my personal experience and research that I have personally conducted in a number of these countries, I collected a number of books written by Christians and Muslims on a particular topic. By comparing the terms and idioms used to express the same thoughts, I was able to arrive at the meanings as perceived by the two cultural groups, Christians and Muslims.

My goal was to produce a translation that serves the Church and at the same time communicates clearly and accurately to Muslims.

**Part I: The Historical Development of the Arabic Bible**

The Arabic translations of the Bible have an older history than that of the English Bible. Scores of Arabic versions had been in existence when the first English Bible known as the Wycliffe Bible was completed in England shortly after John Wycliffe's death in 1384.

There is no conclusive evidence that Arabic was among the languages to which the Bible was translated before Islam. However, Anton Baumstark (1872-1948) was convinced that the gospel had existed in Arabic in pre-Islamic times. He argues that a certain Armenian monk, Euthymius (377-473) evangelized the Arabs. Naturally then he must have used at least one gospel or selections from the New Testament in his work. Irfan Shahid argued that the Najran tribes in Southern Arabia had been Christianized and that their primary language was Arabic. Therefore their

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[1] As Director for the Middle East and North Africa I supervised translation projects in Arabic and Kurdish. And helped in the initial phase of translations into Farsi, Turkish, and Kabyle for Living Bibles Internationals which later merged with the International Bible Society, now Biblica.

Church liturgy could not have been Syriac since Najran is far removed from Syria and Palestine. He writes: "...there was a Gospel in South Arabia around 520 AD. Whether the whole of the Bible or only a part of it was translated is not clear; it is safe to assume that of the books of the Bible, the Gospels and the Psalms, and possibly the Pentateuch, were the first to be translated." [2]

Others argue however that the language of Christians was Syria/Aramaic, which was the liturgical language. If any Christian Scriptures existed in Arabic, they were probably only portions of the New Testament translated from Syriac.

Even if no portion of the Bible was ever translated to Arabic, the fact that there were many Christians among the Arabs allows us to speculate that they may have orally translated portions of the Bible from Aramaic, the lingua franca of the time.

**Early Christian-Muslim Relations**

The first century of Islam was difficult for Christians living under Islamic rule. Muslim rulers considered them *Dhimmis* (subjects) under the tutelage of Islam. Christians, on the other hand, saw Muslims as their oppressors. The main language of Christians in the Middle East at the time was Syriac or Aramaic. In the second century of Islam, Christians began to write apologetic literature in Arabic countering Muslim polemics. Griffith writes:

"Perhaps it was in response to this Christian apologetic offensive in Arabic that, in some of the renditions of the "Covenant of Umar" dating from the first Abbasid century, we find among the conditions which the Christians should observe, the agreement that they would not use the language of the Muslims. Under the caliph *al-Mutawakkil* (d. 86l) this stipulation was at least theoretically strengthened to the point of prohibiting Christians even from teaching Arabic to their children."

Despite this serious restriction, Christians managed to produce several translations of the New Testament in Arabic.

**Early Arabic Bible Translations:**

Beginning with the eighth century, Muslim-Christian encounters sparked a flurry of debates that led to a rich body of literature by Christian apologists defending the faith against Islamic polemics. As a result, and particularly in the ninth century, many embarked on translating the gospels and other portions of the Bible to Arabic.

Sidney Griffith embarked on a serious inquiry into the appearance of the Arabic Bible in the early Islamic period. In 1985 he wrote a well-researched article detailing the development of the early Arabic manuscripts. Griffith has found out that the first known Arabic manuscripts of portions

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[2] Irfan Shahid, *The Matyrs of Najran,* (Subsidia Hagiographica, 49; Bruxelles, 1971), pp. 242-250.

of the New Testament date back to 867 A.D. It was translated by Bishr Ibin Assiri and was known as the Sinai Arabic MS 151[3]. This was published in the latter part of 20th Century by Harvey Staal. Around that time and later other translations appeared such as the Sinai Arabic MS 72, MS 154, and MS 155.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of Arabic manuscripts of the gospels was conducted by Lebanese Scholar Hikmat Kashouh who recently published his phenomenal volume of 761 pages under the title "The Arabic Versions of the Gospels." Kashouh cites a 1902 German researcher, Caspar René Gregory who listed **one hundred and thirty seven Arabic Manuscripts** of the NT and identified their locations in the various European Libraries and museums including the Vatican.[4]

These Arabic translations fall under three major categories depending on the language from which they were translated being Syriac, Coptic or Greek. Of critical importance is the fact that Muslim Arab literature written by Al-Ghazali, At-Tabari, Ibn Ishaq and many others contain biblical quotes in Arabic. This indicates that the Arabic scriptures were available to them.

**One noteworthy common feature of all these translations from Greek, Coptic and Syriac is that they all utilize Christian, not Muslim terminology.** This is a significant observation because Christians were living as subjects to Islam and would have been tempted to compromise or reduce the pressure on them. Yet they were consistent in faithfully retaining the language of the Church in the Bible.

**An Early Attempt to Islamize the Arabic Bible**

The one time when Christians were asked to Islamize the Bible to accommodate Islamic thought, they refused to do so. It was in 12th Century when Patriarch John was ordered by the Arab ruler to contextualize the Bible with these orders:

> "Translate your gospel for me into the Saracen language, i.e., Arabic but do not mention Christ's name, that he is God, or baptism or the cross." Fortified by the Lord, his Beatitude said, "Far be it that I should subtract a single yod or stroke from the Gospel", even if all the arrows and lances in your camp should transfix me." When he saw that he would not be convinced, he gave the order, "Go, write what you want". So, he assembled the bishops, and he brought help from the Tanukaye, the Aqulaye, and the Tuaye, who were knowledgeable in both the Arabic

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[3] MT. SINAI ARABIC CODEX 151 published by the Institute for Middle Eastern New Testament Studies in cooperation with the United Bible Society, Beirut, Lebanon. 1985.

[4] Hikamt Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels. De Gruyter. Berlin/Boston 2012 page15.*

and in the Syriac language, and he commanded them to translate the Gospel into the Arabic language."[5]

## The Arabic Bible in the Protestant Era

Until the twentieth century, Bible translations in Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages were based on the original languages and some cases on Coptic and Syriac manuscripts. The protestant reformation of the sixteenth century turned the tide. The focus in Biblical scholarship shifted from the East to the West. Most prominent among all the English language translations was the King James Bible first published in 1611 which became the favorite Bible for the English-speaking world until recently.

The availability of scripture in the vernacular brought about an emphasis on evangelizing the Muslims by western missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A wave of modern translations hit the Western world towards the middle of the twentieth century. The discovery of many Greek papyri documents in Egypt at the turn of the century and in following years, contributed a great deal to a new trend in Bible translation. Much of New Testament vocabulary which once was thought of as highly classical, was proven by these papyri to be part of everyday life of the people in New Testament times. Christian linguists observed that God spoke the language of the people. This realization inspired many modern speech versions in the first half of the twentieth century both in England and the USA.

## A Major Shift in Bible Translation Theory

These 20th century non-literal translations triggered a significant revolution in the theory and practice of Bible translation. Their sweeping popularity was a clear indication that people began to look for a Bible that actually speaks the language of the heart, the mother tongue. American translators were contextualizing the English Bible to an American audience with the goal of letting God sound American. One example of the cultural contextualization of the New Living Bible for instance is found in Romans 16:16 greet each other with a holy kiss is translated as "Greet each other in Christian love." The rationale behind it must have been that the Middle Eastern times of Jesus people greeted each other with a kiss, but Americans do not.

James Moffatt produced the first translation of the Bible that diverged from the traditional philosophy of literal translation. The New Testament was published in 1913 and the full Bible thirteen years later. Moffatt taught that to achieve an accurate translation, we need to break the tradition of word for word transfer. The Moffatt Bible was controversial because it incorporated interpretations which were met with opposition by many Christian scholars. The language was

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[5] Sydney Griffith, *The Gospel in Arabic: an Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century.* Otto Harrassowitz. Wiesbaden Germany. 1985 Page 136.

more readable than the King James. Although it was not completely a paraphrase, it became the first serious modern translation that set the stage for a number of paraphrases that were a lot more daring such as,

J.B.Phillips, 1958

Cotton Patch Gospel, 1968

The Living Bible, 1971

Good News Bible or Today's English Version, 1976

The Message, 2002 Eugene Peterson.

The New International Version, 1979, struck a balance between the literal conservative translations and the paraphrased Bibles. This contributed to its success and popularity for half a century. The NIV also became a model for other Bible translators who tried to achieve clarity with accuracy.

**The Influence of English Bibles on Arabic Translations**

With the exception of the Van Dyck translation which was influenced by the King James Version, it was not until the twentieth century that English translations started influencing the philosophy and style of Arabic translations. The Jesuit New Testament of 1969 leaned heavily on the Jerusalem Bible first published in French (*La Bible de Jérusalem) in 1956 then in English in 1966. Kitab al Hayat* was partially modeled after the NIV which was beginning to become popular. Today's Arabic New Testament, 1993 better known as the "Common Translation" is practically a translation of the the Good News Bible or Today's English New Testament. It was later modified against Kitab al Hayat and other Arabic translations that have become available.

Theories of Bible translation were coming from the West. Nida, Wonderly, Taber and others enjoyed great influence among Bible Translation agencies. My own training came from their materials and the teachings by trainers who were influenced by them.

**Islamized Bible Translation Projects**

Traditionally literal translation philosophy was being replaced by a more progressive and freer approach. Some have experimented with a high level of contextualized Bible that went so far as to adopt Qur'anic terminology and even Islamic theology. Here are the most serious attempts to Islamize the Bible.

**Paul Ferree:** American named Paul Ferree spent thirteen years creating a Muslim Idiom translation of the Entire New Testament. In 1959 he only printed Gospels, Acts and Romans in one book. I am in possession of a copy plus the entire manuscript of the New Testament which he gave me. That project failed due to massive opposition by Church leaders and was never distributed.

**David Owen:** He was an American graduate of Fuller School of World Mission, hired a Palestinian Muslim, Adnan Baidun to translate the Diatessaron into Arabic. The Diatessaron is a chronological harmony of the Gospels from the late second century. The work which took thriteen years was published in 1987 under the title *Seerat Almaseeh* (The life of the Messiah). It reads like a Qur'an in that it uses Qur'anic terminology and style including rhyme. David printed 2000 copies, but the project came to a halt and never made it to the open market.

**Sobhi Malek:** In 1990 the New Testament under the title of "The Noble Gospel" *Al-Injeel Al-Shareef* was published by Sobhi Malek. The entire Bible followed in 1999. This is a semi-contextualized translation that uses Muslim religious terminology especially names such as Isa for Jesus rather than Yasou'.

**Mazhar Mallouhi:** This recent work was sponsored by Frontiers through Mazhar Mallouhi, a Syrian convert who calls himself a Sufi Muslim follower of Christ. "The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ" was published in 2004 and uses modern Arabic, unlike Owen's, but is a Muslim Idiom Translation because it uses Qur'anic names of biblical characters. The main feature of this work is it is the first to daringly remove all references to God as Father and most references to Jesus being the Son.

Opposition to Islamized or contextualized translations into Arabic have been passionate by Christians and Muslims alike. Dudley Woodberry who himself is not opposed, wrote an article quoted Gabriel Habib, the Greek Orthodox director of the Middle East Christian Council, who in a letter to many evangelical leaders in North America, asserted:

> *Unfortunately, we have all too frequently attempted to "contextualize" our sharing of the gospel-at the risk of diminishing the value of the churches' spiritual heritage. The loss of such a precious spiritual heritage in our efforts to communicate the message of Christ diminishes the real potential of accumulated spiritual experience.* [6]

Muslims have accused Christians of deception and trickery in using Islamic terminology in the Bible Translations. Woodberry writes: "Whatever the final outcome, it is significant that the Muslim community felt these words and exclamations were exclusively their own."

**Conclusion:**

It is not not absolutely certain that the Bible existed in Arabic before Islam. If it did, it was either translated orally or in written form from the Syriac. Over 137 manuscripts in Arabic existed

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[6] J. Dudley Woodberry, Contextualization among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars.

however before the dawn of the 20th Century. The Arabic translations were free from Western influence until the missionary era beginning with the 19th century. More recently, in the last 50 years, several attempts were made to Islamize the Arabic Bible by utilizing Qur'anic terminology. History teaches us that this is not a wise idea as it confuses both Christians and Muslims and hinders the communication of a clear message among them.

## Part II: My Personal Journey in Bible Translation

My career in Bible Translation started in 1973 when theories of contextualization were just becoming popular. I was assigned the task of producing an Arabic Bible translation that would communicate effectively to Muslims who make up the vast majority of Arabs. The then popular Van Dyck translation was proven to be unintelligible to the average reader due to its complicated style and difficult terminology. Dudley Woodberry in his above mentioned article attests to this problem when he quotes an Omani sheikh lamenting:

> "I have the Gospel, too. One of your missionaries gave me a copy twenty years ago. I frequently get it down and try to read it but its Arabic is so strange that I understand nothing."[7]

After much struggle, it was my strong desire to communicate the message of Christ to Muslims that led me to accept to work on a contextualized version of the Bible into Arabic. I embarked on a pilot project translating a portion of the gospels. A large-scale research and testing project was also launched to insure that the goals of the translation had been met. Hundreds of people in the streets and schools of Lebanon and Egypt were contacted. I interviewed over 300 pastors, missionaries and Christian leaders in Egypt, Sudan, Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria,Tunisia, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, and United Arab Emirates.

The results of all this research convinced me that contextualized translations might sound like a good idea theoretically but they do not produce the desired results. I continued to conduct testing and research by expanding my test material from a list of isolated terms to sample verses from the  different parts of the Bible.

I created a battery of ten different tests including back-translation to compare samples of the Van Dyck Bible with the identical texts in my new prototype translation. Popular books, magazines and newspapers were also browsed to see how terms and phrases in these verses are used in modern writings in various parts of the Arab world. Results of the tests were fed back to the translation teams in Beirut and Cairo for their consideration in revising the text. The manuscript was rewritten numerous times until it was satisfactory. The first printing of 7000 copies  in 1982

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[7] J. Dudley Woodberry, Contextualization among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars.

was sold out within a few days. Millions of copies have been sold and distributed since then. The vast majority of those receiving the New Arabic Version are Muslims.

**Principles of the New Arabic Version (Kitab al-Hayat)**

The success of the NAV is attributed to these principles:

**Sensitivity and respect for the national church:** Biblical terminology is part of the language of Christians. Every effort was made to preserve the terminology and idioms used in the Church while producing a Bible that Muslims can read. All people outside the Western world value their language and hold dear certain terms and idioms that they are not willing to forgo. It would create confusion and division to produce a Bible Translation that would widen the linguistic gap between the national Church and the new converts from Islam.

**Islamic Terminology:** Contrary to the trend in contextualization, NAV does not contain terms borrowed from the Qur'an or distinctively Islamic popular speech. The vocabulary used is that of the literary standard Arabic used in respectable publications. It is, in the most part, a secular vocabulary, neither Muslim nor Christian except in the case of specialized terminology like the name of Jesus.

**Muslim Audience:** One of the major purposes for the NAV is to communicate the meanings of the gospel to those who have limited exposure to Christian terminology. A Muslim's understanding of the Bible would then not be hindered by the difficult terms he is not familiar with. At the same time, Christians are not hindered by culturally offensive terminology borrowed from the Qur'an. I realized that when Muslims show interest in Christ, it is the Christians who will be coaching them and discipling them. It makes sense, therefore, to produce one translation that can communicate the same concepts to both the church and Muslims. This indeed was a difficult task, but not impossible by any means.

**Differences in Arabic "Dialects":** The Van Dyck contains numerous archaic words that modern day Arab readers struggle to comprehend. In the early 1980s, The Baptist Publications in Beirut circulated a dictionary called al *mu'een* which means "the helper", treating 1500 of the most difficult words used in the Van Dyck. The NAV, on the other hand, is sensitive to the variation in terminology among the many different Arab countries. A research project that involved people from many Arab countries was carried out to avoid this problem. Newspapers and magazines from the various Arabic countries were studied. Reviewers from these countries were consulted and used in both the beginning stages as well as toward the end of the translation work. Thousands of corrections were made, some of them very serious and others trivial. The NAV was meant to be read, understood, and loved by all Arabic-speaking people.

**Literary Style:** In the early 1920s, Taha Hussein, a well-known and highly respected Egyptian writer, criticized the Van Dyck Bible because "its Arabic is weak," he said. Taha was a popular writer who desired all Egyptians to read and understand his work. But he lived at a time that weak Arabic was frowned at as disrespectful. Hussein introduced a revolutionary literary style of Arabic. He called it *Assahl Al-mumtana3,* which could be translated as "irreplicable simplicity", meaning that the text is easy to read, but difficult to write. In consultation with well-known Lebanese men of literature such as Said Baz and Elia Hawi, I attempted to use his style. The idea is to produce a level of Arabic that was grammatically tight, rhetorically beautiful, yet simple to comprehend and flows naturally.  To do this I needed to choose common terms known by even semi-educated Arabs. Yet the construction was that of the highest literary level.

**Availability of the NAV:** My desire was not only to produce a good translation, but one that gets in the hands of the Muslim majority in the Arab world.

The NAV was sold on the streets of Cairo and in many cities in Egypt. It was distributed in the secular market. It was displayed in bookstores, kiosks, and newsstands throughout Egypt. Soon it spread to many Arab countries where tens of thousands of of copies were sold in public book fairs open to the public. As a result, the Word of God became available to the man on the street. Here is a testimony of a Muslim lady:

"All my life I heard about the Injeel (N.T.), but never was I able to put my hand on one. Now I have one because I found it on a newsstand."

Lesson

### Part III: Translation Philosophy

The controversy over the translation of familial words in the Bible by Wycliffe and others has given rise to a global discussion on the advisability of the Functional Equivalence philosophy that insists on a meaning-based philosophy in place of a word-for-word literal approach. This discussion is likely to cause everyone to rethink their position in hopes that the public debate will help in the development of healthier theories of Bible translation.

**The Complexity of language:**

Language is as old as mankind. It is the tool by which human beings communicate in their interpersonal and social interactions. We use a complex system of symbols to export and import, or code and decode mental images of concrete objects and abstract thoughts. In other words, language is the embodiment of intangible meaning communicated by means of tangible symbols. Until communication takes place, meaning itself resides in the mind of both communicator and receiver. Translation is the avenue by which meaning is transferred or exchanged among people who speak

different languages. Without translation, communication is not possible and therefore meaning remains concealed.

Symbol systems can be visual, verbal, audio, or sensory. According to communications experts, the nonverbal systems of communication may carry with them even stronger emotive value than the verbal or written mediums. These unconsciously influence the communication in manners which may strengthen or weaken the verbal communication we are more consciously aware of.

If communication seems complicated and far from being simplistic within any particular language, what about language as used in a cross-cultural context?!!

This is the challenge of Bible translation, especially in a Muslim context. Christians and Muslims in the Middle East are two "peoples" who share a common cultural heritage and who employ the same linguistic system, yet they are separated by a thick wall of misunderstanding due to linguistic differences stemming from their religious distinctiveness. These two groups have co-existed in the same cultural setting for fourteen centuries. Yet the gap between them remains wide. Meanings attached to linguistic symbols among Christians, differ greatly from the meanings attached to Muslim linguistic symbols despite the fact that these same symbols are similar and sometimes even identical in form. This is the reason Bible translators need to be careful not to cause confusion by mixing terminology from the Bible and the Qur'an.

## Form and Meaning

Every Bible translator is familiar with these two words. Bible translation theory in the last four decades under the influence of Eugene Nida and others, has concentrated on the relationship between the forms and meanings of words. The form is the packaging, the meaning is the content. This linguistic dualism gave rise to the commonly known theory of the Dynamic Equivalent or Functional Equivalent translations.

This theory proposes that form is changeable but the meaning is constant. Therefore the meaning can be extracted from its form and preserved within another form. One example is the translation of the word Allah. Allah is an Arabic form for the Hebrew Jehovah, Spanish Dios, Greek Theos or Persian Khoda. So Allah, according to proponents of Functional Equivalence theory, is a good translation for God in languages of Muslim people because it is a Muslim word for God.

But this is a very simplistic approach to Bible translation. There is no question that the Dynamic Equivalent or Functional Equivalent philosophy is a great improvement over the literal word-for-word translation approach. However, it is short sighted and can be easily misused. It has in fact been responsible for serious mistranslations in the last half century.

## Words and their Meanings

"In the beginning was the word."

God spoke and he used words. He also used many other ways of communication. Words, uttered or written, are vehicles that channel meaning from communicator to receiver. Both communicator and receiver must perceive each item of communication from the exact same perspective for communication to be 100% accurate. This may seem impossible. However, people do communicate. Jobs get done, merchandise is ordered and received, documents are signed, agreements are made, and so on. What makes this communication possible is that symbols of communication can be learned. The brain has an amazing capacity for coding and decoding messages sent and received. Linguists agree that there is a universal grammar that helps people understand each other, sometimes even in the absence of words.

**Dynamics between Word and Meaning**

From the start when I was exposed to the dualism of form and meaning, I felt that there was something missing. I endeavored to discover the limitations of this approach, which has become popular for half a century and is responsible for many mistranslations of the Bible.

The following explanation of the dynamics between words and their meanings is aimed at sensitizing us to the complexity of the issue under examination.

The "form" of words usually refers to their physical characteristics of shape, spelling, sound, intonation etc. The meaning, however, is more complex. Here are some of the many factors affecting meaning in words, phrases, stories, parables, poetry and other literary forms. Words may have any one or more of these 20 types of meaning:

1. Etymological: original root meaning or historical use
2. Denotative: literal or dictionary definition
3. Connotative: suggestive or associated with other meanings
4. Classical or historic: word or idiom as understood at a certain time in history of its linguistic or cultural development
5. Contextual: meaning relative to its surrounding words or situation
6. Cultural: meaning according to a specific cultural group
7. Relative: different meaning to different people sending or receiving
8. Attributional: ascribed or imputed meaning
9. Idiomatic: expressions which diverge from usual use to commonly agreed upon meaning
10. Implicit: hidden, unexpressed or concealed meaning
11. Explicit: obvious, plainly expressed meaning
12. Emotive: meaning that triggers affective reaction
13. Intentional: Meaning as purposed by communicator
14. Perceptual: Meaning as understood by receiver
15. Metaphorical: figurative (non-literal) use of words or phrases

16.     Parabolic: meaning of words as they relate to a parable or proverb.

17.     Artistic: poetic or rhetorical sense of words

18.     Specialized: meaning exclusively used by distinct group of people

19.     Technical: science, medical, engineering religious etc.

20.     Theological: specialized meaning derived from a systematic study of the Bible or the Quran.

    Many words are impacted by one or a combination of these factors, especially when used in a cross-cultural setting. This will become clear as we study the way Muslim/Christian terms are interpreted from within and without each group.

**Muslim/Christian Religious Terminology**

    The problem of terminology differences between Muslims and Christians is immense and deserves serious attention by Bible translators. These differences are not limited to the surface meaning. Rather these differences have to do with fourteen centuries of disparity in theology, philosophy and lifestyle. They are different because they belong to two separate communities each with its own worldview. My research has shown that common words between Christians and Muslims based on the Bible and the Qur'an are vastly different in meaning. So using a Qur'anic word to express Christian concepts can lead to misunderstanding.

    One prime example of this misunderstanding is the work of Dr. Accad who wrote the book "Seven Muslim/Christian Principles". He takes verses from the Bible and puts them side by side with verses from the Qur'an. These verses contain terms that are commonly used by both scriptures. Dr. Accad naively claims that the two books are addressing the same concepts. He uses this method to convince Muslims and Christians that they are not as different as they think.

    In my original research I dealt with over a hundred words. However, for the limited purpose of this study, I shall treat only two words, Islam and Allah. I will give an example of how "*Islam*" can be perceived from the various aspects of meaning. I will apply some of the above mentioned 20 factors to help us understand the complexity and yet simplicity of meaning. The basic structure of my analysis follows these four categories:

    1. The etymological and lexical meanings as originally/historically used.

    2. The concept as perceived by Muslims (claimed or intended)

    3. The meaning as perceived by the Christian outsiders (attributional).

    4. The Christian equivalent or alternative term with comments on its meaning and etymology.

**"ISLAM"**

(Numbers correspond to the list of twenty points above.)

**Etymology (1):** *Islam* is a root word in the infinitive composed of three consonants S-L-M from which a family of words is derived. It is pronounced as SALAMA. Each of its derivatives has its

own distinct meaning that may or may not have a related meaning to the root. For instance, iSLaM, SaLaaM, and SaLeeM mean surrender, peace, and health, respectively. These meanings are associated only with the forms to which they correspond.

Muslim: is the active participle from the verb *Aslama.*

**Denotative meaning (2):** In the dictionary Islam is a noun which simply means surrender or resignation. All Islamic literature, most English translations of Islamic literature, and many Western writers (including Webster's Dictionary) define "Islam" as "submission to Allah." Others go further and define it as "submission to the will of Allah".

**Connotative Meaning (3):** Islam is a word with many connotations to many audiences. Some associate Islam with terrorism, veiled women, crowds of angry men, or rows of prostrated worshipers in robes and caps. To others, Islam connotes exotic architecture, desert scenes, calligraphy, or even music and belly-dancing. Many Muslims associate Islam with their identity, family, and entire society, and to many, Islam connotes an oppressive and backward religion that keeps them from progressing in the modern world.

**Historical (4):** Islamic conquests gave people two choices: "*Aslim Taslam.*" Literally these two words mean "surrender you'll be safe." *Aslim* is the imperative form of Islam. Islam is the nominative form denoting that the one who surrenders becomes a Muslim, one who belongs to Islam.

**Cultural (6):** Non-practicing Muslims perceive Islam as a cultural identity. Many of them do not pray, but they observe certain holidays much like nominal Christians observe Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving with their families. Some who may observe the fast of Ramadan, do not pray or observe other pillars of Islam except socially in the presence of practicing friends and family members.

**Relative meaning (7): (Same as self-perception. 15)**
Muslim scholars often expand the meaning of the word Islam to include various other senses which may be derived from the Arabic three-letter root (SLM). These meanings include, submission, peace, safety, and health (wholeness). Therefore, they claim by deduction that Islam means all these things and therefore Islam offers all of these good qualities.

Many associate Islam with peace. Technically the word *Islam* does not contain the sense of peace (*salam*). But by implication those who surrender to Islam are offered peace, meaning protection by Muslim conquerors. *Taslam* means you "will be safe."

Relative to Christians in the Arab World, Islam is the religion of their oppressors and persecutors. Most Christians do not think positively about the word Islam because it triggers an emotive (12) reaction due to the centuries of strained Muslim-Christian relations.

**Attributional (8):**
Islam is many things to many people. Some attribute to Islam global terrorism. Others see Islam as the invaders of their liberties who are plotting political take over of many western nations. Some see Islam as victims of prejudice by non Muslims and that stereotypes associated with Islam and Muslims are unfair. Minorities of Christians in Muslim lands tend to see Islam as the religion of their oppressors.

**Specialized (18):** To Muslims, *Islam* is the name of their religion. In it they have their identity that unites them together with all Muslims in the *Umma* or global community of those who take Allah as their God, Muhammad as their prophet, and the Qur'an as their book. Everyone else is "other", an outsider. In their worldview, non Muslims are infidels, blasphemers and *kafirs*.
"*Muslim*" is the active participle from the verb "*Aslama*" which means one who surrenders or submitter.
*Aslama* is in the causative which means to cause to submit or to subjugate.
Christians use *Sallama* in the reflexive form: Causing self to submit. For instance *Aslama nafsahu*, in the reflexive (caused by self or self-imposed.)

**Christian Specialized Use of the word Islam**

The Bible in Arabic uses the word *Aslama* at least 60 times but always in the causative form followed by a direct object e.g. "Judas surrenders Jesus to the Jews." (Mark 3:19) Arab Christians almost always use various forms of the word *Islam* but they give these words completely different meanings. To distinguish themselves they use forms of the word that are not peculiar to Muslims. For instance in reference to submission to God's will Christians use the form, "taSLeeM" stemming from the same root as "iSLaM". *Tasleem* is used by Christians in reference to "willful submission or surrender to the will of God". This claimed meaning is based on biblical teaching in this regard, unlike the Muslim term. Etymologically, the two terms have the same root and similar meanings.

**"Allah" (God)**
**Etymology (1)***:* The Arabic word for Allah is a combination of *"al"* which is the definite article *the* and *Ilah* meaning god. The two words *Al-Ilah* are contracted in the word Allah.[8]

**Denotative (2):** Allah is an Arabic word for the supreme deity. It is the translation of the word God.

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[8] Muslim scholars do not agree with this analysis. They consider the word Allah as the primary name of God.

**Connotative (3)**: To most non-Arabic speakers Allah is associated with the God of Islam.

**Relative/Specialized meaning (7, 18):** Allah carries with it different connotations to different people. In some Islamic countries, its use is one of the most explosive issues socially and politically. For instance, in November 1989, the Malaysian government issued a constitutional law banning the use of the word by Malaysian Christians. In non-Arabic Muslim contexts in places such as Afghanistan, India, Iran, Pakistan, Berber regions of North Africa, and Kurdish parts of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, Christians and Muslims have debated among themselves, sometimes fiercely, regarding the use of this term. One of the main issues of the debate is whether the *Allah* of Islam is the same as the God of Christianity. In the majority of cases in the countries cited above, Christians shy away from the term. Persian speaking Christians have chosen to use the word *Khoda*, which is the name for an ancient Persian deity. Muslim Kurds have perhaps had the hardest time with this word. In my work in the Kurdish New Testament, I encountered a serious problem in translating the word for God into the Sorani Dialect. *Khwa* is the authentic and historical Kurdish term for God. However, its use was politically incorrect. With the changing political situation in Northern Iraq, many feared for their lives.

**Classical/Historical (4):** It is assumed by most researchers that the word Allah predates Islam. They claim that Christians in Arab lands have called God *Allah* for centuries before the advent of Islam. After Islam the word became associated with Islam but not exclusively. In the Arab World both Christians and Muslims have always used the same term *Allah*.

**Theological: (20)** Muslims think of God (Allah) as monolithic as opposed to being triune. He is far removed from man. Yet he demands absolute obedience. He is "all-mighty" and is to be feared. *Allah's* characteristics are known more by what he is not than by what he is. He is not anything that man is. The Muslim Allah is transcendent, aloof and unapproachable.
Christians have a drastically differing view of God who is not only transcendent but also immanent. He is far but also near, he is approachable through Jesus as the mediator between God and man.

**A note on translating the word Allah:** Bible translators into languages of Muslim people do not have any problem translating God into Allah. Their strongest argument is the above mentioned fact that Allah is commonly used by both Christians and Muslims in the Arab world. Proponents of this idea do not seem to understand that although Arab Christians use the word, they are cautious in the way they pronounce it. Christians would stress the A sound, *Allaaaah* while Muslims use the vowel o and pronounce it as *Allowwwh*. Of course this is only an oral distinction. In writing however, Arab Christians avoid using the Muslim phrases that use Allah such as "inshallah". Christian evangelicals prefer to say: "Iza Allah raad" (If God wills).

Persians Christians shy away from the use of the word Allah, contending that this is an Arabic word associated with Islam. They prefer "Khoda" just like Turks prefer "Tanrı".

As a rule of thumb therefore I recommend that Allah would not be used in any other language than Arabic. I approach the issue from a language perspective. Allah is an Arabic used by both Christian and Muslim Arabs. But when it is used by non-Arabic speakers, Allah becomes associated with Islam. This confusion can be avoided by using the indigenous word for God whenever it is possible.

**Conclusion:**

The vast differences in meaning between Muslims and Christians using the same terminology is a cause of the huge gap in communication between them. Many of the prejudices and misunderstandings between them are related to misinterpretations of common terminology.

Mixing Muslim and Christian terminology cannot bridge the gap that has existed for fourteen centuries. Expressing Christian concepts using Muslim terms is counter productive. Muslims and Christians need to understand the truth about each other and not pretend that they are all the same. Then they can accept life together despite their differences rather than lie to themselves and to others by pretending that they are the same.

Words of the Qur'an can only be appropriately understood in context of the entire Qur'an, Islamic theology, and world view. Similarly Christian terminology is best understood in context of the entire Bible and Christian theology of worldview. To borrow Qur'anic terms and use them in translating the Bible is to cause unnecessary linguistic confusion and theological interference.

**Part IV: The Need for a Paradigm Shift in Bible Translation**

Bible translation has experienced tremendous advancements on many levels. But there are serious problems, both in philosophy and practice. My own training in Psycholinguistics was with secular professors, some of them Muslims. My training in Bible translation was with Christian linguists, most of them with a background in Anthropology. Charles Kraft, Paul Hiebert, Tom and Betty Brewster, and others. My personal study of the subject included books by Nida, Wonderly, Taber, and others.

I would like to offer some of the insights I have gained over the years, hoping to contribute some positive, fresh, and new ways of thinking to the discussion on Bible translation. My hope is that the missionary movement would experience a necessary paradigm shift that would produce truly accurate translations of the Bible in all languages of the world, particularly among Muslims.

**The Myth of Literal Translations**

Nida and his contemporaries made a very strong case against literal translations. I was taught that the problem with the Arabic King James Bible, the Arabic Van Dyck, and other traditional translations was that they followed a word-for-word formal equivalence philosophy of translation. I read and was told that accuracy was measured by the number of words and word order. Translators were instructed as much as possible to use the same number of words as in the original and try to stick with the word order of the original. The literature, as far as I can remember, argued that literal translations were not concerned with interpretation. This philosophy of translation was named by Nida and others as "Formal Equivalence."

Initially, I agreed and believed this myth. So my translators and I were deliberately trying to avoid literal renderings even in minor and insignificant texts. For instance, in Matthew five, Jesus opens his mouth and speaks. We were told that this should not be translated literally because people do not talk like this these days. Below is a comparison of some translations and how they treat this imagery. Consistently, the "literal" translations retain the imagery of Jesus opening his mouth while the modern versions just cut it out, thinking that it was unnecessary and arguing that they are not following a word-for-word philosophy of translation.

Matthew 5:2 reads:

KJV: and he opened his mouth, and taught them saying.

NIV: and he began to teach them saying:

NLT: and he began to teach them:

ESV, ERV, ASV, ERV and other traditional translations follow the style of KJV.

Another place where modern translators just feel free to cut words out is in Acts 1:8

KJV: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

NIV: and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The KJV retains "both," while NIV removes it without replacement.

We have to come face to face with this phenomenon and ask the question: Why? What is wrong with retaining certain words, images as they appeared in the original?

When I have asked this question, the resounding answer has always been: We do not do literal word for word translations. We are meaning based translators.

In my opinion this is a myth. A literal translation would look more like the interlinear.

Genesis 1:1 in Hebrew reads בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ

It would be awkward if we would retain the Hebrew word order and number of words:

NIV: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth

Literal: "In the head carved gods the highs and the earth..."

There are no literal translations of the Bible anywhere to be found. Otherwise we would translate Benjamin to "son of my right hand", Abraham would be "father of the womb אַבְרָהָם"

This is a myth and a straw man argument. All translation is interpretation. What we need is a better understanding of accuracy based on good exegesis and a submission to the Spirit of God.

There are many problems with the King James Bible. The language is archaic and sounds awkward to the modern reader. Many revisions have improved on it without changing the philosophy of accuracy.

**The Fallacy of Meaning Based Translations**

The new movement in Bible translation theory dismissed the traditional philosophy of word-for-word, phrase-for-phrase translations of the Bible as inaccurate and uncommunicable. Translators argue that the word order in one language cannot be sustained while translating it to another language. The meanings of Biblical truths were to be presented not in a technical linguistic equivalence, but rather in a dynamic style equivalent in impact and effectiveness to that of the original language.

Thus the philosophy of "thought for thought", Dynamic Equivalent and Functional Equivalent was born and the concept of accuracy was redefined. Accuracy is no longer measured by the degree of closeness to the original. It is rather measured by the degree to which the original meaning is communicated in the vernacular. To do that well, translators argue that they need to implement the idioms and emotive expressions of the people for which the translation is prepared. The logical conclusion for this mindset gave rise to the Muslim Idiom Translations philosophy (MIT).

Qur'anic terms are preferred over traditional Biblical terms in translating the Bible to Arabic and other languages of Muslim cultures. For instance the Qur'anic name Isa for Jesus was preferred over the Christian name Yasua. The reason given was that Muslim readers are more likely to read the Bible if they find familiar language in it.

The theory progressed to the point where centuries-old terms are being thrown out, even when their meanings and usage have not changed over the years. Father and Son are being either removed or replaced by alternate words that claim to retain the familial relationships in the godhead. In fact, Wycliffe scholars are now claiming that alternative words to Father and Son are even more accurate than the literal translation.

**The Limitations of Functional Equivalence**

The translation theory of Functional Equivalence has been influenced by a modern and post-modern philosophies of communication. It makes a lot of sense that communication is supposed to serve the recipient. However, this can be taken too far which I believe is why we have the current controversy in Bible translation practices. It is right and good to be sensitive to the reader of God's word in any translation. But the Muslim audience must not so influence the translation that Muslims become co-authors of the message. Communication is only partially about the recipient, but when the recipient and the message are at odds with each other, the message must win. We cannot appease Muslims and we in fact do them a disservice if we cater to their theology.

## Non-Linguistic Factors Affecting Meaning

The Bible can be read as literature. From a literary perspective it is a collection of history, prose, verse, prophesies, stories, parables, poetry, genealogy and more. But the Bible is more than literature. Words, phrases even all figures of speech are only the tangible or physical elements of the Bible. Meaning is embedded in the language of the Bible. But there is more than form and meaning to the Bible. There are external factos beyond forms and meanings. Here are a few of these factors:

**Etic/Emic Perspectives**

Etic and emic are derived from the words phonetic and phonemic. Linguistic anthropologists use these terms to distinguish between those who look at a language from out-side (etic) and those who are insiders (emic). Generally the outsider is limited in his understanding of a foreign language. An etic linguist tends to focus on the physical elements of form more than the function because he is likely to focus on lexical and denotative meanings of words. On the other hand an emic linguist understands the nuances and innuendoes of the language beyond its forms. For instance, in the debate on the Son of God issue, those who have studied Arabic as a second language rely heavily on dictionaries and lexicons, where as native speakers of a language focus on the emotive, social, and cultural understanding of the same words.

**Familiarity/Newness of Message**

Bible translators in recent decades have been influenced by communication theories that stress the importance of starting from where people are. Bible terminology is selected from the repertoire of the recipient's vocabulary. The idea is to bring people from the familiar to the new.

Critics have stressed the importance of communicating new concepts in new forms to avoid confusion in communication. In my own research in the factors affecting attitude change, I have found that familiarity is in fact a hindrance to change. For transformation to occur, the receiver needs to experience a change on three levels: cognitive, affective and behavioral. Cognitive change has to do with new information. The brain recognizes sharp differences more than similarities. Slight differences in information are decoded in the same area of the brain as the familiar information. For the brain to recognize differences the differences need to be stark.

One example comes from my research in Trilingualism. I have found that learning a new language can occur in one of two ways, by immersion or translation. An American who learns Arabic by immersion is one who would live in an Arab setting and set aside his mother language for the entire span of time. The new language is formed in a separate area of the brain than the mother tongue. Whereas, a second language learned through translation is lodged in the same area of the brain as the primary language. Some, very few trilingual speakers have three separate areas of language in the brain. A truly trilingual person is rare but if found he or she is able to think, feel and speak as a native speaker in three languages.

Trilingual research helps us understand how learning occurs. A Quranic Style Bible will not be decoded appropriately by Muslims just like learning a second language through translation. For Muslims to truly understand the message of the Gospel, they need to received it as a fresh and different message which is likely to prick them to the heart as the hearers of Peter on the day of Pentecost because they heard a shockingly new and different message about a resurrected savior, something that completely went against what they were familiar with.

**Receptivity or Rejection**

A reader who is receptive to the message is more likely to understand it and if he does not, he would seek to by asking experts to explain certain difficult concepts. On the other hand, if the recipient is opposed to the concept presented, he is likely to misunderstand the concept regardless of how clear and accurate the message is.

**Confusion and Mixed Messages**

While some communicators think that they are serving the recipient by inserting in the Bible familiar words borrowed from the Qur'an and Islamic culture, they in fact are causing cognitive confusion or interference. Every word in the Qur'an is understood only in the ancient context of

seventh Century Arabia. Similarly, Biblical terms are understood only in their own Hebraic-Greek context.

To bring a Qur'anic term, strip it of its meaning and insert in it a Christian context brings confusion and misunderstanding. For instance, when missionaries put a distinctively Muslim greeting on the top of a tract or booklet geared for Muslims, it immediately identifies the material with Islam. When Muslims read the tract, and find biblical content they are confused by the mixed messages. Mixing verses and concepts from the Bible and the Qur'an is counter productive. This does not mean the Quran cannot be used in witness. I am only advocating not using Muslim terminology with different contextual meanings in a biblical context.

**Cognitive Vs. Spiritual**

The Apostle Paul recognized the non-cognitive element in the word of God when he stressed emphatically,

"...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. 1 Thessalonians 1:5

The Bible is not all about words. Therefore Bible translators need to recognize than non-linguistic element of meaning. There is a hidden meaning that cannot be translated. It is that power embedded within the words of God that make the Bible different than all other writings.
The author of Hebrews describes the Bible with these powerful words:

*"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."* Hebrews 4:12:

God deliberately placed difficult concepts in his word to distinguish the "perishing" from the "being saved. (1 Corinthians 1:17-22)
The Bible is more than literature. Bible translators tend to concentrate on the literary, lexical or cognitive aspect of language. They are right to a certain extent, but it is not the full story. Translators can only work with words, phrases, sentences, stories, poems etc. There is more to translating the Bible than language and translation theory. There is a spiritual battle here. Michael Marlowe writes: "we encounter several statements in the Bible declaring that the Bible cannot be rightly understood by those who lack the Spirit of God." In John 8:43 Jesus says to his questioners, 'Why do you not understand my speech (λαλια)? It is because you cannot hear my word (λογος).'"
The Apostle John's comment on this confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees was: "they did not understand what he (Jesus) was talking about (John 8:27).

Marlowe points to what Paul declares, "these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit … we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God … connecting spiritual things with spiritual." [9] (1 Corinthians 2:10-13)

In the same passage Paul goes on to say: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. I Corinthians 2:14.

Without a clear understanding of the spiritual dimension of the word of God, translators will not be able to faithfully transfer the very words of God in any language to any people.

**Spiritual Distortion of Words:**
Like the Bible is the word of God and therefore it contains intangible, divine power, the Quran has a power from a different source. If we believe that there is deception in the Quran, we must attribute it not to a human source. Jesus tells us that Satan:

"...has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn -- and I would heal them." John 12:40.

William Zwemer, referencing Cornelius Van Dyck, the translator of the 1865 Arabic Bible, sheds light on this problem with these revealing words:

*"The saddest thing in the Arabic language is the influence of the degradation of Islam in every line of poetry and in almost every word of the Arabic language. Dr. Van Dyck said that every word in the Arabic language has a double meaning and that one meaning is vile. For this reason translators could not use any of the root words for love, and were forced finally to adopt a participle that was free from those sinister meanings. The missionaries must be careful in every hymn that they sing and watch the words they use in everything. The whole Arabic language is filled with the stain of awful degradation. The time has come to redeem the Arabic language as well as the Moslems."*

**Who is the Target Reader?**
The Bible is our Judeo-Christian book. In it we find the Torah, God's instructions and the law. The historical books of the Bible are a record of God's dealing with his people. The psalms were the hymns of God's people; the covenants and the prophesies are all from God to his people. Paul demonstrated his understanding of this truth when he affirmed:

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[9] *Michael Marlowe. Against the Theory of Dynamic Equivalence. Revised and expanded, July 2011. Page 7*

"Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen." Romans 9:4,5

Although our target reader is anyone outside the community, we are calling them to enter the new community. We need to think of them as future members of this one unified Ekklesia. Evangelistically, the Bible is an invitation to those who are far to draw near; those who are a people to become the people of God. I Peter 2:10. to join the family of God. Then our book will become their book, our language their language. By language here I mean the specific, specialized, and idiomatic terminology of God's people.

**The Challenge of Naturalness**

It would be hard to argue that a translation should be awkward. The King James and the Van Dyck are examples of awkward translations because the language does not flow naturally like the literature in that language. Certainly the Bible needs to read well. It needs to be grammatically correct and lucid in style. At the same time the reader need not forget that the original was in Hebrew and Greek. A translator must not try to compete with the literary style of the original writers of the Bible or be overly concerned with producing a literary style that would out do the original.

Mary Massoud is an Egyptian Fulbright scholar and head of the English Department at Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt. In her book she identifies a serious flaw in current translation theory. She writes:

"The general view today is that translation should seem very much at home in the language in which it appears. Some do argue, however, in favor of an element of unnaturalness in the translation." [10] Naomi Lindstrom observes that the reader of an unnatural translation perceives that the slightly strange language at hand is actually natural to another language and culture.[11]:

**Language Unites and Distinguishes People**

Language plays a major role in uniting people. The genius of Islam and a major factor in its expansion and success was their insistence on Arabic as the only acceptable religious language. Chinese, Indonesian, and Brazilian Muslims must pray to Allah in Arabic. For almost a century, since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish authorities have tried to assimilate minorities such as

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[10] Mary Massoud, *Translate to Communicate.* David C Cook. Elgin, Illinois. 1988. Page19.

[11] Naomi Lindstrom, "On the Translation of Unnatural Language." Translation Review no. 15 (1984) Page 40

the Kurds for the sake of uniting the Turkish people under one Turkish identity. Kurds were called mountain Turks, and they were banned from speaking or writing in the Kurdish language. Yet the Kurds would not comply, and that saved them from extinction. Violent persecution was used against them until the mid 1990's when the Turkish government, as they began to seek membership in the European Union and removed the ban. Similar things happened with minorities such as Chaldeans, Circassians, Berbers, and others in Muslim lands.

The Bible records an interesting story whereby the pronunciation of a word was used to distinguish between Ephraimites and Gileadites. Whoever pronounced Shibolet[12] as Sibolet (with an S instead of a Sh) was killed. (Judges 12)

Malaysia banned the use of the word Allah by non-Muslims for decades, until recently. The idea was to protect the special terminology of Muslims from abuse by non-Muslims.

Scientists, Engineers, Psychologists, Economists, and Athletes all use specialized terminology that is understood within their field. Theology is not different. There are specialized, technical, and theological terms that are only understood in context of their own disciplines. This, in fact, is necessary for the accuracy of their internal communication. Medical students need to learn specialized language, as do all those entering a new field.

Converts to Islam are expected to learn Arabic terminology because these terms identify them as Muslims. This is an important function of language – to unite and strengthen the bond of people within a group.

**Father-Son Language:** The main controversy centers around what became known as the familial (paternal and filial) words of Father and Son.

I will develop this section by the time we meet.

# To be continued

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[12] In Hebrew שִׁבֹּלֶת

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