

MUSLIM-IDIOM BIBLE TRANSLATIONS: CLAIMS AND FACTS

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1 Introduction

In the last several years there has been growing controversy about Bible translations for Muslim audiences. Since some of the controversy seems to be based on suppositions of hidden agendas where none exist, we hope it will be helpful to review some of the relevant claims and facts.

2 Cultural and linguistic gap

Looking back into history, the cultural and linguistic gap between Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims was in most cases fairly small until the Crusades. They read the same books and engaged in debates about religion and philosophy. With the advent of the Crusades however, Christians retreated into separate subcultures. Even Christians who were mother-tongue Arabic speakers became isolated physically, culturally, and linguistically from Muslims. They developed separate customs and distinct dialects that used different names and terms from Muslims, and when they did use some of the same terms that Muslims did, they often used them with different meanings. Arab Christians, for example, chose to

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use the Aramaic word *kâhin* to denote a Jewish priest, whereas in standard Arabic this word meant sorcerer. They chose to use the Greek word *nâmûs* for law, whereas in ordinary Arabic it meant mosquitoes. They also used different names for famous prophets. This led to miscommunication between Muslims and Christians. The Christians came to reject any of their number who used distinctively Muslim expressions, and they abandoned older Bible translations that had used terms that now sounded Muslim. Even today one finds people who grew up as cultural Christians in Muslim countries who claim that everything distinctive about the language and culture of Muslim communities was inspired by Satan himself. Thus, a linguistic and cultural wall developed between Christians and Muslims that locked the Gospel into the Christian community and kept it from the Muslims, who in their turn came to despise the seemingly corrupted Christian dialects.

In the 19th century, when Western missionaries fostered translations of the Bible into additional languages spoken by Muslims, they often used the terminology that was normal to each language. Later missionaries, however, changed these translations by importing new names and terms, thereby assuming a similar posture of rejection toward Muslim society. These missionaries fostered new Christian subcultures with new linguistic distinctives and a new rejection of the old ways. As might be expected, when the Good News is delivered to Muslims in language that shows disrespect for their mother tongue, it gets rejected. So over the centuries these Christian communities have had little spiritual impact on the majority cultures with which they tensely co-exist, and missionaries who adopted their attitudes have had poor results as well. Whenever some missionaries tried to produce Scriptures that respected Muslim ways of speaking, they found themselves under attack from local cultural Christians who abhor the thought of Scripture in a Muslim dialect.

Yet Jesus told us to make disciples to Him in every ethnic group (Matthew 28:19). God's love for ethnic diversity is so great that

Jesus will not return until this has happened (Matthew 24:14). The result is seen in an end-time vision of heaven that includes people “from every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Rev 7:9). This surely includes people from every Muslim dialect and culture. We read in 1 Peter 3:15 that we must share the Good News with “gentleness and respect,” and that obliges us to show respect for the languages and cultures of all ethnic groups, including Muslim ones. Paul exemplified this by being “as a Jew, in order to win Jews”, and as a Gentile to win Gentiles, while remaining “under the law of Christ” (1 Cor 9:20-21).

Muslims are required by their religion to believe in the “heavenly books” that God revealed in the Bible, and Bible translations into Muslim dialects have been well received. But like most people they expect the translations to be in their own idiom, the way they actually use their language, without words and phrases imposed from outside. In any language, most of the lexical units (dictionary entries) are phrases rather than single words, so one has to translate the phrase as a whole, not just its parts. If one translates the two parts of “hot dog” independently into German, one gets *heisser Hund*, which means a dog in heat. One needs to translate the whole phrase, as *Wiener*. If one translates the term “Holy Spirit” piece by piece into most Muslim languages, the result is a phrase that is a title for the angel Gabriel. To be more accurate and avoid misunderstanding, one needs to translate the meaning, usually into a phrase that means “the Spirit of God”.

Biblical kinship terminology is especially open to misunderstanding. In many languages, if one translates the phrase “son of man” word by word, the result means illegitimate son and is a common term of abuse. As for the terms “Son of God” and “sons of God”, these phrases are well known in most Muslim languages with the meaning “God’s offspring from a sexual union with a woman”. This meaning is taught to them from the Qur’an, so no one questions it. The Qur’an (9:30) says this is such a terrible thing to say about God that He will destroy (and hence condemn to hell) anyone asserting the phrase “son of God.” So

hell) anyone asserting the phrase “son of God.” So Muslims abhor the phrase as something akin to an unforgiveable sin. God-fearing Muslims distance themselves before God from any such sin by confessing 17 times a day that “God did not procreate and He was not born, and there is no one like Him”. The result is that many Muslims fear to read any sentence that describes anyone as a “son of God” for fear they will offend God, and if they hear the phrase asserted they ask God’s forgiveness for having heard it.²

Translators generally try to be as literal as they can without impairing the meaning or the acceptability of the wording. The ESV, for example, is quite literal, yet in Psalm 29:1 and 89:6 it translates the Hebrew expression “sons of God” as “heavenly beings” to avoid obscuring the meaning. In some nominally Muslim cultures it is possible to circumvent the taboo term with something as simple as “spiritual Son of God” or “exalted Son from God”, where “spiritual” contrasts with “biological”. In more religious cultures, however, asserting such phrases is still regarded as a danger to one’s standing with God. On the other hand, Muslims anywhere can *discuss* “Son of God” and “sons of God” as a term, without asserting it. So it is possible to discuss sonship terminology in a footnote and in the introduction to Scripture, explaining its original wording and meaning and how it has been translated in the text, while providing a meaning-based translation in the text itself. Since at the time of Jesus the Hebrew term “the Son of God” was used to refer to the Messiah whom God would send from heaven, who was holy and beloved of God, translators have sometimes expressed it that way in the text, as “God’s Beloved Christ” or “God’s Intimate Beloved Chosen One,” while providing a literal translation in the notes with explanation. John, of course, reveals in his Gospel that the Messiah is the Word of God incarnate, so in passages compatible with that sense some translators have used the

² See “Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term ‘Son of God’” in the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, October 2007.

expression “Word of God” while continuing to present a literal translation in the notes. This approach has overcome the fear some Muslims have of reading the Bible.

Unfortunately, some Christians condemn any non-literal translation of this term. Some do this because they jump to false conclusions regarding the reason for the translation and its effect on readers, thinking there might be a hidden theological agenda behind it. Others oppose any translation into Muslim dialects and use the ‘Son of God’ issue as a way of criticizing it. So let’s take a look at these accusations and then state the facts of the matter.

3 Do we create ‘Muslim compliant translations’?

It has been claimed that translators are making “Muslim compliant” translations that deny the deity of Christ. Neither of these statements is true. These claims ascribe attitudes and beliefs to translators that they themselves would strongly disavow. In our many years of talking and interacting with translators, we have never heard any translators speak of altering the meaning of Scripture for theological or missiological reasons or to be more compliant with Islamic teaching. What translators do discuss is how to communicate the original meaning as well as possible, using wording that is clear and natural.

Similarly we have never heard of Muslims asking for alterations of meaning. They treat Scripture with even more fear than do Christians, and they would not tolerate alterations of meaning. In any case, presenting Jesus as a person with godlike characteristics is far less acceptable to Muslims theologically than presenting him as the Word of God incarnate, so there could not be a missiological basis for doing as the critics claim. Furthermore, Muslims do not object to Jesus being described as “the Word of God”, wherever that is compatible with the original meaning of the passage concerned. Most Muslims recognize “the Word of God” as a unique descriptor for Jesus, because their own holy book says that Jesus is

God's Word whom God placed in the womb of the Virgin Mary to be born as a man. They just need to read John 1:1 to see that the Word is God.

In any case, translations cannot normally be published unless they have been examined in minute detail for accuracy and clarity by experts from the major Bible agencies and then approved by them for publication.

4 Do we communicate the deity of Christ less clearly?

It has been claimed that Muslim-idiom translations seek to communicate the deity of Christ less clearly than more literal translations. This is not true. Muslims do not think that "Son of God" means anything more than "God's offspring," so a literal translation does not communicate the status of Christ. A higher view of Christ is communicated by phrases that describe Jesus' unique role and relationship to God. Translators test draft passages using different phrases and explanatory notes to find out what readers understand from them, and revise them repeatedly until the original meaning is communicated as well as possible. At the same time they explain to the reader that the phrase translates an original-language term saying "Son of God", and that this did not mean procreated offspring to its original audience.

With regard to the deity of Jesus, this is fully communicated in a host of biblical passages that are clearly and faithfully translated.³ These are the passages used by Biblical theologians, who find the deity of Jesus revealed holistically in the things he says and does, and in statements made about him, rather than in the use of particu-

³ For a presentation of passages that teach the deity of Christ, see articles by Rick Brown in the *International Journal of Missiology* issues 19(1); 22(3): pp. 93-95; and 24(2): p. 67. See also "The Person of Christ" in the *ESV Study Bible*, pp. 2515-19. For a fuller treatment see the works in the next note.

lar titles.⁴ Here are a few examples of how the Bible communicates Jesus' deity: "The Word was God," (John 1:1) "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," (John 1:14) "Christ Jesus ... though he was in the form of God ... made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men," (Phil. 2:6-7) "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily". (Col. 2:9) Translators and the outside experts who examine their translations take care to ensure that all the passages cited by scholars and theologians as demonstrating the deity of Jesus are clearly worded to communicate this deity in the translations.

5 Do we try to hide the sonship-terminology?

It has been alleged that Muslim-idiom translations hide the original-language use of sonship terminology. Muslims have been taught that Christians use the taboo phrase "Son of God," and they want to know why. In all recent translations we have examined or asked about, if the translators did not include the word "son" in the text, then they presented it in the explanatory notes. This provides "transparency" to the translation.⁵ Readers can then recognize occurrences in the text without being required to articulate them. So it is not hidden but rather known to all readers and hearers, and they can follow a teaching that refers to it in particular passages. With time, they may choose to start using a Bible that is more literal.

⁴ See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* and Millard Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*. For the meanings of 'Son of God' in the first century, see Adela and John Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*.

⁵ In the *International Journal of Missiology* issue 22(4): p. 138, Rick Brown wrote that if a non-literal translation of the term is used in the text, then a literal translation should be presented in the notes. See www.ijfm.org/archives.htm.

6 Do we deviate from Biblical evangelical scholarship?

It has been claimed that Muslim-idiom translations and explanations deviate from mainstream evangelical biblical scholarship. On the contrary, translators seek to follow current mainstream evangelical scholarship and have no reason or motivation to do otherwise. The very purpose of translation is to communicate God's Word in accord with its original meaning, "determined according to sound principles of exegesis",⁶ and any translation that did otherwise could not be approved for publication. A Muslim-idiom translation is one that uses the mother-tongue idiom of Muslim people groups while taking care to avoid unbiblical interpretations. This follows the principle agreed upon by all Bible agencies, that "the original should be re-expressed in forms that are consistent with normal usage in the receptor language."⁷ Translators of Muslim-idiom translations have no hesitancy at all to be accurate to the original meaning, and their handling of "Son of God" in the text and notes aims to clarify the original meaning while avoiding wordings regarded as indecent in the target language.

The terms "sons of God" and "Son of God" have a great many meanings in the Bible. In each passage, translators consult and follow current conservative biblical scholarship, such as one finds in academic Bible commentaries and scholarly evangelical Bible dictionaries.⁸ Nolland reflects most current conservative Bible scholars when he says that "Sonship is an exalted status and relationship to God on the basis of which the Messiah is enabled to carry out

⁶ Basic Principles and Procedures for Bible Translation, Forum of Bible Agencies International, 1999.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See the articles on "Son of God" in the Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels; Dictionary of Paul and His Letters; Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments; and Dictionary of New Testament Background, all by InterVarsity Press, as well as in The Anchor Bible Dictionary.

his Messianic function.”⁹ One finds the same exegesis reflected in the notes of exegetical study Bibles, where sonship is described as the relationship of God to the Messiah, where the Messiah is the Word of God incarnate as Jesus in his mediatorial role as the Christ.¹⁰

Translators who use the normal idiom of their Muslim audiences have no ulterior missiological or theological agenda at all in the interpretation of the term; they simply strive to convey the unique relational and soteriological essence of Sonship in their translation of the term, particularly in their explanation of it in the footnotes and glossaries, in accord with the original meaning of these terms as recognized by current evangelical scholarship. If they find that a literal translation of ‘Son of God’ and ‘sons of God’ fails miserably in the languages of some Muslim people groups, because the readers fear it is a blasphemous claim that God had sex with a woman, then the translators can paraphrase the term in the text and present its original-language form and meaning in the notes, somewhat as ESV does at Psalm 29:1 and 89:6.

The whole purpose of Muslim-idiom translations is to overcome the linguistic barriers that have hindered interested Muslims from reading the Scriptures. Translators overcome these barriers by showing respect for the language and customs of Muslim readers/hearers, by making the text easy to understand, and by avoiding wordings that are viewed as abhorrent or indecent.

⁹ John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary on Luke*, 1989:58; also pp. 52, 163, 1112.

¹⁰ See for example the explanation of “Son of God” in the *NLT Study Bible’s* mini-article at Mark 4:35–41.

Appendix A: Some examples of study Bible explanations of ‘Son of God’

Here are some explanations of the term ‘Son of God’ provided in the main evangelical study Bibles, based largely on usage in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature of the time.

1 NLT Study Bible (2008)

Most notes explaining the term “Son of God” in the NLT Study Bible refer readers to the explanation provided at Mark 4:35–41:

Mark 4:35–41:

Son of God

In the OT, the title “Son of God” is applied to the people of Israel (Exod 4:22; Deut 32:5–6, 18–19; Ps 82:6; Jer 3:19; 31:9, 20; Hos 11:1; Mal 2:10) and the angels (Gen 6:2; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Ps 29:1; 89:6). It is also applied to Israel’s king in a special way—the anointed king was seen as God’s “son” (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chr 22:10; 28:6; Ps 2:7; 89:26–27). The coming Messiah (Israel’s king, a descendant of David) was also called the Son of God in Jewish literature (the Apocrypha, the Mishnah, the Dead Sea Scrolls). Jews in the first century thus understood the Messiah as being the Son of God.

There are, however, some other brief notes, as below:

Mark 1:1:

The Son of God: this title emphasizes Jesus’ unique relationship with God the Father (1:11; 9:7; 12:4–6; 14:61–62).

2 ESV Study Bible

The ESV Study Bible is careful to minimize the challenge to popular interpretations, while still presenting views that reflect scholarly exegesis and lexicology:

Romans 1:4:

Jesus was **declared** by God the Father to be **the Son of God** in power when he was raised from the dead (see Mat 28:6) and installed at God's right hand as the messianic King. As the eternal Son of God, he has reigned forever with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But this verse refers to Jesus as the God-man reigning in messianic power ("Son of God" was a Jewish title for the Messiah), and this reign began (i.e., was declared or initiated) at a certain point in salvation history, i.e., when Jesus was raised from the dead through the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 3.17:

The **voice from heaven** confirms the eternally existing relationship of divine love that the Son and Father share as well as Jesus' identity as the messianic Son of God (Ps. 2:7). This **beloved Son** is the triumphant messianic King, yet he is also the humble "servant" into whose hands the Father is well pleased to place the mission to bring salvation to the nations (Isa. 42:1–4).

Luke 1:32:

Jesus is the "Son of the Most High". He is the promised successor to the throne of David (see 2 Sam. 7:12–13, 16).

John 1:14:

The only Son from the Father. Jesus is the "Son of God", not in the sense of being created or born (see John 1:3), but in the sense of being a Son who is exactly like his Father in all attributes, and in the sense of having a Father-Son relationship with God the Father.

John 1:49 **Son of God** designates Jesus as the Messiah predicted in the OT (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7; see note on John 1:14).

3 NIV Study Bible

Psalm 2:7:

Son ... Father. In the ancient Near East the relationship between a great king and one of his subject kings, who ruled by his authority and owed him allegiance, was expressed not only by the words “lord” and “servant” but also by “father” and “son”. The Davidic king was the Lord’s “servant” and his “son” (2 Sam 7:5, 14).

New Testament

Most of the footnotes to ‘Son of God’ in the New Testament of the NIV Study Bible (2008) refer the reader to the explanation at John 3:16.

John 3:16:

Gave his one and only Son. Cf Isa 9:6 (“a son is given”, referring to the Messianic Son of David - who is also God’s Son (see 2 Sam 7:14 and note). See also 1:14, 18 and notes; cf. Gen 22:2,16; Rom 8:32 and notes. Although believers are also called “sons” of God (2 Cor 6:18, Gal 4:5–6), Jesus is God’s Son in a unique sense (see 20:31 and note).

There is a note, however, at ***Luke 1:32:***

The Son of the Most High. This title has two senses: (1) divine Son of God and (2) the Messiah born in time. His Messiahship is clearly referred to in the following context (vv. 32b–33).

4 American Bible Society Learning Bible

This study Bible seems to avoid commenting on sonship language in most occurrences, although there are a few footnotes. One such note at Mat 26:63 says:

See the note at 1.17 (Messiah). “Son of God” was one of the titles used for the kings of Israel (Ps 2.7).

There is also a mini-article on the term “Son of God” that explains the OT background of the term. The NT references basically describe how each occurrence is used, but not what they mean. As for the OT description:

Many passages in the Jewish Scriptures, which Christians call the Old Testament, describe the people of Israel as God’s son or child (Exod 4.22, 23; Jer 31.19, 20; Hos 11.1), but the title “Son of God” is given to an unnamed kind of Israel (Ps 2.7). God said that King David is “my first-born son, and he will be the ruler of all kings on earth” (Ps 89.27). David is also told that one of his children would be God’s son (2 Sam 7.14). The later prophets spoke of the faithful members of the people of Israel as God’s children (Isa 43.6; Hos 1.10).

Only in later Jewish writings is the Messiah spoken of as the Son of God (*Enoch* 105.2; *2 Esdras* 7.28-29). For more about these books, which are included in some Bibles, see the article called “What Books Belong in the Bible?” p. 15.

Appendix B: Distinguishing the tasks of lexicology, exegesis, and theology

Some of the misunderstandings about translation come from lack of clarity regarding the different tasks of lexicology, exegesis, and theology.

Lexical research investigates the way words and idioms were being used in a particular language and community, based on all the evidence. It seeks to discover the distinct “senses” that were associated with each vocabulary item in the language, and the kinds of context where each sense would be found. So in translating or defining terms like ‘Son of God’, the task is to discover what this phrase meant in the original languages, and then express this in the translation.

The task of exegesis is to discover the original propositional meanings and speech acts that an author would have communicated to his original audience in their particular context by means of the particular text he composed for them. We do so by analyzing texts within the environment of their author and his audience, with the goal of reconstructing the stories, values, and beliefs that the author was communicating to his original audience. Part of this task involves identification of the specific objects and events to which reference was being made. For example, when Jesus says “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” and that those disciples to him should be baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” (Mat 28:18–19 ESV), we infer that ‘Son’ is coreferential with ‘me’ and hence refers to Jesus. This usage simply refers to Jesus as ‘Son’ rather than ascribing a title or trait to him, since verse 19 does not use ‘Son’ predicatively. The sentence itself is about baptism.

The task of theology is to reflect on the implications of all this in a systematic and holistic way. T. F. Torrance describes how the theology of the Trinity “calls for a fully holistic approach in which

the empirical and conceptual, or the historical and theological, ingredients in the New Testament are held together.”¹¹ In Matthew 28:19, for example, the positioning of a self-reference to Jesus between references to the Father and the Holy Spirit puts them on the same level, and the attribution of a single “name” to all three indicates that they share a common identity. So although the sentence is talking about discipling and baptism, it has clear implications regarding the triune nature of God. Theologians look at all the biblical evidence that bears on this topic and look for a single, rational theory that can best explain it all. It took four hundred years to work this out for the Trinity, but then it was not seriously challenged until the rise of social Trinitarianism in the late twentieth century.

The development of a systematic theology requires the development and definition of technical terms. A common mistake readers make is to assume that the words and phrases used by everyday Jews speaking Aramaic at the time of Jesus had the same meanings as the technical terms defined in fourth century Greek theological discussion. Don Carson describes this kind of mistake as the exegetical fallacy of “semantic anachronism” and “false assumptions about technical meaning”.¹² Obvious examples are terms like ‘Son of God’ and ‘Son of Man’ that had common usages among Jews that were less technically defined than are the technical uses of these terms in theological discussion that occurred decades or even centuries later. This is why it is important to distinguish lexicological research on first-century Greek and Aramaic words from the technical formulations of systematic theologies.

¹¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 35.

¹² Donald A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd edn.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 33, 45.

Another mistake is to confuse the meaning of a word with the meaning of the text in which it occurs. Köstenberger emphasizes that “it is important to distinguish between information supplied by the context in which a word occurs and the component of meaning contributed by the word itself.”¹³ This is illustrated in the example of Mat 28:19, where the term ‘the Son’ contributes little meaning beyond making a reference, but the person to whom it refers, Jesus, receives meaning from the implications of the whole text. Another example is Mark 2, where Jesus says the “Son of Man” has power to forgive sins and authority over the Sabbath; here the term ‘the Son of Man’ contributes little beyond a self-reference, but the statements in which it occurs supply considerable meaning to our understanding of who Jesus is and expand the meaning of the term itself.

Yet another mistake is described by Don Carson is the “unwarranted linking of sense and reference.”¹⁴ This happens when interpreters fail to realize that “the sense or meaning of a word is not its referent but the mental content with which the word is associated” in the community that uses it at a particular time.¹⁵ For example, when Nathanael says to Jesus, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49 ESV), the lexical meaning of these three terms is far less than the knowledge we have about the person they refer to, i.e. Jesus.

The distinction between sense and reference is especially notable when people make references to referents in the past by using a term that identifies the referent as it is in the present. For example, a man will commonly say, “My wife was born in such-and-such a place,” even though she was not yet his wife when she was born.

¹³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 19.

¹⁴ Donald A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd edn.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Similarly Stephen refers to “our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia” (Acts 7:2), even though the Abraham’s name was still ‘Abram’ when he was in Mesopotamia. The New Testament authors often use such references to refer to the second Person of the Trinity prior to the incarnation by using his post-incarnate name ‘Jesus’ or by using terms that describe his incarnate role, such as ‘Christ’ or ‘the Son of God’, both of which were used in Jewish society to refer to the awaited Savior. So in addition to using ‘Word’ (John 1:14; 1 John 1:1) to refer to the pre-incarnate Second Person, Jesus and the Apostles also use terms that identify him by his post-incarnate role, such as ‘the Son of Man’ (John 3:13 and perhaps Matt 20:28), ‘the Bread of God’ (who “comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” John 6:33), ‘Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor 8:6), ‘Christ’ (1 Cor 10:4, Heb 10:5ff, and perhaps John 17:3 and 1 Pet 1:11¹⁶), ‘Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor 8:9), ‘Christ Jesus’ (Phil 2:5-6, 1 Tim 1:15), and even though these terms describe the Jesus during the incarnation. The term ‘Son’ is used this way in Heb 1:1-3 to refer to the one who is both the post-incarnate “heir of all things” and the pre-incarnate agent of creation, and a similar usage is found in Gal 4:4, Rom 8:3, and 1 John 4:9–10. In all these cases, the terms used are ones that were normally associated with the Mediator, the Messiah, but the terms are used to refer to his divine personage at a time prior to the incarnation.

When people use an anachronistic reference often enough, the word acquires that meaning as an additional lexical sense. As a result, the terms ‘Christ’ and ‘Son of God’ were given an additional meaning for Christians, namely the eternal Word of God, the second Person of the Trinity both before and after the incarnation. The early church fathers continued to use ‘Word’ most often for references to the divine nature of Jesus, especially prior to his in-

¹⁶ Calvin understood ‘Christ’ in ‘Spirit of Christ’ in 1 Pet 1:11 to mean the Word, since the Christ was not yet manifested. See Institutes 1.13.7.

carnation,¹⁷ but this changed when the Arian and Semi-Arian heresies arose. This was because the Arians and semi-Arians argued that the word ‘son’ meant an offspring and hence entailed a second being, one who was a literal son to the Father. The Arians went on to say that if the Son was an offspring, then he had a beginning in time as well. The Orthodox theologians disagreed and emphasized that the second Person of the Trinity was eternal and uncreated, thus an “eternal Son”. A century of emphasizing eternal sonship had the effect of making ‘Son’ the most commonly used term for the second Person of the Trinity, instead of ‘Word.’ Calvin justifies this use of ‘Son’ for the pre-incarnate Word on the basis of Col 1:15, which says that Jesus Christ is “the firstborn of all creation” (*Institutes* 1.14.5). Nevertheless, Calvin goes on in the same passage to say he is a Son in respect to the incarnation as well, just before that he explains this double usage of the term (*Institutes* 1.13.24):

For ever since Christ was manifested in the flesh he is called the Son of God, not only because begotten of the Father before all worlds he was the Eternal Word, but because he undertook the person and office of the Mediator that he might unite us to God.

Commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:27, the theologian Charles Hodge notes that “the words *the Son himself*, here designate, as in so many other places, not the second person of the Trinity as such, but that person as clothed in our nature,” “not the Logos as such, but the Logos as incarnate.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Athanasius, the chief advocate for the Nicene position, in his work ‘On the Incarnation’, used ‘Word’ 132 times compared to ‘Son’ 24 times, ‘Image’ 19, and ‘Wisdom’ 6 times (usually in conjunction with ‘Word’). Athanasius makes a distinction in his works between ‘Son’ as the eternal Word and ‘Son’ as the incarnate Savior (the Messiah).

¹⁸ Charles Hodge, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Robert Carter, 1878) pp. 333-4.

Without a proper understanding and employment of these three disciplines, we are unlikely to communicate and translate Scriptural truth accurately.