

CAUTIONS REGARDING “SON OF GOD” IN MUSLIM-IDIOM TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE: SEEKING SENSIBLE BALANCE

By J. Scott Horrell¹

1 Introduction

How should biblical descriptions of Jesus Christ as the “Son of God” be translated in contexts where the word-for-word phrase evokes unbiblical if not vulgar connotations? As is widely acknowledged, Muslims normatively assume that to declare God has a “Son” would mean God literally produced an offspring through sexual relations with a woman.² Muslims deem such belief as “ludicrous and blasphemous”³—as do Christians themselves, indeed, far more adamantly. In light of Islamic cultural and linguistic understanding of the phrase, Bible translators over the last several decades have favored sometimes rendering the Greek phrase *hui-os tou theou* (lit. “Son of God”) with alternative, less offensive terms.⁴ The intent has been to clarify the phrase’s *meaning* regarding Jesus’s Sonship in the biblical setting within today’s varying

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² The concept of divine offspring is sharply spoken against in the Qur’an (cf. 4:171; 5:17, 72–76; 9:30–31; 72:3–4; 112:1–4), often directly related to Jesus.

³ Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2008) 108; see Rick Brown, “Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term ‘Son of God,’” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 43:4 (Oct 2007) 422–29.

⁴ Greek phrases vary slightly as do the meanings; as referring to Jesus Christ, the phrase occurs about 44 times in the New Testament. More varied meanings derive from the Hebrew *ben-elohim*.

contexts into which the Bible is translated.⁵ Good reasons align with such efforts, as do good motives for more effectively communicating to those for whom Christ died.

On the other hand, in such discussions, canonical exegesis together with historical and theological concerns are not always given adequate weight. All classical Christian faith embraces the invitation articulated by the Evangelist, “these [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The confession that Jesus is the “Son of God” continues explicit in earliest post-biblical history. *Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, repeatedly emphasizes the name “the Son of God” and declares “no one will enter the kingdom of God unless he receives the name of his Son.”⁶ A primitive version of the Apostles’ Creed dating as early as 150 AD declares, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord...”⁷ The cornerstone of all Christian orthodoxy, the Nicene Creed (325), affirms, “We believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Repeatedly and unanimously

⁵ See Rick Brown, John Penny, and Laith Gray, “Muslim-Idiom Bible Translations: Claims and Facts,” *St. Francis Magazine* 5:6 (Dec 2009) 87–105; Brown, “Muslim Worldviews and the Bible,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, “Part I: God and Mankind” 23:1 (Spring 2006) 5–12; “Part II: Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Age to Come” 23:2 (Summer 2006) 48–56; and “Part III: Women, Purity, Worship and Ethics” (23:3 Fall 2006) 93–100; Brown, “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Part I, 22:3 (Fall 2005) 91–96 and Part II, 22:4 (Winter 2005) 135–45; Brown, “The ‘Son of God’—Understanding the Messianic Title of Jesus,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17:1 (Spring 2000): 39–52.

⁶ *Shepherd of Hermas*, 89:2 (*Similitudes* 9:12.2, 4). Written in Rome in the first half of the second century, *Hermas* speaks of the Son as “far older than all God’s creation.”

⁷ Following Rufinus of Aquileia and Hippolytus in *Paradosis* (c. 215), in J. A. Buckley, *Second Century Orthodoxy: The Trinity Doctrine in the Teaching of the Second Century Church Fathers* (Cornwall: by author, 1978), i.

in all mainstream Christendom, the designation of Jesus as the “Son of God” is said to be essential to true doctrine and genuine faith. For most in Christian history, outside this confession—that is, outside the fundamental *meaning* of this confession—there is no salvation.

The question, then, is how can fidelity to the New Testament and classical Christian confession of Jesus as the “Son of God” be held together with translations that communicate the meaning of the biblical terminology in Muslim idioms? Differences about how to speak of Jesus Christ as God’s Son are said to be as old as the Bible itself, to some extent evident even in the parallel passages of the Synoptic Gospels. In modern translation theory, Eugene Nida and Charles Kraft developed the concept of *dynamic equivalence* in the translation of the Christian message.⁸ That is, the translator chooses the cultural idioms that best communicate the impact of the biblical text within its original setting. In 1977 the United Bible Society’s Arie de Kuiper and Barclay Newman directly addressed the question for Muslim contexts in the brief article “Jesus, Son of God—a Translation Problem.”⁹ Three decades of discussion follow with significant changes in translation methodology that are widely affirmed by Bible translators around the

⁸ E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964); Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1979); Kraft, “Dynamic Equivalence Churches in Muslim Society,” in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. Don M. McCurry (Monrovia CA: MARC, 1979) 114–22.

⁹ Arie de Kuiper and Barclay Newman, “Jesus, Son of God—a Translation Problem,” *The Bible Translator* 28:4 (1977) 432–38. They comment “It may well be that the phrase ‘Son of God,’ as it applies to Jesus, is the most misunderstood term in the entire New Testament” (432). Far too indebted to Willi Marxsen, they unwisely suggest that the phrase “Servant of God” replace “Son of God.” Lamin O. Sanneh responds in “Jesus, Son of God—a Translation Problem—Further Comments,” *The Bible Translator* 30:2 (1979) 241–44.

world. Two principles are embraced unanimously: 1) accuracy to the meaning of the text, rather than mere duplication of lexical equivalents, and 2) clarity of meaning or naturalness of expression within a given dialect (termed “communicativeness”).¹⁰ Rick Brown and Martin Parsons are well known for their work regarding the contextualized translation of Sonship passages in different Muslim idioms. Numerous other writers also address Christian and Islamic understandings of Jesus.¹¹ Seeking to safeguard traditional testimony that the “Son of God” is “God the Son,” Roger Dixon, David Abernathy, and others have recently raised counter-arguments that call word-for-word translation of Son-of-

¹⁰ I am indebted to Rick Brown, personal correspondence, July 10-12, 2010. The theory of dynamic equivalence is no longer practiced. Today various levels of exchange occur between, on the one side, efforts to be faithful to a literal translation of text itself and, on the other side, the natural understanding of such terminology within the receptor context.

¹¹ Brown, Penny, and Gray, “Muslim-Idiom Bible Translations,” 87–105; Brown, “Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term ‘Son of God,’” 422–29; Brown, “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” Part I, 91–96 and Part II, 135–45; Brown, “Muslim Worldviews and the Bible,” esp. Part 1: 5–12, and Part II: 48–56; Martin Parsons, *Unveiling God: Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture* (Pasadena CA: William Cary Library, 2005); also Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985); Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); I. Mark Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims: A Critical Analysis of Christian Presentations of Christ for Muslims from the Ninth and Twentieth Centuries* (Milton Keynes UK: Paternoster, 2005); and Joseph L. Cumming, “The Meaning of the Expression ‘Son of God,’” Yale Center for Faith and Culture, n.d., <http://www.yale.edu/faith/rc/rc-rp.htm>. Veteran missiologist Phil Parshall has addressed the Muslim-idiom problem regarding Sonship language but deferred to professional linguists, *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization*, 2d ed. (Waynesboro GA: Authentic, 2003) 73–74; and “Lifting the Fatwa,” *Envisioning Effective Ministry: Evangelism in a Muslim Context*, eds. Laurie Fortunak Nichols and Gary R. Corwin (Wheaton IL: EMIS, 2010) 136–37.

God texts.¹² Among published works, the academic weight is decidedly on the side of translation specialists and current translation theory.

This article offers cautionary observations to those employing non-literal translations of the phrase *huios tou theou* in Christological texts. I am not a linguist or specialist in biblical languages. Nor is my focus the Muslim world.¹³ As a missionary theologian through most of my ministry-life, my sympathies are with the best possible communication of the gospel into any culture. But my sense is that translators are not always sensitive to the greater canonical significance of the designation “Son of God” and its centrality to the Christian message. Secondly, linguists may sometimes focus on the biblical text and the immediate target culture without adequate appreciation for the convictions of traditional Christian communities. Third, highly sympathetic Muslim-idiom translations raise theological concerns regarding whether Jesus Christ is adequately communicated as the eternal “Son of God” and whether believers will be able ultimately to perceive God as Holy Trinity.¹⁴ Some claiming to represent Christianity to Muslims do not at all affirm Christological orthodoxy—John Hick, Paul Knitter, and Hans Küng, to name a few.¹⁵ But it is undenia-

¹² Roger Dixon, “Identity Theft: Retheologizing the Son of God,” (Wheaton IL: EMIS, 2007) 220-26, cf. 223; David Abernathy, “Jesus Is the Eternal Son of God,” *St. Francis Magazine* 6:2 (April 2010) 327-94; and “Reflections on the Trinity in Light of 1 John 4:8,” *St. Francis Magazine* 6:3 (June 2010) 471-81.

¹³ I do approach this task humbly and I am grateful for responses from veteran linguists and Islamic missionaries who have interacted with earlier drafts of this article: Rick Brown, John Penny, Laith Gray, and others who cannot be named.

¹⁴ See concerns of Joseph Cumming, “Muslim Followers of Jesus?” *Christianity Today* (December 2009) 32–35, esp. 35, regarding C-5 Christian-Muslim believers.

¹⁵ See Risto Jukko, *Trinitarian Theology in Christian-Muslim Encounters: Theological Foundations of the Work of the French Roman Catholic Church Secretariat for Relations with Islam* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2001) 55-60;

ble that the vast majority of missionary translators are fully Nicene in Trinitarian confession and that a large percentage affirm not only verbal inspiration but also the inerrancy of Scripture. Accusations or innuendos otherwise are simply unfair. In the last section of my “Cautions,” I seek to further clarify what it means to confess that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Holy Trinity.

Summarily, my contribution to the discussion comes from three perspectives: exegetical, historical, and theological. Specifically I address the following questions: (1) Exegetically, in the translation of the Bible, is non-literal rendering of “Son of God” when referring to Jesus omitting too much? (2) Historically, should the centrality of “Son of God” terminology in both Eastern and Western Christianity be set aside for non-Christian religious-cultural concerns? (3) Finally, theologically, what does it mean to confess Jesus as the “Son of God” and how does this relate to translation? Observations from these realms of inquiry help give balance in approaching the translation of Jesus-Sonship terminology for Muslim readers.

2 Exegetically, is non-literal translation of ‘Son of God’ omitting too much?

2.1 Old Testament Meanings in the New Testament Witness

It is well established that the phrase “son(s) of God” has multiple meanings in Scripture, whether supernatural as the divine council and angelic hosts, or human as an exalted king, Adam “the son of God,” or believers themselves in filial relationship to God the Father. The description “son(s) of God” does not necessarily evoke the meaning of innate deity. The predominant Jewish concept of “son of God” at the time of Jesus likely combined

and Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims*, 202-9, who evaluates Kenneth Cragg’s view of Christ as functional, not ontological and preexistent.

imagery of the son of David as eschatological heir with an exalted person especially anointed and privileged by God. As in many biblical commentaries, recent Muslim-idiom translations often focus on these pre-Easter understandings of “son of God” as original hearers might have understood them. This is particularly true in the rendering of introductory texts like Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (NIV) and Nathanael’s early declaration “Rabbi, you are the Son of God!” (John 1:49). Alternative translations seek to avoid misimpressions to Muslim readers who would immediately interpret such texts to say that God begat literal offspring.

Nevertheless, assumptions and alternative renderings of “Son of God” based on what Jews in time of Jesus did and did not comprehend about the Messiah may be overstated. Richard Bauckham comments, “Because Jewish monotheism was not strict but flexible, and the boundary between the one God and all other reality relatively blurred by the interest in intermediary figures, the highest New Testament Christology can be understood as an intelligibly Jewish development.”¹⁶ That is, to affirm that we know what the earliest witnesses could and could not fathom regarding the Messiah may be presumptuous. Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism reflect ambiguities regarding Yahweh’s unity and diversity that allowed place for divine agents such as the Spirit, Wisdom, the divine Word, the Angel of the Lord, and the Messiah. A New Testament example that appropriates Old Testament messianic Sonship language and directly applies it to Jesus as the Son of God is found in Hebrews

¹⁶ Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 3. Also, N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 719–31; and Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2003) 27–53.

1:5–13.¹⁷ In replacing the word-for-word translation of “Son of God” with parallel messianic terms, the phrase’s layered and deeper canonical meanings are often obscured.

2.2 Gospel Use of “Son of God”

The Gospel of Matthew uses “Son of God” sparingly but tellingly. First is the heavenly voice declaring Jesus to be “my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased” (3:17). This is followed by Satan’s temptation which twice asks, “If you are the Son of God...” (4:3, 6). Third, demons cry out, “What do you want with us, Son of God?” (8:29). Notice that each use is a supernatural declaration, and this pattern is nearly identical in the other Synoptic Gospels. Fourth, in Matthew when Jesus walks on water and calms the tempestuous sea, the disciples in the boat “worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (14:32 NIV). Again, as Jesus dies on the cross, with the sky black and nature itself trembling, the Roman centurion declares, “Surely, he was the Son of God!” (Matt 27:54). The pattern and use of “Son of God” is similar in Mark and Luke. Whereas certain New Testament contexts might allow alternative phrases for “Son of God,” in other passages one struggles to discern just what can substitute the word-for-word “Son of God” terminology without losing too much? The title appears theologically intentional on the part of the Gospel writers in part to lead the reader to trust this “Son of God” who is himself God.

This is not all. Matthew includes the angelic explanation to Mary for her virgin birth, that Jesus will be called “God with us” (Matt 1:23)—Luke includes the descriptions “the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32) and “the Son of God” (1:35). Jesus claims that he commands angels, myriads of angels, who will someday come

¹⁷ A leading translator who cannot be named observes that Muslim-idiom translations with which he is familiar are literal in their rendition of Heb 1:8, “Your throne, Oh Allah, is forever and ever.” Personal correspondence, June 2010.

with him from heaven in glory (Matt 13:41; 16:27; 25:31). At the Transfiguration a second time God's voice declares, "This is my Son, whom I love" (17:5). Another time, Jesus states "no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son" (11:27). So we ask again, what alternative expressions can replace "Son" and "Son of God" that do not diminish the weighty implications of Christ's deity?

The immensely important point is this. On the one hand, we should not expect pre-Easter understanding to equal post-resurrection/Pentecost comprehension of Jesus as the Son of God. On the other, we should recognize that the Gospels were largely written *after* certain high Christological statements were already in place and recorded in the Epistles (e.g., Phil 2:6-11, Rom 9:5).¹⁸ This is to say that post-Easter Christological belief is packed into the pre-Easter accounts of the Gospels. Indeed, that is much of their purpose. Mark traveled with Paul and Barnabas, and Luke with Paul. When Mark begins his "gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God," more is intended than Jesus's messianic assignment or great merit before God. Matthew and Luke all the more are writing Christologies as they recount the life of Jesus. Most notably, the Gospel of John begins with the eternal deity of the Logos and describes that this Word became flesh as "God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side" (1:18). So when John the Baptist declares that God testified to him that the one on whom the Spirit comes "is the Son of God" (1:34), the meaning of "Son of God" is already implied from the Prologue (even if the Baptist at the historical event could not have known). When Nathanael declares that Jesus is "the Son of God...the King of Israel"

¹⁸ Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 134-35; and <http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2010/07/22/review-essay>: "Review Essay: [J. D. G. Dunn's] 'Did the First Christians Worship Jesus,'" July 22, 2010, forthcoming in *Journal of Theological Studies*.

(1:49), while he surely at the time had limited understanding of who Jesus is as Messiah, the writer John is infusing into Nathanael's words the theology of the entire book: Jesus is the Christ the Son of God—and by that John ultimately intends God the Son.¹⁹ Efforts to substitute word-for-word translation of Son-of-God passages can easily become reductionistic and forfeit the rich and layered meanings canonically implied and theologically intended.

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

When Jesus in the Gospels most directly alludes to his deity, it is in the teeth of those who angrily reject him—and they did understand (John 8:58; 10:30). At his trial when the High Priest adjures, "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God," Jesus responds "Yes, it is as you say" (Matt 26:64; or "I am," Mark 14:62). Then Jesus further avows, "In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt 26:64; cf. Luke 22:69–70). Jesus steps beyond the High Priest's limited understanding of "Son of God" and in the strongest terms declares that he is the heavenly "Son of Man"—a far more divine claim than the Sanhedrin anticipated. Jesus interprets "Son of God" with his favorite self-designation "Son of Man" now defined in terms of the preexistent heavenly figure who will be worshiped by all people and rule over the world (Dan 7:14; Ps 110:1).²⁰ The Sanhedrin exploded in accusations of blasphemy and began to brutalize the Savior. Hours later at the crucifixion, the religious leaders taunted Jesus that he clai-

¹⁹ On this point see Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2007) 229-30.

²⁰ "Son of Man" is Jesus's primary self-designation 81 times of 82 total in the Gospels. One respondent on an earlier draft observed that "Son of Man" is equally problematic in certain Muslim-idiom settings meaning illegitimate son or bastard; he asks, if "Son of Man" need not be literally translated, then why the insistence regarding "Son of God"?

med to be the “Son of God” (Matt 27:40, 43). Again, the question is—and this is the translator’s challenge—what non-literal titles will capture the lavish implications of “Son” and “Son of God” in these and the other Gospel passages?

2.4 Other New Testament Affirmations of Jesus’s Deity

As noted earlier, nearly all translators agree that Christ’s deity is attested in various ways in the New Testament. Notably in John’s Gospel, Jesus repeatedly claims to be “from above” (John 3:31; 6:33ff, 62; 8:23) and that he will ascend to where he been before (John 3:13; 6:62), to receive the glory he had with the Father from before the creation of the world (17:5). Paul’s letter to the Philipians includes what traditionally is known as the Hymn to Christ or *Carmen Christi*, attesting that Jesus was “in the form of God” prior to the *kenosis* of the Incarnation (Phil 2:6). Other high Christological passages also establish the deity of Christ as Logos and Son: John’s prologue (1:1–18), Colossians 1:15–19 and 2:9, and Hebrews 1:1–14. From a textual-critical vantage, at least eight passages in the Greek testament explicitly state that Jesus is *theos*, four beyond any textual doubt and four more with a high degree of probability.²¹

All scholars agree that the earliest Christians grew in their understanding of their confession that Jesus is Lord and Son of God, but let us be clear that no one in those early years could articulate Jesus as the second person of the Holy Trinity. While the early church’s *experience* of God was abundantly Trinitarian, first-century believers simply did not have the conceptual language that would later be articulated at Nicaea and Constantinople. Most

²¹ Brian J. Wright, “Jesus as *Theos*: A Textual Examination,” in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic and Apocryphal Evidence*, ed. Daniel B. Wallace (Grand Rapids MI: Kregel, forthcoming 2010). Indisputable, John 1:1, 20:28; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1; high probability, John 1:18; Rom 9:5; Heb 1:8; 1 John 5:20.

of us are prone to read back into biblical texts more than early believers would have understood. We may be theologically correct, yet care must be shown not to assume too much in terms of Bible translation. Nevertheless, the New Testament is freighted with significant revelation regarding who Jesus is as the God-man and all that is needed for Nicene confession. Translators face the task of negotiating this delicate balance. My concern is that substitution of the word-for-word “Son of God” can obfuscate the textual evidence for full historical orthodoxy.

2.5 Son-Father Relationship as Divine Self-Revelation

In the New Testament about 117 passages bring together all three persons of the Holy Trinity.²² Terminology and order for the members of the Godhead vary among biblical authors (e.g., God, Christ, Counselor), yet John’s Gospel is widely perceived as the apex of Christological and Trinitarian revelation. The New Testament designates God as “Father” (*pater, patros*) some 254 times, and nearly half of those uses (120) are in the Gospel of John. It is not too forced to say that our pattern of speaking of God as “Father” derives especially from John. The ascription of “Son” for Jesus occurs about 40 times in John’s Gospel (and 22 times in the Johannine Epistles). The full literal phrase “Son of God” occurs nine times John’s Gospel.²³ Important to note is that much of the Son language is ascribed to Jesus himself speaking of his relationship with the Father.

²² Horrell, “The Abundant Trinitarian Passages of the New Testament, Theological Method, and Nicene Implications,” Paper delivered at the Evangelical Theological Society, New Orleans, Nov 2009; this is a conservative listing to be published in my forthcoming *The Center of Everything: The Trinity in Scripture, History, and Practical Living* (Grand Rapids MI: Kregel, 2011).

²³ Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2002) 600–1. While “Son” is often Jesus’s self-designation, he does not call himself “Son of God” although this is often assumed as he speaks of his intimacy with the Father.

What is the bottom line? Both terms “Father” and “Son” for God are repugnant to the Muslim. Yet in the Bible and Christian faith these words take on more meaning than mere metaphors or titles, rather they become the divine *names* that most disclose the divine relations. Without the Son there is no Father, and without the Father there is no Son. In the developing theology of the New Testament, the names “Father” and “Son” assume the force of being not merely external (or economic) descriptions but intrinsic to God’s own deepest reality. Again it must be asked, if “natural” terms replace “Son,” “Son of God,” and even “Father” in Muslim-sensitive translations, then what other language allows us access into this intimate reality? If such designations were rejected by the Qur’an in explicit opposition to Christian faith—even if Muhammed misperceived these terms—what might serve as licit alternatives?

2.6 Rejoinders

Having argued my case, in fairness to Muslim-idiom Bible translators, several responses should be aired.

First, again, virtually no translator has the intention of hiding the deity of Christ or our Lord’s eternal place as the Son of God. To the contrary, virtually all translators affirm Trinitarian doctrine and most of the largest translation organizations affirm the inerrancy of Scripture.²⁴ At the same time, several argue, Nicene theology must not be the matrix by which all translation efforts are determined. That is, it is illicit to impose the theology of the fourth century and beyond on the actual meaning of the original text or its translation.

²⁴ Parsons, *Unveiling God*, includes multiple arguments for Christ’s deity to Islamic listeners, 185–249; also Brown, “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” I, 91–96 and esp. II, 135–45; Brown, “The ‘Son of God’—Understanding the Messianic Title of Jesus,” 39–52; Brown, “Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term ‘Son of God,’” 422–29.

Second, because centuries of indoctrination have shaped language and thought, when Muslims read the phrase “Son of God” it miscommunicates the actual meaning of Scripture. This is not the Muslim’s “fault,” so to speak. Rather the biblical meaning of such language is outside their conceptual grasp. One regional leader of translation writes, “The consistent feedback we hear from Muslim readers is that the reason they reject word-for-word traditional renderings is not because they communicate Jesus’ eternal deity, but rather because they communicate biological reproduction.”²⁵ Various languages have no figurative sense of “father” and “son,” hence non-word-for-word translations are in fact unavoidable. If words are not comprehended by readers as the Bible intends, then wooden word-for-word textual rendering fails as accurate translation.

Third, various parallel renderings of “son(s) of God” are widely recognized among both conservative biblical scholars and linguists. That is, as any dictionary makes clear, most words have multiple meanings.²⁶ Let’s be honest and admit that lexically complex titles like “Son of God” are not easily translated into cultures entirely alien to Judeo-Christian thought. Biblical commen-

²⁵ Laith Gray, personal response to an earlier draft, July 2010.

²⁶ Brown observes that the Hebrew *ben*, like the Aramaic *bar* and the Greek *huios*, carries multiple meanings, such as “young man, subordinate, deputy, vice-regent, disciple, citizen, descendant,” etc., and male offspring is only one meaning. The term “father” has a similar range. “Translators cannot be faithful to the meaning if they translate every sense of *ben* with a word that has only one of those senses, namely ‘offspring,’ so they must translate it with more than one target-language word. Although the King James translation is fairly literal, a look at Strong’s [Concordance] shows [it translates] *ben* over a hundred different ways, depending on the context.” Personal correspondence, July 10-12, 2010. See Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

taries often explore in depth the various meanings of Sonship terminology.

Fourth, for the above reasons, recent pioneer Bible translation endeavors to clarify both the *text* (translation) and the *paratext* (biblical background and meaning). Increasingly translations today include introductions, explanatory notes, and footnotes to clarify Scripture's meaning. For example, in various Muslim-idioms, the Holy Spirit is understood to be the angel Gabriel. When Mary is told (by Gabriel!) that she will become pregnant when the Holy Spirit comes upon her (Luke 1:35), the Muslim understands that Gabriel will have sexual relations with Mary. In such cases, parallel biblical phrases render "Holy Spirit" (perceived as Gabriel) with "the Spirit of God" or "God's Spirit." Rick Brown explains that translation must be as faithful as possible to the *literal* rendering of the text, but that this is not always possible when seeking to be faithful to the *meaning* of the text within a given linguistic context. Consequently in current translation efforts, both the biblical text and the elucidation of its meaning (paratext) are deemed essential.²⁷

In the end, translation of the Bible into another language and culture is not an easy task. Both sides of the "Son of God" debate must show great care to be faithful to the inspired Word of God while minimizing misunderstanding. The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit. All recognize that it is the Spirit who empowers and illumines the Scripture in the life of the reader. Not everything can be explained. My contention is that the largely pre-Easter gospel accounts are dense with post-Easter Christological meaning, thus the literal translation of "Son of God" protects theological meanings that otherwise may be obscured. So we ask, in light of the exegetical cautions earlier set forth, is non-literal translation of "Son of God" in Muslim idioms omitting too much?

²⁷ Rick Brown, personal correspondence, July 10-12, 2010.

Depending on the cultural-linguistic context, often Yes. But with paratext explanation, it may sometimes be justified.

3 Historically, should the literal rendering “Son of God”, so central in Church history, be set aside for religio-cultural concerns?

The early church’s trajectory toward understanding the full implications of Jesus Christ as the eternal “Son of God” is well documented—albeit mingled with controversy.²⁸ Those sensitive to Islamic readers of the Bible argue that, similar to the Jews in the time of Jesus, Muslims must be given opportunity to hear and to understand the man Jesus in his historical setting. It will not do (as intimated in the first rejoinder above), to press later Christian theological categories upon curious Muslim readers. If clarity regarding the magnitude of the Incarnation took decades and centuries to develop, why unnecessarily force Nicene Christology on those who know little if anything of the actual New Testament? Although there is wisdom in such an approach, from a historical vantage, problematic issues remain.

3.1 A Literal Hermeneutic—Patristic Style

Early Christians believed that Jesus Christ as Son of God was revealed throughout the Bible.²⁹ Christopher Seitz argues that the earliest church fathers had no trouble reading multiple meanings

²⁸ Primary works include Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, trans. John Bowden, 2 vols., 2d ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975); Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church*, ed. Andrew Louth, trans. Matthias Westerhoff (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993); N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992–2003); Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*; and, contrarian, Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁹ Note Luke 24:25–27, 44–47; Acts 3:18; 1 Pet 1:10–12.

in the Old Testament text—meanings not always understood by the human authors but intended by the divine author (Pss 2:1–12; 45:6–7; 110:1; Isa 9:6).³⁰ Larry Hurtado notes that the second-century “proto-orthodox” Christians demonstrate three main approaches to the Old Testament: (1) OT proof texts that demonstrate the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus; (2) the typological reading of the OT that saw figures and events foreshadowing Jesus; and (3) interpretation of OT theophanies as manifestations of the pre-incarnate Son of God.³¹ Important to recognize is that the early church interpreted certain Sonship sayings in the Old Testament as reflecting the highest of New Testament Christological meanings (cf. Heb 1:2-3, 5-13). Literal translation of Christological Sonship passages keeps the bridge strong between the two Testaments as interpreted in early Christianity.

3.2 Early Patristic Evidence that Sonship Terminology Is Primary

Likewise, the Christian church very early on sought to unfold ontological implications of Jesus Christ being the “Son of God.” Ignatius speaks of Jesus as God at least eleven times, closing his letter to Polycarp, “I bid you farewell always in our God Jesus Christ.”³² Exemplifying one of many prayers to Jesus in the

³⁰ Christopher R. Seitz, “The Trinity in the Old Testament: A Canonical Approach,” Lecture, Dallas Theological Seminary, Apr 30, 2010; also Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2004). See Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2008), esp. 199-205: “Texts of Scripture do not have a single meaning limited to the intent of the original author... [Rather] Scripture has multiple complex senses, given by God, the author of the whole drama.” (200)

³¹ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 565–66.

³² *Epistle to Polycarp* 8:3, in B. Wright, “Jesus as “Qeov~,” 2. Wright finds 14 times Ignatius speaks of Jesus as God and Weinandy 11 times, Thomas Weinan-

second century, Carpus as he is nailed to a cross and set ablaze cries, “Blessed are you, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, because, though I am a sinner, you deemed me worthy of having this share with you.”³³ The first part of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, as Aloys Grillmeier observes, “is concentrated on Christ, the Son of the Father, to prove his Godhead and his absolute transcendence. ...The incarnate one is the Son of God who is not just Son of God through the incarnation but is already Son of God before his advent in the flesh, indeed, before the creation of the world (6:12).”³⁴ The earliest Christian apologist Aristides writes to Emperor Hadrian (ca. 125), “The Christians trace the beginning of their religion to Jesus the Messiah. He is called the Son of the Most High God. It is said that God came down from heaven. He assumed flesh and clothed Himself with it from a Hebrew virgin. And the Son of God lived in a daughter of man.”³⁵ Justin Martyr, in his *Letter to Trypho the Jew* (ca. 160) writes, “If you had understood what has been written by the prophets, you would not have denied that He was God, Son of the Only, unbegotten, Unutterable God.”³⁶ Patristic testimony grows through the

dy, “The Apostolic Christology of Ignatius of Antioch: The Road to Chalcedon,” in *Trajectories Through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 76.

³³ *Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice* 41, in Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs: Introduction, Texts, and Translations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 26.

³⁴ Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, I:57; *Barnabas* speaks repeatedly of the “Son of God” (5.9, 11; 6.12; 7.2, 9; 12.8, 10; 15.5).

³⁵ *Apology*, cited in David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1998) 93–94 [*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 9.265]; also “Aristides,” *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1990) 90.

³⁶ *Letter to Trypho the Jew*, in Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 94 [*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1.263].

following decades that Jesus Christ is the pre-existent “Son of God,” “the Logos,” “God.”

3.3 The Unanimous Confession of Christian Faith

The Nicene Creed declares, “We believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten and not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being...”³⁷ The First Ecumenical Council’s confession that the “Son of God” is “God the Son” is reiterated and refined through all major Christian traditions in these seventeen centuries.

Christians today stand in a stream of faith. We are part of a body, a church. Traditions may vary on other issues but the foundation is Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God. We cannot return to a pre-Easter understanding of Jesus as the Jewish audience before the cross and then call such a message “Christian.” Of course, on the one hand, in anyone’s life there is a growing understanding of Jesus before “saving faith” (*fiducia*). And people do place their faith in the Savior before comprehending him with any sort of Nicene precision. We all agree here. On the other hand, we do not call people to faith in merely a miracle-working prophet or Spirit-filled messiah (although Jesus is surely all this). While there may be initial attraction to Jesus through the pre-Easter Synoptic narratives, such a message is not yet adequately “Christian” in any canonical sense.³⁸ The gospel invitation is to trust personally in Jesus Christ

³⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed., rev. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977) 215–16.

³⁸ I am not adverse to Hiebert’s centered-set understanding of conversion, as in Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2009) 31-32, and earlier

as the Son of God who through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead reconciles us to God.³⁹ Whatever the religious context of translation and proclamation, the centrality of faith in Jesus as God's One and Only Son united together with the Father as the one God is the position of all Christian orthodoxy. We may not want to identify with Christendom. But all who believe in Jesus are made part of the church under his headship. A translation that detours from the central profession that Jesus is the Son of God through whom all believers are united to that extent compromises both the gospel and the unity of the church.

3.4 Classical Translations in Eastern Church History

As the New Testament writings spread into non-Greek speaking cultures, ancient translations explicitly rendered *huios tou theou* as "Son of God." The phrase was conservatively translated into various languages, in spite of cultural misunderstandings that might have interpreted Jesus as a god or a semi-divine emperor. Syriac was the Aramaic dialect of Edessa and commonly used throughout Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia from the first century through the Middle Ages and later. The Syriac edition of Tatian's *Diatessaron* (a harmony of the four Gospels) dates from around 170 A.D. and became widely distributed in the East.⁴⁰ The Syriac-

works. Faith and regeneration may occur in contexts where the actual content of belief regarding Jesus Christ is *sub-Christian* but not *anti-Christian*.

³⁹ *Euangelion* denotes (1) good news, (2) the good news of the kingdom of God, and (3) the message that we preach for personal salvation. Drawn from John 20:31, Rom 10:9–15, 1 Cor 15:1–5, and others texts, the Christian *gospel* is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died in sinful man's place to make us right with God; and of God's kingdom in which Christ will rule over all things.

⁴⁰ Robert J. Owens, "Peshitta," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 718–19; and "Diatesseron," *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press and Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1997) 477–78. The *Peshitta* translation appears dependent on both the

Aramaic Bible, the *Peshitta*, dates from the fourth century and parallels in influence and longevity the Latin Vulgate in the West. The Syriac wording for the phrase the “Son of God” (*bareh d’alaha*) in both the *Diatessaron* and the *Peshitta* directly translates the Greek *huios tou theou*.⁴¹ This carefulness in translation marks other early Bibles as well. Indeed, we would hardly expect otherwise, especially after the fourth-century Ecumenical Councils’ doctrinal confessions of Christ’s eternal deity.⁴² As the *Peshitta* retained its literal translation, so fidelity in word-for-word rendering of Jesus as the “Son of God” has continued for over 1300 years not only in Syriac but also in Arabic, Farsi, and a multitude of other biblical translations. The literal translation of “Son of God” in referring to Jesus (over 40 times in the NT) continues in the majority of traditional Bibles honored and memorized by believers in Islam-influenced cultures today.

3.5 In the Midst of Islam

With the rise of Islam and the repudiation of God having a Son, Christian confession in the Muslim world has been tested. While several theories have been suggested concerning the rejection of Christ’s deity, the Qur’an conceivably addresses not an orthodox but a heterodox understanding of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity. The case is not clear. Mohammad had contact with Christians. Yet he appears to have thought that Christians espouse a trinity of

Diatessaron and Hebrew and Greek texts but appears to have been revised at various times based on original language manuscripts.

⁴¹ Here I am indebted to my colleague, Syriac scholar Richard Taylor.

⁴² The *Diatessaron* demonstrates the early authenticity of the four Gospels against the so-called lost Christianities. “The deep conservatism of these churches, so far removed from papal or imperial control, makes nonsense of claims that the church bureaucracy allied with the empire to suppress unpleasant truths about Christian origins.” Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008) 88.

God, Mary, and their child Jesus—a probable teaching of heretical sects on the Arabian peninsula.⁴³ In any case, certain statements in the Qur'an, as we have seen, aggressively reject Sonship language: "Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him" (Sura 112:1-4).⁴⁴ While the Qur'an strongly affirms Mary's virgin birth and certain stories from Jesus's childhood, any form of Christ's deity appears flatly rejected. Joseph Cumming has demonstrated various historical variations within Islam regarding Jesus's death, including on the cross.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Islam unanimously rejects Christ's incarnation, atonement, and resurrection.⁴⁶ As Tarif Khalidi puts it, the "Qur'an tilts backward to his miraculous birth rather than forward to his Passion."⁴⁷ At least twenty-nine passages speak of Jesus, most frequently as son of Mary (33 times), but also that he is no more than an apostle (4 times), not the son of God (Suras 4:171; 9:30-31; 72:3), and not God (5:17, 72-75).⁴⁸ Khalidi adds, "In sum, the

⁴³ Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 22. Although not directly relevant regarding Mohammad's perception of Christianity, helpful background material (as from the Sira) is found in Joseph E. Brockopp, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁴ *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, by Abdulla Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2005).

⁴⁵ Joseph L. Cumming, "Did Jesus Die on the Cross? The History of Reflection on the End of His Earthly Life in Sunni Tafsir Literature," Yale Center for Faith and Culture, 2001, <http://www.yale.edu/faith/rc/rc-rp.htm>, 1-35.

⁴⁶ A. H. Mathias Zahniser, *The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2008), esp. 15-78.

⁴⁷ Tarif Khalid, ed. and trans., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 14.

⁴⁸ This is my own count from *The Holy Qur'an*, Abdulla Yusuf Ali, English-Arabic concordance; Sura versification varies. See Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam: Introduction, Survey of Research, Issues of Dialogue* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1999) 22-41, chronicles the various references to Jesus in the Qur'an, 33 times as son of Mary, 11 as al-

Qur'anic Jesus, unlike any other prophet is embroiled in polemic.”⁴⁹ “Here, then, is the true Jesus, ‘cleansed’ of the ‘perversions’ of his followers, a prophet totally obedient to his Maker and offered us as the true alternative to the Jesus of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Redemption.”⁵⁰ John Stringer surely is correct in declaring “We have a concrete problem here: it is not unfair to say that Christianity and Islam are defined by their opposing views of Jesus”⁵¹—and this is true whether Mohammad understood correctly Christological and Trinitarian orthodoxy or not. As a consequence of Islam’s deliberately non-Christian view of Jesus Christ, millions of believers have suffered discrimination if not martyrdom for their determined confession rooted in part in the biblical wording that Jesus is the “Son of God.”⁵²

masih, 3 as messenger, and various other times as servant, prophet, word, spirit. Also Chawkat Moucary, *The Prophet and the Messiah: An Arab Christian's Perspective on Islam and Christianity* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 175-83.

⁴⁹ Khalid, *The Muslim Jesus*, 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 19–20: “How much of the Bible was accurately known to early Islam? And in what form? If one begins with the Qur’an, one finds that apart from its general conceptual and revelatory affinities with Jewish and Christian scriptures, traditions, and lore, verbatim quotations from the Old and New Testaments are very infrequent.”

⁵¹ John Stringer, “Of Straw Men and Stereotypes: Reacting to Rick Wood of Mission Frontiers,” *St. Francis Magazine* 6:3 (June 2010) 587.

⁵² Jenkins’ account of the eradication of Christianity in North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia is bold and disturbing. It begins in the mid-seventh century and continues to the present with Islamic pressures against Christian presence in Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Turkey, Armenia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Palestine. Jenkins’ major point is that the church has ceased to exist because of persecution in various formerly Christianized regions of the world: “For all the reasons we can suggest for long-term decline, for all the temptations to assimilate, the largest single factor for Christian decline was organized violence, whether in the form of massacre, expulsion, or forced migration.” Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 141.

Not surprisingly, then, traditional Christians are taken back and offended when discovering that the term “Son of God” in their older translations is replaced with natural equivalents in recent translations. They feel that to omit the literal “Son of God” from the text betrays the very faith for which the church has suffered and whole communities of Christians have died. Muslims insist that the Qur’an never changes and Islamic polemicists accuse Christians of changing the Bible (to appease them!). National believers caught in this tension find it difficult to respond. Some Christian workers suggest that, because much evangelism occurs through contacts between believers and Muslims, rather than alter the wording of the traditional Bible it would be best that Christian witnesses themselves clarify the meaning of the “Son of God” and other divine kinship passages. To change the New Testament to placate those hostile to its central truth appears to many traditional Christians as an act of betrayal. They assume that the translation of the Bible cannot be independent of the surviving Christian church and its basic Christian confession.

3.6 Perceived Translator Arrogance

In light of recent tensions, fairly or unfairly, some translation efforts are today perceived as enlightened Western Christian imposition on national situations. Not always of course, for many nationals are profoundly grateful for both translators and the fruit of the labor, the Scripture in their own language. On the one side, hundreds of translators have Ph.D.s and nearly all of the many thousands are highly trained in both linguistics and biblical exegesis. Few Christian workers endure as do translators the hardships and sacrifice of living in primitive or dangerous settings. As well, the Bible translation process involves multiple levels of national interface and intense cooperation with both Christian and non-Christian advisors, critics, and helpers.

On the other side, perhaps given the sophistication of modern linguistics, translators sometimes accused of being dismissive toward national Christian concerns. Longstanding Christian traditions with

3.7 Rejoinders

First, open testimony of Christian believers in Muslim societies is rarely occasion to explain the intricacies of Christology and Trinitarianism. While not at all discouraging Christian witness, it is argued that newer “natural” equivalence Bibles with their careful explanations and annotations regarding terms such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit allow the Muslim reader quiet opportunity to ponder the true Word of God.

Second, Sonship language was not the only way the early church spoke of Jesus Christ, and perhaps not the predominant way. Second and third-century fathers focused significantly on *Logos* terminology (hence Logos Christology). Some argue that only with the Council of Nicaea (325), as it addressed Arius’s view that the Son was the firstborn of creation, did the confession that Jesus Christ is the “Son of God” become primary and the explicit mark of Christological orthodoxy.

Third, the Qur’anic term used in passages that reject Jesus as “son” of Allah is *waled*, which only denotes biological offspring; the single exception of *ibn* was likely intended in the same physical sense.⁵³ Whereas word-for-word translation of “Son of God” may be plain enough for those within the Christian community, the Muslim reader reacts against not so much the Christian *meaning* of “Son of God” as the blasphemous concept that God has wives and offspring. Both religious traditions agree that God does not take a wife nor sire children and, in that sense, God does not

⁵³ Here I am again indebted to an unnamed leader in Muslim-idiom language translation, personal correspondence.

beget offspring nor has he been begotten.⁵⁴ Scholars disagree, then, as to whether or not the Qur'an explicitly rejects an orthodox Nicene understanding of Christ's eternal Sonship and Trinity. A communicative translation of "Son of God" within Muslim dialects must clarify its Christian and not pagan meaning concerning Jesus Christ.

Fourth, although most traditional Bible translations in Islamic contexts continue to use the phrase "Son of God," it is surprising to find historically that many esteemed Eastern Christian leaders knowledgeable of Islam chose other titles of Christ as primary. In the eighth and early ninth centuries, the Orthodox father John of Damascus (ca. 655-750) and the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy in Seleucia (ca. 728-823) could not directly challenge the Islamic regimes under which they labored, although Timothy's discourse with caliphs was extensive. Sensitive to Muslim beliefs, when they publically defended the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity, they avoided the phrase "Son of God" preferring the title "Word of God" or "Christ is Word and Spirit of God."⁵⁵ Moreover, some Bible translations did employ equivalent terms of kinship language alongside traditional texts, such as the ninth-century "Elegant Gospels" and the Lectionary of Bishop Abdyeshua of Nisibis (ca. 1399).⁵⁶ The thirteenth-century Coptic theologian Bulus al-Bushi, Bishop of Old Cairo, wrote a systematic theology that was orien-

⁵⁴ Cumming, "What Is the Meaning of the Expression 'Son of God'," 1. Different from *waled*, the Arabic *ibn*, "son," carries either the literal (offspring) or figurative sense, as "son of a nation" or "son of the Nile"; in this latter sense, *ibn* denotes a deep connection of a person's identity with another entity. Arabic terms for "father," "brother," and "daughter" also may be used figuratively, as "daughter of the lips" for a person's words. Ibid., 2.

⁵⁵ Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims*, 12-20, 200-3. See Suras 3:45; 4:171; 5:110. John of Damascus provides the earliest extant written defense of Christian belief to Muslims, suggesting first the line of biblical prophecy, then the Qur'anic analogy that Word is in God.

⁵⁶ Laith Gray, personal observation on earlier draft, July 2010.

ted to the Muslim context. Written as a dialogue with a Muslim interlocutor, *On the Incarnation* consistently speaks of Christ as “God the Word.”⁵⁷ Bulus does so with no compromise of the Coptic Orthodoxy he vanguards, openly declaring that God became man. This pattern of Muslim sensitivity continues today. In Coptic and Eastern churches, when addressing fellow Christians, there seems to be little hesitancy in speaking of Jesus Christ as the “Son of God.” However, considerable more caution occurs in settings of Muslim-Christian interaction.

And so, it is asserted, if a Muslim reader does not comprehend the Christian meaning of “Son of God,” should not Bible translations interpret such a phrase with explanatory (“spiritual Son of God”) or parallel terms (“the Word of God”)? One unnamed translator writes, “Our experience has been that when the Bible is translated in a cultural-religiously sensitive manner it opens a massive population up to understanding and accepting the biblical concept. Apart from this, these people are locked away from freedom in Christ.”⁵⁸ Another leading translator asks those who are opposed to efforts regarding “natural” or communicative translation of the Bible into such cultures, Do you love Muslims? —a question that cuts deeply, especially to those who have suffered injustice.

⁵⁷ Stephen J. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 240-45. Bulus (ca. 1170-ca. 1250) develops Cyril of Alexandria’s analogy of the burning bush, now seen as God the Son incarnate in the womb of Mary. Interestingly, Bulus appropriates the same *al-kalam* tradition of argument as the famous Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204), who moved from Spain to become the leader of the Jewish community in Old Cairo. The Jewish and Christian sectors continue together today.

⁵⁸ Unnamed leader in Muslim-idiom language translation, personal correspondence.

We return to the question, then, should the sacred name “Son of God,” so central in church history, be set aside for religious-cultural concerns because another religion misunderstands and appears to reject what it denotes? From a historical vantage several cautions arise. First, for early Christians as for those in Eastern churches today, “The Bible was a seamless whole in which all pre-figures Christ.”⁵⁹ Canonically sensitive translations of “son(s) of God” keeps the bridge strong between the two Testaments. Second, immediate post-New Testament writings already affirm the importance of the phrase “Son of God” as central to true Christian faith. Third, the Nicene affirmations of the deity of Christ and the Holy Trinity were declared the cornerstones of the Christian truth defended unanimously by mainstream traditions in both East and West. Hence, fourth, all Christians are called to stand in that literary and theological tradition and to identify with others in Christ’s church. Worldwide, nearly all classical (and most recent) translations of the Bible have maintained Son-of-God literalism; believers have stood their ground around Sonship language and the meaning it represents. Fifth, millions of believers have suffered for their belief that Jesus is the Son of God. Innovative translations of Scripture that appear to compromise Christological confession appear highly offensive to many.

These cautions are potent and need to be more adequately addressed by contemporary translators. On the other hand, these reasons alone should not prohibit fresh Muslim-idiom translations designed to better communicate God’s word to those who have never heard or understood the gospel.

⁵⁹ Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 90.

4 Theologically, what does it mean to confess Jesus as the “Son of God”? And how does this relate to translation?

Having considered exegetical and historical reasons for carefulness in using alternative translations of *huios tou theou* in Muslim-idiom translations, it helps to consider the issue from a doctrinal vantage. Theologically, what does it mean to say that Jesus is the Son of God? And what is the role of translation?

4.1 Analogous Language of Father and Son

In one sense, all language about God, even biblical language, is analogy. The infinite God graciously reveals himself in categories that humankind can comprehend: Rock, Shepherd, Righteous Judge, Reconciler. God is our “fortress,” not in a physical sense, rather Scripture as a whole teaches that his personal presence is our protection and strength before adverse powers. We speak of God as masculine “he” because this is the language of revelation, even though with the church fathers we know that infinite God transcends gender. John the Baptist announces Jesus as “the Lamb of God,” an analogy drawn from the rich teaching about sacrifices in the Pentateuch and Prophets. Yet in the Book of Revelation, the heavenly Jesus is now named “the Lamb” (27 times), the one slain from the creation of the world and the one who will reign forever from the throne of God and the Lamb. We can say that the Spirit-inspired words of Scripture are *true* to who God is but not all that God is. What “God-language” signifies, analogically, is made clearer within progressive revelation and the broader canon of Scripture, yet always our infinite Lord stands beyond us.

God comes to us in finite categories of acts and words, and finally in incarnation so that we might know him deep within human reality. In so doing, this divine “him” is further revealed as “they”—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not tri-theism. “Trinity” is a theological term that unifies the biblical witness. God exists eternally as three persons Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Each is fully God, each enjoys particular roles, and this God is one. The Christian God is big enough to be God precisely because he is tripersonal, each person indwelling the other, infinitely dynamic, communicative, holy, loving, all-glorious. Christian apologetics to the Islamic world rarely appropriates the commanding arguments from divine triunity.⁶⁰

If all terminology describing the divine Being is analogy, then when the New Testament speaks of God as “Father” and “Son” what is intended and what is not? First, what is *not* communicated is that God the Father gave birth to or created the Son. The Arian insistence that the Son is a created being—thus neither eternal nor fully divine—is rejected by all orthodox Christianity. Muslims unwittingly argue against not a Christian but an Arian view of the Son as a created offspring, a theology categorically rejected as heretical by the Council of Nicaea three hundred years before Mohammed.

Second, the language of Father and Son in its biblical-theological development denotes full equality of nature, just as my own daughters are every bit as human as I. But different from my daughters and me, God as Father and Son exist in a filial relationship that transcends time, that is, there is no beginning or end. In the famed words of Athanasius, “There was never a time when Christ was not.” Moreover, each person of the Trinity indwells the other without diminishing the distinctness of each (called *perichoresis*). Jesus declares, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me,” yet in the same text he continues to speak of the personal relationship between him and the Father (cf. John 14:8–11). Each is equally God by nature. Yet because each person of the Trinity

⁶⁰ The question of God is primary, that is, who or what is God before and outside of all created existence. Can God be truly personal as a single-personned being? Does God need creation to be fully and personally God (the 99 names)? Beyond immediate Qur’anic anathema (5:73), a Trinitarian apologetic can be remarkably persuasive.

has revealed himself authentically in creation, many affirm that there must be certain roles (Greek *taxis*) in the eternal relations between the Father, Son, and Spirit—this by personal disposition and choice.⁶¹ Surely there are mysteries in the divine relations, yet always the theological language of “Father” and “Son” communicates essential equality and filial relationship.

Third, although all descriptions of infinite God are analogies, the words “Father” and “Son” (and “Spirit”) draw us closest to the personal, intimate reality of God. Other terms tend to highlight the “economic” working of the Godhead within creation (e.g. as Creator, Christ/Messiah, Comforter).⁶² Yet in Jesus’s own revelation of his relationship to God, it is the language of “Son” and “Father” that most transcends creation to speak of a pre-creation glory and reciprocal love (John 17:5, 24). For this reason, as we have seen in the early church, “Father” and “Son” (hence “Son of God”) were perceived not only as descriptions but proper names within the Godhead. Each name mutually depends on the other: there is no Father without the Son or Son without the Father. Therefore, to speak of God as “Father” and “Son” draws us as close to the eternal divine relations as possible. And even these names are finally analogous to something greater in the infinite God. Nevertheless, “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” genuinely reveal each person, that is, the names are true to who each person is as

⁶¹ The relation of immanent and economic Trinities is a longstanding tension. To insist on an eternal hierarchy suggests that each member of the Godhead is not equal. Conversely, to take away all functional or role-distinctions seems to undermine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’s self-revelation in creation. See Horrell, “Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47: 3 (Sept 2004) 399–421; and “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology*, eds. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 44–79.

⁶² Occasionally, even these descriptions are proleptic in their use, e.g., “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8)—although the God-man Jesus was properly conceived only in the Incarnation.

person, that is, the names are true to who each person is as understood from the entirety of the biblical canon. The patristic fathers concluded that there is no biblical terminology greater.⁶³

To confess that Jesus is the “Son of God” is to affirm that Christ is ultimately as fully divine as is the Father and that he stands in eternal, loving, Sonlike, perichoretic relationship with the Father, yet constitutes together with the Father and the Spirit the one true God. The translation of the most sacred divine names, therefore, assumes immense importance.

4.2 Translation as Interpretation

The task of faithfully translating God’s Word within the understanding of another religious culture is arduous and imperfect. In spite of occasional disclaimers, translation always involves interpretation and adaptation to another worldview that includes both idiom and religion.⁶⁴ In *Unveiling God: Contextualizing Christology for Islamic Culture*, Martin Parsons sets forth multiple evidences for presenting to Muslims the supremacy and deity of Christ from the Bible. At the same time, in biblical translation he supports replacing phrases like “Son of God,” “Word of God,” and “image of the invisible God” with correspondent language.⁶⁵ More carefully, Rick Brown, John Penny and Laith Gray suggest that such phrases might best translate as “spiritual Son of God” or

⁶³ See Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed., *Ancient Christian Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009-10), oriented around the Nicene Creed.

⁶⁴ Brown, Penny, and Gray, “Muslim-Idiom Translations: Claims and Facts,” 91–93, deny such efforts are “Muslim compliant translations,” or that they “try to hide the sonship-terminology.” But the reality is that adaptation between the original text and non-Christian (if not anti-Christian) religious understanding is necessarily occurring. Philosophically such interplay is inescapable and not necessarily wrong. Note Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2008) esp. 71–104

⁶⁵ Parsons, *Unveiling God*, 198–203; and more comprehensively, 183–226.

“exalted Son from God” to diffuse Islamic perceptions of God having a physical son by sexual union.⁶⁶ In that the phrase “son(s) of God” carries multiple meanings in the New Testament (as all conservative scholars agree), Brown himself favors a mixture of biblical synonyms and “the *sense* approach” within a given passage, thus sometimes substituting the word-for-word “Son of God” with terms like “Christ,” “the Word of God,” “the Beloved of God,” etc.⁶⁷ As translators choose what they deem the better of multiple meanings, far more than dictionary comparisons are at work. The use of “natural” equivalents and biblical synonyms requires substantial exegesis, interpretation, and adaptation to communicate the original meaning to the receiving idiom and culture. This is a universal translation reality. And it is never a purely scientific or personally neutral endeavor.

4.3 Missiology and the Spiritual Discipline of Translation

As Bible translation attempts to communicate the meaning of the original text into another cultural milieu, it also inevitably associates at least in part with a Christian theological tradition—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, etc. In that sense a translation of the Bible represents a basic form of Christian faith to the receiving community. The translation task, therefore, bridges not only from Scripture to a target-culture, but in some sense it represents a form of Christian belief (even if unintentionally).⁶⁸ Theological as well as exegetical choices are inevitable. Roman Catholic and

⁶⁶ Brown, Penny, and Gray, “Muslim-Idiom Bible Translations,” 90.

⁶⁷ Brown, “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” II: 139–40.

⁶⁸ Gray, personal commentary on an earlier draft, July 2010, remarks: “...there is a difference between translators inescapably being tied to their environment and faith background on the one hand, and insisting that the text must be seen and interpreted through such lenses, on the other. This is why ideally open-minded Muslims would work collaboratively with generous Christians to faithfully and appropriately translate the text of Scripture.”

Coptic Orthodox Bibles are not identical to Protestant and evangelical Bibles today.

Rick Brown is arguably the most articulate evangelical advocate for Muslim-sensitive Bible translation.⁶⁹ After discussing six translation options for translating the phrase “son(s) of God” within Islamic cultural contexts, he summarizes his own policy of complementing text (translation) with paratext (explanatory annotations):

1. If the meaning of a divine sonship term has been put in the text, then a literal representation of the phrase should be put in the footnote if possible. In addition, the introduction or an introductory mini-article should explain the various senses of the term and how each one has been translated. Ideally the phrases used in translation will be unique, so that the audience, whenever they read or hear this phrase, will know that this is the phrase that is translated as “son(s) of God” in some other versions. This provides “transparency” to the translation and gives the readers confidence in it, especially if it differs from other translations which they read or hear.
2. If a literal representation of the term [e.g., “Son of God”] has been put in the text, then the meaning should be explained in a footnote everywhere the term occurs. The introduction should explain the term as well, so that the readers will not be too shocked when they come across the term in the translated text, before they have read the footnote.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Brown, “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” II, 138–39. Brown’s six common approaches to translating “son(s) of God” are by: *calque* (literal translation); *block* (e.g., “spiritual Son of God,” etc.); *simile* (“like a son”); *foreign word*, such as the original text (e.g., *ben elohim*); *sense*, that is, the meaning within the original context (e.g., Ps 2:6–8 “son of God” as “God’s Vice-Regent”); and biblical *synonym* (e.g., “the Christ of God”).

⁷⁰ Brown, “Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” II, 138.

I find Brown's position regarding the translation of the "Son of God" passages helpful. The order of his policy should be very carefully considered within each Islamic, folk-Islamic, and semi-Islamic setting. In my opinion, from the perspective of global and traditional Christian faith, the replacement of the word-for-word phrase should be the exception, not the rule, with footnotes explaining the meanings in either case.⁷¹ Yet Brown's formula is sensitive both to Muslim readers and to traditional Christians accustomed to older versions of the Bible. The translation policy seeks to be honest rather than deceptive about the meanings of the phrase "son(s) of God" and "Son of God." I am further impressed by the apparent success of Muslim sensitive translations among various people groups.⁷² Different translations, insofar as they are faithful to the original text, are justified in that, like the four Gospels themselves, they address varying audiences and purposes. Of course, new translations are imperative for unreached people groups. Likewise fresh, accurate translations can serve to enrich and strengthen traditional Christian communities with long-

⁷¹ Khalid, *The Muslim Jesus*, 21, denies that Jewish and Christian scriptures had a direct role in the forming of the Qur'an. On the other hand, by one popular account, the Qur'an mentions Jesus 97 times, as well as Zechariah, John the Baptist, Mary, and Jesus's disciples. The Law, Psalms and Gospel are referred to in 131 passages. As observed earlier, sometimes deliberate contradiction of the Christian message seems obvious regardless of the understanding of Sonship terminology. Sir Lionel Luckhoo, "Christianity or Islam," *Decision*, June 2010, 26-29. Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne, 2010, 36-37, observes that the calligraphy in the Islamic Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem includes every Qur'anic passage that speaks of Jesus, asserting *tawhid* and denouncing Jesus as Son of God.

⁷² Ibid., II, 140; also accounts in Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2d ed (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2008); and Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 18-41.

established translations that may no longer well communicate to the non-believing cultures around them.

Nevertheless this article has raised various red flags of caution where I suspect some translators run ahead. Many a pluralist and intra-religious ecumenist would gladly reinterpret the phrase “Son of God” as it applies to Jesus with entirely non-theistic meaning.⁷³ This is emphatically not true of the vast majority of translators. Yet the word-for-word phrase “Son of God” is so laden with canonical, theological, and global Christian meanings that great caution should be shown in its translation. Non-Sonship translation of “Son of God” can itself be misleading to readers if it obscures the testimony of Christ’s deity. In the end, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” writes Paul, “a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but... Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1Cor 1:18, 23-25).

5 Conclusion

We began with the question of how fidelity to Scripture and classical Christian confession of Jesus as the “Son of God” can be held together with Muslim-sensitive translations? Ingrained in Islamic cultures, the words “Son of God” elicit the image that Jesus is God’s offspring through physical relations with a woman.

⁷³ Khalid, *The Muslim Jesus*, 21, denies that Jewish and Christian scriptures had a direct role in the forming of the Qur’an. On the other hand, by one popular account, the Qur’an mentions Jesus 97 times, as well as Zechariah, John the Baptist, Mary, and Jesus’s disciples. The Law, Psalms and Gospel are referred to in 131 passages. Sometimes deliberate contradiction of the Christian message is obvious. Sir Lionel Luckhoo, “Christianity or Islam,” *Decision*, June 2010, 26-29. Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne, 2010, 36-37, observes that the calligraphy in the Islamic Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem includes every Qur’anic passage that speaks of Jesus, asserting *tawhid* and denouncing Jesus as Son of God.

Conversely, central to Christian faith is the invitation to “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). I have addressed the following questions:

First, exegetically, are non-word-for-word renditions of Jesus as the “Son of God” omitting too much? My response is that the multi-layered meanings of “Son of God,” as in the Gospels, often point beyond the limited concepts of those in Jesus’s immediate world. Replacing Sonship language—as uttered from heaven at the baptism and the Transfiguration, by Satan in the temptations, and by demons as early testimonies to Jesus’s supernatural origin—can detract from the canonical text’s post-Easter implications. Jesus’s own Father-Son language reaches the deepest levels of divine self-disclosure.

Second, should the traditional centrality of “Son of God” terminology in both Eastern and Western Christianity be set aside for non-Christian religious and cultural concerns? I reviewed early second-century witnesses such as Ignatius, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Barnabas*, Aristides, and Justin who give strong place to describing Jesus as the “Son of God”—this in the midst of Jewish and pagan misinterpretations. The Nicene Creed (325) later codified the meaning of “the Son of God” as “from the substance of the Father...true God from true God.” The full deity of Christ as God’s Son is the fundamental doctrine of all major Christian traditions. In that name millions have faced discrimination and martyrdom. For that reason, Muslim-idiom translations that replace literal “Son of God” terminology are often perceived by long-standing national Christians in such cultures not only as accommodating another religion but also as betraying the church that has endured under oppressive regimes.

Third, from a theological perspective, what does it mean to confess Jesus as the “Son of God”? And how does this relate to biblical translation? We first observed the analogous nature of

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

I offer these thoughts as cautions to Muslim-idiom translators who are sometimes zealous to circumvent barriers to communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such a motive is wholly commendable, with over one-fifth of the world population in the balance. Both national and expatriot translators suffer hardship, opposition, and long hours of tedious linguistic analysis. Nonetheless, no Christian worker is autonomous from the greater body of Christ. No translator can ignore (and most do not) the basic precepts of Christian theology or the long history of the church. Fresh translations of the Bible are vital and consequential, whether in contexts of an existing church or where the word of God has never been heard. My exploration of the questions are intended to contribute to greater balance in approaching the translation of Sonship terminology for Muslim readers. To replace the grammatically accurate and traditional translations of “Son of God”—a phrase central to Christian confession—should be done with the full corpus of exegetical and historical factors in view, and then only with reverence and reserve.