

Delicate Issues in Mission

Part II: Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts

by Rick Brown

Summary of the problem

In part one, “Explaining the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” we saw that the term ‘son(s) of God’ has a broad range of meanings. For most Muslims, however, this term has one meaning only, and that is God’s offspring by a sexual union. Worse yet, many Muslims are so frightened of this term that they refuse to read or listen to any text that asserts it. The term becomes a linguistic stumbling block that bars access to the Gospel. Thus they lose the opportunity to read the Gospel accounts of Jesus, even though the Qur’an commands them to believe in the Gospel (4:136; 3:3).

Solving the problem

Experience shows that there is no single measure one can take to resolve this problem. It requires a two-pronged approach. Basically the two prongs are to explain the original term and what it means and to translate it according to its original meaning or in a way like ‘spiritual son(s) of God’ that blocks the unintended meaning. Suggested explanations of this term were presented in part one. In what follows¹ we will look at options for translating it.

Translating idiomatic phrases

The norm for secular translation is to translate the meaning rather than the form, because translating the form ends up distorting the meaning and spoiling the style. In particular translators avoid creating “calques” (also called “loan translations”). These are phrases which result from translating idiomatic phrases word-for-word without regard for the meaning of the phrase as a whole. The Google translator has a word-for-word approach and exemplifies the production of unwanted loan translations. Consider, for example, how Google translates the idiomatic phrase ‘hot dog’ into German:

English input: He ate a hot dog.

Google German output: *Er aß einen heißen Hund.*

This means he ate a hot hound! An accurate meaning-based translation would be *Er aß eine Bratwurst*. Commercial translators would lose their jobs if they

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produced “hot hound” translations like this. Let’s look at how the Google translator handles ‘son of a gun’:

English input: He is a son of a gun.

German output: *Er ist ein Sohn einer Gewehr.*

This means he is a son of a rifle. An accurate meaning-based translation would be *Er ist ein Kerl.*

The Biblical languages use many idiomatic phrases. Below are some examples from Biblical Hebrew:

his nostrils enlarged	1 Kings 11:9	he became angry (where God is the subject)
covered his feet	1 Samuel 24:3	defecated (i.e., “relieved himself”)
slept with his fathers	1 Kings 2:10	died
gird up your loins	2 Kings 4:29	get ready, prepare (see 1 Peter 1:13!)
soft heart	Job 23:16	fearful
little man of the eye	Psalms 17:8	pupil

If idiomatic phrases like these are translated word-for-word into another language, the resulting calques may produce erroneous meanings. A translation that gives the wrong meaning is inaccurate and cannot be trusted.

It often happens that another language has an idiomatic phrase that is similar to one in a Biblical language, but the phrase has a different meaning in that language. An example is ‘the Holy Spirit’. This phrase does not describe just any spirit that is holy; rather it designates the Spirit of God Himself (Gen. 1: 2; Matt. 3:15), Who is also called “the Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9). Most Muslims, however, use the same phrase, ‘the Holy Spirit’, to refer to the angel Gabriel. So when ‘the Holy Spirit’ is translated word-for-word into some languages spoken by Muslims, it matches their phrase for the angel Gabriel. If you then ask Muslim speakers of such languages what Luke 1:34–35 says to them, some of them will say it means that the angel Gabriel will lie upon Mary and make her pregnant! So these phrases need to be translated in ways that convey the origi-

nal meaning. ‘Holy Spirit’, for example, is often translated in such languages by using Biblical synonyms for it, such as ‘the Spirit of God’ or ‘God’s Holy Spirit’. The meaning can be further explained in a footnote or glossary. One could say ‘Holy Spirit’ and explain it in a footnote, but the meaning familiar to Muslim readers still comes to mind when they hear it. After all, that is what it means in their languages.

As another example, many languages have a phrase like ‘son of man’, but it means someone who does not know who his father is. So when Jesus’ favorite title, ‘the Son of Man’, is translated word-for-word into such languages, it does not evoke Daniel’s vision of the Messianic Lord of all nations, enthroned in heaven (7:13–14).² On the contrary, it makes Jesus appear to call himself a bastard! The translators can add a footnote explaining the intended meaning, but the phrase still sounds like ‘bastard’ to the readers, and it continues to evoke the meanings and feelings associated with the term. As for Muslims, when they read or hear Jesus describe himself as “the Son of Man,” if they don’t think he is saying

Table 1. Some idiomatic sonship phrases and their meanings in English.

(Suggestion: Cover the right column and try to guess the meanings of the phrases.)

Literal representation in English of the original Greek or Hebrew phrase	Citation	Equivalent meaning in English
son of a bow	Job 41:28	an arrow
son of one year	Exod. 12:5	a yearling
son of a murderer	2 Kings 6:32	a hired assassin, a hit man
son of the morning	Isa. 14:12	the morning star (used here as a metaphor)
son of malice	Ps. 89:22	a malicious person
son of wise men	Isa. 19:11	a wise person
son of the king	2 Kings 16:7	a king who is subordinate to a higher king
sons of the quiver	Lam. 3:13	arrows
sons of the singers	Neh. 12:28	members of the choir
sons of the threshing floor	Isa. 21:10	threshed grain
sons of a flame	Job 5:7	sparks
sons of the wedding hall	Mark 2:19	guests of the bridegroom
sons of Zion	Ps. 149:2; Lam. 4:2	citizens of Jerusalem
sons of kings	Matt. 17:25	the citizens of kings (as opposed to aliens)
sons of a fortune-teller	Isa. 57:3	people who consult a fortune-teller (an insult)
sons of might	2 Sam. 17:10	people who are mighty
sons of affliction	Prov. 31:5	people who are oppressed
sons of the beating	Deut. 25:2,3	people who deserve a beating
sons of oil	Zech. 4:14	people anointed for God’s service
sons of the kingdom	Matt. 13:38	citizens of the kingdom
sons of the evil one	Matt. 13:38	everyone outside the Kingdom of Christ

bastard, then they assume he is emphasizing his mere humanity. (Ironically some Christians, ignorant of the Danielic background to the phrase, tell the Muslims almost the same thing!) In languages where a phrase like ‘son of man’ gives the wrong meaning and this meaning cannot be erased, it has been common to use a phrase like ‘Lord of mankind’ or ‘Ruler from heaven’, then explain the original phrase in a glossary or introduction.³

Translating sonship idioms

The Biblical languages include many additional sonship idioms, a few of which are shown in Table 1 (see preceding page). It can be seen that the meaning of each phrase is different from the combination of the meanings of the words in it. That is what makes it an idiom. It should be kept in mind that the phrases in the left column are not what the original text says, because the original text is not in English, and the words in the original languages have different ranges of meaning from the words shown in English. Rather, the phrases on the left are so-called “literal” translations of the words used in the original phrases. In none of these phrases does the word translated as ‘son’ have any of the meanings of the English word ‘son’.

The King James Version is a fairly literal translation, but if one looks at the dictionaries in the back of Strong’s concordance to the KJV, one sees that the KJV translators used 121 different words and phrases to translate the Hebrew word *ben*, which is usually translated ‘son’! Even then, the KJV failed to translate the meaning of the word ‘son’ in many places where it should have done so. For example, it mentions the “sons” of Pharisees (Matt. 12:27), even though the reference is to disciples rather than offspring, and it mentions the “sons” of kings (Matt. 17:25), even though the reference is to citizens, not offspring. Even English readers fail to understand these sonship calques. If the translation is to be accurate, then it needs to translate each idiomatic phrase in accord with its meaning; otherwise it gives the wrong meaning

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and misleads the reader. The translators can give the correct meaning in a footnote, but people who ignore the footnotes will still be misled by what is in the text.

Most Muslim language communities have low rates of functional literacy and limited access to Scripture, so the chief method of accessing the Scriptures in their own language is by listening to the radio or recorded media. Since these media can include introductions but not footnotes or glossaries, translated texts intended for audio delivery need to be accurate to the meaning and not dependant on footnotes to provide the correct meaning.

To find out exactly how the audience understands both the translated text and the introduction or notes that accompany it, most Bible translators do extensive testing. Their goal is that the audience should understand the same meaning that was understood by the original audience, insofar as this is possible. They then revise the translation and notes and test them again, repeating this process until the audience understands the intended meaning. In the case of key biblical terms, the final decision on how to translate them is made by representatives of the community for whom the translation is being produced, together with others who plan to use the translation. The community has the principal voice, because the language is theirs, they know exactly what each word and phrase communicates, and they are the ones who will be using the translation.

The need to translate and explain divine sonship idioms

In most languages used by Muslims, terms of the form ‘son(s) of God’ are quite familiar, because they are used in the Qur’an, in religious training, and in sermons. For Muslims this Qur’anic phrase has a single, well-entrenched meaning, namely physical offspring from God’s sexual union

with a woman. So when this Hebraic phrase is translated word-for-word into their languages, it matches the Qur’anic phrase and conveys the Qur’anic meaning rather than the Hebrew meaning. This is not the meaning intended in the Bible, so the result is inaccurate. Intellectuals are willing to discuss the term and what it might mean, but most of the common people in Muslim communities are so afraid of the term that they refuse to read or listen to anything that affirms it. Some will not even touch a book if they know the term is affirmed in it.⁴

There is a long history of trying to explain ‘Son(s) of God’ to Muslims, and explanations have usually failed to overcome the entrenched meaning of the phrase. Most everyday Muslims are just hopelessly frightened and confused by the sonship terminology. De Kuiper and Newman, senior translation consultants with the United Bible Societies [UBS], wrote about this in 1977, noting that “with this [literal] translation [of ‘Son of God’], misunderstandings [by Muslims] are so great that even continual explanations are of no use.”⁵

In such situations, it is a long and accepted practice in the various Bible agencies to translate the phrase in ways that accurately communicate the intended meanings without creating confusion and rejection. Translating ‘son(s) of God’ meaningfully has nothing whatsoever to do with theological objections that Muslims might have to Biblical doctrine; the sole objective is to communicate the original meanings of the phrase as well as possible and to avoid communicating the wrong meaning, namely God’s biological offspring.

This practice has been going on for almost 2,000 years. The ancient Aramaic translations of the Old Testament, called “targums,” rarely translate the Hebrew phrase ‘son(s) of God’ in a way that could suggest

God's offspring. Instead they translate the meaning of the phrase according to its context, as they understood it. (An exception is "Israel is my first-born son" in Exod. 4:22, where this is a trade-off with Pharaoh's firstborn son.) This practice continued among Jewish translators until the beginning of the modern era. As for Arab Christians, until modern times they used the Jewish Arabic translation of the Old Testament, which followed this practice of not translating 'son(s) of God' literally. The earliest Arabic Gospels followed differing approaches to translating Son(s) of God. Some were more literal, while others were concerned with the meaning or beauty of the translation. The best example of the latter are the so-called "Elegant Gospels," which were produced in Arabic sometime prior to the ninth century. In these Gospels the term 'son(s) of God' is translated in a variety of ways, such as 'companions of God', 'the Chosen One' and 'God's Beloved'.

It was mentioned earlier, however, that the needs of the audience are not well served by avoiding all mention of the Hebrew term 'son(s) of God'. Some of the audience will read or hear Scripture texts from other translations, ones that use calques to translate key terms, and they need to understand them. In the case of Muslims, they have heard that Christians and/or the Bible call themselves and Jesus 'son(s) of God', and it will benefit them to know what this actually means. Therefore the following policy seems reasonable:

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 a 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 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.

Approaches that have been used for translating 'Son(s) of God'

There have been six main approaches to translating the phrase 'son(s) of God' in languages which are spoken by Muslims as well as Christians.



Calque. This is the traditional approach, in which the words of a phrase are each translated according to their primary meaning, without regard for the meaning of the phrase as a whole. This results in "hot hound" translations. In the case of 'son(s) of God', this approach usually results in phrases that mean offspring of God. This is the wrong meaning, and in some communities it frightens the Muslims away from the Scriptures. But some languages make extensive use of kinship metaphors, and in those communities people can accept and understand explanations of 'sons of God' and 'Son of God'.

Block. An alternative approach is to use a phrase that blocks the biological meaning. Examples are 'spiritual Son of God', 'Son from God', 'Beloved Son who comes from God', and 'the Royal Son'. These terms are novel so they do not convey an existing meaning, and the intended meaning can be explained in the introduction and

footnotes. This approach has been acceptable to some Muslim communities, particularly ones with no history of indoctrination against the term, but other Muslim communities have rejected these phrases because they seem too similar to 'son of God'.

Simile. The Bible uses similes of divine sonship as well as metaphors (Deut. 1:31; Ps. 103:13; Mal. 3:17; John 1:14⁶). So a third approach has been to replace divine sonship metaphors with similes. The Jewish translations do this for some passages. At Deut. 14:1, for example, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan says, "So you are like beloved sons before the Lord your God."⁷ The Targum translates Psalm 2:7 with a more extended simile: "You are dear to me as a son to the father." Similes have been used in translations of the Gospel as well: "You are my Messiah, whom I love as a father loves his son. In you I am well pleased." or "You are my Messiah, who is closer to me than a son. In you I am well pleased." (If 'Messiah' is not added, then the simile would express only the relational component of meaning and not the functional component.) Similes are most useful in passages where the sonship motif is important, such as Galatians 4.

Foreign word. The ancient Syriac Bible borrowed the Hebrew word *Elohim* at Genesis 6:2, resulting in a phrase like 'sons of Elohim'. Some Arabic versions did the same thing. Some modern translations have used a foreign phrase to translate 'Son of God' in reference to Jesus, either *ibn allah* (Arabic) or *ben elohim* (Hebrew). The intended meaning of the term is then explained.

Sense. The standard of commercial translation in the modern world, whether Scriptural or otherwise, is to give priority to expressing the meaning of a passage rather than mimicking its linguistic form in the source language.⁸ So the normal approach to translating idiomatic phrases is to translate them according to their original contextual meaning. The phrase 'son(s) of God' has several different senses, so translating its meaning results in the use of

Muslims believe that Jesus is the Christ, and they understand this to be a unique descriptor that applies only to Jesus.

several different phrases, such as ‘angels’, ‘God’s people’, ‘disciple of God’, ‘God’s chosen ruler’, ‘God’s vice-regent’, ‘God’s Word/revealer’, etc. It might be noted that even the ancient Bible translators sometimes avoided calques and expressed the meaning. The earliest translation of Scripture, the Greek Septuagint, translated the meaning of ‘sons of God’ in some passages instead of creating a calque.⁹ The second-oldest translation, the Targums, translated the meaning of ‘son(s) of God’ in many passages (and used similes in most of the others).¹⁰ The New Living Translation translated the meaning into English at Deuteronomy 14:1, saying ‘people of God’ rather than ‘sons of God’.

One of the senses of *ben elohim* (‘son of God’ in Hebrew) is ‘God’s Vice-regent’ or ‘God’s Heir over all things’. This was applied to the one whom God anointed to rule on his behalf over his people and over the nations, as in Psalm 2:6–8 and 89:20–29. In languages that use loanwords from Arabic, this has been expressed as *khalifatullāh*, which means “the Vice-Regent of God” or “the Heir of God.” This is similar to Hebrews 1:2, which describes the Son as “heir of all things.” This communicates the principal messianic sense of the term ‘Son of God’, and it also indicates his unique relationship to God and his godly characteristics. It has the further advantage that the verb form of the Arabic word ‘khalifa’ is commonly used in Arabic to describe the begetting of children, i.e., heirs, so it retains some of the sonship imagery without specifying procreation. In languages that lack a word for vice-regent, a term for king or ruler has been used, such as ‘the King sent from God’ or ‘the One sent from God to govern the world’, as suggested in Psalm 2:6–8.

Synonym. The sixth approach is like the fifth, except that it uses Biblical synonyms (and explains them in the introduction or notes). For example, ‘sons of God’ in Galatians 3:26 (or

Romans 8:14) can be translated as ‘beloved of God’ or ‘God’s saints’, using the synonym found in Romans 1:7. In that case the meaning of ‘saints’ or ‘beloved’ might need to be explained in the footnotes, glossary, and/or introduction.

The Jews were using ‘Son of God’ as a title of the awaited Messiah, and it was shown in part one that the New Testament authors use ‘the Christ’ and ‘the Son of God’ synonymously in regard to Jesus. In passages where that is the case, the terms ‘the Son’ and ‘the Son of God’ can be translated by terms like ‘the Christ’ and ‘the Christ of God’. If there is a passage in which ‘Son’ connotes belovedness, then this can be communicated by saying ‘God’s Beloved Christ’. Muslims believe that Jesus is the Christ, and they understand this to be a unique descriptor that applies only to Jesus, but they do not know what it means. Since the term is empty, they can easily fill it in with the intended meaning, drawing on the contexts of its usage and the explanation of it in the introduction.

Jesus also reveals himself to be the eternal Word of God incarnate, through whom God reveals Himself and intervenes to save and judge humanity. This is expressed in many ways, but sometimes sonship terminology is used. John makes the connection explicit in John 1:14. In passages where sonship terminology is used for Jesus as the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, it has sometimes been translated as ‘the Word of God’. Since Muslims already call Jesus (and Him alone) ‘the Word of God’ (*kalimatullāh*), this term is acceptable. Since this term has little semantic content for them and no contrary meaning, it can absorb Scriptural meaning from contexts of usage and from explanations in the introduction and notes.

Some translators have used a different Christological title to translate the

sonship title, namely ‘the Beloved’, taken from Ephesians 1:6. This has been especially appropriate in languages where ‘beloved’ is used to refer to one’s only son. It mimics the usage at Matthew 12:18 (= Isa. 42:1, echoed at Matt. 3:17; 2 Peter 1:17) and at Mark 12:6; Col. 1:13. It might be noted that the Greek Septuagint translation consistently translated *ben yachid* ‘only son’ as ‘the beloved son’ or just ‘the beloved’.¹¹ A similar approach was taken by the Targums in some passages.¹² The term ‘Beloved of God’ expresses the close relational component of meaning, and the footnotes or glossary can explain the rest of the intended meaning.

Evaluation

The first option, the calque approach, is generally not very helpful, although it can be used in some languages that make extensive use of kinship metaphors. The next three approaches, i.e., the use of blocks, similes, and foreign words, avoid the wrong meaning, but they do not communicate much of the intended meaning. The terms need to be explained in footnotes or the introduction. The use of a foreign word allows time for people to hear an explanation before jumping to a conclusion, but it has the potential of angering people who discover they have spoken the forbidden phrase *ibn allāh* without realizing it.

The fifth approach, sense translation, is the normal way of translating texts between languages. The drawbacks are (1) everyone may not agree on the intended sense of the phrase and (2) sometimes more than one sense is being evoked, especially in the case of metaphors.

The sixth approach, the use of synonyms, avoids these two problems by using a synonym and then explaining it. Basically this means translating ‘Son of God’ as ‘Christ of God’ or ‘Christ sent from God’ in passages where that is the meaning and as ‘Word of God’ (*kalimatullāh*) where that is appropriate, then providing explanations of the full intended meaning of these terms. For

a given context, the explanation of these terms should include everything that was originally conveyed by the Hebraic sonship term in that context. In this way one can preserve and communicate the full meaning of the phrase in each context and avoid communicating the wrong semantic and emotional meanings.

Examples of Results Achieved

Country Q was closed to outreach and outsiders. But a large set of dramatized Scripture cassettes was produced using the synonym approach and was presented to the government for approval. They approved production and distribution. The tapes became so popular that vendors began duplicating them and selling them at street markets. In neighboring countries there were similar Scripture tapes made using the traditional calque approach to this term. Those people generally rejected them and preferred the tapes from Q, even though the language was harder for them to understand. A Gospel film was dubbed in the same way, and it enjoyed wide popularity inside and outside of Q. The state television network of Q got a copy and broadcast it to the whole country. More significantly, the Holy Spirit has been using these tapes to work repentance and faith in the hearts of many people.

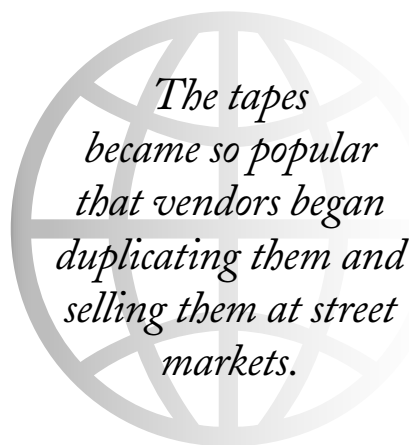
In country L, a translation of the Gospel was made using synonyms. Christians were allowed to use these materials to give public presentations of the Gospel in mosques, halls, and homes. People freely shared them among themselves and talked openly about the death and resurrection of Jesus as historical facts of great significance for their salvation. They also acknowledged the continuing role of Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

The people in country A had been using a translation that was common-language except for some key terms. The translation sold well and bore much fruit, but nevertheless there were many God-fearing people who were too fearful to even give the Gospel a hearing. So some of the believers there produced an experimental edition of

Mark that uses a synonym approach for the divine sonship terminology. What they have found is that many of the God-fearing population are now ready to study it with them and have come to faith as a result.

In location B the 'Beloved' synonym was used in a translation of the New Testament. There were no Christians in that location, but the New Testament is being widely distributed by open-minded Muslims.

For seven decades, the people in country Z have had secular education and little religious indoctrination. Yet it



was found that many objected strongly to the term 'Son of God', even with an explanation, with the result that they would not read a book that contained it. Other expressions were tested with them, and it was found that they could accept 'spiritual Son of God', along with an explanation. So this "block" approach was used, with the result that the Scriptures have been widely distributed and read. A panoramic selection of Scriptures, called *The Way of God – the Blessed Way*, was produced in large quantities using 'spiritual Son of God'. It has proved to be very popular and has been instrumental in leading many to the Lord.

So far, the results of meaning-based translation have been very positive. In many communities where people had previously quit listening as soon as they heard the term 'Son of God', people are now listening to the Gospel with open minds, and the Word of God is working faith in their hearts. They had rejected translations of the

Gospel that seemed to claim that Jesus was God's physical offspring, but they perceive from a meaning-based translation that Jesus is more than a prophet; he is the eternal Word incarnate as a man, the Christ sent from God Himself to be the Saviour and Lord of all.¹³

Issues and concerns

Some people have raised questions or objections to this approach. These are addressed in what follows.

Reservations about meaning-based translation

Some people have said that translators should use a word for 'son' everywhere that the Greek and Hebrew have a word for 'son'. They assume that there is a one-to-one correspondence between words and their meanings in one language and words and their meanings in a second language. Linguists call this the myth of semantic isomorphism. The reality is that languages do not work like that. A word may have many senses in one language, while a corresponding word in another language may have only a few senses. Idiomatic phrases have meanings that are different from their constituent words and different from corresponding phrases in other languages. We saw this in phrases like 'hot dog', 'son of man', and 'Holy Spirit'.

God himself has given us an example of meaningful translation in the Gospels. Palestinian Jews understood the various senses of the phrase 'son of God', but Greeks did not use this phrase in the same ways, so Luke and Paul use the term very little in their writings to Gentiles. Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, who would have understood the terminology used by Jesus, and so we are not surprised that Matthew's translation into Greek is fairly literal and frequently includes sonship terminology. Luke, on the other hand, wrote for a Gentile audience, so he translates the Hebrew and Aramaic words of Jesus in ways that can communicate the meaning. He also finds ways to explain terms like 'Son of God'. Thus Luke gives us an in-

*L*uke did not “remove” ‘Son of God’; he simply translated the meaning of the original Hebrew phrase into Greek—in three different ways.

spired example of a meaning-based cross-cultural translation.

Luke introduces the term ‘Son of God’ at 1:32-33 in a context which brings out the messianic sense of the term. He then explains it at 4:41 with a synonym, ‘the Christ’. When Luke translates Peter’s confession of Jesus at 9:20, reflected in Matthew 16:16 as ‘the Christ the Son of the Living God’, Luke uses a shorter Greek phrase ‘the Christ of God’. Mark (8:29) translates it simply as ‘the Christ’. Mark and Luke did not “remove” ‘Son of God’; they just translated it in a way that was appropriate for a Greek Gentile audience. When Luke comes to translate one of the jeers at the cross, reflected in Matthew 27:40 as ‘save yourself, if you are the Son of God’, Luke translates it as ‘let him save himself if this is the Christ of God, his Chosen One’ (23:35). Gentiles did in fact use ‘son of God’ as a title for the highest ruler, but they might not have discerned that sense from the context of jeering. So Luke makes the sense clear by using a synonym, ‘Christ of God’, then explains some of the meaning of that by adding ‘his Chosen One’. Luke did not “remove” ‘Son of God’; he simply translated the meaning of the original Hebrew phrase into Greek—in three different ways.

Luke does this with other uses of ‘son’ as well. For example, whereas Mark uses a literal ‘son’ in 2:5, where Jesus says to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven,’ Luke translates this for his Gentile Greek audience as ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven’ (Luke 5:20). Luke gives the meaning in Greek and blocks his Gentile audience from wrongly assuming that the paralytic was a relative of Jesus. Mark also translates ‘a son of God’ literally in 15:39, with the evident meaning of ‘a righteous man’, but Luke translates it for his Gentile Greek audience as ‘a

righteous man.’ (Note that the phrase is referring to Jesus.) Again, Luke is simply translating the phrase into Greek in accord with its meaning in this context.

Expressions for the Trinity

The question is sometimes raised regarding the way people can talk about the Trinity if they do not use sonship terminology. First of all, we are talking about the translation of Scripture portions intended for the general population. As far as mature believers are concerned, they usually come to understand the Bible’s metaphorical use of kinship terminology, and some of them can speak of “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” as in Matthew 28:19. The focus on this formula, however, is merely a matter of tradition. There are at least 60 additional passages in the Bible that mention the three persons of the Trinity together, and none of them are the same as this expression in Matthew. The most common term for the first person of the Trinity is simply ‘God’. The most common term for the second person of the Trinity is ‘Christ’, followed by ‘Lord’.¹⁴ So it is wrong to think that the Bible prefers sonship terminology for reference to the second person of the Trinity. It uses ‘Christ’ in 32 of these verses and ‘Son (of God)’ in only 8 of them.

Matthew 28:19 encourages baptism in the name of the Trinity, but it is clear from the rest of the New Testament (Acts 2:38; 8:12-16; 10:48 19:3-5; 1 Cor. 6:11) that Matthew 28:19 was not used as an exact baptismal formula, since ‘Jesus Christ’ was used instead of ‘the Son’. In the century following the New Testament, baptism was performed “in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ So when the Trinity was invoked at baptism, there was flex-

ibility with regard to the way the persons of the Trinity were named. The same is done today.

Liturgical translations obscure the Trinity for Muslims. When Muslims read ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’, they understand the first two terms to mean a biological relationship and they also note that Jesus cannot be God if he is God’s offspring. They do not view the term ‘Son of God’ as an affirmation of Jesus’ unity with God but as proof that he cannot be God. Finally, they understand the “Holy Spirit” to be an angel rather than an aspect of God Himself. In contrast to that, a meaning-based common-language translation can make the Trinity more evident, because it avoids communicating these erroneous meanings.

A fear that having different translations could lessen their credibility

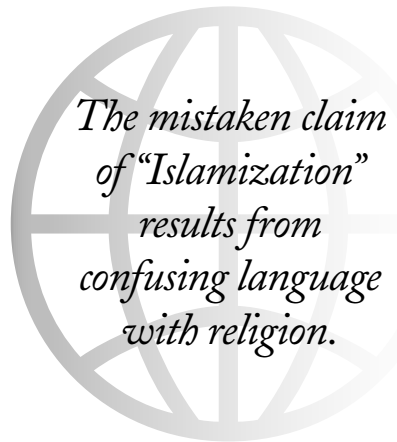
Concerns have been raised that having two different translations might cause problems for Muslims. In general, however, such objections are expressed by traditional Christians rather than by Muslims. In some languages, for example, there are more than a dozen translations of the meaning of the Qur’an, all of them different and some of them fairly free, and this causes little discomfort for Muslims. To a large extent this is because Muslims view the Arabic Qur’an, not its translation, as the sacred text. Translations of the Qur’an usually include the Arabic text alongside the translation, and readers learn to recite the Arabic text. In contrast to that, only a few translations of the Bible have included the original Hebrew and Greek texts, and most Christians give little thought to the original text. Traditional Christian communities have generally treated their own liturgical translation as the sacred text and then viewed all other translations as corruptions.

The question is sometimes asked whether translating ‘son(s) of God’ in non-traditional ways undermines

confidence in the translation when people compare it to other translations. Will they think they are being tricked? Will they think the translation has been corrupted? This could be a problem if the translation of this term is not explained in the introduction or in footnotes or explained by knowledgeable Christians. The general practice, therefore, has been to provide an explanation in the introduction, as recommended above, and this eliminates the potential problem. Suppose, for example, that a person reads ‘you are the people of the Lord’ at Deuteronomy 14:1 in the New Living Translation, and reads in the footnote that a literal representation of the Hebrew would be ‘you are the sons of the Lord’. If that person then compares this with another translation that says ‘you are the sons of Lord’ in the text itself, it is evident that this is merely a difference in translation. The reader understands that the New Living Translation is meaning-oriented while the other translation is more literal. In a few cases, however, the community has opted not to have a footnote explaining the translation of ‘son(s) of God’, because they found that people remained frightened of the translation if this phrase is mentioned in a footnote. In that case the readers or hearers are dependant on more knowledgeable people to explain the original term to them. This would be a good topic for a radio program!

Bible translations come in two main forms: liturgical translations and common-language translations, and most major languages have at least one translation of each kind. Liturgical translations reflect the structures and wordings of the Greek and Hebrew source texts, and generally they have numerous loan words and calques. Such translations are appropriate for traditional Christian communities who have become familiar with the special language of such translations and who have clerics who can explain the meaning. Common-language

translations, on the other hand, use commonly known words and phrases that are natural to the language and can be understood by almost anyone. Such translations are suitable for the general population. The Qur’an affirms the Scriptures, and it encourages Muslims to believe in them and to examine them, but repeated testing has shown that even Muslims scholars cannot understand some of the liturgical translations. So if Muslims are to demonstrate their faith in the Scriptures and hear what God has said in them, then they



need access to common-language translations of at least portions of the Bible. Once Muslims or young Christians or anyone else has understood the message of Scripture by using a common-language version, they can then progress to a liturgical version if they want to do so. Many literate people use both types of translations side-by-side, enjoying the liturgical translation for its other-worldly ecclesiastical language and using the common-language translation to understand the meaning.

Some traditional Christians, however, who live in Muslim-dominated societies, have claimed that common-language translations have been “Islamized,” especially if the phrase ‘son(s) of God’ has not been translated word for word. In regard to the meaning communicated by the translation, the very opposite is the case. Many traditional translations use the same

terms for ‘Holy Spirit’ and ‘Son of God’ that are used in the Qur’an, and so they end up communicating the Qur’anic meanings rather than the Biblical meanings. So it is the traditional translations that end up conveying the “Islamic” meanings. (This applies to many other terms as well, such as terms for prayer and for the Kingdom of God.) In contrast to that, a meaning-based common-language translation tries to use widely understandable phrases that can communicate the original Biblical meaning.

The mistaken claim of “Islamization” results from confusing language with religion. In most of the language communities concerned, traditional liturgical translations use many loan-words and loan translations (calques) from other languages that are not an authentic part of the language of the community. The result is that many Christians use an “ecclesiastical” language that differs from the normal language which the rest of the community uses. A common-language translation, on the other hand, seeks to use normal language that the whole community can understand. That does not make the translation Islamic; it just makes the wordings normal rather than foreign.

Some traditional Christians reject any translation that uses normal language, but many Muslims reject any translation that does not use normal language. If the traditional Christian community already has a translation that uses ecclesiastical language, then the need is for a translation that the rest of the community can use, so that they can understand at least some portions of the Bible. In such cases the provision of a second translation does not divide the community, because the community is already divided. It is the existing social and linguistic divisions that create a need for two translations with different terminology. Some might see it as desirable for everyone to use the same translation or at least the same terminology, but this is not possible unless everyone in the community agrees to use the same terminology!

When Western missionaries hear ‘Son of God’ explained or translated as ‘the Christ’, they sense a loss of content.

Differences between traditional interpretations and scholarly exegesis

When one begins to translate or explain ‘Son of God’ in contexts where it is used of Jesus, there is potential for controversy among Christians. There is remarkable consensus on the meanings of the term in conservative scholarly circles, but this consensus is in conflict with some traditional and liberal ideas. Whereas Biblical scholars, both evangelical and Roman Catholic, see the term as highlighting the Messiah’s holiness, authority, and closeness to God, many lay Christians see only the ontological components of meaning and miss the term’s functional, ethical, and relational components. They equate ‘Son of God’ everywhere with ‘God the Son’, meaning the second person of the Trinity. This viewpoint can be seen in the Westminster Confession, which uses ‘Son of God’ for the second person of the Trinity, ‘Son of Man’ for Jesus’ human nature, ‘Word of God’ for the Bible, and ‘Christ’ as a mere name. The theology of the Westminster Confession may be consistent with Biblical truth, but no contemporary Bible scholar would consider its usage of these terms to be consistent with their usage in the Bible. Other Christians, on the other hand, interpret ‘Son of God’ incarnationally to mean ‘God in human form’. A few take it to refer to the virgin birth. And some people take it to mean that God created Jesus or somehow begat him as a male offspring; these tend to be tri-theists, Arians, or Mormons.

Since these variant meanings are often deeply entrenched in people’s minds, those who lack the training or willingness to do a sound exegetical study of the term can be rather closed-minded about the issue. If they lack training in biblical theol-

ogy, they may feel threatened by scholarly explanations of ‘Son of God’. This can lead them to oppose any Scripture product which translates or explains ‘Son of God’ in a way contrary to their long-standing interpretations. They might even suppose, quite falsely, that the translators are trying to hide the deity of Jesus or that they don’t believe in it. In reality, of course, the doctrine of the deity of Jesus is not based on his being called ‘Son of God’, and the passages on which it is based remain as clear as ever, if not more so.¹⁶ But if people do not understand these things, there is potential for misunderstanding and controversy.

This is not a new issue. In evangelical Biblical journals and academic commentaries, the meanings of ‘Son of God’ are assumed or are mentioned as something accepted and non-controversial, but commentaries for the laity written by the same authors include little or no discussion of the meaning of ‘Son of God’. Most of the academic Bible dictionaries are forthright, but some simple dictionaries avoid the issue. Thayer’s 19th-century Greek NT lexicon has a good description of the various senses of *huios tou Theou* ‘Son of God’, but the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich Greek-English lexicon¹⁷ gives no senses and no definitions; it just gives the gloss ‘Son of God’! The *NIV Study Bible*¹⁸ footnotes the messianic meaning of the term in two contexts that are clearly messianic, Luke 1:32 and Mark 14:61, then remains silent everywhere else. The American Bible Society’s *Learning Bible*,¹⁹ on the other hand, explains ‘Son of God’ somewhat more fully, as does the United Bible Society’s *Holy Gospel—Study Edition*.²⁰ So it seems that some publishers present scholarly opinion on this topic, while others avoid issues that

could be controversial with some of their public.

A further problem is that in Western Christianity the title ‘Christ’ is commonly used as a mere name with little semantic content. So when Western missionaries hear ‘Son of God’ explained or translated as ‘the Christ’, they sense a loss of content. But in the Qur’an and in most Bible translations available to Muslims, the Greek term *Christos* has been translated in all cases as *al-masih* ‘the Messiah’, based on the Hebrew form of the word. So most Muslims understand that *al-masih* is a role description rather than a name and that it applies to Jesus alone. Since the term *al-masih* ‘the Christ’ has little pre-existing meaning in their languages, it easily absorbs semantic content from explanatory notes and from the way it is used in the 516 passages of the New Testament where it occurs. (This includes the 32 Trinitarian passages where it is used to refer to the second person of the Trinity.) In contrast to the term ‘the Christ/Messiah’, the term ‘Son of God’ is used infrequently outside of John’s writings and it is attributed to many different people in the Bible besides Jesus.²¹ So the unique term ‘Christ/Messiah’ has greater potential as a vehicle to communicate to Muslims everything that the Bible says about Jesus.

Summary

Translating ‘son of God’ in a way that is understood as ‘offspring of God’ conveys an inaccurate and unbiblical meaning which fails to convey the intended meanings of the term. Sometimes this can be remedied through explanations in the introduction and footnotes. In many Muslim communities, however, these explanations have proved to be inadequate to overcome the plain sense of the phrase in their languages or to eliminate their fear of the phrase. The result has been that many of them are afraid to continue listening to the very message that tells them the Good News. In contrast to that, in places where the meaning has been translated clearly,

many Muslims have been willing to read or listen to the Gospel and have responded to Jesus in a new way as their Lord and Savior, the divine Word of God incarnate as a man, who died for their sins, rose victoriously from the grave, and reigns over all forevermore. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ This article has benefited from the input of a number of evangelical missiologists, scholars, and translators, serving with several different organizations.

² "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." (Dan. 7:13–14 NIV) The term translated here as 'son of man', *bar enāsh*, occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament, and this is its first recorded use in Aramaic. Daniel probably meant it to mean "a young man", but in the Jewish tradition reflected in 1 Enoch, the Danielic Messiah is referred to as "that Son of Man" or "the Son of Man". It is clear that Daniel 7:13–14 is the background for the title 'the Son of Man' in the New Testament, as seen in Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; John 3:13; Acts 1:9; 7:56; Rev. 1:7; 14:14.

³ The use of 'Lord' follows the example of Paul, who used 'the Lord' rather than 'the Son of Man' when communicating to Gentiles. It also fits well with the Gospels. For example, in the first two instances of the term in Mark (2:10 and 28), Jesus introduces the term and packs it with divine authority. In the next two instances (8:31, 38) He attributes further power and global authority to "the Son of Man," who comes "in his Father's glory." The term 'Lord of mankind' fits these contexts very well.

⁴ As was mentioned in Part One, Muslims grow up being repeatedly warned that it is a blasphemy to say

that God has sex with women or that he requires the help of a woman to create sons. The Qur'an threatens destruction and damnation to anyone who even utters the phrase *ibn allah* 'son of God' (9:30).

⁵ De Kuiper, Arie D. and Newman, Barclay M., Jr, "Jesus, Son of God—a Translation Problem", *The Bible Translator* 28/4 (1977), 432–38, p. 435.

⁶ NRSV is the only major English translation that accurately reflects the Greek in John 1:14: "the glory as of a father's only son." Theologically, however, it makes little difference to add definite articles, as most translations have done. It just obscures what John has done, for in this verse John is using a simile to introduce his special term 'only Son of God', which he uses again at John 1:18; 3:16; 1 John 4:9."

⁷ Targum Neofiti drops the figure of speech and just says, "You are beloved before the Lord your God." The traditional (Jewish) Arabic translation drops the figure as well: "You are the companions (*awliya'*) of God." The New Living Translation has rendered this as "You are the people of the LORD your God."

⁸ An exception is that translations of literature intended for analytical study can be more literal if they provide extensive footnotes and glossaries to bring out the intended meaning.

⁹ In Deut. 32:8, for example, the LXX reads "angels" instead of "sons of God," reflecting the translators' interpretation of this passage, and similarly in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Dan. 3:25 (LXX 3:92).

¹⁰ The Targums translate 'sons of gods' in Psalm 29:1 and 89:6 as 'angels', and similarly 'sons of God' at Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7. At Genesis 6:2 the Targums translate 'sons of God' as 'sons of the rulers', except that Targum Neofiti has 'sons of the judges'.

¹¹ Gen. 22:2, 12, 16; Prov. 4:3; Jer. 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zech. 12:10.

¹² 1 Chronicles 28:6 says 'beloved as a son'. At Deuteronomy 14:1, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan translates 'sons' (of the Lord) as 'like beloved sons', while Targum Neofiti says simply 'beloved (ones)'.

¹³ For a fuller discussion of what one must actually believe about Jesus as a prerequisite for salvation, see Rick

Brown, "What Must One Believe about Jesus for Salvation?" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17(4):13–21 (2000).

¹⁴ *Christ (13)*: Rom. 5:5–6; Rom. 8:16–17; Rom. 14:17–18; Rom. 14:17–18; 1 Cor. 2:14–16; 2 Cor. 1:21–22; 2 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 3:4–6; Gal. 3:11–14; Eph. 3:14–17; Col. 1:6–8; Heb. 9:14; 1 Peter 4:14; *pronoun (11)*: John 14:16–17; John 14:26; John 15:26a; John 15:26b; John 16:13–15; John 20:21–22; Acts 1:7–8; Acts 2:33; Eph. 2:18; Eph. 2:22; Acts 5:31–32; *Lord Jesus Christ (9)*: Acts 11:17; Acts 20:21–22; Rom. 15:30; 1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 5:18–20; 1 Th. 1:3–5; 1 Th. 2:13–14; Jude 20–21; *Jesus Christ (8)*: Acts 2:38–39; Rom. 8:11; Rom. 15:16; Phil. 3:3 (NIV); 1 John 4:2; 1 Peter 1:2; Rev. 1:4–5; Tit. 3:4–6; *Lord (7)*: Acts 11:23–24; 1 Cor. 2:8–10; 1 Cor. 12:4–6; 2 Cor. 5:5–6; Eph. 4:4–6; 2 Th. 2:13; Heb. 2:3–4; *God's Son (5)*: Luke 1:35; Rom. 8:3–4; Gal. 4:6; Heb. 6:4–6; Heb. 10:29–31; *the Son (3)*: Matt. 28:19; John 3:34–35; 1 John 4:13–14; Jesus (2): Acts 7:55; Acts 10:38; *God's Son Jesus Christ (our Lord) (2)*: Rom. 1:1–4; 1 John 3:23–24; *Son of Man (1)*: Luke 12:9–10.

¹⁵ Saint Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61. This was written about 150 A.D. to the Roman emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Justin explains to them the doctrines and practices common to mainline Christianity.

¹⁶ See Rick Brown, "Presenting the Deity of Christ from the Bible", *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 19/1 (2002), 20–27, as well as part one of this article, "Explaining the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts", *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 22/3 (2005), 91–96.

¹⁷ Danker et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). This has been their practice since the first English edition in 1957.

¹⁸ Barker, Kenneth, et al. (eds.), *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).

¹⁹ American Bible Society, *The Learning Bible, New International Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 2003), p. 1947. See also the note at 1 Cor. 1:19.

²⁰ United Bible Societies, *The Holy Gospel, Study Edition* (Brisbane, Australia: UBS Asia Pacific Region, 2001), pp. 920–21. See also the note at Luke 1:32.

²¹ The term ‘son of God’ is used in the Bible to describe Adam, David, Solomon, Israel, Ephraim, unnamed rulers, God’s people, the church, saints, and angels. Even the term ‘firstborn (son)’ is not unique to Jesus; it is also applied to Israel, David, and Ephraim.

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