Sharing the Message "with Courtesy and Respect" (I Peter 3:15)

Producing and Using Meaningful Translations of the Taurat, Zabur and Injil

by John Travis

John Travis has lived for twenty years in Muslim communities and traveled extensively throughout the Muslim world. He has been heavily involved in two Bible translations for Muslims readers and assisted in a number of others.

Few things are as precious to a people as their Scriptures. In the case of the Bible, people have attempted over the centuries to translate this sacred book into as many languages as possible so that all peoples on earth might benefit from its eternal message.

A myriad of new translations of the Bible have appeared over this past century, often with one or more types produced within the same language group. In English, for example, there are now translations ranging from the very formal and traditional, to colloquial, easy-to-read translations for children. Some translations use terms found only in church settings; others use more general terms. Yet others are designed for English reading audiences of different *religious* backgrounds, such as the "Jewish New Testament" (where Jesus is called *Yeshua*) and a translation of portions of the Bible for readers of Islamic background, in which Jesus is glossed as *Isa* and the title of the book contains the word *Injil*.[1] This brief article will address some of the unique linguistic factors involved in producing meaningful and respectful translations of Scripture for Muslim readers.

Muslim Appreciation of the Taurat, Zabur and Injil

For a translation of the Bible to be meaningful to a particular faith community, it needs to take seriously both its language and unique religious heritage. Today, due to globalization and new advances in technology and travel, Muslims and Christians are increasingly interested in one another, and in studying each other's Scriptures. Important in this connection is the very high regard, at least in theory, that Muslims have for the Scriptures that came before the birth of Muhammad. In fact, apart from Christianity, Islam is the only other major world religion that officially accepts the Bible—the *Taurat*, *Zabur* and *Injil*[2]—as God-inspired Scriptures.

While there is debate among Muslims as to whether the Bible as it exists today has been altered or "corrupted" over the years, at least theologically, Muslims consider the *Taurat*, *Zabur* and *Injil* to be sacred in their original form and

languages (i.e. Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic).[3] Thus, it is a service to both God and our Muslim friends to translate the *Taurat*, *Zabur*, *Injil* in ways that are most honoring, comprehensible and relevant for the Muslim heart and mind.

Six Linguistic Keys

The cultural, theological, and linguistic similarities that exist between Islam and the Bible suggest ways to meaningfully translate it for Muslim audiences who, like Jews and Christians, trace their spiritual lineage through Abraham. Several linguistic keys are described below.
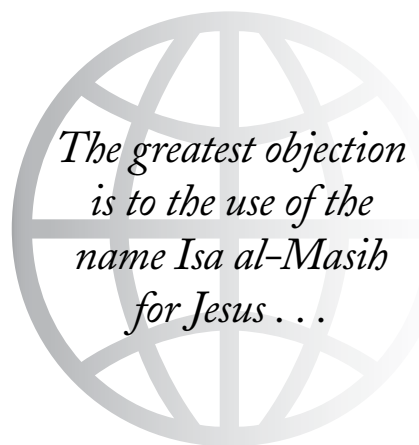
1. Parts of the Bible

The first key is the need for an appropriate title for the name of the translation. Since Islamic literature and theology already provide very adequate terms (*Taurat, Zabur, Injil*) for the various parts of the Bible, these words should be maintained. Sadly, translators have at times felt compelled to refer to the Bible as something like the "Old Testament" or "New Testament", terms which are normally meaningless to a Muslim. Where Muslim terms used to refer to the Bible have been avoided, it is usually because the translator is unaware of these terms or is concerned about offending churches, either local or abroad, who may not like these terms.

Two other factors to be considered are the use of the term *kitab* (book) and the term *Injil*. Islam recognizes four major *kitab*—the *Taurat, Zabur, Injil* and *Qur'an*. The word used for each of the sixty-six "books" of the Bible, however, should not be *kitab* but perhaps rather a term such as *sura, surah* or *surat* depending on local spelling and pronunciation (this term corresponds to the one hundred and fourteen sections or chapters found in the Qur'an). Concerning the term *Injil* (gospel), the first four books of the New Testament are often called "The Gospel of Matthew", "The Gospel of Mark" and so forth. The term *Injil* however, should not be used here in this context as it conveys the impression that there are four *Injil*. It

is better to simply say "Matthew" or perhaps "The Good News According to Matthew" and so forth, reserving the title *Injil* for the entire New Testament.

2. Names of Biblical Characters

The second key involves the names of Biblical characters, in particular Jesus. The majority of major religious figures mentioned in the Qur'an are also mentioned in the Bible. Such figures include Adam (*Adam*), Noah (*Nuh*), Jacob (*Yakub*), Abraham (*Ibrahim*), Joseph (*Yusuf*), David (*Dawud*), Solomon (*Sulaiman*), John the Baptist

The greatest objection is to the use of the name Isa al-Masih for Jesus . . .

(*Yahya*) and Jesus the Messiah (*Isa al-Masih*). Although the Qur'an contains only portions of the accounts of their lives, these Arabic names clearly refer to the same historical figures that are described in the Bible. For the sake of recognition and religious acceptability, it is crucial that these names be used in translations of the Bible. Some, however, object to this practice.

The greatest objection is to the use of the name *Isa al-Masih* for Jesus instead of a foreign name such as Yezu Kristo. The two objections generally mentioned are that the portrayal of *Isa* in the Qur'an is not the same as that of Jesus in the Bible or that churches in the country have been using a different name, such as Yezu.[4] In response to these objections, however, many have pointed out that merely changing *Isa* to another name (one that may phonetically sound closer to the Greek *Ieosous* or the Hebrew *Yeshua*) will not change one's misunderstandings regarding the person of Jesus. In

addition, I Cor 9:19-23 would suggest that those who have the Scriptures at their disposal should view themselves as "servants" of those yet outside of Christ, being flexible concerning their traditions, so that "as many as possible" might come to know the Messiah. I have noticed that when translators learn that the term *Isa* predates Islam and that it was derived from Christian sources[5], they are much more inclined to use it, allowing the context of Scripture to give new or increased meaning where needed.

For this reason and others, many Bible translations from ancient times until the present have used the name *Isa* for Jesus, one of the first being an early translation in Arabic, known today as the *Elegant Gospels*.[6] Translations in Turkish, Farsi (i.e. "Persian," the language of Iran) and the first complete translation of the Bible into Malay-Indonesian and Urdu[7] used *Isa* as well. In fact, in Southeast Asia alone I have identified over twenty translations that presently use or have used *Isa*.[8] Note too that with the increase in the number of translations being prepared for special audiences, there are some translations where, within the same language or dialect, both an *Isa* and a non-*Isa* translation exist. Some examples in major world languages include Arabic, Urdu, Bengali, English, Indonesian and Sundanese.

3. Lord (Kurios)

The third key is selecting an appropriate word for Lord (kurios) in reference to Jesus. The Greek word *kurios*, which is normally glossed as 'sir,' 'lord,' 'Lord' or 'master' in English translations of the Bible,[9] carries the meaning of possessing authority and power. When translating this term, it is crucial that a word be selected that can be used for a human (not just for God as has happened in some translations[10]) since the Word of God, through the incarnation, truly became human. Some good examples of languages that translate *kurios* with a suitable term would be *Lord* in English, *Señor* in Spanish, *Heer* in Dutch, *Herr* in German, *Gusti* in Javanese, and *Ginoo,* which is used

in parts of the Philippines. In each of these languages, the term chosen to translate *kurios* in reference to Jesus, is a term that can clearly be used for a respected person who has authority.[11]

4. Allah

The fourth key is the glossing of the Divine names, particularly the name Allah. Of all words known to Muslims, the name Allah is certainly the most precious. The first phrase of the Muslim creed states, "There is no god but Allah." Allah is etymologically linked to the Hebrew *El* or *Elohim*, which is generally translated as "God" in English. Some have been reluctant to use it in Bible translation, fearing it will convey an incorrect understanding of God. However, like *Isa*, Christians were using the term *Allah* long before the birth of Muhammad, and it has a very long history of being used for Bible translations throughout the world in Muslim majority communities. Major world languages that have used Allah in all of their translations are Arabic, Indonesian, Javanese and Sundanese, and numerous other languages have at least one translation that uses *Allah*.[12]

When used in Bible translation, Allah is normally chosen to translate the Hebrew term *elohim* (and its associated terms) and the Greek term *theos*. A few translations in Southeast Asia and a recent Arabic translation, however, translate both the Hebrew *YHWH* (Yahweh; the Tetragrammaton) and *elohim* as Allah. While some choose to restrict the use of Allah to translating *elohim* and *theos*, in my opinion the term Allah works very well to translate *YHWH* also from the perspective of how Muslims use the term Allah.[13] If however Allah is used for both terms, there are a few special considerations to keep in mind. The first is that when *YHWH* and *elohim* are found side by side in the text, another term is needed to differentiate the two Hebrew terms from each other.[14] The second consideration is that in cases where *elohim* is found in the text in a plural or possessive sense (e.g. "the gods" or "my God", "your God",

Some have been reluctant to use it in Bible translation, fearing it will convey an incorrect understanding of God.

respectively) this other term is also needed. This is due to the fact that generally throughout the Muslim world, the term *Allah* cannot be grammatically used in either a plural or a possessive sense (that is, grammatically and culturally, one can not say "my *Allah*", "your *Allah*", the *allahs* of the Egyptians, etc.).

5. Word of God/Son of God

The fifth key is finding an appropriate way to express the terms "Word of God" and "Son of God". The expression "Word of God" (*kalimat Allah*) in reference to Jesus is found in the Qur'an (e.g. Sura Al Imran (3) 44/39; An Nisa (4):169/171) and in the New Testament (John 1:1 simply "the word"; Rev. 19:13). This expression is very important in that for both Muslims and Christians, albeit in somewhat different ways, this term reflects some of the intimacy and the mystery of the relationship between Jesus and God. By using *kalimat Allah* or an equivalent phrase used by the local Muslim population, an important concept can be more readily grasped.

The title "Son of God" is different altogether because the Qur'an states a number of times that God has no son. However, the Qur'anic term generally used for "son" is an Arabic term that can only mean a physical or biological son and of course, on this point, Christians and Muslims agree: God, who is Spirit, never physically fathered a child. (The phrase "God never begat, nor was he begotten", is a phrase most Muslims have grown up with.) In light of all this, how can the Greek *huios theou* be translated so that it conveys the original biblical intent and yet does not suggest to the reader that God has a physical son, something which neither Muslims or Christians believe? A number of suggestions have been put forth.

If there is a word in the local language that means son in a figurative or metaphorical sense, that might be

a good term to use. It seems, however, that few languages have such a "non-biological" term for son. If such a word does not exist, some translators contend that the title is theologically too heavy to touch and that we need to simply, woodenly, translate the words "Son of God" regardless of how it offends the sensibilities of a Muslim reader. Others have attempted (again, where there is no suitable word for the concept of non-biological son), to coin a term to help bring out the figurative or metaphorical dimension of the title, using phrases like "the Spiritual Son of God" or "the Beloved son who comes from God." Still others have employed the translation practice known as *dynamic equivalence*,[15] attempting to convey the actual *meaning* of the expression "Son of God" as the original audience may have understood it two thousand years ago. Such attempts, which are difficult to do, have sought to create terms that focus on the Messianic sense of the term.[16] (Note: often in Scripture "Son of God" is clearly an alternate term that simply means the Messiah. See Luke 1:32-33; 4:41; Mark 14:61; Matt 16:16, 20.) In short, there is no easy answer as to how to translate the title "Son of God" and each translation team must wrestle over this easily misunderstood term.

6. Church, Christian, Baptism

The sixth key involves discovering the best way to translate the often socio-politically religiously-loaded words "church", "Christian" and "baptism." These three terms often carry much unnecessary socio-political and religious baggage. All three terms have the potential of signaling to the Muslim that this book (the *Taurat*, *Zabur*, *Injil*) is not for him or his people, something that is not true. If translated without much field testing, the term "Church" can be understood to be a building used for some kind of foreign worship, likely from the West. The term "Christian" can be

synonymous with any person, practice, or influence from the West and can contain shades of imperialism, Western morality (or lack thereof) or the Crusades. The term for "baptism", if translated without care, can be seen as a final communal rite separating one from his family and people. The term used to translate the Greek term *ekklesia* should simply denote a group of people who gather together (not a foreign institution or a building); the term "Christian" should mean simply "one who follows Christ (or Messiah)";[17] and the term for "baptism" should communicate an act that is an outward sign of an inward spiritual change, rather than a rite of rejection of family and community.[18]

Closing Thoughts

Most of this paper deals with linguistic matters, yet there are several other factors to consider as well. The first is the presentation of the book. Muslims greatly appreciate beautiful holy books, where artistic borders, bright colors and high quality paper and cover materials are used. Secondly, the use of Greek or Hebrew may be important due to the Islamic emphasis on the importance of the original language. A number of translations now have Greek either along the edge of the page or shown interlinearly. In one country, a version of the *Zabur* is soon to be published in which the first line of each psalm is accompanied by the original Hebrew. The third help is to include maps, glossaries, footnotes and introductions to explain terms or give background information that may be helpful.

Finally, if possible, it is good to involve Muslims in the translation team. Once they have understood the concepts being communicated, they are the ones who will best know how to communicate this message to their own communities. While some Muslim friends and neighbors may feel it is actually wrong or polluting to read the *Taurat, Zabur, Injil*, there are many who long to read the inspired words of Moses, David, Jesus and other servants of the Lord. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] The translation done for Jewish readers is produced by David H. Stern (1989, Jewish New Testament Publications: Maryland) and is known as *The Jewish New Testament*. Although it is in English it consistently uses Jewish religious vocabulary such as *Mashiach* for Messiah, *Ruach HaKodesh* for Holy Spirit and *Adonai* for Lord. Likewise, the English Bible portions for those of Islamic heritage use *Masih* for Messiah, *Allah* for God, and *Yahya, Ibrahim* and *Maryam* for John, Abraham and Mary. This translation uses the *New International Reader's Version Bible* as its base text.

[2] Technically the terms *Taurat, Zabur*, and *Injil* refer to the Torah (Penta-

> *Muslims greatly appreciate beautiful holy books.*
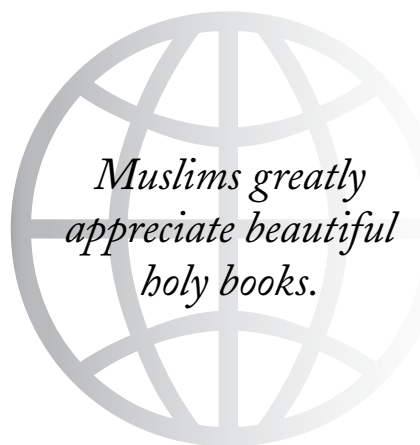
teuch) of Moses, Psalms of David and the Gospel of Jesus. As these words are used in the Qur'an, however, it is clear that they refer to the whole of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

[3] Several verses in the Qur'an refer to corruption occurring in the Bible. The debate focuses on whether the written text itself was altered (Arabic: *tahrif al-lafaz*) or whether those who taught it orally to others did not pronounce it clearly, teach it accurately or share the meaning completely (Arabic: *tahrif al-ma'na*). Most Muslim scholars today, though certainly not all, contend that the words themselves have changed. Yet a number of historically prominent Muslim scholars including al-Tabari, al-Bukhari, Ibn Khaldun and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, have held to the alternative opinion, namely that the text is sound but misunderstood. The most recent Muslim scholar to state that the Bible in its present form is uncorrupted is Abdullah Saeed of the University of Melbourne in Australia (see his article "The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures" in *The Muslim World*, volume 92, Fall edition, 2002).

[4] Two other lesser objections that arise are that local Muslim leaders may not like it or that *Isa* is not etymologically derived from the Hebrew *Yeshua,* which means to save. As to the former objection, what power local leaders have is an issue each translation group must work out on the ground. As to the latter, nearly all scholars agree today that *Isa* is nothing more than a transliteration of the original Hebrew name for Jesus, that underwent further linguistic transformation as it passed through the Aramaic-speaking eastern Church (see footnote five).

[5] Professor Philip Hitti of Princeton in his seminal work, *History of the Arabs* (1951, Macmillan Company) states on page 106 that Syrianized Arabs had introduced the name *Isa* for Jesus to the pre-Islamic world. Other scholars who would concur that *Isa* is a transliteration from Syrian Christian forms of the name are Geoffrey Parrinder (1995, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, Oneworld press, p. 16) and Arthur Jeffrey (1938 *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, Baroda: Oriental Institute). A number of Muslim scholars also agree with this understanding of the origin of the name *Isa*, as do two Western scholar/translators who are very familiar with both Arabic and ancient Syriac, Dr. Jonathan Culver and Dr. Rick Brown.

[6] Copies of this ancient translation into Arabic may be found in the Vatican Library and in the Leiden University Library.

[7] This translation, printed in 1733, was carried out by a Dutch clergyman, Dr. Melchior Leijdecker. His translation principle was to use words already known by the Muslims of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago and to use terms from the Arabic Bible for words or names not found in Islamic tradition, such as the names for Peter or Matthew. When Henry Martyn translated the New Testament into Urdu, he used the names as they are known in that language, including *Îsa,* but the Bible Society later changed the names to sound more like Greek, resulting in Yisû.

[8] These translations are found in South Thailand, the Southern Philippines, Malaysia and the islands of Indonesia.

[9] The translation entitled *The Message* by Eugene Peterson has not used Lord in reference to Jesus but rather the "Master", presumably feeling that this term reflects well in modern English the meaning of the Greek *kurios*.

[10] One of the most blatant examples of this is the standard Indonesian church Bible, which uses the word *Tuhan* as the primary term for *kurios* in reference to Jesus. Although the term is etymologically

related to the word *tuan* (which means lord, master or sir) the word *Tuhan* refers only to God. Generally what an Indonesian Muslim hears when one says *Tuhan Yesus* is "God Jesus." Some pre-1733 Scripture portions in Malay-Indonesian did however use *tuan* as the primary term for *kurios* in reference to Jesus.

[11] If a term is found, like *Lord* in English, it is preferable. Some languages have terms that can be equally used for all males as well as for God (such as the Spanish *señor*); other languages have a term used only for kings or great leaders as well as for God (such as the Javanese *Gusti*). The Arabic term *Rabb* is problematic. Technically it can be (or historically could have been) used for both human *lords* and *the Lord* (in the divine sense), but functionally today it really only carries the divine sense.

[12] In addition to the four languages mentioned in the text, translations I know of personally that have at least one translation using Allah are Turkish, Urdu, Malay, and virtually every Bible translation in the many islands and people groups of Indonesia. In addition, Ken Thomas of UBS (2001 *Allah in the Translation of the Bible*, The Bible Translator 52(3):301-306) reports that Bambara, Fulfulde Hausa, and Mankinka in Africa and Azarbaijani in the Middle East also use Allah.

[13] First, the Semitic Hebrew concept of YHWH and the Semitic Arabic concept of Allah in terms of creative power, divine essence and attributes are strikingly parallel. Second, neither Allah nor YHWH can be expressed in a plural or a possessive sense. Third, both Allah and YHWH, by Muslims and Jews respectively, are functionally viewed as names. In the words of H.A.R. Gibbs, the *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (1961, E.J. Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands, page 34) states:

> *Allah, therefore, is the proper name of God among Muslims. It corresponds to Yahweh among the Hebrews. No plural can be formed from it. To express "gods", the Muslim must fall back upon the plural of* ilah, *the common noun from which [the name] Allah is probably derived.*

[14] When the terms *YHWH* and *Elohim* stand alone in the text, they can be differentiated by using capital letters if the translators feel it is important to be able to indicate the actual Hebrew words.

[15] "Dynamic equivalence" in Bible translation is an attempt to communicate a difficult term or expression through the communication of the *meaning* of the term, not necessarily the actual words, word for word (i.e. a literal translation). The hope is to coin a term or phrase that will evoke in the mind of the present day reader a message or meaning similar to what a listener in the original audience would likely have heard in ancient times in the original language.

[16] Rick Brown has written extensively on this topic. See his recent two part article entitled "Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts", *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 22/3 and 22/4 (2005).

[17] In all Muslim lands there is a word used for the Greek *christianos*. The word is normally some form of the terms *Nasrani, Masehi, Isa*wi, or *Kristen*. In all cases, the term carries much misunderstanding and negative connotation. In the Greek, the term simply means "Christ follower." Along these lines, the 2005 edition of the *Easy-to-Read Holy Bible* (World Bible Translation Center, Inc., Fort Worth, Texas) translates the term *christianos* (e.g. Acts 11:26) as simply "Christ followers" rather than "Christians" for this very reason (personal communication with the publisher).

[18] A term like "washing for the forgiveness of sins" or "washing as a sign of repentance" or "immersion as symbol of unity with *Isa*" or just "immersion" might be appropriate. There may also be a local term for a symbolic cleansing with water that would be appropriate. The problem with using a transliteration of the Greek *baptizo* (such as the English "baptize"), or even the local word used by the minority Christian population, is that it likely does not convey the simple sense of repentance and forgiveness that the word did to the original audience (e.g. Acts 2: 40-41; 16:33). Rather the term used by the local church is likely to have a social/communal connotation, associated with rejection or separation from one's family and community. While baptism may cause such a reaction, it is prudent to find a more neutral term that does not automatically evoke negative feelings.