

## Loaded Language

Translation is an earmark of the Christian movement. The ‘terms of translation’ were determined from the outset. The Incarnation anchored those terms theologically, and Pentecost’s diversity humbled any assumption of a sacred language. Hebrew had already surrendered to Greek and the original Scriptures were written in a different language than its founder’s. The onus was on any language to prove its religious superiority. Over the centuries, it took another monotheism’s sanction of one singular language—a regional dialect of Arabic—to contrast so markedly with Christianity’s natural abandon in translating this gospel of Jesus Christ. The Reformation’s *sola scriptura* overcame a centuries-old Latin dominance in the heartland of Christendom and the DNA of Protestant mission became first and foremost to translate the scriptures into the mother tongue. For the past half a century, the tools of linguistic science have been harnessed in a breathtaking advance in translation efforts.

Quite suddenly, the ‘terms of translation’ of this noble enterprise are under public review and censure. This is true *in principle* and for actual *words*. The pre-eminence of meaning-based translation, which is the practice and orientation of all good translators, has hit a force field of reaction in applying these same principles to the translation of terms such as “Son of God” for languages spoken by Muslim peoples.<sup>1</sup> Over fourteen centuries, this term became an identity marker between Muslim and Christian. It has implicated any dialogue with Muslims, evidenced in the early attempts of John of Damascus and the Patriarch Timothy to communicate the divinity of Christ and the nature of the Trinity in the face of Muslim misunderstandings of the term ‘Son’.<sup>2</sup> Such a long history reveals how the inter-religious contexts of Muslim and Christian have skewed terminology towards dichotomy, reduction and distortion. The heat of this religious rivalry has welded certain terms with certain meanings, and solidified unfortunate connotations in the mix. And behind all the historic theological resistance and confusion are the unintended meanings set off by hidden cultural nuance in the translation process. This is the real pitfall in Muslim-Christian dialogue. Language gets loaded—or at least certain terms do—and these phrases become so very difficult to unpack.

Editorial *continued on p. 104*

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### Editorial Correspondence

1605 E. Elizabeth Street  
Pasadena, CA 91104  
(734) 765-0368, [editors@ijfm.org](mailto:editors@ijfm.org)

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In earlier articles Rick Brown described several approaches people have used to communicate the biblical meaning of 'Son of God' in Muslim contexts.<sup>3</sup> More recent critiques call for a more careful examination of how we guard the meaning of filial language in the translation process. Rick is joined by colleagues Leith and Andrea Gray in offering a 'new look' at this subject (p. 105). This article has gone through a gauntlet of New Testament scholars who recommended that the authors also provide an appendix dealing specifically with the biblical terms of filial relations (p. 121).

It's important that we get below this radioactive religious encounter between Muslim and Christian to the more basic complexity of meaning in language. You'll note that the *Forum for Bible Agencies International* is oriented towards meaning-based translation (p. 149). They assume that words are loaded with meaning and that accuracy requires one to investigate and choose from a field of meanings. Donna Toulmin attempts to frame the different dimensions of meaning we find in those special biblical terms that

provide a backbone to our theology (p. 127). She explores how translators handled the much less controversial title "Son of Man" among a Hindu people. You'll note that in one dimension, the "thought world", she faces a startling contrast between her context and most Muslim contexts.

Finally, Roy Ciampa wants us to consider how the 'direct transferability' of biblical terms can breed unfortunate consequences (p. 139). This New Testament scholar is concerned that our cultural or personal ideologies can drive how we correlate biblical terms with our own contexts. Political power, economic interest, and profound moral concerns can blind us to how we inappropriately select, interpret and apply biblical terms. He highlights some historical and contemporary examples from our English-speaking world that may help us 'feel' just how easily ideology can muddy our use of terms.

As editor, I invite your responses on this subject of translation ([brad.gill@ijfm.org](mailto:brad.gill@ijfm.org)). We're conscious that many are engaged in dialogue over these translation mat-

ters, and we hope to include further exchange and different points of view in future issues of the journal. We do apologize that we're still tardy in our publication schedule, but we should be caught up by the end of January 2012.

In Him,



Brad Gill  
Editor, *IJFM*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Emily Belz, "Holding Translators Accountable", *World Magazine*, Oct. 8, 2011, pp. 45-47; Collin Hansen, "The Son and the Crescent", *Christianity Today*, Feb. 2011, pp. 19-23.

<sup>2</sup> John does't insist on using the term 'Son', but emphasizes Christ as the incarnation of the Word of God who is one with the very being of God [John of Damascus, *Writings (Fount of Knowledge)*, trans. Jr. Frederic H. Chase (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1958) pp. 153-160; 'The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen', *Moslem World*, 25/3, pp. 266-273. On the Patriarch Timothy, see Samuel Moffett, *The History of Christianity in Asia: Volume One* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998) pp. 349-354.

<sup>3</sup> Rick Brown, "Explaining the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts", Part One (*IJFM* 22:3, July-Sept. 2005) pp. 91-96; Part Two (*IJFM* 22:4, Oct.-Dec. 2005) pp. 135-145.

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- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.