

Feature Article: JAF1356

THE SON OF GOD AND MUSLIM IDIOM TRANSLATIONS

by Michael F. Ross

This article first appeared in *Christian Research Journal*, volume 35, number 06 (2012). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Wycliffe Bible Translators and their Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) have been embroiled in a major controversy with evangelical churches, mission agencies, and international ministries around the world. From Pakistan to Park Avenue, the broad consensus of evangelicals has taken exception to Wycliffe's Muslim Idiom Translation (MIT) and its rendering of the familial words of "Father" and "Son of God" in a functional, nonbiological, nonfamilial manner.

Some Bible translators are concerned that Muslims will reject Christianity and the gospel because of the scandalous idea that God had sexual relations with Mary to produce His Son, Jesus Christ. For this reason, the Wycliffe translators are replacing the word *Father* with terms such as "Allah," "Guardian," or "Lord," and translating *Son of God* as "Messiah," "Master of Humanity," or "Beloved Chosen One."

Muslims naturally struggle with the idea of the Trinity—what monotheist does not? And they chafe under the concept of a virgin birth—what human being does not? And the idea that a man (Jesus) is also God is the mystery of Christianity—what person of other religions easily accepts this doctrine? So why do Bible translators from Wycliffe seem intent on granting special exceptions for Islam not extended to other people groups? And why is there a need to avoid the language of Trinity, divine sonship, and only-begottenness in the New Testament?

THE CONCERN OF MIT TRANSLATIONS

The concern that Bible translators have about Muslim negative reaction to the idea of the Trinity or to Trinitarian familial names is not merely a recent concern or contemporary issue. In 1953, Christian and Indian minister P. A. Chowdbury expressed concerns over referring to the first two persons of the Trinity as "Father" and "Son of God." He wrote: "We should no longer use the term *Khodar Beta* (God's Son) and *Hazrat 'Isa* (Lord Jesus) in the literature meant for Bengal Moslems; because the two terms, I venture to think, do not represent the truth. *Khodar Beta and Hazrat 'Isa* have entirely different meanings when used by a Moslem."¹ Chowdbury was one of the earlier modern missiologists to recommend a new approach to Muslim missions and Bible translation for Islam.

The source of the problem is found in the Qur'an: Islam's holy book. It explicitly condemns the idea of either the Trinity or the sonship of Christ. Moshin Khan translates this Muslim *ayat* (paragraph/set of verses) in the Qur'an this way:

*O people of the Scripture (Christians)! Do not exceed the limits in your religion, nor say of Allah aught but the truth. The Messiah 'Isa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah and His Word, ("Be!" —and he was) which He bestowed of Maryam (Mary) and a spirit (Ruh) created by Him; so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not: "Three (trinity)!" Cease! (it is) better for you. For Allah is (the only) One Ilah (God), glory be to Him (Far Exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is All-Sufficient as a Disposer of affairs.*²

Wycliffe has been adamant about their translation practices among Muslims, and until recently, unresponsive to complaint or criticism from Christian groups across the world. It is only fair to note that Wycliffe/SIL is not alone in producing Muslim Idiom Translations. Frontiers Mission and Global Partners for Development also play a strategic role in producing and disseminating MITs. There is a genuine fear on the part of these and other mission ventures to Muslims that a strict and literal translation of familial language—Father, Son, begotten—will keep Muslims from reading God's Word and from coming to salvation in Christ.

Rick Brown of Wycliffe, one of the primary driving forces and defenders of MITs, and a highly respected and influential translation consultant for several translation agencies, has said, "For Muslims [the phrase 'Son of God'] has a single well-entrenched meaning, namely physical offspring from God's sexual union with a woman....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 that term is affirmed in it."³

The Assemblies of God, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church in Pakistan have notified Wycliffe that they have grave concerns concerning MIT translations. Large groups of churches and pastors in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and other Muslim countries have definitely rejected MITs and called on Wycliffe to cease and desist from such efforts. The Pakistan Bible Society has rejected MITs and refused to distribute them. *World* magazine, *Christianity Today*, *World Daily News*, and other publications and Internet sites have written critically about Wycliffe's MIT efforts.

Wycliffe officials have vehemently denied wrongdoing. On their official website, they posted this response: "Wycliffe remains unashamedly committed to the integrity of Scripture and the doctrine of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We want to assure you that we are not removing terms for 'God the Father' and 'Son of God' from the Bibles that we are translating into other languages. Instead, we are seeking the most accurate way to translate those terms from the original Greek and Hebrew texts."⁴

This is, unfortunately, false. Wycliffe has been involved in several projects in which the Trinitarian familial terms have been removed to avoid offending Muslims. *Ingil Sharif* (a New Testament for Bangladesh), *Stories of the Prophets* (Arabic New Testament “audio dramas”), *The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ* (an Arabic translation of the four Gospels and Acts), and the Turkish version of Matthew’s Gospel: *The Exalted Meaning of the Noble Gospel Written by the Disciple Matthew* all back off from the Father/Son terminology of the original, inspired authors of Scripture. Wycliffe has been involved actively and heavily in these ventures and in the promotion of MIT principles across these organizations.

Even within Wycliffe itself, dissident voices have been silenced. Vocal critics have been threatened with dismissal or told to “like it or leave it.” Officials have been prevented from speaking to the media or other church and mission agencies. Leadership at the highest level at Wycliffe has taken three courses of action: first, to ignore the many voices of criticism; second, to deny that there was either a problem or Wycliffe misdoing; third, only recently and reluctantly, in the face of potential loss of financial support, to agree to consult with the World Evangelical Alliance for review and advice.⁵

THE HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

In particular, Wycliffe and other MIT translators are stumbling over the Greek words *pater* (Father), *huios* (Son), *huios tou theou* (Son of God), and *huios ho monogenes* (the only-begotten Son). These words and phrases, and other familial references to the sonship and begottenness of Christ and the eternal Fatherhood of God, are essential to New Testament Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the person and nature of Jesus Christ.

Christ’s favorite word for the first person of the Trinity is *Father*. In fact, Jesus Christ introduces us to the concept and the persons of the Trinity. He is the first person in Scripture to *explicitly* name the Trinity: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’” (Matt. 28:18–20; all Scripture quotations from the ESV except where noted).

His favorite terms for Himself all involve sonship phrases: *Son of Man*, *Son of David*, or, as in the Gospel of John, simply *the Son*. In Matthew 16:16–18 Jesus does not correct Peter for calling him *the Son of the Living God*. Jesus is quite comfortable with being known as God’s Son. The very nature of the Triune God, God’s work in the world, and especially redemption, necessitate the use, by Jesus Christ, of divine familial terms:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." (John 10:34–38)

The writers of the New Testament, following the lead and language of Jesus Christ, consistently—without exception—use two concepts for sonship.

1. Jesus is the eternally *begotten* Son of God.
2. Christians are the *adopted* spiritual sons of God.

The Bible does *not* avoid “biological” words in describing God the Father and His eternal Son: Christ is the *only-begotten Son of God* (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Heb. 11:17; 1 John 4:9). This begotten Son of God is not originally a New Testament concept. Psalm 2 clearly sets forth the eternal sonship of Christ (a verse quoted in the New Testament in Acts 13:33 and in Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5). “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession” (Ps. 2:7–8).

The fact that the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do not speak of the *begotten* Son of God means nothing. They consistently present Jesus as *the* (singular) Son of God (divine son):

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt. 3:16–17)

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

In translating these words and concepts, translators have consistently used biological terms, “Father,” “Son,” “begotten” (i.e., sires), “born,” and so on. None of these versions intended to imply that Jesus was brought into this world via biological sexual relations or that the second person of the Trinity was not eternally coexisting with the Father. These versions simply used the biological familial terms employed by Jesus, the apostles, and the New Testament writers.

The MIT by the title *Stories of the Prophets*, Arabic New Testament audio dramas, uses the following substitutes for *God the Father* and *Jesus the Son*:

Luke 1:32, 35—“Son of the Most High” and “Son of God” become “the awaited Christ.”

Luke 4:3—“If you are truly the Son of God” becomes “If you are truly the Messiah of the most high God.”

Luke 4:9—“the Son of God” becomes “the Messiah of God.”

Luke 6:36—“your Father is merciful” becomes “God is merciful.”

Luke 11:2—“Father” in the Lord’s Prayer becomes “Our loving heavenly Lord.”

Luke 11:13—“the heavenly Father” becomes “the Lord of the world.” (Cf. Qur’an, 1:1-3)

Luke 24:49—“I will send the promise of my Father upon you” omits “of my Father.”

Matthew 28:19—“in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” becomes “in the name of God and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit.”

Various human languages may well have multiple words for father and son. Indeed, some tongues included distinct words for biological sons, adopted sons, legal sons, ethnic sons, spiritual sons, stepsons, and so on, but the proper translation for the New Testament words *pater* (father) and *huios* (son) is to use the biological words for a father who begets (sires) a son.

The New Testament writers followed the lead of Jesus Christ in using *huios* (son) and *pater* (father) to refer to Christ and God, and their eternal natures and relationship. They could have used *teknon* (Greek for “child” in a broad sense) but they chose the biological term “son” (*huios*) to relate Jesus to God the Father. They left the theological explanation and interpretive clarification not to “equivalency” language but to expository preaching and teaching. Translators should do the same: render the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in literal words (biological terms), using footnotes, margin notes, and teachers to explain the meaning and protect the text from false interpretations.

The most common generic sonship term in a given language will almost always best convey a son’s engendered relationship to his father and deliver biblical meaning faithfully. Any confusion about this terminology will need correction by teachers and preachers, but no such changes to the text of Scripture in any language are tolerable. Translation methods must honor Scripture’s verbal and plenary authority, the Holy Spirit’s Authorship, and the divinely selected terms for the manifestation of the character of God and the work of His redemption. Cultural, religious, or linguistic resistances are not sufficient reasons to change terms when those terms carry critical theological weight within particular books of Scripture.⁶

Translators may protest, “But this communicates that Jesus was biologically born out of God the Father.” So it does. But this has been so in *almost every* language in the history of Bible translations. It is the function and duty of the preacher, teacher, evangelist, and missionary to *interpret* and *illumine* the words of the sacred text and give the *meaning* of the biblical words.

Translation work runs along two lines: the *formal equivalence* (word for word) translation and the *functional equivalence* (concept for concept) translation. In the formal equivalence (or literal) translation, the words, grammar, and literary structure of the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic are rendered as closely as possible into the vernacular language. The *English Standard Version* (ESV) and the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) are examples of this formal equivalence method. Functional equivalence (or “dynamic equivalence”) seeks to render original language into equivalent (equal) ideas in the vernacular text. The *New International Version* (NIV) and *Today’s English Version* (TEV) are examples of dynamic equivalent translations. Compare these two verses for one example:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1 NASB)

Before the world was created, the Word already existed; He was with God, and He was the same as God. (John 1:1 TEV)

Notice the subtle but significant difference in these two texts. Being the *same* as God is not the same as *being* God. Human beings are made in the *image* and *likeness* of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Our *sameness* to God is not equivalent to deity. The use of the phrase “*the same as God*” (TEV) is very imprecise and could lead others to think that Jesus is like God without being God. The phrase “*was God*” communicates no doubt to the pre-incarnate divinity of Jesus Christ. In writing and speaking about Christ’s divinity as the eternal Son of God, clarity and precision of language is called for. This is why formal equivalency translations try to be more precise. For primary translations, formal equivalence (literal, word-for-word) translations are preferred to dynamic equivalent versions—which may be of use for secondary or tertiary texts.

THE CONCERNS OF THE CHURCH

Opponents of MITs and critics of Wycliffe and the “insider movement” philosophy of mission to Muslims have verbalized several major concerns to Wycliffe. They may be generally grouped under ten categories.⁷

The Nature of Scripture

The Bible is the Word of God, and therefore, its authorship is both divine in nature and infallible in content. A reverence for Scripture precludes injudicious and unwarranted changes to the sacred text. Reverence, theological integrity, and a self-conscious methodology that guards the original message are demanded by the very nature of

God's revelation. Evangelicals believe, historically and fundamentally, in the verbal plenary inspiration of God's Word. That means that the very words of Scripture (*verbal*) and all the words of Scripture (*plenary*) were selected by the Holy Spirit, and cannot be changed by man at his whim and fancy. The words *Father* and *Son of God* are the Spirit's words for both identifying and defining the first two persons of the Trinity.

The Integrity of the Sacred Texts

Muslims would contend that they hold the Qur'an in higher regard than Christians do the Bible. As such, they do not change the words of the Qur'an to accommodate non-Muslims or modern Islamic audiences. Our efforts to reach Muslims by modifying our sacred texts are backfiring. Muslim converts to Christianity resoundingly reject MITs and have told Wycliffe and others that such texts actually hinder their evangelism of Muslims. For every Muslim who may be offended by divine sonship, there are many stories of Muslims coming to Christ because of this undying and endearing truth.

The Audience of Scripture

To whom is the Bible written? God revealed Himself—in Word and in His Son—to His people, the church. He entrusted to them the sacred writings (2 Tim. 3:15–17) that would make them wise unto salvation. The church of God, across the world, is united in Christ, in the Spirit and in *the Word*. True, this Word is to be shared with the world to bring them to Christ and into the church, but the first audience is the believer, and any translation modified and aimed at unbelieving (pagan) audiences threatens the intent and integrity of God's Word.

Theology of the Trinity

The distinguishing truth of Christianity is the Trinity. Without it, Christianity and the gospel are compromised. The fundamental truth of this gospel is that God the Son, the Son of God, is qualified to be the Messiah only by His divine sonship (John 1:1–4; Ps. 2; Ps. 110; John 3:16 ff). To say that Jesus is the Messiah but not the Son of God is to preach another Christ and a false gospel. Theology trumps methodology as message preempts mission. Jesus is both Son of God and Messiah, but He is Messiah only because He is the Son of God and the Son of Mary. To avoid this truth because it is "awkward," is to preach another gospel (Gal. 1:6–9).

Special Treatment for Muslims

In an effort to produce "converts," missionaries cannot make exceptions for the sons of Muhammed. What group of people anywhere, at any time, from any religious background immediately accepted the Good News of God, His Son, a virgin birth, an incarnation of God in man, a hypostatic union in Christ, and the call to renounce their gods or "Allah" in favor of Jesus? Persecution, martyrdom, and painful, patient mission have outlasted all opposition. It will be so with Islam. The Muslims deserve no special treatment, no shortcut to conversion, no tailor-made message.

Understanding the Mission Enterprise

Accurate and historically consistent Bible translations are essential, but it is the task of the *preacher* to explain the Bible to pagans—American or Arabian (Rom. 10:1–17). The Bible translation cannot answer all the questions, objections, or counter-charges of any people group. That is the responsibility of preaching, teaching, discipleship, catechizing, church planting, leadership training, and the body life of a local church (Acts 2:37–47).

True Conversion

It is not possible for anyone to become a Christian unless he believes that Jesus is God, the Son of God incarnate by the Virgin Mary, and the Christ of God (1 John 4:1–6; 5:1–20). The MIT Christ is not the Savior of the Bible, and those who believe in the MIT Jesus are not truly Christian. A false Christ results in false conversions, false Christians, and a failed gospel mission.

Aberrant Christianity

The church cannot experience the communion of the saints and the unity of the Spirit when they are reading from different Bibles with different messages about Christ. The apostolic formula for baptism teaches us this—loud and clear.

The universality of the Gospel and the catholicity of the church cannot be detached from the familial language for God as Father, Jesus as Son, and believers as the family of God. When we share theological terms across languages, we uphold the solidarity of the family of God. Just as baptism marks the entry in the community of faith, so baptism explicitly in the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” not only honors God’s divinely revealed identity, but also sustains the church’s vital and precious solidarity. Sons of God speak the language of redeemed family members, because believers from all the nations make up one family in the Son of God.⁸

Partnership in Missions

The belief that only those schooled in linguistics can accurately translate a Bible into a vernacular tongue is false. Theologians, pastors, seminary professors, and local, indigenous evangelists should be consulted. The Bible belongs to the people of God, and its translation, dissemination, and representation to any people group is a joint venture of the church.

Support of the Church

Bible translation agencies need the financial, prayer, and personnel support from local churches and denominations. They are not due this; they must earn this. Wycliffe has damaged its standing and its trust among many in the pew and pastorate who once faithfully, confidently, and sacrificially supported SIL. The leaders at Wycliffe, Frontiers, Global Partners for Development, and other mission agencies and Bible societies should ask this question: *What does it profit an agency to gain all of Islam and forfeit the church?*

CONCLUSION: BIOLOGICAL WORDS ARE NONNEGOTIABLE

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). That Word presents the true Christ—God the Son, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, the Messiah for Jews, the Christ for Muslims, and the Savior of the whole world. The only way to present such truth is to use biological words, in any language, for a *Father* and His *Son*, and then to explain such divine mysteries to all who will listen. Paul’s methodology cannot be improved upon:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1–5)

May our words reflect these “mysteries of God”—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—God incarnate among us—for the sake of the Muslim soul.

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NOTES

- 1 D. A. Chowdbury, “Should We Use the Terms ‘Isa’ and ‘Beta’?” *Biblical Theology* (January 1953): 26–27.
- 2 *Koran: An Nisa*, Surah 4:171, trans. Moshin Khan; www.searchtruth.com.
- 3 Rick Brown, “Delicate Issues in Missions Part 2: Translating the Biblical Term(s) ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” *International Journal of Foreign Missions* 22, 4 (Winter 2005): 137.
- 4 www.wycliffe.org/sonofgod.aspx?printerfriendly=yes (7/30/2012).
- 5 “Bibles That Translate ‘the Father’ as ‘Allah,’” *The Corner*, www.nationalreview.com/corner/291088/bibles-translate-father-allah-nina-shea; and “Assemblies of God Delays Decision on Wycliffe Partnership,” *CP Church and Ministries*, www.christianpost.com/news/assemblies-of-god-delays-decision-on-wycliffe-partnership-75369/ (July 30, 2012); and David Garner et al., *A Call to Faithful Witness (Part One): Like Father, Like Son: Divine Familial Language in Bible Translation*, 40th Presbyterian Church in America General Assembly, 2111, 2127–32.
- 6 David B. Garner et al., *A Call to Faithful Witness (Part One): Like Father, Like Son: Divine Familial Language in Bible Translations*, 2169–70; Minutes of the 40th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church in America, www.pcanet.org, Position Papers.
- 7 The issues and struggles behind Bible translations, MITs, and missions to Muslims are vast and variegated. This brief article merely skims the surface. I would direct the reader to the Presbyterian Church in America’s study paper: “*A Call to Faithful Witness (Part One): Like Father, Like Son: Divine Familial Language in Bible Translation* (2012). This is a well-prepared, readable, and easily understood treatment of the issues before us in translating Scripture for Muslims. It will be completed in the summer of 2013 by Part Two, a report on, and response to, the “insider movement” in Islam. Also on the insider movement see Joshua B. Lingel and Bill Nikides, “Chrislam: Insider Movements Moving in the Wrong Direction,” *Christian Research Journal* 35, 2 (2012): 8–14.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 2169.