

# Bible Translations for Muslim Readers

by Vern Sheridan Poythress

What wisdom is needed in producing Bible translations for Muslims? An article recently published in [Christianity Today](#) by Collin Hansen, entitled "The Son and the Crescent" (February, 2011): 19-23 (cover story) takes up this question. I commend the author for the ways in which he tries to give a balanced account of the difficulties involved in translating the Bible in Muslim contexts. But I am dismayed that the article expresses an unnecessarily critical view of some more recent approaches to translation.

## Positive information

Let me elaborate. The article in *Christianity Today* in its first part explains a major issue about Bible translation in Muslim contexts. Muslims have been taught that the expression "Son of God" for Jesus is blasphemous, because, it is alleged, it means that God the Father had sexual relations with Mary in order to father Jesus. The issue presents a major barrier for Muslim understanding of the Bible. "Son of God" in many circumstances is a taboo expression, and Muslims superstitiously avoid a book containing it.

The article in *Christianity Today* also indicates that there is disagreement among missionaries and translators over what wording to use. On the one side is the danger of Muslims rejecting the Bible before they understand it. On the other side is the danger of compromising what the Bible actually says.

The *Christianity Today* article discusses alternatives now being tried for the taboo expression "Son of God," for example, expressions like "spiritual Son of God," "beloved Son who comes from God," and "Beloved of God" (pp. 20-21). The last of these expressions, "Beloved of God," sounds less helpful to English ears, since many people are loved by God, and love in English does not connote the family relationship that is implied by the word "Son." However, it should be noted that the expression "Beloved of God" is being tried out and tested as a possible translation in language situations where the expression is regularly used in the language in question to refer to a man's only son. So it means more in these languages than it does in English.

## Differences between languages

The case with "Beloved of God" illustrates a broader difficulty. What do the expressions in these other languages actually mean? The differences in nuances of meaning between English and other languages make the whole discussion difficult for readers who think only in terms of English. The initial reaction from a reader might be, if an expression means "Son of God," you have to translate it "Son of God" in every language. That reaction seems natural, but it fails to understand that in some languages there is no way to do that. The target language, the language into which one wants to translate, may have no obvious expression that means exactly what "Son of God" means in English--or what the analogous expression *ho huios tou theou* means in Greek. In fact, in English the word "son" is capable of referring to a biological son, a biological grandson or great-great-grandson (see Matt. 1:1, "David, the son of Abraham"), a son by right of inheritance, an adopted son, the second person of the Trinity as the unique divine Son, and Christians as spiritual sons by adoption and union with Christ the Son. That is quite a

range of usage. Other languages do not necessarily match this usage with one word. In some languages there may be one term for biological generation and another for personal family relationship.

Words do not match in a one-to-one fashion across languages. The difficulty is a general one, and is not confined to religious vocabulary. But *meanings* can still be communicated faithfully, provided we recognize a difficulty when it appears. We try patiently to find a way to express the meaning in the target language. But expressing the meaning faithfully may sometimes mean searching for the right expression, rather than immediately choosing an expression in the target language whose words seem to a native speaker of English to match English words at some points.

This difficulty confronts us even when we try to process and understand an article like the article in *Christianity Today*. For example, the article talks about the attempt to use "spiritual Son of God" in a translation. But strictly speaking "spiritual Son of God" is an *English* expression. No translator is using it in a translation. What it proposed for a translation is an expression in the target language. That expression does not really match the English expression "spiritual Son of God" in all respects. Rather, it has its own nuances. And, as a whole, those nuances may be very close to what "Son of God" means in English. Similarly, "beloved Son who comes from God," another expression given in the article, does not literally appear in any translation. It is an English expression. It is trying to represent *in English* some things about the precise wording in the target language. But it does not represent them with complete accuracy in English, even grammatically, because "who," "of," as well as the other words simply do not match the target language. The article talks about Muslims misunderstanding "the phrase 'Son of God.'" But strictly speaking, they are not misunderstanding "Son of God," but rather an expression in their native language. That expression does not have exactly the same meaning that "Son of God" has in English, or the analogue in Greek. And that is the problem, not the English phrase "Son of God."

The article in *Christianity Today* may be doing its best to convey some idea of the challenges. But it simplifies. One might even say, from a technical linguistic point of view, that it falsifies what is going on, because everything is being rendered in English, and that tends to convey--especially to people with experience with only one language--false ideas about the meanings of words, constructions, and whole expressions in other languages.

## **A difficulty and misunderstanding**

Granted the limitations involved in rendering everything in English, the *Christianity Today* article is nevertheless quite informative. But then on p. 23 my name appears as one of several scholars who have said that "Messiah" is not completely equivalent to "Son of God." And indeed, this is true. My discussion appears in a 2005 internet article entitled, "[Bible Translation and Contextualization: Theory and Practice in Bangladesh](#)." Unfortunately, because of the context, the article in *Christianity Today* may appear to suggest that my position criticizes Rick Brown and all others who are seeking alternatives to a taboo expression "Son of God." This is not true, as a careful reading of my article will show.

## **Clarifying**

In the 2005 article I point out that the expression "Son of God" is sometimes used in the New Testament to refer to the Messianic figure for whom the Jews hoped. For example, in Matthew 26:63

the high priest presses the question: "... tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." The expression "Son of God" is brought into close relationship to "the Christ," that is, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. The association made by the high priest doubtless arises partly from a passage like Psalm 2:7, "The LORD said to me, 'You are *my Son*; today I have begotten you,' " which the New Testament shows is fulfilled in Jesus the Christ (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). Hebrews 5:5 says explicitly that Psalm 2:7 applies to Jesus' appointment as high priest, which is part of his mediatorial and Messianic role. Nevertheless, the expression "Son of God" is not completely equivalent to "Messiah," because it has associations with family, intimacy, and love.

It is important that people learn that the Bible is *not* saying Jesus is a "son" in exactly the same way and at the same level as in the normal process of biological reproduction in human families. The word "son" is used analogically rather than on the same level. At the same time, it is also important that, for the long run, we enable people to see the biblical teaching that there is an *analogy* between the divine relationship of Father and Son in the Trinity and the human relationships of father and son among human beings. This analogy is particularly evident in the Gospel of John, which sometimes uses the expression "the Son" as well as "Son of God," and which uses the expression in close relationship to the designation of God the Father as "Father."

As a result, I am critical of any translation that would put into the New Testament text the expression "Messiah" (or equivalent) instead of "Son of God" (or equivalent)--*with no further explanation*. But this kind of translation is not what Rick Brown or other respected Bible translators are considering. There are other alternatives, such as "spiritual Son of God" and "beloved Son who comes from God," both of which clearly *retain* the idea of a relationship analogous to a human family relationship between father and son. We must be sensitive to how people actually hear and understand a Bible translation, as well as what we ourselves intend when we use a particular expression.

Let me put it another way. Suppose we choose in the target language a particular promising-looking expression, with the intention of having that expression mean "Son of God" (in the sense given to "Son of God" in some passage of the Bible). Our choice does us no good if that is not what our chosen expression in fact means in the target language. Languages will bend and adjust to new expressions to some extent, but one must not try forcibly to thrust in a meaning that is alien to the character of the language and thereby generates constant misunderstanding. Carefully selected expressions may succeed *better* in representing and communicating meaning than an expression that violates a taboo and that produces the wrong set of associations when it is heard.

My 2005 article also notes the possibility of using footnotes or other accompanying explanations. Fuller explanations that are printed along with the text of the Bible enable readers in the long run to see more thoroughly and deeply the full implications of the meaning in the original languages. I fully support such explanations, and think that in many circumstances they offer an excellent means of avoiding the two extremes, either creating offense through a taboo expression or leaving out an important aspect of meaning.

*Christianity Today* mentions other scholars--for instance, Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary and Jack Collins of Covenant Theological Seminary--along with me (p. 23). They too have concerns about losing meaning. Obviously I cannot speak for them. But I suspect that they are articulating the same concerns that I have articulated above. They want to make sure that meaning and family associations do not drop out. But that is very different from rejecting translations that retain the meaning while avoiding a taboo expression.

## **The challenge of translation**

It is also worth saying that Bible translation achieves more or less accuracy, not perfection. We are thankful that people can be saved from hearing the gospel in a Bible translation, even though the translation has not captured every last ounce of meaning. The central message is still clear. The translation is still the word of God, because it does express the meaning of the original, even if not every last ounce. No translation is going to capture every nuance of meaning in the original in a perfect way; and that is one reason why we train some people in knowledge of the original languages, and why we have preachers to continue to expound the meaning. It does not mean that we give up on translation or underestimate its value.

People who are sensitive to fine nuances of meaning and who know the original languages sufficiently well begin to recognize that translation is a matter of more or less, not always the exact representation of every aspect of meaning. If you say it one way, you put in the background one aspect that is there in the original. If you say it another way, you risk dropping some other aspect. If you say it a third way, many readers will misunderstand you, even though you yourself know what it "is supposed to mean." Adding notes and explanations ("paratext") is one way of supplying more information to the reader in tough cases, especially in important cases like the translation of "Son of God."

The explanations can provide a literal word-for-word rendering of the key expression "Son of God" to indicate to readers the nature of the issue, and also provide explanations of the theology of the Bible concerning the Son of God. Such explanation can also indicate where some nuances may otherwise fail to appear in translation. Critics and Bible users would be wise not to be overly critical when the challenge is this complex.

## **Rick Brown's role**

There is a final irony. The article in *Christianity Today* specifically mentions Rick Brown as one of the people who are advocating the legitimacy of replacement expressions instead of a taboo expression "Son of God." *Christianity Today* sets forth my position as if I oppose Dr. Brown. In fact, I comment favorably on his approach at more than one point in my 2005 article:

Rick Brown indicates that in some contexts one may use an expression like 'spiritual Son of God' to head off the misunderstanding. In such a context the less literal translation may be better in representing the meaning.

and

Thus Brown's suggestion above, involving the use of footnotes and other aids, may prove superior in the long run.

My article also includes a footnote acknowledging the help I received from Rick Brown in producing the whole article.

## **Conclusion**

We should rejoice that we are seeing Muslims who are reading the Bible. And we should rejoice that Bible translators are paying close attention to what a variety of expressions mean in a target language,

and are trying hard to convey meaning accurately for the sake of the gospel and the salvation of souls. This process can help to overcome barriers of misunderstanding among Muslims, without compromising the message of the Bible.