

The “Son of God”

Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus

There is much confusion about the Messianic titles, even among Christians. The way we use and interpret the titles of Jesus among Muslims is not only confusing but often repulsive, leading many to reject the Word of God before they have a chance to consider its message. This article addresses the issues involved and if heeded will promote proper communication of the Gospel to Muslim peoples so that they may be able to hear, call upon the Lord and be saved.

by Rick Brown

In the Ancient Near East, the main social structure had originally been the tribe, but people extended the rights, duties, and privileges of tribal membership to others by making covenants. Kingdoms arose and expanded when a king made a covenant with his people. The king was then called ‘father’, his vassals were called ‘his sons’, and they called each other ‘brothers’ (Barker 1995:19). In this way, the Israelite covenant community used kinship terms such as ‘son’, ‘brother’ and ‘father’ to describe social relationships as well as biological relationships. When a king made a covenant with a subservient king, they called each other ‘father’ and ‘son’. God’s covenant with David is expressed in these very terms (2 Sam. 7:14 and parallels, Ps. 2:7, Isa. 9:6, Ps. 89). In the New Testament, the King-Messiah is called ‘God’s Son’, his people are called ‘God’s sons’, and God is called ‘their Father’.

Problems with Sonship Terminology

In some languages and people groups kinship terminology is only used for biological relationships, not for social or covenant relationships. If people are called ‘sons of the king’ or the king is called ‘their father’, it means but one thing to them—the king had carnal relations with their mothers. In many cases, such languages attribute no implication of continuing care to these kinship terms; they simply assert a biological relationship. In Arabic, for example, the words for son and father have a biological meaning only. The terms are not used broadly or metaphorically for other interpersonal relationships, not even for a nephew, step-son, or an adopted son, and certainly not for the king’s subjects nor for God’s people.

Judging from the testimony of the Qur’an, when ancient Christians translated these Hebrew expressions literally into Arabic, they gave the impression that they claimed to be God’s offspring (5:18), that Jesus was the result of God’s relationship with a female companion (6:101), that Jesus and Mary were both gods alongside God (5:73, 116), and that the prophets of old were his offspring as well (21:26; 9:30). This view is condemned in the Qur’an as so insulting to the majesty of God as to almost cause the heavens to burst, the earth to split, and the mountains to collapse (19:88-92). Against this the Qur’an affirms that both Mary and Jesus ate food (5:75), meaning they were humans, not gods; that God has no consort or child (72:3; 6:101),

God neither begets nor is begotten (112); and that anyone who calls Jesus ‘offspring of God’ is a *kâfir*, meaning an infidel condemned to hell forever (9:30). The Qur’an scoffs at those who call themselves ‘sons of God’, pointing out that these people are created human beings (5:18), and obviously not gods. It warns that if anyone calls himself a god like *Allah*, he is assured a place in hell (21:29).

Muslims everywhere have been taught that Christians believe this blasphemous biological sonship of God, and their teachers commonly cite this to “prove” Christianity and the Bible are corrupt and full of errors. So when Muslims encounter the phrase ‘God’s son’ in literal translations of the Bible, they not only misunderstand it, they are filled with abhorrence and conclude the Bible is blasphemous and must be avoided. We will therefore look at the meanings of these terms in the first century and suggest effective ways to understand and explain them.

The Title “Sons of God”

Hebrew and Aramaic often use constructions with the word ‘son’ to signify belonging, as in ‘sons of Israel’, ‘sons of Babylon’ (Ez. 23:17), ‘sons of Zion’

(Ps. 149:2), 'sons of the prophets' (2 Ki. 2:5), 'sons of man' (Ez. 2:1; Dan. 8:17), 'sons of the Kingdom' (Mt. 13:38), as well as for benefiting from something, as in 'sons of the resurrection' (Lk. 20:36), 'sons of light' (Lk. 16:8; Jn. 12:36), and 'son of peace' (Lk. 10:6). Similarly the phrase 'sons of God', in both the singular and plural, is used in the Bible to refer to individuals, peoples, and angels who willingly belong to God and enjoy his special favor. God called the Israelites and those associated with them to accept a covenant by which they would be his faithful and chosen people. He would care for them as their "Father" (Deut. 32:6; Jer. 31:9), and they would corporately be his "son" or "sons".

Israel is my first-born son.... (Ex. 4:22; see Hos. 11:1, RSV¹)

You are the sons of the Lord your God... (Deut. 14:1)

In the century before Christ, the phrase 'sons of God' was applied to those who kept the covenant and were considered righteous (Wisdom 18:4-9).

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In the New Testament, citizens are described as "sons of the kings", unlike conquered subjects (Mt. 17:25). Similarly, being "sons of God" is equivalent to being "sons of the Kingdom" (Mt. 13:38), meaning those accepted by God for eternal life with him in his Kingdom,

And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God'. (Rom. 9:26)

These are contrasted with those who are called 'sons of the world' (Lk. 16:8), 'sons of the evil one' (Mt. 13:38), 'child of hell' (Mt. 23:15), and 'son of perdition' (Jn. 17:12). So the phrase 'sons of God' generally refers to the people of God, also called 'his saints', those consecrated to God. Newman and Stine (1988:113) recommend expressing this metaphor as a simile:

The phrase "sons of God" (children of God) causes a problem in cultures where readers would not understand this phrase to be figurative and, further, would not accept the idea of God having physical offspring. Translators in these cases sometimes use similes, as in "God will say they are like children to him," "God will consider them as if they were his children," or "God will have a relationship with (or, will care for) them like a father with his children."

Most Muslims, however, are so sensitive about attributing sons to God that even a sonship simile can be repugnant to them. Islam does not recognize adoption, so that simile does not work either. If the meaning of 'kingdom of God' has been explained, then 'sons of God' can also be explained as "the people of God's Kingdom" (*ahlu mamlakati llâh*). Unfortunately many believers do not understand the Kingdom of God concept, complicated further by the fact that most Arabic translations have expressed it as 'God's sovereignty' (*malakuutu llâh*), to which everyone is already subject. The phrase *ahlu llâh* 'people/family of God' is usually acceptable, since it does not demand a biological interpretation as 'sons of God' does in Arabic, but people generally do not use this expression.

Most natural would be to explain 'sons of God' and 'saints' by using expressions they already know and understand, such as 'the righteous servants of God' (*'ibâdu llâhi S-SâliHîn*), meaning those whom God has accepted (justified). This is especially appropriate in passages referring to believers' current standing with God (Mt. 5:9, Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:26). Another paraphrase is 'companions of God' (*'awliyâ'u llâh*). This phrase was used to translate 'sons of God' in *The Elegant Gospels*, one of the most ancient Arabic translations of the Gospels,² and is especially appropriate when explaining passages that refer to the believers' future state (Lk. 20:36; Eph. 1:5; and perhaps Rom. 8:19).

Another paraphrase suitable for the future state of God's "sons" is 'those close to God' (*al-muqarrabûn*). This expression is usually applied to Jesus and the angels, and highlights the Christian hope of direct fellowship with God. Curiously, these terms are acceptable to Muslims, while the Qur'an (5:18) criticizes the Christians' self-description as 'beloved ones of God' (*'aHibbâ'u llâh*). In modern dialects, however, this expression sounds like it means "God's buddies", which is also objection-

*According
to the Qur'an, if God wanted a son,
he would not have had to beget one [with a woman];
rather, he would have created one by his own command
(19:35).*

able. We see here that part of what hinders Christian-Muslim dialogue is simply the use of objectionable words rather than objectionable concepts—though the latter also exist (e.g., mankind’s hopeless sinfulness, the divinity of Christ and his sacrificial death).

The Title “Son of Man”

The title Jesus preferred for himself was ‘Son of Man’. But as Newman and Nida note, “for the reader of English who does not have the theological training, ‘Son of Man’ is generally either a zero term, or it is misunderstood as a reference to Jesus’ human nature” (1980:52). Muslims often misunderstand the term to be a denial by Jesus of any claim to divinity, which is almost the opposite of its intended meaning.

The indefinite construction ‘a son of man’ was the normal Aramaic idiom for a human, but the definite construction, ‘the son of man’, was not used except in reference to the human-like ruler mentioned in Daniel 7:13. This passage, below, inspired great hope that instead of a merely human Messiah, a heavenly person “like a son of man” would come from heaven to save people of all nations from sin and evil and be their king in a kingdom established by God:

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. (Dan. 2:44)

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed ...the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, for ever and ever. (Dan. 7:14-14, 18)

This passage introduced the idea that the Christ/Messiah would not just be a restored king of the Jews who would give them dominion over other peoples, but rather he would save and rule all peoples inclusively.

This concept was elaborated in certain Jewish writings before Christ. For instance, *1 Enoch* speaks of “that Son of Man” and “the Son of Man” in regard to a pre-existent heavenly being who will come to establish his kingdom, destroy evil, rule the earth, judge all people at the resurrection, and usher in a new world that is free of all evil. Other titles used in *1 Enoch* include ‘the Elect One’, ‘the Righteous One’, ‘the Light of the Nations’ (48:4), ‘God’s Messiah’ (52:4), and God’s ‘Son’ (105:2). Similar titles or expectations are found in other works of that time (*4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, and the *Testament of Abraham*).

As many scholars have noted, first-century Jews were united in their hope for the Messiah and his kingdom, but divided in expectations about their coming. Some awaited Daniel’s heavenly ruler, whom they called ‘the Son of Man’, to rule all nations equitably in an age of peace and righteousness. But most Jews awaited a nationalist leader to lead them in successful battle against their enemies, making Israel the righteous ruler of the world. They used a variety of royal, Davidic titles to describe their awaited commander, such as ‘Messiah/Christ’, ‘Son of David’, and ‘Son of God’. Jesus, however, clearly avoided these titles associated with Jewish nationalism, choosing instead to identify himself with the ‘Son of Man’ concept and title.

Jesus declared that the ‘Son of Man’ came from heaven (Jn. 3:13) and that the Son of Man has authority higher than the Law (Mt. 12:8; parallels: Mk. 2:28; Lk. 6:5), that he has authority to forgive sins (Mt. 9:6; and parallels: Mk. 2:10; Lk. 5:24), that the ‘Son of Man’ has power to raise the dead (Jn. 5:21,28; cf. Php. 3:21) and power even to raise himself from the dead (Jn. 2:19; 10:18), he as the ‘Son of Man’ has authority to grant eternal life to others (Jn. 17:2; Mt. 25:34,46), that his kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18:36-37 and that at the end the ‘Son of Man’ will come in his glory (Mt. 25:31), that he reveals the glory of his Father (Mt. 16:27) that he sends his angels (Mt. 13:41; 16:27) and that the ‘Son of Man’ sits on his glorious throne (Mt. 19:28; 25:31), that he will judge everyone in all the nations (Mt. 16:27; 25:31ff).

The phrase ‘Son of Man’ is clearly an exalted title in its first-century Jewish context, especially as Jesus used it.

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Outside of Jewish contexts, however, it had so little meaning that the Epistles drop it completely in favor of other titles, principally ‘Lord’. It is absent from the preaching in Acts as well, occurring only in Steven’s exclamation in Acts 7:56. Not only does the phrase ‘Son of Man’ lack the intended content in most languages, but it also has unwanted meanings in some languages, such as “bastard.”

Some translations have used expressions like ‘the Man from Heaven’, ‘the Man from God’, ‘He who was born a man’, and ‘the Messiah’ (Living Bible). Many translations simply use the pronoun ‘I’ when Jesus is referring to himself as the ‘Son of Man’. The New Testament writers themselves, when not quoting Jesus, refer to him as ‘Lord’ rather than ‘Son of Man’. ‘Lord’ is a title Jesus accepted and even encouraged (Jn. 13:13; Mt. 25:45).

A new Arabic translation, *al-kitâbu sh-sharîf*, has adopted the translation ‘the One Who became man’ (*allâdhi Sâra basharan*) in place of the incomprehensible *ibnu l-’insân* (‘Son of the Person’). While weak on expressing authority, this expression is unique in its application to Jesus and keeps the ‘man’ part of the original title—hinting at his more-than-human heavenly origin. It is also possible to explain or translate ‘Son of Man’ as ‘lord of all’ (*sayyidu l-kawn*) (Acts 10:36) or ‘lord of mankind’, but this could be confusing in Muslim contexts since some already use these titles for Muhammad.

Therefore, one can explain the title ‘Son of Man’ by referring to the passage in Daniel 2 and 7, describing one who is like a man because he is more than a man. He was originally in heaven and has been given authority over all the earth to establish God’s redemptive Kingdom. This would reflect the first-century understanding of the term. One can then review what Jesus said about himself as the Son of Man, as noted above.

The “Messiah” and “Son of God” Titles in the Old Testament

God ruled his special Old Testament kingdom through the agency of King David and those of his sons whom he anointed, and they related to God as his vice regents. The one chosen by God to rule his people was called ‘his anointed’ (lit. ‘his messiah’, Ps. 2:2; 132:17) as well as just ‘his king’ (Ps. 18:50), meaning appointed by God and accountable to him alone.

Throughout the ancient Near East, it was common to call a king ‘son of God’ after he was enthroned, if not ‘god’ (see Fossum 1992, Hoffmeier 1997). This was more a functional than ontological title—though a few kings became arrogant and actually claimed divinity for themselves. The title ‘son of God’ meant they had divinely sanctioned authority over their subjects, and were themselves subject to no one but God. Fossum, for example, mentions a monument in Pergamum that commemorates “emperor Caesar, Son of God [Greek, *theou huios*], God Augustus” (1992:133). In their book *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, Moulton and Milligan cite papyri that use ‘son of God’ as a royal title for Caesar, such as one dated “the thirty-ninth year of the dominion of Caesar son of God,” and another from the emperor himself, signed “Caesar Augustus, son of God” (1930:649).

Similar terminology was used in Israel as well. The role of Moses with respect to Pharaoh was called that of ‘god’ (Ex. 7:1); the early judges were called ‘gods’ (Ex.

22:8, 9, and perhaps 28), as were the rulers (Ps. 82:1, 6) and king (Ps. 45:6-9; Isa 9:6 (verse 5 in Hebrew)). More common, however, was the term 'son of God'. It was a fitting title for a king who acted as a peoples' representative before God, and as God's vice regent to rule over them. As was common at that time, the king's vice-regency to God was expressed by calling him God's 'son' (Ps. 2:7; 72:1; Isa 9:5), even his 'first-born' (Ps. 89:27). This metaphor indicated both that the king's authority came from God and that his kingdom was a trust from God to whom he must give account.

*Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son!
May he judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with justice!
(Ps. 72:1-2)*

Similarly, the chosen king's enthronement is compared to an adoption of begetting:

I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him.... (2 Sam. 7:14-15; parallel: 1 Chr. 17:13-14) Then he will speak to them... saying, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you. (Ps. 2:5-7; cf. Isa. 9:6a).

Although the people of God's kingdom in the Old Testament era could call God 'Father' or 'our Father' (Isa. 64:8), it seems it was only the anointed king who could call him 'my Father', reflecting their ideal relationship:

[David] shall cry to me, 'Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.' And I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth. (Ps. 89:26-27)

This explains why the authorities became so upset when Jesus called God 'my Father' (Jn. 5:17-18), even though they themselves called God their Father (Jn. 8:41). It is clear that the royal titles of 'messiah/anointed' and 'son of God' were more or less equivalent, and the second Psalm uses both.

But in the Muslim world, kinship terms are not used for the relationship between God and his chosen king, and the meaning of 'messiah' is not known. These passages can be clarified, however, by explaining that the phrase means "the one God has chosen to be king over his people." It is important to note that the divinely appointed king was not just a ruler; he was supposed to guide the people in accordance with God's law and save them by God's grace from crime, waywardness, and outside aggression.

“Messiah” and “Son of God” Titles in the New Testament

It is often said that the greatest obstacle to Muslim-Christian dialogue is the phrase 'son of God'. Before dealing with this issue, let us first understand it as it is used in the

Bible, not just as it is commonly used in systematic theology.

The Davidic monarchy appeared to have ended with the Exile, but God had promised that David's throne would last forever. People expected God would anoint a descendant of David to be the ultimate messiah-king. In addition to Daniel 2 and 7, several prophecies encouraged them to hope for a savior-king, who would live forever and whose divinely-appointed kingdom would never end:

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephra-
thah, who are little to be among
the clans of Judah, from you
shall come forth for me one who
is to be ruler in Israel, whose
origin is from of old, from
ancient days. (Micah 5:2)*

Just as Daniel 7:13 inspired the title "Son of Man" for the coming Savior, many of these prophecies inspired Messianic titles as well. The most quoted prophecy of Christ is Psalm 110:1, which introduced the title 'Lord':

*The Lord says to my lord: "Sit
at my right hand, till I make
your enemies your footstool."*

The most common Old Testament titles for the coming Savior use the name 'David', which inspired 'Son of David' as a Messianic title:

*And I, the Lord, will be their God,
and my servant David shall be
prince among them. (Eze 34:24.
See also Isa. 11:1-10, Jer. 23:5-
6, 33:15; Eze. 37:25-26; 1Chr.
17:11-12; Mk. 11:10; Mt.
9:27; 12:23; 15:21)*

The servant of the Lord title (seen in Mt. 12:18-21; Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30, and echoed at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration) arises from Isaiah 42:1:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. (see also Isa. 42:2-4, 52:13-53:12)

God shows his choice of David to be "highest of the kings" by calling him his "first-born" in Psalm 89:26-27, and he chooses Solomon to be his "son" in 2 Sam. 7:14 (parallel: 1 Chr. 17:13-14), but Isa. 9:6-7 applies 'Son' to the Savior King and may lie behind John 3:16. By the time of Jesus, Jewish teachers were interpreting all royal 'son' and 'messiah' passages as Messianic, along with less obvious passages (e.g., Gen. 3:15, 49:10, Num. 24:17-19, Ps. 80:15, and perhaps Ps. 118:22-29), and thus 'God's Son' became a title for the coming Savior-King. Of these passages, the New Testament picks out Psalm 2 as referring prophetically to the Messiah, quoting parts of it in many places:

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed [lit., 'his messiah], ... "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He 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.

But as mentioned previously, expectations differed among Jews. Nationalists were expecting God to send a military leader to destroy Gentile armies, expel sinners and foreigners, and restore the kingdom of Israel to dominate the world on God's behalf. They were ready to go to war as soon as the Messiah appeared. They called their anticipated hero 'the King of Israel', 'the Messiah of Israel', 'the Lord Messiah',

'the Son of David', 'God's Messiah', and 'God's Son'.³ Their messianic expectation is clearly seen in the *Psalms of Solomon*, composed in the century before Christ. This book of psalms contain the earliest record of the title 'Messiah' being used for the awaited savior-king. A portion of psalm 17 illustrates the prevailing nationalist concept of a warrior-Messiah who will save the righteous by destroying the unrighteous:

See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel in the time known to you, O God. Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers, to purge Jerusalem from gentiles who trample her to destruction; in wisdom and in righteousness to drive out the sinners from the inheritance; to smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter's jar; to shatter all their substance with an iron rod; to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth.... He will not tolerate unrighteousness (even) to pause among them, and any person who knows wickedness shall not live with them.... And he will have gentile nations serving him under his yoke... An he will be a righteous king over them, taught by God. There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days, for all shall be holy, and their king shall be the Lord Messiah.

Similar descriptions of the Messiah's warfare can be found in the targums, the explanatory Aramaic translations of Scripture which were read aloud with the Hebrew text. The passage below from the Dead Sea Scrolls also exemplifies this in language similar to Luke 1:32-33 and Daniel 7, although more violent and nationalistic; it is the Jews who conquer and rule the world, and the Messiah is simply their leader.

The son of God he will be proclaimed and the son of the Most High they will call him. Like the sparks of the vision, so will be their kingdom. They will reign for years on the earth and they will trample all. People will trample people and one province another province until the people of God will arise and all will rest from the sword. Their kingdom will be an eternal kingdom and all their path will be in truth. They will judge the earth in truth and all will make peace. The sword will cease from the earth, and all the provinces will pay homage to them. The Great God is their helper. He will wage war for them. He will give peoples into their hands and all of them (the peoples) He will cast before them. Their dominion will be an eternal dominion.⁴

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Compare this with Luke 1:31-33:

You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus. He will be great; he will bear the title "Son of the Most High"; the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel for ever; his reign shall never end. (NEB)

Usage of the titles 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' in first-century Jewish writings, however, shows that while they were still equivalent, their meaning had narrowed. Instead of meaning just any Israelite king or prophet chosen by God, they generally referred to a unique, undying king through whom Israel would gain the final victory. This understanding is reflected in the 'son of God' question from the high priest (Mk. 14:61 and parallels), who, along with Pilate, understood the title as equivalent to 'King-Messiah' and 'the king of the Jews' (Lk. 23:2-3).

But Jesus rejected the nationalistic view of the Messiah and his Kingdom, and avoided the Messianic titles nationalists used, such as 'Messiah' and 'Son of God'—though he did not deny them when others used these titles of him. He insisted instead on calling himself 'the Son of Man', the inclusivist title of the Messiah, and he specifically sought to include the Gentiles in his kingdom.⁵ Had Jesus proclaimed himself "the Messiah" ('the Christ'), then nationalistic zealots might have immediately acknowledged him as king and risen up in revolt against Rome. For this reason, Jesus not only avoided these titles but forbade others from using them of him in public (Mt. 16:20). He even forbade demons from using these titles:

And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them, and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ. (Lk. 4:41)

This passage not only shows that Jesus did not want his kingly identity announced publicly; it also demonstrates that 'the Son of God' and 'the Christ' were still synonymous titles. When people addressed Jesus as 'the Christ/Messiah' or 'the Son of God', Jesus usually changed it to 'Son of Man', which was the higher title and free of nationalistic connotations:

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." ... Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he [Mark uses 'the Son of man'] must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things.... (Mt. 16:16, 20-21a)

Nathaniel answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel." ... And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." (Jn. 1:49, 51)

... tell us [the High Priest said] if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man [Dan. 7:13] seated at the right hand of Power [Ps. 110:1], and coming on the clouds of heaven [Dan. 7:13] (Mt. 26:63-64)

The High Priest's question above (Mt. 26:63; Mk. 14:61; Lk. 22:70) is footnoted in the American Bible Society's new translation, *The Contemporary English Version*, with this explanation: "Son of God: One of the titles used for the kings of Israel." But the meaning Jews attached to this title is clear from their response to Jesus' acceptance of the 'Son of God' title and his self-identification as 'the Son of Man', "And they began to accuse him... [of] saying that he himself is Christ a king" (Lk. 23:2). Pilate understood it to mean "King of the Jews" (Lk. 23:3; Mk. 15:2; Mt. 27:11; Jn. 18:33), as did his soldiers (Mk. 15:18 and parallels). They posted this same charge on the cross (Mk. 15:26), and the chief priests themselves taunted him with it, "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe" (Mk. 15:32).

It is widely accepted that Peter's important confession of who Jesus is in Mt. 16:16 "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God", like Nathaniel's in Jn. 1:49, employs two titles for the same messianic position. Furthermore, Peter's use of 'Son of God' is the normal Jewish usage, meaning the awaited Messiah. This is clearly how Luke and Mark understood Peter's confession. Luke shortens the confession to 'The Christ of God', omitting the word 'son' as superfluous, while

Mark retains only ‘You are the Christ’, omitting the appositional phrase, ‘the Son of the Living God’. Assuming Luke and Mark knew the longer form of the confession, it is unreasonable to suppose they would have omitted the title ‘Son of God’ if they thought it carried some new revelation not already present in the ‘Christ/Messiah’ title. Even in Matthew, Jesus himself abbreviates Peter’s long title to simply ‘the Christ’ (16:20). Therefore, if ‘Son of the Living God’ were a higher title than ‘the Christ’, Jesus would have commanded his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the ‘Son of God’. The fact is, although Jews had different concepts for the awaited Messiah, they used most titles interchangeably, and both ‘Christ’ and ‘Son of God’ were fairly equivalent. But because these were favored by nationalistic zealots, Jesus generally avoided them both,⁷ preferring the inclusivist heavenly savior title, ‘the Son of Man’ or the shortened form ‘the Son’, and sometimes ‘the Lord’.

Titles of Jesus after His Resurrection

After Jesus’ ascension and enthronement in heaven, there was no longer a danger that the nationalists would misunderstand his messiahship in a restorative

Christians may theologically be correct but exegetically wrong. The Scriptures ascribe divinity to Jesus in a variety of ways—not merely by calling him ‘the Son of God’.

way to start a revolution in support of him. The nature of Jesus’ kingship was now clearly understood to be “not of this world,” and so there was no longer a need to conceal his identity as the King-Messiah. In fact, the resurrection was the sign by which Jesus was publicly “designated Son of God... Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:4). His apostles were no longer bound by his commandment to “tell no one that he was the Christ” (Mt. 16:20). In fact, their task was now to proclaim to everyone the Kingdom of God in Jesus the Christ. They did so now without avoiding the royal Messianic titles such as ‘Christ’ and ‘Son of God’, which they still used interchangeably:

And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, “He is the Son of God” proving that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 9:20, 22)

... the gospel which was preached by me is not man’s gospel, ... but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ... [God] was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles. (Gal. 1:11-16)

Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God.... Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 Jn. 5:1, 5; see also Jn. 20:31, 11:27)

Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Rom. 8:9b) And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal. 4:6)

the kingdom of his beloved Son, (Col. 1:13) ...the kingdom of Christ and of God (Eph. 5:5) ...the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ (Rev. 12:10; also Rev. 11:15)

More often, however, they proclaimed Jesus simply as ‘Lord’, which replaced the ‘Son of Man’ title, probably because the latter was unknown to the Gentiles. Paul uses ‘Son of God’ terminology for Christ only twelve times and ‘the Son’ only once, never in juxtaposition with ‘the Father’, whereas he uses ‘Lord’ and ‘Christ’ hundreds of times each. So what prompted him to use ‘Son’ at all? ‘Son’ is a relational term, and an examination of the passages where Paul uses it shows that in most cases he is focusing on the dearness of Jesus to God, while in others he is identifying Christ with his followers as the one who has made them ‘sons.’

In John, on the other hand, ‘Son’ occurs mostly in contexts emphasizing a close relationship to God that reflect his nature through perfect obedience. Hebrews shows the same trend. As R. C. Sproul notes in *Who is Jesus?*, “The primary significance to sonship in the New Testament is in its figurative reference to obedience. The motif of the firstborn has more to do with preeminence than with biology” (1999:43). But for Paul, the highest title for Jesus was ‘Lord’ (Php. 2:9).

When was Jesus “Begotten”?

When Muslims read in the Bible that Jesus was “begotten” of God, it seems to confirm their belief that the Bible is corrupt and that Christians are accusing God of sleeping with Mary. According to the Qur’an, if God wanted a son, he would not have had to beget one [with a woman]; rather, he would have created one by his own command (19:35). In the Bible, however, the term ‘begetting’ is used of Jesus, not with regard

to his physical birth or his origin in God, but in regard to his enthronement. The apostles used the term ‘begotten’ to speak of the King’s enthronement, just as it was used in Ps. 2, Isa. 9:6, Ps. 110:3, and by implication in 2 Sam. 7:12-14. The ‘begetting’ of Jesus began with his resurrection and was consummated with his ascension to the throne in heaven:

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second Psalm, ‘Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee.’ (Acts 13:32-33)

In Heb. 1:1-5, the author applies the term ‘begetting’ to Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of God, at which time he obtained the name (position) above all names, that of ‘Son’.⁸ Yet the same passage affirms the eternity and divinity of the one who bears that name, so it is clearly not talking about his origin. Jesus did not come into existence at the time of his “begetting” or become divine then. Hebrews clearly implies that he is the eternal Wisdom of God, which John identifies with the Word. The ‘begetting’ refers to his enthronement as the King-Messiah—the Son of God. He was designated king before that, but there had not yet been a public declaration (Rom. 1:1-4) and heavenly enthronement. Therefore, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus constitute, in the words of R.C. Sproul, “the supreme political event of world history. The Ascension catapulted Jesus to the right hand of God, where he was enthroned as King of kings and Lord of lords” (1999:101).

The Nicene Creed

From the close of Scripture until the fourth century, when Christians wanted to refer to the divine nature of Christ, they called him the Word (*Logos*). This was a meaningful term to both Jews and Greeks, though not in exactly the same way, as seen in the Creed of Caesarea:

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, the maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God of God, Light of Light, Life of Life, Son only-begotten, First-born of all creation, begotten of the Father before all the ages,...

We believe also in one Holy Spirit.

It is very revealing that as Christianity developed in the Greek context, it lost its familiarity with the language and worldview of first-century Jewish Palestine. An elder named Arius arose and declared that since Jesus was God’s first-born son and was said to be begotten, he must not be fully God but rather the offspring of God. Arius reasoned that the Son came into existence whenever he was begotten and was therefore not eternal God but a new god. This development introduced polytheism into Christianity, and the first church council convened at Nicea in 325 AD to oppose it. Since Arius had based his position on the fact that Jesus is called God’s Son, they replaced ‘Word of God’ in the Creed of Caesarea with ‘Son of God’, but added an

explanation that ‘begotten’ meant “from the being of the Father” (Greek, *ek tês ousias tou patros*). After this, people began to use ‘Son of God’ the way they had used ‘Word of God’ before, to refer to the divine nature of Christ. So it is natural for Christians today, when they read ‘Son of God’ in the Bible, to think of Christ’s origin in God rather than his role as Savior and Lord of all. Although they were theologically correct, exegetically they were wrong. The Scriptures ascribe divinity to Jesus in a variety of ways, but not by merely calling him ‘the Son of God’.

The “Messiah/Christ” and “Son of God” Titles

Muslims will agree that Jesus is “the Messiah” (though they do not know what this means), and argue that Christianity is obviously false because it claims that God begets offspring. So before explaining ‘Son of God’, one must first explain the meaning of the title ‘the Messiah/Christ’ as developed in the Bible. After doing this, I gently explain that ‘Son of God’ is merely a title for the Messiah, meaning God loves him and sent him as the Messiah with power from God, so that all people should honor and obey him. Some will go on to declare we worship three gods, but when I read Mark 12:29-30 to them, that the most important commandment is to recognize God is One and that we should love him with undivided hearts, they are astounded and have new respect for the Bible. If they say we worship Jesus as God, I ask if Jesus is God’s Word whom he cast into the virgin Mary to be born as a man called ‘the Messiah’. Most reply affirmatively, but do not understand what these titles mean, providing opportunity to explain Jesus as the Word of God.

Nevertheless, even when properly explained, Muslims are loathe to use the phrase 'Son of God' because of the negative and fearful associations it has had throughout their lives. It is therefore usually best to avoid it. In fact, many Muslims who have read the Gospel and come to faith in Jesus cannot bring themselves to call him or themselves 'sons of God'.

In 1989 a video on the life of Christ was being recorded in a certain language. Several actors were engaged to do the voicing, all from non-Christian backgrounds. As they learned their parts, they loved the story and believed the entire message: the power and authority of Jesus, his wondrous claims, sacrificial death, victorious resurrection, and plans to come again. But they could not accept that Jesus was sired by God. Even after hearing several explanations of the phrase, they refused to utter words that to them and their people could only mean God had fornicated with Mary. So the translator finally changed 'Son of God' to 'Beloved of God', a phrase these people used for an only son. Everyone was satisfied and they recorded the video.

This illustrates that the main problem here with 'Son of God' is the wording itself. Since 'Son' is used in contexts emphasizing the dear and intimate relationship of Christ to God, 'God's Beloved' can convey this appropriately. 'Companion (*wali*) of God' has also been used, and while one would think it sounds like *shirk* (polytheism), it has been an acceptable term.⁹ Another acceptable phrase is 'the One loved by God as a father loves his son'. Other translators have used 'God's Messiah', which is accurate if the term 'Messiah' is explained. It should be remembered that biblically, the title 'Messiah/Christ' has no less significance than 'Son of God'. As the Scriptures reveal who Jesus really is,

the meaning of both 'Christ' and 'Son of God' expand to encompass the Word and Wisdom and Image of God, incarnate as the Savior of all mankind.

Nevertheless, Christians in some places have made such an issue of calling Jesus and themselves 'sons of God', that they oppose any translation that uses synonyms, even if it would allow many more people to hear the Word with an open heart and be saved. Recently I read a report about two people groups which have traditionally been very closed to Christianity, as they understood it. Cassette tapes on the life of Christ were produced for them using the phrase 'God's Messiah' and 'God's Word' instead of 'Son of God'. The tapes became very popular. People freely shared them with others and talked openly about the death and resurrection of Jesus as historical facts of great significance for their salvation. But many Christians in neighboring groups, rather than rejoice at the spread of the Good News, complained about the wording. In some cases, outside Christians have even prevented such tapes from being distributed. On the day of judgment, will those who might have heard and believed the Gospel stand up to accuse such Christians of hindering their salvation? Only God knows.

Title "the Son"

Jesus also called himself 'the Son'. The fact that Jesus is never quoted as calling himself 'the Son of God' in the Synoptic Gospels indicates that 'the Son' is his shortened form of 'the Son of Man' title, occurring in contexts where changes of reference are frequent, making it awkward and unnatural to use a longer title:

All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Mt. 11:27; parallel: Lk. 10:22)

But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Mk. 13:32; parallel: Mt. 24:36)

In contexts where there is less rapid change of reference, the longer form is used, even when juxtaposed with 'the Father':

For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father. (Mt. 16:27; parallels: Mk. 8:38; Lk. 9:26)

Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal. (Jn. 6:27)

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; ... As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. (Jn. 6:53, 57)

So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me. (Jn. 8:28)

Where one finds Jesus calling himself ‘God’s Son’ in John, it is generally in association with being the ‘Son of Man’ (Jn. 5:25-27; 3:13-17). In his epistles, John does not use ‘the Lord’ at all for Jesus; instead he uses ‘the Son’ as well as ‘the Christ’. So one can explain ‘the Son’ as an abbreviation of ‘Son of Man’, meaning the one sent from heaven as king and savior for all mankind.

The Title “Lord”

The most quoted messianic passage in the Old Testament is Psalm 110:1, “The Lord [Yhwh] said to my Lord” Jesus himself accepted and affirmed the title ‘Lord’ (Mt. 7:21-22, 12:8; 21:3; 24:42; 25:11, 37, 44; Jn. 13:13-14), and the apostles chose it over ‘Son of Man’ as their most popular title for Jesus. They came to understand that Jesus is “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36) and not just “King of the Jews.”

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Php. 2:9-11)

Given that this had been a title for the Roman emperor, meaning he was the ruler of the world, the Christians’ claim that Jesus is Lord led to numerous persecutions in the first centuries. Confusion arises, however, from the fact that the Greek Bible uses *kurios* ‘Lord’ to translate the Hebrew name of God ‘Yhwh’, as do most modern translations. The Greek, however, makes a subtle grammatical distinction between ‘Lord’ as a name for God and ‘Lord’ as a Messianic title. In the Aramaic of Jesus and the early church, the equivalent Messianic title was *marana* ‘our lord’ (as in 1 Cor. 16:22), while the name of God was *marya* ‘the Lord’. The Hebrew version of Matthew used *adon* ‘Lord’ for the Messiah and *Yhwh* for the name of God, as in the Old Testament.

In Jewish Arabic translations of the Bible, God’s Hebrew name *Yhwh* was translated using his Arabic name *Allah*, but most modern Christian Arabic Bible translations have used *ar rabb*. The term *rabb* means “highest caretaker/upbringer,” and is usually found in possessed constructions, such as *rabbu l-bayt* ‘head of the household’, *rabbu l-â’ila* ‘head of the family, patriarch’, and *rabbunâ* ‘our caretaker, our Lord’. This latter construction is quite common and evokes thoughts of fatherly care. The form *yâ rabb* is frequently used to address God in prayer. Unfortunately, the modern Arabic translations have used the rare form *ar rabb*, not only for the Father, but also as a title for the Messiah. As a result, when Muslims see *ar rabb* in the New Testament, they assume it refers to God (the Father). When they read that people “preached in the name of the Lord” (Acts 9:29; 14:3) or “believed in the Lord” (Acts 11:21; 18:8), they assume it means people believed in God, which they as Muslims already do. They do not hear in these verses the call to believe in Christ. When they read *ar rabb* clearly used of Christ, they react negatively as if he were being called ‘the Father’.

In *The Elegant Gospels* of the 9th-century, the name of God is translated as *Allah* or *ar rabb* or *rabbî* or *rabbuna*, and the Messianic title “Lord” is translated as *sayyid* or *sayyiduna* or *mawlânâ* ‘our Lord’ and sometimes as *îsa* ‘Jesus’. This policy has

also been followed in some recent versions of the JESUS film and in *al-kitâbu sh-sharîf*. So when Muslims ask why Jesus is called *ar rabb*, it can be explained that it means *mawlânâ* ‘our Lord’ or *sayyidu l-kawn* ‘Lord of creation’, and that this is more or less the meaning of the title ‘Messiah’ as well.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of confusion about the Messianic titles, even among Christians. They often misinterpret the titles to be statements of genealogy and of being rather than titles defining particular roles. ‘Son of God’ becomes a statement of deity, and ‘Son of Man’ becomes a statement of humanity, whereas the original intent was that ‘Son of Man’ and ‘Lord’ should describe Jesus’ authority over all mankind, while ‘Son of God’ and ‘Messiah’ meant he was the eternal king over the people of God’s kingdom. Among Muslims, however, these titles are not only confusing but often repulsive, leading many to reject the Word of God before they have a chance to consider its message. It is hoped that this article and the summary of the issues involved will promote understanding of the Messianic titles, enabling believers to explain them effectively. Serious Muslim objections to reading the Bible or considering Christ can melt away when these terms are correctly understood, translated and explained.

Endnotes

1. Biblical quotations are quoted from the *Revised Standard Version*, 2nd edition 1971, except where otherwise indicated.
2. *The Elegant Gospels* are preserved in manuscripts Leiden OR 561 and Vatican Arabic 17 and 18. These manuscripts are said to date to the 9th century, and are called “Elegant” because

of their poetic style.

3. Newman and Stine suggest that when Jews used ‘Son of God’ for the Messiah, “the primary reference was to the moral relationship of love and filial obedience which should exist between a father and his son” (1988:80).
4. Qumran document 4Q246, as translated by Vermes (1997:577). See also 4Q174, which interprets the royal son in 1 Sam. 7:12-14 as a reference to the Messianic ‘Branch of David.’
5. The inclusion of the Gentiles is supported by passages such as Isa. 2:4; 11:10; 42:1; 52:10,15; 55:4-5; Ps. 2:7-8, and Amos 9:11 (as quoted in Acts 15:16-17). Their inclusion by Jesus is mentioned in Mt. 8:10-12; 21:43; 24:14; 28:19; Jn. 10:16, as well as other passages.
6. “Since both these terms are equally Messianic titles, there is no anticlimax in the present passage which places King of Israel after Son of God. The order is perfectly logical and reflects a definite temporal sequence, for it is only as Jesus is designated the Son of God that he can become the King of Israel in this Messianic sense” (Newman and Nida 1980:50).
7. Jesus made subtle use of ‘son’ in the parable of the wicked tenants, where the landlord sends his “beloved son” to collect the rent (Mt. 21:37; Mk. 12:6; Lk 20:13). Jesus uses ‘Son of God’ in Jn. 5:25, 10:36, and perhaps 3:16. He subtly calls himself ‘Christ’ in Mt. 23:10, Mk. 9:41, Lk. 24:26, 46 and Jn. 17:3. Of course, he also accepts these titles from others in Jn. 4:26, 11:27.
8. In Php. 2:9-11, the name (position) he is given above all names (positions) is that of ‘Lord’, and in Eph. 1:20-21 it is ‘Christ’. It seems evident that these titles are more or less equivalent in status. There is also a fragment from the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, IQSa II, which describes the coronation of the Messiah as the time when God “begets” him.
9. This was used in some passages in the 9th century *The Elegant Gospels*. The term Safi was used for ‘Son’ in the high priest’s question in Mt. 26:63 and parallels, and in one of the devil’s temptations in Lk. 4:9 and parallels. ‘Chosen One’ (*muStafa*) was used in the confession of the centurion at Mt. 27:54.

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