A Further Look at Translating "Son of God"

by Michael LeFebvre and Basheer Abdulfadi

Introduction

A controversy has emerged in recent years over the best way to translate certain New Testament terms for Muslim cultures, terms like "Son of God" for Jesus and "Father" for God.

Many Muslims believe that when Christians call Jesus the "Son of God" it means that God physically (sexually) sired Jesus by Mary. Such an idea is so repugnant to Muslims that when they encounter it in the Bible, some refuse to read further! Christians of course vigorously deny this idea. Nevertheless, this misunderstanding is widespread in Muslim societies.

Because of this and other concerns, some translators concluded that using a word-for-word translation for "Son of God" and "Father" in Muslim languages communicates a wrong meaning. In a series of articles from 2000 to 2007, Rick Brown documented alternate ways in which some translators have avoided the connotations sometimes evoked by traditional approaches.[1] At that time, he suggested meaning-based (rather than form-based) translations would provide accurate meaning and avoid offensive connotations. In particular, at that time Brown proposed the use of synonyms like "Christ of God" or "Christ sent from God" along with an explanation in the translation's introduction about the meaning of divine familial terms.[2] As translations using non-traditional terms or phrases for "Son of God" began to appear, many missionaries, national church leaders and other Christians reacted with alarm.[3] Subsequent writings refined the approach and addressed criticisms,[4] but the controversy continued and intensified.

Due to public pressure over the issue, Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL have agreed to submit to a binding external and independent review of their translation policies regarding divine familial terms.[5] This step, now underway, represents a pivotal opportunity for progress toward the resolution of these

Michael LeFebvre (PhD, Old Testament, University of Aberdeen) is the pastor of Christ Church (RPCNA) in Brownsburg, Indiana. Basheer Abdulfadi is a Western tentmaker who has worked in evangelism and discipleship in the Arabian Peninsula for 19 years.

questions. As Wycliffe and SIL submit to this review, we believe it is important for all connected to this conflict to step back and assess where the controversy stands and what key issues remain unresolved.

We approach this issue as a missionary (Basheer Abdulfadi) with nineteen years of experience in evangelism and discipleship in the Middle East and a pastor (Michael LeFebvre) with a scholarly background in Old Testament studies and ancient Near Eastern law.[6] We appreciate the missiological goals that prompted the use of non-traditional translations for "Son of God" and "Father," and at the same time are aware of the importance of the word-for-word forms for bringing out the theological significance of these terms. We offer perspectives on some of the key issues to affirm what we believe is best, explain what is not, and call all sides to engage with renewed hope for resolution.

We understand that the present controversy is much larger than the focused issues taken up in this paper. For instance, the controversy is no longer just about translation issues. The personal affronts and charges of ungodliness concerning the way various efforts have been pursued are matters of moral offense that need to be resolved (Matt. 18:15–20). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to address allegations of sin, we do not wish to whitewash or minimize such concerns by not dealing with them here. Furthermore, we understand that this debate is related to another, larger controversy concerning what are commonly called *insider movements*.[7] Many advocates of insider movements will also advocate for non-traditional, meaning-based translations of "Son of God" and "Father." But there are also proponents of meaning-based translations who are not proponents of insider movements. Our paper focuses on this controversy as it relates to traditional missionary

approaches without taking up the issues surrounding insider movements. We are not ignoring the importance of that other debate, nor are we denying the overlap between these two controversies; it is simply not the focus of this paper.

We have labored to give as fair a representation as possible of the various parties with whom we interact in this article. We solicited feedback on an earlier form of this paper from an extensive circle of persons from all sides of this controversy. We are grateful for the criticisms and corrections we have received. Hopefully we have adequately taken those criticisms into account, as we

There are proponents of meaning-based translations who are not proponents of insider movements.

earnestly desire to represent others' positions accurately. We recognize there will always be points where we have fallen short. For these shortcomings we ask forgiveness in advance and assure all involved that we genuinely desire to deal accurately and charitably in these proposals.

Summary of Recent Progress and Evaluation

It is ironic that the present translation debate has become increasingly polarized at the same time that significant progress has occurred. A timeline of key events will provide perspective both to those who are familiar with the controversy and those who are new to it.

In February of 2011, *Christianity Today* published an article on the controversy.[8] This was followed by articles in *World Magazine*.[9] These articles effectively moved the debate from the confines of Muslim mission circles into the wider Christian public.

In early June 2011, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) approved an amended overture (Overture 9) from the Potomac Presbytery. This overture called on the PCA to declare as unfaithful those translations that "alter" the filial relationship between God the Father and God the Son.[10] The overture was concerned primarily with the missiology of "insider movements" and perceived the new translation policies as motivated by the philosophy behind those movements. Additionally, a study committee was formed to further examine the issue; their report was adopted by the General Assembly of the PCA of June 19–20, 2012.[11]

In late June 2011, a consultation called Bridging the Divide brought together missionaries, missiologists and theologians to attempt to reduce the escalating tension between critics and advocates of insider movements and to discuss the current translation controversy. To the surprise of many, the participants agreed to a statement that included an affirmation to "practic[e] fidelity in Scripture translation using terms that accurately express the familial relationship by which God has chosen to describe Himself as Father in relationship to the Son in the original languages."[12] Furthermore, there was a growing realization that non-traditional translations for "Son of God" are not always motivated by insider movement philosophies. Many had assumed that the move toward meaning-based translations of divine familial terms was an aspect of "insider movements," and that the two trends occur together. It became clear at the 2011 Bridging the Divide consultation that some translators were adopting

meaning-based translations to divine familial titles without any connection to insider movement ideas, but simply out of a desire to communicate *meaning* that they believed was not achieved by traditional, form-based translations.

Then in early August 2011, SIL convened a meeting of its personnel with invited observers[13] to determine best practices for translation of key familial terms. The resulting "Statement of Best Practices" affirmed the importance of retaining familial terms, stating, "Scripture translations should promote understanding of the term 'Son of God' in all its richness, including his filial relationship with the Father."[14] The statement further confirmed the importance of the word-for-word forms by requiring SIL translators to present and explain "Son of God" and "Father" in the paratext—marginal or footnotes—if synonyms, similes, or other meaning-based translations were used. To quote the SIL statement, "… non-literal options for the text may be considered which conserve as much of the familial meaning as possible, provided that the paratext includes the literal form."[15] Not all parties to the controversy are satisfied that these Best Practices statements say enough, but they represent progress.[16]

The September 2011 issue of *IJFM* published a pair of papers by Rick Brown, Leith Gray and Andrea Gray that affirms the importance of the familial nature of the titles "Son of God" and "Father" and reassesses the translation of the titles in Muslim contexts. The papers contain many important insights, some of which will be considered below. Most significantly, the authors strongly affirm the need to retain the familial nature of the titles *and discourage the use of "Messiah" to translate Son of God*. They wrote,

> We now believe it is ideal to express the familial component of meaning in the text … and that terms like

*T*his statement represents a positive shift in emphasis. Some, however, have greeted the change with suspicion and skepticism.

> "Christ/Messiah" should be used only to translate *Christos/Meshiach* and should not be used to translate *huios/ben*. We would discourage anyone from doing this.[17]

This statement represents a positive shift in emphasis and demonstrates further progress. Some, however, have greeted the change with suspicion and skepticism. In particular, both the SIL Best Practices statement and the new articles by Brown et al. give *priority* to the word-for-word translation of "Son of God" and "Father" where they do not communicate wrong meaning (especially the implication of sexual behavior on God's part), but some insist that word-for-word translations of these terms be used *exclusively*.

In early January 2012, an online petition called on Wycliffe and SIL "not to remove *Father*, *Son* or *Son of God* from the text of Scripture."[18] As of October, 2012, over 14,000 people have signed the petition, calling for an absolute commitment to literal word-for-word translations that preserve the form of divine familial terms without exception. This petition effectively changed the nature of the conflict from an intramural dispute to a public controversy. One consequence of publicizing the debate in the form of a petition has been to raise doubts in the minds of donors about the biblical integrity of Wycliffe and SIL, discouraging their further support. The resulting financial pressure has impacted the work of Bible translation worldwide, not just work in Muslim contexts.

The increasingly public criticism led Wycliffe and SIL to issue a series of statements reaffirming their commitment to the authority of

Scripture and the deity of Christ. Further, Wycliffe and SIL committed their organizations to the outcome of a commissioned global and independent review, and agreed to slow the publication of affected translation projects until the review is completed.

While this summary of events shows the increasing polarization that has taken place, we want to highlight the significant progress that has also occurred. Furthermore, although the crisis threatens Wycliffe and SIL translation projects in Muslim contexts and beyond, it also represents opportunities. Scholars and missionaries have been forced to re-examine important theological and missiological issues. The result of the increased study has the potential to greatly enrich our understanding of Christ.

Key Issues

The debate over translating Son of God terminology is complex and multidimensional. The debate involves more than linguistic questions; it also involves socio-religious, philosophy of ministry, and other kinds of issues. To make progress, it is important to respect the complexity and unravel the many layers involved. We identify five distinct issues: two involving biblical linguistics, one involving linguistic issues in target languages, one involving Islamic theology, and one touching on philosophy of ministry issues. This list is not exhaustive, but these are topics at the core of the crisis.

1. The Multi-faceted Nature of the Title "Son of God"

Rick Brown's 2000 article "The 'Son of God': Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus" was the ground breaking argument for meaning-based rather than form-based

translations of "Son of God." While the article proved controversial in its conclusions, some components of his argument drew on widely accepted characteristics of the title, including its *multi-faceted meaning*.

The term "Son of God" has many facets of meaning. It expresses *love*—the close relationship of God to the one he calls "son." It also speaks of *authority*—the delegation of power from God to one he makes his agent. The title underscores a person's *work*—the "son" carries out God's mission among humankind. It communicates *holiness*—the "son" bearing God's likeness manifests his righteousness. And in addition to these and other facets of meaning, the title conveys *identity*—the "son" is one who embodies the presence of God among humanity.[19] The meaning of Son of God is rich and multi-dimensional.

Only Jesus manifests all of these facets of meaning perfectly, so that we rightly speak of Jesus as *the* Son of God preeminently. Nevertheless, Jesus is not the only person in Scripture who is called by this title. This brings us to a second point, generally acknowledged, which was a key component of Brown's early articles: the title "Son of God" is used for many persons in Scripture. It is used chiefly for Jesus, but it is also used for Adam (Luke 3:38), David and his heirs (Pss. 2:7; 89:26–27; 2 Sam. 7:14), the whole nation of Israel (Exod. 4:22; Hosea 11:1) the church (John 1:12; Gal. 3:26; Rom. 8:14–16), and others (e.g., Gen. 6:4; Job 1:6; Matt. 5:9).

These two points—namely, that the title has many facets of meaning and has been used for several persons in Scripture—enjoy general agreement, but the implications Brown drew from them proved controversial. More recent articles by Brown and others have qualified those early conclusions. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to revisit the two basic insights Brown

raised about the nature of the title "Son of God" in order to clarify what we believe their implications for translation ought to be.

Let's revisit these basic points about the title "Son of God" by means of two questions. First, does the title's multi-faceted nature indicate multiple meanings for the term or multiple emphases of a single meaning? Second, only Jesus perfectly fulfills this title, but to what extent does the meaning of *divine identity* attach to others when Scripture calls them by the same title? We now take up the first of these questions, leaving the second to be addressed under point two below.

Only Jesus manifests all of these facets of meaning perfectly.
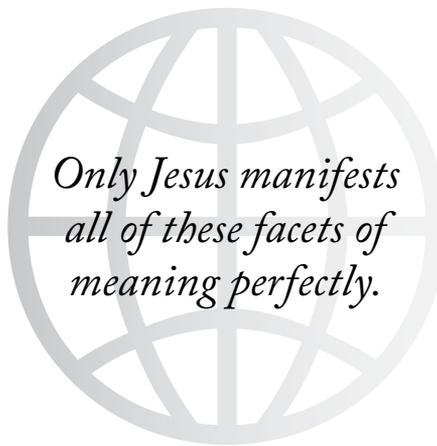
The title "Son of God" has often been treated as though it produces different meanings in different contexts. In some passages it is the facet of *love* that is recognized, while in other passages the facet of *mission* (doing the Father's work) is drawn out, and so on.[20] If the title takes on different meanings in different contexts, it becomes important to determine *which* of the title's meanings is intended in a given passage in order to translate its meaning.

For example, Romans 9:25–26 quotes this promise of God to his "sons":

> Those who were not my people I will call "my people," and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved." And

in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they will be called *"sons of the living God."* (ESV)

In this passage, the title "sons of the living God" brings out God's love. Therefore some have suggested that an alternate translation expressing belovedness would be appropriate: "[To avoid procreative connotations,] translators … 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.'"[21] Notably, these similes emphasize the loving relationship expressed by the term. But does a simile focusing on certain facets of the term's meaning really convey the meaning adequately?

Rather than seeing the nuances of the title as a catalogue of meanings to choose from, we argue it is more accurate to see them as multiple facets of a stable, single meaning. Like a diamond, even though one facet of this title might be prominent in a given passage, the luster and color are a result of the light from all its facets. In the title "sons of the living God" in the Romans passage above, God's love for Israel is on the surface. However, the *holiness* God desires for his people, their faithful service in his *work* and their status as *heirs* are still important parts of the loving relationship that is on display. Furthermore, the term "sons of the living God" communicates more than paternal love: it promises *all the privileges and qualities that go along with restored sonship*, such as moral transformation, restoration to God's service, and the blessing of God's presence.

We believe that the many nuances of "Son of God" should not be treated as distinct meanings that depend on the immediate context. The supposition that one aspect of this title's meaning is adequate to substitute for the whole

in translation needs to be corrected.[22] While a given nuance may be prominent, it never excludes the other meanings. The practical import of this is to highlight the importance of the *form* of the title "Son(s) of God" for its meaning. An attempt to translate the meaning of the term by focusing on one or another of its nuances rather than translating its form actually leads to a loss of meaning. Thankfully, as noted earlier, there is a growing awareness of the importance of the form of familial terms to understand their meaning; these insights further affirm that direction.

2. The Divine Implications of the Title "Son of God"

Among the many facets of the title "Son of God" discussed above, we will argue that the most significant is the idea of *identity:* the son is *one who manifests God's presence.* Muslims react to this implication of the title's meaning—namely that Jesus is divine—as well as to its perceived sexual implications. This aspect of the title's meaning can also make Christians uncomfortable when ascribed to persons other than Jesus. Is Scripture really saying, for instance, that Adam was in some sense an embodiment of deity when he is called "son of God" in Luke 3:38? If "Son of God" implies the deity of Jesus, why doesn't it imply the same for Adam?

We believe a resolution to this question about the divine implications of this title requires understanding that central to the term "Son of God" *in all its uses* is the idea of one who embodies (or incarnates) God's presence. Certainly such embodiment occurs in many different ways. Jesus alone *fully and perfectly* fulfills this qualification; but even in its other uses, the title always expresses the idea, in some sense, of a human embodiment of God's presence.

The question of the divine implications of "Son of God" was the early focus of

*R*ulers throughout the ancient world bore the title "son of god." In Egypt, pharaoh was given a "Horus name" upon coronation.

the current controversy. The debate now encompasses a constellation of familial terms for a variety of relationships with God and within the Godhead. We return to a focused look at the divine implications of the term "Son of God," but not in order to minimize the importance of other terms. It is our sense that the controversy has moved on to other terms without adequately clarifying the divine implications of "Son of God." This lack of resolution contributes to the continuing impasse where some see Son of God as primarily *functional* while others see it as primarily *ontological.*[23] We believe that to break the impasse, it is essential to understand the divine implications of "Son of God." We can see this feature of the title both in its use throughout the ancient Near East and in its biblical usage.

Rulers throughout the ancient world bore the title "son of god." In Egypt, pharaoh was given a "Horus name" upon coronation. This name was part of an elaborate myth wherein the god Osiris begat a divine son Horus, ritually identified with the new pharaoh. Jarl Fossum explains, "The enthronement was the definitive act of begetting or deification in Egypt."[24] An inscription from Horemhab's coronation includes the pronouncement from the sun god Amun-Ra: "You are my son and my heir who has come out of my members."[25] Thutmosis III confessed on his coronation, "[I am Ra's] son, whom he commanded that I should be upon his throne … and begat in uprightness of heart."[26] It was specifically upon enthronement that pharaoh "received … all the magico-religious consecrations which transform him into a living incarnation of Rā, the sun-god, creator of the world."[27]

In Mesopotamia the picture is more varied. Kings in the Fertile Crescent were sometimes regarded as divine, sometimes as men filled with the "seed" or spirit of the gods, and sometimes as stewards of the gods.[28] When the gods created Gilgamesh king of Uruk, they made him "Two thirds … god and one third man."[29] In Sumer, "kings … had their names prefixed by the determinative for divinity."[30] Gudea, king of Lagash, declared to the goddess Gatumdu, "My seed [i.e., the seed of my Father] You have received; in the sanctuary You have begotten me."[31] The literature is replete with such examples, so that scholars conclude: "in the entire Near East, the king could be called 'Son of God' or even 'God.'"[32] And there is a reason for this widespread connection between kingship and deity.

In Egypt, for example, the principle duty of the king was "to maintain *maat* … [which means] 'right order'— the inherent structure of creation … Thus the king, in the solitariness of his divinity, shoulders an immense responsibility."[33] The entire creation order—not just political order— was on the king's shoulders. In the modern world, we conceive of civic power (politics) as distinct from natural power (e.g., the seasons and agriculture) and supernatural power (religion). Such distinctions were unknown in the ancient world. Kings were expected to uphold all aspects of right order so the gods would be pleased, the rains would come at the right times, crops would flourish, and justice would prevail.[34] In short, kingship required superhuman power. The ancient myths of divine begetting are repulsive to Christians for many reasons. But they represent

a widespread conviction that a society achieves righteous order only when a king who is in some sense divine is on the throne.

The Old Testament exhibits similarly lofty expectations of kingship, though strikingly without myths of divine copulation.[35] When David was identified as the next king of Israel, Samuel anointed him "and the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward … [and] the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul …" (1 Sam. 16:13–14). Like the coronation professions of other lands, the Davidic coronation includes the announcement of divine begetting (Ps. 2:7). We must hasten to add that, unlike the kings of the surrounding nations, the "begetting" of the Davidic king was by divine *covenant* (Ps. 2:7a, 2 Sam. 7:8–16), not by divine copulation.[36] Nevertheless, David was endowed with the Holy Spirit in a manner that set him apart as an embodiment of God's presence in Israel, expressed in the title "son of God." David feared the consequences for Israel should he ever quench the Spirit by his sins and thus be abandoned to rule without God's presence as had happened to Saul before him (Ps. 51:11; cf., 2 Sam. 7:14–15; Ps. 89:20–34). As one who bore the title "son of God," David was not "very God incarnate" like Jesus. Nevertheless, by means of the Spirit's infilling, David imperfectly yet actually embodied God's presence in Israel.[37]

Not only kings, but judges (who served as extensions of the king's justice) were sometimes called "gods" in the Bible (e.g., Ps. 82:1, 6; Exod. 4:16; 7:1). One should not read too much into this usage, but neither should it be ignored. These judges were not deified, but they needed the presence of God's Spirit to administer justice (e.g., Num. 11:11–30; cf., Prov. 16:10–11; 2 Sam. 14:17, 20). For this reason judges also bore a divine title. And all Israel (Exod.

4:22) and all the church are granted the profound wonder of being called "sons of God" *because of God's presence manifested through them* (Gal. 4:6).

Those called "son of God" embodied God's presence in different ways and in varying degrees. The term does not apply to Adam in exactly the same way as it does to Jesus, but the core meaning is the same in each instance: God manifests his presence among humanity through the ones he designates as "sons." In fact, other facets of the term's meaning—beloved of God, holiness, authority, and so forth—are secondary ideas that flow from the term's central concept: *God's manifest presence.* In Jesus, one who is

> *We believe it is important to recognize the hope of divine manifestation as central to this term's meaning in all its uses.*
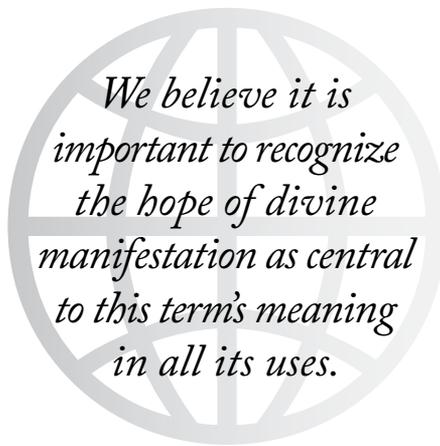
not just Spirit-filled but fully divine perfectly fulfilled the title.[38] But in every case, the term expresses the same basic idea of one who embodies God's presence.

Some have argued that the title has little or no reference to divine embodiment except as ascribed to Jesus. For instance, in a 2000 article, Brown wrote concerning Egypt's use of this title: "This was more a functional than ontological title— though a few kings became arrogant and actually claimed divinity for themselves."[39] He then went on to suggest that the title, when used for Israel's kings prior to Jesus, refers to their belovedness and God-given

mission, not to a divine manifestation. Brown was not (as some have claimed) denying the deity of Christ nor was he denying the importance of the title "Son of God" when ascribed to Jesus as a witness to his deity.[40] However, Brown and others did overlook the idea of divine embodiment, which is present in some sense in all uses of this term, not just in reference to Jesus. We believe it is important to recognize the hope of divine manifestation as central to this term's meaning *in all its uses.* Translating the term with a meaning-based expression that lacks or obscures this sense of divine embodiment hides a vital aspect of its meaning.

There is merit to Brown's statement that "son of God" was "more a functional than ontological title" in the ancient world. But this claim anachronistically projects the modern distinction between *function* and *ontology* onto the term and thereby obscures the divine expectation inherent even in "functional" uses of it.[41] In many cases, the ancients recognized that their kings were still men (ontologically) who functioned in their kingly office with divine authority. But rather than asking whether kings were seen as *ontologically* divine, we should ask whether they were believed to be *really* divine.[42]

There was, after all, *real* power conferred during the king's enthronement. And that power, which continued with the king throughout his reign, was perceived as *really* divine. *Following modern distinctions,* we might say that kings of the ancient world were men (ontologically) who took on divine functions. Israel did not see in King David an incarnation of Yahweh. But there was *real* spiritual power, and by ancient perceptions *real* divine presence, conferred upon kings at their enthronement. This was the significance of the Holy Spirit's presence first with Saul, then later

with David. Inherent in this royal title is the expectation, made explicit by the prophets, that a more perfect king than David would even more perfectly manifest God's presence. Even though the Old Testament saints may not have universally imagined the divine Word himself becoming flesh to fill that office, the title "Son of God" always involves the hope of some manner of divine manifestation in the king.[43]

When Brown distinguishes the ontological deity of Christ from the functional deity of other ancient kings, he is theologically correct. But to impose that distinction of function versus ontology upon the term "Son of God" obscures the real, divine expectations inherent its biblical usage, even in its *functional* appearances.

In summary, throughout the ancient world *and in its many uses throughout Scripture,* "Son(s) of God" always included the concept of real divine presence. As scholars frequently note, the ascription is often more functional than ontological by modern terms. Nonetheless, the form "Son(s) of God" captures the idea of a real embodiment of God's presence. For this reason we urge translators to use the word-for-word form "Son of God." It is *part* of the biblical witness to Israel's need for a king who manifests God's presence and the fully divine King Jesus who perfectly does so.

This leaves us with one further question under this topic. Recognizing that this title is part of Scripture's witness to Christ's deity, should we conclude that simile and other meaning-based translations that replace the sonship *form* are implicit denials of Christ's deity or that they undermine the doctrine of the Trinity? Some critics have made such charges[44] and there are grounds for concern that something is lost. While we concur with those who see the form "Son of God" as an important *part* of the biblical witness to Christ's deity, we

We would caution against impugning the motives of those who have advocated non-traditional translations for "Son of God."

also caution against the presumption that translators are *trying* to obscure the deity of Christ when they use alternate translations for "Son of God." God's Word teaches us to carefully distinguish between those who are well-intentioned but (in our judgment) wrong, and those who ill-intentioned and wrong.[45] In both cases, error needs to be corrected, but how such correction takes place is different where an opponent's motives are honorable. Even when the doctrinal stakes are high—*especially* when the doctrinal stakes are high—"the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but … able to teach … correcting his opponents with gentleness …" (2 Tim. 2:24–25).

Those who have promoted alternate translations for "Son of God" report that they have done so to bring out what they have understood to be the primary meaning of the title: "God's Messiah" or "like children to God." Their intentions are to be faithful to the Word, even if critics deem the resulting translations unfaithful. Good intentions never excuse one from responsibility, but they do compel those who criticize to do so with patience in hopes of winning a brother or sister and not just winning an argument.

We would caution against impugning the motives of those who have advocated non-traditional translations for "Son of God." Alternate translations do not necessarily undermine the title's witness to Christ's deity if the word-for-word form is provided in the paratextual material (as Rick Brown advocated in his 2005 articles[46] and the Best Practices statement now requires).[47] Nevertheless, based on the above evidence that divine expectations are *primary* in the title's meaning and

expressed by its form, we advocate word-for-word translations of "Son of God" in the text.

3. The Use of Biological and Social Terms for "Father" and "Son"

With the consensus that it is important to retain the familial nature of the titles "Father" and "Son," the question arises: *which* familial terms? In some languages, there are terms for a *biological* father/son relationship (e.g., physical offspring) and other terms that indicate a *social* relationship, encompassing both biological and non-biological relationships (e.g., adoption). This issue is the major focus of Brown et al. in their recent articles entitled "A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible" and "A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms." So rather than non-familial alternatives for "Son of God" and "Father" (like "the Christ from God"), the discussion is now re-focusing around which familial terms to use. "Things have changed," Brown et al. explain, "We (the authors) now believe that the familial-relational component underlies the other components of Christ's sonship and is the most important one to express in the text, as also for God's fatherhood and the adopted sonship of believers."[48] While issues still remain, we believe it is important to acknowledge the progress that this shift in focus represents.

In these articles, Brown et al. offer an extensive analysis of various Hebrew and Greek familial terms. They identify terms that express exclusively biological relationships and terms that express social relationships, which may or may not be biological. Their finding is that whenever Scripture expresses *divine* sonship, the terms used carry

in them the possibility of social sonship and do not *demand* a biological relationship.[49] Even where typically biological terms are used, they never *demand* a biological meaning. From this analysis of the apparent kinship system underlying biblical language, the authors conclude that when translators use terms which are exclusively biological to express divine sonship, their translations "*are inaccurate because they add a procreative meaning that was absent from the original …*"[50] There is much to unpack in the reasoning laid out in these articles.

Based on the conclusions just quoted, Brown et al. urge that "the divine sonship of Jesus should be expressed in the text using … *social* filial expressions that do not demand a biological meaning involving sexual activity by God, yet still *allow* for the filiation derived from the Son's eternal generation and incarnation."[51] There is a catch-22 here, and Brown et al. have taken a categorical decision about how to resolve it. On the one hand, a translation that unequivocally expresses the Son's shared essence with the Father typically requires using a biological term. On the other hand, an alternative social term or phrase that avoids a procreative connotation may *allow* for shared essence but *does not make explicit* the idea of shared essence. When faced with tradeoffs like these, the guidance from Brown et al. is to always give priority to avoiding the implication of divine sexual activity.

For example, Brown et al. explore phrases like "the Son *from* God," which signifies "a relationship that is filial ('Son') and not necessarily biological, yet … is compatible with eternal generation *from* the essence of God …"[52] In some languages, such a phrase does not trigger a negative reaction. But what if a given text (e.g., Ps. 2:7) needs a translation that is not merely compatible with eternal generation but *expresses* that shared essence? It is not obvious that the

priority of avoiding biological connotations should always outweigh the priority of expressing shared essence. When translating in Muslim contexts, the position taken by Brown et al. is understandable. But there is loss of meaning where this is done, especially when it is done systematically. Typically it is biological sonship language that most clearly brings out the idea of shared essence between Son and Father.

We do not raise this critique to contradict the authors' conclusions, simply to qualify them. There is certainly no intention on the part of Brown et al. to obscure the divine nature of Jesus Christ. Where target languages offer

> *There is a difference between the way Muslim and Christian Arabs use the common terms for "father" and "son."*
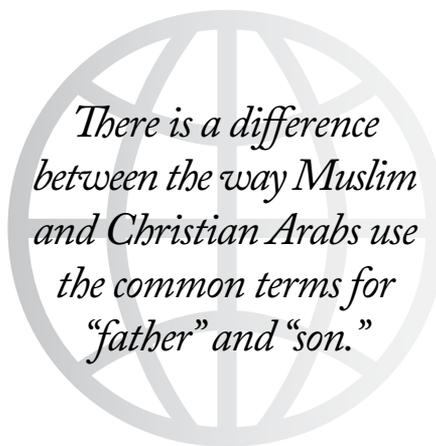
social familial terms, we agree that it is prudent for translators to consider them. But we question whether biological terms must be systematically avoided as Brown et al. seem to insist (compare topic number 4, below). In some passages, the Son's shared essence with the Father is at the heart of the text's meaning, so meaning is lost when biological terms are avoided.

By and large, we are in agreement with the overall thrust of Brown et al.'s recent articles. We affirm their basic point that translators in Muslim contexts should give preference to "social" familial terms that do not exclusively imply procreation. But we think they overstate their case when

they categorically argue that translations that do use biological terms "are inaccurate because they add a procreative meaning that was absent from the original."[53] Bringing out the shared essence of the Son of God with the Father is arguably one reason some biblical passages use biological sonship terms in the first place.[54] So while we appreciate what Brown et al. are recommending, we caution against categorically denying the legitimacy of biological sonship terms.

Having offered this critique, we are also concerned that the thesis of Brown et al. has been misunderstood, particularly in the context of Arabic, and that these misunderstandings have contributed unnecessarily to the escalation of the crisis and the polarization that has ensued. Many linguists have observed that *Christian* Arabs use the common Arabic words for "father" and "son" in a way similar to the biblical usage, while *Muslim* Arabs typically use the same Arabic words for "father" and "son" for strictly procreative relationships. Christian Arabs involved in the debate, particularly those active in Muslim evangelism, have understandably bristled at being told by non-native speakers what their language means. However, there really is a difference between the way Muslim and Christian Arabs use and perceive the common terms for "father" and "son."

The Muslim Arabic usage of "son" (*ibn*) as exclusively procreative arose in connection with the Qur'an's teaching on adoption. The practice of adoption was overturned in the Qur'an in *Sura* 33 (*Al-Aḥzab*) which was recorded when Muhammad married Zainab, the divorced wife of Zaid, Muhammad's adoptee. In connection with that case, the Qur'an introduced a distinction between adoptees and sons: "[Allah] has not made your adoptees your sons" (33:4). Building on this doctrine, the Qur'an specifically sanctioned Muhammad's

marriage to Zainab, which would not have been permitted if Zaid had been his biological son. The Qur'an permitted an adoptive "father" to marry the divorced wife of his adoptee (33:37) and expressed it by limiting the use of the common words for father (*ab*) and son (*ibn*) to literal, procreative relationships. So in Islamic Arabic, the commonly used words for father and son are not "social" in the sense defined by Brown et al. This is in contrast to the broader social use of *ab* and *ibn* by Christian Arabic speakers, who acknowledge and practice adoption and whose kinship system aligns more closely to that of the Bible. Muslim misunderstanding can usually be cleared up with a brief explanation, but the difference in usage is certainly there and arguing over it is not fruitful.

A more useful discussion is whether alternatives for the commonly used words for "father" and "son" will both remove the linguistic offence and communicate the richness of the Bible's use of father and son terminology. However, the misperception of divine procreation is not the only issue Muslims react to when they encounter divine familial titles.

4. What Really is the Muslim Objection to Divine Familial Titles?

The previous three topics dealt with linguistic issues. This next topic moves us into Muslim theology. The reason for the present controversy is that Muslims from some language groups perceive sexual behavior on the part of God when they read or hear the titles "Son of God" and "Father." However, this perception is not the only reason why Muslims reject divine familial titles. Failure to account for the full spectrum of reasons behind the reactions of individual Muslims may lead to oversimplification of the problem and its solutions. Indeed, there has been insufficient attention to the role of Muslim beliefs in this discussion.

*S*ome Muslims, especially Salafists, react to the title "Son of God" because they see that it places Jesus on an unacceptable level of intimacy with God.

The conceptual heart of Muslim reaction to the title "Son of God" is their doctrine of *tawhiid*, the absolute, undifferentiated oneness of God.[55] This belief automatically excludes the Trinity. It is the root of Islamic refusal to even consider distinctions within God and to reject out of hand the divinity of Jesus.

Closely related to the absolute oneness of God is his utter uniqueness and transcendence. Christians likewise confess the transcendence of God, but in Islam transcendence excludes the idea of someone, even Muhammad, knowing God or even communicating directly with him; the Qur'an is entirely a first-person address to Muhammad *through the medium of Gabriel*. Some Muslims, especially Salafists, react to the title "Son of God" because they see that it places Jesus on an unacceptable level of familiarity and intimacy with God. This is the essence of *shirk*, associating "partners" with God, which is the worst sin in Islam.[56, 57] So there are more reasons why Muslims react to "Son of God" and "Father" than the perception of carnal behavior.

In addition, the perception of divine sexual behavior is neither universal nor uniformly serious. Islam is not monolithic. Many Muslims are poorly educated about Islam itself and are even more ignorant about what the Bible says. In the collective experience of missionaries in one Arabian Peninsula country (including one co-author of this article), while some Muslims do react negatively upon encountering divine familial terms, it is not uncommon for others to hear or read "Son of God" and "Father" and continue to read without any negative reaction. And when the traditional

translations of "Son of God" and "Father" raise the question of divine procreation, as they frequently do, a brief explanation is enough to dispel their concerns.

One of the authors (Basheer Abdulfadi) recently started a study of Mark with a seeker who has had limited exposure to the Bible. Since Jesus is called the Son of God in Mark 1:1, the issue came up immediately. After hearing that it doesn't mean that God had sexual relations to beget Jesus, as many say, the seeker responded that this was evidence that Muslim scholars were lying about what Christians believe! Other missionaries and believers active in sharing their faith relate numerous similar stories.[58]

While such evidence is admittedly anecdotal, it illustrates the fact that the perception of sexual activity in the divine familial titles "Son of God" and "Father" is not universal—even in the case of Arabic. Furthermore, the oft-stated claim that this misperception is universal (or nearly so) leans heavily on anecdotal evidence, and anecdotes can always be countered with other anecdotes. We do not deny that many Muslims react strongly to "Son of God" terminology,[59] but we caution against universalizing such experiences as a basis for translation policy. We also warn against the danger of generalizing experience in one Arabic context to the rest of the Muslim world; how people react to "Son" and "Father" in one context may not apply to other parts of the Muslim world or even other parts of the Arab world.

To summarize, the reasons for Muslim perception that "Son of God" and "Father" imply sexual activity on God's part include differing uses

of common familial terms within a language group, basic Muslim beliefs, and misunderstanding of Christian teaching. The misperceptions can often be cleared up with a brief explanation. Muslim reactions to this title based on our different understanding of God's oneness (as triune) and the real possibility of nearness to him in Christ are points of conflict that cannot be avoided. Muslim objections will necessarily continue even if alternate words or phrases remove the perceived sexual implications of the title. It is unrealistic to expect any translation of the "Son of God" titles to express the multi-faceted meaning of that term and at the same time to overcome the many obstacles to understanding that are present within a Muslim context! In solving one problem, others appear, and it seems that the matter comes down to choosing which problems to solve.[60] As we will explore more fully under the next topic, translators can make an important contribution toward clarifying the meaning of "Son of God"; but, in light of the complexity of the problem, even the best translation will not solve all of the difficulties. However, as we explain under the next heading, this is not as serious a problem as it might initially appear.

5. Clarifying the Translator's Role

This next topic follows on the previous one and moves us into another subject area: philosophy of ministry. What is the role of the translator? More specifically, when there is a culture-wide point of confusion (e.g., the meaning of the term "Son of God"), to what extent should the translator *interpret* that term *in the translation itself*? The question we pose is not absolute, as though a translator either should or should not take such misunderstandings into account. The question is one of extent: To what extent is the translator responsible for resolving those interpretation problems in the translation?

Acts 8:26–40 is an important model to consider. In this text, we are told

about an official from Ethiopia who was reading a scroll of Isaiah. He was struggling to understand what he was reading: "Does the prophet say this about himself or about someone else?" (v. 34). Then the Holy Spirit miraculously carried Philip to his side to explain the passage to him: "Beginning with this Scripture, [Philip] told him the good news about Jesus" (v. 36). Here is one example of a biblical norm, that is, an inquirer struggling to understand the written Word finds help from a human witness.

The passage in Acts is not teaching us *how* the Spirit typically brings such witnesses to inquirers. Even in New Testament times, evangelists

In solving one problem, others appear.
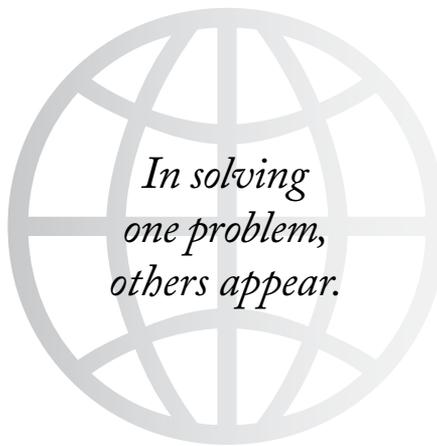
like Paul traveled by ordinary means, just like everyone else. But this text does teach us *how important it is* that an evangelist would serve as the normal interpreter of Scripture. The Spirit went to great lengths to ensure that the Ethiopian traveler had a witness by his side as he struggled to understand the written Word. The biblical pattern of witness illustrated here leads us to expect that the written Word will normally require a human witness to explain its difficult teachings. This is not just an isolated example. The Acts 8 pericope is illustrative of a biblical pattern.

In fact, in all the New Testament there are no examples of unbelievers com-

ing to faith by private reading of the Scriptures. The story of the Ethiopian official is the closest Scripture comes to a private conversion account. Certainly, the Spirit does sometimes bring people to faith in this way, and it is a marvelous testimony to God's grace when that happens. But private conversion is not what Scripture teaches us to expect. The New Testament emphasis is on commissioning witnesses who carry and explain the Word (e.g., Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 10:2; Rom. 10:14–15).[61]

We believe a significant factor in the current crisis is the unspoken assumption[62] that a translator should translate "Son of God" in ways that convey its biblical meaning (translation) *and* that overcomes culture-wide misunderstandings (interpretation). This is a noble goal, but it potentially confuses the roles of translator and interpreter. Translators should exercise sensitivity to potential misunderstandings as they translate, but they should not labor under a burden to resolve every misunderstanding *at the translation level*.

There are statements in the SIL Best Practices guidelines that indicate some progress in recognizing this distinction, but we believe these guidelines need to be strengthened. In that statement, the following two-part explanation of paratextual material is given: "The primary purpose of the paratext is to help the reader to infer the intended meaning from the text. It also presents more literal translations of phrases used in the text." The guidance that accompanies this definition urges translators to preserve literal translations in the text wherever possible, using the paratext for further explanation. Where preserving the form of the titles in the target language communicates wrong meaning, the statement recognizes the use of non-literal translations in the text with the literal word-for-word rendering in the paratext. We appreciate the order of emphasis in that guidance. The text is the preferred place for the word-for-word form.

*W*e must continue to engage those with whom we disagree directly (and face-to-face when possible), rather than taking preemptive steps.

As far as it goes, the Best Practices statement offers helpful guidance in this regard. What it lacks is attention to the fact that, even with excellent translations, *witnesses in the field are still necessary* to explain the written Word. Surely this is assumed,[63] but without acknowledging this point as part of translation policy, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that a good translation is a crucial *tool* of missions *but it is not the missionary.* Translators might be left with the sense that full clarity ought to be achieved in the translation itself, rather than recognizing that their work is to provide a tool for others who will serve as witnesses. Full clarity in the face of culture-wide misunderstanding is simply not going to be possible. But that is okay. Translators do not need to produce self-interpreting translations. It sounds reverent to say that "the Bible is its own best missionary," but *by God's design* the Bible is not its own missionary.

In light of the insights drawn together under the previous topic (number 4) and this one (number 5), we conclude that even if "Son of God" cannot be *fully explained* in the translation itself, it does not need to be.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that "Son of God" has multiple nuances that center around the core meaning of divine presence. Those rich expectations inherent in every use of this title were perfectly fulfilled only in Jesus, who is fully divine. We further argued that Muslim objections to "Son of God" go beyond the perception of sexual activity by God and stem from their doctrine of the absolute oneness and transcendence of God. These objections are so deep-seated that they cannot be resolved completely in translation; indeed, translators should not take on the burden of resolving all these objections since God's plan is to use witnesses to win people to Christ.

The many points that have been raised in this article lead to two primary conclusions. First, wherever possible, the form "Son of God" should be preserved in translation. The term is too rich and theologically important to be substituted with meaning-based translations where some facets of the title's meaning are substituted for a formal equivalent of the title itself. The goals which led some to suggest non-traditional translations—namely to bring out what was assumed to be its primary meaning (beloved) and to avoid Muslim reactions—were worthy motives. We commend those two goals as marks of missionary love and zeal. But it is now apparent that divine presence is at the heart of this title's meaning. We believe that much is lost theologically, exegetically and evangelistically when word-for-word form of "Son of God" is not preserved.[64]

Some might go so far as to argue that no exceptions to a literal word-for-word treatment of "Son of God" should be allowed. As a point of principle, such a strong commitment is appealing to many. However, languages are complex and a uniform policy cannot be expected to address every conceivable problem; blanket prohibitions often result in unforeseen problems down the road. There may be instances where an idiomatic translation in a certain passage is prudent, and critics of the Best Practices statement should acknowledge that reality. But we also urge translators to appreciate anew the importance of the word-for-word form "Son of God" to communicate its core meaning of divine presence.

We have argued that translation policies for divine familial terms should give greater weight to formal

equivalence. But more important than policies on paper is the education of our own hearts as translators, pastors, missionaries, and other Christian workers. Policies on paper should reflect the consensus of a community's heart convictions. What is most needed is a strengthened and shared conviction concerning the importance of the form "Son of God" in communicating the meaning of that title, especially its central idea of manifesting divine presence.

The second conclusion is the need for *continued* patience and direct engagement between the parties involved in this controversy. After engaging in the debate for several years, some critics have made a direct public appeal in the form of an online petition to influence events. In a document explaining the reasons for that petition, the author said, "[…T]he petition was started only after every effort had been made to call Wycliffe, Frontiers and SIL to biblical faithfulness."[65] In light of the progress shown above and the fact that the sponsors of the petition were themselves parties to discussions with the leadership of Wycliffe and SIL that were taking place *as the petition was launched*, the insistence that "every effort had been made" was inconsistent and made it difficult for others to continue the discussion. It is crucial that we continue to engage those with whom we disagree on this issue directly (and face-to-face whenever possible), patiently appealing to one another reasonably and charitably rather than taking preemptive steps to bring external pressure upon those whose opinions differ from our own.

Furthermore, a new window of opportunity is opening as an external and

independent commission organized by the World Evangelical Alliance is reviewing Wycliffe and SIL translation policy. Now is the time for counterparts to engage in order to identify outstanding issues. We especially appeal to critics of Wycliffe and SIL not to prejudge the work of the commission before it is completed. Finally, we urge those concerned with this controversy to commit themselves to prayer and fasting for God's blessing on the formal and informal dialogue surrounding these matters in the coming months.

The progress achieved thus far is a testimony to the fact that God's Spirit has already been at work. We must not deny him glory by ignoring the progress with which he has blessed us. Let us continue to trust the Spirit to work as we persevere in the patient task of Christian debate. The Lord is doing something unusual in the Middle East in our generation. May he be pleased to use us, sharpened by the present controversy, to show his great love through his Son to the Muslim world. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] Rick Brown. "The 'Son of God': Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17(1) (2000); "Part I: Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts." *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 22(3) (2005); "Part II: Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts." *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 22(4) (2005). But see later in this paper the discussion of Brown's revised position.

[2] E.g., Brown, "Part I: Translating," (2005), p. 139.

[3] Roger Dixon, "Identity Theft: Retheologizing the Son of God," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 43(2) (2007). Basheer Abdulfadi, "Modern Arabic Translations and Their Witness to Christ," *Seedbed* XXII (Fall, 2008).

[4] Rick Brown, "Part I: Translating" (2005); "Part II: Translating" (2005). Brown, Rick, Leith Gray and Andrea Gray. "A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms" *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 28(3) (2011), pp. 105–120; Brown, Rick, Leith Gray and Andrea Gray. "A Brief Analysis of Filial and Paternal Terms in the Bible" *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 28(3) (2011).

[5] http://www.wycliffe.org/SonofGod/PreviousResponses.aspx, http://www.wycliffe.org/SonofGod.aspx.

[6] Michael LeFebvre, *Collections, Codes, and Torah: The Re-characterization of Israel's Written Law.* LHBOTS 451 (New York: Continuum, 2008).

[7] For an introduction to insider movements, see Rebecca Lewis, "Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 26(1) (2009). Available from http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/26_1_PDFs/26_1_Lewis.pdf. See also the response by Dick Brogden, "Inside Out: Probing Presuppositions among Insider Movements," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 27(1) (2010). Available from http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/27_1_PDFs/27_1_Brogden.pdf.

[8] Collin Hansen, "The Son and the Crescent," *Christianity Today*, 55(2) (February, 2011). Available from http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/february/soncrescent.html.

[9] Emily Belz, "Holding translators accountable," *World Magazine*, 26(20) (2011). Available from http://www.worldmag.com/articles/18687. Emily Belz, "The Battle for Accurate Bible Translation in Asia," *World Magazine*, 27(4) (2012). Available from http://www.worldmag.com/articles/19184.

[10] The text of the overture is available from http://www.pcaac.org/2011GeneralAssembly/Overture%209%20Potomac%20Faithful%20Witness%203-31-11.pdf.

[11] The PCA Study Committee report is available from http://www.pcaac.org/Ad%20Interim%20on%20Insider%20Movements%20Report%205-17-12.pdf.

[12] The text of the Bridging the Divide conference statement is available from http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/octoberweb-only/missions-muslims-criticisms.html?start=3

[13] One of the authors (Basheer Abdulfadi) was an observer at the consultation. See also the comments of another observer and participant, Stephen Taylor, at http://www.wrfnet.org/c/portal/layout?p_l_id=PUB.1.48&p_p_id=62_INSTANCE_XnIU&p_p_action=0&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_pos=1&p_p_col_count=3&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_struts_action=%2Fjournal_articles%2Fview&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_groupId=1&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_articleId=472&_62_INSTANCE_XnIU_version=1.0,,%20.

[14] The text, with commentary, of the SIL statement of Best Practices for Bible Translation of Divine Familial Language is available from http://www.sil.org/translation/divine_familial_terms_commentary_full.pdf.

[15] We struggled to find the right word or phrase to indicate what is meant by translation that preserves the word-for-word form with the common equivalents for "son" and "father." "Literal" is what a non-specialist would say, but there are too many ideas about what literal means for this to be helpful. Except when quoting other authors or documents, we will use the phrase "literal word-for-word" and sometimes add to it the phrase "preserving the form."

[16] Collin Hansen, "Wycliffe, SIL Issue Guidelines on Translating 'Son of God' Among Muslims," *Christianity Today,* 55 (Web Only), (2011). Available from http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/octoberweb-only/son-of-god-translation-guidelines.html?start=1.

[17] Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," p. 116.

[18] The petition was posted on www.change.org on January 4, 2012.

[19] For a catalogue of concepts expressed by this title, see, Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," pp. 110–11.

[20] For example, Brown says: "An examination of the passages where Paul uses [the term 'Son'] shows that in most cases he is focusing on the dearness of Jesus to God … In John, on the other hand, 'Son' occurs mostly in contexts emphasizing … perfect obedience." (Brown, "Son of God," p. 46.) Also, "The phrase Son of God refers to Christ, sometimes in respect to his eternal sonship and sometimes in respect to his mediatorial sonship as the Messiah." (Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," p. 110.)

[21] Barclay Moon Newman and Philip Stine. *Helps for Translators. A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (London: UBS, 1988) p. 113. Cf. Brown, "Son of God," p. 40.

[22] We are not suggesting that translators have been *explicitly* arguing for the approach here critiqued or that it is currently an issue in translation practice; but the assumption here critiqued is *implicit* if a search for meaning allows immediate

context to obscure the wider context of "Son of God."

23 For representative defenses of the case for primarily ontological meaning for son of God, see David Abernathy, "Jesus Is The Eternal Son Of God," *St.Francis Magazine*, 6(2) (2010); David Abernathy, "Translating 'Son of God' in Missionary Bible Translation: A Critique of 'Muslim-Idiom Bible Translations: Claims and Facts', by Rick Brown, John Penny and Leith Gray," *St.Francis Magazine*, 6(1) (2010); Scott Horrell, "Cautions Regarding 'Son of God' in Muslim-Idiom Translations of the Bible: Seeking Sensible Balance." *St.Francis Magazine*, 6(4) (2010). For a very recent defense of the position that son of God did not "attribute deity," see Bradford Greer, *St. Francis Magazine*, 8(2) (2012), p. 188.

24 Fossum, "Son of God" (1995), p. 1488. Jarl Fossum, "Son of God." In: Karel van der Toorn, et al., eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (*Leiden: Brill, 1995) pp. 1486–98.

25 Fossum, "Son of God" (1995), p. 1488.

26 James H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906), pp. 2.59–60 (§138).

27 Georges Foucart, "King (Egyptian)." In: James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethic* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908–1926) pp. 7.712. Some scholars would say the one crowned had been divine from birth, and that "his coronation was not an apotheosis but an epiphany." Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) p. 5.

28 W. G Lambert, "Kingship in Ancient Mesopotamia" in John Day, ed. *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*. JSOTSup 270 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) pp. 54–70.

29 *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, N. K Sanders, translator (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970) p. 59.

30 Fossum, "Son of God" (1995), p. 1486.

31 Ibid., 1488

32 Jarl Fossum. 1998. "Son of God." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, pp. 6.128.

33 Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods,* p. 51.

34 Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (esp., pp. 3–12); Ivan Engnell,. *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967); John Baines, "Ancient Egyptian Kingship: Official Forms, Rhetoric, Context," pp. 41–46 (in Day, *King and Messiah,* pp. 16–53). Cf., 2 Sam. 21:1–14; Ps. 72.

35 Note Ezekiel's critique of the divine claims of Tyre's king in Ezekiel 28.

36 David was made a "son of God" by adoption with the Holy Spirit filling him upon his anointing. Not surprisingly, one of the early Christian heresies conceived of Jesus as similarly a mere man "adopted" when the Holy Spirit filled him (this adoption usually being identified with his baptism; e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas* 6:5). This heresy (commonly called "Adoptionism") illustrates an early awareness that some of those called "son of God" in Scripture were so designated by the infilling of the Holy Spirit "adopting" them. But *Jesus'* sonship involved much more than that, as orthodox apologists affirmed in the early Creeds and Councils.

37 John Day, "The Canaanite Inheritance of the Israelite Monarchy," pp. 81–6 (in Day, *King and Messiah,* pp. 72–90); Fossum, "Son of God" (1998), pp. 6.128–9; Aubrey R Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1967).

38 Note how Paul, preaching to a synagogue of Jews in Pamphylia, applies Psalm 2 to Christ's *resurrection.* "We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'" (Acts 13:32–33; cf., Rom. 1:4; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). Though Jesus is eternally God, it was not with his birth or his baptism that he fulfilled the "*this day* I have begotten you" of Psalm 2, but on his victorious resurrection (cf., Php. 2:6–11; see Brown, "Son of God," pp. 46–7).

39 Brown, "Son of God," p. 42. For a recent similar argument see Bradford Greer, "Revisiting "Son of God" (2012).

40 Even as long ago as his 2000 paper, Brown affirmed, "The Scriptures ascribe divinity to Jesus in a variety of ways, but not by merely calling him 'the Son of God'," thereby affirming this title as one of Scripture's witnesses to Jesus' deity. Brown, "Son of God," p. 46. See also the list of misperceptions that Brown, Gray and Gray specifically denied in Brown, "New Look…," pp. 117-18.

41 Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) pp. 2–9, 204.

42 Baines explains that, in Egypt, it was recognized that only "full deities" existed in the divine domain, sometimes taking manifestations in the human realm, while the reigning pharaoh was only earth-bound with no concurrent existence in the divine realm. Thus, according to Baines, Egypt's pharaohs were a "lesser deity." Nonetheless, as "a token of the divine in this world," pharaoh's divinity was still regarded as a *real* "manifestation of the world of the gods" on earth. (Baines, "Egyptian Kingship," pp. 16–24.)

43 On a few occasions, Old Testament and inter-testamental writers even use intensely divine expressions—even more exalted than "Son of God"—for the awaited Messiah (e.g., Isa. 9:6; Ps. 45:7).

44 See for example the charge in the online petition, http://www.change.org/petitions/lost-in-translation-keep-father-son-in-the-bible.

45 Cf., Exod. 21:33–22:15; Rom. 14:5–10.

46 Brown, "Part 1: Translating" (2005) and "Part II: Translating" (2005).

47 The final point (#4) of the guided process in the Best Practices states, "If no possible option [for a literal rendering] has been identified through this process, non-literal options for the text may be considered which conserve as much of the familial meaning as possible, provided that the paratext includes the literal form."

48 Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," p. 117.

49 "*It is important to realize that to express divine familial relationships, the Bible uses Greek and Hebrew social familial terms that do not necessarily demand biological meanings.*" (Brown, Gray and Gray, "A New Look," p. 107. Emphasis original.)

50 Ibid., emphasis original.

51 Ibid, 109, emphasis added.

52 Ibid, 115, emphasis original.

53 Ibid, 107.

54 This is especially true where the title is used for Jesus, but might also be understood in reference to others. The bestowing of the Spirit upon God's people is a real bestowing of God's presence, so that 1 John 3:9 even speaks of believers in the profoundly biological language of having "God's sperm" in them.

55 The Arabic word *tawhiid* is an infinitive of the intensified form of the verb that means "to be one."

[56] See in this vein Matthew Carlton, "Jesus, The Son of God: Biblical Meaning, Muslim Understanding, and Implications For Translation and Bible Literacy," *St. Francis Magazine*, 7(3) (2011), especially pp. 10–17, available from http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/Matthew%20Carlton%20August%202011.pdf, and Fred Faroukh, "Is the Scandal for Muslims the *How* or the *Who*?," *St. Francis Magazine*, 8(2) (2012) pp. 213–24 available from http://www.st-francismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/7-SFMFred%20Farrokh.pdf.

[57] The Qur'an calls *shirk* the unforgivable sin. See for example Suurat Al-Nisa (4), verses 48 and 116.

[58] One colleague highlighted the role of deceptive Muslim apologists in stirring up negative reactions. "I have met many [for whom Son of God] is not an issue, and it seems mainly because they have not been taught the negative reading." Private communication, 14 May 2012.

[59] See the examples documented in Rick Brown, "Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term 'Son of God'," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 2007). Even these examples raise the question of whether the response was genuinely spontaneous or was fomented by Muslim religious leaders who seized on "Son of God" for other purposes.

[60] It is clear that the different concerns and priorities of translators and field workers result in divergent translation choices. This reiterates that translation is not solely a linguistic matter.

[61] By witnesses we do not mean foreign missionaries exclusively or even primarily. God is raising up witnesses from the Muslim world for the Muslim world.

[62] We are not suggesting that anyone is explicitly arguing for self-interpreting translations that will not require a human witness. To our knowledge, no one in this controversy is making that case *explicitly*. However, we believe there is an implicit effort to make translations less dependent on a human witness by trying to resolve more at the translation level than possible or necessary. It is that implicit effort which we seek to address.

[63] The Best Practices statement does allude to this point in its opening line: "Bible Translation is an integral part [of] the worldwide Church's participation in God's mission."

[64] By extension, "Father" for God should also normally be translated by the common word for "father." We have not dealt with "Father" directly in this article, but the translation of "Son of God" is intimately related to the translation of "Father" in relation to "the Son."

[65] http://biblicalmissiology.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/LostInTranslation-FactCheck.pdf