Bible Translation in Islam

Part 2 of 2: Challenges of Bible Translation in Muslim Cultures
with Darrell L. Bock, J. Scott Horrell, Imad N. Shehadeh, and Mark L. Bailey
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Mark Bailey: Imad, you’re back online. We’ve lost you in the Skype, but…

Imad Shehadeh: I’m sorry. I’m using the iPad now. It seems to work. So we’ll try.

Mark Bailey: Is this the new one or the mini, or is this the original? That’s the question now.

Imad Shehadeh: I’m still in the early, second one.

Mark Bailey: You and me both. You and me both. You’ve been listening to some of this. Talk to us about your unique context within Amman, within Jordan, within the Middle East. You at the school have taken a pretty strong stand in not wanting to back off of the translation Son of God. Talk to us about why, and talk to us about the response to that.

Imad Shehadeh: Of course, I agree with – some of the last things I heard. It’s great. When we say Son of God, they hear that we’re talking about a relationship beyond creation. That’s what they hear. There’s a relationship within God, i.e. Trinity, eventually, so they hear that there’s a relationship between a Father and a Son that we’re talking about really that strikes at the heart of the problem. Because what happens is a theological struggle in their history of struggle between different factions with a major theological conflict on this issue of relationship within God as it relates with the attributes of God, because an attribute necessarily demands a relationship. So if you have love, for example, you must have the lover and the one loved. And if the attribute is eternal, so is the relationship. That’s just a simple thing.

But if you deny a relationship to begin with, if that’s the mindset, then you’re forced into finding a way to explain how can a relationship, how can an attribute in God exist without a relationship? That’s the bottom line struggle that we might call the monadic monotheism would have. And so eventually what you end up having is really an inability to really define the attributes of God in a way that would appeal to man in a positive way. And actually the proposed solution ends up being that the attributes of God such as love or compassion or holiness, or really mainly the relational attributes, if we may call it that, really stem from his will. It’s something he chooses to do if he so wills to do.
So what you end up having is that the dominant attribute is really that of a powerful will. If we’re to talk into a normal language, a person of that persuasion would say if God were to love me, it’s because he chose to love at some point, but he may choose not to, and I really do not know. Whereas in the Biblical concept of the triune God, where you have an eternal relationship, a Christian would say God loves me because he is love. He was always in a relationship of love and that relationship is eternally defined as a Father/Son relationship with is I would say is analogical. It’s like a father/son, human father to human son, only it’s infinitely more. It’s way beyond.

So supreme, but it’s like us. In other words, I can relate to it, and then because there is that love relationship that there’s that love attribute that in a relationship that fixes the attribute of love. And so he loves me because he is love. He cannot but love. So that’s the beginning of a road, of a diversion in the understanding of God. And so I don’t want to take more time. I’ve already spoken too much, but that becomes the heart of the issue. The issue becomes really the attributes of God and how we define essentially the relational attributes of God.

**Darrell Bock:** Imad, would it be fair to say that in Islam, the hub around the character of God that we think of when we think of God is primarily in the category of power and authority?

**Imad Shehadeh:** Yes.

**Darrell Bock:** Whereas in Christianity, the hub that we’re dealing with, it doesn’t, it isn’t that there isn’t a power and authority, but there’s a relational dimension that’s in it that’s not in the emphases that you see in Islam. Would that be the fundamental difference in terms of the conception of God that we’re dealing with?

**Imad Shehadeh:** Yes, I think so. And because we have a relationship in the Christian Biblical understanding, that means that God is self-sufficient, yet there’s a love, a joy that is with it, shared between the persons in the one God, apart from creation. Whereas in the monadic monotheism, you have a relationship only starts in creation. So creation becomes a need that God has in order to have a relationship. So power becomes before love, in a monadic monotheistic understanding, whereas it’s the opposite in the Christian understanding.
Scott Horrell: May I come in here a little bit, Imad, as well? I think you and I both agree that’s why protection of the divine familial language is so important, because the other terms we have for God, like Logos, or God is our fortress, God is our shepherd, these are ad extra. These are God relating to us.

Imad Shehadeh: Yes.

Scott Horrell: But when we speak of father and son and Jesus – what? The term Son is used of Jesus 40 times in John’s Gospel alone. Father becomes the dominant word for God. It replaces Theos, essentially, in – not entirely so, but about 50 percent more times used in John than even Theos. Suddenly it’s God himself revealing these – not just descriptions but now divine names. They’re not titles, like Christ. They are names of God, analogical names, because they’re not identical to how we understand father and son.

Yet it’s God giving us the language about himself that takes us into the Trinity at intra. Now we see an eternal relationality between father and son, such that by the time we get to John of Damascus and others in the 8th century, they’re saying anyone who says that the Father has not always been the Father, and that implies or that not just implies it, that proves that he has always then had a Son. That anyone who says that is heretical. So father/son language is the bridge into a full inter-relational Trinity that is the hallmark, is the cornerstone of Christian faith.

Imad Shehadeh: Yes. And that’s exactly the danger of eliminating the familial language from the Bible, in translating the Bible. These words, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, are untouchables. These are, they’re defining ontology, eternal. One way to talk to, to communicate, is we know that in Islam, the life of Christ, he had a mysterious beginning, a miraculous beginning. They say that he’s born of a virgin. He had a miraculous life. They agree that he was sinless, and he had a miraculous ending, too. Of course, they have a different way of looking at it, but at least it says that the description of the life of Christ on earth really begins outside earth, outside time and space.
And that’s what we tell them. We tell them that, you know, when we talk about Christ, you’re only talking about a small part of a bigger life that is the life of God itself. And that’s a good way to begin talking about that the story of Jesus is talking about the person of God outside of us, the God without us, that is, so that you’re gradually saying that the relationship of the one true God with us really stems from a relationship within God, without us. Outside of us.

**Darrell Bock:** And the idea the son is uncreated, that he’s eternal.

**Imad Shehadeh:** Yes.

**Darrell Bock:** That he’s not a part of the creation, but in fact sits over the creation is a very, very important part of this overall conception that has to be broken through. That’s where the bridge has to take you.

**Imad Shehadeh:** Yes. Absolutely. And then that takes us to the uniqueness of why father/son, and if we challenge the other side and say, well, can you think of a more beautiful relationship, what other concept can you find that would take you there? What other relationship can you define or come up with to have an understanding of God that is what the New Testament is talking about? If you want to eliminate that it’s father/son, what else, what replacement can you have, to have the same kind of relationship? And there’s no answer to this. This is a revelation that has no replacement. And there’s so much beauty in that father/son relationship in 1:14 of John. It’s the glory of the only, the monoganist, the only one who is father and son. There’s a glory in that relationship, and that defines it in 1:18 of John as this son who is monogamist theos that also is the Son of God who is in the bosom. There’s this intimate relationship between father and son, and that’s a very source of the attributes of God. That’s who he is in eternity before there ever was a world.
Darrell Bock: You know, there’s an irony, Imad, in your citing John 1:14 as you’ve done. Because when you use the phrase only begotten, even in English, English hearers wrestle with, what is that? What does that mean? What are we actually saying? Because the connotation that it has, when you hear the word begotten, you’re in a category that normally speaking, you’re saying isn’t applied to the son. And so you’re left with the situation of having to explain what it means. So you get translations like unique Son of God or uncreated Son of God to get at what only begotten means. So we’ve got the same problem in English, and we have to wrestle with other expressions to help us get at what the terminology is, which initially when you hear it might take you in a direction that isn’t the direction you’re trying to go with the terminology.

Scott Horrell: But backing up just a little bit, one thing that I marvel at is what language in the world is there that doesn’t have a word for daddy or father and son. Every two year old knows that he or she is a son or daughter of a daddy, so the Lord chose this extremely simple language on the one hand to reveal the deepest reality of who he is. That takes us beyond what we can quite fathom at the same time.

Mark Bailey: That raises one more question, I mean, another illustration is we are said to be begotten of God. You know, everyone who has been born of God. I don’t think we would want to toss out that terminology because that sounds physical, and it sounds procreational, and so like you said, in English we have the same kinds of words that by themselves, in isolation, could lead people to wrong conclusions.

But it’s the explanation, and if I can say it, the whole challenge of exposition of Scripture in preaching the Word and expositing the Word is taking the Word, translating the word, and our commitment to Biblical languages here at Dallas is how should it be translated, how should it be preached, how should it be applied. Those are the constant challenges of handling the inherent word. Imad, one more question as we close out this segment. For an Arab context, give us one, two, or three suggestions that would help people who are hearing this podcast know some steps that they can take as they share their faith with a person of Arabic language, of Muslim persuasion, to get to the core of the message, and not get sidetracked on some of the translation nuances?
Imad Shehadeh: Okay. I’ll try. One thing in communicating with our friends is to communicate assurance in our relationship with God. There’s a sense of I know him. I know what he is like. When he told me he loved me, I can understand what that attribute of love is, and because I experience that only his love is infinite and great, and I can be assured of his love. The concept of assurance in their perspective is it’s limiting God to be sure of something. To be sure that he’s going to act in a certain way is limiting him, that he is so powerful that he’s not bound to a promise or law. So that by communicating to our friends that that’s in their understanding, he is not bound to a promise or law, but in our understanding as Christians, God is – surely he’s powerful, but not at the expense of his love or his holiness. All his attributes work together.

Another way to communicate with our friends is to communicate the concept of grace, and that God acts in spite of our sins. In other words, we’re not talking to them that we are higher than them, as if we are better than them. We are just fellow sinners, saved by his grace. We are not better people than they are. We are just telling what we have found, what God has done to us. So it’s very important to communicate this, so that they do not, they’re not offended to think that we know better than they.

And then certainly that when we communicate anything about the Christian faith, there’s nothing political intended here. We are very sorry about the Crusades in the 11th and 12th centuries. We’re very sorry, but that’s not what Christ would have commanded. So when we communicate the Gospel, we’re not trying to make any political invasion here. We’re loving people. It’s a human being talking to another human being.

And in doing so, when we’re asking for a response, we are giving really to that person a sense of honor. In other words, in so many countries, there is lack of freedom, and to them, somebody changing from one persuasion to another is a no-no. It’s very bad, and it’s not accepted. But rather than communicate freedom to them, we communicate the concept of honor. In other words, my friend, I’m telling you these things because I honor you, because I’m giving you the honor of choosing, the honor of responding, to this God, what God is trying to tell you about himself. So God is honoring you by asking you to choose. So choosing is giving you honor, and the language of honor really communicates.

So the language of assurance, the language of grace, the language of honor, and to make sure that there’s nothing political about Christians sharing their faith with other people.
That’s very helpful. We have addressed the topic of translation and terminology. We will have other podcasts in which we will address the issues of being a Christian in a different culture, and especially cultures that are dominated by a particular religion that would be different then, and even at times hostile to Christianity. But we’ve sort of addressed this using the illustration. We’ve used the wheel and the spokes. We’ve not gone around that wheel one, two, three, four. We’ve come at it from all different angles, and hopefully the conversation has been helpful.

Imad, we will connect with you again to bring you into these kinds of conversations. We so appreciate your leadership there. We appreciate your expertise. But we especially appreciate your heart for the Arab peoples.

And Darrell and Scott, thank you, as well, for your time today. We deeply appreciate it.

A pleasure.

Yes.

Thank you.