



Bible Translation in Islam



Part 1 of 2: General Issues in Bible Translation
with Darrell L. Bock, J. Scott Horrell, Imad N. Shehadeh, and Mark L. Bailey
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Mark Bailey:

It's a privilege for me to invite into our studio today to be a part of this Table podcast Dr. Darrell Bock, who serves as our senior professor of New Testament studies as well as the executive director of our newly initiated Center for Cultural Engagement. Dr. Imad Shehadeh, from Jordan, the president of the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, who will join us and via Skype and our technology. And Dr. Scott Horrell, who serves as professor of systematic theology and theological studies, here at Dallas Theological Seminary. Gentlemen, thanks for spending the time with us today.

Our topic that we would like to address is the unique challenges in Bible translation, and especially the challenges that have surfaced in recent years of translating the Word of God into cultures where some terms that we hold dear theologically, Biblically, may not be understood and may in effect cause offense in certain cultures.

And so, Darrell, you and Scott and Imad, all three of you have been involved in translating, and being involved in the issues of translation. Darrell, let me ask you to kick it off. What are some of the unique challenges that a translator faces as they get ready to present the Word of God in a receptor language?

Darrell Bock:

Well, the main issue is, and there's an expression that translators like to cite when they work on translations, that every translation is a lie, which is a strong way of saying that you have the problem that languages don't overlap entirely in the same way. So whenever you render something into another language, you're explaining, but you also may be losing something. And even though the little proverb is certainly a hyperbole and an exaggeration, every translator recognizes that when they move from one language to another, they are losing nuance when they do that.

So the issue is always when I have three, four, or five ways of expressing what an idea is, which one loses the least, if I can say it that way. Which brings over the most referent, that refers to the thing in the most accurate way, even though it may not be a precise overlap. And so that's why translations have challenges. That's actually why you get many translations. Some languages like English are blessed with multiple translations, and the reason you do this is because at certain spots, you have to put one thing in the text, but in fact there may be two or three different expressions that all give something about what is being expressed in the original language, and you have to make the decision. Which one of these carries the most freight in the best way?

That's the challenge of the translator, and that's why sometimes you get translations, and then in the margin you'll get a note that says "or," because they're communicating to you a little bit of uncertainty about the precision of the translation, and the alternative helps you to see the breadth of what it is that you're translating.

Scott Horrell:

The United Bible Society says there are about 6,600 languages in the world, and of those, 2,500 to 2,600 have something of the Scriptures. So the task is far from being done. You can imagine how many words in a tribal language, for example, have no equivalent – almost no equivalent – as we look at the Biblical text and try to put it into their language. And even in Arabic, certain terms like Son of Man, at least in some idioms, I should say, that are out there, Son of Man really means an illegitimate child. So as Jesus goes around calling himself Son of Man, the strong word is "bastard," and if that's put into another translation, then you can imagine the horrific way that a person would read that in another culture.

Even the term Holy Spirit is often taken to be the Angel Gabriel. So when the Angel Gabriel says to Mary, "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be with child," the interpretation of that is immediately disastrous. So there are – and that's with Arabic or Muslim idiom translations. So when we talk of Son of God or Father, are we talking biological? Are we talking social relational father? How are these kinds of terms translated? That's tough.

Darrell Bock:

And that's the problem is that underneath the term, there's – like I say, there's freight that comes with it that isn't expressed in the word but is expressed culturally through that word. And so the question is, when you render it, will you trigger all those associations, or not? And so you're wrestling with getting a rendering that brings as little static, if I can say it that way, if I can use a figure, brings as little static with it that gets in the way of the meaning, as is possible. And sometimes those choices are difficult.

Mark Bailey:

And they're not just word choices. At times it's, as I understand it, like in Ethiopia, it's even conceptual, where theological truth, the way we would explain it, has overtones that don't represent it in the same way in a particular language or a particular setting.

Imad, other than the Son of God, which obviously has raised the discussion in translation, from an Arabic perspective, are there other phrases that you have encountered, knowing both English and Arabic, living in an Arab context in the Middle East, and ministering widely beyond the Middle East – other challenging phrases, before we address the issue of Son of God and how that should be translated, that might illustrate the challenge of translation as well?

Imad Shehadeh: One main one is the word Allah itself. In other words, in the Arabic Bible that Christians have used for centuries, the word Allah is the word used for God. So Allah created the heaven and the earth in the beginning, Allah created the heaven and earth, and for Allah so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. So Allah is a word used by Christians to refer to the true God, yet Muslims use the same word, yet we are talking about a different perspective on who this God is. So is it right to translate it Allah? That's a question often raised to translate God as Allah, and as Christian Scripture, so that in several countries, that are non-Arabic speaking, there's a strong movement asking Christians not to use the word Allah for God in the Bible.

Yet actually the word Allah was there when Islam came, and so it was really used, and it really comes from the Aramaic original that was the lingua franca back then. So Jews and Christians naturally used the word Alaha, which is the Aramaic, and this is actually the word Jesus would have used. So it's really a Christian/Jewish word, not a Muslim word originally. And so Islam came and took that same word, only they defined this Allah in a different way. So you're in a way since you have the same subject, but a different predicate, in a sense, and that's where the issue becomes difficult. So when that's communicated, that we're talking the word Allah was really a Christian/Jewish word used before Islam, it eases things. It makes it much simpler to talk about the attributes of this God that we're talking about.

Darrell Bock: Imad, isn't one of the issues here that when you – I mean, if we look back, we can look at the etymology of the roots of the word. That's one. But then the other part of it is this freight idea that I was talking about: what comes with the word. And so when you say the word Allah and you say it to a Jew or a Christian, there's a relational dimension to this God that is the freight, if I could use the figure, that comes with it. Whereas in Islam, if you use the word Allah, that personal relational dimension is significantly diminished if completely absent, that God is so sovereign and so detached – and so there's this background to the word, and that's part of what people are wrestling with when they even raise the question about whether to use the word or not. Isn't that part of what's going on in the tension between the choice of using or not using a given word like Allah?

Imad Shehadeh: Oh, absolutely. I agree with you. And I missed the first part, the connection was gone, so I didn't quite hear you.

Darrell Bock: Well, all that I was saying was that there's a background to the word, that when Christians and Jews use it, there's a relational dimension to this God and the way that he interacts with his creation that isn't a part, generally speaking, of Islamic theology. God in Islam is much more sovereign and detached. I mean, the whole idea of Islam pointing to the idea of submission shows how non-relational we're looking at the concept of God. So it's not the word. It's not even the letters. It's what comes, it's everything that comes within what you're evoking when you use the word. I think we just lost him.

Scott Horrell: Maybe I can speak to that a little bit. Miroslav Volf is known as a Trinitarian scholar. Yet his recent work has been seeking to bridge politically, sociologically, ethically, but theologically also, into the Islamic world. And his 2011 book, *Allah: A Christian Response*, seeks to establish a commonality around the concept of God. This bridges out of at least two seminars that they have hosted at the Center for Faith and Culture at Yale University.

A second book is just coming out right now. *Do We Worship the Same God? Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Dialogue*. And various contributors to that. Volf's simply the editor there. A lot of emphasis is currently then being given on the general concept of God is parallel, certainly. I'm a little concerned at how far some back away to finally say, but we're Trinitarian so it's not the same God. That needs to be a little closer to the front, I think. But they are, at least, saying, you know, look at the 99 names of God. In many respects, they do parallel what Muslims and Christians together believe. But I think Imad will have a very insightful word here for us as well.

Imad Shehadeh: Yeah. [Break in audio]

Mark Bailey: While we're working on the connection, let me jump in. In talking with lay folks who stumble over, because of the confession of faith of the Muslims – you know, there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet, his prophet – I like to use the letters “god.” We have god of the Philistines. You know, we have the Babylonian gods. In Jonah, the sailors called on their gods. So we use G-O-D, and we're happy in English translations to use G-O-D for both the true God and the false gods. And as Paul says, “Though there be many that are called gods, there is just one God.” It's not in the letters. It is in the meaning.

But we also talk about the theology of Islam, and nobody objects to using theo with the study of, and so even we're using the term for god in other contexts when we don't mean the God of the Bible. And so just as a translation issue, I think the background is very helpful to understand the Aramaic and how it came in even before Islam became a religion, to know that just the word is not the problem. The meaning, and what is associated with that meaning becomes the issue. And therefore the need for clarification.

Darrell Bock: Yeah. Let me see if I can use an illustration that has nothing to do with theology, but might get at what we're talking about. If you use the word father, and you talk to someone who had a loving, compassionate, kind father, that automatically brings all kinds of associations with it. But let's say you use that word with someone whose father was abusive, and was violent, et cetera, then with that terminology comes all kinds of associations that are very different than the associations that the first person has. And so the tension that you're dealing with here is what do you evoke in the person who's hearing this word, when you use the term?

Well, some of it has nothing to do with, if I can say it, the linguistics of the word. It has to do with what's beyond that, and how they are, if I can say it, translating this word or the context in which they place the word, some of which is rooted in their own experience, in the way they have framed the concept of the word that you're using. Now that's a confusing way to say it at one level, but I think that helps to get at the tension that you're dealing with. You evoke certain things by the use of a word, and the question is, are you evoking so much stuff, static, is the figure I've used earlier, that you're actually are getting in the way of communicating what it is you're trying to say by the word as opposed to what it is you intend to communicate by the word choice.

Scott Horrell: But if you change the word, how do you reconstruct the very Biblical image part of it.

Darrell Bock: That's the other half. That's the other half of it. And that's the translator's dilemma. I mean, I think that it's important to appreciate the nature of the problem before you talk about what the best way is to address it, and there's a real, genuine tension here that I think everyone recognizes is a part of the situation. And then the question is, how do you best execute a philosophy of translation that accomplishes as much as you can in rendering from one language to another? And hopefully you come up with a solution that avoids as much static as possible on the one hand and makes sure that it has the bridges to the real concepts you're trying to communicate on the other. Those are the two things you're trying to keep in balance as you work on this.

Scott Horrell: Rick Braun has written extensively. He's probably the leader, the one on the forefront of alternative translations, rather than the literal, for the divine familial language, both father and son. He'll argue that in some tribal situations, father may be the, in one sense the inseminator, the procreator of a child, but the child's de facto father would be an uncle or somebody else in the very familial structure of that tribe. So when you use one word that's used for biological father, in a way that stands over against a social relational father, the one that raises and, in a sense, is the de facto father as we think a normal father ought to be. So these are difficulty issues for translators, and we on the outside very often look on and are quick to criticize, not realizing how deep culturally these things go.

Mark Bailey: Scott, is there a difference in providing a translation for a tract to get the Gospel into a culture for the first time? With New Tribes and Wycliffe they're on the forefront of putting language down that has never been put on paper before, so they're doing all of the linguistics, all of the word meanings. They're developing the dictionary. They're developing the grammar from what they are perceiving from within that culture. Is there and should there be a difference between what we would say to get the Gospel into that culture, and a full-blown Bible translation that represents the best translation into that receptor language?

Scott Horrell: I think there has to be. I mean, that just – one of the criticisms against SIL Wycliffe has been this issue of moving some of the language to what they say is actually striking, as Darrell said, the very understanding of a reader. But they've also said most of these aren't translations. They're radio airtime, or they're explaining the Gospel in one kind of a forum or another. Now, some of them are translations as well. But surely that has to come into it. When you're translating, though, that's the future of the church. That's bedrock authority for how we understand the Christian faith.

So there's a long history of this. You go back to the second century and the Diatessaron of Tatian, what, in 160, with the harmony of the Gospels, the literal translation of the Son of God. You get to the Peshita, which is a kind of the Aramaic or Syriac parallel to the Latin Vulgate, really still used today as the Latin Vulgate. Very dogmatic translation of Son of God, with Nicaea, the confession of trinity, and so much more that Jesus Christ is very God of very God, begotten but not made. That's tricky language, but it has been faithfully translated down through the centuries.

We come to when Islam invades Palestine, and further you have the patriarch Timothy over the Nestorian Church, who in 800 had considerably more influence, if Peter Jenkins is right, than the Pope in Rome. I mean, it was an immense empire. Yet as they translate Scripture, they would do so quite literally. But when they would articulate what does this mean in debates – John of Damascus did the same thing a little further west – they would be using terms like Word of God or Spirit of God to describe Christ, rather than Son of God, which raised the barriers. You see that kind of dualism going all the way through in the Arabic world, for example. The Bible's been translated literally, but the explanation of that, even systematic theologies in, like in Cairo, of a Christian faith but open for Muslims to read, would often use the other language.

So we come to a time here recently, as we start talking about in the last 40 years, dynamic equivalence. What then do we put in the actual translation? Have we created more barriers than we need to, in terms of translating the Son of God, for example?

Darrell Bock: We've got two things going on at the same time that I think it's important to keep on the table and distinct. Now, with some translation work and with some of the work of some of these organizations, they're actually, if I can say it, creating or formulating what the theological language is. They are walking into a culture and first they're trying to get it linguistically catalogued – this is how the language works, because it's all been done orally. And giving it phonetics and all the rest of it. And so they're creating this space in which theological language is going to function. And then you've got the translation, which is your theological language. So you've got to figure out how to get those fused together.

Well, if we just look back at the history of our own, of the church itself, look at how long it took us to carve out our theological language for our concepts like the Trinity. You know, that wasn't something that came overnight. That took several centuries to sort itself out. First you had to have the language that you're going to work with, and then you had to decide which sets of terms cover the most ground the best. And that took councils, et cetera. So we've been here before. We've gone through this, and I think sometimes a sense of that kind of history and the dynamics of what you're dealing with helps a person to appreciate what it is you're really wrestling with when you're doing this.

Those two things, forming the very language out of which your theological expression is going to come, and then deciding which theological languages actually best does it. Two separate steps, two very important steps, and two very complex steps.

Mark Bailey: From the theologian perspective, what I think is a concern with removing Son of God language is that you actually then almost promote the loss of the theological truth, as opposed to getting people closer to the theological truth by that translation.

Scott Horrell: Some of my friends that I'm in dialogue with who are translators, more or less, on the other side, if I can say it that way, but they argue you cannot impose Nicene Trinitarianism on the text. Let the text speak for itself. The problem is, sometimes they burn down the bridge to then get to the clear Trinitarian theology. So it's that tension between the two.

Sometimes I think – well, to give you a little history here, it was Eugene Nida and a little bit later Charles Kraft in the '60s and '70s who were pioneering the area of dynamic equivalence. And translation has come a good, long way since then. And it should be said, right from the outset, every SIL, every Wycliffe, New Tribes, every translation group I know of has a Trinitarian doctrinal statement. They confess Trinity. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. They're not backing away from that. So we're talking about brothers here. Let me put in a parentheses, though, the UBS that draws a lot of these together, has no doctrinal statement. So there are some that may question whether they really believe in Trinity or not. But that's a little beside the point. The vast, the vast numbers want to be faithful to Trinity.

What they've found in terms like Son of God and Father and certain other terms as well is that dynamic equivalence no longer is adequate. They've come to that conclusion.

There are several theories out there, but one that seems to be coming to the fore, Eastern SIL, is that of text and paratext. And Darrell touched on this a little bit. Like we have a word in our text, and then a footnote that will explain the meaning of that, so increasingly, and that's the direction that seems to be pioneering the future, which I think is a great, great solution. Now, do you put the – but which do you put in the text? Particularly in a Muslim idiom translation, where Muslims reverence the word as their absolute. Do you put the dynamic equivalent term, like beloved Son or Messiah there? Rather than the more literal the Son of God? And I argue no, put the Son of God in the text. Explain it in the paratext. Because the Muslim will read that text and take that as the absolute of God, and then the explanation below as oh, that's what it means.

Mark Bailey: I think that's it. The net Bible may have had a –

Darrell Bock: It's a paratext on steroids.

Mark Bailey: On steroids, that many of our faculty worked on. And maybe we were a little ahead of our time to say here's the translation, and here's the paratext that explains why we took that translation. Maybe we blazed some trails we didn't know we were blazing, with regard to that product.

Darrell Bock:

It's actually also a problem in English. With some of the discussions and debates that you've seen with Bible translations in English, my complaint has been to some of those translations that have caught flak has been you haven't used your notes enough to explain what it is that you're doing so that a person can see what the more literal rendering is, and what it is that you've rendered. So that – because that helps you to build that bridge. That always establishes the connection. The dilemma of the translator is I have two or three expressions here, each of which works to a degree. So which takes the most weight? Well, the moment I put one in that text, and I opt the others out, okay, I've lost something.

So by having that paratext, by having that footnote, I can regain some of what I've lost, and I can cover my bases. And so, that's the value of doing that that way, and I think it is a good solution, because some of the losses, some of the alternatives that are put forward, like Messiah, to say Messiah is equivalent to Son of God actually clouds or fogs a major issue, which is that there is overlap between Son of God and Messiah, because of the way it's used in the Old Testament. You know, the 2 Samuel passage, "I will be to him as a father and he will be to me as a son," said to Solomon as part of the Davidic Covenant. There's an overlap there, but there is something unique about Son of God and the way it develops theologically that Messiah doesn't catch.

And so if you just say Messiah, you have not said enough. This was my original criticism when this issue first came up and was brought across my desk and I was communicating with the people who were doing the translating and I was saying, I understand why you want to go to Messiah, and it certainly does overlap, but it doesn't do enough. It doesn't build that bridge to ultimately where you want to get with the concept. And that's part of what a translator wants to try and preserve. They want to preserve as much of the connections of where a term is ultimately taking you as you possibly can when you render it.

Scott Horrell:

And what I'm hearing, Darrell, is that translators have acquiesced on that. I think almost all have said, you're right. Messiah isn't adequate. I would argue for a Son or Sons of God means many things in Scriptures, of course. Angels. Divine council. The Davidic Son, but royal figures of various kinds. And so you come into the New Testament, and the confession that Jesus is the Son of God, if you're just taking that vantage from the Old Testament, may not carry that much weight.

But then you step into the Gospels. Matthew, for example. You have not only will he be Emmanuel, God with us, but you have the baptism. This is my beloved Son. You have Satan. If you are the Son of God, in the temptations in the wilderness, three times. And then immediately demons are crying out and saying, what have you to do with us, Son of God? And so as we get a little further on in the book, like when Jesus calms the sea, and the disciples bow down in the boat and they worship him, worship him as the Son of God. Centurion later on at the crucifixion, surely this is a or the Son of God.

So even in Matthew, and that's paralleled in Mark and Luke – and Darrell's the expert on this – but you have a canonical, meaning it's being unpacked. And I would jump even quicker to the Gospel of John. There you have the prologue which sets it up entirely. The Word is God, and it was with God. So you have a loose already Binitarian, if not Trinitarian, structure being set forth. So when Nathaniel confesses Jesus is the Son of God, or later on in the same first chapter, then you have another confessing Jesus as the Son of God, John has already put the structure in place. And of course, John and the Gospels are likely written after books like Philippians, that seem to have a Christology accepted in the church. Doesn't seem to be a debate about these high Christological titles already in place.

So it seems to me this canonical idea of what the Biblical are doing, the synoptic authors as well as John, needs to be in focus as we translate Son of God. So a final point here. I see words like Son of God being spokes in a wheel. If you translate it in a different way, even in the Old Testament, you begin to take out some of those spokes, all of which begin to coalesce around the axle of this eternal Son of God, feeding into the idea that's the larger big idea of Scripture that we dare not let go of.

Darrell Bock:

Yeah. I think that the tricky thing about this is, if I can say it that way, there are two ways to tell that story of how we get to our wheel, if I can say it. I can do it in terms of where the wheel ends up, what the wheel ends up being, in light of the totality of what's going on. Or I can do it a step at a time, to show how we get the wheel. And so I like to say it this way about the Gospels, that Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of Jesus from the earth up. They start pretty much with categories that we're used to, and then they push us to see that Jesus is more. So that when we go from son of God, we eventually get to Son of God. You know, there's something more happening. But John does it the opposite way around. He tells it from heaven down. He tells you right from the start where he is starting, and then you fit that underneath it.

Well, what we have tended to do in the church is to put everything in the Johanine frame, and we've lost the ability of showing people how we go from a Jesus who works in categories we get, to a Jesus who works in categories that we struggle to get. And we've lost how to tell the story of how to get from A to B. And yet three of our Gospels do it that way. And so we've got to help the church in translations, et cetera, know how to present Jesus as a completely unique figure that is, he's an unprecedented part of our world and a part of the Creation who's both Creator and also incarnate.

And so how do you do that? And how do you help people to see this is a category completely unique to anything else that you'll ever encounter? And of course, that's what you run up against in, not just in Islam. You run up against it in Judaism as well. How do you deal with this unique figure? And the Scriptures attempt to do that, and they come at it from both angles. And so we've got to keep our attention on the fact that it comes at it from both angles.

Mark Bailey:

The term Son of Man does similar things. It's used for the prophet Ezekiel. It's used for a son of humanity. But as you move through, as you said, Scott, and Darrell, you both said it – as you move through the Gospels, what gets attributed to the Son of Man no longer is simply a human category. The ability to forgive. The one who can change the law. Who can redefine the Sabbath. Who is coming back in glory. The term Son of Man becomes a similar kind of fill-out of what the full meaning is. Have the translators struggled in these contexts with the phrase Son of Man as they have with Son of God? Or is it not as big of an issue?

Scott Horrell:

Well, as I mentioned, in some idioms at least, it means exactly what you don't want it to mean, an illegitimate child. I can't answer that entirely. What I do marvel at, we all know that Jesus uses that term of himself what, maybe 80 times, is that when he's standing before the Sanhedrin and they ask him, are you the Son of God, Jesus says, "Yes, you say that I am." And yet, maybe that's okay. But then when he complements that and links it to Daniel 7, Son of Man coming in glory and receiving dominion and power and honor and an everlasting kingdom and the nations will worship him, the Sanhedrin goes ballistic. They tear their clothes and scream out, he must be crucified. Jesus, in his own self-perception, draws those together. He links Son of Man and Son of God in the highest possible terms. And I think that's the dynamite. That's the grenade rolling across the floor in the Sanhedrin, in the trial.

Darrell Bock: And it's very much at the end of the process of Jesus' disclosure about the term. The term itself simply means, in idiom, when you detach it from Daniel and everything else, it simply means a human being. The son of man. The son of Charles. The son of Jane. You know, it's a way of saying another human being. But then, when he connects it to Daniel 7, which is the image of a human being riding the clouds. See, in the Old Testament, the only people who ride clouds are transcendent figures.

And so that's how I think Jesus chose the term, because it has this unique mix of what we're talking about, that points to this uniqueness between humanity and transcendence, which is wedded together. And then when he associates it with the dominion and the rule and authority and all that, that is the grenade. I mean, that the fuse is lit and the light's going off and the explosion is happening.

Mark Bailey: And he wasn't worried that that might be offensive.

Darrell Bock: Not at all. Not at all. And in fact, he knew it. He knew it. By the time we get to the last week of Jesus' life, he is pressing the leadership to make a call. And they make the call. And so, from that standpoint, that term runs very, very, very parallel. I do think that the one difference that you have is that because you're kind of coming at it from below, if I can say it that way, Son of Man into deity, if you will, versus coming at it from above, where Son of God, you know, that lessens the tension a little bit about what might be connoted with the terminology. And so it doesn't quite, it doesn't resonate to the level of a problem that you get with Son of God.