

D. A. CARSON



JESUS

THE

SON OF GOD

A CHRISTOLOGICAL TITLE OFTEN
OVERLOOKED, SOMETIMES MISUNDERSTOOD,
AND CURRENTLY DISPUTED

“No christological designation is as essential as ‘Son of God’; none is more important. This study makes that impressively clear by sound and careful exegesis and theological reflection in the face of misunderstandings and disputes, past and current. Once again, D. A. Carson serves the church well.”

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“I know what it is to reject Jesus as the ‘Son of God.’ As a former Muslim, nothing baffled and, quite frankly, angered me more than hearing Christians call Jesus ‘the Son of God.’ I thought such persons were blasphemers worthy of condemnation. But now, nothing gives me more joy than to know that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and that the title ‘Son of God’ carries far more truth and wonder than I could have imagined. So I welcome this volume from D. A. Carson with all the enthusiasm and joy of one who once denied the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. With his customarily clear, warm, careful, and balanced manner, Carson gives us a fresh exploration of a precious truth that so many Christians take for granted and so many Muslims misunderstand. If you want to know Jesus and the Bible better, this surely is one aid that will not disappoint.”

Thabiti Anyabwile, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Grand Cayman; author, *What Is a Healthy Church Member?*

“What does it mean for us to confess that Jesus is the Son of God? D. A. Carson tackles this question in *Jesus the Son of God*. In this little book he lays a firm foundation to help the church understand ‘Son of God’ with reference to Jesus. After considering uses of ‘Son of God’ in Scripture, both in general and when applied to Jesus, Carson models the way systematic theology should be based on solid biblical exegesis. Carson is especially concerned to bring his study to bear on the controverted issue in missiological circles concerning how to present Jesus as Son of God in Christian and Muslim contexts. Here he critically, but kindly, calls for rethinking new translations that have replaced references to God the Father and Jesus as his Son to make them more acceptable to Muslims.”

Robert A. Peterson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Seminary

JESUS THE SON OF GOD

A Christological Title Often Overlooked,
Sometimes Misunderstood,
and Currently Disputed

D. A. Carson

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Jesus the Son of God: A Christological Title Often Overlooked,
Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed*

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CONTENTS

Preface	11
1 “Son of God” as a Christological Title	13
2 “Son of God” in Select Passages	43
3 “Jesus the Son of God” in Christian and Muslim Contexts	73
General Index	111
Scripture Index	113

PREFACE

This little book originated in three lectures delivered at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, on March 5–6, 2012. In shortened form it became the Gaffin Lecture on Theology, Culture, and Mission at Westminster Theological Seminary on March 14, 2012, and then, slightly modified, became the substance of three lectures in French at the Colloque Réformée held in Lyon, France, in April of the same year. I am enormously indebted to Michel Lemaire and Jacob Mathieu for their very careful work of translation. It is a pleasure rather than a mere obligation to express my hearty gratitude to those who organized these lectures and invited me to participate. I am hugely indebted to them for their hospitality and kindness.

I chose the topic about three years ago. Some work I had done while teaching the epistle to the Hebrews, especially Hebrews 1 where Jesus is said to be superior to angels because he is the Son, prompted me to think about the topic more globally. Moreover, for some time I have been thinking through the hiatus between careful exegesis and doctrinal formulations. We need both, of course, but unless the latter are finally controlled by the former, and *seen* to be controlled by the former, both are weakened. The “Son of God” theme has become one of several test cases in my own mind. Since choosing the topic, however, the debates concerning what a

faithful translation of “Son of God” might be, especially in contexts where one’s envisioned readers are Muslims, have boiled out of the journals read by Bible translators and into the open. Entire denominations have gotten caught up in the controversy, which shows no sign of abating. The last of these three chapters is devoted to addressing both of these points—how, in a Christian context, exegesis rightly leads to Christian confessionalism, and how, in a cross-cultural context concerned with preparing Bible translations for Muslim readers, one may wisely negotiate the current debate. But I beg you to read the first two chapters first. They provide the necessary textual detail on which discussion of the controversies must be based.

This book is not meant to be primarily a contribution to the current disputes, as important as those debates may be. It is meant to foster clear thinking among Christians who want to know what we mean when we join believers across the centuries in confessing, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in his only Son Jesus, our Lord.”

Once again it is a pleasure to record my indebtedness to Andy Naselli for his invaluable suggestions.

Soli Deo gloria.

CHAPTER THREE

“JESUS THE SON OF GOD” IN CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM CONTEXTS

In an ideal world, we should attempt a great deal more exegesis and careful integration to develop a comprehensive theology of “Son of God” as a christological title. Only then should we venture forth on wide-ranging reflections on the confessional, pastoral, and translational significance of what we have uncovered so far. But since this is not an ideal world, it may be worth plunging ahead somewhat prematurely. At very least this may have the advantage of priming the pump of discussion.

I shall organize this last chapter under two questions.

WHAT BEARING DOES THIS STUDY OF JESUS
AS THE SON OF GOD HAVE ON THE WAY
CHRISTIANS SHOULD THINK ABOUT JESUS?

I shall focus on six items.

1. Not All Uses of “Son of God” Are the Same

Owing not least to the Trinitarian confessionalism that we have inherited from the fourth century, “Son of God” as a

christological confession is in many Christian minds primarily associated with the second person of the Godhead. It has become a fixed datum. This is not so much wrong as too narrowly focused—or, better put, some New Testament passages use Son of God terminology to ascribe to Jesus the attributes that were so important in third- and fourth-century christological debates, but many New Testament passages use Son of God terminology in rather different ways. Sometimes it functions much as it did when it referred to Israel as God’s Son, only now, in effect, Jesus is the ultimate Israel. Sometimes “Son of God” is associated with Jesus’s status as the anointed Davidic king, the Messiah, with particular emphasis on his kingly authority. Sometimes the expression focuses on his earthly ministry; sometimes it presupposes his origins in eternity past.

In short, in the New Testament “Son of God” is not a *terminus technicus*, as the Latins say—a technical term that always carries the same associations. It always presupposes some sense of deriving from God, or of acting like God, or both, but the domains of such acting are pretty diverse. Bible readers should exercise special pains not to succumb either to unjustified reductionism, in which one particular usage is read into every occurrence, or to “illegitimate totality transfer,” in which the entire semantic range of the expression is read into every occurrence. Context must decide.

2. *Biblical Trajectories Are Important If We Are to Understand How “Son of God” Commonly “Works”*

This should not surprise us. In various ways, New Testament writers are constantly drawing lines between, on the one

hand, Old Testament persons, institutions, and events, and, on the other hand, Jesus. Thus Jesus is the true Manna, the bread from heaven; he is the Passover Lamb; he is the True Vine; when he is “lifted up” to die, this recalls the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness; he is the ultimate High Priest; he himself is the Temple of God. So it should not come as a surprise that Jesus is declared to be the ultimate Davidic King, and thus the Son of God (as each Davidic king was declared Son of God in turn).

Yet this Davidic trajectory is subtle. We have observed how 2 Samuel 7:14, Psalm 2:7, and Psalm 45:6–7 are applied to Jesus, even though the first certainly applies to Solomon, not Jesus, the second probably applies first of all to David and his immediate successors, and the third certainly applies, initially, to kings who had heirs who replaced their fathers, not to Jesus. Yet in all three cases the context drops hints of a fulfillment that outstrips local petty monarchs. Once these passages are nestled into the complex matrix of the Davidic typology, the many passages that anticipate an heir of David who is declared to be God and whose reign embraces the entire earth and even the heavens, the connection to Jesus is all but inevitable. If these trajectories are not identified and understood, however, we will be at a loss to understand how the Old Testament texts that are said to be fulfilled in Jesus actually “work.” Many is the Christian who has thumbed through Old Testament pages to find the passage that has been quoted by the New Testament and applied to Jesus, only to feel let down by the fact that the connection is at best obscure, and in some cases seems to be talking about something radically different. It takes some hard work to uncover

how these trajectories, these typologies, actually work. But when we take the time and effort to examine them, we are hushed in awe at the wisdom of God in weaving together intricate patterns that are simultaneously so well hidden in their development and so magnificently obvious in their fulfillment.

3. The Relationship Between the Exegesis of the Biblical "Son of God" Passages and the Categories of Systematic Theology Is Not a Simple One

There are several domains to this problem, of which I shall mention three. *First*, the ways in which both exegesis and systematic theology are commonly taught ensure that the two disciplines do not engage each other very well. Of course, there are wonderful exceptions. Nevertheless, it is rare for commentaries and courses in biblical exegesis to carry the argument forward all the way to the categories and integration demanded by systematic theology. More commonly, those who teach exegesis warn against imposing the categories of systematic theology onto the biblical texts. Reciprocating in kind, many a systematician teaches theology with minimal dependence on firsthand study of the biblical texts. In fact, contemporary systematic theology frequently generates dissertations on, say, John Owen's view of the atonement (which properly belongs to historical theology) or perichoresis and personhood in the Trinity (which largely turns on philosophical theology), with relatively little work devoted to the kind of constructive, normative theology that builds a case, starting from the Bible, of what Christians *ought* to believe. Moreover, systematicians are sometimes at least as disdainful of rigorous exegesis as biblical scholars are of systematic theology.

Second, the words used in the two disciplines commonly have rather different meanings. It is as if some of the same vocabulary is being deployed in two rather different domains of discourse. The example I commonly offer is “sanctification.” This side of the Reformation, it is common for systematicians to teach us that, while justification refers to that once-for-all act of God by which he declares sinners to be just, not on the basis of their own righteousness but on the basis of Christ’s righteousness and atoning death, sanctification is that ongoing process by which believers are becoming more holy. All recognize that there are instances when the sanctification word-group refers not to the process of becoming more holy but to the status of a person: someone has been set aside for God, and in that sense “sanctified.” That status may be every bit as instantaneously received and as once-for-all as justification. Justification lies in the domain of the forensic; sanctification lies in the domain of the religious and the sacred. Time has taught us to think of such occurrences of the “sanctification” word-group as positional or definitional sanctification. Some biblical experts strongly argue that *most* occurrences of the word sanctification in the New Testament are actually instances of such positional sanctification.¹

Systematicians in turn may start to wonder if the doctrine of sanctification is being stripped away from them by the biblical experts. Meanwhile, one cannot help but observe how Paul can speak yearningly of the goals he maintains: “to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection

¹See esp. David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1995).

from the dead” (Phil. 3:10–11). Indeed, he has not arrived at his goal, but presses on “to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12). All of this sounds very much like sanctification even though the word “sanctification” is not used. In short, sometimes when we have “sanctification,” we do not have sanctification, and sometimes where there is no “sanctification” there is plenty of sanctification. In short, the doctrine and the word-group are not tightly tied together. Too few biblical scholars and systematicians show us how to establish the doctrine from the Scriptures—the former because they are inclined to think it is not their job, and the latter because they think the confessional standard has already been established and does not need rearticulation.

Third, to make matters more complicated, systematic theology often develops its own specialist terminology not found in the Bible. Such terminology may be the fruit of centuries of theological reflection on what the Bible says, but once it gains traction it takes on a life of its own. One need go no farther than the word “Trinity.” Systematicians may view the doctrine of the Trinity as so well established that they need not lay the foundations again; biblical scholars may view the doctrine as a fourth-century development and therefore outside the purview of their own specialism. Almost as bad, the doctrine of the Trinity may be reduced to a simple formula: for example, “The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God, and there is but one God.” That is true, of course, and so the formula may then be justified by a handful of attendant and relevant proof-texts. But all of this short-circuits how the doctrine of the Trinity came to avoid the Arian christology,

with its lesser-god view of Jesus; the modalism of Sabellius, with the one God disclosing himself in three manifestations that could not actually interact with one another as persons; the Nestorian understanding that emphasizes the differences and disunity between the divine and human natures of Jesus; and adoptionism that teaches Jesus was born a human being and only later became the Son of God. Pretty soon the doctrine of the Trinity was surrounded by expressions like “essence,” “substance,” “person,” and “hypostatic union”—none of which is controlled by Old Testament and New Testament usage. Yet all of these debates and their attendant specialty vocabulary arose from close readings of the New Testament and from attempts to avoid *misreading* the biblical evidence. One recalls John Calvin’s elegant discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, and then his conclusion: “Say that in the one essence of God there is a trinity of persons: you will say in one word what Scripture says, and cut short empty talkativeness.” Those who “persistently quarrel” over these words, he avers, “nurture a secret poison.”² Rightly deployed, confessional standards ought to guide, shape, and enrich our exegesis; wrongly deployed, they become cut off from the biblical texts that nurtured and developed them.

It is easy to see how these reflections on the tension between exegesis and systematic theology have a bearing on our understanding of what it means, as Christians, to confess that Jesus is the Son of God. In most seminaries there is not a clear educational track that helps students move easily and intelligently from how the Bible uses “Son of God” to the Trinitarian use of the title to which all of us are grateful heirs.

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.13.5.

The danger, on the one hand, is succumbing to the mindless biblicism that interprets texts, and translates them, without wrestling with the syntheses that actually preserve biblical fidelity, and, on the other hand, relying on confessional formulas while no longer being able to explain in some detail how they emerge from reflection on what the Bible actually says. Although chapters 1 and 2 were the merest introductions to the recovery of the exegetical and theological work that needs to be undertaken in every generation, they stand, I hope, as pointers in the right direction.

*4. The "Eternal Generation of the Son" Is
Especially Convolved Territory*

It is important to remember what this formula was trying to preserve. As important as it is to defend the deity of the Son in some sonship passages, not least against both the antisupernaturalism of much of the Western world and the anti-Trinitarian monotheism of the Muslim world, it is equally important to preserve the biblical emphasis on the truth of monotheism: there is but one God. To affirm that the Father is God and the Son is God and the Spirit is God, without unpacking the relationships among them, is perpetually in danger of succumbing to tritheism. Leaving aside for our purposes the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Father and the Son, and focusing exclusively on the Father/Son relationships, the eternal generation of the Son became the standard way of avoiding multiple gods. To illustrate how the eternal generation of the Son has been handled in influential systematic theology, I shall quote at length from Berkhof:

The eternal generation of the Son. The personal property of the Son is that He is eternally begotten of the Father (briefly called “filiation”), and shares with the Father in the spiration of the Spirit. The doctrine of the generation of the Son is suggested by the Biblical representation of the first and second persons of the Trinity as standing in the relation of Father and Son to each other. Not only do the names “Father” and “Son” suggest the generation of the latter by the former, but the Son is also repeatedly called “the only-begotten,” John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Heb. 11:17; 1 John 4:9. Several particulars deserve emphasis in connection with the generation of the Son: (1) *It is a necessary act of God.* Origen, one of the very first to speak of the generation of the Son, regarded it as an act dependent on the Father’s will and therefore free. Others at various times expressed the same opinion. But it was clearly seen by Athanasius and others that a generation dependent on the optional will of the Father would make the existence of the Son contingent and thus rob Him of His deity. Then the Son would not be equal to and *homoousios* [of the same essence] with the Father, for the Father exists necessarily, and cannot be conceived of as non-existent. The generation of the Son must be regarded as a necessary and perfectly natural act of God. This does not mean that it is not related to the Father’s will in any sense of the word. It is an act of the Father’s necessary will, which merely means that His concomitant will takes perfect delight in it. (2) *It is an eternal act of the Father.* This naturally follows from the preceding. If the generation of the Son is a necessary act of the Father, so that it is impossible to conceive of Him as not generating, it naturally shares in the eternity of the Father. This does not mean, however, that it is an act that was completed in the far distant past, but rather that it is a timeless act, the act of an eternal present, an act always continuing and yet ever completed. Its eter-

nity follows not only from the eternity of God, but also from the divine immutability and from the true deity of the Son. In addition to this it can be inferred from all those passages of Scripture which teach either the pre-existence of the Son or His equality with the Father, Mic. 5:2; John 1:14, 18; 3:16; 5:17, 18, 30, 36; Acts 13:33; John 17:5; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:3. The statement of Ps. 2:7, "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee," is generally quoted to prove the generation of the Son, but, according to some, with rather doubtful propriety, cf. Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5. They surmise that these words refer to the raising up of Jesus as Messianic King, and to the recognition of Him as Son of God in an official sense, and should probably be linked with the promise found in II Sam. 7:14, just as they are in Heb. 1:5. (3) *It is a generation of the personal subsistence rather than of the divine essence of the Son.* Some have spoken as if the Father generated the essence of the Son, but this is equivalent to saying that He generated His own essence, for the essence of both the Father and the Son is exactly the same. It is better to say that the Father generates the personal subsistence of the Son, but thereby also communicates to Him the divine essence in its entirety. But in doing this we should guard against the idea that the Father first generated a second person, and then communicated the divine essence to this person, for that would lead to the conclusion that the Son was not generated out of the divine essence, but created out of nothing. In the work of generation there was a communication of essence; it was one indivisible act. And in virtue of this communication the Son also has life in Himself. This is in agreement with the statement of Jesus, "For as the Father hath life in Himself, even so gave He to the Son also to have life in Himself," John 5:26. (4) *It is a generation that must be conceived of as spiritual and divine.* In opposition to the Arians, who insisted that the generation

of the Son necessarily implied separation or division in the divine Being, the Church Fathers stressed the fact that this generation must not be conceived in a physical and creaturely way, but should be regarded as spiritual and divine, excluding all idea of division or change. It brings *distinctio* and *distributio*, but no *diversitas* and *divisio* in the divine Being. (Bavinck) The most striking analogy of it is found in man’s thinking and speaking, and the Bible itself seems to point to this, when it speaks of the Son as the Logos. (5) The following definition may be given of the generation of the Son: *It is that eternal and necessary act of the first person in the Trinity, whereby He, within the divine Being, is the ground of a second personal subsistence like His own, and puts this second person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation, or change.*³

Observe several details.

(a) Berkhof links the eternal generation of the Son with the expression “only-begotten,” which he says is regularly predicated of the Son, adducing as evidence John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Hebrews 11:17; and 1 John 4:9. The Greek word is *μονογενής*. The rendering “only-begotten” presupposes it derives from *μόνος* + *γεννάω*. But a very good case can be made for a derivation from *μόνος* + *γένος*, and hence “only one of its kind,” which has generated the modern translations “only” (ESV) and “one and only” (NIV). Berkhof’s list of proof-texts is not reassuring: one of the six, Hebrews 11:17, does not refer to Jesus at all, but describes Isaac as Abraham’s *μονογενής* son—certainly not Abraham’s “only-begotten” son, nor even his “only” son, but properly his unique son, in

³Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 93–94.

that sense his one and only son. In a private communication, Gerald Bray has pointed out that toward the end of the second century, Tertullian in his *Adversus Praxean* talks about the *filius unicus*, the unique Son, which demonstrates how he at least read $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\eta}\varsigma$.

(b) Another comment by Berkhof betrays an unease with the standard proof-texts for the eternal generation of the Son: “The statement of Ps. 2:7, ‘Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee,’ is generally quoted to prove the generation of the Son, but, according to some, with rather doubtful propriety, cf. Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5. They surmise that these words refer to the raising up of Jesus as Messianic King, and to the recognition of Him as Son of God in an official sense, and should probably be linked with the promise found in II Sam. 7:14, just as they are in Heb. 1:5.” This sounds as if Berkhof has not quite decided on which side to come down. I would like to think that my exegesis in chapter 2 might help him decide.

(c) The complex stipulations Berkhof advances doubtless could be shown to arise out of some biblical descriptions of the Son, but he does not take the time to make the demonstration. The result is a feeling that the discussion has slipped away from the world of unyielding biblical texts.

(d) In any case, I tried to show, in chapter 2, that the relationship between the Father and the Son, commonly enfolded in the “eternal generation of the Son,” is better anchored in the broad themes of a passage like John 5:16–30, rising to its apex in 5:26, where the Father who has life-in-himself grants to the Son to have life-in-himself, than in a questionable rendering of $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\eta}\varsigma$.

*5. Understanding Jesus as the Son of God Ought
to Have a Bearing on Our Evangelism*

In past generations—how far back depends on the location—our evangelism in the Western world was largely confined to the churchified and to those who had at least been exposed to basic Christian doctrine. To insist on the importance of believing on Jesus the Son of God, or to preach that God sent his Son into the world to save the world, raised few eyebrows: the “Son” language was so much a part of the heritage that very little was done to unpack it. Today, however, in much of the Western world, we are dealing with biblical illiterates. What does it mean to them when they hear that God has a Son, or that God sent his Son into the world to bear our sins in his own body on the tree? This is not a subtle-but-wicked plea to avoid complex doctrines. Far from it: rather, just as we have to start farther back in our evangelism to provide more of the Bible’s story line for the good news of Jesus to cohere—much as Paul provides much of the Bible’s story line when he preaches the gospel to biblically illiterate pagans (Acts 17:16–31)—so we have to unpack more of the doctrine of God, and thus of the Son, to a generation that knows nothing of the Trinity. There are many ways of doing this, of course, but one of them is to follow the biblical trajectories forward, unpacking the Son of God themes as we go, until we reach their climax in Jesus the Son of God—the true man, the true Israel, the true Davidic King, the one who comes as David’s Son and yet as the mighty God.

*6. Understanding Jesus as the Son of God Ought
to Have a Bearing on Our Worship*

We increase the intensity, joy, and fidelity of our worship, not by including the verb “to worship” in every second line in

our so-called “worship songs,” but by knowing more about God, and bringing our adoration to him, as he is. Insofar as our conceptions of him diverge from what he has disclosed of himself, so far are we worshipping a false god, which is normally called idolatry. To study hard what holy Scripture says about the Son of God, who has most comprehensively revealed his heavenly Father, is to know more about God, and thus to begin to ground our worship in reality rather than slogans.

WHAT BEARING DOES THIS STUDY OF JESUS AS THE SON OF GOD HAVE ON CURRENT DEBATES REGARDING THE TRANSLATION OF THE TITLE, ESPECIALLY IN MUSLIM CONTEXTS?

The issues have become embroiled in much larger issues that deserve discussion. I shall merely identify them before moving on.

C5 and IM

An article appeared in 1998 titled “The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-Centered Communities.’”⁴ The author was John Travis, a pseudonym for a husband/wife team that had been living and serving for twenty years in a tightly knit Asian Muslim community. The “C” component came from “Christ-Centered Communities” in the title. The C1 to C6 categories are:

C1: A traditional church using nonindigenous language. Its believers exist in the broader community as an ethnic/

⁴John Travis, titled “The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-Centered Communities,’” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (1998): 407–8.

religious minority, regularly viewed by the local population as essentially foreign. One might imagine, say, English-language churches in Japan. In Muslim cultures that permit them, such churches are largely cut off from the surrounding culture, although a few Muslim-background believers may be found in them.

C2: Here the church is akin to C1, but the indigenous language is used. The vocabulary, forms of corporate worship, and other cultural values are essentially foreign.

C3: In this case the church not only uses the indigenous language but makes a point of adopting as many religiously neutral cultural norms as possible. The aim is to reduce foreignness as much as possible. Muslim-background believers in the church see themselves as *former* Muslims.

C4: This is similar to C3, but there is a willingness to adopt Islamic religious forms and practices where such are judged biblically permissible: for example, avoiding pork, keeping the fast, praying with raised hands, using more Islamic terms, and so forth. Muslim-background believers still see themselves as *former* Muslims.

C5: In these communities people have accepted Jesus as Lord, as they understand him, and reject elements of Islam that they think are completely incompatible with the Bible, but the list of such incompatibilities is judged pretty short. C5 believers meet with other C5 believers, but they also continue to attend Mosque meetings, read the Qur’an, and revere Muhammad. They are the Muslim equivalent of congregations of Messianic Jews. Most of these converts to Jesus continue to see themselves as Muslims.

C6: These are small groups of converts who meet under-

ground, usually under extreme threat of persecution from totalitarian regimes. Frequently they come to faith in Christ by listening to broadcasts, reading literature, or by contact with Christians while studying abroad. Unlike C5 believers, they keep silent about their faith in the public square, and are viewed by surrounding Muslims as Muslims.

The sweeping debate in missiological circles has centered on C5 communities. Often these are collectively referred to as Insider Movements (hence IM). Many impassioned books and articles have been written on both sides of the debate.⁵ Those who support IM feel they are tearing down unnecessary barriers to the conversion of Muslims; those who reject IM feel that the movement is essentially syncretistic and thus a threat to the gospel itself, engendering many spurious conversions. Inevitably, there are numerous mediating positions.

My purpose in mentioning C5 and IM is modest. The IM is an index of the ferment going on about how best to communicate the gospel to Muslims. The debate over how to translate Father-and-Son passages is part of the same ferment. Nevertheless, the two issues must not be completely identified. Supporters of C5 are likely to favor some of the new translations that avoid using Father/Son language, but it does not follow that all those who support these innovative translations favor the Insider Movement. For our purposes we will focus exclusively on the translation issues that have erupted into their own global debates.

⁵My own meager contribution to the debate is in a rather lengthy sermon on 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, a passage that supporters of IM frequently cite to justify their position. D. A. Carson, “That By All Means I Might Win Some: Faithfulness and Flexibility in Gospel Presentation” (sermon, The Gospel Coalition 2009 National Conference, April 23, 2009), <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/That-By-All-Means-I-Might-Win-Some>.

A Bit of History

It is well known that the Qur’an repeatedly denies that Jesus can be thought of as God’s Son.⁶ At the street level, many Muslims think Christians believe that God somehow impregnated Mary, and that the Trinity is made up of God, Mary, and Jesus, who is thus the Son of God. They find the construct bizarre, not to say blasphemous, and of course they are right. Informed Muslims have a better understanding of what Christians mean by the Trinity, but they find this Christian take on monotheism illogical at best, blasphemous at worst. In short, the objection to thinking of Jesus as the Son of God is not restricted to the repulsiveness of the idea that God had sexual union with a woman, but extends to the deeper criticism of the incarnation: the absolute distinction between God and his creation must not be breached.

Aware of these Muslim sensibilities, some sectors of SIL/Wycliffe, Frontiers, and other organizations have for a number of years embarked on a variety of Bible translations that have replaced many references to God as the Father and to Jesus as the Son. For example, in one recent Arabic translation, *Al Kalima*, the baptismal formula of Matthew 28 becomes, “Cleanse them by water in the name of Allah, his Messiah and his Holy Spirit.”⁷ Sometimes “Guardian” has been used instead of “Father.” Debates over these steps were confined largely to missionary organizations and journals devoted to the disciplines of Bible translation. Some of those debates were pretty intense. They surged into public view in

⁶E.g., 4:171, 172; 5:19, 75–78, 119–120; 9:30–31; 19:35.

⁷For the latest description of *Al Kalima*’s translation policies, which have been considerably revised since the first edition, see http://www.al-kalima.com/translation_project.html.

an article written by Collin Hansen for *Christianity Today*.⁸ The report begins with an account of a convert who, while still an unconverted Muslim, first read a Bible that did not refer to Jesus as the “Son of God” but as “the Beloved Son [implicitly of Mary?] who comes (or originates) from God.” Sometimes “Son of God” becomes “beloved of God.”

Articles and blogposts have proliferated. Biblical Missiology, a ministry of Horizon International, organized a petition against these developments. SIL/Wycliffe has organized study sessions and issued a variety of statements. Toward the end of 2011, its Istanbul statement retreated from the most extravagant renderings while preserving the right to choose less direct renderings wherever there was a danger of suggesting that Father/Son relationships had biological overtones or were based on sexual union. The most recent statement, issued in early February 2012, indicates that all publication of these new translations will be suspended until further discussions have taken place. Frontiers has fostered its own discussions, where it appears that as much time has been spent attempting to maintain good relations and cool the rhetoric as in dealing with the issues of substance. Some churches and denominations have taken public stances against these translational developments (e.g., Overture 9 of the Presbyterian Church of America). Financial support has been cut from some missions or missionaries who back the move away from “Father” and “Son.” Occasionally a missionary has left a mission over this issue. Not a few national Christian leaders, themselves Muslim-background believers, working in Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, and other Muslim-majority

⁸Collin Hansen, “The Son and the Crescent,” *Christianity Today*, Feb. 1, 2011, 18–23.

languages, have taken umbrage at the work of these essentially Western missions, feeling, quite frankly, betrayed.

My own restricted aim in what follows is to offer some evaluations based on what we have so far gleaned from the meaning of “Son of God” as a christological title. I should stipulate two preliminary notes. *First*, because there is no agreed way of referring to these new translations collectively, I shall refer to them as the new translations.⁹ *Second*, I shall at several points interact with positions that are no longer held, as well as with current stances, trying to be careful to distinguish between the two. The reason for interaction with positions now eclipsed by more recent discussion is that the translational and theological issues are intrinsically important, and should therefore be borne in mind.

Six Evaluations

(1) We should all recognize the extraordinary diversity of “son of” expressions in the Bible. Probably they should not all be handled the same way. Yet the diversity of ways in which we translate expressions such as “son of oil” and “son of the quiver,” mentioned in chapter 1, does not by itself warrant similar diversity in the ways in which we render “son(s) of God.”¹⁰

Consider: Recovering from a cold, someone might say, in English, “I have a frog in my throat.” Someone from France would more likely say, in French, “I have a cat in my throat.”

⁹For a while, some spoke of Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT); others have spoken of translations of divine familial terms. Few are happy with these labels, and I shall avoid them here.

¹⁰Which is what Rick Brown seems to be advocating in “Part II: Translating the Biblical Term ‘Son(s) of God’ in Muslim Contexts,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24/4 (2004): 135–45.

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