

Fact Check:

Biblical Missiology's Response To Wycliffe's Comments On "Lost In Translation"

On January 4, 2012, Biblical Missiology sponsored an online petition called "Lost In Translation: Keep 'Father' and 'Son' in the Bible" on change.org. This petition asked Wycliffe, Frontiers and SIL to commit in writing to preserve the terms "Father," "Son," and "Son of God" in the text of their Bible translations. In response, Wycliffe sent a document to their staff, as well as to some of the signatories of the petition, rejecting the assertions of the petition. The following is a response by Biblical Missiology, with input from current and former staff of these agencies, global pastors, translators, linguists, missiologists and theologians with significant experience on the issue.

About Biblical Missiology

Biblical Missiology, a ministry of Horizons International, is a network of missionaries, missiologists, translators, pastors, laity, church missions leaders, theologians, and national church leaders. What brings us together is a shared concern that people in need of the gospel, including Muslims, hear the full and faithful message of Jesus Christ. We are particularly concerned about new initiatives called "Insider Movements" (IM) and "Muslim Idiom Translations" (MIT) that present a distorted and incomplete portrayal of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. For a list of leadership team members and contributors, please visit the Biblical Missiology website.

The Need For A Petition

It must first be said that the petition is not intended as a condemnation of Wycliffe, SIL, Frontiers, or any of their staff members. Rather, it is a request to correct errors involved in Muslim Idiom Translations committed by a portion of their staff and leadership. We acknowledge that the majority of translations produced by these organizations are unrelated to these issues, and we bless the faithful translations that have been produced.

Second, the petition was started only after every effort had been made to call Wycliffe, Frontiers and SIL to biblical faithfulness. Years of private exhortations, meetings with agency leaders, internal dissent from agency staff including resignations over the issue, criticism and earnest appeals from national believers most affected by the translations, group discussions, conferences of proponents and critics, missiological articles, and church and denominational admonitions, have all failed to persuade these agencies to retain "Father" and "Son" in the text of all their translations. Reading the testimonials in the "Why People Are Signing" section of the petition will confirm these efforts. In spite of these appeals, these agencies have solidified their commitment to such translations.

If this were a minor issue, then we would at this point simply have to "agree to disagree." But this is not minor. It is hard to imagine anything more significant. Our understanding of God himself, Scripture, redemption and our adoption are all affected by removing "Father" and "Son" from Bible translations. National believers are aghast at what is being done to God's Word in their languages, stunned by what well-funded outsiders insist on doing in spite of the nationals' objections. After so many appeals, what recourses are left? We genuinely understand the reservations people have for a public petition, and we share those. But "peace" cannot trump truth. Thus, with great sadness, prayer, and a desire to

honor God's name, this initiative was begun to enable individual voices, from all over the world, to speak as one. It is our sincere desire that agency leaders would commit to retain "Father" and "Son" in the text of the Bible, that they would restore the good name of their organizations, and that their most fruitful and faithful days would still lie ahead. We pray to that end. Until that time, we will continue to plead that Bible translations "testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world" (1 John 4:14).

Each of the following sections includes the Petition Statement cited by Wycliffe, Wycliffe's Response, and a Fact Check.

1. Petition Statement

"Western missions agencies Wycliffe, Frontiers and SIL are producing Bibles that remove *Father*, *Son* and *Son of God* because these terms are offensive to Muslims."

Wycliffe's Response

"The titles are not removed, but are translated more accurately to the inspired Greek. The issue is not that the Greek term is offensive to Muslims, rather that traditional translations of it are so inaccurate that they communicate the wrong meaning, appearing to say God has sex with women, and give readers the impression the translation is corrupt."

Fact Check

This must be clearly stated at the outset: the "impression" of the reader never justifies replacing or removing "Father," "Son," or "Son of God" from the text of Scripture, regardless of the reader's misunderstanding or objections. The nature of the reader's offense has no bearing on what God actually says and means in his Word. And in the matter of the self-revelation of God, his Word is abundantly clear: "We have seen and *testify* that the *Father* has sent his *Son* to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the *Son of God*, God abides in him, and he in God." (1 John 4:14-15, emphasis added). We are not to take away from his Word (Deut. 4:2). "Father" and "Son" are not metaphors. They refer to who God is eternally, in his very being: one God in three persons, Father, Son and Spirit. We cannot change these eternal terms for God.

Thus, the petition letter that people are signing asks the agencies to "not support any translation that replaces or removes 'Father,' 'Son,' or 'Son of God' from the text." Whether one says they are removed, replaced, or mistranslated, the fact is that in various ways, these divine terms do not appear in the translated text. While the petition identifies a few such translations, Wycliffe told [World](#) magazine that about 30-40 of their translations "employ some alternate renderings" for the divine familial terms.¹

Wycliffe/SIL has produced no concrete, persuasive evidence that this MIT practice is valid. Instead, undocumented and unconvincing rationale is offered. For example, SIL staff Andrea and Leith Gray, and Rick Brown² assert in an October 20, 2011 article in

¹ <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/18687>

² [SIL](#) indicates Rick Brown is the Eurasia Associate Area Director, an International Translation Consultant, and a Consultant for Special Audiences. He has authored several [articles](#) advocating non-literal renderings for "Son of God" and other familial terms.

[Missions Frontiers](http://www.missionfrontiers.org/blog/post/translating-familial-biblical-terms)³ that a literal translation of familial terms in some languages “results in readers understanding the Lord’s Prayer to say ‘Our Begetter, who is in heaven.’” The SIL authors of the article have not demonstrated the existence of any language in which a son uses the words for “my Father” and actually means “my Begetter.” SIL needs to state which languages they have in mind here, as these types of assumed scenarios seem to be shaping their policy.

The only justification Wycliffe has given for removing Father-Son terms from the Bible text for Muslim audiences is their assertion that those terms mean to Muslims that God had sexual relations with Mary. This “justification” surfaces several times in Wycliffe’s response to the petition and it is the basis for their translation policy that facilitates the MIT practice. However, their assertion is not valid theologically or linguistically. Evidence of this truth comes from many native speakers of Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, Dari, Urdu, Malay, and many other languages of Muslim-majority nations who insist that “Father” and “Son” are valid and accurate terms to use in their own languages. The following are just a few examples from native speakers of Middle Eastern and Asian languages who signed the petition:

- “Arabic is my native language so I can affirm that there is no valid reason to change those terms in Arabic.” (Jihan Husary)
- “Urdu is my native language, there is no offense in the words currently being used” (E. Nisar Khan)
- “No compromise. For ages world has preached these terms and they have understood responding for a decision to follow THE SON.” (David Diwan-Masih)
- “As a former Muslim, I can attest that a literal translation of filial terminology in Muslim languages will provide the clearest gospel picture for Muslims. It will also help dispel the Muslim misconception that Christians have tampered with the Bible.” (Fred Farrokh)
- “Manipulating with the Word of God is exactly what the Qur'an accuses People of the Book of doing. The Bible stands on its own and Muslims are coming to Christ without this manipulative scheme.” (Atif Debs)
- “I myself am a Bible translator into North-Levantine (spoken Syro-lebanese) and I am the son of a Muslim father, and I preach to Muslims. I am shocked at the theology behind such replacements for the terms 'son' and 'father'. I think it is much better to have an explanation in a footnote than removing such words. Muslims who have problems with these terms have been brought up with polemic indoctrination, and no matter what we change in our translation they will not accept it as authoritative before they actually read it with an open heart asking God to reveal the truth. But what makes this worse, is that all these attempts at making Muslims accept the Bible actually give them more reasons to reject the Bible, because when they see how different all the translations are, they can't stop thinking something is very wrong.” (Arkan Zaki)

³ <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/blog/post/translating-familial-biblical-terms>

There are important theological and linguistic reasons why the above statements from native speakers are accurate and why Wycliffe's "justification" and resulting translation practice are not valid. Appendix 1 of this paper outlines those reasons in more detail and shows how the MIT practice is not based on the reality of how actual language works (using context as part of the meaning) or how Muslims understand "Son of God," especially the important fact that this issue is all about theology to Muslims. Thus, contrary to what Wycliffe claims, in translations where the Greek terms for "Father" and "Son" are not translated literally, the word "Father" (*pater* in the Greek) is not "translated more accurately" by terms such as "guardian." Nor is the word "Son" (*huios*) "translated more accurately" by terms such as "representative."

But most importantly, we simply do not have the authority to make such significant changes to God's revelation of himself. Jesus never refers to God as "my Guardian," and we cannot say he did. Replacing "Father" fails to convey the intimate, familial relationship that God the Father eternally experiences with God the Son, and that he graciously secures for us by the sacrifice of his beloved Son, and not merely of a "representative." Any possible misunderstanding of "Father" and "Son" should be cleared up in the footnotes, with an accurate, orthodox, biblical explanation. The text must not be changed.

Again, misunderstandings or objections of the reader never justify changing "Father," "Son," and "Son of God," even for Muslims' actual offense to these terms. The testimony of those who work with Muslims, as well as that of former Muslims, is that Muslims' primary objection to "Father," "Son," and "Son of God" is theological, i.e. that God cannot have a Son because that would imply that God is more than one. Further, the Son of God taking on human nature would mean God is "one of us." Muslims strongly object to these theological ideas. Indeed, Christians have been wrestling with these mysteries ever since Jesus' incarnation. But our difficulty in comprehension, or our offense, does not mean we can change the terms God has given us. There simply is no justification to replace "Father" or "Son" in the text of Scripture with other words that we might think are more acceptable. If there are misunderstandings, then they must be explained, either in the footnotes or verbally. God's Word must not be changed.

Finally, Wycliffe's assertion that "traditional translations" of *Father* and *Son* "give readers the impression the translation is corrupt" is outlandish. If that were the case, then Bibles in every language should remove these terms because of some reader's objections. What reinforce Muslims' understanding that the Bible is corrupt, however, are these new translations that are radically different in content and meaning from existing accurate translations. In the words of a former Muslim and native Arabic speaker who signed the petition,

To even flirt with changing, let alone removing, such language does violence to the text and will have precisely the opposite effect than what is intended. Muslims will not see the beauty of the Godhead and they will be reinforced in their long-standing, but incorrect belief that Christians are at liberty to tamper with God's revelation to suit their needs. God forbid that it should ever be so. (Abdu Murray)

2. Petition Statement

“Wycliffe/SIL produced *Stories of the Prophets*, an Arabic Bible that uses ‘Lord’ instead of ‘Father’ and ‘Messiah’ instead of ‘Son.’”

Wycliffe’s Response

“The Arabic *Stories of the Prophets* is not a Bible but a set of audio dramas. These stories avoid terms that are understood by ordinary speakers to attribute sexual activity to God. A few of the dramas use the word *rabbuna*, which in the normal Arabic means the one who raises us paternally and governs the family as its head. One early story used ‘the Christ sent from God’ to translate *huios*, but these audios were discontinued.”

Fact Check

The audio drama series [*Stories of the Prophets*](#) (SOP) is based on the transcript of the *Jesus* film,⁴ which is mainly a word-for-word account from the Bible text of the Gospel of Luke. In adapting the script for *Stories of the Prophets*,⁵ Wycliffe/SIL indeed chose to “avoid” certain terms, including “Father,” “Son,” and “Son of God.” But doing so radically changes the meaning of God’s Word. For example, when the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, he said something extraordinary: “When you pray, say: ‘Father hallowed be your name . . .’” (Luke 11:2, ESV). German theologian Joachim Jeremias searched the Old Testament and ancient rabbinic writings, and he concluded this was the first instance of a Jew directly addressing God as “Father.”⁶ The Old Testament Israelites referred to God as “Father,” but never in direct address. What Jesus is introducing here not only is unprecedented, it was unimaginable to his Jewish audience. And the remarkable story of the gospel is that God the Son offers to us that same intimate, secure relationship with God the Father. But all of that is lost to readers when *Stories of the Prophets* instead uses *rabunna*, which native Arabic speakers confirm actually means “our Lord,” so that the prayer has Jesus saying, “When you pray, say: Our loving, heavenly Lord . . .” (SOP).⁷ This replacement of “Father” is not just a linguistic issue. Rather, it strikes at the heart of our understanding of God as Father.

Former Muslim Hussein Wario confirms this understanding of *rabunna*:

The Qur'an has the verdict on the meaning of the Arabic word *Rabbuna* which Wycliffe wants Christians to believe it has another meaning other than "Lord." I have searched the entire Arabic Qur'an for the word and it appears 14 times and each time Islamic scholars have rendered it as "Lord." . . . *Rabbuna* is found in Surah 2:139, 5:84, 7:44, 89 & 149, 20:50, 21:112, 22:40, 26:51, 34:26, 36:16, 41:14, 42:15, 46:13, 68:32.

⁴ <http://www.answering-islam.org/fileadmin/reviews/lives-of-prophets.pdf>

⁵ The series was originally titled “Lives of the Prophets.”

⁶ R.C. Sproul, (2009). *The Prayer of the Lord*, p. 17.

⁷ The English back-translation of *Stories of the Prophets* was provided by Steve Coats, Wycliffe/SIL staff member and President of Sabeel Media, in an email dated Nov. 30, 2006.

A few of the many examples where *Stories of the Prophets* “avoids” these terms:

- Luke 9:35 “And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen One’” (ESV) is translated as “they heard a voice from heaven saying: ‘This is the beloved Messiah’” (SOP).
- Matthew 28:19 “. . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (ESV) is translated as “. . . baptize them with water in the name of God and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit” (SOP).
- Luke 22:70 “So they all said, ‘Are you the Son of God, then?’” (ESV) is translated as “Then You are the Messiah of God?” (SOP).

We contend, however, that the translator does not have the authority to avoid/remove/replace “Father,” “Son” or “Son of God,” for any reason. The problem of removing these terms in an audio Bible is compounded by the lack of footnotes, and explanations in a recorded introduction can be passed over.

Further, Wycliffe’s response that “*Stories of the Prophets* is not a Bible” does not justify changing the terms, and even contradicts their own description. A February 11, 2004 Powerpoint presentation by Rick Brown of SIL refers to this series as “An Audio Panoramic Bible for the 10/40 Window.” In a May 20, 2011 email, Steve Coats, Wycliffe/SIL staff member and President of Sabeel Media that distributes the series, refers to it as a “non-print audio panoramic mini Bible.” Sabeel is a partner organization to SIL (see pg. 9). Thus, SIL plainly refers to the series as a Bible. The Bible is God’s Word given to us, whether in print, audio, or electronic media.

Wycliffe’s commitment to such translations is having a devastating effect on personnel who believe it is wrong to remove “Father” and “Son” from Bible translations. Many of the petition comments have sadly come from current and former Wycliffe/SIL staff, including one couple who wrote,

There are many within Wycliffe that disagree with this practice and some encouraging meetings took place, but unfortunately the result of those meetings was a confirmation that this practice will continue and has been given a free reign to move forward with the issuance of "SIL International Statement of Best Practices for Bible Translation of Divine Familial Terms." Because of these translation practices and the theological implications, we have resigned from Wycliffe. (Meredith Boone)

3. Petition Statement

“Frontiers worked with an SIL consultant to produce *True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ*, an Arabic translation which removes ‘Father’ in reference to God, and removes or redefines ‘Son.’”

Wycliffe’s Response

“This translation is unfinished and still being revised. It uses a word for Father that is closer to the biblical meaning than the traditional Arabic term, and does not ascribe carnality to God. It also explains the Greek and Hebrew term and its meaning. It defines

‘Son of God’ at great length in ways that accord with both evangelical biblical scholarship and the interpretive tradition of historic Christianity.”

Fact Check

In this Arabic translation of the Gospels and Acts, otherwise known as *The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ*, “Father” in relation to God is not translated literally, in any instance, and “Son,” “Son of God,” and “Son of Man” are redefined in the footnotes or other explanatory material. In some cases, “Son” is removed entirely.

Regarding “Father,” Wycliffe is not correct in its assertion that *True Meaning* “uses a word for Father that is closer to the biblical meaning than the traditional Arabic term.” *True Meaning* never uses the Arabic word for “Father” (*Ab* in Arabic) in relation to God, and instead uses terms such as “God,” “Lord,” and “Guardian.” These are indeed all terms for God—but the Muslim understanding of such terms lacks the sense of intimacy and familial relationship that “Father” conveys in the Bible. For example, the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 reads, “Cleanse them by water in the name of God, his Messiah and his Holy Spirit.” In this verse, *True Meaning* uses the Arabic word for God, not “Father.” And by translating “Son” as “Messiah,” the biblical concept of the Trinity is totally obscured, and Jesus’ Sonship is totally missing.

Wycliffe’s assertion that *True Meaning* “defines ‘Son of God’ at great length in ways that accord with both evangelical biblical scholarship and the interpretive tradition of historic Christianity” is simply not true. While “Son,” “Son of God,” and “Son of Man” are most often translated literally, these terms are redefined in the footnotes or other explanatory material. For example, a footnote about “Son of God” in this translation says,

This metaphorical title points to the chosen king which had to be from the descendants of the Prophet David. This is what Luke, who recorded the inspired message, intended and this is how the Jewish hearers at that time also understood it.

The note makes no mention of Jesus’ deity, which is an integral part of the meaning of “Son of God.” By describing Jesus’ Sonship as a metaphor, Jesus is portrayed only *like* a son to God, rather than God’s actual Son. Footnotes like this one reinforce Muslims’ belief that Jesus is merely a human being, which is what the Qur’an teaches them.

Further, *True Meaning* inserts “beloved of God” in parentheses after the term “Son of God.” This has the effect of limiting and obscuring the full and true meaning of the biblical term, even if it has been translated correctly. In Islam, terms like “Beloved Son/One who comes from God” do not mean that Jesus *is* God’s actual Son, only that he comes *from* God; all human beings are “from God” according to Islam. The translation charts for the usage of “[Father](#),”⁸ “[Son](#),”⁹ “[Son of God](#),”¹⁰ and “[Son of Man](#)”¹¹ show that

⁸ <http://www.answering-islam.org/fileadmin/reviews/mallouhi-father.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.answering-islam.org/fileadmin/reviews/mallouhi-son.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.answering-islam.org/fileadmin/reviews/mallouhi-sonofgod.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.answering-islam.org/fileadmin/reviews/mallouhi-sonofman.pdf>

these parenthetical explanations and footnotes present “Father” and “Son” in ways that do not accord with “evangelical biblical scholarship,” contrary to what Wycliffe/SIL assert.

And though future revisions may be in the works, this volume has in fact been finished, contrary to Wycliffe’s misleading comment. *True Meaning* has been produced in an elegant hard copy, and according to the [Al-Kalima](http://www.al-kalima.com)¹² site that distributes the book, “The first volume, the Gospels and Acts, was published in March 2008 under the title *The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ*. Work has begun on the second part, the Epistles and Revelation.” The book is also distributed on [Amazon](http://www.amazon.com).¹³

4. Petition Statement

“Frontiers produced a Turkish translation of Matthew, distributed by SIL, that uses ‘guardian’ for ‘Father’ and ‘representative’ or ‘proxy’ for ‘Son.’”

Wycliffe’s Response

“This translation was not produced or distributed by SIL. A partner organization of SIL allowed the producers to use their name as the copyright holders. It is Matthew, with a facing Greek-Turkish interlinear page. The interlinear translation uses the Turkish terms traditionally used to translate ‘Father’ and ‘Son.’”

Fact Check

The focus of our concern is the text of the Matthew translation, not the Greek-Turkish interlinear. In the Matthew text, “Son” is rendered as “representative” or “proxy,” and “Father” is translated as “protector” or “guardian.” However, “Father,” “Son,” and “Son of God” should be translated literally in the text, with explanation provided in the footnotes—and not the other way around. According to 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” It is the text of Scripture that is rightfully considered God’s authoritative word—not the footnotes. While footnotes are helpful, it is not proper for pastors to treat them as scriptural authority to teach, reprove, correct or train their flock.

One example will illustrate the problems with the Turkish translation. At the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:17, “Son” is translated as “representative” in the text. In the footnote to this verse, “Son of God” is defined in several ways, such as “God’s representative,” “the king, Messiah,” and “God’s beloved monarch.” The note incorrectly says the term “is synonymous with the title of Messiah.” Jesus is portrayed only in kingly terms, with no recognition of his divinity or actual Sonship. Needless to say, such explanations have the effect of obscuring the full and true meaning of “Son” and “Son of God,” even if the terms are translated correctly in the footnotes.

In an email (quoted in full in Appendix 2 of this paper) to a supporter of the Matthew translation, Rev. Fikret Böcek of Smyrna, Turkey, writes:

¹² http://www.al-kalima.com/translation_project.html

¹³ <http://www.amazon.co.uk/True-Meaning-Gospel-Acts-Arabic/dp/9953713065>

As a Turkish pastor in Izmir Turkey, a graduate of Westminster Seminary, a trained philologist and linguist, and a graduate of Aegean University, I am a highly-qualified translator, and am currently working on ‘the essentially literal’ Turkish translation of the Hebrew Masoretic Bible. . . . We are not questioning your footnotes or your Greek in your interlinear. We are challenging the islamicised *Matthew*. . . We—Turks—are questioning the Turkish translation. . . . If you want the Turkish to really mean ‘πατερα μου – My Father’—you wouldn’t use ‘Mevlam’. However if, like Muslims, you already have a problem with the words ‘My Father’ the word *Mevla* would do the trick. But it does not mean ‘πατερα μου - My Father.’ . . . Muslims don’t perceive the word ‘Mevla’ as Father, but a protector! . . . You also mention that ‘*Son of God*’ is translated as ‘*Allah’in Vekili*’ which actually means ‘Allah’s Representative’!!!

SIL has indeed been involved in distribution with this translation, through Sabeel Media. To simply refer to Sabeel as a “partner organization” implies they are entirely separate agencies, which is not the case. Rather, SIL provides leadership and funding to Sabeel, as an SIL staff member [name withheld] attests:

Initially SIL denied having published this work to the web. However on 07 January 2012 the site distributing the [Turkish translation](#)¹⁴ was found to be not just under the copyright but bearing the logo of Sabeel Media. Sabeel Media is the "partner organization" that is mentioned in the rebuttal. However, Sabeel is led by SIL members and heavily funded by SIL as documented in the IRS Form 990 filings for both Sabeel and SIL. The original version of Matthew that was distributed on this site in November 2011 (under the copyright of Sabeel Media) did not have the Greek-Turkish interlinear (a copy of that is on file). Only after being confronted about this issue did SIL actually begin to distribute the PDF with the interlinear text. However, on the website on the 7th of January 2012 you will find all text on the site presented without the interlinear and using non-familial language to describe Jesus’ relationship to God. While SIL has claimed that the "literal form" was in the footnotes (see the footnote for Matthew 3:17 on the [site](#)¹⁵) you will find that though "Son of God" is indeed present in the footnote it defines "Son of God" as God's "representative." There is no clarity about Jesus’ eternal Sonship and completely unique divinity. The footnote actually does more to obscure Jesus’ identity than illuminate it.”

5. Petition Statement

“SIL consulted on the Bengali *Injil Sharif*, advising that ‘Son’ be translated as ‘God’s Uniquely Intimate Beloved Chosen One.’”

Wycliffe’s Response

“SIL did not advise this translation. A non-SIL consultant approved it, as did the United Bible Societies. The main Protestant church supports the translation, and the local Catholic seminary has praised it. This translation also explains that the term used is translating a Greek phrase of the form Son of God.”

¹⁴ http://www.allahinhazinesi.net/AnaSayfa/Ana_Sayfa.html

¹⁵ http://www.allahinhazinesi.net/AnaSayfa/Ana_Sayfa.html

Fact Check

In this issue of translating familial terms, SIL has had an enormous influence on other missionaries and agencies, which has led to other translations that remove “Father” and “Son” from the text. Such is the case for Global Partners for Development.¹⁶ In an email dated June 17, 2002, the director of that agency wrote,

Recently, the Wycliffe senior VP for Eurasia (Muslim Languages), Rick Brown, presented two full sessions at our workshop in Bangkok last month on the subject of how to translate Son of God and other delicate Biblical expressions for Muslims. I agree with his proposals.

Global Partners went on to produce the Bengali *Injil Sharif*. The 2005 edition, of which 10,000 copies were printed, translated “Son” as “Messiah.” A 2011 letter from Wycliffe to the PCA entitled “[Concerning Overture 9](#)” says, “The local translators did not engage a certified translation consultant until after they had circulated a trial version in early 2005 for feedback.” In the letter, Wycliffe told the PCA that,

At this point, a PCA missionary in Bangladesh informed Rick Brown [of SIL] about the translation and expressed concerns. Rick explained the rationale for using a functional equivalent that expressed the Mediatorial/Messianic meaning of the term, rather than a phrase understood by Muslims to be sexually suggestive and an unforgivable insult to God. Rick then wrote to the translators explaining that the translation would be inadequate if it failed (1) to mention the relationship to God inherent in the use of *huios tou theou* and (2) if it did not present and explain *huios tou theou* in the introduction and glossary. He sent them a pre-publication version of an IJFM article that urged this very point, and encouraged them to acquire the services of a translation consultant. They did, and the consultant said the same thing. This consultant urged them to search for an expression that emphasized Christ's unique relationship to God. So in late 2005 the Bangla translation team agreed to work with the consultant to find a new term, and they agreed to present and explain the Father-Son terminology in the introduction and glossary. For over two years the team tested various wordings with believers, prebelievers, pastors, and teachers until in March 2008 they all finally decided on a wording. The consultant says that in the synoptic Gospels it is *Ekanto Prio Mononito Jon* and means “God's Uniquely-Intimate Beloved Chosen One,” and that in John it is usually “God's Uniquely-Intimate Beloved One.”¹⁷

Regarding the explanatory material Wycliffe refers to, the glossary entry says,

God's Uniquely Intimate Beloved Chosen One. This phrase is a translation of a title which is used for the Lord Jesus Christ in the Noble Gospel. In the Heavenly Books, this title was used for the kings of the Sons of Israel to show that they are specially chosen and empowered by Almighty God to rule and lead their people,

¹⁶ <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/17944>

¹⁷ <http://www.reformation21.org/Towards%20A%20Faithful%20Witness.pdf>

see Psalms 2:6-7; 89:26-27. In the original language, father-son words are used to express this meaning.¹⁸

In their letter to the PCA, Wycliffe defends the glossary entry as “similar to the explanations of mainstream evangelical study Bibles in English, such as the NLT Study Bible, the Reformation Study Bible, the NET Bible, and the NIV Study Bible.” This is misleading. The notes for these study Bibles affirm that “Son of God” points not only to Jesus’ kingly role, but also to his being the divine and eternal God the Son. However, the *Injil Sharif* offers no such explanation. Further, referring to the usage of terms in the Noble Gospel and the Heavenly Books (an Islamic term meaning God’s equally inspired revelation of the Torah, Psalms, Gospel and the Qur’an), without any qualification, lends credence to Muslims’ belief that the Qur’an is inspired and authoritative. But clearly, the Qur’an does not hold to a biblical view of Jesus as the divine Son of God.

SIL did not produce the *Injil Sharif*, and thus the petition never asserted this. However, clearly SIL has had a direct contribution through Rick Brown being consulted for advice regarding specific terminology and his offering rationale to use a “functional equivalent” rather than the literal term, as well as a general influence through his workshops and articles. Wycliffe/SIL’s subsequent defense of the *Injil Sharif* terminology and explanations indicate support for this translation. Though we are satisfied with the original wording, the Petition Statement now reads, “SIL consulted on the Bengali *Injil Sharif*, which translated ‘Son’ as ‘Messiah’ and ‘Son of God’ as ‘God’s Uniquely Intimate Beloved Chosen One.’” While we do not know the full extent of SIL’s influence, it is correct to say they “consulted” on the translation in the common understanding of the term, i.e. they “gave information or advice about something (in an area of expertise).”

Contrary to Wycliffe’s assertion, the United Bible Societies did not approve the *Injil Sharif*. According to the former General Secretary, it would be a violation of United Bible Society policy for the UBS to approve a Bangla translation without the Bangladesh Bible Society’s approval, and the Bangladesh Bible Society¹⁹ expressly rejects the *Injil Sharif*. Wycliffe further states “the main Protestant church” and the “local Catholic seminary” have supported the translation. These are vague assertions that require documentation and specificity. On the other hand, many Bengali leaders and churches, including the Presbyterian Church of Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Bible Society, the Isai Fellowship of Bangladesh (a coalition of Muslim background churches and ministries) and leaders of the National Christian Fellowship of Bangladesh (NCFB), firmly oppose these new translations that fail to include references to God as “Father” and “Son.” Without resources or influence to stand against Western missions agencies producing these translations, they documented their concerns in a short video entitled “[Unheralded](#).”²⁰

¹⁸ <http://www.reformation21.org/Towards%20A%20Faithful%20Witness.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/17944>

²⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzPK93pI65I>

Wycliffe's Preface

In the preface to their response, Wycliffe says the petition “expresses disagreement with the way the divine familial names are handled in the SIL Best Practices document and Wycliffe USA policy.” Because Wycliffe refers to their policies, a few selected comments regarding the most problematic phrases are in order. We must first say, however, that our concerns are not related to the personal doctrinal beliefs of any staff member or the agencies’ Statements of Faith. Moreover, it is our privilege to call many members of Wycliffe, Frontiers, and SIL our dear friends, who are biblically sound Christians faithfully pursuing an important calling from God. Our concerns are directed instead towards specific policies, the practices of some staff, and the support of agency leaders that brought us to this point. We hope this petition does what so many efforts, over so many years, have failed to do, which is to persuade agency leaders to keep “Father,” “Son,” and “Son of God” in the text of all Bible translations.

[SIL Best Practices](#): “We affirm the eternal deity of Jesus Christ and require that it be preserved in all translations. Scripture translations should promote understanding of the term “Son of God” in all its richness, including his filial relationship with the Father, while avoiding any possible implication of sexual activity by God.”²¹

Response: There is much to be encouraged by here. However, a serious problem is the phrase, “avoiding *any possible implication* of sexual activity by God” (emphasis added). That expansive statement subjectively allows the translators to use alternative familial terms in virtually any instance, depending on the reader’s impressions. Indeed, a translator could justify replacing “Father” and “Son” in any language, including English. Again, see Appendix 1 for more details about why this guiding principle of Wycliffe/SIL’s policies is not valid.

[Wycliffe Translation Standards](#): “In particular regard to the translation of the familial titles of God we affirm 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.”²²

Response: This also is an encouraging statement, depending on what is actually meant. The familial terms that “God has chosen to describe himself” are “Father,” “Son,” and “Son of God.” Other biblical terms and titles of God express truths about God, but they are not *familial* terms. “Familial” is a collective word that refers to “Father,” “Son,” and “Son of God.” (note: *filial* literally refers only to sonship terms, though the word is sometimes incorrectly used to include paternal meanings.) We sincerely appreciate the challenge facing translators in trying to be faithful to the text of Scripture. But as we have demonstrated, the words currently used in these contentious translations fail to “accurately express” the Fatherhood of God and the Sonship of Christ. We can imagine no instance, for example, where a loving father would encourage his children to refer to him as “guardian” rather than “father.” The examples of alternative terms used by Wycliffe mean the reader cannot be reassured by this translation standard.

²¹ http://www.sil.org/translation/divine_familial_terms.htm

²² <http://www.wycliffe.org/TranslationStandards.aspx?printerfriendly=yes>

[Wycliffe Translation Standards](#): “In particular regard to Bible translations done for Muslim contexts we affirm that in the majority of cases a literal translation of “Son of God” will be the preferred translation. In certain circumstances, specifically where it has been demonstrated that a literal translation of “Son of God” would communicate wrong meaning, an alternative form with equivalent meaning may be used. The alternative form must maintain the concept of “sonship.” All translations for Muslim audiences should include an explanation of the meaning of the phrase “ho huios tou theou” (the Son of God) when it refers to Jesus Christ. This may be in a preface, in one or more footnotes, or as a glossary entry, as seems appropriate to the situation.”

Response: While there are multiple ways to interpret “preferred translation,” our main concern is the leeway allowed in the minority of cases. Who decides what a “wrong meaning” of “Son of God” is? The reader? The translator? Why not translate the term literally, and offer explanation as needed? Further, the examples of an “alternative form with equivalent meaning” to “Son of God” deeply trouble us. “Representative of God,” for example, fails to convey Jesus’ deity and the familial relationship of a father to his son. In Turkish, the term “representative” used in the Matthew translation is used in the modern context of “proxy server.” What father would call his son, “proxy”? The solution of relegating explanations to the footnotes or glossary entry promotes further subjectivity. Moreover, many examples of such notes are not biblically faithful descriptions.

Conclusion

We commend any reader for getting this far! It shows you are concerned about God’s Word and the importance of Bible translation. While it is not our desire to add to the disunity that already exists over this issue, the integrity of God’s Word must be our higher consideration. To that end, we humbly pray for God to be glorified throughout the world, for his name to be honored, for his Word to be faithfully proclaimed and received, for his people to be one, for the global church to be steadfast in its witness, and for the spread of the extraordinary hope offered to all people, that “whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 John 4:15).

Appendix 1: Theological and Linguistic Reasons Why Wycliffe's Muslim Idiom Translation Practices Are Not Valid

One of the main teachings in the Qur'an and Islam is that God is one and cannot be divided in any way; any attack on that oneness (even implied) is blasphemy and 'shirk', an unforgivable sin. Muslims understand Father-Son terms in the NT to mean that Jesus is God's actual Son, God incarnate, and that God is His actual Father, which is exactly the correct meaning according to the Scriptures. However, to them that is shirk and so, of course, they find it offensive and are afraid to believe such a thing because the Qur'an falsely teaches them that those who believe such things will be punished with eternal hellfire. Contrary to Wycliffe's statement, any offense associated with the "traditional translations" of these terms also applies to the original Greek terms since *they have exactly the same meaning*.

Assuming that by "traditional translations" Wycliffe/SIL is referring to the use of 'ibn Allah' in Arabic (and equivalent translations in other languages) to refer to Jesus as the Son of God, it is absolutely false for Wycliffe to say that these are "inaccurate" or that they "communicate the wrong meaning". Since 'ibn' is the natural way that any father would refer to his son in Arabic, this is the accurate translation of the Greek, 'huios'. As in all languages, the context in which 'ibn' is used determines whether or not it refers to a son that has resulted from a biological relationship. Native Arabic speakers insist that 'ibn' is the correct word to use when translating the phrase 'huios tou theou' and that the context clearly explains that no sexual meaning is implied.

For example, Luke 1:32-35 and Matthew 1:18-25 make it clear that no sexual relations were involved in the case of Jesus' conception. In these passages, 'ibn' is used to describe the son of a virgin (also in Isaiah 7:14). In the Qur'an, 'ibn' is used to refer to Jesus as the 'son of Mary,' which according to Qur'anic commentators emphasizes the fact that Jesus had no biological father. Once Muslims read in the Qur'an that God created Jesus in the virgin Mary by divine decree, they interpret all other references to 'son of Mary' in the Qur'an the same way, with no thought of sexual relationships. In the same way, after Muslims read Luke 1 and Matthew 1, all other references in the New Testament to Jesus as the 'Son' (or to God as His Father) are also interpreted correctly with no thought of sexual relationships. The context is vital in interpreting any word or passage in Scripture—or in any other literature. As linguists and translators, it is irresponsible to talk about the meaning of a word or phrase without considering the context. Therefore it is completely inaccurate (and linguistically unsound) for Wycliffe/SIL to say in their response that "traditional translations" (i.e. ones using "Son of God" for Jesus and "Father" for God) are "appearing to say that God had sex with women" or to insist as they do elsewhere that "ibn always has sexual connotations". These statements totally ignore the testimony of native Arabic speakers who, as the experts on this subject, have repeatedly stated that 'ibn' can be used in a variety of ways that do not have sexual connotations, including to refer to an adopted son, a stepson, a test-tube baby son, the son of a virgin, and the Son of God.

The overwhelming reason for Muslims' offense at this term is that they know it means that Jesus is God's actual Son, God incarnate, and the Quran forbids anyone to share God's nature.

It is important to emphasize this point, since the only reason Wycliffe/SIL has given for the practice of replacing or removing these familial terms is the claim that Muslims think that 'Son of God' means God had sexual relations with Mary. Based on this false assumption, Wycliffe/SIL's most recent translation policy dictates that translators must choose terms that "avoid any possible implication of sexual activity by God." Given that in every language the word for 'son' or 'father' (out of context) normally implies biological relationship (since most sons are a result of such relationships), there is no language where 'Son' could be used without *any* possible implication... That is, there would always be the slight chance that some people (in any language) might hear the term "Son of God" before they hear the explanation of what that means from Matthew and Luke (which clarify that there was no sexual activity) and so they might think God slept with Mary, especially in societies that have no prior Biblical knowledge or where they have been taught false information about the Bible. Even in English the phrase "Son of God" has the possibility of having this implication. It is better to translate the Bible accurately, using Father-Son terms as the Holy Spirit did, and then teach people the context so that everyone understands God's message accurately.

Appendix 2: Response to the Matthew Translation By Rev. Fikret Böcek of Smyrna, Turkey

As a Turkish pastor in Izmir Turkey, a graduate of Westminster Seminary, a trained philologist and linguist, and a graduate of Aegean University, I am a highly-qualified translator, and am currently working on 'the essentially literal' Turkish translation of the Hebrew Masoretic Bible.

In your email your claim that this criticism '*is a strange petition based on errors of fact*' is absurd. I would like to show you how the criticism is not based on error.

We are not questioning your footnotes or your Greek in your interlinear. We are challenging the islamised Matthew. Your argument is 'Proof by contradiction' (reductio ad absurdum), but you defeat your own argument by your own translation. We are not questioning your Greek interlinear. We -Turks- are questioning the Turkish translation.

You state that you '*did the interlinear*' with the new Turkish translation of Matthew. You move on to explain the Greek interpretation of the Turkish words: '*Mevlam*' and '*Allah'ın Vekili*.' Sadly, your translation reveals a poor command of the Turkish language.

For instance...

If you want the Turkish to really mean '*πατέρα μου - My Father*' you wouldn't use '*Mevlam*'. However if, like Muslims, you already have a problem with the words '*My Father*' the word *Mevla* would do the trick. But it does not mean '*πατέρα μου - My Father*'.

The word '*MEVLA*' is mentioned in the Quran like this:

يُرْوَانِ تَوْلُوا فَاَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ مَوْلَاكُمْ نِعْمَ الْمَوْلَىٰ وَنِعْمَ النَّصِيرِ

"And if they turn away, then know that Allah is your protector, an excellent protector, and an excellent helper!" (Turkish: Bilin ki Allah sizin mevlânızdır (sahibiniz, hâminiz, yardımcınızdır). O, ne güzel Mevlâ ve ne güzel yardımcısıdır" (Enfâl, 40).

In this verse *Mevla* is rendered as 'Protector' and 'Helper', not as 'My Father'.

Here is another verse from the Quran:

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ مَوْلَىٰ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَأَنَّ الْكَافِرِينَ لَا مَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ

"That is because Allah is the Protector of those who believe, but those who reject Allah have no protector." (Turkish: "Öyle, çünkü Allah iman edenlerin mevlâsıdır, kâfirlere gelince onlar için mevlâ yoktur.") (Muhammed, 11)

Muslims don't perceive the word '*Mevla*' as Father, but a protector! If you suggest that مَوْلَى (Mevla) may mean Father, they will respond saying '*May it NEVER be*'!!! *Mevla* means protector and helper!

You also mention that '*Son of God*' is translated as '*Allah'ın Vekili*' which actually means '*Allah's Representative*'!!! 'θεου υιος' does not mean '*Allah's Representative*' but it clearly means '*The Son of God*'... If you wish you can translate it as '*Tanrı'nın Oğlu*' or '*Allah'ın Oğlu*'. But if you are a Muslim who claims that the Bible is a corrupt book, that the Greek is corrupt, then you can translate 'θεου υιος' to mean '*Allah'ın Halefi*' or '*Allah'ın Vekili*.' For a Muslim would translate only according to preconceived impossibilities: seeing as it's impossible for God to have a son, it must mean something other than the typical or actual use of this Greek word.

I agree with late Thomas Cosmades when he wrote about this so called Muslim-friendly translation: "*In the plethora of footnotes, unimaginable gimmicks are employed to give the impression that all these explanations are requisite to support the paraphrase of the text.*"

This translation is ‘an all-American idea’ with absolutely no respect for the ‘sacredness’ of Scripture, or even of the growing Turkish church of former Muslims.

We have some road-side restaurants on the Aegean coast here with signs saying: ‘Kendin Pişir, Kendin Ye’ (Cook It Yourself, Eat It Yourself) which are ‘do-it-yourself-barbeque’ restaurants. Your translation shows that you believe that Christians have the right to similar ‘do it yourself’ smorgasbord translations. Your translation reflects both your poor view of the sacredness of Scripture and an inflated view of the liberties you are ‘allowed’ to make, as you change the inspired Word of God to fit your questionable agenda.

But this makes sense, considering all the translations there are in America floating around catering to this and that group, dummying down the Bible because God did not know how to make it understandable in the first place.

You Westerners fail to trust God and you want results...and you want it now! By islamicising the Bible you hope that your trap will catch some Muslims, but it only satisfies your needs. It does not help the Muslims see that Jesus is the only way to God. Imagine how Muslims will feel when they find out that this translation is nothing but a lie. In the end, it causes them to lose all trust in Scripture.

The Turkish church sees this translation as ‘An American Bible in Muslim Language.’ There are many more deceptions in this translation. I am only responding to the words you mentioned in your email. I have read the Muslim friendly Turkish translation, and since I believe that it is heretical, I subsequently warned my Christian and Muslim friends against this deceptive translation. This translation is not just an honest mistake, but a methodical deception about the unambiguous Truths taught in the Scriptures.

Are you proficient in the Turkish language? You write “*Nothing has been "removed" from the Turkish translation. God's Word was translated faithfully.*” Absurd. Since you are so confident in your translation, I challenge you to bring your Muslim Matthew translation and a Greek NT and publicly debate with me in front of both Muslims and Christians.

We challenge you to return to the faith of our Fathers, our Fathers who feared the curse in Revelation 22:19: “And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” God’s Word is mighty and powerful to save. We do not need to be ashamed of the claims of Christ. The stumbling stones that a Muslim must get over to come to Christ make his faith-muscles strong for his new life in Christ. God is able to get him over them. He got us over them. Maybe, because we Turks come from a Muslim perspective we are more able to understand this than you.

I join the accusations in this petition and support it. This is not slander for any individual or institution, but against this false and deceptive translation. I will use your last sentence in your email: This translation is *a sin against the body of Christ.*

I am attaching Rev. Cosmades' "An Analysis of the Paraphrased New Testament by FRONTIERS"

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you,

Rev. Fikret Böcek
Izmir, Turkey

The Protestant Church of Smyrna