

## Should Christians Use the Quranic Name of Jesus in Arabic Bible Translations?

A Response to Martin Accad's "What's in a Name? A Case for using 'Isa in Arabic Translations of the Bible"

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The Quran refers to Jesus by the Arabic name "Isa." However, Arabic-speaking Christians use a different Arabic name, based on Jesus' Hebrew name Yeshua, to refer to the Lord and Savior: "Yasū" (hereafter, Yasu). For centuries, Arabic-speaking Christians have used the name Yasu and refrained from using Isa, in part to emphasize the fact that the Quranic portrayal of Jesus (Isa) is distorted in various ways when compared to the Biblical Yasu. In recent years, some evangelicals have begun to entertain using the Quranic name "Isa" in Arabic Bibles, especially in new translations.

An example of this new trend is found in Martin Accad's recent blog post in the official website of the Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES) of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Beirut, Lebanon. Accad is an associate professor of Islamic Studies at ABTS and a director at Action Research Associates in Lebanon. In his article, "What's in a Name? A Case for Using 'Isa in Arabic Translations of the Bible," Accad argues that using the Quranic name Isa is an acceptable and even favorable practice in Arabic translations of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Accad suggests translators may readily use the Islamic name for Jesus because "Salvation is located in the power of Jesus's person rather than in the literal name Yasu' or Jesus or whatever equivalent." Accad is satisfied that "the Qur'anic name for Jesus can meet the lexical need of the church." I want to affirm my respect for Accad as both a friend and a scholar; nevertheless, in what follows I offer a counter-perspective on the question of translating Jesus' name in Arabic Bibles. This issue is important and of concern for Christians regardless of their positions on it, so I hope here to offer my humble but firm disagreement with Accad's position and the reasons for it.

### ISA: A QURANIC CHARACTER, NOT A BIBLICAL ONE

To make his case for trusting Quranic authors' motivations in creating the name Isa, Accad relies on a Wikipedia article, deeming it "excellent," and does not seem to value the largely unified wisdom of numerous Arabic-speaking Christians who, for over fourteen centuries, have categorically distanced themselves from the Quranic name Isa and used the Arabic name Yasu. Further, to explain the underlying logic of his position, Accad directs our attention to the famous question asked by 14-year-old Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "What's in a name?" He says that Juliet "poetically spells out the issue that stands at the crux of [his] reflection in this post." If Juliet does not care about names, wonders Accad, should we?

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Accad, "What's in a Name?: A Case for Using 'Isa in Arabic Translations of the Bible," published on May 27, 2021, at <https://abtslebanon.org/2021/05/27/whats-in-a-name-a-case-for-using-isa-in-arabic-translations-of-the-bible/>. My response is a part of a lengthier chapter of the forthcoming edited volume on Bible translations in Muslim contexts, expected for publication in 2022 and co-edited with Professor Ant Greenham. I am indebted to several esteemed colleagues who read an early draft of this article and provided valuable observations. Thanks to David Johnston, Mike Kuhn, Brent Neely, and Imad Shehadeh. Of course, none of them is responsible for any shortcomings or errors.

Ironically, in his reliance on Juliet's words, Accad largely ignores the context surrounding them: Shakespeare's story is a tragedy, centered on portraying the love of Romeo and Juliet as naïve and impractical. While it is true that *here* Juliet implies that names do not matter, the immediate context emphatically indicates the opposite, portraying her as immature and mistaken. The fact is that she does not *want* names to matter, but they do actually matter.<sup>2</sup>

Many, like Juliet, would prefer no such distinctions to exist, but that would prove immature and naïve. Some may even prefer a single true understanding of Jesus across religions: Whether Isa or Yasu, they claim, a name does not really matter as long as it enhances communication between Christians and Muslims. However, names are words. Words are powerful and can be dangerous precisely because they do have meaning. Their context, scope, and content are important in that which they convey.

Accad seems to underestimate the Quranic baggage of the name Isa, as if "Isa" is like any other celebrated name given to Jesus—a neutral, rhyming equivalent. But this very name is distinctively Islamic and explicitly Quranic. Can we use "Isa" as if it is divested of its Quranic connotations? I would strongly question the viability of any such claim. If Muslims hear or read about "Isa," what might happen immediately in their minds? In the Quran,

- 1) Isa is not God,
- 2) Isa is not the Son of God,
- 3) Isa is merely a servant messenger of the deity,
- 4) Isa denies the Trinity,
- 5) Isa is not crucified,
- 6) Isa is only a human, and so forth.<sup>3</sup>

Surely, this is not the Jesus we hope to convey to Muslims in Arabic Bibles. While we may well grant that there is no inevitably positive or negative "magical" quality to the acoustics and sounds associated with either "Isa" or "Yasu," it remains the case that names communicate certain realities because they are never context-free. Names come preloaded with meanings, significances, and connotations. This principle certainly holds true in the case of "Isa."

Indeed, such Islamic preunderstandings are one reason the vast majority of Arabic Bible translations avoided "Isa" as a translation for Jesus. The earliest extant manuscript of an Arabic New Testament, dated from the eighth century, uses Yasu.<sup>4</sup> One might wonder why Christians did

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<sup>2</sup> See Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Fourth Estate, 1999), where he speaks of the immaturity of the love depicted in the story and describes it as "a vision of an uncompromising mutual love that perishes of its own idealism..." (89). See also his work *Possessed by Memory: The Inward Light of Criticism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2020), 147–149.

<sup>3</sup> For studies on the distorted Quranic portrayal of Jesus, see Ayman S. Ibrahim, *A Concise Guide to the Quran* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 108–115; Ayman S. Ibrahim, "Who Makes the Qur'an Valid and Valuable for Insiders? Critical Reflections on Harley Talman's Views on the Qur'an," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*, ed. Ayman S. Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York; Bern: Peter Lang, 2018), 139ff.

<sup>4</sup> This is Vatican Arabic MS 13, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. For a discussion on this manuscript, see Sidney Harrison Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the Language of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 97ff, especially 114; Hikmat Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels: The Manuscripts and Their Families* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 34–35, and especially 133–167.

not adopt the Quranic name *Isa*, although Islam and Muslims had inhabited the conquered lands for over a century by then. A name in a particular context comes with a particular genealogy, and for that reason it has made sense in this part of the world to avoid *Isa* when translating the New Testament. Even Accad admits, “In most classical Arabic translations of the New Testament, Arab Christians chose *Yasu’*.” This assertion is true, though he still seeks to offer the name *Isa* as a better option for Bible translators in Islamic contexts. Realizing that his own words might refute his argument, Accad adds, “but when [Christians] engaged with Islam in dialogical texts, they almost unreservedly used ‘*Isa*.’” Unfortunately, Accad does not support this claim with actual citations. To the best of my knowledge, the use of “*Isa*” by Arabic-speaking Christians in texts engaging Islam is exceptionally rare, if not non-existent. In fact, in textual encounters between Muslims and Christians, many Arabic-speaking Christians were adamant about using the name *Yasu* to distinguish it from the Quranic *Isa*, even in the earliest years of Islam. Two examples may suffice.

We can learn from the medieval Muslim convert to Christ, *Būluṣ ibn Rajā’* (ca. 950–1020). He wrote a defense of Christianity against Islamic charges, titled *al-Wāḍiḥ bi-l-ḥaqq*.<sup>5</sup> In his book, *Būluṣ* always used *Yasu* to refer to the Jesus whom Christians worship, contrasting it with *Isa* when referring to the distorted Quranic portrayal. Was *Būluṣ* less informed of the significance of the name? Did names—*Yasu* and *Isa*—matter to *Būluṣ*? Of course they did.

Similarly, we can learn from the monk *Jurjī* (fl. 1200s), a Melkite Christian from Syria. He reportedly debated three Muslim jurists in the court of the caliph. He never used “*Isa*” to dialogue with Muslims about the Lord Jesus. *Jurjī* emphatically used *Yasu* or *al-Sayyid al-Masīḥ* (the Lord Christ). At times, out of respect for *Yasu*, *Jurjī* followed the name with the honorary phrase, “may he be praised and glorified.”<sup>6</sup>

These two examples serve to contradict Accad’s claim that Christians did “unreservedly use ‘*Isa*’ in dialogical texts. Moreover, there is a lengthy tradition of medieval Christian-Muslim textual debates—identified by Sydney Griffith as “the Monk in the Emir’s Court” texts—in which Christians insisted on calling out the erroneous Quranic portrayal of *Isa*, contrasting it with the Jesus of the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, names do matter. Because we should make every effort to communicate the Gospel clearly, properly, and effectively to Muslims, particularities are of utmost importance, we must recognize that the name “*Isa*” explicitly references the Quranic representation of Christ. It is telling that the angel Gabriel, prophesying of Jesus, told Joseph of the Virgin Mary “will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Specific names

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I am grateful for Professor Imad Shehadeh for describing various features of this manuscript to me, as he studied it for four years in his postdoctoral work in the University of Edinburgh.

<sup>5</sup> See the important scholarly work of David Bertaina, “*Būluṣ ibn Rajā’* on the History and Integrity of the Qur’an: Copto-Islamic Controversy in Fatimid Cairo,” in *Arab Christians and the Qur’an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period*, ed. Mark Beaumont (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 174ff. See also Mark N. Swanson, “*Būluṣ ibn Rajā’*,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, Volume 2 (900–1050), eds. David Thomas and Alex Mallett, et al (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 541ff.

<sup>6</sup> See Ayman S. Ibrahim and Clint Hackenburg, *In Search of the True Religion: Monk Jurjī and Muslim Jurists Debating Faith and Practice*, Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation (NJ: Gorgias Press, forthcoming 2022), where the authors examined over 35 early manuscripts of the debate, analyzed the text, and provided a critical Arabic edition and a modern English translation.

<sup>7</sup> See Sydney Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir’s Majlis,” in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, eds. Hava Lazarus Yafeh et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), 13–65.

matter. In fact, both the Old and the New Testaments repeatedly emphasize that there is meaning in the use of a particular name.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is natural and proper that the Quranic name for Jesus should evoke prejudice and carry its own theological baggage. We cannot disassociate Isa from its source.

### MUSLIM RECOGNITION OF THE NAME “YASU”

A major problem with Accad’s piece is that its central argument is based on the claim that Yasu “is a name largely unrecognized by Islam.” If we accept this premise as correct, then Arabic-speaking Christians have been using an obscure name (i.e., Yasu) for centuries, and Muslims have never understood the word. That is why, says Accad, we should change course and use Isa. If true, Accad’s point would be rather weighty; however, ample pieces of evidence point in *precisely* the opposite direction. Since Islam’s earliest beginnings, Muslim exegetes, historians, and jurists recognized Yasu as the name adopted by Arabic-speaking Christians to refer to Jesus.

- The earliest Quran exegete, Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767), recognizes the name Yasu and explicitly mentions it three times, describing Yasu as the God Christians worship.<sup>9</sup>
- The Muslim bibliographer and biographer Ibn al-Nadīm (d. ca. 995) recognizes Yasu explicitly.<sup>10</sup>
- The famous Andalusian Muslim scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) refers to the Jesus of the Gospel as Yasu.<sup>11</sup>
- The Muslim authority Abū al-Faḥ al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), who was known as an expert in religious and philosophical sects, writes of Christians believing that Yasu (not Isa) is the only Son of the Father.<sup>12</sup>
- A few generations after al-Shahrastānī, the renowned Muslim jurist and exegete Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) refers numerous times to Yasu as the name of Jesus worshipped by Christians.<sup>13</sup>
- The famous Muslim jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) recognizes Yasu as the Jesus of Christians.<sup>14</sup> When talking about Christians, Ibn Taymiyya did not use the Quranic name Isa.
- Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) recognizes Yasu, as does Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) who explicitly refers to the Yasu of Christians.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Middle Eastern scholar Imad Shehadeh, president of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, provides ample examples in this regard. See Imad Shehadeh, *God With Us and Without Us: Oneness in Trinity versus Absolute Oneness* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018), ch. 12, titled, “The Significance of the Name ‘Father’ and the Name ‘Son.’”

<sup>9</sup> Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, ed. ‘Abdullāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (5 vols; Beirut: Dār iḥiyā’ al-turāth, 1423/2002), 5:211.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Ibrāhīm Ramaḍān (Beirut: Dār al-ma‘rifa, 1997), 1:39, 409.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl fī al-milal wa-l-ahwā’ wa-l-niḥal* (3 vols; Cairo: Maktabat al-khānjī, n.d.), 1:52, 2:9.

<sup>12</sup> Abū al-Faḥ al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal*, (3 vols; Syria: Mu’assasat al-ḥalabī, n.d.), 2:28.

<sup>13</sup> Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Qurṭubī, *al-i‘lām bi-mā fī dīn al-naṣārā min al-fasād wa-l-awḥām wa iḥār maḥāsīn al-islām*, ed. Aḥmad Hijāzī al-Saqqā (Cairo: Dār al-turāth al-‘arabī, n.d.), 1:462, 463, et passim.

<sup>14</sup> Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddal dīn al-Masīḥ*, ed. ‘Alī ibn Ḥasan ibn Nāṣir, et al (7 vols; Riyadh: Dār al-‘āṣima li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzī‘, 1419/1999), 1:342, 2:12, 3:228, 5:51, et passim.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ḥājj (Jeddah: Dār al-qalam, 1416/1996), 1:342, 2:488ff, et passim; Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār and Khalīl Shihāda (8 vols; Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1421/2001), 5:418.

These numerous examples from Muslim scholars are not exceptions; there are many more.<sup>16</sup> Taken together, they strongly contradict Accad’s claim that Yasu “is a name largely unrecognized by Islam” and prove it incorrect—or, at best, lacking in support.

In fact, it is noteworthy that even classical Muslim apologists and polemicists did not shy away from distinguishing their Isa of the Quran from the Yasu worshipped by Christians.

- In critiquing Christianity and its origins and beliefs, the renowned Muslim apologist ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025) uses the name Yasu *repeatedly* to refer to the Christian belief in the Sonship of Yasu to the Father.<sup>17</sup>
- Ṣāliḥ al-Hāshimī (d. 1270) accuses Christians of corrupting the Gospel, as he refers to Yasu whom they worship.<sup>18</sup>
- Arguing for the victory of Islam over Christianity, Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d. 1316) mentions Yasu explicitly, and offers an explanation as to why Muslims use the name Isa and not Yasu.<sup>19</sup> For al-Ṭūfī, the choice of Isa is purely Islamic and not arbitrary: He claims that Arabs called Jesus “Isa” although his name in the Gospel is “Yasu,” since they changed the order of the Arabic letters of “Yasu” to make it roughly “Isa.”<sup>20</sup>

Here, it is obvious that “Isa” is distinctly and exclusively Islamic.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to add that not only classical Muslim apologists explicitly use Yasu to refer to the Jesus worshipped by Christians, but modern ones follow the same pattern: Muslim scholars Muḥammad Abū Zahra (d. 1974), Muḥammad al-Bahiyy (d. 1981), Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Ghafūr ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1990), Muḥammad al-Ghazālī al-Saqqā (d. 1995), and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dimashqī (d. 2004) all use Yasu in their discussions of Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

A final point in this regard is that, in 1907, the renowned conservative Muslim thinker Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) supported and supervised the publication of the forged Muslim Gospel, the

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<sup>16</sup> See also Ibn Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī (d. ca. 279/892), *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār and Riyāḍ al-Ziriklī (13 vols; Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1417/1996), 7:69; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1448), *al-Iṣāba fī tamyiz al-ṣaḥāba*, ed. ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd and ‘Alī Muḥammad Mu‘awwaḍ (8 vols; Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1415/1995), 1:446, 5:258, 7:221.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī, *Tathbīt dalā’il al-nubuwwa* (2 vols; Cairo: Dār al-Muṣṭafā, n.d.), 1:93, 121, *et passim*.

<sup>18</sup> Ṣāliḥ al-Hāshimī, *Takhjīl man ḥarrafa al-tawrāta wa-l-injīl*, ed. Maḥmūd ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Qadaḥ, (2 vols; Riyadh: Maktabat al-‘Ubaykān, 1419/1998), 1:126, 129, *et passim*.

<sup>19</sup> See Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī, *al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmiyya*, ed. Aḥmad al-Saqqā (Cairo: Maktabar al-nāfidha, n.d), 1:52, 91, 131.

<sup>20</sup> See al-Ṭūfī, *al-Intiṣārāt al-islāmiyya*, 131.

<sup>21</sup> A critic may say, “But what about ‘Allah’ as the Arabic term for God?” My answer is that the Arabic word for God, Allah, is very different. It is pre-Islamic and had been used by Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews before Islam’s inception. The term “Allah” was adopted by the Quran, but, unlike “Isa,” it has never been distinctively Islamic or explicitly Quranic. Christians have used “Allah” for centuries, but have always been reluctant to use Isa.

<sup>22</sup> See Muḥammad Abū Zahra, *Muḥāḍarāt fī al-naṣrāniyya* (Cairo: Dār al-fikr al-‘arabī, 1381/1966), 24, 26, 27, 28, *et passim*; Muḥammad al-Bahiyy, *al-Fikr al-islāmī al-ḥadīth* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, n.d), 45, 394; Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Ghafūr ‘Aṭṭār, *Aṣṣaḥāb al-adyān li-l-insāniyya* (Mecca: n.p, 1400/1980), 70–79; Muḥammad al-Ghazālī al-Saqqā, *qadhā’if al-ḥaqq* (Damascus: Dār al-qalam, 1411/1991), 49–56; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dimashqī, *Ajniḥat al-makr* (Damascus: Dār al-qalam, 1420/2000), 185–186. These five books are merely a sample of numerous modern and contemporary Muslim apologetic studies against Christianity—and all of them use Yasu explicitly.

so-called “Gospel of Barnabas.” Riḍā funded the translation into Arabic, in which he used Yasu instead of Isa. Riḍā’s choice is telling: even in a Muslim project to translate a forged Gospel that seeks to advance Islam’s claims, Muslims realized that Yasu is the name used by Arabic-speaking Christians for Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

These examples prove that Muslim scholars, teachers, polemicists, and apologists have shown care in distinguishing between the Quranic and biblical representations of Christ—as should we.

Lastly, we must challenge Accad’s bold yet incorrect claim: “The author of the Qur’an had no polemical intentions in his choice of Jesus’s name.” How could this be the case? Each fair-minded reader of the Quran will have to decide for themselves, but to my mind, this claim simply will not stand. Even setting aside the Quran’s many incorrect assertions about and accusations against Christ, how could Accad know the intentions of Muhammad or any author of the Quran? How can one deduce the intentions behind word choice in an ancient text? This cannot be proven, and my rhetorical questions suggest we are resorting to mere guesswork, which, unfortunately, can result in huge theological and practical consequences. As students of texts, we are taught to refrain from assigning intentions, since, in the absence of stated authorial intent, they remain uncertain.

### **USING ISA IN BIBLES EMPOWERS MUSLIMS’ SKEPTICISM**

It is important to sound a final warning about using Isa in Arabic Bible translations. Using Isa in Bibles might provide a further opportunity for Islamic charges of textual *tahrif* (corruption and alteration) in the Bible. Muslims already point to different translations and claim that Christians cannot even agree on the name for their Jesus. Muslims value their Quran, view it as the only preserved heavenly book, and claim—inaccurately and incorrectly—that all Arabic versions of the Quran are the same. Christians cannot underestimate this Islamic view of scripture.

In 2003, on a trip to North Africa, I met a Muslim sheikh. Once he realized I was Christian, we began conversing about Jesus. When I used the Quranic name Isa, the sheikh stopped me and said, “But you call him Yasu, not Isa! Why are you using our Quranic name? Are you trying to deceive me?” This was a surprising response, with significant implications for our current discussion.

Christians and Muslims have radical differences in their respective views of Jesus. These differences are deeply determinative. Because we—Christians and Muslims alike—are aware of these differences, we are ill-advised to inject a pre-packaged Quranic term with all its presuppositions and theological dogma into Bible translations. Middle Eastern Christians largely do not support it, and Muslims use it as evidence of tampering or deception.

For the past two years, I have been examining Arabic Christian texts written by medieval theologians and thinkers who interacted with Islam under the Caliphate. Not once have I found an Arabic-speaking Christian calling Jesus “Isa” to a Muslim, whether it was in a debate or in a theological tract. I will keep looking, but maybe this pertains to what I experienced as a Copt growing up in Egypt: Copts insist on calling the Savior Yasu, not Isa. They seem to want to distinguish him from the distorted portrayal of the Quranic Jesus known as Isa. Maybe the Copts have set a good example for today’s church: We must do ourselves a service and see past the naivety and immaturity of poor Juliet. My experience as a Copt is not an exception. It is the case with all Arabic-speaking Christians in the twenty-two Arab countries, particularly those who

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<sup>23</sup> *Injīl Barnābā* (The Gospel of Barnabas), trans. Khalīl Sa‘āda, ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Manār, 1325/1907).

recognize Christianity as a religion. The problem is not with the names “Isa” or “Yasu,” but with their meaning to the speaker and recipient.<sup>24</sup>

### CONSEQUENCES OF USING ISA INSTEAD OF YASU

For the sake of argument, if we accept Accad’s incorrect premise that Yasu is “unrecognized by Islam”—whatever this actually means—must we therefore assume that “Yasu” is unrecognized by Muslims today? Of course the answer is negative. I have visited most of the Arabic-speaking countries and lived in several of them—in fact I was born and raised in Egypt—and I have never met a Muslim who does not “recognize” Yasu as the Arabic Christian name of Jesus. Accad’s article appears to ignore today’s reality, presenting claims relevant, if at all, to the pre-internet era. His article appears to assume that today’s Muslims are not informed or prudent enough to recognize the name Yasu, which is used by Arabic-speaking Christians all over the world. Quite frankly, today’s Muslims in the Arab World are well-informed and easily recognize the name Yasu, but they cherish only their Isa.

Unlike the picture portrayed in Accad’s piece, most Muslims—especially in the Arab World—are intelligent and theologically alert about religious distinctions. They are well aware of both terms, Isa and Yasu. They can distinguish between them, and they definitely know the significance of both! When Christians use Isa, it irritates some Muslims, as they value the Quranic name and revere its origin and context. One can only hope that all Christians would be as adamant about the particularities of the Jesus of the Bible, as Muslims are about the Isa of the Quran.

I have raised a number of historical and theological concerns about Accad’s piece, but a key issue we must investigate is its relevance to the Church in the Middle East, not least in Accad’s home country of Lebanon. What do Arabic-speaking Christians in Lebanon say about the use of Isa and Yasu? Equally important, what do Christians from a Muslim background say about using Isa in the Bible translations? Are they convinced and satisfied with using Isa in their biblical text and in their worship of Christ? Since Accad’s piece is written and published in a major (church-serving) Baptist seminary in Lebanon, what do Lebanese Christians think about it? Does it reflect their needs, ministry, and experience? It is important to consult these Lebanese friends, because the context of the article matters. I preached for years in various evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox churches in Lebanon. I taught twice at ABTS. The Church of Lebanon means a lot to me.

I will not pretend to offer here any sort of exhaustive, quantitative research. That said, some real-world examples must suffice for the purposes of this simple article:

- I spoke with three evangelical Lebanese pastors about this article, and asked them about their views. None agreed with the article. One of them wondered how such theorizing might affect the Lebanese believers who are winning Muslims for Christ without their getting tangled up in irrelevant philosophies and sophisticated arguments. While I do not necessarily endorse this pastor’s assertion, his words are descriptive of important views which cannot be simply discarded.
- Another Lebanese pastor was even more open. He leads a church which includes hundreds of Muslim converts to Christ. I asked his thoughts on Accad’s article. I said,

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<sup>24</sup> Consider the colloquial Arabic word for a woman or wife in Lebanon, *marah*. You hear it often in the streets of Lebanon. Then take a 1-hour flight to Egypt, and try to call any woman a *marah*! You probably do not want to do that, because the same Arabic word carries a completely different and unpleasant connotation in a different context. If you use the word in Egypt, the punch you receive will serve as a reminder that words are not neutral, and they have consequence.

“Pastor, would you entertain the suggestions voiced in it?” After much sighing, the pastor expressed that he did not want anything to do with such claims, or with places adopting such claims. Though I do not necessarily endorse these pastors’ opinions, they are important to the discussion at hand. If a seminary “plays a tune” that is not in harmony with the needs of the local church, this should be a significant concern.

- I asked my friends Mahmoud and Ali—both are followers of Jesus from a Muslim background—whether they would want to see Isa or Yasu as a name in their Bible and whether they would be comfortable with praising Isa or Yasu in their church service this Sunday. The answer was loud and clear: “Of course, Yasu!” When I asked why, their answer was adamant: “We abandoned a false religion, and we do not want the baggage of Islam placed back on our shoulders.” They continued, “Why are some Christians advancing horrible ideas such as these?” I did not have an answer.

For Accad’s argument for the use of Isa in Arabic Bibles to stand, the name must be distanced from any hint of its association with Muslim polemics against Christianity; thus, he strives to assure his readers that the name Isa is largely neutral and not polemical. In a sense, Accad needs to purify Isa’s baggage, in order to convince Christians to entertain his idea and adopt it comfortably. As matters stand, if Christians realized that the Quranic name Isa is essentially a polemic against them and their faith, then they would never use it in Bible translations.

Accad’s article is written for and posted via the official website of an important Lebanese seminary which seeks to serve—hopefully first and foremost—the local church in Lebanon and the broader Middle East. This relates directly to the question of “relevance.” One may wonder, in posting and endorsing such an article, does the seminary reflect and respond to the needs of the local church in Lebanon and the broader Middle East? As ABTS is a training institution that values academic freedom, one hopes that they would give equal representation to the opposing point of view, especially given that Lebanese—and Middle Eastern—Christians generally do not support Accad’s premise.

## **CONCLUSION**

In sum, I must exhort translators to avoid using Isa in Arabic Bible translations. A good deal is at stake in this debate. We can thank Martin Accad for contributing to an important discussion. However, to my mind, the conclusions we must reach are diametrically contrary to those Accad proposes. Words and names produce theological consequences. Words are loaded, because of what they mean to the recipient and the transmitter. The word “Isa” is not neutral. The name “Isa” receives, carries, and transmits great religious power—the power of Islam’s scripture and its nearly twelve centuries of exegesis on the person Christians have worshiped for two millennia. The word “Isa” is understood by *all* Muslims, not just a majority, to represent a true servant of Allah—a mere prophet who unequivocally denied his equality with God and labeled his followers *kāfirūn* (infidels and unbelievers) if they said he was divine. Does any Christian recognize the person we are talking about here as our Jesus, as described in the Bible? I should hope not, because it is a distorted portrayal of Jesus which is inextricably linked in the minds of Muslims to the name Isa.

Adopting the Quranic Isa in Bible translations may create confusion and mislead Muslims to believe in another Jesus. Advancing the Quranic term “Isa” violates theological wisdom and historical precedent that have been established within the Church for centuries. People flirt with historical misunderstanding and inadvertently misconstrue critical theological particularities at significant spiritual risk. I would plead with Bible translators in Islamic contexts not to adopt the

name Isa in their labors. Doing so is likely to create confusion and mislead Muslims by beckoning them to a Jesus other than the Only Begotten of the Father.