

The Philosophy behind the Arabic Translation *The True Meaning of the Gospel of the Messiah*

Ekram Lamie Hennawie and
Emad Azmi Mikhail

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Introduction

As part of our discussion of the theme of this issue, we present a discussion of a translation of part of the Bible (Matthew to Acts) into Arabic The True Meaning of the Gospel of the Messiah (2008), which has become controversial. Here we present a discussion by two Arabic native speakers from Egypt. They are professors of theology who have previously worked in the same theological seminary and have known each other for decades. One of them, Professor Lamie, serves on the committee that oversaw the creation of the True Meaning translation.

I Ekram Lamie: The Need for *The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ*

In this article, I will address four aspects of the *True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ* translation project: first, the historical background; secondly, the philosophy; thirdly, the principles of the project; and finally, the technical details of the project.

1. Historical Background

The early apostles of Christ had the flexibility to adapt to the cultures of the peoples they evangelized, and the flexibility to set aside customs and traditions of their own Jewish culture. After Roman legions destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, some of the Jewish Christians followed the Mediterranean littoral from Judea until they reached

Rev. Emad A. Mikhail (D.Min., Trinity School for Ministry) an Egyptian who is ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America, serves with the Anglican Diocese of Egypt as parish priest and Principal of the Alexandria School of Theology. He has taught in various seminaries and schools around the Mediterranean world. His 2012 doctoral dissertation was Muslims and Christians in Egypt: Listening to Each Other and to the Gospel of God's Victory. He is writing a book about the phenomenon of agnosticism and atheism in the Middle East.

Rev Dr Ekram Lamie Hennawie, (D. Min San Francisco Theological Seminary), has served in various roles in the Presbyterian Church of Egypt; he was President of the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Cairo and professor of comparative religions. He also writes for daily newspapers and has been elected the Moderator of the Presbyterian Synod of the Nile. He has written more than fifteen books.

Alexandria, where they adopted the Greek and Coptic languages and allowed for the reinterpretation of native Egyptian symbols and customs. For example, the Pharaonic 'key of life' was transformed at their hands into a form of the cross of Christ. A similar phenomenon happened in the Phoenician, Babylonian and Persian cultures. This flexibility was combined with theological depth, in large part due to the influence of the scholars of the Alexandrian school of Christianity.

Unfortunately, with time, the church struggled with divisions and became too weak to present its message in a way that made sense to the Arab Muslims arriving in North Africa and the Middle East. Therefore the first impression the Arabs had of the rituals and incense and worship that took place inside churches was that they were just like paganism, with the images and statues being no more than idols. Their impression was confirmed by the theological terms employed, such as 'Mother of God', 'Son of God', 'Holy Triad', and so on. The church failed to correct this impression throughout the following decades and centuries, and also failed to use a version of Arabic that was understandable to Muslims.

In the 19th century missionaries came to the Arab world trying to reform the Arab church from within. However, these missionaries failed to rectify the image of the church among non-Christians. In some respects, they did try to do something for Arab Muslims. For example, they were the first in the modern era to translate the entire Holy Bible into Arabic in one volume (though separate translations of the Old Testament and New Testament had existed for several centu-

ries), and they translated hymns and sermons into language understandable to the Egyptian man on the street. If it were not for having the Bible and other Christian materials in Arabic, Christianity in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon would have disappeared, as happened in North Africa, where the local language was not adopted.

Even though those first missionaries encouraged the use of the Arabic language in worship and Bible study, it is unfortunate that they did not go further in their adoption of Arab culture. Most of the key terms used in translations of the Bible were borrowed from Greek and Syriac or were Arabic words that looked like Syriac terms but had different meanings. For example, *kahen* means priest in Syriac, so it was translated into Arabic as *kahin*, but this means soothsayer or sorcerer. Even the sentence constructions and style were foreign.

All this resulted in an ecclesiastical form of Arabic that was not the mother tongue of Muslim Arabs and was not understood by them in the ways intended. Although hymns and sermons were now in the Arabic language, they were expressed in the theological terms and expressions of foreign theologians and commentators. No effort was made to encourage Arabs to develop theological expressions and styles of worship that fit the Arab language and cultures, as opposed to Greek, Coptic, or western cultures.

This gave the impression that Christianity was unsuitable for the language and culture of the Arabs. Therefore, neither the modern Protestant churches nor the ancient historical churches have interacted effectively with Arab Islamic culture. So they continue to be

alienated from the surrounding society and have little impact on it.

In this religious and cultural context, some Arabs today welcome the opportunity to express their Arab identity in the fields of worship, theology and Bible translation. *The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ* is one such opportunity. So let us now turn to the philosophy behind this translation project.

2. Philosophy

Many of us have been asking ourselves some important questions related to our Arab identity and our identity as Christians, just a few of which include:

- Why has the message of Christ lost ground before the Islamic tide? Is the problem in the gospel or in the proclamation of the gospel?
- Is the church's mission addressed to a whole community (*umma*), or just to individuals?
- Is it essential to use the vocabulary, customs and traditions of one community in order to introduce the church's message to another community, or can the message be expressed within the language and culture of other communities?
- Can we find a single, identical expression of Christianity appropriate for all the different national churches all over the world? Or can every community have its own expressions of the kingdom of God?
- How can Christian minorities take on real responsibility towards their community without sacrificing either their mission or principles?

As we sought to answer these questions, a vision started to emerge, and finally the mission was clear to us. What was needed was a translation of

the Gospels that not only engages the Arabic language in its native form but also the whole heritage of Arab civilization, history and culture.

Such a translation would appeal to Arab readers as a text springing from their land and would not be seen as something imported from outside or something that comes from ancient pagan practices. Such a translation would belong to the Arab community, respecting Arab thought, language, history and culture, allowing readers to feel at ease and engaged with the text, rather than feeling detached, bewildered, and out of place.

3. Principles

When Christian scholars in the 9th century began to translate the New Testament into the Arabic language, they used the expressions that were in use at the time by both Muslims and Christians, writing with complete naturalness at the beginning of the New Testament 'In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate' and then 'The Noble *Injeel* according to the evangelist Matthew'. Both Muslims and Christians at this time used the same vocabulary.

As time went on, and because of many political, economic and social circumstances, among them the Crusades, the linguistic and cultural gulf widened between Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians. So it happened that each side had a variety of language that differed from the other. For example, the word 'noble' was characteristic of Islam, since this title was given to any Christian person converting to Islam, and so this term was rejected by Christian society. In the

same way the greeting of Islam, ‘peace be upon you’, which was originally a greeting of the Lord Christ, ended up being used exclusively by Muslims, while Christians developed a different greeting, ‘good day’. And so, little by little, Christians spoke in a jargon that was not understood except by those brought up in the church.

Due to this complex linguistic history, the translators of the *True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ* felt it was important to try to help readers understand the gospel message even if they do not know ecclesiastical jargon. Some of the principles that make this volume distinct include:

- We work with Christian theologians and consultants and refer to evangelical commentaries to ensure that the translation is accurate to the original message.
- We attempt to present the biblical ideas themselves, thought for thought, in good Arabic style, rather than trying to represent the Greek text word for word. We try to give the translation the power and the spirit of the original inspired Greek text rather than imprisoning them in the forms of the Greek language, so that the reader can see beyond the words and grasp the ideas that apply to his daily life and thought.
- We use notes and articles to introduce the reader to the cultural and conceptual background of the gospel. We provide introductions and footnotes for every book in the New Testament, and various articles addressing topics relevant to modern readers of the Bible.
- We aim for a translation that is easy to understand, in familiar language and eloquent style that helps the

reader to positively grapple with the challenge of the gospel message. We avoid using terms and phrases that are unknown or that communicate the wrong meaning.

4. Details of the Project

Our core team includes theologians, scholars and those involved in sharing the biblical message. Some are from an Arab Christian background and some are from an Arab Muslim background. There is also a non-Arab linguist who helps with technical issues. The leader of the team is an Arab writer, editor and novelist from a Muslim background who is an expert in communicating the biblical message to Muslims. In addition, there are experts from various Arab countries who help out from time to time in their particular fields of expertise.

The team meets once a year to read out loud and review the latest drafts together, to discuss the translation of key terminology, to decide on the content of articles and other reader aids, and to make other stylistic and logistical decisions. These meetings are valuable, but much of the work we do takes place in between, when each team member works on assigned tasks, such as writing articles or revising footnotes.

These are the steps we went through as a team as we worked on this translation:

- Surveys were conducted among 1000 Arabic speakers in North Africa and the Middle East. The respondents (Muslims with no exposure to the Bible) were given Scripture portions to read from five major existing translations. They

were then questioned about the passages, to measure their understanding of the meaning, their assessment of the literary style, and their attitudes concerning what they had read.

- Arabic Speakers' Workshop. The survey results were analysed at a workshop of native Arabic speakers, both Muslim background believers and Christians. Participants identified words and concepts that were not understood and proposed tentative solutions.
- Draft Translation. Each of the Gospels and the Book of Acts was drafted by a Muslim with a background in translation and Islamic theology, working with input from a Christian linguist-exegetical expert. The authority is the Greek text as understood by major biblical scholars. Full use is made of existing translations and scholarly commentaries.
- Review and revision

The first draft is reviewed by Muslim native Arabic speakers to test elegance of style and clarity of meaning. The draft is reviewed and revised by Arab Christian theologians and Muslim background believers to assure adherence to the meaning of the original biblical text. The new text is tested with a smaller group of Muslims with no exposure to the Bible from a cross segment of society, using the same survey tool as in step one. Final changes are made and approved by the core team.

Members of the project team knew from previous work on commentaries on Scripture that explanatory articles are very important. These articles explain biblical concepts that have been shown to be troublesome for non-Christian readers, such as the Kingdom of

God, the reliability of the Scriptures, the meaning of the term 'Son of God', the incarnation, and so on.

By working with Muslims throughout the process of translation, the translation team hopes to ensure the gospel is presented in a way that overcomes the barriers of language, culture and prejudice. Initial reader feedback has been enthusiastic and positive.

II Emad Azmi Mikhail's first Response

1. Historical Background

First of all I would like to express my appreciation for the stated purpose of this translation project. As Christians we are called upon to communicate our faith as clearly as we can. I agree with Professor Lamie that the church in the Arab world has generally not been concerned to explain the gospel to Muslims. When it does speak to them on matters of faith it often does so in ecclesiastical jargon that is not understood. Moreover, the overall image it projects is of an antiquated or isolated body that intrigues Arab Muslims but in many cases repels them. Rightfully or wrongfully, the impression is given that it is foreign to the Arab world.

The reasons behind this gap are both complex and old. While a full explanation is beyond the scope of this article, it is important for those not familiar with the history of the Middle East to understand something of this complexity. When Christianity spread in the area now known as the Arab world, it encountered a variety of local cultures such as Coptic, Syriac and Berber as well as a widespread use of Greek in the east and Latin further

west. As Professor Lamie points out, the new faith was fairly successful in 'translating' and transporting itself across these and other cultural barriers.

However, the progress of Christianity began to suffer major obstacles beginning in the fourth century. With the end of Roman persecution, the institutionalization of the church and its incorporation into the Byzantine Empire weakened its missionary thrust. Its entanglement with the politics of the Empire intensified rivalry between various ecclesiastical 'sees'; it also introduced corruption and needless theological controversies. These dynamics led to a serious rift in the fifth century, ostensibly over the debates concerning the nature(s) of Christ. Instead of settling the matter, the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) created intense animosity between those churches that adopted its formulation and those that did not.

The rift and politicization of the church greatly weakened both it and the Empire in the decades and centuries following Chalcedon. The Empire attempted to secure the compliance of non-Chalcedonian churches in Egypt and Syria, using both peaceful and violent means. By the seventh century church and Empire seemed too exhausted and divided to notice developments in the Arabian Peninsula. Coptic Christians felt persecuted in their country by the imperial Byzantine Church! In fact, the Coptic patriarch went into hiding before the Arab invasion of Egypt only to emerge after the defeat of Roman armies.

Unsurprisingly, observers both then and in the centuries following have remarked that the Arab invasion was a result of the church's division and

weakness. John of Nikiu, a Coptic bishop writing a few decades after the Arab conquest of the Middle East, ascribes the fall of Egypt to the sins of the Chalcedonians (*Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu* 117.1). In fact, he believes that Chalcedon caused the 'undoing of all Christians in the world' (120.56). Regardless of one's view of Chalcedon, Cragg believes that the Christological debates contributed to the *inception* as well as spread of Islam.¹

So the situation in the 7th century was already quite complex. Christians found themselves in a politicized and divided church, caught in the struggle between the centuries old Roman Empire and the new Arab rulers. Though the earliest years of the new regime seemed positive for local Christians, over time discrimination took its toll on both the Christian population and its very psyche. Arabization and Islamization proceeded during subsequent centuries without abatement. As Professor Lamie points out, Christian icons and documents from the early Arab centuries in Egypt reveal the church's slow attempt to 'translate' itself—at least partially—from its Greek/Coptic heritage into Arabic. By the ninth century the Bible had been translated into Arabic. But while some Christian scholars made attempts to communicate with Muslims on matters of faith, no evidence exists that they or others made a major impact.

The crusades of the 11th-13th centuries further marred the Middle East.

1 Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 15.

Catholic armies from Europe sought to regain the 'holy land' from the 'Saracens' by force of arms. In a region with a long collective memory fed by school curricula and the media, the 'wars of the Cross' (literal translation of 'crusade' in Arabic) still impact the Arab world hundreds of years later. Suspicion of the 'Christian' West was intensified as a result of the colonial period as well as by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Though Arab Christians were themselves negatively impacted by these western incursions into their region, there is a lingering feeling among many Muslims that they were (or are!) allied with the West. Hearing a mass in Coptic or Syriac does not dispel the suspicion.

2. A New Translation the Solution?

In my humble view it appears overly simplistic to think that Muslims' misunderstanding of the Christian message will be significantly impacted by a new translation of the Bible into Arabic. To be sure, translations are important and good translations are very valuable. But, as we have seen, the issues are far broader. First of all, we Arab Christians need to resist the temptation to emigrate to the West or isolate ourselves within our own religious communities in the East.

More importantly, we Arab Christians need to view ourselves and our Muslim neighbours differently. We need to recover the missionary love and fervour of the earliest Christians in our region. Instead of thinking primarily of survival we need to take our Lord's 'Great Commission' to heart. We need to overcome long centuries of

inertia and fear. Moreover, we need to view our Muslim neighbours not as enemies but as those sharing a common humanity as well as a shared homeland and history.

So many of the failures Professor Lamie cites in his article are failures in Christian *praxis*, not translation. I have already cited our tendency to emigrate, isolate ourselves and avoid our God-given privilege to communicate the message of Christ. Professor Lamie writes that so much of Christian worship in the Middle East appears to Muslims to be pagan because of the presence of icons, statues and saints. Unfortunately he is correct. But none of these issues will be solved by a new Bible translation.

Professor Lamie does exaggerate the facts at more than one point. He gives the impression that without the efforts of missionaries in the 19th century, Christianity would have disappeared in the Middle East as it did in North Africa. The fact of the matter is that Christianity disappeared from North Africa centuries before the modern missionary era. At another point Professor Lamie implies that Christians are the ones that changed the Muslim greeting into a particularly Christian one ('good day') not understood by Muslims. In fact, both Muslims and Christians understand 'good day' and both used it in Egypt until the last few decades which have witnessed a resurgence of Islamism and an abandonment of prior customs.

3. Translation Philosophy

Let us now focus on the approach taken by the team that produced this partial translation of the New Testament

in 2008. One thousand Muslims *with no prior exposure to the Bible* were given portions of Scripture to read. Next, as explained by Professor Lamie, 'they were ... questioned about the passages, to measure their understanding of the meaning, their assessment of the literary style, and their attitudes concerning what they had read'.

Several remarks need to be made about this approach. Non-Christians throughout history would not be expected to understand the Bible without some kind of explanation. While some portions (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount) are relatively easy to understand, many biblical passages need to be understood in light of their historical, cultural and theological background. Even those with some biblical background would find much of Scripture difficult to understand, regardless of translation. We are here reminded of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. When Philip asked him, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' the eunuch responded, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' (30-31).

The project's methodology is a very appropriate one if the intention was the production of an evangelistic tool or commentary. Assessing a target audience's level of spiritual understanding is very important for those wishing to explain the gospel. But it is doubtful as a translation methodology. For one thing, Arab Muslims represent a very large target audience, representing a variety of countries, educational levels and religious habits. Highly educated urbanites in Beirut and Cairo will understand the Bible differently from the barely educated rural Muslims. Liberals and Salafists will also have very different reactions.

To which subgroup would the translation be directed? In my view it is important in the Arab world to keep translations fairly broad and constant to avoid the charge that we are 'corrupting' our text. Explanatory material and evangelistic tools can be designed to meet the needs of various reader subgroups.

Much has been written in the last few years about translating the 'familial' language of the Bible, particularly as it relates to the Father and the Son in the Christian trinity. Theologians have long recognized the rich and complex connotations of the word 'Father' and 'Son'. No other words can possibly convey the layers of meaning behind them. Jesus' sonship has at least a messianic as well as an eternal dimension. It also relates to the sonship of those who believe in him. The word 'son' indicates oneness of nature, intimacy and authority. No other single word could possibly replace it.

Additionally, the word *ibn* ('son') in Arabic does not necessarily have a procreative meaning. In fact it is used extensively in Arab culture to signify a non-procreative relationship as in the phrase, 'son of the town', meaning someone who belongs to the town. 'Son of the Nile' means an Egyptian. '*ibn el halal*' (son of uprightness) means someone who walks uprightly. Moreover, men and women regularly use the word *ibn* to refer to those who are not their biological children. The phrase, 'my son' (*ibni*), has connotations of endearment, respect and trust.

Significantly, Qur'anic verses which deny that God can be born or give birth (e.g. 112.3) use a different word (*walad*) that *does* have strong procreative connotations. Actually Greek, unlike

English, also has two words that are translated son/child: *hios* and *teknon*. It is the former which is used of Jesus' sonship precisely because it is the broader of the two. Existing Arabic translations of the New Testament have appropriately translated *hios*, using *ibn*, thus using the broader Arabic term and avoiding the procreative connotation of *walad*.

Speakers of Arabic instinctively understand the difference between *ibn* and *walad*. When Christians explain to Muslims that Jesus Christ is God's son (*ibn*) in a non-procreative sense, Muslims generally find that understandable and reassuring. There is no need—as well as no justification—to change well-established principles of Bible translation. Explanatory notes are sufficient to explain the theological significance of 'son' and 'father'.

III Dr. Lamie's Reply to Dr. Mikhail

I first met Dr. Mikhail 20 years ago when he started to teach at the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Cairo during my tenure as president of the seminary from 1991 to 2000. I appreciate his response, and of course I agree with his historical overview, among other things looking at the Crusades and the emergence of the State of Israel. The challenges he outlines are very real, and one of our biggest problems nowadays is Christian Zionism, which dominates the thinking of many Christians in the West. I have written many books on these issues such as *The Other Face of the Church, Is Jesus Going To Be the King of the World?* and *The Zionist Penetration of Christianity*.

Let me briefly touch on what Dr.

Mikhail considers to be exaggerations on my part. He writes that I give the impression that missionaries kept Christianity from disappearing in the Middle East, while 'Christianity disappeared from North Africa centuries before the modern missionary era'. Dear Emad, I was addressing the question 'why' and not 'when'. My point was that in places where the Scriptures were available in the mother tongue, Christianity held on. One key reason Christianity failed to survive in most of North Africa was the lack of Scripture in the mother tongue of the people.

Dr. Emad also felt I was exaggerating with regard to how greetings have changed, for he understood me to be saying that Muslims don't understand the greeting 'good day'. My point was simply to give an example of how Christians and Muslims at first spoke the same Arabic that included what we now call Islamic terminologies. In further support of this idea, there are a number of manuscripts of Arabic translations of the Gospel from the eleventh century which opened with the words: 'In the name of God the Merciful and Compassionate. The Noble Gospel according to Mark'. However, because of political, social and economic changes, Christians stopped using the ordinary language (what we Christian Arabs now think of as 'Muslim' usage) and started to develop their own variety of the language, with its own terminology.

Before I explain my point of view, I just want to remind us of the principle that there is no easy answer to a difficult question. To the question, 'Is a new Bible translation a solution?', my answer is, 'Yes, to some extent'. Dr. Emad is correct that a new translation of the Bible is not the only solution to

the problems we have identified. As I mentioned earlier, there is also a need for expressions of worship and theology in the Arabic of the mainstream of society.

In addition, Emad is right that there is a need to deal with the issues of emigration and of lack of passion in sharing the gospel. Perhaps a translation that allows Christians to express their faith in a way that truly engages the Arabic language can play a role in dealing with these issues. But the first step in finding the solution is to determine which language you are going to use. We must move the linguistic obstacles out of the way and express ourselves very clearly in order to be understood. In our situation, the main obstacle is Christian ecclesiastical language.

When Dr. Emad says, 'Non-Christians throughout history would not be expected to understand the Bible without some kind of explanation'. I ask, why is this? I see this as a failure of the church, not as an indication that this is the way things should always be. In addition, as academics we need to be careful of making broad generalizations because there are examples throughout history of the Scriptures being translated in order to help non-Christians understand the message of Christ.

The Bible itself says that the Scriptures are for people from any background and that people can be saved when they believe the message of the gospel. But when readers are told they need someone to tell them what the translation is supposed to mean, as opposed to what it actually says, then they tend to distrust the translation as well as the interpreters. Their only hope is to read it in English or French,

with notes to explain the unfamiliar words.

Regarding Philip and the Ethiopian: Philip brought new meaning to the words that the Ethiopian is reading. This is not a translation matter at all. Philip was providing information about the resurrected Christ that was not known when Isaiah wrote and had not yet been written down in the Gospels. However, I agree with Dr. Emad that sometimes a guide is necessary, and that is the reason that the *True Meaning* contains footnotes, articles, glossaries and other aids for the reader. This volume is also a tool for Christians as they act as guides for their neighbours.

The translation team chose to use the title, 'The True Meaning', rather than simply 'the Gospel' to make it very clear that this was not a word-for-word translation but a translation of the sentence meaning, expressed in normal Arabic language, and that our intended readers are those who live in our neighborhoods.

Regarding the charge of corruption of the Holy Bible: as we all know, there is a verse in the Qur'an that mentions this matter. At the same time, Muslims do not consider a translation of the Qur'an to be the sacred text of the Qur'an itself, so they call it a translation of the meaning of the Qur'an. Their translations of the meaning of the Qur'an are often quite free, and they differ widely among themselves in details, but Muslims do not see these translations as corrupt as long as they follow one of the interpretations found in the standard commentaries.

As for us, we know that the Holy Bible was originally written in the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek languages, and that this is the truly authoritative

text. All translations of the Bible are translations of either the word meanings or the sentence meanings of the original-language text. We find differences between them because commentators take different positions on the meaning of the original text, and because translators focus on either the word meanings or the sentence meanings, but not because the original texts of the Holy Bible were corrupted.

I wish to address what Dr. Emad says regarding divine familial terms. He says that ‘Speakers of Arabic instinctively understand the difference between *ibn* and *walad*’. This depends on what we mean by ‘speakers of Arabic’. Those who have grown up in the church have learned to understand the concept behind the term *ibn*, and they have become accustomed to using the term to refer to Christ. However, our audience surveys revealed that Muslims consistently understood the term *ibn allah* to be narrowly biological, and did not consider that it was any less biological in meaning than *walad*.

The Qur’an also does not differentiate between the term *walad* (an-Nisa 4:171) and *ibn* (At-Tawba 9:30) as applied to Jesus. Both are understood in a narrow biological sense. We can see this narrow understanding of the term going as far back in Arab history as the debate between the Caliph Mahdi and the Patriarch or Catholicos of the East Syrian Church Timothy I in 781 AD. The Caliph said, ‘O Catholicos, a man like you who possesses all this knowledge and utters such sublime words concerning God, is not justified in saying about God that he married a woman from whom he begat a son’.

Dr. Emad also says, ‘Theologians have long recognized the rich and com-

plex connotations of the word “Father” and “Son”. No other words can possibly convey the layers of meaning behind them.’ This sounds more like an Islamic understanding of Scriptures than a Christian one. Christians do not believe that the forms of the words have special power in themselves. So perhaps what Dr. Emad means above is that the concept or idea of father and son is rich and complex—not that the words themselves are so rich and complex that no other word in any other language can be used. If that is what he meant, then we are in agreement. Many biblical concepts are so rich and complex that they require descriptive phrases to capture the ideas and footnotes or articles to more fully explain them. That is what we seek to do with the True Meaning translation.

In May of this year I was at a conference bringing together different Christian denominations in Beirut under the title, ‘Christians in the Middle East: Presence and Witness’. While I was leading a Bible study for the attendees, the Catholic Archbishop of Baghdad said: ‘We live in Islamic culture and speak the Arabic language, but we think in Greek.’ When I asked him what he meant by thinking in Greek, he said, ‘The background of New Testament theology and its terminology are Greek. We are badly in need of developing a Christian Arabic theology expressing itself in Islamic culture.’ One of the attendees asked him, ‘How can we do this?’ He replied: ‘I do not know, but I know that the church has been frozen since the fifth century.’ Our hope is that the *True Meaning* will be part of the process of change that this Archbishop spoke about.

IV Dr. Emad's Final Response

I appreciate Professor Lamie's response. We agree on a number of issues, yet significant disagreement remains. Professor Lamie exaggerates the differences between what he calls 'normal' (ie Islamic) Arabic and 'Christian jargon'. History clearly shows that Arabism predates Islam and has been shaped in part by non-Muslim cultures and ideologies, including all the cultures it has absorbed over the centuries. It is doubtful whether we can prove that Christians changed the Islamic greeting to 'good day' as Professor Lamie claims. Both Christians and Muslims used 'good day' throughout the 20th century, and many Muslims continue to use it. It is the recent revival of Islamic ideology that has led *Muslims* to use more Islamic greetings.

Ideological issues also complicate Muslim understanding of the crucial title, 'Son of God'. Muslims easily differentiate between 'son' (*ibn*) and 'child' (*walad*) linguistically. The fact that many still view 'Son of God' biologically is a reflection of their *theological* worldview. When Muslims learn that Christ's sonship is not biological, most respond positively. The obstacle to understanding is not language but Islamic interpretation.

That is the reason I cited Philip's ministry with the Ethiopian eunuch. The problem confronting the eunuch was not a linguistic one. He understood the words of Isaiah 53 but did not know to whom they referred. Philip did not, as Professor Lamie asserts, inject new meaning into it. He simply pointed to the fulfillment of the prophecy in Jesus Christ.

I am also concerned about the implications for biblical authority and in-

rancy in Professor Lamie's response. If the Holy Spirit chose to use the words 'Father' and 'Son' dozens of times in the NT to describe a vital Trinitarian relationship, then we must look for the most natural translation of the those terms, as the Arabic Bible has done for over a millennium.

My concern about Professor Lamie's view of inspiration is not allayed by his final paragraph. Firstly, it is not really accurate to say that the background of NT theology is Greek. While its terminology is Greek, most scholars have long recognized that its intellectual background is largely in the OT and in second temple Judaism. That means that the entire Bible has a Semitic orientation which greatly eases its communication to Arabs.

More problematic is the implication that NT theology needs to be *redefined* to fit Arab Muslim culture. Christians have always held the Bible and its theological propositions to be normative. I fear that the philosophy behind *True Meaning* does not properly respect the authority of Scripture and its words.

While we need translations that Arab readers can understand, it is vital that such translations respect the way Scripture has been understood throughout history. Of course we also need to develop interpretative materials that explain the Scripture to particular groups of Muslims. Most importantly we must make sure that our lives and churches are welcoming to Muslims.

Editor's note: Dr. Lamie feels that his position does not imply, as Dr. Mikhail sees it, a redefinition of theology for the Arab context. Unfortunately we did not have the space to extend the conversation any further.

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