

TRANSLATING ‘SON OF GOD’
IN MISSIONARY BIBLE TRANSLATION:
A CRITIQUE OF “MUSLIM-IDIOM BIBLE TRANSLATIONS: CLAIMS
AND FACTS”, BY RICK BROWN, JOHN PENNY AND LEITH GRAY¹
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1 The issue

Beginning in the 1970’s Bible translation agencies working in the Muslim world were dealing with the problem of popular rejection of New Testament translations based on Muslims’ misunderstanding of and revulsion to the term “Son of God”. This revulsion has been documented in various publications in the last three decades. In response, some translators began to suggest other alternatives for “Son of God” that leave out the core element of sonship. This was done for sheerly pragmatic concerns, but some who advocated this approach soon saw that translation decisions in this matter were inextricably tied to fundamental theological truth, and that changing “Son of God” to anything else would require justification that goes beyond pragmatic concerns. One advocate of such substitution, Rick Brown, began to claim that because certain texts recently discovered from the ancient near east seem to use the term “Son of God” metaphorically as a synonym for “Christ/Messiah,” this is therefore frequently the meaning for first century Jews, and hence must be the meaning it has in the New Testament; therefore it should be translated accordingly (see e.g., Brown, 2000: 45, 48-49, 2005a: 93-94, 2005b: 138-141).

2 Problems with these assertions

However, there are numerous problems with asserting that the principle meaning of the term “Son of God” in the New Testament is “Christ/Messiah”. The first problem is that it is not a settled issue

¹ See St Francis Magazine 5:6 (December 2009).

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among scholars that “Son of God” was widely used as a metaphorical synonym for “Christ” or “Messiah” in the first century. As I document in a separate paper (Abernathy 2010, publication forthcoming), while some scholars have tentatively concluded this, others say that it was not used that way, some are saying that the term was just beginning to be used that way, and others are unsure. Whatever the case, a few dozen extra-biblical texts, many of which are fragmentary in nature, hardly form a sufficient basis to justify changing so critical a key biblical term as “Son of God”, with all the biblical and theological significance that it has. To claim, as some have (see, e.g. Brown 2000: 49), that the Church has largely misunderstood this term until now is to make a very serious judgmental statement about the work of the Holy Spirit. Since it is the work of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church into all truth (John 16:13) one wonders how the Church could have supposedly wandered so far from the true biblical meaning of such a key term, central as it is to the doctrine of the Trinity. And if it takes extra-biblical texts to teach us what a key biblical term means, one must also wonder about the adequacy of Scripture.

A second problem concerns the use of biblical metaphor. Usually a metaphor is coined by an author and used in a limited range of texts. Some metaphors, such as that of the divine shepherd, or of God being a rock, are more widely used, but they are readily recognizable as metaphor. However, the Christian church has no tradition of understanding the phrase “Son of God” as metaphor. Rather, Jesus’ eternal sonship is seen as a *metaphysical reality*.³ The very frequency and distribution of the Father/Son concept, occurring several hundred times in the New Testament and in all but two New Testament books, should tell us something. More evidence that the term “Son of God” is not a metaphor is how Jesus himself constantly referred to God as “Father”. Every prayer Jesus prayed except for the cry of dereliction on the cross began with the address “Father”. Even as a twelve-year old boy in the temple, Jesus understood God to be his Father. At twelve years of age he certainly wasn’t using a metaphor to claim to be the Christ.

³ Linguist/translators normally regard “Son of God” as a *metaphorical* description because it is not *literal*, i.e., *physical*; that is, if something is not literal/physical, it must be metaphorical. The metaphysical is a conceptual category that linguist/translators don’t normally consider, but which theologians use quite naturally.

A third problem is that we are not dealing with a theological term coined in the fourth century. We are dealing with a key biblical term used by authors of Scripture in the first century, one that had enormous theological significance to them, regardless of how Jewish people may or may not have used it prior to Christ. In the gospels we find the term used by a wide variety of speakers – disciples, Roman soldiers, the high priest, the angel at the annunciation, demons, Satan at the temptation, and God himself in two of the three instances in which he spoke directly from heaven. Not all of those speakers mean the same thing by it. Even if it were true that first century Jews used “Son of God” as a synonym for “Christ/Messiah”, the use of the term by Romans, angels, demons, Satan, and God, show us that the meaning cannot be limited to the theological conceptions of first century Jews. *It is the meaning intended by the authors of the biblical books that we must regard as “the” meaning in the books they wrote.* The gospel writers knew things that the human speakers in the gospel accounts did not know, things that surpass what the Jewish population of Palestine would have understood prior to Jesus’ coming. Ultimately it is Jesus himself who determines the meaning of the term. To limit ourselves only to the meaning that pre-Christian Jewish people might have held, as Rick Brown advocates, is to deny the possibility of new revelation.

An even larger problem looms for us theologically if “Son of God” and “Christ” are essentially equivalent in meaning in the New Testament. If there is little difference in semantic meaning between them, then it follows that *Jesus became the Son when he became the Christ.* This would then mean that he is not eternally the Son, an assertion that denies a basic tenet of Christian faith held from the earliest times, even in the first century, long before the deliberations of the ecumenical councils. Recent discussions of this issue have often ignored this point. But to slight this in our debates is to ignore the most important point, and those who advocate such a change without acknowledging the critical theological significance of such a move may be unfairly leaving those who follow their line of thinking seriously under-informed about the magnitude of what is at stake. In discussions of this issue by those who advocate changing “Son of God” to “Word” or “Christ/Messiah” I have not seen any meaningful discussion of the core theological issue of the eternity of Christ’s sonship, other than the questionable claim

by Brown et al. that the formulations of systematic theology regarding Jesus' eternal sonship are irrelevant to the meaning of "Son of God" in the New Testament. One wonders how the Church ever decided that Jesus is eternally the Son of God if they did not believe that this was the clear testimony of the New Testament and the belief of the Church from the very beginning.

In AD 381 the bishops of the Christian church met in an ecumenical council at Constantinople, dealt with a number of important doctrinal and christological issues, and finalized the form of the Nicene Creed. They also condemned as heresy the view that Jesus became the Son of God at the incarnation and anathematized the otherwise orthodox bishop Marcellus for teaching such. This move was no new turn in theology, as the Church had held from the very beginning that Jesus' sonship is an eternal sonship. The eternal nature of Jesus' sonship was also affirmed by the confessions of faith of the Reformation period, including that of the Reformed churches, the Baptists, the Lutherans, and the Anglicans. In making this assertion, the Protestant churches were not just making a statement about theology; they were making an assertion of what they understood the New Testament testimony to mean. This belief in the eternal nature of Jesus' sonship is also reflected in just about every doctrinal statement of any seminary or mission organization that is conservative enough to have a doctrinal statement (including the sending agencies of many Bible translation organizations). These statements usually say something to the effect that "we believe that God exists eternally in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit". Such wording clearly affirms what the creeds and confessions, as well as Scripture itself, assert about the eternity of the Father-Son relationship.

Just about every title by which we name Christ (Lord, Christ, Savior, King, etc), is a reference to a role he exercises toward creatures, a role that began at a point in time. But "Son of God" says something about who he is eternally, in a relationship that never had a beginning point. In a forthcoming paper I will exhaustively document how contemporary conservative scholars affirm that Christ's sonship is eternal, that it is the essence of who and what he is, that his messianic ministry is based upon his eternal sonship, and that it is the pre-eminent description of who he is. (I have well over 100 citations from scholars on

these points.) I also discuss the four meanings of the term “Son of God” as it is used in the New Testament, which are: (1) the nativistic sense, which is that he has no earthly father (Luke 1:32-35), (2) the moral/religious sense in which the essence of sonship toward God is obedience, (3) the messianic sense, and (4) the eternal sonship, upon which the other three are based and from which they are derived. The view that the translation of “Son of God” should reflect one of the first three derived senses only, especially the messianic sense of “Christ/Messiah”, to the exclusion of the most primary and basic meaning of eternal sonship, was unheard of until Bible translators began interacting seriously with the Muslim world.

3 Transparency

Those who advocate changing “Son of God” to “Christ/Messiah” or “Word” often claim transparency by saying that the literal form “Son of God” is included in the footnotes (see Brown et al.: p. 93). Or, if the literal form is left in the text, a footnote is added to indicate what the “true” meaning is, which of course would be that “Son of God” means “Christ/Messiah,” or “God’s beloved one,” or something else. There are two problems with this. One problem is that many Scripture products being developed for Muslim audiences exist in audio format only, in which case there are no footnotes. A much greater problem, however, is that any rendering that lacks the essential component of sonship, or which emends it by a footnote indicating a “true meaning” that lacks that component, has missed the core meaning. As one Bible translator who worked among a Muslim language group has said, “We cannot impoverish the Bible by removing the central ‘Father/Son’ image in order to accommodate any target group.” He notes that there are more than 200 references to the “Father/Son” language in the New Testament, and also that the strategic moments in Jesus’ earthly life are “punctuated by revelations of Father and Son,” moments such as the annunciation, his baptism, the temptation, the transfiguration, his agony, and his crucifixion.⁴ In other words, the issue of Jesus’ sonship is at the core of the New Testament witness of who Jesus is, which is why it is at the core of Christian belief. *We need to be transparent about*

⁴ Unpublished doctoral dissertation by Fritz Goerling, chapter 13.

this core element; otherwise, Muslims who read our translations will not have a reliable way to know who Jesus really is. They should be able to trust the Scripture to tell them that.

4 What do Brown, Penny and Gray believe about eternal sonship?

It is important to recognize what may not be readily apparent in the Christology of Brown et al. in regard to Christ's eternal identity. They say, "Sonship is described as the relationship of God to the Messiah, where the Messiah is the Word of God incarnate as Jesus in his mediatorial role as the Christ" (p. 92). In other words, the focus of sonship is in the incarnation and with regard to his messianic role. They go on to say that the term "Son" can be used to describe his pre-incarnate state only in a referential sense, by which they mean that it properly describes his incarnate state only. That is, it can be used retrospectively to refer to Jesus in his preincarnate state while not actually meaning that he was Son in the preincarnate state. They say, "The New Testament authors often use such references to refer to the second Person of the Trinity prior to the incarnation by using his post-incarnate name 'Jesus' or by using terms that describe his *incarnate role*, such as 'Christ' or '*the Son of God*,' both of which were used in Jewish society to refer to the awaited Savior" (pp. 102-103, emphasis mine). Although he never openly says that Jesus became Son at the incarnation, this line of thinking can be found in several of Rick Brown's works. Whereas many scholars see the divine sonship as the basis for the messianic ministry, with some even saying that "Son of God" is Jesus' pre-eminent title, Rick Brown says, "Jesus is pre-eminently the Christ, the eternal Saviour-King sent from God, and this is what makes him *the Son of God*" (Brown 2004: 63, emphasis his).⁵

5 Language or theology?

In their article Brown et al. claim that removing "Son" or "Son of God" from translations for Muslim audiences is based on language use, and

⁵ This from an unpublished monograph, though Brown has distributed it freely to anyone who has requested it.

has nothing to do with theological prejudice (pp. 89, 91).⁶ It is said that their languages do not have divine “kinship terminology” (see also Brown 2000: 41, 45). But this assertion cannot be sustained. For one thing, Muslim audiences that object to the term “Son of God” speak languages from many different and often unrelated language families, but what they have in common is their religious beliefs. As Brown et al. themselves tell us, the Qur’an anathematizes the very idea that God could have a son, and devout Muslims state in prayer seventeen times a day that God did not procreate. Furthermore, there are Christian speakers of some of these languages who *do* understand the phrase, so we cannot say that it is the languages that Muslims speak that set the limit on understanding it. It is *their religious beliefs* that limit its use. No doubt there are even British Muslims who are scandalized by the idea that God has a son. Would we say that their native language, English, does not have divine “kinship terminology”?

6 The Trinity

Now if it is claimed that “Son of God” is primarily a metaphorical way of saying “Christ/Messiah”, then, as I said above, we have to conclude that Jesus became the Son when he became the Christ. But what was he prior to the incarnation, if not eternal Son? The answer that is given is that he is eternally the Word, or the Word and Wisdom of God (Brown 2001:20-26), which of course is true of him. But to remove the understanding of Jesus as eternal Son leaves us with a Trinity of God, the Word, and the Spirit (Brown 2001: 26). As much as Christian theologians have used the term and concept of “Word” throughout the history of theology, they did so with the understanding that this eternal Word was also a person who was eternal Son. It is the eternal sonship that makes sense of calling him the eternal Word, but when that sonship is removed, the Trinity as we know it dramatically changes. There is no eternal Father-Son relationship, only an eternal God-Word relationship, which is conceptually very foreign to the doctrine of the Trinity as it has always been understood. The historic Christian understanding of the Trinity essentially collapses.

⁶ Rick Brown has stated elsewhere that “the main problem with ‘Son of God’ is the wording itself” (Brown 2000: 50).

7 The deity of Jesus

Brown et al. say that removing “Son of God” from what they call “Muslim-idiom translations” does not communicate the deity of Christ any less clearly than more literal translations (p. 92). Rather, they tell us, the deity of Jesus is fully communicated in other biblical passages, and then make reference to certain biblical theologians whom they say “find the deity of Jesus revealed holistically in the things he says and does, and in statements made about him, rather than in the use of particular titles”. They cite Richard Bauckham in support of this claim.

It is true that the deity of Jesus is revealed in many such passages, and not only in the titles used of Jesus. In fact, his deity emanates throughout the biblical revelation of him. But part of the biblical revelation is that *he is the Son of God*. The title is one window into who Jesus is, which includes his deity. With regard to the association between the title “Son of God” and Jesus’ deity, in appendix A of my forthcoming article I have over thirty notes or citations from twenty-seven scholars who associate Jesus’ divine sonship with his deity. Bauckham himself says that for Mark the title “Son of God” “indicates Jesus’ unique relationship to God as one who participates in the divine identity” (Bauckham 2008: 265). He also says that “the divine identity comprises the relationship in which the Father is who he is only in relation to the Son and vice versa” (Bauckham 2008: 106). So biblical scholars and theologians, *including Bauckham*, do believe that Jesus’ eternal divine sonship and his eternal deity are inextricably related.

8 What would a Muslim-compliant translation be like?

Brown et al. object to the notion that translations that substitute some other rendering for “Son of God” are “Muslim compliant”. They say:

In our many years of talking and interacting with translators, we have never heard any translators speak of altering the meaning of Scripture for theological or missiological reasons or to be more compliant with Islamic teaching. What translators do discuss is how to communicate the original meaning as well as possible, using wording that is clear and natural. Similarly we have never heard of Muslims asking for alterations of meaning. They treat Scripture with even more fear than do Christians, and they would not tolerate alterations of meaning. (p. 91)

Their presupposition here of course is that the “original meaning” of the term “Son of God” is something other than that Jesus is actually God’s Son from all eternity. And despite the claim that Muslims treat Scripture with more fear than Christians do, that they don’t ask for alternations of meaning, and that they would not tolerate changes of meaning, the entire reason for substituting some other wording for “Son of God” is that many Muslims will not tolerate the “meaning” that Jesus really is God’s son. But as I mentioned above, I have documented scores of scholars who understand “God sent his Son” to mean that Jesus was already the Son prior to being sent. This is a mainstay of Christian theology and exegesis, and is also what gives meaning to the story of Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac in Genesis 22. Abraham is a picture of how God himself will provide the lamb. Christians have always believed that this story was a prefiguring of God’s sacrificing *his* own Son. In Romans 8:32 when Paul says, “He who did not spare his own Son,” the phrase “his own” before “Son” emphasizes the fact that what God did was costly to him. God sent – and sacrificed – more than just his Word; he sent and sacrificed *his own Son*.

We can reasonably raise the question of what a “Muslim-compliant” translation would look like. Brown et al. have already told us (pp. 89-90) that the Qur’an tells us it is a terrible thing to say that God has a son, and that God will condemn to hell anyone who commits the unforgiveable sin of asserting such. We also know that the Qur’an considers Jesus to be the Word as well as the Messiah. So to comply with what the Qur’an forbids and allows, one only has to substitute “Word” or “Christ/Messiah” for “Son of God”. But what it would take to justify such a change exegetically and theologically would be to prove that in the New Testament “Son of God” does not in fact really mean that Jesus is actually God’s son, but rather that he is the Messiah, or Word, or whatever else is deemed appropriate to the passage. I would invite the reader to search for any tradition of this kind of interpretation in Christian exegesis and theology. Avoiding what the Qur’an forbids and substituting something else that it allows *is the definition of Muslim-compliant translation*.

9 Deviating from evangelical biblical scholarship

In justifying their claim that translators who follow the premise that “Son” or “Son of God” can be changed to something else, Brown et al. state that “in each passage, translators consult and follow current conservative biblical scholarship, such as one finds in academic Bible commentaries and scholarly evangelical Bible dictionaries” (p. 94). Then they cite certain articles on “Son of God” in academic Bible dictionaries and also a statement by New Testament scholar John Nolland for support for their understanding of the term “Son of God”. They also cite footnotes from various study Bibles and reference a number of scholars and theologians to support various aspects of their approach, which as has been pointed out, stands or falls on the assumption that in the New Testament “Son of God” is a reference to who Jesus is in his earthly messianic ministry, a metaphorical way of saying “Christ/ Messiah”. In addition to Nolland, they use quotations from Richard Bauckham, Millard Erickson, Andreas Köstenberger, Don Carson, T. F. Torrance, Athanasius, John Calvin, and Charles Hodge to support various points they try to make. I think it is worthwhile to see what these sources have to say about the eternal nature of Jesus’ sonship. Interestingly, none of them support the principal presupposition that “Son of God” is essentially a synonym for “Messiah” or that it is not a reference to Jesus as the eternal Son of God.

10 Articles in Bible dictionaries

Brown et al. recommend the reader to several articles in academic Bible dictionaries for information on the various meanings of “Son of God” in the New Testament. Let us examine what three of those articles have to say about the relevant issues we are discussing.

In the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, which Brown et al. cite, David. R. Bauer says that “Son of God” is probably the most important Christological title in the New Testament. He indicates that there is not much evidence that people in the first century would have associated the term “Son of God” with the Messiah. The term, he says, was not a typical messianic designation, as evidenced by the near total absence in literature from Palestinian Judaism of any connection between messianic hopes and that title (770-71). Bauer also asserts that both Paul and

John saw Jesus' sonship as a pre-existent sonship (771, 775). Jarl Fossum, in his article in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, which Brown et al. also cite, agrees with Bauer that Paul and John saw Jesus' sonship as pre-existent (136).

Likewise, in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Larry Hurtado agrees with Bauer that there is no clear evidence that the title "Son of God" was used as a messianic title, and it is difficult to say just how widely messianic expectations included the idea of divine sonship (901). He says that the divine sonship is a major component of Paul's Christology, primarily used by Paul to show Jesus' unique status and intimate relationship with God (900). For John, Hurtado notes, it is his preferred way of referring to Jesus as divine, and of heavenly origin, and as Jesus himself used it, was a claim to deity (902).

Hurtado further comments that for Paul, the sonship of Christians is a "derived sonship, given through and after the pattern of Jesus, whereas Jesus is the original prototype, whose sonship is not derived from another" (906). Although he does not say so, presumably this would mean that Jesus' sonship was the prototype of the sonship of the Davidic (messianic) kings, and not vice-versa. That is, his messianic sonship would not be a metaphor derived from the prior sonship of the Davidic kings, but the other way around.

So the claim by Brown et al. that "Son of God" was widely used as a synonym for "Christ/Messiah" is not upheld by Bauer or Hurtado. Also contrary to the claims of Brown et al., Hurtado sees Jesus' divine sonship in terms of his deity. Bauer and Fossum say that both Paul and John understand Jesus' sonship in terms of a pre-existent sonship, and Hurtado agrees with that assessment for John's theology.

11 Writers quoted

11.1 John Nolland

Brown et al. (94-95) cite John Nolland for support of the idea that the "Son of God" is used as a reference to the Messiah, and that "sonship is described as the relationship of God to the Messiah, where the Messiah is the Word of God incarnate as Jesus in his mediatorial role as the Christ". But what Nolland is clearly saying in the larger passage is that it is Jesus' sonship that enables his messianic ministry. Sonship, he

says, when applied to the Messiah, speaks of the “exalted status and relationship with God which would be the basis of his messianic rule” (164). “For Luke,” Nolland comments, “Jesus’ sonship involves more and is more fundamental than anything that can be contained in normal messianic categories” (Nolland 1989: 163-164). Thus Nolland distinguishes the messianic ministry from the divine sonship, and sees the messianic ministry as dependent on the divine sonship. That this is so is confirmed *in the very same passage* from which Brown et al. take their quote from Nolland. On the same page from which they quote Nolland he very clearly states that “Son” and “Messiah” are not the same (Nolland 1989: 163). In his commentary on Matthew’s gospel, Nolland also expressly states that “‘Son’ is not simply another word for ‘Messiah’” (Nolland 2005: 158). So Nolland obviously does not support the assertions of Brown et al.

11.2 Richard Bauckham and Millard Erickson

Brown et al. assert that biblical theologians draw conclusions about the deity of Jesus holistically, through what he says and does and in what is said concerning him, as opposed to the use of particular titles. They reference works by Richard Bauckham and Millard Erickson to support their point. However, we need to understand that the titles are part of the holistic revelation, and we must not separate the titles from the rest of the revelation. Let us see what these two scholars actually believe about the overall issue.

11.2.1 Richard Bauckham

We have already mentioned that Bauckham sees Jesus’ sonship in terms of him participating in the divine identity. Bauckham sees the relation of the Father to the Son as being at the core of who they are and of their relationship to each other. He says:

The terms “Father” and “Son” entail each other. The Father is called Father only because Jesus is his Son, and Jesus is called Son only because he is the Son of his divine Father. Each is essential to the identity of the other. So to say that Jesus and the Father are one is to say that the unique divine identity comprises the relationship in which the Father is who he is only in relation to the Son and vice versa. (Bauckham 2008: 106)

So Bauckham sees “Son” and “Son of God” as far more than a metaphorical synonym for “Christ/Messiah”.

11.2.2 Millard Erickson

Erickson fully upholds the idea of the Trinity existing eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Erickson 1983: 337-38). He also sees Jesus’ sonship as eternal and related to his deity; it is not just a functional category describing a ministry office, but is of the essence of who he is as deity (Erickson 1991: 627). In fact, he says, even the Jewish leaders recognized that Jesus’ use of the term “Son of God” went beyond a functional claim, and actually made him equal with God, which is why they opposed him. Erickson affirms that Jesus’ incarnate ministry has its ontological basis in his own unique, pre-existent sonship (Erickson 1991: 231). He also sees the testimony for this embedded in the New Testament itself, and takes issue with interpreters who do not see ontological elements within the biblical testimony (Erickson 1991: 231, 219). Erickson relates Jesus’ unique sonship to his divinity and pre-existence (Erickson 1991: 35).

So Erickson sees “Son of God” as meaning much more than the functional category of “Christ/Messiah” or ministry in his incarnate state. He sees Jesus’ divine sonship as an eternal, pre-existent sonship that is the essence of who he is as deity. He also affirms that this is the clear testimony of the New Testament itself.

11.3 T. F. Torrance

In the section in which Brown et al. distinguish the tasks of lexicology, exegesis, and theology, they differentiate between the meaning a term may have had in the biblical text, and how it may have been used in the outworking of systematic theology. They cite T. F. Torrance’s definition of systematic theology to describe the difference between the task of systematic theology and the task of translation and exegesis, and use that distinction to draw the conclusion that we should not expect the New Testament’s meaning of “Son of God” to be the same as in the systematic theological conclusions of the ecumenical councils of the Church in the fourth century. On this presumed divergence from the original meaning, in a previous publication Brown says, “It is very revealing that as Christianity developed in the Greek context, it lost its

familiarity with the language and worldview of first-century Jewish Palestine” (Brown 2000: 49). In other words, a disconnect had supposedly arisen between the understanding of the biblical writers and the theology of the fourth century. The problem with this view is that the bishops meeting in the ecumenical councils assumed that the biblical testimony teaches that Jesus actually *is* the Son of God; if it were otherwise, we would have to conclude that their deliberations were misinformed, and that the creeds resulting from them do not represent fundamental biblical teaching.

But the notion of Brown et al. that the bishops of the ecumenical councils understood Jesus’ sonship in a way that was substantively different from that intended by the authors of the New Testament, is not the testimony of history. Two millennia of Christian belief and witness strongly affirm that the testimony of Scripture itself is that Jesus *is* the Son of God from all eternity, and not just metaphorically so by virtue of being the Christ/Messiah, or theologically so by decree of an ecumenical council. Unlike some other terms used in systematic theology, “Son of God,” “Son,” and “Father” are an inherent, core part of the biblical vocabulary and revelation, *not* terms newly coined in the fourth century for the purpose of expressing theological truths hammered out only after centuries of theological reflection and debate.

Brown et al. don’t claim that T. F. Torrance holds to their view of Jesus’ divine sonship. But I think it worthwhile to comment that Torrance holds the historic orthodox view of what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God, and he does not divorce the sonship theology of the fourth century councils from the teaching of the New Testament. So the citation by Brown et al. of Torrance’s distinction between exegetical meaning and systematic theological meaning does not, in fact, mean that every theological term is a conceptual construct distinguished from its use in Scripture. Torrance says, “Our formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity...takes its rise *ab initio*” (i.e., from the beginning) “from God’s indivisible wholeness as one Being, three Persons, and proceeds in accordance with what is revealed of God’s internal homoousial and hypostatic interrelations as Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Torrance 1996: 29). So despite the questionable claim by Brown et al. (p. 101) that it took four hundred years to work out the doctrine of the Trinity, we ought not conclude that our understanding of the meaning of the

term “Son of God” was developed centuries after the writing of the New Testament and in a way that departs from the New Testament meaning. We have good evidence to believe that the understanding of Jesus’ divine sonship that the apostles came to hold even in the days and weeks immediately following the resurrection, based on Jesus’ own teaching and witness, was not significantly different from what the Church understood at the time of the ecumenical councils. For the bishops at the councils, the biblical witness about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit was the raw material from which to elaborate the doctrine of the Trinity, which is what Torrance is also saying. I draw the conclusion that Torrance, like systematic theologians generally, understands the terms Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be meaningful in systematic theology *in the same way* they are used in the Bible. Brown et al. have not proved otherwise.

11.4 Andreas Köstenberger

In attempting to lessen or remove any element of real sonship from the term “Son” in Mt 28:19, Brown et al. state that in Mt 28:19 the term “Son” “contributes little meaning beyond making a reference” (p. 102). To support this claim they cite Andreas Köstenberger’s distinction between information supplied by the context in which a term occurs, and the component of meaning supplied by the word itself. Whether or not Köstenberger would agree with their application of the principle he articulates is questionable. But with regard to the larger issue about whether “Son” is no more than a reference to a role or roles in Jesus’ earthly ministry, we can look at how Köstenberger understands the difference between “Son of God” and “Christ/Messiah”. He apparently would not agree with the claim of Brown et al. that they are essentially the same. In his commentary on the gospel of John, Köstenberger agrees that although the terms are closely related, they are *not* synonymous. He says that “Christ” related mainly to Jewish messianic expectations, and while “Son of God” has messianic connotations, he says that it goes beyond that to accent Jesus’ relationship with God as the Son of the Father. Jesus, Köstenberger says, “is the sent Son” (Köstenberger 2004: 504). In other words, “God sent his Son” means that he was the Son before he was sent. So Köstenberger would not agree

with the basic premise or conclusions of Brown, et al. concerning the meaning of “Son of God”.

The claim that “Son” has little meaning in Mt 28:19 is consistent with other comments Rick Brown has made in which he minimizes the importance of Mt 28:19 as a Trinitarian formula (Brown 2001: 26, 2004: 131).⁷ It is worth noting however, that it was the use of the baptismal formula in Mt. 28:19 that ultimately gave us the creeds, both in the western, Latin tradition, culminating in the Apostles’ Creed, but also in the east, culminating in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, which grew out of other older creedal traditions (J. N. D. Kelly 1972: 89–91, 96, 121). These creeds naturally arose out of the most primitive form of baptismal confessions stemming from Mt 28:19 because candidates for baptism had to be catechized and had to be able to profess the faith into which they were being baptized (J. N. D. Kelly 1972: 206). Some early Christian writers even considered the baptismal formula of Mt. 28:19 to be the “rule of truth” or “rule of faith” that would serve not only as a symbol for entrance into the household of faith, but also as a means of recognition of the true Church and as a safeguard for orthodox belief against heresy (D. Kelly 2008: 427). So if “Son” in Mt 28:19 “contributes little meaning” as Brown et al. claim, one would have to call it unfortunate that the early Church did not know this when they used this passage as a basis for baptismal catechesis, and then depended on it when they developed the creeds and defined the Trinitarian faith, convinced as they were that their creedal formulations were drawn directly from the meaning of the New Testaments texts themselves.

11.5 D. A. Carson

Brown et al. cite D. A. Carson’s description of the fallacy of the “unwarranted linking of sense and reference” in their support of the idea that “Son of God” does not have the same meaning in the New Testament as in later use (whether in the ecumenical creeds or today). As a presumed example of this fallacy they refer to Nathanael’s statement in John 1:49, in which he says to Jesus “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” They state that “the lexical meaning of

⁷ Brown has also argued that “Son” in Mt 28:19 is an abbreviated form of “Son of Man” (Brown 2004: 31-32).

these three terms is far less than the knowledge we have about the person they refer to, i.e., Jesus” (p. 102). They appear to want to limit the meaning of the text to no more than Nathanael presumably would have known it to mean. But it should be apparent that in John’s gospel the evangelist intends the reader to understand more than the original speaker understood, as is evident from his comment in 11:51 that Caiaphas’ statement had a meaning that went far beyond what Caiaphas himself recognized or intended. But what does Carson say about Nathanael’s comment? Would he draw that same conclusion that the meaning (and presumably the translation) should be limited to what Nathanael understood? In his commentary on this passage Carson says that, while the title “Son of God” does have a messianic sense, it also expresses a relationship to God that is *metaphysical and not just messianic* (Carson 1991: 162, emphasis mine). About Nathanael’s statement, Carson says that Nathanael was “saying more than he knew,” which is to say that elements of meaning that Nathanael may not have known at the time are significant as part of the evangelist’s intended meaning for that text. And in his commentary on Matthew, Carson comments that at his baptism Jesus is presented as Messiah, but also as the very Son of God in an ontological sense (Carson 1984: 109, 345). So Carson definitely would not agree with their arguments about the meaning of “Son of God,” nor how they apply his fallacy of the unwarranted linking of sense and reference to John 1:49, nor would he agree that Nathanael’s comment should be translated in such a way as to limit it to the meaning “Christ/Messiah” and to exclude the idea of sonship.

11.6 John Calvin

Brown et al. claim that “Son of God” is used in the New Testament only in a referential sense when it refers to what Jesus was before the incarnation, namely the eternal Word (but not eternal Son). In attempting to establish credibility for this idea they cite John Calvin’s comment on 1 Peter 1:22 in which Calvin refers to “the Spirit of Christ” speaking through the prophets, even though Christ was not yet manifested and therefore not yet the Christ (p. 103). While this demonstrates that Calvin can recognize the use of a referential expression in Scripture, it *does not* establish that Calvin would have understood “Son of God” that way, nor that he thought that Jesus was not actually the

Son from all eternity. In a section of *The Institutes* in which Calvin comments on the error taught by Servetus and others, he expressly says that Jesus did not become Son of God at the incarnation, but is so by virtue of his deity and eternal essence (Institutes II, xiv, 6). Citing Augustine, Calvin also says that Christ is called “God” with respect to himself, but “Son” with respect to the Father; the Father is called “God” with respect to himself, but “Father” with respect to the Son (Institutes I, xiii, 19). Clearly he saw the sonship as an eternal sonship, and at the heart of who Jesus is as deity.

11.7 Charles Hodge

Brown et al. likewise attempt to show (p. 104) that Charles Hodge uses “Son” referentially in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:27, where he says “the words ‘the Son himself’ here designate, as in so many other places, not the second person of the Trinity as such, but that person as clothed in our nature...not the Logos as such, but the Logos as incarnate.” But what did Charles Hodge believe about Jesus’ sonship? On the very same page in Hodge’s commentary on 1 Corinthians from which they cite, Hodge says explicitly “He was from eternity the Son of God” (Hodge 1878: 334). In his commentary on Romans 1:3 Hodge says that in this verse,

‘Son’ designates the divine nature of Christ...Christ is called the Son of God because he is consubstantial with the Father, and therefore equal to him in power and glory. The term expresses the relation of the second to the first person in the Trinity, as it exists from eternity. It is therefore, as applied to Christ, not a term of office, nor expressive of any relation assumed in time. He was and is the Eternal Son. (Hodge 1886: 18)

So we can see that Hodge repudiates the idea that “Son” refers *only* to an office or to Jesus in his incarnate state, but affirms Jesus’ eternal sonship, and sees the relation of his sonship to his deity. It is also interesting that with Hodge, as was the case with Nolland, the proof of what he really understands about Jesus’ eternal sonship can be found on the very page where Brown et al. cite him to support their own views.

11.8 Athanasius

Brown et al. even cite Athanasius for support of their distinction “between ‘Son’ as the eternal Word and ‘Son’ as the incarnate savior (the

Messiah)” (p. 104). They also note that in one particular work he uses the term “Word” five times as often as “Son”. However, this does not mean that he did not believe that “Son” was significant, or, more importantly, that he saw Jesus’ sonship as referring only to his role as Messiah. As they themselves point out, Athanasius was “the chief advocate for the Nicene position”. That in itself tells us that Athanasius affirmed the statement of the council of Nicaea that Jesus was Son of God before all worlds, although as we mentioned earlier this doctrine had been part of previous creeds for some time. Athanasius said of the Father-Son relationship that it is inherent in who God and Jesus are eternally. “It belongs to the Godhead alone that the Father is properly Father, and the Son properly Son, and in them, and them only, does it hold that the Father is ever Father and the Son ever Son.” (*Against the Arians: Discourse Four, Ch. VI, section 21*). So Athanasius obviously does not support the thesis of Brown et al. that “Son” is a designation proper only to Jesus’ earthly ministry.

12 Comments on the use by Brown et al. of the NIV and ESV Study Bibles

Brown et al. cite the notes from several study Bibles to illustrate or support their view about the meaning of “Son of God”. Let us examine two of those study Bibles to see if they really support the notion that “Son of God” is more or less equivalent to “Christ” or that Jesus is eternally the Word, but only the Son in the messianic sense.

12.1 The NIV Study Bible

The NIV Study Bible is published by Biblica, which is an organization formed by the 2009 merger of the International Bible Society and Send The Light. The Biblica statement of faith says, “We believe in one God, eternally existing in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”. The original co-editors of the New Testament study notes for the NIV Study Bible are Walter Wessel and Donald Burdick. Burdick taught at Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary in Denver, now known as Denver Seminary. The doctrinal statement of Denver Seminary says, “We believe that Jesus Christ is God’s eternal Son”. The seminary also adopts the doctrinal statement of the National Association of Evangelicals, which says “We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in

three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. I find it hard to believe that Burdick would support a position as divergent from his own doctrinal commitment such as Brown et al. advance.

The other co-editor, Walter Wessel, is the author of the commentary on the Gospel of Mark in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* series. In that volume he clearly associates the term “Son of God” with Jesus’ deity (Wessel 1984: 637). In his comments on the transfiguration he cites Calvin, who asserts: “We truly and strictly infer from these words that by nature he was God’s *only Son*”(Wessel 1984: 700, emphasis Calvin’s). Concerning the parable of the tenants, Wessel quotes Jeremias who says, “No evidence is forthcoming for the application of ‘Son of God’ to the Messiah in pre-Christian Palestinian Judaism” (Wessel 1984: 732). While it could be argued that “Son of God” actually was used in this way in the first century by at least some Jews, what we see here is that Wessel at least does not believe that.

Brown et al. also refer to the NIV study footnote on Luke 1:32 (p. 98), which was written by Lewis Foster. Foster says that the angel’s description of Jesus as “the Son of the Most High” can have two senses, one of which is “the Messiah born in time”, and the other of which is “the divine Son of God.” Foster therefore sees a difference between “Messiah” and “divine Son”. That Foster would see the divine sonship as eternal can be concluded from reading the statement of faith of Cincinnati Bible Seminary, of which Foster was dean. That statement says “There is only one true God, revealed to us in the Old and New Testaments as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Brown et al. also reference the footnote on John 3:16, commenting that most of the footnotes to “Son of God” in the NIV Study Bible refer the reader to this passage (p. 98). The footnote for this passage explains “his one and only Son” as referring to “the messianic Son of David – who is also God’s Son,” a statement that certainly seems to differentiate between his being Son and his being the Messiah. The last sentence in that footnote says “Jesus is God’s Son in a unique sense” and then refers to the footnote on 20:31, where we find John’s purpose statement for writing his gospel, which is that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. The comment about Jesus being “God’s Son in a unique sense” was in the original edition of the NIV Study Bible, of which the footnotes for this passage were written by

Leon Morris. Let's examine what Morris understood about the term "Son of God".

In his commentary on John's gospel, Morris comments on John's purpose statement for the gospel following the account of Thomas' confession. Morris says that John is showing two important things about the content that faith must have: one is that Jesus is the Messiah, and the other is that he is the Son of God (Morris 1995: 756). He thus clearly distinguishes the two. He also says that the Jews of that day did not take "Son of God" and "Messiah" as being the same thing, because the Messiah was not expected to stand in the close relationship to God of which John is speaking. John, Morris says, has a much fuller and richer conception of the Messiah than his Jewish contemporaries did. "Son of God" and "Christ" *when used together*, Morris tells us, indicate the highest view of the person of Jesus, one that must be seen in light of what Thomas has just said; that is, John saw in Jesus the very incarnation of God (Morris 1995: 756). Commenting on Romans 8:3 where it says God sent *his own* son, Morris says the word "'own' is important, pointing as it does to the close unique relationship between the Father and the Son." He goes on to say that God was not sending some remote messenger, but his own Son. Whereas believers are sons by grace, Morris notes, Jesus is a Son by nature (Morris 1988: 302). On the use of "Son" in Hebrews 1, Morris says that "It is the Son's essential nature that is stressed," and "the very Son of God came" (Morris 1981: 13). Obviously this is no "referential" use by Morris, referring to Jesus' pre-existent state using a term that only properly applies to his incarnate state, such as Brown et al. propose for New Testament interpretation.

So even though Brown et al. point to the NIV Study Bible notes to support their assertions about the meaning of "Son of God" in the first century, we can see that the publisher, editors, and authors of the NIV Study Bible notes would not agree with the notion that "Son of God" primarily refers to Jesus' messianic ministry, nor with the idea that he was not eternally the Son.

12.2 The ESV Study Bible

Brown et al. also cite footnotes from the ESV Study Bible for Mt 3:17, Luke 1:32, John 1:14 and 49, and Romans 1:4. We can profitably look

at what those notes say, and also examine what the editors of that edition and the authors of those notes actually believe.

The general editor of the ESV Study Bible is Wayne Grudem, who teaches at Phoenix Theological Seminary. That seminary has a statement of faith that says “We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” The Old Testament editor, C. John Collins, teaches at Covenant Seminary, which takes as its statement of faith the Westminster Confession and also the Statement of Faith of the National Association of Evangelicals, which says: “We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The New Testament editor is Thomas Schreiner, who teaches at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. That institution holds to the Baptist Faith and Message, which says: “The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” and “Christ is the eternal Son of God.”

The study note for Mt 3:17 was written by Michael Wilkins of Talbot School of Theology. It says that “the voice from heaven confirms the eternally existing relationship of divine love that the son and the Father share as well as Jesus’ identity as the messianic Son of God.” So it seems that Wilkins distinguishes between the “eternally existing” Father-Son relationship and the messianic sonship. This is what we would expect too, since Talbot’s statement of faith, to which Wilkins must subscribe, says “There is one God, eternally existing and manifesting Himself to us in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

The ESV’s study notes for Luke were written by Grudem and Schreiner. The note for Luke 1:32, says “Jesus is the ‘Son of the Most High’. He is the promised successor to the throne of David (see 2 Sam 7:12-13,16).” This very brief note could be taken to affirm the idea that “Son” equals “Messiah”, but that is not in fact what Schreiner or Grudem believe. For one thing, this would violate the doctrinal statements of the institutions where they teach (shown above). Grudem says in his textbook on systematic theology that in the New Testament the “title ‘Son of God’ when applied to Christ strongly affirms his deity as the eternal Son in the Trinity, one equal to God the Father in all his attributes” (Grudem 1994: 547). And in his commentary on Romans, Schreiner, who wrote the ESV study notes for Romans, affirms Jesus’ eternal pre-existence *as Son* (Schreiner 1998: 38, 402), which is consis-

tent with what the study note on Rom 1:4, cited by Brown et al., further says: “As the eternal Son of God, he has reigned forever with the Father and the Holy Spirit.” So despite the association of “Son of the Most High” with the messianic office in the study note for Luke 1:32, we know with certainty from other material they have written that the authors of the note clearly affirm Jesus’ eternal sonship – as we should expect from reading the doctrinal statements of the seminaries where they teach, and to which they must subscribe.

The ESV’s study notes for John were written by Andreas Köstenberger of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The note at 1:14 says that Jesus is the Son of God in the “sense of being a Son who is exactly like his Father in all attributes, and in the sense of having a Father-Son relationship with God the Father”. At 1:49 the study note says “Son of God designates Jesus as the Messiah predicted in the OT (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7; see notes on John 1:14).” If it seems that Köstenberger believes that “Son of God” *only* designates Jesus as the Messiah, we should recognize that he teaches at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, which holds to the Baptist Faith and Message, and to which all faculty must subscribe. As noted above, that statement affirms that “The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being,” and that “Christ is the eternal Son of God.” As we commented in a previous section, in his commentary on John’s gospel, Köstenberger distinguishes between Jesus’ messianic ministry and his relationship with God as Son, and affirms that “he is the sent Son” (Köstenberger 2004: 504).

A final comment could be made about what Brown et al. say about the ESV Study Bible notes. They say that “The ESV Study Bible is careful to minimize the challenge to popular interpretations, while still presenting views that reflect scholarly exegesis and theology” (p. 96). But we can legitimately ask, Is it fair to characterize the notes presented by the ESV scholars as catering to “popular interpretations”? In my view, such a statement imputes to those scholars a lack of theological and pastoral integrity, implying that they presumably know something about the important title “Son of God” – representing a core doctrine of the Christian faith – but that they are not willing to divulge that openly for fear of popular reaction or possibly even loss of sales. In my own

seminary study and my experience in over ten years of exegetical research I have never seen any evidence that such a thing is being done. On the contrary, as we have seen from the doctrinal statements printed above, and from the statements in the various commentaries that we have cited, the scholars who contributed to the ESV Study Bible very much believe that Jesus is eternally the Son of God and that his sonship consists of *more* than just his messianic ministry. In fact, it is *normal* for scholars to see his divine sonship as eternal, to recognize a very strong connection between that eternal sonship and his deity, and to see the eternal sonship as the *basis* for the messianic ministry.⁸ So the critical comment by Brown et al. about minimizing “the challenge to popular interpretations” cannot be sustained, and must be viewed in light of their overall attempt to present their view as the scholarly consensus. In my years of biblical study I have never encountered anyone holding their view other than Bible translators working among Muslim people groups. As far as I can tell, their view is unheard of in conservative scholarly circles, so it cannot be considered to be the scholarly consensus.

13 Conclusion

For New Testament translations done for Muslim language groups Brown et al. have attempted to justify the substitution of the phrase “Son of God” with something else by claiming the following:

1. That it is Muslims’ languages and not their theology that prevent them from understanding the term “Son of God” properly. Consequently, they hold that removing “Son of God,” which the Qur’an anathematizes, and replacing it with “Word” or “Christ/Messiah,” which the Qur’an acknowledges, is not an attempt to comply with Islamic sentiments and beliefs, but a decision based on linguistics and a scholarly understanding of lexicology.

⁸ In my forthcoming paper I document over seventy scholars who comment on the eternity of the divine sonship, twenty-seven who connect Jesus’ sonship with his deity, fifteen who see the messianic ministry as predicated upon the eternal divine sonship, plus a few more who see sonship as the pre-eminent category for understanding Jesus.

2. That the term “Son of God” was widely used metaphorically by first century Jews to refer to the Messiah, and therefore must be considered to be the principle meaning in the New Testament.
3. That in his eternal pre-existence Jesus is the Word, and when “Son” or “Son of God” appear to be used to describe his pre-existent state, it is a referential use only, that is, referring properly to the eternal Word who *became* the Son of God in his incarnation. The unstated but obvious presupposition here is that Jesus is not eternally the Son of God.
4. That “Son of God” in the New Testament had a lexical meaning that was quite different from the theological meaning it carried in fourth-century deliberations, and that those deliberations were *not* based on an understanding of the phrase that was imbedded into the very fabric of the New Testament books.
5. That the evidence for Jesus’ deity in the New Testament is not tied to the use of the term “Son of God”.
6. That their views are the common and accepted view of conservative scholars.

Their assertions however, cannot be substantiated in view of the facts, historically, exegetically, or theologically. Specifically:

1. It is obvious that it is religion and not language that drives Muslim revulsion to the term “Son of God”, because the same phenomenon is evident among Muslims from many unrelated language families, and because some people from those language families who are Christians understand the term quite well. Unless it can be legitimately justified on exegetical, historical, and theological grounds, the attempt to substitute “Word” or “Christ/Messiah” for “Son of God” is exactly what is meant by Muslim-compliant translation, meaning that the primary driving force is Islamic belief and the Qur’an, not Christian belief and the Bible.
2. It is *not* true that scholars have generally concluded that first century Jews widely understood the term “Son of God” to be essentially a metaphorical reference to the Messiah. But even if that were the case, that does not set the meaning for its use in the New Testament. The coming of Jesus brought much new revela-

tion, which the inspired authors correctly understood and communicated. It is the meaning intended by the authors of the New Testament documents that constitutes the meaning of “Son” and “Son of God”.

3. The idea that “Son of God” refers to Jesus’ pre-existent state only in a referential sense is virtually unknown in New Testament scholarship, other than among a very few Bible translators working in the Muslim world. That Jesus is the Son of God from all eternity is a non-negotiable tenet of orthodoxy in the entire church, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox.
4. The fourth-century councils articulated the doctrine of the eternal sonship of Jesus based squarely on how the writers of the New Testament used the term, and used it in a manner that was consistent not only with the understanding of the New Testament authors, but also of the entire church from the apostolic era on. Though there is a deeper understanding of and appreciation for Jesus’ eternal divine sonship in the fourth century, there is *no* divergence or departure in meaning for the concept or term “Son of God” between the apostolic era and the fourth century.
5. Jesus’ eternal sonship and his deity are inextricably tied together, as testified to by the broad consensus of conservative scholars.
6. The views of Brown et al. are not supported by contemporary conservative scholars. In fact, they are almost unknown outside a relatively small group of Bible translators working in the Muslim world. Statements contrary to their views pervade exegetical and theological literature, both currently as well as throughout the history of Christian thought for many centuries.

At this point a quote from A. W. Tozer would be appropriate. In his book *The Knowledge of The Holy*, in the chapter on Faithfulness, Tozer says:

We hold a correct view of truth only by daring to believe everything God has said about Himself. It is a grave responsibility that a man takes upon himself when he seeks to edit out of God’s self-revelation such features as he in his ignorance deems objectionable. Blindness in part must surely fall upon any of us presumptuous enough to attempt such a thing. And it is wholly uncalled for. We need not fear to let the truth stand as it is written.

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