

TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE TO MUSLIMS IN SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION AND FORMAT

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Introduction

There are several questions that we need to answer before one can say what is acceptable to the people of other faiths in Scripture translation: What kind of person is our "target audience"? Is he/she a Sunni or a Shi'i, a Durzi or an 'Alawi, an educated or uneducated, urban or rural, Arab or non-Arab, Middle Eastern or South East Asian, North African or sub-Saharan Muslim? And when we speak of scriptures, do we mean the whole Bible, including the Deuterocanonicals, the NT or portions of it? All of these questions make us think for whom, what and how should we translate.

I will try to restrict myself to the educated, urban, Arab Muslim living in the Middle East. From there one could adapt and extend to those of the same faith living in other parts of the world. The people living in this region have been in touch with Christianity throughout their existence and know something about the Christian faith from their scripture, their education in Christian institutions and through their relation with their Christian neighbours. I shall take the NT as our base text to be translated.

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The question of format, though important, is like the packaging of a present. It could make the presentation attractive but it is secondary for our purpose because in translation we need to speak about the content more than the format. Nevertheless, I might say that for our target audience all scriptures should be well presented, well bound, with no pictures of human form, and if any art work is to be included, it should be more of geometric patterns and calligraphic in nature. All we need to do is to look at some of their own scripture publications. But even that could be dangerous and could produce a negative reaction - accusations of subterfuge and imitation.

We know that there are many things found in the New Testament that are not acceptable to the Muslims. Starting with the most offensive doctrines, one could mention the concept of "the Trinity", "the divinity of Jesus", "his being the son of God", his death on the cross", his resurrection, "atonement", and "his claims for being the saviour of the world".

But, who says that these concepts are unacceptable to them only? Are there not Christians who find such concepts equally repugnant? Interestingly enough, certain concepts which are totally unacceptable to liberal theologians, such as the "the virgin birth", are well accepted by Muslims of all shades and confessions. In the Qur'an we read:

"And she who was chaste, therefore, We breathed into her of Our Spirit, and made her and her son a sign for all people" [XXI 91, cf. III 42-42, 45].

The question, therefore, is how should translators render the passages where these offensive concepts are affirmed in an undisguised manner? And how should they be packaged for them?

There is a radical way of handling the problem. The way most 19th century liberal theologians and exegetes have handled was to "demythologize" them, or to expunge them from the text of the NT, by labelling them as later interpolations, post-Easter interpretations, because they are offensive to the target audience for one reason or another.¹ But, do these suggestions present a legitimate solution for

1. See A.N. Wilder, "Mythology and the NT", *JBL*, I.XX (1950) 99ff; E. Dinkler, "Myth in the NT", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, III (New York 1962) 487ff. For example, Norman A. Beck, in his book published in 1985, suggests that the most offensive passages to the Jews found in the NT should be expunged, *Mature Christianity: The recognition and Repudiation of the Anti-Jewish Polemic of the New Testament* (Selinsgrove 1985) 283ff. One could argue similarly that such passages that are most offensive to the Muslims should be expunged, a view to which I could not subscribe in good conscience.

the translator of the NT? Should not one keep the exegetical work he is undertaking, separate from the theological endeavour he is obliged to carry?

In this paper I propose that we look at the fundamental concepts about Jesus Christ, which could be summed up in one word - "Christology". Interest in Christology has increased among theologians and biblical scholars since the end of the Second World War. When we have found the content of Christology in its historical, theological and linguistic aspects, then we shall try to see how it can be presented to the Muslims through our translational endeavours. But we may have to do three things before that: 1) find out what is the Islamic view of Jesus, especially in the Qur'an; 2) study Christology in the theological thinking of the early Church; 3) find out what is the content of Christology in the NT and in the self-understanding of Jesus.²

I - The Qur'anic View of Jesus

Before getting into the discussion of Jesus in the early Church and the NT, we must first find out what does the Qur'an say about Jesus. Normally, one could write a whole volume on this subject alone. I suggest that we look very briefly at what the Qur'an has on Jesus and draw the necessary conclusions. In the Qur'an we read:

"And when Allah said: O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to men, 'Take me and my mother as two gods beside Allah?' He said, 'May You be Glorified: it is not for me to say that which I did not have the right to. If I had said it, then You would know it. You know what is in my mind but I do not know what is in Your Mind'" [V 116].

"Say, 'He is Allah, the One God, the One who is the everlasting Refuge. Who does not beget nor is begotten and there is none equal to Him'" [CXII 1-4].

"And for their saying that we killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's

2. I would like to refer the readers to some of the major books written on Christology: P. Pokorny, *The Genesis of Christology*, (trans. M. Lefebure) (Edinburgh 1987); G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (trans. I. & F. McLuskey with J.M. Robinson) (New York 1960); O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, (trans. S.H. Guthrie & C.A.M. Hall) (Philadelphia 1959); D.M. Baillie, *God was in Christ* (London 1954/5) 30-58; M. Goguel, *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity*, (trans. O. Wyon & C.L. Mitton) 2 vols (New York 1960); and R. Bultmann, *Theology of the NT*, II (trans. K. Grobel) (London 1955) 155-202.

messenger, but they did not kill him nor did they crucify him, yet it appeared so to them and behold, those who disagree concerning it, are in doubt of it, they have no knowledge of it except to pursue doubts, for certainly they did not kill him. But Allah took him up unto Himself, for Allah is mighty and wise" [IV 157-158, for Messenger see also IV 171 and II 253].

"When Allah said, 'O 'Isa (Jesus), son of Mary, remember my favour to you and to your mother. How I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit... and how I taught you the Book and the Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel... and you healed him who was born blind and the leper with my permission, and how you raised the dead with my permission...'" [V 110].³

In the most concise form possible, it is interesting to note that the Qur'an regards Jesus, first and foremost as being a great prophet, a messenger, the son of Mary, who had a miraculous birth. He was given the Gospel (*al-Injil*, an Arabised form of the Greek *Euangelion*). It is important to note that the Gospel is in singular and not plural. He performed signs and miracles. He is called the Messiah. He and his mother were endowed with the Holy Spirit. He was not killed or crucified, but was taken to heaven. Jesus should not be associated with God nor should he be called the "son of God", because God does not have a wife, does not beget and is not begotten. According to the precepts of Islam, the greatest sin is "shirk" which means to associate others with God - i.e., "polytheism", "idolatry".

II - The Early Christian Views of Jesus

Before finding out what is the content of Christology in the NT and in the theological thinking of the earliest Christians - viz., of the apostolic period - it would be good to touch very briefly on the question of Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries.

The earliest Christians had a very exalted view of Jesus. He was called "Christ" (the anointed one, "Messiah") and "Lord" (*Kyrios*). In fact, the basic confession which seems to have been asked of the first converts was to confess that "Jesus is Lord". When the first Christians living in the Greco-Roman environment used the title *Kyrios* (a title which in Hellenistic culture designated a divine mediator) the

3. See also, M. Jinbachian, "Jesus in the Qur'an", *Bulletin*, United Bible Societies (Struttgart 1979) No. 116/117, 38-43.

question arises, what semantic content did they give to it? Was it the same as the Greek or a different one?

Interestingly enough, the Qumran texts have helped us to understand the use of this title in Palestine of the period when Jesus lived. We see that Jews at that time referred to God in an absolute manner as '(the) Lord' both in Hebrew and Aramaic. In Job 34, 12 in Aramaic *hādā* 'Lord' translated in Hebrew *shēdday* 'the Almighty' and is in parallel with '*alāhe*' God.⁴ Similarly, the Hebrew form '*adōn*' is found in Ps 151,4.⁵ Hence, the question: could the absolute use of *Kyrios* for Christ in the NT be an extension of the use of this title in Jewish circles by the Palestinian Jewish converts? It looks as though the confessional title used by the early Christians *medē* 'yēshū'ē Jesus is Lord, is as much Palestinian in origin as Hellenistic.

Sometimes Jesus was called the "Wisdom of God" (*sophia*) and identified with the "Word" (*logos*), "and the Word was God" (Jn 1,1). Again, we need to ask if the semantic content of "logos" is the same in the Hellenistic conceptual scheme and in the NT. Undoubtedly there are components of meaning which overlap, but were they equivalents?

During the second and the third centuries, divergent views of the relation of Jesus to God were put forward. Gnostics believed that Jesus Christ was a phantom, not real flesh and blood. The Marcionites advanced a dualism where Jesus became another deity. Against these Irenæus promulgated a strong monotheism which later developed into what became known as Monarchism.⁶

Tertullian went back to the idea of the Word Incarnate; in Jesus the divine and the human did not fuse, Jesus was both God and man. He has one "Persona" but two "substances" or natures. But, was the Son *homoousion*, that is, of the same substance with the Father, or *homoiousion* of similar substance with Him, whence the Nicene Creed of 325 CE that promulgates "homoousion". I could go on to speak about Monotheletism, Synergism and the "hypostasis" or "persona" also known as *Prosōpon*, the credal declaration of the council of Chalcedon of 451 CE and the ensuing Monophysite controversy, but these would only confuse you as it confused the ancient world.

4. 11 Q_tJob 24,6-7.

5. 11 Q_Psa 28,7.

6. K.S. Latourette. *A History of Christianity* (London 1964) 140-188.

As a result of the need to combat heresies, such as, Gnosticism, Docetism, Monophysitism (all of which try to explain away the full humanity of Jesus), the Church promulgated a number of confessions of faith or creeds and in doing so took a distance from the way the NT spoke about the person and the work of Jesus. In one word, in combating heresies “the Church fathers subordinated the interpretation of the person and work of Christ to the question of ‘natures’.”⁷ This discussion of “natures” is a conceptual scheme coming from Hellenistic thought, it is basically a Greek way of thinking, in contrast to the OT and Jewish thought. In other words, in the confessions of the first five centuries, the Semitic thought patterns found in the NT and the teachings of Jesus, were garbed with Hellenistic apparel.

Should we, then, dismiss the whole endeavour of the Church of the first five centuries as being an exercise in futility? Certainly not! The history of the Church shows us how the Church faced certain questions and how under those circumstances it attempted to confront and resolve them. Could we do the same while facing today other religions in their cultural, political and economic backgrounds? Could we attire christology in an Islamic attire that could be acceptable to our neighbours belonging to the Muslim faith?

III - Jesus in the New Testament

In the NT itself we see a double line of thought developing about the identity and life of Jesus: one, where Jesus is regarded as human and earthly, whose parents and siblings were well known;⁸ and a second, where he is regarded as being the primordial divinity, a divine being, in fact, God himself.

We note that even in the New Testament the question of the identity of Jesus, “Who was Jesus?” arose during his own lifetime. The public had a certain conception

7. Cullmann, *Christology*, 4.

8. We know the names of his parents, Joseph and Mary, and the names of his brothers, James, Josés, Judas and Simon (Mk 6,3). His brothers and his mother were at first unbelievers (Mk 3,21,31; Jn 7,5). Tradition also mentions his sisters (Mk 6,3; Mt 13, 56). I am aware that there is currently a strong debate on the real meaning of the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus. I refer the reader to a short bibliography: Jesef Blinzler, *Die Brüder und Schwestern Jesu* (SBS 21; Stuttgart 1967); John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (Doubleday; Garden City NY 1975); Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Doubleday; Garden City NY, 1977); Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried et alii, *Mary in the New Testament* (Fortress; Philadelphia/Paulist Press; New York 1978); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (Doubleday; Garden City NY 1991) 319-332.

of Jesus (whether warranted or not we are in no position to discuss). They regarded him as being a prophet, a miracle worker and a teacher (Rabbi). Jesus himself is aware of the problem and he asked his disciples on one occasion:

“Who do men say that I am? And they told him, ‘John the Baptist: and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets.’ And he asked them: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ’” (Mk 8,27-29).

It is interesting to note that some manuscripts add at the end of verse 29, “the son of God” or “the son of the living God”. I have always asked myself why would they do such a thing? One could ask the same question about the introductory sentences of the Gospel according to St Mark, where the words ‘the son of God’ are added in a number of manuscripts at the end of 1,1, while a great number of manuscripts do not seem to have it. Are these words original or subsequent interpolation? There is a great amount of literature on the subject and it would be futile to try and summarize all of the arguments for or against the inclusion of these words in such a short paper. The addition or the omission are symptoms of an underlying problem, the understanding of which could be the answer to our question. Some scholars think they are post-Easter interpolations while others regard them as being original. If they are later interpolations the debate could take a different denotation.⁹ Suffice us to point that the title “Son of God” is used in extra biblical texts among Qumran manuscripts.

“[X] shall be great upon the earth, [O King! All (people) shall] make [peace], and all shall serve [him. He shall be called the son of] the [G]reat [God], and by his name shall he be named. He shall be hailed (as) the Son of God, and they shall call him Son of the Most High...”¹⁰

How close the above lines are to the words of Archangel Gabriel addressed to Mary the mother of Jesus?

“He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High [God]. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end... for this reason the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1,32-35).

9. See below point 1 “Jesus of History and Christ of Faith” and (iii) “The Son of God”.

10. J.A. Fitzmyer, “New Documents: Qumran and Gnostic Writings”, in *The Bible in The Twenty-First Century*, (Ed. H.C. Kee) (ABS; New York 1993) 18-19.

We need to pose a further question: what was Jesus' own understanding of his mission? What did he call himself? Did Jesus apply the various Christological designations to himself? How did the NT authors understand such designations? Are there semantically important discrepancies in the content of such titles in their use by the NT writers and Jesus' use of them?

1 - Jesus of History and Christ of Faith

When we look at the NT it becomes evident that we do not have therein a history or biography of Jesus. There is an imbalance in the Jesus story found in the Synoptic Gospels. The passion narratives occupy a disproportionate part in them. The death and resurrection become the focal point of the whole narrative and, as Bornkamm says, everything is recounted from that point back.¹¹ The Gospels do not tell us the past history but of the present, of who Jesus is, and not what he actually was. The authors of the Gospels took the words of Jesus very seriously and adhered to them, but at the same time they gave to them an interpretative twist, indicating the great freedom they took in reinterpreting these words. The words of Jesus spoken before his death took a different post-Easter meaning. Probably the words spoken by the risen Christ, coloured the words of the historical Jesus. We cannot deny the fact that the faith of the Church has shaped the picture of Jesus. But at the same time, we cannot dismiss the Gospel story as being unauthentic: they take us back to the Jesus of history. There is a question of function and meaning. How does a group understand and react to certain words or events, is conditioned by the society that has written them and by the cultural background of the people who read them.¹²

The Gospels were written by believers in Christ, for the use of the believing Church and not for the use of non-believing scholars and, for that matter, believers of other faiths. If my presupposition is correct, it would have grave consequences as to what and how we should translate the Scriptures for the people of other religions living around us.

11. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 16sq.

12. Pokorny, *Genesis of Christology*, 7-13.

2 - Christological Titles

We now need to go back and see how Jesus is presented in the NT and what his self-understanding of his person and mission was. R. Bultmann, in his famous work, *Theology of the NT*, asserts that Jesus did not consider himself as having a special divine commission, as the Eschatological Messiah, who would bring the awaited salvation, and that Jesus only proclaimed the Fatherhood and the Kingdom of God. Bultmann's assertion is debatable.¹³

Here are some of the titles used in the NT to designate Jesus: Christ (the Anointed One or the Messiah), Judge, King, Logos, Lord, Mediator, Prophet, High Priest, Rabbi (Teacher), Suffering Servant of God, Lamb of God, Holy One of God, Saviour, Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God and God. These titles represent not only designations but also functions and some of them could be clustered together. If I were to take each and discuss them at length, I could write a whole volume. I would like to refer you to the great work of O. Cullmann on Christology mentioned above. I will only take up some of the outstanding designations here below. Before doing that, I would like to point out that all these titles are used metaphorically.

(i) Prophet

Prophet is the title given to Jesus by his contemporaries. But the concept of "prophet" can only be applied to Jesus' pre-Easter earthly activities and teachings. To the earliest believers, the risen Christ is no more a prophet.

Furthermore, in the NT Jesus is not presented as being an ordinary prophet, he is "the Eschatological Prophet" who was expected to come at the end of time, a sentiment that was quite prevalent among the Jews at the time of Jesus. This prophet was called to perform a very special duty;¹⁴ Elijah and Enoch (even Jeremiah) were supposed to return before him to pave the way for his coming.¹⁵

13. Bultmann, *Theology*, I, 26-32; Pokorny, *Genesis of Christology*, 38-54; Cullmann, *Christology*, 8-10. For a discussion on the self-consciousness or self understanding of Jesus see J.H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism* (New York 1988) 130-131; Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 169-178; Pokorny, *Ibid.*, 38-54; Goguel, *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity*, II, 572-578.

14. Mk 6,14; 13,22; Mt 21,10-12; Lk 7, 16-17.39-40; Mt 21,46; Act 3, 22-23; 7,37-39.

15. Mal 4,5; Enoch 90,31; cf. Mk 9,4-5. 11-13; Lk 1,76; Rev 11,4-5.

In the NT, however, the conception of Jesus as “prophet” is not separate from that of “Teacher” and “Messiah” [John 4,19.25; 6,14]. Suffering is also part of the destiny of a prophet [Mt 23,37], and as such, Jesus was at the same time the “Suffering Servant”. Cullmann indicates that the concept of the “Suffering Servant of God” had its origins with Jesus, but Jesus did not use the title to designate himself. It was Paul who gave a central position to the concept of the atoning death of Jesus. In certain references the Messiah is identified with the “Son of Man”.¹⁶

(ii) *The Son of Man*

“Son of Man”¹⁷ is the designation that Jesus mainly applied to himself. But is the Greek translation a correct rendering of the Semitic title? My feeling is that it is too literal, and thus, has distorted the semantic content of the designation. One could translate the Aramaic title simply by “Man” [see Ps 8,4].

The first time we meet the use of the title “Son of Man” is in Dan 7,13; it also appears in the “Similitudes of Enoch” and “IV Ezra 13”. What is the origin and nature of this figure? In ancient Judaism there existed a concept of the “Eschatological Redeemer”, and apocalyptic “Son of Man” who is to appear at the end of time as Judge, to establish “the Nation of the Saints”. He is no other than the “Saint of the Most High” [Dan 7,15]. “The transference to Jesus of judgement, which the New Testament also often ascribes to God himself, is directly connected with the concept of the “Son of Man”;¹⁸ he is at the same time the ideal “Heavenly Man” who is identified with the first man, Adam.

In the Similitude, it is generally accepted that the “Son of Man” is identified with Enoch himself [71,14], and this “Son of Man” is the same as the Messiah [48,10; 52,4]. The “Son of Man” is preexistent, “whom the Most High has kept for many ages” [4 Ezra 13,26]. In what sense then does Jesus designate himself as the “Son of Man”? In two passages Jesus uses the title in the ordinary sense of “Man”: in the Gospel of Mark 2,27 we find the discussion about Sabbath being for the Son of Man, and in the Gospel of Matthew 12, 31-32 Jesus speaks about sin against the

16. Cullman, *Christology*, 60-69, 79; Pokorny, *Genesis of Christology*, 42.85.

17. *huioi tou anthropou* in Aramaic: *Bar-nasha* and in Hebrew *ben-'adam*.

18. Cullmann, *Christology*, 157: 2 Cor 5,10; 1 Cor 4,5; 2 Tim 4,1.8; 1 Pt 4,5.

Son of Man, contrasted to sin against the Holy Spirit. In these two passages Son of Man does not necessarily refer to Jesus, it could equally refer to men in general.¹⁹

(iii) *The Son of God*

The title "Son of God" was in common use at the time of Jesus by both Jews and non-Jews. Was the use of the title by Jesus and by those around him, closer to the Hellenistic or Jewish concept of Son of God? In the time of Jesus and during the writing of the NT, the Roman emperors were given the title "divi filius". But the use of the title in non-Jewish usage was not limited to emperors. Anyone who had some kind of divine power, miracle working ability, was called "son of god". The use of the title did not denote a uniqueness in pagan usage.

In the OT, however, we find the title used in three connotations:

a) The whole people of Israel is called "Son of God"; In Ex 4, 22-23 God commands Moses to tell to Pharaoh "Israel is my first-born son..."; in Hos 11,1 the Lord says "Out of Egypt I called my son..."²⁰ Even in the Pseudepigrapha we see the people of Israel is called with the same title.²¹ As Cullmann points out, "in all these texts the title 'Son of God' expresses both the idea that God has chosen this people for a special mission, and that this, his people, owes him absolute obedience."²²

b) The kings of the Jews were given the title 'son of God'; they are the representatives of the chosen people and hence are called by God as being His Son. "I will be his father, and he will be my son" (2 Sam 7,14); "You are my son, today I have begotten you" (Ps 2,7); "He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation'" (Ps 89,26). The king is not only chosen by God, but he is at the same time called by God for a special task. He was the Son of God as the whole nation was supposed to be.

19. On the "Son of Man" see Cullmann, *Christology*, 137-192; J.J. Collins, "The Son of Man in First-Century Judaism", *New Testament Studies*, Vol XXXVIII/3 (1992) 448-466; Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 175-178; Pokorny, *Genesis of Christology*, 56-59.

20. See also Is 1,2; 30,1; 45,11; 63,13; Jer 3,22; 31,20; Mal 1,6; Ps 82,6.

21. Sir 4,10; Psalm of Solomon 13,9; 17,27; 18,4.

22. Cullmann, *Christology*, 273.

c) Special persons and angels are called “Sons of God”. We know that the angels are called sons of God because they are also commissioned by God to do certain tasks (Gen 3,22-24; Job 1,6; 2,1; 38,7). In all the three senses used above, the concept of sonship is linked to the total obedience and submission of the agent to God’s will.

The concept of “Son of God” has its roots in early Judaism. We need to see how the concept of “Son of God” is used in early Judaism. There are, according to J.H. Charlesworth, fifteen quotations in Jewish literature that indicate this. In Sirach 4,10, coming from the second or early first century BCE in the Greek version we read, “...you will then be *like a son* of the Most High...” while in Hebrew we find “...and God will call you son.”²³ There is a very interesting twist in the Greek translation as the underlining indicates, where the metaphorical “son” is turned into a simile “like a son”. We read in I Enoch 105,2 “Until I and my son are united with them forever in the upright paths...”²⁴ In “Ezekiel the tragedian”, God calls Moses “my son”. We could go on and quote all the fifteen cases Charlesworth mentions, but time and space forbid us. We could refer the readers to the chapter by him on “Jesus’ Concept of God and His Self-understanding.”²⁵

We cannot speak about the question of the Sonship of Jesus without first speaking about his understanding of God. Most scholars agree that Jesus saw God as being a heavenly, loving, caring, intimately concerned Father. He called God by the Aramaic title “Abba”. Even Paul, in Galatians uses the title: “Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4,6, cf Rom 8,15).

Was Jesus unique in calling God Father? Jesus’ use of “Abba” is based on the Jewish custom of calling God *’abinu* “our Father”. Jesus’ concept of God as “Merciful Father” is found in the Jewish prayers. The term Father is also used to designate God in a number of Jewish writings - such as in Jubilees (1,24-25a): “And their souls will cleave to me and to all my commandments. And they will do

23. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, 149.

24. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, (Doubleday; Garden City NY 1983) 86.

25. Charlesworth, *OT Pseud*, 131-164. See also WisSol 2,18; 4 Ezra 7,28-29; JosAsen 6,3,5; 13,13; ApEl 5,25.

my commandments. And I shall be a father to them, and they will be sons to me. And they will all be called 'sons of the living God'.²⁶

In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is called the Son of God on a number of occasions and at some points he acknowledges the designation.²⁷ But we must note that Jesus is the Son of God not because he is a miracle worker or because he was given the title by others, but because he was totally obedient to the will of God, which ultimately led him to his death on the cross. Furthermore, the title "Son of God" is connected to suffering which is clearly expressed in the centurion's confession at the foot of the cross [Mk 15,39]. But these statements do not lead one to conclude that from the concept of Divine Sonship one could claim Divinity. Would it be wrong to surmise in the case of Jesus that Divine Sonship is the indication of the closest possible relationship between Jesus and God in the totality of its meaning?

The very close relationship between Jesus and God is also expressed in Mt 11,27:

"All things have been delivered to me by my Father: and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."²⁸

We must say that the genuineness of this Synoptic passage is questioned by many scholars. Pokorny notes that this verse has a hymnic form and should not be taken as a direct quotation of Jesus' own words.²⁹ The content of the verse is connected with the idea that the relation of Jesus with God the Father is based on a supernatural and "secret knowledge" which can be imparted to a man through some magical means, a view which could be dangerous if separated and taken out of its context.

From what we have said till here about the "Divine Sonship" of Jesus, we could say that his Sonship was in no way in line with physical or biological sonship so well known in the ancient and modern Middle East. Physical "Divine Sonship"

26. *OT Pseud.*, 2 (1985) 54; cf. Jub 1,28; 19,29; Tob 13,4; Sir 51,10; WisSol 2,16,18; 11,10; 14,3.

27. See Mk 1,11; 9,7; Mt 4,3,6: 14,33; 16,16.

28. It is interesting to note that this statement has parallels in Hellenistic mystery religions. One could quote a prayer-addressed to Hermes in the Magical Papyrus (Lond. 122.50) where it says, "I know you, Hermes, and you know me; I am you, and you are I," Cullman, *Christology*, 278 n. 2

29. Pokorny, *Genesis of Christology*, 55.

has no place in Christian theology or, for that matter, in early Jewish theology. Jesus was referring to his special, intimate and unique relationship with God, of his complete submission to the Divine violation, and a willing, conscious acceptance of the consequences of such obedience. This fact is best expressed in a parable of the evil tenants as recounted by Jesus himself in Mk 12,1-12:

“He had still one other person to send, a son whom he loved; at last, he sent him to the tenants thinking, ‘They will respect my son’. But those tenants said to one another, ‘This man is the heir, let us kill him and the land will be ours’” [Mk 12,6-7].

This parable is very intriguing. Should one take this story literally or metaphorically? What is the central point of the parable? Is it the killing of the son and the subsequent punishment meted out upon the evil tenants? As indicated above, I doubt! As far as I can see, it is the willingness of the son to listen to what his father said and obeying him with the full knowledge that those who preceded him in the mission were ill treated and killed.³⁰ It was this total submission that made Jesus special and his relationship to God a very particular one. Should not we emphasize this aspect of the personality of Jesus in presenting him to the people of other faiths in our region, rather than continue using the metaphorical language of “Divine Sonship” to symbolize his identity, something which offends the Muslims so greatly? Should not we try to find other metaphors to express this very intimate and unique relation Jesus had with God?

IV - Metaphorical Titles

There are, however, a number of metaphorical titles that could be used to present Jesus to the Muslims. They are well familiar with the semantic contents of these metaphorical titles. I will take up four such titles:

1) The Prophet

Prophet is one of the metaphorical titles given to Jesus by his contemporaries, as we have noted above. It is also a title given to Jesus in the Qur’an. Muslims regard

30. One is reminded of the willingness of Isaac to submit to the volition of his father to be sacrificed, see Gen 22,1-14.

Jesus as being one of the greatest prophets, who was born in a miraculous manner, who was endowed with miraculous powers, and was filled with the power of the Spirit of God. He is in fact the penultimate prophet, only a degree below Muhammed and the equal of Moses.

We need to ask ourselves: does the title “prophet” have the same semantic content in the OT, the NT, as it was used by the Jews living at the time of Jesus, and the Qur’an? What is the Qur’anic concept of prophethood and how is it different from the biblical concept? Time and space hinder us from getting into an extensive discussion of the subject. Suffice it to say that there are a number of components of meaning that overlap both in the Bible and the Qur’an of the concept of Prophethood, but there are also some fundamental differences: in the Qur’an a prophet is the messenger of God, therefore he cannot be defeated or hindered from accomplishing the mission he was sent to fulfil, for otherwise, it is God who has failed in protecting his prophet and is thus unable to bring about the realisation of his will. This is why in the Qur’an Jesus did not die on the cross but someone else who looked like him was crucified, while God raised Jesus up to heaven.

Nevertheless, we could present Jesus to the Muslims as a “Prophet”. This does not contradict part of the biblical image of Jesus, nor does it negate the nature and goal of his work. But, the metaphorical title of prophet can only be applied to Jesus’ pre-Easter earthly activities and teachings. In the eye of the earliest believers, the risen Christ is more than a prophet, he is in fact the exalted Lord.

2) *The Lord*

I would think that another metaphorical title to describe Jesus could be “Lord”, a title well understood by the Muslims. Lord has been extensively used by St Paul in a non-Jewish context while preaching the “Good News” to the gentiles. The first Christians of both Jewish and non-Jewish extraction expressed their deep faith in Jesus by reciting the brief confessional formula *Kyrios Jēsus* “Jesus is Lord”.³¹

The metaphor of “lordship” is crystallized in the Aramaic proclamation, *Maranatha* (I Cor 16,22). One could read it in two ways: as statement in the past

31. See above the discussion on The Early Christian Views of Jesus. See also I Cor 15,22; Rom 10,9; Phil 2,11; cf John 20,28; Acts 16,31; Eph 4,5.

(perfect) "Our Lord has come"; or as a petition, a call, as in Revelation 22,20, "Our Lord, come!" Paul, in fact, uses the designation "Lord" more than any other. The early Christians from Greco-Roman background could not understand the Semitic concept of the "son of man" but could readily understand the meaning of "Lord". The concept of "Lordship" is well accepted and understood by the Muslims. They use the metaphorical title "Rab al-'Alamîn" (The Lord of the Worlds - i.e., Eternal Lord), and "Malik Yom al-Dîm" (Owner of the day of Judgement).

3) *The One Close to God*

A third metaphorical title that we come across in the Qur'an applied to Jesus and which seems to be in line with our general discussion is the title "The One who is Close to God", (Al-Muqarrab).³² In the Qur'an we read:

"...The angel said: O Mary, Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from him whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in this world and in the hereafter, and One of those Close to Allah" [Sura 3,45].

4) *The Suffering Servant*

A fourth metaphorical title that could be used to present Jesus to the Muslims is the title of "The suffering Servant". As we have pointed above, Jesus understood his role to be that of the Suffering Servant. For the Muslims the concept of "Servant" or "Slave" is well known. They often use it as a proper name 'Abd Allah (the Servant of God). Thus the concept of a Suffering Servant is not alien to the Muslim mentality.

Finally, we must underline one fundamental reality: we cannot eliminate totally the metaphorical title "Son of God" in our translation of the Scripture to our non-Christian neighbours. We may have to explain in a footnote or an end note what is the semantic content of the concept "Son of God", emphasizing the fact that this concept of sonship is not a biological or physical relationship, that of "flesh and

32. See above our discussion on "The Son of God". This idea of Al-Muqarrab was brought to my attention by Mr. David Owen.

blood”, but one of “intimate relationship” and “total submission” to the will of God. Of course we realize that the metaphor expresses the convictions of Christians ever since Christianity was founded that Jesus shares with God his nature.

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