

# New Paths in Muslim-Christian Dialog: Understanding Islam from the Light of Earliest Jewish Christianity

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Recent developments in the study of earliest Christianity provide great opportunity for Muslim-Christian dialog, enabling us to see that there is far more common ground between us than commonly assumed. New perspectives afforded by these developments are causing a growing number of Christians to rethink the message of the Qur'ān in ways they never imagined possible. Unfortunately, most are unfamiliar with the study of earliest Christianity and its theological implications. Therefore, most Christians continue to assume that the Qur'ān completely contradicts biblical revelation, thereby erecting significant barriers to dialog and peacebuilding with Muslims. Similarly, while the Qur'ān certainly brings correction and warning to Christians who persist in excessive doctrines not taught by Jesus, most Muslims believe that certain titles used for Jesus in the New Testament constitute clear evidence of its corruption, further complicating dialog and peacebuilding with Christians. This paper will demonstrate how the study of earliest Christianity can help us move beyond peacebreaking assumptions of textual contradiction and corruption by examining one particular title of Jesus used by early Jewish Christians, showing how its later usage was complicated by worldview and translation, then proposing a cooperative effort between Muslim and Christian scholars to gently and respectfully address these matters in our faith communities to build genuine understanding and greater peace between Muslims and Christians.

According to the Qur'ān, humble and learned Christians will be moved to tears after hearing it recited because they will recognize its divine origin:

*... the closest in affection towards the believers are those who say: 'We are Christians,' for there are among them priests and monks. These people are not given to arrogance, and when they listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflowing with tears because they recognize the Truth [in it]. They say, 'Our Lord, we believe, so count us amongst the witnesses.'*<sup>1</sup> (Sūrat al-Mā'ida 5:82b–83)

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Qur'ān are taken from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), except 5:82b above where "priests and monks" is used, as in most translations, despite Haleem's footnote.

In the next verse, these Christians ask,

*Why should we not believe in God and in the Truth that has come down to us, when we long for our Lord to include us in the company of the righteous? (Sūrat al-Mā'ida 5:84)*

Many Christians today may well reply pejoratively, “Why should we *not* believe in the Qur’ān? How about the utter rejection that Jesus is the Son of God? Or the complete denial of the Trinity and crucifixion of Jesus? With all due respect, there are *many* reasons for Christians *not* to believe what has come to us in the Qur’ān.”

Given the incredible displeasure of God revealed in the Qur’ān regarding the excesses of Christian doctrine,<sup>2</sup> it is certainly understandable when Muslims become somewhat agitated by Christians who dogmatically reference them as axiomatic truths. Nonetheless, from the early centuries of Christianity, correct belief (orthodoxy) has always been a matter of paramount importance, and it remains so today. Just as most Muslims agree that God’s oneness and Muḥammad’s prophethood are essential for Muslim orthodoxy, most Christians agree that God’s oneness and Jesus’ divine sonship are essential for Christian orthodoxy. So as uncomfortable as it may be for Muslims to hear Jesus identified as God’s *son*, understanding the Jewish origins and biblical meaning of this title is crucially important for effective Muslim-Christian dialog.

## Jewish Christianity

*Earliest Christianity* refers to the very first communities of Jews in the first century c.e. who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Jewish Christianity therefore began decades before the first documents of the New Testament were written, and at least five years before the Apostle Paul began preaching to non-Jews, commonly referred to as *Gentiles*. History tells us that Jewish Christianity continued into the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries,<sup>3</sup> albeit leading a rather clandestine existence since the late fourth century after Gentile church fathers like John Chrysostom of Antioch demonized Jews and Judaizing Christians with a series of sermons against *Against the Judaizers*.<sup>4</sup> The French-Iranian

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<sup>2</sup> *Sūrat al-Nisā* 4:171; *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* 5:77.

<sup>3</sup> Near the end of the fourth century, Jerome reports having visited Nazarene Jewish Christians in Beroea (Aleppo), Syria (*Lives of Industrious Men*, 3). In the mid-fifth century, Palestinian church historian Sozomen wrote of Jewish Christian proselytes who trace their ancestry to Abraham through Ishmael (*Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen*, 6.38). In *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries According to a New Source*, Shlomo Pines cites a Jewish-Christian document composed in the fifth, sixth or early seventh century, then adapted by ‘Abd al-Jabbār in the tenth century to criticize the errors of Gentile Christianity (Jerusalem: Central Press, 1966, 35). Cf. Georg Strecker, “The Problem of Jewish Christianity” in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Walter Bauer (Mifflintown: Sigler Press, 1996), 241–285.

<sup>4</sup> John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians* (vol. 68 of *Fathers of the Church*), trans. Paul W. Harkins (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1979). Pines, *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source*, 38–39.

scholar François de Blois asserts, “the *naṣārā* of the Qur’ān were in fact Nazarenes, i.e., so-called Jewish Christians, and this name only later became the general Arabic designation for [all] Christians,” bringing early Islam into direct contact with Jewish Christianity.<sup>5</sup> After the seventh century, however, history is virtually silent about Jewish Christians, except for their brief reappearance in the tenth century, suggesting thereafter they were either assimilated into Islam, mainstream Judaism, or Gentile Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Jewish Christianity finally resurfaced in the nineteenth century and then evolved into various streams of what is popularly known today as *Messianic Judaism*.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Gentile Christianity promoted by the Apostle Paul, Jewish Christians continued to observe the requirements of Torah — as did Jesus and his Jewish apostles — regarding circumcision, Sabbath, and dietary purity (e.g., abstinence from pork).<sup>8</sup> Paul, however, taught that Gentile Christians need not observe these particular laws. According to many Messianic Jewish theologians today, Paul simply reasoned that God did not expect all nations to keep the same covenant which he had made at Sinai with one particular nation — the descendants of Jacob — so Gentiles are therefore under no contractual obligation to observe such law.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Paul taught that other nations were required to follow the Noachide Laws and the Law of Christ,<sup>10</sup> also known as the New Covenant foretold by former prophets.<sup>11</sup> Different laws for different nations is a pluralistic proposition which many Gentile Christian theologians find difficult to accept even now, but it nonetheless explains why many Jewish Christians today can be both completely Torah-observant and completely opposed to Judaizing (i.e., converting Gentile Christians to Jewish faith and practice).<sup>12</sup> Paul, we might say, was something of a nomian (legal) pluralist, promoting unity between peoples with different legal obligations before God.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, many of Paul’s Jewish-Christian contemporaries thought that he was an absolute heretic promoting lawlessness.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup> François De Blois, “Elchasai — Manes — Muhammad. Manichäismus und Islam in religionshistorischem Vergleich,” *Der Islam*, 81 (2004), 47. Cf. Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 494–495, 673.

<sup>6</sup> Pines, *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity According to a New Source*, 37–41.

<sup>7</sup> David H. Stern, *Messianic Judaism: A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past* (Clarksville: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5:17–19; Acts 10:14, 21:20.

<sup>9</sup> Stern, *Messianic Judaism*, 154–157ff.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 15:1–31; Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21; Matthew 28:20.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 9:15; Jeremiah 31:31.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 15:7–20.

<sup>13</sup> W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); James D. G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Acts 15:5, 21:21; Gerd Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

## The Sonship of Vassal Kings

Ask a Christian if Jesus is *the son of God*, and all will reply affirmatively. Ask a Christian what it actually *means* that Jesus is *the son of God*, and most will pause before responding that it likely refers to his eternal membership in the Holy Trinity, and perhaps also to his virgin birth. The Qur'ānic affirmation of the virgin birth therefore surprises many Christians. Why then, Christians wonder, do Muslims say that Jesus is not the son of God if they believe in his virgin birth? If Mary's husband Joseph was not the father of Jesus, who was?

Most Christians are unaware that the *son of God* title is not biblically unique to Jesus but also used for Adam, David, Solomon, and other rulers.<sup>15</sup> Over the centuries, Christians have understood this title to mean a variety of things when applied to Jesus, but what did earliest Jewish Christians mean when they proclaimed in Hebrew that Jesus was *ben elohim* and declared in Greek that he was *huiōs tou theou*? Do literal translations of these phrases as *son of God* accurately communicate today the meaning intended then? And what does the biblical usage of this same title for other kings and rulers tell us about its perceived meaning among Jews in the first century?

In the ancient Near East, long before the reign of King David, kinship terms were used to describe the relationship between a sovereign emperor and his vassal kings. While emperors displayed their superiority and authority by addressing their vassal kings as *my son*, vassals displayed their inferiority and submission by addressing the emperor as *my father*. Likening the authority structure of an empire to a family clearly communicated who was of higher rank, as is the case whenever an elder refers to a young man as *son*. In this context, ancient Israelites were keenly aware that the Supreme King and Lord of the Universe is, of course, God.<sup>16</sup> So when God installed his vassal king to rule and reign over his people, consistent with conventional language used then, God addressed him as his *ben* (son), and the king addressed God as his *āb* (father). For example, after the prophet Samuel had anointed David with oil and pronounced him king over ancient Israel, the Bible records God addressing David as his *ben* (son) and David addressing God as his *āb* (father).<sup>17</sup> Likewise, before the prophet Nathan anointed Solomon king over Israel, the Bible records God saying of Solomon, "I will be his *āb* (father), and he shall be my *ben* (son)."<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the title *son of God* represented both royalty and divinely instituted authority. In emerging monarchies where leaders are not elected, what gives one man the authority to rule over all others? The anointing of kings by Hebrew prophets answered this question decisively for ancient Israel. The title *son of God*, therefore, reminded all of the king's divine

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<sup>15</sup> Luke 3:38; Psalm 89:27; 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13; Psalm 82:6.

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 47:2, 2:4; 1 Kings 20:28.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 2:7, 89:20–27.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13.

appointment and authority to rule and reign as God's chosen agent and representative, much like firstborn sons are often authorized to manage the affairs and estate of their father.

## Anointing and Coronation

In this context, we can better understand why biblical scholars call Psalm 2 a coronation psalm, ceremonially recited at the installation of Davidic kings: *I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you"*<sup>19</sup> (Psalm 2:7). For Hebrew kings to be *yalad* (*begotten*) by God was not understood as referring to biological birth, but to the ceremonial inauguration of their rule and reign as God's vassal king, the moment they *became* (figuratively speaking, of course) God's *son*.

This Hebraic understanding of divine "sonship" also helps us comprehend why early Jewish Christians were interested in the question of exactly when Jesus *became* God's *son*. In other words, they wanted to know when Jesus was coronated to begin his rule and reign as the messianic king. Several New Testament verses suggest that earliest Jewish Christians believed that this occurred when God raised Jesus up.<sup>20</sup> Even as men of ancient Israel were declared to be God's *son* the moment they ascended to their throne as king, so too the Bible describes Jesus of Nazareth as a man who was *designated son of God* when he ascended to his heavenly throne "at the right hand of God."<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, one such verse immediately follows a statement that Jesus was "descended from David", alluding to another popular messianic title used by Jewish Christians for Jesus: the son of David.<sup>22</sup> Despite its supreme significance among Jewish Christians, this title emphasizing Jesus' biological descent from the royal line of the prophet David has been almost totally eclipsed by Gentile Christianity's fondness for the title *son of God*.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, when perceived from the worldview of first-century Jewish Christians, there was evidently no contradiction for the *son of David* to also be *designated son of God*. While the prior referred to biological ancestry, the latter referred to Jesus' divine appointment to rule and reign as vassal king at God's right hand. Doubtless, early Jewish Christians were well aware that the same language was used centuries prior for King Solomon, another son of David who was also called the *son of God*.<sup>24</sup>

Questions of when Jesus became God's *son* were also coupled with the moment of his anointing. By the second century, many Jewish Christians believed that Jesus became

<sup>19</sup> *New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>20</sup> Romans 1:4; Acts 2:32–36; 13:32–34.

<sup>21</sup> Romans 1:4; Acts 2:22, 32–36; 13:32–34. Cf. John 18:36; Küng, *Islam*, 491–493.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 1:3, 4; Matthew 1:1; 2 Timothy 2:8.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 9:27, 12:23, 15:22, 20:30–31, 21:9, 15, 22:42. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), xxxi.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13.

the *messiah* (lit. “the anointed one”) at his baptism by the prophet John (*Yahyā*).<sup>25</sup> This is supported not only by the fact that kings in ancient Israel typically began their reign after being anointed by a prophet, but also by the biblical account of the voice which Jesus heard from heaven after coming up from the waters of baptism, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased” — very similar to God’s statement in the coronation psalm.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, one ancient manuscript of Luke’s gospel, codex Bezae, reports that the heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism recited Psalm 2:7 verbatim, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” Although Bart Ehrman argues rather persuasively that codex Bezae’s reading of Luke 3:22 is in fact original, it has been rejected as such in the present Greek New Testament.<sup>27</sup>

Whether the heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism was an exact repetition of Psalm 2:7 or not, the fact that early Jewish Christians believed Jesus became God’s *son* at any time other than his birth proves that they did not connect this title to pagan Greek concepts that wise and mighty men like Plato and Alexander the Great were the biological offspring of gods procreating with human women.<sup>28</sup> Instead, when first-century Jews referred to Jesus as God’s *son*, they did so within a Hebraic worldview and context of meaning to express their faith in his royal appointment as the son of David, the rightful heir to the Davidic throne, anointed by God to rule and reign as the promised messianic king.

## Diverse Worldviews and Translational Danger

Hebrew figures of speech make great use of sonship terminology, e.g., sons of Babylon, sons of the kingdom, sons of the evil one, sons of thunder, sons of peace, sons of the light, sons of darkness, sons of heaven, and sons of the resurrection.<sup>29</sup> Obviously, such titles neither imply biological offspring, nor suggest that a woman could literally be impregnated by thunder or light. Similarly, English also uses sonship terminology apart from biological offspring, e.g., son-in-law, adopted son, and stepson. So while some languages make great figurative and metaphoric use of sonship terminology without implying biological offspring, others do not. In classical Arabic, *ibn* (*son*) and *walad* (*son*) were not generally used figuratively or metaphorically for interpersonal

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<sup>25</sup> A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish Christian Sects* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 34. Cf. “The Earliest Adoptionists” in Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 48ff, and Richard N. Longnecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Vancouver: Regent, 2001), 98–99.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Matthew 3:17, Luke 3:22, and Mark 1:11 with Psalm 2:7.

<sup>27</sup> Ehrman, 62–72. Cf. Klijn, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 31.

<sup>29</sup> Ezekiel 23:17; Matthew 13:38; Mark 3:17; Luke 10:6, 16:8, 20:36; 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

relationships. Instead they referred almost exclusively to biological offspring.<sup>30</sup> Given this Arabic context of meaning for *ibn* and *walad*, it is not difficult to imagine how pre-Christian Arab pagans would have understood the phrase *ibn Allāh*, or language like “God has ‘begotten’ a *walad*”. Arabic language neither referred to kings as *sons of God*, nor to the inauguration of a king’s reign as being *begotten of God*.

Nonetheless, it was not only pre-Christian Arabs who were prone to misunderstand a literal translation of this royal Hebraic title, but also first-century Greeks. Like Arabic, the meaning of the Greek *huios* (*son*) was almost completely limited to biological offspring.<sup>31</sup> As mentioned above, the concept of gods procreating with human women was widespread among Greeks. Alexander the Great was told by the Oracle of Ammon at Siwa that he was the son of the god Zeus, not of King Philip. Tradition supported this with news that Philip had avoided the bed of his wife Olympia because she was so fond of sleeping with snakes. Alexander’s superhuman strength and supremacy over nations was therefore understood to be the natural consequence of his being the offspring or *seed* (Greek *sperma*) of Zeus, the supreme god of the sky and thunder. Similarly, ancient writers report that Plato was the offspring of virgin conception after his mother had been divinely impregnated by the god Apollo. Plato’s extraordinary wisdom was therefore perceived to have been inherited from his father Apollo, god of reason and wisdom. Clearly, the worldview of Greek Christians needed to be informed by that of Jewish Christians to prevent a perverted understanding of the Hebraic titles for Jesus, through whom God’s power and wisdom were displayed in most miraculous ways.

Unfortunately, the divide between Jewish and Gentile Christians grew wider in the second century. Jewish-Christian observance of the Torah (e.g., circumcision, dietary purity, and Sabbath) obviously created challenges for united worship with Gentile Christians. While some zealous Jewish Christians tried to convert Gentile Christians to Judaism, many Gentile Christians insisted that Jewish followers of Jesus should cease observing the Law of Moses — despite the Torah-observance of earliest Christianity, and despite Paul’s instruction to the contrary.<sup>32</sup> As early as 110 C.E. Gentile bishops like Ignatius of Antioch concluded that belief in Christ was completely incompatible with Torah-observance.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the second century, most Gentile Christians believed

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<sup>30</sup> While the qur’ānic *ibn al-sabīl* (*wayfarer* or lit., *son of the road*) is used to describe travelers, and the modern *ibn al-nīl* (*son of the Nile*) those born near the Nile, such figurative usage of *ibn* denote one’s region of origin, not interpersonal relationships. A notable exception occurred in pre-Islamic Arabia when *ibn* could be used for adopted boys, e.g., as Zayd ibn Ḥarīthah was referred to as Zayd ibn Muḥammad. Nonetheless, there remained an immense difference between the unusual usage of *ibn* to describe the relationship between humans or between God and humans. For example, it would have been an innocent mistake if people incorrectly assumed that Muḥammad had had relations with Zayd’s mother after hearing Zayd addressed as Zayd ibn Muḥammad. The Qur’ān, however, reveals that God does not want anyone to make a similar mistake about his interaction with Mary.

<sup>31</sup> Hengel, *The Son of God*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Acts 21:20; 1 Corinthians 7:17–18.

<sup>33</sup> Ignatius, *To the Magnesians*, 8–10.

that Jewish Christians were heretics because, according to Hans Küng, Jewish Christians “could not go along with the complications of a Hellenistic christology which was growing increasingly higher and more intricate.”<sup>34</sup>

## Christological Development

*Christology* is a branch of theology concerned to study the person, nature, and life of Jesus the Messiah. Given the intense christological controversies among Gentile Christians in the fourth and fifth centuries, Jewish Christians were obviously not alone in their inability to go along with many Hellenistic christological developments. The complicated christology to which Küng refers was rooted in Gentile Christian efforts to articulate the implications of yet another title for Jesus used by early Jewish Christians: the Word of God.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, this same title for Jesus reappears centuries later in the Qur’ān.<sup>36</sup> While most Muslims believe that the Qur’ānic use of *kalima* (Word) for Jesus refers to the way God made Jesus — by his creative Word *kun* (be) — early Jewish Christians believed that Jesus was he whom the Word of God actually *became*.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, in his classic commentary on the Qur’ān, al-Ṭabarī cites the opinion of Ibn ‘Abbās that Jesus is both created *by* God’s Word and also *is* that Word, “God calls this son which is in thy womb his word.”<sup>38</sup> After Jesus was identified as the Word of God by early Jewish Christians, later christological development became analogous to Muslim doctrine and debate on the eternality of the Qur’ān.

The Bible teaches that God created all things by his Word, “God said, Let there be light; and there was light.”<sup>39</sup> According to Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, “The Word, heard and announced by the prophet, often became, in the conception of the seer, an efficacious power apart from God, as was the angel or messenger of God.”<sup>40</sup> Kohler illustrates this from the writings of the prophet Isaiah:

*The Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it will light upon Israel. (9:8)*

*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (55:11)*

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<sup>34</sup> Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 1.26.2; 3.15.1; 5.1.3. Cf. Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History and Future* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1995), 102.

<sup>35</sup> John 1:14, Revelation 19:13. Cf. Richard A. Norris, Jr. *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 1–31.

<sup>36</sup> *Sūrat al-Nisā’* 4:171; *Sūrat al-Imrān* 3:45.

<sup>37</sup> Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’ān and Its Interpreters Vol. II: The House of Imrān* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 130–135; John 1:14.

<sup>38</sup> *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* 3:45. Cf. Ayoub, *The Qur’ān and Its Interpreters Vol. II*, 131; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’ān* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 47; A. M. Charfi, “Christianity in the Qur’ān Commentary of Ṭabarī,” *Islamochristiana*, 6 (1980), 105–148.

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 1:3, Psalm 33:6–9, Hebrews 11:3.

<sup>40</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, “Memra.” *JewishEncyclopedia.com*.

Because the Hebrew term for *Word* (*dābār*) is masculine, it was personified with masculine pronouns, e.g., “*He* (the Word) will light upon Israel,” and “*He* (the Word) shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent *him*.” Jewish prophets poetically personified God’s Word as *running swiftly* to earth, *leaping* from heaven as a stern warrior *carrying* a sharp sword, even *touching* heaven while *standing* on earth.<sup>41</sup> If Jews could poetically personify God’s Word as *he* and *him*, *running*, *leaping*, *touching* and *standing* — as an efficacious power apart from God — then they could also speak metaphorically about the very first utterance of God as the Word being *born of God*. So Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE–50 CE), a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, described the very first spoken Word as God’s *firstborn* Word.<sup>42</sup> And because both Hebrew and Greek nouns for *Word* (*dābār* and *logos*) are masculine, Philo could extend such poetic metaphor to speak of this Word as God’s *firstborn Son* and *Viceroy*, with and by whom God rules the created world.<sup>43</sup> Theologians are quick to point out, however, that “it is an error to see in such personifications an approach to personalization. Nowhere either in the Bible or in the extra-canonical literature of the Jews is the word of God a personal agent or on the way to become such.”<sup>44</sup> Rather, as observed by James D. G. Dunn, such vigorous metaphors “are simply alternative ways of speaking about the effective power of God in his active relationship with his world and its inhabitants.”<sup>45</sup>

By the second and third centuries, Gentile Christians continued the Jewish tradition of personifying God’s Word as his *firstborn Son*, but they further extended such poetic imagery by describing the Word as God’s *offspring*.<sup>46</sup> While this particular extension did not seem to stir any controversy among Gentile Christians (despite their identification of Jesus as he whom the Word of God became), such language was certainly foreign to Jewish Christians since the New Testament never refers to Jesus as the offspring or seed (*sperma*) of anyone but David and Abraham.<sup>47</sup> Even Philo did not venture to describe the Word as God’s offspring, despite his deep familiarity with Greek philosophy and his innovative, poetic imagination which came uncomfortably close to portraying the Word as an independent being who can function as an intermediary between God and man.

Naturally, if one combines (1) the anthropomorphic language describing God’s creative Word as his *firstborn offspring* and (2) the identification of Jesus as the *Word of God* with (3) Mary’s virgin birth, the probability that simple Greek Christians might misunderstand a literal translation of Jesus’ Hebraic title *ben elohim* (lit. *son of God*)

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 147:15; Wisdom of Solomon 18:15–16.

<sup>42</sup> Philo, *On the Confusion of Languages*, 28.146. Cf. Psalms 33:6–9.

<sup>43</sup> Philo, *On Husbandry*, 12.51.

<sup>44</sup> George F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* Vol. I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 415. Cf. Dunn, *Christology*, 219–230.

<sup>45</sup> Dunn, *Christology*, 219.

<sup>46</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.36.3, 4.7.4.

<sup>47</sup> John 7:42; Acts 13:23; Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8; Galatians 3:16; Revelation 22:16.

increases exponentially. However, a conflation of these titles and metaphoric motifs common in fourth-century Alexandria virtually guaranteed confusion among all who disconnected their understanding of Jesus from his identity as the Word of God. Athanasius (d. 376 CE), Bishop of Alexandria, commonly taught that *the Son* is the *offspring* of God.<sup>48</sup> While this may sound dangerously close to suggesting that Jesus is the biological offspring of God, a thorough read of Athanasius reveals that he was not only fully cognizant that Jesus is he whom the Word of God became, but also that such mention of *offspring* refers not to Jesus being born of Mary but to the very first utterance of God's creative Word. In other words, if Jews like Philo could speak about the very first Word uttered by God as God's *firstborn Son* (poetically personified, of course), then Athanasius saw little problem referring to that same Word as the *offspring* of God.

To prevent such language from slipping into polytheism, Athanasius was mindful of the *continuity* of Word christology expressed by early Jewish Christians.<sup>49</sup> Because they believed that Jesus is he whom the Word of God *became*, Jewish followers of Jesus began to speak about him in ways they would formerly only speak about God's Word. For example, after God's Word *became* Jesus, statements like "all things were made by God's Word" could be expressed as "all things were made by Jesus" — not because they believed that Jesus of Nazareth literally pre-existed as anything other than God's Word, but because they believed that Jesus *is* the Word of God.<sup>50</sup> However, as we have already seen, poetic personification was not perceived as literal personalization. As Rabbi Kohler stated, the Word of God was never understood as an independent agent of God, or as completely separate from God. Rather, the Word of God was understood as the creative, revelatory, and redemptive power of God: spoken in the beginning to create the heavens and earth, recorded on scrolls by prophets, and revealed in and through the life and teaching of Jesus the Messiah.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, what would less theologically astute Greek Christians think of statements like "the Son is the *offspring* of God" — especially when their term for *son* (*huios*) was almost completely limited to biological offspring? If such a statement is understood apart from its rootedness in Word christology, it is grossly misunderstood. In all likelihood, therefore, pre-Christian pagans of Arabia, whose use of sonship terminology was limited primarily to biological offspring, not only heard Jesus described as *ibn Allāh* (a literal translation of the Hebrew *ben elohim*, i.e., *son of God*) — this would have been ominous enough — but they also heard it from Gentile Christians comfortable with describing Jesus, the Word of God, as the *offspring* of God. While Gentile church fathers and theologians could navigate through these intellectual complexities to

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<sup>48</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 1.5.14, 1.8.28, 3.23.1f, *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, 3.34f.

<sup>49</sup> *Word christology* refers to an understanding of Jesus rooted in his identity as the Word of God. Regarding its *continuity*, see Dunn, *Christology*, xxvi, xxxi–xxxii, 190, 255.

<sup>50</sup> Colossians 1:15–16; Hebrews 1:2.

<sup>51</sup> John 1:18, RSV.

comprehend how orthodox christology remained within the strict confines of Jewish monotheism, this became increasingly difficult for Christians less sophisticated theologically and philosophically. ‘Abd al-Jabbār, a leading Muslim intellectual of the late 10th century, preserves a popular Christian understanding of Jesus’ sonship in the 9th century, as reported by Nazzām (d. 868) and his student Jāḥiẓ:

Know that the masses of the Christians believe that God chose Mary for himself and his son, that He selected her as a man chooses a woman and took her as a concubine because of his yearning for her. . . . [Jāḥiẓ] reports, “They only declare this outright to one who has their trust.” Ibn al-Ikshīd reports this about them . . . saying, “This is what they indicate. Do you not see that they say, ‘If He were not a Begetter He would be sterile, and sterility is a flaw?’” This is the opinion of all of them, which indicates physical intercourse. . . . All who have mixed with the monks and the sacristans of the churches, who have spent a long time with them and befriended them, know this from them.<sup>52</sup>

Such an understanding of Jesus is rightly condemned in the Qur’ān:

*The disbelievers say, ‘The Lord of Mercy has offspring’. How terrible is this thing you assert: it almost causes the heavens to be torn apart, the earth to split asunder, the mountains to crumble to pieces, that they attribute offspring to the Lord of Mercy (Sūrat Maryam 19:88–91).*

According to the esteemed evangelical theologian Colin Brown, some Christians today find the doctrine of the Trinity so perplexing that they essentially “practice tritheism in all but name. Thus, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are worshipped as three separate deities. . . .”<sup>53</sup> If such confusion can exist among Christians today, we can certainly grant that at least a similar amount of confusion — if not more — existed among Gentile Christians of seventh-century Arabia. Obviously, literal translation of *ben elohim* (son of God) was even more vulnerable to evolve into heresy in Arabia not only because of the more restrictive use of terms like *ibn* and *walad*, but also because of how easily such titles were confused by pagan idolaters to refer to that which the Qur’ān condemns unequivocally.

## Rethinking Textual Conclusions

The light of earliest Jewish Christianity enables us to see that the Qur’ān correctly rejects both referring to Jesus as *ibn Allāb* and saying God has begotten a *walad*, not because earliest Jewish Christians never identified Jesus as *ben elohim* and *huiōs tou̯ theou̯* (lit., *son of God*) to proclaim their faith both in his divine appointment to reign as the messianic king, and in his identity as the Word of God. Rather, the Qur’ān correctly

<sup>52</sup> Gabriel Said Reynolds and Samir Khalil Samir, *Critique of Christian Origins — ‘Abd al-Jabbār* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 85.

<sup>53</sup> Colin Brown, “Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Ex Auditu* 7 (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1991), 83.

rejects literal translation of *ben elohim* in Arabic because radically different usage of sonship terminology in Arabia predisposed many Arab Christians to pervert its meaning into that which was appalling to God.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, it is striking to consider that the Qur'an actually affirms both biblical meanings of Jesus' Hebraic title *ben elohim* while plainly rejecting its literal translation into Arabic. In other words, as we have seen above, when many New Testament verses refer to Jesus as *huiòs tou theou* (a literal Greek translation of the Hebrew *ben elohim*), they do so to identify him as the Messiah, appointed, anointed, and crowned as God's vassal king to reign with God's authority as God's agent and representative. Literally in Hebrew, *messiah* means *anointed one*. As we have seen, Hebrew kings were not enthroned until first *anointed* by a prophet. The day God's *anointed one* was crowned king was poetically spoken of as the day he was *begotten* as God's *ben* (lit., *son*).<sup>55</sup> In ancient Israel, therefore, God's anointed vassal king, his *messiah*, was also referred to as his *son*.<sup>56</sup> So by affirming Jesus truly is *al-masih*, the Qur'an essentially affirms the same royal authority and primary Hebraic meaning conveyed by *ben elohim* (lit., *son of God*), while plainly rejecting its literal translation in Arabic.

Where other New Testament verses refer to Jesus as *huiòs tou theou* (lit. *son of God*), they do so to identify him as the Word of God, a title also affirmed of Jesus in the Qur'an where he is called a *kalima* (Word) from God. Wide figurative and metaphoric use of sonship terminology in Hebrew enabled Jews to refer to God's Word as God's *son* long before Jesus of Nazareth was born. So by affirming Jesus truly is both a *kalima* (Word) from God and *al-masih* (the messiah), the Qur'an explicitly affirms both biblical meanings of Jesus' Hebraic title *ben elohim* while correctly rejecting its literal translation in Arabic.

The Qur'an therefore suggests God is more concerned with a proper understanding of his message and messengers than with wooden allegiance to literal translations of former revelation which may have made perfect sense to the people to whom it was revealed, and in the language in which it was revealed. However, when translation of divine revelation in radically different linguistic contexts leads to heresy, the Qur'an suggests God is concerned both to correct man's perverted understanding and discontinue use of literally translated terms and titles so vulnerable to theological corruption.

Qur'anic condemnation of perverted Son of God christology is not terribly difficult for most Christians to accept. More difficult for many Christians is Qur'anic testimony suggesting God is not interested in literal translation of *ben elohim* or *huiòs tou theou* to describe Jesus in Arabic — despite the virtual impossibility for most Arabic speakers to correctly understand the original Hebraic meaning from literal translation, and despite the fact that its biblical meaning may be accurately conveyed by two titles used

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<sup>54</sup> *Sūrat Maryam* 19:88–92.

<sup>55</sup> Psalm 2:2,7.

<sup>56</sup> Psalm 2:2; 1 Samuel 24:6, 26:9; 2 Samuel 1:14.

exclusively for Jesus in the Qur'ān: *al-masīḥ* (the messiah) and *kalima* (Word). Nonetheless, biblical history suggests it would not be the first time God chose to retire sacred symbols when an unhealthy focus on them hindered correct understanding and practice. Consider the unthinkable loss of the Ark of the Covenant (*al-Tābūt*) and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (*Bayt al-Muqaddas*) not just once but twice. Both Ark and Temple were ordained and instituted by God as symbols of his divine presence, but that did not prevent their eventual loss and destruction when their use was presumed to guarantee divine protection or military victory regardless of humble submission to God's commands.<sup>57</sup>

Several prominent Christian theologians today are seeking to prevent Christians from slipping into tritheism by reconnecting them to the same biblical christology mentioned in the Qur'ān: Word christology. James D. G. Dunn explains how a proper understanding of Word christology is essential for a right appreciation of biblical monotheism and classic Christian orthodoxy:

For it was only at Nicea that the hitherto dominant Word christology gave way to the dominance of Son of God language. With Word christology the emphasis is essentially the same as that in John's Gospel — on the *continuity* between the Father and the Son, since the Son is the Word, the self-expression of God. . . . An emphasis on Christ as the Son, independent of that earlier Word christology, can easily become in effect an expression of the very bitheism or tritheism of which Judaism and Islam accuse Christianity. . . . If the creedal Son of God language is not understood as an expression of Word christology, it is misunderstood.<sup>58</sup>

Dunn warns that if Christians read New Testament verses like *he is the firstborn in creation* and *all things were made by him* as straightforward descriptions of Jesus of Nazareth instead of seeing them as expressions of Word christology (an understanding of Jesus rooted in his identity as the Word of God), then “we are committed to an interpretation of that text which has broken clearly and irrevocably from monotheism.”<sup>59</sup> Dunn aims to reconnect Christians to the very same Word christology in which much of the New Testament and post-Nicean orthodoxy are grounded. Without understanding how these documents express the *continuity* of Word christology, not pedantic literalism, Christians can easily “lose sight of the monotheistic control which prevents such language from slipping into tritheism.”<sup>60</sup>

Dunn elsewhere demonstrates that Word, Wisdom and Spirit “are simply variant [biblical] ways of speaking of the creative, revelatory, or redemptive act of God.”<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> 1 Samuel 4:3–11; Jeremiah 7:10.

<sup>58</sup> Dunn, *Christology*, xxxi.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxii. Cf. Colosians 1:15–17; John 1:3; Hebrews 1:2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> See “the parallelism between word and spirit in Psalm 33:6 and 147:18, and the equivalence between Psalm 33:6 and Proverbs 3:19 where the same creative power is described as Yahweh's word, Yahweh's breath/spirit, and Yahweh's wisdom” (*Ibid.*, 219). Cf. Wisdom of Solomon 9:1–2, 17.

Whereas most Muslim scholars agree that Word christology in the Qur'ān describes the biological origin of Jesus (a *creative* act), most Christian scholars agree that Word christology in John's Gospel describes the self-revelation of God through Jesus Christ (a *revelatory* act). Word christology in the Qur'ān, therefore, remains consistent with variant biblical expressions of God's activity. Significantly, the Qur'ān not only employs Word christology to correct a perverted understanding of Jesus' sonship, but does so in the very same verse where Jesus is also identified as *a spirit proceeding from God*.<sup>62</sup> By referencing Spirit christology alongside Word christology, the Qur'ān expresses profound correspondence to biblical revelation regarding the creative, revelatory and redemptive acts of God in Christ, whom the New Testament also identifies as the Wisdom of God.<sup>63</sup>

## Common Ground In Depth

Over the centuries, there has been a wide spectrum of opinion between Christians and Muslims regarding each other, ranging from fraternal embrace to demonization. Peaceful relations often hinge on how much respect one can genuinely show to the other's faith, prophet and scripture. The seventh-century Christian king of Abyssina, Negus al-Aṣḥam ibn Abjar, asked early Muslim refugees, "What do you say about Jesus?" Jāfar replied, "We say about him that which our prophet brought, saying he is the slave [or servant] of God and his apostle, and his spirit, and his word, which he cast into Mary the blessed virgin."<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the eighth-century Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdī asked the Assyrian Patriarch Timothy, "What say ye about Muḥammad?" The patriarch replied, "He walked in the path of the prophets."<sup>65</sup> Such respect and honor is often achieved by a careful selection of words that are completely honest without denying one's own exclusive truth claims. So behind these carefully constructed gestures of respect and honor often lay assumptions that our Scriptures contradict each other on matters of great importance. Intelligent people thus assume that if *our* Scriptures are true, *theirs* must be false — at least on matters which contradict what we know to be true. For example, if the Bible says Jesus is the *son of God*, and the Qur'ān says he's not, they cannot both be correct. However, as we have seen above, digging deeper into the meaning of these Scriptures — encoded in figures of speech, historical semantics, and linguistic worldview — we find an entirely different picture of surprising agreement that literal translation can never convey.

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<sup>62</sup> *Sūrat al-Nisā'* 4:171.

<sup>63</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:24.

<sup>64</sup> A. Guillaume, *The Life of Mubammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sirat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 152.

<sup>65</sup> David A. Kerr, "He Walked in the Path of the Prophets': Toward Christian Theological Recognition of the Prophethood of Muhammad", *Christian-Muslim Encounters* by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Zaydan Haddad (eds.), (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995) 426.

So is Qur'ānic testimony that Jesus is not *ibn Allāh* and that God has not begotten a *walad* proper cause for Christians to conclude that the Qur'ān contradicts the Bible? Clearly not — not in light of earliest Jewish Christianity. Jesus is not the biological offspring of God, but of Abraham, David, and Mary, as both the New Testament and Qur'ān affirm.<sup>66</sup> According to Catholic theologian Hans Küng, “Regardless of how *son of God* was later defined by Hellenistic councils with Hellenistic terms, in the New Testament what is unquestionably meant is not descent but an appointment to a position of justice and power in the Hebrew Old Testament sense. This is not a physical divine sonship, of the kind that occurs in Greek myths, which is often supposed and rightly rejected by Jews and Muslims, but an election and authentication of Jesus by God, completely in keeping with the Hebrew Bible. . . .”<sup>67</sup>

Does biblical testimony that David, Solomon and Jesus are *ben elohim* and *huios tou theou* (lit., *son of God*), mean Muslims should reject those texts as obvious corruptions? Absolutely not — not when understood in the light of earliest Jewish Christianity. The celebrated Muslim theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī reached a similar conclusion in his commentary on *Sūrat al-Tawba* 9:30, “I believe it to be nearer to the truth to say that perhaps the word *ibn* occurs in the Gospel to denote high honor, as the word *khalīl* (intimate friend of God) denotes high honor. Then [later] . . . Christians exaggerated their claim and interpreted the word *son* literally to signify actual sonship.”<sup>68</sup>

As eminent Christian theologians labor through meticulous scholarship to reconnect Christians to Word, Wisdom, and Spirit christology, mindful that this can protect Christians from the tritheism of which Jews and Muslims accuse them,<sup>69</sup> a growing number of Christians find it rather astonishing that the Qur'ān was pointing to the same biblical corrective centuries ago.

## Dialogical Collaboration

I have attempted in this brief paper to stimulate both Christian and Muslim communities to take a closer look at each other's Scripture from the light of earliest Jewish Christianity, taking special care to thoroughly consider the worldview of meaning encoded in language but often lost in translation. As Farid Esack has wisely written, “Language, we now know, plays a significant role in shaping us and our consciousness.

<sup>66</sup> Matthew 1:1, 16; John 7:42; Acts 13:23; Romans 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:8; Galatians 3:16; Revelation 22:16; *Sūrat al-Nisā'* 4:171.

<sup>67</sup> Küng, *Islam*, 493.

<sup>68</sup> Cf., Mahmoud Ayoub, “Jesus the Son of God: A Study of the Terms *Ibn* and *Walad* in the Qur'ān and *Tafsir* Tradition” in *A Muslim View of Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007) 124.

<sup>69</sup> Dunn, *Christology*; Sarah Coakley, “‘Persons’ in the ‘Social’ Doctrine of the Trinity”, and Brian Leftow, “Anti Social Trinitarianism”, *The Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); James F. McGrath, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity”, *New Blackfriars* 81 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2000), 432–445.

Language though, much as it shapes history, is also a prisoner of history.”<sup>70</sup> If Muslim-Christian dialog is to be meaningful then, participants must not shy away from careful, scholarly work to understand the language of our Scriptures within their corresponding historical and linguistic contexts of meaning. Thankfully, a growing number of scholars are achieving this by examining the intertextuality of the Bible and the Qur’ān along these lines.<sup>71</sup> The light of earliest Jewish Christianity allows us to focus our dialog not only on matters of obvious common ground and agreement, but also on topics many assume are irreconcilable differences. As demonstrated above, the light of earliest Jewish Christianity can reveal profound correspondence between our Scriptures, even where translations suggest contradiction and corruption. Once immersed in the light of earliest Jewish Christianity, we just may find a way out of the theological gridlock which has hindered Muslim-Christian dialog for centuries. As we discover that way, let us partner together to gently, humbly and respectfully share this knowledge far and wide at churches and mosques to help build genuine understanding and greater peace between Christian and Muslim communities.

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<sup>70</sup> Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997) 10.

<sup>71</sup> John C. Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Textuality* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur’ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Walid A. Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to al-Biqā’ī’s Bible Treatise* (Boston: Brill, 2008).