

The Son of God and the Crescent

21st Century Reformation - Guest Editorial

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A recent, fascinating article in *Christianity Today* (Feb. 2011, "The Son and the Crescent") reports on a massive confusion between Moslems and Christians on the issue of Jesus as the Son of God. The Qu'ran explicitly says that God cannot have a son. In Arabic, the article notes, the word *ibn* ("son of") carries biological connotations. Moslems reject the idea that God could have produced a Son through a sexual relationship with Mary. Moslems, according to the Qu'ran (*At-Tawba* 9:30) believe that God curses anyone who would utter the "ridiculous blasphemy" that Jesus could be *ibnullah* (a son of God). But of course, at the same time, Moslems agree that Jesus is the Messiah, and also virginally conceived by Mary!

Moslems have been able to read the entire Bible in Arabic since the 18th century. They continue, however, to stumble at the title Son of God. Some Bible translators, eager to avoid the "offensive term" - "Son of God," have opted for paraphrases such as "spiritual Son of God," or "the Beloved Son who comes (or originates) from God." With the taboo title "Son of God" removed, the hope is that Moslems will more easily accept the claims of Christianity. Other Bible translators have objected that the essential terminology of the Christian Bible has been lost and that no concession should be made to Islamic objection to the title Son of God for Jesus.

Another factor entered the debate: According to Christian Trinitarianism the Son of God is the second member of an eternal Trinity. The Son is equivalent to the preexisting Word of God. If that central pillar of Trinitarianism is demolished then orthodox Christianity's core doctrine of God is lost. As the *Christianity Today's* article notes, "If there is no eternal Father-Son relationship, only an eternal God-Word relationship... the historic Christian understanding of the Trinity essentially collapses."

Defenders of the proposal to weaken the Bible title "Son of God" for the sake of Moslem sensitivity argued that in Peter's confession "Son of God and Messiah (Christ)" are synonyms. Moreover in Luke 4:41 the demons recognized Jesus as Messiah and Son of God showing that both terms carried the same meaning. Likewise in Luke 1:32-33 the title Son of the Most High carries obvious Messianic implications.

Other scholars, however, complained that Son of God and Messiah are not entirely synonymous since Peter did not confess: "You are the Christ, the Christ." Though the terms Son of God and Christ overlap they do not mean quite the same thing. Son is inevitably expressive of a special and intimate relationship with the Father.

Rather surprisingly the article in *Christianity Today* observed that "Son of God is strangely absent from the Old Testament's messianic texts." But this is inaccurate. Ps. 2: 6, 7 and 12 give both titles, Son of God ("my Son") and "the Messiah" as designations of the prophesied Messiah. And II Sam. 7:14 explicitly tells us that the promised descendant of David is to be God's Son. The text is cited of Jesus in Heb. 1:5, along with the text from Ps. 2:7. The LXX of Ps. 110:3, and many Hebrew manuscripts of that verse, speak of the Son whom God has begotten.

Perhaps this unfortunate dispute between Christians and Moslems is a product of fundamental misunderstanding on the part of both camps. Christianity in post-biblical times distorted the important title “Son of God” and turned it into “God the Son,” producing the impossible notion (as Moslems have been taught) that both Father and Son are entitled to be called “God.” The Qu’ran insists on unitary monotheism (God is strictly a single Person), which happens ironically to be the creed also of the historical Jew Jesus (Mark 12:29. John 17:3, etc.), and of Paul in I Cor. 8:4-6; I Tim 2:5). On no account may a Moslem endorse a Godhead consisting of Three Persons who are incomprehensibly One God. Moslems are unlikely to be persuaded that the Trinitarian claim that God is both Three and One can ever be acceptable. Trinitarianism really does not offer a coherent proposition, since Christians speak of God as “He” (=a single Person) and then speak of “Him” (= a single Person) as at the same time Three Persons. God as One Person and Three Persons is no more coherent than: “this is a chair, that is a chair and that is also a chair, which makes one chair.” Trying to avoid the contradiction by saying that “God is one *What* in three *Whos*” does nothing to ease the problem. Bible readers can see at once that God is never called a “What” or an “It.” “One plus one plus one” does not equal one. But that is currently offered as a definition of God by some Christians as the core of their belief.

If Moslems, who claim that the Bible is Scripture along with the Qu’ran would turn to Luke 1:35 all their issues would be resolved. The same would be true for Christians. It is astonishing that Moslem leaders have not already abandoned their objection to Jesus being the Son of God. Remember that their longstanding objection has been that a sexual relationship is implied by the term “Son of God.” But five minutes work on Luke 1:35 should have persuaded them that a sexual connotation is absolutely forbidden by Gabriel’s words to Mary. There is much more at work here than meets the eye. Moslem objection to “Son of God” could have been dispelled easily, if Christians or Moslems had bothered to examine Luke 1:35. No one in his senses finds any sexual innuendos here! Moslems could have read this for themselves, and Christians could have encouraged Moslems to read the text for what it obviously says.

Unfortunately Christians have also discarded the plain words of Gabriel in Luke 1:35. In answer to Mary’s reasonable question as to how she might be pregnant in the absence of a husband, Gabriel offered a lucidly simple statement about why, how and when Jesus is entitled to “be called” (the equivalent of “being”) the Son of God. There is not a hint of an “eternal Son” who is also “God.” Gabriel simply provides the sole reason (*dio kai*, “for that reason indeed”) for Jesus being the Messiah and Son of God. It is because of the miracle worked by God in Mary. There is no sexual connotation whatever. And there is certainly no “eternal Son.”

Just imagine the peace that could be produced between Moslems and Christians if both camps would read, study and believe the matchlessly simple definition of Gabriel about what it means for Jesus to be “the Son of God.” John’s Gospel of course should not then be read in a way which contradicts Luke or Matthew. Luke 1:35 remains an undiscovered treasure which is capable of bringing billions together.

(Please see also my “If Only We Had Listened to Gabriel” in *Focus on the Kingdom*, Jan, 2007, at www.restorationfellowship.org and chapter 7 of my *Jesus was not a Trinitarian*, pp 192-225.)