

# Choosing an Arabic Bible

## Based on comprehensibility and translation philosophy

by Tim and Sharon Warner

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### Abstract

After evaluating the most common existing Arabic Bible translations as to where they fall on a ‘formal equivalent – functional equivalent’ scale, the authors used a representative selection of Bible verses from each translation to test comprehension among nine relatively open-minded, educated Yemeni readers. While all translations tested had some problems with comprehensibility, the formal translations were found to be much more difficult for respondents to understand than functionally equivalent (meaning-based) translations. The authors recommend further research and suggest their results will be useful for those wanting to communicate God’s Word clearly to Muslim readers with little or no Bible background.

### Introduction

Arabic Bible translations – just like Bible translations in English – vary greatly in their philosophies of translation. These Bible translations also differ in how well they are understood by Muslims and believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMBs). Over the past fifteen years in the Arab world, we have had the opportunity to watch our local friends interact with several major Arabic translations of the Bible. We have observed that formally equivalent translations (sometimes referred to as ‘literal’ translations) such as the Smith - Van Dyck - Bustani (SVB) were less easily understood by the Yemeni people we worked with than the translations

that tended towards functional equivalence (sometimes referred to as ‘meaning-based’ translations), such as the Today’s Arabic Version (TAV) or the Sharif (SHR). We also noticed that most believers using and providing people with Arabic Bibles had little idea of which translations were available or which Bibles to choose for different circumstances. Sometimes they were not even aware that there were different translations to choose from.

A method of evaluating differences in translation philosophies and level of understandability suggested itself when one of us was recently reading Fee and

Strauss' book, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions*, which compares English Bible translations along a form-function continuum.<sup>1</sup> We decided to apply their method to Arabic translations of the Bible in order to help ourselves and others in ministry to Muslims to choose an Arabic translation in a more informed fashion.

In our experience, few people, even when dealing with Bible translations in their own mother tongue, feel adequately knowledgeable in either biblical languages or the theory of translation to be able to make informed choices about which translation to use in different circumstances. In the sphere of Arabic Bible translations, this situation is compounded by the fact that the majority of people who use the Bible in ministry to Muslims are from non-Arabic-speaking backgrounds. They often base their decisions about translation choice on what other people use, on whether a parallel English translation is included, or even simply on what is available. It is our hope that this brief study will inform and provide an objective way to help in answering the following two questions:

1. Where do the current major Arabic Bible translations fall along the formal equivalent to functional equivalent spectrum?
2. How well are the most widely used Arabic translations understood by our Muslim cousins?

We are aware that emotions sometimes enter into these kinds of discussions and that 'Bible wars' may occur, most commonly with formal equivalence proponents pitching themselves against functional equivalence proponents and vice-versa (often with all too little Christian love in the exchange). In such a polemic environment, let us state our belief upfront, which is that no one Bible translation can meet all the needs for a language community. For those who have not been previously exposed to the Bible, a functionally equivalent translation is useful in order to 'get at the meaning' (unless the language community is so small that all members have access to a trained Bible teacher). On the other hand, for those who are already quite familiar with the Bible, a formally equivalent translation is a useful study aid, especially when accompanied by helps such as those found in Study Bibles. Finally, a mediating translation, which falls somewhere between the two poles of the spectrum, often provides a suitable middle-ground position for many readers.<sup>2</sup> We believe that there is no perfect translation and that there are mistakes in all translations. Yet the Holy Spirit uses these imperfect translations, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit is more crucial to understanding the truths of God than any particular translation.<sup>3</sup>

## Methodology

### The form-function spectrum

In the first stage of this study, twenty-five terms or lexical items were chosen from twenty-three verses in the following five Arabic Bible translations most commonly used in our area: Smith – van Dyck – Bustani (SVB), New Jesuit Version (NJV), New Arabic Version (NAV), Today's Arabic Version (TAV) and the Sharif (SHR). Verses were chosen exclusively from Fee and Strauss' book in order to avoid any bias of verse choice. These verses represent a spectrum of categories relevant to determining where any one translation falls along the formal-functional equivalence spectrum. Some of the categories represented are idioms, implicit/explicit information, genitive constructions and technical or theological terms. Further research might make use of additional categories and verses.

After choosing which terms to examine, we placed each translation in its place along the form-function continuum in the following manner: first, each verse in each translation was marked as to whether it represented a formal or functional translation of that term. The number of verses were then tallied and the translation was placed in its appropriate position along the

formal equivalence-functional equivalence continuum.<sup>4</sup>

**Understandability: correct, wrong or unknown meaning**

### The interviewees

After classifying the verses according to formal or functional equivalence, we elicited local input, through one to three-hour interviews with nine native Yemeni Arabic speakers. Interviewees were chosen for their willingness to be interviewed on questions relating to the Bible. Although we attempted to interview Yemenis from a wide range of educational levels, all interviewees had an educational level well above the norm for typical Yemenis – either formally or through extensive reading and self-study. All except for two of the interviewees had graduated from university or were currently enrolled as students. One was a university professor. All were in their twenties and thirties and only one was a woman. As a group, our respondents also had had more contact with Christians and the Bible than is common for Yemenis as a whole: all but one had had some prior contact with Christians and only two had not had any contact with Scripture before (through reading the Bible, Internet, radio, talking to Christians, etc); three were BMBs.

## Conducting the interviews

We and several other non-native Arabic speakers conducted the interviews. During the interviews, we initially looked at one term at a time in each of the different translations. However, we quickly discovered that with each translation following on so closely from the other, there was a lot of learning that took place as each successive translation of a term was encountered, so, as it turned out, we were not actually measuring how well a term was being communicated by each successive translation. Therefore, we chose to conduct the interviews by focusing on one translation at a time to avoid as much as possible this carry-over effect. Also, since our experience has shown us that as a general rule the more functionally equivalent translations tend to com-

municate meaning (whether it be correct or incorrect) more clearly than formally equivalent ones, we ordered the presentation of translations in our interviews from the formally-equivalent to the more functionally-equivalent versions, again in order to avoid influencing understanding as much as possible. The interviewee was given each term in the context of the immediate sentence or two in Scripture, to provide an adequate point of reference, and asked to explain how he or she understood its meaning. The interviewer immediately recorded the answer on a form provided, either in Arabic or translated into English. Then after working through each term for that translation version, the same process was repeated for each successive version.

**Table 1: Example from Respondent Form**

| VERSION: NJV |                          |              |                                             |             | INTERVIEWEE # 1                                     |   |   |   |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Verse        | English back-translation | Word         | Correct meaning                             | Original    |                                                     | C | W | U |
| Matt. 7:29   | Their scribes            | كُتِبَتَهُم  | Scribes (scholars & authorities on the Law) | Γραμματεῖς  | Like the SVB: someone who writes, clerk / secretary |   | I |   |
| 2 Kings 2:7  | The sons of the prophets | بني الأنبياء | Sons of the prophets (prophets' guild)      | בני הנביאים | Like the SVB: sons of the prophets (اولاد)          |   | I |   |

**C = Correct meaning; W = wrong meaning; U = unclear meaning**

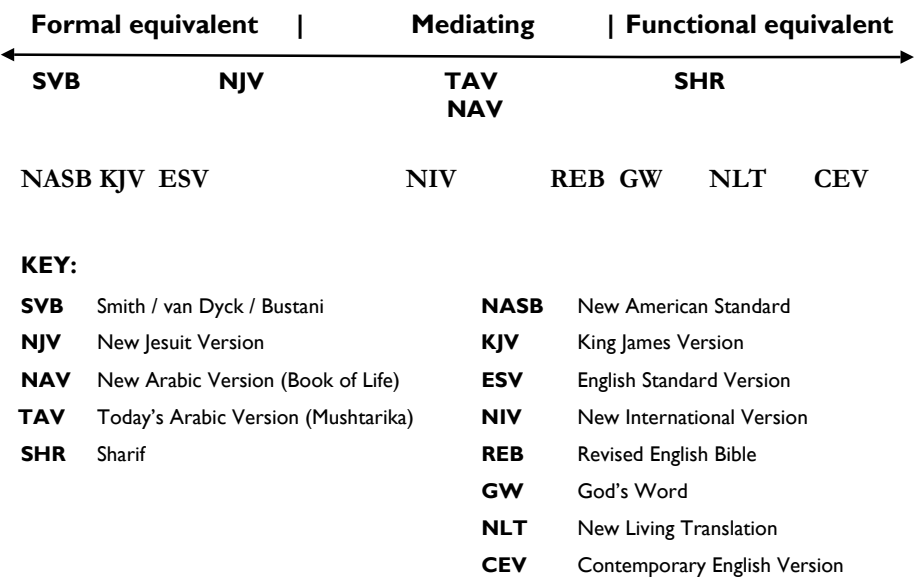
How results were evaluated

Results were tabulated on a spreadsheet and evaluated to determine whether answers conveyed a correct meaning, wrong meaning or a lack of understanding (see example in *Table 1* above). Some recorded answers were unclear to us due to inadequate recording, and were discarded. Finally, to check whether there might be bias of the researcher in assessing answers

from different translations or from different respondents, one of the authors randomly selected fifty answers from the various translations and respondents and reassessed how the original tabulator (the other author) would evaluate them as to understandability. In every case the answer was reassessed into the same category as that into which it had originally been placed.

Figure 1: Main Arabic Translations<sup>5</sup>

(English version in alternate font for comparison)



Results

Formal – functional equivalence range

As can be seen from the form-function continuum in *Figure 1* above which includes the English translations beneath

the Arabic ones for comparison, and the following summary *Table 2* on next page, the five Arabic translations appear to fall along a fairly broad range of the spectrum from Formal Equivalence (the SVB

and NJV translations) through Mediating (the NAV and TAV) to Functional Equivalence (the SHR translation). Based on Fee and Strauss' definitions, the SVB is an extremely formal equivalent translation, roughly equivalent to the NASB and KJV/ NKJV in English<sup>6</sup>; the NAV and TAV translations fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, rather like the English NIV; and the SHR is the sole functional equivalent translation (falling somewhere between the GW and NLT in English).

### Communicativeness: Getting at the Correct Meaning

Now as interesting and as potentially useful as these results may be, the truly striking thing we discovered is not where any one translation falls along the formal-functional spectrum,

**Table 3**  
**Translation**  
**Communicativeness**

| Version    | %<br>Correct | %<br>Wrong | %<br>Unclear |
|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| <b>SVB</b> | 11           | 55         | 34           |
| <b>NJV</b> | 27           | 53         | 19           |
| <b>NAV</b> | 37           | 54         | 9            |
| <b>TAV</b> | 49           | 43         | 8            |
| <b>SHR</b> | 72           | 19         | 9            |
| <b>all</b> | <b>39</b>    | <b>45</b>  | <b>16</b>    |

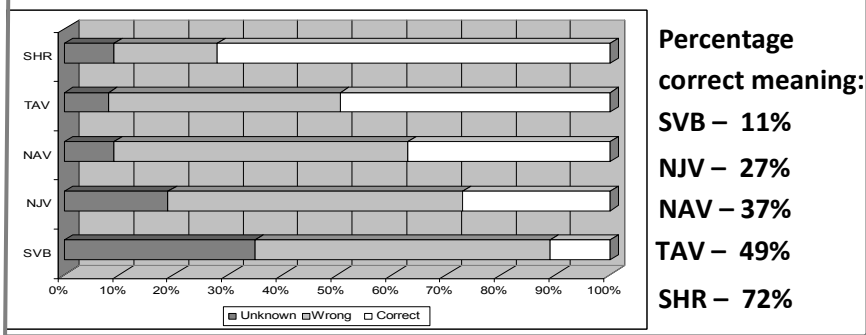
**Table 2**  
**Formal / Functional Equivalence**

| Version                       | Formally<br>equivalent<br>verses | Functionally<br>equivalent<br>verses |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>SVB</b>                    | 24                               | 1                                    |
| <b>NJV</b>                    | 18                               | 7                                    |
| <b>NAV</b>                    | 12                               | 13                                   |
| <b>TAV</b>                    | 12                               | 13                                   |
| <b>SHR</b>                    | 7                                | 18                                   |
| <b>Formal Equivalence</b>     |                                  |                                      |
| <b>Mediating</b>              |                                  |                                      |
| <b>Functional Equivalence</b> |                                  |                                      |

but rather how often the translations fail to communicate correct meaning. As we see in *Table 3* (above) and *Figure 2* (next page), figures range from 55% wrong and 34% unclear meaning for the SVB to 19% wrong and 9% unclear for the SHR, based on the terms examined in this study.

This failure to communicate correct meaning is especially noteworthy when we recall that our local informants were far more educated and biblically literate than the average person in Yemen, suggesting that the average person might understand even fewer of the verses. From *Figure 2* we can see that although

**Figure 2: Arabic Translations - Charted for Meaning**

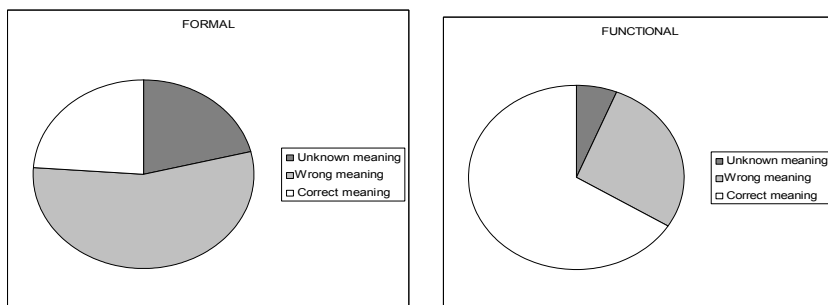


none of the translations can claim boasting rights to a high percentage of correct meaning, we do observe a fairly broad range in how accurate the translations are: the SVB has the smallest percentage of correct meaning at 11%, while the Sharif has the highest at 72%.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, we see wrong and unknown renderings are not just found not in one type of translation, but in both formal and functional types of translations (see Figure 3 below). However, less *wrong meaning* arises from the functional side of the spec-

trum for, after all, the purpose of a functional equivalent translation is to clearly communicate meaning. We also see from the chart that the lion's share of *unknown meaning* comes from the formal equivalent translations (at roughly 20% versus 6% for the functional equivalent translations), especially the SVB. This is also not too surprising as these translations often use foreign grammar and construction, as well as rare lexical items, including borrowings from Greek and Syriac and literal idioms and metaphors which rarely communicate cross-linguistically.

**Figure 3: Meaningfulness of Formal and Functional**



## Discussion

### Possibilities for improving the study

As we mentioned above, our first goal in conducting this study was to find an objective way to evaluate Arabic Bible translations. We can see from the limited data in this study that the placement of Arabic translations along the form-function scale is as we saw in *Figure 1*, and that the understandability of Arabic translations is rather poor, especially in the more formal equivalent translations. However, there are a number of things we should consider. First, the number of terms examined and respondents interviewed in our study was quite low, with the latter representing a very small segment of the population. A greater number and variety of both verses and interviewees would have provided broader results, but this is difficult to do in Yemen due to people's reluctance to be interviewed or to approach the Bible.

With regards to the placement of the Arabic Bible translations along the form-function continuum, our experience would have us place both the NJV and the SHR more to the left on the scale than our study results show. The NJV should be placed near the SVB, with the SHR at the Mediating/Functional border in the region of the English REB. Further study utilizing a broader range of verses should clarify this situation.

As for our pool of interviewees, study results were obtained from a small group of fairly narrowly defined Yemeni Arabic speakers, and extrapolation can only be tentative. We expect that less educated Yemenis, which would include most women, would understand even less of the Bible than our group of respondents did, and many would be completely unable to read the text, as many Yemenis are illiterate. On the other hand, we would not be surprised to find greater understanding of these Bible translations in other areas of the Arab world that enjoy higher levels of literacy and greater exposure to Christians and Christian teaching.

Some answers received in the study were inadequately recorded and were therefore discarded from the data. This problem could have been resolved through better selection and training of interviewers in eliciting clear, useful data. We noticed, for example, that some interviewers accepted an answer such as 'he gave him another heart' for the Hebrew idiom (*wa yahafakh-lo lev 'akher*) 'he gave him another heart,' rather than asking the further question, 'What do you understand to be meant by that?' Although some interviewers could be easily trained to go that extra mile to elicit more useful data, others were naturals and knew intuitively how to 'get at the meaning' of what was in the head of the respondent. Another useful step would have been to make

audio recordings of the interviews, if interviewees were to allow this.

As verses were chosen exclusively from Fee and Strauss's book, the results obviously do not represent the level of understanding of the entire Bible by an individual. Verses were chosen by Fee and Strauss as those which are often more difficult to understand in an English translation; this does not necessarily reflect those verses difficult for Yemeni Arabic speakers, nor does it reflect the difficulty of the Bible as a whole. There was also no attempt to evaluate understanding of different genres (e.g. narrative in contrast to poetry or persuasive material).

### **Some general observations**

The method of starting with all of the terms from one translation and then moving on to the next translation was designed to reduce the amount of carry-over from translation to translation, but some carry-over did inevitably happen. It is possible that as individuals were exposed to different versions of the same verse, 'learning' of meaning occurred, and a portion of the increase in understanding from form-based translations to meaning-based occurred because of the order in which the versions were presented. Support of this possibility might include the comment of one respondent on a later translation, 'So that's what that meant.' However, in such cases we found that when a formal equivalent translation then followed a functional one, rather

than giving what they now understood to be the correct meaning, they would say something like 'this one is like the SVB.'

People are problem-solving creatures. Each individual tried to find meaning in each text, sometimes making multiple hypotheses for possible meanings (e.g. 'the Pharisees must be a group from one village or place named Pharis and the tax collectors [عشار] are from another place). On occasions where the text made no sense to the interviewee, the explanation given was that either a word was unfamiliar or that the combination of words did not make sense given the usual meaning of the words as the individual understood them. However, most individuals tried to derive meaning from what they were reading, often thinking about the verse for some time. In Exodus 34.13, for example, destroying Asherahs is spoken of. The NJV uses a word for *Asherahs* that means 'tent pegs' to our respondents. This led to misunderstandings such as 'the tent pegs which they worship,' or 'holy stakes? How can they be holy?' or, 'This answer is completely different [from SVB]. It means tent pegs...The things you thought were fixed and depending on, get pulled up ...maybe 'holy' should be taken sarcastically?' This last example highlights how our interviewees intelligently tried to understand what they were given, even giving abstract meaning to verses which otherwise seemed to make no sense. Interest-

ingly, education level within our group (of highly educated people) did not correlate with higher levels of understanding: the most highly educated member of our sample, who had one of the highest levels of exposure to Scripture, misunderstood about an average amount. On the other hand, the three BMBs (among them the two least educated members of our sample) had by far the highest understanding of these Bible verses, even though they did not have the greatest exposure to Scripture or to Christians. It is likely that these believers had learned relevant Bible background and cultural information through their fellow believers that, in conjunction with the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, enabled them to correctly interpret texts that would otherwise be obscure.

### **Misunderstanding due to world view differences**

One thing that became very clear in people's responses to the verses was how strong the tendency is to base understanding of new material on previous knowledge and beliefs arising out of one's experience and world view. For example, in 2 Kings 2:7 the Hebrew refers to 'sons of the prophets' meaning a group of prophets from the company, or guild, of prophets (English translations NIB and NAB). This is literally translated in the Arabic SVB, NJV and NAV, and meaningfully as 'a group of prophets' in TAV and SHR. The only individu-

als in our sample who understood the correct meaning, even when reading the meaningful translation, were the three BMBs. In Islam, only one prophet is understood to be in the world at any particular time, so our Islamic respondents could not imagine there could be such a thing as a group of prophets. They therefore made the best sense they could of the passage, understanding it to mean either offspring of prophets or followers of prophets. This is an issue of world-view difference between the Islamic understanding of the world and the biblical one, rather than a translation issue.

Another example of how the Islamic world view prevails in Muslim reading of Scripture is the near universal misunderstanding of 'the righteousness of God' in Romans 1:17. In the original text, this refers to how God imputes righteousness to people, accepts them and includes them into his covenant community, but it was almost universally understood by our respondents to be related to people's obedience to God, to our correct behaviour in following his laws.<sup>10</sup> Such misunderstandings of meaning will occur in any translation, regardless of translation philosophy. Teaching from believers (whether in person or in footnotes, by radio, or other books or tapes) is most likely to overcome this.

## Conclusion

In spite of some of the weaknesses of this study that we have mentioned above, we nevertheless feel that we have made some progress towards evaluating Arabic Bible translations in a systematic and informed way. We also hope that our research will help readers to make a more informed choice on appropriate translations for communicating with our Muslim friends.

We were unable to evaluate in our research the recently-published inter-

pretive reading of the Gospels and Acts entitled *The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ*. This project was done by CBBs and BMBs working in collaboration with open-minded Muslim academics.<sup>11</sup> We expect that this text will fall further to the right on the form-function continuum than the Sharif. If it is easily understood by our Muslim friends, then this may provide yet another good option for our ministry toolbox.

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## Endnotes

1 Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

2 Fee and Strauss, p. 26, state, Formal equivalence, also known as "literal" or "word-for-word" translation, seeks to retain the *form* of the Hebrew or Greek while producing basically understandable English. This goal is pursued for both words and grammar..... functional equivalence, also known as idiomatic or meaning-based translation, seeks to reproduce its meaning in good idiomatic English. *Functional equivalence* was originally called *dynamic equivalence*.... Advocates of functional equivalence stress that the translation should sound as clear and natural to the contemporary reader as the original text sounded to the original readers.' For a more detailed discussion see the book.

3 Note, for instance, the many biblical authors' references to the Old Testament in which they quote the Greek Septuagint rather than the original Hebrew. Matthew, for example, in chapter 12, verse 21 of his Gospel, quotes the Septuagint translation for Isaiah 42:4 rather than giving his own Greek translation of the Hebrew original.

4 Determining whether any particular translation represents a formal or functional equivalent of the original term is usually quite straightforward, e.g., the NAV translation

الأنبياء بني

'the sons of the prophets' for *bene hanavi'iim* 'the sons of the prophets' (referring to the prophet's guild) is clearly formally equivalent, whereas the SHR translation جماعة الأنبياء 'the group of the prophets' is clearly functionally equivalent. However, sometimes the determination is not so easy. For example, the SVB translation of Pilate's

rhetorical question, Μητι εγω Ιουδαιος  
'Am I a Jew,' is

ألعلى أنا يهودي

'Am I perhaps a Jew'. Although not completely a word-for-word translation, it is nonetheless clearly not a functionally equivalent translation (which would be something along the lines of 'I am not a Jew') and was marked in this study as being formally equivalent to the original.

5 Placements for English versions along the spectrum taken from Fee & Strauss, 2007.

6 KJV and SVB can also be equated in their use of language not currently in common parlance, in the fact that both are based on the Erasmus Greek translation tradition rather than the more common NA27/UBS4, and also in how some groups who have traditionally used them hold firmly to the translation as sacred, the only 'true Bible'.

7 Interestingly, for the three BMBs, the NAV had the highest understanding rate at 65%. Our suspicion is that this might be due to the fact that the majority of non-native Arabic-speaking church planters (at least those we've come across in our fifteen years of ministry in Yemen) tend to use this version in their work, resulting in the NAV being the familiar one to most BMBs.

8 One example, offered by Rick Brown in an email communication, is Mark 1:9 which says in ESV 'In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.' Arabic does not have a passive construction

with an agent, but SVB tried to create one:

واعتمد من يوحنا في الأردن

'and (Jesus) leaned away from John in Jordan.'

9 A few examples of these loan words are *karaza* 'to preach' from the Greek *kerûsso*, *nâmûs* 'the Law (of Moses)' from the Greek *nomos*, and *malakût* 'kingdom' from the Syriac *malkût*, even though in Arabic *malakût* means 'sovereignty'.

10 Example responses: 'Righteousness is what God announces about how we behave,' 'how people become obedient,' 'obedience to God,' 'In the *Injeel* (Gospel), the obedience to God is revealed,' 'God explained how a person can become obedient,' 'how God gives to man filial obedience from his works,' 'God reveals what people can do to be righteous before him (the way of the righteous),' 'God announces how we can be righteous, walk in duty,' 'God showed us how he can consider us to be righteous (if we follow his laws).' One person said, 'righteousness (of God) which we present to him through our obedience. The word "God" not important - it just clarifies "godly righteousness". We obey him in godly righteousness.'

11 المعنى الصحيح لإنجيل المسيح can be ordered through the following website: [www.al-kalima.com](http://www.al-kalima.com). It can also be purchased directly from this online bookstore: <http://www.adabwafan.com/display/product.asp?id=61495>.