

Initial Response to Reading *The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ*

by Phillip Drapper

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I received a copy of *The True Meaning of the Gospel of Christ* in May when it was distributed at the national book fair in the country where I work. I had heard that sales were very good and was very interested in reading it because it had created a little controversy among the workers. What follows is not a book review as such, but an initial reaction to the publication. My goals in writing this are to lay out some issues for future discussion. Since I have gone over the translation quickly and have only read some of the articles, I feel that this is all I can do at the moment.

My first comment on the book relates to its format. It is not just a translation of the Gospels and Acts, but it also contains articles on a variety of subjects, mostly relating to concepts and objections that Muslims have concerning the Bible. This, I believe, is an excellent idea. I have always tried to get Muslims to read one of the Gospels and to pray that God would reveal Himself to them. While in most cases I would still just give an individual Gospel to a seeker, I might use a book like this for someone who has serious questions about Christ.

As I look at the titles of the articles, I am very impressed in that they almost all answer questions that Muslims ask about the New Testament. For example: 'The Concept of Inspiration in Christianity and Islam', 'The relationship of the Messiah to God' and 'The Meaning of the Phrase "Son of God"'. The only other issue I can think of that should be covered would be that of Israel in the Bible versus modern-day Israel. There are a few articles that deal with things that do not normally trouble Muslims, but in general I can't disagree with the selection of topics. What needs to be determined, though, is how well the volume accomplishes its goal. The articles themselves also need further analysis: how true are they to New Testament theology? I felt that the article on the Kingdom of God was very good but I need to look more closely at some of the others.

I do, however, have two concerns after reading this translation. The first deals with the way that *salaam alayhu* (peace be upon him) is written after the names of prophets and *salaamahu alayna* (his peace be upon us) is written after the name of Jesus. While I have heard that some people are against this for theological reasons, I

am more concerned about how this might be perceived by readers. I applaud the fact that the translators want to show that Jesus is unique, but this is done in a way that the biblical writers clearly do not do. In fact, it seems almost gimmicky to me. I would raise the question for further discussion: does this add anything to the translation? Will this make Muslims more receptive to reading it?

The other concern deals with the translation of the terms 'Son of God' and 'Father.' 'Son of God' is translated *habib Allah al-wahid* ('the unique beloved of God') or just 'Messiah'. In John 1:18 the term *ibn Allah* appears in the actual translation, so it is not true that the term is totally removed from the translation. Actually, there is a footnote explaining the translation of *ibn allah* as *habib Allah al-wahid* in John 1:18. Also there is an article in the volume about 'Son of God.' The article correctly links the term to the chosen King in the line of David. However, at the end of the article, there is a very strong statement: 'The expression "Son of God" simply means "the awaited messiah" or "Glorious King", nothing more and nothing less.' The adding of 'nothing more or nothing less' seems to minimize the richness of the meaning of both 'Messiah' and 'Son of God'. An interesting recent treatment of the term appears in chapter 14 of Gordon Fee's *Pauline Christology*. I realize that this is dealing with Paul, but you see the same development in the Gospels, especially in John.

This seems to me to present problems for translating certain passages. In Paul, we see a lot of emphasis on the concept of 'Eternal Son of God', especially in Ephesians. How can we eliminate father/son terminology from verses like Ephesians 1:2-3, 4:13 and 6:7, 23? It seems like when you come to Paul, you have to return to sonship language.

In the present volume there is another place where I think it doesn't work at all. Matthew 28:19 is translated *taharuhum bilma' bism allah wa masiihi wa ruuhihi ilqadus* (cleanse them with water in the name of God, His Messiah, and His Holy Spirit). This seems to be a deliberate attempt to eliminate proto-trinitarian language. Not only are Father and Son eliminated, but possessive pronouns are added before Messiah and Holy Spirit. I understand what the translators are trying to do, but this is very radical. Hopefully, they were consulting NT scholars as they were doing this. Why not leave the term 'Son of God' in the translation and include the article in the appendix?

Also, the word 'father' is translated *wali* instead of *ab* which is found in most other Arabic translations. Of course these terms can be used interchangeably, but they do have slightly different nuances. The term *wali* has a nuance of having authority or responsibility over another; whereas the term *ab* has a nuance of love and intimacy. I have had Arabs say that *wali* is not so shocking for Muslims whereas *Ab* is very shocking.

However, I have found that Muslims who come to faith in Jesus are very drawn to the concept of God as a loving father. Could this lead to misunderstand in people's minds? If I believe that a word means one thing, while the person I am talking to attaches another meaning to it, we are not really communicating.

Let me state in conclusion that this is just my initial reaction to the volume. I look forward to reading it in more depth in the coming months. Also let me say that the translators have done a lot of good things as well. The pre-existence of Christ is very clear in John 1. John 14 is also clear about Jesus being the only way to approach the Father. My prayer is that some of the people who read this book will be drawn to faith, commitment and a personal relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I was asked by a person involved in the translation how I could see this book being used. I told him that there were first of all some limitations on it just because of the format. It could never be used as a Bible for a church or small group. I think this will remain true even when the whole New Testament is completed. I see its use as being quite limited. If I was talking to someone about Christ and I felt that the person was a sincere seeker who had serious intellectual questions about the Gospel, I would maybe give him this book. I would, however, have to be convinced that he would read it. Otherwise, I would just give him a Gospel of Luke. My main hope for the volume is that people who have no contact with believers will purchase it at a book fair or in a shop and that through this book, they will encounter the Living Christ.