

## RECLAIMING THE STRAIGHT PATH: AFFIRMING BIBLICAL MONOTHEISM THROUGH AN EXPLORATION OF THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTOLOGY

### *Introduction*

On October 13, 2007, the world's Christian leaders received an open letter from 138 Muslim scholars. This letter, entitled "A Common Word Between Us And You", was a call for Muslims and Christians to come together and seek common ground. The letter addressed the two greatest commands in the Bible, to love God and to love one's neighbor. These commands, according to the letter, are central to both faiths. "A Common Word" also stressed the critical importance of such an endeavor at this time in history due to the current climate in which we live: "without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians"<sup>1</sup>

One interesting facet of the letter is an invitation to the Christian community to return to the monotheism of its past if in fact it has left. How much of the current Islamic understanding regarding Christianity's diversion from monotheism is rooted in what *was* practiced in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia and that *did* emphasize extra-biblical views? And how much of this understanding is due to a Christianity that quickly left its home in Jerusalem and within a short amount of time had penetrated the Greco-Roman cultural basin which had its own emphases, cares, and concerns effusing itself in certain doctrines which have amalgamated over the centuries? It is the author's contention that interfaith dialogue would be more successful if Muslims were to encounter Christians practicing a faith rooted in 1<sup>st</sup> century Biblical language

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<sup>1</sup> *A Common Word Between Us and You*. (2007, October 13). Retrieved on June 23, 2008, from <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=downloads>

and understanding. To realize this possibility, Christians must be willing to table discussion of later theological developments within Christianity especially speculation about Jesus' nature and instead subsist within the Biblical context and language that gave birth to some of these later developments.

This paper will endeavor to show that Biblical faith is monotheistic and loving God and loving one's neighbor has been one of the most relevant themes within all of the Biblical prophets from Adam to Jesus. This paper will seek to define monotheism, discover the meaning of Jesus' controversial title, Son of God, and consider the interfaith implications of these findings for future dialogue, understanding, and cooperation between Muslims and Christians.

### ***Monotheism Defined***

Monotheism in its most general sense means exactly what it says, belief in one God. Monotheism is not reserved solely for the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; however, this paper will limit itself to the Abrahamic faiths, with special emphasis on Christianity and Islam.

#### *I. Biblical Monotheism*

Biblical monotheism finds its beginning within the Creation story itself. God, singular, is the Creator of all that is. Through God's spoken word all things are created. In Genesis chapter one there is a series of creative events beginning with a similar phrase, "And God said" (Ge 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, and 24). There are many other references to monotheism in the Old Testament, I will refer to two prominent ones: the first and second of the Ten Commandments as well as the *sh'ma*.

In the Ten Commandments, the first five commands God gives to the Israelites are regarding belief, worship, and service to Him alone. Here are the first two,

“You shall have no other gods before me. “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me<sup>2</sup>

These commands do not necessarily say that there are no other gods in existence; however, Israel is to only serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is evident throughout the Biblical narrative that at times some Israelites may have considered God to be a local God who blessed them and belonged to them alone. However, from the creation event to God’s promise to Abraham, to the Psalms of David, and many of the utterances of the Prophets, there is stronger evidence to support the fact that God is the God of all the Earth, the Creator, Sustainer, and Lord of all, whether the Israelites and the nations realize this fact or not<sup>3</sup>.

The second reference to monotheism I would like to speak on is found in the *sh'ma* which states, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."<sup>4</sup> The significance of the *sh'ma* in Israel’s history can be described as the closest that “early Judaism came to the formulation of a creed.”<sup>5</sup> Orthodox Jews continue to this day to recite the *sh'ma* twice daily, once in the morning and once in the night. This is how they continually place themselves under the sovereignty of God. God’s covenant conditions with Israel can be summed up with the *sh'ma* because God is a jealous God and requires complete and whole-hearted devotion to Him alone.

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Bible are from *The Holy Bible : New International Version*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.), Ex 20:2-5

<sup>3</sup> See Ge 3:15, 12:3; Ps 2:8, 67:2-4; Is 2:2; Jer 3:17; Ez 39:27; Dan 7:14; Mi 4:2-3; Zech 9:10

<sup>4</sup> Deut 6:4-5

<sup>5</sup> Daniel I. Bock, “How Many is God?: An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4-5,” *Journal of the Evangelical Society* June (2004): 193-212

Therefore monotheism is truly connected to Kingdom language, for to profess belief and devotion to one God, is to come under His rule and His reign and to embody His values and purposes.

In reading the Common Word document this same theme is apparent. The prophets called people back to the worship, devotion, and love of the Most High God, and to His worship and rule alone. Thus, the document is also a welcome to Christians to return to monotheism (again, if they have left). Jesus' own statement strikes similar chords, when in response to a question of which commandment is most important, he replies,

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus begins his response with the *sh'ma*, “God is one LORD”, and proceeds to state a summary of Mankind's relationship to God. The second commandment is love for one's neighbor which in fact sums up commandments five through ten (Mt 22:40). The overarching theme of Islam greatly resembles this teaching of Jesus'.

## *II. Islamic Monotheism*

One subject that arises within dialogue between Muslims and Christians is prophethood and its connection to a continual call to monotheism, “For We assuredly sent amongst every

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<sup>6</sup> Mk 12:28-31

People a messenger, (with the Command), "Serve Allah, and eschew Evil.""<sup>7</sup> Considering the *sh'ma's* close similarity to the Islamic creed, the *shahada*, one must recognize the significance of reciting this as part of converting to Islam as well as the Islamic ritual prayers that occur five times daily.

This continuity between the prophets incorporates the Holy Books as well, as far as Muhammad understood, the Torah, the Gospels, and the Quran must be read as a single, cohesive narrative about humanity's relationship to God, in which the prophetic consciousness of one prophet is passed spiritually to the next: from Adam to Muhammad.<sup>8</sup>

This statement finds its basis in the Qur'an in Aal-E-Imran 3:84:

Say: "We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in (the Books) given to Moses, Jesus, and the prophets, from their Lord: We make no distinction between one and another among them, and to Allah do we bow our will (in Islam)."<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, it is clear that every prophet, from Adam to Muhammad, contained the same message of belief and devotion to the one God, God Most High. This means that the entire compendium of Holy Books falls under this theme of returning and submission. Not only this, but that God was gracious enough to send a prophet to every people with the same message of monotheism.

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<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Qur'an translations are from *The Qur'an: A Translation*. (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Trans.). (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 2000), S. 16:36.

<sup>8</sup> Reza Aslan, *No god but God* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 99

<sup>9</sup> S. 3:84.

### *III. Monotheism Refined*

What role might Islam and Christianity play in refining both respective faiths? Does interfaith dialogue contribute in any way to this refinement? It is quite possible that both faiths in their endeavor to maintain true monotheism, have overlooked the practical side to this commitment. Namely, there may be present blind spots where false gods have crept in unnoticed by most believers. Some of these gods are not in idol form, nor are they worshipped as a deity per say, but in practice, they are just as powerful in their ability to entice and draw people away from devotion to God alone. A few such examples would be humanism, materialism, traditionalism, and the love of money. If our argument remains solely at the theological level we may miss the fact that the greater sin will be the practice of turning from the one true God and instead declaring ourselves either self-reliant or reliant on other means besides the one God. According to the Qur'an, Muslims and Christians are to vie with one another in good works<sup>10</sup>; this is a great place to start and something that should not be missed within the overarching dialogue regarding monotheism. Secondly, it is apparent both historically as well as presently that some Christians *have* erred in practice, speech, and thinking into either bi or tri-theism and need to return to the earlier language of the Bible to understand the theological developments regarding Jesus' nature so that they can give Jesus his proper place within Christian faith and witness.

#### *The Son of God Controversy*

In interfaith dialogue, one of the most oft repeated differences that Muslims and Christians will cite as an example of the divide between Islam and Christianity is that Islam teaches Jesus was a prophet while Christianity teaches he is the Son of God. From the Muslim

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<sup>10</sup> S. 5:48

perspective, underlying this claim is a belief that Islam has maintained its devotion to monotheism while Christianity has strayed into polytheism with its belief in Jesus as God's literal or spiritual son. Yet, is this really true? Has Christianity left its monotheistic heritage in Judaism and ventured beyond with its understanding of Jesus' nature? Or could it be said that Islam in general is rejecting a belief that true Biblical faith would reject as well? Kenneth Cragg is convinced that true Biblical Christianity can be nothing other than monotheistic,

We cannot proceed except on the understanding that we are both firmly and equally believers that God is one. We both stand squarely in the Hebrew tradition: "The Lord our Lord is One Lord." We are not discussing theism and tritheism. Christianity is concerned only with the first.<sup>11</sup>

How much of this current misunderstanding is due to a variant form of Christianity that was practiced in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia that did believe in a literal "son of god?" How much is due to a linguistic and translation issue—meaning, the references in the Bible to "son of god" when translated and spoken statically, convey only one meaning in the Arabic language, a literal meaning? And, how much is due to a Christianity that is practiced today, that in fact has slipped into bitheism or tritheism? The author suggests that two changes in perspective are needed: A deeper connection for Christians with Muslims and their highest source of authority, the Qur'an. Christians should specifically be able to discern Muslim sensitivities to the divine unity as well as the Qur'an's teaching regarding the son of God title. And secondly, Christians need to grow in their knowledge and practice of early Christianity's faith and its language used to describe Jesus' nature and how this theology developed into what we now know popularly as the doctrine of the Trinity.

### *I. Understanding the Islamic Rejection*

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 3<sup>rd</sup> eds. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 279

In this section we will explore the reasons behind why the title “son of God” is considered as *shirk* by Islam as well as explore the source of Islam’s greatest authority, the Qur’an, to see what it has to say regarding this title. I will say at the outset that this topic consists of a complex web of intricacies from theological speech anchored within two very different cultural basins (Semitic and Greek/Western), to considering how a transcendent God reveals Himself to His creation.

It is important to understand what the Qur’an actually says about the title, Son of God, and then to understand how these passages have led Muslims to repudiate this title as evidence of corruption.

The Qur’an presents two arguments against the designation “son of god”, “...Say not "Trinity": desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son...”<sup>12</sup> The first contention is that such a description challenges God’s divine unity, His oneness. The second is a denial of a literal interpretation of sonship, meaning that God had relations with Mary and produced Jesus. Another verse gives further clarification, “They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One Allah...”<sup>13</sup> and,

And behold! Allah will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah?" He will say: "Glory to Thee! never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart, Thou I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all that is hidden."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> S. 4:171.

<sup>13</sup> S. 5:73

<sup>14</sup> S. 5:116

The first passage strongly disputes that Allah is one of three gods. The latter finds Jesus refuting a command supposedly given by himself to his followers to worship him and his mother as gods. According to Islam, this tri-theistic view puts God's unity and character at stake. Islam states that God is not one of three gods nor has He ever had relations with a female in order to produce some sort of demigod. To most present day Christians, once the Islamic perspective is understood, it becomes apparent that Islam is not abandoning the Biblical Jesus, but rather a title that means something completely different from its original Biblical context. But regardless of this original meaning in the Bible the problem still remains. One reason is due to the fact that Christians also do not use son of God language in its original context. In fact, many Christians believe that part of their duty to God in fulfilling the commission that Jesus gave his disciples (Mt 28:18-19) is to convince Muslims that Jesus is in fact the son of God and that this title is a sign of Jesus' divinity. According to one popular Christian view, once Muslims accept this, they are on their way to eternal life.

It must be understood that the Muslim resistance to the son of God title is really a defense of monotheism. There are a number of heretical nuances within at least one expression of Christianity that Islam seeks to correct. It is true that Islam corrects these heresies; however, it is yet to be proved that Biblical faith actually ever proposed these beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Some of these nuances are expressed in arguments such as if Jesus was God and if Jesus died on the cross, then God died on the cross. And taken to its logical conclusion, how could God die on the cross and be buried for three days? There is a heresy that arose in the early Church called *patripassianism* which did state that God suffered on the cross. This was a heresy and the Qur'an rightly reproves it, however, this was also renounced by Christian Orthodoxy as well. Another common nuance is that Jesus, Mary, and God are all separately worshipped as gods. However, this belief

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<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (Rockport, MA: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 133

is not found within the Bible, nor is it an Orthodox position regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. According to Geoffrey Parrinder, there was such a heresy being practiced in Arabia by the Collyridians who had exalted Mary in “unseemly fashion”,<sup>16</sup> and it is possible it was this heresy which Islam disputes. Regarding most of Islam’s corrections, Parrinder states that one of true Biblical faith should join Muslims in correcting such teachings, “The notion of three gods is as offensive to Christianity as to Islam. Christianity claims to be monotheistic, to believe in one God only.”<sup>17</sup>

The second concern is a literal interpretation of “son of god” to mean that God, in human terms, had relations with Mary and produced a god-like progeny in Jesus. Not only does this still offend the sense of divine unity, but now also offends the very character and righteousness of God Himself. So whether this renunciation is evidence of a cultural and linguistic misunderstanding or is in fact correcting a Christian heresy practiced locally in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia, this does not reflect on actual Biblical teaching. Parrinder is sympathetic to the Muslim concern,

But the objection to the use of the word ‘son’ remains against the background of Arabian paganism, to which it ‘could only mean one thing, namely, the son of God by cohabitation with a woman. That this is not what Christians meant by the term goes without saying.’<sup>18</sup>

Parrinder attributes the rejection of this term predominately to the sensitivity of having just come out of paganism. If Christians do not take care in how they communicate this doctrine, they can very easily trigger the very sensitivities that would suggest a belief in three gods which strikes familiar chords within Arabia’s pagan past as well as amongst the Greeks and Romans of

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 135

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 134

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 128

antiquity. Many Christians involved in interfaith dialogue have also mentioned various linguistic difficulties in translating the term from Hebrew or Greek into Arabic, because Arabic only allows for only one sense of sonship in the language, a literal sense.<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Cragg further clarifies the Biblical view,

The terms “Father” and “Son” have no physical significance and are used analogically. The divine solicitude for humankind in ignorance and sin “begets” or generates the activity of redeeming love that is evident in the historic Christ. That “God was in Christ” rather than that “Jesus was God” is the classical expression of this truth.<sup>20</sup>

It is this statement that leads us to Christian language about the doctrine of the Trinity and the use of the title “son of God” which has led to modern day carelessness in its transmission. Have some instances of Christian explanation veered from what Jesus actually taught and instead entered into communication of creedal statements that in many ways have lost their historical bearing? Could it be in cross-cultural communication some of these creedal statements disconnected from their historical process might actually communicate bi or tri-theism that both the Bible and early Christians never intended to communicate? One result of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims is a renewed interest in the Biblical and early Christian understanding of this term “son of God.”

## *II. Early Language about Jesus’ Nature*

Many Christians believe that part of their purpose in relating to Muslims is to convince them that Jesus is God. And those who succeed in this endeavor have begun the process of successfully evangelizing the Muslim community. This assumption has led me back to the

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<sup>19</sup> See Rod Cardoza’s paper, “New Paths in Interfaith Dialogue: Understanding Islam from the Light of Earliest Christianity”, *Presented at A Conference on Muslim Peace, Justice, and Interfaith Dialogue* (Washington D.C. 2007). Retrieved on March 2, 2009 from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/390876/New-Paths-in-Interfaith-Dialog>, p. 5

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 3<sup>rd</sup> eds. (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 286

Scriptures to explore the discipline of Christology. This quest has led to a number of questions, including: How did Jews and the early Church understand the title ‘son of God’? Does this term when used in the Bible to describe Jesus intend to place Jesus as second person in the Trinity? And is the communication of creedal fourth century statements regarding Jesus’ nature really the task that God has given His Church? What elements might be missing from this assumption?

In this section, I will seek to discover the 1<sup>st</sup> century meaning of Jesus’ most controversial title: “son of God”, by examining the context of the Bible as well as other early Jewish sources. “Son of God” language can be found in a number of places in the Hebrew Bible, the term is found as some variation of בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים *ben elohim*. And in the Greek, the term “son” or “sons of God” is found as some variance of ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ *ho uios to theo*. Although the most apparent meaning from these passages was messiah or the promised king, could some of these passages be referring to the second person of the Trinity? After considering the immediate context of each passage as well as other uses of the term within the same book and author, it is strongly evident that there is a connection between son of God and the messiah who was the promised king to come from the lineage of King David (i.e. 2 Sa 7:11-16). Although there were other usages such as an angelic being or a reference to believers or the people of Israel, predominately, the term was used in conjunction with christ or messiah<sup>21</sup>.

Indeed the question must be asked, when (if at all) were any of these son of God references referring to the second person of the Trinity? And, if the term son of God was not initially connected to the second person of the Trinity, when did it become so? Is there now more meaning injected within the term than was initially intended? If this is so, then it is

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<sup>21</sup> See Colin Brown’s paper, “Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Ex Audito* 7 (1991), 83-100 and N.T. Wright’s book, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 483-489, 629-631, and 652-653

understandable how references to Jesus as the son of God might lead modern day Christians to see these passages as confirmation of his deity.

In the light of these passages in their context, the title "Son of God" is not in itself a designation of personal deity or an expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead. Indeed, to be a "Son of God" one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God's representative, God's vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God's son.<sup>22</sup>

According to this quote, son of God was to be understood as a title signifying the king as God's agent on earth. Correlating with this view,

One echo in particular must be stressed, and properly understood. Several texts from this period speak of the king as 'son of god'. The use of Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7 is attested at Qumran in a messianic context, and there are other references which show that 'son of god' as a messianic title was known in various circles in this period. But we must stress that in the first century the regular Jewish meaning of this title had nothing to do with an incipient trinitarianism; it referred to the king as Israel's *representative*. Israel was the son of YHWH: the king who would come to take her destiny on himself would share this title.<sup>23</sup>

With this understanding of the 1<sup>st</sup> century use of the term as basically synonymous with messiah or king, what might this then say about the Qur'an's rejection of the term, son of God? Is it rejecting Jesus as messiah and king or is it in fact rejecting a term that as stated previously was

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<sup>22</sup> Colin Brown, "Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Ex Audito* 7 (1991), 83-100

<sup>23</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 485-486

either a linguistic cultural misunderstanding or was a local heretical view that in no way represents the Biblical meaning?

The Qur'an uses the term, المسيح *al-masih*, in reference to Jesus as the promised messiah. This word's root means, "anointed; wiped, clean, smooth."<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note the similarity with the Hebrew term, מָשִׁיחַ *mashiakh*, which means "anointed" or "messiah."<sup>25</sup> Plus, its root, similar to Arabic, means "to smear, anoint, spread a liquid."<sup>26</sup> Although this term finds little flushing out within the Qur'an itself, it is clearly an appropriate title for Jesus. If this is the case that son of God as a title could verily be replaced with a similar title such as messiah or possibly a short clause expressing Jesus as God's promised king, why has there been such resistance from the Christian community in communicating meaning over form? And, how might interfaith dialogue build further understanding regarding what the Bible means by the terms messiah and king?

This brings us to another title that may be more revealing regarding Jesus' nature: Jesus, "the word of God". In order to fully understand this title and its significance, some exploration into the Old Testament and other pre-Christian sources is necessary. In the Old Testament there are a number of ways the Bible uses figurative and imaginative language to describe God's acts of immanence within His Creation while also maintaining His stature of transcendence. Two very important such terms are God's word, דָּבָר *davar* and wisdom, חֵכְמָה *hokmah*. According to Wright,

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<sup>24</sup> Hans Wehr and J. Milton Cowan (ed.), *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1994), 1065

<sup>25</sup> J. Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), H4899

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, H4886

[I]t is that language about angels, about the Shekinah or ‘presence’ of Israel’s god, about Torah, about Wisdom, about the Logos—all of these make their appearances, not as mere fantasy or speculative metaphysics, but as varied (and not always equally successful) attempts to perform a necessary theological task. At one level this task was purely linguistic: speaking of the divine ‘presence’ or ‘word’ enabled one to speak of the one god active in his world without committing the solecism of suggesting that this god was somehow contained within this action, or indeed within the world.<sup>27</sup>

The phrase “And God said” is one example of the creative power of God’s word which spoke Creation into existence and enacted the laws of the created order (Ge 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, and 29). Another important example is found in Genesis 15:1, “The word of the LORD came to Abram”, and again in Genesis 15:4, “Then the word of the LORD came to him.” What is significant about this passage is that after Abraham believes God’s word, Abraham is credited with righteousness (Ge 15:6). Lastly in Exodus 20:18, the context is God speaking from Mount Sinai to His people, however, it is interesting to note what takes place,

“<sup>18</sup>When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance <sup>19</sup>and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 258-259

<sup>28</sup> Ex 20:18-19

According to the imagery in this passage, the people are actually seeing God's word on display. It is not something limited to mere auditory sensation, but rather seen via lightning and smoke as well.<sup>29</sup>

God's wisdom is also depicted in various figurative ways which once again seek to preserve God's transcendence while relating His immanence within Creation. In Proverbs 3:19, Jeremiah 10:12 and 51:15, God's wisdom is active in the creation of the earth. The context does not in any way mean that there is a second being called "Wisdom" who is cooperating with God in creating the earth. It is merely a figurative expression that preserves God's otherness while also displaying His creative presence within history.<sup>30</sup>

Lastly, in Wisdom 18:14-16, again there is powerful imagery of God's word leaping "down from heaven out of thy royal throne"<sup>31</sup> and shown as "a fierce man of war...And brought thine unfeigned commandment as a sharp sword."<sup>32</sup> God's word is also depicted as having been suspended between God and His creation, where it "touched the heaven, but it stood upon the earth."<sup>33</sup> This may be one of the strongest of figurative speech used of God's word prior to the New Testament.<sup>34</sup>

In John's Gospel, we have the familiar and powerful phrase, "In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."<sup>35</sup> Later in the same chapter, "The Word [*logos*] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen the

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<sup>29</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John," *Harvard Theological Review* 94:3 (2001): 243-284, 250

<sup>30</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 253-254

<sup>31</sup> *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament with an English Translation* (Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton, trans.) (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, Ltd., 1851), Wisd 18:15

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, Wisd 18:16

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, Wisd. 18:16

<sup>34</sup> D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 218-219

<sup>35</sup> John 1:1

glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>36</sup> To fully understand John’s meaning and use of the word *logos*, it is important to understand its background usage within pre-Christian Jewish thought, especially Jewish thought in relationship to Hellenism.

Philo is probably the best representative of Jewish thinking influenced by Hellenism. He has been attributed as the connector between Jewish monotheism and Greek philosophy. One question that has arisen: Has Philo in any way compromised the Jewish faith, especially as it relates to monotheism? Or does Philo in fact represent the Jewish thought of his day and set the stage for the language and imagery of John’s prologue?<sup>37</sup> Philo’s concept of the divine *logos* incorporates the element of pre-existence.

And the Father who created the universe has given to his archangelic and most ancient Word [*logos*] a pre-eminent gift, to stand on the confines of both, and separated that which had been created from the Creator. And this same Word is continually a suppliant to the immortal God on behalf of the mortal race, which is exposed to affliction and misery; and is also the ambassador, sent by the Ruler of all, to the subject race.<sup>38</sup>

In the above passage, God’s word is also shown as an intermediary between God and His creation. Further, Philo describes God’s word as “the interpreter and prophet of his will”<sup>39</sup>, and further, “appointing, as their immediate superintendent, his own right reason, his first-born son, who is to receive the charge of this sacred company, as the lieutenant of the great king”<sup>40</sup>. The usage of sonship is again employed as God’s word, “to his first-born word, the eldest of his

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<sup>36</sup> John 1:14

<sup>37</sup> See James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 216

<sup>38</sup> Philo of Alexandria, “Who is the Heir of All Things,” in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996, c1993), .205

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, “Unchangeable”, .138

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, “Agriculture”, .51

angels, as the great archangel of many names; for he is called, the authority, and the name of God, and the Word, and man according to God's image."<sup>41</sup> Probably the most controversial of all statements that Philo makes regarding God's word is, "for no mortal thing could have been formed on the similitude of the supreme Father of the universe, but only after the pattern of the second deity, who is the Word of the supreme Being."<sup>42</sup>

Is Philo's language purely symbolic and figurative or is this evidence of binitarianism or even bitheism previous to the New Testament? According to Dunn, "Only when we can understand these passages within the context of Philo's overall thought will we understand them properly."<sup>43</sup> So what does Philo mean? What is his understanding of *logos*? How much of Greek philosophy is evident in his thinking and how much of *logos* is actually on par with *davar* in the Old Testament? Dunn states that Philo's concept of *logos* is "a unique synthesis of Platonic and Stoic world-views with Jewish monotheism."<sup>44</sup> Dunn argues that Platonic and Stoic thought are not preserved wholly in their original form, but rather are absorbed and re-appropriated within Philo's thinking.<sup>45</sup> Philo's concept of *logos* was still at odds with his Greek contemporaries in a number of ways. Stoics viewed the *logos* as something fully consisting of substance where Philo still saw *logos* as both immaterial as it remains within the mind of God while also immanent as God expresses His word.<sup>46</sup> The Stoics also believed "the divine reason is God and beyond it there is nothing superior, whereas for Philo beyond the Logos there is always God."<sup>47</sup> Dunn summarizes Philo's understanding of the *logos* as "*the thought of God*

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, "Confusion", .146

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, "QG II", .62

<sup>43</sup> See James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 221

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 221

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 222

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 222-223

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 223

*coming to expression*, first in the world of ideas and then in the world of sense perception.”<sup>48</sup> It is clear from the above that Philo’s thinking still remains well within Jewish monotheism. How does Philo’s grasp of *logos* relate to John’s Prologue? It is clear from Dunn’s analysis that Philo is not saying that *logos* is a separate being from God, but rather is God’s self expression to His creation. It is God acting within time and making Himself known. Philo is employing figurative imagery in describing God’s acts of self-revelation to mankind. So, is John also using such imagery in describing God’s word in John 1:1, and what about in 1:14? Or has John in fact taken this earlier imagery found both within the Old Testament as well as other Pre-Christian Jewish sources and moved beyond it to express a new act within God’s purposes in history, the incarnation? It is outside the confines of this paper to consider this, but what is of supreme importance to note is: both Islam and Judaism contain similar concepts and theologizing on the divine word.<sup>49</sup> We will cover Islam’s understanding of the divine word later in the paper, but first let us consider how Christians ought to communicate Biblical truths about Jesus within the confines of interfaith dialogue.

### ***Implications for Future Dialog***

Scripture commands Christians to go to all nations (*ethne*) and make disciples, to teach them Jesus’ commands (Mt 28:19), and to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to all peoples (Mt. 24:14). How much of this injunction involves communicating very technical theological speculation about the nature of Christ and his relationship to God? Just as this thinking and speculation was birthed in a social, cultural, and linguistic milieu where it grew and flourished,

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 224

<sup>49</sup> See Mahmoud Ayoub, “The Word of God in Islam,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 31:1-2 (1986): 69-78, 72-

so also this same phenomenon of seed entering new soil and growing anew should be allowed to continue. It is quite possible that within other soil, new and different theological frameworks will develop as the needs, values, and thought patterns of its people require. There should still be accountability to God's word and the moving of His spirit, however, it is quite possible that certain doctrines and theological wrangling that were important to a Greek, Western audience will in fact be irrelevant and unnecessary within a different milieu.

In speaking of seed language, it is important for Christians engaged in interfaith dialogue among Muslims to first ascertain the Biblical seed language that laid the framework for understanding Jesus' role in God's overall plan for humanity. It is this seed language coupled with an understanding of the Islamic worldview and Muslim/Christian history that must be considered if there is to be any progress in penetrating this wall of confusion, rejection, and even hostility between the two faiths.

### *I. Jesus the Messiah*

Perhaps one of the best shared titles that Islam and Christianity have for Jesus is messiah. Most Western Christians may prefer the Greek form, Χριστός *kristos* meaning Christ, and have less affinity for the more Hebraic term מָשִׁיחַ *mashiakh* meaning Messiah. Yet it is the latter that most closely resembles the Arabic, المسيح *al-masih* used solely for Jesus. The Hebrew and Arabic as previously discussed also share very similar definitions referring to the word "anointed." Surprisingly however, the similarity does not go much further. If one considers the Qur'anic conclusion that there is no distinction between the Messengers (*rusulih*), meaning those who brought books, i.e. Moses—Torah, David—Psalms, Jesus—the Gospel, and Muhammad—the Qur'an, then the earlier books are part of the full message that Muslims and Christians alike need to know. In fact, the Torah was read along with the Qur'an during the first two centuries of

Islam and was not until later that Islam made a decisive break from the earlier holy books.<sup>50</sup> If the Qur'an is not necessarily hostile to the Biblical concept of Messiah, what has led Muslims to either reject the Biblical concept or at least remain stranger to it?

## *II. Son of God*

I suggest one possible reason why the Biblical concept of Jesus' messiahship has not been understood within an Islamic context is due to a perception that Christians have strayed into polytheism. This title has led to a suspicion that the previous books are corrupted and Muslims have responded by remaining solely within the confines of the Qur'an. Due to the Qur'an's poetic and summarative nature (it completes the earlier books); titles such as messiah do not receive further clarity. According to the Qur'an, when doubts do arise, Muslims are instructed to ask the people of the book.<sup>51</sup> However, if these books have been corrupted by polytheistic ideas and held by polytheistic people, then the books and the people are no longer a valid source of authority. Thus these questions (if even asked) remain areas of speculation and tradition—even speculation and tradition that have hardened themselves from the Biblical perspective due to the many years of conflict, debate, and outright hostility between the two communities.

## *III. Monotheism and The Word of God*

The Qur'an itself has two categories for Christians. It states that there are Christians who have erred and gives much correction for these errors. However, the Qur'an also consistently acknowledges that there are also true believers who are following the teachings of Jesus. One such verse says,

If only the People of the Book had believed and been righteous, We should indeed have blotted out their iniquities and admitted them to gardens of bliss. If only they had stood

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 101

<sup>51</sup> S. 10:94

fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that was sent to them from their Lord, they would have enjoyed happiness from every side. There is from among them a party on the right course: but many of them follow a course that is evil.<sup>52</sup>

The key phrase here is “a party on the right course.” What is the Islamic understanding of such a party? The Qur’an contends that they should be monotheistic.<sup>53</sup> Another is that Christians ought to live righteously within revelation they have been given.<sup>54</sup> This is similar to the intent of today’s Common Word letter as an invitation to modern day Christians to re-connect to the monotheism Islam believes it has restored.

Are Christians veering off Biblical terrain in affirming monotheism? We have already covered Jesus’ summary of the Law, however, there are plenty of references to Paul giving similar monotheistic language (Ro 3:30, 1 Cor 8:6, Gal 3:20, Eph 4:5-6, & 1 Tim 2:5) as does James (Ja 2:19). Even the council of Nicaea affirms monotheism, “We believe in one God...” This is a good starting point for the long road ahead especially when one considers Prophet Muhammad’s own emphasis, stating that the best part of the Islamic creed was the initial part, “There is no god but God.”<sup>55</sup>

Due to interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians, there is a renewed desire to seek out earliest Christianity’s understanding of Jesus. How did earliest Christians remain within monotheism while speaking of Jesus as the word of God? This is also an acceptable title that Islam gives to Jesus. What is the general Islamic understanding of the divine word and what might the Qur’an mean in attributing to Jesus the title word of God? Within Islam there has been much discussion regarding Muslim understanding of the divine Word. Is it created or eternal?

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<sup>52</sup> S. 5:65-66

<sup>53</sup> S. 3:64

<sup>54</sup> S. 5:65

<sup>55</sup> *A Common Word Between Us and You*. (2007, October 13). Retrieved on June 23, 2008, from <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=downloads>, 4

According to the teachings of Ibn Hanbal and al-Ash'ari on this subject the Qur'an is not created and is thus eternal.<sup>56</sup> According to Mahmoud Ayoub,

Many have written that what is analogous in the Islamic tradition to the Trinity in Christianity are the divine attributes. From the theological point of view this may be true, because, as al-Ash'ari reminded us, they are "neither he nor are they other than he." Therefore, divine attributes share in that aspect of mystery; they are that divine mystery which we can only know in the concretely created things.<sup>57</sup>

Al-Ash'ari's perspective is furthered with the following,

Islamic doctrine asserts that one should not say (*lā yajūzu an yuqāla*, or *lā yajūzu al-qawl*) that God's uncreated *kalām* is something other than God (*ghayr Allāh*), for the Eternal (*al-azalī*) is one, i.e. God himself. If God's *kalām* were something other than God (*ghayr Allāh*), then since it is eternal, this would mean asserting (*ithbāt*) two separate eternal things (*shay'ayn mutafāriqayn azaliyyayn*), i.e. two gods, and this is absurd and rejected (*mutāl wa-marfūd*).<sup>58</sup>

So, although Muslim thought may shy away from John's statement, "and the Word was God"<sup>59</sup>, according to al-Ash'ari, the divine attributes are both not God, but also, not other than God. Although there is some distance, these statements are not too far from each other.

Secondly, we must consider what the Qur'an has to say about Jesus, and his title, the word of God.

Behold! the angels said: "O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the

<sup>56</sup> See Joseph Cumming's paper, "Kalam Allah in Islam and Christianity," Retrieved on February 10, 2009, from <http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/rp/WordGodIslamChristianity-English.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, "The Word of God in Islam," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 31:1-2 (1986): 69-78, 76

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 4

<sup>59</sup> Jn 1:1

Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah;<sup>60</sup>

Elsewhere he is called, “His [God’s] Word, which He bestowed on Mary...”<sup>61</sup>

How are these Qur’anic passages to be understood?

Regarding the meaning of the designation of Jesus as “a word” from God, Tabari reports the following view on the authority of Qatadah: “The word to which God refers as ‘a word from Him’ is His word ‘Be.’ God thus called Jesus His word because he came into being through God’s word.” Others asserted that Jesus is himself a word from God.

Thus Ibn ‘Abbas is said to have declared that “Jesus is the word of God.”<sup>62</sup>

So, if Islam also describes Jesus as a word from God or even as *the* word of God (*kalimat Allah*) and its theology describes God’s word as eternal and uncreated, then are we not at least at similar seed language that produced John’s Gospel even if today, Muslims and Christians may differ in what this seed language actually implies?

During my study on this topic, James D.G. Dunn’s work, *Christology in the Making*, was instrumental in clarifying the process by which Christians spoke of Jesus as the word of God while yet remaining within the monotheism of their predecessors. The key to it all is *logos* Christology. Without *logos* Christology as the foundation of Trinitarian language, Dunn states:

[A]n emphasis on Christ as the Son, independent of that earlier Logos-christology, can easily become in effect an expression of the very bitheism or tritheism of which Judaism and Islam accuse Christianity. It is of crucial importance for a right appreciation of Christian orthodoxy, therefore, to bear in mind that Father/Son Trinitarian language has to be read and understood *within the context of Christian monotheism*. If the credal Son

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<sup>60</sup> S. 3:45

<sup>61</sup> S. 4:171

<sup>62</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur’an and its Interpreters Vol II: The House of ‘Imran*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 132

of God language is not understood as an expression of Logos-christology it is misunderstood.”<sup>63</sup>

Further, it is important to note a shift that took place in how Christians referred to Jesus as the son of God. As I showed above, son of God language in the Biblical context predominately referred to Jesus as the prophesied messiah, the anointed king, or ruler who God has chosen as His representative to reign on earth. There was an important shift in meaning attributed to the title, son of God, in the ensuing movement called Christianity. Christians began to inject later meaning into son of God language whose foundation was not rooted in the Biblical term itself, but rather was rooted in a growing understanding of Jesus’ nature from his title, the word of God.

It is a common but patent misreading of the opening of John's Gospel to read it as if it said: "In the beginning was the *Son*, and the *Son* was with God, and the *Son* was God" (John 1: 1).<sup>36</sup> What has happened here is the substitution of *Son* for *Word* (Greek *lo-gos*), and thereby the *Son* is made a member of the Godhead which existed from the beginning. But if we follow carefully the thought of John's Prologue, it is the *Word* that preexisted eternally with God and is God. The same Word that made all things and is the light that enlightens humankind "became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14; cf. vv. 3 and 8). In other words. Son-language in John denotes *the Word made flesh in Jesus* who as such speaks God's Word to human beings on earth.<sup>64</sup>

Later, Brown laments,

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<sup>63</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), xxxi

<sup>64</sup> Colin Brown, "Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Ex Audito* 7 (1991): 83-100, 89

How things might have been different, if the fathers had kept strictly to the language of John's Prologue as their paradigm for speaking of Trinity and Incarnation. What pre-exists is not the Son *per se*, but the Logos. In John the Logos is not begotten or generated. The Logos was with God and was God, and in the course of time became flesh as the Son.<sup>65</sup>

Where has communication gone wrong if this is truly Biblical orthodoxy? If later son of God language rests upon *logos* Christology, why has this earlier language been neglected or even forgotten? Have Christians in their earnest desire to dialogue with Muslims regarding Jesus' nature left out an important piece of the whole puzzle which in fact secures Christianity to monotheism?

### ***Conclusion***

As fellow monotheists, there is much we can learn from each other as we seek to put into practice the goals of the Common Word letter. The *sh'ma's* connection with the greatest two commandments of loving God and loving neighbor should propel Muslims and Christians forward into mutual edification. Much can be learned from both sides. Our goal as Christians should be to truly understand the Muslim concerns of adding partners to Allah and its connection with *shirk* which is a sin that is punishable by hell. It is vital that Christians return to the 1<sup>st</sup> century cultural, religious, and linguistic mindset of the disciples, Paul, and of Jesus himself. In what ways might we return to such language and descriptors in our discussion of Jesus as messiah and in explanation for the term son of God in the Bible?

Word christology is still in my opinion secondary to dialogue with Muslims regarding the Biblical understanding of Jesus as messiah. However, if there is a significant barrier in communication, namely the accusation of error into polytheism, then the first task is to Biblically

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 90

expound how the Bible and many Christians have maintained their monotheism even after the advent of Islam. Is it possible that Christians might live and speak in such a way as to remind Muslims of the Qur'an's description of faithful Christians?

113 Not all of them are alike: Of the People of the Book are a portion that stand (For the right): They rehearse the Signs of Allah all night long, and they prostrate themselves in adoration. 114 They believe in Allah and the Last Day; they enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten (in emulation) in (all) good works: They are in the ranks of the righteous.<sup>66</sup>

Lastly, Christians should consider the purpose of interfaith dialogue, what is it we seek to accomplish? It is my strong conviction that in dialogue it is our hope that Muslims might more fully understand how Christianity has and can continue to be monotheistic, even with our differences in understanding of Jesus' title, the word of God. Secondly, that both faith's might appreciate more fully monotheism's connection with the two greatest commandments in submission to the One God, by coming under His rule and reign, and allowing Him to be the One to make us righteous and holy however He sees fit, and for humanity to accept His provision with humility and faith. Jesus as son of God means that he is the messiah that God has sent into the world as a fulfillment of God's promise to Adam and Eve (Ge 3:15) of victory over Satan, to Abraham (Ge 12:3) as blessing of restored relationship between God and His creation, and to David (2 Sa 7:11-13) as the coming future king whose throne will last forever and who will rule the nations with justice and govern the earth as God's representative. The twist in the story that has led to so much controversy is the meaning of John 1:14, "the Word became flesh." But despite all the differences of tradition and history that have separated Muslims from Christians, it is interesting to note how similar our seed language is in speaking of Jesus as the word of God.

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<sup>66</sup> S. 4:113-114

As Christians respond to A Common Word's invitation to come, may we indeed affirm our commitment to the straight path (*Sirat al-Mustaqeem*) and begin to express the language and faith that began our faith's process of understanding Jesus' nature and God's purposes in history with the hope for greater depth of understanding and cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

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