

Claims and Responses relating to the Arlington Statement on Bible Translation

The [Arlington Statement on Bible Translation](#) affirms principles that the signers believe are faithful, biblical principles for Bible translation in all contexts. This section addresses claims that have been made in support of translation choices critiqued in the Arlington Statement. While some of these claims have been made in public discourse—especially those relating to the translation of divine Father-Son terms—other issues have seen very little public debate, yet are important issues worthy of greater awareness in the church. We have sought to do our best to fairly represent the claims made in support of practices critiqued in the statement, based on public papers as well as many conversations in which the initial signers of the Arlington Statement have participated. While these claims have all arisen in public and private discourse, not all critics would agree with all the claims below. We apologize in advance if we have mischaracterized any claims made.

This document is produced by initial signers of the Arlington Statement, but might not necessarily be endorsed in its entirety by all signers; signers are committing to the statement itself.

Claims and Responses relating to [Article I](#)

While no Bible translator to our knowledge has argued against the general principle of Article I, some have promoted the inclusion of the Islamic profession of faith in Bible translations, which Article I specifically prohibits.

1. **Claim:** The first half of the Islamic profession of faith, *La ilaha illallah* (“There is no god but Allah/God”), is the natural way for many groups to express belief in one God, and is therefore the most natural functional equivalent for translating affirmations of monotheism in the Bible for these groups.

Response: While the first half of the Islamic profession of faith may affirm monotheism, it does so in a way that biases readers toward an Islamic understanding of God, which denies the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. To explicitly affirm this in a Bible translation is to mislead readers. The Biblical affirmations of monotheism in the Old Testament always include a reference (usually directly, and sometimes indirectly) to the LORD (that is, YHWH) as the only true God, while the New Testament affirms monotheism in ways that underline a Trinitarian understanding. The Islamic understanding connoted by *La ilaha illallah*, therefore, does not fit with the biblical understanding.

Moreover, there is no place in the Bible where including *La ilaha illallah* is linguistically necessary. Only by deliberately choosing to insert this Islamic phrase into a translation would it ever occur.

Therefore, there is no sufficient justification for its inclusion in any Bible translation, in any language.

2. **Claim:** Inserting *La ilaha illallah* will make it easier for Muslims to accept and believe the Bible’s message, because they will see that the Bible affirms monotheism and denounces idolatry.

Response: The Bible already affirms monotheism and denounces idolatry in no uncertain terms, and there are many places that could be helpfully used to show Muslims this. But doing

so in an Islamic way can easily affirm an *Islamic* understanding of “idolatry,” in which the biblical truth of Jesus’ divinity and the Trinity are considered “idolatrous.” From a biblical perspective, this Islamic understanding is itself idolatrous, and does not belong in God’s Word. The implications of the second half of the *Shahāda* (“and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah/God”) make the inclusion of the first half in a Bible translation especially problematic.

While an Insider Movement approach to missiology may find the inclusion of *La ilaha illallah* very attractive, since it makes it easier for Insider Movement members to continue to affirm the *Shahada* and worship in mosques, one cannot include this phrase in a Bible translation without unfaithfully reading too much into the biblical text, and ignoring the important theological differences between the *Shahada* and true biblical teaching on monotheism.

3. **Claim:** Muhammad can, in a qualified sense, be considered to have a “positive prophetic status” from a biblical perspective. (See [Talman 2014](#), written under a pseudonym).

Response: The Bible teaches that if a so-called prophet teaches anything God did not command (Deuteronomy 18:20), or if a prophet denies the Son (1 John 2:22-23) or denies the apostolic testimony about Jesus (1 John 5:9-13), he is not a true prophet. Meanwhile, in Islamic theology, one either accepts Muhammad’s infallible prophethood fully, following Islamic tradition of his teaching, or one is an unbeliever. Accepting Muhammad as a true prophet therefore requires accepting everything he taught, including his denial of Jesus’ divinity, the Trinity, and the crucifixion. Neither Islamic tradition nor the Bible allow for a “grey area” where Muhammad can be considered a true prophet in some kind of qualified sense.

Talman links his discussion of Muhammad’s prophethood to a call for greater acceptance of those who affirm the second half of the *Shahada*. But even if Muhammad’s prophethood could be affirmed by Christians, even in a qualified sense akin to Saul or other Old Testament figures, it is the Islamic understanding of this Islamic phrase, not the musings of a Christian academic, that is relevant to the implications of including the *Shahada* in Bible translations. Even so, Talman’s view of Muhammad’s prophethood should be rejected, as it has been by a number of evangelical scholars (see, for example, [Ibrahim 2015](#), [Ibrahim 2016](#), [Farrokh 2018](#)), and the inclusion of the *Shahada* in Bible translations along with it.

Given that Talman and other evangelicals who agree with his view of Muhammad’s prophethood are influential teachers of new Bible translators going out to work among predominantly Muslim groups, it should not surprise us that the inclusion of the first half of the *Shahada* in Bible translations is considered acceptable in these circles. When we understand the nature of Muhammad’s self-claim as a prophet, however, we must reject this claim, as well as the inclusion of the *Shahada* in Bible translations.

4. **Claim:** “Allah” is simply the Arabic word for “God,” and has been used by Arab Christians and Jews for centuries.

Response: We agree; use of “Allah” in Arabic to translate *elohim* or *theos* is not at all prohibited by Article I. See the last page of our [Questions Frequently Asked By Other Translators](#) document.

Claims and responses relating to [Article II](#)

Few, if any, Bible translators would disagree that one should not change the Word of God in order to avoid offense or to avoid confronting sin or falsehood. However, some have claimed other, “legitimate” motivations for translation choices that have the same effect, such as removing reference to the “calf” in the parable of the prodigal son.

5. **Claim:** Jesus’ purpose in telling the story of the prodigal son has nothing to do with eating beef. Including reference to the “calf” in Luke 15 distorts the focus of Jesus’ story for Hindu audiences, and distracts readers from what Jesus is actually saying. Therefore, it can be removed—not because it is offensive, but because it distracts from Jesus’ main point.

Response: The slaughtering of cattle is pervasive in the Old Testament. It cannot be removed from God’s Word without causing serious inaccuracy. Anyone who believes that eating beef is unacceptable is therefore going to be offended by reading the Bible. In order to follow Jesus wholeheartedly, any such person will sooner or later need to come to the understanding that God does not in fact forbid the eating of beef, and that there is nothing inherently wrong with eating beef. (There is, of course, also nothing inherently wrong with *not* eating beef, and no one should feel compelled to eat beef; see Romans 14:1-12.)

Some translators might decide to leave in all the Old Testament references to slaughtering cattle, but still argue that it is a “distraction” in the parable of the prodigal son, and should therefore be removed from Luke 15:23, 27, and 30 (and presumably also in Matthew 22:1-4, where the same reasoning could be employed, and where the character in Jesus’ parable who orders the slaughtering represents God). But if translators do this, readers are left vulnerable to the false interpretation—which Jesus’ actual words do not allow—that slaughtering cattle is merely a “relic” of Old Testament teaching, just like stoning, *herem* warfare, or other aspects of Old Testament law that do not apply to the church today. From their translations, they could successfully argue that Jesus never said anything about eating cattle, and that true followers of Christ would never engage in such a barbaric practice as eating beef.

In other words, by calling a truth of Scripture a “distortion” of the focus, translators can end up creating true distortion in God’s Word. In this case, we can see clearly how trying to avoid a distortion of focus leads instead to a distortion of the truth.

Finally, in some cases, the taboo against eating cattle is associated with actual worship of cattle. One need only look to Exodus 32 to understand the LORD’s attitude toward this practice. We do not believe that translators desire to compromise on the Bible’s rejection of worshiping cattle or anything other than the LORD, but removing the calf from Luke 15:23-30 or Matthew 22:1-4 also removes an opportunity for those who do actually worship cattle to be confronted with the truth and be set free.

Evangelists and preachers may choose which passages to start with based on what they believe will most fruitfully address the problem of sin and the offer of salvation through Jesus for their audience. But translators cannot avoid the clear teaching of Scripture that Jesus did not consider eating beef to be unacceptable for His followers. God’s Word does not return empty, but accomplishes its purposes (Isaiah 55:11); those purposes may not always be the same for all people. We should not presume to know God’s purposes for different groups well enough to remove details like this from the text when translating.

Claims and Response relating to [Article III](#)

Some translators have misunderstood Article III to require 100% verbal correspondence for all key terms. This misunderstanding has been addressed [here](#). Beyond this, several claims have been made in relation to the examples given under Article III.

6. **Claim:** Treating Jesus and God the Father differently when translating *kyrios* is justified by the fact that the New Testament in Greek “very consistently makes distinctions in usage” between “the *kyrios*” as a title for Jesus, and “*kyrios*” alone, without the word “the” in Greek, as a rendering of the divine name, *YHWH*. (See [Gray & Gray 2008](#), written under pseudonyms.)

Response: This claim is based on faulty linguistic analysis. In fact, the New Testament authors were not particularly consistent at all in their use of the Greek article to distinguish between *kyrios* as a title for Jesus and *kyrios* for *YHWH*. Instead, this distinction is maintained in only about 50% of the New Testament instances of *kyrios* (see [Vitrano-Wilson 2020](#), Section 6). In other words, it is quite common for *kyrios* to have no article when used as a title for Jesus, and likewise quite common for *kyrios* to have an article when used as a rendering of *YHWH*. The Holy Spirit was perfectly capable of ensuring complete consistency in articular usage—or of using two different terms entirely—had He desired to keep the title for Jesus and rendering of *YHWH* separate. Instead, the inspired authors often directly and deliberately *joined* these two usages together, such as in 1 Peter 1:25-2:4 and 3:10-15, Romans 10:9-13, Philippians 2:9-11, and other passages, in a beautiful and theologically rich way.

7. **Claim:** Using the same word to translate *kyrios* for both Jesus and God the Father will cause “significant offense and confusion among Muslim audiences.” Some will believe that “the Bible is declaring the existence of Jesus as another God,” while others will believe the Bible is saying that “Jesus is the same being as the Father.” (See [Gray & Gray 2008](#).)

Response: It is certainly true that using the same term to translate *kyrios* representing *YHWH* and *kyrios* as a title for Jesus will offend and confuse Muslims. The beautiful doctrine of the Trinity has been confusing not just to Muslims, but to all who ponder what it means that Jesus is Lord (*kyrios*), yet the Father and the Spirit too are Lord (*kyrios*). Some have read the original inspired Greek or faithful translations and have erroneously come to either tritheistic or modalistic heretical understandings. This has been true throughout history, and will continue to be true until Jesus returns. Yet we dare not change this beautiful and essential truth of the gospel, or weaken its implications in translation.

8. **Claim:** Translations should be consistent in how they translate *YHWH* in the Old Testament and quotes of *YHWH* that have *kyrios* in the New Testament. If this leads to different usage in the New Testament between *kyrios* as *YHWH* and *kyrios* as a title for Jesus, this is acceptable.

Response: If translators place a high value on consistency between the translation of *YHWH* in the Old Testament and the translation of *kyrios* in the New Testament when used to represent *YHWH*, they can simply use whatever term is most suitable as a translation of *kyrios* when used as a title for Jesus, and also use this *same* term to translate *YHWH* in the Old Testament. Indeed, this is a very common translation practice among many languages in the world. Translators may choose to use a different translation for *YHWH* (such as transliteration), but if they do, they should not insist on consistency between the Old and New Testament handling of *YHWH*. To do so is to disrupt the theological usage of *kyrios* to tie together the identity of Jesus and *YHWH*. The New Testament is consistent in using the same term for *YHWH* and for Jesus. This consistency has deep theological implications that should be maintained in translation.

9. **Claim:** The use of *kyrios* to render *YHWH* in the New Testament is a “frozen usage,” inherited from the Septuagint. We should therefore not read too much into the New Testament authors' use of the same term for Jesus and for rendering *YHWH*.

Response: This treats the inspiration of the New Testament as less than fully intentional on the part of the Holy Spirit and the human authors He inspired. As stated above, the Holy Spirit could certainly have inspired the New Testament authors to eschew the Septuagint pattern and render *YHWH* in some other way, or to avoid using *kyrios* as a title for Jesus. The Holy Spirit also could have moved in history to prevent the practice of rendering *YHWH* as *kyrios* in the Septuagint to begin with—though in fact, there is no consensus among scholars that the use of *kyrios* in the Septuagint to render *YHWH* predates its use in the New Testament for the same purpose; this question is still vigorously debated (see for example [Pietersma 1984](#), [Tov 2008](#), [Wilkinson 2015](#)).

Whatever the historical origin of using *kyrios* to render *YHWH*, translators cannot simply ignore important linguistic features of the New Testament by deciding that a particular feature comes from a “frozen usage” of the Septuagint. In fact, we can see from the many instances where *kyrios* is deliberately used simultaneously as both a title for Jesus and a representation of *YHWH* that the Holy Spirit, breathing out words written by the human authors, did not simply passively accept Septuagint use, but actively joined these two usages to communicate important theological truths. At times, New Testament authors even include *kyrios* to strengthen this effect when it does not occur in the Septuagint text.

For instance, in 1 Peter 1:25, Peter writes of the “word of *kyrios*” while quoting Isaiah 40:8 (which in the Septuagint says “word of our God”), and then Peter says, “And this is the word that was preached as good news (*euangelisthen*) to you.” Just a few verses later, Peter quotes directly from Psalm 34:8, using *kyrios* to represent *YHWH*, but applies this to Jesus (1 Peter 2:3-4). Peter’s choice to include *kyrios* in 1:25, along with his use of the word *euangelisthen* “to announce good news,” lays the foundation for his much more explicit application of *YHWH* to Jesus in 2:3-4. This is clearly more than a frozen usage inherited from the Septuagint, but instead is a conscious choice of Peter’s to use the word *kyrios* in such a way that Jesus is included in the identity of *YHWH*, the one true God.

10. **Claim:** In some languages, the traditional word used to translate *kyrios* in the New Testament can only be used for Jesus or divine beings, not for any other human. It is therefore necessary to split up the function of *kyrios* in these languages.

Response: As the Arlington Statement [FAQ](#) section states:

The same usage as a title of respect or ownership sometimes applies to other people besides Jesus, such as Caesar in Acts 25:26. It is critical that the word chosen to translate *kyrios* as a title for Jesus and a representation of *YHWH* also be a word that can apply to other human “lords” or “masters,” so that the beautiful truth of Jesus’ full humanity can be maintained as it is in the Greek.

It is of great theological importance that the translation of *kyrios* be a word that can be applied to other humans besides Jesus, in order to avoid the heretical idea that Jesus was not truly human. A term that cannot fulfill this function should therefore be replaced with a term that *can* fulfill it—and translators should use this same term to translate *kyrios* when it renders *YHWH*, just as the inspired New Testament authors did. In this way, a much greater level of consistency can be maintained in the translation of *kyrios*.

11. **Claim:** Muslims misunderstand divine Father-Son terms as referring to sexual procreation. Use of alternative terms or modifiers are necessary to block misunderstanding.

Response: This issue is thoroughly discussed in Section 4.1 of [this document](#).

General claims in relation to the Arlington Statement

In addition to claims made in relation to specific examples given in the Arlington Statement, other claims are of a more general nature.

12. **Claim:** The Forum of Bible Agencies International (FOBAI)'s [Translation Standards](#), and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)'s [Divine Familial Terms guidelines](#), the wording of which are carefully crafted, are sufficient to achieve accuracy in translation. (See [Kroneman 2020](#).)

Response: FOBAI's Translation Standards are very helpful but quite broad. If they were specific enough to deal with the issues addressed in the Arlington Statement, the practices critiqued in the Arlington Statement would not have occurred. The WEA guidelines on Divine Familial Terms, meanwhile, only address the translation of divine Father-Son terms. They do not address any other issues that arise in Religious Idiom Translations, or other areas addressed by the Arlington Statement. In addition, the WEA guidelines only apply to the Wycliffe/SIL family of organizations, who requested the WEA's help in producing the guidelines. Other organizations, unless they have signed onto the Arlington Statement or otherwise publicly committed to following their own set of principles on Divine Familial Terms, have no restrictions whatsoever on translating Father and Son in relation to God.

Furthermore, as the Arlington Statement [FAQ](#) makes clear, the initial signers believe that there are areas in which the recommendations of the WEA report could be fruitfully improved upon. *All* translation guidelines, including the Arlington Statement, are carefully crafted by their authors, but different guidelines are crafted based on different beliefs and for different purposes.

It is important to realize that there is a history of translation organizations believing that less oversight is needed, but of churches pushing back and requiring more oversight. As an example, for decades, no translation organization had any guidelines on Divine Familial Terms. After controversy arose, some organizations developed their own internal guidelines on the issue. These guidelines were deemed insufficient by a large number of churches and denominations, as well as by many experienced Bible translators, and as a result, the WEA Independent Bible Translation Review Panel was commissioned.

Most of the issues addressed in the Arlington Statement have not been addressed specifically by any other set of translation guidelines. If the FOBAI Translation Standards are truly sufficient to address all of these issues, why were the WEA guidelines—or the previous internally developed guidelines on Divine Familial Terms—considered necessary by any translation organizations? It is clear, then, that FOBAI's Translation Standards, while helpful, are insufficient for adequately dealing with issues of theological importance in translation.

13. **Claim:** There are so many different languages and cultures in the world. We should not restrict translators by prescribing specific rules that translators must follow in all circumstances, and thereby “fall into the trap of setting rules and fixed boundaries.” (See Warren-Rothlin 2020.)

Response: Certainly, translators should be careful to recognize the great diversity in language and culture that exists in the world God made. However, the diversity of languages and cultures does not mean that there are no universal principles in translation, or that one cannot rule out certain renderings in any situation. Just as the LORD is Lord of all the universe, and has made all human languages, so too, there are truths that God desires to be universally known, and some principles that may be faithfully applied in order to ensure that what He has given us is faithfully retained in translations for all people.

As an extreme hypothetical example, imagine a translation is done in which “Jesus” and “Satan” are translated using the same word, with no distinction apart from context. One would not need to explore the linguistic nuances of this word—or even speak the language being translated into!—in order to know for certain that this translation choice is not faithful. The theological problems of readers not being able to tell for certain whether Jesus or Satan is referred to are abundantly clear, and we can definitively state that every language has an adequate way of distinguishing between the words for “Jesus” and “Satan” in translation. The great diversity of language and culture in the world, and our lack of comprehensive knowledge about this diversity, does not prevent us from rightly drawing this conclusion.

In the case of the principles in the Arlington Statement, the initial signers and subsequent signers collectively have tremendous breadth and depth of knowledge and experience of many languages and cultures throughout the world. The group of signers includes dozens of Bible translators, linguists, and missiologists from around the world. The principles were crafted with great care to promote faithfulness without being overly restrictive on translators in varying linguistic and cultural contexts.

14. **Claim:** If local believers support a translation decision, outsiders cannot say it is wrong. Only those who are intimately familiar with the local context can provide any meaningful input into translation choices. To do otherwise is impose a colonialist model on Bible translation.

Response: This claim is misleading for several reasons. One is that, in fact, many [signers](#) of the Arlington Statement are themselves insiders who are intimately familiar with the local context. Secondly, the translation choices critiqued in the Arlington Statement are in fact opposed by a wide majority of local believers, and are often promoted by outsiders who wish to promote “Insider Movement” theology, even when this is deeply unpopular among local churches. Such situations are clearly not the right response to past wrongs done under colonialist systems. Instead, we should together strive for faithfulness to God informed by the whole global church, looking together to God’s Word.

Beyond this, it is simply not true that anything a group of local believers wants to do in translation is unquestionably correct. We are all fallible humans, and faithfulness to God must come first. As the statement says:

Both global and local expressions of the Church have valuable, relevant knowledge (such as knowledge of the source or receptor languages or theological knowledge) which is beneficial in producing faithful translations, as believers work humbly together as one body in the unity of the Spirit. Translations should be produced in such a way that they faithfully express God’s self-revelation, honor the local congregations who will use the translation, and maintain the bond of peace in the global Church.

No language groups, including our own, are served by being sealed off from the influence, wisdom, and insight of the rest of the body of Christ. God wants us to learn from each other, and to help each other achieve faithfulness in translation. When we recognize that there are indeed

principles of translation that can be applied universally in order to preserve what God desires all people to know, even given the great diversity of languages and cultures that exist, we should welcome, not prohibit, input from as wide a variety of sources as possible.

Finally, it should be noted that when proponents of Religious Idiom Translations use the term “local believers” or “local churches,” what is actually meant in some cases is local members of an Insider Movement, excluding all other local followers of Jesus. Restricting the “context” to participants in an Insider Movement enables these translators to ignore the often vociferous objections of local churches, and even to ignore the objections of Christians from the same religious and linguistic background who are not considered to have remained sufficiently “embedded” in their “ethnoreligious” environment. The signers of the Arlington Statement include highly experienced and knowledgeable Christians from Muslim backgrounds and other non-Christian backgrounds, who are very familiar with the theological and religious issues inherent to translation, and who thoroughly reject the translation choices that are critiqued in the statement. Their voices should not be ignored simply because they do not still worship at a mosque or temple.

15. **Claim:** Those who critique Muslim Idiom Translations and similar translation styles among Hindus, Buddhist, and others ultimately don’t care about people being saved, and are motivated by ignorance or lack of love.

Response: Dozens of signers of the Arlington Statement have devoted their whole lives to understanding, showing love to, and sharing the saving message of the gospel with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other groups, and many of us have family members from these backgrounds as well. While we recognize that translators who promote renderings critiqued in the Arlington Statement also have a desire to love, serve, and bring people to saving faith, we believe that following the principles laid out in the statement leads to greater faithfulness and therefore, ultimately, greater fruitfulness in serving the God who gave us His perfect Word.

16. **Claim:** Discussing controversial issues in Bible translation will lead to a loss of trust and therefore a loss of funding for Bible translation projects. Since most people are not informed enough to understand the issues, it is better to let translation experts discuss these issues privately or in academic journals not often read by the public.

Response: The fact that the issues addressed in the Arlington Statement are controversial among Bible translators is, in itself, quite surprising to many Christians, including many well-educated pastors, professors, and Bible translators who are surprised to learn that these issues are even in need of discussion. It is certainly regrettable that in some cases, faithful translation projects have been negatively impacted by a loss of funding because of the controversial practices of others in their organization. We have no desire for the good work of our dear brothers and sisters to be hindered; in fact, some of us have faced this very situation ourselves.

However, the alternative of keeping these discussions quiet or restricted to obscure academic forums does not properly value the role of the broader global Church in ensuring faithfulness in Bible translation. The Spirit has given many different spiritual gifts to people across a wide range of native languages, educational backgrounds, or social status within the Bible translation world. Bible translators will be blessed if they open up discussion of translation issues to others not normally included in these discussions, including theologians, professors, pastors, and laypeople from around the world whom the Lord has given relevant knowledge and experience.

Moreover, even internal discussion of some controversial issues, or discussion in academic journals or at academic conferences, has been discouraged or forbidden by some translation

organizations, and members have been penalized or threatened with removal for seeking broader academic discussion of theologically important issues in translation. In these situations, even the normal academic enterprise of dialogue and mutual sharpening is not allowed to take place.

Finally, as regrettable as it is that faithful translators may be negatively impacted by those engaging in more controversial practices, translation organizations should not squelch or discourage discussion in order to protect their funding. Instead, they, like all Christians, should trust God that He is fully able to provide for the work He has called them to, and recognize that we must all be accountable to each other within the body of Christ. Funding relationships, like all relationships, should be based on mutual transparency and trust. In the long term, trust is built and sustained better by transparency, and by acknowledging and correcting mistakes, than by hoping controversial issues won't be noticed or talked about, let alone by actively discouraging or forbidding open discussion. We believe the Arlington Statement is a positive step in addressing these challenges, in that it encourages transparency from translators and translation organizations in relation to the important issues addressed by the statement.

May God, who alone is wise, lead us into all wisdom in accordance with His will, and bring us to unity of mind and heart in submission to His perfect Word.

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