

# Allah in Translations of the Bible

by Kenneth J. Thomas

The question is asked by certain groups whether Allah can validly be used to translate words for God in the Bible. It is inconceivable to many that a word that is commonly associated with the Islamic religion would be found in a Christian Bible. There are some English speakers, for example, who say that the words Allah and God refer to different deities and therefore that Allah should never be used in any translation of the Bible. One person who has written a book arguing against the use of Allah by Christians is a Nigerian, G. J. O. Moshay. In his book, *Who Is This Allah?*, he writes, “For long we had assumed that Christians and Muslims serve the same God, and that it is only in the language of expression and mode of worship that they differ.”<sup>1</sup> But he concludes that they are not the same. Significantly, this objection does not come from traditional Arab Christians, most of whom live in the Islamic heartland.

The basic question is whether the word “Allah” can be considered a generic term for the supreme being that can be used to translate *elohim* or *theos*, which are themselves generic terms in Hebrew and Greek. The Arab philologists discussed the etymology of the word at great length. Some held that it was a loan word from Syriac or Hebrew, but most regarded it as a contraction of *al ilāh* (“the god”).<sup>2</sup> Western scholars are fairly unanimous that the source of the word Allah probably is through Aramaic from the Syriac *alāh* (“the god”).<sup>3</sup> In either case, the Arabs used the word Allah for the supreme being before the time of Muhammad.<sup>4</sup> Inscriptions with Allah have been discovered in Northern and Southern Arabia from as early as the fifth century B.C.<sup>5</sup> Christians have used the word Allah from pre-Islamic times, and Allah has been used continuously in Arabic translations of the Bible from the earliest known versions in the eighth century to this day. One Arabic translation of the New Testament using the word may even be pre-Islamic.<sup>6</sup>

Jews, Christians, and Muslims have used Allah in their citations and translations of the Bible since the first centuries of Islam. Jewish commentators writing in Arabic used Allah in their translations and citations. Sa’adiah Ga’on b. Joseph, a 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Rabbanite translator of the Hebrew into Arabic (using Hebrew characters), used Allah for *elohim*. For example, for Genesis 1:4

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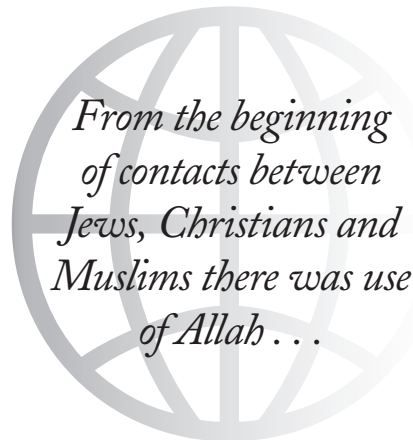
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he has: "And Allah saw that the light was good."<sup>7</sup> This practice of Sa'adiah was followed by the Karaites, a Jewish sect in Jerusalem, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> An acquaintance of St. John of Damascus, Abu Qurah, the Bishop of Haran in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., uses Allah to translate *theos* in his citations of the Bible in Arabic. For example, in John 1:1 he has "the Word was with Allah."<sup>9</sup> A number of Muslim writers in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. used Allah in their citations of the Bible. Al-Tabari, quoting the words of Jesus in John 10:36, has "Allah sent me into the world" and, quoting the words of the devil in Matthew 4:3, has: "If you are the son of Allah..."<sup>10</sup> Another Muslim writer, Ibn Qutayba al-Dinawari of Baghdad, quotes Jesus as saying in Matthew 6:24, "You cannot serve both Allah and Mammon."<sup>11</sup> A Shi'ite Muslim scholar of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Al-Ya'qubi cites the answer of Jesus to the devil in Matthew 4:7, "Do not test Allah your Lord."<sup>12</sup> Thus, from the beginning of contacts between Jews, Christians, and Muslims there was use of Allah that enabled them to enter into common discussion about biblical content and to dialogue with one another.

It should be noted that the biblical translations of the Bible into Arabic and other languages used by the majority Muslim communities in the Middle East, Africa and Asia have generally not used Allah to translate the Hebrew tetragrammaton *YHWH*. This is considered to be the particular name of the supreme being of the people of Israel as revealed to Moses. In Arabic translations it is transliterated as *yahwah* or translated as *rabb* (Lord), corresponding to the Jewish custom of using *adonai* in place of saying the divine name. Translations of *YHWH* in other languages used in the Islamic world have followed the precedent of the Arabic in either transliterating *YHWH* and/or using a word for Lord (*rabb* in Bambara and Somali, *khodavand* in Persian,

Pashto, Sindhi, and Urdu, *Tuhan* in Indonesian). The exceptions to this practice are the Malay translations of 1912 and 1988 that use *Allah* for *YHWH*; the Biatah translation used in Sarawak, Malaysia, and the Tausug translation used in Jolo, Philippines, followed the precedent of the Malay translations.<sup>13</sup>

This use of Allah in translations of the Bible has served as a bridge between Christians and Muslims for understanding one another. A Christian official in the Vatican, Thomas Michel, emphasizes,



For fourteen centuries Arabic speaking Christians, Muslims and Jews have called God 'Allah', a common witness that in spite of our difficulties our God is one and the same... It is the firm conviction of Christians today, and has been through the centuries, that the God of Muslims and Christians is *one*, and hence we must oppose any attempts to give the impression that we worship different Gods by the use of different names for the one and the same God... I have personally discussed this matter with Arab and Indonesian Muslim scholars, and they firmly support the importance of the one name for the one God."<sup>14</sup>

F. S. Khair-ullah, a Christian scholar in Pakistan (note the use of Allah as an element in his compound name), suggests that

in Urdu we should not avoid the word Allah but use it for God so that a bridge is formed for a common understanding of God.<sup>15</sup>

Allah has been employed in translations of the Bible not only in Arabic but also in the languages used by the majority Muslim communities in the Middle East, Africa and most of Asia. These include Arabic, Turkish and Azarbaijani in the Middle East; Bambara, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Mankinka in Africa; and Malay, Indonesian, Javanese, Madurese and Sundanese in Asia. The exceptions to this generalization are the languages in the geographical area that is or was Persian-speaking, including Iran, Afghanistan, and the Mogul empire of Akbar (1542-1605) in India. This part of the world, while largely Islamic, traditionally rejected the use of the Arabic language and retained the Persian word *Khoda* for the supreme being. Accordingly, Bibles translated into the languages of this region, including Persian, Urdu and Sindhi, have utilized the commonly-used Persian word for the supreme being. Another exception is the Swahili translation of the Bible in East Africa where the traditional name for the supreme being, *Mungu*, was retained.<sup>16</sup>

Recent translations of the Bible into languages used by majority Muslim communities have generally followed the precedent set by earlier biblical translations in the major languages in the region in their choice of the word for the supreme being. Thus new translations in Africa (e.g., Juba and Wolof) and Southeast Asia (e.g., Patani Malay) use Allah, while those in South Asia (e.g., Baluchi and Dari) use *Khoda*. Likewise, new translations in Central Asia in areas that were once part of Persia use *Khoda* (e.g., Kazakhi, Kirghizi, Tajiki, and Uzbeki). These are the words for the supreme being that have long been used by the peoples in these geographical regions. Thus new translations rarely use a word for the supreme being that differs from the common usage of the language group or from other available transla-

tions of the Bible found in the major languages of the area.<sup>17</sup>

There have been biblical translations in a few languages that have changed the word used for the supreme being from previous translations. The original Pashto translation of the Bible in 1895 had Allah, but this was changed to *Khoda* in the revision of the New Testament beginning with the Gospel of Matthew published in 1931, conforming to the usage in Urdu and the Iranian languages. The populations using Pashto and Urdu live in the same geographical area. The Bengali translation of the Bible made in 1809 by William Carey used *Isbwar*, the common word used by Hindus for the supreme being. When the new Musalmani Bengali Common Language translation of the Gospels was published in Bangladesh in 1980, the word *Khoda* was used since that was the word commonly used by Muslims. Now in the year 2000 the complete Musalmani Bengali Common Language Bible has been published with the word *Allah* because that has become the commonly-used word by Muslims and Christians from a majority community background. Conversely the Scripture Union of Malaysia in its publications has been changing Allah to Tuhan when quoting the Indonesian translation of the Bible, *Terjemahan Baru*, without the consent of the copyright holder, namely the Indonesian Bible Society. The result is no distinction is made in the translation of *YHWH* and *elohim*.<sup>18</sup>

From this survey it can be seen that there is a long-established precedent and tradition of using Allah in translations of the Bible. Christians accept it as their term for the supreme being in most of the world where Muslims are the majority community. They affirm that Allah is not an exclusively Muslim name for the supreme being but is a generic term dating from pre-Islamic times that is now shared by Christians, Muslims and others. When the government in Malaysia

## Does common usage of a generic term mean that Christians and Muslims have the same concept of the supreme being?

passed a law that Allah and other Arabic terms could not be used in the Bible and other non-Muslim publications, not only did the Christians protest,<sup>19</sup> but the other faith communities in Malaysia objected to this law: they all use Allah to refer to the supreme being and have no other word to use in its place.<sup>20</sup>

Does common usage of a generic term mean that Christians and Muslims have the same concept of the supreme being when they employ the word Allah? Jews, Christians and Muslims all profess that there is only one supreme being, whom they worship. They affirm that Allah is the one supreme being who is Lord, Creator, Sovereign, and Sustainer, possessing power, wisdom, mercy and truth. But each monotheistic faith has its own understandings about the supreme being, and it is therefore important, when talking about the supreme being, to identify specific characteristics of the deity. For example, only Christians profess that the One whom they worship is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It can be argued that this reality need not justify using different words or names for the supreme being. Bishop Kenneth Cragg writes:

[W]e reduce everything to chaos if we suggest that disparate predicates do not relate to the identical ‘subject’ to whom they are ascribed, as if there could be, in truth, ‘gods many and lords many’ corresponding to all the confused concepts, however numerous and contradictory.

He goes on to conclude,

Thus, the answer to the vexed question, ‘Is the God of Islam and the God of the Gospel the same?’ can only rightly be ‘Yes! and ‘No!’ Yes, as the common ground of all we say in partial unison: No, insofar as our convictions diverge.<sup>21</sup>

The use of the same word for the supreme being by people of various religions need not mean that they all have the same views about deity. Each religion defines the meaning of the supreme being according to its own convictions. Those of different religions who use the word “Allah” understand the nature of the supreme being to which it refers according to the beliefs of their own traditions. English speakers can understand this reality by reference to their own usage patterns. Allah is the equivalent to the English word “God” with a capital “G”. Michel observed that “Just as ‘God’ is the name in English for the one divine being who alone is to be worshipped and obeyed, used by Muslims, Christians and Jews, so God’s name in Arabic and those languages who derive their religious terminology from Arabic (like Bahasa, Indonesia) is ‘Allah.’”<sup>22</sup> Many Muslims have recognized the equivalency of these words as generic terms when writing in English by using the English term “God.”

A prominent Arab Christian writes that

for more than five hundred years before Muhammad, the vast majority of Jews and Christians in Arabia called God by the name Allah. How, then, can we say that Allah is an invalid name for God? And what about the 10 to 12 million Arab Christians today? They have been calling God ‘Allah’ in their Bibles, hymns, poems, writings, and worship for over nineteen centuries. What an insult to them when we tell them not to use this word *Allah!*<sup>23</sup>

When those whose mother tongue is Arabic and who live among Muslims have no problem with the name Allah being used for God in the Bible, this raises a question about what possible problem there might be with the use of Allah elsewhere in the translation of the Bible. It would



seem that those who object to its use do so in order to maintain a radical distinction between the Christian and Islamic concepts of the supreme being. Precedence indicates that each faith community has clearly defined its distinctive understanding of Allah through its contextual use, teaching and tradition.

Translators involved in new translations of the Bible or revisions of the Bible in languages used by the majority Muslim community are advised to use the word for the supreme being that is commonly used by people in that language group. It is a standard principle of translation to use the words and expressions in common use, and that principle also applies to the word for the deity. In spite of allegations that Allah is not the same as the *elohim* and *theos* in the Bible, the use of Allah by Christians speaking Arabic and many other languages demonstrates its acceptance as a word to be used in their Bibles. Christians should not be encouraged to avoid the use of Allah where it has been traditionally used. The argument of non-Arabic speakers cannot be determinative for those who have a long history of using the word Allah. Rather the term for the supreme being in the translation of the Bible should be determined by what is already the term used by the Christian community, whether Allah, *Khoda*, *Mungu*, or some other local word. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Ibadan, Nigeria: Fireliners Int., 1990, 8.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), p. 66; D. B. Macdonald, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), III, 1093.

<sup>3</sup>Jeffery, *loc. cit.*; J. Spenser Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London & New York: Longman, 1979), p. 251, n. 14.

<sup>4</sup>H.A.R. Gibb & J.H. Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 33. Even

Muhammad's father was named Abd Allah, God's servant; see Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, Tenth Edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup>René Dussaud, *Les Arabes en Syrie avant l'Islam* (Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1907), pp. 141f., and Hitti, *loc. cit.*, pp. 100f., citing the work of F. V. Winnett, *A Study of the Libyanite and Thamudic Inscriptions* (Toronto: 1937), p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>One existing manuscript may be pre-Islamic. See A. Baumstark, "Das problem eines vorislamischen christlichen-kirchlichen Schrifttums in Arabischer Sprache," *Islamica* 4 (1929/1930): 562-567, in Kenneth Bailey, "Early Arabic New Testaments of Mt. Sinai and the Task of Exegesis (with special focus on Sinai Ar. 72 and Luke 15)," *Theological Review*, XII/2 (1991): 49. See also Meira Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Meira Polliack, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup>*Loc. cit.*, pp. 36ff. Note the example of Yefet ha-Levi ben 'Eli's use of Allah (hll') in his introduction to Genesis, *loc. cit.*, pp. 43 and 293.

<sup>9</sup>Father Yusuf Qushaqji, S.J., *Ta'rib al-Anajil wa al-A'mal ol-Rusul (Arabization of the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles)* (Beirut: Libran Oriental, 1961), p. 108. Dr. Manuel Jimbachian graciously provided me the information from this book and the translation of the Arabic quotes.

<sup>10</sup>*Loc. cit.*, pp. 113, 115.

<sup>11</sup>*Loc. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup>*Loc. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup>The completely revised Malay Bible of 1996, however, restored the practice of translating *elohim* as Allah. This was at the advice of the Malaysian church leaders, who considered the translations of 1912 and 1988 as not being exegetically accurate or faithful to the original texts. Thus the rendering of the divine names returned to the precedent established in the history of the Malay/Indonesian translations since 1629. The Biatah translation is also being revised to restore Allah as the translation of *elohim*. Information from Daud Soesilo, "Translating the Names of God Revisited: Field Experience from Indonesia and Malaysia," (a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the SBL/AAR in November 2000), pp. 4 and 8.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas Michel, S.J., in "Official

Letter from Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians" dated October 25, 1984.

<sup>15</sup>Khair-ullah, *loc. cit.*

<sup>16</sup>Soesilo, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>Soesilo, *op. cit.*, pp. 2f., gives an example of an exception to this generalization in a recent Indonesian translation, *Kitab Suci: Torat dan Injil* (Jakarta: Bet Yesua Hamasiah, no date), in which the tetragrammaton is translated YAHWE and *elohim* is transliterated as *Eloim*. This was done for the ideological objection to the use of Allah in the Bible.

<sup>18</sup>Soesilo, *op. cit.*, pp. 1f.

<sup>19</sup>Soesilo, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup>Because of this protest the law was modified.

<sup>21</sup>Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 124f.

<sup>22</sup>Michel, *loc. cit.*

<sup>23</sup>Fouad Elias Accad, *The Qur'an as a Bridge to the Bible* (Colorado Springs, CO: NAV Press, 1997), p. 22. Accad is the former General Secretary of the Bible Society of Lebanon and father of the present General Secretary.