

Sharing the Message "with Courtesy and Respect" (1 Peter 3:15)

## Who is "Allah"?

by Rick Brown

The rise of Islamist terrorism has outraged people across the world. Many Christians have directed their anger, not simply towards militant Islamists, but towards Muslims in general and towards Islam in particular. (Most Muslims, on the other hand, direct their anger sensibly towards the Islamist terrorists themselves rather than against the whole Muslim community.) Much of the anger expressed in the West has taken the form of demonizing the Islamic religion, to the extent of accusing Muslims of worshipping a demon. A key element of this attack has been the claim of some that the name Allah refers to a demon or at least a pagan deity, notably the so-called "moon god." Such claims have even been made by scholars who are reputable in their own fields but who are poorly acquainted with the Arabic language and Middle-Eastern history. The Kingdom of God, however, is never advanced by being untruthful, so this matter bears further investigation.

### *Moon God?*

Those who claim that Allah is a pagan deity, most notably the moon god, often base their claims on the fact that a symbol of the crescent moon adorns the tops of many mosques and is widely used as a symbol of Islam. It is in fact true that before the coming of Islam many "gods" and idols were worshiped in the Middle East, but the name of the moon god was *Sin*, not Allah, and he was not particularly popular in Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. The most prominent idol in Mecca was a god called *Hubal*, and there is no proof that he was a moon god. It is sometimes claimed that there is a temple to the moon god at Hazor in Palestine. This is based on a representation there of a supplicant wearing a crescent-like pendant. It is not clear, however, that the pendant symbolizes a moon god, and in any case this is not an Arab religious site but an ancient Canaanite site, which was destroyed by Joshua in about 1250 BC. There is also an ancient temple in the ruins of the kingdom of Sheba (Saba), in Yemen, and it includes inscriptions to the kingdom's patron god *Almaqah*. It has been claimed that *Almaqah* was a moon god, but there is no solid evidence for this, and scholars now think *Almaqah* was a sun god.<sup>1</sup> If the ancient Arabs worshipped hundreds

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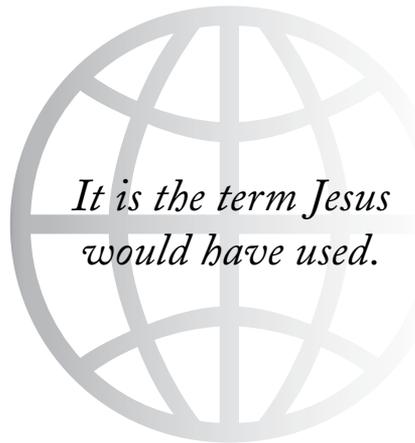
of idols, then no doubt the moon god *Sin* was included, for even the Hebrews were prone to worship the sun and the moon and the stars,<sup>2</sup> but *there is no clear evidence that moon-worship was prominent among the Arabs in any way or that the crescent was used as the symbol of a moon god, and Allah was certainly not the moon god's name.*

So if the crescent symbol does not represent an Arabian moon god, then where did it come from? The crescent had been a symbol used in Constantinople (modern Istanbul) and was used on the flag of the Byzantine Empire, which proclaimed itself to be Christian. Some of the ancient Turkish tribes also used a crescent-like symbol, although it might have been derived from the horns of a bull rather than the moon. But when the Turks conquered Constantinople and the rest of the Middle East in the 15th century, they kept the Byzantine symbol of empire. In fact, they affixed crescent symbols atop public buildings throughout their empire as a symbol of their imperial rule. It also figured in the flags of their vassal states, even after the states became independent. Once the crescent no longer represented Turkish imperial rule in its former colonies, it was reinterpreted as a symbol of Islam, which is its modern significance.<sup>3</sup> *So the crescent symbol has not been passed down through Islam from a supposed ancient Arabian moon religion but is a symbol imposed by the Ottoman Turks for political reasons.*

### **Origin of the name 'Allah'**

So where did the name Allah come from? To anyone who knows the Aramaic language and its history in the Middle East, it seems obvious that the Arabic name *Allāh* is an adaptation of the Aramaic word for God, *Alāh* or *Alāhā*. Prior to the rise of Islam and for some time afterwards, Aramaic was the main language of Jews and Christians in the Middle East (apart from Egypt, where varieties of Coptic were used), and many Aramaic words were borrowed into Arabic. The usual term for God in Aramaic was *Alāh* (ā). *It is the term that Jesus would have used.* It is used as the term for God in the books of Ezra and Daniel, in the Jewish translations of the Bible (the Targums), in the

Talmud and in the Syriac Aramaic Bible used by many Middle-Eastern Christians today. These Aramaic-speaking Jews and Christians lived throughout the Middle East, and there were also many Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians. It might be recalled that there were Arabs at Pentecost (Acts 2:11), and Paul went to Arabia before beginning his ministry among the Syrians and Greeks (Gal 1:17). There were Arab bishops at the Council of Nicea, and there are archeological remains of pre-Islamic churches in Yemen, in southern Arabia (Najran), along the Gulf, and in Jordan. Archeologists have found



inscriptions in cemeteries associated with these churches. The proper names found in these inscriptions are often names compounded with Allah, (such as *'Abd Allah*, servant of God) so Allah was clearly a name that Christians were using for God.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately the Bible was not translated into Arabic at that time, so although these pre-Islamic Christians spoke Arabic, they used Scriptures in the Aramaic language. One result of this was that they introduced many Aramaic words and names into Arabic, often transforming them in the process to fit the sound patterns of Arabic. It seems likely that this is how the Aramaic word for God came to be borrowed into Arabic as the name of God.<sup>5</sup> Especially revealing is the fact that *Allāh* is pronounced in Arabic as it is in Aramaic, using the Aramaic pronunciation of the second syllable, even though this pronunciation is unusual in Arabic.<sup>6</sup> Muslim scholars, however, do not like to admit that the Arabic of the Qur'an has loan-words,

and they suggest that the name Allah is derived from the expression *al'ilah*, meaning "the God." It might be noted that the word *'ilah* is related to the Biblical Hebrew words *'eloh* and *'elohim*, meaning "God," as well as to the Biblical Aramaic word *elāh*, so regardless of the derivation, the word is related to the Biblical terms for God.

### **Jewish and Christian Use of 'Allah'**

However the term Allah came into Arabic, we know from ancient inscriptions that Arabic-speaking Christians were using the form Allah before the rise of Islam. This is evident from inscriptions on tombs and from a pre-Islamic inscription in the ruins of a church at Umm al-Jimāl, Jordan.<sup>7</sup> The prophet of Islam claimed to preach a continuation of the message of the Jewish prophets and of the Messiah Jesus, so it stands to reason that he would use the same names that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians were using. Some of the statements in the Qur'an reflect a situation in which Christians are using the term Allah, such as when they proclaim that Jesus is Allah. This claim is rejected in the Qur'an, which says, "In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary" (Sura 5:17, Yusuf Ali translation). The very next verse in the Qur'an condemns Jews and Christians for claiming that they are "sons of Allah" (Sura 5:18). So the term Allah seems to have been in common use among the Jews and Christians.

Even today, Allah is the Arabic name for God that is commonly used by Jews and Christians. The standard Jewish Arabic translation of the Torah was translated by the Jewish scholar Saadia Gaon before 1000 AD and has been used by Middle Eastern Jews until the present time. It was also used by Christians until American missionaries widely distributed an Arabic version of the King James Bible in the late 19th century. There were other Jewish Arabic translations as well, notably the one made by the Karaites at the same time as Saadia. All of these Jewish translations use Allah as the name of God, using it to translate both *Elohim* and *YHWH*. There are multitudes of ancient Christian Arabic

translations of Scripture, from the seventh century until now, and they all without exception use Allah.<sup>8</sup> So for Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians, the name Allah is the name of the God of the Bible, and Arab Christians often respond with amusement and dismay when Westerners “point out” to them that they shouldn’t use the name Allah. Millions of Muslims have come to faith in Jesus, and they have not seen a need to stop using Allah in reference to God, whom Muslims identify as “the Creator,” “the Lord,” “the God of Abraham,” “the God of Moses,” etc. If they were using Allah in their language to refer to God previously, then they continue to do so after becoming disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Meaning of ‘Allah’*

Suppose for the sake of argument that the ancient Arabs did worship the moon. This would have no bearing on the name Allah, for there is no inscription that identifies Allah as a moon god or as a pagan deity. This contrasts with the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English words for God, all of which descend from words that were commonly used by pagans in reference to pagan deities. So the name Allah is freer of pagan roots than are these other names! Now suppose for the sake of argument that the ancient Arabs did worship some pagan deity under the name of Allah, whether the moon or something else. This would still have no bearing on current usage of the term or even the usage in the Qur’an. The meaning of a word is a function of how people conventionally use it to refer to things, not how it was used in the past. Modern speakers of English, for example, say the names of the week without thinking that they are honouring the Anglo-Saxon gods after whom the days were originally named, yet Quakers used to piously avoid these names for that very reason. Most Christians happily use words like ‘enthusiasm’ without thinking about spirit possession, yet some Holiness Christians avoid the term because it originally had that meaning. The list could go on. The meanings of a word are a matter of social convention. If Muslims use the term Allah to refer to the one and only God, the creator of the universe, the sustainer of all life, the

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bestower of all blessings, the sender of all prophets and Scripture, then that is what the term means for them, and not a moon god. Allah is God.

Lexical meaning has at least two components, called ‘sense’ and ‘denotation’. The denotation is the set of entities that are conventionally described by that word. The sense is the set of properties that are typically attributed to an entity when it is described by that word. For example, the English word ‘dog’ denotes the set of dogs and also expresses a set of descriptive properties that are typical of dogs. A speaker might use the denotative power of a word to refer to some particular entity, as in “Look at that dog swimming in the water,” or she might use the descriptive power of a word, its sense, to describe some entity, as in “That is a muskrat, not a dog.” (Most words actually have several senses and denotations, distinguished by their domains and contexts of usage.)

### *Different Concepts of God*

The sense of a word is the common conceptualization of the entities that it denotes. It is the concept that is evoked when the word is used with that sense. As it happens, however, people do not always share the same conceptualization of something. Their concepts of it can be different, even though they use the same words to refer to it. For example, there are some traditional people who think the moon is a disc in the sky or that it emits light of its own, rather than being a large globe that reflects the light of the sun. Their concept of the moon is different, but when they refer to the “moon,” they are referring to the same object in the sky that I call “the moon” even though their concept is different from mine. People also have different concepts of God. Even within cultures that share a Christian heritage, sub-cultural conceptualizations of God can be quite different. Mormons, for example, think of God as a man who became a god, created the earth, joined with spirit women to beget spirits who would be born as humans, and had

a physical union with Mary to beget Jesus. Jews and Muslims typically think of God as one and indivisible, without distinctions of person, and without being incarnate in any way as the Messiah, but Jews also conceive of God as preferring Jews over others, whereas Muslims think of God as preferring themselves to Jews.<sup>10</sup> Like Jews and Muslims, Jesus-only Protestants are anti-Trinitarian, but they view Jesus as God. Liberal Protestants do not view God as incarnate in Jesus but as revealing his characteristics and message through Jesus. Some Christians view God as punitive and requiring regular propitiation through the sacrifice of the mass. Atheists typically share the concept of God as judgmental and punitive but without grace, and they conveniently add the property of non-existent. Deists view God as distant, uncaring, and uninvolved. And then there are evangelicals. All of these people use the same word ‘God’ to refer to the same entity, yet they have different concepts of who God is. The significance is this: *One cannot change a person’s concept of God merely by changing the name he uses for God. Any name that denotes God for someone will evoke that person’s concept of God. What is required for reconceptualization is new information about God that will change the concept itself, and that is the task of the Bible.*

Fortunately God has designed the Bible such that it builds and revises one’s concepts of God and man, creation and destiny, sin and holiness, Jesus and salvation, etc. It is through reading or hearing the Word of God, particularly in one’s mother tongue, that one’s concepts and worldview are revised. This change in the concept of God may involve eliminating some properties (such as capriciousness and dispositionateness), adding new properties (sympathy and joy, consistency and reliability), increasing the strength of some properties (lovingness and holiness), and decreasing the strength of other properties (vindictiveness), as well as adding new information (incorporating

Word and Spirit, incarnate in Jesus, purposeful in guiding history).<sup>11</sup>

### *Complications of Rejecting the Name 'Allah'*

There is another aspect to this question, and that is the social implications of using Allah. If I am speaking another language, the language of the people I hope to reach, and the normal word for God in that language is Allah, then any refusal on my part to use that term will distance me from the very people I am trying to reach, and it will distance them from the message. My insensitivity to their preferences and taboos will signal a lack of genuine care for them and a lack of respect for their culture and heritage. My rejection of their preferred terminology will signal a rejection of them personally and of their community and kinfolk in general. Thus my attempt to draw them will in fact repel them because I reject their way of talking about things.<sup>12</sup> And if a Christian tells a Muslim that he is worshipping the moon rather than the creator of the universe, then the Christian will be viewed as a liar and a blasphemer, and his testimony will have no credibility at all, because the Muslims know that it is God whom they fear and whom they seek to please.

In the early sixties, most Western missionaries were expelled from Sudan. One man instigated most of this by campaigning against the missionaries and by arranging many false charges against them. In the seventies I had an opportunity to talk to this man and listen to him. It turns out that what angered this Arab man the most was that the missionaries had pointedly rejected many of the normal Arabic names for God and Jesus and certain prophets, and he perceived this as a humiliating insult to himself and his people. The man's name? 'Isa.<sup>13</sup>

Modern Turkey has two predominant subcultures: modern Muslims and religious Muslims. Modern Turks use a modern "Turkified" language in which foreign words have been replaced with neologisms based on Turkish, while religious Turks retain many Arabic and Persian loan-words, especially those pertaining to religion. The Turkish Bible Society has

produced a wonderful new translation of the Bible that suits the modern and better-educated Turks quite well, but the religious Turks refuse to read it, even those who long to know what the Bible says. Why? Because the modern translation uses the Turkish word *Tanrı* for God, and the religious Turks associate this term with pagan gods. In their view, if a book does not use Allah for God, then it does not come from God. So the very group of people who are most concerned about spiritual issues are locked out of God's Word by the absence of the word Allah.<sup>14</sup>

### *Summary*

While the concept of God held by Muslims differs from that of biblical Christians, so does the concept of God held by non-Messianic Jews. The Jewish concept of *Elohim* is not Trinitarian, just as the Muslim concept of Allah is not Trinitarian. The Apostle Paul wrote about this in Romans 10:2: "For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge." Such is the case with Muslims as well. If the name Allah were unsuitable because Muslims have a non-Trinitarian concept of God, then the name *Elohim* would be unsuitable for the same reason. Muslims want to please God and escape his judgement, but they lack the Biblical revelation of what God is like and his provision of salvation through Jesus Christ. They have zeal without Biblical knowledge. The problem is not their name for God but their concept of God. The concept of a holy, loving, consistent Trinitarian God comes from absorbing the worldview revealed in the Bible. It is the Word of God, with the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit and the testimony of the saints, that can lead Muslims to a fuller concept of God, regardless of the name they use for him. **IJFM**

### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup>See entries for 'Allah' and 'Hubal', in the *Encyclopædia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), entries for 'Sin (mythology)', 'Hubal', and 'Allah' in *Wikipedia*, entries for 'Sin', and 'Arabian religion' in *Encyclopædia Britannica 2003*, and especially the entry for 'South Arabia, Religion of' in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. The claim of widespread moon worship in the Arabian peninsula was

propagated by Ditlef Nielsen in *Der dreieinige Gott in Religionshistorischer Beleuchtung*, Vol. 1 (Berlin, 1922); Vol. 2 (Copenhagen, 1942). His claim was based largely on what he thought was a crescent moon on a temple in Saba (Sheba), but further investigations, cited in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, have shown that it is a bull's head.

<sup>2</sup>See Jer 8:2; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3; 23:5; Deut 17:2-3.

<sup>3</sup>See the entries for 'crescent' in *Wikipedia*, 'crescent' in *Encyclopædia Britannica 2003*, and 'hilâl' in the *Encyclopædia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

<sup>4</sup>One would have to search many different journals and books to collect all of the examples. The main journals are the *Journal of Semitic Studies* and *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* (Blackwell's, Oxford). There is also a series of 54+ volumes called *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*.

<sup>5</sup>Pre-Islamic Arab Christians in southern Arabia also used the term *Rahman* "the Merciful" for God the Father. See the entries for 'Allah' in the *Encyclopædia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), in *Wikipedia*, and in *Encyclopædia Britannica 2003*. See the entry for 'South Arabia, Religion of' in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

<sup>6</sup>The vowel is *zapha*. In western Syriac it is written with a Greek omicron. Its sound was much like the English vowel in 'ought'.

<sup>7</sup>See Enno Littmann, *Arabic Inscriptions* (Leiden, 1949) and James Bellamy, "Two Pre-Islamic Arabic Inscriptions Revised: Jabal Ramm and Umm al-Jimal", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 108/3 (1988). Bellamy disputes Littmann's reading of Allah, but Bellamy's reading seems contrived, both in sense and in decipherment, as if he were avoiding the word Allah. In any event, it is significant that many pre-Islamic inscriptions record "theophoric" names that include Allah, just as many Hebrew names included *El* or *Yah*.

<sup>8</sup>The author has personally examined microfilms and photographs of manuscripts representing the history and spectrum of Arabic Bible translation, and they all use Allah. One of the earliest Christian Arabic translations is the so-called *Elegant Gospels* (Leiden 2378 / OR 561; Vatican Arabic 17 and 18). Like Saadia's translation, it often uses Allah to translate both Greek *Theos* and *Kurios*. This practice has been resumed in recent Arabic translations such as the *Sharif Bible*.

<sup>9</sup>In many of the languages ranging from Iran to Central Asia to northern India, Muslims commonly refer to God as *Khoda* rather than as Allah, although they use the latter form as well.

<sup>10</sup>For a comparison of a Biblical concept of God and concepts held by many Muslims