

The Etymology of the W ‘Allah’

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Many evangelical Christians in North America are influenced by recent books that state that the Arabic word *Ilah* (God), especially when it appears in the form *Allah*, should not be used in evangelism or Bible translation. They assert that:

...the cult of the Moon God which worshipped *Allah* was transformed by Mohammed into a monotheistic faith... By the ninth century, Islam was the dominant political force in Arab lands and the men who translated the Bible into Arabic faced a difficult political situation. If they did not use *Allah* as the name for God, they might suffer at the hands of fanatical Muslims who, as part of their religion, believed that *Allah* of the Quran was the God of the Bible. Since *Allah* was at this time the common name for God because of the dominance of Islam, translators bowed to the political and religious pressures and put *Allah* into the Arabic Bible.¹

In my contact with Arabic-speaking national Christians from several countries, I have never found one that holds this view. Their comment is that *Allah* is the Arabic word for God and it is the only word they have ever known that expresses the concept of a Supreme Being who revealed Himself to men through the prophets in early times, and then more recently, through Jesus Christ.

1. Is Allah an inappropriate term for the God of Christianity?

Although it may appear that *Ilah* (and *Allah*) is inseparably linked to Islam, it actually pre-dates Islam by several centuries. The fact that this same word appears in Arabic as well as Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Sabeian indicates that the three-consonant root ‘L-H has its true origin in the parent language (or mother tongue) from which all Semitic languages descended. Each language added different vowels to the word – ‘*laH* in Arabic, ‘*LoaH* or ‘*LoHim* in Hebrew and ‘*LaH* in Aramaic – but these are merely different pronunciations of the same three-consonant root (‘L-H) used in different geographical areas or people groups.

In the Old Testament, ‘*eloah* (57 times), the more common plural form ‘*elohim* (2603 times) and the Aramaic ‘*elah* (95 times) are used both of pagan gods and the God of Israel. Context is usually sufficient to determine who is being talked about. Often the word is used like a proper name, God. Occasionally, however, the word is used like a generic noun with the definite article (the) added to clearly indicate that the text is speaking about The [One True] God of the Bible. Note for example, Genesis 5:22: ‘Enoch walked with the God’; Genesis 27:28: ‘May the God give you the dew of heaven...’ and Ezra 1:5: ‘everyone whose spirit the God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem’.

Jacob used the Hebrew equivalent of *Ilah/Allah*. An interesting passage is Genesis 33:20. Jacob builds an altar and calls it *El Elohe Israel*. The first word is *El* (a short form

meaning God), the second is 'eLoHim (with modified ending to link it with the following word). The third word is *Israel* which is Jacob's personal name, but later became the name of the nation of Israel. In the Arabic, this is *El Ilah Israel* (إله إسرائيل) and means *El is the God of Israel*.

Jesus used the Aramaic equivalent of *Ilah/Allah*. The local dialect of Palestine in Jesus' day was Aramaic. This was due to the fact that the Jews brought back Aramaic with them when they returned from the Babylonian exile (c 538 BC) and because Aramaic had been the common language of the Persian empire that ruled Palestine from 539 - 331 BC. As a result, Jesus used the Aramaic language during his time on earth. Mark 15:34 records the words of Jesus on the cross: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani* (Matt. 27:46: *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*). Since the New Testament was written in Greek and Greek has no equivalent for *h*, the Aramaic word *Elohi* (*my God*) was transliterated as *Eloi* in Mark's Gospel (and shortened even more by Matthew). This statement by Jesus (*Elohi*) is almost identical to the word Muslims and Christians use in the Arabic language today (*Ilahi*) which is literally *God + my* (i.e. *my God*) (*Ilah + y*) (إله + ي).

The early translators of the Bible used the root form 'L-H. The earliest translation of the complete Old and New Testament was the Syriac version (c 100 AD), a form of Eastern Aramaic and it also uses the basic root form 'eLaH for God.

It is clear that the word 'L-H was used for the God of the Bible centuries before Muhammad came on the scene. Since the Arabic *Ilah* (*god*) is the same word as Hebrew 'eloah / 'elohim and Aramaic 'elah, one cannot assert that the Arabic term in and of itself is inappropriate when referring to the God of Christianity.

2. How do Arabic speakers distinguish between God and idols?

The Arabic word *Ilah* appears in several forms; *Ilah* (إله), *el-Ilah* (الإله), and *Allah* (الله). The simple form is *Ilah* (*god* or *a god*). The second form *el-Ilah* (*the god*) simply adds the definite article *the* to the word. The term *Allah* is a specially contracted form of *el (the) + Ilah (god)*. Among Arabic-speaking-people, the term *Allah* is used to denote *The [One Supreme] God*. In fact, the other forms are used for pagan gods. NOTE: the sole exception is when the term *god* is linked together with another noun (called a construct relationship) and therefore cannot have a definite article with it. In such cases, the word *the* is implied and the identity of the god in question is clearly evident from the context (e.g. *Ilah-Ibrahim* = [*the*] *God of Abraham*). We must keep in mind that what is appropriate in one language is not necessarily appropriate in another. In the Old Testament 'eloah, 'elohim, and in Aramaic 'elah, can be used either for God or for pagan gods. This is not the case in Arabic. In Arabic *Allah* (الله) is reserved only for the One and Only God. The notion of the *uniqueness* of God is so strong that any plural form of the word *Ilah* could only be used for idols.

Comparative chart of English and Arabic protocol in the description of Deity			
	Origin of the word	The [One Supreme] God	Word used for idols
English	<i>God</i> was the common Teutonic word for a personal object of worship.	<i>God</i> with capital <i>G</i> . Without an article	<i>god</i> with a small <i>g</i> . It can have either a definite or indefinite article (<i>the, a</i>).
Arabic	The root form (‘-L-H) is common to Semitic languages. Experts say the ‘contracted form’ of <i>El-Ilah</i> (<i>Allah</i>) may be a loan word to Arabic from Aramaic.	<i>Allah</i> which is the contracted form of <i>El-Ilah</i> (<i>The God</i>), often written as follows:  (with dagger <i>alif</i>) which is an archaic spelling, as a sign of respect.	<i>Ilah</i> . It can have a definite article (<i>El-Ilah</i>). Singular and plural forms of this word are used for idols. NOTE: The word <i>Allah</i> الله (contracted form) is never used for idols.

3. Should we use the word *Allah* to describe the God of the Bible?

You may remember that we said above that what is appropriate in one language is not appropriate in another. If you are speaking English and the audience is North American or European, you would not use the word *Allah* to describe the God of the Bible. This is because the world view of this audience is that God is the word for deity of the Christians and Jews and *Allah* is the word for deity of the Muslims. The Black Muslims of North America also seem to favour this definition. I have been surprised to see that even in Bible schools and seminaries, the word *Allah* is construed as meaning only the God of the Muslims.

Arabic-speaking people have another world view. The Muslims believe that the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is *Allah*. In their view, the Jews and Christians who knew the same God in the beginning, at a later date turned away from him, while the Muslims held to the true path. Thus they use the same word *Allah* for the God of all three groups, groups they identify as *People of the Book*. So, the Arabic-speaking Christians have no problem with using the word *Allah*. Their attitude is ‘we had it first; give us back our word’. Therefore, when speaking Arabic, *Allah* is the word to use to describe the God of the Bible.

In Summary:

1. *Allah* is directly related to the Hebrew word for God and is the best Arabic translation for the word *God* in the Bible.

2. No other form of *Ilah* can be used of the One True God without implying that God is a pagan god.

3. The use of *Allah* best fits the Arabic world view.

Conclusion: The real problem is the way God is defined outside the writings inspired by the Holy Spirit.

There is nothing wrong with the word *Allah* which is used by Muslims and Christians. The problem is that the Qur'an does not define him in the same way that the Bible presents him. This is analogous to the many cults in our country who share the same name for God that we use, but whose view of God is completely different from ours.

I have dozens of Arabic-speaking friends who worship God because of their personal relationship with him through their faith in Jesus Christ. When they address their Father in heaven in prayer, they call him *Allah* or *Ilahi* (my God). This kind of personal family relationship is revealed only in the Bible, not in the Qur'an. I am glad to report that there are thousands of Arabic-speaking people who are becoming Christians and who understand *Allah* in the way the Arabic Bible presents him.

Footnote

1. Robert Morey, *The Islamic Invasion*, Harvest House: Eugene. 1992. pp. 62, 64-65)

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