

The Use of the Word 'Allah' in the Arabic Bible

by Bob Cox

An American pastor recently asked me the following question: 'Can we pray in the name of both Jesus and Allah (when Allah denies that Jesus came as God in the flesh)?' My answer to him was that when I am praying in the Arabic language, I pray to *Allah* in the name of Jesus Christ (*Yesu'u ul-Masih*). The Arabic Bible affirms that Jesus is Allah in the flesh. The common assumption is that Allah is not the God of the Bible. I would like to make a *cautious correction* to this assumption by stating that Allah has always been the God of the Arabic Bible.

When I began learning Arabic in the early sixties, I was introduced to a Bible in the Moroccan dialect, which used *Allah* for the word *God*. As I progressed, I began using the Bible in literary Arabic known as the Bustani-Smith-Van Dyck version, which was completed in 1865 under the sponsorship of the American Presbyterian Mission in the Middle East. It uses the word *Allah* for God. This has been the favoured translation of evangelical Christians in the Arabic-speaking world for more than 140 years. In the last few years *Today's Arabic Version* and *Kitab ul-Hayat* (*The Book of Life*, funded by Living Bible International) have been added to the list of translations consulted by Arabic-speaking evangelicals. These newest versions also use the word *Allah* for God.

I now know, after study, that translations of the Arabic Bible have a very long history. Among the early translations was *The Diatessaron of Tatian*, which was a sort of harmony of the four gospels composed of fifty-five chapters with a single continuous account of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord. This was written in Greek about 172 AD. This version was very popular among Syriac-speaking Christians. Syrian bishops had an uphill battle getting Christians to use *The Gospel of the Separated Ones* (meaning the text in which the four Gospels were separated from one another rather than blended) in their churches. The only copies of the *Diatessaron* that have survived the centuries are in Armenian and in Arabic. The Arabic version does not seem to be translated from the Greek, but experts say that internal evidence indicates that the Arabic version reflects the style of *Old Syriac* (second century), which was a translation of Syriac which preceded the *Peshitta* (fourth century). In spite of its early origin, many think that it wasn't translated into Arabic until the eleventh century.

From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries there were an amazing number of translations of the New Testament (and in some cases, the entire Bible) in Arabic. Following is a list of surviving manuscripts in different museums, monasteries or libraries (the name of the institution indicates where the manuscript can be found, not who was responsible for writing it):

- *Vatican Arabic No. 13*
- *Sinai Arabic No. 151 (867 AD)*
- *Vatican Arabic No. 95 (eighth-ninth century)*
- *Vatican Arabic No. 71 (tenth century)*
- *Vatican Arabic No. 18 (993 AD)*

There is a manuscript attributed to Ibn Tayyib, a monk, pastor, scientist, physician, author and translator who died in 1045. As a medical doctor, he treated the Caliph of Baghdad. As a biblical

scholar, he produced a full commentary on the four gospels with his own translation of the text. Then there is a manuscript called the *Coptic Vulgate* (1203 AD) which has the Scripture text in both Coptic and Arabic. This is now in the Vatican library as *Vatican Coptic No. 9*. The most comprehensive of all was the work of Hibet Allah Ibn Assal (1252) who collected twelve manuscripts of the Arabic New Testament from Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, and Syriac Orthodox churches and made the world's first critical edition of the gospels. The notes are copious and precise. A copy made by a monk called Ghabriel in about 1260 is now in the British Museum (No. 3382).

All the above were done before the printing press was invented. Since 1591 there have been about twenty translations of the Bible in Arabic done by Catholics, Protestants, Maronites and Orthodox. (These translations were probably not made with the Arabic-speaking Muslim in mind but for the Christian minorities in the Middle East.) Of interest to Bible scholars may be the fact that one manuscript from the ninth century, containing the four gospels (*Vatican Arabic No. 13*) did use the word *eloheem* in some places for *Allah* in translating the Greek word *Theos*. As you know, *Elohim* is a Hebrew word used in the Old Testament and is the plural of *Eloah*. I can only speculate why they didn't continue using *Elohim*. Perhaps they opted for a singular word because the Muslims accuse the Christians of worshipping three gods. As far as I know, all other translations of the Bible, including English, use a singular word to translate the word *God*.

Of course, I personally have not been able to consult all the above-mentioned manuscripts and printed Bibles. In the Arabic version of the article from the *Theological Review* mentioned above, there is a comparative study of several manuscripts on Romans 1:4: 'and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord'. Among these are *Vatican No. 13* and *Sinai Arabic no. 151*, both from the ninth century. Both use the word *Allah* for the word *God* in this verse. All the printed versions that I have been able to consult also use *Allah*. I think that it is safe to say that the translators of the Arabic Bible have always used *Allah* for the word *God* with the exception of the manuscript *Vatican No. 13*, which used *Elohim* in some places.

I give you all this background just to prove that Arabic Bible translators have been locked into the use of the word *Allah* in Bible translation for the last 1200 years. This was done on the basis of choices made by early translators and is just like the use of *God* in the English Bible, which was the choice (good or bad) of translators since Wycliffe (or perhaps even before him).

Now, here is the reason I react to those saying we shouldn't use the word *Allah* in the Bible. Our mission office in the USA gets mail from people who have been influenced by American polemicists who say that you shouldn't use the word *Allah* to describe the God of the Bible. They want to know what they can do to help get the word *Allah* out of the Arabic Bible. My reaction is as follows: who are we as non-Arabic speaking people to dictate to Arab Christians that they should not use the word *Allah*? People who don't know one word of Arabic don't even have the courtesy to ask the Arabic-speaking Christians what they think about it.

What would you think if South Korean Christians told us that we should not use the word *God* in English anymore? Let us suppose that several South Korean Christians wrote books about false cults originating in America. In these books, they argue convincingly that god, as defined by these cults, is not the same as the God of the Bible. They encourage us English-speaking Christians to get rid of the word *God* because it associates us with a false religion which has a false concept of deity. Let's suppose also that they took up large collections of money to make a new translation of the Bible in order to eliminate that word and that they did not even consult with Christians of England and North America about this. If such a translation of the Bible came out, I can only imagine how the lovers of the King James Version, NASB or NIV would react.

I do concede that there is a polarization in North America. Many people think that the word *God* describes the Christian's God and the word *Allah* describes the Muslim's god. A few years ago I was invited to speak to a mission class at a well known Bible College. I was shocked to hear the professor say that Allah was unknowable, but God was knowable, and that Allah was not a god of love, but that God is love. I had gone to the class thinking that *Allah* was the Arabic word for deity and *God* was the English equivalent. After some reflection, it dawned on me that the professor was using a different definition from mine. To him, *Allah* meant the Muslim's god and the word *God* meant the Christian's god.

I think that American Black Muslims feel that way because when they convert to Islam they often take Arabic names like Abdullah (which means servant of God) and they refer to Allah as their deity. In light of this, I admit that it is wiser to use the word *God* in English when talking about the God of the Bible. However, when I speak Arabic (with people from Egypt, Syria, Morocco etc.), I always refer to God as Allah.

I guess it boils down to how you interpret the word *Allah*. If you interpret this word in the context of the Old and New Testaments (which the Arabic Bible does), then you are describing the God of the Bible. If you describe Allah as the way the Qur'an presents him, then you are not describing the God of the Bible.

References

Information about manuscripts and translations of the Arabic Bible is taken from an article entitled "The Arabic Versions of the Bible, Reflections on their History and Significance", by Kenneth E. Bailey and Harvey Staal that appeared in the *Reformed Review* (vol.36), 1982, pp. 3-11. I also have the same article in Arabic (slightly expanded version) from the *Theological Review*, Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon, pp. 142-155 (date not shown on the copy in my possession).

Information about the Syriac versions of the Bible (*The Diatessaron, Old Syriac, Peshitta*) is taken from *Quiknotes, The Origin of the Bible*, by Philip W. Comfort, Ph.D., Tyndale House Publishers, 2000, page 59.

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