

a process emanating from power encounter be sought. ... The ordinary Muslim understands the power of the Qur'an to heal, or the use of the rosary to divine and guide. He needs to discover that Christ can heal, can give power, can defeat demons, can speak supernaturally to man to guide him, etc. (Musk 1979: 214,213).

Women seem to be in the majority of those involved in folk Islam. We women, who want to minister to them in a holistic way, must in humility and with strong faith and courage in our victorious Saviour, ask and allow Him to teach and equip us for this part of the battle. We must allow Him to cast out fear and let His love be perfected in us. This does not mean that we are to go looking for battle in power encounter, rather it is a call to not neglect being prepared when the Lord brings us into contact with those with such need.

Looking into the Muslim woman's family relationships and involvement in the supernatural in the Arab world have given us insight into areas of need to which we might minister. These, however, are only two aspects of her life; they should not be generalized to every country and situation, nor are her power and influence limited to these. Moreover, the conditions which limit her power are changing. Further study into the ways women exercise power and influence in the Arab world is needed and could give us more insight into how to make our ministry meet their felt needs.

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LANGUAGE AND THE ARABIC BIBLE:

SOME FURTHER REFLECTIONS

by I. L.

Having read with some interest the articles in SEEDBED concerning the need to rework our approach to the problem of the language used for communicating Christian Truth to Muslims, I have been prompted to set down my rather underdeveloped thoughts on this subject. I offer them for your consideration.

Issues to be Confronted in Formulating an Approach

A starting point for our discussion is the claim made by Muslims that the Qur'an was "sent down" verbatim from heaven in Arabic, and is therefore sacred. Several conclusions are drawn from, or linked to, this claim.

a. Muslims hold that the Qur'an cannot be translated. The words are fixed; they can only be true Word of God when recited in Arabic exactly as given. Translation devalues the words. Because translating is a human activity that is not precise, translations of the Qur'an cannot be considered reliable; they do not have the same status as the original Arabic text.

This view may be changing somewhat. Muslims have translated the Qur'an, and seem to consider translations made by Muslims more credible than those made by non-Muslims. Nevertheless, it is still assumed that the Qur'an, and by extension other holy books, cannot, or perhaps should not, be translated.

When therefore a Muslim sees Christians freely translating the Bible, and using different versions, he jumps to the conclusion that it must be inferior. (We leave aside here the question of the Muslim assertion that the Christian Scriptures have been corrupted.)

b. To the Muslim, God does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way--full stop. God only reveals His will: the words of scripture reveal what God expects of man and how he is to behave in society, but God does not reveal Himself in scripture. That would compromise His transcendence.

c. In the Muslim view, "inspiration" means that God dictated the words of scripture from an eternally existing Book in heaven. This type of inspiration is considered to be far superior to the way the Bible was "inspired" because its human authors are acknowledged to have had a role in the choice of words used. Once again the Muslim interprets things so as to elevate the Qur'an above the Bible.

d. Part of the problem is the view of man in Islam. Man is a slave of God; he has a low status. Man does not bear the image of God, nor can he have a personal relationship with God. (Some of the mystics, the Sufis, do however reach out for a relationship with God. And in popular Islam we find people going to Holy men to have them intercede on their behalf.) The implications of this will be explored later.

e. Finally, there is the high status of Classical Arabic in Islam. It is hard for us non-Arabs, even those who have learnt some Classical, to appreciate what it means to the Muslim. If the Qur'an "came down" from heaven in that language, they reason, then it must be the "language of heaven." Even those who do not understand it well still have a high regard for it. This is why Arabs will not refer to their different dialects as "Arabic" at all. This is also why Muslim Arabs have such a strong prejudice against using the dialect for writing, especially anything sacred; they charge those who do with "corrupting

our language." One may use the dialect for speaking, but books must be in the Classical. How well it is understood is another matter (and a subject for further investigation).

Pointers for Dealing with These Issues

In discussing possible ways to deal with the above issues, I will treat them in reverse order, beginning with f.

e. Across the Arab world a low Classical-type spoken Arabic is developing, under the influence of the press and the radio, due to the fact that more people are learning the Classical (Modern Standard Arabic), in school for instance. It simplifies the Classical somewhat, with the result that more and more people are able to understand it. Under its influence the dialects are also changing, incorporating an increasing number of words from the Classical. Whether we will ever see it become a standardized literary language remains to be seen, as the developments are more in the area of speaking than in writing. But these trends are going to help Christian witness. The rise in the language level of the population will help translators achieve a high status translation that is also understandable. New translations of the Arabic Bible already avoid obscure words, and difficult styles and constructions.

It would seem that the North African Bible anticipates this development in spoken Arabic somewhat. It uses language that is common to the various North African dialects, incorporating simple Classical words and expressions where these differ, but unfortunately still uses "ecclesiastical Arabic." It would be helpful at this point if someone would undertake an evaluation of this translation in the light of these recent developments.

In my view, if a translation is not acceptable to the intended audience then it is of little use. The ideal of making the Arabic Bible comprehensible through use of the dialects may not be achievable if it is not acceptable even to the Christians.

d. The dignity of man as taught in Scripture needs to be explained to the Muslim. Man is not just a slave; he was created as a responsible being and given the task of governing this world in partnership with God. The difference between the Qur'anic and Biblical viewpoints are graphically depicted in the way the two books describe the naming of the animals. In the Qur'an (2:30ff), God "teaches their names" to Adam. In the Bible (Gen 3:19-20), by contrast, "God brought them [the animals] to man to see what he would name them." Here, we see God respecting the dignity of man by involving him, interacting with him, and using his personality, mind and skills. The situation is similar for the inspiration of the Scriptures.

c. The truth of the Biblical concept of inspiration and its implications needs explaining. When the Holy Spirit of God inspired the authors of Scripture, He did not use them as one would use dictating machines. Rather, the Holy Spirit guided their choice of words and approved the words they used, so that they spoke and wrote in cooperation with God the things He wanted them to write. The authority and

accuracy of the text are guaranteed by fact that the author superintended and approved what was written.

But what can we say of Bible translations? As we have seen, Muslims tend to question their authority. An analogy may help us here. On 7 November 1987 the then Prime Minister of Tunisia had the aging President Bourguiba declared incapable of doing his job, and took over the presidency. That same day a declaration was published in Arabic and in French. Presumably, the Arabic would have been the original. But the French translation was also regarded as "official" and authoritative. The authors of the declaration in Arabic knew French well, and had approved the translation. In other words, translations do share the authority of the original.

Indeed, the Christian understanding of inspiration is more akin to the idea of translation than that of dictation. The original texts of scripture are more a translation of what God wanted to communicate than the verbatim "speech of God," as Muslims understand inspiration. In this view, God takes man and his responsibility and dignity seriously. He used men to write what He wanted said. He gave men translation skills; the art of translation has now become so highly developed that one can have every confidence that in our translations one is hearing the word of God. The Scriptures are not just so many words; they are the basis for a real communication from God to men with a view to their salvation; the goal of Scripture is man's salvation. Such a goal is more important than that of preserving and venerating a form of words that is not understood.

I wonder if we might not also draw some conclusions from the way the New Testament writers quoted the Septuagint. The quality of translation in it was not uniform; it was in fact rather poor in places. And yet the New Testament writers apparently had no hesitation to quote it, even when, as in the case of Paul, it is hard to imagine them not being familiar with the Hebrew original. Can it be, then, that the goal of clear communication is more important than slavish adherence to accuracy? If this is true, then what limits should be set for such imprecisions? I personally believe there is room for experimentation in finding ways to communicate life-changing truth.

b. The battle not only concerns the mode of inspiration; it involves the nature of revelation as well. Christians believe that God has revealed Himself, both in creation and in history, in words and in the person of Christ. As we have seen, Muslims reject the idea that God reveals Himself; He is the great unknown; anthropomorphisms (using human terms to describe God) are forbidden, though practically they are hard to avoid. The Christian view, however, rests on the following considerations:

- 1) God created language, and chose the language forms to be used in His self-revelation. He made language such that there is a correspondence between word and thought; words really do express and reveal thoughts, attitudes and the like. Muslims know, as do all peoples, that to describe what someone does is to reveal something of that person's character. This is the basis for much of human social interaction and of our knowledge of each other. The nature of lang-

uage is such that to use it involves self-revelation as well as communication. God can be known and known truly, not just described, even though our knowledge of Him is not comprehensive.

2) There is a popular assumption out there, both in our own thinking and in that of Muslims, that needs to be dealt with. This is the assumption that a person thinks in words. Words, however, are only the outward expression, the concretisation, the externalization of thought; they are not "thought" per se. Some Muslims might go along with this to a certain extent, but then go on to argue that mere words cannot reveal God Himself. This, however, ignores the other fact stressed above: that words correspond to, and reveal, what a person is thinking in a consistent and reliable way. Words are a translation of thought in their own right. This is why Muslim opposition to translation, and their argument that words do not mean the same when applied to God as when applied to man, are not convincing.

3) God has given man the responsibility for the use of language, and the dignity of sharing in His self-revelation in Scripture, by using him to write it down by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

4) God has sent His Holy Spirit into the world to take the words of Scripture and make them come alive to the readers, in the same way a letter comes alive to one who knows the author. The words of scripture are given in order to be the means of a personal encounter with the living God.

In sum, although Muslims may argue that words used to describe God do not mean the same when used to describe men, I maintain that they do. The words of Scripture find their real meaning when they are placed in the context of God establishing and continuing a relationship with man. To deny that words are revelatory of the person in the context of a personal relationship is to deny an essential part of the nature of man and of God. The inspiration of the Scriptures took place in the context of God's relationship with people, a relationship of friendship and not of slavery, and the Scriptures are only understood today in the context of such a relationship.

God uses words about Himself and draws conclusions for man in such a way that there is a solid link with what they mean when applied to man. Even if the details are not fully understood, the link is still there. For example, "Be Holy as I am Holy" would be meaningless were God's holiness totally different from ours. Such statements makes sense only if words used to describe God mean the same as when used of men. Other passages where this argument applies include the verse "Love as I have loved you," verses describing the Fatherhood of God with implications for human fathers, those describing the husband-wife relationship in parallel with that of Christ and the Church, etc. In each case what is said about man is also applied to God, or vice versa. A classic example of God using words to reveal His nature is the "I am" passage of Exodus 3:14.

a. Today, Muslims have come around, reluctantly, to translating the Qur'an. This is in stark contrast to Christian missions, a major thrust of which is to translate the Bible into the mother tongues of

as many people as possible. As Lamin Sanneh has pointed out (1987, see SEEDBED 1V/2, p27-28), this strikes at the heart of Islam's insistence on the dominance of Arabic in religion. The Christian approach is based on the premise that "the greatest and most profound religious truths are compatible with everyday language," and that "ordinary men and women" are "worthy bearers of the religious message." It affirms the truth that no one culture is normative for communicating the message; all cultures are considered valid. Islam, of course, idealizes Arab society of the time of Muhammad as normative for all time. The problem with this, as Sanneh puts it, is that "a divinized absolutised culture precludes the possibility of change." Many of the tensions within the Arab World today arise from differences of opinion as to how much change is acceptable.

Sanneh points out that it is Christians who have transformed the vernaculars into serious means of communication; they have reduced them to writing and translated the Scriptures into them. Where no existing written language is predominant, this approach seems to have worked quite well; translations in the vernacular have been accepted and used.

But where do we find the vernaculars of Arabic origin dignified and given status? It would seem that the vernacular is respected and used primarily in Bedouin poetry, which has a "pure" status as the language of the "true Arab." Vernaculars are also used in popular forms of poetry, in music and in the theatre. In his time, former President Bourguiba of Tunisia gave speeches in the dialect; he was loved for it as one who could communicate with ordinary people. Each of these cases involve the spoken language. These need exploiting for communicating the gospel, but probably not for printed Scriptures. In this complex situation, the overall goal should be to get the Scriptures read and understood.

The events of the Day of Pentecost make it clear that the good news was meant to be heard and understood. "And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?" (Acts 2:8, cp Matt. 28:19, Rev. 5:9, 7:9) This supports the view that Scripture is by nature translation, sanctioned and approved by the author. This brings me to my main point: the Spirit and content of the good news is far more important than the letter or the exact form of its transmission.

This indicates the measure of freedom that we have to be innovative as we seek to communicate life-changing truth.

Such an approach and perspective is so new and totally different from the Muslim's way of thinking, however, that it is going to take some ingenious communicating to make any impact; he will continually need to be drawn to the content and goal of the Scriptures, not just their form.

Finally, Some Practical Suggestions

But what does all this mean for people actually on the ground, who are struggling with Arabic and are not experts in anything. Much of what I have written would interest a serious student, but such people are few and far between. We live in a real world.

It would seem that there is much greater room for experimenting and creativity with spoken Arabic than with the written, and a greater likelihood that truth spoken in the dialect will be accepted. The situation with written Scriptures is much more complicated. Although it may not be possible to use the dialect for Scripture, it is possible to produce a comprehensible Classical Arabic translation.

Of more immediate practical use is the idea of using Islamic words and phrases to convey the truth of Scripture. I personally applaud such an attempt. But I would like to see more study done on how Muslim readers of different backgrounds understand them, rather than just taking their textbook meanings. Indeed, Arabic is so rich, a number of profitable areas of study come to mind. Could not someone, for example, ransack the various sources of Arabic proverbs and draw up a list of those especially useful to the Christian communicator?

Then there are those words, such as "grace," that are in common use by both the Qur'an and the Bible, both Muslims and Christians, but with different meanings. When a President "graces" a prisoner, does that express the Biblical idea? If not, how can we express or explain what is meant in a phrase or sentence? When witnessing we usually do not have time for long explanations.

But what of the Arab's love of stringing nouns and adjectives together in sentences; could this feature of Arabic be used to create a list of memorable one-phrase explanations of these key concepts? Some time ago, for example, we were trying to explain the phrase, "the glory of God" in Arabic, and came up with the phrase, "majd-Allaah, huwa taahir, wa-jamiil, wa-qawiy" [the Glory of God is pure, beautiful and powerful]. This is probably not a very good explanation of the Biblical idea, but it does illustrate what I am talking about, and in this case helps explain why man has fallen short of God's glory, according to Romans 3:23.

I suggest that it would be helpful, as a start, if someone would draw up a list of such problem words and concepts needing study. What are people finding difficult to explain? Where are people trying out new words and having success? Such a list would be the basis for further research and would eventually tie in with the phrase list for explaining truth, already mentioned. This, along with understanding the issues, is I believe one of the ways to go forward now.

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