

Should Christians Use Allah in Bible Translations?

by Joshua Massey

The question of translating God as Allah is hotly debated in non-Arab lands, where many sincere Christians are convinced Allah is a false god. Ironically, this debate doesn't exist for Arab Christians, who have continually translated *elohim* and *theos* (the primary terms for God in Biblical Hebrew and Greek) as Allah from the earliest known Arabic Bible translations in the eighth century till today. Most scholars agree that Allah is the Arabicised form of the Biblical Aramaic *elah*, corresponding to the Hebrew *eloah*, which is the singular of *elohim*, a generic word for God used throughout the Old Testament. As in English, the Bible uses *elah* and *elohim* for both the Most High God and false gods—English uses an upper or lower case “g” to distinguish between these two. By contrast, Muslims never use Allah to refer to a false god, but only the One True God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Muslim writers have been using Allah in their quotations of the Christian Bible since the ninth century. Jewish scholars have also been translating *elohim* and *elah* as Allah since the earliest known Arabic translations of the Torah in the ninth century until today. So in spite of the apparent differences in how God is understood according to Biblical and Qur'anic content, Arabic-speaking Jews, Christians and Muslims together have been addressing God as Allah over the last fourteen centuries.

Nonetheless, many sincere missionaries who strive to be Biblical tend to reject all Muslim terminology, culture, and religious forms which they construe as “Islamic”—even elements rooted in Biblical Jewish and Christian origin. Issues of terminology for God are significantly convoluted when working with Muslims in non-Arabic-speaking lands where Christians use alternate terms for God. Although millions of Arab and non-Arab Christians (e.g. thirty million Javanese and Sundanese Christians in Indonesia) worship God as “Allah”, other non-Arab Christians are susceptible to strong aversions toward using Allah for God when unaware of its history and broader usage in the body of Christ. It is all too easy to misunderstand any foreign term when we do not know the language or its wider context of usage.

Similarly, it is equally easy to gloss over the sordid history of many non-Arabic terms Christians use for God. The English word “God”, for example, comes from the pagan Germanic “Gott,” which was used as a proper name for the chief Teutonic deity Odin, who lives on top of the world-tree and created the first humans with his wife Freya, a blonde, blue-eyed goddess of love, fertility and beauty. Should English speakers therefore discontinue addressing the Most High as God? In spite of its pagan origin and its present use for both false deities and the Most High, “God” (when capitalized) is generally understood by English speakers as the God of the Bible, and therefore perfectly acceptable to English-speaking Christians. Allah, by contrast, shares the same Semitic roots as Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, is not presently used for false deities, and clearly understood by all Arab Christians and Muslims as the God of the Bible. Allah is therefore a perfectly acceptable term for Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims.

While using Allah is a non-issue for Arabic-speaking Christians, many non-Arabic-speaking Christians nonetheless have difficulty separating the term from its meaning as defined by Islamic teaching. If we don't use a new term, it is believed, Muslims will misunderstand the nature of God in the Bible. Christian advocates for using Allah amongst Muslims in non-Arabic-speaking counter that introducing foreign terms for God will create immense hurdles in communication, perhaps even guaranteeing that a truly indigenous church planting movement will never occur. The ask, they say, is not to discard such easily redeemable terms, but to fill them with Biblical meaning. The more a Muslim's understanding of Allah is informed by the Scriptures, the more Biblical their theology of God will become. Filling familiar words with new meaning, rather than tossing them aside as irreparable, is something the church has wisely done from the beginning. For example, logos (the Word) was long used by pagan Stoics to describe "the divine soul of the world." Like elohim and elah, non-Jewish usage of the Greek theos did not denote a specific deity in the first century, but a polytheistic totality of gods, with Zeus being the father of gods and men—as Scripture testifies (Acts 14:1-12). Nonetheless, New Testament writers did not shy away from using (John 1:1, 14) or theos, which occurs 1,343 times in the New Testament and translated "God" 1,320 times.

Therefore, if the translator's objective is to render the Scriptures in a way that will be well received as "Good News" by Muslim readers, the solution to this linguistic quagmire is not necessarily to avoid the terms Allah, no matter how vehemently some non-Arabic knowing Christians may oppose it. Allah has been a perfectly acceptable term in Bible translation to millions of Arab and non-Arab Christians for over a millennium, and remains so for Muslim readers today.

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