

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAMIC STUDIES IV

ALLAH'S LEXICAL PROBLEMS: A CRITICAL NOTEBOOK

Introduction

The below remarks arose out of a discussion with a colleague on the etymological history of the word Allah; and the manner to which its use should be or not be enjoined upon other parties. This is a broad sketch, but necessary for translators and cultural workers involved in linguistics. Today, the subject of Islam among current events is a scorchingly hot topic. The title 'Allah' is near the center of the debate as so few understand its meaning or history. So I gave some thought to this and figured that, rather than writing a long technical paper, I would merely put some stand alone opinions on 'Allah' in an informal piece that will be an easy future reference for any reader. Hopefully, the following will contain enough critical information for further reflection and study.

Some notes on the meaning of 'ALLAH'

One How does one begin an objective but impartial look into a fast growing religion; especially, one that is guarded by its adherents and historically, so misunderstood? The host of directions in which a historian might go to gather information is vast and varied. The easiest path though, is also the one fraught with the most dangers, and that is the language. To gain insight into the nature of Islam requires detailed studies in difficult strains of minutiae. Of the many issues we could study in this paper, the Arabic name for 'God' seems to be the most relevant.

The whole issue of the usage of 'Allah' in modern publications is a bit disturbing; if for no other reason than the lack of real analysis that goes into making an honest attempt at rightly situating its meaning(s). The definition of Allah in Arabic writings defines for Arabs--both, Christians and Muslims—God. That is the restricted gloss used by all. In fact, to lead a prayer in Arabic It would be necessary for me to use the word Allah, as do all Christians. In a more generic sense, Allah can be used to speak of 'the god.' And any casual reader of Arabic texts in the Old Testament can confirm this, as well as, those reading from non-religious Arabic literature of today.

Modern problems in defining Allah, and there are many

Two First of all, a main point, which I believe needs further elucidation, concerns the visible Muslim 'baggage' related to the word 'Allah. It is true (In some quarters) that whenever we in the West hear the term Allah we immediately envision Islam. This is a known fact that

is going away no time soon. Muslim extremists have done a excellent job at utilizing the press and publishing houses worldwide to create an aura of uniqueness for their religion, and its vernacular speech terms; and this appraisal should also extend from medieval times on up unto our present day. Within the departments of the United Nations, there is actually an observatory for the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Representing more than 50 Muslim countries, they issue reports, which are geared towards slanting the West's mind on Islamic matters.

So of necessity, the sifting of material is now a primary activity. Because of Allah's perceived role in the Quran as the one who gave Islam—believed to be Abraham's religion {sur. 2:135; 3:67; 14:35-41}--through the Arabic language, Islam's association with the term Allah is solid and concrete. But there are problems on historical and philological grounds. I often hear prominent teachers and others speak of Allah's original meaning being related to an ancient moon god; the whole assumption is a matter of misinformation; and just a small amount of linguistic study would prove it to be so (*personal note: I have supplied research for a number of individuals who insist on misappropriating facts in order to create mass hysteria about Muslims and 'Allah's supposed roots).

The Nebataean, whose scripts were the precursors to our modern Arabic script, worshipped, among others, Al-lat, the goddess of spring and fertility, and also, Al-Uzza, the goddess of power. The Qur'an alludes to these idols and it is the reference to these deities {in sur. 53:19} that has brought on the Allahic links to strange idols. Nevertheless, there is a large amount of fact that needs to be separated from fiction.

- Fact: a)* In pre-Islamic days, many Arab tribes of the Arabian Continent were polytheistic.
- Fact: b)* Allah was viewed as the chief god among a pantheon of idols worshipped by the masses.
- Fact: c)* Arabs worshipped angels, the moon & sun, even statues of various types.
- Fact: d)* Later, Muhammad adopted and adapted the term Allah for his mono-theistic religion, believing that he was recovering the genuine faith system of Abraham.

The linguistic strata

Three So now, let's look at the evidence on philological grounds. A study of this type should be conducted along comparative lines. The same manner in which the Indo-European languages are connected through a lingual system of root stems, also, applies to other dialects, especially if you believe in a common ancestor for tongues; the old comparativist theme of 'laboring with one fact and one hypothesis' rings true in Semitics. Believing as I do in the *literal Babel story of Genesis*,

there is no difficulty at all in recognizing that words fix their meanings through their stems; with slight alterations occurring through the affixation of proper suffixes. So here, I declare a belief in common genetic ancestry.

Nobel Prize winning researchers have laboriously gathered data on the sequentials of DNA and have carefully placed, at our disposal, fulsome amounts of information on how offspring inherit parental characteristics. In the late eighteenth century an outstanding linguist—Sir William Jones—an Englishman, conducted a linguistic survey of languages he knew, and he also added Sanskrit to the examination. By the end of his evaluation he concluded that all of these {Greek, Latin, German, Celtic, and Sanskrit} must derive from the same dialectal parent. It is this type of sophisticated research which leads us, today, to form ideas and opinions along proven historically linguistic lines.

Consider the stem-root hypothesis in light of the way the word ‘God’ is counter parted in Indo-European dialects: *Deus—deiw-os*, then, the couplet-*dyeu-peter*, known now in Lat. *Jupiter*, or Gk. *Zeus pater*. The ancients saw god-*{deus}* as a fatherly-*{pater}* figure in the pantheon.

In like manner, moving eastward, we purpose to show that Allah is cognate to other Semitic words for God: In Aramaic parlance, the word for God is ‘*aa-la-haa*’--with extended syllabic accent on the first short vowel, and in Heb. *El, Elohim*—the suffix *im*, marks plural significance. But, rarely does anyone ever ask where the syllable *lo or ‘O’* in Elohim comes from. This is most unfortunate since critical study is a lexical endeavor also.

Phonetically, little real investigation is given to authenticating the ‘Lo’ syllabic. But responsible analyses will prove that *El and El-lah* were ancient forms of Elohim--Eloah being the fem. form. To some degree, I am illustrating in part, a genetic classification of languages; a work in which a superb stemologist might find great joy. Although the Elohim form displays a line of antiquity, we still must ferret out its provenance.

From Phoenician-Hebrew scripts we have discovered ancient forms like ‘El and Elah.’ For instance, discovered in 1880, a Siloam inscription found in the water way built in Jerusalem by Solomon evidences archaic forms. Also, the Sennacherib prism, chronicles the siege events of Hezekiah’s day, and presents valuable evidence for El/Elah in prototypical Hebrew. Aramaic still uses both, *aalahaa* and *Eloiyi* in modern speech—translated *Eli, Eli*.in the Gospel of Mark 15:34 (KJB). The current idiolect of Aramaic speakers has not changed much, and both words are functional to this day in common vernacular.

Nebataean links?

Four Our modern Arabic script descends from Aramaic. From the fourth century BC unto fourth century AD the Nebataean overspread much of the region we know presently as Jordan and Syria. We know that the Apostle Paul's conversion occurred on a road to a Nebataean city. At the time, Greek was the international tongue, but, Aramaic was distinctly the lingua franca of the Levantine world. All that is left of Nebataean remains are some 4000 bits of graffiti and inscriptions from the time of Aretus IV {II Cor 11:32}. Much of our information from their early history emerges from our readings of early Greek historians like Diodorus, and the eyewitness account of Strabo, who wrote about his journeys in his book *Geography--XVI*. Historian's writings speak of a nomadic people, fierce in some regards and simple in other aspects—like seamanship.

Mostly containing names and titles, they still preserve ancient forms still common to the Arab populace today.¹ Also, there are the Petra Scrolls—In Greek; they are to Byzantine Nebataean scholars, what the Dead Sea Scrolls are to Hebraists. From the visible portions, a preliminary assessment by Dr. Ludwig Koenen, the H.C. Youtie Professor of Papyrology at the University of Michigan in January 1994, dated the fragments to c.450AD.

This was a find of great import because epigraphists and paleographers are now able to ground their theory of Arabic beginnings in fact. Containing letters, contracts and other tidbits, the scrolls demonstrate a vocabulary contemporary to their times—all Greek cursive MSS that contain, in many cases, transliterations of key Nebataean words, and many other locutions copied from the first century AD up to the early fifth century. Indeed, Nebataean ruins and remains have been found in the hegira region of Saudi Arabia, proving that the influence of the Nebataeans on early Arab culture is not a remote idea but a sensical fact.

Pre-Islamic timeframes in Arabia

Five The National Museum of Saudi Arabia contains over 9000 catalogued epigraphic objects. Everything from inscriptions carved in bas-relief stones, to small rock statuaries. In olden times, the Arabian continent possessed two sets of scripts; one of the North region and another of the South. Eventually, southern dialects—Sabaean, Qatabani, Hadrami and Hassanean--won out through the spread of Islam. Arabic, as an agnate dialect of Nebataean Aramaic script, early on was used for

¹ For an excellent treatment of Arabic loan words see M. O'Connor's article 'Arabic loan words in Nebataean Aramaic' in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* #45 pp213-29

inscription purposes. As Arabic grew multitudes began to utilize these forms for writing and now there are thousands of remains extant.

THE PRE-ISLAMIC ‘ZEBED INSCRIPTION’

In Zebed, South of Aleppo, Syria, a text found over a door is written in Greek, Syriac and Arabic. The date {given by the Greek} is that of 512 AD. The inscription reads “*by the help of God, Sergius, son of Amat Manaf, and Tobi, son of Imru’i-quais and Sergius, son of sa’d, and Sitr and Shouraih.*” The Arabic text is not a translation of the Greek, although it does mention a few of the names found therein. A little familiarity with Arabic epigraphy will show that the carved form of Allah is exactly like that of the form used by later Muslims; even though it pre-dates Muhammad’s birth by some sixty years. Moreover, the names mentioned in the Arabic text are names commonly found in later texts of Arabic type.

‘*The inscription of Abraha*’ is located in Southern Arabia near a well and contains ten lines, which state “By the power of God, and the Jesus {the Christian} king Abraha Zeebman, the King of Saba’a, Zuridan and Hadramaut.” Two things are of note. Written long before Islam’s development, here two forms are preserved in rock: One is the same name for Jesus and the other is same symbolic name for God, {Rahman—merciful one--c.f. fn. 3 for another example}. This was quite a popular term for God in use at the time. It was wholly appropriated by the Muslims and is in the beginning superscription of every Quranic surah but one. Far be it from me to stretch the truth, but, it is more than plausible to suppose that the form Allah was also in use in earlier times.

Retracing our steps backwards to Akkadian—Ugaritic—we have the same forms in use then. In a note to me from distinguished Semitist John Huehnergard² of Harvard University’s Department of Near East studies, he wrote “*The form Alla:h is from al-‘ila:h ‘the god’, the definite article and the word ‘ila:h god’. The form has become ‘worn’, as frequently happens in forms of frequent use, so that the unaccented syllable has been elided. I’m sure this explanation appears in standard works such as Brockelmann and Noldeke*”. This added insight was contributed only after I had already reconstructed the form on my own. But it leads to a basic conclusion, which affirms that sound structural linguistic theory, along with its application, will lead to similar or same results.

If one thing is certain, the term for God was widespread and singular, and the separation of communities led to a few disparate accented tones and the like, but the word continued the same. Yet, this holds true only if the sound correspondents were semitically derived. E.g., Baal—B’- {A}El, of {The} God has a genitive structure and texture, which gives the word a hint of ownership, as in ‘master.’ However, notice the second

² His Akkadian grammar 2nd edition is the standard volume for use in further studies in cuneiform dialect and its morphology.

syllable closely: Canaanite 'Al'—is like Heb. *El*—is like Aram. *EL*, or *Al*—is like Arabic *Al*. Now, it is time to move on from here.

Tying up loose ends

Six Understandably, many pioneers have forged a path through the thicket of Semitic phonetics and have cleared a wide enough swath to let some light shine through. Some of last century's greatest linguists bequeathed not a little wisdom to their heirs; of repute, are those with whom I have become familiar.

While being trained in Arabic grammar in Amman, Jordan, an eminent archaeologist--G.E. Mendenhall, now deceased, was a lecturer at a nearby university in Yarmouk. Although he was not an adjunct lecturer in our *kuliyya*--school, he was a revisionist and quite liberal text-critical wise—more so than most Semitists, but, he was innovative, and a remarkable linguist. He wrote extensively then, and I did read many of his papers. His supposition (to which I do not subscribe) was that Abraham, being from Ur, probably spoke Arabic.

He also believed that Arabic was widespread even way back then. With this second proposition, I have no problem because there are fragments of early Arabic poetry lately unearthed in many locations of the Red Sea & Persian Gulf regions.³ With so much data being compiled and commented on in archaeological spheres, what are we to make of all of this material? Since the work above is scant and is so briefly laid out, to synthesize it is far from an easy task. So, to this end, here are some concluding remarks:

- (1) Allah, as it stands now, is known to be an amalgamation of the Arabic—pre Islamic—word *Al-ilah*. The 'i' being swallowed up now in regular speech, reappears in the Muslim confession '*Laa ilah illa Allah wa Muhammad rusuul Allah*,' {There is} no god but god and Muhammad is his apostle.⁴ As you can see, it is the same word but in two different forms. Today the first syllable of **Al**-lah is now the definite article in Arabic grammar books.

³ "Our knowledge of the pre-Islamic institutions of South Arabia in the period from the 5th B.C. to the 6th century A.D. has been considerably augmented during the last twenty years as a result of the publication of numerous texts.." J. Ryckmans' article: Biblical and Old South Arabian Institutions: Some Parallels, published 1983 for Arabian and Islamic Studies. Articles presented to R.B. Sergeant on the occasion of his retirement from the Sir Thomas Adam's Chair of Arabic at the University of Cambridge pg 14.

⁴ The Arabic Papyrological Database contains a fragment dated to 91AH/709AD. It is an official letter containing the bismillah *irrahman*.. construction written in Arabic with Greek below in the document {P.Heid.Arab. I 06}. Once again, showing that the 'ilah' form was a natural and normal outgrowth of the Semitic *El* and/or *Elah*.

*Today the best and most trustworthy witness to early forms of Arabic is the Qur'an. Since it has been maintained in one literary standard form (under the pain of death) for 1300 years, it allows an Arabic reader an opportune peek into its microstructures, and to scrutinize its own internal parts. For instance, the form '*ilah*', is found in surahs 9:31 and in 18:110. Muhammad did not invent a new word for god. He merely adopted and adapted the term in current usage. Pre Islamic materials are slight and paltry, but piecing the Arabian cloth together is not so difficult from the tribal language side.

- (2) In former times **Al or El** signified God. It still does in Hebrew, Aramaic, and other Semitic tongues. Through time, with glottal glides and migratory changes new things took shape. Thus, originally, and quite literally, Allah means 'God, the God! It is slightly metaphorical, referring to the big dog (God) in the pack!' It must be remembered that in the minds of pre Islamic Arabs a panel of deities sat eternally in session in the heavens.

Whether to use Allah or God in translation

Seven In a number of Bible schools and colleges today there is excessive discourse about the word Allah and whether it constitutes an inflammatory type of rhetoric. There are many who are of the opinion that it should possibly be replaced with a term less incendiary. To this I can only add these few meager thoughts on such a sensitive issue:

The debate today as to the appropriateness of using Allah in English publications is riddled with problems. Heated debates and caustic rhetoric is flung about in far too many circles. So now, many modern Muslim authors are moving away from using Allah in Western translations.

The current trend seems to be to simply write the English word God. M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem's new edition of the Quran reflects this new tendency. His Qur'an reads smoothly, has excellent alternative renderings, but his translations are politically correct throughout.

Even so, it is highly doubtful that our Christian brethren who still dwell in the Middle East will ever cease to use 'Allah' as a derivative because they understand that it was an etymological term around long before Islam's advent. Westerners, typically, are unaware of this truth, so there is hesitation here in America as regards its usage. Also, Christians in the Middle East have rich traditions associated to the Arabic word for God—Allah. The oldest book of the Bible in Arabic translation dates from the 9th century. It is a translation with commentary on Hebrews and the word 'Allah' is used throughout.

True, Allah, as Muslims view him, and the God of Christians are wholly different entities. But to refrain from utilizing the term on the grounds that Islam's god has no Son, seems to me, to be lacking foundation. Moreover, we, as Christians, do still employ El & Elohim--even Jehovah/Yahweh--, in speech and writing, but Jewish persons do not believe that their God/Elohim has a Son {I Jn 2:22,23}, although all Christians know that the God of the Old and New Testaments are one!

These deitic locutions are signs—descriptive terms—for pointing to a person or object, and as confusing as the issues may be, unless someone constructs new ones, they are all we have to function with. Besides, I am willing to aver that the majority of people of other cultures do not want their word(s) for their god tampered with. Religion is a very touchy subject, and for critical work to stand it must objectively tackle knotty problems without interjecting impulsive reactions. Then, and only then, can we achieve success in winning the lost!

So, in summing up, we assert that Allah as a descriptive term is generic in substance, but combustible in its nuance. To the general reader, I hope this was somewhat helpful. There is much to unpack and sort out with respect to these types of investigations.⁵ Semitic studies afford us, at no great cost, the chance to interpret history as it was lived out among the peoples of their day.

There is so much more to unravel. Archaeologists dig up material remains and conjecture as to 'how events unfolded' through time. Whereas, the student of lexical remains pays the strictest attention to how culture is revealing itself linguistically. There is no better way to get to know a historical people than through a scan of their popular/vulgar speech and writings.

Your brother in Christ,
Moshe Hanna

⁵ For another interesting line of study, examine Arabic plant names. Their connections to biblical Hebrew allude to a singular ancestry and to a unique continuity from pre-Islamic formative years unto now.