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## Who Was “Allah” before Islam? Evidence that the Term “Allah” Originated with Jewish and Christian Arabs

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In talking with Muslims, it is essential to understand their names for God. In most languages spoken by Muslims, the term *allāh* is at least one of their names for God. Dudley Woodberry<sup>2</sup> has pointed out that the name *allāh* “is of Christian Syriac origin and was in use long before Muhammad’s time.” Syriac-speaking Christians have always believed this, and scholars like Arthur Jeffery<sup>3</sup> have noted this as well. But violent acts perpetrated by some militant Islamists in the name of *allāh* have led some people in the West to conclude that *allāh* must be someone besides God.

For example, I was recently at an academic conference where one of the speakers was noting that each of the languages of Africa has an indigenous name for the Supreme Being, the Lord and Creator of the universe, and that this local name is used by the Christians in their worship and in their translations of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> Suddenly, however, he was struck with some doubt, so he qualified his remark by saying, “Well, at least everyone south of the Sahara has a name for God.” He was uncertain whether the Muslims and Christians of northern Africa had a name for God! This doubt stemmed from claims he had read that

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1 The author acknowledges with gratitude the helpful feedback received from a great many reviewers. A note on transliterations: All transliterations of foreign words are in lowercase, even if they are names, but when names are cited as borrowed into English, they are capitalized, as with “Allah.”

2 J. Dudley Woodberry, “Contextualization among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13, no. 4 (1996): 173.

3 Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an* (Baroda, India: Oriental Institute, 1938), 66.

4 In point of fact, as Lamin Sanneh in *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 181, points out, long-time Islamized language communities like Hausa and Fulani have “allowed *Allāh* to displace the god or gods of pre-Islamic times,” with the result that some groups no longer even remember the name by which their ancestors invoked the Most High God.

*allâh*, the Arabic word for God, does not refer to the Lord and Creator of the universe but to some demon or idol, such as the ancient Semitic moon god *sîn*. Their poorly substantiated claims have left many Western Christians fearful of the term *allâh* and opposed to its use.<sup>5</sup> Some Western Christians have even removed the term *allâh* from translations of the Arabic Bible and from other materials.<sup>6</sup>

Dudley Woodberry, however, has long warned us about the dangers of such rejectionism. In an article entitled “When Failure Is Our Teacher: Lessons from Mission to Muslims,” he made this observation:

Many missionaries branded so-called Muslim forms of worship and religious vocabulary as wrong, without knowing that virtually all qur’anic religious vocabulary, including the name “Allah,” and virtually all the forms of worship, except those specifically related to Muhammad, were used by Jews and/or Christians before they were used by Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

But when Muslims encounter Christian religious materials that have carefully avoided all mention of the name *allâh*, they often fear the materials are intended to lead them away from God. And if Western Christians “explain” to their Muslim friends that Muslims use the name *allâh* to invoke a demon or moon god, then the Christians lose all credibility. Besides these fears and follies, there is the simple fact that if we are speaking to people in their own language and yet reject the names they use to refer to God and the prophets, then we convey rejection of them personally. Such insults often prompt their rejection of our testimony before they have even considered it.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, those who believe these myths regarding the term *allâh* are doomed to failure as witnesses to Muslims. Of course, people who have lived closely with Muslims understand that Allah is their most cherished name for God, and a name that Christians use as well from Senegal to Indonesia. But some of them encounter opposition to its use from people in their supporting churches or in their home offices, people who have misconceptions about the term.

Christians who are unaccustomed to religious diversity are often confused by the fact that different monotheistic religions teach different conceptualizations of God, and some Christians even suppose that adherents of different religions are referring to different gods,

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5 Opposition to use of this term in translations of the Bible is discussed and addressed in Kenneth J. Thomas, “Allah in the Translation of the Bible,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 23, no. 4 (2006): 171–74.

6 An example is ArabBible, <http://www.arabbible.com>, which has published the Van Dyck Arabic Bible online with all mentions of *allâh* removed.

7 J. Dudley Woodberry, “When Failure Is Our Teacher: Lessons from Mission to Muslims,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13, no. 3 (July–September 1996): 122.

8 Rejection of the audience’s language is just one part of a wider phenomenon of cultural denigration that characterizes polemical approaches. Unfortunately, such approaches tend to antagonize people and to harden them in their positions rather than to open them up to the love of God in Christ (see Heather J. Sharkey, “Arabic Anti-Missionary Treatises: Muslim Responses to Christian Evangelism in the Modern Middle East,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 3 (2004): 98–104.

as if there were a pantheon to choose from. In the technical language of semantics, these people are confusing different “senses” (or “conceptions”) with different “referents.” The referent is the person or entity to which one is referring, who in this case is God. The sense encompasses the characteristics that are attributed to God in their conception of him. People can have different conceptions of the same referent. Even Christians differ among themselves in their conception of God.<sup>9</sup> A person’s concept of God can change, but this does not happen simply by calling God a different name; it happens by grace when a person ponders the characteristics of God as he is presented in the Bible, and especially as he is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. It happens when people hear the testimonies of believers, when they experience God’s grace in their lives, when they apprehend God in their inner life, and when they receive illumination from the Holy Spirit.

There have been many articles that falsified erroneous claims about the Arabic name *allâh*. In one I showed the mistakenness of claims that *allâh* was ever the name of a moon god, and showed that the crescent symbol used in modern Islam does not come from an ancient moon-god religion but was a medieval symbol of Ottoman political domination.<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Thomas<sup>11</sup> followed up with an article showing that Arabic-speaking Jews, Christians, and Muslims have always referred to the one true God as *allâh*. Bob Cox<sup>12</sup> emphasized that Arab Christians call God *allâh*, and that the term is related linguistically to Hebrew terms for God. Imad Shehadeh,<sup>13</sup> director of an Arab Christian seminary, noted that the oldest extant Arab Christian translations of Scripture use *allâh*, and that this practice is documented from ancient times until the present. This fact was exemplified in the essays in David Thomas,<sup>14</sup> especially the one by Hikmat Kachouh.<sup>15</sup> Shehadeh noted the total lack of evidence that anyone ever used the term *allâh* as the name of a moon god. Quoting Montgomery Watt, he says the claim that “Christians worship God and Muslims worship Allah” is as sensible as saying “Englishmen worship God and Frenchmen worship Dieu.” He goes on to say that “Muslims and Christians ... believe in the same God as subject [but] the nature of God as conceived by Islam is not at all identical to the nature of God within the Judeo-Christian

9 See Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, *American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depths and Complexity of Religion in the U.S.* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2006), <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf>. For a description of the main features of the biblical concept of God compared to features of Muslim concepts of God, see Rick Brown, “Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers; Part 1: God and Mankind,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 23, no. 1 (2006): 5–12.

10 Rick Brown, “Who Is ‘Allah’?” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 23, no. 2 (2006): 79–82.

11 Thomas, “Allah,” 2006.

12 Bob Cox, “The Etymology of the Word ‘Allah,’” *Seedbed* 20, no. 2 (2006): 14–17.

13 Imad Shehadeh, “Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?” *Bibliotheca sacra* 161, no. 641 (2004): 14–26.

14 David Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

15 Hikmat Kachouh, “The Arabic Versions of the Gospels: A Case Study of John 1.1 and 1.18,” in Thomas, *The Bible*, 19–36. Kachouh reviews over fourteen independent traditions of Bible translation into Arabic, from the ninth century to the eighteenth, from Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and Latin source texts, and all of them use Allah as the name of God, as do all the modern translations.

faith.”<sup>16</sup> The need, then, is for Muslims to encounter the nature of *allāh* as presented in the Bible.

These articles, however, have not assuaged the concerns of some who think that the term *allāh* has its origin as an Islamic invention or as a pre-Islamic demon or idol, and some people remain worried by the apparent similarity of the name *allāh* with that of the pagan goddess *allāt*.<sup>17</sup> So following Luke’s example, it seemed good to me to investigate these things carefully, and to present in this essay detailed evidence relevant to what Dudley Woodberry wrote, namely that *allāh* was the term used by Arab Christians for the God of the Bible before the rise of Islam, and that it has its origin in the Aramaic term for God, which Jesus himself would have used. If so, then the term *allāh* is freer of pagan history than is the Hebrew word *ʾel*, which was used by the Canaanites as the name of the chief deity of their pantheon,<sup>18</sup> or the English word “God,” which comes from a generic term for middle-rank Teutonic deities.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows I present evidence that Christianity pervaded all parts of Arabia prior to the rise of Islam, that most Christian Arabs used Aramaic Scripture and liturgy in which God was called *alāh(ā)*, that they borrowed this term into Arabic as *allāh*, and that even non-Christian Arabs identified *allāh* as the God of the Bible, the Supreme Being, who is Creator and Lord of all and above any other gods. I argue that in languages like Arabic where *allāh* is the normal term for God, its avoidance by Western Christians is unjustified. Similarly there is no reason to avoid calling our Lord Jesus Christ by his well-known Arabic epithet, *kalimat allāh*, the eternal “Word of God,” incarnate as a man, the visible image of the invisible God, and the Lord and Savior of humankind.

16 Shehadeh, “Muslims and Christians,” 26.

17 Except for geographical names and the word *allāh*, Arabic words have been transliterated in accord with DIN31635, which is identical to ISO 233 except for the long vowels. The exception in *allāh* is that the velarized “el” sound, which occurs uniquely in this word in Arabic, is represented on occasion with the “dark el” symbol *l*, and the velarized (low-back) vowel sound that follows it is represented with the symbol *ā*. The symbol *ā* is used in accord with convention to represent the normal long /a:/ vowel in Arabic, as in *ʾilāh* “god.” Thus the name of the supposed goddess is transliterated as *al-lā*, which rhymes with “cat,” whereas the name of God is transliterated as *al-lāh*, which rhymes with “law.” Transliterations of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac consonants are in accord with ISO 259, which is followed by the Society of Biblical Literature. The seven vowel qualities represented in the Tiberian system have been represented here as *i, ē, e, a, ā, o, u*, and similarly for Syriac. Thus a low-back vowel sound has been represented in the same way in all of these languages, i.e., as *ā* rather than as *ā*, to maintain uniformity of representation for this sound.

18 See Jack B. Scott, “אלה (*ʾlh*) god, God,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr., and B. K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 41–45. He notes that the word *ʾel* is used across the Semitic languages both as a generic term for a god and as an epithet for the most high God. The latter meaning is sometimes made explicit in Hebrew by use of the phrase *ʾel ʿelyōn*.

19 See the entry for *gheu(a)-* in Calvert Watkins, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000). Some historical linguists think the English word “god” originates in the name of a Teutonic king named Gaut who was deified after his death.

## 1. Pre-Islamic Arab Christians Referred to God as *allâh*

In what follows I show first of all that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians lived throughout Arabia for centuries before Islam. Therefore they would have had a term for referring to God. I then note the existence of pre-Islamic Christian names that incorporated the term *allâh*. I also show that ancient Arabic Bible translations and the Qur’an itself reflect pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian usage of *allâh* to refer to God. The conclusion is that pre-Islamic Jews and Christians referred to God as *allâh*.

### Arabic-speaking Christians lived throughout Arabia for centuries before Islam

Although Muslim historians tend to emphasize the paganism and depravity of pre-Islamic Arabia, a more accurate description is that Judaism had been in Arabia from ancient times, with several Arab tribes having converted. This had been followed by a wave of conversions that made Christianity the dominant religion in much of Arabia. The town of Yathrib (later called “Medina”) had long been settled and dominated by Jews.<sup>20</sup> In the south of the Arabian Peninsula, the populations of Najran and Yemen included large numbers of Jews and proselytes.<sup>21</sup> The witnesses of Pentecost included Arabic-speaking Jews and proselytes (Acts 2:11), and they would have taken the gospel back to their homelands. Paul made a trip to Arabia as well (Gal 1:17), probably the kingdom of Nabataea, meaning “the peoples of the towns and villages that existed throughout the whole region east of a line from Aleppo to the Dead Sea” and including Sinai.<sup>22</sup> So Judaism was present in Arabia before Christ was born, and the gospel entered Arabia soon after his resurrection.

The number of Christians quickly grew. Origen, the third-century theologian and commentator, gave theological lectures in Petra in 213 or 214 at the invitation of the governor.<sup>23</sup> Origen returned again to “Arabia” to correct Beryllus, bishop of Bostra,<sup>24</sup> and returned again in 246 to settle theological disputes in the Arab church synod, which was “of no small dimensions.”<sup>25</sup> In the introduction to his Hexapla edition of the Old Testament, Origen wrote

20 R. B. Winder, “Al-Madina,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 5, ed. P. J. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 999–1007.

21 Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najrân: New Documents*, vol. 49 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971).

22 J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (New York: Longman, 1979), 72.

23 Erwin Preuschen, “Origen,” in *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 8, ed. P. Schaff (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953 [1908]), 268–73.

24 According to Eusebius, Beryllus had been teaching that Jesus was not preexistent. Eusebius, “*Historia Ecclesiastica*,” in *The Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 2, Books 6–10, trans. J. E. L. Oulton (London: William Heinemann, 1932), 326. This was also a doctrine of the Ebionites, a Jewish Christian sect that might have influenced some of the Arab Christians.

25 According to *ibid.*, 6:37, Origen sought to correct an unorthodox doctrine that had developed in Arabia, namely that the soul died with the body and was restored with it at the resurrection. It might be noted that a form of this doctrine survives in Islam, as does the view of Beryllus regarding the mere humanity of Jesus Christ.

that he consulted Bible translations in several languages, including Arabic.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that at least portions of the Old Testament had been translated into Nabataean Arabic by the third century, presumably using Nabataean script, although it is possible that it was a translation into Nabataean Aramaic. In AD 244, an Arab Christian, Philip the Arab, became emperor of Rome, indicating the degree to which Arab Christians were involved in the Roman Empire.<sup>27</sup> Their status in the church is indicated by the presence of Arab bishops at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and at the later councils as well.<sup>28</sup>

By the early fourth century, northern Arabia and the Arabian Gulf were ruled by the Christian Arab King Imrul Qays (AD 288–328), whose capital was the town of Hira in Mesopotamia and who ventured as far south as Najran. His Lakhmid dynasty of Christian Arab kings continued until 602, when their kingdom was destroyed by the Persians. According to Bellamy,<sup>29</sup> it was this Christian Lakhmid kingdom that fostered the development of the Arabic alphabet and the writing of classical Arabic poetry, some of which survives. He notes that according to Arab traditions, three Christian Arabs—Muramir, Aslam, and °Amir—developed the Arabic alphabet from the Syriac alphabet and taught it to the people of the Lakhmid kingdom. It is said that the alphabet was brought from there to Mecca by Bishr ibn °Abd al-Malik. Prior to this, the Meccans and South Arabians had used the Musnad alphabet, which was very different from the Syriac script, to which people in the rest of Arabia had become accustomed.

As for northwestern Arabia (modern-day Syria and Jordan), it was ruled by the Arab Nabataean kingdom. In 106 it was annexed to the Roman Empire and became the province of “Arabia.” Then from 363 this whole region was ruled by a succession of Orthodox Christian Arab monarchs who were outside the empire but were federated with it. Māwīya, Queen of the Saracens, ruled AD 363–378, and she lobbied successfully for the appointment of Moses of Sinai as bishop of the Saracens.<sup>30</sup> Moses was famous for the miracles that attended his ministry. He evangelized the Bedouin and was later recognized as a saint. Māwīya was eventually succeeded by King Zokomos (Dhuj°um), who converted to Christianity in

26 Alfred F. Beeston, “Background Topics,” in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, eds. A. F. Beeston, T. M. Johnstone, R. B. Serjeant, and G. R. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 22.

27 See Eusebius, “Historia Ecclesiastica,” 326, 6:34. This would make Philip the first Christian emperor. It is also recorded that Origen corresponded with him. Philip stopped the persecution of Christians, but he did not give favored status to Christianity, and he maintained certain imperial Roman religious traditions (Michael Grant, *The Roman Emperors: A Biographical Guide to the Rulers of Imperial Rome*, 31 BC–AD 476 (New York: Scribner’s 1985), 155.

28 See “Arabia” in Charles Herbermann, ed., *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1913), 668, where it is reported that six bishops participated in the Council of Nicaea from the Roman province of “Arabia.” There were also bishops from Mesopotamia, which was outside of the Roman Empire, and which would have included the Christian Arab Lakhmid kingdom.

29 James A. Bellamy, “The Arabic Alphabet,” in *The Origins of Writing*, ed. W. M. Senner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 91–102.

30 John A. Langfeldt, “Recently Discovered Early Christian Monuments in Northeastern Arabia,” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 5, no. 1 (1994): 53. The word “Saracen” is from the Arabic word *šarqiyīn* “Easterners.” See the extensive footnotes in Langfeldt’s article for his sources.

response to an answered prayer. Zokomos began a dynasty of Christian Arab kings,<sup>31</sup> with the result that, according to Langfeldt,<sup>32</sup> “The indigenization of Christianity among Arabian tribes proceeded rapidly from the late fourth and early fifth centuries.” By the sixth century, the Christian Arab Ghassanid kingdom covered most of Syria, Palestine, and Jordan, and extended south almost to Yathrib (Medina). It competed with the Christian Arab Lakhmid kingdom in Mesopotamia and the Gulf.

As for the people in southern Arabia and Yemen, which the Romans called “Arabia Felix,” they had converted to Judaism in the fourth century, but by the sixth century large numbers of them had become Christians. The church building in Najran was so large that their Jewish persecutors were able to force two thousand people inside before burning it down.<sup>33</sup> In Sanaa (Yemen), there was an even larger cathedral, built by King Abraha,<sup>34</sup> the site of which remains to this day.

Langfeldt provides further detail on the extent of Christianity:

A brief summary of the 4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries shows a great many of the tribal groupings in the areas now called Jordan, Syria and Iraq becoming Christian, including the Tanukhids, the Kalb confederation of tribes, the Tamim, the Taghlib, Banu Ayyub, and the majority of the tribes in the Hijaz, Nafud, Najd, Yamama and Bahrain sections of present day Saudi Arabia. A large portion of the Kinda tribe, having left the Yemeni Hadramawt in the 4<sup>th</sup> C and migrating to the Najd, by the 5<sup>th</sup> C, had forged alliances with the Maʿadd; this “federation” stretched from a point two day’s journey east of Mecca, north and east to include the entire heart of central Arabia. As part of an alliance with the Byzantine Empire in the opening years of the 6<sup>th</sup> century the Kinda federation adopted Christianity. Many of the Yamama centering in the area of modern Riyadh were Christian (since the middle of the fourth century), as was the great tribal grouping of the Bakr ibn Waʿil in the central and eastern regions.

South west Arabia had a strong Christian enclave in Najran where some 2,000 believers were massacred in AD 523. There was also a Christian presence in the Hijaz. In the process of hurling invectives at the Umayyad poet Jamil (ca. 701), a Christian of the ʿUdra tribe, Jaʿfar ibn Suraqa testified to Christian monks living in the Wadi al-Quara near Medina. The

31 Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3–8.

32 Langfeldt, “Early Christian Monuments,” 53.

33 Shahid, *Martyrs of Najrân*; René Tardy, *Najrân: Chrétiens d’Arabie avant l’Islam* (Beirut: Dar el-Mashriq, 1999); and Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, updated ed., vol. 13 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), chapter 4, esp. 105.

34 Alfred Guillaume and Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s “Sīrat Rasūl Allāh”* with Introduction and Notes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1955]), 21.



Udra were Christianized, probably by the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and maintained that faith well into the Islamic period. There is evidence of Christian monasteries located at strategic locations on the caravan routes and functioning as caravanserais. The writings of al-Muqaddasi, al-Azraqi and other Islamic sources record a) a Christian cemetery (Maqbarat al-Nasara) and Christian stopping place (Mawqif al-Nasrani) in or very near Mecca, and b) the mosques or praying places of Maryam (Masajid Maryam) outside of Mecca on the road to Medina—quite likely a church turned mosque since the Qur’an accepts the Virgin Mary. In the Ka’ba itself in 630 when Muhammad captured the city, paintings of the Virgin Mary and Jesus occupied positions on the pillars along with Abraham and the prophets.<sup>35</sup>

So as Langfeldt observes, Christianity dominated the Arab religious scene in most of pre-Islamic Arabia and was “the primary religious allegiance of the vast majority of the population,” even after the rise of Islam.<sup>36</sup>

Daniel Potts concludes his two-volume history of *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity* with a similar observation:

As we have seen, Christianity was widespread both amongst the tribes of northern Arabia and in the settled communities along the coast.

It is not incorrect to say that, in one sense, the Nestorian Church, for the space of over three centuries, united a region which secular rulers from Sargon to Šapur had never mastered so completely.<sup>37</sup>

So by the time Islam appeared Christianity was present throughout Arabia, and Christians dominated the major kingdoms into which Arabia was divided: Ghassanid, Lakhmid, Himyarite (Yemen), and Kindite (Southern Arabia). Christians had the weakest presence in the towns that fell outside these kingdoms, notably Mecca and Yathrib (Medina), the very places that gave birth to Islam. Yet the Udra tribe in Mecca was Christian, and in Yathrib (Medina) there were three or more Jewish tribes. Since Christianity was widespread across the various Arab tribes and Judaism was present as well, their name for the God of the Bible,

35 Langfeldt, “Early Christian Monuments,” 53.

36 Ibid. It should not be thought, however, that Arab Christianity was uniform or even orthodox. Many of the Jews converted to Jewish Christianity of the Ebionite or Nazarene kind. Origen went there in 214 and 246 to correct theological aberrations, such as a doctrine that the dead remain in the grave until the judgment. According to Epiphanius, writing in 375, some Christians in Arabia worshiped Mary as a goddess and made offerings to her (*Panarion* 79). In 381, after the ecumenical Council of Constantinople, the Roman emperor Theodosius expelled from all churches anyone who did not subscribe to the “Nicene faith,” and many “heretics” moved to the Arabian kingdoms. The Qur’an agrees with most doctrines of Jewish Christianity and rejects doctrines of other Christian sects, but the distinct doctrines of Nicene Christianity are not even mentioned.

37 Daniel T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 353.



the Creator of the universe, would have been well known to all of the Arabs. In what follows we will discover what name they were using for God.

## Pre-Islamic Christian names incorporated the term *allāh* in reference to God

There has been speculation that some of the pre-Islamic Arab churches would have developed an Arabic-language liturgy and lectionary in the fourth or fifth century. Irfan Shahid<sup>38</sup> entertains this as a likelihood. He affirms with confidence, however, that there was pre-Islamic Christian Arabic poetry, as does Kenneth Cragg.<sup>39</sup> Trimmingham lists five of the poets by name.<sup>40</sup> These pre-Islamic Arab Christians would have had a name for God that they used when speaking Arabic; the poetry that survives from Nābigha al-Dhubyānī shows that he used the term *allāh*.

The hardest pre-Islamic evidence comes in the form of stone inscriptions that bear theophoric Arab names, i.e., Arabic names that incorporate a word for deity. The word one finds most often in the surviving inscriptions is *ʾlh*, pronounced [aħħāh]<sup>41</sup> and sometimes the shortened or Hebraic form, *ʾl*.<sup>42</sup> There is no evidence for a significantly different term for God used in place of this, such as Greek *theos* or Hebrew *ʾadonai* or *elohīm*, although

38 Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, 528f.

39 Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

40 Nābigha al-Dhubyānī (died AD 604), Jarīr ibn ʿAbd al-Masīh (died AD 580), Abu Duʿād al-Iyādī, Aws ibn Hajar, and Maimūn ibn Qais (a.k.a. al-ʿAʿshā, died AD 625). Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 177, 201, notes that the poetry which survives does not focus on Christian themes.

41 Since doubled consonants were not usually marked in ancient Syriac and Arabic inscriptions, *ʾlh* could be pronounced with one el or two. Gonzague Ryckmans, *Les noms propres sud-sémitiques* (Leuven, Belgium: Universitaires, 1934–1935), vocalized them as *ilāh*, evidently under the influence of Wellhausen’s thesis that henotheism developed later in history. Frederick V. Winnett in “Allah before Islam,” *The Moslem World* 28 (1938), 247, objects to this view, presenting linguistic evidence for the pronunciation *allāh*: “Against this theory it may be urged that when we meet names like *W-h-b-ʾ-l-h* and *W-h-b-ʾ-l-h-y* in Nabataean no one doubts that the theophorous element is Allah. It cannot very well be *ilāh*, because the Nabataean word for God is *allāhā* which would require a final *alif* after the *ha* in the inscriptions. The Greek transliterations of these Semitic names are a further proof that the theophorous element should be read as Allah. If we admit that these names are Allah names when they appear in Nabataean, on what ground shall we deny them the same interpretation when they appear in Lihyanite or Thamudic?” When Arabic names are found in Greek texts and inscriptions, the letter *lambda* is doubled. This means the Arabic *lām* must have been pronounced with doubling, as *allāh*. For example, the common Arabic name *وهاب الله* *wahab allāh* “Gift of God” is found written, as in Ancient Arabic, as *whbʾlh*, but in Greek as *Ουαβαλλας ουαballas*, showing that the *lām* was pronounced doubled at an early time. See also Antonin Jausen and Raphaël Savignac, *Mission archéologique en Arabie*, vol. 4 (Paris: Leroux, 1914), 264, cited in Michael A. C. Macdonald, “Personal Names in the Nabataean Realm,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 44, no. 2 (1999): 275.

42 There is literary evidence for the pre-Islamic use of the phrase *al-ʾilāh* “the god” to designate the Supreme Being, but this does not appear in the pre-Islamic epigraphic evidence or in pre-Islamic names. Later, one does find the name *ʿabd al-ʾilāh* عبد الاله “servant of the god,” meaning servant of the one who is truly God.

YHWH is found on occasion, probably as part of an Arab Jewish name.<sup>43</sup> Harding's<sup>44</sup> *Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Names and Inscriptions* includes the following observation: "A feature which emerges very clearly from these lists [of theophoric names] is the overwhelming popularity of ʾl, ʾlh." So while many inscriptions bore theophoric names that incorporated the names of pagan deities, there was an "overwhelming" number of theophoric names that incorporated ʾlh [allāh] and the shortened form ʾl. The widespread usage of these terms in the two centuries before Islam correlates with the well-documented spread of Christianity throughout most of Arabia that occurred during that same period.<sup>45</sup>

The Arabs used a number of scripts, but what we now call "Arabic" script was not developed until the fifth or sixth century. The earliest dated Arabic-language inscription in this "Arabic" script is the Zebed inscription. It was inscribed onto a shrine honoring a Christian martyr in AD 512, where the inscribed texts are in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic.<sup>46</sup> The Arabic text includes a name or statement in which God is referred to as *alāh*.<sup>47</sup> This

43 Jane Taylor in *Petra and the Lost Kingdom of the Nabataeans* (London: Tauris, 2001), 168, notes that among the seven thousand Nabataean inscriptions in the Sinai (mostly from the first and second centuries AD), none of the theophoric names mention traditional Nabataean deities. There are names incorporating *allāh*, as well as names with ʾel and even names with *baʿal* (which might mean the Canaanite god "Baal" but more likely has its normal meaning of "Lord" or "husband"). But she also notes the names *šmʾyw*, *ʿbdyw*, and *ʿabdʾhyw*, which appear to "relate to the worship of YHWH." In addition to Nabataea, in review of "Les religions arabes préislamiques," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 72, no. 4 (1952): 178, Frederick V. Winnett (1952) cites epigraphic evidence in North Arabia for theophoric names that end with *-yah* (i.e., YHWH) as well as *allāh*. See "Review of *Les religions arabes préislamiques* by G. Ryckmans," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 72, no. 4 (1952): 178. One notes that any or all of these names could be Jewish, including those with *baʿal*, and so they might belong to Jewish, Christian, or Jewish Christian Arabs.

44 G. Lankester Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Names and Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 907.

45 See Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 18. It would be useful for someone to make a map of pre-Islamic Arab sites, correlating what is known of the distribution of Christians with the epigraphic evidence of theophoric names using *allāh*. This is complicated, however, by the fact that the documentation on inscriptions is spread over a large corpus, such that the list of relevant books and articles—K. A. Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia, Part I: Chronological Framework and Historical Sources* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994)—runs to 821 pages, and the index of names—Harding, *Index and Concordance*—runs to 943 pages.

46 For dates and literature, see Beatrice Gruendler, *The Development of the Arabic Scripts: From the Nabatean Era to the First Islamic Century according to Dated Texts* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993). There is also an inscription on a church in Jabal Ramm which is thought to be from the fourth or fifth century, but it is not dated and does not include a word for God. There are two earlier Arabic inscriptions written in the Nabataean alphabet, namely the ʿEn ʿAvdat inscription of the second century AD and the Namarah funerary inscription of the Christian Arab King Imrul Qais of Hira, dated AD 328, but neither inscription includes a reference to deity. Earlier Arabic inscriptions exist, such as a first-century BC inscription in Musnad script at Faw, in southern Arabia, but they do not include the term *allāh* or any other reference to God. For a catalogue of early Arabic inscriptions and dialects, see Michael C. A. Macdonald, "Reflections on the Linguistic Map of Pre-Islamic Arabia," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 11, no. 1 (2000): 28–79.

47 Photographic plates are found in Adolf Grohmann, *Arabische paläographie II: Das schriftwesen und die lapidarschrift* (Vienna: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1971), 6–8. The letter 'l' may have been pronounced doubled. The term *allāh* is found at the beginning of a list of names of Christian martyrs, but it is not clear if it is part of a name meaning "Help of God," or is a statement, "By the help of God." The spelling of *allāh* is phonetic, with the long second vowel indicated by an *alif*: ʾlʰh (Arabic script: ʾلّٰه), which is normal for long vowels in Arabic. But elsewhere the term is spelled without marking the long vowel, probably because it is not marked in Jewish Aramaic and Christian Syriac.

shows that pre-Islamic Christians were using this term in reference to God in Arabic, just as they used *alāh(ā)* to refer to God in Syriac.

This archaeological evidence is corroborated by historical sources as well. For example, a leader of the Christians who was martyred in Najran in AD 523 is said to have been °Abdullah ibn Abu Bakr ibn Muhammad. Not only does he bear a theophoric name that means “servant of *allāh*,” he is also said to have worn a ring that said “*allāh* is my Lord.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, when four of the leading pre-Islamic men of Mecca pledged to renounce idolatry, worship God alone, and seek the true religion, it was *allāh* whom they acknowledged, and three of them found *allāh* in Christianity.<sup>49</sup>

There is also evidence that henotheism had become widespread among the pagan Arabs, i.e., that they acknowledged that the God of the Bible was the Lord and Creator of the universe, while continuing to fear and appease lesser beings instead of God alone. This is reflected in the Qurʾan in verses like al-°Ankabūt [29]:61,63, which speaks of pagan Arabs who refused the message of Muhammad:

If indeed thou ask them who has created the heavens and the earth and subjected the sun and the moon (to his Law), they will certainly reply, “Allah.” How are they then deluded away (from the truth)? ... And if indeed thou ask them who it is that sends down rain from the sky, and gives life therewith to the earth after its death, they will certainly reply, “Allah!” Say, “Praise be to Allah!” But most of them understand not (Yusuf Ali).

For example, Muhammad’s father was named °Abdullah “servant of Allah,” yet it seems that the one who named him, his father °Abdul Muttalib, was a henotheist rather than a monotheist.<sup>50</sup>

In summary, there is epigraphic evidence that the pre-Islamic Arab Christians were using *allāh* as the name of God, and there is no evidence that they were avoiding this name and using some other name instead. As Cox<sup>51</sup> has noted, *allāh* is the only word in Arabic for God, it is cognate with the Hebrew and Aramaic terms used in the Bible, and it has been used by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians to refer to God for as long as we have records.<sup>52</sup>

48 Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 18.

49 Ibid., 98–103.

50 See *ibid.*, 66–68.

51 Cox, “Etymology.”

52 It might be noted that in proto-Hebrew, the word for a deity would also have been <sup>ʔ</sup>*ilāh* or <sup>ʔ</sup>*elāh*, but long /ā/ vowels shifted to /o/ vowels in stressed syllables, resulting in the form <sup>ʔ</sup>*eloh*. This is a common word for “god” in biblical Hebrew, as in Psalm 18:32 (“Who is god besides YHWH”), although in Job and Proverbs 30 it is used as a name for God. In Aramaic the vowel shift was less pervasive and less pronounced, from a long low-front /ā/ vowel to a low-back /a/ vowel, written here as /ā/. In some dialects this was pronounced [ɔ] as in British “ought” and later [o] as in “coda.” In Arabic the word for “god” remained <sup>ʔ</sup>*ilāh*. To refer to the one true God in Arabic, the Aramaic word *alāh* was used. At an early stage the “el” sound was doubled, resulting in the word *allāh*, but with either pronunciation the word was written as <sup>ʔ</sup>*lh*, at least until the seventh century.

## Arabic Bible translations reflect pre-Islamic Christian usage of *allâh* to refer to God

Bruno Violet<sup>53</sup> published a bilingual fragment of Psalm 78 [77 in LXX], discovered in Damascus, in which the Greek text is in one column and the parallel column contains an Arabic translation in Greek characters. Michael Macdonald,<sup>54</sup> a paleographer and an expert on Ancient Arabic, makes the following evaluation of this text:

Following a detailed study of this text I am convinced that it is pre-Islamic. This is the most valuable text in Old Arabic so far discovered since the Greek transliteration seems to have been made with great care and consistency from an oral source, and thus is uncomplicated by the orthographic conventions of another script.<sup>55</sup>

In this fragment, the Greek term for God, *ho theos*, is found in verses 22, 31, and 59. It is translated there into Arabic as *αλλαν* (= Arabic *allâh*) (where the Arabic /h/ has been transliterated with a Greek *upsilon*, as is the custom in this manuscript). This provides further evidence that pre-Islamic Arab Christians were using *allâh* to refer to God. One also notes that the Greek letter *lambda* is doubled; this demonstrates that the Arabic letter *lām* must have been pronounced double by this time as well. Given the practice in Ancient Arabic of not writing doubled letters twice or an internal /ā/ vowel at all,<sup>56</sup> this Greek evidence provides further support for Winnett's claim<sup>57</sup> that *ʿlh* in the epigraphic evidence was pronounced as *allâh*.

The New Testament or parts of it were translated many times into Arabic. Kachouh<sup>58</sup> has compared 210 different ancient and medieval translations of the Gospels, and he discerns among them 22 different translation traditions. The extant manuscripts date from the post-Islamic period, but there is evidence for pre-Islamic translations of the Gospel, although scholars disagree on the matter.<sup>59</sup> It is said that Waraqaḥ ibn Nawfal translated a Gospel and

53 Bruno Violet, "Ein zweisprachiges Psalmfragment aus Damascus [A Bilingual Psalm Fragment from Damascus]," *Orientalistische literatur zeitung* 4, no. 10 (1901): 384–403.

54 Michael C. A. Macdonald, "Ancient North Arabian," in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World's Ancient Languages*, ed. R. D. Woodward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 50.

55 In line with his general thesis, Sydney H. Griffith, in "The Gospel in Arabic," *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985): 134, had suggested an eighth century date.

56 Macdonald, "Personal Names," 271.

57 Winnett, "Allah before Islam," 247.

58 Hikmat Kachouh, personal correspondence, 2006. See Kachouh, *Arabic Gospels: A Classification, Description, and Textual Examination of the Arabic Gospel MSS of a Continuous Text* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2007) <http://syneidon.org.uk/Hikmat.htm>.

59 Orientalist Anton Baumstark in "Der älteste erhaltene griechisch-arabische text von Psalm 110 (109) [The Oldest Preserved Greek-Arabic Text of Psalm 110 (109)]," *Oriens Christianus* 31 (1934), argued that the Gospel and Psalter were translated into Arabic prior to Islam. But Griffith in "The Gospel in Arabic," 166, disagreed, noting that since no dated Arabic manuscripts survive from the pre-Islamic period, "All one can say about the possibility of a pre-Islamic, Christian version of the Gospel in Arabic is that no sure sign of its actual existence has yet emerged." Griffith's judgment seems a bit too dismissive, however, because few

other portions of the Bible into Arabic in Mecca in the sixth century. Ibn Ishaq (died 761) wrote that in AD 570 one of the stones of the Ka’ba was found to have writing on it, and the words he quotes are clearly taken from Matthew 7:16.<sup>60</sup> Irfan Shahid<sup>61</sup> presents evidence that before AD 520 the Christians of Najran had the Gospel in their language, meaning their dialect of Arabic, written in Musnad script. Trimmingham<sup>62</sup> cites Michael the Syrian’s twelfth-century *Chronicle* to the effect that John of Sedra, patriarch of Antioch, arranged in the early seventh century for “the first translation of the four Gospels” into Arabic for use by Muslim scholars. The patriarch’s translation does not survive, except perhaps, for a passage from John that is “quoted” by Ibn Ishaq.<sup>63</sup>

Many translations were lost, largely due to the destruction of monasteries, but copies of many translations have survived and can be viewed in various libraries and museums. The following chart lists the principal ancient and medieval Arabic translations that I have examined,<sup>64</sup> showing the dates of the surviving manuscripts and the evident origin and source language of each translation.<sup>65</sup> The translations that appear to be earliest in origin are presented first.

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manuscripts were dated in that period in any language, and in later manuscripts that do have a date, it is usually the date of copy that is noted rather than the date of the original translation.

60 Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 86.

61 Shahid, *Martyrs of Najrān*, 249–50.

62 Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs*, 225.

63 For discussion of the quote in Ibn Ishaq, its relation to the Palestinian Syriac Lectionary, and its possible relation to the translation sponsored by John of Sedra, see Griffith, “The Gospel in Arabic,” 137; Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 104; and Alfred Guillaume, “The Version of the Gospels Used in Medina c. A.D. 700,” *Al-Andalus* 15 (1950): 289–96. According to Michael, the Muslim scholars asked John of Sedra to use terminology in the translation that was acceptable to them; Michael says that John resisted, but the passage cited in Ibn Ishaq is clearly contextualized, in that “Father” is translated as *Rabb*, which then meant “Sustainer, Patriarch, Paterfamilias,” whereas the extant Christian Arabic manuscripts use *Rabb* to translate κύριος, “Lord.” Although Trimmingham cites Michael’s note as part of his argument that Arab churches used Aramaic liturgy and Scripture rather than Arabic, it is not clear what lies at the origin of this tradition. It could represent the first translation of the four Gospels into the Arabic language, or the first that used the new Arabic script, or the first authorized by the Syrian Orthodox Church, or the first for Muslim scholars, or the first that included the “Four Separated Gospels,” in contrast with the *Diatessaron*. (The *Diatessaron* Gospel harmony had been the standard form of the Gospel in Syriac until the fifth century. The Arabic *Diatessaron* that survives today was translated or revised by Abdullah ibn al-Tayyib in the tenth century.)

64 I am grateful to Kenneth Bailey for loaning me photocopies and microfilms of many of these manuscripts so that I could duplicate them, and to Berend-Jan Dikken as well, for providing digital versions of some manuscripts. Microfilms of some manuscripts were ordered from libraries.

65 For discussions of provenance see Georg Graf, *Die Christlich-arabische literatur bis zur fränkischen zeit (ende des 11. jahrhunderts): Eine literarhistorische skizz* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany: Herzer, 1905); Bruce Metzger, “Early Arabic Versions of the New Testament,” in *On Language, Culture, and Religion; in honor of Eugene A. Nida*, eds. M. Black and W. A. Smalley (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 157–68; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989); and Griffith, “The Gospel in Arabic.”

Name of Arabic Version	Source Language	Place of Origin	Date of Origin	Date of ms
The Palestinian Gospels <sup>66</sup>	Greek	Palestine	probably pre-Islamic	9 <sup>th</sup> to 11 <sup>th</sup>
The Elegant Gospels <sup>67</sup>	Syriac	uncertain	possibly pre-Islamic	10 <sup>th</sup>
Vatican Arabic 13 Gospels <sup>68</sup>	Syriac	uncertain	possibly pre-Islamic	8 <sup>th</sup> or 9 <sup>th</sup>
Vatican Arabic 13 Epistles	Greek	uncertain	probably post-Islamic	9 <sup>th</sup>
Treatise on the Triune God <sup>69</sup>		Palestine	776	9 <sup>th</sup>
Mt. Sinai 151 <sup>70</sup>	Syriac	Damascus	867	867
Vatican 71 <sup>71</sup>	Greek & Syriac	Damascus	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>
Abdullah ibn al-Tayyib <sup>72</sup>	Syriac	Baghdad	980	many

- 66 The Palestinian Gospels are also called “Mt. Sinai Family A.” This family of manuscripts includes Sinai 72 (copied 897 AD), Sinai 16, Sinai 74, Vatican Borgia 95, and Berlin 1108 (copied 1046 AD). This version is quoted in some patristic quotations. A study of this version is presented in Anton Baumstark, “Die sonntägliche Evangelienlesung im vor-byzantinischen Jerusalem,” *Byzantinische zeitschrift* 30 (1929–1930), 350–59. According to Griffith, “The Gospel in Arabic,” 153–54, Baumstark shows that all of these manuscripts are marked for the Sunday lectionary readings according to a liturgy that was used in Palestine *prior* to the rise of Islam but *not afterwards*. He reasons, therefore, that this translation was made prior to the rise of Islam.
- 67 The Elegant Gospels survive in Leiden 2378 (OR 561), Vatican Arabic 17, and Vatican Arabic 18. The translation uses rhyming prose, with names and terms similar to those in the Qur’an. It translates both the Greek epithet (*ho theos* “God” and the proper noun Kurios “LORD” as *al-lāh*). For a critical edition with textual commentary see Joséphine Ibrahim Nasr, *تقديم مخطوط إنجيل لوقا وتحقیقه وفهرسته* [Edition critique et étude de l’Evangile rimé de Saint Luc d’après les Manuscrits Vatican 17, 18 et Leiden Or. 2378 (=561), avec Index, etc.] (Beirut: Université Saint Joseph, 2000). She writes that Vatican 18 was copied in Cairo in AD 993, while Vatican 17 was copied in AD 1009. The date of the Leiden 2378 manuscript is unknown.
- 68 Kenneth E. Bailey and Harvey Staal in “The Arabic Versions of the Bible: Reflections on Their History and Significance,” *Reformed Review* 36 (1982), 3–11, date Vatican Arabic 13 to the eighth or ninth centuries but say the translation itself is earlier. It is not a single work but a collection of works from five different scribes. The Gospel of Matthew appears to be the oldest. Bailey and Staal think it was translated from Greek, in part at least, but Syriac influence is evident as well. For example, it uses the Aramaic loanword *salih* for “apostle” (as well as the term *hawāri* for “disciple”), and this is a characteristic of Syriac-based translations. Kachouh has compared Vatican Arabic 13 diligently with other versions and is convinced that the Gospels were translated from Syriac and the Epistles from Greek.
- 69 The so-called “Treatise on the Triune Nature of God” is not a Bible translation, but it contains many biblical quotations in Arabic. The terminology resembles the usage in the Qur’an and in the Elegant Gospels, but the wording is different from the Elegant Gospels. Part of the Treatise is found as part of Mt. Sinai 154 and was published in Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *An Arabic Version of the Acts of the Apostles and the Seven Catholic Epistles: With a Treatise on the Triune Nature of God* (London: Clay and Sons, 1899). Additional fragments of this treatise exist in other locations but have not been published.
- 70 Mt. Sinai Arabic 151 consists of the Acts and Epistles. It was written in Damascus at different stages. The Epistles of Paul are dated 867, and the dates of the Acts and other Epistles are assumed to be near that.
- 71 Other manuscripts similar to Vatican 71 include Vatican Arabic 467, Leiden 2376, Leiden 2377, and St. Petersburg AsiaticMuseum D226.
- 72 Ibn al-Tayyib translated Tatian’s *Diatessaron* using the text of the Syriac Peshitta, and he produced a translation of the four Gospels with a running commentary that is still used today. Manuscripts can be found in many libraries.

Name of Arabic Version	Source Language	Place of Origin	Date of Origin	Date of ms
Alexandrian Vulgate <sup>73</sup>	Coptic	Alexandria	uncertain	1202
Mt. Sinai 76 (Sinai Family B)	Greek?	uncertain	uncertain	13 <sup>th</sup>
Lectionary of Abdishu <sup>74</sup>	Syriac	Levant	1299	many

Figure 2: Surviving Arabic Translations of the New Testament or Portions Thereof

Years ago I tabulated the key terms used in these translations in a comparative fashion. They exhibit such a diversity of wording that one is forced to conclude that they represent several independent traditions of translation. In other words, the earliest ones seem to have been translated independently of one another by different churches in diverse locations from different source texts. One of the things they have in common, however, is that they all use the word *allâh* to refer to God. Since the Arab Christians were spread over a vast region and belonged to diverse and warring churches long before the rise of Islam, the fact that all of them used *allâh* to refer to God in the earliest surviving translations is an indication that the term *allâh* must have been in widespread use by Arab Christians in pre-Islamic times.<sup>75</sup>

More recently, Hikmat Kachouh has studied a newly discovered Arabic manuscript of the Gospels. He shows that it represents a translation made from a Greek text whose unique text type lies between Sinaiticus and Beza.<sup>76</sup> Since it is highly unlikely that a translator would base his work on a source text that was no longer in use, and since by the sixth century the Byzantine/Syrian text type of the Gospels had become the standard in the Middle East and had replaced the previous text types, this Arabic translation must almost certainly have been made before then, at a time prior to Islam. Since the translation uses *allâh* for the name of God, it is another witness to the usage of that term by Arabic-speaking Christians.

The Qur<sup>ʾ</sup>an reflects pre-Islamic Christian usage of *allâh* to refer to God. Prior to his mission, Muhammad interacted with a number of Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews, notably the Jordanian monk Bahira<sup>77</sup> and later Waraqah ibn Nawfal, who was an

73 The Alexandrian Vulgate is represented in Vatican Coptic 9 (Coptic and Arabic). It became the normative Arabic translation of the New Testament in Egypt. A later version was printed in Rome in 1591, and afterwards in the Paris and London Polyglots.

74 This Lectionary of Abdishu (“servant of Jesus”) is translated in rhyme. It was widely used in the Levant.

75 It is not known when the first Jewish translations of the Bible were made into Arabic, but ancient fragments survive that use the pre-Islamic spelling of *allâh* with one *el* letter, as אלה. The principal medieval Arabic Jewish versions were made in the tenth century by Saadia Gaon and by the Karaites. They used *al-lâh*, sometimes written in Hebrew script as הללה, to translate both (*hâ-)**elohîm* “God” and *yhwh*. Meira Polliack, *The Karaite Tradition of Arabic Bible Translation: A Linguistic and Exegetical Study of Karaite Translations of the Pentateuch from the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

76 Hikmat Kachouh, “Sinai Ar. N.F. Parchment 8 and 28: Its Contribution to Textual Criticism of the Gospel of Luke,” *Novum Testamentum*, 50/1 (2008), 28–57.

77 Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 89–91.



older cousin of Muhammad's wife Khadija and lived in Mecca.<sup>78</sup> According to Fr. Joseph Qazzi, Waraqah was an Ebionite cleric who groomed Muhammad for his mission, including instruction in the Torah and the Gospel of the Hebrews.<sup>79</sup> Muhammad also attended lectures by an unnamed Christian teacher near Mecca.<sup>80</sup> So he would have been immersed in the religious terminology of Christian Arabs of that region. After the commencement of his mission, Muhammad often debated with Jews and Christians, including a delegation of Christians from Najran. The participants in such discussions must have used mutually intelligible names for God. Some of the Qur'anic prophecies are addressed to Christians, repeatedly declaring the Qur'an to be a "confirmation" in Arabic of the previously revealed Book, in which there is "no doubt."<sup>81</sup> In other words, the Qur'an says it is reiterating what the Bible says about God and the prophets. It does not present itself in opposition to God or the Bible but as the final part of a heavenly book that includes the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Such a claim would not have been possible if the Qur'an had been proclaiming in *allāh* a different god or if he had been using radically different terminology from that used in the Arab Christian tradition of that region.

Some Western scholars argue that many of the Meccan suras are based on hymns and poetry of the pre-Islamic Arab Christian tradition. This is based in part on the presence of Syriac words that were used by Christians but were not used or understood by non-Christian Arabs. Luxenberg<sup>82</sup> and Lüling<sup>83</sup> show that when the words are interpreted in accord with their meaning in Syriac, it is possible, with some further editing, to recover fragments of Christian hymns and poetry. It is also based on similarities between pre-Islamic poetry

78 The Hadith (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, volume 9, book 87, number 111) and *Kitab al-Aghani* state that Waraqah ibn Nawfal, the cousin of Muhammad's wife Khadijah, was a Christian who studied the Bible and who translated a Gospel into Arabic. Such an activity would suggest that Muhammad had access to Christian Arabic terms for God.

79 See Joseph Qazzi, *The Priest and the Prophet: The Christian Priest, Waraqa ibn Nawfal's Profound Influence upon Muhammad, The Prophet of Islam*, ed. David Bentley, trans. Maurice Saliba (Los Angeles: Pen Publishers, 2005). Ebionite Christians derived from early Jewish Christianity. They rejected Paul, obeyed the Torah, and used a single Gospel, based on Matthew, as their only New Testament Scripture. They rejected the Trinity and regarded Jesus as human rather than the incarnation of God. Muhammad's teachings continued this doctrinal tradition. For a discussion of Jewish Christianity in Arabia, see Shlomo Pines, *The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries* (Jerusalem: Central Press, 1966).

80 The usual speculation is that this teacher was Bahira, as noted in Thomas Patrick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2001 [1885]), 30:

Sprenger thinks that Bahīrā remained with Muhammad, and it has been suggested that there is an allusion to this monk in the Qur'an, Surah xvi. 105 [103]: "We know that they say, 'It is only a man who teacheth him.'" Ḥusain the commentator says on this passage that the Prophet was in the habit of going every evening to a Christian to hear the *Taurāt* and *Injil*.

81 Sura Yunus [10]:37.

82 Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische lesart des Koran: Ein beitrag zur entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2004).

83 Günter Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003).

and verses of the Qurʾan, as shown by Abul Kasem.<sup>84</sup> Lüling<sup>85</sup> states the thesis of his book quite forcefully: “The text of the Koran as transmitted by Muslim Orthodoxy contains, hidden behind it as a ground layer and considerably scattered throughout it (together about one-third of the whole Koran text), an originally pre-Islamic Christian Text.” It might be noted that medieval Christian sources claim that parts of the Qurʾan were written by the Nestorian monk Bahira.<sup>86</sup> If many of the Meccan suras were indeed drawn from Christian poetry, then their terminology, including the name *allāh*, would seem to have its origin in Christian Arab sources. A more likely explanation, however, is that the apparent Aramaic loanwords and other biblical terms were simply the normal Arabic religious terminology as used by Warāqah ibn Nawfal and other Christians and Jews in Mecca. They are found, for example, in poetry quoted from Jews and Christians in Ibn Ishaq’s *Life of Muhammad*.

In later stages of his mission, the Prophet of Islam was engaged in disputation with Christians of diverse views. There are a number of passages in the Qurʾan that cite these disputes. Some of these passages quote statements made by the Christians, and the Christians are quoted as using the term *allāh*. Examples include their claim that “*allāh* is Jesus” (al-Māʾida [5]:17), that Christians are “sons of *allāh*” (al-Māʾida [5]:18), and that Jesus is a “son of *allāh*” (at-Tawba [9]:30). Nowhere in the Qurʾan is there any indication that Arab Christians and Jews referred to God by a name different from those used in the Qurʾan. All of the disputation passages reflect situations in which the same God is in view and is referred to in the same basic ways.

In light of this evidence from inscriptions, historical documents, and Arabic translations of the Bible, we can conclude that *allāh* was the term used by pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian Arabs to refer to God.<sup>87</sup> In the next section I will argue that Jews and Christians introduced this term themselves into Arabic from Aramaic.

84 Abul Kasem, “Who Authored the Qurʾan?” (Sydney, 2005), [http://www.islam-watch.org/AbulKasem/WhoAuthoredQuran/who\\_authored\\_the\\_quran.htm](http://www.islam-watch.org/AbulKasem/WhoAuthoredQuran/who_authored_the_quran.htm).

85 Lüling, *Challenge to Islam*, 1.

86 A. Abel, “Baḥīrā,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 1, ed. P. J. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 921–23.

87 Christians in Yemen and other parts of southern Arabia also called God *rahmān-an*, which equals northern Arabic *al-rahmān*, but this was in reference to God as the Father. In AD 541, King Abraha, the Christian ruler of Yemen and southern Arabia, placed an inscription on the dam at Marib (in Musnad script) that began with an expression of the Trinity: “By the power and grace of the *Rahmān* and his Christ and the Holy Spirit.” Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres, *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum; Pars Quarta: Inscriptiones Himyariticas Et Sabæas Continens* (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 1911), fig. 541, 278. Abraha also placed an inscription on a cliff at Mureighan that begins “by the power of the *Rahmān* and his Christ” (Wickens et al. 1954). See A. G. M. Wickens, Alfred F. Beeston, and J. Daniels, “Notes on the Mureighan Inscription,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 16/2 (1954), 389–394.

The Jewish Aramaic term *rahmān-ā*, רַחֲמָנָא, was a common epithet for God among Jews, and one finds Jewish Arabic inscriptions in South Arabia that use this term (Abdallah 1987), so this is the evident source of the Arabic term. See Y. M. Abdallah, “The Inscription CIH 543: A New Reading Based On The Newly-Found Original,” in Christian Robin and Mohammad Bafaqih (eds.), *Sayhadica: Recherches Sur Les Inscriptions De L’Arabie Préislamiques Offertes Par Ses Collègues Au Professeur A.F.L. Beeston* (Paris: Geuthner, 1987), 4–5. The root *rhm* means “womb,” and *rahmān* describes a male who is compassionate like a father.

The Aramaic term *rahīm-ā* means “beloved one.” It is possible that the term *rahīm* was used by Christians in Southern Arabia to refer to Jesus as God’s Beloved and the bearer of his love. In that case the *basmala* might

## 2. The Term *allâh* Is Most Likely Derived from the Aramaic Word for God, *alâh*

Dudley Woodberry stated that the term *allâh* is derived from Syriac, which was the form of Aramaic commonly used in literature and Scripture in the Middle East from the fourth to the ninth centuries. (Forms of Aramaic had been the lingua franca for centuries, but Syriac took on the role of a literary language.) Kenneth Thomas<sup>88</sup> supports Woodberry's claim with the observation that "Western scholars are fairly unanimous that the source of the word Allah probably is through Aramaic from the Syriac *alâhâ*." Arthur Jeffery<sup>89</sup> wrote that "there can be little doubt" about this, and F. V. Winnett,<sup>90</sup> an expert in Ancient Arabic, came to the same conclusion. Syriac-speaking Christians, most of whom speak Arabic as well, have had the same opinion, namely that the Arabic term *allâh* is a loanword from Syriac, and Imad Shehadeh<sup>91</sup> has supported the argument from the perspective of an Arab Christian scholar. But since this statement runs contrary to the claims of both Muslim tradition and anti-Muslim polemicists, it seemed worthwhile to see if there was compelling evidence for it, and that is what follows.

### Aramaic was the language of scripture and liturgy for most Arab Christians

For most of Arabia, the principal literary language was Aramaic, whether in Syriac script, Nabataean script, or others. From what we know of Jewish practice in the sixth century, the Scriptures would have been read aloud in Hebrew, followed by recitation of an Aramaic translation of the passage and perhaps one into Arabic. (This practice was later codified into written triglot versions of the Jewish Bible.) As for the Arab Christians, although some of those in northwestern Arabia were Greek Orthodox, the historical records indicate that many or most of the Arab Christians used Scriptures in Syriac, a variety of Aramaic.

Most of the common-era pre-Islamic inscriptions found in Arabia were written in varieties of Aramaic, although there are also inscriptions in Greek, Arabic, and South Arabic. When the Ka'aba was being demolished and rebuilt in AD 605, five years prior to the beginning of Muhammad's mission, an Aramaic inscription was found on the foundation cornerstone of

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be derived from an originally Christian formula that meant "in the name of God, the Compassionate One and the Beloved One and the Holy Spirit." No evidence, however, survives to verify or falsify this speculation.

88 Thomas, "Allah," 171.

89 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 66.

90 Winnett, "Allah before Islam," 247.

91 Shehadeh, "Muslims and Christians."

the Ka<sup>c</sup>ba.<sup>92</sup> (In AD 570 the words of Matthew 7:16 had been found on another stone, but it is not recorded whether it was in Aramaic or Arabic.)<sup>93</sup>

A great many pre-Islamic Aramaic (and Greek) inscriptions survive until today in Arabia, and many of them include names that are Arabic in form although written in Greek or Syriac scripts. So the Arabs were obviously using these languages for literary purposes. One of the Syriac scripts, Nabataean, was used by the Arabs of northwestern Arabia in their Aramaic inscriptions, and it is thought that this script contributed to the later development of the Arabic script by Christians in Mesopotamia.<sup>94</sup>

In Aramaic, God is called *alâh-â*, where the final *-â* is removable. It is the same word that our Lord Jesus would have used when speaking Aramaic. It is found in the Aramaic portions of Daniel and Ezra, in the Jewish Aramaic translations of the Old Testament (Targums), and in the Syriac Aramaic translation of the whole Bible. It is cognate with the corresponding Hebrew term *elôh*.

## Many Aramaic names and terms were borrowed into Arabic in the pre-Islamic period

As one would expect, when speakers of Arabic wanted to refer to biblical concepts and names of biblical personages, they often borrowed them from the language in which they were hearing them, meaning Aramaic, Greek, and in some places Ethiopic. Woodberry<sup>95</sup> cites a number of key religious terms that were borrowed into Islam from Christian usage, and the work of Jeffery<sup>96</sup> on this topic is well known. As with loanwords in general, these words were made to conform to the sound patterns of Arabic, which used triconsonantal roots and had only three vowel qualities. For example, Greek *diabol-os* “devil” became *iblis*, Greek and Aramaic *euangeli-on* “Gospel” became *ingîl* (and later pronounced *injîl*), and Aramaic *sâtân-â* “Satan” became *saytân*, later pronounced *šaytân* and *šētân*. Note that when words were borrowed from Aramaic into Arabic, the word-final suffix *-â* was regularly dropped. This suffix had originally been a definite article in Aramaic, but by the fourth century it had lost this function in most varieties and had become redundant. So Aramaic words like *alâh-â* were usually borrowed into Arabic without the suffix, i.e., as *alâh*. Given the prevalence of Judaism and Christianity in Arabia, the term *alâh-â* would have been well-known, and one

92 According to Ibn Ishaq’s biography of the Apostle of Islam (Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 85–86), when the walls of the Ka<sup>c</sup>ba were demolished in preparation for rebuilding it and roofing it, the builders found a Syriac inscription on the cornerstone. A literate Jew read it to them as follows: “I am Allah the Lord of Bakka [an earlier name for Mecca]. I created it on the day that I created heaven and earth and formed the sun and moon, and I surrounded it with seven pious angels.”

93 Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 86.

94 See Bellamy, “Arabic Alphabet.” While it is widely held that the Nabataeans spoke Arabic as their mother tongue, Macdonald in “Reflections,” 47, suggests that only those of northern Arabia (modern-day Syria) spoke Arabic, while those of Petra and the Sinai might have spoken Aramaic.

95 Woodberry, “Contextualization among Muslims,” 173–74.

96 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*.

would expect them to have Arabicized it by dropping the final *-â* vowel. Further evidence for this can be found in its pronunciation, which is unusual for Arabic.

## The Arabic name for God has the low-back vowel and darkened “el” sound of its Aramaic counterpart

Standard British and American pronunciations of English include both clear els and dark els, [l] and [ɫ], the choice depending on their position in the syllable or on the vowel that follows. (Irish, Welsh, and Minnesotan varieties of English have only clear els, and Australian English has only dark els.) The difference is that the dark el is “velarized,” meaning it is pronounced with the center of the tongue depressed and the back of the tongue raised towards the velum. The dark el can be heard in “pill,” which contrasts with the clear el in “lip.” Usually the clear el occurs at the beginning of a syllable and the dark el at the end. In American pronunciation either el can be found between two vowels, such that “elicit” has a clear el and “illegal” has dark els. More importantly for our purposes, the el is dark if it is followed by a low-back vowel, as in the American pronunciation of “ought” [ɒt] (British [ɔt]). This vowel depresses the center of the tongue and moves the back of the tongue towards the velum, with the result that the el in “law” is darkened and the word is pronounced [ɫɒ], with a dark el.

The el sound in Aramaic, written with the letter *lâmad*, is normally clear, but it is velarized to a dark el if it is followed by the vowel *zqâpâ*.<sup>97</sup> This is a slightly rounded, low-back vowel that was pronounced [ɒt] or [ɔt], depending on the dialect. Thus the Syriac word for God is pronounced as [aɫâhâ], where [ɫ] represents the dark el sound and [â] equals the low-back vowel sound [ɒ]. The first vowel in this word is called *ptâhâ* in Syriac. It sounds something like the vowel in English “map.”<sup>98</sup>

Classical Arabic has only three distinctive vowel qualities, although it distinguishes two vowel lengths. It has the *ptâhâ* vowel, which it calls *fatha*, but it does not have the *zqâpâ* vowel.<sup>99</sup> The el sound in Classical Arabic, written with the letter *lâm*, is always clear, never dark. The one exception is the word for God, which is pronounced [aɫâh]. This one word has both the dark el and the low-back vowel sound that is found in the Syriac pronunciation [aɫâh(â)]. This contrasts with the Arabic word *ʿilâh* “god,” which has a clear el and a low-front vowel. As Shehadeh<sup>100</sup> points out, Arabic does not have a vowel with the “ought” sound of the Syriac *ptâhâ* in *alâh(â)*, and the only reasonable explanation for its presence

97 This velarization of *lâmad* is confirmed in personal correspondence from Dr. Abdul-Masih Saadi, professor of Syriac and Arabic at the University of Notre Dame. This vowel is called *qâmets* in the Tiberian system, but since then it has split and merged with *patah* and *holem*.

98 In Syriac script *alâhâ* is written as ܐܠܗܐ. In the Western Syriac system of vowel diacritics, the *ptâhâ* is represented by a Greek alpha and the *zqâpâ* by a Greek omicron. It seems that Western Syriac *zqâpâ*, Hebrew/Aramaic *qâmets*, and Greek *omicron* had a pronunciation at that time like the rounded low-back vowel sound in the British pronunciation of “law,” while in Eastern Syriac, the *zqâpâ* was unrounded, like the American pronunciation of “law.”

99 Although Arabic has only one low vowel, the *fatha*, it can sound somewhat like the Syriac *zqâpâ* vowel if it follows a velar or pharyngeal consonant. So once the dark el has been learned, it is quite natural to follow it with a back-low variety of *fatha*.

100 Shehadeh, “Muslims and Christians,” 19.

in *allâh* is that the vowel was borrowed from Syriac along with the word *alâh(â)*, “making the second vowel in ‘Allah’ unique.” Since the Syriac word *alâhâ* would have been well-known to the Arabs and used by them when speaking Syriac, it would have been natural for them to use it in Arabic as well, in an Arabicized fashion. The presence of this Syriac vowel sound in the second syllable of the Arabic word *allâh* is compelling evidence that the Syriac word *alâhâ* was borrowed into Arabic as *allâh*.

It is normal for words to undergo some alteration when they are borrowed into another language. An obvious alteration in this case is that the el sound in *allâh* is doubled, whereas it is not doubled in Syriac. This suggests that when monolingual Arabs heard the dark el that had been borrowed into Arabic, they perceived it as longer than their own clear el and pronounced it as doubled. This lengthening of dark el happens in British and American English as well, although this is due in part to the position of the el relative to the syllable. For example, the dark el sound in “Bill” and “Phil” is longer in duration than the clear el sound in “billet” and “Philip.”

### There is historical evidence for the doubling of the letter *lām* in *allâh*

In Arabic, as in other Semitic dialects, if a consonant in a word is pronounced doubled, it is still written just once. In manuscripts the doubling is sometimes marked with a diacritic called the *shadda*, but not in inscriptions, especially ancient inscriptions. In the Zebed inscription there is a single letter *lām* in the word for God, but this does not reveal to us whether it was pronounced doubled at that time or not. Evidence for doubling can be found, however, in ancient Greek transliterations in which the Greek letter *lamda* is written twice. In the Greek-script Arabic translation of Psalm 78 [77 in LXX], the Greek term for God, ο θεός, is translated into Arabic as αλλαν, showing that the el sound was pronounced long. In contrast the Arabic phrase *al-ʾilâh* “the god” is written without doubling the *lamda*, as ελ λεν (Ps 78:56). Note that this spelling indicates the difference in vowel quality as well, ε versus α. The doubled el sound is also indicated in some pre-Islamic Arabic theophoric names written in Greek characters, such as οαβαλλας, which equals *wahab allâh*, “Gift of God.”

With time, the doubled el sound on the *lām* was reinterpreted as two distinct letters, the first one belonging to a definite article, *al-*. Thus *allâh* was reinterpreted as consisting of two parts: *al-lâh*. As Shehadeh<sup>101</sup> points out, in dialogue with Christoph Heger, this reinterpretation of *lām* happened with other loanwords as well, such as the name Alexander, which was reinterpreted as *al-iskander*.

Since the *l* of the definite article *al-* is always written separately in Arabic, this resulted in the letter *lām* in *allâh* being written twice, with the first *lām* belonging to the definite article. In other words, the spelling of the term changed from ٱل to ٱلٱ both pronounced [aḥḥâh]. This process of reinterpreting and respelling the *lām* as a definite article can be seen in some of the early inscriptions. In the Zebed inscription of AD 512 the word *allâh* is written with a single *lām*. In a post-Islamic inscription on a tomb in Cyprus, dated AH 29 (AD 649), *allâh*

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 19–20.



is still being spelled with one written *lām*, as found in the word *بِسْمِ اللَّهِ* “in the name of God.”<sup>102</sup> In a slightly later inscription, a prayer dated AH 46 (AD 666), the text begins by addressing God in the vocative as *at-lāhumma*, “O God,” spelled with two *lāms* (الله), yet when the supplicant writes his own name, *‘abdullāh*, which means “servant of God,” he spells it the old way, with one *lām*: *عبد الله*.<sup>103</sup> Later inscriptions use a doubled *lām*.

This same process is seen in manuscripts of Jewish Arabic Bible translations. In fragments of an ancient Hebrew-Aramaic-Arabic triglot that were preserved in the Cairo Genizah, the name of God was translated with one *lamed* as *אלה* *allāh*, but in the Bible translations done by Saadia Gaon and others in the tenth century the *lamed* was written twice, as *אללה* *at-lāh*.<sup>104</sup> So we can see a progression in Jewish sources from Aramaic *אלהא* *alāhā* to early Judeo-Arabic *אלה* *allāh* to classical Judeo-Arabic *אללה* *at-lāh*.

This reinterpretation of *allāh* as *at-lāh* was most likely prompted by an analogy with the Arabic tradition of using epithets to refer to deities, since these epithets usually begin with the definite article, *al-*.<sup>105</sup> For example, the so-called “ninety-nine beautiful names of God” are all epithets; each of them begins with the definite article *al-* and continues with a noun that indicates some characteristic of God. Examples are *al-quddūs* “the Holy One” and *al-khāliq* “the Creator.” Some of the traditional pagan deities had names that were epithets rather than proper nouns. The goddesses *al-lāt* and *al-‘uzzā*, for example, are named with epithets meaning “the kneader” and “the powerful (female),” respectively. This tradition of using epithets for divine names would naturally incline people to reinterpret *allāh* as *at-lāh*, i.e., as the definite article *al-* plus a noun *lāh*.

This resegmentation of *allāh* into *at-lāh* made *lāh* a noun and the source of further lexical derivations. It also raised the question of what *lāh* meant. On this matter the Arab philologists were perplexed. According to D. B. MacDonald<sup>106</sup> and Arthur Jeffery,<sup>107</sup> some ten different derivations were suggested, most notably a derivation from the root *LYH*, meaning “to be lofty.” A few scholars said the term *allāh* was actually a loanword from Syriac, but this was rejected by most Muslim clerics. They preferred the theory that *allāh* has always been God’s name and that this is why it was used in Aramaic as well. In the end, the explanation that was adopted by many was that *lāh* was a special word that denotes the very essence of God, his unique and eternal, divine nature, whereas the other ninety-nine epithets denote

102 Grohmann, *Arabische paläographie* II, 71.

103 Ibid., 124.

104 See for example, the translation of Exodus 29:39 in the Cairo Geniza manuscript Taylor Schechter B1.17, in which *YHWH* is translated as *אלה*.

105 By “epithet” I mean a common-noun phrase that functions like a name, i.e., it is conventionally used for referring to a unique referent, even though it is not a proper noun. In the Greek New Testament, for example, *ho kurios* “the Lord” and *(ho) christos* “Christ/ the Messiah” are common epithets for Jesus. In the Hebrew Old Testament, *adonāi* “my lord,” which is translated into English as “the Lord,” is an epithet for God, as is *qdošh yisrā’ēl* “the Holy One of Israel.” In Arabic, *kalimat allāh* “the word of God” is a well-known epithet for Jesus.

106 D. B. MacDonald, “Ilāh,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 3, ed. P. J. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 1093–94.

107 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 66.



mere characteristics of God. And *lâh* did indeed gain this meaning. Christian theologians then derived from *lâh* the term *lâhût* “the divine nature, the Godhead” and the term *lâhûtiyya* “theology.” But unlike the definite article, the *al* in *allâh* is inseparable. Normally the definite article is omitted after *yâ*, but this does not happen with *allâh*. One says *yâ allâh*, not *yâ lâh*. This shows that *allâh* functions as a single word rather than an epithet, just as it does in Aramaic, and is basically the same word. Nestorian Christians spread the Aramaic form of the name eastwards as far as India and China, and with the spread of Islam, the Arabic form was disseminated even wider.

### 3. The Term *allâh* Is Not a Contraction of *al-ʾilâh* as Some Authors Have Suggested

It is often claimed that Arabic *allâh* is simply a contraction of *al-ʾilâh*, “the god.” The evidence given for this is that both words begin with the definite article *al-*, and both have the letters *lām* and *hāʾ*, with a long vowel between them. In the previous section, however, I explained that the *el* sounds are not the same; they are different, as are the two vowels. In addition, the word *ʾilâh* begins with an initial radical consonant, the glottal stop *alif muhammaza*, whereas the word *lâh* does not. Since the meaning and identification of an Arabic word depend on the radicals of its root, such a deletion is problematic. As Shehadeh<sup>108</sup> notes, “This popular view [of contraction] does not explain the elimination of the second syllable *ʾel* (or *ʾil*), which is the most important in *al-ʾilâh*, where *ʾel* or *ʾil* is the Semitic word for God since time immemorial.” If this were a common process, then the root might be recoverable, but to my knowledge there is no evidence of such a process in classical Arabic, one in which an initial glottal stop radical of a noun is deleted, along with its vowel, following the definite article *al-*. So although these two phrases seem similar in English transcription, they are significantly different in Arabic.

One of the reasons polemicists make this claim is so they can then make the additional claims that (1) *al-ʾilâh* could designate any particular “god,” including pagan gods, and that (2) *allâh* was a contraction of *al-ʾilâh* and therefore *allâh* could designate a pagan god.<sup>109</sup> These claims, however, have never been substantiated. For the first, there is a lack of clear evidence that *allâh* was ever used as a substitute for *al-ʾilâh* “the god.” If *allâh* were simply a contraction *al-ʾilâh*, then one would expect to find the contraction in contexts where *al-ʾilâh* is used in its normal, common-noun functions, such as anaphora or as a classifier or as part of a restrictively modified noun phrase. An example of anaphoric usage is Jonah 1:6: “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought

<sup>108</sup> Shehadeh, “Muslims and Christians,” 18.

<sup>109</sup> To my knowledge, these views were first promulgated by Julius Wellhausen in *Reste Arabischen heidentums* (Berlin: Reimer, 1897), 218ff. They are consistent with his general academic goal of interpreting religious history such that henotheism and monotheism are seen as late developments in the evolution of religion. This view has been refuted by extensive anthropological research around the world, which has found that henotheism is quite common, even in cultures that Wellhausen would have regarded as evolutionarily “primitive.”

to us, that we may not perish” (ESV). Here “the god” is anaphoric because it means “the god who was previously mentioned,” in this case the one served by Jonah. In other words, it simply means “the same god as was previously mentioned.” We do not find *allāh* occurring with such a usage, only *al-ʿilāh*. An example of a classifier usage is Acts 7:43: “You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship” (NASB). Here the phrase “the god” serves to identify “Rompha” as one of a class of entities called “gods.” We do not find *allāh* occurring as a classifier, only *al-ʿilāh*. An example of restrictive modification is Elijah’s semantic reference to “the god who responds with fire” in 1 Kings 18:24. In Elijah’s case the restrictive modification refers to *either* of two supposed “gods,” depending on the outcome. Such phrases exist in Arabic texts as well, but they are expressed as *al-ʿilāh*, not as *allāh*.<sup>110</sup>

A definite noun phrase can also be used to present its referent as unique or superlative, as in “the sun” and “the lord,” respectively. It is unique because it belongs to a singular class (i.e., a category with only one member). The story of Elijah goes on to use the Hebrew definite noun phrase *hâ-ʿelohîm* “the god” in a unique or superlative sense:

Then you will invoke the name of your god, and I will invoke the name of YHWH. The god who responds with fire will demonstrate that he is the [true] god (1 Kings 18:24).<sup>111</sup>

It is the second instance of *hâ-ʿelohîm* “the god” in this verse that has a unique or superlative meaning, “the one true god,” whether *YHWH* or Baal. This usage can be found in Arabic as well, in texts and dictionaries that say *allāhu smu l-ʿilāh* “Allah is the name of the [one true] god.” Such statements would make no sense if *allāh* were merely a contraction of *al-ʿilāh*. It would be like saying “The god is the name of the god” or “God is the name of God.” D. B. MacDonald,<sup>112</sup> however, cites two passages in the Qurʾan, 6:3 and 28:70, where he says *allāh* might be a contraction of *al-ʿilāh*, i.e., in the superlative sense of “the only true god.” These verses are shown below in Yusuf Ali’s translation:

110 An example from a nonbiblical text: *أطلس هو الإله اليوناني الذي يحمل الأرض* “Atlas is the god the Greek [i.e., the Greek god] who carries the earth.” This is written as *al-ʿilāh al-yūnānī*, never as *allāh al-yūnānī*, but if *allāh* really were a contraction of *al-ʿilāh*, then one would expect to find the latter usage as well.

111 This is quoted from the New English Translation, except that (1) I have bracketed “true” to show that it was added by the translators, (2) I used “YHWH” instead of “Lord,” and (3) I put the second instance of “god” in lowercase, since it is used here as a noun rather than a name. Note that the word “true” is needed in English to bring out the sense of uniqueness implied by the article in this context. Most English translations omit the article of uniqueness and use the name “God,” which makes little sense in this context, since the English name “God” is coreferential with the name “YHWH.”

112 D. B. MacDonald, “Ilāh,” in Peri J. Bearman (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Vol. III; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 1093–94.

Āl °Imrān [6]:3: And He is Allah in the heavens and on earth. He knoweth what ye hide, and what ye reveal, and He knoweth the (recompense) which ye earn (by your deeds).

Al-Qasas [28]:70: And He is Allah: There is no god but He. To Him be praise, at the first and at the last: for Him is the Command, and to Him shall ye (all) be brought back.

If *al-°ilāh* had been used in these passages, one could argue that it must mean “the supreme god” or “the one true god,” or else the reference would be unclear. The fact is, however, that *al-°ilāh* was not used in these passages, the term *allāh* was used, and the context demands nothing beyond its usual meaning as an epithet for God. There is nothing that demonstrates it is a contraction of *al-°ilāh*.

The superlative usage is common in biblical Hebrew, where one of the most common epithets for God is *hā-°elohîm* “the god” or “the deity,” meaning “the one, true, most high god.”<sup>113</sup> There are equivalent epithets in biblical Aramaic and biblical Greek, namely the terms *alāh-ā* and *ho theos*, respectively. These expressions are usually translated into English as a proper noun: “God,” and similarly in many other European languages, but the original terms are more like epithets, using the “article of uniqueness.” One finds this usage in Arabic as well, among both Christians and Muslims, ancient and modern, in their use of the term *al-°ilāh*. This usage is uncommon but one can find it, especially in lines of poetry where the metrical structure of *al-°ilāh* fits the meter better than does *allāh*. A pre-Islamic example of this is a verse cited by Zwemer<sup>114</sup> from the poet Nābigha al-Dhubayānī, in which both terms are found: “Allah has given them a kindness and grace which others have not. Their abode is the God (Al-ilah) himself and their religion is strong.”<sup>115</sup>

113 The uniqueness comes from having the article of uniqueness. Although the word resembles a plural in form, it is not construed grammatically as plural. The form is better understood as signifying the essence, as in “the Deity.” The Hebrew word for virginity, for example, looks the same as the word for virgins, but it is abstract rather than plural. See Joel S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).

114 Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God: An Essay on the Character and Attributes of Allah according to the Koran and Orthodox Tradition* (New York: American Tract Society, 1905), 25.

115 Zwemer notes that the poets Nābigha and Labīd use the term *allāh*, but he does an injustice in calling them “pagan.” As Zwemer himself notes, some Christian scholars have recognized the Christian motifs in their poems. Zwemer, however, follows the custom of Muslim historians in calling all of the pre-Islamic Arabs *jāhili* “ignorant, pagan,” rarely mentioning that large numbers of them were Christians. Both Nābigha (535–604) and Labīd (560–661), for example, lived in the Arab Christian Lakhmid kingdom, and Nābigha also spent part of his life in the Arab Christian Ghassanid kingdom in southern Syria. While lamenting the humanistic themes of their surviving poems, Trimmingham in *Christianity among the Arabs*, 247, nevertheless notes that “the poems of Nābigha adh-Dhubayānī (c. 535–c. 603) show him to be well-acquainted with Christian rites and festivals.” Nābigha’s famous poem uses *al-°ilāh* once, in reference to God speaking to Solomon, and it is evident that this three-syllable term maintains the poetic meter.

Zwemer cites this passage as the sole evidence for his claim that *allāh* is derived from *al-ʿilāh*, but all this passage demonstrates is that *al-ʿilāh* could be used to refer back to God, who had just been mentioned, and this fact has no bearing on the question of derivation.

In conclusion, there is no clear evidence of *allāh* being used as a contraction of the articular common-noun phrase *al-ʿilāh*, not even in its superlative sense. While both terms can be used to refer to God, they nevertheless differ slightly in grammar, in sense, in phonological sound, and in etymology. With regard to grammar, *allāh* is a unique epithet for God and hence functions like a name, whereas *al-ʿilāh* is a common noun phrase. In suitable contexts *al-ʿilāh* can be used to describe any supposed god, as in the Arabic translation of Acts 7:43: *al-ʿilāh ramfān* “the god Rompha,” whereas there is no clear evidence that the epithet *allāh* was ever used in reference to a pagan god. In regard to phonology, the last syllable of *allāh* is pronounced with velarization (i.e., as a dark el and back vowel) whereas *al-ʿilāh* is pronounced without velarization. In regard to etymology, *allāh* is a loanword from Aramaic, whereas *al-ʿilāh* is native to Arabic. We can conclude, then, that *allāh* is a loanword derived from the Aramaic religious language that was used by Arab Jews and Christians and is not a contraction of *al-ʿilāh* (the god).

#### 4. Several Dubious Claims about the Term “Allah”

Dudley Woodberry urged Christians who talk with Muslims to respect the names and terms with which Muslims are familiar.<sup>116</sup> He noted that most of these terms, including the Arabic name for God, have their origin in the faith communities of pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian Arabs. Woodberry was seeking to dispel the mistaken notions that (1) pre-Islamic Arab Jews and Christians did not use the term “Allah” for God prior to Islam but were somehow compromised into doing so, and (2) the term “Allah” originates as the name of a pagan Arab deity rather than as a name for the Most High God. In the previous sections, I presented historical and linguistic evidence in support of Woodberry’s statements about the Jewish and Christian origins of the name, in hopes of clearing these myths from the air, so that Muslims and Christians can dialogue with integrity and mutual respect (1 Peter 3:15). In this section I will provide evidence against the second mistaken notion, namely that “Allah” originates as a term for one or more pagan deities and that this makes it unsuitable as a name for God.

**Contrary to claims, the fact that a pagan goddess was called *al-lāt* does not imply that *al-lāt* was a pagan god**

The Syriac and Arabic epithet *alāh(ā)/allāh* is found in Arabia in conjunction with the spread of Jewish and Christian influences in the region, beginning with the Nabataeans in Sinai and the East Bank of the Jordan.<sup>117</sup> The earliest surviving attestation of the term in true Arabic

<sup>116</sup> Woodberry, “Contextualization among Muslims,” 173.

<sup>117</sup> There are thousands of pre-Islamic Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions in Sinai and the East Bank of the Jordan. These are written in the Aramaic/Syriac language using the Nabataean script, but since the Nabataeans were

script is the Christian Zebed inscription of AD 512, while the earliest manuscript evidence is the Arabic translation of Psalm 78 in Greek script. The goddess *al-lāt*, on the other hand, is attested across the ancient Near East and from two thousand years earlier. The oldest surviving mention is evidently an Ugaritic document from about 1200 BC<sup>118</sup> in which the Canaanite goddess Asherah, the wife of El, is referred to as *elat*, meaning “goddess” or perhaps meaning “wife of El.”<sup>119</sup> Fahd<sup>120</sup> notes that forms of the name *elat* are mentioned in the Greek works of Herodotus, in Akkadian texts, Safaitic texts, Palmyran texts, Nabataean texts, and ancient Aramaic texts. He writes that “The Arabic form of her name dates back, at least, to the time of the Khuzāʿī ʿAmr b. Luhayy, the reformer of the idolatrous cult in Mecca at the beginning of the third century AD, a period for which there is evidence of the cult of al-Lāt in Nabataea, in Safā, and in Palmyra.”<sup>121</sup> Macdonald<sup>122</sup> makes a similar observation and notes that the name is found in some ancient Aramaic inscriptions in Egypt. So it is not the case that *al-lāt* is derived from *allāh* or vice versa, or that they originated as a mythological pair.

They are not a semantic pair either. Fahd<sup>123</sup> notes that “Arab lexicographers are unanimous in considering that *al-lāt* is derived from the verb *latta*,” which means to knead barley meal. They do not perceive *al-lāt* as a feminine form of *allāh*. The feminine form of *allāh* would be *allāha*, not *al-lāt*. Nor do they perceive *al-lāt* as derived from *al-ʿilāh* “the god.”

These names are not an acoustic pair. Although the consonant and vowel of the second syllables are commonly transcribed into English the same way, as *la*, they sound different in Arabic. The word for God has a dark el and a back vowel, whereas the name of *al-lāt* does not. The names do not sound related in Arabic. So in spite of what some people have imagined, the fact that the pagan goddess of North Arabia had the name *al-lāt* has no bearing at all on the derivation, sense, or referential meaning of *allāh*.

For the sake of argument, however, let us suppose there were some polytheistic Arabs who supposed that *al-lāt* was God’s wife or daughter.<sup>124</sup> That would not prove that *allāh* did

Arabs, many of the inscribed names are Arabic words, and some names include the Arabic definite article *al-*. One finds many names composed with theophoric elements using *al(l)āh(ā)*, indicating a recognition of the Jewish-Christian God. But with time, as the Nabataeans assimilated to the Byzantine Empire and to Greek Orthodoxy, they began to use Greek names more and more. Biblical names occur as well, such as *dnyʿl* (Daniel) and *ywsf* (Joseph). See J. Cantineau, *Le Nabatéen* (Osnabruck, Germany: Otto Zeller, 1978 [1932]); Avraham Negev, *Personal Names in the Nabatean Realm* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991); and Macdonald, “Personal Names,” 251–90. (Note that MacDonal is quite critical of Negev’s work.)

118 Ugaritic texts date from the period 1300–1190 BC, mostly from the latter part of that period.

119 See W. G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 226; and Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Hadley (206) notes that “She [Athirat in the Ugaritic literature] is identified as the consort of the chief god El; the creatress of the gods; and the nursemaid of the gods. Her epithets include *ilt* ‘goddess,’ and *qdš* ‘holy.’”

120 T. Fahd, “Al-Lāt,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 5, ed. P. J. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 693.

121 Ibid., 692.

122 Macdonald, “Ancient North Arabian.”

123 Fahd, “Al-Lāt,” 693.

124 The medieval Muslim historian Hishām ibn al-Kalbī relates in *The Book of Idols* (*Kitāb al-Asnām*), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), that some of the ancient pagan devotees of the goddesses *al-lāt*, *al-ʿuzzā*,

not designate the creator; it would only show that those individuals had an unbiblical concept of God. Passages in the Bible and in ancient Hebrew inscriptions indicate that some of the Hebrews thought *YHWH* had a wife named Asherah.<sup>125</sup> This does not imply that *YHWH* was a pagan deity; it just indicates that some of the Hebrews had an unbiblical concept of *YHWH*. As for the New Testament term for God, *ho theos* “the god,” ancient Greek philosophers used this same term to refer to the Supreme Being, Creator, Father, and King of all things, yet they attributed to him thousands of sons who ruled with him as gods.<sup>126</sup> Mormons have a similar view today, namely that God has spirit wives, through whom he begets millions of spirit offspring. These unbiblical views of God do not, however, oblige Nicene Christians to quit using the words *YHWH*, *ho theos*, and “God.”

### Contrary to claims, there is no evidence that *allâh* was a pagan idol in the Ka<sup>c</sup>ba

The merchants of Mecca made their town a center of pilgrimage by placing in and around their shrine, the Ka<sup>c</sup>ba, an image or emblem of every deity that was worshiped by people anywhere in Arabia.<sup>127</sup> Foremost among these was Hubal, their chief deity. The Meccans, however, were also in competition with the cathedral in San<sup>c</sup>a, which drew many Christian pilgrims and which would have had icons or statues of Jesus, Mary, and others. So they included in the Ka<sup>c</sup>ba paintings of Jesus, Mary, Abraham, and other prophets, and they included a wooden dove, which might have represented the Holy Spirit.<sup>128</sup> Curiously, there is no evidence that there was an idol of *allâh* in the Ka<sup>c</sup>ba. But for the sake of argument, suppose there were. If the presence of an emblem of *allâh* in the Ka<sup>c</sup>ba would indicate that *allâh* a pagan deity, then would not the presence of images of Jesus, Mary, and Abraham identify them as pagan deities as well? But in spite of modern claims to the contrary, there seems to be no evidence that there was an image of *allâh* in the Ka<sup>c</sup>ba or anywhere else in Mecca.

The chief god of Mecca was Hubal. Wellhausen<sup>129</sup> speculated that Hubal was called *allâh*, and that Muhammad had proclaimed Hubal to be the Lord and Creator of the uni-

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and *manât* called them the “daughters of *al-lâh*.” This claim appears to be reflected and ridiculed in the Qur<sup>’</sup>an at al-<sup>3</sup>Isra<sup>’</sup> [17]:40 and an-Najm [53]:21ff, where the Meccans are derided for inventing female angels for God.

125 Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, with an introduction by Merlin Stone (New York: Ktav, 1968); and Hadley, *Cult of Asherah*.

126 See in particular the ancient work *What God Is According to Plato* by Maximus Tyrius, in which he affirms that “God is one” (θεος εις) and is the “Father,” “King,” and “Creator” of all things, and yet goes on to say that God rules with his “sons” (παιδες), who are “gods,” of whom there are “thirty thousand.” See *The Dissertations of Maximus Tyrius*, Translated from the Greek by Thomas Taylor (Vol. I; London: Whittingham, 1804), 16.

127 The Ka<sup>c</sup>ba of that time was not a temple. It was a roofless enclosure around a well, but valued objects were hung on its walls, such as poetry, paintings, icons, and the like. Idols, mostly stone slabs with emblems of gods, were placed near it. Inside the enclosure was a well in which “treasure” was kept. A. J. Wensinck and J. Jomier, “Ka<sup>c</sup>ba,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 4, ed. P. J. Bearman (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 317–322; Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 84.

128 Wensinck and Jomier, “Ka<sup>c</sup>ba,” 317–322.

129 Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischen heidentums*, 75–76.

verse. Wellhausen, however, provided no substantiating evidence. Against his claim is the historical fact that the Meccans persecuted Muhammad for opposing their religion. If he had proclaimed Hubal to be the Lord and Creator of the universe, then the Meccans would have tolerated him instead of hating him and trying to kill him. Hubal had chief place among the idols of the Ka’ba, but when Muhammad conquered Mecca, he is said to have destroyed all of the idols, saving only the pictures of Jesus and Mary.<sup>130</sup> If Hubal had been Muhammad’s God, he might have saved his image as well instead of destroying it.

Contrary to Wellhausen’s claim, there is no evidence that each Arab tribe called its own tribal god *allâh*

Wellhausen<sup>131</sup> conjectured that each Arab tribe called its chief tribal god *al-ʿilāh*, and that they each abbreviated this to *allâh*. Wellhausen based these conjectures on the erroneous assumption that pre-Islamic Arab tribes were almost entirely polytheistic, rather than henotheistic, and so he wrongly assumed they would have had no term for the Supreme Being. While this could have been the case in the prehistoric past, it was not the case for the historical period, when the terms *allâh* and *ar-rahmān* were in use for the Most High God. Wellhausen made the additional assumption that each tribe called its chief deity *al-ʿilāh*, a claim that is doubtful. Thirdly, he assumed that each tribe contracted *al-ʿilāh* to *allâh*, still in reference to their chief tribal deity. There is no evidence at all for the use of *allâh* for tribal deities, and we have already seen the lack of evidence for the claim that *allâh* is a contraction of *al-ʿilāh*. Nevertheless, Wellhausen’s claims continue to influence discussions of this topic, even though they are mere conjectures unsupported by the evidence. For a critique of Wellhausen’s premises and methodology, see Andræ.<sup>132</sup>

Contrary to some claims, the use of *allâh* for God is not in conflict with the use of the name  $\text{YHWH}$  in the Bible

A website called “ArabBible” has put the Van Dyck Arabic translation onto the Internet,<sup>133</sup> but with one exception: they replaced every instance of *allâh* “God” with *al-ʿilāh* “the god.” They did this without the consent of the Bible Societies and in spite of the millions of Arab Christians who call God *allâh*. The website provides a rationale that may be summarized as follows

- God has only one name, *YHWH*.
- No other name should be used for God except *YHWH*.
- The Arabic word *allâh* is a proper noun rather than a common noun.

<sup>130</sup> Guillaume and Ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, 552.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–20.

<sup>132</sup> Tor Andræ, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. T. Menzel (New York: Dover, 2000 [1936]), 25.

<sup>133</sup> <http://www.arabbible.com>.



- The name *allâh* applies only to “Islam’s deity.”
- Hence *allâh* should be expunged from the Bible.

Let me list some objections to these claims:

1. McLaughlin and Eisenstein<sup>134</sup> write that, according to Jewish reckoning, “The number of divine names that require the scribe’s special care is seven: El, Elohim, Adonai, Yhwh, Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh, Shaddai, and Zeba’ot.” Except for *Ehyeh*, *YHWH*, and *Shaddai*, all of these terms are epithets derived from Hebrew common nouns. *Ehyeh* and *YHWH* are forms of the same verb. Of these seven, *Ehyeh* “I am” is regarded by some as the most holy name, followed by *YHWH* “he is,” and then the others. The meaning of *Shaddai* is not known, but it is assumed from its form to have been an epithet in origin. So it is not true, as the website claims, that God has only one name, and the names he has in Hebrew seem to be epithets.
2. There is no Scripture that says one must not use any other names for God. There are over six thousand languages in the world, and most of them have a name for the Supreme Being. This is what one would expect in the light of Psalm 19 and Romans 1:19–21. In most of those languages into which the Bible has been translated, the local name for the Supreme Being has been used to refer to God. In English the word “God” is a proper noun that is used as the name of God. The authors of the website, however, deny that “God” is a proper noun, and they argue that one should use no names for God at all in a Bible translation. They justify this on the precedent that the translators of the Septuagint used *Kurios* in place of *YHWH*, and that *Kurios* is a common noun.<sup>135</sup> It should be noted, however, that *Kurios* is treated

<sup>134</sup> J. F. McLaughlin and Judah David Eisenstein, “Names of God,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, eds. I. Singer and C. Adler (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901–1906).

<sup>135</sup> In actual fact, the earliest surviving manuscripts of the Septuagint did not translate *YHWH* at all but just wrote it in Hebrew characters. In manuscripts LXX pOx3522, LXX Nahal Hever Habakkuk, and LXX Nahal Hever Zachariah, *YHWH* is written in paleo-Hebraic characters, while in LXX pFouad 266b the name *YHWH* is written in neo-Hebraic characters. Manuscript LXX pOxy1007 uses an abbreviation of the paleo-Hebraic name. In a later manuscript, LXX 4QLevB, the name *YHWH* is transliterated into Greek as ΙΑΩ (*iaō*). Until the fourth century, Christian scribes transcribed the Hebrew name *YHWH* using Greek characters that resembled the Hebrew characters, namely ΙΙΙΙΙ (pi iota pi iota) instead of יהוה (yod he waw he). In the third century Origen criticized this use of ΙΙΙΙΙ in place of the Hebrew characters, but by the sixth century scribes were using ΙΙΙΙΙ in copies of Origen’s own Hexapla edition of the LXX. In the fourth century, however, it became common to use an abbreviation of the Greek term *Kurios* as the name of God in the Septuagint, as seen in the codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus and in the fifth-century codex Alexandrinus. This is also the practice in

in the Septuagint and in quotations from it in the New Testament as a proper noun rather than as a common noun. It can often be distinguished from the use of *kurios* as a common noun by the lack of an article.<sup>136</sup> It is in English, not Greek, that *YHWH* is regularly translated as an epithet: “the LORD.” In Greek it is a proper noun, Κύριος.<sup>137</sup> So the statement on the website lacks the biblical justification that it claims.

3. As we have shown previously, the Arabic word *allâh* is related to the common noun for God and is interpreted by many as a special epithet signifying God in his divine essence.
4. Contrary to the implication on the website, the epithet *allâh* is not the name of some being who is different from God; on the contrary, it is the name that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians used for the God of the Bible. Muslims also identify *allâh* as the God of the Bible, the one who created the world, chose Abraham, sent the prophets, sent the Messiah, and will judge the nations on the last day. This description narrows the possible reference of *allâh* down to just one person: God.
5. In conclusion, there is actually no justification for omitting *allâh* from the Arabic Bible or other materials as an inappropriate term for God. In fact, rejecting the term *allâh* is something of an insult to the many millions of Arabic-speaking Christians who have worshiped God as *allâh* since pre-Islamic times, and to the millions of Christians in other languages who use Allah as their name for God.

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all extant manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. In other words, the translators of the Septuagint initially retained the Hebrew form of the name *YHWH* but translated the other divine names, while the authors of the New Testament used Greek terms for all of them, including use of the proper noun *Kurios*. Similar practices can be seen in translations around the world, including Arabic and languages with Arabic loanwords.

<sup>136</sup> The article is absent except where it was needed to correspond to a Hebrew preposition such as *l-* or *et* or to disambiguate the case; this is the practice with all proper nouns in the Septuagint.

<sup>137</sup> There are grammatical contexts in Greek where proper nouns require a definite article, especially if they are indeclinable foreign names (as *YHWH* originally was in the LXX), and there are also grammatical contexts where definite common noun phrases shed their article. That is beyond the scope of a footnote, except to mention that these variations can confuse an investigator who does not understand the Greek linguistic conventions that pertain to this matter.

## Conclusion

Jews spread both Judaism and their Aramaic term for God among the Arabs. In Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, Judaic pilgrims from Arabia heard the name of God being praised in Arabic by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:11). Jewish Christianity subsequently spread to Arabia, with other Christian sects coming later. The Aramaic name of God became well assimilated into the Arabic language, taking the form *allâh*. Meanwhile Nestorian Christians spread their faith eastwards across Asia, using the Syriac Bible and spreading the Syriac term for God: *alâh-â*. When Islam spread across the same region, it popularized the Arabic form of this same term, *allâh*. As a result, forms of this word have been borrowed into many languages as the name of the Supreme Being. Thus a term which our Lord Jesus Christ used to refer to God has been disseminated across much of the world.

Among Arabs *allâh* remains the name by which Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship God, and they use it frequently in their speech to praise and acknowledge him. In a poignant article entitled “Allah and the Christian Arab,” an evangelical Middle Eastern Christian tries to explain to Western Christians the significance of the name *allâh* to Christians in the Arab world. It might be appropriate to close with his concluding remark, which is in the form of a plea:

PLEASE never never [speak] against the glorious name of Allah, a name that has been loved and revered by millions of God’s children down through the centuries.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Rafique, “Allah and the Christian Arab,” *Seedbed*, 13/1 (1998), 7.