

PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR
**THE BIBLE
TRANSLATOR**

*Published twice yearly
(April and October)
by the United
Bible Societies*
Vol. 44, No. 4, October 1993

EDITOR: Euan Fry

JOHN ELLINGTON

A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY? Translating the name of Jesus in Muslim areas

Dr Ellington is a UBS Translation Consultant based in USA

In Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus Christ, Joseph is told that when Mary gives birth to a son "you will name him Jesus—because he will save his people from their sins" (1.21). This name is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Joshua which means "the LORD [Yahweh] saves." The name is very significant and is in itself especially dear to Christians around the world. Christian missionaries agree that the person of Jesus Christ is central to their work and that his "name" should be made known to all people. Unquestionably great importance is attached to the name of Jesus by Christians of all persuasions and backgrounds.

It is, therefore, no surprise that great controversy sometimes surrounds the precise form of this name to be used in translations of the Bible. There was considerable debate, for example, in the Lingala (Zaire) project in the early 1970s when Protestants and Catholics attempted to work together on a new, inter-confessional translation of the New Testament. Protestants had traditionally used the form "Yesu" for the name of Jesus while Catholics spelled it "Yezu." Many hours were spent in discussion of a single letter difference. The problem was eventually solved by a decision to use French pronunciation as the basis for the transliteration of all proper names, but even this required a great deal of negotiation and was not universally accepted.

Yet nowhere is the controversy over the name of Jesus greater than in those areas where Islam is strong. This is true because the historical person we know as Jesus is referred to in the Qur'an as "Isa." Some translators feel that this name should be used in order to reach Muslims and help them make the historical connection between the person they read about in their Holy Book and the person talked about in the Christian Scriptures. Many missionaries, however, strongly oppose the use of this term because of the mistaken notions about Jesus in the Qur'an.

As a general rule the form of the name of Jesus used in translation is the one used by the Christian community in places where such a community

exists. Dr. Kenneth Thomas writes: "Where there is a convert Christian community which uses 'Isa' or where there is no Christian community in an Islamic situation, then 'Isa' is the form used in translation (for instance, in Kurdish, Persian, Pashtu, Sindhi, Turkish, Philippine and Indonesian and Central Asian Islamic languages)" (personal communication). This was also the case in early translations in Somali, Djerma, Moore and Mandinka in various parts of Africa where Islam is a powerful force. But in some places where the Christian community uses a form of "Jesus," translations designed for use by Muslims have used something more like "Yesu" (Bengali, Tamil, Hausa and Wolof, for example).

In the first work done among speakers of Hindi and Urdu on the Indian subcontinent translators used "Isa." But it was decided in 1843 that "Yusua" and other non-Arabic biblical names should be used, although many missionaries opposed this decision at the time. Since that crucial decision non-Arabic forms, including "Yusua," have become widely accepted by the Christian communities in South Asia.

Translators working in languages of the world where there is little or no Christian community are faced with a dilemma when it comes to the form to be used in translating the name of Jesus. And there is clearly no united worldwide precedent to be followed. The remainder of this article will attempt to provide help to translators who find themselves in such a situation.

Arguments against using "Isa"

1. The arguments against using the Qur'anic form of the name for Jesus have been neatly summed up in a footnote on pages 83 and 84 of Nida and Taber's *Theory and Practice of Translation* (1969):

"... An analysis of the different componential structures of the meanings of these two terms (i.e., the differences in concepts held popularly by Christians and Muslims concerning Jesus and Isa respectively) will serve to highlight the fact that for what is essentially the same word (or name) there may be such different sets of conceptual values as to override certain historical connections:

<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Isa</i>
1. the Son of God	1. a prophet
2. strong emphasis upon the content of his teaching	2. relatively little knowledge of Jesus's teaching
3. worked miracles but repudiated showmanship	3. was a typical wonder-worker
4. died for man's sins	4. was not killed on the cross
5. resurrected from the dead	5. not resurrected from the dead."

In other words, the Isa of the Qur'an is so different from the Jesus of the NT that it would be counter-productive to use "Isa" in translation. Over the past two decades some translators have considered this the final, definitive word on the matter and they have used forms like "Yesu" in Muslim situations. But recently many have been rethinking this decision

in the light of the movement to be more sensitive to the cultures of the people being evangelized.

Nevertheless, the facts presented by Nida and Taber stand. The Qur'an is quite clear in these matters. On the question of whether Jesus was the Son of God, the Muslim Holy Book says:

"... the Christians say, 'The Messiah is the Son of God'; That is the utterance of their mouths, conforming with the unbelievers before them. God assail them! How they are perverted!" (Sura 9, 31)

On the death of Christ on the cross for sinners, readers of the Qur'an find:

"... and for their saying, 'we slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God'—yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them." (Sura 4, 157)

On the question of the resurrection, the Qur'an indicates that Isa did not really die, so he could not have been raised from death to new life with God.

While there is no question of the Isa in the Qur'an being identical with the Jesus of the Gospels, some translators are convinced that there is sufficient common ground to show that the problem is one of beliefs about the person rather than of identification. On the other hand, many missionaries argue that it is unwise to allow Muslim inquirers to begin their quest with so much misinformation about the central personage of the Christian faith by using the Qur'anic name for Jesus.

2. A second argument against the use of "Isa" in the New Testament has to do with the Muslim accusation that the "people of the Book" (Christians) are constantly altering the words of the Book (Christian Scripture). The argument goes like this: There are already two or three translations existing in neighboring languages and these translations use "Yesu." If "Isa" is used in a related language, Muslims will seize on this as yet another example of Christians playing fast and loose with the Word of God. While this argument may be valid in some very limited contexts, it cannot be said to hold true when looked at over a broader scope. The world is pluralistic and even if people find no "contradictions" when comparing on the local level, the more widely they range, the more likely they are to find the kinds of problems that many well-meaning people want to avoid. There are simply too many different situations in which the Yesu/Isa problem has been solved differently.

Arguments in favor of using "Isa"

1. Every language has a right to use a form that is suitable to its own rules and traditions. For this reason we find a wide variety of spellings for the name of Jesus: English and German are the same, "Jesus." And while Spanish places an accent mark over the second syllable (Jesús), French has a similar mark over the first (Jésus). In West Africa we find forms like Jizos, Yisos, Jisosi, Zize, Ziize, Gize, Jise, Yise, Jesu, Zyezu, Yisa and even Isa (Djerma 1954, Niger). But rules of transliteration are never applied in

isolation. Other considerations may be more important—especially when the issue is the name of Jesus.

2. The person of Jesus is well known among Muslims who are careful readers or hearers of the Qur'an. He is frequently referred to as "the son of Mary." This phrase is very often repeated in the Qur'an which also hints that he was born by the direct agency of God rather than having a human father. Readers of the Qur'an also know that "Isa" was born in Bethlehem, and that he was given the Holy Spirit. They are aware that he performed miracles, that he was rejected by the Jews, that he ascended to heaven and that he will return to earth to destroy a great enemy. He is also frequently referred to as "Al Masih," the Messiah.

In spite of the differences between the New Testament Jesus and the Qur'anic Isa, there are enough similarities for some translators to feel that an adequate, if not perfect, foundation has been laid in the minds of Muslims. The use of the name Isa in translation would therefore provide an important basis for a deeper understanding of the person and work of Jesus. Misconceptions could be corrected as Christian instruction builds on this imperfect foundation.

3. A third argument in favor of the use of "Isa" is related to the use of other Islamic terms in Bible translation. In certain areas where Islam is well established it has influenced the vocabulary of the languages to such an extent that some rather key vocabulary items are Arabic borrowings. Along with the Arabic terminology comes a certain amount of Islamic theology—or at least theological connotations—which may not be fully consistent with biblical notions. For example, the verb "to fast" is loaded with Muslim connotations including the idea of participation in elaborate meals after sundown—a concept that is not found in the Bible. Words like these are at least as susceptible to misunderstanding as Isa. And yet they are often used in translation with an explanation of the differences in meaning in the glossary.

The term often used for God is "Allah" or some variation of this word in parts of the world where Islam has spread. In Wolof (Senegal) it is Yälla; in Kpelle (Liberia) the spelling is γâla. Hausa (Nigeria) and Pulaar (Senegal) use the form without alteration: Allah. As far afield as Malaysia and many other countries of Southeast Asia the term Allah is also used for God. When a componential analysis is done of this term, it becomes apparent that there are at least as many differences between the Allah of the Qur'an and the God of the New Testament as between Isa and Jesus. Yet the term Allah, or an adaptation of it, is used in translation and missionaries busy themselves in the task of explaining these discrepancies and teaching new converts and inquirers the truth about the very real differences between their previous notions about Allah and the biblical revelation about God. If these differences can be overcome, those related to Isa and Yesu should also be able to be overcome.

4. The final argument for the use of "Isa" rather than "Yesu" is that Muslim misconceptions will persist regardless of which name is used. In this regard, Rev. Isidor Loewenthal, a 19th century missionary to the

Afghans, wrote in September 1860: “these defects would continue to exist in the Musselman’s creed, even if we **were** able, in some way, to change the name Isa into Yusua in their entire literature, sacred and profane, as well as in the minds of the whole Musselman world; a change of a name could not alter their doctrine” (cited in James P. Dretke, *A Christian Approach to Muslims*, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979, page 209). If these mistaken notions are truly an integral part of the Muslim mind, then neither the use or non-use of “Isa” will change them.

Conclusion

While anecdotes are not necessarily good arguments for or against any particular course of action, the following experience which I had while living in West Africa changed my opinion in the matter under discussion. After living in Senegal for several months I encountered a young Muslim with whom I began to discuss matters of religion. I spoke to him in French and used the name “Jésus” but in the course of our conversation I also used “Yesu” since this was the term used in some of the African languages of the area. At first he seemed unfamiliar with the person I was talking about, but after some discussion of this New Testament character and considerable explanation about him, the young man finally lit up and said, “Oh, you are talking about Isa!” It was at that point that I began wondering whether it might not be better to start with “Isa,” in spite of all the Muslim misconceptions about him, and move on from that point rather than starting with an entirely unknown name and having to build from the ground up—only to find that associations are made with “Isa” after considerable discussion.

The concern of the missionary should be to change what he or she considers to be faulty thinking about Jesus in the Muslim mind rather than pretending that there is another—totally different—person who died on the cross and was raised from the dead for all people.

The decision about whether to use “Yesu” or “Isa” is without question very important to the success or failure of the communication of the Gospel. And it is not a decision to be taken lightly. But all too often this decision is made in order to avoid offending the sensibilities of a handful of foreign missionaries rather than taking into consideration the needs of hundreds of thousands of other people for whom this Jesus also died.

BARCLAY M. NEWMAN

BIBLICAL POETRY AND ENGLISH STYLE

Dr Newman is the Chief Translations Officer of the American Bible Society

Martin Luther, in his essay “Defense of Translation of Psalms,” says:

Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather he must see to it—once he understands the Hebrew author—that he