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EDITOR: Paul Ellingworth

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Jocelyn Murray

KENNETH J. THOMAS

THE USE OF ARABIC TERMINOLOGY IN BIBLICAL TRANSLATION

The author is the UBS Asian-Pacific translation-consultant-at-large, based in New York.

A unique situation exists for translators of many languages in Africa and Asia. Through the spread of Islam, Arabic words have been incorporated into common usage in languages of various linguistic families. Some of these are words with religious or theological significance which have entered into a language through familiarity with the Qur'ān and Islamic traditions. It is unique that a large number of words in so many languages of so many linguistic families in such a wide geographical area can be found which are lexically related to the same family as the biblical languages Aramaic and Hebrew. Many of the religious and theological words themselves entered into Arabic either directly or indirectly from the biblical languages.¹ In addition to the many words in Arabic which have their cognate equivalents in other Semitic languages, at least 275 words of the Qur'ān other than proper names have been identified as having non-Arabic origins. Of these about three-fourths had been incorporated into the Arabic language before the time of Muhammad. Of the remaining 70 words, about half came directly from Syriac and Ethiopian but many of these had originally come from Greek and Aramaic, about 25 directly from Hebrew or Aramaic, and a few directly from Greek. Many these foreign loan words which entered Arabic are found in the Bible and are now identified as "Arabic" loan words in other languages.²

This phenomenon is the result of the historical relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The fact that the Arabs had had centuries of contact with Jews and Christians gave the "peoples of the Book" a common vocabulary of specialized terminology for religious concepts. Muhammad himself had direct contacts with Jews and Christians and their traditions, which enabled him to understand and utilize these religious terms.³ There is a significant continuity of concepts between the three faiths regularly expressed with the same words, sometimes with the same components of meaning and sometimes with differing ones. As Muslims travelled to other areas outside the Arabic-speaking world, they used their Arabic terms, both ordinary and religious, many of which entered into non-Arabic languages.

¹ Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938, p.2.

² Statistical summary of Jeffery's analyses from W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*. Edinburgh: University Press, 1970, p.85.

³ Jeffery, *op. cit.*, pp.19-28.

For the translation of the Bible from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the existence of Arabic religious terminology provides a ready-made vocabulary, some of it appearing to be familiar biblical words. Since many of these Arabic terms are in common usage in certain non-Arabic languages, they provide the potential for direct communication according to concepts already understood. Thus, they are a means toward bridging language, cultural, and religious differences. Some translations of the Bible, both old and new, have maximized the use of Arabic terminology as a means to express biblical concepts.⁴

I. ISSUES

The use of Arabic terminology is to be affirmed as a valuable aid in the translation of the Bible into many non-Arabic languages. There are some issues, however, which need to be taken into consideration in the use of Arabic words in biblical translation.

A. Semantic Shifts

There is sometimes a semantic shift in the meaning of an Arabic word in contemporary use in a non-Arabic language from its qur'anic and corresponding biblical concept. (For example, *tawbah* is used in the Qur'an for "repentance"⁵ and so functions in certain other languages, but in at least one language it is used as an oath that one will not repeat a particular action). It is not possible to make a single definitive study of an Arabic word in terms of its use in the Arabic language to determine its appropriateness for use in the translation of the Bible into all other languages in which it appears as a loan word.

B. World Views

The Bible and the Qur'an present two different world views and religious systems so that a certain term has a particular meaning within each world view.⁶ When the term is used within either context without reference to the other, its meaning is defined and clear. But when a reader from one religious system reads the word in the context of another world view, there is a problem in communication until the other world view is understood by the reader. The differing functions of the term within the two views may in fact create a hindrance to the reader's understanding. (For example, the Arabic *malakūt* in the Qur'an is a technical term which refers only to the whole dominion of God in heaven and

⁴ E.g., the Persian translation of the Bible in 1895 and the revision of the Carey Bengali Bible in 1984(?)

⁵ Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'an*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, p.1218.

⁶ Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*. Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964 [Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, reprint 1987], pp.12f.; Khadiga Karrar El Shaikh El Tayeb, *Principles and Problems of the Translation of Scriptures: The Case of the Qur'an*. (Temple University Ph.D. Dissertation, 1985), Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms Int., 1985, p.49, observes that, "The language of the Qur'an communicates a world or a reality that is essentially different from any reality that any text strives to communicate".

earth,⁷ while the Hebrew *malekuth* and Greek *basileia* used in the Bible also include ordinary contexts which refer to the rule of king over his subjects.⁸ Again, the Arabic *kāhin* in the Qur'ān denotes a soothsayer⁹ while the Hebrew *kohen* in the Bible denotes a priest.¹⁰ In addition to the continuities which exist between the two faiths, the discontinuities also need to be recognized so that the text can be translated in a way which will clearly communicate its meaning. The translation should not be based on a prior general determination of the nature and degree of continuity and discontinuity between the faiths, but rather the translation should be such that it can provide a basis for a determination by the religious communities of a hermeneutic of relationship between the faiths.¹¹

C. Linguistic Identity

A particularly critical issue is the role of language in the self-understanding of religious communities and their relationships with one another. In situations where Christians and Muslims live together, "language" becomes a distinguishing mark of each religious community by which its members communicate and recognize those who are part of their own community.¹² Arabic terminology in non-Arabic languages is particularly significant in this regard. Its significance goes beyond the referential meaning of the words to their social symbolism.¹³ Firm traditions for the use or non-use of certain Arabic religious terms have been established, and their use in such situations may be identified as exclusively Islamic by either Muslims or Christians or by both. Their use in biblical translations may be objected to by Muslims as usurping distinctive vocabulary and identity or by Christians as being syncretistic and/or a threat to their identity. These traditions, related to a particular language, even affect the usage which would be considered appropriate by a Christian community for the translation of the Bible into other languages in its country. A Bible translation in the major or national language is usually considered the standard from which translations into regional or tribal languages are made or with which they are compared. Thus translators of the Bible cannot face *de novo* the issue of what Arabic terminology may be used.

Another aspect of this issue is the situation which is created by the use of Arabic terminology in a new translation of the Bible by which a new Christian

⁷ Kassis, *op. cit.*, p.768; H. A. R. Gibb & J. H. Kramers, eds., *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974, pp.78f.

⁸ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1971, pp.198f.

⁹ Jeffrey, *op. cit.*, pp.247-248; Kassis, *op. cit.*, p.649.

¹⁰ Holladay, *op. cit.*, p.152.

¹¹ See Kenneth J. Thomas, "Hermeneutic in relation to people of other faiths". *UBS Bulletin*, No.140/141, 3rd/4th Quarters (1985), pp.35-48.

¹² F. S. Khair-Ullah, "Linguistic hang-ups in communicating with Muslims", *Missiology*, vol. IV:3 (1976), pp.307, citing the example of Urdu; but *contra* Michael Nazir Ali, *Frontiers in Muslim-Christian Encounter*. Oxford: Regnum Books, 1987, p.81.

¹³ The observation of Johannes P. Louw, ed., *Sociolinguistics and Communication*, (UBS Monograph Series, No.1), London, NY, Stuttgart: UBS, 1986, p.108, is pertinent:

"In order to more fully understand the real nature of verbal communication, the actual performance of the speech act in its social setting must be taken into account. Sociolinguistics has shown how people understand any communicative event more in terms of its paralinguistic and extralinguistic features than in terms of its strictly structural aspects".

church comes into existence in a particular nation using a different vocabulary from that of the established church. There is not only the problem of communication between them, but the possibility of rejection of one by the other as Christian, due to linguistic aspects of identity symbols.

D. Alternative Possibilities

It might be thought that it would be best to avoid all Arabic words in the translation of the Bible because of possible confusion with Islamic conceptualizations. The alternative would be to use non-Arabic words. Sometimes this is possible, and many translations use only a minimum of Arabic terms, not simply because they have Islamic associations but because they represent high-level, literary vocabulary in a particular language. But there are problems with this as a thorough-going principle. In some languages Arabic terms are the only words which are commonly used for particular concepts (for example, the word for extemporaneous, spontaneous prayer, *du'ā'*). To express these in some other way would be cumbersome and unnatural. In those instances in which the Arabic term seems unsuitable for use in biblical translation, the translator is faced with several choices, none of which may be desirable: to use the term in spite of problems; to use a word from yet another religious tradition which may be unfamiliar or evocative of unacceptable concepts; to borrow or coin a new word; to use a descriptive phrase; or to combine two or more of these approaches.

II. APPROACH

A. Basic Translation Principles

In the face of these issues there needs to be the clear establishment of principles for the translation of the Bible on the basis of which the use of Arabic vocabulary can be determined. It is proposed that the biblical text be translated to maintain three basic principles:

1. Insofar as much as possible the translation be capable of clear understanding by both Christians and non-Christians;
2. The translation be recognized by the whole Christian community as a faithful understanding of the biblical message and thus be a basis for the unity of the church;
3. The translation serve as a bridge for understanding, dialogue and witness between the Christian and Muslim communities.

B. Practical Implications of Principles

The practical implications of these principles for the use of Arabic terms with religious and theological significance are:

1. Those terms which faithfully represent the meaning of the biblical text may be used;
2. Those terms which are in common use by both religious communities and for which there is a continuity between the concepts of Christianity and Islam may be used;
3. Those terms which are seen by both religious communities as exclusively Islamic should be avoided.

III. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

On the basis of these principles it is necessary to develop a methodology which can be used as a guide in relation to each language and situation. The development of such a procedure or methodology is explored here. Not only those doing first translations into languages with Arabic terminology need a means to evaluate such terms, but also those working on common language translations and revisions of previous translations.

A concordant approach to translation is not being considered in this discussion. It is recognized that no single Arabic term can be used in every instance for a corresponding Hebrew and/or Greek word. Rather, the appropriateness of using a particular Arabic term in a particular biblical context is being considered.

A. *Determination of Biblical and Qur'anic Meanings*

Basic to any consideration of the use of Arabic terms is an analysis of their use and meaning in the Qur'an followed by a comparison with comparable concepts in the Bible. Any particular term needs to be considered in relation to others in the same semantic domain so that differentiations of meaning can be clearly identified as a basis for comparative componential analysis. Such a componential analysis enables one to ascertain the degree to which the basic concepts are the same and different.¹⁴ Also important is the identification of the supplementary and emotive components of the terms.¹⁵ These ultimately may determine their suitability.

Fortunately there are some resources to help with this analysis. For Qur'anic terms there is the scholarship of both Muslims and Western Islamicists. There are many word studies available for biblical terms.

The first stage of this procedure, to determine the biblical and Qur'anic meanings, can be done by Christian and Muslim scholars with the results made available to all translators in various situations.¹⁶

B. *Determination of Contemporary Meanings*

The next stage, which is more difficult, is the componential analysis of Arabic terms in their contemporary use. The usage of both Christians and Muslims needs to be determined and compared with biblical and Qur'anic concepts to ascertain the degree to which contemporary usage corresponds to these concepts.

Resources for this stage include modern dictionaries and literature. But more valuable are actual surveys of speakers of each particular language. These can be done through questionnaires and/or conversations with a broad cross-section of those using the language.

¹⁴ Eugene A. Nida, *Componential Analysis of Meaning*. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1975, pp.174-193; Jan de Waard & Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986, pp.178-181.

¹⁵ Nida, *op. cit.*, pp.28-30 & 35-39.

¹⁶ Perhaps an UBS aid for translators with a compilation of this information is needed.

C. *Determination of Social and Symbolic Significance*

An extremely important aspect of the process is the determination of the social and symbolic significance of particular Arabic words. Their significance to both the Muslim and Christian communities is important and needs to be determined. Even in situations where there is little interaction between the Muslim and Christian communities, there is often a strong sense about the exclusive nature of particular Arabic terms.

This type of significance is ascertained from the responses of various speakers of the language. It is important to obtain the response of more than the educated religious leadership; the responses of ordinary people in the society are needed. Again the responses of both Muslims and Christians are important.

D. *Evaluative Guidelines*

Through these procedures a mass of data is collected. How is this data to be evaluated? On what basis can it be determined whether or not a particular term is appropriate for use in the translation of the Bible? From the data obtained through the three previously mentioned steps, it is suggested that the following evaluative guidelines be followed to determine the appropriateness of particular Arabic terms for use in biblical translation:

1. Particular Arabic terms should have the same basic referential meaning in the Qur'ān with the same minimal diagnostic components as equivalent biblical terms. But if the supplementary and emotive components in their qur'anic contexts are specifically anti-biblical or anti-Christians or are designated as exclusively Islamic concepts, then serious consideration should be given to the elimination of the use of such terms in biblical translation. Even if contemporary usage does not carry such components, the terms may take on these components as there is increasing knowledge of their qur'anic usage.

2. Particular Arabic terms should also have the same basic referential meaning in contemporary use by both Muslims and Christians with the same minimal diagnostic components as equivalent biblical terms. If the terms have acquired supplementary and emotive components in addition to those which existed in their qur'anic use, their social and symbolic effects need be considered.

3. Particular Arabic terms should be recognized as not being exclusively Islamic. If the terms are considered to be exclusively Islamic by all persons in the society, their use in the Bible may be considered by both religious communities as unwarranted. If these terms are considered exclusively Islamic *only* by Christians, the Christian community may need to recognize their basic meaning common to both religious traditions and their potential value in biblical translation.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL APPLICATION OF THE PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

During the translation of the Sindhi Common Language New Testament in Pakistan, there was discussion about whether or not *jinn* could be used for *archai* in Romans 8.38. Taking that situation as a possible case, the following is an

outline of the procedure which has been tested for carrying out the proposed methodology:

Terms: *jinn* in Arabic and semantic domain of supernatural beings and powers in Arabic and Greek.

A. Biblical and Qur'ānic Meanings

1. Qur'ānic use: *jinn* denotes invisible, intelligent, imperceptible spirit(s) created by God from flames to carry out various labours in the service of God. They are distinguished from humans and angels who were created from clay and light. Some are evil and will be judged and punished, but are capable of being saved in that Muhammad was sent to them as well as to humankind.¹⁷

2. Biblical use: A radical distinction is made between good and evil supernatural spirits with *angelos*, used for good spirits and *daimonion* and *pneuma akatharton* or *pneuma ponēron*, used for evil spirits. The latter are subject to and instruments of Satan, opposed to God and God's people, the cause of some sicknesses, and associated with paganism. They will be condemned for eternal punishment.¹⁸ There are various supernatural forces (*aiōn*, *archai*, *dunamis*, *exousia*, *thronos*, *kosmokratōr* and *stoicheia*) which have a role in human fate and the events of this world, but is not possible to distinguish between them in the New Testament.¹⁹ They are considered to be spiritual beings which were created as good spirits but are now in conflict with people although their power has been broken by Christ.²⁰

3. Comparison: *jinn* denotes both good and evil spirits in the Qur'ān while there are separate Greek terms for good and evil spirits. When the Greek terms indicated above are used as titles for supernatural forces, those are understood to denote evil powers. *Jinn* in the Qur'ān is capable of being saved while the evil spirits in the New Testament will be condemned to eternal punishment.

B. Contemporary Meanings:

1. Muslims [in Sind of Pakistan]: *jinn* denotes spirit(s) which have various types of influences, both good and evil, over people and which must be controlled in various ways.

2. Christians [in Sind of Pakistan]: *jinn* denotes spirit(s) which Muslims

¹⁷ Toshihiko Izutsu, *op. cit.*, p.172; D. B. Macdonald, "Djinn", in H. A. R. Gibb & J. H. Kramers, eds., *op. cit.*, pp.90-91.

¹⁸ Werner Foerster, "*daimōn*, *daimonion*", in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. & ed.). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964-76, II:16-19; Eduard Schweizer, "*Pneuma*, *pneumatikos*" in Kittel, *op. cit.*, VI:395-397.

¹⁹ Foerster, "*exousia*," in Kittel, *op. cit.*, II:571-573; Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, New York: UBS, 1988, 12:43-50.

²⁰ Gerhard Delling, "*archē*" in Kittel, *op. cit.*, I:483; Foerster, *loc.cit.*, p.573; Walter Grundmann, "*dunamai*, *dunamis*," in Kittel, *op. cit.*, II:307-308.

believe have various types of influences, both good and evil, over people and which must be controlled in various ways.

3. Comparison: *jinn* has same referential meaning for both. This meaning corresponds to the qur'ānic use, but not to the meaning of the Greek terms used in the New Testament.

C. *Social and Symbolic Significance:*

1. Muslims [in Sind]: Practices to control *jinn* are associated with folk religion.

2. Christians [in Sind]: Practices to control *jinn* are considered to be Muslim superstition.

3. Comparison: Practices to control *jinn* are considered by both Muslims and Christians to be non-orthodox religious behaviour.

D. *Evaluation*

1. *jinn* in terms of the three proposed principles (*jinn* 1) in the Qur'ān does not have the same minimal diagnostic components as the comparable Greek terms in the Bible.

2. *jinn* has the same meaning for both Christians and Muslims in contemporary usage in Sind which differs from the comparable Greek terms.

3. *jinn* is recognized by both Christians and Muslims as associated with Muslim belief and practice.

4. Conclusion: It would not be appropriate to use this word for any Greek terms in the domain of spiritual beings and powers in the Sindhi translation of the New Testament.²¹

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²¹ In fact it was decided not to use *jinn* to translate *archai* in Romans 8.38 in the Sindhi Common Language New Testament.