

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Dr John Potter*

One of the more challenging and important tasks facing the cross cultural missionary/aid-worker is to establish a name for God in the language of the target group. Otherwise it is impossible to translate the scriptures or hold a conversation in the local vernacular.

A CASE IN POINT

In Malawi in Central Africa pioneer Presbyterian missionaries settled on *Mulungu* as the name for God. But whether this name is synonymous with the Biblical Hebrew *Elohim* or the Biblical Greek *Theos* is highly questionable. For *Mulungu* is the traditional name given by the Achewa people to 'the creator god', just one god, in their minds, in a pantheon of gods. That is to say, for Malawians located in traditional animism, *Mulungu* represents only one attribute of a Supreme Being, other attributes being given to other entities. What the term *Mulungu* conveys to the average modern Malawian, who is somewhat emancipated from animistic understandings, remains uncertain. It is probably that the name means as little to him as the term God means to people in the West who use the name in conversation but can provide no ontological account of what the name actually represents.

What we do know is that, to the Achewa mind, *Mulungu* is a personage who is far away, unreachable and unknowable. That is why it is the animists believe it is necessary to hold fast to a relationship with their ancestors. Each month at the New Moon, tribal leaders including the headman of each village is obliged to visit a traditional sacred site, most often a small hill, bearing gifts. There he or she presents the current needs of his/her community to the ancestors. They do not worship ancestors as some observers have argued; they simply use the ancestors as intermediaries so that their needs are presented to *Mulungu* – he being too far away for human agents to communicate with him directly. Of course there are right and wrong ways of doing things; if *Mulungu* is to be expected to respond to requests for assistance, it is required of mere mortals that their agency be pleasing to Him! In addition to helping with communication, the ancestors also provide an infallible guide to right behaviour. Praying to the ancestors is little different than praying to the saints – the latter practice presumably being adapted from primal tradition, in the same way that confession is derived from standard practices at the Oracles of Delphi and the Oasis of Siwa.

I had a colleague in Malawi who was away at a funeral for several days. When he returned I asked him what Malawians did at funerals. He informed me that they 'sang Christian Hymns all night', but he was silent when I asked him why they did this. Further investigation revealed that the Achewa and most other Bantu peoples (and the vast majority of primal folk) believe that it was important to 'sing the spirit of the ancestor' into the cosmos, especially if he or she had been a good person. For singing the spirit is important in ensuring that the *moya* (Bantu lit. life/soul) of the person finishes, as far as is possible, close to *Mulungu*. For, from this position the ancestor may better communicate the needs of their descendants to Him. (Besides, who wants the spirit of Grandma hanging around the village!).

These few understandings reveal that *Mulungu* is far different in character from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as revealed by Jesus Christ (the Liberator and Anointed One). For the God of the Bible is revealed as a Relationship Personage, not a remote unknowable being who runs an international aid agency. Perhaps the term *Mulungu* was not the best choice that the Bible translators could have made in old Nyasaland!

FURTHER SOUTH

In KwaZulu/Natal in South Africa translators settled on *uNkulunkulu* as the name of God. This is a Zulu word meaning 'the ancestral spirit of all mankind'. This is at least is a 'spirit' term (God is a Spirit, John 4:24) but what exactly do the Zulus think about when they use this name? For they have other relationships with spirit beings which are strange to the Caucasian and even the Semitic mind. For instance, Rider Haggard discovered that in former times the Zulu would not go into battle until the White Lady' (She-who-must-be-obeyed) appeared in the sky (Haggard 1887)! And the term 'ancestor' is problematic for it implies that humanity is equivalent to God's own substance. St Augustine would have none of that (Augustine 1961) for this would make humans ontologically equal with God. There are certainly some problems with the 'name of God'!

WHO IS ALLAH?

In these times when many Muslims are converting to Christianity, especially in Indonesia, it is pertinent to ask whether the Judeo-Christian God is equivalent to the Muslim *Allah*, for the Prophet was quick to claim a place in the line from the Prophets of Israel and Jesus the Messiah. Should converts be encouraged to go on using the name Allah? Or should they find an ancient name for God in their tribal language or use the Western terminology?

The Hebrew terms translated 'God' in the Masoretic text are *El*, *Elah* and *Elohim*. *El* came to the language of the sons of Eber (Genesis 10:23-24) from the Chaldeans in antiquity; it seems to refer to God's sovereignty and majesty and is most often translated in the English text as The Mighty One or The Most High God. For example, it is used in Genesis 14 with reference to Melchi-zedek (lit. the King of Righteousness), King of Salem and Priest of *the Most High God*. And in Genesis 17 the deity reveals Himself to Abraham by this name when he called on him to make Covenant,

The term *Elah* (or *Eloah*) usually refers to God as an object of worship. It is found in the Masoretic text mainly in the books of Daniel and Ezra at the time of the fall and restoration of Jerusalem; the seventy years 586 to-516 BC (see Potter, 1993). *Eloah* is also the term used in the book of Job.

But by far the most often used word for God in the Hebrew text is *Elohim*. This is problematic for those who follow *Allah* as it has plural connotations: e.g. 'Let us make man in our own image, after our own likeness...' (Genesis 1:26). If Islam is certain about anything it is that God is One! And if that is their key presupposition as to the nature of God, then there is a serious discrepancy between traditional Judaism and the dictates of the Prophet. And this, and other things, makes the Islamic claim that *Allah* in pre-Islamic times was the God of the Israeli Patriarchs and prophets, and the apostles and followers of Jesus, more than dubious because it is clear that while both Jews and Christians see God as One they also see him revealed as different personages – as difficult as this concept maybe to explain and comprehend. For God revealed Himself to Abraham, Samuel and the Apostles, as 'The Word of the Lord' (Heb. *Dabar*; Gk. *Logos* – see Genesis 15:1; I Sam. 3:21 and John 1:1-14) and to Moshe as *Yahweh* (The One Who Is - 'I am'). To Christians He is Father (Jesus's special term), The Word made Flesh and the Indwelling Spirit (the free gift of the Father to humanity). No traditional vernacular names here!

THE MOON GOD

Some commentators have argued from archeological diggings that the name *Allah* was the name given to the Moon God who was worshipped throughout the Middle East prior to the establishment of Islam¹. Moon God artifacts are commonly found in the region from the mountains of Turkey (Ararat) to the banks of the Nile. In fact, it has been established that Moon God worship was the most popular religion throughout ancient Mesopotamia amongst the Assyrians, Babylonians and Acadians. Artifacts from the Temple of the

Moon God at Ur excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley are displayed in the British Museum to this day. The Moon God was universally represented as a man sitting on a throne with a *crenscnt moon* carved on his chest.

Coming to Southern Arabia, excavations have revealed thousands of inscriptions on walls that suggest that 'South Arabia's stellar religion has always been dominated by the Moon God in various forms'². While the people of Mecca worshiped 360 gods at the Kabah (the white stone shrine in Mecca), the Moon God was the chief deity there right up until Muhammad's time. The widespread name of the Moon God was Sin but his title was *al-ilah* (lit. the deity, the chief or high god – see *Elah* above). This name was shortened to *Allah* in pre-Islamic times in Arabia.

So it seems that Muhammad was pragmatic amongst his home town polytheistic community by taking the local name of the chief deity as the name of God and proclaiming the Moon God (*Allah*) to be 'the greatest' god. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the name *Allah* is never defined in the Qur'an, presumably because the name *Allah* was already well known to the Arabian populace. But, like the Bible translators in Malawi, by taking the name of God from just one of the local pantheon, Muhammad may have created a problem for himself and posterity – what do Muslims think about when they cry '*Allah akbar!*' (God is the greater, or the greatest)?

It is clear why Muhammad's claim to Jews and Christians that *Allah* was their God fell on "deaf ears" for *Allah* is clearly connected to the crescent moon, and the Bible is full of admonitions to refrain from worshipping deities related to heavenly bodies (see Deuteronomy 4:19; Jeremiah 8:2 and Zephaniah 1:5, etc.). *Allah* was not a good name to use if you wanted to bring Judeo-Christianity under your covering. And it remains so to this time.

As an aside, the embracing of the Kabah by Muslims is an interesting conundrum. The ancient mythology concerning the Kabah is that the stone which it houses is none other than the stone which came down from heaven in Pre-Flood times 'through the kingdoms of the world'. According to Arabian tradition, it was rediscovered by Abraham and Ishmael around 1900BC. Gilmore (1885) claims that Muhammad preached *against* the worship of the stone and in doing so earned the wrath of the local priests. In fact, they planned to kill him and this was the cause of him having to flee by night from Mecca to Medina. If this is so, it is a strange contradiction that Muslims visit Mecca to kiss the stone in their hajj! Perhaps this

highlights another case of problems arising when we use an old name for a new proposition.

THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

The distinctive characteristic of Judaism and Christianity over other religions is that they prescribe the possibility of intimacy with Deity. In the case of Judaism this intimacy was the preserve of special people. Maybe Shem was the first, for Noah refers to 'Shem's God' in Genesis 9:26. With regard to the Hebrews, Abraham's encounters with God are foundational for both Israel and Christians. Moses was next (Exodus 3:1-6), then Joshua and Samuel and later the Israeli Prophets.

The unique aspect of the New Covenant that God has made with both Jews and Gentiles is that all believers may experience intimacy with the Lord (Jeremiah 31:33-34, Hebrews 8:10-12). That is to say, the special favour God granted to one nation and to certain personages in that nation under the Mosaic Covenant given at Sinai (which is now decaying and fading away – Hebrews 8:13) has been replaced by a better Covenant which is open to all who open themselves to the Lordship of the risen Jesus.

Jesus choice of a name for God was innovative even for the Jews. He called Him 'Father'. This did away with remoter, abstract traditional terms like 'Almighty God' and re-emphasized the possibility of relationship. This is critical to both our ontological and epistemological understandings of whom and what God is. What we 'know' from an intimate experience with another personage is vastly superior for an ongoing practical relationship than knowing about a person who is only knowable in an intellectual sense. We may all say that we 'know' the current Prime Minister of Australia but the reality is that have no intimacy with her and cannot claim that we have a working relationship with her. How can we relate and cooperate to a God that is remote and unavailable to our senses?

RECENT TIMES

The modern day Samoan Prophet, Miloalii Siilata, reports that a number of Pacific nations have made Covenant with the *God of Israel* in recent times (private communication). Papua New Guinea was the first (26th August 2007)³. Vanuatu was the second (14th may 2010) and the Solomon Islands the most recent (8th July 2012). While this may be something we would applaud, the name *God of Israel* is confrontational in maintaining some old debates. The term has obvious problems for Muslims, placing covenant keeping countries in the Israeli camp. This highlights the fact that there is a growing dichotomy in Christianity circles with

regard to whether Christians need to be grafted into Israel (Romans 11:24) or whether God in Jesus has made 'one new man' (Ephesians 2:14-18).

It is becoming clear that the worldwide Christian Intercessory Movement favours the first position, for the waving of Israeli flags is commonly practiced amongst them. And in some cases this appears to be just an initiation point for a wholesale return to Jewish practices under the Law of Moses; celebration of the Feasts by the Jewish calendar and celebration of Shabbat on the Sabbath (Saturday) in particular. How do we relate to this behavior when the injunction of the writer to the Hebrews is that the Old (Mosaic) Covenant is 'decaying, growing old and is ready to vanish away'? (Hebrews 8:13)? Or the writings of the Apostle Paul who says that the wall of partition is broken down, that Jew and Gentile are reconciled (at peace), and both have access to the Holy Spirit. By using the name 'God of Israel' are we not overlooking reconciliation, reaffirming the old divisions, bringing unnecessary affront (to Islam in particular) in an age when nations are sharply divided as to their opinions of the modern nation of Israel?

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul makes the point that 'as many as are under the works of the Law are under a curse... that no man is justified by the Law in the sight of God... (rather) the just shall live by faith'⁴? And further, that 'Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law... that the blessing of Abraham might come upon (us)', i.e. that we might receive the promised Spirit (Galatians 3:10-14). For by Paul's analysis, the promises were made to Abraham and his seed (singular), i.e. Jesus the Christ (Messiah). This view is confirmed in the first verse in the New Testament which affirms that Jesus Christ is '...the son of David and the son of Abraham' (Matthew 1:1). By this account, Jesus of Nazareth is the recipient of the Eternal Covenants made between the Lord and Abraham (Genesis 15:18, 17:6-8) and the Lord and David (II Samuel 7: 8-17). In the great ecclesiastical meeting in Jerusalem called to discuss the necessity that Gentile Christian converts should be circumcised, the apostle Peter was quite sure that it was unnecessary to 'put a yoke (the Law) on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear' (Acts 15:10). In the light of these reports, why would some argue that Christians are called to a neo-Judaism under the Old Covenant?

My view is that the Pacific nations would be better to have made covenant with 'the God of Abraham'. This is a name that is satisfactory to both Jews and Christians; and even Muslims might accept it if it was presented to them the right way. For the sons of Ishmael are also Abraham's descendants, reconciled to God by the blood of Jesus.

The nation of Israel continues to play out its part in history on the world stage. But to join with Israel is to take on her history of conflict past, present and future. To take on *reconciliation* is to take us forward to possibilities of peace and harmony amongst all men. Let's be careful to choose and use names which reflect that purpose.



NOTES

¹See www.biblebelievers.org.au/mmongod.htm

²ibid

³A brief report with pictures is available on request by email to the author

⁴We understand that 'faith' is not 'trust', rather an active verb describing action by human agents initiated by the resident Holy Spirit within a man.

⁵Despite this, it is of interest that the Lord told Jeroboam that 'David always kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart'!

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*Dr John Potter is the Executive Chairman and Director of International Programs for the Paraclete Institute. A South Australian by birth, Dr Potter has worked extensively in Southern and Central Africa for the past 36 years, He may be reached on paracamp@senet.com.au