

Immanuel – Immanu-Allah

The Name of the Creator Deity and the Name for God

By Martin Goldsmith

1 INTRODUCTION

Martin Goldsmith is a Jewish Christian, college lecturer in world religions at All Nations



Christian College (England) and a former missionary, Goldsmith is one of the most widely respected Christian writers on other faiths. From his early service with OMF in the 1960s, through 24 years lecturing at All Nations Christian College and into world-travelling retirement, Martin has been indefatigable in teaching people about the task of taking the gospel to the whole world. He has written a valuable book about how the Gospel of Matthew urges the Church to mission (Martin Goldsmith, *Matthew and Mission: The Gospel Through Jewish Eyes* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001). In this book he has some interesting things to say about the usage of the name of God in the Bible, and he relates that to the question of whether the name Allah is a proper name to use for the God of the Bible.

Goldsmith spoke on that same theme at an Arab World conference of Interserve on 28 December 2006. Here an edited transcript of that speech; we have maintained the conversational style of speaking of Goldsmith as much as possible.

2 THE NAMES OF GOD IN THE BIBLE

2.1 El as the name of the Creator Deity

In the Gospel narrative about the birth of Jesus, in Matthew 1: 21–25, Jesus is given the amazing

title Immanuel. This is the Hebrew word for ‘God with us’. It is a most remarkable title, as it contains the name for God: El. Where does the God-name El come from? Who was El?

When you look at the first 13 chapters of the book Genesis you will not find El there. The (plural) name Elohim is there, and its singular form Eloah, as well as YHWH. The name El is not used in the Bible until the 14th chapter of the book of Genesis and it is introduced by that rather interesting character Melchizedek, who of course was not a Hebrew. El was the high creator-deity who was worshipped by all the Middle Eastern people surrounding Israel, like the Canaanites and the Moabites, right through the Old Testament period in fact.

After Melchisedek introduced the name to Abraham, you find that El is accepted biblically. In the rest of the Old Testament you find that the word is used interchangeable with Elohim and Eloah. Israel’s calls the creator Elohim or El.

In order to fit El into the Biblical revelation there was a need to change the character of El from its heathen background; that was rather different from the Biblical revelation of Elohim. The word, the title, the name, was adopted but its content was adapted and corrected.

2.2 Elah as another name of the Creator Deity

Later, Israel went into exile to Babylon and there they found that the Babylonians worshipped a high creator deity called Elah. In the book of Ezra, for the first time, Israel also called

Elohim: Elah. Since then, the creator in the Old Testament YHWH is referred to as Eloah, Elohim, El, and Elah. Like previously with El, the character of Elah had to be changed to some extent, corrected, perfected, adapted in order to fit the previous Biblical revelation of YHWH.

2.3 Theos as the name of the Creator Deity

When you get into the time of the New Testament, the Greek title for a creator deity was Theos. If you have studied Greek, you will be used to translating theos as god – for any god of the Greek pantheon. But the writers of the New Testament went further; they began to use the term Theos for the Elohim of the Old Testament. So they used theos, with its Greek religious, animistic background, and adopted that term as a designator for YHWH. That is amazing, isn't it? The word 'Theos', with its multitude of complicated Greek ideas surrounding it, was adopted and adapted to designate JHWH. The word was also used for describing Jesus Christ, who is also called Theos in the New Testament.

2.4 Adopting the name of the Creator Deity but not the personalised gods

We should notice the other side of the coin: While El, Elah and Theos were adopted and adapted as designator for YHWH and Jesus Christ, the Baals and similar personalised deities who were worshiped as idols in shrines etc, were absolutely extinguished. They were forbidden totally and they were to be destroyed by the people of Israel. There was absolutely no question of calling Elohim Baal. It would be considered idolatry. And the same of course is true in the New Testament. Theos is adopted and adapted, but there is no question of calling God Venus or Mercury. That was absolutely forbidden as idolatry.

3 HOW EARLY CHRISTIANITY ADOPTED NEW NAMES

In the first centuries of Christianity in Europe, a similar process continued. For translating the liturgy and the Bible, the pagan creator deities was adopted and adapted, 'God', 'Gott', 'Dieu', 'Bog' etc. The pagan creator deity, 'God', was recognised by the pagan British long before the coming of Christianity. The word 'God' was totally pagan, but it was adopted and adapted; the lesser deities, the shrine idols, were forbidden in the Christian religion in Europe.

Strangely, some of those lower deities have lingered, for instance in the names of the days of the weeks and months. We still have the day of the sun which was worshipped, and the day of the moon, and the day of the god Tiu, and the day of the god Ouden or Wodan, and the day of the god Thor, and the day of the goddess Freya, and the day of the planet Saturn that was worshipped, and then we come back to the sun again. Somehow even Christians don't seem to mind having worship of the living Lord on the day of Thor or the day of Freya.

4 THE CREATOR DEITY IN ISLAM

4.1 Muhammad and the lower deities

In the context of mission to Islam, Muhammad has already done away with the lower deities for us. Hallelujah 😊 When he returned to Mecca and conquered it, a couple of years before his death, he removed the idols from the Ka'aba and all the shrines of the daughters of Allah that were worshipped there: Uzza, al-Manat, al-Arusa, and that rather mysterious figure of al-Lat that may have been a daughter of Allah or a consort of Allah. (You will notice why Muhammad was not very keen on the idea of Jesus as the Son of God; he got rid of the

daughters of God, so now to believe that God had son was a retrograde step in his worldview.)

4.2 Is Allah the same as El?

Do we accept Allah as Elohim? Allah is a Semitic name for the Creator, very closely related of course etymologically with Eloah, Elohim, El and Elah. But, as with El and Elah. Theos, God, Gott, Deui and Bog, the character, the understanding of the nature of Allah will have to be adapted: the way He works, the way He relates or doesn't relate to people. To begin to say that Allah is a demonic figure, as some Christian writers have done, is biblically ridiculous. It is like going to an English person, or American or Australian, and saying God is a demon. God is God is God. God can't be anything but God. Allah is Allah. What else can Allah be?

4.3 Inadequate understandings, yet the same person

If I were to ask you to write down your impressions of me, what sort of person I am, some of you, I would hope, might write down some nice things. Some of you would probably write down some nasty things. But you would give a sort of description of your impressions of this person, of me, even if your descriptions are wrong or different from reality. If you were to go to Elizabeth, my wife, and say: 'I think Martin is like this', she would probably say to you 'well actually I know him a little bit better. Actually he is not quite as ... as you think. And actually there is another side to his character that you have not noticed'. And she might just correct you a bit.

Also, if I were to get Elizabeth to write down on a piece of paper my character, what sort of person I am, it would probably be a bit different from the way I see myself. Even though we

have been married for over 40 years and she knows me a little bit now and is very gracious in that, even so probably my own impression of me would be a little bit different from her impression of me.

If you were to go to God and God could write down for you who this Goldsmith guy is, God's impression of me might be rather different from my impression of me, or from Elizabeth's impression of me or let alone your impression of me. Nevertheless all of them are me, maybe inadequately understood. Of course I could have done the same thing for George Bush or anybody else and all of you could write you're your impression of these political characters, but their husbands and wives might actually not agree with us.

The understanding of Allah, or of God, may be inadequate, may be wrong. Indeed it will be inadequate and wrong for all of us because we all see through a glass darkly, even though we may be redeemed and have the Scriptures before us, the very revelation of the Word of God, and even though we may be filled with the Holy Spirit who leads us gradually step by step into all the truth, nevertheless there are a few steps to go.

Let give a personal example. My father died just before I was born. My mother used to tell me what a brilliant dad I had. He was wonderful, the best father I ever had. I, as a boy, always had a photo of my father by my bed. At night as a little boy, even into my teens, I used to tell my father, or his photo actually, what a wonderful father I had and how I loved him and so on. Then I would also tell him some of the things that were on my heart and in my mind. I would share with him whether I had scored a goal that day or whether I had got a gold star for my mathematics, all the important things of life for a little boy. I could share those things with

my father because actually it was only a photo and my father never answered back because actually he wasn't there. And I grew up with that. Then I became a Christian, and I carried on the same practice with my heavenly Father. I told Him what a great Father He was and what a lovely person He is. We call that worship or praise, the same activity. And I used to share with Him slightly more adult things perhaps, probably not whether I scored a goal or get anymore gold stars. We call this prayer, but my heavenly Father never answered back; He was distant. Now Jesus, He would speak to me and the Holy Spirit could speak to me and be close. But the Father was distant, removed, not there, not revealing Himself or His will at all. Is that Biblical? I don't think so. It was long after I was a missionary, in fact it was during my time as a teacher at All Nations Christian College, that I came to see that my childhood background partially determined my understanding of the nature of God. There was an inadequacy in my understanding of the nature of God, due to my own background. That will probably be true for you as well.

Maybe because of your personal character, psychological makeup, maybe because of your denominational background or your particular form of spirituality, your view of God has some distortions. One way or another probably your picture of God is inadequate, I am quite sure of that. It would be a fascinating activity to write down your understandings of God, your picture of the character of God, the nature of God, the way God works. We'd get a most interesting display of distorted views, with truth but not the whole truth, and with some error, truth and error going together.

5 IMMANUEL AND MISSION

As human beings, redeemed or unredeemed, we are created in the image and likeness of God. God looks on humanity, and says that people are very good. Now I realise the word good in English has become a rather weak word. Good in Hebrew is a strong word because it describes the fundamental, essential nature of God Himself. God is good. So, when God looks on humanity, He says it is very good. Then of course in Genesis 3 that nature of humanity is corrupted at every point by sin and truth is mixed with error and goodness is mixed with sin. Likewise, our understanding of God is mixed, truth with untruth, goodness and sin going together. Now just in case you're worried by that sort of statement, let me remind you that John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, wrote of the image of God as a remnant in humanity, and yet corrupted in us at every point. Or, you could turn that around, human nature is filled with sin but that is mitigated, lessened, lightened at every point by the image of God remaining in us. This high Creator deity, Immanuel, is with us.

I find it amazing that El is with us. You would have expected it to be YHWH with us, Immanu-YHWH, the covenant-name for the Creator with us. And of course in John's Gospel He is YHWH with us, because he is the great I Am, the great YHWH. I am who I am. But He is not only YHWH with us, Immanu-YHWH, He is also the high Creator deity. This deity was unknown and unknowable in unbiblical religion; that is why in the religion of the Moabites, and the Canaanites, and the Babylonians and the Greeks, worship was usually not directed to the high Creator but

actually to the lower deities that were knowable and approachable. The high Creator was considered as unknowable.

How does that relate to us in our mission? The glory of our message in the Arab World is Jesus. You shall call his name Yeshua, 'Isa, Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins. He is Immanuel now. He is the high creator deity of people around here, but not distant and unknowable, but with us. You want to know Allah? You want to relate to Allah? Well, wonderfully, Allah has taken the initiative and He has come right down to us in the form of Jesus the Messiah, living with us, comforting us, strengthening us, purifying us, doing His work with us and in us, Immanu-El, the Creator deity of the people people around us, Immanu-Allah.

6 CONCLUSION

I remember in our All Nations course on Islam inviting a Muslim leader to come and do some lectures and answer questions and discuss with our students. I can't remember the question, and I can't remember most of his answer but I remember one thing he said. 'He said I know Christianity very well. I have read the New Testament again and again. I have lots of Christian friends and I am always discussing

with my Christian friends about Islam and Christianity. I know Christianity quite well.' He then added: 'There is one thing my Christian friends keep saying to me and I just can't understand. I don't know what they are talking about and I have asked again and again and I never get a satisfactory answer.' We were dying to know what it was. And then he said:

They keep saying to me that they know God personally and that's impossible. Allah is above, He is the other, the distant, the remote, He is the glorious, the high God. I worship God. I serve God. I obey God. I keep God's commands. I pray to God. I know that God hears and responds to my prayers. I know that God in his providential care looks after me and my family and my people and humanity in general because He is in command of everything that happens in the world. I know that. But to have an intimate relationship with Allah is impossible for a mere human being. God is above.

Gloriously, Allah has actually come to us in the wonderful glorious reality of Jesus the Messiah. El with us, beautifully translated in English as God. The unknown pagan deity of the pagan British tribes, that God is now with us in the fullness of that wonderful, knowable, relatable, beautiful God. God with us. He is worth following, because this Jesus, He is El. He is Allah with us.