

The Word “MUSLIM”: A Christian Term?

We have often wondered how the term *Muslim*, which means *subjected*, could possibly come from a root such as *SALAM* (Hebrew: *Shalom*), which means *peace*. The answer lies in a tradition in which the Gospel of Matthew in Aramaic plays a central role.

The fact that the Gospel of Saint Matthew proved a major reference for the Koranic text to draw from has too often eluded the attention of those who took interest in it. This being said, a few scholars have had the right hunch from the simple fact that this Gospel – in Aramaic – provided its material to that of the “Nazarenes” (as reported in several accounts from Antiquity), also known as the *injl* (literally, the *gospel*, in the singular form), which the Koranic text refers back to ¹.

The question raised here regards the designation “*Muslim*” [root *slm*, like in the word *salam* + prefix *mu-*]. Since the beginning of *Islam*, it has literally meant “*he who is submitted*” just like the word *islam* means “*submission*” – certainly not “*peace*” as we hear claimed here and there in deceiving articles directed to a misguided European readership. Let us recall that *Muslims* did not refer to themselves as “*Muslims*” before the end of the 7th century, early 8th century. Prior to that time, they referred to themselves as **Mu-hajirun**, literally: “**Those who made the Hijra**, or *Hegira* (i.e. the travel to Medina).”

The difficulty ² raised by a number of scholars concerns the origin of such a signification as “*submission*.” No equivalent form of this root with this signification is to be found in Hebrew. Moreover, it is in itself surprising: how could the meaning of *salam* (basic form) – in Hebrew: *šalom*, *peace*, *wholeness*, *well-being* – slide to *islam* (4th Arabic form), meaning *to submit* (to slavishly yield to the power of) *to God*? Considering the matter from a grammatically logic point of view, the expected meaning can hardly fail to semantically agree with the following: *preserving in good shape, as an intact whole*.

The case for a bookish explanation was made following with the view of several scholars, most notably Patricia CRONE, Michael COOK, and Kurt HRUBY. It relied upon two earlier (Aramaic) texts in which the root *slm* is found to be used with the following meaning: *to commit or hand [oneself] over [to God]*, which is to say, *to submit [oneself]* ³. Fair enough. But, what **living** connection can there be made between these two texts and the use of this meaning in the Koran? The Arabs did not know how to read (except for monks and nuns) and their culture was essentially *oral*, untouched by the methods and ways of literate milieus.

¹ The Koranic text abundantly and implicitly refers to the Gospel of Matthew (and to no other!), see *Le Messie et son prophète*, in particular in tome II – *The Index des auteurs et ouvrages antiques ou patristiques* (page 549) gives some sense as to the number and frequency of the references. A systematic study of the whole Koranic text would probably double the number.

² See tome II, p. 102 to 104.

³ Respectively in *Memar Marqah*, a Samaritan text, and the *Acts of Saint Thomas*, produced in the (Chaldean) Church of the Eastern. We read in the latter that some young people “were convinced by Our Lord and put their faith in him [= they submitted themselves to him, root *slm*],” see p. 103.

It is therefore in the direction of a popular use that it seems pertinent to turn. In other words, necessarily to the communal and colloquial milieu in which the root *slm* was actually used to take on the unexpected meaning of *to submit to God* – with the result that such a meaning be so understood when the propaganda accounted for in the primitive Koranic folios began. Unmistakably, if one goes on to assume that such a milieu was that of the Meccan community, it becomes increasingly difficult to answer the question, given the fact that Koranic Arabic was not the language they spoke.

It is through Aramaic (the cultural setting of which places us over a thousand kilometers away from Mecca), wherein all the forms of the root *slm* turn out to match up with occurrences in the Koran, that the question finds its answer. For instance, the 3rd form, also known in Hebrew and expressing the idea of *being whole* or *perfect* (see in sura 2:71: *to be without blemish* in reference to *the cow*, which gives its title to the sura). There remains the 4th form.

The Aramaic Gospel of Matthew (of which Syriacs and Chaldeans possess an accurate text originating from the Aramaic Peshitta written in the original language of the New Testament) is more enlightening than a grammar. The root *slm* appears under a variety of forms therein (58 times in total), taking on multiple meanings, beginning with the most evident of all, *peace*:

“And when you enter into a house, greet the household. And if the household is worthy, let your *peace* (*šlama*) come upon it. But if the household is not worthy, let your *peace* return to you.” (Mt 10:12-13)

The notion of *perfection* or *completion* follows from it, as in:

“Again you have heard that it was said to those before you: ‘You shall not swear falsely, but you shall *bring to completion* (*tšalem*) your oaths to the Lord.’” (Mt 5:33) –[parall.]– And so it was, when Jesus had *completed* (*šalem*) these sayings, that the crowds were astonished at His teaching ⁴ (Mt 7:28) –[parall.]– Jesus answered and said to them: Elijah is coming first to *bring to completion* all things.” (Mt 17:11)

Or again that of *transmitted perfection*:

“Why do your disciples transgress the *tradition* (*mašmanouta*) of the elders and do not wash their hands when they eat bread?” (Mt 15:2)

Next, a semantic variation appears with the sense of *delivering*. What is *perfect*, *completed*, is so made to be *transmitted* (this meaning of *handing down* or *passing over to*, is unknown in Hebrew ⁵):

“And it came to pass that when Jesus had *completed* (*meštlem* or *delivered* in the sense of *handed down*) all these sayings, He said to His disciples: ‘You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man is to be *delivered up* to be crucified.’ (Mt 26:1-2) [...] And he [Judas] said to them: ‘What are you willing to give me if I *deliver* Him to you?’ And they promised him thirty (pieces) of silver. And from that time, he sought opportunity to *deliver* Him. (Mt 26:15-16) [...] Judas the « *deliverer* » (*mašmana*) answered and said: ‘Rabbi, is

⁴ See Mgr. Alichoran, *L'évangile en araméen. Traduction de la Peshitta et commentaire* (Abbaye de Bellefontaine: COLL. Spiritualité Orientale n° 80, 2002) p. 130.197.

⁵ That is one of the key objections against the idea of a Hebrew original of the Gospels rather than Aramaic. Here J.-M. van Cangh and A. Toumpsin, who both posit the hypothesis of an original Hebrew version of the Gospels to justify their alleged retroversion of Marc, are obliged to assume an Aramaic Semitism that would have passed in Hebrew. The whole enterprise amounts to too many suppositions – see *L'évangile de Marc. Un original hébreu ?* (Bruxelles: Safran Editions, 2005).

it I? Jesus said to him: "You have said so." (Mt 26:25)

"Then they will *deliver* (= *submit*) you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for my Name's sake. And then many will be offended, and they will hate one another, and will *deliver* each other up." (Mt 24:9-10)

We thus end up with the equivalent of the 4th Arabic form against which emerges the religious connotation of *to commit* or *hand oneself over* (or again *to submit*) **to God**, which Jesus uses in reference to Himself:

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man **is handing Himself over to** the chief priest and to the scribes. And they will condemn Him to death, and *deliver* (*hand over*) Him up to the Gentiles." (Mt 20:18-19a)

This form has systematically been rendered in Greek by use of the verb *paradidomi*. The same connotation of *to commit* or *hand oneself over to*, is found occurring in that section of the *First Epistle of Peter* which precisely refers to the Passion of Jesus:

"He committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but **committed** Himself (**entrusted** or again **handed** Himself **over**) to the righteous Judge." (1P 2:22-23)

It must be emphasized, against the usual meaning associated with the term submission ⁶, that *to commit oneself to God* does not stand for *bringing oneself down before God* (= *subordinating oneself to an All-Powerful Tyrant*). This negative meaning clearly is a distortion Judeo-Nazarenes first introduced, and which the Koran inherited.

In a way, the Gospel of Matthew in Aramaic is the living semantic source of the expression « *submitted to God*, » at least before it took on the connotation of subservient abasement of man before his Creator. By the time the Judeo-Nazarenes began to indoctrinate them, it still resounded with the noble sense of « he who trusts in God, » « who commits himself to Him » to the ears of Arabic Christians. It is the concealment and distortion of the real history of the origins of Islam which have created a lot of confusion, in particular regarding the origin of the meaning of the word *muslim* – not only confusion, but also a good deal of absurdity. Consider, for example, the passage we find in a verse of the Koran (5:116), and which is read in such a way as to place Mary in the Trinity, while it is well-known that what is behind points to a common way, among Aramaic people to this day, of referring to the Holy Spirit as « Mother of Jesus. » Once again, we see that the Koran can only be properly understood in an Aramaic cultural milieu, as Christof Luxenberg has shown, following in the footsteps of other conclusive research. Scholars knowledgeable in Syriac or Aramaic suspect it and see it for themselves as soon as they start reading the Koran in Arabic. However, the subject is still very taboo.

Translated by Sébastien Renault

⁶ It is another verb that expresses the meaning of *submission-subordination*, and which corresponds to the Greek *upotasso* precisely found in 1P 2:13.18 and 3:1, and elsewhere as well.