

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

WHAT IS A MUSLIM NAME? - A MISNOMER

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The word 'Muslim' in this article is used as it is generally understood. For a better understanding of the term 'Muslim', please see related article in the section at the end.

There is no such concept as a Muslim name in Islam. This is a misnomer. There are names with inherently good meanings and conversely, those that are not so good. A 'name' by itself has neither volition nor capacity to submit. 'Muslim' is simply a condition pertaining to a believer's soul regardless of what name they are known by.

What Muslims generally keep are 'Arabic' names, often associated with revered personalities from the past. To keep such names of past personalities is an ancient tradition which can also be attested from previous scriptures. However, it is to be appreciated that this remains a tradition and not a requirement.

It is also incorrect to synonymise Arabs with Muslims. There are many Arabs that are not Muslims.

What is often not appreciated is the fact that not all popular Arab names have necessary 'soft' or particularly pleasant meanings.

ABBAS - AN EXAMPLE

As an example, a popular Arabic name such as Abbas usually kept because it refers to the uncle of the Prophet has quite an aggressive rendering. Popular understanding refers to it as a 'lion', others only slightly better, refer to it as a 'description of a lion'. Neither of these descriptions are particularly helpful in capturing the essence of the word 'Abbas' and its true rendering.

A derivative of the root of the word Abbas (abasa) can be found in the Quran for example, when dealing with an expression that the Prophet made (80:1) when a blind man approached him (80:2). For his actions and given the situation, the Prophet received strong words of advice from God (80:1-11).

080:001-2

"He frowned (Arabic: abasa) and turned away. Because there came to him the blind man"

Other examples in the Quran:

076.010

"Indeed! we fear from our Lord a day harsh / stern (Arabic: abusan) and of fate"

074.022

"Then he frowned (Arabic: abasa) and he scowled"

The word's etymology can also be captured from classical texts such as good classical lexicons. It also becomes apparent from the discussions contained within them that it is not the courageousness of a lion that is at the heart of the name 'Abbas' but the sternness that a lion presents and the somewhat aggressive expression that it is usually associated with.

عَبَسَ

1. عَبَسَ, (Ş, L, Mşb,) or عَبَسَ وَجْهَهُ, (A, O, K, TA,) or وَجْهَهُ, (Bd in lxxvi. 10,) aor. عَبَسَ, inf. n. عَبُوسٌ [app. properly used only when the verb is intrans.] (Ş, A, O, Mşb, K) and عَبَسَ [app. only when the verb is trans.]; (A, O, K;) and عَبَسَ, (L, K, TA,) inf. n. تَعْبِيسٌ; (TA;) He frowned; [looked sternly, austerely, or morosely;] or contracted his face: (Mşb:) or he contracted the part between his eyes: (L, TA:) or he grinned, or displayed his teeth, frowning, or contracting his face, or looking sternly, austerely,

عَابِسٌ [and عَبَسَ, mentioned above,] A man frowning, or contracting his face: (Mṣb:) [*grim-faced; or looking sternly, austere, or morosely:*] or contracting the part between his eyes; &c.: (TA:) and عَبَّاسٌ one who does so much [or habitually; stern, austere, or morose, in look or countenance; as also عَبُوسٌ and مُعَبِّسٌ]: (Mṣb:) or عَبَّاسٌ and مُعَبِّسٌ signify a man having a hateful face: and عَبَّاسِيٌّ, hateful to encounter or meet; stern, austere, or morose, in countenance. (TA.) — [Hence,] العَابِسُ signifies The lion (O, K;) as also العَبُوسُ, and العَبَّاسُ, (IAḥ, O, K,) and العَنْبَسُ, (Ṣ, and mentioned in the K in art. عَنْبَسَ, q. v.,) [accord. to some,] of the measure فَنَعَلَ, (Ṣ,) and العُنَابِسُ: (K in art. عَنْبَسَ;) or the lion from whom other lions flee. (TA.) — See also عَبُوسٌ.

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [2]

Furthermore, many Muslims keep names of Prophets from the Quran without realising that these are not necessarily true names of the Prophet's at the time when these names were given. Most readers of the Quran often miss the point that the names given by the Quran are the names of the Prophet's as they were understood at the time of revelation of the Quran to the Arabs in 7th century Arabia.

This does not imply that these were the names originally kept. The Quran merely speaks in the language of its primary audience and captures names as understood by them.

For example, Prophet 'Isa' ^(pbuh) would most likely have been known as 'Yeshua' (Hebrew) / 'Jeshua' (Aramaic) to the Jews of the first century Palestine and his mother Mary.

Mary would not have known her son as 'Isa' which is an Arabic rendering developed later. The Quran merely communicates in the language of its audience. (See related article (1) below)

Of course, a lot of the phonetic essence of the names would have been retained by the Arab Jews and Christians in Arabic such as the name 'Maryam' but this does not mean they would have always been identical. Similarities in Semitic languages would have also kept phonetic resonance.

Jesus

"late 12c. (O.E. simply used *hælend* "savior"), from Gk. *Iesous*, which is an attempt to render into Greek the Aramaic proper name *Jeshua* (Heb. *Yeshua*) "Jah is salvation," a common Jewish personal name, the later form of Heb. *Yehoshua* (see *Joshua*)..." [3]

Similarly, Prophet 'Musa'^(pbuh) (as known in Arabic) would have most likely been known as 'Moshe' (Moses) to Pharaoh and his family. This would probably have been a name kept by the family of the Pharaoh of Egypt in whose household Moses was raised. Rabbi Eliezer Danzinger notes the following:

"According to the *Chizkuni*, (Note 1) it was actually Moses' biological mother, Jochebed, who gave Moses (משה) his name. Jochebed later told Pharaoh's daughter, Bithiah, the child's Hebrew name in Hebrew, and so Bithiah also called him by this name, remarking that this name was indeed appropriate, since she had drawn (Note 2) him out of the water.

The *Ibn Ezra* (Note 3) says that Bithiah gave Moses the Egyptian name *Munius*, which the Torah translates into Hebrew as *Moshe* (Moses). Alternatively, the *Ibn Ezra* suggests the possibility that Bithiah actually had learnt to speak Hebrew, and it was she who gave Moses his Hebrew name. This latter explanation is also given by other commentators" [4]

There are only two names captured by the Quran contemporaneous to the revelation given to the Prophet which are 'Muhammad' (Name of the Prophet himself - four times: 3:144, 33:40, 47:2, 48:29) and Zaid (33:37), his adopted son. There is also a possible allusion of another name, 'Abu Lahab' (111:1) but it is arguable whether this is a reference to a proper name or a well known alias describing the heated temperament of the individual in question. (Father of flame).

Of course, there are exquisite names with wholesome inherent meanings which are kept from the Quran, such as the name of the Prophet himself (Muhammad),^(pbuh) *Tasneem* (a fountain of heaven 83:27-28), *Kauthar* (abundance / or sometimes interpreted as a river in Paradise - 108:1), *Khalid* (forever, endless), and *Sidra* (Lote tree at the Heavenly boundary - 53:14-16) etc.

However, it is also to be appreciated that not all Arabic names have inherently pleasant meanings. Furthermore, it is a point worth noting, that many names of early Arab Muslims that one may be familiar with were given to them at birth when they were Pagans.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A name should represent a pleasant meaning, whether it is an Arabic name or otherwise. There is also no requirement to keep an Arabic name other than preference.

It is to be noted that even God Himself asks His servants to only call Him by beautiful names.

017:110

“Say: "Call upon Allah, or call upon Rahman: by whatever name ye call upon Him, (it is well): for to Him belong the most beautiful names. Neither speak thy Prayer aloud, nor speak it in a low tone, but seek a middle course between.””

007.180

“The most beautiful names belong to God: so call on him by them; but shun such men as use profanity in his names: for what they do, they will soon be requited”

Furthermore, there is simply no such concept as a 'Muslim name' in the Quran. A 'Muslim' is a condition pertaining to believer's soul regardless of what name an individual is known by.

Related Articles:

- (1) [Why was the Quran revealed in Arabic?](#)
- (2) [Allah is Not an Exclusive Name for God](#)
- (3) [Mary - Sister of Aaron ^{\(pbuh\)}](#)
- (4) [Muslim and Mu'min \(Believer\) - The Difference](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 5, Page 1939

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] Ibid.

[3] ETYMOLOGY DICTIONARY [online], Available at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Jesus> [Accessed 17th April 2011]

[4] DANZINGER. E. [online], [chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org), Available at http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/627663/jewish/What-was-Moses-real-name.htm [Accessed 6th September 2011].

Footnotes used: (Note 1) His commentary on Exodus 2:10, "She called his name Moses, as she said 'For I drew him from the water.' (Note 2) See Rashi on Exodus 2:10, s.v. "mi'shi'ti'hu" ["I drew him"]. (Note 3) Exodus, *ibid.*, *ad loc.*

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