

Lecture 9: The Word 'Ali in the Bible

The word cali is used 226 times in the Hebrew scriptures. The following study examines all of these occurrences at least briefly. The Massoretic text of the Hebrew Bible is the source, but I have ignored the Massoretic pointing of the word cali, rather examining each context for clues to which pointing and consequently which meaning of the word is to be preferred.

Most of the time the word cali is a preposition, either with or without the first person singular pronominal suffix. The first occurrence with the pronominal suffix is in Genesis 20:9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done.

The following texts, the great preponderance of passages including the word cali, seem to have the same meaning, that is, "upon me" or something similar. Genesis 27:12; 13; 30:28; 33:13; 34:12; 34:30; 42:36; 48:7; 50:20, Numbers 11:11; 14:35; 22:30; Judges 7:2; 19:20; 20:5; 1 Samuel 17:35; 21:15; 22:8,13; 23:21; 2 Samuel 1:9; 3:8; 14:9; 15:33; 19:38; 1 Kings 2:4; 14:2; 22:8,18; 2 Kings 16:7; 18:14; 1 Chronicles 22:8; 2 Chronicles 18:7; 18:17; 36:23; Ezra 1:2; 7:28; Nehemiah 2:8; 2:18; 6:12; 13:22; Esther 4:16; Job 7:12; 7:20; 9:11; 10:1; 13:13,26; 16:9,10,13,14,15; 19:5,6; 19:11; 19:12; 21:27; 29:13; 30:1,12,15,16; 31:38; 33:10; Psalm 3:1(2); 3:6(7); 13:2(3); 13:6(7); 16:6; 17:9; 22:13; 27:2,3; 31:13; 32:4,5; 35:15; 35:21; 35:16,26; 38:2(3); 38:16(17); 40:7,12; 41:7; 41:9(10); 41:11; 42:4(5); 42:5(6); 42:7(8); 42:11(12); 43:5; 54:3(5); 55:3(4); 55:4(5); 55:12(13); 56:5(6); 59:3(4); 60:8; 69:9(10); 69:15(16); 86:14; 88:7(8); 88:16(17); 88:17(18); 92:11(12); 109:2; 109:5; 116:12; 119:69; 139:5; 142:7(8); 143:4; Proverbs 7:14; Ecclesiastes 2:17; Song of Solomon 2:4; Isaiah 1:14; 61:1; Jeremiah 8:18; 11:19; 12:8,11; 15:16; 18:23; 49:11; Lamentations 1:15; 3:5,20,61,62; Ezekiel 3:22; 8:1; 11:5; 35:13; 37:1; 40:1; Daniel 4:34; 4:36; 7:28; 10:8; 10:16; Hosea 7:13; Hosea 11:8; Joel 3(4):4; Jonah 2:3(4); 2:7(8); and Malachi 3:13.

The first occurrence of the word as a preposition without suffix is in Genesis 49:17, which is a poetic passage. Indeed, the form is typical of poetic style. Genesis 49:17 Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward.

Similarly the word appears to be used as a simple preposition without suffix in Genesis 49:22;

Deuteronomy 32:2; Job 6:5; 8:9; 9:26; 15:27; 18:10; 20:4; 29:3,4; 30:4; 33:15; 36:28; 38:24; 41:30; Psalm 49:11; 50:5,16; 92:3(4); 94:20; 108:9(10); 131:2; 142:3(4); Proverbs 8:2; 30:19; Isaiah 18:4; Lamentations 4:5; and Micah 5:(6)7.

In 1 Samuel 1–4 is found the story of the house of Eli. The name is also mentioned in 1 Samuel 14:3; 1 Kings 2:27; This proper name of the high priest and judge of Israel before Samuel is written cAli. The pointing with the long e merely reflects the more complex vowel system of Hebrew as compared to Arabic.

Arabic cognates with a appear in Hebrew with either a or e, and often preferably e. The segholate character of Hebrew thus clouds the fact that the name is precisely the same as the Arabic cAli. There are some striking parallels as well as direct contrasts between the Biblical Eli and Imam cAli (as). The first cAli had two unrighteous sons who led the people into disaster. The second one had two sons who became righteous leaders.

There is a parallel between the two figures from a historical perspective as well. The Samaritans claim that Eli caused the rift between Samaritans and Jews by his false claim to the priesthood. The division between Shi'ite and Sunnite Islam surrounds the claims of the figure of Imam cAli (as).

The first clear passage in which the word must be translated as the imperative singular of the verb “to go up” is in 1 Samuel 25:35 So David received of her hand that which she had brought him, and said unto her, Go up in peace to thine house; see, I have hearkened to thy voice, and have accepted thy person. Similarly the word occurs in Isaiah 21:2; 40:9; Jeremiah 22:20; and 46:11.

The word appears with the meaning of “leaves of” in Nehemiah 8:15 And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written.

The first text that requires reevaluation is Exodus 8:(5)9.

And Moses said unto Pharaoh, Glory over me: when shall I intreat for thee, and for thy servants, and for thy people, to destroy the frogs from thee and thy houses, that they may remain in the river only?

It is not likely that anyone would pretend that the phrase “glory over me” makes any sense at all. The assumption of the translator is that the word here is the preposition with the pronominal suffix, which is of course the dominant usage of the word in the Torah, especially in the prose passages.

There seems to be no questioning of the preposition and suffix themselves, while the hesitancy about how to understand the verb placed with the preposition and suffix is of longstanding debate, going back to the Septuagint (LXX) underlying the Vulgata expression *constitue mihi*, appoint me (a time).

Reference to the Masoretic text has led most translators to reject the Septuagint and Vulgata alternative

for something presumably based on the Hebrew text, whether or not it makes sense.

Those translators requiring meaning in their translation have tended to read an unwarranted expression into the Hebrew in the sense of “do me the honor to...” an interpretation that goes back at least to Luther. Wavering between sense and nonsense is illustrated by the Webster original, which was “Glory over me” and the revised Webster which is “Command me,” apparently accepting the LXX over the Masoretic text. In sum, three alternatives are to be found in the more commonly known translations.

The first follows the LXX–Vulgata tradition. The second tries to make sense of the Hebrew Massoretic text by attributing unattested meanings to the preceding verb. The third translates the Massoretic verb correctly, producing nonsense in the word *cali* by insisting that it is a preposition with suffix.

An alternative is to accept the Massoretic verb as it stands and attribute a non–prepositional meaning to the word *cliy*. The choices are one of the verb forms “to rise,” or one of the proper or common noun meanings. The position requires the latter, rather than the imperative verb. The choices are thus basically “glorify my leaf,” “glorify a pestle or pistil” or “glorify *cAli*.” The common nouns do not make sense, and the second meaning is not even attested in Scriptural Hebrew.

An Arab will immediately suggest a reference to the Deity, as “exalted.” This word, however, in the Hebrew text, would consist in an Arabicism. We are thus left with the enigmatic “glorify *cAli*,” in reference to an unknown named figure, or reference to God under the term, something that appears to be more or less without precedent in Biblical Hebrew.

The reflexive sense of the verb could be thought to imply the necessity of a preposition before the object. However, the lack of the preposition is almost the rule in poetic passages, and is not lacking in the Torah as well. Thus these two alternatives are otherwise perfectly feasible.

The rest of the texts must be examined in the light to two questions. The first is whether or not the word should be translated as one of the common alternatives noted above (as a preposition, a preposition with the suffix, the verb imperative, or as “leaves of” or “pestle.”). Once these meanings are eliminated, we are left with the alternatives of Exodus 8:(5)9. The second task is to determine whether the text refers to Imam Ali (as) or some other figure.

There is nothing in Exodus 8:(5)9 to indicate whether a human or divine figure is meant. The Muslim reader will immediately doubt whether the word is an epithet of God, since it is generally used so in the holy Qur’an.

The translators of the Bible, however, have generally neglected that possibility, probably from hesitance to impose an Arabicism on the Biblical Hebrew text rather than bias. We can only hope to answer the question by an examination of all of the texts. Failing that, recourse to extra–biblical sources will be necessary

Such texts as Numbers 11:13 and 14:27 could conceivably be translated cAli as well as a form of interjection, something on the order of “ya Ali!” Numbers 11:13 Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people? for they weep unto me, saying, Give us flesh, that we may eat.

Numbers 14:27 How long (shall I bear with) this evil congregation, which murmur against me? I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel, which they murmur against me. The second occurrence, however, in Numbers 14:27 can only be translated as in the Authorized Version. Even without this evidence, however, the structure of the sentences makes the authorized translation preferable.

The structure of Numbers 14:29 is neutral, and would actually as such allow the translation with cAli as easily as “against me.” The witness of verse 27, however, speaks against cAli as the better alternative. Numbers 14:29 Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me.

Numbers 21:17 is the second text that translators have been willing to leave in a form void of meaning, in the figure of the flying well. It is doubly troublesome in lacking an explanatory context.

Numbers 21:17 Then Israel sang this song, Spring up, O well; sing ye unto it. The authorized translator writes words more appropriate to Alice in Wonderland than to scriptural translation. Most others do little better. Douay, Darby, The Jewish Publication Society Bible, The Twenty-first Century King James, Green’s Literal Translation, The Modern King James Version, The New King James Version, la Bible nouvelle edition de Geneve, the Webster and most other are satisfied with this interpretation.

The Bible in Basic English tries to avoid the problem of the flying well by replacing it with the obedient well that comes when called: Then Israel gave voice to this song: Come up, O water-spring, let us make a song to it.

Other translators have recognized the problem and tried to make sense of it by referring to the springing up of the water from a fountain. Among these are Finnish translation of 1938, the Swedish translation of 1917, and la nuova Diodati 1991. These are roughly “surge out, o well!” English translators are willing to depend on the ambiguity of the word “spring” in English.

A few translators assume a preposition between the verb and the noun, thus making the noun the direction of movement rather than the vocative. This relieves us of the rather forced speech to a well. Among these are the redivierte Schlachter Bibel 1951 Da sang Israel dieses Lied: «Kommt zum Brunnen! Singt von ihm! It is rare to find help from the LXX in this dilemma, but perhaps Luther’s original is such an example Da sang Israel dieses Lied, und sangen umeinander über dem Brunnen.

The translators in the revision of Luther have succumbed to the general fascination with nonsense. Even the Vulgata is surprisingly interpretive with the LXX with tunc cecinit Israhel carmen istud ascendat puteus concinebant.

Young makes a novel contribution by rejecting the Masoretic pointing of the word, thus changing it from an imperative to the preposition. (Young's literal translation.

Then singeth Israel this song, concerning the well--they have answered to it. In so doing, Young is the only translator to write a grammatically sensible translation. However, by doing so, he suppresses the song itself, thus raising the issue of what "this" can possibly refer to. In sum, almost every possible configuration has been tried. The implication is that no translator actually knows what the verse means.

There is a construction that is completely normal and understandable in Hebrew, whereby cAli is the subject and the well the predicate: cAli is a well. It is not clear, however, to whom this proper name refers.

It is possible, but not necessary, to translate cAli as a proper name in Numbers 24:6.

The Authorized Version is As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river's side, as the trees of lign aloes which the LORD hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters. All translators seem to accept the interpretation "by the river." Furthermore, it parallels what follows, "beside the waters."

Semantically and syntactically there seems to be no better alternative. If one understands cAli as a proper name here, the translation might read (following the Authorized Version otherwise): Ali is like the valleys that spread forth, like gardens, a river: as the trees... No linguistic arguments favour this interpretation.

However, its position so close to Numbers 21:17, the similar references to water (well, river), and the further consideration that almost the entire book of Numbers contemplates the question of leadership authority, are factors that speak in favour of cAli as a proper name in this text also.

Deuteronomy 17:14 also deserves attention. The Authorised Version has this as When thou art come unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me... The significant phrase is "a king over me" or cAli melekh. If cAli were an epithet (exalted), it should come after the word "king" rather than before it. As it stands, it could be translated "I will set cAli king like all the peoples that are around me."

This implies that the personage of cAli is king of all the peoples around. The Authorised Version also has hermeneutical problems. The actual narrative relative to the establishment of kingship in Israel is found in 1 Samuel, and is clearly ill-advised. It requires the establishment of the unacceptable monarchy of Saul as a bridge to the acceptable dynasty of David (as)

The critical study of Deuteronomy would date it as a later text, in which case there would be no problem. As it stands, the acceptability (with reservations) of the monarchy in Deuteronomy conflicts with the policy of Samuel. Probably the verse should stand as interpreted by the Authorised Version, whatever

the hermeneutical problems may be.

In 1 Chronicles 28:19 there is an occurrence of the word that could well be translated as an epithet. The Authorised Version has this as All (this, said David,) the LORD made me understand in writing by his hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern. The relevant phrase is “miyyadh YHWH cAli.”

The translator has rearranged the words in translation probably because he does not, on the basis of philological reasons, accept the possibility of understanding cAli as an epithet. A Qur’anic translator would have thought of this alternative first and perhaps have ignored the other altogether, but would at the same time lay himself open to charges of Arabicism.

Many translators have noticed the awkwardness of including “upon me” in the text, and have merely disregarded it, as does the American Standard Version: All this, (said David,) have I been made to understand in writing from the hand of Jehovah, even all the works of this pattern. Others reinterpret it as a preposition with an elliptical object as does the Revised Standard Version All this he made clear by the writing from the hand of the LORD concerning it, all the work to be done according to the plan. In the latter cAli is translated with some imagination as “concerning it.”

The more straightforward translation would be “The whole in writing from the hand of YHWH cAli made clear...” This could be understood as “He made clear the whole in writing by the hand of YHWH cAli.”

The interpretation “cAli made clear the whole in writing by the hand of YHWH” ignores Hebrew syntax. cAli must therefore refer to God in this text. The concrete meanings of the words should probably give way to their more abstract meanings, thus “The whole by decree from the authority of YHWH cAli made clear...” If this is an acceptable interpretation, it would provide a Hebrew precedent for the use of the word as an epithet, the exalted, as in Arabic.

A strange syntactical configuration is one found in Nehemiah 5:7. The Authorised Version has this as Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them. The relevant phrase is “with myself” which seems to translate libbi cali. The full phrase is “my heart reigned cali.

The word is syntactically in the position of a prepositional phrase. This is the only occurrence of the expression in the Scriptures, and it may well not mean “I consulted with myself.” It would seem more likely to suggest that his heart, the seat of his cogitations, reigned over him, thus influencing him to act as follows. In any case no reference to a proper name can be inferred.

Much of the Book of Job is ambiguous, but the word cali appears in such a context only once, in Job 29:7. The Authorised Version has it When I went out to the gate through the city, when I prepared my seat in the street! No translators seem to see real alternatives to this interpretation. Several Spanish translations disregard the prepositional meaning and read “judicial” or something similar for cali. Another adjectival alternative might be “leafy,” but neither of these is relevant to the proper name Ali.

Psalm 7:8(9) has an interesting case. The Authorized Version renders this The LORD shall judge the people: judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, and according to mine integrity (that is) in me. There is no reason whatsoever to add “that is” to the text. The final word is just as clearly a vocative as is the word YHWH at the pausal midpoint of the verse. The two words parallel each other.

In this case the word Ali most readily relates to God, and is thus possibly a second precedent for the epithet. On the other hand, there is no reason to prohibit addressing a human figure in the second clause, that is, appealing to Ali as judge.

An interesting expression appears in Psalm 42:6(7). This is rendered in the Authorised Version as O my God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee from the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar. The relevant phrase is cali nafshi. There are several cases when the preposition occurs before a noun with the same suffix, and these are merely circumlocutions expressing possession.

The same structure appears here. However, it appears ambiguously, since cali appears between Elohay and nafshi, and could stand as easily with one as the other. The expression could be interpreted as “my God exalted.” In this case cali would be an epithet referring to God, either as a proper name or as an attribute, but again an Arabicism unrecognized by Biblical scholars.

Another case of possible reference to God may be seen in Psalm 56: 12(13). The Authorised Version gives Thy vows (are) upon me, O God: I will render praises unto thee. A more straightforward interpretation would render both words at the beginning as vocatives, thus cAli Elohim. This interpretation would require the third word, “thy vows,” to go with the rest of the sentence.

The midpoint pausal does not exclude that possibility. The translation would then read “O exalted God, (by) thy vows will I render praises unto thee.” Again, this would require the acceptance of an Arabicism.

Psalm 57:2(3) presents another possibility of a vocative parallel. The Authorised Version gives I will cry unto God most high; unto God that performeth (all things) for me. Here again the Qur’anic translator would immediately see two parallel epithets after the word El. Many verses of the Qur’an terminate in precisely this way.

Thus we should read “I will cry unto God most high; unto God Accomplisher, Exalted.” This is especially interesting, since it uses the expanded word from the same root as Ali, celyon. This form of the word Ali is the one generally used in Hebrew in reference to God.

Psalm 86: 13 is ambiguous, and could be translated in either of two ways. The Authorized Version gives For great (is) thy mercy toward me: and thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell. The alternative would be “For great (is) thy mercy, O cAli...” In this case the name again would refer again to God.

There is a final verse in Ezekiel 3: 14 where the word could just as well be translated as an epithet of

God. The Authorised Version gives So the spirit lifted me up, and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; but the hand of the LORD was strong upon me. The alternative translation would be "...the hand of the LORD exalted was strong."

The texts examined may be placed in several groups. The first includes cases of ambiguity which do not contribute toward finding the word cAli used as a proper name or epithet. The second includes cases of ambiguity in which the word cAli could just as well be translated as a proper name or epithet, but in which cases the translators have never chosen to do so.

The third group includes cases of ambiguity in which the word cAli could best be translated as a proper name or epithet, but in which cases the translators have sought awkward alternatives, often adding words not found in the original.

The texts remain troublesome. There are texts that can clearly best be translated as referring to a proper name or epithet. These suggest that others, ambiguous ones, might also best be interpreted in this way. As we examine these to determine whether the name Ali (or the Hebrew segholate form Eli) is meant, we see that some of these, if they are interpreted as epithets or proper nouns, must refer to God. In that case, an Arabicism produces a parallel term to the common Hebrew term Elyon.

Nevertheless, there are two considerations to note. The first is that several of the ambiguous names, notably those in the Torah, associate the name cAli with a source of water. This brings to mind Qur'anic associations, specifically the pool of Kauthar and the role given to cAli (as) in that regard.

While it is not possible to state that the word cAli in the Hebrew Scriptures is used in a prophetic sense in regard to cAli (as), there are passages that seem to be evocative of that. They are ambiguous, and perhaps refer to God, but the possibility remains that they are faint intimations, or perhaps more than faint intimations of a promised figure to come.

The second consideration is that non-Muslim Biblical scholars have not taken note of the fact that the epithet cAli as applied to God in the Qur'an has striking parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures, not only in the Psalms but in several other passages. This failure is only to be expected, since it requires the acceptance of an Arabicism.

The positive result of this study is to show that the Hebrew Scriptures and the holy Qur'an are perhaps closer to each other in expression than has generally been acknowledged. In any case, either the acceptance of the term as meaning "exalted" on one hand, or as a proper name on the other, seems to be the best way of accommodating those texts of Scripture that until now have been glossed over with translations having little or no meaning. Either solution brings the Bible closer into accord with Islam.

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