

# Kalimah Tayyibah

English Translation

by Muhammad Sulaiman

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# بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

## 1. Kalimah Tayyibah

This discussion concerns only the first part of the Kalimah:

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ

*laa ilaaha illa-llaah*

This means “No *ilaah* except Allaah,” thus negating the existence of any *ilaah* except Allaah.

This fact is confirmed by many verses of the Qur'aan, for example:

شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

*Allaah bears witness that there is no ilaah but He—and (so do) the angels and the men of knowledge—being the One who maintains equity. There is no ilaah but He, the Mighty, the Wise. (3:18) (Muhammad Taqi Usmani, but without his translation of ilaah)*

## 2. Translations

### 2.1 Allaah's (a.w.j.) Definition of *ilaah*

The means of discovering the English definition of *ilaah* (or that of any other language for that matter) can be derived via the *kalimah* alone, i.e. if there is only one *ilaah*, whose personal Name is Allaah (a.w.j.), then the description of Allaah (a.w.j.) is also the description of the one *ilaah*.

Allaah (a.w.j.) describes Himself in the Qur'aan in terms of His Names, Qualities and abilities, so any non-Arabic speaker can learn who Allaah is (and thus the meaning of *ilaah*) through reading any scholastic translation of the Qur'aan.

Allaah (a.w.j.) has also defined *ilaah* using a method of negation, by pointing out the lack of abilities that would warrant anything else being described as an *ilaah*, for example:

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ سَمْعَكُمْ وَأَبْصَارَكُمْ وَخَتَمَ عَلَى قُلُوبِكُمْ مَنْ إِلَهٌ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُمْ بِهِ  
أَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ نُصَرِّفُ الْآيَاتِ ثُمَّ هُمْ يَصْدِفُونَ

*Say “Have you seen if Allaah took away your hearing and your sight and sealed your hearts, who is the ilaah other than Allaah to bring it to you?” See how We explain the Signs; yet they turn away. (6:46)*

يَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ ضُرِبَ مَثَلٌ فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَنْ يَخْلُقُوا ذُبَابًا وَلَوْ  
اجْتَمَعُوا لَهُ وَإِنْ يَسْلُبْهُمُ الذُّبَابُ شَيْئًا لَا يَسْتَنْقِذُوهُ مِنْهُ ضَعُفَ الطَّالِبُ وَالْمَطْلُوبُ

*Oh mankind! An example is set forth, so listen to it. Indeed, those whom you invoke besides Allaah will never create a fly, even if they gathered together for it. And if the fly snatched a thing away from them, they could not take it back from it. So weak are the seeker and the one who is sought. (22:73)*

إِنْ تَدْعُوهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُوا دُعَاءَكُمْ وَلَوْ سَمِعُوا مَا اسْتَجَابُوا لَكُمْ وَيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يَكْفُرُونَ  
بِشْرِكِكُمْ وَلَا يُنَبِّئُكَ مِثْلُ خَبِيرٍ

*If you invoke them, they do not hear your call; and if they heard, they would not respond to you. And on the Day of the Resurrection they will deny your association. And none can inform you like The All-Aware. (35:14)*

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَأَنَّ مَا يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ هُوَ الْبَاطِلُ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ

*That is because Allaah, He is the Truth, and that which they invoke besides Him, it is the falsehood. And that Allaah, He is the Most High, the Most Great. (22:62)*

Despite these methods of defining His Self-description as *ilaah*, and the negation of any false claims to anything other than He being an *ilaah*, there is a mistranslation of the *kalimah* that has become prevalent among English publications and speakers. This has originated from both Urdu and Arabic speakers, although the route by which the mistranslation has occurred is different in the two languages.

## 2.2 Mistranslation from Urdu

Urdu speakers have mistakenly used the Arabic word *مَعْبُودٌ* *ma'bood* (which is grammatically a passive participle) as a synonym for *ilaah* (which is grammatically a noun) in their translation of the full *kalimah* into Urdu from Arabic:

*Allaah kay siwaa koy ma'bood nahee, Muhammad Allaah kay rasool hai*

*There is no ma'bood except Allaah, Muhammad is Allaah's rasool.*

The nearest equivalent term for *ilaah* in Urdu is *khudaa*, but rather than use this word, or just keep the original Arabic word chosen by Allaah (a.w.j.) (i.e. *Allaah kay siwaa koy ilaah nahee*) as they have done for *rasool* (Messenger) in the second half of the *kalimah* (*Allaah kay rasool*), they have replaced *ilaah* with the word *ma'bood* (something which is worshipped); a word which Allaah (a.w.j.) has not used anywhere in the Qur'aan to describe Himself, and which I have not found the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) using in any *hadeeth* to describe Allaah (a.w.j.) or any of the false gods.

Translators have subsequently carried the mistaken substitution of *ma'bood* over when translating the *kalimah* into English. "No *ma'bood* except Allaah" is not, however, translated as "There is nothing which is worshipped except Allaah," because the English language is often understood more literally than Arabic. An English speaker would point out that Jesus, Mary and Shiva, for example, are worshipped on a daily basis. This is why the words "worthy of" are added, and the passive verb structure is replaced by an active one, to give "There is none worthy of worship except Allaah."

### 2.3 Mistranslation from Arabic

Arabs, on the other hand, know that *ilaah* and *ma'bood* are not universal synonyms, so when expanding on the meaning of the *kalimah* for explanatory purposes, they more closely define the intended meaning of *ma'bood* to give variations on the statement:

لَا مَعْبُودَ بِحَقِّ إِلَّا اللَّهُ

*Iaa ma'booda bi haqqin illa-llaah*

*There is nothing which is worshipped by right except Allaah*

which is then translated into English **as though it were the original *kalimah***, and with additional obscuring of the meaning by translating without the passive structure of *ma'bood*, to give "There is none worthy of worship except Allaah."

This is not the translation of the *kalimah*; it is a translation of a consequential implication of the *kalimah*, i.e. if there is no god but Allaah (a.w.j.), then of all the things that are worshipped, only He (a.w.j.) has the right to such worship.

### 3. Synonyms

To examine the mistake of Urdu speakers further; the definition of a synonym is:

*A word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another word or phrase in the same language.*

(English Oxford Living Dictionaries)

The words *home* and *abode* are synonyms in the English language and are thus interchangeable without altering the general sense of any sentence they are used in.

A demonstration of the mistaken understanding of this issue is that the statement "'Eesaa (a.s.) is *ma'bood*" is correct, but if *ma'bood* is interchanged with the falsely-claimed synonym *ilaah*, it would result in the statement that 'Eesaa (a.s.) is *ilaah*, which is incorrect.

It can be pointed out that 'Eesaa (a.s.) is both *ma'bood* and *ilaah* in the opinion of the Christians, and that this is a justifiable use of *ilaah* in Arabic, but we are not discussing the linguistic meanings of *ilaah* in the whole Arabic language; we are discussing its specific, singular meaning in the *Kalimah* of Truth.

In Arabic, the *ilaah* referred to in the *kalimah* is a proper noun referring to a single, specific thing—Allaaha *ta'aalaa*. *Ma'bood* on the other hand, as a passive participle, describes any number of things

which are in a relationship of being worshipped by another thing—Allaah (a.w.j.), 'Eesaa (a.s.), money, power etc. *Ma'bood* is not used in either the Qur'aan or *ahaadeeth*, so there is obviously no text from Qur'aan or *hadeeth* which limits the meaning of *ma'bood* to Allaah (a.w.j.) alone in the way that there is such text to limit the meaning of *ilaah* to Allaah alone, so it cannot be taken as a universal synonym. On the contrary, there are many verses of the Qur'aan which state that other things are worshipped besides Allaah (a.w.j.), for example:

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ

Say : "Oh you that reject Faith! I do not worship that which you worship." (109:1-2)

وَإِذْ قَالَ اللَّهُ يَا عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ أَأَنْتَ قُلْتَ لِلنَّاسِ اتَّخِذُونِي وَأُمِّي آلِهَتَيْنِ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ...

And when Allaah says "Oh Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to mankind "Take me and my mother as gods (*ilaahayn*) besides Allaah?"..." (5:116)

اتَّخَذُوا أَحْبَارَهُمْ وَرُهْبَانَهُمْ أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَالْمَسِيحَ ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ سُبْحَانَهُ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ

They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords beside Allaah and the Messiah, son of Mary, when they were not commanded, except to worship One god: there is no god except Him; glory be to Him above what they associate (with Him). (9:31)

When 'Adee bin Haatim (r.a.) became Muslim after being a Christian, the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) recited this verse to him, at which he replied "They did not worship them." The Prophet (s.a.w.s.) said "Yes they did. They (the rabbis and monks) prohibited the allowed for them (Christians and Jews) and allowed the prohibited, and they obeyed them. This is how they worshipped them." (Tafseer ibn Katheer)

All such examples are defined in the Qur'aan as *ma'bood in reality*, so there are more than one, whereas nothing other than Allaah (a.w.j.) is defined as *ilaah in reality*.

### 3.1 Further Definition of *ma'bood*

Translators fail to recognise that either:

#### 3.1.1 *ma'bood* has two conflicting meanings

which negates its being a universal synonym:

a) A thing which is worshipped due to a belief in it having the power to benefit or harm the worshipper, and does in fact have that power, and

b) A thing which is worshipped due to a belief in it having the power to benefit or harm the worshipper, but which doesn't in fact have that power (either independently of Allaah (a.w.j.), or at all).

In this case, the *ilaah* of the *kalimah* is of the first type of *ma'bood*, but not the second, and therefore *ilaah* is not universally synonymous with the word *ma'bood*. A translation would have to limit the meaning of *ma'bood* to reflect this, i.e. "*There is nothing which is worshipped which has the independent power to benefit or harm, except Allaah.*"

Or

### **3.1.2 *ma'bood* has a single meaning**

A thing which is worshipped due to a belief in it having the power to benefit or harm the worshipper, whether it does in fact have that power or not.

The resultant, simplified translation: "*There is nothing which is worshipped except Allaah*" is obviously and demonstrably false.

It can be seen in this case that the single, only *ilaah* referred to in the *kalimah* must carry the additional meaning of being a *ma'bood* which actually has the power to benefit or harm the worshipper. This additional, *essential* meaning over and above this single definition of *ma'bood* negates *ilaah* being synonymous with *ma'bood*.

### **3.1.3 Effect on Translation**

In both cases, the distinction of Allaah (a.w.j.) being worshipped and singularly being deserving of that worship *due to having the powers that warrant it*, is missing from a translation which only includes His warranting being worshipped, i.e. "*There is none worthy of worship except Allaah.*" The reasons for warranting worship have to be implied.

The English equivalent of a Being which is worshipped (due to having the powers that warrant it or not) is "god." We generally refer to the Being which is worshipped due to *having* the powers that warrant it as "God", but English-speaking Muslims don't usually translate the personal Name of this Being from *Allaah* to *God*. Hence the closest translation would be "*There is no god except Allaah*" rather than "*There is no god except God.*"

Despite knowing that Thor, Zeus and Rama are known as gods, the translation "*There is no god except Allaah*" is not taken linguistically, as it is understood immediately by a native English speaker that, as in the original Arabic, the word "true" is naturally implied, to give a meaning of "*There is no true god except Allaah*" and the understanding that all other things referred to linguistically as gods are false gods.

## **3.2 Further Definition of *ilaah***

It can be seen from the classical Arabic dictionary *Lisaan ul Arab*, that *ilaah* is not universally synonymous with *ma'bood*.

\* إِلَهٌ \* : إِلَهٌ : اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ ، وَكُلُّ مَا أُتَّخِذَ  
 مِنْ دُونِهِ مَعْبُوداً إِلَهُ عِنْدَ مَتَّخِذِهِ ، وَالْجَمْعُ  
 آلِهَةٌ . وَالْأَلِهَةُ : الْأَصْنَامُ ، سُمُوا بِذَلِكَ  
 لِإِعْتِقَادِهِمْ أَنَّ الْعِبَادَةَ تَحَقُّ لَهَا ، وَأَسْمَاؤُهُمْ  
 تَتَّبَعُ إِعْتِقَادَاتِهِمْ لَا مَا عَلَيْهِ الشَّيْءُ فِي نَفْسِهِ ،  
 وَهُوَ بَيْنَ الْإِلَهَةِ وَالْأَلِهَانِيَّةِ . وَفِي حَدِيثٍ وَهَيْبِ

*a-l-h: The ilaah: Allaah ('azza wa jall); and everything that is taken besides Him (as) a ma'bood (thing which is worshipped) (as an) ilaah in the opinion of one who takes it (as an ilaah); and the mass of the aalihah. And the aalihah: the idols; they are named as such due to their belief that worship is due to them; and their names follow on from their beliefs, not from anything which they have of themselves; and the (difference between) aalihah and divinity is clear.*

The first definition of *ilaah* is that of the *ilaah* of the *Kalimah*: *The ilaah: Allaah (a.w.j.)*.

In the second definition of *ilaah*:

...everything that is taken **besides Him** as a thing which is worshipped as an **ilaah** in the opinion of one who takes it as an **ilaah**

the word *ma'bood* is used specifically and unambiguously for the multitude of things (*aalihah*) **other than** Allaah (thus excluding Allaah (a.w.j.) Himself), so can in no way be thought of as a synonym for the single, unique *ilaah* of the *kalimah*.

It can be seen that the rest of the *aalihah* (plural of *ilaah*) defined above, and which are mentioned in the Qur'aan and *ahaadeeth*, are only referred to as such by custom in the language, and by false belief. This class of *aalihah* are also *ma'bood*, as in the example of 'Eesaa (a.s.) discussed earlier. None of them is actually an *ilaah* as defined by Allaah (a.w.j.) Himself.

An example of customary use of the word *ilaah* is when Allaah (a.w.j.) says:

أَفَرَأَيْتَ مَنْ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِ وَغَشَّىٰ عَلَيْهِ بَصَرَهُ  
 غَشْوَةً فَمَنْ يَهْدِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ اللَّهِ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ

*So, have you seen him who has taken his desires as his ilaah, and Allaah has let him go astray knowingly, and has sealed his hearing and his heart, and put a cover over his sight? Now who will guide him after Allaah? So will you not take heed? (45:23)*

An example of use of *ilaah* in false belief is the statement of the disbelievers of Makkah:

أَجْعَلُ الْأَلِهَةَ إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا إِنَّ هَذَا لَشَيْءٌ عَجَبٌ

Has he made the *aalihah* into one *ilaah*? Truly this is an amazing thing! (38:5)

#### 4. Summary

Allaah (a.w.j.), has complete knowledge of Himself and of the Arabic language, with which He chose to describe Himself through the revealed word *ilaah* in the Qur'aan and on the tongue of His Messenger (s.a.w.s.). He has nowhere described Himself with the term *ma'bood*. Anyone substituting Allaah's word *ilaah* with their word *ma'bood* in translations of revealed text is:

a) Unwittingly (as this would otherwise be open disbelief) and indirectly claiming that his or her own knowledge of Allaah (a.w.j.) or of the Arabic language is superior to that of Allaah Himself, thus requiring "correction" of Allaah's word *ilaah* with their word *ma'bood*, or

b) They have unwittingly made a serious mistake that needs to be corrected once they become aware of it, or

c) They have purposely misdirected the common folk (*'aam*) away from the correct translation to avoid the intended, natural train of thought arising from understanding that only Allaah (a.w.j.) is a god. Realising this fact leads to questioning what makes Him (a.w.j.) so unique, which leads to investigating his Names, Attributes and abilities. The *fitrah* of the *'aam* on these issues contradicts the *'aqeedah* of the scholars of their communities, necessitating that they be diverted away from the curiosity arising from understanding the *Kalimah* in their own language. See my publication *Identifying Islaam's Saved Sect* for a more detailed discussion of this topic.

Using *ma'bood* in a complementary way of further explanation, as the Arabs do, does not fall into any of these categories.

*ma'bood* and *ilaah* can be used interchangeably for the created *ma'boodoon* and *aalihah*. A created *ma'bood* can be an *ilaah* and vice versa. There are and have been millions of *ma'boodoon*.

The *kalimah* and many verses of the Qur'aan limit the number of true *aalihah* to one. There is no text to limit the number of true *ma'boodoon* in the same way. The Qur'aan names many *ma'boodoon* and states them to be *ma'boodoon* in reality. They are worshipped besides Allaah (a.w.j.).

Allaah (a.w.j.) is stating through this *kalimah* that all the things (*aalihah*) which are consciously or unconsciously worshipped as though they have the power to benefit or harm, or are taken as sources of guidance to right and wrong, or are obeyed or loved instead of Allaah, have no power or authority or qualities to be taken as such. Only He and nothing else has such power, authority, qualities and rights.

While *one* aspect of *The ilaah* is that He is worshipped, the many other facets to being *The ilaah* (as described in His Names and Attributes) are lost when limiting the translation of *ilaah* to just being a deserving object of worship. This in turn demeans the import of the *kalimah*.

The whole of our belief and way of life is founded on the *kalimah* and the true meaning of the word *ilaah*. We cannot substitute a *non-revealed* term having a different meaning and grammar into this *kalimah* and expect it to retain its original meaning and intent.

The correct translation of the first part of the *kalimah* should be:

*There is no god except Allaah.*

## **5. Additional notes**

5.1 The use of *ma'bood* is not unbecoming for Allaah (a.w.j.) as such. As a passive participle it describes Him as the second (the object) in a mutual relationship, but He chose to describe Himself in just such terms when He used the passive participle *musta'aan* to describe Himself in the Qur'aan:

*And they brought upon his shirt false blood. (Jacob) said "Rather, your souls have enticed you to something, so patience is most fitting. And Allaah is The One sought for Help (Al Musta'aan) against that which you describe." (12:18)*

*(The Prophet) has said "My Lord, judge (between us) in truth. And our Lord is the Most Merciful, The One Whose Help is Sought (Al Musta'aan) against that which you describe." (21:112)*

5.2 Mistranslation of the *kalimah* also leaves the door open for such as the Jehovah's Witnesses to claim a belief in the first part of the *kalimah*, albeit with the personal Name Jehovah instead of Allaah. They believe that Jesus is a god, but should not be worshipped. This is a theological contradiction within itself, but nevertheless they can try to claim "*There is no-one worthy of worship except Jehovah*" despite believing in two gods.

"*There is no god except Allaah*" negates the acceptability of believing in two gods, whether the second is worshipped (knowingly or unknowingly) or not.