

## The word “Muslim” in the Bible: A Linguistic and Theological Inquiry into Isaiah 42:19

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One of the Qur’ān’s central theological assertions is that all prophets across human history were sent with the same essential religion—*islām*—which denotes submission to the will of God. The Qur’ān explicitly names this religion as the only one acceptable to God:

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ. (١٩:٣)

Islam is the only religion in God’s sight. (3:19)

وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ. (٨٥:٣)

And He who would like to choose a religion other than Islam, it shall never be accepted from him whatsoever and in the world to come he will be from among the losers. (3:85)

This idea is further reinforced in Qur’ān 42:13, where the religion of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (peace be upon them all) is identified as a unified, continuous path of divine guidance.<sup>1</sup>

According to this framework, all those who surrendered themselves to God’s will in earlier dispensations—be they Israelites under Moses or disciples of Jesus—may properly be termed *Muslims* in the Qur’ānic sense. This is consistent with the Qur’ān’s broader conception of religion as primordial and universal:

أَفَغَيْرَ دِينِ اللَّهِ يَبْغُونَ وَلَهُ أَسْلَمَ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ طَوْعًا وَكَرْهًا وَإِلَيْهِ

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1. “He has prescribed the same religion for you to which He guided Noah and whose revelation [O Prophet] We have sent to you and whose directive We gave to Abraham, Moses, Jesus: “Adhere to this religion [in your lives] and do not create difference in it.””

يُرْجَعُونَ. (٨٣:٣)

So, do these people now seek a religion other than God's even though all things in the heavens and the earth are obedient to Him, willingly or unwillingly and to Him shall they be returned. (3:83)

It is thus difficult to negate the existence of Islam (in the sense of submission) in earlier times. The Bible, which is the most substantial and authentic pre-Qur'ānic religious source, also emphasizes submission as the essence of true religion.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus (pbuh) says:

For I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him that sent me. (John 6:38)

David (pbuh) similarly affirms in the Psalms,

I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart. (Psalm 40:8)

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path. (Psalms 143:10)

These and many other examples highlight that submission to God's will is the essential trait of the truly faithful, mirroring the Qur'ānic notion of *islām*. Yet, one might inquire whether words like "Islam" or "Muslim" explicitly appear in sources predating the Qur'ān.

### **Qur'ānic Reference to the Antiquity of the Term *Muslim***

The Qur'ān also supports the antiquity of the designation *Muslim*. Qur'ān 22:78 recalls the "way (*millat*) of Abraham (pbuh)" and adds:

هُوَ سَمَّاكُمُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَفِي هَذَا ...

It was he who had earlier named you Muslim and in this [Qur'ān] also [your name is Muslim] ...

Classical exegetes differ as to whether the pronominal subject

is God or Abraham (pbuh), yet in either case the verse unambiguously suggests that the identity of being a *Muslim* predates the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The question then arises: do pre-Qur'ānic sources outside the Qur'ān bear witness to this term's existence?

### Isaiah 42:19 and the Hebrew *Mešullām*

One of the more striking textual resonances with this Qur'ānic idea of *Muslim* is found in Isaiah 42:19. The verse reads in Hebrew:

מי עור כי אם-עבדי וחרש כמלאכי אשלח מי עור כמשלם ועור כעבד יהוה:  
mî 'iwwēr kî 'im-'abdî  
we-ḥērēš k-mal'ākî 'eshlāḥ  
mî 'iwwēr k-mešullām  
we-'iwwēr k-'ēbed YHWH

This is variously translated in English versions:

**KJV:** “*Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent? who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the LORD’S servant?*”

**NRSV:** “*Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger whom I send? Who is blind like my dedicated one, or blind like the servant of the LORD?*”

**NIV:** “*Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of the LORD?*”

Isaiah describes the collective Israel metaphorically as a blind and deaf servant entrusted with divine guidance yet failing to uphold its covenant responsibilities. Among the descriptive terms is the Hebrew משלם (*mešullām*), closely resembling the Arabic مسلم (*muslim*). The Hebrew term משולם (*mešullām*) is traditionally understood to mean “dedicated,” “perfected,” or “one at peace,” derived from the root ש-ל-ם (*š-l-m*), which bears meanings related to completeness, reconciliation, and peace. The same root is shared by the Hebrew word *šālōm* and the Arabic

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words *salām* (peace) and *muslim* (one who submits), reflecting a broader Semitic semantic field. The phonetic shift between Hebrew *š* and Arabic *s* is regular in comparative Semitic linguistics, as seen in other examples such as Hebrew *šēm* / Arabic *ism* (name).

This linguistic correspondence has not gone unnoticed by biblical commentators:

### **Mešullām and Exegetical Works**

Several Bible commentaries discuss “*mešullām*” in Isaiah 42:19:

Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers notes:

**As he that is perfect.** — Strictly speaking, *the devoted, or surrendered one*. The Hebrew *meshullam* is interesting, as connected with the modern *Moslem* and *Islam*, the man *resigned* to the will of God. The frequent use of this, or a cognate form, as a proper name after the exile (1 Chron. ix. 21; Ezra viii. 6, x. 15; Neh. iii. 4) may (on either assumption as to the date of 2 Isaiah) be connected with it by some link of causation. Other meanings given to it have been “perfect” as in the Authorised Version, “confident,” “recompensed,” “meritorious.”<sup>2</sup>

The Pulpit Commentary observes:

**As he that is perfect;** rather, *as he that receives reward from me* (see Prov. xi. 31; xiii. 13). The word used is connected etymologically with the Arabic *muslim* (our “Moslem”); but it does not appear to have had the sense of “surrender” or “submission” in Hebrew.<sup>3</sup>

George A. F. Knight offers a particularly illuminating discussion that explores multiple interpretive possibilities:

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2. Charles J. Ellicott, ed., *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, Exposition (on ‘Isaiah’) by Rev. E. H. Plumptre, vol. 4 (London: Cassell & Company, 1884), 529.

3. George Rawlinson, *Isaiah*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, vol. 2 of *The Pulpit Commentary* (New York and Toronto: Funk & Wagnalls Company), 120.

The shocking reality, however, is that “he with whom the all-embracing covenant has been made” cannot grasp the majesty of his calling. These ten words seek to translate just the one word *dedicated* in Hebrew. My translation is but one of several possible ways of rendering it. If the root is *m-sh-l*, then the word has to do with “reporting in story form.” If it is *sh-l-m*, then it might be vowelled to mean “he who has been granted *shalom*, peace.” But in DI’s<sup>4</sup> day, the root *sh-l-m* conveyed the idea of wholeness, completeness, fullness, comprehensiveness, and the like. Yet “peace” implies all these things. Solomon (from this root) was meant to be the man with the whole heart (1 Kings 11:4). A generation before DI’s day, Ezekiel had declared that God said to Israel “I will make with them a complete, total, comprehensive covenant” (34:25; 37:26). Today we have to learn to distinguish between what our newspaper means by peace and what DI meant by the word. On the other hand, others have translated this four-consonant word by “devoted” or “dedicated” in that it may be vowelled in a manner similar to the Arabic word *muslim*, “he who is devoted to God.” Others suggest that the word might be rendered by “rewarded”, or “paid”, and so “hired”, all of these being adjectives added to the noun *servant*. Whatever way we decide to translate it, we should note that it has become an epithet for Israel, in the same way as has Jeshurun at 44:2.<sup>5</sup>

In his commentary on Isaiah, Cheyne renders *mešullām* as “the surrendered one.” Further explaining this word, he writes:

[the surrendered one] One might almost say, “as the Moslem,” for the prophet’s word (*mēshullām*) is closely akin to the Arabic *muslim* (Moslem), i.e., “he that devoteth or submitteth himself (to God).” Comp. Emerson: “A more *surrendered* soul, more informed and led by God.”

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4. DI: Deutero-Isaiah (Sultan)

5. George A. F. Knight, *Servant Theology: A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 40–55*, International Theological Commentary (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 53–54 (emphasis added).

Apparently this word became a favourite among the pious Jews in later times. It appears as a proper name in Ezra viii. 16, x. 15, 29, and the fem. Meshullemeth (before the Exile), 2 Kings xxi. 19. Comp. also the frequent expression *lēbh shalēm*, “a perfect (= devoted) heart.”<sup>6</sup>

Cheyne further points out that *Měshullām* and *Meshullemeth* were often adopted as a personal names among Jewish men and women, akin to “Muslim” and “Muslimah” in Arabic-speaking contexts.

These scholarly resources confirm that *mešullām* connotes “devoted” or “one in covenantal loyalty,” and is likely used in Isaiah 42:19 in a deeply ironic way: the “devoted one” has become spiritually blind.

### Historical Reception in South Asian Bible Translations

The first complete Urdu (Hindustani) translation of the Bible was published in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1843. The second volume, covering Job through Malachi, contains the following translation of Isaiah 42:19 directly from the Hebrew text:

اندھا کون ہے مگر میرا بندہ۔ اور کون ایسا بہر اسے جیسا میرا رسول جسے میں نے بھیجا، کون  
مسلم کا سا اندھا اور عبد اللہ کا سا اندھا ہے۔

Who is blind but My servant? And who is as deaf as My messenger whom I have sent? Who is as blind as “Muslim,” and as blind as “Abdullah”?

This rendering demonstrates the interpretive transparency with which South Asian translators of the nineteenth century viewed the semantic link between *mešullām* and *muslim*. Whether deliberate or incidental, the translation reflects a theological insight that aligns with Qur’ānic affirmation of the term’s antiquity.

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6. T. K. Cheyne, *The Prophecies of Isaiah: A New Translation with Commentary and Appendices*, 5th ed., rev., vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1889), 271.

7. *The Holy Bible in the Hindustani Language*, vol. 2 (Calcutta: Printed at the Asiatic Press for the Auxiliary Bible Society, 1843), 351.

## Conclusion

Isaiah 42:19 offers compelling linguistic and theological evidence for the pre-Qur'ānic usage of a term closely resembling *muslim*—*mešullām*—to describe one wholly devoted or surrendered to God. *Mešullām* in Isaiah 42:19 is a rare but profoundly theological epithet, commonly rendered as “the wholly-devoted one.” Its lexical and phonetic features, when viewed through the lens of historical Semitic linguistics, reveal a striking resemblance to the Arabic word *muslim*—“one who submits”—once the standard phonological shifts between cognate Semitic languages are taken into account. This observation, though philologically subtle, has not gone unnoticed: Biblical commentators have drawn attention to this parallel, in some cases explicitly identifying the Hebrew *mešullām* with the Arabic *muslim*. Within the context of Isaiah 42:19, this association gains theological weight, as the verse appears to confront Israel with the very title that encapsulates its divinely ordained vocation—complete submission to God. The rhetorical force of the verse thus lies in its implicit critique: Israel, as the supposed *mešullām*, is indicted not for ignorance but for failing to embody the ideal of submission inherent in its own calling.

When viewed in light of Qur'ānic affirmations that *islām*—understood as total surrender to the divine will—has been the consistent and perennial message of all true prophets, the resonance between *mešullām* and *muslim* acquires intertextual significance. Isaiah 42:19, in this view, becomes a potent scriptural witness to the continuity of God's call to submission from the Abrahamic legacy, through the biblical prophetic tradition, and culminating in the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Far from being a linguistic coincidence, the convergence of these terms across Hebrew and Arabic may reflect a deeper theological unity that transcends the historical divisions between the scriptural communities.

