

ALLAH MOST HIGH

This article comprises the following sections: i. Definitions and Usage; ii. Etymology; iii. Belief in Allah Most High is Obligatory (*wājib*); iv. Gnosis of Allah Most High (*maʿrifat Allāh taʿala*); I. The Qurʾān and the Existence of Allah (*wujūd Allāh*): The Qurʾān itself is a Proof of Allah Most High, Knowledge of the Existence of Allah Most High is Innate, Proofs of His Existence from Divine Acts, Proofs for His Existence in Intellectual Works, Position of the Philosophers about His Existence, The Path of the Sufis; II. His Attributes (*ṣifāt*), His Transcendence (*tanzāh*), He is the First and the Last, His Self-Subsistence, Speech of Allah Most High (*kalām Allāh taʿala*); III. Seeing Allah Most High (*ruʾyat Allāh taʿala*); IV. Table of Selected Texts and Commentaries; V. Bibliography.

Say, “Were all the sea ink for [writing] the words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the Words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought the like thereof to replenish it.” (Q 18:109)

And if all the trees on the earth were pens, and the seas [were ink]—replenished with seven more seas—the Words of Allah would not be exhausted. Indeed, Allah is All-Mighty, All-Wise. (Q 31:27)

Commentaries on these verses observe that humans’ limited capacities preclude the possibility of full comprehension of an Infinite God Who is unlike anything that exists. The exegetes elaborate that forests of pens and replenished seas of ink would all be insufficient to expound the wonders He has created, the blessings He has bestowed, or His Inexhaustible Knowledge (cf. *Tafsīrs* of Ṭabarī, Tustarī, Qushayrī, Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr, *sub* Q 18:109 and Q 31:27).

Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) comments that, since His Book is part of His knowledge, even if one of His bondmen were given a thousand ways of understanding each letter of the Qurʾān he would not be able to fathom the knowledge within it. This, he writes, is because the Qurʾān is His pre-eternal Speech (*kalāmuh al-qadīm*), and His Speech is one of His Attributes; there is no end to any of His Attributes, just as He has no end. All that can be comprehended of His Speech is whatsoever He opens to the hearts of His friends (*sub* Q 18:109). Nor can human beings fully praise Him. ʿĀʾisha, Allah be pleased with her, reported that one night she found the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, uttering while prostrating: “O Allah, I seek refuge in Your pleasure from Your anger and in Your forgiveness from Your punishment, and I

seek refuge in You from You; I cannot fully praise You, for You are as You have praised Yourself” (Muslim, Ṣalāt, *mā yuqāl fi-l-rukūʿ wal-suḥūd*).

What follows here is a selective summary of what has been said in Muslim sources about the Supreme Name and the Qurʾānic descriptions of His Existence, Attributes, and the possibility of a paradisiacal vision of Him. Other topics related to the Divine are covered in other entries as cross-referenced in the text below.

Definitions and Usage

The Divine Name *Allāh*, referred to as the “Name of Majesty” (*ism al-jalāla*) and “the Name of the [Divine] Essence” (*ism al-dhāt*) in commentary literature, occurs in the Qurʾān 2697 times in 85 of its 114 suras, aside from its presence in the theonymic invocation which occurs at the head of every sura except Q 9 (see BASMALA).

Al-Zabīdī (1145-1205/1732-1790) defines: “*Allāh* is the proper name of the Essence (*al-dhāt*) of the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*), combining all attributes of perfection (*al-mustajmiʿ li-jamīʿ ṣifāt al-kamāl*); He is free from [all] deficiency and from being non-existent (*al-munazzah ʿan al-naqs wal-zawāl*); to Him is referred the existence of all else; and all that is said about His Essence, Attributes and Acts is a commentary on this statement” (*sub ʿ-ḥ*; also see: Ibn Abī Sharīf, *Kitāb al-Musāmara*, p. 21; al-Qārī, *Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ* 3:917).

Allāh is considered “the Supreme Name” (*al-ism al-aʿzam*) by Abū Ḥanīfa (80-148/699-767) (Māwardī, *sub* Q 1:1); a majority of Muslim scholars concur (cf. Tustarī, *sub* Q 1:1; Ṭabarī, *sub* Q 59:24; Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Aḥkām*, *sub* Q 7:180; Rāzī, *sub fī mabāḥith al-ism*; Ibn ʿAtāʾ Allāh, *al-Qaṣd al-mujarrad*, p. 103; Ibn Mandah, *Tawḥīd*, p. 268-270; al-Sanūsī, *Sharḥ al-Asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*, p. 27; al-Shirbīnī, *al-Sirāj*, *sub* Q 3:2; al-Qārī, *Mirqāt al-mafātīḥ* 1:6).

The Hadith master Ibn Mandah (310-395/922-1005) gives an expressive title to the discussion on the Supreme Name in his credal encyclopedia, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*: “Regarding the Gnosis of the Greatest Name of Allah by which He has Named Himself and which He has Honored above all Other Forms of Remembrance” (*Dhikr maʿrifat Ism Allāh al-akbar al-ladhī tusammā bihi wa-sharrafahu ʿalā al-adhkār kullihā*). He cites Q 29:45 (and surely the remembrance of *Allāh* is the greatest) as a proof for this position:

His Name *Allāh* is [key to the] gnosis of His Essence (*maʿrifati dhātihi*); Allah, Mighty and Majestic is He, has denied its usage to anyone

else from His creation, none can be named by it, and none [deemed] worthy of being worshipped can be called by this Name; He has made it the beginning of faith, the central pillar of Islam (*‘umūd al-islām*), the statement of truth and sincerity, the very opposite of contradictions and associations... With it begin all obligatory acts and by it faith is established. One seeks refuge from Satan by this Name and by it begin and end all things. Blessed be His Name—there is no god except Him”

(*Tawhīd*, p. 268).

The word *Allāh* is pronounced with magnification (*tafkhīm*) of its double *lām* and unwritten *alif* when preceded by a *fatha* or *ḍamma*, and with attenuation (*tarqīq*) when preceded by a *kasra* (see SCIENCE OF QUR’ĀNIC RECITATION). If one mispronounces it by suppressing its unwritten *alif*, that is, vocalizing *Allah* instead of *Allāh*, such a solecism (*lahn*) invalidates ritual prayer (*q.v.*) and legal oath (*q.v.*), although poetic license may allow it if required by the exigencies of rhythm and meter (Bayḍāwī, *sub Q* 1:1).

Etymology

According to the vast majority of scholars (*al-jumhūr*), *Allāh* is originally a proper and underived noun (al-Shawkānī, *Nayl al-awṭār* 1:18). Other exegetes list names of scholars who hold this view; these include Abū Ḥanīfa, al-Shāfi‘ī (150-204/767-819), al-Zamakhsharī (467-538/ca.1074-1143), al-Ghazālī (450-505/1058-1111), al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), and al-Suyūṭī (849-911/1445- ca.1505), but, according to al-Rāzī (543-606/1148-1209), the majority of Mu‘tazilīs and most of the littérateurs (*al-udabā’*) consider it a derived word (al-Rāzī, *Lawāmi‘*, p. 80). The master-grammarian Sibawayh (d. 180/796) called it “the most definite of all definites” (*a’raf al-ma‘arīf*)—a description for which he is said to have received great benefit after death, as was revealed to someone in a dream vision (see DREAMS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION) (al-Zarkashī, *Ma‘nā*, p. 106; Samīn, *Durr*, *sub Q* 1:1).

“This name is exclusively reserved for the Creator Most High (*al-Bārī ta‘ālā*)” (Māwardī, *sub Q* 1:1; Rāghib, *sub* ²-*l-h*; Rāzī, *Lawāmi‘*, p. 79-81). The Qur’ān rhetorically asks: *Do you know any who could be His namesake (lahu samīyyan)?* (Q 19:65).

Extensive discussions on the etymology of the word “Allāh” can be found both in commentary literature as well as in specialized works on the Divine Names. For instance, al-Rāzī discusses it in his *Tafsīr* as well

as in his *Lawāmi‘ al-bayyināt*, an important treatise on Divine Names and Attributes (see BEAUTIFUL NAMES OF ALLAH), as does al-Bayḍāwī in his *Tafsīr* (*sub Q* 1:1). Al-Suyūṭī in his commentary on al-Bayḍāwī’s exegesis, titled *Nawāhid al-abkār wa shawārid al-afkār*, lists “around thirty opinions” on the etymology of Allah—including the following: (i) that the word is of Syriac (*suryānī*) origin (meaning the Syriac considered to be the primordial angelic language; see LANGUAGE AND SPEECH); (ii) that it is Arabic (*q.v.*) but underived; and (iii) that it is derived but its root is known to Allah alone (*Nawāhid* 1:126-144). Al-Suyūṭī quotes, among others, the polymath Sa‘d al-Dīn Mas‘ūd b. ‘Umar al-Taftāzānī (722-792/1322-1390), who said, “Just as the speculations are bewildered (*taḥayyarat al-awḥām*) in [regard to] His essence and His attributes, so they are confounded [regarding] the word signifying Him (*al-lafz al-dāll ‘alayh*), as to whether it is a noun or an adjective, derived or underived, a proper name (*‘alam*) or not a proper name, and so on” (*Nawāhid* 1:127). According to al-Bayḍāwī himself,

The origin of the word “Allāh” is *ilāh* (“deity”), from which the [opening] *hamza* was elided and replaced with *alif* and *lām* (*al-*). That is why one says *yā Allāh* (“O Allāh”) disjunctively [rather than *yallah*]. [*Allāh*] is used solely for the One Who has the true right to be worshipped (*mukhtaṣṣ bil-ma‘būd bil-ḥaqq*).

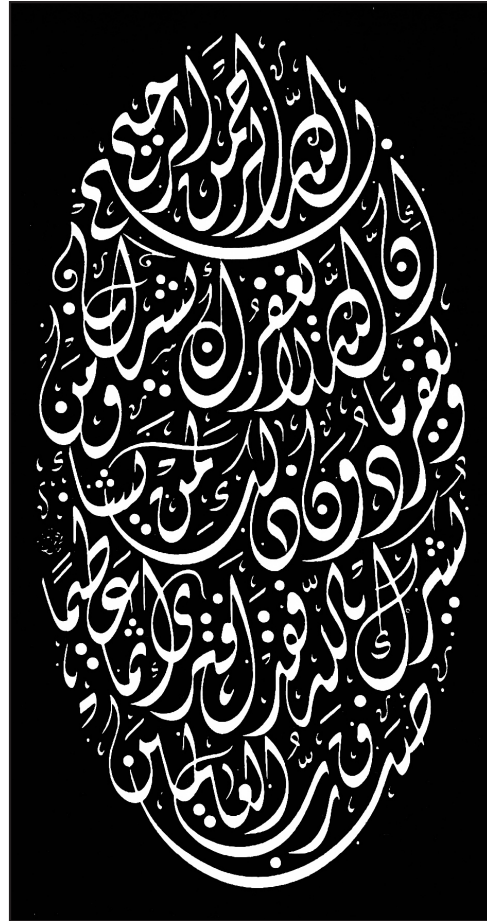
Basically, *ilāh* refers to any object of worship (*li-kull ma‘būd*); but its predominant usage has become specific to the One Who is worshipped in truth. Its derivation is from *alaha*—[infinitives] *alahatan*, *ulūhatan*, and *ulūhiyyatan*—in the sense of ‘*abada* (“he worshipped”), and from it [the verbs] *ta’allaha* and *ista’laha*, “he devoted himself to worship” are derived. It is also said [to derive] from *aliha*, when one is perplexed, because intellects are confounded in His gnosis; or from *alihtu ilā fulān* (“I took refuge with so-and-so”), that is, I was at rest with him (*sakantu ilayh*), for hearts become tranquil (*taṭma’in*) in His remembrance and souls (*al-arwāḥ*) rest assured (*taskun*) with knowledge of Him; or from *aliha*, when one is distressed by something that befalls him. *Ālahah ghayruh* (*ajārah*, meaning “someone protected him”) means to rush in panic to another who then gives him protection, whether actually or merely as perceived by the refuge-seeker. Again, it [is said to derive] from *aliha*, the craving of a newborn calf for its mother, as creatures yearn for Him, earnestly imploring, when in difficulties. Another [pro-

posed] derivation is *waliha*, which is when one's intellect is confounded and bewildered—in which case its root is *wilāh*, the *wāw* becoming a *hamza* because of the difficulty [in vocalizing] the *kasra* (...). It is [also] said that its root is *lāh*, infinitive noun (*maṣḍar*) of the verb *lāha*—aorist *yalihu*, infinitives *layhan* and *lāhan*—meaning to be veiled (*ihtajaba*) and elevated (*irtafa'a*); for [Allah]—may He be glorified and exalted—is veiled (*mahjūb*) from visual perception and is elevated (*murtafi'*) above all things...

It is said that [*Allāh*] is a proper name (*'alam*) for His specific essence, because (i) He describes things, but He Himself cannot be described; (ii) it is necessary that He have a name (*ism*) to which His Attributes (*ṣifātuh*) relate—but there is no [word], among those applied to Him, that is appropriate to Him apart from [the word *Allāh*]; and (iii) were [*Allāh*] an adjective (*wasf*), the statement “There is no god but Allah” would not constitute monotheism (*tawḥīd*), just as [the statement] “There is no god but the all-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*)” does not preclude partnership (*shirkā*).

It is more likely (*al-azḥar*) that [the word *Allāh*] was originally an adjective (*wasf*) but through predominant usage—in that it was not used for any other entity—it came to refer to Him like a proper name (*'alam*), as [happened] with al-Thurayyā (the Pleiades, *lit.* “multitudinous”) and with al-Ṣa'iq (*lit.* “thunderbolt”, which became the surname of Khuwaylid b. Nufayl). [The word *Allāh*] came to act in this way (*ujriya majrāh*) in that adjectives are applied to it, it never served as an adjective, and any hint of possible partnership was precluded. For His Essence, He being as He is (*mim ḥayth Huwa*), without considering any other factor—intrinsic or otherwise—is inconceivable to human beings and therefore cannot be signified (*yadull*) with a word. Also, if [the word *Allāh*] signified nothing but His specified identity (*mujarrad dhātih al-makhṣūṣa*), then a sound meaning would not obtain from the manifest [level] of His saying—glorified and exalted be He—*And He is Allāh in the heavens and the earth* (Q 6:3). Furthermore, what derivation means is that one of two terms has meaning (*ma'nā*) and form (*tarkīb*) in common with the other, and this is precisely the case between it (the word *Allāh*) and the etymons (*al-uṣūl*) mentioned.

sub Q 1:1



Q 4:48. *Inna llāha lā yaghfir an yushrika bihi wa yaghfiru mā dūna dhālika liman yashā'u wa man yushrik bi-llāhi fa-qad iftarā ithman 'azīman. Ṣadaqa Rabb al-'ālamīn.*

Indeed, Allah does not forgive that a partner be ascribed to Him. He forgives—other than that—what He wills. And whosoever ascribes partners to Allah, has certainly invented a heinous sin.

(Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Abd Allāh)

A Prophetic hadith links the mention of Allah to the very survival of the world itself: “The Hour will not come so long as [even a single] person on earth calls out ‘Allah! Allah!’” (Muslim, Īmān, dhahāb al-īmān ākhir al-zamān; Tirmidhī, Fitan, mā jā' fī ash-rā' al-sā'a). He also said: “A house in which Allah is mentioned compared to the one in which He is not mentioned is like the living compared to the dead” (Muslim, Ṣalāt al-musāfirīn, istiḥbāb ṣalāt al-nāfila fī baytiḥ) (see REMEMBRANCE AND REMINDER OF ALLAH).

The Qur'an clearly establishes the incommensurable hiatus separating Allah Most High and all else. He is as He has described Himself: *No sight can perceive*