

Feature Article: JAF2403

## **IS THE BLACK MAN GOD? Challenging the Central Claim of the Nation of Islam**

by Jimmy Butts

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 3 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

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### **SYNOPSIS**

During the 1950s and '60s, Americans were confronted with a unique time of racial conflict. African Americans organized a movement to challenge the racial caste system in the nation. Amidst this largely Christian movement were African Americans who were disillusioned by Christianity's complicity in their experience of racial terror. Many of these people joined the movement known as the Nation of Islam (NOI). Those two decades mark the zenith of the NOI's recruitment and activity. Although presently the numbers have dwindled, there are signs of continued influence in African-American communities such as the continued ministry of Minister Louis Farrakhan and the twentieth anniversary of the Million Man March held in October 2015.

One of the fruits of Farrakhan's ministry is Dr. Wesley Muhammad, who has defended the doctrines of the NOI using his academic training in the area of religion. In the past, the myths taught by this group were seen as fanciful and easily rejected by the intellectually minded individual. However, Muhammad seeks to legitimize the teaching that the black man is God.

This defense, however, although claiming to be founded on a historic Afrocentric philosophy, departs from the majority of African thought on the nature of God. Muhammad also bases his theory of the development of anthropomorphic understandings among philosophers on his presupposition about traditional Jewish

hermeneutics rather than the history of interpretation of the Bible. Finally, he seems to miss the fact that his own explanation about an ontologically immaterial being conflicts with NOI orthodoxy.

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For African-American religions, the quest to reconcile the absurdity of living in a society that cannot seem to reform completely from denying one's worth with faith in an omnipotent creator seems to occupy a dominant place in their formulation. This framework should help the observer understand how the ideology of the Nation of Islam (NOI) was able to develop in the context of African Americans attempting to make sense of their reality.

The need for ethnic "roots" is a concern that some leaders have long ignored.<sup>1</sup> According to Dr. E.U. Essien-Udom, whose field research on the NOI I am indebted to, although the black church has been the central institution among African Americans, rather than addressing the psychological and practical needs of the black community, it has accommodated the broader culture by focusing more on the hereafter.<sup>2</sup> He goes further and argues that the lack of engagement among black preachers in urban centers has made the messages of other religious leaders more attractive.<sup>3</sup> Whether one agrees with his assessment or not, it should be apparent that a large number of African Americans are looking for answers to life outside the Christian tradition and are no longer attending the black church. The Nation of Islam was able to capitalize on this estrangement from the black church and suggest that Islam is the religion for the black nation.<sup>4</sup> The movement's effort to give black people a sense of identity, civilization, tradition, and culture made it a logical alternative to those who felt that the church disregarded these needs.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Maulana Karenga, originator of the holiday Kwanzaa, expresses this view: "Messenger Muhammad's theology is above all a liberation theology which seeks to free Black people from mistaken conceptions about themselves and their oppressor."<sup>6</sup> Even with these cultural factors that may explain its allurements to those dissatisfied with the black church, historically it has been unable to attract a large number of formally educated African-Americans.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, however, a young, charismatic scholar and member of the NOI has arisen by the name of Dr. Wesley Muhammad.<sup>8</sup> Having received his Doctorate of Philosophy in Near Eastern Studies from the University of Michigan, he seems to give academic legitimacy to the NOI. He explicitly states that his mission is the academic vindication of Elijah Muhammad.<sup>9</sup> This makes an apologetic response to the claims of the NOI urgent for this generation of Christians.

In the past, some Christians assumed the teachings of the NOI were intellectually impotent and could draw adherents from only the uneducated; Wesley Muhammad's career challenges that assumption. I will engage critically with Muhammad's claims after providing a brief history of the Nation of Islam and a summary of Muhammad's defense of the doctrine of God.

## History

The first revival of an Islamic movement among African Americans was the Moorish Science Temple during the early twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The NOI owes its origin to this group.<sup>11, 12</sup> Essien-Udom explains, "For some time, one W. D. Fard assumed leadership of the Moorish movement. Fard claimed to be the reincarnation of Noble Drew Ali. By 1930 a permanent split developed in the movement. One faction, the Moors, remain faithful to Noble Drew Ali, and the other, which is now led by Elijah Muhammad, remains faithful to Prophet Fard."<sup>13</sup>

Fard was a silk peddler in Paradise Valley in Detroit, where there was a large African-American population.<sup>14</sup> He began teaching<sup>15</sup> the people and founded his first temple by 1930. Estimated to have recruited up to eight thousand followers by 1934,<sup>16</sup> he mysteriously disappeared from any authoritative record by 1933.

The NOI needed a leader who would carry on the teachings of Fard.<sup>17</sup> A split arose between those who accepted Fard's deification and those who rejected it. Those who accepted it set up a temple in Chicago under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad.<sup>18</sup>

Born in 1897 to a Baptist minister, Elijah Muhammad was then named Elijah Poole.<sup>19, 20</sup> He also was a Baptist minister for a time until he became a member of the NOI.<sup>21</sup> Muhammad was seen as someone who suffered for the cause of Allah because he was convicted in 1942 for encouraging draft-resistance.<sup>22</sup> He led the NOI until his death in 1975. One of his most profitable recruits was a man who eventually became known as Malcolm X.<sup>23</sup> Malcolm was a great orator who was very skilled in street preaching.<sup>24</sup> Through the help of his ministry,<sup>25</sup> the NOI grew substantially over the next few years.<sup>26</sup>

After Elijah Muhammad's death, his son Imam Wallace Muhammad became the leader of the NOI and began moving it toward Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>27</sup> He disavowed his father's divine authority, disbanded the paramilitary Fruit of Islam group, and changed the doctrine from religious Black Nationalism to Americanism and orthodox Islam.<sup>28</sup> While many accepted these changes, in 1978, Louis Farrakhan dissented and began to resurrect the original form of the NOI.<sup>29</sup> Since there are many people who continue to this present day to adhere to this form of Islam, a brief description of Dr. Wesley Muhammad's defense of their doctrine of God is necessary.

### Wesley Muhammad's Defense of the Doctrine of God

Although in conflict with Elijah Muhammad,<sup>30</sup> Wesley Muhammad argues that Genesis 1 records the evolution of the body of God.<sup>31</sup> He describes day one as the beginning of God's corporeal manifestation. Prior to this, God was hidden in the darkness and eventually emerged out of that darkness into a luminous Anthropos.<sup>32</sup> In essence, God incarnated the black body of Adam.<sup>33</sup>

Wesley Muhammad borrows from physics to describe how Allah, existing as an electric force, and through his will for self-manifestation in a material body, caused an

explosion that resulted in the first atom.<sup>34</sup> He argues that movement of energy causes it to gain mass.<sup>35</sup> When it reaches the light barrier, it has acquired so much mass its acceleration appears to have stopped; the energy now becomes frozen matter.<sup>36</sup> He contends that “this is how matter is produced. All matter is ‘frozen energy.’”<sup>37</sup> Equating energy with spirit, he suggests that this process demonstrates how God, being spirit (energy), materialized into a man.

Wesley Muhammad also cites history to prove his thesis about God. The ancients, he argues, believed that God and man were of the same nature<sup>38</sup> and that belief in God as a formless spirit did not begin until the fifth century BC, with the Greek philosophers.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the Semitic revelatory tradition had no such understanding of God as immaterial prior to contact with Hellenistic culture.<sup>40</sup> This interaction caused Jews<sup>41</sup> and Muslims<sup>42</sup> to depart from their original understanding of God. In early Islamic history, the Mu’tazila school of theology developed as a minority group opposing popular Islamic belief in the humanlike descriptions of Allah in their texts. They applied Hellenistic rationalism to strip away the references to Allah that conflicted with the god of Greek philosophy.<sup>43</sup> From this he concludes that “the immaterial Deity of the philosophers replaced the Man-God of Scripture in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad therefore represents a turning back to ‘the God of old.’”<sup>44</sup>

Finally, Wesley Muhammad is convinced that the anthropomorphic language in Scripture justifies his claim. In Isaiah 42:13, there is an explicit reference to Yahweh as a man.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the language and context of Genesis 1:26 requires the conclusion that Adam’s physical and corporeal appearance was like God’s.<sup>46</sup> He goes on to say that the “Hebrew term *ruah* and Greek term *pneuma*, used in these passages to characterize God as spiritual, both imply a luminous material substance.”<sup>47</sup> In response to the “God is not a man” texts found in Scripture, he argues that the Hebrew actually says that God is not a man *who* lies or repents and not that he is categorically not a man.<sup>48</sup> On the surface, these arguments may seem convincing to some, but one must subject them to critical evaluation.

### **Critique of Wesley Muhammad’s View**

Besides reaching questionable academic conclusions in order to support his thesis,<sup>49</sup> there are other weaknesses of Wesley Muhammad’s position. I contend that Muhammad’s understanding of God departs from the collective religious understanding of African people. He argues, “To reject the basic contours of Elijah Muhammad’s teaching on God is to reject the collective testimony of the ancients and their scripture — our ancestors and our scriptures.”<sup>50</sup> However, apart from a few examples, African peoples in all of their religious traditions (both biblical and nonbiblical) do not attribute a body to God,<sup>51</sup> nor suggest through their use of anthropomorphic language that He is a human being.<sup>52, 53</sup> According to a traditional Pygmy hymn addressing the attributes of God, they say, “He has no body.”<sup>54</sup> Another

scholar points out that African American theology shares the view that there is a balance between God's transcendence and His immanence similar to that of continental African theology. In other words, unlike Wesley Muhammad's doctrine, God is not identical with His creation.<sup>55</sup> Although the author can see the psychological function of the deification of a people who have been degraded, James Baldwin uncovers its greatest weakness: "An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought."<sup>56</sup>

Another weakness of Wesley Muhammad's thesis is its failure to acknowledge the usage and legitimacy of anthropomorphic language. The symbolism in this type of language "offers the greatest intellectual coherence possible" when referring to the infinite God.<sup>57</sup> As Dr. Mark Smith, professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis at Princeton Theological Seminary put it, "Divinity can be grasped in association with the human or in nature, not apart from the human or the natural; nor can it be reduced to either."<sup>58</sup>

One must note that through the interaction with the Greco-Roman world, along with the translation of the Scriptures into Greek by the third century before Christ, Jews felt the pressure to defend their Scriptures to the philosophically oriented culture.<sup>59</sup> Dr. Hava Tirosh-Samuels, who earned a PhD in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, agrees when she states, "In the new rationalist climate, which sets up reason as a judge of religion, Judaism had to be proven to be a rational religion."<sup>60</sup> Therefore, while Wesley Muhammad argues that the nonliteral readings of anthropomorphic statements in the Jewish Bible were a reaction to encounters with Greek philosophers, contrarily, this more precise articulation of God's nature may simply have been a response to some misinterpretations<sup>61</sup> of texts whose metaphoric meanings were assumed within the Jewish context.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the more detailed articulation of divine incorporeality may be the response of Jews to the development of false teachings from people unfamiliar with Jewish interpretive assumptions during that time.<sup>63</sup> It is ironic, however, that Muhammad interprets the anthropomorphic language from Isaiah 42:13 as suggesting that God is a man, while on the same page, he quotes the anthropomorphic descriptions from Deuteronomy 32:42 that state Yahweh will "make his arrows drunk," but seems to accept a figurative interpretation rather than insist that the arrows are human due to the human quality attributed to them.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, he is inconsistent within his own methodology.

Lastly, Wesley Muhammad's description of God's temporal self-manifestation in the original black man conflicts with Elijah Muhammad's critique of Christianity's "spook God."<sup>65</sup> When Elijah Muhammad used the word *spook*, he was critiquing the idea that God cannot be seen and does not have a material body. Contrarily, Wesley Muhammad states that "prior to Adam, Allah existed as the Divine Form — a man of Light with no material body."<sup>66</sup> This means that Wesley Muhammad's God is not a man ontologically but an immaterial Divine Spirit, or, in the words of Elijah Muhammad, a spook. Therefore, his whole thesis is self-defeating. The author has argued that Wesley Muhammad's doctrine of God is deficient because it does not stand up to his own

standard of the testimony of African religious thought. It ignores the biblical and theological usage of anthropomorphic language, and although it affirms NOI orthodoxy, it is refuted by its chief authority, Elijah Muhammad. For these reasons, African Americans should not be beguiled by Wesley Muhammad's writings or the Nation of Islam as a whole.

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## NOTES

1. E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: The Rise of the Black Muslims in the U.S.A.* (Harmondsworth, Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1966), 91.
2. *Ibid.*, 268.
3. *Ibid.*, 39.
4. Elijah Muhammad, *Our Savior Has Arrived* (Phoenix: Secretarius MEMPS Publications, 1974), 86.
5. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 220–21.
6. Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2010), 232
7. Essien-Udom, *Nationalism*, 170.
8. Wesley Muhammad is also known as Wesley Williams. This name change seems to be related to his practice of Islam. Another name he ascribes to is "True Islam"; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EeDeOLYAJw&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop>.
9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmC0lxdcHak&app=desktop>.
10. Dennis Walker, *Islam and the Search for African-American Nationhood: Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2005), 241.
11. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 68.
12. Walker, *Nationhood*, 259.
13. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 47.
14. Walker, *Nationhood*, 256.
15. Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America* (Chicago: Muhammad's Temple Number 2, 1965), 16.
16. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 52–53.
17. *Ibid.*, 53.
18. *Ibid.*, 53.
19. *Ibid.*, 77.
20. Walker, *Nationhood*, 259.
21. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 77.
22. *Ibid.*, 71.
23. "There's not one person who is a Muslim who believes in Elijah Muhammad today who believes in him more strongly than I did. When I was with him I believed in him 100 percent. And it was my strong belief in him that made me go along with everything he taught. And I think if you

- check back on my representation of him while I was with him, I represented him 100 percent.” Malcolm X, *February 1965: The Final Speeches*, ed. Steve Clark (New York: Pathfinder, 1992), 186.
24. *Ibid.*, 189.
  25. Malcolm traveled around the United States preaching the message of the NOI. Clayborne Carson, *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: Carrol and Graf Publishers, 1991), 103–6.
  26. Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 252.
  27. Walker, *Nationhood*, 257.
  28. Karenga, *Black Studies*, 237.
  29. *Ibid.*, 238.
  30. Elijah Muhammad taught that Genesis 1 records the making of the white race of devils. E. Muhammad, *Message*, 95, 118
  31. True Islam, *The Truth of God: The Bible, The Qur’an and Point Number 12* (Atlanta: All in All Publishing, 2007), 208.
  32. *Ibid.*
  33. *Ibid.*, 172.
  34. True Islam, *Encyclopedia*, 77.
  35. *Ibid.*, 81.
  36. *Ibid.*, 81–82.
  37. *Ibid.*, 82.
  38. *Ibid.*, 27.
  39. *Ibid.*, 34.
  40. True Islam, *Truth of God*, 23.
  41. True Islam, *Encyclopedia*, 44.
  42. Tim Winter, *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 121.
  43. True Islam, *Truth of God*, 118–20.
  44. *Ibid.*, 124.
  45. True Islam, *Encyclopedia*, 206.
  46. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
  47. True Islam, *Truth of God*, 21.
  48. *Ibid.*, 39.
  49. Attempting to demonstrate his thesis’s consistency with the NOI’s orthodoxy, Muhammad quotes Elijah Muhammad as saying something different than his transcriber; however, the only evidence mentioned is his claim that the transcriber was in clear error. True Islam, *Book of God*, 58.
  50. True Islam, *Truth of God*, 243.
  51. John MBiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers 1999), 49.
  52. John MBiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2015), 54.
  53. 53 Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 25.
  54. MBiti, *Religion and Philosophy*, 34.
  55. Edward Antonio and Dwight Hopkins, *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 79. According to Dr. Abel Ndjerareou, who holds a PhD in Old Testament Exegesis from Dallas Theological Seminary, in African traditional religions, the transcendence of God is sometimes overemphasized; they often describe him as beyond the reach of human beings. Adeyemo, Tokunboh. *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi, Kenya: Zondervan, 2010), 887.
  56. James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 333.
  57. Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 89.

58. Mark Smith, *Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 112.
59. Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 61.
60. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1951.
61. "Anthropomorphism was a very sore problem among the Greeks. To Greek philosophers it meant much more than to Jewish Bible-readers. The Greeks could see their Gods in statues and images, which conveyed to the onlookers the idea not only of a personal, but a physical god appearing in a form made by man from earthy material." Rabbi Arthur Marmorstein, PhD, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God II: Essays in Anthropomorphism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 2.
62. "No Jew would ever have imagined that certain of these metaphors could be taken literally; but the case was rather different with Gentiles, trained in a Greek tradition, accustomed to physical representations of divine forms, and prepared to dismiss Jews as intellectually barbarous, though they happened to possess a revelation of the true God. It certainly needed to be made clear to the Gentile world that the anthropomorphisms of the Old Testament were to be interpreted in a spiritual sense." (G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock publishers, 2008], 8.) Psalm 102:25–27 is one of many Scriptures that make a distinction between God and the heavens and the earth; when these are combined with Genesis 1:1 announcing that God created the heavens and the earth, one can be confident that there was a pre-Hellenistic understanding of God being immaterial and distinct from His creation. Richard Bauckham, a biblical scholar whose research includes Jewish apocalyptic literature and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, argues that early Jewish literature presents God as having an absolute distinction in kind from all other reality. (Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008], 109.)
63. For more on this, see Martin Hengel, *Jews, Greeks, and Barbarians: Aspects of the Hellenization of Judaism in the Pre-Christian Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 51; Douglass Blount, "Togas, Tulips and the Philosophy of Openness," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 47, 2 (Spring 2005): 182; Sheridan, *Language for God*, 63.
64. True Islam, *Book of God*, 206.
65. E. Muhammad, *Savior*, 68.
66. True Islam, *Book of God*, 137.