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THE QURANIC CHRIST

C. George Fry

Seventy years ago Samuel M. Zwemer, the Apostle of Arabia, wrote this description of the Muslim Jesus:

A Christian studying the faith of Islam soon learns not only that Christ has no place in the Moslem idea of God, as they deny the Trinity, but that the protrait of our Savior, as given in the Koran and in tradition, is a sad caricature. According to Moslem teaching, Jesus was miraculously born of the virgin Mary; He spoke while still a babe in the cradle; performed many puerile miracles in His youth; healed the sick and raised the dead when He reached manhood. He was specially commissioned to confirm the Law and reveal the Gospel. He was strengthened by the Holy Spirit (Gabriel). He foretold another prophet, whose name should be Ahmed (Mohammed). They believe that Jesus was, by deception and substitution, saved from crucifixion and taken to heaven, and that He is now in one of the inferior stages of celestial bliss; that He will come again at the last day, slay anti-Christ, kill all the swine, break the cross, and remove the poll-tax from infidels. He will reign as a just King for forty-five years, marry, and leave children, then die and be buried near Mohammed at Medina. The place of his future grave is already marked out between the graves of Omar and Fatimah.¹

Zwemer's account is as accurate at the closing of the twentieth century as it was at its opening. For the majority of the world's 700,000,000 Muslims, that is a summary of the true story of Jesus. Our task in this essay is to deal with two questions:

1. How much of the popular Muslim portrait of Jesus is really based on the Quran? and how much is due to the accretion of tradition?
2. What are the real sources of the Quranic Christ? Where did Muhammad obtain the material from which he composed his stories?

The Shape of the Quranic Christ

When we study the Quran, we soon find that Jesus is one of its most prominent figures. Three chapters or suras are named after references to Jesus (suras 3, 5, and 19). Jesus is mentioned in fifteen suras and in at least ninety-three verses. In all instances Jesus is praised as the sinless prophet sent from God. As Geoffrey Parrinder observed, "Jesus is always spoken of in the Quran with

reverence; there is no breath of criticism.”²

From an evangelical perspective, however, simply to respect Jesus is not sufficient. In our Christian Scriptures we read of a similar case, when “a woman in the crowd,” who marvelled at Christ’s power to heal, “raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’” (Luke 11:27, 28 RSV).

Repeatedly Jesus is reported to have asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46 RSV) Christ is properly honored not merely by praise of the lips, but by transformed lives and the labors of obedient love. It is my contention that the Christ of the Quran cannot produce such a conversion, for true discipleship requires both sincerity and truth.

For the sake of illustration, let us compare the Quranic and Biblical Christs in four respects: name, birth, work, and death. In each instance, in spite of the Quranic praise of Jesus there is missing sufficient truth and power to make even a sincere person acceptable in the sight of God.

1. The Name of Jesus

In the Middle East, names are much more important than they are in the West. A name indicates a person’s nature, function, and destiny. Name and fame are the same. For that reason, both the Quran and the Holy Gospels are concerned to give the correct name of Jesus. Professor Geoffrey Parrinder has made this point:

The Quran gives a greater number of honourable titles to Jesus than to any other figure of the past. He is a ‘sign,’ a ‘mercy,’ a ‘witness’ and an ‘example.’ He is called by his proper name Jesus, by the titles Messiah (Christ) and Son of Mary, and by the names Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word and Spirit of God.³

The name *ISA* (or Jesus) occurs thirty-five times in the Quran, where Christ is called *Isa Ibn Maryam*, or, “Jesus, Son of Mary.” This expression, used only once in the New Testament, is employed twenty-three times in the Quran.

In the Four Gospels much attention is given to the name Jesus. Mark, said to have been the scribe of St. Peter, started his biography in this fashion, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1 RSV). Even before the Lord’s conception, it was made known that his name would be Jesus. During the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel said to Mary: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you

shall call his name Jesus" (Luke 1:30 RSV).

Matthew reports that later, in a dream, an angel of God came to Christ's step-father, Joseph, and said: "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21 RSV).

On the birthday of Jesus the angels told the shepherds the good news, saying, "for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11 RSV). After eight days the boy was circumcised, an event still observed among many Christians on January 1, or the Feast of the Holy Name. That day the words of Luke are read which tell us "he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (Luke 2:21 RSV). The entire Gospel of John is an extended commentary on the meaning of the name Jesus. Much of this exegesis is offered in the Lord's own words. Jesus is God Himself, "The Great I Am" (John 8:58), and for that reason he can say, "I am the Light of the World" (John 8:12), "I am the Bread of Life" (John 6:48), "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6), "I am the True Vine" (John 15:1), "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11), "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25), and, lest we misunderstand, Jesus, speaking again through his servant John, says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:13 RSV). Both Jesus and John know that the words "Alpha and Omega" can be used only of the Deity, for earlier in the text it was written, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," *says the Lord God . . .*" (Rev. 1:8 RSV). By the use of the name Jesus, the Gospel authors want to tell us that Jesus is God.

The message of biography and prophecy is made clear in the New Testament Letters. Paul reports that the name Jesus is "above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (Ephesis 1:21 RSV). In another place Paul tells us that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil, 2:10, 11 RSV). The author of Hebrews says of Jesus, "Let all God's angels worship him" (Hebrews 1:6 RSV). Men and angels adore the Lord because the name Jesus means "Savior," for the God-Man is the way of salvation, and, as Peter preached, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12 RSV).

A comparison of the name of Jesus in the Quran and the Bible proves the point made by H. Spencer when he wrote:

The Jesus of Islam is neither the Son of Man of the Scriptures nor the Son of God, and despite the unusual titles which are Given to Him in the Quran, He remains a mere mortal, only a prophet of Allah.⁴

2. The Birth of Jesus

The Quran teaches the Virgin Birth of Jesus. While there is no mention of Joseph, the step-father of the Lord, there is considerable attention given to Mary. Mary is a prophetess. As a matter of fact, Mary is the only female prophet mentioned in the Quran, and, because she is the mother of Jesus, she is the only Muslim prophet to physically mother another prophet. Of Mary it is said that she was "one of the devout" (sura 66:12), "a faithful woman" (sura 5:79, 75), who "guarded her chastity" (sura 21:91), and for this reason God chose her "above the women of the world" (sura 3:37, 42). By a direct action of Allah, Jesus was "cast into Mary" (sura 4:168) so that Christ was a direct creation of Allah like Adam (sura 43:59).

The New Testament writers consistently affirm the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew, the Jewish tax collector, and Luke, the Gentile physician, both feature the story of the Virgin Birth at the beginning of their biographies of Jesus (Matthew 1: Luke 1). Mark starts his account with the Baptism of Christ. In that context, by illustrating the Trinity in action, he indicates the real origin of Jesus, for when Jesus "came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10, 11 RSV). John, in the first chapter of his Gospel, implies a comparison between the rebirth of the believer and the birth of Jesus, for in each instance the Holy Spirit makes sure we "were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13 RSV). For in the Christian Scriptures the story of the Virgin Birth is crucial because it tells us who Jesus is.

If in the Semitic Orient a name reveals a man's fame, so also a person's heredity indicates his identity. To the authors of the New Testament Jesus is not merely a remarkable man, the product of a fortuitous combination of famous ancestry and fine education. Though both Joseph and Mary had illustrious pedigrees (Matthew 1; Luke 1), Christ cannot be understood in natural terms. Jesus cannot be explained by heredity or environment.

Neither biology, nor history, nor pedagogy can identify Jesus. Christ is not a creation of God, for he is God Himself come to earth "for us men and for our salvation."

In Christian teaching the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is intimately associated with the affirmation of the Holy Trinity. For the account of the Virgin Birth identifies Jesus as the Second Member of the Trinity, for Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil, 2:7, 8 RSV).

Only God Himself could pay the price demanded on the cross, and God humbled Himself to be born of the Virgin, lead a life of perfect obedience, and give Himself as the ransom on the tree of Calvary. This work of redemption involved the entire Trinity, for Jesus, the Son, was sent by His Father, supported by the Spirit, and we believers, in the words of Jude, are to "build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the memory of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (Jude 20, 21 RSV).

Every good story has two parts — narration and significance. In the New Testament we have a narration of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. The signification of the event is made clear: Christ is God incarnate, come for the redemption of the human race. Jesus is identified as the Eternal Son of God the Father.

In the Quran we have a narration of a Virgin Birth of Jesus. But in the Quran we are nowhere told the signification of this event. Instead, the import of the Virgin Birth is denied. In the Quran we read such statements as "How can Allah have a son when He has not a wife (sura 6:100; sura 72:3), or "The Jews say Ezra is the son of Allah and the Christians say the Messiah is the son of Allah . . . Allah fight them! How they lie" (sura 9:30). Whether these verses are initially aimed at Arabs who said that Allah had sons and daughters, or whether they were originally intended for the Christians, is now beside the point. Today Muslims use such texts to deny the Incarnation, refuse the Trinity, and rob Jesus of his rightful identity. The result is that the Quran is left with only a parody of the real story of the Virgin Birth, that there is a real absence rather than a real presence of the Savior God in their midst, for they receive Jesus not as the Redeemer but as a Stranger, and that Jesus becomes only "a semi-angelic created being." At that point the Quranic account leads Muslims dangerously close to idolatry.⁵

3. The Work of Jesus

The Quran also discusses the work of Jesus. He is God's messenger. Since speech is one of the seven attributes of Allah (along with Power, Life, Knowledge, Will, Hearing, and Seeing), God can give revelation. Sometimes Allah calls an apostle (*rasul*), who receives a revelation and is commanded to communicate it to mankind. Muhammad was such an individual. Sometimes Allah calls a prophet (*nabi*), who also receives a revelation. He may not be commanded to share it (as in the case of more than hundreds of forgotten prophets). He may be commanded to preach it (as John the Baptist, or Noah), but not author a book. He may be commanded to both preach it and write it. Through the course of history one hundred and four writings were given to prophets. Of these four are books (*kutub*), and one hundred are leaves (*suhuf*). Since Allah created the pen, all the books and decrees are with him on the Preserved Tablet (Sura 85:21) in heaven. One of these four books came through Jesus.

Because Jesus is the creature and slave of Allah (sura 43:59), he must do the will of his Maker. Jesus worked wonders, healed the sick, raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, and amazed the multitudes. But his primary task was to deliver a message from Allah. Twelve times in the Quran we are told the name of the book Jesus brought. It was the *Injil* or "Gospel." This was not the first book given to the Jews. Moses had come earlier with the *Tawrat* (Torah, or Law) (see sura 3:44). David had provided the *Zabur* (Psalms, see sura 4:161). Because these Hebrew Scriptures had been distorted and disobeyed, Jesus came with precisely the same message; only it was once more in its original or pristine perfection. The Gospel was only a summation of the Law, or a message of salvation of works. Because the Christians confused the religion of Paul (which was about Jesus) with the religion of Jesus, it was necessary for Muhammed to come with a transcript of the Archetypal Book (sura 43:3), the Quran, which is, in fact, the true teaching of all previous prophets: "We have revealed Our will to you as We revealed it to Noah and to the prophets who came after him; as We revealed it to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and David, to whom We gave the Psalms" (sura 4:164). While Jews and Christians, in spite of their corrupted Scriptures, remain "Peoples of the Book," the pure Word of God is found in the Quran.

This Muslim teaching reduces Christ to only a penultimate prophet. Though Jesus surpasses all other Quranic prophets in perfection (he is the only sinless prophet in the Quran) and often in the popular affection he inspires among the masses, he is still in-

ferior to Muhammad. What John the Baptist was to Jesus, Jesus is to Muhammad. Jesus is the Pathfinder for the Prophet of Mecca. Christ prepared the way for Muhammad. Professor H. Spencer wrote:

... on the basis of Surah 61 v. 6, the promised Paraclete of John 16:7 is identified with the prophet Muhammad, and Jesus is supposed to have foretold the coming of the Praised one (*Ahmad*). The Christians are accused of having changed the supposed original Greek work *Periklutos* ("Praised one") to *Parakletos* ("Comforter"). Such charges may, of course, easily be refuted by reference to Greek Mss. of the New Testament which were written over a hundred years before the birth of Muhammad (e.g. the Codex Alexandrinus in the British Museum).

The New Testament also pictures Jesus as a prophet, as the spokesman of the Almighty, coming with the Gospel, to proclaim the Kingdom of God, Kenneth Scott Latourette the distinguished Baptist historian, explained it this way:

... Jesus began preaching and teaching. He believed that the kingdom of God was about to be inaugurated, and it was this which constituted the recurrent theme in his message. Obviously the kingdom of God meant a society in which God's will would prevail. As Jesus conceived it, the kingdom of God was to be the gift of God and was not to be achieved by men's striving.⁷

The cost of the Kingdom was the cross. The cross is the culmination of the Gospel, for, along with the empty tomb, it forms the heart of the Christian message. Paul summarized for us the apostolic Gospel: (1 Cor. 15:1-9):

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast — unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles . . .

The consistent New Testament witness is this: the work of Jesus

was to live a perfect life and died as the faultless ransom for the human race. And "What must we do, to be doing the work of God? . . . This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6:28, 29 RSV).

This is a work a Muslim cannot do, because Islam denies the death of Jesus.

4. The Death of Jesus.

While Western scholars have detected a fundamental contradiction in the Quran as to whether or not it teaches that Jesus actually died (sura 19:3 quotes Jesus as saying, "peace upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive"; and sura 3:474 has Allah say, "O Jesus! I will make thee die and take thee up again to me"), most Muslim authorities favor the text in sura 4:156, 157 which denies the crucifixion of Christ:

They denied the truth and uttered a monstrous falsehood against Mary. They declared: "We have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.

On that basis Muslim commentators have taught that Jesus avoided the cross and that a substitute — possibly Simon of Cyrene, Judas Iscariot, Pilate, one of the disciples, or even one of the Master's enemies — died in his place. Numerous tales have been devised to explain what actually happened on Good Friday. One of these, possibly a confused interpretation of such passages as Luke 4:30 and John 8:59, where Jesus really did escape premature death, states that Jesus hid in a niche in a wall in Jerusalem and that one of his companions was killed in his place. Another, recited by Wahab, mentions the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, the preparation of the cross, the darkness at noon, the advent of protecting angels, who, in the night-like conditions, were able to help Jesus escape and who left Judas to be crucified. Yet another, associated with Tabari, reports that Herod gave the order for Jesus to be executed. Jesus fled and went into hiding until he was betrayed by Simon Peter. Jesus was captured and dragged to the cross. The Jews also had a thief named Joshua (Jesus). God worked a miracle and transformed the features of Joshua the thief to resemble those of Jesus the prophet. Quite literally a "Jesus" or Joshua died on the cross while the real Jesus of Nazareth escaped. For seven days the body of Joshua the criminal was on the cross, and each of those days Mary the mother of Jesus came to Golgatha to weep. On the eighth day Jesus, the son of Mary, made himself known to his mother, comforted her, and ascended into heaven. Such are a few of the historic alternative versions of the

crucifixion story that have been found in Islam.

In spite of the evidence of the New Testament and the arguments of modern historical science (even secular scholars in the West do not doubt the death of Jesus), Muslims persist in their teaching that Jesus escaped death on the cross. Today there are at least three novel accounts of the Good Friday events among Muslims:

- a) Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the Indian Muslim, taught as follows:
 . . . crucifixion itself does not cause the death of a man, because only the palms of the hands, or the palms of his hands and feet are pierced . . . After three or four hours Christ was taken down from the cross, and it is certain at that moment he was still alive. Then the disciples concealed him in a very secret place, out of fear of the enmity of the Jews.⁸

This analysis is the basis of the Ahmadiyya Sect of Islam, which teaches that

. . . Jesus was truly crucified and buried, but that he was revived in the tomb by means of a miraculous ointment known as the 'Marham Esau,' or Jesus salve. Then, they say, he left Palestine for India, where he eventually died and was buried at Srinagar, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement, claimed to have found Jesus' tomb in Srinagar.⁹

- b) In his book, *City of Wrong*, the celebrated Arab author, Dr. Kamel Hussein, rejected the conventional Muslim teaching that a substitute mounted the cross for Christ. Hussein wrote:

. . . the idea of a substitute for Christ is a very crude way of explaining the Quranic text. They had to explain a lot to the masses. No cultured Muslim believes in this nowadays. The text is taken to mean that the Jews thought they killed Christ but God raised him unto him in a way we can leave unexplained among the several mysteries which we have taken for granted on faith alone.¹⁰

- c) A few contemporary Muslim writers would go so far as to say that only the body of Jesus died on the cross, but his soul lived, in keeping with what Christ said in Matthew 10:28, "be not afraid of those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul . . ."

There are, undoubtedly, many other Muslim variants — both ancient and modern — of the last days in the earthly life of Jesus. The exact form of the explanation is not nearly so important as the consistent Muslim assertion that Jesus did not die on the cross. This is very puzzling to Christians. The unanimous witness

of the Bible is that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried . . .” Furthermore, the Good Friday Story is one of the few events in the life of the Master almost universally accepted in both ancient and modern times by non-Christian scholars. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans of yore, nor the secular historians of our own time have doubted that Jesus died. Muslim resistance to this teaching is based on a deep-rooted theological bias — a resistance to the central doctrine of Christianity, salvation through the shed blood of the Redeemer. As H. A. R. Gibb pointed out at the turn of this century, Islam “is distinguished from Christianity, not so much . . . by its repudiation of the trinitarian concept of the Unity of God, as by its rejection of the soteriology of Christian doctrine . . .”¹¹

The Sources of the Quranic Christ

What we must now do is to seek the sources of that theological prejudice in the history of Islam. It is time to ask the question: “What are the sources of the Quranic Christ?”

Where did Muhammad acquire the information that he incorporated into the sermons, poems, stories, and sayings that are now perpetuated as the Quran? Three answers to that question are possible; divine revelation, human imagination, and heretical Christian speculation. Let us consider each of these in sequence.

1. Divine Revelation

Today we know the basic facts about the Life of Muhammad. A member of the Qurayish tribe born about 570 near Mecca, Muhammad was early orphaned, raised by relatives, worked as a caravaner, married his employer, retired to a cave to pray, experienced a midlife crisis in 610, believed himself to be the recipient of a revelation from God, preached a religion called Islam, was initially persecuted, fled with his followers to the adjoining oasis of Medina, established earth’s first Muslim Commonwealth, taught fervently and fought successfully, converted and conquered most of the Arabs, entered Mecca in triumph, and died in 632 as the Prophet-King of the East. In retrospect it is obvious that the turning point in his life came when he claimed to be the last of the Abrahamic prophets.

How shall we evaluate that assertion?

Muhammad boasted that he exhibited seven of the criteria connected with prophethood in the Old and New Testaments. Like such prophets as Moses and Jeremiah, he authored (or at least dictated) a book. Furthermore, like Amos and Micah, his message had a strong moral and ethical content, urging personal sanctification and social regeneration. Also, like Samuel of old,

his word was with power and he was an “enabler” of the laity. As Gabriel ministered to Mary and Jesus, so he brought Muhammad the Quran. As Isaiah saw a vision in the temple, so Muhammad heard bells, voices, and ringing, and saw a spiritual sight. As Elijah condemned idolatry and restored the ancient faith of Israel, so Muhammad cleansed the Kaaba and returned the Arabs to the religion of Ishmael. And like Joshua, Saul, and David, Muhammad was successful in war and was vindicated by military triumph. For these reasons Muhammad and his disciples have testified to his prophetic role — he was ecstatic and ethical, energetic and blessed with angelic visitation, he was a reformer of the existing religion (like Josiah, or Luther, or Zwingli), he had a book, and he was rewarded with honor and glory.

A Christian, however, has different criteria by which to measure Muhammad, and it is clear from these standards, derived from the Scriptures, that Muhammad was a *false* prophet. Two of these tests which we must apply to Muhammad’s testimony are as follows:

a) There is the Christological test. Does his message give a true and accurate account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? It obviously does not, and therefore Muhammad falls under the indictment levelled by Christ in Matthew 24 (23-26):

Then if any one says to you, ‘Lo, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand. So if they say to you, ‘Lo, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out; if they say, ‘Lo, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it.

Because Muhammad’s rendition of the life of Jesus contradicts the self-confessed purpose of the Master’s life, “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28 RSV), it cannot rest on divine revelation.

b) There is the canonical test. Does his message square with the written Word of God, the Holy Bible? It obviously does not. Muhammad’s teachings contradict the Living Word, Jesus; the Spoken Word, Christian preaching; and the Written Word, the Bible. We have it on apostolic authority that we are to cling to the Scriptures, and, in Paul’s words, “even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8 RSV). The fact that Muhammad claimed angelic deliverance for his message, therefore, does not vindicate it because it openly contradicts Scripture. As St. John the Divine wrote at the conclusion of his

Prophecy, in words placed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit at the conclusion of the entire Biblical Canon, and, therefore, applicable to all the Scriptures: (Rev. 22:18-19):

I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in three of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

Because Muhammad's account of the life of Christ contradicts that given in the Sacred Scriptures, it is obviously not based on divine revelation.

2. Human Imagination

Because Muhammad did not obtain his ideas from God, he must have acquired them from his environment. The question then is this: Must we look at the inner or outer environment? Did Muhammad create his Christ out of the richness of his own imagination, or did he generate his version of Jesus by drawing on existing heretical accounts? Richard Bell, the celebrated Islamicist, suggested:

. . . Muhammad's own originality may have worked upon very slender information. According to his theory, so often expressed in the stories of the prophets, they were always delivered from the catastrophe. Jesus, had He actually been crucified by His enemies, would have been the only exception. Add to this that he had learned that Christians believed in a living Christ exalted at the right hand of God, and that before the end all God's people would be brought to know him. In that, I think, we have sufficient to generate in Muhammad's mind the account which he gives, without attributing to him any intimate knowledge of Christian speculation, or supposing him to have been influenced by obscure sects which he otherwise shows no knowledge of.¹²

Bell's theory, shared by others, is that Muhammad's theodicy, or philosophical explanation of evil, caused him to defend God's honor by denying that any true and faithful prophet would be allowed to die in shame and disgrace. That tenet seemed to be vindicated by reference to the lives of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, all of whom were successful. In similar fashion, therefore, so Muhammad reasoned, Jesus must have ascended in triumph to heaven, rather than dying in tragedy on the cross. While there is much to commend this interpretation, it is much to facile in its denial of an obvious fact: there is nothing taught by Muhammad

in the Quran that was not previously stated in heretical Christian speculation. It is more reasonable to see the Christ of the Quran as having its origin in the interplay between the fertile imagination of Muhammad and the many heretical Christologies then in circulation in the East.

3. Heretical Christian Speculation

It has been pointed out that there are probably a million ways to miss a target. One can go with his bow and arrow and miss the bullseye by firing backward, or upward, or downward, or side-ward, let alone shooting forward and missing the goal by only a small margin. In the same way, there are quite literally thousands of false ways in which to tell or interpret the story of Jesus. The landscape of the ancient church is littered with hundreds upon hundreds of these erroneous Christologies. Gnosticism, Marcionism, Ebionitism, Arianism, Monarchianism, Sabbellianism, Pelagianism, and many more “isms” long since forgotten, came up with alternative narrations of the life of Christ. Many of these heterodox histories denied the crucifixion of Christ. For instance Mani, the Persian teacher who died in 276, taught that Jesus, “the son of the widow” (he apparently confused Christ with the son of the widow of Nain), fell victim to the devil, who desired to have him crucified; but, in a clever last-minute transaction, Satan, not the Savior, was nailed to the tree — and Jesus escaped unscathed. Or again, the *Travels of the Apostles* claimed that “Christ had not been crucified, but another in his stead.” Yet again, the *Acts of John* has our Lord

. . . represented as talking to John in a place apart while the people are supposed to be crucifying Him. He says: ‘Unto the multitude in Jerusalem I am being crucified and pierced with lances and gall and vinegar is given Me to drink. But unto thee I speak.’ ‘Neither am I he that is on the cross, whom now thou seest not but only hearest a voice. I was reckoned to be that which I am not, not being what I was to many others.’ ‘Nothing, therefore, of the things which they will say of Me have I suffered.’¹³

Or, according to Ignatius, as early as the year 115 “some believed that Jesus suffered only in semblance.” Or, still again, in the *Gospel of Peter* Jesus was silent on the cross, “since he felt no pain.” Cerinthus taught that “before his crucifixion Christ withdrew himself, leaving Jesus to suffer and to rise again, while Christ, as being a spiritual being, remained unpassible.”¹⁴ There are literally hundreds of such tales.

One of the most fascinating and frustrating is that associated with the name of Basilides, a popular philosopher during the reign

of emperors Adrian and Antoninus Pius (120-140). This figure is fascinating, because his views seem to have been plagerized by the Muslims in order to obtain their account of the death of Christ. But he is also frustrating, because his ideas are known only through their quotation by his enemies — and his orthodox opponents do not ascribe to him a consistent Christology. St. Irenaeus attacked Basilides for teaching that

. . . Jesus appeared in human form and taught, but at the crucifixion changed forms with Simon of Cyrene, so that the latter was crucified in the form of Jesus, while Christ Himself stood by and mocked at his enemies in the form of Simon; for since He was incorporeal, He was essentially invisible, and so He returned to the Father. Hence no one who really knows the truth will confess the Crucified, for, if he does so, he is a slave of the world-angels; but if he understands what really happened at the crucifixion, he is freed from them.¹⁵

While other theologians denied that Basilides taught these doctrines (they ascribe even more heretical views to him), the point is obvious: deviant versions of the life of Jesus were quite common by the time of the immediate post-apostolic generation. Furthermore, there is nothing in Islam that is not contained already in some of these ancient Christian heresies. Since “nothing has sprung from nothing,” we should probably seek the origins on the Quranic Christ in the heterodox thought of the second century of the Christian Era.¹⁶ More careful searching amidst the rubble of the false theologies of antiquity would doubtless provide ample proof that Islam is, in fact, a very successful *Christian* heresy.

We who preach the Christian Gospel, finally, must see in our own hearts the *one* source of the Quranic Christ that ultimately counts — man’s false pride that seeks a remedy for sin anywhere else than in the shed blood of the Lamb of God. Having identified that sin, let us confess it, allow the Holy Spirit to purge it, and then resolve with Paul that “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23, 24 RSV).

FOOTNOTES

1. Samuel M. Zwemer, *Islam: A Challenge to Faith*, second revised edition (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1907), pp. 93, 94.
2. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Quran* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1965), p. 16.
3. *Ibid.*

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4. H. Spencer, *Islam and the Gospel of God* (Delhi: S.P.C.K., 1956), p. 9.
 5. At points in his ministry Muhammad was an idolater. For a while to win the allegiance of the Tha'qif tribe, Muhammad allowed them to keep *Allat* (the feminine form of Allah) as their idol, and once Muhammad even admitted that there were three goddesses, the daughters of Allah. It has also been suggested that since Islam teaches the eternity of the Quran alongside Allah, it in fact proclaims not monotheism but ditheism.
 6. Spencer, *Islam and the Gospel of God*, p. 8.
 7. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1953), p. 37.
 8. As quoted by Parrinder, *Jesus in the Quran*, p. 113.
 9. John Elder, *Biblical Approach to the Muslim* (Houston: Leadership and Training International, 1974), p. 72.
 10. Quoted Parrinder, *Jesus in the Quran*, p. 112.
 11. H.A.R. Gibb. *Mohammedanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 69.
 12. Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Frank Cass and Company, 1968), p. 154.
 13. J. Windrow Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945), p. 30.
 14. George Salmon, "Docetae," *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*, edited by William Smith and Henry Wace (London: John Murray, 1877), I, 865-867.
 15. A. S. Peake, "Basilides, Basilidians," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), II, 428.
 16. W. St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Quran* (London: SPCK, 1905), p. 11.