

# **MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS TALKING TOGETHER**

WHAT CAN WE AGREE ON CONCERNING THE GOSPEL?

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## **THE PRAYER**

All praise is due to You our God.

You are the First before whom there was no first,

And the Last after whom there shall be no last.

Our eyes fall short of seeing You.

Our imagination falls short of describing You.

But in our own small way we still praise You.

Holy are Your names.

Great are Your blessings.

No power can question You for what You do,

But You shall question us.

We realize that we know so little.

Yet when others offend us,

We think we know so much.

Help us, O Lord, to learn

What is most important for us to know.

We praise You our God for what You have taught us about Yourself.

I wrote this prayer as a paraphrase of a section in Al-Sahifat Al-Kamilat Al-Sajjadiyya. This ancient book of prayers by Imam Zayn al-‘Abidin is especially used by Shi‘a Muslims, but the words of this paraphrase could easily be spoken by any Sunni Muslim. Christians would also find useful meditation material within this prayer.

The best-known Muslim prayer comprises the opening text of the Qur’an. It is called Surat al-Fatihah:

In the name of God the Gracious the Merciful.

Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds,

The Gracious, the Merciful,

King of the Day of Judgment.

It is You that we worship

And Your assistance we seek.

Lead us in the straight path,

The path of those with whom You are pleased,

Not of those with whom You are angry,

Nor of those who go astray.

Amen.<sup>1</sup>

I once heard a prominent Muslim scholar remark that every Christian should be able to pray Surat al-Fatihah, and every Muslim should be able to pray the Lord's Prayer. In this statement he was pointing out close similarities between what Muslims and Christians believe. The Qur'an even goes so far as to say that out of all the people of the world those closest to Muslims in love are those who say, "We are Christians." (Surah 5:82)

Muslims and Christians both believe many of the same things about God.<sup>2</sup> Both believe that God is,

Creator of everything.

Eternal

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<sup>1</sup> This is my own translation of the first surah of the Qur'an. Muslims would normally recite this prayer in Arabic, no matter what their first language may be—and they would be quick to point out that any English translation of the Arabic text is always incomplete and provisional. Throughout the remainder of this booklet, unless otherwise noted all Qur'anic quotations will be taken from the revision of 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's translation: The Holy Qur'an, English Translation of the meaning and Commentary, rev. and ed. The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance. (King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, n.d.)

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to use the word "God" rather than "Allah" in this booklet, unless "Allah" is used in a quotation. Because the term "Allah" is foreign to most English speaking Christians, they often assume that "Allah" must be a false deity—they don't realize that Arabic translations of the Bible also refer to God as "Allah." The word means "the God." Since Arabic is a Semitic language, we should not be surprised that "Allah" is also related to Biblical Hebrew terms used for God. Muslims are commanded in the Qur'an to say to People of the Book (Jews and Christians), "Our God and your God is One." (Surah 29:46)

All powerful

All knowing

Ever present

Lord of all

The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the other patriarchs

The One who spoke to Moses from the burning bush

The One who caused Jesus to be born of a virgin

The One who sent all true prophets

The Judge before whom we will stand on the Last Day.

Christians should never underestimate the respect Muslims have for Jesus. Muslims, as well as Christians, affirm that

Jesus was born of a virgin.

He was the Messiah.

He performed many miracles, including healing the sick and raising the dead.

He was a prophet.

He was completely sinless throughout his entire earthly existence.

God raised Jesus to heaven.

He will come back to earth before the Day of Judgment.

He is the “Word of God.”

Yet as close as Christians and Muslims may be on many points there are still serious differences as well. The purpose of this booklet is to address some issues that our Muslim readers may have concerning the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is hoped that you as a Muslim will seek out a Christian friend with whom you can discuss these matters after you have read this

material. You will find nothing in these pages that speaks against the Qur'an or Muhammad.<sup>3</sup> Instead I choose to take a respectful approach, trying to build upon what Muslims and Christians already have in common. May God grant all of us deeper insight into truth as we seek the One who is the source of all Truth.

### **Is the Gospel to be trusted today?**

Muslims are required, as an article of faith, to believe in all the books of God. The word of God include the Taurat (Torah), the Zabur (Psalms), the Injil (Gospel) and any other portion of scripture that had been given to Jews and Christians from their Lord (as mentioned in Surah 5:66). Whoever denies that God sent these scriptures, denies Islam. A representative question and answer book for Muslims asks, "What about the man who refuses to acknowledge the Taurat, the Zabur, and the Injil as the books of Al-lah?" Then the answer is given, "Such a person is a kafir (unbeliever), for the holy Qur-an testifies to their being Divine Scriptures."<sup>4</sup> On the question of whether God sent books to Moses, David, Jesus and other prophets, there is no controversy.

Muslim scholars, however, do argue among themselves as to whether the books of the Bible are with us today in a reliable state of preservation or not. Some will say that the scriptures of Jews and Christians have been so corrupted that they are no longer trustworthy. Others scholars say that the scriptures given to the Jews and Christians remain uncorrupted. Ibn Khaldun wrote that "the statement concerning the alteration (of the Torah by the Jews) is unacceptable to thorough scholars and cannot be understood in its plain meaning, since custom prevents people who have a (revealed) religion from dealing with their divine scriptures in such a manner."<sup>5</sup>

The Qur'an specifies five ways people have corrupted the scriptures:

When someone reads the scriptures aloud to others, he may deliberately add words or twist words to distort the meaning of the text. Listeners may think the distorted words are from God, but they are not. (See Surah 3:78)

A listener may hear the words read correctly but then repeat a distorted version of what was heard. (See Surahs 2:75 and 5:13)

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<sup>3</sup> If the first Christian believers in Ephesus restrained from blaspheming the polytheistic Artemis cult (Acts 19:37), then today's Christians should take an even more respectful attitude in their conversations with Muslims, because Muslims are monotheists and they share more common beliefs with Christians than any other major religious group.

<sup>4</sup> Al-lama Mufti Muham-mad Kifayatul-lah, Lessons in Islam (Ta'limul Islam) (Delhi: Kutub Khana Azizia, trans. Sabihud-din Ahmad Ansari, n.d.), 3:11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 1986), 1:20.

A person may write a fake book and then claim it is from God. The motive of the deceiver is to make a profit selling what is written. (See Surah 2:79)

Someone may deliberately conceal what has been written, hiding portions of scripture. For example, he may cover a verse with his hand and read only what was before it and what was after it, avoiding what he did not like in the scripture. (See Surah 6:91)

A person who has not read or studied the scripture may give strange opinions as to what it really teaches. (See Surah 2:78) If we are not careful, we may easily confuse legends, hearsay, maxims and opinions with scripture.

Jews and Christians have no monopoly on these errors—Muslims have done the same. But the crucial point to notice is that none of these errors caused the text of the scripture itself to be changed. No one can point to the verses above to show that the Bible has been corrupted beyond reliability. In fact the Qur'an clearly states that no one is able to change the words of God. (See Surahs 6:34, 115 and 18:27)

Sometimes Muslim scholars distinguish between two kinds of revelation when talking about the Gospel and the Qur'an. Some say that the Gospel came by ilham, but the Qur'an was given by tanzil. They see ilham as a less reliable form of revelation. However, this theological distinction does not match what the Qur'an says on the subject. Ilham is never used in the Qur'an to refer to any part of the Bible. The Arabic root (nzi) from which we get tanzil is used in Surah 3:3 for the sending down (nzi) of the Qur'an which confirms the Torah and the Gospel which God had previously sent (nzi)—in this verse the concept of tanzil is used for all three books, not just one.<sup>6</sup>

When Jesus came as a prophetic messenger (rasul), God sent the Gospel through him (Surah 57:27). His disciples were inspired of God (Surah 5:111). Therefore the disciples of Jesus were able to safely preserve the Gospel message. This is why the Qur'an never claims to correct the Gospel or to replace it.<sup>7</sup> Quite the contrary, the Qur'an affirms the truthfulness and soundness of the Gospel (see Arabic root sdq in Surah 3:3). The Qur'an not only confirmed the Gospel and other scripture, but the Qur'an was supposed to help protect them from accusations of corruption (Surah 5:48).

Sometimes Muslims argue that the Gospel we find in the Bible cannot be the same Gospel mentioned in the Qur'an. They reason that we find four Gospels in the Bible, but the Qur'an only mentions a single Gospel. This is easily explained. When scribes originally copied the Gospel on scrolls, a separate scroll would be used for each account

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<sup>6</sup> To simplify matters for those unfamiliar with the Qur'an, I will use only surah numbers rather than Arabic names for the surahs. Surahs are sometimes called chapters, but they are not chapters in a strict sense—much the same as Psalms in the Bible would not normally be called chapters. There are two different verse-numbering systems used for publications of the Qur'an. I am using the more common verse system. If you use the other verse-numbering system and have difficulty locating a reference, look a few verses before or after and you should find it.

<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an claims to correct Christian teachings when they have been taken to extremes (Surah 4:171), but the Gospel itself remained truthful.

recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Then the codex was invented. A codex was an early type of book, much easier to store and transport than a scroll. Then it became customary to put all four Gospel accounts between one set of covers. By the time of the birth of Muhammad it was common to refer to the four Gospel accounts that were gathered into a single volume as simply “the Gospel.”

Occasionally Muslims will claim that the true Gospel exists today, but they say it is the Gospel of Barnabas rather than the Gospel accounts found in the Bible. There is something appealing about this for Muslims. The Gospel of Barnabas prophesies the coming of Muhammad by name, it denies Jesus was the “son of God,” and it denies the crucifixion. At first glance, it appears to be quite friendly to Muslim ideas of what the Gospel ought to be. However, upon closer inspection we see that the Gospel of Barnabas explicitly contradicts the Qur’an. Eleven times in the Qur’an Jesus is called “the Messiah” (al-Masih), but the author of Barnabas denies Jesus is the Messiah (section 42).

The writer of Barnabas was unfamiliar with the geography of Palestine. In section 20, he writes that Jesus “went to the Sea of Galilee, and having embarked in a ship sailed to his city of Nazareth.” For that to happen, Jesus would have needed to fly his ship many miles across dry land to reach Nazareth, or he would have had to miraculously move Nazareth to the edge of the Sea of Galilee. No such miracle is ever recorded in either the Bible or the Qur’an.

Who wrote this Gospel of Barnabas, and when was it written? Internal evidence gives us clues. It must have been written sometime between 1300 and 1350 A.D., because it says that the “year of jubilee” occurs every 100 years (section 82). A year of jubilee is mentioned only in Leviticus and Numbers in the Bible, and then it was to occur every 50th year.<sup>8</sup> There is only one time in religious history when a year of jubilee was to occur every 100 years. Pope Boniface VIII of the Roman Catholic Church instituted a year of jubilee in 1300 A.D., with the understanding that the next Catholic jubilee would be 100 years later. However, Pope Clement VI made the next year of jubilee occur in 1350. The only time in history when the year of jubilee was thought to last 100 years was between 1300 and 1350. Based on this and other evidence it appears the author of the Gospel of Barnabas was a Roman Catholic convert to Islam who wrote this forgery sometime after 1300 and probably before 1350. Fra Marino discovered an Italian manuscript of the Gospel of Barnabas in the library of Pope Sixtus (1585-1590 A.D.) No ancient Latin, Greek or Aramaic manuscripts of this book have ever been found. If we are to believe in the Gospel, it is not Barnabas, but rather the Gospel of the Bible.

Even among Muslims, such as Ibn Khaldun, who affirm that the Gospel of the Bible is uncorrupted, they will often say it has been abrogated and replaced by the Qur’an. Abrogation (naskh) is a principle (Surah 2:106) employed by Muslim scholars to determine if one legal command in the Qur’an has replaced another. However, there are

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<sup>8</sup> You will find a number of references to jubilee in Leviticus 25 and 27 and one reference in Number 36:4 in the Torah.

limits to abrogation. Truth cannot be abrogated. Neither can historical facts. Only legal instructions can be abrogated, such as guidelines related to drinking alcohol.

At no time does the Qur'an claim to abrogate the Gospel. In fact, the opposite is true. The Qur'an commands Christians, "Let the People of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein. If any do fail to judge by what Allah hath revealed, they are those who rebel" (Surah 5:47). The Qur'an commends some Jews and Christians who have been faithful to the Torah, the Gospel and all the rest of Biblical scripture—even if the majority of their religious communities have not stood fast by what God has given them (vs. 66). And the Qur'an says that those who have rejected the Torah and the Gospel have nothing to stand on (vs. 68). Even Muhammad himself, whose example Muslims are commanded to follow, is told, "If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee" (Surah 10:94). The Qur'an says, "Allah doth blot out or confirm what He pleaseth" (Surah 13:39). We know that the Qur'an says it came to confirm the Gospel—it never claims to blot it out.<sup>9</sup>

### **Does the Qur'an contradict the Gospel?**

The reason for the whole controversy over reliability is that there seems to be contradictions between the Qur'an and the Bible. When faced with Muslim-Christian doctrinal conflicts, we can take one of two approaches. In the first approach, Muslims say the Qur'an is right and the Bible is wrong (corrupted), whereas Christians say the Bible is right and the Qur'an is wrong. This is the easiest and the most popular approach. It allows combatants on both sides to feel they have steadfastly defended their faith against the other. Unfortunately, they often never enter within the understanding distance of what the other is saying, and when they look at the other's book they see it in the worst possible light.

The second approach is to see if there is a way the two texts can be harmonized on these points without doing injustice to either the Arabic text of the Qur'an or the Hebrew and Greek text of the Bible. In other words, we consider whether these conflicts are problems of interpretation or irreconcilable problems in the actual texts. The remainder of this booklet will take the second approach. My own position is that the Qur'an does not contradict the Bible on two key points that have been a constant source of controversy between Muslims and Christians. These are:

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<sup>9</sup> This short work cannot examine how we can know that the Qur'an or Bible today is a reliable reconstruction of what was recorded in the earliest manuscripts. Although Muhammad himself permitted variant readings of the Qur'an, Muslim scholars have worked to reconstruct a uniform text. The Egyptian Standard Text of 1925 is the most widely used Arabic Qur'an. For information on the development of the text of the Qur'an and an argument for its reliability from a Muslim perspective, see Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum Al-Qur'an: an introduction to the sciences of the Qur'an*. For more information on variant readings in the Qur'an, see Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an*. The most widely used scholarly text for the New Testament in its original language is Greek New Testament, UBS 4th edition. It contains variant readings in footnotes. For more information on the development of the text of the New Testament and an argument for its reliability from a Christian perspective, see F.F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents: are they reliable?*



Whether or not Jesus is the “son of God.”

Whether or not Jesus died on the cross.

Let’s look at each issue more closely.

### **“Son of God”**

There are two Arabic words for “son” in the Qur’an. The first is *walid*. It refers to a child who is physically begotten through sexual relations. The Qur’an constantly uses this term when denying that Jesus is the “son of God.” Christians sometimes say that Jesus must be the “son of God,” because he had no physical father. Muslims reply that if this makes someone God’s son, then Adam must be doubly the “son of God,” because he had neither a physical father nor mother.

When Christians say Jesus is the “son of God,” it sounds to Muslims like Christians are claiming God had sex with Mary, and Jesus was their offspring. An obvious question is asked in Surah 6:101: “How can He [God] have a son when He hath no consort?” Muslims know that Mary is Jesus’ mother. Often in the Qur’an, like in Mark 6:3, Jesus is called “son of Mary.” Muslims remind Christians that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was born (Surah 19:16-21).<sup>10</sup> Since God is Spirit, he would not need to have sexual union with a woman to give birth to a child. He would simply say, “Be,” and the child would be created (Surah 19:35).

Based on the internal evidence of the Qur’an, it appears to be attacking a Christian heresy rather than the Bible itself on this point. Apparently in the Arabian peninsula there were people who claimed to be Christians who had mixed pagan ideas with the few things they knew of the Gospel story, and they worshipped a family of three gods—God, His consort Mary, and their child Jesus (Surah 5:116). Most of these paganized Christians (or Christianized pagans) probably had only a vague, second-hand familiarity with the Gospel story. They most likely heard from travelers that Mary was sometimes called “Mother of God,”<sup>11</sup> and she was venerated in icons and liturgy. So these pagan Christians had gone too far in the meaning they gave to “son of God.” The Qur’an warns them, “O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion.... Say not ‘Three’: desist.” (Surah 4:171).

The second Arabic word for “son” is *ibn*. This can mean a physical son or a son in a spiritual or allegorical sense. For example, a wayfarer is literally called “son [*ibn*] of the road” in Surahs 17:26 and 30:38. No one would take this to mean the road physically

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<sup>10</sup> Until now I have never met a Muslim who denied the virgin birth of Jesus, although I have met some who claimed to be Christians who did so.

<sup>11</sup> Although some church groups call Mary “Mother of God,” the term is never found within the Bible itself.

beget a child any more than anyone would claim that the “Mother of the Book” in Surah 13:39 referred to a woman who gave birth to a book. The only way we can determine when ibn is used in a physical or spiritual/allegorical sense is by context.

Only on one occasion does the Qur’an use the word ibn when denying that Jesus is “son of God.” This is in Surah 9:30, where we read, “[T]he Christians call Christ the Son [ibn] of Allah. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say.” The context shows that ibn is here used as a synonym for walid, because the so-called Christians are imitating the pagans who believed one god could carnally beget another. In fact, the verse begins by saying that the Jews of that region had done something similar with Ezra (‘Uzair), calling him “son [ibn] of Allah.” I am not aware of any other example of Jews making this claim. It cropped up here because paganism had infiltrated Judaism and Christianity more than the Bible itself in the Hijaz region of Arabia.

I would suggest that the Qur’an is right when it says Jesus is not the “son of God” in a physical sense, and the Bible is right when it says Jesus is the “son of God” in a spiritual sense. The Qur’an is not attacking the Bible. It is only attacking a view of Jesus held by paganized Christians who had strayed far away from the teachings of the Gospel.

Humans and angels are called “sons of God” or “children of God” at various times in the Bible (Exodus 4:22; Job 1:6; Luke 3:38; Acts 17:29). In addition to making us, God watches over us and helps us— like a loving Father. Muslims and Christians do not argue this point, even if Muslims do not normally refer to God as Father.<sup>12</sup> However the term “son of God” when used with reference to Jesus goes beyond this meaning.

When the title “son of God” is used for Jesus, it points to his mission. In ancient Judaism, the king of Israel was sometimes called “son of God,” not in a physical sense but to show his authority and his need to rely upon God for guidance (see 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7). By the time Jesus began his ministry in Israel, Jewish people had long been anticipating that God would send a final king to destroy oppression and restore righteousness. The Hebrew name they gave for this king was Messiah, and its Greek equivalent was Christ.

Jesus’ public ministry as Messiah began with his baptism. According to the Gospel, when Jesus came up from the water a voice from heaven said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matthew 3:17).<sup>13</sup> Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was near and that all should repent. Even though many did not submit to his kingly authority before he ascended to heaven, that is not the end of the story. Today Christians and Muslims alike look forward to the second coming of Jesus. Both groups believe he will

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<sup>12</sup> One of the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of Allah in Islam is Al-Wadud, “the Loving.” Al-Habib (a more common term for love) is a synonym for Al-Wadud in the Hadith collection of Sahih Bukhari, volume 9, “Book of Tawhid,” chapter 22. I mention this because sometimes Christians mistakenly say that the concept of love is absent from the doctrine of God in Islam. Christians and Muslims may disagree on many points, but this should not be one of them.

<sup>13</sup> All Biblical quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

return to earth, destroy evil and establish righteousness before the Day of Judgment. Muslims and Christians hold much in common if they understand the meaning of “son of God” in this light.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to pointing to Jesus’ mission, the title “son of God” also refers to something distinct about his nature. The Bible is clear that Jesus was not a second god. But the one and only God revealed Himself to us in a special way through Jesus—as the scripture says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The way Jesus entered this world and the way he left it confirmed his title as “son of God” (Luke 1:35 and Romans 1:4). Even if others can be called God’s children, the Gospel says Jesus claimed he was the monogenes “son of God” (John 3:16, 18). This Greek word is often translated “only begotten” but that creates a misunderstanding for our Muslim readers of what Jesus was saying. A clearer translation of monogenes is “the only one of his kind” or “unique.” Jesus claimed to be the distinctive “son of God.”

At first glance this might appear to contradict the Qur’an. In Surah 4:171 we read;

“Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him....” But the phrase “no more than” is absent from the Arabic. This list affirms important qualities of Jesus. He is a Messenger of God. He is the Word of God. And he is Spirit coming from God to take residence in the human body of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi in *Fusus al-Hikam* explains the nature of Jesus in a surprising way for a Muslim theologian. Building on the concept of Jesus as the “Word” of God, he said, “[Jesus] is the Word of God, he is the Spirit of God, and he is the servant (that is to say the creature) of God. This is something that has taken place for no other man, in so far as one considers his apparent form.” He then went on to say in praise of Jesus, “Be at once God (in thine essence) and creature (by thy form) and thou wilt be through God the dispenser of His grace.”<sup>16</sup>

Many Muslims will object, saying this is a distortion of what it means for Jesus to be the “Word” of God. They argue that God said, “Be.” Mary conceived. And Jesus came into existence through God’s command. Therefore, they say, the title “Word” of God only

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<sup>14</sup> Muslims are often told that Jesus’ ministry was purely local, not worldwide. The Gospel records that Jesus made a similar claim when he said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). But this changed shortly before he went back to heaven. At that time he commanded his followers, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19). The Qur’an also points to the worldwide scope of Jesus’ importance. He is called “a sign for all peoples” (Surah 21:91) and a sign of the coming Hour of Judgment (Surah 43:61).

<sup>15</sup> Muslim mystics have been more likely to recognize these special qualities than other commentators on the Qur’an.

<sup>16</sup> Muhyi-d-din Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Wisdom of the Prophets (Fusus al-Hikam)* (Gloucestershire: Beshara Publications, trans. Arabic/French Titus Burckhardt, trans. French/English Angela Culme-Seymour, 1975), 73-74.

refers to the manner of Jesus birth, not his nature. The biggest problem with this line of reasoning is that Muslims and Christians alike believe that God brought everything into existence through His Word. He said, “Let there be light,” and light came into existence. God created the sun, moon, stars, earth and creatures by His Word. Yet not one of them is ever called the “Word” of God after that. This title is reserved for Jesus alone. So whatever the title means in Surah 4:171, it appears to mean more than simply the manner of his birth. It would be good for you as a Muslim to reread Surah 4:171 as well as John 1:1-14, and discuss what you see in both passages with a Christian friend. See what truth you can help each other understand on this point.

### **Death of Jesus on the Cross**

Most Muslims think Jesus never died on the cross. A basic reason they believe the Gospel has been corrupted is because about half of the Gospel material focuses on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Christians, on the other hand, see these events as a summary of the Gospel itself (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). For Christians the Gospel is more than a book. It is above all else the revelation of the grace and love of God for humanity displayed through the events of Jesus’ life, in his triumph over sin and death. It provides us hope. As God raised Jesus from the dead, so He too may give us a new and abundant life—freeing us from slavery to sin and its consequences. The book of the Gospel is not simply God’s Word; Jesus Himself is also God’s Word offering us God’s grace.

Most Muslims, however, believe the appearances surrounding the crucifixion are deceiving—it only looked like Jesus died on the cross. They have suggested that perhaps a faithful disciple was changed to look like Jesus, and that disciple died. Or perhaps Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was changed by God to look like Jesus, and Judas was really the one who was crucified. Or perhaps Jesus himself was hung on the cross, but he didn’t really die—it only looked like he died—but he recovered and died at a later time.

None of these conjectures are found within the Qur’an itself. But they all grow from a particular interpretation of Surah 4:157: “That they [the Jewish leaders] said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’;— but they killed him not, nor crucified him. Only a likeness of that was shown to them. And those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge. But only conjecture to follow, for of a surety, they killed him not.”

The way we understand the verse depends on the way we translate the phrase *shubbiha la-hum*. The translation above says, “Only a likeness of that was shown to them,” meaning that it only looked like Jesus died on the cross but he didn’t really. If that interpretation is adopted, Muslims reject the Gospel because the crucifixion account appears to contradict the Qur’an.

When Muslims translate *shubbiha la-hum* to mean “it only appeared to them as such” or “it only looked like this,” a different understanding of the whole verse comes to light. Then we understand the verse to mean that the Jewish leaders were boasting of their power to kill Jesus, but in reality they had no power at all—if Jesus dies, it is because

God decrees it, not because evil men condemn him to death. This interpretation fits quite well with the second half of the very next verse: “Allah is exalted in Power, Wise” (Surah 4:158).

I would suggest that Jesus’ own words shed light on which of the two ways we should translate the verse. Jesus said, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father” (John 10:17-18). The Jews thought they were in charge, but it only looked that way. In reality God, who is exalted in power, was actually in charge. When Jesus was arrested, he said he could appeal to his Father to send twelve legions of angels to protect him if he so chose (Matthew 26:53). Instead he chose to willingly surrender his life in obedience to the divine plan. God allowed it to look like the Jews were in charge, but in reality they had no independent authority at the time of Jesus’ death. Then after three days Jesus was raised from the dead and later was taken up to heaven. This fits also with the first half of Surah 4:158: “Allah raised him [Jesus] up unto Himself.”

### **The second interpretation has a number of advantages over the more popular**

interpretation. The second interpretation harmonizes the Qur’anic statement with the Gospel without distorting the words of either book. It has support from various Muslim scholars. It fits well with other verses in the Qur’an that allude to the end of Jesus’ life on earth (see Surahs 3:55 and 19:33). Surah 5:114-115 refers to a solemn festival that would be celebrated by Jesus’ disciples from the earliest of them until the last of them. This appears to be a reference to the Lord’s Supper. Christians from the earliest days until now have celebrated the Lord’s Supper in commemoration of Jesus willingly giving his life for us. If Jesus never died on the cross, this festival would lose all meaning.

Muslims sometimes are quick to say that even if Jesus died on the cross, it cannot be for our sins. The Qur’an says that “no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another” in Surahs 6:164 and 17:15. However, the Qur’an also teaches that Jesus was pure (Surah 19:19), and Muhammad is reported to have said, “Every person when his mother gives birth, Satan strikes him but it was not the case with Maryam and her son [Jesus].”<sup>17</sup> So Jesus had no sins of his own to carry.

We have examined a few key points that are important for Muslims and Christians to discuss with each other. In these discussions and in Muslim-Christian relations in general, certain guidelines should be followed. Christians are commanded to not bear false witness against their Muslim neighbors (Exodus 20:16). Christians are expected “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with ... God” in their relationships with Muslim individuals, groups and nations (Micah 6:8). Christians are told that that if they want to be “pure” in their religion, they need to help those who are poor and oppressed, such as widows and orphans (James 1:27)—including Muslim refugees and victims of

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<sup>17</sup> Sahih Muslim, volume 4, Hadith 6429

war. Christians are required to “treat people the same way you want them to treat you” (Matthew 7:12), even when discussing doctrinal differences with Muslims.

Muslims also should have no problem affirming these guidelines. And in the Qur’an Muslims are commanded to “strive as in a race in all virtues” (Surah 5:48) when dealing with their Christian neighbors.

If Christians and Muslims follow these guidelines, then surely they should be able to have many fruitful discussions. And they should also be able to work together on various projects for common good—whether they always agree with each other on every point or not. People from both groups want to honor God by their thoughts, attitudes and actions. What do you think the next step should be?