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The Koran's Denial of Christ's Crucifixion: A Critique

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Introduction

It is well-known among scholars of Christianity and Islam that the holy books of each religion portray the crucifixion of Jesus quite differently. In the New Testament, of course, Christ dies on a Roman cross for the sins of the faithful, and is resurrected. In the Koran, however, we are told that Christ was not crucified at all, but rather someone who looked like him was executed in his stead. In this paper, I want to do four things.

One, to show that the New Testament account is preferable to the Koranic account on purely historical grounds (I say preferable, since neither account can be shown to be true beyond all doubt. Such 'proof' exists only in the realms of mathematics and formal logic). Two, to point out that Muslim explanations of what happened at the crucifixion are unconvincing, especially regarding the so-called 'substitution theory'. Three, to show that Muslim scholars sometimes go to such lengths to reinterpret the New Testament narrative of the crucifixion that they seek refuge in a supra-

historical realm which is inappropriate when dealing with an historical event like the crucifixion. Finally, I want to briefly raise the issue of how all of this impacts the Islamic doctrine of the infallibility of the Koran.

I do not intend this article to be an indictment of Islam as a religion; much of what is in the Koran is fully acceptable to a Christian (e.g., the great respect shown for the OT prophets and patriarchs, the stress on the Day of Judgment, and the insistence on monotheism). Still, the disagreement over what happened to Jesus is of vital importance. If Christ was not crucified, then Christianity is without its historical and theological basis. If he was indeed crucified, then Islam faces historical and theological problems of its own. This is especially true for Islam, as Muslims view their scriptures and their religion as superseding and correcting the mistakes of the earlier, mistake-riddled Christian revelation.

The story of Christ's death is well-known, and is described in detail by the four gospel writers, and is referred to in various other places in the NT. My

goal here is not to address the topic of Christ's resurrection, as this has been done before, and in excellent manner, by numerous apologists, from C.S. Lewis to John Warwick Montgomery to N.T. Wright, Gary Habermas, and William Lane Craig.

But since the focal point of this paper is the Islamic denial of Christ's crucifixion, the Koranic verse in question reads as follows, with Jews exclaiming, in surah (chapter) 4:157-158: "[W]e have surely killed the Christ, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; rather it was made only to appear so to them. And those who have differed concerning him are in doubt regarding him; they have no knowledge of him except the following of conjecture. They did not kill him with certainty. Rather, God took him up to Himself, for God is mighty and wise.' How and when Christ *did* eventually die, is 'not able to be clearly judged from the text of the Koran....[references to Christ's ultimate fate] are acutely scanty and, moreover, ambiguous.'¹

The Koran's teachings on the crucifixion 'have become the *crux interpretum*, the burden and pain of exegetes'.² Some Christian theologians have not dealt realistically with the fact that the Bible and the Koran contradict each other on this matter. Martin Bauschke writes that 'Christians and Muslims are agreed that however Jesus may have died and whatever happened to him after his death—this death did

not and does not have the last word about his life and activity on behalf of God. Rather, this death was the way through, the transition, the way back into the presence and nearness of the one who sent him.'³ Such a statement is troublesome because, apparently in the name of preserving religious harmony between the two faiths, it claims there is an 'agreement' between Christians and Muslims where no such agreement exists. What Christian says it does not matter how Jesus died? And what Christian or Muslim holds that it does not matter what 'happened to him after his death'?

I Confirmation of the Crucifixion by Non-Biblical Sources

A brief word needs to be said regarding the confirmation of the event by extra-biblical sources. It is a general rule of historical investigation that an event is more likely to have actually happened if it is multiply attested, that is, if the event is described by more than one source. Tacitus (ca 56-117 A.D.), a Roman historian and senator, confirmed the historicity of Christ's crucifixion: 'Christus, from whom the name [Christians] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hand of the procurator Pontius Pilate.'⁴ The first-century Jewish historian Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, also confirms

1 Christine Schirrmacher, *The Islamic View of Major Christian Teachings* (Bonn, Germany: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2008), 23.

2 Hans Kung, *Islam: Past, Present, and Future* (Oneworld Publications, 2007), 498.

3 Quoted in Kung, *Islam*, 499.

4 Quoted from Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 2.

that Christ was executed on the cross by Pilate.⁵

A somewhat later source (though still early enough to be of at least *some* historical value) comes from Lucian of Samosata, a second-century Greek writer who confirms the crucifixion in a mocking descriptions of the Christians: '[t]he Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.'⁶ Finally, the Tannaitic Period of the Talmud (which ranges from 70–200 A.D.) references the crucifixion in Sanhedrin 43a: 'On the eve of Passover Yeshu was hanged.'⁷ It is important to note that with the Talmudic evidence, '[i]t would be expected that the most reliable information from the Talmud would come from the earliest period of compilation—70 to 200 A.D., known as the Tannaitic period'.⁸

So, there is at least a good chance that what is recorded about Christ's death here is contemporaneous, or at least nearly contemporaneous with the event. That the Talmudic position

on Christ's death was still Jewish orthodox centuries later can be shown. In his debates with Jewish and Christian audiences, Petrus Alfonsi (1062–1110), a Jewish scholar who converted to Christianity, assumes that the one thing Christians and Jews can agree on is that Jesus died on a Roman cross. 'Thus, Jews, Romans, and early Christians all affirmed that Jesus really died, differing only about whether he was raised from the dead.'⁹

All the evidence listed above is far more decisive, from a purely historical perspective, than the Koran's account of Christ's death, which was written over 500 years after the fact. An analogy would be the life of Buddha. The earliest written records of his life date to 500 years after his death, and this huge amount of intervening time led to these writings being 'embellished with fanciful details, which makes it difficult to separate fact from legend'.¹⁰

Thus, even NT scholar John Dominic Crossan, the farthest thing from a biblical fundamentalist, can say that Christ's death 'under Pontius Pilate is as sure as anything historical ever can be'.¹¹ This is despite the fact that Crossan is well-known for doubting other portions of the New Testament's accounts of Christ's life. Even *The Journal of the American Medical Association*,

⁵ Scholars believe the passage in question by Josephus was later amended by Christian editors; it is unlikely that Josephus, a non-Christian, would have portrayed Christ as the resurrected Jewish messiah, but most scholars believe he did indeed confirm the basic fact of the crucifixion of Jesus. For more on this, see Norman L. Geisler, 'Flavius Josephus', in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 253–54.

⁶ Geisler, 'Jesus, Non-Christian Sources', *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 383.

⁷ Geisler, 'Jesus, Non-Christian Sources', 383.

⁸ www.garyhabrmas.com/books/historicaljesus/historicaljesus.htm.

⁹ Steven J McMichael, 'The Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus in Medieval Christian Anti-Muslim Religious Polemics', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 21:2 (2010), 160.

¹⁰ Damien Keown, *Buddhism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), 17.

¹¹ John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 5.

published an article explaining that, based on descriptions of Christ's suffering in the gospels, his death is not in question. 'Modern medical interpretation of the historical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead when taken down from the cross.'¹²

Also, the koranic denial of Christ's death is not multiply attested; there are no other sources that corroborate what the Islamic holy book says on this matter. The one exception would be the version of the crucifixion offered by the second-century Christian gnostic Basilides. His position was that Christ 'did not suffer, for at the crucifixion Christ and Simon of Cyrene (mentioned at Mark 15:21 and par) in effect traded places, each being transformed, so that Simon was crucified while Christ stood by laughing at the event. After the crucifixion had taken place, Christ ascended back to the father, knowing from when he had come.'¹³

But there are at least two problems here. One, Christ is presented in a quite callous manner, laughing over the death of an innocent man. Surely Muslims, who have great respect for Christ as a prophet, would find this portrayal

quite unappealing. Indeed, that an innocent man should suffer for another is unacceptable in Islam, a religion that holds each person accountable for his or her own sins, and denies the idea of substitutionary suffering.

Furthermore, a Muslim cannot accept Basilides' general view of Jesus because of Basilides' docetism (from the Greek word meaning 'to seem' or 'to appear'). Basilides 'was convinced that Jesus did not get involved in the material realm. Since matter is evil, the good Jesus could not have had a real physical body.'¹⁴ This is why Basilides denies the crucifixion; what is non-material cannot suffer a material death. Thus there is no corroboration here for the koranic denial of the crucifixion, unless the Muslim wishes to accept all of the anti-Islamic theology that Basilides brings to his account of Christ's avoidance of the cross.¹⁵

II The Spurious 'Gospel of Barnabas'

It was once commonplace for Muslim apologists to claim that the non-canonical 'Gospel of Barnabas' (first

¹² William D. Edwards, et al., 'On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ.' *JAMA* March 1986, vol. 225, p. 1455. This article proved controversial, not because the analysis of Christ's sufferings and death was inaccurate, but because some thought that the medical doctors of the journal were taking the passion narratives too literally and falling into the age-old trap of blaming the Jews, en masse, for the death of Jesus; I am interested only in their verdict that, from a modern medical perspective, Jesus did indeed die upon the cross.

¹³ *The Earliest Cristian Heretics*, ed. Arland J. Hultgren and Steven A. Haggmark (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 60.

¹⁴ William E. Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus*, (NY: Continuum, 1996), 203.

¹⁵ Although, it must be admitted that certain stories about Jesus do seem, to non-Muslims at least, to have been taken from docetic Christian sources. 'The Quran, in spite of its determination to deny that Jesus was a deity, accepts some of the tales that were invented to prove the opposite. The stories of baby Jesus performing miracles' is one example, according to Phipps (204). But this is quite different from taking the position of Basilides that Jesus was non-material, for the Koran goes to great lengths to stress that Christ was indeed fully human, and *only* human.

published in 1907) could be used to corroborate the Koran's teaching on the crucifixion. But today, all Christian scholars and most Muslim ones admit that Barnabas was written sometime in the Middle Ages, and is therefore useless as a source for the life of Christ. Still, as recently as the late 20th century, a prominent Muslim scholar could write that

The Gospel of Barnabas has provided modern commentators not only with a supposed first-hand report in support of the substitutionist theory, but also with what appears as a plausible justification. Thus we have come full circle back to the earliest interpretation of the words *shubbiha lahum* as meaning 'another took his likeness and was substituted for him.' Modern Muslim thinkers have been aware of the claim that Barnabas is a late document. Some have therefore used it only as partial evidence, while others have argued that it is the true Gospel in full or in part, which Christians had hidden for many centuries until it was found in their most sacred institution, the Vatican Library. The question of the historicity of the event of the Cross remains open, nonetheless, and a more up-to-date study of the Gospel of Barnabas would help greatly in moving Christian-Muslim dialogue from scriptural polemics to the more important task of understanding and appreciating the significance of Christ for the two religious traditions.¹⁶

16 Mahmoud M. Ayoub, 'Towards an Islamic Christology', *The Muslim World*, LXX, no. 2 (April 1980), 113.

That the 'Gospel of Barnabas' should arouse great interest among Muslims scholars is not surprising, since it quotes Jesus not only as denying his death on the cross, but also predicting the coming of Allah's final messenger. Christ says that men will be deceived about his manner of his death, as well as his alleged divinity, 'until the advent of Mohammed, the Messenger of God, who, when he shall come, shall reveal this deception to those who believe in God's law'.¹⁷

Barnabas is full of other problems so it is problematic in relation to corroboration of the Koranic denial of the cross. Its anachronisms are many, one being that it seems to reflect the cultural life of 14th century Italy rather than first-century Palestine. Barnabas also suggests that the forty-day Lenten fast was practised in the first century, when in fact it did not start until the seventh century AD.¹⁸ Most damning of all, though, is that the author of Barnabas displays a thorough knowledge of the Latin version of the Bible, which of course proves that Barnabas is hundreds of years removed from the first century AD.¹⁹ Even esteemed Muslim scholar Cyril Glasse says of Barnabas, 'there is no question that it is a medieval forgery'.²⁰

17 Quoted from *The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity*, by A.H. Mathias, (NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 82.

18 Ayoub, 'Toward an Islamic Christology', 87, 88.

19 Ayoub, 'Toward an Islamic Christology', 81.

20 Cyril Glasse, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Walnut Creek, CA: Atamira Press, 2002), 78.

III Muslim Explanations as to Who Died on the Cross

The Koran's lack of clarity led one 19th-century Muslim sect in India, the Ahmadiya, to postulate that Christ was indeed crucified, but that he

recovered from his crucifixion wounds and moved to Kashmir. After teaching there successfully for several generations, he died at the age of 120 and was buried at Srinagar. Ghulam Ahmed, the sect's founder, claimed that he found Jesus' tomb there and that he, Ahmed, was a reincarnation of Jesus.²¹

Another example of a rather fanciful attempt to avoid the belief that Jesus died on the cross comes from the late 19th-century Muslim scholar Sayyid Ahmad Khan:

[c]rucifixion itself does not cause the death of a man, because only the palms of his hands, or the palms of his hand and feet are pierced After three or four hours Christ was taken down from the cross, and it is certain that 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.²²

Of course, Khan's theory has a parallel in outdated European biblical scholarship, and was sometimes referred to as the 'swoon theory'. Certain biblical scholars of the eighteenth century advocated this view, and so the idea that Christ was crucified but did not actually die on the cross 'is something ad-

vocated in European rationalism prior to its discussion in Muslim apologetic literature'.²³ However, I know of no major NT scholar who holds to this position today. There are plenty of western scholars who doubt the truth of the resurrection, but Christ's death on the cross is not doubted by credentialed biblical scholars.

This swoon theory is of course an old canard, and the idea that the disciples stole and hid Christ's body has been refuted by various Christian apologists. As for the assertion that Christ was not on the cross long enough to die, it must be remembered that Christ was beaten and flogged before being crucified, and that the loss of blood and related trauma caused by the especially savage Roman method of flogging is 'the best explanation of his relatively speedy death'.²⁴

Another common Muslim objection to Christ's crucifixion is that Allah would not allow so great a prophet as Jesus to suffer such an ignominious fate at the hands of sinful men. '[A] reason given for the rejection of Jesus' crucifixion comes from the report of two Gospels that, after he was nailed to a cross, he cried, "My God, why have You forsaken me?" 'This is a blatant declaration of disbelief,' writes M.T. Al-Hilari; he claims that a true believer could not utter these words. The Koran affirms that Jesus was continuously a true prophet, so an account displaying his loss of faith cannot be accepted'.²⁵

But from a Muslim point of view,

²³ Schirmacher, *The Islamic View of Major Christian Teachings*, 37.

²⁴ Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 32.

²⁵ Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus*, 222.

²¹ Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus*, 218.

²² Quoted in Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 115.

such sentiments seem problematic to say the least. Firstly, Christ's cry of dereliction from the cross need not be taken as a loss of faith at all. Had he lost his faith, he would not have bothered crying out to a God in whom he no longer believed. Secondly, even if the cry of dereliction indicates spiritual weakness in Jesus, this is not problematic for Muslims, for the Koran does not teach that any of the prophets were perfect. Muslims often take Muhammad to be in some sense the 'ideal' man of Allah, but the Koran never portrays him as perfect or sinless in a Christ-like way. In fact, when Muhammad first began to receive the koranic revelations from the angel Gabriel, he doubted his prophetic calling, and actually thought that he might be falling prey to satanic trickery:

Muslim tradition reports that Muhammad reacted to his 'call' in much the same way as the Hebrew prophets. He was both frightened and reluctant. Frightened by the unknown—for surely he did not expect such an experience. Reluctant, at first, because he feared he was possessed and that others would dismiss his claims as inspired by spirits, or *jinn*s.²⁶

But if Muhammad, Islam's greatest prophet, had such misgivings about himself, how can Muslims cite Christ's doubt on the cross as proof that he was not crucified? Perfect knowledge or

faith is not a prerequisite for prophethood in either the Bible or in the Koran. In fact, it is precisely the doubt expressed by both Jesus and Muhammad that makes them credible figures. Had they been mythological constructs, we probably would not have such seemingly 'negative' information about them.

New Testament scholars refer to this as the 'criterion of embarrassment'. This means that any passage in the gospels that seems to 'damage' the image of Jesus is necessarily authentic, since the New Testament writers would not have invented stories or put words into Christ's mouth that seem to play against the picture they are trying to present of him as lord and saviour. An example from the NT would be Mark 6:4-6, where Jesus is said not to be able to perform miracles in unbelieving Nazareth. An example from the Koran is that a new koranic revelation had to be given by Allah to allow for Muhammad's social faux pas of marrying a woman whom his adopted son had recently divorced.²⁷

IV The Question of Someone Being Made to Look like Jesus.

Muslim exegetes throughout the ages have been troubled by the idea of Christ switching paces with another man:

Important to most of the substitutionist interpretations is the idea that whoever bore the likeness of Jesus, and consequently his suffering and death, did so voluntarily. It must have been felt by hadith trans-

26 John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7. It was only after his first wife, Kadijah, convinced him that he was not possessed and that he was a recipient of divine revelation, that Muhammad fully embraced his divine calling.

27 Thomas W. Lippman, *Understanding Islam* (NY: Meridian, 1995), 54.

mitters and commentators that for God to cause an innocent man to die unjustly to save another would be divine wrongdoing (*culm*), which cannot be predicated of God. Thus the theory which eventually gained most popularity was that one of the disciples voluntarily accepted death as a ransom for his master.²⁸

But in the koranic passage that describes this, we are not given any indication that human trickery was involved, so we are left to assume that it was Allah who made another man take on the semblance of Jesus.

On the face of it, there is nothing objectionable here in terms of Allah's power to do such a thing; he is omnipotent in both Muslim and Christian understandings of his nature. Yet the question must be pressed, *why* did Allah do such a thing? And it had to be his doing, for what other power could have caused another man to take on Jesus's appearance? The only other option would be that this was a satanic deception, but the Koran gives no indication of this and, given the high regard in which the Koran holds Jesus, the Muslim holy book would not portray Jesus as a plaything in the hands of a wily devil.

That all of this raises a serious problem for Muslims is partially acknowledged by Cyril Glasse when he writes, 'the crucifixion as a pointless charade can hardly be meet to God's

purpose, and two thousand years have not shown what God could have meant by such sleight of hand. Nor does the Koran warrant such a view.'²⁹ This of course is precisely my point; there is no reason why Allah should have caused such a deception to happen. Yet this is precisely what Glasse claims: '[i]t is clear from the Koran that God willed the people to see what they saw The Koran does say that the crucifixion of Jesus is what the people saw, and does not go into the reasons why God let the event take place and let the people see what they saw.'³⁰

This point must be stressed. Allah is the cause of the confusion here, not Satan, not even the jinn (supernatural creatures in Islamic thought, whose essence is fire, and from which we get our English word 'genie'). Thus for Glasse, the mistaken interpretation of the crucifixion is no mere human mistake, but part of Allah's plan, although the reasons behind his plan are inscrutable, according to Glasse.

V The Islamic Retreat into 'Supra-History'

The nineteenth-century German theologian Martin Kahler, when addressing the historicity of the resurrection, took the position that there was a 'distinction between "ordinary history" (*Historie*) and "suprahistory" (*Geschichte*)'. Rudolf Bultmann, a prominent German NT scholar, responded to this by asking, 'why regard such events as histori-

²⁸ Ayoub, 'Toward an Islamic Christology', 97. Hadith refers to the collected sayings of Muhammad, compiled by those who knew him well (often called his Companions). Throughout Islamic history, the Hadith literature has been almost as important as the Koran, especially in matters regarding Islamic law.

²⁹ Glasse, *New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 239.

³⁰ Glasse, *New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 78.

cal at all?'³¹ But this kind of Kahler-like theological sleight-of-hand seems to be what occurs when Muslim scholars examine the crucifixion.

For instance, Glasse writes that 'the crucifixion of Jesus does not play a role in the Islamic perspective any more than does his superhuman origin, for salvation in Islam results from the recognition of the Absoluteness of God and not from a sacrificial mystery'.³² If I read Glasse correctly, the issue of historical accuracy is *secondary*, since Christ's death, whether it happened or not, plays no role in salvation for the Muslim:

Western writers who, for reasons of the defense of Christianity and Judaism, or for reasons of their disbelief (*kufi*) in any Divine Revelation, have been wont to disparage the Koran as regards factual, *historical accuracy* [emphasis mine], or have spoken of Muhammad's confused knowledge of history or of his imperfect or deficient knowledge of Judaism are, in every respect, wide of the mark. To begin with, such observations presume the Prophet's participation in the composition of the Koran, which is in no way admissible.³³

Again, here is Glasse: 'In Islam it is the absolute, or higher, that takes precedence in the Koran over the appearances [i.e., what appears to be the historical truth of Christ's death as recorded in the NT] of this world, be they

of life or of death.'³⁴

In a similar vein, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written of the crucifixion that

[f]rom the traditional philosophical point of view it is possible for a single reality—especially of the order of Christ's final end—to be seen in two ways by two different worlds, or from two different religious perspectives, without there being an inner contradiction. It is modern Western philosophy that does not allow such a thing.... When it comes to the question of the life of Christ, the historical life, on the level of fact it is either the Christian or the Islamic version that can be held.³⁵

The first thing that is odd about this passage is that Nasr attributes the law of non-contradiction to 'modern Western philosophy' when in fact it goes back at least to the ancient Greek philosophers. Not only that, but the great Muslim philosopher Avicenna (980-1037 AD) insisted upon the importance of the law of non-contradiction as an aid to right thinking. Second, if the Koran is going to address historical subjects like the life of Christ and his crucifixion, then the Koran must play by the rules of history, like any other historical document. The facts of history do not change simply because of one's theological worldview.

Nasr goes on to write that the 'Qur'an is more indifferent to the historical significance of sacred history than the Bible and much more interested in the moral significance of events

31 Quoted in John Warwick Montgomery, 'Speculation Versus Factuality: An Analysis of Unbelief', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (Jan-March 2001), 40.

32 Glasse, *New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 239.

33 Glasse, *New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 265.

34 Glasse, *New Encyclopedia of Islam*, 239.

35 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Response to Hans Kung's Paper on Christian-Muslim Dialogue', *Muslim World* 77, no. 2 (April 1987), 100.

recounted in that history.³⁶ This is fine as far as it goes, for there are certainly multiple ways to interpret any historical event. But this does not allow Nasr to violate the law of non-contradiction by advocating two contradictory versions of the crucifixion, one for Christians, one for Muslims, both equally valid. Yet this is what he seems to be attempting.

Yet Nasr and Glasse cannot have it both ways. Both men, I imagine, accept as historical fact that Christ was born of a virgin, as taught in the Koran (3:45-47). This is portrayed as a surety in the Koran, without implying therefore that Christ is divine or the messiah. In the Koran, (19: 29-30) when the infant Jesus speaks, and calls himself a messenger of Allah, Nasr and Glasse surely would not reject the historicity of the event, because it fits in well with their theology, lending credence to Christ's role as only a messenger of Allah, not his Son, or his Equal.

Or, when Jesus predicts the coming of 'Ahmed' (another name for Muhammad), in Koran 61:6, what Muslim relegates such a passage to a non-historical status? The Koran teaches that Muhammad was illiterate, and this is taken as a 'real' statement of historical fact; this is proof for the Muslim that the poetic profundity of the Koran had to come from God, because the unlettered Muhammad could not have written it. The same can be said of surah 8:17 in the Koran, which explains that the Battle of Badir (the battle in 624 AD in which Muhammad's forces were victorious over his polytheistic rivals)

was won not by the Muslims alone, as some of them mistakenly believed, but by the grace of Allah.³⁷ Secular historians take Badir to be a veridical event, as do all Muslims.

My point is, Muslims *do* take the Koran as a history book when it comes to such events as enumerated above. Yet when the Koran is faced with a conflicting version of the crucifixion found in the far earlier (and therefore more reliable) NT documents, (not to mention the contemporaneous extra-biblical material) then somehow the koranic version must be interpreted in a very convenient non-historical, 'spiritual' way.

Of course, there are critical Koranic scholars, just as there are critical Old Testament and New Testament scholars. Such Islamic scholars are still probably on average more 'conservative' than 'liberal' Christian ones, but they still are forced to ask 'yes, but what does one mean when he or she says the Koran is God's word'?³⁸ This of course is a question that has bedevilled (or improved, depending on one's theological point of view) Christian scholarship since at the least the 1800s, when what was then called the higher criticism of the German biblical scholars began to question the divine origins of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. But for good or ill, the historical-crit-

³⁶ Nasr, 'Response to Hans Kung's Paper on Christian-Muslim Dialogue', 102.

³⁷ Michael G. Fonner, 'Jesus' Death by Crucifixion in the Qur'an: An Issue for Interpretation and Muslim-Christian Relations', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 29:3-4 (Summer-fall 1992), 445.

³⁸ For a helpful overview of differing Muslim attitudes toward the Koran, see Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: One-world, 2002), 1-12.

ical approach is accepted by virtually all modern scholars when studying ancient documents, be those documents secular or religious. Thus even Hans Kung, who might be called somewhat of a Christian apologist for Islam, can ask of the Muslim scholarly community, 'if we have historical criticism of the Bible (for the benefit of a contemporary biblical faith) why not then also have historical criticism of the Qur'an and this for the benefit of a Muslim faith appropriate to modern times?'³⁹

Indeed, there is no way to divorce the Koran's theology from the historical milieu in which it was revealed: 'the Qur'an's claims to be a guide to people who are located within history mean that revelation remains related to history. Muslims, like others, have connected with a reality transcending history and that revelation, putative or real, has taken place within history and has been conditioned by history.'⁴⁰

But such 'liberal' attitudes are not representative of the typical Koranic scholar. 'Both the doctrines of the Qur'an's eternalness and its inimitability have profoundly affected the nature of Qur'anic scholarship and account for the absence of historico-literary criticism in Qur'anic studies.'⁴¹ Thus, it seems fair to say that while not all Muslim scholars interpret the Koran in a 'fundamentalist' manner, it would be a rare one indeed who would accuse

the Koran of incorrectly reporting the events of the crucifixion.

Conclusion

Ultimately, one must ask if the denial that Christ died on the cross would have even been mentioned in the Koran if the crucifixion were not at the heart of the religion that Muhammad saw Islam as surpassing:

It is interesting to speculate whether or not it would have been necessary for Muslims to deny the crucifixion of Jesus if that event were a doctrinally neutral issue. In light of the almost universal acceptance that 'someone' was crucified, it appears that the problem faced by [Muslim] exegetes is not so much Jesus' death on the cross, but their inability to accept this and at the same time maintain their Islamic understanding of prophecy.⁴²

The Muslim acceptance of Christ's death on the cross seems necessitated by the evidence presented in this paper.⁴³ Muslims could still maintain that a great prophet, Jesus, was killed by sinful men, but that Allah raised him up to heaven. The resurrection could be ignored, since it is not mentioned at all in the Koran, and is a matter of Christian doctrine, not a historical fact, as is

39 Hans Kung, 'Christianity and World Religions: The Dialogue with Islam as One Model', *Muslim World* 77, no. 2 (April 1987), 89.

40 Farid Esack, 'Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Problems and Prospects', *The Muslim World*, vol. LXXXIII, no. 2, April 1993, 136.

41 Esack, 'Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Problems and Prospects', 101.

42 Lawson, *Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 12-13.

43 Some Muslim scholars have begun to employ historical-critical methods to the Koran, although it seems safe to say they do so with more restraint than liberal Jewish or Christian scholars when approaching the Bible. Still, in 1993 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd could write that koranic scholarship 'must proceed from reality and culture as empirical givens. From these givens we arrive at a scientific understanding of the phenomenon of the text' (quoted from Esack, *The Qur'an*, 5).

the crucifixion. By accepting the historicity of the crucifixion, Muslims might actually make their faith stronger, as they would be bringing it into line with what all historians, even non-Christian ones, accept as the established fact of Christ's death. Acceptance of this fact would in no way require them to accept Christ's divinity, nor his substitutionary death. All other Muslim doctrines, such as Allah's absolute oneness, the Day of Judgment, heaven and hell, and Muhammad's status as Allah's greatest and final messenger would remain untouched.

True, to admit that the Koran is wrong about the crucifixion would involve a major theological sacrifice for Muslims—the doctrine of the perfection and inerrancy of the Koran. This may seem unthinkable to many Muslims, but what is the alternative? To continue to claim that another was crucified in Jesus's stead seems to be the result of theological obscurantism, rather than the result of honestly grappling with history. Consider Nancy Roberts, who takes the rather curious position of calling herself 'a Muslim who also considers herself a follower of Christ, and for whom Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection are a meaningful reality'.⁴⁴ She admits that, when one surveys the theological gymnastics that Muslim exegetes have done to reconcile the contradictory crucifixion accounts found in the Bible and the Koran, it is clear

the insistence of many Muslim ex-

eges down the centuries on rejecting the historicity of the crucifixion may have been less a response to the text of Q. 4 157-158 [Koran chapter 4, the account of the crucifixion] itself than a reaction to Christian polemics against Islam and a need to assert their rejection of Christians' belief in Christ's death as atoning for others' sins.⁴⁵

This type of theological 'split personality' is the inevitable outcome of Islam's inability to confront the crucifixion as an actual event in space and time. But for now, the flexibility with which some Christians have handled the Bible since the rise of the historical-critical method in the 1800s is still largely missing from the manner in which Muslims exegetes treat the Koran.

Thus, in summing up the Muslim position regarding the conflict between the Christian and the Muslim understandings of the crucifixion, 'the Koran will always have the casting vote in any debate if it is perceived to speak decisively on the topic in [sic] hand So long as Q 4.157 is understood to deny that Jesus was crucified, this will be the understanding which holds sway among Muslims.'⁴⁶ But this seems more like fideism than scholarship. The facts of history are what they are, and they do not vanish because of one's philosophical or theological commitments. Islamic thinkers must find a way to accommodate the certainty that Jesus of Nazareth died on a Roman cross.

⁴⁴ Nancy Roberts, 'A Muslim Reflects on Christ Crucified: Stumbling-Block of Blessing?' *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24, 3 (May 2013), 313.

⁴⁵ Roberts, 'A Muslim Reflects on Christ Crucified: Stumbling-Block or Blessing?' 318.

⁴⁶ Whittingham, 'How Could So Many Christians Be So Wrong?' 176-77.