

ISLAM FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

By SS

INTRODUCTION

As Jesus is the model for the Christian life, so Muhammad's life, character, behavior, views about piety, deeds, faith, and relationships have become an example and proper model to be followed by Muslims in their practical and spiritual life. In his capacity as the central figure in Islam he held several titles, among them a preacher, a warner, a messenger of Allah, a prophet, a statesman, and a warrior. Each of these titles represents an aspect of his personality and mission. The first four titles reflect the nature of his message and how he viewed his role as the carrier of God's message to mankind. Obviously, the Qur'an made it clear that Muhammad, at the inception of his mission, was a mere preacher and a warner. In chapter 7:188, Allah commanded Muhammad to say; "I am but a warner and a bringer of glad tidings to those who have faith. "

Being a messenger implies that he was commissioned to communicate a certain message which, in his opinion, was not different from the messages of the previous Scriptures that were revealed to Moses and Jesus. Most of the time, the Qur'an alludes to three main books of Scriptures: The *Torah* (the five books of Moses), the *Zabur* (Psalms), and the *Injil* (Gospel) of 'Isa (Jesus). In some cases it refers to the scrolls of Abraham and other prophets about whom Muhammad undoubtedly heard from the Jews of Arabia who were well acquainted with their traditions more than their own Torah. One of the Qur'anic verses reiterates:

Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham. and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we surrendered (41:4).

Islam acknowledges all the prophets of both the Old and New Testaments, though the Qur'an mentions about twenty-three of them. The most significant of them are: Adam or Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Certainly, Muhammad is regarded as the last and the seal of the prophets. These prophets are called the "ones of the resolution." Apparently, "Muhammad considered himself a prophet in the true biblical line" (Farah 2003,71).

During the first twelve years of his life, known as the Meccan period, Muhammad's message was focused on spiritual and social issues. He preached the social message when he called upon the people to care for the poor and the widows. He urged Muslims to show compassion towards each other, "On those who show compassion, God is the most compassionate" (Qur'an 12:64); or, "Good is the reward for those who do good in this world" (Qur'an 39:10). But he mostly occupied himself with warning the people of Mecca to relinquish the worship of the idols and to believe in one God.

Ideologically, unlike Jesus, Muhammad is not the focal point of the Islamic faith. Allah is the central theme of Islam. Muhammad never claimed that he was divine. He alleged that he was just a prophet, a human being chosen by Allah to communicate His message to humankind. As he attempted to persuade his people to believe in God the Creator of heaven and earth, he resorted "to reason, logical proof, and fair exhortation . . . (and) threats of impending doom" (Farah 2003, 89). Muhammad emphasized three issues in particular in this stage of his mission: The oneness of God, the resurrection, and the day of judgment. These three issues became the basis of his preaching, but without any real success.

At this time of Muhammad's life, he was poor, weak, and without followers. Most of his adherents were the poor, the slaves, and some women. He lacked the military power and the right support that would enhance his mission in a society that believed in force and wealth. The only way to protect or to defend himself against the attack of his vehement enemies was to seek the help of Allah's wrath on the infidels who resisted his *da'wa* (mission) and refused to accept the new faith. He threatened his enemies with

the Day of Judgment in which God will punish all those who reject the prophethood of Muhammad and the revealed word of Allah. The description of hell in the Qur'an is very prolific and terrifying. It obviously meant to create fear in the hearts of Muhammad's enemies. No one will be exempted from the terror of that day except those whom Allah wills to spare the anguish of that Day (such as the prophets and the martyrs). Threatening his foes with the retribution of the Day of Judgment was Muhammad's only weapon against his enemies, and the shield by which he fortified himself. It is also worth noticing at this point that Muhammad's message was similar in many ways to most of the Old Testament prophets' messages. Yet, his eschatological perspectives of paradise portray a physical picture of a worldly utopia to the satisfaction of the sensual needs of the human flesh. Such description aimed at inciting his followers to look forward to paradisiacal rewards as martyrs or the slave of Allah. This type of paradise does not exist in Christianity or in Judaism, but it echoes some aspects of "Zoroastrian" paradise.

Another striking feature of this period is Muhammad's view of Christianity and Judaism. He hardly expressed any hostility against these two communities, but rather called them the people of the Book. Actually, there is a corpus of verses in which the Qur'an praises the Torah, the Gospel, and their adherents -- even in the Medinan Chapters. For instance, the Qur'an states:

All those who believe, and the Jews, and the Sabeans and the Christians -- any who believe in God and the Last Day and does good will have nothing to fear or regret (5:69).

This verse and others like it contradict the Qur'anic concept of predestination. The Qur'an decrees that the final destiny of each soul is in the hand of Allah. He is the one who guides people in the straight path of faith and righteousness or, if he wills, he sends them astray in the way of godlessness.

After Muhammad and some of his followers suffered severe persecution in Mecca, he was compelled to immigrate to Yathrib, a city where he had signed a secret treaty with some of its inhabitants who pledged to protect him and support him against his enemies. This step signaled the second phase of Muhammad's life. It also ushered the beginning of the Islamic calendar. In Medina, Muhammad added to his titles two new offices: The office of the statesman and the office of the warrior, and thus, the first Islamic state was established.

Muhammad then began to organize the daily life of the Islamic community. At this time, most of the claimed revelations he received appertained to the practical interest of the new society: The spiritual and the social structure of the nascent community became the focal point of Muhammad's efforts. At the same time, Muhammad started to wage military campaigns against those whom he believed to be a threat to his mission and newly born state. In his book *The Wars of the Emissary of God*, al-Waqidi provides an account of Muhammad's battles which either he himself led or commissioned some of his companions to oversee. Thus, the meek, powerless, and poor prophet turned into a belligerent military leader who embarked on a crusade that included invading the caravans of Mecca and annihilating those who opposed him politically and religiously. Also, the tone of his message carried a war cry that did not exist in the first phase of his mission. The concept of *Jihad* or holy war permeated the teaching of Islam and became part of the Pillars of this new faith. One of the Islamic traditions ascribed to Muhammad states, "I have been commanded that I should fight people till they bear witness that there is no god but Allah and keep up prayer and pay *zakat* (almsgiving). If they do this, their blood and their property shall be safe with me except as Islam requires, and their reckoning is with Allah" (Maulana M. Ali, 216-217). Sura 2:216 indicates:

Fighting is prescribed upon you, and ye dislike it. But it is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for ye, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knoweth, and you know not.

Sura 8:65, encourages Muhammad to incite Muslims to fight because Allah will empower them to destroy their enemies even if they outnumber them:

O Prophet! Rouse the Believers to the fight. If there are twenty amongst you, patience and persevering, they will vanquish two hundred: if a hundred, they will vanquish a thousand of the Unbelievers: for these are a people without understanding.

These verses, supported by a corpus of traditions, manifest the violent attitude of the Qur'an towards its foes. When western politicians and other groups, for political gains or for the sake of tolerance, claim that Muslim radicals "hijacked" the faith of Islam, they are ignoring a significant aspect of the spirit of the Qur'an. It is true that there are those who call for peace and try to justify or to present a modern interpretation to the above verses within the context of their historical events and eras. But these modern trends do not explain the persistence of the spirit of violence in Islam and do not abrogate the Qur'anic views towards the unbelievers. It is difficult for a true Muslim to liberate himself from the multifaceted concept of *Jihad*. But these two phases of Muhammad's life provided ammunition to both groups: the radicals and the moderates refer to them according to the needs and circumstances.

Islam did not start in a void. In the eve of the rise of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by different religious groups and sects. Some of them were Christian Nestorians and Monotheists; others were Jews who found refuge from persecution in Arabia, or Arab tribes converted to Judaism. Also there were the Hanifs who believed in the God of Abraham and abstained from offering sacrifices to the idols or eating their meats. The majority of the Arabs, however, were polytheists. Muhammad, with his inquisitive mind, was not satisfied with the worship of idols. Some enlightened Hanifs, Christians and Jews had undoubtedly influenced the theology of Muhammad.

THE CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE

It is possible to trace the Christian influence that shaped some of Muhammad's thinking. In his book *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, Richard Bell remarks:

To us, knowing the result and tracing his borrowing from Christianity and Judaism, there often appears to be a certain designed and cunning opportuneness. He seems to adopt what suits his own purpose at the moment, and to pass by what does not suit them (Bell 1968, 101).

Since Muhammad was not acquainted with foreign languages, it seems he had to rely "upon oral information given to him in response to his inquiries" (Bell 1968, 104). Most of the information he obtained is borrowed either from apocalyptic or apocryphal sources (Tisdall 1980, 47-75). In reality "so far as the descriptions of the End of the World are concerned, almost every detail of them can be paralleled in well-known books of Apocalyptic" (Bell 1968, 103-4). It is likely that Muhammad had received his information from Christians who converted to Islam: his first wife Khadija, whom some scholars believe belonged to the Ebionite heresy; Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who is regarded as the bishop of Mecca; and even from his Christian concubine Mary the Copt, who was a highly educated Christian lady (al-Hariri 1985, 11-34). Islamic sources suggest that Waraqa was very supportive of Muhammad up to the last moment of his life (al-Hariri 1985, 35-36). He was the one who presided over his wedding and was among the first to confirm Muhammad's prophethood. Thus, some scholars believe that Waraqa had great impact in molding Muhammad's religious views. Waraqa was used to translate the well-known apocryphal *Gospel to the Hebrews* into Arabic. The similarities between the teachings of this gospel and the Qur'anic teachings are striking (al-Hariri 1985, 28, 123-96).

THE JEWISH INFLUENCE

It is a well-known fact that Muhammad was accustomed to visit the Jewish synagogue in Medina to dialogue with the Jewish Rabbis. Two significant consequences resulted from these visits. First, he became acquainted with many of the Old Testament stories he was not aware of. But not all these stories were quoted directly from the Bible. Many of them were distorted by Talmudic and folkloric Jewish episodes (Tisdall 1980, 11-46). Second, he discovered that there were serious contradictions between his teaching and the biblical teachings as well as the antagonized attitude of the Jewish community towards his claim of prophethood. Actually, both Christians and Jews refused to acknowledge his claims.

THE ZOROASTRIAN INFLUENCE

Muhammad may have had some access to the Zoroastrian religion and beliefs through his companion Salman al-Farisi, who was knowledgeable in Zoroastrianism (Tisdall 1980, 76-91), Christianity, and Islam. Islamic sources documented his biography and specified in detail his background before his conversion to Islam (A HAQ, 1990, 95-98). He was the one who saved Medina from the siege of the Meccan army when he suggested building a trench around the city. Muhammad also borrowed many customs from the pre-Islamic traditions, especially the rite of pilgrimage.

But what is Islam? The simple answer that we hear from Muslims is that Islam means to surrender to the will God. In the opinion of this writer, this is a partial answer. Islam is a way of life that dominates the religious, political, social, and economic aspects of the Islamic community. It is both Faith and Law. Some Christians assume that Islam is a religion of deeds only: This is not true. Islamic faith is creeds and deeds. The creeds are called the Fundamentals of Islam. They are: believing in one God, all the prophets and the messengers of God, all the scriptures, the angels, the Day of Judgment, and predestination. The deeds or the practices are called the Five Pillars of Islam. They are: the confession of faith, prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, and almsgiving. Both the fundamentals and the pillars of Islam are designed to help the Muslims to obtain God's favor for their eternal life. Muslims admit that they do not have the assurance of salvation. Their eternal life depends on God's will and mercy. Such perception is the source of the perpetual fear in the lives of Muslims. Their hope to go to paradise is shrouded with anxiety, since God will judge people according to their good or bad deeds. This is an ethical judgment. God's requirements are beyond the capability of man; thus, no one is sure of his final destiny. Muslims realize that they cannot enter paradise on the basis of their merits. They strive to do good, hoping to receive God's mercy.

Muslims believe that Islam is superior to any other religion, especially Christianity. This attests to their conviction that "Islam is the final revelation from God; that it reflects the ultimate truth to the entire world" (Shahid 2002, 64). But a quick glance at the Qur'an would testify that such a claim is baseless. The Qur'an made it clear that it was sent to the Arabs in the first place, and it is local and not universal (Suras 12:2; 13:37; 16:109; 20:113; 26:192-195; 39:28; 42:7; 43:3; and 46:12). What made Islam universal is Islamic conquest and politics. Suras 6:92 and 42:7 affirm that Muhammad's message was targeting the people of the Arab Peninsula whose language was Arabic. The Qur'an was revealed to warn the people of Mecca and the surrounding areas.

Another preconceived misconception among Muslims is that the Qur'an was revealed to correct the corruption of the Bible. They disregard all the archeological and historical evidence that proves beyond any shadow of doubt the veracity of the Bible. Even the Qur'an itself attests to the authenticity of the Bible when Muhammad refers to the Scripture of the people of the Book. Moreover, the Qur'an confirms that God will guard His revealed word from corruption; how, then, did He fail to protect the book from being perverted?

Muslims also believe that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad verbatim through the medium of the archangel Gabriel. It was dictated bit by bit over the course of twenty-three years. Thus, the content, the language, and the style of the Qur'an are originated with God, preserved in the Mother of the Book in heaven. There is no human element involved in the process of revelation. This claim creates insurmountable problems to the adherents of the Islamic faith. A careful examination of the Qur'an reveals many historical, scientific, even linguistic, and ethical discrepancies. If God is the originator of the Qur'an, does He commit all these inappropriate mistakes? The problem of abrogation in the Qur'an is also an abstruse dilemma that is difficult to solve. In spite of all the attempts to justify the logic that underlines the concept of abrogation, Muslims have failed to come up with a convincing answer. It is Muslims' loyalty to their faith that stands in the way of an objective examination of this fundamental issue.

In the theological arena, Islam contradicts all the basic doctrines of Christianity. The remainder of this essay attempts to shed light on the major differences between these two monotheistic religions.

A. The Fallen Nature of Man. The Qur'anic account of Adam's disobedience of God's commandment (Suras 2, 7, 20) is similar in many ways to the biblical stories, though the conclusion contradicts the scriptural outcome. The Qur'an emphasizes that Adam's failure to obey God was the result of his weakness because man is imperfect. This weakness became a dominant feature of human nature. Islam teaches that man is born innocent. He did not inherit the fallen nature of Adam. His weakness is the source of his sins. In his book *The Truth about Jesus Christ*, Muhammad al-Khuli presents eighteen reasons against the concept of the fallen nature of man (p.42-43). But a cross examination of the Qur'an and the Islamic Tradition reveals that there is enough evidence that Islam acknowledges the reality of the fallen nature of man. For instance, Abu Hurayra, one of Muhammad's companions, ascribes to the Messenger of Allah the following statement: "Thus Adam disobeyed and his descendants disobeyed likewise. Adam forgot and ate from the tree; likewise his offspring also forgot. Adam sinned and his posterity sinned too." One of the interesting Qur'anic verses is found in Sura 12:53, in which Joseph son of Jacob admits his sinful nature by saying, "Nor do I absolve my own self (of blame): the (human soul) is certainly prone to evil." Perhaps a better translation should suggest, "The soul of man incites to evil, or conspires with evil." The rejection of the concept of original sin entails that Muslims reject the whole concept of redemption. The way of salvation in Islam is based on repentance and good deeds. God is a sovereign God and He can do whatever He wants. There is no need for an intercessor.

B. The Crucifixion. The Qur'an does not discuss in any detail the story of the crucifixion. There is only one verse in the entire Qur'an that alludes to this unparalleled historical event (Sura 4:157), and that is in a negative way. The Qur'an acknowledges that the event took place, but the one who was crucified was not Jesus. The identity of the ambiguous person who suffered on the cross is not mentioned in Islamic holy scripture, but the tradition furnishes us with a number of names, among them Judas Iscariot. This tradition alleges that Judas miraculously was physically transformed into the likeness of Jesus and was crucified instead. The notion that underlies the crucifixion of a likeness of Jesus is to prove that Jesus was not crucified, for there is no need for any sort of atonement. And, if Jesus is really the Son of God, how then could the Son of God be crucified? And if Jesus is just a prophet, then the crucifixion of an innocent man contradicts God's justice. Apparently Islam does not harbor the concept of reconciliation between God's justice and His love.

The Qur'an attests that some of God's prophets had been slain or stoned (3:82; 3:183, 179-180; 4:154). But there are some evidence in the Qur'an that hints Jesus did die a natural death (5:117; 19:34). Even some famous Muslim scholars like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi indirectly disputed the idea that a substitute was crucified. He presented six ambiguities against the theory of the likeness (AI-Qayrawani 1994, 18-26). However, the general view accepted by Muslims is that Jesus was not crucified, but God spared His life and lifted Him up into heaven in body and soul, and at the end of time He will come back to prove to Christians and Jews that He was not crucified.

C. The Second Coming of Christ. Muslims believe in the second coming of Christ. His second advent is a sign that the end of time is nigh. He will be coming to declare that the whole teaching of his crucifixion is a fabrication of the Jews who set out (and succeeded) to deceive Christians, to announce that Islam is the true religion of God, and to warn that anyone who does believe in Christianity will be killed. He will also kill the Antichrist and destroy the people of Gog and Magog by his supplication to God. The world, then, will witness a period of peace and prosperity, similar to the description recorded in the Book of Isaiah. When He is forty years old He will get married and have children. He will perform the Islamic pilgrimage and visit Muhammad's tomb in Medina. When He dies, Muslims will conduct His funeral and He will be buried beside Muhammad waiting for the Day of Resurrection. Thus, Jesus in this case is not the judge of the living and the dead or the One who will be Lord of Creation, but a mere human being endowed with the prophethood.

D. The Trinity. Muslims believe that Christians are polytheists because they believe in a triune God, which, according to them, is an impious, irrational doctrine and a blasphemy against God. They are convinced that Christians believe in three gods. This is the unforgivable sin that does not merit any mercy from God. The Qur'an vehemently attacks Trinitarianism in several places (5:76, 77, 79, 81, 116-

117). But it seems that Muhammad was not acquainted with the biblical Trinity, because the doctrine that was rejected was either the Marcionian doctrine of the three gods (the god of Justice, the god of Mercy, and the god of Evil), or the heresy of the Marionite's creed that regarded Mary as one of the triune God (Tisdall 1980, 145- 75). Besides, Muhammad associated the doctrine of the Trinity with the practice of the Arab polytheists who worshiped the idols as the lesser gods in spite of their belief in a supreme, inactive god. Traditional Christians, regardless of their denomination, detest the idea that the Qur'an rejects the Trinity, because it is against the biblical teaching and the creed of the church. By rejecting the Trinity, the Qur'an presented a God who has a different nature than the God of Christianity. Allah of Islam, in his essence, is not a God of relationships. He is the creator, the mighty, the merciful, etc., which are some of the ninety-nine of his attributes that embody some aspects of his nature, but failed to develop an intimate relationship with man.

E. The Fatherhood of God. Muslims are hesitant to call God their father. The term "Father" implies relational attachment. From the Islamic point of view, when there is a father, there must be a mother and children. They perceive the relationship as a physical one instead of spiritual unity. Interestingly enough, the Qur'an indirectly refers to the three persons in Sura 4:169, "The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary is only the messenger of God and His Word which he committed to Mary and a Spirit from Him." The three persons of the triune God are mentioned in this verse, though Muslims attempt to interpret it differently.

WITNESSING TO MUSLIMS

As we study the Qur'an, we encounter a number of characters and events that are similar to the biblical accounts in one way or another. Though most of these accounts portray blurred or even distorted images of the biblical personalities, they constitute the common ground that paves the way for creative dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Witnessing to Muslims is a rough road that is full of holes, and it requires a well-lequipped person -- spiritually and educationally -- to embark on such a mission.

Generally speaking, both Muslims and Christians believe in a Sovereign Creator who created the world in six days, in the Day of Resurrection and Judgment, in heaven and hell, in the angels and the devil. They believe in all the prophets and the revealed Scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ and His second coming, and the formation of a new heaven and new earth after the day of resurrection. But these points of agreement do not imply that both religions carry the same interpretations. In reality there are profound differences of interpretation for every basic Christian doctrine. Their ideology is different as well as their worldview.

There are, however, basic principles that Christians should practice when called to reach out to Muslims. We should employ the power of prayer and be obedient to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our life, for this is our power against the antichrist spirit. We must be deeply rooted in our faith and well acquainted with the Bible. We must live a Christ-like life and manifest His love and care towards Muslims. We have to be patient and persevere as we communicate the Word of God to Muslims. We have to understand that we cannot change people. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our main mission is to preach the gospel with conviction and sensitivity.

To be able to be more effective in our ministry to Muslims, we must learn about their religion, culture, history, mentality, and background. Muslims are very proud of their religion and culture and they will be delighted to engage in a constructive dialogue in which they can share about their faith and culture. Listening to their information and inquiring about their culture does not mean that we agree with them, but as we show respect to their faith and culture, we will be winning their trust and respect. Creating a healthy, non-threatening environment is essential in developing the right relationship with Muslims. We should remember that love is the key in any relationship.

We must also eschew any unfamiliar terminology with which Muslims are not acquainted. For instance, Muslims are not familiar with such phrases as "born again Christian." He may comprehend such

phrases as "committed Christian" or "practicing Christian." There are terminologies that are offensive to Muslims, such as "the Son of God." Since there are similar terminologies acceptable to both Christians and Muslims, why do we not use them? For example, Jesus is called in the Qur'an "the Word of God," the same as He is called in John 1:1. This could be a good start. Later on, after the Muslim comprehends what we mean by the "Word of God," we can then explain to him what we mean when we say that Jesus is the Son of God.

In conclusion, because of its importance, I would like to quote a paragraph from an article I published relevant to this discussion:

One point of contention among Christians is the use of the Qur'anic verses to prove a Christian point of view. Those who refrain from quoting the Qur'an have feared that it may suggest that Christians adhere to the authenticity of the Qur'an. Actually, Muslims have confronted Christians when they cited the Qur'an and questioned whether they believed in the Qur'an or not. As Christians, our first obligation is to introduce our Muslim friends to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But since Muslims do not accept the veracity of the Bible, we have to utilize a different approach acceptable to them without compromising our own faith. In other words, as a first step, we employ a tool -- in this case the Qur'an -- that they believe in. But there is great danger in practicing this method. A witness should not resort to the Qur'an as his end. He must proceed to explore with the Muslim the treasures of the Bible as our higher authority in understanding the way of salvation and other theological issues. Quoting the Qur'an should be just a means to an end (Shahid 2002, 74).

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