



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 verse 94)



BUT WASN'T JESUS A MUSLIM?



Peter Saunders



If you would like more information or to meet someone,
please contact:

Or

info@bridgesoption.org



Published by John Saah, Allentown, PA

ken and for him to have a profound effect on people. Furthermore we'd expect his influence to be universal and lasting and for his life to fulfil in minute detail the prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament of the Bible. This is exactly what we find. Finally we would expect him to exercise power over death and again this is confirmed by the eye-witnesses through his resurrection and rising from the dead.

We simply have to look at the evidence and come to our own conclusions. To return to our original question of 'Was Jesus a Muslim?' - we would again say 'Yes he was' if we simply mean by this that he was submitted to God. If however, we mean would he have denied his divinity and claims as recorded in the New Testament, then Jesus clearly was not a Muslim.

Despite the similarities between the two religions we are left at the end with them being completely irreconcilable with regard to their beliefs about Christ. The greatest sin in Islam is to associate anything with God. To do this is a certain route to judgement and everlasting hell. By complete contrast, in Christianity unbelief in Christ's divinity and resurrection is the path to judgement and hell.

Clearly both religions cannot be equally true. Despite the similarities the answer must turn on the identity of the person of Christ. You can compare Islam and Christianity to two bank-notes, both similar, but one of which is a valueless counterfeit. In deciding which one is counterfeit we need to ask which gives the true picture of Jesus. Ultimately this means that we either accept the testimony of the eye-witnesses who knew him, or accept that a 'revelation' received by someone 600 years after the events of the first century is more accurate. I simply leave you with a quote from St Paul: 'even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we have preached to you, let him be eternally condemned' (Gal 1:8). I am being deliberately provocative here, but you can see that I have no choice but to be. Either Christianity is a counterfeit or Islam is, and we must make our decision on the evidence available and act accordingly. I challenge you as one who has read the Qur'an and yet chosen in favour of the Bible. I pray that if you are a Muslim you will take up my challenge and read the New Testament Gospels with an open mind, praying that God will show you whether Christianity or Islam is true. Thank you.

But Wasn't Jesus a Muslim?

Peter Saunders

This is the transcript of a talk given by Peter Saunders, Student Secretary of the UK Christian Medical Fellowship, at Manchester University on Tuesday 24th February 1998.

I didn't choose the title of this talk and you may think it strange even to ask the question 'wasn't Jesus a Muslim?' After all, Jesus Christ is the central figure in Christianity and the name Christian was first used to describe his followers (Acts 11:26).

But Jesus is a very important figure in Islam too. He's regarded as one of the greatest prophets, the forerunner of Muhammad and the one to whom God revealed the 'Injil' or Gospel.

In the broadest sense of the word Jesus was a muslim because the word muslim simply means 'one who submits to God'. Jesus certainly submitted to God and perhaps uniquely could ask 'who accuses me of sin?' and silence all his critics. In fact the word Islam simply means 'submission'.

But we're asking a far deeper question. We're asking whether or not Jesus embraced the same faith as Muhammad. Would he, for instance, have recognised Muhammad as 'the seal of the prophets'? Would he have believed that the Qur'an was the word of God? Would he have prayed towards Mecca, fasted at Ramadan, recited the Creed or indeed denied his own divinity?

If by saying 'wasn't Jesus a Muslim?' we're asking these far deeper questions then Muslims and Christians find themselves strongly at odds in their answers.

Both Christianity and Islam have been tremendously influential. About one quarter of the world's population at least nominally, would regard themselves as Christians. A fifth would call themselves Muslims. Yet for most of the last thirteen centuries the two religions have developed in parallel in separate parts of the world. Islam has mainly been centred in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, Turkey, India and South East Asia (especially Indonesia and Malaysia). By contrast Christian-

ity has been confined largely to Europe, North and South America, Africa and the former Soviet Union. And yet both have been, and still are, growing rapidly.

Now, perhaps for the first time in world history, Christians and Muslims can meet and talk in a way that they've never been able to before. This is especially possible in schools, university forums like this, and on the internet where Muslim Christian dialogue is taking place on an unprecedented scale.

In many ways Muslims and Christians find themselves as co-belligerents in a common battle against the modern world. The West is now not Christian but rather post-modernist. It's characterised by an obsession with media technology (consumerism and entertainment), a radical relativism which asserts that we can all have our own private truth, an ego-centrism (which looks after number one) and a religious pluralism which asserts all religions are the same. This way of thinking has led to escapism and cynicism in society generally.

By contrast both Christianity and Islam find themselves running against this ideology. They share a concern for community, service and absolute truth: involvement rather than escapism, hope as opposed to cynicism. While postmodern society holds that man is simply a clever monkey, the product of matter, chance and time in a Godless universe, Muslims and Christians are together in asserting that man was made to enjoy a relationship with God.

Similarities between Islam and Christianity

Before exploring the differences between Islam and Christianity its useful to map out our common ground. There are seven common strands that are clearly evident.

First, Islam and Christianity share a common ethical code, one which underlies respect for marriage, a belief in the sanctity of life, and a respect for property. The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament are very similar to Islamic ethics and as Christian doctors we find ourselves agreeing with Muslims on many ethical issues. For example members of the Christian Medical Fellowship work together with members of the

plicit claim to Divinity. Their response was to say 'you have heard the blasphemy' and then to condemn him as worthy of death.

What are we faced with?

What should we think of someone who claims to be God? There are only three alternatives. If the claim is false and the person making the claim does not know it to be false then we would have to say that they are suffering under a delusion and probably psychotic. On the other hand, if the claim is false and the person making it knows it to be false, then we would have to say that they are a deceiver trying to lead people astray. On the other hand, if the claim is true then we should recognise that person as God and act accordingly. Would it be possible for God to become a man? If God can do anything then it must be. Why would he want to? Jesus said that he came to save the lost. In other words his visit to our planet had a purpose. He was both revealing his true identity and also dying on the Cross in order to make it possible for our broken relationship with God to be restored. The central message of Christianity is that the only way we can be put right with God and forgiven of our sins is by accepting that Jesus Christ has taken the punishment for our sins on our behalf. If we put our faith in him he will then grant us forgiveness and give us a new life so that we can approach the Day of Judgement with confidence.

Is it possible that Christ could have been psychotic or an evil deceiver? Certainly Muslims believe neither of these possibilities. How could he be mad when he gave such profound teaching? Similarly, how could someone who lived a life of virtue be evil?

He must have been God

Let us turn the question around. If it were possible for God to become a man, what sort of man would we expect him to be? We would expect him to have an unusual entry to life and both Qur'an and Bible confirm his virgin birth. We would expect him to be morally perfect and to perform extraordinary deeds, again facts confirmed in both Qur'an and Bible. We would expect him to speak the greatest words ever spo-

presence of his disciples which were not recorded. John's comment on this is to say that 'if everyone of them were written down I suppose that even the whole world would not have had room for the books that would be written' (John 21:25).

The New Testament confirms that Christ gave wonderful teaching and performed many miraculous deeds. In stark contrast to the Qur'an it claims that Christ was crucified by the Roman authorities.

Probably the most remarkable things recorded about Christ in the New Testament are the claims that he made. He claimed that he was the only way to God (John 14:6) and this claim was confirmed by the Apostles - in particular both Peter (Acts 4:12) and Paul (1 Tim 2:5). More than this, when asked to reveal God the Father to the disciples he simply asked them 'have I been with you so long and you don't know me?' (John 14:9) He followed this up by saying that anyone who had seen him had seen the Father. It was this astounding teaching that Jesus and God were one that marked him out as unique.

That this is what he was claiming is very clear from the New Testament where his divinity is directly stated in at least eight passages (John 1:1,2; John 1:18; John 20:28; Acts 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1) and strongly implied in others (Matt 1:23; John 17:3,5; Col 2:2; 2 Thess 1:12; 1 Tim 1:17).

His claims to be one with God were further confirmed by the fact that he called himself 'I Am' (John 8:58) a title which God used in the Old Testament to describe only himself (Ex 3:14). He accepted the title Lord (Hebrew Yahweh ' Greek Kyrios) and accepted worship (John 9:38) while being intimately aware of the Old Testament laws about idolatry. He claimed to have the power to forgive sins (Mark 2:5), which only God can do and also to be the Judge on the Day of Judgement (John 5:22). On top of this he affirmed that he existed even before the world was made (John 17:5).

If we have any doubts about what Jesus said we can tell from the reactions people had to him that they knew what he was claiming. They either worshipped him (Matt 4:33) or accused him of blasphemy (John 10:33). He was crucified simply because he claimed at his trial to be 'the Son of God'. From Psalm 2, the Jews at the time knew this to be an im-

Islamic Medical Association within HOPE (Healthcare Opposed to Euthanasia).

Second, Christianity and Islam share a common geography and history. The two religions date back to the Middle East and in particular come together in the person of Abraham and his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac.

Third, we share a belief in one God. This may seem a surprise to Muslim listeners, but both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible assert God's oneness. 'The Lord is one' says Deuteronomy 6:4. 'There is One God...' says 1 Timothy 2:5.

Fourth, we share a belief in prophets - men throughout history chosen as God's mouthpiece who spoke God's Word. Many of these prophets are shared in both religious traditions. For example: Moses who brought us the Torah (Taurat), David who brought us the Psalms (Zabur), and of course Jesus who preached the Gospel (Injil). There are several other biblical prophets who are also mentioned in the Qur'an.

Fifth, we share a belief in angels: heavenly beings who are used as God's messengers throughout history. Gabriel in particular plays a prominent place in both religions. Muslims believe that Muhammad was visited by Gabriel and of course Christians believe that Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce the birth of Jesus Christ.

Sixth, we share a belief in Scriptural authority. We accept that God's revelations throughout history have been recorded in books, and while we may disagree about the degree of divine inspiration of the various books in the other's religious traditions, we nonetheless both share a profound respect of the authority of 'Scripture'.

Seventh and finally, we share a belief in the day of judgment. Both, Christians and Muslims, hold that on this day God will divide everyone who has lived on our planet into two groups; one group consigned to heaven and the other group consigned to hell. While we differ on the criteria by which that judgment will be made, we nevertheless concur on the fact that there are only two possible destinations for human beings after death.

Similarities between Muslim and Christian views of Christ

So, there are many similarities between the two religions, in fact even when we come to the person of Jesus Christ there are some common strands. There is very little in the Qur'an about Jesus. When we consider that the Qur'an is about the same length as the New Testament but only mentions Jesus in a few of its 114 chapters (whereas by contrast the whole of the New Testament of the Bible is about Christ) we can see that there is little balance in the quantity of material. However, what little there is in the Qur'an affirms a lot of what we know about Jesus from the Gospels.

This is particularly evident in three areas.

First with regard to his birth. The Qur'an deals with this in Sura 19:16-23, 29-33 and in Sura 3:42-47, 59. These verses affirm that an angel visits Mary (cf Luke 1:26,27), and indicates that God has chosen her and singled her out (cf Luke 1:28). She is said to be blessed among women (cf. Luke 1:31-33) and great things are spoken of the son she will bare (cf. Luke 1:31-33). The Qur'an in Sura 3:59 likens Jesus to Adam, (as does the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 5:22, 45-49 and Romans 5). Most importantly the Qur'an repeatedly affirms the fact of the virgin birth (Sura 19:20). Interestingly Jesus is the only one of the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an who is said to have had a virgin birth. When we consider that Jesus was male, and that he therefore had a Y chromosome, we see that the only explanation for its origin (since it could not have come from Mary herself) was that God must have created it afresh. This is probably what the Bible means when it affirms 'a body you have prepared for me' in the book of Hebrews. Certainly there is no suggestion in the Bible or in the Qur'an that God had intercourse with Mary or implication that even the X chromosome came from her. This creation of a body for Jesus was a unique act (although Jesus himself, we believe, was existing before time began).

Second, there are similarities in the Qur'an and the Bible with regard to the life of Christ. Like the New Testament, the Qur'an affirms that Jesus performed miracles: in particular that he restored sight to the blind, healed lepers and raised people from the dead (Sura 3:49, 5:11). The Qur'an also affirms that Jesus brought 'the message of the Gospel'

when could it have been changed in relation to the writing of the Qur'an? It cannot have been after the Qur'an was written since we have New Testament manuscripts pre-dating the Qur'an as I have already said.

Equally, it cannot have been changed before the Qur'an was written because otherwise the Qur'an would say so. Interestingly the Qur'an does not say that the Bible has been changed at any point. In fact, to the contrary, the Qur'an encourages its readers to compare its own teaching with the Old and New Testaments of the Bible in order to confirm the truth of the message. This makes sense when we understand that the New Testament was not translated into Arabic until after the Qur'an was written. Therefore there was no opportunity for Muslims to realise that there was any clash between the teaching of the two books. This explains why Muhammad used to refer to the Bible for guidance (Sura 5:43, 46 and 6:34 and 10:64).

Most importantly how could God have allowed the Bible to be changed when Jesus himself said that 'Scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35). Why would anyone have dared to try and change it when faced with the truth of the warnings of the consequences of doing so in the Bible itself. It is significant that the early Muslim commentators Bukhari (Al-Razi) were all agreed that the Bible could not be changed since it was God's Word and several centuries passed before Muslims claimed that it had been changed. Surely if the Qur'an was indeed written by God, as Muslims claim, it would record the plain fact that the Qur'an and New Testament disagree. Instead - the Qur'an affirms the Bible.

Jesus Christ in the New Testament

What then do the New Testament documents tell us about the person of Christ? As mentioned, they agree with some of what the Qur'an teaches but provide much more detailed eye-witness accounts of Jesus' teaching, miraculous deeds and claims about himself. For example, the Sermon on the Mount which makes up three chapters of the Gospel of Matthew consists entirely of Christ's direct teaching on a multiplicity of different subjects. Many miracles showing Christ's mastery over diseases and natural phenomena are described in all four Gospels and the Apostle John tells us that Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the

Christian leader himself.

Their parallel accounts, although recording different details, show a remarkable degree of consistency. There was clearly no change in the story through a chain of oral tradition, simply because there wasn't such a chain. It was eye-witnesses who recorded these events. Also, the fact that we have very early manuscripts and fragments of New Testament mean that we can be confident that what we have today is what the original authors first wrote. The earliest fragments that exist include the John Ryland fragment in the John Ryland Library in Manchester which dates from 125 AD, and the Magdalen fragments which date from about 65 - 70 AD and are housed in the Magdalen College Library in Oxford.

What is remarkable is that these date from either the life-time of the Apostles (in the case of the Magdalen fragment) or from the life-time of those who knew the Apostles personally. This is despite the fact that they were written on papyrus which easily disintegrates.

There are also complete manuscripts of the New Testament from the first three centuries after Christ including the Codex Alexandrinus and Codex Sinaiticus in the British Library and the Codex Vaticanus in the Vatican Library in Rome. In fact there are over 230 New Testament manuscripts and fragments of the New Testament (in about eight different languages) which pre-date the time of Muhammad. In addition to this there are 88,000 quotes from the New Testament in the writings of the 'church fathers', 32,000 of which date from before the Council of Nicea in 325 AD.

We find nothing like the documentary evidence for the New Testament in any other literature from antiquity. For example, we know of Julius Caesar only from ten documents, the earliest of which is a copy written 1,000 years after his life-time. Apart from the New Testament the best documented literature in antiquity is Homer's Iliad of which have only 643 copies, the earliest written 500 years after the original.

Clearly, the New Testament manuscript evidence is extremely reliable.

Has the New Testament been changed?

It is often said by Muslims that the Bible has been changed, but

and that he committed no sin (Sura 3:46).

Third, there are similarities between the titles given to Christ in the Qur'an and those in the Bible. The Qur'an calls Jesus 'the statement of truth' (Sura 17:24), a similar claim to Jesus calling himself 'the Way the Truth and the Life' in John 14:6. Similarly, the Qur'an calls Jesus the Word (Sura 10:19 cf John 1:1), the Apostle (Sura 19:31 cf. Hebrews 3:1) and the servant or slave of God (Sura 4:172 and 19:31 cf. Isaiah chapters 42, 49, 50 and 53). The servant of God was one of Jesus' favourite terms for himself and he clearly taught that he was the person talked about in the prophet Isaiah's 'Servant Songs' written many centuries before. Most remarkably, the Qur'an refers eleven times (for example Sura 3:45, 4:71, 5:19, 9:30) to Christ as the Messiah. This is particularly interesting because Messiah (or Christ in Greek) is the title repeatedly applied to Jesus throughout the Bible. In fact, much of the Old Testament is devoted to explaining the characteristics and qualities that the coming Messiah will have.

So, we see that there are similarities between the person of Jesus as painted in the Qur'an and the Bible. But there are huge differences too.

Differences between Muslim and Christian Views of Jesus

Some stories we find in the Qur'an about Jesus are not in the Bible at all. For example the Qur'an tells us that a palm tree provides anguish for Mary after Jesus' birth (Sura 19:22-26). We are told that Jesus created pigeons from clay and then threw them into the air whereupon they turned into real birds and flew away (Sura 3:49 and 5:11). The baby Jesus is alleged to have talked from the crib (19:29-33) and perhaps most surprising of all we are told that God, Mary and Jesus together constitute the Christian trinity (Sura 5:116).

These ideas to Christians sound quite bizarre, but now with the benefit of archaeology we have some idea as to what their sources may have been. At the time of Muhammad the New Testament had not yet been translated into Arabic and so he didn't have access to the New Testament manuscripts when recording the Qur'an. However, we know that he was in contact with a number of groups who, although calling themselves Christian, had quite bizarre beliefs. Some people suggest that Muhammad may have been influenced by this and simply incorporated

'heresy' into the text of the Qur'an and there is, in fact, very good support for this view. The story of the palm tree is found in an apocryphal document called 'The Lost Books of the Bible'. Similarly the story of the pigeons comes from 'Thomas' Gospel of the infancy of Jesus Christ'. The story of baby Jesus talking is remarkably similar to that found in an Arabic apocryphal fable from Egypt named 'The First Gospel in the Infancy of Jesus Christ' and the false belief about God, Mary and Jesus making up the trinity was also peddled by a heretical sect called the Choloridians which had been banished to Arabia at the time.

So there are similarities but also differences.

If we want to know more details about the life of Christ, then we need to look at sources other than the Qur'an. The Qur'an was not written down until at least 600 years after the death of Jesus but the New Testament was recorded by eye-witnesses within a few years of his death. Not surprisingly we can also learn a reasonable amount about Jesus from late first and early second century documents written by non-Christian Jewish and Roman historians. Let us look at some of these latter documents first because they predate the Qur'an by at least 400 years.

Early non Christian sources about Christ

First there is Tacitus. Tacitus is of particular interest to us in England because he was the son-in-law of Julius Agricola, who was once the Roman Governor of Britain. In approximately 110 AD Tacitus, one of Rome's most famous historians, recorded this about Christ:

'Therefore to dispel rumour, Nero substituted his culprits and treated with the most extreme punishments some people, popularly known as Christians whose disgraceful activities were notorious. The originator of that name Christus had been executed when Tiberias was Emperor by order of the procurator Pontius Pilatus. But the deadly cult, though checked for a time, was now breaking out again not only in Judea, the birth place of this evil, but even throughout Rome where all the nasty and disgusting ideas from all over the world pour in and find a ready following.

Tacitus was by no means a follower of Christ but he did nonethe-

less record and confirm the basic facts about his life and death. Similarly Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived from AD 37 to 90, wrote the following in his 'Antiquities of the Jews'.

'And there arose about this time a source of new trouble, one Jesus. He was a doer of marvellous deeds. This man was the so-called Christ and when Pilate had condemned him to the Cross, those who had loved him did not cease - for he appeared to them, as they said, on the third day alive again.'

There was also Lucian of Samosata, a Satirist - a 'John Cleese' of the early second century who referred to Christ as 'the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced a new cult into the world'. Seutonius refers to Christians as being 'given over to a new and mischievous superstition'. Pliny the Younger gives advice to Trajan about killing Christians and Thallus and Phlegon are two first-century historians who debate the cause of the darkness in the middle of the day which occurred at Christ's crucifixion.

This brief excursion into Jewish and Roman history is simply to show that the consensus among non-Christian writers was that Jesus existed, performed miracles, was crucified under Pilate when Tiberius was Emperor, and was believed by his followers to have risen from the dead. If we're wanting more detailed evidence, then it is to the Gospels in the New Testament that we must turn.

The Gospels in the New Testament

The New Testament consists of 27 books all of which were almost certainly written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The New Testament is all about Jesus and as mentioned is about the same length as the Qur'an. Therefore we have a tremendous amount of material to examine.

The first four books in the New Testament are four biographies written by two of Jesus' twelve disciples (Matthew and John), another man (Mark) who was a close follower of Jesus and one of the leaders in the early church, and a Greek doctor (Luke) who although he never met Christ personally interviewed the eye-witnesses and became an early