

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'AN  
INCLUDING THE QURANIC VIEW OF JESUS

by

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A. Introduction:

It usually feels good to have someone tell you that you had a good idea, and I hope this comment will please you. To bring Muslims and Christians together to discuss fundamental issues is a very good idea indeed. I am not sure if you realize what percentage of the world's population is made up of Muslims and Christians. It is about 55% or 3.7 billion people, over half all the world. Surely it is plain that if Christians and Muslims are friends and mutually co-operative the world will be a better place. In fact, it might be said that they have the fate of the world in their hands. In that light I am privileged and glad to be here, and I thank the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon and the Saskatoon Islamics Association for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

Before going farther I want to recognize old friend Archbishop Bolen. His recent move to Regina is Saskatoon's loss, but in the divine scales of justice that will all work out. I also want to acknowledge Sister Phyllis Kapucinski, a member of the organizing committee, with whom I worked together many years ago and whose dedicated efforts contributed a lot to the development of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Regina. And let me not forget Fr. Bernard, the hard-working committee chairman. One has to be careful about these young men who see visions! I also look forward to a new friendship with Imam Ilyas. Thank you all.

The holy Qur'an has a lovely phrase "The abode of peace", a term for heaven. I want to use that phrase in a different way. In Christian-Muslim relations the construction of an abode of peace is a high vision indeed. It will be built through the efforts of many ordinary people, each placing a brick of friendship in the edifice. Such an effort requires foundational beginnings like these sessions. I recall the time, in the late 1970s, when I introduced the first Islam classes at Luther College, in the University of Regina. I was surprised to see two Muslim leaders present -- Dr. Massud Hassan and Mrs. Aziza Sleightholm, both of whom later became close friends. I asked them, "Why are you here?" They answered, "We want to know what the University is doing with our religion!"

I suppose that some Muslim friends who are here tonight may have similar uncertainties about this program, or others like it. After all, the

topic is a sensitive one. I have prepared an introduction to Islam entitled Muslim Friends: Their Faith and Feeling. I will quote some words I wrote there about the Muslim reverence for the Qur'an:

It is the guiding star for life in this world, and it is the compass for the Muslim's journey to the next world. The Qur'an is the tangible symbol of God's Reality, the exposition of His eternal will, and the most precious religious possession of Muslims. Because of its divine nature, it is unhesitatingly referred to as the ultimate and infallible authority in all human affairs. It can safely be said that nothing is more important to Islam than the Qur'an. (p.129)

Christians have similar feelings about the Bible. So I am pleased by your co-sponsorship and your dialogical approach.

Let me then proceed with a word about how I will be approaching our topic.

#### B. The Essential Factor

How do you get at the relation of the two books - the Bible and the Qur'an? At some level that effort would seem to involve comparison. Max Müller, the founder of modern religious studies, even declared: "All higher knowledge is acquired by and rests on comparison" (Introduction to the Science of Religion 1873, p.12). That statement, in my view, is far too sweeping, but there is also much truth in it. Yet how do you compare two books? Look at any two volumes. What do you compare? -- their size, their weight, their cost, their cover, their stitching, their printing? Of course, you will say, you are teasing, you must compare their content. But what if one is a hymnal and the other a dictionary? Then you might say, you can't compare them, but you can compare two religious books like the Qur'an and Bible! But we must remember that the Qur'an is a monograph, i.e., a single text, given through a single prophet, over a period of only 22 years, and from one culture context. The Bible, on the other hand, is a series of 66 booklets given through a variety of authors over a period of 1500 years, living in several regional culture contexts.

Surely these facts alone will raise the question of what to compare. Should it be their names, their origin and formation, their arrangement, their language, their teaching, their interpretation

and study, their sacred quality, their place in the community of faith and in the believer's home? These questions illustrate that comparing sacred scriptures is not such a simple matter. Where does that leave us? This is a jungle of material. And in a jungle we can become beastly toward one another.

Let me look at the issue from another angle. In considering the relation between two books that have similar content it is a common scholarly routine to start out historically. At first sight this would seem to be a good way to make a start. Since the Bible is 600 years older than the Qur'an, it would appear logical to examine how it influenced the Qur'an. In fact, one quickly discovers many overlaps. For example, you will find that eighteen Biblical prophets are mentioned in the Qur'an. But this approach too can only be a very limited one. The overlaps do not occur because the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) read the Bible. He could not have done that. The reason he could not have done that is not because he was illiterate. Some Muslims believe that, but it is arguable. The real reason he could not have read the Bible is that it was not available. Scholars agree that the first Arabic translation of the Bible did not appear before the 800s. Muhammad lived 200 years before that, 570-632 AD. The Qur'an was the first Arabic book, and the Bible came into the peninsula two centuries later. Christians need to think about the implications of that failure. From a purely historical point of view the Prophet Muhammad had to receive his information orally from the few Jews and Christians resident in Arabia, or from traders passing through, or from semi-Christianized tribes on the borders, where there were many sectarian groups. It would be hard for a clear picture to emerge from such sources.

The difficulties with comparison and history point to the need for another way of looking at the basic relation between these two sacred scriptures, a method that I call function analysis. What is the Qur'an intended for? What is its purpose? What is the Bible intended for? What is its purpose?

Usually we get the answer to those questions from the Preface to a volume. Neither the Qur'an nor the Bible has a Preface, but that is not a problem because the answers are clear in the texts.

### C. the Primary Purpose of the Qur'an

I'll start with the Qur'an. What is its primary purpose? When it speaks about itself it uses various descriptions and addresses a variety of topics, but it seems to me that there is no mystery in regard to its primary purpose. Its self-description includes such phrases as:

- "sure knowledge"
- "a reminder and a warning"
- "a plain sign" and
- "true guidance"

Among its core topics is a great double theme. On the one hand it emphasizes God's unity and power; on the other side it lays great stress on humanity's surrender and obedience. What links these two is divine guidance. That is where the Qur'an comes in. It is God's infallible guiding Word. Its overriding function is to teach one how to surrender to the Almighty and how to lead a God-pleasing life of piety.

Why do we need God's guiding revelation? We need the guidance because human beings are naturally frail and weak. They have a tendency to give way to idolatry and bad behaviour. They need help. That is why the last three verses of Chapter One of the Qur'an are a prayer: "Show us the straight path, the path of those whom Thou has favoured, not the path of those who earn Thine anger, nor of those who go astray" (114:5-7).

God does His part. He is al-Rahmān and al-Rahīm, the all-merciful One and al-Ghaffūr and al-Maghfūr, the all-forgiving One. He answers the prayer and gives the guidance. Over 240 times the term "guidance" and its derivatives appear in the Qur'an (huda, hidayat). Guidance is like a golden thread that holds the book together. It represents God's greatest gift of mercy and is the ultimate mark of God's friendship. "Lo! my protecting friend is Allah, who reveals the Scripture" (7:196).

In the Muslim view that divine friendship and mercy became evident right at the beginning of human history. The Qur'an reports that when Adam became a wrong-doer in the Garden, God's message came to him: "Go down all of you from here, but verily there cometh unto you from Me a guidance, and whoso followeth My guidance, there shall no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve" (2:38). That promise -- with which the terms mercy and good tidings are associated -- was then fulfilled. Over the centuries God graciously gave His guidance through inspired prophets and sacred books, including the Bible, but unfortunately humanity constantly went astray. So God mercifully decided to give humans one more chance, the last one! He sent His final Word in a clear message that clarifies and sums up all the previous revelations. It began at Mecca in the month of Ramadan in the year 610 -- the descent of the conclusive, closing portion of God's Eternal Speech. By it, 2:185 reports, "Was revealed the Qur'an, a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance, and the criterion of right and wrong." A summary passage of the function of the Qur'an is this one: "This is a blessed Scripture which We have revealed. So follow it and be righteous that you may receive mercy." On the last Judgment Day there will be an inquiry regarding the level of your obedience.

At this point I will turn to the Bible and briefly consider the same question. What is its primary purpose?

#### D. The Primary Purpose of the Bible

Although the Bible is a very large book with many parts, it too has an overriding function that holds it together. Like the Qur'an it has a profound respect for the principles of spiritual guidance and surrendering obedience to God's will; that is why its followers celebrate the Ten Commandments and strive to adhere to them. The Bible's single overall theme, however, is that humans consistently -- we could say miserably -- fail the obedience test. Therefore God in His mercy goes beyond guiding people. He also saves them from the consequences of their attitudes and actions. The Bible tells us about that. Salvation is its central theme,

the golden thread that holds it together. The Germans have an interesting theological term for this -- "Heilsgeschichte." The word "Geschichte" means story. The dictionary meanings of "Heil" include healing, salvation, welfare, and happiness. In short, the Bible testifies how God in His love made humanity whole again and gave us a fresh start.

The Bible also is a story about God's Word at work, for God carried out His renewal plan and His acts of salvation through His Word, His Self-expression. In a culminating act of mercy He sent His word into the world in another way to restore it. As He worked through the prophets in human language, He does so now in the human form of the Saviour. As John ch.1 puts it:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....He was in the world and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not accept him..And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us....From his fullness we have all received....grace upon grace.

That fullness includes the forgiveness of sins and life-power to walk the straight path. God the Creator and Re-Creator declares: "Behold, I make all things new."

The Bible's testimony to God's salvation began already with the promises of the Old Testament (tawrāt, zabūr). 700 years before the birth of the Messiah-Saviour the prophet Isaiah declared:

There is no god beside me, a righteous God and Saviour. Therefore turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth. For I am God and there is no other" (45:21f.)

Then in the New Testament days of fulfillment, Mary/Maryam, the mother of Jesus sang: "My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." Giving the essential purpose of the Bible the apostle Paul later said to Timothy, his younger colleague: "From childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim.3:15). Jesus himself declared to the Jewish scholars: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness to me" (Jn.5:39). So the impossible had happened! God lovingly and personally intervened in the human situation to correct it.

Both Muslims and Christians call God "the Almighty." When we look at the two principles, guidance and salvation, side by side, we get a sense of what that means -- power in a special form. Two of the glorious names of God in Islam are al-Qādir and al-Jalīl, the Almighty. Muslim scholars define their meaning in these words: "He is able to do anything in the way He wills," and "He does what He wills in the way He wills."

And with that we come to the Qur'anic account of Jesus.

#### E. The Qur'anic Account of Jesus: the Story

The Qur'an does not report the activity of Jesus as the saving Word of God. Rather it looks at Him through the lens of guidance. I will start with a note on the Muslim admiration of Jesus. It is almost impossible to overstate this esteem. Jesus belongs to a small group of six prophets that are most revered: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. The Qur'an mentioned him in 93 verses. In the later development of Islam the respect for Jesus became even more enlarged. For many Muslims he is not only a humble prophet and teacher of love, but he is also a saint and a symbol of true piety. I will illustrate the attitude by quoting a poem by Ahmad Shawqi, an Egyptian Muslim (d.1932). [It was quoted in a speech on "Jesus in Islam" by Fadel Ibrahim Abdallah of the IQRA" Educational Foundation in Chicago (cf. Muslim World, Vol.L, No.4, October, 1960, p.300).] Shawqi wrote:

Kindness, chivalry, guidance and humility were born  
The day Jesus was born.  
His coming brightened the world.  
His light illuminated it.  
Like the light of dawn flowing through the universe,  
so did the sign of Jesus flow.  
He filled the world with light,  
making the earth shine with brightness.  
No threat, no tyranny, no revenge, no swords, no raids,  
no bloodshed did he use in his call to the new faith.  
A king he lived on earth,  
but wearying of his state,  
He substituted heaven for it.



To his faith wise men were attracted,  
Humble, submissive and weak before him,  
Their submission was followed by the submission  
of kings, common folk and sages.  
His faith found roots on every land,  
and anchors on every shore.

This deep admiration starts from the Qur'an. That is all the more surprising because the biography of Jesus there is much shorter than it is in the Bible. In some cases there are differences in the Quranic and Biblical accounts; from the Muslim perspective what is in the Qur'an has been verbally revealed by God. In the Muslim view the differences are due to the fact that some errors crept into the previous scriptures, which the Qur'an corrects.

The Quranic materials centre on Jesus' birth and childhood. There is much less reference to his later ministry. The story begins with Mary who is referred to as Miryam. God sent an angelic spirit to her named Jibrīl (Gabriel) in the appearance of a handsome man. Naturally Mary was very disturbed. Jibrīl announced to her: "You will have a faultless son." Faultless means sinless. Then the angel said, "The child will bear a Word from God, the Messiah, near to God, righteous, highly regarded. The troubled virgin Mary gasped, "How is this possible?" The angel reassured her: "God says be! (Ar.kun), and it is."

Then the angel described the mission of Jesus. God will prepare the child by teaching him the Book and Wisdom, the Torah and Gospel, thereby enabling him to confirm the previous revelations. He will do signs of wonder, for example, making a bird out of clay, breathing on it and giving it life. He will heal the blind and the leprous, and will even raise the dead with divine permission. His mission will be to teach people to fear and to worship God, and to call humans to the straight path.

What was predicted happened. Mary became pregnant and retreated from public view. When her time for delivery came near, she sat near the trunk of a palm-tree and cried out in despair.

A voice from above said, "Don't worry. I am sending a stream of water, and for food shake the tree." There she delivered and God care of them. When she came home, critics challenged her about baby, and she replied: "Ask the child." The little baby spoke up from the cradle and said, "I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and appointed me as Prophet."

As mentioned above, apart from his miracles few details are given as to how his ministry developed, about his teachings and parables, or about his final days. He did receive a book called the Gospel (Injil), but nothing more is said about it. The message he proclaimed was plain and simple: "Lo Allah! He is my Lord and your Lord, so worship him. This is the straight path" (19:37). More space is given to what he denies. He rejects the idea that he is anything other than an ordinary human being. In that respect he is earthy like Adam and the other prophets (5:75). He also disavows some teachings that Christians too reject. The idea that God took a human wife and He is their offspring, or the idea that there are three gods named Father, Mother and Son, are abhorrent to him (72:2, 5:116). Neither has God adopted him as a son (23:91). Although some enemies succeeded in putting him on a cross, God did not allow him to die there and took him to himself" (4:158). Later traditions add the account of His second coming, but that is not recorded in the Qur'an.

In summary, the story of Jesus in the Qur'an is the story of a prophetic messenger and faithful servant. There is a later tradition (Hadith) report that sums up the position this way:

If anyone testified that there is no god but God alone, who has no partner, that Muhammad is his servant and messenger, that Jesus is God's servant and messenger, the son of His handmaid, His word which he cast into Mary, and a spirit from Him, and that paradise and hell are real, God will cause him to enter Paradise no matter what he has done. (Bukhari and Muslim, Mishkat I, p.111).

In the Qur'an, however, there are the names of Jesus and in conclusion I will take up that impressive list. The fifteen names

powerful and revealing. While most of them reflect aspects of his prophetic vocation, a few carry hints of something more. It is not easy to remember all of them, but they are truly bridges for dialogue, and I will conclude on this high point.

#### F. The Quranic Account of Jesus: His Names

I don't know how many of you are mountain-climbers. In my younger years I spent some time doing that in the Rockies and elsewhere. When you climb mountains, you usually have to first walk a long way through valleys and dark hill-side trails, sometimes clearing underbrush, and Christian-Muslim dialogue can be like that. But then you emerge on the peaks, the view is clear and the air refreshing. Both the ascent and the arrival are worthwhile. The names of Jesus are like a trail that lead upward.

##### 1. 'Īsā

The first is the common name for Jesus in its Arabic form. It may be a transliteration of the Syriac Yeshu' or Yasu'. All are derived from the Hebrew Yeshu'a. In the Bible the angel Gabriel tells its meaning - "He shall save his people from their sins," but Muslim interpreters are not aware of that meaning.

##### 2. Nabī

The word means prophet, like the Hebrew equivalent. Nabī is usually joined with the name 'Īsā. Muslims usually call Jesus "'Īsā Nabī."

##### 3. Masīh.

Masīh is the same as Messiah, and is also commonly joined to 'Īsā. 'Īsā Masīh. The Hebrew meaning of "Anointed One" is not known; the majority of interpreters say it means "the wandering ascetic."

##### 4. Son of Mary

This name is used only once in the New Testament, in Mark 3, but is used several times in the Qur'an. It emphasizes the humanity of Jesus and respect for Mary.

##### 5. Messenger

The Arabic is rasūl. A Rasūl is a prophet who has been given a written revelation, like Moses. Jesus has received the Gospel. Muslims believe in the continuity of Law, Gospel and Qur'an. Muslims therefore call Jews and Christians "people of the book" (ahl-al-kitāb).

6. Servant

The Arabic 'abd is a word that implies complete surrender to God in worship and life. The Qur'an says that Jesus is nothing but a servant and that he is content with that status. The cognate Hebrew term is ebed.

7. One Near to God

The angel Jibril gave him that name. Some Muslims say it refers to Jesus' physical place in heaven, while others, such as Sufis, say it expresses his role as a model of piety.

8. The Example

The Ar. is mathāl, which means parable. The life of Jesus is a parable of righteousness. A similar name is "one of the upright."

9. The Blessed One

Ar. mubarak. A Muslim commentator, Al-Baidawi, says that this is to be explained as "having much profit for others."

10. Sign

The Ar. is āya. Āya means a miracle. Each verse of the Qur'an, for example, is called a miracle. The coming of Jesus is a sign, and in his life he is to be a beacon not only to the Jews but to the world.

11. The Witness

Ar. shahīd. This is one of the 99 beautiful names of God in Islam, and it is also the word for martyrs who give their life for God. In the Qur'an 'Isā says that he was a witness while he lived among them, and he will be a witness about them on the Day of Judgment.

12. Mercy

Ar. rahma. God is called al-Rahmān, al-Rahīm. At the annunciation the angel Jibrīl describes Jesus as "a mercy from us." "We" and "Us" are frequently used by God in the Qur'an to refer to Himself.

13. A Spirit of God

Ar. rūh. "Spirit of God" is used seven times in connection with Jesus. Muslim interpreters generally are perplexed by the meaning. When the Prophet Muhammad's first followers had to become refugees in Ethiopia, according to Ibn Ishaq, the Prophet wrote to the Ethiopian Christian Emperor, saying "I bear witness that Jesus the son of Mary is the spirit of God and His word which He cast into Mary the virgin."

14. Word of God

The Ar. term for Word is kalima. The term for Word of God is kalimatullāhi (Qur'an 3:40; 4:169). It is used only of Jesus. I think of it as possibly the greatest Quranic name for Jesus. It is a true link between the Bible and the Qur'an, and the link between guidance and salvation. Muslim scholars ponder its meaning -- it is a treasure waiting to be found.

15. Illustrious in This World

This simply means "the Noble One." It needs no further explanation. It is no wonder that a premier Muslim poet, the poet of love, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d.1273), considered Jesus and his names and wrote: "Die before his beauty!" (diwan-i-kabir, in Annemarie Schimmel, As Through a Veil, p.214).

**CONCLUSION**

With this I conclude. Two books, two primary purposes, differing perceptions yet many points of contact, much to talk about, much to bring us together. For who in the world does not need guidance? And who in the world does not need salvation?

Thank you for having me and for your great patience!

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