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IS ISLAM THE “END” OF CHRISTIANITY? (PART ONE)

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Fundamental to the Muslim view of Christianity are the two lenses through which Muslims see all of reality: The Qur’an and the Hadith (traditions regarding Muhammad’s teachings and way of life). For example, the Qur’an teaches that the doctrine of the Trinity is polytheistic and that Christians believe Jesus was conceived through a sexual union between God as the father and Mary as the mother (Sura 4:171; 5:73, 116). As a result, despite protests to the contrary, appeals to Scripture,¹ and explanations,² it is extremely difficult to persuade Muslims that Christianity is monotheistic.

Compounding such misunderstandings of our faith is the Muslim belief that Islam has superseded (fulfilled and replaced) the Christian faith, thus abrogating (bringing to an end) Christianity as a valid faith. Muslims suppose that *as Christianity is to Old Testament religion (Judaism), so Islam is to Christianity*. Let’s understand how they have come to this conclusion.

In the Beginning, Islam. Muslims believe the original religion of humanity was Islam (Sura 7:172), and every human being is born a Muslim. The Hadith states, “Allah’s Apostle [Muhammad] said, ‘Every child is born with a true faith of Islam (i.e., to worship none but Allah alone) but his parents convert him to Judaism, Christianity or Magainism [Zoroastrianism]....’”³

God graciously sent messengers to every nation to teach them submission to God and to warn them against falsehood (16:36; 35:24). Moses and Jesus are understood to have been prophets of Islam, as well as Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob (3:67; 61:6; 2:136). Muslims are expected to honor these prophets and their books (4:136). The religions that predated Muhammad are thus said to have been originally Islamic and their prophets Muslims (15:10). The Qur’an even affirms, “Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does righteous good deeds shall have their reward with the Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (2:62; cf. 5:69).⁴

Then Came Muhammad. Muhammad is considered a successor of the prophets of old (61:6) — their books containing prophecies regarding him (7:157). Many Muslims believe the Bible contains several prophecies concerning Muhammad, most significantly Deuteronomy 18:15–18 and John 14:16.⁵ The other prophets’ missions were limited, while Muhammad is the one prophet for all humankind (7:158; 34:28), the last of the prophets (33:40). A well-known Hadith affirms this belief: “Allah’s Apostle said, ‘My similitude in comparison with the other prophets before me, is that of a man who has built a house nicely and beautifully, except for a place of one brick in a corner. The people go about it and wonder at its beauty, but say: “Would that this brick be put in its place!” So I am that brick, and I am the last of the Prophets.’”⁶

Muslims ascribe superlative status to the Qur’an as well as to Muhammad. The Qur’an is the incomparable and final revelation from God (17:88–89), confirming the previous revelations (10:37; 46:12). Unlike previous revelations, which have been textually corrupted and muted by human interpretations, the Qur’an was inscribed on a tablet in heaven (85:21–22) and is kept incorruptible by God: “We have, without doubt, sent down the Message [the Qur’an]; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption)” (15:9).

Islam and Other Religions Today. Because Muhammad was the final prophet and the Qur’an God’s final revelation, Muslims reject claims to new revelations. They are highly critical of such groups as the Baha’i,⁷

Ahmadiyyah,⁸ and Nation of Islam,⁹ each of which asserts elements of succession and abrogation. At first, Muslims embraced adherents to other monotheistic faiths, but that came to an end with the finished work of Muhammad and the Qur'an. Now *only* Muslims are accepted by God: "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to God), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good)" (3:85).¹⁰

The Importance of Continuity. *As Christianity is to Judaism, so Islam is to Christianity.* This analogy is at the heart of Islamic claims to supersession and abrogation; yet, for one religion to fulfill a preceding religion, there must be continuity with what is essential to that prior religion.

Islam claims such continuity. Muslims believe there is only one God, who created the universe and is sovereign, powerful, and active with His creation. God knows the intimate details of human lives and will one day bring all humanity to judgment. Both Christians and Muslims believe God has spoken through messengers and that this revelation has been written in holy books.

Even with these agreements, however, several significant discontinuities exist that undermine the Islamic claim to fulfill or replace Christianity. These discontinuities include such areas as sin, the Atonement, salvation, and the acknowledgment of previous revelation. Here we'll address the last point, saving the others for part two.

Revelation: Continuity or Criticism? Christians often respond to Muslim claims to supersession by referring to such doctrines as the Trinity or the incarnation of Christ. Muslims attempt to mute the significance of our doctrinal differences by arguing that the text of the Bible has been corrupted. This is a major disanalogy between Christianity and Islam. Simply put, the New Testament authors *never* criticized the text of the Old Testament Scriptures, the contemporary manuscripts, or the revelation found in them.

In contrast to Muslim criticisms, in the New Testament we find an affirmation of the entire Old Testament as inspired by God, even providing wisdom for salvation through Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:14–17). The Old Testament prophets are acknowledged to have been inspired (2 Pet. 1:21; cf. 2 Sam. 23:2). In both the Old and New Testaments, moreover, we find declarations that God's Word will not pass away (Isa. 40:6–8; 1 Pet. 1:24–25).

Jesus confirmed the reliability of the Old Testament in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7; especially 5:17–18) and elsewhere (e.g., Luke 16:31; 24:27; John 10:35; 17:17).¹¹ This is significant because we have found large portions of the Old Testament among the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls show that the text we have is substantially that of Jesus' time; thus, critics have no grounds to claim that the Old Testament text was somehow emptied of Islamic teachings.¹² We must ask, If God can sustain the Qur'an throughout the ages, could He not sustain the biblical texts? The evidence shows he has indeed sustained the biblical texts.¹³

In addition to these straightforward statements, throughout the New Testament we find regular appeals to the Old Testament as the source and confirmation of Christianity. For example, consider the affirmations and teachings of the apostle Paul in the book of Romans.¹⁴ Paul both introduced and concluded Romans noting how the Gospel he proclaimed stems from the Old Testament (Rom. 1:1–2; 16:25–27; cf. Gal. 3:6–8). Along with these agenda-setting declarations, Paul noted that the righteousness of God, which is the heart of the Gospel, was testified to by the law and the prophets (3:21). Even though some charged Paul with being unlawful, he declared the contrary: "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (3:31, NIV). His ministry and message of Christ confirm God's promises to the patriarchs: "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy" (15:8–9). Paul even viewed himself and his congregations as accountable to the Old Testament Scriptures: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (15:4, NIV; cf. 4:23–24 and 1 Cor. 10:1ff.).

Paul's dependence on the Old Testament is amply verified through even a cursory reading of his letter to the Romans (and not only this letter!) with its explicit Old Testament references (e.g., Rom. 3:10–18;

10:5–21; 15:8–12), as well as his innumerable allusions.¹⁵ His gospel was no innovation but was *dependent on*, and *derived from*, the Old Testament.

Paul’s practice clearly stands in sharp contrast to the critical charges of Muslims and others; indeed, *Islam stands in sharp disanalogy to Christianity when it seeks to establish its teachings by criticizing the text of the Bible*. We can best illustrate the truthfulness of God’s Word by showing Muslims our high regard for the Bible — both the Old and New Testaments.

In the conclusion of this series we’ll focus on the significant doctrinal discontinuities between Christianity and Islam regarding sin and salvation. We’ll also consider the Christian view of Old Testament religious practices.

– Kevin James Bywater

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Deut. 4:35, 39; Isa. 44:6–8; 43:10–11; 1 Cor. 8:5–6; Eph. 4:4–6.
2. See Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996).
3. Sahih Bukhari, vol. 2, book 23, Hadith 441 (<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/023.sbt.html#002.023.441>).
4. All quotations of the Qur’an are from A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: American International Printing Company, 1946).
5. Other less significant texts include Deut. 21:21; Ps. 118:22–23; Isa. 42:1–13; Hab. 3:3–4; Matt. 21:42–43; John 14:26–28 and 16:7–14.
6. Sahih Bukhari, vol. 4, book 56, Hadith 735 (<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/056.sbt.html#004.056.735>).
7. See www.bahai.org and www.us.bahai.org. For Christian interactions with the Baha’i faith, see Francis J. Beckwith, *Baha’i* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985) and William M. Miller, *The Baha’i Faith: Its History and Teachings* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1984).
8. See John Gilchrist, “A Study of the Ahmadiyyah Movement” (<http://www.answering-islam.de/Gilchrist/Vol1/9c.html>).
9. See C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) and Steven Tsoukas, *The Nation of Islam: Understanding the “Black Muslims”* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001).
10. See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur’anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
11. See John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984).
12. See Walter Kaiser, *Are the Old Testament Documents Reliable and Relevant?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
13. See Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986).
14. It is common for critics, including Muslims, to assert that the teachings of the apostle Paul are different than those of Jesus. In response, see David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
15. See Moises Silva, “Old Testament in Paul,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 630–42; Ben Witherington, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Nashville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); and the discussions in Gregory K. Beale, ed., *Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996).