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MUHAMMAD AND THE MESSIAH:

Comparing the Central Figures of Islam and Christianity

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**“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what
they are doing.” (Luke 23:34)¹**
Jesus, during His crucifixion

**“May Allah curse the Jews and Christians, for they built
the places of worship at the graves of their Prophets.”²**
Muhammad, on his deathbed

SYNOPSIS

Although some varieties of relativism compel adherents to treat all religious claims as *equally true*, and while the “new atheists” often maintain that all religious claims are *equally false*, a cautious examination of the evidence shows that all religions are not created equal. Whereas Christian beliefs about Jesus are based entirely on sources written within the lifetimes of eyewitnesses, Muslim beliefs about Muhammad are based on documents composed more than a century after his death. Nevertheless, even if we take these late Islamic sources seriously, additional problems immediately arise. Muhammad’s moral teachings and example, especially in the areas of sex and violence, can be shocking to those unfamiliar with Muslim sources. When viewed against the backdrop of the New Testament picture of Jesus, Muhammad’s example only serves to highlight Jesus’ moral excellence. Further, Jesus and Muhammad taught radically different theologies, but we have firm grounds for accepting Christian theology and rejecting Islamic theology. All available evidence confirms that Jesus rose from the dead. Islam, however, falls short on two fronts—Muhammad could offer no compelling

reason to believe he was a prophet, and his teachings lead to a dilemma that can only be avoided by abandoning Islam.

As Jesus of Nazareth hung from a cross—barely recognizable, skin dangling like ribbons, muscles and inner tissues exposed, covered only by His own drying yet still flowing blood—He asked His Father to forgive the people who had treated Him this way. Six centuries later, Muhammad lay dying, his internal organs shutting down after being poisoned by a Jewish woman whose family had been slaughtered by Muslim invaders.³ His prayer was for Allah to curse Jews and Christians.

A careful comparison of Jesus and Muhammad reveals that Christianity and Islam are far more different than is commonly thought. In terms of historical evidence and ethical teachings, the founders of history's two most popular religions are poles apart. When we factor in the dissimilarity of their central messages and of the divine support backing these messages, the gulf between Christianity and Islam couldn't be deeper. Muhammad seems inextricably tied to a particular culture during a specific time period. Jesus appears timeless.

HISTORICAL RECORDS

While several ancient non-Christian writings refer to Jesus, virtually everything we know about His life is based on sources contained in the New Testament. The four Gospels, the book of Acts, and numerous letters were all written either by eyewitnesses themselves or within the lifetimes of eyewitnesses. Having multiple, independent, early sources allows us to form a reliable picture of the historical Jesus.

The historian's task is far more difficult when we turn to Islam's origins. The Qur'an tells us next to nothing about Muhammad (at least, not explicitly). Our earliest detailed biographical source for the prophet of Islam is Ibn Ishaq's *Life of Muhammad*, which was written more than a century after Muhammad's death. Modern Muslims, however, have declared that Ibn Ishaq's methodology was defective, forcing them to turn to even later works for information concerning their prophet. Islam's most trusted collections of stories about Muhammad (e.g., *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, etc.) were written approximately *two centuries* (or more) after the events they report.

Needless to say, two centuries is ample time for embellishment and outright fabrication. Quests for early Islamic historical data have uncovered little, and the general movement among scholars of Islamic studies over the past century has been toward greater skepticism.⁴ Of course, there is no shortage of New Testament scholars who are highly critical of Christian beliefs (e.g., Jesus' miracles and divine nature). But there is a crucial difference between skepticism about Jesus and skepticism about Muhammad. Whereas critics of Christianity have to contend with and explain away a significant amount of early historical evidence, critics of Islam do not.

MORAL EXAMPLE

Shortly after he became a theist, the late British philosopher Antony Flew was asked whether he thought he might ever subscribe to a specific theistic religion, such as Christianity or Islam. Although Flew answered in the negative, he used the opportunity to draw a comparison between Jesus and Muhammad: “One thing I’ll say in this comparison is that, for goodness sake, Jesus is an enormously attractive charismatic figure, which the Prophet of Islam most emphatically is not.”⁵

Why did Flew, a man notorious for his criticisms of Christian theism through much of the twentieth century, find Jesus “enormously” appealing, but Muhammad not at all? The answer is rather straightforward: Flew had spent a significant portion of his life studying world religions, and the contrast between Jesus and Muhammad is striking.

Jesus spent the bulk of His three-year ministry caring for the needs of others. When challenged to perform miracles to satisfy His own hunger (Matt. 4:3–4) or to bring Himself instant personal glory (Matt. 4:5–6), He refused. Yet He never turned away the blind, the deaf, the ill, the disabled, or the hungry. He defended social outcasts while condemning the self-righteous (Luke 7:36–50). He commanded His followers to love everyone (Matt. 5:43–45) and to harm no one (Matt. 26:52). When complaints arose, Jesus was so confident in His integrity that He could say to His critics, “Which one of you convicts Me of sin?” (John 8:46).

Beyond this, Jesus set the ultimate moral example by laying down His life for others. After warning His disciples not to exalt themselves, Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Due to Jesus’ sacrifice, countless Christians have given their lives for others, whether preaching the gospel in hostile areas or caring for the sick in disease-ridden territory.

By contrast, the life of Muhammad hardly serves as a noble pattern of conduct. There are, to be sure, many instances in Muhammad’s life when he was kind, generous, or courageous; and the advent of Islam did put an end to certain heinous practices (such as female infanticide). Nevertheless, the Qur’an establishes Muhammad as the ultimate role model (33:21), while his teachings should have ruled out such esteem.

Consider two categories of Muhammad’s moral example: sexual ethics and violence. Despite the Qur’an’s prohibition against marrying more than four wives (4:3), Muhammad had at least nine wives at one time⁶ (after he received in 33:50 a special revelation giving him, and him *alone*, the right to violate the four-wife limit). Islamic sources report that one of Muhammad’s wives, a girl named Aisha, was only nine years old when the marriage was consummated.⁷ Another wife, named Zaynab, was originally married to his adopted son Zayd. However, after Muhammad saw Zaynab practically naked while attempting to visit his adopted son, he became attracted to her, and Zayd divorced his wife so that Muhammad could have her.⁸

Although Muslim men are limited to four wives, Muhammad allowed them to possess an unlimited number of captives and concubines (see Qur’an 23:5–6; 70:22–30).⁹ Muslims are not required to marry their captives in order to have sex with them, and

they are permitted to have sex with captive women whose husbands are still alive (4:24).¹⁰ Muhammad even allowed his followers to practice a form of prostitution (called “Muta”), according to which a Muslim could pay a woman for sex, marry her for a short time, and then divorce her after having sex with her.¹¹

Just as disturbing is Muhammad’s treatment of critics, apostates, and non-Muslims in general. Modern Muslims often claim that Muhammad only killed when his enemies attacked him, but history shows that he murdered numerous people whose only crime was writing poems criticizing him.¹²

Those who decided to leave Islam fared no better, for Muhammad commanded his followers, “Whoever changed his Islamic religion...kill him.”¹³ Based on Muhammad’s repeated commands to kill those who abandon Islam, all four schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, along with Shia schools, agree that male apostates should be killed. There is some disagreement, however, as to whether female apostates should be (a) executed or (b) imprisoned and tortured until they return to Islam.¹⁴

While several passages in the Qur’an appear to promote peace toward non-Muslims,¹⁵ the Qur’an defines its own method of interpretation: “Whatever communications We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it or like it” (2:106, Shakir).¹⁶ This is the basis for the doctrine of *abrogation*, according to which earlier passages of the Qur’an are canceled by later passages, provided there is a conflict. With this in mind, consider a few passages from the last three (major) chapters that Muhammad delivered to his followers:

O you who believe! do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other. (5:51, Shakir)

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day. (9:29, Ali)¹⁷

Surely Allah has bought of the believers their persons and their property for this, that they shall have the garden; they fight in Allah’s way, so they slay and are slain. (9:111, Shakir)

O you who believe! fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you hardness. (9:123, Shakir)

Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and those who are with him are severe against disbelievers, and merciful among themselves. (48:29, Hilali-Khan)¹⁸

Notice that the main criterion for fighting or mistreating people in these passages is that they do not believe in Allah as the only true God. Muhammad’s final marching orders, then, consist largely of commands to violently subjugate non-Muslims. These commands abrogate any earlier teachings calling for peaceful coexistence with

unbelievers. Excessive moral relativism aside, by this point, there should be no questioning Flew's assessment that Jesus is vastly more attractive than Muhammad.

RELIGIOUS MESSAGE

Jesus addressed numerous issues during His earthly ministry, and much of what He said could be viewed as common ground with non-Christian religions and philosophies. However, the most unique aspects of Jesus' message (and those that provoked the harshest reaction from His listeners) concerned His identity and prerogatives as the divine Son of God.

The carpenter from Nazareth claimed to be the great "I AM" who led the Israelites during the Exodus (John 8:58; 8:24; cf. Exod. 3:14), the final judge over all mankind (Matt. 25:31–33), and the apocalyptic "Son of Man," who would come on the clouds of heaven and receive worship in His everlasting kingdom (Mark 14:62; cf. Deut. 7:13–14). He assured His hearers that He could forgive their sins (Mark 2:1–12), and that when people sin, they owe a debt to Him (Luke 7:40–50). Jesus said that He is with His followers wherever they gather (Matt. 18:20) and with them forever (Matt. 28:20). He announced His ability to answer prayers (John 14:13–14), shortly before declaring that He had glory with the Father before the world began (John 17:5). Jesus called Himself the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28) and the Lord of King David (Matt. 22:41–45).

Combining these teachings with Jesus' claim to be a "ransom for many," the "Christian message" becomes clear: the divine Son of God entered creation in order to be the perfect sacrifice for sins (John 3:16).

Muhammad denied the core doctrines of the gospel. Jesus was "no more than a Messenger" (Qur'an 5:75, Ali).¹⁹ Jesus couldn't have died for anyone else's sins, both because He never died on the cross (4:157–158), and because "no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another" (39:7, Ali).²⁰ The Qur'an also explicitly denies the doctrine of the Trinity in 5:73 and 5:116 (though we should note that, according to the Qur'an, Christians believe in a Trinity made up of Allah, Jesus, and Mary!²¹).

The central message of Islam is that human beings must avoid idolatry (which includes belief in the deity of Christ) and must submit to Allah by making Muhammad the final authority in their lives (4:65, 3:31–32). Since Muhammad declared that his followers must recite the creed,²² pray the five daily prayers, give alms, fast during the month of Ramadan, and take the pilgrimage to Mecca (assuming one is physically and financially able), Muslims must perform these duties out of obedience to Allah.

DIVINE CONFIRMATION

History is filled with men and women telling other people what to believe about God. Even today, many self-proclaimed "prophets" have convinced their followers that they hold the keys to paradise. Jesus and Muhammad taught theologies that differed radically from one another and from those of other religious leaders. Why should we believe *any* of these messages?

Interestingly, the Bible and the Qur'an agree that Jesus lived the most miraculous life in history. According to both Christian and Muslim scriptures, Jesus was born of a virgin (Matt. 1:18–23; Qur'an 3:47), He cured lepers (Luke 5:12–13; Qur'an 3:49), He gave sight to the blind (Mark 10:46–52; Qur'an 5:110), and He raised the dead (John 11:38–44; Qur'an 3:49). The Qur'an even includes two apocryphal miracles—Jesus speaking at birth (19:29–33) and giving life to a clay bird (5:110).

Of course, the bedrock of Christian belief has always been Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12–19). When we look at the first-century evidence, we find that after Jesus' death, His followers became depressed because their teacher had been killed. Yet these same followers were suddenly transformed into bold preachers, most of whom went to their deaths confidently proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to them. We see a similar transformation in two people who weren't followers of Jesus during His earthly ministry. The apostle James went from being a skeptic who rejected Jesus (John 7:5) to being a leader in the early church, all because he was convinced that Jesus had appeared to him (1 Cor. 15:7). The apostle Paul initially persecuted the church and tried to destroy it (Acts 9:1–19). After seeing Jesus on the road to Damascus, however, he started preaching the same message that Peter, James, and the rest of the apostles were preaching—that Jesus is the risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:11). The only explanation that fits these historical facts is that Jesus rose from the dead.²³

According to the Qur'an, Muhammad's only miracle was the Qur'an itself (29:48–51).²⁴ Apparently, the eloquence of the Qur'an was supposed to be a sign of its divine origin (see 2:23). But this argument is clearly flawed. Even if the Qur'an were the most eloquent book ever written (which it isn't), this could hardly be taken as proof of divine inspiration, any more than the unsurpassable brilliance of Mozart's symphonies proves that his music came from God.

While I suspect we might lawfully view the Qur'an's main argument (the "argument from eloquence") as inherently absurd (and therefore evidence *against* its divine origin), a few facts drawn from the early Muslim sources could be more relevant. First, when Muhammad began receiving revelations in the cave on Mount Hira, his first impression was that he had been possessed by a poetry demon.²⁵

Second, after his experience in the cave, Muhammad became suicidal, and tried to hurl himself off a cliff. Muslim sources report that his wife Khadijah and her cousin Waraqah, who weren't in the cave and had no idea what he encountered, persuaded him that he wasn't possessed—he was a prophet of God.²⁶

Third, when Muhammad delivered the 53rd chapter of the Qur'an to his followers, it contained verses allowing Muslims to pray to three pagan goddesses (al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat). Muhammad recited these verses and bowed down in honor of the new revelation. A little later, however, he told his followers that the so-called "Satanic Verses," which he had delivered as part of the Qur'an, weren't really from Allah; they were from Satan. Muhammad removed them from the Qur'an and replaced them with the words we find in chapter 53 today.²⁷

Fourth, at one point late in life, Muhammad said he was the victim of a magic spell that lasted about a year. According to multiple sources, one of Muhammad's

enemies stole his hairbrush and used it to cast a spell on him. Ibn Ishaq tells us that Muhammad was bewitched during this time, and Bukhari adds that the spell made him delusional.²⁸

Hence, when we look for divine confirmation of Muhammad's message, we are immediately confronted by an incredibly strange argument ("My poetry is better than yours, so it must be from God"). Yet as soon as we dig deeper, we find significant *disconfirmation* of Muhammad's teachings.

THE ISLAMIC DILEMMA

There is a final difference between Jesus and Muhammad that we haven't considered—namely, that one of these men confirmed the message of the other. As we have seen, the Qur'an calls Jesus a "Messenger" of God, and Muslims are therefore required to honor Jesus' teachings. But since the Gospels obviously support the Christian view of Jesus, Muslims who want to deny Jesus' deity, death, and resurrection must say that the Gospels have been corrupted. And here Muslims face perhaps their greatest difficulty.

The Qur'an affirms the inspiration of the Christian scriptures (see 3:3–4, 7:157, 10:94, etc.). It also commands Christians to judge by what we read in the gospel (5:47), which makes no sense if the gospel has been significantly altered. Indeed, the Qur'an declares that we have "no ground to stand upon" if we do not adhere to the Torah and the gospel (5:68, Ali). Contrary to Muslim charges of corruption, the Qur'an claims that no one is capable of corrupting God's Word (6:114–115, 18:27). Thus, a dilemma rises to the surface. If the Gospels are *reliable*, Muhammad cannot be a prophet, because the Gospels contradict Muhammad's teachings. Alternatively, if the Gospels are *unreliable*, Muhammad cannot be a prophet, because Muhammad proclaimed the inspiration, preservation, and authority of the Christian scriptures. Either way, Muhammad cannot be a prophet.

ASSESSMENT

Even a cursory examination of the evidence shows (1) that we have better historical records for the life of Jesus than for the life of Muhammad, (2) that Jesus was a far better moral example than Muhammad, (3) that we have clear divine confirmation of Jesus' message, but palpable disconfirmation for that of Muhammad, and (4) that Muhammad's teachings self-destruct. This should cause any sincere, truth-seeking

Muslim to reevaluate his position. Far from being cursed (as Muhammad prayed), Christians have been blessed with an unsurpassable gift.

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NOTES

- 1 .All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
- 2 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers, 1997), Number 436.
- 3 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Numbers 2617 and 4428; Ibn Sa'd, *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, vol. 2, trans. S. Moinul Haq (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, n.d.), 252.
- 4 For a discussion of recent skeptical trends, see Robert Spencer's *Did Muhammad Exist?* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2012).
- 5 Antony Flew and Gary Habermas, "My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew," available at <http://www.biola.edu/antonyflew/flew-interview.pdf>.
- 6 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Number 268.
- 7 See *Sahih al-Bukhari* 3895, 5133; *Sahih Muslim*, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi (n.p., n.d.), 3309, 3311.
- 8 For a thorough discussion of the Zaynab affair, see Sam Shamoun, "Muhammad, Zayd, and Zaynab Revisited," available at <http://answering-islam.org/Shamoun/zaynab.htm>.
- 9 Muhammad had a Coptic Christian sex-slave named Mary.
- 10 For numerous narrations granting Muslims the right to have sex with their captives, see "Muhammad and the Female Captives" by Silas, available at <http://answeringislam.org/Silas/femalecaptives.htm>.
- 11 See *Sahih al-Bukhari* 5075. Sunnis typically believe that Muhammad eventually forbade this practice, while Shias usually hold that *Muta* is still acceptable.
- 12 See, for example, Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah (The Life of Muhammad)*, trans. A. Guillaume (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 550–51, 675.
- 13 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Number 6922.
- 14 Muslim scholar Abul Ala Mawdudi's thorough analysis of the penalty for apostasy, "The Punishment of the Apostate According to Islamic Law," has been translated into English by Syed Silas Husain and Ernest Hahn and can be accessed at <http://www.answeringislam.org/Hahn/Mawdudi/index.htm>.
- 15 See, i.e., 2:256 and 109:6.
- 16 Qur'an quotations labeled "Shakir" are from the M. H. Shakir Translation (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1999).
- 17 Qur'an quotations labeled "Ali" are from the Yusuf Ali Translation (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2011).
- 18 Qur'an quotations labeled "Hilali-Khan" are from *The Noble Qur'an*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1999).
- 19 See also 4:171; 5:17; and 9:30.
- 20 Cf. 6:164; 17:13–15; and 35:18.
- 21 The Qur'an addresses the doctrine of the Trinity in 5:116, where Allah asks Jesus, "Did you say unto men: 'Worship me and my mother as two gods besides Allah?'" (Hilali-Khan). Since no Christian sect has ever taught belief in a Trinity composed of God, Jesus, and Mary, we can only wonder why this serves as the Qur'an's official response to Christian doctrine.
- 22 "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his Messenger."
- 23 For a more thorough discussion of the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, see Gary Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004).
- 24 See also 6:37; 10:20; 11:12; 13:7; 17:59; 28:48. We should note that, while the Qur'an repeatedly denies that Muhammad could perform miracles (apart from the Qur'an), later Muslim authors composed thousands of stories about Muhammad's miracles. However, since these sources are extremely late and contradict the Qur'an, they are not credible.
- 25 Ibn Ishaq, 106.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., 165–66.
- 28 See *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Numbers 3175 and 5765; Ibn Ishaq, 240.

