

**TAKE UP AND READ:
KENNETH CRAGG'S CALL FOR MUSLIMS TO
ENGAGE THE BIBLICAL CHRIST¹**

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1 Introduction

'It is imperative that we strive to think ourselves into the interior life of Islam and to appreciate the inwardness of its external problems. Such a purpose calls for a steady effort and imaginative sensitivity.'² These words by the eminent Christian Arabist and interpreter of Islâm, Kenneth Cragg, set a high standard for Christian engagement with Islâm. But evangelicals must not shirk from the task. Robert Yarbrough's call for evangelical Christology 'to articulate an orthodox understanding of Christ's person and work in a conceptual framework which relates not only to past, but just as importantly to present and immediately future ideological and social realities' remains a pressing need when considering the Qur'ânic Christ.³ Islâm is the only world religion besides Christianity that has a distinct Christology stemming from what is taken to be revealed body of truth.⁴ Muslims believe that the Jesus presented in the

¹ Paper submitted to the faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of masters of theology in Systematic Theology at Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois, December 2005.

² Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 182.

³ Robert W. Yarbrough, *New Testament Christology and the Jesus of Islam* (Tacoma, Wash.: Evangelical Theological Society, 1990; Portland, Ore.: Theological Research Information Exchange, 1990), microfiche, p. 8.

⁴ There are many interpretations of Christ in almost every religion; however, to the writer's knowledge no other religion besides Islâm claims to formulate its view of Christ based upon a revealed body of truth distinct from the Bible. There are a variety of Christian heresies, such as Mormonism and Pentecostal Oneness, with distinct views of Christ; however, all of these believe the Scriptures have some semblance of authority. Some as far back as St. John of Damascus have argued that Islâm is a Christian heresy and not a separate religion. Despite Qur'ânic Christology's affinity with many unorthodox views of

Qur'ân and Islâmîc Tradition is both historically accurate and doctrinally orthodox. Their fundamental contention is that despite Jesus' being virgin-born and performing miracles, he is not divine. They attribute the assertions by Christians of Jesus' divinity to the intentional corruption of their Scriptures.

Muhammad's message of the absolute oneness of God (*tawhîd*) delivered to Muslims in the Qur'ân is believed to correct this corruption and present a call to Jews and Christians to return to the 'pure faith'. In a strange twist of history, the Muslim view of Christ encapsulates many of the challenges to biblical faith that evangelicals have been battling since the rise of critical scholarship on the Bible. 'Western evangelicals have for two centuries now existed in a climate where Jesus, it is insisted in influential circles, can only be seen in non-Trinitarian terms as a first-century Jewish prophet and teacher. This Jesus of post-Enlightenment historical-critical theology has obvious affinities with the Jesus of Islâm' as will be evident from this study.⁵ Because the arguments against Christ's deity coming from liberal scholars are approximated in Islâm, evangelicals are uniquely equipped to face the challenges and present the biblical Christ to the Muslim world, calling them to repent and confess, 'my Lord and my God'.

Over the years Kenneth Cragg has presented a steady and thoroughgoing refutation of the Qur'ânic understanding of Christ albeit in the most conciliatory idiom. The primary manner in which he has accomplished this is, in a nutshell, by calling Muslims to 'take up and read' the New Testament and engage the biblical Christ on his own terms – in biblical terms. The genius of Cragg is his methodology. By urging Christians to seek to understand Muslims and the Qur'ân on *their* own terms he has inconspicuously built a bridge for traffic to flow both ways and modeled the reciprocity he expects from Muslims sincerely interested in understanding Christ and the Bible. The product of his labor has been over 100 publications including several monographs addressing a number of the most contentious issues between Islâm and Christianity. His methodology is an excellent model for Western Christians engaged in in-

Christ, both modern and ancient, Islâm's denial of the Bible's authority in matters pertaining to doctrine places Islâm squarely outside all that can be considered 'Christian'.

⁵ Yarbrough, *New Testament Christology and the Jesus of Islam*, p. 15.

terfaith dialogue with Muslims and missions among Muslims, particularly for American.

In order to get a better understanding of Cragg's methodology for surmounting the formidable challenge of Islâm and Islâmîc Christology we need to first understand the contours of the Qur'ânic picture of Jesus. This paper will begin by outlining the basic fundamentals of Qur'ânic Christology, focusing on the denial of Christ's deity, and its roots in the accusation of scriptural corruption by Christians. Every attempt will be made to portray the Qur'ânic Christ in a manner faithful to Muslim beliefs. Emphasis here will be on Şûrah 5 in the Qur'ân. cursory attention will be paid to matters of historical importance, particularly as it relates to Islâm's denial of Jesus' crucifixion and death. The second part of the paper will look specifically at Cragg's approach to Qur'ânic Christology and the prospects for getting past the charge of scriptural corruption in our dialogues and evangelistic encounters with Muslims.

2 The Qur'ânic Context

In order to get a complete picture of the Qur'ânic Jesus it would be beneficial to summarize briefly the content of what the Qur'ân says about Jesus' birth, life and crucifixion and then focus our attention on the Qur'ânic denial of Jesus' deity.

2.1 *Jesus in the Qur'an*

Upon searching the Qur'ân to ascertain its view of the identity of Jesus one's immediate impression is that there is a scarcity of information. Cragg points out that the Qur'ân lacks any direct quotations from the Gospels and no narrative descriptions of his ministry and teaching.⁶ He goes on to state:

It is further surprising that within the limits of some ninety verses in all [of the Qur'ân] no less than sixty-four belong to the extended, and partly duplicate, nativity stories in Surahs 3 and 19. This leaves a bare twenty-six or so verses to present the rest and some reiteration here reduces the total still fur-

⁶ Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), p. 25.

ther. It has often been observed that the New Testament Gospels are really passion narratives with extended introduction. It could well be said that the Jesus cycle in the Qur'an is nativity narrative with attenuated sequel.⁷

The Qur'anic depiction of the Annunciation has certain affinities with the account given in Luke 1.⁸ The angel Gabriel, considered a prophet in Islām, comes to Mary and announces to her that she will give birth to a son and she is to name him Jesus. He also tells her that, due to her virginity, this birth will be a divine miracle (cf. Q :42-47). Şūrah 19:20-23 states:

She said: 'How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?' He said: 'So it will be, thy Lord saith, 'That is easy for Me: and We wish to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us': it is matter so decreed.' So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree: she cried in her anguish, 'Ah! Would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!'

It appears that the Qur'anic account has been influenced by various apocryphal renderings of Jesus' birth, which tell of Mary being nourished by a palm tree. Also, Jesus' speaking from the cradle to defend his mother when she is falsely accused of immorality might also be taken from an apocryphal account (Q 19:28-33).⁹

What is most problematic for Muslims is not his conception by the Holy Spirit nor his mother's virginity, but the title given to him at his birth as recorded in the New Testament, 'the Son of God' (cf. Q 19:35). It is for this reason that Muslims and the Qur'ān continually refer to him as '*Isā ibnu Maryam*, Jesus, son of Mary, in order to emphasis that despite his being virgin-born, he was not related to God but was the son of his mother Mary. Undoubtedly, Muḥammad thought that by calling Je-

⁷ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

⁸ William J. McConnell, *The Qur'anic Depiction of Jesus* (Wheaton, Ill: Evangelical Theological Society, 1988; Portland, Ore.: Theological Research Information Exchange, 1988), microfiche, p. 6.

⁹ Ibid.; cf. William St. Clair Tisdall, *The Sources of Islam* (New Dehli: Amarko Book Agency, 1973) for more information on various sources which have influenced the Qur'ān.

sus the Son of God Christians were intimating that there was some sort of biological relationship between Mary and God.

Regarding the teaching and message of Jesus, the Qur'ân holds that prophets and messengers have been sent to all nations throughout history (cf. Q 10:48). Those who were given a distinct message (*risâlah*) or book (*kitâb*), such as Moses (the Torah), Jesus (the Gospel), and Muhammad (the Qur'ân), are given the title of messenger (*rasûl* – taken from the verb 'to send', *rasala*). Those who simply acted as bearers of good news and forewarners of judgment, without being given any type of divinely inspired book, are called prophets (*nabî*, pl. *anbiya'*) in Islâm (cf. Q 6:48). In the Qur'ân's view, all messengers are prophets but not all prophets are messengers. Thus, in this technical sense, Jesus is just like Muḥammad; a messenger in a long line of other prophets and messengers sent by God to warn people and teach them his law.

The primary message that Jesus brought was the same as those who came before him. It consisted of obedience and submission (*islâm*) to God. He is said to have told the children of Israel to worship God and him alone (cf. Q 5:117). This is the fundamental message of all prophets and messengers from Islâm's point of view. McConnell summarizes the Qur'ân's view of Jesus' teaching:

These remnants of Jesus' teaching preserved in the Qur'an...reaffirm the central themes of Muhammad's creed: the unity of God and the human duty to respond in obedience, signified by proper worship, prayer, and almsgiving. Any other elements of Jesus' preaching that Muhammad may have been aware of were superfluous to his purpose in depicting him.¹⁰

Jesus is also purported to have predicted the coming of Muḥammad. Şûrah 61:6 states, 'O Children of Israel! I am the Messenger of Allah sent to you, confirming the Law which came before me, and giving glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad.' Many see a prediction of Muḥammad's coming in this verse by Jesus. The verb root from which both the name Muḥammad and Aḥmad are formed is the same *ḥamida*. It can be roughly translated as 'to praise' or 'to bless'. Thus, the name Muḥammad comes from the passive participle of the emphatic form of this word meaning 'the one who is praised' or

¹⁰ McConnell, *The Qur'anic Depiction of Jesus*, p. 10.

‘the one who is blessed’. Aḥmad could mean something similar, though it is in the comparative form – ‘more blessed than...’.¹¹ Muslim apologists have tried to link this verse with Jesus’ prediction of the coming of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7. They say that the term translated ‘comforter’ (*parakletos*) is a corruption of the word ‘the praised one’ in Greek (*periklutos*). Since there is no textual evidence for this theory Muslims generally hold that Christians have corrupted their Scriptures so as to conceal any allusions to Muḥammad’s coming. This charge will be treated in detail below.

As with other prophets, Jesus is purported to have performed miracles as a sign that his message is from God (cf. Q 2:87; Q 43:63). One of those miracles was the fashioning of birds from clay (Q 3:49). This account is similar to that found in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas.¹² Another possible miracle found in the Qur’ān which parallels the New Testament account is the feeding of the 5000 (or 4000). Jesus’ disciples ask him to provide food and after praying to God, the food is provided (Q 5:112-115). The purpose of miracles in the Qur’ān is always to provide proof to those to whom the messenger is sent in order that they may believe the message is truly from God. When they do not believe they are justly condemned (cf. Q 5:115). Interestingly, none of those miracles which record Jesus’ raising the dead or healing those born blind is recorded in the Qur’ān.

Finally, the Qur’ānic denial of Christ’s crucifixion and subsequent resurrection is well known. Ṣūrah 4:157-158 states:

They said in boast, ‘We killed the Christ, Jesus, the son of Maryam, the Messenger of Allah’; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, *but so it was made to appear to them*, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no certain knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is exalted in power, wise.

The italicized portion above is the focus of most of the difficulty in ascertaining the meaning of this passage. The subject is undoubtedly the

¹¹ Ibid., p. 11. McConnell cites Watt’s suggestion that it be translated with an adjectival connotation, ‘the one whose name is more worthy of praise’.

¹² McConnell, *The Qur’anic Depiction of Jesus*, p. 13.

Jews as is determined by the context. The Arabic *shubbiha* (*lahum*) is translated by Cragg as ‘...they were under an illusion that they had (i.e. ‘crucified him’). The preposition with the attached pronoun, *lahum*, ‘to them’, is straightforward enough. However, the problem is in determining the subject of the passive verb *shubbiha*, ‘made to seem’ or ‘made to appear’. What was ‘made to seem to them’? Cragg elaborates:

Either ‘he [i.e. Jesus] was resembled to them’, or ‘it [crucifixion] was made to seem so to them’. On that hidden pronoun turns the decision whether we opt for a substitute sufferer, not the real Jesus, or whether we opt for an only ‘apparent’ crucifixion for Jesus himself?¹³

Various exegetes and scholars have taken a multitude of approaches to this issue in Islâm; however, for the Christian the end result is the same. Muslims deny Jesus’ vicarious death on the cross for sin and his triumph over death by resurrecting three days later. He was raised, yes, but not from the dead in the Muslim’s view. God lifted him up to himself prior to death in order to protect him from his enemies. At the heart of Islâm’s denial of the crucifixion is the idea that such a ghastly death is not befitting a prophet of God. If Jesus were truly a prophet of God, so it is reasoned, he would not have suffered such a degrading death at the hands of his enemies. Such a defeat would be tantamount to a miscarriage of God’s sovereign power in protecting his chosen one. *Istaghfir Allâh!* God protect us from such thoughts! After all, the proof that Muhammad is a prophet and Islâm is the true religion of God is evidenced by the defeat of all those who stood in Islâm’s path as it spread westward from the Arabian peninsula to Spain and eastward to the Indus River. The notion that Jesus’ crucifixion is tantamount to defeat, and his ‘rescue’ by God from the Jews is vindication of his message, will be explored further when we look at Cragg’s treatment of this issue.

¹³ Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, pp. 170-71.

2.2 *The Qur'anic Denial of Jesus' Deity*

Şûrah 5 was most likely one of the last *Şawar* written,¹⁴ and as Shehadeh points out, it 'includes some of the most polemical attacks against biblical Christology and Trinitarianism' in the Qur'ân. He goes on to state that 'Surah 5...exposes much of the unbiblical theology that forms the bedrock of Islâm's idea about Christology and the Trinity'.¹⁵ There are three main sets of assertions in this Şûrah all of which lead to an explicit denial of Jesus' deity (Q 5:17; Q 72-77; Q 116-19). We will look at the context of the first denial (Q 5:12-26) in detail due to its comprehensive nature, drawing in highlights from the other two denials, and then summarize the Qur'anic teaching of these passages and its implications. Şûrah 5:17 states:

In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Maryam. Say: 'Who then hath the least power against Allah, if His Will were to destroy Christ the son of Maryam, his mother, and all – everyone that is on the earth? For to Allah belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and all that is between. He createth what He pleaseth. For Allah hath power over all things.'

The denial of Christ's deity in v 17 is situated in the context of vs 12-26 where there are two themes that are either repeated or expanded in the other two denials of Christ's deity. The first theme is the unfaithfulness of the children of Israel and the Christians in breaking the covenants God made with them. Verse 12 states that God had promised to be with the children of Israel *if* they would be faithful in prayer, almsgiving, and believing the message of his prophets. However, they breached their covenant with God (*naqđihim mithâqahum*) and as a result God cursed them and caused their hearts to grow hard (v 13). Verse 14 makes a similar claim about the *Naşârá*, Christians. There the Christians are charged with forgetting the message that was sent to them. For this rea-

¹⁴ For more information regarding the dating of certain Şûrahs, see W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Quran* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1953).

¹⁵ Imad N. Shehadeh, 'Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (July-September 2004), p. 275.

son God has caused there to be enmity and strife among them which will last until the end. Shehadeh comments on this verse:

For breaking their covenant Christians are said to have been punished by experiencing constant feuds among themselves down through the centuries. These feuds are said to be reflected in the Christological and Trinitarian controversies leading to church councils and also in the strife between the many denominations, and they are said to continue as a punishment until the day of judgment.¹⁶

In vs 60-64, leading up to the second denial of Christ's deity, this theme is intensified. Jews and Christians are those who have rejected Islâm and the Qur'ân. As such, they have incurred the curse and wrath of God. In so doing, God has transformed some of them into apes and pigs. Their covenant-unfaithfulness and evil deeds are proof that their faith is illegitimate. The charge of covenant-unfaithfulness is repeated again in vs 20-26 where Israel's failure to possess the land in the days of Moses is viewed as a result of their unbelief, and in v 70 just prior to the second denial of Christ's deity (vs 72-77).

What is notable about the charge of unfaithfulness is the absence of any notion of unconditional grace. At the heart of the Qur'anic treatment of covenants between God and man is the notion that all of God's dealings with humans are conditioned upon their works. The only covenant mentioned in the Qur'ân between God and the children of Israel is the Mosaic covenant. Shehadeh observes:

While the Bible does present conditional elements in Israel's relationship to God, the Qur'an is void of any signs of grace to the unworthy. Surah 5 as well as the entire Qur'an makes no mention of God's unconditional covenants with Israel, namely the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 15:1-21; 17:1-8), the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4-17), and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34).¹⁷

Law-keeping is foundational to the Islâmic system of religion. Disobedience is equated with infidelity. The Arabic word for grace (*ni'mah*)

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 280.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 279.

does appear in the Qur'ân and is the same word used to translate 'grace' in the Arabic New Testament; however, it is generally understood to mean temporal 'favor' and does not have a soteriological connotation. Therefore, the first denial of Christ's deity is situated in a context where the biblical notion of grace is wholly absent.

The second theme of vs 12-16 is that of the corruption of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and the correction wrought by Muhammad and the Qur'ân. Verse 13 charges the children of Israel with changing the words of the message that was sent to them: 'They change the words from their context...' (*yuḥarrifûna al-kalimah 'an muwâd'ihî*). They are also charged with forgetting part of the message given to them, a similar charge against the Christians in v 14. The verb used here for 'corruption' or 'changing' is the intensive form of the word *ḥarafa*. This same root forms the word for 'letter' (*ḥarfun*). Al-Jalalayn makes it clear that the object of the 'changing' in v 13 is the Torah, *tawrât*.¹⁸ The verb 'to change' (*yuḥarrifûna*) is understood to mean 'changing' or 'exchanging' the words of the Torah for other words. This form of 'corruption' of the Jewish or Christians Scriptures is commonly known as *taḥrîf lafzî*, which is generally understood to mean 'changing the text'. We will deal with the various notions attached to the Qur'ânic concept of *taḥrîf* or 'corruption' momentarily. In this verse, the precise meaning implied by the changing or exchanging the words of the Torah is not clear; however, the broader context reveals that it had something to do with changing or hiding those verses that were thought to refer to Muḥammad's coming (cf. v 15). This feature is made more evident in the context of the second denial of Christ's deity (vs 72-77). In vs 47-48 Christians, referred to as People of the Gospel (*Ahl al-Injîl*), are urged to evaluate their book so as to discern the truth. The truth in this context is that Muḥammad is a prophet and the Qur'ân is God's revelation to them. Shehadeh summarizes Al-Razi's commentary on this passage by saying:

Al-Razi mentions three things Christians are responsible to do. (1) Christians are to judge and see what signs and predictions there are in the New Testament that speak of Muhammad. (2) Christians are to accept only those

¹⁸ Jalâl al-Dîn Muḥammad bin al-Malhî and Jalal Jalâl al-Dîn Abî Bakr al-Suyûtî, *The Commentary of the Jalalayn* (Beirut: Dar Ehia Al-Turâth al-'Arabî, 1999), p. 109.

teachings in the New Testament that have not been abrogated by the Qur'an. (3) Christians are warned against altering or corrupting their Scriptures.¹⁹

Therefore, to the extent that Christians or Jews reject any prediction of Muḥammad's coming in their Scriptures, they are charged with changing or corrupting those Scriptures. The Qur'an is viewed as the ultimate judge of all previous Scriptures (v 45b). Furthermore, the Qur'an contains the true teachings of the Torah and Gospel (v 65-68) which speak about Muḥammad (cf. v 15).

After the charges of covenant unfaithfulness by the children of Israel and the Christians in vs 12-14, and changing the words of the Torah in v 13, a direct address is given in vs 15-16 to the People of the Book, a title which refers to both Jews and Christians collectively. Here Muḥammad and the Qur'an are presented as coming to correct and clarify the previous Scriptures. It states, 'O People of the Book! There hath come to you Our Messenger, revealing to you much that ye used to hide in the Book and passing over much. There hath come to you from Allah a light and a perspicuous Book'. The promise of this 'new' book is that it will guide all those who seek God and lead them into a straight path. Thus, there is a clear call to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) to forsake their covenant-unfaithfulness and their corrupted Scriptures and follow the one true path, the one that was revealed by Muhammad and the Qur'an.

The definition of *tahrif* is, 'corruption of a document, whereby the original sense is altered. It may happen in various ways: by direct alteration of the written text; by arbitrary alterations in reading aloud a text which is itself correct; by omission or interpolation; or by a wrong exposition of the true sense'.²⁰ Regarding the nature and understanding of *tahrif* among Muslim scholars throughout the ages, Saeed notes three broad understandings:

There are three broad approaches to this among Muslims: (a) the scriptures of Jews and Christians of which the Qur'an approves as uncorrupted are only

¹⁹ Imad N. Shehadeh, 'Additional Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (October-December 2004), p. 399.

²⁰ H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, 'Tahrif', *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), p. 560, quoted by Abdullah Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', *Muslim World* vol. 92 (Fall 2002), p. 421.

those that were actually revealed to Moses (*Tawrat* or Torah) and Jesus (*Injil* or Gospel), not those that existed with the Jews and Christians at the time of the Prophet Muhammad or exist today; (b) significant parts of the scriptures that exist today are distorted and corrupted and it is difficult to know which these are; (c) there are no uncorrupted scriptures of Jews and Christians remaining today – those that the Qur'an refers to as *Tawrat* or *Injil* have been obliterated.²¹

When approaching this issue Muslims differentiate between the timing of the supposed corruption and the nature of this corruption. Explanations regarding the timing of the corruption vary widely from the time they were given to the prophets (Moses and Jesus) to some intervening time before the arrival of Muhammad. There is generally no consensus among Muslim scholars as to when this corruption took place.

Views on the nature of the corruption have also varied. Traditionally, there have been two broad understandings of the meaning of *tahrîf* related to Jewish and Christian Scriptures as indicated in the definition above. The first accuses Jews of changing the actual text of their Scripture. This is known as *tahrîf lafzi*. The second notion of corruption is the false interpretation of their texts *tahrîf ma'nawî*. Usually this entails the intentional hiding or concealing (*katam*) of the true meaning of certain texts in the Torah or *Injil* (Gospel) which, in the Qur'anic context, are usually taken to refer to the supposed prediction of Muhammad's coming. This is why God sent Muhammad and the Qur'an to protect the revelation given in the previous Scriptures. The Qur'an is, therefore, considered all-sufficient in determining matters related to the identity of Christ. For this reason Muslims see no need to read the New Testament.

This notion of the corruption of Jewish and Christian Scriptures is a feature in the contexts of the first two denials of Jesus' deity but plays a more prominent role in the second denial. It is not a feature in the third denial. We will explore the difficulties Muslims face in holding this view in the second part. For now it should be emphasized that the Muslim belief in the sufficiency of the Qur'an and the corruption of all previous Scriptures given to Jews and Christians accounts for the reason why they

²¹ Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', p. 419.

generally see no need to read or engage in a study of either the Hebrew Bible or Greek New Testament.

Stylistically, Shehadeh sees a chiasmic structure in vs 12-26 with the denial of Jesus' deity being the central argument. The two themes mentioned above, the unfaithfulness of Jews and Christians in breaking their covenants and the corruption of their Scriptures, form the two repeated prongs of the chiasm:

- A. Jews and Christians breaking their covenants with God (vs. 12-14)
- B. Muhammad and the Qur'ân correct corrupted Scriptures (v. 15-16)
- C. The denial of Christ's deity (v. 17)
- B'. Muhammad revealed the truth to the unfavored People of the Book (vs. 18-19)
- A'. Israel's failure to possess the land was due to their lack of faith (vs. 20-26)²²

As we have seen, the first denial of Christ's deity is situated in a context where Christians have corrupted their Scriptures and broken their covenant with God, thereby losing any favor they had with him. The central contention here is that Christ's deity (v 17) is that it is blasphemous and evil to claim God is Christ and that if God had wanted he could have destroyed both Mary and Jesus, thereby vindicating his righteous power.²³ The second denial (vs 72-77) is similar to the first with the idea of scriptural corruption being most prominent in the context leading up to this denial. Here, a denunciation of those who believe in a Trinity is included (v 73). Additionally, Jesus himself in v 72 is purported to have urged the children of Israel to worship God alone and not ascribe partners to him (*shirk*). This could possibly be a reference to the Trinity; however, given the context in which Muḥammad was preaching it is more than likely a reference to polytheism in general. This feature is repeated in the third denial (v 117). Commenting on these verses, She-

²² Shehadeh, 'Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology', p. 226.

²³ Technically speaking, Christians agree with the idea that 'God is not Christ'. It is more appropriate to state that Christ is God, the Second Person of the Trinity, not that God (the Trinity) is Christ. This is a form of modalism. However, Muslims reject all notions of Christ's deity, however conceived, on the grounds that oneness cannot include any form of variation or differentiation. God is monadic unity in Islām.

hadeh notes that there are four reasons behind why Muslims reject the deity of Christ:

First, it is said that Christ denied ever claiming deity. God asked Jesus whether He called people to worship Him and His mother, but this was not asked in order to glean information but to deny the claim. Jesus is presented as responding in fear, so that He did not defend Himself but relegated all knowledge to God. Second, God is said to know that Christ never claimed deity. Third, Christ is said to have taught His disciples that God is His Lord (v. 75). Fourth, it is said that if Christians deny the deity of Christ they will have great eternal rewards.²⁴

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to investigate all the varying conceptions of the Trinity the Qur'ân rejects; however, it should be noted at this juncture that the weight of the Qur'ânic data is generally understood as rejecting various forms of tri-theism which Christians were accused of believing. Associated with this is the Qur'ân's rejection of Christ's Sonship as somehow being derivative of a physical union between God and Mary. Despite the fact that all such notions are rejected by the New Testament and later orthodox creeds, the charge of scriptural corruption and the denial of the biblical notion of grace continue to influence Muslim perceptions of Christ and the Bible. Overcoming these misperceptions is the subject of the next section.

3 Evangelical Engagement of Islam: Cragg's Approach

3.1 Need to understand Muslims and the Qur'an

For Cragg, understanding the Muslim mindset and the Qur'ân is obligatory if Christians are going to effectively communicate the gospel and overcome the barriers the Qur'ânic Christ presents. He says, 'It is imperative...that Christians strive to enter as fully as possible into the Qur'anic world, with the painstaking ambition to know it from within.'²⁵ No corners can be cut in this endeavor and certain tools are a necessity. Therefore, we will begin this section by briefly addressing Cragg's view

²⁴ Shehadeh, 'Additional Reasons for Islam's Rejection of Biblical Christology', p. 411.

²⁵ Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 174.

on the importance of acquiring the proper tools in order to understand the Arab mind. Following this, Cragg's approach to Islâmic Christology will be presented by exploring his treatment of the problems and issues raised in the first part of the paper. The focus there will be on Cragg's treatment of the doctrine of corruption, *tahrîf*, and the deity of Jesus.

3.2 Proper Accoutrements

Thinking ourselves 'into the interior life of Islam', as the opening quote by Cragg states, has one purpose: to make Christ known where he is not known. In order to be understood we must seek to understand. This is the essence of Cragg's methodology; theory and praxis are held in tandem. He states:

Christians are ambassadors of a person-to-person relationship. They are debtors to their fellow mortals. They must surpass the limits of merely academic knowledge. More than students, they must learn to be in some measure participants. As bearers of 'the Word made flesh' they must strive to enter into the daily existence of Muslims, as believers, adherents, contemporaries. This is a prerequisite of being understood.²⁶

Cragg's call is to a contextualized life which seeks, as much as is possible, to understand the Muslim worldview from the inside out. Doing so, Cragg argues, will engender the type of reciprocity needed for Muslims to engage the biblical Christ on his own terms.

In order to accomplish this lofty goal Cragg suggests that individuals become deeply acquainted with the Arabic language and its history of literature and poetry.²⁷ The modern missionary church has produced a number of notable missionary Arabists whose works on Arabic grammar and Islâmic religion remain invaluable for those seeking to acquaint

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The assumption here is that one is working in an Arab Muslim context. However, the same principle would apply if one were working with Muslims in Pakistan, Turkey, or Indonesia. In those cases a good knowledge of Urdu, Turkish, or Indonesian would be necessary. Interestingly enough, for those involved in evangelism among Muslims in Israel, a good understanding of Hebrew is needed!

themselves with Islâmic civilization.²⁸ Producing and equipping individuals devoted to the task of making Christ known to Muslims is the perennial task of each generation and it begins with study. We have a tremendous need for ‘consecrated scholarship which knows that dictionaries and diction, vocabulary and syntax, have much to do with the faith of “the Word made flesh”. Fascinating fields of study and achievement are open to those who can find their way from the kingdom of God to a grammar and back again to the kingdom.²⁹

For those involved in missions among Muslims, Cragg’s advice for studying Arabic is apropos. Those who have done so have inevitably discovered the difficulty in acquiring one of the only surviving languages from antiquity. But the notorious difficulty of Arabic should not be overstated. Given time its mastery is promised to provide an entrance into the Arab mind. Cragg acknowledges that there are abundant opportunities for those who are unable to master Arabic. Indeed, teaching English provided one of his first ministry opportunities while in Lebanon. Nevertheless, he is uncompromising in his assessment of the importance of Arabic if Christ is to be communicated to the Arab mind:

Was it unguarded enthusiasm that prompted the idea that every Christian ministrant to Islam should aspire to be an Arabist? For the theological aspects of our relationship, that ideal is imperative. To discover the Qur’an in its untranslatable character and to feel the pulse of Arabic literature from Al-Mas’udi to Taufiq al-Hakim is an ambition no missionary should dare to abandon.³⁰

For Cragg, the message of the Gospel itself lies in the balance:

Christians who intend serious communication cannot absolve themselves of the duty to enter into and to apprehend this [Arabic] literature. As long as their own expression, whether in preaching, in conversation, or in print, remains non-Arabic and Western, they are to that extent failing to articulate the universal Christ.³¹

²⁸ Cragg gives a short history of some of these missionaries and their works; *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 183ff.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 184.

³¹ Ibid.

Communicating Christ effectively is the goal, and language and cultural acquisition is one of the primary ways for Cragg that this is accomplished. Endeavors to train and equip individuals engaged in dialogue and missionary endeavors should be ever mindful of this necessity. In the end it is Cragg's hope that this will provide opportunities for Muslims to encounter the biblical Christ for the first time when they meet his disciples who are ready and prepared 'to give a reason for the hope that they have' in a manner that can be grasped by the Arab mind.

3.3 Scriptural Corruption: Tahrif

One of the barriers in the Muslim mind that casts doubt on the reliability of the Bible is the notion that all that is rightly considered 'Scripture' should conform to the form of the Qur'ân. For most orthodox Muslims, the Qur'ân is the eternal, uncreated word of God. It is pre-existent in a manner that accords with the Christian view regarding the pre-existence of the Son of God. When the time was right, God revealed this word to Muḥammad via the angel Gabriel. At no time does the Qur'ân mix or mingle with the mental understanding of the Prophet. Muḥammad alone received the message and delivered it to his followers who faithfully recorded the message and preserved it for posterity. This is, in fact, the Muslim view of all the prophets who received a written message including Jesus. 'All prophets are bearers of words, understood to be entrusted to them in complete form, not as a result of a divine enabling of their mental and spiritual powers, but as a verbal transmission from heaven.' Therefore, 'it is difficult to understand why there should be four Gospels, when the Gospel, or *Injil*, entrusted by God to Jesus the Prophet was a single book.'³² For this reason it is assumed that the 'original' Gospel is lost and subsequent generations of Christians proceeded in corrupting and manufacturing what is now considered the Bible. This is why God sent Muḥammad and the Qur'ân; to preserve Jesus' original teaching and protect it from further corruption by Christians.

Complicating matters further is the fact that there are many shared but discrepant stories between the Qur'ân and the Bible including, among others, accounts of Adam, Abraham, Joseph and Moses. These

³² Ibid., p. 248.

discrepancies, in the Muslim's view, are not to be attributed to Muḥammad's sources of information but to the doctrine of corruption; *tahrīf*.

Understanding this background is essential in Cragg's mind when Christians attempt to present Jesus himself as the good news. Their task is to help Muslims 'conceive of a divine revelation that is primarily personal, not oracular; that proceeds by enabling, not overriding, the minds of its writer; and that gathers into its written "word" the comprehension of the hearing of the Word incarnate.'³³

How do they do this? For some Muslims, a dogmatic insistence at this point will most likely not be overcome. Appeals to logic and the veracity of the text as we now have it will not avail. However, Cragg is optimistic that some within Islām can be drawn out 'into more objective and scientific attitudes toward the problem of interscriptural revelations.'³⁴ Indeed, there are signs that Cragg's optimism is not unfounded. Abdullah Saeed's article, cited earlier, suggests a reevaluation of the doctrine of corruption. The wholesale corruption of Jewish and Christian Scriptures as taught by many modern Muslim apologists is dismissed by him on both Qur'ānic grounds and as conceived within Islāmic Tradition. His main appeal is to verses like Ṣūrah 5:47 which seem to honor the Scriptures of Jews and Christians. He states:

Since the authorized scriptures of Jews and Christians remain very much today as they existed at the time of the Prophet, it is difficult to argue that the Qur'anic references to *Tawrat* and *Injil* were only to the 'pure' *Tawrat* and *Injil* as existed in the time of Moses and Jesus, respectively. If the texts have remained more or less as they were in the seventh century CE, the reverence the Qur'an has shown them at the time should be retained even today. Many interpreters of the Qur'an, from Tabari to Razi to Ibn Taymiyya and even Qutb, appear to be inclined to share this view. The wholesale dismissive attitude held by many Muslims in the modern period towards the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity do not seem to have the support of either the Qur'an or the major figures of *tafsīr* [Qur'anic exegesis and commentary].³⁵

³³ Ibid., p. 249.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', pp. 434-35.

A strong case can be made for a Muslim reading of the Bible using both the Qur'ân and Islâmîc Tradition. Being equipped in Arabic can facilitate the use of such arguments, especially with religious Muslims. Saced's comments present a hopeful picture for the future of Muslim scholarship on the Bible which until now has been sorely lacking.

The supposed prediction of Muḥammad's coming in the New Testament based upon Şûrah 61:6 is a somewhat more complicated issue. It is based on a faulty presupposition and has no textual basis in the Greek New Testament. Cragg concedes that it is plausible for someone familiar with Arabic consonantal words to suggest that *parakletos* be read as *periklutos*, with the 'e', 'i', and 'u' vowels replacing the 'a', 'a' and 'e' ones.³⁶ However, 'the Christian must cheerfully shoulder the task of distinguishing clearly between Muḥammad and the Holy Spirit, and of appreciating how it comes about that the Muslim can be so confidently confused on this point.'³⁷ Muslim insistence that the New Testament predicted Muḥammad's coming is in many ways related to the Christian view regarding Christ's prediction in the Old Testament. However, in the face of no textual evidence to support their view and the collapse of the traditional doctrine of the corruption of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, Muslims who desire to remain faithful to their tradition and to a high standard in their scholarship should look elsewhere for ways to relate Islâm to Judaism and Christianity.

For Muslims, the New Testament remains a 'treasure unexplored because it is thought of as possessed' in the Qur'ân.³⁸ Overcoming the charge of scriptural corruption is possible with patience and a commitment to objectivity, and it is a must if Muslims are to come to terms with the historical Jesus. 'Christians will best communicate the Jesus of their New Testament discipleship if they relate patiently and intelligently to the light in which Muslims see him.'³⁹ They can rest assured that once the Lord's word goes out, 'it will not return void.' Getting it out, however, in the case of Islâm is among the most formidable challenges.

³⁶ Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 266.

³⁷ Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 257.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 4.

3.4 The Deity of Christ

The lack of understanding of the biblical view of Jesus and Christianity throughout the Arab and Islâmic world can be attributed to ignorance more than anything else. Dispelling misunderstandings and superficial treatments of the Bible and Christianity in Muslim scholarship will take time and patience. Understanding the Muslim mind is only half the battle. Communicating Christ faithfully and accurately to this mind is the second half. 'We must learn to communicate at all costs what it is to us to recognize in Christ the incarnate Savior, and we must do so in terms that Muslims can understand.'⁴⁰

Muslims reject the doctrine of the Incarnation primarily on the basis that it is unworthy of God. In Islâm, God is conceived as being wholly transcendent. Emphasis on God's immanence is usually reserved for the more mystical sects of Sufi Islâm. For orthodox Muslims, being born, eating, sleeping, and defecating are unbecoming for God. Where does the Christian begin?

Cragg suggests that Christians avoid trying to build bridges with Muslims by overemphasizing Jesus' humanity. Concentrating on the more 'palatable' elements in Jesus that Muslims can accept is to do injustice to the biblical witness and Jesus' own self-understanding. More than this, it disregards what the Muslim needs most and what can only be found in Christ.

Another path Cragg suggests Christians should avoid in approaching the Incarnation is by appealing to what they share with Muslims in their respective doctrines of God. The Incarnation is a doctrine of God. But how does the Christian reply to the charge that his Christology is tantamount to *shirk*, associating partners with God? In order to answer this, we must understand clearly what it is that the Qur'ân is rejecting:

What Christians mean by 'God in Christ' is not adoptionism. This...was a misreading which the early Church itself resisted and rejected. But it is a way of thinking which, in rebuking Christians, the Qur'ân itself has re-

⁴⁰ Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 259.

quently in view. Its rejection of Christology is in fact a rejection of adoptionism which Christians also repudiate.⁴¹

The confusion can be seen in the verb used in Sûrah 19:35 to reject the notion that God ‘took (*ittakhadh*) unto himself a son’.. In some versions of the Qur’ân this verb is translated ‘to beget’. It is the same verb used to describe Israel’s ‘taking to themselves’ the golden calf as a god. The New Testament conception of the Incarnation is that of Christ’s descending or God’s ‘sending down’ (*tanzil*) Christ and not God’s ‘taking up’ Christ. He existed prior to his Incarnation. The Qur’ân may have intended to reject the Trinity as conceived in the New Testament but it has only rejected a heresy condemned by Christians themselves.

The understanding of Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God is not a notion foreign to Muslims for there is an apt parallel in their doctrine of the uncreated Qur’ân. While the parallel has obvious difficulties when related to a *person* instead of a book, it can be utilized to show Muslims that the Christian view of Jesus’ ontological status is not something beyond their comprehension.

This brings up the issue of credal formulations. Most Muslims, building on the assumption that the Bible has been corrupted, think that Christians formulated their creeds to safeguard their views on Jesus apart from the facts. Early Christian history is almost entirely unknown to Muslims and, therefore, the creeds are viewed with the utmost suspicion. This too requires patience and teaching:

It must be made clear that the Christian doctrine about Jesus is not an imposition upon the facts, but rather a conclusion from the facts. It must be our desire and prayer that Muslims so become acquainted with the real Christ that they come to understand why Christianity has explained him in terms of the historic creeds. The whole faith as to Christ must not be left to seem a mere dogmatism or a piece of doctrinal subtlety, but rather a reasonable and legitimate ground of explanation.⁴²

In explaining the creeds, care must be taken to root the doctrines found there where the framers themselves found them – in the Scrip-

⁴¹ Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 203.

⁴² Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, p. 260.

tures. Western Christians in particular tend to think in a systematized fashion that gives precedence to systematic theology over biblical theology. Muslims will inevitably be led to similar conclusions and formulations regarding Christ's deity if Christians are careful to make sure they derive their views from the Scriptures. 'We are to bring others to God in Christ, before we can justify to them what creedally we believe about him.'⁴³

The primary task for the Christian is to acquaint the Muslim with the New Testament. Wisdom dictates that we begin by using selected passages that 'allow Muslims to make contact with Jesus without immediately provoking their resistance'.⁴⁴ The Sermon on the Mount is often suggested as a good starting place, as well as many of the parables. This is where the disciples themselves began:

Our aim will be to lead Muslims by the same path: to let them begin where the disciples began. The final explanation of the personality [of Jesus] can hardly antedate its discovery. No Muslim is more a monotheist than were Peter, James, and John in Nazareth. We shall not err if we suppose that the order of Muslim experience will be the same as theirs. 'What manner of man is this?' is a question Jesus is capable of compelling upon every generation, however predisposed it may be against the ultimate answer.⁴⁵

The Holy Spirit can be trusted to bring Muslims to a realization that Jesus is 'the Christ, the Son of the Living God' when they read of him in the New Testament and encounter his work in the life of the Christian who is sharing with them. This is his work and it is his honor that is at stake.

For the Christian, revelation resides not only in a book but also in a person. The Muslim believes in revelation but it is always via intermediaries. 'God sends rather than comes.'⁴⁶ For God to become a human would mean something unbecoming of God and a breach of his sovereignty. However, in conceiving of God this way Muslims unknowingly are placing limits on God. The Incarnation must always be held out as a possibility for the Muslim if he does not want to be seen as impinging

⁴³ Ibid., p. 286.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 259.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 263.

upon the divine nature and dictating what God can and cannot do. If it is a possibility, then it must be investigated.

At this point there is a merging between the Incarnation and the cross. Inevitably the question will be asked as to why Christians believe that God would become a man. The answer cannot be found in the Qur'ân. Sin in the Qur'ân is 'atoned' for by works of prayer, almsgiving, and *Jihâd*. Forgiveness is the prerogative of divine *fiat*. Therefore, the cross is not necessary because sin has not so corrupted man as to render him unforgivable. However, the Qur'ân does describe God as merciful and forgiving. Much of what motivates Muslim piety and good works, especially as seen in Sufi Islâm, is a yearning for what seems unobtainable.

Our task is to relate what we find in Christ to all those aspirations, to the Muslim yearning for what lies beyond law, to forgiveness, renewal and true piety. It may be said, in general, about the divine mercy, as Islam conceives it, that it remains unpredictable. It is bestowed freely and in relation to the practices of Muslim religion. But it does not come forth to embody itself in a redemptive enterprise, or to articulate itself in inclusive events where it may be known indubitably.⁴⁷

The crux of the 'redemptive enterprise' in Christianity is the cross. Two issues lie at the heart of the Muslim rejection of Jesus' crucifixion. The first is the idea that such an evil done to one of God's great prophet's would reflect badly on God himself if it were allowed to have happened. Protecting and rescuing Jesus is the more honorable act. There is a sense here in which the Muslim's lack of understanding of Scripture and God's redemptive purposes in the world provides a fresh view that Christians seemingly take for granted. Was not Christ's crucifixion, in point of fact, evil? Was he not worthy of being spared such a heinous death? Christians can agree, in principle, with the Muslim here. However, the reality is that Jesus was not spared nor rescued. His death by crucifixion was, in fact, foretold and predetermined from the foundation of the world. What the Muslim is missing is the fact that human life is marred by tragedy. Sin is real and no one is immune. This is why Je-

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 264-65.

sus came; not only to suffer and bear our shame and guilt but to redeem evil. Cragg comments:

In the real world immunity and security do not everywhere avail. There is tragedy. There is suffering which has to be vicariously 'taken' and its inflictors forgiven...The element of evil in the resistance, though it may safeguard and defend effectively, does not positively redeem the evil it resists, nor of itself redeem the evil-doers... It may arrest a situation: it does not deeply restore it.⁴⁸

Christ's work is a vindication of God's triumph over evil. God is more glorious in our eyes for doing that which he was not bound to do; come to earth and redeem us from our sins.

The second issue in the Muslim's denial of the crucifixion was mentioned earlier. It has to do with the low view of sin found in the Qur'ân and the ease with which God can mete out his forgiveness. Overcoming this challenge will entail further familiarity with Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. A correct understanding of God's holiness and sin as an affront to that holiness will be the natural result of studying the Torah and prophets. In doing so, the Muslim will become aware of man's responsibility for sin and inability to atone for that sin and, hence, his need for the God-Man.

4 Conclusion

Islâmic Christology presents several formidable challenges to biblical faith. The Muslim's rejection of Christ's deity is rooted in a misunderstanding of both the nature of God's revelation in Christ and the Bible as well as his rejection of the biblical notion of grace. Overcoming these misunderstandings will entail challenging the Muslim's view that the Scriptures have been corrupted. With patience, time and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, Christians can and should equip themselves to sustain a long-term engagement of Islâm at all levels, particularly their view of Christ. By approaching Islâm and Muslims in a conciliatory manner as modeled by Kenneth Cragg the hope is that many

⁴⁸ Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, p. 179.

Muslims will reciprocate and venture to engage the biblical Christ on his own terms. When this occurs, Christians can trust that the Lord will not allow his word to return void.

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