

## EMBRACING ISLAM THROUGH THE BACKDOOR

### Review of *A Deadly Misunderstanding: A Congressman's Quest to Bridge the Muslim-Christian Divide* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008)

By Bill Nikides<sup>1</sup>

#### 1 Introduction: Book summary

To be more accurate, the title should have read, “A Former Congressman’s Quest”, since the author left office several years before most of his observations were fully formed. Nevertheless, it was changes in his thinking that began to emerge while in public service visiting the Muslim world, that emerge in the text. It is, to say the least, a mind-boggling work of genuine significance. I do not believe that, however, on the basis of the book’s quality or credibility. To be quite clear, it is a book that has far more in common with Dan Brown and the Da Vinci Code than it does a serious work of theologically informed scholarship. That is not to say that it is not influential. It is. Many people and churches appear to form their opinions of Christianity, Islam, insider movements etc., on the basis of pronouncements such as these.

It is a difficult book to characterize. It is, Brian McLaren observed, “a real page-turner.” It is that. It has the feel of a novel, a socio-political analysis of the Muslim world, a philosophy of religions and a work of missiology. Is it autobiography? Sometimes yes. The variety of perspectives and claimed authority, albeit with attempts at modesty, has me wondering if the appeal of the book is due to Siljander appearing as “everyman” or “Superman.” He states that he is not a linguist, but much of his book attempts a close read of Bible and Qur’anic passages balanced against Aramaic. Again,

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Nikides has long-term experience working with indigenous church planting on 4 continents, is a Presbyterian minister, part of i2 Ministries leadership team and a doctoral student working on his dissertation in systematic theology.

while he claims not to be a linguist, he knows to one degree or another English, Spanish, Hebrew, Korean, Mandarin, French, Italian, Portuguese, Aramaic, and Arabic.<sup>2</sup> This point is not peripheral, as we shall see, because he bases the lion's share of his opinions on language. He also claims, as he takes us on his personal journey of enlightenment, that Yasser Arafat, the Chairman of the PLO, actually put out a contract on him.<sup>3</sup> He treats us to encounter after encounter with world leaders, demonstrating their own positive response to his insights. He is a bit like Forrest Gump, seemingly always present in the most important places at world-changing times.

All of this makes the book readable. We all want to know what he will discover and say next. I can also say that it is heartening to read of someone who loves Muslim people. I do and I appreciate the fact that he does too. More profoundly, however, we have to ask, what is the book essentially saying? What is its message with regard to Christianity and Islam? In a nutshell, Siljander proposes that the centuries of conflict between Christians and Muslims, East and West are the product of a tragic misunderstanding. If we just understood the world of the Bible and the world of the Qur'an, we would discover that they are not merely compatible; rather they form a continuum.<sup>4</sup> All we need is the right key to unlock the conundrum. That key, according to the author is a hidden language uniting the two horizons of Islam and the Bible. That hidden language is Aramaic. If we took the disputes between Islam and Christianity based on the words of their holy books and went back to the root language behind both religions (Aramaic), we would find that the religions share the same linguistic origin, the same perspective, the same goals, and the same hope. Siljander had help in making this critical discovery. He mentions, for example, the influence of John Book, a pastor in Three Rivers, Michigan, and author of two books on the role of Assyria in biblical prophecy. It is Book, among

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<sup>2</sup> Siljander 6.

<sup>3</sup> Siljander 7.

<sup>4</sup> Siljander 119.

others, who referred to Aramaic as the “secret” language of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> He also lists several other “experts” who helped shape his understanding.

As he erects a bridge of understanding between the world of the Qur’an and the world of the Bible, he is careful not to suggest a bridge connecting Islam and Christianity. Christianity is a word that has caused such grief in the Muslim world that it is best unmentioned. It is a curse word. Any reminders of the cross, whether that be in reference to Christ’s crucifixion or with regard to the crosses that crusaders wore on their tunics, are a serious barrier to understanding. As an observation, Siljander, perhaps because he reflects a Christian background, is intent on breaking down barriers erected by his own tradition. So, he is intent on describing barriers such as the crosses worn by crusaders without also addressing barriers erected by Muslims such as the Islamic conquests.

It is central to his argument that the saving work of Christ, however Siljander construes it, is separated from the vehicle that conveys it such as the Church or even Christianity. He mentions repeatedly, in concert with so many contemporary evangelical voices, that Jesus is not about converting anyone to a religion. The Great Commission in Mt 28 makes no mention of recruiting people to Christianity. The Bible never brings up a strategy of conversion like that at all. Siljander notes that Jesus never uses even the word “religion”. In its sole use (James 1:27), it refers to a way of life, not a cultus or series of practices.<sup>6</sup> It is also not a structure. According to the author, what Jesus is all about is God’s truth being revealed through Jesus’ influence, to the individual human heart. To the President of Benin, who was entering into a new relationship with Christ, he states: “Mr President... Since there are so many different religious expressions in Benin, don’t start calling yourself a Christian. There’s no need to pigeonhole yourself. Just keep following what Jesus taught - and don’t call yourself anything but a follower of Jesus.” Likewise, when referring to “potential roadblocks” be-

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<sup>5</sup> Siljander 28.

<sup>6</sup> Siljander 17f.

tween Islam and Christianity such as the Ka'aba, Ramadan, and Mecca, the reader is exhorted not to confuse these cultural specifics with the essence of what he believes is common faith behind them.<sup>7</sup>

The theory of this book and others like it is that Jesus fundamentally spoke Aramaic rather than Hebrew or Greek. More importantly, the New Testament roots themselves are in Aramaic, which were then codified in the Greek Bible. In other words, if you could peer under the surface of the Greek New Testament, you would find an Aramaic understanding. By extension, therefore, if you wish to clear up misunderstandings between Hebrew, Arabic, and even Greek, you should go to Aramaic.<sup>8</sup> Siljander wants the reader to accept the essential goodness and truth of the Qur'an. He notes that the Qur'an mentions Jesus more than 110 times and 11 times as the messiah. He notes, too, that the holy books of both Jews and Christians are afforded a place of honour in the Qur'an. A careful reading of both reveals that they also share the same perspective; for example, the way that God is addressed is similar. The Qur'an makes pronouncements on the basis of "the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful." Isn't that just like Ex 34:6: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious"?

Of course, behind the desire to legitimate the Qur'an is the desire to make Islam an "acceptable religion". When he accompanied Doug Coe to meet the blood-stained president of the Sudan, Omar al-Bashir, Coe stated, "We're here because we know you are a devoted follower of the Qur'an, and we are also devoted followers of

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<sup>7</sup> Siljander 114.

<sup>8</sup> Two quick points before we move on: Siljander and those upon whom he depends, see Aramaic as the root language of both Hebrew and Arabic, and since it is, going back to the root will expose the true fruit.<sup>8</sup> Second, in order to understand what a given text means, you have to get under the surface to discover what is in the mind of the writers, in this case, those who know and reflect an Aramaic world and life view. If you want to know the mind of the biblical writers of the first century, depend on the Aramaic translation to give it to you. Think of how useful this tool can be. The Aramaic word for "convert" is "shalem," obviously related to the Hebrew "shalom" which means "peace." Shalem also means submit or surrender, the root to both "Islam" and "Muslim."<sup>8</sup> So, the peace that the Bible offers is essentially the same as that which motivates Muslims. Aramaic makes it plain.

the same Allah and the same Isa that you know through the suras of the Recitation of the Prophet.”<sup>9</sup> He mentions repeatedly the *shahada*, the creed and first pillar of Islam, which states that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger. Reciting this with genuine sincerity makes one a Muslim. It also links Muslims to the world of the Bible, according to Siljander, since *shahada* is the same as the Hebrew *shema*, “Here O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Dt 6:4). We both believe in one God; the same exact God. As he states, “The central professions of faith for all three religions are not simply compatible, they were essentially identical.”<sup>10</sup> He also takes the Islamic interpretation of its own history and formation on face value. Accordingly, Muhammad is a person illiterate prior to his special revelations from God. These revelations, as Islam asserts, are a continuance of what God had revealed to Moses, David, and Isa. So, in that sense, when Muhammad speaks, he forms a continuum with what was revealed before. The point in this is that Siljander simply affirms the Muslim point on the matter of revelation. As he says, “No wonder the Qur’an declared that Abraham, Moses, and Jesus were all Muslims.”<sup>11</sup>

The core of Siljander’s argument is removing three key biblical “obstacles” that separate Muslims and Christians: the nature of Jesus, the Trinity, and the crucifixion. Jesus himself is accurately described in the Qur’an. As such, he is the *ruhallah*, the spirit of God at work among humanity. He is not, as Nicea wasted so much time to prove, “the only begotten Son of God.” Siljander labors at length with his favourite tool, the Aramaic New Testament, to prove that begotten does not mean, as Muslims fear, sexual generation. The tragedy for the author is that it took centuries of wrangling by the church to understand the Bible’s Greek when a quick trip to the Peshitta could have cleared the whole matter up. Seven church councils and seven wastes of time. “With the Semitic texts spread before me, I didn’t think we needed to get into the theologi-

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<sup>9</sup> Siljander 66.

<sup>10</sup> Siljander 119.

<sup>11</sup> Siljander 122.

cal hair-splitting to resolve this issue. The plain truth is that most of the faithful on either side of the fence would agree that the flesh and body of the man Jesus were physical, finite and distinctly human.”<sup>12</sup> Both the Qur’an and Bible, according to the author, conclude that “Jesus/Isa was conceived by a purely energetic act of spirit, a conception sparked within Mary without benefit of sexual act.” Both see this as a supernatural, virgin birth. So what does that say about Jesus and how the Bible and the Qur’an describe him? Is Jesus an ordinary flesh-and-blood human being? Yes and no. Does Isa have a divine nature? Yes and no. Is Jesus/Isa made of flesh and blood like the rest of us, or is he animated by the Spirit of God? Yes... and yes.<sup>13</sup> So goes the first of the two greatest barriers between Islam and the Bible. It is the same Jesus that is described by both.

The other great perceived obstacle is the Trinity; the medusa of theologians, transfixing and destroying all those caught in its gaze. Despite its fearsome reputation for impenetrability, Siljander chalks up differences between Muslims and Christians as simply caused by semantic misunderstandings. It is not differences in substance that divide us, but, rather, differences in how we express ourselves. “No Muslim views God as being literally a plurality, but his many attributes are of such great importance that his very nature can only be described in plural terms.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Muslims reject a plural God, but they accept One God with plural attributes. He then finds support for this opinion from an interesting source, Eastern Orthodoxy. According to his research, Eastern Orthodoxy, signatories to some but not all of the ecumenical councils, rejected the idea of one God in three Persons, preferring One God with three attributes. He then supports his assertion by stating that the Nestorians preferred the Aramaic word *kenomey* (attributes) to *prosopon* (persons).

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<sup>12</sup> Siljander 144.

<sup>13</sup> Siljander, 145.

<sup>14</sup> Siljander, 146.

More importantly, the Bible never mentions the word “Trinity”. Its best support, according to Siljander, is “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one (1 Jn 5:7 NKJV).”<sup>15</sup> Siljander fails to see how the arguing between Muslims and Christians can be justified. “The attributes of Father, Holy Spirit, and Son or Word are primal in the Christian tradition but, whether you call them persons or attributes, the meaning is the same: we are talking about a single God, albeit one with many aspects. I have asked Muslim and Christian clerics to explain the interaction of these attributes: ‘It’s a mystery.’ So what are we arguing about? As far as I can see, the controversy about the concept of the Trinity was a theological red herring.”

As for the crucifixion, Siljander notes that both the early Christian Nestorians and Sufi Muslims believe that only Jesus’ outward physical form was crucified while his spirit was received by Allah in heaven.<sup>16</sup> It seems that he also wishes to downplay the centrality of the cross in any case since it was the rallying symbol of the crusades and the murderous killing spree (his words) that the crusaders inflicted on the people of the Middle East. Better to affirm the things we can all embrace than dwell on the symbol that produced such pain.

Fortunately, some people are getting the message. As he surveys Bangladesh and Indonesia, he sees an enormous movement of Muslims to Christ “who worship at mosques, not churches; who pray on carpets, not in pews; who faithfully follow the five Pillars of Islam and all the cultural and traditional aspects of their faith - and have fully embraced the teachings and person of Jesus.”<sup>17</sup> These

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<sup>15</sup>Note the difference between the NKJV Bible cited by the author, based on Erasmus’ Textus Receptus, itself dependent on the 5th century Syriac, Aramaic Peshitta, dated from 2-5<sup>th</sup> century AD) and the following: (NIV): “For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. (NASV) “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. (ESV) For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.

<sup>16</sup> Siljander, 150.

<sup>17</sup> Siljander, 215f.

messianic Muslims go to the mosque and read the Qur'an, and they pray in the name of Jesus and read the Bible.

They make every effort not to stand out. They aren't converting. They aren't leaving anything behind. They are simply discovering a powerful new common ground."<sup>18</sup> They have no need to leave and every reason to stay; after all, "true religion is a state of being."<sup>19</sup>

This is Siljander's brave new world and its inhabitants are messianic Muslims. The New Heavens and New Earth is a unified, generous (to borrow from Brian McLaren) Islam, with Isa at its heart, a Bible-affirming Qur'an as its dogma, all pointing towards one God of amazing complexity.

The book ends with affirmations and thanks for those who encouraged him along the way. The list is significant. It includes those who gave him his understanding of Aramaic such as Dr. Eldon Clem, a messianic Jew and head of the Olive Branch Institute; Dr. Ergun Caner, the former President of Liberty University; Doug Coe, the leader of what has been called "The Fellowship" or "C Street" by outsiders and "The Family" by its members such as Siljander, Gov. Mark Sanford (SC), James Inhof, etc. According to a *Mother Jones* article, the organization of professing evangelicals target movers and shakers in the developing world (to include Muslims) for influence.<sup>20</sup> He also thanks Samir Kreidie, a wealthy busi-

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<sup>18</sup> Siljander, 216.

<sup>19</sup> Siljander, 217.

<sup>20</sup> *Mother Jones*. Adapted from Jeff Sharlet, 27 Sept 2010, "C Street: The Fundamental Threat to American Democracy". I cannot vouch for the content and conclusions concerning Siljander and his friends. I refer to it principally because it was the only article I could find that attempted to describe Siljander's social context. See also the important article, "Inside C Street – Six Questions for Jeff Sharlet" by Scott Horton, *Harpers Magazine* (29 September 2010). Horton's comments concerning Siljander's thinking in para 5 makes the article worth reading. "The creation of what former congressman Mark Siljander, a Family leader who wrote a book on their approach to Islam, calls "Messianic Muslims." Misbah Ahdab, a popular Muslim MP, credits C Streeter Sen. Tom Coburn with helping to open his eyes to the centrality of Jesus, though he still calls himself a Muslim—he wouldn't be elected otherwise. Samir Kreidie, another "Messianic Muslim" who hosted Coburn and



nessman and model messianic Muslim. So too is Dr. David Coffey, signatory to *A Common Word*, raised in Bangladesh and forerunner of insider movements in that country, as well as husband of the prominent missiologist Ida Glaser. Additional noteworthies include Dr. Joseph Cumming, another champion of *A Common Word* and insider movements; Dr. James DeFrancisco, a member of the church of God, Seventh Day, head of MILTHA Ministries, praised for his insights into Aramaic but also notable for his use of the cultic Jewish *Kaballah*; and the journalist Cal Thomas. It is an anachronistic but fascinating mélange.

## 2 Analysis and critique

Siljander's entire interpretation hinges on his use of Aramaic as a tool that brings Islam and the Bible into comprehensive alignment. What shall we make of that? First, he asserts that a growing body of scholars supports the Aramaic origins of the New Testament. Where is this body? I have consulted several seminary professors on the point and neither they nor I are aware of such a movement. I have, of course, heard the arguments on all sides concerning what language Jesus spoke. A few points stand out with regard to this. First, it is completely apparent from these discussions that no one actually knows. Second, there is not one shred of evidence to support the idea that the New Testament was written or spoken in Aramaic. Third, we should remember that the Aramaic New Testament Siljander cites post-dates the existent ancient copies of the Greek New Testament. Fourth, on a broader front, he claims that ancient Hebrew is rooted in Aramaic. Where is any proof for this? I know of no genuinely scholarly work that proves this point. Perhaps, charitably, we say that he thinks so because Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldees. Even so, this neither proves that Hebrew

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fellow C Streeter Rep. Mike Doyle (D., Pa.) during a 2009 visit (Doyle travelled on the Family's dime; Coburn charged his missionary work to taxpayers) sums up what he's learned from the Family as "Jesus for the world." Of course, anybody is free to convert, but these guys are actually encouraged not to convert—to keep calling themselves Muslims."

descended from Aramaic, nor that fifth century AD Aramaic is at all the same language as second millennium BC Aramaic. It is a non-sequitur.<sup>21</sup>

Let me remind us of D.A. Carson's concise and challenging masterpiece, *Exegetical Fallacies*. No book has been used to better effect to humble over-confident seminarians armed with a basic knowledge of biblical languages; just enough to make one dangerous. Carson summarizes the basic mistakes of interpretation that readers of the Bible routinely make. Relevant to us is what he refers to as the "root word fallacy". Mistakes are made when readers assume that the meaning of a word is inevitably bound up in the 'basic', 'original', or 'literal' meaning of its component parts. Carson notes that the Greek word *Apostolos* is literally "one who is sent". But in the New Testament, the emphasis is on the message rather than the sending itself. In other words, the context helps determine the meaning, rather than the root. In this case, apostle becomes a "special messenger." The message is the star, not the person. Relying on the root can easily take us to the wrong place. Over and over Siljander demonstrates a heavy reliance on the same error in thinking. In fact in every place he cites as an example of the indispensability of Aramaic, fuzzy understanding is dispelled by a careful examination of the biblical context. In that way, the appeal to Aramaic becomes a clever gimmick to influence opinion rather than a genuine use of scholarship in order to produce understanding.

It seems as though the author presents an appearance of scholarly understanding while at the same time eschewing genuine precision. For example, he notes that the Qur'an refers twice to Jesus as *wajih* (mediator) and *shafa'a* (intercessor). Rather than addressing what classical and contemporary Qur'anic exposition mean by these

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Thielman, email with Bill Nikides (4 Feb 2011). "I know of no one in the guild of New Testament scholarship that thinks any major portion of the New Testament is translated from Aramaic. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic, and rather incompetent arguments have been made in years past that Matthew and John were originally in Aramaic. I know of no one who thinks that now. The epistolary literature and Luke-Acts were certainly Greek compositions."

terms, he glosses over their meaning, giving readers the impression that they mean the same in Islam and Christianity. Wrong.

Siljander is most certainly guilty of distorting the discussion of the Trinity. Consider what he does with regard to 1Jn 5:7 noted above. First, he asserts that the Trinity is based on an erroneous interpretation of the verse, but he uses an old translation of the text that accords with the Aramaic against most other translations. It is therefore anachronistic.<sup>22</sup>

This so-called Johannine Comma is a string of extra words which appear in 1 John 5:7-8 in some early printed editions of the Greek New Testament. In these editions the verses appear thus (we put brackets around the extra words):

ὅτι τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες [ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ὁ Πατήρ, ὁ Λόγος, καὶ τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα· καὶ οὗτοι οἱ τρεῖς ἓν εἰσι. 8 καὶ τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες ἐν τῇ γῇ] τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὸ αἷμα, καὶ οἱ τρεῖς εἰς τὸ ἓν εἰσιν.

The King James Version, which was based upon these editions, gives the following translation: “For there are three that bear record [in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth], the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.”

These extra words are generally absent from the Greek manuscripts. In fact, they only appear in the text of four late medieval manuscripts. They seem to have originated as a marginal note added to certain Latin manuscripts during the Middle Ages, which was eventually incorporated into the text of most of the later Vulgate manuscripts. In the Clementine edition of the Vulgate the verses were printed thus: Quoniam tres sunt, qui testimonium dant [in caelo: Pater, Verbum, et Spiritus Sanctus: et hi tres unum sunt. 8 Et tres sunt, qui testimonium dant in terra:] spiritus, et aqua, et sanguis: et hi tres unum sunt.

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<sup>22</sup> I quote extensively from the site, [www.bible-researcher.com](http://www.bible-researcher.com) for the following explanation.

From the Vulgate, then, it seems that the Comma was translated into Greek and inserted into some printed editions of the Greek text and in a handful of late Greek manuscripts. All scholars consider it to be spurious, and it is not included in modern critical editions of the Greek text or in the English versions based upon them. For example, the English Standard Version reads: “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.” We give below the comments of Dr. Bruce M. Metzger on 1 John 5:7-8, from his book, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, 1993).

After μαρτυροῦντες the Textus Receptus adds the following: ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ὁ Πατήρ, ὁ Λόγος, καὶ τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα· καὶ οὗτοι οἱ τρεῖς ἐν εἰσι. 8 καὶ τρεῖς εἰσιν οἱ μαρτυροῦντες ἐν τῇ γῇ. That these words are spurious and have no right to stand in the New Testament is certain in the light of the following considerations.

(A) External Evidence.

(1) The passage is absent from every known Greek manuscript except eight, and these contain the passage in what appears to be a translation from a late recension of the Latin Vulgate. Four of the eight manuscripts contain the passage as a variant reading written in the margin as a later addition to the manuscript. The eight manuscripts are as follows:

61: codex Montfortianus, dating from the early sixteenth century.

88: a variant reading in a sixteenth century hand, added to the fourteenth-century codex Regius of Naples.

221: a variant reading added to a tenth-century manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

429: a variant reading added to a sixteenth-century manuscript at Wolfenbüttel.

629: a fourteenth or fifteenth century manuscript in the Vatican.

636: a variant reading added to a sixteenth-century manuscript at Naples.

918: a sixteenth-century manuscript at the Escorial, Spain.

2318: an eighteenth-century manuscript, influenced by the Clementine Vulgate, at Bucharest, Rumania.

(2) The passage is quoted by none of the Greek Fathers who, had they known it, would most certainly have employed it in the Trinitarian

controversies (Sabellian and Arian). Its first appearance in Greek is in a Greek version of the (Latin) Acts of the Lateran Council in 1215.

(3) The passage is absent from the manuscripts of all ancient versions (Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Slavonic), except the Latin; and it is not found (a) in the Old Latin in its early form (Tertullian Cyprian Augustine) or in the Vulgate, (b) as issued by Jerome (codex Fuldensis [copied a.d. 541-46] and codex Amiatinus [copied before a.d. 716]), or (c) as revised by Alcuin (first hand of codex Vallicellianus [ninth century]).

The earliest instance of the passage being quoted as a part of the actual text of the Epistle is in a fourth century Latin treatise entitled *Liber Apologeticus* (chap. 4), attributed either to the Spanish heretic Priscillian (died about 385) or to his follower, Bishop Instantius. Apparently the gloss arose when the original passage was understood to symbolize the Trinity (through the mention of three witnesses: the Spirit, the water, and the blood), an interpretation that may have been written first as a marginal note that afterwards found its way into the text. In the fifth century the gloss was quoted by Latin Fathers in North Africa and Italy as part of the text of the Epistle, and from the sixth century onwards it is found more and more frequently in manuscripts of the Old Latin and of the Vulgate. In these various witnesses the wording of the passage differs in several particulars. (For examples of other intrusions into the Latin text of 1 John, see 2.17; 4.3; 5.6, and 20).<sup>23</sup>

It is essential to understand the significance of this and it must not be understated. Siljander redefines the Greek New Testament, the original New Testament with a fifth century Aramaic translation. What makes this action any different, therefore, from Jehovah's Witnesses appealing against the translations of the Greek New Testament used in every orthodox Bible to their own anachronistic New World Translation? This is the sort of appeal that creates cults, not affirms the Bible or biblical religion.

Siljander brought up the issue of 1Jn 5:7 in order to cast doubts on the Christian formulation of Trinity. We have dealt with the translation issue, but there is much more to say about the issue. But what of his broader point? Is Trinity not a biblical idea? Is it only

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<sup>23</sup> See Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 101 f. [www.bible-researcher.com](http://www.bible-researcher.com).

explicit in one place? Can it be counter-argued that this simply refers to three modes of existence concerning God rather than one God in three persons? Along the way to answering these questions, he manages to distort both doctrine and history. First, he states that the Eastern Orthodox believers rejected the idea of God in three persons in favour of god in three attributes or modes of existence. To be clear, the truth is quite the opposite. Eastern Orthodox along with every other orthodox believer universally acknowledged one God in three persons. The idea of one God in three attributes was explicitly condemned as a heresy. Siljander distorts history in discussing the Trinity and Christology's progress through the ecumenical church councils. First, it is true that the Council of Nicea adopted the basic Trinitarian formula in 325 AD.

He also muddies the water by making the idea of attributes and persons equivalent. We can only assume he does so because he wants Islam to become acceptable to Christians. Muslims steadfastly reject the one God in three persons concept. Siljander substitutes the idea of "persons" with a plurality of attributes. The two are not even remotely related. The Church recognized this early on when it completely rejected modalism, the idea that we have one God in three forms. This heresy of Sabellianism was rejected formally and finally by the church, starting in 262 AD, though it cropped up later in the radical Reformation through the teachings of Socinus and later still with Swedenborg. Siljander anticipated the force of this appeal to tradition by casting doubt on the councils, painting a picture of equivocation by the church concerning the Trinity and the nature of the deity of Christ. It is important to note that not only is he completely wrong concerning historical details (dates, etc.), but he is wrong in a comprehensive sense. Each church council, as it dealt with the deity of Christ, the deity of the Holy Spirit, the fact of the Trinity and relations within the Trinity built consistently on the base laid by each previous council. Read the deliberations for yourself. You will find church fathers carefully developing an enduring doctrine, steeped and saturated in scripture and in concert with each other. As they did so, they ran into threats to the gospel message. They ran back to the Word itself and dis-

tinguished between the core gospel and its unbiblical counterfeits. The Church, once again, is faced with a resurgence of counterfeits, insider movements and Mr Siljander's machinations among them. These "new" ideas were never accepted by our ancestors in the faith and for good reason.

Siljander's problem is that he accepts the Muslim approach to theology. That is what makes the accepted view of Trinity disposable to him. He makes spurious claims such as the only reference to three is 1Jn 5:7 (interesting that I found the same claim in a Wikipedia article on modalism), but he gives the argument weight because he expects the same sorts of proof that Muslims demand. They want to see three in one stated explicitly. They want Trinity spelled out verbatim. Also interesting is the fact that Nestorians and other non-orthodox followers of Christ use the same arguments online. In other words, Siljander simply parrots arguments made by early opponents of received Christology and Trinitarian theology and then repackages them for the Muslim-Christian debate. He offers nothing new whatsoever. His alternatives are the same heretical solutions that emerged in the early church and he applies them in the same way that many people living in Arabic Christendom did in the first centuries of the Arabic conquests. People embraced modalism as a way of building bridges to Islam. The result was that they left their Christian distinctives behind and eventually were engulfed by the rising tide of Islam.<sup>24</sup> "So what are we arguing about? As far as I can see, the controversy about the concept of the Trinity was a theological red herring."

He cannot see what all the fuss was about? Really? He cannot see that three attributes is not the same thing qualitatively as three persons in one? This seems to me to be the theological equivalent

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<sup>24</sup> See Alain Becançon, *Trois Tentations dans L'église* (Paris: Perrin, 2002). This little masterpiece looks at how the church, during the early Muslim conquests, attempted to deal with Islam. Its key assertion was that in the attempt to build dialogic bridges between Christianity and Islam, Christians adopted sub-Christian doctrinal positions in order to attract Muslims. The results, however, were exactly the opposite of what they had hoped. The doctrinal changes made them all the more vulnerable to Islam and isolated them from the rest of the Christian world.

of snow blindness. What could possibly cause an intelligent human being well acquainted with Christianity and Islam to miss what every competent theologian in both the Christian and Muslim world clearly recognizes? Perhaps he realizes that to face the differences head-on would wreck his enterprise. It is transparently obvious that the monistic God of Islam is not the same God as the triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not even manipulation to blunt the force of that fact, by changing the names of the members of the Trinity, is sufficient. What about his assertion that no verses can be brought to bear that address the triunity of God? Without stretching this review into dozens of pages, let me simply say that Siljander's point can only be sustained if you read the Bible as a disconnected collection of independent assertions. As soon as you start reading the text symphonically, you see the triune patterns weaving together the narratives in John, Ephesians, Hebrews etc. More disturbingly, it appears as though Siljander approaches the text in the same way a Muslim would approach the Qur'an. The Qur'an is often unfathomable to Christian readers, just as the opposite is true, because it has no narrative, redemptive story organizing the text. With the exception of its first sura, it is simply organized from longest to shortest suras. It lacks the kind of logical flow we find in the Bible. This makes it difficult for Christian readers to understand the Qur'an, but it also makes it difficult for Muslim readers to adjust to the Bible's underlying structure and logic. What I find troubling in Siljander's work is a similar inability to see the triune patterns suffused throughout the text, not even just in the books I cited above, but obviously throughout the New Testament and typologically in the Old. More to the point, even Muslims have historically understood that the Bible is all about the Trinity. It is one reason they never accepted it.

What about Siljander's thinking about Jesus? Is Islam's point that Jesus is the spirit of God good enough? What of the Muslim and Nestorian point that it was only the empty physical shell of Jesus, the husk, that suffered on the cross, while the spiritual essence of Jesus went straight to Allah? I failed to see Siljander actually resolving the issue of what happened on the cross; other than



by asserting the *ruhallah* (spirit) of God, he was agreeing with the Nestorians and others that the Son of God did not die on the cross, let alone take on the sins of the world. Siljander seems to forget that the Nestorians were not considered orthodox believers. Rather Nestorianism was condemned as a heresy. Nestorians believed that Christ existed as two unmingled, separate natures: the man Jesus and the divine Logos. It was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. They are not considered part of the Middle Eastern Church to this day. What Siljander wants the reader to do is adopt the position that was ultimately excluded from the definition of biblical Christianity. It was, however, adopted by Islam, along with other heretical ideas as it shaped its own theology. It seems also likely that there is a connection between Siljander's commendation of an anachronistic Aramaic Bible, his adoption of Nestorian Christology and his promotion of Islam.

He is also silent on the reason why the cross matters at all. Why did the Church reject the gnostic and Nestorian idea that only the physical shell of Jesus went to the cross, if any part of him actually did? They did so because the Son of God had to die a death as one whole person rather than a divine-like essence trapped in a physical body escaping to God at the last moment. Suggesting the latter just means that the Muslim or Siljander does not understand the depth and reality of sin, of our total inability to escape eternal death, and of our need for Christ to die in our place. Take a good look at the book of Romans. The necessity of Christ's death in our place forms the guts of the book, the engine that drives our transformation. Siljander glosses over the crucifixion, refusing to deal with Islam and Christianity's essential differences because he cannot see the point of Christ's sacrifice. Nothing else can account for his inability or unwillingness to engage with the crucifixion. Perhaps this is also part of the reason why he resists the concept of conversion. He equates it with switching organizations, as for example, from Islam to Christianity. Perhaps he also cannot abide the thought of it because he cannot see the necessity of it. Muslims do not. They of course recognize the realities of sin and judgment, but because they do not acknowledge the depth and power of original sin, they

have the theoretical ability to satisfy God without a redeemer. They cannot accept the cross because they reject the idea of God dying on a tree and because it seems entirely unnecessary. I am not sure that I can discern any appreciable difference between the Muslim position and Siljander's. In another sense, it seems Siljander's theological perspective beautifully mirrors that of classic Protestant liberalism. Devoid of the cross and resurrection, the flesh and the blood of passion, the Bible is reduced to morality and moralism. It is about living better as we imitate God. Come to think of it, what makes that different than Islam?

An additional worry is something that remains slightly veiled in Siljander's book, only breaking the surface in a few places. You see it popping up in his dialogue with Libya's foreign minister. Siljander wants to assure the Libyan that "Christianity doesn't have 100% ownership of Jesus".<sup>25</sup> This is an interesting turn of phrase. Going even further, Siljander concludes that Muhammad named his own movement Islam ("submission") because he was identifying it with the core message of Jesus - summed up in the Aramaic "shalem", surrender. He is openly and adamantly opposed to Christianity as a formal, organized religion. It is in one sense irrelevant to him, since the essence of faith is personal and experiential. In another sense it is harmful since Christianity is the source of the crusades and centuries of bloodshed. Let's look at a few things in turn. First, is there biblical faith without Christianity or some formal, organized expression?

I think that what Siljander advocates is not biblical faith at all. If anything, it is a revived gnosticism that eschewed visible organization, leadership, connections to other parts of the visible church, etc. It promoted individual faith and avoided the Church. It did so, because it also rejected the authority of the Old Testament. The omission was fatal to gnosticism which was relegated to the status of cult by the early Church. Since the gnostics avoided the Old Testament, they also failed to see that "Church" (Gk *ekklesia*) in the New Testament believing community was a continuation of the Old Tes-

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<sup>25</sup> Siljander, 91.

tament idea of *qahal*, a covenantal assembly, a visible, structured, well-defined and bounded thing indeed. The Church emerged from Israel. It was not a new dispensation in the sense that it obliterated God's established way of working through one people, a family created by him, that was bounded by its beliefs and formed by faith. His preference for private, personal devotion rather than institutional Christianity is a false choice. Biblical faith has always been both personal and corporate, emotional and doctrinal, spiritual and institutional.

Second, what about his charges about Christianity? Have Westerners committed atrocities in the name of Christ? Did the crusaders shed innocent blood? Of course they did, but slinging around these charges without also stating that Muslims have done the same in the name of Allah is a bit one-sided. Nor can the scales balance justly by blaming Muslim terrorism exclusively on Western causes. History will not permit such distortion. Siljander simply replays the modern Islamist propaganda tape. Crusades were themselves a response against centuries of Islamic imperialism. It is highly unlikely that Europe would have resisted the Muslim onslaught without them. The Islamic conquests, despite their depiction by polemicists of every stripe, were also bloody affairs, full of coercion and terror that ground down and assimilated one Christian community after another. This is not a blame game that Siljander should engage in.<sup>26</sup>

Where is this brave new world of transformed Muslim followers of Isa?<sup>27</sup> According to Siljander, it is found in the "huge Messianic

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<sup>26</sup> As an aside, the popular understanding of the crusades popularized throughout the Islamic world and in Western media such as the film *Kingdom of Heaven* are fundamentally a fiction.<sup>26</sup> Life is always more complex than Hollywood and the author would do well to dig a little deeper or speak with a bit more objectivity.

<sup>27</sup> I insist on using Isa in this context rather Jesus. Muslims have their own theology of the Messiah, Isa, and it is not remotely the same as the Christian understanding of Jesus, as Son of God; Messiah -yes, but Messiah in the light of the resurrection which fully revealed his divinity. The Muslim understanding of biblical terms and concepts is shaped by a deficient engagement with the Old Testament and Christian heresies, not with the consummate clarity afforded only by the complete Bible.

Muslim movement in Bangladesh and Indonesia” alluded to earlier.<sup>28</sup> He has apparently been there, as he wrote about a meeting in Dhaka with Muslim theologians and acknowledges the contributions of Dr. David Coffey, a well-known expatriate expert raised in that country. Perhaps he has met genuine messianic Muslims who do what he describes, or perhaps other Westerners such as Dr Coffey has. I can say, however, after many years of meeting and interviewing insiders, former insiders, Muslim background Christians etc., that I have not experienced anything like the picture he describes. I have spoken with hundreds of experts on the subject and I have not seen the vibrant, believing, communities of biblically faithful Muslims he so persuasively describes. I have visited remote locations in the very heartland of the insider movement, sometimes guided by insiders themselves, and have found nothing on the scale or of the substance he and others have articulated. What I have found bears telling and I will do so, but not here. In my experience the insider movements have more in common with Disney World’s Epcot Center than they do with the real world.

In the Epcot Center, located outside of Orlando, Florida, you have a re-creation of countries and cities of the world. If you want to see Norway, Mexico, China, Germany, Italy, Japan and five other countries, you fly to Orlando and you see them there. The food you eat is authentic and the young people who work there are real too, complete with their charming accents, but the entire thing is an illusion. It is an American theme park. Perhaps there is a genuine insider movement alive somewhere, but all I have personally experienced has been a very clever theme park. I have met insiders, that is true, but they hardly match Siljander’s description. Their leaders are all former-Muslims who became Christians and then were persuaded to become Muslims again primarily by Western missionaries. They learned their biblical theology as Christians not as Muslim followers of Isa. There are no Jesus mosques. The vast numbers quoted never materialize in the light of day. It exists, yes, but what exists is nothing like the anecdotes describe. I am of

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<sup>28</sup> Siljander, 215f.

course completely open to being proved wrong, but someone will have to do it. I have seen insiders in places where the insiders themselves said I was their first Western visitor since they came to Christ as Christians in the 1980s. You can prove me wrong, but you will have to work hard for it – and I doubt you will succeed.

Siljander's ideas are nothing more than an example of *dhimmi* religion.<sup>29</sup> The Qur'an and Islam slowly begin to appropriate and redefine biblical terms. In the author's view, in order to produce a real peace between Islam and Christianity, we will have to dispose of the Bible, the Church and Christianity. These become barriers to genuine peace and love, our ultimate goal. The Bible has to be eliminated because at some point it will keep highlighting the existence of two potentially different stories that form two ultimately different people. Since there really only is one people, with one way of submitting to God, we only need one book and one identity. Siljander and others like him (Chrislam, insider movements, Common word, etc.) deliberately remove Christianity and the Church from view, opening the way for Islam to subsume Jesus within itself. We love Jesus, but we love him within Islam. The message of Siljander's book is that we have been tragically killing one another for centuries over a misunderstanding. All we really need to do is simply become good Muslims who love Jesus as the Qur'an and the Bible prescribe, and the killing stops. It is a wholesale surrender to Islam, its categories, definitions, worldview, and authority. Unlike many other works to which I also object, this is breathtaking in its ambition. It goes beyond the insider movements' "yes" to Islam. It also says "no" to Christianity. Siljander's vision for the future is the vision of the minaret engulfing the cross. When you come right down to it, there is one statement I can endorse in this work. There is a Deadly Misunderstanding: it is his.

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<sup>29</sup> *Dhimmi* religion assumes not only the legitimate existence of Islam, but of the inevitability of its ascendance among religions. To be a *dhimmi* person is to acknowledge one's subordination to the world of Islam. In other words, if you are not a Muslim in a formal way, you are a tolerated second-class part of society.