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EDITORIAL

What is the future of the Church in the Middle East? What is the future of ministry in the Middle East? The events of the last few months have raised questions about what it means to live as God's people in the face of opposition and suffering. It begs of God's people a response that is shaped by a divine view of these events. We have become so used to the road paved for the gospel by the church being recognised by the state, that these events seem to shake our understanding of God's purposes. Let's reread Acts, and see the story of a small group of followers of Jesus who walked out faith in the face of great opposition, and saw amazing evidence of God at work.

This issue of St Francis has been delayed due to some transitions for some of our editorial and production group. Please accept our apologies.

The edition begins with a letter to those considering ministry in this region. The advice and encouragement it offers provides a helpful roadmap for those setting out the journey. The other articles give context to the place of the Bible in Arabic and how it came to us, challenge us to consider the way we consider areas that are important in discipleship, and present a different perspective on the context the birth narratives of Jesus. There is a book review as well of Reza Aslan's book, *No god but God*.

It is our desire to spur each other on in ministry and the way we live our lives as God's people in the face of the challenges of Islam

Melanie McNeil

15 January, 2015

FOR THE SAKE OF THE NAME: A LETTER TO NEW MISSIONARIES IN THE ARAB WORLD

Abu Daoud¹

1. Greeting

Dear Brother and Sister,²

Um Daoud and I have been so happy to be one voice of many that helped you to recognize your vocation to the Arab world, and then help you in a minor way to get from A to B to C. And now you are there, beginning language acquisition. You have sold or given away most of your human possessions, including that collectible sports car, an assortment of leftover things from your pantry, and a table lamp that we use most every day. In doing this you reveal where your treasure resides.

First I want to confirm your call. We've been missionaries now for about a decade and I remember when I first met the two of you for supper, how you were interested in missions, broadly speaking. I encouraged you to consider mission among the less and least-reached peoples. How happy I was months later when we met up again and heard that you had met some other workers from our missionary society and you were considering the Arab world, all of which is least-reached or unreached. I see in this the hand of God.

And remember also that your apostolic vocation to the mission field was not merely a matter of private judgment; it was confirmed by your congregation and its leadership and by our missionary society as well. This has always been encouraging to me in moments of doubt: that we are not missionaries because we alone feel that this is our calling, but that this calling has been affirmed by our local church, and in many cases multiple churches, and also by a ministry of Christians committed to and knowledgeable about the Church's mission in the world.

2. For the Sake of the Name

I would like to now share a few insights. They are not primarily spiritual, I suppose. I think that by this time in your spiritual life you know the basics: prayer, fasting, liturgy, sacrament, silence, Scripture, pilgrimage, and so on. And to be honest, if you want to learn more on these then there are many far better teachers than me, for I have often reflected on the reality of true and resplendent holiness and my lack of success in obtaining it. But I will share with you some reflections on what I learned from living in the Arab world, with the hope that you will find something of value as you journey towards fruitfulness for the name's sake.

But before I get to that, let me share with you my favorite Bible verse about missionaries, and I commend this to you: "For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles [that is, non-Christians]. Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth" (3 John 7, 8). This might seem like the kind of verse you would use when fundraising, but I like it because it reminds us of who we are and what we do at the heart of our vocation: that we have gone out—out from our culture, from our homeland, from our language— and that this has been done for the sake of "the name". Jews in the 1st Century (as today) often did not want to pronounce the divine name (YHWH) because of its overwhelming holiness, so they would say "the Name" or "ha shem". (May I note that the Hebrew *shem* and the Arabic *ism* are cognates?) But here John the elder means not God, but God as revealed in Jesus— *Jesus* is now *ha shem* or "the name". There is much more one could say on these two brief verses, but let us move on to the heart and soul of this letter.

The first months are special: both easier and more difficult than the following months and years in the field. The exciting part is that every experience brings something new and interesting. The hard part is that the day to day things you know how to do so well in your home country are so different there: getting the phone hooked up, finding out where stuff is in the store, figuring out public transportation and visa procedures, and so on. I know for Um Daoud the hardest part was being away from her parents and siblings. Also, as a man I was out in public much more and met other men, who were more likely to have received a good education and so speak English.

¹ Abu Daoud is a contributing editor at *St Francis Magazine*.

² This is a real letter written to real missionaries, but I felt it was worth publishing because I trust that other workers will find something of worth in it.

3. Advice to New Missionaries

But here are a few pieces of advice, for the short and the long term. Feel free to use them or not, as you see fit. Many of these we received from others and have found them to be useful and fruitful, and so they are handed on to you.

First, apply yourself to language acquisition above all else.

Of course take care of your marriage and your relationship with God and so on, but once you have those essentials of life taken care of, language study should come first. It may not feel very spiritual or fruitful—sitting around quizzing each other on lists of verbs and their conjugations. But trust me, this is important. Language is at the heart of how people understand themselves and Arabic has a very special place in the Arab heart—much more so than English does to Americans. Most Arabs cannot actually carry on a good conversation in classical Arabic, and if you show that you know it they will respect you. But if you show that you are familiar with the local dialect as well then you demonstrate that you are not merely an erudite academic, but a man of the people as well. Proficiency in Arabic is an absolute must. I don't know of a single fruitful long-term missionary in the Arab world who did not become at least proficient (if not fluent) in Arabic.

Second, learn the classical stuff.

Yep, you need it. See, Arabic is not really one language, the way that English is. British, American, Australian, and Indian English—they differ on very minor points. And you will hear people say that Arabic is like that. Rubbish and hogwash. Iraqi Arabic and Moroccan Arabic have about as much in common as Italian and Spanish (both birthed from Latin). Knowing that classical Arabic will enable you to speak to a crowd anywhere in the Arab world, even though your comprehension of them will be limited. For instance, I studied Arabic in the Levant but once found myself in North Africa where I was to present lectures on Scripture and church history. This I was able to do, leaning heavily on my Classical Arabic (with some French tossed in). When the locals spoke to me it was very difficult for me to understand them in their dialect. Another reason why this is important is that if you need to learn a new dialect, it is relatively easy to work down from Classical Arabic to a local dialect, but very difficult to work from only knowing a local dialect to working your way up to Classical Arabic.

Third, remember that you are Americans and don't try to hide it.

I know lots of Americans who have gone out of their way to be more Arab than the Arabs—adopting names and customs and idioms that to a lot of Arabs don't always seem authentic coming from a non-Arab. Learn the language well, stay up to date on the history and politics of the region, and that is enough. God caused you to be born and raised in a certain place and time, and while you need to respect local customs (I'm thinking of clothing here, among other things), be who God made you to be.

Fourth, learn the history of the people and country.

Americans are very historyless people. We have a new country and most of us cannot name all of our great grandparents. Arabs are not like this. They tend to be very proud of their history (even if they are bothered by some of the implications and consequences of the history). So learn it. Knowing the history and the language of a people is the foundation to understanding the local context, and this will allow you to discern how to approach different topics in different settings, including but not limited to the topic of the Messiah and his ministry and his community. When we arrived in the Middle East I learned so much from books like Cragg's *The Arab Christian*, Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain*, Fromkin's *A Peace to End all Peace*, Yergin's *The Prize*, Lewis' *What went Wrong?*, Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Ye'or's *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam*, and more recently Stark's *God's Battalions*. Never stop learning, and never stop reading.

Fifth, do not badmouth other Christians.

Evangelicals do this all the time. They look at the Christians of the Crusades, for instance, and say, O those were not real Christians. These evangelicals often don't know the first thing about the historical Crusades, like that the first one was occasioned by massacres of Christian pilgrims to the

Holy Land and the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and that the reconquest of Jerusalem was absolutely a just cause because it had been taken from Christendom in an unjustifiable Arab war of aggression, or that the violence of the Crusaders was pretty conventional for those days and paled in comparison to that of the infamous Muslim leader Baybars, or other things. In fact, coming to the defense of other Christians, even when I don't entirely agree with them, but out of solidarity and collective honor is something I learned *from* Muslims. If you are confronted with a very real sin committed by Christians against Muslims then own it, and apologize on the behalf of your Christian brothers.

Sixth, don't be ashamed of being a Christian.

American evangelicals are very odd people, and we have a very bizarre form of religion. American religion is like a buffet, you sort of take what you like and leave what you don't like. If you don't like the word "Christian" then you call yourself a "Jesus follower" or just invent your own word. If you feel uncomfortable calling your assembly a "church" you call it something else— a fellowship or whatever. This form of Christianity is so deracinated and historyless that I have very little hope for its future. I am saying, don't be like that. If you are talking with a Muslim and you think they don't understand the correct meaning of the word "Christian", then ask them. Indeed, this can be a great entre to the Gospel: I am a Christian, praise be to God, but let me ask you— what do you think Christians believe? As a side note, I have grown to be proud of this wonderful label— Christian— for which our ancestors would sooner have died rather than rejected. If you make up your new label in the Middle East it may well not lead to more openness, but to suspicion that you are deceitful or a cultist. Americans love novelty. Most of the world, including the Arab world, has more sense than to think that just because something is new it is ipso facto better.

Seventh, learn from the ancient Churches.

The deepest theological statement I have heard in the last ten years came from my friend the Orthodox priest. I asked him if it was possible to be justified by faith alone, apart from works, because some of his rhetoric sounded pretty evangelical. He thought for a moment and replied, "It is possible to be justified by faith without work, but it is better to be justified by faith *and* works." Or with the same man (who received no theological training), when he was put in charge of a church in a neighboring town that had been without a priest for a long time, I asked him, "So how do you start?" He answered, "I will call every family on the membership list and visit them at their home." The idea of an American pastor calling and visiting every person/family on their membership list and then actually *visiting them at home* was shocking to me. But then I realized that he was right. The man with no training was following the genuine Christian tradition of being a pastor, and I had never seen that in the USA.

Eighth, Don't fall in love or in hate.

Over the years you will find yourself (if you are like most people) starting in a stage of absolute delight at the newness and goodness of stuff you see in Arab culture that is absent in the West; and then to a state of absolute disillusion with the nepotism and corruption and backwardness of Arab society; and then to a state of equanimity. Sometimes the first two reactions come in the opposite direction. Anyway, wait for the equanimity. And let me note that when you come back to the West you will undergo this process all over again. When you find yourself tending too strongly in one way or the other, remember this.

Ninth, realize that Islam as a civilization has a long-term future and that the West does not.

You might think that by saying this I am violating the advice I just offered, but this is not the case. I cannot predict the future with certainty here, but this conviction comes from well-documented demographic trends. The West, after the Enlightenment, placed each individual human at the center of his or her own universe, giving him the duty of constructing his own sense of ethics (now called values, how pathetic), purpose of life, relationships, beauty, and so on. Not surprisingly, this way of life, called modernity, has in these last days led to surprising realities wherein people contend even with objective physiology in terms of sexuality. The good news is that this unnatural way of ordering society is waning. It may appear powerful but the proponents of this way of life (if one can call it that) cannot offer a good cause for having children, or more than one child, which is at

least an “interesting” commodity whereby one can realize their own emotional capacities. This is a fancy way of saying that the West is breeding itself out of existence. I won’t bore you with all the demographic figures, but Islamic civilization, for all its faults and problems and deficiencies, is still closer to God’s will for the family than is the secular West (today).³ Because of this marriage and children are still valued, even if we might object that Christian marriage is superior to Islamic marriage in many cases. Muslims, when asked, *Do you believe in this civilization enough to give birth to at least two human beings in order to make sure it does not die?* can largely say yes (the only exception being in Iran, believe it or not). In almost every country of the West, the secular Westerner responds with a resounding *no*.

Tenth, in making point nine, I’m not being a pessimist.

Um Daoud and I were chatting last night and she mentioned that people who don’t live long are pessimists, implying that I am one. I objected that I’m a realist, but that the demise of the West is not necessarily bad, because I have a hopeful and positive vision for that society that does really matter— the Church. The West may indeed be the bastard child of the Church (I find that description compelling), but the Church alone among all communities on the face of the earth was founded directly by the Messiah. So while the West is in a state of irreversible demographic decline (and declining societies grow violent, mind you), the Church, the pillar of truth, a chosen people, will endure.

Eleventh, the local Christian church or mission can easily suck up all your time.

I have known a lot of missionaries who didn’t have a single real friendship with a Muslim. So be aware of that. By all means help the local church to some extent, but never let it suck up all your time and make sure that every week you are spending some time with local Muslims.

Point twelve is that there is no Golden Key.

Our society in the West is very focused on productivity, and this is as true for business management as it is for mission. The history of evangelical witness to Muslims is littered with Golden Keys— the mythical formula that, if only put into practice, would instantly lead to conversions and new churches. The problem is that what works in one place doesn’t always work in another place, and what works in a given time period doesn’t always work later. So when you hear of the latest great breakthrough (IM, CPM, CAMEL, Kingdom Circles, T4T, etc.) just listen, and learn it, but remember that at the most basic level your role is to cross boundaries for the sake of the Gospel. Or as Augustine said, “Love God and do as you will.”

And finally (13), have a sense of humor.

You really need this because you will learn more from your mistakes than your successes, especially at first. If you are too hard on yourself when you mess up or use the wrong word or say something embarrassing or commit some cultural faux pas, then the learning process will become a burden and not a joy, which is what it should be.

4. Doxology and Blessing

Perhaps you are disappointed that I have not included more on the practical points of witness to Muslims. But that can wait for another day. For now, believe in God, and glory in the majestic glory of your religion and truths revealed about God by himself and for our salvation: Atonement, Incarnation, and Trinity. These are the crown jewels of our religion called Christianity, initiated by Jesus Christ and named after his followers, both Jewish and Gentile, who were called Christians, who were named after Jesus, the Christ.

Now, glory be to God in Christ Jesus and in the Church, from generation to generation!

And may God bless you and make you fruitful for his glory.

³ For what it’s worth, for more info on this check out my blog islamdom.blogspot.com, and do a search for ‘Europe’ or ‘demographics’ or ‘demography’ or ‘fertility.’

THE VAN DYCK BIBLE TRANSLATION: THE AMERICAN MISSION BOARD¹ AND THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO ARABIC

Rev. Azar Ajaj²

Introduction

At the time of their arrival in Palestine in the 1820's, the American Protestant missionaries' main activity was the distribution of Scripture and tracts. Their primary audience was Christian pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for Christmas and Easter.³ Initially, the use of Arabic literature was very limited. On the one hand, outreach among Muslims could, according to Ottoman law, result in the death penalty; on the other hand, Protestant relations with the Arab Christian communities were weak or even hostile.⁴ However, over time the situation shifted and the missions were able to establish schools, hospitals, and churches throughout Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. In this context, the need for an Arabic Bible translation was reckoned an urgent priority.

Nonetheless, a few questions had to be addressed before action could be taken. First, such a translation would be costly and time consuming, so, why should the mission sacrifice the time and money for it? Second, were any adequate Arabic translations of the Bible already in existence? If so, why did the American Mission want to have a translation undertaken by its own people? Third, if a new translation were required, how would the quality of such a translation be assured?

Bringing the Word of God to the Sinners

The above is the major reason that motivated some of the missionaries to initiate a new translation. In 1847 a committee chaired by Dr. Eli Smith sent an appeal advocating a new translation of the Bible into the Arabic language; this Bible was seen as a means of bringing hope to the whole Middle East:

Can we exaggerate on such a theme? Is it easy to overestimate the importance of that mighty power that shall send the healing leaves of salvation down the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Nile, and the Niger; that shall open living fountains in the plains of Syria, the deserts of Arabia and the sands of Africa; that shall gild with the light of life the craggy summits of goodly Lebanon and sacred Sinai and giant Atlas? We think not. These and kindred thoughts are not the thoughtless and fitful scintillations of imagination, the baseless dreams of a wild enthusiasm. To give the Word of God to forty millions of perishing sinners, to write their commentaries, their concordances, their theology, their sermons, their tracts, their school-books and their religious journals: in short, to give them a Christian literature, or that germinating commencement of one which can perpetuate its life and expand into full grown maturity, are great gigantic verities taking fast hold on the salvation of myriads which no man can number, of the present and all future generations.⁵

Thus, the purpose of the new translation was to bring the word of God to the whole Middle East, and so to permeate every aspect of the lives of the Arabophone peoples in the region. Hall in his article gives the credit to Dr. Smith for persuading the American Board that, "a new Arabic translation of the Bible was indispensable, and that the success of American missions and the spread of the truth demanded the work".⁶

¹ I'm referring here for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). It was founded in September 5th 1810, and became the first organized missionary society in the United States. Most of its members were Congregationalist and Presbyterians. They arrived to Palestine in 1821. From there they visited Beirut and decided to make this city their main station in the area.

² Rev. Azar Ajaj is the president of Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary in the Galilee. He is a leader in the Association of Baptist Churches of Israel and is a PhD candidate with Spurgeon's College (London).

³ Aharon Ya'afe 'The activity of the American Protestant mission in Israel from 1821-1845' [Hebrew] *Katedra*, 74 (1994), 36-60 (p. 50).

⁴ Margaret R. Leavy 'Eli Smith and the Arabic Bible' *Yale Divinity School Library: Occasional Publication* (1993) 1-25 (p. 7).

⁵ Henry Harris Jessup *Fifty-Three Years in Syria* 2 vols. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910) p.68-69.

⁶ Isaac H. Hall 'The Arabic Bible of Drs. Eli Smith and Cornelius V. A. Van Dyck' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 11 (1885) p.276-86 (p.283-284).

However, the mission faced a further profound challenge: namely, mass illiteracy. It would scarcely be helpful to put the Bible in the hands of people when most of them could neither read nor write. During the 18th century few books were written or published in Arabic since the level of literacy among the public was very low, especially in the countryside and among the desert tribes. Classical Arabic had retreated relative to the Turkish language, and the divergence between written Arabic (i.e. classical) and spoken Arabic had grown to the point that the latter had almost become a separate language unto itself.⁷ Therefore, the project of translating the Bible to Arabic would only be meaningful as the work of the mission schools, where Arabs could learn to read and write, advanced.⁸ Accordingly, both Dr. Smith himself and Dr. Van Dyck⁹ were involved in establishing and teaching in schools.¹⁰

Why a New Arabic Bible Translation?

When we speak about the Arabic Bible translation by the American mission in the 19th century, many assume that this was the first Arabic translation of the whole Bible, particularly since this version is the most popular one and the oldest one commonly in use. This is not accurate, however. According to an account written by Dr. Van Dyck himself, there were various Arabic translations of the spanning the 9th century through to the 19th. At least one of these translations of the entire Bible, namely, the '*Propaganda*,' was well known to the missionaries, and was used by them. (Most of the other translations included only certain portions of the Bible.¹¹) So why did the Mission desire a new one?

When the first evangelical missionaries arrived in the Middle East in the first half of the nineteenth century, they did not find an Arabic translation of the Bible which they felt they could use in preaching or teaching.¹² The edition they circulated was the so-called *Propaganda* version, which was printed by the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) without the Apocrypha. This translation had been done by the Maronite Bishop of Damascus who began the work of translation in 1620; it was first printed at Rome¹³ in 1671, with the Apocrypha.¹⁴ This version, it was reckoned, suffered from many weaknesses and grammatical errors, and was described by the Protestant missionaries as follows:

It is a servile imitation of the Vulgate. The rendering of the historical parts is intelligible, but the meaning of the Epistles is often obscure, and their doctrinal arguments robbed of almost all their force. Much of the prophetic and practical parts of the Old Testament is either unmeaning or in bad taste, and the whole version is neither classical nor grammatical. The missionaries could not put it into the hands of literary natives without an apology for its awkwardness and errors, and some of them never read it in public without previous revision.¹⁵

Furthermore, the *Propaganda* version was printed in three large volumes which made it difficult to transport, and it was very expensive: only monasteries, churches, and wealthy people could afford to buy it. From this we may conclude that the majority of the people did not know the content of the Bible, nor had they ever physically touched one. This was yet another motive for a new Arabic

⁷ Aharon Ya'afe 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission' [Hebrew] *Pe'amim* (2000) 57–69 (p. 75).

⁸ Leavy, 'Eli Smith' p.14–15.

⁹ He is one of the American Board missionaries, more information about him will come later.

¹⁰ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years*, p.54, 69.

¹¹ Hall, p.277–278.

¹² Ghassan Khalaf 'The Role of Evangelicals in Translating the Bible into Arabic' (Beirut, Lebanon, 1998) p.1–8 (p.5) <<http://www.ghassankhalaf.com/works0202.php>>.

¹³ It was printed by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and the name *Propaganda* was taken from the Latin name of the congregation, Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide.

¹⁴ Hall, p.278.

¹⁵ Thomas Laurie *Historical Sketch Of The Syria Mission* (Boston: The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1866) p.19.

translation of the Bible for the benefit of the people of the region, who had little knowledge of the written Word of God.¹⁶

Ironically, the Maronite Patriarch was also unhappy with the BFBS edition of the *Propaganda* translation that was being used by the missionaries. Two main reasons are likely. First, the BFBS edition omitted the Apocrypha. Second, he felt that this Bible was being used to convert people to Protestantism. He even called the missionaries (American and British alike) infidels and atheists because of their use of this edition. He instructed the members of his community and the clergy to boycott the BFBS edition and ordered them to send him any copy they got hold of.¹⁷ In any case, it is very clear that the missionaries were dissatisfied with the *Propaganda* version and felt the need for a new translation, a translation which would have the linguistic and theological credibility to meet the needs of the people and the churches.¹⁸

New Translation

The Mission did not only discuss the reason and the need of a translation, they were also careful to assure its quality. In 1847 Smith was formally asked by the Board to take responsibility for the new translation. Smith's life experience had equipped him for this important role of translating the Bible into Arabic: his theological training at Yale and Andover, his work as a missionary for thirty years, his contacts with Bible scholars in the States and Europe, and his ties to printing experts in Germany.¹⁹ In addition, he had a remarkable ability to learn new languages. Leavy writes about him:

Eli Smith's lively interest in languages was, no doubt, one reason the Mission Board was so eager to send him to the Mediterranean. He was already competent in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew from his years at Yale and Andover, and seems also to have had some familiarity with German and French, as well as with Italian, which was the *lingua franca* of Westerners in the Mediterranean world. He was a quick learner, and in the coming years was to acquire a number of other languages, including Turkish and Armenian, and even something of the language of the Syrian Gypsies. Of course, he shortly mastered the Arabic language too.²⁰

Smith was assisted in his task by two of the best intellectuals in the Levant at the time, Boutros al Bustani and Sheik Nasif al Yaziji. Bustani was an educator of Lebanese Maronite Christian origin, who converted to Protestantism and worked as a teacher at the boys' mission school in Abeih.²¹ Like Smith, al Bustani had great linguistic abilities, and "in addition to Aramaic and Syriac, he knew Latin, Greek, Italian and French and quickly sharpened his English," and when he was asked to join the translation team he invested his time in the study of Hebrew as well.²² And so, he acquired knowledge of all three original languages of the Bible. Al Yazigi was a poet and a writer, and, while Arabic was the only language he spoke, he mastered this language very well. Both of these men also became some of the main leaders of the Arab Renaissance²³ later in the 19th century.²⁴

Smith was a perfectionist who devoted attention to the smallest details.²⁵ For example, when it came even to the style of the printing he worked to have the one that "possess a classical beauty acceptable to the most exacting readers of Arabic and worthy of the sacred text itself. Not even the

¹⁶ Khalaf, p.5.

¹⁷ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission' p.58.

¹⁸ Khalaf, p.6.

¹⁹ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission' p.61.

²⁰ Leavy, 'Eli Smith' p. 7.

²¹ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission', p.62.

²² Issa A Saliba 'Bible in Arabic : The 19th-Century Protestant Translation' *Muslim World* (1975) p.254-63 (p.255).

²³ Also known by the Arabic word *Al-Nahda*, a cultural renaissance that began in the second half of the 19th century and continued until early 20th century. This renaissance took place in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. It is often considered as a period of intellectual, literature and nationalism awakening led by Arab Christian poets, writers and thinkers.

²⁴ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission' p.62.

²⁵ Jessup, Fifty-Three Years, p.56.

Sultan's press in Constantinople could meet that standard.”²⁶ When it came to the translation itself, Smith adopted a strict method: first, Al Bustani translated the text into Arabic from the Hebrew or Greek. Then, Al Yaziji made any changes needed to guarantee the purity of the Arabic. Smith revised Al Yaziji's work and then went over the revision with Al Yaziji, making sure that the meaning was clear.²⁷ After getting comments from other mission members who knew Arabic well, a printed document of the translation was sent to “Arabic scholars in the Middle East, Britain, Germany, and the United States, inviting their comments, criticisms, and suggestions.”²⁸ After receiving comments Smith would make any necessary changes, and only then would he send it to the press.²⁹

Smith died in January of 1857, and his work was far from completion. In fact, only the books of Genesis and Exodus had been printed. The rest of the Old Testament, and very little of the New Testament, had been translated by Al Bustani.³⁰ Before he died, Smith said that he “would be responsible only for what had been printed.”³¹ That meant that the one who would replace Smith must himself review all the translated but unprinted material.

Continuing the work - Dr Van Dyck

Dr Cornelius Van Dyck was chosen as the successor to Smith. Van Dyck was also an outstanding linguist with an excellent grasp of Arabic. He had been involved in the project as a member of the translating committee, as well as being one of the “review scholars.”³² It seemed obvious that he was the right person to finish the work of translation. And so, in the same year he was moved from Sidon to Beirut in order to complete the work of translation.³³

Van Dyck decided to prioritize finishing at least one of the testaments, and so began with the (shorter) New Testament first. As to his Arabic language assistant, Van Dyck decided to secure the services of a Muslim Scholar by the name Sheikh Yusuf el-Asir, a graduate of El Azhar University in Cairo. He “preferred a Muslim to a Christian, as [one] coming to the work with no preconceived ideas of what a passage ought to mean, and as being more extensively read in Arabic.”³⁴ Some suggested that the Arabic style of the translation should be similar to that of the Quran, but those who were involved in the translation (Smith, Bustani, Van Dyck, and other Arab scholars) preferred a simple and pure Arabic language, different from the Quran style but also free from any foreign expressions.³⁵ Yet it is important to note that we do in fact find different levels of the Arabic language in the translation. The language that is found in the historical books and the Pentateuch is translated simply and in a straightforward manner, while more ornate and complex vocabulary and language appear in the wisdom and prophetic books.³⁶

On the 28th of March 1860, a complete copy of the New Testament was placed before the annual meeting of the Mission Board. At that meeting Van Dyck was urged to complete the full task by translating the Old Testament, and he was able to finish that task on the 25th of August, 1864. On March 10th, 1865 they celebrated the printing of the Old Testament and the completion of the new Arabic translation of the entire Bible.³⁷

²⁶ Leavy, ‘Eli Smith’, p.12-13.

²⁷ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years*, p.70.

²⁸ Saliba, p.258-259.

²⁹ Saliba, p.259.

³⁰ Leavy, ‘Eli Smith’, p.19.

³¹ Hall, p.279.

³² Saliba, p.260.

³³ Leavy, ‘Eli Smith’, p.20.

³⁴ Hall, p.280.

³⁵ Saliba, p.262.

³⁶ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years*, p.75.

³⁷ Yaafe, ‘Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission’, p.67-68.

Conclusion

In 17 years the American Mission was able to provide a new Arabic translation of the Bible for religious and educational life in the Middle East. The success of this project was beyond the expectations of the missionaries. In a short time this translation was embraced by the evangelical churches in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt and Sudan. They used it for evangelism, preaching, teaching, school education, and worship. So too did the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and Sudan, as to this day. The so-called Smith and Van Dyck version is also the Bible of the Antiochene Orthodox Church, as well as the Greek Orthodox Church. In other words, this translation became the *de facto* accepted version (with the exception of the Catholic Church) for all the Churches in the Arabic world.³⁸

Since the completion of the Van Dyck translation, another four Arabic translations have appeared.³⁹ Yet the Van Dyck translation is still considered the best among all of these translations. The main challenge of this translation is that it has not been revised for more than 140 years. A revision of this valuable version would help to correct translation mistakes, simplify the Arabic language used in it, and make it easier for new generations to read and understand it.

The translation of the Bible into Arabic by these American missionaries and their colleagues played a major part in the renewal of the Arabic language. The translation has been defined as one of the most important contributions of American missionaries to the renewal of spiritual life in the East, and the revival of the Arabic language in the nineteenth century after a period of neglect during Ottoman rule. Furthermore, the translation also contributed to the establishment of the mission in the Middle East, and helped to confirm the place of living and active Arab Protestant denominations, alongside the ancient Orthodox and Catholic Churches of the East.⁴⁰

³⁸ Khalaf, p.6.

³⁹ The Jesuit Bible translation 1878; the Paulinian translation 1953; the Lebanese Bible Society translation 1979; and the *Gospel Book of Life* (Living Bible) 1982. There are other translations, yet they are not accepted by most of the churches, or at least they are not in use.

⁴⁰ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission', p.68.

“JESUS AKBAR”: LUKE’S BIRTH NARRATIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF EMPIRE AND ITS VERY GOOD NEWS.

Salmaan Corniche

... some months before his [Caesar Augustus] birth, a prodigy was produced before the eyes of all announcing that Nature was to give birth to a king for the Roman people.¹ –Suetonius

Upon you, [Caesar Augustus] however, while still among us, we give you honours, set up altars to swear by your numen, and confess that none like you has arisen or will arise again.² –Horace

Imagine that one of the shepherds at the time of the birth of Jesus had a silver-coloured coin in his pocket. It was the equivalent of a day’s wages for the average worker. Its head featured Caesar Augustus, and the reverse side displayed the Roman goddess Victoria with wings like an angel, standing on the globe with a victory wreath in one hand and a palm branch in the other.³ The message? Caesar is to be revered and Rome will be victorious over all.

In the context of this Empire, the Gospel of Luke brings us the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. This paper will focus on Luke 2 and show that very subtly, yet forcefully, Luke introduces his readers to another *Kurios* [=supreme lord] who will shake up not only an empire but all of world history. He is the full culmination of all of the Hebrew Testament promises of the “great and terrible day of the Lord” and of the Messiah.

Luke is confident of the certainty of Jesus’ rule and reign of all things in time and for eternity. Luke intends to instruct not only Theophilus, the immediate recipient of his letter, but by extension the wider church just coming into existence then, and the wider church now, and even non-Christians of that certainty. This paper will set out the continuing confidence of God in Trinity still ruling and reigning and how this affects the Islamic faith as well. By a close examination of texts concerning Caesar Augustus, Luke 2, and a widely popular Islamic poem called El-Burda, we will come to see that whereas the Caesars said in effect, “Caesar Akbar”, and Muslims proclaim “Allahu Akbar”, the truth is “Jesus Akbar”.

Rock-solid certainty: A major purpose of Luke’s writings

If we see Luke-Acts as the answer, then what is the question? Likely the question in his audience was “How can we know for certain that the Son of God is who he says he is?” and by extension, “Can we be certain that this Christian faith is trustworthy?” This is a loaded question in light of the fact that the Roman emperor referred to himself as the “son of god” and that Christianity was scoffed at by the Romans as being some kind of new and novel invention of lunatics who believed in and tolerated a crucified hero.

Luke thus opens his Gospel addressed to Theophilus [meaning “lover of God”] with the end goal of his letter: “... that you may have certainty [Gk. *aspháleia*] concerning the things you have been taught” (1:4 cf. Acts 1:1).⁴ Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, concluded similarly: “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty [Gk *asphalōs*] that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36).

To drive home this certainty, Luke uses what Richard Burridge called the genre of “ancient lives” to make his case.⁵ In this type of ancient literature, the life and exploits of the hero are recounted in

¹ Yves Bonnefoy *Roman and European Mythologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p.101-102 quoting Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 94.

² Horace wrote this of Caesar Augustus in 12 BC after he had been elected as *ponifex maximus* as the head of Roman state religion, or its “supreme guide”. From Joseph D. Fantin *The Lord of the Entire World: Lord Jesus, A challenge to Lord Caesar?* (Diss: PhD, University of Sheffield, 2007, p.216. The emperor’s *numen* can be defined as his divine power.

³ For an image of this coin see the post by Potator of May 8, 2010: <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/board/index.php?topic=58023.msg390859#msg390859> (Accessed 20 Sept 2014)

For numerous Augustinian coins see: http://www.ancientcoins.ca/RIC/RIC1/RIC1_Augustus_1-200.htm (Accessed 30 Sept 2014)

⁴ BDAG= stability of idea or statement, certainty, truth

⁵ Space does not permit a discussion of varying points of view as to the genre of Luke and Luke-Acts. See F. Scott Spencer *The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), especially chapter 1. In chapter 2 he lists 7

written form. In the case of Luke, Burridge observes that Jesus is the subject of 18 per cent of the verbs, and 40 per cent are Jesus speaking.⁶ The written form is important as it carries more authority than an oral tradition. Thus Luke writes to Theophilus that he going to “write an orderly account” (1:3) as a precise historian. This is no myth-telling like the story that Augustus was born of “no mortal seed” and was conceived miraculously at a midnight ritual at the temple of Apollo, but the “eyewitness account” (1:2) of what Jesus actually did and taught.⁷ We would anticipate that Luke will use every literary convention possible to instill rock-solid certainty in his readers. The macro political context is prominent among them.

Luke in the context of empire

The British scholar Justin Meggitt advised New Testament readers to adopt a keen awareness of its cultural context, and notably, the place of the Roman emperor in that context.⁸ Such advice is well taken and this paper will delve closely into the place of Caesar Octavian Augustus [reigned 27 BC to 14 AD] in Luke’s birth narrative.

“... *in the reign of Caesar Augustus*” So begins Luke’s narrative in 2:1. This is the first direct reference Luke makes to any Roman emperor, and he continues in 3:1 referencing Tiberius [reigned 14 AD to 37 AD], Claudius [41–54 AD] in Acts 11:28; 18:2 and perhaps Nero in Acts 25:8,21,26. An un-trained eye might miss the significance of a cursory reference to Tiberius, but his mention holds considerable weight. Tiberius who ruled during the days of Jesus was hailed as “god” and “son of god Sebastos” [referring to his adoptive father, Caesar Augustus, the “revered one”].⁹ Luke uses very accurate terminology in describing various Roman authorities in Luke-Acts. These references reveal that Luke, more than any of the other Gospel writers, had a keen sensitivity to the political context in which he was writing.

Doubtless, Luke had seen the same coins as the shepherds with their imperial propaganda and even the words CAESAR DIVI F [=Caesar the son of (a) god] on the reverse. Likely he had seen coins with Germans, Armenians and Persians on bended knee showing obeisance to Augustus. Doubtless Luke was aware of the milestones, songs, poems, the epics, the statues, the temples, and the oaths of allegiance to Caesar Augustus, not to mention the other Caesars who had lived up to the time of writing his Gospel around 62 AD. He was aware that they referred to themselves as *Kúrios* [=Lord], *Eurgetēs* [=Benefactor], *Sōtēr*, [=Saviour] and that they had brought “good news” of “peace” for the “entire world.” He had heard the legend Romulus and Remus, supposed founders of Rome, who had been found by shepherds and were friends of shepherds. He had heard the tales of the signs or portents in nature and in the skies that foretold the birth of Augustus and the Golden Age that he would usher in.

As one steeped in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Testament Luke no doubt took Roman political propaganda, legends and the whole ancient cultural scene in stride. He knew that the “herald of good tidings” [LXX Gk *ho euangelizomenos*] of Isaiah 40 and 52 would announce “Your God reigns” and He is the truly victorious one, rather than Caesar. He took care to show in his letter that Christianity is a fulfillment of Davidic Messianic expectations attested in speeches by Simeon (Luke 2:29–32) and Peter (Acts 2:16–36). In a manner similar to other “ancient lives”, Luke shows the “ancient pedigree” of Jesus with words like, “beginning with Moses” (Luke 24:27) and that He is vested with full divine authority— similar but completely different from the myth of the divine

issues that he believes Luke is addressing. Also see Sean A. Adams in his *The Genre of Acts and Collected Biography* for a survey of current literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶ Richard A Burridge and Graham Gould *Jesus Now and Then* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2004), page 52 in response to the question, “Who is the Subject of the Gospels?”

⁷ For a very helpful table of comparisons and contrasts between Luke’s accounts of Jesus’ conception, birth and boyhood appearance at the temple, and those of Caesar Augustus, see p. 86 in Bradley S. Billings ‘At the age of 12: the Boy Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41–52), the Emperor Augustus, and the Social Setting of the Third Gospel’ *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 60 pt 1 (April 2009) p.70–89.

⁸ The full quote from Meggitt reads: “The Roman emperor was a central feature of the cultural context of the first century and must be taken consistently into account in exegesis of the New Testament”. From his ‘Taking the Emperor’s Clothes Seriously: New Testament and the Roman Emperor’ in *The Quest for Wisdom: Essays in Honour of Philip Budd*, ed. Christine E. Joynes (Cambridge: Orchard Academic, 2002) p.143–68.

⁹ Robert L. Mowery ‘Son of God in Roman Imperial Titles and Matthew’ *Biblica* no 83 (2002) p.102. Mowery notes that the Greek phrase “son of god” was applied to Tiberius, Nero, Titus, and Domitian (p. 104).

origins of the Caesars— and that all the events of His life are the result of the “definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (cf. Acts 2 :22-23).

Michael Peppard has a term for some of Luke’s references. He calls them “colonial mimicry”. Using the example of the dove at Jesus’ baptism in Mark’s Gospel account, Peppard compares and contrasts it with the Roman imperial eagle. He asserts that the Gospel writers used alternate— yet subtle— symbols to pose a challenge to Rome that would not incite charges of subversion.¹⁰ The peaceful dove, in effect, mocks the rapacious and warlike eagle. Likewise, in Luke 2 heavenly choirs of angels is contrasted to earthly choirs of praise-singers hailing Caesar.

Luke 2 and the birth of Jesus

... *all the world*

Luke chronicles the political situation of his day in terms his readers would recognize as doing double duty. An authoritative proclamation or “decree” is announced by Caesar Augustus concerning taxation (2:1).¹¹ This decree affects “all [Gk *pas*] the world.” A few verses later an angel makes an authoritative declaration “for all [*pas*] the people” (v.10). Here we observe a back and forth resonance between the self-important Caesar who assumed he held power over all of humanity, including and extending beyond the Roman empire, and a Truly Divine Person and message that has actual universal scope. The Roman historian Suetonius had declared that there was an omen or prodigy that was produced “*before the eyes of all*” concerning the upward trajectory of Augustus. Simeon had already recognized that in Jesus was embodied a “salvation which [God has] prepared in the presence of *all peoples*, a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:30-31). Later, John the Baptist would declare that “*all flesh* would see the salvation of God.” (Luke 3:6). Finally after Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection, (Luke 24:47) his witnesses would receive power from the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) and preach His Gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins to believers and it would go to “*all nations*.”

Just as the coin demonstrated the victory of Augustus over all the world, so did monuments, biographies and even maps of the Roman empire. Here are a few brief statements:

To: “The Emperor, Caesar, son of god, the god Augustus, the overseer of every land and sea”.¹²

From the mausoleum of Augustus, an inscription called the *Res Gestae* begins, “the accomplishments of the deified Augustus by which he subjected the inhabited world under the empire of the Roman people”.¹³

Augustus was the patron of the poet Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19 B.C.) known as Virgil. Augustus commissioned him to compose a grand epic history of Rome, rivaling the Greek *Iliad*. Here Virgil’s *Aeneid* expresses in almost prophetic terms the coming of the messiah-like Augustus.

This way and see this people, your own Romans.
Here is Caesar, and all the line of Julius,
All who shall one day pass under the dome
Of the great sky: this is the man, this one,
Of whom so often you have heard the promise,
Caesar Augustus, son of the deified.
Who shall bring once again an Age of Gold
To Latium, to the land where Saturn reigned

¹⁰ Michael Peppard *The Son of God in the Roman World Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Peppard (p.120) notes that the eagle was the symbol of divine power for the Romans.

¹¹ Caesar issued a “dogma” which was the legal term for taking an imperial action with the Roman Senate’s consultation. See Thomas E. Phillips “Why Did Mary Wrap the Newborn Jesus in ‘Swaddling Clothes’? Luke 2.7 and 2.12 in the Context of Luke-Acts and First-Century Literature” (p. 40) in Loveday Alexander and Steve Walton *Reading Acts Today: Essays in Honour of Loveday C.A. Alexander* (London: T & T Clark, 2011). See Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom *The Roman Empire in Luke’s Narrative* (LNTS, 421; New York: T&T Clark International, 2010) p. 73 who calls this a “formal action by the Roman Senate”.

¹² From Craig A. Evans *Jesus and His Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Boston: Brill, 2001) p.55. Compare this with a statement about Nero who was said to be “Lord of the entire world”.

¹³ Gary Gilbert ‘The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 no 3 (Fall 2002) p.497-529, here p.515. Also see his ‘Roman Propaganda and Christian Identity in the Worldview of Luke-Acts’ p.233ff in Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele eds *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

In early times. He will extend his power
Beyond the Garamants and Indians,
Over far territories north and south
Of the zodiacal stars, the solar way,
Where Atlas, heaven-bearing, on his shoulder
Turns the night-sphere, studded with burning stars
(Aen. 6.788-97; tr. R. Fitzgerald)

The message from Rome was crystal clear: “We are the owners of the universe, extending as far as the stars.” Luke’s angels sing under the night sky when the stars are evident, and one cannot but wonder if Luke is not so subtly deflating the bubble of Roman hubris when he relates how Jesus addresses his God and Father as “Lord of heaven and earth” (Luke 10:21 cf. Acts 17:24).

... *good news of great joy*

In the Roman empire, news of great importance, formerly unknown, was announced, by using the word *euangelion*. This news might be a military victory, an upcoming wedding, and even the news of the accession to the throne of a new emperor.¹⁴ In a papyrus dated close to Jesus’ birth, a couple named Apollonios and Sarapias write to Dionysia with their greetings: “You filled us with joy when you announced the *good news* (Gk *euangelisamene*) of most noble Sarapion’s marriage.”¹⁵ Philo recounts that Jerusalem became a center of disseminating the news of Caligula’s ascension to the throne (c. 37 AD) and it was “from our city that rumour to carry *the good tidings* sped to the others”.¹⁶ We see joy connected with good news in the Christmas story, as well as its spread by the shepherds who glorified and praised God “for all that they had heard and seen” (v.20).

In the Hebrew Scriptures we find a linkage between news telling [Hebrew root *bsr*] and the Septuagint Greek translation rendered *euangelizomai* [=to proclaim news]. For instance, messengers are sent from the field of battle to proclaim [Heb. *bsr*] to King David the news [Heb. *bsrh*] of victory as well as the news of Absalom his son. It is recounted that the Cushite interpreted the bad news of Absalom’s death as “Good news [LXX *euaggelishēto*] for my lord the king” (2 Sam 18:19–31, here v.31).

Multiple commentators have observed that the “calendar inscription” found at Priene, near to Ephesus also uses this “good news” language. Just before the birth of Christ an official appeal was made to change the date of the new year to coincide with the birth of Caesar Augustus. One cannot help but observe the religiously charged language that even talks about the “appearing” of Augustus and how he would change the world order as a god, a savior, a benefactor and a bringer of peace and hope. Might Luke have had this in mind as he composed the Gospel?

In part the inscription reads:

It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: “Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings [Gk *euangelia*] for the world that came by reason of him,” which Asia resolved in Smyrna.¹⁷

It would appear that Luke and the other Gospel writers, in effect are saying that the Caesars had appropriated the word for Good News to themselves and the Gospel writers were taking it back. In

¹⁴ John P. Dickson ‘Gospel as News: *εὐαγγέλιον*-from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul’ *New Testament Studies* 52 no 2 (April 2005) p.212-230.

¹⁵ Erica A. Mathieson ‘The Language of the Gospels: Evidence from the Inscriptions and the Papyri’ in Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2010) p.69.

¹⁶ Dickson, p.215.

¹⁷ Craig Evans closely compares the language from the opening of Mark’s Gospel and that of the calendar inscription with a special emphasis on the “good news” of a divine agent. See Craig Evans ‘Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel’ *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000) p.67-81.

fact for Jesus to speak of the “good news of the kingdom” (Luke 16:16) is to imply that another empire is the true and legitimate one.

... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord

Already in Luke 1 Jesus is introduced in language that could be termed “subtly subversive”. In the context of an empire that called itself *Roma eterna* he was said to have a kingdom that would last forever (1:33).¹⁸ In an atmosphere where the Caesars deemed themselves to be great and sons of the gods, Jesus would be “great and son of the Most High (1:32) and “the Son of God” (v. 35).¹⁹

The Priene calendar inscription from 9 BC called Augustus “a savior” and a “god”. To the Graeco-Roman mind he was “the supreme lord” [Gk *kúrios*] who had re-arranged the created order and brought peace out of chaos.²⁰ It was him who had ushered in the new era.

With this in mind, the angel announcement continues this subversive tone. Just as the birth of Augustus was said to be ushered in by portents or omens in nature, the angel says “this will be the sign.” Whereas Augustus was going to “save” the Roman empire from war, and would be its benefactor, Jesus had the name “Yahweh saves” (1:31) and He would “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21) and thus bring supreme benefaction²¹. Jesus’ salvific efforts would reach the entire globe for all time.

Luke continued to build the titles for Jesus who in effect is one greater than even the Caesar himself. The title Saviour, coupled with “Christ” has such vibrant Messianic connotations that all the world would notice. The expectations of an anointed king, who was supreme lord (*Kúrios*) is powerful language for Jesus. Two-thirds of the LXX Greek Old Testament translates YHWH and Adonai as *Kúrios*. It is clear that Caesar’s status and prominence cannot even be compared to the true God-man.

As we observe a few descriptions of Caesar Augustus it is obvious that the angelic announcements could come across as clearly subversive:

“the ruler of the world [alt. master of the universe] is now born” mirrors what the astrologer Publius Nigidius cried out when the hour of Augustus’ birth was announced.²²

An inscription after 2 BC from Halicarnassus refers to Augustus as “Hereditary God and Savior of the common race of humanity... all mankind is filled with glad hope for the future...”²³

A decree from Cos opens with these words: “Since Emperor Caesar, son of god, god Sebastos has by his benefactions to all men outdone even the Olympian gods...”²⁴

An inscription beneath a statue of Augustus in Myra in Lycia reads: “The God Augustus, Son of God Caesar, *Autokrator* [Autocrat, i.e., absolute ruler] of land and sea, the *Evergetes* [Benefactor] and *Sōtēr* [Savior] of the whole cosmos, the people of Myra [have set up this statue]”²⁵

¹⁸ For a compilation of references to *Roma eterna* see Jason A. Whitlark “Here we do not have a city that remains”: a Figured Critique of Roman Imperial Propaganda in Hebrews 13:14’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131 no 1 (2012) p.161-179.

¹⁹ Note the “son of god” usage by the first documented priest of the imperial cult who lived between 5 and 3 BC: “high priest of the goddess Roma and of Emperor Caesar Augustus son of god” from Adela Yarbro Collins ‘Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Greeks and Romans’ *Harvard Theological Review*, 93 no 2 (April 2000) p. 85-100 here p.95.

²⁰ The term *sōtēr* was polyvalent and was applied to humans such as physicians, philosophers, Hellenistic rulers, the emperor, and gods such as Zeus, Asclepius, Castor and Pollux, and Isis and Serapis. The lines between helper god and emperor became rather blurred in the Roman empire.

²¹ TDNT observes that *sōtēr* also contains the idea of benefaction or “well-being”.

²² Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 94.

²³ Werner Foerster *Sōtēr TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Bromiley, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971) p.1003-11 referring to British Museum Inscriptions, 894. Cf. P. Wendland, *Die hellenistisch-romische Kultur* [HRK] (Handbuch zum N.T. 1.2) (1907) p.410, no. 9.

²⁴ S. R. F. Price *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p.55.

²⁵ Frederick C. Grant *Ancient Roman Religion. Edited with an Introduction* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957) p.175. Also E. Petersen and F. von Luschan *Reisen in Lykien, Mylias und Kibyratis* Vol. II (Vienne, 1889) p.43. Similarly, Nero was called “Savior of the World” [Gk *sosikosmos*].

The news of the angel in effect “turned the world upside down”. The good news message preached by the early apostles caused the authorities to charge them with having done just that (Acts 17:6-7). There was “another king, whose name was Jesus”.

Fast forward to July 180 when a tribunal in Carthage passed sentence on a Christian who was still honoring “another king”. The proconsul Saturnius ordered a Christian named Speratus of Scili in Numidia: “Swear by the *genius* of our lord the Emperor!” To which Speratus replied, “I know no *imperium* [=empire] of this world, ... I know my Lord, the King of kings, and Emperor of all nations”.²⁶ Needless to say, Speratus joined the martyr throng.

... *Glory to God in the highest*

In the Roman empire there was a guild of singers known as the *hymnodes*. An inscription from Pergamum (c. 41 AD) describes a festival in which they took part. The effect desired by the authorities was to “provide a public display of reverence and of pious consideration toward the imperial household”. Here, on the birthday of Tiberius Caesar, they were to “complete a great work to the glory of the assembly, making hymns to the imperial house and completing sacrifices ... leading festivals and hosting banquets”.²⁷ The point of their serenade was to give “glory to Caesar in the highest”. Although the exact contents of their songs is not known, a story by the Roman historian Suetonius [70-130 AD] in his *Lives of the Caesars* might provide some clues. Augustus was taking a holiday and had to sail by the gulf of Puteoli. What follows is a description which has some uncanny parallels to the multitude of angels singing praises to God in Luke 2:14:

... it happened that from an Alexandrian ship which had just arrived there, the passengers and crew, clad in white, crowned with garlands, and burning incense, lavished upon him good wishes and the highest praise, saying that it was through him they lived, through him that they sailed the seas, and through him that they enjoyed their liberty and their fortunes.²⁸

Whereas Suetonius in his “bio” of Augustus can call on a large number of humans to sing his “highest praises”, Luke the Gospel writer does one better in the “bio” of Jesus. He displays a heavenly multitude of angels, who are called a “heavenly host” or “heavenly army” [Gk *stratia*] to sing “Glory to God in the highest”. As Verlyn Verbrugge pointed out, there appears to be a purposefully delicious irony that the babe in the manger has as many as 12 legions of angels at his command (cf. Matthew 26:53-) who sing in effect, “Hail to the [Commander in] Chief.”²⁹ Just who is the true *Imperator* [a term given to victorious commanders and the Caesars] in this picture? These angels, like all of the angelic visitations in Luke, appear, as Steve Walton has noted, “at key moments to indicate that the other world is breaking into this one”.³⁰ This angelic visitation is already the third one, namely to Zechariah, 1:11; to Mary 1:26; to the shepherds 2:9. Did Luke have the celestial comet which appeared in the skies at the time of the funeral games of 44 BC in mind when he wrote this? We cannot be dogmatic, but that portent was interpreted as a sign that Augustus’ adoptive father Tiberius Caesar had achieved godhood, and by implication, so did Augustus. Yet the angels sing “Glory to God in the highest” and the prophecy of Isaiah said, “unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder ... Mighty God ... Everlasting Father ... and the Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).³¹

²⁶ Adolph Deissmann *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: Harper & Row, 1922) p.344-54. The word *genius* according to Peppard (p. 113) suggests “an unseen spiritual power, often personified as an object of worship, which unifies the members of a family (*gens*)”.

²⁷ Steven J. Friesen *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) p.105.

²⁸ Suetonius *Divus Augustus* 98:2.

²⁹ Verlyn D. Verbrugge “The Heavenly Army on the Fields of Bethlehem (Luke 2:13-14)” *Calvin Theological Journal* 43 no 2 (November 2008) p.301-311. It is noteworthy as well that Nehemiah 9:6 refers to “the host of heaven” [LXX *stratia*] that worships YHWH who is God alone and who preserves all things. David tells Goliath that he came in the name of “Yahweh of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel” (1 Sam 17:45).

³⁰ Steve Walton “Where Does the Beginning of Acts End?” in *The Unity of Luke-Acts* ed. Jozef Verheyden (BETL 142; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999) p.456, as cited by Ransom, p.97.

³¹ Could the prophecy of Isaiah have anticipated that the Roman emperors would call themselves “the father of the fatherland?”

... *and on earth peace*

With bitter sarcasm, Calgacus, the chieftain of the Caldonian confederacy observed the actions of the Roman army in his native northern Britain (c. 83-84 AD):

To plunder, butcher, steal, these things they misname empire: they make a desolation and they call it peace.³²

The peace that Calgacus referred to was the famous “Pax Romana” or the peace that the Roman Empire had brought. He, like the Christians in Rome at the time of Luke’s writing the Gospel, would say that such a peace was very much in the eye of the beholder.

Around AD 62 when the Gospel was written, Nero had come on the scene [he ruled from 54 to 68 AD] and in spite of his title *agathō theō* [=the good god] he was anything but that.³³

Even at the time of Jesus, not all was peace and love in the empire, contrary to the Priene inscription which announced that the purpose of the coming of Augustus was “that he might end war and arrange all things.” The art of crucifixion was being perfected and innocent baby boys in Judea were slaughtered without consequence by the Roman puppet-king Herod (Matthew 2:16-18) and heavy taxes were imposed on subjugated states with the likes of Matthew the tax-collector being co-opted to work for the Romans. Logically it follows, as Geraldo Zampaglione noted, that “almost all the Roman writers agreed that spreading peace ... meant subjecting other peoples to Roman domination.”³⁴ Likely he is thinking of Virgil who said “You O Roman, remember to rule the nations with might. This will be your genius – to impose the way of peace, to spare the conquered and crush the proud”.³⁵

It is in this context that the heavenly army sings “and on earth peace among those with whom he [God] is pleased!” Whereas the so-called Roman peace extended throughout the empire via brute power, these angels sing of a completely different world-wide peace. Obviously they are proclaiming that the Messianic Prince of Peace has arrived and has instituted a new Golden Era where humans can experience an integrated sense of well-being [=the Hebrew word “shalom” from which New Testament peace mostly derives its definition] due to right relationship with God and then with neighbour.

Summary observations concerning the true Son of God

One can sing well-known Christmas carols while being somewhat oblivious to the historical context in which they occurred. The idea of somewhat brutish shepherds being serenaded by harp playing angels and then coming to a cattle trough to see a helpless babe, for all their nice sentimentality, somehow fails to impress on us the highly subversive, yet so subtle message of Luke. Jesus who has a truly divine commission as the Son of God– as opposed to the Caesars with their own imaginative divine commission as *divi filius* [son of god/son of a divinized man]– comes in weakness and in ignominy to institute the one and only Golden Age, where he himself can say:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me
to bring good news [Gk *euangelisasthai*] to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn
(Luke 4:18-19)

³² Translation by William Peterson of the Roman historian, Tacitus *Agricola* 30:4-5.

³³ Brian J. Incigneri *The Gospel to the Romans The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark’s Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) p.169.

³⁴ Geraldo Zampaglione *The Idea of Peace in Antiquity*. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973) p.135, as cited by Warren Carter in *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity, 2001) p.55.

³⁵ Virgil *Aeneid* 6.850-53.

As such, Jesus acts and lives as the true Son of God. He is the one who has all the power of God at his disposal to actually set people free. Luke also uses the genealogy of Jesus to make absolutely clear that while Jesus is fully human and as such a son of Adam, He is also “the son of God” (Luke 3:38). Demons, the devil, angels, religious authorities and even Paul, the former terrorizer of Christians, all refer to him as the Son of God (1:35; 4:3; 4:41; 8:28; 22:70; Acts 9:20).³⁶ Jesus does acts that only God could do, and receives worship as only God could receive. Recall, that the question that Luke-Acts might we have been addressing was, “How can we know for certain— or have a rock-solid certainty [Gk *aspháleia*] that the Son of God is who he says he is?” This question was of vital importance in the context of the empire which daily tried to impress on its subjects that all of the exploits of the Caesars were the result of divine approval. Now One has become incarnate in human history who has the true and only divine approval.

“Jesus Akbar” as good news for Muslims

Just as the narrative of Luke 2 challenged the Priene inscription that attributed a type of “saviourhood” to Caesar Augustus, the same narrative still challenges other claims to “saviourhood”. Another writing was composed in the 13th century and like the Priene inscription its author desires to portray the greatness and “saviourhood” of its subject. Its title even has a Christmasy feel to it, with stars, worship, and adoration. To whom was “The Glittering Galaxy of Stars in Praise of the Best of God’s Creatures” dedicated? Not to Jesus, but to Muhammad. Also known as the poem of the mantle, or the ‘El Burda’ has been described as the most celebrated poem ever composed in Arabic. It was put into an easily memorable rhyming pattern, and Samuel Zwemer observed that it functions as the Coronation Hymn of Muslims.³⁷ In a fashion it functions as a direct competitor to the birth narrative of Jesus, and in fact even mentions Christians by name.

Just as Luke set out to place Jesus as the True Caesar, Sharif ud Din Mohammad el Busiri, (d. 1294 AD) set out to usurp the throne of Jesus with the person of Muhammad. Thus, about half-way through the poem, after extolling the exploits of Muhammad, he suggests:

Set aside what the Nazarenes [Ar. al-nasara or Christians] have claimed for their prophet, and give praise as you would ...

Attribute to his person [i.e. Muhammad] as you would of nobility, and to his standing as you would of greatness [or vastness]

Earlier in the poem the birth of Muhammad is described as,

His birth made manifest the sweet-smelling goodness of his substance. How fragrant was the commencement thereof, and the conclusion

Busiri with all of the imagination of Arabic poetry and Sufi devotion continues in echoes that rival the angel’s song:

Vainly would men strive to comprehend The excellence of his mental endowments! Just as when seen from far of day’s bright orb The enormous magnitude is not apparent, But dazzles and confounds the vision Of him who near beholds it. ... Prince of both of God’s great worlds, That of men and that of genii. Sovereign likewise is he of the two races, Arabians and Barbarians ... He is our prophet, who to us prescribeth What we shall do and what we shall avoid ... Vast as the sea is his generosity, His designs are as large and long as time. ... O thou most excellent of all created beings!

He would have his readers believe that Muhammad was the embodiment of “good news for all people”³⁸ and that he would have some kind of “everlasting kingdom.” Near to the close of the poem,

³⁶ Robert L. Mowery ‘Son of God in Roman Imperial Titles and Matthew’ *Biblica* 83 (2002) p.100-110. He notes that precisely the term “divi filius” referred to “son of a divinized man” (p.101) but in Greek it was easily rendered “son of a god”.

³⁷ Samuel Marinus Zwemer *Islam, a Challenge to Faith: Studies on the Mohammedan Religion and the Needs and Opportunities of the Mohammedan World from the Standpoint of Christian Missions* (New York: Laymen’s Missionary Movement, 1907) p.50-51. The full text of the poem can be found in English translation by J.W. Redhouse, Al-Busiri, Sharaf al-Din. ‘The “Burda”: El-Busiri’s Poem of the Mantle’ in *Arabian Poetry for English Reader* edited by W. A. Clouston (Glasgow: Privately printed, 1881) p.321-341.

³⁸ The Qur’an suggests that it is “a guidance and a mercy and a good tiding [Ar. *b-s-r* root] for all those who submit themselves to God” (Q 16:89), and Muhammad himself was reported to have said that he embodied “[the answer to] the

he appeals to the “saviourhood” of Muhammad as someone who will intercede for him at the judgment. In his words:

To whom but thee can I flee for refuge In that moment so terrible to every mortal? O Apostle of God,
thy glory will not be tarnished By whatsoever aid thou mayest vouchsafe to me In that tremendous day
wherein the Mighty Himself shall be manifest as the Avenger.

Millions of Muslims have recited al Busiri’s words in expectation of healing, miracles, and the favour of Allah. Just as the Romans placed their hopes in the quasi-divinity of Caesar Augustus, so many Muslims place their hopes in the human being they call the “most excellent of all created beings.” It is a great tragedy that both the Romans and Muslims have overlooked the True Prince of Peace who can actually assure right relationship with a Holy God. Both Caesar Augustus and Muhammad, for all their claims of being the greatest, and ruling for eternity, died the death of all mortal humans. Only Jesus lives and reigns forever.

Conclusion

As early as the confrontation of Moses and Pharaoh, the essential question raised was, “Which God is the greatest?” Pharaoh as the embodiment of the Egyptian gods, was roundly defeated. Caesar Augustus positioned himself as a god greater than all the gods, and the birth narrative of Jesus, as well as his subsequent life, death, resurrection and ascension made the claims of Caesar, look like a mouse threatening an elephant. Busiri’s poem, whose artistry encapsulates Islamic doctrine thoroughly, would try to affirm the idea of *Allahu Akbar* with the spokesman and authorized representative of this deity being Muhammad. As much as he said that “the superiority of the Apostle of God hath no limit” in actual fact, Jesus as the God man, worshipped by angelic armies is the only one who deserves the title of “Jesus Akbar”. To him we bow our knee. Long live King Jesus.

prayer of my father Abraham, the good news [Ar. *b-s-r* root] of Jesus to his people, and the dream of my mother”. Cited by Jane McAuliffe ‘The Prediction and Prefiguration of Muhammad’ in John C. Reeves *Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (Leiden: Brill, 2004) p.114–115.

GOSPEL MESSAGES FOR MUSLIMS : THE TWO ADAMS AND JESUS THE PURIFIER

Colin Bearup

What exactly do we need to get across to Muslims to draw them into discipleship? It is my contention that it is possible to present a simple and authentic message that communicates. Many of our approaches reflect the richness of Biblical theology in a way which conflicts with the Muslims' worldview at almost every point. This does not reflect the examples of Gospel proclamation given by the scriptures themselves. In this article I review some basic principles and then apply them with examples developed through work in the field. It is about connecting with ordinary people, not engaging with their theologians, recognising their need before God as they experience it and presenting Christ accordingly, working with the mindset not against it. This paper is a sequel to 'How Effective are Chronological Approaches?' October 2012.¹

If we were to ask Western Christian workers what were the essentials of the message they wanted to get across to Muslims, they would typically mention a range of things such as the deity of Christ, the death of Christ on the cross, the necessity of blood, the importance of sacrifice, the trustworthiness of the Bible, free forgiveness, Christ being the only way, the love of God, along with other important themes.

Dr Colin Edwards², speaking in the Friendship First DVD course³, talks about the research he did among believers of Muslims background (BMBs) in South Asia. He asked them about their understanding of salvation in Christ. He found that the majority talked about being joined to Christ in his death and resurrection. This is a major theme in the epistles of Paul but not something on which Western workers typically focus. Edwards reported that very few of the BMBs he spoke to talked of the death of Christ without reference to the resurrection and ascension and very few used courtroom imagery. He went on to talk about the awareness people had of their need to be clean before God and the stories of Jesus that demonstrated that even his spittle had saving power.

The contrast between our typical message priorities and their understanding of the Gospel gives pause for thought. We are all talking about genuine threads of the Gospel fabric, but our thread selection is quite different.

With this in mind, it is instructive to examine the Acts of the Apostles. Unlike the Epistles, Acts gives us a record of the Good News being announced to people who were not believers. If we read through Acts examining the messages intended for making converts what do we find? What do we find if we seek to tease out the material that is new to the listeners that required a response? Broadly speaking, the messages recorded or summarised in Acts are addressed to people who fall into three groups: 1. Jews in Jerusalem; 2. synagogue participants away from Jerusalem (both Jews and Gentiles); 3. Gentiles with no knowledge of scripture. The content of the message varied accordingly. In Jerusalem the fact that Jesus had been crucified was taken as known, in synagogues away from Jerusalem this was part of the new information. Groups 1 and 2 were frequently reminded of what they already knew— scripture, history and the promises of God. The few messages we have addressed to uninitiated Gentiles always started at a different point and expressed the required response in different terms too.

It is important to draw the correct inferences. It is not that we should slavishly copy what we find in these scriptural examples, rather the example of scripture encourages to adapt the presentation of the message to the audience, specifically to what they already know. We can also note that only one of the 16 messages in Acts proclaims Jesus as Son of God and that was to a Jewish audience (Acts 9:21-22). In all likelihood, this example is using Son of God primarily as messianic title rather than a statement of divinity as indeed was reflected in Caiaphas's challenge in Matthew 26:63. Many other messages— to Jews— identify Jesus as the Christ without addressing questions of his nature. As Christ he brings salvation, the fulfilment of God's promises, good news enough to require a response. It is also interesting to note that not one of the messages in Acts attempt to

¹ Colin Bearup 'How Effective are Chronological Approaches?' *St Francis Magazine* 8 no 5 (October 2012) p.593-598.

² Colin Edwards of Interserve and Redcliffe College, England.

³ Friendship First, 2011, Steve Bell & Tim Green, Interserve, UK.

explain the theology of the cross. This is not to say that expounding atonement theology is never appropriate in initial Gospel proclamation, but it does indicate that it cannot be seen as mandatory. The Apostles didn't do it.

Such a survey of Acts should prompt us to re-evaluate what we regard as essential in our initial Gospel message. Is our selection based simply on our background and the habits of our sub-culture or is it based on what is going to be most helpful to our listeners? The Gospel is deep and rich. We have much material to draw on. The goal of a Gospel message is to persuade people to begin a process of learning and believing, or in other words to become disciples. It need not, it cannot, cover all the riches of Gospel teaching.

One of the striking things about examining the accounts in Acts is the high proportion of each message given over to reminding the listeners of what they already know and linking it together. The various chronological approaches so popular these days are premised on the need to address ignorance, to tell unsaved about the background that they do not know so that they will be sufficiently instructed that they are finally able to understand the Gospel message (*our* Gospel message?) and respond to it. While it may be legitimate and effective, it contrasts with the approach we see in Acts.

Is it really the case that Muslims know nothing that we can draw on? To oversimplify for a moment, the Gospel message is about God's solution to Man's need. What is man's need? The scriptures gives us a variety of expressions : human beings are sinful, guilty, lost, dying/dead, in darkness, deceived, under evil, unclean, separated, under wrath and so on. Each of these expressions carries its own emotive resonances and associations. How does God bring a solution in Jesus? Again we have many expressions to draw on. He is saviour, Lord, redeemer, deliverer, shepherd, sacrifice, mediator, the way, the key holder, the giver life and so on. We may have our own default selection from this library of themes, but the question is which of these terms best expresses human need to our listeners and which descriptions of Jesus communicate with credibility?

Here are the outlines of two brief Gospel presentations that seek to apply this thinking. They were both developed with African Muslims in mind.

The First Adam and the Second

We all know the first Adam, do you know about the second?

God created our father Adam and made him a perfect man. God put him in an ideal place. Adam heard the words of God with his own ears— Glory to God.

But Satan was stronger than our father Adam and Satan deceived him and Adam went wrong. Because of that he fell and in the end he died.

And the descendants of Adam became like him. They also did wrong and it was easy for Satan to deceive them and ruin them. And they die.

God sent them prophets to give them words of truth but the children of Adam like Adam were not strong and they could not follow the truth as they should and it was easy for Satan to deceive them and ruin them.

God gave rules, laws and commandments, but the children of Adam are no stronger than their ancestor and Satan easily leads them astray.

And so God sent the second Adam. His birth was different from that of the children of Adam. He had no human father. And he was strong and did no wrong. Satan was not able to deceive him.

The second Adam defeated the Devil and drove demons from people. He healed the sick and encouraged the poor and his name is Isa al-Masīh, Glory to God.

We are all children of Adam by our birth and so we inherit his weakness. We can become brothers of the second Adam by faith and he shares his strength with us. He offers us new life.

God sent Jesus Christ to save us from Satan's power. The Second Adam is alive.

Believe in him and follow his way.

This approach echoes Paul's teaching about Christ and Adam in Romans 5:15-17 and I Corinthians 15:21-22 & 45-49. It describes the Fall in terms that Muslims will recognise. Rather than correcting what is lacking in the Islamic account of the fall it draws out its implications⁴. Indirectly, it challenges the standard Islamic message of salvation through obedience by pointing to

⁴ This approach is also advocated by E M Hicham *How Shall They Hear?* (Greenville, S.C. : Ambassador Press, 2009) chapter 11 p.99-100

human experience. It presents Christ as “like Adam” (an expression used in Islam but with different connotations) as being powerful and alive. It draws on the familiar to put together a new unfamiliar message (“news”) with immediate relevance. The terminology is so familiar that Muslims have been known to have worked out that we are talking about Jesus before his name is used.

The theme of this paper is developing approaches that connect with the intended audience. In the culture for which the Adams message was intended, it is accepted that the devil is strong and man at a disadvantage. A colleague with experience in Turkey commented that Turks tend to assert that man is stronger than the devil, that temptation can be resisted and that the individual is therefore responsible. It is to be anticipated that any approach be limited in its applicability. In Africa, unlike every other part of the Muslims world, Adam is a very popular boy’s name. An Adam-based message is all the more appropriate.

The second presentation is about *tahārah*, ritual purity or cleanness without which one’s worship is not accepted. Although only the text is given here in this article, it has been developed into an illustrated paper tract and put into an MP4 for phones.⁵

Al-salām alaykum.

How can God accept someone who is not clean? Being clean before God is vital.

A man with leprosy came to the Lord Jesus. At that time, a person with leprosy was considered unclean. He could never enter the place of prayer. He knelt before Jesus and said: “Heal me so I will be clean”.

And Jesus touched him and immediately the man became clean. Glory to God.

There was a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She said to herself: “If I touch the clothes of Jesus, I will be well and become clean”. She approached him and touched the hem of his garment.

Jesus turned and saw her. He said: “My daughter, take heart. Your faith in me has saved you”. Right then she was completely healed and became clean. Glory to God.

Even if a person’s body is healthy he is not pure if his heart is unclean. Christ said: “What comes from inside a man, from his heart, that is what makes him unclean”.

For from inside a person, from his heart, come bad thoughts, wicked desires, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deception, corruption, evil eye, slander, pride and folly.

Can a man wash his own heart clean? No he can’t.

But Christ is able to purify the heart of the person who believes in him, Glory to God.

Jesus Christ is alive and active. He does what no other can.

While most Muslims do not wrestle with sinfulness, uncleanness is a constant preoccupation. This approach takes the felt-need of being clean seriously. It identifies two examples of physical impurity which generally resonate, leprosy and blood, and draws on something that Muslims know, namely that Jesus healed. It also draws on what they have not thought about, namely that Jesus not only healed but made clean with his touch. This approach also adds the teaching of Jesus concerning the true nature of uncleanness as being sin proceeding from the heart. However, rather than unpacking atonement theology it simply affirms that faith in Christ brings inner cleanness. Hopefully this is enough to encourage serious enquiry and the beginning of learning.

In addition, this tract intentionally gives both a male and a female example. Incidentally, doing so follows the example of Jesus in Mat 13:31-33 and Luke 15:1-10. Ritual uncleanness is a big issue in the life of Muslim women. The direction the story takes may well surprise many Muslims women and impart hope. And that hope points them to Christ the living saviour.

It is not the intention of this article to simply posit new presentations to replace old ones. Rather it is a call engage seriously with Muslims as they are and as they have been taught to think and then to re-examine the vast resources we have in the Gospel. The time is surely past for seeking ever more ingenious ways to make our preferred simplification of the Good News comprehensible and credible to those with a radically different mindset.

⁵ The English language edition can be found at <http://youtu.be/twfbmB4DwVY>

BOOK REVIEW

Reza Aslan *No god but God* (Random House, 2011) 292p.

Reviewed by Chris Mauger M.Div, MA.

As a religious person, the title *No god but God* grabbed my attention as soon as I heard about the book. The author, Dr. Reza Aslan was born in Iran and currently lives in Los Angeles, California where he works as a professor. What makes him somewhat famous is that he is married to a Christian woman while remaining a Muslim. According to him, they are raising their children in both faiths.

Aslan did not waste any time making his opinions known so neither will I. The book's introduction included a slam on Samuel Huntington's fine work, *The Clash of Civilizations* and that literal interpretation of both the Holy Bible and the Qur'an are irrelevant. According to Aslan the real issue at hand is not a clash of civilizations but a clash of monotheisms. Actually, neither phrase is completely accurate but the respective authors both have a valid point. The best way to define or title the issue is, "The ways of sinful man as he put his own personal desires above the desires of Almighty God". As for the second issue the reader is told that meaning, not the validity of the event itself, is the most important part of religious writing. Aslan referenced Hazrat Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and also the source of the Qur'an. First, if Lazarus did not actually come back to life how could a reader of the Holy Bible know that Jesus was all powerful and that other miracles happened as was written? Aslan claims it is irrelevant to ask (or believe) whether or not the word of God indeed poured through the lips of Muhammad. This is the first Muslim I have ever heard that questioned the validity of the Qur'an. By making this statement, "only the meaning matters" the author is repeating the God-less mantra, "There are no absolutes." This is his foundation to start a book about God.

Chapter 1 begins at the Ka'ba and does a thorough job explaining the political and religious situation in Arabia prior to the time of Islam. It was interesting to me that at one time there were 360 idols housed inside the Ka'ba. Although the book did not bring out this point, that is one for each day of the lunar year. Aslan seemed to be very fair by stating that the historical record mentions the Ka'ba as a mud and stone building in the year 600 CE but that there are only legends that date it back to the time of Adam. However, because I believe Moses wrote a literal account of Adam and the Garden of Eden in Genesis, I have to question why he thinks that these are legends. The Garden of Eden was located somewhere near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Simply put, the locations are very far apart and it is highly unlikely that a mud building remained intact for that many years. The reader is told that Noah re-built the structure of the Ka'ba after the Flood but once again it seems very unlikely that he would have traveled from modern day Turkey to Mecca, a distance of 3000 kilometers. There is a much better chance that tribes local to the area built and maintained the structure, and that it was not visited by anyone who lived thousands of years prior to its first written reference.

Aslan, in accordance to the Qur'an, was very open to the idea the Mohammed was not perfect from his birth. Muhammad participated in idol worship prior to the revelations he received in the cave. The reader is told that Muhammad's original message was an attempt to reform the existing religious beliefs and cultural practices of pre-Islamic Arabia so as to bring the God of the Jews and Christians to the Arab peoples. However, I do not know how this statement could be true because he did not follow either the Christian or the Jewish religions. Although he probably had interaction with people from both groups during his work as a trader, his main desire was to receive their acknowledgement that he was a prophet. When they did not grant this desire, his attitude toward Jewish people changed very dramatically (and negatively). This truth is evident by comparing what is said about Jewish people in the early sections of the Qur'an and what is said in the latter sections.

Chapter 2 documented Muhammad's life from young childhood until he left Mecca as a new leader and moved to Medina. It is well known that he first worked on and then later was in charge of caravans, trading goods in the region. Eventually he married his boss who became very influential and supportive after he received revelations in the cave. According to the story, the revelations came in painful and violent manners. This is very interesting because one of the attributes of God is that He is merciful. Another, if you take the Holy Bible literally, is that He is loving. Actually, the 99

beautiful names nor the Holy Bible give the impression that God is violent. After receiving the first revelation Muhammad was afraid and sought out his wife for comfort. It took many years for the second revelation to come. The initial revelations focused on what type of god Allah is, and the later ones focus on reforming the local society. It seems to me the second of these topics is covered in much greater detail and is very specific to the local context of Arabia.

After Muhammad began to share what was revealed to him, local people were silent up to the point that he began to attack their religious-economic system. These people were more interested in their livelihood and less interested in hearing anything that might require a change. Every year people came to the Ka'ba to worship their idols and naturally the local tribes profited on the event. As soon as someone said both the idol worship and the unfair business practices were wrong, local people became upset. First they boycotted Muhammad, his clan, and his followers. As a result, those who believed in Muhammad stealthily moved to Yathrib (Medina) which was an oasis settlement.

When Muhammad finally arrived to the new place he immediately found success as an arbiter between the two main Arab tribes who lived in that area. He also had an opportunity to implement the reforms he was preaching in Mecca. The author does not go into great detail about the rest of Muhammad's life but does mention his peaceful return to Mecca several years later. I am not sure why the author did not answer the big question which is rarely addressed. The question is: "What caused the change of mind and heart in the people of Mecca?" He fled almost certain death but there are no records of warriors going out to searching for him. Then several years later, Muhammad entered Mecca as a hero and welcomed leader. As a self-proclaimed research scholar, I would have liked Aslan to address this topic. And this is one of the problems of the book. Dr. Aslan either ignores or is very vague about key points in Muhammad's history which are controversial. It is a fact that Ali laid in his bed in Mecca just in case an attack would come at night. This is a very valiant act by Ali but raises questions about the valor of Muhammad. An example of the author being vague is on the issue of what happened to the Jewish tribes who lived in Medina. Originally they were very rich from the cultivation of dates and other trades. However through "competition over limited resources" the local Arabs seemed to have gained the upper hand. I have an idea from reading other books what this phrase really means but Dr. Aslan apparently does not think it is an important issue.

Chapter four is about Jihad. According to Aslan, "Until the day he died, Muhammad continued to engage in peaceful discourse— not theological debate with the Jewish communities of Arabia" (p. 102). However he was personally involved in eight major battles and led in the planning of 38 other battles. If both statements are true, then it must have been difficult for any Jew to take him seriously when he mentioned he wanted to live in peace. Another very interesting story mentioned in this chapter goes back to when Muhammad was cleaning out the Ka'ba. As mentioned before, there were 360 idols housed inside of it. As the story goes, at this one event he brought out each of the idols and smashed them on the ground until he reached a statue of Jesus and his mother. This image the Prophet put his hands over reverently, saying, "Washout all except what is beneath my hands" (p. 107). The only time I have ever heard this story before was from a course called 'Loving Muslim Neighbors' and that author took his story from this very book. Dr. Aslan does not provide a source for this event. As a disciple of Jesus and one who tries to live within the boundaries of the Ten Commandments, I have to question why Muhammad saved what appeared to be an idol. Even if Muhammad did not know the Ten Commandments, his key message was for people to get rid of idols and worship God alone.

After the Prophet's death, there was little consensus for who the next leader of Islam should be. Another conflict centered on what type of leader should follow Muhammad. Was the person only a political leader? Or was there spiritual authority and responsibility that came with the position? Many believed Ali was ideal to be the next leader, but he did not get his turn until three others came before him. 'Uthman was the third Caliph (the Arabic word for *successor*) and caused the most controversy. To the positive he was able to many lands but to the negative he gave money and positions to his family while disregarded the religious tradition. To make matters worse he took on the title "Khalifat Allah" or "Caliph of God" which means successor to God. The other major thing he did which made many angry was to recall all the copies of the Qur'an, burn them, and have his own canonized version written down. The reason he did this was because there were many variations in print which did not agree with each other. However, each group thought their particular version was the correct one and fair-minded scholars were not a part of the process when

the new Qur'an was made. Although this event is a historical fact, Muslims do not see it as something that weakens the Qur'an's authority. I see it a big problem because today's reader has the access to Uthman's version (called the Uthmanic recension) and not Muhammad's version. Added to this fact, Uthman was not a devout man, regardless of the title he gave himself.

In contrast, the Holy Bible was written by prophets and apostles through the inspiration of Creator God. Once it was written, God, through man, protected His written Word. One of the ways He protected it was by preserving countless partial and complete manuscripts from time periods very close to the original writing. For example, I was not alive when India received independence but if I were to write a book that said India received her independence from France in 1920, I would be mocked and my book would never get printed. Why? Because eye witnesses are still alive today and every history book agrees on the fact that it was England not France and the year was 1948, not 1920. The same is true with the Holy Bible. The oldest copies available today are from a period only one or two generations after the events actually happened. The version of the Holy Bible that is available today is compared to those manuscripts to make sure it agrees with what was originally written. I do not believe Aslan intended to expose a flaw in the Qur'an's origin but when he stated that only the meaning is important and then documented the work of Khalifat Uthman, he did just that.

Chapter 6 starts out with a very interesting and thought-provoking question: is the Qur'an created by God, or is it increate and coeternal with God? Aslan did not give a clear answer to this question within the chapter, but he did make several other interesting points. He also, without trying to, brought out an interesting and helpful comparison between Islam and Christianity. Islam does not believe in a trinity, however the author basically said that Allah and God are on one level and the Qur'an and Jesus are on the next level. There is not a Holy Spirit in Islam but some would say that the Angel Jibril (Gabriel) fulfilled that role when he delivered the revelations to Muhammad and also told Mary that she was going to give birth to Jesus. At the end of the chapter Aslan makes another confusing statement. "During the twenty-two years of Mohammad's ministry, the Quran was in an almost constant state of flux, sometimes altering dramatically depending on where and when a verse was revealed, whether in Mecca or Medina, whether at the beginning or the end of Mohammad's life ... while God may not change, the Revelation most certainly did, and without apology" (p. 170). If we agree that God does not change, than how can His revelation change to the point that the theme is no longer consistent? Perhaps my question is better stated, "Does the Qur'an or Islamic history present a picture of a consistent God?" Muslims say that God does not change but Aslan seems to tell a different story.

Chapter 7 focuses on the Battle of Karbala, the beliefs of the Shi'ite and a history of Iran. The chapter is very good and informational for anyone who is interested in these specific topics. Chapter 8 does an equally good job with the Sufi branch of Islam.

Chapter 9 focuses on India's first war of independence against the British in 1857. Because I was a long time resident of India and have read a good deal on the topic of the country's history, I noticed several discrepancies in Aslan's account. Fortunately, none are large enough to worry about. I will mention that both sides, the Indians while they had a brief turn at power, and the British when they regained power were equally brutal. Aslan was only willing to record the British brutality. He finished this chapter highlighting Aligarh Muslim University which was/is an attempt to mix the better parts of Western educational with the traditions of Islam. In Aslan's opinion the attempt did not and could never succeed, however the school is still active and a vital part of Indian society.

Chapter 10 was a wonderful history of Iran and Iraq, even up to the present period. The quote that caught my eye was,

There are those in the West who argue that such a democratic system is impossible, that Islam is inherently opposed to democracy and that Muslim peoples are incapable of reconciling democratic and Islamic values. Such a view not only contradicts Islamic history (not to mention observable reality), it flies in the face of countless surveys that reveal overwhelming majorities throughout the Islamic World pinning for democracy as the "best form of government" (p 261).

Although democracy is a common term, it is defined in many different ways. Democracy, just like any other political system, takes on the culture of the country. Therefore, democracy in the Middle East would probably not look like democracy in the West. In addition, the human spirit is restless which means people fight for what they want until they get it. Then they fight to get rid of it. The other admission in this chapter that I thought was worth noting was when the author said, "God

may be one, but Islam is most definitely not" (p 272). This is very true. Islam takes on the culture of nation. I personally talked to a Muslim man from India who said, "God is one" and "God is in the trees and the rocks and in everyone". The second part of his comment is exactly what a Hindu would say. Of course someone from another country can declare this man wrong but before that happens, that person might want to make sure culture has not become a part of their religion also. There are American Muslims who were drawn to the religion simply because their heritage is not European. And they maintain their belief structure based on race. He finishes this chapter by saying that the West is only a bystander in a conflict that is between various sects of Islam and the true rivalry is all about who will be writing the next chapter in Islamic history. I believe it was Huntington's book *Clash of Civilizations* that also stated that the West shamed several Islamic countries by getting involved in conflicts that should have been handled locally. And by doing this, became (or re-enforced) the enemy of specific nations. I am sure that Westerners do not want to be called a bystander and in many ways this term is wrong. The West is involved in nationalistic Islamic affairs, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worst.

The final chapter recounts the history of Egypt and highlights the effect of electronic media. In the past, people listened to and followed their local religious leaders. But now, Aslan rightly states, there is a reformation happening within Islam and it is a result of mass communication. Through TV and the internet every variation of Islam is available around the world. For better or worse, people are connecting to the version they like the most and bypassing both tradition and local teachings. According to the author this reformation has positives and negative built into it. Aslan finishes the book by making some comparisons between Osama bin Laden and Martin Luther. If you want to know what they are, you will have to read the book.

As a history book, *No god by God* is a good read. I do not agree with everything in the book but that is not a requirement for me and I hope it is not for you either. However, I am disappointed with the title of the book because it does not fit the content. The term *Allah Akbar* (God is the Greatest) was never even mentioned. The 99 beautiful names were never mentioned. Passages from the Qur'an or the Holy Bible are absent. Actually, except for the historical account of Muhammad at the Ka'aba, God was not mentioned in the book. And in that section, Muhammad was the subject, not God. Added to this, there were no stories about a people's remarkable faith or the providence of God within history. Instead, the book read as a secular history book with its roots in a religious leader.

If you want to read a book about God, I suggest J.I. Packer's book, *Knowing God* or John Ortberg's book, *Love Beyond Reason*. Both are life-changing books about our Creator and Sustainer.