

Negative Considerations

An examination of the Christian scriptures from an Islamic point of view has, as a side issue, thrown grave doubts on the Biblical roots of such Christian doctrines as the Trinity, the deity of Jesus, and his death on the cross as an atoning, vicarious sacrifice for sin. At this point I shall try to do the same for Islam.

Are there portions of the Bible which conflict with the teachings and practices of Islam?

It is clear by now that the basic teachings of Islam can be justified on the basis of the Bible as easily as the doctrines of Christianity, perhaps more easily and convincingly. But there may be Biblical texts which conflict with the texts we have examined and thus with Islam as well. Furthermore, there may be Biblical practices which are unknown to Islam. Finally, there may be Islamic practices we have not mentioned which conflict with the Bible. Let us take up these three subjects in order.

The foremost body of texts causing problems for the Muslim reader are those referring to the crucifixion of Jesus. Islam denies the death of Jesus because it cannot accept any human sacrifice for sin. The Islamic understanding of forgiveness is that it is made on the basis of divine grace and repentance. No sacrifice can add to divine grace nor replace the necessity of repentance. The Muslim sees the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to detract both from infinite divine grace and human responsibility in repentance.

Rather than dealing with the issue directly, there has been a tendency in Islam to deny the death of Jesus out right, and thus avoid the issue altogether. There can hardly be a sacrifice on the cross if Jesus never died. There are two explanations in Islam.

The majority explanation, taken from the Gospel of Barnabas, is that there was a substitute on the cross, who miraculously seemed to take on the appearance of Jesus. The minority explanation is the so-called swoon theory, by which Jesus was on the cross, but did not die. He merely swooned and revived in the tomb. In general Muslims do not deny the ascension or the second coming of Jesus at the end of the world. They differ from Christians, however, in making his activities at that future time somewhat subordinate to the awaited Islamic figure of the Mahdi. Many Muslims believe that the main reason for Jesus' second coming is so that he will have a chance to die as all men must.

It is almost undeniable that the New Testament teaches the death and resurrection of Jesus. A case has been made for the swoon theory, but it has to presume that the disciples and gospel writers were then ignorant of the true facts.

There are several references to the death or removal of Jesus in the Qur'an, but all are subject to various interpretations. Q3:54 'Recall when God said: O Jesus, I will take thee away and lift thee up unto Me...' The margin reads 'complete thy term'. It is not at all clear what the Qur'an means to have happened to Jesus at the end of his life on earth and before his resurrection. Q4:157 'And for their saying (in boast) "Verily we have slain the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Apostle of God;" But they slew him not, and they crucified him not, but (it) became dubious unto them; and indeed those who differ therein are only in doubt about it, they have no knowledge about the (real) matter, pursuing (only) a conjecture; and certainly, they slew him not.' In Q19:33 Jesus is said to have prophesied of himself miraculously in the cradle, 'And peace be on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised alive.'

The Christian will immediately see Jesus' words about his birth, death, and ascension as completely in accordance with the Gospel birth, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, and wonder why the Muslim interprets them in terms of a disappearance without death and a return to die some millennia later.

The text on the crucifixion is generally interpreted to deny the death of Jesus, rather than to deny that it was the boasting Jews who killed him. Either interpretation is possible, and both have problems. The context of the verse is clearly within the discussion of Jewish ridicule of Christians, not in context of whether or not Jesus died.

On the other hand, the expressions against the crucifixion are strong, so that to interpret the meaning for Romans rather than Jews to have committed the act is also suspect. If the latter meaning is correct, it would have been more effective to state that the Romans killed Jesus, rather than to emphasize that the Jews were not in possession of the facts. If the interpreter desires to reconcile the Qur'an and the Gospel narrative however, the only way of doing so is to understand that the Qur'anic text refers to the Romans having killed Jesus instead of the Jews.

Most Muslims will certainly prefer to keep their belief that Jesus was not crucified, and consider the Bible corrupted on that point. For those desiring to meet Christians on a more congenial footing, another interpretation is possible.

A more difficult problem for Muslims is the Bible practice of describing God in anthropomorphic terms. The Hebrew Scriptures are especially filled with such passages and the translations into Arabic do nothing to mitigate the problem. Muslims reading the Arabic Bible thus get a stronger impression of anthropomorphism than is found in the Hebrew.

An example is Genesis 6:6. 'And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.' The Christian will likely feel comforted by the idea of God grieving for humankind. The

Muslim will focus on the problem of God regretting having made man. The Muslim will note that the text does not take divine foreknowledge into consideration, nor God's unchangeability. Some Muslims might also be offended by attribution of grief to God.

Another example is Exodus 31:17. 'It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.' The Qur'anic references to the same event speak not of resting on the seventh day, but of ascending the throne. The Muslim finds the idea of God needing rest in the first place offensive, and to add to this that God was 'refreshed' is outright repulsive. The Christian, on the other hand, may find such expressions comforting in bringing God closer to human experience.

It is likely that both Muslims and Christians do the text an injustice by judging it from criteria foreign to it. The ancient Hebrew language is extremely poor in expressions indicating the distinction between concrete and abstract. Thus words are used in Hebrew with both an abstract and concrete meaning.

By contrast, the Arabic language is very precise in making such distinctions. It is easy to misconstrue the Hebrew meaning of words by giving them concrete connotations where such did not exist at the time of writing. Thus both Muslims and Christians should adjust their thinking. Christians should realize that the Hebrew text is more foreign to their thinking than they presume in drawing anthropomorphic conclusions.

Muslims should realize that the Hebrew does not have the precision of the Arabic and expresses the same concepts of God as they are acquainted with in language as appropriate to them as the ancient Hebrew allows. It may be unfortunate that abstract thought was not so well expressed in ancient Hebrew as it was in medieval Arabic, but that is a fact that has to be accepted. Muslims have the advantage over Christians in that the Qur'an can prevent errors of misunderstanding the Hebrew text.

Christians must face not only the linguistic and cultural differences of the text, but overcome centuries of prejudice in favor of non Biblical doctrines, such as the Trinity, the deity of Jesus, and the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus in atonement for sin.

Besides what seems to be anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Bible, Muslims often face difficulty with narratives of the prophets. Bible stories often tell events offensive to Muslims especially regarding sin on the part of prophets. Although some of these can be understood as translation problems, there remains a residue of truly difficult passages.

In the chapter on marriage it was noted that the story of David and Bathsheba can be interpreted more to David's favor by merely translating the word 'wife' as 'betrothed wife'. With that, the accusations of both murder and adultery fall, and David remains with a lesser fault. In the same chapter Judah's behavior with Tamar was seen to relieve him of charges of prostitution by the application of a marriage contract.

Among the residue of truly difficult passages there are the stories of Noah and Lot. In Genesis 9:20-29,

Noah runs into trouble for being drunk. Even if we go so far as to say that the intoxication was unintentional, the Muslim will always note that a prophet should be protected from such involvements. The story of Lot and his two daughters goes beyond mere drunkenness to incest. Although the text makes it clear that Lot is not responsible, the story remains a sordid narrative from the Islamic viewpoint.

Islamic explanations of these texts generally turn on the issue of Bible corruption. The Muslim will see these texts as malicious additions to the Bible. Many Christians have become accustomed to historical criticism and do not find this a problem. Muslims may consider corruption of one passage to defile the whole.

Such stories seem to have no other explanation but corruption of the text, a cultural source no longer understandable, or an allegorical interpretation. None of these is very convincing. At this point it might be useful for Muslims to learn a new attitude from Christians. It is possible to relate to a mutilated text in terms of its usefulness.

Muslims relate to the Qur'an in a way incomprehensible to Christians, some of whom see the Bible as hardly more than a historical witness of questionable reliability. It would be possible for Muslims to see the Bible as an imperfect witness of truth that is perfectly expressed in the Qur'an. Even if we possessed the earlier books in their original and uncorrupted form, if they had been perfect, what need would there have been for the Qur'an?

The story of Lot brings us to another problem with the Bible text, the problem of pornographic description. Much of the problem here lies in Muslim prudery which defines pornography in different terms than those used when the Bible was written. Muslims are able to discuss legal matters in detail. It is the matter of narrative which is offensive.

This problem could be largely offset in Muslim eyes if Muslims understood that narrative has a different function in the Bible than it does in the Qur'an. There is very little narrative in the Qur'an, while much of the Bible is narrative in nature. Bible narrative is legislatively purposeful even when it is not directly stated to be so. What is considered by Muslims to be pornographic narrative can generally be classed in one of two categories.

The first is legislative condemnation of such acts by implication. The second type is prophetic denouncement using pornographic figures. Prostitution is one of the most common Biblical figures for idolatry. It is not a great leap for Muslim sensibilities to realize that sexual unfaithfulness is an apt figure for the atrocious character of shirk, that is, association of false gods with God.

The final textual problem of the Bible is that of alcohol. Muslims generally believe that the prohibition of alcohol came only at the time of the Qur'anic revelation. They do believe, however, that none of the early prophets used alcohol. Most Muslims see the Qur'an as giving a progressive and ever more strict prohibition of alcohol. Some even deny that alcohol is actually prohibited in the Qur'an. The Bible is even more ambiguous on this point.

There are Biblical texts condoning wine for medicinal purposes, most notably 1 Timothy 5:23. 'Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities.' But the Biblical approach to alcohol does not end there. There are some Christians who maintain that the Bible condemns the non-medicinal use of alcohol completely, and it is certainly true that the Bible consistently condemns drunkenness. From the historical critical point of view, one of the earliest Biblical texts condemns drunkenness (1 Samuel 1:14). So there is a clear limitation on alcohol from the earliest times.

One of the best-known of Biblical condemnations of drunkenness is Proverbs 20:1. 'wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.'

But it is one of the Torah texts that causes the most problems, Deuteronomy 14:26. And thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the Lord thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household.' There is not a problem with the word wine, which does not differentiate between fermented and unfermented.

Thus all of the texts speaking positively about wine in both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures may be interpreted as referring to unfermented wine. The word 'sheker' or strong drink is another matter, and it is easily recognized by the Muslim who knows the Qur'anic language as well. It is inescapably alcoholic and intoxicating. The problem is magnified by the fact that it is described here as appropriate to the worship activities of the pilgrimage itself.

Of the Biblical practices unknown to Islam, we have already mentioned the levirate. Most Biblical practices seemingly unknown to Islam are contained within the priestly ministrations of the ancient Hebrew temple service. Besides those there are the annual festivals described in the Torah, and the weekly Sabbath.

Of these practices, rabbinical Judaism follows in some sense all but the priestly, temple services. The rationale for not following these is that the temple was destroyed in the seventh decade of the first century AD, so there are no longer the requisite facilities for doing so. Apparently the only priestly function preserved in modern Judaism is the receipt of the redemption money for the first-born.

Of these practices, Christianity in general follows almost none. There are only quaint exceptions, such as the Lutheran requisite that a priest in the church not be disabled according to the priestly descriptions in the Torah. There are some exceptions as well on the peripheries of Christianity, such as the animal sacrifices of the Armenian Christians, and the Sabbath-observance of the Ethiopian Coptic Christians and some others.

The Christian rationale for neglecting these is that the law came to an end in the Messiah and is no longer valid. As I have pointed out, this is an inconsistent rationale, since Christians apparently continued to participate in the temple sacrifices for a generation after the death of Jesus which was supposed to put them to an end. Christians generally place all of these features, temple worship, annual

festivals, and the weekly Sabbath into the one category of ceremonial law which was a shadow of things to come, that is, of Jesus the Messiah.

Temple practice seems to have contained the possibility for change. There is certainly a striking difference between the temple service described in Leviticus and that described in the last chapters of Ezekiel. There are also essential differences between Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

It is very likely that these differences reflect differences from one time period to another, differences in practice from one place to another at the same time, and differences based on the verdicts of different divinely appointed representatives at different times. Thus the Biblical revelation can be considered to represent a variety of temple practices without necessarily being inconsistent.

Such variation in practice can be seen for the annual festivals as well. The list in Numbers twenty-eight and twenty-nine does not mention the specific pilgrimage festival at all, while Deuteronomy twelve seems to focus entirely upon it. The structure of the Psalms includes all of them. Christianity has rejected all of them on the basis of a symbolic interpretation, and replaced them with extrabiblical festivals originating in the local religions of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Judaism follows the sequence in Numbers, neglects the pilgrimage, and adds some festivals from a post-Biblical period.

Although Islam cannot be seen to follow temple procedures and annual festivals exactly, it can be seen to be well within the same field of variation and viewpoint. An emphasis of the Deuteronomic pilgrimage to the detriment of some of the festivals of Numbers twenty-eight and twenty-nine is certainly as justifiable as the Jewish practice, which neglects the pilgrimage festival.

Among the Biblical festivals only one is not represented in some way in Islamic practice, and that is the festival of Tabernacles or Succoth. Otherwise, Ramadhan corresponds in time and spirit with Pentecost, Muharrem with the feast of trumpets and the day of atonement, and the widespread practice of fasting in the seventh month with Passover. The differences in observance are largely within the variation already noted for the Bible itself.

The Sabbath is another problem. Historically, the three great traditions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism have had their representative days, Jumu'a (Friday), Sabbath, and Sunday. A careful examination of the Bible text reveals the most astounding fact. All three traditions depart from the Bible and perhaps even the Qur'an in their practice. The Bible and possibly the Qur'an supports the marking of two days of the week with special regard, Friday and Sabbath or Saturday. There is little evidence for any Sunday observance in the Bible at all, and what there is depends heavily on the weight of post-Biblical centuries of practice to give it any force.

It might be best to look at some detail in this matter since both Muslims and Christians will be justifiably skeptical of my conclusions. The Bible begins with the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:3. The structure of the story suggests that one of its major functions is the justification of the week. The seven days of creation are each given their own character by the things purported to have been created on them, but

the sixth and seventh day are especially marked. The sixth day is said to be the day on which human beings were created, blessed, given the power to reproduce, given dominion, and the right to food. The seventh day is also set apart from all others by the fact that it was the only day that was blessed by God.

The same configuration of a special blessing on the Sabbath day, preceded by a special blessing on humankind on the preceding day continues throughout the Bible. Note, for example, Exodus sixteen, in which the days of the week are again divided into three groups. There are the days on which manna comes in the morning, is sufficient for that one day, and spoils if kept over. These are the first to fifth days of the week, Sunday to Thursday. On Friday a double portion of manna comes, and this manna can be kept over without spoiling. On Saturday or the Sabbath no manna comes and the blessing of Friday feeds the population, thus showing all to be dependent on God.

Most of the Sabbath regulations in the Torah reflect this concern of providing a double portion of food on Friday, and avoiding food-getting or preparing activities on the Sabbath. The other writings expand on this to some extent, but add little of a new nature. Everything relates to the Friday blessing of food and the Sabbath enjoyment of that double portion and avoidance of food-getting on that day. The thrust of the cycle thus focuses on human dependence on God for sustenance and represents it literally and specifically in the Friday and Sabbath experience.

The Sabbath is mentioned in the Qur'an several times. Q2:65,66 `And indeed ye know of those amongst you who transgressed on the Sabbath, so We said unto them, "Be ye apes, despised and spurned!" So We made it a lesson for (those of) their own times and for those (of their posterity) who came after them and an exhortation unto those who guard (themselves) against evil.' This text is said to be in reference to an event during the time of David when people set traps for fish before the Sabbath and came at the end of the Sabbath to gather the catch. They were punished for this attempt at circumventing the Sabbath by being turned into apes. See Q5:60.

The story is given more extensively in Q7: 163 `And ask them about the town which was beside the sea; when they did exceed (the limits) in the Sabbath when their fish did come unto them on the day of their Sabbath, appearing on the surface of the water; and on the day they observed not the Sabbath, they (the fish) did not come unto them; Thus did We try them for they were transgressing.'

In Q4:47 `O ye whom the Scripture hath been given! believe in what We have sent down confirming what is (already) with you, ere We change their faces (features) and turn them towards their backs, or as We cursed the people of the Sabbath; (know ye, that) the Command of God is ever executed.' Further, Q4: 154 `And we lifted up the Mountain over them at their covenant and said We unto them "Enter the door prostrating" and said We unto them "Exceed not (Our limits) in the Sabbath (day)" and We took from them a firm Covenant.' Ali (1988:425) gives the marginal note for this verse.

`Some may argue about the importance of the "Sabbath" while days are God's. The answer is the same as would be given about the importance attached to the "*Qiblah*" while in all directions is God's – It is

only a Test.¹ In this Ali does not recognize the symbolic value of the Friday–Sabbath configuration as representing the sustaining power of God. He only sees it as a test, like the *Qiblah* or direction of prayer. No doubt he is right in this, and for this he has the direct witness of the Qur'an in 7:163. But the *Qiblah* has been changed from time to time, whereas the Friday–Sabbath configuration has not. His remark seems to indicate that some Muslims argue for the importance of the Sabbath, whereas he disagrees with them.

In Q16:124 `Verily the (punishment of) the Sabbath was ordained only for those who differed about it; and verily thy Lord will judge between them on the Day of Judgement in what they used to differ about.'¹ This text was probably addressed to the Jewish practice of Sabbath observance. The Jews recognize the death sentence of the Bible on Sabbath–breaking, and yet fail to carry it out. The Qur'an relegates the punishment for Sabbath–breaking to the Day of judgement, and furthermore only on those who differ about the Sabbath, or deny its validity. The Qur'an thus draws together the loose ends of Bible legislation.

The Friday–Sabbath configuration is best described in the Qur'an in Q62:9–11 `O ye who believe! when the call is made for prayer on Friday, then hasten ye (all) unto the remembrance of God and leave off (all) trading, that is better for you, if ye do know! And when the Prayer is ended then disperse ye in the earth and seek ye of the grace of God, and remember ye God much, so that ye may be successful. And when see they merchandise or sport, they break away unto it, and leave thee standing. Say thou "What is with God is better than sport and (better) than merchandise, and God is the Best of sustainers."¹

The matter of Friday prayer is clear, as well as the fact that Friday itself is not a sabbath or day of rest, since trading continues up to the call for noon (*dhohr*) prayer. After the time of noon prayer, which according to Ali (1988:105a) is `from the time the sun passes the meridian up till a little before the sunset', it is appropriate to seek the grace of God, remember God much, and avoid merchandise and sport. These four practices foster the realization that `God is the Best of sustainers.'¹ The Qur'anic understanding of the Friday–Sabbath configuration thus appears to be very much in accordance with the Bible understanding before it.

Since the Qur'an relegates punishment for Sabbath breaking to the Day of judgement, and since there is no provision for recuperating Sabbaths missed, as with the Passover in the Bible or prayer and fasting in Islam, it is only natural that the details of Sabbath–observance have no place in Islamic *Fiqh* or jurisprudence. The lack of provision for recuperating missed Sabbaths means not only that no recuperation is possible, but only aspects of the Sabbath which cannot under any circumstances be missed can be declared *wajib* or obligatory. Only the *niyat* or intention itself could fall in that category, since everything else could be legitimately overridden. It is thus *mustahab*.

Yet there is evidence of more extensive observance of the Sabbath in Islam in earlier times than seems presently followed. According to Islamic *hadith*, not only the prophet but all four rightly guided caliphs followed the practice of two units *duha* prayer on Sabbath mornings in the Quba mosque in Medina, and

not on other mornings. An examination of the extensive *hadith* literature would reveal a number of other traits as well, such as Sabbath avoidance of marriage and burial if possible, because of the belief that what one does on the Sabbath will be repeated. If the Sabbath is unknown in Islam, it is mainly for not knowing Islamic traditions themselves. As Ali notes, there is some disagreement among Islamic scholars about how important such injunctions are, but no one denies that they exist.

It is finally time to ask whether there are Islamic beliefs and practices which conflict with the Bible. We have already noted that the belief that Jesus did not die on the cross almost unavoidably conflicts with the Gospel narrative. We have also mentioned the fact that the Qur'an permits the camel as both sacrifice and meat to eat, which the Bible does not permit. We have also noted that some Islamic scholars also permit the zebra, and Sunni practice permits an even larger number of both sea and land animals forbidden in the Torah.

There is but one final issue I should like to bring up. Is the Islamic use of the strict lunar calendar an innovation or a restitution of Biblical practice? The Jewish and Christian establishments will uncritically condemn the Islamic calendar.

The Christian calendar has so far departed from the Bible that there is no need to examine it. It is a solar calendar with artificial months having more to do with the Roman emperors than with the phases of the moon. The Jewish calendar is more problematical. Its generalized use over many centuries gives it an aura of authority.

The recent conformity of Karaim Jews to the rabbinical calendar only serves to strengthen this post-biblical tradition. That the rabbinical calendar is post-biblical is clear even without a detailed examination of its history, going back to Hillel II. The fact that two thousand years ago there were several competing calendar systems within Judaism speaks for itself. All of them claimed to be Biblical, and none of them are precisely the same as the Jewish calendar presently in use.

What we need to demonstrate is not the details of postbiblical calendars in use among Jews and Christians in different eras, but whether or not the Islamic calendar can be defended on the basis of the Bible, and whether it can be shown to have been in use in early times. Surprisingly enough, both are easy to do.

The Islamic calendar consists of twelve lunar months in one year, established by the sighting of the moon. The Jewish calendar adds a thirteenth month on certain years and does not rely absolutely on the sighting of the moon for the beginning of each month. What we need to establish is that the Bible mentions only twelve months, and that the months are established by the sighting of the moon.

The Islamic calendar can be defended on the basis of the fact that out of the scores of dates mentioned in the Bible, including all twelve months of the year, there is no date for any event during a thirteenth month. The thirteenth month is completely unknown to the Biblical record of dates. If the adjustment to the solar calendar by a thirteenth month was accepted practice in Biblical times, there should be a

mention in justification of the practice or at least a date using it. There is neither. There is no mention of a thirteenth month, so we are justified in assuming a year of twelve months for the Biblical year.

There are a few texts in the Bible mentioning the new moon, but Psalm 81:3 is most important for establishing the process of sighting and broadcasting the arrival of the new moon. `Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day.' The necessity for giving the signal shows that the new moon was established not by any calculation, but by sight.

Clearly, Islam has added a few features to the Biblical faith and we have discussed these in more or less detail as they appeared. There seem to be several important innovations. Among these are the strict lunar calendar, fasting in Ramadhan, the *Qiblah* (direction of prayer) and pilgrimage to Mecca, the pilgrimage and sacrifice in the twelfth month, limitation of the number of wives to four, Friday congregation, slight differences in laws of marriage and inheritance, and permission to eat camel. A closer examination shows that even some of these, regard for Friday, the strictly lunar calendar, and pilgrimage in the twelfth month, and fasting in the ninth, are merely reforms going back to the Bible.

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