Editorial: Muslim Contextualization I

Phil Parshall and I meet in Manila, just a month after he publicly denounced the "C5" concept (also called "Messianic Muslims") as syncretistic. After reading "The Amazing Diversity of God in Drawing Muslims to Christ" (see the first article) Phil says, "I don't have any problem with what you have written." Completely perplexed, I ask,"You don't? Then why did you label C5 as syncretism?" Later on as we drive through a jungle of jeepney traffic and hash over the details of our apparent disagreement, it soon becomes clear that we are operating from very different definitions of who C5 believers really are.

The so-called "C5 missionaries" whom Phil had met advocate that it is okay to affirm Muhammad as a genuine prophet of God; that Muslim background believers should attend the mosque perpetually; and that Christians should consider legally converting to Islam to win Muslims as Muslims. "This is not C5!" I insist. "According to those who've described C5 to me," Phil replies, "yes it is!" Stuck in a definitional stalemate, we decide to contact John Travis, the architect of the C1–C6 Spectrum (Travis 1998). John responds by email:

> There are few people in the world I respect more than Phil Parshall. He and Julie are wonderful friends and tremendous role models for my wife and me. He has spent decades studying Islam and living among Muslims. I have much to learn. Having said that, Joshua, the way I conceived the C5 category is basically the way you have described it. What makes a particular Muslim "C5" is that he has received Isa (Jesus) as Lord and Savior, meets regularly with other such believers, and yet is still seen as "Muslim" through his or her own eyes, as well as the eyes of fellow Muslims. A C5 believer will certainly have different beliefs from other Muslims (e.g., Isa did die on the cross, Muhammad is not a prophet in the biblical sense, salvation is in Isa al-Masih and not in works). However, C5 believers remain in the Muslim community (i.e., they do not officially become members of a traditional church), and they still participate in Muslim cultural and religious practices—except for those contrary to Scripture. The simple fact is, I know individuals who are truly born again and living for Jesus, yet because of their upbringing, ethnicity, or community, simply see themselves as Muslims who have found salvation in Jesus. I would be hard pressed to say by biblical definitions that they are not part of God's Kingdom.

The articles in this feature edition do not attempt to merely save the "C5" term from disrepute, but rather the people, whom the term attempts to describe, who love the Lord Jesus with all their heart. While Phil Parshall's conclusion about C5 was unfortunately based on erroneous descriptions from alleged "C5 advocates," each theological and methodological concern Phil raised in his "Danger!" article (1998) is crucially important for us to grapple with as we seek to extend God's Kingdom in the Muslim world. Parshall concluded his article with, "Let's bring the subject out in the open and dialogue together" (1998:410). This Special Edition of the IJFM has purposed to do just that.

Our first article sets today's C5 Messianic Muslim movement against the backdrop of several rather surprising blessings and assignments from God throughout biblical history. Yet another spectrum is introduced, helping us see that not all Muslims are the same, especially in their attitude toward Islam, and that God is therefore using a variety of approaches all along the C1–C6 Spectrum to draw Muslims to Christ. The implications of accepting or rejecting God's diversity is discussed, along with the call to unite in cooperation and mutual support amidst varied philosophies of ministry, in order to complete the task of reaching all Muslim peoples with the Gospel.

Parshall is also concerned about C5 believers who sometimes only identify themselves as "Muslims" without immediately articulating their faith in Jesus. In response to this, Bernard Dutch has written a seminal article on the highly complex issue of self-identity among Muslim background believers (MBBs). Dutch's phenomenal insight into the mind of MBBs comes from many years of experience in one of the world's largest Muslim countries, where an incredible number of Muslims have already poured into the Kingdom.

Editorial: Muslim Contextualization I

Stuart Caldwell lays an exegetical foundation for C5 Messianic Muslim communities in his superb exposition of how Jesus modeled contextualized church planting in Samaria. Caldwell further challenges us to seriously rethink how the time-honored metaphor of "church planting" may very well be sending us in the wrong direction. He offers fresh biblical and missiological insights for a powerful alternative.

Jameson and Scalevich show the remarkable biblical similarities between today's Messianic Muslims and first-century Jewish followers of the Way. The first-hand case studies illustrating each point provide precious insight into how God's approach to raising up of C5 Messianic Muslim communities is not as new as it may appear.

Rick Brown uncovers the critical biblical texts to help us not only explain Jesus' 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man' titles to Muslims effectively, but also to understand it more fully ourselves. His poignant analysis with linguistic implications for contextualized translations will enrich both the missionary in training and the veteran mission practitioner.

John Travis, author of the C1–C6 Spectrum, and Andrew Workman give us an up-close look at C5 through several amazing case studies from where they minister. They also directly address several of Parshall's concerns, articulating what C5 is, and what it is not.

Finally, Jonathan Culver completes our Special Edition with a fascinating treatment of the remote origins of Islam through the Ishmael promises. Culver then explores the contextual implications of God's promise to Abraham for the worldwide Muslim community, both now and in the eschatological age to come.

You will notice that most every article omits geographic and people-specific references for obvious reasons. In accepting Parshall's invitation to bring this discussion "out into the open," anonymity is necessary for security—both for the missionaries themselves and for the C5 believers.

It became clear as we began to assemble this edition that we will definitely need to dedicate an additional IJFM issue to this same theme in the near future. Lord willing, respondents to the articles herein will carry this discussion to the next level in "Islamic Contextualization II."

May God use the articles in this Special Edition to sharpen our vision and challenge our souls, equipping us to participate in what He is doing around the world to draw Muslim peoples to Himself. To God be all the glory!

Joshua Massey
IJFM guest editor
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Parshall, Phil. 1998   "Danger! New Directions in Contextualization." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34(4):404-406, 409-410.
Travis, John. 1998   "The C1 to C6 Spectrum." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (4):407-408.

God's Amazing Diversity
in Drawing Muslims to Christ

How would the mission community respond today if God should ask us to do something strange or even offensive, as He has done throughout biblical history? As familiar as we may be with Scripture, we will never always be able to fully predict how God will work in a given situation. This is definitely the case today as we see God drawing Muslim peoples to Himself in several rather surprising ways.

by Joshua Massey

Scripture shows that God has never been entirely predictable. In God's passion to crush the serpent's head and redeem mankind, who could have predicted He would eventually wipe out most of humanity to start over with Noah and his family?

Consider Abraham and try to transport yourself back to his time. If we had been present with Abraham and witnessed God's covenant to make his descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky, who of us could have predicted that God would allow Abraham and his descendants to take multiple wives? Polygamy is surely one way to exponentially multiply a man's descendants, but why would God allow it to enter into the line of the promised Messiah? That's not something most Westerners today could have easily predicted.

If we say that the patriarchs' propensity toward polygamy was merely part of God's permissive will, then why would God tell David in 2 Sam. 12:8, "I gave... your master's wives into your arms"?[1] God is disciplining David through Nathan for taking Bathsheba and appears to be saying, *"I gave you so many wives! How then could you do this wicked thing by taking Uriah's wife?"* God gave David more than one wife? This is not something many of us would have expected to hear from God.

Unlikely Candidates for God's Blessing

Consider Jacob and try to transport yourself to his household for a moment. If you had seen everything Jacob had seen of his sons, including Judah sleeping with his daughter-in-law Tamar (unknowingly of course, he thought she was a prostitute), from which son's line would you have predicted the promised Messiah would come? I would have expected Joseph to be the man, and I believe Jacob expected the same. Judah is *not* the man I would have predicted. But instead, we learn in Matthew 1:3 that the genealogy of Jesus doesn't just trace back to Judah, but to Judah's union with his daughter-in-law Tamar! This is not the line many would have expected God to use.

And we can be pretty sure, according to Gen. 49:5-7, that Jacob had serious doubts about anything good coming of Levi, a son in whose counsel Jacob would not sit. Yet from Levi came Moses, as well as the entire Levitical priesthood.

Offensive Obedience

Consider how God asked Isaiah to go around preaching naked for three years, as a sign against Egypt and Cush (Isa. 20:2-4). Do you think Christian leaders today might want to distance themselves from an evangelist claiming that God told him to preach naked for three years? Church planting teams to Muslims frequently write-up MOUs (memos of understanding) to give prospective teammates some idea of their approach to ministry. But who among us would blame a team leader for refusing to believe that God would ask his teammate to preach naked to Muslims? "Maybe to ascetic Hindu holy men or to primitive tribals—maybe," some might grant, "but to Muslims?"

Isaiah was not the only prophet who preached naked. Micah did the same, weeping and wailing; he howled like a jackal and moaned like an owl (Mic. 1:8). This is not the kind of behavior I would predict for a prophet. And does it really matter whether Isaiah and Micah preached fully naked or just in their underwear? However far they stripped, it was clearly intended to foreshadow the humiliation and shame peoples would soon experience as recipients of God's judgment. It was a divine object lesson God used to get people's attention.

Defilement and Pollution

It is not uncommon for peoples of the world to roast food over dried cow or camel dung, especially in areas of the world where firewood is scarce. But it is nowhere common to roast food over dried human excrement. So when God asked the prophet Ezekiel to do this, Ezekiel, understandably, reacted rather strongly (Ez. 4:12-15). He clearly understood that cooking his food in such a way would defile it completely. Of course it would, since God clearly states that this is the very reason he asked Ezekiel to do it, to show the Israelites that they too will eat defiled food among the nations where God will drive them (Ez. 4:13). God asked Ezekiel to *defile* himself to send a message to the Israelites? Surely, it seems, there could have been another way! (Those less familiar with the account may be relieved to know that God, in his mercy, let Ezekiel use cow dung instead.)

So as familiar as we may be with the Scriptures, we will never be able to predict how God will handle a given situation. The Pharisees knew the Scriptures extremely well, but they

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Our periodic astonishment with God's ways likely reflects our shallow capacity to understand Him: "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?"

utterly failed to recognize Jesus (John 5:39-40). Peter did recognize Jesus, but almost missed God's clear instruction about ritual purity (Acts 10:14). Why? Because God wanted to do something Peter didn't expect—to lift the ban on unclean foods that Scripture *specifically* forbade. How did God make his unexpected will known to Peter? He spoke directly through the vision of unclean animals and the clear instruction, "Kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). Abstinence from such meat was so deeply ingrained in Peter's mind that God had to give the vision three times, and even then Peter still wondered what it meant (Acts 10:17). Remember, at this time Peter had no other Scripture than the Old Testament, so as far as he could see, God seemed to be asking him to do something completely unbiblical. God also wanted Peter to enter a Gentile's home. This too, Peter believed, was totally against God's law (Acts 10:28).

God's Ways are Not Like our Ways

We could go on and on throughout Scripture, showing example after example of how God frequently does what his people never expect. God has never been entirely predictable. In his passion to draw the nations to the Savior, about the only thing we can predict with confidence is that God *will* do things we do not expect! In fact, he may even do things that seem so contrary to our understanding of him that we might rally a list of verses to justify our refusal to accept them as being from him at all. We have no trouble supporting our expectations from Scripture, even as the Pharisees and Judaizers had little trouble supporting theirs from Scripture.

We must never forget that God is God; and his ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8-9; Job 37:5). Therefore, God may absolutely astonish us sometimes (Luke 11:38; Mark 10:32). But then again, he is God! He can do whatever he wants! In reality, our periodic astonishment more likely reflects our shallow capacity to understand God and his ways: "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7).

The above examples are in no way intended to challenge our basic hermeneutic of Scripture, nor to undermine what God has clearly revealed in his Word. My only intent is simply to drive home one point beyond question: God has never been entirely predictable. He frequently surprises us! Sometimes it may even appear he is contradicting what he previously revealed. But God never contradicts himself (Num. 23:19). It only to appears that way to us because our understanding is so limited. Whether he asks us to preach naked or roast our food over dried human excrement, we need to accept that God is God. Therefore, we will not always be able to fit his unpredictable ways into our limited understanding without some occasional befuddlement and discomfort.

Has God been doing anything lately in drawing Muslims to Christ that we would not have predicted? Most definitely! God has been drawing Muslims to Christ (John 6:44) in so many different ways that one worker, John Travis, developed a spectrum to describe six very different kinds of Christ-centered communities in the Muslim world today. Before I briefly summarize this *C1–C6 Spectrum* (Travis 1998), we need to understand that the "C" stands for "Christ-centered community." While both healthy and unhealthy examples can be found for each of the six communities, none are necessarily more Christ-centered than the others. Furthermore, C1–C6 are all

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realities, not mere theories or positions. Muslim men and women who at one time only knew Jesus as a prophet of Islam now know him as Savior and Lord in a variety of very different communities.

C1 is a traditional Christian church which either reflects the culture of foreign Christians or that of the minority indigenous national church. Many English-speaking churches in former British colonies are good examples of the prior, while most Coptic churches of Egypt are good examples of the later. In either case, Travis writes, "A huge cultural chasm often exists between the [C1] church and the surrounding Muslim community" (1998:407). C1 churches speak neither the daily language nor the religious terminology of the local Muslim population. C1 believers identify themselves as "Christians."

C2 is basically the same as C1, except C2 churches use the daily language of the surrounding Muslim population. Like C1, C2 churches avoid Islamic terminology and instead use a distinctively "Christian" vocabulary for religious description. The cultural chasm between C2 believers and the surrounding Muslim community is often still huge. C2 believers identify themselves as "Christians."

C3 churches are essentially the same as C2, except C3 makes use of local music styles, dress, art and other indigenous cultural elements. C3 makes a clear distinction between practices that are purely "cultural" and those which are "Islamic." Islamic

forms are rejected. Travis writes, "The aim is to reduce foreignness of the Gospel and the church by contextualizing to biblically permissible cultural forms" (1998:408). C3 believers also identify themselves as "Christians."

C4 congregations are much like C3 but have also adopted biblically permissible Islamic forms and practices (e.g., praying prostrate, perhaps toward Jerusalem; washing before prayer and before touching the Bible; abstaining from pork, alcohol, or from keeping dogs as pets; using some Islamic terms; wearing some clothing popular among Muslims). To distance themselves from the negative baggage and misperceptions Muslims have about "Christianity," C4 believers do not call themselves "Christians" but "followers of *Isa* (Jesus)." However, the Muslim community does not generally regard C4 believers as fellow Muslims. From a Muslim's perspective, "If they were Muslims, they wouldn't hesitate to call themselves Muslims. And we'd see them at the mosque on Fridays as well!"

C5 is much like C4 with the primary difference being self-identity. Whereas C4 believers identify themselves as "followers of *Isa*," C5 believers identify themselves as "Muslim followers of Jesus"—much like Messianic Jews calling themselves "Jewish followers of Jesus." Islamic theology incompatible with the Bible is rejected. Some C5

The C1–C6 Spectrum

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
Christ-Centered Community Description	A church foreign to the Muslim community in both culture and language	C1 in form but speaking the language used by Muslims, though their religious terminology is distinctively non-Muslim	C2 using non-Islamic cultural elements (e.g., dress, music, diet, arts)	C3 with some Biblically acceptable Islamic practices	C4 with a "Muslim follower of Jesus" self-identity	Secret Believers, may or may not be active members in the religious life of the Muslim community
Self-Identity	"Christian"	"Christian"	"Christian"	"Follower of Isa"	"Muslim follower of Jesus"	*Privately*: "Christian," or "Follower of Isa," or "Muslim follower of Jesus"
Muslim Perception	Christian	Christian	Christian	A *kind* of Christian	A *strange kind* of Muslim	Muslim

believers remain in the Muslim community for as long as they can to "win Muslims as Muslims" (1 Cor. 9:19–23). In time, however, their deviance from mainstream Islamic theology may lead to their banishment from the Muslim community. But where whole communities of Muslims begin to follow Jesus, the local mosque may transform into a Messianic Mosque for Jesus. Some C5 believers desire to distance themselves from the mosque and Islam, still preferring to maintain their identity as Muslim followers of Jesus. In contrast to C4, Muslims view C5 believers as Muslim, though perhaps "a strange kind of Muslim." Most Muslims have never met Muslims who "follow Jesus," so the curiosity that results from their identification often leads to open doors to share their faith in Christ.

A Surprising Progression

C1 and C2 best describe the majority of churches in the Muslim world today, which isn't too surprising. However, C3–C5 believers represent what I believe to be a surprising progression of God's diversity in drawing Muslims to Christ. I use the term "progression" because the surprises did not start with C5 but with C3. In its day, C3 received plenty of opposition from C1–C2 believers, who insisted, for example, that certain musical instruments are inherently evil and inappropriate for any community of Christ-followers. But in time, C3 became more widely accepted, and in turn laid a foundation for C4. Furthermore, I attribute this progression "to God" (rather than to the contextual experiments of man) based on the firm conviction that no one becomes "Christ-centered" unless God draws them, as Jesus stated so clearly (John 6:44).

Phil Parshall certainly became the vanguard of C4 fellowships in the late 70s, and he endured an extreme amount of opposition from more than a few C1-3 believers who had serious concerns about the integrity of C4 work. But Parshall took the necessary time and actually wrote a book, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (1980), to build his case for C4. God used Parshall's book, along with several others (McCurry 1979; Parshall 1983; Gilliland 1989; Woodberry 1989), to help some of His workers switch gears in their approach to reaching Muslims. In spite of the opposition that Parshall and other pro-C4 workers endured, early adopters of C4 believed it held tremendous potential for Kingdom advance in the Muslim context—even though it did not come without risks in such uncharted territory.

Ironically, 20 years after Parshall's ground breaking publication of *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism,* C4 is today probably the most common approach used by new missionaries to Muslims. And who could have predicted 20 years ago that God would raise up still another group of messengers who believe God wants to take them beyond C4? C4 surely paved the way for C5, whose major difference is one of identity. Whereas C4 allows any biblically-permissible Islamic form or practice, C5 does not claim to go any further, except in the area of self-definition.

C5 practitioners insist that even as Paul argued tirelessly with Judaizers that Gentiles did not have to convert to Judaism to follow Jesus, Muslims do not have to convert to "Christianity" to follow Jesus. There is no doubt that C5 believers are genuine disciples of Jesus (Acts 15:8, 11), but they do not desire to align themselves with what they perceive as that godless Western institution called "Christianity," where (from a Muslim perspective) homosexuals enter the clergy, immodest women come to worship in scantily clad summer dresses, and people put the Word of God on the floor right next to their dirty shoes.

C5 workers point out that Jesus commanded us to make disciples, not converts (Mt. 28:19). They argue that when Muslims who are drawn to Jesus commit to obey all his commands, bearing witness that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man and that only his death on the cross can pay the price for man's sin, what does it matter what they call themselves? In reality, much like E. Stanley Jones described "Christ-centeredness" as quite separate from "Christianity" (1925), C5 workers want to convert Muslims to Jesus, not to Christianity. Our mandate is not to "Christianize" the nations with fine-sounding labels of self-identity, but with love for Jesus and obedience to his commands (Mt. 28:20; John 14:15, 21).

On the other hand, opponents of C5 argue, "How could anyone who identifies himself as any kind of Muslim be a genuine follower of Jesus? To call oneself 'Muslim' means they adhere to certain Islamic beliefs that flatly contradict Scripture!"

To this objection, C5 practitioners respond, "That sounds like the same argument Judaizers used against Paul since Gentiles were well known by all Jews to be unclean, uncircumcised, and mostly sexually immoral idolaters—all violating clear Biblical teachings. 'How is it possible,' Judaizers must have asked Paul, 'to be both Gentile and a follower of Jesus? The two terms are mutually exclusive!' And yet we find this phrase, 'Gentile believers' twice in the Book of Acts—which must have been quite disturbing to Judaizers, many of whom no doubt loved the Lord Jesus deeply."

Opponents of C5 contend, "But to remain a Gentile follower of Jesus is different than remaining a Muslim follower of Jesus since being Gentile is an issue of ethnicity, not adherence to a false religion." To this C5 practitioners respond, "Tell that to Peter, who, though he could not point at a cohesive body of religious literature describing 'Gentilism,' nor an order of priests claiming to represent the offices of 'Gentilism,' believed he would be ritually polluted upon entering the home of Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile (Acts 10:28). Peter knew Cornelius was a God-fearer, a 'proselyte of the gate,'[2] not a typical idolatrous Gentile. Still, Jews like Peter refused to enter such a man's home lest they be defiled. If the proximity of God-fearing Gentiles was thought to ritually pollute a Jewish follower of Jesus, being Gentile was certainly much more than ethnicity for it included serious implications of religious consequence, deeply ingrained in the psyche of every Jew and Judaizer who objected to the inclusion of Gentiles in the church without them first fully converting to Judaism, i.e., becoming 'a proselyte of righteousness.'"[3] Judaizers, of course, backed their arguments with abundant Scripture. Fortunately for us Gentiles, men like Paul and Barnabas could, at least initially, see God's purposes much further than Peter and James, who later recognized God's stamp on the Gentile movement after God went to unusual lengths to convince them (Acts 10).

Deceit and "Muslim" Identity

Every pro-C5 worker I know sees a huge difference between someone from a Christian background assuming a C5 identity and someone from a Muslim background becoming a C5 believer. In fact, one pro-C5 team I know has a countrywide policy disallowing anyone from a Christian background from becoming C5; their identity can go no further than C4. If someone from a Christian background goes around calling himself Muslim, all they will do (according to popular C5 opinion) is either look like a total phony, or mislead Muslims into thinking they converted to Islam. So when I use the term "C5 believer," I am always referring to those who were raised Muslim by a Muslim family. This distinction becomes even more significant when considering the question of deceit in a C5 approach.

While pro-C1–C4 workers may assert that following Jesus requires one to cease identifying themselves as "Muslim," pro-C5 workers believe that identity is a matter of both theology and culture. For example, C5 Muslim followers of Jesus see themselves as far more "Muslim" than "Christian," even though they disagree with the common Muslim belief that the Bible is corrupt and that Jesus was not crucified. How can they possibly see themselves as more Muslim than Christian in spite of these theological differences?

To answer this question, we must first ask, "Whom do they see as 'Christian'?" In parts of the world where significant numbers of C5 believers exist today, they are mostly looking at C1–C2 believers. When C5 believers compare themselves to C1–C2 Christians, they say, "I don't pray like a Christian, unwashed in a pew with my shoes on; I pray like a Muslim. I don't dress like a Christian, with Western pants and collared shirts; I dress like a Muslim. I don't talk like a Christian, with all their strange terms to describe God and his prophets; I talk like a Muslim. I don't eat like a Christian, consuming uh... you know[4] and *haram* meats (i.e., meat not butchered in the "kosher" way); I prefer *halal* meats, like a Muslim. I don't have a Christian name, like John, Tom or Paul; I have a Muslim name." Thus, C5 believers are being entirely honest when they identify themselves as "Muslim" followers of Jesus.

C6 Secret Believers

While "C6" accurately describes a certain Christ-centered community of secret believers, it does not fit well on this spectrum in other respects, particularly in the area of contextualization and self-definition. Throughout C1 to C5, we can see a progression in contextual "friendliness" with a Muslim's culture, Islamic forms, and even Muslim identity. But any sense of contextual progression ends at C5, for the defining factor of C6 is whether or not a believer's faith in Jesus is made public. Privately, C6 believers surely practice a wide range of self-definition, and if we ask them how they think their fellow Muslim countrymen would best be reached with the Gospel, we would surely hear a variety of replies all along the C1-C5 spectrum.

Christian Response to God's Diversity

I see two common responses to God's unpredictable diversity in drawing Muslims to himself.

1. *Accuse brothers up the spectrum of compromise, syncretism and heresy. We should never gloss over the genuine concerns of brothers who sense sig-*

nificant dangers in a pro-C4 or C5 approach. But some, instead of praying for the protection and fruitful labors of those involved in C4–C5, judge them as having crossed from contextualization into syncretism. Still others spread their dogmatic opinions of heresy to engage in what we could well call "missiological gossip." To be fair, they do not see it as gossip at all, but as alerting God's people to the sloppy doctrine of compromising saints.

I am not referring here to differences on the non-negotiables of the Gospel. Missiological gossip occurs when we elevate disputable matters to such an extent as to condemn our brothers of wrong doing in matters where Christ has given us freedom. Satan's ancient strategy to divide and conquer is ever-present among missionaries to Muslims who accuse their Christ-centered brothers of watering down the requirements of the Gospel to make it more palatable for Muslim acceptance. They assume they know full well how God draws Muslims to Jesus, and as far as they are concerned, it does not include a C4 or C5 approach. They have forgotten that God is not always predictable. In God's passion to reach the nations, he may actually surprise us sometimes.

2. *Accuse brothers down the spectrum of obstructing the flow of the Gospel with a culturally insensitive and extractionist approach.* Pride can easily develop in those who are early adopters of God's unpredictable ways, as if they are on the cutting edge of a movement of God due to some personal ability of their own. Many fall into a trap of believing the approach God has called them to is the approach for everyone: "If everyone does not get on board," it is believed, "they will unwittingly contribute to actually hindering the very purposes of God and thereby prevent

Muslim souls from drawing near to Christ." This trap is especially easy to fall into when brothers down the spectrum are stridently dogmatic and condemning of the freedoms they exercise in disputable matters. In their eagerness to, as Paul writes in Rom. 14:16, "not allow what they consider good to be spoken of as evil," they become overly zealous to prove their point and actually offend their brothers whose conscience simply has not yet permitted them such freedom.

Paul offers some incredibly specific instruction on such issues, "So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God" (Rom. 14:22). One wonders if Paul's seasoned advice throughout Romans 14 isn't rooted in some pretty hard lessons he himself learned when dealing with the Judaizers. The intensity of his debate with these brothers is clearly seen years earlier in his rather harsh comments about Judaizers, "As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (Gal. 5:12). So if we find ourselves agitated and perhaps even upset at dogmatic Christians who condemn our freedoms to reach Muslims, let us remember that the Apostle Paul wrestled with similar issues. He and Barnabas had already had several "sharp disputes" with Jewish Christians who traveled all the way from Judea just to teach Gentiles believers in Antioch of their need to be circumcised and become Jews before they could follow Jesus (Acts 15:2). When Paul and Barnabas visited the Jerusalem council to settle the matter, the Scriptures state that after "much discussion"—this was no quick and easy matter on which they could reach immediate agreement—Peter finally stood up and reminded everyone how God surprised him with the sheet lowered from heaven with the unclean animals God commanded him to eat (Acts 15:7; 10:13). Peter then recounted God's instruction to enter the home of Cornelius, a Gentile God-fearer, even though this was a blatant violation of Jewish law (Acts 10:28). James then adds his powerful words which have no doubt provided inspiration to every believer called to contextualize, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19).

While the issues and the spectrums may change throughout history, Christians have always engaged in such condemnation of brothers for exercising their freedom in Christ. Similarly, pride continues to induce other Christians to look down on those whose conscience does not allow them such freedom. I believe both responses fall far short of Christ's command to love one another as he has loved us. Furthermore, both responses seem to ignore Paul's instruction to not pass judgment on one another in disputable matters, nor judge another man's servant for "to his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Rom. 14:4). There is however a better way, a third response to God's amazing diversity in drawing Muslims to Christ, which I believe Peter and James modeled for us at the Jerusalem council.

If we do not accept God's diversity in drawing Muslims to the Savior, blessing and praying for those who do not exactly share our philosophy of ministry, we will be playing right into Satan's age old scheme to divide and conquer.

3. Accept God's diversity in drawing Muslims to Christ, blessing and praying for those who do not share our philosophy of ministry. We can be confident that many Judaizers loved the Lord Jesus deeply (Acts 21:20), but wouldn't it have been better if they could have acknowledged God's diversity in drawing Gentiles to Christ and then responded to contextualizers like Paul in an entirely different manner? Imagine the Judaizers writing the following letter to Paul:

Paul, as much as your approach seems to contradict what we know from Scripture in the Law, we acknowledge that there is great freedom in Christ and that he has in fact fulfilled all the requirements of the Law in our behalf. It follows then that Gentiles don't have to actually convert to Judaism to receive the blessing promised to our forefathers; rather, they need to convert to Jesus the Messiah. And you, brother Paul, are doing a great work among them. We believe God has anointed you for this work and will be praying for God's blessing and protection upon you, to guard your heart and mind through some very challenging issues ahead. It is great to see the Hellenist believers supporting your efforts and we too wish you well.

Still, many of us just don't have the cultural flexibility you have Paul. We love the cherished traditions of our fathers; and frankly, many of us just don't feel comfortable in Gentile surroundings—especially during meals! Yes, yes, we know God has made all things clean. We heard about the vision Peter had with the sheet from heaven and the visit to Cornelius. Wow! Does nothing stay the same? Anyway, some of us frankly feel nauseous around non-Kosher meats; it's something we know we need to work through.

Meanwhile, we believe God will make the most of our cultural rigidity, for there are millions of Jews who still haven't believed in Jesus the Messiah. And while we worship Him at the Temple and in the synagogues, we trust that God will give us ample opportunity to share our faith with unbelieving Jews.

So let the Gentiles worship Jesus as Gentiles who have been grafted into Abraham's line by faith, and we will worship Jesus as God has revealed to our forefathers—not because it is the right or best way, or even because it is more comfortable for us, but because we long to see more of our people enter God's Kingdom. God bless you brother Paul. We'll be praying for you, daily.

With all the accusations of compromise and syncretism on the one side, and accusations of "making it hard for Muslims to enter the Kingdom" on the other, there is one critical point we must not overlook. It will certainly help resolve some of the tensions.

Not All Muslims are the Same

There are many different kinds of Muslims, each positioned on their own spectrum of how near and dear Islam is to their hearts. Many Muslim countries may well contain all of the groups listed below, and many Muslim people groups will contain individual members who share a greater sense of affinity and belonging to some of these groups than they do to the mainstream of their own ethnolinguistic people.

Nominal Muslims: These are Muslims in name only, who only go to the mosque on *eid* (a major Islamic holiday) once or twice a year.

Westernized Muslims: These Muslims, often urban youth, are infatuated with Western culture and MTV. Their parents have provided well for them financially and strive to get them into good universities. They dance at discos and smoke cigarettes with their buddies. Many are eager to learn English and live abroad. Serving God is not usually a big priority to them. Some are disappointed with their religious leaders who, they believe, are living in the past and not taking advantage of all that modernity offers.

Liberal Muslims: These are open-minded Muslims who are not intimidated by conservative Islamic fundamentalists. They are often well-educated and financially well off. One such Muslim friend of mine in Asia is a professor of English literature. Because his father, who passed away years earlier, called himself a "Christian Muslim," this professor's heart has always quite soft to the mention of Jesus' name. When his wife was admitted to a Catholic hospital, he took the opportunity to go into the chapel and pray to Jesus for her healing. As he genuflected before the cross, two bearded Muslim clergymen were passing by the doorway. One shouted in stern disapproval, "What are you doing?" He stood up quietly, walked over to the Muslim leaders, looked them straight in the eye and boldly demanded, "Tell me! Where in the Qur'an does it say I can't pray to Jesus?! Tell me! Where?" They walked away and never bothered him again.

Conservative Muslims: This devout group needs no explanation.

Ultra-Orthodox Muslims: Islamic reformists movements, like the *Wahhabis* (often called "The Protestants of Islam"), frown on what has become of Islam throughout much of the world today: a mix of Qur'anic observance with superstitions, sacred shrines, richly ornamented tombs, divination, omens, and excessive reverence of Muhammad.

Modern Muslims: These have successfully integrated Western technology with Islamic devotion and are proud to be part of a global Islamic community.

Mystical Muslims: Sufis and other folk Muslims, who, according to Wahhabis and conservative Muslims, are desperately in need of serious reform.

Atheistic Muslims: In some parts of Central Asia and other former communist lands, Islamic identity has been almost completely stripped away. They know they should call themselves "Muslim," but that's about it. One missionary to Kazakhs described them as never having seen a mosque or Qur'an in their entire life. Needless to say, this is a very different situation from most others in the Muslim world.

Rice Muslims: Some poor animistic tribes of sub-Saharan Africa or low Hindu castes of South Asia convert to Islam for material benefit or economic convenience.

Muslim Attitudes About Islam

This list is by no means exhaustive, but no matter how many kinds of Muslims we list, I believe they will all fit into one of three following categories when examining their attitude toward Islam.

1. *Muslims Disillusioned with Islam.* Iranian Muslims are a great example. Many saw what Khomeini did to their country under the banner of Islam and said, "If this is Islam, we want nothing to do it!" When a Persian in the West was asked what her religion was, she said with conviction, "I have no religion!" She, and many like her, are so disillusioned with Islam they do not even want to be publicly identified as Muslim.

2. *Muslims Ambivalent about Islam.* These Muslims are ignorant and apathetic about Islam. They don't know much about Islam, and they really don't care.

3. *Muslims Content with Islam.* These Muslims love Islam. They believe with all their heart that Islam is the only true path to God. When they look at Christianity, they see countries with the highest divorce rate in the world, where selfish ambition and materialism are at their zenith, where sexual immorality and homosexuality are accepted as commonplace, and whose economic appetites led to the colonization and exploitation of their people and national resources. They are impressed with the person of Jesus, but totally unimpressed with Christianity.

Each of these three "Muslim attitudes about Islam" ("M") has high and low ends on the spectrum. High contentment (M9) could represent devout Muslims as well as propagators of Islam. Low contentment (M7) could represent liberal Muslims who may not be too impressed with, and perhaps even embarrassed by, the dogmatism of many Islamic leaders. Nonetheless, they are very proud to be Muslim. Most communistic and rice Muslims would probably fall somewhere on the ambivalence portion of the spectrum (M4–M6), while westernized Muslims are often found between low ambivalence and low contentment (M6–M7).

The M1-M9 Spectrum: Muslim Attitudes About Islam

M1 M2 M3	M4 M5 M6	M7 M8 M9
Muslims Disillusioned with Islam	**Muslims Ambivalent about Islam**	**Muslims Content with Islam**
←――――――→	←――→	←――――――――――――――――――――――→
Iranians	*Kazakhs*	*Arabs, South Asians, Indonesians*[5]
High Dis. **Low Dis.**	**High Amb.** **Low Amb.**	**Low Contentment** **High Contentment**

Different Approaches Required

Which approach will be most effective with Muslims who are perfectly content with Islam? I believe C5 offers great promise. C4 is excellent too, but it isn't hard to understand why Muslims who are content with Islam would much prefer to learn about Jesus from a "fellow Muslim" than they would from a non-Muslim (i.e., C1–C4). For a Muslim to enter the home of a "Christian" to learn about religious matters is akin to treason. But to enter a fellow Muslim's home—even though a Muslim following Jesus may seem rather unusual—is much less likely to worry watchful neighbors. In fact, they may even go themselves to see what this study of the *Taurat, Zabur,* and *Injil* (the Bible) is all about!

Also, when the Muslim seeker after God comes home with some literature about Jesus, it is C5 literature, often printed by well-respected Muslim publishers, not by suspi-

cious-looking Christian organizations. Therefore, such literature does not need to be hidden under a mattress. Instead, it can be freely shared with family and friends.

Because the C5 believer was raised a Muslim in a Muslim family, he is worlds apart from the peculiar foreigner claiming to be "Muslim." The C5 believer really talks like a Muslim, observes proper respect for holy books like a Muslim, washes before prayer, and eats food like a Muslim. The dietary habits of C5 believers allow Muslim guests to be at ease during meal times. In non-Muslim homes, by contrast, Muslims often need to create polite excuses to leave before meals lest they be confronted with the uncomfortable situation of being served *haram* (forbidden) foods.

The doors God has opened for C5 workers was certainly seen by one North American brother in Asia who fasted and prayed six months that God would lead him to a Muslim background believer gifted in sharing the *Injil* (Good News). After finding Rashid in a C3 work and training him in C5, John sent Rashid out to reach Muslims as a Muslim. In less than two years, Rashid started 10 fellowships—they are not called "churches." God is using C4 in amazing ways too, and Phil Parshall has done an excellent job describing this (1980, 1983, 2000).

Which approach will be most effective with Muslims who are totally disillusioned with Islam? It will not be a pro-C4 or C5 approach! Muslims disillusioned with Islam want out! These Muslims are ripe for conversion to "Christianity" and want to be "extracted" from their Muslim communities. C1–C3 churches should, therefore, be most suitable to reach them, depending on their language and cultural preference. Ask any Persian Muslim background believer at an Iranian Christian Fellowship what he or she thinks about C4 contextualization, and you will probably get a confused look followed by the question, "Why in the world would anyone want to do that?" Iranians have experienced a very fanatical expression of Shi'ite Islam and as far as they are concerned, no Islamic forms or elements are worth retaining. To do so, from their perspective, seems rather foolish when so many Persian Muslims are trying to distance themselves from Islam.

What about Muslims who are ambivalent about Islam? What approach is best for them? Few from this group tend to come to faith in Christ because their ambivalence about Islam is often rooted in ambivalence about spiritual matters. The contented and disillusioned groups may therefore prove to be much more fertile soil for sowing God's Word. Nonetheless, ambivalence toward Islam means they might be reached by any community of believers along the C1–C5 spectrum.

So with all the accusations of compromise and heresy up the spectrum, and accusations of hindering the flow of the gospel down the spectrum, we may be overlooking the fact that not all Muslims are the same. It should therefore come as no surprise that God is raising up many different kinds of workers who use many different approaches to reach many different kinds of Muslims. If we do not accept God's diversity in drawing Muslims to the Savior, blessing and praying for those who do not exactly share our philosophy of ministry, we will, I believe, be playing right into Satan's age old scheme to divide and conquer.

Denying God's matchless diversity in drawing Muslims to Jesus damages the cause of Christ in far greater ways than merely wounding our brothers with accusations which discredit their missiological methods or theological scruples. Denial can dam-

age trust between brothers called to reach the same people. Those who do not trust each other do not generally pray together. Like a cancer, distrust can be quite contagious among coworkers. Rather than rejoice at what God is doing in so many different ways and learning from each other, we avoid sharing valuable information with those who might disapprove—to save ourselves from tiresome controversy.

I know brothers who do not feel free to share some thrilling developments in their C5 work with C3 brothers laboring among the very same people group. Because these C3 brothers have judged the C5 work as having "gone too far," they cannot rejoice that Muslims are being reached with the Gospel and in turn spreading the Good News far and wide.

Ground-breaking works like this can be seriously jeopardized by dogmatic C3 brothers who feel it is their duty to alert the saints of what they perceive as heresy or syncretism. Add to this the issue of physical danger such news could cause responsive Muslim participants and their families, and one can begin to see the escalating cost of denying God's diversity in drawing Muslims to himself. Surely, not all C3 believers are so dogmatic. Numerous C3–C4 workers rejoice with great pleasure over how God is blessing this C5 work, but the vigilance in security that must be taken to keep this news from our more dogmatic brothers can be uncomfortably challenging.

Conclusion

When you hear a brother engaging in missiological gossip, discrediting another for his or her approach either up or down the C1–C5 spectrum, kindly stop him, and help him see that not all Muslims are the same. For that reason, God

does not call all his messengers to reach Muslims in the same way. As dangerous or extractionist or unsettling as an approach may seem, God will use a variety of Christ-centered approaches to reach a variety of Muslim peoples.

We must all be on our guard! For if God is anything like he has been throughout history, he will surprise us occasionally. May we all heed Paul's instruction to not judge our brothers on disputable matters for to his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand (Rom. 14). Instead, "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Rom. 12:15) and "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Rom. 14:19).

When you meet workers who have been called to a different point on the C1–C5 spectrum than you, encourage them. Pray for God's protection and blessing upon them, acknowledging that God will use them to reach Muslims that you will not likely reach, "for God is not willing that any should perish" (2 Pet 3:9).

End Notes

1. All biblical quotations are from the *New International Version,* except where indicated otherwise.
2. *Proselyte of the Gate*, a well-wisher of Judaism who worshipped the God of Abraham but did not want to submit to the entire Mosaic Law, requiring, among other things, circumcision, strict dietary habits, and complete obedience to Sabbath restrictions. They were seen as "half-converts" to Judaism, and therefore could not actually call themselves "Jewish."
3. *Proselyte of Righteousness,* a circumcised Gentile who has fully converted to Judaism by complete submission to the Mosaic Law. Only these Gentile proselytes were allowed to identify themselves as "Jewish."
4. Many Muslims have been taught from childhood that to even say the word "pig" or "pork" defiles one's mouth. Because of this, its sight or smell in a non-Muslim kitchen is enough to make many Muslim background believers nauseous.
5. The peoples suggested as representatives of these attitudes are not intended to be strictly interpreted; they are attempts to discern popular patterns among Muslim peoples at the macro-level. At the micro-level, however, we could surely find numerous Arab and South Asian Muslims who are disillusioned with or ambivalent about Islam. Still, even most non-practicing Arab and South Asian Muslims share a deep pride in Islam. They will defend it before non-Muslims, even though they may complain about it amongst themselves.

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Should Muslims Become "Christians"?

Issues regarding the identity of Muslim background believers are extremely critical. Our best hope for reaching the vast Muslim populations of the world, with its great variety of Muslim people groups, is to plant flourishing churches of Muslim background believers who remain culturally relevant to Muslim society.

by Bernard Dutch

During the Gulf War in 1991, most in the country where I live considered Saddam Hussein a hero. Hearing Saddam praised was common, especially when people mistook me for an Arab. So after entering a shop one day and greeting the shopkeeper with the common Muslim "*Assalaamu alaykum*" (God's peace be upon you), his tirade against evil Americans and praise for Saddam came as no surprise. But when I purchased my items, he looked at me more closely, then asked, "Where are you from?" Not wanting to embarrass him for having been so kind and open with "one of the enemy," I replied, "I'm from Wisconsin." As expected, he crinkled his forehead and asked, "Where is that? I've never heard of it." I replied, "A small place near Canada." Smiling and evidently satisfied, he bid me farewell as I left his shop.

In my encounter with this Muslim shopkeeper, I downplayed my American identity in favor of my Wisconsin identity to avoid provoking an unnecessary conflict. Consider the much more serious issues facing Muslim background believers: Should they identify themselves as Christians or Muslims? To which community do they belong? Should they feel free to articulate their identity differently in various situations? How will they gain a hearing in their own community?

Self-Identity: A Multi-faceted Issue

Western Christians tend to place great emphasis on the self-identity of Muslim background believers. Self-identity is a major criteria differentiating several points on the "C1–C6 Spectrum" (as presented by Joshua Massey, John Travis and others in this edition of the IJFM). Some think that a Muslim background believer who continues to identify himself as "Muslim" crosses a line from contextualization to syncretism.

In my experience with Muslim background believers, their self-identity is a multi-faceted issue that defies simple explanation and often frustrates external expectations. As cultural outsiders, we often see the issue in false clarity, imposing simplistic understandings of terms and relationships. We have great expectations for young believers to "take their stand" in a society hostile to the spread of Christianity within its ranks, where the struggle for survival is more intense than we outsiders will ever understand. But for many Muslim background believers, identity is fluid, taking the most appropriate form for the situation. For instance, where Christianity has strong negative connotations, Muslim background believers may avoid a "Christian" label and identify themselves in different ways according to various perspectives and situations.

This is similar to Western Christians who may not want to be put in a "born again" box or want to be seen as "religious fanatics" by unsympathetic acquaintances. We try to distance ourselves of the negative baggage associated with the Jim Bakers, Jimmy Swaggarts, and others who have shamed the name of Christ. We disclaim association with Christian complicity in the historical realities of slavery, colonial exploitation, and paranoid witch-hunts. We, too, adjust elements of our identity to fit our situation.

Others have written about the need for multiple levels of contextualization to reach a broad spectrum of Muslims. Contextual approaches are more likely to be effective among Muslims who are content with Islam, or who face considerable social pressure, than with Muslims disillusioned with Islam. This article seeks to examine several issues of self-identity that face Muslim background believers at higher levels of contextualization. I focus on this because I believe that our best hope for reaching the vast Muslim populations of the world is to plant flourishing churches of Muslim background believers who remain culturally relevant to Muslim society.

To understand the complex issues surrounding the self-identity of Muslim

background believers, we need to take a closer look at Muslim perceptions of Christianity, the identity of the gospel in contextual approaches, and the believers' perception of their own identity. We will then look at historical usage of the term "Christian," options for believer identity in Muslim society today, and how society perceives these various kinds of believers.

Understanding local perceptions of Christianity is crucial to appreciate a Muslim background believer's self-identity. The Muslim society where I live has a long and skewed acquaintance with Christianity. Missionaries targeted animist peoples here for well over a century. The resulting church naturally developed with animistic customs and traditions. I use the term "animist background Christian" to describe this church and its adherents. The religious vocabulary of animist background Christians and Muslims are totally different and mutually offensive. For example, Christian vocabulary for worshiping God sounds, to Muslim ears, like bringing an offering of flowers and fruit before an idol. Animist background Christian religious practice also appears to Muslims as pagan and idolatrous. Burning incense before a crucifix and pictures

In some parts of the world, it has not been expedient for believers to call themselves "Christian" due to serious misconceptions about the term.

of Jesus look, to Muslim eyes, like idol worship. This animistic flavor in the church and among Christians has created major barriers to reaching Muslims.

In addition to these difficulties, Muslim clerics have preached against Christianity for generations and fostered numerous malicious misconceptions about Christians. To the average Muslim here, "Christian" means someone who worships three gods, believes Jesus is the product of a sexual liaison between God and Mary, drinks wine, eats pork, defiles himself with ritually unclean habits, betrays his cultural heritage, and uses religion to procure assistance from Westerners. This local understanding of the term "Christian" works against the spread of the gospel when it is called "Christianity," and is understandably not a label by which Muslim background believers desire to be identified.

Historical Considerations

We should remember that the term "Christian" does not come as a God-ordained label for followers of Jesus. The name arose as a local—and probably derisive—name for Jesus' disciples in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Most early believers, at least Jewish believers, preferred to identify themselves as following or belonging to "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:23; 24:14). This was true both before and after the term "Christian" had been coined in Antioch, indicating that the early believers did not quickly accept the label "Christian." In other words, there is no Biblical mandate for followers of Jesus to call themselves "Christian." Accordingly, when the term "Christian" causes serious misunderstanding and creates unnecessary barriers to the gospel, it seems appropriate to discard its use in favor of an identity that will communicate more effectively.

In some parts of the world, it has not been expedient for believers to call themselves "Christian" due to serious misconceptions about the term. Prior to evangelical missionaries arriving in Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church existed for centuries and promoted many non-scriptural practices. As non-orthodox Ethiopians came to faith in Jesus, they knew they could not be identified as "Christian" because that meant Ethiopian Orthodox Christian. So they identified themselves simply as "believers" and have become a huge and vibrant church today. Similarly, Christians among the Hausa, a largely Muslim people group in northern Nigeria, refer to themselves as "*Masu Bi*" (trans. "those who believe").

In a slightly different vein, some Catholics in Ireland, who have come to an evangelical understanding of salvation through faith in Jesus, refuse to identify themselves as Protestants because of its negative connotations. Historically, believers have often adjusted their spiritual communal identity away from the supposed "universal" designations that have negative local connotations.

Gospel Identity in Contextual Approaches

Most who work in contextualized outreaches to Muslims seek to gain a hearing by starting with things we hold in common. Christianity and Islam share many spiritual disciplines, a similar cosmology, and most all of the same prophets. Much in the Qur'an supports a high view of Jesus and the so called "previous" Scriptures. This common ground is fertile soil for sowing seeds. Thus, a contextualized approach begins from an Islamic context, then bridges across our common ground to Jesus and the "previous" scriptures. The gospel is therefore initially perceived as harmoni-

*Let's
follow in the footsteps of the
early church fathers, and not impose unnecessary
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background believers.*

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ous with—and to some extent supported by—Islamic scripture.

Some may ask, "Isn't this a deceitful blurring of two religions? Doesn't this run the risk of deceiving Muslims into becoming Christian without them realizing it?" In my experience, Muslims are not that naive. They all know that anything to do with the Injil (New Testament) is essentially Christian, but this approach provides them an acceptable "window" through which they can investigate the previous scriptures without turning traitor to their society. As Muslims come to faith, they accept baptism when they confess Jesus as Savior and Lord, they acknowledge that salvation is by God's grace through faith, and believe that the Bible (*Taurat, Zabur, Injil*) is God's Word. I have yet to meet a Muslim background believer who failed to realize that what he believes is basically Biblical, and in that sense Christian.

We therefore do not hoodwink or manipulate Muslims into believing Biblical truth. We merely present it in a manner they can understand, making palatable to Muslims what they know to be essentially Biblical Christianity.

Paul utilized a similar approach in Athens. After noting their altar to "an Unknown God," Paul pronounced, "Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23 NIV). He then proceeded to use quotes from their pagan poets (including a hymn to Zeus) as stepping-stones to the Gospel. In other words, Paul built a bridge for the Gospel with redeemable elements of Athenian paganism. This did not win the entire crowd or obviate theological hurdles, but it opened the way for several to come to faith in Christ (Acts 17:34).

Believers' Perception of Faith and Community

When a Muslim comes to faith in Christ as his savior, he knows he is making a religious change. In my experience, Muslim background believers do not perceive themselves as Muslim reformers following a "purified Islam." However, a true Islamic perspective would hold that the religion revealed by all prophets (e.g., Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad) was originally the same, but later changed by Jews and Christians. From this viewpoint, some Muslim background believers could possibly consider that they are returning to the "true Islam" as revealed through Jesus. But even in this case it would be understood that this "true Islam" is what real Christians believe.

Muslim background believers continue to see themselves as members of Muslim society. They keep their Islamic names, avoid consuming pork and wine, and do not (publicly at least) malign the Qur'an or Muhammad. They feel comfortable with the familiar rhythms and flow of life in Muslim society, and continue to meet social obligations to Muslim friends and relatives.

Muslim background believers do not see themselves as having become animist background Christians, and do not make highly visible links to the animist background Christian community. However, they do realize that animist background Christian believers are their brothers in Christ. They do not feel the same bond with people in the church who are Christian in name only, or with Christian sects who deny the essentials of the faith. So the fraternal bond between Muslim background believers and animist background Christians is therefore one of faith, not of community.

Debate on the unity of faith and community has troubled the church for centuries. The early church wrestled through the religious and communal identity of Gentile background believers. Judaizers wanted Gentiles believers to make

a complete break from their pagan traditions by embracing Judaism along with Jesus, and they no doubt insisted on circumcision along with the entire Law of Moses. This all must have seemed to have clear Biblical support. The Jerusalem Council discussed the matter at great length. Finally, James articulated their decision of the early church, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19ff). Gentile believers were not required to join the Jewish community, attend synagogue services, become circumcised, change their names, or maintain the ritual cleanliness prescribed by the Law.

After two thousand years and a Protestant ethos that emphasizes theology over community, it is easy to think in only theological terms and completely overlook the massive communal identity issues being addressed in the Jerusalem Council decision. Believers from a Muslim background are in a similar situation to that of early Gentile believers. I also believe that we should not make it difficult for the Muslims who are turning to God. Following the example of our early church fathers, we should not impose unnecessary changes to the cultural identity of Muslim background believers.

The most effective prevention against syncretism is found in a good understanding of Scripture.

Problems Associated with a "Christian" Identity

Muslim background believers face many problems identifying themselves as "Christian." In my region of the world, this is understood to mean animist background Christian. As noted above, they feel no affinity to the animist background Christian community. From their perspective, becoming a "Christian" is to betray one's family and community by following the polytheistic path of animism. With such an understanding of the term, who can blame the Muslim community for ostracizing a "Christian" and his family from the life of the community? The "Christian" child will have no playmates, and his marriage will be almost impossible to arrange. A "Christian" identity actually communicates the very antithesis of what it means to be a Christ-follower.

In addition to suffering social ostracism, a "Christian" identity precludes the Muslim background believer from gaining a hearing in his own community. A mature believer—and effective evangelist—sadly told me how he ruined his chances of reaching his family for Christ because, as a new believer, he shared the gospel using animist background Christian language and identity. Twenty years later they are still offended.

Where I live, Muslim society is broad and inclusive of many different faiths and practices. Muslim youth join communist parties and espouse atheistic dogma, but are still considered Muslims. Some Muslims never stop to pray except for Friday noon prayers. Others only pray on Islamic holidays. Mainstream Muslims belong to a bewildering number of mystical sects. Sufi *pirs* (holy men) lead groups of disciples through many unorthodox practices in their quest for a mystical experience of God—some of which are animistic and some even erotic. Of course, there are orthodox, bearded Muslims with prayer caps, and modest women covered from head to toe. Surely there is room for Muslim background believers underneath this broad umbrella of Muslim society.

Looking at the Various Options

1. Animist background Christian. This option generally results in social ostracism, and therefore can not establish a local witness relevant to Muslim society.

2. Christian with Muslim culture. Some groups have taken a "Christian" identity and retained much of their Muslim culture, such as language, dress, names, etc. However, few are able to establish a witness in their home areas. Most receive outside funding to engage in witness away from their home areas, and they are seeing some Muslims come to Christ. It is yet to be seen whether or not this outreach can result in fellowships led by local believers who remain positively engaged in their community.

3. Neither Christian nor Muslim. Some set themselves out to be followers of Jesus—outside Islam and outside animist background Christianity. This is a difficult identity for young believers to take, as there is no supporting community and no such legal category. The government only recognizes major religious communities (i.e., Christian, Muslim, Tribal Animist, etc.), so an individual cannot just create a new legally recognized religious community known as "followers of Jesus."

4. *Jesus Muslims.* A few believers try to identify themselves as a new sect of "Jesus Muslims." Some find this a viable identity, but most are not deeply involved in their communities. Muslims generally regard it as a disguise for Christianity, albeit a more palatable form of Christian than the animist background form.

5. *Mystical Muslims (Sufi).* Some believers have come from mystical Sufi backgrounds. The Sufi tradition is quite popular where I live. Adherents come to a *pir* (holy man) expecting him to be their mediator before God. The *pir* will dispense special wisdom or power to help the person cope with life's problems. Sufi brotherhoods are outside of orthodox Islam, but accepted as part of Muslim society. Believers from these traditions have perhaps the easiest job determining their identity. They say they belong to a special Sufi brotherhood called "The Way". Their specific teaching and path of salvation involves Jesus as their mediator before God. This identity is only an option for those with Sufi leanings—those whom society will recognize as Sufi-type people. Believers from mainstream traditions will not take this identity, as the trappings of a Sufi brotherhood would be problematic for them.

6. *Muslims with non-mainstream beliefs and practices.* Where I live, most Muslim background believers keep a general Muslim identity, but incorporate several non-mainstream practices in prayer, celebration of Muslim holidays, and Scripture reading. Like believers in the West who are effective in sharing their faith, they tailor their identity according to the openness of their audience. People who ask questions in a belligerent or ridiculing manner are usually shown a mainstream, God-fearing Muslim identity with few differences. This avoids wasting precious opportunities to bear witness on people not ready to hear (Matt. 7:6). If accused of apostasy, a believer can often deflect charges by pointing to the positive changes in his life. Those who inquire more sincerely are usually shown a distinctive identity that melds Muslim elements with a disclosure of faith in Jesus. The more an inquirer progresses towards faith in Jesus, the more he/she is shown an identity that deviates from mainstream Islam. There are no hard and fast rules for this matter, but this practice of testing motives and responding accordingly is an integral part of behavior in the culture at large.

7. *Full Muslims.* Some Muslim background believers tried to remove any trace of difference between themselves and an orthodox Muslim identity. They advocated full Ramadan fasting, recitation of the Qur'an in corporate worship, and confession of Muhammad as prophet. One even made plans for an off-season pilgrimage to Mecca. They were trying to take the identity of highly religious Muslims—more religious than they had before coming to faith in Jesus. Other believers opposed these steps, as they believed this was syncretistic and undermined any effective witness. After all, if believers are totally the same as orthodox Muslims, they have nothing about which to bear witness. This identity, like the animist background Christian identity, makes no progress toward establishing a local witness relevant to Muslim society.

Additional Factors

Several additional social factors affect the way Muslim background believers identify themselves to others. Testing a questioner's motives and responding accordingly (as mentioned above) also governs openness to animist background Christians, many of whom are deeply critical and suspicious of Muslim background believers. Around this type of Christian, Muslim background believers may disclose their faith, but not emphasize the essential unity of their faiths. Some animist background Christians are thrilled with the emerging fellowships of Muslim background believers, so relationships in this context can be open and cordial.

Another factor influencing a believer's identity is his social status relative to the person with whom he is interacting. If the believer comes from a higher stratum of society, then he is more free to share the distinctives of his faith. Higher social standing provides greater importance to one's views, and insulates them from trouble-making attempts of social subordinates. If the believer is of lower status, he generally keeps a lower profile around people of high position.

Whatever the audience and circumstance, believers should not deny Christ and his work on the cross (Mark 8:38, Heb. 10:39). Denial of Christ may happen due to fear of persecution or death, which we consider a weakness of faith. However, a strategy that denies Christ in order to maintain a Muslim identity crosses the line into syncretism. New believers need help to work through what constitutes a denial of Christ in their context.

For most believers where I live, this means not affirming Muhammad as their prophet, and not participating in the sacrifice of an animal for *eid*. Habitual mosque prayers are considered inappropriate for believers, but time is given for a new believer to accept this position. Occasional mosque or *eid* prayers are deemed acceptable as a sign of belonging to Muslim society.

My experience suggests that rules imposed by outsiders are not likely to be followed. Believers need to work through the Scriptures and apply them to their own situation. Outsiders can and need to help in this process, but cannot do it for local believers. The most effective prevention against syncretism is found in a good understanding of Scriptures. Proper discipleship of new believers is, therefore, far more basic, and in that sense far more important, than the degree of contextualization used in the approach.

Societal Perceptions

Muslim background believers are perceived as different from mainstream Muslims. Where believers have given bold witness, they are commonly perceived to be Christians—though not as negative as animist background Christians. Physical beatings and being cut off from government assistance often results.

Where believers take the identity of a Muslim with non-mainstream beliefs and practices (option 6 above), they are often suspected of being Christian, but still perceived as more similar to Muslims than animist background Christians. Oppression in these cases is usually mild or non-existent, unless the community spots any telltale signs of apostasy to animist background Christianity—taking a Christian name,

drinking wine, eating pork, maligning the Qur'an and Muhammad, and not attending the Muslim festivals.

When a believer's life changes for the better, local perceptions of him also improve. Muslims hold in high regard any person who believes in one God, prays, reads the Scripture, is sensitive to the needs of others, and lives an honest life—regardless of their religious affiliation. A friend of mine from Europe—well known as one of those rare Christians who lives out the above life—was recently with some Muslim friends who joked about arranging his marriage. When he questioned whether it would be acceptable for a Christian man to marry a Muslim woman, they laughed and said, "No problem! You are a good man and believe almost the same as us!"

We have seen fellowships of Muslim background believers remain in their communities for years without significant difficulty. Their low profile provides time for maturity to develop, and for quiet growth to gradually spread through their community. A few such fellowships tried later to take on a more Christian identity, joined a church denomination, and put up a public signboard. Community opposition mounted swiftly, an angry mob broke down the signboard, and leaders were intimidated. Subsequently, oppressive scrutiny was imposed on the fellowship, causing the believers to avoid meeting together for three years. Witness to the community was completely curtailed.

The "flash points" that galvanize community opposition to Muslim background believers seem to be their visible adoption of animist background Christian practice. These include erecting a church building (especially one with a signboard), adopting "Christian" names, legally changing one's religion by affidavit, eating foods that defile, and disrespecting the Qur'an and Muhammad. However, if believers avoid these affronts and live increasingly transformed lives, they are able to gain both the respect of and a hearing in their own community.

Low Profile Ministry in Hostile Societies

In societies hostile to the Church, the self-identity of believers is no trivial matter of little consequence. High profile approaches involve taking a public stand, facing strong opposition, suffering persecution, and displaying strong spiritual vitality under duress. Such courage attracts people to Christ. Even amidst such boldness, cultural sensitivity is crucially important. Little is gained by needlessly provoking public opposition. Publicly maligning the Qur'an and Muhammad are rarely helpful approaches for reaching Muslims.

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,…"
(1 Peter 3:15, 16)

In Acts 19, we see that Paul had an extremely effective ministry in Ephesus for over two years. Local silversmiths, who made and sold small replicas of Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus, were fearful of losing customers. They instigated a riot against Paul because he was leading many astray and claiming that "man-made gods are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26). Note that Paul's reported claim was not against the goddess herself, whose image was a meteor that had fallen from the sky (v.35). In defusing the situation, the city clerk argued, "You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples *nor blasphemed our goddess*" (v.37, emphasis added). Some might expect Paul would have spoken out publicly against such idolatry, but he apparently avoided making public attacks on the city's goddess. Even during his high profile ministry in Ephesus, accompanied by exorcisms and healings, Paul was sensitive to local culture and sentiment, choosing his battles carefully.

Low profile approaches involve remaining in society; identifying those who are open; appropriately arousing people's interest; and wooing them toward Christ. Low profile does not mean huddling in fear and failing to give any sort of witness. It means giving sensitive witness appropriate to a situation, all in the context of maintaining relationships in one's family and community.

> *"Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, …so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders…" (1 Thess. 4:11-12).*

In the Muslim society where I work, maintaining good relationships is perhaps the strongest factor influencing a person's behavior and is unabashedly valued more than truth, honesty or wealth. Those who treat social responsibilities lightly communicate disdain to others around them.

Paul was not the only Apostle who advanced the Kingdom with sensitivity to and respect for the sentiments of pagan peoples. Peter advocated a similar approach,

> *"Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king." (1 Peter 2:17)*

> *"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect…."*
> *(1 Peter 3:15, 16)*

Effective low profile ministry occurs as the transformed life of a believer abides in community. When positive change is lived out for all to see, respect is earned and questions are asked. These are the priceless opportunities to penetrate a hostile society with gospel truth! Such a personal witness spreads easily to others because it values people and relationships.

Modern missions, on the other hand, tend to be unreasonably biased toward high profile approaches when its participants know nothing of spilling their blood for Jesus. We read biographies of high profile missionaries that transformed cultures, and of spiritual giants that overcame astounding obstacles. We read stories about the impact of the martyrs' witness, and are filled with wistful notions about taking bold stands ourselves. Then we expect young believers to make a bold and public witness, facing consequences that we have never known. Somehow we miss the fact that most ministry is low profile: lay people living out Christ's life in the daily gaze of everyday people. This slow, steady growth ministry is an effective way for the gospel to penetrate a hostile society, and enables the church to build a local foundation.

Twenty years ago in the country where I work, Muslim background believers were so few they could almost be numbered with the fingers on two hands. Then a low profile, contextualized ministry was begun by several organizations. Numbers began to increase. Muslim background believers stayed in their communities and witnessed to others. Given the low profile and lack of centralized statistics, no one is certain of the number of Muslim background believers today. But even conservative estimates put the number in excess of ten thousand. These are true believers from Muslim backgrounds who continue to live in their communities, and work through the issues of identity much as I have described. Some have taken higher profiles and won people to Christ—along with significant persecution. Most took low profiles and are quietly winning friends and relatives to believe in Jesus.

It seems God only equips some believers to take high profiles. We should not try

to fit everyone into this pattern. Believers should have the freedom to respond to God's leading regarding the profile they should take. Let us thank God for those whom He leads into high profile ministry; we need these people who make a wide impact for the gospel. Thank God also for those whom He leads into low profile ministry, "common" believers with the extraordinary task of bringing Christ into the daily life of their community. And thank God for those whose profile falls somewhere in between.

Questions and Problems

When high contextualization and low profile ministry are considered, several questions arise.

1. How does this fit with the need to give verbal witness as mentioned in Matthew 10:32-33 and especially Romans 10:10, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved"? This matter to confess Jesus as Lord came at a time when it was treason to confess anyone other than Caesar as lord. Thus, the argument goes, Muslim background believers need to make a strong verbal confession even if it leads to their social ostracism or martyrdom.

Verbal confession is an important biblical mandate for personal growth, but to whom is it given? Is it given to anyone on any occasion? Certainly a believer confesses Christ as Lord at his baptism, in the local congregation, and in the presence of other believers. I encourage verbal witness to unbelievers whenever appropriate opportunities are created. But reckless or disrespectful witness in a hostile context is not to be encouraged. I doubt many early Christians walked up to Centurions on the street and provokingly declared, "Jesus is Lord, not Caesar!" No, most

chose low profile ways to witness as well as low profile places to meet. Their transformed lives created many opportunities to share their faith. If caught, many were uncompromising in their faith and refused to deny Christ. I have similar hopes for Muslim background believers: transformed lives creating opportunities to witness, and firm resolve never to deny Christ.

2. Does not this approach run counter to the believer's call to suffer for Christ? (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet 2:21, 4:13) There is no easy answer. Should we encourage new believers to find ways to suffer? Do we ourselves seek ways to encounter suffering for Jesus? I think all Muslim background believers will experience some suffering, and should learn to see how God uses suffering for His purposes. But there is surely little merit in suffering for insensitive and disrespectful witness, particularly if it is performed to satisfy ill-informed outsiders' notions of "proper" witness. Whether under the oppressive communist regimes of Mao in China, or the sinister plots of Nero to exterminate all Christians who would not bow to him as a god, or the persecution by a Muslim majority, low profile witness should be motivated by a strategic concern to see the church established in a hostile society—not by a desire to avoid suffering. If a believer embraces the difficulties that come with low profile witness, he will learn that God is faithful to provide all our needs, eroding the fear that can paralyze faith and witness.

3. How and when do Muslim background believers become part of the worldwide body of Christ? This is a challenge for any church of believers from a particular socio-ethnic group. But it is a particularly acute problem for Muslim background believers who wish to distance themselves from the animist background Christian community. I do not expect Muslim background believers to worship with animist background Christians in the same local fellowship. Why should I? In Western countries we consider many options when selecting a local fellowship in which to worship. We often look for churches of people with similar socio-economic class or ethnic background who share our views of "proper" worship style, preaching style, sermon length, and so on. I expect and encourage Muslim background believers to exercise similar freedom.

Still, we have high hopes for Muslim background believers to fellowship with others. Where I work, we see friendships forming between Muslim background believers and animist background Christians. For instance, in our organization, we remain convinced that members from both backgrounds must attend staff conferences together. We see organizations from both backgrounds conferring with one another on common issues. A good example of this is the regular conference of Bible correspondence schools where believers from both backgrounds share strategy and discuss common challenges. As the Muslim background church organizes and grows in confidence, I foresee them working with the animist background Church in joint ministry opportunities. Representatives of the Muslim background church in my country relate to national church leaders in other countries through an association fostered by our sending agency. In this way, they gain a sense of belonging to the worldwide church.

4. Can believers flourish and grow without a distinct identity and community? This is a profound question without a simple answer. When a community of believers is small and weak, it is difficult to meet together regularly and meaningfully. Individual

believers then have difficulty retaining their passion for Christ. I have seen many believers fall out of fellowship and then lose all signs of spiritual life.

Many believers are concerned about their children: When will they have opportunity to have believing peers? Can they keep their faith without such friends? These are not problems associated with Muslim identity per se, but with small churches struggling to survive in a hostile society.

Where I live the spiritual battle is not so much for individual Muslims coming to faith in Jesus; it is for Muslim background believers forming themselves into local fellowships. I have heard similar comments from colleagues working with Muslims elsewhere in the world. Believers in the church have a collective strength for spiritual victory that individuals do not (Matt 16:18). I believe Satan knows this and opposes the formation of the church at every opportunity. This spiritual opposition confirms to me that forming local fellowships of Muslim background believers is the right strategy. The Apostle Paul wrote, "I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me" (1 Cor. 16:8, 9). Similarly, opposition can strengthen our sense of urgency and God's guidance. We must persist in prayer for breakthroughs in establishing the church among believers of Muslim backgrounds. We must continually encourage and teach them about the crucial role of the local church in God's plan for His Kingdom.

Why These Issues Really Matter

There is more at stake here than correctly splitting missiological hairs; the eternal destiny of millions of Muslims hangs in the balance. Are we serious about giving the 850 million Muslims in the world a chance to hear the gospel in a manner that they can understand and accept? Missionaries from Christians lands will never be numerous and effective enough to win the Muslim world ourselves. The task is far too great. We need more witnesses who are located throughout Muslim society.

If we insist or suggest that Muslim background believers boldly identify themselves as "Christian," the usual result is expulsion from their society. They go from accepted insider to social pariah. The tragedy of this is not so much the personal suffering of that, but that an opportunity to penetrate Muslim society with the gospel is lost. Outsiders lack the social respect and interdependence needed for the church to take root. Our goal in outreach needs to be the establishment of a local witness relevant to Muslim society.

The majority of Muslims in the world seem fairly content with Islam—especially when compared with the "Christianity" they see portrayed in Western media. I believe that these Muslim masses will never be reached by evangelism that results in converts being extracted and expelled from their society. We will never see significant numbers come to Christ through outsiders making forays into Muslim society to abduct a few responsive people. To reach significant numbers of Muslims, we need growing numbers of vibrant, Biblically based churches that remain in and relevant to Muslim society. The Muslim world will only be reached through indigenous church planting movements that explode far beyond what outsiders can direct or fund.

Concluding Vision

The identity of Muslim background believers is a crucial and complex issue. Outsider expectations are often based on a poor understanding of the issues involved and unrealistic aspirations for young believers. Identity is fluid and takes different forms in different contexts. Believers need the freedom to work out how high a profile God is calling them to take in their community. Muslim background believers struggling to establish the church in their locality need significant prayer support to accomplish this humanly impossible task.

Perhaps these identity issues are temporary concerns, until the resulting Muslim background church grows bigger and stronger. Where I work, the Muslim background church is growing, but it has not yet attained adequate size to earn its own identity and presence in the community which can openly draw interested Muslims. The day will come when this church becomes large enough to have its own identity within Muslim society, and some of these earlier concerns will likely fade into insignificance.

In my vision for the people group in which I work, I foresee the gospel deeply penetrating Muslim society. Most believers will increasingly share with relatives and neighbors through sensitive low-profile witness and transformed lives. Upon this foundation, ever increasing numbers of people will come to faith in Jesus without being ostracized from Muslim society. With increasing numbers I foresee a growing number of believers engaging in high-profile witness that will challenge society's basic assumptions about Islam. This will not be regulated or inspired by outsiders, but will be the result of the Holy Spirit working to

expand the Church in the Muslim world.

I believe that in this way the Muslim background church will eventually grow so large and have such a power-ful vitality that Muslim society will no longer be able to contain it. The early church could not be contained within Judaism; similarly the Muslim back-ground church will eventually break out from Muslim society to form its own distinct community. When this happens, God will be seen trium-phantly extending His reign among precious Muslim peoples everywhere. Concerns about the early believers retaining a Muslim identity will be a thing of history as we behold the great-ness of God's kingdom fully estab-lished among them.

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Jesus in Samaria
A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims

The ministry of Jesus in Samaria is of supreme importance to church planters among Muslims. Not only does Jesus show us how to evangelize estranged peoples, but he also shows us how to approach the task of establishing his church among "resistant" peoples.

by Stuart Caldwell

Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well has long been a gold mine for Christians seeking to follow his example as effective communicators of the Gospel. But his ministry to the entire Samaritan village through the woman shows Jesus not only as an evangelist, but also as a church planter. John 4 is, therefore, of supreme importance to church planters among Muslims, for it chronicles the way the Master himself approached the task of establishing his church among a "resistant" people. Consider the tremendous parallels between the obstacles Jesus faced when reaching Samaritans and the obstacles Christians face reaching Muslims.

Worship Location

Samaritans and Jews had separate centers for worship. Islamic worship revolves around the *qibla*, i.e., the direction one faces to worship God. One source of conflict between early Muslims and Jews was over the issue of whether the true worshipper should face Mecca or Jerusalem.

After acknowledging Jesus was a prophet, the Samaritan woman's first comment resembles Islamic regard for place in worship, "Must worship really be offered in Jerusalem to be acceptable, or is Mt. Gerizim, where our fathers worshipped, sufficient?" As we seek to reach Muslims, this same issue of place for true worship emerges. How did the Master establish his church in this context?

Scripture

Samaritans and Jews shared a similar Scriptural tradition, along with significant differences. Like Jews, Samaritans accepted the five books of the Pentateuch, but they disregarded all additional books in the Jewish canon. Furthermore, the Samaritan pentateuch differed from the Jewish Pentateuch at several important points. For example, the prophecy of a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15-18 in the Jewish Pentateuch) has been displaced in the Samaritan pentateuch to Exodus 20:21ff. In fact, Edersheim states that it was by "impudent assertion and falsification of the text of the Pentateuch" that Samaritans claimed the superiority of Gerizim (1971:396).

One of many obstacles in evangelism among Muslims concerns our view of Scripture. Like Samaritans and Jews, Muslims believe we share a common Scriptural heritage, but disagree about who holds the "true Scripture," i.e., the complete and uncorrupted version. Christians believe the Qur'an distorts clear Biblical revelation, and Jews surely felt similarly toward Samaritans. How did the Master establish his church in this context?

Religious Vocabulary

Samaritans and Jews shared many theological concepts and terms, but some had very different meanings. For example, all Jewish sects believed in some kind of Davidic Messiah. The Samaritans, however, did not share this messianic expectation in quite the same way. They expected the *Taheb* (Teacher) would come to restore true worship, assumed to be on Mt. Gerizim. There was no Davidic connection to the *Taheb*, which should not surprise us given the historical conflict between Judah and Samaria.

Like Jews and Samaritans, Christians and Muslims share a similar religious vocabulary and main theological concepts. Yet, few would deny that we often use the same words to mean different things. How did the Master establish his church in this context?

Ritual Purity

While they were similar in many ways, Jews considered Samaritans so "unclean" that association with them resulted in defilement (Jn. 4:9). Similar

concerns for ritual purity arise between Muslims and Christians. After entering a village mosque at the invitation of a Muslim friend, there was great anxiety about my presence as a foreigner. I soon learned that they were not worried about my faith, but about whether or not I was circumcised. If not, their mosque would be desecrated and their prayers nullified. They were much relieved to hear that I too bore the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, and I was much relieved that they did not demand proof! Similar issues of purity and pollution among Muslims involve eating pork, using the left hand, washing after intercourse, and numerous other examples—many of which were equally important to Jews and Samaritans. So how did Jesus establish his church among people with so many complex issues? Surely we have much to learn from his example.

Jesus' Approach to Place of Worship

As with Jews and Samaritans, we can not underestimate the importance of place to Muslims during worship. While the woman may have been dodging Jesus' very personal remarks about her marital status (Jn. 4:17-18), her response

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Just as the Jewish followers of Jesus continued to participate in the cultural and religious life of their Jewish community, we can safely assume Samaritan believers did likewise.

reveals a very pointed question: Which religion is true? Notice how Jesus answered her—and how he did not.

> *Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks." —Jn. 4:21-23 (NIV)*

Jesus responded that the Father desires neither Jerusalem nor Gerizim to be central for worship. Did he thereby nullify worship both in the Jerusalem Temple and on Mt. Gerizim as false and unacceptable to God? Did Jesus repudiate all physical *qibla*, or (direction for prayer), in favor of a spiritual *qibla* ?

Given that the earliest Jerusalem church and the Apostles continued meeting in the temple for prayer (Acts 3:1), we must conclude that Jesus' closest followers, though they were surely among those who "worshipped in spirit and truth," did not interpret Jesus' teaching in the strict literal sense. Rather, they understood the real force of Jesus' teaching: Regardless of "here" or "there," true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. In other words, "place" is not the main issue—the heart is.

So Jesus initially answered the question of which religion is "true" by suggesting that neither religion's location of worship was "the place." Still, having heard him say "neither-nor," his disciples did not apply this in a literal sense. They continued worshipping at the temple. Considering they were Jews, this does not seem so odd. But what of the Samaritan followers of Jesus? Did they continue worshipping on Mt. Gerizim? What did Jesus teach about these matters to all the Samaritans who came from town to receive him as the promised Savior of the world (Jn. 4:39-43)? Jesus spent two full days teaching these new Samaritan believers. Surely, they must have been filled with questions similar to the woman at the well: How do we worship? Will Jerusalem become our place? Where is our *qibla* today?

Outside of Jesus' instructions to the woman at the well, Scripture is silent about what Jesus taught these Samaritans during those two days. However, his Jewish followers, having heard him say "neither in Jerusalem," continued to worship in Jerusalem since they understood the real meaning of his teaching. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume Samaritan believers also understood Jesus' teaching and continued to worship in spirit and truth on Gerizim. Just as the Jewish followers of Jesus continued to participate in the cultural and religious life of their Jewish community, we can safely assume Samaritan believers did likewise, with one major difference: they were now disciples of Jesus.

Historical evidence is scant to prove Samaritan believers continued to worship within the Samaritan religious system, but if they did not, there is a strange silence about this in Acts 8 where the Apostles do not mention a "proper place" for worship, or an alternative to Samaritan religion. We see instead a believing, Spirit-filled community apparently within Samaritan society. Why don't we see the Apostles extracting believers out of Samaritanism? Unlike Judaizers, the Apostles were simply follow-

*I am convinced
that hidden in the word "church" for many
of us are concepts that are not entirely biblical, but are
rather identified with our experience of church as
independent, isolated, and self-contained
congregations.*

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ing the same approach they personally observed from Jesus when he ministered in Samaria.

In spite of Jesus' example in Samaria, many hesitate to do similarly in Islamic contexts. They explain that Islam is different from Samaritanism. Islam was founded by a false prophet, who may have borrowed from Biblical revelation but nevertheless ended with incomplete and inaccurate conclusions about Scripture and the Messiah. However, this is precisely how Jews saw Samaritans in the first century. Jesus' ministry in Samaria is therefore highly applicable to our work among Muslims.

Samaritan Scriptures

Jesus handled the issue of different Scriptures in a way that is both more simple and more complicated than his response to place in worship. Jesus simply avoided direct confrontation about her concept of scripture, though he alluded to the superiority of Jewish Scripture when saying, "salvation is from the Jews" (Jn. 4:22). Jesus addressed the matter in another way. This is where the issue becomes more complicated, partly because Jesus was, in a very real sense, "making scripture" as he lived. Jesus gave Samaritan believers two days of "living Scripture" through his direct teaching and presence. Indeed, Jesus left this very living Scripture with his disciples, which eventually became the New Testament Gospels we so treasure today. Nevertheless, we have no evidence that denigration of Samaritan scripture was ever part of Jesus' ministry.

In a later mission to Samaritans (Acts 8), we see that the Apostles followed Jesus' example. Peter and John taught Samaritan believers what Jesus taught. And once again, we hear no debate over whether use of the Samaritan pentateuch was to be discontinued or not. Based on Jesus' clear statement that salvation is from the Jews who know what they worship, whereas the Samaritans do not, we know the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch was unacceptable to Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus' approach did not greatly emphasize or debate the errors of the Samaritan scripture.

Jesus' Approach to Contextualizing Language

Jesus used Samaritan religious terminology freely. We might miss how contextualized his dialogue about "living water" really was, but Samaritan wisdom literature contains numerous references about "living water" (Brown 1971:459). Jesus chose to redirect the metaphor toward himself.

Jesus also used Samaritan religious terminology critically. Samaritans, as mentioned above, expected a *Taheb* to appear and restore true worship, on Mt. Gerizim in particular. It is therefore no accident that Jesus addresses the theme of true worship, but note the context in which he does this. Samaritans believed the *Taheb* would be the prophet promised by Moses (Dt. 18:15-19. Cf. Brown 1983:171–172). The woman's declaration that Jesus was a prophet therefore implies she may have believed Jesus to be the *Taheb* (Jn. 4:19). By following her declaration with a question about true worship—a subject about which the *Taheb* would know since he was expected to restore true worship (cf. Brown 1983:171–172)—she further reveals her hunch that she is standing before the *Taheb* himself. Jesus answered her question about true worship, and, in effect, let her believe he was the *Taheb*—the one come to restore true worship. However, Jesus did not affirm the Samaritan belief about Gerizim; he directly corrected and transformed it (Jn. 4:21-24).

So we see that while Jesus freely uses and even assumes the religious vocabulary and concepts of Samaritanism, he does so critically. Every Samaritan belief is not accepted. There is correction and

transformation as he ultimately brings the focus back to himself.

Jesus' Approach to Ritual Purity

In the Muslim-Christian encounter, the Muslim, whom we seek to reach, is very sensitive about ritual purity. The situation is reversed in John 4. In order to reach them, Jesus exposed himself to—from a Jewish perspective—an "unclean" Samaritan. He did not observe the cultural and ceremonial (i.e. religious) taboos that separated them.

But what might Jesus have done in the opposite situation? Would he have adopted ceremonial cleanliness in the eyes of those he was trying to reach to minimize barriers to the Gospel? While we do not see Jesus doing this in the Gospels, Paul surely did and had Timothy do the same when being circumcised to gain Jewish acceptance (1 Cor. 9:19-23, Acts 16:3). In Paul's own words, he lived "as under the law" among Jews and "as not under

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I submit that the teaching and practice of Jesus, especially in Samaria, point us unmistakably towards obedience and faithfulness to Him who beckons us to walk in His steps toward the fulfillment of His vision for His Kingdom in the Muslim world.

the law" among Gentiles. And just as Paul urges us to follow his example as he follows the example of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1), I have no doubt that Jesus would have adopted ceremonial cleanliness to reach people even as he set aside such ceremonial purity to reach Samaritans.

Following Jesus' Approach to Ministry

Let us summarize these lessons from Jesus' approach to ministry and apply them to our work among Muslims today.

1. Indigenous Worship in Community. At the time of Jesus, Samaritans represented a distinct religion with their own focus of worship. They were at best heretical in the eyes of Jews. More often, they were viewed by Jews as demonized. In reality, Jews felt about Samaritanism much the same way as many Christians feel about Islam. In spite of this fact, we see no command from Jesus to leave Samaritan "religion."

Jesus, and later the Apostles, apparently planted a community of believers within Samaritan society. This was to be a community that would worship in spirit and truth, following the teachings of Jesus. Application to an Islamic context seems clear: Expect God will raise up a believing community of true worshippers who follow the teachings of Jesus within Islamic society.

We have seen how Jesus stayed with the Samaritans for two days then left. No one was there to organize this new community of believers or make decisions for them. They put their faith in the truth Jesus revealed during his time with them and were left to develop "on their own." Answers to questions about worship practices and other matters were not in the hands of outsiders or "missionaries." Such answers could not even be found by observing the example of "a missionary," because none remained long enough to observe. The "missionary" (in this case, Jesus) was gone. In contrast to the uneasiness of mission leaders today to leave new believers to themselves after only two days of teaching, Jesus did not seem overly concerned about their propensity toward syncretism. I believe this was because Jesus trusted the "Truth-impacting-lives" process enough to leave Truth on its own, even in an environment that did not seem conducive to the flourishing of truth—i.e., a different religion, different scriptures, and a different content for similar theological concepts.

2. Giving Scripture Without Polemics. Samaritan scripture differed from Jewish scripture in both content and form. How did Jesus handle this extremely challenging issue? We don't find Jesus debating Samaritan leaders about the superiority of Jewish scripture. Instead, he provides two full days of living Scripture, teaching truth and letting it do its own work in Samaritan hearts.

Although every believer is a temple for the Holy Spirit, we are surely in no place to duplicate "living Scripture." We are not Jesus and our words will not be canonized as Scripture. Nevertheless, the principle we learn from Jesus remains: Give what biblical truth we can (written, audio, video, verbal, etc.), then let his Truth do its work in the hearts of Muslims. My repeated experience has been that when a new Muslim believer begins to drink in the Word, there is no need to argue about the Qur'an.

3. Adoption and Transformation of Religious Terminology. Samaritans and Jews had theological similarities akin to Christians and Muslims. We saw how Jesus assumed and used Samaritan terms both freely and critically, while correcting and transforming erroneous concepts. This is how Jesus established his church among Samaritans.

In our work with various Muslims, should we use Islamic terms? If so, what will it mean to use such terms both freely and critically? We may freely adopt, for example, terms for Jesus such as *Mahdi*, or Qur'anic titles for Jesus such as *Kalimatullah* (Word of God), and *Ruh-allah* (Spirit of God). But to use these terms critically will mean that new biblical content must reshape and revise a Muslim's understanding of these terms. Just as Jesus assumed the role of the Samaritan *Taheb* and in the process transformed the word (Jn. 4:21-23), so too we can freely and critically adopt Islamic terminology. Like Jesus' own example, the end result of our effort must always point to him.

4. Adjusting to Islamic Ritual Purity. Jews believed Samaritans were unclean. But to accomplish his mission, Jesus was willing to cross this line and accept water "polluted" by an unclean and adulterous Samaritan woman. These taboos were not merely cultural. The distinction between culture and religion may seem reasonable to our Western and disintegrated view of life, but such distinctions were and are meaningless and absurd to peoples whose worldview was and is more holistic, like the Jews of Jesus' day and Muslims today.

Adjusting to Islamic concepts of ritual purity may require low usage of our left hand, abstinence from pork, and women dressing according to Muslim views of modesty. But how will we pray? Should we do ablutions or prostrations, use a prayer liturgy, kiss our Bibles before reading them, or wrap the Bible with special cloth and keep it on the highest shelf?

Church Planting or Kingdom Sowing

Let us question an assumption that has rested quietly throughout this article. I stated that Jesus' mission in Samaria can rightly be seen as a model for church planting. But was Jesus really "church planting"? Our answer to this question depends greatly upon our understanding of the "church planting" metaphor, which in turn rests upon how we understand its component words "church" and "planting." In our minds these are shaped, I believe, not so much by the Bible as by our mental images of what "church" means and what we think it takes to "plant" one.

As a young boy, I used to spend summers riding motorcycles in the desert. One day I was sitting on the back while my cousin drove. I noticed an interesting rock and pointed it out to my cousin over the handlebars. Immediately our motorcycle veered in the direction of the rock and we ended up picking cactus needles from our backsides. The point is that we tend to head for what we look at. Many church planters among Muslims are consciously or unconsciously looking at a "model" that may not be what Jesus had in mind at all.

Consider the idea of "church." Surely, few missionaries head out today armed with the cultural imperialism of earlier times. We are prepared to think in terms of "dynamic equivalent" Bible translations and "planting indigenous churches." But I am convinced that hidden in the word "church" for many of us are concepts that are not entirely biblical, but are rather identified with our experience of church as independent, isolated, and self-contained congregations. We therefore run the risk of equating that experience with the essence of "church."

While Jesus mentioned "the church" (*ekklesia*) only three times, he spoke far more about "the kingdom" (*basileia)*. However, Jesus' portrait of the Kingdom is far removed from what most of us think of as "church," influenced as we often are in the West by a congregational polity. There certainly is a "congregational" element to the meaning of church, especially in Paul's use of *ekklesia*. But I am convinced that we need to balance this with a recovery of Jesus' view of the Kingdom. Although these two concepts (*ekklesia* and *basileia)* are certainly not identical, they nevertheless should not be held in isolation from each other. Let us look briefly at Jesus' teaching concerning the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13.

The Kingdom is like seed sown in various types of soil. Sowing seed requires letting go. It assumes a natural process of growth. How different from thinking of church as an organization to be built, structured, trained, coached and

coaxed. Sowing is also very different from "gathering" believers. Sowing puts seed "down and in," quite the opposite of gathering wheat at a harvest.

The Kingdom is like wheat growing in a field thick with tares, which the owner hesitates to separate. Here the "gathering" or "harvesting" (i.e., what we often think of as "church planting") is something assumed to come at the end of the age. Until then, let the wheat (and notice it is good wheat from good seed) grow right there among the tares. There's no fear of syncretism. Why? Because wheat can not become tares; it remains wheat. Good seed is sown, takes root and grows—among the tares. This occurred as Jewish members of the Way (wheat) continued worshipping God at the Temple and synagogues with fellow Jews (tares) who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. Their fellowship with other believers occurred elsewhere (Acts 2:46-47), so Muslim followers of the Way may well do something similar today, as did Samaritan believers in their day.

The Kingdom is like a mustard seed. It starts small, very small according to Jesus. But it grows until birds can fill its branches. Thus, the Kingdom can be considered "planted" even when very small and insignificant. Some missionaries talk about not having "planted a church" because there are only two believers. This kind of thinking seems totally foreign to Jesus' view.

The Kingdom is like yeast in dough. Again the imagery is something "down and in," which then permeates all throughout. The Kingdom spreads and grows, transforming all it touches. In stark contrast, many of us who work among Muslims expect a church will form or be gathered by extracting members from a people rather than transforming members in a people.

The Church, when understood from a Kingdom perspective, is not so much a congregation, as it is a movement, a life, an organism, a seed. According to Jesus' metaphors, the church lives and grows amidst all sorts of other things: weeds, rocks, and dough. To plant the church among Muslims we must recover the imagery Jesus used for the Kingdom.

"Planting," the other word of the "church planting" phrase, is by itself is a good term and carries everything Jesus envisioned. However, when coupled with the word "church," which we functionally understand as something structural and organizational, we seem to subtly distort the natural and organic element of the metaphor. When we use "planting" after "church," we usually refer to the *building, organizing, gathering* and *establishing* of a church. These concepts are of course part of the overall mix of mission—we do seek to "gather" communities of faith. But overemphasis on the "gathering imagery misses the full import of Jesus' vision of "planting."

Therefore, I propose we use a new metaphor called "Kingdom sowing." To plant something we focus on a single location and often on a single plant. But to sow, we scatter, broadcast, and spread seed widely and freely. Sowers trust that in many cases, though not all, their seeds will take root and grow. So, perhaps it is time to return to the actual language of Jesus' parables and advocate the metaphor of "Kingdom sowing" rather than "church planting."

A "Kingdom sowing" metaphor is consistent with Jesus' actual practice in John 4. All that we saw in our study of John 4 flows perfectly from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 13 about how the Kingdom spreads. Jesus not only envisioned a spreading, growing, organic movement that would be sown like seed, grow like wheat, and spread like yeast, but everything he did promoted that end. It is wise to ask ourselves whether or not there is such congruence between our own mission theory and practice.

Because metaphors have inherent power to guide and shape our destinations, it is crucial to use ones that actually describe where we want to go. For this reason, I believe "Kingdom sowing" is more appropriate. At the very least, it seems necessary to refill the time-honored term "church planting" with the fresh biblical content.

Kingdom sowing is incarnational, adopting the religious and cultural forms of our Muslim friends. A community of believers will remain in their world, though not of it.

Conclusion

Jesus' example of Kingdom sowing in Samaria provides us with several applications in an Islamic context. Kingdom sowing means we seek and expect a believing community to form and remain within the religio-cultural world of the Muslim community, at least for some time. As in the early Church's eventual break from Judaism, so too believers may eventually break away from the Muslim religious community. However, I believe this should be instigated from the Muslim side, as it was in the first century from the Jewish side.

Forming a community of believers within the religio-cultural world of Muslims will include Islamic places and patterns of worship. This is what happened in Samaria (Jn. 4; Acts 8), and it seems to be what Jesus expected when he taught about Kingdom sowing in parables, especially the parables of the yeast in the dough and the wheat and the tares.

Kingdom sowing in an Islamic context means that no confrontational effort to replace the Qur'an with the Bible is needed, at least not at the beginning. While Jesus must have believed the Samaritan scripture were insufficient, he made little mention of its deficiencies. God's Spirit will lead his people into all truth. As Jesus trusted his truth to have its own power and sway, so too we can trust his Truth to be like yeast that transforms the dough. Therefore, we will be passionate about getting his Truth to our Muslim friends in effective styles and forms they can access, whether in print, audio, video, or orally memorized or even chanted.

Kingdom sowing means Truth will be communicated in the language of Muslims, including their religious vocabulary. In so doing, concepts will be changed from the inside out. Though Jesus assumed the role of the Samaritan *Taheb*, he transformed the concept as well. We need not fear syncretism, for the heart of Jesus' Truth will transform whatever vocabulary it encounters.

Kingdom sowing is incarnational, adopting the religious and cultural forms of our Muslim friends. A community of believers will remain in their world, though not of it. Many behaviors, customs, and values will be retained by a believing community, and will need to be adopted by the cross-cultural missionary. But unbiblical values will also be challenged and changed from within, by believers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:13).

I know that much of what I have proposed in this article has been addressed and debated elsewhere. Nevertheless, I humbly submit that the teaching and practice of Jesus, especially in Samaria, point us unmistakably in this direction. Obedience and faithfulness to him beckon us to walk in his steps toward the fulfillment of his vision for the Kingdom in the Muslim world.

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First-Century Jews and Twentieth-Century Muslims

For the last twelve years we have been observing what God is doing among Muslims at the close of the twentieth century. We have been amazed at the parallels between the emerging Muslim believing community of today and the believing Jewish community of the first century. These parallels are very instructive as we wrestle with how Muslim background believers desire to express their faith in Christ as their Lord and Savior.

by Richard Jameson and Nick Scalevich

Dawud lifted his eyes and examined the group gathered in his home. Ordinary! That was the only word to describe these men. None of them could be called wealthy or brilliant. Yet, when they gathered together to pray, to study the teachings of Jesus, and to share a simple meal together, they sensed a power that surpassed explanation.

Each of these men had been raised in religious Muslim families. The idea that Jesus could be God or that the Messiah could be crucified had been unthinkable to them. However, each of them had come face to face with Jesus' claims about himself. They and their families had decided to become his followers.

It never occurred to Dawud and his friends that they were "changing religions." They continued to be proud of their religious heritage. When the men of their village gathered for prayer, they joined them. They fasted and gave to the poor. In fact, Dawud and his friends thought of themselves as the true adherents of their religion. Little did they know that their expression of faith would be at the center of a missiological controversy.

Was Dawud a first-century Jew or a twentieth-century Muslim? Is it appropriate for a Muslim background believer to follow the example of his first-century Jewish brothers in Christ? May a Muslim background believer express his faith in the Messiah in the context of the Islamic religion? Is it acceptable for him to continue to join the Muslim community in prayers at the mosque? Is it legitimate for him to continue calling himself a "Muslim"?

For the last twelve years we have been observing what God is doing among Muslims at the close of the twentieth century. We have been amazed at the parallels between the emerging Muslim believing community of today and the Palestinian believing Jewish community of the first century. These parallels are very instructive as we wrestle with how Muslim background believers express their faith in Christ.

A Narrow Legalistic Perversion of Truth

Some argue, "How can you compare Judaism of the first century with Islam of the twentieth century? The former was a religion received from the true God, whereas the latter is not."

The New Testament reveals great similarities between Judaism as practiced in the first century and modern Islam. The pillars of Islamic religion and the pillars of Islamic faith parallel basic tenets of first-century Judaism. For example, Jesus speaks directly about three of the five pillars in the sermon on the mount: giving, zakat (Mt. 6:2-4); prayers, salat (Mt. 6:5-7); and fasting, sawm (Mt. 6:16-18). The first half of the Islamic confession echoes the Jewish Shema (Deut. 6:4). Jews also made regular pilgrimages to their Holy City (Acts 5:11), as do Muslims today to theirs. The basic tenets of faith are also common to both religions: Belief in One God, angels, Holy Writings, prophets, and final judgment based on a man's deeds. Furthermore, in Judaism, as in Islam today, the religion had often degenerated into either an arrogant legalism or a tool for maintaining political control.

Jesus gave the following commentary on first-century Jews,

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.
—*Jn. 8:44 (NIV)*

This commentary is equally appropriate for twentieth-century Islam. Yet the Eternal Word of God found it necessary to be made like His brothers in all things, but without sin (Heb. 2:17; 4:15). He entered the world as a light in the darkness. To the twentieth-century Muslim who has become his follower, he also says, "As the Father has sent me, in the same manner I send you" (Jn. 20:21).

As followers of Jesus, Jewish believers created a new identity for themselves within their old religious identity. The Palestinian believers clearly perceived themselves to be Jews both ethnically and religiously. Some thirty-five years after Pentecost, James reports that "thousands of Jews have believed, and

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Among both Jewish believers of the first century and Muslim believers of the twentieth, we observe a boldness to proclaim the gospel, giving full witness to the person and work of Christ.

all of them are zealous for the law" (Acts 21:30). Various sects of Judaism interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures in a variety of ways. In spite of their heterodoxy, obedience to the Law produced a certain orthopraxy that united all Jews in a common religion. The Jewish followers of Jesus, who zealously kept the law, maintained their right to be called Jews both ethnically and religiously.

As Jewish believers, they adopted for themselves a new self-identity within Judaism. They called themselves, "The Way." Although Jewish leaders perceived this to be an heretical cult, they did not perceive it to be another religion. Paul's defense before Felix is instructive. He stated,

However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets. —*Acts 24:14*

Paul is identifying himself as a Jew to other Jews. He will not even concede that he is a part of "a sect," though he acknowledges Jewish leaders think of Jesus' followers in this way. It would be more accurate to say that Paul and his Jewish background believing friends saw themselves as the only proper expression of Judaism.

Similarly, twentieth-century Muslims are forging an identity for themselves within Islam. Over thirty Muslim families, in two strongly Islamic areas, have become "followers of *Isa* (Jesus)." Some call themselves "followers of the Straight Way." They feel, live, and experience a new power. The power of the gospel has gripped their lives, making them very different from their Muslim neighbors. They have believed that Jesus died on the cross for their sins and rose from the dead. They now view Jesus as the incarnate eternal Word of Allah who became man. Not only is their theology different, their lives are different. They experience and demonstrate a new and vibrant love, joy, peace, and patience. They have become "new creations." However, most of them never considered changing their religion. Some of their leaders, who also became followers of the Straight Way, taught them to remain in their Islamic heritage. After all, the Qur'an teaches that followers of *Isa* are Muslim (5:111). They are new creations within their old religious environment.

New Faith Within Traditional Forms

Early believers continued to worship the Lord as Jews. Peter and John went "to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon"(Acts 3:1). Acts 10:9 shows Peter going to the roof to pray at the time of noon prayers. It appears that the early believers continued to observe the times of prayer as practiced by the Jewish community at large.

They also worshiped in their usual place of prayer, "day by day continuing with one mind *in the temple*" (Acts 2:46). Peter and John also went "to the temple" (Acts 3:1). In this very same temple priests were daily offering "up sacrifices first for their own sins and then for the sins of the people" (Heb. 7:27).

Jewish believers knew they were saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as Gentiles were (Acts 15:11). Imagine the confusion their worshiping in the temple could have caused. Believers who had trusted in Jesus' one and final sacri-

*Muslim
believers, like early
Jewish believers, are forming their own
communities within Islam, and learning
to love one another in small home fellowships as believers
in Isa.*

fice for sins were worshiping alongside Jews who were still trusting in daily temple sacrifices for their atonement. They worshipped God in the same place where the blood of these daily sacrifices was being offered.

Could such a practice lead to syncretism? In some cases it must have. Indeed, the book of Hebrews was written in part to address such syncretistic belief (Heb. 10:1-18). However, twenty-five years after Pentecost, the community of Jewish believers was still maintaining their place in the temple. Their leadership actually requested Paul, the great missionary to Gentiles, to make offerings in the temple as a testimony to the Jews of Jerusalem (Acts 21:23-26). It is safe to assume that the benefit of maintaining a testimony to Jews from within the Jewish community outweighed the danger of syncretism in their minds.

Mr. Ali, an *imam* (priest), has become a follower of the Straight Way. His new faith and character is now vibrant with the Spirit of Christ. Daily he attends his duties at the mosque and leads those who come to perform *salat* (ritual prayer). When Mr. Ali preaches, he often quotes from the *Injil* (New Testament). Many who come to the mosque are not yet followers of the Straight Way, but at least fourteen families have confessed faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and many others are very interested in understanding these new teachings from Mr. Ali. All of these new followers still worship Allah through *salat*, but as one of the new believers stated, "Now I truly enjoy my times in *salat*. These times of prayer and worship are no longer an obligation but a joyful time with my Savior."

All fourteen families continue to participate in Muslim holidays and activities. Is there a danger of syncretism? Certainly! But like Jewish believers of the first century, these twentieth-century Muslim believers feel that the opportunity to be lights amidst the darkness outweighs this risk.

One Body, Two Communities

In order for Jewish believers to maintain their position within Judaism, they lived under the Jewish law and apart from Gentiles. James reports that they were "zealous for the Law." As such, they had to keep their distance from "unclean" Gentiles. In so doing, the early Jewish believers were following the example of Jesus. As far as we know, Jesus never entered a Gentile home. He never violated the Jewish dietary laws. He lived his life as member of a people who had by and large separated themselves from Gentiles.

Paul's writings reveal two distinct categories for the body of Christ: First the Jews, then the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16; 3:29; 9:24). Paul clearly perceived that the single Body of Christ was made up of members from both groups when they put their faith in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). However, to maintain a credible witness to unbelievers from their respective communities, many chose to be one in Spirit yet separate in almost all aspects of everyday life. To reach those living under the Law, the Jewish background believer lived as though he was under the Law, all the while knowing Christ had freed him from the Law (1 Cor. 9:19,20; cf. Fisher 1985). Paul wrote,

Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised [i.e. a Jew] when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised [i.e. a Gentile]. Was a man uncircumcised [i.e. a Gentile] when he was called? He should not be circumcised [i.e. a Jew]. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. —1 Cor. 7:17-20 [comments mine.]

In order for a Palestinian Jew to "retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God had called him," he had to separate himself from "unclean" Gentiles, at least to some degree. Similarly, many twentieth-century Muslim believers are finding it necessary to maintain their distance from the traditional Christian community in order to stay within their Muslim context. Christian dietary practices, dress, and worship styles make it difficult for Muslim believers to freely fellowship with them. To do so would destroy their credibility in their own community, as it would have for first-century Jewish believers.

Ahmed, a leader of a Muslim community of believers, begged a Christian pastor not to tell other Christians about his movement: "We are seeing new people join us on a regular basis. If the [traditional] church finds out about us, they will want to come see. That will destroy everything we've built. Please stay away."

Muslim background believers are forming the vanguard of a new evangelistic thrust into the Muslim world. How will we respond? Will we affirm them? Will we encourage them as they strive to be and do to what God has called them to be and do?

Sharing the Gospel

Among both Jewish believers of the first century and Muslim believers of the twentieth, we observe a boldness to proclaim the gospel, beginning with the testimony of the writings held to be authoritative by the unbelieving community, and progressing to a fuller proclamation of the person and work of Christ. In Acts 2, Peter preaches Christ's death and resurrection with quotations from the prophet Joel and Psalms. In Acts 3, he preaches repentance based on Deuteronomy 18 and Genesis 22.

Paul followed this pattern of ministry to the Gentiles. As long as his audience was primarily Jewish, he relied heavily on the Old Testament Scriptures. However, as soon as he found himself in a context where the Jewish Scriptures were not thought to be authoritative, he laid his scrolls aside. In Lystra Paul based his message upon God's revelation of himself in creation, seasons, rainfall, and growing crops (Acts 14:14-18). When standing before the philosophers of the Areopagus, he quotes not from the Old Testament but from two poet-philosophers (Bruce, pg 357)

In many different villages, Muslim "followers of the Straight Way" often sit and share their faith in Christ with friends in the market place, mosque or neighborhood. Most of these men have never been trained in any methods of outreach, they just share what they have read in the *Injil* (New Testament) or experienced in their lives since believing in Christ. Mr. Yusuf visits relatives in a strong Muslim area once a month. Shortly after he placed his faith in Jesus, the Straight Way, he visited relatives and began sharing the new power he had through Christ. After many hours of discussion and many visits from Mr. Yusuf, four men have also trusted Christ and are now studying th*e Injil.* One of these men in turn started his own study group with five others.

Reinterpretation of the Holy Writings

Both Jewish believers of the first century and Muslim believers of the twentieth defend their faith with their traditional Holy Book. Moreover, both communities radically reinterpret these writings based upon their knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. The teachings of the apostles contain hundreds of quotations and allusions to the Old Testament. Rarely, if ever, would their interpretations of these passages have met with the approval of the Jewish religious leadership of their day. Ironically, New Testament writers often used the same hermeneutical methodology, *midrash*, as did the Jewish leadership of their day (Ellis 1978:151-162), but they arrived at some very different conclusions. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they found Jesus and his church prophesied throughout the Old Testament. Most Jewish rabbis did not see the same fulfillment of Joel 2 in the events of Pentecost. Similarly, most scribes did not agree with Peter's use of Psalm 16 to prove the Messiah had to be raised from the dead. If Jesus or the early disciples ascribed to the practice of only allowing the religious elite to determine the meaning of their Holy Scriptures, much of what we call the New Testament would not have been written.

Rashid was responsible for preparing the sermons preached in all the mosques in his region. At first he was shocked to hear Rahmat and his friends teaching new ideas from the Qur'an. Rahmat taught Jesus was the eternal Word of Allah (Qu'ran 4:171), born of a virgin, killed and raised again. They quoted Surah 19:33 from the

Qur'an, "So Peace is on me the day I was born the day that I die and the Day that I shall be raised up to life (again)"! These "common, uneducated men" now called themselves "followers of the Straight Way," the very "Way" Rashid was obligated to seek in prayer seventeen times a day! They explained to Rashid that according to the Qur'an (5:68), they are not of the true religion even a little bit unless they "stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord." They explained that this verse was referring to the Bible. Also, these men boldly declared, "The *Injil* (New Testament) was not falsified as taught in the mosque since '. . . In the life of the present and in the hereafter: No change can there be in the words of Allah' (Qur'an 10:64; 6:115)." Many dozens of verses from the Qur'an were interpreted in a new light to Rashid. Looking at the Qur'an through the lens of the *Injil* was a new experience. These verses prompted Rashid to begin reading the *Injil* until he too trusted Christ as his sacrifice.

Persecution of Muslim Believers

It would have been naïve for Jewish believers to assume they could have avoided persecution by remaining Jewish. Jewish believers faced two types of persecution. The first involved arrests, interrogation, and floggings (Acts 4,5). This opposition came because Jewish leadership perceived the apostles to be teaching an aberrant form of Judaism. The apostles were claiming that the crucified Christ had risen from the dead and as such had demonstrated that he was the promised Messiah. Jewish leaders warned and flogged the apostles, but then let them go (Acts 5:40). Though persecuted, the Palestinian believing community was able to stay within the Jewish fold primarily because it continued to worship at the Jewish temple, thereby honoring what was sacred to Jewish leadership. The fact that thousands of Jewish believers remained zealous for the law twenty-five years after Pentecost (Acts 21:20) testifies to their success in maintaining their place within Judaism. When believers began to face this type of persecution, their first and foremost prayer request was not that they would be protected from harm, but that they would be bold to speak the Word (Acts 4:29).

It wasn't the first time Mr. Alim had come to the house physically beaten for the sake of his Savior. However, this was the worst beating he had taken. Black and blue, the whole left side of of his face was swollen from the pummeling. Mr. Alim had once again paid the price for sharing his faith with a group of Muslim men. It all started a few months earlier, when a few seekers had gathered with him to study about Jesus from the Qu'ran. After a few meetings, he began teaching from the Holy *Injil* (New Testament). Through the *Injil* they were coming to understand more fully the person who they called the Word of Allah. During one of these meetings, suddenly a man burst in to the room, accused Mr. Alim of being the anti-Christ, and began to beat him mercilessly. They chased him from the village and told him never to return.

A few weeks later Mr. Alim came to the house again. His face mostly healed, he excitedly shared about another group of seekers he had found. Over the next few weeks he shared the gospel with the local witch doctor, a man known for his powerful black magic. This man became a follower of Jesus and renounced his black power. Seeing the dramatic change in the witch doctor's life, two village mosque leaders decided to accept the great sacrifice provided by Allah. Many continue to come from surrounding villages to learn from these three men about *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah), and the number of believers continues to increase.

In the early church, the second level of persecution began with Stephen and was characterized by imprisonment and martyrdom. F. F. Bruce contends that the intense Jewish persecution against the church was focused on the Hellenistic believing community, primarily due to their separation from and criticism of the temple (1985:648, 649). In contrast to the Hebraic Jewish believers, the teachings of Hellenistic Jewish believers was a cancer to be cut out and destroyed. Stephen was stoned to death. Saul organized raids on towns throughout Palestine, attempting to eliminate their heresy.

In our context, Muslim followers of Jesus who continue to honor their religious traditions, the mosque, prayers, fasting, and the Muslim holidays are still called to give an account for their teaching about Jesus. In most cases they have been able to defend themselves from the Qur'an and were released to continue their witness in the community. However, Muslims who have left the Islamic fold to "become Christians" face persecution at a different level. Some have been

killed. Most are evicted from their homes, divorced by spouses, and fired from their jobs. Most flee to a large city, become members of churches and marry Christian background spouses. They grow in the Lord but have virtually no witness to their own people.

Building Each Other Up in Small Group Settings

As members of a new community within an older established community, healthy interpersonal relations quickly emerge as essential for the life of the group. In Acts 2 and 4 we see small groups gathered for prayer and mutual encouragement; they learned from each other and shared meals together. Within a few years, James, the Lord's brother, emerged as the leader of this community (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). James begins his letter admonishing Jewish readers to receive trials and persecutions as the building blocks of faith. He then devotes the bulk of his epistle to building and maintaining a community of mutual love and compassion. The extraordinary unity of these believers was attractive to the community at large (Acts 2:47; 5:13b,14).

Mr. Nur became a follower of Christ, the Straight Way. He shared the testimony of the Qur'an concerning the *Taurat, Zabur* and *Injil* (Bible) with his good friend Latif, who had seen a remarkable change in his life. This, along with the verses from the Qur'an, convinced Latif to begin studying the Bible. They invited four Muslim friends to join them. Almost daily they studied the Bible together, and soon all six were following Christ. The group grew to almost forty, then broke into five groups that met at different times of the week for prayer and Bible study. These "cell groups" decided to meet at times that did not compete with mosque activities. Deep love, concern, and mutual support typify each one of these groups.

Miracles in the Name of *Isa*

Both Jewish believers of the first century and Muslim believers of the twentieth gained credibility through miracles. From the linguistic miracle of Pentecost to healings and angelic jail breaks, the miraculous placed a hedge of protection around the early Jewish believers (Acts 3:6-8; 5:12, 17-20). Even the Sanhedrin found it difficult to argue with the miracles that accompanied the faith of early Jewish believers, "But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say" (Acts 4:14).

Asgar had long been involved in black magic. He had become crazy over the last few months, possessed by evil spirits. His friends brought him to four Muslim shamans to free Asgar from the spirits, but his condition only worsened. Finally, one Muslim man said in desperation, "Let's bring him to Mr. Ghafur. He is part of the new sect, the followers of *al-Masih* (the Christ)." As a last resort, they brought Asgar to Mr. Ghafur, who casts out the demons in the name of *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah). Asgar was miraculously freed. To this day, he is "clothed and in his right mind." Three other demon-possessed men were then brought to Mr. Ghafur, who prayed for them and saw them released from bondage as well. This so impressed the leader of the mosque in Mr. Ghafur's village, he too put his faith in Christ's sacrifice.

Conclusion

The faith of Palestinian Jewish believers described in the book of Acts has given twentieth-century Muslim believers a newfound freedom in the way they express their faith in Jesus. Like early Jewish believers, they are forming their own communities within Islam, and learning to love one another in small home fellowships. They are boldly proclaiming the gospel by beginning with a radical reinterpretation of the Qur'an as it bears witness to Christ, and then moving to a fuller testimony of the person and work of Christ from the Bible. Although they continue to face persecution from the Muslim majority, they have maintained their witness as religious insiders by righteous living accompanied by demonstrations of God's miraculous power. These Muslim background believers are forming the vanguard of a new evangelistic thrust into the Muslim world. How will we respond? Will we pray for them? Will we support them in love? Will we affirm the unique place in life that the

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Both Jewish believers of the first century and Muslim believers of the twentieth gained credibility through miracles...The faith of Palestinian Jewish believers described in the book of Acts has given twentieth-century Muslim believers a newfound freedom in the way they express their faith in Jesus.

Jameson and Scalevich

Lord assigned to them in His Kingdom, encouraging them as they strive to remain where God has called them? Or will we brand them as syncretistic heretics, and demand that they conform to the ranks of more traditional and Western Christianity?

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The "Son of God"
Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus

There is much confusion about the Messianic titles, even among Christians. The way we use and interpret the titles of Jesus among Muslims is not only confusing but often repulsive, leading many to reject the Word of God before they have a chance to consider its message. This article addresses the issues involved and if heeded will promote proper communication of the Gospel to Muslim peoples so that they may be able to hear, call upon the Lord and be saved.

by Rick Brown

In the Ancient Near East, the main social structure had originally been the tribe, but people extended the rights, duties, and privileges of tribal membership to others by making covenants. Kingdoms arose and expanded when a king made a covenant with his people. The king was then called 'father', his vassals were called 'his sons', and they called each other 'brothers' (Barker 1995:19). In this way, the Israelite covenant community used kinship terms such as 'son', 'brother' and 'father' to describe social relationships as well as biological relationships. When a king made a covenant with a subservient king, they called each other 'father' and 'son'. God's covenant with David is expressed in these very terms (2 Sam. 7:14 and parallels, Ps. 2:7, Isa. 9:6, Ps. 89). In the New Testament, the King-Messiah is called 'God's Son', his people are called 'God's sons', and God is called 'their Father'.

Problems with Sonship Terminology

In some languages and people groups kinship terminology is only used for biological relationships, not for social or covenant relationships. If people are called 'sons of the king' or the king is called 'their father', it means but one thing to them—the king had carnal relations with their mothers. In many cases, such languages attribute no implication of continuing care to these kinship terms; they simply assert a biological relationship. In Arabic, for example, the words for son and father have a biological meaning only. The terms are not used broadly or metaphorically for other interpersonal relationships, not even for a nephew, step-son, or an adopted son, and certainly not for the king's subjects nor for God's people.

Judging from the testimony of the Qur'an, when ancient Christians translated these Hebrew expressions literally into Arabic, they gave the impression that they claimed to be God's offspring (5:18), that Jesus was the result of God's relationship with a female companion (6:101), that Jesus and Mary were both gods alongside God (5:73, 116), and that the prophets of old were his offspring as well (21:26; 9:30). This view is condemned in the Qur'an as so insulting to the majesty of God as to almost cause the heavens to burst, the earth to split, and the mountains to collapse (19:88-92). Against this the Qur'an affirms that both Mary and Jesus ate food (5:75), meaning they were humans, not gods; that God has no consort or child (72:3; 6:101),

God neither begets nor is begotten (112); and that anyone who calls Jesus 'offspring of God' is a *kâfir*, meaning an infidel condemned to hell forever (9:30). The Qur'an scoffs at those who call themselves 'sons of God', pointing out that these people are created human beings (5:18), and obviously not gods. It warns that if anyone calls himself a god like *Allah*, he is assured a place in hell (21:29).

Muslims everywhere have been taught that Christians believe this blasphemous biological sonship of God, and their teachers commonly cite this to "prove" Christianity and the Bible are corrupt and full of errors. So when Muslims encounter the phrase 'God's son' in literal translations of the Bible, they not only misunderstand it, they are filled with abhorrence and conclude the Bible is blasphemous and must be avoided. We will therefore look at the meanings of these terms in the first century and suggest effective ways to understand and explain them.

The Title "Sons of God"

Hebrew and Aramaic often use constructions with the word 'son' to signify belonging, as in 'sons of Israel', 'sons of Babylon' (Ez. 23:17), 'sons of Zion'

(Ps. 149:2), 'sons of the prophets' (2 Ki. 2:5), 'sons of man' (Ez. 2:1; Dan. 8:17), 'sons of the Kingdom' (Mt. 13:38), as well as for benefiting from something, as in 'sons of the resurrection' (Lk. 20:36), 'sons of light' (Lk. 16:8; Jn. 12:36), and 'son of peace' (Lk. 10:6). Similarly the phrase 'sons of God', in both the singular and plural, is used in the Bible to refer to individuals, peoples, and angels who willingly belong to God and enjoy his special favor. God called the Israelites and those associated with them to accept a covenant by which they would be his faithful and chosen people. He would care for them as their "Father" (Deut. 32:6; Jer. 31:9), and they would corporately be his "son" or "sons".

Israel is my first-born son.... (Ex. 4:22; see Hos. 11:1, RSV[1])

You are the sons of the Lord your God.... (Deut. 14:1)

In the century before Christ, the phrase 'sons of God' was applied to those who kept the covenant and were considered righteous (Wisdom 18:4-9).

The phrase "sons of God" causes a major problem in cultures where readers would not understand this phrase to be figurative and, further, would not accept the idea of God having physical offspring.

In the New Testament, citizens are described as "sons of the kings", unlike conquered subjects (Mt. 17:25). Similarly, being "sons of God" is equivalent to being "sons of the Kingdom" (Mt. 13:38), meaning those accepted by God for eternal life with him in his Kingdom,

> *And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God'. (Rom. 9:26)*

These are contrasted with those who are called 'sons of the world' (Lk. 16:8), 'sons of the evil one' (Mt. 13:38), 'child of hell' (Mt. 23:15), and 'son of perdition' (Jn. 17:12). So the phrase 'sons of God' generally refers to the people of God, also called 'his saints', those consecrated to God. Newman and Stine (1988:113) recommend expressing this metaphor as a simile:

> *The phrase "sons of God" (children of God) causes a problem in cultures where readers would not understand this phrase to be figurative and, further, would not accept the idea of God having physical offspring. Translators in these cases sometimes use similes, as in "God will say they are like children to him," "God will consider them as if they were his children," or "God will have a relationship with (or, will care for) them like a father with his children."*

Most Muslims, however, are so sensitive about attributing sons to God that even a sonship simile can be repugnant to them. Islam does not recognize adoption, so that simile does not work either. If the meaning of 'kingdom of God' has been explained, then 'sons of God' can also be explained as "the people of God's Kingdom" *(ahlu mamlakati llâh)*. Unfortunately many believers do not understand the Kingdom of God concept, complicated further by the fact that most Arabic translations have expressed it as 'God's sovereignty' *(malakuutu llâh)*, to which everyone is already subject. The phrase *ahlu llâh* 'people/family of God' is usually acceptable, since it does not demand a biological interpretation as 'sons of God' does in Arabic, but people generally do not use this expression.

Most natural would be to explain 'sons of God' and 'saints' by using expressions they already know and understand, such as 'the righteous servants of God' *('ibâdu llâhi S-SâliHîn)*, meaning those whom God has accepted (justified). This is especially appropriate in passages referring to believers' current standing with God (Mt. 5:9, Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:26). Another paraphrase is 'companions of God' *('awliyâ'u llâh)*. This phrase was used to translate 'sons of God' in *The Elegant Gospels*, one of the most ancient Arabic translations of the Gospels,[2] and is especially appropriate when explaining passages that refer to the believers' future state (Lk. 20:36; Eph. 1:5; and perhaps Rom. 8:19).

Another paraphrase suitable for the future state of God's "sons" is 'those close to God' *(al-muqarrabûn)*. This expression is usually applied to Jesus and the angels, and highlights the Christian hope of direct fellowship with God. Curiously, these terms are acceptable to Muslims, while the Qur'an (5:18) criticizes the Christians' self-description as 'beloved ones of God' *('aHibbâ'u llâh)*. In modern dialects, however, this expression sounds like it means "God's buddies", which is also objection-

*According
to the Qur'an, if God wanted a son,
he would not have had to beget one [with a woman];
rather, he would have created one by his own command
(19:35).*

able. We see here that part of what hinders Christian-Muslim dialogue is simply the use of objectionable words rather than objectionable concepts—though the latter also exist (e.g., mankind's hopeless sinfulness, the divinity of Christ and his sacrificial death).

The Title "Son of Man"

The title Jesus preferred for himself was 'Son of Man'. But as Newman and Nida note, "for the reader of English who does not have the theological training, 'Son of Man' is generally either a zero term, or it is misunderstood as a reference to Jesus' human nature" (1980:52). Muslims often misunderstand the term to be a denial by Jesus of any claim to divinity, which is almost the opposite of its intended meaning.

The indefinite construction 'a son of man' was the normal Aramaic idiom for a human, but the definite construction, 'the son of man', was not used except in reference to the human-like ruler mentioned in Daniel 7:13. This passage, below, inspired great hope that instead of a merely human Messiah, a heavenly person "like a son of man" would come from heaven to save people of all nations from sin and evil and be their king in a kingdom established by God:

> *And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. (Dan. 2:44)*

> *I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed ...the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, for ever and ever. (Dan. 7:14-14, 18)*

This passage introduced the idea that the Christ/Messiah would not just be a restored king of the Jews who would give them dominion over other peoples, but rather he would save and rule all peoples inclusively.

This concept was elaborated in certain Jewish writings before Christ. For instance, *1 Enoch* speaks of "that Son of Man" and "the Son of Man" in regard to a pre-existent heavenly being who will come to establish his kingdom, destroy evil, rule the earth, judge all people at the resurrection, and usher in a new world that is free of all evil. Other titles used in *1 Enoch* include 'the Elect One', 'the Righteous One', 'the Light of the Nations' (48:4), 'God's Messiah' (52:4), and God's 'Son' (105:2). Similar titles or expectations are found in other works of that time (*4 Ezra, 2 Baruch,* and the *Testament of Abraham*).

As many scholars have noted, first-century Jews were united in their hope for the Messiah and his kingdom, but divided in expectations about their coming. Some awaited Daniel's heavenly ruler, whom they called 'the Son of Man', to rule all nations equitably in an age of peace and righteousness. But most Jews awaited a nationalist leader to lead them in successful battle against their enemies, making Israel the righteous ruler of the world. They used a variety of royal, Davidic titles to describe their awaited commander, such as 'Messiah/Christ', 'Son of David', and 'Son of God'. Jesus, however, clearly avoided these titles associated with Jewish nationalism, choosing instead to identify himself with the 'Son of Man' concept and title.

Jesus declared that the 'Son of Man' came from heaven (Jn. 3:13) and that the Son of Man has authority higher than the Law (Mt. 12:8; parallels: Mk. 2:28; Lk. 6:5), that he has authority to forgive sins (Mt. 9:6; and parallels: Mk. 2:10; Lk. 5:24), that the 'Son of Man' has power to raise the dead (Jn. 5:21,28; cf. Php. 3:21) and power even to raise himself from the dead (Jn. 2:19; 10:18), he as the 'Son of Man' has authority to grant eternal life to others (Jn. 17:2; Mt. 25:34,46), that his kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18:36-37 and that at the end the 'Son of Man' will come in his glory (Mt. 25:31), that he reveals the glory of his Father (Mt. 16:27) that he sends his angels (Mt. 13:41; 16:27) and that the 'Son of Man' sits on his glorious throne (Mt. 19:28; 25:31), that he will judge everyone in all the nations (Mt. 16:27; 25:31ff).

The phrase 'Son of Man' is clearly an exalted title in its first-century Jewish context, especially as Jesus used it.

Christians in some places have made such an issue of calling Jesus and themselves "sons of God" that they oppose any translation that uses synonyms, even if it would allow many more people to hear the Word and be saved.

Outside of Jewish contexts, however, it had so little meaning that the Epistles drop it completely in favor of other titles, principally 'Lord'. It is absent from the preaching in Acts as well, occurring only in Steven's exclamation in Acts 7:56. Not only does the phrase 'Son of Man' lack the intended content in most languages, but it also has unwanted meanings in some languages, such as "bastard."

Some translations have used expressions like 'the Man from Heaven', 'the Man from God', 'He who was born a man', and 'the Messiah' (Living Bible). Many translations simply use the pronoun 'I' when Jesus is referring to himself as the 'Son of Man'. The New Testament writers themselves, when not quoting Jesus, refer to him as 'Lord' rather than 'Son of Man'. 'Lord' is a title Jesus accepted and even encouraged (Jn. 13:13; Mt. 25:45).

A new Arabic translation, *al-kitâbu sh-sharîf*, has adopted the translation 'the One Who became man' (*allâdhi Sâra basharan*) in place of the incomprehensible *ibnu l-'insân* ('Son of the Person'). While weak on expressing authority, this expression is unique in its application to Jesus and keeps the 'man' part of the original title—hinting at his more-than-human heavenly origin. It is also possible to explain or translate 'Son of Man' as 'lord of all' (*sayyidu l-kawn*) (Acts10:36) or 'lord of mankind', but this could be confusing in Muslim contexts since some already use these titles for Muhammad.

Therefore, one can explain the title 'Son of Man' by referring to the passage in Daniel 2 and 7, describing one who is like a man because he is more than a man. He was originally in heaven and has been given authority over all the earth to establish God's redemptive Kingdom. This would reflect the first-century understanding of the term. One can then review what Jesus said about himself as the Son of Man, as noted above.

The "Messiah" and "Son of God" Titles in the Old Testament

God ruled his special Old Testament kingdom through the agency of King David and those of his sons whom he anointed, and they related to God as his vice regents. The one chosen by God to rule his people was called 'his anointed' (lit. 'his messiah', Ps. 2:2; 132:17) as well as just 'his king' (Ps. 18:50), meaning appointed by God and accountable to him alone.

Throughout the ancient Near East, it was common to call a king 'son of God' after he was enthroned, if not 'god' (see Fossum 1992, Hoffmeier 1997). This was more a functional than ontological title—though a few kings became arrogant and actually claimed divinity for themselves. The title 'son of God' meant they had divinely sanctioned authority over their subjects, and were themselves subject to no one but God. Fossum, for example, mentions a monument in Pergamum that commemorates "emperor Caesar, Son of God [Greek, *theou huios*], God Augustus" (1992:133). In their book *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament,* Moulton and Milligan cite papyri that use 'son of God' as a royal title for Caesar, such as one dated "the thirty-ninth year of the dominion of Caesar son of God," and another from the emperor himself, signed "Caesar Augustus, son of God" (1930:649).

Similar terminology was used in Israel as well. The role of Moses with respect to Pharaoh was called that of 'god' (Ex. 7:1); the early judges were called 'gods' (Ex.

22:8, 9, and perhaps 28), as were the rulers (Ps. 82:1, 6) and king (Ps. 45:6-9; Isa 9:6 (verse 5 in Hebrew)). More common, however, was the term 'son of God'. It was a fitting title for a king who acted as a peoples' representative before God, and as God's vice regent to rule over them. As was common at that time, the king's vice-regency to God was expressed by calling him God's 'son' (Ps. 2:7; 72:1; Isa 9:5), even his 'first-born' (Ps. 89:27). This metaphor indicated both that the king's authority came from God and that his kingdom was a trust from God to whom he must give account.

> *Give the* king *thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son! May he judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with justice! (Ps. 72:1-2)*

Similarly, the chosen king's enthronement is compared to an adoption of begetting:

> *I will be* his father, *and he shall be* my son. *When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him.... (2 Sam. 7:14-15; parallel: 1 Chr. 17:13-14) Then he will speak to them... saying, "I have set* my king *on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are* my son, *today I have begotten you. (Ps. 2:5-7; cf. Isa. 9:6a).*

Although the people of God's kingdom in the Old Testament era could call God 'Father' or 'our Father' (Isa. 64:8), it seems it was only the anointed king who could call him 'my Father', reflecting their ideal relationship:

> *[David] shall cry to me, 'Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.' And I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth. (Ps. 89:26-27)*

This explains why the authorities became so upset when Jesus called God 'my Father' (Jn. 5:17-18), even though they themselves called God their Father (Jn. 8:41). It is clear that the royal titles of 'messiah/anointed' and 'son of God' were more or less equivalent, and the second Psalm uses both.

But in the Muslim world, kinship terms are not used for the relationship between God and his chosen king, and the meaning of 'messiah' is not known. These passages can be clarified, however, by explaining that the phrase means "the one God has chosen to be king over his people." It is important to note that the divinely appointed king was not just a ruler; he was supposed to guide the people in accordance with God's law and save them by God's grace from crime, waywardness, and outside aggression.

"Messiah" and "Son of God" Titles in the New Testament

It is often said that the greatest obstacle to Muslim-Christian dialogue is the phrase 'son of God'. Before dealing with this issue, let us first understand it as it is used in the Bible, not just as it is commonly used in systematic theology.

The Davidic monarchy appeared to have ended with the Exile, but God had promised that David's throne would last forever. People expected God would anoint a descendant of David to be the ultimate messiah-king. In addition to Daniel 2 and 7, several prophecies encouraged them to hope for a savior-king, who would live forever and whose divinely-appointed kingdom would never end:

> *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be* ruler in Israel, *whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)*

Just as Daniel 7:13 inspired the title "Son of Man" for the coming Savior, many of these prophecies inspired Messianic titles as well. The most quoted prophecy of Christ is Psalm 110:1, which introduced the title 'Lord':

> *The Lord says to* my lord: *"Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool."*

The most common Old Testament titles for the coming Savior use the name 'David', which inspired 'Son of David' as a Messianic title:

> *And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. (Eze 34:24. See also Isa. 11:1-10, Jer. 23:5-6, 33:15; Eze. 37:25-26; 1Chr. 17:11-12; Mk. 11:10; Mt. 9:27; 12:23; 15:21)*

The servant of the Lord title (seen in Mt. 12:18-21; Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30, and echoed at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration) arises from Isaiah 42:1:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. (see also Isa. 42:2–4, 52:13–53:12)

God shows his choice of David to be "highest of the kings" by calling him his "first-born" in Psalm 89:26-27, and he chooses Solomon to be his "son" in 2 Sam. 7:14 (parallel: 1 Chr. 17:13-14), but Isa. 9:6-7 applies 'Son' to the Savior King and may lie behind John 3:16. By the time of Jesus, Jewish teachers were interpreting all royal 'son' and 'messiah' passages as Messianic, along with less obvious passages (e.g., Gen. 3:15, 49:10, Num. 24:17-19, Ps. 80:15, and perhaps Ps. 118:22-29), and thus 'God's Son' became a title for the coming Savior-King. Of these passages, the New Testament picks out Psalm 2 as referring prophetically to the Messiah, quoting parts of it in many places:

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed [lit., 'his messiah], ... "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.

But as mentioned previously, expectations differed among Jews. Nationalists were expecting God to send a military leader to destroy Gentile armies, expel sinners and foreigners, and restore the kingdom of Israel to dominate the world on God's behalf. They were ready to go to war as soon as the Messiah appeared. They called their anticipated hero 'the King of Israel', 'the Messiah of Israel', 'the Lord Messiah',

'the Son of David', 'God's Messiah', and 'God's Son'.[3] Their messianic expectation is clearly seen in the *Psalms of Solomon,* composed in the century before Christ. This book of psalms contain the earliest record of the title 'Messiah' being used for the awaited savior-king. A portion of psalm 17 illustrates the prevailing nationalist concept of a warrior-Messiah who will save the righteous by destroying the unrighteous:

See, Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel in the time known to you, O God. Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers, to purge Jerusalem from gentiles who trample her to destruction; in wisdom and in righteousness to drive out the sinners from the inheritance; to smash the arrogance of sinners like a potter's jar; to shatter all their substance with an iron rod; to destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth.... He will not tolerate unrighteousness (even) to pause among them, and any person who knows wickedness shall not live with them.... And he will have gentile nations serving him under his yoke... An he will be a righteous king over them, taught by God. There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days, for all shall be holy, and their king shall be the Lord Messiah.

Similar descriptions of the Messiah's warfare can be found in the targums, the explanatory Aramaic translations of Scripture which were read aloud with the Hebrew text. The passage below from the Dead Sea Scrolls also exemplifies this in language similar to Luke 1:32-33 and Daniel 7, although more violent and nationalistic; it is the Jews who conquer and rule the world, and the Messiah is simply their leader.

The son of God he will be proclaimed and the son of the Most High they will call him. Like the sparks of the vision, so will be their kingdom. They will reign for years on the earth and they will trample all. People will trample people and one province another province until the people of God will arise and all will rest from the sword. Their kingdom will be an eternal kingdom and all their path will be in truth. They will judge the earth in truth and all will make peace. The sword will cease from the earth, and all the provinces will pay homage to them. The Great God is their helper. He will wage war for them. He will give peoples into their hands and all of them (the peoples) He will cast before them. Their dominion will be an eternal dominion.[4]

The way Christians interpret and use the titles of Jesus among Muslims are not only confusing but sometimes down right repulsive, leading many of them to reject the Word of God before they have a chance to consider its message.

Compare this with Luke 1:31-33:

> *You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus. He will be great; he will bear the title "Son of the Most High"; the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be* king over Israel *for ever; his reign shall never end. (NEB)*

Usage of the titles 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' in first-century Jewish writings, however, shows that while they were still equivalent, their meaning had narrowed. Instead of meaning just any Israelite king or prophet chosen by God, they generally referred to a unique, undying king through whom Israel would gain the final victory. This understanding is reflected in the 'son of God' question from the high priest (Mk. 14:61 and parallels), who, along with Pilate, understood the title as equivalent to 'King-Messiah' and 'the king of the Jews' (Lk. 23:2-3).

But Jesus rejected the nationalistic view of the Messiah and his Kingdom, and avoided the Messianic titles nationalists used, such as 'Messiah' and 'Son of God'—though he did not deny them when others used these titles of him. He insisted instead on calling himself 'the Son of Man', the inclusivist title of the Messiah, and he specifically sought to include the Gentiles in his kingdom.[5] Had Jesus proclaimed himself "the Messiah" ('the Christ'), then nationalistic zealots might have immediately acknowledged him as king and risen up in revolt against Rome. For this reason, Jesus not only avoided these titles but forbade others from using them of him in public (Mt. 16:20). He even forbade demons from using these titles:

> *And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the* Son of God!*" But he rebuked them, and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was* the Christ. *(Lk. 4:41)*

This passage not only shows that Jesus did not want his kingly identity announced publicly; it also demonstrates that 'the Son of God' and 'the Christ' were still synonymous titles. When people addressed Jesus as 'the Christ/Messiah' or 'the Son of God', Jesus usually changed it to 'Son of Man', which was the higher title and free of nationalistic connotations:

> *Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." .... Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he [Mark uses 'the Son of man'] must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things.... (Mt. 16:16, 20-21a)*

> *Nathaniel answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"6...And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." (Jn. 1:49, 51)*

> *... tell us [the High Priest said] if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man [Dan. 7:13] seated at the right hand of Power [Ps. 110:1], and coming on the clouds of heaven [Dan. 7:13] (Mt. 26:63-64)*

The High Priest's question above (Mt. 26:63; Mk. 14:61; Lk. 22:70) is footnoted in the American Bible Society's new translation, *The Contemporary English Version,* with this explanation: "*Son of God:* One of the titles used for the kings of Israel." But the meaning Jews attached to this title is clear from their response to Jesus' acceptance of the 'Son of God' title and his self-identification as 'the Son of Man', "And they began to accuse him… [of] saying that he himself is Christ a king" (Lk. 23:2). Pilate understood it to mean "King of the Jews" (Lk. 23:3; Mk. 15:2; Mt. 27:11; Jn. 18:33), as did his soldiers (Mk. 15:18 and parallels). They posted this same charge on the cross (Mk. 15:26), and the chief priests themselves taunted him with it, "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe" (Mk. 15:32).

It is widely accepted that Peter's important confession of who Jesus is in Mt. 16:16 "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God", like Nathaniel's in Jn. 1:49, employs two titles for the same messianic position. Furthermore, Peter's use of 'Son of God' is the normal Jewish usage, meaning the awaited Messiah. This is clearly how Luke and Mark understood Peter's confession. Luke shortens the confession to 'The Christ of God', omitting the word 'son' as superfluous, while

Mark retains only 'You are the Christ', omitting the appositional phrase, 'the Son of the Living God'. Assuming Luke and Mark knew the longer form of the confession, it is unreasonable to suppose they would have omitted the title 'Son of God' if they thought it carried some new revelation not already present in the 'Christ/Messiah' title. Even in Matthew, Jesus himself abbreviates Peter's long title to simply 'the Christ' (16:20). Therefore, if 'Son of the Living God' were a higher title than 'the Christ', Jesus would have commanded his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the 'Son of God'. The fact is, although Jews had different concepts for the awaited Messiah, they used most titles interchangeably, and both 'Christ' and 'Son of God' were fairly equivalent. But because these were favored by nationalistic zealots, Jesus generally avoided them both,[7] preferring the inclusivist heavenly savior title, 'the Son of Man' or the shortened form 'the Son', and sometimes 'the Lord'.

Titles of Jesus after His Resurrection

After Jesus' ascension and enthronement in heaven, there was no longer a danger that the nationalists would misunderstand his messiahship in a restorative

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Christians may theologically be correct but exegetically wrong. The Scriptures ascribe divinity to Jesus in a variety of ways—not merely by calling him 'the Son of God'.

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way to start a revolution in support of him. The nature of Jesus' kingship was now clearly understood to be "not of this world," and so there was no longer a need to conceal his identity as the King-Messiah. In fact, the resurrection was the sign by which Jesus was publicly "designated Son of God... Christ our Lord" (Rom 1:4). His apostles were no longer bound by his commandment to "tell no one that he was the Christ" (Mt. 16:20). In fact, their task was now to proclaim to everyone the Kingdom of God in Jesus the Christ. They did so now without avoiding the royal Messianic titles such as 'Christ' and 'Son of God', which they still used interchangeably:

> *And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God" .... proving that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 9:20, 22)*

> *... the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel, ... but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ... [God] was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles. (Gal. 1:11-16)*

> *Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God.... Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 Jn. 5:1, 5; see also Jn. 20:31, 11:27)*

> *Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Rom. 8:9b) And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6)*

> *the kingdom of his beloved Son, (Col. 1:13) ...the kingdom of Christ and of God (Eph. 5:5)   ...the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ (Rev. 12:10; also Rev. 11:15)*

More often, however, they proclaimed Jesus simply as 'Lord', which replaced the 'Son of Man' title, probably because the latter was unknown to the Gentiles. Paul uses 'Son of God' terminology for Christ only twelve times and 'the Son' only once, never in juxtaposition with 'the Father', whereas he uses 'Lord' and 'Christ' hundreds of times each. So what prompted him to use 'Son' at all? 'Son' is a relational term, and an examination of the passages where Paul uses it shows that in most cases he is focusing on the dearness of Jesus to God, while in others he is identifying Christ with his followers as the one who has made them 'sons.'

In John, on the other hand, 'Son' occurs mostly in contexts emphasizing a close relationship to God that reflect his nature through perfect obedience. Hebrews shows the same trend. As R. C. Sproul notes in *Who is Jesus?*, "The primary significance to sonship in the New Testament is in its figurative reference to obedience. The motif of the firstborn has more to do with preeminence than with biology" (1999:43). But for Paul, the highest title for Jesus was 'Lord' (Php. 2:9).

When was Jesus "Begotten"?

When Muslims read in the Bible that Jesus was "begotten" of God, it seems to confirm their belief that the Bible is corrupt and that Christians are accusing God of sleeping with Mary. According to the Qur'an, if God wanted a son, he would not have had to beget one [with a woman]; rather, he would have created one by his own command (19:35). In the Bible, however, the term 'begetting' is used of Jesus, not with regard

to his physical birth or his origin in God, but in regard to his enthronement. The apostles used the term 'begotten' to speak of the King's enthronement, just as it was used in Ps. 2, Isa. 9:6, Ps. 110:3, and by implication in 2 Sam. 7:12-14. The 'begetting' of Jesus began with his resurrection and was consummated with his ascension to the throne in heaven:

> *And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee.' (Acts 13:32-33)*

In Heb. 1:1-5, the author applies the term 'begetting' to Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God, at which time he obtained the name (position) above all names, that of 'Son'.[8] Yet the same passage affirms the eternity and divinity of the one who bears that name, so it is clearly not talking about his origin. Jesus did not come into existence at the time of his "begetting" or become divine then. Hebrews clearly implies that he is the eternal Wisdom of God, which John identifies with the Word. The 'begetting' refers to his enthronement as the King-Messiah—the Son of God. He was designated king before that, but there had not yet been a public declaration (Rom. 1:1-4) and heavenly enthronement. Therefore, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus constitute, in the words of R.C. Sproul, "the supreme political event of world history. The Ascension catapulted Jesus to the right hand of God, where he was enthroned as King of kings and Lord of lords" (1999:101).

The Nicene Creed

From the close of Scripture until the fourth century, when Christians wanted to refer to the divine nature of Christ, they called him the Word (*Logos*). This was a meaningful term to both Jews and Greeks, though not in exactly the same way, as seen in the Creed of Caesarea:

> *We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, the maker of all things visible and invisible;*
>
> *And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, God of God, Light of Light, Life of Life, Son only-begotten, First-born of all creation, begotten of the Father before all the ages,...*
>
> *We believe also in one Holy Spirit.*

It is very revealing that as Christianity developed in the Greek context, it lost its familiarity with the language and worldview of first-century Jewish Palestine. An elder named Arius arose and declared that since Jesus was God's first-born son and was said to be begotten, he must not be fully God but rather the offspring of God. Arius reasoned that the Son came into existence whenever he was begotten and was therefore not eternal God but a new god. This development introduced polytheism into Christianity, and the first church council convened at Nicea in 325 AD to oppose it. Since Arius had based his position on the fact that Jesus is called God's Son, they replaced 'Word of God' in the Creed of Caesarea with 'Son of God', but added an

explanation that 'begotten' meant "from the being of the Father" (Greek, *ek tês ousias tou patros*). After this, people began to use 'Son of God' the way they had used 'Word of God' before, to refer to the divine nature of Christ. So it is natural for Christians today, when they read 'Son of God' in the Bible, to think of Christ's origin in God rather than his role as Savior and Lord of all. Although they were theologically correct, exegetically they were wrong. The Scriptures ascribe divinity to Jesus in a variety of ways, but not by merely calling him 'the Son of God'.

The "Messiah/Christ" and "Son of God" Titles

Muslims will agree that Jesus is "the Messiah" (though they do not know what this means), and argue that Christianity is obviously false because it claims that God begets offspring. So before explaining 'Son of God', one must first explain the meaning of the title 'the Messiah/Christ' as developed in the Bible. After doing this, I gently explain that 'Son of God' is merely a title for the Messiah, meaning God loves him and sent him as the Messiah with power from God, so that all people should honor and obey him. Some will go on to declare we worship three gods, but when I read Mark 12:29-30 to them, that the most important commandment is to recognize God is One and that we should love him with undivided hearts, they are astounded and have new respect for the Bible. If they say we worship Jesus as God, I ask if Jesus is God's Word whom he cast into the virgin Mary to be born as a man called 'the Messiah'. Most reply affirmatively, but do not understand what these titles mean, providing opportunity to explain Jesus as the Word of God.

Nevertheless, even when properly explained, Muslims are loathe to use the phrase 'Son of God' because of the negative and fearful associations it has had throughout their lives. It is therefore usually best to avoid it. In fact, many Muslims who have read the Gospel and come to faith in Jesus cannot bring themselves to call him or themselves 'sons of God'.

In 1989 a video on the life of Christ was being recorded in a certain language. Several actors were engaged to do the voicing, all from non-Christian backgrounds. As they learned their parts, they loved the story and believed the entire message: the power and authority of Jesus, his wondrous claims, sacrificial death, victorious resurrection, and plans to come again. But they could not accept that Jesus was sired by God. Even after hearing several explanations of the phrase, they refused to utter words that to them and their people could only mean God had fornicated with Mary. So the translator finally changed 'Son of God' to 'Beloved of God', a phrase these people used for an only son. Everyone was satisfied and they recorded the video.

This illustrates that the main problem here with 'Son of God' is the wording itself. Since 'Son' is used in contexts emphasizing the dear and intimate relationship of Christ to God, 'God's Beloved' can convey this appropriately. 'Companion (*walî*) of God' has also been used, and while one would think it sounds like *shirk* (polytheism), it has been an acceptable term.[9] Another acceptable phrase is 'the One loved by God as a father loves his son'. Other translators have used 'God's Messiah', which is accurate if the term 'Messiah' is explained. It should be remembered that biblically, the title 'Messiah/Christ' has no less significance than 'Son of God'. As the Scriptures reveal who Jesus really is,

the meaning of both 'Christ' and 'Son of God' expand to encompass the Word and Wisdom and Image of God, incarnate as the Savior of all mankind.

Nevertheless, Christians in some places have made such an issue of calling Jesus and themselves 'sons of God', that they oppose any translation that uses synonyms, even if it would allow many more people to hear the Word with an open heart and be saved. Recently I read a report about two people groups which have traditionally been very closed to Christianity, as they understood it. Cassette tapes on the life of Christ were produced for them using the phrase 'God's Messiah' and 'God's Word' instead of 'Son of God'. The tapes became very popular. People freely shared them with others and talked openly about the death and resurrection of Jesus as historical facts of great significance for their salvation. But many Christians in neighboring groups, rather than rejoice at the spread of the Good News, complained about the wording. In some cases, outside Christians have even prevented such tapes from being distributed. On the day of judgment, will those who might have heard and believed the Gospel stand up to accuse such Christians of hindering their salvation? Only God knows.

Title "the Son"

Jesus also called himself 'the Son'. The fact that Jesus is never quoted as calling himself 'the Son of God' in the Synoptic Gospels indicates that 'the Son' is his shortened form of 'the Son of Man' title, occurring in contexts where changes of reference are frequent, making it awkward and unnatural to use a longer title:

> *All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Mt. 11:27; parallel: Lk. 10:22)*

> *But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Mk. 13:32; parallel: Mt. 24:36)*

In contexts where there is less rapid change of reference, the longer form is used, even when juxtaposed with 'the Father':

> *For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father. (Mt. 16:27; parallels: Mk. 8:38; Lk. 9:26)*

> *Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal. (Jn. 6:27)*

> *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; ... As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. (Jn. 6:53, 57)*

> *So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me. (Jn. 8:28)*

Where one finds Jesus calling himself 'God's Son' in John, it is generally in association with being the 'Son of Man' (Jn. 5:25-27; 3:13-17). In his epistles, John does not use 'the Lord' at all for Jesus; instead he uses 'the Son' as well as 'the Christ'. So one can explain 'the Son' as an abbreviation of 'Son of Man', meaning the one sent from heaven as king and savior for all mankind.

The Title "Lord"

The most quoted messianic passage in the Old Testament is Psalm 110:1, "The Lord [*Yhwh*] said to my Lord ...." Jesus himself accepted and affirmed the title 'Lord' (Mt. 7:21-22, 12:8; 21:3; 24:42: 25:11, 37, 44; Jn. 13:13-14), and the apostles chose it over 'Son of Man' as their most popular title for Jesus. They came to understand that Jesus is "Lord of all" (Acts 10:36) and not just "King of the Jews."

> *Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Php. 2:9-11)*

Given that this had been a title for the Roman emperor, meaning he was the ruler of the world, the Christians' claim that Jesus is Lord led to numerous persecutions in the first centuries. Confusion arises, however, from the fact that the Greek Bible uses *kurios* 'Lord' to translate the Hebrew name of God '*Yhwh*', as do most modern translations. The Greek, however, makes a subtle grammatical distinction between 'Lord' as a name for God and 'Lord' as a Messianic title. In the Aramaic of Jesus and the early church, the equivalent Messianic title was *marana* 'our lord' (as in 1 Cor. 16:22), while the name of God was *marya* 'the Lord'. The Hebrew version of Matthew used *adon* 'Lord' for the Messiah and *Yhwh* for the name of God, as in the Old Testament.

In Jewish Arabic translations of the Bible, God's Hebrew name *Yhwh* was translated using his Arabic name *Allah*, but most modern Christian Arabic Bible translations have used *ar rabb*. The term *rabb* means "highest caretaker/upbringer," and is usually found in possessed constructions, such as *rabbu l-bayt* 'head of the household', *rabbu l-'â'ila* 'head of the family, patriarch', and *rabbunâ* 'our caretaker, our Lord'. This latter construction is quite common and evokes thoughts of fatherly care. The form *yâ rabb* is frequently used to address God in prayer. Unfortunately, the modern Arabic translations have used the rare form *ar rabb*, not only for the Father, but also as a title for the Messiah. As a result, when Muslims see *ar rabb* in the New Testament, they assume it refers to God (the Father). When they read that people "preached in the name of the Lord" (Acts 9:29; 14:3) or "believed in the Lord" (Acts 11:21; 18:8), they assume it means people believed in God, which they as Muslims already do. They do not hear in these verses the call to believe in Christ. When they read *ar rabb* clearly used of Christ, they react negatively as if he were being called 'the Father'.

In *The Elegant Gospels* of the 9th-century, the name of God is translated as *Allah* or *ar rabb* or *rabbi* or *rabbuna*, and the Messianic title "Lord" is translated as as *sayyid* or *sayyiduna* or *mawlânâ* 'our Lord' and sometimes as *'îsa* 'Jesus'. This policy has also been followed in some recent versions of the JESUS film and in *al-kitâbu sh-sharîf*. So when Muslims ask why Jesus is called *ar rabb,* it can be explained that it means *mawlânâ* 'our Lord' or *sayyidu l-kawn* 'Lord of creation', and that this is more or less the meaning of the title 'Messiah' as well.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of confusion about the Messianic titles, even among Christians. They often misinterpret the titles to be statements of genealogy and of being rather than titles defining particular roles. 'Son of God' becomes a statement of deity, and 'Son of Man' becomes a statement of humanity, whereas the original intent was that 'Son of Man' and 'Lord' should describe Jesus' authority over all mankind, while 'Son of God' and 'Messiah' meant he was the eternal king over the people of God's kingdom. Among Muslims, however, these titles are not only confusing but often repulsive, leading many to reject the Word of God before they have a chance to consider its message. It is hoped that this article and the summary of the issues involved will promote understanding of the Messianic titles, enabling believers to explain them effectively. Serious Muslim objections to reading the Bible or considering Christ can melt away when these terms are correctly understood, translated and explained.

Endnotes

1. Biblical quotations are quoted from the *Revised Standard Version*, 2nd edition 1971, except where otherwise indicated.
2. *The Elegant Gospels* are preserved in manuscripts Leiden OR 561 and Vatican Arabic 17 and 18. These manuscripts are said to date to the 9th century, and are called "Elegant" because

of their poetic style.

3. Newman and Stine suggest that when Jews used 'Son of God' for the Messiah, "the primary reference was to the moral relationship of love and filial obedience which should exist between a father and his son" (1988:80).

4. Qumran document 4Q246, as translated by Vermes (1997:577). See also 4Q174, which interprets the royal son in 1 Sam. 7:12-14 as a reference to the Messianic 'Branch of David.'

5. The inclusion of the Gentiles is supported by passages such as Isa. 2:4; 11:10; 42:1; 52:10,15; 55:4-5; Ps. 2:7-8, and Amos 9:11 (as quoted in Acts 15:16-17). Their inclusion by Jesus is mentioned in Mt. 8:10-12; 21:43; 24:14; 28:19; Jn. 10:16, as well as other passages.

6. "Since both these terms are equally Messianic titles, there is no anticlimax in the present passage which places King of Israel after Son of God. The order is perfectly logical and reflects a definite temporal sequence, for it is only as Jesus is designated the Son of God that he can become the King of Israel in this Messianic sense" (Newman and Nida 1980:50).

7. Jesus made subtle use of 'son' in the parable of the wicked tenants, where the landlord sends his "beloved son" to collect the rent (Mt. 21:37; Mk. 12:6; Lk 20:13). Jesus uses 'Son of God' in Jn. 5:25, 10:36, and perhaps 3:16. He subtly calls himself 'Christ' in Mt. 23:10, Mk. 9:41, Lk. 24:26, 46 and Jn. 17:3. Of course, he also accepts these titles from others in Jn. 4:26, 11:27.

8. In Php. 2:9-11, the name (position) he is given above all names (positions) is that of 'Lord', and in Eph. 1:20-21 it is 'Christ'. It seems evident that these titles are more or less equivalent in status. There is also a fragment from the *Dead Sea Scrolls,* IQSa II, which describes the coronation of the Messiah as the time when God "begets" him.

9. This was used in some passages in the 9th century *The Elegant Gospels*. The term Safî was used for 'Son' in the high priest's question in Mt. 26:63 and parallels, and in one of the devil's temptations in Lk. 4:9 and parallels. 'Chosen One' (*muStafa*) was used in the confession of the centurion at Mt. 27:54.

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Messianic Muslim Followers of *Isa*
A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations

*Our team has prayed for and patiently shared with many Muslim friends
about* Isa al-Masih *(Jesus the Messiah). Some have become Messianic Muslims who reject or modify
unbiblical Islamic teachings, yet they still see their lives woven together by the social fabric of
Islam. They strive to form groups with other like-minded Muslim followers of Jesus to
study the Bible, pray for each other, and fellowship in Christ. Yet they do not view
or call themselves "Christians."*

by John Travis

For the majority of the world's one billion Muslims, "changing religions" is never seriously contemplated. Even nominal Muslims tend to see Islam as a single fabric weaving together tradition, culture, and customs related to dress, diet, family life, morality, worship, and in some contexts, even economics and politics. Having lived in the heart of a Muslim community for the past thirteen years, my family and I have had the privilege of praying for and patiently sharing with many Muslim friends about *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah). I am convinced that many Muslims are drawn to the person of Jesus, and some long to accept him as Savior, though "changing religions" is for them unthinkable.

I personally know many Muslims who have put their faith in Jesus. Some have formally converted to Christianity and worship at local (often Westernized) denominational churches, or in small home fellowships with other Muslim background believers (MBBs). Fearing persecution, others worship underground. Still others, often called "Messianic Muslims," follow Christ but remain within the Muslim community. These Messianic Muslims reject or modify unbiblical Islamic teachings (e.g., they insist Jesus did die on the cross), yet still see most aspects of their lives woven together by the social fabric of Islam. They are not silent about their faith in Jesus, though they are discerning about when and where to share. They strive to form groups with other like-minded Muslim followers of Jesus to study the Bible, pray for each other, and fellowship in Christ. Yet they do not view or call themselves "Christians."

I designed a simple chart called The C1-C6 Spectrum to graphically portray these different expressions of faith by MBBs (Travis 1998; see chart on page 5 in this edition). It must be noted that each "C" on the spectrum represents a particular type of "Christ-centered community" or follower of Christ, differentiated by language, culture and religious identity. While this spectrum helps us distinguish several different kinds of MBBs, it also raises many questions, particularly about the C5 "Messianic Muslim" expression of faith. The purpose of this article is to take a closer look at C5 by examining its background and several present-day case studies. However, three points must be emphasized at the onset.

First, most of these case studies chronicle the very first penetrations for the Kingdom of God among a particular Muslim people group. Consequently, these newly emerging bodies are very much in process (see Gilliland 1990 concerning "process"). Hiebert (1994), in his theory of "bounded and centered sets," also reminds us that the *direction* in which a believer or group of believers is headed is extremely crucial. For any group of Christ-followers, it needs to be asked whether or not they are becoming more or less Christ-like and Biblical over time.

Second, there are inherent limitations in how much non-Muslim outsiders like ourselves can dictate what happens in C5 fellowships. We proclaim the Gospel, lead Muslims into relationship with Jesus, and invite them to immerse themselves into the Word of God with us. How they view Islam is not prescribed by us, but left to them as they are guided by the Word and the indwelling Spirit.

Finally, Muslims are coming to faith in many different contexts worldwide all along the C1-C6 spectrum. C5 is neither the greatest nor the only thing

God is doing in the Muslim world, but it is something about which we must know, rejoice and pray.

What is Meant by the Word "Christian"?

The term "Christian," when coined two thousand years ago in Antioch, originally meant "those belonging to Christ" (Barker 1995). Today however, the word means different things to different groups. To American evangelicals, "Christian" is a positive word meaning one who knows or is committed to Christ. More than mere religious affiliation, this term describes one's heart-faith and relationship with God. Therefore, it is not uncommon for evangelicals to say, "I went to church regularly as a child, but became a Christian in high school." Here "becoming Christian" refers to the time he experienced salvation and life-changing faith in Christ. Using this understanding of the word "Christian," some evangelicals might say the United States is not a Christian country, since the majority of the population has not experienced this life-changing faith in Christ.

Nevertheless, Johnstone indicates that over 86% of those residing in the

In the Muslim context, the word "Christian" is now largely devoid of its original spiritual meaning. It now connotes Western culture, war (the Crusades), colonialism and imperialism.

United States consider themselves "Christian" (1993:563). In contrast to evangelical use of the term, many within this 86% define "Christian" in terms of tradition, nominal religious affiliation, ethnic heritage, or, most of all, by not belonging to another religion (e.g., Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism). To those holding this definition, it sounds peculiar for one raised in the church to proclaim later in life, "I have become a Christian."

In the Muslim context, the word "Christian" is now largely devoid of its original spiritual meaning in Acts. It now connotes Western culture, war (the Crusades), colonialism and imperialism. While some Muslims may associate Christianity with the love and selfless living of Mother Teresa and relief organizations, most tend to focus on negative aspects of present day Western culture like immodest dress, sexual promiscuity, disrespect of elders, indulgence in alcohol, Hollywood violence, narcotics and pornography. With such negative perceptions of the Church rooted in negative stereotypes of the West, it is little wonder that "joining Christianity" is often seen by Muslims as betraying one's family and community to join the heretical camp of their enemies.

Consider, therefore, how different listeners will perceive the news, "Achmad (a Muslim) became a Christian." Evangelicals hear a spiritual message of supernatural encounter with the living God: "Achmad is now a born-again follower of Christ!" Nominal church members hear a religious or administrative message: "Achmad has become a member of a church." Muslims, however, hear a message of betrayal and apostasy: "Achmad has forsaken the faith of his forefathers and joined with immoral infidels."

Because of the above semantic misunderstandings, we never speak of Muslims "becoming Christians" in our ministry. Instead, we speak of those who have "experienced life-changing faith as followers of *Isa.*" Still, is the problem only one of semantics, easily corrected with a change of terminology? Could the problem of old and new religious community run much deeper? In these days, for the sake of the lost, might the Holy Spirit be moving the hearts of some Muslim background believers to live out their new faith in Christ while remaining in the Muslim community?

C5 Believers and Congregations

C5 believers are Muslims who have been drawn to faith in Christ by the Spirit of God, often through reading the Bible on their own, hearing a radio broadcast, receiving a dream or vision, experiencing a miraculous healing in the name of *Isa,* or seeing the loving, patient, incarnational witness of a believing friend. C5 believers understand that good works and religious observance cannot remove sin; that the sacrifice of the Word made flesh, the Messiah, is God's only provision for salvation; that the *Torah, Zabur* and *Injil* (the Old Testament, Psalms and New Testament) are the Word of God; and that obedience to Christ was God's original plan for true "Islam" (Arabic for "submission to God"). Heart attitudes, family relationships and communication with God change radically, as the indwelling Holy Spirit produces his fruit in their lives. Just as early Jewish followers of the Way enjoyed fellowship in homes and in the temple with the larger Jewish community, so many C5 believers gather in small home fellowships and in the mosque with the larger Islamic community. Just as early Jewish followers of Jesus changed few of their outward Jewish religious

The interaction of C5 believers with outside Christians and theologians is very limited. They rely heavily on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. We must pray for them and trust the Holy Spirit will give them supernatural wisdom and guidance.

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forms, so too C5 believers change little in their outward Muslim religious forms—most of which, incidentally, are derived from ancient Jewish and Christian traditions (Woodberry 1989 and 1996).

Objections and Responses

Phil Parshall, respected missiologist and pioneer in contextualization, expressed objections related to C5 (1998). Massey (1999), Gilliland (1998), Travis (1998) and Winter (1999) responded briefly to some of Dr. Parshall's concerns, three of which are as follows:

1) Deception in Christians posing as Muslims to reach Muslims (i.e., "C5 missionaries").

2) Danger in ongoing mosque attendance past a transitional period for new believers since "the mosque is pregnant with Islamic theology" (Parshall 1998:409) and exalts Muhammad as a prophet.

3) Affirming the prophethood of Muhammad by recitation of the Muslim creed (shahada): "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet."

On Parshall's first concern, I agree. C5 was never intended to be a "missionary approach," but rather to describe how some MBBs live out their faith in Christ. I personally cannot endorse Christians claiming to be Muslims for outreach. However, I want to add a word of caution. Missionaries to Muslims are also "in process." Although there have been some very noble and fruitful attempts at Muslim outreach in previous centuries, on the whole the Church worldwide has only recently begun a concerted effort to bring the light of the Gospel to the Muslim world. With so few Muslims responding to the Gospel, it is premature for anyone to conclude that they have arrived at the correct way to reach the Muslim world. If a believer truly feels called of God to somehow enter a certain sect or local expression of Islam, and if he can with integrity share the identity of those Muslims and maintain his witness for Christ, then I will not condemn him. Theoretically, I suppose it is possible that some types of folk or Sufi Muslim groups, or other localized forms of Islam, may be conducive to such an approach, but officially converting from Christianity to any variety of orthodox Islam involves so many complex theological and cultural hurdles that it is most unwise for the typical young, aspiring missionary who is eager to contextualize.

On point two concerning mosque attendance, I have known some C5 believers who attend prayers in the mosque, some who only attend occasionally and some who never go at all. In much of the Muslim world, there are many nominal Muslims who seldom attend the mosque anyway. Returning again to Gilliland and Hiebert's emphasis on process and direction, mosque attendance may only be a transitional part of some C5 believers' spiritual journey. For others, they may attend with the mindset of Naaman in 2 Ki. 5:18, where he asked Elijah's permission to still enter the temple of Rimmon in his home country. Still other C5 believers may attend the mosque like evangelical Catholics who attend mass but no longer pray to saints or exalt Mary. On the other hand, it is not unusual for some C5 believers to avoid mosque attendance all together, especially if they did not attend prior to following Christ.

As followers of Jesus, C5 believers understand that they must never disown or deny Christ as Lord, no matter the circumstance (Mt. 10:32-33). They must also never stray from the core components of the Gospel (e.g., the atoning death of Christ, his resurrection, salvation through Jesus only, his divinity,

and the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God). How much of orthodox Islam they can affirm is determined as they study the Word of God together and are guided by the Holy Spirit. What various C5 communities affirm in Islam will vary in different contexts. Irrespective of mosque attendance, however, most C5 believers remain acceptable members of the Muslim community by continuing to give alms, keep the fast, pray daily, wear local dress, and use their customary religious vocabulary and worship style. Affirmation of these acceptable Islamic forms not only allow MBBs to keep their place in the Muslim community, but they also build bridges for effective witness to their family and community.

Regarding Parshall's third concern, being C5 does not insinuate that the creed (*shahada*) is recited. Some C5 believers I know change the creed when performing their prayers to exalt *Isa* rather than Muhammad, proclaiming "there is no god but God, and *Isa* is the Straight Path" (see case studies below). Others whisper prayers in the name of Jesus or remain silent when the *shahada* is recited in public worship. I have heard of some C5 MBBs

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While we must guard against syncretism, we must also be mindful that ascent to perfect theological propositions is not the apex of the coming Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.

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who say the creed because they feel it is an important sign of solidarity with their community, and they consider Muhammad to be a sort of "prophet" or religious leader, at least inasmuch as it was his words about Jesus in the Qur'an that first stimulated them to find a Bible to learn more about Christ in the Gospels.

Some C5 believers adopt Samuel Zwemer's approach toward Muhammad by affirming all the truth Muhammad brought and never speaking disrespectfully of him. They emphasize that Muhammad was a great statesman and religious reformer, bringing Arabs from pagan polytheism to Abrahamic monotheism. They are quick to add that Muhammad spoke of *Isa* the Messiah (his virgin birth, miracles and sinlessness) and acknowledged that the *Torah, Zabur* and *Injil* are God's Word and must be obeyed. When it becomes clear that the Muslim listener is ready for more, they, like Zwemer, share Jesus as Lord and Savior. My observation is that over time, without dictating how new MBBs should view Muhammad, he becomes less and less important to them as they grow in their love and obedience to Jesus. The interaction of C5 believers with outside Christians and theologians is very limited. They rely heavily on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. We must pray for these groups and trust the Holy Spirit will give them supernatural wisdom to respond to the inherent religious and social tensions which arise in their families and communities.

The following four case studies will attempt to illustrate the principles discussed above. I have been personally involved in the first three case studies, while the final one comes from my colleague, Andrew Workman.

Case Study 1: Taufik

Taufik comes from one of the most fanatic Muslim areas of the country. Now in his early 50s, Taufik was led to Christ over ten years ago by a foreign Christian coworker. We first met soon after his profession of faith and have fellowshipped together many times since. His family, most of whom don't yet believe, have stayed in my home. To my knowledge, he has only attended one church service, and that was while he worked abroad. He faithfully keeps the fast of *Ramadan,* and in his clothing, diet, and vocabulary seems outwardly like any other Muslim in the community. However, he reads God's Word daily, especially the *Zabur* (Psalms) and the *Injil* (New Testament). For several years the desire to succeed financially—not Islam—drew him away from his walk with Christ. But in recent months he has been faithfully meeting weekly for Bible study with a foreign believer, our coworker.

Taufik enfolded another Muslim man into this small Bible study group, who in turn occasionally brings his adult son. The verses Taufik shares from the *Zabur* and *Injil* with Muslims in his community are well received as a blessing from a fellow Muslim. Taufik faithfully carries out his daily prayers, experiencing the presence of the Lord as he uses a small booklet with verses from the *Torah, Zabur* and *Injil* to accompany the motions of his Muslim prayer ritual. To date neither his wife nor his two teenage children have come to faith in Christ, but Taufik continues to share his faith with them regularly. He never thinks of himself as being a "Christian," but reads many Christian devotional books. He sees himself as being a good Muslim, called to share salvation in the Messiah with fellow Muslims.

Case Study 2: Achmad

Achmad lives several miles from my home. Unlike Taufik, who is an upper-middle class university graduate, Achmad is poor and the father of eight children. He came to Christ in 1996 through several dreams and the witness of another foreign coworker. He is now being discipled by a national MBB on our team. Achmad and most of his family were baptized with several other MBBs in 1997. Before coming to the Lord he made a living as an Islamic shaman. His economic situation has worsened since coming to faith, having left his practice of sorcery and divination. He faithfully attends a weekly C4/C5 MBB fellowship and may soon be appointed one of its first elders. Achmad frequently brings Muslim friends and relatives to the fellowship. He perceives himself as a Muslim who knows *Isa,* and faithfully shares Christ with fellow Muslims. Before coming to faith he rarely attended the mosque, and has not changed this pattern since his decision to follow the Messiah.

Case Study 3: Abdul

On a recent taxi ride through town, my colleague and I enjoyed a brief conversation with the driver, Abdul. Having mentioned early on that he was a Muslim, Abdul astonished us both when he asked, "Did you know that *Isa* can forgive sin? Look at the hair on my arms," he said, "every time I say the name of *Isa*, the hairs stand up! Jesus is the King of kings!" We asked how he knew so much about Jesus, then Abdul described his search for freedom from his sins. After someone gave him a New Testament years ago, he began reading it frequently.

He now regularly shares what he reads with fellow Muslim taxi drivers, and plans to become a Christian, along with his two daughters, in five years' time. Abdul wondered out loud, "What if I die in my sins before I become a Christian?" We asked why he wanted to wait. He explained that his two daughters, when older, could stand up against the persecution they may receive from their mother and other relatives. I responded, "Abdul, if you really believe the *Injil* (Gospel), and the promises of God for salvation in Christ, then you can be saved this very day." He started weeping— while we were driving! As we neared our destination, we pulled over, stopped the car, and prayed together in the taxi. He confessed his sins and received Christ.

An MBB coworker and I visited Abdul several times since then. God is using Abdul to draw a whole group of fellow taxi drivers to Christ. One of these, a *haji* (a respected Muslim who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca), was moved to tears when he read portions of the *Torah, Zabur* and *Injil* (the Bible).

Abdul's wife recently heard from an acquaintance that Abdul must be thinking about changing religions. She suddenly began opposing Abdul's faith with great vehemence. At this time, she does not seem open to the Gospel at all. What kind of fellowship would be best for Abdul? A congregation of C5 drivers?

Case Study 4: Soleh,
(by Andrew Workman)

Soleh is a respected member of a remote village community. In order to provide income and employment for his extended family, he works as the foreman of a construction crew from his village, buys goods from local farmers to resell in the city, and raises chickens. Soleh also teaches religion at the local mosque, mostly by helping children learn the Arabic alphabet so they can eventually recite the Qur'an.

Soleh received an opportunity to construct a dormitory at a small Christian boarding school in the city. He had worked for this school before and was confident they would be good employers. So he took the contract, gathered his crew, and left the village for a few months to do this work.

During construction, Soleh and his crew interacted with the school's students and staff. The students, mostly from poor villages, spent break times with Soleh and his crew, trading stories about village life. They brought tea to the crew, shared what little food they had, and even spent personal money to buy them cigarettes. The students also shared their testimonies, especially about answered prayer. On several occasions the students prayed in front of the crew for their families and situations. The crew felt cared for and began to bond relationally to the students. Soleh once saw how the students prayed for God to supply their need when they had no food. Miraculously, food was donated to the school. Soleh had neither experienced such faith, nor ever seen God answer prayer so dramatically. He was deeply moved. Soleh also wanted this sort of relationship with God, but kept quiet.

One day Ali, a student, sat down to talk with Soleh, unaware Soleh had been desiring such a relationship with God. Having recently studied contextualized ways to share his testimony with Muslims, Ali began asking questions and listening. Soon Soleh opened his heart and asked how he could join the students, learning to pray in faith like them. Soleh was ready to become a traditional Christian (C1). This would have almost certainly resulted in social ostracism from his village and great difficulties with his family. Soleh was willing to undergo these trials to obtain the kind of relationship with God he saw these students had. Ali explained that Soleh could have this same relationship with God by praying for forgiveness through *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah). Soleh accepted this invitation and prayed with Ali.

Ali then explained that if Soleh wished to reach his family and crew for Christ, he might consider becoming a "follower of *Isa*" (C5) instead of a "traditional Christian" (C1), because staying in his community as a Messianic Muslim would likely increase his ability to share his faith with them. Soleh agreed. He would remain in his Muslim community, instead of joining the C1 Christian community. The two agreed to keep this matter private until Soleh could study more about following *Isa*. This all took place in December, 1996.

Within a few weeks Soleh shared his new faith with his son, who worked in the same city. His son wanted to read the Gospel but was too afraid to enter the Christian bookstore to buy a Bible, since a Muslim acquaintance might see him and cause trouble. Ali arranged to get him a Bible, and now he is reading it.

Since Soleh became a follower of Jesus, he has read the Bible, met with Ali for prayer and study, and witnessed to many coworkers on his crew. In fact, many crew members and heads of households in his village have also prayed for salvation through *Isa al-Masih!* Of those who attend prayers at the mosque, many have changed their creed. They now proclaim, "God is great. God is great. There is no god but God and *Isa* is the Straight Path." No one suggested that Soleh change the creed; he did so on his own and tells his friends. He is convinced that true prayer is only through *Isa*, and that before putting his faith in Christ, he had no connection to God.

Soleh and his wife recently had a baby boy, whom they named after *Isa*. His in-laws asked if this meant Soleh was a Christian. He denied it, but later felt uncomfortable that he had not explained things more fully. Soleh therefore invited all heads of households in his village, including elected community and religious leaders, to attend the customary ceremony for his infant son. This ceremony of thanksgiving and prayer for God's protection on the newborn is usually officiated by the head of the mosque or a Muslim shaman. However, on this day Soleh officiated himself. And in the presence of all the leaders, Soleh announced that he was a Muslim who now followed *Isa*. Not only did nobody seem upset, but many people were very interested, including the village chief who also became a follower of *Isa* soon thereafter!

As of June 1999, twenty male heads of households have become followers of *Isa*. It is unknown how many women and children also believe. Recently they asked for advice regarding a village tradition of visiting ancestral graves. Their conscience was bothering them not only about ancestor worship, but also about certain animistic aspects of marriage and burial ceremonies. Like many Muslims around the world, their folk Islam condoned the continuance of many ancient rites to appease the spirit world. Now, however, many have turned to *Isa* to protect them from the spirit world. Furthermore, the village heads have asked the Christian students to come and pray against the plague of rats that has destroyed their crops for many years. A team gifted with faith and experience in this kind of ministry went to the village to pray. While we wait on God's answer to these prayers, the village is growing in faith as they pray in the name of *Isa al-Masih.*

Concluding Observations

Some Muslims who receive Christ as Savior deliberately choose a C5 expression of faith, not for their own sake (e.g., Soleh was prepared to join a church), but for the

Let us pray for these infant, emerging C5 congregations and believers. In particular, please join us in praying for Taufik, Achmad, Abdul, Soleh and the thousands of other Messianic followers of Isa. Pray for all those whom their witness touches.

John Travis

sake of the lost who would be far less likely to receive truth from outsiders (i.e., "Christians"). Others, like Taufik and Achmad, love Jesus, but simply see staying in the Muslim community as something natural.

There are surely points at which C5 believers must reject the theology of non-Messianic Muslims. Clearly, one can't affirm two completely opposite statements as true (e.g., "Jesus died on a cross," and "Jesus didn't die on a cross"). Therefore, C5 believers will be found to have "aberrant" beliefs. However, when confronted by family and friends with their deviance from Islamic orthodoxy, we have seen the Holy Spirit empower C5 believers to reply with amazing answers (Col. 4:6; Mt. 10:19,20). They often present reinterpretations of particular Qur'anic verses, bringing much glory to Jesus.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the "aberrance" of C5 Messianic theology almost pales in comparison to the "aberrance" of numerous folk beliefs and shamanistic Muslim practices that saturate popular Islam in our context. Therefore, the way in which C5 believers are received by the larger Muslim community will depend on a variety of factors such as tolerated Islamic heterodoxy, country, ethnicity, local politics, size of the local mosque, and so on. C5 may be appropriate in certain milieus, but not in others. Again, we need to affirm the diversity found throughout the C1-C6 spectrum.

It is possible that C5 may only be a temporary option. Few case C5 studies have been documented, and none go back far enough to watch C5 dynamics across several generations of time. C5 may prove to only be a transitional stage, ending when believers choose, or are forced by the Muslim community, to leave Islam, thereby moving to another point on the C1-C6 spectrum. The first century Jews gathered regularly in the temple with non-Messianic Jews, and in homes with fellow Messianic Jews (Acts 2:46-47). However, in time Jewish authorities began expelling any Jew who believed Jesus was the Messiah. It is noteworthy that this separation of the two communities was not initiated by Jewish believers. Still, many Jews and Jewish leaders came to faith in the intermittent years. The same sequence of events could eventually happen to today's Messianic Muslims. Meanwhile, MBBs like Soleh who stay in their community may be used of God to usher millions of Muslims into His Kingdom.

While we must be careful to guard against syncretism, we must also be mindful that ascent to perfect theological propositions is not the apex of the coming Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. All our work must be judged according to Scripture. So let us pray for these infant, emerging C5 congregations. In particular, please join us in praying for Taufik, Achmad, Abdul, Soleh and all the people whom their witness touches.

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The Ishmael Promise
and Contextualization Among Muslims

Does Islam provide an acceptable cultural-religious form for an incarnated gospel? Some believe that a contextual movement such as "Jews for Jesus" is acceptable in Judaism but that a similar "Muslims for Isa*" movement must be rejected because it would compromise the purity of the gospel. This article examines Islamic origins from the perspective of the Ishmael factor in Genesis which has strong implications for incarnational contextualization of the Gospel among Muslims.*

by Jonathan Culver

During the past few years I have spoken with various Christian leaders from different countries about Muslim contextualization, the use of Islamic religious forms and terminologies in Christian worship and witness. Most could accept a "Jews for Jesus" movement, but had great difficulty with "Muslims for Isa (Jesus)." They all cited one fundamental difference: God himself established Judaism through his covenants with Abraham and Moses, whereas Islam is essentially a human religion energized by Satan. Thus, while a contextual movement like Jews for Jesus is acceptable, a "Muslims for Isa" movement must be rejected because its foundations and religious forms are not of divine origin and therefore compromise the purity of the gospel.

In his seminal article, "Contextualization in Islam: Reusing Common Pillars" (1989, 1996), Dr. J. Dudley Woodberry has shown how many Muslim forms for prayer, recitation, ablutions, and other distinctly "Islamic" practices actually derive from ancient Jewish and Christians origins. Woodberry concludes that reusing these "common pillars" is permissible if redefined and given distinctly Christian meanings.

This article seeks to complement Woodberry's insights by showing how a biblical perspective on the remote origins of Islam through Ishmael is an extremely valuable starting point to engage Islam contextually. For many Christians, Ishmael is the forgotten or the disdained son of Abraham. Sutherland points out that the Christian faith has suffered a lack of definition concerning the theological role of Ishmael. The popular conception of Ishmael has therefore been based on "ill-fated misinformation and ignorance," leading to connotations of Ishmael as evil (Sutherland 1977:3-4). The Lutheran scholar, George C. Fry, believes this ignorance is very dangerous, for Ishmael, he asserts, is prominent in the plans of God (1977:14).

Various non-Muslim writers have argued that the origins of Islam are based on such things as the human genius of its founder or pagan elements, or a combination of these. I propose that there is also a significant element of divine involvement in the remote origins of Islam, beginning with Hagar and Ishmael. Genesis 17:20 and 21:20 characterize this involvement as divine providence, a special kind of common grace granted to the other seed of Abraham (Gen. 21:13). I believe it is this divine providence which has sustained the rise of Ishmael's descendants, culminating in the worldwide Muslim community. God graciously blessed Ishmael because of Abraham's great concern for his firstborn. Through this blessing God also intends to redeem Ishmaelite culture to glorify His name in this age and in the eschatological age to come (g. 60:6-7). Matthew 2:1-12 reiterates this Isaianic theme in his account of the Magi (most likely Ishmaelite Arabs) who worshipped the Christ child. Taken together, Genesis 17, Isaiah 60 and Matthew 2 reveal important data to support a "Muslims for Isa" contextual approach.

The Problems Involved

The premise that Islamic origins somehow relate to the Ishmael promises raises a number of problems.

Problem 1: Does it Validate Islam?
I do not believe that a constructive or positive interpretation of the Hagar-Ishmael narratives validates Islam as a religion, as some have argued (Scudder 1986; Kuschel 1995:135-136). More specifically, I reject the argument that the Ishmael promises serve as a basis to include Islam in a triple covenant concept along with Judaism and Christianity. Instead, I affirm that the Ishmael promises are better understood as God's loving concern and

providential care to insure the survival and historical greatness of Abraham's seed in Ishmael's line (Gen. 17:20; 21:20; 25:12-18). Based on the nature of the One who promised, and because Ishmael was born to the man of promise, I also affirm that these promises contain lasting spiritual implications. Ishmael and his lineal and spiritual descendants stand as a unique community that have risen to historical greatness as a direct answer to Abraham's prayer: "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" (Gen. 17:18).

Problem 2: Exegetical-Historical Dimensions

Some critics believe that the Ishmael promises are time-bound, basically fulfilled in Genesis 25:12-18. They therefore contain no ongoing force of blessing for Ishmael's descendants—whoever they might be. The fact that the promises are not repeated throughout Scripture seems to strengthen this conclusion. Colin Chapman raises these issues in his thought-provoking article, "Revisiting the Ishmael Theme" (1989). Chapman avers there is almost no exegetical or historical warrant to link the Ishmael promises with Islam and Muslims today. I do not intend to make a point-by-point

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The truth cannot be denied that Ishmael and his descendants derive a specific blessing from a corresponding portion of the covenant promise to Abraham.

refutation of Chapman's assertions, but my exegetical comments below will address some of his concerns. As for the difficult historical-critical issues of Arabian descent from Ishmael, I refer the reader to the appendix below.

Problem 3: How does Ishmael Relate to Non-Arab Muslims?

The central point of the Ishmael promises is the divine guarantee that Ishmael would become "a great nation" (Gen. 17:20; 21:13,18; 25:12-18). We need to note here that the biblical term "nation" (Heb. *goy*) is not restricted to a single ethnic entity; it also contains political overtones with multi-ethnic implications. D. Block, for example, points out that the term is used for bedouin-type desert tribes and multi-ethnic imperial states like Babylon (1986:492). Accordingly, I understand the Ishmael promise of great nationhood as applying first of all, to the lineal descendants of Ishmael, namely, Muhammad and some of the North Arabian tribes (see appendix below), and then to the waves of Muslim converts from the various nations who have come under the "Ishmaelite" cultural-religious umbrella. Thus Ishmael's lineal and spiritual descendants have indeed become a great nation extending from Morocco to Irian Jaya.

It is important to note how non-Arab Muslims identify themselves with Ishmael. An Indonesian Muslim convert to Christianity with an M.A. in Islamic jurisprudence explains: "Indonesian Muslims regard Ishmael as an enduring symbol of what it means to be a true Muslim because of his submission to God's command to become the sacrificial son (Qur'an 37:102). This concept is perpetuated in their consciousness when they perform the *Hajj* or the annual Festival of Sacrifice" (Noorsena 1994). Thus the non-Arab Muslim relationship to Ishmael is not racial; it is spiritual and theological. In a spiritual sense, they are heirs to the Ishmael promise. Indeed, Indonesian Muslims love to cite the promises in Genesis concerning the multitude of Ishmael's descendants. Ahmad Asnawi, for example, cites the prophecy concerning Kedar in Isaiah 42:10-12 in an attempt to prove that divine prophecy foretells the spread of Islam to the islands of the world, including Indonesia (1994:42). We do not need to fully agree with Asnawi's interpretation, but we can affirm his understanding that the divine blessing for Ishmael and his descendants extends to Indonesian Muslims.

Problem 4: Is Ishmael Under a Divine Curse?

Throughout the centuries Christians have expressed a fondness for quoting Genesis 16:12:

> *He will be a wild donkey of a man and his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand will be against him, and he will dwell in hostility toward all his brothers (NIV).*

Christians have generally understood this as a curse, or at least a divine rebuke against Ishmael and his descendants. However, numerous factors should give pause before accepting such an interpretation. First, Ishmael's name, given by the angel of Yahweh in the previous verse, means, "God will hear." It is a name that came down from heaven, originating in the councils of divine perfection (Gen. 16:11). The covenant angel conveyed this name to Hagar before Ishmael was born. As such it is a beautiful name that contains an element of promise. Secondly, Genesis 16:12 is

*Let's
rejoice in God's intention to honor Abraham's
concern, understanding that the rise of the Muslim world
stands as a corollary expression of
God's faithfulness to
Abraham.*

given in the context of a promise to Hagar. It would be strange indeed for the covenant angel to try and motivate Hagar to return to Abraham's tent by pronouncing a curse on her child! Accordingly, the wild donkey metaphor is better understood in light of passages like Job 39:5-8. Here God describes the wild donkey as a freedom-loving creature and a wilderness wanderer. This is an apt image of what Ishmael and his descendants were later to become—Bedouin nomads, free from the yoke of domination. This would have been good news for Hagar, a slave woman, as she trembled at the thought of facing Sara's wrath.

Others have cited Galatians 4:30, "Cast out the bondwoman and her son," to argue Muslims are under a divine curse. Yet, we must ask who Paul really wanted cast out. A careful reading reveals Paul was calling on the Galatians to cast out the *Judaizers*, not Ishmael's descendants, because they were enslaving Galatians into bondage under the law. Hagar and Ishmael served as useful allegorical symbols for Paul to illustrate this theological truth (Gal. 4:24). Allegory makes use of names and places without respect to literal and historical contexts. The Judaizers were under a curse because they were slaves to the law (Gal. 3:10). Thus, Paul's point of similitude between the two is slavery. Hagar was a slave-wife; Judaizers were slaves of the Law. We therefore cannot say Paul condemned Hagar and Ishmael, he merely alluded to them as allegorical symbols to curse the Judaizers.

The Ishmael Promise in the Context of the Abrahamic Covenant

Having addressed the above problems, we are now ready to examine the Ishmael promises. We will confine our attention to the most important promise which arises during the covenant discourse. Genesis 17 culminates the earlier covenant promises (Gen. 12:1-3, 15:4-18), and contains the clearest statement of how much God is willing to bless Abraham and Ishmael, even though He rejects the latter as the covenant successor. The key verse regarding Ishmael is 17:20, where he receives a blessing similar to Abraham's, with its attendant promises of national greatness and numerous descendants. On the other hand, the text carefully points out that the covenant heir would not be Ishmael, as Abraham apparently supposed, but Isaac (17:19, 21). Still, the Ishmaelite blessing of national greatness (17:20) closely parallels God's promise to bring forth from Abraham a multitude of nations (17:6). This suggests the promise is not only efficacious, but also lasting, even if the content is considerably less meaningful than the covenant. It is important, therefore, that we examine the structural features of this chapter.

Structural Components of Genesis 17

Sean McEvenue (1971) convincingly argues that Genesis 17 forms a very tightly structured unit. He points out that it is composed of five divine speeches introduced by the phrase, "and God said." These five speeches and a concluding epilogue are arranged to produce a unified framework of balanced themes. There is no dialogue except for Abraham's prayer for Ishmael (vs. 18) and God's answer (vss. 19-21). The first two speeches (vss. 2-8) deal with numerous descendants, while the last two (vss. 15-21) deal with the individual heir through whom these descendants will originate.

The third and central speech (vss. 9-14), which unifies the entire chapter, focuses on circumcision, the obligatory sign for all covenant participants. The epilogue (vss. 22-27) reports how Abraham carries out the divine injunction to circumcise himself and all the males in his household, particularly Ishmael, whose circumcision is mentioned three times (vss. 23, 25, 26). The overall pattern of Genesis 17 clearly emerges as a parallel promise-response structure arranged in four, interlocking sets (*see Table 1 below*).

It is important to note the parallelism and interlocking of sets two and four, which contain the crucial verses, 17:6 and 17:20 respectively. The former establishes that nations will come forth from Abraham; the latter strongly suggests that Ishmael, in some sense, is one of these promised nations.

Verbal repetitions abound to an amazing extent in Genesis 17. The word "covenant" appears thirteen times, while "circumcision" is mentioned eleven times. It is the grouping of the words, however, that arrests our attention. Six sets of paired words appear in the passage. For example, "multitude of nations" (4b, 5b), "your name" (5a, 5b), and "eternal" (7a, 8a). Moreover, the phrase, "Sarah will bear you a son," which appears three times (vss. 16, 19, 21) finds a contrasting echo in the thrice-repeated phrase, "Ishmael his son" (vss. 23, 25, 26).

In several instances these paired and tripled word sets create small chiastic structures that interlock and correspond with each other. The most significant lies in God's fifth speech (17:19-21), which develops an Isaac-Ishmael-Isaac chiasm:

A. Sarah will bear you a son (19a)
  B. I will establish my covenant with Isaac (19b)
    C. I will bless Ishmael and make him a great nation (20)
  B1. I will establish my covenant with Isaac (21a)
A1. Sarah will bear you a son (21b)

When love and respect for Muslims as "a people with a promise" floods our souls, we will be better able to process the complexities and wonders of contextualizing the Gospel among them.

	1	2	3	4
God	The Lord said (1a) covenant promise (2)	God said, As for Me (4a) cov. explanation (4-8)	then God said (15a) promise to Sarah (15-16)	But God said (19a) cov. recipient (19b-21)
Abr.	fell on his face (3a) worship (3a)	God said, As for you (9a) circumcision (10-14)	fell on his face (17a) doubt/Ishmael (17-18)	Then Abraham (23a) circumcision (23-27)

Table 1: The Parallel and Interlocking Structure of Genesis 17

Interestingly, this chiasm broadly corresponds with God's second speech (17:4-8), which projects a covenant-nations-covenant pattern. Thus "nations" and "Ishmael" lie at the center of these two interlocking speeches. Verses 1-8 speak of the covenant in general terms, whereas verses 15-21 speak in specific terms. McEvenue notes that Genesis 17 "always moves from intention to fact, and from vague to specific... from progeny (1-8) to a son of Sarah (15-21)" (1971:156).

The inescapable conclusion is that even as Isaac stands as a specific expression of the covenant promise of 17:4–5, 7–8, Ishmael in some sense stands as a specific fulfillment of 17:6: "And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you" (17:6). Note how this wording parallels Ishmael's promise in 17:20: "I will bless him, and I will make him fruitful and I will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation."

Commentators ordinarily understand "nations" in 17:6 as Abraham's spiritual descendants, those who possess the faith of Abraham who come from all the nations (Rom. 4:13-16). This spiritual emphasis is certainly the primary meaning of the verse. However, we also need to see that there is a genealogical corollary to this promise which branches out to bless and preserve a non-covenant Abrahamic line apart from the faith community (Kidner 1967:149). We see this clearly in Genesis 21:12-13, where God informs Abraham that his "seed" (i.e., covenant descendants) would be named through Isaac. But then God adds, "Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed" (NKJV). Interestingly, most commentaries pass over 21:13 without much comment, but the corresponding parallelism to the Isaac promise in 21:12 is astonishing. Although this genealogical corollary may not appear important to us, it definitely was important to Abraham, and God chose to honor it for his sake. Abraham was concerned about his physical descendants, *all of them*, especially Isaac and Ishmael. I suggest we rejoice in God's intention to honor Abraham's concern, understanding that the rise of the Muslim world stands as a corollary expression of God's faithfulness to Abraham.

Genesis 17:20: Because Abraham Prayed

Genesis 17:19-21 is God's answer to the prayer of Abraham, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" (Gen. 17:18). God essentially responded, "Abraham, if you are asking that Ishmael replace Isaac as the covenant heir, My answer is no (vs.19). But if you are asking Me to bless Ishmael, My answer is yes, and this is how I will bless him.... (vs.20)." In the Hebrew text of 17:20 God makes four promissory "I wills." First God says, "I will bless him." This blessing is less than Isaac's, but is nonetheless divine. As such it conveys the energy and authority of the One who gives it. This is followed in the Hebrew by two hiphil causatives: "I will cause him to be fruitful, I will cause him to multiply." Qualitatively, these words carry far more weight than the qal imperatives given to Adam and Noah: "be fruitful and multiply." As hiphil causatives, they suggest God will guarantee that Ishmael succeeds in this endeavor to produce progeny. The final phrase of 17:20 provides fur-

ther evidence of these divine guarantees, "he will become the father of twelve princes and I will make him a great nation." We should not overlook the Hebrew wording for "I will make him a great nation," i.e., *untattiw legoy gadol*. Based on its use in other contexts (Gen 17:6; 41:41; Ex. 7:1; Jer. 1:5; Ez. 3:17), the phrase, "I will make" or "I will establish" could easily be understood as a formula for investing one with a high office or commission (McEvenue 1971:166).

There are many parallels between this Ishmaelite blessing and the greater Abrahamic blessing. Ishmael is promised princes and a nation (17:20); Abraham is promised kings and many nations (17:6). Both receive divine guarantees of numerous descendants. Thus the Ishmael promise of Genesis 17:20 *forms a corollary to the Abrahamic covenant* in Genesis 17. Although not a covenant in the "messianic" sense, the promise guarantees the proliferation of Ishmael's descendants and their attainment of historical greatness. Ishmael received the promise of a blessing, but not the blessing of the covenant. Genesis 21:20 adds that God was "with" Ishmael in achieving this appointed destiny. This is clearly the language of divine providence. It appears to endow the line of Ishmael with a particular sense of potential that is not fully spelled out in Genesis (Scudder 1986:288-289).

When Abraham's Other Children Come Marching In

An Indonesian theology professor once asked, "If the Ishmael promises in Genesis impact Muslims today, why are they are not repeated elsewhere in Scripture?" It would seem that any important plan of God would be reaffirmed in successive waves of biblical revelation. The absence of any direct restatement of the Ishmael promises after Genesis 25 is not surprising because the entire Bible follows the account of Isaac, not Ishmael. However, there are interconnected, thematic allusions to the Ishmael promises in other biblical passages, such as Isaiah 60:1-7. By mentioning the sons of Keturah (Abraham's concubine) and the sons of Ishmael, Isaiah 60:6-7 certainly recalls their genealogies in Genesis 25. And given the fact that Genesis 25 serves as an initial fulfillment notice of the Genesis 17 promise to multiply Abraham's progeny (Kidner 1967:149), it is reasonable to conclude that Isaiah 60:6-7 clearly alludes to the Abrahamic covenant and the Ishmael promise.

Ishmaelites in the New Jerusalem

Isaiah 60 is a prophetic promise that God will restore Israel's diminished fortunes. Much of the focus in previous chapters of Isaiah was upon Israel's exile under divine discipline for failing to obey and trust in God. The nations had come to carry away the wealth and people of Jerusalem. Isaiah 60, however, describes a great reversal of fortunes. The nations return the scattered remnant to their land, bringing cargoes of immense wealth and abundance to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple until it radiates God's glory (60:7, 13). Isaiah envisions a "wondrous capitulation of the nations" who had been superior to Israel in exploitative ways (Brueggemann 1998:206). The submission of the nations is total—political, economic and *theological*, for they come with sacrificial offerings for the God of Israel.

Isaiah's prophecy lends itself to a double fulfillment, beginning with the rebuilding of the temple in the Persian era. At that time King Darius decreed that the lambs and rams of his western provinces be provided for acceptable burnt offerings to the God

of heaven (Ezra 6:10). This could be understood as a partial fulfillment of Isaiah 60:7, which foresaw the flocks and rams of Kedar and Nebaioth (Ishmael's first two sons) offered as acceptable sacrifices on the temple altar.

Yet, the lofty language and imagery of Isaiah 60 also presupposes a future eschatological fulfillment (Delitzsch 1980:416; Ridderbos 1984:536-537). Indeed, certain verses resemble the imagery of the Heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21, which comes down out of heaven from God:

"The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory" (Isa. 60:19; cf. Rev. 21:23).

Also, this Isaianic picture of the nations bringing their wealth to Jerusalem corresponds to the glory and honor of the nations that will be brought into the Heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:26).

Yet, as Richard Mouw points out, the Holy City of Isaiah 60 is not entirely discontinuous with earthly conditions. The contents of the City, Mouw argues, "will be more akin to our present cultural patterns than is usually acknowledged in discussions of the afterlife" (1983:6-7). So let us now take a look at the *cultural patterns* of

the non-covenant Abrahamic nations preserved in the Holy City:

A multitude of camels will cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, and will bear good news of the praises of the Lord.

All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth will minister to you; They will go up with acceptance on My altar, and I shall glorify My glorious house. (Is, 60:6-7, NASB)

Clearly Isaiah tells us that Abraham's descendants through Keturah (Gen. 25:1-6) will one day offer up their praises and gifts in the Holy City. Midian and Ephah (Abraham's sons from Keturah) represent North Arabia, whereas Sheba (Abraham's grandson from Keturah) represents South Arabia.

Furthermore, Isaiah 60:7 prophesies that the sacrificial offerings of the Ishmaelites will find acceptance on God's altar. Isaiah and the other major prophets use "Kedar" to represent the North Arabian tribes (Ridderbos 1985:185; cf. Isa. 21:16; 42:11; Jer. 48:28-33; Ez. 27:21).

A proper understanding of God's dealings with Hagar and Ishmael will help tear down the walls of prejudice toward Arabs and Muslims that have hindered mission efforts to them for centuries.

So while the tribe of Kedar is no longer extant today, North Arabians certainly are. We must not overlook the fact that Ishmaelite presence in the eschatological Holy City indicates that many conversions will have taken place among all Abrahamic peoples of Arabia during the Church age! Samuel Zwemer makes this same point when he says of Isaiah 60:6-7, "this gem of missionary prophecy leaves no room for doubt that the sons of Ishmael have a large place in this coming glory of the Lord and the brightness of His rising" (Zwemer 1950:35).

Transformation of Ishmaelite Culture

Isaiah pictures the entire wealth of Arabia pouring into Jerusalem. The camels of Sheba, the gold and frankincense of Midian and Ephah, and the flocks and rams of the Ishmaelites are the cultural and economic expressions for which these peoples were known in the ancient world. But as Mouw points out:

They are no longer signs of pagan *cultural strength or displays of alien power. Nor are they objects to be envied at a distance. Here in the transformed City these vessels and goods serve a very different purpose. Isaiah is very explicit about this new purpose, noting what function each creature and item now performs. Ephah's camels now "proclaim the praise of the Lord" (v. 6). Nebaioth's rams "shall minister to you" as acceptable sacrifices on the Lord's altars (v. 7).... Isaiah is, in contemporary jargon, interested in the future of "corporate structures" and "cultural patterns." And his vision leads him to what are for many of us very surprising observations about the future destiny of many items of "pagan culture." He sees these items as being gathered into the Holy City to be put to good use there (1983:8-9).*

Mouw refers here to the redemption and transformation of cultural patterns for the praise and glory of God in Christ Jesus. Of special interest to our study of contextualization among Muslims is the fact that Isaiah emphasizes *Arabian* and *Ishmaelite* cultural patterns. If God is willing to transform aspects of Ishmaelite culture for His praise and glory during the eschaton, why are many reluctant to do the same with the cultures of Ishmael's lineal and spiritual descendants?

Arabian Magi Worship the Christ Child

How does the episode of the Magi relate to this study? If we adhere to the traditional view that the Magi were Persians or Babylonians, it would not. However, there is a strong line of evidence suggesting that the Magi were Ishmaelitic Arabs (cf., Maalouf 1998:202-246). The fact that Matthew understands the coming of the Magi as a fulfillment of Isaiah 60:6-7 supports this view, as we shall see below.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." ... On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh. (Matthew 2:1-2, 11)

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The Relationship to Isaiah 60:6-7

The Magi's offering of gold, frankincense and myrrh is clearly reminiscent of the gifts offered by the non-covenant Abrahamic nations in Isaiah 60:6-7. In fact, given the specificity of the language and the structural arrangement of Matthew 2, it would be difficult to argue that this is mere coincidence, or that Matthew 2:11 is a casual allusion to Isaiah 60:6-7. Rather, it appears to be a deliberate fulfillment of that passage. A number of authorities have acknowledged this (cf. Brueggemann 1998:205-206; Gundry 1967:206-211; Davies and Allison 1988:250-251; Hengel and Merkel 1973:140-142; 154-155). Commenting on Isaiah 60:6-7, Brueggemann is most emphatic about this point, "Christian readers will not fail to notice the phrase 'gold and frankincense' and make a connection to Matthew 2:11. There can be no doubt that the Matthew narrative alludes not only to the specific commodities brought but to the dramatic theme of the submission of the nations..." (1998:205-206).

Hengel and Merkel arrive at the same general conclusion but buttress their argument with more sophisticated analysis. They point out that Matthew 2 is composed of five discreet sections, each of which fulfills an Old Testament prophecy in a specific geographical area (1973:140-142). Thus the appearance of the Magi in Jerusalem (2:1-6) fulfills Micah 5:1 and 2 Sam. 5:2 regarding Bethlehem; the worship of the Magi (2:7-12) implicitly fulfills Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 60:6 regarding South Arabia (1973:155); Hosea 11:1 is fulfilled in the flight of the holy family to Egypt; Jeremiah 31:15 is fulfilled in the killing of the children in Ramah (2:16-18); and the immigration of the holy family from Egypt to Nazareth fulfills the enigmatic prophecy, "He shall be called a Nazarene" (2:19-23). Hengel and Merkel conclude: "The skill which Matthew displays in the overall layout of his Gospel—it is of all the Gospels the best arranged—he also shows here in the structuring of this dramatic story" (1973:142, translation mine). In light of this purposeful structuring for Matthew 2, it is highly improbable that Matthew would have inserted an incidental allusion in 2:11 without conscious reference to Isaiah 60:6-7.

Arabian Origins of the Magi

One cannot fail to notice that Isaiah 60:6-7 and Psalms 72:9-11 contain parallels to Matthew 2:11 in terms of the gifts offered and the submission of the nations to a "King." We must further notice, however, that all these Old Testament references cite the submission of Arabian nations. Therefore, it would seem inconsistent for Matthew to have understood the Magi to be anything other than ethnic Arabs.

The problem with an Arabian identity of the Magi is that it conflicts with the traditional view that they were Persian or Babylonian. Matthew only tells us the Magi came "from the east." The Magi cult arose among the priestly caste of Medio-Persia and later spread to the Chaldaean-Babylonian realm (Hengel and Merkel 1973:143). However, the cult also spread to Arabia (Morony 1986:1110). That the ancient Arabs had the propensity and capacity to function as Magi is seen in the apocryphal Book of Baruch, "The sons of Hagar... seek for wisdom upon the earth" (3:22; cf. 1Kgs. 4:30). Furthermore, knowledge of the stars and movement of the planets, an essential aspect of the Magi cult, flourished among Arabs. Joseph Henninger, in his synthesis of pre-Islamic Bedouin religion, demonstrates that the worship of planets and fixed stars proliferated in Arabia (1981:11-12), easily allowing for Arabs to follow "His star in the east," which the Magi "had seen in the east" (Matt 2:2, 9).

This and other lines of evidence has enabled Tony Maalouf (1998:202-247) to argue persuasively for the Arabian origins of the Magi. In fact, "the traditional view" of Magi from Persia or Babylonia is not the view held by some of our earliest church fathers. Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue With Trypho*, emphasizes the Arabian origin of the Magi when he says: "For at the time of His birth, the Magi came from Arabia and worshiped Him" (cited in Maalouf 1998:213). Others attest to the fact that Tertullian and Epiphanius also understood that the Magi were Arabian (Davies and Allison 1988:228). If so, then the Magi that worshipped the Christ child were most likely Nabataean Arabs, for the Nabataeans controlled North Arabian trade of gold and spices (Glueck 1965:4; Graf 1992:970; see appendix on the Nabataean-Ishmaelite connection).

In short, we have no reason to reject the possibility that the Magi were ethnic Arabs. Furthermore, we have compelling reasons to assume that Matthew intentionally associates them with the descendants of Keturah and Ishmael in Isaiah 60:6-7. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that Arabian Magi were the *first* among the gentile nations to worship the Christ child, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that other Abrahamic nations would bring the wealth of Arabia as offerings to worship the *King* in the Holy City. Both passages show the transformation of Ishmaelites cultural patterns—their expression of praise to God, their treasures, and their sacrificial offerings—for the purpose of worshiping God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The structural features which connect the Ishmael promise with the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17 signify that

God's promises for Ishmael and his descendants is enduring. They extend beyond the confines of Genesis 25 to include Ishmael's lineal and spiritual descendants—the worldwide Muslim community. Thematic allusions to the Ishmael promise and the account of the Arabian Magi support this assertion (Isa. 60:6-7, Mt. 2:1-12).

These passages reveal God's intention to make the Ishmaelites a great nation for the purpose of His praise and glory in Christ Jesus. Their greatness is described in the wealth of their flocks, rams, gold and frankincense—all of which found acceptance, according to Scripture, as appropriate sacrifices for worship in the Holy City and of the Christ child. Furthermore, an eschatological fulfillment of Isaiah 60 indicates that there will be those among Ishmael's descendants who will also be accepted in the Heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation 21. We therefore need not be reluctant to transform and redeem Islamic cultural forms in ministries to Muslims. Moreover, it would be prudent for us to integrate this understanding into our theories of Islam's origin and the acceptability of a "Muslims for Isa" movement.

Samuel Zwemer, the modern "apostle to Islam," found that the Ishmael promises establish Muslims as a unique people with kinship ties to God's Covenant people (cf. Zwemer 1950). Zwemer understood this kinship as a motivational factor for the Church to evangelize Muslims. I also submit that a proper understanding of God's dealings with Hagar and Ishmael will help tear down the walls of prejudice toward Arabs and Muslims that have hindered mission efforts for centuries. When love and respect for Muslims as "a people with a promise" floods our soul, we will be better able to process the wonders and complexities of Muslim contextualization.

Appendix: North Arabian Descent from Ishmael

According to the claims of Islam, Muhammad and some of the North Arabian tribes descend from Ishmael. For the most part, modern critical scholars have expressed a great deal of skepticism towards these claims.

Most Western scholars believe the idea of descent from Ishmael was never an indigenous Arabian concept from the pre-Islamic era. Rather, it was cleverly devised by Muhammad to advance the apostolic character of Islam (Guillaume 1966:61). The concept was later embellished by Muslims of the second and third Islamic centuries when they forged a patriarchal pedigree for Muhammad. Thus we find the ninth century compiler, al-Tabari, reporting earlier traditions which supposedly trace Muhammad's descent through either Nebaioth or Kedar (al-Tabari 1988:38-42).

Rene Dagorn (1982) wrote a devastating critique of these Islamic claims to Ishmael in *La geste d'Ismaël: d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arab*e (The Ishmael Legend: Concerning the Onomasticon and the Tradition of the Arabs). Yet, more recent evidence compiled by Irfan Shahid, a Christian Arab scholar, does not agree with Dagorn's conclusion (1989:332-360; 382-383). There are other ways to probe the subject of North Arabian descent from Ishmael outside the traditions of early Muslims, as I have done in, "An Inquiry Into the Historicity of Islam's Claims of North Arabian Descent From Ishmael" (Culver 1999a). While the hypotheses, methodology, and supporting data from my doctoral tutorial are too extensive to include here, I list some of its important points below.

Outline of Supporting Evidence for North Arabian Descent from Ishmael
A. Archaeological evidence shows that the Ishmaelite tribal federation of Kedar (the name of Ishmael's second son, Gen. 25:13) established a dynastic house just two hundred miles north of Medina in the fifth century B. C. This places a documented Ishmaelite presence close to the heartland of Islam (see Graf, 1990a:139-140).

B. The Nabataean Arabs, "one of the most remarkable people that have ever crossed the stage of history" (Glueck 1970:243), are very arguably Ishmaelite. Chronologically, they appeared between the demise of the Ishmaelite tribe of Kedar (c. 350 B.C.) and the rise of Islam (622 A.D.). However, their precise origins are shrouded in mystery, resulting in conflicting theories. According to the German transjordanian scholar Ernst Knauf, the Nabataeans are possibly a sub-clan of the Kedar (1989a:96-112; 1989b). Edomite scholar John Bartlett associates them with the Nebaioth, descendants of Ishmael's firstborn son (1979). Nabataean scholar David Graf argues for a Syro-Mesopotamian homeland for the Nabataeans, without reference to Ishmaelite origins (1990b:45-75).

C. It was from the Nabataeans that the earliest Muslims derived their script for the Qur'an (Healey 1990; Gruendler 1993). Thus, the script of the Qur'an, which has become a cultural heritage of Muslims throughout the world, derives from an Ishmaelite source. The significance of this is underscored by fact that the Qur'an has become an important vehicle for extending the religio-cultural heritage of Ishmael's descendants to non-Arab peoples.

D. According to early Islamic sources, Qusayy b. Kilab, the ancestor of Muhammad from the fifth generation, claimed to be a descendant of Kedar (al-Tabari 1988:38).

Interestingly, early Islamic traditions establish that Qusayy may well have been a Nabataean (Abdul-Karim 1990:422; Fahd 1993:836). Furthermore, Qusayy is characteristically a Nabataean name, and rarely occurs outside the Nabataean and Safaitic Arab realms of transjordania (Della Vida 1986:520; Negev 1991:4,58).

E. The Christian Arab scholar, Irfan Shahid, has amassed a convincing body of evidence proving that at least some of the pre-Islamic Arabs maintained an independent, self-conscious awareness of their descent from Ishmael (1989:154-158;167-180; 332-360; 382-383). Thus Qusayy's alleged claim of descent from Kedar has a historical context. Moreover, this data challenges one of the pillars of modern critical scholarship, namely, that North Arabian descent from Ishmael was essentially an early Islamic invention.

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