

# Jesus, the Clay Birds, and the Quran

## Introduction

In the seventh century, a brand new monotheistic religion grew out of the flames of rampant, Arabian paganism. A man by the name of Mohammad is said to have begun receiving direct revelations via the angel Gabriel about the timely reform of the true religion. The religion of Islam was born out of Mohammad's revelations from Allah. The Quran, the record of those revelations and the holy book of Islam, contains various statements concerning Jesus Christ (known as Isa ibn Maryam or Jesus the son of Mary within the religion). Islam teaches that Jesus Christ was a messenger of Allah who was miraculously born of a virgin, performed various symbolic miracles, raised the dead, brought the revealed book of the Gospel (known as the *Injeel*), and called down as a sign from heaven a table laden with sustenance.<sup>1</sup> Islam however diverges from orthodox Christianity and teaches many erroneous things: that the Bible has been corrupted, that Jesus was not crucified, that Jesus was not divine, that God is not triune, and that Jesus was a prophet of Islam. Both religions make assertions as to being the exclusive and correct way to worship and come to God. Islam, which is rapidly growing in adherents worldwide with 1.6 billion followers, presents itself as the final revelation of God and as a formidable foe of Christianity. An aim of Christian apologetics must be to defend and articulate the supremacy of the Christian religion as compared to Islam. The goal of this paper will be to highlight a historical issue surrounding the Quran's source material for its account of Jesus Christ and some clay birds.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cyril Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), 270.

## Failed Endeavor?

When issues of source material arise within discussions surrounding the Quran with Muslims, statements of inspiration and religious trust in the Prophet's words abound.<sup>2</sup> Muslim beliefs concerning their doctrine of inspiration supposedly protect the Quran from any error. Cyril Glasse, an Islamic scholar, noted that:

Western writers who, for reasons of the defense of Christianity and Judaism, or for their reasons of their disbelief in any Divine Revelation, have been wont to disparage the Quran as regards to factual, historical accuracy, or have spoken of "Muhammad's confused knowledge of history" or his "imperfect or deficient knowledge of Judaism" are, in every respect, wide of the mark. To begin with, such observations presume the Prophet's participation in the compositions of the Quran, which is in no way admissible...Although the stories in the Quran have their historical origins, they undergo a transformation which lifts them out of their former context into a retelling which is not that of a human tongue ...Divine revelation [takes] this "material" and [uses] it for its own purposes; the origins of the story become irrelevant...<sup>3</sup>

This leads one to have the impression that history is of no value when it comes to Quranic texts! If the Christian Scriptures are not to be exempt from historical scrutiny despite claims of divine inspiration,<sup>4</sup> neither should Islam. The mere idea that history is of no importance when deducing the factuality of a religious claim is thwarted with the admission that God is a God of truth who acts in history. As C.S. Lewis stated, "history is a story written by the finger of God."

Furthermore, religions contain postulations or statements that are to be regarded by their

---

<sup>2</sup> In my own apologetic encounters, this argument was rebutted with the miracle of the Quran's existence despite Muhammad's illiteracy, the divine, protective role of inspiration, and the supposed, scientific nature of their book.

<sup>3</sup>Glasse, 299

<sup>4</sup> There is considerable difference between the Christian understanding of inspiration and the Muslim understanding of inspiration. The Christian doctrine appreciates the dynamic nature of Scripture as being God-breathed yet utilizing men through their unique personalities, experiences, emotions, and intellects. Islam teaches a divine dictation theory.

followers as facts. If they are to be considered and discussed as facts, they must be subjected to the rules of historical criticism.<sup>5</sup> One is free to utilize the tools of history and reason in seeking to better understand how at least some of the content of the Quran came to be what it is today.<sup>6</sup> When history, reason, and revelation are taken into consideration, one will reasonably understand the limitations of Islam and its failure to supersede the veracity and preeminence of the Christian message.

### The Clay Birds in the Quran

Within the Quran, Jesus' miraculous virgin birth is recounted with Mary having astonishment. How could she become pregnant when no mortal man has touched her? The angel she is having a conversation with discourages her incredulousness with an affirmation of the power and might of Allah's definitive decree. The virgin birth lacks the majesty of the Christian doctrine because it is not an announcement of God coming to earth. Jesus would be like others before him, a prophet who announces God's truth. The angel goes on to describe just what Jesus would do. Within the description, the author narrates an account of a miracle that Jesus performed as "clear proof" that he was a prophet of Allah. The miracle is repeated later in Surah 5.

Surah 3:49	Surah 5:110
And will make him a messenger unto the Children of Israel, (saying): Lo! I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Lo! <i>I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by Allah's leave.</i>	When Allah saith: O Jesus, son of Mary! Remember My favour unto thee and unto thy mother; how I strengthened thee with the holy Spirit, so that thou spakest unto mankind in the cradle as in maturity; and how I taught

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995), 34.

<sup>6</sup> Mateen Ellass, *Understanding the Quran: A Quick Christian Guide to the Muslim Holy Book* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 95.

I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I raise the dead, by Allah's leave. And I announce unto you what ye eat and what ye store up in your houses. Lo! herein verily is a portent for you, if ye are to be believers.	thee the Scripture and Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel; <i>and how thou didst shape of clay as it were the likeness of a bird by My permission, and didst blow upon it and it was a bird by My permission...</i>
---	--

Many of the things Mohammed wrote down are found within the Judeo-Christian canon: Jesus taught the Scriptures, he healed lepers and men who were born blind, and he raised people from the dead. But, the Gospels and nowhere else in Scripture presents Jesus ever molding clay into sparrows and breathing life into them, causing them to fly away. Where is this material found? Discussing the origin of many pseudo-biblical themes, accounts, and motifs within the Quran, Yehuda D. Nevo noted that:

The Quran contains material from disparate sources. Some of it is native Arab material...Some was borrowed from the other monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and especially Judeo-Christianity. Thus the Quran alludes repeatedly to the content of the Pentateuch and the Gospels. But while it is true that more Quranic material is classifiable as "Judaic" or "Christian" than as specifically "Judeo-Christian," nonetheless the influence of the later is central; for whereas the "Judaic" and "Christian" material consists of references to "known facts," or allusions to, and occasional retellings of, stories and legends, the Judeo-Christian material shaped the theology of the Quran.<sup>7</sup>

The source material for the account of Jesus creating birds out of clay is likely derived from the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, a late second or third century pseudepigraphal gospel that describes Jesus' early life before he started his ministry as an adult.<sup>8</sup> The story reads:

When the boy Jesus was five years old, he was playing at the ford of a rushing stream. And he gathered the disturbed water into pools and made them pure and excellent, commanding them by the character of his word alone and not by means of a deed. Then, *taking soft clay from the mud, he formed twelve sparrows.* It was the Sabbath when he did these things, and many children were with him. And a certain Jew, seeing the boy Jesus

---

<sup>7</sup> Yehuda D. Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 337-338.

<sup>8</sup> William St. Clair Tisdall and William Muir, *The Sources of Islam* (1st Indian ed. New Delhi: Amarko Book Agency, 1973), 57-58.

with the other children doing these things, went to his father Joseph and falsely accused the boy Jesus, saying that, on the Sabbath he made clay, which is not lawful, and fashioned twelve sparrows. And Joseph came and rebuked him, saying, “Why are you doing these things on the Sabbath?” But Jesus, *clapping his hands, commanded the birds with a shout in front of everyone and said, “Go, take flight, and remember me, living ones.” And the sparrows, taking flight, went away squawking.* When the Pharisee saw this he was amazed and reported it to all his friends. (Inf: 1:1-5 italics added for emphasis concerning source similarity)

While the Quran mentions the miracle in passing whereas the infancy gospel narrates the episode, the apparent similarity cannot be denied. The source material for this account poses special problems for Muslim source critics because of the nature of the infancy account.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Infancy Gospel of Thomas**

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* belongs within a popular genre of legends in early Christian literature. Such legends developed in the early centuries of the Christian movement and were constantly elaborated and expanded upon from late antiquity through the Middle Ages for purposes of edification and instruction.<sup>10</sup> The infancy gospel and other books like it (*Protevangelium of James*) were written to satisfy the imaginations and creativity of latter Christians who sought to expound upon what the nativity narratives willfully leave out. Attributed to the apostle Thomas,<sup>11</sup> the story accounts Jesus’ doings from age five to his

---

<sup>9</sup> It is possible for similar arguments to be made for the following: the account of Jesus speaking from the cradle in Surah 19:29-31 and its relation to the *First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus* chapter 1, the account of Mary being miraculously provided for by God in Surah 3:37 and its relation to the *Protevangelium of James* chapters 6:3 and 8:1, the account of Mary and divining rods being used to decide on her custody in Surah 3:44 and its relation to the *Protevangelium of James* chapters 8:3 and 9:1, and the account Mary’s two miracles in Surah 19:23-26 and its relation to the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* chapter 20.

<sup>10</sup>Robert J. Miller, *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 369.

<sup>11</sup> This is an example of one writing pseudonymously or under the false name of another which was rejected in the early Church (2 Thess. 2:2; 3:17; also *Muratorian Canon* 64–67; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.12.3).

appearance within the temple (Luke 2:41-49). In his book *The Lost Bible: Forgotten Scriptures Revealed*, J.R. Porter commented:

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas portrays the child Jesus as a boy of mysterious and dangerous power. His words can have harsh consequences when he is angered or insulted, as when he shrivels up one boy for a quite insignificant act and strikes another dead for merely bumping into him. It is hard not to feel distaste at such stories, which seem so far removed from the Jesus of the canonical gospels, and one can even detect a degree of unease on the part of the author as he narrates them: while attempting to absolve Jesus from the blame, he more than once records the great offense which Jesus' behavior caused, as well as the efforts of his parents to restrain him, as when Joseph asks Jesus: "Why do you do such things that these people must suffer and hate us and persecute us?" On another occasion Joseph tells Mary: "Do not let him go outside the door, for all those who provoke him die."<sup>12</sup>

The Christ-child is presented as one that does not grow in wisdom and understanding but yields his sharp omnipotence at a whim on unsuspecting people and his parents.

Though widely influential in Christian imagination and art, the infancy gospels were never close to canonization.<sup>13</sup> They were not discussed or considered because they were known to be fictitious fables. F.F. Bruce discussing the nature of the infancy gospels remarked that "the embellishments with which the 'infancy gospels' fill out the sparse details of the birth stories in Matthew and Luke are all fabricated out of whole cloth, they are not traditions of more or less dimly remembered facts; but they generated tenacious traditions of a new kind."<sup>14</sup> The text was viewed as unhistorical, spurious, and useful only as a vehicle of Christian curiosity. To further

---

<sup>12</sup> J.R. Porter, *The Lost Bible: Forgotten Scriptures Revealed*. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 139.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*. (3rd ed. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 282.

<sup>14</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 87.

add to the case of why it was never remotely considered within the canon, the orthodox Christian writers of the late second century associated the infancy gospel with circles that they considered heretical, particularly with groups of Gnostic Christians.<sup>15</sup> No scholar would dream of taking seriously the infancy gospels as valid, historical sources.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Argument**

The infancy stories do not bear resemblance to the Jesus of the gospels and were never thought to even be remotely historical. Rather, they existed much like Christian fiction does today, to create enjoyment in speculative discourse that is full of biblical metaphor, idioms, and themes. The Quran's use of the infancy story or legends built upon that story pose a special problem for Muslims apologists: the Quran is a divinely-dictated book that contains accounts of Jesus Christ found in unreliable literature some 100 to 200 years after the last book of the New Testament was written. Such information has value when discussing the reliability of the Quran versus the historical reliability of the Christian Scriptures. The argument is stated as such:

- The Quran uses the Infancy Gospel of Thomas as a historically reliable source.
- The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is not a historically reliable source.
- Using sources which are not historically reliable sources as though they were historically reliable sources is a very serious defect.
- So, the Quran has a very serious defect.

---

<sup>15</sup> Miller, 370.

<sup>16</sup> Phillip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost its Way*.(New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 104.

The argument above and other arguments associated with the Quran's dubious source material lend credibility to the claim that the religion built upon a less than trustworthy foundation.

### **Two Possible Objections**

One possible objection would be to deny that the Quran uses the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* as a historically reliable source. Rather, the Quran *transcends* the historical incongruities and limitations of the book and includes a story that is absolutely authoritative and without error. The historicity of Infancy Gospel would be a moot point. The issues with this objection are three-fold: how the story is presented within the narrative, what the Quran says about itself, and what the objection implies about Allah. The story is presented within the narrative flow as events that happened within Jesus' lifetime. The clay birds incident is said to be a "sign from your Lord" that Jesus teaches the truth about Allah. The "sign" is meant for the children of Israel to see the truthfulness of Jesus' message of Allah. How can something be a sign if the something has no historical referent? The Quran also claims for itself a very impeccable status: it is errorless (4:82; 18:1), eternal (85:21-22; 43:3-4), final revelation to humankind (2:2; 10:37), incomparable in beauty and elegance (29:48; 2:23), the very word of God (1:1-7), not originating in the will of Muhammad (53:1-5, 10-11) and many other things. If the Quran is truly errorless, could a historical error be possible? The objection might also imply something about the character of Allah and his ability to use inaccuracies or falsities within his revealed truth. What makes matters worse for the objector is the pivotal role the Quran plays within Muslim thought concerning inspiration. Islamic scholar Stefan Wild asserts "The importance of the Qur'an for Muslims and Islam is tantamount to the importance of the person of Jesus Christ for Christians and Christianity. It has been rightly observed that the Christian concept of incarnation

corresponds to what one might call “illibration” in Islam. In Christianity the divine *logos* becomes man. In Islam, God’s word becomes text, a text to be recited in Arabic and to be read as an Arabic book.”<sup>17</sup> The Quran is viewed literally as the word of God or an extension of Allah’s nature. For it to contain any sort of error would impugn the nature of an errorless God (39:1-2; 55:1-2). A further question would be whether or not something that never happened in the passing of time can be viewed by definition “historical?”<sup>18</sup> This could be an example of a pseudo-task. Responses and others similar to them make the objection implausible.

Another possible objection would be to argue that the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is in fact historically reliable and that early Christians erred when they left it out of their canon.<sup>19</sup> Muslim apologists would then be making the claim that “Christians made a mistake by not seeing the text’s truthfulness and historical validity.” The problem with this objection is threefold: the criteria for canonicity, the history of the books, and the theology of the gospel itself. Good reasons existed for rejection of canonicity for the spurious book. The book failed to meet the requirements for canonicity: apostolic authority (Was it written by the apostles or early eye-witnesses?), orthodoxy (Does it line up with clear OT and NT teachings?), antiquity (Has it been used within the covenant community for an extended period of time?), inspiration, (Does the book make a tangible and testable claim of divine inspiration?) and usage (Was it accepted by the catholic church at large?). The early Church also viewed their discussions and debates surrounding the issues of canonicity as being directed and superintended by God. The

---

<sup>17</sup> Stefan Wild, *The Qu’ran as Text* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 137.

<sup>18</sup> I am using the term “historical” as an event which actually occurred in space-time history at some point.

<sup>19</sup> This point was brought up in a debate between Dr. William Lane Craig and Dr. Jamal Badawi at the University of Illinois from 1997.

determinations and deliberations concerning the canon were in some sense within the will and superintending of God working through his church. Furthermore, this objection ignores the history behind the Infancy Gospels themselves and the intentions behind their creation. The Christians penning the gospels *knew* they were creating stories that were not meant to be read as truth or contain actual, correct historiography. Lastly, the christology of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is loftier and more theologically expansive than the christology of the NT documents! If Muslim apologists choose to argue that the book contains correct theology and history concerning the nature and work Jesus Christ, they will have to deal with the ramifications of a book that teaches Jesus was God in more ways than the NT documents elucidate. Thus, the book would then contradict the teachings of the Quran itself. Both objections are found to be lacking to the argument presented against the Quran. Serious reflection and study should be given concerning the trustworthiness of the Quranic text itself and the teachings espoused within the book.

## Bibliography

- Bruce, F. F.. *Jesus and Christian Origins outside the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.
- Elass, Mateen. *Understanding the Quran: A Quick Christian Guide to the Muslim Holy Book*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004.
- Glassé, Cyril. *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*. Rev. ed. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001.
- Jenkins, Philip. *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost its Way*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- McDonald, Lee Martin. *The Biblical Canon: its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*. Updated & rev. 3rd ed. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.
- Miller, Robert J.. *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*. Rev. and expanded ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.
- Nevo, Yehuda D., and Judith Koren. *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003.
- Porter, J. R.. *The Lost Bible: Forgotten Scriptures Revealed*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Tisdall, William St. Clair, and William Muir. *The Sources of Islam*. 1st Indian ed. New Delhi: Amarko Book Agency, 1973.
- Warraq, Ibn. *Why I Am Not a Muslim*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995.
- Wild, Stefan. *The Qu'ran as Text*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996.