

**SCRIPTURE WARS:  
CONTEMPORARY POLEMICAL DISCOURSES OF BIBLE VERSUS QUR'AN  
ON THE INTERNET**

F.V. Greifenhagen

Luther College, University of Regina

[Draft Copy: Not to be Distributed or Cited]

INTRODUCTION

While teaching an introductory course on Islam via distance education (in 2003), I received a term paper from an off-site student entitled, "Muhammad and Jesus: Each Very Different and Unique". The paper compared the founders of Islam and Christianity in terms that were very favorable to Jesus and extremely negative about Muhammad. It soon became apparent that most of the paper was not the student's own work; in fact, the student had plagiarized the paper almost entirely word-for-word from two polemical Christian anti-Muslim internet sites: [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org) and [www.thechristianexpositor.org](http://www.thechristianexpositor.org). This experience brought home to me that the internet is not only fast becoming the default option for locating information quickly and efficiently, and an easy source for cut-and-paste plagiarism, but also that it makes accessible to unsuspecting students and others unreliable information from acutely biased sources. More specifically, the internet has become a ready source for polemical discourses, not least in the area of religion.

A knee-jerk academic reaction to the presence of such discourses is to ban them from acceptable academic investigation and certainly from student papers.<sup>1</sup> However, this paper argues that it is necessary instead to explore these discourses, to categorize and characterize them, and to begin to formulate the rules and structures that produce them.<sup>2</sup> It is especially important to attend to the explicit and implicit practices of exclusion around which these discourses are organized.

To this end, I intended to begin the process of describing, categorizing and characterizing online polemical sources dealing with the Qu'ran and the Bible in relation to each other, paying attention to recurring themes and sources. I had hoped to put

---

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, for instance, disallows these polemical websites as sources for article text on Islamic topics. See the list, which includes [www.answering-christianity.com](http://www.answering-christianity.com) and [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org), at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject\\_Islam/Links\\_Cleanup](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Islam/Links_Cleanup) (last modified July 2, 2009) [Accessed Nov. 4, 2009].

<sup>2</sup> Howard & Davies (2009) likewise argue that although the Internet presents special challenges regarding plagiarism and the overconfidence of students in the reliability of information on websites (See Wang & Artero 2005), rather than vilifying the medium, students need to acquire the skills to use the Internet properly as a research tool. This paper draws attention to the necessity of delineating the specific genres of discourse found on the Internet, in this case, polemical discourse.

together an inventory of scriptural passages from both the Bible and the Qur'an that appear repeatedly in this polemical discourse and the hermeneutical presuppositions behind their use. In order to make the task manageable, I proposed to limit my investigation to two of the most popular Christian anti-Muslim and Muslim anti-Christian polemical internet sites: [answering-islam.org](http://answering-islam.org) and [answering-christianity.com](http://answering-christianity.com). However, it was an absolute nightmare for a traditional textual scholar like me to try to impose some sort of order on the wild proliferation of endlessly hyperlinked pages on these sites. Therefore, rather than an inventory or survey that pretends to be in any way comprehensive even about these two sites, I will instead provide a number of comparative probes into the material on these sites.

But first the context for this investigation will be set by considering the nature of polemic, and then, briefly, the history and features of Christian-Muslim polemic. Next, a number of cases will be examined in some detail. A conclusion will (locate present on-line Christian-Muslim polemic in relation to its historical precedents, and) consider the possible effects of the existence and use of online polemic on teaching and scholarship on the Bible and the Qur'an.

### (RELIGIOUS) POLEMIC

It could be argued that religious traditions are born in polemic, that they did not achieve definition except through some sort of conflictual relationship with other contending visions. This seems true at least in the cases of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the major religious traditions with which I am most familiar. It seems that their foundational origin stories, enshrined in their scriptural texts, are saturated with a sense of the crucial necessity of (and ambiguity about) separating from other options. The Tanakh is laced with a foreboding sense that the Israelites must set themselves apart from the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Canaanites and other peoples and behaviours, and the ideologies associated with them, or else suffer extreme consequences. The New Testament is likewise imbued with conflict between contending viewpoints: Jesus versus the scribes and Pharisees, Paul versus his opponents, the church versus the claims of the empire. And the Qur'an clearly manifests a polemical context vis-à-vis Jews, Christians and Arabian polytheists.

And yet, in the academy, polemic is generally eschewed. Jonathan Crewe has argued that, since the 1960's, an aversion to polemic has intensified in the academy:

Polemic has a bad name in the humanities academy. Reasons for avoiding or seeking to discredit polemic aren't always articulated, yet they surely include these: polemic disrupts the shared endeavors of the academy and preempts the civil or technical discourses of professionalism; polemic is a short cut to professional recognition typically chosen by those whose ambition outruns their achievement; conversely, polemics is the last resort of major figures in decline, seeking to maintain their professional dominance; polemic is a cheap, often trivial, substitute for real intellectual production; polemic belongs to the sphere of public journalism, where careers can be made on the basis of verbal aggression alone; polemic

caters to the unseemly pleasures of cruelty or malice; polemic tends to become compulsive and consuming (Crewe 2004:135).

The demand for civility, respect, negotiation and collective endeavor now trumps what is seen as an embarrassing, if not pathological, desire of “academic warrior-critics” to annihilate their opponents. And we might agree that this is all to the good. The word “polemic”, after all, is derived from the Greek *polemos* and *polemikos*, “war” and “warlike”. In an interview in 1984 shortly before his death, Foucault made the following connection between polemic and war:

The polemicist proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for truth but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For him, then, the game consists, not of recognizing the person as a subject having a right to speak, but of abolishing him, as interlocutor, from any possible dialogue (Foucault 1984: 382).

Jonathan Crewe warns, however, against the dangers of thus marginalizing and cordoning off polemic (or intellectual aggression): such a move obscures the inescapably polemical formulation of the stance against polemic; it closes discussion on the possible tempering, mediating, modulation and regulating of the excesses of polemic; and it does not acknowledge the pleasure and fertility of polemic.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in our examination of Muslim-Christian scripture wars, we will want to pay attention not only to its troublesomeness, but also to its potential as a possible source for innovation, and to how it can itself be transformed in less denigrating and aggressive directions.<sup>4</sup>

One consequence of the invention of printing was the commodification of polemical discourse. Polemics could be a game, an entertainment, and it was possible to make polemics into a career (Crewe 2004: 141).<sup>5</sup> And certainly, when reading online Muslim-Christian polemic I often felt that I had been transported into an outrageous amalgamation of Hulk Hogan professional wrestling-like posturing and National Enquirer sensationalism and exaggeration. But if polemics often comes across as theatre, it is serious theatre since it can have serious consequences. As Foucault said, “One gesticulates; anathemas, excommunications, condemnations, battles, victories, and defeats are no more than ways of speaking, after all. And yet, in the order of discourse, they are also ways of acting which are not without consequences” (2004:383).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Witness the birth of feminist, queer and post-colonial approaches in polemical challenges and exchanges. It could be argued that change and innovation rarely take place without polemic (Crewe 2004:138).

<sup>4</sup> Crewe (2004:140) speaks of how polemic “can be – or historically has been – susceptible to decorous neutralization, performative transformation, generic regulation, and medium-specific conventionalization”.

<sup>5</sup> The names of certain individuals recur frequently in contemporary online Muslim-Christian polemic, suggesting that at least some have made this type of polemic into somewhat of a career.

<sup>6</sup> Is there a causal link between polemics as verbal aggression and *polemos* as war? Is there an ethical dimension to a historical investigation of polemic? Can polemic aspire to be ethical?

Religious polemic can, while having high minded goals such as eternal salvation in mind, descend simultaneously to the crudest level of personal insult. An extreme example is furnished by the polemical exchange between Thomas More and Martin Luther in 1521: Luther writes against Henry VIII: “. . . since he knowingly and conscientiously fabricates lies against the majesty of my king in heaven [Christ], this damnable rottenness and worm, I will have the right, on behalf of my king, to bespatter his English majesty with muck and shit and to trample underfoot that crown of his which blasphemes against Christ”.<sup>7</sup> More responds: “. . . for as long as your reverend paternity will be determined to tell these shameless lies, others will be permitted, on behalf of his English majesty, to throw back into your paternity’s shitty mouth, truly the shit-pool of all shit, all the muck and shit which your damnable rottenness has vomited up, and to empty all the sewers and privies into your crown divested of the dignity of the priestly crown, against which no less than against the kingly crown you have determined to play the buffoon”.<sup>8</sup>

No less contemptuous and insulting expressions can be found in the current Muslim-Christian polemic on the internet. From the Christian side, here are two examples: “Hey the little queer boy who isn't man enough to defend his fake prophet” (Sam Shanoum).<sup>9</sup>

Abdallah got caught with his pants down. He screams at the top of his lungs that he still has a hat on, and also a pair of gloves, as if this changes anything in regard to the fact that his pants are down, and he is basically naked. In addition, he claims that his hat is so powerful and so special, it will dwarf my whole wardrobe. Well, the fact remains, he still has his pants down. Moreover, whether or not this bag that he put over his head even qualifies as a hat is a completely different discussion, and we may pick that one up at some other time. The only effect that his "bag-hat" has is that it covers his eyes so that he can't see what everyone else sees so clearly, i.e. how naked he really is down there (Jochen Katz).<sup>10</sup>

From the Muslim side, here are some examples from Osama Abdullah, who runs the [www.answering-christianity.com](http://www.answering-christianity.com) site. “Since this topic is the top one that the **Islam-hating** anti-Islamics use to "refute" Islam, I therefore challenge those **doomed-to-Hell infidels** to refute this article.”<sup>11</sup> “. . . further exposing how stupid (pardon my language) and low-life this foul-mouthed scum truly is. . . Feeling deeply helpless and enraged, the two con artists found no other choice but to resort to a new lie in a hope to deceive the reader.”<sup>12</sup> “I will continue to annhialate [sic] you and your sluty [sic] bible and put you and it in the dumpster that you all belong in.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Responsio ad Lutherum* in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (1969: v. 5:311).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Note that each side of this vicious polemic feels totally justified in proceeding with their scurrilous attacks on the authority of their opponent’s “king”.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.answeringchristianity.com/sami\\_zaatri/examining\\_sam\\_shamouns\\_character\\_5.htm](http://www.answeringchristianity.com/sami_zaatri/examining_sam_shamouns_character_5.htm)

<sup>10</sup> <http://answering-islam.org/Responses/Osama/preposterous.htm>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.answering-christianity.com/shooting\\_stars\\_miracle.htm](http://www.answering-christianity.com/shooting_stars_miracle.htm)

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.answering-christianity.com/responses/dead\\_sea\\_rebuttal.htm](http://www.answering-christianity.com/responses/dead_sea_rebuttal.htm)

<sup>13</sup> <http://answering-islam.org/Responses/Osama/preposterous.htm>

These virulent and aggressive remarks, with their strong sexual overtones,<sup>14</sup> while most evident in polemical email messages, and not characteristic in total of the polemical websites, are quite off-putting and present an obstacle in attempting to analyze the material on the websites. Yet they are a definite characteristic of the type of Christian-Muslim interreligious polemic on the internet today.

## MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC

Muslim-Christian interreligious polemic occurred already at the very origins of Islam. The Qur'an itself witnesses to an ambivalent relationship, both sympathetic and agonistic, of the emergent Muslim community with the religious traditions of Christianity and Judaism.<sup>15</sup> But of special note for this presentation is the Muslim-Christian polemic that emerged when the Arab armies burst out of the Arabian peninsula to conquer the Persian and much of the Byzantine empires. When the Umayyads conquered predominantly Christian territories such as Egypt and greater Syria (*al-Shām*), Christian intellectuals mounted polemical defenses of their religious tradition against this new upstart tradition. Muslim intellectuals came up with their own polemical defenses of Islam.

John of Damascus (675-753 C.E.) stands at the head of a tradition of Christian apologists and polemicists against Islam, especially in the Syrian tradition. On the Muslim side, one encounters authors such as 'Alī al-Tābarī (770 -855 C.E.), Ibn Ḥazm (994-1064 C.E.), Al-Ghazālī (1059-1111 C.E.), and Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1360 C.E.). The history of this polemic, from its beginnings in the eighth century C.E. to the twentieth century C.E., is surveyed in detail by J. M. Gaudeul (2000). Recurring themes in the polemic discussed by Gaudeul include disputes over the nature of God (one or triune), the nature of Christ (human or divine), the crucifixion (fiction or fact), salvation (submission or redemption), the Bible (corrupt or authentic), Muhammad (prophet or false prophet), the Qur'an (miracle or forgery), and various practices (e.g. polygyny or celibacy). Of interest is how the scriptures of both sides are used in these polemical discourses.<sup>16</sup>

In his Martin D'Arcy Memorial Lectures at Oxford in 2000, Thomas Michel SJ outlines what he sees as the enduring common elements of Muslim-Christian polemic over the centuries: "a recognizable pattern of shared religious presumptions, literary conventions, and intellectual argumentation". He confines himself to what he calls the classical tradition of "serious polemic" (as opposed to gratuitous and facile attacks) in which the opponents took the trouble to be well-informed of the other's views and had a serious regard for truth. He observes that these common elements, or this pattern, may however not be shared with contemporary Muslim-Christian believers and polemicists.

1. Religious faith consists of logical propositions that can be defended or refuted. The focus is on dogma, and, thus, little attention is paid to non-rational elements in religious life (e.g. ritual, morals, mysticism).

<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the More-Luther polemic was full of scatological references.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Q 2:135-141; 3:64-71; and 5:12-19, 78-86.

<sup>16</sup> From early on, Muslim and Christian polemicists read and made use of each other's scriptures. See, for examples, Swanson 1998, Demiri 2007, and Beaumont 2008.

2. A selective number of controverted issues, dealing primarily with areas of disagreement, some of them rather peripheral to the core convictions of the religious tradition concerned, appear repeatedly, to the neglect of common elements that may actually be more central to the faith traditions involved.

3. Truth is assumed to be demonstrable, and so the goal is to convince one's opponents of their errors and convert them to one's own path. No room was given to "conscientious doubt, sincere objection, the free action of God's grace, or the ambiguity or inadequacy of the author's own argumentation" (Michel 2000).

4. The intended audience of these polemics was, "consciously or not, the writer's own co-religionists who found in them a reassuring confirmation of what they already believed" (Michel 2000). Thus, even when the polemical writing is structured as a dialogue, or as an invitation to dialogue, this is actually not its foremost purpose. (This characteristic exists in tension with the immediately preceding characteristic).

Besides these shared characteristics of interreligious polemic, Michel finds the following six tropes (he calls them "main currents") in Muslim polemic against Christians:

1. The Christian Bible contains prophecies of Muhammad. Many of the passages Muslim writers discuss come from Deuteronomy, the Psalms and Isaiah, and are the same passages that Christians identified as predictions of Jesus. However, the appeal to passages in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus promises the coming of the Paraclete, as a prediction of Muhammad stands out as a unique feature of this trope. By the early fourteenth century, Muslims had developed detailed collections of biblical texts which they interpreted as prophecies of Muhammad.

2. The Christian Bible, to the extent that it is textually sound, contains material that actually refutes Christian beliefs, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, which Muslims consider aberrant innovations.

3. The Christian Bible is obviously corrupt (the accusation of *tahrīf*), meaning that in its present form it deviates from the original form in which it was originally revealed. Evidence of corruption includes that it does not clearly mention Muhammad nor accord with the doctrines laid out in the Qur'an. In practice, this accusation was rare or carefully nuanced since it undermines the purpose of the first two tropes above.<sup>17</sup>

4. Christian beliefs are untenable based on human reason: they are self-contradictory, logically inconsistent, or based on unfounded hypotheses.

5. The original true message of Jesus and his faithful disciples was subsequently replaced by a man-made substitute called Christianity due to the work of Paul, who adapted (or intentionally corrupted) the original message for a Roman gentile audience, and the Church councils, which produced creeds having little relationship to Jesus' prophetic message.

6. On the basis on "common sense, human dignity, the glory of God, and the advancement of society", Islam is obviously superior to Christianity. Here the rituals and morals of Muslims are compared to those of Christianity and seen as more excellent. Sometimes specific historical instances, such as the capricious behaviour of the Crusaders, are adduced to support these claims.

---

<sup>17</sup> On this tension in Muslim polemical attitudes towards the Bible, see McAuliffe 1996.

Although Michel does not summarize the repeated tropes or main currents of Christian polemic against Muslims, Beaumont provides a handy summary (2005), although he focuses specifically on Christian polemic about the Qur'an:

1. The Qur'an contains material unworthy of a divine revelation. Exactly what is unworthy varied from author to author. It could include sexual ethics such as the permission for polygyny or for Muhammad's marriage to the wife of his adopted son Zayd, or what were seen as false descriptions of Christian doctrine (for example that God took a wife and had a son by her – Q 72:3).

2. The Qur'an is corrupt since variant readings exist, and it contains vocabulary foreign to Arabic. It also is not convincing to Muslims themselves since they do not follow its precepts, but rely on warfare instead of the persuasive power of God's word alone to propagate their faith.

3. The Qur'an actually testifies to the truth of Christianity. For example, it confirms that Jesus performed signs to authenticate his message, as did also prophets like Moses, but it denies such signs or miracles to Muhammad. It also states that Jesus is the Word and Spirit of God, born of the virgin Mary, which implicitly proves his divine status. Likewise Qur'anic texts are interpreted to support other Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, if they are properly understood. (This trope exists in tension with the first two tropes described above).

While the above survey of the general currents of Muslim-Christian polemic through the centuries is obviously too general and arbitrary, it does highlight a number of tropes that seem to characterize such polemic. It will be interesting to see whether these tropes are reflected in contemporary Muslim-Christian polemic on the internet.

## THE WEBSITES

My original intention was to focus solely on two websites. One is the polemical Christian anti-Muslim site [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org). The domain name was registered in 1997. This large and relatively well-organized website is run by evangelical Christians in the United States who otherwise do not identify themselves (they claim that they want the material to speak for itself), although many of the articles posted on the website are attributed to their authors by name or pseudonym (although dates on which the material was posted are usually not given). Jochen Katz seems to be the chief editor and webmaster (Kidd 2009:115).<sup>18</sup>

The second website is [www.answering-christianity.com](http://www.answering-christianity.com), a polemical Muslim anti-Christian site run by Osama Abdullah, a Palestinian-American with an academic background in computer science. The domain name was registered in 1998. The website is huge, presenting a forest of articles, many by Abdullah but also by a variety of other authors, that are repeated frequently as hyperlinks in other articles, with little regard for dating or attribution. The presentation tends to be sensationalistic, with much use of

---

<sup>18</sup> According to [www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com) (I am unsure of the reliability of the statistics on this web traffic analysis site – see, for example, [www.mark8t.com/2008/08/31/alexa-ranking-does-it-matter-to-increase-your-rank/](http://www.mark8t.com/2008/08/31/alexa-ranking-does-it-matter-to-increase-your-rank/)), this website is accessed most by younger and middle-aged males with children and some higher education. It ranks 77,892 among websites visited in the U.S. [Nov 5, 2009]; 1270 other websites link to it. The U.S., India, Indonesia, Netherlands and the U.K. account for almost two-thirds of those accessing this site; it also has high rankings in Syria, Morocco, Egypt, and Malaysia.

colored and larger fonts. The webmaster has a special interest in using modern science to demonstrate the miraculous nature of the Qur'an.<sup>19</sup>

Given the case studies upon which I eventually settled, I also used material that was archived on another polemical Muslim anti-Christian site:

[www.bismikaallahuma.org](http://www.bismikaallahuma.org). This site is run out of Malaysia; the domain name was registered in 2002. It is organized more as a news site, so only the current articles are on display. However, it also archives various articles responding to Christian anti-Muslim polemic, if one knows for what one is searching.<sup>20</sup>

#### EXAMPLE ONE: INTERPRETING ISAIAH 53

Isaiah 53, or more accurately, Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, the fourth of a series of four so-called Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible, has been a primary text in which Christians claim to find a prediction or foreshadowing of Jesus as Messiah.<sup>21</sup> So also this text is extensively used on [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org) to argue for the validity of the Christian faith against the claims of Islam.

In his chapter on Isaiah from his Muslim evangelism book, posted on [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org), Gilchrist notes that neither the prophet Isaiah nor the other writing prophets from the Hebrew Bible appear in the Qur'an, and yet they provide “some of the most emphatic proofs in the scriptures of his [Jesus] deity and redeeming work”. After a look at standard messianic passages such as Isaiah 7:14 (the virgin birth), 9:6-7, 11:1-5, 42:1-4, 61:1-2, and their fulfillment in the New Testament narratives of Jesus,<sup>22</sup> Gilchrist focuses on Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, “the greatest of all the prophecies in the Old Testament to the suffering, rejection and ultimate glory of the coming Messiah . . . the most remarkable testimony, seven hundred years before the event, of the crucifixion of the Christ *and its atoning purpose*”. Gilchrist emphasizes that this text is unambiguously clear, and that, coming from a Jewish scripture, it is a witness independent of any Christian propaganda. In his view, the text clearly outlines the events of the passion of the awaited Messiah as reported in the New Testament: his humiliation and suffering, his silence before his accusers, his death, his burial in a rich man's tomb,

<sup>19</sup> According to [www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com), this website is accessed most by younger males with no children and some higher education. It ranks 155,642 among websites visited in the U.S. [Nov 5, 2009]; 484 other websites link to it. The U.S., Pakistan, the U.K., India and Saudi Arabia account for almost two-thirds of those accessing the site; it also has high rankings in Trinidad & Tobago, Singapore and Malaysia.

<sup>20</sup> According to [www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com), this website is accessed most by younger and older males with no children and graduate education. It ranks 374,116 among websites visited in the U.S. [Nov 12, 2009]; 288 other websites link to it. India, the U.S., Indonesia, the U.K., and Malaysia account for over two-thirds of those accessing the site; it also has high rankings in Singapore.

<sup>21</sup> Aejmelaeus (2005:483) characterizes Isaiah 53 as “an intertext par excellence for the evolving formulations of the Christian faith”. This text is directly quoted several times in the New Testament: Matthew 8:17, Luke 22:37, John 12:38, Acts 8:32-33, Romans 15:21, and 1 Peter 2:22-25. However, the influence of Isaiah 53 is pervasive in allusions and conceptual parallels beyond these direct quotations, especially in the way that the passion and death of Jesus are portrayed in the Gospels.

<sup>22</sup> Notably, Gilchrist mentions that the Jews do not accept the Christian interpretation of these texts, but he gives no details on Jewish exegesis of them.



and his vindication through resurrection.<sup>23</sup> The text also describes, in his view, the nature of Jesus' suffering and death as a vicarious atonement for the sins of others.

Gilchrist here reiterates a traditional Christian understanding of the Isaiah text, an understanding that is already apparent in the New Testament. He presents it here as a means to convince Muslims. The logic seems to be one of strict prediction and fulfillment: God in Isaiah describes in detail the life and death of the Messiah, and Jesus, as portrayed in the New Testament, exactly fulfills this description,<sup>24</sup> proving that he must be the Messiah, and that, furthermore, his death is an atonement for the sins of others.<sup>25</sup> This understanding of Isaiah is generally reflected in other references to Isaiah 53 on [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org).

In contrast, an interesting and novel interpretation of Isaiah 53 was offered by Osama Abdullah, who runs the [www.answering-christianity.com](http://www.answering-christianity.com) website, leading to an extended polemical exchange with a certain Nakdikmon, who posts on the *answering-islam.org* site. Abdullah's argument, while rather difficult to follow through the maze of hyperlinks, digressions and repetitions in his article ([www.answering-christianity.com/isaiah\\_53.htm](http://www.answering-christianity.com/isaiah_53.htm)), seems to proceed in six parts:<sup>26</sup>

First, and this is the most novel part, Abdullah argues that Isaiah 53, as a text about the promised Messiah, must be evaluated through the perspective of another text from the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 91, which he claims also speaks of the coming Messiah. He makes this claim because Psalm 91 is invoked in the accounts of Jesus' temptation by the devil in Matthew 4:5-10 and Luke 4:10-12. One of devil's temptations is that Jesus should throw himself from a high point to demonstrate his trust that God will save him; the devil quotes Psalm 91:11-12 in this regard: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so you will not strike your foot against a stone".<sup>27</sup> Jesus resists this temptation by referring to yet another scripture passage, from Deuteronomy 6:16: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test". Abdullah argues, however, that by his response Jesus did not nullify the application of the Psalm verse to himself. In fact, according to Abdullah, an explicit connection is made between Jesus and

---

<sup>23</sup> One notes that the Isaiah text consistently talks about a servant, and does not mention a messiah at all (Isaiah only mentions a messiah or "anointed one" once – 45:1 – and there it clearly refers to King Cyrus of Persia). The identity of the servant is contested. While Christians have traditionally seen the servant as a messianic figure fulfilled in Jesus, Jews have argued that the servant symbolizes the entire Israelite community or a pious minority or individual (Moses? Jeremiah?) in its midst. Early Jewish exegesis in the targums and various midrashim identify the servant as the Messiah.

<sup>24</sup> In a different segment under the title of "The Lamb of God", Gilchrist specifically lists 11 prophecies in Isaiah 53 that he sees fulfilled by Jesus as he is portrayed in the New Testament: [www.answering-islam.org/Gilchrist/lamb.html](http://www.answering-islam.org/Gilchrist/lamb.html).

<sup>25</sup> Gilchrist does not consider that New Testament scholars have identified how the writing of the Gospels was shaped by the messianic passages in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, he sees the Hebrew Bible as a completely independent text that verifies what he sees as the accurate historical accounts of the New Testament.

<sup>26</sup> I have generally followed Abdullah's own outline for his article. Typically, his articles are interspersed with numerous hyperlinks and digressions; thankfully, he usually presents an outline of his main points near the beginning of his articles.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 4:6. All biblical quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted. The NIV is the translation of choice for evangelical Christians. Osama Abdullah of [www.answering-christianity.org](http://www.answering-christianity.org) uses an eclectic mixture of translations that he finds available on the internet. For example, in this case he quotes from the New Living Translation, found on [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com): "He will order his angels to protect and guard you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone".

Psalm 91 in this story – thus Psalm 91 can legitimately be used as outlining the divinely expected pattern for the Messiah.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Abdullah claims that Jesus makes no such explicit connection between himself and Isaiah 53 (he does not seem to be aware of Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 53:12 in Luke 22:37).

Notable is the utter disregard for context and historical-critical consciousness in this line of argument; scripture verses and stories can be pulled from anywhere to support a particular line of argument. This is typical of much of traditional biblical and qur'anic exegesis, both in the past and today – scripture is seen as an undifferentiated fund of divine utterances which can be drawn upon in an atomistic fashion to explicate and support particular thematic and dogmatic propositions.

Psalm 91 pictures the confidence of the psalmist that God will save and protect him/her from calamity. Applying this psalm as a prediction of the Messiah, Abdullah argues that Psalm 91 establishes that, although Jesus was brought close to death, in the end he was saved from death by crucifixion – which, of course, accords with the traditional Islamic view that Jesus did not actually suffer death on the cross but was rather saved and taken up by God (Q 4:157-158).<sup>29</sup> The psalm predicts that God will save the Messiah (91:3), cover him with protection (91:4), allow no harm to come upon him (91:10), and rescue him (9:14). Instead of suffering death, the Messiah will see the punishment of the wicked (91:8) – Abdullah sees here a possible reference to the story of Jesus watching a substitute die in his place on the cross.<sup>30</sup> If indeed God will not allow the Messiah to even strike his foot against a rock (91:11-12), then he would certainly not allow the Messiah to be crucified, since, Abdullah reasons, crucifixion would involve the striking of feet against rock as the body is taken down from the cross and transported for burial. The psalm depicts the Messiah as calling out to God and God answering by rescuing him from his troubles (91:15) and giving him a long life in which he will see his descendents (91:16). So also Abdullah calls attention to the cries of Jesus in the Gospels, asking God to spare him the agony of suffering and death; he sees the psalm establishing that God responded to those cries by saving Jesus from crucifixion, and that, indeed, Jesus may have therefore lived a long life, with wives and children.<sup>31</sup> Most importantly, the psalm attests that the angels will *lift* the Messiah in their hands (91:12), which not only accords with other references in the Psalms and Isaiah where God lifts or saves those in distress, but most importantly accords with the qur'anic assertion that Jesus did not die but was lifted up to God (Q 4:158).

In Abdullah's view, therefore, Psalm 91 predicts that the Messiah will be rescued from death, and he insists that it is in this light that Isaiah 53 must be read. Why, though,

---

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the edited and rewritten "islamicized" version of Matthew's gospel produced by the Zaydī theologian al-Qasīm ibn Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (785-860 C.E.) omits precisely the temptation on which Abdullah's argument depends (Thomas 1996:35). Thomas speculates that al-Qasīm may have wanted to avoid any implication that Jesus is specially guarded in a way that might indicate his divinity.

<sup>29</sup> See Todd Lawson (2009), who argues that the standard Muslim view today that the Qur'an categorically denies the crucifixion of Jesus is based less on the words of the Qur'an alone but on the extensive Muslim interpretive tradition on these ayas.

<sup>30</sup> Abdullah refers to the (Gnostic) Apocalypse of Peter as the source of this story. It is doubtful whether Abdullah is aware that there are two early Christian writings that go by this name, nor that the so-called Gnostic one discovered in Egypt pictures the divine Savior separating from the human body of Jesus before the crucifixion.

<sup>31</sup> Abdullah makes reference to Q 13:38 here, which describes (all?) the prophets as having wives and children, and wonders therefore whether this was also true of Prophet Jesus.

do Christians read Isaiah 53 quite differently, as a prediction of the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus? Here Abdullah mounts the second major part of his argument, namely that Christians are relying on mistranslations or misunderstandings of the Isaiah text. If translated and understood accurately, the picture of the coming Messiah painted by Isaiah 53 accords with the Islamic view of Jesus and contradicts the depiction of Jesus' end in the Gospels.

Examples of mistranslation/misinterpretation that, if corrected, support an Islamic portrayal of Jesus include:

- Isaiah 52:13 "See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high". This verse does not speak of death but of exaltation, and so accords exactly with the Islamic view of Jesus, contends Abdullah.
- Isaiah 53:5 "he was wounded for our transgression". Abdullah argues that "wounded" does not signify death.
- Isaiah 53:8. Based on a note in the NIV regarding an alternate reading for the beginning of this verse – "From arrest" – Abdullah contends that the verse pictures the servant being thrown into jail rather than dying.
- Isaiah 53:9 "he made his grave with the wicked and the rich in his death". Abdullah argues that the reference to death in this verse is figurative, referring to Jesus' suffering but not to his literal death. Abdullah here makes use of a lexicon entry on the Hebrew word *mwt* which indicates some figurative uses of this word in the Hebrew Bible. He also references Young's Literal Translation which reads "his high places" rather than "in his death", which he sees as further support that a literal meaning for death is not meant here.<sup>32</sup>
- Isaiah 53:12 "because he poured out himself to death". Abdullah argues that these words do not necessarily signify that the Messiah will die, but could in fact be read as indicating that he will overcome and escape death: "It clearly states that he will shadow [sic] or overwhelm death by his life".<sup>33</sup>

The point of all these citations is to demonstrate that the Islamic Jesus, who is not crucified and who does not die, but is instead lifted up by God, is supported by a proper understanding and translation of Isaiah 53. That is, when properly read, Isaiah 53 makes no reference, even implicit, to the Messiah dying or being resurrected. This is especially the more so if Psalm 91 is used as an interpretive grid to understand Isaiah 53.

Examples of where Abdullah sees contradiction between Isaiah 53 and the way Jesus' end is portrayed in the Gospels, include:

- Isaiah 52:14 "so marred was his appearance beyond human semblance". Abdullah notes that in the Gospel accounts, Jesus is never depicted as being disfigured beyond recognition.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> The Hebrew text literally reads "in his deaths" which textual critics find does not make sense; an alternative vocalization results in the reading "his *bamah* or high place/burial mound".

<sup>33</sup> Abdullah here also inserts a note that the Jehovah's Witnesses equate "death" and "hell" (Sheol); therefore, this verse could also mean that Jesus overcomes hell. This is an example of the frequent references he makes to the various figurative meanings of "death". He also uses the bizarre analogy of a cup of juice poured out on a carpet "overcoming" the carpet's color with the color of the juice.

<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, Abdullah argues that this verse from Isaiah actually supports the story that someone else other than Jesus (Judas) became unrecognizable and so was crucified in the stead of Jesus because Jesus' opponents mistook him for Jesus. He thinks this story is found in the Apocalypse of Peter.

- Isaiah 53:3 “he was despised by [all] men”.<sup>35</sup> This cannot be true of Jesus, Abdullah contends, because the Gospels portray him as having many followers.
- Isaiah 53:7 “he did not open his mouth”. Abdullah notes that, to the contrary, in the Gospels Jesus was not silent but prayed asking to be spared death, spoke at his trial, and cried out from the cross
- Isaiah 53:9 “he will be buried in a grave”. Abdullah argues that, according to the Gospels, Jesus was never buried but only temporarily placed in a tomb; he was also not buried with the wicked and the rich, but alone.
- Isaiah 53:10 “he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days”. Abdullah argues that this verse implies that the Messiah will live a long life, be married and have children, unlike Jesus who is portrayed in the Gospels as dying as a relatively young man without wives or children.

These examples are meant by Abdullah to cast doubt on the portrayal of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection in the Gospels. The presumption is that, if Isaiah 53 is an accurate prediction, then the Gospels have misrepresented what actually happened to Jesus and can therefore not be trusted.

Thirdly, Abdullah diverges from Isaiah 53 to examine another Messianic text from the Hebrew Bible that is taken up in the Gospels, but his purpose is again to bolster his case that his reading of Isaiah 53, through the prism of Psalm 91, is both feasible and preferable. In the aftermath of the crucifixion, John’s Gospel (19:31-37) notes that the soldiers did not, as would normally have been expected, break the bones of Jesus. John understands this as a fulfillment of a messianic prophecy in Psalm 34:20 “None of his bones shall be broken”.<sup>36</sup> Abdullah again mounts a two-pronged attack to demonstrate that these prophetic texts actually support the veracity of the Islamic account of Jesus and contradict the New Testament accounts of his death. Thus he notes that, if Psalm 34 is to be applied as a prediction of Jesus, then the immediately preceding verse of the psalm needs also to be taken into account. This verse (34:19) reads: “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all”. For Abdullah, applying this verse to Jesus confirms the application of Psalm 91 to him; that is, God rescued him and surely did not let him suffer an ignominious death, which is exactly what Muslims believe.

Abdullah then notes that the prediction of Psalm 34:20 could not accord with the experience of crucifixion. If Jesus were nailed through the hands and feet, he reasons, surely some of the bones in these appendages would have been broken. So again the Gospel account is shown to be unreliable since it does not accord in detail with predictions from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>37</sup>

Fourthly, Abdullah reiterates his claim that the Islamic account, in which Jesus was never crucified but raised by God, fits as a fulfillment of Isaiah 53. He points out that the Isaiah text never explicitly refers to crucifixion or to resurrection, but it does

---

<sup>35</sup> Abdullah here seems to understand the translation “he was despised by men” or “he was despised of men” as connoting universal rejection.

<sup>36</sup> Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12, with their references to the Passover lamb whose bones are not to be broken, may actually be more compelling intertexts for John 19:36 given John’s focus on Jesus as “lamb of God” (John 1:29, 36) and his depiction of Jesus death as paralleling the slaughter of the Passover lambs (John 19:14, 31)

<sup>37</sup> Abdullah provides a hyperlink to a refutation of the claim made in the next verse in John, namely that Jesus fulfilled the prediction in Zechariah 12:10 that “they will look on the one whom they have pierced”.

speak of God raising and exalting the servant (especially Isaiah 52:13), just as the Qur'an does. Therefore, the accounts from Isaiah and the Qur'an mutually support and confirm each other over against the erroneous accounts found in the Gospels.

Fifthly, Abdullah makes the strange argument that, even if one grants that the predictions in the messianic texts from the Hebrew Bible actually depict a Messiah that dies and is resurrected, this would not prevent God from changing his mind. As evidence, Abdullah presents a lengthy catena of texts from the Hebrew Bible that portray God as repenting, revoking, or relenting what he originally intended. Why is it not possible that the same thing happened in the case of God's intentions for the Messiah, he asks, especially in light of Jewish intransigence: "Why couldn't this be possible, when GOD Almighty saw that the Jews were total losers and that no Prophet was ever fruitful with them?" In other words, seeing that even Jesus' vicarious death on the cross and resurrection would not convince the Jews, God changed his mind and decided to save Jesus from this death.

The sixth point or argument, given Abdullah's immediately preceding denigration of the Jews, oddly hyperlinks to Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 53. These have been culled by Abdullah from [www.jewsforjudaism.org](http://www.jewsforjudaism.org), and, ironically contain many of the arguments that Abdullah makes about Christian mistranslation and misinterpretation of Isaiah 53 (perhaps Abdullah got some of his arguments in the first place from this source). However, this material distinctly contends that the servant in the Isaiah text is a symbolic reference to the Jewish people as a whole, a contention that does not fit with Abdullah's Muslim worldview. This may be the reason that the material is only hyperlinked rather than presented directly.

Finally, Abdullah concludes by generalizing: Just as Isaiah has no explicit reference to the crucifixion or resurrection of the Messiah, so also neither does any other text from the Hebrew Bible. And just as Isaiah 53, especially as understood through the lens of Psalm 91, portrays a Messiah who does not die but is saved and lifted up by God, so also many other texts from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament do the same.

Abdullah's interpretation was challenged by a Christian convert from Judaism, writing under the pseudonym Nakdimon on [www.anweringmuslims.com](http://www.anweringmuslims.com); a slightly edited version of the exchange was posted on [www.answering-islam.org/authors/nakdimon/rebuttals/ac/isaiah\\_53\\_mistranslated.html](http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/nakdimon/rebuttals/ac/isaiah_53_mistranslated.html). Nakdimon essentially questioned Abdullah's interpretation on two main grounds. First, he disputes Abdullah's use of Psalm 91 as messianic. In fact, he claims that in the stories of the devil's temptation of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, Jesus, by countering the devil's suggestion that he prove the truth of Psalm 91 by jumping from the highest point of the temple, actually refused Psalm 91 entirely as having any messianic predictive value. Therefore, Nakdimon wonders why Abdullah would prefer "the Satanic reading of Psalm 91 over the Messianic rebuke of that reading". (In doing so, Nakdimon ignores Abdullah's attention to the fact that the temptation is resisted, not with words indicating that the devil's quotation has no validity, but with the words "It is (also) written";<sup>38</sup> for Abdullah, this indicates that Jesus accepted the devil's application of scripture to himself, but cited another scriptural text that was more applicable in the circumstances).

---

<sup>38</sup> Only Matthew's version includes the word "also", and only in response to the particular temptation, the second one in Matthew's gospel, to jump from the highest point of the temple.

For Nakdimon, Isaiah 53 as a messianic text is well established, whereas the messianic status of Psalm 91 remains to be proven. While seeming to reflect the traditional Christian view in which Psalm 91 is not usually found on lists of messianic passages in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>39</sup> Nakdimon ignores the possibility of the interpretive connection that Abdullah is making. Intriguingly, Creach (1998) has surmised that Second Isaiah (40-55) and the fourth book of the Psalter (Psalms 90 - 106) are literarily connected.<sup>40</sup> And Caneday (1999) argues that Mark's short story of Jesus' temptation (Mark 1:13) alludes to Psalm 91:9-13, refracted through Isaiah 35:9, and points to an Israel/Messiah typology. Matthew and Luke, in their versions of the temptation story, make Mark's use of Psalm 91 explicit.

Even if Psalm 91 were capable of a messianic interpretation, Nakdimon implies that its picture of the Messiah is so different from that of Isaiah 53, that the interpreter would need to choose between the two: "Psalm 91 says that he will not be harmed, Isaiah 53 says he will be harmed. WHAT WILL IT BE????". In other words, Nakdimon argues that Abdullah cannot apply both Psalm 91 and Isaiah 53 to Jesus; he must choose between one or the other.

Secondly, Nakdimon disputes the mistranslations or misinterpretations that Abdullah identifies in the traditional Christian reading of Isaiah 53. He recognizes that these are similar to the objections raised by Jews to the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53, which Nakdimon claims to have dealt with on his website. Thus, interestingly, the Jews are drawn into this Muslim versus Christian debate by both Abdullah and Nakdimon.

Nakdimon's objections to Abdullah's treatment of Isaiah 53 include the following:

- Isaiah 53:3. Nakdimon argues that Jesus, the Messiah, was despised, not in general, but specifically in his suffering, trial and death. Also, the Greek text says he was despised by "men", not "all men".
- Isaiah 53:5. This verse, according to Nakdimon, portrays "wounding" as a precursor to the Messiah's death, depicted later in verses 8-12. Also, if the Messiah is wounded, then he was obviously not kept from harm, as Psalm 91 would seem to indicate (another reason to reject the messianic application of Psalm 91). Nakdimon also rejects Abdullah's musing that the "wounding" in this verse could refer to the purely "spiritual hurt" of the Messiah at his rejection by the Jews.
- Isaiah 53:7. Nakdimon argues that the description of the Messiah not opening his mouth refers specifically to the fact that Jesus never objected to his accusers and did not say a word to defend himself before them. (Although Nakdimon asserts his argument strongly, he does not really deal with those Gospel passages where Jesus does seem to defend himself. Only Matthew's passion account points out Jesus' silence when accused – Matthew 26:63, 27:14).
- Isaiah 53:8. Nakdimon rejects Abdullah's assertion, which he based on footnotes in some bible translations, that this does not portray the Messiah's death, but rather his

---

<sup>39</sup> However, Psalm 91 is interpreted as a messianic psalm by T. Ernest Wilson (1997) because it predicts Jesus' temptation by the devil (91:11-12) and his victory over the devil or serpent (91:13).

<sup>40</sup> Creach argues that linguistic parallels between Psalm 90 and Isaiah 40, and between Psalm 106 and Isaiah 55, the beginnings and endings of these two blocks of material, may indicate that Book Four of the Psalter was shaped on the model of Isaiah 40-55.

imprisonment. In other words, Nakdimon rejects alternate textual renditions of this verse.

- Isaiah 53:9. Nakdimon here disputes Abdullah’s metaphorical or figurative reading of the word “death”, insisting that death is meant literally here, as it is usually in the Hebrew Bible according to his understanding. In fact, since death is literally plural here (“his deaths”), it becomes even more real in that both physical and spiritual death is signified.<sup>41</sup> He also rejects the alternate vocalization that results in the reading “his high place” because it connotes idolatry and is therefore untenable in a text relating to the Messiah.<sup>42</sup> Nakdimon also explains that ancient burial practices involved putting the corpse into a tomb first, before later burying the bones.
- Isaiah 53:10-11. Here Nakdimon invokes a metaphorical reading of the word “seed” in this verse (not “his seed” as he observes) to refer not to the Messiah’s physical descendents but to something else (he does not specify further). He also insists that the reference to a prolonged life in this verse refers to the Messiah after his resurrection. In verse 53:10, Nakdimon rejects Abdullah’s interpretation that the Hebrew reading, indicated in a footnote to the NIV translation, “though you [not the LORD] make his life guilt-offering” indicates that people, not God, wanted the Messiahs’ death.
- Isaiah 53:12. Nakdimon objects to Abdullah’s interpretation of “poured unto death” meaning that the Messiah will not die but will rather overcome death. Nakdimon understands this verse to accord with the traditional Christian doctrine that the Messiah dies in order to overcome death, and that the honour accorded to him is the honour of being vindicated by God in being resurrected from the dead, not by being saved from death. He also objects to Abdullah’s references to the Apocalypse of Peter because for him this is not an authentic book.<sup>43</sup> He also rejects here Abdullah’s characterization of the Messiah bearing the sins of many as being equated to the description of his intercession for transgressors at the end of the verse.

(Please see Appendix 1 for a chart outlining the contending interpretations of Isaiah 53 by Abdullah and Nakdimon).

Finally, Nakdimon argues that just because Isaiah 53 does not explicitly mention crucifixion or resurrection, it does not mean that these concepts cannot be found via interpretation in the text (he seems to allow for interpretational development, although he does not call it this). He also finds that the Qur’anic verses cited to assert that Jesus was not crucified to be ambiguous – these verses insist that the Jews did not kill Jesus, but, according to him, allow for the possibility that the Romans did so.

## EXAMPLE TWO: ADAM OR TWO ADAMS

If Osama Abdullah displayed a creative use of Psalm 91 in combination with Isaiah 53 to argue for a traditional Islamic concept of Jesus and against the portrayal of Jesus crucifixion and death in the Gospels, this next example will demonstrate some creative exegesis by Christian anti-Muslim polemicists in relation to a story about Adam that

<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the Jewish interpretation hyperlinked in Abdullah’s article, interprets the plural here in relation to the servant signifying the plural people Israel.

<sup>42</sup> Nakdimon’s theological presuppositions are at work here.

<sup>43</sup> He does not specify that this is so because that book is not in the canon.

appears in the Qur'an but is missing from the Christian Bible. The story in question is that of the angels being ordered by Allah to bow to Adam and Iblīs refusing to do so (Q 2:34, 7:11-18, 15:28-44, 17:61-65, 18:50, 20:116, 38:71-88). While much of the on-line polemic between Christians and Muslims about this story seems to focus on debates about whether Iblīs is an angel (who technically would not be able to disobey God) or a jinn (who can disobey God),<sup>44</sup> a second issue of debate concerns whether the angels' prostration to Adam represents forbidden worship (shirk).<sup>45</sup> An article by Wail Taghlibi on [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org) draws on this second issue to argue that Jesus, the "second Adam" according to some New Testament passages, is the only one worthy of the prostration that God commands the angels to perform.

First, Taghlibi finds unsatisfying the contention of Muslim commentators that the prostration that God ordered the angels to perform to Adam did not involve worship but rather was merely a means of showing honour and respect.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, he wonders why the angels are to prostrate only to Adam and not to both Adam and Eve, since, according to the Qur'an (30:21, 39:6) and Muslim tradition, she was also, like Adam, created at the beginning by God's own hands. In other words, Taghlibi is trying to argue that prostration or worship of Adam alone does not make sense given the only explicit reason for it given by the Qur'an – that God made Adam with his hands. This leads him to bring up Jesus as the person who, in his opinion, alone would be worthy of this worship and honour. He draws on qur'anic passages to highlight the special status of Jesus in Islam, but then quickly proceeds to the key biblical passage for his argument: I Corinthians 15: 45-49, which speaks of two Adams, the first one, from the earth, and the last one, from heaven. Using copious biblical quotations, he contrasts the characterization of the first Adam, who, along with Eve, disobeyed God, with that of the last Adam, namely Jesus, who alone fully obeyed God and therefore, according to the similar Adam typology in Romans 5:12-21, restored humanity's broken relationship with God. Finally, invoking the first chapter of Hebrews in which "the Son" is presented as superior to the angels,<sup>47</sup> Tablighi concludes that the prostration to Adam in the Qur'an is actually due to the last Adam, Jesus. In other words, the New Testament doctrine of the two Adams is used to reinterpret, or perhaps more accurately to correct, the qur'anic story of the angel's prostration to Adam.<sup>48</sup>

Tablighi's article inspired a lengthy rebuttal by Jalal Abualrub. This rebuttal in turn received a lengthy two part responses from Sam Shamoun. Only the main lines of their arguments are presented in the following.

---

<sup>44</sup>For example, [www.answering-christianity.com/abdullah\\_smith/jinn\\_dragons\\_rebuttal.htm](http://www.answering-christianity.com/abdullah_smith/jinn_dragons_rebuttal.htm).

<sup>45</sup> For example, [www.answering-christianity.com/muhammadwasnotapagan.htm](http://www.answering-christianity.com/muhammadwasnotapagan.htm).

<sup>46</sup> The same argument is made by Muslim commentators in the case of the prostration to Joseph (Q12:4, 100).

<sup>47</sup> Although he is not cited in Tablighi's article, William St. Clair Tisdall, in the fourth chapter of his 1905 book *The Original Sources of the Qur'an*, argued that the qur'anic story of God commanding the angels to prostrate to Adam stems from Muhammad's misunderstanding of the "first-born" in Hebrews 1:6, which God orders all the angels to worship, as the first Adam instead of Jesus.

<sup>48</sup> Tablighi goes on to justify to his Muslim readers his use of the Christian Bible to explain the Qur'an by countering the accusation of the Bible's corruption in two ways: first, with qur'anic quotations that he argues support the credibility of the Bible and its protection by God, and, second, with assertions of the reliability of the Bible's manuscript.



Abualrub begins by mocking the pretensions of Christian missionaries to be “shaiyks” and issue “fatawa” on Islamic matters that are full of “horrific confusion and plain errors”, deal with emotion rather than truth, and focus on the more tangential aspects of belief rather than core tenets. In response to Taghlibi, he first argues that the word *sujūd* or “prostration” has a range of meanings in Arabic and does not always, even in the Qur’an, signify worship: although the Qur’an “overwhelmingly” uses *sujūd* in the sense of worship, it does not do so “exclusively”. For instance, the Qur’an uses *sujūd* as a metaphor of the automatic obedience of the non-human elements of creation to God’s will (22:18). Whether *sujūd* refers to worship needs to be ascertained from context.

Second, the context of the entire story of the angels being commanded to prostrate to Adam indicates, according to Abualrub, that it is not worship of Adam that is at issue (the Qur’an makes no references to worship, *tawhīd* or *shirk* in these passages) but rather the relative *honour* accorded to Adam vis-à-vis the angels and Iblis. Iblis, in his reply to God clearly states that he is upset because God has honoured (*karama*) Adam above him (Q 17:62).<sup>49</sup> So the meaning of *sujūd* in this story is prostration with the intention “to honour” not “to worship”. Furthermore, God mentions why Adam is to be honored: because he has been created by God’s own hands (Q 38:75); Iblis, it seems, disagreed with this reason.

Thirdly, Abualrub argues that the Christians’ own Bible also has examples of prostration that do not involve worship, especially that of Joseph’s family bowing down to him, a story of prostration that is also found in the Qur’an (Genesis 43:26-28. Q 12:100). Abualrub is, of course, aware that prostration to other than God, even if for the purpose of honour, is not allowed in Islam, but he argues, fourthly, that this is a result of the abrogation of a previously acceptable traditional practice by the coming of Islam. Even the Christians, he says, must accept the reality of abrogation since they no longer follow many of the precepts found in their Old Testament (circumcision, prohibition of pork, stoning adulterers).

Fifthly, Abualrub asserts that Taghlibi’s argument that other prophets were far more deserving of honour than Adam is irrelevant: the story focuses not on the relative privileges or merits of the prophets but on God and the fact that God created Adam with his hands - and God’s actions are not open to question (Q 21:23). Even so, he accuses Taghlibi of a further confusion: God honoured Adam *before* he sinned, yet Taghlibi focuses on Adam’s disobedience as the reason he should be disqualified from God’s honour.

Finally, Abualrub rejects the whole Pauline notion of a second Adam: “Comparing Adam who sinned later on in his life with the rather fictitious, eternal, spiritual, sinless, second Adam is just another fantasy that has no relevance to the topic under discussion”. He sees the introduction of this notion as merely a means for Christians to sneak in their doctrine of original sin, a distortion introduced into the religion of Jesus by Paul. It certainly does not accord with the Qur’anic presentation of Adam sinning, asking for forgiveness, and receiving it.

Sam Shanoum’s response to Abualrub is found in two parts on the [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org) website. “The Prostration to Adam – A Quranic Problem, Part

<sup>49</sup> Abualrub accuses Taghlibi of “hiding” this verse from the readers of his article, likely a deliberate allusion to the Qur’anic accusation that (some of) the People of the Book conceal (*katama*) the truth (e.g. Q 3:71, 5:61).

1” first takes issue with Abualrub’s assertion that Adam was honoured because he was created by God’s hands. Shamoun asserts that Eve was also created by God’s hands (from Adam’s rib – a story that, while not found in the Qur’an, does appear in Muslim tradition) and so should also have been honoured. That she is ignored is proof for him that women suffer from an inferior status in Islam and that they are not even created in God’s image like men.<sup>50</sup> In his haste to condemn, Shamoun ignores the fact that the accounts of the creation of women that he quotes from al-Tabari all narrate the prostration of the angels to Adam and the disobedience and expulsion of Iblis as taking place before Eve is created from Adam’s rib.

Secondly, Shamoun argues that the method whereby God created Adam in the Qur’an is not unique. In fact, Q 3:59 actually draws an analogy between the creation of Adam and Jesus, so, Shamoun reasons, Jesus is just as deserving of honour as is Adam. In fact, and here is where Shamoun’s Christian convictions especially come out, Jesus is far more deserving of honour than Adam. Shamoun proceeds by using citations, mainly from the Qur’an and some hadiths, to argue that Jesus was born of a virgin, was sinless, performed miracles, ascended to heaven, is described as a spirit and word from God, and will return at the end to kill the *dajjal* or antichrist, in order to establish that Jesus “is vastly superior to Adam and is therefore more deserving of honor and glory than the first man”; in fact, Shamoun asserts, these sources indicate that Jesus is superior even to Muhammad.<sup>51</sup>

Thirdly, Shamoun sets out to prove that the notion of a “second Adam” is not a fantasy but is actually supported by the Qur’an and hadiths. He cites hadiths that blame Adam for humanity being turned out of paradise and Eve for cursing all future women, in order to establish the type of a sinful Adam. He then reiterates Qur’anic citations about Jesus in order to establish an anti-type to sinful Adam. Q 3:49 then brings these two – type and anti-type - together: “Lo! The likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam”. For Shamoun, this shows that the Qur’an is in agreement with the New Testament passages about Jesus as a second Adam: Romans 5:14-21 and I Corinthians 15:20-23, 45-49: “The Qur’an . . . says Jesus is like Adam, which happens to be another way of saying that Jesus is the second Adam . . . Therefore, if the Bible is fictitious at this point then the same thing must be said of the Qur’an since it is in complete agreement with God’s true Word!” With this astounding leap, which completely ignores the context of the Qur’anic passage, Shamoun believes he has convinced the reader that Jesus is the second Adam in both Christian and Muslim scripture.

Fourthly, Shamoun examines all the Qur’anic passages cited by Abualrub in an attempt to establish, against Abualrub, that *sujūd* means prostration for purposes of worship in all the instances it is used. He goes beyond this to delve into hadiths depicting the prostration of animals and trees to Muhammad in order to insist that such prostration come dangerously close to deifying Muhammad. As for the prostration of Joseph’s brothers to Joseph in Q 12:100, Shamoun argues that the Qur’an simply contradicts itself

---

<sup>50</sup> Shamoun goes on at length on the supposedly inferior status of women in Islam. He also quotes selected biblical passages to demonstrate the much better status of women in Christianity, but, of course, omits the passages in the New Testament about women’s subordination to men.

<sup>51</sup> Shamoun ignores the contention of Abualrub that the story of the angels prostrating to Adam has nothing to do with relative position of the prophets. The Christian image of the angels worshipping Jesus seems to be such a controlling presupposition for him that the story cannot be seen in any other way.

here. In the Bible, prostration to other than God is acceptable, but not so in the Qur'an.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, Shamoun rejects the arguments about abrogation. If the prophets of old, who are described as Muslims in the Qur'an, could be involved in acts of prostration to other humans (Shamoun here generalizes from the sole qur'anic example of Joseph, but implicitly includes examples also from the Hebrew bible), then "why are such practices disallowed for Muslims today?" His denial of abrogation totally ignores how his own Christianity involves a massive abrogation of Judaism and the practices of the Hebrew Bible.

In the second part of his response to Abualrub, "The Prostration to Adam – A Qurnic Problem, Part 2", Shamoun begins by mocking "the Shaikh who tried to do Biblical Exegesis" and accuses Abualrub of illegitimately using the Bible to support his views given the usual Muslim strategy of discrediting the Bible as corrupt. Shamoun contends that, while the Bible does not condemn prostration to another human being as a sign of respect and humility, it does have specific words that refer to worship of God alone.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the notion of abrogation does not apply to the Bible, he argues, since it is a multi-authored work coming from different times. And the Bible does not ban statues and images as Islam does, but only the worship of them. All of this is meant to lead to this conclusion: "For Abualrub to think that by appealing to biblical examples where people prostrated before others will somehow justify the angels prostrating before Adam is seriously misplaced, since within a biblical setting such practices are not wrong and do not violate the pure worship given to God alone. But within an Islamic context these practices do violate Islamic monotheism and worship. Abualrub is comparing apples and oranges". Shamoun sees the Bible and the Qur'an as incommensurate, having neither the same history, cultural context, theology nor source. (If so, one wonders at Shamoun's extensive use of the Qur'an to support Christian doctrines such as the exceptional status of Jesus).

Shamoun's second major argument in Part 2 is that the story of the angels prostrating to Adam is a human folktale invented long after the Bible was written, which was passed off as divine revelation in the Qur'an. He depends here on scholars who find exemplars or precursors of the qur'anic story in late Jewish and Christian extra-biblical traditions, and who have speculated that these traditions made their way into Arabia where they were taken up by Muhammad. Such a relatively late story, which does not appear in the canonical Bible, Shamoun argues, should be rejected since Jesus in the New Testament and even the Qur'an, in his opinion, attest to the completeness of the Mosaic Torah (Shamoun bases this assertion on a rather stretched interpretation of Q 6:154 and 7:144-145, 157). In fact, even though the book of Genesis does not explicitly mention Satan, by a rather fanciful interpretation of Job 38:4-7, 1:6 & 2:1 in conjunction with Ezekiel 28, Shanoun claims that the Bible pictures Satan as an obedient cherub in the Garden up till the time that Eve was created from Adam. In contrast, the Qur'an portrays

---

<sup>52</sup> Such absolute dichotomies are usually not accurate, as more reasoned and comprehensive scholarship indicates Roberto Tottoli, for instance, adduces biblical texts that object to "secular" prostration to kings and the like (1999:105); he also historically differentiates between the *sujūd* texts in the Qur'an and later Muslim attitudes towards prostration (1998).

<sup>53</sup> Shamoun claims that the Aramaic *pelach* and the Greek *latreuo* unambiguously always refer to worship of God alone, supposedly over against the ambiguity of the usual Hebrew and Greek words for prostration (*h□ishtah□wāh* and *proskynesis*).

Satan as disobeying God before Eve was created. Shamoun concludes: “What all this basically means is that the Qur’an is wrong”.

It is of interest to note that Shamoun at least recognizes that Abualrub, as a Muslim, assumes that the qur’anic account must be true, but at the same time he fails to recognize that he, as a Christian, also presumes, with the same conviction, that the Bible must be true. For neither the Muslim or the Christian in this debate is the accuracy and veracity of their own scripture ever seriously in question or subject to a process of proof; rather, the burden of proof is almost entirely on the scriptures of the opponent. And yet the scriptures of the opponent can be selectively drawn upon to support one’s own argument. Shamoun explicitly recognizes this strategy in his opponent: “Hence, whenever it is convenient and it serves his purpose, Abualrub will quote the Bible, but when the Bible happens to contradict the Qur’an, he will either say that the Bible is corrupted or that it has been abrogated”. But he does not admit that he himself engages in the same strategy.

### EXAMPLE THREE: SURAT AL-IKHLĀS (QUR’ĀN 112)

One strategy that appears constantly in Muslim-Christian polemic is the questioning and critiquing of the opponent’s scripture. This includes, as we have seen, charges of misinterpretation and mistranslation; more serious are attributions of error in the text of the opponent’s scripture. The third example concerns an article by Sam Shamoun on [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org) which attempts to question the monotheistic concept of Allah described in Surat Ikhlas (112:1-4) by alleging that the first aya of the surah is either badly mistranslated or contains a significant error.<sup>54</sup> This article receives no direct rebuttal from Osama Abdullah on his website, but a rebuttal does appear on [www.bismikaallahuma.org](http://www.bismikaallahuma.org), another polemical Muslim site, originating in Malaysia, that seeks to debunk Christian materials aimed at Islam.

Shamoun’s article proceeds to argue as follows. First, quoting a Muslim writer, Dr. Zakir M. Naik, he establishes the centrality of Surah 112 to the Muslim monotheistic concept of God. Secondly, he draws on the polemical writing of Abdullah Al Araby,<sup>55</sup> to question English translations of the first aya of this surah, which typically read something like “Say: He is Allah, the One” (Pickthall), claiming that they are not translating the last word in the aya according to its grammatical form and meaning in Arabic. Shamoun argues that this last word, the indefinite *ah□ad(un)*, literally means, not “one” but “one of” and quotes 29 qur’anic passages in which he claims that the word is used in this way.<sup>56</sup> He thus interprets the first aya as describing Allah as one of a group rather than as unique or solitary. He also argues that, if the Qur’an wanted to be clear about God’s oneness and unity in this surah, it would have used the word *wāh□id*, as it does in a number of other passages, which he also quotes. This allows him to assert that in 112:1, the Qur’an has committed a gross grammatical mistake, showing it to be an

<sup>54</sup> “Monotheism vs. Eloquence of the Qur’an”, [www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/ahad.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/ahad.htm)

<sup>55</sup> Abdullah Al Araby is the main author on another Christian anti-Muslim website: [www.islamreview.com](http://www.islamreview.com). He is also the author of *Islam Revealed*, published by The Pen VS the Sword in 2000, and of *The Islamization of America: The Islamic Strategy and the Christian Response*, published by Booklocker.com in 2003 (these are both essentially self-published books)..

<sup>56</sup> Shamoun does not note that in his examples the word *ah□□ad(un)* is invariably followed by the preposition *min* or an enclitic pronoun, which is not the case for *ah□ad(un)* in Q 112:1.

imperfect fallible writing and not the perfect word of God that Muslims claim it to be. He further argues that this so-called mistake originated in the influence on Muhammad of the Jewish Hebrew *Shema*, with its description of YHWH as *'ēh□ād* or “one”.

In conclusion, Shamoun suggests that the “mistaken” reading actually expresses the truth; namely, that Allah is one of a group, namely, of “many who have always existed as God”. In other words, through an alteration in how the last word of the first aya is translated, he transforms the entire surah into picturing a god who incorporates plurality. He adduces the argument, given elsewhere on [www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org), that the Spirit of Allah is a divine person,<sup>57</sup> and ends up with a “translation” of Sura 112 that could accommodate a trinitarian understanding of God:

Say: He is Allah, one (of many others who are) Allah, the Eternal, Absolute (since he exists as a plurality of divine Persons which makes him completely self-sufficient); He begetteth not, nor is He begotten (since these divine Persons have always existed and therefore did not come into being); And there is none like unto Him (since there are no other beings that exist as a plurality of persons in one).

But he finally draws back from this speculation since it implies that the god of the Qur'an and the god that Christians find in the Bible are possibly the same – apparently a notion that is anathema to evangelical Christian anti-Muslim polemicists. Instead, he ends by reiterating that the Qur'an is confused and mistaken in its portrayal of God and is thus “obviously not divine revelation”.

In another article on the same website,<sup>58</sup> Shamoun examines the enigmatic word *s□amad* in the second aya of Surah 112. He outlines the various and different explanations of the term in Muslim tafsir traditions, concluding that the Muslim commentators could not adequately explain this term, which he views as “a major source of mass confusion and embarrassment for Muslims” (citing no sources, of course!). Finally, he quotes extensively from an article by Franz Rosenthal,<sup>59</sup> who suggests the term is a survival of an ancient Northwest Semitic religious term. Shamoun displays no interest in the possible ancient Near Eastern meaning of the term and how that meaning may have been transformed and adapted to new contexts during its trajectory through history; instead, he finds this puzzle merely another example of unintelligibility and confusion in the Qur'an, allowing him to claim that it is far from the divine miracle that Muslims claim it to be.<sup>60</sup>

A certain Mohd Elfie Nieshaem Juferi posted a rebuttal of Shamoun's first article described above on the Malaysian Muslim anti-Christian website

---

<sup>57</sup> For example, see the extended interchange of Sam Shamoun with Osama Abdullah over whether the Holy Spirit is part of God or a creation of God: <http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Osama/spirit1.htm> and <http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Osama/spirit2.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> [www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/samad.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/samad.htm)

<sup>59</sup> “Some Minor Problems in the Qur'an”, originally published in 1953 and republished in *What the Koran Really Says*, ed. Ibn Warraq, 2002.

<sup>60</sup> One also suspects that he is attracted to Rosenthal's tracing of the root *s□md* to the Ugaritic deity Baal, and to Rosenthal's conclusion: “we are dealing with a pagan survival” (2202:337) – more fodder with which to discredit the Qur'an.

[www.bismikaallahuma.org](http://www.bismikaallahuma.org). Juferi, reproducing entries from various Arabic-English lexicons, first seeks to expose what he calls the “extreme idiocy and ignorance” of the Christian polemicists by demonstrating, so he thinks, that the word *ah□ad* functions as the adjective “one”, whereas “one of” is a pronoun and requires the word *ih□dā* (Juferi seems unaware that *ih□dā* is the feminine form of *ah□ad*).<sup>61</sup> Secondly, using the same lexicons, he attempts to show that the term *wāh□id*, contrary to the assertions of the Christian polemicists, can connote “one of a group” whereas this is not possible for the term *ah□ad*.<sup>62</sup> Thirdly, he claims that the term *ah□ad* is “rhythmically consistent” with the rest of the sura. Finally, he considers the affinity between the Arabic *ah□ad* and the Hebrew *’ēh□ād* in the Jewish Shema, finding that in both cases the words mean “one”. He concludes by exposing what he sees as the vain Christian polemical attempt to “read into” the Qur’anic text evidence for the Christian trinity, an attempt that is thwarted by the Christian’s own Bible which includes the vigorously monotheistic Jewish Shema.

I was unable to locate a Muslim on-line response specific to Shamoun’s interpretation of the second aya of Sura 112 and the word *s□amad*, perhaps because pointing to interpretive multiplicity in one’s attack on the scriptures of one’s opponent only leaves one open to the same charge against one’s own scriptures. It is noteworthy, though, that both sides in these polemics tend to present their particular interpretation of contested scriptural passages in their own tradition as the only valid one while throwing doubt on the standard interpretations of the scriptural passages of one’s opponent.<sup>63</sup>

Both Shamoun and Juferi involve themselves in a thicket of grammatical issues that they seem ill-qualified to evaluate. A comparison with Uri Rubin’s scholarly article (1984) on Sura 112 is illustrative. Rubin notes that the syntactic structure of the first aya of this sura, not the meaning of its individual words, is crucial for understanding its meaning. Consulting various Muslim commentators, and comparing the syntax of this verse with others similar to it in the Qur’an, Rubin concludes that both the words Allah and *ah□adun* are predicates of the subject *huwa*, resulting in the following rendition: “Say: He is Allah; (he is) one” (Rubin 1984:200). The fact that *ah□ad* is indefinite in the first aya does not imply plurality.

Regarding *s□amad*, Rubin concludes that this was a title given in pre-Islamic Arabia both to the person with the highest authority within one’s tribe and to the high god Allah, connoting the most powerful and authoritative one to whom one turns for help and protection in cases of exigency. The novelty of sura 112 is in combining a previously known title for Allah (*al-s□amad*) with a characteristic (*ah□ad*) that had not previously been applied to him. Rubin notes that al-Rāzī, followed by al-Bayd□□āwī,

---

<sup>61</sup> Juferi thus makes a similar mistake to Shamoun. Whereas Shamoun saw the indefinite *ah□ad* being used elsewhere in the Qur’an as “one of” (but ignored the necessary preposition or pronoun required for this construction) so also Juferi saw the feminine form *ih□dā* being used elsewhere in the Qur’an as “one of” (but ignored that the indefinite masculine form is also used in this way).

<sup>62</sup> A response attached to Juferi’s article argues that the term *ah□ad*, in comparison to *wāh□id*, has the additional connotation of “beyond composition, plurality and resemblance” The response refers to one of the occasions of revelation given in Muslim tradition for Sura 112: a query to Muhammad asking what Allah is made of. The Christian polemicists use the various occasions of revelation for this sura to argue against the reliability of Muslim tradition (see [www.answerislam.info/Shamoun/samad.htm](http://www.answerislam.info/Shamoun/samad.htm) and [www.answer-islam.org/Quran/Tafsir/112.html](http://www.answer-islam.org/Quran/Tafsir/112.html)).

<sup>63</sup> This is an example of the debate strategy whereby one compares the best in one’s own position and tradition with what one sees as the worst in one’s opponent’s position and tradition.

explains that *al-samad* is definite because it was a known feature of the high god Allah, whereas the indefinite *ah□adun* signified a new characteristic (1984:205-206) The implications of this combination are spelled out in the rest of the sura: Allah therefore is not related to any other gods (112:3) (a critique directed first towards belief in the “daughters of Allah” and subsequently to Christian trinitarian notions); in fact, as one, he is absolutely incomparable (112:4).

The Shema in Deuteronomy as a parallel to Sura 112 was evoked by Baumstark in an article published in 1953 in which he attempted to trace the monotheistic formulas of the Qur’an indirectly back to Deuteronomy 4: 35, 39 and 6:4.<sup>64</sup> But to evoke the parallel of Sura 112 with the Shema, if anything, underscores rather than impugns the monotheistic tenor of the sura.<sup>65</sup> (See Appendix 2).

## PATTERNS OF INTERPRETATION

The three examples of Muslim-Christian on-line polemic examined above yield some observations as to the strategies and patterns employed by these authors. More often than not, the rhetoric and interpretational moves made by one side are mirrored by the other side. Thus, methodologically, the Muslims and Christians who are writing this material are more united than their divergent perspectives would normally reveal. This was true also of Christian-Muslim polemic in the past, as Michel (2000) has described (see above). Following is a rather unsystematic inventory of these strategies and patterns.

1. Uniting both the Muslim and Christian polemicists is a view of scripture being self-evidently predictive, as well as being a truthful witness to the fulfillment of scriptural predictions. Thus passages from the Hebrew Bible can be drawn upon unproblematically as predictions of Jesus or Muhammad. The Gospels can be read as uncomplicated portrayals of the life of Jesus. The point of contention is not whether scripture actually functions in this way, but which scripture is authentically and truly scripture. Thus, for the Muslim polemicist, neither the Qur’an nor the Bible as scripture are in question; what is questionable is what parts of the Bible count as actual scripture. The Bible is read as divinely predicting and fulfilling where it suits Islamic presuppositions, but where it differs from Muslim dogma it is judged corrupt. For the Christian polemicist, the notion of scripture is likewise not up for debate, but the notion of the Qur’an as authentic scripture is attacked while the Bible’s scriptural authenticity is steadfastly defended.

2. That the “predictive passages” identified in scripture might have a hand in shaping the form and content of later scriptures or stories of fulfillment of prophecy is unthought in these exchanges when it comes to one’s own scripture. The scriptures of one’s opponent, in contrast, are subject to copying and influence, thus proving them to be debased. This strategy is especially used by the Christian polemicists; one sees it in the attempt to posit Sura 112 as an echo of the Shema in Deuteronomy, and to trace the story of the angels’ prostration to Adam to a misunderstanding of New Testament passages. On the Muslim side, this pattern is expressed in the notion that Christian scripture is, to various degrees, misinterpreted, mistranslated, or corrupt and unreliable.

<sup>64</sup> He speculated that the influence occurred via a supposed Jewish Arabic version of Aramaic translations.

<sup>65</sup> On the Shema in Deuteronomy, one might note the syntactical difficulties involved in its translation as well (see Moberly 1990).

3. Both sides tend to treat verses of scripture as undifferentiated and context-free units. One can pull verses from just about anywhere to make one's point. Such a procedure actually makes more sense with the Qur'an given its repetitious and oracular style, but it is applied also by both sides to biblical passages. For instance, the overall literary context of Isaiah 53 or Psalm 91 is never seriously considered. Neither are all the verses of these texts considered, but only the ones that are seen as directly relevant to the argument.

4. While one's own scripture, considered *a priori* to be the truth, is employed regularly to call into question the opponent's scripture, it is fascinating to see, for instance, a Muslim polemicist employ Christian scripture to call into question Christian scripture, such as Abdullah's use of Psalm 91 as an interpretive lens through which to read Isaiah 53. Of course, the controlling paradigm behind this move is the Qur'an and its presentation of Jesus, but none-the-less, that Abdullah plays off two parts of the Hebrew Bible against each other involves a dizzying alternation between seeing both authenticity and corruption in the scriptures of one's opponent. Similarly, Christian polemicists such as Shamoun deftly use qur'anic texts to build an argument about Jesus and Adam, for example, which calls into question other qur'anic texts.

5. A feature of the on-line polemic is the reference, when convenient to one's argument, to textual variants (e.g. in Isaiah 53:10) or to issues of grammar (e.g. in Q 112:1) or to non-canonical material (e.g. the Apocalypse of Peter). However, clearly the protagonists in this debate do not possess the expertise to deal with these technical matters; they depend on their native tongue (sometimes Arabic or Hebrew) or to sources that they are able to dig up, likely on the internet, to make their assertions. The use of scholarship is gratuitous and selective – only what is close at hand (often on-line) and what supports one's argument is used, without regard to the scholarly conventions with which this sort of material has been produced. Examples include the quotation of traditional Muslim authors of hadith and tafsir, or modern scholars like Rosenthal, by the Christian polemicists, or the use of scholarly annotations in the NIV Bible by Abdullah. Perhaps one of the effects of the shift of this type of polemic to the internet is the (mistaken) belief that anyone can be an expert because anyone can have access to the sources.

6. Both sides in this polemic read scripture literally when it supports their argument, but are quick to claim a figurative or metaphorical meaning when suitable. Thus Abdullah argues that references to death in Isaiah 53 must be figurative, while he reads references to being disfigured, keeping silent, having bones broken, being buried in a grave, and seeing one's descendents in as literal a fashion as possible. Nakdimon, conversely, reads many of these references in Isaiah 53 more loosely, but insists on a literal reading of the references to death. Neither opponent invokes any literary or historical-critical criteria to justify their decisions as to what is to be read literally and what is to be read metaphorically; rather, each already comes to the text with a preconceived dogma to prove.

7. Adamant theological convictions guide these readings; they are not open readings inviting examination. When a particular line of interpretation seems to lead to conclusions not in keeping with the polemicist's own beliefs, it must be repudiated. For example, Shamoun needs to draw back from the implications of his (forced) literal



reading of Sura 112 since it might upset a theological distinction between the god of Christians and the god of Muslims.

8. A particular strategy that these polemicists employ is to propose, for the sake of argument, that their opponent's particular scriptural passage is true, but then to show how this leads to absurd or contradictory positions. An extreme example is provided by Abdullah's proposal that, even if Isaiah 53 were a prediction of the Messiah as Christians see him, God could still change his mind. Abdullah proposes this point on the basis of the changeability of God that he sees in the Christian scriptures, not on some Islamic notion of the absolute sovereignty of God.

9. A feature of these polemics is a rigid drawing of lines between two alternatives, one which must be totally true and the other which must be totally false. Either Isaiah 53 or Psalm 91 applies to Jesus, but not both. Either Isaiah 53 refers to crucifixion and resurrection, or it doesn't. Either *sujūd* always implies worship, or the Qur'an is hopelessly confused. Either the Qur'an is absolutely consistent in its monotheistic language, or it is a polytheistic document. There is no room for ambivalence or interpretive play or multiple, equally compelling interpretations.

10. It is noteworthy that a hidden and silenced partner emerges every now and then in these polemical exchanges, and that is the Jew. Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 53 lurk in the background of the Christian-Muslim polemic about this text, but neither the Christian or Muslim side can fully make use of them without compromising their own positions. The story of the angels prostrating to Adam is partially traced to Jewish antecedents. The Shema is evoked without consideration of its place in Jewish religious tradition. In fact, of course, the whole use of the Hebrew Bible without reference to Jewish interpretations signifies an absent presence of a third partner in the polemic.<sup>66</sup>

11. While direct Jewish voices seem to be absent in these polemical discourses, except as ghosts, the Muslim and Christian voices do seem to interact. If the polemic of days of yore was more meant to assure one's own co-religionists of the validity of their positions rather than to engage the religious other in genuine debate, today's polemic on the internet does seem to involve actual engagement between Muslims and Christians. The engagement may not be pleasant or harmonious, it may largely involve only a few individuals who often occupy somewhat marginal positions in their communities, and it may take place between positions that are so entrenched that it really seems to matter little that engagement is taking place. But the fact of quick electronic communication and access has transformed the polemical scene such that it no longer takes place in isolation.

12. The on-line environment has meant a further change in Muslim-Christian interreligious polemic. While the examples from the past tend to be more-or-less well-crafted and extensive polemical treatises (see Gaudeul), contemporary on-line polemic is quite fragmented, often pieced together from diverse sources, and unclear and disjointed in argument. It also takes place relatively quickly and seems to be full of boundless energy.

## CONCLUSION

---

<sup>66</sup> Muslim-Jewish polemic and Christian-Jewish polemic also exist, both historically in the past and also in the present, including, I presume, on-line. However, I have not made a concerted effort to find and examine examples of these particular religious polemics.

So what approach should I have taken with that student who drew uncritically on Muslim-Christian on-line polemic to write an academic paper (forgetting for the moment that she also plagiarized everything)? Certainly the content and methods of this interreligious polemic she drew upon can be described and categorized; reading and comparing the polemic from both sides would be illuminating, especially when the similarities in approach are illuminated. But beyond these removed and objective academic procedures and approaches concerning content and method and comparison, there seems to be an energy and vigour in interreligious polemic that I find disorienting and overwhelming. It was extremely difficult to settle down in this world where everything was continually pounding home the same assumed truths in endless series of hyperlinked and cascading self-referential and self-confirming discourses. Can that alternately frightening and seductive energy be harnessed in more productive directions?

While these are big questions, for scriptural scholars the issues are perhaps more manageable. I will conclude with three of them: First is to merely note how easily the scholarly material we produce can be drawn into these polemical battles with no regard to the carefully nuanced arguments we might craft or the attention that we give to alternative explanations, ambiguity and multiple interpretations

Second, the on-line nature of this polemic with its changeability and potential for endless hyperlinking exacerbates the tendency towards the atomizing of scriptural texts. Quite simply, on-line there is no definitive text. This has, of course, been true of scriptures all along – despite various mystifications, no text of scripture has been or continues to be entirely stable. However, the on-line environment enacts and intensifies the instability of scriptural constructs with an overwhelming array of instantly available different translations and forms, and the easy ability to create new selections and combinations. The polemicists, of course, imagine that they adhere to a stable scripture, but this is largely a utopian desire masquerading as a conviction.

Finally, we might ask whether these manifestations of interreligious polemic are in a sense really any different from the polemics which gave birth to, and remain embedded in, the “original” scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While the similarities are instructive, one difference, it seems to me, is that in contemporary on-line polemic we have the opportunity of hearing both sides of the debate, not just the voices that were canonized.

## APPENDIX ONE

## ISAIAH 52:13 – 53:12

NIV	Abdullah	Nakdimon
<p><sup>13</sup>See, my servant will act wisely <sup>[1]</sup>;  he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.  1. Or <i>will prosper</i></p>	<p>The description of the Messiah in this verse accords perfectly with the Islamic view of Jesus and his exaltation</p>	
<p><sup>14</sup>Just as there were many who were appalled at him<sup>[1]</sup>—  his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man  and his form marred beyond human likeness—  1. Hebrew <i>you</i></p>	<p>The Gospels do not depict Jesus as altered in appearance in this drastic way. The <i>Apocalypse of Peter</i>, however, describes Judas as becoming unrecognizable as himself and therefore as crucified in the stead of Jesus</p>	
<p><sup>15</sup>so will he sprinkle many nations, <sup>[1]</sup>  and kings will shut their mouths because of him.  For what they were not told, they will see,  and what they have not heard, they will understand.  1. Hebrew; Septuagint <i>so will many nations marvel at him</i></p>		
<p>53Who has believed our message  and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?</p>		
<p><sup>2</sup>He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  and like a root out of dry ground.  He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.</p>		
<p><sup>3</sup>He was despised and rejected by men,  a man of sorrows, and</p>	<p>The Gospels describe Jesus as having many followers and not as being despised</p>	<p>The Gospels describe Jesus as despised by (some, not all) men specifically at his</p>

<p>familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.</p>	<p>by all men</p>	<p>trail and death</p>
<p><sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.</p>		
<p><sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.</p>	<p>Being “pierced” and “wounded” does not necessarily mean death.</p>	<p>The wounding of the Messiah here is a precursor to his death in verses 8-12. The fact that the Messiah will be wounded invalidates the application of Psalm 91 as a messianic prediction.</p>
<p><sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.</p>		
<p><sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.</p>	<p>The Gospels portray Jesus as praying, speaking at his trial, and crying out from the cross, not as being silent.</p>	<p>The Gospels portray Jesus as remaining silent in the fact of the accusations made against him.</p>
<p><sup>8</sup> By oppression <sup>[1]</sup> and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living;</p>	<p>The beginning of this verse can be read as a reference to Jesus being arrested (see note to 53:8 in NIV); being “cut off from the land of the living” therefore does not mean death but being</p>	<p>Rejects the interpretation of “cut off from the land of the living” as referring to imprisonment</p>

<p>for the transgression of my people he was stricken.<sup>[2]</sup>  <sup>1.</sup> Or <i>From arrest</i>  <sup>2.</sup> Or <i>away. / Yet who of his generation considered / that he was cut off from the land of the living / for the transgression of my people, / to whom the blow was due?</i></p>	<p>thrown into jail (unjustly for other people's transgressions)</p>	
<p><sup>9</sup> He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  and with the rich in his death,  though he had done no violence,  nor was any deceit in his mouth.</p>	<p>In the phrase "in his death", death is to be understood as figurative of the Messiah's suffering; an alternate reading has "his high-place".  The Gospels depict Jesus as temporarily placed in a tomb by himself, not as being buried in a grave.</p>	<p>Death in this phrase is meant to be read literally, not figuratively; the reading "his high places" connotes idolatry and is therefore to be rejected.  Ancient burial practices involved internment in tomb first, and then gathering of the bones for burial.</p>
<p><sup>10</sup> Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,  and though the LORD makes <sup>[1]</sup> his life a guilt offering,  he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.  <sup>1.</sup> Hebrew <i>though you make</i></p>	<p>The Gospels portray Jesus as dying a relatively young age with no surviving descendants, yet the Messiah here is depicted as living a long life with many children.  It is not God but "you" (the people being accused) who want to make the Messiah's life a guilt offering.</p>	<p>The Greek says that "he will see <i>seed</i> (singular)" leading to a figurative reading; "prolong his days" refers to the Messiah's life after his resurrection.  The proper reading is to see God making the Messiah a guilt offering.</p>
<p><sup>11</sup> After the suffering of his soul,  he will see the light of life <sup>[1]</sup> and be satisfied <sup>[2]</sup> ;  by his knowledge <sup>[3]</sup> my righteous servant will justify many,  and he will bear their iniquities.  <sup>1.</sup> Dead Sea Scrolls (see also Septuagint Masoretic Text does not have <i>the light of life</i> .  <sup>2.</sup> Or (with Masoretic Text) <i>He will see the result of the suffering of his soul / and be satisfied</i>  <sup>3.</sup> Or <i>by knowledge of him</i></p>		

<p><sup>12</sup> Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,<sup>[1]</sup> and he will divide the spoils with the strong,<sup>[2]</sup> because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.</p> <p>For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.</p> <p>1. Or <i>many</i> 2. Or <i>numerous</i></p>	<p>The phrase “poured out his life unto death” signifies that the Messiah overcomes death by not succumbing to death.</p> <p>“He bore the sin of many” refers to the Messiah’s intercession for transgressors, not to an expiatory death.</p>	<p>The phrase “poured out his life unto death” signifies that the Messiah overcomes death by dying and then being vindicated by God by being resurrected.</p> <p>The verse clearly indicated that the Messiah dies an expiatory death.</p>
--	---	--

## APPENDIX 2

## TAWHID/SHEMA

Qur'an: Al Iklās □ 112	Deuteronomy 6:4
<p>قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ١  الله الصَّمَدُ ٢  لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ  يُولَدْ ٣  وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ كُفُوًا  أَحَدٌ ٤</p>	<p>שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל  יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ  יהוה אֶחָד:</p>
<p><i>Kul huwa llāhu 'ah □ ad</i>  <i>Allāhu l-s □ amad</i>  <i>Lam yalid wa-lam yūlad</i>  <i>Wa-lam yakun llahu kufūwan 'ah □ ad</i></p>	<p><i>Šēm 'a yiśrāēl</i>  <i>'adonai 'ēlohēnu</i>  <i>'adonai 'ēh □ ād</i></p>
<p>Say he is God, one  God forever (<i>or</i> God, the refuge)  Not begetting, unbegotten  And having as an equal none</p>	<p>Hear, O Israel  The LORD our God  The LORD is one  (<i>or</i> The LORD is our God, the LORD alone)</p>

The Qur'anic translation is from Michel Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (1999), and the Biblical translation is from Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh Translation*.

Note: In other affirmations of the divine oneness, the Qur'an uses the word *wah □ id*, such as in the formulaic phrase *ilāhukum ilāhun wāh □ idun* (eg. 2:163, 18:110) or *allāhu-l-wāh □ id* (e.g. 12:39). The use of *'ah □ ad* in surah 112 uniquely stands out as perhaps a deliberate allusion to the Shema's *'ēh □ ād*.

## WORKS CITED

- Abdullah, Osama (n.d.), "Lies upon Lies! The crucifixion and Resurrection were never prophesied in the Bible's Old Testament". [www.answering-christianity.com/isaiah\\_53.htm](http://www.answering-christianity.com/isaiah_53.htm) [accessed Nov 2, 2009].
- Abualrub, Jalal (2005), "When the Evangelist Becomes a Shaikh, the Angels Become Worshippers of Adam", posted October 14 [Accessed Nov. 4, 2009] <http://www.bismikaallahuma.org/archives/2005/when-the-evangelist-becomes-a-shaikh-the-angels-become-worshippers-of-adam/>
- Aejmelaesus, Anneli (2005), "The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 as an Intertext of the New Testament", *Lux humana, lux aeterna: essays on biblical and related themes in honour of Lars Aejmelaesus*, ed. Antti Mustakallio. Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 475-494.
- Baumstark, A. (1953), "Zur Herkunft der monotheistischen Bekenntnisformeln im Koran", *Oriens christianus* 37: 6-22.
- Beaumont, Mark (2005), "Early Christian Interpretation of the Qur'an", *Transformation* 22.1: 195-105.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2008), "Muslim Readings of John's Gospel in the 'Abbasid Period'", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19.2: 179-197.
- Caneday, A.B. (1999), "Mark's Provocative Use of Scripture in Narration: 'He was with the wild animals and angels ministered to him'", *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 9: 19-36.
- Creach, Jerome (1998), "The Shape of Book Four of the Psalter and the Shape of Second Isaiah", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 80: 63-76.
- Crewe, Jonathan (2004), "Can polemic be ethical: a response to Michel Foucault", *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical?* ed. Jane Gallop. New York: Routledge.
- Demiri, Lejla (2007), "Hanbalite Commentary on the Bible: Analysis of Najm al-Dīn al-Tūfī's (d. 716/1316) *Al-Ta'liq*", *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, ed. David Thomas. Leiden: Brill. 295-313.
- Foucault, Michel (2004), "An interview with Michel Foucault", *Foucault: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon.
- Gaudeul, J.M. (2000), *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History, I: A Survey & II: Texts* (Collection 'Studi arabo-islamici del PISAI' 15). Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d' Islamistica (PISAI).



- Gilchrist, John (2003), "Isaiah: Behold the Servant He has Chosen", *Sharing the Gospel with Muslims: A Handbook for Bible-based Muslim Evangelism*. Capetown: :life Challenge Africa. [www.answering-islam.com/Gilchrist/Sharing/10isaiah.html](http://www.answering-islam.com/Gilchrist/Sharing/10isaiah.html) [accessed Nov 2, 2009].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (n.d.), "The Lamb of God". [www.answering-islam.org/Gilchrist/lamb.html](http://www.answering-islam.org/Gilchrist/lamb.html) [accessed Nov 2, 2009].
- Howard, Rebecca Moore & Laura J. Davies (2009), "Plagiarism in the Internet Age", *Educational Leadership* 66.6: 64-67.
- Juferi, Mohd Elfie Nieshaem (2006), "Ahad(un) and the Missionary's Folly", posted 9 February. <http://www.bismikaallahuma.org/archives/2006/ahadun-and-the-missionary-folly/> [accessed Nov 7, 2009]
- Kidd, Thomas S. (2009), *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims From the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lawson, Todd (2009), *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A study in the history of Muslim thought*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- McAuliffe, Jane Dammen (1996), "The Qur'ānic Context of Muslim Biblical Scholarship", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7.2: 141-158.
- Michel, Thomas SJ (2000), "Features of the Muslim-Christian Polemical Tradition", *The Martin D'Arcy Memorial Lectures* 1. Oxford: Oxford University. [www.ssjweb.info/dialogo/index.cfm](http://www.ssjweb.info/dialogo/index.cfm) [accessed Nov 2, 2009].
- Moberly, R.W.L. (1990), "'Yahweh is One': The Translation of the Shema", *Studies in the Pentateuch*, ed. John A. Emerton. Leiden: Brill. 209-215.
- More, Thomas (1969), "Responsio ad Lutherum" (originally published 1523), *Complete Works of Thomas More*, ed. John M. Headley, vol. 5. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Nakdimon (n.d.), "Exchange about alleged mistranslations of Isaiah 53 and the Quranic error about Ezra in Surah 9:30". [www.answering-islam.org/authors/nakdimon/rebuttals/ac/isaiah\\_53\\_mistranslated.html](http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/nakdimon/rebuttals/ac/isaiah_53_mistranslated.html) [accessed Nov 2, 2009].
- Rosenthal, Franz (2002), "Some Minor Problems in the Koran", *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text and Commentary*, ed. Ibn Warraq. Amherst: Prometheus Books. 322-342.

- Rubin, Uri (1984), “*Al-Sūrah amad* and the high God: An interpretation of *sūrah CXII*”, *Islam* 61: 197-217.
- Shamoun, Sam (n.d), “Monotheism vs. Eloquence of the Qur’an”, [www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/ahad.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/ahad.htm) [accessed Nov 4, 2009]
- \_\_\_\_\_ (n.d.), “The Issue of the Quran’s Teaching on Islamic Monotheism”, [www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/samad.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/samad.htm) [accessed Nov 4, 2009]
- \_\_\_\_\_ (n.d.), “The Prostration to Adam – A Quranic Problem, Part 1, [www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Abualrub/twoadams\\_ss1.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Abualrub/twoadams_ss1.htm) [Accessed Nov. 9, 2009].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (n.d.), “The Prostration to Adam – A Quranic Problem, Part 2, [www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Abualrub/twoadams\\_ss2.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Abualrub/twoadams_ss2.htm) [Accessed Nov. 9, 2009].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (n.d.), “Is Allah really one or only “one of”? Monotheism vs. Eloquence of the Quran”, [www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/ahad.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/ahad.htm) [Accessed Nov 4, 2009].
- Swanson, Mark N. (1998), “Beyond Proof-texting: Approaches to the Qur’ān in Some Early Arabic Christian Apologies”, *The Muslim World* 88.3-4: 297-319.
- Taghlibi, Wail (n.d.), “One Adam or Two?”, [www.answering-islam.org/Authors/Taghlibi/two-adams.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Authors/Taghlibi/two-adams.htm)
- Thomas, David (1996), “The Bible in Early Muslim Anti-Christian Polemic”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7.1: 29-38.
- Tisdall, W. St. Clair (1905), *The Original Sources of the Qur’an*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Tottoli, Roberto (1998), “Muslim attitudes towards prostration (*sujūd*)”, *Studia Islamica* 88: 5-34.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1999), “Muslim Traditions Against Secular Prostration and Inter-religious Polemic”, *Medieval Encounters* 5.1: 99-111.
- Wang, Y.M.E. & M.E. Artero (2005), “Caught in the Web: University student use of Web resources”, *Educational Media International* 42.1: 71-82
- Wilson, T. Ernest (1997), *The Messianic Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio Press. <http://plymouthbrethren.wordpress.com/2008/11/20/the-messianic-psalms-ternest-wilson/> [Accessed Nov 6, 2009]