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The Qur'an and Its Biblical Under-text: New Perspectives on Non-Muslim Readings of the Qur'an

Introduction

There is a growing interest among non-Muslims in the field of qur'anic studies. Since 9/11 Westerners are waking up to the realization that Islam is no longer a distant and exotic phenomena but is a reality next door that needs to be carefully considered. People are also becoming aware that the Qur'an is central to Islam. As a result, there is unprecedented development in the area of qur'anic studies by non-Muslims in the West, a kind of "golden age" that so far is mostly active at a scholarly level.

Historically, non-Muslim studies of the Qur'an have tended to draw upon centuries-long hermeneutic of medieval Muslim scholarship (al Tabari, Razi, Baidawi, al Zamakhshari, Ibn Kathir, al Suyuti), with hardly any sustained or collaborative conversation with contemporary Muslim scholars dealing with the qur'anic sciences. But that isolation between Muslim and non-Muslim qur'anic studies is starting to be bridged by joint interfaith events and professional exchanges among scholars.

Journals that were quite segregated now show a greater diversity of authors' names and institutions. Opportunities to lecture at universities in the Muslim world are being offered to non-Muslim scholars, and scholars from Muslim universities are invited to lecture in European and North American institutions.

There is also a growing number of Interfaith Dialogue/Conversation initiatives that are struggling to forge new paths and raise questions beyond doctrinal comparisons or attempted manufactured consensus building. This new approach represents a break from traditional forms of confrontational debates in which Muslims and Christians have either squared off against each other to prove their superiority or limited their conversation to common ground.

Thus, when platitudes are set aside and when both Christians and Muslims are able to communicate what is central to their faith traditions, when both groups put aside the search for “the lowest common denominator” and reach a clear affirmation of who we are, even when this may highlight areas of irreconcilable difference, constructive engagement becomes possible. This can only happen when all parties come to the table seeking to bring glory to God (not simply to defend the particulars of their denomination). In seeking God first, the Holy Spirit brings forth truth and exposes the futility of suspicion, misunderstanding, and triumphalism. Foundational to this approach is the commitment to listen to what comes from God in the Other and the need to meet him where he is at.

Can Adventists, who seek to engage Muslims seriously, afford to ignore the Qur’an? The contemporary relevance of the Qur’an in the Muslim world, its role in politics, legal issues, and matters of faith hardly needs to be argued. So, perhaps a more pertinent question could be, Can Muslims and non-Muslims—who are faithful to the biblical revelation—engage the Qur’an and work together constructively? If so, how and for what purpose?

Faithful Readings from People of Faith

The ensuing conversation is not about secular non-Muslims studying the Qur’an from a variety of scholarly angles (literary, historical, textual), but rather about people of faith committed to honoring God in truth and grace and to love the other as they follow in the footsteps of Jesus. In other words, what is needed is not less commitment to what we understand to be sacred Scripture and its ultimate authority, nor to water down our core convictions, but a rethinking of how truth, born out of cold indifference or brewed in hatred, cannot be the same as truth offered in the spirit of reconciliation. In such a situation, literary, historical, critical, or linguistic considerations are not offered from some neutral place, but from an imitation of God’s own loving way of being present in the world and being committed to a *relationship* based on truth.

Adventists seeking to engage Muslims constructively will need to have the courage of inviting Muslims to reassess their views on the authority of the Bible considering that the Qur’an aligns itself with the biblical text that is in accordance with its own claims that it too proceeds from God.

Understanding that the Qur’an itself allows for a hermeneutical approach by which the Bible could serve as the “under text” opens new possibilities where there used to be a stalemate between biblical Christianity and Islamic theology developed through the lenses of Muslim traditions and commentaries.

Because of the strong qur’anic endorsement of the “previous revela-

tions," non-Muslims should not view the Qur'an with apathy, even when we as Christians may not see it as an authoritative revelation of divine origin.

Reading the Qur'an with biblical eyes is a sensitive issue that could easily be misconstrued as an "orientalist" exercise of power bent on dispossessing Muslims of their traditional hermeneutics—a way of legitimizing an ethnocentric Western agenda which uses the Bible as a tool of domination, a new form of subtle colonization. Therefore, from the beginning there has to be clarity regarding the Qur'an's freedom to establish its message in a unique way. Its self-appointed relationship to the Bible and how its own employment of biblical language serves to advance the qur'anic religious meaning that is in harmony with the previous revelations must be appreciated. Otherwise some Christians may be tempted to believe Paul of Antioch, the twelfth-century bishop of Sidon, who argued that the Qur'an is a *Christian book*.

Failing to establish a clear frame for reading the Qur'an could result in non-Muslim interpretations in which biblical meanings are imposed upon the Qur'an, thereby drowning out its own voice to become a faint echo from past revelations which could alienate even more of the Muslim community. For Muslims, the world of the Qur'an is holy ground. Therefore, missionaries to the Muslim world in seeking to find its parallel in Christianity have often compared its centrality to Jesus. Thus, much discernment and guidance from the Holy Spirit is needed.

Madigan (2010) explains that because of the manner in which believing communities engage with their sacred writings, it is helpful to understand that any significant re-reading of the Qur'an has to happen by engaging Muslim readers who are in front of the text, rather than communicating our findings to them by having dug behind and underneath the text.

Non-Muslim readings of the Qur'an that do not take seriously the Muslim reader may miss the overall referential frame of its message and worldview and may end up fragmenting its text until it can no longer be recognized by Muslim believers. This would be a futile intellectual exercise.

Let us also remember that from a missiological perspective that is advocated in this paper that the purpose of engaging the Qur'an is to lend "our biblical eyes" to Muslims so that God's Spirit could use the building blocks that are familiar to them to build a fresh understanding of his self-revelation. If we win a philological, logical, or historical argument but close a heart in that process to what the Spirit is saying, our efforts have been in vain.

Even more important as we approach Muslims we should expect God to also expand our own understanding of how he communicates in the

world through a multiplicity of means, and we will find that the Bible speaks to Eastern peoples in ways that deepen our own understanding of who God is and how he saves. Whitehouse wrote:

Dialogue and proclamation are not mutually exclusive. Proclamation is communicating the biblical understanding of the God/man relationship, godliness, and saving faith in God's way of solving the problem of sin, with all kindness, respect and with an "other's religion competency" under the power of the Holy Spirit. Dialogue is an openness to a discovery of the mystery of God's action in the other. Engaging in dialogue is an expression of an awareness of God's presence and action outside the boundaries of my particular faith system. (2006:2)

Avoiding the "Certainty Trap"

Every act of reading is an interpretative act that takes place in a particular milieu and under the direction of certain premises. Non-Muslim readings have their sets of assumptions that bear on how meaning is arrived at. Confessional Muslim scholars, as well as those who claim scholarly objectivity in secular arenas, may be reluctant to acknowledge how their own histories, narratives, and assumptions shape their readings; but serious interpretations of the Qur'an and the Bible need to be open to the possibility of questioning each other's hermeneutics and assumptions if there is to be any trust.

Bill Musk (2008), in his insightful book *The Certainty Trap*, exposes the dangers of two common extremes: on one hand, the entrapment of the literalistic reading of the fundamentalist (Christian and Muslim alike) creates a false sense of *certainty* and ownership of the moral and theological high ground. The danger of fundamentalists is in their claim that only theirs is a valid reading of scriptures that could lead to faithful obedience since their approach leads to a stricter adherence to the text. The literalistic approach of fundamentalists does not allow for even other Muslims, let alone non-Muslims to read the Qur'an constructively, since their reading of the Qur'an is based on a *hermeneutic of suspicion* of each other's scriptures.

On the other hand, the "uncertainty trap" of our modern Western world is suspicious of any claim to universal truth, any proclamation of overarching meaning, any submission to a meta-text, and is reluctant to see in the natural order manifestations of a supernatural God. This approach has its dangers too.

As Adventists, we should stand with neither group. We should approach Muslims as people of faith, with a certainty that recognizes that while truth is absolute, fallen people are not able to fully apprehend it, so our certainty lies not in the orthodoxy of our views, as important as they

are, but in the faithfulness of God and his character. So while we keep our eyes on the text, our ears are tuned to God to listen to the Holy Spirit who guides us to the fullness of truth and sets us free from our human ideas. Knowing how much we depend on God takes away any sense of superiority, militancy, and personal claims to authority: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Pet 5:6).

Our understanding of the dynamics of how God and Satan operate in the world (the Great Controversy motif) gives us the foundation to approach Muslims by expecting to recognize the presence of God in their history and sacred writings; but also knowing that Satan has been at work too.

Resident Alien in the World of the Qur'an

Borrowing categories from Fazlur Rahman (2007)¹ and Whitney Bodman (2009), I could say that while we might not be citizens in the world of the Qur'an, neither are we completely foreigners or invaders, but more like *resident aliens*. While we may not be at home, yet we can be in residence in a world that has traits we can recognize.

By alien, I am primarily referring to non-Muslim adherence to traditional Muslim notions of the Qur'an as "sent down" from God, and therefore of its exclusively divine origin, believing it is a text that mirrors a heavenly one (the Mother of the Books). This understanding of the origins of the Qur'an frames and limits how far Muslims can interrogate its text.

By resident, I am referring to the fact that the world of the Qur'an is not completely foreign to us either. Familiar stories of biblical prophets and descriptions of God, and even certain practices (such as circumcision, fasting, and prayer) are very much present giving us a sense of *déjà vu*. There is a sense that this world has been visited by the Almighty before we ever arrived, so we need to tread this ground with expectation. Even more, the qur'anic claim is that its message is not new, what is new is that now it comes in the Arabic language (Qur'an, Al Baqara 12:2).² Murata and Chittik explain: "The divine Word assumed a specific, Arabic form, and that form is as essential as the meaning that the words convey. Hence only the Arabic Koran is the Koran, and translations are simply interpretation" (1994:xv).

Non-Muslim readers of Islamic literature will find it useful to see how Muslim scholars describe to what extent interpretations of the qur'anic message are shaped by Muslim understandings of its origins, nature, and historical perspectives;³ and how individual *ayats* (verses) relate to the overall picture of the Qur'an as understood at the time the first hearers of the Qur'an received it. "The orthodox Muslim view of the Koran as self-

evidently the Word of God, perfect and inimitable in message, language, style, and form, is strikingly similar to the fundamentalist Christian notion of the Bible's 'inerrancy' and 'verbal inspiration' that is still common in many places today" (Lester 1999).

Historically, Muslim scholars have been aware that the activities of interpretation, understanding, and exegesis of "God's eternal discourse" are still human actions that must be renewed in every age. In other words, while the text itself remains uncontested, interpretations do not.

The Qur'an: Continuation, Rupture, or What?

Muslims and non-Muslim exegetes disagree on the Qur'an's relation to the previous Sacred Texts. Since the time of the Crusades, Muslim exegetes have tried to distance the Qur'an from any external sources, such as the Jewish Midrash, Christian apocryphal sources, or biblical oral accounts. So the Qur'an ends up being deconstructed to remove any content associated with pre-existing sources. Even more, the traditional history of the emergence of the Qur'an and its sectarian milieu seem to downplay the presence of Christians and Jews by presenting Mohammad as constantly engaged with pagans.

But as Gabriel Said Reynolds (2012) argues throughout his book, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective*, the Qur'an's taking Christians to task over their Christological views (which were mostly heretical) and the frequent references and allusion to biblical narratives may suggest that the Qur'an emerged in an environment in which there was a rich interaction between the new Muslims and Arab Christians.

It is true that Mohammad might not have had access to the written text of the Bible, which did not exist in Arabic at that time, but he was most likely familiar with the oral traditions, Christological disputes, and narratives of both Jews and Christians. In summary, non-Muslim readings of the Qur'an may challenge the current perception of the great distance between the Qur'an and the Bible. While the Qur'an may clearly refute some unorthodox Christian teachings, it is not against the Bible.

Muslims today generally consider the Bible to be corrupted by later accretions and therefore unreliable. Muslims present the Qur'an as the real exegesis of what preceded it, as that which supersedes previous revelations, thereby rendering the Bible obsolete. This constitutes a serious obstacle for those who are advocating the recovery of the Bible's rightful place in relation to the Qur'an, and one that needs to be challenged.

Efforts to detach the Qur'an from its historical background serve to communicate that the Qur'an is otherworldly, and has its origins in God alone. So Muslims have resisted suggestions that the Qur'an has a his-

tory. As Toby Lester reported in the January 1999 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*:

“To historicize the Koran would in effect delegitimize the whole historical experience of the Muslim community,” says R. Stephen Humphreys (2009), a professor of Islamic studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The Koran is the charter for the community, the document that called it into existence. And ideally—though obviously not always in reality—Islamic history has been the effort to pursue and work out the commandments of the Koran in human life. If the Koran is a historical document, then the whole Islamic struggle of fourteen centuries is effectively meaningless.

Making the question of the historicity of the Qur'an the point of departure for Christian-Muslim relations can only lead to a stalemate. Non-Muslim scholars are starting to realize that a different point of departure is needed, one that may start with different questions beyond the origins, transmission, and reliability of the textual form of the Qur'an.

Trajectories in Non-Muslim Qur'anic Studies

Two distinct trends have dominated the area of non-Muslim Qur'anic studies, and both are having a rather distinctive impact in the area of mission: one is apologetic (often becoming polemic); the other is more irenic and conciliatory.

Foreclosure: Repossession of the Qur'an

Unfortunately, much of the non-Muslim readings of the Qur'an have been an attempt to undermine its coherence, message, and originality by exaggerating the role of the biblical and Jewish subtexts of the Qur'an. This has resulted in what Daniel Madigan refers to as a “re-possession or foreclosure of the text,” or by claiming that it is attributed to an act of forgery that needs to be unmasked. Either way, repossession or forgery, leads to the same result: “This is ours, and we are taking it back” (2010).

Everything Qur'anic that corroborates earlier scriptures, thus, is viewed as *borrowing*, leaving the Qur'an without a voice of its own, or just a faint echo of itself. Emerging trajectories among non-Muslim scholars vary from the idea that the Qur'an is a parody of Christian and Jewish literature, a borrowed text that once the original is found there is no longer a role for it; to the belief that the Qur'an can be discredited on the basis of how it was historically transmitted.

Among the growing number of non-Muslim scholars challenging the traditional Muslim understanding of the origins and collection of the Qur'an are Günter Lüling, Christoph Luxenburg, John Wansbrough, Ye-

huda Nevo, Patricia Crone, Mike Cook, Karl-Heinz Ohlig, Gerard Puin, and John Burton. Even though they offer very dissimilar theories regarding how the Qur'an originated and was compiled, they share the premise that historic Muslim sources are unreliable and contradictory. Therefore, they rely on non-Muslim external sources in order to unlock the mystery of how the Qur'an became the book as we know it today. They search for the relationship between the Qur'an and its pre-Islamic sources; they look at the issues of compilation, manuscripts, and compare it with other Holy Books.

Worth mentioning is the controversial philological work of Christoph Luxenburg. He makes a case for an "Aramaic" reading of the Qur'an that could unlock its true meaning, which is trapped in the Arabic language. Luxenburg makes a weak case for Syro-Aramaic as the *lingua franca* of Arabia in the 7th century before it was replaced by Arabic, while Arabia has retained the Syro-Aramaic culture. Thus, the Qur'an, in Luxenburg's view, contains a mixture of Arabic and Syro-Aramaic words (*aramaisch-arabische Mischsprache*). He believes that interpreting obscure terms in the Qur'an by retrieving their Syro-Aramaic roots was then a more appropriate and meaningful approach to the text (2007).

In other words, the Qur'an is not an Arabic text but a Syro-Aramaic one, and its meaning is to be found by unearthing its true language. With Luxenburg, the area of qur'anic studies steps down from the secluded scholarly arena to the public arena (TV, radio talk shows, etc.), which received a disproportionate attention and created a new interest in understanding the Qur'an by non-Muslims.

Another popular western scholar is Günter Lüling. Even though rarely mentioned, his ideas seem to have gained acceptance among European scholars. Lüling (2003) in his *Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations*, argues that the Qur'an combines four textual strata in its current rendition. The first one is a Syriac strophic hymnal composed at least one century before Mohammad by Mekan Christians (both Trinitarians and non-Trinitarians). A third of the Qur'an belongs to this first layer. The second stratum consists of passages from that hymnal that were edited and Islamized by Muhammad to substantiate his prophetic claims. The third stratum contains newly created Islamic sections written at the time of Muhammad. The fourth and final stratum consists of a layer of text altered by later Islamic scholars during the process of orthographic editing. In a nutshell, the Qur'an, in the opinion of Lüling, is actually a Christian text that is the product of layered textual revisions.

John Wansbrough, in his 1977 book *Qur'anic Studies*, argues that the

Qur'an was written in a Judeo-Christian context. The Islamic story of the Qur'an's proclamation in the pagan desert environment of Arabia was written to defend the claim that the new religion was revealed by God, not borrowed from Jews and Christians, and to develop a direct genealogical connection to Abraham (through Ishmael, who fled into the desert with his mother Hagar).

Not all the reworking of how Islam emerged, challenging traditional understandings, amounts to dispossession.

In *Muhammad and the Believers*, Fred Donner argues that the origins of Islam lie in what he refers to as "the believers' movement" (2010:69). The movement, begun by the prophet Muhammad himself, was a movement of religious reform emphasizing strict monotheism and righteous behavior in conformity with God's revealed law. The believers' movement thus included righteous Christians and Jews in its early years, because like the qur'anic believers, they were also monotheists and sought to live righteously in obedience to the law as revealed to them.

In Donner's view, the parting of the ways by which Muslims constituted a separate religious community, distinct from Christians and Jews, happened when the leaders of the believers' movement decided that only those who saw the Qur'an as the final revelation and Muhammad as the final prophet qualified as believers. This separated them decisively from monotheists who adhered to the Gospels or the Torah. This phenomenon occurred more than a century after the death of Mohammad in AD 632 (see chap. 6).

In this latter case, it would be incongruous to speak about *borrowings*, *distortions*, or even *misunderstandings*, as the qur'anic revelation would also be recognized as expounding the common truth of monotheism in its own right.

Another way by which the Muslim community has felt that non-Muslims are trying to foreclose on their text is by discrediting the transmission of the Qur'an. The traditional view that the Qur'an is faultless, and that it remains in its pristine original rendering, fails to answer some serious textual and historical questions that seem to suggest that the transmission of the Qur'an has a history.

In 1972, construction workers renovating a wall in the attic of the Great Mosque of Sana'a (in Yemen) discovered a large quantity of old manuscripts and parchments, a kind of qur'anic gravesite. The preserved fragments comprised both qur'anic and non-qur'anic material. Of special importance was a palimpsest with two layers of text, both of which are qur'anic. While the upper text is almost identical with the modern Qur'an in use (with the exception of spelling variants), the lower text contains significant diversions from the standard text.

Gerd Puin,⁴ after investigating the Yemeni manuscripts, came to the conclusion that the Qur'an is an *evolving* text rather than simply the Word of God as revealed in its entirety to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century.

Such variants, though not surprising to textual historians, collide with the orthodox Muslim belief that the Qur'an between their hands is the perfect, timeless, and unchanging Word of God. In Islamic traditional history, Uthman compiled an existing text. Non-Muslim scholars have claimed that Uthman created his own Uthamic codex, which was already one reading (Hafsa's collection) among others, shaping the current version. It is a well-known historical fact that Uthman destroyed all other versions circulating at his time. So, the Uthmanic codex came to be accepted as the inerrant word of God.

Additionally, non-Muslim scholars have pointed out that no current edition of the Qur'an contains an *apparatus criticus*, a list of words that are different, missing, or added in certain manuscripts.

In 1924, the standard Cairene Egyptian edition of the Qur'an became the official version. This served to create the sense of a completely uniform text with no variations. Those who led in this project⁵ never intended to offer a final rendition or to erase any other critical reading of manuscripts and its variations; but rather offered one of the canonical *qira'at* (readings) of the Qur'an which was considered an authentic reading. This project was not about recovering a text, as much as recovering one legitimate reading of it or of choosing an authentic text.

Angelika Neuwirth argues that the best way forward is to compare and analyze all the qur'anic manuscripts. Accordingly, she has begun a major project, *Corpus Coranicus*, to prepare the first critical edition of the Qur'an (this project was initiated in 2007 and is expected to be completed by 2025).

As scholars schooled in Semitic philology and conversant with the historical-critical study of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament turned their attention to the Qur'an, they subjected it to textual critique and philological analysis. In the second half of the nineteenth century some of the seminal works that still guide the field of qur'anic studies today were written. The names of Gustav Weil, Theodor Nöldeke, Abraham Geiger, and Hartwig Hirschfeld were soon joined by their twentieth-century counterparts, such as Ignaz Goldziher, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, Otto Pretzl, Richard Bell, Arthur Jeffery, and Rudi Paret.

To summarize, a crucial area of contention is historiographical. For traditional Muslim scholarship, only that which falls within orthodox accounts of the origins, transmission, and development of the qur'anic understanding are open to question; while for non-Muslim Western scholars,

according to Marshal “the problem lies in traditional historical literature not being distinguishable from salvation literature” (2008:4).

History as such has never held much interest for most Muslims. What is important about historical events is simply that God works through them. . . . From this point of view, the one event of overwhelming significance is God’s revelation of the Koran. The actual historical and social circumstances in which it was revealed relate to an extremely specialized field of learning that few scholars ever bothered with. The fact that Western historians have devoted a great deal of attention to this issue says something about modern perceptions of what is real and important, but it tells us nothing about Muslim perceptions of the Koran’s significance. (Murata and Chittick 2006:*xiv*)

So what have been the Muslim responses to all of this? Muslims have perceived much of non-Muslim qur’anic scholarship as part of an onslaught against Islam dating back to Peter the Venerable (d. 1156). Thus, contemporary criticism is received as a child of the post-Enlightenment critique of all religious thinking, and an integral part of the colonialist/Orientalist project.⁶

A particularly strident objection to contemporary non-Muslim criticism was published in the *Muslim World Book Review* (1987) by Parvaez Manzoor in a paper titled *Method Against Truth: Orientalism and Qur’anic Studies* by the Muslim Critic. Manzoor’s opening remarks are rather telling.

The Orientalist enterprise of Qur’anic studies, whatever its other merits and services, was a project born of spite, bred in frustration and nourished by vengeance: the spite of the powerful for the powerless, the frustration of the “rational” towards the “superstitious” and the vengeance of the “orthodox” against the “non-conformist.” At the greatest hour of his worldly-triumph, the Western man, coordinating the powers of the State, Church and Academia, launched his most determined assault on the citadel of Muslim faith. All the aberrant streaks of his arrogant personality—its reckless rationalism, its world-domineering fantasy and its sectarian fanaticism—joined in an unholy conspiracy to dislodge the Muslim Scripture from its firmly entrenched position as the epitome of historic authenticity and moral unassailability. The ultimate trophy that the Western man sought by his dare-devil venture was the Muslim mind itself. In order to rid the West forever of the “problem” of Islam, he reasoned, Muslim consciousness must be made to despair of the cognitive certainty of the Divine message revealed to the Prophet. Only a Muslim confounded of the historical authenticity or doctrinal autonomy of the Qur’anic revelation would abdicate his universal mission and hence pose no challenge to the global domination of the West. Such, at least, seems

to have been the tacit, if not the explicit, rationale of the Orientalist assault on the Qur'an. (Mansour 1987).

At the heart of the attack on the whole of non-Muslim scholarship lies a crucial assumption. "Epistemologically, it [Western Qur'anic scholarship] is grounded in a materialistic metaphysics that does not recognize the possibility of the Transcendent acting in human history, just as, dogmatically, it is unable to concede that God speaks to anyone but to His 'own people'" (Mansour 1987).

Muslims have also protested against Christian approaches to the reading of the Qur'an because of the ideological premises and methodological practices that would be considered taboo even in the study of the Bible. Finally, they denounce as duplicity the covering of sectarian passions under the venerable guise of scholarly methodology applied by the Orientalists. Unfortunately, this seems to be more often than not what is happening.

Issa J. Boullatt pleads for "the need for a new trend in Western scholarship that studies the Qur'an for itself as a literary text; a Scripture having its own proper referential system, and independent of any other consideration" (1988:157).

The issue of the origins and transmission of the Qur'an has not only been addressed by scholars. Lay people, seeking to learn about Islam, invariably ask the question of whether the Qur'an is from God or Satan. Is it possible that by taking this question as the starting point non-Muslims may be hampering the possibility of engaging Muslims constructively and as a result closing the door for the gospel to be communicated?

On a personal note, for years I struggled to make sense of the origins of the Qur'an, its relationship to its historical context, the canonization process, and more importantly, its authority. Over time, I understood that a more promising point of departure from a missiological perspective was to start with an understanding that God is making himself known to all nations, and that evidence of his presence can be found in the Qur'an. This approach, referred to as "bridge building," offers a frame that sees both Muslims and Adventists as seekers of truth rather than as competing voices, even when we might not agree on the divine origins of the Qur'an.

As we journey together, we will encounter areas of irreconcilable theological differences; at that point we are reminded that the agent of transformation is the Holy Spirit who brings conviction to the human heart. We are also reminded that lifting up God's truth (as demonstrated in the Bible) is a far more powerful witness of who God is than undermining the theological basis of Muslims and exposing the "errors" in the system, even when they may seem incongruent.

Francis Peters proceeds "as if" Islamic accounts were reliable, and the

controversial aspects had to be postponed. "This is an issue that must be addressed, but is highly technical, and rather than put such daunting stuff between the reader and the subject of this book, I have placed it in an appendix" (Peters 1994:xii).

This irenic approach to the study of the Qur'an changes the conversation from an us versus them approach to an all of you and us approach that is seeking God and struggling to discern his voice and accept his truth. Muslims seem to respond better to those who approach them as a guest in the world of their sacred text, who are also people of faith, choosing to focus on inter-textuality rather than historical reconstructions of the sources or the religious milieu out of which the Qur'an emerged.

Conciliatory Approaches to the Qur'an

Conciliatory readings of the Qur'an consist of readings that are responsive rather than reactive to each other; they recognize that the Qur'anic theological discourse needs to be taken seriously since it represents the gate of access to God for 1.3 billion Muslims around the world.

Madigan is right to point out that fruitful readings of the Qur'an will not arise from competing conflictual analysis, nor discrediting its foundations; but by collaboration by which Muslims believers and non-Muslim readers take the text of the Qur'an seriously as a canon of Scripture for a contemporary community and who approach it seeking to find common ground upon which to reach higher ground (2010). Furthermore, constructive non-Muslim readings of the Qur'an are unlikely to emerge from deconstructing the text in isolation. What is needed is for new relationships to be forged with those who read the text from within as a basis for asking clarifying questions.

With every generation, Qur'anic scholars have sought to mine the wealth of Qur'anic meanings by developing a variety of hermeneutics tools: reasons for the revelation (*asbab al nuzul*), etymology, pre-Islamic poetry, *ahruf* and *qira'at* readings and modes of revelation, abrogation (*naskh*), reliance on *tafsir* (commentary) literature, clear and unclear verses (*muhkamah and mutashabihat*), modern linguistic tools, etc. This variety has created a richness of meaning, that often is ignored in Western circles under the assumption that Muslims have a rigid and monolithic approach to their text. "The difference of opinion is mercy" and is attributed to Mohammad, who also is known for saying that the text of the Qur'an has seven possible meanings, with the literal one being viewed as the most superficial one and the seventh one being known only to God.

While Muslims claim that the textual rendering of the Qur'an is of divine origins, the interpretation is a human enterprise and can never be other than provisional. Agreeing on this point of view opens up new pos-

sibilities beyond comparative studies.

Until now, non-Muslim readings of the Qur'an can be best described as *parallel conversations*; but non-Muslims, who approach the Muslim believing community, could have a constructive role by offering an eye for "the rich complexity that is needed in approaching a sacred text, and by offering their tools used in the study of the Bible" (Madigan 2010).⁷ But even more important, by offering an understanding of the Bible that, according to the Qur'an, has a clarifying role.

For the past years there has been a concerted effort among Christian leaders to empower lay people to approach the Bible inductively. Those ministering among Muslims who have approached the Qur'an using an inductive approach have been well received since most Muslim believers live inside the text of the Qur'an, its sounds, its line of familiar prophets, and its message, but they have rarely explored the text systematically.

Considering that the first hearers of the Qur'an in Mecca were not Muslims, but pagans, and tribes of Jews and Arab Christians, our knowledge of the Christian milieu, its law, history and theology is helpful, since Mohammad was communicating against the background of these pre-existing traditions. The presence of Christians is evident by several rebuttals of some known Christian doctrines that were prevalent among Christians at the time of Mohammad, especially concerning heretical Christological issues (for a detailed analysis of seventh century Arabia see Reynolds 2012).

Even though the Qur'an reveals a significant relationship to the traditions of the Jews and Christians and to the midrashic and apocrypha literature, it is not simply a recollection, a type of parody or borrowing of previous narratives. The Qur'an represents a unique and distinctive text that puts forth its own logic and reconfigures the past in a way that creates its own voice among the other Abrahamic religions in a way that both distinctiveness and continuity can be found in its pages.

Traditionally, the Qur'an has been read through the lenses of the *sirat* literature (accounts on the life of the Prophet Mohammad), but is this the only and even the most authentic way to discover the religious meanings of the Qur'an?

Bible as a Subtext in Qur'anic Hermeneutic

While the Prophet Mohammad was alive, he was the natural interpreter of the message of the Qur'an, after all, he was its sole recipient. After his death his companions and wives (especially Aisha) were the ones consulted on account of their proximity to the one who knew the real meaning of unclear verses, or knew how to apply them.

Over time in the medieval tradition the biography of Muhammad and the collection of his sayings became the under-text of the Qur'an.⁸ Thus,

the science of qur'anic interpretation (*'ilm 'l-tafsir*) with its pertinent literature flourished as Muslims tried to make sense of its revelation for their ever expanding empire and changing times. It was during that time that several schools of theology and schools of law (religious jurisprudence) emerged, several of which are still in existence today: Shafi'i, Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Ja'fari, Zaidi, Ibadi, Zihiri.⁹

But could it be that the Qur'an's best interpreter is the Bible? The Qur'an itself makes allowances for this kind of hermeneutics. Daniel Kings, in reviewing Gabriel Said Reynolds' work, presents Reynolds arguing that the Qur'an at the time of its origins was not "in conversation with what came after it (*tafsir*) but with what came before it—Biblical and Jewish literature" (2010:84).

Reynolds may be right to suggest that it is time that Christians change the conversation from elucidating what sources entered the Qur'an to establishing the relationship the Qur'an had with Jewish and Christian under-texts as are found in its own text. This may shed some light on the otherwise convoluted mass of qur'anic later accretions in the *tafsir* literature. Reynolds, Madigan, and others are starting to move in this direction, and Muslim responses have been cautious and rather timid, but not dismissive so far.

Muslims and non-Muslims can agree that the Qur'an seeks to awaken the memory of its listeners to the biblical sub-text through allusions, echoes, and other visual forms of reference especially in the area of the stories of shared prophets. Even more, at times the stories are so pithy that only the biblical subtext can render them intelligible.¹⁰

Salwah El Awa commented, "If recipients of the Qur'anic text lack access to the knowledge they need to process the meaning of its language, they are unlikely to succeed in uncovering the intended meanings" (2006:67).

Could it be that some of these meanings are to be found in conversation with those who read the Bible? Notice what the Qur'an says: "If thou (Mohammad) wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, *then ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee*: the Truth hath indeed come to thee from thy Lord: so be in no wise of those in doubt" (Sura 10:94 Yusuf Ali's translation, emphasis mine).

However, medieval Muslim commentators, working in a context of religious rivalry, developed narratives that sought to separate the original relationship between the Qur'an and Bible, thus creating a "parting of the ways" in which the biblical subtext was lost and the Qur'an lost a rich strata of meaning that Muslims and Christians could only retrieve together.

What has been lost sight of in this tragic divorce is that the Qur'an has had a rather generous attitude toward the Bible and presents itself in

continuation with the “previous scriptures,” starting with “the sheets of Abraham and Moses” (Suhuf Ibrahim wa Musa, Qur’an Al A’ala 87:19). Notice two qur’anic references: “Say ye: ‘We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Isma’il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow to Allah” (Al Baqara 2:136). “And (O Prophet!) We have revealed to you the Book with the truth *in confirmation* of the Book before it, and *standing as a guardian over it*. Therefore, give judgment among men according to the guidance revealed by God and do not yield to their whims by swerving from the truth revealed to you” (Qur’an Al Maida 5:48).

Not only does the Qur’an say that the Bible has its origins with God and is a valid revelation,¹¹ but the Qur’an applies the same referential terms (exalted titles) to the Bible as to the Qur’an, such as light, the Book, etc. The Qur’an, unlike its current status, was not to be set as the arbiter of the previous revelations, but rather to confirm them and even more, to serve as its protector. The idea of confirmation seems to indicate the supremacy of that which came before, which somehow was getting lost or was under threat, therefore was in need to be reaffirmed and safeguarded.

Understanding how the Qur’an established its own relationship to the Bible has the potential to challenge current Muslim attitudes of distrust towards the previous Scriptures and to put the Bible in a position for both Muslims and Christians to wrestle with its text, but not simply to affirm what confirms the traditional Islamic views and reject as falsification everything else.

And yet, if Muslims today were to ask those reading the Bible (Torah, *Injil*, *Zaboor*), would they find partners among the People of the Book ready to receive their questions and point them back to the Bible without having them first destroy the ground on which they stand? Even more important, would the People of the Book understand the Muslim’s questions that are based on a very different set of assumptions?

This is a crucial missiological question. The Adventist movement, from its inception had a clear self-understanding of having a clarifying role because of their subordination to the teachings of the Bible under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Can this clarifying role go beyond the Christian soil from which Adventists came into existence? I pray so.

It is worth noting, that as far as can be traced back, there was no translation of the Bible available in Arabic at the time of Mohammad and yet it is known that Mohammad had contact with Christians in the area who transmitted biblical narratives orally, the best known being Waraqah Ibn al Nawfal. The stories were told to him in Arabic, but the written sources were in Aramaic (linguistically closely related to Arabic), Ethiopian, and

Hebrew.¹² In recent years there have been some attempts to recover the Aramaic as a bridge to the Arabic.

Today the Bible in Arabic is widely available, so while the People of the Book may be approached by Muslims, it is our role to guide them to the text of the Bible, not our interpretations of it.

A Way Forward

How can Adventists, faithful to their own faith community and Scripture, approach the Qur'an in a way that is authentic both to qur'anic hermeneutics and to their beliefs? I believe it is possible by playing the role of a guest in the world of the Qur'an while offering the rich biblical faith as a sub-text to the Qur'an and by asking critical questions of the text itself. This hermeneutical approach, while not yet popular in Muslims circles, does not force a foreign method on the study of the Qur'an but seems to be in accordance to what the Qur'an itself established. But even more important, the model proposed here is one that grows in the "presence of each other" rather than in separate tracks.

Perhaps the time has come for missiologists to explore the deeper issue of the Qur'an's self-described positive relationship to the Bible and discover the wider possibilities instead of attempting to establish the sources and history of the Qur'an as a primary focus.

This article is only an attempt to outline a rich field for future studies that could be promising both conceptually, as it redefines new possibilities for qur'anic hermeneutics in conversation with the Bible, and constructively as it allows for a better understanding of where to find God's footprints in each faith community and an openness to be transformed by his revelation.

It is worth noting that even if scholars could open themselves up to critique the origins and transmission of the Qur'an, often the believers would not tolerate such an approach because they find it hard to see how an exploration of this nature could nurture their faith without undermining the basis of their certainty. This means that before Muslims and non-Muslims can engage spiritually at any level there needs to be robust trust in the redemptive attitude that exists in each other and a clear purpose on seeking to discern God's voice, not ours. But in the end, we need to humbly recognize that what will break down the barriers of separation between Muslims and Christians is not a new hermeneutical approach or philosophical redefinitions but God's Spirit leading us all to transforming truth.

Notes

¹Fazlur Rahman used the analogy of a country, using the categories of citizens, foreigners, and invaders to describe various approaches to the Qur'an.

²In Islam, the only Qur'an is the Arabic one. Other translations are rendering of its meaning but are not the Qur'an.

³It is a historical fact, accepted by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, that the writing of the text (but not the text itself) of the Qur'an has significantly evolved. One such major evolutionary variation is that originally the text was written without diacritical marks, which distinguish some letters from others, but early in the history of its writing, diacritical points were added.

⁴Puin and his colleague Graf von Bothmer have published only short essays on the Sana'a find. For more information refer to the 1999 interview with Toby Lester, in the *The Atlantic Monthly*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/01/what-is-the-koran/304024/>

⁵The "Cairo Text" of 1924 was produced by a committee appointed by the Egyptian government to establish a uniform Qur'an for the public school system.

⁶Farid Esack, in *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2005) offers an interesting description of how Muslims view non-Muslim scholarship, using a woman's body as the imagery to describe the Qur'an and the type of relationship different Muslims and non-Muslims establish with "her."

⁷I am borrowing language from Madigan.

⁸It is worth noting that while the Qur'an names Moses 136 times, Abraham 69, Jesus 25, Muhammad is mentioned only four times. It provides hardly any information regarding his background, family, children, spouses, companions, etc. Therefore, all this material that serves as a background to the Qur'an is based on external sources that appeared more than a 100 years after the death of Mohammad.

⁹The above mentioned schools of legal thought had been officially recognized by the 200 Muslim scholars from 50 countries that wrote the Amman Message: "*Whosoever is an adherent to one of the four Sunni schools (Mathahib) of Islamic jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali), the two Shi'i schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Ja'fari and Zaydi), the Ibadi school of Islamic jurisprudence and the Thahiri school of Islamic jurisprudence, is a Muslim.*" <http://ammanmessage.com> (Message; accessed 12 October 2012).

¹⁰When the Qur'an alludes to but is not quoting, it is creating a sense of having a distinct voice, not simply being an echo. This distinction is important in that it does not just surmise that the Qur'an is just an Arabic rendering of Jewish or Christian narratives.

¹¹Al Baqara 2:40-42, 126, 136, 285; Al Imran 3:3, 71, 93; Al Nisa 4:47, 136; Al Maida 5:47-51, 69, 71-72; Al An'am 6:91; Yunus 10:37, 94; Al Anbiya 21:7; Al Ankabut 29:45, 46; Al Fatir 35:31; Al Ahqaf 46:11.

¹²The clearest argument for this thesis is to be found in the foreign words of the Qur'an. It is reasonable to assume that Prophet Mohammad's hearers were familiar with such terms and had no difficulty in interpreting his message.

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