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Narratives in Conflict: Atonement in Hebrews and the Qur'an

Description

Did Jesus die on the cross for our sins as the Gospels describe? Or, as Muslims often contend, was Jesus rescued to heaven in order to avoid the shameful crucifixion that would be unbefitting of a messenger of God? This debate has raged for generations and has caused no shortage of frustration among those seeking to explain the central teaching of the Christian faith to those influenced by the Qur'an. What this book aims to do is uncover four barriers to understanding the biblical teaching on atonement that likely exist in the minds of our Muslim friends prior to asking about the historical reality of the Christ event.

What we will discover is that the Qur'an diverges from the biblical teaching on atonement at the lexical, ritual, narrative, and worldview levels. Each of these points of divergence presents a barrier to communication. Therefore, before arguing with our Muslim friends *that* Jesus died on the cross, we must provide an answer to the prior question, *why would it matter?* This book argues that the Letter to the Hebrews provides a particularly helpful biblical starting point for overcoming all four barriers.

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Atonement in Hebrews and the Qur'an

MATTHEW AARON BENNETT

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NARRATIVES IN CONFLICT

Atonement in Hebrews and the Qur'an

American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 42

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To my wife, Emily, whose efforts in the process of seeing this project completed far exceed my own:

Thank you and I love you.

To my Egyptian brothers and sisters, whose love of the gospel and hope for its transformative power in their communities is fuel for my own passion:

الف شكر يا كنيسة مصرية

And to Dr. Bruce Riley Ashford and Dr. Heath Aaron Thomas who have labored long with me in the process of seeing this project through. Your character and integrity in academics and the Christian life have left an impression on me that goes far beyond this dissertation. Thank you.

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Preface

AS THE LAST 1,400 years of Christian-Muslim dialogue have demonstrated, there are several areas of Islamic theology and Qur'anic claims that conflict with the message of the Bible. One such conflict arises when considering an area of vital concern to the Bible: the concept of atonement. In the Hebrew Bible atonement is a logically unified concept whereby God grants his people means of achieving forgiveness and purification by accepting the blood of a sacrificial animal as a ransom-purgation. The book of Hebrews highlights the way the Christ event accomplishes atonement by connecting Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension with the ritual actions of the high priest on the Day of Atonement.

The Qur'an, however, despite both claiming to continue and complete prior revelation and while including similar language often understood to mean atonement, teaches a very different doctrine of forgiveness. Despite the presence of the component parts of biblical atonement—sacrifice, forgiveness, purification, ransom, blood—the Qur'an keeps each aspect conceptually separate from the others. Such separation is most clearly seen in the Qur'an's refusal to acknowledge blood's role in achieving forgiveness or purification. Thus, while atonement language and the concepts of forgiveness and purification are present in both texts, there is an underlying disunity in the biblical and Qur'anic ideas of atonement (conveyed through the Arabic word, *kaffāra*).

Where many scholars accuse the Qur'an of being blatantly mistaken or ill-informed in its retelling of quasi-biblical narratives, this dissertation will show that a generous reading of the Qur'an reveals a potentially nuanced intertextuality resulting in a different understanding of continuation. Exegesis of *Sura 5* demonstrates that the Qur'an sees sacrifice as a demarcation given to mark off new dispensations of revelation. This understanding of the purpose of sacrifice gives the Qur'an the ability to claim to stand in the stead of Judaism and Christianity without having to

account for some of the details of underlying meaning and overt ritual. Thus, rather than assuming the Qur'an to be negligent in its treatment of Jewish and Christian atonement, the Qur'an simply makes a different claim to continuation than the book of Hebrews makes.

Ultimately, Hebrews offers a narrative-driven answer to the question, "Why did the Christ event occur as the Bible indicates?" In so doing, it challenges the Qur'anic claims to continuation of prior revelation more forcefully than does the mere factual question, "Did the Christ event occur as the Bible indicates?" The affirmative answer given to the latter question gains impact through understanding the whole biblical narrative that the Christ event brings to a climax. The book of Hebrews demonstrates the climactic nature of the Christ event, and thus its portrayal of Christian atonement coheres more seamlessly with biblical ritual, metanarrative, and worldview than does the disjunctive metanarrative suggested by the Qur'an. Ultimately, the argument of this dissertation is that Christ's fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, as presented in the book of Hebrews, exposes distinct worldviews between the Qur'an and Bible, and can be used to challenge Qur'anic claims to completing prior revelation.

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Abbreviations

ACCOS – Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture

CMB – Christian from a Muslim Background

CPM – Church Planting Movement

EI – Encyclopedia of Islam

EMQ – *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*

IJFM – *International Journal of Frontier Missions*

MIR – *Missiology: An International Review*

NICNT – New International Commentary on the New Testament

NICOT – New International Commentary on the Old Testament

SFM – *St. Francis Magazine*

WBC – Word Biblical Commentary

ABC – Anchor Bible Commentary

Introduction

Atonement in Hebrews and the Qur'an

THE QUESTIONS THAT DRIVE this project began to take shape in my mind on August 15th, 2013 at six in the morning, as I stood on the bloody streets of Alexandria, Egypt. It was Islam's annual Feast of the Sacrifice (*'id al Adha*), and the makeshift butchers that had been set up throughout the city's neighborhoods were already surrounded by the carcasses of sacrificial animals. Trickling out from under piles of these carcasses, the puddles of blood already filling the streets were not unexpected. The bustling city of five million people requires butchers to start early to accommodate all of the worshippers celebrating the feast.

What was curious, however, was the Egyptian tradition of using the blood of the sacrifices to adorn the walls and doorways of storefronts and apartment buildings. Dipping their hands in the blood, residents and owners of such buildings made bloody handprints around their dwellings as an element of their ritual. Most attributed the habit to superstition, but the echoes of Passover blood applied to doorposts mixed with the celebration of the feast commemorating Abraham's near sacrifice of his son evoked multiple questions: What is the role of blood in Islam? How does Islam see itself relating to previous religious cultus? What is the relationship between sacrifice, blood, and atonement in the Qur'an? With so much commonality and shared history, why does it prove so difficult to explain Christian atonement to Muslims? Are there places in the Bible that might be used to effectively explain Christian views of atonement?

This last question in particular has served to lay the foundational inquiry for this particular monograph.

Initial investigation of these questions, however, uncovered the fact that this project will not be the first to ask what parts of Scripture are most helpful for sharing the Christian message with Muslims. Though much contemporary missiological scholarship concerns itself with how far one might go in accommodating cultural and religious forms before falling into syncretism, a few scholars have argued that one must consider issues such as the selection of Scripture prior to advocating for a contextual expression of faith.¹

For example, some apologists argue for engaging Islam in a point-by-point, propositional manner, using biblical proof texts to establish the Christian position on a given doctrine.² Other missiologists have identified a particular book of the Bible, suggesting that the selected book serves as an especially appropriate text for reaching Muslim people. Colin Chapman's selection of the book of Luke stands as an especially well-known example of this approach.³ Yet others have proposed selecting portions of Scripture from the Old and New Testaments in order to provide an overview of redemption history while accommodating various worldview distinctives.⁴

While this book both recognizes the importance of the concerns and affirms the relative merits of each approach given above, the focused purpose will be to ask, "What section of Scripture might be helpful in explaining the difference between biblical and qur'anic understandings of the atonement, while also providing a challenge to the qur'anic

1. Douglas, "Ongoing Strategy Debate," 70, writes, "Conversations regarding contextualization center on questions of 'how much' to contextualize and where to draw the line."

2. See Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, whose work will appear below under the methodological approach referred to as "combative."

3. See Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 322–23, who argues for using Luke due to Luke's use of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), its christology, and the manner in which it connects to the book of Acts. Chapman's work will appear below under the methodological approach referred to as "conversational."

4. See Brown, "Selecting and Using," 10–25. Others have followed Brown's recommendation, creating story sets of their own. See Smith and Kai, *T4T*, whose C2C suggestion can be told in a single telling, or broken into multiple lessons. Also, see McIllwain, *Building on Firm Foundations*, whose curriculum comes in a five-volume set, the first story-set for evangelism being seventy lessons long. Brown, Smith, and McIllwain appear below under the methodological approach referred to as "overarching biblical narrative" (OBN).

perspective?” This question ultimately led to the research contained herein. While the inquiry began as a personal curiosity following the *‘id al Adha* observations mentioned above, the question generated answers that are instructive for Christians attempting to contextually explain the Christian faith to their Muslim friends.

Simply stated, then, the purpose of this project is to argue for a biblical starting point for explaining a biblical view of atonement to those operating out of a qur’anic worldview. However, as missiologist and anthropologist Paul Hiebert indicates, potential problems abound when employing the word worldview due to the various ways that philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and missiologists have used it.⁵ Since worldview will provide a key aspect of this book’s content, it is important to first pause to define what worldview means within this project from the outset.

Reinforcing Hiebert’s claim regarding the wide-ranging ways that worldview is discussed in the academy, David Naugle has dedicated an entire monograph to conducting a historical analysis of the different approaches to—and even rejections of—worldview.⁶ Therein, Naugle finds that for philosophers following Immanuel Kant, the word worldview refers to “an intellectual conception of the universe from the perspective of a human knower.”⁷ Thus, worldview is the product of one’s intellectual examination of the world.

Taken in a different direction, however, Naugle highlights Wilhelm Dilthey as an influential philosopher who uses the word worldview to describe an inherent, intuitive response to the world that is not intellectually constructed, but which exists in the social and historical environment into which one is born and which is further formed as one lives in a particular environment.⁸ Further distilling Dilthey’s perspective, authors Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen summarize Dilthey’s understanding of worldview by stating that reason cannot simply produce a

5. See Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 13–30, whose first chapter provides a historical overview of the varied uses of worldview within a variety of disciplines.

6. Naugle, *Worldview*. While some criticize and reject the worldview discussion for being so broad as to dissolve into meaninglessness (See the discussion and rebuttal to such dismissal offered by Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 112–15), the definition proffered herein will provide sufficiently limited parameters to allow the concept to serve as a helpful heuristic device for the comparative religious work undertaken herein.

7. Naugle, *Worldview*, 59.

8. Naugle, *Worldview*, 86–87.

worldview because worldview is the foundation for both science and philosophy.⁹

While multiple other uses of worldview exist, these two examples suffice to determine the importance of positioning one's use of the word on the spectrum of its intended meaning. This project will use the word worldview, then, following Dilthey through the work of Bartholomew and Goheen and intending to communicate a subconscious, foundational way of seeing the world. Worldview, in other words, will mean what N. T. Wright describes as the "presuppositional, pre-cognitive stage of a culture or society."¹⁰ Such an approach understands worldview as the latent framework underlying a person's and a society's understanding of the world that is yet accessible through intentional investigation. Worldview is the subconscious substructure formed by a culture or society's stories that provides answers to basic questions regarding reality, provides the symbols and rituals that tell, rehearse, and reinforce their stories, and which govern the subsequent manner of living in the world.¹¹

Therefore, the following chapters attend to the stories told by the Bible and the Qur'an at the point of each text's discussion of atonement. To do so, chapters 2 and 3 will investigate the biblical concept of atonement through the lens of both the Hebrew Bible and the book of Hebrews, then chapter 4 will turn to the Qur'an in order to understand how parallel component parts (sacrifice, blood, forgiveness, cleansing, and atonement) serve divergent purposes, driven by alternative stories and undergirded by different worldviews.

Beyond highlighting the incompatibility of the worldview of Hebrews and the worldview of the Qur'an at the point of each tradition's teaching on atonement, the following chapters will investigate how the book of Hebrews might be used to explain a Christian understanding of atonement to those whose worldview draws on the Qur'an's influence. In the process of this investigation, the current project will capitalize on the narrative-driven explanation of atonement found in Hebrews in order to provide a challenge to the Qur'an's teaching on the same topic while also providing a means to communicate a biblical worldview in which atonement fits in continuity with the teaching throughout the Hebrew Bible.

9. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Christian Philosophy*, 19.

10. Wright, *People of God*, 122–24.

11. Wright, *People of God*, 123–24.

Ultimately, this monograph argues that Christ's fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, as presented in the book of Hebrews, exposes distinct worldviews between the Qur'an and Bible, and can be used to challenge Qur'anic claims to completing prior revelation.

Communication: Words, Stories, and Worldviews

Basic cross-cultural communication can be an arduous task when the message is simple. The further attempt to explain complex concepts such as atonement across linguistic, geographic, and religious barriers is additionally problematic when the receptor culture or religious tradition uses similar vocabulary loaded with alternative meaning.¹² Missiologist Jackson Wu provides an example of this in his book, *One Gospel for All Nations*, showing that, translated into Chinese and viewed through Chinese culture, the words "law" and "guilt" communicate very different things to an Asian audience than what a Westerner intends when sharing the widely used "Four Spiritual Laws" tract.¹³

Setting the stage for such potential miscommunication between Christians and Muslims, Sidney Griffith, a renowned scholar of Middle Eastern culture and faiths, notes that when Christians began to write theology in Arabic, it was often done in response to Islamic polemic against Christianity and thus shaped by Islamic concerns.¹⁴ Likewise, the Qur'an,

12. Reed, *Preparing Missionaries*, 134.

13. Wu, *One Gospel*, 11, gives the example of the use of common Western evangelistic tools in the broader world, writing, "A missionary from America might uncritically translate a presentation like 'the Four Spiritual Laws' or the 'Romans Road' without consideration as to whether categories like 'law' and 'guilt' convey the same thing in a place like East Asia as they do in the American 'Bible Belt.'"

14. Griffith, *Church in Shadow*, 75, notes that Christians writing in Arabic adopted the vocabulary and idiom of Islam, allowing Islamic contention against Christianity to shape subsequent discussions. He writes, "Christians sought to defend the reasonableness of their distinctive doctrines in terms of the same religious idiom as that employed by their Muslim interlocutors and counterparts, who, in accord with the teachings of the Qur'an, often rejected the central Christian doctrines. In contrast with the previously standard modes of Christian discourse in Greek or Syriac, for example, the Arabic-speaking Christian writers often built their arguments on ways of thinking that the Muslims had initially elaborated in view of commending their own faith in the Qur'an and the traditions of the prophet Muhammad." Furthermore, and also citing Griffith's work, see Bridger, "Christian Exegesis of the Qur'an," 25, who summarizes Griffith's findings, saying, "Griffith demonstrates that Christian adoption of Arabic as a theological language resulted in a degree of Islamicization in the diction

along with its underlying theology, has served to shape the Arabic language itself, even when employed by Christian writers and translators of Scripture.¹⁵ Therefore, the vocabulary Christians use in Arabic can prove a barrier to communication with Muslims who use the same words with different meaning and for different purposes.

As the following chapters demonstrate, the Christian concept of making atonement, carried in Arabic by the word *kaffara* (كَفَّرَ), is prone to such misunderstanding when used in discussion with a Muslim audience.¹⁶ Because the Qur'an and Islamic theology have exerted so much influence on the language of Arabic, then, Christian use of the term must be distinguished by its use in biblical context rather than understood to mean independently as a mere shared lexeme.¹⁷ The biblical narrative provides both the context for the meaning of atonement and the formative basis for a biblical worldview.

In recent decades several notable biblical scholars have made such a point about the relationship between biblical narrative and worldview. Authors such as Kevin Vanhoozer, Craig Bartholomew, Michael Goheen, Michael Williams, and N. T. Wright have all convincingly argued that one of the effects of the biblical story is the shaping of the worldview of its audience.¹⁸ Building on such scholarship, then, this project recognizes and phraseology of early Arabic Christian theology.”

15. Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, 209–10.

16. The verbal root *kaffara* (كَفَّرَ) and its derivative forms, which are used in the Arabic translation of the OT (e.g., Lev 16) and the NT (e.g., Heb 2:18), and which are found in the Qur'an (e.g., Qur'an 2:271), are translated by derivations of the verb “atone” in English.

17. Griffith, *Bible in Arabic*, 209, explains the earliest emergence of Christian theology and biblical translation in Arabic, saying, “Arguably, it was due in no small part to the religious provocation of Islamic scripture and its influence on the linguistic development of Arabic that Arabic emerged as the *lingua franca* of the newly emerging Islamic polity, becoming the public language even of the newly subject Jewish and Christian communities. It followed as a natural development that the Arabic Qur'an became a stimulus for the first written translations of the Bible into Arabic. . . . It was under the shadow of the Qur'an and a developing Islamic religious discourse that the language of the early translations of the Bible into Arabic took on the Muslim cast that was, as we have seen, a discernable feature in their diction, especially among the Christians.”

18. As will be considered in chapter 6, the biblical story provides a context and a plotline that serves to form a biblical worldview within which the Christian life might appropriately situate itself throughout the ages and across cultures. This point has been extensively and convincingly argued by Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*. See also Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama of Scripture*; and Williams, “Systematic Theology.”

that merely attempting to define atonement lexically will prove unhelpful without giving attention to its function within the larger narrative in which it is situated and the subsequent impact upon the biblical worldview.

Concurring with Wright and Vanhoozer from an anthropological and missiological perspective, Paul Hiebert claims, “To understand Scripture, we must seek to understand the worldview themes that underlie the whole. The unity of Scripture lies first in its insistence that all the biblical events are part of one great story—in other words, a central diachronic worldview theme.”¹⁹ Therefore the overarching biblical narrative context in which Christian perceptions of atonement are located carries a great deal of explanatory weight, giving meaning to the words and shaping the concepts employed within Scripture. Simply stated, the story itself is a key to understanding the individual concepts located within its narrative.

Hiebert goes on to show that the storied framework of Israel, bearing the concepts of sin, sacrifice, salvation, and Messiah, is the narrative precursor for God’s final revelation in Christ, concluding, “Had Christ come at the time of Abraham, the people would not have had the fundamental categories and worldview to understand his self-revelation.”²⁰ If, then, the power of Israel’s story so establishes the biblical worldview that the Christ event would not make sense apart from the preceding narrative, it is crucial that one presents the Christ event’s implications to new audiences by rehearsing the same worldview-shaping narrative into which it fits.²¹

For one interested in communicating the biblical concept of atonement to a Muslim audience, then, the OBN can provide a means of distinguishing a Christian use of *kaffara* from that of the Qur’an. Despite the fact that the Qur’an lays claim to much of the same history as the Christians and Jews, this project will show that the Qur’anic worldview diverges substantially from the biblical worldview, and that the concept of atonement is a central point at which this divergence might be recognized. The initial answer, then, to the question of why it is so difficult to explain Christian atonement to Muslims is that there are lexical,

In a similar vein, see the five-act-play model for Christian theology and life by Wright, *People of God*, 140–41.

19. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 266.

20. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 266.

21. Throughout, “Christ event” refers to the historical death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

narrative, and worldview-level conflicts between the two systems of faith which coalesce at the concept of atonement.

Returning to the central concern of this project, then, one might ask again, “Does the book of Hebrews provide a narrative-driven, contextually appropriate section of Scripture by which to challenge the Qur’an’s claim to continuity with prior revelation and also to explain a biblical perspective on atonement in Christ to those influenced by the Qur’an?” The following chapters will address this question, arguing an affirmative answer, and demonstrating that Hebrews overcomes lexical, narrative, and ritual barriers to communication, and finally proposing a model by which to utilize the message of Hebrews and to communicate a biblical position to Muslims in contextually appropriate manner.

Literature Review

Prior to beginning the argument, however, it is important to consider the concerns that have driven other arguments for how to engage Muslims contextually with the gospel. Surveying other offerings will both situate the current argument within the literature and prepare the reader for chapter six’s concluding thoughts which will address many of the concerns of alternative methodologies. While it would prove inadvisable to attempt to investigate every piece of scholarly and popular literature that suggests a way forward in Muslim evangelism, there are several authors who have done the difficult-yet-invaluable work of categorizing approaches to contextualization.²²

Unfortunately, despite several attempts at categorization, the discussion regarding various approaches to contextualized ministry among Muslims has neither agreed upon a single, universal taxonomy, nor utilized the same categorical labels in the same ways.²³ For this reason,

22. Some examples of such categorization of contextualization approaches include Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*; Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*; Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*. For examples used in this project of Muslim-ministry contextualization categorizations, see Travis, “Must All Muslims?,” 411–15; Terry, “Approaches,” 314–19; Schlorff, *Missiological Models*.

23. Consider the distinction between Schlorff’s use of “dialogical” vocabulary and Terry’s use of the same. See Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, 23, whose dialogical model rejects attempts to encourage the conversion of people from one faith to another, opting instead for the creation of a diverse “community of communities.” On the other hand, Terry, “Approaches,” 316, uses dialogical to refer to the work of those who are culturally sensitive, engaged in listening and speaking, yet who are still committed to conversionism.

the following section will provide a synthesis of two such taxonomies: Steven Bevans's more general *Models of Contextual Theology* and Sam Schlorff's Muslim-ministry focused offering, *Missiological Models in Ministry to Muslims*.²⁴ The resulting simplified taxonomy highlights three basic evangelical approaches, grouping them by shared concerns, starting points, postures, and methods.

By restricting this taxonomy to evangelical approaches, this paper intends to follow the basic definition of evangelical offered by David Bebbington. Bebbington's so-called quadrilateral defines evangelicals as those who uphold the authority of the Bible, find salvation in the cross of Jesus the Messiah, are active in expressing the gospel and its implications, and who are committed to conversionism.²⁵ Such restriction does not suggest that non-evangelical missiologists do not offer significant contributions, but merely serves to narrow the scope of this project to distinctions within evangelicalism.

Stephen Bevans

As indicated above, Stephen Bevans is an influential writer who has proposed a taxonomy for categorizing six different approaches to doing contextual theology in the widely-read book *Models of Contextual Theology*. Bevans opens his book jarringly, stating, "There is no such thing as 'theology'; there is only contextual theology."²⁶ Working from this thesis, Bevans goes on within the book to suggest that there are six basic models for doing contextual theology (see Table 1.1).²⁷ Three of Bevans's models find expression in evangelical circles, broadly speaking: the synthetic model, the translation model, and the counter-cultural model.

24. Bevans' *Models*, xvi, went through nine printings in a decade. Its second edition, revised and expanded, is in its seventeenth printing. Schlorff, *Missiological Models*, xiii. Schlorff's book focuses on work among Muslims, though his categories overlap and occasionally depart from Bevans's distinctions. Thus, Bevans will be used due to his impact on missiology, and Schlorff will be consulted for his Muslim focus.

25. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 2-3.

26. Bevans, *Models*, 3.

27. Bevans, *Models*, 31-33.