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Christ in the Scripture of Islam: Remnantal Revelation or Irredeemable Imposter?

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meaning from non-Christian religious systems?

Two Competing Missiological Realities

One of the realities that cross-cultural communicators around the world encounter is the one that presented itself to Newbigin in India: language is not a value-neutral communication vehicle. In the quote above, Newbigin highlights the fact that Hindus use the word “god” to refer to one of the many deities in a polytheistic pantheon. When a Christian is forced to use the same word to identify YHWH, intentional labor is required to distinguish and define the term Christianly since the default understanding of the word is neither monotheistic nor biblical.

Whereas the polytheism of Hinduism allows a Christian to readily distinguish a biblical use of the word “god” from one informed by the Vedas, such distinction is not as easily communicated when the concepts are less apparently divergent. In fact, the danger of miscommunication and even syncretism is far higher when the difference between the concepts carried by shared vocabulary is less pronounced. Hence the perennial conflict over the question, “Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?”²

In tension with this vocabulary difficulty, a missionary also encounters the need to find some point of contact or common ground with the host culture. If one is unable to make the biblical story connect with the life, experience, concerns, and hopes of a people, it is difficult to imagine how biblical truths will present themselves as relevant. Therefore, missionaries desire to find inroads into a culture that capitalize on shared concepts and ideals as vehicles by which to introduce biblical truth.

Cross-cultural communicators thus face the Scylla and Charybdis of the need to communicate clearly and biblically on the one hand and the need to communicate meaningfully and contextually on the other. Over-correction to either side threatens the success of the communication process. When communicating the gospel of Jesus to Arabic-speaking Muslims, missionaries must chart a course between these two dangers.

Among the first decisions one must make in this process is to consider what posture one will take towards the Jesus character in the Qur’an. In other words, is ‘Isa in the Qur’an a bridge or a barrier to understanding the biblical gospel? Though many missiologists argue that it is crucial to recognize the Qur’anic ‘Isa as a shared prophet, this essay argues that the biblical Jesus (Yasua’) should be presented in contrast to—rather than compatibility with—the Jesus character in the Qur’an (‘Isa). In order to

Christ in the Scripture of Islam: Remnantal Revelation or Irredeemable Imposter?

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The Qur’an endorses and reveres Jesus, providing Christian missionaries with communicative traction as they can lean into a shared Messiah. Or does it? This article compares the Qur’anic Jesus (‘Isa) and the biblical Jesus (Yasua’) in order to investigate whether or not the apparent similarity extends beyond superficial similarities. By employing Daniel Strange’s categories of “remnantal revelation” and “subversive fulfillment” as a helpful heuristic for assessment, this article contends that the two Jesus characters are not compatible. In fact, the Qur’an’s use of ‘Isa appears to be an attempt to subvert the message and work of the biblical Yasua’. As a result, it recommends rejection of the missiological impulse to utilize the Qur’anic nomenclature in evangelism, discipleship, and Bible translation. Such attempts at contextualization are counter-productive since this name is inextricably tied to a character whose intent is to subvert the message and work of the biblical Jesus.

Key Words: Arabic, contextualization, evangelism, ‘Isa, Islam, missiology, Qur’an, translation, Yasua’

When Lesslie Newbigin arrived as a missionary in India, he quickly identified a major communication problem. Since the local language was permeated by Hindu theological presuppositions, the danger of syncretism attended any and all communication of biblical teaching. Newbigin reports,

I saw how, inevitably, the meaning of sentences spoken by my Christian friends was shaped by the Hindu background of the language. The words used, the only available words for God, sin, salvation, and so on, are words that have received their entire content from the Hindu religious tradition.¹

Newbigin’s observation reveals a perennial missionary problem: How does one communicate biblical truths using language that derives its

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, “The Cultural Captivity of Western Christianity,” in *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 689.

² For example, one might consult the twenty-plus articles arguing the same-god question as published in the 2016 Special Edition of the EMS Occasional Bulletin.

provide some context to this contextualization discussion, however, let us first consider our overall approach to a Christian philosophy of religions.

Daniel Strange: Categories of Revelation

As our world is increasingly hyperconnected, it is all but impossible to ignore the questions that arise from exposure to religious plurality. For Christians—such as myself—who hold an exclusivist perspective on soteriology and who understand the Bible to be the sufficient, inerrant, inspired, and authoritative revelation of God to humanity, the questions become more pronounced. Specifically, how are we to understand non-Christian religions when they espouse similar ethical ideas, they tell similar stories, and their sacred texts contain biblical characters?

This is the question that prompted Daniel Strange to write a Christian theology of religions entitled *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*. In this book, Strange employs two unique phrases as he argues for his theology of religions that prove helpful to this essay's task: "remnantal revelation" and "subversive fulfillment."³ Employing these two concepts in the task of assessing the Jesus character in the Qur'an will provide a helpful heuristic structure for missiological assessment by offering one of the most optimistic approaches to the religious other available among exclusivists. If, then, even such a positive approach to the phenomenon of Islam yet reveals basic incompatibility between the Yasua' of the Bible and the 'Isa of the Qur'an, this essay's thesis that the two characters should be contrasted will stand.

Remnantal Revelation

In order to utilize these categories in our assessment, we must first define them. In *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, Strange builds upon Wilhelm Schmidt's convincing argument for original monotheism. Schmidt's single-source theory of religious pluralism helps Strange to describe and define remnantal revelation, as he writes, "There is a historical *remnantal* revelation within religious traditions, which, though entropically distorted over time . . . gives us a comparative theological explanation of 'commonalities' and 'continuities' between religious traditions, for example certain events, themes and archetypes."⁴ Thus, Strange anticipates finding bits of dislocated special revelation stemming from a single-source and carried on collective memory and scattered within non-Christian religious teaching and practice.

³ Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 104, 267.

⁴ Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 120 (emphasis original).

The Bible indicates that at various points in history—notably during the first three chapters of Genesis and then again after the flood—every human on the face of the earth was privy to some measure of special revelation by virtue of having interacted with God himself. Over time—particularly following the Babel account—human sinfulness, dispersion, and historical distance allowed true knowledge of God to comele with superstition and sin, and eventually produced a variety of idolatrous faiths. While some may contest the wisdom of Strange's argument that this "remnantal revelation" be recognized as a separate theological category of revelation, the basic concept appears to be plausible given the biblical narrative.

This posture towards non-Christian belief systems has inherent missiological value in that it optimistically inclines a Christian to discover biblical teachings embedded in other faiths. In Strange's words, "While such revelatory material is always sinfully corrupted, distorted and degenerates to the point of being salvifically useless, it has to be factored into the phenomena of religion in general and therefore of the 'religions' in particular."⁵ Believing that remnantal revelation might exist—though displaced and re-appropriated—within non-Christian cultural stories and mores positively predisposes a Christian to find such common ground upon which one might gain momentum for communication of the biblical gospel. Since such remnantal revelation is dislocated from the biblical narrative, however, the missionary task involves resituating this material within the proper revelatory setting of the biblical canon.

Subversive Fulfillment

It is at this juncture that Strange's book makes its second missiological contribution. Building a case for viewing the gospel as the subversive fulfillment of non-Christian religion, Strange contends that recognizing bits and bobs of genuine truth is evangelistically helpful only insofar as one is able to demonstrate how such truth fits more appropriately within an original, biblical context than it does in the non-Christian metanarrative in which it is found.

Strange readily admits that this concept precedes him in the works of authors such as Herman Bavinck, who writes, "Christianity is not only positioned antithetically towards paganism; it is also paganism's fulfillment. . . . What is sought there, is found here."⁶ He assumes that there

⁵ Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 104.

⁶ Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 267; Quoting from Herman

are certain religious expressions that, though they are directed at idolatrous ends, are provoked by proper human desires and longings.

Again, whether or not one adopts this language, Strange's proposal appears congruent with the biblical testimony. For example, as Rom 1:25 concludes Paul's teaching on human depravity, Paul states, "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever." Thus, Paul sees the inclination to worship as essential to humanity, yet under the influence of sin, worship is misdirected to the created rather than the Creator.

The helpful categories of "remnantal revelation" and "subversive fulfillment" encourage a Christian analyzing a non-Christian religion to expect to find evidence—or remnants—of dislocated biblical revelation embedded in the stories and ethics of the religious other. Yet they also remind the Christian that this shared content is not beneficial unless it is exposed as belonging more properly within the canon of Scripture and fitting within the narrative of the biblical gospel. Having defined these terms, this essay will now turn from the theoretical to the practical by applying these two fruitful aspects of Strange's theology of religions to the specific case of missiological engagement with Muslims.

Remnantal Revelation and the Case of Islam

In particular, this essay's attention is focused on the purportedly shared character of Jesus. As one publication puts the matter, "Among the major world religions, Islam is the only non-Christian faith that recognizes the person of Jesus."⁷ For a Christian eager to find common

Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 319–20. On the same page, Strange quotes Hendrick Kraemer, "Continuity or Discontinuity," in *The Authority of Faith: International Missionary Council Meeting at Tambaram, Madras*, ed. G. Paton (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 5, who provides Strange with the phrase "subversive fulfillment" as he writes, "Only an attentive study of the Bible can open the eyes to the fact that Christ, 'the power of God' and the 'wisdom of God', stands in contradiction to the power and wisdom of man. Perhaps in some respects it is proper to speak of contradictive or subversive fulfillment."

⁷ "A Comprehensive Listing of References to Jesus (ʿIsa) in the Qur'an," *NAMB Apologetics*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.namb.net/apologetics-blog/a-comprehensive-listing-of-references-to-jesus-isa-in-the-qur-an/>. This statement, however, assumes that ʿIsa and Yasua' are the same undifferentiated character. This same assumption can be seen in secular books, such as John Kaltner and Younus Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (New

ground with a Muslim neighbor, an Islamic Jesus provides an apparently obvious point of contact. In fact, many missionaries have adopted the qur'anic name ʿIsa to refer to Jesus over and against the name Yasua' as it appears in the Arabic Bible.⁸

In so doing, such approaches view the Jesus character of the Qur'an positively as dislocated remnantal revelation waiting to be relocated into the biblical narrative. Taking a potentially redemptive approach, then, they intend to demonstrate ʿIsa in his proper setting to subversively fulfill his role in the Qur'an. However, before making the positive assessment that ʿIsa is remnantal revelation, one must inquire if, in fact, the Qur'an has already employed ʿIsa in its own attempt to subvert the biblical gospel. To do this, we must investigate ʿIsa in the Qur'an.

ʿIsa In the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, ʿIsa is a character who was born of a virgin named Miriam (Q 19:19–22), known as a prophet and messenger of God (Q 4:171), and whose ministry confirmed the Torah given before him (Q 5:46). These biographical similarities—in tandem with the Qur'an's claim to continue prior revelation—indicate that ʿIsa is the qur'anic referent for the biblical Jesus.

As a result, Christians working among Muslim populations often view the name ʿIsa as being interchangeable with the Arabic Bible's name for Jesus, Yasua'. Furthermore, many advocate for the strategic value of intentionally using the qur'anic Arabic name for Jesus. For example, John Travis contends,

Although the Qur'an contains only portions of the accounts of [biblical figures'] lives, these Arabic names clearly refer to the same historical figures that are described in the Bible. For the sake of recognition and religious acceptability, it is crucial that [qur'anic]

York: T&T Clark, 2018), 76. When Jesus is paralleled with ʿIsa the implied assumption is that ʿIsa is the Arabic name for Jesus when it is in fact an explicitly qur'anic Arabic name.

⁸ See Muhammad Sanavi, "The Insider Movement and Iranian Muslims," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*, ed. Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 443. It should be noted that Sanavi is speaking about Farsi-speaking Iranian Christians who have a long history of having used the name ʿIsa to refer to the biblical Jesus. One of the limitations of this essay, then, is that it is focused on Arabic-speaking populations where Arabic-speaking Christians are known.

names be used in translations of the Bible.⁹

As Travis's quote demonstrates, the choice of vocabulary doesn't merely occur at the level of interpersonal conversation but has also been incorporated into various Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) of the Bible in Arabic.¹⁰ We will return to the question of vocabulary when we consider the missiological ramifications of this discussion. For now, we must consider the teaching that the Qur'an attaches to the name 'Isa before making any recommendations.

Biblical Similarity

As noted above, the author of the Qur'an clearly intends the reader to connect the person of 'Isa to the biblical Jesus. That this is the case can be seen in at least five different ways. First, the Qur'an recognizes 'Isa as the son of the virgin Miriam (Mary).¹¹ In fact, 'Isa is known throughout the Qur'an in connection with his mother as *'Isa bin Miraim*.¹² On the surface, 'Isa's virgin-birth to a woman named Mary appears to parallel the biblical account of Jesus's birth.

Second, the Qur'an regularly attributes to Jesus the role of continuing and confirming prior revelation. For instance, Qur'an 5:46 reads, "And in their footsteps We followed up with Jesus, son of Mary, confirming what was with him of the Torah, and We gave him the Gospel, containing guidance and light, and confirming what was with him of the Torah, and as

⁹ John Travis, "Producing and Using Meaningful Translations of the Taurat, Zabur, and Injil," *IJFM* 23.2 (Summer 2006): 74. It is worth noting that Travis—along with most of those who advocate for the use of Islamic names and vocabulary—works among populations whose first language is not Arabic.

¹⁰ For a helpful discussion of the wide-ranging translation decisions that often attend Muslim-sensitive translations, see Adam Simnowitz, "Appendix: Do Muslim Idiom Translations Islamicize the Bible? A Glimpse Behind the Veil," in *Muslim Converts to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 501–23.

¹¹ Qur'an 19:19–21: "He said, 'I am only a messenger of your Lord (sent) to grant you a boy (who is) pure.' She said, 'how can I have a boy, when no human being has touched me, nor am I a prostitute?' He said, 'So (will it be)! Your Lord has said; 'It is easy for Me. And (it is) to make him a sign to the people and a mercy from Us. It is a thing decreed.'"

¹² John Kaltner and Younus Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 76, write, "The prophet and messenger Jesus/'Isa is mentioned by name twenty-five times in the Qur'an. On nine occasions the name appears by itself, and the other sixteen times it is found in combination with the descriptors 'son of Mary' and/or 'Messiah.'"

guidance and admonition to the ones who guard (themselves)."¹³ This, too, appears to be consonant with the biblical testimony of Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's scriptures.

Related to this, the third connection between 'Isa of the Qur'an and the Jesus of the Bible is that he is known as a moral teacher and example.¹⁴ For instance, in Qur'an 43:63 Jesus discloses his mission as one sent to clarify prior revelation, saying, "I have brought you the wisdom, and (I have done so) to make clear to you some of your differences. Guard (yourselves) against God and obey me." Immediately following this verse, Jesus reminds his audience that he is teaching them the straight path that will please God. As a teacher of the law and one who instructs in the ways of God, 'Isa parallels the role of Jesus as teacher in the Gospels.

A fourth way that 'Isa in the Qur'an might be seen to exhibit biblical similarity is his eschatological role. In Qur'an 43:61, according to some readings, 'Isa returns as a sign of the hour of judgement.¹⁵ Thus, for many commentators, 'Isa's return is one of the signs that the day of judgement is imminent.¹⁶

Finally, in the Qur'an 'Isa is known for having performed miracles. In Qur'an 5:110, God addresses Jesus, saying, "[Remember when you] healed the blind and the leper by My permission. And when you brought forth the dead by My permission."¹⁷ Since signs of this nature are predicted in the Old Testament and also recorded in numerous places throughout the gospels, 'Isa as a miracle worker also appears to have a counterpart in the Jesus of the Bible.

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, English renderings of the Qur'an are drawn from A. J. Droge, *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation* (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2015).

¹⁴ Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 79. Kaltner and Mirza cite Qur'an 43:57 and 59 where Jesus is seen as a moral exemplar (*mathal*).

¹⁵ One could render the pronoun "he/it" in this verse as a reference to Jesus—and subsequently his return—as a sign of the hour of judgement. However, one could also read the pronoun as a reference to the Qur'an. See Droge, *The Qur'an*, 332n61.

¹⁶ Al Tabari, "Qur'an 43:61," in *Tafsir Al-Tabari*, <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura43-aya61.html>. See also, Ibn Katheer, "Qur'an 43:61," in *Tafsir Ibn Katheer*, <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura43-aya61.html#katheer>. See also, Jalalayn, "Qur'an 43:61," in *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=43&tAyahNo=61&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>. See also, Ibn 'Abbas, "Qur'an 43:61," in *Tannir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas*, <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=73&tSoraNo=43&tAyahNo=61&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>.

¹⁷ Cf. Qur'an 3:49 for a similar list of Jesus's signs, though here he declares his own works.

These five similarities are often assumed to be sufficient to prove that the Qur'an is describing the biblical Jesus. Taken positively, many Christian communicators are encouraged to leverage the similarities listed above to provide good momentum for describing the gospel of the biblical Jesus. Yet, these are not the only instances in which the Qur'an features 'Isa.

Non-Biblical References

In addition to the biblical themes mentioned above, several examples of extrabiblical material have also woven their way into the qur'anic story of 'Isa. First, in Qur'an 19:30–33, 'Isa speaks to Mary miraculously as a newborn baby, explaining his own calling, saying,

Surely I am a servant of God. He has given me the Book and made me a prophet. He has made me blessed wherever I am, and He has charged me with the prayer and the alms as long as I live, and (to be) respectful to my mother. He has not made me a tyrant (or) miserable. Peace (be) upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive.

Apparently prior to this event, an angelic messenger had prophesied to Miriam regarding her infant 'Isa, saying that he will speak from the cradle in Qur'an 3:46.¹⁸

The second event that the Qur'an records that does not have a biblical equivalent involves 'Isa forming birds from clay and then bringing them to life by God's permission. This story is recorded in Qur'an 3:49 and referenced again in Qur'an 5:110. Both of these accounts appear to have parallels in several second-century documents, among which are the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.¹⁹

In addition to these accounts, the Qur'an also includes apparent references to 'Isa clarifying his role that neither directly fit with biblical material nor do they flatly contradict it. One such example comes from Qur'an 5:116, which records a dialogue between God and 'Isa:

(Remember) when God said, "Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to

¹⁸ Qur'an 3:46 states, "He will speak to the people (while he is still) in the cradle and in adulthood, and (he will be) one of the righteous."

¹⁹ Mark Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context: A Christian Exploration* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 209–10, notes that the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew includes a speaking infant Jesus counseling his mother. Also, Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 79, connect the clay birds event with a very similar account in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. This connection is also recognized in Droge, *The Qur'an*, 35n73, where Droge specifically cites the Infancy Gospel of Thomas 2:2–4 as the apparent parallel account.

the people, "Take me and my mother as two gods instead of God (alone)?" He said, "Glory to You! It is not for me to say what I have no right (to say). If I had said it, You would have known it. You know what is within me, but I do not know what is within You. Surely You—You are the knower of the unseen."

Though this passage is often drawn up into Islamic polemic against the Christian understanding of the Trinity, it is treated here as extrabiblical material due to the fact that it is not representative of any conception of the Trinity known within Christianity.²⁰ Finally, we must turn our attention to the elements in the Qur'an that depict 'Isa as a character in conflict with the biblical Jesus.

Anti-Biblical Elements

While the preceding material is often viewed positively by Christian communicators as potential common ground to leverage in evangelism, perhaps the most important material about 'Isa contained in the Qur'an is that which contradicts the Bible. In several places throughout the Qur'an, 'Isa explicitly functions as an opponent of Christian teaching.

The first example is found in the presentation of 'Isa as decidedly nothing more than a prophet and messenger. One reads this contention clearly in Qur'an 5:75, which states,

The Messiah, son of Mary, was only a messenger. Messengers have passed away before him. His mother was a truthful woman. They both ate food. See how We make clear the signs to them, then see how deluded they are.

Likewise, Qur'an 2:136 equates Jesus with the prior prophets, saying,

Say: "We believe in God, and what has been sent down to us, and what has been sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus, and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we submit."

These references, along with Qur'an 4:171 and 42:13, demonstrate that the role of 'Isa as a prophet, messenger, and bringer of religion is no different than that of his predecessors.

Second, the Qur'an is ambiguous in its presentation of 'Isa's death. In

²⁰ Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 78, comment, "This passage appears to claim that Christians worship Mary/Maryam as a deity and that they consider her to be a part of the Trinity."

some places, 'Isa anticipates the day of his death, such as Qur'an 19:33. Likewise, some take the several qur'anic references to God's assumption of Jesus to the heavens to be a parallel idea to resurrection and ascension found in the Bible, and therefore to presuppose his death.²¹ Furthermore, scholars such as Gabriel Said Reynolds have argued convincingly that the most natural reading of the Qur'an does not deny Jesus's death.

Historically, however, most Muslim commentators have understood Qur'an 4:155–159 to deny that 'Isa was killed at all.²² Such a denial comes primarily from verses 157–158 which state,

And for [the Jews'] saying, "Surely we killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of God"—yet they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it (only) seemed like (that) to them. . . . Surely they did not kill him. No! God raised him to Himself.

Interpretive difficulty presents itself perennially over the issue of how to understand the phrase, "it (only) seemed like (that) to them." Many exegetes explain the phrase to mean that someone who looked like 'Isa was crucified in his place while God spared 'Isa from such an ignoble death by assuming him to heaven. Thus, 'Isa does not serve his followers as a substitutionary sacrifice. In fact, to the contrary, one of his followers substitutes himself in 'Isa's place.

Regardless of how one understands this passage, the Qur'an elsewhere prevents one from believing that 'Isa's death—if it occurred—could have substitutionary or atoning value for those who follow him. This is because Qur'an 17:13–15a teaches that each person is inescapably responsible for

²¹ See Qur'an 3:55 and 5:117 as alternative passages that speak of God taking Jesus to the heavenly realms, though the Arabic verb translated by Droge and others as "took you" and "took me" respectively (*mutawaffik/tawaffayitni*) is elsewhere in the Qur'an understood to be a reference to death.

²² For the argument against reading the Qur'an to imply that Jesus never died, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *Bulletin of SOAS* 72.2 (2009): 237–58. For historical Islamic interpretations, see the various explanations given in Al Tabari, "Qur'an 4:157," *Tafsir Al-Tabari*, <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura4-aya157.html#tabary>. These accounts variously suggest that either one of Jesus companions volunteered or Jesus chose one of his friends to be made to look like him and to take the honor of being martyred in his place. Still other accounts say that Judas was made to look like 'Isa and crucified in his place. Most all of the accounts recorded by al Tabari, however, show that Jesus was not crucified or killed, but was assumed into heaven by God. For an English summary, see Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 81.

his or her own deeds, and none can bear away personal responsibility for another:

And every human—We have fastened his fate to him on his neck, and We shall bring forth a book for him on the Day of Resurrection, which he will find unrolled. "Read your book! You are sufficient today as a reckoner against yourself." Whoever is (rightly) guided, is guided only for himself, and whoever goes astray, goes astray only against himself. No one bearing a burden bears the burden of another.²³

If no one can alleviate or carry the burden of another, there is no room for substitutionary atonement for sins. Thus, even if one contends that 'Isa died, it was not in the place of sinners.

Finally, in Qur'an 61:6, 'Isa predicts that there will be one named Ahmad who will follow him: "And (remember) when Jesus, son of Mary, said, 'Sons of Israel! Surely I am the messenger of God to you, confirming what was before me of the Torah, and bringing good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name will be Ahmad.'" Nearly all Islamic commentators understand this to be a direct reference to Muhammad.

Reading the qur'anic prediction backwards, then, Abdullah Yusuf Ali expresses a common contention that the biblical Jesus also anticipated a coming prophet named Muhammad. Those making such an argument rely on a theoretical corruption of the Greek word *perichyotos* to read *paracletos* in three places throughout John 14–16. Ali summarizes the position, writing,

"*Ahmad*" or "*Muhammad*," the Praised One, is almost a translation of the Greek word *Perichyotos*. In the present Gospel of John 14:16, 15:26, and 16:7, the word "Comforter" in the English version is for the Greek word *Paracletos*. . . . Our doctors contend that *Paracletos* is a corrupt reading for *Perichyotos*, and that in their original saying of Jesus there was a prophecy of our holy Prophet *Ahmad* by name.²⁴

Thus, not only does the Qur'an indicate that 'Isa expected Muhammad,

²³ See also Qur'an 6:164, which teaches that every person will be responsible for their own deeds.

²⁴ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2005), 1540n5438. See also Droge, *The Qur'an*, 383nn8–9. Droge illustrates a common Islamic teaching that connects 'Isa's prediction of a coming messenger to the biblical references to the *paraclete* that Jesus anticipates in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; and 16:7. Many such commentators claim that the biblical Jesus predicts Muhammad's advent using the *paraclete* reference in the same way as the qur'anic 'Isa predicts it using Ahmad.

but traditional Islamic theology teaches that the Jesus of the Bible also pointed to his coming.

In summary of the Qur'an's teaching about 'Isa, then, one sees that the superficial similarities this character shares with the Jesus of the Bible prove less important to defining the character than do the deep-seated antitheses. 'Isa is a virgin-born prophet, yet his virgin birth does not have any bearing on Adamic headship, nor does his ontology extend beyond his prophetic role. Most damningly, however, 'Isa does not declare from the cross, "It is finished." Rather, avoiding the cross completely, 'Isa prophesies, "Ahmed is coming."

Missiological Implications

The discussion of remnantal revelation presented in this essay up to this point proves to be much more than mere theory. How a person views the material—ethical, historical, and biographical—found in the Qur'an that is ostensibly shared with the Bible radically shapes the approach to ministry among Muslims that one takes. For example, in an effort to build bridges with Muslims and to gain communicative momentum, many have taken the approach of affirming the basic idea that Muslims and Christians both revere Jesus, though in different ways.

Out of the good desire to connect with Muslim neighbors, some missiologists have advocated for giving preference to the name 'Isa over and against the biblical Arabic name Yasua'. One such advocate, Harley Talman, states his position; "Workers desirous of communicating Christ to Muslims need to learn the distinctively Islamic language."²⁵ However, Talman does not only recommend that Christian communicators understand Islamic language, he goes on to say that it should be employed and given preference in gospel presentations. Talman even claims that, "Islamic language is needed for clear communication."²⁶ Talman's support for this strong claim is limited to two observations.

First, Talman states that Islamic language is necessary because using Christian vocabulary identifies a speaker with a Christian subculture. By giving deference to Islamic vocabulary, one then communicates respect for Islamic heritage.²⁷ Second, Talman notes that some Christian words and names are foreign to Muslims. Thus, using unknown terminology will

²⁵ Harley Talman, "Comprehensive Contextualization," *IJFM* 21.1 (Spring 2004): 7.

²⁶ Talman, "Comprehensive Contextualization," 7.

²⁷ Talman, "Comprehensive Contextualization," 7.

cause psychological and emotional barriers to arise as they consider the message.²⁸ What Talman assumes, however, is that Islamic vocabulary is interchangeable with and conceptually equivalent to Christian vocabulary. He does not address whether or not using the Islamic idiom obscures the biblical message.

Nonetheless, this preference for the Qur'anic nomenclature has been the operating principle behind many of the MIT such as the *Kitab al-Sharif* translation of the Bible.²⁹ Prior to offering criticism of this translation principle, it is important to consider how advocates best articulate their commendation of 'Isa language. To do so, we will utilize Strange's categories of remnantal revelation and subversive fulfillment in order to determine what posture a missiologist should take in regarding the missiological value of the Qur'an's 'Isa character.

Is 'Isa Remnantal Revelation?

The first step is to consider whether or not 'Isa provides an instance of remnantal revelation. Certainly, one might see the apparent similarities listed above as opportunities to extract and reframe elements of 'Isa's biography according to the biblical account. For example, one might view the fact that both 'Isa and Yasua' were virgin-born as an instance of remnantal revelation.

Moving from this affirmation to the demonstration of biblical subversive fulfillment, then, one might ask what reason the Qur'an would have for affirming the virgin-birth of a prophet who is ontologically identical to other naturally-born prophets? Turning to Rom 5:12–21, one might then demonstrate that biblically speaking, Jesus's virgin birth allows him to escape the original affliction of Adamic headship and sin-guilt. Thus, in its larger biblical setting, Jesus's virgin birth allows him to take up the vocation of both a spotless sacrifice and a blameless high priest.³⁰ Thus, in this portion of 'Isa's biography, one finds fertile ground for affirming

²⁸ Talman, "Comprehensive Contextualization," 7.

²⁹ Some arguments in support of these types of translations can be found in Travis, "Producing and Using Meaningful Translations," 74; Talman, "Comprehensive Communication," 7. For a devastating critique of these models, see Adam Simnowitz, "Appendix: Do Muslim Idiom Translations Islamicize the Bible? A Glimpse behind the Veil," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*, ed. Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 501–23.

³⁰ Hebrews 7–10 shows Jesus to be the sacrifice and high priest that the Levitical system anticipates.

a shared concept, exposing divergent theology underlying the shared concept, and evangelizing in light of the more fitting role the shared concept enjoys within biblical narrative.³¹

Despite the potential for leveraging parts of 'Isa's biography as subversive fulfillment, the anti-biblical aspects of 'Isa yet remain a part of this qur'anic character and are inextricably embedded in the distinctly qur'anic signifier 'Isa.³² Nonetheless, missiologists such as Talman continue to commend 'Isa as fertile common ground, citing statistics that claim that the biggest factor in Muslims deciding to follow Christ is that which is written about 'Isa in the Qur'an.³³ Here again, as above, Talman leans on subjective reports as support for capitalizing on the conversational momentum that comes from affirming 'Isa as a shared character.

If, however, such reports are admitted as providing sufficient warrant to commend the use of Islamic terms, one cannot help but reach a point of confusion when detractors produce their own statistics and data that expose the use of Islamic terms as untenable. For instance, Fred Farrokh

³¹ See the article by Christopher Flint, "How Does Christianity 'Subversively Fulfill' Islam?" *SFM* 8 (2012): 776–822. Flint provides multiple such examples following a progression of affirming common ground, exposing contradiction, and evangelizing through subversive fulfillment.

³² Travis, "Meaningful Translations," 7, attempts to dislocate the name 'Isa from its qur'anic appearance, saying, "When translators learn that the term *Isa* predates Islam and that it was derived from Christian sources, they are much more inclined to use it." However, Travis's presentation of this concept obscures the fact that there is no scholarly consensus as to the origins of the Arabic word, 'Isa. Consulting the sources that Travis footnotes as evidence of his claim merely reference the theory of Syriac Christian origins of 'Isa. Travis's presentation of 'Isa as a pre-Islamic Christian name for Jesus as a settled fact is misleading at best. Compare the renowned scholar, Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 83–84n64, who demonstrates the lack of scholarly consensus, writing, "Of the many explanations for the form of Jesus's name as it appears in the Qur'an, the most reasonable one from this writer's point of view is that it reflects an Arabic speaker's spelling of what he hears in an Arabic articulation of the common East Syrian form of the name: *Isbo*." Even apart from noting the hypothetical nature of Griffith's proposal, it is academically irresponsible for Travis to suggest that 'Isa is established as a pre-Islamic referent to Jesus.

³³ Harvey Talman, "Muslim Followers of Jesus, Muhammad, and the Qur'an," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*, ed. Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 130.

conducted a series of interviews with Muslims and believers from a Muslim background in his PhD dissertation. Farrokh found that 95 percent of the interviewees understood the Jesus of the Bible to be a different character than 'Isa in the Qur'an.³⁴ Given the conflicting subjective perspectives, we cannot decide this question merely by referring to reports of success or failure. Lest we entrust our missiological strategy to anecdotal observations, as Christian communicators we must reach beyond receptor responses to consider the inextricably Islamic baggage that comes with the name 'Isa.

Is 'Isa Already an Attempt at Subversive Fulfillment?

As 'Isa appears in the Qur'an—and as his role is traditionally interpreted within Islam—this character is overtly at odds with gospel of the biblical Jesus. 'Isa is neither the Son of God nor does he die an atoning death accompanied by a victorious resurrection.³⁵ Still, some scholars believe that one can liberate this character from traditional Islamic understanding while retaining the missiological advantage of preexisting Islamic reverence for 'Isa through a christocentric reading of the Qur'an.³⁶

To respond to such a claim, we must first ask if it is possible to provide such a reading of the Qur'an. It is possible to proof-text sections that discuss *Isa al-Masih* and isolate them from the rest of the Qur'an. However, this is hardly a christocentric reading. At best, such a project would be a christo-exclusive reading of the Qur'an.

In fact, if one isolates the qur'anic references to Jesus, it becomes apparent that the Qur'an will not admit of such an 'Isa-centric reading because 'Isa is simply not the center of the Qur'an's message. As Sidney Griffith insightfully notes, "The recollections and reminiscences in the Qur'an of the biblical and para-biblical narratives of the patriarchs and

³⁴ Fred Farrokh, "Will the *Umma* Veto SITO? Assessing the Impact of Theological Deviation on Social Acceptability in Muslim Communities," *IJFM* 32.2 (Summer 2015): 74.

³⁵ See the necessity of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection according to Paul's gospel in 1 Cor 15:3–5.

³⁶ Talman, "Muslim Followers," 124. Citing Bradford Greer, Talman casually dismisses any critique by accusing Western Christians of "theolonialism" when they deny Muslim followers of 'Isa the right to interpret the Qur'an in such a way as to make its teaching accord with biblical Christology.

prophets are not random . . . they are selected according to Islam's distinctive 'prophetology.'³⁷ In other words, the apparently shared prophetic characters are made to play different parts in the Qur'an than they do in the Bible. Thus, to interpret 'Isa in such a way as to make him the focal point of the Qur'an's teaching is to fight against the grain of the entire Qur'an.

Rather, the distinctive prophetology Griffith identifies dismisses the salvation-history of the biblical narrative in which these prophets feature, while utilizing de-historicized and dislocated biblical characters to promote the qur'anic idea that all prior prophets proclaimed the singular message of Islam.³⁸ Thus, when one attempts a christo-exclusive reading of the Qur'an, one encounters a character who—like Abraham, Moses, and David before him—lends credibility to Islam and Muhammad while undermining the Bible's historical-redemptive narrative.

The Qur'an has capitalized on Christian reverence for the Jesus character but recast him in a different role and a different story. It appears, then, that 'Isa in the Qur'an—along with Abraham, Moses, and David—is himself a qur'anic attempt at subversive fulfillment of the Christian concept of Jesus the Messiah. If 'Isa is a character whose purpose is already bound to the task of subverting biblical Christology, one wonders if it is wiser to attempt to subversively fulfill such a character or to expose the character as an irreconcilable imposter.

Implications for Missionary Vocabulary

Finally, we come to the question of missionary vocabulary. We have seen that it is improper to view the entire character of 'Isa as remnantal revelation. Likewise, this essay has shown that the 'Isa character himself appears to be a qur'anic attempt at subversive fulfillment of Christian Christology. It remains to inquire as to whether or not the initial missiological traction one may gain through using the qur'anic name 'Isa gives sufficient warrant to the missionary to consider such a decision wise.

As we have seen above, there are aspects of the biblical Yasua' that appear to have benign counterparts in the qur'anic 'Isa. One might readily seize on these opportunities to demonstrate how Yasua' has some commonalities with 'Isa. But since this character cannot be extracted wholesale from the Islamic context without bringing along anti-biblical elements, and since he must be repositioned as the center to which the biblical story points in contrast to a mere mouthpiece for Islam, one wonders what missiological value remains in using such a baggage-laden name. The claimed similarity must ultimately give way to a contradiction if a

³⁷ Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 3.

³⁸ Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 63.

communicator of the gospel is to be true to the Bible.

Though the Muslim audience may respond with greater initial enthusiasm to hear and read more about 'Isa due to his status as a highly revered Islamic prophet, the biblically-faithful missionary will have to deconstruct the 'Isa character to the point that he will no longer be recognizable as he appears in the Qur'an. Having deconstructed the qur'anic character, then, the Christian will need to reconstruct a biblical understanding of this character that is even further afield of the Qur'an's prophetology and theology. At the point of actually communicating this character's role in the biblical gospel, then, he no longer bears any resemblance to the 'Isa of the Qur'an and the common ground that promised communicative traction has been eroded from beneath the communicator's feet.

Conclusion

In the end, this essay has labored to demonstrate, using the categories of remnantal revelation and subversive fulfillment, that the Jesus character portrayed in the Qur'an is not the common ground that is often claimed by Muslims and missiologists alike. In fact, the Jesus of the Qur'an is neither remnantal revelation nor a displaced character to be rescued back into his biblical setting. Rather, 'Isa should be treated as an imposter to be exposed.

Furthermore, the distinctively qur'anic baggage that comes with this nomenclature is embedded in the name. For former Muslims who have cut their theological teeth on qur'anic vocabulary while following Islam, such language is likely to retain its former meaning long after a Christian evangelist has painted a biblical portrait of 'Isa. The difference between the biblical Yasua' and the qur'anic 'Isa is made much clearer theologically and narratively when one can maintain lexical distinction. Fortunately, the Arabic language provides the Christian missionary with just such an opportunity in the biblical name Yasua'.

In light of this argument, this essay concludes that it is unwise to refer to Jesus by the name 'Isa. To be faithful to the Bible, one will inevitably have to redefine this character in order to distinguish the biblical Jesus from the qur'anic 'Isa. Since the Arabic-speaking world already has both a Christian and a Muslim name for the Jesus character, the labor of making such a distinction benefits from the linguistic distance presented by the two different names.

Ultimately, it appears that the 'Isa character is designed to function as a trojan horse whose hidden freight purposes to infiltrate the biblical narrative and redirect it towards an Islamic *telos*. In our evangelism, discipleship, and Bible translation, we do well to leave all such wooden horses

outside the gate.