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THE QUR'ANIC USE OF THE APOCRYPHAL NEW TESTAMENT

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## “The Qur’anic Use of the Apocryphal New Testament”

### Introduction

“No legacy is so rich as honesty,” says Mariana to Diana in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well*.<sup>1</sup> What Mariana knew in that moment was that a history of honesty gives honor, while a legacy mired in half-truths would never receive praise and reverence. Does the sacred text of Islam, the Qur’ān, have this “legacy of honesty?” Or does the Muslim holy book have a more checkered past? While it is impossible to assign *motive* 1400 years after an event, the Qur’ān seems to rely on material that is historically dubious at best, namely, material from the apocryphal New Testament. This paper will argue that the Qur’ān draws from this apocryphal material alongside canon New Testament writings, seemingly unable to distinguish which is within the bounds of orthodox Christianity and which is clearly of late provenance and dubious historicity. To this end, it will briefly examine several apocryphal works as related to their role in the *Surat* of the Qur’ān. It will also briefly examine the way in which heretical teaching born out of these documents influenced the composition of certain *Surat* against the Muslim claim that their holy book has existed eternally, without composition or influences.

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, “All’s Well that Ends Well” in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, (Secaucus: Historic Reprints, Inc., 1977), 179.

## Prefatory Remarks

In examining a topic as complex as the intertextual relationship between the Qur'an and New Testament apocrypha, a few prefatory remarks are in order. First, it would seem that the Qur'an documents a use of Christian apocryphal material on par with canonical Christian material; as Sidney H. Griffith points out, the lack of direct quotation of New Testament material in the Qur'an and its use of apocryphal material alongside canonical elements suggests an oral source for the material that later found its way into the Qur'an. In other words, the first author of the *Surat* in which apocryphal material is found (notably, 3, 5, and 19), probably received these stories not from written copies of Christian texts, but oral stories passed among trading caravans that mixed the elements together.<sup>2</sup> Western scholars are quick to recognize the literary dependence of the Qur'an on these previous stories, citing many examples along the way of the Qur'anic use of apocryphal material.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Sidney H. Griffith, "The Gospel, the Qur'an and Jesus in al-Ya'qubi's *Ta'rikh*," in John C. Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 136-137. Here Sidney explains that the culture surrounding Muhammad would not have had a text to draw from, but rather a collection of oral stories transmitted among travelers.

See also Peter G. Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Context: Past, Present, and Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 64-68. Riddell and Cotterell have an excellent, if brief, introduction to the use of oral storytelling among Arabic traders during this period. They further describe the Syrian, Meccan, and Medinan Christians Muhammad's caravan may have come into contact with.

<sup>3</sup> See Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Gospels: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 17-18.

Incidentally, this oral transmission may be the source of another Qur'anic blunder: the misidentification of the virgin Mary as Aaron and Moses' sister Miriam. The Qur'anic translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem gives the apologetic that "sister of Aaron" means "in the priestly line," but this is not a sufficient explanation for the reference. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 192. Unless otherwise noted, this is the version of the Qur'an we will draw from.

For a response to this explanation, see James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2013), 106.

So what, though? From an Islamic perspective, it would not matter whether the stories came from an apocryphal source or not if the Qur'an is God's preexistent word. It would merely be a happy coincidence (or even divine intervention!) that these stories of Christ were found in apocryphal material. After all, if the stories were true, multiple attestation to those events would make sense!

However, there are two serious objections that the Muslim must consider when making this claim. First, the Qur'an is supposed to be functionally sourceless, a direct revelation from God that has no beginning and has always existed.<sup>4</sup> Second, these apocryphal stories must actually be *true* of Christ, a severely difficult claim to substantiate, given the late date of composition for almost all apocryphal material.

Therefore, the origins of the individual apocryphal books must be examined to better understand their relation to the Qur'an. If the origins of these books are dubious, and the Qur'an contains the same stories as found in a questionable and earlier work, the stories in the Qur'an are discredited. Even if one does not attack the Qur'an itself, it is without a doubt that a late origin and doubtful authenticity of stories found in an earlier source and repeated in a later document cast the later attestation into doubt.

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<sup>4</sup> For a definition of the eternal quality of the Qur'an in Muslim thought, see Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan* (Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah, 2003), 25.

To see a Christian restatement of this doctrine and a subsequent critique, see Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 178-204.

### ***Sura 3 and the Infancy Gospels***

Keeping this in mind, a good place to start is the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, a potential source for one of Jesus' miracles as recorded in the Qur'an: the manufacture and vivification of clay birds as seen in *Sura 3:49*. This Gospel, so called, is first recognized in history by a dismissal by Irenaeus<sup>5</sup> around 185 AD; while certain scholars speculate that an earlier, oral version of the *Infancy Gospel* may have circulated prior to this date, there is absolutely no evidence other than scholastic whim that this record was originally composed in the first century, and many scholars place a firmer date in the mid to late second.<sup>6</sup> This material is also referenced in the second-century *Epistula Apostolorum*, a document containing an apologetic against the Gnostics, who no doubt played a significant role in the *Infancy Gospel*'s composition.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, this *Infancy Gospel* predates the Qur'an by some centuries.

The content of the *Infancy Gospel* itself is inconsistent with the view of Jesus taken by

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<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Oxford: Nashotah House Press, 2012), 55-63.

<sup>6</sup> For a defense of the mid-second century dating of this book, see Oscar Cullmann, "The Infancy Story of Thomas" in Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), I: 439.

Klauck is more specific in tying the use of this gospel to the story found in the Qur'an, writing, "The surprising element in [this *Sura*] is not the allusion to Jesus' miracles of feeding the crowds, but the reference to the remarkable visual miracle of breathing life into birds formed of clay. This is related in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (2:2-4...), and this is the source on which the Koran draws...much of what the Koran knows about Jesus has passed through the filter of apocryphal traditions." Klauck, *Apocryphal Gospels*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> See Charles E. Hill, "The Epistula Apostolorum: An Asian Tract from the Time of Polycarp," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 1-53.

For further commentary on this document, see H. Duensing, "Epistula Apostolorum" in Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), I. 189-191.

the Qur'an. Would any Qur'an-respecting Muslim embrace a document in which the child Messiah kills children and blinds their parents? Would a Muslim being willing to embrace the story of Jesus taking the role of the trickster? Certainly not, but the Muslim finds himself in the odd position of plucking one "true" story from the midst of numerable falsehoods to accept the story of Jesus making clay birds and denying his part in killing a child within the same document.<sup>8</sup>

Still more interesting about the *Infancy Gospel* is its relationship to the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, a document derived from various legendary sources including, some argue, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>9</sup> The most interesting thing about this Gospel is not necessary its content (though it does reproduce the story of Jesus speaking from infancy as found in the Qur'an, which

<sup>8</sup> To quote Cullmann from the first edition of *New Testament Apocrypha*, "there is a vast difference between these miracles and those in the canonical gospels. The extraneous material is simply imported into the story of Jesus, without the slightest attempt to make it suit its subject. If the 'child' or 'boy' were not actually called Jesus, no one would guess that the tales of this playful divine boy were intended to supplement the tradition about him." Oscar Cullmann, "The Infancy Story of Thomas" in Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963) I: 391.

See also Stephen M. Miller and Robert V. Huber, *The Bible: A History: The Making and Impact of the Bible* (Intercourse: Good Books Press, 2004), 100-101 for an overview of the miracles of the young and mischievous Jesus portrayed in this Gospel.

<sup>9</sup> Oscar Cullmann writes, "special reference should be made to the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* already mentioned, today extant in several manuscripts...and probably a translation from the Syriac. It combines the three cycles: birth of Jesus, miracles in Egypt (in which Mary plays a dominant role), and miracles of the boy Jesus, most of which are taken from the (infancy) *Gospel of Thomas*. Thanks to this translation into Arabic the legends also became known among Muslims. At any rate Mohammed [sic] was familiar with this tradition, and adopted many of the legends into the Koran." Oscar Cullmann, "Later Infancy Gospels" in Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster/John Know Press, 1991), I: 456.

As an aside, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* also bears the marks of influence from another New Testament Apocryphal work, the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*. See Stephen J. Shoemaker, "The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 14, no. 3 (January 2010): 607-609. This *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, also referred to as the *Syriac Infancy Gospel*, may be what Cullmann had in mind in the above quote.

is why it is worth discussing at all!), but its dating and history. This Gospel may help elucidate where Muhammad heard stories of Jesus that eventually made their way into the Qur’anic text. How can that claim be substantiated? Simply put, because this Gospel, as its name implies, is originally believed to have been in Arabic during the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> While it is impossible to know for sure if Muhammad would have come into contact with this Gospel directly, it seems well within the realm of possibility that he could have heard about Jesus through a heretical Christian versed in this material.<sup>11</sup> Given that the Qur’an places the events of the canonical Gospels on par with the events seen in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, and the other apocryphal material from the first seven centuries, it may very well be that Muhammad, no student of the New Testament, did not have the proper knowledge to determine what was true and false in the life of Jesus he heard from Christians with whom he came into contact.<sup>12</sup> The author of the Qur’an does not seem to have any awareness that he is combining the historical and the legendary.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cullmann, “Later Infancy Gospels,” 456.

<sup>11</sup> Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2007), 218-219

<sup>12</sup> James White, *What Every Christian*, 236. See also Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 276.

<sup>13</sup> James White, *What Every Christian*, 237.

See also Vernon K. Robbins and Gordon D. Newby, “A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qur’an and the Bible” in John C. Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur’an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 36.

### Mary in the Qur'an and the *Protoevangelium of James*

On the topic of legends considered fact, another text to briefly consider when examining the Qur'an is the *Protoevangelium of James*, an apocryphal work dated to the mid to late second century.<sup>14</sup> Also known as the *Gospel of James*, this apocryphal work is of some interest because of its early popularity and influence on medieval art. For our purposes, however, this *Protoevangelium* is of interest not because of any facet of Jesus' life, but the life of His mother Mary. In chapters 4 through 8, this document describes the annunciation of Mary's birth to her mother Anna and, more importantly, describes Mary's early life growing up in the temple of the Lord.<sup>15</sup> In *Sura 3:37*, the Qur'an describes a Mary that seems to have a place to stay in the temple, saying, "So her Lord accepted her graciously and blessed her with a pleasant upbringing—entrusting her to the care of Zachariah. Whenever Zachariah visited her in the<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cullmann, "The Protoevangelium of James," in Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) I: 422-424

<sup>15</sup> Cullmann, "The Protoevangelium of James," 429.

<sup>16</sup> Note that most major versions of the Qur'an translate the word مَنْصُوبٌ as "the sanctuary" or "the prayer chamber," citing the use of the Arabic definite article *-al*. See W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1996), II: 225 for a discussion of the Arabic article *-al*.

For further discussion of the Arabic article see also J.A. Haywood and H.M. Nahmad, *A New Arabic Grammar of the Written Language* (London: Lund Humphries, 1965) 22-26.

However, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem translates this phrase "her sanctuary," and while one does not want to impugn motive, it is an odd choice considering the third person possessive pronoun is not used in this *ayah*. This change is not footnoted. Given the use of *-al* as described in Wright and in Haywood and Nahmad, it would appear that the proper translation should be "the sanctuary." Note also that, just 3 *ayat* later, the Qur'an describes Zechariah as praying in "the sanctuary" as translated by Haleem, rather than "his sanctuary." If this story is based on the account found in Luke 1:5-25, this is not Zechariah's private chamber, but a place of prayer in the temple. This should not be pressed too far backwards, but it does not seem necessary to translate the phrase "her sanctuary." Haleem, *Qur'an: New Translation*, 37.

sanctuary, he found her spanplied [sic] with provisions. He exclaimed, ‘O Mary! Where did this come from?’ She replied, ‘It is from Allah. Surely Allah provides for whoever He wills without limit.’” This could be considered nothing more than a coincidence, but the setting of this *Sura* seems to suggest that Mary lives in the temple itself, for in *Sura* 3:37a she is described as being in “the care of Zechariah,” and in *Sura* 3:39 and following, Zechariah is seen as paralleled in Luke 1:5-25, receiving the annunciation of John while ministering before God. Some translators of the Qur’an may recognize the problem of this dependence, and choose to explicitly translate this phrase with a personal chamber in mind.<sup>17</sup> However, this does not respect the context of the passage and does not do away with the larger context of Mary in the care of Zechariah, who himself ministered at the temple.<sup>18</sup> This similarity does not automatically prove a literary dependence, but it is also worth mentioning that the *Protoevangelium of James* enjoyed great Eastern popularity, eventually influencing the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* when it made its way west.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to further note that this *Protoevangelium* exists in an Arabic version based

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<sup>17</sup> For the sake of the translation issues mentioned in note 16, we are here using the translation by Yusuf Ali. A. Yusuf Ali, trans., *The Holy Qur'an* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), 39-42.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Marx agrees that Mary is in the temple, even appealing to the word “Mihrab,” and citing the *Gospel of James* as an influence. He also notes that the temple is alluded to in *Sura* 19:16. He defines the “Mihrab” as “a term used to denote a form of arched architecture or a canopied structure occur[ing] mainly in contexts where Christian traditions are being addressed.” Michael Marx, “Glimpses of a Mariology in the Qur'an: From Hagiography to Theology via Religious-Political Debate” in Angelika Neuwirth et al (eds.), *The Qur'an in Context* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 542.

<sup>19</sup> Cullmann, “The Protoevangelium of James,” 422.

on an earlier Greek manuscript, though this Arabic translation only surfaces in the historical record after the composition of the Qur'an.<sup>20</sup> If such a Gospel was intended for “the glorification of Mary,”<sup>21</sup> and the veneration of Mary had already made its way into Arabia,<sup>22</sup> it would not be shocking to find a polemic against what may have been perceived as “Mary-worship” in such places as *Sura* 4:171.<sup>23</sup> Further, this may be a more specific example of the inability of the Qur'an's author to determine which stories of Mary were based on reliable testimony and which came from later apocryphal works. In fact, *Sura* 3:36-41 is a good example of this phenomenon, blending of apocryphal material from this *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* with the canonical material from Luke 1.<sup>24</sup> This problem is again reflected in *Sura* 5:110, an *ayat* in which Jesus' speech from the cradle and creation of birds from clay is presented on par with the healing of the blind, healing of lepers, and resurrection of the dead, the former coming from apocryphal sources and the latter from the canonical Gospels themselves.<sup>25</sup> While none of these bits of evidence are

<sup>20</sup> Cullmann writes, “One Arabic version [of the *Protoevangelion of James*] has so far been published from a 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript...the translation appears to have been made directly from a Greek *Vorlage*.” Cullmann, “The *Protoevangelium of James*,” 422.

<sup>21</sup> Cullmann, “The *Protoevangelium of James*,” 425.

<sup>22</sup> White, *What Every Christian*, 85-87. Interestingly, White here proposes that the Najran Christians, a heretical Christian group with whom Muhammad met in Arabia, may have introduced him to the veneration of Mary and the apocryphal traditions.

<sup>23</sup> White, *What Every Christian*, 87. See also Marx, “Mariology in the Qur'an,” 557-561.

<sup>24</sup> White, *What Every Christian*, 239.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of Jesus' miracles in the Qur'an, including the influence of apocryphal material on Muhammad, see Kate Zebiri, “Contemporary Muslim Understanding of the Miracles of Jesus,” *The Muslim World*

overwhelming, taken as a whole, they produce a problematic weakness for the supposed lack of source material for the Qur'an.

### ***Pseudo-Matthew and the Account of the Palm Tree***

Next, there is the influence of the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. In *Sura* 19:22-26, the Qur'an records, "So she carried him, and secluded herself with him in a remote place. The labor-pains came upon her, by the trunk of a palm-tree. She said, 'I wish I had died before this, and been completely forgotten.' Whereupon he called her from beneath her: 'Do not worry; your Lord has placed a stream beneath you. And shake the trunk of the palm-tree towards you, and it will drop ripe dates by you. So eat, and drink, and be consoled. And if you see any human, say, 'I have vowed a fast to the Most Gracious, so I will not speak to any human today.''"

While this story is not found in an earlier source verbatim, a strikingly similar event is recorded in this *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. The event in *Pseudo-Matthew* only takes place after Jesus is born, but it too involves a miracle involving a palm tree in a desperate situation, in which Jesus commands a palm tree to stoop down, give fruit to his mother to refresh her, and raise back up again.<sup>26</sup> Some scholars, such as Oddbjorn Leivrik, believe the Qur'an has a literary

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90, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 74-77. Note especially the statement, "The creation of birds...does occur, with additional details and minor variations, in the apocryphal Gospel of Infancy Story of Thomas. One can therefore assume that some early Christians counted this among Jesus' miracles."

<sup>26</sup> Chapter 20 in full reads, "And it came to pass on the third day of their journey, while they were walking, that the blessed Mary was fatigued by the excessive heat of the sun in the desert; and seeing a palm tree, she said to Joseph: Let me rest a little under the shade of this tree. Joseph therefore made haste, and led her to the palm, and made her come down from her beast. And as the blessed Mary was sitting there, she looked up to the foliage of the

dependence on this story.<sup>27</sup> Islamic scholars try to place the date of the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* after the Qur'an, appealing to such scholars as Bart Ehrman, who dates the composition of Pseudo-Matthew around 690, a generation after the Uthmanic standardization of the Qur'an.<sup>28</sup> The “problem” of literary dependence is therefore done away with.

However, this solution is unacceptable for several reasons. First of all, as Ehrman points out himself, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* can be dated no later than the first quarter of the eighth century.<sup>29</sup> This may seem to make the Muslim case stronger, but there is a problem with this theory: the text was produced in the Latin-speaking West.<sup>30</sup> In other words, while it is possible that the text itself came into existence sometime after the Qur'an was written, it was likely a contemporary account, and the text bears no evidence of having been influenced by the

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palm, and saw it full of fruit, and said to Joseph: I wish it were possible to get some of the fruit of this palm. And Joseph said to her: I wonder that you say this, when you see how high the palm tree is; and that you think of eating of its fruit. I am thinking more of the want of water, because the skins are now empty, and we have none wherewith to refresh ourselves and our cattle. Then the child Jesus, with a joyful countenance, reposing in the bosom of His mother, said to the palm: O tree, bend your branches, and refresh my mother with your fruit. And immediately at these words the palm bent its top down to the very feet of the blessed Mary; and they gathered from it fruit, with which they were all refreshed. And after they had gathered all its fruit, it remained bent down, waiting the order to rise from Him who had commanded it to stoop. Then Jesus said to it: Raise yourself, O palm tree, and be strong, and be the companion of my trees, which are in the paradise of my Father; and open from your roots a vein of water which has been hid in the earth, and let the waters flow, so that we may be satisfied from you. And it rose up immediately, and at its root there began to come forth a spring of water exceedingly clear and cool and sparkling. And when they saw the spring of water, they rejoiced with great joy, and were satisfied, themselves and all their cattle and their beasts. Wherefore they gave thanks to God." See M.R. James, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 75.

<sup>27</sup> Oddbjorn Leivrik, *Images of Jesus in Islam: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 34.

<sup>28</sup> Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Plese, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 75.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Qur'an.<sup>31</sup> While this may seem speculative, it is possible that both accounts came into being based on a common legend that was later recorded.<sup>32</sup> After all, it is widely accepted that *Pseudo-Matthew* contains a literary dependence on the *Protoevangelium of James*.<sup>33</sup> This does not present a problem for the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, since no religion's foundations are at stake in whether or not this apocryphal gospel used prior sources. However, it presents a severe problem for the Muslim, who is forced by his orthodoxy to presuppose that the Qur'an is eternal, perfect, and not dependent on previous sources.<sup>34</sup> If, then, both of these documents (*Pseudo-Matthew* and the Qur'an) display a literary dependence on prior common testimony, it seems to be a case of special pleading to deny that the Qur'an drew on these sources (or to appeal to muddy historical data regarding composition) while disregarding the dependency of *Pseudo-Matthew*. Which case seems more likely: that the Qur'an (and an extremely early Qur'an at that!) was brought over to the West, read by a Christian scholar, one anecdote adapted into a palatable version for Christians, and not used in any other part of its text? Or is it more likely that a man on the Arabian Peninsula heard oral tales from heterodox or heretical Christians that may have

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ehrman makes the point that the account may have been the recording of someone invested in the spread of monasticism in the West. Drawing on the work of Gijsel, he supposes that this person may have been “enchanted by the account” found in the *Protoevangelium of James* (upon which *Pseudo-Matthew* draws) and subsequently taken down the account that later became *Pseudo-Matthew*. Ehrman, *Apocryphal Gospels*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> Leivrik, *Images of Jesus*, 34. See also Ehrman, *Apocryphal Gospels*, 75.

<sup>34</sup> White, *What Every Christian*, 77.

contained an aberrant or legendary tale developed over the centuries?<sup>35</sup> And if the latter were the case, would it not follow from this that these tales might be placed side-by-side with mainstream Christian thought, especially if the author were not learned in Christian writings and would not have the tools to differentiate which tales were true and which were contrived later? If this were any other book besides the Qur'an, the latter would not even be contested!

Conversely, the Bible does not make any claims against its authors drawing on prior sources. The problem of these prior sources is, therefore, a uniquely Muslim one, born out of their doctrine of how the Qur'an came to be. Christians adhere to plenary verbal inspiration for our Scripture, a doctrine that teaches that God worked *through the personalities* of the New Testament authors, not using them as some sort of typewriter or passive conduit.<sup>36</sup> Islam, however, teaches that the Qur'an was received by Muhammad; he was no more than a receptor for its text; Allah did not work through his personality.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, Muhammad cannot have used any sources, for he had no input on the text of the Qur'an. He merely received it.

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<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Muhammad is known to have met with a group of heretical Christians from the city of Najran, in modern-day Yemen. Evidently, these Christians from Najran argued that Jesus was God based on the evidence of His miracles—including, according to this group, the miracle of creating living clay birds and speaking from His cradle! Colin Chapman writes, “the Christian arguments clearly reflect Muslims beliefs that probably came originally from heretical Christian sources.” Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 218-219

<sup>36</sup> For a good description of this doctrine, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 90-110.

<sup>37</sup> See Tamara Sonn, *A Brief History of Islam* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010), 2-3.

For a definition of the doctrine of the Qur'an's eternity (and Muhammad's passive role in its reception) see Ayatullah Sayyid Abulqasim al-Khui, *Al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, The Prolegomena to the Qur'an* (Qom: Ansariyan Publications, 2007), 271-278.

### Heretics and the *Acts of John*

One must also understand the possible influence of Docetism and its use of apocryphal literature on the resurrection denial in the Qur'an. *Sura 4:157-158* states, "And [for] their saying, "Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah." And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain. Rather, Allah raised him to himself. And ever is Allah exalted in might and wise." These *ayat* have sparked much controversy, far beyond the scope of this work.<sup>38</sup> However, we will briefly consider the possible influence of Docetic heresy on this Qur'anic denial of Jesus' death. Some Christian scholars seem to take for granted the influence of Docetism in this account, such as F.F. Bruce.<sup>39</sup> Further, Leirvik supposes that the Qu'ran and some Hadith had been influenced by heretical Christian sects in Arabia.<sup>40</sup> While it may seem out of place to bring up Docetism as a school of thought in

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<sup>38</sup> For an introduction to the historical problems these *ayat* create, see Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 210-217.

<sup>39</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 93. Here Bruce makes passing reference to the Docetic influence on the Qur'an, saying, "The docetic note in this narrative appears in the statement that Jesus, while being crucified, 'remained silent, as though he felt no pain', and in the account of his death. It carefully avoids saying that he died, preferring to say that he 'was taken up', as though he - or at least his soul or spiritual self - was 'assumed' direct from the cross to the presence of God. (We shall see an echo of this idea in the Qur'an.)"

<sup>40</sup> Leirvik writes, "If the substitutionist interpretation (Christ replaced on the cross) is taken as a valid reading of the Qur'anic text, the question arises of whether this idea is represented in Christian sources. According to Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses*, the Egyptian Gnostic Christian Basilides (2nd century) held the view that Christ (the

the midst of an examination of specific books, it is important to recognize which books fed the heresies which then fed the Qur'an. In this way, there may not be direct literary dependence, but a theological dependence contingent on the use of apocryphal material used by these Christian heretics. And to that end, we turn to an interesting statement in the apocryphal *Acts of John*:

“(they say) that I was pierced, but I was not wounded; that I was hanged, but I was not hanged; that blood flowed from me, yet it did not flow; and, in a word, those things that they say of me I did not endure.”<sup>41</sup> Though the similarities between *Sura 4:157-158* are striking, the task still falls to the scholar to make a connection between these two works. A phrase or concept used earlier chronologically does not automatically connect the two. Picking up on this, scholar Geoffrey Parrinder points out that Docetism *itself* may not be directly influential on these texts. The influence may lie in other heretical groups on the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>42</sup> However, to reiterate what James White points out, each individual point of connection between the Qur'an and prior materials (including New Testament apocrypha) may not amount to much, but taken as a whole, the probability of these points of connections being merely coincidence shrinks to nearly zero.<sup>43</sup>

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divine nous, intelligence) was not crucified, but was replaced by Simon of Cyrene. However, both Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus denied that Basilides held this view. But the substitutionist idea in general form is quite clearly expressed in the Gnostic Nag Hammadi documents *Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter* and *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*.” Leivrik, *Images of Jesus*, 34.

<sup>41</sup> M.R. James, the prolific commentator and translator of New Testament Apocrypha, has a helpful translation of this work. These verses specifically come from the 101<sup>st</sup> chapter of the *Acts of John*. See James, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 255-256.

<sup>42</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 62-63.

What can be ascertained with some certainty is that several heretical groups made their home in Arabia around the time the Qur'an was purportedly written.<sup>44</sup>

In light of the issue of the *Acts of John* and the other apocryphal materials bearing such striking similarity to accounts found in the Qur'an (and at earlier dates, even granting a late composition of *Pseudo-Matthew* in particular), a serious problem—an irreconcilable problem—seems to be present in Islamic orthodoxy's position. Islam has effectively painted itself into a corner, boxed in by the dual pressure of historical data and its own rigid orthodoxy.<sup>45</sup>

### A Christian Understanding of Apocrypha

None of the apocryphal material we have examined is even close to being considered canonical by Christians. While it may be granted that certain aspects of a few apocryphal books may relate true material about Jesus, as Craig Blomberg points out, those parts of apocryphal material closely resemble the Jesus presented in the four canonical Gospels.<sup>46</sup> There is not a

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<sup>43</sup> James White, *What Every Christian*, 234.

<sup>44</sup> Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 215-217. Chapman is actually quite helpful in describing the likely relationship between Docetic thought in the *Acts of John* and *Sura 4:157-158*, saying “we should note that before the time of Muhammad there were Christian sects which taught Jesus was not crucified. Muhammad may therefore have heard the idea from sources of this kind...some of these ideas were found in the teaching of Docetists...who taught that the suffering of Jesus was apparent, not real. If this was the background to the denial of the crucifixion in the Qur'an, it might explain the difficult phrase *shubbiha lahūm* ('it appeared so to them,'4:157). Muhammad could have first heard the idea from heretical Christian circles, and accepted it—not because he believed the teaching of the Docetists, but because the idea of Jesus not being crucified fitted his understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus and of God's obligation to vindicate his apostles.”

<sup>45</sup> Norman Geisler, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 514. The entry “Divine origin of the Qur'an” is helpful.

<sup>46</sup> See Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 279-280.

historical record of suppression of alternate Jesus traditions nor the stamping out of thriving “proto-orthodox” Christianities, as Bart Ehrman<sup>47</sup> or Walter Bauer<sup>48</sup> may imagine. The record simply does not exist and does not exit the realm of hypothesis. At first blush, this may seem irrelevant to a study of the Qur'an, but it is vitally important to understanding the origin of apocryphal Jesus material, especially that material that bears such a striking resemblance to the recordings of the Qur'an. If no record of these stories of Jesus exists from the early Christian period, and if the material comes into the historical record long after the Gospel authors were dead and gone, it does not suggest that such teachings were suppressed and reemerged later. No, unfortunately for the Qur'an, it suggests that the teachings in question did not come into being out of a recovered record but a fabricated one, either knowingly or unknowingly. The Muslim may argue that it was simply the will of Allah to reveal these “truths” at a later date, but it is irresponsible to allow such an *ad hoc* solution to go unnoticed or unchallenged. To merely dismiss the serious issues surrounding the inclusion of possibly fictional material (and material that was never seriously considered authentic in its own history!) in a book that is supposedly the eternal word of God with a hand wave and an appeal to the will of Allah is untenable. One must engage with the material and engage with it as best as possible.

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<sup>47</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 163-180.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 33.

What should the Muslim do in light of this data? Turn to the true revelation from God, the Bible contained in the Old and New Testaments. If the Bible is taken on its own terms, most of the problems discussed in this paper simply evaporate, as Christian orthodoxy makes no claim to an eternally existent Bible. Rather, Christians can engage with critical scholarship on the battlefield of history, instead of appealing to conspiracy or *ad hoc* solutions.<sup>49</sup> The Muslim claim of an eternal, received Qur'an cannot be substantiated in the light of apocryphal and other historical data. Indeed, one is reminded of the words of *Sura 3:70-71*, which reads, “People of the Book, why do you deny God’s revelations when you can see they are true? People of the Book, why do you mix truth with falsehood? Why do you hide the truth when you recognize it?” These words, so often weapons in the hands of Muslim polemicists, take on an eerie irony in light of the historical data surrounding the apocryphal material upon which the Qur'an seems to draw.

### Conclusion

No one argument or explanation can ever forcibly change a human heart. Though the large body of data suggesting the Qur'an has drawn on apocryphal sources may be compelling to many Christians, it simply cannot, on its own, convince a faithful Muslim to convert from his religion. Rather, we as Christians must rely on the work of the Holy Spirit to use arguments such

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<sup>49</sup> For the use of conspiracy theory in modern Islamic thought, see Riddell and Cotterell, *Islam in Context*, 160-163.

as these to soften the hearts of the unbelieving Muslim, bearing with them in patience and love.

Above all, we must rely on the sufficiency of God's Word, given to us clearly (in spite of the

plethora of apocryphal distractions) to do its work, never returning to our Lord void. It is this

Word, which stands even above the Qur'an and all of its sources, which can bring life and light

to a spiritually dark community.

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