

Marlen's Response to Response to "Reinterpreting the 'Prophet' Muhammad for C5/Insider Movement"

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I read with great interest Marlen Z's ThM thesis, "Reinterpreting the 'Prophet' Muhammad for C5/Insider Movement." I appreciate many things about it, but would also note a few concerns and issues that seem to me to constitute significant weaknesses in the thesis.

I noted with interest that one of Marlen's readers prefers to remain unnamed and Marlen's expression of thanks notes that his readers "graciously supervised this thesis without endorsing all of its conclusions." I would be interested to know what critiques his readers offered, and which of his conclusions they did not endorse. But in the absence of that information, I press on with my own thoughts in response.

First, I appreciate Marlen's acknowledgement that "the fact that some Messianic Muslims continue to recite the central Muslim creed, *shahada*" is "among the key objections to IM" (6) and a significant and ongoing subject of missiological debate.

Second, I deeply appreciate his commitment to biblical authority: "*Is it possible to recite shahada (with a clear conscience) and view the Bible as the only divine source of guidance?*" (16) Also helpful is his grappling with the potential ethical problem of "giving the word *rasullah* (God's messenger) a private meaning, something far less than its normal and accepted meaning" (17) paired with his acknowledgement, "The Scripture is very clear that God does not need His servants to use ethically questionable approaches in the effort of bringing people to Christ" (17). I didn't find his analogies from Paul's ministry convincing, but I appreciated his effort to respond to the ethical concern rooted in 2 Cor. 4:2.

A third positive point was Marlin's statement, "Just like the sayings of the Greek philosophers the Qur'an by no means is a divine source of guidance....When a Muslim trusts Christ and the Holy Spirit is working in his life it becomes very obvious to him that the Bible is the only truly divine source of guidance" (34). I find this reassuring and very helpful.

A fourth positive point was Marlin's clear statement that he's proposing a "new interpretation of *shahada*" with the acknowledgement that, "if they fully accept *shahada* in its existing traditional understanding it will certainly welcome negative elements of syncretism" (17). Also, he notes that one of the major goals of his thesis is "to prevent IM from syncretism" (16). His acknowledgement of this possibility and danger is reassuring. I welcome his concern to avoid syncretism and his frank acknowledgement of the chasm between the Muhammad of Islamic tradition and the teaching of Christ: "Muhammad of the Islamic tradition deserves a full right to be called an anti-Christ....howeverIs it really true that the teaching of the Islamic tradition is the teaching of Muhammad?" (31).

Another reassuring statement of desire for doctrinal soundness is his hope that his reinterpretation will "help prevent Messianic Muslims from syncretistic influence of the false

religion” (39). He has verbalized one of my concerns more bluntly than I would have. Thus I find much that is helpful and praiseworthy in “Reinterpreting.”

At the same time, I was left with a number of concerns about “Reinterpreting,” which can be grouped into four categories.

1. Assumptions

Marlen lays as a foundation for his thesis a number of assumptions that seem questionable at best. On page 11, he makes the claim: “It seems that it is much less the cross of Christ but mainly misconceptions about Christian theology that keeps many Muslims from paying heed to the Gospel message.” Granted there *are* a number of misconceptions about Christian theology that keep many Muslims from paying heed to the Gospel message. But surely the cross of Christ also ranks high among stumbling blocks. There is general antipathy (or “allergy”) among Muslims toward the physical object or shape of the cross. This antipathy clearly predates association of the cross with the Crusades (which certainly didn’t help matters!).

A Christian eyewitness in Jerusalem reported that when the Muslim army came into Jerusalem in 634 AD, they expressed hostility to symbols of the cross by breaking or tearing down crosses on churches.ⁱ Also, hadith Qudsi 19:5 (cited as a *sahih* hadith) reports: “The Prophet said that Allah commanded him to destroy all the musical instruments, idols, crosses and all the trappings of ignorance.”ⁱⁱ Given the foundational antipathy of Muslims even from the earliest days (and apparently coming from Muhammad himself) toward the cross, it seems misleading to minimize this stumbling block.ⁱⁱⁱ

At a more foundational level, there is Quranically-rooted antipathy toward the biblical teaching of substitutionary atonement, which stands at the heart of Jesus’ message of salvation. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Note in contrast: “Then guard yourselves against a day when one soul shall not avail another nor shall intercession be accepted for her, nor shall compensation be taken from her, nor shall anyone be helped (from outside)” (al Baqara 48, 123).

A second questionable assumption (found on pages 16-17) is that “Messianic Muslims” should remain religiously connected in order to be a witness. This view is offered as an assumption before addressing any biblical or ethical concerns related to the issue, though Marlen does follow the assertion with an acknowledgement that saying the *shahada* with traditional understanding is syncretism.

A third questionable assumption is that C5 is a work of God. We read on page 23 that “this whole discussion must be viewed in the context of the Messianic Muslim community among whom God seems to have begun his work in a special way.” The nuance of “seems to” thinly veils insertion as foundational assumption a point still hotly contested within the missiological community. Building on this assumption, Marlin adds that “God is able to use [Muhammad’s] influence for His redemptive purposes.” He then moves directly to the questionable conclusion that “if the Church continues to be silent or confrontational regarding Muhammad... she will further distance herself from many people whose identity is ‘ingrown’ in their prophet.” Thus for

Marlen, it appears that the problem is *not* that most Muslims have their identity ‘ingrown’ in their prophet. The problem is that Christians have not changed their negative view of Muhammad or accepted the assumption that C5 is a work of God. These assumptions appear to me to be questionable at best.

I agree that those are the assumptions that do not have a significant factual support. However, I need to make clarifications for some of David’s critiquing points.

1 assumption about the stumbling cause...The cross as a symbol is not welcomed by the majority of Muslims. But I would further argue that the reason why is because they clearly understand its theological meaning of substitutionary atonement. First of all, the practice of sacrificial killing of animals is celebrated among a large group of Muslims. Even though the quote from Bahara hints that Muslims should oppose any substitutionary offers, in reality, a. the broader context of that verse may lead us to an alternative understanding (which is another long discussion) and b. in many countries of the Islamic world Muslims celebrate a big religious holiday called the “sacrifice feast”. In the nutshell this holiday is a remembrance of Abraham sacrificing a lamb instead of one of his sons. (There are other ideas from folk Islam associated with this holiday). My key point is Muslims are familiar with the concept of the substitutionary sacrifice in general and, despite the opposition of the educated or conservative Muslims, continue to celebrate it. And secondly, because the symbol of the cross became by default associated with the cultural expression of the Western Christianity or of the Eastern Orthodoxy, there is this “allergy”, as David figuratively, said towards the cross. Muslims saw Westerners wearing the cross without proper explanation of its meaning and, thus, it simply became falsely associated with Western culture. The cross as a symbol does not interpret itself. Someone needs to explain it and, preferably, in a way that has no previous false assumptions. So if by God’s grace MMs could in an unprecedented way explain the meaning of the cross (without necessarily wearing its symbol ☺) my assumption is that the response to it will drastically increase.

2 assumption that MMs should remain religiously connected to witness...I guess the question for me was can a Muslim person be culturally relevant without being religiously affiliated with Islam at least on a superficial level? My assumption was no because Muslim culture is rooted in Islamic religion. Is it possible to separate what is cultural from what is religious then? I think that is a hard question that I would leave MMs to wrestle with. It was a struggle for the church in Corinth to determine whether it was cultural or religious to eat meat brought for the idols. So will MMs guided by the Scripture will determine what religious practices of Islam are valid and what are not. But if a person distance himself from every religious practice of Islam he is culturally marginalized. Can a person witness from this position? Yes, but his testimony will likely be limited in depth and broad audience.

3 assumption that IM is a work of God...of course this is a big assumption. No question about it. Is it wrong to have such an assumption? No. I think I could simply be wrong. When Gamaliel in Acts 5 spoke of the early church, his was a mere assumption that it could be a work God. He brought some examples of the work of men but that did not add any weight to believe that this Jesus crowd was the work of God. All that was left is to wait for this assumption to prove right or wrong.

2. “Prominent Christian Scholars”

In building his case, Marlen leans heavily on two scholars not known for strong faith in the Bible as God's infallible word. For some readers, this might not be a problem, but it seems a very dubious foundation if one were hoping to make a case among those who view the Bible as the ultimate spiritual authority. Among the scholars cited for support, Marlen quotes Montgomery Watt and Hans Kung as "prominent Christian scholars."

On page 20 we read: "Montgomery Watt who fully accepts Christianity as expressed in the ecumenical creeds...makes a bold conclusion that Muhammad was a genuine prophet. His argument is mainly based on the general positive influence of Muhammad on the lives 'of countless ordinary people who have been enabled to live decent and moderately happy lives.'"

I suspect that if asked, Marlen would acknowledge that enabling people "to live decent and moderately happy lives" is not the biblical standard for discerning a true/false prophet.^{iv} More important would be matters such as whether a prophet points people away from or toward:

- salvation by grace through faith
- Christ's death as the essential sacrifice for sin
- knowledge of Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God's truth and the Son of God
- trust in the Bible as God's revealed word.

On matters such as these, Muhammad's teaching (as expressed in the Qur'an, even without any reference to the hadith) does not point strongly in a positive direction. Creative interpretation of some quranic verses can point in a neutral or somewhat positive direction on *some* of these points, yet taken on balance, the Qur'an seems clearly to point in a different direction.

Marlen claims that, "Due to ignorance there is a general strong conviction among Christians that the message of the Qur'an is diametrically opposed to the biblical revelation" (35). He counters this "ignorance" by citing verses from the Qur'an saying that the Qur'an "was given to confirm the previous books and not to replace them" (35), and the testimony of a Muslim scholar saying the same. While these are appreciated, they don't erase the fact that at best the Qur'an does a poor job of "confirming" the message of God's previous revelations.

On many points the Bible and Qur'an may be in agreement. But on the most essential issues such as those above (most immovably, to this writer's knowledge, the issue of salvation by works vs. salvation by grace through faith) the gap between quranic teaching and biblical revelation has stood firm through the centuries. It hardly seems accurate or fair to blame the gap on "ignorance" among Christians."

Turning to Montgomery Watt himself, Charlotte Alfred, a reporter for the "Edinburgh Middle East Report," wrote: "His views on Islam and Christianity have at times been controversial. *He rejects the infallibility of both the Bible and the Qur'ān*, but regards each as divinely inspired. He has argued that the Muslim and Judaeo-Christian traditions have much to teach each other, personally commenting that his study of Islam deepened his understanding of the oneness of God"^v (italics added). Carole Hillenbrand, a professor of Islamic History at the University of Edinburgh, has said of Watt: "He was not afraid to express rather radical theological opinions....He often pondered on the question of what influence his study of Islam had exerted on him in his own Christian faith. As a direct result, he came to argue that the Islamic emphasis

on the uncompromising oneness of God had caused him to reconsider the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.”^{vi} Watt would seem to be dubious theological company to cite for a biblically-based perspective on issues of Christian and Islamic theology.

On page 21 we read: “Another prominent Christian scholar Hans Kung who also claims to hold an orthodox view on Christianity writes: ‘Muhammad...can be accepted as an authentic prophet...’” Here again, I suspect that if pressed, Marlen might acknowledge that he knows he is “stretching” by using the description: “claims to hold an orthodox view on Christianity.” The reality is that Kung does not at all claim to be an evangelical. He is Roman Catholic and viewed askance even by that ecclesiastical standard. “The Vatican has rescinded his authority to teach Catholic theology.”^{vii}

Marlen notes that, “The majority of evangelical scholars will have a number of objections to these conclusions which will be partly addressed in the next chapter. The purpose of this section, however, is to indicate that among Christian scholars of mainstream Christianity there is more than one attitude to Muhammad as God’s messenger” (21). I note in passing that these claims are only “partly addressed” in the next chapter. The more important concern is that among liberal and Roman Catholic “Christian scholars of mainstream Christianity,” we can find different views, not only of Muhammad’s prophethood, but also of the nature of salvation, the divinity of Christ and the sufficiency of the Bible as a standard for faith and practice. In my opinion, Marlen seriously weakened his case by building it on the shoulders of a liberal and errant Roman Catholic theologian. If “Bad company corrupts good character,”^{viii} it may corrupt good doctrine as well.

Great point for David and a real weakness of my thesis. I made a very superficial research of the perspectives on Muhammad among the different church traditions (something that hopefully others will be able to do). The question is can there be an “orthodox” position on Muhammad? In other words how much of our orthodoxy should be connected with questions outside of Biblical revelation? Other than that I agree, neither Montgomery nor Kung could be a serious reference for Biblical support of the nature of Muhammad’s mission.

3. Handling of Biblical Data and Categories

Marlin writes: “It seems that the Bible does not give a very clear definition for the term ‘God’s messenger’ (*rassullah*)” (29). I’m not confident the Bible ever uses the word “*rassullah*” – perhaps in Arabic; I don’t believe it’s there in Greek or Hebrew. It seems anachronistic to note that the Bible “does not give a very clear definition” of a word used for religious claims made over 500 years later in a non-biblical language. I’m also a bit troubled that Marlen lays the foundation of his case with the quranic word rather than words or categories used in the Bible.

Marlin continues, “For our case study, it is important to create a scripturally defensible definition for God’s messenger. Here is a proposed definition: God’s messenger is someone who consciously or subconsciously fulfills the redemptive plan of God. This definition is very broad but it does fit well to the Muslim understanding of the term” (29). He then cites numerous examples from the Qur’an, but nothing from Bible. Beginning with a “foundation” of a quranic

word, we find the “first floor” of the structure built in a way that “does fit well to the Muslim understanding” yet still with no reference to Biblical data.

Two things unsettle me about this approach. First, the methodology of building a case for something from the Qur’an (or Islamic practice) and then trying to show that it’s “scripturally defensible” seems fundamentally flawed. As we interact with any idea or concept, it seems wiser to begin with a foundation of understanding and obeying God’s word,^{ix} and subsequently to consider other perspectives and practices in the light of that truth.

Yes, that is a solid rebuke. I have not much to say in defense. I would simply add that field workers naturally build their harvest strategy as they go about harvesting. They measure their methods in light of what they see not of what they learned to be true. So having someone to remind about what we learned to be true (and what is really true) is always good. So, that was a great reminder that our center of truth is not our audience but the Word of God.

Second, the definition, “God’s messenger is someone who consciously or subconsciously fulfills the redemptive plan of God” is broad enough to include anyone who has ever done anything of any spiritually positive value (or even anything that providentially had a positive result, regardless of personal intent). To cite a ridiculous example, it would include a reprobate atheist who throws away a tract, which is then picked up by a person who reads it and comes to saving faith. I don’t think that’s what anyone means by *rassullah*. Marlin makes a series of leaps to propose, “Can we call Nebuchadnezzar God’s messenger? Was he not deliberately sent by God to accomplish God’s purpose of Israel’s judgment?” (27-28) Mixing the categories of “God’s messenger” and instrument of God’s judgment hardly takes us in a helpful direction.

Why not? Why can’t we look at M. as God’s messenger to bring judgment on heretical Christian movements who disobeyed God’s command to follow sound doctrine?

On page 37, Marlen claims that Muslims “are well prepared to hear the Gospel message if it is presented in a culturally and theologically relevant way,” and he cites Rick Brown suggesting Muhammad be viewed “as a pre-messianic messenger whose mission was similar to the mission of John the Baptist. Thus Messianic Muslims may boldly proclaim *shahada* as an indication that Muhammad was God’s messenger sent to prepare a way for the Messiah.” This approach seems to overlook two major differences between Muhammad and John the Baptist. First, Muhammad came roughly 600 years *after* Jesus instead of before him, and second (and more importantly), Muhammad’s teaching has tended to overwhelmingly point people *away* from the biblical Jesus instead of toward him.

1. M. as a parallel of the mission of John the Baptist could have been talking about the second coming of Christ while John was about the first.
2. Do we know anything about M. and his life outside of the sources of the Islamic tradition? My point in this final chapter was to challenge not only Christians but also Muslims about the mission of M. Is there a third alternative that explains M’ mission? I simply suggested a discussion for such a third perspective. Therefore a broad definition is only the beginning in this discussion.

If God is currently using some parts of the Qur’an to point Muslims toward biblical truth and ultimately salvation in Christ, we greatly rejoice! I believe this is happening in a great many

cases around the world and I celebrate it. But this seems to me to fall far short of justification for Muslim followers of Christ to continue to profess Muhammad as “God’s messenger.”

4. The Central Thesis: Muhammad of the Qur’an Can be Separated from Muhammad of Islamic tradition

My fourth category of concern is really a large question mark rather than a point of clear disagreement: “Will this thesis ‘hold water’? Is it viable?” Marlen only minimally addresses how much or little either of these perspectives on Muhammad (Marlin’s proposal and the Islamic tradition) do or don’t reflect the actual historical person and teachings of Muhammad. “This research opens a door to question the validity of how the Islamic tradition has been portraying Muhammad...The quest for the historical Muhammad...is a very difficult task” (32). I also don’t intend to engage this question. I leave it to others to grapple with this issue.

Marlen posits that, “While Muhammad was fulfilling his mission of establishing Islam, God in His sovereign plan was preparing a large community of Muslims for an unprecedented response to the gospel” (22). This involves a “megashift of a paradigm on Muhammad and Islam.” This optimistic assessment doesn’t mention that this “unprecedented response to the gospel” has not yet taken place during almost 1400 years of Islamic history. **(That is ok. The Gospel was not preached globally for the first 17 centuries anyway).** At best we might be seeing a few hints of it here and there in the past few decades. This “unprecedented response” claim also ignores the fact that historically, non-Islamic tribal groups have often turned relatively quickly to Christ while Islamic tribal groups have almost unanimously posed strong resistance to the gospel. On balance, globally and historically, Islam has not served as a helpful preparation for the gospel, either individually or corporately. **(It could be so, or it could be that the church never tried to approach Ms’ with the genuine respect to their prophet)** Again, if that were to change, we should all rejoice. But so far the evidence seems thin.

Marlin does acknowledge, “The major contribution of Muhammad for the advancement of the Messiah is yet to be seen” (36). It seems a stretch to describe this as “Muhammad,” as if his true teaching has been lying dormant for millennia and is just now beginning to have its intended effect. This is in fact a fresh interpretation of the Qur’an, which God’s Spirit may be using to point people toward Christ. As already mentioned, to the extent God is using the Qur’an to bring people to himself, we ought to give him great praise. But we shouldn’t deceive ourselves that the Qur’an points toward a gospel of salvation by grace through faith. Marlin expresses his hope with this invitation: “Can we envision a day when Messianic Muslims will...bring the Good News of salvation to every mosque?” (41). Perhaps we can, but this writer is left wondering if it’s a realistic hope or a weakly grounded optimistic dream. 😊

Marlin also claims, “The traditional Islamic interpretation of *shahada* must yield to a new Messianic view where Muhammad’s role as God’s messenger is understood the one [sic] who was instrumental in preparing a way for the Messiah Jesus” (43). I’m left wondering if this yielding really “must” take place. Let’s watch and see.

A related question would be: How valid is it to give the Qur’an a Christo-centric interpretation (that would not be agreed to by the majority of Muslims), just as the Old Testament was given a

Christo-centric interpretation by Jesus himself and his followers in the New Testament? Ultimately, I think the best respondents to this question are Muslims, followers of Jesus from a Muslim background, and serious scholars of Islam. I'm none of those, so I refrain from weighing in on that debate.

Conclusion

While it seems that Marlin's thesis contains a number of weaknesses (particularly in the shortage of biblical foundation), I applaud his firm grasp on the Bible as God's standard of truth and the clear incompatibility of traditional Islamic understanding with biblical truth. I have questions about Marlen's central thesis, but I leave it to others better qualified to evaluate whether his proposed redefinition of Muhammad's message is ethical, credible, viable or fruitful. Perhaps only the test of time will determine the last three of these.

Thanks again, David, for a great and stimulating feedback. I look forward to holding further open dialogue about issues that have serious ramifications on our ministry philosophy as we go about fulfilling the Lord's great commission. May Christ further lead and guide us by His Spirit and through His Word in building Messianic spiritual movements everywhere.

ⁱ This was reported by and translated and commented on by Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1997.

ⁱⁱ Hadee's-e-Qudsi 19:5 (Ahmad), <http://www.hraicjk.org/hadith.html> accessed April 12, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ as described in 1 Cor. 1:18-23.

^{iv} 1 John 4:1-3; Matt. 7:15-21

^v From Obituary by Charlotte Alfred. Edinburgh Middle East Report Online. Winter 2006. Cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Montgomery_Watt accessed April 12, 2012.

^{vi} Wikipedia, *ibid*.

^{vii} Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration", (Dec. 15, 1979) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19791215_christi-ecclesia_en.html Cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_K%C3%BCng accessed April 12, 2013.

^{viii} 1 Cor. 15:33

^{ix} Especially as revealed in Christ – Matt. 7:24-27.