

Expert Contributions

Growing Up Muslim in America

Abdu Murray

Contributing to Part 1: “Called to Prayer”

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In the salty-white landscape of the Detroit suburb of my youth, my family was a dash of pepper. We stood out because, at that time, we were exotic—one of the few Muslim families in the area. And I took Islam seriously so that I could stand out even more because that would cause my friends to ask questions about my faith. That, in turn, would lead to opportunities to share what I considered to be the beauty and truth of Islam with the low-hanging fruit of the many non-Muslim, mostly Christian, individuals around me.

I was like many Muslims I knew. Even as a youth, I loved talking about God and my Islamic faith. I was puzzled that the non-Muslims around me found it so uncomfortable to talk about matters of religion. *Don't these Christians really believe their traditions? If their message is true, why are they so afraid to talk about it?* The answer, I told myself, is that Christians know deep down that their religion is silly. They only need to be shown the truth of Islam to see the true path.

Muslims get that kind of confidence from religious training received during their childhood and teen years. Most are students at the informal academy of the American Muslim home. Our parents, uncles, and older relatives sit us down and teach us Muslim apologetics: the defense of the Muslim worldview. The Quran is the word of God, we are taught, because Muhammad was illiterate and could not have come up with such beautiful, profound language on his own. From this informal training, we come to believe that the Quran is proven to be miraculous because it contains scientific information and facts that have only recently been discovered. And we are told, time and time again, that the Quran we have today is exactly the same as was delivered to Muhammad, with no changes whatsoever in fourteen hundred years. Islam provides the best way to live a moral and just life. And on the teachings go. Those kinds of discussions are steady fare at a Muslim family's dinner table.

But we also have a steady diet of polemics. From a young age, I was told that although Christians may mean well and may even sincerely follow their faith, their faith is fatally flawed. Their sacred texts were once the unadulterated word of God, but they fell into hopeless corruption. And Christians had invented logically ridiculous doctrines, like the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity. The Quran was revealed to Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia to undo the harm caused by the biblical corruption and blasphemous teachings of Christianity. Muhammad's mission was to restore true religion. And it was my goal as a good Muslim to continue that mission.

But equipping young people to spread what is believed to be the truth is not the sole motivation for this informal training. Muslims of earlier generations fear that the negative aspects of American culture could be a powerful, corrupting influence on successive generations. They fear their children will succumb to temptation and order their meals from the menu of illicit

drug use, drunkenness, and wanton sexual promiscuity that they believe is characteristic of American life. But if young Muslims remain convicted of their Islamic beliefs, they will be better equipped to resist the temptations. As bad as these lifestyle pitfalls are, they pale in comparison to the ultimate dishonor of abandoning Islam, especially if it means becoming a Christian. Islam is not just a set of religious beliefs. It is an all-encompassing identity. It is inconceivable to change that identity, even for those who barely practice their Islamic faith. To do so is like suicide. It kills the identity of the convert and leaves the rest of the family in a state of shameful mourning.

A healthy diet of apologetics and polemics, spiced with cultural pride, it is believed, can help prevent that disaster. And young Muslims are convinced by their families that being a Muslim means to affirm Muhammad's prophethood and the Quran's divine origin while at the same time resisting the very idea of becoming anything else, especially a Christian.

Most Christians have a hard time imagining what it is like to live with the tension of blending in with American society while maintaining a Muslim identity. And so most don't understand the difficulty Muslims have in even considering that the gospel might be true. I thank God that there are those precious (and all too few) Christians who exhibit Jesus' love and caring in their actions and who thoughtfully proclaim the beauty and truth of the gospel in their words. God uses them to carefully navigate the waters of spiritual discussion without running aground (well, as little as possible).

Like so many Muslims who eventually give their lives to Christ, it took me quite some time to embrace the truth, though that truth is worth embracing, despite the tremendous price I paid. I knew that fully embracing the person and work of Jesus Christ would cost me the very identity that had been forged for me at the dinner tables of the Muslim community. Until I was

able to see that Christ is worth the cost, I was not willing to pay it. But eventually, I understood what the famed Jim Eliot, who lost his life in service of the gospel, meant when he wrote, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”¹ Eliot rephrased Paul’s words that “for his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8 ESV). Yet the price that Jesus paid for us dwarfs whatever price we might pay to follow Him. C. S. Lewis wrote that God’s love for us “is quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of [our] sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to Him.”² Following such a God is worth sacrificing our identities so that we can be given a new one that looks more and more like Jesus.

Since giving my life to Jesus, the table set before me has quite different. Before, I gobbled up superficial answers that left my stomach gnawing and my throat parched. But in Christ, my hunger is fed by the Bread of Life and my thirst is slaked by the Living Water who satisfies eternally.

¹ Edyth Draper, *Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992), 1533.

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), 133.

East Meets West

Mark Mittelberg

Contributing to Part 2: “An Ambassador for Islam”

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“It is important for you to know that Allah is the one and only God, and that Muhammad, peace be upon him, was his true prophet. God is not divided, and He does not have a son. And Jesus, peace be upon him, was not the Son of God. He was a true prophet, like Muhammad, and we are to honor him, but we must never worship him. We worship Allah and Allah alone.”

These bold words, spoken by the imam—a man dressed in white who stood in front of our group and was clearly in charge of the mosque that day—were communicated in a manner that delivered more than just theological content. They were conveyed with an authority that made clear that the message was something we were expected to accept, rather than test.

It was not that the imam wasn't willing to entertain a few questions. Rather, he apparently saw this as a chance to challenge the thinking of an entire group of Christians at one time. So after a short period of teaching, he opened the floor to whatever issues we wanted to raise. But even then, he responded with an emphatic tone, one that relayed his belief that he had the truth and we were there to learn it.

This assuredness was borne out when I finally raised my own question. I asked the imam why he and other Muslims denied that Jesus is the Son of God, that He died on the cross, and that He rose from the dead three days later. As politely as I knew how, I explained that I, and the others from my church who were visiting the mosque that day, believed these things on the basis of the testimonies of Jesus' own disciples. They were the ones who walked and talked with Him for three years and who heard Him make repeated claims to be the Son of God. They saw Him die on the cross and met, talked with, and even ate with Him after His resurrection. And they were the ones who made sure it was all written down in the New Testament gospels.

“What I'm curious about,” I said, concluding my question, “is whether you have any historical or logical reasons why we should accept your Muslim point of view over and against what we understand to be the actual historical record?”

The imam looked at me intently and then declared resolutely, “I choose to believe the prophet!” With that, our time for questions was over.

East meets West, indeed! I walked away that day with a fresh awareness that we do not all approach questions about truth in the same way. In fact, years later, I wrote about what I believe is a characteristically Eastern versus a characteristically Western approach to gaining knowledge.³

In the East, and for Islam in particular, what is accepted as true is generally what the authorities tell you—and you are expected to embrace what they teach. That is why I call this approach the Authoritarian Faith Path. In fact, the original meaning of the Arabic word *Islam* is

³ Mark Mittelberg, *Confident Faith: Building a Firm Foundation for Your Beliefs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013), esp. chaps. 5 and 8.

“submission.” It seems fair to say that the prevailing tenor of the Muslim faith is one of submitting to—not questioning—what the religion teaches.

This squares with my friend Nabeel Qureshi’s assessment in this part 2 of his book “People from Eastern Islamic cultures generally assess truth through lines of authority, not individual reasoning. Of course, individuals do engage in critical reasoning in the East, but on average it is relatively less valued and far less prevalent than in the West. Leaders have done the critical reasoning, and leaders know best.”

As Nabeel indicates, this contrasts sharply with the more typical approach in the West, which I refer to as the Evidential Faith Path. This approach decides what should be accepted as true based not on the word of authorities but rather on logic and experience, including experiences recorded in trustworthy historical records like the ones I cited in my interactions with the imam.

Of course, both sides can have their pitfalls. Westerners in the evidential mindset often need to be reminded to be lovers of truth (2 Thess. 2:10) who are willing to rigorously apply reason and the study of evidence, and then follow them wherever they lead. Too often, people in Western culture fall into an approach that limits possible causes to naturalistic ones, and they won’t even consider supernatural causes. This prejudices the outcome and, in fact, makes scientific and historical inquiry atheistic by definition. But if we can help people reopen their minds to the full gamut of possible explanations, then I’m confident that logic and evidence (along with the inner workings of the Holy Spirit) will lead them back not only to a belief in God but also to the Christian faith.⁴

⁴ Ibid., esp. chaps. 10–12, where I present twenty arguments for the truth of Christianity.

Easterners who embrace an authoritarian mindset need to be reminded that religious authorities are not all created equal; some are worth following, and some are not. If the credentials of the leaders are not scrutinized and their messages not weighed, how can one know which should be followed? The Bible encourages us to “test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21 ESV) and warns, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1 ESV).

The question is, Will Easterners have the courage and tenacity to apply the needed tests? This can be challenging because, as Nabeel reminds us, “When authority is derived from position rather than reason, the act of questioning leadership is dangerous because it has the potential to upset the system. Dissension is reprimanded and obedience is rewarded.”

Thankfully, more and more Muslims are willing to face the inherent dangers and discomforts in order to seek not only the truth but ultimately the one who said He *is* the truth (John 14:6). Nabeel is an inspiring example, one I trust many others will emulate.

The New Testament

Daniel B. Wallace

Contributing to Part 3: “Testing the New Testament”

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace is a professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. He is the senior New Testament editor of the NET Bible and a consultant on four other Bible translations. His book on biblical Greek grammar, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament, is the standard textbook in the English-speaking world and has been translated into multiple other languages.

In my second year of college, I transferred to Biola University, a small Christian liberal arts school in Southern California. I went there to study the Bible. I had the good fortune of studying Greek from a bona fide textual scholar, Dr. Harry Sturz. Several weeks into the first semester, on a hot Friday afternoon, Dr. Sturz briefly informed us that not all the manuscripts of the New Testament said the same thing. “In fact, there are hundreds of thousands of textual differences among the manuscripts,” Dr. Sturz calmly stated at the end of the hour. Then, without further explanation, he dismissed the class.

I went home that afternoon, bewildered and confused. *How can I have any assurance that what we have today is the word of God? How do I know the Bible hasn't been corrupted beyond all recognition?* I had committed my life to Christ a few years earlier. Now I wanted to know if I had given my life to a myth.

Thus began my lifelong investigation into the reliability of the text of the New Testament. Dr. Sturz wanted his students to own their convictions and to study the evidence for themselves. This is why he sometimes threw his charges into existential crises of faith. I've been studying the New Testament for more than forty years, largely inspired by his model. And I've come to realize that while the great number of variants is only part of the story, it is an important part that attests to the vitality of the gospel.

In my spiritual and academic journeys, I have learned that it is imperative for Christians to pursue truth at all costs. And what I have learned about textual variants and their impact on the Christian faith over more than forty years of examining both published Greek New Testaments and hundreds of individual manuscripts has strengthened my faith in ways I never had thought possible.

In this brief essay, I will lay out three important facts about textual variants and their impact on the Christian faith.

The Number of Variants

The best estimate today is that among New Testament manuscripts there are about four hundred thousand textual differences. The reason for this astounding number, however, is the even more astounding number of manuscripts. There is absolutely nothing in the ancient Greco-Roman world that compares to the New Testament in terms of the number of manuscript copies or their dates. The average Greco-Roman author has fewer than twenty copies of his writings still in existence. Usually, there are far fewer. The New Testament boasts more than fifty-eight hundred copies in Greek alone. But the New Testament was translated into various languages early on—languages such as Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Georgian, Gothic, Armenian, and Arabic. Altogether, there are more than twenty thousand manuscripts of the New Testament. To be sure,

some of these are small scraps of papyrus, and most are not complete New Testaments. Nevertheless, the average-size manuscript is more than four hundred fifty pages long.

If all the manuscripts were destroyed in the blink of an eye, we would still not be left without a witness. That's because church fathers, from the late first century to the thirteenth century, quoted from the New Testament in homilies, commentaries, and theological treatises. And they did not have the gift of brevity. More than a million quotations of the New Testament by the church fathers have been collected so far. Virtually the entire New Testament could be reproduced many times over just from the quotations of these fathers.

What about the dates of the manuscripts? It is often claimed that there are very few manuscripts of the New Testament written in the first millennium. That is true—*relatively* speaking. Only 15 percent of all New Testament manuscripts were produced before the year 1000. But that is still more than eight hundred manuscripts—more than forty times the amount of manuscripts from the average classical author in more than two thousand years of copying! The average classical author has zero manuscripts extant today produced within half a millennium of the composition of his writings. The New Testament has at least two hundred fifty manuscripts—in Greek alone—produced within five hundred years after the composition of the New Testament. Within three hundred years, the first complete New Testament—codex Sinaiticus—was produced, along with more than one hundred other manuscripts that have survived till today. And some of the manuscripts, though fragmentary, were produced within mere decades of the completion of the New Testament.

The very fact that Christians were more concerned with getting the message out than with crossing their t's and dotting their i's is testimony to the vibrancy of the Christian faith. But did this passion for the gospel end up *changing* the message?

The Nature of Variants

More than 70 percent of all textual variants are mere spelling differences that affect nothing. And several more involve inner-Greek syntax that can't even be translated into English (or most other languages). Then there are variants that involve synonyms, such as between "Jesus" and "Christ." The meaning is the same; no theological issues are at stake. And there are variants that, though meaningful, are not viable. That is, because of the poor pedigree of the manuscripts they are found in (usually few or very late manuscripts), no plausible case can be given for them reflecting the wording of the original. Remarkably, less than 1 percent of all textual variants are both meaningful and viable.

An example of a meaningful and viable variant is "616" (instead of "666") for the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18. But even though meaningful and viable, this variant is not significant enough to affect the essential teachings of the Christian faith.

Far and away the two longest passages that are textually doubtful are Mark 16:9–20 and John 7:53–8:11. These involve a dozen verses each. The next largest textual variants are only two verses long. Only about two dozen variants are between one and two verses long. The consensus of New Testament scholars is that these verses were added to the New Testament later, since they are not found in the earliest and best manuscripts and they do not fit with the authors' known syntax, vocabulary, or style. No doctrines are impacted by these variants. To be sure, they may involve favorite verses for many people, but they do not in the slightest jeopardize a cardinal tenet of the Christian faith.

Christian Beliefs Affected by Textual Variants

The fundamental question that these textual variants raise is whether the Christian faith has been fundamentally altered from what the authors of the New Testament originally wrote.

Does the resurrection of Jesus depend on textually suspect passages? Is the divinity of Christ found only in verses that are dubious? Such questions obviously should be of profound concern for anyone seeking the truth about Christianity. I wish to conclude this essay by quoting the authority that many Muslims and atheists appeal to regarding textual corruption in the New Testament.

In the appendix to Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*, there is a dialogue between the editors of the book and the author:

“Why do you believe these core tenets of Christian orthodoxy to be in jeopardy based on the scribal errors you discovered in the biblical manuscripts?”

Ehrman's response is illuminating: “Essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.”

Even this skeptic, a bona fide New Testament scholar, had to concede that no cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith is jeopardized by textual variants. Many atheists and Muslims who have followed in Ehrman's path have exaggerated his claims way out of proportion to what he actually stated.

The textual history of the New Testament is robust and fascinating. When the dust has settled, we can be assured that what we have today, in all essentials, and even in the overwhelming majority of particulars, is what they wrote then.

My friend Nabeel Qureshi has discovered this same truth for himself. Ever since I met him, shortly after his conversion, I have seen in him an earnestness for truth, an acuteness of intellect, and a heart for God that I have witnessed in only one or two others. I applaud him for his enthusiasm, his zeal to pursue truth at all costs and to know Christ deeply, and his courage in

the face of growing opposition from family and friends. I pray that his book, his spiritual autobiography, will be used by the Spirit of God to reach many people for Christ.

Defining Moments

Michael Licona

Contributing to Part 4: “Coming to the Crucifixion”

Michael Licona is associate professor of theology at Houston Baptist University and author of the groundbreaking work The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach. He has publically debated many leading agnostic and Muslim scholars and spoken at more than fifty university campuses worldwide.

There are times when each of us must make a decision that reveals our character and determines the course our life will take. This is called a “defining moment.” Caesar decided to cross the Rubicon, knowing his action would result in a civil war with Rome. Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided to involve himself with a plot to kill Hitler, knowing his actions were morally justified but also that the plan could cost him his life.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus wrestled with His impending torture and brutal execution. He had to decide whether to retreat or face the ordeal. Anyone in similar circumstances would want to leave, and Jesus indicated that was His desire. But He also recognized that His very purpose in this world was to endure such an ordeal. So He decided to face the ordeal (Mark 14:32–15:39; John 18:1–19:30). This was a defining moment in Jesus’ life, and it altered the cosmic order.

When I first met Nabeel, neither he nor I realized each of us would soon experience defining moments in our lives. The journeys on which each of us were about to embark were

quite similar. At the starting line, both of us were raised in families that took seriously their religious beliefs. From a very early age, both of us had possessed a desire to know God and please Him. Both of us were committed to following truth, no matter where it led. Both of us sincerely believed we were already following the truth and the other was not.

My journey started in 2003 when I began my doctoral research. I began with the objective of proving Jesus' resurrection from a different angle: to show Jesus had risen from the dead, using the standard tools of historical investigation. I began by reading literature on the philosophy of history and the historical method. It wasn't long before I was confronted with the challenge of my personal biases. I wanted Jesus' resurrection to be proven fact. But the literature was informing me that my objective could severely hinder the integrity of my investigation. Of course, skeptics are faced with a similar challenge: they want Jesus' resurrection to be disproved. If left unchecked, our biases will so guide our historical investigations that we will almost always arrive at the conclusion we seek.

After about a year of study, the motivation behind my doctoral research changed. Instead of seeking to prove Jesus' resurrection, I was now consumed with discovering what an investigation of the matter would reveal if I were to place my bias on the shelf as best as I could. I engaged in numerous public debates with prominent skeptical scholars on the question, "Did Jesus rise from the dead?" Prior to each debate, I asked God to reveal truth to me. "If I'm on the wrong track, please show me my error. Humiliate me if needed. Just break through any part of my conditioning that's prohibiting me from seeing truth. I just want to follow You, Lord, even if You're not who I think You are."

Because most of my debate opponents were prominent scholars who are well-informed, I knew there was no room for laziness on my part. I was forced to become well-acquainted with

the data and how each opponent would account for it. In a debate, I could not merely reply that their arguments did not convince me. I had to provide reasons—good reasons—for why their arguments were ineffective. Therefore, debates forced me to think through virtually every element of the matter of Jesus’ resurrection. My journey was a difficult one, in which I often agonized over keeping a check on my bias. After five and a half years, my journey ended with my concluding that Jesus’ resurrection from the dead accounts for the historical data in a manner far superior to any competing hypothesis.⁵ My decision to seek and follow truth no matter where it led and my decision to engage in persistent efforts to manage my biases as best as I possibly could during my investigation were defining moments in my life. I remain a follower of Jesus not because I was raised that way but because the historical evidence strongly suggests that His resurrection from the dead was an event that occurred in history.

Nabeel entered his journey with confidence that the evidence would confirm his Islamic faith. His journey was intense and, as far as I could tell, was honest and open-minded. Nabeel unreservedly wanted Islam to be true. It was the way he had been raised, and he was proud to be a Muslim. He also deeply loved his parents and did not want to cause them grief or bring them disgrace from their Islamic community, difficulties that would surely follow if Nabeel left the faith they had taught him and become a follower of Jesus. This is a matter that non-Muslim Westerners rarely consider, since this type of disgrace is not common in our culture. However,

⁵ Interested readers may view a number of my debates at <http://www.vimeo.com/licona>. A slightly revised version of my doctoral dissertation is available as a book: Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).

like I am, Nabeel is more interested in discovering and finding truth, even when doing so may lead to undesirable consequences. But when we consider that there is a very good chance that our decision about Jesus will determine our eternal destiny, should anything other than a serious pursuit of truth satisfy us? Nabeel's journey may have taken less time than my own, but it was no less agonizing for him. When Nabeel discovered that the strong evidence for Jesus' divinity—His personal claims to being God's heavenly Son, His death by crucifixion, and His resurrection from the dead—was able to withstand the toughest critical scrutiny by Islamic and skeptical scholars alike, he decided to be led by the truth and became a follower of Jesus. This was, indeed, a defining moment for Nabeel.

The Deity of Jesus Christ

J. Ed Komoszewski

Contributing to Section 5: “Jesus: Mortal Messiah or Divine Son of God?”

J. Ed Komoszewski has served as a professor of biblical and theological studies at Northwestern College and as the director of research for Josh McDowell Ministry. He is coauthor of two influential books: Reinventing Jesus and Putting Jesus in His Place, both focused on the identity and deity of Jesus.

Tensions rise when the name Jesus is dropped. It has always been this way. In Jesus’ own day, the Jewish authorities were just as suspicious of His divine claims as Nabeel had been as a pious Muslim struggling to come to terms with the provocative rabbi from Galilee in modern times. “Who do you think you are?” they demanded upon realizing that Jesus claimed to be greater than Abraham (John 8:53). The scribes and Pharisees were repeatedly confronted with Jesus’ claims straight from His mouth, so they couldn’t simply dismiss those claims as later corruptions (as Islam had taught Nabeel to do). Quite tellingly, their own explanation—reported in all four gospels—was that Jesus was controlled by a demon (Matt. 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15; John 7:20; 8:48).

Islam does not stoop so low. In fact, it honors Jesus as highly as its theology allows it to honor any human being. Islam regards Him as a great prophet, second in importance only to Muhammad. It agrees with the New Testament that Jesus (unlike Muhammad) was conceived and born of a virgin. It also teaches that Jesus ascended bodily to paradise or heaven without

even dying (again, unlike Muhammad). Although this teaching disagrees with the New Testament, it expresses a noble view of Jesus from a Muslim perspective.

Of course, Christians agree that Jesus was both a human being and a great prophet, but we understand Him to be far more than that. Regrettably, we sometimes give the impression that belief in Jesus as God incarnate derives solely from the gospel of John. And this opens the door to the “John doesn’t count” argument that Nabeel used to get around the testimony of the fourth gospel. In actuality, as Nabeel soon discovered, other parts of the New Testament tout an equally high view of Jesus Christ. The following examples only scratch the surface.

The apostle Paul wrote his epistles or letters between the years 49 and 65. Since Jesus died in 30 or 33, this means his epistles were all written within about twenty to thirty-five years after Jesus’ death. They are generally recognized as the earliest Christian writings. Remarkably enough, Paul twice called Jesus “God” (Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13). But his favorite title for Jesus was “LORD,” the designation used by Jews in the first century when speaking or writing in reference to the Hebrew divine name *YHWH* (“Yahweh” or “Jehovah”). For example, where the Old Testament referred to “the day of the LORD” (day of Yahweh, e.g., Joel 2:31), Paul referred to “the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:14; etc.). Where the Old Testament spoke of “calling on the name of the LORD” (the name of Yahweh, e.g., Joel 2:32), Paul spoke of calling “on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2; see also Rom. 10:12–14). Where the Old Testament made the foundation of Israel’s faith the confession that there is “one LORD” who alone is God (Deut. 6:4), Paul affirms that Jesus is the “one Lord” through whom all things were made (1 Cor. 8:6; see also Eph. 4:5). Where the Old Testament states that every knee will bow and every tongue swear allegiance to the LORD (Isa. 45:23), Paul says that every knee will bow

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10–11). These examples make clear that Paul—just like John—viewed Jesus as far more than a prophet.

But if John “doesn’t count,” then perhaps Paul doesn’t count either. Nabeel describes some of the polemical arguments he was taught as a Muslim to call Paul’s teaching into question. The problem with this approach, of course, is that soon no early Christian source will count. Yet Jesus is called God not only in John (1:1, 18; 20:28) and Paul (Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13) but also in Acts (20:28), Hebrews (1:8), and 2 Peter (1:1). He is revered as the LORD (Yahweh) not only in Paul but also in Acts (1:24; 2:21, 36) and 1 Peter (2:3; 3:13–16). Both Hebrews (1:6) and Revelation (5:12–13) teach that the angels in heaven worship Jesus Christ. The belief that Jesus is infinitely exalted permeates New Testament writings.

Consider the gospel of Mark, which most scholars think was the first gospel to be written. Mark begins his gospel by quoting Isaiah 40:3: “Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight” (Mark 1:3 NASB). Yet “the Lord” whose way is made ready is the Lord Jesus, whom John the Baptist said was so far above him that John was not even worthy to perform the menial slave’s task of loosening his sandal (Mark 1:7–8). Throughout the gospel of Mark, Jesus speaks and acts in ways that are simply far too exalted even if He were a great prophet. When Jesus healed people, cast out demons, or performed other miracles, He did so not by asking God in prayer to do these things; rather, He spoke the word, and it happened (1:25–27, 41, etc.). He forgave a man’s sins, which the scribes recognized was the sole prerogative of God (2:5–7). He claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath, transcending the laws of its observance (2:28). When He was on the Sea of Galilee with His disciples and a violent storm threatened to pull their ship down, Jesus told the storm to “be still,” and it did (4:39). When He was questioned by the high

priest, Jesus said that He would sit at the right hand of the Power in heaven (14:62). In other words, He was going to rule from the throne of God alongside the Father.

What about Matthew, usually considered the most Jewish of the four gospels? Matthew's gospel has all of the same elements we have seen in Mark's and includes additional testimonies to the deity of Christ. Matthew's narrative begins by describing Jesus as "God with us" (Matt. 1:23) and climaxes with the resurrected Jesus promising His disciples, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (28:20 NASB). In other words, Jesus embodies the divine presence; He is God in the flesh. Another statement along the same lines appears about halfway through the gospel, when Jesus tells His disciples, "Where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (18:20 NASB). No mere prophet, no matter how great, would or could make such a claim. When the disciples saw the risen Jesus, they worshiped Him, and He claimed to have all authority in both heaven and earth (28:17–18). Clearly, Matthew also viewed Jesus as nothing less than full deity.

All of the principal authors of the New Testament writings—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, and the unnamed author of Hebrews—attest to the divine claims, nature, and prerogatives of Jesus. These men wrote from thirty to sixty years after Jesus' death; all of them except Luke were Jewish men who spent part of their lives in Judea and Galilee. They all either knew Jesus personally or knew people who had known Jesus personally. By contrast, Muhammad did not know Jesus and did not know anyone who had ever seen Jesus. He lived five hundred years later in a different culture and in a different country (Arabia), and it is on the basis of his teaching alone that Islam regards Jesus as a great prophet but not divine. From a strictly historical perspective, the multiple testimonies of the first-century New Testament authors must take precedence with regard to understanding who and what Jesus claimed to be. Nabeel

eventually gave the New Testament writings their proper place. And Jesus eternally took His rightful place, as God, on the throne of Nabeel's heart.

The Trinity and the Gospel

Robert M. Bowman, Jr.

Contributing to Part 6: “The Case for the Gospel”

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Nabeel was a Muslim when he struggled with and even fought against the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and of salvation by the death of Jesus Christ. But it isn't just Muslims and people of other non-Christian backgrounds who have difficulty coming to terms with these beliefs. I myself, though coming from a Christian background, went through a period of intense doubt and searching during my college years regarding these and other Christian teachings. Like many others, I was especially troubled by the doctrine of the Trinity. Not only was it difficult to understand but it was unclear whether the Bible even supported it. I once had discussions with a Sunday school teacher who tried to defend the Trinity by insisting that Jesus is God the Father. I knew that wasn't what the Trinity means.

As I studied the Bible and wrestled with these issues, I came to understand that in a real sense the doctrine was not a human creation, even though its verbal formulations in the creeds were composed by fallible men. Frankly, the Trinity is not the sort of doctrine people invent.

When people create doctrines, they generally try to come up with an elegantly simple idea that others can get behind. In doing so, they typically come up with an idea that you can find in a variety of religions throughout history. On the one hand, that is why there are various religions teaching that everything is divine or has divinity in it, why quite a few teach that there are many gods with some greater than others, and why several assert that God is a solitary person who stays outside the universe looking in at us. On the other hand, a God who exists eternally in three distinct persons, one who assumed human nature while still remaining God—this complex, challenging set of ideas is unique among all the religions of the world. You cannot find it outside of historic Christianity.

So where did this doctrine originate? Christians believe that God is triune—that He exists as one God in three persons—because Jesus revealed God in that way. Jesus taught us, foremost, about our heavenly Father. The Lord’s Prayer, the most famous of all prayers, begins, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Christians think of God as their Father because Jesus taught us to think of Him that way. At the same time, we see in the gospels that Jesus claimed to be God’s “Son” in a way that showed Him to be absolutely unique. For example, when Jewish teachers challenged Jesus for working on the Sabbath (by healing a paralyzed man), Jesus explained that the Father worked on the Sabbath, and as His Son, so did He (John 5:17). In some way, then, Jesus is uniquely the Son of God, but He graciously invites us to “share” in His close, familial relationship with the Father, to become God’s “children.” Jesus also promised that after His return to heaven, He would send someone else in His place to be with His disciples forever (John 14:16–17; 15:26–27). This someone else was the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit is identified in the Bible as God (Acts 5:3–4) but is someone distinct from the Father and the Son, as these and many other texts of the Bible reveal. So Jesus reveals the Trinity to us by revealing

(1) the Father as the one who sent Jesus and who invites us to be His children, (2) Jesus Himself as the unique Son of the Father, and (3) the Holy Spirit as a divine person sent from the Father and the Son after Jesus returned to heaven.

The key to understanding this, for me, was to answer the question, Who is Jesus? If Jesus really is the Son who came from the Father, died and rose again for our salvation, ascended into heaven, and then sent the Holy Spirit to live within His people, then something along the lines of the doctrine of the Trinity is true. The more I studied the Bible, the more ways it revealed Jesus to be the eternal, divine Son of God come in the flesh (what Christians call the incarnation). Once I got past crude caricatures of the Trinity and weak objections to its possible existence, I began recognizing its truth throughout Scripture.

I also came to appreciate how closely the doctrine of the Trinity is linked to the gospel of salvation. The gospel or “good news” is the message of God’s victory over the devil and over human rebellion, corruption, and death. It isn’t about what I do for God; it’s about what He has done and is doing for me. Jesus isn’t a character sent by the Creator to tell us to straighten up and fly right; Jesus is the Creator who walked among us in humility to experience our fragility and to rescue us from our hopeless human condition.

His paying the debt for our sins is just one part of how He saves us. Jesus did not pay the penalty for our misdeeds so we can continue disobeying God with abandon; rather, in dying on the cross, Jesus not only canceled our spiritual debt but also cured our spiritual disease. When we put our trust in Christ, He forgives our sins and also begins the work of changing us from the inside to become holy and loving like Him, and like God our Father. Jesus does this through the Holy Spirit, whom He sent. Salvation by grace does not mean we stay impure sinners forever. Rather, it means that God forgives all our sins and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves

by paying the penalty for our sins and working to eliminate sin from our lives. He does this in two stages: while we are mortal, the Holy Spirit changes our hearts so that we begin to live in a way that is more pleasing to God, even though we still commit sin; and then in the resurrection at the end of history, we will be made morally and spiritually perfect beings.

Thus, all three persons of the Trinity are involved in our salvation. The Father calls us into a relationship with Him through the Son, whom He sent; the Son creates that relationship by dying to break down the barrier of rebellion that has separated us from the Father; and the Holy Spirit works within us to trust in the Son and to worship the Father according to the truth of the gospel. When we are brought into the Christian faith, this is why we are baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19 NIV). It means that we are acknowledging the three persons as the one God who has mercifully rescued us from our sin and given us the gift of eternal life.

The Historical Muhammad

David Wood

Contributing to Part 7: “The Truth about Muhammad”

David Wood is the director of Acts 17 Apologetics, a ministry dedicated to examining the core claims of atheism, Christianity, and Islam. He is host of the satellite television show Jesus or Muhammad, which is regularly broadcast throughout North America and the Middle East. He has debated more than two dozen Muslims and atheists and earned his PhD in philosophy from Fordham University.

According to the Quran, Muhammad is the ideal model of conduct for Muslims (33:21), and true believers are not allowed to question his decisions (33:36). So it is not surprising that when Nabeel and I began discussing the character and teachings of Muhammad, things occasionally got heated. Arguing with a Muslim about his prophet’s relationship with a nine-year-old girl is hardly a path to harmony.

That’s where friendship is useful. Even if Nabeel and I got angry during our discussions, we eventually calmed down, and we always understood that we had each other’s best interests at heart. Nabeel was criticizing Christianity not because he hated Christians but because he was convinced that Christianity was false and that his best friend was missing out on something important. Likewise, I wasn’t complaining about Muhammad because of the 9/11 attacks but because I wanted my best friend to know Jesus.

When Muslims and non-Muslims attempt to evaluate the life of Muhammad, we are confronted with a difficulty. On the one hand, Islam's historical sources are far removed from the events they report, giving rise to a fair amount of skepticism concerning their reliability. On the other hand, if we take the Muslim sources seriously, a highly unflattering (and sometimes disturbing) portrait of Muhammad emerges. Hence, whether we doubt Islam's sources or trust them, we never find the impeccable figure preached by Muslims.

To see the difficulty in more detail, consider a sketch of what Nabeel and I discovered when we examined the Muslim sources.

A Historical Problem

Islam's earliest source is the Quran. Yet the Quran is not biographical in nature. Rather, it is claimed to be Allah's eternal word, revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. As such, the Quran gives us very little direct information about Muhammad and mentions him by name only four times. To interpret passages of the Quran in the light of Muhammad's life, we must turn to non-Quranic texts.

Our earliest detailed biographical source for Muhammad is Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, which was written more than a century after Muhammad's death. Most Muslim scholars today, however, are convinced that Ibn Ishaq's historical methodology was defective, which forces them to turn to even later works for information about their prophet. Islam's most trusted collections of narrations about Muhammad (*Sahih Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, and *Sunan Abu Daud*) were written approximately *two centuries* (or more) after the events they report.

Two centuries is ample time for embellishment and fabrication, especially when competing political and theological factions were vying for power. Indeed, the most important reason for compiling stories about Muhammad was because so many false or contradictory

stories were being manufactured. Modern quests for early Islamic historical data have uncovered almost nothing, and the general movement among scholars of Islamic studies over the past century has been toward greater skepticism.

A Brief History of Muhammad

Assuming we treat the Muslim sources as at least somewhat reliable, we can piece together an outline of Muhammad's life. He was born around AD 570 in Mecca (in present day Saudi Arabia). While still young, Muhammad began work in the Meccan caravan trade, which put him in contact with diverse religious traditions. At twenty-five years old, he married a wealthy widow named Khadija, who was fifteen years his senior. Like many others from his tribe, Muhammad developed the habit of retreating to a cave on Mount Hira for prayer and reflection.

When Muhammad was forty years old, he had a mystical experience in this cave, and he emerged reciting five verses of what would eventually become the Quran (96:1–5). He soon began preaching Islam to friends and family, and later to the public. Due to his increasingly inflammatory condemnation of the Meccan polytheists, Muhammad and his followers were persecuted. After his wife Khadija and his uncle Abu Talib (who had been protecting him) died, Muhammad fled Mecca.

In Medina, having formed alliances with several non-Muslim groups, Muhammad began robbing the Meccan caravans. These attacks eventually led to a series of battles with Mecca. However, as war booty poured in, so did new converts, and the ever-expanding Muslim army allowed Muhammad to subdue not only Mecca but the rest of Arabia as well. Muhammad died in 632 following a prolonged sickness, which he attributed to being poisoned by a Jewish woman.

Muhammad and Violence

One of the most unsettling aspects of Muhammad's life concerns his use of violence to achieve his goals. Modern Muslims often claim that Muhammad killed only in self-defense, but history shows that he ordered his followers to murder people for writing poems that were critical of him. Apostates fared no better, for Muhammad commanded, "Whoever changes his religion, kill him" (Sunan An-Nasa'i 5.37.4069).

Although Muhammad promoted peace and tolerance when Muslims were in the minority, his revelations suddenly changed when his followers outnumbered his enemies. Consider three verses from the last major chapter of the Quran to be revealed:

1. "Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the People of the Book, until they pay the *Jizyah* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (9:29 Ali).
2. "O Prophet! strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites and be unyielding to them ..." (9:73 Shakir).
3. "O you who believe! fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you hardness ..." (9:123 Shakir).

Notice that the main criterion for fighting people in these verses is simply that they do not believe in Islam. Muhammad's final marching orders to his followers, then, consisted largely of commands to violently subjugate non-Muslims.

Muhammad and Women

No less troubling is Muhammad's example regarding women. While the Quran allows Muslims to marry a maximum of four wives (4:3), Muhammad had at least nine wives at one

time (after he received a special revelation that gave him the right to ignore the four-wife limit). One of Muhammad's wives (a girl named Aisha) was only nine years old when the marriage was consummated. Zainab, another wife, was originally married to his adopted son Zaid. However, because Muhammad became attracted to Zainab, Zaid divorced her so that Muhammad could marry her.

On at least one occasion, Muhammad physically struck his wife Aisha for lying. This was in accordance with the Quran's command to physically discipline rebellious wives: "Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them" (4:34 Pickthall).

Muhammad had a concubine named Mary, who was a Coptic Christian, and he allowed his followers to possess an unlimited number of sex slaves (see Quran 23:5–6; 70:22–30). Early Muslims were even permitted to engage in a form of prostitution (called *mutah*), according to which a Muslim could pay a woman for sex, marry her for a short time (perhaps a few hours), and then divorce her when finished.

Spiritual Concerns

While Muhammad's teachings about violence and women call into question his status as the perfect role model, certain spiritual problems in his life raise concerns about his prophethood. For instance, Muhammad's first impression of the revelations he received was that they were demonic. As a result, he became suicidal and tried to hurl himself off a cliff. Muhammad's wife Khadija and her cousin Waraqah—people who were not with him in the cave and had no idea

what he experienced—eventually persuaded him that he was not possessed and that, instead, he was a prophet of God.

Even more startling is that, according to our earliest Muslim sources, Muhammad once delivered a revelation from the devil (the infamous “Satanic Verses”). When Muhammad was initially reciting chapter 53 of the Quran (so the story goes), Satan tricked him into promoting polytheism. Later, Muhammad was supposedly informed by the angel Gabriel that all prophets occasionally fall for this ruse.

Multiple Muslim sources also report that Muhammad was the victim of black magic. According to these accounts, a Jewish magician stole Muhammad’s hairbrush and used one of the hairs to cast a spell on him. The spell lasted about a year, and it affected Muhammad’s memory and gave him delusional thoughts.

Assessment

Given the questionable reliability of the Muslim sources and their unflattering portrayal of Muhammad, how can modern Muslims hope to defend the Islamic view of their prophet? For many months, Nabeel took the most common route: He sifted through the texts and drew attention to every favorable story about Muhammad, while reinterpreting or dismissing most unfavorable stories. Yet he eventually realized that such a method could be used to make *any* historical figure appear trustworthy. After pondering the evidence more carefully (and resisting the Muslim tendency to automatically defend Muhammad from criticism), Nabeel was left with a dilemma: either we know next to nothing about Muhammad, or we know that he is not what Muslims claim him to be.

The New Testament and the Quran

Keith Small

Contributing to Part 8: “The Holiness of the Quran”

Rev. Dr. Keith Small is a Quranic manuscript consultant to the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. He is also a visiting lecturer and an associate research fellow at the London School of Theology and teaches internationally concerning the history of the texts of the Quran and the New Testament. He is the author of Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts.

Any religion in our day must make its case amid the competing claims of secularism and other faiths. Nabeel has poignantly shared one double claim he was raised to passionately believe but then came to question—the conviction that the Quran had been preserved perfectly, whereas other books of scripture had not, and that this supported the Quran's divine credentials.

If this was just an academic question or just a case of overblown religious rhetoric, perhaps it would not carry so much weight. But as Nabeel shares from his own experience, this was a primary question forming his religious foundation. It was a question informing not only his identity as a Muslim but also his perspective on forgiveness of sin, his view of his personal religious obligations to God, and his hope for salvation and eternity. The inviolability of the Quran is truly an eternal life and death issue to Muslims around the world.

Too often, emotions and issues of personal, community, and religious honor eclipse issues of truth. In these situations academic studies can provide dispassionate information for evaluation by individuals on all sides of the issue.

How do we decide which books tell the truth? One test is to see which one squares best with available historical testimony. The claim about the Quran's perfect transmission and the Bible's corruption is significant and goes to the foundation of one's view of Jesus. Muslims claim that one indication of the divine authority of their faith is that their scripture has been kept perfectly, while the New Testament has been corrupted, and that as a result, their view of Jesus is more accurate. This is an enormously significant historical claim that can be tested.

During the last three hundred years, the New Testament has undergone rigorous textual research, studies of how well the text has been transmitted from the earliest available Greek manuscripts through today. The Quran has never undergone such a systematic examination of the earliest manuscripts against the entire Quranic tradition, though this is now starting to be undertaken.

Results from these textual studies are extremely important. First, studies have demonstrated that the transmission of the New Testament books from their original forms until now has happened faithfully without calling into question any cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith. Studies of corrections in these manuscripts have also demonstrated that no one has changed the text to make it support a political or theological agenda—a hollow accusation often made, for example, against Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in the early 300s.

Initial results from the study of Quranic manuscripts confirm, through Islamic historical sources (similar to what Nabeel cites from the hadith), that in Islam's first century there was an official project to establish a precise written text of the Quran. Corrections in the earliest available manuscripts indicate a concern with establishing a precise text. There also existed in Islam's early decades the political, social, and religious conditions necessary to perform such a task and to ensure the widespread adoption of this official text in the growing Islamic empire.

Instead of the Quran's text being preserved perfectly from the time of Muhammad, it was shaped after his lifetime into a document that would command political and religious unity under the established and growing political power of the time.

Such historical conditions, however, were never in place for a similar project to occur with the New Testament. Skeptics who assert a conspiracy to change the text of the New Testament, whether reputable scholars or authors of popular fiction, attempt to construct their arguments largely from silence and force controversial assumptions onto very minor textual changes—like claiming a small isolated rivulet is the main river while ignoring the broad, strong, mainstream of the existing textual tradition.

New Testament manuscript evidence provides strong support that the gospels deliver the best historical information concerning Jesus, and recent studies are confirming how Jesus both fits into and challenges the context and ideas of first-century Palestine. Similar studies of the Quran are demonstrating that the Jesus it portrays is more a figure of the theological controversies of the sixth and seventh centuries than a figure of the first century.

The issue of corruption versus perfection of the text is important because Muslims use the matter to justify the authority of their faith over other world faiths like Christianity. In another way, though, this claim to perfect transmission of the Quran is actually a bit of a rhetorical sideshow. The more significant divergence of Islam and Christianity has always been and will continue to be between the teachings of the Quran and the New Testament, and between their historical testimonies about Jesus.

That the New Testament is historically reliable provides not only a solid basis for personal faith in Christianity but also the strong basis for offering to people of any background, religious or nonreligious, the message of the gospel—that they can have their sins forgiven, that

they can be freed from lives of futility and shameful habits, that they can actually know God personally and find His purpose for their lives, and that they can have the assurance of an eternity of justice and joy in His inexpressible presence, all through what His Son Jesus accomplished in the crucifixion and resurrection. If Christian scriptures were not grounded in history, all we would have to offer would be our personal opinions.

Belief and Doubt

Gary Habermas

Contributing to Part 9: “Faith in Doubt”

Dr. Gary Habermas is Distinguished Research Professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy at Liberty University. His chief areas of research are related to Jesus’ resurrection, though he also has published frequently on the subject of religious doubt. He has authored, coauthored, or edited thirty-six books and written more than one hundred articles and reviews for journals and other publications.

Two religious doubters experienced tormenting questions. One began his search as a Christian, the other did not. They came from quite diverse educational, religious, and ethnic perspectives. In both cases, their doubt was resolved after years of research and study. Both concentrated on many of the same academic issues. And the same God met them both.

Recently, Christians have grown more vocal about expressing their religious doubts, and so have unbelievers. If done in the right context, why not? Similar responses are certainly found in scripture. Humans seem always to have doubted and questioned even their deepest beliefs. Why so? Presumably because we do not know everything; we are limited and restricted in our knowledge. Further, these perennial religious issues concern us, often deeply. And from a theological angle, we are sinners. Complicating the issues, these conditions sometimes militate against our desire for personal peace.

I met Nabeel Qureshi during one of my family's yearly visits to Virginia Beach to stay with our close friends, Mike and Debbie Licon. Nabeel had joined a group of searchers who met regularly at Mike's house to discuss scientific, philosophical, and theological issues. There, I met a former rather militant atheist, philosophy student David Wood. Another attendee from the same university, likewise majoring in philosophy, was an agnostic Buddhist named Zach. Then there was Nabeel, an ardent Muslim believer. Without question, Nabeel was very intelligent and always thoughtful, inquisitive, and exceptionally polite. He defended his faith, and no one minded a bit. Everyone spoke freely.

When Mike debated Muslim scholar Shabir Ally at another local university, Nabeel and I sat together. We later evaluated the dialogue, along with David and Mike. That was the evening when Nabeel made his amazing comment that the only thing that Christian apologetics had over Muslim apologetics was the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. I remarked to Mike later that such a conclusion could be precisely the sort that might continue to impress Nabeel.

Then there was the meeting at Mike's house that both Nabeel and his father attended. Once again, the give-and-take of conversation was fairly and politely granted. Mike even asked Nabeel's father to open the meeting in prayer.

Later, when I heard that Nabeel traveled overseas to ask imams the questions that still bothered him, I was again amazed. Here was a young scholar who was unafraid to ask the tough questions. Eventually, his doubts were a key component in fulfilling his quest.

Although I had been raised in a Christian home, I went through more than ten years of doubt that often grew quite intense. My personal study centered on the resurrection of Jesus, because of my conclusion that, if it had occurred, it could bear the weight of the Christian

message. However, after several years, I reached an impasse in my studies and had determined that it could not be shown that this event happened.

Returning to the same subject a little later while writing my PhD dissertation, I was able to work through the stalemate that had bogged me down earlier, only to find that my doubts failed to subside. Little did I know that I still had years of struggle left.

Having concluded long before that addressing the factual component of doubt was the key to my struggles, I had grown convinced that there were several key evidential avenues both for theism in general, as well as for Christianity in particular. But why did my doubts remain, often more strongly than ever before?

Soon afterward, I learned what I dearly wished someone had explained to me much earlier—that there is commonly an emotional element to doubt, although at the time this was seldom recognized in the research. Not only is this emotional element the dominant species of such uncertainty, but it is usually far more painful and often more stubborn than factual elements.

One thing was entirely clear: I simply had to do something to overcome the suffering that hounded me every hour of the day. How could I be sure the Christian hope was grounded, when factual evidence alone was insufficient to do the job?

At this point, I stumbled on research in the area of psychological assurance and related issues that has since changed my life. Falling under the general rubric of the “cognitive” or “cognitive-behavioral method,” the central idea is that what we tell ourselves, think, and do will determine how we feel, as well as our subsequent actions. Further, the most painful things in life are not generally what *occurs* to us but what we think and articulate to ourselves *about* those occurrences. Thus, it is not so much the events in our lives but rather how we download and

respond to them that determines whether we are able to adjust and live peacefully, with minimal pain and stress.

I learned that the heart of the cognitive method revolves around picking out the false statements that we believe, think, or say to ourselves and then arguing against them. Believers must dispute thoughts like, “Though I’ve done everything Scripture tells me to do, I still may not be a Christian.” Or, “Maybe I’ll get to heaven and Jesus will tell me that He never knew me.” Even something as simple as, “*What if* Christianity is untrue?” when the evidence shows otherwise can cause very painful repercussions.

Therefore, I had to learn to argue directly against these notions, and the more forcefully the better. I began to work through every aspect of the gospel message (like the deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ) and then ask myself if I believed or had trusted the Lord in light of that (Rom. 10:9–10). If I responded, “I’m not sure,” then I needed to press the point with the precise data. “You know you did that, dozens of times as a matter of fact.” Or, “You know you believe that, because when someone objected the other day, you were ready with your defense of its truth.” When others wondered if they had shown any “fruit” in their lives after salvation, I encouraged them to list items that could be reviewed. Asking a very good friend what they see in us is very helpful too.

Dozens of biblical texts also teach us to stop worrying and being “downcast” by changing what we say to ourselves. Instead, we are to replace these thoughts with meditation on God’s truth, His promises, worship, or prayer.⁶ Other passages tell us to avoid irresponsible or careless

⁶ Ps. 37:7–8; 42:5–6, 11; 55:4–8, 16–17, 22; 56:3–4; 143:4–7; Matt. 6:19–34; Phil. 3:18–21; Col. 3:1–17; 1 Thess. 5:14–18; 1 Peter 5:7.

words, anxiety, envy, and other emotions that lead to anguish. Instead, we are to teach uplifting truths to ourselves and to each other, producing healing and peace.⁷

One key passage that occupied much of my thinking was Philippians 4:6–9, where Paul exhorts believers to control their anxiety (v. 6), which often contributes heavily to emotional doubt. I knew that curbing my anxiety would provide a huge advantage in treating my emotional doubt.

Paul issued a four-step remedy. He commanded prayer to God regarding our needs. Peter offers additional details to his anxious readers, telling them to cast their worries on God (1 Peter 5:7).

Paul states that thanksgiving (Phil. 4:6) and praise (Phil. 4:8) should be given as well. Testimony shows that these practices, during anxiety or periods of being downcast, are often fantastically liberating actions that lessen our anxieties and fears.

In perhaps the strongest “cognitive” passage in Scripture, Paul instructs his readers to exchange their anxiety for God-honoring truths. His readers should meditate steadily, deeply, and single-mindedly on God’s truths, employing these concepts (Phil. 4:8) instead of the ruminations that led to anxiety in the first place.

Last, Paul adds a behavioral component—practicing the actions that he had just listed (Phil. 4:9). This does not mean that these four steps must be duplicated every time; other texts encourage the same steps, either by themselves or along with different practices.

Many popular writings explain how to implement this process in more detail, but I have long preferred the bestseller *Telling Yourself the Truth* by William Backus and Marie Chapian.⁸

⁷ Prov. 4:23–27; 12:18, 25; 15:13–15; 17:22; 18:21; Lam. 3:19–24; Eph. 5:15–20.

Although often very painful, the effects of emotional doubt may be eliminated or at least severely reduced.⁹ The remedy is the habitual and forceful application of techniques that correct our mistaken thinking and behavior.

⁸ William Backus and Marie Chapien, *Telling Yourself the Truth*, 20th ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2000).

⁹ Two of my three books on religious doubt can be found on my website, <http://www.garyhabermas.com>, without charge, under the “books” tab. Of the three, *The Thomas Factor: Using Your Doubts to Grow Closer to God* is concerned primarily with emotional doubt.

Dreams and Visions

Josh McDowell

Contributing to Part 10: “Guided by the Hand of God”

Josh McDowell has been an internationally recognized evangelist and apologist for more than fifty years, having addressed more than twenty-five million people and given more than twenty-six thousand talks in 125 countries. He is author of several dozen books that share the essentials of the Christian faith in everyday language. He has written or coauthored more than 130 books, including More Than a Carpenter, which has sold more than fifteen million copies in eighty-five languages.

Many Westerners find it hard to understand that God is using dreams and visions in a powerful way to reveal Himself to Muslims. In Isaiah 65:1 (NIV), it says, “I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me, I was found by those who did not seek me.”

Joel proclaimed, “Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28 ESV). As in the days of Joel, when God wanted to teach Israel “I am the LORD your God and there is none else” (Joel 2:27 ESV), He used dreams and visions.

I believe He is demonstrating the same thing to the Muslim people today. In God’s infinite wisdom and passion, He reveals Himself to people in different ways that are culturally relevant so they can understand who He is, receive Him, and follow Him.

In many Muslim cultures, dreams and visions play a strong role in people’s lives. Muslims rarely have access to the scriptures or interactions with Christian missionaries, yet God

is as passionate about having a relationship with Muslims as He is about having a relationship with you and me (Exod. 34:14 NLT).

The phenomenon of God’s revealing Himself through dreams and visions is not limited to any one people, language, or country. People experience revelatory dreams from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia and beyond. It’s not just limited to the Arab world. In Persian and Turkish-speaking countries and throughout Africa and Asia, many cultures place a high premium on such dreams.

Dreams and visions do not convert people; the gospel does. These seekers begin a personal or spiritual journey to find the Truth. As was the case for Nabeel, the dreams lead them to the scriptures and to believers who can share Jesus with them. It is the gospel through the Holy Spirit that converts people.

Mission Frontiers magazine reported that out of six hundred Muslim converts, more than 25 percent were affected spiritually through dreams.¹⁰ One missionary in Africa reports that “42 percent of the new believers came to Christ through visions, dreams, angelic appearances and hearing God’s voice.”¹¹

No two dreams are exactly the same, but in my experience, many say that in their dreams Jesus is standing with His arms outstretched and says either, “Why are you resisting the Truth?”

¹⁰ Christine Darg, “The Jesus Visions—Signs and Wonders in the Muslim World Introduction,” accessed January 7, 2013, <http://www.jesusvisions.org/intro.shtml#top>.

¹¹ “Accounts Multiply of Muslims Who Have Encountered YAHUSHUA (Jesus Christ) in Unusual Dreams,” AMightyWind.com, accessed January 7, 2013, <http://www.amightywind.com/fastfood/dreams/040723muslimdreams.htm>.

or “Seek the Truth.” I have found that the normal Muslim response is, “What is the truth?” or “Show me the truth.”

This is why we get so many response letters asking, “Why has it taken you so long to get me the truth?”

One missionary shares this story:

I met a man from Baluchistan, which is a region in Pakistan. I met him in a Bible college where I was to give a devotional, and he turned out to be there because Jesus appeared to him, literally at his death bed, healed him, and told him to go to Karachi, study the Word, then return to Baluchistan to spread the gospel.¹²

Another missionary says:

An Iranian student with whom I had worked here in Paris disappeared from circulation, because of great pressure from his older brother who was a practicing Muslim. Six months later, he returned, beaming a big smile on his face, and told me the great news that now he is very sure that the Bible is true. As we sat together and talked, he told me how hard his brother had beat him many times, and forced him to keep Ramadan. But one night, as he had been struggling with the question, “Which is true, the Bible or the Koran?” he had a dream in which he saw Jesus, and he asked Jesus all the questions he had, and he remembers how satisfied he was with the answers. He could only remember the last question he’d asked, which, amazingly, was a strange one for us, but not for a Muslim. He asked Jesus, “Now that I am your follower, what shall I eat?” I was pleased to hear that Jesus had said to him, “Eat my Word.” I turned to the book of Jeremiah, and I showed him the passage where Jeremiah said, “I found your Word and I ate it.” Well, he jumped with excitement and told me, “Jesus must be right.”¹³

The following are credible stories of the impact of dreams:

¹² From an email to Josh McDowell dated January 7, 2013.

¹³ Ibid.

In one African Muslim country, a young man violently tore up a Bible tract and threatened the life of the Every Home for Christ worker going door-to-door with the literature, Dick Eastman of Colorado Springs-based EHFC told NIRR. The next afternoon as the worker sat in his home, he was shocked to see the man knock at his door. “I must have another booklet,” the Muslim told him. He explained that the previous night two hands awakened him, and when he turned on the light and asked who was there, a voice said, “You have torn up the truth.” The voice instructed him to acquire another booklet, directing him to the EHFC worker’s home, the young man said. There, the Muslim read the booklet and became a believer. He has since been expelled from his wealthy family, lives with EHFC’s Africa director, and is preparing for ministry to Muslims.¹⁴

In another incident, several EHFC workers were distributing literature in a marketplace. A man who received a booklet gasped and said he had a vision of the person pictured on the cover in his dream the night before, Eastman said. In the dream, the man was in a deep pit when a rope was thrown to him and two strong hands pulled him up. Upon climbing out, he looked into the face of the man who helped him: Jesus. The workers explained the meaning of the dream and the man was converted on the spot. Later, three other people recounted the same dream and two of them became Christians, Eastman said. God is preparing Muslims, and Christian workers follow through, he said.¹⁵

¹⁴ “Dreams and Visions Move Muslims to Christ (an excerpt from National and International Religion Report,” Eternal Perspective Ministries—Resource Library, accessed January 7, 2013, <http://www.epm.org/resources/1996/Sep/12/dreams-visions-move-muslims-christ/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

In Kawuri, Nigeria, a Christian was beaten nearly to death by his tribe for leaving Islam, according to Open Doors with Brother Andrew. As the man lay close to death, he asked God to forgive his attackers, unaware that they were listening in the next room. That night, two Islamic priests who participated in the beating had visions. One said Jesus showed him his three greatest and most private sins. The next day, the two mullahs repented and led eighty followers to a church, the Santa Ana, Calif.-based group said.¹⁶

Karima, a Muslim, dreamed she was in a car when it crashed. She was knocked out, but when she opened her eyes (in her dream), she saw that Jesus was the driver. “Come to Me,” He told her, “I am with you. I love you.” That experience led her to seek out a Christian church, where she responded to the gospel.¹⁷

Omar had been locked up and tortured for years in a jail cell in a nation ruled by a dictator. One night a messenger visited him in a dream, telling him he would be set free. Within days he was released from prison and traveled to America, where newfound friends reached out to him. When he was given a book with a picture of Jesus on the cover, his eyes lit up. “I know him,” he said. “He came to me in a dream.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Audrey Lee, “Why Revival Is Exploding among Muslims,” *Charisma Magazine*, accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.charismamag.com/spirit/evangelism-missions/14442-when-muslims-see-jesus>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The Jesus Film team was returning late one night from a showing. They saw a fire up in the mountains where shepherds were caring for their sheep. Several of the team members went up the mountain with the Jesus Film DVD and copies of the book *More Than a Carpenter*.

After a brief introduction, they offered each shepherd a DVD and book. One shepherd got all excited and proclaimed, “Last night I saw this book in a dream and I was told to read it.” Needless to say, each shepherd enthusiastically received the book!¹⁹

A brother I personally know was telling me about seventeen people in a group of former Muslims. Every one of them had seen visions or dreams of Jesus. One of the men asked this brother if he had seen Jesus in a vision. He replied, “No.” The man put his arm around my friend and said, “How blessed are you! You have not seen Him, yet you love Him, and you serve Him.” Then he added, “We have no excuse; we have seen Him face to face!”

Our God cares about the believer and those still searching for truth. He does not give up on His creation, as Nabeel’s own story proves. His journey was filled with questions, frustrations, and disappointments, yet his friends continued to pray for him for four years until God’s love broke through.

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9 NIV).

Whether through dreams or visions, reading scripture, personal testimony from friends, or any of the other ways God reaches His people—I can unequivocally say that “He is a God who is jealous about his relationship with you” (Exod. 34:14 NLT).

¹⁹ Story told personally to Josh McDowell.