

The “Gospel” of Peter: A Rebuttal to Islamic Rejection of the Apostle Paul

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Introduction

In the December 2010 issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Yale professor Lamin Sanneh reviewed a new book on a very old and obscure subject: Sergius Bahira (Sanneh 2010). Few modern Christians have heard of Bahira, but they have a good excuse. This seventh-century Syrian Christian monk would have sunk unnoticed beneath the waves of history but for a meeting with a boy named Muhammad.

Both Muslim and Middle Eastern Christian authorities accept the historicity of the meeting itself. What is disagreed is the nature of the conversation between the two men. Christians see it as an early polemic against Muhammad’s prophethood, while Muslims see it as precisely the opposite. According to Muslim tradition, Bahira saw the “seal of prophethood” between the shoulders of Muhammad (Ayoub 2007; Parrinder 1995, 164)

More interesting than the review itself, however, is the background Sanneh provides on the development of a Christology in Islam. In the centuries leading up to Bahira and Muhammad, he says, Christians were consumed with protecting their faith against the assault of Greek philosophy. Muslim scholars, meanwhile, seized theological and doctrinal territory by re-historicizing the Old Testament and New Testament. (Or, from a Christian perspective, DE-historicizing the biblical accounts.) If the appearance of Jesus heralded a radical move of God to confront the Jews with his claims, then Islam would claim that the appearance of Muhammad heralded a radical move of God to confront all mankind with a message even more universal than that which Jesus brought. This could only be true if Jesus were detached from both the prophetic history that preceded him and the Christian faith that followed him.

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To accomplish the first objective, Old Testament references to the coming Messiah and his divine mission were re-historicized as fabrications by the Jews, who, according to Islam, resisted God's true message—Islam—over the centuries between Adam and Jesus. To accomplish the second objective, New Testament references that conflicted with the Qur'anic view of Jesus were similarly re-historicized. They were mere fabrications by Christians who also were resisting the true message of Islam. The final blow to biblical Christology, then, was struck by discrediting the Apostle Paul as the premier interpreter of Christian faith and practice. Instead, Paul was declared to be a kind of first century theological “pirate,” hijacking the true message of Jesus the prophet of Islam and raising Jesus to “partnership” alongside God (the cardinal Islamic sin of *shirk*).

Jesus was thus detached from Old Testament prophecy affirming his messiahship; from New Testament references to his teaching, miracles, and his ultimate sacrifice on the cross; and from Pauline interpretation of the eternal *missio dei*. All of which left the prophet Muhammad standing as the exemplar of true *islam* (submission to God), and the Qur'an as the sole complete and untampered revelation of God.

To this day, as Sanneh points out, Islam has commanded the high ground in this strategic conflict. The world's 2.2 billion Christians (Operation World 2011) may see Jesus as God Himself, come into this world clothed in flesh (however one's theology interprets that event) as the perfect, sinless sacrifice for the sin, guilt, and shame of men and women in every culture through all time. But for the world's 1.6 billion Muslims (Pew Foundation 2011), absolute faith in the Exalted Qur'an, in Muhammad as the Seal of the Prophets, and in Islam as the divinely mandated *deen* (religion) is as axiomatic as saying the sun rises in the east.

Islamic Objections to New Testament Christology

The scriptures or traditions of one religion should not be used as criteria to judge the truth or errors of the other. (Ayoub 2007, 67)

Islam has turned the Christology of the New Testament into a theological “free fire zone.” No Christian affirmation of Christ's divinity or *missio dei* is allowed to raise its head unchallenged, and no Muslim is allowed to explore the territory with anything like scholarly dispassion. This is ground where Muhammad's prophethood, the Qur'an's eternality, and Islam's

raison d'être stand or fall. Accordingly, this paper will focus on the objections of four Muslim authors: Pakistani scholar Muhammad 'Ata ur-Rahim, Lebanese professor Mahmoud Ayoub, Palestinian professor Tarif Khalidi, and Al Azhar University Sheik Muhammad Abu Zahra.

Islamic Objections to the Gospels

In Muslim thinking, the four canonical gospels are, at best, merely corrupted fragments of the original *injl* (gospel) that Jesus brought to his people. Generally, Islamic scholars fix on the following assertions:

1) The gospel of Jesus has been lost to history. Muhammad brought the Qur'an to his people, so Jesus too must have had a real, physical book. The multiplicity of gospels in existence today—canonical and extra-canonical—only proves that Jesus' book has been lost. Ayoub expresses it well:

[The Gospel=the single book that Jesus preached from=the Qur'an] is the parables of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount and whatever is in the Gospel that can be isolated as the teaching of Jesus, but it is not the story of the life, ministry, and passion of Christ (Ayoub 2007, 12).

2) The gospels have been corrupted by in-fighting and theological disagreement among Christian sects. The early centuries of Christianity were full of struggle with Greek philosophy, hair-splitting interpretations of Christ's nature, and bloody confrontation between pagan secular authorities and Christian faith. When Khalidi points out, "Islam was born amid many, often mutually hostile Christian communities" (Khalidi 2003, 7), he is only drawing attention to an uncomfortable but true fact of Christian history.

3) The gospels contain doctrines Jesus never taught (crucifixion, atonement, and especially tritheism). Khalidi observes:

[Jesus] is the only prophet in the Qur'an who is deliberately made to distance himself from the doctrines that his community is said to hold of him. In answer to God, Jesus explicitly denies any responsibility for advocating tritheism" (Khalidi 2003, 12).

4) The gospels were written by men who did not know Jesus personally and who therefore were not reliable witnesses. "None of the gospels are written by people who personally saw and heard the events and words they describe" (Ur-Rahim 2000, 9). He continues, "The author of the [Gospel of John] should not be confused with John, the disciple, who was another man" (2000, 9).

5) The gospels are corruptions of a “proto-gospel” that Muslims know as the Qur’an, and Christian scholars know as “Q”. Quoting al-Azhar University sheik Abu Zahrah, Ayoub says:

‘Should we then understand that there actually was a true Gospel that was revealed to Jesus and which he preached as they [Christians] claim? . . . and that this Gospel must be considered as the foundation of his religion?’ He sees a possibility for this in the ‘Q’ document, which he renders into Arabic as *al-qalb* (the heart) (Abu Zahra 1965; Ayoub 2007, 225).

6) Jesus was a Sufi saint. Khalidi echoes many Muslim writers when he sees Jesus as a mystical, ascetic Sufi saint: “The Jesus of Islamic Sufism became a figure not easily distinguishable from the Jesus of the Gospels” (Khalidi 2003, 41).

Islamic Objections to the Apostle Paul

More pointedly, Muslim authorities revile the Apostle Paul. To them, he is the author of all the doctrines that distinguish Christians from Muslims: the Crucifixion as atonement; Jesus as the divine Son of God; and the Church as the earthly ‘body’ of Christ. Here, too, are specific points of interest for Muslim scholars:

1) Atonement, sin, and repentance versus the “guidance” of the Qur’an. Islam believes humans simply lack knowledge. Better guidance from God, and greater diligence on our part will rectify man’s shortcomings. Paul’s doctrine of human sinfulness strikes at the very heart of Islam. Ur-Rahim responds,

The theory of redemption was Paul’s brainchild, a belief entirely unknown to Jesus and his disciples. It was based on a mistaken belief in ‘original sin’, the ‘crucifixion’, and the ‘resurrection’, none of which have any validity (Ur-Rahim 2000, 72).

2) Paul’s trinitarianism versus Qur’anic unitarianism. Muslim thinkers attribute trinitarianism (which they confuse with tri-theism) to the Apostle Paul. Al-Azhar sheik Abu Zahrah calls it “pagan tritheism” (Abu Zahra 1965; Ayoub 2007, 228). Yet ur-Rahim admits, “Paul never actually preached the divinity of Jesus, nor the doctrine of Trinity” (Ur-Rahim 2000, 69). And Abu Zahrah contradicts himself when he credits trinitarianism to Paul but then says, “the period of unitarianism, which went to [lasted until] the Council of Nicaea” (Abu Zahra 1965; Ayoub 2007, 228).

3) The Church versus the Ummah of Islam. The Church is mentioned only once by our four Muslim authorities, but it is a critical issue. If Jesus instituted the Church, then the *Ummah* of Islam is excluded from God's people. Ur-Rahim flatly declares: "The Church was not instituted by Jesus" (Ur-Rahim 2000, 225).

4) Paul abandoning Moses and Jesus. In Islamic tradition, Moses and Jesus are the two greatest prophets after Muhammad. Paul's teaching, rather than being built on the foundation of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament revelation of Jesus, is a distortion of all that came before him. His assertion that he is a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" falls on deaf ears in the world of Muslim scholarship. "How is it possible for Paul to annul the law of Moses and Jesus?" asks Rashid Rida (Ayoub 2007, 218). Ur-Rahim concurs: "Paul rejected both the rewritten law of the Jews [rewritten by Jesus] *and* the original Law of Moses" (Ur-Rahim 2000, 71).

5) Paul versus Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas are the historical justification for Muslims to condemn trinitarianism. Barnabas is the leader of a Semitic Unitarian party, and Paul an unrestrained European Trinitarian. Ur-Rahim (2000, 73) summarizes as follows:

Very soon after the disappearance of Jesus, there was a sharp disagreement, followed by a parting of the ways, between the true followers of Jesus and the enthusiastic followers of Paul, which in time was to develop into all-out war between what became the Unitarian church on the one hand, and the Trinitarian church on the other.

6) Paul as an unreliable authority. Finally, Paul's apostolic authority is challenged. Quoting Al-Azhar sheik Abu Zahrah again, Ayoub (Ayoub 2007, 227) writes:

Luke, who is our main source on the apostles, was himself neither a disciple of Christ nor a disciple of his disciples. Therefore, his claim for the apostleship of Paul or any of the other apostles cannot be accepted . . . Paul only called himself the apostle of Christ and not the apostle of God.

Needed: A New Reference Point

So where does this leave us? If Paul is a traitor to the true teaching of Christ, if he is the poisoned wellspring of trinitarianism, to what other source can the Christian faith appeal against Islam's assaults?

Pakistani scholar Sayyid Anwar Ali (Ayoub 2007, 204) honors Peter by calling him "Christ's true vicegerent," no mean title. Throughout the Synoptics, to a lesser extent in John, and across the early chapters of Acts, Peter's influence is considerable. Additionally, he leaves

behind two letters written to expatriate Jewish fellowships in Asia Minor (today the western half of the modern nation of Turkey).

We will briefly note Peter's relationship to Jesus and the other disciples. More important, though, are 1) his leadership of the early Christian community, and 2) the teaching he left behind in his two letters written near the end of his life. This *corpus* constitutes a genuine, albeit fragmentary, "gospel of Peter" that allows us to determine if he was indeed a "Semitic Unitarian."

The "Gospel" of Peter

<p>"None of the gospels are written by people who personally saw and heard the events and words they describe." (Ur-Rahim 2000, 9)</p>
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In Qur'anic terms, Peter is the most trustworthy (*sahih*) witness to the life and teachings of Jesus—an *eyewitness*. He was the first disciple Jesus called, the last one to have a private conversation with him, and one of the three disciples who constituted the innermost circle of Jesus' followers. Scholars agree that Peter did not write a gospel with his own hand. Church history, however, credits Peter as the source of the Gospel of Mark, compiled as Mark traveled with Peter and heard his preaching. Ur-Rahim's statement, however, raises doubts as to whether he ever actually read the gospel accounts he dismisses.

1. Peter's Position Among the Disciples of Jesus.

The preeminence of Peter among the twelve disciples of Jesus is beyond dispute. Just a few of the many references to his position among the disciples of Jesus will suffice.

Peter is always mentioned first (Matt. 4:18; Mark 1:16; Luke 5:1). Jesus visits Peter's house and heals Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8:14; Mark 1:30; Luke 4:38). When Jesus walks across the surface of a storm-tossed lake at night, he invites Peter to join him (Matt 14:29; Mark 6:45; John 6:16). Peter is first to call Jesus "Lord" and worship him. When Jesus asks the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"¹ Peter confidently answers: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20).

Before his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain for prayer. His appearance is "transformed," Moses and Elijah appear on either side of him, and Peter blurts out, "Let's make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one

for Elijah.” In Jerusalem during Jesus’ final week, when Peter asks what will be the sign of the end of history, Jesus prophesies the end of Jewish semi-autonomy under the Romans.

In the Upper Room, Jesus reveals that Peter will betray him (Matt. 26:34; Mark 14:30; Luke 22:34; John 13:38). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter rises to the defense of Jesus, slashing off the ear of the servant of the High Priest (Matt. 26:51; Mark 14:47; Luke 22:50; John 18:10). True to Jesus’ prediction, Peter denies three times that he even knows Jesus (Matt. 26:74; Mark 14:71; Luke 22:57; John 18:26-27).

Three days pass. The women who followed Jesus go to the tomb to anoint his body. There, an angel announces the resurrection, and says, “Go and tell his disciples, *including Peter* . . .” that Jesus is risen and will meet them in Galilee (Mark 16:7). When Peter and John run to the tomb, Peter peers inside and concludes the body has been stolen (Luke 24:24; John 20:3-7).

Later in Galilee, Jesus restores Peter by eliciting a threefold confession of love that undoes Peter’s earlier three denials (John 21:15-17). And in a final walk together on the beach, Jesus reveals how Peter will die. When Peter, possibly out of jealousy, asks after Jesus’ plans for John, Jesus says it is none of Peter’s business.

In a court of law, the testimony of an eyewitness is usually validated by four elements: substantial detail, agreement with other accounts, verifiability, and balance (the bad presented with the good). All four elements are present in the canonical gospel accounts of Peter’s story.

2. Peter’s Post-Resurrection Leadership

As we move from the four canonical gospels into the Book of Acts, the Apostle Paul is most closely associated with the planting of churches across Asia Minor (today’s westernmost third of Turkey) and Greece. But Peter actually dominates Acts for most of the first fifteen chapters from Pentecost through the Council at Jerusalem.

Peter at Pentecost

Pentecost is a Jewish feast on the fiftieth day after Passover (the day after Jesus was crucified). Acts says the resurrected Jesus was continually appearing to his disciples over the forty days between Passover and Pentecost, thus placing the Ascension of Jesus one week before Pentecost.² The disciples and other followers of Jesus were commanded to wait this one week in Jerusalem for the baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5).

During the week of waiting (for the feast day itself, not for some “moment of readiness” in the disciples themselves), Peter conducts a vote to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15-26). The chosen replacement, Matthias, is never heard from again.

Pentecost is a different story. As the Holy Spirit fills the 120 and enables them to speak at least fifteen different languages none of them has learned, the group apparently spills out into the street, mingling with the crowd below. This time, Peter is anointed by the Holy Spirit, not simply driven by a need to lead. His address to the largely Jewish and convert crowd below (assuming he finds a window or balcony in the Upper Room from which to be heard by the masses of people in the street) is prophetic:

- What you hear is direct fulfillment of ancient prophecy;
- The empowering of the Holy Spirit is now made available to men, women, boys and girls of every class, generation, and age to come;
- The Jews enlisted the Gentiles to carry out the execution of Jesus on the cross;
- In fulfillment of prophecy written 1000 years earlier by King David himself, God has raised his Holy One to life again;
- Jesus is beyond doubt the long-awaited Messiah of Israel; and
- All Israel must turn to Jesus in repentance, accept him as Savior and Lord, and be filled with the same Holy Spirit who is at work this day.

In a sermon heard by more than 3000 people, Peter testifies to the divinity of Jesus, his relation as Son to God the Father, his redemptive death on the cross and resurrection three days later, his ability to save all who come to him in repentance, and to the separate and powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all who come to Jesus in faith (Acts 2:1-42). Each affirmation stands in contradiction to a foundational claim of Islam’s prophet and sacred book; none is the product of a canonical gospel writer or the Apostle Paul.

Peter’s Miracles

Ur-Rahim challenges the integrity of the canonical gospel writers when he says, “None of the Gospels are written by people who personally saw and heard the events and words which they describe” (Ur-Rahim 2000, 9). Ayoub, quoting Abu Zahra again, supports him: “The apostle to whom [a sacred book] is revealed . . . must prove his claim by miracles and unbroken

testimony. . . . [N]either the apostles nor the books attributed to them meet these essential conditions” (2007, 227). The “*hadith*” of the Christian Scriptures, however, contradicts Ayoub, ur-Rahim and Abu Zahra.

Peter and the 3000 new followers of Jesus continue to meet in the temple as they have always done. At the gate of the temple one day, Peter commands a beggar “in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene” to get up and walk. The miracle brings 5000 more followers into the Church (Acts 3).

For a brief time, the believers share all their possessions in common. A couple named Ananias and Sapphira sell a piece of property, but keep a portion of the proceeds and then tell Peter they have brought the entire amount as an offering. Peter first rebukes Ananias, then, some hours later, Sapphira—and both are struck dead by God for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5). The anointing of the Holy Spirit is so heavy on Peter that his shadow passing over someone is sufficient for that person to be healed (Acts 5:12-16).

Peter’s ministry increasingly includes the role of evangelist among his leadership responsibilities (Acts 10:32). Near the coastal city of Lydda, his prayer in the name of Jesus restores a man bedridden eight years, and then raises to life a woman named Dorcas who is dearly loved by all the believers (Acts 9).

In these miracles, Peter invokes the name of Jesus as Healer and the source of life itself, the Holy Spirit as both the Spirit of Truth and the daily indwelling Spirit. Peter’s miracles exceed the number performed by any other apostle, including the Apostle Paul, again validating his leadership in the Church and the testimony of his “gospel.”

Peter’s Leadership Before the Temple Authorities

As mentioned earlier, the preaching and miracles that accompany Peter often take place in and around the temple precincts. There, the temple authorities arrest Peter and John in an attempt to stifle this new movement while they can. Peter’s accusation that the Jewish leaders colluded with the Romans to crucify Jesus is simply too dangerous to be left hanging in the air.

In the subsequent interrogation of Peter and John by the Council, Peter again takes the lead in responding to the accusations laid against them:

- Yes, he and John are guilty of praying for a cripple in the name of Jesus and seeing him healed;

- That same Jesus was crucified by the very men now sitting in judgment on Peter and John; and
- No salvation remains for any Jew who rejects the work of Jesus on the cross (Acts 4:1-22).

Unable to devise a punishment for Peter and John that will not incite a riot among the people, the Council frees the two men. But some time later, as Peter's mere shadow brings healing to those he passes by (and further swells the ranks of the followers of Jesus), the high priest and the Sadducees re-arrest Peter and the apostles and throw them in jail. After an angel of the Lord frees them in the night, "Peter and the apostles" (probably the remaining Ten) are all called a third time before the Council. This time the threats of the high priest fall on deaf ears as Peter declares, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29), thus drawing a line in the sand that will divide Jews and so-called "Messianic Jews" for centuries.

Peter at Cornelius' house

Peter's expanding ministry throughout Israel sets the stage for one of the most dramatic events of his career as pastor and leader among his people. It begins with Philip's visit to Samaria, and culminates with Peter's visit to the seacoast garrison town of Caesarea.

One of the "other disciples," Phillip, travels to Samaria. The Samaritan community has its own temple, its own Pentateuch, its own meta-story affirming Samaritan identity as distinct from their Jewish cousins. But Phillip's proclamation of Jesus as Savior, together with his miracles of healing and deliverance, produce a response beyond expectation (Acts 8:1-13).

News of "Phillip's revival" reaches Jerusalem, and the apostles task Peter and John to check it out. Arriving in Samaria, they lay hands on the new believers and pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. Then, on their return to Jerusalem, they preach in Samaritan towns and villages that Peter almost certainly would have had cultural reservations about visiting had the Holy Spirit not obviously been at work in great power.

The ensuing period between the Samaria awakening and the Council at Jerusalem is difficult to determine, but may be as long as several years. Certainly, between Pentecost (Acts 2) and the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15), a period of at least ten years passes, during which the Messianic Church learns to embrace the Samaritan Church. Peter, meanwhile, continues to encourage the predominantly Messianic churches and believers, a path takes him once again to a

Jewish home in the coastal area. This time, he receives a vision that will alter the course of Christian faith for the next twenty centuries, sending it on a global and multi-ethnic trajectory neither he nor his contemporaries can anticipate.

Most evangelical Christians of Western background consider Paul's vision of the Macedonian Call as the key event that propelled the gospel beyond the confines of Judaism and into the predominantly Gentile world of Greece, Rome, Spain, and on into northern Europe. Accordingly and rightfully so, Paul is known as the Apostle to the Gentiles. I would contend, however, that the vision given to Peter on his visit to the home of Simon the Tanner in Joppa was equally missional, if not more so.

The Vision of the Sheet Let Down From Heaven (Acts 10) comes to a conservative, rural Jew still clinging to the cleanliness ordinances of the Mosaic Law. Peter, however, is rigid in his thinking. When the vision itself does not budge him, God has to audibly tell him that the Mosaic Law has fulfilled its purpose and been set aside. No longer will Peter—more than a decade after Christ's atoning death on the cross—be allowed to define "neighbor" as only Jews like himself. From this day forward, Gentles too are "neighbors" deserving to hear the good news of the Kingdom.

The vision Peter receives is not for him alone. Each of the Eleven is equally Jewish, cut out of virtually the same cloth as Peter. It is possible that Matthew is already on his way to Ethiopia, Bartholomew to Armenia, Andrew to Greece, and Thomas to India. But, more likely, they are all as ingrown and narrow in their missiology as Peter himself. But Peter's vision not only releases him to minister in freedom and love to the household of Cornelius, it equally releases his apostolic colleagues to embark on their own unique missions north, east, and south from Jerusalem. Without that release, we might never have heard of Nestorian Christians taking the gospel to the doors of Turkic tribes in Asia, "St. Thomas" Christians in India, or Augustine and the Berber churches of North Africa.

This vision also has enormous implications for the claims of Islam:

- The vision is a direct revelatory act of God in Peter's life, not a tract or epistle he pens with polemic intent;
- The vision and its interpretation run completely counter to all Peter has been taught and practiced as an observant Jew;

- The vision is the initial fulfillment of the great prophetic word of Jesus to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven” (Matt. 16:19).
- God himself—not Peter or Paul—declares both an end to the Mosaic Law, and the beginning of an initiative to the entire non-Jewish world.

Peter Imprisoned a Second Time

Following events at Cornelius’ house, Barnabas and Saul embark on their first missionary journey to Cyprus and beyond. At the same time, the ranks of Messianic believers at home continue to swell. In an apparent effort to bring matters control, Herod Agrippa arrests and executes James the brother of John.³ When he sees how it pleases the Jewish leadership, he orders Peter arrested a second time, and chains him between rotating squads of guards in the most secure part of the prison. It’s preplanned: a trial will find Peter guilty, and he will follow James to his death.

In the middle of the night, however, an angel appears in Peter’s cell. The shackles fall off, the guards are rendered fast asleep, the iron doors swing open, and the angel walks Peter to freedom on the open streets of Jerusalem. Peter immediately goes to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, to inform the Church leadership, and then disappears into hiding (Acts 12:1-19), probably until the death of Herod but not much later.

Implications for Islam.

Muslim authors –perhaps blinded by the wealth of doctrinal material in Paul’s epistles that undercuts the foundations of Islam– have failed, without exception, to take stock of Peter. But Peter’s life, lived in the shadow of Jesus himself and filled with one miracle after another in which God affirms Peter’s leadership, stands as a massive “rock of testimony” that Islam cannot simply ignore. And as we will see in the next two sections, Peter’s testimony to Jesus Christ stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the greatest of Paul’s affirmations written from a Roman prison cell.

3. Peter In Mission

Soon after the disappearance of Jesus, there was a sharp disagreement, followed by a parting of the ways, between the true followers of Jesus and the enthusiastic followers of Paul, which in time was to develop into all-out war between what became the Unitarian church on the one hand, and the Trinitarian church on the other (Ur-Rahim 2000, 73).

The Council at Jerusalem.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Cornelius' house catches the entire Jewish leadership in Jerusalem off-guard. Accepting Samaritans into the household of faith as brothers who had simply strayed from the truth was one thing; making room for the entire Gentile world was quite another. Standing at this crossroad, the Church could easily have taken a wrong step and "forbidden the kingdom" to a world beyond its greatest imaginings. Without the second half of Acts, without the letters of the Apostle Paul, without the Book of Hebrews, most of Revelation could never have been written, leaving heaven more like a mono-cultural Messianic worship service than a gathering of the nations offering up a thunderous cataract of praise. With this in mind, it is not overreach to say that Acts 15 is perhaps the greatest historical chapter in the New Testament outside the gospels themselves.

Although Paul, Barnabas, and James are key actors in this event, Peter starts it all. His visit to the house of Cornelius and the resultant outpouring of the Holy Spirit threaten the assumed birthright of Messianic Judaism to leadership of the Christian faith. The sect of believing Pharisees proposes a solution: Gentile followers of Christ must be circumcised and come under the authority of the Law of Moses. Paul and Barnabas respond by reminding the council of all God has done in bringing Gentiles to salvation. Then Peter, for the last time in the biblical record, takes center stage to deliver what is without question one of the most missional statements in the entire New Testament:

Brothers, you all know that *God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles* so that they could hear the Good News and believe. God knows people's hearts, and *he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us*. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that *we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus* (Acts 15:7-11).

[Emphasis mine]

Once again, Peter is the linchpin that holds the Church and the *missio Dei* together. His challenge to the council gives James three “dots” to connect back to the prophecy of Amos 500 years earlier:

- This ingathering of the Gentiles to Christ is not our (Peter’s or Paul’s) doing; it is a *missio Dei*;
- The Mosaic Law (and specifically circumcision) failed to gather “the nations” into the household of faith, and has now been cast aside by God; and
- There is now only one way of salvation for all: by “undeserved grace”.

When Muslim authors—such as Ayoub, ur-Rahim, Khalidi, and Abu Zahra—attack the Apostle Paul, they make the error of judging Christian history and Scripture by their own scriptures and traditions. The driving theology of both Peter and Paul grew out of a prophetic vision of global inclusion in divine grace. The global conquest and submission to *sharia* law demanded by Islam simply cannot comprehend this, any more than the post-19th century universe of sub-atomic particle physics could be comprehended by the perspectives of pre-19th century Newtonian physics.

4. Peter’s Churches: Two Letters

The “insidious error” began with Paul, who had no authority to transmit from Jesus, being neither one of his disciples nor even a disciple of his disciples. Paul . . . was a scheming genius who constructed a Christianity foreign to the teachings of Christ and his disciples, a Christianity concocted from diverse elements of Graeco-Roman philosophy and religion (Ayoub 2007, 226).

Only indirect references to Peter appear from this point forward. In Galatians 2, Paul refers to a time when he sharply reminds Peter that Jewish *kashrut* laws are the enemy of salvation. Only by believing in Christ can anyone—Jew or Gentile—be made right in God’s sight (Gal 2:1-16, and possibly Acts 15:1-3).

Some Muslim authors cite this rebuke as proof of a doctrinal watershed between Paul the Trinitarian and Peter the Unitarian. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Peter is simply “being Peter,” a rural Jew momentarily torn by his conservative upbringing. By the time Peter and Paul reach the Council at Jerusalem, both are on the same page. That Peter does not “cave” on the council floor testifies to their unity, not to any disunity.

Let's turn now to the final piece of Peter's legacy in scripture: his two letters.

Geographical Location

The first of Peter's two letters suggests he has a following in Asia Minor, in lands first plowed by Paul and Barnabas. "Pontus, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" are all Roman provinces on the Anatolian plateau. Pontus is the southeastern Black Sea coastal area; Cappadocia the area of volcanic "fairy chimneys" to the southeast of Turkey's capital, Ankara; Asia the large province south of the Sea of Marmara; and Bithynia the area east of the Sea of Marmara. Of the four, Paul's missionary work only focused on the western half of Asia and the southern coast of Anatolia.

How the other three areas were evangelized and by whom is not revealed in Scripture. From Acts 16 on, the story belongs to Paul. It is safe to say, however, that Peter is not idle during Paul's time in Asia Minor and Europe. Peter cannot sit still, and brings his strength of personality, rather than scholarship, to the service of the gospel. We know he travelled with his wife (1 Cor. 9:5), and may have spent time in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12). Beyond that, Peter's day-to-day trail goes cold.

Key Teachings

The authenticity of Peter's two letters has been debated, but many Early Church leaders—Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Cyprian, and Tertullian in particular—accepted them as genuine. This much is important: unlike Paul's letters to the churches, Peter's letters plow little new ground. His observation that the prophets wondered for whom their words were intended is a lovely glimpsed from the Holy Spirit into the inner workings of *ilham* (revelation). In his second letter, he continues by saying no (true) prophet ever spoke out of his own understanding or initiative. The Holy Spirit moved on them, and they spoke "from God" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Peter writes to churches off the beaten track, to believers "living as strangers," which helps explain the general tone of both letters. He writes out of pastoral concern for the integrity of the believers' daily walk with Christ and before the communities where they live as persecuted minorities. "I will always work hard," he says, "to make sure you always remember these things after I am gone" (2 Peter 1:15).

Peter Recounts His own “Gospel”

From Peter’s earliest days with Jesus to the letter written shortly before his death in Rome, there is consistency.

1) Peter the Faithful Eye-Witness. Peter places great weight on his being an eye-witness to the life of Jesus: “I too am a witness to the sufferings of Christ” (1 Peter 5:1).

We were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendor with our own eyes when he received honor and glory from God the Father. The voice from the majestic glory of God said to him, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” We ourselves heard that voice from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain (2 Peter 1:16-18).

2) Peter the Trinitarian: Christ is Lord. Any thought of Peter being a “Semitic Unitarian” is contradicted by the Trinitarian references in his letters:

- “We have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).
- “[The ransom God paid to save you] was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God (1 Peter 1:19).
- “Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit” (1 Peter 3:18).
- “Christ has gone to heaven. He is seated in the place of honor next to God, and all the angels and authorities and powers accept his authority (1 Peter 3:22).
- “This faith was given to you because of the justice and fairness of Jesus Christ, our God and Savior” (2 Peter 1:1).

3) Peter’s definitive declaration: Paul is not the Enemy. Finally, Peter declares Paul’s letters to be Scripture itself, denying any supposed theological rupture between the two of them.

And remember, our Lord’s patience gives people time to be saved. This is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him—speaking of these things in *all of his letters*. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, *just as they do with other parts of Scripture* (2 Peter 3:16) [emphasis mine].

Knowing Peter’s personality, it is not remotely possible that he is simply being kind to Paul. Peter does not merely affirm the weight of Paul’s writings, he places them alongside those

of Moses, David, and Isaiah. They are radiant with the *shekinah* of the Holy Spirit, “transfigured” on the mount of biblical inspiration.

Conclusion: Peter’s “Gospel”: A Rebuke to Islam

“In process of time it became almost absolutely impossible [sic] to distinguish history from fable, or truth from error...” (Ur-Rahim 2000, 75).

The Christian who journeys into Christology as defined by Muslim scholars discovers a land of fantasy and misrepresentation.

Three thousand years of meticulously recorded Judeo-Christian biblical history, prophecy, and teaching are swept aside, counted as mere fabrications by Jews and Christians to justify their abandoning the true Unitarianism of the Qur’an in favor of a perverted Trinitarianism of human devising (Khalidi 2003, 12). Here, the Jesus of the canonical gospels is morphed into a severe, ascetic, anorexic Sufi saint in an itchy woolen robe who eats nothing but barley and prays all night (Khalidi 2003, 133).

It is a world where even the standards to assay the *hadith* of the Muslim faith story are suspended, where the imaginings of any Muslim thinker on the life, teachings, miracles, and passing of Jesus are accorded greater authority than the historical accounts of Peter who actually was present on the Mount of Beatitudes and in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Khalidi’s summary (2003, 44–45) of the importance of Jesus in Islamic thought is typical, and revealing:

The Islamic Jesus is, after all, a compound figure, filtered and transmitted in a particular environment. But even if we think of him as an artificial creation, he seems to be an unusual instance of the way in which one religion reaches out to borrow the spiritual heroes of another religion in order to reinforce its own piety. . . . Here is a Jesus who on the one hand is shorn of his Christology, but who on the other is endowed with attributes which render him meta-historical and even, so to speak, meta-religious. In his Muslim habitat, Jesus becomes an object of intense devotion, reverence, and love . . . and becomes a living and vital moral voice, demanding to be heard by all who seek a unity of profession and witness.

Were Christian scholars to “borrow” Muhammad, see him “shorn” of his prophethood and turned into a “meta-historical, meta-religious” Christian, the Muslim world would be outraged. Yet, Khalidi considers it the “right” of Islam to strip Christ of his Christology (his

divinity, majesty, eternality, *kenosis*, Passion, atonement, resurrection, glorification, Parousia, and victory over sin, hell, and the grave) and declare him a mere “living and vital moral voice.” What towering arrogance!

In every courtroom drama, a parade of witnesses is *de rigueur*. Some know a portion of the truth. Others twist it. Some are flat-out liars. Others tearfully, passionately believe their version of events to be the whole story. The judge and jury weigh each new piece of evidence, scrutinize each face for truthfulness or prevarication. Yet only one witness is needed to render all other testimony null and void: the unshakable eyewitness.

The Apostle Peter is that witness. First-chosen among all the disciples, most intimate eyewitness to Jesus’ 3 ½ years of ministry, to Jesus’ crucifixion, to his post-resurrection appearances, to his ascension, to the first decade of the growth of the Church, to the God-sent vision that forever changed the course of the Christian movement, and to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that effected and empowered the *missio Dei* to the nations.

While examination of Jesus by Muslims must always be welcome, let it be done by Muslims who have actually read and digested the story of Peter’s “gospel”—his discipleship, preaching, leadership, miracles, and eyewitness testimony. Anything less is mere self-serving speculation, and unworthy of being labeled scholarship.

Appendix: Brief Biographies

(Included due to the unfamiliarity of most of the Muslim authors to a Western audience.)

Abu Zahra, Muhammad (b. Egypt 1898, d. 1974). Professor of Islamic Law, Cairo University; member of Al-Azhar Academy of Islamic Research.

Ayoub, Mahmoud (b. Lebanon, 1938). Faculty Associate in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Hartford Seminary.

Khalidi, Tarif (b. Palestine, 1938). Shaykh Zayid Chair in Islamic and Arabic Studies, American University of Beirut.

Parrinder, Geoffrey (1910-2005). Missionary in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire. Methodist minister. Professor of Comparative Religion, King's College, London.

Sanneh, Lamin (b. Gambia, 1942). D. Willis James Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School and Professor of History at Yale University.

Ur-Rahim, Muhammad Ata. Retired Pakistani Army colonel. BT, LLB and MA at the Muslim University of Aligarh. Completed studies in education at the Universities of Edinburgh and London. Self-published author of several books on Christ and Christology.

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¹ All quotations from the New Living Translation (NLT)

² Fifty days minus the 40 days of "appearances," minus the "three days" when Jesus was in the grave.

³ Not James, the brother of Jesus, who officiated over the Council at Jerusalem.