Ibn Ḥazm’s and al-Ghazzālī’s Most Divergent Responses to Christianity: A Question of Epistemology and Hermeneutics

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Muslims consider themselves the heirs of both Judaism and Christianity. However, the Islamic religion takes the Qurʾān to be a more faithful expression of divine revelation than the Torah or the Gospels, and therefore often ‘corrects’ biblical narratives. This has to do with the Islamic doctrine of taḥrīf, which states that Jews and Christians have either distorted the ‘wording’ (taḥrīf al-naṣṣ) or the ‘meaning’ (taḥrīf al-maʿānī) of their respective sacred texts. The following Qurʾānic versions of some biblical stories are representative samples of the various types of ‘discrepancies’:

• Ḥawwa’ (Eve) was not created from Adam’s rib (this version only appears in the Ḥadīth, Islam’s second scriptural text). Also, she is not responsible for the Fall. Adam and Eve both disobeyed God and, accordingly, were punished equally.

• Contextual clues in the Qurʾānic narrative suggest that Ismāʿīl (i.e., Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arabs through Hagar)—not Isḥāq (Isaac)—was meant to be sacrificed (Q XXXVII, 102–105).

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1 There is an earlier study of these two Muslim philosopher-theologians by Roger Arnaldez, “Controverses théologiques chez Ibn Hazm de Cordoue et Ghazali,” Les Mardis de Dār el-Salām, Sommaire MCMLIII: 209–248. Arnaldez’s study is very rich in information. It is, however, of a more descriptive nature and, accordingly, contributes little to the comparative approach taken in the present essay.

2 On ‘Biblicizing’ (the Qurʾānic narrative) and ‘Islamicizing’ (the Bible) as means for Islam’s double appropriation of the biblical tradition, see Sidney H. Griffith, “Arguing from Scripture: The Bible in the Christian/Muslim Encounter in the Middle Ages,” in Scripture and Pluralism. Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plurals Worlds of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and Thomas E. Burman (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 29–58.

King Suleymān (Solomon) is a Muslim, and Bilqīs (as the Queen of Sheba is known to Muslims) converts to Islam after meeting him (Q XXVII, 22–44).

Maryam (Mary) grows up in the Temple where she is placed in the care of Zakariyyā (Zacharias) and receives religious education (Q III, 35–37). As in the Gospel she is a virgin-mother, but she has no male companion (i.e., no Joseph) and thus raises her son ʿĪsā (Jesus) all by herself. As a result, she comes across as a much more independent figure than in Christianity.

ʿĪsā is not the son of God, but just the son of Mary. Accordingly, his genealogy is reflected in his name, ʿĪsā ibn Maryam, which may explain why Mary is the only woman in the Qurʾān to be called by name (for the identification of other female biblical figures one needs to rely on contextual clues). Therefore, Jesus cannot be one with God, which is why there may be no theological basis for the Christian doctrine of Holy Trinity in Islam. Muslims address Jesus as ‘Sayyiduna ʿĪsā’ (Our Lord Jesus) or ‘al-Masīḥ’ (The Messiah).

As the Qurʾānic chapter named after Maryam states, Jesus performs his first miracle as a newborn by making a palm tree grow dates to help sustain his mother (Q XIX, 24–26). He also defends her against accusations of unchastity (Q XIX, 30–33).

Finally, Jesus does not die on the cross (Q IV, 157). According to Islamic teaching, God would never submit one of his prophets to such humiliation and pain.

Clearly, the Qurʾānic narrative is not entirely compatible with the canonical books of the Bible. One should keep in mind, however, that the ancient Christian communities in Muslim lands happened to represent a great variety of Christological views and did not even agree on which books were canonical. Nevertheless, there is still sufficient overlap between the Muslim and Christian records to grant Mary and Jesus, for instance, a prominent place in Islam’s sacred history. Many Muslim theologians go as far as to assign Jesus a major role on the Day of Judgment, a role second only to Prophet Muḥammad. For this purpose, they rely on a hadīth (narration) preserved solely by Abū Hurayra, a close companion of the Prophet. Abū Hurayra, being the transmitter of over 5300 ahadīth (pl. of hadīth), was deemed a reliable source. Nevertheless, considering the extremely narrow textual basis, acceptance of the hadīth in question by some leading theologians like al-Ghazzālī may also be read as a testament to their veneration of al-Masīḥ.

The thesis of the present essay is that the degree to which Muslim theologians are at all prepared to examine Christian teachings, however critically, depends on a pre-existing hermeneutics. Basically, this entails that their attitude towards Christianity, and any other religion for that matter, is determined