CHAPTER 15

The Infallibility of the Prophets and the Fallible Jesus in Islam: On the Transformation of a Jewish Story into an Islamic Anti-Christian Polemic

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A rare opportunity to study the relationship among the three monotheistic religions arises from the analysis of one single story. This is the case with the story at hand, written by the tenth-century Islamic author Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandi (983 CE).

After analyzing some of the historical and literary ramifications of this story stemming from an ascetical Islamic milieu, we will trace the Jewish sources of the Islamic story about the erring Jesus. By following the paths along which the Talmudic stories have been transformed into one or more Islamic stories about Jesus, our insight into the respective religions will be deepened.

15.1 The Islamic Story about Jesus in Its Historical and Literary Ramifications

The portrayal of Jesus in the Qurʾān is characterized by a highly polemical bent. Time and again, the Qurʾān warns the hearer that God has no son. Jesus is even taken to task by God: “Did you tell mankind: take me and my mother as two gods beside God?” (Q. 5:116). Of course the Islamic Jesus denies having said that. A typical Christian Arab rebuttal wonders at what time God may have said this to Jesus: was it before Muhammad, in which case Jesus would be with God, and apparently divine? Or on the Last Day, which presupposes in Muhammad or in the Qurʾān a clairvoyance of things that have not yet happened?1

The context of this and similar mentions of Jesus in the Qurʾān is a polemic directed at two central Christian tenets: the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity.

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1 Barbara Roggema pointed out that this Christian polemical argument against the conversation between Jesus and God can be found in Papyrus Heidelberg inv. Arab 438, which contains one of the oldest Christian polemics against Islam. The lecture will be published in a collection of articles: Barbara Roggema and Yannis Papadogiannakis, eds., Patterns of Argumentation and Exchange of Ideas in Late Antiquity and Early Islam.
In addition, the fact of the crucifixion remains a bone of contention (Q. 4:157).² Although the Qurʾān identifies Jesus both with God’s w/Word and with His s/Spirit (Q. 4:171)—a fact that did not escape Christian Arab authors³—the Qurʾān emphasizes that God has no partner. In the hadith, the ninth-century post-Qur’anic stories about Muhammad, both he and Jesus are referred to as God’s slave or servant and God’s messenger.⁴

After the Qurʾān, other dimensions of the Islamic view of Jesus started to develop.⁵ The hadith, collections of stories reported to have been told by Muhammad, ascribe an important role to Jesus at the End of Times. Paradoxically, this motif went along with an emphasis on Jesus’s supposed ignorance as to the specific eschatological events. Jesus asks the angel Jibrīl (Gabriel) when the Hour will come, but Gabriel does not know it either.⁶

² Although the famous Islamic author al-Ṭabarī in his Tafsīr a.l. interprets this passage as referring to some else having taken the place of Jesus, I assume that the Qurʾān wants to emphasize that evil forces could not really harm Jesus, who, protected by God, had been taken up to heaven. This would bring the Qurʾān quite close to Christian persuasions. Not many Muslims would agree with this interpretation though.

³ Cf. as one example among many, how Paul of Antioch (twelfth century CE) proves both Jesus’s divinity and the Trinity from the Qurʾān. See Herman Teule, “Paul of Antioch’s Attitude towards the Jews and the Muslims: His Letter to the Nations and the Jews,” in The Three Rings: Studies into the Triolgue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, ed. Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis, and Pim Valkenberg (Peeters: Leuven) 91–110.

⁴ Bukhārī, Saḥīḥ IV, 644. For similarities between Muhammad and Jesus, see Robert Tottoli, Biblical Prophets in the Qurʾān and Muslim Literature (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), 121.


⁶ Abdallah ibn al-Mubarak (d. 797), Al-Zuhd, 771228, quoted from Miguel Asin y Palacios, “Logia et agrapha domini Jesus apud moslemicos scriptores, asceticos praeertim, usitata,” Patrologia Orientalis 19 (1926), 585n98; translation in Khalidi, The Muslim Jesus, 54. Cf. Qurʾān 7:187, the same admission of not knowing the End is attributed to Muhammad. Comparing Jesus to other prophets is a characteristic feature in the Islamic description of Jesus. Apparently the statement of the gospel that even the Son does not know the Hour, but the Father alone (Mark 13:32, already mitigated in Matthew 24:36!) was known to this eighth-century author, who ignores Jesus being addressed as Son and God’s appellation as Father, but retains the notion of Jesus not knowing the End. An intra-Muslim polemic against