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12/10/18 Historical Jesus and Muhammad:

A comparative overview of debates, discussions, and trends in both fields

Jesus and Muhammad are two fascinating figures in world history. Jesus a figure much admired in the Western world for preaching God’s love even holds an exalted status in Islam as another Messenger of Allah. Meanwhile, Muhammad the beloved Prophet of all Muslims around the globe is applauded by some non-Muslims for his political shrewdness and military strategies. Both of these figures fit the archetype of the ideal preacher-leader, thus providing hope and inspiration for believers who wish to fulfill their present needs. While Jesus may have more admirers in the Western world, far more Muslims vociferously defend the honor and reputation of the last messenger of God. Such deep attachment with two Middle Eastern men who lived ordinary lives until their middle ages, makes one wonder, why they have continued to capture popular imagination long after the deaths?

A more interesting question asks, how have the scholarly study of the *historical* Jesus and the *historica*l Muhammad evolved since its inception? What new alternate portraits have emerged of these figures, and what direction are the fields as mentioned above heading in? Are scholars of Biblical and Islamic studies any closer to capturing an essence of Jesus and Muhammad, just as the writers of the canonical Gospels and as the transmitters of hadith collections believed they did? To answer these questions and more this paper, in a non-exhaustive manner, explores the evolution of study of historical Jesus and the study of historical Muhammad together. In P*art I: Study of Historical Jesus,* I briefly summarize how Jesus is remembered in the Christian tradition. Then this paper proceeds towards the opinion of Biblical studies scholars who challenge believers’ assumptions, and how Christian scholars who defend their theological positions against such skeptics. The remainder of this section discusses current debates taking place within Biblical studies, the kind assumptions regarding Jesus which are being reexamined, and whether a possibility of retrieving the historical Jesus exists. Part II of this paper: *Study of Historical Muhammad* also summarizes how Muslims view Prophet Muhammad and his career. Then the paper examines how the study of Muhammad emerged in Western scholarship, what the contributions of some exceptional minds in Islamic Studies did, what certainties do scholars have regarding Muhammad and his environment? The second half of this section also analyzes some obstacles facing scholars of Islam and asks whether they believe they can recover a historical Muhammad. In conclusion, a brief mention of biases in both fields as well as benefits of interdisciplinary collaborations is discussed.

Part I: Study of Historical Jesus- Beginnings, contributions, and believers’ bias

According to Christian doctrine, Jesus was born in Palestine, in Bethlehem in 6 B.C. His mother Mary conceived him miraculously as a virgin and remained so even after his birth. Mary was engaged to Joseph a humble carpenter, who raised Jesus as his son, in the city of Nazareth, and also taught Jesus the trade of carpentry. After being recognized by John the Baptist as the Son of God, Jesus was baptized at the age of 30 and then wandered into the desert in Judea, to meditate and fast for 40 days. After successfully resisting Satan’s temptations in the desert, Jesus returned to the city of Galilee and began preaching his version of God’s message for two years. While in Galilee, Jesus attracted several followers including the esteemed 11 apostles, excluding off course Judas, who would later betray Christ. Among the 12 there was Peter, Matthew, Thomas, to name a few, as well as Mary Magdalen, a Jewish woman who traveled, ate, accompanied, and learned from Jesus personally. Jesus’s centrally teachings included; the prophecy of coming Kingdom of Heaven, blissful eternal life for the poor, the meek, and the oppressed, loving and forgiving one’s enemies, and forming a community of believers on earth to fulfill the coming of God’s kingdom. For the believer nothing about Jesus ordinary, neither his birth nor his death.

Jesus was captured, arrested, and eventually crucified by the orders of the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, in 30 AD which fell on a Friday. Three days after his death, on a Sunday, Mary Magdalene discovered Jesus’ tomb to be empty. Jesus appeared before her, Thomas, and before all of the 11 apostles in flesh and blood. Jesus stayed on earth for forty more days and then ascended to heaven by the will of the Holy Father. Through his selfless sacrifice to save all of humanity, Jesus became the lord, shepherd, and Messiah for the believers. His crucifixion served as the turning point in human history where for the first and last time, God intervened and freed men from the burden of their original sin, by demanding the sacrifice of his only son. Believers hold dearly to the theological portrait of Jesus painted above. However, for the skeptical scholar, it is worth examining in what ways does the academic study of the historical Jesus challenge the confident image of a theological Jesus.

The first serious challenge came from the form critics camp. Form criticism as a method categorized biblical material into several different literary genres, such as parables or sayings, to discover the original form of such materials, and discovering something about the historical Jesus. Relying upon the criterion of authenticity to parse authentic material from inauthentic, one of form criticism’s grand masters, Rudolf Bultmann, concluded that a kernel of Jesus’ true teachings was preserved in the New Testament thanks to the frequency of rabbinic parables which occur there (Peters, 1991, 295). Bults- 60mann's students including Ernst Kasemann and Gunther Bornkamm used the criterion of dissimilarity and redaction criticism, to claim that early Christian community had created the image of Jesus as a son of God and not Jesus himself (Peters, 1991, 295). Overall form critics firmly believed that “the tradition about Jesus is a servant to the faith and has been from the beginning” (Keith, 438). However, they also remained hopeful that a residue of authentic material could be recovered by arranging and studying the Gospel narratives as individual literary units.

While the form critics were instrumental in critically examining the Bible as a literary source and recovering some traces of the historical Jesus, Elaine Pagel’s *Gnostic Gospel* completely transformed the way both believers and non-believers would regard the role of early Church in its representation of Jesus. Pagel’s great accomplishment was making use of the Gnostic Gospels found in the library of Nag Hamadi, discovered during 1945 in Egypt. A central aspect of Gnosticism included a desire of becoming one with the transcendental true God, through a secretive and mystical process of introspection. Gnostic Gospels then bring forth a radically different image of Jesus, as encouraging his disciples to look within themselves rather than to him for guidance. No doubt his image and other material within Gnostic Gospels such as; The *Gospel of Thomas*, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*,and *The Gospel of Mary* gravely offended Orthodox Christians, who labeled these as “heretical” inventions.

Pagel's informs her readers that all the Gnostic Gospels found in Nag Hamadi were Coptic translations from some 1,500 years ago of “still more ancient manuscripts” which probably first appeared in Greek around 120-150 AD, and even may contain older traditions than the New Testament (Pagels, xvi). Pagels’ examination of Gnostic Gospels highlights the great power struggle which ensued during the early years of Christianity and how central tenets of Christian faith were constructed to confer legitimacy on to a select group of men. Pagels explains the canonical gospels confer authority on to an exclusive group of apostles such as Peter, who claimed to have witnessed Jesus’ resurrection first hand, though “we have only second-hand testimony from believers who affirm this and skeptics who deny it” (Pagels, 9).

Gnostic Gospels counter the apostles' version of events and assert that any individual’s vision of Jesus was valid, such as Mary Magdelene who was first to witness the risen Jesus. Gnostic writers also emphasize an intimate relationship shared between Jesus and Mary Magdelen, as she was taught the secrets of the kingdom of heaven and kissed on the mouth often by Jesus, offending many of his other disciples (Pagels, 77). In Pagel’s analysis, the Gnostic Christians did not recognize the authority of the Church, nor of the 11 Apostles, nor of their version of Jesus as a human son of God who died on the cross. For them, Jesus was a divine figure who descended on earth to share some secret teachings such as “whoever will drink from my mouth will become as I am” (Pagels, 157). While many believers rejected and continued to reject the validity of Gnostic Gospels in understanding the power struggles present between different groups in early Christianity, Pagel’s work offers a valuable and far more interesting portrait of Jesus than presented by Orthodoxy.

In contrast, some believing scholars such as Richard Buckram view the New Testament Gospels as far more historically reliable than the Gnostic Gospels. The former offer rich, biographical information on Jesus, from his birth and early ministry years, up until his death and ultimate resurrection. Meanwhile, Gnostic Gospels in Bauckham’s opinion offers very little making “no attempt to tell the story of Jesus’ historical life” (p.8). While he gives some weight to the *Gospel of Thomas* as a potential “historical source for Jesus” Bauckham still contends that its value remains uncertain. Bauckham admits that *Gospel of Thomas* contains some material independent of the canonical Gospels as well as other sayings which resemble NT material, yet the differences can be explained away as simply a Gnostics interpretation of Jesus’ sayings. However, several sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* are confounding, confusing, and refuse to go away easily, for instance, "I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.” How should a believer interpret this saying when Jesus himself is declaring that he is neither the apostles’ teacher nor their leader? This saying highlights a central tenet of Gnostic teachings, transcending the authority of a master, something Jesus seems to be encouraging exactly here. Bauckham’s lack of alternative explanation for the saying quoted above only weakens his critic of the *Gospel of Thomas* as a collection of Jesus’ sayings interpreted a Gnostic way.

Another believing scholar Michael F. Bird displays great confidence in the historical reliably and uniqueness of the canonical Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, since their presentation of the virgin birth, does not parallel any Old Testament stories of barren women giving birth. According to Bird, it is highly unlikely then that writers of the four Gospels “would have conjured up [Jesus’] conception out of thin air based purely on Old Testament precedents” (p.19). For, however, Mary’s virgin birth can explained as heavily influenced by Jesus’ image as the son of God, which required an extraordinary birth, and simultaneous elevation of Mary’s status as chosen by the holy spirit. However, Bird continues to assert that Mary’s virgin birth does not imply a human-divine sexual union trope as present in some Ancient Near Eastern religions, thus making it a unique incident and authentic event (20).

The Gospels’ recounting of Jesus miracles and exorcism distinguishes him from other similar healers in Palestine since Jesus embodied an unmediated authority and spoke on behalf of God as if intimately acquainted with him. According to Bird, “Mark’s account gives the embarrassing element which early church would be unlikely to invent, that Jesus could not perform any miracles in Nazareth because of the lack of faith” (21). As an academic Bird does admit that the “Kingdom of God” is an elusive topic in the Gospels however as a believer, he remains certain that Jesus preferred the title of Christ since he was the rightful son of God. Unsurprisingly Bird also agrees with Bauckham’s dating of the canonical gospels of Mark as the earliest “written around ad 65–75. Matthew's and Luke's Gospels date from at least a little later in the 1st century, while John's Gospel the last of the four to be written dated in the last decade of the century” (Bauckham, 10).

Bible Studies scholars like Bird and Bauckham have expended considerable energy on the canonical or officially accepted Gospels since that is the only written material available to them on Jesus. Such scholars and others in Biblical studies subdivide the four gospels into a “Synoptic Gospels” of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, since all three report similar incidents and use exact phrases or wording at times. John’s Gospel is given a separate category since it includes material not found in the first three. Among Matthew and Luke, however, there are instances of overlapping material, which isn't available in Mark’s Gospels. This overlap led scholars to hypothesize of Q (*Quelle*—source) a collection of Jesus sayings and quotes, which formed Matthew and Luke’s Gospel material.

One interesting debate still raging within New Testament scholarship is to what extent is Q attainable? Some scholars hold that it cannot be entirely recovered as it has been lost, and can only be vaguely accessed from Matthew and Luke’s account. Others believe that John’s Gospel served as “a formative source for Q” but off course such claims cannot be relied upon unless presented with concrete evidence (Foster, 213). One of the most challenging obstacles which remains for Biblical studies scholars is to explain, how did the Q source, if it was present in its oral stages and circulated in Jesus’s language Aramaic, come to be written down in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke’s which are written in Greek? Put differently, was Q ever written down in Aramaic and then translated into Greek? If yes that should mean having an original Aramaic written source Q and a Greek written translation Q1.

In response to the Q hypothesis and the stated above questions, Professor of New Testament Language Paul Foster adds that an original oral layer of Gospel tradition no doubt would have circulated in early Christian communities. He reaches this conclusion by analyzing that though the period between oral transmission and written gospels is short since “few scholars would see the Gospel of Mark as the first instance of Jesus tradition taking a writing form… many theorize a pre-Markan passion narrative” (207). Despite his analysis, a lack of sufficient evidence leads Foster to conclude that scholars today cannot successfully retrieve a prewritten oral stage of Q from the Gospels (207). Furthermore since the writers of Gospels were not objective historians whose agenda was to reconstruct the reality as it occurred, but rather to console believers who believed in Jesus as the son of God, their recollections and account of Jesus are bound to be biased. Hence Foster sees a heavy reliance upon the New Testament Gospels as historical materials as problematic and questions the reliability of memory studies. He questions whether the use of memory in reconstructing the life of Jesus can be helpful since, “we have no cause to imagine that those who remembered him (*Jesus)* were at any movement immune to the usual deficiencies of recall (Foster, 201). Therefore in Foster’s opinion methods from the field memory studies needs to be discarded for other sounder methods.

In the midst of such debates and disagreements, other scholars are attempting to lead the way of biblical revisionism by challenging taken for granted knowledge, such as the fact that Jesus was born a “Jew” and that his followers were Christians. According to University of Leeds Professor Keith Elliot’s article, the terms Jewish and Christians are both are misnomers, which do not adequately reflect how Jesus and his group of believers chose to label themselves. Elliot reminds his readers that groups often have multiple categories to describe themselves, some name or labels meant to used with “in groups” members only, while others are used when interacting with out-group members.

Since in the ancient Near Ancient, a person’s identity was dependent upon his or her family, tribe, and place of birth, thus calling Jesus of Nazareth or a Nazarene is appropriate as he was raised there (Elliot, 122). While scholars do not have any evidence reliable or questionable which would highlight how Jesus preferred to identify himself within group and outgroups, “indirect evidence does show how others identified him in the New Testament”(Elliot, 126). Thus Jesus was misidentified as Judeans by outsiders and non-believers meanwhile the preferred name for him, and his group of followers was Israelite, as he reportedly states, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (ibid). Based on this saying Keith is quick to conclude that the House of Israel was the preferred collective marker for Jesus’ followers to be used within the in-group members (139).

For skeptical scholars such as James Crossley, there are many glaring gaps in the theological version of events on Jesus and the origins of Christianity. He remains adamant that very little can be verified about Jesus, especially during years form his childhood and young adulthood years. Countering the Christian account of Jesus’ miraculous birth Crossley writes “the circumstances were probably like that of any conventional peasant birth, and he had two normal human parents probably Joseph and Mary (2008, 2). He supports this conclusion since no serious scholar can verify Christian believers’ faith in the virgin birth and since Jesus’ miraculous birth does not appear in Mark, the earliest account of Jesus’ life. Furthermore, scholars do not have any independent evidence to prove if Jesus worked as a carpenter, if he mediated in the Judean desert, and which sources specifically inspired his belief in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Crossley finds the terms “Kingdom of Heaven” and “The Kingdom of God” to be puzzling since the New Testament never specifies what it meant by them. Additionally as Jesus prediction that the Kingdom would occur in the lives of some disciples did not materialize, the early church had to “employ creative interpretation” to explain away this incorrect prediction (p.6). However, he finds it plausible that Jesus may have been a “legal debater” however one wonders, if true then where did Jesus develop the skills necessary for the art of debating? Moreover, who were his teachers who imparted such skills to Jesus?

Crossley also finds it plausible that Jesus deeply cared for the poor those disenfranchised in Galilean society. This then explains why he harshly criticized the wealthy and why he comforts the poor with his message of a better life in the hereafter. However, as to Jesus’ exceptional healing, miracles, and exorcism skills, Crossley argues that that “Jesus was hardly the only healer and exorcist around as he notes himself in Mark 9.38- 40 … there is no good reason why we should make an exception for Jesus's healing and exorcisms” p.12. He also challenges the idea that Jesus preferred the title “the son of Man” and views it as another creation by the early Church. Additionally, he adds that the resurrection accounts of Gospels are conflicting since Mark ends his account with only describing that both Marys fled after they discovered the tomb empty, and the possibility of a bodily resurrection is offered as a possible explanation for missing body rather an actual occurrence. Crossley adds that in Judaism the idea of bodily resurrection and belief in an afterlife was prevalent thus perhaps this is an instance of Jewish influence, but logically“There is no serious evidence in favor of the bodily resurrection of Jesus” (63).

Lastly, Crossley takes issue with John’s Gospel which usually serves as the most quoted source to confirm believing scholars’ biases. Crossley admits that John’s Gospel differs from the Synoptic Gospels since it includes Jesus’s “I am” sayings, the incident of the last supper, Jesus washing the feet of his disciples' episode, and his resurrection in front of multiple disciples which confirms his role as the Son of God (110). Overall Crossley does believe that a figure called Jesus existed, however, this figure was a humble preacher and healer. The image of Jesus as possessing superhuman abilities was a creation by early Church and Orthodoxy, which is all we can see through the New Testament lens, thus the historical Jesus is not retrievable for now.

Part II: Study of Historical Muhammad

Similar to the Christian tradition, the Islamic tradition also provides a comprehensive treatment of Prophet Muhammad’s life from the year of his birth to his death. According to Muslim accounts, Muhammad was born in 570 AD, in the year of the Elephant, in 6th century Arabia. Muhammad’s father Abdullah passed away before his birth while his mother Amina, died when the Prophet was five. From then Muhammad was raised by his grandfather Abdul Muttalib for two years, after which his paternal uncle Abu Taleb became his permanent guardian. Muhammad’s family Banu Hashim belonged to the tribe of the Quraysh, who were keepers of the sanctuary in Mecca and had consolidated their power and wealth in Hijaz, by attracting pilgrims to pay their respects to Arabian pagan idols of Hubal, Al Lata, Al Uzza, and Manat. When the Prophet reached young adulthood, he gained the reputation of being trustworthy (al-*Amin*), and was hired and later proposed to by one of the most sought-after widows in Quraysh, Khadijah bint Khuwaylid. She was 15 years Muhammad’s senior, a divorcee, and in charge of a trading enterprise. Muhammad and Khadijah remained in a monogamous marriage for 25 years and eventually had four daughters and two sons, both of whom died.

Muhammad like Jesus used to wander in solitude and meditate in the cave on Mount Hira. During one of his trips, Muhammad was approached by angel Gabriel and commanded to recite the words of God. Muslims view this as the first instance of Quranic revelation starting in the year of 610 when the Prophet was 40. These revelations continued for 23 more years. After this incident, the Prophet shared his experiences with Khadijah and close family members until he gained enough confidence to share his message in public. The core of Muhammad’s message included belief in the unity of God, belief in the last day of resurrection and judgment, assisting the poor, the orphans, and the oppressed, and most importantly believing that Muhammad was God’s chosen final messenger.

The Quraysh rejected Muhammad’s message and forced him to flee to Medina, where he eventually established himself as an arbiter, a shrewd politician, and a brilliant military strategist. After several battles with his tribe of Quraysh, Muhammad conquered Mecca with little bloodshed and declared the pagan sanctuary of Kaba’a as the house of Allah. Unlike Jesus, Muhammad died a mortal death in the year 632, in the arms of his beloved and youngest wife Aisha. This portrait of Muhammad is colored heavily with Muslim accounts and interpretations. If one wishes to understand how non-Muslim academics in the West studied the historical Muhammad, then one must question everything a believer holds dear, including established creeds of their faith.

Biographies on the life of Muhammad had been written by non-Muslims as early as the 7th century; however, the first scholarly study came in 1843, by Gustav Weil, who used the historical-critical method to examine the life of Muhammad (Jeffrey, 344). German Orientalist Theodor Noldeke also pioneered a critical evaluation of the Quran to reconstruct Muhammad’s life (ibid). D. S. Margoliouth, an English Orientalist, in his 1905 *Muhammad and the Rise of Islam* supported a popular theory of his time that the Arabian Prophet had epilepsy which is why the Quran verses were so elusive. Scottish scholar Sir William Muir countered this theory by stating “hallucinations, and hysterical frenzy are not factors strong enough to produce so generally an upheaval as caused by the new faith" (Jeffrey, 346). Muir explained the rise of Islam by proposing a socio-economic theory given the geography and peripheral position of the Hijaz. Muir asserted that since the Prophet had been a disenfranchised orphan thus “Muhammad laid down strict legislation that every man should support the needy” (Jeffrey, 349). Most Orientalists scholars held that with careful parsing of Muslims sources, the historical Muhammad would emerge.

However, this theory was turned on its head with the efforts of Ignaz Goldziher. A Hungarian scholar of Islam, Goldziher’s extensive investigation of Hadith corpus led him to believe that most saying attributed to the Prophet, were fabricated by later Muslims from the eighth and 9th century. Goldziher’s work propelled the wave of revisionism, to question everything Orientalist scholars had once held about Islam and its messenger. As Chase Robison explains revisionists scholars’ agenda was not to reject anything and everything presented by the Islamic tradition but “to argue that the emergence of early Islam should be explained through the use of models, techniques, and ideas, that derive from the study of other Near Eastern religious traditions” (2008, 211). Belgian historian Henry Lammens also concluded that all of the Islamic tradition was tendentious, and did not preserve any true data which could be attributed safely to the historical Muhammad, since “their [Muslim] intention was not to reconstruct the past but to construct a picture according to their opinion” (Jeffrey, 350). Some scholars such as Richard Bell, went beyond Lammens in 1925, to assert Muhammad himself was a legendary figure created by later generations, to distinguish Islam as it arose within a Christian environment with some Jewish influences.

Overall revisionist scholars began sifting through every corner of Islamic tradition with a fine tooth comb and generating far more questions than answers. Many began to scrutinize the year of Muhammad’s birth which according to Islamic tradition, was the same year as Abraha’s invasion of Mecca as briefly mentioned in the Quran. The discovery of Murayghan Inscription (Ry506) of 1951 challenged this Muslim account. In the inscription, the name of Aksumite army general Abarah is given as well as a mention of a possible expedition which occurred in 552 CE. If this expedition is the same as the elephant invasion from the Quran, then Muhammad’s birth could not occur in the year of the elephant (Conrad, 371). Such epigraphic pieces of evidence only strengthened revisionists critique of Islam, giving an impression that all dates offered by Muslims were fabricated. It was believed that for Arabs, years of birth were never remembered, and numbers such as four and forty (the age Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation and the age Khadijah married him) were symbolic (Conrad, 372). Additionally, John Wansbrough held that the Quran itself was created and collected two-three centuries later in Iraq, long after the advent of Islam, which is why it offers so little information on Muhammad, Mecca, and the political, cultural, or economic conditions of his milieu (Robinson, 2009, 212). While many others refuted Wansbrough’s theories, one scholar took inspiration from his work and went on to shake the foundations of Islamic studies as a whole.

Patricia Crone made her debut in Islamic studies with her book *Hagarism* co-authored with Professor Michael Cook. Crone and Crone heavily inspired by Wansbrough, and relying only exclusively upon non-Islamic sources, presented a radical theory on the origins of Islam. According to their hypothesis, Islam began as a Jewish messianic movement within Hijazi Arabs. The Arabs later split from Jews and distinguished themselves by creating a mythic Islamic past and the figure of an Arabian Prophet, Muhammad (Robinson, 2014, 603). Though no scholar in Islamic studies took *Hagarism*’s premise too seriously, the authors attempt to retrace the origins of Islam took revisionism to new frontiers.

According to Robison’s analysis, “Crone propelled a trend discernible across several fields of pre-modern history, her skepticism was grounded in a deeper critique of orientalist positivism, ‘I have refused to treat the Arabs as an exception to the normal rules of history.'" (607). Crone’s later work also stayed true to her sentiment that several aspects of Islamic tradition could be reconstructed by using alternative sources which displayed a greater fit between evidence and model. Thus her books *Meccan Trade* (1987) and *God’s Caliph* (1986) both continued to dismantle Orientalist and Islamic tradition’s version of events, by arguing that Islam did not originate in Mecca, and the Sunni conception of Caliphate was a deviation from the norm. Robinson adds that Crone’s work embodied “an extraordinary punch because it applies evidence to model so effectively… using documents, numismatic, and literary evidence, all of which can be dated to the 7th and 8th century” (609).

In an article written in 2014 title “What do we know about Muhammad” Crone summarized for non-specialists audiences how far the field of Islamic studies had progressed, what were some certainties about Muhammad, and what remained a mystery. She began by summarizing that Muhammad’s year of death 632 seems credible since a Byzantine Greek source from 632-634 AD mentions “a false prophet has appeared among the Saracens [Arabs] with sword and chariot” (Crone, openDemocracy). On the Islamic side, she recognizes the Constitution of Medina as an authentic document, which was signed between the Prophet, the Arabs, and the Jewish tribes of Yathrib (Medina), recognizing that bonds created by this treaty took precedence over bonds of blood relations and kinship. Further Crone recognized that the Quran was a collection of utterances made by Muhammad however, beyond these certainties, everything else remained a mystery for Islamic studies scholars.

Crone explained that the Quran did not offer any exact information on people, events, places, and dates. As a historical document, its utility was minimal. Quranic passages included vocabulary words whose meaning was now lost, and full context of incidents was never provided. Instead of speaking about Muhammad, Quran as Muslims believed, was instances of God’s conversation with Muhammad. Crone concurred with the Muslim view that, “the Quran takes us inside his [Muhammad’s] head where God is speaking to him, telling him what to preach, how to react to people who poked fun at him, and hat to say to his supporters” (openDemocracy). However for the skeptical scholar since Muhammad is the original author of Quranic utterances, this creates an awkward situation, where he is in conversation with himself, speaking on behalf of God in the third person (We), and even at times in the first person (I), while also listening to his own utterances and reacting to them. Thus scholars like F.E Peters hypothesized that the Arabian Prophet was a poet/composer who sang or chanted Quranic verses and he must have edited and rehearsed his performances beforehand. Like Peters, Crone entertains the possibility that Muhammad took inspiration from 7th-century hymns and prayers which were either “translated or adapted from another Semitic language” (openDemocracy). However, since there is no other 7th-century literary evidence with which we can compare the Quran to, for now, the Muslim holy book remained a locked door.

Moving away from the Quran, Crone also mentioned the problem of the geography in which Islam reportedly began. Crone writes, “The Byzantine and Persian Empires inhabitants wrote about the northern and southern ends of the Arabian peninsula, from where we also have numerous inscriptions, but the middle was *Terra incognita*” (openDemocracy). For Crone, it was no coincidence but rather a calculated decision by the following Islamic community, to place Muhammad and his message in Hijaz, where very little activity took place according to contemporary non-Islamic sources. While she acknowledged that a pagan sanctuary in Mecca could have existed, it was in no way the only sanctuary in the region. In sum, Crone felt that Islamic scholars still do not have a reliable context in which to place Islam and it is Prophet; however, advances in Quranic studies, haidth studies, and archaeology would yield more fruitful results as time proceeded.

Professor F. E. Peters’ article from 1991 also highlights what Islamists knew then and how much they since have learned. Peters back then felt that there was no contemporary source from Muhammad’s time which could shed light on either the Quran or on the context in which Islam arose. “For early Islam, there is no Josephus to provide a contemporary political context, no Apocrypha for a spiritual context… there is only poetry” (292). Even though the Islamic tradition has done its best to fill the gaps of knowledge, for the critical scholar, Muslim sources were biased and fell short on explaining the details of the political and economic history of pre-Islamic Mecca. To complicate matters further, Quantic verses and stories were told with a vagueness with a purpose to instill faith, and not impart historical information. Though several passages in the Quran overlapped with Biblical stories, these passages were told in an “extremely elliptical, elusive, and referential style” (Peters, 1991, 296). Recent undertaking by independent researchers online has also revealed that Jesus’ story in the Quran matches the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Particularly the episodes of Jesus speaking while in the cradle, his creation of birds made of clay coming to life, as well as his watching of the crucifixion of an imposter.

Aside from these similarities, however, Peters found the methodologies from biblical studies to be futile in cracking the code of the Quran. He lamented, “Modern attempts at applying form criticism to the Quran…has no useful purpose in Islam since the Quran is not reported but simply recorded” (299). Though the Quran was written during the Prophet’s lifetime, it was assembled into a book under the reign of the third caliph Uthman, who ordered the destruction of other recensions. Peters also asserts that“there are no convenient rabbis, preachers, or Arab monks, whose words or style we might compare the utterances of the Prophet” meanwhile redaction process revealed that minimal editing was done to the Quran as most of the material was kept (299). Peters remained confident however that the Quran did reveal an evolution in Muhammad’s thinking by looking at how he referred to God. Peters added, “The name Allah does not appear in the earliest revelations and Muhammad refers to God simply as Lord... his preference is for the merciful familiar deity of al-Rahaman” (301). Peters in his latest work published in 2010, on comparing the lives of Jesus and Muhammad, has expanded on some ideas mentioned above stating, “The Quran shows an ongoing awareness of audience reaction…on-the-spot explanations-introduced by ‘What will make you understand ... ?’ -that are cued by audience reaction” (2010, 76).

In general Islamic studies, scholars possess a lot more confidence now. According to Chase Robinson, scholars are sure that a man called Muhammad lived, preached, and died in 7th century Arabia. They are also confident that the Prophet assumed the monotheistic legacy of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and he urged his followers to believe in and fight for a single god Allah. As Robinson writes, “According to the meager evidence that is reliable, conquering was done for the sake of God and ruling was done to affect God's order on Earth” (2009, 205). Robinson explains that since monotheists in the Near East shared spaces, ideas, and stories then most likely, “traditions (like Islam) that explicitly claim to succeed earlier traditions might reasonably be taken to inherit some of their features” (2009, 214).

Hence there is a good reason to believe that Islam was influenced by Judaism, Gnostic Christianity, and pre-Islamic Meccan traditions, though to what extent, is still being investigated. Robinson also does not believe that there is any literary evidence from early 7th century Hijaz, which has survived or which even existed, since “from everything we know about sixth and early 7th century Arabia, there is no question of verbatim memorization” (216). Any hopes of discovering a Muslim Q must halt at this point. Scholars like Robinson also emphasize that Jihad was a central tenet of the nascent Islamic community since believers had to prove their worthiness to be eligible for “divine reward." As Robinson notes a lot more groundbreaking studies on the historical Muhammad have surfaced. These include; David Powers’ *Muhammad is not the father of any of you men* (2011), Stephen Shoemaker’s *The Death of a Prophet* (2011), Fred M. Donner’s *Muhammad and the Believers (2012),* Kecia Ali’s *The Lives of Muhammad* (2014), and the latest, Juan Cole’s *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the clash of empires* (2018).

Part III: Interdisciplinary obstacles and discussions

Herbert Berg and Sarah Rollens in an article from 2008, offered some helpful suggestions on how Islamic studies and Bible studies scholars should generate interdisciplinary discussions, sharing of methodologies, and collaborative works. For Berg and Rollens, the fundamental problem with Biblical studies scholars is that if they have not paid much mind to their neighbors at Islamic studies. Meanwhile, Islamic studies scholars displayed an inferiority complex given that their methods are less sophisticated than Biblical scholars (271). Most importantly, however, scholars especially from Biblical studies treat theological texts as historical ones and inadvertently confirm believers’ biases by describing Jesus as extraordinary figures. Berg and Rollens write, “Scholars inevitably fall into a theoretical trap by assuming that Q has preserved the original teachings of Jesus” (276).While Islamic studies scholars also tend to applaud Muhammad for his exceptional political acumen and as the originator of Islam, they tend to overall reach more critical conclusions. “Islamic scholars are outsiders and their working environments not culturally dominated by Islam, therefore they can start with the assumption that the Islamic texts are not accurate descriptions of everything or even anything, and more mundane cultural, social, political, and economic reasons account for the early Islamic community success” (Berg & Rollens, 280).

Thus by working together, Bible studies scholars can learn from Islamic studies scholars and handle New Testament material more critically. Since the publication of Berg and Rollens’ article, several scholars of Bible studies have produce revisionist materials including; Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (2010), James Crossley’s *Jesus and the Chaos of History* (2014), and Joan E. Taylor’s *What did Jesus look like* 2018. Additionally scholars from both fields have begun producing interdisciplinary works such; Marlies Ter Borg’s *Sharing Mary:Bible and Quran Side by Side* (2011), Nicolia Sinai’s “Muhammad as an Episcopal Figure” (2018),Jon C Reeves’ *Enoch from* *Antiquity to Middle Ages Volume I: Sources from Judaism Christianity, and Islam,* (2018) and Carlos Segovia’s *The Quranic Jesus and New Interpretation* (2018).

In conclusion, Jesus and Muhammad hold sway over millions of hearts, minds, and imaginations due to their messages, perseverance, and struggles. While these two Middle Eastern men may have uneventful lead lives, to their followers, they represented God’s will on earth; one as the son and another as God’s last messenger. Though scholars of the Historical Jesus and the Historical Muhammad have a long way to go to before meeting believers halfway, advances in methodologies show signs of an exciting new phase of revisionism, research, and reconstruction.

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