

“Take Me and My Mother as Gods Apart from God”: Surat Al Maida and the Qur’an’s Understanding of the Trinity

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And when God said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, ‘Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?’” He said, “Glory be to Thee! It is not for me to utter that to which I have no right. Had I said it, Thou wouldst surely have known it. Thou knowest what is in my self and I know not what is in Thy Self. Truly it is Thou Who knowest best the things unseen.”¹

One can read the central texts in Muslim Scripture relating to the Christian doctrine of God and what the Qur’an considers the errors of the Christian

faith in a single sitting, literally in a matter of minutes. And yet the vast majority of Christians are blissfully unaware of the fact that they are addressed, directly, by the Scriptures of one of the largest religions in the world, and exhorted to repent of their beliefs. Sadly, the Qur'an is a closed book to Christians, including Christian leaders, just as much as the Bible is a closed book to the world's Muslims.

There are a limited number of truly significant texts in the Qur'an that address Christian belief and teaching about Jesus. But one particular *surah*, *Surat Al-Maida*, (*Surah 5*) is rich with texts directed to the Christian people in particular. We will utilize this *surah* as the base text upon which to ask, "Does the form and content of the Qur'an allow for the construction of a coherent understanding of the author's knowledge of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity?" Through this lens we can likewise consider subsidiary questions such as the nature of the Qur'anic revelation and its relationship to what Christians would think of as serious exegesis based upon genre, context, setting, and authorial intent. Can the text bear up under the same kind of scrutiny Christians are accustomed to applying to their own Scriptures? And if a sufficient contextual argument can be sustained, can we come to any firm conclusions regarding the accuracy of the Qur'anic response to the Christian affirmation of the Trinity?

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Christians approaching the Qur'anic text often bring assumptions that lead to confusion when seeking to apply their reading to conversations with Muslims themselves. A few brief observations will assist in our inquiry.

First, Sunni orthodoxy teaches today that the Qur'an is eternal and uncreated. As such, there is nothing of man in it. This not only raises numerous theological issues relating to the attributes of God, etc., but most important for our purposes, it likewise means that all of the questions Christians normally ask about the author, authorial context, language, content, etc., are seen in a fundamentally different way by the majority of Muslims. We cannot ask questions about what the author of the Qur'an understood or believed since he has nothing to do with the actual content of the book. He is merely the passive instrument. Traditionally, the entirety of the Qur'an came down on "Laylat al-Qadar," the night of power, when it was given to the angel Jabreel. Then it was

parceled out to Muhammad over the course of twenty-two years. Muhammad was merely a recipient. His understanding of, for example, Christian doctrine, is irrelevant since it has no bearing on the actual words.

Second, *Surat Al-Maida* is considered, traditionally, to be one of the last surahs revealed. From a historical perspective, then, it would come after all of the conflicts in Muhammad's life, including his back-and-forth relationship with both Jews and Christians. What it reflects, then, concerning the Christian faith would be "final," both in the sense of reflecting the final stance of Muhammad toward these faiths as well as in regards to the matter of "abrogation," the concept held in some form or another by the majority of Muslims whereby later portions of the Qur'an are allowed to abrogate or supersede previous portions.

THE TEXT REVIEWED

Surat Al-Maida is next to impossible to outline as the subject matter is varied and the blocks of text exist without transitional statements. The only theme that appears multiple times in the narrative is that of the errors of Christians regarding Jesus, yet these discussions are intermixed with a number of (seemingly) unrelated exhortations. While this may seem unusual at first sight to someone accustomed to following a closely reasoned argument such as that of Paul in Romans or that found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is normative for much of the Qur'an. Contextual exegesis is rarely an option with a collection of poetry that makes as one of its primary arguments for inspiration not the content of its message but the overwhelming beauty of its form. This is reflected as well in the *tafsir* (commentary) literature written on the Qur'an over the centuries. No attempt is made to harmonize or contextualize. Each block of text is taken as a unit and attached to traditions (normally statements from the *hadith* literature) without any felt need to create a contextual flow of interpretation.

Given the late date of *Surat Al-Maida*, it should be noted that the phrase in *ayah* 3, "This day I have perfected for you your religion," is taken as a summary statement of the revelation of the Qur'an, a closing word, in essence. This often adds weight and authority to the entirety of the *surah*.

After various regulations regarding food laws and oaths, we come to the first key text relevant to the Christian faith:

14 And with those who say, "We are Christians," We made a covenant. Then they forgot part of that whereof they were reminded. So We stirred up enmity and hatred among them, till the Day of Resurrection. God will inform them of what they used to do. 15 O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come unto you, making clear to you much of what you once hid of the Book, and pardoning much. There has come unto you, from God, a light and a clear Book, 16 whereby God guides whosoever seeks His Contentment unto the ways of peace, and brings them out of darkness into light, by His Leave, and guides them unto a straight path. 17 They indeed have disbelieved who say, "God is the Messiah, son of Mary." Say, "Who would have any power over God if He desired to destroy the Messiah, son of Mary, and his mother, and those on earth all together?" Unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and whatsoever is between them. He creates whatsoever He will, and God is Powerful over all things.

It is asserted that Allah made a covenant with the Christians, but they "forgot" a part of this covenant. Possibly strife and schism amongst the Christians is seen as judgment for this violation of the covenant, or the natural result. In any case, similar to the accusations made against the Jews in *ayah* 13, which included "forgetting," as well as some form of *tahrif* in the phrase "what you once hid of the Book," the exhortation is to look to the clearer revelation of the Qur'an, "a light and a clear Book." The Arabic term *mubinun* is used here for clear, perspicuous, evidently in contrast to the Christian Scriptures in which things have been "hidden." Immediately following the offer of Allah's guidance into the ways of peace, light, and the straight path (echoing the thoughts of the opening *surah* of the Qur'an, words repeated by every Muslim in the daily prayers, where they pray to be guided to the straight path and not the path of those who have gone astray, i.e., the Christians) comes a sharp word of warning and here we encounter the first representations of the errors of the Christians.

We are not being disrespectful when we say the phrase "God is the Messiah, son of Mary" is a very clumsy way of expressing the Christian belief in the deity of Christ. But the odd phraseology aside, it is important to note that this confession is specifically said to be disbelief (*kafara*). It is important to recognize how clear the Qur'anic teaching is at this point. This is not just a disapproved opinion, this is unbelief.

And in this instance we are offered a counter-argument. Counter-arguments often provide invaluable insights into the understanding of the

author of a text (hence the value of debate and direct interaction). Surely this is the case here, for the essence of the argument is that God could have destroyed the Messiah *and his mother* and all other human beings. The point is the creatureliness of the Messiah. The Christian does not immediately see the force of the argument in light of the doctrine of the Incarnation, but just here we must ask if there is any evidence in the Qur'anic text of an understanding of that very doctrine. Given that the Qur'an shows no evidence of direct interaction with the written New Testament, we cannot assume the author had ever read John 1:14 or Philippians 2:5-11. But from the Islamic perspective, this consideration is irrelevant, for the author of the text is Allah, not Muhammad, and surely by the year A.D. 630 the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the hypostatic union, were well known to the Almighty. Surely if this is a counter argument provided by the deity himself to his people as a means of responding to the Christians the argument should demonstrate the deepest insight and strength of refutation. Yet it is based upon an assumption that is all too rarely recognized: that there can be no incarnation. Though God is allowed to be able to create, he surely cannot enter into his own creation, cannot take on a perfect human nature, if he so wills for his purposes. This is the fundamental assumption of Islamic theology, but it is an assumption rarely fleshed out and expressed with clarity.

The *Surah* moves on from here to a discussion of Moses and the Israelites, and then quickly to an odd and controversial narrative concerning Cain and Abel. *Ayah* 32 contains the famous line, "Whosoever slays a soul ... it is as though he slew mankind altogether, and whosoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether." But this worthy and high line is followed quickly by the prescription of killing, crucifying, or cutting off the hands and feet on opposite sides of those who "wage war against God and His Messenger" (33).

The *surah* transitions into a vitally important section, worthy of deep study and inquiry of itself, with great relevance to Christian/Muslim dialogue, regarding the giving of the Torah, the Injeel, and the Qur'an. All are described as revelations of God. One of the rare direct citations of the Bible is found in *ayah* 45, where the *Lex Talionis* is cited (Exod 21:24, Lev 24:20, Deut 19:21).³ An argument is then presented linking the giving of the Torah to Moses, the Injeel to Jesus, and the Qur'an to Muhammad. The

people of the Gospel are specifically mentioned, and they are instructed to “judge by what God has sent down therein (i.e., the Gospel).” Though it is beyond our scope of inquiry here, it should be noted that this text is central to a compelling Christian apologetic in defense of the validity of the New Testament Scriptures over against the charge of textual corruption that has become the primary Islamic point of attack. These words have no meaning if the people of the Gospel did not have access to the Gospel itself! Likewise, *ayat* 66-68 assume the continued presence of the Torah with the Jews and the Injeel with the Christians. Both groups are chastised for not having “observed” those revelations in *ayah* 66, and in 68 we read, “Say, ‘O People of the Book! You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord.’” Just as in the argument in *ayat* 44-48, the assumption is Torah, Injeel, Qur’an—all sent down, all revelation, all still in the possession of their respective communities (“and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord” referring to the Qur’anic revelation). This places the relevant time frame directly in the days of Muhammad, and if the Torah and Injeel were no longer available, the words would have no meaning. But clearly, for the author at this point, all three revelations are present, viable, and authoritative.

72 They certainly disbelieve, those who say, “Truly God is the Messiah, son of Mary.” But the Messiah said, “O Children of Israel! Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.” Surely whosoever ascribes partners unto God, God has forbidden him the Garden, and his refuge shall be the Fire. And the wrongdoers shall have no helpers. 73 They certainly disbelieve, those who say, “Truly God is the third of three,” while there is no god save the one God. If they refrain not from what they say, a painful punishment will befall those among them who disbelieved. 74 Will they not turn to God in repentance and seek His forgiveness? And God is Forgiving, Merciful. 75 The Messiah, son of Mary, was naught but a messenger—messengers have passed away before him. And his mother was truthful. Both of them ate food. Behold how We make the signs clear unto them; yet behold how they are perverted! 76 Say, “Do you worship, apart from God, that which has no power to benefit or harm you, when it is God Who is the Hearing, the Knowing?” 77 Say, “O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion beyond the truth, and follow not the caprices of a people who went astray before, and led many astray, and strayed from the right way.” 78 Those who disbelieved

among the Children of Israel were cursed by the tongue of David and Jesus son of Mary. That was because they disobeyed and used to transgress.

This section of *ayat* may be the longest contiguous polemic against Christian beliefs in the Qur'an, at least in reference to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The strength of the condemnation should not be underestimated. The Christian profession of the Trinity (and most specifically the deity of Christ) is said to be "disbelief." This is said to be an ascription of a partner to God, the unforgivable sin of *shirk*⁴ which excludes from paradise and sends to the fire. There are no helpers for such wrongdoers, and a painful punishment awaits them for their disbelief. They must repent, for they have become "perverted." The Qur'an contains many condemnation texts, but this series of statements must be allowed to have its full weight when considering the relationship of Islam to Christianity.

But looking past the strong condemnation, we find this text central to ascertaining the accuracy, or depth, of the Qur'an's criticism of Christian belief. The first phrase is a clumsy assertion of the deity of Christ in the words, "Truly God is the Messiah, son of Mary." The counter claim, a quote from Jesus, echoes John 21:17. As with almost all of the quotations ascribed to Jesus in the Qur'an, it is a-contextual and unsourced. Its primary assertion is that since Jesus worships God, he cannot be God. That is, the presupposition of unitarianism is assumed. There is no indication in the argument, however, that the author understands the distinction, already quite evident in Christian theology of his day, between unitarian monotheism and Trinitarian monotheism.

The next key Christian assertion recorded by the Qur'an is, "Truly God is the third of three." The specific term for "Trinity", well known in Christian usage in Muhammad's day, is not used in the Qur'an. Instead, the ordinal number "three" is used, as it is here, *thalithu thalathatin*, literally, "third of three," but properly rendered "one of three." One of the strong consistencies of the text of the Qur'an is observable here as well. In every single instance where the ordinal "three" is used in reference to the Christian confession, the next phrase contains a strong assertion of monotheism, just as here, "there is no god save the one God." So, clearly, the category of existence in view is gods/god, so the use of the term "three" is in reference to a charge of polytheism, just as the "third of three" must mean "three gods." This

connects directly to the concept of association already mentioned. Nothing in these words indicates an understanding of such categories as being or person, and understandably so, if we assume these are the words of an Arabic religious leader from the early portion of the fourth decade of the seventh century, for not only had the Bible not yet appeared in Arabic, but surely the patristic writings would not appear in Arabic for many centuries to come. But while this observation is natural for the Christian, the Muslim does not have the option of viewing the situation thusly. Allah knew all about *ousia* and *hypostasis* and the like, and could have formulated arguments against the Christian faith that would be accurate and powerful, if the doctrine is, in fact, so erroneous as to consign those who believe in it to everlasting fire.

The most important question before us however is, “Who are the three?” Can we merely assume accurate knowledge on the part of the author of the Qur’an so that Father, Son, and Spirit, can be safely supplied? Or might we already have seen a clue as to the author’s understanding earlier in the *Surah* when Mary was included as one of those who could have been destroyed by Allah if he had so willed? We come to one of the most important texts in answering this question in *ayah* 75 where we are told that Jesus was “naught but a messenger” using language that limits Jesus’ nature to the creaturely. Like all messengers, Jesus is mortal.⁵ And Jesus has a truthful mother. And then we have the assertion, “Both of them ate food.” Why would the Qur’an need to tell us that Mary ate food? For the same reason that it tells us Jesus ate food. If you eat food, you are not divine. Allah is never hungry, Allah never eats. Both Jesus and Mary ate food, therefore *both* Jesus and Mary are not divine. But, this would mean that the “three” in the mind of the author of the Qur’an would be Allah, Mary, and their offspring, Jesus. Is this conclusion defensible? We need to finish looking at *Surat Al-Maida* to see.

The text moves on to identify the Jews and the *mushrikun* as those “most hostile” toward believers, but it then says that those “nearest in affection” to believers are those who say “We are Christians” (v. 82). It is very rare for the Qur’an to speak positively of any other religion. But even this positive word has caveats. It is limited to “priests and monks” who are not arrogant, and, *ayah* 83 seems to indicate that in particular these are Christian converts, because they have believed the Qur’an. This would leave those who remain obstinate outside of the commendation of the text.

The text transitions, without notice, into various exhortations regarding

foods, wine, gambling, idols, and divining arrows. Rules regarding hunting follow, moving directly, again without even an attempted transition, into a discussion of the Kabah and then more miscellaneous laws and exhortations. This moves into a brief discussion of the messengers sent by God, including a specific recitation of the words spoken by Allah to Jesus, evidently sometime in the future. Significantly, Allah makes reference to the story, first found in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, of Jesus creating birds from clay and making them come alive.⁶ This is followed by the story of the heavenly table (from which the *surah* derives its name), which is sent down to the disciples of Jesus, along with the warning that if they disbelieve after such a miracle, “I shall punish him with a punishment wherewith I have not punished any other in all the worlds” (115).

Finally, in the very last words of the *surah*, the topic addressed multiple times rises once more:

116 And when God said, “O Jesus son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind, ‘Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?’” He said, “Glory be to Thee! It is not for me to utter that to which I have no right. Had I said it, Thou wouldst surely have known it. Thou knowest what is in my self and I know not what is in Thy Self. Truly it is Thou Who knowest best the things unseen. 117 I said naught to them save that which Thou commanded me: ‘Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.’ And I was a witness over them, so long as I remained among them. But when Thou didst take me [to Thyself], it was Thou Who wast the Watcher over them. And Thou art Witness over all things.

This seems to refer to a conversation, at the day of judgment, between Allah and Jesus.⁷ Famed commentator Ibn Kathir noted about this text:

Allah will also speak to His servant and Messenger, Isa son of Maryam, peace be upon him, saying to him on the Day of Resurrection in the presence of those who worshipped Isa and his mother as gods besides Allah ... This is a threat and a warning to Christians, chastising them in public ... This *Ayah* also shows the crime of the Christians who invented a lie against Allah and His Messenger, thus making a rival, wife and son for Allah. Allah is glorified in that He is far above what they attribute to Him.⁸

Jesus is asked to testify whether he was the source of the errors of the Christian faith. It is a consistent theme of the Qur'an that Christians have gone into "excess" in their religion, they have transgressed the bounds, and here evidence is offered pre-emptively from the lips of Jesus himself. But the question he is asked gives deep and abiding insight into the understanding of the author, for it frames the very form of rebuttal being offered by the Qur'an. What is the concern? Did Jesus teach men to "take me and my mother as gods apart from God?" The language is clear, and there are three principal individuals named: Allah, Mary, and Jesus. They are clearly distinguished from one another. To "take" here is to take as deities, as gods, for in *ayah* 117 Jesus offers, as evidence of his innocence, his consistent teaching to men, "Worship God, my Lord and your Lord." So clearly the author of the Qur'an lays out the three to which he had made reference earlier in this *surah*: Allah, Mary, and Jesus, and to this error Jesus responds in the negative.

Immediately we must ask the question, "Can we connect the earlier sections which provide such important contextual information to these final *ayat*?" Surely if these sections were concurrent we would have unquestionable confidence in the conclusion, but they are not. And yet, what other context could they all be referring to? It is very common for the Qur'an to address the same topic multiple times with interruptions, especially in the longer *surahs* that make up the first half of the book. And *tafsir* writers have, from the earliest times, felt no difficulty in connecting these texts together despite the presence of other subjects and topics between their appearances in this *surah*. Given the similarity in terminology and expression throughout *Surat Al-Maida's* discussion of the errors of the Christians, together with the same terminology and thought in *Surat al-Nisa* (4) 171ff, it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that we most assuredly do have a sound basis for concluding that these texts are properly taken together, and therefore that we do here have an identification of the "three" to which the Christians refer in their worship: Allah, Mary, and Jesus.

HISTORICAL/THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Often it is urged that the Qur'an is here addressing a very small group of Christians, heretics of some sort, such as the Collyridians, who (it is alleged—information is very sparse) worshipped Mary. This kind of effort is normally

made to avoid the difficulty inherent in explaining why the author of the Qur'an, namely, God, would describe the Trinity in such an inaccurate fashion. Of course, there is no evidence of the existence of such a group in the days of Muhammad in or around Mecca or Medina. Further, those criticized earlier for *shirk* and excess and disbelief in their worship were, specifically, the Christians, not a tiny sub-set of them. Only by isolating 116-117 from the preceding sections could such a reading be adopted.

Many Muslims today point to such dogmas as the Bodily Assumption of Mary, defined by Roman Catholicism less than a century ago, as evidence of the accuracy of the words of 5:116. And yet even in its highly compromised position Rome specifically denies exalting Mary to the position of deity, and a modern dogma such as this was hardly current in the days of Muhammad.

If we take *Surat Al-Maida* as a whole, we can, in fact, put together a strong statement of condemnation of Christian theology and Christology proper that gives us compelling insight into the thinking of the author of the Qur'an. When we do so we see that his concern is polytheism and the affirmation of a strong form of unitarian monotheism. His strong warnings to the Christians focus upon a perceived violation of monotheism and the dreaded association of a created being with God. The threeness of the Christian proclamation is interpreted not as Father, Son, and Spirit, but instead it is seen as Allah being "one of three," and the only three that is enumerated is Allah, Mary, and Jesus. This ties firmly into the consistent Qur'anic statement that God is "exalted above having a son," and the nearly creedal affirmation of *Surat al-Ikhlās*, (112) 3, "He does not beget, nor is He begotten."

Application

The Christian mandate to proclaim the gospel to every creature under heaven places us in the position of answering the question, "What do we do with this information?" Muslims need to know about the true Jesus revealed in the Christian Scriptures who differs fundamentally and essentially from the Qur'anic Isa, Son of Mary. The reality that the author of the Qur'an did not possess true and accurate knowledge (which was readily available in his day) of the doctrine of the Trinity is a key apologetic and evangelistic truth. Muslims anachronistically view the Qur'an as the "guardian" of the previous Scriptures, correcting alleged errors and corruptions. But if they can come to see that the author of the Qur'an was guided by human ignorance, and

was in error at this very fundamental point, it is possible to use this truth as a springboard to the presentation of the gospel. Specifically, one of the greatest barriers to the Christian message among Muslims is the idea that Christians engage in the unforgivable sin of *shirk*, the association of something or someone with Allah in worship. Yet, if the Qur'an is in error regarding the "three," this opens the possibility of explaining the true oneness of God's being, and the threeness of the Persons, so that we can demonstrate that since the Son has eternally been God, and is not the offspring of God and a "consort," there is no *shirk* involved in worshipping him. This can remove one of the greatest stumbling blocks to the truth in the life of a Muslim.

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- ¹ *Surat Al-Maida* (5) 116. In late 2015 a new translation of the Qur'an appeared in English. *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, and Joseph E. B. Lumbard (New York: Harper One, 2015). This new translation truly broke ground as it is a true "study Qur'an" in the tradition of major "study Bibles," with a small amount of text and a large amount of commentary on almost every page, along with extended appendices. It represents a wide variety of Islamic scholarship, which in and of itself is a tremendous accomplishment. Oddly, it adopted an older English form, replete with Thee's and Thou's. But given it is representative of a very wide swath of modern Islamic thought, it will be used as the base text in this article.
 - ² *Tahrif* is a term fraught with difficulties and controversy. It refers to alteration or corruption of the text, but can refer either to the misinterpretation of the text, or to the alteration of the actual words of the text (*tahrif al-mana* and *tahrif al-nass*, respectively). Numerous articles and even books have been written arguing every possible understanding of the Qur'an and even the hadith on this topic, all of which together seem to prove that confusion on the topic goes all the way back to the origins of Islam. Two of the many important contributions on this topic would be: Gordon Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries on the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), and Abdullah Saeed, "The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures" in *The Muslim World* 92 (2002):419-436.
 - ³ As with all other possible citations of the Hebrew or Greek Scriptures, it is most probable that the author of the Qur'an is relying upon oral retelling of these texts. This particular text, for example, is well known by many who have never spent a moment reading the Bible.
 - ⁴ The majority opinion of Muslims around the world is surely that Christian worship involves *shirk*, and most would identify it as major rather than minor *shirk*. Westernized Muslims, however, often recognize that Christianity is in fact monotheistic and hence hesitate to use the strong term *shirk* of Christian worship. This text, however, seems unambiguous.
 - ⁵ Just as one finds in *Surah* 3:55 and 19:33, the Qur'an speaks naturally of Jesus' death. Yet, this creates conflict with *Surah* 4:157, leading to all sorts of speculative remedies. But this text, too, seems to assume Jesus' death, once again casting serious questions on the origin and meaning of the logion of 4:157.
 - ⁶ See my translation of the relevant text in *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2013), 237-238.
 - ⁷ As rendered in the *Tafsir Al-Jalalayn: And remember when Allah will say* on the Day of Rising to rebuke his followers: "*Isa son of Maryam! Did you tell people, 'Take me and my mother as two gods besides Allah?' he (Isa) will tremble and say, 'Glory to you!' declaring Allah free of inappropriate partners and other things. Tafsir Al-Jalalayn*, trans. Aisha Bewley (London: Dar Al Taqwa Ltd., 2007), 277.
 - ⁸ *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (London: Darussalam, 2003), 3:303-304, 306-307.