

Is Muhammad Also Among the Prophets?

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The complexity of this topic requires a lengthy treatment. This paper attempts a reconsideration of four issues: I. Muhammad and Islam, II. Theology of Revelation, III. Criteria for Prophethood, and IV. Muhammadan Prophethood. I would ask Bridging the Divide 2014 participants to read at least Part 1 (pp. 1-12), the last page of Part 3 (p.26), and all of Part 4 (pp. 27-33). Parts II and III (pp. 11-25) were largely contained in my BtD 2013 paper "Muhammad and Prophethood." You are encouraged to read this material as well, especially if you did not do so previously, so as to reduce the risk of misunderstanding my thinking on this sensitive, complicated topic.

The prophet Samuel had anointed Saul as king and predicted that the spirit of the Lord would come upon him with power so that he would prophesy and be changed into a different person (1 Sam 10:6). And thus it happened that "God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day" and he prophesied (10:9,11). This was the last thing that people expected to happen to the "son of Kish." As a result, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" became a proverb in Israel.¹ The same spirit later empowered him to defeat the Ammonites in battle (11:6).

Yet this same Saul disobeyed God's word and failed in his kingly office. It seems incredible that one endowed with the spirit of God could act so contrary to his will. God eventually rejected him as king, and withdrew his spirit from him (16:1, 14). Saul persecuted David and repeatedly sought to kill him. The way that Saul's life finished is so tragic that it dominates our memory of him; we forget that he had once been "among the prophets."

However, in recent years some biblical scholars have sought to restore balance to our corporate memory of Saul. Seeking to rehabilitate his image, Ron Youngblood finds that despite his failings, Saul could also be "kind, thoughtful, generous, courageous, very much in control, and willing to obey God."²

Is it advisable that Christians consider undertaking a similar project with the prophet of Islam? Can the malevolent image of Muhammad in our minds possibly be "rehabilitated"? As surprising as the idea may be, it is worth contemplating, since one of the most delicate issues we face in seeking constructive dialogue with Muslims is our response to the question: "Is Muhammad also among the prophets?"

This question has also become a very controversial issue within the body of Christ. Disciples of Jesus have strong feelings and hold diverse and contrary convictions about their answer. While the majority of Christians would answer "absolutely not," some are more tentative or affirming. Many Muslim followers of Christ would answer in the negative, but others may continue to affirm both halves of the Islamic *shahadah*: "There is no god but God *and* Muhammad is the *rasul* (messenger) of God"—albeit with a wide range of meanings.³ Many Christians are strongly opposed to any such practice. Perhaps it would be beneficial to reconsider this topic.

¹ 1 Samuel 10:11-12 and 19:24. "Is Saul also among the [ecstatic] prophets?" is the meaning according to Ron Youngblood, "1-2 Samuel," in *Deuteronomy-2 Samuel*. Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 3, ed. Frank Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 627.

² Youngblood, 618.

³ Christians have observed varied practices among Muslim followers of Christ, including:
a. They do not say the *shahadah*.

I. Muhammad and Islam Reconsidered

Several years ago, I had a conversation with an Islamics professor. I told her of my difficult journey in seeking to understand and assess Muhammad, accurately, fairly, and biblically. She replied that none of the great Islamicists knew quite “where to land” with respect to Muhammad. Thus, I was not alone in this journey. I hope that after reading this article others will appreciate the reasons why this challenge has been so perplexing for so many.

Part of the problem lies in the binary categories of prophethood that have been used in relation to Muhammad. I hope that this article will serve to broaden our base of theological, historical and missiological understandings of prophethood in general and of the person of Muhammad in particular. While I do not expect immediate acceptance of my proposals, this study may enable readers to identify and question assumptions that underlie their convictions, stimulating renewed reflection and discussion.

Recognition of the Right Muhammad

Before beginning our quest to assess Muhammad we must ask what may seem to be a rather ridiculous question: “Which ‘Muhammad’ are we talking about?” This is actually an important issue. It emerges from the difficulty of ascertaining the actual details of Muhammad’s life due to the extreme lack of personal information about him in the Qur’an. Consequently, among scholars Muhammad has at least four different identities.

a. *Muhammad according to Islamic tradition.*

The Qur’an and the diverse collections of the Hadith provide the basis for the Muhammad of Islamic tradition. This is the Muhammad that is most popularly known. However, the foundation for the popular Muhammad is questionable.

Some Muslim scholars admit that a portion of the purported words and actions attributed to Muhammad in various hadith were fabricated, e.g., his doing miracles identical to those performed by Jesus—especially since the Qur’an indicates that Muhammad did not perform miracles (cf. 2:118, 30:58). In addition, many of his biographical accounts (*sira*) were created long after his death and are of dubious reliability.⁴ Critical scholars believe that a significant portion of the *sira* were fabricated to serve several purposes. The first was the need to provide context to aid in the interpretation of the Qur’anic revelations. Muslims far removed from the

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- b. They say “there is no god but God,” but stop without saying “Muhammad is God’s messenger.”
 - c. They say the full *shahadah*, but add “and Jesus the Messiah is the Word of God and the Spirit of God.”
 - d. They say the *shahadah* and mean only that Muhammad was a simple messenger and warner.
 - e. They say the *shahadah* and assert that Muhammad was a messenger and a prophet for he points to Jesus.

⁴ The first biographer, Ibn Ishaq (d. 767), wrote over a century after Muhammad’s death and comes to us only in an abbreviated form edited by Ibn Hisham (d. 833) more than a century after that. Despite his many defenders, some classical Muslim authorities disputed his reliability. Cf. Robert Spencer, *Did Muhammad Exist? An Inquiry into Islam’s Obscure Origins* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2012), 87-100; Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 50-56; and Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), chapter 6.

original context generated these stories in order to explain the meaning of some baffling Qur'anic phrases. In contrast, these Qur'anic phrases make much better sense if they are read in light of the biblical accounts. Second, there was the need for guidance in matters not addressed in the Qur'an which was supplied through the example (*sunnah*) of Muhammad's life. Furthermore, being disadvantaged in their debates with Christians, Muslims felt duty bound to magnify Muhammad's personage in order to compete with the biblical prophets and Jesus.⁵ Andrew Rippin adds that this creative story-telling happened at a time when "the manifestation of the raconteur's ability to elaborate, entertain and enhance were highly praised merits".⁶

b. *Muhammad of the Qur'an as interpreted by Muslim tradition.*

The Muhammad of the Qur'an is somewhat obscure. This is because many verses in the Qur'an lack sufficient context to clarify their meaning. Due to this, there are those who interpret the Qur'anic data through a lens shaped by the highly questionable Islamic traditions. These traditions portray the prophet of Islam as condemning and hostile to Jews, Christians, the Bible, and Christian doctrine.⁷

c. *Muhammad of the Qur'anists.*

Scholars, Muslim and Christian, who rely primarily on the internal evidence of the text of the Qur'an are cautious in their acceptance of other sources.⁸ They view the Qur'an as a much more reliable historical source than Islamic tradition. It is difficult to ascertain much personal information about Muhammad apart from his message. With this limitation, it is argued that the Qur'an affirms and authenticates the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Thus, many Qur'anists maintain that Muhammad's message should be interpreted in harmony with the previous scriptures which it claimed to confirm, not by relying on later traditions that contradict them.⁹

d. *Muhammad of the revisionist historians.*

Applying higher critical methods to the study of Islam, revisionist scholars may reject almost anything attributed to or about Muhammad, including the Qur'an, unless it is corroborated by non-Islamic sources.¹⁰ While many theories of the most radical revisionists are not widely

⁵ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2010); cf. also Part 2 (esp. chapter 6) in his *Emergence of Islam*; also Giulio Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977).

⁶ Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 1990), 34.

⁷ These accounts evidence an attempt at legitimizing Muslim rule of their day by presenting Muhammad's movement as the "Islam" of their time, a religion distinct from Judaism and Christianity, and the earlier expansions as a series of divinely aided religious "Muslim" conquests over "non-Muslims" (Donner, 119-120).

⁸ Reynolds and Donner are examples.

⁹ C. Jonn Block, *Expanding the Qur'anic Bridge: Historical and Modern Interpretations of the Qur'an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue with Special Attention Paid to Ecumenical Trends* (Minneapolis: Routledge, 2013) seems to be a representative of this.

¹⁰ Spencer summarizes the findings of the revisionists. Their theories and findings are worthy of careful consideration, but carte blanche dismissal of all Islamic sources that lack outside corroboration is an excessively

accepted, their research does discredit the traditional and popular narrative at a number of points.

In the old TV show “To Tell the Truth,” after panel members tried to identify the described contestant from among imposters, the question was asked: “Will the real Muhammad please stand up?” Unfortunately, the real Muhammad is not among us to reveal himself. But the identity which one selects from the above Muhammads will also greatly influence one’s view of Islam.

Revelation of the Original Islam

Much of what is considered today as representing “orthodox” Islam likely represents an understanding that developed two or three centuries after Muhammad. The most widely accepted version of Muhammad, based upon Islamic tradition, is dubious.

For example, Dan Gibson presents massive and multiple streams of evidence for the astonishing yet compelling proposal that the first holy city of Islam was Petra, not Mecca.¹¹ If such a fundamental historical “fact” in Islamic history as the location of “Mecca” could have been created by Muslim revisionist historians, then how can we trust their accounts of other matters? Therefore, there is valid reason to be skeptical about many aspects of Muhammad’s life as well as the emergence and expansion of Islam as set forth in Islamic traditions (their authority with Muslims notwithstanding). Thus, we are compelled to evaluate the historical narrative these traditions present in light of non-Muslim historical documents and archaeological evidence.

What one finds is that when this is done, our view of Muhammad and Islam is significantly altered, along with our view of Muhammad in relation to redemptive history.

The sub-sections which follow reflect on various Christian views of Islam, a revised history of Muhammad and the movement he founded, and a theological reassessment of the prophet of Islam based on a potentially more objective portrayal of his character and actions.

Disparate Perceptions of Islam

Muhammad is regarded as the founder of the religion of Islam. Since our judgment of his possible prophethood will be in large measure determined by our assessment of Islam, we need to consider the origins, history, and nature of Islam and his relationship to it. Kate Zebiri notes the varied ways that Christians have looked at Islam.¹² These include:

as a Christian heresy; as a harbinger of the end of the world; as diabolical; as a natural or man-made religion; as a punishment of Christian infidelity . . . ; as a *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the gospel); or as an independent way of salvation. On the other hand, many Christians, particularly in the modern period, have been hesitant to categorize Islam in such ways, either because this would be speculation on matters which can be known only to God, or because they do not

radical approach. Spencer will only grant that Muhammad “as a prophet of the Arabs who taught a vaguely defined monotheism... may have existed,” 214.

¹¹ Dan Gibson, *Qur’anic Geography* (Surrey, BC: Canada, Independent Scholars Press, 2011). See the summary by Jeremy Smyth, “The Mecca Question” at <http://searchformecca.com/>

¹² Cf. also Charles Kimball, *Striving Together* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

see Islam as a reified or monolithic entity but rather in more fluid and undefined terms which would preclude making such generalizations.¹³

An in-depth evaluation of each of these perceptions of Islam is not possible here. However, a few comments are in order.

First, I do not view any kind of Islam as an alternative way of salvation apart from personal faith in Christ. Second, the Islamic traditions have not historically or widely functioned as a preparation for the gospel for the Muslim community.¹⁴ However, the Qur'an's testimony about Jesus has recently facilitated a number of Muslims in embarking on a journey that led to encountering him as savior.¹⁵ Nonetheless, it seems that historical military, political, and theological Christian-Muslim conflicts rendered Islam more of an obstruction to the gospel than a preparation for it. It could be that the theological conflict has largely been the result of cultural conflict—similar to the dynamics in the culturally-rooted theological conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christianity in the book of Acts. The late Ralph D. Winter saw Islam as a contextualization of the biblical faith for those Arabs who rejected the alien and unbiblical character of Arabian Judaism and Christianity.¹⁶

Many Eastern Christians gave thanks to God for the ascendancy of the Arabs, hailing their armies as liberators from their Byzantine oppressors. Other conquered Christians saw Islam primarily as a punishment on Christianity for their sins and disunity. They expected that after they repented, God would remove the Muslims. Yet, this never materialized. Other Christians (particularly Byzantines¹⁷) who lost opportunity, status, political power or territory spoke of Muhammad and Muslims in very pejorative terms.¹⁸ As Islam evolved into a distinct religion and as a competitor to Christianity, Muslim-Christian relations further degenerated. During the Crusades animosity increased on both sides and Islamic theology turned ever more hostile toward Christianity.¹⁹

Norman Daniel's extensive study of Islam in the 12th-14th centuries portrays the nearly universally negative picture of Islam in the West.²⁰ Europeans often viewed Islam as the work of

¹³ Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford, UK: One World), 188.

¹⁴ David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014), 112-118.

¹⁵ For examples, see Fouad Elias Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 27, and David Garrison, 118.

¹⁶ Personal conversation in Pasadena, CA, 2004.

¹⁷ Byzantines were Greek Christians whose name came from Byzantium, a Greek city on the European side of the Bosphorus Strait. It became the capital of the Eastern part of the Roman empire under Constantine I who renamed it Constantinople. The Greek Christian empire eventually lost much of its territorial control to the Arab Believers movement (which eventually morphed into Islamic rule).

¹⁸ John of Damascus reacted to the Islamization of the civil service in Syria. After the Byzantines lost political dominion to Muslim armies, the polemicist Nicetas of Byzantium (c. 842-912) vented such vitriol and animus that I feel some shame in being associated with him by the label "Christian."

¹⁹ Likely in reaction to the persecution of Muslims during the Re-conquest of Spain, Ibn Hazm charged Christians with corrupting the text of scripture, not just corruption of its meaning.

²⁰ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West*, revised edition (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 1983).

the devil or Antichrist.²¹ This diabolic view of Islam prevails in the West, as well as among national Christians in the Middle East. I, too, held this view in the past.

However, there are good reasons to challenge this pejorative view, as some reputable Christian scholars have been doing. The critical question is: Does our present perception of Islam accurately represent what Islam was in the time of Muhammad and what he intended his movement to be?

Divergent Histories of Muhammad and Muslims

Abdul-Haqq puts Muhammad in the tradition of the *ḥunafā'* (plural of *ḥanīf*):

Pre-Islamic “Hunafa” God-fearers were pagan Arabs who had been exposed to Jewish and Christian monotheism. They claimed that their monotheistic tradition dated back to the Friend of God, Abraham. It was handed down by those spiritually alive during the pre-Islamic history of Arabia. According to the Koran, the prophet Muhammad came only as a reformer and a warner to pagan Arabs,²² calling them back to Abrahamic monotheism.²³

Support for Abdul-Haqq’s view is found in the Armenian “Chronicle of Sebeos,” a very early (7th century) record of how non-Muslims perceived Muhammad and his mission among the sons of Ishmael²⁴:

[Muhammad] as if by God's command appeared to them as a preacher [and] the path of truth. He taught them to recognize the God of Abraham, especially because he was learnt and informed in the history of Moses. Now because the command was from on high, at a single order they all came together in unity of religion. Abandoning their vain cults, they turned to the living God who had appeared to their father Abraham.... He said: 'With an oath God promised this land to Abraham and his seed after him forever.... But now you are the sons of Abraham and God is accomplishing his promise to Abraham and his seed for you. Love sincerely only the God of Abraham, and go and seize the land which God gave to your father Abraham.'²⁵

²¹ Kimball, 40.

²² For example, Surah 92:12-16 strongly warns polytheists.

²³ Abdiyah Akbar Abdul-Haqq, *Sharing Your Faith with a Muslim* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1980), 15.

²⁴ Cf. Jonathan, Culver, “The Ishmaelite Promise and Contextualization among Muslims.” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17(1):62-69, 2000, “The Ishmaelite Promises in the Light of God’s Mission: Christian and Muslim Reflections.” Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001; chapter 12 in Mark Harlan, *A Model for Theologizing in Arab Muslim Contexts*, Evangelical Missiological Society Dissertation Series (Pasadena, CA: WCIU Press, 2012); and Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: the Unfolding of God’s Prophetic Plan for Ishmael’s Line* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003).

²⁵ Robert William Thomson, James Howard-Johnson & Tim Greenwood, *The Armenian History Attributed To Sebeos*, Translated Texts For Historians, Vol. 31 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 95-96.

Sebeos also has Muhammad in alliance with the Jews and notes that the Muslim movement's first governor of Jerusalem was a Jew.²⁶

In addition, some reject the historical narrative proposed by Islamic tradition based on internal evidence of the Qur'an. They argue that Muhammad began his mission as an ecumenical movement of monotheist "Believers" that included numbers of Jews and Christians. Its focus was on devotion (esp. prayer and almsgiving) and the practice of righteousness and good deeds in preparation for the Day of Judgment.²⁷ Immeasurably more successful than Jerry Falwell's ambitions for the Moral Majority, Muhammad mobilized what we might call a Monotheistic Moral Majority Movement that respected and incorporated Jews and Christians for two to three generations after his death. Fred Donner concludes that this "confessionally open" ecumenical movement was "in no way antithetical to the beliefs and practices of some Christians and Jews." They could belong not only because they of their religious identities but because they were "inclined to righteousness."²⁸ The movement's theological teachings do not seem to have been repugnant to many Christians of that period—unlike the situation that developed a century later.²⁹ It appears that many local Christian communities did not oppose the movement—in contrast to the Byzantine Christians.

Significant external evidence from archeology supports the ecumenical character of the Believers movement. For example, a coin found in Palestine dated in the 640s or 650s is inscribed with "Muhammad" and a person holding a cross.³⁰ Similar coins were minted by Muslim caliphs for up to a century. However, the Christian symbols were removed during the Umayyad era.³¹ All inscriptions, coins and papyri with the *shahāda* until 66/685 contain only the phrase "There is no god, but God" with no mention of Muhammad. This would not have hindered Jews, Christians or other monotheists from joining the ranks of the Believers.³²

The absence of archaeological evidence of widespread violence and destruction of churches and towns in Syria-Palestine further supports the ecumenical character of Muhammad's movement.³³

Non-Muslim historical documents in the formative period also point toward this ecumenism. In Egypt during the early period of Islam, the Arabic papyri make no mention of "Muslims," but

²⁶ Donner cautions us regarding the complete historicity of the account since Christian polemicists of the time loved to discredit opponents with guilt by association with the Jews, 114. Spencer rejects the historical accuracy due to outside corroboration, but notes the lack of hostility to Jews, 33.

²⁷ Donner, chapter 2. Donner argues that Muhammad started a reform movement of monotheism that focused on the practice of morality. Much later it became what we recognize today as "Islam." See also Donner's "The Qur'an in Recent Scholarship", in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2008), 33.

²⁸ Donner, 69-70, cites Qur'anic support from Surah 46:9, 48:29, 3:199, 3:113-116 and the like.

²⁹ Donner thinks the Christians who joined this "Believers Movement" were non-Trinitarian Christians, seemingly based on his anti-Trinitarian understanding of certain Qur'anic verses. However, Block demonstrates that these verses were aimed at tri-theism and other heretical Christian views. (See footnote above).

³⁰ Spencer, xiv.

³¹ Reynolds, *Emergence of Islam*, 160. Cf. also Spencer, xiv, and chapter 2.

³² Donner, 112. Sometimes the anti-polytheism denunciation "who has no associate" also appeared, but this was not an obstacle for true monotheists.

³³ Donner, 114.

instead we only find the terms “believers” (*mu’minûn*) and “emigrants” (*muhajirûn*).³⁴ Syrian Christians saw the movement as linked to descendants of Abraham and Hagar through Ishmael who confessed one God. Little more than decade after the death of Muhammad, a document (dated 644 AD) written by Syrian Christians describes a religious discussion between the emir of the “immigrants” (the Arab conquerors) and the Syrian Patriarch. John of Sedreh noted that the immigrants accepted the Torah, like Jews and Samaritans, and described how Jewish scholars with the emir examined the Christians’ quotations from the Scriptures. Much of their discussion was about the Scriptures; yet, there was no reference to the Qur’an (perhaps indicating that it was not yet circulating) and there was no mention of a new religion. The term “Islam” was never used.³⁵

Syriac Christian sources viewed the conquest as an ethnic (Arab) one more than a sectarian religious one.³⁶ John of Phenek (d. 690s), a Nestorian Christian observed, “Among them [the Arabs] there are many Christians, some of whom are from the heretics, others from us.”

Syriac writers referred to their leaders in secular and political terms, not by religious titles. Muhammad was called “the first king of the immigrants,” and occasionally called “the Guide,” “Teacher,” “Leader” or “Great Ruler.”³⁷ A letter (c. 647) from Isho’yahb III, the Nestorian patriarch in Iraq, states that they “not only do not fight Christianity, they even commend our religion, show honor to the priests and monasteries and saints of our Lord, and make gifts to the monasteries and churches”.³⁸

It appears that two civil wars over political leadership created and intensified divisions between the Believers. The companions of the prophet disappeared from the scene and with them the last vestiges of the prophet’s charisma and eschatological motivation. Donner observes, “The conquests by now apparently had become less a matter of the personal zeal of individual Believers driven by vision of an impending Last Judgment and more a lucrative form of state policy intended to keep revenues and plunder flowing into the treasury”³⁹ After the Second Civil War (680-692), ‘Abd al-Malik sought to restore Umayyid political rule by appealing to religious authority and designated himself as Muhammad’s successor. (Hence, the first attested documentary use of *khalifa*/caliph occurs in this period). For reasons that are not entirely clear,

³⁴ Reference to the work of Petra Jijpsteijn of Leiden University is made by Anton Wessels, *The Torah, the Gospel and the Qur’an: Three Books, Two Cities, One Tale* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 106. Their self-identity as “emigrants” indicates a mentality of *hijra* with its notions of entering a devout community, striving (even militantly) in the path of God, and adopting a non-nomadic lifestyle (Donner, chapter 2 and 134).

³⁵ Abdul Massih Saadi, “Nascent Islam in the Seventh Century Syriac Sources”, in *The Qur’an in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (NY: Routledge, 2008), 217-219. Syriac Christian sources are judged to be more objective than those of the Byzantines who were more polemical due to their direct political and territorial losses to the Arabs.

³⁶ “Arab” was a linguistic or cultural identity, not a political one. It would be erroneous and anachronistic to suppose an Arab nationalistic political identity existed. Donner states, “There is almost no evidence for the existence of a collective ‘Arab’ political identity before the Believers created their empire” (218).

³⁷ Abdul-Masih Saadi, “Nascent Islam in the seventh century Syriac sources,” in “*The Qur’an in Its Historical Context*,” ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (NY: Routledge, 2008), 217-218.

³⁸ Donner, 114.

³⁹ Donner, 190.

“Islam”, the inclusive Believers movement,⁴⁰ began to be redefined to exclude Jews and Christians and morph into a distinct religion—one that over the centuries grew increasingly negative toward Christianity.⁴¹

During the Crusades and re-conquest of Spain, mutual hostility increased markedly (as seen in the change from Muslims understanding *tāhrīf* as Jewish/Christian distortion of the *meaning* of scripture to corruption of the actual *text* of the scriptures).⁴²

Reassessment of Muhammad’s Theology

In light of the above considerations, many Christian scholars are reassessing their position on Muhammad, acknowledging him as important religious leader whose prophetic message contains much that the Bible affirms—even if Islam eventually became more hostile to Christianity.⁴³

It is significant that during the first century Christians did not seem to think of Muhammad as a false prophet. The evidence indicates that Christians who first encountered Islam regarded it as an alternative Christology, and only later as a Christian heresy. Therefore, it likely had more commonality with Christianity than is recognized today. Recent studies demonstrate that the Meccan *surahs* can fit into a context of conflicting Christianities, not the purported pagan context of Muslim tradition.⁴⁴ There is also much to be said in favor of considering the original Islam as a Jewish heresy because of its many parallels. Even more fruitful may be the suggestion of its links with Jewish Christianity.⁴⁵ Joseph Azzi, a Lebanese Christian, argues from Islamic sources that Muhammad’s mentor, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, was an Ebionite Christian priest.⁴⁶ Several German scholars think that Jewish Christian Christology was passed on until

⁴⁰ All believers were “muslims”. Those who were Jews or Christians could still be so identified, but polytheists who forsook idolatry to follow Qur’anic law could then only be called “muslims”. Over time, the term began to be applied exclusively to the “new monotheists” (Donner, 72).

⁴¹ Block provides historical evidence that for a century, Christians viewed Muhammad’s doctrines in similar terms as they did other branches of Christianity (such as Monophysites and Nestorians) that had alternative Christological views (126). Of course each group regarded all other views as heretical. Reynolds rejects the traditional view of the Islam’s origins and its sacred text, as does Spencer. Many scholars view “orthodox” Islam as likely representing something that existed two or three centuries after Muhammad.

⁴² Cf. Martin Accad, “Corruption and/or Misinterpretation of the Bible: The Story of the Islamic Usage of *Tāhrīf*,” *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 24 (2003): 67-97; also Abdullah Saeed, “The Charge of *Distortion* of Jewish and Christian Scriptures,” *The Muslim World*, Vol.92, No.3/4 (Fall 2002): 419-436.

⁴³ As a result of this more negative stance toward Christianity, many Christians lay the blame of the bad fruit of the Islamic system upon the root, Muhammad. However, following this logic, the responsibility and blame for the religious system that developed under the Pharisees (that shut the door to Jews who sought to enter kingdom of heaven - Mt. 23:13) should be placed upon the shoulders of Moses. This is certainly not justifiable. Similarly, we would have to blame Peter, Paul (and even Jesus) for what Christianity became in medieval Roman Catholicism.

⁴⁴ Reynolds, *Emergence of Islam*, chapter 7.

⁴⁵ During the 1st C., Jewish Christians were Torah-observant, distinct from other Jews only by their belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Later, they included groups like the Ebionites and Nazarenes. Some followed a Hebrew or Aramaic version of Matthew, others one of several non-canonical Jewish-Christian gospels. Ebionites seem to have denied Christ’s pre-existence, but some still accepted the Virgin Birth. By the 4th C., Constantine’s persecution drove them to Arabia and beyond.

⁴⁶ *The Priest and the Prophet: The Christian Priest, Waraqa Ibn Nawfal’s Profound Influence Upon Muhammad, The Prophet of Islam* (Los Angeles: Pen Publishers, 2005). Azzi’s demonstration of Waraqa’s ties to Jewish Christianity is quite strong. That he was an Ebionite is less certain, in my opinion.

Muhammad encountered and embraced it. The cultural compatibility and appeal of this type of Christology would seem to have allowed this to happen quite naturally.⁴⁷ Such a Christology would not have compromised the Abrahamic monotheism of the *ḥunafā'*, as did the aberrant Christologies of the Christians that Muhammad refuted in the Qur'an.

W. Cantwell Smith also questions the notion that Islam was originally a separate religion.⁴⁸ The early consideration of Islam as a Christian heresy, along with the many theological divisions in the Middle Ages, and the Muslim veneration of Jesus, compel Smith to believe that conversion from Christianity to Islam may then have been regarded as merely a change to another theological position.⁴⁹ This harmonizes with the view of scholars who contend that Qur'anic verses allegedly critical of Christianity are best understood as challenging or correcting unorthodox Christianities or disputed Christologies.⁵⁰ Reliable historical and textual evidence supports this understanding.

It is also significant that for more than a century orthodox churchmen spoke of Muhammad's followers using the same terminology as they did of other branches of ancient Christianity. This indicates that they viewed Islam as an alternative Christology, not as a different religion. C. Jonn Block concludes that they even "recognized a distinction between the teachings of Muhammad and the behaviours of his followers to the degree that Muhammad himself may have been considered a prophet from a Christian perspective" (as we shall see in the testimony of Timothy I).⁵¹ Block asserts: (1) Surahs 4:171 and 5:173 are not a rejection of the Trinity but a tri-theism as promoted by John Philoponus (pp. 44-52); (2) Surah 19:35 corrects the adoptionism of the Nestorians; (3) Surah 5:116 condemns Mariolatry; (4) the rejection of Jesus as "son of God" in Surah 2:116-117 pertains to Christian corruption of an apocryphal 4 Ezra text; and (5) Muhammad defended the Christianity of his in-law, Waraqa ibn Nawful.⁵²

This more positive attitude toward Muhammad, his message and his mission is not a new innovation, but rather a return to the trend of the earliest period of Christian-Muslim encounter.

⁴⁷Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Muslim-Christian Relations: Questions of a Comparative Religionist" *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 8, 1987, cited in Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: One World, 1997), 191. Such scholars look to a recovery of Hebrew Christian views as a promising contextual Christology for Islam today.

⁴⁸ Similarly, John Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15.

⁴⁹ Smith, 20, cited in Zebiri, 190. Although zealous evangelical Christians completely reject any movement deemed heretical, we should realize that devout non-Chalcedonian Christians were similarly classed—not to mention Nestorius, who it seems did not merit that branding. I do not believe that such "heretics" are necessarily infidels (unbelievers)—they may be trusting in Christ but have a different "grasp" of a theological mystery. The same may be true of many evangelical Christians today, who if asked to explain the Trinity would likely give an answer that the ancient church declared heretical. Even theologically sophisticated, Bible believing Christians do not all agree in their understanding of the nature of the Trinity. (Some see social Trinitarians as in conflict with a proper understanding of Nicene orthodoxy).

⁵⁰ William Montgomery Watt, "The Christianity Criticized in the Qur'an" *Muslim World* 57:3 (1967):197-201.

⁵¹ Block, 126.

⁵² Block examines historical and exegetical contexts of Qur'anic criticisms of various Christian identities, 290; cf. also Basetti-Sani.

After a millennium of spiteful scholarship, most Christians unfortunately assume that their forebears had always regarded Muhammad as a false prophet.⁵³

Rehabilitation of Muhammad

Biblical scholars have sought to make a more accurate and balanced assessment of Saul's life and character. Should a similar effort be conducted with the prophet of Islam?

To begin with, available information from Islamic sources on Muhammad's early life reveal him to have been a sincere seeker of truth and of honorable character, a picture that has not been appreciated by Christians and Western societies. These tend to have belabored his moral failures. Recognizing this, Montgomery Watt states, "Of all the world's great men none has been so maligned as Muhammad." He mitigates most of Muhammad's alleged moral failures by pointing out that they were largely for the sake of strengthening Islam's position or departing from tribal tradition and were not serious departures from the standards of his time.⁵⁴

F. Buhl views Muhammad's character in a positive manner in light of his early reception of divine communications (but not his infallibility). He says:

The scientific student therefore does not see in Muhammad a deceiver but fully agrees with the impression of sincerity and truthfulness which his utterances in the older revelations make . . . the cogent imperatives . . . the self-denunciation . . . along with the fact that he unselfishly endured years of hostility and humiliation in Mecca in the unshakable conviction of his lofty task. It is more difficult with the later Madinese revelations, in which it is often only too easy to detect the human associations, to avoid the supposition that his paroxysms . . . could sometimes be artificially brought on, and there is even a tradition which makes 'A'isha say to the Prophet: "Thy Lord seems to have been very quick in fulfilling thy prayers". It must not be forgotten however that natures like this, without actually being conscious of it, are able to provoke the same states of excitation which earlier arose without their assistance; and so probably not only were his followers in Madina . . . but he himself was convinced, that the spirit was continually hovering about him to communicate the revelations to him. By this we do not of course mean that in his ecstatic condition he received the divine communications *in extenso*, as we now have them in the Kur'an; only the foundations were given him, which he afterwards developed into discourse of greater lengths. Since in doing this he used the external forms of the old Arab soothsayers it is natural that the Meccans took him for one, but it does not follow that he was spiritually akin from the first to those soothsayers who were inspired by *djinns* [spirits].⁵⁵

⁵³ Block, 281. Block traces the change to a polemical attitude toward Muhammad to John of Damascus in the 8th C and details the history of deliberate malice in scholarship.

⁵⁴ Watt, William Montgomery, *Islam and Christianity Today: A Contribution to Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1983), 60-61. I would agree with Watt in this regard, as well with his conclusion that Muhammad is not an exemplar for humanity when judged by modern standards—only the incomparable Christ sets a moral standard that challenges all humans in all times and places.

⁵⁵ F. Buhl, "Muhammad" in *Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, eds. (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 2001), 393-394.

In order to explore the possibility of ascribing a legitimate prophetic role for Muhammad requires a theological discussion about revelation, types of prophecy, and the impartation process of the Qur'an. This I proceed to do. I will subsequently propose a set of criteria, both invalid and proper, for evaluating a prophet. Finally, I will reconsider the possibility of viewing Muhammad as prophet.

II. Theology of Revelation Reconsidered

In this section I look at the possibility of special revelation in the present (or church) age, the nature and kinds of post-canonical and present-day prophecy, the power of general revelation as an impetus to prophecy, and finally the source, character, manner, and process by which the Qur'an was given.

Special Revelation in the Present

I fully affirm the traditional theological distinction between general and special revelation; yet, I suggest that we reassess some of our assumptions.

Christopher Little defines special revelation as “God’s communication of himself at specific times in specific ways with specific truths in order to reconcile specific individuals and communities to himself.” It is also redemptive (aimed at reconciling humanity to God), personal, progressive, and propositional (communicating knowledge essential for belief and adherence in order to have a right relationship with God).⁵⁶ Scriptural modalities (or means) of special revelation include the lot, the urim and thummin, dreams, visions, theophanies, angels, the prophets, Jesus Christ and the Bible.⁵⁷ After a study of pertinent biblical figures in salvation history, Little asserts, “The response of faith to the truths revealed by way of the modalities of special revelation is the sole means by which God redeems people throughout human history.”⁵⁸ However, some currently question whether God continues to use among the unevangelized other modalities of special revelation besides Jesus Christ and the Bible (yet never in contradiction to the Bible). Three of the stronger reasons to support that he does are:

1. Throughout church history prominent theologians have held that dreams are a source of divine revelation. Morton Kelsey declares: “Everyone of the apologists . . . believed in healing and dreams, in supernaturally given information and visions.” Kelsey lists subsequent church leaders who continued to hold to this view of the supernatural.⁵⁹
2. The situation of many unevangelized today parallels that of many individuals in the OT (such as Eve, Noah, Abraham, Melchizedek, and Job) who, though not possessing God’s

⁵⁶ Christopher Little, *The Revelation of God among the Unevangelized* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2000), 47.

⁵⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 63-65.

⁵⁸ Little, 115. This faith response to special revelation always has some christological element to it, is always true (though not always fully grasped), and its content regarding what is necessary for salvation is progressively developed.

⁵⁹ These included Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chryostom, and Gregory of Nazianzus in the Eastern church, and Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory the Great in the West. Even Augustine changed in his views when he saw such phenomena occurring around him (Morton Kelsey, *The Christian and the Supernatural* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1976), 97-98.

written word, received a message from him through other modalities of special revelation.⁶⁰

3. Even after God's word was enscriptured, he continued to use other revelatory modalities. For example, even though the magi and Cornelius were acquainted with Jewish Scripture, God used a star and an angel to lead them to salvation.⁶¹

Although I had been taught that God no longer used revelatory modalities apart from the Scriptures, this position lacks clear biblical support. On the contrary, Scriptures like Joel 2:28ff. indicate that prophecy, dreams and visions will characterize the pouring out of God's spirit in the Last Days.⁶² Moreover, there is no theological reason to prohibit God from employing them. On the contrary, to so assert would seem to limit His sovereignty. Scriptures itself testifies that God did not restrict Himself to Hebrew prophets to communicate His message, he not only used Balaam but even used Balaam's donkey. Furthermore, a denial of present manifestations of these other modalities cannot satisfactorily explain their abundant appearance in mission history. For example, Woodberry's research showed over half of Muslim background believers surveyed experienced one or more dreams or visions before or after conversion.⁶³

Post-Canonical and Present-day Prophecy

Having examined evidence for the theological possibility of post-canonical special revelation, we can now look specifically at the possibility of valid present-day prophecy. This requires that we first understand the nature of prophecy in the Bible.⁶⁴

Conservative evangelicals recognize two kinds of prophets. The major prophets of the canonical OT were mediums of the authoritative revelation that became the inerrant or infallible Word of God—in their original autographs. The second kind was in the schools of the prophets, a distinction evidenced by passages such as Numbers 12:6-8 and 11:29. Their “charismatic and enigmatic” messages are the type envisioned by Joel's prophecy that Peter said was fulfilled on

⁶⁰ Little, 82. While the Bible was present in Arabia in some non-Arabic languages, such as Syriac, it was the coming of a divine revelation in a “clear, Arabic tongue” (26:195) that gave such great significance to the mission of Muhammad. Stories from Bible translators record the immense difference it makes to tribal peoples when the Scriptures are translated into in their heart language, even though they are available to them in another language.

⁶¹ Little, 117.

⁶² I see this prophecy as having had an initial and partial fulfillment at Pentecost (Ac. 2:16-21) and will be fully fulfilled in the Last Days. The Pentecostal-charismatic movement whose explosive growth claims upward to ½ billion in just one century would lay claim to be a further aspect of fulfillment.

⁶³ This is special revelation, even if not viewed as normative authority for all believers, times and places. Jones, Daniel Jones, “Dreams of Christ Awakening Muslims to Newfound Faith” *World Pulse* 30 (5):4-5; Rick Kronk, *Dreams and Visions: Muslims' Miraculous Journey to Jesus* (San Giovanni Teatino, Italy: Destiny Image, 2010); Tom Doyle, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 223; Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims Become Christians* (East Sussex, UK: Monarch, 1999).

⁶⁴ Though my seminary and church background denied this possibility, my views later changed through my experiences with individuals who are so gifted, along with the writings Carson, Grudem and Deere. Cf. D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), and Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God: How God Speaks Today through Prophecies, Dreams, and Visions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1996).

Pentecost (Ac. 1:16). This type of prophecy, exercised as a gift of the Spirit in the NT church, was not infallible, but had to be carefully examined, evaluated, or weighed as 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 instruct. The word used here is *diakrino* and implies a mixed quality that had to be sifted like chaff from wheat. We must also recognize that it was Christ's apostles (and not these prophets) who were the heirs of the OT canonical prophets, with regard to authorship of infallible revelation in the NT.⁶⁵ Accepting the validity of this distinction between these two types of prophecy, we can allow for a continuance of prophets whose utterances do not supersede biblical authority.

While acknowledging such a possibility for those in the Judeo-Christian heritage, some may question the possible existence of such prophets outside the fold of Christianity. Balaam certainly received divine revelation from the true God whom he claimed as “the Lord my God” (Num. 22:18). Don Richardson offers an example of possible revelation to a seer/prophet and philosopher-poet. Epimenides provides the backdrop for Paul's quoting him (Acts 17:28) in his sermon about the “unknown god.” This pagan poet/prophet was consulted as to the cause of an unrelenting plague in Athens. He concluded their offense was not against any of the Athenian gods, but an unknown god. He advised them to let loose hungry sheep on the lush pastures of Mars Hill. On each place where a hungry sheep lay down without grazing, that sheep was sacrificed, and the plague subsided.⁶⁶ The Herman Bavinck quote above listed this passage as proof of God's revelation among the pagans.⁶⁷

General Revelation is Special

For those who cannot accept the possibility of present day special revelation, Johan H. Bavinck, the Dutch missionary theologian, expands the traditional boundaries of general revelation. Bavinck does this by challenging a theological understanding of general revelation that is often associated with “infantile natural theology” or “philosophical conclusions of the human mind.”⁶⁸ Though available to all, God is actively engaged in it—in a way that others would associate with special revelation. Bavinck explains:

When the Bible speaks of general revelation, it means something quite different. There it has a much more personal nature. It is divine concern for men collectively and individually. God's deity and eternal power are evident; they overwhelm man; they strike him suddenly in moments when he thought they were far away. They creep up on him; they do not let go of him, even though man does his best to escape them. Escaping from them and repressing them is the human answer to God's revelation, an answer that becomes evident in the history of the religion of man. . . .

⁶⁵ Carson 1987, 94-98.

⁶⁶ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, revised ed. (Ventura, CA: Venture Books, 1984), 9-25; cf. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 373, comments on Acts 17:23.

⁶⁷ *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 318.

⁶⁸ Johan H. Bavinck, *The Church between Temple and Mosque* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 123.

In the “night of power”⁶⁹ of which the ninety-seventh sura of the Koran speaks, the night when “the angels descended” and the Koran descended from Allah’s throne, God dealt with Muhammad and touched him. God wrestled with him in that night, and God’s hand is still noticeable in the answer of the prophet, but it is also the result of human oppression. “The great moments in the history of religion are the moments when God wrestled with man in a very particular way....”

God can at times, as it were, stop the noiseless engines of repression and exchange and overwhelm man to such an extent that he is powerless for the moment. There is, also, always the silent activity of the Holy Spirit inside man, even if he resists Him constantly. The way in which Isaiah speaks of Cyrus, the anointed one, who was called by His name and girded by God (Is. 45:4, 5), indicates that the Bible certainly leaves the possibility open for God to anoint those who do not know Him with His Spirit and to gird them for certain tasks to which He calls them.⁷⁰

Bavinck asserts that it was truly God (not an evil angel) whom Muhammad encountered in his revelatory experiences. He holds that human religion is the result of varied responses in degrees of repression and substitution (as in Rom. 1:18-28) to these divine encounters. Religions are not all the same, and we can infer that he recognizes in Islam a high degree of divine influence, when he says:

We meet figures in the history of the non-Christian religions of whom we feel that God wrestled with them in a very particular way. We still notice traces of that process of suppression and substitution in the way they responded, but occasionally we observe a far greater influence of God there than in many other human religions.⁷¹

Thus Bavinck can acknowledge that Muhammad (at least at some point and in some way) encountered the true and living God in his revelatory experiences. Contradictory differences from biblical revelation could be attributed to imperfect responses by him, by the community that succeeded him, and by the People of the Book whom they encountered. Let us look closer at what may have transpired.

The Impartation Process of Qur’anic Revelation

Kenneth Cragg declares that we cannot honestly appraise the Prophet of Islam apart from a true understanding of the manner in which the Qur’anic revelation was imparted to him: for “His words are not his own devising. The Qur’an is revelation imparted” (Surah 53:3,4). Cragg understands and appreciates the traditional Islamic view of *wahy* (revelation) as “celestial dictation,” but he rejects any view of Muhammad’s inspiration that expunges human involvement.

⁶⁹ Some scholars believe the “night of power” (Surah 97:1-5) is actually a reference to Christmas night, based on the similar vocabulary used in the Qur’an and the nativity narratives (Spencer, 183-185).

⁷⁰ J.H. Bavinck, 124-126.

⁷¹ J.H. Bavinck, 126.

Is apostolate really to be understood by the analogy of stone figures devised by cunning plumbers and sculptors to impress the eye but which deceive none save the unwary? Does prophethood have no part but that of a mere channel otherwise uninvolved? The undoubted fact that the original source is beyond prophethood itself need not reduce the prophet to a pair of lips.⁷²

Fazlur Rahman relies on the earliest account of Ibn Hisham that states that Muhammad “awoke” as inferring his revelation came while he was in a state of a vision or quasi-dream. Rahman presents a reasoned rejection of theories that attribute Muhammad’s revelatory experiences to epilepsy, but he also rejects the traditional Islamic idea of an angel speaking to Muhammad in a normal state of consciousness, attributing that to the creative theological labors of later orthodoxy—a formulation that is actually anti-Qur’anic.

This was supposed to guarantee the externality of the Angel or the Voice in the interests of safeguarding the “objectivity” of the Revelation. The attempt may seem to us intellectually immature, but at the time when the dogma was in the making, there were compelling reasons for taking this step, particularly the controversies against the rationalists. A great deal of Ḥadīth . . . commonly accepted later, came into existence portraying the Prophet talking to the Angel in public and graphically describing the appearance of the latter. Despite the fact that it is contradicted by the Qur’an which says “. . . We sent him (the Angel) down upon your *heart* that you may be a warner” (XXVI, 194, cf. II, 97) this idea of the externality of the Angel and the Revelation has become so ingrained in the general Muslim mind that the real picture is anathema to it.⁷³

Rahman supports his view that the Prophet’s revelations were inner spiritual experiences with Surah 53:11-12 “The heart has not falsified what it has seen,” and Surah 17:1 and 81:23. Hence, he rejects the doctrine of a physical *mi`rāj* (Ascension of Muhammad) and charges it with being “no more than a historical fiction” that was developed by “orthodoxy” with fabricated hadith, being patterned after the Ascension of Christ.⁷⁴

Cragg also challenges the “celestial dictation” view of Qur’anic revelation from a number of angles. Like Rahman, he focuses on the fact that the Qur’an states that the revelation came via Muhammad’s “heart” (26:194; 2:97), not just by way of his lips. He notes that *tanzīl*, God’s sending down the revelation, is also applied to the giving of iron to mankind in Surah 57:25: “We have sent down iron which has such great strength and diverse uses for mankind.” This parallel suggests that a looser manner of bestowal of divine revelation than the “orthodox” view may be what the Qur’an intends.⁷⁵ Moreover, Cragg gives strong reasons why the orthodox belief in Muhammad’s illiteracy is quite unlikely. More probably, the disputed meaning of the phrase in Surah 7 *al-rasūl al-nabī al-ummī* (the “unlettered” prophet-apostle) means that he was the “unscriptured” prophet-apostle; in contrast to the People of the Book, Muhammad and his

⁷² Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad and the Christian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 84.

⁷³ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1968), 4-5.

⁷⁴ Rahman, 5.

⁷⁵ Cragg, 95.

people to whom he was sent did not have the Scripture in their own language.⁷⁶ This explains why the plural form of *ummī* often appears in contradistinction to *al-Yahūd* (the Jews) who had the Scriptures. If this is the meaning, then the *i'jāz* (miraculous or wonderous nature) of the Qur'an does not refer to its being a linguistic miracle, but rather to the wonder of the message of monotheism coming in the language of the Arabs, akin in significance to Moses' receiving the law for the Jews.⁷⁷

In essence, a more realistic and accurate understanding of the process of Qur'anic revelation would be on the order of what Cragg has advocated: "as proceeding within a full engagement of mental and spiritual capacity, responsive to living situations" and "recognizing in the great original an experience, not merely of loyal spokespersonship that had no other dimension, but of vivid personal commission known only through vision, by travail and in intensity of soul".⁷⁸ Such a view not only handles the Qur'anic and historic data more soundly, but it is also compatible with the common biblical portrayal of prophetic experience (whether it be either the canonical or the common type of prophecy). As Christians, we do not regard the Qur'an to be utterly infallible and authoritative, but need not rule out the possibility of God's calling and using Muhammad as a prophet (like Saul in the OT or a charismatic prophet in the present era).

A second reason for our problem in handling the issue of Muhammad's prophethood is that we are unfamiliar with the existence of prophetic figures like him who have arisen in mission history. Gottfried Oosterwal in his *Modern Messianic Movements* reflects on the existence of the multitude of modern religious movements around the world that have derived their central themes from Christianity.⁷⁹ In spite of the diverse cultural, social, economic, political, ideological and religious conditions in which they arise, there are significant similarities between them: "prophets' and charismatic leaders, a crisis situation, ecstatic tendencies, a special revelation and a movement that suddenly arises and totally absorbs its adherents, giving them a whole new life-style, a new ethos, a new morality, and often leading to great reforms."⁸⁰ But that which is at their heart is their eschatology as proclaimed by a prophet or charismatic leader.

An amazing example of this phenomenon is William Wadé Harris. In the context of his people's being plundered, fined, resettled and victims of a costly war, Harris was in prison when in a trance he was called to be a prophet of the end times by the angel Gabriel. David Shank chronicles his little known story:

⁷⁶ Block takes a different view, thinking "unscriptured" may simply refer to the fact that Muhammad was not a known scholar like his uncle Waraqa, as the context gives the impression of one who is an "amateur" or "under-educated." This is influenced by his belief that "much of the scripture already existed at least orally in Arabic, and textually in Karshuni in Muhammad's time. The Theopaschite [affirming that God can suffer] formula was debated by Arab Bishops, the Ghassanids had bishops since the 4th century, the Nicene creed was in Arabic, and there are Christian Arabic inscriptions from at least the 5th century. The text may have been in Syriac, but the debates were in Arabic" (personal conversation, March, 2013).

⁷⁷ Cragg, 86-87.

⁷⁸ Cragg, 97.

⁷⁹ Gottfried Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1973), 37. Some key characteristics of modern messianic movements are reminiscent of Islam: their seeking to present a holistic view of life with religion at its center, strength of community, simplicity of message, and establishing a new fellowship that provides security and a new identity with meaning. ...

⁸⁰ Oosterwal, 9.

Convinced through Russellite influences that Christ was soon to bring in the kingdom of peace, Harris predicted World War I as a judgment on the civilized world, and then announced a difficult period of seven years, before everything was to be transformed by the reign of Christ. Seeing himself as the Elijah of Malachi 4, he felt he had appeared before the great and dreadful day of the Lord in order to prepare the people for the coming kingdom of peace, during which he was to be the judge responsible for West Africa.⁸¹

Western missionaries reported that the number of his converts in a matter of months exceeded the combined efforts of all their missions over decades—100,000 tribal Africans baptized in 18 months, many of them ready to be taught by the “white man with the Book” ten years after the event.⁸² Shank typifies his profound impact through the testimony of the politician, Casely Hayford:

You come to him with a heart full of bitterness, and when he is finished with you all the bitterness is gone out of your soul . . . Why, he calls upon the living God. He calms, under God, the troubled soul. He casts out strife . . . He brings joy and lightness of soul to the despairing. This thing must be of God.⁸³

We are compelled to acknowledge him as the greatest evangelist in the history of West Africa and his legacy to the church was unprecedented. But, his calling was not as an evangelist, but to be a prophet. Fellow African, Lamén Sanneh refers to him and others like him as “charismatic prophets”.⁸⁴ Yet others may be troubled by his calling to prophethood by an angel (reminding us of Joseph Smith),⁸⁵ and certainly by his self-identity as Elijah and judge, and his erroneous prediction about the advent of Kingdom.

Oosterwal depicts the theological and missiological challenge created by such movements: “All this points to a causative factor that transcends all human factors and suggests that, ultimately, the prophetic revelations and messianic movements are a problem of theology,” not the problem of the social and scientific disciplines. He asks:

⁸¹ David Shank, “William Wadé Harris,” in *Mission Legacies*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson, Robert T. Coote, Norman A. Horner, and James M. Phillips (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 158. David Shank further describes Harris’ prophetic ministry: “Accompanied by two women disciples--excellent singers playing calabash rattles-- he visited village after village, calling the coastal people to abandon and destroy their ‘fetishes,’ to turn to the one true and living God, to be baptized and forgiven by the Savior; he then taught them to follow the commandments of God, to live in peace, and organized them for prayer and worship of God in their own languages, music, and dance, to await the ‘white man with the Book’ and the new times that were to come” (155). Harris declared himself God’s prophet and was mightily used of God like no other person in West Africa in the conversion of thousands to Christ. Nevertheless, we see error in some of his prophetic views (155-165).

⁸² Shank, 155.

⁸³ Casely Hayford, in *William Waddy Harris*, 16-17, n.d. Quoted in David Shank, “William Wadé Harris,” in *Mission Legacies*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson, Robert T. Coote, Norman A. Horner, and James M. Phillips (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 159.

⁸⁴ Lamén Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 59.

⁸⁵ Founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormonism).

Why do these millions of people, Christians and Muslims, Buddhists and “secularists,” people of ethnic religions . . . suddenly expect the soon coming of a messiah, or of a “new heaven and a new earth”? . . . Do they have the same source as the original Christian teaching of the coming Kingdom of Christ, or are they perhaps human, even diabolic, distortions of or reactions against the Christian expectation of the messiah? . . . What is the relationship between (the message of) salvation in these messianic movements and the salvation in Christ witnessed in the Holy Scriptures, and in the extension of the Christian churches and missions?⁸⁶

In light of abundant anthropological evidence throughout all parts of the world, Oosterwal holds as untenable the view that the messianic movements are strictly due to contact with Christianity.⁸⁷ He challenges the standard missionary assessment: “the prophets are called liars, the messiahs, false, and the movements an antichristian threat to the Truth. For any prophet, any religion that comes after Christ, can only be antichrist”⁸⁸ Oosterwal asserts that the matter is not so simple, for a good number of the prophets and charismatic leaders of these movements were trained in Christian schools and served in the churches. On the other hand he adds, “Does not the Bible itself mention even false prophets who were inspired by God to reveal truth, and “pagans,” whom God used as His instruments to instruct, to guide and to direct His people?”⁸⁹

A parallel principle is found in Anthony Hoekema. He declared the cults to be the “unpaid bills of the church,” having observed how they each pick up important truths neglected by the Church. Although they have built their entire movement around these teachings, the church can and must learn from them.⁹⁰ Does only that which is entirely orthodox manifest the workings of God? Does the existence of error of any kind render someone demonically inspired? Hence, a prophetic leader under the overall influence of the Holy Spirit could be in error on a particular issue⁹¹ while the leader of a cult could hold a position on a particular issue that is more biblical.

Many Christians need to rethink their attitude toward those whose doctrines differ from their own. We should also consider the possibility that many non-Chalcedonian Christians (whom the Western church has regarded as unorthodox or heretical) may be in heaven because of their genuine trust in the Lord Jesus Christ; whereas some theologically orthodox (in the Chalcedonian sense) may not really know Him (cf. Mat. 7:21-23). Alan Richardson concludes:

⁸⁶ Oosterwal, 13-15.

⁸⁷ Oosterwal, 21.

⁸⁸ Oosterwal, 28.

⁸⁹ Oosterwal, 34-35

⁹⁰ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963),1. We should note that Hoekema classified the Seventh-Day Adventists as a cult, along with Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christian Science; whereas, many like myself, count the Adventists as fellow evangelical believers (although I seriously differ regarding their theology of hell). This should serve to illustrate the need for spiritual sophistication that does not just apply rigid categories and labels to an individual, group, or prophet.

⁹¹ I mean apart from the writings in the canon of Scripture. Some mistakes in Agabus’ prophetic understanding (Ac. 21:10-11) are noted by Carson (1987:97-99). Recall how even an apostle, Peter, erred in his practical theology at Antioch (Gal. 2).

Many heretics, whose opinions the Church had to condemn, were men of saintly character, actuated only by the sincerest desire to promote the true religion of the Lord Jesus. . . . On the whole the greatest heretics — "the heresiarchs" — were honest Christians, zealous for the promotion of a true and reverent Christian theology.⁹²

Consequently, our assessment of religious movements and leaders cannot be based solely upon whether they are in or out of the fold of Christian orthodoxy (as defined by one particular creed of the church). How then might we go about this? When then should be our assessment criteria? That is our next subject.

III. Criteria for Prophethood Reconsidered

In this section, I will demonstrate the inadequacy of the most commonly used criteria for validating or rejecting prophets (their moral blamelessness, their absence of hostility with Christianity or their performance of miracles). Instead I will propose that the most important issue is their attitude toward Christ and the Scriptures.

Not Moral Blamelessness

First, let it be said that the basis of our assessing a prophet's gifting or calling cannot be moral blamelessness or abstinence from use of force. The Corinthian prophets, like most of the other gifted believers in the church seemed to have been quite carnal. And even prophets of the canonical type committed grave sin: David committed adultery and shed innocent blood in order to cover up his sin. Solomon, who authored three books in the OT canon, makes Muhammad's weakness for women pale in comparison to his passions; he "loved many foreign women" and had "seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines." Moreover, Solomon participated in their idolatry in his old age (1 Kg. 11:1-6), as did Gideon (Jud. 8:27), whereas Muhammad was faithful to worship only the Creator. Furthermore, Muhammad's view and use of force and political means for the sake of religion does not seem strange to the Semitic mentality. Gideon and David combined military, political and spiritual leadership. Nehemiah used violence to enforce God's law and preserve communal purity, beating and pulling out the hair of those who had married or given sons in marriage to foreign women (Neh. 13:25). Are we also to condemn Joshua, who was divinely directed to undertake a campaign of total annihilation of the Canaanites (including their children)?

In his lectures, Woodberry highlights the predominately OT-like context of Muhammad, referring to him as a BC-like prophet during an AD time frame. Examples of similar phenomena may be seen in Acts 18-19 (albeit not exact parallels). Apollos preached powerfully and boldly about Jesus (an evidence of the Holy Spirit's anointing in Luke's theology), yet knew (and apparently taught) the baptism of John. Unacquainted with the theology of the new dispensation, he preached an important, but somewhat incomplete, message belonging to the prior era—until instructed by Aquila and Priscilla. In Acts 19, Paul encounters a group of disciples who were still following John the Baptist, having not even heard of the Holy Spirit. It may be that Muhammad was living faithfully according to the theology of a previous dispensation. We need also to remember that OT prophets to non-Jews (like Jonah, Nahum and possibly Obadiah) did

⁹² Alan Richardson, *Creeds in the Making: A Short Introduction to the History of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1935, reprint 1986), 31.

not preach obedience to the Mosaic law, the prophetic message to the Jews. Rather, they emphasized fundamental theological and ethical truths such as we find in the Qur'an. Furthermore, we cannot judge with the level of Muhammad's gospel knowledge based simply on what is present in the Qur'an. The many Qur'anic references to biblical narratives indicate that the audience was well acquainted with these stories that Muhammad alluded to and affirmed.

Returning to the issue of our assessing a prophet and his message, Oosterwal also asserts that it cannot in fairness be the excesses or immoral behavior of a minority of the movements' adherents, neither can we compare our high moral ideals with their low actual behavior; because the same can be done with Christianity. Rather we must evaluate these movements with a holistic understanding of them as well as by valid theological criteria—which for Oosterwal is the same as it is for Christian churches—it is simply “the person, the life and the mission of Jesus Christ.”⁹³

Confirming Christ

Granting the possibility of legitimacy of a post-biblical prophet, the issue becomes: by what criteria are we to evaluate his revelation? Little, following Barth, states that information from God must:

(1) conform to and agree with Jesus Christ; (2) attest to Jesus Christ without subtraction, addition, or alteration; (3) confirm that Jesus Christ has in some way been encountered by those who speak and relate to it; (4) agree with the witness of Scripture; (5) be affirmed by the dogmas and confessions of the church; and (6) manifest good fruit....Therefore, any revelation that is not substantiated and supported by either Jesus Christ as presented in Scripture or by Scripture itself, must be rejected and renounced. In other words, the Bible is our complete, final and ultimate authority when it comes to all matters pertaining to Christian faith and practice.⁹⁴

Unquestionably, Christ and the Scriptures must be our ultimate authority for assessment. However, we must be careful and clarify the implications of declaring “any revelation that is not substantiated and supported by either Jesus Christ as presented in Scripture or by Scripture itself, must be rejected and renounced.” As I argued in the section on post-canonical and present day revelation, we need only reject the parts that are in error—not the entire revelation. Unfortunately, Western thinking patterns do not naturally facilitate such moderation. We think in terms of black and white, or in what Hiebert calls “bounded sets.”⁹⁵ Thus we regard a prophetic message or movement as either true or false. If it is totally true, we reason, it may be inspired by God; but if it contains error, it is false, heretical, and inspired by the devil.

⁹³ Oosterwal, 30.

⁹⁴ Little, 119.

⁹⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, “The Category ‘Christian’ in the Mission Task” *International Review of Mission* 72(3): 1983: 421-427.

A more sensitive, balanced approach to prophetic evaluation would incorporate Hiebert's thinking in terms of "centered sets," in contrast to "bounded sets."⁹⁶ To use centered sets in viewing conversion would look at a person's direction and movement toward or away from Christ—as opposed to "bounded set" categories of saved and unsaved. The former regards a person as a Christian if he is following Christ; whereas, the latter wants to know whether a person has accepted Christ, by making a decision or praying a prayer that will clearly mark his transfer into the set of the saved.

It seems to me that both approaches have validity and can be found in the Scripture. But bounded set thinking tends to look much more at the informational dimension—does a person believe (know and accept) the right facts (the message of salvation or correct doctrines) or not. In contrast, centered set thinking focuses on the relational aspect: Is the person seeking Christ and obeying him—regardless of the degree of his knowledge of the truth about Jesus? A centered set approach would have little difficulty in accepting that the twelve apostles (except Judas) were saved even as novice disciples of Jesus. In contrast, bounded set thinkers may struggle in determining when these apostles understood enough of Jesus' nature and identity and the gospel to be saved.⁹⁷

I would suggest that we also appropriate Kraft's thinking on three-dimensional contextualization (1999).⁹⁸ We would then evaluate a prophet or a prophecy in terms of the three dimensions of allegiance/relationship (attitude toward and distance from Christ), truth/knowledge (accuracy and completeness with regard to the Scriptures), and power/freedom (the spiritual fruit of his message in his life and in the lives of his followers).

Evaluation of a prophet and his message using these criteria would consider the direction and distance with regard to Christ in allegiance, truth, and power dimensions. Using these criteria, we can view Muhammad's message in a positive prophetic sense, though not one that is sufficient by itself.

1. Regarding allegiance/relationship (with Christ) it was very positive, though more distant than in the NT. Jesus is presented as unique—bearing titles and ascriptions that exalt him far above all other prophets and the Qur'an strongly affirms the biblical scriptures that bear witness to him. While we do not find in the Qur'an the detailed accounts of Jesus' life and teaching that the gospels provide, the Qur'an does warn those who do not accept the previous scriptures are unbelievers who have an appointment with hellfire.⁹⁹

2. With respect to truth, the Qur'an was largely accurate regarding OT themes like God's unity, idolatry, sin, judgment, the need for righteous living, and even a high view of Christ, even if there were some errors in details. Muhammad's message may be viewed as a contextually driven presentation of biblical themes. The chief concern of the Christian is the presence of Qur'anic verses that appear critical of Christianity. However, as previously mentioned, I am

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ This is an illustrative example, not necessarily expressing my view on when they were saved. Admittedly, some would see differences from our present age due to transitional and dispensational distinctions.

⁹⁸ Charles Kraft, "Contextualization in Three Dimensions," inaugural lecture given at installation into the Sun Hee Kwak Professor of Anthropology and Intercultural Communication Chair, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, October 20, 1999.

⁹⁹ Cf. Surahs 2:285, 4:136, 163, 5:44-48, 11:17, 40:69-72, and 42:15.

persuaded that these attack aberrant, not biblical, Christianity.¹⁰⁰ Thus, we may be able to support his being a prophet of the common kind—not the canonical kind (like the prophetic and apostolic writers of the Holy Bible). Muhammad’s teaching was neither comprehensive nor complete regarding Christ and the biblical scriptures, but he adamantly proclaimed their value and the necessity of believing in them.¹⁰¹ His message brought nothing significantly new; rather it was a confirmation of the message of the biblical scriptures in an Arabic language.

3. Regarding the power dimension, the Prophet of Islam was high in turning the Arabs away from idolatry, injustice and iniquity to return to the worship of the God of their ancestor Abraham.¹⁰² An objective appraisal of his mission must consider that Muhammad eliminated the infanticide of baby girls, was an advocate for the poor, cleansed Mecca of its many idols, and united the Arab tribes around the worship of the God of Abraham—all in one generation.

Not Absence of Conflict with Christians

The subsequent hostility between Islam and Christianity does not necessarily preclude a positive prophetic role for Muhammad, for a parallel situation exists with many of the “cargo-cults” of the Pacific. Mircea Eliade explains the irony of their eventually becoming hostile to Christianity. If we substitute the words “Muslims” for “natives” and “Christians” for “missionaries”, he could well have been describing Islam’s relationship with Christianity:

If the natives came to feel disappointed in the missionaries, if the majority of the “cargo-cults”¹⁰³ ultimately turned anti-Christian, it was not on account of anything in Christianity itself, but because the missionaries and their converts did not appear to conduct themselves as true Christians. The disillusionments that the natives suffered in their encounter with official Christianity were many and tragic. For what attracted the natives to Christianity the most powerfully was their preaching of the coming renewal of the World, the imminent arrival of Christ and the resurrection of the dead; it was the prophetic and eschatological aspects of the Christian religion that awakened in them the most profound echo. But it was

¹⁰⁰ See C. Jonn Block’s work for likely explanations, and Basetti-Sani (1977) for possible ones.

¹⁰¹ Although the Qur’an’s portrayal of Christ is incomplete and inadequate apart from the Injil, the same could also be said of the apostle Paul. A religiously observant Jew who follows Jesus as Messiah pointed out to me that an abridged New Testament volume called simply “The Epistles” that contained only Paul’s writings would seem to be somewhat scattered and incomplete, just like the Quran does to us. From his viewpoint, the Christian overemphasis on Paul’s writings to the Greeks and Romans results in our giving greater authority to Paul’s teachings about Jesus than to Jesus himself. Practically speaking, Paul becomes the greatest and final messenger, like Muhammad is in Islam, due to Islam’s overemphasizing his writings. Of course, the latter is incomparably more adverse due to Muslim neglect or rejection of the gospels]. Regardless of the degree to which one agrees with his assessment of gentile Christianity’s overemphasis on Paul, his incompleteness analogy of the Qur’an and the Epistles is helpful.

¹⁰² Although essential elements of gospel teaching are absent from the Qur’an, some listeners may have been acquainted with it from the varied Christian groups that formed the original context (as some recent scholars assert). In any case, I understand the Qur’an to demand that Muslims believe in and follow the Injil.

¹⁰³ The term “cargo-cults” refers to groups in Oceania that splintered off from the fruit of European missionary efforts because the missionaries hid the secrets for obtaining the “cargo” of European material wealth (Mircea Eliade, “‘Cargo-cults’ and Cosmic Regeneration,” in *Millennial Dreams in Action: Studies in Revolutionary Religious Movements*, ed. Sylvia Thrupp (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1970), 122-125.

precisely these aspects of Christianity that the missionaries seemed in practice to ignore or not take seriously.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, it seems likely, that Muhammad recognized that Jews had the Word of God, but were guilty of *tahrīf* (corrupting it) by their living and teaching.¹⁰⁵ Christians, were “nearest in affection” (Surah 5:82) to the Muslim believers, but were divided and various heresies were promulgated among them. Consequently, Muhammad preached the eschatological themes, such as the resurrection, the return of Christ, and reward and judgment that were so neglected by the Christians who were embroiled in Christological controversies. Although the portrayal of Christ was not nearly as complete as found in the NT, it was uniquely positive, and the injunction incumbent upon him and his followers was to ask the People of the Book regarding the absent, unclear or debatable issues of special revelation (10:94), thereby affirming the message of biblical scripture. Part of Islam’s eventual turning anti-Christian, was not necessarily due to anything in the gospel itself, but because Christians did not appear to conduct themselves as true Christians (the Byzantines in their veneration of relics, Western Christians in their Crusades and the resentful Eastern Christians in their withdrawal from witness). However, as noted earlier by Bavinck, a primary factor involved in the subsequent strife with Christianity was due to repression and exchange of divine revelation (by all of the parties involved).

Not Miracles and Signs

Early Christian refutations of Muhammad’s claim to prophethood were based on his not performing any miracles. Most orthodox Muslim scholars reject the miracles attributed to Muhammad in later traditions, but appeal to the Qur’an as Muhammad’s miracle (*i’jāz*). However, if Cragg’s view above is correct, then *i’jāz* of the Qur’an does not refer to a miracle, but rather to the marvel that God’s message was now in Arabic.

We are led to ask what was the motivation behind the invention of Muhammad’s miracles? Perhaps some were the result of devoted Muslims who would go to any measure to preserve the honor of their religion as a consequence of the debates with their opponents (Christians). Based on the presupposition of pious Muslims that Muhammad was the last and greatest prophet, he by definition must have done the miracles at least equal to those of Jesus. When speaking to the many Muslims who believe in the miracles of Muhammad, we can remind them that the Qur’anic testimony denies this; moreover, we should point out to them that failure of the early Muslim apologists to cite any miracles of Muhammad in reply to challenges of the early Christian apologists’ is strong evidence that his alleged miracles were a later invention.

Nevertheless, Christians should recognize that performance of miracles is not a necessary proof of prophethood per se. Except for Moses, Elijah, and Elisha, most OT prophets were not characterized by performance of miracles. In the same way, NT prophets did not frequently

¹⁰⁴ Eliade, 143.

¹⁰⁵ Muhammad’s accusation against the Jews (and Christians?) of *tahrīf* (“corruption” of the Word of God) did not charge them with changing the written text of Scripture, but with concealing the truth (Surah 3:71; 6:92), distorting its meaning as they read it aloud (3:78), composing their own texts and passing them off as Scripture (2:79), and forgetting the covenant (5:14, 15). On the contrary, he insists that no one can “change the words of God” (10:64, 6:34).

perform miracles (in contradistinction to the Apostles).¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, we can affirm that plentiful performance of miracles is an indication of the elevated rank of those prophets of God who perform them. We can support this by noting the higher regard given to Moses, Elijah and Elisha by the Jews. Moses is revered above the latter two, because of his role as mediator of the divine revelation. Elijah was more esteemed than Elisha, due to his role as the eschatological forerunner of the coming kingdom (Mal. 4:5). However, Jesus declared one who performed no miracles, John the Baptist, to be the greatest of all the prophets and more than a prophet. This was due to his role in preparing the way for and pointing people to the Messiah (Mt. 11:9-11). Recall that this is the same theological gauge for measuring the contribution of any prophet that we presented earlier in this discussion: the prophets' ultimate significance is in their pointing to Christ.

Muhammad's unique role was as bearer of God's message in Arabic. However, this contradicts the traditional Islamic view that Muhammad instituted a new religion that abrogated the previous revelation. We must challenge this by appealing to the Qur'an's witness that he confirmed the prior revelations in the *Tawrat* and *Injil*. We should also clarify for Muslims the biblical position that Jesus did not actually abrogate the law of Moses, but fulfilled it (Mt. 5:17ff).¹⁰⁷ Even though abrogation or supercession was argued by some of the early Arab Christian apologists, this position needs to be nuanced. In the case of Moses and Jesus, miracles served as divine attestation to the authority of their teaching (He. 1:2-4) that was essential in marking a new phase in salvation history, but not an abrogation. Jesus did not abrogate the law, although he did introduce a major change in salvation history by inaugurating the prophesied kingdom of God. His miracles, done in such incomparable abundance and power, demonstrated that the power and signs of the eschatological kingdom reign of God were inaugurated by his earthly ministry. His authority is mediated in the present through His followers, and will culminate when he establishes the kingdom in its fullness at his second coming.¹⁰⁸

To summarize, a more biblically sound position would not assert the necessity of performance of miracles to establish prophethood. But bountiful performance of miracles is a major evidence of increased rank among prophets (as well as apostles). Regular direct (unmediated by angels) revelation and communication with God is another mark of distinction. But, as I will argue in the next section, ultimate greatness in a prophet is a function of his pointing people to Christ. Therefore, we could allow the possibility that Muhammad is a prophet in the biblical sense explained in the preceding section, and in the Qur'anic mode of being a warner to his people,

¹⁰⁶ I would side with those who hold that the NT distinguishes between these original Apostles who authored infallible authoritative revelation and those who are apostles merely as a spiritual gift, empowered to be sent as missionaries or pioneers of new ministries.

¹⁰⁷ For an analysis of the various views on how Christ fulfilled the Law see Donald A. Carson, "Matthew" in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 8, ed. Frank Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1984), 141-145.

¹⁰⁸ I am here presupposing an initial, partial, and progressive view of kingdom fulfillment at Christ's first coming, as advocated by progressive dispensationalists writers like Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: IL: BridgePoint, 1993) and Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999). This approach has considerable commonality with George Eldon Ladd's "already, not yet" view of the kingdom of God (*The Gospel of the Kingdom*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959). Moreover, even some amillennial covenant theologians might not disagree greatly with much of this basic interpretative framework.

without requiring his performance of miracles. However, while we appreciate, respect and affirm Muhammad's greatness, and the possibility of prophethood, we cannot honor him with a greater status than Jesus (or even Moses).

It may help (non-fanatical) Muslims to see that Qur'anic support for this is found in Surah 2:253 "Of those messengers, We have caused some to excel others, some to whom God spoke, and some of them He exalted in degree (above others); and We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs (miraculous signs) and supported him with the Holy Spirit." Here the Qur'an notes that prophets hold different ranks. To whom did God speak? Implied is Moses, who was greater than others, because he spoke directly with God (apart from angelic mediation). Who are those whom God exalted in degree? The arch-example is Jesus, who alone is named in context immediately afterwards. We can logically infer that he was exalted in degree, because he not only spoke directly with God like Moses, but also performed the most miraculous signs and wonders. Muhammad, despite his noble accomplishments and greatness, did neither, and thus by implication, holds a lesser rank than those who did. Muhammad did no miracles, so he is not to be regarded as equal to those like Moses, and certainly not to Jesus. Muhammad presented a powerful and positive witness to Christ to the Arabs, and to other peoples of the world. In this sense we can regard him as the greatest prophet to the Arabs, because for most Arabs, it is his noble witness to Christ that they have heard.

Admittedly, most Christians would view this perspective with skepticism or disfavor, given the fact that the Islamic teaching about Christ is but a faint shadow of what is offered in the Bible. But that does not invalidate Muhammad's testimony to Christ. In a similar manner, Jewish religious teachers and systems missed Moses' witness to Christ. Similarly, medieval Christianity in the West degenerated into an religious shell devoid of the gospel of Christ. Yet we do not impugn the Bible for this tragedy.

Research into gospel movements among Muslims reveals the potential efficacy of Muhammad's testimony to Christ. David Garrison was surprised to learn that the witness of the Qur'an brought many Muslims in South Asia to "initial" faith in Christ who then led them to the Bible for a clearer understanding. For instance, Amid had been challenged to stop reciting the Qur'an in Arabic (which he did not understand) and began reading a translation in his mother tongue. He was astonished:

The first thing I noticed was that there many stories in the Qur'an that were at variance with what I had heard from the *mawlanas*, the Islamic teachers in the mosque. I searched the Qur'an to understand more about Muhammad, but instead, I found Isa, and this disturbed me. . . .

In the Qur'an...I found no titles of honor for Muhammad, but 23 honorable titles that Allah gave to Isa. I saw that Muhammad is not with Allah now, but Isa is in heaven with Allah now. Muhammad is not coming again, but Isa is coming again. Muhammad will not be at the Last Judgment Day, but Isa will be at the Last Judgment Day. Muhammad is dead, but Isa is alive. Only four times does the Qur'an speak of Muhammad, and yet 97 times it talks about Isa. Muhammad is not a savior, according to the Qur'an, but Isa's

very name means ‘Savior.’ Muhammad is only a messenger, but Isa is called Ruhallah, the Spirit of Allah.¹⁰⁹

Amid concluded that either the Qur’an is correct and Isa is the savior, or else the *mawlanas* are right and Muslims should follow Muhammad. He challenged the Islamic teachers to obey the Qur’an and follow Jesus. Some scorned him, but others admitted he was right and counseled him to find out more about Jesus from the Christian community. Amid obtained a Bible, learned more of Christ, and was eventually baptized. Those in his movement demonstrate to other Muslims from the Qur’an that Jesus is the savior and baptize them. Afterwards they disciple them from the Bible.¹¹⁰ Though Islamic dogma has misled untold millions of Muslims, when the Quranic testimony to Christ is allowed to speak for itself, many Muslims have come to trust him as savior. Furthermore, the Qur’an repeatedly directs them to follow the guidance of the previous scriptures.

IV. Muhammadan Prophethood Reconsidered

Like a number of Christian scholars of Islam, I believe there is biblical warrant for considering the possibility of some kind of positive prophetic status for Muhammad. I have shown that biblical and mission theology can allow for this. However, it does entail seeking to interpret the Qur’an exegetically and with regard to its biblical subtext, rather than primarily through the lens of later Islamic tradition. While contemplation of this possibility of prophethood runs counter to the position embraced by most contemporary Christians, it is not a new missiological invention—such voices were heard among Christians at the outset and continue to the present.

The most famous is the patriarch Timothy I who declared, “Muhammad is worthy of all praise, by all reasonable people. He walked in the path of the prophets and trod in the track of the lovers of God” and that “all believers rejoice in the good that he did,” teaching the unity of God, driving people away from idolatry, polytheism, and bad works and toward good works. “Muhammad taught about God, His Word and His Spirit, and since all prophets had prophesied about God, His Word and His Spirit, Muhammad walked, therefore, in the path of all the prophets”.¹¹¹ Timothy even praised Muhammad’s zeal for God with the sword, his preaching monotheism to other peoples and that God therefore gave him sovereignty over the kingdoms of Persia and Rome and praised and exalted him. It can be argued that he cautiously affirmed that Muhammad was a prophet, if granted a trinitarian understanding of the Qur’an (Block: 129-132).

The spirit of Timothy I can be seen again in a contemporary Arab evangelical scholar of Islam. Martin Accad advocates authentic engagement with Islam that mediates between traditional apologetic/polemic and liberal syncretistic/existential positions. In calling for a kerygmatic approach to Islam that emphasizes the proclamation of God’s full and final revelation in Christ apart from institutional religion, Accad also states:

¹⁰⁹ Garrison, 117-118.

¹¹⁰ Garrison, 118.

¹¹¹ Timothy I, “Timothy’s Apology for Christianity,” trans. A. Mingana, in *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*. Vol. 2, ed. Jean-Marie Gaudeul, pp. 234-245 (Rome: Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, 1984), 242.

But this needs not prevent us from admitting the greatness of Muhammad, and perceiving him, if not as a prophet, nonetheless as a *messenger*, a *rasūl*, who carried an important divine message to his people, leading them away from polytheism and drawing them to the worship of the one God.¹¹²

Another evangelical scholar of Islam, Bill Musk, likewise seeks to affirm a prophetic role for Muhammad:

If “truth” as conveyed by the Bible is primarily about relationship between God and humanity, rather than a collection of propositions to be acknowledged, then surely all statements from Muhammad that reflect the reality of God’s self-revelation are prophetic. I do not want to undermine the importance of propositional statements derived from biblical text. But I do want to suggest that those are secondary. After all . . . the Bible is not an end in itself; it bears witness to Another. Nor did God simply bellow into humans’ ears a handful of propositions. “Truth”, in its Christian sense, is more subtle, more nuanced, than that. It finds its essence in a Person. Where the Prophet Muhammad gained insight into who that Person is – for example in his conviction, against a polytheistic background, of the oneness of God – his utterances to that effect are truly in the lineage of the biblical prophets. Whether and to what extent Muhammad himself lived by such insights will be evaluated by the One who will evaluate all of us.¹¹³

An opinion which cannot be easily dismissed is that of the renowned Reformed theologian, Herman Bavinck:

In the past the study of religions was pursued in the interest of dogmatics and apologetics. The founders of (non-Christian) religions, like Mohammed, were simply considered imposters, enemies of God, and accomplices of the devil. But ever since those religions have become more precisely known, this interpretation has proved untenable; it clashed both with history and psychology. Also among pagans, says Scripture, there is a revelation of God, an illumination of the Logos, a working of God’s Spirit (Gen. 6:17; 7:15; Ps. 33:6; 104:30; Job 32:8; Eccles. 3:19; Prov. 8:22f; Mal. 1:11, 14; John 1:9; Rom. 2:14; Gal. 4:1-3; Acts 14:16, 17; 17:22-30).¹¹⁴

¹¹² Martin Accad, “Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: a Kerygmatic Approach,” in *Toward Respectful Understanding & Witness among Muslims*, Evelyne A. Reisacher ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 39.

¹¹³ Bill A. Musk, *Kissing Cousins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 82.

¹¹⁴ *Reformed Dogmatics*, 318. Others in line with Bavinck cite biblical support for Spirit induced prophecy outside the biblical canon but which is not necessarily infallible. The NT gift of prophecy (unlike NT apostleship) was not necessarily infallible; for 1 Cor. 14:29-31 and I Thes. 5:19-21 require that the pronouncements of prophets be sifted, not necessarily accepted or rejected in toto. Cf. Donald A Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 94-98; also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), chapter 53). Parallels can be seen in church and mission history. In West Africa the charismatic prophet William Harris claimed to have been called by God to be a prophet through a vision. Western missionaries testified to the spectacular impact of his ministry and considered it to be of God, but some of his prophetic pronouncements missed the mark. Cf. Mark Harlan, *A Model for Theologizing in Arab Muslim Contexts* (Pasadena, CA: WCIU Press, 2012), chapter 11.

A very recent and extensively argued case for Muhammad as a prophet is made by Anton Wessels, Presbyterian minister and professor emeritus at Amsterdam's Free University. Defining the term, he says:

A prophet is not someone who predicts the future, who looks into a crystal ball. Rather, a prophet is a seer, someone who points out what an event means, someone who provides insight into what is going on both spiritually and politically. A prophet is an agitator, someone who walks around temple and palace starting his criticism, who rages against the injustices political leaders are committing. A true prophet does not adopt the drab and colorless language of his society, does not speak the jargon of diplomats, the language of theologians or a priestly caste, or the rigid prose of the business world. He is and remains faithful to the language of the parable. He does not predict history but studies and analyzes it, uncovers and unmask it.¹¹⁵

Wessels presents various lines of evidence for Muhammad as prophet. First, he points out significant parallels between biblical prophets (especially Moses and Elijah) and Muhammad in their commission. Isaiah is instructed to "Cry out." He asks, "What shall I cry out?" (Isa 40:6); Muhammad is called by God to "Recite" (Q. 96:1). Like Isaiah, he asks, "What shall I recite?" (Q. 96:1-5). Commanded to warn others, he dons a cloak, and covers his face with it, like Elijah (1 Kgs 19:11-13). As with Jeremiah (20:7), Muhammad cannot resist God who is stronger than he; he is compelled to speak (Q. 53:5).¹¹⁶

Wessels also notes Muhammad's claim to be a prophet to the "unlettered" (*an-nabi al-ummi*) meant his bringing to those who were without the scriptures a message that confirmed the previous biblical revelation. In the sense of a "confirmer" he is the "seal of the prophets." Thus, Muhammad "brings the same 'Book,' not the same text but the same message from God, the same guidance for humanity."¹¹⁷ The *umma* (community) relates to all three communities who claim descent from Abraham and are "people of the Book", each having its unique rite, religion or way of living. Some Jews and Christians accepted Muhammad's message (Q 28:53-53; 2:121; 29:47;3:199; 6:114); but now as then, most do not. Wessels maintains that Christians who accept Muhammad as a prophet are not obliged to become "Muslim" in the narrow sense; they are to be "muslim" like Abraham (Q. 3:67), the exemplar for all three communities.

Wessels also seeks to remove some stones of stumbling for Christians.¹¹⁸ Many Christians maintain that Muhammad shifted from a positive attitude toward Christians in Mecca (when it was expedient) to a hostile, militant one in Medina (where after acquiring political power he showed his true colors). However, recent research points to a different scenario.

¹¹⁵ Anton Wessels, *The Torah, The Gospel and the Qur'an: Three Books, Two Cities, One Tale* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eermans, 2013), 32.

¹¹⁶ Wessels, 42-43.

¹¹⁷ Wessels, 53.

¹¹⁸ Regarding some alleged errors in the Qur'an, such as its reference to Haman as a minister of Pharaoh (29:29), Wessels explains that this is not a historical assertion, but rather a spiritual one. Just as the Bible often links motifs to powers of different eras that are opposed to God, so Haman is connected to Pharaoh, the enemy of God's people. In the Qur'an these two, like Korah, are arrogant (Wessels, 156). Also, he believes Jesus is the Mahdi (197).

Muhammad was supportive of Christians, including the Byzantines. While preaching in Mecca, he predicted that the Byzantines would lose the nearest part of the land (Palestine/Jerusalem) to the Persians, but in a few years would have victory over them. And when they did, the Muslims¹¹⁹ would rejoice with them (Q. 30:1-5). However, some 15 years later, after the Byzantine victory over the Persians (629/630), Muslim sympathy with the Byzantine cause suddenly turned into sharp hostility.¹²⁰ What accounts for this change?

Pursuing political objectives, Emperor Heraclius had appealed to religious sentiments to rally his army—to wrest the true cross from the Persians and bring it back to Jerusalem. After defeating the Persians, he ceremoniously brought the true cross up the Via Dolorosa. Interpreting this act of the Byzantines as idolatry, the Muslims immediately responded by attacking them at Mut'a. This veneration of the cross provoked the well-documented Muslim antagonism over the symbol of the cross in Syria/Palestine.¹²¹ However, in contrast to the imperialistic arrogance and cult of the cross of the Byzantines, the Qur'an viewed Christians in Arabia (primarily Monophysite, Syrian Orthodox, Nestorian, and Assyrian) as those "closest in affection" to Muslims, for their priests and monks were not proud (5:82). Thus, the Qur'an does not view Christians with hostility as a matter of principle, but only when they practice polytheism.¹²² And even when violence is justified in the cause of God, the Qur'an infers a measure of culpability and the need to seek forgiveness.¹²³

The above examples are sufficient to show that some prominent Christians scholars have recognized or affirmed Muhammad as a prophet, albeit with various meanings of the term. The scholars cited above have no dog in the fight over contextualization and insider movements. Many and complex issues are causing them to reassess their stance on Muhammad. Certainly widespread belief in an inherent incompatibility between the Bible and the Qur'an has centuries of support in Muslim-Christian encounter, in religious polemics and apologetics, and in political, military and cultural conflict. But as was discussed above, this was not the case at the outset.

¹¹⁹ These "Muslims" or "Believers" likely included Christians and Jews, though many scholars would disagree.

¹²⁰ Wessels, 226-227.

¹²¹ David Cook, "Why Did Muhammad Attack the Byzantines?" in *Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad: Defenders, Detractors, Definitions*, ed. Joseph Morrison Skelly (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security, 2010), 28. Given debates over chronology, Cook says that it is possible that the attack at Tabuk in 631 could have been the Muslim reaction to this veneration of the True Cross (31).

¹²² Wessels, 227-228. He cites other indications of positive attitudes toward other "people of the Book." In 632 Muhammad received a Christian delegation from southern Arabia to Medina and allowed them to pray in his mosque. His treaty with them and with Jews of the Hijaz was later ignored by his later successor, Umar. Yet even under Mu'awiya, the first Umayyid ruler, the police force in Medina was comprised of 200 Christians and for many years there was a cemetery for Christians and Jews in Mecca (255-256).

¹²³ Wessels contrasts the Qur'an's attitude toward conquest to the later Islamic view:

"It is incorrect to understand the use of the word *fath* [success] in Muhammad's time in its later sense of "conquest"...it is obvious, according to the Qur'an, that the attainment of the conquest and victory and the use of violence, however minor, entail dirty hands. That is why forgiveness must be continually sought: "When God's help (*nasr*) comes, and success (*fath*), and you [Muhammad] see the people entering the religion of God in droves, then praise the glory of your Lord and ask him forgiveness (Q. 110:1-3; cf. Q. 40:55; 71:10), 252.

Many factors are calling for a reassessment of Muhammad, such as the critical scrutiny of Islamic historical sources. Study of non-Muslim historical documents and archeological evidence do not support the Islamic narrative. Theories about the origins of the Qur'an and Islam, as well as the Islamic doctrine of abrogation, are being challenged. Textual criticism of the Qur'an, long a taboo—even in academia—is opening possibilities for harmonizing verses that had previously been considered irreconcilable within the Qur'an and with the Bible. This comprehensive project is still in its infancy, and it will likely take many years before these questions are adequately answered. The results of this scholarly activity will eventually substantiate or weaken the case for consideration of Muhammad as prophet in some capacity.

If Christians were to accept Muhammad as a prophet in one of the ways posited above, then could we affirm this to Muslims without obliging ourselves (in their thinking) to become Muslims? I think that Christ followers could do so and be faithful to biblical authority.

First of all, we acknowledge that prophets were sent both before and after Jesus Christ (as supported by NT passages such as 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Th. 5:19-21). We also establish that every prophet of God, pointed his followers to the way toward God. That being agreed, we would point out that Jesus Christ not only directed people to the way, but claimed that he himself was the way (Jn. 14:6), and that all of God's prophets (before and after Christ) pointed to him. We can quote Acts 10:43: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name," as well as Jn. 5: 39 and Lk. 24:44-47. Although exegetically this reference is to those prophets who preceded Christ, theologically it is true of those who came after him (from NT era prophets until the Elijah of Malachi 4 precedes the Second Advent). We can affirm that Muhammad testified to Christ's uniqueness greatness, as Parrinder observes:

"The Qur'ān gives a greater number of honourable titles to Jesus than to any other figure of the past. He is a 'sign', a 'mercy', a 'witness' and an 'example'. He is called by his proper name Jesus, by the titles Messiah (Christ) and Son of Mary, and by the names Messenger, Prophet, Servant, Word and Spirit of God. The Qur'ān gives two accounts of the annunciation and birth of Jesus, and refers to his teachings and healings, and his death and exaltation. Three chapters or sūras of the Qur'an are named after references to Jesus (3, 5 and 19); he is mentioned in fifteen sūras and ninety-three verses. Jesus is always spoken of in the Qur'ān with reverence; there is no breath of criticism, for he is the Christ of God.¹²⁴

Christ's being "near stationed to God" (Surah 3:45) has been understood by some Muslims scholars to refer to his supremacy in intercession. Also, Muhammad did in fact testify to the virgin birth (Surah 3, 19, and 66), but appropriately, the emphasis of his eschatological proclamation was Christ's Second Advent. And as mentioned before, since Muhammad himself was instructed to ask the People of the Book (Surah 10:94), then so should his followers (Surah

¹²⁴ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Sheldon Press, 1965), 16; cf. also Donald R. Rickards, "A Study of the Quranic References to Isa in Light of the Tafsir and Hadith." Ph.D. dissertation, Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1969.

5:68).¹²⁵ Those who obey by searching these Scriptures will be pointed to Christ (Jn. 5:39), and this is the primary purpose of prophethood (Ac. 10:43).

Although, such consultation may surface theological differences, we should appeal to what the Bible says as our final arbiter, based on the Qur'an's injunction to "let the People of the Gospel judge by that which He has revealed therein" (Surah 5:47). Admittedly, this position conflicts with the mistaken Islamic belief in the infallibility of their prophet, but we can show how the Injil commands us to apply this same standard to Christian prophets as well (1 Co. 14: 29). We need not denigrate Muhammad's character (for even biblical prophets had serious faults). At the same time, allowing for Muhammadan prophethood does not oblige us to embrace Islamic views on it. In this vein, Montgomery Watt advises Christians to acknowledge

Muhammad as a religious leader through whom God has worked, and that is tantamount to holding that he is in some sense a prophet. Such a view does not contradict any central Christian belief. It has, however, to be made clear to Muslims that Christians do not believe that all Muhammad's revelations from God were infallible, even though they allow that much of divine truth was revealed to him."¹²⁶

Conclusion

Is Muhammad also among the prophets? This paper has provided theological, missiological, and historical sanction for expanding constricted categories of prophethood to allow Christians to entertain the possibility of Muhammad being other than a false prophet. He may be seen as fulfilling a prophetic role, whether in response to general revelation or special, whether as a preacher or religious leader, whether as an ecstatic or charismatic prophet, or something more. Nevertheless, for those who cannot accept this, perhaps this study will at least reduce their level of indignation toward those who differ with them.

I do not expect a Christian consensus to be reached on this issue—not until he who sits on the throne returns and announces his ultimate and unerring judgment. Sincere and faithful Christians through the centuries have held vastly disparate viewpoints regarding the prophet of Islam—that may not change greatly. A major obstacle is our uncertainty about the actual details of Muhammad's life due to the great lack of personal information about him in the Qur'an and the complexities of the historical sources. Future historical studies may strengthen or weaken the case for Muhammad being regarded as a prophet. The outcome of critical scholarship as to the Qur'an's relationship to the Bible (positive or negative) will also affect thinking. We must also recognize that our attitudes, opinions, and convictions are influenced by our personal experiences with Muslims, church, community and cultural attitudes, as well as geo-political events and their impact on our lives. Differing theological assumptions and understandings will also shape our perspectives.

¹²⁵ "People of the book" in this instance refers to Muslims since "what was revealed to you by your Lord" refers to the Qur'an. They are obliged to uphold the Tawrah and Injil as well.

¹²⁶ Watt, William Montgomery, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: Routledge, 1991), 148, cited in Block, 241.

If nothing else has been achieved, my hope is that this study will engender a degree of humility from recognition of the limits of our knowledge on this issue. I would hope that my presenting positive prophetic possibilities might enable Christians to show Muslims more respect in regard to Muhammad. I also desire to see a lowering of the level of consternation against disciples of Jesus who think positively about Muhammad. Their opinions or convictions should not greatly concern us as long as they render ultimate allegiance and obedience to Jesus Christ and biblical authority. May we do the same.

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity