

ISLAMIC HERMENEUTICS IN ACTION:
INTERPRETIVE PRINCIPLES WITH CHRIST AS TEST CASE

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	3
2. Islamic Hermeneutics – Roots and Branches	6
3. Lutheran Hermeneutics at a Glance	22
4. Jesus and his Prophecy	26
5. Applications	29
6. Conclusion	31
7. Appendix	32

1. Introduction

1.1 Abstract

In our Lutheran circles, Islam remains largely a misunderstood religion. That hermeneutics and exegesis are practiced consciously among Muslims with the sacred text of the Qur'an (also spelled Koran) does not seem logical, given their conclusions regarding theology, Christology, and life's purpose. The truth is that these two practices are as deeply cherished among traditional *sunni* Muslims as they are among the most conservative and orthodox Christians. This commonality is conducive for dialogue and learning between religions, a compare/contrast conversation that highlights pros and cons to both systems, with the obvious, ultimate goal on our part of bringing the Muslim to faith in Christ as Savior. With Christ as the focus, this thesis aims to outline the major components of Islamic hermeneutics and see how they apply to the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

1.2 Preface

"There is scarcely an activity which is practiced so generally and so perseveringly by everyone as that of interpretation."

- J.P. Koehler¹

When Professor Koehler wrote these words, he was introducing a discussion of the history of communication with a major focus on exegetical practices in Scripture study. The point he was making with this particular sentence was simple: as for communication, every human being does it and does it so often that general rules of interpretation are most often simply taken for granted. In my research for this particular topic, several sources mentioned that with regard to the discipline of hermeneutics (the so-called "art of interpretation"), there is a major issue: any attempt at definition tries to describe something so natural and basic to communication, the act of interpreting, that outlining concepts with further terminology or discussion will inevitably complicate things. Hermeneutics is "self-evident." More bluntly: the hyper-analysis of hermeneutics itself begets... bad hermeneutics.

¹ Jahn, Curtis, ed. *The Wauwatosa Theology: Volume I, Koehler – Pieper – Schaller*, 207. Northwestern, 1997.

This discussion, however, hinges on a critical point: we assume that we are all playing by the same rules of communication in every circumstance. This assumption poses a problem, especially with regards to approaching a sacred text. Koehler alluded to the potential problem of such thinking when he stated that some exegetes operate with only “several concepts based on partial faith.” It might not have been on the author’s mind at the time, but this phrase addresses an entire field of study that is important to exegetical discussion, WELS ministry, and communication in general: the hermeneutics, exegesis, and intertextuality contained in the Islamic belief system. This belief system differs from that of the conservative Lutheran in both strong and subtle ways, the entire spectrum of which is worth exploring.

This thesis aims to compare and contrast two systems of hermeneutics; that of WELS (conservative Lutheran) and that of the more traditional Sunni Muslim (conservative Islam). It is important in this comparison to avoid all caricature, sweeping generalizations, or otherwise faulty assumptions on either side. This thesis will outline points of Islamic history pertinent to the discussion of hermeneutics, specifically the life, death, and succession of Islam’s greatest prophet and leader, Muhammad. The thesis will examine briefly the formation of Islam’s sacred text, the Qur’an, its themes, and three historical perspectives of its interpretation.

For the purposes of a concise, specific discussion on the two hermeneutical systems, this last point of using only three historical Muslim perspectives is vital. The three Muslim exegetes viewed in this thesis belong to the “classical period” of Islamic exegesis (1000-1258 AD) as well as to reactors to this period. This period was a foundational time in Qur’anic interpretation as well as for the discussion of the validity of various *hadith* (the accepted “sayings of the Prophet”) and how they are to be handled. These men in particular, Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839-923 AD), Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (1268-1328 AD), and Ismail ibn Kathir (d. 1372 AD), contributed significantly to the rules of interpretation in modern Islam. Other exegetes, or *mufassirs* (practicers of *tafsir*, roughly translated “exegesis”), may be mentioned. Needless to say, the debate on which *mufassirs* are most influential in exegetical practice or widely-read by the global Muslim community is worthy of a study of its own.

Having narrowed down the list of exegetes chiefly to these three figures, the content-range also requires narrowing. This thesis will apply the system of hermeneutics of these individuals to one basic doctrine: the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (also referred to as “Messiah” in the Qur’an and other Muslim writings). Where Lutherans would say Christ is our High Priest,

offering himself in our place before God the Judge, Muslims would name him solely a great *prophet*, subordinate to Muhammad in the greater scheme of religion. This thesis will look at the issue with the perspective of “both” sides (as if there are only two ideal perspectives within each system). The entire range of doctrinal similarities and differences is not to be treated but rather Jesus’ prophecy and status as a prophet in Islam. Even with this narrowing down of the Islamic sources and doctrine to be discussed, before addressing historical context and Qur’an formation we need to make a number of disclaimers for this thesis to remain honest, realistic, and useful.

1.3 Disclaimers

1.3.1 Working in Translation

To discuss finer points and mechanics of Qur’anic exegesis and interpretive thought, a mastery of Arabic is needed. Simply put, no study of Arabic was utilized at any point of this work. All Qur’an quotations are from Ahmed Ali’s translation through the Princeton Press, with occasional noted exceptions. This decision is intentional: translation selection is a thesis unto itself. Textual critical questions and their historical treatment are theses unto themselves. Hebrew/Aramaic/Arabic differences and similarities, whether cultural or linguistic, are not treated here.

From the preceding, it might appear that all dialogue concerning the main issues of Islam are impossible for the conservative Lutheran theologian or evangelist. Someone might add that the notion exists that translations of the Qur’an are invalid in Christian-Muslim dialogue (because of the Muslim belief that solely the original Arabic is inspired) has been de-bunked by Muslim exegetes themselves.² To address the hermeneutical issue quickly in this introduction: the message or content of the Qur’an has over time risen as the most important aspect of the faith over against the recitation of the correct, inspired Arabic syllables.

1.3.2 Muslim Input

Equally important to the language entertained in this work is the “brand” of Islam most directly addressed. The traditional Sunni approach to Qur’anic study, specifically the perspectives of the three mentioned Muslim scholars around the classical period, do not

² McAuliffe, Jane. "Qur’anic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir." *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’an*. Ed. A. Rippin. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 50.

comprehensively represent global Islam in all its political or cultural diversity. Rather these scholastics of the past laid down principles of interpretation and so are the chief contributors of the current discussion. In my study for this thesis I also talked with or read modern perspectives hailing from Syria, Pakistan, and Iran, though they are not cited.

Using English translations and specific Muslim voices on a particular doctrinal point, we can move forward in a discussion that has a clear scope and objective: the comparison of hermeneutics between a Lutheran and traditional Sunni system. First this thesis will outline the most important points in Muhammad's life and the formation of the Qur'an. It will then view the interpretive nature and history of Qur'anic study. From there the comparison between traditional Sunni and confessional Lutheran hermeneutics can be drawn. Finally the implications for WELS apologetics, education, and evangelism can be analyzed, albeit in broader terms.

2. Islamic Hermeneutics – Roots and Branches

2.1 Muhammad – Prophet at the Crossroads of Religious Thought

Islam, relatively speaking, is a new religion. Islam has been well-described as “the youngest of man's great universal religions.” The important dates in Islamic history show this to be true. Islam's chief and most revered prophet, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn al-Muttalib, was born around 570 AD. Although the facts of his early biography are contested among Muslims and no non-Muslim history of it exists³, it is widely accepted that Muhammad's becoming a great prophet began with the life-changing event he supposedly experienced in a cave in Hira in 610 AD. Over the next 20 years Muhammad supposedly received sporadic bouts of revelation which would later be compiled into what is now called the Qur'an.

Islamic hermeneutics address the attitude and presuppositions of a believer, a Muslim, who reads this Qur'an or any sacred text with particular perspective and purpose. For the purposes of this work a short summary of the religious thought in Muhammad's environment, specifically around the time of his first revelation, is critical to the conversation on hermeneutics. This brief summary will help the reader understand the manner in which Muhammad spoke as a prophet to an original audience of Arab pagans and various sects of Judaism and Christianity. These hearers would become his future followers, the inheritors of revelation who, by their own

³ Shorrosh, Anis. *Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab's View of Islam*, 47. Thomas Nelson, 1988.

historical-religious context and set of presuppositions, would shape future interpretation and application of the Qur'an as a sacred text and guide for living up, to today.

We turn to address the ways in which the Qur'an itself and its most influential interpreters address these precursor sources (e.g., the Tanakh, the Gospels, or pseudepigraphal writings). For now we content ourselves with the historical variety of the main religious groups that were on the scene during the formative years of Muhammad's upbringing, revelation, and teaching. For the sake of the scope of this thesis, we simplify the main groups to these three: Arab paganism, Judaism, and Christianity.

2.1.1 Arab Influences

Muhammad was born in Mecca. In the sixth century AD Mecca was a crossroads of commerce with a revolving door of nomadic tribes coming to trade commodities but also to share ideas.⁴ In this cultural mixture, traditions and rules of religious practice were more or less in flux, with the amalgamation of differing religious concepts a common occurrence. Paganism dictates a host of superstitions and work-righteous practices. In this world Muhammad was born and grew up: a world in which systematic, corporal doctrinal agreement in matters of theology did not exist. This world which combined Arab tradition with trending spiritual ideas was Muhammad's source of identity, existence, and expression; so much so that the dialogue between Islam and its spiritual opponents dominates the Qur'an. In such a mixed religious climate the importance of tribal rule and allegiance largely overruled the lifestyle choices dictated by any single religious practice.

Literature as an art form in ancient Arabia, a tradition still in formation stage during Muhammad's time, was chiefly poetry. One Arab proverb has stated, "The beauty of a man lies in the eloquence of his tongue." Whether the epic poem of the warrior Anatara or the more reflective verses, poets explored themes of courage, love and, naturally, tribal greatness.⁵

Certain doctrines and features of Arabic paganism remained largely unchanged in the land's transition to the Islamic faith. The term for demons, good or bad, that can be manipulated (*djinn*) certainly predates Muhammad as a concept but was carried over into the Qur'an (especially in *Sura 72*). The format of the lunar calendar, associated with a powerful moon deity,

⁴ Wendland, Paul. "Islam: the Religion of Submitting to Allah," 1. WLS, Mequon 1989.

⁵ Ehlke, Roland. *Speaking the Truth in Love to Muslims*, 7. Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee 2004.

was not reinvented; most Muslims use the lunar calendar to this day. Even the Kaaba, the site of worship for Muslims because of its Abrahamic significance, originally was the house of a pantheon of Arab idols. That these matters and characters exist to a certain extent in Islam cannot be denied. How they are treated or “reinvented” according to the needs of Islam’s reworking of theology is a different matter.

2.1.2 Judeo Influences

As far as the number of gods involved in a person’s spiritual life, it is clear that Muhammad reacted violently against the polytheism traditional of his people for a more monotheistic stance. The following two influence groups, Judaism and Christianity, groups Muhammad certainly ran into frequently, had a much stronger and more lasting effect on his theology, each with a certain distinct combination of doctrines and practices.

The thunderous power and authority of the God of the Pentateuch undoubtedly struck Muhammad as simple and primary to Jewish faith-life. Yet where the teaching began simply, scholars distinguished themselves by degrees of obfuscation. Instead of an inductive or deductive rationale to solving a problem and explaining it, scholars could simply meander in hypotheticals with their varying moral implications. One scholar’s contributions would be treated by another with varying degrees of enhancing or clarifying, and a third would take it further, and so on. This approach might have impressed Muhammad as he observed it in his lifetime, but the degree to which such an approach shapes the dialogue about the Qur’an or the *hadith* cannot be measured. Reason is to be employed alongside faith, and *the role of time-tested tradition is paramount*. Any projected discussion on doctrine must employ quotations from the Prophet, quotations from his Companions, or a quotation from one of the Successors to the Prophet’s Companions.

Whereas absolute truth and a “right answer” are essential to resolution in Christian circles, in Islam a more subtle enhancing of knowledge is the goal. Multiple interpretations and applications are accepted. Any “answer” must be reached on the basis, ultimately, of a revelation from the Prophet, recorded specifically in the Qur’an or indirectly through *his* application of knowledge as described by the *hadiths*.

Mysticism as exegetical practice was also greatly influential in Muhammad’s day. Figures like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob functioned more as motifs and symbols of godly characteristics and small peeks into the divine rather than historical people. The concept of God was malleable;

a feeling or spirit to be sought internally and existentially rather than an objective, all-powerful mover of events and greater history. The subjectivity of this understanding of the divine certainly struck the Prophet bluntly as a contradiction in terms, a corruption of how to engage and follow a divine being.

2.1.3 “Christian” Influences

One would hope that justification by faith in Christ was the greatest and most lasting effect to have occurred from Christian sources on Muhammad’s growing spiritual mind. One would be wrong. Instead the greatest contribution from “Christian” sources to the intra-religious dialogue in Muhammad’s day were the numerous controversies that had taken place concerning God’s nature and, as will be addressed directly in this thesis, the nature specifically of the person Jesus Christ.

Many assume that the church’s condemnation of thinkers like Arius (256-336 AD), Nestorius (d. 451 AD), or Eutyches (c. 375-454 AD) meant that a clean slate was drawn up in certain spiritual matters; that everyone was now on the same page with regards to the divine nature and Christ’s relation to the Father. Actually followers of these heterodox thinkers persisted and spread, even to Muhammad’s context. Aspects of historic Catholicism like the practice of Mariolatry were right before Muhammad’s eyes. Arguments amongst “Christians” of these matters were most definitely a part of Muhammad’s spiritual consciousness, a catalyst for how he would develop his concept and descriptions of the one divine power and the kind of worship and lifestyle this power demanded out of believers.

2.1.4 Summary – Muhammad’s Mind

Given the historical context in which he lived, it is guaranteed that Muhammad was shaped by a few basic things concerning what the divine was (or *should be*) which are clearly reflected in the work of the Qur’an; namely A) The Middle Eastern religious climate operated on a plurality of valued beliefs, whether they be about the divine nature or the practice of one’s spirituality. B) The spiritual issues of the day seem to largely boil down to how we understand God and if its definition involves “saving work” or not. Specific Qur’an references will also show that C) Muhammad and Allah’s discontent with the confusion inherent in A) and B) necessitated a

simple message. This message puts the saving work on God's creation and maintains a strong separation between God and any potential plural nature or human involvement in his creation.

2.2 The Qur'an as Hermeneutics Manual

2.2.1 Muhammad's lifetime and legacy

In his book, *Understanding the Qur'an Today*, Mahmoud Hussein asserts that the Qur'an is, in the end, "notoriously difficult to engage."⁶ As he explains throughout the rest of his book, Hussein means to say that there are aspects of communication and interpretation within the Qur'an that take a great deal of historical research, analysis, and "inspired guesswork" in order to understand. Even then there is no promise that complete understanding is achievable.⁷ For the purposes of a comparison in hermeneutics, we look briefly at the formation of the Qur'an, its attributes as a unified work, and its major themes. With these in place we can engage in a more comprehensive examination of the Qur'an's specific definition of prophet status and its application to Christ, according to Muslim exegesis and principles of interpretation.

2.2.1.1 Manner of revelation

When a reader picks up the Qur'an, he notices the presence of certain patterns and the complete absence of others. For instance the chapters (*suras*), apart from a sort of prologue, generally follow an order from longest to shortest. This organization constitutes about the only decipherable attribute of order within the Qur'an as the work does not follow a chronological sequence or a topical treatment of figures, events, or places.

A first impression might be that this lack of predictable order is ammunition against the Qur'an's divine origin; that no God would possibly allow his words to be so unintelligibly jumbled together.⁸ The truth is that most Muslims attribute this reason-defying sequence as *evidence* of divine origin. The sense of beauty is otherworldly, the pattern nonhuman, the logic supernatural. To argue about order and organization, then, is to meet a dead end in conversation with a Muslim. However, Muslim and Western scholars have recognized the utility of dividing the Qur'an according to the time and place of Muhammad's receiving inspiration. The most

⁶ Hussein, Mahmoud. *Understanding the Qur'an Today*. Saqi Books, 2013, p. 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Hussein, 218.

widely accepted version of this system was made famous by the 19th century German orientalist Theodor Nöldecke.⁹

2.2.1.2 Nöldecke's System

Nöldecke's premise was that certain points of Muhammad's career dictated the inspiration needed concerning specific doctrines at the time. Piecing together tradition along with specific Qur'an references, Muhammad's reception of *suras* is divided into four periods: three in Mecca and a final stage in Medina. The shift in tone and subject matter across these periods is a fascinating and important topic that, unfortunately, cannot be treated here. The main point to be gleaned from the existence of such a system is this: The adherence to or rejection of this historical explanation is greatly indicative of the hermeneutical leanings of a given Qur'an scholar. As will be explained later, the role of historical context is not denied by Muslim scholars. Rather the *degree* to which historical context helps explain inspired truth and whether or not an explanatory system is necessary are matters for debate and further study.

2.2.1.3 The Companions and Successors

At the time of his death in 634 AD, Muhammad had no heirs or named successors. Over the course of Muhammad's twenty years of supposed direct inspiration from God, no formal system of recording this divine truth through Muhammad had been established. A scramble to nail down the inspired message to Muhammad from God took place amid a divisive political power struggle. This struggle was for control over what had become (through Muhammad's effective preaching accompanied with the sword) a massive empire including Northern Africa and the Holy Land of Jerusalem.

To this day, the debate remains over who follows the proper *caliph* or successor to Muhammad, dividing the *sunni* (often viewed as the more traditional branch) and the *shi'a* (often viewed as the more liberal branch). This debate has large political significance but the differences are also seen in the practice of Qur'an exegesis. Though an analysis of differences in exegesis between *sunni* and *shi'a* traditions would be most helpful, we limit ourselves in this discussion to the more traditional *sunni* stance towards the study of the Qur'an and the applications of its teachings.

⁹ Robinson, Neal. *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 26, 27. New York Press, 1991.

2.2.1.4 *Hadiths – The Major Collections*

Hadiths (Literally “reports,” “speeches,” or “accounts”) are recordings of the sayings of Muhammad the Prophet according to trusted witnesses and historians in Muslim tradition. For most *sunni*, the *hadiths* carry equal “canon power” to the Qur’an itself and are just as important for matters of history and jurisprudence. In the appendix of his article “The Function of Hadith,” R. Marston Speight outlines the six most authoritative collections: first and foremost the *Sahih* by al-Bukhari, followed by *Sunan abi Da’ud* by Abu Da’ud, *Sunan* by ibn Maja, *Tuhfat al-ahwadhi bi-sharh Jami’ al Tirmidhi* by al-Mubarakfuri, *Sahih* by al-Hajjaj, and *Sunan* by Al-Nasa-I’s.¹⁰ In addition to these six there are many *hadiths* that are less trustworthy because of their clear political agenda or shabby historical research.

Neal Robinson, in his work *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, boldly states that “only a small proportion [of *hadiths*] are directly concerned with the exegesis of the Qur’an.”¹¹ By this he means to say that an explicit explanation of Qur’an verses is not the objective of the *hadiths*, rather the simple and truthful demonstration of Muhammad’s sayings. *Tafsir* (Qur’an exegesis) is a different discipline from studying *hadith* formation. The *hadiths* are a source; a *tafsir* is the interpretation of that source to discover meaning.

One practice concerning *hadiths* needs mentioning here, and that is *isnad*. *Isnad* is the study and scientific explanation of the chronology going back to a given *hadith*’s most original source. The assumption is that every link in the chain is an orthodox and reliable historian of sound memory. This tradition carries huge implications in exegesis: if a reliable historian of sound memory has stated something concerning Muhammad’s verbatim prophecy, it is not contested but automatically contributes trusted knowledge to any exegetical work or discussion.

The lines drawn between what is the primary source or a secondary source, of what is the canon of Islam, gets very murky. “Abrogation,” or negating certain verses in light of others, automatically enters the discussion when one source is deemed inadmissible and another legitimate. The practice then follows to draw on the “clearer” meanings and letting the rest of the Qur’an remain a “dark book.” This practice is not consistent among Muslim contributors. We content ourselves now with a look at the unequivocal primary source, the Qur’an, and its most

¹⁰ Rippin, Andrew. *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’an*. 80, 81. Clarendon Press, 1988.

¹¹ Robinson, 62.

clear themes meant to guide the reader's hermeneutic and therefore his reading experience and life.

2.2.2 Themes of the Qur'an

Even without a topical or chronological arrangement to help indicate importance of certain *suras* (chapters) or *ayats* (verses) over others, the Qur'an displays its most essential doctrines of the faith through a few simple devices. The strongest signs of a developed theme are repetition, the assumed dialogue between Allah (guarding his teaching) and any opponents attempting to refute him, and subsequent threats of punishment against any deniers of that proposed teaching. With these signs in mind, three chief themes of the Qur'an prevail, dictating how a Muslim is to interact with Allah, his fellow man, and the beloved Qur'an itself: divine guidance, human submission, and universalism. This last theme in particular is vital to inter-religious dialogue and intertextual discussion.

2.2.2.1 Guidance

On an existential level, the foremost purpose of a Muslim's life is not to submit or "earn Paradise." Rather he is to have a close relationship with Allah. To recognize God for who he is remains the Qur'an's most important work. For this reason the Qur'an has equally been referred to as "The Reminder." To know God is to see the greatest guide a person can ask for. He is the non-contingent on whom we are contingent. God's purpose is to guide man and man's purpose is to serve God.

In his work "Themes of the Qur'an," Fazlur Rahman emphasizes that this relationship does not beget a Hellenized system of cyclic motion, some "merry-go-round that goes nowhere," but rather a linear path towards Paradise.¹² The narrative of ethical purpose describes the Qur'an's message and structure much more than any other single doctrine. God guides us on the path to Paradise. A few Qur'an *ayats* will show this most clearly.

Sura 31, Luqman, opens by saying, "These are the verses of the sagacious Book,/ And a guidance and grace for those who do good... They are on guidance from their Lord, and will prosper."¹³ A sample of verses that demonstrate this guidance exists. First, recognition of Allah

¹² Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 10. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

¹³ Ali, Ahmed, ed. *Al-Qur'an*, 348. Princeton, 1993.

as the first step in receiving guidance comes in the prologue (*Al-Fatihah*). The dominance of the “I” pronoun (*Al-Ma'idah* 5:3) shows the active role God has in this guidance: “Today I have perfected your system of belief/ and bestowed My favours upon you in full...”

To what end is this guidance? Paradise is the goal, but what are the steps or tools a person uses in serving God? Most broadly it is faith in God’s Prophet and the Qur’an as the only definitive instruction for life. The *sura* Bani-Israel says: “Verily this Qur’an directs you to the path that is straight and gives happy tidings to those who believe and do right: For them is great reward.” Those who receive guidance in this way will be blessed with even greater spiritual guidance in their life (47:17; 2:2).

Everything follows from this theme throughout the entire body of the Qur’an. Every doctrine, whether it is a description of prophets true and false, positive and negative examples of faith, or the detailed instruction on sanctified living (the famous Five Pillars), is meant to lead a believer forward in his walk of faith.

2.2.2.2 Submission

The reader has undoubtedly heard or read that the word “Islam” itself can be translated as “submission.” In the Muslim mind this is the natural outflow of faith in God, the active response following a recognition of God’s being and guiding role. Those *suras* mentioned above (*Luqman* 31; *Al-Baqara* 2) are references to God’s guidance immediately followed by tangible descriptions of the believer’s response, a response of submission. Thoughts, words, actions, family, finances are all resources to be employed in a person’s individual relationship with God. Humankind does have a free will, but in that free will is a freedom to deny our own will in light of what is best for us -- what God has outlined in the Qur’an. Again, the reader is meant to view every figure in the entire Qur’an, every prophet including Muhammad himself, as a positive example or foil of this truth. Historical contexts may change but God and his truth remain.

2.2.2.3 Universalism/Intertextuality

The use of the term “intertextuality” has become an issue since Bakhtin’s *dialogism* concept concerning discourse in the novel.¹⁴ “Polyphonia” (or “dialogism”) has considerable baggage to it as a concept. Thoughts of reader-response theory and postmodern philosophy become easy avenues when one thinks of a potential “double discourse” within a single text. However, “intertextuality,” etymologically and for our purposes here, is a very simple and useful term. That a single text draws on another text as its *source* naturally begets intertextuality, or a correspondence between the texts. That the author of a text therefore expects the intended reader to recognize allusions or overt references to that source (its people, events, or places) for clarification is equally natural.

Gabriel Said Reynolds explains this principle simply and directly in his work *The Qur’an and Its Biblical Subtext*.¹⁵ He states that just as it is imperative to draw on Muhammad’s historical context, his life, to know key teachings of the Qur’an, so it is vital to draw on biblical tradition, oral or otherwise, to explain the significance of certain historical points or doctrines. A good example is the supposed “birth of three religions,” the near-sacrifice of Isaac (or Ishmael, as some Muslim commentators interpret the event) by Abraham. This event is *not* described in full detail in the Qur’an; however it *is* comprehensively treated from start to finish with a major theme of faith (or “submission”) in the Bible. Across Muslim commentators there is disagreement on how important (or detrimental) reference to the Bible is. The idea of using biblical tradition too much in exegesis is called *isra’iliyat*.

This idea of intertextuality (or natural inter-religious dialogue) is intrinsic to Qur’an study. The Qur’an is clearly supplemented by biblical historical evidence and references. This is not only obvious by lining up the texts together, but is also clearly stated by the Qur’an itself. The Qur’an acknowledges this connection and seeks a dialogue between religions based on it (*Al-Imran* 3:64).

2.2.3 Prophecy – Who Has It and Why

In a word, the Qur’anic depiction of prophets displays examples of godly living and service. There is the imperative that the reader emulate these prophets, the Prophet Muhammad in

¹⁴ Bakhtin, M.M. Holquist, Michael, ed. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. University of Texas, 1982.

¹⁵ Reynolds, Gabriel Said. *The Qur’an and Its Biblical Subtext*, pp. 2, 93. Routledge, 2010.

particular being the pinnacle of humility and devotion to Allah. The number of prophets shifts from researcher to researcher, but the vast majority are figures already recognized in Jewish and Christian sources. The Qur'an treats these figures with great respect and lays down aspects of prophethood that depart from Christianity and Judaism in telling and unique ways.

First there is the prophet Muhammad, the most revered prophet in Islam. *Sura 2 (Al-Baqara)* quotes Abraham as saying, "Our Lord, raise up a messenger in their midst, from among them, to recite to them your signs, teach them the Book and Wisdom, and purify them." Muhammad exercised all that was foretold in his receiving inspiration, his teachings, and his conquests.

As it happens only five prophets are named before their appearance according to the Qur'an (Muhammad, John, Jesus, Isaac, and Jacob). Drawing on the point of intertextuality previously mentioned, it becomes clear that *a prophet is only as good as his main message*. Isaac's very name communicates the greatness of God in contrast to the futile, defiant reason of humankind. Isaac's son carries on this legacy. John's birth similarly points to the power of God over against the human condition of barrenness. In Islam to read further into these characters for guidance or truth is suspicious behavior at best.

As for Muhammad, he is distinct as a prophet in that his message is directly from Allah and carries both immediate application and universally applicable truths. The other prophets have valid messages (note the *Injil* ["gospel"] of Jesus), but none come close to the importance of Muhammad's relaying God's descriptions and rules. All other prophets serve the purpose of foretelling Muhammad, adding detail anticipatorily to his message, or otherwise further validating his office.

2.3 Post-Qur'an Exegesis

2.3.1 *Tafsir*

Muslim exegesis (*tafsir*) stands at a disadvantage compared to Christianity in that actual recording of the Qur'an took a longer time-span and a great many more scribes. Muslim scholasticism has attempted to make up for this shortfall ever since with a complex organization of exegetical history and practice over the centuries, a step-by-step Islamic anthology and epistemology. Such categories cover every conceivable angle of research and thought. If a scholar's propositions are linked directly to the original source, it is noted (*b-i-l-rawiya*). Should

a scholar lean towards employing more reason than faith or established historical precedent, it is labeled and noted (*bi'l-ra'y*). Arguments easily rise over which discipline is most relevant to a given passage. However, for our purposes there remain two particular practices within *tafsir* that deserve mentioning. One is highly traditional and mutually respected (*asbab-al-nuzul*), the other divisive and controversial (abrogation).

2.3.1.1 Asbab-al-nuzul

Asbab-al-nuzul is simply the conscious reference to historical events surrounding a passage in order to supplement its meaning, to get at the heart of the issue and the Prophet's words. For instance those passages which are clear prescriptive commands concerning divorce may seem, to the untrained reader, to come out of nowhere and be said to anyone who will listen. The truth is, according to this discipline, these passages often had a very specific time, place, and audience. In the example of divorce, *asbab-al-nuzul* reveals that the Prophet was specifically addressing *Jews* concerning marriage in view of deuteronomic law or the words of the prophet Jesus.

Thus *asbab-al-nuzul* is essential to discovering who receives commands or reprimands specifically and how that lesson can apply to the reader, albeit far removed from the original context. For instance, it is a commonly held Muslim belief that Jews and Christians have corrupted the Bible to suit their own ends and deny the truth. The Qur'an makes this point explicit when it says, "O People of the Book, why do you blaspheme against the signs of God, though you witness them?/ O People of the Book, why do you confound truth with falsehood, and conceal the truth, even though you know it? (3:69-71)." *Jews* and *Christians* are the original audience of these words (discovered through historical investigation). Their instruction to derive truth from the Qur'an and not other corrupted texts is a strongly made one.

Another example comes against critics of the format of the Qur'an. According to the historian Al-Zamakhshari, Meccans originally said to Muhammad, "Why was this Book not revealed all at once, in the same way as the other Books?" Allah's reply is: "Those who blaspheme say: 'If only the Qur'an had been sent down upon him whole and undivided!' Rather, to confirm your heart with it! And We made it to be chanted, a sublime chant! (25:32)."

2.3.1.2 Abrogation

Just as the exact words of the prophet are debated, his successors are debated, and the validity of historians is debated, so it is very much debated which *ayats* completely nullify the doctrines or points made in other *ayats* because of interpretive incompatibility. Qur'an verses always stand as worthy of contemplation and interpretation, but at times those interpretations can very well negate the teachings Muhammad put forth at another time or place.

The principle of abrogation is laid out in a case of *asbab-al-nuzul*. In *Al-Baqara* Allah answers polytheists who question Muhammad's practice of abrogation by saying, "For every verse We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring down one better or similar (2:106)." Muslim scholars themselves recognize this verse as "troubling" because of its impact on how one reads the Qur'an.¹⁶ In the end, we will simply note that it is not wise to reach for an abrogation argument with a Muslim, but to treat every passage referred to with respect and as worthy of discussion.

2.3.2 Al-Tabari

If one aspect of Muslim exegesis is to be taken away from Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, it is the reliance on tradition. Though not the first classical period contributor to *tafsir* (that would be ibn-Abbas), al-Tabari wrote the definitive work on prior Muslim discourse. For al-Tabari, tradition stands as a necessary preliminary move for any discussion of doctrine in the Qur'an. Born in northern Iran but adopting Baghdad as his home, al-Tabari was a historian *par excellence*. His *Annals*, or *History of the Prophets and Kings*, is reputed to be originally over one hundred volumes of Middle-Eastern history. His history of Jesus as a prophet of the Qur'an actually drew on the accounts of Matthew and Luke.¹⁷ Most pertinent to the discussion of hermeneutics, al-Tabari wrote "The Full Exposition of the Qur'an Commentary" (*Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ay al-Qur'an*) in 884 AD, recording the most comprehensive collection of *hadiths* and nearly two and a half centuries of Muslim exegesis. The 11th century historian al-Khatib al-Baghdadi commented: "He had a degree of erudition shared by no one of his era."¹⁸ He was historically-minded, meticulous, and traditional.

¹⁶ Hussein, 142.

¹⁷ Robinson, Neal. 44

¹⁸ McAuliffe, Jane Dammen, Rippin, Andrew, ed. "Qur'anic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir." *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, 48. Oxford, 1988.

As Jane McAuliffe states, al-Tabari's commentary is just that: not a mere collection of material but a structured work containing insight and judgment.¹⁹ His introduction fights for exegetical exercise, the reputations of previous commentators, and the problematic status of interpretation by personal opinion. Setting these other worthwhile discussions aside, we look at two aspects of al-Tabari's hermeneutic as they will apply to the prophet Jesus.

The first aspect appears in al-Tabari's treatment of a Qur'an verse that distinguishes classes of Qur'an verses. The verse reads: "He has sent down this Book which contains/ some verses that are categorical/ and basic to the Book,/ and others allegorical. But those who are twisted of mind look for verses metaphorical, seeking deviation/ and giving to them interpretations of their own... (*Al-Imran* 3:7)²⁰." Based on lexicography and semantic domains numerous possibilities of meaning occur in this verse, but al-Tabari hones in on one key point in particular, the so-called "anti-hermeneutic," a foil to the proper approach to the Qur'an. McAuliffe sums al-Tabari's stance up:

The wrongheaded exegete, as characterized by al-Tabari, is one who deliberately seeks out the more obscure Quranic [*sic*] verses and then manipulates their meanings in order to support his own misguided preconceptions. Rather than attempting to understand these verses in the light of those which are clearly *muhkam* [categorically simpler instruction], he ignores the latter, thereby perpetuating his own confusion and that of others.

Perhaps this *scriptura sui interpretis* principle ("Scripture is its own best interpreter") would be more profound if the path al-Tabari took to get to it were made explicit. Suffice it to say that through a categorical system of five distinct interpretive possibilities, al-Tabari, relying on *hadiths*, plants his feet on this sole principle as the matter-at-hand in 3:7 and applies it throughout his work. By doing this he set a trend in Muslim exegesis that persists to modern times. Overall, al-Tabari's preference for traditional reinforcement alongside thorough classification of exegetical practice set a standard by which future exegetes would stand or fall for the entire classical period.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Ali, Ahmed.

2.3.3 Al-Taymiyya

The next two exegetes, starting with al-Taymiyya, make up the opposite chronological “book-end” of the classical period, both scholars living near its conclusion. In fact, great debate has occurred over the influence al-Taymiyya had over ibn-Kathir as his instructor. Regardless, history shows that al-Taymiyya, though a traditionalist in form, used certain innovative trends of exegetical practice. Namely, a coalescing of reason and revelation largely influenced his work in his constant attempt to refute heretical views of the Qur’an and its application. Al-Taymiyya took to refuting faulty interpreters head on with his writing. Disputation of incorrect exegesis (*jadl sahih*) and refutation (*radd*) were his chief concern.

Often quoted by exegetes appealing to one’s reason, al-Taymiyya simply does not carry the import and lasting effect with his work that al-Tabari did. His preoccupation with confronting other exegetical works apart from diving into traditional *hadith* or the Qur’an created a tangential trend in Muslim exegesis that pockets of modern scholars adhere to today.

Though al-Taymiyya may not be the most famous exegete of the classical period, his work most certainly brought numerous issues to the table, including the frank use of philosophy and logic to explore the truths of the Qur’an. What is more, whether or not they were as closely tied together ideologically at one time as some assume, it cannot be denied that ibn-Kathir’s career was a reaction to al-Taymiyya’s rationalistic bent. In fact, this “al-Taymiyya” reaction was so strong that the groundwork ibn-Kathir laid down with his writings helped to set in stone patterns of Qur’an exegesis that remain today.

2.3.4 Ibn-Kathir

Influence of al-Taymiyya aside, ibn-Kathir’s approach involving a priority of sources created a model to be adhered to by Muslim exegetes up to today. To reroute the philosophical and polemic leanings of his predecessor al-Taymiyya, ibn-Kathir laid out a simple hierarchy of sources to appeal to in every matter of exegesis: first the Qur’an, then the *hadiths*, then anything the successors supplied, the other *tafsir*. This categorization, admittedly, is a unique blend of the rationalism that was on the scene in ibn-Kathir’s day and the traditionalism of old (specifically

al-Tabari and al-Razi). Thus ibn-Kathir was much more occupied with reliable historical narratives than convincing theological arguments.²¹

Through historical study and comparisons in traditional literature, ibn-Kathir drew one conclusion in particular that is helpful in the discussion on Christ's status as prophet. He states: "I hold that the prophets are protected and aided by God, the most powerful and majestic, and there is no disagreement in this in terms of the true scholars from the early ones to the latter-day ones."²² Based on such a conclusion ibn-Kathir went so far as to say that prophets were essentially free from sin. The way in which ibn-Kathir married reason and faith to draw this conclusion is indicative of *sunni* practice today; the verses from the Qur'an stand and are simply incapable of being misunderstood except by those with an agenda to misrepresent the religion, and only a select number of traditional *tafsir* or commentaries hold to this truth.

2.3.5 Modern Thought

One may wonder what significance these classical exegetes have had on the interpreters of the Qur'an today. The fact of the matter is the principles they taught and practiced have permeated the *sunni* tradition as it stands today. We look at a couple of traditional *sunni* commentators, Jamaal Zarabozo and Ahmed Hussein, as test cases of exegetes who write to be understood by outsiders to the faith of Islam.

Ahmed Hussein's work, *Understanding the Qur'an Today*, is replete with *tafsir* references with little to no explanation of their history or validity. They are simply interchangeable with the Qur'an in terms of reliability, prescriptive relevance, and historical accuracy. Some references help show that the concept of refutation of false teachers, from within or without Islam, is a justifiable practice since the Prophet did it himself with Jews and apostate followers.²³ The strong use of historical narrative is a simple display of the truths of the Qur'an is central to Hussein's line of thought and how he communicates the doctrines of his faith.

On the other hand, Jamaal Zarabozo topically treats the themes of the Qur'an, with their sequence and relevance, in a much more rationalistic way; *even when he is talking about the futility of reason in view of faith*. He appreciates that Islam is a system that one either believes by

²¹ Mirza, Younus. "Was ibn-Kathir the 'Spokesperson' for ibn-Taymiyya?" *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 16.1, 16. Edinburgh Press, 2014.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³ Hussein, 93.

the power of Allah or one does not. His attempt to bridge the gap is telling as to the intellectual pathways created by Muslim exegetes in order to explain the Qur'an's simplicity, direction, applicability, and eternity.

The classical period exegetes have largely shaped the pathways of communication used by Muslim writers today; so much so that modern scholars fall into time-honored paths of traditionalism or rationalism (or the amalgamation of both) seamlessly. The importance of historical narrative, traditions honored, and the tactful use of reason all play into the interpretation of the Qur'an in all its doctrines, especially that of the prophet Jesus, as we will see. First we root ourselves firmly in the solid hermeneutical principles of interpretation inherent in confessional Lutheranism and historical in Christianity.

3. Lutheran Hermeneutics at a Glance

3.1 The Impact of the Fathers

Presuppositions largely dictate how a person encounters a text. This idea may come off as rather postmodern; that a subject imposes meaning into the page rather expositing it from the page. However, a reader's presuppositions do not negate the importance of the author's original, intended meaning. This point is especially true when a reader's main guiding presupposition is that the author *has* an intended meaning and that author *wants* to, by every possible means, convey that meaning to the reader in the *simplest*, most effective way.

As Lutherans we appreciate this truth when we encounter God's Word: the Divine has employed a combination of psychological and supernatural means to communicate the narrative of humankind's salvation from itself; to give people eternal life through Jesus. To speak of an Islamic hermeneutic with any manner of critique or praise requires a brief, working summation of Lutheran hermeneutics; those presuppositions in an exegete's toolbox that historically have served to most directly access God's intended meaning in Scripture.

We will see how historically we have received guidance in proper hermeneutics from the Bible itself (those "men carried along by the Holy Spirit"), starting with Jesus himself. We then shift historically to seven theses regarding hermeneutics during the Reformation era. Next is a brief glance at the "back-to-basics" work of the Wauwatosa theologian J.P. Koehler who addressed issues in the Wisconsin Synod in heated and controversial times. Finally we see how

most recently Lutheran works have summed up key points in hermeneutics according to the applicable text *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way* by Professor David Kuske. From this process we can state definitively those similarities or differences in interpretation between confessional Lutherans and the *sunni* tradition just outlined.

3.1.1 Jesus, Paul, and Peter

Jesus and the writers of the New Testament did not publish a “Guide to Hermeneutics” pamphlet. No meta-language or Latin phrases were used to describe how to discover meaning, translate a text, and communicate these things to others. Instead these men stood as models of good hermeneutics, examples for us to imitate regardless of the shift in culture or historical context, and instructors of interpretation principles by their direct application.

As expected, no one shows better hermeneutics than the God-man himself. In his ministry and teaching Christ showed that the *sola scriptura* principle was the real foundation for anyone’s understanding of the divine and subsequently existence and human interaction. Scripture as the foundation for meaning shines within his words. He did not destroy Scripture, but fulfilled its intended promises and meaning (Matthew 5:17). Concerning the resurrection, Jesus appealed to the simple and direct words of the Old Testament as the source of truth (Matthew 22:31-33). That truth has involved many details and sub-points, but principally the truth is concerned with salvation through Christ’s work (John 5:39). The self-authenticating nature of Scripture allows it to explain itself in matters of confusion (Luke 4:12). Once one knows that salvation through Christ is the major theme of Scripture and all other points are reinforcement thereof, minor themes are automatically prioritized according to this major theme (promises pointing forward to it or explanations referring back to it).

It is this referencing back to Christ and his major premise of humankind’s salvation that Paul and Peter practiced and allowed to guide the rest of their hermeneutics. Whether it be Habakkuk 4, 2 Samuel, the Psalms, or Isaiah; Christ crucified and faith in him is the central goal of all Scripture. Peter similarly uses an ancient prophecy from Joel to indicate Christ’s centrality to life and the gift of the Spirit that only God can bestow (Acts 2). God’s intended meaning in Scripture is the communication of his love personified in Jesus to whom all Scripture testifies. All applications rest on this interpretive foundation and are connected by it.

3.1.2 The Confessions

It is worth mentioning here that the practice of employing good hermeneutics as the best proof of their importance rests not only with Jesus, his witnesses, and the epistle writers, but also with the Lutheran fathers who composed the Confessions we use today. Considering all the controversies between Roman Catholicism, Zwinglians, Calvinists, and confessional Lutherans, the objective examination of hermeneutics as a concept has never been addressed (an article titled “On Translation” or “On Scripture”) before the Formula of Concord.

Certainly Luther wrote on these matters, but not formally in the documents that make up the Book of Concord. One argument might be that the chief principles of hermeneutics were accepted by all parties and so such an examination would be superfluous. Mariolatry, indulgences, and confusion regarding the Real Presence prove this not to be true. Rather, the Lutheran fathers knew that the best way to teach hermeneutics, those basic communication rules, was to use them well and to allow the Holy Spirit to do the rest. Thus we now turn to several theses within the Reformation era which showed the only way a conversation on interpretation could effectively take place and the correct meaning from Scripture is discovered.

3.1.3 Reminders from the Reformation

3.1.3.1 Unus Simplex Sensus

This phrase (“one, simple sense”) describes the existence of one intended meaning by the author. Such a definition was necessitated by the tangents of interpretation that existed in Luther’s day thanks to scholasticism: the idea that every text has parallel meanings (allegorical, moral, anagogical) alongside the simple, literal meaning. With the idea of one, simple sense of the text, Lutherans point out that you either have a single meaning within a work or infinite meanings, subject to the interpreter’s preference.

3.1.3.2 Scriptura Sacra Sui Ipsius Interpres

“Scripture is its own best interpreter.” This phrase outlines the practice of allowing the clearest passages containing articles of faith to explain other passages whose context or application might be difficult for the reader for cultural reasons or otherwise. The phrase has been mentioned before but bears repeating for one specific reason: Within Scripture, as Martin

Franzmann explains it, there is a clear *res*, a subject at hand that is the sum of all its parts, the *verba*.²⁴ Both *res* and *verba* are organically connected, relating to one another constantly.

The ultimate *res* of Scripture is the “radical Gospel,” as Franzmann puts it: a soteriological attitude that permeates the writings and proposes and supports justification by faith in Christ. Knowing this *res* allows a reader to comprehensively interpret any single set of *verba* in Scripture.

3.1.4 Reminder from Koehler

As Lutheran we are eternally indebted to the hermeneutical work of the proponents of the Reformation. It deserves mentioning that at the earlier part of the 20th century, a temptation occurred within our own synod to circumvent these principles in favor of a thoroughly dogmatic system to describe and apply Scripture. The renowned exegete J.P. Koehler, in his works “Biblical Hermeneutics: An Outline for the Seminary Course” and “The Analogy of Faith,” pointed his contemporaries to the deep need of detecting Scripture’s simplest, most direct sense and apply its truths.

Really, in Reformation-style, Koehler indicated that exegetical work on the *verba* to illuminate the *res* relied on the appreciation of that very “radical Gospel” that remains Scripture’s most profound theme. We appreciate today Koehler’s appeal to bring the art and science of hermeneutics back to the basics of letting the text stand on its own and say what God intended.

3.2 Summary Thus Far

We have seen that the historical practice of formal exegesis is as much a major part of Islam as it is of Christianity. That historical context and a simple, often reason-defying meaning to the text exist is an equally valid fact in both religions.

Alongside these similarities we have exposed certain differences. Though both the Qur’an and the Bible are presupposed to be self-referential works, the Qur’an is allowed to abrogate itself in matters of controversy. What is more, *hadiths* carry as much weight as the primary source for exegetical purposes, while Scripture stands alone as moral and instructive authority. Finally, the very *radix* of each religion (their *res*) is different. Christianity views the Bible as the

²⁴ Franzmann, Martin. *Scripture and Interpretation*, 3. WLS, 1961.

narrative of God's action in humankind's history to save them from sin by his own sacrifice. Islam holds to God's guiding each individual through life to reach, by his own work, Paradise.

With these principles and practices in mind we now turn to a specific subject in which the hermeneutics of each religion can show consistencies and inconsistencies within their respective faiths. The person Jesus, integral to Christianity but marginal to Islam, serves to reveal those ways in which Islam is justified in certain manners of interpretation but answerable to skepticism in other respects.

4. Jesus and his Prophecy

4.1 The Qur'an Speaks

4.1.1 A Composite Picture of Jesus

4.1.1.1 *Mother and Miraculous Birth*

The special status of Jesus' mother is irrefutable according the Qur'an reference in *Al-Imran*, *ayats* 33-37 and 45. It says there, "Whenever Zachariah came to see her/ in the chamber,/ he found her provided with food, and he asked:/ 'Where has this come from, O Mary?'/ And she said: 'From God who gives food in abundance to whomsoever he will.'"²⁵ The miracle provision of food is a hallmark of divine intervention in Mary's life, intervention because of a very special role she will play in mothering a great prophet.

This message is driven home later in the *sura* at *ayat* 45: "When the angels said: 'O Mary,/ God gives you news of a thing from Him, for rejoicing, whose name will be Messiah,/ Jesus, son of Mary,/ illustrious in this world and the next, and one among the honoured.'"²⁶ All supernatural occurrences in Mary's life set the stage for this prophet's entrance into the world. The Qur'an account further dovetails with the New Testament in that Jesus' mother is still a virgin at his birth (3:47). Thus Mary and Jesus are together a sign "for the world" (21:91).

Using numerous historical sources, Al-Tabari comments on how this conception occurred:

²⁵ Ali, 55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The spirit was Gabriel. God named him his spirit on account of the love he had for him and his closeness, just as you say to your loved one: you are my spirit. Some read this as “our refreshment” with a *fatha* because the reasoned that it was a reference to the refreshment of the worshippers.²⁷

4.1.1.2 Miracles

Entertaining the notion that the Bible acts as subtext to the Qur’an, it is clear that miracles remain a large part of Jesus’ ministry in both religions but simply for different purposes. Where Christianity views Christ’s miracles as testaments to his divine power and witness of his authority, the Qur’an views Jesus’ miracles as signs of a connection to Allah and *his* power (2:87). The greatest of these miracles occurs in *sura* 5:112-114 in which Jesus miraculously provides food for his disciples. Any Christian reading this account can see that it contains details of the gospels’ accounting the Lord’s Supper but for Muslims it is merely a sign of Allah intervention. Even resurrection of the dead is acknowledged as a sign Jesus can perform, but only with God’s permission (3:49).

4.1.1.3 Injil

Literally the Arabic for “Gospel,” Jesus’ *Injil* is the body of his message during his earthly life; a message pertaining to, according to the Qur’an, the guidance necessary to live for Allah as outlined in the themes of the Qur’an above. In fact, Christ’s message mirrors that of Muhammad’s in that it is described as “light,” “wisdom,” “admonition,” and “right path,” all terms used of the Qur’an’s message.

4.1.2 Christ as Prophet

Jesus is clearly viewed as a prophet within Islam by explicit Qur’an references and the fact that he is often mentioned alongside several other notable prophets. Just as one example, *An-Nisa* (*sura* 4) casually refers to Jesus together with Noah, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, and David as those who have received revelation (*ayat* 166). He is named “among the upright” in *Al-Baqara* 2:85. Jesus receives a binding covenant from Allah in *Al-Ahzab* 33:7. Alongside his miraculous birth, career miracles, and central (Islamically-perverted) gospel

²⁷ Wheeler, Brannon M. *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis*, 302. Continuum, 2002.

message these statements give us partial puzzle pieces as to who Christ is and his significance as a prophet.

The limit of a prophet's power and connection to Allah is critical to Islam in that, as mentioned before, no sharing of the divine essence can be ascribed to anyone. The Qur'an comes down hard on this fact in such references as 4:171, 5:17, 5:73, 5:116, 6:100, and dozens others. Ibn-Kathir describes his contemporaries' stance on this point in this way: "The polytheist Arabs allege, in their ignorance, that the angels are the sons of God, that they are in-laws of the Jinn." The unbelievers from among the philosophers, polytheist Arabs, Jews, and Christians allege, without knowledge that God had a son."²⁸ Though this certainly downplays Christ's role in comparison to Christianity, Ibn-Kathir concedes that Christ is the pinnacle of Old Testament-style prophets, being their seal of the divine message in first century Palestine.

In his prophet ministry, the Qur'an makes it clear that any notion of personal crucifixion or resurrection of Jesus is to be immediately erased from the mind (4:155-159). Muslim exegetes rely on these Qur'an verses and subsequent tradition to support this claim. By this rationale, the title "Messiah" has zero implications of divinity, power over death, or a greater salvation work in Christ. It is merely a name borrowed from Old Testament documents to mark Jesus as a useful prophet for the message of submission to Islam.

Specifically, Jesus' message according to the Qur'an includes chiefly *zakat* (alms-giving) and *salat* (ritual prayer), pillars of the Islamic faith that remain to this day.²⁹ Thus his ministry retro-validates the message of Muhammad and his followers.

4.2 The Hermeneutical Comparison

Clearly there are differences in the approach of Muslims and Christians to the sacred text that are worth noting. For one, the framework of *sola Scriptura* is entirely different. In ways that cannot be described at length in this work, what is acceptably part of canonical works within Islam does not follow similar rules to Christianity and so confusion (with regards to *hadiths*, certain Qur'an verses over others, and the validity of other sacred texts) ensues.

Most important to a hermeneutics discussion is the very idea that the *res* within Christianity is opposed to the proposed *res* of Islam; it is justification by the God-Man's work opposed to

²⁸ Wheeler, 313.

²⁹ Robinson, 37.

point-by-point instruction on how to please a detached God. This difference in *radix* is explicitly clear in Jesus' function. For Christians his principal work is to save through his own perfection and sacrifice while for Muslims it is to serve as an example of submission, even *according to* the rules of submission laid down far after his own death. Crucifixion and resurrection are denied in favor of a few simple images of a humble messenger.

Apart from these differences, there are similarities in hermeneutics that can serve as bridges of communicating the gospel, as will be seen in the next section. Specifically, although the *sola Scriptura* attitude gets murkier in Islamic circles (especially those outside the *sunni* tradition), credence is given to those who are able to treat the primary sources of the Qur'an and the Bible first rather than personal reasoning, as was the *modus operandi* of al-Tabari and ibn-Kathir. The inconsistencies in the Islamic approach naturally arise and give opportunity for showing the Bible as a truly self-authenticating, communicative work on the narrative of salvation.

5. Applications

5.1 Apologetics

5.1.1 Conversationally-Speaking

Many people panic at the very thought of engaging a Muslim in any kind of theological discussion; usually with a fear that such a person is unwilling to see things from different perspectives. The tradition of the *sunni* going back to Islam's very (Judeo-Christian) roots shows this not to be true. Rather, dialogue over the critical issues has been a key part of Muslim scholars in exegesis and history for over a millennium. The following sections are meant to describe what to keep in mind from the previous pages when venturing into apologetics with Muslims, Christian education at numerous levels, and evangelism practices.

The chief component of an Islamic hermeneutic to keep in mind in any kind of "debate" with an Islamic believer is that *sources must be agreed upon*. When you encounter someone who adheres to abrogation and a higher critical view of exegetes like al-Tabari, al-Taymiyya, and ibn-Kathir, precious little ground is going to be made apart from coming to terms on where divine truth (which *does* exist) lies. From there one similarly attempts to come to a similar concept of

res between the works, from which the *verba* can be honestly assessed and interpreted. That the *verba* and *res* explain each other cyclically is key; *Scripture interprets scripture*.

5.2 Christian Education

Clearly more needs to be done at an earlier level with regards to “Muslim literacy,” or, detecting and acknowledging divergent Islamic beliefs from Christianity. This truth applies to a wide age-range of believers (or those who are encountering Christianity for the first time). For simplicity’s sake we will discuss the traditional Lutheran catechism class, adult Bible Information Class participants, and WELS seminarians.

Luther reacted strongly against the Roman Catholic view of justification, the sacraments, and sanctification. This point is clear from his writings. However, in the 21st century we as a synod are still consistently instructing youth with an anti-Catholic polemic mentality. Work-righteousness as it manifests itself in Catholic practice (e.g. rosaries, pilgrimages, the papacy) has a large target on its back while Islam covertly attempts to re-wire a Christian’s hermeneutics much more subtly. A greater stress on theology alongside anthropology and soteriology would arm students for those debates with a Muslim audience concerning who God is, what he is like, and what he has done.

By my very terminology it is apparent that I do not just mean Christians between the ages of 10 and 15 but also Christians at the seminary level. The seminary would do well to include (if only a few) quotations from Muslim scholars (certainly modern along with the traditional classical period) to show spiritual deviation from the truth of Scripture. Knowledge is power.

Similarly in a BIC environment certain doctrines do need to be stressed, given pause over, and reviewed often with a Muslim-to-Christian convert. Those doctrines concern the nature of God, Jesus Christ, and justification by faith; all knowing the ways in which Islam has perverted these truths.

5.3 Evangelism

The chief purpose I have in presenting this thesis is to personally break down barriers in communication between Christians and Muslims by showing that similar hermeneutical principles are at work between faiths. These barriers have often been presented as cultural or

ideological and there is some validity to that point. The point that spiritually speaking these two groups operate on entirely different planes is also true; but only to a point.

With the section on universality being a theme of the Qur'an, it should have become clear that a faithful Muslim who believes his or her Qur'an appreciates this fact: the truth is meant to be shared and people converted. Christians who show an evangelistic attitude to that end have more in common with their audience than they know; they merely have a message that completely reinvents their worldview and practice.

Evangelists need not be afraid of door-to-door trips, billboards, or other media in a Muslim neighborhood in the United States (yet). More bridges exist between the faiths than people are willing to realize thanks to xenophobic instinct or unfortunate personal experience.

6. Conclusion

6.1 A Summary

An Islamic hermeneutics exists. It carries a rich history balancing reason, historical-contextual research, and letting the sacred text stand alone. In many ways this hermeneutic differs from confessional Lutheranism but there are potential connections to be made in view of those principles that are shared.

As these truths come to focus on the person of Jesus Christ, it becomes clear that blind-spots and conscious abrogation are necessitated to obstruct Christ's own life, words, and message. That hermeneutical inconsistencies occur in the *sunni* perspective is not something to be exploit and highlight in a conversation on exegesis, canon, or hermeneutics in general, but simply kept in mind so that the theological conversation can proceed respectfully and productively.

The applications of these truths to apologetics, Christian education, and evangelism are various, signifying a host of ways in which Lutherans can make connections with the gospel with a demographic that is often marginalized or demonized. That further study takes place in any one of these areas mentioned in this thesis (Islamic exegesis, religious history, or the application of good hermeneutics in the Islamic-Christian dialogue), is the chief goal of this paper.

7. Appendix

Points of Further Study

The following are related departure points worthy of their own theses in the future for whoever is willing and able:

- *Tafsir* (Islamic exegesis)
 - Al-Tabari
 - Al-Taymiyya
 - Ibn-Kathir
 - Zamakhshari
 - Al-Razi
- BIC class within a strong Muslim context (neighborhood or experience of the student)
- A Muslim view of specific doctrine (e.g. “the analogy of faith”, the crucifixion, or the resurrection)
- *Asbab-al-nuzul* – what practices might Lutherans benefit from? How is it done incorrectly?
- The Mormon/Jehovah’s Witness/Pentecostal hermeneutic

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