

When the Church Is More Cultural than Christian

July 7, 2011

So, I'm reading this excellent biography of Bonhoeffer right now, and I've been mulling this question. Well, I guess it's twofold, really.

Background: You probably know this already, but just in case. In Nazi Germany the German church pretty much abandoned any form of orthodox Christianity in order to fit in with the culture. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller and others formed the Confessing Church as a stand for true Christianity in the face of the cultural abdication of the wider church. Most were either imprisoned or killed for their efforts.

1 – Do you think that the American church is undergoing a similar shift to fit in with cultural norms on a broad scale that could threaten orthodox Christianity (clearly, hopefully, not to the extent of the Reich church, but still, I see some possible parallels)? What do you think are the areas in which the American church is most at risk? Why?

2 – Do you think we have leadership that is taking a stand for orthodoxy in a counter-cultural and true way on the national scene? If so, who?

Yes. The American church acquiesces to the culture in various ways which are detrimental to the Gospel. It's tricky because it is vital to the Gospel that the Gospel (whose hands and feet are the church) be relevant. Churches which are highly separatist and never adapt to or accommodate culture do violence to the Gospel as well, so it's tricky. And we'll none of us ever get it 100% right. Ever. I keep trying to tell God humility is overrated; he never listens.

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

Now to your actual question: What are these traps?

Liberal:

Of course there are the far left examples like: Employing poor hermeneutics which 1) Undercut Scripture as a text which is not historical or literal at all, and 2) justify sin, usually sexual sin such as premarital sex and homosexual sex and the sexually-related sin of abortion. And then there is the slightly more subtle trap of feeling the need to bend over backwards to kiss the keister of Science. Finally, there is the acquiescence of the (pseudo)tolerance mantra of hypermodernism: partly out of fear of being legalistic, partly because it is more comfortable, we succumb to Relativism.

Conservative:

Employing poor hermeneutics which truncate Scripture as a text which is entirely literal (it seems to me that this is a very Western thing to do, but I could be wrong; it could simply be a human thing to do... we feel more comfortable in black and white). Such a lack of hermeneutic leads to overly hard-nosed positions about creation and "the woman issue" among other things. It also leads to, instead of justifying sin, creating an extra hedge of rules so that we can be darn sure we avoid the undignified, socially unacceptable sins, perhaps especially, sexual sin.

And then of course there's the idea of a Christian America; or that politics can fix every(one else)thing.

Traps for all:

[Moralistic Therapeutic Deism](#) is probably a problem for both

sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You'd better keep your hands off of my individual rights and my private life... and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton's *Heretics*:

But if we look at the progress of our scientific civilization we see a gradual increase everywhere of the specialist over the popular function. Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.

Professionalization probably also includes running our churches too much like businesses.

Finally, Q number 2: Yes. What's tricky about this is that one must sometimes be under the radar to be counter-cultural, partly because when you're counter-cultural, no one wants to listen to you! Eugene Peterson, Tim Keller, NT Wright, Nancy Pearcey, Os Guinness (an outside perspective is always helpful) and the [Trinity Forum](#), Jamie Smith, especially in the area of how we do church and spiritual formation... I'm sure there are others, including my [colleagues](#) who are currently working on assessing and addressing this issue of cultural captivity: first creating an Ah-ha moment about our cultural captivity, and secondly, creating a way out of captivity and into freedom.

Good question!

This blog post originally appeared at reneamac.com/2011/07/07/when-the-church-is-more-cultural-than-christian/

Try Jesus???

The other day I saw a bumper sticker: "Try Jesus." *Try Jesus?* Whoever wrote and printed that soooo doesn't get it. They don't get Jesus, they don't get the Christian life, they don't get the relational aspect of biblical Christianity, they don't understand the Cross.

Try Jesus? We might as well print bumper stickers for plants that say "Try Light." Or for appliances: "Try Electricity." Or for pens: "Try Ink."

Try Jesus. The mentality of this thought permeates our culture, and even worse, it permeates many churches: Jesus as God's best self-help tool. Jesus as an addition to our lives, like vitamins or exercise.

The other day I was having a texting conversation with a young lady when I had reason to suggest that she was a functional atheist: claiming to love God but living and thinking in ways that are no different from an atheist. She said, "Sue, how can you say that? I have God in my life!"

I responded, "YOU have God in YOUR life. . . can you see how backwards that is?" God as an additive completely misses the point of why He made us, why He calls us to be reconciled to Himself. Not so we can "have us some God in our lives," as they say in the South, but so that we can join the love-fest of Father, Son and Spirit in an ongoing dance of friendship, fellowship and celebration.

Recently, I've been thinking a lot about the Trinity and how the Three-Personed God wants us to join in on Their party. It has impacted my prayer life: now, when I pray for someone, I envision her in the middle of a divine group hug, surrounded

by Father, Son and Spirit loving each other with the person caught up in the middle, getting “loved on” on all sides.

It’s so much bigger, so much better than the puny “Try Jesus.”

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/try_jesus
on Dec. 8, 2009.

“Christianity Teaches Four Gods, Right?”

The Bible clearly states that there is only one God. Deuteronomy 6:4 states, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” The Father is obviously called God as seen throughout the Bible. No one will argue that point. So there is one member of the Trinity, the Father.

Jesus the Son, is a separate person but He is also called God. John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The Holy Spirit is also a separate person, and He is also called God.

Let me see if I got this right. Please correct me if I’m wrong.

God is a trinity, composed of three divine persons, namely, the Father, Son, and holy spirit. God is also the Father, the first person of the first God who is a trinity. God is also the Son, the second person of the first God who is a trinity. God is also the holy spirit, the third person of the first God who is a trinity.

All of this means that there are four Gods. One three-person God and three single-person Gods. But to avoid the stigma of polytheism, all four Gods are really one God.

Did I get that right?

I don't know if you really wanted a response or not, since it seems like you may have just been trying to have some fun. But obviously no orthodox trinitarian Christian would subscribe to the doctrine as you have characterized it.

Actually, you basically got it right when you wrote: "God is a trinity, composed of three divine persons, namely, the Father, Son, and holy spirit." In other words, God just "is" the unity of the three divine persons. Traditionally, this has been expressed by saying that God is one in essence, three in subsistence. Trinitarian Christians do not propose the absurd (and logically contradictory) notion that there is only one God, and yet (somehow) there are three Gods. That would clearly be incoherent. Rather, we maintain that there is only one God (monotheism) who mysteriously subsists as three distinct persons (Trinitarianism).

Consider an analogy (which I take from the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig). Cerberus was a three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to Hades in Greek mythology. Cerberus, therefore, was one dog with three heads. Now we could imagine that each head constituted a distinct center of consciousness. We could even give them names, say, Spike, Bowser, and Rover. Spike would be conscious of being Spike, but also of being Cerberus. He would also be conscious of not being either Bowser or Rover. The same could be said, in an appropriate way, regarding the conscious experience of both Bowser and Rover. Now consider Cerberus as a spiritual, disembodied entity. You have one being, Cerberus, who has three distinct centers of consciousness (i.e. Spike, Bowser, and Rover). This is something akin, I think, to what the Trinitarian maintains about the nature of God, recognizing, of

course, that God is an infinitely higher being than any merely finite being. I could write more, but you get the idea. Hopefully this analogy will help you better understand what Christians maintain about the nature of God. Of course, it's only an analogy—and to ridicule it for that reason would really be rather petty. I offer it solely as a way of making this doctrine a bit more comprehensible, while nonetheless acknowledging that there is genuine mystery here as well.

Best wishes as you continue to explore and examine Christian doctrine!

Michael Gleghorn

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M.A. in bioethics from Trinity International University. She is married to David, another former Probe intern and teacher at Trinity Christian Academy. You can find Heather's updates on her web site: www.hz-probe.ministryhome.org.

PROBE PUBLICATIONS

Amniotic Stem Cells

Healthcare and the Common Good

Human Embryonic Stem Cells Go to Human Trials

A Meaningful World

Michael Moore's Sicko Healthcare Perspective

The Mitchell Report: Christian Response to Steroids in Sports

Personhood and Origins

The Spiritual Brain

The Texas State Board of Education and Public School Content
(David Zeiger as co-author)

PUBLICATIONS

"Amniotic Stem Cells." *The Conservative Voice* (www.theconservativevoice.com – now townhall.com), January 10, 2007

"Can ID Contribute to Our Understanding of Genetics?" by Raymond G. Bohlin and Heather Zeiger *Salvo*, Issue 4 Winter 2008.

Book Review: "A Meaningful World," *Areopagus Journal*, vol. 7, no. 6, November-December 2007.

LECTURES

A Christian View of the Mind and Brain

Evidence for the Existence of God

Genetic Engineering

Origins

Personhood

Stem Cells

Teaching Bioethics in the Church

The Texas State Board of Education and Public School Content

The Facts

The Texas State Board of Education is a group of fifteen individuals, representing various districts in Texas. One of their roles is to decide on standardized, statewide guidelines on public school contents for grades K-12. These guidelines are delineated in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), which dictate the content for every subject for every grade level that students must master in order to graduate from a Texas accredited public school. Importantly, these guidelines also dictate what textbooks are approved for classrooms and selection criteria for universities. While these guidelines are not enforceable in the private school setting, private schools that are college preparatory must consider these guidelines in determining student advancement and subsequent collegiate eligibility.

The old draft of the TEKS, which was approved in 1998, states that students are expected to “analyze, review, and critique scientific explanations, including hypotheses and theories, as to their strengths and weaknesses using scientific evidence and information.”[\[1\]](#)

The new draft of the TEKS, set for final approval in March

2009, states in the parallel section that students are expected to “analyze and evaluate scientific explanations using empirical evidence, logical reasoning, and experimental and observational testing.”^{2} This line is in the introduction to the Biology class content under “scientific processes.” The content portion of the biology class has various topics listed, and what students are required to master within each of these topics. Topics include *Cells and Cellular Processes*, *Molecular Genetics and Heredity*, *Evolution and Populations*, *Classification and Taxonomy*, *Biochemistry*, *Systems and Homeostasis*, *Ecosystems*, and *Plants*. Under each of these topics are specific items that students need to know.

The Contentious Issues

Those are the facts of the issue as best as we can describe them. However, these changes have created more than a little uproar from various groups that have a vested interest in how evolution is taught. The lines divided as such: advocates of the unquestioned teaching of evolution in public schools who were in favor of the new wording, and advocates of questioning certain aspects of evolutionary theory who were in favor of keeping the wording “strengths and weaknesses” within the TEKS. Many people that were for the new wording said that there were no weaknesses to evolutionary theory, or accused the other side of using this language of “weaknesses” to somehow smuggle creationism into the classroom. Many people who wanted to keep the strengths and weakness language intact accused the other side of censorship and subversively teaching an ideology and abridging academic freedom.

The Texas State Board of Education hosted a public hearing on Wednesday, January 21 (2009), where they welcomed testimony from individuals. The hearing would close at 12:40 p.m., no matter how many testifiers were left on the schedule. With a list of nearly a hundred, the Board only got through thirty testifiers. Some provision was made for trading up and testifying earlier, and the Board members invited select

individuals to testify at the public hearing. However the majority of people there to be heard, including me (spot thirty-nine), and my husband (a science teacher who has taught both in public high school and private middle school and was spot sixty-three) went unheard. While each testifier had a three-minute time limit, an obviously divided Board asked several questions, either for clarification or to be on public record for having asked.

Whatever one may read or hear in the media, most of the testimonies on both sides were articulate and intelligent, and the testifiers fielded their questions remarkably well. If you look at the audience, you might think it looked like a rally; the room was a bit of a zoo. But the testimonies were certainly at a higher level than some kind of emotionally-charged, rah-rah pep rally. Whether we agreed with them or not, we thought each testifier made good points.

Testimonies

While we do not necessarily agree with everything below, we have summarized the main points presented by each side.

For the Proposed Wording and Against "Strengths and Weaknesses" Wording

- The old wording does not provide guidance to teachers, especially new teachers.*
- Students are not necessarily capable of analyzing evolutionary theory, or are not necessarily capable of evaluating the current research.*
- Academic freedom refers to the university level, and students do not have the same freedoms of speech as adults.*
- The current draft has more specific wording.*
- There is a possibility of litigation as has happened in other states.*

- *Students could fall behind if they are taught supposed weaknesses in evolutionary biology.*
- *“Strengths and Weaknesses” wording would block the publication and adoption of good textbooks. In fact, it could result in the adoption of subversive Creationist books designed to exploit this flaw in educational guidelines.*
- *These weaknesses are pseudoscience, or these weaknesses are from sources that engage in pseudoscience (no satisfactory definition of pseudoscience was given).*
- *The word “weaknesses” has changed in meaning due to the use of it for P.R. by certain Creationist groups, and therefore should not be included in the TEKS.*
- *Warning that people may doubt the integrity of Texas education if strengths and weaknesses are allowed.*
- *“Strengths and weaknesses” is inaccurate because there are no weaknesses. These supposed weaknesses are false and misleading information. Teaching weaknesses is likened to teaching that Grant surrendered to Lee.*
- *It’s better to get your information from the National Academy of Sciences than from “creationist” sources [quotes are mine].*
- *The peer review literature does not argue whether evolution happened, it is just researching how it happened. Whether it happened is not in question.*

Against Proposed Wording and For “Strengths and Weaknesses” Wording:

- *Even within the “strengths and weaknesses” wording, there has been silencing of students, and some teachers are intimidated to even broach the subject. Examples were cited by two of the testifiers.*

- *Cases of scientific hoaxes were cited by several people, including Piltdown Man and Haeckel's Embryos. These are significant because many evolutionists will not admit these were hoaxes/errors. While they could be examples of how theories grow and change (something they agree is part of science and should apply to evolution), they instead go unaddressed and worry those who respect true scientific research and achievement.*
- *No one area of science has answers to everything, so there are always weaknesses in theories.*
- *There has been no litigation in the last twenty years with the wording "strengths and weaknesses" and to say that this encourages pseudoscience, brings up the question as to whether Texas has been engaging in pseudoscience for the last twenty years.*
- *Standards should promote academic diversity and critical thinking. Some of the great minds in science were non-conformists.*
- *Children begin thinking abstractly at young adolescence, and their abstract and cognitive abilities continue to develop through high school. This stresses the importance of including critical thinking skills in the TEKS. Teaching strengths and not weaknesses does not promote abstract thinking.*
- *Teaching strengths and weaknesses is more honest.*
- *Examples were cited of students who did learn strengths and weaknesses and it worked well.*
- *Real science deals with strengths and weaknesses of a theory; why should evolution be held to a different standard?*
- *We should not proclaim high school students too dumb to understand (my note: two of the testimonies were given by*

high school seniors).

- “Evolution” is a tricky term because when someone says “evolution” they may mean three different things, one of which is a fact and two of which are conjecture: 1) Microevolution (fact), 2) Common Descent (theory), 3) Natural Selection acting on mutations is how things evolve (theory). Student should distinguish this.

- Scientific consensus is only one part of science, the conclusion part. Students need to also know the scientific process.

- There is a difference between scientific law, theory and hypothesis.

- All theories are refined in the scientific process. Evolution does not have testable postulates. (This testimony was cut off due to time, but he was going to distinguish between origins and operations science).

Assessment

My husband David is a science teacher who has taught high school science in public school and now teaches middle school science in a private, college-preparatory school. I have two degrees in science and am a research associate at Probe Ministries. Here is our assessment of the TEKS:

The wording “strengths and weaknesses” seems very intentionally omitted from the proposed version, which is suspect, but neither one of us can say definitively that it was left out in order to promote a particular agenda of misleading students or indoctrinating them by evolutionist advocates. “Analyze and evaluate” does convey something different than “analyze, review, and critique” and it does seem to be a very subtle difference that allows for slightly less freedom of discussion within the classroom; however, with

this language, by itself, there may still be opportunity to have a rigorous discussion of weaknesses, especially if it falls under the category of “evaluating.” Its omission from the TEKS however, as one Board member pointed out, does communicate something as well, so we are skeptical of the perceived freedom with this language.

Another, and what I think is a blatant problem with the evolution curriculum, is in the specific wording within the evolution content section. Within the TEKS Biology section, there are several topics that the students must cover. Within each of those topics are specific things that they must master. In the TEKS proposed draft, the evolution section of high school biology requires students to:

A. Identify how evidence for common ancestry among groups is provided by the fossil record, biogeography, and homologies including anatomical, molecular, and developmental;

B. Recognize that natural selection produces change in populations, not individuals;

C. Describe the elements of natural selection including inherited variation, the potential of a population to produce more offspring that can survive, and a finite supply of environmental resources resulting in differential reproductive success;

D. Recognize the relationship of natural selection to adaptation, and to the development of diversity in and among species; and

E. Recognize the effects of other evolutionary mechanisms including genetic drift, gene flow, mutation, and recombination. {3}

The action verb at the beginning of each of these points is important because each verb is intentionally chosen, and from

an educator's perspective has a technical meaning. According to Bloom's taxonomy of educational activities, verbs such as "describe," "define," or "identify" represent a low level of cognizance, while words such as "explain," "recognize," "illustrate" and "predict" are mid-level, and words such as "compare" "analyze," "interpret" are higher level of cognizance. {4} In all of the other science concepts taught in biology, students are asked to "compare," "investigate," "predict," "analyze," and "interpret." However, evolution is kept at a purely definitional level, meaning that even though the proposed TEKS include "analyze and evaluate" within the general scientific process section, there is no opportunity to do this when the students get to the evolution section; they are only required to essentially memorize definitions or memorize what fossils lead to common descent. Many testifiers claimed that students were free and in fact encouraged to discuss evolutionary theory. They said the "strengths and weaknesses" language was being replaced by the better, more specific "analyze and evaluate." This is intentionally misleading. The general standards do read that way, but the evolution section itself is exempt from this rigid treatment in the new TEKS.

I was particularly unimpressed with Terrence Stutz's article from the *Dallas Morning News*, in which he labeled the board members who wanted to include "weaknesses" as being aligned with "social conservative groups that in past have worked to cast doubt on science-based theories on the origins of life," {5} when really, most of the testifiers and Board members that wanted "weaknesses" left in the TEKS, including my husband and myself, are arguing for academic freedom and free inquiry. The way evolution is handled in the proposal does nothing to promote even an analysis and evaluation, let alone an atmosphere of inquiry on a theory that is supposed to be the cornerstone of biology. {6}

The Vote and Results:

The Texas State Board of Education had a preliminary vote Thursday, and it was tied 7-7, which means that, so far, “strengths and weaknesses” language will not be in the next version of the TEKS (it requires a majority). However, the board has until March to make its final decision, and make a final vote.

While “strengths and weaknesses” is not in the current draft of the TEKS, the board did vote on some amendments that ask students to “analyze and evaluate” specific aspects of evolutionary theory, bringing the evolution science concepts up a notch (or two) on Bloom’s scale.

According to *Evolution News and Views*,[\[7\]](#) the wording change is as follows:

(7) Science concepts. The student knows evolutionary theory is a scientific explanation for the unity and diversity of life. The student is expected to:

(A) analyze and evaluate how evidence of common ancestry among groups is provided by the fossil record, biogeography, and homologies including anatomical, molecular, and developmental;

(B) analyze and evaluate how natural selection produces change in populations, not individuals;

(C) analyze and evaluate how the elements of natural selection including inherited variation, the potential of a population to produce more offspring than can survive, and a finite supply of environmental resources result in differential reproductive success;

(D) analyze and evaluate the relationship of natural selection to adaptation, and to the development of diversity in and among species; and

(E) analyze and evaluate the effects of other evolutionary

mechanisms including genetic drift, gene flow, mutation, and recombination.

Furthermore, the Board passed an amendment that asks students to “Analyze and evaluate the sufficiency or insufficiency of common ancestry to explain the sudden appearance, stasis, and sequential nature of groups in the fossil record.”[\[8\]](#) Unfortunately, media coverage on these particular amendments are scarce. We would consider these amendments a success, especially since they address the issue of low-level cognizance in the evolution requirements. Now they are at a level that seems much more appropriate for high school biology, and we feel will promote good critical thinking and intellectual inquiry. We also believe that these amendments will better serve to prepare our students for the intellectual rigor and higher level thinking skills that they will need at the collegiate level.

Texas State Board of Education
Public Testimony
Heather Zeiger, M.S.
Research Associate, Probe Ministries

I went to Texas public schools for junior high and high school. I knew then that I was going to pursue a career in science, and ended up choosing chemistry my senior year. I graduated in 1999, and at the time, I had received some education in evolutionary biology. That education mostly consisted of memorizing facts and definitions, but gave no indication that there was anything more to be discussed. By way of example, one of the things we learned in biology was the Miller Urey experiment. We learned that this was the prevailing theory on how life began, and this is how it worked. There was no further discussion on chemical origins, and as far as I knew from what I was taught in the public high

school, scientists agreed that this was how it happened. Except . . . it turns out that there were and still are many questions about chemical origins. In fact, as I later learned, there is an entire field of study in which chemists deal with the very fundamental questions of how life began. There is more than a little contention among those who believe that life came from an RNA-based world and others who believe that it was originally metabolic. There are still others who think that life beginning from purely chemical processes may not even be possible under our current theories.

What was presented as a boring little tidbit in our biology books, actually is an entire field of inquiry. Chemical origins is just one area of evolutionary theory; and as we all know there are evolutionary biologists still researching these issues, which means that there are still challenges or unexplained parts of the theory to be investigated. The students that go into science, the ones I've worked with, are fascinated by the unexplained parts of a theory, by the mysteries. I think it is a disservice to our children and to the scientific community to gloss over the places where a theory needs more work. We should encourage students to go on and become the next scientist to answer these questions in evolutionary theory. While the proposed draft does discuss strengths and limitations, in science, in general, it does not leave the evolution section open to this, but keeps it at a definitional level. I therefore contend that the Biology TEKS, science concept seven (evolution) should be phrased in such a way that would go beyond the less interesting part of science, identification and description of terms. And hopefully, this will open classroom instruction to analysis and discussion of current strengths and weakness within this important theory.

Texas State Board of Education

Public Testimony

David Zeiger

Texas SBEC Certified Science Composite Teacher for Grade 9-12

My name is David Zeiger and I am a certified composite science teacher for grades nine through twelve. I taught Chemistry and Physics for two years in Garland ISD, and now I teach seventh grade Life Science at Trinity Christian Academy, a private college preparatory school in Addison. In my relatively brief tenure as a science teacher, I have had to come to terms with a simple discouraging fact: most of my students will not love science as much as I do, let alone become researchers, engineers, doctors, nurses, or even science teachers. In fact the National Science Foundation found that in 2000 only one third of college students earn bachelor degrees in science and engineering.[\[9\]](#)

Therefore, when I read the TEKS as the guiding structure for my curriculum, I have to ask what my job as a science teacher truly is. Am I wasting my time with two-thirds of my students? Memorizing the parts of a plant, reeling off the periodic table, or calculating using laws of motion; are these things that students are going to use again? Do I even want them to memorize a chart with the strengths and weaknesses of evolutionary theory? No. The things that every student can take with them are how to gain information from their environment, whether that environment is a job training manual, a relationship with their spouse, or a new technique for hammering a nail; how to test that new information against their previous experience and training; and most importantly, how to be flexible enough to change their ideas when it turns out they were wrong.

Those important methods of learning are included in the TEKS for non-biology science classes and in the non-evolution biology standards. When teaching science other than the evolutionary theory, students are asked to “compare,” “predict,” “investigate,” “explore,” “explain,” “analyze,” “interpret,” and “model,” activities from the whole range of cognizance. But, the proposed recommendations on evolution use language that refer to and limit the students to the simplest

level of cognitive learning: memorization.

If we don't teach the simple fact that every theory has weaknesses, we don't teach young people true science. If we don't teach them to find and evaluate those weaknesses, we don't teach them to be humble in their search for truth. And if we don't teach them how to keep or reject those theories, we leave them as prey to whoever has a stronger opinion than they do.

Please keep teaching students to analyze and evaluate scientific theories. Critical reasoning is one of the few things I know all my students will need and use every day of their lives.

Notes

1. 1998 TEKS, Section 112.43, (c), (3), (A).
 2. Section 112.43 (c), (3), (A) of proposed TEKS
 3. Proposed 2009 TEKS Section 112.43, (7)
 4. www.teachervision.com
 5. Terence Stutz, "Texas Board of Education votes against teaching evolution weaknesses," *Dallas Morning News*, January 24, 2009. tinyurl.com/bncw55
 6. Theodosius Dobzhansky, "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution," *American Biology Teacher* 1973, volume 35, pp. 125-129.
 7. www.evolutionnews.org/2009/01/recap_texas_board_of_education.html
 8. Ibid.
 9. www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind04/c2/c2s3.htm
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Critique of “The Shack” – A Christian Theologian’s Perspective

Dr. Zukeran commends the author on attempting to make the gospel accessible. However, from a Christian theologian’s perspective, he also warns us that the book presents confused pictures of the nature of God, the Son, and the way to salvation. The book can act as a great starting point for discussion, but do not rest your theology upon the pages of this fictional book.

The Shack by William Young has become a *New York Times* bestseller. Eugene Peterson, Professor Emeritus of Spiritual Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C. writes, “The book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for his. It’s that good.” Many Christians say that the book has blessed them. However, others have said that this book presents false doctrines that are heretical and dangerous. The diversity of comments and questions about the book created a need to research and present a Biblical critique of this work.

William Young creatively writes a fiction story that seeks to answer the difficult question of why God allows evil. In this story the main character, Mackenzie Allen Philips, a father of five children, experiences the unthinkably painful tragedy of losing his youngest daughter to a violent murder at the hands of a serial killer. Through his painful ordeal he asks the questions, “How could God allow something like this to happen?” and “Where was God in all this?”

One day he receives an invitation to meet God at the shack where his daughter was molested and killed. There he meets God the Father who appears as a large African-American woman named

Papa, God the Son who appears as a Middle Eastern Man in a leather tool belt, and God the Holy Spirit who appears as an Asian woman named Sarayu. In this place over the course of a few days Mack asks each member of the triune God difficult questions about life, eternity, the nature of God, evil, and other significant issues with which every person struggles in their lifetime. Through several dialogues with each member of this "Trinity," Mack receives answers, and through these answers we learn about the nature of God and the problem of suffering and evil.

COMMENDABLE FEATURES

The Shack creatively addresses a relevant and difficult issue of God and the problem of evil. Young answers the problem of God and evil with the free will argument, which states that God created people with the free will to commit evil. Young also emphasizes that God has an ultimate plan for our lives which cannot be overcome, even by acts of evil. As humans, we are limited finite creatures who cannot see how all things can fit together or how even evil events might somehow fulfill God's ultimate plan. God is good, and God is love. Therefore, what He allows is filtered through His love and infinite wisdom. God permits individuals to exercise their free will even if they choose to go against His commands. In His love, He does not impose His will on us. When we choose to do evil, these actions hurt Him deeply. Often we cannot understand events that happen in our lives; however, we are asked to trust God even when we cannot see or comprehend why He allows things to happen. In fact Young points out that taking away our freedom would not be the best thing for God to do. I believe Young does a decent job of tackling the difficult issue of evil. He does attempt to answer a very difficult question in a creative way that many will find engaging.

Young also emphasizes the intimate relationship we are to have with God. There is a danger that a believer's faith can become cerebral and neglect the emotional, heart aspect of one's walk

with God. A faith that is only centered on knowing doctrine only can be a cold kind of faith (Rev. 2:4-5).

CRITICISMS OF *THE SHACK*

I commend Young for attempting to wrestle with a difficult issue in a creative manner. Young is not a trained theologian or Bible scholar. He wrote this book for the purpose of sharing his experience and insight as he worked through personal tragedy in his life. He does attempt to be orthodox in his theology but there are some apparent errors. I do not doubt his sincerity or his relationship with God. He is a brother in Christ and it is my goal to present an accurate critique of his work.

In seeking to address the issue of God and the problem of evil, the author presents flawed theological views that confuse the nature of God. One of my concerns is the emphasis on experience and how it is given emphasis equal to or stronger than the Bible. Young refers to the Bible superficially; however, his primary focus in this work is on experience. In fact, he unfortunately makes some critical remarks regarding the sole authority of the Word and the training needed to interpret it properly:

In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen and follow sacred scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God's voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book.
(p. 65)

Throughout the book, he criticizes Biblical teachings as “religious conditioning” or “seminary teaching” (p. 93). Young’s intention may be to encourage the audience to break stereotypes in their thinking about God. This is commendable, for we must constantly examine our theology of God and evaluate whether we have adopted false stereotypes in our understanding of God. It may not have been the author’s intent to devalue the word of God or theological training. However, comments like these give that impression.

Our theology must be consistent with God’s Word. God will not reveal Himself or communicate in ways that are contrary to His Word. God is not limited to words on a page; He also communicates through His creation or general revelation (Rom. 1). However, God has given us special revelation and communicated specific truths about His character in His Word. If God reveals and communicates information that is contrary to His Word, then He could not be a God of truth. There are truths that are not mentioned in the Bible, but those facts should be consistent and not contrary to the Word of God. It was unfortunate that there were more critical remarks made on biblical training and not a stronger emphasis to study and exhort believers to be diligent students of the word (2 Tim. 2:15).

Confusion Regarding the Nature of God

Young presents several incorrect and confusing teachings regarding the nature of God and salvation. In this story, God the Father appears as a large African-American woman. In contrast, the Bible teaches that the Father never takes on physical form. John 4:24 teaches that God is spirit. 1 Timothy 4:16 states, “God, the blessed and only ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light whom no one has seen or can see.” To add to this, God appears as a woman named “Papa.” It is true that God is neither male nor female as humans are, and both feminine and masculine attributes are found in God. However,

in the Bible God has chosen to reveal Himself as Father and never in the feminine gender. This gender distortion confuses the nature of God.

In the story, God the Father has scars on His wrists (p. 95). This is contrary to Biblical teaching in which only Jesus became human and only Jesus died on the cross. It is true the Father shared in the pain of Christ's suffering, but God stood as the judge of sin, not the one who suffered on the cross. Christ bore the burden of our sins; God the Father was the judge who had to render His judgment on His Son.

God the Father says "When we three spoke ourselves into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human" (p. 99). Young teaches that all three members of the Trinity became human. However, scripture teaches that only the Son, not all members of the Trinity, became human. This distorts the uniqueness and teaching of the incarnation.

Confusion Regarding the Son

In this story, Jesus appears as a Middle Eastern man with a plaid shirt, jeans, and a tool belt. In the Bible, Jesus appears as a humble servant veiling His glory (Phil. 2). After the resurrection, Jesus retains His human nature and body but is revealed in a glorified state. He appears in his glorified and resurrected body and His glory is unveiled (Revelation 1).

As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus retained His divine nature and attributes. His incarnation involved the addition of humanity, but not by subtracting His deity. During His incarnation He chose to restrict His use of His divine attributes, but there were occasions in which He exercised His divine attributes to demonstrate His authority over creation. However, in *The Shack* God says:

Although he is also fully God, he has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything. He has only lived out of his relationship with me, living in the very same manner that I

desire to be in relationship with every human being. He is just the first to do it to the uttermost – the first to absolutely trust my life within him, the first to believe in my love and my goodness without regard for appearance or consequence. . . . So when He healed the blind? He did so as a dependent, limited human being trusting in my life and power to be at work within him and through him. Jesus as a human being had no power within himself to heal anyone (p. 99-100).

First, it is not true that Jesus “had no power within himself to heal anyone.” Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God, never ceased being God. He continued to possess full and complete deity before, during, and after the incarnation (Colossians 2:9). He did do miracles in the power of the Spirit, but He also exercised His own power (Lk. 22:51; Jn. 18:6). Young appears to be teaching the incorrect view of the incarnation that Christ gave up His deity, or aspects of it, when He became human.

Confusion Regarding the Holy Spirit

In this story, the Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman named Sarayu. In contrast, the Holy Spirit never appears as a person in the Bible. There is one time when the Holy Spirit appears in physical form as a dove at the baptism of Jesus. Moreover, the Spirit is never addressed in the feminine but is always addressed with the masculine pronoun.

Confusion Regarding the Trinity

The first inaccuracy regarding the Trinity is that in this story, all three members of the Trinity take on human form. This confuses the doctrine of the incarnation, for Scripture teaches that only Jesus takes on human form.

The second inaccuracy presented in *The Shack* is the idea that the relationship taught between the members of the Trinity is

incorrect. In the book, "God" says, "So you think that God must relate inside a hierarchy like you do. But we do not" (p. 124). Young teaches that all three members of the Trinity do not relate in a hierarchical manner (p. 122-124).

In contrast, the Bible teaches that all three members of the Trinity are equal in nature while there also exists an economy, or hierarchy, in the Trinity. It describes the relationship of the members of the Godhead with each other, and this relationship serves as a model for us. The Father is the head. This is demonstrated in that the Father sent the Son. The Son did not send the Father, (Jn. 6:44, 8:18, 10:36). The Son also is the one who sends the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:7). Jesus came down from heaven, not to do his own will, but the will of the Father (John 6:38). The Father is the head of Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). 1 Cor. 15:27-28 speaks of creation being in subjection to Jesus, and then in verse 28, Jesus will be subjected to the Father. The Greek word for "will be subjected" is *hupotagasetai* which is the future passive indicative. This means that it is a future event where Jesus will forever be subjected to the Father. These passages teach that there is indeed a hierarchy within the Trinity in which all three members are equal in nature, yet the principle of headship and submission is perfectly displayed in the Trinity. This critical theological principle is incorrectly taught in *The Shack*.

Confusion Regarding Salvation

In this story, Young appears to be teaching pluralism, which is the belief that there are other ways to salvation beside faith in Jesus Christ. In this story Papa states:

Those who love me come from every system that exists. They are Buddhists or Mormons, Baptists or Muslims, Democrats, Republicans and many who don't vote or are not part of any Sunday morning or religious institutions. I have followers who were murderers and many who were self-righteous. Some are

bankers and bookies, Americans and Iraqis, Jews and Palestinians. I have no desire to make them Christian, but I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved. (p. 182)

Young states that Jesus has no desire to make people of other faiths Christians, or disciples of Christ. One then wonders what this "transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa" entails. What does it mean to be a son or daughter of Papa?

Jesus commanded us in the Great Commission to "Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you." Being a disciple of Christ requires us to know and obey the teachings that God has revealed in His Word.

Mack asks Jesus, "Does that mean all roads will lead to you?" To this question, Jesus replies, "Not at all. . . . Most roads don't lead anywhere. What it does mean is that I will travel any road to find you" (p. 182). Although pluralism is denied here, there is confusion regarding salvation. It is a strange statement by Jesus to say, "Most roads don't lead anywhere." In actuality Jesus stated in the Gospels that most roads lead to destruction when in Mt. 7:13-14 He says, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Young fails to mention eternal judgment for those who do not receive Jesus whereas Jesus makes it clear in John 14:6 that He is the only way to life; all other roads lead to destruction.

Things are further confused when the Jesus of *The Shack* states, "I will travel any road to find you." The message appears to teach that Jesus will reveal Himself to people no matter their road or religion. Jesus does not ask them to

leave that road and follow the narrow path of salvation.

Moreover, in a later conversation on the atoning work of Christ on the cross, Mack asks, "What exactly did Jesus accomplish by dying?" Papa answers, "Through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world" (p. 191-2). Mack is confused and asks if the whole world has been reconciled or only those who believe. Papa responds by saying reconciliation is not dependent upon faith in Christ:

The whole world, Mack. All I am telling you is that reconciliation is a two-way street, and I have done my part, totally, completely, finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open the way" (p. 192).

Young appears to be saying all people are already reconciled to God. God is waiting on them to recognize it and enter into a relationship with Him. These dialogues appear to teach pluralism. Although it is denied on page 182, the ideas presented by Young that Jesus is not interested in people becoming Christians, that Jesus will find people on the many roads, and that the whole world is already reconciled to God presents the tone of a pluralistic message of salvation. Thus, the book presents a confusing message of salvation.

Emphasis on Relationship

Throughout the book, Young places an emphasis on relationships. He downplays theological doctrines and Biblical teaching and emphasizes that a relationship with God is what is most important. However, Jesus stated, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:23-24).

It is not possible to have a relationship with God that is not

based in truth. In order to have a meaningful relationship with God, one must understand the nature and character of God. Truth is rooted in the very nature of God (John 14:6). A relationship with God comes through responding to the truths revealed in His Word. Thus, a believer must grow in his relationship with God through seeking emotional intimacy as well as growing in our understanding of the Word of God.

Throughout his book Young emphasizes the relational aspect of our walk with God and downplays the need for proper doctrinal beliefs about God. It is true that Christians are to have a vibrant relationship with God, but this relationship must be built on truth as God has revealed in His Word. Seeking a relationship and worship of God built on false ideas of God could lead one to discouragement and even false hope. As one grows in Christ, one's understanding of God should move toward a more accurate understanding of God's character that is revealed in His word.

An essential part of growing a deep intimate relationship with God involves the learning of Biblical and doctrinal truths about God. The Apostle Paul refers to this in Ephesians 4:13 when he says, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Simply knowing doctrine without the involvement of the heart leads to a cold faith. I believe Young was trying to emphasize this point. However, a heart religion without truth as its guide is only an emotional faith. We must have both heart and mind. In fact, Jesus commanded Christians in Matthew 22:37 to "Love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."

Conclusion

The Shack attempts to address one of life's toughest issues: the problem of God and evil. Although this is a work of

fiction, it addresses significant theological issues. However, in addressing the problem of evil, Young teaches key theological errors. This can lead the average reader into confusion regarding the nature of God and salvation. I found this to be an interesting story but I was disturbed by the theological errors. Readers who have not developed the skills to discern truth from error can be confused in the end. So although the novel tries to address a relevant question, it teaches theological errors in the process. One cannot take lightly erroneous teachings on the nature of God and salvation.

I believe this book would make a great subject for discussion groups. The topics presented in the book such as the problem of evil, the nature of God, and salvation are worthwhile topics for all believers to discuss. We can often learn and become more accurate in our beliefs when we analyze error, compare it with scripture, and articulate our position in light of the Bible. I do not believe Christians need to run from error as long as they read and study with discernment.

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Healthcare and the Common Good

One of the hot topics in the presidential election campaign is healthcare and healthcare reform, but is there a Christian perspective on healthcare? If so, what is it? I had the privilege of attending the annual bioethics conference hosted by the [Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity](#) and Trinity International University this past July. Guided by this year's theme, "Healthcare and the Common Good," some of the health

profession's leading practitioners discussed issues of healthcare and the health profession from a Christian perspective.

What Is "The Common Good"?

Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, began the conference by distinguishing between first-order healthcare questions and second-order healthcare questions. First-order questions in this case involve the moral or ethical implications of healthcare. These questions include: What do we do with the poor and ill? What are our moral obligations to them? By what criteria do we judge healthcare programs? And, is the healthcare system providing for basic human needs? Second-order questions, often covered by the media, include economic issues, systems, and politics. Usually, this level of inquiry seeks to answer questions like "How is healthcare to be structured?"

Dr. Pellegrino used Aristotelian philosophy to discuss the idea of common good. He describes common good as everyone being enabled to fully achieve their own perfection as men. Essentially, everyone is valuable because he is a human being, and part of giving them value is to provide for them relief from suffering and the opportunity to flourish, whether they merit it or not. Dr. Pellegrino asserts that this is similar to the biblical idea of being not only your brother's keeper, and your enemy's keeper, but also ministering physically to those who are irresponsible. As Christians we have an obligation to care for the weak and the infirmed, and we, furthermore, cannot make value judgments on the worth of someone's life because of their personal behavior.

Human Dignity

Underlying any area of bioethics based on a Christian worldview is the concept of man as a special part of creation made in God's image.[\[1\]](#) This means that our views on

healthcare should reflect the inherent dignity of the individual. Dr. Pellegrino discussed this essential element that part of common good is valuing man because he is man, and I would add that it is expressly because he is made in the image of God.

Many of the sessions at the conference, whether they were on doctor/patient relationships or public policy, centered on this point that man is made in the image of God and that individuals should be valued as unique and important. This presupposes a theistic worldview.

During my paper session at this conference, I emphasized the importance of a worldview approach for laying the foundation of how to evaluate specific bioethical issues. This is also essential in evaluating healthcare policies and our moral obligation to the weak and infirmed. How does one's worldview affect their various views on healthcare?

As Nancy Pearcey points out in *Total Truth*,^{2} every worldview answers three basic questions: Where did we come from? What happened to us (why is there evil)? And, how can things be made right? As Christian theists we would answer these questions with "Creation-Fall-Redemption." Naturalists, on the other hand, would answer with the triad "Darwinism—Evil is an illusion—Survival of the fittest." A naturalist's creation story is that of Darwinism.^{3} Therefore, man is nothing more than a product of natural selection. He does not hold a unique position above other animals, and he was not specifically created with a purpose.

One's view on origins is fundamental to how man is regarded, and it determines which ethical system is used to determine right and wrong views on healthcare. The tension is between the theistic view that man has inherent dignity and worth, despite his capabilities or lack thereof, and the naturalistic view that man's worth is based on whether or not he is a burden on society as a whole.

One view places an absolute value on a person while the other places a relative value. This, in turn, determines whether or not we share a moral obligation to help the weak and infirmed.

But We Vote on Second-order Questions!

While the ethical implications on healthcare are of primary importance, usually we are asked to evaluate healthcare based on second-order questions: How much does healthcare cost? Who should get subsidized? How are they subsidized? Should healthcare and health insurance be privatized? Which candidate's plan do I agree with?

Several of the speakers at this bioethics conference addressed specific plans by candidates and their opinions about them (For more information on second-order analyses, see the [Women of Faith Blog post](#) which summarizes Dean Clancy's discussion on McCain/Obama Healthcare plans. See also James Capretta's [discussion on policy analysis](#), PowerPoint® [presentation](#) from the conference and a related [article](#).) But the emphasis at the conference was not in endorsing one candidate over another as much as evaluating healthcare from the perspective of a Christian worldview. In other words, we first must answer the primary questions and then use that analysis to guide our views on the secondary questions in healthcare.

I came away from the conference with an understanding that there are several problems with the current healthcare system, from overuse of technology to doctor/patient relationships to how the government subsidy system works. However, these problems are really the fruits of a deeper problem having to do the worldview approach that medical health professionals, politicians, and we, as a culture, take on the issue of health and healthcare. Healthcare is becoming more and more a consumer business or a commodity, and less and less a moral obligation to help those that are weak and infirmed (or a moral obligation to help prevent people from becoming weak and infirmed).

There is no one solution; thus, no one candidate has *the* solution to all of our healthcare problems. And deciding between expanding government subsidies and privatization is not the root of the problem, so it is not the ultimate solution. As Dean Clancy, former member of the President's Council on Bioethics, pointed out in his session on "Solutions," society can achieve four levels of "happiness": 1) the ultimate good, 2) good beyond oneself, 3) personal achievement, and 4) immediate gratification.

As a culture we are stuck at levels 3 and 4 (personal achievement and gratification), and this means our priorities and decisions are stuck there. This is directly tied to our worldview. From a naturalistic vantage point, it would be logically inconsistent to move beyond levels 3 and 4. However, on a theistic worldview, 1 and 2 follow from the biblical perspective on priorities such as, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...You shall love your neighbor as yourself."[\[4\]](#) God is the ultimate good, and then we are to love others by doing good beyond what benefits ourselves.

What Can I Do?

We can serve a witness to our culture by modeling the biblical perspective on healthcare and human dignity. Maybe not necessarily on the voting ballot, but oftentimes this mindset is modeled on a very personal level by providing for the weak and infirmed in our churches and communities. Or by treating individuals with value, even if they are irresponsible with their health. Or through the way doctors and nurses treat their patients. These are all very tangible ways that people can see the love of Christ and may very well be one way to change some of the problems in our healthcare system from the grassroots level.

Notes

1. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" Genesis 1:27 (ESV).
2. Pearcey, Nancy, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, Crossway Books, 2004, pgs. 45-46.
3. This is referring to Darwinism as a philosophy: The presupposition that there is no God, only nature.
4. Matt 22:37, 39 (ESV).

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"My JW Friend Needs a Blood Transfusion and Won't Allow It!"

I have a friend who broke his back riding a motorcycle last week. He needs a blood transfusion so he can have an operation to get the feeling back in his legs. He won't let them give him blood. How can I show him he's wrong in a loving manner? I did copy Patrick Zukeran's article on [Jehovah's Witnesses and the Trinity](#) to share with his wife who isn't a Christian. I think she can get the gist of it.

Dear _____,

We at Probe will be praying for your situation. It is all too common among Jehovah's Witnesses. First of all, I believe there is a law for doctors that if a JW needs blood, they have the right to overrule the wishes of the JW church and family members and give blood. Make sure your doctors are aware of this law. It applies in the U.S.; I don't know about other countries.

Second, the Bible in the Old Testament law, Leviticus 3:17 and other passages, forbid the eating of blood. Also in Acts 15:20, the apostles wrestled with the whole issue of eating meat with blood. One thing to understand here and make this very clear, eating blood and receiving a blood transfusion are two different things. When you eat blood it goes down the digestive tract into the stomach. When we receive a blood transfusion, it goes into an entirely different system, the cardiovascular system, the blood veins to the heart. We are talking about two different system, one the digestive system and the other the cardiovascular system. The Old Testament law forbids the eating of blood (the digestive tract), but it does not forbid blood transfusion (the cardiovascular tract), to save a life.

False interpretation of the Watchtower does have its consequences.

“Lord, may you equip _____ to defend your word of truth and give her words of wisdom to share with her JW friends that the life of this man may be saved. Empower _____ to share your truth with love and power. In Jesus’ mighty name. Amen.”

God Bless you _____.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

“Is the United Pentecostal Church a Cult?”

Is the United Pentacostal Church a cult, theologically speaking? And if so, why? What do they believe?

The doctrine of the UPC is definitely heretical; they deny the Trinity in favor of what is called the “oneness” doctrine. Heresy makes groups a cult. Here’s a good article on that from Watchman Fellowship: www.watchman.org/cults/upc.htm

Happy reading!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

Jesus in the Qur’an – Muslims Receive a False View

Dr. Zukeran clearly lays out the differences between a biblical view of Jesus and the view brought forth in the Qura’n. He makes a strong case that the biblical reports are supported by historical fact while the Muslim writings were created to strengthen their case. Looking at the birth, the life and the death of Christ he highlights the distinct differences and the case for a Christian view over an Islamic view.

The Debate

Islam and Christianity both recognize Jesus as a significant historical figure. However, they teach contrary doctrines regarding the nature and person of Jesus Christ. Christians have taught from the beginning that Jesus is the divine Son of God. This was not a doctrine invented centuries after the life of Christ as some allege, but was taught from the beginning by Christ Himself and the church. There is strong evidence that the New Testament was written in the first century, and there are numerous verses proclaiming the deity of Christ (Matt.

1:23; Mark 2:1-12; John 1:1). Old Testament prophecies regarding the nature of the Messiah proclaimed that He would be human as well as divine (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6). Even non-Christian Roman historical works, such as the writings of Pliny the Younger (AD 112) and Celsus (AD 177), acknowledge that the Christians worshipped Christ as God.

✘ Muslims reject the biblical teaching that Christ is the divine Son of God. Islam builds upon the teachings of the Qur'an, which is considered perfect and without error. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus was a significant prophet but not the divine Son of God. Muslims reject the doctrine of the Trinity, and, therefore, worshipping Jesus as God is considered *shirk*, or blasphemy (Sura 5:72).

Islam teaches that Jesus Himself never claimed to be the Son of God. Sura 9:30 states, "The Jews call Ezra a son of God, and the Christians call Christ the son of God. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. God's curse be upon them: how they are deluded away from the truth!" The assertion that God stands against those who believe in the deity of Christ is in contradiction with the Bible. Sura 5:116-117 states:

And behold! God will say [i.e. on the Day of Judgment]: "Oh Jesus, the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of God?" He will say: "Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, You would indeed have known it. You know what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Yours. For You know in full all that is hidden. Never did I say to them anything except what You commanded me to say: 'Worship God, my Lord and your Lord.' And I was a witness over them while I lived among them. When You took me up, You were the Watcher over them, and You are a witness to all things."

Chapter five of the Qur'an asserts that Christianity taught the worship of Mary as a god. From this passage and others, many Muslims have incorrectly concluded that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the Father, the Son, and Mary. In fact, the New Testament never taught the worship of Mary. Instead it clearly taught that one must worship the Lord God alone (Matt. 4:10). The biblical doctrine of the Trinity never included Mary. The chapter further states that Jesus Himself clearly denied claiming to be the Son of God and would not accept the worship of others. In contrast, the Bible teaches that Jesus claimed to be the divine Son of God and received worship (Jn. 8; Matt. 14:33; 28:17). Sura 5:75 states:

Christ, the son of Mary, was no more than a messenger; many were the messengers that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth. They had both to eat their (daily) food. See how God makes His signs clear to them; yet see in what ways they are deluded away from the truth!

The Qur'an emphatically teaches that Jesus was a prophet and not the divine Son of God. Those who believe Jesus is divine are "deluded."

The Apostle John, writing in AD 90, states in chapter one of his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Apostle Paul, writing his letter to the Colossians in AD 60, states in chapter 2:9, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form."

It is apparent that Christianity and Islam teach contrary views of Christ and, therefore, cannot both be true at the same time. In this article I will investigate what the Qur'an teaches regarding the life of Christ and compare it with the Gospels. Since they teach contrary views, I will examine to see whether the Bible or the Qur'an has the greater weight of evidence to support its teachings on the nature of Christ.

Infancy Narratives of Christ in the Qur'an

What does the Qur'an teach regarding the childhood years of Christ? Not only do the Bible and the Qur'an teach contrary views regarding the nature of Christ, they also record contrary accounts of His early life. The Bible teaches that Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the time of Caesar Augustus and the reign of King Herod over Bethlehem. Jesus was born in a stable because there were no rooms available for Mary and Joseph. On the eve of His birth, shepherds, who were told of his birth by angels, visited him. Later, wise men from the East came and worshipped the child. Herod, threatened by the announcement of a newborn king, sought to kill the child. Joseph fled from Herod, traveled to Egypt, and, after Herod's death, returned to Nazareth where Jesus grew up. The Gospels rely on eyewitness accounts for their source of information.

The Qur'an includes stories regarding the birth and childhood of Christ, but it relies on very questionable sources that are not eyewitness accounts. First, the Qur'an teaches that Jesus was born in the desert under a palm tree. Sura 19 teaches that Mary, feeling the pangs of childbirth, seized the trunk of a palm tree and desired at that moment to die. However, the baby Jesus speaks to her from beneath saying, "Grieve not; for your Lord has provided a rivulet beneath you. And shake towards yourself the trunk of the palm tree: it will let fall fresh ripe dates upon you. So eat drink and cool [your] eye" (Sura 19: 24-25).

This story parallels an account from the apocryphal *Gospel of Pseudo Matthew*, which is dated to the early seventh century AD (between AD 600 and 625).^{1} New Testament scholar Dan Wallace dates this Gospel even later to the eighth to ninth century AD.^{2} Wallace's date would push back the date of the Qur'an to several generations after Muhammad. In chapter 20 of this apocryphal work, Joseph and Mary are fleeing to Egypt and come

to rest under a tall palm tree. Mary longs to eat the fruit of a palm tree and Joseph states their need for water. It is then the infant Jesus speaks to the palm tree:

Then the child Jesus, with a joyful countenance, reposing in the bosom of His mother, said to the palm: "O tree, bend thy branches, and refresh my mother with thy fruit." And immediately at these words the palm bent its top down to the very feet of the blessed Mary; and they gathered from it fruit, with which they were all refreshed. And after they had gathered all its fruit, it remained bent down, waiting the order to rise from Him who had commanded it to stoop. Then Jesus said to it: "Raise thyself, O palm tree, and be strong, and be the companion of my trees, which are in the paradise of my Father; and open from thy roots a vein of water which has been hid in the earth, and let the waters flow, so that we may be satisfied from thee." And it rose up immediately, and at its root there began to come forth a spring of water exceedingly clear and cool and sparkling. And when they saw the spring of water, they rejoiced with great joy, and were satisfied, themselves and all their cattle and their beasts. Wherefore they gave thanks to God.

Historians and textual scholars such as F. F. Bruce have concluded that Muhammad incorporated this story from the apocryphal *Gospel of Pseudo Matthew*.[\[3\]](#)

Another infant narrative from the Qur'an teaches that not long after Jesus' birth, Mary presents the infant to her people, several of whom question her regarding the baby. In her defense she points to the infant, which confuses the people since the child is only an infant. Then to everyone's surprise, the newborn Jesus speaks saying:

I am indeed a servant of Allah, He has given me revelation and made me a Prophet; And He has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and He has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as

I live. [He] has made me kind to my mother, and not overbearing or miserable; So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life [again]. Such was (Prophet) Jesus, the son of Mary. A saying of truth, concerning what they doubt (Sura 19:30-33).

This account teaches that shortly after his birth, Jesus spoke, proclaiming His calling as the prophet of Allah, and defending the innocence of His mother Mary. The source of this story is another pseudo-gospel, the *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior*.^{4} According to Wallace, this apocryphal work was written in the fifth or sixth century AD.^{5} This work states:

We have found it recorded in the book of Josephus the Chief Priest, who was in the time of Christ (and men say that he was Caiaphas), that this man said that Jesus spake when He was in the cradle, and said to Mary His Mother, "Verily I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Word which thou hast borne, according as the angel Gabriel gave thee the good news; and My Father hath sent Me for the salvation of the world."

Here we see the parallels between the Qur'an and this apocryphal work. This work specifically mentions the infant Jesus speaking from his cradle, declaring His calling from God.

A third account in the Qur'an records Jesus making birds out of clay and then bringing them to life. Sura 3:49 states:

I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it and it becomes a bird by Allah's leave: And I heal those born blind, and the lepers, and I quicken the dead by Allah's leave; and I declare to you what you eat and what you store in your houses. Surely therein is a Sign for you, if you did

believe.

This story of Christ breathing life into clay birds has no parallel in the Gospels. Instead, this story comes from another apocryphal work, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Historical evidence indicates this Gospel was not written by Thomas; moreover, it was not even written in the lifetime of the apostles. The earliest manuscript of this Gospel dates from the sixth century AD., but most scholars date this work in the late second century.^{6} New Testament scholar Wilhelm Schneemelcher writes that the author was most likely not Jewish but a Gentile Christian. He asserts the fact that “the author was of gentile Christian origin may be assumed with certainty, since his work betrays no knowledge of things Jewish.”^{7}

Another account of Jesus in this *Infancy Gospel* reveals a capricious child who inflicts painful revenge several times on those who cross him in a manner he does not like. Fred Lapham states, “[M]any of the stories in the earlier part of the work are morally offensive and indefensible, showing the growing Jesus to be cruel, callous, and vindictive, and exercising power without regard for the consequences.”^{8} This account portrays a young Jesus contrary to that in the Gospels. A vengeful and bad-tempered Jesus would be contrary to the description given in Luke which states that he was “filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon Him” (Lk. 2:40). Also, a child of the character portrayed in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* would not likely be described as growing in “wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Lk. 2:52).

There are several concerns regarding the accounts of Christ in the Qur’an. First, the infancy accounts of Christ contradict the Gospels. The Qur’an teaches that Jesus was born in the desert under a palm tree while the New Testament Gospels teach that Jesus was born in the city of Bethlehem in a stable (Lk. 2:7). The infancy narratives in the Qur’an teach that Jesus

performed miracles in his infancy and childhood. However, John 2:11 states that Jesus' first miracle was performed in Cana of Galilee at the beginning of His ministry. Since the Qur'an and the Bible present contrary accounts of the life of Christ, both cannot be true at the same time.

What Does the Historical Evidence Support?

The historical evidence strongly confirms the New Testament Gospel accounts. First of all, two of these authors—Matthew and John—were eyewitnesses. Meanwhile, Mark and Luke derived their facts from the apostles themselves. There are numerous facts that support this to be the case. The internal evidence, archaeology, manuscript evidence, quotes from the early Church Fathers, and ancient non-Christian historical works affirm the first century date and historical accuracy of the gospels. [{9}](#)

Muhammad wrote the Qur'an nearly six centuries after the life of Christ. Unlike the Gospel writers who relied on eyewitness sources, Islam's defense is that the angel Gabriel revealed the information to Muhammad. However, the parallels to Gnostic apocryphal works reveal that Muhammad's sources came from a mixture of Christian fables and Gnostic works that were prevalent in Arabia at that time.

Muhammad no doubt had interaction with Christians. There were several Christian communities in Arabia, and he would have also met Christian traders traveling in caravans along the trade routes. Also his first wife, Khadija, had a cousin named Waraqa who was a Christian. [{10}](#) These Christian and Gnostic "Christian" sources told Muhammad stories from the New Testament and also the fables and apocryphal stories spreading at that time. Since Muhammad was illiterate, he was not able to read and research these sources for himself; instead he relied on second or third hand accounts told to him. As he retold the stories, some of the details were changed due to an

incorrect telling, a lapse in memory, or a desire for them to better fit his belief system.

In creating the Qur'an, Muhammad does recount some biblical stories, but he also relies on apocryphal sources written centuries after the eyewitnesses. These works present a Gnostic refashioning of Christ and have shown to be unhistorical in nature. Since they were not derived from apostolic sources and presented a false view of Christ, they were never considered part of inspired Scripture. The evidence strongly favors the New Testament Gospel accounts over the Qur'an. Since the Qur'an presents stories contrary to the Gospels, its historical accuracy and inspiration comes into question. Also, if Muhammad recorded false stories regarding the infant life of Christ, one must also question his understanding of the nature of Christ as well.

In citing apocryphal works as unreliable, one may fairly question whether the Bible quotes apocryphal works. Indeed, there are occasions where the Bible does quote from uninspired sources. One of the most questioned are Jude's references to the *Assumption of Moses* (Jude 9) and the *Book of Enoch* (Jude 14-15). However, these two references do not present a theological or historical problem since they do not present any teaching contrary to biblical revelation. So, although Jude does quote uninspired sources, there is no reason to reject the inspiration of Jude. Although the *Assumption of Moses* and the *Book of Enoch* are apocryphal works, Jude is referencing portions that are true and consistent with other areas of the Bible. Therefore, this does not affect either the doctrine of inspiration or the integrity of Jude's book.

In contrast, the birth and infancy account of Christ in the Qur'an is problematic since it both contradicts the New Testament Gospels and presents a contrary view regarding the nature of Christ. Therefore, unlike Jude, it is inconsistent with the New Testament, and we must decide whether it is the Qur'an or the Gospels that are in error.

The Life of Christ

The Qur'an speaks on five aspects of Christ's life. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus was a prophet of God but rejects the deity of Christ. However, it does affirm that Christ lived a remarkable life. The Qur'an affirms the virgin birth of Christ (Sura 3:42-47; 19:16-21). The Qur'an affirms the prophetic call of Christ. It also affirms that Christ performed many miracles. The Qur'an affirms that Christ was sinless (Sura 19:16-21). However, it rejects the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and instead teaches that Christ did not suffer physical death but God raised Him up to heaven (Sura 4:158).

What is significant to realize is that, comparing Jesus to Muhammad in the Qur'an, Jesus performs greater works than Muhammad. First, according to the Qur'an, Christ is born of a virgin while there is nothing miraculous regarding the birth of Muhammad. Second, the Qur'an teaches that Christ accomplished many miracles, but Muhammad does not perform any in the Qur'an. The Qur'an teaches that true prophets of God are confirmed by miracles. It teaches that previous prophets Moses and Jesus were confirmed as prophets by their miracles (Sura 7:106-8; 116-119; 5:113). However, when the people ask Muhammad to do so, he refuses, stating that the Jews witnessed miracles from the prophets but remained in unbelief (Sura 28:47-51; 17:90-95). If, according to the Qur'an, God confirmed His prophets through miracles, a question remains as to why He would not confirm Muhammad with the same "seal" of the prophets. This certainly was within God's ability to accomplish.

Contemporary Muslim author Isma'il Al-Faruqi claims that "Muslims do not claim any miracles for Muhammad. In their view, what proves Muhammad's prophethood is the sublime beauty and greatness of the revelation itself, the Holy Qur'an, not any inexplicable breaches of natural law which confound human

reason.”{11} Muslim scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali admitted that Muhammad did not perform any miracle “in the sense of a reversing of Nature.”{12}

Muslim apologists point to the miracle accounts of Muhammad in the *Hadith*, a record of the sayings of Muhammad. However, the Qur’an is the inspired book of God, and the *Hadith* does not carry the authority of the Qur’an. The *Hadith* was written nearly one to two centuries after the life of Muhammad. Since this follows the pattern historians such as A.N. Sherwin-White have identified of miracle accounts that appear two generations after the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, the alleged miracle accounts in the *Hadith* stand in question. Moreover, the *Hadith* accounts seem to also go against the spirit of Muhammad in the Qur’an who repeatedly refused to perform miracles (3:181–84; 4:153; 6:8–9). It is also significant to note that many Muslim scholars such as Sahih Bukhari, who is considered to be the most reliable collector of the sayings in the *Hadith*, believed the vast majority of the miracle stories to be false.{13}

When pressed to defend the miracles of Muhammad, some point to Muhammad’s night journey in Sura 19 in which he claims to have been transported to Jerusalem and then ascended to heaven on the back of a mule (Sura 17:1). There is no reason to take this passage as referring to a literal trip to heaven as even many Muslim scholars do not take it as such. The noted translator of the Qur’an, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, comments on this passage, noting that “it opens with the mystic Vision of the Ascension of the Holy Prophet; he is transported from the Sacred Mosque (of Mecca) to the Farthest Mosque (of Jerusalem) at night and shown some of the Signs of God.”{14} Even according to one of the earliest Islamic traditions, Muhammad’s wife A’isha reported that “the apostle’s body remained where it was but God removed his spirit by night.”{15} Further, even if this were to be understood as a miracle claim, there is no evidence presented to test its

authenticity. Since it lacks testability, it has no apologetic value. [\[16\]](#)

Another miracle is the prophecy of victory at the Battle of Badr (Sura 3:123; 8:17). However, it is a stretch to call this a supernatural miracle. It is common that generals will predict victory over an enemy army to inspire his troops. Also, Muhammad did not prophesy his defeat at the Battle of Uhud a year later.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam teach that God confirms His messengers through miracles. The Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the apostles have the testimony of miracles but this is lacking in the testimony of Muhammad. The miracle testimony of Christ affirms that He was more than a prophet.

The Resurrection

The Qur'an rejects the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ because Muslims believe that Allah would not allow His prophet to die such a shameful kind of death. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus did not die on the cross. Sura 4:157-159 states:

That they said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Apostle of God';—But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not:— Nay, God raised him up unto Himself; and God is exalted in power, wise;—And there is none of the people of the Book but must believe in him before his death; And on the Day of Judgment He will be a witness against them.

Muslims believe that Jesus did not die on the cross but escaped death and was taken up to heaven. The phrase “God

raised him up unto Himself” is understood to teach that Jesus was taken up alive to heaven, never experiencing death. Based on the phrase, “it was made to appear to them,” orthodox Muslims have traditionally interpreted this to mean that God made someone else look like Jesus, and this person was crucified instead of Christ. There are various views regarding the identity of this substitute. Candidates include Judas, Simon of Cyrene, or a teen age boy.

The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus predicted His death and resurrection (Matt. 26:2; Mk. 10:33; 14:8; Jn. 2:19). The Bible records the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Christ, which is central to the preaching of the apostles and to Christianity. The Qur’an and the Gospels cannot be true at the same time since they present contradictory accounts. One must examine the historical evidence and determine which account the evidence supports.

There is strong evidence to support the historicity of the Gospels and the fact that they were written by first century eyewitnesses or their close associates.[{17}](#) We also have thousands of ancient manuscripts dated as early as the beginning of the second century, confirming that the Gospels have been accurately preserved.[{18}](#) There are also several non-Christian Roman and Jewish historical works that affirm both the death of Christ and that Christians believed He had risen from the dead. These include the writings of Tacitus, Thallus, Lucian, Josephus, and the Jewish Talmud.[{19}](#) Finally, the preaching of the death and resurrection of Christ began just days after His death on the cross, and has been continuously preached since then for over two thousand years. This account was proclaimed from the beginning, not generations after the resurrection.

The Qur’an’s account is not built on historical evidence but rather a commitment to Muslim theology. There is little historical evidence to support the Qur’an in its denial of the crucifixion and resurrection and its assertion that someone

else took Jesus' place on the cross. To support their view, Muslims often appeal to the "Lost Gospels." These are the Gnostic Gospels such as the *Gospel of Judas* and others. However, these have proven to be non-apostolic works, written centuries after the life of the apostles. They are not regarded as historically accurate and were written by Gnostics attempting to refashion Jesus in their image.[{20}](#)

The death and resurrection of Christ is one of the most reliably recorded events in ancient history. The historical evidence strongly favors the Gospel account. Therefore, the Qur'an would be in error, and its inspiration must, therefore, be questioned.

Conclusion

As we have studied, the Qur'an and the Bible present contrary views on the nature and life of Christ. The Qur'an rejects the deity of Christ and the death and resurrection of Christ. The Qur'an presents stories regarding the infancy of Christ that are contrary to the New Testament and rely on Gnostic apocryphal works as its source. The Qur'an rejects major doctrines and events recorded in the Bible. Since the historical evidence upholds the Gospels, the perfection and inspiration of the Qur'an is in question since its teachings contradict major doctrines and events taught in the New Testament.

That being said, from a survey of the Qur'an, one should realize that even in the Qur'an, Jesus is greater than Muhammad. First, Jesus' titles in the Qur'an are greater. Despite rejecting the deity of Christ, the Qur'an gives Jesus several honorary titles. He is given the titles of Messiah, the Word of God, the Spirit of God (Sura 4:169-71), the Speech of Truth (Sura 19:34-35), a Sign unto Men, and Mercy from God (Sura 19:21). Although these titles may refer to deity in Christian theology, Muslims do not equate these titles in the

same way.

Second, Jesus' miracles in the Qur'an are greater, for the Qur'an affirms several miraculous aspects of Christ's life. The Qur'an affirms the virgin birth of Christ (Sura 19:16-21; 3:37-45). The Qur'an also affirms that Christ performed miracles (Sura 3:37-45; 43: 63-65). The Qur'an also affirms the prophethood of Christ (19:29-31). The Qur'an also affirms that Christ did not die but was raised up to heaven by God (4:158; 19:33). In contrast, according to the Qur'an, there is very little, if anything, supernatural regarding the life of Muhammad.

Even in the Qur'an, Jesus lived a life that is much more extraordinary than Muhammad. Since this is evident in the Qur'an, it would be wise for all Muslims to study the life of Jesus in the Bible. Not only is the Bible an accurate historical record, but it is a text that Muhammad encouraged Muslims to study (Sura 10:94; 2:136; 4:163; 5:56; 5:68; 35:31). Muhammad believed the Bible in the sixth century AD was accurate. We have many ancient New Testaments that predate the sixth century. Examples include the Chester Beatty Papyri (AD 250), Codex Vaticanus (AD 325 – 350), Codex Sinaiticus (AD 340), Codex Alexandrinus (AD 450), the Latin Vulgate (fourth century AD), and Syriac New Testament (AD 508). From these we can be assured that we have accurate copies of the New Testament that predate the sixth century.

I encourage all Muslims, therefore, to read the New Testament and learn what it says about Jesus Christ. One will soon discover that He was more than a prophet; He was indeed the unique Son Of God.

Notes

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- Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 156.
3. F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974), 172-73.
 4. St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur'an* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1905), ch. 4, section 3.
 5. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 156.
 6. Ronald Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa, CA.: Polebridge Press, 1995), 91-92.
 7. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 442.
 8. Fred Lapham, *An Introduction to the New Testament Apocrypha* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 130.
 9. See Patrick Zukeran, "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels," Probe Ministries, 2004, probe.org/historical-reliability-of-the-gospels
 10. Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1967), 83.
 11. Isma'il Al-Faruqi, *Islam* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1984), 20, quoted in Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam : The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 105.
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 14. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, "Introduction to Sura XVII," in *Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar Al-Kitab Al-Masri, n.d.) 691.
 15. Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, 183.
 16. Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 2nd ed., 164.
 17. Zukeran, "The Historical Reliability of the Gospels."
 18. Ibid.
 19. Patrick Zukeran, "Jesus in Ancient Non-Christian Sources," Evidence and Answers, bit.ly/18XCiME
 20. Patrick Zukeran. "Discerning Fact from Fiction in *The Da*

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