

You may have heard the argument that the Bible is untrustworthy, because it has been changed and corrupted, You may also have heard that Jesus was not crucified, and that he was not killed. In this article you find the proof that these accusations are, in fact, untrue. Inform yourself personally.”

Dear Abdallah – Letters from Theophilus – by Gerhard Nehls

This is a fictitious correspondence to help promote a better understanding between Muslims and Christians.

The name Abdullah is Arabic and means ‘Servant of God’.

The name of the writer is given as Theophilus, a Greek word meaning ‘Loved by God’.

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The Last Word

1. THINKING OF A PURE HEART BEFORE GOD

Dear Abdullah,

I write this letter to tell you how glad I am to have met you. It does not seem to happen all that often that a Muslim and a Christian meet in a manner as we did.

We discovered a lot of common ground while not pretending that there is no disparity. We are both aware of the differences between our faiths – and the need to think them through. Our pledge that our conversation should take place in a friendly spirit, appropriate for the topic, I consider something quite beautiful. All to the honour of God!

It is good to realise that both of us have very similar hopes and expectations of life. What intrigued me in particular was our perception of an Almighty God. While our understanding of religious dogma may differ, our affinity, affection and intuitive consciousness of God are remarkably similar. To me it means that basically mankind must have an innate knowledge of God, which He planted into our 'hearts'.

Probably linked to that, and highly significant to me, is the fact that both of us were acutely aware of our need for a pure heart in the sight of God. This is of special significance, as Jesus once said, that only those who have a pure heart will see God (Matthew 5:8). What else can Jesus mean, but that a pure heart is, likewise, the entrance ticket to heaven.

This reminds me of the Word, which says:

“Be obedient to God, and do not allow your lives to be shaped by those desires you had when you were still ignorant. Instead, be holy in all that you do, just as God who called you is holy” (1 Peter 1:14, 15).

“Pursue holiness, because no one will see the Lord without it” (Hebrews 12:14).

I am sure we are all conscious of our personal lack of a pure – I mean pure – heart. Our thoughts and actions are often quite unholy. I suppose deep down in our hearts we are all aware of that, even while following different religions.

Every time we are confronted with a death in our immediate family, or someone of our closest circle of friends, or when we see or touch a dead body, we are made aware again of our innate fear of death – or perhaps rather fear of what comes after death. We might be able to ‘enjoy’ a ‘good life’, with lots of fun of every kind, but only as long as we suppress any thought about eternity and God. However, eventually and ultimately the certainty of death spoils it all, for we are all aware that, as the Bible puts it:

“ . . . it is appointed to man once to die – and after that is the judgement” (Hebrews 9:27).

Ultimately all mankind is ‘in the same boat’, for all have sinned against the eternal God, be it in thought, word or deed. Is it not interesting to note in this context that every religion follows ritual practices, which signify cleansing? They are essentially no more than symbolic tokens and obviously do not really affect anything by themselves. While we may clean our bodies by such rituals on the outside, we are well aware that water can never wash away sin and by that create a pure heart! Jesus once made a remarkable statement when confronted about the ritual washing of hands before meals:

“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean’. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’” (Matthew 15:17-20).

Rituals are really no more than a reminder of our need for purification – because we know that we are impure.

After having committed a particularly ugly sin, David expressed his heart’s longing beautifully in one of his Psalms:

“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned . . . Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God.” (Psalm 51:2 – 4, 9 – 10).

Are we not touched by this confession? And yet, on many other topics we are not likely to readily agree. In conversations with spiritual contents it is natural to argue according to our respective convictions. Someone rightly said that convictions often are worse enemies to the truth than lies. What we call convictions are, in reality, little more than opinions. Discussions on this basis are predictable and futile: Everybody talks and nobody listens.

I suggest the answer is to honestly face contentious issues squarely, but with the determination to find out together what is trustworthy, and why it is so. After all, it is a matter concerning and affecting eternity! Let us be mature, and go beyond silly arguments.

Let us speak from a mutual concern for each other, not to win an argument. Let us make sure to follow the only eternal Truth of God. We do not want to risk that one of us goes astray!

Knowing each other a little by now, I am sure that together we will, with kindness, understanding and sober judgement, find what concerns us more than anything else in this world!

Yours sincerely,

Theophilus

2. THINKING ABOUT THE REVELATION OF GOD

Dear Abdullah,

I knew I would be right in expecting your reply straight from the heart. Thank you!

I acknowledge your sentiments and do not doubt your sincerity for one minute. Sincerity must be the foundation of any conversation regarding God and our relationship with Him. However, it must be linked to established facts. We have to ask the question: Is what I sincerely believe, really and factually true? A mother may sincerely believe in the innocence of her son that has just been convicted of a crime. But is he innocent, because she believes that he is? Not the sincerity of our belief will determine that, but an investigation of the evidence. Sincerity cannot change error into truth.

The important thing, therefore, is not our sincerity as such, but the object of our sincerity. Please accept, therefore, that while I appreciate your sincerity, I query part of what you accept as fact. Let me explain.

You state that you have deeply rooted reservations about the trustworthiness of today's version of the Bible. While I somehow expected this, it still surprises me! Let me try to respond to your suspicion. First of all, we will have to make a distinction between established facts and our interpretation of these. What Islam never permitted, happened to Christianity. For the last couple of centuries Bible critics, many of them theologians, had the liberty to table and propagate their critique, which was often based on quite extravagant interpretations. These reflect their expedient, personal convictions and opinions by which they interpret the Bible.

However, books like the Bible or the Qur'an, are believed to be of divine origin. They should not be interpreted randomly, and not be subjected to personal opinions. Islam has always resisted a critical study of the Qur'an. Christians, with a much older and also more extensive

Scripture, were and are very conscientious not only to preserve the old manuscripts physically, but also the original meaning of the words, idioms and phrases that make little sense when only the words are known.

What is called textual critique is the science, which is established to determine the exact text of an original document, and to sift out any possible corruption of a given text or any copy mistakes that might have slipped in over the many centuries in which these manuscripts have been copied by hand.

Just imagine how a linguist in two thousand years from now will be baffled when he discovers an old letter in which the writer tells his friends that yesterday it was raining cats and dogs, and now he feels a bit under the weather. His cousin was first beating around the bush, and when he attempted to steal his thunder, he was barking up the wrong tree. Fortunately, that happens only once in a blue moon. A dictionary would offer little help here.

In addition, words change their meaning. When just a hundred years ago a young man would say that he is gay, it meant that he was happy. What it means today I do not need to explain to you. Some words 'died out'. They are unknown today, like the Hebrew word 'selah' in the Psalms of David, which was likely to be a musical term, for the Psalms were also sung.

But during the last two centuries other, liberal, scholars attempted to 'reinterpret' the Bible.

The so called 'historical critical method' is of quite a different nature. It attempts to 'correct' a text by assessing its feasibility, if I may put it this way. The Bible teaches, for instance, that the Jews went through the Red Sea on dry foot, or that Jesus was born of a virgin, that He walked on a lake and raised dead people to life. Since that is [humanly] impossible, reason the critics, one has to classify such a text as a myth. By various ways and means their pens have censored the Bible of anything that could be classified as supernatural.

Being aware of man's inclination, it had to be expected, that such a critique would undermine the fear of God, and contribute to the spiritual decay in what is now called 'the Western world'. Intentionally or not, these critics made their own finite minds the judge over the infinite God, assessing and stipulating what He did, and what He 'could not have done'. This resulted in a very human interpretation of the divine Book and its Author. The unheard-of happened. God was criticised by His creation, and was verbally stripped of His eternal attributes. Encouraged by the media, people took this to be a licence to live according to their own judgement and their own lust. Now the vast majority of the people 'in the West' live God-less lives. We call that 'secular humanism.

At least by now you must have learned, never make the mistake to assume that Europe, America, and other nations are 'Christian' countries. They are not! Yet, in them, as in Africa, Asia, and Australia, live those who are totally committed to God. Only they deserve to be named after their Saviour: Christ.

Coming back to the Bible: While we know of occasional copy errors, we can be sure that these in no way influence or distort the message and meaning of God's Word. Actually, we consider it a miracle that the biblical manuscripts, which have been copied by hand over periods of up to 3 000 years, are so remarkably preserved.

We are astonished that many Muslims use the liberal arguments to propagate the falsification of the Gospel, while they refuse to apply a much needed text critique to their own scriptures. They completely ignore the fact that, although the Qur'an is of a considerably younger date, it has similar, if not more, complex problems. I am aware of the explosive character of this statement, but it cannot be more offensive to you than many Islamic statements concerning the Bible are to us. In short, I suggest we will have to play by the same rules. Muslim doctors who propagate that the Bible was corrupted also overlook the fact that most eminent Muslim theologians like al-Tabari (died AD 855), al-Bukhāri (died AD 870), as well as al-Ghazzāli (died AD 1111) believed in the authenticity of the (Greek) Gospel text. And that is what the very message the Qur'an promotes:

“Say ye: We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses, and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord: we make no difference between one and another of them.” (Surah al-Baqara 2:136).

*“It was We who revealed the Law (to Moses); therein was guidance and light . . . if any do fail to judge by the light of what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) unbelievers . . . We sent Jesus, the son of Mary, confirming the Law that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: Therein was guidance and light . . . a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah. **Let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein. If any do fail to judge by the light of what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) those who rebel. Judge what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires.*** (Surah Mâ-ida 5:47, 49,50, 52).

“Say: we believe in the revelation which has come down to us and that which came down to you” (Surah al-Ankabût 29:46).

These texts make it quite clear that at the time when the Qur’an was written down, there was no suggestion anywhere about a possible corruption or unreliability of the Bible. Anyone propagating such falsehood or fabrication, will not only contradict the Qur’an, but will also have to provide an answer to questions like: WHO changed or corrupted the Bible? WHEN was the Bible corrupted? WHERE is the original, or evidence that shows that there was such an original? So far I have not heard an answer to these.

If the Bible was corrupted before or at the time of Muhammad, the Qur’an would hardly have spoken of the Bible as the Word of God. Had the Bible been changed or corrupted afterwards, the many existing old manuscripts that predate Muhammad by hundreds of years, would give abundant proof that no changes had sneaked in. Besides, we have just read from the Qur’an that the Bible is God’s Word. We should add, also from the Qur’an, that “no man can change the words of God” (Surah 6:34 and 10:64). We do have to ask what Muslim critics of the Bible are trying to achieve by this deception.

Some Muslims reason that the Qur'an does state that the Bible was distorted. They quote:

“Ye People of the Book Why do ye clothe truth with falsehood, and conceal the truth, while ye have knowledge?” (Surah Al-Imran 3:71).

“There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues: (as they read) you would think it is part of the Book, but it is not part of the Book.” (Surah Al-Imran 78).

These passages say nothing more than that the Bible, rendered by the Jews of Medina in public, as the context suggests, was distorted with their tongues, not with their pens. Else the Qur'an would not suggest that Muslims should ask the People of the Book, Jews and Christians, about the content of the Bible:

“Ask of those who possess the Message”. (Surah al-Anbiyāa, 21:7).

We may well ask, why so many Muslims believe that the Bible was corrupted, when history, archaeology and the Qur'an deny this? The answer seems to be rather intriguing.

Ibn Khazem (died AD 1064) ruled the South of Spain for some time as the vizier of the caliph. When reading the Qur'an he came across a verse that referred to Jesus speaking of Good News of an Apostle who was to come after him and whose name should be Ahmad (Surah As-Saff, 61:6). The meaning of this Arabic word is similar to the meaning of the name 'Muhammad'. He must also have read about “the unlettered prophet (i.e. Muhammad) whom they find mentioned in their own (Scriptures); in the law and the Gospel” (Surah Al-A'raf, 7:157). So he began to search the Bible for these clues about Muhammad. Probably to his surprise, he did not find them. What he did find, however, were a number of contradictions between the two Books, both of which were assumed to have come from the same divine source. You can see the problem Ibn Khazem was facing. Both the Bible and the Qur'an are stated to be Word of God – and they contradict each other.

Ibn Khazem's decision was not to question the integrity of the Qur'an. He rather assumed that since the Gospel should agree with the Qur'an, and because Muhammad had spoken so highly of it, the existing Gospel text must have been falsified by the Jews and Christians. This assumption may well display his zeal for the Qur'an, but it is not based on historical facts.

Since then Muslims have questioned the integrity of the Bible. Their argument is not only contradicted by the Qur'an, but also by the ever increasing strong archaeological and historical arguments, which support the genuineness of the Bible. Besides, why should anyone, for any reason, attempt to change the Word of God?

Perhaps this letter has helped you to take a glimpse at what most Muslims seem not to know. Practising Christians have a very special place for the Bible in their hearts and lives. It is God's love letter to them.

I take it that you are a believing Muslim. Therefore, what I wrote here is likely to hurt your soul. I must assure you that it is probably equally painful for me to write on what appears to be negative about the source of your deepest convictions and devotion. But I am sure that our concern to believe and practise the Truth of God will enable us to overcome some tensions and even hurt feelings, on our common journey. I hope that my next letter will not be as technical, and in a way negative.

I hope and trust that this letter finds you well and in good health. Please answer soon!

Warmest greetings!

Theophilus

3. THINKING ABOUT THE TRUTH OF GOD

Dear Abdullah

Thank you for your frank letter. Thank you also for sharing with me the way you view Nabi Isa, as you name Jesus in the Arabic language. A different name makes nobody another person. It is the *person* behind the name that matters. It is obvious that the '*person*' Nabi Isa as he is described in the Qur'an, and the '*person*' Jesus in the Bible, do differ greatly. Yet it is the same person we are talking about!

I suggest we first of all look for evidence that can assure us of the divine origin of our 'Holy Books'. Both of us will insist that our respective Scriptures are inspired by God and consequently revelation from Him. But since your Book and my Book differ on crucial matters, both cannot really come from the same source. You will agree with that. Take for example the crucifixion and death of Jesus. This event is explicitly and abundantly reported of in the Bible. However, this is contradicted by the Qur'an, and, consequently, by Islam. Logic tells us that one of the views cannot possibly be true. This is a touchy statement to make, and it can cause anger or hurt, which I by no means wish to cause. Therefore, I would like you to approach this topic with an open, 'cool', and yet a critical mind. It is likely that I will introduce to you something that you are not familiar with.

How on earth can anyone be sure whether a book was revealed by God? Perhaps it was written hundreds or even thousands of years ago by some well meaning and concerned man who wanted his book to better the thinking and actions of the people around him? Someone like Buddha, or Confucius.

You may well say, that religion is a matter of faith, and not of reason. What has logic to do with faith? What has the 'heart' to do with the mind?

We have to ask whether faith in God and His revelation is believed with the heart. Is faith activated by our emotions, or our mind? The Bible

repeatedly challenges us not to follow God half-heartedly, and believe Him with our whole *heart*. But God has also given us a *mind* and our senses that are required to distinguish between true and false. Let us consider again the question that was raised: Was Jesus crucified as the sacrifice for our sins – or not? If your faith is placed in the wrong ‘object’, it does not make it true! We got to establish the truth before we put our trust in it. And that is hardly done. The overwhelming numbers of people believe without question what their parents, and the social context makes them believe. To sum it up: We use our mind to discover, and to make sure where or what the Truth (about God) is, and then follow this faith in God and His Word with all our heart.

Let me illustrate: I found the truth about God and His Word in the Bible, because it carries an undeniable imprint of His authorship. I am speaking here of absolutely unpredictable events, which were foretold by the biblical prophets hundreds of years before they were eventually fulfilled. We are, in fact, instructed over and over again, and in no uncertain terms, that a prophet, whose prophecies do not come true, is not to be believed or trusted:

“You may say to yourselves, ‘How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?’ If, what the prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken, That prophet has spoken presumptuously”

(Deuteronomy 18:21, 22).

“Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7).

And through Isaiah God said :

“I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, ‘My idols did them’” (Isaiah 48:5).

“I am the Lord, who has made all things, who carries out the words of His servants and fulfils the predictions of His messengers” (Isaiah 44:24, 26).

The attentive Bible reader can detect three main themes of prophecy. One foretells the very unique history of the Jews, right up to the present time. The second pictures in dramatic detail the Time of the End of this world, and the third predicts, again in much detail, the life of Jesus the Messiah. In graphic description the prophets also foretold His suffering and death on the cross, as well as His resurrection from the dead. Had these not been fulfilled, we might have a good reason to question the message and its divine source. Excepting, of course, the predictions that describe the end of the world, these prophecies were all fulfilled. This gives us the confidence to rely on the message of the Bible, for no man could have predicted these historic happenings. Only God could have known and revealed them.

Little wonder then that throughout the Gospel we read phrases like “as it was written”, or “as the prophet has said”. In the New Testament we read about Jesus:

“I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve [Apostles of Jesus]. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep [have died]” (1 Corinthians 15:3 – 7).

The words “**according to the Scriptures**” refer to what had been written by the prophets who had lived hundreds of years before the fulfilment of the announced events. My letter is rather long already, therefore I can only refer to the most noteworthy texts, hoping that you have the opportunity to look them up for yourself:

The following prophecies reported the time and place of Jesus’ coming (Micah 5:2, Daniel 9:24ff [this passage needs introductory information to be understood]); that He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), and what His name would be (Isaiah 63:8) [Saviour in Hebrew is Yeshua; this is the name Jesus actually had, while on earth]. Also His divinity was foretold (Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6 [Immanuel means, God with us]). Now let us look at some prophecies that predict His crucifixion and death.

David wrote about Jesus around 1000 BC, stating:

“Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing” (Psalm 22:16 – 18).

Isaiah the prophet spoke in 700 BC, saying:

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Surely, He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open his mouth. He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people He was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death, though He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth . . . by His knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities . . . He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:3 – 12).

Can any honest person ignore, side-step, or ‘explain’ away such evidence for the truth of the crucifixion of Jesus??

To amplify this even further, the Bible contains a number of eyewitness reports, which would certainly have been rejected by the contemporaries, had they not been true:

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised

Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him” (Acts 2:22-24).

What would the Jews have done, had Jesus not been crucified or killed? They would have strongly rejected this public address. But nobody ever queried this, because they all knew what had happened. While the Jews always objected that Jesus is the Messiah, they never denied His death on the cross. They knew that it had happened, for they were present at the scene.

May just one more noteworthy piece of evidence be added in support of the trustworthiness of the crucifixion report in the Gospel? We are aware that the life of Jesus in a remote place like Judea was of no significance to the Roman historians of His time, who wrote the annals of wars and mighty conquerors. Yet Rome’s most prominent historian, Cornelius Tacitus, being an aggressive opponent of early Christianity, wrote *inter alia*:

“The name ‘Christian’ is derived from Christ, who was executed under the government of the procurator Pilate” (Annals 15.44).

Flavius Josephus was a Jewish general, fighting the last battle for Jerusalem against the Romans (AD 70). Having been taken prisoner, he became the Roman historian for Israel. He lived shortly after the time of Jesus, and wrote:

“Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was (the) Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again on the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him” (Antiquitates Judearum)

Evidence of such importance must have been given for a reason. And that is, no doubt, God’s way to verify the truth of His message for

generations to come, for they as we depend on some kind of tangible proof or evidence to believe what He has revealed.

Why do I write all this? Why do I risk disturbing peace and harmony between us? I hope you have detected by that I care for you! Up to now you have probably not been aware of the need to verify the truth and trustworthiness of our faith. As said before, most of the world's people practise their respective religions in the sincere belief that all is well and that they are following the right path. There were many people who *sincerely* believed that Hitler and Stalin were good people in their effort to change the world for the better. But they were *sincerely* wrong. The two dictators were responsible for the tragic and violent deaths of more than 150 Million people who just wanted to live in peace.

You raised certain objections to the trustworthiness of the Bible. You would not have done it, had you not been influenced by other people with the same conviction. And now I have to challenge you to test the foundations on which your eternal future rests.

You must understand that I do not write this letter to destroy your faith in God, but rather to amend and enhance it. That demands scrutiny.

The other day my wife and I wanted to visit someone in hospital. A relative explained the way to get there. It was done very accurately – except for one little slip. At one turn we were told to turn left, where we should have turned right. When I checked out the route on the map, I discovered the mistake. Had I not checked, we would not have reached our destination. Sometimes this does not matter all that much, but when it concerns your and my eternity, it does!

Yours sincerely,

Theophilus

4. THINKING ABOUT THE QUR'AN

Dear Abdullah

It is hardly necessary for me to tell you how I appreciated your response to my last letter. It is good that our mutual relationship is strong enough to discuss such emotionally laden topics, and that despite the differences our beliefs and their foundations. I am glad that you agree on the need for an also sober approach to spiritual matters, which led you to acknowledge the truly convincing argument that fulfilled prophecy, as also the eyewitness reports and the historic sources express.

While it is decidedly good to have a rich emotional life, our spiritual conversation should never be governed by emotions only. We dare not overlook the facts. That can be hurtful at times. That is why we are taught in the Bible to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Someone rightly said that truth without love can be cruel, while love without truth is sentimentality. As emotions should be built on facts, so truth must be accompanied by love. These two belong together.

In your letter you express the view of almost all Muslims, that the Qur'an in its present form is identical to the original [‘heavenly’] one. Islamic traditions (aHadith) dating from the time of the first caliphs do not support this assumption, as every scholar should know and acknowledge.

If I understand you correctly, you suggest that evidence other than fulfilled prophecy should equally verify divine revelation. Firstly, you point to the outstanding literary quality and content of the Qur'an. You further argue that the fact that many Muslims can recite the whole of the Qur'an from memory is miraculous and therefore underscores its divine origin. Thirdly, you categorically state that the Qur'an has never been tampered with, but has been preserved in every detail as it came from the mouth of the Prophet.

Anyone with some basic knowledge of Arabic will have no problem to appreciate the poetic beauty of at least the early Meccan Surahs of the Qur'an. It must be said, however, that grammatically and in the choice

of words the Arabic Qur'an is not considered to be perfect. But even if it were, we must realise that it is not unreasonable to assume that even the very best product of man's ingenuity is still human. Proof of a divine token would be its superiority beyond what man can produce – something like fulfilled prophecy.

Regarding the contents of the Qur'an, Christians obviously compare it with the Gospel. In all honesty, and trying to be as objective and fair as one can be, I have to say that the Qur'an cannot be compared with Gospel. You will be convinced when you have a look at 'Your Book and My Book', a topical comparison of the Qur'an with the Gospel, which you can download for free from this website.

The citation of the Qur'an from memory is a different matter altogether. I remember watching dozens of young men pacing the courtyard of al-Azr University in Cairo, busy memorising the Qur'an. Sharpness of intellect, diligence and, as a bonus, a photographic memory play a part here. It would have been miraculous if this knowledge had been achieved instantly, without any learning, for example.

But let me return to your main point, the statement that the Qur'an has been preserved in its totality. While it is not possible to substantiate all my statements in a short letter like this, I will gladly do so, should you request it. It is well supported by Islamic tradition that during the lifetime of Muhammad, seven different 'forms' of the Qur'an existed:

“This Qur'an was revealed in seven forms, so recite what is easiest!” said Muhammad. (Al-Bukhari vol. VI, Page 482, Chapter LXI (5) Vs. 514, Mishkatul Masabih vol. 3, pp.702-704; Tafsir of at – Tabari and Commentary of al – Baidawi).

It has been suggested that this refers to different dialects. People in England, Wales, Scotland or Ireland speak very different dialects, but when they write, they use the one English language. Different dialects do not mean different texts.

We must also realise that the Uthmani version of the Qur'an is actually a revision of earlier texts. Besides the version of the Qur'an, which was collected and collated on the suggestion of Abu Bakr and Umar by Zaid b Thabith, there existed a number of other texts, compiled by men even better equipped than Zaid, men like Abdullah b. Mas'ud, Ubay b. Ka'b and Abu Moosa.

The revision of the originally collected Qur'an was ordered by Uthman, because the various Qur'an collections competed with each other. After the Uthmani revision was completed, all previous versions were burned. It surely is significant that even the copy compiled by Zaid, which at that time was in the possession of Muhammad's widow Hafsa, was destroyed (by Marwan ibn-al-Hakam, Governor of Medinah) (al-Bukhari vol. VI, page 477-479; Chapter LXI (3) vs. 509, Mishkatul Masabih vol. 3, Page 664, Masahif by Ibn Abi Dawood, pp.24, 25, and ibn Asakir, vs. 445).

Now, that is a tremendous thing to do. Today it would be called obliteration and destruction of evidence, a punishable crime! We are glad to say, however, that since these early texts had been memorised by many, they have survived in recorded theological debates and can still be compared with the Uthmani version. Besides the four major manuscripts of old that are already mentioned, of whom some had more Suras or Ayas than others, we also find omitted, changed and added texts (Masahif by Ibn Abi Dawood, pp.24, 25, and ibn Asakir, vs. 445). Ibn Abi Dawood's collection of these differing portions of the Qur'an fills several hundred pages, by the way.

Being aware of this, let us add to the believing heart a critical, yet open mind. Critical not toward God – for who are we to question Him? But toward man and his sometimes fraudulent claims!

Again I must beg you not to consider what I write as an affront. I do not write this to offend or hurt you. On the contrary, I do want you "to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4), as the Bible calls it.

Yours sincerely,

Theophilus

5. THINKING OF THE QUR'AN IN THE LIGHT OF SCIENCE

Dear Abdullah,

You sent me a letter to which you attached a book into which all my letters to you could easily be accommodated. Thank you for it, and “The Bible, the Qur’an and Science” by Maurice Bucaille! It goes without saying that I can reply only now, after I have carefully studied the book.

To draw on science to discover at that time unknown knowledge within the pages of the Qur’an, is a relatively new venture that developed over the last few decades. Some Muslim scholars feel this to be convincing evidence for its divine origin. The idea is, as already stipulated, that scientific knowledge that was unknown at the time of Muhammad is contained in the Qur’an. In particular, current knowledge of embryology is said to clearly confirm what the Qur’an says about this topic. The geological formation of the universe, including the earth, is another topic. In that case, I have to admit it would be strong evidence for the inspiration of the Qur’an, but is it?

Dr. Bucaille finds in the Qur’an a description of the origin of the universe, which, according to him, at first consisted of gas that caused the ‘Big Bang’. That in turn facilitated the formation of galaxies, and solar systems, including our sun with its planets (p.139). This rests on his rather fanciful interpretation of two texts in the Qur’an, where we read:

“Do not the unbelievers see that the heavens were joined together, then We clove them asunder”. (Surah Al-Anbiyaaa, 21:30) and
“Then He turned to the sky and it had been (as) smoke: He said to it and to the earth, come ye together . . .” (Surah Fussilat, 41:11).

Parallel passages of the Qur’an provides additional information:
“He (i.e. Allah) withholds the sky from falling on the earth”. (Surah Al-Hajj, 22:65).

“He (i.e. Allah) created the heavens without any pillars that ye can see; He set on the earth mountains standing firm lest it should shake with you”.
(Surah Lukman. 31:10).

“Allah is He Who raised the heavens without any pillars that ye can see”.
(Surah Ar-Ra’d 13:2).

Can one really see in these texts a hint or suggestion to the ‘Big Bang’? More convincing is the fact that one cannot see the pillars that prevent the sky from falling on us.

In the same chapter it is alleged that the balance of the Laws of Gravitation and Centrifugal Force within a solar system is described by the above passages (p. 152ff). Again we fail to see such a statement reflected in the Qur’an.

The gravitation of a celestial body, according to the Natural Law, actually attracts any other body towards its own mass. That would, of course, eliminate the existence of the smaller celestial body. But the force of gravity is balanced by the centrifugal force due to the planet’s movement around itself and a sun. As a ball, when spinning around at the end of a string, is kept from flying away, so planets are forced away from the sun by the centrifugal force, but are kept in place by the law of gravity. So the balance between the two opposing forces keeps the planets on track. It was Isaac Newton, who discovered these Laws in the 17th century.

Do we actually find these Natural Laws, to which Dr. Bucaille refers, directly or by implication, in the Qur’an in general, or in these mentioned verses in particular? Certainly not in the suggested texts. And could Isaac Newton have formulated these Laws of Nature, as he did, based on the knowledge of the above verses, if he had access to them? I am sure we agree that with the best will in the world it would need a lot of imagination to let these verses explain the function of our universe. But Dr. Bucaille did it, and he went even further. He discovered in the Qur’an a prediction for astronauts:

“O ye assembly of Jinns and men! If it be ye can pass beyond the zones of the heavens and the earth pass ye! Not without authority shall ye be able to pass!” (Surah Ar-Rahman, 55:33).

It is further assumed that when the Qur'an speaks of seven heavens (e.g. Surah 78:12), the number seven merely means plurality. From that he concludes that the Qur'an clearly states that there would be many heavens and earths in the universe, a fact that could only be verified in our time (p. 141). Without being antagonistic, one can surely question the logic of such an argument.

In fairness we acknowledge that the Qur'an, was composed under the then prevailing worldview, which also assumed that the earth is a disc and not a sphere, as we know today:

"Zul-qarnain (according to tradition Alexander the Great) . . . when he reached the setting of the sun he found it set in a spring of murky water" (Surah Al-Kahf, 18:83-86).

Without trying to say more than the text wants to say, let us compare a verse from the Bible, which was written well over two thousand years before the Qur'an:

"He (i.e. God) spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing" (Job 26:7).

The most prominent argument for the alleged existence of then unknowable scientific data in the Qur'an, however, is gynaecology, or, more specific, embryology, the science of the conception and development of the human embryo in the womb, or uterus, of its mother. Many an eloquent article is trying to interpret the Qur'an to mean something it does not say. In flowery language we are informed how medical doctors are stunned at the accuracy of the description of the reproductive system and its function. So let us have a look at these:

"We (i.e. Allah) created you out of dust then out of sperm then out of a leech-like clot then out of a morsel of flesh partly formed and partly unformed in order that We may manifest (Our power) to you; and We cause whom We will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term then do We bring you out as babes then". (Surah Al-Hajj, 22:5).

"We (i.e. Allah) did create from a quintessence (of clay); Then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest firmly fixed; Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (foetus)

lump; then We made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then We developed out of it another creature; so blessed be Allah the Best to create!” (Surah Al-Muminun, 23:12-14).

“It is He (i.e. Allah) Who has created you from dust then from a sperm-drop then from a leech-like clot; then does He get you out (into the light) as a child”. (Surah Gafir, 40:67).

“He (i.e. man) is created from a drop emitted. Proceeding from between the backbone and the ribs”. (Surah At-Tariq, 86:6-7).

“He Who has made everything which He has created most Good . . . began the creation of man with (nothing more than) clay and made his progeny from a quintessence of the nature of a fluid despised”. (Surah As-Sajda, 32:7-8).

“He (i.e. Allah) makes you in the wombs of your mothers in stages one after another in three veils of darkness”. (Surah Az-Zumar, 39:6).

“Allah doth know what every female (womb) doth bear by how much the wombs fall short (of their time or number) or do exceed. Every single thing is before His sight in (due) proportion” (Surah Ar-Ra’d, 13:8).

It ought to be mentioned here that the above passages, with the exception of some duplications (Surahs 16:5, 80:19-20, 75:38-40, 18:38), constitute all that the Qur’an says about this subject. We find no hint about the fertilisation of the ovum by a sperm, but rather the assumption that the sperm is the seed that is planted into the womb to mature. To correct this omission Dr. Bucaille quotes from a Hadith:

“He (the Holy Prophet) said: ‘The reproductive substance of a man is white and that of a woman is yellow. When they have sexual intercourse and the male’s substance prevails upon the female’s substance, it is the male child that is created by Allah’s Decree. When the substance of the female prevails upon the substance contributed by the male, a female child is formed by the Decree of Allah.’ The Jew said: ‘What you have said is true; verily you are an Apostle.’ He then turned round and went away. The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: ‘He asked me about such and such things of which I had no knowledge until Allah gave it to me” (Sahih Muslim Hadith 614).

You, as I, may not find all this enlightening either. Also the following Hadith would need a lot of interpretation to make sense to our 21st century minds:

“Allah’s Apostle the true and truly inspired, narrated to us: ‘The creation of everyone of you starts with the process of collecting the material for his body within forty days and forty nights in the womb of his mother. Then he becomes a clot of thick blood for a similar period (40 days) and then he becomes like a piece of flesh for a similar period. Then an angel is sent to him (by Allah) and the angel is allowed (ordered) to write four things: his livelihood, his (date of) death, his deeds, and whether he will be a wretched one or a blessed one (in the Hereafter) and then the soul is breathed into him” (Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 9.546, see also 4.430).

It would need a book to go into more detail on this topic. What conclusion can we draw from what we looked at? It is normal for all people at all times to view the world on the basis of the knowledge and understanding prevailing at their time. People who first saw the newly invented car driving past them, looked under the bonnet for the hidden horses or oxen that moved the car, for there can be no such thing as a vehicle moving without them. We all live by the assumption that the way we know and see the world around us is what it is.

On the basis of this we do not expect the recorders of Scripture to speak of Dollars and Pounds, Meters, Miles, Inches, Kilograms, and the like. They described distances, finances, and whatever, in terms of their own experience. Even the perception of the earth being flat, and not round, can be accommodated. Who does Dr Maurice Bucaille, address? Fools?

I am deeply sorry to be so negative about this book’s content. Please pardon what may come over as cynical. Perhaps it is a kind of anger over such a cheap attempt to prove the divine, which should be self-evident.

Yours sincerely,

Theophilus

6. THINKING OF GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

Dear Abdullah,

Thank you for your very interesting remarks in your last letter. They are remarkably true. One so easily gets sidetracked from the real issue. And that can only be God. We agree that there is, and only can be, one God, by whatever name we may call Him. He would know who we are and why we call on Him.

Does that mean that Allah, as He is called in Arabic, and how He is manifested in the Qur'an, is the same as the One who revealed Himself in the Bible? The meanings of the *words* we use for God, are the same. Who He is, is not clarified by His Name, but by His *nature*, the *way* He *acts* and *'speaks'*. Therefore, I deem it essential to first define what – or better Whom – we mean when we say 'God', or 'Allah'.

Before we can do this, we have to identify a strange phenomenon. When a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, or any human being for that matter, closes his eyes to meditate about the essence, the nature and character of God, the perceptions of God in their minds is remarkably more alike than the theology of their respective '*Holy Books*' would allow.

I believe wholeheartedly that all true knowledge about God must essentially come from Him alone, be it by using a man to be His clearly identified Prophet.

So, what can we know, perceive about God? Firstly, there is what we may call the revelation of God in creation. It was really only in the last century or so that man had more functional 'tools' to discovered the Cosmos, be it by the use of a Telescope or Microscope. I am referring of the sum of everything that exists. 'Nature' reveals to us unimaginable information of something infinitely greater, more powerful, complex, and intelligent than that it just happened to be. This, our unthinkable Universe, could not possibly exist without a designer and creator of all there is. A Psalm expresses this beautifully:

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display

knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the world.” (Psalm 19:1-4)

Yet creation does not reveal anything more. It cannot tell us whether this powerful intelligence is just a force of some kind, or whether it has a personality. So while I can safely state that God is almighty and super-intelligent, I could not conclude from observing nature that He is personal, holy, righteous, merciful or loving. Both Christians and Muslims rightly claim that He has these attributes. Our Books say so, and so do our theologians. And yet, we differ in our perception of the nature of God.

Take the word righteousness. Does that mean that God is totally good and therefore will always act rightly? If God is good, can He create evil? If He is righteous, can He cause someone to commit sin and then punish that person for doing so? If God is love, can He be indifferent to our eternal wellbeing? Intuitively both of us will answer without hesitation that God could not have created evil or induce a person to sin and punish him for that, and that He cannot be indifferent to His creatures. Our innate perception of God causes us to think this way. What have our Books to say?

According to Imam al-Barqavi (died 1135), the famous theologian and Qur'an commentator:

“He (Allah) receives neither profit nor loss from whatever may happen. If all the infidels became believers . . . He would gain no advantage. On the other hand, if all believers became infidels, He would suffer no loss. He can do what He wills, and whatever He wills come to pass. He is not obliged to act. Everything, good or evil, in this world exists by His will. He wills the faith of the believers and the piety of the religious. If He were to change His will there would be neither a true believer nor a pious man. He willeth also the unbelief of the unbeliever and the irreligion of the wicked and, without that will, there would neither be unbelief nor irreligion . . . He is perfectly free to will and to do what He pleases. In creating unbelievers, in willing that they should remain in that state; in making serpents, scorpions and pigs; in willing, in short, all that is evil. God has wise ends in view which it is not necessary that we should know.” ('Haft sifat' as quoted in Hughes 'Dictionary of Islam' p.141).

Quite obviously, what al-Barqavi and most other Muslim theologians want to underline, is the greatness of God by formulations like this. Of course, he cannot write this without consulting the Qur'an and the Traditions, else no one would have accepted such a statement:

“If Allah so willed He could make you all one people: but He leaves straying (should read: leads astray) whom He pleases and He guides whom He pleases: but ye shall certainly be called to account for all your actions” (Surah An-Nahl, 16:93 as translated by Yusuf Ali) (See also Surah An-Nahl, 16:37; Al-An'am.6:149).

It seems as if the greatness of Allah overrules righteousness, mercy and love. These are attributes we certainly expect God to have. In fact, verses like the above, and there are many, are contradicting many other passages in the Qur'an – including the Shahada. I indeed fail to see it as an example of righteousness and justice, when a person is punished for something he was compelled by God to do. This is by no means an isolated passage. It is verified by verses like:

“Whom Allah doth guide – He is on the right path; whom He rejects from His guidance – such are the persons who perish. Many are the Jinns and men We have made for Hell” (Surah Al-A'raf, 7:178).

“If We (i.e. Allah) had so willed, We could certainly have brought every soul its true guidance; but the word from Me will come true, ‘I will fill hell with Jinns and men all together’” (Surah As-Sajda, 32:130).

“Allah leads astray those whom He pleases, and guides whom He pleases” (Surah Ibrahim, 14:4).

See also Surah At-Tauba or Baraat, 9:51, Al-Maidah, 5:20, An-Nahl, 16:93, As-Saffat, 37:96, Al-Insan, 76:29-30, An-Nisa, 4:88, An-Nahl, 16:36, Al-An'am, 6:149 and Al-A'hraf, 7:158.

“He forgiveth whom He pleaseth and He punishes whom He pleaseth” (Surah 5:20).

Read also Surah As-Saffat, 37:96; Al-Insan, 76:29 – 30; An-Nisa, 4:88; An-Nahl, 16:36; Al-An'am, 6:149, and Al-A'raf, 7:158.

Such statements are strongly supported by the Hadith. Let us just look at two passages:

*“Abu Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: Allah fixed the very portion of adultery which a man will indulge in. **There would be no escape from it**” (Sahih Muslim IV, p. 1396 – 1398.)*

*“Abu Darda’s reported that the Holy Prophet said: ‘**Allah created Adam when He created him. Then He stroke his right shoulder and took out a white race as if they were seeds, and He stroke his left shoulder and took out a black race as if they were coals. Then He said to those who were in his right side: Towards Paradise and I don’t care. He said to those who were on his left shoulder: Towards Hell and I don’t care**’” (Mishkat vol.3 p. 117).*

Any person with a darker complexion believing that would certainly be terrified at this prospect.

Al-Baqawi explains the principle that led to such doctrine:

“Not only can He (Allah) do anything, He actually is the only one who does anything. When a man writes, it is Allah who has created in his mind the will to write. Allah at the same time gives the power to write, then brings about the motion of the hand and the pen and the appearance upon paper. All other things are passive, Allah alone is active.”

Where does the love of God fit in here – and His mercy and grace, on which we all depend? I reflect again on our imperfection and lack of purity. If you take the trouble to analyse this in the Qur’an, you will find that Allah only loves the righteous and good. And what about us, who did wrong, who trespassed God’s commands? What al-Ghazzali (I don’t need to introduce him to you) once wrote is frightening, isn’t it?

“Love is to sense a need of the beloved, and since Allah cannot be said to have a need or an experience of a need, it is therefore impossible that Allah should love.”

Such a view of God is contrary to the Bible. One can accommodate the core statement about God in Islam is Allahu akbar, and that of the Bible, that God is Love. True, He is holy and righteous in His judgements. We do realise that this aspect by itself is severely threatening to us, because we are unrighteous. But God’s righteousness is bonded with His mercy and love. Have a look what the Bible says about that:

About God's majesty:

"This is what the Lord spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.'"
(Leviticus 10:3).

"Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His footstool – He is holy."
(Psalm 99:5).

"I dwell in the high and holy place." (Isaiah 57:15).

"He is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honour and everlasting power. Amen." (1 Timothy 6:16).

"Holy, holy, holy, [is the] Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!" (Revelation 4:8).

About what God's expectation from us:

"What does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good."
(Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

About God's efforts to draw us to Himself:

"Oh, that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea."
(Isaiah 48:18).

"I will not cause My anger to fall on you, for I am merciful," says the Lord; 'I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God, . . . and you have not obeyed My voice,' says the Lord." (Jeremiah 3:12 – 13).

"Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you." (Isaiah 55:3).

"I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins . . . Return to Me, for I have redeemed you." (Isaiah 44:22).

"He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom." (Isaiah 40:11).

"For thus says the Lord God: 'Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out . . . I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down,' says the Lord God." (Ezekiel 34:11).

600 Years later Jesus said:

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.” (Luke 15:3 – 5).

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd and I know My sheep . . . Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again . . . My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.” (John 10:11 – 17, 27 – 30).

You will have realised that my writing is not a theological paper on the doctrine of God. But, depending on your honesty and openness of heart, you will have picked up some ‘vibes’ from the heart of God. But you will also have detected the intrinsic difference between our views of God, and probably also begin to understand or even appreciate my enthusiasm for Him. Of course, in a letter like this one can only touch on minute aspects of the nature of God, and even that only briefly.

Let me in closing try to sketch with a few words the essence of our differing perceptions of God:

In an effort to honour God, you, as a Muslim, emphasise His power and might. Islam demands submission under the rule of God, and you try to oblige by submitting to its demands. Yet due to your view of God, you cannot have any assurance whatsoever about your standing before God – until Judgement Day.

While Islam maintains that God is tansih, (transcendent in His majestic glory, and detached from all else) the Bible depicts God, while also transcendent, as the immanent One who condescends in love and compassion toward all who seek Him with their whole heart. It is He who in and through Jesus created the way to rescue all who come to Him (without prescribing to Him how He should be) and how to perform his rescue.

Shortly before His death on the cross, Jesus, looking at the people around Him directed these heart-rending words to those who opposed Him:

“How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37).

The obstacle for God is not our sin, for His love has conquered these already, but our unwillingness to receive His gift of love, namely forgiveness through Jesus.

But now I must apologise for the length of this letter! Just realise the relevance of the proverb which says, *“out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.”* Well, that’s the way it is with me when thinking, speaking, or writing about God. (By the way – that proverb also originated from the Bible in Matthew 12:34).

You will agree that this saying is not inappropriate for the topic we touched on.

Sincere greetings!

Theophilus

7. THINKING ON OUR FAILURE REGARDING GOD (SIN)

Dear Abdullah,

In our effort to know God more, we looked at a number of aspects to make us wise. There is another one we dare not skip, a topic which confronts us with a problem that affects us day by day, and which is, consequently, most relevant. It is what God hates.

Some time ago someone asked me why Christians are so ‘obsessed with sin’, as he put it. “Because we offend God when we do what He hates”, I replied. This amounts to spiritual unfaithfulness toward God. When one of the partners in a marriage bond commits adultery, and hides his or her breach of trust from the partner, this may stay unnoticed. Not so with God. Just think, how may the God of righteousness and love feel when we *cheat* Him? Don’t we just behave as though He does not exist, or does not care? You judge for yourself.

Whatever is offensive to the nature or ‘character’ of God is sin. The Bible makes it clear to us who God is, and the way God wants us to be:

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things...

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry...

now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips... Do not lie to each other...

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” (Col 3:2-15)

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about these things.”

(Philippians 4:8)

You and I, and everyone who truly loves God and honours Him in his or her heart, hates to do what hurts God. You may question such a possibility, as Allah is described as *'tansih'*, transcendent, far removed from earthly concerns in His glory. The Bible does not agree with that: *"The Lord saw how great man's wickedness had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was evil all the time. The Lord was grieved . . . and His heart was filled with pain . . ."* (Genesis 6:5-6).

But there is another hard reality, and we know it all too well. At times we are overwhelmed by temptation. At such an occasion, it is greater than our love for God. We do the wrong against better knowledge. We all did it. We all do it from time to time, and hide it, perhaps deny it. At best we are ashamed of it.

The urge to sin is universal. There was only one person who did not yield to sin. Jesus. You probably recall this from 'The Message of Nabi Isa'. But it is part of our nature from childhood on. How often did we lie: "It is not my fault!" Or say, "but this was only a little mistake."

Any honest person with a normally functioning conscience ought to be deeply concerned about our ever present readiness, not to say urge, to think or do what we know to be wrong. Even the prophets in the Bible succumbed to this pressure.

Adam disobeyed God. Abel killed his brother. Noah got deliriously drunk, Lot's daughters slept with their father, Abraham lied to save his skin by declaring his wife to be his sister, Jacob was a deceiver, Moses was a murderer and acted against God's orders, David committed adultery and planned a murder, and so it goes on.

At the very beginning, after Adam was created, God had given man the choice of acting in agreement with, or against Him. Without such an option man would be little more than a programmed robot. He would only be able to act on impulses from outside himself. He would plainly have no choice. He would not be able to love God, neither his fellowman. The ability to choose is foundational to our humanity. Without it there could be neither right, nor wrong. There could be no accountability.

Sadly, we read that Adam and Eve chose to act against God's purpose. Every human being since that time has made the same choice. Adam, as all the people who have lived since then, questioned God's good intentions, and endeavoured to be 'god' over their own lives. But this 'god' is Satan, the deceiver. That is why we cannot stop sinning at will.

The New Testament states a case that we all have to unhesitatingly confirm: *"I do not understand what I do, for what I want to do I do not, but what I hate I do . . . I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out."* (Romans 7:15 – 18).

Are we really like that? Why do we fail? To answer this question rightly, we will have to define the meaning of the word 'sin'.

The exact meaning of the word translated as 'sin' in the Hebrew and Greek (the languages in which the Bible was originally written) is "missing the aim". A warrior takes up bow and arrow, aims and shoots. But the arrow misses! The purpose is not fulfilled. It does not really matter whether he misses by one millimetre or a kilometre. Even his good intention to hit, is ultimately of no consequence. Other meanings of similar words are: departure from a predetermined path, a revolt against legitimate authority, transgression of the law of God, the breaking of a covenant, unfaithfulness, treason and vanity – all in relation to God. At the root lies the "fundamental and positive choice or preference of self instead of God" (A.H. Strong).

The underlying principle governing our inclination to do wrong is explained in the New Testament:

"... the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit (of God), and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." (Galatians 5:17).

I am sure we agree that by virtue of the fact that God created us and is Lord, He can rightfully expect us to think and act in accordance with His will and purpose. To instruct us about this, He has given us His Word, which tells us about the conflict between good and evil, right and wrong, and how to overcome evil. He also tells us about His will for us:

“It is the will of God that you should be holy.” (1 Thessalonians 4:3), and “Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:24).

Holiness is a biblical term and means to be separated for God’s purpose. Of course, this meaning clashes ever so often with our personal will, desires, and interests, which seek self-gratification. While we may strive to honour and please God, the demands of our ‘self’ are, in fact, ever so strong. We do what our desires cry out for.

Religion prescribes to its followers an effort to compensate for sin by doing good.

And that makes us feel good too. “I am able! I can ‘pay the price’ for what we did wrong”. So I do not owe God anything. But God’s righteousness does not work like that, neither does it reflect His mercy and grace.! Good deeds’ are God’s norm! Note what Jesus taught us: *“So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” (Luke:17:10)*

To attest our goodness, we are inclined to compare ourselves with other people, and that may do, to a certain extent, in our human society. But God applies His own divine standard to us. Too many people are wrongly instructed that if 51% or more of what they do complies with God’s laws, it will suffice to take them to paradise or heaven. God thinks differently:

“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking the whole of it.” (James 2:10).

We do not break commandments. We break God’s Law! This verse reveals to us the desperate state in which we find ourselves. We must understand a fundamental truth:

We are not sinners, because sin. But we sin, because we are sinners!

Sin comes naturally. It is our nature to comply with it. We need no training to do it. Whether we like it or not, in each of us is, deeply rooted, the almost irresistible urge to sin. And remember: Sin is all that is contrary to God’s nature. Despite this most lamentable condition, deep in our hearts we want to be pure.

It is touching to read a Psalm of a broken-hearted David, which he prayed after having committed adultery. He had just one wish:

“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin . . . Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight . . . Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God . . . ” (Psalm 51:2, 4, 9 – 10).

King David was distressed when he realised that he had not just sinned against people, but that he had actually sinned against his holy God!

I think I have to stop at this point. There is more than enough to think about. I plan to continue and conclude this subject in my next letter. If you found this letter to be depressing, you are perfectly right. It shows us as who we are. It would be worse to live without the hope for a solution. Fortunately, God offers one!

So then, as-Salam'allay-kum!

Yours sincerely

Theophilus

8. THINKING OF THE NATURE OF GOD (IN A TRINITY)

Dear Abdullah

That you are deeply concerned about your own position before God, is perhaps the (second) best that could ever happen to you. Why? You would not ever bother to search for the Good News, the Gospel, if you knew not the bad news of God's coming Judgment! Jesus once told a man "Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven!" (Matth 9:2). So let us have a look at the cause for the Good News. And that is Jesus. I am aware that you struggle with that. So let us begin with what The Qur'an has to say about Him.

- **He was the Messiah** (Surah An-Nisa, 4:171) (Bible: John 1:41, 4:25, 26). The Qur'an does not define the term 'Messiah'. According to Jewish and Christian understanding the expected Messiah would be sent by God to liberate people from the bondage of sin.
- **He was a Spirit from God** (Surah An-Nisa, 4:171).
- **He was the Word of God** (Surah An-Nisa, 4:171) (Bible: John 1: 1 – 14). We note that the Word of God is the Thought of God and with that, part of God!
- **He created life and healed the sick** (Surah Al-i-Imran, 3:49), (Bible: Matthew 11: 1 – 6).
- **He is a sign to mankind** (Surah Maryam 19:21) (Bible: Luke 2:25 – 32).
- **He is illustrious in the world and the hereafter** (Surah Al-i-Imran, 3:45) (Bible: Hebrews 1 – 3; Colossians 1: 16, 2:9).
- **He was taken to heaven by God** (Surah An-Nisa, 4:158) (Bible: Acts 1:9 – 11).
- **He will come back to earth for judgement** (Surah Az-Zukhruf, 43:61, Mishkat IV. pp. 78 – 80) (Bible: John 14:1 – 6; John 5:22, 25 – 27).
- **He was holy (Pickthall) or faultless (Yusuf Ali)** (Surah Maryam, 19:19) (Bible: Hebrews 7:26).

We already noted in this connection that, against popular belief, both the Bible and the Qur'an do not agree that all prophets were sinless. But Jesus was.

Does all this not raise the intrinsic question on just how 'human' a person can be who unites all the above attributes in himself? Do you actually know of any person who could boast of calling just two of these attributes his or her own? In the case of Jesus, one can only conclude that He is more than human. And that is divine!

Now let me very briefly touch on another point you mentioned and that is causing confusion even among some Christians, the so-called 'trinity' of God. You could not have touched on a topic more difficult to comprehend. To understand this divine concept is equal to the attempt to *understand* who God Himself is. Let me say categorically that Christians are decidedly monotheists! We believe in *one* God, as our Bible teaches:

"The Lord our God is one Lord." (Deuteronomy 6:4).

"I am the Lord your God . . . Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2, 3).

"There is . . . one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:4 – 6).

Both the Old and the New Testament are unanimous on this.

Allow me to simplify a complex concept: I am *one* person, and yet I am made up of three 'components': my body, my soul and my spirit. So I am actually a unity of three, i.e. a trinity. Visible is only my body. I am not I without my body, neither without my soul or spirit. Let me reverently try to use this metaphor on the person of God. The Bible speaks of God as the Creator, the Father. That needs little explanation.

But then it also speaks of God becoming incarnated in human form:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural

descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1: 1 – 5; 9 – 14)

“...Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:5 – 11)

“I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us— yes, the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, “Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me”; and so He became their Savior.” (Isaiah 63:7-8)

*“... in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form...”
(Colossians 2:9)*

He did this to reveal Himself to mankind, and to take up the role of the promised Saviour. Limited by our language, and what humans can perceive, and perhaps for lack of a more illustrative word, God introduced Jesus as his Son. I would like to come to that again a little later again.

The third aspect or facet or ‘component’ is God’s Holy Spirit. By His Spirit God speaks to the hearts and consciences of people. By His Spirit He also leads them (John 16:7 – 15). Evading complicated theological formulations let us simply assume that the *one* God chose to reveal Himself in the *three* mentioned ‘personalities’, ‘forms’, or ‘functions’. Knowing our incapacity to comprehend this, He chose to explain Himself in this way, and that is the way we are meant to understand it. Although my formulation may not be sufficient or comprehensive, it expresses in essence what the concept of the trinity of God is all about.

To help you understand, I like you to consider how you would react when I would claim that the Qur'an teaches that God is two in a duality. There is Allah, and there is the *Ru Allah*.

The name by which God revealed Himself in the Bible is *Yahweh Elohim*. *Yahweh* translated means simply 'Lord'. *Elohim* stands for God. The ending '... *im*' always indicates the masculine plural form of a word. To be exact, this word should actually read 'Gods'. In Deuteronomy 6:4 (given to Moses), we read: "*Yahweh* (the Lord) *Eluhenu* (our Gods) *Yahweh echad* (the Lord is one, or a unity)."

As time went on (8th century before Jesus came), God explained his 'personality' somehow more tangibly through the prophet Isaiah: "*I will tell of the kindness of the LORD – he became their JESHUA (the Hebrew form of the English name 'Jesus', meaning 'Saviour') . . . yet they rebelled and grieved his HOLY SPIRIT*" (Isa. 63:7 – 10).

In the Gospel, Jesus is called both, '**Son of God**' and '**Son of Man**'. Although these names seem to be in opposition to each other, in essence they are the same. That becomes quite clear when we consider a vision the prophet Daniel had:

*"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a **Son of man**, coming with the clouds of heaven . . . He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away."* (Daniel 7:13, 14).

We realise that this does not refer to a human being, and that is what Jesus said He was.

Not with a single word does the Bible even remotely suggest, what most Muslims seem to assume is taught in the Bible, that Christians believe Jesus to be a Son of God resulting from a physical, sexual union between Him and Mary. The attribute 'son' rather suggests that in every sense no one is closer to the father than his son. They are of the same kind. And so it is with God the Father and His son Jesus.

The words 'only begotten Son', as used in an old Bible translation for the Greek word '*mono-genis*', actually mean 'only-born'. The other is an unfortunate wording and can be misleading.

Jesus, while on earth, displayed just about all human characteristics. He was a baby and grew up with His parents. He needed food, drink and sleep. He is reported to have wept. This humanity He inherited from His mother, if I may formulate it like this. But He was sinless, forgave people their sins, walked on the water, calmed the storm, and fed a crowd of some 5000 men plus whoever was present of their families, with five cakes of bread and two fish. He healed countless sick people, had absolute power over the demonic world, and even raised the dead. He Himself rose from the dead and was raised to heaven. All these are the credentials of His divine nature. He did what only God can do. This demonstrates that He was the Son of God.

Please let me still add that I fully appreciate that much of what I wrote to you may overwhelm you. When you hear the words "Son of God", the influence of your Islamic up-bringing, will flash a red light, warning that this is *shirk* (adding a partner to Allah). Since much of what I have written here is flatly contradicting what you have been taught since childhood, you just got to apply your mind in addition to your feelings. Weigh the evidence that God alone could provide, to help you make the right decision.

You have already signalled your agreement that the Bible is proven to be the revelation from almighty God. Will you resist, or even oppose Him just because you are (still) tuned to misunderstand this mystery of God? I do not want to be a scare monger, but when dealing with the Gospel Truth we have to be dead serious about it. Believe God and what He has said about Jesus.

Keep well! Keep true!

I trust I will hear from you soon!

Fond greetings!

Theophilus

9. THINKING ABOUT FORGIVENESS AND RESTORATION (SALVATION)

Dear Abdullah

Thank you for your last letter! It actually was an unexpected surprise to me! Thank you very much for your effort to reply in such a comprehensive and understanding manner!

I do admit that my last letter contained depressing news from God, when we look at the universality and severity of sin. Maybe this is best understood when looking at our Test Stone that Jesus calls the 'Great Commandment'. It really is the sum total of the Law of God and the Ten Commandments:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . and . . . love your neighbour as yourself!" (Matthew 22:37, 39).

This is God's plan and desire for us. Anything short of that is 'missing the aim'. You will recall this allegory from my last letter.

Yet we may well be governed by our self-will, and or self-gratification instead of God's will. We say that we believe in God, but often act quite differently. But sin has consequences. The Bible simply states:

"Your iniquities have separated you from your God" (Isaiah 59:2).

Sin is like a 'red card', given to a foul player in a soccer match. It means: "You are out!"

The last book in the Bible records a vision of the devastating consequence of sin with a most tragic end:

"I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened . . . The dead were judged according to what they had done according to the books." (Revelation 20:12).

On Judgement Day everybody receives what he or she deserves. It is the execution of God's righteousness.

The Judge will be Jesus, as He Himself stated:

“When the Son of man (i.e. Jesus) comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left . . . Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world’ . . . Then He will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’, then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31 – 34, 41, 46).

Who then are the “blessed by my Father”, that inherit the Kingdom of God? Are these people sinless? When we look at the passage carefully, we will notice, that it is not those who *deserve* to be in God’s presence, but those who *inherit* it. How can this be understood? The heirs of someone are (as a rule) his children. They do not inherit their fortune because they deserve it, but because they are the children of the testator.

In New Testament terms, every person that asks for and receives God’s pardon through or from Jesus, becomes by that virtue a child of God, and belongs to His family, because the barrier, separating us from God, is removed. Being a child of God then, we can confidently call God our Father! But to belong to ‘the family of God’, one must be born into it. It says of Jesus:

“He came to that which was His own (i.e. the Jews), but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name (Jesus means Saviour, Rescuer), He gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” (John 1:10 – 13).

“When the Son of man (i.e. Jesus) comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left . . . Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take

your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world' . . . Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels', then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (Matthew 25:31 – 34, 41, 46).

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Explaining this, Jesus said:

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water (natural element) and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" (John 3:3 – 7).

It requires some serious thinking to understand the deeper meaning of this metaphor. We are all alive, because we were born into this world. That was our physical birth. To be truly *human* the way God intended it, we must also be *spiritual*. Without a spiritual birth a person is spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-3).

The spiritual birth into the 'family' of God is affected through faith in Jesus. By this rebirth we become children of God and by that also His heirs. (Romans 8:17, Galatians 3:29).

Having understood this, we will become aware of an important statement in the New Testament:

“Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. Through faith, not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians. 2:4 – 5, 8, 9).

Because we all have sinned, we all totally depend on God's mercy. Always. Continuously. Try as we may, our old nature just does not always comply. As long as we are in this life, we are subjected to temptation. But read this:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything... Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.” (James 1:2-4 and 12)

God turns our temptation to sin into a test to prove our loyalty to Him, and an act of maturing for us.

Let us review: The Law of God shows us His character and divine standard. It merely determines what is right and what is wrong, but it cannot *make* us right:

“Know that a man is not justified by observing the law, rather through the Law we become conscious of sin.” (Romans 3:20).

That is why God, in His mercy, offers us His own righteousness. Speaking about the Jews who rigidly tried to keep the Law, the New Testament says:

“I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.” (Romans 10:2, 3).

That is why it says of Abraham, the father of faith, that...

"... he believed God and He credited it to him as righteousness." Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:3, 20-22).

I just wonder now, how you, as a Muslim, will react to this (for you) possibly very foreign message or revelation. That, in fact, *is* the Gospel! It tells you – as it did to the Jews – that by trying to establish merit or righteousness before God, you actually do *not* submit to God!

"So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith." (Galatians 3:24)

The basis of our faith in God is that we can do nothing to earn eternal life, but depend on His rescue, and that is called salvation. Salvation is to be forgiven, pardoned. Actually, it is more than a pardon that is offered to us. God actually says:

"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34).

"You (God) will cast all our sins into the depth of the sea." (Micah 7:19).

"As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12).

That is 'Good News', and that is what the word Gospel actually means. God not only undertakes to forgive and to pardon us, but He actually promises to forget our sins. They are gone! No more there! He makes us as pure as though we had never sinned. Our heavenly records are clean. Our names are recorded in the 'Book of Life' (see also Daniel 12:1; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 20:12,15; 21:27). That is the deciding factor which determines our entrance into God's eternal glory. In short, we have been reconciled to God and are at peace with Him:

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ." (2 Corinthians 5:18).

You will now understand why we Christians rely so much on Jesus. He is our only chance. Jesus himself said:

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6).

Let us consider once more a question that has been asked repeatedly: “Why should anyone try to perform good deeds, when their sins will be forgiven anyway”. Well, we want to please our Father! It is out of gratitude for having saved us! Because:

“ . . . The love of Christ compels us.” (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Now you want to ask me, where are those Christians who are committed to live like this? You find them in every country and every society, in some more – in others less. Their numbers are not big and more often than not they are not in the limelight. But if you search for them, you will find them. But please take note again; they are not (yet) perfect. Perfection cannot be found on this side of the grave. But they will have a commitment that is already reflected in the Bible:

“Not that I have already obtained all this . . . But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal . . . for which God has called me.” (Philippians. 3:12 – 14).

With sincere greetings, I am

Yours faithfully

Theophilus

10. THINKING ON THE DEATH OF JESUS

Dear Abdullah,

I thank God that your response to my last letter showed me that, besides the faith in your heart, you also see the need to apply your mind, your intelligence, and with it sound judgment, to matters of faith. I strongly believe it to be necessary to stand firmly on both legs (heart and mind) in this world of lies and deception.

Using one of these 'legs' alone, makes us vulnerable. We can easily topple over, become one-sided, or unbalanced. In addition we may well become unteachable, simplistic, and even fanatic. To protect us from such, God has given us an intellect and the ability to scrutinise, compare, and draw conclusions. So let us then honestly investigate the matter of truth and then let us yield ourselves in obedience and worship to the only true God.

Apart from the controversial concept of the divinity of Jesus, at which we looked earlier, the cross is likely to be the most emotionally loaded topic in conversations between Christians and Muslims. As I stated before, I like you to remember that everything I say is not done to hurt you or to win an argument. The possibility that I might hurt your feelings, and the possibility that you might misunderstand the Gospel because of my poor communication, weighs heavily on me. Even so, we must not avoid 'hot' subjects, but rather tackle them in love.

We are both aware of the contradicting statements in our respective 'Books'. The Qur'an clearly states:

"... they (i.e. the Jews) killed him (i.e. Jesus) not, nor crucified him . . . only a likeness of that was shown to them... for a surety they killed him not" (Surah An-Nisa, 4:157).

The context explains that the crucifixion and death of Jesus only appeared to have taken place. The court and police officials, the Roman soldiers who conducted the execution and the onlookers at that specific occasion, only imagined what they saw. The words "only a likeness of that was shown to them but God took Jesus to Himself", later led to the assumption that someone else, some say Judas, was crucified instead.

In contrast to that the crucifixion and death of Jesus fills about one third of the four biographical accounts that are actually named Gospels, record the narrative of the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus. In the New Testament the cross is mentioned 23 times, and the verb crucify 49 times. You will remember that even in the Old Testament the crucifixion and death can be found in the form of prophecies, which were fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus.

It is beyond doubt that both above versions cannot be true. Instead of entrenching ourselves and arguing against each other to defend our conviction, as it is often done, we rather use our objective 'leg' again. So let us consider the supporting evidence to secure the right conclusion.

In an earlier letter I have already mentioned the evidence of fulfilled prophecy, acknowledged eyewitness reports, and contemporary historical reports. All speak so unequivocally in support of Jesus' crucifixion and death. All this evidence is contradicted by just one allegation, stated 600 years after the recorded event, and which supplies no evidence for this claim at all.

I am tempted to repeat our supporting evidence (as presented in my third letter), but will rely on your good memory. I am equally tempted to share with you the biblical teaching on the need for a sacrifice for the remission of sin. This was an essential part of and the basis for obtaining forgiveness, and with that reconciliation with God, under the Law of Moses. Every sacrifice pointed to the future, when Jesus would come to replace these symbols by sacrificing Himself. The former offerings were just shadows of things to come, to use a biblical term.

John the Baptist, recognising Jesus, pointed to Him and said:
"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

While still alive, Jesus spoke to His disciples about Himself, explaining:
"The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the Law. They will condemn Him to death and will turn Him over to the Gentiles (non-Jews) to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life!" (Matthew 20:18 – 19).

Further He said:

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28).

And that was the way it happened. To further illustrate this event, let me use an historical event, which can serve as a parable.

Shamuël was a Caucasian prince, living a couple of hundred years ago. His people, living in south-west Russia, were involved in constant warfare with the Turks. Once he, with his army, besieged a Turkish city. As in all her son's excursions, his mother accompanied him. One night he planned a surprise assault, but the enemy was lying in wait. His secret plans had been betrayed. The battle was lost. Distressed, Shamuël announced that the traitor, when caught, would be punished with 100 lashes of a whip. In great secrecy another attack was planned – but the result was the same. They had been betrayed again. But this time the traitor was caught. It was Shamuël's mother.

In anguish he withdrew to his tent for three days and nights. What should he do? What would be the right thing to do? Should he spare his mother, all could rightly claim that justice was distorted. Were he to punish her, however, all might say: “Look at that merciless and cruel man! He does not even show compassion and pity for his own mother!” At last he appeared. His men gathered around him curiously. Standing on his horse to be seen by all, he addressed them: “We lost two battles because of treason. We lost many a man as a result of this. There is no excuse for the action of the traitor. The crime was committed, and so punishment shall be meted out according to our law with 100 lashes! Righteousness and justice must be upheld!”

His mother was led into the circle that opened up around the men. She was pale, trembling with fear. The executioner lifted his whip – but before the first strike came down on her back, Shamuël shouted: “Stop! Hang on! This is my mother; I am of her flesh and blood. I will take the punishment for her!” He entered the circle, bared his back and commanded: “Executioner, strike! But not lighter than with the last offender. Do your duty!” Lash after lash came down, until he lost consciousness. Against

expectation Shamuël did survive his ordeal. Will we ever know how his mother felt about what she had caused to her son? Shame, wonder, or love resulting from the behaviour of her son must have overcome her.

This event, perhaps more than others in history, illustrates the way Jesus did. He died in our stead. He took our place:

“He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree (cross), by His wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24).

It was not just the physical pain, bad as it was, that caused the suffering of Jesus, the only ever sinless and pure person. It was that He who took on Himself the ugly filth of our sin, as the prophet Isaiah foresaw in a vision from God 750 years earlier:

“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6)

God’s righteousness and love met at the cross of Jesus.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

This happened once and for all. This sacrifice for sin is sufficient for all men at all times, and therefore never needs to be repeated. It is God’s grace in action. It is God’s gift to us. A gift, however, becomes mine only when I am ready and willing to accept it. Listen to another illustration: A couple of hundred years ago a certain Austrian painter was commissioned to paint a picture of the crucifixion. He had composed the scene and had selected and painted all the models. Only one white space was still open on his large canvas. It was kept open for Mary Magdalene. She had been a prostitute who found forgiven by Jesus, and had become one of His devoted followers. The painter just could not find the right model. Walking through the streets of Vienna one day, he was struck by the features of a Gypsy woman. That was his “missing person!” She agreed to sit for him as a model and he took her to the studio where the painting was waiting to be completed.

The woman looked intently at the painting and said “That man on the cross must have been a horrible criminal to deserve a punishment like this”. “No”, replied the painter, “on the contrary. He was a very good man indeed!” “But why then did the people kill him?”, the Gypsy inquired. The painter explained: “He actually died for the sins that we have committed”. “For yours as well?”, the girl asked after a thoughtful silence. “Yes”, replied the artist truthfully. “Then you must love him very much indeed”, concluded the ignorant Gypsy.

These words struck home, for up to that point he had been a Christian by name only. He knew the stories about Jesus, but never personally accepted or applied the deeper meaning of this message to himself. At that moment his eyes were opened. He recognised what Jesus had done for him, personally, and was overcome by love for Him. So this incident became the turning point in his life. The Bible calls such a happening conversion, which means change – a change of heart.

We listened to subject matters that are far from small talk. We thought, weighed, questioned and tested ‘things’ that are ‘out of this world’. We discovered that God reached down as far as our personal minds and hearts. Because He wants us to trust Him, He led us to discover His own trustworthiness by leading our minds to discover it within His prophetic speaking of old, and our knowledge of its fulfilment.

Now we can know who God is, even though in this life we cannot fully comprehend Him. We also found out more about Jesus, God’s salvation for us. Last not least, we also discovered which ‘Book’ carries a divine imprint, and which we can trust and consult it regarding our life on earth and in eternity. In a way we even discovered the heart of God, who said:

“I long to redeem them...” (Hosea 7:13)

Just think of such a statement to a selfish, materialistic, and dishonest people! And to you, very personally.

All this knowledge from and about God demands our decision: Will we commit ourselves to Him, whatever the cost? Whoever declines this – has already decided to live and die without Him:

“This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life.”

(Deuteronomy 30:19).

And what do I do?

“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he (Jesus) has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance.” (Ephesians 1:18)

Yours sincerely

Theophilus

LAST WORD

Dear Friend,

We are convinced that you have benefited from these letters. Answering the following questions will help you to a deeper evaluation, and give us insight into your reflections.

We will reward your efforts with another booklet from our publications.

1. What kind of “common ground” do Christians and Muslims share?
2. Give us your opinion to the author’s appeal “Would it not be better to honestly face the issues and be determined to find the Truth together?”
3. Can you give us any answers to the questions “Who”, “When”, and “Where” with regard to the alleged corruption of the Bible?
4. How can we know whether a prophet has told the truth or not? Substantiate your answer from Scripture.
5. Why is it so important to realize that truth and love belong together?
6. What should be our reaction to the discovery of the fundamental differences between Islam and the Biblical revelation?
7. What do you see as the problem with Dr. Bucaille’s reasoning about the scientific revelations he claims to have found in the Qur’an?
8. What is the difference between the two statements “Sin is what we do” and “Sin is what we are”?
9. Describe in your own words what “faith” means according to the Bible. Then explain what it means in Islam?
10. Who is Jesus according to the Qur’an? Make a list of all titles and descriptions.
11. Why does the cross of Jesus divide mankind into two groups of people?
12. What actually is the true meaning of “conversion”? Have you experienced conversion and, if so, what does it mean to you?