

Praise for This Book

Dr. Mahmoud M. Ayoub, Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations Hartford Seminary, Hartford CT:

(This book) by Ace Knight is an engaging analysis of the life and mission of the two kindred religious personages, John the Baptist (*Yahya*) and Jesus (*'Isa*). Even though the central argument of the book, namely that the man who was hung on the cross was John and not Jesus, may be academically open to question as it rests on circumstantial evidence, the book will add much to the discussion of an epoch-making event that has shaped world history.

The book is informative and entertaining. It is certainly worth reading.

Dr. Harte Weiner, Lead Editor, Ph.D., Stanford University:

Ace Knight is a first generation American of Albanian descent. He is devoted to a few things. One is his family, another is his religion, and yet a third is intellectual and spiritual religious inquiry. His book is a tribute to this devotion and inquiry. It is a brilliant and original look at the Gospels and the Quran, as well as the earlier Mosaic texts. In this book, the self-taught Knight, with no formal education, points out linguistic and spiritual parallels between generations of key characters in three religious histories. A devout and inquiring Muslim, using the close reading of the Quran as his guide, Knight, is able to look back at the central story of the crucifixion through a new lens, the Muslim lens, using key passages from a number of religious scriptures to build a fascinating new argument. His thoughts, insights and interpretations are remarkable, profound, and leave the reader in awe.

Ace Knight notices that a son is born to the prophet Zachariah at about the same time as a son is born to Mary. He systematically and spellbindingly leads us through the parallels between these two prophets, the second of whom we have come to know as Jesus. Both are raised in secrecy, and bring prophesy and healing. Both are spared somehow the decree of Herod at birth, only to befall religious ostracism and apparent physical mutilation beheading/crucifixion at the time of apparent earthly death.

Knight takes us through the similarities in these prophet's lives, their coming into the lives of their parents, as the sons had done, in response to prayer, or in the unlikely moment,

for Mary, of her chastity. The coming together of Zachariah and Mary is cemented with the former shielding Mary from harm as her foster-father. Knight brings us back further in scriptural history to draw other such parallels when it comes to prophets, and he draws upon the Arabic roots of the names of these figures, from Adam to Zachariah's son, to convince the reader of his novel contribution to scriptural reading. But I'm not going to give that away! For that, you must read the book yourself!

This book is slim, but both erudite and yet easy to follow, in its step by step progression through the many scriptures, seemingly so familiar is Ace Knight with every passage, the apt ones come easily to mind for him, and strike an immediate cord in us, no matter how familiar or unfamiliar we are with the text and story. And yet, this book is no recipe for persuasion. It is much more sophisticated than that. Written in a devout and true Muslim spirit, it is also—as mentioned at the beginning of this review—an inquiry and a wholly new contribution to that body of sculptural scholarship.

Ace Knight advances a theory which sheds an entirely novel light on the views that are commonplace today, and, through an examination of linguistics, passages, intent, and meaning, causes us to re-examine, in an exciting, clue-ridden way, what we have assumed to be true about the three major religions for centuries, concentrating on his own Muslim faith.

Dr. Jay R. Crook, author of *The Bible: An Islamic Perspective*:

Ace Knight's controversial book, vigorously challenges the conventional view of John the Baptist as little more than the baptizer of Jesus and the herald of his messiahship. The result of years of study, it expounds his revolutionary theories about the life, work, and significance of the neglected prophet.

The John/Yahya that Knight's work brings forth from the shadows of history is a major prophet in his own right, with an independent stature and mission. The book is a thought-provoking and fascinating re-examination of the prophet's place in history.

Award-winning journalist Tim King:

If all of Ace Knight's research and the conclusions he draws from it prove to be valid, then the traditional view of John the Baptist/Yahya, both scholarly and conventional, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, will be subjected to a tidal wave of revision and reconsideration. This will also affect most extant translations of the Quran into English, with the exception of The

Sublime Quran by Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar which incorporates all of his results that relate to Quranic verses.

Additionally, the great collections of medieval Islamic commentaries, both Sunni and Shiah, which often repeat such colorful Biblical stories as the beheading of John the Baptist, will have to be viewed more critically. Such revisionism is sure to meet with a strong opposition.

Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar, Chicago:

There are two methods of gaining knowledge in the great religious traditions of the world in general, and Islam, in particular. One method is knowledge that is imitated (*taqlid*) or transmitted by hearsay from generation to generation like the sciences of language, history and law. With this method, a person never asks “Why?” but accepts what is taught by an authority. In the Islamic tradition this leads to *ijtihad*, *ijtihad* specifically referring to developing expertise in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) to the level of being able to use independent judgment in understanding Islamic law (Shariah). Such a person is known as a *mujtahid*. Whoever is not a *mujtahid*, whoever has not reached that level, must “imitate” or “follow” a person who has, whether that person is dead (Sunni Muslims) or alive (Shia Muslims).

The second method of gaining knowledge is what is of most interest to us in this book review, that of *tahqiq* or intellectual knowledge where one may have a teacher for guidance but it is knowledge that cannot be passed from one generation to another. Each person has to discover it for himself or herself by “polishing the heart,” by becoming a person who sees with the eye of Oneness or *tawhid*, a person who deeply senses his responsibility to God, His creation and His humanity.

The person who gains knowledge with this method is called “a seeker of truth” (*muhaqqiq*). Intellectual knowledge (*tahqiq*) builds on transmitted knowledge but goes deeper. Transmitted knowledge includes memorizers of the Quran and the Hadith but only with intellectual knowledge can one understand what God and the Prophet are saying. Those who lack this intellectual endeavor have, one might say, not sought the means to see with the eye of “Oneness.” Questions like “why” are not the only ones that the intellect of the seeker of truth asks because the underlying distinction is to think, “to think for oneself,” and not to stop at “imitation alone.”

Not everyone has been burdened with this capacity as the Quran says in 2:286, but one person who has is Ace Knight. He is a seeker of truth, seeker of the Reality (*haqq*), a person

who has verified knowledge, not on the basis of imitating the opinion of others, but on the basis of having realized the truth for himself as well as being one who acts in accord with *haqq*, all the time realizing his belief in the One God, the one creation and the one humanity. A faith tradition may survive without a living *mujtahid*, but it rapidly disappears without a living *muhaqqiq*. Without a living seeker of truth, a seeker of reality, the faith tradition cannot remain faithful to its principles because it cannot understand those principles.

A faith tradition may survive without a living *mujtahid*, but it rapidly disappears without a living *muhaqqiq*. Without a living seeker of truth, a seeker of reality, the faith tradition cannot remain faithful to its principles because it cannot understand those principles. Ace Knight's basic premise is to follow the Quran and the New Testament which all assert that Jesus is the Messiah. However according to the Quran and the Hadith, it only appeared to the people who bore witness to the Messiah that he had been crucified.

In reality, according to the intellectual endeavor of the author, it was "he who lives" (*Yahya*), the Concealer of Secrets (*hasura*), as the Quran refers to him who was placed on the cross and lived, a view held by early Christian Gnostics as well, but later declared to be a heresy. The Concealer of Secrets concealed the secret of his identity and that of the Messiah in order to save the Messiah. The Messiah was then allowed to carry on his prophetic mission (perhaps traveling even as far as Kashmir where many believe that he is buried).

At the same time that Mary retired to a sanctuary, Zechariah becoming her protector, Zechariah prayed for an heir. The son of Mary was close in age to the son of man (the Concealer of Secrets fathered by Zechariah). They may have even been cousins who resembled one another. They both began their prophetic mission around the same time yet neither revealed themselves as to who they actually were. The author traces these and other parallels in the lives of the son of Mary and the son of man for a fascinating read. In the great tradition of seekers of truth in the past, Ace Knight brings harmony to ancient mysteries. He shows the possibility of how thing may be in the Presence of the Oneness of God and he does so through scriptures – the Quran, Hadith and the New Testament. This is a book that should be read by everyone who wants to discern the Reality of the story of the Messiah.

M. Dennis Paul Ph.D., Creator of Thought Addiction programs:

I am impressed with the amount of detail Ace, as well as his editor and good friend Jay Crook, have used in composing this remarkable thesis. No easy task, Ace sets about trying to justify, clarify, and rectify, as applicable, the disparities within various retellings of the history of John the Baptist and his relationship to Jesus the Christ. It is apparent to some that political movements of the time either changed, restricted or completely eliminated various contributions to the bible. It is conceivable that all such scriptural offerings in all the various religions underwent various pressures of a similar type.

Ace opens several windows with which to air questions and suggestions that might lead to greater reasoning, awareness and understanding... part of a great gift we often take for granted (or, in some cases, refuse to employ). It is telling that some men will welcome a flame with which they may explore caverns of thought previously cursed by darkness while others will curse the flame and cling to the walls of darkness swearing that this is all there is... and all that should be. My brother Ace is most definitely the former.

Lisa Spaulding, journalist and researcher:

It is said that history is written by the winners. As one engaged in research and journalism and who keeps that old saw in mind, I am always interested in new ideas and new interpretations of accepted truths. This carefully researched study of one of the most important events in human history certainly answers to both of those interests.

The author re-examines the conventional ideas about the relationship between the Baptist and the Christ that most people have accepted for centuries as gospel truth. He uncovers manifest discrepancies in the biblical narratives that have dominated European and even Muslim thought and, moreover, between them and lesser-known external sources such as the writings of Josephus.

The calm logic of his analyses overturn convention and lead inexorably to startling new visions of John and Jesus and even the Passion itself.

This is a well-written and interesting book. It is recommended reading for those interested in redressing the distortions of "history written by the winners."

Roger H. Sigal, Trial Attorney – Tucson, Arizona:

Mr. Knight has reflected an unparalleled inner commitment towards becoming a more spiritually-evolved and God-devoted person, and towards unraveling the truths and myths behind the Islamic, Judaic and Christian theologies. This substantial piece of scholarship is the result of the years of devotion to which Mr. Knight has dedicated himself, towards understanding, questioning, and seeking new perspectives on the religious traditions and issues of our times.

Professor P. Dreier/Encore Music Academy:

A More Likely Scenario. An Inspiring Read.

A well written and well thought out alternative to what was at best a problematic and most likely fictitious account of the personalities involved in the crucifixion. Knight's evidence to support his supposition is very strong, much stronger than can be found in the new testament. A very enlightening and entertaining read.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1974 of Albanian descent, Ace Knight is largely self-educated in Islam. He attended classes in New Jersey about religious tenets and the doctrinal differences among the various Islamic sects under the tutelage of a shaykh. While there, he participated by giving lectures on Christian doctrines. He also studied the proper recitation of the Quran to such a degree of proficiency that he was selected to perform the call to prayer because of the excellence of his voice and pronunciation.

His eagerness to learn more about Islam motivated him to travel to North Africa in order to engage in dialogue with various scholars there. Since then, he has been working in the study, research, and writing about things Islamic, with a special interest in comparative religion. He developed a particular interest in the prophet Yahya (John the Baptist). In 2008, he published his *Ihya al-Nabi Yahya*, from which the present, more comprehensive study of Yahya has evolved.

Knight's work on some key words in the Quran has been referenced in Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar's *The Concordance of the Sublime Quran*, a supplemental study resulting from translation of the Quran, *The Sublime Quran*, the first such translation by an American Muslim woman. His work motivated Dr. Jay R. Crook to write the essay *Rethinking John the Baptist*.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Toni L. Taylor is a visionary artist whose work travels through the realms of fantasy and mysticism. She feels a special kinship with the mysteries of Ancient Egypt as well as the spirit of Native America. Goddess imagery is represented powerfully in her collection and as a lover of all things celestial; the beauty and limitlessness of the cosmos often finds its way into her paintings.

Toni's creative history includes commercial illustration, the fantasy and visionary facets of fine art, scenic painting and she now has a new passion for creating copper wire sculptures. Her fine oil paintings are inspired by her beliefs, desires, and inner visions. Always attracted to the unusual, her subjects will range from angels, whom she deeply believes in, to dragons—and she will be quick to tell you her beloved dragons are benevolent and wise—as are the rest of her characters. She says of her work, “When people view my creations, I want them to feel as though they’re taking a journey of the mind while tapping into the ethereal and otherworldly. My desire is to touch some part of their souls, allowing them to dream their dreams, stimulate their own imaginations while elevating their spirits.”

Having had no formal training, Toni considers herself ‘life taught’ and her gift a blessing from God/Universe. She was born to be an artist, beginning at the tender age of three with crayons. Now her preferred mediums are oil and pencil. Her professional career began in 1985 with a cover for Heavy Metal Magazine, of which she was an avid collector. She was commissioned for another in 1991. Since then she has worked with various clients such as The Miller Brewing Company, Marvel Comics, Black Enterprise Magazine, MBI—Easton Press, Inner Traditions—Destiny Books, U.S. Games, American Kennel Club, PolyGram, GRP, RCA, EMI, Island Records, Creative Kingdom's Magic Quest and as a scenic artist at Disney and Universal Studios among other projects.

She contributed her scenic skills to both installations of The Wizarding World of Harry Potter Hogsmeade and Gringotts Bank in Daigon Alley. Toni especially enjoys catering to private collectors. She teaches private art lessons and workshops to aspiring students from beginners and intermediates. Her work has been shown at local galleries such as Avalon Island, City Arts Factory, Om Lab Gallery, Orlando Museum of Art, the Shakespeare Theatre in Loch Haven, Café Tu Tu Tango, The Hyder Gallery and Gods & Monsters in Orlando. Toni is also self-published with 18 images in print and 24 greeting cards with astrological, angelic and goddess imagery. She includes portraits and custom murals in her repertoire and has exhibited her work at galleries, conventions and festivals from Boston to Dallas.

Bill Moyers once asked Joseph Campbell, a scholar, writer and the preminent authority on mythology before his passing, “Who interprets the divinity in nature for us today? Who are our shamans? Who interprets unseen things for us?”

Campbell replied, “It is the function of the artist to do this. The artist is the one who communicates myth for today.” He added, “If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are, if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you all the time.”

Contact: Phone: [407-515-0885](tel:407-515-0885) ~ Email: Visionary-art@att.net

THE BLACK PROPHET

HE LIVES

By

Ace Knight

Edited and Annotated by

Jay R. Crook, Ph.D.

StudioAceBoston

The Black Prophet: He Lives © 2008-2016, Ace Knight

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Cover Art by Toni L. Taylor

Published by
Ace Knight
StudioAceBoston
StudioAceBoston@gmail.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	15
Abbreviations	19
THE REVIVAL OF CHIEF YAHYA	21
Was Chief Yahya/John the Baptist Beheaded?	27
<i>Shubbiha</i> , Mistaken Identity?	32
THE BLACK PROPHET	
The Message	39
Another Look	45
The Return of the Messengers	63
Secrecy	72
Who Is Who?	76
The Disciples	89
The Final Act to Provoke the Jews	100
A Striking Resemblance	111
Afterword	118
Bibliography	121
TIM KING DISCUSSES JOHN THE BAPTIST WITH ACE KNIGHT	124

*“John the Baptist has been misrepresented by scholars
of both Christianity and Islam.”*
—Ace Knight

INTRODUCTION

In this book, Ace Knight offers a fresh interpretation of the momentous events on a hillock beyond the walls of Jerusalem nearly two millennia ago: the Crucifixion. Knight asks disconcerting questions about the received version of gospel “history” and gives free rein to his inquisitive nature. Many of his ideas and speculations will strike the casual reader schooled in the ancient Biblical traditions with which they conflict as unhistorical, impossible, and unbelievable. Yet, when questioning established premises, the impossible may often be shown to be possible, as Socrates was fond of doing.

Mr. Knight does not claim to be *proving* anything, except that with some speculation and reinterpretation of the Biblical record and relevant Quranic texts, when coupled with a few remarks from Josephus, the whole traditional version of the Crucifixion can be seen in a different light. Knight throws new ideas and new possibilities at the reader, asking only that they be considered. Like a barrage of rockets shot into the moonless night sky, some flaring more brightly than the others, some of his speculations are more plausible than others, but all are provocative and worth thinking about. His is the first innovative interpretation of the Crucifixion since Dr. Hugh Schonfield looked at it two generations ago.

Beyond that, Knight has taken upon himself the task of redressing the imbalance between the gospel Jesus and the gospel John the Baptist and, in our opinion, has done so with justice on his side. The gospel writers diminished John in order to exalt Jesus and transform him into a superhuman, divine entity. While their motives are understandable, the researcher who seeks to explore unanswered questions and obscure “competitors” to the demigod they were creating, is understandably frustrated and can only mourn the lost evidence. This is particularly true for John the Baptist. In the New Testament, he is a minor figure, his purpose is to introduce and validate the mission of his kinsman Jesus as the Messiah.

Knight asks why was John the Baptist so used by the gossellers and then dismissed to the limbo of silence, together

with the Essenes who, though a considerable presence in the Palestine of the day, are not even mentioned by them? He was intrigued by that question and began to study the references to John, gradually conceiving unprovable, but provocative theories. His work became known to a mutual friend, the author of a number of valuable books and articles on various aspects of Islamica, Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar—who also became interested in John the Baptist, and through her, I was introduced to him. At first, I was rather skeptical, but was persuaded to look into the historical injustice done to John. (He is much better served in the Quran than he is in the Bible.) Having trusted her instincts over the years in such things in my own literary projects, and with her continuous encouragement and suggestions, I set to work. The result of my own inquiry, the monograph *Rethinking John the Baptist*, is appended to the present volume.

Meanwhile, Ace Knight continued his own research, examining new evidence while elaborating and working out his theories and speculations. The results of this work constitute the main portion of this volume that is dedicated to the rehabilitation of the repute and stature of that much neglected prophet, John the Baptist, known in the Islamic world as Yahya. I was pleased to be chosen as his editor and annotator for this book.

The reader may note that when Jesus and John are mentioned in their Biblical and Western context in this book, they are referred to as John and Jesus, or John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ. However, in an Islamic context the Quranic names are generally used: for John, *Yahya*; and for Jesus *Isa*. We hope that this does not cause undo confusion.

We have used Pickthall's admirable translation as the starting point for all of the translations of Quranic verses. However, we have made one consistent change in his work: substituting the English "God" for the Arabic "Allah" to avoid the invidious connotation that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are talking about different Supreme Beings. (After all, Christian Arabs also call God "Allah.") We have also made some modifications based upon Knight's interpretations.

We have used the *Revised Standard Version* of the Holy Bible (RSV) as the basis for Biblical quotations. We have also

consulted other translations of the Bible, principally the *King James Version* (KJV) and the scholarly *Jerusalem Bible* (JB). We have also had occasion to refer to the Hebrew text with parallel English translation issued by the Hebrew Publishing Company of New York.

In our Biblical quotations we have restored the distinction between second-person singular *thou* and plural pronouns *ye* (with attendant verb changes), because we feel strongly that an important distinction is often lost by ignoring this difference. Is the addressee an individual or a group? Many times in order to clarify the matter we have had to refer back to the KJV, the magnificent prose of which—though not so accurate in places as that of the RSV—maintains that distinction. However, when the Bible is being quoted in the context of a direct quotation taken from another source, we have usually respected the author's usage in such matters, though on occasion we have also made some alterations in punctuation and capitalization of a minor nature to improve readability.

Biblical quotations are designated in the standard fashion, using the abbreviated name of the book, the chapter, colon, and verse or verses. The fourth verse of chapter one of *Genesis* = Gen. 1:4. The abbreviations used to designate the various books of the Bible will be found in the list following this Foreword. As in the case of the Quran, we are responsible for the final form of the quotations.

Italics are used in quotations from the Quran, for names of Biblical books and other writings when they occur in our text, especially where there is likely to be confusion between the name of the writer and his work as, for example: "The disciple Matthew is the putative author of *Matthew*." The phrase "May the blessings and peace of God be upon him!" uttered following the Prophet's name and similar phrases honoring other Prophets and the Companions are not indicated in our text, but should be uttered by the Muslim reader either aloud or in his heart when they occur.

We would remind the reader that this contains both fact and speculative theory. We hope that we have made the difference between the two clear in the text and notes. We do not

claim to have said the last word about John the Baptist, but we offer our opinions and speculations in the hope that we may stimulate others to join us in the project to restore John/Yahya to his proper rank and dignity among the prophets. *And God knows best!*

THE EDITOR

Abbreviations for the Books of the Bible

<i>Old Testament</i>	<i>OT</i>	<i>New Testament</i>	<i>NT</i>
Genesis	Gen.	Matthew	Mt.
Exodus	Ex.	Mark	Mk.
Leviticus	Lev.	Luke	Lk.
Numbers	Num.	John	Jn.
Deuteronomy	Deut.	Acts	Acts
Joshua	Josh.	Romans	Rom.
Judges	Jgs.	1 Corinthians	1 Cor.
Ruth	Ruth	2 Corinthians	2 Cor.
1 Samuel	1 Sam.	Galatians	Gal.
2 Samuel	2 Sam.	Ephesians	Eph.
1 Kings	1 K.	Philippians	Ph.
2 Kings	2 K.	Colossians	Col.
1 Chronicles	1 Ch.	1 Thessalonians	1 Th.
2 Chronicles	2 Ch.	2 Thessalonians	1 Th.
Ezra	Ezra	1 Timothy	1 Tim.
Nehemiah	Neh.	2 Timothy	2 Tim.
Esther	Est.	Titus	Titus
Job	Job	Philemon	Phlm.
Psalms	Ps.	Hebrews	Heb.
Proverbs	Prbs.	James	Jas.
Ecclesiastes	Ecc.	1 Peter	1 P.
Song of Solomon	Song	2 Peter	2 P.
Isaiah	Is.	1 John	1 Jn.
Jeremiah	Jer.	2 John	2 Jn.
Lamentations	Lam.	3 John	3 Jn.
Ezekiel	Ezek.	Jude	Jude
Daniel	Dan.	Revelation	Rev.
Hosea	Hos.		
Joel	Joel		
Amos	Amos		
Obadiah	Ob.		
Jonah	Jonah		
Micah	Mic.		
Nahum	Mic.		
Habakkuk	Hab.		
Zephaniah	Zeph.		
Haggai	Hag.		
Zechariah	Zech.		

Malachi

Mal.

Other Abbreviations

Besides the standard conventional and bibliographical abbreviations, a few less familiar ones have also been used in the text:

AH	= Hijri, Lunar	ch.	= chapter
AHS	= Hijri, Solar	d.	= died
Ar.	= Arabic	rgd.	= reigned
BCE	= Before Common Era (= BC)	v.	= verse
c.	= circa (about, approximately)	vv.	= verses
CE	= Common Era (= AD)		

THE REVIVAL OF CHIEF YAHYA

BY ACE KNIGHT

The Quran mentions the prophets as having special names and qualities. For example, Prophet Muhammad is called the Seal of the Prophets (Q. 33:40) and a mercy for the worlds (Q. 21:107).

Abraham is called Imam (Q. 2:124), the friend of God (Q. 4:125), a model to the world (Q. 16:120), one who is forbearing and repentant (Q. 11:74), a monotheist (Q. 16:123).

Isaac is also given the quality of an Imam (Q. 21:73) who has power of vision (Q. 38:45).

Aaron is called a minister (Q. 20:29); he is blessed with eloquence (Q. 28:34) and he is sent with signs and manifest authority (Q. 23:45).

David is called a vicegerent on the earth (Q. 38:26) who has power and wisdom (Q. 2:251); a man of strength (Q. 38:17).

Solomon is a king (Q. 38:35); he is taught the speech of birds and is bestowed with all things (Q. 27:16).

Joseph is a ruler (Q. 12:88) and one who interprets dreams and visions (Q. 12:21), a man of truth (Q. 12:46), concealed as a treasure (Q. 12:19).

Jacob is also called Imam (Q. 21:73). He is given the power of vision (Q. 38:45).

Jesus is called the Messiah (Q. 3:45). He spoke in the cradle (Q. 3:46) and is a sign to humanity and a mercy from God (Q. 19:21).

These are all prophets whose lives are familiar to us. What about the Prophet Yahya/John the Baptist? What have we been taught about this prophet who has been overlooked and misrepresented? One reason he has been overlooked is that there are five words used in the Quran to describe Prophet Yahya that have been misinterpreted in translations of the Quran.

The first is the word *hasur*, used in the Quran (Q. 3:3,

usually translated as “chaste.” My research shows that the Arabic word *hasur* does not mean “chaste” with regard to Yahya; rather, it means a “concealer of secrets.”

Why the mistake in translation and commentary? As there was no extensive information given in the Quran about the life of Prophet Yahya nor in the Traditions (Hadith), the commentators turned to Christian tradition and simply repeated what they found there.

That said, in fact the commentators of the Quran have placed considerable emphasis on this word. Al-Tabari interprets the word *hasur* to mean one who abstains from sexual intercourse with women. He then reports a Tradition on the authority of Said ibn al-Musayyab which has Prophet Muhammad commenting on this: “‘Everyone of the sons of Adam shall come on the Day of Resurrection with a sin (of sexual impropriety) except Yahya bin Zechariah.’ Then, picking up a tiny straw, he continued, ‘this is because his generative organ was no bigger than this straw’ (implying that he was impotent).”

Does this mean that even the prophets other than Yahya will be raised up with this sin of sexual impropriety? How can we accept that this was said by such a modest human being as the Prophet of Islam, comparing a straw to another prophet’s generative organ and perhaps implying that Yahya was impotent?

Another commentator, Ibn Kathir, a renowned Islamic scholar, rejects this view and adds: “This would be a defect and a blemish unworthy of prophets.” He then mentions that it was not that he had no sexual relations with women, but that he had no illegal sexual relations with them. Indeed, the whole discussion is unseemly.

It is known that prophets of God are immune from major sins, so this statement makes no sense at all when interpreting the word *hasur*. In addition, I would like to mention the fact that in his commentary, Ibn Kathir says he (Yahya) probably married and had children. He said this on the basis of what was related in the Quran of the prayer of Zachariah.

There are several reasons why interpreting *hasur* in this context as “chaste” or “celibate,” as has been done by many

commentators, is a misinterpretation:

First of all, there is another word in the Quran for “chaste” and that is *muhsin*. As God used a different word, *hasur*, it must imply something different.

Secondly, God says in the Quran that Islam did not bring Monasticism, but that it was something that they (the Christians) invented. (Q. 57:27) Also: “And verily We sent messengers (to mankind) before thee, and We appointed for them wives and offspring, and it was not given to any messenger that he should bring a portent save by God’s leave. For everything there is a time prescribed.” (Q. 13:38)

This definitely does not recommendation monasticism. Furthermore, we find in the Traditions that the Prophet said that there is no monasticism in Islam. Therefore, God would not have sent a Prophet who was celibate. In addition, it is contrary to the famous exhortation in the Torah to “go forth and multiply.”

Thirdly, Yahya’s father, Zechariah prayed for a protector who would provide descendants (*dhurriyah*) for his family: Zachariah called to his Lord, saying: “My Lord! Bestow on me good offspring from Thy presence; truly, Thou art hearing supplication.” (Q. 3:38) God gave him Yahya. God would not have sent a son to Zechariah who would not carry on the line of Jacob’s descendants because then God would not have answered the prayer of Zechariah.

The word *hasur* is used once in the Quran and that is in regard to the Prophet Yahya. A major Arabic-English lexicon, that of Edward William Lane (*Taj al-Arus*) states that when *hasur* is used alone, it means “concealer of secrets.”

In his translation of Ibn al-Arabi’s *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon*, Elmore also translates the Arabic *hasur* as concealer of secrets. In the referenced passage, “chaste” would not have been appropriate.¹

The second word that has been misinterpreted is *waliy* (Q. 19:5) which in this verse and many other places in the Quran means “protector” or “guardian,” rather than “heir” or

¹ Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, Brill 1999, p. 482

“successor.” *Waliy* can also refer to the Levites, as they were Protectors or Guardians of sacred places.

In this specific case, Zechariah prayed to his Lord: “And truly I have feared my defenders after me and my wife has been a barren woman. So bestow on me from that which proceeds from Thy Presence a protector (*waliy*).” In Q. 3:39, Zachariah’s prayer is answered, “...God, giveth thee glad tidings of (a son whose name is) Yahya (who cometh) to confirm a word from God, and (he will be) a chief (*sayyid*), and concealer of secrets (*hasur*), a prophet of the righteous.” Thus John became the *waliy* “protector” or “guardian” of Mary and Jesus. It can also imply that John is safeguarding revelation as a whole.

It is commonly thought that Zachariah was simply asking for a son; however, this misconception may be corrected by reading further on in the text. After receiving this good news, Zachariah asked, “O my Lord! How shall I have a son, when age hath touched me already and my wife is barren?” Zachariah was asking how this would be possible as he had not even contemplated being blessed with a son in his old age, and that with a barren wife.

Compare this with Mary who said, when she was given good news of a son, “How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?” (Q. 3:47) Both Zechariah and Mary were asking about the possibility of such a thing. If Zachariah were asking for a son, as has been suggested by many scholars of Islam, than why did he ask such a question when God informed him of the impending birth?

The truth is that Zachariah was not asking for a son explicitly. He was asking God to send him a divinely appointed protector, from the same place whence Maryam received her provisions (*rizq*); hence “Give me from thy presence a protector (*waliy*)” (Q. 19:5, 3:38).

The third word that is misinterpreted is *fard* in Q. 21:89: “And mention Zechariah when he cried out to his Lord: My Lord! Forsake me not unassisted (*fard*) and Thou art the Best of the ones who inherit.”

It is usually translated as “childless” or “heir,” but the same reasoning applies as above. The word unqualified refers to

the fact that Zechariah did not want to be left alone without any protector. He feared for those who would defend him and his honor after he died; that they would be left without a protector and thereby could not defend his honor.

The fourth misinterpreted word in relation to Prophet Yahya is *sayyid*. Prophet Yahya is referred to as a *sayyid*, chief in the Quran. The commentators have interpreted this to mean that he was a scholar of religious law, a wise man, a noble wise and pious man, and so forth.

This was a prophet of God. Knowledge and wisdom were given to him by his Lord. The title given to Yahya by his Lord shows that Prophet Yahya is one who has spiritual authority over his people and not “noble” or “honorable” as this word is usually translated. Honor and nobility are good qualities, but they fail to indicate that Prophet Yahya was also given a role of leadership by his Lord.

Moreover, why has the title of Sayyid not been exclusively reserved for the prophet Yahya as is the title Messiah for Jesus? If one were to say *Messehu Muhammad*, Muslims would quickly respond *astagfurullah* (seeking forgiveness as if one had committed a huge mistake). They would insist that this title is exclusively for the son of Mary.

Would it not be fair to ask why then is the title *Sayyid*, given by God, not exclusive for the prophet Yahya? Keep in mind that technically, any of the prophets, messengers, and righteous servants of God can be called “Messiah: as it means “one who is anointed or appointed for divine service.

That being said, no one has the right to be called Sayyid in this meaning, not the so-called descendants of Muhammad, and most certainly not the Prophet Muhammad himself. This, in my opinion, would be a great injustice, Quranically speaking.

It should also be noted that the word *sayyid* shares the same root as *sud* meaning “black.” I see Prophet Yahya as the Black Chief who has inherited the House of Jacob; hence, The Black Prophet. The word also signifies “greater or greatest in

estimation, rank, or dignity” (*aswadu*).²

The fifth word is *hanan* which means mercy, which is part of the compound name Yu’hanan (in English “John”), meaning “God is Merciful.” The word *hanan* is used once in the Quran (Q. 19:13) and that is in reference to Chief Yahya: “And continuous mercy (*hanan*) from Us and purity...” This is singularly appropriate to the circumstances of the Prophet Yahya.

The names Yahya and Yu’hanan are not the same as many assume. They have two entirely different roots. *Hanan* and the *hannah* both derive from the Semitic root *h n n*. While the word *hannah* means “mercy or tenderness,” the root word for Yahya is *h y y*. It means “life” or “he lives.” One does not need to be a linguist to see the obvious difference.

In addition, I would like also to mention that this name and attribute given to Prophet Yahya can also be found in Sabian literature. The Sabians are mentioned in the Quran in verses (Q. 2:62), (Q. 5:69) and (Q. 22:17) and in their canonical prayer book we find *Yahya Yuhanna*.

It has been known that it was the practice of the Sabians to have two names, a real name and a special name. According to the Sabians, this prophet’s real name was Yahya (he lives) and his lay name was Yuhanna (John).

Prophet Yahya is the only one who was given this name, as the Quran clearly states: “O Zechariah! Truly We give thee the good tidings of a boy; his name will be Yahya (he who lives) and We assign it not as a namesake (*samiy*) for anyone before.”

Again, another word that we need to pay attention to is *samiy*. It is used twice in the Quran, once in reference to Chief Yahya (Q. 19:7) “O Zechariah! Truly We give thee the good tidings of a boy; his name will be Yahya and We assign it not as a namesake for anyone before.”

The other time it is used is in reference to God. “...Knowest thou any namesake (*samiy*) for Him [God]?” (Q. 19:65) In the famous Arabic lexicon *Lisan al-Arab*, the root *s m*

² See also the root *s m w* discussed below in connection with Chief Yahya/John the Baptist.

w means “elevation or highness.”

WAS CHIEF YAHYA/JOHN THE BAPTIST BEHEADED?

We are told by an early historian, Josephus, that Chief Yahya/John the Baptist was put to death because of his political importance. The belief that he was executed is probably related to the New Testament story of his beheading at the behest of Salome, a story the truth of which we reject. Josephus does not mention the manner of his death.

Others have stated that he was beheaded. If it be true that Chief Yahya was put to death by Herod Antipas on the suspicion of planning an insurrection, as Josephus indicates, the punishment would not have been beheading. Under Roman law, only Roman citizens were sentenced to beheading. Any non-Roman citizen was sentenced to death by crucifixion for such activity.

This was the case with Jesus, a non-Roman citizen, being accused of treason and sentenced to crucifixion. In addition, we see that when Paul was sentenced to die, he pleaded that he was a Roman citizen so that he would be beheaded and not crucified (Acts 22:27-28).

Certainly, if it was the case that Chief Yahya’s followers were many, spread far and wide, as it has been reported by some, and that Josephus mentions that the Jews were greatly moved by his words, and that Herod Antipas feared that Chief Yahya’s influence over the masses would cause a rebellious uprising leading to a revolt by the Jews against the Romans (*Antiquities* 18:5.2 116-119), then this would be in accord with the practice of capital punishment of such criminals under Roman law. That is, that non-Roman citizens be crucified.

As far as his being beheaded by Antipas, now believed to be a fiction, we know that records show Herod the Great lost his power to execute anyone. It is also known that he had to bring those whom he wanted to execute to the Roman

authorities, as he had lost his title of “Caesar’s Friend.”

With that in mind, there is nothing whatsoever showing that this power to execute prisoners was ever restored to his heirs, one of whom was Herod Antipas. If Antipas had wanted to execute Chief Yahya/John the Baptist, he most likely would have needed permission from Rome to do so. If this be true, then the punishment would have to have been crucifixion and not beheading as this was reserved for Roman citizens.

Would it be fair to say that the High Priest Caiaphas, who was endorsed by Rome, had a problem with this new Black Chief whom the masses were flocking to see by the River Jordan? Would it be fair to say that Chief Yahya/John the Baptist threatened not only the throne of Antipas, but also the Jewish religious establishment?

Would it be fair to say that both Antipas and Caiaphas conspired together to do away with Chief Yahya? That the Sanhedrin and Antipas could not execute anyone should be kept in mind. Would it be fair to say that Chief/Yahya was arrested and brought before Pilate?

The Prophet Yahya could not have been beheaded as has been stated by Muslim and Christian scholars. With regard to Jesus, in the Quran we read: “Peace on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day I will be raised up again.” (Q. 19:33)

The verse states that Jesus was given safety and security in these three situations. But what about the son of Zechariah? We find the same description for him as we find for Jesus: “Peace on him the day he is born, the day he dies, and the day he is raised up again.” (Q. 19:15)

How does the supposed beheading of this prophet fit in with the above Quranic verse of one given peace by his Lord? We find in the commentary of Ibn Kathir that Yahya was also given safety and security in these three situations, but the book speciously ascribed to Ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets*, agrees with the Gospel accounts of Chief Yahya’s being beheaded and the serving of his head on a platter.

How do we explain the beheading of this Prophet of God? How, then, is he one who was “safe and secure”? Are we

to say that God saved Jesus, but abandoned Yahya? Is this divine justice?

Josephus's account of the imprisonment and execution of Yahya/John the Baptist would place it in the middle of the fourth decade, say 35 or 36 AD and therefore years after the events of the supposed crucifixion of Jesus, not before.

In *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, Crook writes, "Josephus' evidence creates a colossal chronological problem of enormous consequences."

That is still true. Since we also know that while the gospels portray John in their narratives primarily to introduce and testify to Jesus' superior stature, we also know from Josephus, that John/Yahya was a major player on the Palestinian stage, not just a walk-on to herald the messiahship of Jesus.

Subsequently, Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas were both removed in 36 AD. Where does the supposed crucifixion of Jesus fit in here exactly? The two principal characters in the gospels responsible for allegedly crucifying Jesus were no longer in power.³

Consider the following examples of the way God dealt with his prophets: "And, certainly, Noah cried out to Us. And how excellent were the ones who answer! And We delivered him and his people from tremendous distress. And We made his offspring—they, the ones who remain. And We left for him to say with the later ones: Peace be on Noah among the worlds. (Q. 37:79)

About Prophets Moses and Aaron: "And, certainly, We showed Our grace to Moses and Aaron. And We delivered them and their folk from the tremendous distress and helped them so that they, they had been the ones who are victors. And We gave them the manifest Book and guided them to the straight path. We left for them a good name with the later ones: Peace be on Moses and Aaron! (Q 37:114-120)

About Prophet Lot: "Truly, he was of Our servants, ones who believe. And, truly, Lot was of the ones who are sent. We

³ Roman governor Pontius Pilate—Ant. XVIII, iv, 2; Caiaphas the High Priest—Ant. XVIII, iv, 3

delivered him and his people, one and all, but an old woman of the ones who stay behind. Again, We destroyed the others.” (Q. 37:133-136)

About Prophet Jonah: “Then, the great fish engulfed him while he was one who is answerable. If he had not been of the ones who glorify, he would have lingered in expectation in its belly until the Day they are raised up.” (Q. 37:142-144)

All of them, plus Jesus, and Muhammad—as far as we know, all the prophets mentioned by name in the Quran were delivered from their enemies. Yet, the Prophet Yahya, whose name ironically means “He Lives,” is popularly supposed to have been put to death. Clearly, you can see how this story of the beheading creates an inconsistency with a text believed by Muslims all over the world to be internally consistent.

It is my belief that Prophet Yahya was possibly put on the cross and not Jesus. However, he did not die on the cross. By God’s giving him the name of *Yahya* (“he who lives”) in the Quran and the Quranic fact that the Messiah was not crucified, but it appeared to the people as such, the Quran is telling us that that person was Chief Yahya (The Black Prophet).

Chief Yahya survives as he lives out the words from God of “peace be upon him” as was the case with Prophet Abraham when he was thrown in the fire yet he was saved, “We said: O fire! Be coolness and peace for Abraham!” (21:69); hence: “Peace be on Abraham! Thus We give recompense to the ones who are doers of good! (37:110)”

Chief Yahya died a natural death at some later time, as did Jesus. It is my belief from my understanding of the Quran that Yahya was raised up in honor (*rafa’ a*) as was Jesus. Because this is not mentioned in the Quran, it does not mean that it could not have happened this way.

Again, we must turn to the Quran and its “divine wisdom” to receive understanding. When one compares Isa/Jesus and Yahya/John, we can observe that Jesus has been mentioned in detail, whereas John has not.

Here are some examples for one to consider:

The Quran tells us that Jesus was sent to the children of Israel, but John is not mentioned as being sent to them. Was John

sent to the children of Israel? Of course he was.

Jesus in the Quran preaches to the children of Israel, but John is not mentioned. Did John preach to the children of Israel? Of course he did. We are told that Jesus had disciples, but John's are not mentioned. Did he have disciples? Of course he did. We are told that Jesus received the Gospel (*Injil*), but John's revelation was not specified, but he was told to hold onto the scripture with might. Did John receive scripture from his Lord as did Jesus? Of course he did.

Because John is not mentioned in similar circumstances, it does not mean that he was not as favored as Jesus.

Countless works have been published pertaining to the false crucifixion of the son of Mary by Muslims, yet the false beheading of the son of Zachariah is largely ignored, why?

***SHUBBIHA*: MISTAKEN IDENTITY?**

“And because of their saying: ‘We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, God’ s Messenger—They slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so (*shubbiha*) unto them; and lo! Those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of conjecture; they slew him not for certain.”(Q. 4:157)

Although Muslims believe in the words of God, that the son of Mary was neither killed nor crucified, they too ask questions about the circumstances of the crucifixion and the identity of the victim if, indeed, there was one and the whole crucifixion was not an illusion.

In common with the early Christian sects that doubted the reality of the crucifixion, Muslims also have proposed many theories about who may have been crucified in place of Jesus. We find the commentators of the Quran offering contradictory theories about this. Some say it was a companion of Jesus who volunteered to be crucified in his place.

This theory can be found in the famous commentary of the Quran by Ibn Kathir. In it, he mentions a strong chain of narrative going back to Ibn Abbas, who is known in the Islamic world as a great interpreter of the Quran.

Yet in the commentary of Ibn Abbas, it is reported that he said: “God destroyed their man Tatianos... God made Tatianos look like Jesus and so they killed him instead of him [Jesus]... certainly they did not kill him,” thereby contradicting the Ibn Kathir’s version noted above.

So, clearly we can see the conflict in the commentaries. Others say it was Simon of Cyrene, a Roman soldier, or even that it was Judas Iscariot. This last theory is found in the Gospel of Barnabas. Unfortunately, there is no factual evidence to prove any of these theories.

The Quran challenges us, “Say: Bring your proof if ye

have been speakers of the truth!” (Q. 2:111) Consequently, with so many different and incompatible traditions flying about, the matter of the true meaning of the Quranic verse cannot be considered closed and one may feel free to argue other possibilities, as I shall do below.

So, who was the man who was identified, tried, and put on the cross? We are told in the Quran that it was not the son of Mary, but someone (or something) resembling him (*shubbiha*). Who would likely to have resembled him more than a relative? If not Jesus, could it have been his cousin Yahya?

The victim does not die on the cross but is taken down from the cross when the Roman soldiers mistakenly think that he is dead. An indication of this may be found in Mark where we read that a certain Joseph of Arimathea went to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea, and asked for the body of a man on the cross whom many assume to have been Jesus.

What is interesting to note is that he asks to take down the body (*soma*), while Pontius Pilate had told him to take the corpse (*ptoma*). There are many signs in the New Testament that suggest that the man crucified that day did not die on the cross.

What does all this mean? Keep in mind that *Yahya* in Arabic suggests life: “he lives.” The victim survives and continues to teach in secret after this ordeal. God tells Yahya, ... hold fast the Book (Q. 19:12). What does this mean? It suggests that Yahya may have been given a special book or task and will face great opposition.

All Muslims agree that Jesus did not die on the cross; rather, what the witnesses of the crucifixion saw was a deception, a similitude, or a substitution. It is my belief that it was a case of mistaken identity.

By using the method of explaining the Quran by the Quran, (as should be done with regards to the crucifixion in relation to the word *shubbiha*), I examined this word *shubbiha* more closely, and if there were anyone more similar or shared any kind of resemblance to Jesus, it would have been Yahya, the son of Zechariah, and no one else.

Here are some of those distinct similarities:

- Both were born miraculously: (About Yahya) “He said: ‘My Lord! How can I have a son when age hath overtaken me already and my wife is barren?’ (The angel) answered: ‘So (it will be). God doeth what He will.’ (Q. 3:40) and (about Jesus): ‘She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me?’ He said: ‘So (it will be). God createth what He will. If He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is.’” (Q. 3:47)
- Both were given unique names: “And the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: God giveth thee glad tidings of (a son whose name is) Yahya, (who cometh) to confirm a word from God, chief, concealer [of secrets], a prophet of the righteous (Q. 3:39) and he whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God).” (Q. 3:45)
- Both were given significant titles by God: Yahya: ...Chief, concealer of secrets, a prophet of the righteous (Q. 3:39) and Jesus “whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God).” (Q. 3:45)
- Both Yahya and Jesus received mercy: In regard to Yahya: “... and mercy from Our presence, and purity; and he was devout.” (Q. 19:13) and in regard to Jesus: “...and a mercy from Us, and it is a thing ordained.” (Q. 19:21)
- Both were prophets of God: In regard to Yahya: “... a prophet of the righteous.” (Q. 3:39) and Jesus: “He spake: ‘Lo! I am the servant of God. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet.’” (Q. 19:30)
- Both were righteous: Yahya: “...a prophet of the righteous.” (Q. 3:39) and Jesus: “...and he is of the righteous.” (Q. 3:46) Both were given sagacity: Yahya: “And we gave him wisdom when a child.” (Q. 19:12), Jesus: “And He will teach him the Scripture and wisdom...” (Q. 3:48)
- Both were associated with the Word of God: Yahya: “...who confirms a Word from God” (Q. 3:39); Jesus: “God gives glad tidings of a Word from Him.” (Q. 3:45) Both were respectful to their parents: Yahya: “...and (he was)

dutiful toward his parents;” (Q. 19:14) Jesus: “And (God) hath made me dutiful toward her who bore me.” (Q. 19:32)

- Both were humble: Yahya: “And he was not arrogant, rebellious.” (Q. 19:14) Jesus: “...and (God) hath not made me arrogant, villainous.” (Q. 19:32)
- Both were saved as infants from death; both were unknown when they returned. One baptized with water (Yahya) and the other with the Holy Spirit (Jesus). Both had followers and disciples; both were sinless; and both were sent to the Children of Israel. Both finished and completed their missions successfully and were elevated and honored with God’s peace: Yahya: “Peace be upon him the day he was born, and the day he dies and the day he shall be raised alive!” (Q. 19:15) and Jesus: “Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!” (Q. 19:33)

Moreover, there are parallels in the conditions of Mary and Zechariah. Both reacted with incredulity when given the news of their future offspring: Zechariah: “(Zechariah) said: ‘My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren and I have reached inform old age?’” (Q. 19:40; see also Q. 3:40) Mary: (Mary) said: “How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste?” (Q. 19:20; see also Q. 3:45)

If anyone was substituted for Jesus, as has been suggested above, then the substitute must have been Yahya. One cannot dismiss the implications of the circumstantial evidence which points to the Prophet Yahya and explains why it was possible to mistake the identity of one for the other. There is no factual evidence for the belief that it was any of the other men mentioned in the commentaries when explaining this verse: Q. 4:157.

Keep in mind that the word *shubbiha* also has the meaning of “to be doubtful, dubious, uncertain, or obscure.” Circumstantial evidence may be weaker than fact in a court of law, but when facts are absent, strong circumstantial evidence is

often enough to prevail.

This brings us to the question of the mistaken identity. Turning to the New Testament, we read in John: “And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who art thou?’ He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Art thou Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Art thou the prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ They said to him then, ‘Who art thou? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What dost thou say about thyself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” as the prophet Isaiah said.’” (Jn. 1:19-23)

It is quite clear from this passage that John was causing quite a stir; why else would the Jews be sending their priests and Levites to him? His position of authority is confirmed in the Quran with the title “chief” (*sayyid*), given to him not by man, but by God (Q. 3:39). Zachariah had prayed to God for a “protector” (*wali*) from His Presence.” (Q. 19:5)

The Arabic word so used in the Quran in this context denotes one with authority. Yahya’s prominence is well known from the passages about him in *The Antiquities* of Josephus, as well as in other traditions. Yet, perhaps the most important part of this passage is that he does not mention his name. He conceals his identity from them; hence, the Quranic reference to him as *hasur*.

Let us continue with John:

“Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, ‘Then why art thou baptizing, if thou be neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water; but among you is one whom ye do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’ This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.” (Jn. 1:24-28)

This passage would indicate that, in addition to his baptizing, his powerful preaching was of a special kind, and not as it was usually heard by the Jews.

It also appears that what he was saying touched upon

something they had found in their traditions concerning the signs of a messiah; hence, the gospel passage: “and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Messiah.” (Lk. 3:15)

If we look more closely, not only had John not revealed his own identity, but he also had not disclosed the identity of his contemporary, Jesus. Note, too, that the people mentioned by Luke must have thought that the man they had just met was worthy of consideration as a potential messiah, so much so that they wondered about his real identity.

One cannot miss the appearance that John is concealing something (*hasur*) here. Why is that? Though the messiah is present, he is not to be revealed. There is a reason for this, that is, if we follow scriptures.

According to the Quran, after the birth of Jesus, when Mary brought her infant to her people, they accused her of fornication. This accusation is also recorded in extra-Biblical Jewish tradition. Does this have anything to do with Jesus’s identity not being revealed?

According to Jewish law, “and the daughter of a priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire.” (Lev. 21:9)

If the accusation mentioned in the Quran against Mary were true, then accordingly, Jesus would have been labeled illegitimate. Jewish law states that “no bastard shall not enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord.” (Deut. 23:2)

With such threats overhanging them, would Mary and Jesus have revealed themselves publicly after their return to Palestine? Would they have ever revealed themselves to anyone?

Jesus never revealed his identity just as John never revealed his. That is why we never find in the gospels either of them mentioning their own names. Little wonder that Jesus is also mysterious to the point that today some even deny the reality of his very existence.

That Jesus was present, but not known, does not remove him from the picture. He continued his mission in secret, while John filled the office of “chief” (*sayyid*) and “protector” (*wali*).

He was designated as such by God and given command over his people.

What does this have to do with *shubbiha*? As was mentioned above, the Jews did not know who Jesus and John were. John's own testimony is sufficient. We have also shown above from the text of the Quran the complementary natures of Jesus and Yahya.

One can see that it was quite possible for one to be mistaken for the other. It was John's authority and reputation that certain factions among the Jews wished to do away with. It is for this reason that I believe that John the Baptist was put on the cross. Consider the meaning of *shubbiha* in this context.

"None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that Allah hath power over all things?" (Q. 2:106.)

THE BLACK PROPHET

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND JESUS THE CHRIST

THE MESSAGE

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah 'Isa (Jesus)⁴ son of Mary, God's messenger—They slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! Those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof, they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. (Q. 4:157)

The above-quoted verse of the Quran is a message to us

⁴ Concerning the Arabic name of Jesus ('*Isa*), some Western critics have suggested that the form of Jesus' name is a kind of mocking fraud perpetrated upon the Prophet by the Jews. According to this theory, the Jews, who were contemptuous of Jesus, taught the Prophet a slightly modified form of Esau, the despised brother of Jacob and the progenitor of several of Israel's Biblical enemies, especially Edom and Edom's hated representatives in Roman times, the Herodians. While it is true that thus far the form '*Isa* has not been found in written form anywhere earlier than in the Quran, it is astonishing to think that the Makkan Arabs (including, according to Tradition, the Prophet himself), who had frequent commercial contact through trade with Christian Palestine and Syria, would not have known the name of the central figure of the Christian faith in some form or other, and would not have remarked or complained that the form '*Isa* was unfamiliar or unknown to them. The riddle of the origin of the form '*Isa* remains unsolved, but such a postulated Jewish joke or insult could not have passed unnoticed. Jeffrey suggests that the form may have been influenced by Nestorian pronunciation of '*Yeshu*', and the form '*Ysw*' has been found in pre-Islamic inscriptions. The form '*Jesus* is Greek and is a variation of Joshua, a name very common among Jews of the Roman period. (NTAIP, p. 168)

that rejects the Christian belief that the son of Mary was crucified. The Quran further states that it ...*appeared so unto them*. Those who differ in it are full of doubts with no definite knowledge and they follow conjecture. We are assured that *they slew him not*. Christians reject the assertion in this verse, as it contradicts the central tenet of Christian faith. They reply that they have their own proofs and records, pointing principally to the four canonical gospels of *Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* and other writings in the New Testament.

To my surprise, after a careful examination of these gospels, I have found what may be a case of mistaken identity. The mistake was made under the assumption that a messiah had been killed; however, quite possibly, I believe, he was not the son of Mary. It is my thesis that this may, in fact, have been the case. An examination of the gospels will show that the Temple authorities, as well as others, were uncertain as to who the Messiah really was. Thus, the Quran states, "... *but it appeared so to them*." If we accept the possibility of a mistaken identity, then the question becomes: who was really put on the cross, if not the son of Mary? I hope to explore this problem in these pages.

Although Muslims believe in the words of God, that the son of Mary was neither killed nor crucified, they too ask questions about the circumstances of the crucifixion and the identity of the victim if, indeed, there was one and the whole crucifixion was not an illusion.

Muhammad Asad writes: "Thus, the Qur'an categorically denies the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. There exist, among Muslims, many fanciful legends telling us that at the last moment God substituted for Jesus a person closely resembling him (according to some accounts, that person was Judas), who was subsequently crucified in his place. However, none of these legends finds the slightest support in the Qur'an or in authentic Traditions, and the stories produced in this connection by the classical commentators must be summarily rejected. They represent no more than confused attempts at 'harmonizing' the Qur'anic statement that Jesus was not crucified with the graphic description, in the Gospels, of his crucifixion.

"The story of the crucifixion as such has been succinctly

explained in the Qur'anic phrase *wa-lakin shubbiha lahum*, which I render as 'but it only appeared to them as if it had been so' - implying that in the course of time, long after the time of Jesus, a legend had somehow grown up (possibly under the then-powerful influence of Mithraistic beliefs) to the effect that he had died on the cross in order to atone for the 'original sin' with which mankind is allegedly burdened; and this legend became so firmly established among the latter-day followers of Jesus that even his enemies, the Jews, began to believe it—albeit in a derogatory sense (for crucifixion was, in those times, a heinous form of death penalty reserved for the lowest of criminals). This, to my mind, is the only satisfactory explanation of the phrase *wa-lakin shubbiha lahum* [*but it appeared so unto them*], the more so as the expression *shubbiha li* is idiomatically synonymous with *khuyyila li*, '(a thing) became a fancied image to me', i.e., 'in my mind'—in other words, '(it) seemed to me.'⁵

In common with the early Christian sects that doubted the reality of the crucifixion, Muslims also have proposed many theories about who may have been crucified in place of Jesus. We find the commentators of the Quran offering contradictory theories about this. Some say it was a companion of Jesus who volunteered to be crucified in his place. This theory can be found in the famous commentary of the Quran by Ibn Kathir.⁶ In it, he

⁵ This is Dr. Muhammad Asad's version of the "Legend Theory." Dr. Asad's reference: See Qamus, art. *khayala*, as well as Lane II, 833, and IV, 1500. (Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran*.)

There are other theories, such as the "Swoon Theory." According to this theory, Jesus was crucified, but did not die. He apparently swooned on the cross and was later revived, perhaps as part of a conspiracy to save him.

There is nothing in the major *hadith* literature about the crucifixion.

⁶ "Commentary of Ibn Kathir" (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir*): the most popular of the Arabic commentaries. It was written by Al-Hafiz Isma'il bin 'Umar bin Kathir (1302-1372 CE), who taught traditions and history at Damascus. In addition to his famous *Commentary*, he also produced a universal history. The English translation used in our text was made by a number of scholars and specialists for the Darussalam in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and published about 2000 CE. Regretably, it is not a

mentions a strong chain of narrative⁷ going back to Ibn Abbas,⁸ who is known in the Islamic world as a great interpreter of the Quran.

Yet in the commentary of Ibn Abbas, it is reported that he said: God destroyed their man Tatianos⁹... God made Tatianos look like Jesus and so they killed him instead of him [Jesus]... certainly they did not kill him,”¹⁰ thereby contradicting

complete translation and is styled a “summarization.” In addition, some material has been omitted for editorial reasons.

⁷ “chain of narrative” Ar. *sanad*: the chain of authorities going back to the Prophet or his Companions upon which the reliability of a tradition is based.

⁸ Ibn ‘Abbas, a Companion of the Prophet, died 687 CE. ‘Abdullah was the son of ‘Abbas, an uncle of the Prophet. He was born just three years before the Hijrah. When the Prophet died, Abdullah was thus only thirteen years old. Born in 3 BH (618-619 CE).

The 11th century Persian commentator Surabadi gives us his version of this story: “...when Gabriel came to carry off Jesus, Jesus (who appears in this tradition to have been imprisoned with his disciples) asked which of them would volunteer to be crucified in his place. Only Simon volunteered. Then Jesus named Simon as his successor. Simon was then transformed into the image of Jesus. When they came to take Simon, thinking he was Jesus, this image of Jesus was transferred to the executioner. Simon fled, while the executioner was executed in his place, and the people disputed about it. The ending of both versions, with the people disputing about what happened, is to explain the ending of the Quranic verse: *those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain* (Q. 4:157).” (NTAIP, pp. 298-9) (See also Note 7 below.)

⁹ Tatianos (or Tatyanus): Probably Titus, the Roman general who destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. He went on to become the ruler of the Roman Empire, reigning from 79 to 81 CE.

¹⁰ Commentary for Q. 4:157 from *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir ibn ‘Abbas*: Attributed variously to the Companion Abdullah Ibn ‘Abbas (d. 68/687) and to Muhammad ibn Ya‘qub al-Firuzabadi (d. 817/1414), *Tanwir al-Miqbas* is one of the most pivotal works for understanding the environment which influenced the development of Qur’anic exegesis. Despite its uncertain authorship and its reliance on the controversial *Isra’iliyyat* or Israelite stories, *Tanwir al-Miqbas* nevertheless offers readers valuable insight into the circulation and exchange of popular ideas between Islam, Judaism and Christianity during the formative

the Ibn Kathir's version noted above. We can clearly see a conflict in the commentaries. Others say it was Simon of Cyrene,¹¹ a Roman soldier, or even that it was Judas Iscariot. This last theory is found in the *Gospel of Barnabas*.¹²

phase of Islamic exegesis.

The 11th century Persian Commentator Surabadi gives a fuller version of this tale: "In his version, Herod, the king of the Jews, had locked Jesus up and erected a gallows for a public execution. When the time appointed for the execution arrived, Tatyanus the executioner entered the cell to bring out Jesus. Gabriel came, carried Jesus away through an aperture, and transported him to the fourth heaven. Then he caused Tatyanus to assume the outward form of Jesus. When he came out of the cell and told the people that Jesus had escaped, the people looked at him and said that he was himself Jesus. He tried to fight off the people with magic, but failed and was executed. After this was over, the people looked about for the executioner and then began to have doubts." (NTAIP, p. 298.) (See also Note 5 above.)

¹¹ "It has been suggested that the absence of the pericope about Simon of Cyrene's bearing Jesus' cross in *John* and *John's* emphatic statement that Jesus went out "bearing his own cross" (Jn. 19:17) is a refutation of the Gnostic tradition that Simon of Cyrene was crucified instead of Jesus. That story was already in circulation by the last decade of the 1st century CE, if not earlier. Proof of the antiquity of this story is found in the writings of early fathers of the church. Irenaeus (c. 130-200 CE) mentions the teaching of the Gnostic heretic Basilides who was active about 120 CE: "that (Jesus) had not suffered and that a certain Simon of Cyrene had been compelled to carry his cross for him and that this man was crucified through ignorance and error, having been changed in form by him so that it should be thought that he was Jesus himself. (NTAIP, p. 302.)

¹² *The Gospel of Barnabas*: Almost certainly not by the Barnabas mentioned by Paul in the New Testament. "The manuscript that was the basis of [the] edition was an Italian 16th century CE Venetian copy of an earlier Tuscan manuscript. No Greek or Latin texts are known to exist and there is no manuscript evidence that pushes the history of the text nearer to the time of the putative author, St. Barnabas, the companion of Paul, who was active in the 1st century CE. The Raggs [the editors] cite a reference to a 100-years Jubilee as a clue that the gospel may have been written some time between 1300 and 1350 CE. The first Church jubilee was held in 1300 and the Church originally planned to hold a jubilee every century. However, in 1350, another jubilee was held and the interval was changed to every 50 years. This

Unfortunately, there is no factual evidence to prove any of these theories. The Quran challenges us: *Prepare your proof if ye are truthful.* (Q. 2:111) Consequently, with so many different and incompatible traditions flying about, the matter of the true meaning of the Quranic verse cannot be considered closed and one may feel free to argue other possibilities, as I shall do below.

points to a date of composition between 1300 and 1350 CE.” (NTAIP, p. 160.)

In *Barnabas*, Judas is transformed into the image of Jesus and mistaken for him by the other disciples. It was he who was arrested and brought before Pilate, condemned and crucified and buried in the tomb arranged by Joseph of Arimathaea. (See David Sox, *The Gospel of Barnabas*, pp. 44-47.)

ANOTHER LOOK

*Let the People of the Gospel judge by that
which God hath revealed therein.
Whoso judgeth not by that which God hath revealed;
such are evil-doers. (Q. 5:47)*

Both the New Testament and the Quran tell us about those personages whose lives in first-century CE Palestine were destined to affect the course of history and were milestones in the moral and religious development of mankind: Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary, and their sons John the Baptist, and Jesus the Christ. The gospels, purporting to be history, tell their stories in a roughly chronological order while the Quran refers to them anecdotally, as to stories well-known, but stressing the moral and theological implications of the situations described. Therefore, let us first take another look at these materials, with an eye towards signs and hints that may presage a crucial later case of mistaken identity.

The New Testament narratives that lead to the passion and the cross begin with a series of birth stories about two of the major figures in the drama: John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ. The Quran, however, deems the birth of Mary worthy of mention. Logically, her birth would have preceded those of the two prophets, so we shall begin with that:

(Remember) when the wife of Imran said: 'My Lord! I have vowed unto Thee what is in my belly as a consecrated (offering). Accept it from me. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Hearer, the Knower. And when she was delivered, she said: My Lord! I am delivered of a female—God knew best of what she was delivered—the male is not as the female; and lo! I have named her Mary, and lo! I crave Thy protection for her and for her offspring from Satan the outcast.' (Q. 3:35-36)

If we reflect upon this verse, we can see the first case of mistaken identity. The mother of Mary expected a male child, but instead she was delivered of a female. She was mistaken as to the gender of the child in her womb. In this verse, we read that

God knew what she brought forth, in other words it was a divine plan already decreed. Yet, as we shall see, that which started as a mistaken identity will persist as such. Those who adhere to the message of their Lord and are wise will be the ones who prevail—liberated or set free from erroneous beliefs.

Now, Zechariah was a righteous servant of God and was in His favor:

“And they [Zechariah and his wife] were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.” (Lk. 1: 6)

And Zechariah and Yahya (John)¹³ and Jesus and Elias: each one was of the righteous. (Q. 6:85)

Because of his virtuous character, Zechariah had the good fortune to become the guardian of Mary¹⁴: *This is of the tidings of things hidden We reveal unto thee. Thou wast not present with them when they threw their pens (to know) which of them should take control of Mary nor wast thou present with them when they quarreled (thereupon).* (Q. 3:44)¹⁵

Ibn Kathir relates the story of Zechariah’s becoming Mary’s guardian in this manner: “Ibn Jarir recorded that

¹³ *Yahya*: The Quran refers to John the Baptist by this name. “It should also be remarked that John’s name in Arabic, *Yahya*, is applied only to John the Baptist and not to any of the other Biblical Johns called Yuhana or Yuhanan in Arabic. The form is pre-Islamic and probably derived from Christian Arabic usage.” (Yahya, EI, Vol. XI, p. 249.)

“The name would appear to be related to the root *h-y-y* or *h-y-w* meaning, ‘to quicken, animate, give live to’ (especially the fourth form of the verb). It may have referred to his mother’s ‘quickenened’ womb and perhaps is in the nature of an epithet. ‘John,’ despite the shared guttural =, has a quite different meaning in the original Hebrew: ‘Jehovah has been gracious.’ (John, NCB, p. 288 and elsewhere.) However, Smith translates it as ‘Jehovah’s gift.’” (BD-Smith, p. 304.) (NTAIP, p. 193.)

¹⁴ Knight holds that Zechariah became both the guardian of Mary and the Word.

¹⁵ A majority of commentators take this verse as referring to Zechariah, as does Knight. However, others, including Maulana Muhammad Ali and the present editor, believe it refers to Joseph, later the husband of Mary, based upon the narrative in the apocryphal *Birth Gospel of Mary*.

‘Ikrimah said, “Maryam’s [Mary’s] mother left with Maryam, carrying her in her infant cloth, and took her to the rabbis from the offspring of Aaron, the brother of Musa. They were responsible for taking care of Bayt al-Maqdis (the Masjid) at that time, just as there were those who took care of the Ka‘bah. Maryam’s mother said to them, ‘Take this child whom I vowed [to serve the Masjid], I have set her free, since she is my daughter, for no menstruating woman should enter the Masjid, and I shall not take her back home.’ They said, ‘She is the daughter of our Imam,’ as ‘Imran used to lead them in prayer, ‘who took care of our sacrificial rituals.’ Zakariyya [Zechariah] said, ‘Give her to me, for her maternal aunt is my wife.’ They said, ‘Our hearts cannot bear that you take her, for she is the daughter of our Imam.’

“So they conducted a lottery with the pens with which they wrote the Tawrah, and Zakariyya won the lottery and took Maryam into his care.” ‘Ikrimah, As-Suddi, Qatadah, Ar-Rabi‘ bin Anas, and several others said that the rabbis went into the Jordan river and conducted a lottery there, deciding to throw their pens into the river. The pen that remained afloat and idle would indicate that its owner would take care of Maryam. When they threw their pens into the river, the water took all the pens under, except Zakariyya’s pen, which remained afloat in its place. Zakariyya was also their master, chief, scholar, Imam and Prophet, may Allah’s peace and blessings be on him and the rest of the Prophets.”¹⁶

¹⁶ *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (Commentary of Ibn Kathir) for Q. 3:44. It should be pointed out that all Muslim commentators are not in agreement about the identity of the man who was selected by these means to be Mary’s guardian. A majority say it was Zechariah; however, other identifications have also been proposed. The casting of pens or quills is not mentioned in the Bible, but the tradition is found in *The Gospel of the Birth of Mary* which was known in the 4th century CE and quite probably earlier. In it, Joseph, not Zechariah, is made her guardian: “Among the rest there was a man named Joseph, of the house and family of David, a person very far advanced in years, who drew back his rod, when every one besides presented his. So that when nothing appeared agreeable to the heavenly voice, the high priest judged it proper to consult God again, who answered that he to whom the Virgin was to be betrothed was the only person of those who were brought together, who had not brought his rod. Joseph was therefore betrayed.

Thus, Zechariah, the righteous servant of God, became the guardian of Mary.

Now, after the child Mary had been in Zechariah's care for some time, he came to notice something unusual: *And her Lord accepted her with full acceptance and vouchsafed to her a goodly growth: and made Zechariah her guardian. Whenever Zechariah went into the sanctuary where she was, he found that she had sustenance. He said: 'O Mary! Whence cometh unto thee this?' She answered: 'It is from God. God giveth without stint to whom He will.'* (Q. 3:37)

Thus Zechariah observed the miraculous sign of provisions¹⁷ bestowed upon Mary by her Lord. Could it be possible that Zechariah also witnessed something more extraordinary in that? Could it be possible that—as a priest and a

For, when he did bring his rod, and a dove coming from Heaven pitched [alighted] upon the top of it, every one plainly saw, that the Virgin was to be betrothed to him: Accordingly, the usual ceremonies of betrothing being over, he returned to his own city of Bethlehem, to set his house in order, and make the needful provisions for the marriage.” (Mary 6:1-6) (Quoted in NTAIP, p. 205.)

If the verse does refer to Joseph (otherwise unnamed in the Quran), as some scholars believe, it would not relate to her infancy, but rather to her circumstances at a more mature, childbearing age.

¹⁷ “provisions” (Ar. *rizq*): or “sustenance.” Many translators interpret this to mean “food;” however, others believe that it refers to *spiritual* provisions and enlightenment, as does Knight.

“Nisaburi interprets Mary's heavenly provisions as follows: ‘These were provisions of the revelations of the unknown (*futuhat al-ghayb*) with which God nourishes His servants, those who spend their nights with him and not with anyone of the creatures. This is in accordance with the prophets saying, “I spend the night with my Lord, and He provides me with nourishment of food and drink.”’ The Phrase ‘God surely provides whomsoever he wills without reckoning’ means ‘that which she did not reckon, such as a child without a father, fruits without a tree, miracles without prophethood, and divine sciences (*Al-Ulum al-Laduniyah*) without any intermediary.’” (Nisaburi, III, p. 186) (Cited by Mahmoud M. Ayoub, p. 183.)

Ibn Arabi's interpretation of this verse is essentially similar to that of Nisaburi (Ibn Arabi, I, p. 182) (Cited by Mahmoud M. Ayoub, p. 183.)

prophet¹⁸ of God very familiar with the scriptures—Zechariah realized that she would deliver the expected Messiah? At once, he turned to his lord and prayed: *Then Zechariah prayed unto his Lord and said: ‘My Lord! Bestow upon me of the Thy bounty goodly offspring.’*¹⁹ *Lo! Thou art the Hearer of Prayer.’* (Q. 3:38)

Here Zechariah is not asking for a physical descendant but for a divinely appointed protector (this will be explained below) who would inherit from him and from Jacob. Quite possibly those who followed the divine plan would keep the faith and integrity of Zechariah and Jacob. Just as we today a majority of non-Arab Muslims cannot claim physical descent from Abraham, yet we may claim it as our spiritual inheritance. We have spiritually inherited the faith of Abraham; hence, we are his descendants through faith if not by blood; that is more valuable than blood alone without faith, for there is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, and vice versa.²⁰

¹⁸ In Islam, Zechariah, the father of John, is counted among the prophets. The Old Testament minor prophet of the same name is not mentioned in the Quran.

¹⁹ *dhurriyah* “offspring”: While this is usually thought of as physical “children” or “descendants,” Knight interprets this to mean spiritual progeny as well. “Qurtubi understands, as do most classical commentators, the word progeny (*dhurriyah*) to mean not only descendants, but also the followers of a prophet. He thus quotes Ibn Abbas who said, ‘The people of the house of Abraham and Imran are the people of faith among their descendants, as well as the family of Muhammad.’ God says, ‘Surely the men most worthy of Abraham are those who have followed him, this prophet [i.e., Muhammad] and the people of faith’ (Q. 3:68). It is also said that the family of Abraham are Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs. Muhammad is also of the house of Abraham.” (Qurtubi, IV, p.62) (Cited by Mahmoud M. Ayoub, pp. 86-87.)

And from the mouth of the prophet Yahya: “‘Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’” (Mt. 3:7-10) Clearly one can inherit the house of Abraham through faith. Spiritual descent in this case as well with *dhurriyah*.

²⁰ “All of you belong to Adam and Adam is (made) of earth. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab and for a non-Arab over an

What prompted Zechariah to make such a request at that time? Let us compare the above with this passage from *Surah Maryam* in the Quran to get a better understanding:

A mention of the mercy of thy Lord unto His servant Zechariah when he cried unto his Lord a cry in secret, saying: 'My Lord: Lo! My bones wax feeble and my head is shining with gray hair, and I have never been unblest in prayer to Thee, my Lord. Lo! I fear my defenders after me, since my wife is barren. Give me from Thy presence a protector²¹ who shall inherit of me and inherit of the house of Jacob. And make him, my Lord, acceptable (unto Thee).'' (Q. 19:2-6)

Contrary to the common belief, it is obvious that he was not asking for a son,²² but rather asking for a protector to come from the same source from which Mary was given her provisions, for he foresaw that they would all be in need of protection in the future.

With respect to the inheritance of Zechariah and the House of Jacob, Zechariah did not want his legacy to be cut off. Perhaps this protector would preserve and honor him and the House of Jacob.

Zechariah's prayers were answered by his Lord: *And Zechariah, when he cried unto his Lord: 'My Lord! Leave me not unassisted,²³ though Thou art the best of inheritors.'* Then We heard his prayer, and bestowed upon him Yahya, and cured his wife for him. Lo! They used to vie, one with the other, in good deeds, and they cried unto Us in longing and in fear, and were submissive unto Us. (Q. 21: 89-90)

Arab; nor for a red-coloured over a black-coloured and for a black-skinned over a red-skinned except in piety. Verily, the noblest among you is he who is most pious." *Orations of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam*, p. 96.

²¹ See Knight, *Ihya' al-Nabi Yahya*, p.2, for more about this word.

²² The usual interpretation of Zechariah's prayer is that he was doing just that; however, Knight believes that he was asking for a divinely-appointed protector, as he could not have anticipated the birth of a son in his old age with a barren wife. Why then the question: *How can I have a son?* (Q. 3:40; 19: 8)

²³ See Knight, *Ihya' al-Nabi Yahya*, (pp. 2,3,10,11) for comments about this word.

And the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: 'God giveth thee glad tidings of Yahya, to confirm a word from God, and (he will be) a chief and concealer (of secrets) and a prophet of the righteous.' (Q. 3:39)

Zechariah was informed that his son Yahya would be marked by distinction: *'O Zechariah! Lo! We bring thee tidings of a son whose name will be Yahya; We have not given that name to anyone before.'* (Q. 19:7) The name God gave to the son of Zechariah has significance.²⁴ Hearing this, Zechariah reacted with natural amazement: *He said: 'O my Lord! How shall I have son, when age hath touched me already and my wife is barren?' 'It shall be thus; God doeth what he will.'* (Q. 3:40)

One can only imagine the feelings of excitement and wonder at that moment running through the mind and soul of Zechariah. He asks his lord, 'How shall I have a son?'

He said: 'O my Lord! Appoint a sign for me,' (The angel) said: 'Thy sign (will be that thou shalt not speak unto mankind three days except by gesture,'²⁵ Remember the Lord much, and praise (Him) in the early hours of night and morning.' (Q. 3:41)

And when Yahya was born, he proved to be a blessing to his parents and the special recipient of divine wisdom and mercy befitting a future prophet: ... *[To his son came the command]: 'O Yahya! Take hold of the Scripture with might.'* *And we gave him wisdom when a child and mercy²⁶ from Our presence, and purity; and he was devout and dutiful toward his parents. And he*

²⁴ Again, another word that we need to pay attention to is *sam\ly*. It is used twice in the Quran, once in reference to Yahya: "O Zechariah! Truly We give thee the good tidings of a boy; his name will be Yahya and We assign it not as a namesake (*samiy*) for anyone before." (Q. 19:7) The other time it is used is in reference to God. "...Knowest thou any namesake (*samiy*) for Him [God]?" (Q. 19:65) In the famous Arabic lexicon *Lisan al-'Arab*, the root *s m w* means "elevation or highness." See Knight, *Ihya' al-Nabi Yahya*, p. 3.

²⁵ "gesture": Arabic *ramz*.

²⁶ "mercy" (Ar. *hanan*): interestingly, the Hebrew cognate of the Arabic word in the Quranic verse forms the second element in the compound name *Yo-hanan*, "God (has been) gracious/merciful/ compassionate," which is the origin of "John" in English. See Knight, *Ihya' al-Nabi Yahya*, p. 3, for a discussion of *hanan*.

was not arrogant, rebellious. Peace be upon him the day he was born, and the day he dieth and the day he shall be raised alive.
(Q. 19:12-15)

In the New Testament, *Luke* gives the most remarkable account of the birth of John, hinting both at the uniqueness of his name and his future importance:

“Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son. And her neighbors and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they would have named him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said: ‘Not so; he shall be called John.’ And they said to her: ‘None of thy kindred is called by this name.’ And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote: ‘His name is John.’ And they all marveled.

“And immediately [Zechariah’s] mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God. And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judaea; and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying: ‘What then will this child be? For the hand of the Lord was with him.

“And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for He has visited and redeemed His people,
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of His servant David,
as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets
from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath which He swore to our father Abraham,
to grant us that we, being delivered
from the hand of our enemies,
might serve Him without fear,

in holiness and righteousness before Him
all the days of our life.” (Lk. 1: 57-75)

Professor Kee writes: “In this first part, the prophecy stresses the fulfillment of Jewish eschatological hopes... Throughout this section of the poem the child John is seen to fulfill the typical expectation of a nationalistic Jewish Messiah.”²⁷ Thus, John was seen by his father as a possible Messiah. It is a tantalizing indication of John’s greater historical stature that somehow survived the general diminishment of his importance in the New Testament.

In the second part of his father’s prophesy, John is relegated to being merely the forerunner of Christ, the traditional Pauline view of his role in religious history:

‘And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet
of the Most High;
for thou shalt go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to His people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
through the tender mercy of our God,
when the day shall dawn upon us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.’” (Lk. 1: 76-79)²⁸

²⁷ The complete text of Prof. Kee’s comments about this passage is as follows: “In this first part, the prophecy stresses the fulfillment of Jewish eschatological hopes. God has visited his people with salvation and redemption. The *horn of salvation* is a symbolic way to refer to the power of God (cf. 1 Sam. 2:10). All the predictions of the *prophets* shall be fulfilled, and the *covenant* with *Abraham* will be remembered. The *enemies* who are being overthrown would be identified as the Romans by the Jewish interpreter, but for Luke they are the foes of Christ, or the persecutors of the church. Throughout this section of the poem the child John is seen to fulfill the typical expectation of a nationalistic Jewish Messiah.” The author of the commentary on *Matthew* was Prof. Howard Clark Kee. (Laymon, p. 675.)

²⁸ Comments Prof. Kee: “In this 2nd part, John is presented under the Christian interpretation as the forerunner of the Messiah, *the prophet* of the end time who will prepare the way of the Lord. Here the Elijah motif of Mal. 4:5 is taken up, and *the Lord* in vs. 76 is no doubt to be

Luke's birth narrative of John closes with a positive view of his growing up: "And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel." (Lk. 57-80)

Let us now turn to the story of the birth of Jesus. God, in His infinite mercy, tells us the story of Mary and her son in some detail. First is the announcement:

In the Quran, revelation came to Mary, praising her:

And when the angels said: 'O Mary! Lo! God hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation. O Mary! Be obedient to thy Lord, prostrate thyself and bow with those who bow (in worship).' (Q. 3:42-43)

This was soon followed by another revelation, this once conveying awesome news:

(And remember) when the angels said: 'O Mary! Lo! God giveth thee glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah 'Isa son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous.' (Q. 45-46)

The announcement by the angels perplexed Mary, for she was as yet an unwed virgin: *She said: 'My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me? He said: So (it will be). God createth what He will. If He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: "Be! and it is."* (Q. 3:47)

The prophecy about the future role of the man-child with whom she will be blessed continues: *And He will teach him the Scripture and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel, and will make him a messenger unto the Children of Israel, (saying): 'Lo! I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Lo! I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it*

identified as Jesus. The main feature of this preparation is to make way for God's saving and redemptive action. Vs. 78 is difficult to translate, but the meaning is clear: with the prophetic activity of John the messianic age has dawned. The idea of God's revelation symbolized by *light* is typical (cf. Isa. 9:2), while the concept of the rising of the sun of righteousness is found in Mal. 4:2." (Laymon, p. 675.)

is a bird, by God's leave. I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I raise the dead, by God's leave. And I announce unto you what ye eat and what ye store up in your houses. Lo! herein verily is a portent for you, if ye are to be believers. And (I come) confirming that which was before me of the Torah, and to make lawful some of that which was forbidden unto you. I come unto you with a sign from your Lord, so keep your duty to God and obey me. Lo! God is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him. That is a straight path.' (Q. 3:48-51)

And make mention of Mary in the Scripture, when she had withdrawn from her people to a chamber looking East, and had chosen seclusion from them. Then, We sent unto her Our Spirit and it assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man. She said: 'Lo! I seek refuge in the Beneficent One from thee, if thou art God-fearing.' He said: 'I am only a messenger of thy Lord, that I may bestow on thee a faultless son.' She said: 'How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste?' He said: 'So (it will be). Thy Lord saith: It is easy for Me. And (it will be) that We may make of him a revelation for mankind and a mercy from Us, and it is a thing ordained.' (Q. 19:16-21)

Presumably after some time, though the next verses follow directly upon the preceding, Mary conceived and gave birth to her son:

And she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a far place. And the pangs of childbirth drove her unto the trunk of the palm-tree. She said: 'Oh, would that I had died ere this and had become a thing of naught, forgotten!' Then (one) cried unto her from below her, saying: 'Grieve not! Thy Lord hath placed a rivulet beneath thee, And shake the trunk of the palm-tree toward thee, thou wilt cause ripe dates to fall upon thee. So eat and drink and be consoled. And if thou meetest any mortal, say: Lo! I have vowed a fast unto the Beneficent, and may not speak this day to any mortal.' (Q. 19:22-26)

Again, after an unspecified interval, Mary displayed her child:

Then she brought him to her own folk, carrying him. They said: 'O Mary! Thou hast come with an amazing thing. O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a wicked man nor was thy mother a harlot.' Then she pointed to him. They said: 'How can

we talk to one who is in the cradle, a young boy?’ He spake: ‘Lo! I am the servant of God. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet, and hath made me blessed wheresoever I may be, and hath enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I remain alive. And He (hath made me) dutiful toward her who bore me, and hath not made me arrogant, unblest. Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!’ Such was ‘Isa, son of Mary: (this is) a statement of the truth concerning which they doubt. (Q. 19:26-34)

Let us now look at the traditional Biblical account of the birth of Jesus. According to *Matthew*, King Herod received news from the wise men that a king of the Jews had been born: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.’” (Mt. 2:1-2)

Hearing this disturbed Herod so much that he gathered the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born: “They told him: ‘In Bethlehem of Judaea; for so it is written by the prophet: And thou, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the My people Israel.’” (Mt. 2:5-6)

Matthew goes on to tell us that Herod summoned the wise men *secretly* and learned the exact time the star appeared. He then sent them into Bethlehem to search diligently rulers of Judah; for from thee shall come a ruler who will govern for the child, and to report to him as soon as they had found him, so that he might go and pay his respects to him (Mt. 2:7-8).

Herod apparently did not understand that there is no hiding of intentions from God:

Hast thou not seen that God knoweth all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth? There is no secret conference of three but He is their fourth, nor of five but He is their sixth, nor of less than that or more but He is with them wheresoever they may be; and afterward, on the Day of Resurrection, He will inform them of what they did. Lo! God is Knower of all things. (Q. 58:7)

So, after this secret meeting with King Herod, the wise men went off and found the child: "...and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." (Mt. 2:11)

The wise men, however, were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and they returned to their own country by taking another route (Mt. 2:12).

Then, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph²⁹ in a dream, saying: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." (Mt. 2:13)

When Herod realized that the wise men had deceived him, he became furious: "He sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men." (Mt. 2:16)

In another version of the story of the visit of the wise men, Zechariah is involved. It states that when Jesus was born, Zoroastrian priests (Magi)³⁰ from Iran, had traveled to Judaea, following the special star that shone in the heavens. They first went to Herod, the King of the Jews, and asked about the child. Herod became suspicious of the newborn child of whom they spoke and asked them to let him know when they found him. The Magi realized that Herod wanted to have the baby killed. Once they found Jesus, they left their gifts and then traveled back to Persia without telling Herod. After some time had passed, Herod, realizing that they would not return, turned to Zechariah for news, thinking that it might be the son of Zechariah who would overthrow his rule.³¹ As the Quran tells us:

²⁹ The husband of Mary, not Joseph the son of Jacob of the Old Testament. In Knight's opinion, Mary was unmarried at that time.

³⁰ Zoroastrian priests or Magi: Their number is not mentioned in the New Testament, but in Western Christianity, their number is traditionally three. However, Oriental tradition prefers twelve. (DB)

³¹ In the 2nd-century CE apocryphal *Protevangelium of James*, we read:
"Then Herod turned to John's father, Zechariah:

"Now Herod sought for John, and sent officers to Zechariah [at the altar], saying: 'Where hast thou hidden thy son?' And he

Is it ever so, that, when there cometh unto you a messenger (from God) with that which ye yourselves desire not, ye grow arrogant and some ye disbelieve and some ye slay? (Q. 2:87)

If the reason given above for the flight to Egypt not be true, then it may have been necessary for Jesus and Mary to flee Palestine for another reason: the allegation that his mother Mary had committed a fornication of which Jesus was the product. This slander is referred to in the Quran and appears in early Jewish sources.³² For Mary, who had Levite roots,³³ a horrible

answered and said unto them: ‘I am a minister of God and attend continually upon the temple of the Lord. I know not where my son is.’ And the officers departed and told Herod all of these things. Then Herod was wroth and said: ‘His son is to be king over Israel?’ [The text continues with a description of the martyrdom of the father of John, probably a confusion with the story of the Zechariah son of Baruch mentioned by Josephus who is said to have been brutally slain in the Temple.]

According to these accounts, Herod had strong reason to suspect that the son of Zechariah might be the prophesied royal messiah. (James, p. 48.)

³² According to *Luke* (Lk. 1: 5, 36), Mary was kin to Elizabeth (her cousin), the wife of Zechariah. Zechariah was a descendant of the Levite Abijah division, while Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron, also a Levite. This firmly establishes her Levite connections. It is well known that the assertion that Jesus was of the House of David and therefore had Davidic ancestry posed a dilemma for early Christians who believed in the literal interpretation of *Luke*’s and *Matthew*’s stories of the virgin birth. Since, if Jesus had simply been the acknowledged son of Joseph, who was of the tribe of Judah and the House of David, there would have been no problem. The virgin birth of Jesus was and still is believed by millions to be the result of some sort of divine intervention in which no human male was involved. How then to connect Jesus to the House of David? Simple, just make Mary a Judahite descendant of David. Is there any foundation for this in Scripture? After all, *Luke* makes it pretty clear that Mary is a Levite.

With a little ingenuity, the Levite Mary can easily be made a Judahite. Several verses are cited to prove this conundrum. For example, the oldest (pre-gospel) reference that “proves” her Davidic credentials is found in Paul’s epistle to the *Romans* (c. 56-7 CE): “... the gospel concerning His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh... (Rom. 1:3) Mary is not mentioned, nor is she

death was possible, for Mosaic Law states: “And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire.” (Lev. 21:9)

As for her son Jesus, if deemed illegitimate because of the mystery surrounding his birth, there awaited a kind of excommunication. States the Mosaic Law: “No bastard shall enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord.” (Deut. 23:2)

Was this what Zechariah had feared? What were his people going to do in the following years that would have prompted him to cry out for a protector? Is it possible that Zechariah knew that his people, the contemporary Children of Israel, would not believe in what the son of Mary was to convey to them, and that they would not accept him as a messenger, prophet, much less the Messiah?

Yes, Zechariah knew his scripture very well. That which Zechariah feared came to pass: ... *and because of their disbelief and of their speaking against Mary a tremendous calumny...* (Q. 4:156)

Zechariah knew that his son had a special mission and had to be protected until he grew to manhood; hence the hiding of Yahya until he was called forth to preach and show himself before Israel. This would assure Zechariah that one day his son would direct his people back to the straight path. Moreover, if we look closely, this was all part of a divine plan that had to be kept secret until the time was ripe for its fulfillment. That was the reason that Zechariah was commanded to remain silent even though he was not struck dumb— ‘... *thy sign is that thou, with*

in 2 Timothy (attributed to Paul, most probably spuriously): “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel...” (2 Tim. 2:8). Yet these are cited as evidence of Mary’s Davidic lineage. In what manner? Since Jesus did not have a human father, and the Bible says that he was of the House of David, therefore his *mother* must have been of the House of David, Q.E.D! Students of deductive logic may smile at the obvious flaw in such a syllogism.

Knight holds that Jesus was a spiritual descendant of David. (See Note 13 above.)

³³ In Islamic tradition, Mary is the daughter of a priest.

no bodily defect, shalt not speak unto mankind three nights.' (Q. 19:10)—and for Mary's parallel vow not to talk to any human being that day: '*Lo! I have vowed a fast unto the Beneficent, and may not speak this day to any mortal.*' (Q. 19:26)

Thus, when questioned of the whereabouts of said child, Zechariah remained mute and probably made a gesture (Q. 3:41) of shrugging his shoulders implying he did not know, as he was sworn to a vow of secrecy by his Lord.

Whether true or not, with such threats overhanging them for any reason, would Mary and Jesus have revealed themselves publicly after their return to Palestine? Would they have ever revealed themselves to anyone? We shall return to this question below.

In the context of the infant massacre, *Matthew* does not mention the son of Zechariah, though he also fit the criteria of a man-child of two years or under. All mention of his birth is left out in this gospel, although his birth story is related in the first chapter of *Luke*. According to *Luke*, there were *two* miraculous births, one to Mary, and the other to Elizabeth and Zechariah. Why does *Matthew* mention one and not the other? In his eyes, was not the son of Zechariah just as important? As our discussion moves forward, it will be shown just how important the son of Zechariah may have been in the whole messianic story.

In the case of John, if the story of Herod the Great's order to kill all male children under the age of two not be true, there may have been another reason to flee. The Sabians³⁴ have recorded in their sacred writings that a Jewish priest at the time of Herod the Great had a dream in which it was foretold that he would be overthrown by the son of Elizabeth (i.e., Yahya), so Herod wanted him killed. In the 2nd-century CE apocryphal *Protevangelium of James*, we read:

"But Elizabeth, when she heard that [Herod's men] sought for John, took him and went up into the hill-country and looked about her where she should hide him: and there was no

³⁴ Sabians: Thought by Maulana Muhammad Ali and others to be identical with the Mandaean of lower Mesopotamia for whom John the Baptist became a major figure in their writings and theology. (See Note 90 below.)

hiding-place. And Elizabeth groaned and said with a loud voice: 'O mountain of God, receive thou a mother with a child.' For Elizabeth was not able to go up. And immediately the mountain clave asunder and took her in. And there was a light shining *always* for them: for an angel of the Lord was with them, keeping watch over them."³⁵

We learn from *Luke* that Jesus' mother Mary and John's mother Elizabeth were kinswomen (Lk. 1:36). It follows, then, that John and Jesus were also kinsmen—cousins, John being the elder by about six months. Both were reportedly taken away from the regions of their births as infants for their own safety, Jesus to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod and John to the hill-country also beyond Herod's reach.

The son of Zechariah is not mentioned in *Matthew's* account of the infant massacre. It is at this point, I believe, the first cover-up by the opponents of God's plan begins. The rescue of the son of Zechariah from King Herod's wrath has been ignored. Who rescued him and how did he end up in the wilderness before his sudden appearance by the River Jordan? While the Bible diminishes the role of John in this critical period of religious history, the Quran emphasizes, stressing his special qualities as quoted above. Someone must have saved this child who was given importance by God in the Quran, and that person was probably his mother Elizabeth, with the complicity of his father, if he were still alive.

It should also be noted that according to the Quran, just as Zechariah had been ordered to be silent in order not to divulge the role of his future son Yahya, Mary, after the birth of her son, was also not to discuss her situation. She was the only witness to the identity of the Messiah. It is also my belief that Mary secluded herself from the Children of Israel. This is the reason why we do not find anyone in the gospels accusing Mary of playing the harlot, and her son as an illegitimate child. If they had calumniated Mary, then they would have revealed the identity of her son. There is no other reason why they are told to be silent, and God knows best. Mary from that point has been

³⁵ James, p. 48.

silenced and veiled forever. Even the text of the New Testament has little to say about Mary after the birth story.

As mentioned above, the Quran tells us that Mary was accused of playing the harlot and according to Jewish law she could be burned to death for her crime (Lev. 21:9) This is probably the reason why Mary cried out: *'Oh, would that I had died ere this and had become a thing of naught, forgotten!'* (Q. 19:23)

How can she explain herself? The mercy of God stands by her every step of the way; it allowed her son to speak and bring her comfort not to grieve: *'...Grieve not! Thy Lord hath placed a rivulet beneath thee, and shake the trunk of the palm-tree toward thee, thou wilt cause ripe dates to fall upon thee. So eat and drink and be consoled...'* (Q. 19:24-26)

God protected her:

...and how I restrained the Children of Israel from (harming) thee when thou camest unto them with clear proofs, and those of them who disbelieved exclaimed: 'This is naught else than mere magic' ... (Q. 5:110)

And He made of her and her son a Sign:

And We made the son of Mary and his mother a portent, and We gave them refuge on a height, a place of flocks and watersprings. (Q. 23:50)

This is the strongest Quranic evidence that Mary and her son were under divine protection, the protection sought by the mother of Mary (Q. 3:36) and Zechariah (Q. 19:5) in their prayers. They were given safety and security at an undisclosed location. If the surrounding Israelites had known Mary and her son's true identity, how can we explain no mention of the charge of her son's illegitimacy in the four Gospels? If they knew who she and her son were, they would certainly have brought forth this objection against him. It is my belief that they did not reveal themselves to the Children of Israel upon their return to Palestine.

THE RETURN OF THE MESSENGERS

The years passed and the two servants of God grew to manhood. They were dispatched by their Lord to perform their missions and they returned to Palestine. Both prophets, Yahya and Jesus, began their missions to preach when they were in their late twenties or early thirties, Yahya preceding Jesus by several months (according to the gospels). Neither did anyone recognize them, nor did they disclose who they were to anyone. Herod Antipas³⁶ and the Romans heard stories of a man who was baptizing people and of a man who was performing miracles. Herod Antipas suspected that one of these two could be the one who would end his power, information probably passed down to him from his now-deceased father, Herod the Great. Herod Antipas resolved to arrest one of them—him who was the prophesied Messiah.

According to *Luke*, "... the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance." (Lk. 3:2-3) He had been keeping away from mankind as the son of Mary still was. Now John was told to come out of the darkness and into the light. *Matthew* 3:1 says that he began with the dire warning: "'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'" (Mt. 3:2) From then on, he began to preach to the people and attract followers and disciples.

Mark writes: "As it is written in *Isaiah* the prophet, 'Behold I send My messenger before thy face, who shall prepare the way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!'" (Mk. 1:2-3)³⁷ That messenger was Yahya (John). Yahya did not reveal his own

³⁶ Herod Antipas: not to be confused with his father Herod the Great (d. 4 BCE). When after the death of his father the kingdom was divided, his inheritance was Galilee (northern Palestine) and Peraea (a territory east of Jordan River) where he reigned from 4 BCE to 39 CE.

³⁷ "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" (Is. 40:3) The verse from *Isaiah* quoted by *Mark* is actually from the section of *Isaiah* called the "Second Isaiah" (Is. 40-66) and dates from the time of Cyrus in mid-6th century BCE. The prophet Isaiah who gives his name to the book was active in Judah some two centuries earlier.

name, nor did he reveal the name of the Messiah who was among them and who kept himself secret. For this, he earned the epithet applied to him in the Quran *hasur* that is, “concealer (of secrets).”

Mark continues with a hint of John’s tremendous popularity and a description of the prophet himself: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judaea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now, John was clothed with camel’s hairs, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey.” (Mk. 1:4-6)

Then *Mark* uses John to introduce the appearance of Jesus: “And he preached, saying, ‘After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you the Holy Spirit.’” (Mk. 1:4-8)

John had begun his work by baptizing the people. His teachings astonished the people, so much so that *Luke* tells us: “All the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ.” (Lk. 3:15) We have already seen above that his father Zechariah had prophesied about him as though he were the expected Messiah (Lk. 1:67-75).

Now, to the common folk who were being baptized, the son of Zechariah was a gentle and mild-tempered man, but his demeanor changed upon seeing the Pharisees and Sadducees. *Matthew* tells us that he reprimanded them with harsh words as if he were provoking them: “‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.’³⁸ Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’” (Mt. 3:7-10)

This was, in fact, what John was doing. He provoked the

³⁸ See Note 15 above.

delegation sent by the priests and the Levites to assess him so that in John 1:19, they surrounded him, inquiring of him his identity. The son of Zechariah testified: “‘I am not the Christ. And they asked him, ‘What then? Art thou Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Art thou the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ So they said to him, ‘Who art thou? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What dost thou say about thyself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord ...’” (Jn. 1:20-23)

Notice that the son of Zechariah did not reveal his true identity to those learned men. It is clear that they did not know that he was the son of Zechariah. If they had, why would they have asked such questions about his identity? The answer is simple: Jesus and Yahya had left when they were infants and when they returned, they were adults. Who could have known them after so many years had passed? Another thing to keep in mind is that nowhere in the New Testament do we find either of the two, Jesus nor Yahya, revealing their actual names to anyone. The people referred to both of them as either “lord” or “rabbi.”

However, there is, as we shall see, a way to distinguish between the two.

Yet the question remains, why John did not reveal his true identity. The answer is that he knew his mission, and that required that his true identity should be withheld. In the Quran, we read the following command by God to his righteous servant: *‘O Yahya, take hold of the Scripture with might,’ and We gave him wisdom when a child.*” (Q. 19:12) To which scripture does the verse refer? According to the *Tafsir* of Ibn Kathir, we are told:

“This also implies what is not mentioned, that this promised boy was born and he was Yahya. There is also the implication that God taught him the Book, the Torah which they used to study among themselves. The Prophets who were sent to the Jews used to rule according to the Torah, as did the scholars and rabbis among them. He was still young in age when God gave him this knowledge. This is the reason that God mentioned it. Because of how God favored him and his parents, He says, (O Yahya! Hold fast to the Scripture [the Tawrah]) This means,

“Learn the Book with strength.” In other words, learn it well, with zeal and studious effort.”³⁹

Why must the presumption be that the scripture he is told to take hold of with might only refers to the Torah? We read in the Quran the following: *And He will teach him [the son of Mary] the Scripture and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel.* (Q. 3:48)

Here we are told that God taught the son of Mary the Law [*Torah*] and the Gospel [*Injil*]. But, what was this Scripture and Wisdom that God also taught him? It is my belief that this scripture and wisdom were nothing less than the instructions to the son of Mary about his prophetic mission. And as the son of Zechariah was the son of Mary’s ally and aide, it should be assumed that he too had been given such a scripture (or instructions) and wisdom, as was done with Moses and his kinsman and aide Aaron. It requires no stretch of the imagination to presume that the son of Zechariah, as a prophet, was also given such a scripture. The Quran tells us that all the prophets came with a scripture:

Mankind were one community, and God sent (unto them) prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners, and revealed therewith the Scripture with the truth that it might judge between mankind concerning that wherein they differed. And only those unto whom (the Scripture) was given differed concerning it, after clear proofs had come unto them, through hatred one of another. And God by His Will guided those who believe unto the truth of that concerning which they differed. God guideth whom He will unto a straight path. (Q. 2:213)

The son of Mary and the son of Zechariah each brought his own message and wisdom that confirmed existing scripture. Consider Moses and Aaron, but at the same time they were also of one purpose. In the Quran, we are told that Aaron was a prophet: *And We bestowed upon him of Our mercy his brother Aaron, a Prophet (also).* (Q. 19:53)

As a prophet, Aaron was also given that which was given to Moses: *And We verily gave Moses and Aaron the Criterion (of right and wrong) and a light and a Reminder for*

³⁹ *Tafsir of Ibn Kathir.*

those who keep from evil ... (Q. 21:48)

And in another place: *And We verily gave grace unto Moses and Aaron, and saved them and their people from the great distress, and helped them so that they became the victors. And We gave them the clear Scripture and showed them the right path. And We left for them among the later folk (the salutation): 'Peace be unto Moses and Aaron!'* (Q. 37:114-120)

It is my belief that there can only be one reason for the son of Zechariah's being told to *take hold of the scripture with might*; it is that he will be the one they would assume to be the messiah, and it is he who would be the one to face the great opposition, not the son of Mary as most assume. The son of Mary and the son of Zechariah became alter egos to some degree. This will be shown below. *Nothing of our revelation (even a single verse) do we abrogate or cause be forgotten, but we bring (in place) one better or the like thereof. Knowest thou not that God is Able to do all things?* (Q. 2:106)

The son of Zechariah had his instructions, and this prophet of God would in no manner deviate from the divine plan. He stood by the words of his Lord. The reason for withholding his real identity will become clearer as the story moves forward.

And so the interrogation continued: "... 'Why then dost thou baptize if thou art not the Messiah, Elijah, nor that prophet?' John answered them, 'I baptize with water, but among you stands one whom ye do not know, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'" (Jn. 1: 25-27) The Synoptic gospels⁴⁰ have John say, "'I baptize with water, but he who comes after me baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" (e.g., Mk. 1:8) Here the son of Zechariah alludes to his contemporary, the son of Mary, who is amongst them also, and who has not revealed himself. He gives them a distinguishing feature: his baptizing.

After the learned men finished interrogating the son of Zechariah, the son of Mary appeared before the son of Zechariah for baptism, that is, spiritual involvement. It is my belief that at

⁴⁰ "Synoptic Gospels": "synoptic" means "having a common view." *Matthew, Mark, and Luke* have affinities that have long been recognized and which set them apart from *John*. Together they are called the "Synoptic Gospels." (NTAIP, p. 90.)

this point the two prophets of God conversed about their respective missions and how they were to be implemented. This was a critical point, as this would be the first and last time they would show themselves together before anyone.

Matthew tells us that the son of Zechariah was moved by this, and said, “‘I must be baptized by thee, and thou comest to me?’ To which Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’” (Mt. 3:14-15) With the people and the learned men looking on, it is clear here that the son of Mary was not to be revealed, but to remain unknown. The son of Zechariah was to continue his public ministry and remain the leader. In other words, “let it be so now,” was the signal that the divine plan was now underway.

The Quran confirms the position and status of the son of Zechariah: *And the angels called to him (Zechariah) as he stood praying in the sanctuary: God giveth thee glad tidings of (a son whose name is) Yahya, (who cometh) to confirm a word from God, chief (sayyid), concealer (of secrets) hasur, a prophet of the righteous* Q. 3:39)

Let us examine these Quranic epithets for Yahya more closely: The first is “chief” (*sayyid*). In his Commentary, Ibn Kathir reports the following concerning this word *sayyid*, meaning of: “Abu Al-‘Aliyah, Ar-Rabi‘ bin Anas, Qatadah and Sa‘id bin Jubayr said that God’s statemen, (and *sayyid*) means ‘a wise man.’ Ibn ‘Abbas, Ath-Thawri and Ad-Dahhak said that *sayyid* means, ‘the noble, wise and pious man.’ Sa‘id bin Al-Musayyib said that *sayyid* is the ‘scholar and *faqih*.’ ‘Atiyah said that *sayyid* is the man ‘noble in behavior and piety.’ ‘Ikrimah said that it refers to a person who is ‘not overcome by anger,’ while Ibn Zayd said that it refers to ‘the noble man.’ Mujahid said that *sayyid* means, ‘honored by God.’”⁴¹

In the Quran, the Prophet Yahya is referred to as *sayyid* (chief). The commentators have interpreted this to mean that he was a scholar of religious law, a wise man, a noble wise and pious man, etc. However, this was a prophet of God; intuitive knowledge and wisdom were given to him by his Lord. The epithet given to Yahya indicates that he was one endowed with

⁴¹ *Tafsir of Ibn Kathir.*

authority over his people and not “noble” or “honorable,” as this word is usually translated. Honor and nobility are praiseworthy qualities, but they fail to connote that God had given Yahya a role of leadership.⁴²

The second is “concealer (of secrets)” (*hasur*): The passage quoted from Ibn Kathir above continues: “God’s statement [and *hasur*] does not mean he refrains from sexual relations with women, but that he is immune from illegal sexual relations. This does not mean that he does not marry women and have legal sexual relations with them.”⁴³

The word *hasur* is usually translated as “chaste.” My research shows that the Arabic word *hasur* does not mean “chaste” with respect to the Prophet Yahya. Why this preference for “chaste” in translation of and commentary on the Quran? As there was no extensive information given in the Quran about the life of Prophet Yahya nor in the Sunnah, the Muslim commentators turned to Christian writings and simply repeated, with some adjustments, what they found there.

Commentators on the Quran have placed much emphasis on this issue. Tabari interprets the word (*hasur*) to mean: one who abstains from sexual intercourse with women. He then reports a Tradition on the authority of Said ibn al-Musayyab which has Prophet Muhammad saying the following: “‘Everyone of the sons of Adam shall come on the Day of Resurrection with a sin (of sexual impropriety) except Yahya bin Zechariah.’ Then picking up a tiny straw, he continued, ‘this is because his generative organ was no bigger than this straw (implying that he was impotent).’”⁴⁴

Does this mean that even the prophets other than Yahya would be raised up guilty of the sin of sexual impropriety? How can we accept that this was said by such a modest human being, comparing a straw to another prophet’s generative organ? Was Yahya impotent? According to other commentators—for example Ibn Kathir, who is considered a renowned scholar of Islam, rejects this view and further states: “This would be a defect and a blemish unworthy of prophets.” He then mentions

⁴² Knight, *Ihya’ al-Nabi Yahya*, pp. 2-3.

⁴³ *Tafsir of Ibn Kathir*.

⁴⁴ *Tafsir of Tabari*, cited by Mahmoud M. Ayoub in his *The Quran and Its Interpreters*, p. 109.

that it was not that Yahya had no sexual relations with women, but that he had no *unlawful* sexual relations with them. Why make mention of this? It is well known that the prophets of God are innocent of major sins, so this statement about Yahya makes no sense at all when interpreting the word, *hasur*. Moreover, in his commentary, Ibn Kathir says he (Yahya) probably married and had children.

There are several reasons why interpreting *hasur* as “chaste” here is inappropriate: God says in the Quran that Islam did not bring monasticism, but that it was something that they (the Christians) invented. (Q. 57:27) Also, *And verily We sent messengers (to mankind) before thee, and We appointed for them wives and offspring, and it was not given to any messenger that he should bring a portent save by God’s leave. For everything there is a time prescribed.* (Q. 13:38) This is definitely not a recommendation for monasticism. Furthermore, we find in the Traditions that the Prophet said that there is no monasticism in Islam. Therefore, God would not have sent a Prophet who was celibate. In addition, to be celibate is against the Jewish exhortation to “go forth and multiply.”

The word *hasur* is used but once in the Quran and that is in regard to the Prophet Yahya. Well-known Arabic lexicons state that when *hasur* is used alone, it means “concealer.”⁴⁵ The Prophet Yahya as a “concealer (of secrets)” will play a very special role in the life of Jesus.

Many, if not all, translations of the Quran render the word *sayyid* in Q. 3:39 as “noble,” as the meaning can refer to nobility, and *hasur* as chaste. However, after scrutinizing these words in their Quranic context, I find that these words as interpreted by the above mentioned scholars diminish the power of this prophet’s identity, character, and status, and especially his

⁴⁵ A major Arabic-English Lexicon, that of Edward William Lane (based upon *Taj al-‘Arus*) states that when *hasur* is used alone, it means “concealer [of secrets].” In his translation, of Ibn al-Arabi’s *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon*, Elmore also translates the Arabic *hasur* “as concealer [of secrets].” In the referenced passage, “chaste” would not have been appropriate (Q 3:39). (Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, p. 482.) See also Knight, *Ihya’ al-Nabi Yahya*, pp. 1-2.

role in the messianic story. Although the Quran gives us but a brief description of the son of Zechariah, it does make mention certain key points, his position, status, role, and unique name that are clues to his real greatness that distinguish him from all others before him. As we proceed, we shall point out these characteristics of the son of Zechariah and bring to light some of his long-hidden qualities and distinctions, God willing.

The Children of Israel had rejected the signs of God at the first appearance of Mary with her newborn son, and God said the unbelievers planned, and God said He too planned, and that He is the best of planners. As stated above, the Quran described the son of Mary in detail, but they rejected the signs of God, and upon their return as adults, the son of Mary became a hidden secret, and the son of Zechariah now exposed and fully detailed.

SECRECY

From the beginning, we are told by both the Bible and the Quran that these two prophets of God are not to be generally known:

Mary screened (*secreted*) herself from her people.

Zechariah cries to his lord in *secret*.

A certain Joseph takes the son of Mary (as a child) *secretly* into Egypt.

The wise men did not give information of the child's whereabouts to King Herod; they kept it *secret* by departing for their own country.

Zechariah and Mary swore a vow of *secrecy*.

The son of Zechariah did not reveal himself by the Jordan, thus keeping his true identity *secret*.

The son of Zechariah did not reveal the son of Mary while baptizing him, thus keeping him *secret*.

One may ask, why all this secrecy? It was simply because a divine plan was being implemented. The Children of Israel, as the scriptures tell us, attempted to kill prophets and righteous men of God; hence the secrecy. As the Quran tells us: *We made a covenant of old with the Children of Israel and We sent unto them messengers. As often as a messenger came unto them with that which their souls desired not, (they became rebellious). Some (of them) they denied and some they slew. They thought no harm would come of it, so they were willfully blind and deaf. And afterward God turned (in mercy) toward them. Now (even after that) are many of them willfully blind and deaf. God is Seer of what they do.* (Q. 5:70-71)

The rebellious nature of the Children of Israel is decried in the Bible:

“Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you.” (Deut. 9:24)

“For I know how rebellious and stubborn ye are; behold, while I am yet alive with you, today ye have been rebellious against the Lord; how much more after my death!” (Deut. 31:24)

“They have stirred me to jealousy with what is no god; they have provoked me with their idols. So, I will stir them to

jealousy with those who are no people; I will provoke them with a foolish nation.” (Deut. 32:21)

For this reason, it is written in *Matthew* that the kingdom of heaven was now being taken from them [Children of Israel] and given to another nation, perhaps the Arabs: “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them.” (Mt. 21:43-45) That is, that the kingdom of God would be taken from them and given to another people.⁴⁶

What was this “foolish nation” that are called “not a people” that inherited this Kingdom of God? Was it not the Arabs, who in the words of Thomas Carlyle, have been “Roaming unnoticed in its desert since the creation of the world”? History tells us that Alexander the Great, the Romans, the Persians, and the Egyptians all passed them by. In the 6th century CE, the Arab Prophet [Muhammad] emerged to deliver the message (the Quran) that would transform what was once a foolish and unnoticed nation into a mighty kingdom: The Islamic Nation. One man, one book, one global following—Oneness and Unity!⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Christian exegetes, of course, interpret this verse to mean the transfer would be to the Christian church. However, Knight interprets this as a prophecy of the passing of the kingdom of God to the Muslims some five and one-half centuries later. Similarly, the identity of “foolish nation” mentioned in Deut. 32:21 (in the section known as the *Song of Moses*) is uncertain. Some Biblical commentators think it is the Philistines; Knight takes it to be a foreshadowing of the rise of Islam among the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula. The Quran refers to this disobedience too: *Those of the Children of Israel who went astray were cursed by the tongue of David, and of Jesus, son of Mary. That was because they rebelled and used to transgress. They restrained not one another from the wickedness they did. Verily evil was that which they used to do!* (Q. 5:78-79) See also the following text.

⁴⁷ It may be interesting to look at the birth narrative of the Prophet Muhammad by the early (11th-century CE) Persian commentator Abu Bakr ‘Atiq Nishaburi Surabadi celebrating the Prophet’s future eminence and impact upon the world. It is a part of his commentary on *Surah al-Najm* (Q. 53 - The Star) and is translated from his Persian *Commentary on the Quran*. Safiyah, the daughter of ‘Abd al-Muttalib and the Messenger’s aunt, is telling the story:

Say: O God! Owner of Sovereignty! Thou givest sovereignty unto whom Thou wilt, and Thou withdrawest sovereignty from whom Thou wilt. Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt, and Thou abasest whom Thou wilt. In Thy hand is the good. Lo! Thou art Able to do all things. (Q. 3:26)

The son of Mary was doing a service for God, and was sent among the Children of Israel as a moral example. In the Quran, we read the following: *He is nothing but a servant on whom We bestowed favour, and We made him an example for the Children of Israel.* (Q. 43:59) The Quran does not mention that the son of Zechariah [Yahya] was one who was also sent as an example to the children of Israel, but it is clear that he was.

Their divinely appointed mission was, among other things, the setting of an example with which no mortal could

“At that hour [of the Prophet’s birth], all the surface of the earth became green with plants; all the trees put forth leaves and blossoms; and all the fountains of the earth flowed with water. All the afflicted found solace; all the sick found cure; all the perplexed found tranquility; and all the pregnant delivered their burdens. A cry filled the kingdom of the seven heavens and the earth: *‘The unlettered Arabian Hashimite Prophet is born, the Seal of the Prophets!’* Without exception, all the idols of the world fell on their faces and the fires of the Magians were extinguished. Not a cross was left standing anywhere on earth. Not a temple of idol-worship was left that had not been shaken by earthquakes. The palace of Chosroes was shattered, all the synagogues trembled, and all the demons were alarmed, (wondering) what had happened.

“Iblis trembled on his throne on an island in the sea and the throne was overturned. He fell from his throne with a loud cry; then he shouted so that all the demons of the world heard him and turned in his direction. His throne remained overturned for forty days. The demons shook with fear and asked: ‘What shall we do? What has happened?’ Iblis answered: ‘That person is born for whose sake I was ordered to prostrate myself before Adam. That person is born who is the cause of my falling into this state. That person is born for whose sake the two existences and the two worlds were created. *He shall change religions, he shall smash the false idols, he shall expel Satan, and he shall declare God, the Merciful, to be One!*’

“And all the wild beasts of the world turned to one another with the good news: ‘Muhammad, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, is come!’” (excerpted from NTAIP, pp. 243-4.)

deflect. The son of Mary and the son of Zechariah would demonstrate that the Children of Israel would revert to their traditional pattern of attacking and persecuting the prophets and righteous men of God. Their actions would be recorded as evidence against them. God knew that among them there were factions plotting to kill the Messiah. The secrecy would impede the progress of their plans. In the Quran, we read the following: *And they (the disbelievers) planned, and God planned (against them): and God is the best of planners.* (Q. 3:54)⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Writes Maulana Muhammad Ali in his notes to his translation of *The Holy Quran*: “*Makr* is explained by R as *the turning of another with ingenuity or skill from that which he aims at*, and he considers *makr* as of two sorts, *a good one and an evil one*. Therefore, the best interpretation of the work *makara* (including both sorts) is that adopted by [*Taj al-‘Arus*], viz. *he exercised craft, cunning, art, or skill in the management or ordering of affairs with excellent consideration or deliberation, and ability to manage according to his own free will* [*Arabic-English Lexicon by Edward William Lane*]. The idea of the plan being contrived for an evil purpose or clandestinely, which is included in the significance of the word, has led many to take the idea at its exclusive significance, which is not the case. *Makara-llahu* may also signify that *All[h recompensed or requited them for their makr* [*Taj al-‘Arus; Arabic-English Lexicon by Edward William Lane*]. According to some, *its original significance is the gathering of an affair and its strengthening* [*Al-Tafsir al-Kabir* (Commentary) by Imam Fakhr al-Din R[ā]]. All these explanations show that it is the equivalent of the word *plan*, the good or evil nature of the plan being dependent on the object or doer’s intention. Allah is called here *Khair al-makirin* or *Best of planners*, the qualifying word *khair* being inapplicable to an evil object.” (Note 434, Quran-MMA, pp. 146-7.)

“The Jews planned to put Jesus to death by crucifixion, and Allah made a plan to frustrate their plans; and Allah’s plan was successful, i.e. he was saved from death on the cross...” (Note 435, Quran-MMA, P. 147.)

WHO IS WHO?

Now that we know the two prophets were implementing God's plan, how can we determine which are the words of the son of Zechariah, and which are those of the son of Mary? According to the first chapter of *John*, the people of Judah did not know either of them. As described above, both had left Judaea as infants and returned as adults. According to *John*, the son of Zechariah never revealed his true identity, and *John* further refers to the son of Mary as one who stood among them "whom ye do not know" (Jn. 1:26).

So, how do we know who is who? It should be noted that the gospels in question were not written until long after the son of Mary and the son of Zechariah had departed from Palestine. These anonymous writers of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John* were not disciples, nor did they personally know the son of Mary or the son of Zechariah. The four gospels were composed by their author based upon collections of sayings and traditions and put into the form of the narratives we now find in the four gospels of the New Testament. Perhaps we should look a little deeply into the history of New Testament writings under consideration:

"Modern Biblical scholars believe that all of the books and letters [in the present New Testament] were written between 51 and c. 150 CE, and that the earliest writings are not the gospels as one might suppose, but rather the genuine letters of Paul... The oldest of the gospels, that of *Mark*, is believed to have been penned in Rome between 70 and 75 CE; that is, about two generations after the events of the crucifixion which are generally believed to have taken place c. 30 CE.

"The second gospel in point of chronology is thought to be *Matthew*, written between 85 and 90 CE, probably at Antioch [then in Syria, now in Turkey]. Luke's more comprehensive work *Luke-Acts*, including a history of the early church and its missionary activities in addition to a biography of Jesus, was probably finished between 85 and 95 CE. The fourth and latest gospel was that of *John*. There is much dispute about its date, with present estimates ranging between 95 and 115 CE. The provenance of *Luke-Acts* and *John* is not definitely known.

“The *Book of Revelation*, originally attributed to John, the author of the fourth gospel, was written about 96 CE, and the *Epistle of James* came shortly after. *First Peter* may have been written between 80 and 96 CE, but the three letters of John (falsely ascribed to the disciple of that name as is the gospel by the same unknown author) were composed between 100 and 110 CE. Paul’s authorship of three more letters ascribed to him (*1 & 2 Timothy* and *Titus*) is now denied by modern scholarship.⁴⁹ They could have been written between 100 and 140 CE. *Jude* was written sometime between 125 and 150 CE; and *2 Peter*, believed to be the latest work included in the New Testament, dates from about 150 CE.”⁵⁰

How does this affect the authenticity and authority of the fourfold Gospel? “Despite the perhaps gratuitous assertion to be found in *John*—that the writer was a witness of at least some of the events of the life of Jesus (Jn. 19:35; 21:24), modern scholarship is virtually unanimous in the opinion that none of the authors of the gospels were actual observers of any part of the life of Jesus. At best, the gospel evidence is second-hand, what would be called “hearsay” in a court of law today. It is also colored by the rapid evolution of theological ideas in the crucible of two generations of tumult, war, and strife in Palestine followed by the amazingly rapid triumph of the Pauline theology that strove to accommodate Jesus to Graeco-Roman culture by Hellenizing him. Moreover, the multiplicity of variant readings and simple errors in the earliest manuscripts attest a lack of standards and supervision in the copying and transmission of the texts in the crucial period before Christianity became a major religious force in the Roman Empire, further compromising the testimony of the gospels.

“In addition to the recognition that we are dealing with interpretation and not objective history (if there is any such thing), we must remember, as we have already pointed out several times, that we are working from reminiscences, translated by the putative authors of the gospels. Though the original language of the Fourfold Gospel was Greek, Jesus taught in Aramaic with excursions into liturgical Hebrew, just as modern Persian-speaking preacher might cite a Quranic text in

⁴⁹ See Trawick-NT, pp. 134-6.

⁵⁰ NTAIP, pp. 86-87.

Arabic and then expound upon it in Persian for the edification of his audience.”⁵¹

This brief look at some aspects of the textual history of the New Testament “is perhaps devastating enough to any attempt to get behind the New Testament and to observe the historical Jesus, a Jesus who would, Muslims confidently feel, be in harmony with the Jesus found in the Quran.”⁵² The same would apply to the largely ignored story of John the Baptist who is perhaps more honored in the Quran than in the Bible.⁵³ Given the uncertain historicity of the life and deeds of Jesus proffered in the Bible, one should not be criticized for indulging in his own speculations about the course and significance of the life and deeds of John the Baptist.

Thus, the question becomes, how can we distinguish the sayings of the son of Zechariah from those of the son of Mary? Nowhere in the four Gospels do the son of Mary and the son of Zechariah identify themselves by name. Both are addressed as either “rabbi” or “teacher”; never by name. It is the gospel writers active years after these two prophets had departed from the scene who made the assumptions of their identity.

⁵¹ NTAIP, p. 117.

⁵² NTAIP, p. 118.

⁵³ With respect to authenticity and authority of its basic text, “vis-à-vis Christianity and Judaism, Islam is in a unique position. Even if the historicity of parts of the Hadith literature cannot withstand the critical apparatus of textual and especially form criticism, Islam still possesses a firm foundation from which to work: the Holy Quran. While modern scholarship has destroyed much of the *historical* basis for Christian faith, it has been unable to affect the basic integrity of the text of the Quran, the foundation of Islamic faith. One may accept or reject its mission, debate its meaning and interpretation, postulate source theories, and dispute its divine origin, but *the fact* of the Quran remains unaffected. Clearly, it is the task of Muslim scholarship to return to the Quran and resume the task of elucidating its meaning with every means at our disposal: the traditional disciplines of textual criticism, as well as the newer disciplines of archeology, comparative religion, anthropology, etc. In this task, the Traditions stand in a secondary position, but still have great importance as witnesses in Islam. They may be used as evidence for proof, but not without some cautious reservation.”

Both prophets of God were blessed with wisdom, and they used that wisdom. As long as their identities were kept secret, they would complete their missions successfully. The Children of Israel were not privy to the divine plan. An epithet that has many Christian and non-Christian scholars perplexed is “son of man.” It is the popular Christian belief that Jesus was the son of man, but this would be incorrect if one believes in the virgin birth. Jesus was born without a father so that would make him the son of woman;⁵⁴ hence, the Quranic epithet frequently used for Jesus: “son of Mary.” Since Jesus was not a “son of man” in the literal sense, what are we left with? Yes, Yahya! He was born to Zechariah, and this title can only be applied to him. The son of Zechariah is the true son of man.

The Jewish prophecies about the messiah postulated that he would be of the seed of David. The Christian belief that Jesus was the son of David would be impossible in my view, if one accepts the virgin birth. However, this omission would not exclude him from being a *spiritual* descendant of David. Prophets are brothers to one another, hence Jesus could have been a spiritual descendant of David, but so could John the Baptist for that matter. The original meaning of the word “messiah” is “anointed.” Both John and Jesus were anointed by God, therefore, is it possible that *both* were Messiahs? The act of God in creating Jesus without a human father could be seen as a stratagem to throw the Jews into confusion from the beginning. This device makes it clear that God was doing something new.

Since, according to the gospels, Joseph—nor any other mortal—was not his father, the son of Mary had no paternal ancestry. It is well established that in Jewish tradition and custom, genealogy was traced through the male line; but the son of Mary’s genealogy is only on the maternal side. The genealogies offered by *Matthew* and *Luke* end with Joseph who, according to most interpretations of the New Testament, was not the father of Jesus. The son of Zechariah called himself “son of man” so as not to confuse him with the son of Mary, but also to identify him when he comes in his glory. Consider the following

⁵⁴ Ibn Kathir also points out that Jesus is called the “son of Mary” to signify that he had no father (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Vol. II, pp. 39-40). Cited by Mahmoud M. Ayoub, p. 132). Knight refers to this situation when he refers to the son of Mary as the “son of woman.”

verses from the Quran: *And mention Zechariah when he cried unto his Lord: 'My Lord! Leave me not unassisted, though Thou art the Best of inheritors.'* (Q. 21:89)

In another place in the Quran, Zechariah ...*cried unto his Lord a cry in secret, saying: My Lord! Lo! the bones of me wax feeble and my head is shining with grey hair, and I have never been unblest in prayer to Thee, my Lord. Lo! I fear my defenders after me, since my wife is barren. Oh, give me from Thy presence a protector who shall inherit of me and inherit (also) of the house of Jacob. And make him, my Lord, acceptable (unto Thee).* (Q. 19: 3-6)

What did the son of Zechariah inherit? It was not worldly property;⁵⁵ rather, it was a spiritual kingdom.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ See Num. 18:8-20 for an extensive discussion of the rights and duties of the Levites, Num. 26:62 "... for [the Levites] were not numbered among the people of Israel, because there was no inheritance given to them among the people of Israel"; Deut. 9:20 "Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers; and the Lord is in his inheritance..." Deut. 12:12 "...and the Levite that is within your towns, since he has no portion or inheritance with you." Deut. 14:27 "... and thou shalt not forsake the Levite who is within thy towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with thee." There are more references to this legal condition in the Old Testament, but let these suffice.

⁵⁶ Knight believes that Yahya's inheritance was the great office of Abraham, through Jacob and Zechariah who followed the monotheistic creed of Abraham. All the prophets proclaimed the Unity of the One God. It was Yahya's responsibility to guard and preach the authentic tradition of Abraham. According to Knight, all the prophets descended from Isaac were called guardians of the faith (of Abraham). Unfortunately, the message was susceptible to the corrupting influences of God's opponents. (See the warning of Moses about this: Deut: 31:25-29.) Therefore, prophets were sent in succession (*muttabi>Jn*) to restore the Abrahamic tradition all the way to the time of Yahya and 'Isa. But the corruption of the message did not cease and God suspended the prophetic succession through Isaac and became the Guardian of His revelation. *Lo! We, even We, reveal the Reminder, and lo! We verily are its Guardian.* (Q. 15:9) God favored mankind with a last prophet of the seed of Abraham and Ishmael, the Prophet Muhammad, who was the seal of the prophets, and the final representative of the office of Abraham: *This day I perfected your*

Unfortunately in Islamic literature, the traditions about the son of Zechariah do not correspond to his important status and role. In the book *Stories of the Prophets* ascribed to Ibn Kathir, we find some traditions that derive from the misinformation found in the gospels and to which commentators have added their own embellishments:

“There are quite a number of traditions told about John. Ibn Asaker related that one time his parents were looking for him and found him at the Jordan River. When they met him, they wept sorely, seeing his great devotion to God, Great and Majestic.

“Ibn Wahb said that, according to Malik, grass was the food of John Ibn Zakariyah [John son of Zechariah], and he wept sorely in fear of God. A chain of narrators reported that Idris Al Khawlawi said: “Shall I not tell you he who had the best food? It is John Ibn Zakariyah, who joined the beasts at dinner, fearing to mix with men.” Ibn Mubarak stated that Wahb Ibn Al-Ward narrated that Zakariyah did not see his son for three days. He found him weeping inside a grave which he had dug and in which he resided. “My son, I have been searching for you, and you are dwelling in this grave weeping!” “O father, did you not tell me that between Paradise and Hell is only a span, and it will not be crossed except by tears of weepers?” He said to him: “Weep then, my son.” Then they wept together. Other narrations say that John said: “The dwellers of Paradise are sleepless out of the sweetness of God's bounty; that is why the faithful must be sleepless because of God's love in their hearts. How far between the two luxuries, how far between them?” They say John wept so much that tears marked his cheeks. He found comfort in the open and never cared about food.

John's life as hermit is somewhat romanticized:

“He ate leaves, herbs, and sometimes locusts. He slept anywhere in the mountains or in holes in the ground. He sometimes would find a lion or a bear as he entered a cave, but being deeply absorbed in praising God, he never heeded them. The beasts easily recognized John as the prophet who cared for all the creatures, so they would leave the cave, bowing their heads. John sometimes fed those beasts, out of mercy, from his

religion for you and completed My favor unto you, and chosen for you a religion AL-ISLAM. (Q. 5:3)

food and was satisfied with prayers as food for his soul. He would spend the night crying and praising God for His blessings. When John called people to worship God, he made them cry out of love and submission, arresting their hearts with the truthfulness of his words.”

Then the gratuitous fable about Salome’s licentious dancing seducing king Herod into granting her John’s head on a platter:

“A conflict took place between John and the authorities at that time. A tyrant king, Herod Antipas, the ruler of Palestine, was in love with Salome, his brother's daughter. He was planning to marry his beautiful niece. The marriage was encouraged by her mother and by some of the learned men of Zion, either out of fear or to gain favor with the ruler. On hearing the ruler's plan, John pronounced that such a marriage would be incestuous. He would not approve it under any circumstance, as it was against the Law of the Torah. John's pronouncement spread like wildfire. Salome was angry, for it was her ambition to rule the kingdom with her uncle. She plotted to achieve her aim. Dressing attractively, she sang and danced before her uncle. Her arousing Herod's lust. Embracing her, he offered to fulfill whatever she desired. At once she told him: "I would love to have the head of John, because he has defiled your honor and mine throughout the land. If you grant me this wish, I shall be very happy and will offer myself to you." Bewitched by her charm, he submitted to her monstrous request. John was executed and his head was brought to Salome. The cruel woman gloated with delight. But the death of God's beloved prophet was avenged. Not only she, but all the children of Israel were severely punished by invading armies which destroyed their kingdom.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *Stories of the Prophets*. Ibn Kathir, trans. By Sheikh Muhammad Mustafa, pp. 328-31. This book is ascribed to Al-Imam Ibn Kathir (810-870 CE). Were this ascription so, it would be of great value for both scholars and the general public. Regrettably, the integrity of the ascription is compromised by the contents of the Translator’s Note which states: “We have elected to simplify the translation to suit the foreign reader. We deleted all the controversial passages; therefore, this text covers most of the important points which are relevant today.” If this were not enough, sections from other works have been included that are *not* from the hand of Ibn Kathir: For this reason we also

Is it possible that our Muslim savants have been so influenced by the colorful Biblical story of John that they have failed to recognize the special Quranic attributes for this prophet of God? The Biblical tradition in many respects diminishes John in order to enhance the role of Jesus; Muslims should not imitate them in this. Here we are told that the son of Zechariah, who is mentioned in the Quran, as well as in the Gospel of Luke, as one with a powerful position in the divine plan; eating grass, herbs, and sometimes locusts. He slept in the mountains and holes in the ground. We are told that the beasts recognized the son of Zechariah as a prophet and upon leaving their cave for him, they left bowing their heads. It should also be noted that the same book reports the fabricated story found in the gospels that the son of Zechariah was beheaded.

I do not believe Ibn Kathir made such a statement for the simple reason that in his *Commentary of the Quran* he states that Yahya was given safety and security in three situations—birth, death, and raising on the resurrection. It is my belief that this statement was inserted by another hand. If one reads the introduction to this book, it will be quite obvious. Countless works have been published pertaining to the false crucifixion of the son of Mary by Muslims, yet the false beheading of the son of Zechariah is largely ignored. Why?

The Prophet Yahya could not have been beheaded as has been asserted by many Muslim and Christian scholars. With regard to Jesus, in the Quran, we read: *Peace on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day I will be raised up again.* (Q. 19:33) The verse states that Jesus was given safety and security in these three situations. But what about Yahya ibn Zechariah? We find the same description for him as we find for Jesus, *Peace on him the day he is born, the day he dies, and the day he is raised up again.* (Q. 19:15)

How does the supposed beheading of Yahya fit in the above Quranic verse of one given peace by his Lord? We find in

depended (sic) on some other sources by contemporary writers such as *The Stories of the Prophets* by Sheikh Al Sharawy, *God's Prophets* by Ahmad Bahgat, and *Selected Stories from the Qur'an.*" Though the honesty of the translator in informing us of his methods is to be commended, unfortunately there are no indications in the text regarding the source of any particular passage one may be reading.

the commentary of Ibn Kathir that Yahya was also given safety and security in these three situations, but the book speciously ascribed to Ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets*, agrees with the Gospel accounts of Yahya's being beheaded and the serving of his head on a platter. How do we explain the beheading of this Prophet of God? How, then, is he one who was "safe and secure"? Are we to say that God saved Jesus, but abandoned Yahya? Is this divine justice? As far as we know, all the prophets mentioned in the Quran were delivered from their enemies.⁵⁸ Yet, the Prophet Yahya, whose name ironically means *He Who Lives*, is popularly supposed to have been put to death. In my opinion, this would create an inconsistency in the Quran.

In the gospels, John was supposedly beheaded during the first year of the ministry of Jesus, c. 27 CE. This was done by Herod Antipas because of a vengeful wife and at the behest of her daughter Salome whose dancing had captivated him. In other

⁵⁸ *Noah cried to us, and we are the best to hear prayer. And We delivered him and his people from the great calamity, and made his progeny to endure. And We left for him among generations to come in later times. Peace to Noah among the nations!* (Q. 37:75-79)

And We bestowed Our favor on Moses and Aaron and We delivered them and their people from Great Calamity. And we helped them so they overcame. And We gave them the book which helps to make things clear; And We guided them to the straight way. And We left for them among generations a later time. Peace to Moses and Aaron! (Q. 37:114-120)

So also was Lut among those who were sent. Behold! We delivered him and his adherents, all except an old woman who was among those who lagged behind: Then We destroyed the rest. (Q. 37:133-36)

And the fish swallowed him while he was blameworthy; and had he not been one of those who glorify God, he would have tarried in its belly till the day when they are raised... (Q. 37:142-4)

And lo! Elias was of those sent (to warn). When he said unto his folk: Will ye not ward off (evil)? Will ye cry unto Baal and forsake the best of Creators. God, your Lord and the Lord of your forefathers? But they denied him, so they surely will be haled forth (to the doom) save single-minded worshippers of God. And We felt for him among the later folk (the salutation): Peace be unto Elias! Lo! Thus do We reward the good. Lo! He is one of Our believing servants. (Q. 37:123-132)

We said: O fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham, (Q. 21:69) Thus do We reward the good. (Q. 37:110)

words, it was a private crime, not a state affair. Josephus, who mentions John the Baptist rather favorably in his *Antiquities* says nothing about this lurid tale. Josephus does mention John's execution at Macherus on the order of Herod Antipas, but the reasons are political, not personal. Moreover, putting John's death so early clashes with Josephus' own independent account.

Crook writes: "Accepting the death of John at Macherus as an historical fact, Josephus gives us one firm date: Herod Antipas' defeat in battle at the hands of the Nabataean King Aretas IV (rgd. 9 BCE to 40 CE), whose daughter Herod had married and divorced. Angered by the perceived insult to his family and honor by this repudiation of his close kin, Aretas sought revenge by sending his troops into battle against Herod's army. That occurred in 36-37 CE. In the Biblical story, John's death is the direct result of his opposition to that marriage, therefore the order of events is Herod's divorce, his marriage to Herodias, John's criticism and death, and Aretas' armed reprisal, not mentioned in the Biblical tale, but strongly affirmed by the evidence of Josephus. Consequently, the date of John's death could not have been later than the date of that battle, 36-37 CE.

"The lower end of the dating is that of the New Testament, which indicates a date up to two years before the events of the Passion, usually given now as c. 29 CE. Thus, according the Bible, John died c. 27-29 CE. Reconciling the Bible and Josephus means that John died some time between c.27 CE, the downward limit, and 36-37 CE, the upward limit, a period of some ten years.

"If we hold that the Bible is correct, Josephus is wrong or, one might argue, that ten years had elapsed between the Herod's insult to Aretas' family honor and that both are correct. Since Josephus says only that John's death occurred before the battle of 36-37 CE, is it realistic to suppose that Aretas waited ten years before avenging Herod's insult? ...

"We need not be that cautious. Prof. Eisenmann thinks that Josephus' text suggests a date of c. 36 CE for the death of John.⁵⁹ Josephus' text supports a rapid scenario. Aretas, not being obstructed by overzealous lawyers, would have sought to restore the honor of his family in the old-fashioned way, with

⁵⁹ Robert Eisenmann, *James the Brother of Jesus*.

swift, peremptory action, perhaps within a year or two of Herod's act of *lèse majesté*. That would make Prof. Eisenman's suggested 36 CE quite plausible, superseding the traditional c. 27 CE based upon the Pauline New Testament. We think that the implications of the words of Josephus present a serious challenge to the received view, a view that is influenced by lingering ideas of Biblical infallibility.⁶⁰

"How would this later date affect our discussion of Knight's theories, especially his suggestion that John was the principal actor in the crucifixion, not Jesus? Put simply, it would remove it from the realm of chronological impossibility to that of chronological possibility. The alternative would require us to shift the date of the Jesus' Passion from 29 or 30 CE to a date *after* 36 CE. However, here we encounter another problem. The Biblical evidence—the only source of information that we have about Paul—indicates that he never met Jesus in person. His conversion reputedly took place some time c. 34-36 CE. To move the crucifixion to a date as late as 36 CE or later would appear to be impossible."⁶¹

Thus, Josephus' brief remarks give the lie to the whole sordid gospel fabrication about the beheading of Yahya by a king smitten by the dancing of his step-daughter. The tale is merely another and most degrading instance of the covert trivialization of John the reader finds in the gospel picture of him.

Though I agree with Josephus as to the date of the Prophet Yahya's arrest, I do not agree with his statement that Yahya was put to death. Josephus was not an eyewitness to this

⁶⁰ The patient reader may be interested in the fate of Herod Antipas after he had been defeated in battle by Aretas: at the urging of Herodias, Herod sought from the Roman emperor Caligula (rgd. 37-41 CE) the title of king. The couple went to Rome for this purpose, but Herodias' brother Agrippa, coveting Herod's territories, brought charges against Herod. This resulted in Herod's banishment to Gaul (modern France) by Caligula, who was Agrippa's friend, in 39 CE. Herodias stayed with Herod and he died there in Lyons, far away from Palestine. Herod Antipas had the longest reign of any Jewish ruler of the Second Temple period, some 43 years. Aretas IV remained on his throne until 40 CE.

⁶¹ Crook, Jay R, *Rethinking John the Baptist*. However, Knight believes that there was no attempted crucifixion of Jesus, therefore 36 CE would still be a possible date for a crucifixion of John.

execution, but was informed of second-hand, perhaps from official records, for that was the way it was meant to appear. What is interesting is that the date of Josephus' account of Yahya's arrest and alleged execution is about the same time as that of the crucifixion of Jesus, 35 or 36 A.D. Of course, not everyone agrees with such a late date for the crucifixion, most putting it half a dozen years earlier, but some scholars have begun rejecting the traditional chronology and have accepted the good possibility of a later date.

Schonfield writes: "When Jesus was baptised by John he 'began to be about thirty years of age'. So that in A.D. 35 he would have been twenty-nine. Luke's system thus fits in with the evidence of Josephus, on whom, as we have seen, he relies a good deal. Matthew's chronology does not affect the date of the ministry and crucifixion of Jesus: it only makes him a considerably older man, born in 6-5 B.C. in the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C. Therefore at the date of his crucifixion in A.D. 36 Jesus would have been about forty-one, which would more nearly agree with John's Gospel, where the Jews of Jerusalem say to Jesus, 'Thou art not yet fifty years old.'"⁶²

It is my belief that there was only one arrest and one alleged execution and that was of John the Baptist who, I believe, was put on the cross yet in some manner survived the ordeal. If Jesus was crucified, how then do we explain the absence of any mention of the event by Josephus? If, in fact, he

⁶² Schonfield, p. 257. "The Jews then said to [Jesus], 'Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?'" (Jn. 8:57) The clear implication is that Jesus was a man of middle age, in his forties. This flies in the face of the tradition that depicts Jesus as comparatively young, traditionally 33, at the time of the Passion. This anomaly and its implications are usually passed over in commentaries." (NTAIP, p. 222) It is interesting to note that the word *kahl* is used only twice in the Quran and both times in passages about Jesus: *And (Jesus) will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood...* (Q. 3:46) and: *... so that thou [Jesus] speakest unto mankind in the cradle as in maturity...* (Q. 5:110) the word translated as "manhood in the first verse and "maturity" in the second is the same, namely *kahl*. The dictionary (Wehr) tells us that *kahl* is formed from a root meaning: "to be mature, middle-aged."

was a sober historian and can be trusted in his reports of matters which did not affect his personal reputation, how could he have ignored this momentous event of the crucifixion of Jesus so trumpeted by early Christians? It is my belief based on the available evidence that there was only *one* arrest of a prominent figure at that time and that figure was the Prophet Yahya. For this reason, he is commented upon in the writings of Josephus. It is also my belief that although Josephus does not mention the manner of the Prophet Yahya's alleged execution, it would probably have been by crucifixion. This was normal for insurgents or potential insurgents in the Roman Empire, as Herod Antipas viewed John the Baptist. We shall see why this was also the sentence of the Prophet Yahya as we continue below.⁶³

I would like to remark that though Yahya is called the Prophet of the Highest by his father Zechariah, also a prophet, it seems that most scholars of both Christianity and Islam (following his characterization in the traditions and most commentaries) have portrayed him as a prophet of a lower rank and have unjustly underestimated his important role in the messianic story and in the development and spread of the universal religion of the One God.

⁶³Knight, *Ihya' al-Nabi Yahya*, pp. 4-5.

THE DISCIPLES

We know from the gospels that Jesus had disciples, traditionally twelve in number, and that John also had an unspecified number of disciples. *Luke* mentions the austere behavior of John's disciples (Lk. 5:33) and records that John sent two of them to meet with Jesus (Lk. 7:18-22). Though the disciples of Jesus were criticized by some for their laxity in the performance of their expected religious obligations, they probably represented the type of men attracted to such causes. As the Bible gives no other information about John's disciples,⁶⁴ let us look at those of Jesus and we may gain some insight about what sort of men the disciples of John may have been. These are the names of the followers named in the gospels, following the order given in the oldest gospel, *Mark* (Mk. 3:16-19):

1. Simon, surnamed Peter: According to the Synoptics, Simon lived with his family in Capernaum on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He was a fisherman. *John*, however, states that he was from Bethsaida at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, about 6 miles to the east. In the Synoptic gospels, Simon and his brother Andrew were the first disciples to be called by Jesus and was later called Peter (the rock) by him. Simon-Peter was a Galilean, as was Jesus.

2. James, the son of Zebedee: A Galilean, the son of a prosperous fisherman. Apparently he and his brother John were in a kind of partnership with Simon-Peter and his brother

⁶⁴ John's disciples are mentioned several times in the gospels, none by name except Andrew who, *John* tells us, defected with another unnamed disciple from John to follow Jesus. Andrew also brought his brother Simon Peter who later became Jesus' most important disciple (Jn. 1:40-42). In the tale of Salome and the beheading, John's disciples collected John's body, buried and reported to Jesus (Mt. 14:2). In another incident, *John* reports that a question of purification brought to John by his disciples. This provides *John* with another opportunity show the Baptist expanding upon his inferiority to Jesus (Jn. 3:25-36). One can almost hear the smug satisfaction of the author of *John* as he writes: "Now when the Lord [Jesus] that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John..." (Jn. 4:1)

Andrew. All became disciples. Jesus nicknamed him “son of Thunder” (*Boanerges*).⁶⁵

3. John, the brother of James: Another son of Zebedee, he shares the above description of his brother, including the epithet “Son of Thunder.” However, he became much more prominent in Christian tradition than James and was called the “beloved disciple.” He should not be confused with the putative author of *John* or John of Patmos, who is credited with the writing of *Revelation*.

4. Andrew: According to *John*, Andrew, the brother of Simon-Peter and also a fisherman, was at first a disciple of John the Baptist, but left him for Jesus, also bringing his Simon-Peter to him. Both became Jesus’ disciples at about the same time.

5. Philip: nothing much is known about his circumstances other than that he was also from Bethsaida in Galilee.

6. Bartholomew: Little is known about him save his name. Bartholomew is really a patronymic meaning “Son of Tholmai.” His given name may have been Nathanael, if the Nathanael mentioned by *John* (who does not mention Bartholomew) is same as the Bartholomew of the Synoptics (who do not mention Nathanael). In that case, his full name would have been Nathanael, son of Tholmai.

7. Matthew: A the tax collector (publican), collecting dues and taxes from the Jews for their Roman masters. Another Galilean, perhaps from Capernaum or its environs, he is depicted in the gospels as being prosperous and he threw a lavish feast for Jesus and his party that attract the disapproval of the Pharisees and other Jews. His given name was probably “Levi, the son of Alphaeus” (Mk. 2:9); Matthew (“gift of God”) appears to be additional name possibly given by Jesus. Some believe that he was the brother of James, son of Alphaeus, listed below (No. 9), but there as strong circumstantial evidence against this hypothesis.⁶⁶

8. Thomas: Only his name is given by the Synoptics, he

⁶⁵ Boanerges: the nickname bestowed upon the sons of Zebedee, James and John, by Jesus, supposedly meaning “sons of thunder.” The word is of uncertain etymology. (DB, Boanerges, p. 110.)

⁶⁶ DB, Matthew, p. 630.

plays a greater role in *John*.⁶⁷ There is a tradition that he was born in Antioch, but nothing definite about his origins is mentioned in the Bible.

9. James: A Galilean about whom little is known but much is speculated. He was the son of Alphaeus and a fraternal relationship with Matthew has been proposed. James may be the father or brother of the apostle Judas who appears in *Luke-Acts* in place of Thaddeus (see below).

10. Thaddeus: Called by this name in *Matthew and Mark*, this disciple is apparently the Judas (son or brother of James, not Judas Iscariot) referred to by *Luke* and *Acts*. To add to the confusion, he is also called Lebbaeus in some texts of the New Testament. *John* makes no mention of him and the sum of the Biblical information about him is his name. As the disciples were in Galilee at the time of the calling, we may assume that he was also a Galilean.

11. Simon, the Cananaean: Or Simon the Zealot, Cananaean or Canaanite having that meaning. Simon is the only to disciple of Jesus to have an overt connection with the extremist Zealots who were partisans of Jewish independence and the Law and were fierce opponents of Roman rule.

12. Judas Iscariot, the betrayer: After Peter, perhaps the most famous—or infamous—of the disciples, he was the only

⁶⁷ After the supposed crucifixion of Jesus, the first time he appeared to the disciples, Thomas was absent. When they told him about the return of Jesus, Thomas said: “‘Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.’ Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put thy finger here, and see my hands; and put out thy hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Hast thou believed because thou hast seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.’” (Jn. 20:25-29) Hence, the expression “a doubting Thomas” in English.

Incidentally, “Thomas” means “twin” [in Aramaic] and is a cognate of the Arabic *taw'am*. In *John*, the name Thomas is often coupled with Didymus, which is simply a Greek translation meaning “twin.” Thus “Thomas called Didymus” (Jn. 11:16, 21:11-12) = “Twin called Twin.” NTAIP, p. 308 (note).

Judaean disciple. According to *John*, he was the treasurer of the disciples (Jn. 12:5; 13:29). Various explanations have been given for the term Iscariot,⁶⁸ but if it be derived from the Latin word *sicarius* (dagger-man) imported into Aramaic, this would strongly imply that, like Simon the Cananaean, Judas too was a Zealot. In *John*, he is referred to as “Judas the son of Simon Iscariot” (Jn. 6:71; 13:26). Little else known about him, except of course his role in the betrayal of Jesus to his enemies that led to the events of the trial and crucifixion. More about him will be said in the proper place below.

Thus the disciples of Jesus, according to the New Testament. Except for Peter and Judas Iscariot, not much is known about them as individuals save for a few scattered incidents involving them. “Whilst a majority of Christian scholars deny any real connection between Jesus and the Zealots, there is some room for speculation. It has been suggested that Judas Iscariot, the alleged betrayer of Jesus, was a Zealot, and that his surname Iscariot derives from Sicarii, although other derivations...have been proposed. Putting aside the question of Judas Iscariot, Jesus certainly had another connection with the Zealots: one of his Twelve Disciples was explicitly called Simon the Zealot (Lk. 6:15). These speculations become particularly important when considering the events of the Passion Week...”⁶⁹

We have given this review of the disciples in order to give the reader an idea of the kind of person who was attracted to such charismatic leaders as Jesus and John the Baptist. Because the gospels are in praise of Jesus, we find much about him and

⁶⁸ Such as “man from Issachar” (one of the ten ancient northern Israelite tribes carried off by the Assyrians in 721 BCE), “man of Sychar (which would make him a Samaritan), “man from Keriath (by breaking the word up into *ish Kariot*), and “carrier of the *scortea* (purse?).” (*Judas Iscariot*, article by Thomas S. Kepler in DB, pp. 535-6.)

⁶⁹ NTAIP, p. 74. In another place, Crook writes: “*Mark* comes down squarely on the side of Paul and, as a consequence, *Mark*’s portrayal of the disciples is biased and condescending, making them thickheaded and incapable of understanding the Pauline subtleties that were, for *Mark*, the true *kerygma*.” (The *kerygma* is the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ.) (NTAIP, p. 107.)

very little about John. The disparity is even greater with respect to their respective disciples. John's disciples are mentioned but not named, except when a couple apparently defected from John to Jesus. The rest were loyal and they even braved the wrath of Herod Antipas to collect the body of John when he was allegedly beheaded by Herod to please his wife and daughter. Though the story is a probably fiction, the impression of John's steadfast disciples may not be. In any case, they were there and shared his fortunes.

Though Paul never encountered the living Jesus,⁷⁰ he managed to insert himself among the surviving disciples of Jesus, especially James (not the brother of Jesus), Peter, and John. Their relations were not always cordial, especially with Peter, and the Gospels written by Paul's followers reflect their master's disdain for the real disciples who had walked, talked, and eaten with Jesus. "In their composition and editing of the gospels, they reduced—for the most part—the disciples into a group of slow dullards incapable of understanding Jesus. They were to be compared with Paul's immediate perception of the "true" nature of Christ and his mission through the illumination of his vision. At the same time, Paul's followers imputed words and actions to Jesus that validated Paul's abrogation of the Mosaic Law."⁷¹

In the Quran, the following verses describe Jesus' plea for help and the willing response of his disciples. We may extend its scope to illuminate the nature of John's relationship with his own disciples:

⁷⁰ "...there is a major flaw in Luke's accounts of Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus: Paul himself does not refer to it in the authentic letters! We would have expected such things in the first chapter of *Galatians*, but Paul's own words do not allude to it: "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him to the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood..." (Gal. 1:15-16) None of the incidents Luke lovingly describes, not even the blindness, are confirmed by Paul's own words! Not only that, but directly after this "revelation" Paul did not even head for Damascus, but—according to his own testimony—he went straight to Arabia..." (NTAIP. P. 421)

⁷¹ NTAIP, p. 421

[‘Isa] cried; “Who will be my helpers in the cause of God? The disciples said, “We will be God’s helpers. We believe in God and bear thou witness that we have surrendered (unto Him). Our Lord! We believe in that which Thou hast revealed and we follow him whom Thou hast sent. Enroll us among those who witness (to the truth).” (Q. 3:52-53)

Jesus’ disciples were almost all Galileans, northerners, like himself, Judas being the conspicuous exception. This becomes important when we consider the events at that critical Passover Week. We may assume that John’s disciples were probably drawn from Judaea and the regions close to the lower Jordan valley, where he was active. We may also assume that the disciples of both men were not so uncomprehending as the gospels would like us to believe. John’s disciples would more likely have been at home in the more sophisticated milieu of southern Palestine and the lower Jordan region.

We do not read of John’s disciples performing miracles, but considering the minimizing tone of the gospels with respect to John, if they had done so, we probably would not have heard about it. The gospel treatment of the disciples of Jesus was quite different, for they were baptized by the Holy Spirit. When they went out to perform miracles, they succeeded. For example, in *Luke*, we read that the true disciples of the son of Mary said, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in thy name.” (Lk. 10:18) However, such success was not total, for they failed abjectly to cure the boy possessed by the dumb spirit (Mk. 9:18).⁷²

Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit. In the Quran 2:87, we read the following: *We gave unto ‘Isa, son of Mary, clear proofs (of God’s sovereignty), and We supported him with the Holy Spirit.” (Q. 2:87)*

We are told here that the son of Mary was capable of performing miracles, and that he was supported by the Holy Spirit. Who is the Holy Spirit and what does it mean that Jesus was supported by the Holy Spirit?

⁷² This seems to be another Pauline disparagement of the abilities of Jesus’ disciples.

According to *Matthew* and *Luke*, the Holy Spirit is none other than the angel Gabriel. We read the following in *Matthew* about the birth of the son of Mary: “She [Mary] was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit.” (Mt. 1:18) Compare this with *Luke*: “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin ...” (Lk. 1:26) In the Quran, too, the angel Gabriel is the Holy Spirit. Gabriel is believed by Muslims to be the medium through which God revealed the Quran to Prophet Muhammad. We read in the Quran the following: *Say (O Muhammad, to mankind): Who is an enemy to Gabriel! For he it is who hath revealed (this Scripture) to thy heart by God's leave, confirming that which was (revealed) before it, and a guidance and glad tidings to believers...* (Q. 2:97)

Compare this with another verse of the Quran: *Say: The Holy Spirit hath revealed it from thy Lord with truth, that it may confirm (the faith of) those who believe, and as guidance and good tidings for those who have surrendered (to God).* (Q. 16:102)

There is no doubt that *Matthew* and *Luke*, as well as the Quran, recognize the Holy Spirit as being the angel Gabriel. Being supported by the Holy Spirit is obvious; without the support of Gabriel, Jesus could not have performed miracles such as healing those who were born blind, raising the dead back to life, cleansing those with leprosy, etc.

Now, the disciples of the son of Mary, as stated earlier, were baptized with the Holy Spirit (the angel Gabriel). According to another verse in the Quran, we read that when Jesus was a child, he spoke in the cradle and *foretold a sign* from his Lord to the Children of Israel: *And will make him a messenger unto the Children of Israel, (saying): Lo! I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Lo! I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by God's leave.⁷³ I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I raise the dead, by God's leave. And I announce unto you what*

⁷³ Knight points out that the miracle of the bird fashioned from clay by Jesus and given life may be interpreted as a prophecy of his giving such miraculous powers to his disciples, making them “spiritual fliers.” This idea is also found in Sufi mysticism.

ye eat and what ye store up in your houses. Lo! herein verily is a portent for you, if ye are to be believers. (Q. 3:49)

In the Quran, we read the following: *And when I inspired the disciples, (saying): Believe in Me and in My messenger, they said: We believe. Bear witness that we have surrendered (unto Thee). (Q. 5:111)* It was God who inspired the true disciples of Jesus and they declared their faith by submitting to the Lord of the Worlds.

In the Quran, the disciples asked their master to show them a miracle so as to be certain that what he said to them was true and so that they could witness for themselves the manifestation of his power: *When the disciples said: 'O 'Isa, son of Mary! Is thy Lord able to send down for us a table from heaven? He said: Observe your duty to God, if ye are true believers. (They said:) We wish to eat thereof, that we may satisfy our hearts and know that thou hast spoken truth to us, and that thereof we may be witnesses.'* (Q. 5:112-13)

Jesus replied with a prayer to God: *'Isa, son of Mary, said: 'O God, Lord of us! Send down for us a table from heaven, that it may be a feast for us, for the first of us and for the last of us, and a sign from Thee. Give us sustenance, for Thou art the Best of Sustainers. God said: Lo! I send it down for you. And whoso disbelieveth of you afterward, him surely will I punish with a punishment wherewith I have not punished any of (My) creatures. (Q. 5:114-15)*

After witnessing such things, can there be any doubt that the disciples were of real and immovable faith? We believe the same may be asserted for the disciples of Yahya.

According to *Matthew*, Jesus gave specific instructions to his disciples. The true disciples of the son of Mary were not faithless, as we have said above. The son of Mary instructed his disciples as follows: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.⁷⁴ And preach as ye go, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. Ye received without paying, give

⁷⁴ Mt. 10:5.

without pay. Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the laborer deserves his food.” (Mt. 10:5-10) Further we read: “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master...” (Mt. 10:24-25)

He empowered them to perform the miracles he himself performed. They all received the same instructions. Thus, they all became as one, a reflection of God’s Unity.

The message they were told to preach is of interest: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Is this not the same message the son of Zechariah preached at the beginning of his public career? Is there a connection? Why are they all proclaiming the same message? We may recall that the son of Mary deferred to the authority of the son of Zechariah when they first met at the Jordan. This was so that the Temple authorities would keep their eyes on the son of Zechariah. He was famous for his use of this heavenly warning.

The son of Mary sent out his elect, and then turned to his Lord and prayed: “I have manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest me out of the world; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to me, and they have kept Thy word. Now they know that everything that Thou hast given me is from Thee; for I have given them the words which Thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from Thee; and they have believed that Thou didst send me. I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom Thou hast given me, for they are Thine; all mine are Thine, and Thine are mine, and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, which Thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” (Jn. 17:6-11)⁷⁵

The true disciples of the son of Mary were representatives of the Messiah; as such, they were just as genuine as he.

⁷⁵ This prayer epitomizes *John’s* sublime divinization of Jesus, an interpretation of his mission which both Muslims and Jews reject. Knight holds that Jesus gave the disciples the same powers that had been given to him by God.

The son of Mary had no reason to reveal himself to anyone. His disciples, as stated in the above verse, brought him the glory. *(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! God giveth thee glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah, 'Isa, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God). (Q. 3:45)*

The disciples taught the people as they were taught by their master, the son of Mary. The Messiah and his mother Mary were to be protected from the evil ones. Consider the saying of Mary's mother from the Quran, when Mary was delivered: *Lo! I crave Thy protection for her and for her offspring from Satan the outcast. (Q. 3:36)*

God prevented any harm from touching them: *...and how I restrained the Children of Israel from (harming) thee when thou camest unto them with clear proofs, and those of them who disbelieved exclaimed: This is naught else than mere magic... Q. 5.110)*

But God Almighty secured them: *And We made the son of Mary and his mother a portent, and We gave them refuge on a height, a place of flocks and watersprings. (Q. 23:50)*

The disciples went into all of Jerusalem, each in his own direction, and did as the son of Mary instructed them. The kingdom of heaven that they preached was now being realized by the people. News of a messiah performing miracles spread rapidly throughout Jerusalem. The Temple authorities received word from every direction where a messiah was spotted. Unaware of the divine plan, they must have been baffled as to how one man could be in so many places at once!

Each disciple instructed his followers not to reveal his identity. His mission was one of secrecy, and those who accepted and believed were those who prospered: *O ye who believe! Be God's helpers, even as 'Isa son of Mary said unto the disciples: Who are my helpers for God? They said: We are God's helpers. And a party of the Children of Israel believed, while a party disbelieved. Then We strengthened those who believed against their foe, and they became the uppermost. (Q. 61:14)*

It is my belief that the Temple authorities sent agents into every town, village, and city in order to apprehend and to

deliver up any messianic claimant. When the people were confronted by the officers, they were ordered to surrender him, but to their surprise, the officers were faced with a dilemma. One by one, a person would come forth and say: “I am he” until the whole town, village, or city became a phalanx of would-be messiahs. No one would give up his master. How could he? Children who were born blind had been given sight, those with leprosy had been cleansed, and the dead had been raised to life. They were taught well by their masters. Consider the master’s words, according to the *Mark*: “For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mk. 8:35-38)

We can barely imagine the loyalty and devotion given to the disciples by the people who had been helped by them and who were now driven by a different spirit. How wonderful it is that the Quran calls those who followed the messiah *nasara*—supporters, helpers, those who aid and assist, and not Christians, a name introduced long after the disappearance of the son of Mary.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Though Luke refers to the use of the term “Christians” in Antioch in the early 40s CE (Acts 11:26), its use was apparently not welcomed by the followers of Jesus, especially the Jewish Christians, and it took nearly a century for it to be generally accepted by the now largely gentile followers of Christ. (See DB article on “Christian,” pp. 137-39.) *Nasara* is an Arabic plural of *Nasirani* meaning “a Christian.” The root *n s r* has the general meaning of to help, to aid, to assist; and to triumph.” In Egypt, a noun derived from the root, *mansar*, is used for “a band of robbers.” (Wehr)

THE FINAL ACT TO PROVOKE THE JEWS

Now that the son of Mary had his mission well underway, the time had arrived for him to provoke the Jews into action. Jesus first told his followers what would take place: “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes,⁷⁷ and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise.” (Mk. 10:33-34)

Well versed in the Scriptures, Jesus instructed his followers to find a donkey for him so that he might fulfill the prophecy in *Zechariah*: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion... thy king comes to thee. Triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.” (Zech. 9:9) As he rode into Jerusalem, *Matthew* tells us that the people threw branches in the way and were shouting: “Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest.” (Mt. 21:9)

Luke tells us that some of the Pharisees in the crowd complained to the master: “Teacher, rebuke thy disciples.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.’” (Lk. 19:39-40) Then, *Luke* continues with the master’s lament over the fate of Jerusalem: “Would that even today thou knewest the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from thy eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, when thine enemies will cast up a bank about thee and surround thee, and hem thee in on every side, and dash thee to the ground, thou and thy children within thee, and they will not leave one stone upon another in thee; because thou didst not know the time of thy visitation.” (Lk. 19:42-44)

The synoptic gospels all relate that Jesus next entered the Temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers, and the

⁷⁷ Knight believes that the “son of Man” here is a code word for John the Baptist and that this presages the events on Calvary. See chapter *Who Is Who?* for a discussion of the term son of man.

benches of those selling doves. He provoked them again with harsh words: “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but ye have made it a den of robbers.” (Lk. 19:46)

Mark tells us that the chief priests and the teachers of the law became enraged, and began looking for a way to kill the master (Mk. 11:18). Then, Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and asked: “What will ye give me if I deliver him to you?” They gave him thirty pieces of silver (Mt. 26:14-15). They needed Judas to identify the master for them as Jesus was not well known by sight in Jerusalem.

How is that they did not know which person was the master? Did the master not speak in the synagogues and the temples where the Jews worshipped? Why should Judas be needed to identify him? Before his coming to Jerusalem for the Passover, most of Jesus’ teaching had been outside of Jerusalem. Moreover, the son of Mary and his disciples made it very difficult for anyone to identify which one was the real Messiah. The people who followed and supported the man whom they believed to be the messiah were not willing to give up their master, so the Temple authorities needed someone from the inside to identify the man who posed a danger to them. They wanted to be sure that they captured and executed the right man. Therefore, Judas Iscariot—a Judaeen who had associated with the disciples of the son of Mary—was the most qualified to perform this task.

While the betrayer Judas Iscariot conspired with the Temple authorities to identify the Messiah, the son of Mary instructed his zealous followers at what is now known as the Last Supper: “But now, let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one. For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, ‘And he was reckoned with transgressors’; for what is written about me has its fulfillment.’ And they said, ‘Look, Lord, here are two swords.’ And he said to them, ‘It is enough.’” (Lk. 22:36-38)

Why were only two swords enough? The reason is that he was not planning to engage in any major battle, but they would be need to implement God’s plan.

After the supper, Jesus and his disciples retired to the

place called Gethsemane.⁷⁸ At least a few of his followers were now armed. There he simulated the appearance of one ready for combat. While the disciples took up positions around the grove, Jesus moved further up to be alone. This is what is called Jesus' agony.⁷⁹

Matthew relates: "And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.' And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.'

"And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, couldst thou not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, Thy will be done.' And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words." (Mt. 26:37-44)

My interpretation of the following events may startle many of my readers, as it contradicts the traditional "historical" account found in the Gospels, but this is what I believe may have happened when Jesus repeated his prayer that the cup be taken away from him:

Unbeknown to the disciples and moments before Jesus

⁷⁸ The exact site of Gethsemane—most commentators say the name means "oil press"—is disputed, although it was almost certainly near or about the place now pointed out to tourists and pilgrims. Besides churches, there are a number of ancient olive trees, though probably not ancient enough to have "witnessed" the events of the Passion. The Synoptics do not call Gethsemane a garden, *John* does, but does not use the name Gethsemane. Another minor (it was probably an olive grove in which an oil-press was situated) conflict between the Synoptics and *John*.

⁷⁹ It is interesting to note that only *John* omits this episode, skipping from the entrance into the garden to the betrayal and arrest. Presumably the author's vision of the divine Jesus was inconsistent with such a display of human emotion facing death in such a situation.

had repeated his prayer, John the Baptist, perhaps accompanied by a young acolyte,⁸⁰ had entered the garden to meet with him, their second public meeting together, the first having been the baptism of Jesus by John at the Jordan River some three years before. John came upon Jesus in profound prayer and heard the words he uttered: "If this cannot pass unless I drink it, Thy will be done."

A voice called out that only John could hear: "O Yahya, take hold of the scripture with might."⁸¹ (Q. 19:12) Is this to

⁸⁰ "young acolyte": We have taken the liberty of proposing of our solution to the mystery of the "young man" who appears suddenly in *Mark's* narrative: "And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body; and they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked." (Mk. 14:51-52) None of the other gossellers mentions him. Notes Nineham: "Speculation about the identity of the young man has been endless, and, in view of the meagerness of our information, quite profitless..."(Nineham, p. 396.) Despite Prof. Nineham's admonition, we suggest that there *may* be a link between this man and John the Baptist. There will be more about him below and he is also discussed below in Crook's *Rethinking John the Baptist*, pp. 102-3.

⁸¹ The word *khudh*, translated as *take hold of*, comes from the word *akhadha* which also carries the meanings of *to take up*, *make one's own*, *take over*, and *adopt*. Knight asks the question: What will Yahya take up, adopt, or make his own? It may be recalled that Zechariah feared what his people would do after him, so he prayed to God for a protector to aid and assist the son of Mary because some had disbelieved in the miracle of Mary and made false charges against her. God in His infinite mercy gave the good news to Zechariah of Yahya, *a chief and a concealer of secrets*, who would protect the son of Mary and *to confirm a word from God* (Q. 3:39). Not only is he told to take hold of the scripture, but he was told hold it with *might*. It is he who will face great opposition. Prophets are known for bringing their own miracles. We know of Jesus' but what could Yahya's be? It is my belief that it is embodied in his name, *Ya=yf*: "He who lives." Jesus was given the power to raise the dead, but Yahya was himself the miracle of life, that no one could take from him but God Himself. How else could he have confirmed the word of God? Though they would try to kill him, he would not die. It was only God who would be responsible for the death and raising of Yahya, as He was for Jesus.

In the *Book of John* of the Mandaeans we read a version of his immunity: "Yahya, go forth from our city! Before thy voice quaked

hearten John as he takes the bitter cup of the impending ordeal upon his own shoulders? The messages of the two prophets complemented each other and now it was God's decree that John would take up the scripture—the mission—from where Jesus had left off as he disappeared from Palestine. John, perhaps the priestly messiah, was to taste the bitter cup prepared for Jesus, perhaps the royal messiah, as cupbearers in royal courts of old were wont to do for their sovereigns. Cupbearers were the confidants of the kings whom they served.⁸²

Both knew that God's decree must be fulfilled. John understood what God wanted of him and when Jesus saw him, Jesus too understood what must happen. They were both bearded and bore a familial resemblance to each other. The moon was full, but its light was perhaps dimmed by some clouds and the deep shadows of the mature olive trees. Jesus rose somberly and nodded to John. The two men embraced, perhaps for the last time. In obedience to the decree of God, Jesus disappeared into the darkness and left the city.

Thus, John was the protector of Jesus and at same time of the word of God. He confirmed the word of God so the word lived on after the departure of Jesus, now concealed after his rejection by the Jews.⁸³

the house of the people, at the sound of thy proclamations the temple did quake, at the sound of thy discourse quaked the priests' dome.' Thereon Yahya answered the priests of Jerusalem: 'Bring fire and burn me, bring sword and hew me in pieces.' But the priests in Jerusalem answered to Yahya: 'Fire does not burn thee, O Yahya, for Life's Name has been uttered o'er thee. A sword does not hew thee in pieces, O Yahya, for Life's Son rests here upon thee.' And Life is Victorious." (*The Book of John*, Mandaean Chapter 10)

⁸² Knight comments that the Prophet Yahya becomes the embodiment of a chief cupbearer, indeed, the most exalted cupbearer who ever lived.

⁸³ Knight believes that, while still an infant in his cradle, Jesus prophesized the coming of a Messenger named Ahmad. This Ahmad would reveal the truth about Jesus and John. *And when Jesus son of Mary said: O Children of Israel! Lo! I am the messenger of God unto you, confirming that which was (revealed) before me in the Torah, and bringing good tidings of a messenger who cometh after me, whose name is the Praised One.* (Q.61:6) The Praised One, of course, is the Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be the peace and blessings of God!

John had accepted the cup. He warned the young man to leave if he heard any commotion. The new disciple promised to obey John's words. He followed him as he walked down to the place where the disciples were waiting.

Wrapped in a cloak against the coolness of the night air, thereby conveniently concealing most of his features, he went down to the dozing disciples of Jesus and spoke to them: "Are ye still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand." (Mt. 27:45-46)

Once again, mistaken identity became a factor in the lives of God's envoys to Roman Palestine. The disciples, groggy with sleep, assumed that Jesus was addressing them, whereas in reality, it was Yahya, ready to assume the coming ordeal in obedience to God.

The gospels tell us that Judas Iscariot arrived with a band of men armed with swords and clubs and besieged the master. Judas had told the men beforehand that he would identify the master by kissing him.

After Judas Iscariot had kissed his master, *Luke* tells us the master said: "Judas, wouldst thou betray the son of man [the son of Zechariah] with a kiss?" (Lk. 22:48) When the disciples saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?"

The gospels say that one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. The master restrained himself from doing any harm to anyone of them out of mercy.⁸⁴ The master said to his zealous follower: "Put thy sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot appeal to my Father,⁸⁵ and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (Mt.

⁸⁴ See Knight, *Ihya al-Nabi Yahya* for *hanan*, p. 2.

⁸⁵ While Christians are at ease addressing God as "Father," Muslims normally refrain from this practice, addressing Him by many names (traditionally, ninety-nine): however, "father" is not one of them. God is our Creator, our Lord, but not our father.

26:52-54)⁸⁶ As we can see, both Jesus and John never planned to fight their enemies, it was just a stratagem to implement the divine plan. At this point, all the disciples forsook him and fled except the young man who had accompanied John. He was briefly seized, but managed to slip out of the grasp of his would-be captors and fled, leaving them holding only his linen wrap, fleeing the scene as his master had ordered him to do.⁸⁷

This is what I believe may have occurred on that crucial evening at Gethsemane.

The reader may very well gasp at that idea that John faced Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate and the cross, not Jesus. “How can this be?” he might exclaim, or: “This is impossible! Everyone knows that Jesus was on the cross!” As one writer has put such a reaction: “The idea is so bizarre that one is tempted to reject it out of hand—to say ‘I don’t believe it!’ But I have long since learned never to close my mind to any possibility, no matter how unlikely it might seem. To say ‘I don’t believe’ *without any evidence* is to make as much an act of faith as is made when one says ‘I *do* believe’.”⁸⁸

I sympathize with the reader’s dilemma. However, remember that this is an exercise in reinterpretation and

⁸⁶ Perhaps this refers to future events beyond Palestine, the transfer of the torch of leadership of monotheistic believers in the One God from the Israelites to the Arabs six centuries later with the divine proclamation to the unlettered Prophet delivered by the angel Gabriel: *Read in the name of thy Lord...!* (Q. 96:1) See the chapter entitled “Secrecy” above.

⁸⁷ “Was the linen cloth some sort of baptismal or initiatory gown? Hippolytus states that both the person being baptized (*catechumen*) and the officiating elder (*presbyter*) must stand naked in the water. The mystery remains unresolved, but the Clementine fragments offer more grist for the mills of speculation.” (NTAIP, pp. 289-90.)

And this is what later may have happened: Later in mid-life, the young man who had fled his pursuers in a linen wrap, would in turn sojourn with a young Jew for several years who would become the historian who would later give the lie to the Pauline story of John’s beheading *before* the crucifixion at the order of Herod Antipas. John would encounter the wrathful fear of the king at a later time. For the young man was Banus and the future historian was Josephus.

⁸⁸ Henry Lincoln, *The Holy Place*, Arcade Publishing, New York, 1991, p. 81.)

speculation about shadowy events of nearly two thousand years ago. Some aspects of my version of events may be more plausible than others, but when we put aside preconceptions and examine the inconsistencies in the received version of events, there is plenty of room for all sorts of speculations, including mine. Moreover, I believe that my theories are more consistent with the brief statements of Josephus cited in the text above, as well as the probabilities (and improbabilities) of the Biblical story.

Having said that, let us continue with the story of Yahya:

Then they seized John, thinking him Jesus, and put him under arrest. He could have summoned twelve legions of angels and all would have been over with, but he knew that the scriptures must be fulfilled. The master (the son of Zechariah) was then brought to the high priest, who questioned him about his teaching. According to *John*, the master said: "...‘I have spoken openly to the world, I always taught in synagogues and in the Temple where all Jews come together. I have said nothing secretly. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me. They know what I said.’" (Jn. 18:20-21)

John continues, saying that the master’s words provoked one of the guards to strike him in the face. The master said: "If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong, but if I have spoken rightly,⁸⁹ why dost thou strike me?" (Jn. 18:20-23) They brought their witnesses together, but their testimonies did not agree. "And the high priest said to him, ‘I adjure you by the living God, tell us if thou art the Christ, the Son of God.’" (Mt. 26:63) The master replied to him: "‘Thou hast said so. But I tell thee, hereafter thou wilt see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.’" (Mt. 26:64)

What could the son of Zechariah do? From the beginning, he has told them that he was not the Messiah. Yet, they believed that he was. So he told them what they wanted to hear: "Yes, it is as ye say..." In other words: "Whatever you

⁸⁹ "speaking rightly": Compare with this from the Quran: *God giveth thee glad tidings of Yahya [John] confirming (musaddiqan) a Word from God...* (Q. 3:39)

say.” He then reminded them that in the future, they would see the son of man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven. At that point, the high priest became enraged at his words and then condemned him for blasphemy, and the people said he was worthy of death.

When Judas Iscariot had seen that they had bound him and sent him off to the governor, Pontius Pilate, he was struck with remorse. He returned the money to the chief priests and said: “I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.” (Mt. 27:4) In other words, he had betrayed the wrong man. Judas Iscariot now understood that the son of Zechariah was not the man with whom he had broken bread at the Last Supper. He feared that which would befall him and so he hanged himself. Had Judas the betrayer suffered from a bad case of mistaken identity?

Next, according to *Luke* (Lk. 23:2), they brought the master before Pontius Pilate. “And they began to accuse him, saying, ‘We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.’” The son of Zechariah never opposed taxes to Caesar. When he was asked if one should pay tribute to Caesar, he replied: “‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’” (Mt. 22:21) These words are appropriate to both Jesus and John.

John never claimed to be a messianic king. He testified to this, according to *John*, at the beginning of his ministry, when he stated: “I am not the messiah.” (Jn. 1:20) John knew that they were asking about the *royal* messiah. He did not deceive them in his answer, because he was the *priestly* messiah. But the Jews had already decided his fate before his arrest. The high priest Caiaphas said to them: “...‘ye do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.’” (Jn. 11:50)

The high priest condemned him for blasphemy, but now in front of Pilate, they changed the charge to treason. Why would they do that? Because to Pontius Pilate, it would not matter if the master had said he was the son of God. Pontius Pilate was a pagan who worshipped many gods; that posed no threat to Rome. However, treason was quite another matter. *John* 18:33-34 tells us that Pontius Pilate asked the master: “Are you the king of the Jews?” The master replied: “‘Dost thou say this of

thine own accord, or did others say it to thee about me?" (Jn. 18:33-34) Does this not suggest confusion among the people about his identity?

And the master (son of Zechariah) said further: "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." (Jn. 18:36)

Thus, the son of Zechariah refuted the charge of claiming to be a worldly king. It was others who had testified falsely about this claim. It is true that his mission was in some way designed so that people might assume that he was the Messiah; for this was his task. But he also had to tell the truth, and that is why he denied claiming to be an earthly king.

Pilate then says to the master: "So thou art a king then?" (Jn. 18:37)

Were the master's words not clear enough? The son of Zechariah was claiming *a* heavenly kingdom, not a worldly one. But he knew that the plan must proceed, and he must not deviate from his script. So he agreed, and according *John*, he answered: "Thou sayest that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." (Jn. 18:37)

Pontius Pilate, unaware of the divine plan, stood perplexed and asked the son of Zechariah, "What is truth?" Something about the son of Zechariah perplexed Pilate, and so he came out to the Jews and said, "I find no crime in him." (Jn. 18:38) Let us not forget that the son of Zechariah was sent as an example to the Children of Israel and not the gentiles, yet here this gentile, Pontius Pilate, recognizes his innocence and the chief leaders of the Children of Israel pervert the heavenly qualities given to him by God with false accusations and demand that he be put to death. The gospels tell us that it was a custom that at the time of the Passover that a prisoner would be released. Pilate asked if they would want him to release the king of the Jews. The people shouted, "No, not he!"

Mark tells us that the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pontius Pilate release Barabbas instead. Pontius Pilate asked the Jews: "Do ye want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief

priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead.

And Pilate again said to them, ‘Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?’ And they cried out again, ‘Crucify him!’ And Pilate said to them, ‘Why, what evil has he done?’ But they shouted all the more, ‘Crucify him!’” (Mk. 9-14)

Matthew tells us that the wife of Pontius Pilate had a dream. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, “‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream.’” (Mt. 27:19)

The gospels tell us that Pontius Pilate tried to persuade the Jews to reconsider their intentions, saying them that this man’s actions did not warrant a death sentence, yet they were persistent in demanding that the master be crucified. Pilate, being pressured by the crowd, gave in and handed the master [son of Zechariah] over to them to be crucified, but not before he washed his hands of their treachery: “So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.’” (Mt. 27:24)⁹⁰

And so they put the master the son of Zechariah on the cross believing him to be the son of Mary. Above his head they wrote “King of the Jews” to mock him. *John*, however, tells us that the inscription read “Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews.” This, however, would be another case of mistaken identity.

⁹⁰ Compare with Deut: 21:6-9: “And all the elders of that city nearest to the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the valley; and they shall testify, ‘Our hands did not shed this blood, neither did our eyes see it shed. Forgive, O Lord, Thy people Israel, whom Thou hast redeemed, and set not the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of Thy people Israel; but let the guilt of blood be forgiven them. So thou shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from thy midst, when thou doest what is right in the sight of the Lord.’”

A STRIKING RESEMBLANCE

*And because of their saying: 'We slew the Messiah
'Isa son of Mary, God's Messenger—
They slew him not nor crucified him,
but it appeared so [shubbiha⁹¹] unto them; and lo!
Those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof;
they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of conjecture;
they slew him not for certain. (Q. 4:157)*

So, who was the man who was identified, tried, and put on the cross? We are told in the Quran that it was not the son of Mary, but someone (or something) resembling him. Who would likely to have resembled him more than his relative who was also his ally and aid? Could it not have been the prophet Yahya?

All Muslims agree that Jesus did not die on the cross; rather, what the witnesses of the crucifixion saw was a deception, a similitude, or a substitution. By using the method of explaining the Quran by the Quran, (as should be done with regards to the crucifixion in relation to the word *shubbiha*), I examined this word *shubbiha* more closely, and if there were anyone more similar or shared any kind of resemblance to Jesus, it would have been Yahya, the son of Zechariah, and no one else. Here are some of those distinct similarities:

Both were born miraculously: (About Yahya) *He said: 'My Lord! How can I have a son when age hath overtaken me already and my wife is barren?' (The angel) answered: 'So (it will be). God doeth what He will.'* (Q. 3:40) and (about 'Isa): *'She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me?' He said: 'So (it will be). God createth what*

⁹¹ *shubbiha* is derived from an Arabic trilateral verbal root *sh, b, h* with the general meaning of "resemblance" or "resembling." It is the masculine third-person singular of the Passive form of the Active Form II verb *shahhaba*. Form II verbs are usually transitive and often causative in meaning. In this case, the Active form means "to make equal or similar, to compare or liken." The Passive form, *shubbiha*, means "to be doubtful, dubious, uncertain, or obscure, to appear like or as though."

He will. If He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is.' (Q. 3:47)

Both were given unique names: *And the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: God giveth thee glad tidings of (a son whose name is) Yahya, (who cometh) to confirm a word from God, chief, concealer [of secrets], a prophet of the righteous* (Q. 3:39) and *he whose name is the Messiah, 'Isa, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God).'*" (Q. 3:45)

Both were given significant titles by God: Yahya: ... *chief, concealer [of secrets], a prophet of the righteous* (Q. 3:39) and 'Isa whose name is the Messiah, 'Isa, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God). (Q. 3:45)

Both Yahya and Jesus received mercy: In regard to Yahya: ... *And mercy from Our presence, and purity; and he was devout.* (Q. 19:13) and in regard to Jesus: ... *and a mercy from Us, and it is a thing ordained.* (Q. 19:21)

Both were prophets of God: In regard to Yahya: ... *a prophet of the righteous.* (Q. 3:39) and Jesus: *He spake: 'Lo! I am the servant of God. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet.'* (Q. 19:30)

Both were righteous: Yahya: ... *a prophet of the righteous.* (Q. 3:39) and Jesus: ... *and he is of the righteous.* (Q. 3:46)

Both were given sagacity: Yahya: *And we gave him wisdom when a child.* (Q. 19:12), Jesus: *And He will teach him the Scripture and wisdom...* (Q. 3:48)

Both were associated with the Word of God: Yahya: ... *who confirms a Word from God* (Q. 3:39); Jesus: *God gives glad tidings of a Word from Him.* (Q. 3:45)

Both were respectful to their parents: Yahya: ... *and (he was) dutiful toward his parents* (Q. 19:14); 'Isa: *And (God) hath made me dutiful toward her who bore me.* (Q. 19:32)

Both were humble: Yahya: *and he was not arrogant, rebellious*⁹² (Q. 19:14); 'Isa: *and (God) hath not made me arrogant, villainous.*⁹³ (Q. 19:32)

In addition, both were saved as infants from death⁹⁴; both were unknown when they returned to Judaea (Yahya) and to Galilee (Jesus). One baptized with water (Yahya) and the other with the Holy Spirit (Jesus). Both had followers and disciples; both were sinless; and both were sent to the Children of Israel. Both finished and completed their missions successfully and were elevated and honored with God's peace: Yahya: *Peace be upon him the day he was born, and the day he dies and the day he shall be raised alive!* (Q. 19:15) and Jesus: *Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!* (Q. 19:33)⁹⁵

The Prophet Yahya died a natural death at some later time, as did 'Isa. From my understanding of the Quran, it is my belief that Yahya was raised up in honor as was 'Isa. The Quran does not offer comprehensive history and biography; rather, it gives us significant moments. The Quran does not mention the last days of Yahya, nor does it mention the last days of Moses or Aaron, to name but a few. Therefore, because this is not mentioned in the Quran, it does not mean it could not have happened this way. Again, we must turn to the Quran and its divine wisdom to receive understanding. When one compares 'Isa with Yahya, we observe that 'Isa has been presented in detail, whereas Yahya has not. Here are some examples for one to consider: The Quran tells us that Jesus was sent to the children of Israel, but Yahya is not mentioned as being sent to them. Was

⁹² "rebellious": the Arabic is *'asiy*. It is from a root connoting disobedience and rebellion.

⁹³ "villainous": the Arabic is *shaqiy*. The word can mean being miserable, wretched, unhappy, and also villainous, criminal, rogue, etc.

⁹⁴ In the Bible, *Matthew* (Mt. 2: 7-19) tells of the dangers to the infant Jesus posed by the fear and anger of Herod the Great that prompted the flight to Egypt. In that apocrypha, we find that John the Baptist was encompassed by the same threat and his mother Elizabeth fled to the hill country with, not returning until it was deemed safe (*Protevangelium of James* in James, M.R., *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford University Press, London (1953), p. 48.)

⁹⁵ Knight, *Ihya' al-Nabi Yahya*, pp. 8-9.

Yahya sent to the children of Israel? Of course he was. We are told that 'Isa had disciples, but Yahya's are not mentioned. Did he have disciples? Of course he did. We are told that Jesus received the Gospel (*Injil*); Yahya's revelation was not specified, but he was told to "take hold of the scripture with might." Did Yahya receive scripture from his Lord as did 'Isa? Of course he did. Because Yahya is not mentioned in similar circumstances, it does not mean that he was not as favored as Jesus. *And God knows best!*

* * *

There are parallels in the conditions of Mary and Zechariah. Both reacted with incredulity when given the news of their future offspring: (Zechariah: (*Zechariah*) said: *My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren and I have reached inform old age?* (Q. 19:40; see also Q. 3:40) Mary: (*Mary*) said: *How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste?* (Q. 19:20; see also Q. 3:45)

If anyone was substituted for Jesus, as has been suggested by a majority of Muslim commentators of the Quran, then the substitute must have been Yahya. It is my belief that it was not a substitution, but rather a case of mistaken identity in reference to the Quranic phrase *wa lakin shubbiha lahum*. One cannot dismiss the implications of the circumstantial evidence which points to the Prophet Yahya and explains why it was possible to mistake the identity of one for the other. There is no *factual* evidence for the belief that it was any of the other men mentioned in the commentaries when explaining this verse (Q. 4:157). Keep in mind that the word *shubbiha* also has the meaning of "to be doubtful, dubious, uncertain, or obscure." Circumstantial evidence may be weaker than fact in a court of law, but when facts are absent, strong circumstantial evidence is often enough to prevail.

That Jesus was present, but not known, does not remove him from the picture. He continued his mission in secret, while John filled the office of "chief" (*sayyid*) and "protector" (*waliy*). He was designated as such by God and given command over his people.

What does this have to do with *shubbiha*? As was mentioned above, the Jews did not know who Jesus and John were. John's own testimony is sufficient.⁹⁶ We have also shown above from the text of the Quran the complementary natures of Jesus and Yahya. One can see that it was quite possible for one to be mistaken for the other. It was John's authority and reputation that they wished to do away with. It is for this reason that I believe that John the Baptist was put on the cross, but did not die.

Names are very important, especially when they are applied to the prophets of God. Here are a few examples of their significance:

Adam, meaning first blood in Arabic. The first letter of the name is an *alif*, which is the first letter of the Arabic alphabet. The second two letters combined equal *dam*, which means "blood" in Arabic. The first blood created was "A-dam." His name also shows three stages of life. If we look at the Arabic letters from left to right, we get the following: *mim* with a *fathah* (which means opening) over the *mim* we get the word *ma*, which means "water." *We made every living thing of water* (Q. 21:30) When we at the the letters *dal* and *alif*, we can see three stages of life. Letter *mim* signifying the beginning, letter *dil* the middle, and the letter *alif* signifying maturity. If we look at the letters starting from the letter *alif*, we can see the stages of decline: *Alif*, *dal*, and *mim*.

The three-unit Muslim prayer is also instituted from the beginning with this first man. The *alif* is the believer standing in prayer; the *dal* is the believer sitting in prayer; and the *mim* is the Muslim in the prostration (*sajdah*).

Abraham means "father of a multitude," Abraham being the father of the prophets.

⁹⁶ "And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who art thou?' He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.' And they asked him, 'What then? Art thou Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Art thou the prophet?' And he answered, 'No.' They said to him then, 'Who art thou? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What sayest thou about thyself?' He said, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord," as the prophet Isaiah said.'" (Jn. 1:19-23).

Ishmael means “to hear” or “to listen”, literally “God heard” the prayers of Abraham and Ishmael was born.

Isaac means “laughter” or “he laughs”; Abraham’s wife Sara laughed at the news that she will bear a child.

Moses means “to draw out.” He was drawn out of the River Nile.

From the beginning, the son of Zechariah was given a distinctive name by his Lord, one that foreshadows his special role in the messianic story. This prophet of God has not yet been given his just due by the world of Islamic scholarship. According to the Quran, when Zechariah prayed for a protector, his prayers were answered by God: *O Zechariah! Lo! We bring thee tidings of a son whose name is Yahya; we have given the same name to none before (him).* (Q. 19:7)

Why was his name significant? This name, *Yahya*, in Arabic *suggests life*, and according to the gospels, we can see signs that suggest life in this man they put on the cross that day. Here are some of many references from the gospels that suggest life:

An angel of God came to *strengthen him*;
Assuring him that God will keep him *alive!*

When the spear was thrust into his body (Jn. 19:34), straight forth came water and blood because he was *alive!*

Pontius Pilate’s wife has a dream, in which she was shown that no harm should come to this just man; in other words, he should be kept *alive!*

Pilate found the son of Zechariah not guilty. He should be kept *alive!*

Joseph of Arimathaea asks Pontius Pilate to take down from the cross *a living body!*

The sign of Jonah: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Mt. 12:38)

Though Yahya was put on the cross, he *lived* through the ordeal as his ancestor Abraham, the Father of Multitudes, *lived* through the blazing fire. *We said: O fire, be coolness and peace for Abraham,* (Q. 21:69) *Thus do We reward the good.* (Q.

37:110)

Also, consider the *Book of John* of the Mandaeans: ⁹⁷

“Fire does not burn thee, O Yahya,
for *Life*’s Name has been uttered o’er thee.
A sword does not hew thee in pieces, O Yahya,
for *Life*’s Son rests here upon thee.’
And *Life* is Victorious.”

⁹⁷ Mandaeans: sometimes called the “Christians of St. John (the Baptist).” Members of a sect that still survives in southern Iraq. The sect has affinities to dualistic Persian Manichaeism as well as Gnosticism, and it reveres John the Baptist but regards Jesus as a false messiah. They are noted for their bathing customs and the Arabs have also called them *Al-Mughtasilah*, “those who wash themselves.” (Muhammad Ali’s translation of the *Holy Quran*, Note 103). There is a tradition that its founders were a group who emigrated to the comparative safety of southern Mesopotamia, then ruled by the more tolerant (or indifferent) Parthians. If this be true, it is possible that disciples of John were among those who fled the oppressive Roman rule. They may be the Sabians mentioned in the Quran, along with the Jews and the Christians, as a People of the Book.

AFTERWORD

It was a case of mistaken identity. The Temple authorities were under the *assumption* that the son of Zechariah (Yahya) was the real Messiah, even though he denied it. And as scripture tells us, there were some who wondered if Yahya were the Messiah or not. His zealous disciples just gave more credibility to the assumption. There were so many miracles and wonders happening that the whole ordeal was puzzling to the temple authorities. This was, however, what was planned from the beginning. The son of Zechariah and the son of Mary knew their scripture and they fulfilled it. They lived out the rest of their lives on earth until their natural deaths.⁹⁸

The son of Zechariah and the son of Mary knew the resources of the temple authorities: the plan was to show by way of example just how much the temple establishment had deviated from the word of God and their indifference to God's signs. The son of Zechariah was the innocent decoy while the son of Mary, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, set everything in motion. They could not reach the son of Mary because they did not know who

⁹⁸ If Josephus was misinformed about the fate of John at Macherus, by no means an impossibility, and John's disciples were successful in spiriting him out of Palestine far from the authority of Rome and its puppets, the Herodians, there is a fair degree of probability that he made his way to lower Mesopotamia where he is revered to this day by the Mandaean, who are perhaps the Sabians mentioned in the Quran. Many believe that his influence may be seen in their beliefs and the practice of baptism.

And what of Jesus? What happened to him after his escape from Palestine? Perhaps he too journeyed far from Roman rule. In Srinagar, Kashmir, the visitor is shown the tomb of one Yuz Asaf. It has been suggested that the Yuz is a corruption of some version of *Yashu* (Joshua = Jesus). It is not inconceivable that there may be some truth in the association of the tomb with Jesus. It would be fitting for both of these prophets of God to end their days teaching and benefiting the inhabitants of lands distant from Palestine where they were treated with such malicious hostility by interests vested in the Roman status quo: one in the cradle of civilization, Mesopotamia; the other in one of its farthest outposts, the Himalayan roof of the world. *And God knows best.*

he was, but someone had to be held responsible. As the high priest Caiaphas said: “it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” (Jn. 11:50)

From the beginning, they thought that Yahya was withholding something from them. When they questioned him about his identity, he told them that he was “the voice of one calling in the wilderness.” When they finally arrested the son of Zechariah, the plans for both sides were well under way—one side to kill a messiah and the other to demonstrate by way of example how innocent blood is taken in vain by the One God’s enemies.

We can still hear the voice of Yahya “confirming a word from God,” but even more loudly: “Make straight the way of the Lord.”

God made a covenant of old with the Children of Israel and We raised among them twelve chieftains, and God said: Lo! I am with you. If ye establish worship and pay the poor-due, and believe in My messengers and support them, and lend unto God a kindly loan, surely I shall remit your sins, and surely I shall bring you into Gardens underneath which rivers flow. Whoso among you disbelieveth after this will go astray from a plain road.

And because of their breaking their covenant, We have cursed them and made hard their hearts. They change words from their context and forget a part of that whereof they were admonished. Thou wilt not cease to discover treachery from all save a few of them. But bear with them and pardon them. Lo! God loveth the kindly.

And with those who say: “Lo! we are Christians,” We made a covenant, but they forgot a part of that whereof they were admonished. Therefore, We have stirred up enmity and hatred among them till the Day of Resurrection, when God will inform them of their handiwork.

O People of the Scripture! Now hath Our messenger

*come unto you, expounding unto you much of that which ye used to hide in the Scripture, and forgiving much. Now hath come unto you light from God and plain Scripture, whereby God guideth him who seeketh His good pleasure unto paths of peace. He bringeth them out of darkness unto light by His decree, and guideth them unto a straight path.*⁹⁹ (Q. 5:12-16)

⁹⁹ “straight path” (*Sirat Mustaqim*): the straight path that the believer (*mu'min*), under God’s guidance, treads from the reception of his soul until its delivery into the Presence of his Creator. Some five centuries before John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ, the Second Isaiah sang of it: “... prepare the way of the Lord, make *straight* in the desert a *highway* for our God.” (Is. 40:3) John the Baptist took up the cry and proclaimed it anew on the banks of the River Jordan: “Make *straight* the way of the Lord!” And six centuries later, it reverberated again among the sere mountains of the Hijaz: “Guide us on the *Straight Path*, the path of those whom Thou hast favored; not of those who earn Thine anger, nor of those who go astray.” (Q. 1:6-7)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This Bibliography is a list of the books quoted, cited, referred to, or consulted in the preparation of the text of *The Passion of the Baptist, Not the Christ*. Some sources cited in the text and notes are referred to by the code names in parentheses after the bibliographical material.

Asad, Muhammad. *The Message of the Quran*. 2nd edition, The Book Foundation, 2004.)

Ayoub, Mahmoud M.. *The Quran and Its Interpreters*. Vol. II, Albany: State University of New York, 1992. (Mahmoud Ayoub)

Knight, Ace. *Ihya' al-Nabi Yahya (The Revival of the Prophet Yahya)*. Franklin, MA: IMN Publishing, 2008.

Bible with the Apocrypha, The New English. Oxford study edition. New York: Oxford Univ. Press. 1976. (NEB)

Bible, The Holy (King James Version). Cleveland: World Publishing Co., undated, but conforming to edition of 1611. (KJV)

Bible, The Holy (Revised Standard Edition). Revised 1952. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952. (RSV)

Bible, The Interpreter's. 12 volumes. Nashville: Abington Press, 1951-57. (IB)

Bible, The Jerusalem. Jones, Alexander, gen. ed. Standard edition. London: Barton, Longman & Todd, 1966. (JB)

Bible, The Oxford Annotated. Revised Standard Version - College edition. H.G. May and B.M. Metzger, eds. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962. (OxBible)

Bible: The Septuagint, Greek & English Old Testament with the Apocrypha. Trans. Sir Launcelot Lee Brenton. London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1976. (LXX)

Crook, Jay R. *Rethinking John the Baptist*, 2009.

Crook, Jay R. *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*. Chicago: ABC International Group, 2nd edition, 2007. (NTAIP)

Eisenman, Robert. *James the Brother of Jesus*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997. (Eisenman)

Elmore, Gerald T., *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*. Brill, 1999.

Encyclopædia of Islam, The. 11 vols. + indices. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960-2002. (EI)

Hastings, James, ed. *Dictionary of the Bible*, rev. Ed. Frederick C. Grant & H.H. Rowley. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963. (DB)

James, Montague Rhodes. *The Apocryphal New Testament*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953. (James)

Josephus. *Complete Works*. Trans. William Whiston. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1967; orig. Published in Edinburgh, 1867. (Josephus)

Laymon, Charles M., ed. *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971. (Laymon)

Lincoln, Henry. *The Holy Place*. Arcade Publishing, New York, 1991.

Mandaean Book of John, The. Trans. G.R.S. Mead. London: Watkins, 1924.

New Compact Bible Dictionary, The. T. Alton Bryant, ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967. (NCBD)

Nineham, D.E. *Saint Mark*. Pelican New Testament Commentaries. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, revised 1969. (Nineham)

Orations of Muhammad. Trans. Maulana A.M.G.M. Md. Ubaidul Akbar. Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1954.

Quran: Arberry, Arthur J. The Koran Interpreted. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964. (Quran-Arberry)

Quran: Maududi, S. Abul A'la, commentator. The Meaning of the Quran. Trans. Muhammad Akbar Muradpuri. First 17 surahs in 6 vols. Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1971-73. (Quran-Maududi)

Quran: The Holy Quran. Trans. & commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 2 vols., continuous pagination. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1969. (Quran-Yusuf Ali)

Quran: The Holy Quran. Trans. & commentary by Maulana Muhammad Ali. 5th edition. Lahore: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1963. (Quran-MMA)

Quran: The Koran. Trans. & annotated by George Sale. London: Frederick Warne and Co, undated. (Quran-Sale)

Quran: The Koran. Trans. N.J. Dawood. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966. (Quran-Dawood)

Quran: The Meaning of the Glorious Koran. Trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall. New York: Mentor Books, 1953. (Quran-Pickthall)

Schonfield, Hugh J. *The Passover Plot*. New York: Bantam Books, 1967. (Schonfield)

Smith, William. *A Dictionary of the Bible*. New York: Bible House, 1900. (DB-1900)

Sox, David. *The Gospel of Barnabas*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981. (Sox)

Stories of the Prophets. Ibn Kathir, trans. By Sheikh Muhammad Mustafa Geme'ah, El-Nour for Publishing, Mansoura, pp. 328-31.

Surabadi, Abu Bakr 'Atiq Nishaburi. *Stories From the Holy Quran*. Dr. Mahdavi, ed. Persian. No. 66 in Iranian Texts Series. Tehran: Tehran Univ., AHS 1347. (Surabadi)

Tafsir ibn Kathir (abridged): Translated and abridged by a group of scholars under the supervision of Sheikh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri (c. 2000).

Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir ibn Abbas. Trans. Mokrane Guezzou.

Trawick, Buckner B. *The Bible as Literature: The New Testament*. Second edition. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968. (Trawick-NT)

Wehr, Hans. *Arabic-English Dictionary*. Trans. J.M. Cowan. Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1980. (Wehr)

TIM KING DISCUSSES JOHN THE BAPTIST WITH ACE KNIGHT

Tim King: Ace, you mention that the Prophet Yahya (John the Baptist) was not beheaded. Explain the words, “The Quran does not agree, and history never said it”

Ace Knight: The Quran does not agree—does not accept the beheading of Yahya (PBUH). If a Muslim accepts this fabricated story of the beheading, then he should know it is inconsistent with the text of the Quran: “God has sent down the fairest discourse, a Book, one that is consistent in its often repeated parts of the Quran by which shiver the skins of those who dread their Lord.” (Q. 39:23)

In the Quran, we read this verse with respect to Jesus (PBUH): “And peace be on me the day I was given birth and the day I die and the day I will be raised up, living.” (Q.19:33) When asked what this means, the answer is quite obvious to a Muslim; that God gave him security in these three circumstances; that is, God saved him from the hands of his enemies. Now listen to the exact words of the Quran regarding Prophet Yahya: “And peace be on him the day on which he was given birth and the day he dies and the day he will be raised up, living.” (Q. 19:15) The two references are identical, except in the verse about Jesus, he is speaking, while in the verse about the Prophet Yahya it is being said by another—God—about him.

This particular verse about Yahya aroused my curiosity. Since the most popular Quranic Commentary studied in the Muslim World is that of Ibn Kathir (Tafsir Ibn Kathir), I turned to that to see what has been said. I find the same things said about Jesus by Muslims also said about Yahya, but here it is from the scholar’s own mouth: that Yahya was given safety and security in these three circumstances: birth, death, and being raised to life again.

I then took a look at the cover of a book, *Stories of the Prophets*, the title of which seemed to imply that this was a selection of stories from the much larger *Commentary of Ibn Kathir*. It states “by Ibn Kathir.” One would assume that the book contains stories translated into English by Sheikh Muhammad Mustafa Geme’ah from the complete *Commentary of Ibn Kathir*, much as our colleague Dr. Crook has done in his series comparing the Biblical and Islamic stories of the Prophets using the Persian *Quranic Commentary of Surabadi*, *The Bible: An Islamic Perspective*.

However, when I turned to the story of Yahya, I was shocked to find that the text included a version of the New Testament story of Yahya’s beheading. Puzzled— how does having one’s head being chopped off make one safe and secure? The Arabic *Commentary of Ibn Kathir* does not contain the tale of the beheading yet here it was in this book! A translator is not supposed to intrude his own embellishments into a faithful translation. I could not believe my eyes, Tim. I called my friend Dr. Crook to see what he thought about this anomaly. As it happened, he had a copy of the book. He got it down and began to examine it. He asked me if I had read the Translator’s Note at the beginning of the book? I confess that I had not, so he began reading it to me. I mean, whoever reads the translator’s notes, right?

Tim King: (laughing): Right!

Ace Knight: As it happens I have it here. Let me read it for you; listen and learn! "We have elected to simplify the translation to suit the foreign reader. We deleted all the controversial passages; therefore, this text covers most of the important points which are relevant today" If this were not bad enough, sections from other works have been included that are not from the hand of Ibn Kathir: "For this reason we also depended on some other sources by contemporary writers such as *The Stories of the Prophets* by Sheikh Al’ Sharawy, *God’s Prophets* by Ahmad Baghat, and *Selected stories from the Quran*," —Sheikh Muhammad

Geme'ah. All this under the banner of Imam Ibn Kathir. May God denounce such misleading fabrications.

Tim King: Keep going, Ace.

Ace Knight: It is quite obvious what was meant by Ibn Kathir in his commentary of this Quranic verse (Q. 19:15) about the Prophet Yahya's being given peace by his Lord.

Tim King: It makes sense. Can you be more specific about what the Quran says in this regard?

Ace Knight: God-willing! If we look in the Quran, we see that other prophets were given peace, safety, and security as well. Here are a few examples:

“And, certainly, Noah cried out to Us. And how excellent were the ones who answer! And We delivered him and his people from tremendous distress. And We made his offspring—they, the ones who remain. And We left for him to say with the later ones: Peace be on Noah among the worlds. (Q. 37:79)

About Prophets Moses and Aaron:

“And, certainly, We showed Our grace to Moses and Aaron. And We delivered them and their folk from the tremendous distress and helped them so that they, they had been the ones who are victors. And We gave them the manifest Book and guided them to the straight path. We left for them a good name with the later ones: Peace be on Moses and Aaron! (HQ 37:114-120)

About Prophet Lot:

“Truly, he was of Our servants, ones who believe. And, truly, Lot was of the ones who are sent. We delivered him and his people, one and all, but an old woman of the ones who stay behind. Again, We destroyed the others.” (Q. 37:133-136)

About Prophet Jonah:

“Then, the great fish engulfed him while he was one who is answerable. If he had not been of the ones who glorify, he would have lingered in expectation in its belly until the Day they are raised up.” (Q. 37:142-144)

All of them, plus Jesus, and Muhammad—as far as we know, all the prophets mentioned by name in the Quran were delivered from their enemies. Yet, the Prophet Yahya, whose name ironically means He Who Lives, is popularly supposed to have been put to death. Clearly, you can see how this story of the beheading creates an inconsistency with a text believed by muslims all over the world to be internally consistent.

Tim King: Right! Right! Ace, one question before I continue. You say that Prophet Yahya was given peace by his Lord, but your theory is that he was put on the cross in place of Jesus in a case of Mistaken Identity. How does this fit in with the peace and safety reported in the Quran with regard to other prophets?

Ace Knight: My theory that Prophet Yahya was put on the cross would in no way compromise the peace of God given to other prophets, such as Abraham who was given the same peace, but thrown into the fire and rescued from it by the Almighty. “We said: O fire! Be coolness and peace for Abraham! (Q. 21:69) “Peace be on Abraham! Thus, We give recompense to the ones who are doers of good. (Q. 37:109-110) I believe Prophet Yahya was put on the cross, but he lived; hence, his name Yahya, “he who lives.”

Tim King: Very interesting! As far as the Quran is concerned, it is clear how the text implies a refutation of the story that John was beheaded. This belief, that prophet Yahya was beheaded, cannot be accepted. You also mention that history never said it. Now, if I am not mistaken, Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, in his Antiquities of the Jews makes mention that John the Baptist (Prophet Yahya) was arrested and put to death. How do you explain this?

Ace Knight: Interesting you make mention of this, Tim. First of all, Josephus was not an eye witness to this event, but heard of it from hearsay. He does, however, make mention of the arrest and execution of Prophet Yahya. If the popular story circulating at that time was that John the Baptist was beheaded, why then did Josephus not make mention of the manner of his death? Simply put, in his work, Josephus makes reference to many arrests and executions of Jews by crucifixion. According to Josephus almost half the Jewish population was crucified. We are told by Josephus, that prophet Yahya was put to death because of his political importance. If it be true that Prophet Yahya was put to death by Herod Antipas on the suspicion of planning an insurrection as Josephus indicates, the punishment would not have been beheading. Under Roman law, only Roman citizens were sentenced to beheading. Any non-Roman citizen was sentenced to death by crucifixion for such activity. This was the case with Jesus according to the gospel scholars, a non-Roman citizen, being accused of treason and sentenced to crucifixion. In addition, we see that when Paul was sentenced to die, he pleaded that he was a Roman citizen so that he would be beheaded and not crucified (Acts 22:27-28).

Ace Knight: Make sense?

Tim King: So far.

Ace Knight: Certainly, if it is the case that Prophet Yahya's followers were many, spread far and wide, as it has been reported by some, and that Josephus mentions that the Jews were greatly moved by Prophet Yahya's words, and that Herod Antipas feared that Yahya's influence over the masses would cause a rebellious uprising leading to a revolt by the Jews against the Romans (Antiquities 18:5.2 116-119), then this would be in accord with the practice of capital punishment of said criminals under Roman law; that is, that non-Roman citizens be crucified.

Ace Knight: Was Prophet Yahya a non-Roman citizen?

Tim King: He certainly was!

Ace Knight: Then, in all fairness, because the manner of death was not mentioned, one would have to assume the obvious, that he was put on the cross as Josephus reports many Jews were. However, Josephus was not an eye witness to the event. This is where my theory comes into play about Prophet Yahya being put on the cross in a case of mistaken identity (shubbiha) and not Jesus, and his—Yahya’s—surviving the ordeal.

Tim King: And the story of the beheading found in the New Testament?

Ace Knight: Perhaps you should ask Dr. Crook about that. It is my belief that there was only one arrest and alleged execution that took place and that was of the Prophet Yahya not Jesus, in 36 AD, as some modern day scholars are placing the supposed crucifixion of Jesus these days. It is my belief the crucifixion of Jesus never happened, and what’s mentioned in Josephus’ work about Jesus is an interpolation, according to many critical scholars. Some would disagree of course, but too much doubt has been cast upon it for it to be considered authentic.

Tim King: Dr. Crook, perhaps you could tell us a bit about the problems with the beheading story. As I understand it, you investigated the chronology. Had you raised the issue before?

Dr. Crook: Yes, I discussed the problem in passing in *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective* that was published several years before I came to know Ace Knight or his theories. Taken alone, the story of John’s being beheaded at the behest of Herod’s daughter-in-law makes good reading. Richard Strauss’ opera based on the story, *Salome*, is one of my favorites. The problem arises when one tries to correlate the Biblical story with the writings of Josephus. As Ace has pointed out, Josephus was not a witness to these events, but rather reporting them as an historian does. Josephus was born c. 37 or 38 CE and died about the year 100. Most Biblical scholars date the alleged crucifixion

of Jesus at 29 or 30 CE; some, however, opt for a later date. Be that as it may, the gospels are absolutely clear that the beheading of John took place before the crucifixion.

Tim King: Yes, in the first year of Jesus' mission, I believe.

Dr. Crook: That is correct. That would make John's death about 27 or 28 CE.

Tim King: What is the problem with that?

Dr. Crook: Just this, Josephus' account of the imprisonment and execution of Yahya/John the Baptist for historical reasons that are discussed in Ace's book, that account would place it in the middle of the fourth decade, say 35 or 36 CE and therefore years after the events of the crucifixion, not before.

In *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, I wrote, "Josephus' evidence creates a colossal chronological problem of enormous consequences." That is still true. Since we also know that while the gospels portray John in their narratives primarily to introduce and testify to Jesus' superior stature, we also know from Josephus, that John or Yahya was a major player on the Palestinian stage, not just a walk-on to herald the messiahship of Jesus.

Tim King: Why should we trust Josephus over the Gospels?

Dr. Crook: Why not? We know that the gospels were written to present Jesus from a more or less Graeco-Roman point of view, downplaying Jesus' Jewishness. Many criticize Josephus for his desertion of a lost cause during the Jewish War, but he had no axe to grind concerning John. In fact, he seems to have admired him. In any event, Josephus' evidence makes Ace Knight's theory of John's being on the cross possible. His theory cannot be dismissed out of hand for chronological reasons. I admire his work in bringing this much neglected prophet out of the shadows of comparative obscurity and restoring him to his rightful place as one of the major religious figures of human

history. He is to be congratulated.

Tim King (turning back to Ace Knight): It seems as if Josephus depicts the Prophet Yahya (John the Baptist) as a powerful figure.

Ace Knight: Yes. And let me say that the Quran corroborates this as well: “O Zechariah! Truly We give you the good tidings of a boy. His name will be Yahya and We have not assigned it as a name-sake for anyone before.” (Q. 19:7) This Arabic word (*samiy*) is used twice in the Quran, once in reference to Yahya, and the other time it is used is in reference to God. “...Know you any name-sake for him (*samiy*) for Him ?” (Q. 19:65) In the famous Arabic lexicon *Lisan al-Arab*, the root *s m w* means “elevation or highness.” How significant is that, Tim?

Tim King: Very significant and very impressive!

Tim King: You also mention a wise man requests a protector from his Lord?

Ace Knight: Yes. Zachariah prays to his Lord for a protector. The key word here is *waliy* in 19:5, and other places in the Quran, it means “protector” rather than “heir” or “successor.” In this specific case, Zechariah prayed to his Lord: “And truly I have feared my defenders after me and my wife has been a barren woman. So bestow on me from that which proceeds from Your Presence a protector (*waliy*).”

His prayer for a protector was answered by God’s giving him a son, one with spiritual authority (*sayyid*) in chapter 3:39, “Then the angels proclaimed to him while he was one who stands invoking blessings in the sanctuary that God gives you good tidings of Yahya—one who establishes the word of God as true—a chief and a concealer of secrets and a prophet, among the ones who are in accord with morality.”

It is commonly thought that Zachariah was simply asking for a

son; however, this misconception may be corrected by reading further into the text. After receiving this good news, Zachariah asked, “My Lord! How is it I will have a boy while surely I have reached old age and my wife is a barren woman.” Zachariah was asking how this would be possible, as he had not even contemplated being blessed with a son in his old age, and that with a barren wife.

If Zachariah were asking for a son, as has been suggested by Muslim scholars, why then did he ask such a question when God informed him of the impending birth? The truth is that Zachariah had not been asking explicitly for a son. He was asking God to send him a protector, from the same place where Mary received her provisions (rizq); hence “Give me from Your presence a protector (waliy)’ (Q. 19:5, 3:38).

If Zachariah wanted a son so badly as has been suggested by Muslim scholars, then why did he not just take a second wife? Polygamy was practiced in that time; this would be in accordance with the tradition of Abraham, whose wife Sarah was barren. Therefore, he married Sarah’s maidservant Hagar to father a child.

John the Baptist was of Levitical descent, and it is well known that the Levites were protectors/guardians of the sacred precincts. Yahya/John the Baptist ultimately became the protector/guardian of a sacred word: Messiah Jesus.

The Quran tells us that the Jews accused Mary of playing the harlot. That would make Jesus an illegitimate child. This accusation can be found in later Jewish traditions. If this be true, then Mary faced the threat of being thrown alive into a blaze of fire, as prescribed by Mosaic law: “and the daughter of a priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire” (Lev. 21:9). As for Jesus’ being labeled an illegitimate child, Jewish law states, “no bastard shall enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord”

(Deut. 23:2).

Jesus only revealed himself to a select few as an adult. Little wonder then that Jesus is so mysterious to the point that today some even deny the reality of his ever having existed. It was John the Baptist who would face the great opposition and not Jesus, and this is why I believe that God told him, “O Yahya, take the book with strength, and We gave him critical judgment while a lad.” (Q. 19:12)

Tim King: Very interesting!

Ace Knight: Tim, I want to add something before we end. If the title Messehu Esa is an exclusive one for Jesus in the Muslim tradition, then the title Sayyidina Yahya should also be an exclusive one for Yahya (John the Baptist). No one in Islamic history from the beginning of time until the present day has deserved this honorable title more than the son of Zachariah.

They were prophets of success not failure. Prophet Yahya features as a major player in this messianic story. The ungrateful tried to dismiss him from the story, but as God says, “They want to extinguish the light of God with their mouths, but God refuses so that He may fulfill His light even though the ones who are ungrateful dislike it” (Q. 9:32) Also, “O humanity! Surely there has drawn near to you proof from your Lord. And We have sent forth to you a clear light.” (Q. 4:174)

Tim King (turning to Dr. Bakhtiar): Dr. Bakhtiar, I am well-aware of the wonderful work you have done to undo an over 1400 year misinterpretation of the Quran no longer allowing Muslim husbands to beat their wives with your Sublime Quran translation and, this, the masterful Concordance of the Sublime Quran that you published which proves that the method of formal equivalence that you used in translating the Quran works. I also know that your translation is the only one that translates the word hasur as “concealer of secrets” in reference to John the Baptist or, as the Quran calls him, Yahya. As you are clearly aware of the work of Ace Knight on John the Baptist, do you

believe that John the Baptist was on the cross instead of the Christian belief that it was Jesus on the cross?

Dr. Bakhtiar: Thank you, Tim. I believe that it certainly is a possibility.

Tim King: What difference would it have made if John the Baptist had been on the cross instead of Jesus?

Dr. Bakhtiar: That is a very important question, and the answer is not simple. Let me begin by saying that it is not a universally held Christian belief that Jesus died on the cross to save us from sin. The sin, by the way, that he is saving us from is the original sin committed by Adam, or in some cases the belief is that Eve committed this sin and then the belief expanded to include all sins that I commit in my lifetime. As a Muslim, I do not believe in original sin or that anyone died to save me from my sins, but that I am accountable to God only for my sins, the sins I commit. Therefore, we would have to let go of the idea of original sin.

Secondly, as a Muslim I believe in One God, not Three. I am joined by many Christian groups in this belief, Christians like the Unitarians, Christadelphians, Christian Scientists, Iglesia ri Cristo, Jehovah's Witnesses, some groups of Latter Day Saints, Oneness Pentecostals and the United Church of God. Therefore, I could be considered to be a Christian from one of these groups as far as the belief in the Trinity is concerned.

As a Muslim, I believe that Jesus was the Messiah, that he was born of the Virgin Mary, that he spoke from the cradle and performed many miracles during his lifetime. I believe that he was gathered or raised to God, living to return at the end of time. These are the beliefs of Muslims in regard to Jesus, the Christ. By the way, the pastor who burned the Quran unfortunately also burned the name of Jesus Christ in his ignorance about Islam.

I also believe that Jesus did not die on the cross, but that "a likeness to him of another was shown to them." Based on the work that Ace Knight has done, it is certainly possible that the

“likeness of Jesus” could very well have been his first cousin, John the Baptist. Having said that, what difference would it have made if John the Baptist had been on the cross instead of Jesus?

The most conclusive arguments in Islamic tradition to prove or disprove something is to use the Quran to prove another point in the Quran. This Ace Knight has done in his work on John the Baptist, in particular, John having been a concealer of secrets. Therefore, John, the concealer of secrets, by being on the cross would have shown the world the highest virtue, that of altruism. He would have been willing to die in place of the Messiah so that the Messiah could continue his mission.

If Jesus was not crucified, and John was in his place, all of humanity could come to agree that Jesus was a Messiah. This would include Jewish and Muslim belief as well as Christian belief. There would be agreement. The Jewish people are still waiting for the first coming of a Messiah. The Muslims and Christians are waiting for the second coming of the person they recognize as the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Buddhists and Hindus and people of all other faiths would have no theological issues with Jesus being a Messiah.

Therefore, if all Christians could recognize the messiahship of Jesus and not insist that a person believe in Jesus having died on the cross to save them from sin, there would be peace among the people of faith. All would be working together in an altruistic, compassionate way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. For some it would be the first coming and, for others, the second coming, but all would agree that would be the fulfillment of the Quranic description of John: “Peace be on him the day on which he was given birth and the day that he dies and the day that he is raised up, living” and the words of Jesus: “Peace be on me the day I was given birth and the day that I die and the day I am raised up, living.”

END OF INTERVIEW

Books by Jay R. Crook

The Old Testament: An Islamic Perspective

The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective

The entire text and contents of *The Old Testament: An Islamic Perspective* and *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*

are also available separately in a series format as

The Bible: An Islamic Perspective.

Translations:

The Royal Book of Spiritual Chivalry (Kashifi)

The Alchemy of Happiness (al-Ghazzali)

Translations/Adaptations as Muhammad Nur Abdus Salam:

The *Stories for Young Adults* series:

Attar

Rumi

Kalilah and Dimnah

Saadi

Fiction:

The Burnt City

Ambling Through Life

The Shrouds of Moharram

(in preparation)

Recommended by Ace Knight and Jay R. Crook:

The Sublime Quran, translated by Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar