

INTRODUCTION

MEETING JAMES

*James can serve as a desperately needed “missing link”
between the children of Abraham.*

—Jeffrey J. Bütz, scholar of religion, Lutheran minister¹

IT WAS ONE OF THE EARLY DAYS OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM after Christ. I was walking on the busiest street of my home city, Istanbul—also known as Constantinople—to meet an old friend at an ever-busy cafe. As usual, the street, named İstiklal, which means “Independence,” was swarmed by not only thousands of urbanites and tourists but also various political activists.

First, I saw the communists. They were wearing red shirts on which large yellow letters spelled the acronyms of the specific brand of the “people’s party” that they supported. One of them handed me a flyer about the glory of the impending proletarian revolution. I took it politely, only to put it in my pocket intending to keep it until I saw the next recycling bin. Then I saw a group of Kurdish mothers sitting on the street mourning for their sons who, most probably, had been victims of Turkey’s then two-decades-old and infamously draconian campaign of “counterterrorism.”

Walking a little farther, I saw another group that looked less

familiar to my eyes. One of them, a notably smiling young man, approached me politely and asked:

“Hello, sir, have you ever read the Good News?”

While I was still in the “Well, er” moment, he deftly handed me a small book entitled *İncil*, which is the Turkish word for gospel.

“Hmm, I see,” I silently said to myself. These were the Christian missionaries, in flesh and blood, that Turkey’s ultranationalists and Islamists were obsessing about. There were a lot of rumors in the press at that time about a secret decision in the West to “Christianize” the Turks and then somehow conquer their homeland. Some newspapers had even written that the missionaries were funded by the CIA and were distributing hundred-dollar bills inside every Bible that they passed out.

I checked the copy in my hand. Unfortunately, there was no hundred-dollar bill. Yet still it was a valuable gift that I decided to keep. I thanked the young missionary, whose name I had then learned but would never be able to recall, and moved on for the rest of the day.

At night, before I went to sleep, I opened my copy of the Good News and began reading it. It really sucked me in. I think I finished the Gospel of Matthew that very night. In the next couple of weeks, I read the whole New Testament, gospel after gospel, epistle after epistle, with great attention. Most of the teachings, especially those of Jesus, struck me with their admirable passion, devotion, sincerity, and godliness. As a faithful Muslim—and thus a believer in the all-compassionate God, the God of Abraham—I found much of the Christian scripture quite appealing and inspiring.

The only passages not to my liking were those that emphasized the divinity of Jesus—a belief that Islam’s strict monotheism can never accept and, no wonder, the Qur’an explicitly condemns. To my Muslim mind, Jesus as a messenger of God was a very familiar, appealing theme. But Jesus *as* God was anathema.

That is why, at some point during my reading, I decided to use a method: I began underlining the passages of the New Testament

that I liked the most with a blue pen while underlining the passages that I found objectionable with a red pen. It soon turned out that I had more blue lines in the gospels, especially in the first three, whereas the epistles of Paul got filled with many red lines. Paul's "christology"—a term I would learn later—was just not working for me.

Then, toward the end of the New Testament, I came to an epistle that rekindled my ambiguous affection for this book. This particular document was both full of teachings that deeply resonated with my faith and, more importantly, contained nothing that contradicted my faith. My underlining turned out to be all blue, in other words, and no red.

There were even passages in this epistle that I found strikingly similar to my own scripture, the Qur'an. I was awestruck, for example, when I read the passage below in this canonical epistle:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow let's go into this city, and spend a year there, trade, and make a profit." Whereas you don't know what your life will be like tomorrow . . . You ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will both live, and do this or that."²

I was astonished because this was so similar to a Qur'anic verse that I knew well: "Never say about anything, 'I am doing that tomorrow,' without adding 'If God wills.'"³

I loved this epistle so much that I decided to share it with my informal Qur'anic study group—a circle of friends which, for many years, has met once every week or two to read and discuss Islam's scripture and its exegeses. As believing yet questioning Muslims, my friends were happy to listen when I said I wanted to read them a passage from the Christian Bible. They listened carefully and, as I expected, they liked what they heard.

"This is very similar to the Qur'an," one of my friends said. "And there is nothing in it which says that Jesus is the Son of God," another one noted. "Are you sure it is from the Christian Bible?"

“Yes, yes, of course,” I replied. “It is from the New Testament, and it is called the Epistle of James.”

“James? Who is James?” one of them asked.

In return, I asked myself: Yes, really, who was James?

A THEOLOGICAL AHA

Over the next few months, I did some research to understand who the James was whose letter I admired so much. I learned that he was known in Christian history as James the Just and that he had a very special relationship with Jesus: he was, as suggested by a plain reading of the New Testament, his very brother. For after the virgin birth, Jesus’ mother, Mary, had married a man named Joseph and they apparently had other children, James being the eldest.⁴

I also learned that, despite James’s striking connection to Jesus, his letter, a short, three-page document buried toward the final pages of the New Testament, has not been a popular text in Christian history. I read that when early Christians decided on the canon of their scripture in the fourth century, the Epistle of James was regarded as a “disputed book,” one that was accepted by church fathers only reluctantly.⁵ In later centuries, some prominent Christian figures continued to cast doubt on the letter, prominent among them Martin Luther, who openly wrote against it, calling it a “straw-epistle.”

I realized then that I was onto something by noticing these oddities about the Epistle of James—its implicit divergence from mainstream Christianity and its curious resonance with my Muslim faith. But I had no time to dig deeper. I was trying to finish a master’s thesis on something totally different—Turkey’s Kurdish question—and I would be kept busy by other political and religious writings that followed in the years ahead. Yet, in the meantime, I kept reading about early Christianity. And I kept James, and his elder brother Jesus, in mind.

It was about a decade after my first encounter with the New Testament that I decided to put more thought and effort into this curious matter. I acquired and read dozens of academic books on early Christianity and the historical Jesus. All these works suffered the strokes of my blue and red pens, but probably no passage captured my attention—and made up my aha moment—more than one by James D. Tabor, a scholar of Christian origins and ancient Judaism:

There are two completely separate and distinct Christianities embedded in the New Testament. One is quite familiar and became the version of the Christian faith known to billions over the past two millennia. Its main proponent was the apostle Paul. The other has been largely forgotten and by the turn of the first century A.D. had been effectively marginalized and suppressed by the other . . . Its champion was none other than James the brother of Jesus.⁶

Of course, as I also noticed in my research, not every expert on early Christianity agrees with this provocative thesis. Traditional Christian scholars have long offered a more reconciliatory take on James and Paul, suggesting that the two apostles espoused not different doctrines, but only different emphases. On the other hand, since the late 1970s, some scholars have developed a “new perspective” on Paul, arguing that Paul’s interpretations and reformations were not as radically different from those of James as some Christians later assumed.⁷

Yet still, to me, the divergence between the teachings of James and Paul were unmistakable. Even more telling was the historical fact that the two men had become the originators of two different branches of Christianity. James, who assumed the leadership of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem right after Jesus’ crucifixion, was the pillar of “Jewish Christianity.” This was quite different from the Pauline Christianity that spread mainly among Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world, and gradually became the globe’s most popular

religion, which we all know today. While Paul's line had amazing success, its Jewish counterpart vanished in history, only finding a place for itself as one of the many "heresies" of the faith.

Jewish Christians, despite being devoted followers of Jesus, were still Jews—in practice, doctrine, and mind-set. In other words, they still observed the Jewish Law, sought their salvation in the Jewish way, and believed in concepts such as God and Messiah in the Jewish sense. Especially in three aspects of their faith, they were quite different from the other Christians:

- For them, God was strictly "one," and not triune.
- Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Jews, but not divine.
- Men could be saved only by two things: faith in God *and* good deeds.

When I became aware of these aspects of the Jewish Christian faith, once again, the parallelism with Islam left me bewildered. The Qur'an, proclaimed by Prophet Muhammad almost six centuries after James, also taught that:

- God is strictly "one," and not triune.
- Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Jews, but not divine.
- Men can be saved only by two things: faith in God *and* good deeds.

Hence I kept asking myself: Is all this mere coincidence? Or is it rather too much coincidence?

CURIOUS CONNECTIONS

At this point, it might surprise some readers that the scripture of Islam says anything about Jesus. (Well, no one can blame them, for the content of the Qur'an is often misreported in our day and age. It does *not* decree, for example, that suicide bombers will get

“seventy-two virgins” in heaven, or adulteresses should be stoned to death, or apostates from Islam should be killed.⁸)

But, yes, the Qur’an says a lot of things about Jesus—and his mother, Mary. Its sura, or chapter, 19, a pretty long one, is even named “Mary,” and gives a detailed account of the virgin birth. In various chapters of the Qur’an, the teachings and the miracles of Jesus are narrated, and Muslims are even advised to imitate the apostles.⁹ Most of these Qur’anic accounts are very similar to, or at least not in contradiction to, the gospels. However, there is one key point that the Qur’an repeatedly emphasizes, presenting a clear rejection of mainstream Christianity: Jesus, like Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad himself, was a human prophet of God—but certainly not himself God. He deserves to be praised, admired, and followed, but not worshiped as though he were divine.

Tabor, whom I quoted above, is one of the experts who noted this curious parallelism between the two seemingly unrelated faiths. “There are some rather striking connections between the research I have presented [on Jewish Christianity] . . . and the traditional beliefs of Islam,” he notes at the very end of his popular book, *The Jesus Dynasty*. “The Muslim emphasis on Jesus as messianic prophet and teacher is quite parallel to . . . the book of James.”¹⁰

Robert Eisenman, a prominent biblical scholar, historian, and archeologist, also finds it “very curious” that “the key ideology of faith and works together, associated with James in New Testament Scripture, fairly shines through the Koran.”¹¹ Furthermore, he argues, “Muslim dietary law is also based on James’ directives to overseas communities as delineated in the Book of Acts.”¹²

But how is that possible? How could there be such striking connections between the theology of the Jewish followers of Jesus and the Arab followers of Muhammad? If Jewish Christians lived in and around Jerusalem during the first century AD and then vanished from history by the end of the fifth century as historians believe, how could they be linked to Islam, which appeared in early seventh-century Arabia with a new call for faith, repentance, and salvation?

In this book, I will seek to answer these questions, while also introducing the Islamic view of Jesus. What makes my work relatively easy is that both Jewish Christianity and Islam's view of Christ have been studied thoroughly by expert scholars—but often independently and as unrelated subjects. A handful of academics—most of them notably European, especially German—have noticed the connection between these seemingly unrelated stories and examined their intersection in academic books and articles as well. However, the issue has not yet been explored as comprehensively as it should be and remains largely unknown to the general public. Hence with this book, I will probe deeply into the matter, which I believe is one of the key puzzles, if not mysteries, in the history of religion.

To start to collect the pieces of the puzzle, I will first go back to the first century AD, to Palestine, to get a sense of Jesus the Jew and his earliest followers—the small community of Jewish Christians. Then I will move forward in time, to the seventh century AD, to Arabia, to see the emergence of Islam. Then I will show how these two separate stories match.

I will also look more carefully into what the Qur'an teaches about Jesus, and about his mother Mary, and how these Islamic narratives resonate with Christian sources, including not just the Bible but also the Apocrypha. I will also discuss whether, according to Islamic sources, Jesus will come back to the world for the second time and what Muslims can understand today from such prophecy.

In the meantime, deep down, I will explore how the three great Abrahamic religions of our battered world, despite all the past and present tensions between them, come together at the story of this most amazing man—this Jesus of Nazareth. Whether we are Jews, Christians, or Muslims, we share either a faith followed by him, or a faith built on him, or a faith that venerates him.