



## Qur'an, Crucifixion, and Talmud

### A New Reading of Q 4:157-58

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#### Abstract

This paper establishes and explores the inter-textuality of *Sanhedrin* 43a (a text from the Babylonian Talmud that contains a rabbinic counter-narrative to the New Testament story of Jesus' death) with Q 4:157-58 (two verses of the Qur'an which have historically been read by Muslim and Christian scholars as a denial of Jesus' death by crucifixion). The idea that the Qur'an denies the New Testament story of the crucifixion makes the two scriptures appear mutually exclusive. This article suggests that, rather than denying Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the Qur'an may be defending this story from a counter-narrative.

Keywords: Christian-Muslim relations, Abrahamic dialogue, Jewish-Christian relations, Qur'anic Jesus, Talmudic Jesus

#### Introduction

Muslim and Christian interpreters of the Qur'an have long held that it denies the New Testament account of Jesus' crucifixion. This claim, which has been an obstacle for Christian-Muslim relations for centuries, is primarily based on two verses of the Qur'an, Q 4:157-58. In these verses, the Qur'an accuses "the Jews" of boasting, "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God" (Q 4:157a).<sup>1</sup> It then denies the boast: "They did not kill him; nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, without any knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him. God raised him up to Himself" (Q 4:157b-

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<sup>1</sup> The translation of the Qur'an used throughout is by Abdel-Haleem.

158a). Beginning with John of Damascus (d. 739), these verses have been read by Christians as a docetic denial that Jesus was actually crucified in the flesh (Lawson: 144). In the Muslim tradition, beginning with early authorities such as 'Abd Allah Ibn Abbas (d. 687), Mujahid B. Jabr Al-Makki (d. 722), and Wahb Ibn Munabbih (d. 732), exegetes have understood these verses as indicating that certain Jerusalem Jews indeed tried to crucify Jesus but actually crucified someone else; meanwhile, God rescued Jesus by rapturing him into the heavens (Lawson: 43-67). These traditional Christian and Muslim interpretations, which continue to shape the discourse in their respective communities of faith, do not adequately explain the meaning of the Qur'an's enigmatic denial of a Jewish boast about killing and crucifying Jesus. Until now, neither Muslim nor Christian interpreters have examined these verses considering the polemical Rabbinic account of the execution of Jesus found in the Talmud, to which the Qur'an is likely responding in Q 4:157-58.

Since the mid twentieth century, as the tone of the discourse between many Christian and Muslim scholars has become more respectful and constructive, Q 4:157-58 has become an important exegetical site for repairing the broken relationship between Christianity and Islam. Typically, authors with this goal have hoped to shift attention away from the Qur'an's supposed denial of the crucifixion in Q 4:157 and instead attempt to find common ground in its affirmation in Q 4:158 that God raised Jesus to Godself. Christian scholars, hoping to present the Qur'an in a more positive light to Christian readers, have labored to prove that these verses need not be interpreted as a denial of the crucifixion (Lawson; Parrinder; Zahniser). Muslim scholars, while cautiously expressing their doubts about the dominant traditional Muslim reading of these verses, have demonstrated that Muslims can have a deep appreciation for the Jesus of the New Testament, while remaining agnostic as to whether he was actually crucified (Ayoub; Hussein). This article adds a new element to the current discourse that has the potential to shift the ground of the debate: by identifying the Rabbinic counter-narrative to the New Testament that the Qur'an is refuting in Q 4:157-58, it frees interpreters from assuming that the Qur'an is refuting the New Testament.

While the Qur'an presents a unique vision of Abrahamic faith that pushes back on certain truth claims of both Christianity and Judaism, I believe that this intertextual tension has often been overstated by Muslim, Jewish, and Christian interpreters of the Qur'an who assume the mutual incompatibility of their scriptures and doctrines. Interpreting the Qur'an as falsifying the Christian story of Jesus' crucifixion (an essential part of every canonical Christian scripture, as well as ancient liturgies, sacred art, and holidays like Holy Week and Easter) forces a false dichotomy: either the Qur'an is true and the New Testament false, or vice versa. The Qur'an criticizes Christians for believing in the Trinity and worshipping Jesus as God, but it does so in the context of affirmation of key Christian beliefs about Jesus: not only his status as prophet and Messiah, and his healing miracles, but also his divine conception and mystical identity as word and spirit of God (Q 3:49, 5:113, 3:45-51, 4:171, etc.). This article argues that the death and resurrection of Jesus should be shifted on the balance sheet from qur'anic denial to qur'anic affirmation. This would drastically alter the dynamic of the debate between the Qur'an and the Christian tradition, lowering the stakes substantially. The Qur'an would no longer seem to deny the basic substance of the Christian story but would still weigh in forcefully on doctrinal issues that mainstream Christians have

been debating for hundreds of years. In this case, many Christians could find the Qur'an to be a scriptural ally rather than an adversary.

The Qur'an's presentation of Jesus as Messiah, but not God, represents a balanced criticism of both Jewish and Christian views of Jesus. By affirming Jesus as Messiah, the Qur'an problematizes Judaism's rejection of him. By denying that Jesus is God the Qur'an problematizes Christianity's deification of him. The Qur'an mediates disagreement between Judaism and Christianity regarding Jesus, but at the same time honors the basic integrity of these religions, referring to Jews and Christians as "People of the Book" and asserting that faithful followers of either path will be saved (Q 2:62, 5:69). The scriptures of the three Abrahamic faiths are each distinct and bear significant differences, but for the most part their intertextuality is mutually supportive and confirming of similar spiritual, theological, and ethical values. The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures compose an Abrahamic canon which can, if we choose, be revered, studied, and discussed in peace by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

#### **Q 4:157-58 as Response to Talmudic Counter-Narrative to the New Testament**

Abraham I. Katsh's 1954 study, *Judaism in Islam*, combs the second and third suras of the Qur'an verse by verse demonstrating rich interconnections with the Tanakh and the Talmud. Katsh argues: "The Arabian Jews took an active part in Jewish spiritual life, erected many synagogues, schools and other institutions, and succeeded in maintaining strong permanent ties with the Jews of Palestine and Babylonia" (xxv). A full affirmation of Katsh's historical claims about the pre-Islamic Arabian Jewish community is not necessary to my argument. But the general idea that Muhammad would have been familiar with the Talmud through his relationships with Arabian Jews is crucial to my argument, insofar as it explains how a rich inter-textuality between the Qur'an and the Talmud was born.<sup>2</sup> Katsh's hypothesis has been confirmed by subsequent studies (Mazuz; Newby).<sup>3</sup> Hans Küng reports that Medina was one-third Jewish: "there was even a Jewish clan of goldsmiths and there were armorers and scholars familiar with the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud" (33). The fact that *al-Nisa'* (*Women*) is a Medinan surah further supports the thesis that Q 4:157-58 emerged out of an encounter between Muhammad and Talmudic Jews of Medina. These verses were a kind of benchmark distinguishing the beliefs of the nascent Muslim community regarding

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that the Qur'an is apparently in conversation with the Talmud at many points, does not support, to my mind, a claim that Muhammad plagiarized the Talmud. In my interpretation, the Qur'an self-consciously and openly engages in conversation with the Talmud. For example, in Q 5:32, where the Qur'an affirms the Talmudic ethical principle (*Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin* 4:1 22a) that "if anyone kills a person . . . it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind," the Qur'an telegraphs its reference to the Talmud with the phrase, "We prescribed for the Children of Israel . . ." This is deliberate intertextuality, neither "plagiarism" nor "copying." As a Christian theologian who wishes that Jews and Muslims respect my tradition, I am obliged to extend that same respect to Jews and Muslims. This is one reason why, as a Christian, I go against the grain of my tradition in affirming the prophethood of Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an; Christian arguments that Muhammad is a heretic and false prophet, while dominant throughout Christian history, are of the same kind as the Talmudic counter-narrative which frames Jesus as a heretic and false prophet.

<sup>3</sup> Mazuz utilizes sensitive text analysis and the latest archeological evidence to substantiate the historicity of the Talmudic Jewish community of Medina.

Jesus from Muhammad's Jewish contemporaries. They refute a Rabbinic counter-narrative to the Christian story of Jesus' death which frames him as a false prophet justly deserving of death according to the biblical laws.

The idea that there is a Talmudic counter-narrative to the New Testament account of the crucifixion was first presented to Christian readers in Gustaf Dalman's analysis of controversial passages related to Jesus which were censored from the Talmud in the era of Christendom. Dalman identifies two passages that together comprise an alternative account of Jesus' execution and the events leading up to them: *Sanhedrin 67a* and *Sanhedrin 43a*. In the former passage, which describes the trial and execution of an "enticer" to idolatry, there is no direct reference to Jesus; instead, the passage speaks of "Ben Stada," a title Dalman takes to be a Talmudic nickname for Jesus. Dalman links the two passages together because both contain the phrase, "And they hanged him on the eve of Passover" (79-81). This idea that "Ben Stada" refers to Jesus is highly debatable. In *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition*, Morris Goldstein offers several arguments and citations in favor of the opinion that Ben Stada and Jesus are separate persons. In his view, *Sanhedrin 67a* ends with the phrase, "And they hanged him on the eve of Passover," due to the error of Babylonian Amoraim (later editors) who conflated Jesus and Ben Stada (59). Goldstein argues that Dalman and others go too far in claiming various codenames and slanders in the Talmud for Jesus, thereby creating unnecessary tensions between Jews and Christians (57). However, in regard to the other passage Dalman identifies, *Sanhedrin 43a*, Goldstein agrees that it is an authentic Jesus passage.

I cite this passage in full, including the Mishna of 42b (Solomon: 504-505)<sup>4</sup>:

MISHNA:

42b When the verdict was reached, they would take him out for stoning. The place of execution was close by the court for it is said, TAKE OUT THE BLASPHEMER FROM THE CAMP (Leviticus 24:12).

[An officer] stands at the court door holding a flag, and a horseman remains within sight. If anyone says, I have something to say in his favour, [the officer] waves his flag and the horsemen gallops to halt [the execution]. Even if [the accused] says, I have something to say in my favour, they bring him back, as many as four or five times, provided there is sense in what he says.

MISHNA:

43a If they find in his favour, they set him free, but if not, he is taken to be stoned.

A herald goes before him [and proclaims]: So-and-so is on his way to be stoned for such-and-such an offence, and so-and-so are the witnesses against him. Will anyone who knows anything in his favour come forward and plead for him!

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<sup>4</sup> Solomon concurs, in an editorial note, that it is "one of the very few passages in the Talmud to refer explicitly to Jesus."

GEMARA:

Abbaye said, [The herald] must also proclaim the day, the time and the place, for there may be someone who knows [that the witnesses were elsewhere] and can refute them.

A herald goes before him. Before him, but not earlier? Does not a Baraita state: Jesus of Nazareth was hanged on Passover Eve. A herald went out for forty days (prior to the execution, proclaiming:) Jesus of Nazareth is to be executed by stoning for witchcraft and for leading Israel astray [to idolatry]. Will anyone who knows anything in his favour come forward and plead for him! They found nothing in his favour, so he was hanged on Passover Eve.

Ulla said, What sort of a question is that? Was Jesus of Nazareth a person for whom favourable arguments would be sought? He led people astray, and [of such a person] the Torah says, YOU SHALL NOT HAVE PITY NOR COVER UP FOR HIM (Deuteronomy 13:9). [Answer:] Jesus was [treated] differently since he was close to the government.

One recent and significant scholarly attempt to unpack the meaning of this and other Talmudic passages related to Jesus is Peter Schäfer's *Jesus in the Talmud*. Schäfer's work is a deliberate response to Johann Maier's 1978 tome, *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung*. While Schäfer praises the detail and precision of Maier's work, he criticizes what he sees as a misguided attempt to undermine the historicity of the Talmud's references to Jesus. Schäfer accepts Maier's conclusion that the Talmud does not contain any reliable information about the historical Jesus, yet he finds the Talmudic material concerning Jesus significant in what it reveals about the life, thought, and social context of its authors. One finding of Schäfer's study is that the bulk of Talmudic material regarding Jesus, including the above-quoted passage, is only found in the Babylonian Talmud; apparently, rabbis in Babylonia, outside the confines of Christendom, were freer in challenging Christian truth claims. Schäfer knowingly breaks from Maier's (and Goldstein's) more cautious estimates of which passages refer to Jesus; he identifies the Talmud's "Ben Stada" with Jesus (5-8). My argument does not rely on this assumption because the only text necessary to it is *Sanhedrin* 43a, an indisputably explicit Talmudic commentary on Jesus. The two commentators who are named in the Gemara, Abbaye and Ulla, were Babylonian amoras of the early fourth century, and the Baraita cited by the anonymous author is of an earlier date (Schäfer: 65). This Talmudic tradition concerning Jesus' trial and execution would have been an important piece of the Arabian Jewish conception of Jesus in Muhammad's time (570–632); in this context, Q 4:157-58 emerges as a defense of both the integrity of the Christian story about Jesus and of Jesus himself as prophet and Messiah. Dalman, though he does not explore the connection between *Sanhedrin* 43a and Q 4:157-58 deeply, winks at it in a footnote: "The Jews also of Mahommed's time *boasted* of having put Jesus to death. *Sura*, iv. 156" (87).

The major point of historical discrepancy between the New Testament and *Sanhedrin* 43a is the story of how Jesus was executed: "according to the New Testament Jesus was crucified (obviously following Roman law); according to the Talmud he was stoned and subsequently hanged (following rabbinic law)" (Schäfer: 70). Schäfer argues that the rabbis

who produced this account knew that it was fictitious, but nevertheless saw it as a powerful answer to the Christian story about Jesus.

[T]he rabbis were certainly aware that crucifixion was the standard Roman death penalty, that Jesus was indeed crucified not stoned and hanged. Hence, why the stubborn insistence on the latter? Because this is precisely the core of their polemical counternarrative to the Gospels . . . With this deliberate “misreading” of the New Testament narrative, the Bavli (re)claims Jesus for the Jewish people – but only to fend off once and for all any claim by himself or his followers. Yes, indeed, the Bavli admits, Jesus was a Jewish heretic, who was quite successful in seducing many of us. But he was taken care of according to the Jewish law, got what he deserved – and that’s the end of the story (71-72).

The Bavli’s claim of direct Jewish agency in the killing of Jesus is in glaring historical disagreement with the Gospels – but their most important differences are moral and theological rather than historical. The moral counter-claim is that Jesus was killed justly. The theological counter-claim is that the story ends with his death, not his resurrection.

Unlike other Jewish scholars, such as Goldstein, who present the Talmudic Jesus with an eye to minimizing offensiveness to Christian audiences, Schäfer presents the Jesus passages in their full force. Schäfer is intrigued by the brashness of the Babylonian Talmud in “proudly proclaim[ing] Jewish responsibility for Jesus’ execution.”

Ultimately and more precisely, therefore, it turns out to be a complete reversal of the New Testament’s message of shame and guilt: we do accept, it argues, responsibility for this heretic’s death, but there is no reason to be ashamed of it and feel guilty for it. We are not the murderers of the Messiah and Son of God, nor of the king of the Jews as Pilate wanted to have it. Rather, we are the rightful executioners of a blasphemer and idolater, who was sentenced according to the full weight, but also the fair procedure, of our law (74).

For Schäfer the Babylonian Talmud’s counter-narrative to the New Testament plays an important ideological function for the Babylonian Jewish community: it is a response to Christian anti-Judaism, as reflected most strikingly in the Gospel of John.

The Babylonian Jews in the Sasanian Empire, living in a non-Christian and even progressively anti-Christian environment, could easily take up, and continue, the discourse of their brethren in Asia Minor; and it seems as if they were not less timid in their response to the New Testament’s message and in particular to the anti-Jewish bias that is so prominent in the Gospel of John. They fought back with the means of parody, inversion, deliberate distortion, and not least with the proud proclamation that what their fellow Jews did to this Jesus was right (129).

By boldly unveiling the polemical intent of the Talmud’s portrait of Jesus, yet with due empathy for its authors, Schäfer offers a plausible account of how the Christian anti-Judaism represented by the Gospel of John (and other texts) fueled the Jewish anti-Christianity found

in the Babylonian Talmud. Schäfer's analysis of *Sanhedrin* 43a helps explain what occasioned the Qur'an to chastise "the Jews" for claiming to have killed and crucified Jesus. The Qur'an was answering an intentionally boastful account of Jesus' trial and execution crafted by polemically-minded rabbis; it was denying the substance of this counter-narrative as well as the knowledge and sincerity of its authors.

Let us be mindful that this Talmudic passage is not paradigmatic of the relationship of the Talmud to either Islam or Christianity. I believe an objective analysis would show that the Talmud tends to unite Islam and Christianity in agreement with its ethical and theological insights. According to Katsh's study, "an inexhaustible amount of talmudic and midrashic tales," together with material from other Jewish and Christian sources, can be found at the "structural core of the Koran and its exegesis" (xxv). This textual interweaving is an artifact of the Qur'an's self-definition as a scripture which confirms previous scriptures: "We sent to you [Muhammad] the Scripture with the truth, confirming the Scriptures that came before it" (Q 5:48a). The New Testament also has a high degree of intertextuality with Rabbinic traditions found in the Talmud. The Talmud is a vast resource and its counter-narrative to the Gospels, only found in the Babylonian Talmud, is not a major theme. As Schäfer puts it, "Jesus is mentioned in the Talmud so sparingly that in relation to the huge quantity of literary production culminating in the Talmud, the Jesus passages can be compared to the proverbial drop in the *yam ha-talmud* ('the ocean of Talmud')" (2).

### **The Intertextuality of *Sanhedrin* 43a and Q 4:157-58**

The logic of turning first and foremost to the Talmud for an explanation of Q 4:157-58 is that these verses are part of a larger passage that is concerned primarily with Jews and Judaism. For the sake of readers who are unfamiliar with this passage in its qur'anic context, I cite it below with the verses that most directly concern us in bold.

153 The People of the Book demand that you [Prophet] make a book physically come down to them from heaven, but they demanded even more than that of Moses when they said, "Show us God face to face," and were struck by the thunderbolt for their presumption. Even after clear revelations had come down to them, they took the calf as an object of worship, yet We pardoned this, and gave Moses clear authority; 154 We made the mountains tower high above them at their pledge; We said to them, "Enter the gate humbly," and, "Do not break the Sabbath," and took a solemn pledge from them. 155 And so for breaking their pledge, for rejecting God's revelations, for unjustly killing their prophets, for saying "Our minds are closed" – No! God has sealed them in their disbelief, so they believe only a little – 156 and because they disbelieved and uttered a terrible slander against Mary, 157 **and said, "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God."** (They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him – 158 **God raised him up to Himself. God is almighty and wise.** 159 There is not one of the People of the Book who will not believe in [Jesus] before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection

he will be a witness against them.) 160 For the wrongdoings done by the Jews, We forbade them certain good things that had been permitted to them before: for having frequently debarred others from God's path; 161 for taking usury when they had been forbidden to do so; and for wrongfully devouring other people's property. For those of them that reject the truth we have prepared an agonizing torment. 162 But those of them who are well grounded in knowledge and have faith do believe in what has been revealed to you [Muhammad], and in what was revealed before you – those who perform the prayers, pay the prescribed alms, and believe in God and the Last Day – to them We shall give a great reward (4:153-162).

In the above passage, God is talking to Muhammad about why and how “the Jews” went astray from their covenant with God over the centuries – though, as verse 162 indicates, not all have gone astray and they may still find God's good favor through prayer, good works, and faith. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss this entire passage. However, for the purposes of our argument it is important to briefly consider Q 4:156. This verse may also be a response to a Talmudic counter-narrative.

The “terrible slander against Mary” referenced in verse 156 likely questions her sexual purity and subverts the story of her divinely initiated conception of Jesus. As Schäfer demonstrates (though aware of the debatable nature of identifying Jesus with Ben Stada or Ben Pandera in *Shabbat* 104b), “the unkind countermesssage to the New Testament – Miriam/Mary was a whore and her son a bastard – was the Jewish answer to the Christian propaganda of the divine origin of Jesus” (98-99). To support his argument, Schäfer also cites passages from Celsus' mid- to late-second century *Alethes Logos* (via Origen's third century *Contra Celsum*) which feature a Jew who explains that Mary was “convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera (*Pantbera*)” (19). If Muhammad encountered some version of this “terrible slander against Mary” in his discussions with Jews in Medina, it would only make sense that the Qur'an would refute it; since, in an earlier Meccan surah, “Mary,” the Qur'an specifically confirms Mary's immaculate conception of Jesus.

Mention in the Qur'an the story of Mary. She withdrew from her family to a place to the east and secluded herself away; We sent Our Spirit to appear before her in the form of a perfected man. She said, “I seek the Lord of Mercy's protection against you: if you have any fear of Him [do not approach]!” but he said, “I am but a Messenger from your Lord, [come] to announce to you the gift of a pure son.” She said, “How can I have a son when no man has touched me? I have not been unchaste,” and he said, “This is what your Lord said: ‘It is easy for Me – We shall make him a sign to all people, a blessing from Us.’” And so it was ordained: she conceived him (Q 19:16-22).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that this version of Jesus' birth narrative apparently derives from the *Protevangelium of James*, a mid-second century text of pseudonymous authorship.

If my interpretation is correct, Q 4:156 is a defense of Mary from Talmudic parody. This lends strength to the idea that Q 4:157-58 are of the same kind; that is, a defense of, rather than a challenge to, a key element of the New Testament narrative. This is not to say that the Qur'an's defense of these elements of the Christian story implies a tensionless relationship with Christian doctrine. For example, the Qur'an's affirmation of Mary's miraculous conception of Jesus can be read in tension with its categorical theological declaration that "[God] begot no one nor was He begotten" (Q 112:3).

Due to the traditional interpretation of Q 4:157-58 – that the Qur'an denies that the crucifixion of Jesus really happened – it has become customary to think of the Jesus of the New Testament, who suffers and dies, as being incompatible with the prophetology of the Qur'an. The Qur'an typically portrays prophets as eventually triumphing over the unbelievers who reject their messages. The argument can be made that this prophetology, based on Muhammad's life-pattern, forces the Qur'an to deny the crucifixion of Jesus. However, if Q 4:157-58 is a response to a Talmudic counter-narrative to the gospel, rather than a revision of the traditional Christian account, this prophetological explanation loses its saliency. The Christian tradition already supplies an answer to the prophetological problem of Jesus' crucifixion: his resurrection and the growth of the Jesus movement. In March of 2015, Berta Cáceres, a leading environmental and indigenous rights activist, was assassinated in her home in Honduras. In response to this unjust killing, her daughter Laura Cáceres said: "My mother has not been killed. My mother been planted and she will be born and reborn. This fire, the struggle of the people, that they tried to put out has been ignited even more, because they tried to put out the fire with gasoline" (Goodman). Like the followers of Jesus, Cáceres' daughter is denying the death of her mother in a metaphysical sense by asserting that her life-work and dream for justice will endure. Another example is Malcom X, the great American advocate for the human rights of black people. At his funeral, Omar Osma, a leader from the Islamic Center of Switzerland and the United States, declared, "Those who die on the battlefield are not dead but are alive!" (Haley: 76). The Qur'an's assertion that Jesus was not really killed but that God raised him up is the same kind of moral-theological claim.

#### **Q 4:157-58 and Christian-Muslim Dialogue**

Hermeneutical strategies of both Christian and Muslim interpreters of Q 4:157-58 – which present the verses as a denial of the New Testament account of the crucifixion – have, since at least the eighth century, served the polemical function of prejudicing the other's sacred scriptures as unbelievable. The vast majority of Muslim and Christian interpreters still maintain this view of Q 4:157-58. However, several different interpretive options were developed by Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an in the classical and medieval period; many questioned the dominant interpretation of the verses based on substitution legends and some notable thinkers even affirmed the crucifixion (Lawson: 68-114). Although the denial interpretation is dominant within Muslim thought today, many contemporary Muslim thinkers have distanced themselves from the substitution legends that originally supported this interpretive paradigm and are reading the verses differently (Lawson: 115-42; Ayoub; Hussein). Between the apparent appetite of contemporary Muslim thinkers to reconsider the meaning of these verses, and the diversity of historical interpretations which may be drawn

on, one hopes that the Muslim discourse may be dynamic enough to be affected by the new ideas presented here.

Our focus in this article, however, is on Christian interpretations of this passage, which rest on the foundation of John of Damascus' linking of these verses with the heresy of Docetism. Christian thinkers such as Nicolas of Cusa, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther are solidly in agreement with John of Damascus, not only in terms of the Docetism connection but also in terms of branding Muhammad as a heretic. Today this tradition has been modified by more sympathetic modern interpreters such as Hans Küng and Kenneth Cragg, who bring a newfound respect to their encounter with Islam, Muhammad, and the Qur'an, yet who nevertheless agree with John of Damascus' theory linking Q 4:157-58 with Docetism. A minority of contemporary Christian scholars have broken more decisively with this Damascene tradition by arguing that Q 4:157-58 need not be read as a denial of the death of Jesus.

Todd Lawson argues that John of Damascus' interpretation of Q 4:157-58 is out of keeping with an objective reading of the Qur'an (21). John's reading of these verses ties them to the heresy of Docetism as part of an agenda of branding Islam as one among many heresies opposed to the one true Orthodox Christian faith (144-45). In *On Heresies*, John tersely describes how the "superstition of the Ishmaelites" arose when "a false prophet named Mohammed . . . having chanced upon the Old and New Testaments and likewise, it seems, having conversed with an Arian monk, devised his own heresy." For John, the Qur'an's apparent denial of the crucifixion is one of Muhammad's "ridiculous compositions," proving that Islam must be understood as a heresy (Chase: 153).

And he says that the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the law, and that they seized His shadow and crucified this. But the Christ Himself was not crucified, he says, nor did He die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven (Chase: 154).

The mocking tone of John's interpretation of these verses should warn readers that he intends to make the Qur'an appear absurd. Yet his divisive branding of Muhammad as a heretic is still deeply embedded in Christian views of Islam.

Lawson also takes issue with classical Muslim exegetes, arguing that their interpretations of Q 4:157-58 as a denial of the crucifixion rely upon traditional legends rather than the Qur'an or authentic Hadith (43-67). As Lawson points out, "the Qur'an itself only asserts that the Jews did not crucify Jesus," which "is obviously different from saying that Jesus was not crucified" (12). While Hans Küng acknowledges the grammatical possibility of an interpretation like Lawson's, "that strictly speaking only the view that Jesus was killed by the Jews is rejected" by Q 4:157, he favors the idea that the Qur'an denies the crucifixion of Jesus. Küng argues that Islam requires an image of Jesus that corresponds to the Prophet Muhammad, who was not defeated but prevailed militarily over his and God's enemies. Küng asserts that Muhammad was likely influenced by the writings of Basilides, a Christian Gnostic who taught that Simon of Cyrene was crucified instead of Jesus; therefore, he argues, the classical exegetes of the Qur'an may have been correct in their interpretation, though mistaken historically (498). Kenneth Cragg also endorses the idea that Q 4:157-58 may derive from "docetic tendencies in early heretical Christianity which, for mainly

metaphysical reasons, questioned the possibility of the Messiah being literally and actually a sufferer” (Hussein: x). Küng and Cragg deeply appreciate and respect Islam, yet they find no better interpretation of these verses than John of Damascus – that is, Muhammad was influenced by heretical Christian ideas.

Two less influential Christian scholars, A. H. Mathias Zahniser and Geoffrey Parrinder, advance readings of Q 4:157-58 that do not project disagreement with the New Testament. Zahniser, following an unpublished manuscript of Kenneth E. Nolin, interprets Q 4:157, the “denial verse,” in light of Q 3:55, the “affirmation verse”: in this verse, he asserts, God says to Jesus, “I will cause you to die and raise you to myself” (23). This verse is often rendered: “God said, ‘Jesus, I will take you back and raise you up to Me’” (Q 3:55). Zahniser cites two very early Muslim authorities who read “take back” in this context to mean “cause to die,” as in, “take back your soul.” However, the majority of Muslim interpreters, beginning with Al-Tabari, read these verses in keeping with the tradition that Jesus never died but was raised alive into heaven.

Geoffrey Parrinder makes a similar argument to Zahniser’s. Parrinder argues that the verb *mutwaffika* in Q 3:55, literally “bring thy term to an end” or “take thee to me,” is used elsewhere in the Qur’an (Q 2:240) as “cause thee to die” (106). This same verb is used in Q 5:117, where Jesus speaks of his term as a witness or watcher over his followers expiring when God took him to Himself. Parrinder reads these verses together with Q 19:33, where Jesus states, “Peace is upon me the day of my birth, and the day of my death, and the day of my being raised up alive.” According to Q 19:33, Jesus predicts his death prior to his being raised up, and if Jesus is raised up in Q 3:55 and Q 5:117, then it follows that he has already died. Parrinder observes that the only thing keeping Muslims from accepting the idea of Jesus’ death is Q 4:157-58. However, he does not consider the substitution legends to be plausible interpretations of these verses, nor does he accept the Christian theory about Docetism influencing the Qur’an (118-19). He writes, “The cumulative effect of the Qur’anic verses is strongly in favor of a real death, and a complete self-surrender of Jesus” (121). In a powerful blow to the whole idea that the Qur’an could not fathom a prophet being killed, Parrinder points out that Q 4:155 explicitly charges the Jews with “unjustly killing their prophets” (120).

Gabriel Said Reynolds argues that this trope about the Jews “unjustly killing their prophets,” which appears nine times in the Qur’an, references early Syriac Christian writings that link the deaths of Jesus and later Christian martyrs with the deaths of pre-Christian Jewish prophets. Such narratives of Jewish prophets being unjustly killed are also found throughout the Bible (for example: 1 Kings 18:42, 19:9-10; Chronicles 24:20-21; Jeremiah 26:20-23; Nehemiah 9:26; Matthew 23:34-38; Luke 13:31-35; Hebrews 11:36-37). The Qur’an’s vague assertiveness in repeating these accusations of unjust killing suggests that Muhammad and his audience were familiar with this martyrological tradition and did not need the Qur’an to elaborate its gruesome stories; the fact that two Syriac church fathers, Ephrem (d. 373) and Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), wrote important texts in this tradition further supports Reynolds’ assumption that it is a Qur’anic subtext (9-32). In the biblical and post-biblical martyrological tradition, with which the Qur’an is likely interacting, the theme of Jewish killing of their prophets is well-developed. If the Qur’an is in conversation with Christian writings in this tradition, in which the unjust killing of Jesus is linked with the

deaths of earlier prophets, this would make the Qur'an's denial of Jesus' death even less plausible; each time the Qur'an references the idea of the Jews "unjustly killing their prophets" it would be, in effect, lamenting Jesus' death.

M. Kamel Hussein's *City of Wrong* is notable among works of modern Muslim scholarship in transcending the polemics between Muslims and Christians over the historicity of the crucifixion. Hussein's creative retelling of the story of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem reflects deeply upon the universal problem of the failure of conscience due to closed-mindedness and ideological rigidity. It highlights, with remarkable insight and appreciation, the principle of non-violent resistance to evil that lay at the heart of Jesus' ministry, and its relevance today to Muslims and humanity in general (207, 194-96). Hussein offers a picture of Jesus in keeping with God's announcement to Mary in the Qur'an: "We shall make him a sign to all people – a blessing from Us" (Q 19:21). Though Hussein admits that "the idea of a substitute for Christ is a very crude way of explaining the Qur'anic text," he remains functionally agnostic regarding Jesus' death, leaving room in his narrative for the traditional Muslim belief that Jesus was in fact not crucified (222).

What is most at stake in this essay is the way Christians read Q 4:157-58. Will we continue to read them as inspired by Christian heresy and contradictory of the New Testament? Of course, the new reading cuts both ways, challenging the authority of traditional Muslim readings. Potentially, it makes a way for Muslims to regard the New Testament as more credible. I will leave it to Muslim thinkers to assess this potential. As a Christian theologian, my focus is on the Christian side of the dialogue. I see great value in a Christian re-reading of these verses that removes what has been a major obstacle to constructive dialogue with the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition in general. While the ambiguity of Q 4:157-58 allows for multiple interpretations, this article further weighs the scales in a new direction.

#### **Q 4:157-158 in Light of Sanhedrin 43a and the NT**

As mentioned earlier, the Qur'an repeatedly accuses "the Jews" of "unjustly killing their prophets." One mention of this accusation comes in Q 4:155, where it begins the Qur'an's rebuttal of the Talmudic counter-narrative that the Jews killed Jesus *justly* for being a heretic who led the people astray. In the Qur'anic perspective, Jesus' killing was *unjust* because he was the Messiah. To dramatize this problem, the Qur'an gives "the Jews" this problematic line: "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God" (Q 4:157a). Of course, "the Jews" that the Qur'an is arguing with would not have used honorific language for Jesus, but the troubling sound of "We have killed the Messiah" gets the point across that killing Jesus is not something of which to boast.

The sequence of events in Jesus' execution in the Talmud, first stoning and then hanging, can be read as corresponding to the Qur'an's double-denial that the Jews "did not kill him, nor did they crucify him" (4:157). If the Qur'an were denying that the Jews crucified Jesus as presented in the New Testament (indirectly, by prompting the Romans to crucify him), its separate mention of killing and crucifying would need to be read as a parallelism (reinforcing its rebuttal by saying the same thing twice using different words). However, if the Qur'an is denying the account elaborated in the Talmud, where Jesus' execution by stoning is followed by the desecration of his corpse by hanging, then it makes sense for it to

deny both the stoning and the hanging, both the killing and the crucifying. Again, while the phrase makes sense in either case, the double-denial tracks better to the Talmudic counter-narrative than to the New Testament version of Jesus' death. When one attempts to apply the Qur'an's denial that the Jews killed Jesus to the New Testament story it does not fit so well, especially because the Jews in this story do not kill Jesus. The Talmudic counter-narrative fictitiously claims Jewish agency in the death of Jesus to emphasize the idea that Jesus was killed justly as a false prophet; given this rhetorical situation, there is a lot at stake in the Qur'an's denial of Jewish agency in Jesus' killing. The Qur'an's statement is precise and nuanced when seen as a denial of Jewish agency as presented in the Talmud's parody of Jesus' death. If we interpret the Qur'an as totally denying Jesus' crucifixion, we make this passage less clear and turn it into an unintentional attack on Christianity.

But why would the Talmud's "hanging" of Jesus be spoken of in the Qur'an as "crucifying"? The concept of crucifixion in antiquity included a wide range of methods of suspending bodies for punishment or execution.

. . . in studying the ancient world the scholar is wise not to differentiate too rigidly the categories of "crucifixion," "impalement," and "suspension" (as if these were clearly to be distinguished in every instance). Hence any study of crucifixion conceptions in antiquity must grapple with the broader context of the wide variety of penal suspension of human beings (Chapman: 32).

The Qur'an's use of the word "crucifixion" in reference to Jesus produces images in the Western mind of a man with a crown of thorns on his hanging head, arms outstretched, hands and feet nailed to a cross. However, when the Qur'an denies that the Jews "crucified" Jesus, it may not be referring to this picture of Roman execution at all, but to an image of Jesus stoned to death and then "crucified" or "suspended" on a stake. The practice of crucifixion in the first Muslim Caliphate grew out of a pre-Roman tradition in which crucifixion was typically not a form of execution but rather a practice of publicly hanging dead bodies (Anthony). In a commentary on Q 4:157, the editors of *The Study Quran* note that, "in general, Muslims understood crucifixion as a punishment carried out after death in most, but not all, cases" (Nasr et al.: 262). These facts undermine interpretations of Q 4:157 which assume that the word "crucifixion" in the Qur'an has the same meaning as it does in the New Testament. When the Qur'an denies that the Jews crucified Jesus, it can be understood as denying the Talmud's account of the "hanging" of Jesus' corpse without implying a total denial that Jesus was crucified by the Romans as in the New Testament.

In this light, the next phrase, "though it was made to appear like that to them," may be interpreted as an acknowledgment that, through oral traditions preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, it was made to appear to the Jewish community that they killed and crucified Jesus. The following phrase, "those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition," may be interpreted as referring to the "supposition" of Rabbinic scholars who carried on debates about Jesus over the centuries.

In the dominant paradigm of interpretation, Muslim and Christian exegetes understand these assertions that the Jews did not have their story straight about Jesus' death as if they applied to Christians and the New Testament. Though the Qur'an denies a *Jewish* claim about the death of Jesus, and explains that *Jews* have had misperceptions about what really

happened, it has been claimed that these verses deny *Christian* claims about Jesus' death, and make *Christians* out to be "full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition" (Q 4:157). Though Q 4:157-58 is explicitly aimed at debunking a Jewish claim about killing and crucifying Jesus, it has been assumed that the collateral damage of these verses is that they in effect nullify the Christian account of Jesus' death. But when one knows that the Jewish boast is based, not on the New Testament (where the agents of Jesus' execution are Roman, not Jewish authorities) but on the counter-narrative preserved in the Babylonian Talmud (which counter-factually claims that Jewish authorities tried and executed Jesus according to Jewish law), it is no longer tenable to read the Qur'an's denial of the boast of the Jews as implying a denial of the New Testament. Rather, the verses now appear to confirm the New Testament narrative over and against the Talmudic counter-narrative.

When the Qur'an states that "they certainly did not kill him" (Q 4:157), it echoes with Q 2:154: "Do not say that those who are killed in God's cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it." The Qur'an asserts that God's promise of life after death extends across Jewish, Christian, and Muslim paradigms: "God has purchased the persons and possessions of the believers in return for the Garden – they fight in God's way: they kill and are killed – this is a true promise given by Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an" (Q 9:111). When Jesus promises a man being crucified beside him that "today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), is he not relying on God's promise of "the Garden" in return for struggling in God's way? The Qur'an and the New Testament seem to agree: since Jesus was killed in the cause of God he was not really killed; in a very real sense he is alive with God.<sup>6</sup> As a mythical articulation of the faith that the followers of God's way are alive even after death, the Christian tradition asserts that Jesus was not only spiritually but also physically raised from the dead.

If the Qur'an's statement (in Q 4:157) that "the Jews" did not really kill Jesus is a metaphysical affirmation rather than a literal or historical denial, then its statement (in Q 4:158) that "God raised him up to Himself" can be read as an affirmation of the story of Jesus' resurrection and ascension as told in the New Testament. The verb *rafa'a* in this verse – normally translated "raise up" or "exalt" – is typically interpreted by Muslims as a reference only to Jesus' rapture or ascension, and not to his resurrection (Nasr et al.: 261); of course, this type of interpretation is necessary if one reads the verse before it as a literal denial that Jesus was killed. For example, al-Tabari (d. 923), whose *tafsir* on the subject has been so influential, passed on a tradition from Wahb ibn Munabbih that Jesus was raised alive and thereby saved from being killed:

[T]he people who were with 'Isa [Jesus] in the house scattered from the house before the Jews came upon him. 'Isa remained, and his LIKENESS was cast upon one of his companions, who still remained with him in the house. And 'Isa was RAISED UP, and one who was changed into the LIKENESS of 'Isa was killed. And his companions thought that the one CRUCIFIED was 'Isa,

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<sup>6</sup> Jesus expresses a similar idea in the Gospel of Mark when he argues against the Sadducees in favor of the resurrection: "And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong" (Mark 12:26-27).

because of what they saw happen to the one who was made to look like him. And the truth of the matter was hidden from them, because of his being RAISED UP and the changing of the one who was killed into his LIKENESS happened after the SCATTERING of his friends. And [because] they [had] heard 'Isa that night announce his death, and mourn because he thought that death was approaching him. And they related what happened as true, but the affair with God was really quite different from what they related. And those disciples who related this do not deserve to be called liars (Lawson: 71).

Here we see the meaning that *rafa'a* takes on in the context of the substitution narrative: Jesus is physically raised up. However, the phrase "But God raised him up to himself" is open to a range of interpretations, depending on the backstory one assumes: if one assumes the passion narrative of the New Testament as backstory, this "raising up" means resurrection and ascension; if one assumes the non-suffering substitution stories of Islamic interpretive tradition, it means ascension or rapture without death and resurrection. The phrase itself does not appear to validate or invalidate either interpretive option. *Rafa'a* does not literally mean resurrection or ascension; translations of it, such as raise up, elevate, or exalt, could arguably carry either or both meanings. Some Muslim exegetes, though in the minority, have went in the direction of viewing the raising of Jesus as being moral or spiritual in nature. Al-Rāzī (d. 1209), for example, is one authoritative figure who questioned the idea that God made someone else look like Jesus (which could have troubling legal implications) as well as the idea that Jesus was physically lifted into heaven (which would require God to have a physical location). For al-Rāzī, Jesus is raised in rank rather than in place; his memory and teachings are exalted (Lawson: 105-107). For al-Tabataba'i (d. 1981), a modern Shi'ite scholar, the raising of Jesus in 4:158 is spiritual rather than physical (Lawson: 142).

In the Qur'an, the verb *rafa'a* is used in several ways: to speak of God's raising of the heavens in the act of creation (Q 13:2, 52:5, 55:7, 79:28, 88:18); to describe the raising or building of the Kaba and other houses of worship (Q 2:127, 24:26); the exaltation of righteousness (Q 35:10) and the Qur'an itself (Q 80:14); in reference to the elevation of Mount Sinai during the revelation of the Torah to the Children of Israel (Q 2:63, 2:93, 4:154), which is also a Talmudic image; and, most often, to describe the exaltation of some people over others, in terms of their spiritual rank, socio-economic status, place in heaven, and/or role in a familial or religious hierarchy (Q 2:253, 6:83, 6:156, 12:76, 12:100, 19:57, 43:32, 49:2, 56:3, 56:34, 58:11). The semantic range of *rafa'a* in the Qur'an allows it to bear meanings of physical raising as well as spiritual exaltation. Jesus' body can be raised like God raised the heavens or raised Mount Sinai over the Children of Israel; of course, these references are not merely spatial but include the idea of transcendence. At the same time, Jesus can be raised in the sense of being ranked above other believers and prophets, being exalted to God in a spiritual sense.

One striking indicator of semantic overlap between New Testament language for Jesus' resurrection and the Qur'an's declaration that God raised or exalted Jesus is in the Qur'an's use of *rafa'a* to speak of raising the Kaba and other houses of worship. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is asked for a sign when he casts the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals out of the Temple in Jerusalem:

The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken (John 2:19-22).

In this passage, Jesus uses the word *egeiro* to speak of "raising up" the temple of his body, that is, his resurrection. *Egeiro* is a common New Testament metaphor for Jesus' resurrection, though its primary literal meaning is to wake up or rouse (e.g., Acts 5:30; 1 Corinthians 15:12-19). The Jews, in interrogating Jesus about the feasibility of raising "this temple" in three days, use *oikodomeo*, a term that more literally refers to building construction. Jesus' interlocutors do not understand the spiritual significance of what he is saying, or that he is referring to "the temple of his body," which is why they choose a narrower term. The Qur'an's use of the word *rafa'a* (which implies spiritual exaltation) to speak of raising houses of worship and raising Jesus, is well within the semantic range of *egeiro* in the above passage. If the Qur'an used a more literal term for Jesus' resurrection, such as *ba'atha* or *anshara*, it would miss the meaning of spiritual exaltation and raising in status that is essential to refuting the Talmudic counter-narrative; furthermore, these more common terms for resurrection would be deficient insofar as they do not, as *rafa'a* so naturally does, also include the idea of Jesus' ascension.

In the New Testament, the verb most commonly used to speak about the resurrection, *anastasis*, literally means "raise up" or "stand up"; it does not specifically mean "resurrection." Furthermore, the terms *anastasis* and *egeiro* are not so exact that they only refer to the resurrection of Jesus and not his ascension; rather, they are often used to speak of both kinds of "raising," from the dead and into heaven. In the Gospel of John (12:32-33), *hupsóo*, which means to lift up or exalt in status, is used in a very broad sense to refer to Jesus' crucifixion (lifting up on the cross) as well as his resurrection and ascension (lifting up to God); in every case, it also bears the added meaning of exalt in a spiritual sense. The Qur'an's assertion that God raised up or exalted Jesus to Godself is sufficient, by the linguistic standards of the New Testament, to refer to the whole story of Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The Qur'an's use of *rafa'a* in Q 4:158 also concisely names the rhetorical and ideological tension between the Talmudic and New Testament interpretations of the death of Jesus: Jesus being abased or Jesus being exalted. In Q 56:1-3 *rafa'a* is used in much the same way: "When that which is coming arrives, no one will be able to deny it has come, bringing low and raising high." The Qur'an's bottom line is agreement with the gospel that Jesus has been exalted by God.

In several places the Qur'an quite directly and intentionally critiques the Christian community for the deification of Jesus (5:17), the worship of Jesus and Mary (5:116), exclusivist claims to salvation (2:111-13), and the development of the doctrine of the Trinity (4:171), but nowhere does the Qur'an say that Christians have the basic story about Jesus' death and resurrection wrong. Such a claim would completely undermine the authority of Christianity's scriptural tradition. The Qur'an, while defending the basic integrity of the

Bible, does accuse the People of the Book of misinterpreting or altering their scriptures (Q 2:79). For Christians, this accusation makes sense in terms of the changes that were made to the New Testament over the centuries for the sake of justifying creedal formulations, especially regarding the Trinity and divinity of Jesus. Yet such changes – an altered word, preposition, or inserted creedal formula here or there<sup>7</sup> – while significant in their meaning, are not even remotely close to the scale of changing the story of Jesus' death, which would require a total re-write. Furthermore, if the Qur'an did deny Jesus' death, there would undoubtedly be something in the Hadith about it, because it would have caused a major row between Muhammad and his Christian contemporaries.

My theory is that many if not all early Qur'anic exegetes were unaware of the Rabbinic counter-narrative to which Q 4:157-58 is responding. To fill this information gap in their interpretation of these verses, they resorted to or devised the legends and backstories of substitution and miraculous escape we know today. While these legends and backstories have been questioned and disputed by Muslim thinkers for centuries, they have held sway over public opinion. For Christians, the Qur'an's supposed denial of Jesus' death has created a definite barrier between the traditions, and in a way has been a convenient justification for those who would take a polemical position towards Islam. Of course, if one is seeking to present the Qur'an and New Testament as mutually exclusive, an interpretation of Q 4:157-58 that altogether denies Jesus' death is very useful. For Christian and Muslim authors committed to the idea that the other faith is false, this interpretation of Q 4:157-58 has been a reliable trope to buoy up the two faiths' supposed incompatibility. In modern and contemporary Christian scholarship, besides a purely academic desire for truth and accuracy, mixed motives have led to questions of the Qur'an's denial of Jesus' death. Some have continued a polemical stance, seeking to discredit the Qur'an for being historically wrong; Lawson and other scholars have sought to redeem the Qur'an from this supposed mistake, while shifting the locus of error to traditional *tafsir*. The truth of the matter, it appears, is one that points towards a potential for increased compatibility between Christianity and Islam. We have the option to embrace more of a shared reality in terms of our sacred stories and sources.

The misinterpretation of Q 4:157-58 that I am attempting to remove is a significant barrier for Christian-Muslim relations. Other problems, while significant, are more workable. For example, explicit debates between the Qur'an and the Christian tradition over the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity can be seen as bridges, not walls. These doctrines did not fully develop until the fourth and fifth centuries of Christianity; they are not, strictly speaking, biblical doctrines, except by virtue of changes to or reinterpretations of the text (as

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<sup>7</sup> For example, see 1 John 5:7 in the King James Version for an inserted creedal formula: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." This passage is not found in any of the oldest Greek manuscripts but was added into the Latin Vulgate. A more debatable inserted creedal formula is found in Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Besides these two texts, the New Testament has no explicit Trinitarian proof-texts. In the Gospel of John, one verse that shows evidence of tampering in favor of the doctrine of Jesus as God is 1:18, where some manuscripts read "only begotten son" and others read "only begotten God." It is arguable that a Christological upgrade was made from "Son" to "God" at some point in the chain of manuscript transmission.

numerous studies in New Testament and other pre-Nicene Christian texts have shown). I believe that the Qur'an is on target with its theological critiques and that accepting them would help Christians bring our faith into greater harmony with Judaism and Islam. For example, Rod Cardoza argues that the qur'anic denial that Jesus is "the son of God" (read not literally but contextually) is a precise theological corrective to later Hellenistic misunderstandings and exaggerations of the original sense of this title in the earliest forms of Jewish Christianity:

As eminent Christian theologians labor through meticulous scholarship to reconnect Christians to Word, Wisdom, and Spirit christology, mindful that this can protect Christians from the tritheism of which Jews and Muslims accuse them, a growing number of Christians find it rather astonishing that the Qur'an was pointing to the same biblical corrective centuries ago (462).

Cardoza argues that being immersed in "the light of earliest Jewish Christianity," which has a theological and christological profile that is aligned with the Qur'an, might help us "find a way out of the theological gridlock which has hindered Muslim-Christian dialog for centuries" (Cardoza 463). As a person of mixed Jewish and Christian heritage and beliefs, I find the Qur'an's critique of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus supportive rather than challenging. The Qur'an defends my minority non-trinitarian view in a tradition that is often anti-Semitic and marginalizes those with Jewish-rooted beliefs.

### **Conclusion**

This essay demonstrates that Q 4:157-58 is responding to a Rabbinic counter-narrative to the New Testament story of Jesus' death and resurrection. Building on previous scholarship, this essay explores the implications of this new interpretation for Christian-Muslim relations and, especially, for Christian views of the Qur'an and the qur'anic portrait of Jesus. There is not space here to fully explore the range of novel ideas and implications which this particular connection between the Qur'an and the Bavli may yield. I leave it to other scholars to explore the implications of this finding insofar as it might affect other fields of study. This new interpretation of Q 4:157-58 promises to spark debate and conversation, and has the potential to cause a shift in the interpretation not only of these verses but of the qur'anic Jesus. For scholars who are seeking a new paradigm of Christian-Muslim relations, this finding strengthens a view of the scriptures of both faiths as compatible, rather than intractably contradictory. The need to correct the misperception that the scriptures of Christianity and Islam (the world's two largest, fastest-growing religions) are mutually exclusive is urgent. Scholars, religious leaders, and lay practitioners seeking to foster peace and mutual respect between these faith-communities are called to this work of reconciliation. This article also highlights the need to include Jewish voices and perspectives in Christian-Muslim dialogue; moreover, what we need is a Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue. There would be nothing more tragic than for Christians and Muslims to unite on a platform of anti-Judaism. Rather, we must educate against religious bigotry between all three faiths, and foster a common spirit of empathetic understanding and mutual appreciation. We need to become more comfortable and skilled at negotiating the polemical views of our ancestors in faith that perpetuate fear and mistrust of each other. Do we still need to hold on to polemical views that divide us? Peace will come to the whole Abrahamic family – to Jews,

Christians, and Muslims together – or not at all. As Reb Zalman (1924–2014) taught us, “The only way to get it together . . . is together.”

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