

Shumack, Richard. *Jesus through Muslim Eyes* (London: SPCK, 2020). 160pp. \$34.90 paperback.

Islam has a long tradition and growing literature on Jesus Christ. Shumack relates conversations with his Australian Muslim friends in which they called him away from the Christian Jesus to the Muslim Jesus. That they are different is unsurprising, given Gabriel Reynolds observation that “the history of Islamic thought on Christ is fundamentally independent from the study of the Bible and the tradition of Christological thought in the Church.”¹ Shumack states the aim of his book: “What follows is my attempt to take my friends’ challenge to consider the Muslim Jesus seriously.” (xiii) What is at stake is both academic and deeply personal. Shumack aims to “meet the Muslim Jesus, on his terms, and weigh up his claims to be the true Jesus of history and religion and worthy of my devotion.” (xiii)

Part 1 is devoted to the Muslim Jesus. After discussing the Jesus known in pre-Islamic Arabia – which was largely an orthodox Christian Christology, Shumack devotes chapters to examining, in turn, Jesus in the Qur’an, the Hadith, Sufiism, and contemporary Muslim literature.

The Qur’anic Jesus is remarkable and mysterious. Qur’anic honorifics of Jesus set him apart from and above other prophets by calling him, for example, Messiah, Word of God, a spirit from God. Yet, “We are told virtually nothing of his teaching, of his movements or his ministry patterns, or his character, or his interactions with ordinary people.” (9) This might be because the Qur’an seems to assume knowledge about Jesus, joining in, as it were, on an existing Christian conversation. This would explain why “the Qur’anic Jesus, unlike any other prophet, is embroiled in polemic”.² The Qur’an seems to ‘cleanse’ Jesus from false beliefs associated with him such as his divine sonship and death by crucifixion; negative corrections exist alongside positive affirmations. Shumack observes, “For every verse affirming how ordinary he is as a prophet, there is another highlighting his extraordinariness. For every negative correction of a supposedly false Christian doctrine of Christ, there is a positive allusion to a mysterious Islamic doctrine of Christ.” (12)

Shumack highlights important information about Jesus from the Hadith and Tarikh (history) of Al-Tabari. The Hadith go beyond the Qur’an in assigning to Jesus an important role on the day of judgement. Al-Tabari relates how Jesus fulfilled some Old Testament prophecies, and more remarkably, narrates a version of the Last Supper. Al-Tabari reports Jesus saying: “What I have done with you tonight in serving you the meal, washing your hands with mine – this is to make you and me equal. You consider me the best of you, so do not be arrogant towards one another. Sacrifice yourselves for one another, just as I sacrifice myself

¹ Gabriel Said Reynolds, ‘The Islamic Christ’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: OUP, 2015), 185.

² Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 12.

for you.” (18) Shumack asks how fulfilling Old Testament prophecy and Jesus speaking of sacrificing himself fits within Islam?

After discussing the Sufi Jesus, who resembles a Sufi mystic, Shumack engages with Mustafa Akyol’s 2017 book *The Islamic Jesus*. Akyol repeats a standard Islamic polemic (dating back to Abd al-Jabbar in the tenth century) that biblical Christology was originally a low Christology, later associated with the Ebionites. However, this true and original Christology was supplanted by the apostle Paul who claimed Jesus to be Son of God, and this was ratified at the Council of Nicaea. Similarly, the original gospels were suppressed and replaced by what we have today. In sum: “At its heart, the Muslim Jesus story involves... a historical conspiracy. It claims that the mainstream Christian accounts of Jesus’ life – the biblical Gospels – were intentionally fabricated.” (33)

In Part 2 Shumack responds to these allegations. He notes that it is patronising to suggest that Christians or Muslims “would happily accept scriptures filled with obvious contradictions, and bare-faced lies.” (44) After systematically refuting the Islamic Christological polemic, his concluding chapter makes four important points. First, all ancient evidence indicates the Muslim Jesus is not the original and true Jesus of Jewish Christianity. Second, the differences between the Muslim Jesus and the Christian Jesus are due to “Islam cleansing Jesus of some feature – it is never due to Islam teaching us something new about Jesus life.” (72) Third, Islam adds nothing to our knowledge of Jesus beyond that taught by the Christian tradition. Fourth, the Muslim Jesus is a fabrication and not a historical person: “the Muslim Jesus appears to have emerged out of religious conviction, not out of the pages of history.” (73)

Parts 1 and 2 provide the groundwork for Shumack’s main points in Parts 3 and 4. The Muslim Jesus is apiece with the well-recognised pattern of the Qur’an Islamising Biblical material by fitting it into its own theology.³ The Jesus of the New Testament that Christians worship is unparalleled and extraordinary. It appears that this Jesus was co-opted into the Islamic authoritative sources and traditions by attempting to squeeze him into an Islamic theological mould. From this Shumack argues positive (Part 3) and negative (Part 4) conclusions.

Positively, Islam’s domestication of Jesus was incomplete. Despite the corrections and distortions, the extraordinary Jesus of the New Testament still shines through the Islamic sources in all kinds of ways that render him unparalleled and extraordinary. Shumack says this makes Jesus an uncomfortable and unnatural fit within Islam. Jesus alone is virgin-born, son of the only women named in the Qur’an. Only the Qur’anic Jesus heals the sick and is called Messiah, Word of God, spirit from God, and eminent in the Hereafter. Only Jesus is described

³ A. Rippin, ‘Interpreting the Bible through the Qur’an’, in *Approaches to the Qur’an*, ed. G.R. Hawting and A.K.A. Shareef, (London: Taylor & Francis, 1993), 250; Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 147–48; A. Bannister, *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?* (London: IVP, 2021), 83.

by Islamic scholars as a 'new Adam', although this "is religiously unexpected, unnecessary, and unexplained." (81) Jesus is described as celebrating the Last Supper, which Christians know points forward to his sacrificial and vicarious death, something that is suggested by Al-Tabari (87-88). This un-Islamic description indicates Shumack's main point: Jesus does not appear to be native to Islam, he "does not appear to be at home there. He feels *too big* for his Islamic role." (99)

Negatively, the "Muslim Jesus is essentially the Christian Jesus with all the *objectionable* bits taken out." (136) From a Christian perspective, removing the "best bits" leaves "a Jesus devoid of saving and transforming power... a diminished, impoverished, emasculated Christ... one who has been domesticated, tamed by Islam. Why would Christians buy in?" (136-37) The Muslim Jesus fits as one prophet amongst a series of Islamic prophets who are precursors to Muhammad. Muslims believe in and revere this Jesus, and are sometimes confused when Christians refuse their offer of uniting around their shared devotion to Jesus. For Christians, this Muslim Jesus is entirely inadequate. "In the Islamic mindset, the Muslim and Christian Jesuses are walking the same religious road; but in the Christian mindset they are walking in the same direction, but along profoundly different routes." (108) Shumack calls Akyol, and Muslims in general, to understand the *Jesus of Christianity* rather than simply recast him according to his own religious assumptions and thus fail in understanding the religious other. (135)

In *Jesus through Muslim Eyes* Shumack succeeds in helping readers understand the Muslim Jesus while also critiquing this figure from a Christian perspective. It is aimed at a general readership, has academic depth while requiring no prior knowledge, and would interest Christians and Muslims alike. It's writing style is engaging and succinct while being information-rich. *Jesus through Muslim Eyes* deserves to be read widely and would be a profitable text for Christians and Muslims to read together. For many decades since 1965 Geoffrey Parrinder's *Jesus in the Qur'an* has been the classic introductory text to the Qur'anic Jesus. While slightly different in scope, Shumack's *Jesus through Muslim Eyes* deserves to be the definitive introduction to Islamic Christology and is a must-read for those involved in Christian-Muslim relations.

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