Jesus and Muhammad – F. E. Peters (Quotes)

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[T]he historian approaches the Quran document without Muslim consent, which is not crucial, but also without valuable Muslim assistance. (p. xvi)

Other saints earn their authority by their personal holiness, that famous "odor of sanctity" that exudes from their persons. Jesus and Muhammad doubtless possessed that, but their authority derived from elsewhere, as they claimed and as their followers believed: they were the chosen of God. And they spoke with an authority higher than themselves (p. xvii)

Muhammad was a mortal; he was born, lived, and died in Western Arabia at the turn into the seventh Christian century. As just remarked, his remains are believed to be in a tomb inside a mosque in Medina, where he died. (p. xviii)

Quran gives no signs of being acquainted with the actual Christian Gospels, which are our earliest and best source of information about Jesus. Rather, the Quranic information about Jesus seems late, derivative, and legendary (p. xx)

As Christians became better informed and, more to the point, as more and more Christians were swept under Muslim sovereignty, heresy was discarded as too benign a characterization of Islam (p. xx)

Gospels were written in the popular, almost demotic Koine Greek of the Mediterranean world. Quran, in contrast, was orally composed in an improvisational and artisanal Arabic Kunstsprache that was the poetic medium of the day and whose intricacies were in this particular case thought to be God-given (p. xxii)

It is the believers who chiefly bother the skeptics, those devotees so committed to their faith, it is suspected, that they might well be willing to invent anything, including its founder. (p. 1)

The best and most useful of the available evidence for the careers of Jesus and Muhammad is literary, that is, written accounts about them, many from apparent eyewitnesses, and some even purport to have preserved our subjects' very words (p. 1)

Jesus, it turned out, is not in the Scrolls—nor are the Essenes in the Gospels!—and he was certainly not himself an Essene (p. 6)

Our Arab sources make a great deal of the commercial activity of Mecca in that same era, but neither Procopius, who had looked, nor anyone else had apparently ever heard of the place. (p. 8)

Mecca and Medina had no archives in Muhammad's day, nor any, it appears, for a long time thereafter. In the sixth and seventh centuries they were centers of an oral society where writing, if it existed at all, was of an extremely limited and specialized use. (p. 8)

There is no lack of evidence for Muhammad's Mecca. It is, however, entirely literary, and it dates from more than a century later the Prophet's death. And it is the product of a different society living in a place very different from the pagan and tribal Mecca of the sixth and early seventh centuries (p. 9)

Muhammad's own Quran was in fact what are now the constitutive parts of our book, those stanza-like units (suras) whose original contours are no longer easy to discern (p. 9)

Like the Homeric poems, its sophistication seems to signal the prior existence of a religio-poetic tradition. There is no trace of such, however; the Quran appears to be a virginal conception. And if it is mysterious what kind of prior tradition could produce the Quran, what is even more mysterious is who in that society barely emerging from illiteracy had the skills to write it down (p. 10)

Muhammad lived in a very different place, and we cannot be sure that he ever left it. The population of Mecca in the Hijaz was singularly Arab, relatively recent transplants from a tribal to an urban culture with the shared values of each, uniquely Arabophone and vastly illiterate. (p. 10)

[T]he Prophet seems never to have had direct encounters with Christians until the very end of his life (p. 10)

On the evidence of the Quran alone we would know little or nothing of Mecca save that perhaps there was such a place (p. 12)

At their very best they confirm for us that in the 60s in Rome there was a group of religious fanatics who called themselves “Christers” and who caused problems—unspecified—for the Roman authorities (p. 15)

Not all Jews of Jesus’ day believed in the imminence of the End Time nor in a Messiah; Jesus’ followers obviously did, and the shape and color of their belief can be read of the pages of this apocalyptic literature. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal just one such apocalyptic community in the grip of expectation of the End Time. The Jesus movement was another (p. 17)

According to the statements in the Talmud regarding Jesus, his birth was illegitimate: he was the son of Miriam (by one account a hairdresser) who had conceived of a certain Pantheros, a Roman soldier. By the same accounts Jesus was put to death by the Jews, either by crucifixion or by hanging, on the capital charge of having led the people astray. (p. 17)

If we isolate and look more closely at what constitutes Q, it becomes apparent that Q was a collection of Jesus' sayings, or logoi, as they were called in his day. And only sayings. there is, oddly, no death by crucifixion, no resurrection (p. 19)

Who would make such a collection and why? Was it a kind of primitive catechism to serve as an introduction to the Jesus movement, leaving the hard parts till later? Was it conceivably a real Gospel (p. 19)

And "Thomas" presents to us, exactly like Q, a Jesus who had not died on the cross and had not risen from the dead. The Jesus of both Thomas and Q was simply a teacherpreacher (p. 20)

On all the evidence, by the second century Christians were already using in their church services these four Gospels and these alone. So it appears that relatively early on there had developed a consensual Gospel canon among the individual congregations (ekklesiai) of Christians that had come into existence around the Mediterranean (p. 20)

By all accounts the siege and fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its Temple was a dramatic and a traumatic event in the life of the Jews, including Jesus' emerging first generation of followers (p. 21)

John's Jesus has a very distinct point of view that is enunciated in a highly sophisticated language and imagery quite alien to the aphoristic and homely Jesus portrayed in Mark and Q (p. 22)

In this earliest portrait of Jesus there was no eschatology, no passion narrative, and no resurrection or appearances account. Jesus was a wisdom teacher purely and simply and it merely remains to determine of what sort. (p. 24)

[M]ay not be all Muhammad pronounced—indeed there is good evidence that all his revelations are not in our Quran—but there is no indication of interpolation or tampering (p. 26)

There is in it no visible reflection on Muhammad's unhappy Meccan experiences, no vindictiveness against the Quraysh who had sought to kill him, and, perhaps most surprisingly, no triumphalist gloating in the light of the increasing successes of Muslim armies and the ever wider spread of Islam. Unlike Jesus, Muhammad lived long enough to be his own Constantine, (p. 26)

The Medina suras of the Quran do not lack for confidence, but they are not filled with either self-praise or self-congratulation. The Quran "ends"—a very imprecise notion—much as it "began," with its gaze focused on Salvation History and not on the contemporary events at Mecca and Medina that the historian is so eager to hear about. (p. 27)

In the eyes of the skeptics, the Prophetic traditions were orally transmitted for a century and a half after Muhammad's death and during that period underwent substantial transformation (p. 34)

Our primary sources, as well as the later rabbinic writings, do seem to indicate, however, that the paternity of Jesus, who is quite remarkably called "son of Mary" (Mk 6:3), was problematic, or at least unusual (p. 42)

He was certainly Aramaic-speaking, though it is not inconceivable that he knew some Hebrew (learned in the local synagogue), some Greek, and perhaps even a smattering of Latin patois. (p. 45)

And yet no one comments on the fact that Jesus was not married. here the matter seems to stand. The Jesus movement had, however, an increasingly important investment in celibacy and so there has been a constant insistence from within the Christian tradition that Jesus himself was celibate (p. 46)

There is, however, a South Arabian inscription that describes an Abraha-led military engagement east of Mecca that seems to belong to the same campaign. It bears the date in the local era that yields AD 552, which places both Abraha and his military foray far too early to be connected to the birth of Muhammad. (p. 50)

Once the notion of “covenants” or commercial treaties is no longer squeezed out of this sura, the annual Quraysh caravans to Syria and the Yemen disappear, and with them, the entire fable of Hashim the trader and Mecca as a kind of sixth-century Venice-in-the-Hijaz (p. 60)

If there was any trading going on in or around Mecca in the sixth century, as there assuredly was, it was probably in raisins and leather, and it inevitably had some connection with the shrine there (p. 60)

Even the traditional fixing at 570, which is arrived at simply by counting back the stereotypical forty years from his call to prophecy, is almost certainly much too early for Muhammad’s actual year of birth (p. 61)

For us it is inconceivable that its compilers knew of such things, particularly the resurrection, and neglected or chose not to mention them.(p. 64)

What is more often proposed is that the compositors of Q knew of Jesus' crucifixion but chose not to mention it, presumably because it had no significance for them; or more, because it was a reversal, an embarrassment that was best forgotten. (p. 70)

The Quran, without a genuine beginning or end, is a kind of Möbius recitative looping through eternity. (p. 73)

One conclusion from this is that we are here in the presence of an oral recitation, which no one doubts, but the logic may lead to a more profound, and radical, conclusion, that Muhammad belonged to a tradition of oral poetry and so was composing as well as declaiming: singing, performing, and composing are closely connected acts in an oral tradition (p. 75)

Whatever the similarities in style and matter, some at least of Muhammad's audience went away with the conviction that they had heard the words not of a poet but of God. (p. 75)

And there must also have been gestures: as already noted, many of the dramatic presentations of the Judgment—the just on one side and the unjust on the other (50:20–26 and 37:50–56, e.g.)—would be unintelligible without identifying gestures or perhaps changes in vocal register (p. 76)

[A]udience reaction (101:9–11), or in these instances, perhaps a lack of it. There are direct answers to both questions and criticisms (2:135, etc.). And there was, finally, the charge that the "revelations" were somewhat too improvised, that Muhammad was in effect making it up as he went along, with one eye steadily fixed on the main chance (21:5, 52:33). (p. 76)

[T]he Muslims were not speaking in tongues like the early Christians who had received “the gifts of the Holy Spirit”; they were repeating what was now a text (p. 77)

And his listeners drew the appropriate conclusion, that these were “old stories” and that he must have gotten his poetry from someone else, and even that what he was “reciting” had been “recited” or “passed on”—this is not the same word as that referring to the Quran—to him (p. 78)

At first merely allusively and then in far more detail as salvation stories, either because the allusions were not working or perhaps because of obvious audience interest in this new historical storytelling approach to Muhammad’s message. (p. 79)

Where did the Prophet’s apparently pagan audience receive an understanding that matched his own, the pre-Islamic poets may have had, as some maintain, some notion of biblical ideas , but they certainly know nothing of the biblical stories with which Muhammad and his audience were seemingly familiar (p. 80)

What we have in extensive segments of the Quran are nothing less than the scattered members of a seventh century midrash on the Bible. (p. 80)

The prosody of Quran bears little resemblance to the highly formalized metrics of the ancient Arabic ode, but does it show the characteristics of the kahin’s saj‘? The subsequent Muslim literary tradition says “No,” as indeed it must since to grant that the Quran is a form of saj‘ is to concede in effect that Muhammad was a kahin as charged. More, those same critics were careful to so define saj‘ that the Quran’s diction could not possibly qualify as such (p. 81)

We do not know where this minor merchant of Mecca learned to make poetry. For the Muslim tradition there was necessarily no issue here and so it offered no explanation; both the content and the diction of the Quran—its language, style, and very tropes— were from God. (p. 82)

Whether it was the "fine magic of the language" that brought it to pass, as one early nineteenth-century critic thought, or simply an act of God, there was no sensible way by which an untrained Meccan—the question of Muhammad's illiteracy is irrelevant; most oral poets, and certainly the best, have been illiterate— (p. 82)

Where the term "the anointed" (ha-mashiah) appears in the Bible, it is not used as a title but simply as a descriptive word that is regularly and normally applied to a priest or, more generally, a king, and never to a figure from the onrushing End Time (p. 95)

The early followers of Jesus, like Jesus himself and like most of their fellow Jews, read religious texts in an "open" fashion. They were not limited by the same "constraints of history" as ourselves about what we consider a historically accurate—that is, a contextual— understanding of a given text, whether Isaiah or Daniel or Enoch. There were no "authentic" readings, just hopefully persuasive ones (p. 95)

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." (p. 101)

And just as Jesus is understood to have followed the traditional Jewish practices of his day, so Muhammad may be assumed to have participated in the civil religion of Mecca before his call to Islam (p. 106)

Though he protested that he was just a man (17:93, 41:6), Muhammad was declared by Muslims to be as free from sin as Mary was for Christians. Mary just got there a little sooner: she had an “Immaculate Conception”; he had perhaps to await the “Opening of the Prophet’s Breast.” (p. 106)

He was sleeping when the Angel Gabriel appeared, covered him with a blanket, “on which was some writing,” and said, “Recite (p. 106)

Muhammad was uncertain what had occurred to him and the identification of the experience comes from an expert and a Christian, which makes it all the more credible (p. 109)

Had not the boy Muhammad already been recognized and acknowledged as a prophet, by the monk Bahira among others? (p. 110)

Waraqa tells Muhammad that what has occurred to him was what had once happened to Moses with the sending down of the Torah on Sinai, where namus is clearly an Arabic transcription of the Greek nomos , the “Law” or Torah (p. 110)

What is chiefly remarkable, perhaps, is that in the early Meccan suras Muhammad almost invariably refers to the deity not as “Allah” but rather as “Lord” (Rabb) or, since God is often the speaker, by the self-referential “your Lord (p. 110)

Who was Muhammad’s “Lord”? It is not at all clear, not at any rate at this point, though later it is unmistakably the Allah of the Quraysh, and, of course, the Almighty God of the Jews and Christians (p. 111)

The trouble was, they worshiped other gods as well, and one of the central aims of the Meccan preaching was to make the Quraysh and other Meccans surrender their attachment to other deities, the idols and empty names they associated with the one true God (p. 111)

We do not always know the contexts in which the Quraysh venerated their gods, which prayers went with which sacrifices, or how the pre-Islamic "retreat" with its prayer and fasting favored by Muhammad was combined with the pilgrimage ritual (hajj (p. 111)

Quraysh had no problems with the Prophet's morning prayer at the Ka'ba, but to perform the prayer at sunset, Muhammad and his companions had to scatter to nearby ravines. (p. 112)

This story, or something like it, has a claim to authenticity. The criterion of embarrassment rises unbidden from its lines: it is impossible to imagine a Muslim inventing such an inauspicious tale. But even without the accompanying story, the implications of a Quranic verse being uttered and then withdrawn are profound for Islamic scriptural theology and jurisprudence. (p. 114)

Though it has its own particular details, the Quran's version of the End is obviously different from anything we encounter among the pre-Islamic Arabs, whose view of the Afterlife was dim rather than apocalyptic, but it is noticeably similar to that current among the Jews and Christians (p. 115)

The story of the prophets is rehearsed at length in the Quran, never quite consecutively in the manner of a history, but rather to make the same point that Jesus insists on in the Q source, to wit, when humankind has refused to heed the bearers of God's message, the consequences have been terrible (22:42–43). The lesson here is even clearer than Jesus' own: (p. 116)

The position of Jesus in Muhammad's thinking appears to rule out a straightforward Jewish source for the thinking on display in the Quran. Nor would an orthodox Christian one regard Jesus, as Muhammad does, as a prophet rather than the Son of God (p. 117)

Muhammad prayed thrice daily and facing Jerusalem, practiced ritual purity, abstained from pork and wine, and yet knew about a miraculous Eucharistic banquet (p. 118)

We do not know how or whence these putative Jewish Christian convictions came to Mecca. They let no institutional trace but their presence was deep and powerful (p. 118)

Islam was nothing other than the din Ibrahim , the "religion of Abraham" (2:135), which was still, despite the travails of a long bout of pagan polytheism, from which Muhammad absolutely disassociated himself (109:6), deeply embedded in the fabric of Mecca (p. 119)

The Jerusalem Temple priesthood, whose integrity had been compromised under both the Maccabees and Herod, was a provocative issue for many Jews in Jesus' day, but Jesus himself appears to have had no problems with either the institution or the individuals who comprised it (p. 127)

[W]hen an oral poet or storyteller is performing for or in the presence of one who will commit that performance to writing, there are considerable changes that will take place, changes that emanate from both the performer's self-consciousness (altered speed, pace, deliberateness, emphasis) coupled with a desire to impress, and the transcriber's willingness to "improve" what he is hearing (p. 134)

The change of audience, and so of purpose, from Mecca to Medina is true and important, but is it not equally plausible to think that Muhammad may have found a scribe at Medina? The Medina suras do indeed show some of the signs of a dictated text, in circumstances perhaps where the Prophet could no longer recite in the earlier bardic style but now had to pronounce, and slowly and clearly enough for an unskilled scribe to catch and record it (p. 135)

Everything we know about that time and place makes it highly unlikely that there should be in Medina in Muhammad's day a scribe skilled enough to have taken down the suras as dictation (p. 136)

The simplest solution is that Q was collected or composed as a record— whatever its purpose—of Jesus' sayings, perhaps during his lifetime, or perhaps immediately after his death since that event seems to be only faintly reflected in the collection, and certainly before the resurrection stories began to circulate. Mark's Gospel presents a more difficult problem. It is a composition one of whose purposes, and perhaps its chief purpose, was, on the face of it, to explain Jesus' death by execution (p. 147)

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Though the commonly held opinion is that the Gospels were composed after Paul's letters of the 50s, they are very un-Pauline documents. They share very few of Paul's theological and ecclesiastical concerns.(p. 148)

He will remain until I come," Jesus mysteriously says (v. 22). The Christian tradition stretched the life of this John for as far as it would go, but when he died in Ephesus, perhaps sometime about AD 100, it was said, the Lord had still not come. (p. 149)

The Acts of the Apostles shows the earliest believers preaching the risen Jesus inside Jewish synagogues of the eastern Mediterranean Diaspora (Acts 13:26, 43, 48, etc.), where in that era Gentiles constituted a small but welcome audience of interested parties, and even occasionally in more public non-Jewish venues (Acts 17:17, 19:9–10). (p. 150)

Paul responded that he had in fact a divinely appointed mission to be "a light for the Gentiles." He had had to preach the Good News to the Jews first, of course, "but since you reject it, we now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46–47) (p. 150)

Had Jesus in fact said, "Go then to all nations and make them my disciples . . ." (Mt 28:19)? The reports from his own lifetime are quite different, however. (p. 150)

"Do not take the road to Gentile lands. . . . Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 10:5– (p. 151)

[W]hen confronted by a local Gentile woman begging a cure, Jesus remarks, "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and to them alone" (Mt 15:24) (p. 151)

"Nothing that goes into a person from the outside can defile him," Jesus says, "because it does not go into his heart but into his stomach" (Mk 7:18 (p. 151)

In Acts, Peter, who cries out to God, "I have never eaten anything that is unclean!" (10:14), has to be reassured by a vision from on high that it is permissible to associate with Gentiles (p. 151)

And later he is publicly accused of transgression by his fellow Christians: “You have been visiting men who are uncircumcised, sitting at table with them” (11:3). And Paul too, as we have seen, encountered the same kind of opposition from Jesus’ immediate followers. It seems, then, highly unlikely that Jesus thought of his message as intended for Gentiles or that he instructed his followers to carry it to any but Jews. (p. 151)

There is no reason, then, that either we or his contemporaries should expect that Muhammad’s career be capped with some divine vindication. He had made no claim to function as a mahdi or eschatological guide; indeed, such a messiahlike figure appears nowhere in the Quran’s various scenarios of the End Time (p. 152)

Muhammad’s Meccan audience had demanded miracles of him (17:90–92). He refused. He was, he insisted, merely a mortal (18:110). The Islamic tradition continues to affirm his mortality, particularly in the face of what are in Muslim eyes the extraordinary Christian claims of divinity for Jesus, who was a prophet—and mortal—as the Quran insists (3:59) and as Muslims freely recognize (p. 154)

One result of this profusion of information about the personal adab of the Prophet is that Islamic behavior has, in addition to an internal moral code and prescriptive regulations regarding behavior, a sense of a particular lifestyle not immediately present in either Judaism or Christianity, both of which prefer epigone models, a Francis of Assisi—whose own appropriation of the Jesus adab proved unsustainable—or one of the Eastern European rebbes who stand behind the Hasidic movement (p. 157)

Politically Muhammad was relentless, even ruthless; pragmatic rather than an ideologue, but unbending on the core values of Islam; thin-skinned to a fault, quick to blame and equally quick to forgive; possessed of piety but the very antithesis of pious; famously uxorious yet married, monogamously, to the same woman for twenty-four years: she the mother of all his surviving children and their only daughters in a society that valued male heirs above all else; excessive in little besides energy and profound conviction; and generous, always generous. (p. 158)

In his defense of the use of religious images against the eighth-century Christian iconoclasts, John of Damascus called them “books for the illiterate” that differed from what was in Scripture only in that they pictured in line and color what the Bible had painted in words (p. 159)

During Muhammad’s lifetime, and for very long thereafter, conversion to Islam followed upon conquest; it never preceded it. Christians, on the other hand, had converted anywhere from 10 percent to 20 percent of the Roman Empire before Constantine became a Christian. Christian missionaries often preceded armies; they leaped across frontiers, worked behind the enemy lines deep in Germany, Central Asia, India, and China. (p. 168)

The often-styled “Constitution of Medina” included in the Ibn Ishaq–Ibn Hisham biography of Muhammad is an example of what is perhaps an authentic preserved document, while the extensive correspondence conducted by Muhammad and various world leaders and reproduced in other biographies is almost certainly all invented. (p. 172)

Jesus was thought by his followers not so much inspired as speaking in his own voice with the authority of God Himself, his “Father in heaven.” The Gospels, on the other hand, were regarded as inspired, written as they were by human hands under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, though how precisely that worked is not clear (p. 173)

Muhammad was regarded as inspired in the sense that what issued from his mouth in the identifiable “revelational mode, probably signaled by some form of cantillation on Muhammad’s part, had come word for word from God through the Angel Gabriel. There was no human agency or conditioning involved in Muhammad’s utterances, and though our Quran, the “copy” (mushaf), is the product of human editing, its contents share the same divine guarantee as the words uttered by the Prophet. (p. 173)

The closest analogue is in the authentic letters of Paul, which are arranged in the New Testament canon in the same order of descending length, though here the chief consideration was fitting them economically on a standard papyrus roll, a mechanical element that does not appear to have been in play in the ordering of the Quran. (p. 174)

Munahhemana in Syriac means, like the Hebrew Menachem, “comforter,” and seems linguistically unrelated to either “Ahmad” or “Muhammad,” whose root meaning (H-M-D) is “praise.” Another possibility is that the Quran, or someone, was familiar with a Gospel text that read at John 14:16, instead of the more usual parakletos , the variant periklytos , which does stand in some manuscripts and might reasonably be rendered as “Ahmad” in Arabic. In any event, Quran 61:6 caused later Muslims, and Ibn Ishaq was not the first, to search out, first in the Gospels and eventually in the entire Bible, predictions of the coming of Muhammad, the “seal of the prophets.” (p. 175)

The implication is clear: a recited Quran is the genuine Quran; the written version is merely a copy. (p. 176)

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to compound the curiosity, the other Jesus sayings source, the Gospel of Thomas, has 114 logoi, the same number as the suras of the Quran. (p. 176)

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery (p. 177)

The spoils of Badr were large enough at any rate to provoke a dispute about their division among the raiders (p. 179)