

# The Bible in Anabaptist Witness among Muslims: The Development and Distribution of *The People of God* Bible Study for Muslims in Eastern Africa

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When they became teenagers, my wife, Grace, and I took our three oldest grandchildren to visit Bumangi, my boyhood home in Tanzania. My parents were the first emissaries of the Gospel among the Zanaki people of Bumangi. Seven hundred people filled the church as the community gathered to greet the great grandchildren of the first missionaries. When there was a pause in the singing of the choirs, Muse danced and sang her way into the middle aisle. She was aged with her body crippled from arthritis. She was among the first to believe in Jesus, seventy-five years ago. As she danced she held high a little tattered booklet for all to see. She sang, "This book tells all about it!" She was holding up the Zanaki translation of the Gospel of Matthew. That was the first book ever written in Zanaki. My father, with a Zanaki colleague, had translated Matthew into the Zanaki language; that mission was my parent's first priority.

In a recent visit to Fungdu University in Shanghai, China, professors impressed upon us their amazement about the rapid growth of the church. They estimated that there are now some 200 million Christians in China. Then we visited Amity Publishing House in Nanjing that is now printing over a million Bibles a month. The availability of Bibles in China is an indispensable contributor to the growth of the church.

Annually Grace and I visit Moldova, where I teach courses on faithful Christian witness among Muslims at the Universitatea Divitia Gratiae (Riches of Grace University). As many as thirty students are in our classes; these students are mostly Muslim-background believers-in-Christ from across Central Asia. Each year I ask, "How did you become a Christian?" Some 80% respond, "Someone gave me a Bible!"

These three vignettes from the African traditional religion of Tanzania, the Maoist neo-Confucianism of China, and the secularist Islam of Central Asia all demonstrate that the Bible in our day is a key contributor to the global interest in Jesus and the Gospel. In this essay I will focus on the Bible in witness among Muslims, but many of the themes I highlight are relevant to other world religions and ideologies as well.

In this essay I give special attention to *The People of God* Bible study course for Muslims that was developed in the 1970s by the Mennonite Board in East Africa. I present the narrative of bearing witness to the message of the Bible in East Africa and Somalia. Working with this Bible study has been a journey of unexpected surprises as well as unexpected challenges. The serendipitous implications for church formation and missiology are considered.

Developing and distributing *The People of God* Bible study in East Africa has relevance for other settings as well where there are possibilities for Muslims to become engaged with the Bible. This is a narrative of praxis describing an attempt to fruitfully introduce the Bible to Muslims, as well as a narrative of missional engagement and challenge. Welcome to *The People of God* journey!

## Muhammad's Request for a Bible Study

Our family had recently arrived in Somalia (1963) when there was a late evening knock on our door. It was illegal to propagate Christianity, so I was surprised when one of my students, Muhammad, stepped into my office and requested, "Please give me a book that explains the Bible message in a simple way for me as a Muslim." I did not know what to give him. So I promised, "I will write that course."

School was closing for vacation break, so I met daily with a couple of Muslim-background believers as we wrote the first drafts of the course. We called the course, *The People of God*. Our goal was to introduce chronologically key vignettes of the biblical narrative. We selected twenty-three episodes, each of which was a "lesson" in the study.

A first guiding principal was to present episodes that the Qur'an alludes to. For example, Noah and the flood are mentioned in the Qur'an, so we developed a chapter on the biblical account of Noah and the flood.

A second principal in selecting episodes was to focus on transforming events that would genuinely surprise the Muslim reader. About the time we were developing the course, a Jewish theologian, Emil Fackenheim, wrote that the essence of biblical revelation is "root experiences" that create an "abiding astonishment."<sup>1</sup> Although we had not yet read Fackenheim, the conviction that we should focus on biblical events that create astonishment was a guiding light.

What are the key biblical events that would plant within the soul of a Muslim reader an abiding astonishment? A Muslim imam would probably say the creation, the saga of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the Messiah. These would be of special interest, for the Qur'an also refers to these events. So we gave those accounts special attention. Based on the Qur'an, the imam would add the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad as a key event. As we developed this course we were well aware that we were writing within a milieu thoroughly influenced by the Qur'an.

## The Bible Cannot Be Scripture

When the students returned from their two-month break, we had the course ready! We mimeographed it; there were 23 lessons. Later we organized the course in four booklets. Muslims loved this course! One reason for the interest was that most lessons were accounts that were referred to in the Qur'an. The Qur'an refers to biblical accounts as parables. So there are allusions to the biblical narratives in the Qur'an, but one needs to go to the Bible for a presentation of the narrative as history.

Although Muslims are intrigued by the biblical accounts, they often are, nevertheless, perplexed by them as well. Why? Ibrahim expressed that perplexity. Like Muhammad had done, Ibrahim also came at night and asked for a Bible. Noting the restrictions we worked with, I asked him to sign a statement that he had voluntarily asked for this Bible.

The next evening Ibrahim returned. He placed the Bible on my desk exclaiming, "This is not the Word of God. It is corrupted scripture. I read the book of Genesis last night, and it is a history book, not scripture. Some of it should not even be mentioned, like Lot getting drunk and impregnating his daughters." He left the Bible on my desk and went out into the night, a very disappointed man.

Ibrahim's comment reveals a most significant divergence between the Qur'anic and biblical views of scripture. Muslims believe that every word in the Qur'an is an exact copy of a heavenly original. The

<sup>1</sup> Emil Fackenheim, *The Presence of God in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 8-14.

Prophet Muhammad is just an instrument through whom the Qur'an flowed. They refer to revelation as *tanzil*, meaning "sent down." Muslims do have their history. That is called *Hadith* or "Traditions." The *Hadith* are especially concerned with descriptions of the way Muhammad acted, for every faithful Muslim wants to emulate Muhammad. But the *Hadith* generally are secondary in authority to the Qur'an. So when Ibrahim read Genesis, from his perspective, that book was a confusing amalgam of revealed instruction and narrative. In Islam the Qur'an is instruction on what we should say, do, and believe. As Muslims look at the Bible, they see both instruction and narrative mixed together.

## Transforming Narratives

Recently I was in Sarajevo and participated in a dialogue with the chief imam in the Muslim university there. In my presentation I mentioned that Christians do not believe that the Bible is a replica of a scripture in heaven, but rather that the Bible is an account of the saving acts of God in history and our response to what God is doing as he calls forth a covenant people who serve in his kingdom. The imam was astonished. He pressed me with urgency to come to the university as soon as possible to share with the whole university that the Bible is the account of God coming down to save us, not a book that is a copy of scriptures inscribed in heaven.

The Sarajevo imam demonstrates that although there is perplexity, for Muslims who choose to read the Bible, it can be exceedingly interesting. They appreciate the narratives! Furthermore, in biblical revelation the narratives are informed by God's acts of coming down and meeting us in our history. The Bible is an account of God's initiative and our response to God. All of that is astonishing, that God would love us so greatly that he has come down in Jesus to meet us and save us and form believers into his covenant people! God's action in Christ is the unifying theme of course.

We used a name for Jesus found in the Qur'an: Jesus the Messiah. There is an aura of mystery surrounding the meaning of the name, Jesus the Messiah. Although the Messiah is a sign to all nations,<sup>2</sup> the Qur'an asserts that the Messiah had a limited mission for a limited period of time only to the house of Israel.<sup>3</sup> From a biblical perspective, however, Jesus the Messiah is much more than that! As a first step in presenting the full identity of Jesus, we commenced with Genesis 3:15 as the first sign of promise that God planned to redeem us when humanity turned away from God. That plan is centered in the life and ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Messiah. We linked Genesis 3:15 with John 3:16.<sup>4</sup>

Within Islam God sends down instruction; within the gospel God comes down. God is the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. Students discovered that redemption is the central theme of the biblical message.

## Exceedingly Chagrined!

Shortly after the first mimeographed copies began to circulate, a Marxist government in Somalia gradually pushed all westerners out of the country. It was not the Muslims who pushed us out of Somalia; it was essentially the Soviets. So we moved to Nairobi, Kenya, and lived in the Somali and Muslim part of the city known as Eastleigh. A team of ten joined with me to further develop the course into a more fruitful witness among Muslims. Working as volunteers on marginal time, we invested four years in that commitment.

All lessons were taken into Muslim communities for their response. For example, one of our respondents was a quite polemical opponent of the presence of the church in his community. I took the

<sup>2</sup> Qur'an 21:91.

<sup>3</sup> Qur'an 13:38.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, C. K. Leaman, *Biblical Theology: Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 71), 65.

course to him asking for his evaluation. After two weeks I returned for his comments. He told me it is an excellent course that accurately communicates the Christian message. He added that there is no distortion of the Qur'an or of Islam in the course. However, he was very agitated about the lesson on the "fall" when Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit.<sup>5</sup> The cleric exclaimed, "This chapter about the fall made me exceedingly chagrined!"

So he helped me rewrite that chapter. We did not use "fall" language. Rather we wrote that in their choice to disobey God, Adam and Eve were turning away from God; all of us know what that is about, for we all participate in turning away. In our personal and corporate decision to turn away from God, we experience death and sinfulness. It was quite amazing, for a cleric who would stand on the street where we lived preaching against Christians, also giving counsel on how to better communicate the gospel. That was significant. However, even more significant was the trust we enjoyed from Muslim leaders as a consequence of discussing *The People of God* with them before we began distribution of the course.

## Connecting with the Muslim Worldview

We appreciate that the Qur'an commands Christians to stand upon their scriptures; in our engagement with Muslims we bear witness that we read these scriptures daily and stand upon them. That confession of commitment to the Bible opened doors as we introduced *The People of God* to Muslims. We grounded the course in those scriptures that the Qur'an especially mentions: the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> However, we also recognize the high regard the Qur'an asserts for the entire Bible.

We developed the course as four booklets. The first is based on the Torah, the second also on the Torah and portions of the Psalms; the third on the Gospel; the last course we based on other holy writings of God. That final course introduces the student to the Book of Acts and several of the New Testament epistles.

The opening statement of book one is a window on the whole philosophy of the course. We write, "The Torah came from God. The Qur'an says that God revealed the Torah and the Gospel. Muslims, Christians, and Jews all believe that the Torah is God's word. For this reason everyone should read the Torah. This course is about the first part of the Torah that is called Genesis."<sup>7</sup>

## Climbing the Ladder

We conceptualized each lesson in the course as a rung in a ladder. The question in preparing each lesson was how far we could go up the ladder without our students falling off the rung. For example, when we wrote the lesson about Noah and the flood, our Muslim-background team members said that this lesson would throw Muslims off the ladder. The rung was too wide-spaced.

The offense was caused by the biblical statement, "the Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled."<sup>8</sup> The implication of this passage is that God is affected by human sinfulness. Our sin causes God grief. In Islam we never affect God. Islam does not present an awareness of a God who grieves because of our sinfulness. The concern was not trivial, for

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:1–24.

<sup>6</sup> The Qur'an specifically mentions several biblical scriptures as being revealed. These are the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel. Muslims generally think of the Gospel as one book known as the *Injil*. For that reason there is perplexity about the four gospels in the New Testament. We explain that Jesus the Messiah is the Gospel, and the four books are witnesses about the One who is the Gospel. We based much of the first portions of *The People of God* upon the scriptures that are especially recognized in the Qur'an. Muslims also refer to the Scrolls of Abraham, but Muslims believe those scriptures have been lost.

<sup>7</sup> D. Shenk, et al, "The Beginning of People," *The People of God*, (Nairobi: The People of God, 1982), 3. There are five books in the Torah. We based the first course on the first book of the Torah, which is Genesis.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 6:6. All Scripture citations are from the New International Version.

the heart of the Gospel is that God is love. Jesus crucified is the ultimate revelation of the suffering love of God. So as we wrote that lesson we sought for a way to present the love of God in an understandable way.

Another example of the ladder approach is the discussion with the cleric about lesson three. In essence he said that the way we described the “fall” had thrown him off the ladder. After he helped us think through how to communicate that lesson, he said, “I still disagree with your theology, but I can now hear what you are saying.”

Developing such a Bible study course for Muslims is in harmony with the Qur’an’s respect for the biblical scriptures. In fact, the Qur’an provides helpful advice to Christians and Muslims on the use of the Christian scriptures. Christians should make their scriptures freely available, and they are commanded not to hide their scriptures.<sup>9</sup> They are not to change their scriptures and are forbidden to write false scriptures.<sup>10</sup> The Qur’an counsels Muhammad to ask any questions he might have of those who are in possession of scriptures written before the time of Muhammad.<sup>11</sup> The Christians are respectfully nicknamed “the People of the Book.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Is the Bible Corrupted?**<sup>13</sup>

However, there are also challenges. Muslims view the Qur’an as the final revelation of scripture that clarifies all previous revelation. In other words Muslims interpret the Christian scriptures through the Qur’an, much like Anabaptists interpret the Bible through Christ. A classic example is the denial of the crucifixion of Jesus within the Qur’an. In the Bible the suffering Messiah who is crucified is an overwhelming theme. Yet Muslims insist that the Messiah was not crucified. The scriptural basis for that denial is the Qur’an. Much like Anabaptists who confess that Jesus has the last word, not Moses, the Muslims say that the Qur’an has the last word, not the Gospel.

Or Muslims might seek to resolve the dilemma of contradictions between the Bible and the Qur’an by dismissing the Bible as having been changed or corrupted. Another reason Muslims might believe the Bible has been changed from the original texts is the reality that the Bible is fundamentally historical narrative. As we have already noted, Muslims have their history; it is the *Hadith*. But *Hadith* as history is generally considered secondary to the Qur’an. So, for a Muslim the Bible seems to be rather irreverent in its intertwining of history and revelation.

Muslims are also often perplexed about the vigorous effort of missionaries to translate the Bible into local vernacular. Muslims believe the Qur’an cannot be translated, for it is an “Arabic” Qur’an. We might have an English version of the Qur’an in our possession, but that book is not Qur’an, for the Qur’an is an exact copy of a heavenly Arabic original. These are core perplexities affecting Muslim reception of the Bible.

### **A Trustworthy Bible**

It is significant that the Qur’an, as such, has a high view of the Bible. As I see it, the Qur’an does not charge that the Bible is a corruption of the original texts. There are warnings to Christians not to change their scriptures, but not an accusation that the Christians have actually tampered with their scriptures. Christians are also commanded to stand upon their scriptures and not misquote the

<sup>9</sup> Qur’an 3:187.

<sup>10</sup> Qur’an 3:78.

<sup>11</sup> Qur’an 10:94.

<sup>12</sup> Qur’an 5:44–47.

<sup>13</sup> For a more complete discussion of the Bible and “corruption” and the realities one faces in comparing the nature of biblical revelation and the Qur’an, see the chapter “The Qur’an—the Bible,” in Shenk, *Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church, Exploring the Mission of Two Communities*, (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 2003), 95–112.

Bible.<sup>14</sup> The Qur'an observes that God would not permit the scriptures to be corrupted. It asserts that the Messiah fulfills the scriptures.<sup>15</sup>

In an effort to address questions about the trustworthiness of the Bible, we developed a booklet on biblical authority to complement *The People of God*.<sup>16</sup> This booklet describes the nature of biblical revelation and the manner in which the Bible was developed. It looks at the manuscript evidence that strongly supports the conviction that the biblical texts are trustworthy transmissions of the original texts. The booklet also looks at texts in the Qur'an as well as the Bible that assert that the biblical texts are trustworthy.<sup>17</sup>

Admittedly some Muslims interpret some verses in the Qur'an in ways that critique the trustworthiness of the biblical texts. That includes texts I have referred to above. For instance, some Muslim scholars will charge that the reason the Qur'an prohibits writing false scripture is because Christians were actually writing fabricated scriptures. All of this is to say that the representation of the Bible in both the Qur'an and the *Hadith*, as well as in Muslim scholarship, deserves much more attention than this brief essay permits. Nevertheless, we are grateful for those many Muslims who are ready to study the Bible for its message; for example, *The People of God* has been received by thousands of Muslims as a study of the trustworthy Bible.

## The Gospel is Astonishing

When the Gospel meets any worldview it is immensely challenging. No ideology or philosophical or religious system can contain the gospel. It breaks open all religious categories. This is why the study of the Bible is immensely challenging to Muslims. The same is true of the Bible in the context of all religions and ideologies. For example, in the Zanaki worldview, which we have referred to above, God is described as the creator who went away and will never return. When Muse stood up in worship time singing that the Gospel of Matthew tells all about it, what was it that the Gospel was telling that she could not find in her traditional religion? Certainly central to the great surprise she was singing about was that God has not gone away and, in fact, has appeared in person in Jesus. In Jesus she saw God revealed as the one who loves so greatly that he gives his life on a cross inviting us to forgiveness and reconciliation!

Some years ago about thirty of us Christians were invited to share our views on the essence of the gospel in a gathering at a mosque in Philadelphia. In ten minutes we described the life, mission, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus.

In response to our presentation the imam said firmly, "It is impossible for God to love that much!" We pled with him, "Let God be God! Let God surprise you by his love! Let God free us from the religious boxes that prevent us from receiving the forgiving, reconciling embrace of Jesus crucified and risen.

Just as the congregation in the mosque was surprised when they heard the Gospel, so also participants who enroll in *The People of God* course are often quite surprised and challenged as they come in touch with the biblical message.

## Empowerment

The availability of the Bible in local vernaculars is empowering in ways that the Arabic Qur'an does not replicate. Lamin Sanneh observes that vernacular translations of the Bible across Africa have empow-

<sup>14</sup> Qur'an 5:68.

<sup>15</sup> Qur'an 5:49

<sup>16</sup> David W. Shenk, *The Holy Book of God: An Introduction* (Achimota, Ghana: AC Press, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> For example, Qur'an 10:64; Psalms 119:89; John 10:35.

ered the emerging church there to critique the missionaries' inclinations to cultural imperialism. In contrast, the Muslim missionary who knows Arabic possesses an authority that the local people who do not know Arabic do not possess.<sup>18</sup>

For example, in Somalia the time came to form a conference of the congregations that had emerged. We needed a leader for the conference. At the meeting to choose our leader, the missionary chairperson tried to explain Robert's Rules of Order.<sup>19</sup> This created total confusion.

Finally the Somalis asked, "Where is Robert's Rules to be found in the Bible? If it is not in the Bible, then why must we follow the practice of the missionaries? We want to choose our leaders in the Somali way." After an overwhelming affirmation, the twenty Somalis stood and all shouted at each other in what seemed to the missionaries to be total bedlam. After several minutes matters quieted down, and a spokesperson stood and informed the gathering that the Holy Spirit had revealed that so and so would be their leader. A contributor to their self-confidence was the availability of the Somali New Testament in the Somali language. The existence of scripture in their vernacular empowered them to critique the cultural imposition of the missionaries, and to take a bold step toward the indigenization of the church as a truly Somali movement.

## Who is Jesus?

As the course developed, we gave special attention to "meaning" in our attempt to explain Christology. There are many words in the Qur'an that are the same as biblical words in regard to the Messiah. Notice the convergence in this selective listing of words that are the same in both scriptures. Jesus is Messiah, born of a virgin, the Word of God, miracle worker, fulfiller of the former scriptures, returning to earth, good news, and without sin.

Yet, when we probe the meaning of these words that seem biblical, we discover that in the Qur'an Jesus is only an apostle, rescued from the cross, returning to prepare for the final judgment by turning the world toward Islam, sent only to Israel for a limited time and limited mission, and prophesied the coming of Muhammad who is the seal of the prophets. So, although Jesus is the Messiah born of the virgin he, nevertheless, has a limited mission only to Israel. We recognize that there are some remarkable convergences between the Qur'an and the Bible in regards to Jesus. Nevertheless, we discover that the overall thrust of the worldview of the Qur'an is to deny the soul of the Gospel, namely the incarnation, life and teachings, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus.

## The Insider Movement

Currently there is much discussion among missiologists and theologians in regard to the so-called "insider movement." This movement grows out of a passionate commitment to bear witness to the Gospel in ways that authentically and understandably contextualize the Gospel within the Muslim worldview. Among these missiologists there is much searching for the way to most effectively communicate the Gospel.

For example, we have mentioned that in the Qur'an that "Jesus is the Messiah." Could it be that Muslims are, therefore, near to or even already within the Jesus-centered movement? Some proponents of the insider movement suggest that Muslim background believers might even remain in the mosque joining Muslims in their ritual prayers, but doing so as confessors that Jesus is the Messiah.

However, those who engage in this conversation discover that "Messiah" in the Qur'an does not have the same meaning as "Messiah" in the Bible. Nevertheless, some missiologists might seek to help

<sup>18</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1989), 211–214.

<sup>19</sup> Robert's Rules of Order are rules for parliamentary procedure that are widely used in westernized societies.

Muslims reinterpret the meaning of the statements in the Qur'an concerning Jesus as the Messiah. Some might exegete "Messiah" in the Qur'an in such a way that the Qur'an seems to be saying the same things about Jesus that the Bible says.

We struggled with this issue. Should we attempt to reinterpret Jesus the Messiah so that the Jesus of the Qur'an converges with the Jesus of the Bible? As writers of *The People of God*, we made a decision that we would not wrench the text of the Qur'an in ways that did not reflect its actual meaning. So when the Qur'an says that Jesus is the Messiah, we explored what that term means in the Qur'an. We did not impose a biblical meaning on the Qur'an.

A very key term in this regard is the qur'anic assertion that Jesus is *Kalimatullah*.<sup>20</sup> That is to say that Jesus is the Word of God. On the face of it, that term seems to mean that the Qur'an accepts John's assertion that "the Word" became flesh.<sup>21</sup> In our eagerness to communicate the Gospel, missionaries might make that assumption. This is to say that we might advocate that Jesus as *Kalimatullah* and Jesus as the Word in John 1:14 are essentially the same.

However, when we examine the Qur'an we discover that is not its intent, for it clarifies that Jesus as *Kalimatullah* means that God spoke and Jesus was miraculously created in the womb of the virgin, just as God spoke and thereby created Adam.<sup>22</sup> This is creation theology, not incarnation theology!

Yet we do reach for a possible connection here. As I pondered Jesus as the Messiah in John 1:1-14 and Jesus as the Word in Islam, I sometimes lay awake in my bed at night, considering how to move forward in explaining the incarnation in a way that would be faithful to the Bible, understandable to Muslims, and would not press the Qur'an into a biblical mold that is untrue to its meaning.

In the Qur'an God creates the Messiah through his Word. Within the Bible the Messiah is the incarnation of the eternal Word of God. We acknowledged that John 1:1-4 is uniquely God's revelation. Although the Word in Islam and the Word in the Gospel might seem to converge, in reality they do not converge. Did the Word create Christ or has the Word become human in Christ? The Gospel and Islam give radically different answers to that question. And the response to the question is not trivial; these different understandings of the essence of the Messiah reveal the essence of God's relationship with humanity.

## The Son of God

The question persists, "Who is Jesus?"

On a rattling, over-crowded bus in Somalia, a passenger at the front shouted to the back where our family sat tightly crowded. "You are a Christian," he shouted. "That means you believe God has a wife and a son!"

As in the bus that day, the questions about Jesus are quite often far more intense than quiet parlor conversation over a cup of tea. One reason the questions persist is because Muslims often interpret the Qur'an to be saying that Christians believe God had a consort who bore a son. The assumptions of the passenger in the bus are widespread. The Qur'an commands Christians to desist from any such ideas.<sup>23</sup> We agree with that warning! We make it clear that we are not polytheists who believe in God the Father, God the Mother, and God the Son.

<sup>20</sup> Qur'an 4:171.

<sup>21</sup> John 1:1-14.

<sup>22</sup> Qur'an 3:59.

What, then, do Christians mean by confessing that Jesus is the Son of God? Several years ago in an overflow gathering in the Central London Mosque I was asked that question. I will describe how I responded, which is in line with the way we expressed our confession that Jesus is the Son of God in *The People of God*. I said,

The Son of God is the name God himself gave to the Messiah. When the angel Gabriel announced the coming birth of the Messiah to the Virgin Mary, Gabriel said, “He will be called the Son of God.”<sup>24</sup> Then twice in the ministry of the Messiah God spoke from heaven, declaring, “This is my beloved Son.”<sup>25</sup> This proclamation happened at the time when Jesus was baptized, and when he was on a mount with several of his disciples amidst a brilliant appearance of Elijah and Moses. So the name Son of God is given to Jesus the Messiah by God! What does God mean when he declares that the Messiah is his beloved Son?

There is a statement in the Qur’an that might be a hint as to what it means to say that Jesus is the Son of God. In the Qur’an we read that Jesus the Messiah is *Kalimatullah*. It seems to me that what Muslims mean by saying Jesus is *Kalimatullah* is that God spoke and Jesus was created in the womb of the virgin just as God spoke and Adam was created. Is that what you mean?

There was vigorous nodding of assent, and I thanked them for this clarification. Then I went on to say,

Tonight I want to explain what the Bible means when we read that the Messiah is *Kalimatullah*. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Apostle John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.”<sup>26</sup> “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>27</sup>

This means that Jesus is truly *Kalimatullah*.<sup>28</sup> He is the Word from heaven. He is the Gospel. Jesus did not bring a book. Rather he is the life-giving revelation of the Word of God in fullness.

When we open the Bible to the first four books of the New Testament that Muslims call the *Injil*, we see the gospel according to Matthew, and then we see Mark, Luke, and John. These writers were very acquainted with the accounts of Jesus the Messiah. God appointed them to be trustworthy witnesses of the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah. If you go to a court, and there is only one witness, the matter will not be established. But if you have four witnesses, the matter is established. God wanted us to know the Messiah in his fullness, and hence he arranged for these four witnesses to describe the life and ministry of the Messiah who is the living Word of God.

There is a second dimension of Jesus as the Son of God. He had a perfect relationship with God. Jesus said, “I and the Father are one.” “When you have seen me you have seen the Father.” “All that the Father wants me to do, I do.”<sup>29</sup>

When we believe in Jesus the Messiah, we are invited into the family of God. We become God’s adopted daughters and sons. This is why believers in the Messiah, pray, “Our Father who is in heaven!” So Jesus is *the* Son. However all his disciples are also sons and daughters of God. We know God as loving heavenly Father.

<sup>23</sup> Qur’an 5:75; 6:100–1.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 1:35.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 3:22; 9:35.

<sup>26</sup> John 1:1–5.

<sup>27</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>28</sup> Qur’an 4:171.

<sup>29</sup> John 14:8–10.

The positive reception in that crowded mosque was remarkable. My impression is that this was the first time that congregation had heard the meaning of Jesus as the Son of God. They were quite astonished that Jesus as Son of God means that God is love.

Some years ago several dozen of us Christians were guests in a mosque in Philadelphia. The Muslim congregation invited us to explain the meaning of Jesus as the Son of God. We shared as we have just described. The leader of the mosque exclaimed, “So, Son of God means that Jesus is the Word! In that case I could become a Christian!” On another occasion theologians from Mecca were intrigued by the description in John 1:1–14 of Jesus as the Son of God. They exclaimed, “We wish all the theologians in Mecca could hear this essence of the Christian understanding of God.”

## **The Role of the Qur’an?**

I am completing this essay in Moldova, teaching Central Asians, whom I have alluded to in the introduction. The Bible has been prominent in the journey to Christ for most of the participants in my classes.

However, another theme has also been prominent in some of their stories. That is the Qur’an. A number of students have mentioned that a significant influence in their journey to Christ has been the teaching of the imams that there are other scriptures beyond the Qur’an that are also revealed from God. Also important has been a high view of Jesus in some passages in the Qur’an, as for example, the passage that says Jesus is a sign to all nations.

Hearing these testimonials of the role of the Qur’an in the coming to faith of some of these students suggests that more attention be given to signs pointing to Christ within the Qur’an, and probably within other religions as well. These testimonials are an affirmation of the approaches developed in the *People of God*, where we occasionally used the Qur’an as a bridge to the biblical message. We do this recognizing, however, that the Qur’an can also detract from the Gospel. The Qur’an does not always lead people to Christ!

However, that was not the experience of my friend, Ahmed Ali Haile. He was a devout Muslim, who after his conversion to Christ became one of the team members who helped to develop *The People of God*. Later, as a university teacher in Mogadishu he used the *People of God* in outreach to students.

Ahmed occasionally commented, “Islam is not the Gospel. But how can I speak critically of the Qur’an when it is that book that planted in my soul a quest for the Bible and a curiosity about Christ?”<sup>30</sup>

## **Launching the Bible Study**

Developing *The People of God* Bible study was an exercise in careful contextual communication with strategies for distribution and follow-up. More significantly, however, was the substantive theological and missiological engagement. For participants engagement in developing this course formed us deeply. There is something about engagement with Muslims that opens fresh understandings of the essence of the Gospel; perhaps that happens especially because whenever Muslims and Christians meet at the faith level, we discover the ongoing reality of convergence and divergence. We are so close, yet so far apart.

After four years of development and testing, we were finally ready to begin circulating *The People of God* as a Bible study especially prepared for Muslims. We decided to use it as a correspondence

<sup>30</sup> Ahmed Ali Haile as told to David W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu, My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam* (Harrisonburg: Herald, 2011), 23–27.

course. We printed a brochure introducing the course as a study prepared for people who were acquainted with the Qur'an. To begin we offered only the first course based upon the book of Genesis. We advertised this first course as being based upon the first part of the Torah of the Prophet Moses. We did not refer to the Bible in the first course, preferring to use the names for scripture that Muslims are most acquainted with. That is why we found "Torah" (*Taurat*, in Arabic) preferable to "Bible."

As mentioned earlier, the first course in this four-course series is based upon Genesis. In the brochure introducing the course we listed the different prophets or biblical characters that they would meet in the course: Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Jacob.

As the course developed we engaged translators for translation of the course material into Swahili and Somali. So when we were ready to begin distribution we engaged several young people to take the brochures into communities where Muslims lived, and to give them to interested people. The distributor might sit in a tea shop and, as persons sat down at his table the conversation would develop:

"Have you heard of the Torah of Moses?"

"Indeed I have; in fact all true Muslims believe the Torah came from God."

"That is so true, and I enjoy reading the accounts of prophets in the Torah."

"That is interesting. How did you find the Torah?"

"Well there is a print house in Nairobi that prints the Torah, and in fact if you are interested, I can give you a free copy of the first part of the Torah as well as some lessons that go with it."

When people requested the material, we would tuck several brochures in an envelope with a letter inviting them to introduce the course to their friends who know the Qur'an. So very quickly the distribution of the course shifted from our team to Muslims across Kenya who were enrolling in the course and finding it interesting. As the English version began circulating we launched the Swahili and Somali translations as well. The president of the Bible Society was the chairperson of Mennonite World Conference. He was enthusiastic about this ministry and so the Bible Society provided the funds for publishing the scriptures needed for all three languages.

Within a year a thousand students had enrolled. Eighty percent who enrolled went through all four booklets. We kept the course focused on Muslims in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. If a person applied for the course who had a Christian name, we would divert them to one of the other Bible correspondence courses in East Africa, such as the Navigators program. We wanted *The People of God* to be available especially for Muslims.

*The People of God* introduces Muslims to the broad sweep of the biblical narrative. The unifying theme through the course is the Messiah and his saving mission. Jesus the Messiah is an intriguing mystery for many Muslims. What does it mean for Jesus to be Messiah? The Qur'an says it means he had a limited mission. Yet the Qur'an also says he is a sign to all nations. That is a puzzle! So in various ways each lesson is a step-by-step unfolding of the Messianic mystery. The concluding lesson of course four is an invitation to faith in the Messiah and his saving grace. Introducing Jesus the Messiah is the purpose of *The People of God*.

As people studied the scriptures, read the commentary, and worked through the questions for each lesson, many came to faith in the Messiah. In Nairobi some new believers formed a fellowship. There were baptisms. The same was happening in Somalia.

## **Meeting Those Responsible for Developing the Course**

Then questions emerged. People wrote, "We do not know if the course is good, because we have not met the persons who are handling the course." One of the first persons to use the course came to

faith in Christ. After her conversion she became a river of joy, and besought us for a way to help distribute this course that had introduced her to Jesus Christ. She therefore joined our team.

We also shifted the location of *The People of God* course to one of the most congested Muslim areas of Nairobi. It was administered within the Eastleigh Fellowship Center which was an Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) community center touching hundreds of Muslims a week. So the course was not an outside intervention, as it were; it was administered and distributed right within a key activity crossroads of the Somali people of Eastern Africa. People passing through could stop in and meet the person handling the course.

We determined to make the identity of the agency handling the course completely open. Our conviction was that offering the course as a secretive movement would only raise suspicions. So the second names of the eleven people who were engaged in writing the course are included, and the church agencies who worked with EMM are mentioned. The address is, of course, public knowledge for most of the lessons were sent back and forth through the mail.

The Nairobi Mennonite Church meets within the Eastleigh Fellowship Center. For forty years multi-ethnic communities of Christians have functioned within the Eastleigh Fellowship Center. That center is a “see and tell” revelation of the presence of the Messiah and his kingdom within this crossroads of Muslim people. Somalis are always on the move. A thousand miles from Eastleigh, Somali Muslims know about the center and its variegated ministries. *The People of God* Bible study emanates from the Fellowship Center and is closely related to the Nairobi Mennonite Church.

Paul writes to the Corinthian Church, “you are a letter from Christ” that is “known and read by everybody.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed through *The People of God* we were making the written word of God available, but our presence in Eastleigh was an incarnation of the presence of the living word of God.

## Developing Firm Foundations

Some of our team gave attention to Bible studies for those who had completed *The People of God* studies. That took us to the book of Hebrews. Why? The form of Islam that we met in Eastleigh was known as *sufi*. In fact, the mosque on our street was a *sufi* mosque. The *sufis* are Muslims who value intercession as a means to bring them into a relationship with God and lead them into forgiveness of sins.

*Sufism* is considered to be a quite heretical form of Islam by modernist and Islamist Muslims.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, across East Africa and Somalia *sufi* spirituality permeated all Muslim communities. *Sufis* were especially committed to the veneration of deceased saints who they believed served as intercessors between the Muslim community and God. Conservative Muslims objected to the veneration of saints as intercessors. However, the *sufis* clung to a key verse in the Qur’an that declares there is no intercessor *unless* God has appointed the intercessor.<sup>33</sup> Some influential Muslim theologians worry about who the intercessors might be whom God has appointed. Others insist there can be no intercessors.

Imagine the amazement for a *sufi* Muslim who discovers in the book of Hebrews that God declares that the Messiah is chosen to be an intercessor forever. Why? The Messiah is without sin; he has lived among us; he is the sacrifice for the sins of the world; he is risen from the dead and lives forever; he is appointed by God to be our intercessor forever. The theological themes of Hebrews are powerfully relevant and attractive to Muslims, and especially relevant to the *sufis*.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:3, 2.

<sup>32</sup> By modernist I am referring to secularist and pluralist Muslims and by Islamist I am referring to purist Muslims who seek to go back to their idealized views of Muslim practice at the time of Muhammad.

For Ahmed Ali Haile it was the book of Philippians that turned his world upside down. He came to faith in the Messiah in Somalia before *The People of God* was developed. But after his conversion, he joined with the team who were writing that course. When we left Somalia for Kenya, Ahmed shortly left as well. He not only joined *The People of God* writing team, but also immersed himself in serious study of the Bible. We arranged for him to attend a one-week youth retreat in which the book of Philippians was explored. After reading Philippians 2, Ahmed's worldview was revolutionized in a way that transformed him for a lifetime of ministry as a Christ-centered peacemaker.<sup>35</sup> Ahmed's experience of God was transformed for in this Philippians passage he met God as the suffering servant who participates in our sufferings and who gives his life for our salvation.<sup>36</sup> In Islam God never comes down to serve us and never suffers with us or because of us. It became clear to Ahmed that Islam and the Gospel cannot be reconciled. He needed to choose between Jesus and Islam. He chose Jesus, and the peace theology he developed in the following years was grounded in that paradigm revolution.

When a student commits to the Messiah, the church needs to step forward and work with the Holy Spirit to lay firm foundations. That was the purpose of the further studies that we developed, first in Somalia with the early beginnings of *The People of God* as a mimeographed Bible study, and then relating to the developing fellowship in Kenya.

We developed several Bible studies especially related to key implications of Christian faith meeting the Muslim worldview. There was a keenly felt need for such studies, so we developed a seminar especially for Muslim-background believers on the intersection of the Gospel and Islam. Muslims sometimes joined in sessions as we worked at the challenges dialogically.

Our conviction was that it was vitally important to not only lead a person into faith, but also to provide a spiritual home within the fellowship of the church. For a number of believers the Eastleigh Fellowship Center and the developing fellowship of believers provided that spiritual home. Moreover the seminars provided theological foundations.

We grieve that in recent years jihadist Islam has become active in Eastleigh. Consequently believers have to meet in other areas of the city. Likewise the fellowship of believers in Mogadishu have scattered. Remarkably the distribution of the course continues from *The People of God* office in Eastleigh.

## Extending around the World

We launched *The People of God* in Eastern Africa in 1977. Very quickly other church and mission agencies became interested in using this resource in their outreach among Muslims. According to our records, over the years the course has been translated or published in some 45 languages. In the last decade it has expanded, with quite a number of radio broadcasts using *The People of God*. A supplementary development is a multi-lingual half-hour broadcast that builds upon the course. This broadcast is called *Fifty-Two Questions that Muslims ask Christians*, with answers by the wise sage. It is aired mostly within Central Asia.

As far as we know there have been no objections to *The People of God* from Muslims, except for a warning years ago in a Central Asian country that there is a course circulating that seems to be Muslim, but in reality is Christian. The news article then described what the Christian message was so that people could identify it as Christian.

<sup>33</sup> Qur'an 2:55.

<sup>34</sup> See Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:21-28.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed 49-51.

<sup>36</sup> Philippians 2:5:11.

At the end of the four-booklet study there are written questions in regard to the student's faith response. A significant number state that the course has led them into an appreciation and commitment to Jesus the Messiah. The great weakness in our ministry is inadequate follow-up, and helping those who have made a commitment to Christ to find a church home. For some years we had a full-time staff member working at that kind of follow-up. At present that dimension of the ministry is languishing.

The most fruitful use of the course is in home Bible studies in which a Christian teacher meets with a Muslim and they walk through it together, lesson by lesson. An especially fruitful use of the course has been in South East Asia. There, a pastor strolls through a market with a pouch in which he has the course booklets with the scripture portions. He meets someone ready to chat, and over a cup of tea he asks if his tea-drinking companion has ever read the Torah of Moses. After giving his companion the booklet and scripture, they promise to chat about it when they next meet. Two weeks later, the Christian is back in the market and sights his companion. They sit for another tea and discussion about what the recipient has read. The pastor gives his tea-drinking friend the next course and they agree to meet again in a couple weeks. In this manner this pastor has led hundreds to faith in Christ, and in fact started some home group fellowships of believers.

### **A Surprise in Singapore**

Some years ago I was in Singapore and mentioned *The People of God* in a seminar I was teaching. A man stood at the back of the room and waved his hands. He exclaimed, "I am here because of that course. I am from Lahore. A Christian gave me *The People of God* Bible study. Jesus met me as I studied God's Word as explained in that Bible study!"

When Ibrahim entered our home many years ago asking for a simple study of God's Word written especially for Muslims, I never imagined how God would prosper our "yes" to that request!

## For Further Reading

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