

The early Christians and circumcision?

How did the early Christians come to believe that gentiles did not need to be circumcised?

For us today it seems obvious but in those times they believed that the Law was given by God and it was a clear requirement of the law. We still believe that.

Circumcision, along with food laws and Sabbath, were special kind of markers that marked out who God's people were. Circumcision is talked of as a sign of the covenant.

Early on, for example with Cornelius, the Holy Spirit came to dwell in him and his household after they heard the message, believed and were baptised.

Now if God's Spirit dwells in someone how can it be said that they are not part of God's family. They must be.

If they are part of God's family without circumcision, there is no need for them to be circumcised. The Spirit is already a marker of their position. To have them circumcised as well implies that circumcision is a more important marker than the Spirit of God. To say that is actually approaching the blasphemous.

This makes sense as God's long term plan was to bring the nations to follow him. Abraham, and then his family, is often seen as God's plan B after Adam failed.

What does that mean about the law. Jesus as the Messiah, the King, represents his people. What is true of him is true of his people. When David fought Goliath he represented Israel.

His victory meant a victory for Israel.

Now when Jesus died and rose again in a sense his people have died and risen again and they now dwell in a new age.

If Jesus death is linked to the exodus. Then the appropriate accompanying law must be linked to Pentecost and the giving of the Spirit. Thus the guidance for this new age is the Holy Spirit and also what the apostles, teachers and prophets wrote early on, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Overview of Romans

Romans 1

The gospel reveals the covenant justice of God.

God has come to put the world to rights.

The good news is about God's Son, and power is released when Jesus, the Crucified One, Israel's Messiah, raised from the dead is proclaimed Lord of the World.

Deuteronomy 27-30 and Daniel 9 speak about God's anger and punishment as being part of his covenant justice, God's hostility to idolatry.

God is coming to judge the world – Psalm 96, 98.

Romans 2

The Jew is the answer to the problem of sin in the world. However, Israel's vocation went wrong.

All humans have sinned ... What is God going to do about it?

He granted promises to Israel ... How is God going to be

faithful to those promises?

Genesis 15 is in Paul's mind.

Rom 5

Reconciliation through the work of Jesus. Peace, reconciliation, the love of God.

Renewal of humanity – Genesis 1. When humans are redeemed creation is set free from its slavery.

Glory – rule over creation

– the divine presence returning

Rom 6,7,8

Holy spirit reveals glory in human lives.

Romans 6,7,8 parallel the Exodus.

6 Slaves going through the water/ baptism

7 Mount Sinai / the Law

8 God dwells in the Tabernacle, leads as a pillar of cloud / Spirit

Led to promised land / Renewal of creation

Jesus shaped, spirit driven?

At end of paragraph after paragraph we read “through Jesus the Messiah”, or “in Jesus...”

Through – to do with the human being Jesus Christ

In Christ – who we are as his people.

Purpose of the law – to draw sin into one place and let it be dealt with there.

Love of God – Covenant Love of God. Because of Love longs to do justice. Because of Love, does justice.

God does justice on the cross.

Romans 12-16

Doctrine of ethics. Follows through from 3-4 in the new humanity.

The world was divided into slave and free, class. In the new age there are none of these divisions.

Should we reject the Gospels because of contradictions?

In a recent debate in Bradford (Mar 2012) between a Muslim and a Christian over the question of who Jesus was, the Muslim speaker simply read through a list of 'contradictions' in the Bible, mainly from the gospels, with no analysis – and then said that this proved the Bible was unreliable, and so should not be listened to. Moreover, that the Qur'an as perfect should be believed instead.

In this post I will argue that nit picking the Gospels for contradictions and then considering them unreliable and

accepting the Qur'an instead is at best naive and at worst completely ridiculous.

This essay will go as follows: Bible large picture; Qur'an larger picture; Qur'an smaller picture and finally Bible smaller picture.

Bible Large Picture

One of the strengths of the Bible's witness is numbers. There are many different books, written by many different people over a long period of time which give a consistent message – for example the fact that God chose the people of Israel, the importance of sacrifices, prophecy and fulfilment of the Messiah etc. From Moses approx 1200 – 1400 BC to Paul (50-65AD), Peter, John etc. There is fulfilled prophecy – for example prophecy about Jesus – his birth in Bethlehem, born of a virgin (Isa 7), would set people free (Isa 41), would suffer (Isa 53), would cleanse the temple, would die with sinners, would rise again. Also prophecies about the giving of the Holy Spirit and a new law.

Qur'an Large Picture

In contrast the Qur'an claims that there were 120,000 prophets, including Jesus, who preached a message like Muhammad. But where are they? It is very clear that the Bible is incompatible with the Qur'an for several reasons. Take language for example, it is clear in the Qur'an that Arabic is the language of heaven. In that case why in the Bible does God make it clear again and again that he has chosen Israel, (Hebrew speaking people) out of all the nations of the earth. In the New Testament it is clearly portrayed that Jesus is divine and that salvation is found through repentance and faith in Christ. In contrast the Qur'an preaches that people will be saved if their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds.

Islam has had to adopt almost cult like beliefs to save face: Muhammad was the last prophet and preached the original truth, however the fact that no-one before Muhammad is recorded as

giving a similar message is because it got lost – that is why Muhammad had to come. Sounds reasonable till you realise that every single cult says almost exactly the same thing.

Qur'an Small Picture

So from a big perspective Islam looks suspicious. What about on a small scale. Can we say that the Qur'an looks like it came from God and so ignore the problems on the large scale. Well if we look at the Qur'an we find that a lot of material that supposedly came from heaven looks like it has been copied. For example the Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus appears with a few modifications in Sura 18:9-26. Also many Jewish stories from the Mishnah including the murder of Abel (Surah 5:27-32; Mishnah Sanhedrin, 4:5) are copied into the Qur'an as the word of God. Also, some claims that the Qur'an contains incredible information about embryology fall flat on their face when one realises that Muhammad is simply passing on what ancient scientists such as Galen (130 – 210 AD) wrote hundreds of years previously. On top of this the Qur'an itself refers to frequent accusations of copying made against Muhammad by his peers Suras 6:25; 8:31; 16:24; 23:83; 25:5; 27:68; 46:17; 68:15; and, 83:13.

Regarding contradictions, there are many claims that could be made against the Qur'an. If you look at a Muslim site e.g. <https://sites.google.com/site/muslimanswers/Home/contradictions>

that answers contradictions you will see they bend over backwards to fit accounts together, but when it comes to the Bible do Muslims generally adopt a sympathetic attitude..

Was Pharaoh drowned:

Drowned?

17:102-3

I deem thee lost, O Pharaoh. And he wished to scare them from the land, but We drowned him and those with him, all together.

Not drowned?

10:90-92

Pharaoh ... when the (fate of) drowning overtook him, he exclaimed: I believe that there is no God save Him in Whom the Children of Israel believe ... But this day We save thee in thy body that thou mayst be a portent for those after thee. Lo! most of mankind are heedless of Our portents.

Answer?: Pharaoh was drowned but his body was preserved as a sign for mankind.

How should Jews and Christians be treated?

With forgiveness

2:109

Many of the people of the Scripture long to make you disbelievers... Forgive and be indulgent (toward them) until Allah give command.

with fighting

9:29

Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah.

Who was the first Muslim?

Abraham/Jacob

2:132

The same did Abraham enjoin upon his sons, and also Jacob, (saying): O my sons! Lo! Allah hath chosen for you the (true) religion; therefore die not save as men who have surrendered (unto Him).

Moses

7:143

And Moses fell down senseless. And when he woke he said: Glory unto Thee! I turn unto Thee repentant, and I am the first of (true) believers.

Muhammad

39:12

And I [Muhammad] am commanded to be the first of those who are muslims (surrender unto Him).

Answer?: Each prophet is the first from among his followers. He is the one leading them to the true believe in God.

Will all Jews and Christians go to hell?

Yes

3:85

Whoso seeketh as religion other than the Surrender (to Allah) it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter.

No

2:62

Those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans – whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right – surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.

And then what about abrogation, e.g. alcohol:

“It went through three stages: from being ok but not recommended, to being prohibited near and during prayer time, to being totally forbidden. The three are all still mentioned in the Quran.”

Another VERY serious problem with believing the Qur'an is that according to an Islamic view the Qur'an is the final and best revelation. However, it seems pretty clear that the vision of God, view of heaven and moral code preached by Jesus and the apostles by the power of the Holy spirit was infinitely superior to that preached by Muhammad even though it came 600 years previously. The god of the Bible is living – he loves sinners and seeks to save them, Allah only loves believers, i.e. those who live him – hardly mature; the view of heaven is pure in the Bible, the perfection of creation and God living

with his people; the Quranic view is basically an orgy. The moral code of Jesus found in the sermon on the mount and elsewhere is far deeper and purer than anything in the Qur'an.

If Islam was the true religion what would we expect:

- material preserved from the 120,000 prophets that coincides with Muhammad's revelation.

-God speaking to the arabs through prophets before Muhammad.

-that the Torah and Injil are in agreement too.

-early evidence that Jesus spoke what he was supposed to.

-that the Qur'an gives a higher view of God, heaven and moral behaviour.

So should we ignore the fact that the 120,000 prophets have vanished with no trace; that there is no evidence for a Torah or Injil that is in agreement with the Qur'an; that there is no early evidence that Jesus preached pure 'Islamic' Monotheism as Islam claims and that the final revelation of Muhammad is vastly inferior to that of Jesus? Should we ignore contradictions in the Qur'an and explain them away by bending over backwards? Should we ignore all this and then reject the Bible because some bits look as though they contradict each other? Shall we say they are contradictions, making no effort to consider context or what we have done to ignore contradictions in the Qur'an? NO.

Islam does not fit the evidence and does not fit history.

Bible Small Picture

The whole of the argument put forth by the Muslim in the debate was that there are two options either the Gospels are perfectly logically coherent or else they are completely corrupted and should be ignored. This is a very naive view which ignores a very viable alternative option – that the Gospels present a picture of Jesus that is accurate and reliable. Not perfect but accurate. And they do. All the

gospels hint very strongly at Jesus divinity. His message of deeper moral purity, non-violence, discipleship. His death and resurrection.

Is the Gospel of John Historical?

These are a few preliminary thoughts for an essay I will shortly write.

Q. John's portrayal of Jesus is so different to that in the Synoptics that some scholars have no confidence in its historicity. Discuss.

Differences in accounts do not imply that one source is more historical than another. For example a newspaper account written shortly after a major event will be very different than an academic work written 30 years or maybe even hundreds of years later. Take for example the shooting of the Arch Duke Ferdinand in 1914. Immediately after the event it would have been a sad affair for Austria-Hungary, but would have had little impact on England and certainly very little impact on America. And yet within days and then years it had a massive impact. A newspaper article would have been concerned with all the details of the events and questions of who did it and why. An academic account appearing much later would almost certainly consider the wider picture – the consequences, the part that this incident played in a much wider stage. The newspaper article would be more concerned with detail, the

latter with interpretation. In this article I want to consider what differences there are – style, content etc – and whether this implies lack of historicity or is due to another reason.

I want to consider what parts of John can definitely said to be non-historical, what parts are definitely historical and what we are unsure about.

Then I will make an overall assessment about whether John should be dismissed as non-historical.

The Deity of Jesus in the Synoptics

I am involved with quite a bit of debate with Muslims in the Bradford area which I really enjoy. One accusation that is frequently asserted is that Jesus did not claim to be God. Now the most explicit answer would be to redirect the reader to John 8:58 “Before Abraham was born I am.” The “I am” identical to the name given by God when he revealed himself to Moses (Ex 3:14). However, I find this a slightly uneasy answer as John’s gospel is very different from Matthew, Mark and Luke – known as the synoptics. It is generally accepted that John contains theological reflections – some things that Jesus may not have

said but are a theological explanation of what he said and did. This then raises the question of whether John interpreted Jesus correctly.

In response to this I looked at the term Son of God in the synoptics. This comes up again and again in the synoptics. Below is a sample from the :

1. In Mark 1:1 (the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.)
2. The Angel Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35)
3. When Jesus is about 12 he speaks of the Temple as his Father's house (Luke 2:49)
4. At Jesus' baptism God calls him his Son (Mat 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22)
5. The Devil tempts him to try to prove he is the Son of God, Jesus does not deny it. (Mat 4:3; Lk 4:3)
6. The demons called him the Son of God (Mat 8:28; Mk 3:11; Lk 4:41)
7. His disciples called him the Son of God (after he calmed the storm (Mt 14:33) and at Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:16))
8. He acknowledged he was the Son of God at his trial (Mt 26:64; Mk 14:61)
9. On the cross some bystanders act as if he had claimed to be the Son of God (Mt 27:40)
10. The centurion says that he is the Son of God (Mt 27:54; Mk 15:39)

Does this prove that Jesus is the Son of God? Well it may do. However, the term Son of God is used in the Old Testament to refer to God's appointed king (Ps 2:7). Are the gospel writers simply saying that Jesus is The King of the Jews? In some cases this may be acceptable, though I think it would be a bit cheeky to write off all of these instances with that

explanation, especially at Jesus' trial. Claiming to be a king would not be heresy; claiming to be divine and equal with God would be heresy.

In an interesting article Daniel Doriani [JETS 37/3 (September 1994) 333 – 350] mentions 12 implicit acts that Jesus did in the synoptics that prove that he was the Son of God.

1. He claimed the right to judge mankind (Mt 7:22-23)
2. He claimed the right to forgive sins (Luke 5:17-26)
3. He claimed the right to grant eternal life (Mark 10:17-21; Matt 19:16-21; Luke 18:18-22)
4. He declared that his presence was God's presence as well as the presence of God's kingdom (Matt 12:6; 18:20; 28:18)
5. He declared that the attitude people took toward him would determine their eternal destiny (Matt 7:21-27; 10:32-33)
6. He identified his actions with God's actions (Matt 10:40; Mark 9:37).
7. He taught the truth on his own authority (Matt 5:18;
8. 6:2; 18:3; Luke 13:35)
9. He performed miracles on his own authority (Matt 8:2-3).
10. He appeared to receive worship or obeisance (Mark 5:27, 33;
11. Luke 5:8).
12. He assumed that his life was a pattern for others (e.g. Matt 16:21-26, Luke 8:19-21).
13. He applied to himself Old Testament texts that describe God (Mt 21:15-16)
14. In several parables he indirectly identified himself with a father or king who represents God (Lk 15:3-32).

For a more in-depth analysis of each of these points read the original article which is here:

http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/37/37-3/JETS_37-3_333-350_Doriani.pdf