

# Dear Abdallah

## Letters from Theophilus

Gerhard Nehls

*This is an imaginative exchange of letters addressing issues that concern Muslims and Christians alike.*

*The name "Abdallah" is Arabic and means "Servant of God". The writer is called Theophilus; this is a Biblical name meaning "Loved by God".*

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# Dear Abdallah

## *First Letter*

### **We all sit in the same boat**

Dear Abdallah

I write this letter to tell you how glad I am to have met you. It does not seem to happen all that often that a Muslim and a Christian meet in a manner as we did. We discovered a lot of common ground while not pretending that there is no disparity. We are both aware of the differences between our faiths - and the need to think them through. Our pledge that our conversation should take place in a friendly spirit, appropriate for the topic, I consider something quite beautiful. All to the honour of God!

It is good to realise that both of us have very similar hopes and expectations of life. What intrigued me in particular was our perception of an Almighty God. While our understanding of religious dogma may differ, our affinity, affection and intuitive consciousness of God are remarkably similar. To me it means that basically mankind must have an innate knowledge of God, which He planted into our 'hearts'.

Probably linked to that, and highly significant to me, is the fact that both of us were acutely aware of our need of a pure heart in the sight of God. This is of special

significance as Jesus once said that only those who have a pure heart will see God (Matthew 5:8).

This reminds me of the Word, which says:

*“Be obedient to God, and do not allow your lives to be shaped by those desires you had when you were still ignorant. Instead, be holy in all that you do, just as God who called you is holy” (1 Peter 1:14, 15).*

*“Pursue holiness, because no one will see the Lord without it” (Hebrews 12:14).*

I am sure we are all too conscious of our lack of inward purity. Our thoughts and actions are all too often rather

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unholy. I suppose deep down

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in our hearts we are aware of the spiritual lack caused by our imperfections, even if we follow our respective religious rules. Every confrontation with death creates

in us troublesome questions, which cause our fear of death – or perhaps rather fear of what comes after death. One might ‘enjoy’ a fairly good life in an atmosphere where God is absent, but ultimately the certainty of death spoils it all, for we are all aware that, as the Bible puts it:

*“ . . . it is appointed to man once to die - and after that is the judgement” (Hebrews 9:27).*

Thus all mankind is in the same boat. All fall short of God’s standard, be it in thought, word and even deed.

Is it not interesting to note in this context that every religion follows ritual practices, which signify cleansing? They are essentially no more than symbolic tokens and obviously do not really affect anything by themselves. While we may clean our bodies by such rituals on the

outside, we are well aware that water can never wash away sin and by that create a clean heart!

Jesus once made a very remarkable statement when confronted about the ritual washing of hands before meals:

*“Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean’. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’” (Matthew 15:17-20).*

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**Is it not interesting to note in this context that every religion follows ritual practices, which signify cleansing?**

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Rituals are really no more than a reminder of our need for purification - because we know that we are impure.

After having committed a particularly ugly sin, David expressed his longing beautifully in one of his Psalms:

*“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned . . . Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God.”*

*(Psalm 51:2 - 4, 9 - 10).*

I’m sure we both agree and are touched by this. Yet on many other topics we are not likely to agree. In conversations with spiritual contents it is natural to argue according to our respective convictions. Someone rightly said that all too often convictions are worse enemies to the truth than lies. Convictions are really little more than opinions. Discussions on this basis are predictable: Everybody talks

and nobody listens. We should not follow such a pattern. I suggest the answer is to honestly face contentious issues squarely and with determination to find out together what is trustworthy and why. After all, it is a matter affecting eternity! Therefore, we dare not be superficial in our search. We do not want to risk that one of us goes astray! Unless our faith is based on evident revelation from God, we should be critical. After all, if we do believe and follow God's truth, what are we afraid of losing? Divine truth must be and is perceived and backed up by evidence.

Knowing each other a little by now, I am sure that together we will, with kindness, understanding and sober judgement, find what concerns us more than anything else in this world!

Yours sincerely,  
THEOPHILUS

## **Second Letter**

# **Is sincerity all that matters?**

Dear Abdallah,

I knew I would be right in expecting your reply straight from the heart. Thank you!

I acknowledge your sentiments and do not doubt your sincerity for one minute. Sincerity must be the foundation of any conversation regarding God and our relationship with Him. However, it must be linked to established facts. We have to ask the question: Is what I sincerely believe really and factually true? A mother may sincerely believe in the innocence of her son that has just been convicted of a crime. But is he by that token innocent? Not our degree of sincerity will determine that, but an investigation. Sincerity cannot change error into truth.

The important thing, therefore, is not our sincerity as such, but the object of our sincerity. Please accept, therefore, that while I appreciate your sincerity, I query part of what you accept as fact. Let me explain.

You state that you have deeply rooted reservations about the trustworthiness of today's version of the Bible. While I somehow expected this, it still surprises me! Let me try to respond to your suspicion. First of all, we will have to make a distinction between established facts and our interpretation of them. What Islam never permitted, happened to Christianity. For the last couple of centuries Bible critics, many of them theologians, took the liberty to table and propagate their critique, which was often based on very extravagant interpretations. These all too often reflect their expedient, personal convictions and

opinions by which they interpret the Bible. However, there are and have been other critics, and one would need to listen to what they have to say.

We have to find the difference between what is called 'Text critique' and the so-called 'historical critical method' of interpretation. **Text critique** is the science, which is established to determine the exact text of an original document, and to sift out any possible corruption of a given text or any copy mistakes that might have slipped in over the many centuries in which these manuscripts have been copied by hand. It also attempts to rectify incorrectly understood words, phrases and figures of speech. Many scholars, Christian and other, have critically and thoroughly studied each of the old manuscripts. This helped to identify any error, and to trace it back to where it had originally slipped in. This gives us the assurance that today we have in hand a close to perfect replica of the original revelation.

The '**historical critical method**' is of quite a different nature. It attempts to 'correct' a text by assessing its feasibility, if I may put it this way. The Bible teaches, for instance, that the Jews went through the Red Sea on dry foot, or that Jesus was born of a virgin, that He walked on a lake and raised dead people to life. Since that is impossible, reason the critics, one has to classify such a text as myth. By various ways and means their pens have censored the Bible for anything supernatural. As expected, their critique largely contributed to the spiritual decay in the Western world. Through this God was erased from the minds of many people. Intentionally or not, these critics made their own finite minds the judge over the infinite God, assessing and stipulating what He can do and what not. This resulted in a very human interpretation of the divine Book and its author. We call that 'secular humanism'. As

lamentable as it is, this has become the dominant way of thinking as reflected by the Western media.

To support their theses, these critics revised the dating of the books of the Bible, claiming, for instance, that the Law of Moses was actually written by Ezra, who lived some 900 years after Moses. This was based on the assumption that writing was unknown at the time of Moses. Now we know that long before Abraham (500 years before Moses), writing was common practice.

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Some critics also claim that after the death of Jesus – His ascension to heaven they would discard as an impossibility and by that token a myth – Paul came and hi-jacked Christianity. It is claimed that he censored the Gospel to match his theology. But contemporary records show very clearly that there was never a doctrinal controversy between Paul and the other Apostles of Jesus. He did, in fact, consult with them.

While we are ready to acknowledge the occasional copy error, we are more than sure that these in no way influence or distort the message and content of God's Word. Actually, we consider it a miracle that the biblical manuscripts, which have been copied by hand over periods of up to 3 000 years, are so remarkably accurate.

It is astonishing to us that many Muslims use these liberal arguments to propagate the thesis of the falsification of the Gospels, while they refuse to apply a much needed text critique to their own scriptures. They completely ignore the fact that although the Qur'an

is of a considerably younger date, it has similar, if not more, complex problems. I am aware of the magnitude of this statement, but it cannot be more offensive to you than many Islamic statements concerning the Bible are to us. In short, I suggest we will have to play by the same rules. Muslim doctors who propagate that the Bible was corrupted also overlook the fact that most eminent Muslim theologians like at-Tabari (died AD 855), al-Bukhari (died AD 870), as well as al-Ghazzali (died AD 1111) believed in the authenticity of the (Greek) Gospel text. And that is the very message the Qur'an promotes:

*“Say ye: We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses, and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord: **we make no difference between one and another of them.**” (Surah al-Baqara 2:136).*

*“It was We who revealed the Law (to Moses); therein was guidance and light . . . if any do fail to judge by the light of what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) unbelievers . . . We sent Jesus, the son of Mary, confirming the Law that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: Therein was guidance and light . . . a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah. **Let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein. If any do fail to judge by the light of what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) those who rebel.** Judge what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires (Surah Mâ-ida 5:47, 49.50, 52).*

*“Say: we believe in the revelation which has come down to us and that which came down to you” (Surah al-Ankabût 29:46).*

It is quite clear that at the time the Qur'an was written, there was no hint given anywhere about a possible corruption or unreliability of the Bible. Anyone contradicting it now will not only go against the Qur'an, but will also have to provide an answer to questions like: WHO changed or corrupted the Bible? WHEN was the Bible corrupted? WHERE is the original, or evidence that shows that there was such an original? So far I have not heard an answer to these.

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If the Bible was corrupted before or at the time of Muhammad, the Qur'an would hardly have spoken of the Bible in such a positive manner. Had the Bible been changed or corrupted afterwards, the many existing old manuscripts that predate Muhammad by hundreds of years would have given proof of that fact. Besides, we have just read from the Qur'an that the Bible is God's Word. We should add, also from the Qur'an, that "**no man can change the words of God**" (Surah 6:34 and 10:64). So, what are Muslim critics of the Bible trying to do?

Some Muslims reason that the Qur'an does state that the Bible was distorted. They quote:

*"Ye People of the Book Why do ye clothe truth with falsehood, and conceal the truth, while ye have knowledge?" (Surah Al-Imran 3:71).*

*"There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues: (as they read) you would think it is part of the Book, but it is not part of the Book" (Surah Al-Imran 78).*

These passages say nothing more than that the Bible, rendered by the Jews in public, as the context suggests, was distorted *with their tongues*, not with their pens. Else the Qur'an would not suggest that Muslims should ask the People of the Book about the content of the Bible:

*“Ask of those who possess the Message”*  
(*Surah al-Anbiya, 21:7*).

We may well ask, why so many Muslims believe that the Bible was corrupted, when history, archaeology and the Qur'an deny this? The answer seems to be rather intriguing.

Ibn-Khazem (died AD 1064) ruled the South of Spain for some time as the vizier (vice regent) of the caliph. When reading the Qur'an he came across a verse that referred to Jesus speaking of Good News of an Apostle who was to come after him and whose name should be Ahmad (Surah 61:6). The meaning of this Arabic

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word is similar to the meaning of the name 'Muhammad'. He must also have read about "the unlettered prophet (i.e. Muhammad) whom they find mentioned in their own (Scriptures); in the law and the Gospel" (Surah 7:157). So he began to search the Bible for these clues about Muhammad. Probably to his surprise he did not find them. What he did find, however, was a number of contradictions between the two Books, both of which were assumed to have come from the same divine source. We can see the problem Ibn-Khazem was facing. Both the Bible and the Qur'an are stated to be Word of God – and they contradict each other.

Ibn-Khazem's decision was not to question the integrity of the Qur'an. He rather assumed that since the Gospel

*Dear Abdallah*

should agree with the Qur'an, and because Muhammad had spoken so highly of it, the existing Gospel text must have been falsified by the Jews and Christians. This assumption may display his zeal for the Qur'an, but it is not based on historical facts.

Since then Muslims have questioned the integrity of the Bible. Their argument is not only contradicted by the Qur'an, but also by the ever increasing strong archaeological and historical arguments, which support the genuineness of the Bible. Besides, why should anyone, for any reason, attempt to change the Word of God?

Perhaps this letter has helped you to take a glimpse at what most Muslims seem not to know. Practising Christians have a very special place for the Bible in their hearts and lives. It is God's love letter to them.

Because it may hurt your feelings it is a rather painful effort for me to write a letter which questions the source of your deepest convictions. But I am sure that our concern for the foundation of our faith in God will enable us to overcome some sentimental hitches.

I hope and trust that this letter finds you well and in good health. Please answer soon!

Warmest greetings!

THEOPHILUS

### ***Third Letter***

# **IT IS WRITTEN – AND IT HAPPENED**

Dear Abdallah

Thank you for your frank letter. Thank you also for sharing with me your understanding of Nabi Isa, as you name Jesus in your devotional language. It is not only the somewhat different name but also the different role ascribed to Him in the Qur'an and the Bible that makes your perception and subsequent understanding of Jesus different from ours. You made me aware of your sometimes rather strong feelings about the biblical narrative regarding Him. Naturally, everyone's perception is largely determined by the information one has. We will do well to diligently check on the reliability of our respective sources of information to enable us to differentiate between what is fact – and what is myth.

I suggest we first of all look for a token that can assure us of the divine origin of our 'holy Books'. It is unlikely for either of us to question that our respective Scriptures are inspired by God and consequently revelation from Him. But since your Book and my Book differ on crucial matters, they cannot really both be from the same source, you will admit. Take for example the crucifixion and death of Jesus. This event is explicitly and abundantly testified to in the Bible, but, for some reason, denied by Islam. Both views cannot possibly be true. I would like you to approach this topic with an open, though not uncritical, mind. It is likely that I will introduce to you something you are not familiar with.

How on earth can anyone be sure whether a Book comes from God, or whether it is perhaps a well meant writing of a concerned man who wants to reform a decadent society?

Christians believe in what God revealed in the Bible, because it carries an undeniable imprint of His authorship. I am speaking here about absolutely unpredictable events, which were foretold by the biblical prophets, and which were fulfilled hundreds of years later. We are, in fact, told over and over again and in no uncertain terms, that a prophet whose prophecies do not come true is not to be believed or trusted:

*“You may say to yourselves, ‘How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?’ If, what the prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken, That prophet has spoken presumptuously” (Deuteronomy 18:21, 22).*

*“Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7).*

And God spoke through Isaiah:

*“I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, ‘My idols did them’” (Isaiah 48:5).*

*“I am the Lord, who has made all things, who carries out the words of His servants and fulfils the predictions of His messengers” (Isaiah 44:24, 26).*

We can detect three main themes of prophecy in the Bible. One foretells the very unique history of the Jews, right up to the present time. The second pictures in dramatic detail the time of the end of this world, and

the third predicts, again in much detail, the life of Jesus the Messiah. In graphic description the prophets also foretold His suffering and death on the cross, as well as His resurrection from the dead. Had these not been fulfilled, we might have a reason to question the message and the divine source of our Book. But, excepting those describing the end of the world, these prophecies were all fulfilled. This gives us the confidence to rely on the message of the Bible, for no man could have predicted these historic happenings. Only God could have known and revealed them.

Little wonder then that throughout the Gospel we read phrases like “as it was written”, or “as the prophet has said”. In the New Testament, we read:

*“I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins **according to the Scriptures**, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day **according to the Scriptures**, and that He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve [Apostles of Jesus]. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep {have died}”*

*(1 Corinthians 15:3 - 7).*

The words “according to the Scriptures” refer to what had been written by the prophets who had lived hundreds of years before. It was these Scriptures that had been fulfilled in Jesus.

They reported the time and place of His coming (Micah 5:2, Daniel 9:24ff [this passage needs introductory help to be understood]); that He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), and what His name would be (Isaiah 63:8 [Saviour in Hebrew is Yeshua; this is the name Jesus actually had, while on earth]). Also His divinity was foretold (Isaiah 7:14 and

9:6 [Immanuel means, God with us]) and it all culminated in the prophecies predicting His crucifixion and death. Allow me to mention just two or three of these prophecies. David wrote about Jesus around 1 000 BC, stating:

*“Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, **they have pierced my hands and my feet.** I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing” (Psalm 22:16 - 18).*

Isaiah the prophet spoke in 700 BC, saying:

*“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Surely, He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But **He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.** We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and **the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.** He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; **He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open his mouth.** He was cut off from the land of the living; **for the transgression of my people He was stricken.** He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich **in His death,** though He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth . . . by His knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and **He will bear their iniquities . . . He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:3 - 12).***

Can any honest person ignore, side-step or 'explain' away such evidence?

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**These prophecies were all fulfilled. This gives us the confidence to rely on the message of the Bible**

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To amplify this even further, the Bible contains a number of eyewitness reports, which would certainly have been rejected by the contemporaries, had they not been true. Just imagine, for example, what the Jews of Jerusalem would have done to Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, had he lied when addressing a vast crowd of them just seven weeks after the crucifixion, when stating:

*"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and **you**, with the help of wicked men, **put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross.** But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him" (Acts 2:22-24).*

What would the Jews have done, had Jesus not been crucified or killed? They would have denied it strongly. But nobody ever queried this, because they all knew what had happened. While the Jews always objected that Jesus is the Messiah, they never denied His death on the cross. And they knew that it had happened, for they were present at the scene.

May just one more noteworthy piece of evidence be added in support of the trustworthiness of the crucifixion report in the Gospels. We are aware that the life of Jesus in a remote place like Judea was of no significance to the

Roman historians of His time, who wrote the annals of wars and mighty conquerors. Yet Rome's most prominent historian, *Cornelius Tacitus*, being an aggressive opponent of early Christianity, wrote *inter alia*:

*"The name 'Christian' is derived from Christ, who was executed under the government of the procurator Pilate" (Annals 15.44).*

*Flavius Josephus* was a Jewish general, fighting the last battle for Jerusalem against the Romans (AD 70). Having been taken prisoner, he became the Roman historian for Israel. He lived shortly after the time of Jesus, and wrote:

*"Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was (the) Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again on the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him" (Antiquities of the Jews).*

Evidence of such importance must have been given for a reason. And that is, no doubt, God's concern to verify His message for generations to come, to those who would depend on some kind of tangible proof or evidence to believe what He had revealed.

Why do I write all this? Why do I risk disturbing peace and harmony between us? I hope you have detected that by now: Because I care for you! Up to now you have probably not been aware of the need to verify the basis

of our faith. Most of the world's people practise their respective religions in the sincere belief that all is well and that they are following the right path.

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**Up to now you have probably not been aware of the need to verify the basis of our faith.**

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Even you would not have come up with these objections to the Bible; had you not questioned its integrity and trustworthiness, and had you not been influenced in this direction. Therefore I have to challenge you to test the foundations on which your eternal future rests.

You must understand that I do not write this letter to destroy your faith in God, but rather to amend and enhance it. That demands scrutiny.

The other day my wife and I wanted to visit someone in hospital. A relative explained the way to get there. It was done very accurately – except for a little slip. At one turn we were told to turn left, where we should turn right. Fortunately, I checked out the route on the map and discovered the mistake. Had I not checked, we would not have reached our envisaged destination. Sometimes this does not matter so much, but when it concerns eternity, it does.

I am really curious to hear your opinion and expect your response soon. My warmest greetings to you!

Yours sincerely,  
THEOPHILUS

**Fourth Letter**

# **Facts and Feelings**

Dear Abdallah

It is hardly necessary for me to tell you how I appreciated your last letter. It is good that our personal relationship is so open, despite the fact that our beliefs rest on different foundations. I am glad that you seem to agree on the need for a sober approach to spiritual matters and acknowledge the strong and, to an honest reader, obvious and convincing argument that fulfilled prophecy represents. The same applies to the eyewitness reports and historic sources. Together they are a rock on which we can safely build our trust in the Bible.

While it is decidedly good to have a rich emotional life, our spiritual conversation should never be governed by emotions only. We have to look at the facts too. That can be hurtful at times. That is why we are taught in the Bible to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Someone rightly said that truth without love is brutal, while love without truth is sentimentality. As emotions should be built on facts, so truth must be accompanied by love. They belong together.

In your letter you also express the generally accepted view of almost all Muslims, that the Qur’an in its present form is identical to the original. Islamic traditions dating from the time of the first caliphs do not support this assumption, as every scholar *should* know and acknowledge.

In your letter you mention three reasons why you are convinced that the Qur'an must be a revelation from God. I take it that you list these in response to the evidence for the inspiration of the Bible.

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**As emotions  
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If I understand you correctly, you mean that other evidence may also verify divine revelation. Firstly, you point to the outstanding literary quality and content of the Qur'an. You further argue that the fact that many Muslims can recite the whole of the Qur'an from memory is miraculous and therefore signifies its divine origin. Thirdly, you categorically state that the Qur'an has never been tampered with, but has been preserved in every detail as it came from the mouth of the Prophet.

Anyone with some basic knowledge of Arabic will have no problem to appreciate the poetic beauty of at least the early Meccan Suras of the Qur'an. It must be said, however, that grammatically and in the choice of words the Arabic Qur'an is not considered to be perfect. But even if it were, we must realise that it is not unreasonable to assume that even the very best product of man's ingenuity is still human. Proof of a divine token would be its superiority *over* what man can produce - like fulfilled prophecy.

Regarding the contents of the Qur'an, Christians obviously compare it with the Gospel. In all honesty, and trying to be as objective and fair as one can be, we will have to confess our preference for the Gospel. It would be beyond the scope of a letter like this to produce the reasons for this assumption right here, but I would like to encourage you to just read in the New Testament - as I

also read in the Qur'an. Maybe you should just read, for example, the Gospel according to John from chapter 10 onwards, or in the first letter to the Corinthians chapter 13, etc.

The citation of the Qur'an from memory is a different matter altogether. I remember watching dozens of young men pacing the courtyard of al-Azr University in Cairo, busy memorising the Qur'an. Sharpness of intellect, diligence and, perhaps a photographic memory play a part here. It would have been miraculous if this knowledge had been achieved instantly, without any learning, for example.

But let me return to your main point, the statement that the Qur'an has been preserved in its totality. While it is not possible to substantiate all my statements in a short letter like this, I will gladly do so, should you request it. It is well supported by Islamic tradition that during the lifetime of Muhammad, seven different 'forms' of the Qur'an existed:

*"This Qur'an was revealed in seven forms, so recite what is easiest!" said Muhammad. (Al-Bukhari vol. VI, Page 482, Chapter LXI (5) Vs. 514, Mishkatul Masabih vol. 3, pp.702-704; Tafsir of at - Tabari and Commentary of al - Baidawi).*

It has been suggested that this refers to different dialects. But that cannot be the case. It means different texts.

We must also realise that the Uthmani version of the Qur'an is actually a revision of earlier texts. Besides the version of the Qur'an, which was collected and collated on the suggestion of Abu Bakr and Umar by Zaid b Thabith, there existed a number of other texts, compiled by men even better equipped than Zaid, like Abdallah b. Mas'ud, Ubay b.Ka'b and Abu Moosa.

The revision of the Qur'an was ordered by Uthman, because the various Qur'an collections competed with each other. After the Uthmani revision was completed, all previous versions were burned. It surely is significant that even the copy compiled by Zaid, which at that time was in the possession of Muhammad's widow Hafsa, was destroyed (by Marwan ibn-al-Hakam, Governor of Medinah) (al-Bukhari vol. VI, page 477-479; Chapter LXI3 vs. 509, Mishkatul Masabih vol. 3, Page 664, Masahif by Ibn Abi Dawood, pp.24, 25, and ibn Asakir, vs. 445).

Now, that is a tremendous thing to do: it is the obliteration and destruction of evidence! We are glad to say, however, that since these early texts had been memorised by many, they have survived in recorded theological debates and can be compared with the Uthmani version. Besides many minor variations, some had more Suras or Ayas than others. We also find omitted, changed and added texts (Masahif by Ibn Abi Dawood, pp.24, 25, and ibn Asakir, vs. 445). Ibn Abu Dawood's collection of these differing portions of the Qur'an fills several hundred pages, by the way.

Being aware of this, let us add to the believing heart a critical, yet open mind. Critical not toward God - for who are we to question Him? But toward man and his claims!

Again I must beg you not to consider what I write as an affront. I do not write this to offend or hurt you. On the contrary, I do want you "to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4), as the Bible says.

Yours sincerely,

THEOPHILUS

**Fifth Letter**

# **THE BIBLE, THE QU'RAN AND SCIENCE**

Dear Abdallah,

Thank you for your prompt reply and the spirit in which you wrote. We seem to get very involved!

In your letter you bring to the fore arguments from the book "The Bible, the Qur'an and Science" by Maurice Bucaille. In it, you write, the divine origin of the Qur'an is amply evidenced.

To draw science into the picture is a new trend over the last few decades. Some Muslim scholars feel this to be an evidence for the divine origin of the Qur'an. The claim is that certain scientific knowledge that must have been unknown at the time of Muhammad, is reflected in the Qur'an. In particular, current knowledge of embryology is said to clearly confirm what the Qur'an says about this topic. The geological formation of the universe, including the earth, is another topic. In that case, I have to admit it would be strong evidence for the inspiration of the Qur'an, but it is not.

Dr. Bucaille finds in the Qur'an a description of the origin of the universe, which, according to him, at first consisted of gas that caused the 'Big Bang', which in turn facilitated the formation of galaxies, solar systems including our sun with its planets (p.139). This rests on his rather fanciful interpretation of two texts in the Qur'an, where we read:

*“Do not the unbelievers see that the heavens were joined together, then We clove them asunder” (Sura 21:30) and*

*“Then He turned to the sky and it had been (as) smoke: He said to it and to the earth, come ye together . . . ” (Surah 41:11).*

Parallel passages of the Qur’an suggest something else. They mention columns, which keep the heavens from falling onto the earth:

*“He (i.e. Allah) withholds the sky from falling on the earth” (Surah 22:65).*

*“He (i.e. Allah) created the heavens without any pillars that ye can see; He set on the earth mountains standing firm lest it should shake with you” (Surah 31:10).*

*“Allah is He Who raised the heavens without any pillars that ye can see” (Surah 13:2).*

These texts suggest convincingly that the Qur’an does not speak of the ‘Big Bang’, but rather tries to explain why the sky does not fall down to earth.

In the same passages it is alleged that the balance of the Laws of Gravitation and Centrifugal Force within a solar system is described by these passages (p. 152ff). The gravitation of a celestial body, according to the Natural Law, actually attracts any other body towards its own mass. That would, of course, eliminate its existence. But the force of gravity is balanced by the centrifugal force due to the planet’s movement around a sun. As a ball, when spinning around at the end of a string, is kept from flying away, so planets are forced away from the sun by the centrifugal force, but are kept in place by the law of gravity. So the balance between the two opposing forces keep the planets on track. I think it was Isaac Newton,

who discovered these Laws in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Do we actually find these Natural Laws, directly or by implication, mentioned in the Qur'an in general or in these mentioned verses in particular? Certainly not in the suggested texts. And could Isaac Newton have formulated these Laws of Nature as he did, based on

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universe.**

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the knowledge of the above verses? I am sure we agree that with the best will in the world it would need a lot of imagination to let these verses explain the function of our universe. But Dr. Bucaille did it and he went even further. He discovered in the Qur'an a prediction of astronauts:

*“O ye assembly of Jinns and men! If it be ye can pass beyond the zones of the heavens and the earth pass ye! Not without authority shall ye be able to pass!” (Surah 55:33).*

It is further assumed that when the Qur'an speaks of seven heavens (e.g. Surah 78:12), the number seven merely means plurality. From that he concludes that the Qur'an clearly states that there would be many heavens and earths in the universe, a fact that could only be verified in our time (p. 141). One can surely question the logic of such an argument.

In fairness, one will have to also acknowledge that the Qur'an held the then prevailing worldview, that the earth is a disc and not a sphere, as we know today:

*“Zul-qarnain (according to tradition Alexander the Great)... when he reached the setting of the sun he found it set in a spring of murky water” (Surah 18:83-86).*

Without trying to say more than the text wants to say, let us compare a verse from the Bible, which was written about 3500 years ago:

*“He (i.e. God) spreads out the northern [skies] over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing” (Job 26:7).*

The most prominent argument for the alleged existence of then unknowable scientific data in the Qur’an, however, is gynaecology, or more specific, embryology, the science of the conception and development of the human embryo in the uterus of its mother. Many an eloquent article is trying to interpret the Qur’an to mean something it does not say. In flowery language we are informed how medical doctors are stunned at the accuracy of the description of the reproductive system and its function. So let us have a look at these:

*“We (i.e. Allah) created you out of dust then out of sperm then out of a leech-like clot then out of a morsel of flesh partly formed and partly unformed in order that We may manifest (Our power) to you; and We cause whom We will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term then do We bring you out as babes then” (Surah 22:5).*

*“Man We (i.e. Allah) did create from a quintessence (of clay); Then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest firmly fixed; Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump; then We made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then We developed out of it another creature; so blessed be Allah the Best to create!” (Surah 23:12-14).*

*“It is He (i.e. Allah) Who has created you from dust then from a sperm-drop then from a leech-like clot; then does He get you out (into the light) as a child” (Surah 40:67).*

*“He (i.e. man) is created from a drop emitted. Proceeding from between the backbone and the ribs” (Surah 86:6-7).*

*“He Who has made everything which He has created most Good... began the creation of man with (nothing more than) clay and made his progeny from a quintessence of the nature of a fluid despised” (Surah 32:7-8).*

*“He (i.e. Allah) makes you in the wombs of your mothers in stages one after another in three veils of darkness” (Surah 39:6).*

*“Allah doth know what every female (womb) doth bear by how much the wombs fall short (of their time or number) or do exceed. Every single thing is before His sight in (due) proportion” (Surah 13:8).*

It ought to be mentioned here that the above passages, with the exception of some duplications (Surahs 16:5, 80:19-20, 75:38-40, 18:38), constitute *all* that the Qur’an says about this subject. We find no hint about the fertilisation of the ovum by a sperm, but rather the assumption that the sperm is the seed that is planted into the womb to mature. To correct this omission Dr. Bucaille quotes from a Hadith:

*“He (the Holy Prophet) said: ‘The reproductive substance of a man is white and that of a woman is yellow. When they have sexual intercourse and the male’s substance prevails upon the female’s substance, it is the male child that is created by Allah’s Decree. When the substance of the female prevails upon the substance contributed by the male, a female child is formed by the Decree of Allah.’ The Jew said: ‘What you have said is true; verily you are an Apostle.’ He then turned round and went away. The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: ‘He asked me about*

*such and such things of which I had no knowledge until Allah gave it to me” (Sahih Muslim Hadith 614).*

You, as I, may not find this all that enlightening either. Also the following Hadith would need a lot of interpretation to make sense to our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds:

*“Allah’s Apostle the true and truly inspired, narrated to us: ‘The creation of everyone of you starts with the process of collecting the material for his body within forty days and forty nights in the womb of his mother. Then he becomes a clot of thick blood for a similar period (40 days) and then he becomes like a piece of flesh for a similar period. Then an angel is sent to him (by Allah) and the angel is allowed (ordered) to write four things: his livelihood, his (date of) death, his deeds, and whether he will be a wretched one or a blessed one (in the Hereafter) and then the soul is breathed into him” (Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 9.546, see also 4.430).*

It would need a book to go into any more detail in this discussion, but the little I could accommodate throws some light on the prevailing argument. In essence all the other arguments boil down to the same substance. What conclusion can we draw from all this? It is normal and understandable for people to reason on the basis of their worldview. We all live by the assumption that our worldview is right and true. But we must learn to question the validity of everybody’s way of thinking which determines their actions. This may be a sobering and sometimes heartbreaking process.

If we want to live spiritually truthful and meaningful lives, we will have to say ‘good bye’ to popular opinion and seek the truth of God. Without any smugness or antagonism I have to confess that the search for a divine origin of a Book in the manner we observed right now, raises a lot more questions than it can hope to answer.

*Dear Abdallah*

I am deeply sorry to be so negative in so many ways. You really ought to know my heart to understand my guiding motive. You will know that it is neither a love for polemics, nor a hidden smugness. All I desire is our commitment to God, based on true information about Him. May this letter add a little to that?

Yours sincerely,

THEOPHILUS

## ***Sixth Letter***

# **WHAT IS GOD LIKE?**

Dear Abdallah,

Thank you for your very interesting remarks in your last letter. What you write is all too true. One so easily gets sidetracked from the real issues - and you bring us right on track again.

You say that both of us speak about God and have a certain perception of Him. Yet when we speak about Him, we discover that our perceptions differ, and with it our worldview and life style. Why is that so, since we both acknowledge that there is only one God? You have provided the answer already: Because we base our understanding of God on different premises. I deem it necessary to try to define what - or better Whom - we mean when we say 'God'.

Observing the many extremely diverse perceptions people often have of God, one cannot help feeling that many follow a figment of their imagination. We will have to think about that.

Who is God? Is *Allah*, as portrayed by Islam, and *Yahweh Elohim*, as He is presented in the Bible, the same? If the answer is yes, why do we get conflicting information about Him? Let me share my view of this with you.

Around the world thousands, if not millions of deities are venerated or even worshipped, yet you and I believe there is one God, one God only. I also believe that any seeming differences about God in the one or other religion are not reflecting a division within God, but are the result of false or incomplete information about Him. I believe wholeheartedly that all true knowledge about

God must essentially come from God Himself. What can we know about Him?

Firstly, I like to mention creation. I am speaking of the sum of everything that exists. Nature gives the information that something infinitely greater, more powerful and intelligent than what we can perceive, must be the designer of everything.

Yet creation does not reveal anything more. It cannot tell us whether this powerful intelligence is just a force of some kind, or whether it has a personality. So while I can safely state that 'God' is almighty and super-intelligent, I could not conclude from observing

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nature that He is personal, holy, righteous, merciful or loving. Both Christians and Muslims rightly claim that He has these attributes. Our Books say so, and so do our theologians. And yet, we differ in our perception of the nature of God.

Take the word righteousness. Does that mean that God is totally good and therefore will always act rightly? If God is good, can He create evil? If He is righteous, can He cause someone to commit sin and then punish that person for doing so? If God is love, can He be indifferent to our eternal wellbeing? Intuitively both of us will answer without hesitation that God could not have created evil or induced a person to sin and punish him for that, and that He cannot be indifferent to His creatures. Our innate perception of God causes us to think this way. Incidentally, what you and I intuitively believe, is in full agreement with the Bible.

Yet this cannot be said of Islam. According to Imam al-Barqavi (died 1135), the famous theologian and Qur'an commentator:

*"He (Allah) receives neither profit nor loss from whatever may happen. If all the infidels became believers . . . He would gain no advantage. On the other hand, if all believers became infidels, He would suffer no loss. He can do what He wills, and whatever He wills come to pass. He is not obliged to act. Everything, good or evil, in this world exists by His will. He wills the faith of the believers and the piety of the religious. If He were to change His will there would be neither a true believer nor a pious man. He willeth also the unbelief of the unbeliever and the irreligion of the wicked and, without that will, there would neither be unbelief nor irreligion . . . He is perfectly free to will and to do what He pleases. In creating unbelievers, in willing that they should remain in that state; in making serpents, scorpions and pigs; in willing, in short, all that is evil. God has wise ends in view which it is not necessary that we should know."*

*('Haft sifat' as quoted in Hughes 'Dictionary of Islam' p.141).*

Quite obviously, what al-Barqavi and most other Muslim theologians want to convey by formulations like this is the greatness of God. Of course, this is based on the Qur'an and the Traditions, else no one would have accepted such a statement:

*"If Allah so willed He could make you all one people: but He leaves straying (should read: leads astray) whom He pleases and He guides whom He pleases: but ye shall certainly be called to account for all your actions" Surah 16:93 - translated by Yusuf Ali. (See also Surah 16:37; 6:149).*

It seems as if the greatness of Allah overrules righteousness, mercy and love. These are attributes we certainly expect from God. In fact, verses like the above, and there are many, are contradicting many other passages in the Qur'an - including the Shahada. I indeed fail to see it as an example of righteousness and justice, when a person is punished for something he was compelled by God to commit. This is not an isolated passage. It is verified by verses like:

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**I fail to see it as an example of righteousness and justice, when a person is punished for something he was compelled by God to commit.**

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*“Whom Allah doth guide - He is on the right path; whom He rejects from His guidance - such are the persons who perish. Many are the Jinns and **men We have made for Hell**” (Surah 7:178).*

*“If We (i.e. Allah) had so willed, We could certainly have brought every soul its true guidance; but the word from Me will come true, ‘I will fill hell with Jinns and men all together’” (Surah 32:130).*

**“Allah leads astray those whom He pleases, and guides whom He pleases”.**

*(Surah 14:4, see also Surah 9:51, 5:20, 16:93, 37:96, 76:29-30, 4:88, 16:36, 6:149 and 7:158)*

*“He forgiveth whom He pleaseth and He punishes whom He pleaseth”.*

*(Surah 5:20, read also Surah 37:96; 76:29 - 30; 4:88; 16:36; 6:149; 7:158)*

Such statements are strongly supported by the Hadith. Let us just look at two passages:

*“Abu Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be*

upon him) as saying: **Allah fixed the very portion of adultery which a man will indulge in. There would be no escape from it**” (Sahih Muslim IV, p. 1396 - 1398).

“Abu Darda’s reported that the Holy Prophet said: **‘Allah created Adam when He created him. Then He stroke his right shoulder and took out a white race as if they were seeds, and He stroke his left shoulder and took out a black race as if they were coals. Then He said to those who were in his right side: Towards Paradise and I don’t care. He said to those who were on his left shoulder: Towards Hell and I don’t care’**” (Mishkat vol.3 p. 117).

Any person with a darker complexion believing that would certainly be terrified at this prospect.

Al-Baqawi explains the principle that led to such doctrine:

*“Not only can He (Allah) do anything, He actually is the only one who does anything. When a man writes, it is Allah who has created in his mind the will to write. Allah at the same time gives the power to write, then brings about the motion of the hand and the pen and the appearance upon paper. All other things are passive, Allah alone is active.”*

The overruling question that arises is: where does the love of God fit in here - and His mercy and grace, on which we all depend? I reflect again on our imperfection and lack of purity. If you take the trouble to analyse this in the Qur’an, you will find that Allah only loves the righteous and good. And what about us, who did wrong, who trespassed God’s commands? What al-Ghazzali once wrote is frightening and I don’t need to introduce

him to you:

*“Love is to sense a need of the beloved, and since Allah cannot be said to have a need or an experience of a need, it is therefore impossible that Allah should love.”*

Such a view of God is absolutely contrary to the Bible. As a core statement about God in Islam is Allahu-akbar, so the Bible states that “God is Love”. Yes, He is holy and righteous in His judgements. We do realise that this knowledge by itself is severely threatening to us, because we are unrighteous. But God’s righteousness is bonded with His mercy and love. Have a look what the Bible teaches:

About His majesty:

*As a core statement about God in Islam is Allahu-akbar, so the Bible states that “God is Love”.*

*“This is what the LORD spoke, saying: ‘By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified’ (Leviticus 10:3).*

*“Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His footstool - He is holy” (Psalm 99:5).*

*“I dwell in the high and holy place” (Isaiah 57:15).*

*“He is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honour and everlasting power. Amen” (1 Timothy 6:16).*

*“Holy, holy, holy, [is the] Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8).*

About what God expects from us:

*“What does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).*

About God’s view of mankind:

*“They have turned their back to Me, and not their face. But in the time of their trouble they will say, ‘Arise and save us’” (Jeremiah 2:27).*

About God’s efforts to draw us to Himself:

*“Oh, that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea” (Isaiah 48:18).*

*“I will not cause My anger to fall on you, for I am merciful,’ says the LORD; ‘I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God, . . . and you have not obeyed My voice,’ says the LORD” (Jeremiah 3:12 - 13).*

*“Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you” (Isaiah 55:3).*

*“I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins . . . Return to Me, for I have redeemed you” (Isaiah 44:22).*

*“He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young” (Isaiah 40:11).*

*“For thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out . . . I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down,’ says the Lord God” (Ezekiel 34:11).*

600 Years later Jesus said:

*“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing” (Luke 15:3 - 5).*

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd and I know My sheep . . . Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again . . . My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:11 - 17, 27 - 30).*

You will have realised that my writing is not a theological paper on the doctrine of God. But you will have picked up some ‘vibes’ from the heart of God. And you will also have detected the intrinsic difference between our views of God, and probably also begin to understand or even appreciate my enthusiasm for Him. Of course, in a letter like this one can only touch on minute aspects of the nature of God, and even that all too briefly.

Let me in closing try to sketch with a few words the essence of our differing perceptions of God:

In an effort to honour God, you, as a Muslim, emphasise His power and might. Islam demands submission under the rule of God, and you try to oblige by submitting to its many rules. Yet due to your view of God, you cannot have any assurance whatsoever about your standing before God - until Judgement Day.

While Islam maintains that God is *tansih*, (aloof in His majestic glory, and detached from all else.) the Bible depicts God as the condescending one, whose love and compassion toward man creates a way to rescue him.

From the Bible, I know that God is holy, and I know that I am not. I also know that God is justified by **demanding** righteousness from us, but that He actually **gives** us His own. In His love He gives Himself for us. In Jesus He is our 'good shepherd', who goes after the lost sheep until He finds it and then gives His life for His sheep. This indeed reflects God's love for us, and such love expresses the value God attaches to each of us. We are not like rats or lice in His sight. If we accept His outstretched hand, we are His beloved children!

*The obstacle for God is not our sin,  
for His love has overcome that already,  
but our unwillingness to receive His gift of  
love, forgiveness through Jesus.*

There is one restriction however. Just before His death on the cross Jesus, obviously grief-stricken, uttered these heart-rending words to those who opposed Him:

*"How often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, **but** you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37).*

The obstacle for God is not our sin, for His love has overcome that already, but our unwillingness to receive His gift of love, forgiveness through Jesus.

*Isn't it true what the proverb says, "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks?" Well, that's the way it is with me when writing about God. (By the way – that proverb also originated from the Bible in Matthew 12:34).*

But now I must apologise for the length of this letter! However, you will agree that this is not inappropriate for the topic we touched on.

Fond greetings!

THEOPHILUS

**Seventh Letter**

# **Just a Simple Word: Sin**

Dear Abdallah,

I value your appreciation for the central themes of our faith. After having spent some time on our investigation into the very central theme of who God is, I suggest we tackle a topic which contains a problem that affects us day by day, and which is, consequently, most relevant. It is the concept of sin.

Some time ago a Muslim acquaintance of mine asked me why Christians are so 'obsessed with sin', as he put it. "Because it is the contrast between us and God that affects us every day of our lives", was my reply. Naturally, we all want to stay clear of sin, yet yield to it all the time. If we want to live with God this is a relative theme. It addresses probably one of the most crucial issues of life. Any honest person with a functioning conscience and some basic awareness of ethics, will be alarmed at our ever present readiness, not to say urge, to think or do what we know to be wrong. Even the patriarchs in the Bible succumbed under this pressure.

Adam disobeyed God. Abel killed his brother. Noah got deliriously drunk, Lot's daughters slept with their father, Abraham blatantly lied by declaring his wife to be his sister, Jacob was a deceiver, Moses was a murderer and acted against God's orders, David committed adultery and planned a murder, and so it goes on.

Why do we all have this tendency to sin, even against our will? It is apparently the heritage of our nature from our parents and forefathers. Already at the time of Noah:

*“The Lord was grieved . . . and His heart was filled with pain”, (Genesis 6:6), “the Lord saw how great man’s wickedness had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5).*

At the very beginning, when Adam was created, God had already given man the choice of acting in agreement with or against Him. Without such an option man would be little more than a programmed robot. He could not be held responsible. He would not be able to love God and his fellowman. The ability to choose is fundamental.

*It does not really matter whether he misses  
by one millimetre or a kilometre.*

We read that Adam and Eve decided against God’s purpose. Every human being since that time has made wrong choices. Adam, as all the people who have lived since then, again and again questioned God’s good intentions, and endeavoured to be ‘god’ of their own lives. But it is Satan, the deceiver, who becomes that ‘god’. That is why we cannot stop sinning at will.

The New Testament states a case that we all can unhesitatingly confirm:

*“I do not understand what I do, for what I want to do I do not, but what I hate I do . . . I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:15 - 18).*

Are we really like that? Why do we fail? To answer our question rightly, we will have to define the meaning of the word ‘sin’.

The exact meaning of the word translated as 'sin' in the Hebrew and Greek (the languages in which the Bible was originally written) is "missing the mark, the target or aim". A warrior takes bow and arrow, aims and shoots. But the arrow misses! The purpose is not fulfilled. It does not really matter whether he misses by one millimetre or a kilometre. Even his good intention to hit is ultimately of no consequence. Other meanings of the word are "departure from a laid down path, a revolt against legitimate authority, transgression of the law of God, the breaking of a covenant, unfaithfulness, treason and vanity" - all in relation to God. At the root lies the "fundamental and positive choice or preference of self instead of God" (A.H. Strong).

The underlying principle governing our inclination to do wrong is explained in the New Testament:

*"For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want" (Galatians 5:17).*

I am sure we agree that by virtue of the fact that God created us and is Lord, He can rightfully expect us to think and do according to His will and purpose. To instruct us about this, He has given us His Word, which tells us about the conflict between good and evil, right and wrong, and how to overcome evil. He also tells us about His will for us:

*"It is the will of God that you should be holy" (1 Thessalonians 4:3), and*

*"Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24).*

Holiness is a biblical term and means to be separated for God's purpose. Of course, this meaning clashes ever

so often with our personal desires and interests, which seek self-gratification. While we may strive to honour and please God, the demands of our self are, in fact, ever stronger.

*Whether we like it or not, in each of us is, deeply rooted, the irresistible urge to sin.*

We are inclined to compare ourselves with other humans, and that may be satisfying to a certain extent. But God judges us by His own divine standard. Too many people are wrongly taught that if 51% of what they do complies with God's laws, it will suffice to take them to paradise or heaven. What God wants is our whole heart:

*“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking the whole of it” (James 2:10).*

This verse reveals to us the desperate state we find ourselves in. We must understand a fundamental truth: **We are not sinners because we have sinned. But we sin because we are sinners!**

Sin comes naturally. It is in our nature. We need no training to do it. Whether we like it or not, in each of us is, deeply rooted, the irresistible urge to sin. Sin is all that is contrary to God's nature. It begins with unkindness and failure to love, which turn into hatred, discord, jealousy, gossip, envy, greed, and fits of rage and covetousness, not to mention the more serious sins. Yet deep in our hearts we want to be pure.

It is touching to read a Psalm of a broken-hearted David, which he prayed after having committed adultery. He had just one wish:

Dear Abdallah

*“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin . . . Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight . . . Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God . . . ” (Psalm 51:2, 4, 9 - 10).*

David realised that he had not just sinned against people, but that he had actually sinned against the holy God!

I suggest we stop at this point. There is more than enough to think about. I would like to continue and conclude this subject in my next letter. If you found this letter to be too negative, you are perfectly right. It would be depressing to stop here without the hope for a solution. Fortunately, God offers one.

So then, as-Salam'allay-kum!

Yours sincerely

THEOPHILUS

## ***Eighth Letter***

# **In case we get what we deserve**

Dear Abdallah

Thank you for your last letter! It was a pleasant surprise to me! Thank you very much for your effort to reply in such a comprehensive and understanding manner! Often people are inclined to minimise sins by classifying them into big and small ones: sins that can be compensated for by 'good deeds', those that need repentance and those that are unforgivable. The Bible makes a different assessment.

Maybe it is best understood when looking at what Jesus called the 'Great Commandment'. It really is the sum total of the Law of God, the Ten Commandments:

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . and . . . love your neighbour as yourself!" (Matthew 22:37, 39).*

This is God's desire for us. Anything short of that is actually 'missing the aim' He has for us. You will recall this allegory from my last letter.

*To practise self-will or self-gratification instead of God's will is not only missing the aim, but has consequences as well. The Bible simply states:*

*"Your iniquities have separated you from your God" (Isaiah 59:2).*

Sin is a kind of 'red card', like in a soccer match. It means: "You are out!" Religion demands from its followers a rigid effort to act correctly and, once a sin is committed, to try to compensate for it somehow with 'good deeds'. That makes us feel good. "I can! I am able!" It is part of our nature to try to pacify God by compensating for our sin. Ultimately that amounts to the assumption that as long as I do not commit shirk or kufr, I do not really need God. This is equal to a convicted criminal expecting to be released on his promise of doing a 'good deed' to compensate for his crime and, in addition, not to repeat that crime. God's righteousness does not work like that neither does it reflect His mercy and grace. Unless God removes it, sin separates an offender from Him for all eternity!

*Anything short of that is actually  
'missing the aim' He has for us.*

The last book in the Bible records a vision of the devastating consequence of that:

*"I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened . . . The dead were judged according to what they had done according to the books" (Revelation 20:12).*

Judgement Day is harvest day. Everybody receives what he or she has planted, that is what he deserves. It is the execution of God's judgement.

The Judge will be Jesus, as He Himself stated:

*"When the Son of man (i.e. Jesus) comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from*

*another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left . . . Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world' . . . Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels', then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:31 - 34, 41, 46).*

*Judgement Day is harvest day.  
Everybody receives what he or she has  
planted, that is what he deserves.*

Who then are the "blessed by my Father", that inherit the Kingdom of God? Are these people who are sinless? When we look at the passage carefully, we will notice, that it is not those who deserve to be in God's presence, but those who inherit it. How can we understand that? The heirs of someone (as a rule) are his children. They do not inherit their fortune because they deserve it, but because they are the children of the testator. Inheritance is obtained after the testator has died. In His New Testament God uses that metaphor. Every person that receives God's pardon through Jesus, belongs to the family of God, because the barrier, which separated us from God, is removed. Being a child of God then, we can joyfully call God our Father! But to belong to 'the family of God', one must be born into it. It says of Jesus:

*"He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name (The name "Jesus" means Saviour),*

*He gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:10 - 13).*

Explaining this, Jesus said:

*"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.*

*Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again'" (John 3:3 - 7).*

It requires some thinking to understand the deeper meaning of this metaphor. We are all alive, because we were born into this world. That was our physical birth. Jesus said that to be truly human the way God intended it, we must also be born spiritually. Without a spiritual birth one is spiritually dead.

*...that it is not those who deserve to be in God's presence, but those who inherit it.*

Spiritual birth into the 'family' of God is effected through faith in Jesus. This faith not only constitutes trust in what He did for us, but also the recognition of our desperate need for His forgiveness. He was the one who was killed in our place. By this rebirth we become children of God and by that His heirs. (Romans 8:17, Galatians 3:29).

Having understood this, we will agree with an important statement in the New Testament:

*"Because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been*

*saved. Through faith, not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians. 2:4 - 5, 8, 9).*

Because we all have sinned, we all depend totally on God’s mercy.

*But to belong to ‘the family of God’, one must be born into it.*

That raises the question, whether in that case our attempt to live righteously is really necessary. Not as a means to relinquish former sins or to gain merit! God wants His children to ‘grow up’ spiritually by being changed more and more to reflect His nature! Jesus once said:

*“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”  
(Matthew 5:48).*

But try as we may, our old nature just does not always comply. As long as we are in this life, we cannot be righteous in the sight of God by our own effort. Neither can God’s Law justify or forgive us. A law merely determines what is right and what is wrong:

*“Know that a man is not justified by observing the law”  
(Romans 3:20).*

That is why God, in His mercy, offers us His own righteousness. Speaking about the Jews who rigidly tried to keep the Law, the New Testament says:

*“I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Romans 10:2, 3).*

This was never different, for we already read of Abraham that:

*“ . . . he believed God and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).*

I just wonder now, how you, as a Muslim, will react to this (for you) possibly very foreign ‘language’. It tells you - as it does to the Jews - that by trying to establish merit or righteousness before God, you actually do not submit to God!

The basis of our faith in God is that we can do nothing to earn eternal life, but depend on His rescue (salvation). We already noted that salvation is offered by the Saviour. He is Jesus. Salvation means to be pardoned. Actually, it is more than a pardon that is offered to us. God actually says:

*“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34).*

*“You will cast all our sins into the depth of the sea” (Micah 7:19).*

*“As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12).*

God not only undertakes to forgive and to pardon us, but He actually promises to forget our sins. He makes us as pure as though we had never sinned. Our heavenly records are clean. Our names are recorded in the ‘Book of Life’ (see also Daniel 12:1; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 20:12,15; 21:27), which is the deciding factor determining our entrance into God’s eternal glory. In short, we have been reconciled to God and are at peace with Him:

*“All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:18).*

You will now understand why we Christians rely so much on Jesus. He is our only chance. Jesus himself said:

*"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).*

Last but not least, I want to mention a question I have been asked repeatedly: "Why should anyone try to perform good deeds, when their sins will be forgiven anyway". Well, we want to please our Father! It is out of gratitude for having saved us! Our love for God makes us hate sin, because He hates it and it hurts Him.

*You will now understand why we  
Christians rely so much on Jesus.  
He is our only chance.*

The Bible presents God as deeply affected and grieved by our sin, and because we are devoted to Him and love Him, we strive to be the way He wants us to be. Let a couple of verses from the Bible demonstrate this:

*"Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things . . ." (Philippians. 4:8).*

*"Become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars . . ." (Philippians. 2:15).*

And why do we try to live right? Because:

*" . . . The love of Christ compels us" (2 Corinthians 5:14).*

Now you want to ask me, where are those Christians who are committed to live like this? You find them in every country and every society, in some more - in others less. Their numbers are not big and more often than not they are not in the limelight. But if you search for them, you will find them. But please take note again; they are

Dear Abdallah

not perfect. Perfection cannot be found on this side of the grave. But they will have a commitment that is already reflected in the Bible:

*“Not that I have already obtained all this . . . But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal . . . for which God has called me” (Philippians. 3:12 - 14).*

With sincere greetings, I am

Yours faithfully

THEOPHILUS

## *Ninth Letter*

# How unique is Jesus?

Dear Abdallah

I knew you would raise objections to my last letter - and so you did. You quoted Surah 4:171 from the Qur'an: "Jesus was no more than a prophet." It is understandable that you want to stay on familiar ground, for it seems secure. May I take you up on that by asking you to read the context of your quote and perhaps a few other passages from the Qur'an - and then reconsider what you wrote? We read about Jesus that:

- **He was the Messiah** (Sura 4:171) (see Bible: John 1:41, 4:25, 26).
- Note: The Qur'an does not define the term 'Messiah'. According to Jewish and Christian understanding the expected Messiah would be sent by God to liberate people from the bondage of sin.
- **He was a Spirit from God** (Sura 4:171).
- **He was the Word of God** (Sura 4:171) (Bible: John 1: 1 - 14).
- We note that the Word of God is the Thought of God and with that, part of God!
- **He created life and healed the sick** (Sura 3:49), (Bible: Matthew 11: 1 - 6).
- **He is a sign to mankind** (Sura 19:21) (Bible: Luke 2:25 - 32).
- **He is illustrious in the world and the hereafter** (Sura 3:45) (Bible: Hebrews 1 - 3; Colossians 1: 16, 2:9).
- **He was taken to heaven by God** (Sura 4:158) (Bible: Acts 1:9 - 11).

- **He will come back to earth for judgement** (Sura 43:61, Mishkat IV. pp. 78 - 80) (Bible: John 14:1 - 6; John 5:22, 25 - 27).
- **He was holy** (Pickthall) **or faultless** (Yusuf Ali) (Sura 19:19) (Bible: Hebrews 7:26).

We already noted in this connection that against popular belief both the Bible and the Qur'an do not agree that all prophets were sinless.

Does all this not raise the intrinsic question on just how 'human' a person can be who unites all the above attributes in himself or herself? Do we know of any person who could boast of calling just two of these attributes his or her own? In the case of Jesus, one can only conclude that He is superhuman. And that is divine!

Now let me very briefly touch on another point you mentioned and that is causing confusion even among some Christians, the so-called 'trinity' of God. You could not have touched on a topic more difficult to comprehend. To understand this divine concept is equal to the attempt to understand who God is. Let me say categorically that Christians are decidedly monotheists! We believe in one God, as our Bible teaches:

*"The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4).*

*"I am the Lord your God . . . Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2, 3).*

*"There is . . . one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4 - 6).*

Both the Old and the New Testament agree on this.

Allow me to simplify a complex concept: I am one person, and yet I am made up of body, soul and spirit. So I am actually a unity of three components, i.e. a trinity, although visible is only my body. I am not I without my body, neither without my soul or spirit. Let me reverently try to use this

metaphor on the person of God. The Bible speaks of God as the Creator, the Father. That needs little explanation.

But then it also speaks of God becoming incarnated in human form (John 1: 1 - 5; 9 - 14; Philippians 2:5 - 11; Isaiah 63:8; Romans 9:5; Colossians 2:9). This was to reveal Himself to mankind and to take up the role of the promised Saviour. Perhaps, for lack of a more illustrative word, God introduced Jesus as his Son. I would like to come to that a little later again.

*Do we know of any person who could  
boast of calling just two of these  
attributes his or her own?*

The third aspect or facet or 'component' is God's Holy Spirit. Ru Allah you would call Him. By His Spirit God speaks to the hearts and consciences of people. By His Spirit He also leads them (John 16:7 - 15). Evading complicated theological formulations let us simply assume that the one God chose to reveal Himself in the three mentioned 'forms', 'functions' or 'personalities'. Knowing our incapacity to comprehend this, He chose to explain Himself in this way, and for that reason we ought to accept that. Although my formulation may not be sufficient or comprehensive, it expresses in essence what the concept of the trinity of God is all about.

The name by which God revealed Himself in the Bible is Yahweh Elohim. Yahweh translated means simply 'Lord'. The ending ' . . . im' of Elohim, always indicates the masculine plural form of a word. Therefore it should actually read 'Gods'. In Deuteronomy 6:4 (given to Moses), we read: "Yahweh (the Lord) Eluhenu (our Gods) Yahweh echad (the Lord is one, or a unity)."

As time went on (8<sup>th</sup> century BC), God explained his 'personality' somehow more tangibly through the prophet Isaiah:

*"I will tell of the kindness of the LORD - he became their JESHUA (the Hebrew form of the English name 'Jesus', meaning 'Saviour') . . . yet they rebelled and grieved his HOLY SPIRIT" (Isa. 63:7 - 10).*

In the Gospels, Jesus is called both, '**Son of God**' and '**Son of Man**'. Although these names seem to be in opposition to each other, in essence they are the same. That becomes quite clear when we consider a vision the prophet Daniel had:

*"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a **Son of man**, coming with the clouds of heaven . . . He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away" (Daniel 7:13, 14).*

We realise that this does not refer to a human being.

The term 'Son of God' does not want to indicate a sexual relationship between God and Mary, which resulted in a 'begotten' son to be born. We must be mindful that God is Spirit! It rather demonstrates the unique relationship between Yahweh and Jeshua, i.e. God the Father and Jesus His Son. Not with a single word does the Bible even remotely suggest what most Muslims seem to assume is taught in the Bible, that Christians believe Jesus to be a physical Son of God. The Bible rather suggests that in every sense no one is closer to the father than his son. They are of the same kind. And so it is with God the Father and His son Jesus.

Jesus, while on earth, displayed all the human characteristics. He was a baby and grew up with His parents. He needed food, drink and sleep. He is reported

to have wept. This He inherited from His mother, if I may say so. But He walked on the water, calmed the storm and fed a crowd, of which 5000 were men, with a few scraps of food. He healed countless sick people, forgave sins, had absolute power over the demonic world and even raised the dead. He Himself rose from the dead and was raised to heaven. All these are the credentials for His divine nature. He did what only God can do. This demonstrates that He was the Son of God.

*Jesus, while on earth, displayed all the human characteristics.*

The use of the title 'Son of God' may, for a lack of an even more descriptive word, be a figure of speech like the term 'son-of-the-road', which is, I am told, the translation of the Arabic word for a traveller. The purpose is to show a relationship.

The words 'only begotten Son', as used in an old Bible translation for the Greek word 'mono-genis', should actually be 'only-born'. The other is an unfortunate wording and can be misleading.

I fully realise all this may at first appear very strange to you. But you have already acknowledged the Bible to be proven revelation from almighty God. Shall we resist or even oppose it just because we fail to fully understand it? I do not want to preach here, but dealing with the Gospel Truth I would like to urge you to seriously think about this. Since much of what I have written here is in contradiction to what you have been taught since childhood, it will indeed be necessary to apply your mind and your reasoning instead of your feelings.

I will hear from you again! Fond greetings!

THEOPHILUS

**Tenth Letter**

# **Choose what is true and right**

Dear Abdallah,

I thank God that your response to my last letter proved to me, contrary to some inner fears, that you did indeed accept the validity of rational thinking in matters of faith, together with your devoted submission to God. I strongly believe it to be of a necessity to stand firmly on both legs in this world of lies and deception. An illustration may help to show what I want to say.

Let one leg symbolise sober and rational thinking. We need to be open-minded, but at the same time ready to test every thought and information input (even our own!), ever keen to scrutinise whatever introduces itself as Truth. This is achieved by checking on the available documentation, references and, above all, evidence to support its claim to originate from a divine source.

Then let the other leg stand as a symbol of your wholehearted devotion to God with an undivided heart, which is our genuine form of worship, love and obedience towards Him. That should not be done without continuous, sincere prayer to God for the right guidance and to enable us to distinguish truth from error.

Standing on one of these 'legs' alone, makes us highly vulnerable to fall over, be one-sided or unbalanced. One could easily become unteachable, simplistic and perhaps a fanatic. To protect us from this, God has given us an intellect and the ability to scrutinise, compare and draw

conclusions. So let us first honestly investigate the matter of truth and then let us yield ourselves in obedience and worship to the only true God.

*So let us first honestly investigate the matter of truth and then let us yield ourselves in obedience and worship to the only true God.*

Up to now I have somehow expected you to stand on your objective 'leg'. Can you still hold on a little? I would like you to consider with me the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Apart from the controversial concept of the divinity of Jesus, which we looked at in the last letter, the cross is likely to be the most emotionally loaded topic in conversations between Christians and Muslims. As I stated before, I like you to remember that everything I say is not done to hurt you or to win an argument. The importance of this happening and the possibility that you might misunderstand it, weighs heavily on me. Even so I suggest that we do not avoid 'hot' subjects, but that we tackle them in love.

We are both aware of the contradicting statements in our respective 'Books'. The Qur'an clearly states:

*" ... they (i.e. the Jews) killed him (i.e. Jesus) not, nor crucified him ...for a surety they killed him not" (Surah 4:157).*

The context explains that this event only appeared to the contemporaries to have happened, but God took Jesus to Himself. In contrast to that the crucifixion and death of Jesus takes by far the most prominent place in the Gospels. It can hardly be overlooked, even in the Old Testament teaching, where it appears in the form of prophecies, which were fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus.

It is obvious that both views cannot be true. Instead of entrenching ourselves and arguing against each other to defend our conviction, as it is often done, let us rather use our objective 'leg' again. So let us consider the supporting evidence to secure the right answer.

In an earlier letter I have already mentioned the evidences of fulfilled prophecy, acknowledged eyewitness reports, contemporary historical reports and the archaeological evidence. All speak so convincingly in support of Jesus' crucifixion and death. So how can all this evidence be contradicted or invalidated by just one allegation, stated 600 years after the recorded event, and which supplies no evidence for this claim at all.

*Every sacrifice pointed to the future  
when Jesus would come to replace the  
symbols by sacrificing Himself.*

I am tempted to repeat our supporting evidence (as presented in my third letter), but will rely on your good memory. I am equally tempted to share with you the biblical teaching on the need for a sacrifice for the remission of sin, an essential part of and basis for obtaining forgiveness and with that reconciliation with God as ordained during the Old Testament era. Every sacrifice pointed to the future when Jesus would come to replace the symbols by sacrificing Himself. The former offerings were just shadows of things to come, to use a biblical term.

John the Baptist, recognising Jesus, pointed to Him and said:

*"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).*

While still alive, Jesus spoke to His disciples about Himself:

*“The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the Law. They will condemn Him to death and will turn Him over to the Gentiles (non-Jews, i.e. the Romans) to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life!”*  
(Matthew 20:18 - 19).

Then he said:

*“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many”*  
(Matthew 20:28).

And that was the way it happened. Let me use a historical event, which can serve as a parable.

*This event, perhaps more than any other in history, illustrates the way Jesus stepped in for us to take our place.*

Shamuel was a Caucasian prince living a couple of hundred years ago. His people seemed to be involved in constant war with the Turks. Once he besieged a Turkish city with his army. As usual his mother accompanied him. One night he planned a surprise assault, but the enemy was lying in wait. His secret plans had been divulged. The battle was lost. Distressed, Shamuel announced that the traitor, when caught, would be punished with 100 lashes of a whip. In great secrecy another attack was planned - but the result was the same. They had been betrayed again. But this time the traitor was caught. It was Shamuel's mother.

In anguish he withdrew to his tent for three days and nights. What should he do? What would be the

right thing to do? Should he spare his mother, all could rightly claim that justice was distorted by his love for his mother. Were he to punish her, however, all would say: "Look at that merciless and cruel man! He does not even show pity for his own mother!" At last he appeared. His men gathered around him curiously. Then he addressed them: "We lost two battles because of treason. We lost many a man as a result of this. I find no excuse for the traitor. The crime was committed, and so punishment shall be executed according to my law with 100 lashes! Righteousness and justice must be upheld!"

*This sacrifice for sin is sufficient for all men at all times and therefore never needs to be repeated.*

His mother was led into the circle. She was pale, trembling with fear. The executioner lifted his whip - but before the first lash came down on her, Shamuel cried: "Hang on! This is my mother; I am of her flesh and blood. I will take the punishment for her!" He went into the circle, took off his garment and commanded: "Executioner, dare not strike more lightly than with the last prisoner. Do your duty!" Lash after lash came down, until he broke down unconscious. Against expectation Shamuel did survive his ordeal. Will we ever know how his mother felt about what she had caused to her son? Shame, wonder and love at the behaviour of her son must have overcome her.

This event, perhaps more than any other in history, illustrates the way Jesus stepped in for us to take our place:

*"He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree (cross), by His wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).*

It was not only the physical pain, bad as it was, that caused the suffering of Jesus, the only ever sinless and pure person. It was that He took on Himself the ugly filth of *our* sin. One cannot help feeling as Samuel's mother must have felt.

God's righteousness and love met at the cross of Jesus.

*"God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19).*

This happened once and for all. This sacrifice for sin is sufficient for all men at all times and therefore never needs to be repeated. It is God's grace in action. It is God's gift to us. A gift, however, becomes mine only when I stretch out my hand to accept it. Allow me to use another illustration:

A couple of hundred years ago a certain Austrian painter was commissioned to paint a picture of the crucifixion. He had composed the scene and had selected and painted all the models. Only one white space was still open on his canvas. It was kept for Mary Magdalene. She was a prostitute who had been forgiven by Jesus and had become one of His devoted followers. The painter just could not find the right model. Walking through Vienna one day, he was struck by the features of a Gypsy woman (a semi-nomadic, rather despised people group of South-eastern Europe). That was his "missing person!" She agreed to sit for him as a model and he took her to the studio where the painting was waiting to be completed.

The woman looked intently at the painting and said "That man on the cross must have been a horrible criminal to deserve a punishment like this". "No", replied the painter, "on the contrary. He was a very good man indeed!" "But why then did the people kill him?" the Gypsy inquired. The painter explained: "He actually died for the sins that we have committed". "For yours

as well?" the girl asked after a thoughtful silence. "Yes", replied the artist truthfully. "Then you must love him very much indeed", concluded the ignorant Gypsy.

These words struck home, for up to that point he had been a Christian by name only. He knew the stories about Jesus, but never personally accepted or applied the deeper meaning of this message to himself. At that moment the veil fell from his eyes. He recognised what Jesus had done for him personally, and was overcome by love for Him. So this incident became the turning point in his life. The Bible calls such a happening conversion, which means change - a change of heart.

You will have to take time to think seriously about this message - and to ponder over it in your heart. You know that your decision has eternal implications. The Bible urges us to make the right choice:

*"This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19).*

The ultimate questions are: "To whom do we entrust ourselves? To whose voice do we listen? Which is the witness to the Truth that God has provided for us? And is that witness really trustworthy?"

I pray that you may be blessed with the full realisation of God and His plan and will for your life, and may you have the determination to choose what is true and right!

Yours sincerely

THEOPHILUS

Dear Friend,

We are convinced that you have benefited from these letters. Answering the following questions will help you to a deeper evaluation, and give us insight into your reflections.

We will reward your efforts with another booklet from our publications.

1. What kind of “common ground” do Christians and Muslims share?
2. Give us your opinion to the author’s appeal “Would it not be better to honestly face the issues and be determined to find the Truth together?”
3. Can you give us any answers to the questions “Who”, “When”, and “Where” with regard to the alleged corruption of the Bible?
4. How can we know whether a prophet has told the truth or not? Substantiate your answer from Scripture.
5. Why is it so important to realize that truth and love belong together?
6. What should be our reaction to the discovery of the fundamental differences between Islam and the Biblical revelation?
7. What do you see as the problem with Dr. Bucaille’s reasoning about the scientific revelations he claims to have found in the Qur’an?
8. What is the difference between the two statements “Sin is what we do” and “Sin is what we are”?
9. Describe in your own words what “faith” means according to the Bible. Then explain what it means in Islam?
10. Who is Jesus according to the Qur’an? Make a list of all titles and descriptions.
11. Why does the cross of Jesus divide mankind into two groups of people?
12. What actually is the true meaning of “conversion”? Have you experienced conversion and, if so, what does it mean to you?

Please send your answers together with any other questions or comments you might have to our address . Thank you.

**Booklets recommended  
for our readers:**

1. Made for a Purpose
2. Dare to compare
3. Destination unknown
4. Dear Abdallah
5. Why trust the Bible
6. Man with a message
7. Qur'an and Bible
8. Follow your heart

Al-Kitab (Bible Course for Muslims)

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.....

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