

***The Cross of Christ: Islamic Perspectives.* By W. Richard Oakes, Jr. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020. 328 pp. ISBN: 978-1-7936-1745-3. \$126 hardcover; \$45 e-book.**

Probably no other theological issues divide Christians and Muslims more than the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus, since these are the foundational historical events that link Jesus with the divinity claim. Christian and Muslim scholars have written extensively about the identity of Jesus in general (birth and infancy, teachings, miracles, death, and resurrection); but few are focused exclusively on the issue of cross of Jesus (death and resurrection). W. Richard Oakes, Jr., has provided readers with a comprehensive presentation on the cross/death of Jesus in the Islamic tradition with a unique and significant focus on early Islamic commentaries concerning this controversial topic.

Part I provides a comprehensive overview of Jesus in the Qur'an and the early Islamic tradition, especially comparing this material to the early Christian tradition. Oakes presents the Jesus of the Qur'an, New Testament, para-biblical Literature, and seventeen classical works of Islamic literature. This presentation that reveals the author's considerable knowledge of the key primary and secondary sources of both the Christian and Islamic tradition regarding Jesus. The first three chapters are an excellent source for those who desire to learn not only about the crucifixion of Jesus in these religious traditions, but also the infancy narratives, titles, and miracles of Jesus.

The summation of all this material of the first four chapters leads Oakes to the conclusion that the Qur'anic Jesus has fewer ties with the Biblical Jesus and correlates more with the para-biblical literature of the first Christian centuries. As he shows, the titles given to Jesus—such as messiah, prophet, and messenger—appear to be the same in the Qur'an and the New Testament, but there is a radical difference in the meaning of these titles, especially since the Qur'an does not seem to situate these titles in their first century context. For example, Jesus is called the Messiah in the Qur'an, but there seems to be no indication of the significance of this title in its first-century Jewish-Christian controversial context. Chapter three is significant in this regard because of the similarity of Jesus in the para-biblical literature and the Qur'an. The conclusion of first part of the book is that Jesus conforms to the image of prophets and messengers of the Islamic tradition, and therefore is a model for the ultimate prophet and messenger of Islam, Muhammad.

Regarding the main issue of the book, Part I covers the ambiguous passage from the Qur'an that essentially denies the fundamental Christian doctrine of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection: "That they said (in boast), 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah'; but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not" (Qur'an 4:157, translation by Yusuf Ali). The main issue of so much work of translators and commentators is the meaning of the phrase "it was made to appear to them (*shubbiha lahum*)" and the related issue of Jesus' death (*tawaffā*). The reader of this book will come away with a fundamental understanding of the ambiguity of these words and the attempt to finding the real meaning of this phrase *shubbiha lahum*. The overall

understanding of the early Islamic interpretative tradition is that Jesus did not die on the cross and another person who resembled Jesus was crucified in his place. The ramification of this understanding is not only the denial that Jesus was crucified but also that he did not experience the resurrection—the foundational theological claim of the New Testament.

Part II presents seventeen Ismā'īlī scholars of the mid-tenth century and their approach to the crucifixion of Jesus. Oakes identifies this material as his original contribution to the scholarship to the Islamic approach to the crucifixion of Jesus. He presents not only a biography of these authors but also a translation of their writings on the crucifixion of Jesus that provides “the entirety of their comments about the crucifixion for this analysis” (p. 127). A review of these commentaries reveals that they presumed the crucifixion to be true but “it is then used as a premise in an argument for doctrines that are important to the Ismā'īlīs, such as the veracity of the Qur'an, the use of *hadīth* in commentaries, reason vs. revelation, and Muhammad's “prophethood, along with the legitimacy of the Ismā'īlī prophets, *du'āh*, and their Imam” (p. 258). Thus, the central issue for these writers was not the crucifixion of Jesus, but other matters that are indirectly related to the cross of Jesus: “the arguments are for essential Ismā'īlī doctrines, in which the crucifixion is a premise in the argument” (p. 185).

Part III presents *tafāsīr* scholars—mostly comprised of Sunni commentators—who were writing during the ninth to the twelfth centuries. Most of these commentators determine that it was not Jesus who died on the cross, but another figure who was crucified in his place. We see one of the main different approaches to the solving of this dilemma was either through “lexical meanings of the words and their grammatical relationships” or through “external means, such as *hadiths*” (p. 199). Both grammar and *hadiths* utilized by these scholars usually lead them to a substitution theory with its three principal problems: “It would be unjust for Allah to punish an innocent man in place of Jesus; it would be ironic to punish an innocent man in order to save the innocent Jesus from punishment; it would be irrational for Allah to be the author of the confusion that results from convincingly casting the likeness of one man into another” (p. 223).

The book concludes with an overview of the related literature that presents how various scholars have approached the theme of Jesus in Islam and the crucifixion issue in this last century. This is evidence that Oakes is aware of much of the scholarly material concerning the issue of Jesus' death by crucifixion and ascension to Allah in the Qur'an and Islamic theological tradition. Especially important is his review of Todd Lawson's *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* that serves the author in such a substantial way for his own presentation of this issue.

The major contribution of this volume is its presentation of the Qur'an and early Islamic tradition concerning one of the most perplexing issues between Muslims and Christians. Oakes presents to us the complexity of how a single phrase of the Qur'an 4:157 (*shubbiha lahum*) has such significance because so much is at stake regarding the identity and mission of Jesus for Christians and Muslims. The book is highly recommended for professional specialists in Christian-Muslim relations, professors who are looking for quality teaching material, and graduate students who

desire to understand the complexity of the issue of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Christian and Islamic traditions.

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