

## ARTICLE

# “The Quest of the Historical Jesus” within the Framework of Interreligious Relations in the Middle East

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### **Abstract**

This essay explores the use of the “Quest of the Historical Jesus” framework in Arab and Middle Eastern scholarship. It analyzes its rare but significant presence in contemporary theological discourse. While historical criticism is well-established in Western Christological studies, it is largely unwelcomed by Middle Eastern Christian and Muslim theologians; this results in limited engagement with this method in the region. However, some 20th-century Arab Christian and Muslim authors have employed historical criticism to examine Jesus Christ, producing works that remain largely unstudied in Anglophone and Germanic academic circles. This essay offers a comparative and analytical presentation of four such discourses—two by Christian authors and two by Muslims. By contextualizing these works, it provides a cross-religious perspective on how Arabic-speaking, Middle Easterners have engaged with the historical Jesus (*Īsā al-Masīḥ*) through a method not widely accepted in institutional religious scholarship. This study contributes to a non-Euroamerican, interreligious hermeneutical framework, enriching understanding of the historical Jesus within Middle Eastern contexts.

### **Keywords**

historical criticism, Quest of the Historical Jesus, Middle Eastern Christian, Muslim, comparative

In 1951, the American theologian and social ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr wrote his famous monograph, *Christ and Culture*. This text was written within the broader context of reasoning and inquiry on the relation of religious belief and thought with historical reality and the critical, forensic investigation of historicity. In the West, such attention to Jesus's relation to culture as part of the consideration of the historical nature of knowledge—religious knowledge included—culminated in the development and prevalence of the so-called “Historical Quest” and the method of historical criticism. In Christianity, we witnessed the creation of “the Quest of the Historical Jesus” and “the Quest of the Historical Bible.” Meanwhile, in Islam we had orientalist scholars who started to apply historical-critical methods of investigation to the Prophet and the Holy Book of Islam: “The Quest of the Historical Muhammad” and “the Quest of the Historical Qur’an.” Inquiring about Jesus, therefore, from the perspectives of his relation to history and culture became the birthing womb of the ensuing contextualized reasoning on religiosity, which generated Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*.

Ever since that publication, the majority of Christian Christology scholars have departed in their hermeneutics of Jesus Christ from a serious attention to the conclusions of the “Quest of the Historical Jesus” in order to approach the Jesus of history from a frank conviction that “Gospel and culture are dialectically related.”<sup>1</sup> The belief in the dialectic nature of the connectedness between the Gospel and the cultural context came as a sort of natural evolution of the belief in a dialectic between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history—or, dogmatic Christology and historiological hermeneutics—which was philosophically confirmed in “the Quest of the Historical Jesus’s” realm of reasoning from the nineteenth century till the end of the twentieth.<sup>2</sup> It is now almost taken for granted that the logical, epistemological, and historiological connectedness between faith and time, Gospel and human reality, is fundamentally dialectical and binary in nature.

It was this attention to the binary between Christ and history, Gospel and culture, and faith and context, that generated, since the last decade of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first, new trends in Christological and theological reasoning alike. We witness

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1 Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, John Bowden (trans.), (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 34. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

2 Najib George Awad, “Is a *Perichoresis* between Theological Interpretation and Historical Criticism Possible? Toward A Balanced Hermeneutics of Scriptural Christology,” in *Theological Review*, 31 (2010), 152–78.

now the resurgence of new areas of studies called contextual theology/ Christology and the Global South's theologies or Christologies. They are developed outside the Western, Euro-American world and from the non-Western, Latin, African and Asian contexts; yet they are deeply immersed in the "Historical Quest" scholarship that was developed in the Western hemisphere of religious reasoning. There was a time in the history of Christianity when Christian theology and Christology students in Euro-American academic centers unquestionably believed that

Outside [the study of missions] classes nothing that happened in [the non-Western Christian] world was considered of real significance. Any theology worthy of the name came from Germany, the Netherlands, or Britain, and, now and then, from America. If there was theological reflection taking place in other parts of the world, we know nothing about it.<sup>3</sup>

It has now been noticed that the pendulum has swung and the theological attention to, and appreciation of, global majority's theological and Christological discourses is noticeably growing in extent and impact. Theologians in the Western academy today seriously take on board questions like "has [the global majority] setting significantly affected the way we Christians in the West think about our faith? Have we made the connection between economic and political relations and theological exchange?"<sup>4</sup> There are even Western Christian scholars who went as far as stating that if the theology that matters is the one that is representative of the majority of the Christians, then "theology in the Third World is now the only theology worth caring about," especially if theology is rooted in the actual life-settings of the Christians.<sup>5</sup>

In today's theological and christological libraries, one finds dozens of texts written on theology in general, and on Jesus Christ in particular, from frank locational and non-Western perspectives that are founded on serious adoption of historical criticism and historical quest-like presumptions. Throughout the past three decades, there are found many monographs that represent this genre of theological writing. What, nevertheless,

3 William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books/Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 11–12.

4 Dyrness, *Learning about Theology*, 12.

5 Dyrness, *Learning about Theology*, 13. See also Andrew F. Walls, "Towards an Understanding of Africa's Place in Christian History," in *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, J. S. Pobee, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 180–89 at 182.

caught my attention is the fact that these discourses divide Global South discourses geographically: Christologies (or historical inquiries on Jesus) from Latin America, Christologies from Africa, and Christologies from Asia. Notwithstanding, one hardly finds yet any serious study available in the Anglophone and Germanic academic libraries on Christology—or even on the historical Jesus Christ in general—from indigenous Middle Eastern, Arab authors who build their own reasoning on the reading-games and hermeneutic strategies of the “Quest of the Historical Jesus” scholarship. One can only find some studies composed by western scholar, not on how the historical Jesus is understood in the Middle East, but on the historical Jesus’s manifestation in his life and ministry of particular cultural and contextual features rooted in the Middle Eastern *Sitz im Leben*. Among these very rare texts stand the studies of the late American New Testament scholar and Missionary, Kenneth E. Bailey (1930–2016), especially his earlier *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (1983), and his latter *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (2008). One, nevertheless, cannot but point out here that Bailey’s texts are written by a non-Middle Eastern, First World scholar *about* how Jesus Christ can be understood from the perspective of western author’s imagination of how Middle Easterners would think when they read about Jesus’s life and teaching in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, those local, Middle Eastern authors who try to develop studies on Middle Eastern, Arab theology end up either reductively narrowing down their presentations into very localized, generally religious speech on specific contextual cases without developing any Christology or discourse on Jesus Christ from a serious engagement with any historical inquiry in the Jesus of history.<sup>7</sup> Or, they title their books with something like “the Arab Christ;” but upon reading the content, the reader discovers that the text speaks about Arab *Christians* and almost never about Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

The above negligence, shortcomings, and deviation cases do not at all mean that there are no Arab, Middle Eastern texts written on Jesus Christ

6 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasants and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1983); and K. E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic/InterVarsity Press, 2008).

7 See, for example, chapters 18 and 19 in the recent Mitri Raheb and Mark A. Lamport, eds., *Emerging Theologies from the Global South* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), 246–72.

8 See the typical example of Mouchir Basile Aoun, *The Arab Christ: Towards an Arab Christian Theology of Conviviality*, tr. Sarah Patey (London: Gingko, 2022). See also my short critical review of this text in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 76 no. 4 (2023): 394–96.

during the 20<sup>th</sup> century that actually dared to challenge the mainstream religious thought in that region and adopted frankly the hermeneutic strategies and methods of reasoning one can find in “Quest of the Historical Jesus” scholarship. In this essay, I endeavor to demonstrate that the case is totally otherwise. There are Arab, Middle Eastern authors—not just Christians, but also Muslims—who produced historiological discourses on Jesus Christ during the past century. More intriguing still, these authors developed their discourses from a serious and complete engagement in, and knowledge of, the Quest of the Historical Jesus scholarship that had permeated the Western academic scene during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We do not have yet one analytical study of these Arab, Middle Eastern, historical-critical discourses on Jesus Christ. It seems that the Western academic world is not paying sufficient or comparative attention to them, though some Western scholars, especially in the area of Islamic Studies, express awareness of, at least, the Muslim versions of such texts.<sup>9</sup>

This essay, for the first time, offers an interreligious, comparative, and analytical presentation of four Arab Middle Eastern discourses on the historical Jesus: two by Christians and two by Muslims. It aims at comparing these four multi-religious discourses in order to offer the reader the chance to assess these unique attempts cross-religiously and to construct a historical-critical, Global Majority, Christian-Muslim hermeneutic framework on how contemporary Arab Middle Easterners approached the historical and religious messenger of God called *ʿĪsā al-Masīḥ* (Jesus the Messiah/Christ). In the ensuing sections, I present the four texts in a chronological order, starting with a Christian text from the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ending with another Christian text from the last decades of that century, sandwiching between them two texts written by two Muslim authors who composed their discourses on *al-Masīḥ* (Christ) during the 1950s and the 1960s.

This essay is *not* a paper in contextual theology *per se*, though it focuses on four examples taken from one and the same specific geographical framework. Furthermore, it is *not at all* a paper on Middle Eastern intellectual background in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in general, or on how the Christian and Muslim authors in that region interacted interreligiously with the belief

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9 See, for instance, Gabriel Said Reynolds, “The Islamic Christ,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, eds., Francesca Aran Murphy and Troy A. Stefano (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 183–98; and Mourad Takawi and Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Muslim Perceptions of Jesus,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 15: Thematic Essays (600–1600)*, eds., Douglas Pratt and Charles L. Tieszen (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2020), 123–51.

in Jesus Christ, or even on how this was shaped by the socio-political and literary conditions of the region during that time. This paper is also *not* on how Muslims and Christians talked about Jesus in Middle Eastern history in general. It is, specifically, about how Arab, Middle Eastern Christian and Muslim authors used the claims, methods of reasoning, hermeneutical strategies, and reading-games that, in the western scholarly world, are associated with “The Quest of the Historical Jesus” scholarship. This is the *main* theoretical framework of the paper. The main goal is to show how four unique, Christian and Muslim authors from the Arab Middle East (and contrary to the overwhelming majority of other Christian and Muslim authors in that region who have written about Jesus) used explicitly the toolkit from the “Quest of the Historical Jesus” scholarship to develop a discourse on Jesus Christ in relation to the Middle Eastern life-setting and out of it. Why these four authors and not others? Because they uniquely challenge the mainstream orientations in the Arab Middle East and use in a frank and explicit manner the methods and the discursive claims of historical criticism and historical-critical inquiry to reinterpret Jesus Christ. Such scholarship is not welcomed generally in the Middle East—neither by the Christians concerning Jesus and the gospels, nor by the Muslims concerning the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an. Therefore, they are ideal examples to show how this particular, historically western scholarship was actually embraced by Arab authors during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was used frankly and without further ado in developing discourses on Jesus of Nazareth.

The interreligious importance of the abovementioned theoretical framework is threefold: First, it demonstrates an interreligious binary reading-game played by Christian and Muslim authors, each approaching the same subject from the particular perspective and interest of his own religious belief and background. Second, the subject of Jesus Christ’s life and ministry is an old, classical, and everlasting subject in interreligious dialogue, reasoning, and relations—in use ever since Muslims and Christians co-existed in the Middle East. Third, the paper makes a comparative juxtaposition between Christian and Muslim stances—not on Jesus only, but *mainly on a particular scholarly approach to Jesus* (that is, The Quest of the Historical Jesus) that appeared in the Western world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which these Middle Eastern Muslims and Christians encountered, embraced, and decided to use. Each one did this by developing a binary relation between the Jesus of History and his understanding in the religious imagination of their particular faith.

## The Syrian Christ, or the Syrians of Christ's Homeland

The first author I consider is Ībrāhīm al-Raḥbānī, a Christian who is an Arab immigrant to the United States of America. Al-Raḥbānī was born in 1869, in a village called Btater in Mount Lebanon. He immigrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the whole region was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, and when the countries that represent the region's geopolitical map of today were not created yet. From his homeland, al-Raḥbānī decided to write a book in English, titled, *The Syrian Christ*. That was in 1916, and he composed his book in Boston and New York, wherefrom the book was published as well. In this monograph, al-Raḥbānī endeavors to demonstrate that Jesus in the Bible and the overall biblical content alike mirror genuinely what he called “the Syrian cultural and societal context.” Jesus mirrors how the “Oriental” or Syrian people live in their daily life, not just in the past but right in the present as well (at least the present time of the author). One can validly suggest here that al-Raḥbānī wanted to primarily disclose and unpack the spiritual significance of the ordinary life *habitus* of Oriental people.<sup>10</sup>

To display a systematic reading of al-Raḥbānī's thesis in the book, it is important to pause at the foundational ethical motivation that drove the author to compose his book. Below, I quote at full-length al-Raḥbānī's ethical motif in his own terms:

But “the hour cometh and now is” when the peoples of the earth are beginning to realize that righteousness and truth, kindness and good manners, are the exclusive possessions of no one race. The peoples of the earth are beginning to realize that a mutual sympathetic understanding between the various races is an asset of civilization, and a promoter of the cause of that human commonwealth for which all good men pray and hope. Therefore, as one who owes much to both the East and the West, I deem it my duty to do what I can to promote such a sympathetic understanding, without doing violence to the truth.<sup>11</sup>

10 Throughout I will employ the adjective “Oriental,” despite its antiquated use in the English language, because that is the term used by al-Raḥbānī.

11 Ībrāhīm al-Raḥbānī, *The Syrian Christ*, (Georgia, USA: Bridges Publishing/Freiburg: Verlag Hans-Jürgen Maurer, 2008), 164.

The above statement indicates that al-Raḥbānī departs from a principal rejection of racial and cultural discriminations and from his belief in the total equality of all races and civilizations. This is indeed a candor and revolutionary voice in that old American scene, where discrimination and racism were paramount at that time. In addition, his ethical confirmation comes out at a time when Western colonial supremacy and hegemonic condescension, especially in its Orientalist version, could not be more absolutist and could not reach a higher peak. In the midst of this Western, colonial, Christian-centered supremacy and Orientalism, al-Raḥbānī resolved to write a text on the Orient and its people by means of inviting his American co-citizens to pause at the historical characteristics of the most central and referential figure in their Christian and Jewish traditions and socio-anthropological conscience. He invites them to ponder the character of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, in order to realize his genuine Oriental-Syrian identity.

Al-Raḥbānī does this to offer an ethical alternative to the Western colonial discriminative stances on other civilizations. He pursues this by demonstrating through his book's chapters that the core-figure in the imagination of the Western world, Jesus Christ, is central, referential and criterial to the Oriental people as well. By this, al-Raḥbānī wants to flip over the center-margin equation by showing that the cultural center of gravity must be granted to the Orient because the ultimate human figure, Jesus Christ, is himself Oriental (Syrian). Thus, what he represents, namely the culture of Syria or the Orient, must not be relegated to the margin. Otherwise, Jesus himself would lose his centrality and join the Orientals on the margin to which they were cast by the West. Decolonizing the Orient-Occident equation (in a tendency similar to the one Homi Bhabha pursued later in the 1990s) is here fulfilled vis-à-vis highlighting the Syrian/Oriental identity of Jesus and the Bible alike.<sup>12</sup> For al-Raḥbānī, this is not a counter-discrimination or counter-racism tendency. It is, rather, a confrontation of discrimination and racism by means of emphasizing particularity and individuation. The Oriental/Syrian context is unique and one of its kind, and this is what the historical Jesus of Nazareth personally manifests.

Upon reading the title of al-Raḥbānī's book, *The Syrian Christ*, the reader might anticipate encountering a text written on the inquiry about Jesus's

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12 See, for example, Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1994); and H. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1990). I study Bhabha's and other postcolonial scholars' projects in my forthcoming monograph, whose tentative title is *From Orientalism into Postcolonialism: Essays from Historical, Epistemological, Methodological and Religious Perspectives*.



historical identity and biography, or even a text developing Christological hermeneutics of Jesus's history in the Bible approached from the angle of his cultural context. As a matter of fact, reading the detailed contents of the book discloses a different case-in-hand. The book's thesis circles around two main purposes. The first is stated explicitly by al-Raḥbānī in the book's preface. There, al-Raḥbānī relates that his text is not one more commentary on Jesus Christ's life and teaching, but "an Oriental guide to afford Occidental readers of the Bible a more intimate view of the original intellectual and social environment of [the] sacred literature." Al-Raḥbānī, then, elaborates on this Bible-centered focus in the following manner:

The need of the Western readers of the Bible is, in my judgment to enter sympathetically and intelligently into the atmosphere in which the books of the scriptures first took form: To have real intellectual, as well as spiritual, fellowship with those Orientals who sought earnest in their own way to give tangible form to those great spiritual truths, which have been, and ever shall be, humanity's most previous heritage.<sup>13</sup>

The core thesis of al-Raḥbānī's constructed argument for this goal states that, since the central subject of the Bible is a Syrian Oriental figure called Jesus of Nazareth, there is no way for non-Oriental Christians to truly and genuinely understand Jesus's life and ministry, and to apprehend the Gospel message of the Scripture unless they perceived first, even belonged to, the socio-cultural and anthropological nature and constituents of the Oriental/Syrian identity and life. Al-Raḥbānī principally concedes that, in Christianity, Jesus has a theological, ontological identity as "the incarnation of the Spirit of God," thus Jesus "in a higher sense [is] a man without country," and he even is "a prophet and a teacher...[who] belongs to all races and all ages."<sup>14</sup> This theological ontology notwithstanding, al-Raḥbānī adds that the supra-localization of the Gospel must not drive us to forget that "as regards his modes of thought and life and his method of teaching, [Jesus] was a Syrian of the Syrians...Jesus never saw any other country than Palestine." It is interesting that al-Raḥbānī never calls Jesus "Palestinian," but always "Syrian" and "Oriental."<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, the Biblical attestations on Jesus, which were composed in the same life-context to which Jesus belonged, are also "Syrian of the Syrians." According to al-Raḥbānī, "Gospel truths

13 Al-Raḥbānī, 11–12 (vi–vii).

14 Al-Raḥbānī, 15 (3).

15 Al-Raḥbānī, 15 (4).

should have come down to the succeeding generations—and to the nations of the West—cast in Oriental molds of thought, and intimately intermingled with the simple domestic and social habits of Syria. The gold of the Gospel carries with it the sand and dust of its original home.”<sup>16</sup>

The Gospel of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, the Biblical testimonies on the *Heilsgeschichte* have a birthplace, a homeland, and indigenized identity. Only those who were born in the very same homeland, and who hail from the very same realm of indigeneity, states al-Raḥbānī, can have truly “an ‘inside view’ of the Bible, which by the nature of things, a Westerner cannot have.”<sup>17</sup> So, only Syrian-Orientals (like the author himself) can authentically understand and explain the Bible to other non-Orientals and non-Syrians: “as a sojourner in this Western world, whenever I open my Bible it reads like a letter from home...the Bible might all have been written in my primitive village home, on the Western slopes of Mount Lebanon some thirty years ago.”<sup>18</sup> Lest the reader accuses him of insinuating racist discriminative implications in his declaration, thus breaching the ethical paradigm he constructed his entire thesis upon (see above), al-Raḥbānī immediately amends his tone and confirms his recognition of the Western world’s success in “knowing the mind of Christ” and his belief that denying this fact “would do violent injustice, not only to the Occidental mind, but to the Gospel itself as well, by making it enigma, utterly foreign to the native spirituality of the majority of humankind.”<sup>19</sup> This confessional, self-remitting note notwithstanding, al-Raḥbānī proceeds to emphasize: “It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a people to understand fully a literature [here the Bible] which has not sprung from that people’s own racial life...as a literature, the Bible is an imported article in the Western world, especially in the home of the Anglo-Saxon race.”<sup>20</sup>

Earlier in his ethical principal rule, al-Raḥbānī called for banning the discriminative language of racialism. Here, he personally uses the language of race and alludes in this use to an intellectual and cultural, inescapably discriminative view. Those Anglo-Saxon readers of the Bible, al-Raḥbānī suggests, and because they are not Syrian/Oriental, ends up caged on the level of merely relating to the Biblical content as “only a photographer... deals with externals.” He believes this to be the case simply because, as an outsider visitor of a foreign land (the land of the Bible), the Anglo-Saxon can

16 Al-Raḥbānī, 15 (4).

17 Al-Raḥbānī, 16 (5).

18 Al-Raḥbānī, (5–6).

19 Al-Raḥbānī, 16 (6).

20 Al-Raḥbānī, 16 (6–7).

only say what that life in that land means to *him*, but not what life means to “the *people of* that land themselves.”<sup>21</sup>

It is this indigenous rootedness in particular homeland and cultural reality that alone enables the Scripture’s readers to perceive Jesus the Syrian Oriental. Al-Raḥbānī also never talks about Jesus “the Jew,” not even in the religious or theological sense of Jewishness. This, despite the fact that, in 1916, Israel was not yet existent, thus the politico-ideological ramifications of its 1948 establishment in the Arab World were not part of the picture. Be that as it may: “The story of Jesus’s birth and kindred Bible records disclose not only the predisposition of the Syrian mind to accept miracles as divine acts without critical examination, but also its attitude towards conception and birth—an attitude which differs fundamentally from that of the Anglo-Saxon mind.”<sup>22</sup>

For al-Raḥbānī, such stories of Jesus’s birth and nativity and their existence in the Christian Bible are embraced by the Syrians/Orientalists with absolute and unquestionable certainty on the basis of utter intuitiveness: They do not need to sift the stories for “there is nothing in the phraseology of such statements which is not in perfect harmony with the common, everyday speech of [the Syrian] people.”<sup>23</sup> The same perfectly applies, in al-Raḥbānī’s conviction, to the central stories in the Gospels about Jesus’s last hours, farewell speech, last supper, and agony in the garden of Gethsemane: “The events of the ‘upper room’ on Mount Zion, and of Gethsemane, are faithful photographs of striking characteristics of Syrian life.”<sup>24</sup> In a hardly missed romanticization of the Orient almost to the extent of fantasized imagination, al-Raḥbānī speaks about Jesus’s last supper with his disciples in the following manner:

The last supper was no isolated event in Near Eastern history. Its fraternal atmosphere, intimate associations, and sentimental intercourse are such as characterize every such gathering of Syrian friends...from the simple ‘table manners’ up to that touch of sadness and idealism which the Master gave that meal...I find nothing which is not in perfect harmony with what takes place on such occasions in my native land.<sup>25</sup>

21 Al-Raḥbānī, 17 (8).

22 Al-Raḥbānī, 23 (21–22).

23 Al-Raḥbānī, 23 (23).

24 Al-Raḥbānī, 39 (56).

25 Al-Raḥbānī, (56–57).

Jesus's life and personality merely confirm and sanctify the common Syrian life of the Oriental people. Jesus did not invent any new thing. In Jesus, there is nothing new under the sun for the Syrians. His life and especially his, usually theologically central, agony in the garden before the crucifixion are basically valuable due to their expression of "the fundamental traits of the Oriental nature,"<sup>26</sup> Be that as it may, al-Raḥbānī concludes, the accurate and insider understanding of the Syrian Bible must teach us the following: "Before we can fully know our Master as the cosmopolitan Christ, we must first know him as the Syrian Christ."<sup>27</sup>

The above was the logical preconception that manifests the main purpose behind al-Raḥbānī's thesis. In his elaboration on that goal, al-Raḥbānī already furnishes for his belief in the existence of a so-called "Syrian/Oriental mind," on one hand, and "Occidental/Anglo-Saxon mind," on the other. This language-game places us directly within the circle of the second determining purpose of his book: developing a comparative binary hermeneutics of the Oriental-Syrian person and culture and the Western-Occidental one by means of the Biblical attestations. Al-Raḥbānī traces this binary comparativism vis-à-vis taking Jesus as a case-study off the center of the attention and placing therein, instead, the scriptural texts. This time, he travels beyond the gospels and their accounts on Jesus into the other books of the Old and the New Testaments alike. He performs this by treating the textual attestations of both testaments as if theology- and history-free, and using their contents supra-chronometrically as records on the stark difference and particularity of the Oriental character.

According to al-Raḥbānī, whatever the Biblical texts convey in their various literary forms and textual genres, they all want to reveal that, while the Western religious mind is rational and a lover of "reasonable faith," the Oriental religious mind clings tightly to, and expresses itself in, "superstitious forms of worship."<sup>28</sup> The first attitude is presented as totally *definitive* of Occidental Christianity, whereas the latter is absolutely and meta-historically symptomatic of Oriental Christianity. Furthermore, when it comes to living *modus operandi*, the Occidental person is obsessed with "correctness of the technique" of performance and conduct. To the contrary, the Oriental's life is "brimful of sentiment," and this is what the Bible specifically illustrates about the Oriental life of Jesus and other Biblical figures.<sup>29</sup> Contrary to the

26 Al-Raḥbānī, 46 (72).

27 Al-Raḥbānī, 48 (77).

28 Al-Raḥbānī, 22 (19).

29 Al-Raḥbānī, 39 (57).

modern Western and far-Eastern persons, who live their lives in a manner expressive of the *habitus* of “a businessman or and industrial worker,”

the son of the Near East is more emotional, more intense, and more communicative...his temperament remains somewhat juvenile, and his manner of speech intimate and unreserved... the Oriental’s manner of speech has been that of a worshiper...[his] life revolves around a religious center...[which manifests] his intellectual limitations and superstitious fears.<sup>30</sup>

No wonder, al-Raḥbānī gleans from the above, that the Oriental, opposite of the Occidental, “has not achieved much in the world of science, industry and commerce...previous to his very recent contact with the West, he never knew what structural iron and machinery were...He has never been a man of inventions. His faithful repetition of the past has left no gulf between him and his remote ancestors.”<sup>31</sup> It is not surprising, al-Raḥbānī opines, that the Syrian’s daily language is soaked fully in the linguistic oasis of a religious book (the Bible) from his ancestors’ past. The Oriental “has no secular language”, because

The history of the Orient compels [one] to believe that the soil out of which scriptures spring is that whose life is the active sympathy of religion, regardless of the degree of acquired knowledge... an industrial and commercialist atmosphere is not conducive to the production of sacred books. Where the chief interests of life center in external things, religion is bound to become only one and perhaps a minor concern in life.<sup>32</sup>

Al-Raḥbānī takes the reader farther in his comparative binary to touch also upon other life aspects, like the relation to parents (Jesus’s relation to his parents become an example), the attitude towards enemies (Jesus’s teaching on blessing one’s enemies), literal accuracy, manners of speech, the stance on woman (Jesus’s attitude towards the sinning female) and the stark contrast between East and West regarding them. Ultimately, al-Raḥbānī proposes that the Bible is the primary interpretation and source of the Syrian Oriental person and culture to the Western readers.

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30 Al-Raḥbānī, 51 (81–82).

31 Al-Raḥbānī, 52 (83).

32 Al-Raḥbānī, 53 (85–86).

The reader of al-Raḥbānī's book can certainly realize that the author is not actually representing Jesus Christ to re-understand by means of his life and ministry the historical, indeed Oriental and Jewish, context and era. He is, rather, implementing Jesus's Biblical narrative in the service of al-Raḥbānī's own, premeditated, personal imagination of the Orient. The details of his logic and rationale indicate conspicuously that he relies fully on a dialectic binary as a method of reasoning, something which today's postcolonialism (whether right or wrong) judge to be colonial and hegemonic, a practice once performed by the West over the rest. From this perspective, al-Raḥbānī seems to be a fully assimilated author, who echoes, rather than confronts, the prevalent Orientalist binary tendencies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Western scholarship. He does not truly speak about the "Orient," but bequeaths his own understanding, experience, and imagination of an "Orient" that is totally subordinated to his very own narrow, personal, and privative life-experience. His language and expressions all echo views and stipulations one can read in the texts of Western Orientalists, missionaries, and travelers from that period of time, when a binary comparison is applied to construct an "Occident-versus-Orient" imagination.<sup>33</sup> Al-Raḥbānī promotes this binary by recruiting the Biblical texts and Jesus's life in its service. He seems not interested in pondering the possibility that the scriptural texts may not actually reflect the Oriental background of their original authors. The scriptural language, expressions, and stories might actually have shaped, influenced, and left its marks on the Oriental people. Maybe what we have is not the cultural context imaged in the scriptural language, but the scriptural language embraced by the Bible's readers and their context, something which can happen East and West, North and South, and with any or every reader imaginable.

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33 See, for example, Hamilton Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947); H. Gibb, ed., *Whither Islam? A Survey of Modern Movements in the Muslim World* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1932); Gustav Von Grunebaum, *Islam, Essays on the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1955); Ignaz Goldziher, *Verlesungen ueber Islam* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitaetsbuchandlung, 1910); and Henry H. Jessup, *Syrian Home-Life*, Isaac Riley (ed.), (New York: Dodd & Mead Publishers, 1974).

### III. The Genius of Christ: A Muslim Celebrating His Middle Eastern Fellow

One of the unique and memorable Muslim attempts at relating to Jesus Christ and understanding him historically was made in Egypt during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1953, the famous Egyptian writer and scholar, ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād (1889-1964), wrote a book in Arabic on Jesus Christ titled, *‘Abqariyyat al-Masīh* (The Genius of Christ). The book was positively welcomed by the Egyptian readership, Muslim and Christian alike—which led to the production of a second edition of the book in 1958, this time under the title, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh: Fī Tārīkh wa-Kushūf al-‘Aṣr al-Ḥadīth* (The Life of Christ: In the History and Discoveries of the Modern Era). In 1996, a slightly revised third edition of the book was produced. That edition was translated into English in 2001 by Peter Ford, Jr.<sup>34</sup> In the ensuing paragraphs, I present al-‘Aqqād’s thesis using the Arabic second version of his text that was re-published in Egypt in 2005.<sup>35</sup>

In the introduction he made for the second edition of his monograph, al-‘Aqqād states the fundamental motivation behind writing on Jesus Christ. He reveals his primary interest in the “history of the religious call” (*tārīkh ad-da‘wah ad-dīniyyah*) in general, after he realized that the phenomenon of “prophetic call” (*da‘wat an-nubūwah*) is exclusively symptomatic of the Semitic nations of the Orient. Al-‘Aqqād relates that, contrary to other places, the Orient witnessed the birth of grand historical prophecies. In a noticeable socio-anthropological sensitivity, al-‘Aqqād further adds that these prophecies originated in the context of what he calls “the caravan city-stations” (*mudun al-qawāfil*), neither in the civilizational urban context, nor in the context of Bedouin societies.<sup>36</sup> The caravans’ resting-stations, which are emancipated from the governing law-codes of the urban setting and the rule of power and blood-vengeance of the nomadic world alike, resorted to a middle-ground, referential option between the two by relying on prophetic guidance (*al-hidāyah an-nabawiyyah*). Al-‘Aqqād states that he deduced this conclusion from investigating the history of the prophetic *vitae* of “Abraham, Christ

34 ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, *The Genius of Christ* (trans. F. Peter Ford, Jr: Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

35 ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh: Fī Tārīkh wa-Kushūf al-‘Aṣr al-Ḥadīth* [The Life of Christ: In the History and Discoveries of the Modern Era], (ed. Dāliyā M. Ībrāhīm, rev. ed.: Cairo: Nahḍat Maṣr Press, 2005).

36 Al-‘Aqqād (2005), 3.

and Muhammad, peace be upon them” (*fī sīrat al-khalīl ʾIbrāhīm, wa sīrat Muḥammad wal-Masīh, ʿalayhim as-salām*).<sup>37</sup>

Al-ʿAqqād, then, informs his readers that his study is pursued from the perspective of a historical quest on religions (*Religionsgeschichte*), not from any literary, theological, jurisprudential, or even scriptural perspectives. Later on in his text, he will reveal his deep interest and avid attention to the scholarship of “the Quest of the Historical Jesus,” which was avidly popular and paramount in the Western, primarily German, Christian scholarship during his lifetime. What we have, then, in al-ʿAqqād’s text is an Arabic, Muslim intellectual attempt at constructing a discourse or a portrait on “the Jesus of history” apart from “the Christ of faith.” Such distinction was quite known and frankly preconceived in the Euro-American circles of academic and non-academic reasonings.<sup>38</sup>

Abiding with the rules of investigation implemented in the Quest of the Historical Jesus’s arena, al-ʿAqqād discloses that he postponed the publishing of the second edition of his book, *The Genius of Christ*, for five years because he wanted first to acquaint himself with the latest archeological discoveries and published studies on this area of reasoning, especially the ones that became part of the intellectual research activities in the West. Let us notice here that al-ʿAqqād states this at the moment in modern history when the manuscripts of Qumran Valley, near the Dead Sea, eastern Jordan, were unearthed at the beginning of 1947. Al-ʿAqqād expresses his great interest in looking at the scrolls and reading the latest studies and commentaries scholars produced on them.<sup>39</sup> The other sources he also wanted to read before editing his book were the latest English studies on Jesus’s historicity that, according to al-ʿAqqād, were written from the philosophy of history (*falsafat at-tārīkh*) perspective.<sup>40</sup> He relates his discovery of two genre of texts written within this circle of reasoning: Contemplative, philosophically oriented and romanticized reflections, and historiological, critical and

37 Al-ʿAqqād (2005), 3.

38 For an exposition of this historical quest phenomenon in Western scholarship in the twentieth century, see, for example, Robert Funk et. al., eds., *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say? The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993); Marcus Borge, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1993); Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, eds., *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: SCM Press, 1998); Gregory W. Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Question: The Challenge of History to Religious Authority* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); and James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), Vol. 1.

39 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 8ff.

40 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 13ff.



forensic comparative religions' texts.<sup>41</sup> He, then, states his enjoyment of reading the first genre and his serious reliance on the second one, because he believes that the second genre engages him into rational discussion with its theories.<sup>42</sup>

Be that as it may, as a serious scholar and researcher, al-ʿAqqād relates that the second edition of his book was re-prepared after consulting the three following sources: Qumran Scrolls (*lafāʾif wādi Qumrān*), the new revised translations into foreign languages of the Old and the New Testaments (*tarājim al-ʿahdayin al-qadīm wal-jadīd al-munaqqāḥah fī al-lughāt al-gharbiyyah*), and the new compositions of religious and non-religious thinkers on Jesus Christ from post-WWII contemporary perspectives (*muʿallafāt al-mufakkirīn ad-dīniyyīn wa-ghayir ad-dīniyyīn ʿan al-sayyid al-masīh min jihat an-nazar al-ʿasriyyah baʿd al-harb al-ʿilamiyyah ath-thāniyyah*).<sup>43</sup> What al-ʿAqqād concludes from his study of these sources is that neither Qumran Scrolls, nor the revised translations, nor the new studies offer any additional data that might change the thesis on Jesus's historical life, which he developed in the first edition of his book.

By affirming this, al-ʿAqqād is implicitly explaining, and justifying, the arguments in his book not just on Christ's life, but primarily on Christ's *genius* (*ʿabqarriyah*). What supports the emphasis on Christ's genius, in al-ʿAqqād's view, is discovering from the reading of the Dead Sea Scrolls that the pre-Christ texts and teachings did not really pave the way to Christ's message. The Scrolls' content does not provide us with anything we do not already know about Christ's message (*lakinnahā lā-tudīf ilā maʿlūmātīnā ʿan ḥaqāʾiq al-risālah al-Masīhiyyah wa-lā tukhrījānā bi-shayʾ jadīd fī amr hadhih al-risālah*).<sup>44</sup> What they merely suggest, according to him, is the uniqueness, intelligent newness, and creativity of the message Christ divulges to emancipate the religious call from dead literalism and intellectual stagnation (*risālah lāzimah tuʿallim an-nās mā-hum bi-ḥājah ilā an yataʿallamuh kullamā ghariqū fī lujjatin rākidah min al-ḥurūf al-mayyitah wal-ashkāl al-mutaḥajjirah*). The genius of Christ lies in his remedying of the religious call that existed before him, and not in his continuation, consummation or completion of that thought: "This is Christ's message to that era that was infested with its stagnation and hypocrisy alike"

41 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 15.

42 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 16. He names, specifically, two texts he personally studied carefully and positively appraised: Rupert Furneaux, *The Other Side of the Story: The Strange Story of Christianity: The Dark Spot of History* (London: Cassell and Company, 1953); and Robert Graves and Joshua Podro, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (New York: Doubleday, 1954).

43 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 9.

44 Al-ʿAqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 12.

(*hadhihi hiya risālat al-sayyid al-Masīh fī dhalika al-ʿaṣr al-maūbūʿ bi-jumūdiḥ wa-riyāʾih ʿalā al-sawāʿ*).<sup>45</sup> Be that as it may, al-ʿAqqād stipulates that nothing new in scholarship truly challenges the genius of the historical Christ. “We do not deem these authors to have informed us of a new opinion that is capable of driving us to revise an essential aspect in the picture we clearly have of Christ’s message, when we collected our thought and information first to compose this book.”<sup>46</sup>

The question now is, what are the fundamental constituents of Christ’s genius message, according to al-ʿAqqād? Here, al-ʿAqqād dwells on a particular reading offered by scholars of the Historical Jesus Quest, especially the one that started to dominate the arena of that Quest from the post-WWII era till, at least, the 1990s. This reading was inaugurated by the well-known, German theologian and Biblical scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, and then developed by some of his students, like Günter Bornkam, Ernst Käzmann, Hans Conzelmann, and others, and it is known as “the Second Quest of the Historical Jesus.” In this school of thought, scholars quit inquiring about the historical Jesus and moved into investigating historical Christianity: How did Christianity come historically into being? It seems from his book that al-ʿAqqād was one of the—certainly rare—Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim—even rarer—followers of Western research on the Second Historical Quest (something not even Arab, Eastern Christians in that region were caring to read about, let alone attentively study).<sup>47</sup> He reveals his knowledge of one specific theory in the Second Quest, namely the one that suggests that, after Christ’s departure, Christianity was created from two branches or religious versions: the first—centered around James, the “Lord’s brother”—was based in Jerusalem and focused primarily on conveying Jesus’s message to the Jews, whereas the second—circled around Paul the Apostle and his followers—

45 Al-ʿAqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 12.

46 Al-ʿAqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 20.

47 If the “First Quest of the Historical Jesus” is usually attributed to Albert Schweitzer’s inquiry, the so-called “Second Quest of the Historical Jesus” is ascribed to the scholarship of some of the most influential students of Rudolf Bultmann, like Ernst Käsemann and Günter Bornkam, as well as to Käsemann’s followers Norman Perrin and Ernst Fuchs. It focuses mainly on pinpointing what is exactly and evidently historical inside the Gospels’ texts and what is not. It is more like a historical critical inquiry on the historical attestations to Jesus, rather than investigating Jesus *per se*. See, for example, Colin Brown and Craig Evans, *A History of the Quest for the Historical Jesus, Volume 2: From the Post-War Era through Contemporary Debates* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers/Zondervan Academic, 2022); and Ernst Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlag, 1967).

spread outside Palestine and far from the Jewish temple, and was directed solely at the Gentiles.<sup>48</sup>

Against this twofold thesis, al-‘Aqqād emphasizes that Christianity’s identity and uniqueness is directly attributed to Christ’s genius *per se*, not to any of his disciples or followers (that is, James and Paul). In addition, al-‘Aqqād confirms, Christ’s message has never been particularistic or exclusively directed towards the Jews alone. It is not Paul who turned Christ’s message into an inclusivist, universal call. The calling of all the nations started with Christ’s religious call as such. The disciples did not invent this posterior to Christ. They, rather, learned from him to include the nations in his own call and not to restrict it to the people of Israel (*da‘wat al-umam qad bada‘t fi ‘ahd al-sayyid al-Masīh, wa-anna at-talāmīdh wal-rusul ta‘allamū minhu an yashmulū al-umam bi-da‘watih wa-lā yaqṣirūhā ākhir al-amr ‘alā banī Īsrā‘īl*). The historical data tell us, al-‘Aqqād relates, that Christ had no other choice but to redirect his call to the other nations after some Jews rejected his message in his lifetime. Universalizing the message, al-‘Aqqād concludes, was the most plausible option for avoiding the only remaining result of giving up on this message altogether.<sup>49</sup> Denying the universal and inclusivist call of Christ not only ignores his genius, it also twists and misuses the available historical data and abuses it in the service of the author’s privative fecundity and imagination (*min waḥī al-qarīḥah auw min waḥī al-khayāl*).<sup>50</sup>

It is intriguing that al-‘Aqqād does not think that the salvific, or redemption-centered, aspect in Christ’s message is one of the constituents of Jesus’s genius religious faith. Belief in salvation and in the appearance of a saving messenger (*al-īmān bil-khalāṣ wa-zuhūr al-rasūl al-mukhalliṣ*) at an anticipated time is a common idea among religions, as the science of comparative religions reveals.<sup>51</sup> To the contrary, al-‘Aqqād adds, the idea of the appearance of a divine messenger called “the Messiah” (*al-Masīh*) is unique and unprecedented, as it has not been known in this formula before the Torah and its commentaries (*qabl kutub at-Taūrāt wa-tafsīrātihā auw at-ta‘līqāt ‘alayhā*).<sup>52</sup> However, the available historical evidence demonstrates that Jesus did not image *verbatim* the character of the Messiah as it was depicted in Jewish religion. Jesus hailed from Galilee, which was degraded in the eyes

48 Al-‘Aqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 17–18.

49 Al-‘Aqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 19.

50 Al-‘Aqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 20.

51 Al-‘Aqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 22. One can find it, al-‘Aqqād asserts, in the belief of the native Americans, in the history of the Egyptians and Babylonians, and in the teachings of the Zoroastrians.

52 Al-‘Aqqād, *Ḥayāt al-Masīh*, 22ff.

of the people of Judea, who never believed that any good thing or a prophet can come from it. Furthermore, Jesus was born historically in 5–6 B.C. This means that he started his ministry at the age of twenty-three or twenty-four. For al-‘Aqqād, this is another indicator of Christ’s uniqueness and genius different from the Jewish tradition of the Levite priests, who did not start their service until they become thirty years of age, and of the Scribes and the Rabbis, who were not deemed qualified for their positions until they became fifty years of age.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to his date of birth, place of origin, and ministry at young age, Christ’s message, that founded the Christian faith, is incomparable with any other message, and it does not represent any historical evolution of messages and trends of thought preceding it. All Christ’s teachings and ideas reflect one point of view that had never had any existence except in the life and ministry of the person called Jesus Christ:

The Christ-like sayings criticize the Pharisees, though they do not represent the views of the Sadducees or the Samaritans... They also criticize the fanatic Essenes, though they do not follow the views of the philosophers, the Epicureans, or the Stoics... they also refer to the sayings of Moses, Abraham, and the prophets, yet they do not abide unreservedly or fully with everything they say or mimic them or slavishly abide with them.<sup>54</sup>

The message conveyed by Christ was unique and unprecedented, though it was divulged as a response to the needs of its historical era (*jā’at fī ibānihā wifāqan li-matālib zamānihā*).<sup>55</sup> Being a response to its era’s needs does not negate or deny Christ message’s unique genius, because Christ’s call was staunchly resisted and antagonized by the people of that era.<sup>56</sup> Had it been just one call similar to others, it would have not been a source of threat and danger for the messenger’s life. Jesus’s message was a call for “changing the direction” and an inauguration of a new destination that can never reconcile with the other directions and destinations (*taghiyir wijhah wa-iftitāh qublah, walā sabīl ilā al-jam‘ bayn al-wijhatayin wa-lā ilā at-taraddud ilā al-qiblatayin*).<sup>57</sup> The new destination is grounded in Christ’s call for obeying “the law of love”

53 Al-‘Aqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 69.

54 Al-‘Aqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 78.

55 Al-‘Aqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 86.

56 Al-‘Aqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 89.

57 Al-‘Aqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 90.

(*sharīʿat al-hubb*) and the word of conscience (*kalimat ad-damīr*).<sup>58</sup> It is a law that deconstructs every known tradition or convention, and it blows away every figural reality (*sharīʿah tahdum kulla ʿurfīn qāʾim wa-taʿṣufu bi-kulli shaklin zāhir*).<sup>59</sup> All this and many other things, al-ʿAqqād concludes, disclose the genius of Christianity in contemporary terms, understood now as one-of-a-kind and very rare supreme genius that has no equal in all ages (*jalāʿ al-ʿabqariyyah al-masīhiyyah fī sūrah ʿaṣriyyah...wa qad qalla fihā nazīr hadhihi al-ʿabqariyyah al-ʿāliyah fī tawārīkh al-azmān qātibah*).<sup>60</sup>

In al-ʿAqqād’s book, *The Genius of Christ*, we encounter a unique, almost rare, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim scholar. We have a Muslim versed deeply in the scholarship of the Quest of the Historical Jesus as it was conducted and as it evolved in the Western academic world. This scholarship, and not just in al-ʿAqqād’s time but also today, has never been truly welcomed, studied, or even seriously or openly conversed with by any known Christian Arab theologian in any of the Oriental Christian denominations that were, and still are, predominantly leaning more frankly towards religious orthodoxy, conservatism, and piety. One might presume that a Muslim scholar like al-ʿAqqād resorts to the historical-critical school in order to demonstrate the falsehood and historical incredibility and inauthenticity of Christian faith. Quite the contrary, he uses the historical-critical method to demonstrate the uniqueness and genius of the messenger and prophet of Christianity. Yes, al-ʿAqqād also uses a binary and dialectical comparative method of reasoning. Yet, he does not implement it in constructing a binary between Christianity and Islam. He points, rather, to a binary between the message of Christ and every other religious or philosophical view existing before him, contemporaneous to him, or existing today. One does not, basically, find in al-ʿAqqād an attempt to create a binary between the Muslim Orient and the Christian Occident by means of historically investigating Christ. He is, thus, different from his Syrian compatriot Ḫbrāhīm Raḥbānī. For him, the binary is not between cultural historical contexts viewed from the perspective of the religious belief of these contexts’ inhabitants. The binary lies, instead, between religious, supra-cultural, supra-spatial discourses: The one of Jesus Christ and the remaining religious ones that existed before him. If Raḥbānī relies on the Western, comparative, Orientalist method to confirm the discriminative conclusions, which the Western mind held in his era on the Orient, al-ʿAqqād uses a Western, historical-critical method in a forensic manner not to defend his

58 Al-ʿAqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 108.

59 Al-ʿAqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 110.

60 Al-ʿAqqād, *Hayāt al-Masīh*, 159.

own faith and Oriental religiosity, but to praise and present the uniqueness of the different other.

### A Muslim Walking with the Christ of the Gospels

Close to a decade after *The Genius of Christ's* publication, another Egyptian Muslim author, inspired by al-ʿAqqād, also produced a monograph on the historical Jesus and the gospels. In 1961, the renowned Islamist scholar and author, Muḥammad Faṭḥī ʿUṭhmān (1928–2010), composed a text touching upon the Quest of the Historical Jesus and aspiring at presenting a balanced and positive presentation of the Jesus of history to Egyptian Muslims and Christians. ʿUṭhmān's book was titled, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ fī al-Anāʾijl al-Arbaʿah* (With Christ in the Four Gospels). Considerably versed in the main scholarly literature and discourses of the First Quest of the Historical Jesus, ʿUṭhmān decides to gainsay this Quest's skeptical and negating claims about Jesus's historicity, and he constructs an alternative discourse centered around the attestations on Christ in the Christian gospels. "I only want," ʿUṭhmān declares, "to be acquainted peacefully and sincerely with Christ and Christianity in the gospels that are acknowledged today by the Christians, and to offer this attempt to people within these boundaries alone."<sup>61</sup> ʿUṭhmān knows that his choice would cause a controversy among the Muslim readers, since the conventional Islamic view considers the Christian gospels forgery, falsifications, and an abrogation of the true and authentic *Injīl* of Jesus the Son of Mary (*ʿĪsā b. Maryam*). To this anticipated criticism, ʿUṭhmān preemptively states:

I am not someone who denies the significance of doctrine and dogmatic discrepancies' role in constructing any religious belief. Nor am I someone who negates the main difference between Christianity and Islam. This notwithstanding, I say that Christianity is not merely about the crucifixion and trinitarianism. The circulated gospels beam with stories, parables, and commandments, which are sources of a humanist ethical literature from which every religion, [every] ethical and rational person can derive and learn. Yet, all this slips away in the throng of limited doctrinal conflicts.<sup>62</sup>

61 Faṭḥī ʿUṭhmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ fī al-Anāʾijl al-Arbaʿah* [With Christ in the Four Gospels] (2d ed.; Cairo: al-Dār al-Qaūmiyyah lil-Ṭibāʿah wal-Nashr, 1966), 8.

62 ʿUṭhmān, *Maʿ al-Masīḥ*, 17.

For ‘Uthmān, when one casts aside the doctrinal discrepancies, one would concur with his realization that, in Christian teachings, there are many lessons which other religions similarly embrace and can benefit from in general.<sup>63</sup> Be that as it may, ‘Uthmān opts for presenting a study of the Christ of the gospels in order to persuade Muslims that the circulated New Testament does not merely contain what they reject. It also demonstrates that what the Muslims refute needs to be reconsidered, reexamined, and reassessed, so that if they happen to reject something in Christianity, their stance would be founded on reliable knowledge.<sup>64</sup> ‘Uthmān immediately points out, nevertheless, that his endeavor to develop a positive rationale based on scientific comparative study of religions does not at all endorse a trivial, shallow, and artificial concurrence and harmony between Christianity and Islam. ‘Uthmān concedes the impossibility of reconciling the Qur’ān’s faith with what he calls “the Pauline faith” (the Christian belief discourse that was allegedly conjured by Paul the Apostle), which is rooted in a belief in the Trinity, crucifixion, and atonement (*al-diyānah al-Būlusīyyah al-mabniyyah ‘alā anna al-thālūth wāḥid ḥaqīqah wa-‘alā ‘aqīdat al-ṣalb wal-fidā*).<sup>65</sup> The comparison he endorses is one that maintains the distinction between Islam and Christianity and discerns their differences as much as their commonalities. ‘Uthmān believes that he can successfully achieve the comparative task by means of distinguishing the gospels’ attestations from the extra-biblical, philosophical interpretations and hermeneutics (*al-shurūḥ wal-ta’wīlāt al-falsafīyyah*) as well as the churchly traditions (*al-taqālīd al-kanasīyyah*).<sup>66</sup>

According to ‘Uthmān, the threat with which the modernist rationalist reasoning challenged Christianity in his time stemmed from the school of “Higher Criticism” (*al-naqd al-a‘lā*), i.e., historical criticism, and its deconstructive skepticism towards the Christian Bible. This criticism damaged the authenticity of the Scripture by fiercely attacking the Biblical story’s truth and historicity. For ‘Uthmān, the best method for studying Christianity without becoming a victim of the difficulties and dangers of Higher Criticism is to cling to the circulated gospels and to rely on studying their content.<sup>67</sup> This is what ‘Uthmān himself strictly abides by in his speech on Christ and Christianity. He clings to this option, as he states, because he wants to speak about Christianity in its followers’ terms (*‘urīd an ataḥaddath*

63 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 18.

64 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 20.

65 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 21.

66 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 22.

67 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 24.

*‘an al-Masīhiyyah min wijhat nazar ahlihā*), and he wants to demonstrate to the Muslims and the Christians alike that the discrepancies are too narrow to prevent the followers of one faith from relating to the followers of the other and that the gospels take both communities towards common ethical ground far beyond the limited dogmatic controversies.<sup>68</sup>

‘Uthmān’s study of the gospels and the history of Jesus’s life inform him that Christ was born in Palestine, and he addressed his mission to the people of Israel (*ilā hadhā al-sha‘b kānat risālat al-Masīh*).<sup>69</sup> Yet, ‘Uthmān realized that Christ’s message was not embraced by the religious sects of his people: All the Jewish sects conspired against Christ and his teachings (*wa-qad ta‘amarat al-tawā‘if al-yahūdiyyah jamī‘ahā did al-Masīh wa-ta‘ālimih*).<sup>70</sup> Their leaders have endeavored to arouse the suspicions of the Roman authorities against him; this consequently drove the Roman governor and his military force to conduct a tribunal and exert punishment on Jesus.<sup>71</sup> Despite ‘Uthmān’s commitment to the Islamic negation of Christ’s crucifixion, he still pauses at the gospel’s stories on the crucifixion of Christ, something his Egyptian compatriot, al-‘Aqqād, principally evades and passes over silently, as we saw earlier. ‘Uthmān looks at the different gospel narratives on the trial, torture, and crucifixion itself, and he concludes that, historically speaking, this incident *did take place*. He, nevertheless, relates that the event seems to have been treated as merely an internal, local affair that caught no Roman ruler’s attention outside Jerusalem. Thus, Pontius Pilate treated it instantaneously without consulting the authorities in Rome, relying solely on the judgment of Jesus’ Jewish accusers.<sup>72</sup> For ‘Uthmān, the gospels invite the reader to appreciate the Roman juridical and tribunal procedures that granted the convict fair trial, blaming, eventually, Jews for Christ’s fate and holding them accountable for his death. Ultimately, then, while ‘Uthmān concedes that the crucifixion is a factual historical event, he still confirms that it has no doctrinal, theological implications expressive of the Christian doctrine of atonement or salvation.

What ‘Uthmān gleans essentially from the gospels’ attestations is that the historical Jesus, prescinding from the issue of his divinity and humanity, was a unique religious messenger. This is how he is also seen in Islam: The Messiah is a messenger God sent to convey a specific message (*al-Masīh*

68 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 26–27.

69 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 59.

70 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 73.

71 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 76–77.

72 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 77.



*rasūl...arsalahu Allah li-yuballigh risālah bi‘aynīhā*).<sup>73</sup> ‘Uthmān here discloses his impressive learnedness about the major Western scholarly studies of the First Quest of the Historical Jesus’s claims and theses. He expresses, for instance, his familiarity with the literature of Herman Reimarus, Johann Gottfried Herder, Heinrich Paulus, David Strauss, Ferdinand Christian Baur, J. M. Robertson, and others.<sup>74</sup> According to ‘Uthmān, such scholarship is serious and hardly ignorable. However, he personally leans towards other approaches that rely on ancient historians, like Josephus, Plinius, Suetonius, Julius Africanus, and others. He deems the attestations of these ancient authors as equally reliable and convenient to testify to the plausibility of the gospels’ accounts.<sup>75</sup> After all, ‘Uthmān states, Jesus’s genius and individuation lie not in *what* he said or did, but basically in *why* he said and did it (*laysa fī madhā, wa-lakin fī limādihā*).<sup>76</sup> This “why-ness” foundation drives us to conclude, ‘Uthmān suggests, that Christ existed historically and had a unique personality, which establishes the posterior continuation of his message after his ascension (*risālatahu qad istamarrat ba‘da raf‘ih*).<sup>77</sup>

Now, by pointing to the continuity of Jesus’s message in the ensuing centuries, ‘Uthmān implies that the gospels were not the products of Christ’s pen and that they were written after his departure: “Christ conversed and did not record. The first Christians preferred listening over reading. Yet, the believers scattered all over, and the Greek and others who affiliated to the new religion did not understand Aramaic. Thus, recording became inevitable...and the four gospels originated from this.”<sup>78</sup> The gospels, therefore, are just a “collection of memoirs, events, and conversations that were stored in the minds of the first disciples. They were not arranged after specific chronological order. Furthermore, the earliest Christians did not own any written biography that chronologically narrates the event of Christ’s *vītae*.”<sup>79</sup> This notwithstanding, ‘Uthmān vouches for the gospels’ authenticity by relating that the discrepancies among the gospels’ texts are merely minor in extent and particularities. The three synoptic gospels incredibly concur and display harmonious depictions of Christ (*tattaḥiq ṭīfīḥāqan ‘ajīban wa-ta‘rud fī majmū‘ihā šūrah munassaqah lil-Masīh*).<sup>80</sup>

73 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 99.

74 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 100–101.

75 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 101ff.

76 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 103.

77 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 107.

78 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 110–111.

79 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 114.

80 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīh*, 120.

Eventually, ‘Uthmān concedes that the gospels can validly be treated as “objective signs with great importance for disclosing the personality of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The credibility of these signs ultimately lies in the fact that they respond to the expectations and requirements of their historical context: Christ is a true historical figure because he uniquely related to his era in accordance with its expectations and understanding.<sup>81</sup> This is sufficient to demonstrate the uniqueness and authenticity of Jesus’s historical reality without any necessary need for miracles and wonders to verify this truth. Jesus’s prophetic authenticity does not require miraculous evidence to espouse for it. And, if such miracles existed, they are just means for testifying to the more fundamental fact of the prophet’s credibility. They should not become an end by themselves.<sup>82</sup>

Be all the above as it may, the Christ of the gospels is the same one whom the Muslims deem a prophet and the Qur’ān calls *Īsā b. Maryam*. This means he is an extraordinary person scented with “whiffs from God’s Spirit” (*nafaḥāt min rūḥ Allah*). This is the very same Jesus the Muslims read about in their Qur’ān as God’s “*kalimah wa rūḥ minhu*,” thus, whenever Jesus is mentioned, they always praise him and pray for God’s peace to be upon him. Muslims, therefore, are more approximate in kinship to the Christians than those skeptics—Christians and non-Christians—who question, even deny, the historical reality of Christ and who cast doubts on the historical reliability of the gospels.<sup>83</sup> Even if Muslims argue that Christianity was falsified and twisted by foreign ideas imposed on it after Jesus’s time, they do not do this to attack Christ’s, the gospels’, or Christianity’s historicity. They just echo what other major Christian philosophers said once before them.<sup>84</sup> Christians themselves concede that the doctrinal versions of Christianity are the synthetic outcome of the intermarriage of Jewish dogma and Greek philosophy, which culminated in the creation of the doctrine of the Trinity, according to ‘Uthmān.<sup>85</sup> Finally, ‘Uthmān acknowledges that, opposite to Muslims’ veneration of Christ as one of God’s prophets, Christians cannot tender a similar veneration to the Prophet Muhammad. This notwithstanding, such shortcoming, he confirms, must never warrant any intellectual, psychological, or social binary between Muslims and

81 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīḥ*, 143.

82 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīḥ*, 205.

83 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīḥ*, 417.

84 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīḥ*, 419ff. ‘Uthmān pauses here at the English philosopher, Bertrand Russell.

85 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīḥ*, 423.

Christians.<sup>86</sup> Both communities must concede that the discrepancies about prophets and the meticulous examination of their personalities and messages are always incumbent.<sup>87</sup>

In ‘Uthmān’s book, we have another Muslim scholar approaching the historical Jesus from a perspective orbiting around binary and dialectical connectedness. Yet, instead of building upon this binary (like Raḥbānī) or re-directing its track (like al-‘Aqqād), ‘Uthmān endeavors to demonstrate the possible overcoming of such binary in relation to Jesus Christ. Christ’s historical reality proves, instead, that any presumed dialectical binary between Christianity and Islam on the basis of Jesus’s reality is pre-conceived and pre-imposed, rather than deduced or demonstrated.

### **Who Was Jesus? Or, Mixing Scholarship with Conspiracy**

When Ībrāhīm Raḥbānī paused to consider the historical Jesus and the gospels’ narratives, the Arab Middle East in general, and Palestine in particular, had not yet experienced the creation of the Arab States or the State of Israel. When ‘Abbās al-‘Aqqād and Faṭḥī ‘Uthmān did likewise, conflict between the Arab States and the newly established State of Israel (1948) had not yet produced what is known among Arabs as *Naksat 67* (the Failure of 1967) and among Israelis as “the Six Days War”—wherein Israel defeated the armies of Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Hence, none of these three Arab authors composed his book on Jesus and Christianity influenced or driven by any attempt at implementing the discourse on Christ in the service of any evident exposition of political conspiracy or a defense of any ideological or pan-nationalist agenda. They approached Jesus Christ’s life and ministry and the notional, critical, and historical inquiries about him from genuine scholarly, intellectual, and culture-oriented perspectives. They did not try to insert political and ideological connotations into their reading of Jesus’s Jewish background or into his background as a Jew from Palestine.

For the fourth and final monograph on Jesus that I present in this essay, the situation was different. It was written at a time and in a political context when Arabs were deeply torn apart by their historical defeats by Israel. They had to find a way to explain the presence of the Israeli State in the holy land of Jesus, Palestine, and the catastrophic life-conditions the Palestinians were facing due to this establishment. Jesus’ Jewish identity and the relatedness

86 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīḥ*, 440.

87 ‘Uthmān, *Ma‘al-Masīḥ*, 441.

of Judaism to the land of Palestine became sources of disturbance and embarrassment for the Christians in the Arab Middle East. It was in such a background that the fourth text of this study was produced.

The fourth author whose book on Jesus I want to bring to the reader's attention is the late Lebanese historian, Kamāl Ṣalībī (1929–2011). This Lebanese Protestant scholar wrote various books related to the historical origin of Lebanon, Palestine, and Arabia, and also the Bible, Judaism, and Christianity. Haunted by a staunch pan-Arabist ideological stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Ṣalībī tried resiliently to prove that the Torah, the Gospel, the people of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, and earliest Christianity all historically hailed from the geographical context of the northeastern territories of the Arab Peninsula (*Hijāz*, *Naǧrān*, and *ʿAsīr*), and they have never truly originated from the historical land of Palestine. This was Ṣalībī's methodological strategy for withstanding and countering the existence of the State of Israel in Palestine and the Jews' claim of it as a land promised to them by God. He wanted to deconstruct the foundations of this State and its theological, Biblical, and religious premises, especially the idea of "the promised land" and the Biblical messianic and covenantal promises. Ṣalībī's strife for demolishing these foundations centered on the thesis that Palestine is not the promised land for the Jews because Judaism and its Biblical history and belief are all rooted locationally in Arabia and never in the historical land called Palestine. The Jews of today's Israel are European and non-Semitic in origin, so they are not the descendants of the Biblical Jews who actually came from the Arab Peninsula.<sup>88</sup>

In 1988, Ṣalībī produced a book titled, *Conspiracy in Jerusalem: The Hidden Origin of Jesus*. This book appeared in a reprint in 1998, this time with the title *Who Was Jesus? A Conspiracy in Jerusalem*. The change in the preconceptual orientations of the author manifests in the development one spots in titling the book: from an early title delineating an inquiry on Jesus's identity into one that presumes head-on this identity's hiddenness. At any rate, both titles equally reveal the author's frankly predetermined conviction that Jesus's

88 I have studied Ṣalībī's thesis and unpacked its ideological background elsewhere. See Najib George Awad, "Is Christianity from Arabia? Examining Two Contemporary Arabic Proposals on Christianity in the Pre-Islamic Period," in *Orientalische Christen und Europa: Kulturbegegnung Zwischen Interferenz, Partizipation und Antizipation* (ed. Marin Tamcke: Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2012), 33–58. For Ṣalībī's thesis, see Kamal Salibi, *The Torah Came from Arabia* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985); and K. Salibi, *Al-Baḥṯh ʿan Yasūʿ: Qirāʿah Jadīdah fī al-Anāǧīl* [In Search for Jesus: A New Reading in the Gospels], (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, 1999). And, for a criticism of Ṣalībī's thesis, see Frederic Gangloff, "Did the Bible Come from Arabia? A Review Article," in *Theological Review* 29, no. 2 (1998): 134–59.

historical identity and origin are victims of serious historical conspiracy. The implicit political and ideological connotations of Ṣalībī's promotion of a conspiracy theory regarding Christ is hard to be missed by the careful reader of his claims, whether in this book or in his other writings. So much so that, in this text, as we will see, Jesus's personhood, life, and Gospel message are fully shrouded with plot-centered mystery and fully soaked in deliberate fabrications.

In his book, *Who Was Jesus?*, Ṣalībī states clearly the goal behind his decision to pursue historical-critical inquiry on Jesus. He initially acknowledges the scholarly efforts that have already been made by the scholars of the Quest of the Historical Jesus towards achieving the same purpose. Yet, he notices (wrongly, in fact) that the search for the historical Jesus mistakenly restricts its investigation to the canonical, churchly scriptural sources: "The search for the historical Jesus has so far been dependent almost entirely on the canonical Gospels—none of which is an eye-witness account—and on the occasional references made by Paul."<sup>89</sup> According to Ṣalībī, the Biblical testimonies of the Gospels and the Pauline literature merely demonstrate that Jesus did historically exist and that Paul has personally altercationed with his biological brother, James, and his companion Peter in Jerusalem, shortly after Jesus's death. Beyond that, the Bible does not offer any data that pertain to answering the following, outstandingly problematic inquiries: "Who was the historical Jesus? Where did he come from? What was the actual nature of his public career? What made his followers accept him as the Messiah, or Christ, whose coming was prophesied in the Israelite scriptures?"<sup>90</sup> Ṣalībī adds to these basic historiological inquiries other questions that reflect no other than his own, pre-tailored conspiratorial reading of Jesus's life and ministry, which is the reading Ṣalībī actually offers as his book's main thesis:

89 Kamal Salibi, *Who Was Jesus? A Conspiracy in Jerusalem*, (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 10. Those who are learned in the scholarship of the First, Second and Third Quests of the Historical Jesus would instantly recognize the falsehood of Ṣalībī's claim. The scholarship on this Quest does not depend almost entirely on the Biblical texts. It rather methodologically and historiographically criticizes the total, sole reliance on these canonical textual attestations, and it calls for consulting and searching for extra-Biblical and extra-textual data.

90 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 13–14. All these inquiries are classical inquiries in the realm of the Quest of the Historical Jesus scholarship, and scholars seek extra-Biblical data and sources to answer them. (See literature I mentioned in an earlier footnote above.) Ṣalībī is either ignorant of this scholarship, or he deliberately demeans it in order to ascribe originality and presidency to himself.

Was the historical Jesus no mere religious preacher, but a man of political ambitions, claiming a hereditary right to the last throne of David? Did his brother James in Jerusalem consider himself, in some way, to be his dynastic successor? Did Paul oppose James and slur over the details of the historical career of Jesus, playing down the question of his Davidic descent and emphasizing his transcendental Christhood instead, because of an inherited Benjaminite distaste for what may have been the dynastic pretensions of the two men as scions of the royal house of Judah?<sup>91</sup>

Although Ṣalībī jots down these points in an inquiry-like style, his text bluntly reveals that his stance on them is not interrogative or examinational at all. Ṣalībī never treats them as questions for which he searches objectively for answers. He, rather, takes them as axiomatic, self-evident preconceptions. He subjectively departs from them as preconceived truths; then he constructs an entire conspiracy-centered binary upon them.

Ṣalībī's prefabricated narrative of the historical Jesus circles around the following prejudicial conviction: In history, we had the real Jesus who was born in Arabia and who became the ancestral king of the Israeli inhabitants of the Arab Peninsula. At one point, this Jesus and his followers moved up to Jerusalem to claim his Jewish monarchical status, and he ended up crucified there. Furthermore, we have Christ's personality which was invented by a man called Paul (from Damascus), who conjured around the Jesus of Arabia a story of a metaphysical savior (not an earthly ruler) coming for the gentiles (not for the Jews), whose identity is shaped after Hellenic, not Arabian-Semitic, cultural imagination. The early history of Christianity, according to Ṣalībī, is nothing but a saga of a ferocious strife between Paul and Christ's story, on one hand, and James, the brother of the Arabian Jesus, and Peter, who tried to continue Jesus's legacy and be his heirs in rulership over the Israelite followers, on the other. Based on this prolegomenon, Ṣalībī argues that the more authentic method for understanding the Arabian Jesus and his Israelite followers is to compare their lives and group dynamics with ones that are known and practiced in their original homeland, Arabia, and by means of looking at the Arabian Muslim societies and how the Muslims live to this day.<sup>92</sup>

91 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 19.

92 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 20. He writes: "At the time when the followers of Jesus first emerged as an Israelite sect under the Jerusalem apostles, it appears that the Israelites had their own sharifs and sayyids, as the Muslims do to this day" (20).

For Ṣalībī, it is evident (how so, one wonders!) that those who met Jesus and his followers in Jerusalem upon their arrival from Arabia acknowledged him as the king of Israel, as the “Son of David.” Therefore, upon his death, they searched for continuing his mission by circling around the second royal figure in the “Son of David” dynasty, Jesus’s brother James.<sup>93</sup> According to Ṣalībī, this was a scenario the Damascene Paul never endorsed, as he went to create his own discourse on Jesus, not as the royal descendent of David who is promised to rule the Israelites, but as a universal, transcendental, and theologized Christ, who is now holding a cosmic, salvific, spiritual message to the gentiles. What we have then is a conflictual binary between James’, Jewish-centered call for following the Jesus of Arabia, the king of Israel, over and against Paul’s, gentile-focused call for following Christ the Hellenic, the savior of the world.

Ṣalībī knows very well that all the serious scholars in the Quest of the Historical Jesus’s arena confirm plainly that “not much is actually known about the identity of the historical Jesus and the nature of his mission,” and he personally inescapably confesses as much. However, instead of taking this conviction on board, he casts it out of the scene altogether, resorting frankly to an attempt to construct knowledge based on lack of certainty. Based on such uncertainty, he proposes a conspiracy conjured by Paul the apostle and his plan to forge his own private *curriculum vitae* of Jesus as the Christ. This conspiracy starts with Paul’s decision to travel to Arabia, not to go to Jerusalem. Now, of course, for Ṣalībī, Paul did not sojourn to the Bedouin territories of *Bilād ash-Shām* (one of the nomenclatures of Syria), which used to also be called “Arabia” (*al-‘Arabiyyah*).<sup>94</sup> He went, instead, to the Arab Peninsula to chase after the story of the true Jesus and his Israelite followers. As can one expect, Ṣalībī uses the story of Paul’s journey to this “Arabia” in the service of his tailored conspiracy:

Why did Paul, having experienced his revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, decide to go *at once* to Arabia instead of Jerusalem, although he was fully aware that the apostles who had known Jesus were in Jerusalem? Second, why did the book of Acts omit all reference to

93 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 20–21.

94 On Paul’s mentioned journey and to which “Arabia,” see N. G. Awad, “Is Christianity from Arabia?”, 34–37; J. Murphy-O’Connor, “Paul in Arabia,” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1993): 732–37; N. T. Wright, “Paul, Arabia and Elijah (Galatians 1: 17),” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 4 (1996): 683–92; and E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC–AD 135)*, Vol. 1, G. Vermes and F. Miller, trans. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 574–86.

Paul’s Arabian visit, although Paul himself appears to have regarded it as highly important, since he decided to go immediately after his conversion? Third, why does Paul nowhere explain exactly why he went to Arabia – at least nowhere in his available writings?<sup>95</sup>

Paul, according to Ṣalībī, certainly ended up in a territory beyond “Roman Arabia,” going down either to *Hijāz* or even to Yemen in the Peninsula.<sup>96</sup> He went there searching for “the special Israelite theology or cult which was preached in Arabia, and from which the mission of Jesus and the apostles derived.”<sup>97</sup> By chasing after this secretive source, Paul wanted to bring back with him to Jerusalem tools “to silence Peter, who was an influential apostle, and so withdraw him from the ranks of the open opposition to his own preaching.”<sup>98</sup>

In the ensuing chapters of his book, Ṣalībī adds extra details to his scenario by unfolding a full-scale conspiracy about Jesus’s history. He eisegetically looks at, and employs, New Testamental and extra-Biblical textual attestations related to Jesus, like the accounts of Eusebius of Caesarea and Hegesipus. From such accounts, Ṣalībī concludes that the career of Jesus had a political, not primarily a religious, nature.<sup>99</sup> He does not even suffice with unreservedly treating these texts as sheer historical, political materials on the existence of a man called “Jeshua,” who was the son of a Roman soldier called “Pantera/Pandera.”<sup>100</sup> He even goes so far as to use the Muslim Qur’ānic materials as *historical* documentation coming from Jesus’s homeland, and recruit them as evidence that Jesus hailed from the Peninsula: “It is therefore far more reasonable to assume that the Qur’ān spoke of Jesus as *Īsā*, not as Jeshuah, because there was actually a ‘Jesus’ revered in Arabia, certainly until the seventh century AD.”<sup>101</sup>

Ṣalībī then proceeds to argue that, despite the fact that the Qur’ān does not divulge the place and date of *Īsā*’s mission, it, nevertheless, “gives the general impression that, as a latter-day prophet to Israel, he was active in the same environment where Islam was born, i.e., in Western Arabia,” before Ṣalībī afterwards adds that there are indications “that Christianity... originated in Arabia rather than Palestine... that Christianity should have

95 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 27.

96 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 28.

97 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 29–30.

98 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 31.

99 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 41.

100 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 42.

101 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 49.



originated in Arabia before making a fresh start and assuming a new form in Palestine is not implausible.”<sup>102</sup>

Ṣalībī does not make any effort to explain to us why such scenario is “more reasonable” than others. His justification or advocacy of such claimed reasonability stands merely on his sheer personal, subjective, and totally anticipated presumption that such a scenario is “not implausible.” Ṣalībī simply constructs, and adamantly imposes, a circular argument, namely that the Arabian origin of Jesus and Christianity is authentic because, according to him, it is not fabricated and it is an internally consistent postulation.<sup>103</sup> What does this allegedly “authentic” and “consistent” scenario relate? According to Ṣalībī, it states the following:

Apparently, there was a Christianity in Arabia...which was several centuries older than the one which relates to the historical Jesus of the gospels; a primordial Christianity which survived on its original home ground certainly until the coming of Islam. The Qur’ān assumes it to be the true Christianity, and asserts that its founder, *Īsā b. Maryam*, was the true Jesus who did not die on the cross. Furthermore, the Qur’ān implicitly recognizes the existence of another brand of Christianity—allegedly a false one—whose followers, in grave error, worshiped the same “Jesus” as a god, maintaining that he was actually crucified. This claim is roundly dismissed in the Qur’ān as a delusion.<sup>104</sup>

Ṣalībī affirms that his (rather highly questionable) reading of the Qur’ānic attestations, let alone his treatment of religious texts, is “safe” epistemologically. Yet, he cannot care less to offer us any objectively scientific evidence or foundation for such claimed safety other than his personal, subjective appraisal, simply confirming that the real historical Jesus is the Arabian *Īsā b. Maryam* of the Qur’ān and no other, and Christians are the Arabian Israelite followers of this *Īsā*, whom the Qur’ān calls “Nazarenes.” (Ṣalībī ignores the fact that, in the Arabic of the Qur’ān, the term used for Christians is “*Nāṣāra*” and not “*Nāṣiriyyūn*.” The latter might be translated into “Nazarenes.” Etymologically, the former does not.)

What Ṣalībī’s scheme represents is another Arab Middle Eastern scholar relying on a dialectical binary method of reasoning to recreate a discourse

102 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 53.

103 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 58.

104 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 58.

on Jesus and Christianity in the service of a particular scheme shaped after a premeditated *Weltanschauung*. For Ṣalībī, Jesus and Christianity are Arab Peninsular realities and nothing else, placed in a long historical clash with a false Hellenic story on Jesus the savior that was conjured upon a conspiracy orchestrated by a man from Damascus called Paul. Why should this scenario be the case and how can one prove it to be so historically? Ṣalībī's only answer to this question is simply stipulating without any further ado that "there is certainly no proof to the contrary."<sup>105</sup> He merely states this conclusion without paying any attention to the fact that there is equally no proof that this is the true case either.

### Some Concluding Insights

In his analysis of identity formation in a German essay on "Systems Theory" in 1990, Niklas Luhmann relates that "operating with dualities or with 'binary codes' appears as a 'method of recognition; or as a 'condition of self-identification', and it thus appears as a means of protecting identity... Dualities would be important only for the question of how a society, or part of one, can observe and describe itself."<sup>106</sup> Referring to Luhmann's view, the theologian Gerhard Sauter comments that such binary thinking makes any identity-formation process "irrelevant for the knowledge of truth."<sup>107</sup> In today's postcolonial studies, this epistemologically criticized binary is classically deemed one of the unforgivable sins of colonial reasoning and discourses, and more crucially one of the constitutive characteristics of conventional Euro-American Orientalism. The Orientalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were believed to have also invested to an excessive extent in all sorts of "binary codes" and used them as dualist "methods of recognition" to create stark, almost unbridgeable contrast between the "Orient" and the "Occident," let alone using this binary (at least as postcolonialism argues) to hegemonize and colonize the Orient intellectually.

105 Salibi, *Who Was Jesus?*, 90.

106 Niklas Luhmann, "Identität—Was und Wie?" in *L'argomento Ontologico*, Marco M. Olivetti, ed., *Archivio di Filosofia* 58, nos. 1–3 (1990): 579–96, 585, 591–93.

107 Gerhard Sauter, "Argue Theologically with One Another: Karl Barth's Argument with Emil Brunner," in *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology; A Festschrift for Daniel Migliore* (ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Kimlyn J. Bender: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 30–47 at 43.

We actually have lesser studies on the fact that such a binary methodology was not something that just the so-called “colonizers” instrumentalized; nor did they alone have a stance on such instrumentalization. There is also almost equal implementation of, and a stance on, binary methods one can detect among the deemed “colonized” as well. This paper showed that examples of this can be found among authors from the context of the Arab Middle East. It pursued this by visiting four particular Arab Middle Eastern, Muslim and Christian authors who developed discourses on the historical Jesus that are reflective of stances on binary, historical-criticism in relation to the cultural, anthropological, and sociological perspectives of the Oriental context. We found two Christian and two Muslim authors writing on Jesus Christ’s history and historicity from the angle of an interest in developing a discourse on the religious and interreligious situations of the Orient that is rooted in an epistemological binary.

In the Arab intellectual sphere, there is a general skepticism towards, if not total rejection of, the conclusions, hermeneutic strategies, and reading-games of the historical-critical inquiry on the historical truth of religious belief and its constitutive components (the reality of the human founder and the reality of the founding text). As a scholar hailing from the Arab Middle East, I had always thought that the Middle East would not witness the birth of an Arab Christian author who is Albert Schweitzer-like<sup>108</sup> or an Arab Muslim Tor Andrae-like.<sup>109</sup> Yet, the four authors I presented in this essay prove me wrong. The four of them courageously develop a discourse on Jesus from a “Quest of the Historical Jesus” perspectives that are similar in orientation, hermeneutical leanings, and methodological trends to what one reads in the classical texts of Schweitzer and Andre. Noticeable, of course, is the fact that the four authors pursue this historical inquiry in relation to Jesus Christ, but not in relation to the Prophet Muhammad. It would be interesting to investigate whether one can find, in the modern Arab intellectual context, Muslim authors who might like to compose discourses on the Prophet Muhammad from a frank attention to the “Quest of the Historical Muhammad” scholarship. Such a niche would definitely merit a separate, fully-fledged study by itself.

108 Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede: eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, (Tübingen: Verlag von J. B. Mohr [Siebeck], 1906). In English, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, W. Montgomery, trans. (Cambridge: Adam Charles and Black, 1911).

109 Tor Andrae, *Mohammad: The Man and His Faith*, Theophil Menzel, trans. (New York: Harper Torchbooks/Harper & Row Publishers, 1960).

To come back to this essay, in their implementation of the “Quest of the Historical Jesus” scholarship, each one of these four authors reflects a particular stance on binary thinking that is distinguished from the others. The earliest author we looked at is the Christian, Syrian Ībrāhīm Raḥbānī. In his text, we saw that he constructs a binary in terms of *degree* between the Oriental and Occidental cultures. He seems to have adopted fully the comparativist essentializing mentality of Western Orientalism, despite his insistence that he departs from a moral principle grounded in equality. Jesus’s and the Biblical cultural background are used to demonstrate that the Orient’s cultural identity is not just totally different from the one of the Occident, but also of lesser quality.

The second author we looked at is the Muslim Egyptian, ‘Abbās al-‘Aqqād. He also invests in binary dialectical logic in his arguments on the historical Jesus. Yet, different from al-Raḥbānī, he does not use Jesus’s example to argue for any degree of difference between Jesus and other prophets or between Christianity and Islam, for instance. Far from this, he reflects a binary in terms of *uniqueness*. He uses it to demonstrate that Jesus is distinguished in his genius from other prophets and messengers who came before him. The binary is not a criterion of essentialization or hierarchical comparison; it is rather an expression of individuation and particularity.

The third author we visited was also a Muslim from Egypt, called Faṭḥī ‘Uthmān. In his text on the historical Jesus, we see someone trying to *overcome* any possible presumption of a binary between Christianity and Islam. Jesus’s historical identity and story become evidence of his proximity, even affinity, to the understanding of prophecy and religious calls in other faiths, especially Islam. We have here a discourse against making a binary a tool in the service of imposing dialectical contrariety with the different other. Jesus’s historical personality is a case-in-hand against a binary and its essentializing and leveling consequences.

Finally, we visited the text of the Lebanese Protestant Kamāl Ṣalībī on the historical Jesus. In this text, we encounter an Arab Middle Eastern author who wholeheartedly adopts a dialectic binary and binary codes in the service of a premeditated conspiracy based on a frank belief in antagonism and contrariety. He promotes a from-within binary between the Historical Jesus of Israel who came from Arabia and the Hellenic Christ of Paul who is said to come from Palestine. Here, the binary is neither merely used in terms of degree, nor in terms of uniqueness, nor still meant to be overcome. The binary is here *confirmed* and *preconceived* as the foundation of a thesis grounded in conspiracy.

What these four examples reveal before us is that, contrary to what might be conventionally imagined, there have been Arab Middle Eastern authors who courageously embraced the historical-criticism school of reasoning and invested in it in writing about the historical Jesus. Their discourses merit attention by the scholars who are keen on studying and understanding non-Euroamerican Christology and interreligious reading-games in the Arab Middle Eastern context. We have here cases of Christian and Muslim takes on Jesus Christ that tackle him and his story from an explicit implementation of binary codes as methods of recognition in historical-critical hermeneutics. What is interestingly noteworthy is that while the two Christian authors seem to be using the historical quest on Jesus Christ in the service of their premeditated perception of reality and their privative binary agendas, the two Muslim authors seem to be seriously trying to emancipate the historical inquiry on Jesus's story from any premeditated antagonistic binary perception of reality and prejudicial dialectical preconceptions. In this sense, the Muslims manifest sincere and genuinely interreligious and dialogical stances on Jesus, in contradistinction to their two Christian compatriots. The Muslim authors seem to be more charitable, objective, and unbiased in their stance on Jesus than the Christians; something the Arab Middle East of today can learn profoundly valuable lessons from for overcoming binary approaches and codes in the context of Christian-Muslim, Jewish-Muslim, and Muslim-Muslim co-existence.

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