

Roots of Islam 3 . . .

MOST REASONABLY INFORMED CHRISTIANS are probably aware that the Koran draws some of its ideas from the bible. Few are perhaps aware just how much of it comes from the bible. I wasn't, until I sat down to read it. After I started reading, I was totally dumbfounded by the sheer extent of the copying!

Let's consider one *sura* (chapter) only—sura 2:

[Sura 1 is a very short introductory chapter of just a few verses. After this the Koran places the suras in descending order of length, the longest at the beginning and then getting shorter at the end. There is no attempt at chronology or systematizing according to content or them, in the way that the bible does. Its all mixed together—one of the many things that makes reading the Koran a real challenge for western readers. Imagine a bible where the chapters were arranged in order of length!]

In the first *sura* alone (admittedly it's a long one) we find the following mentions that have fairly obviously been taken somehow or other from either the Old or the New Testaments:

- The Hereafter, the Last Day of Judgment, the torment of the damned, Hell, the fire for the unbelievers, the day of Resurrection
- Satan, the enemy and tempter
- The tree in Paradise which Adam and his wife are forbidden to eat from
- God's covenant with Israel
- Sacrifice of 'the yellow cow' (compare the red heifer in Numbers)
- Direct references to the bible as the Taurat (Torah) and the Injeel (Gospel)
- Delivery from Pharaoh
- Parting of the Red Sea and drowning of the Egyptians
- Moses, the golden calf, the manna and the quails in the desert
- Moses strikes water from the rock
- The Sabbath
- Jesus, the son of Mary
- The angels Jibrael (Gabriel) and Mikael
- Abraham and his offspring: Ishmael his son; Jacob; Isaac; the twelve sons of Jacob
- The Israelites' request that God should give them a king. Appointment of Taloot (Saul) as king
- The 'wooden box' containing artifacts from Moses and Aaron (= the Ark of the Covenant)
- Gideon's water-drinking test on the eve of battle
- Jaloot (Goliath) killed by David

In addition to these specific references to biblical people and events, we also find repetition of **biblical concepts**—like-for-like principle in administration of justice; the importance of faith without which good deeds will not save you; the Covenant with the Jews.

And then there are **specific laws and biblical precepts** such as—forbidden to eat dead animals, blood, pork, meat sacrificed to other gods; no sex during menstruation and need for postmenstrual purification rituals; private, secret charity better than public charity; the fear of Allah.

And that's just in one chapter! The next chapter continues with Eve, John the Baptist and his father Zechariah, Noah, and much more besides. And so it goes on.

*One interesting thing about all these Biblical allusions is that they are virtually devoid of context. There are many passing references to biblical characters and events, but no attempt to fit them into a cohesive narrative. In the bible they are all part of a framework, the gradual playing out over time of God's grand plan of salvation through history. In the Koran they are just **there**, sitting in a glorious vacuum, as if no further explanation were deemed necessary. I think its fair to say that if you—or a*

Moslem for that matter—really wants to fully UNDERSTAND the Koran, the only way to do that is to read the bible as well!

So what conclusions can we draw?

1. CS Lewis was right in describing Islam as a Christian heresy. Islam was never really a ‘new’ religion, any more that Mormonism or Jehovah’s Witnesses can really claim to be really new. They are all offshoots, or modifications, of Christianity and Judaism, from which the key message, the ‘offence of the gospel’ as Paul calls it, has been deleted.
2. Muhammad clearly identified as being the same personal God as Yahweh in the Old Testament, or God the Father as Christians know Him. Allah was worshipped in Arabia long before the time of Muhammad, along with several other ‘gods and goddesses’, but no one had suggested that he was Yahweh under another name. This was a key theme of Muhammad’s message.
 - i. *This is still a sensitive point for many Moslems. Last week I was reading of a current controversy in Malaysia, a predominantly but not exclusively Moslem nation, over Christians choosing to use the name Allah for the Christian God (something that Christians have frequently chosen to do at different times and in different places through the course of history.) Some Moslems find this offensive and object to it; if so, they need to study the Koran a bit more deeply!*
3. You can’t understand the Koran without reading the bible. A lot of what is mentioned here—the golden calf, the delivery from Pharaoh, and much else—simply has no meaning without the biblical background. When Muhammad mentions the golden calf he seems to be talking to people who are familiar with the story of the golden calf in the book of Exodus. If you don’t read Exodus, the allusion means nothing.
4. There’s more in the Koran from the Old Testament than from the New. There were many Jews living Medina at the time of Muhammad, and it’s easy to imagine Muhammad in social chatter with the Jewish community picking up the stories. He was illiterate (it is generally accepted) and so couldn’t have read the actual Old Testament first-hand for himself.)
5. If Islam is a Christian heresy, then what is the core of the heresy? As with most heresies it’s the denial of the things that really matter. Denial of the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God. Without that there’s no real basis for forgiveness and reconciliation, just an arbitrary and capricious God who accepts or rejects according to his mood of the day.
6. Seen from a Jewish standpoint, the question of the heresy is more difficult. Actually Islam and Judaism are extraordinarily similar, and its quite difficult to come up with really substantive points of difference (though neither side, I suspect, would be happy at hearing that.)
7. When we seek for an Islamic understanding of Judaism from the Koran it becomes, as it often does, a bit confused and self-contradictory. We are told in the second *sura* that Abraham wasn’t actually a Jew, he was a Moslem. Well that’s a bit odd! After all, how do you define a Jew? Most Jews would probably say, a descendant of Abraham. On this basis, a Jew is, by definition, whatever Abraham was. You can change the name, call a Jew a Moslem; but mere changing of names has no effect on substance.

8. Can we get any further? Muhammad was comfortable with the notion that the Torah had been given by God. In a sense much of the Koran is embellishment and commentary on the Torah, not dissimilar to the commentaries being issued by the Jewish scribes and Pharisees. The Jewish theological seminaries or *yeshivas* had been hounded out of Palestine by the Christians and were now located in Iraq. The 8th century centres of Islamic learning were also in Iraq, not thirty miles away. More mysteries.
9. Finally, a quick look at the word *Islam*. The ordinary meaning of the Arabic word *islam* is “submission”. Now, of course, it’s become a proper name with a capital letter—*Islam*, describing a religion. But when did the change occur? When did *islam* change from being something you do to being *Islam*, something you’re a part of? It’s very unclear. But quite important. After all, if all it’s saying is ‘Submit to God!’ then in that sense we’re all Moslems!

THESE ARE MY QUICK THOUGHTS on Islam, Muhammad and the Koran. In the final post I’ll look at the morality of Islam. What does it really say? War or compassion? Violence or charity? We’ll see . . .