

A Muslim Encounters the Gospel of Mark: Theological Implications of Contextual Mismatch

by *Leith Gray and Andrea Gray*

Amal, a Muslim friend, had come to faith in Jesus Christ through a series of vivid dreams and wanted to follow him faithfully. However, she was confused about whether to conform to the traditions of her Christian neighbors. “Amal,” we told her, “as a follower of Jesus, you know you don’t need to take off your headscarf, or change your name, or wear a cross around your neck...” Amal looked surprised at our statement. “If I don’t have to wear a cross, why does Jesus say in the Gospel, ‘take up your cross and follow me?’”

What’s going on here? Although Amal loved Jesus and loved reading God’s Word, this conversation revealed a serious misunderstanding of an aspect of Jesus’ teaching. The problem, as we will see below, lies in the fact that Amal was accessing a set of assumptions that was different from that of the Biblical authors. As long as she continues to operate according to this different set of assumptions, it is unlikely that the gospel message will penetrate to the deepest level of her worldview.

If the goal of church planting is not simply to call on individual believers to profess a set of doctrines, but for believers and their communities to experience changed lives in obedience to Jesus, then how do we go about enabling transformation at the very deepest level of reality—that is, their worldview?

One way of bringing about a changed worldview is to broaden the set of assumptions that the Muslim reader/listener shares with the biblical writers and the original audience. In this paper, we will use the Relevance Theory of communication to examine the process one Muslim goes through as she interprets the Biblical message according to her worldview. We will then suggest some strategies for correcting misunderstandings and helping the reader/listener to move towards a Biblical worldview.

Identification of Contextual Mismatch

In the spring of 2005, Leith asked an educated Muslim to produce the text on which this study is based. She has studied English literature and has a Masters degree in Islamic studies. While she is educated and has some knowledge of Jesus, Christians and the Bible from within her own worldview, she had no previ-

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ous direct exposure to the Bible itself. In this regard she is representative of many Muslims who are introduced to the Bible.

We asked our friend to paraphrase the text of the Gospel of Mark from an existing Arabic translation, rewording it as best she could in her own words. She worked from the TAV (Today's Arabic Version, produced by the United Bible Societies). Leith added some explanatory comments where he felt she would not understand the text alone.

As she would work at paraphrasing the text she was given, she would often comment, "This is illogical" in reference to a particular passage. What she was basically saying was, "This doesn't fit my worldview, my conception of reality, my existing information." Her solution was to modify the meaning of the text to say what she thought it must mean, since any other meaning would be "illogical."¹

As we will see in the theoretical section below, when a Muslim (or anyone else for that matter) reads the Bible, he or she interprets the message according to their existing worldview. In the process of paraphrasing, we are afforded the rare opportunity of seeing this process made explicit, since the Muslim reader is writing down the process that usually occurs internally.

As our Muslim friend continued in this exercise of paraphrasing, it became clear that there was a significant gap in cultural knowledge that interfered with her being able to correctly understand the Scriptures. Examples of this gap in cultural knowledge will be examined below.

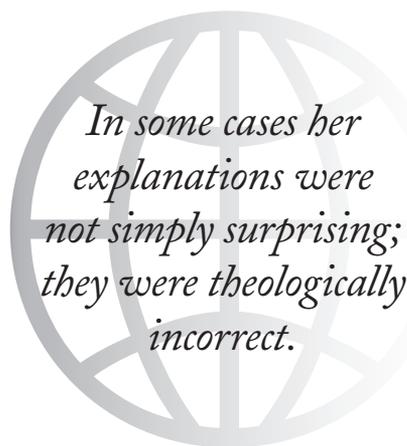
Theological Implications of Contextual Mismatch

An absence of shared cultural information (or cultural context) between the woman who created this paraphrase and the original author and audience of Scripture often led to her to try to guess what was being communicated. She achieved this by assimilating the text to her worldview. This resulted

in some surprising explanations and expressions. Furthermore, in some cases her explanations were not simply surprising; they were theologically incorrect. The following examples show how cultural contextual mismatch led her to incorrect assumptions about major theological themes.

1. Messianic Titles

One very noticeable area in which contextual mismatch plays a significant role is the issue of messianic titles. Most of these titles carry either zero meaning or wrong meaning for the Muslim reader.



The best-known title for Jesus, *al-maseeh*, is found in the Qur'an as well as the Bible. The word "Messiah" was for the Jews of first-century Palestine a title used for the awaited Savior-King who would reestablish the kingdom of his ancestor David and bring a reign of justice and peace, defeating the Gentile enemies of the Jewish nation. To the Muslim, however, the word *al-maseeh* is either a name without meaning, or is assigned certain other meanings by Muslim scholars. One explanation for this title is that Jesus *masaha* "wiped/stroked" people in order to heal them, and this is the explanation that our friend incorporated in several verses. For example, she paraphrased Mark 6:5 as follows:

And so it was impossible for Jesus the Messiah to show his miracle in Nazareth, except that he wiped/stroked some of the sick and healed them.

Another misunderstood title is *Son of David*. In Mark 10:47, we find a blind man proclaiming Jesus as the anti-

ipated heir who would restore David's kingdom. Many naïve readers of literal translations would understand that the man is claiming that Jesus has a father named David. Our paraphraser gets closer to the point here, but still misses that this is a messianic title.

And when he heard that the one passing on the road was Jesus, peace be upon him, he began to cry out: "O Jesus, O descendent of the prophet David, have mercy on me!"

The messianic titles that create the most problems for those communicating the Biblical message in Muslim contexts are the titles "Son of God" and "Lord." While there has been much missiological attention focused on Muslim rejection of the title "Son of God," authors for the most part have been unaware of the exegetical insights of contemporary New Testament scholars in this regard (See Fossum 1992 and Evans 2000 for further discussion of this messianic title).

As for the messianic title "Lord," one of the most common of the titles for the promised Messiah, its traditionally-translated form has created significant offense and confusion among Muslim audiences. Many translations do not distinguish between the Greek word *kurios* as referring to YHWH and "the *kurios*" as referring to the Messiah, even though the Greek itself very consistently makes distinctions in usage (as do ancient translations such as Syriac). As a result, some Muslims understand the title to mean "the deity Jesus," and that the Bible is declaring the existence of Jesus as another God besides God the Father. Others take it to mean that Jesus is the same being as the Father. This has been corrected in a recent Muslim-sensitive translation of the Bible, *The Noble Book (Al-Kitaab al-Shareef)*, which uses the term *as-sayyid* (the master) when "the *kurios*" is found as a title for the Messiah, and *Allah* when the the Greek *kurios* is referring to God. For a thorough exegetical treatment of the Greek *kurios*, see Brown and Samuel (2002).

Regarding our paraphraser, we should point out that if we had not discussed the meaning of the above two terms (including their Old Testament background) with her beforehand, a contextual mismatch would most certainly have occurred. However, due to the potentially very serious misunderstandings that usually occur with these terms, it was judged prudent to discuss them with her ahead of time, and for this reason, she was able to express the meaning of these concepts more easily as she was paraphrasing.

2. The Holy Spirit

The concept of the Holy Spirit as understood in orthodox Christian thought does not occur in the Muslim worldview. Indeed, the Holy Spirit has often been misunderstood as the Angel Gabriel. A further complication is the attribution of grammatically masculine gender to the word “spirit” in the phrase “Holy Spirit” in traditional Bible translations and in ecclesiastical usage. In ordinary non-ecclesiastical Arabic, the word for spirit is almost always grammatically feminine. An informal survey Leith conducted with semi-educated and educated Muslims (including believers, seekers and non-believers) showed that “spirit of God” with masculine gender indicates for many speakers of the language an independent being sent from God (in a few instances, respondents indicated that if masculine, it would refer to the angel Gabriel). “Spirit of God” with feminine gender, on the other hand, represented something from God’s own being, his own spirit, a meaning reflecting the Biblical view.²

The paraphraser who worked with us in this study first encountered the concept of the Holy Spirit in the first chapter of Mark, where it appears three times in the context of John the Baptist’s preaching and the baptism of Jesus. Trying to make sense of Mark 1:8, she wrote:

And though I have been performing the purification of your bodies with water, he will perform purification of your spirits with the blessings of Heaven.

This emphasis on God’s transcendence in the Muslim worldview leads to a strong belief in God’s communication through mediation.

In this case, she understands the word “Holy Spirit” to be a metaphor for blessings, while keeping the word “spirit” to refer to John’s cleansing of human spirits.

Similarly, the Muslim paraphraser had difficulty interpreting Mark 1:10, in which she interprets the Holy Spirit as an angel:

He saw the heavens split open, and the revelation, the angel, came upon him as a white dove.

Not surprisingly, the paraphraser also had difficulty with Mark 1:12, in which she expresses the Holy Spirit as a revelation from God in a generic sense:

And it was revealed to the chosen messenger to go out to the wilderness.

The Muslim paraphraser’s confusion is understandable. Without access to the Old Testament, or even the rest of the Gospels or the New Testament, how can she make sense of being baptized or filled with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit descending on someone, or the Holy Spirit compelling someone to do something? Her deductions are logical according to her worldview, though factually incorrect. It is interesting to note that even though the same term “Holy Spirit” occurs in each of the three passages, the Muslim paraphraser has interpreted it differently in each occurrence: “blessings”, “angel” and “it was revealed”. Since the Biblical concept of the Holy Spirit is not part of her worldview, she did not even seem to notice that all three references in the Biblical texts actually refer to the same being.

3. God as Unknowable

This theme seems to underlie some of the other themes, and does not often become explicit. But as we will see below, the Muslim focus on divine law (*ash-shari’ah*) derives from the belief that one can only know God’s will, not his being, and one cannot interact with him directly. Thus, when Jesus

says that whoever receives him receives God, Muslim readers will often interpret the statement to mean that when a person has received the teaching of the prophet, he has thereby received God’s teaching, but God himself remains veiled and unknown in all but his expressed will. Consequently, our paraphraser said:

Whoever feels compassion for a child, this means that he has responded to me and my teaching; indeed this means that he has responded to God’s teaching (Mark 9:37).

This emphasis on God’s transcendence in the Muslim worldview leads to a strong belief in God’s communication through mediation. God chooses to communicate to human beings through angels, and even angels only communicate to prophets. The only exception to this is the prophet Moses, *kaleem allah* (the one who speaks with God). So the voice that speaks to Jesus at his baptism cannot be the voice of God, but must be an angel:

He saw the heavens split open, and the revelation, the angel, came upon him as a white dove, and one calling saying to him: “You are the one God has chosen to be his Word, and to whom he has promised his kingdom on earth.” (Mark 1: 10–11)

Note how the paraphraser changed God’s direct address into mediated communication, in order to assimilate this event to her worldview.

4. Good Deeds/Reward System

Since God is ultimately unknowable, and a person can only know and obey his will, the focus of religion for Muslims is identifying God’s commandments or teachings and obeying them. So religion is ultimately focused on law. James Piscatori notes this political dimension: “Several political ideas grow out of the *shabada* . . . God does not directly govern the commu-

nity of believers but that its government is based on His revealed law (it is not a theocracy but a nomocracy)...” (Piscatori 1986:14).

Since God is only knowable through divine commandments, in Islam there is consequently a heavy focus on reward and punishment for those who obey or disobey God. We can see this idea expressed in the following passages, which our friend paraphrased:

If you are this way, and want more credit/reward, then you need one thing, which is to do good to those around you (Mark 10:21).

Just as a person must love others, (wanting) for them what he wants for himself, and the credit/reward of this is greater than the rewards for sacrifices and offerings given to God (Mark 12:33).

What this woman has put into this (collection) box exceeds in credit/reward earned what all those rich people have given (Mark 12: 43).

5. Salvation through Teaching

There were many examples in the paraphrased text in which salvation was attributed to belief in Jesus’ teaching rather than belief in him. This seems to be due to two related aspects of the Muslim worldview: first, the emphasis on teachings/law as noted above, and secondly, the belief that Jesus came with a message from God, but that it is his teachings that save apart from his own person.

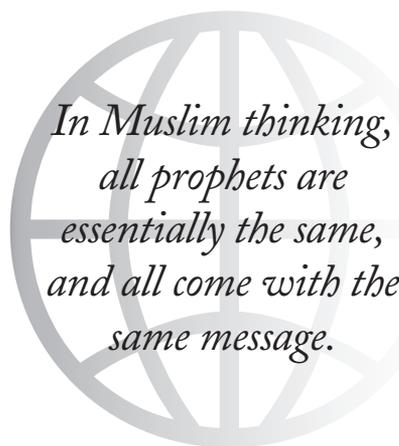
So whoever among you desires to travel on the path of guidance saving himself from the sins of humanity, people will confront him and he will lose his life, but what gain is it to a person to lose his life compared with his gaining the whole world? And the self is the most valuable thing that one of you can offer as a sacrifice for the sake of these principles and the teaching that I proclaim among you (Mark 8:35-37).

Whoever among you remains steadfast in spite of these calamities to the principles that he received from me, he will be saved (Mark 13:13).

6. All Prophets Bring the Same Message

The issues mentioned above also are related to a broader worldview issue. In Muslim thinking, all prophets are essentially the same, and all come with the same message. This is very different from a Biblical worldview, where God over time progressively reveals new and more truth, building upon previous concepts revealed to earlier prophets. Kate Zebiri describes the Muslim view well:

The Qur’anic narratives [of past prophets] do not usually give any indication



of chronology, and contain very little historical or environmental detail; they are characterized by brevity, allusion and ellipsis....The Qur’an also has a distinctive prophetology, with its cyclical view of the history of revelation. Each prophet brings essentially the same message—the rejection of idolatry and the call to worship the one true God—and each perseveres in the face of strong opposition....The strong sense of continuity and identification between Muhammad and the former prophets, who delivered the same message and suffered the same opposition, enhances the value of these stories which serve to console Muhammad, encourage his followers and warn his opponents (1997:18).

Since Muslims understand their prophet Muhammad primarily as a teacher of the unity of God and a lawgiver, they tend to see Jesus as bringing the same message. Jesus is accepted as a savior only insofar as he brings a set of teachings that save those who obey them.

7. Other Issues

Many other misunderstandings were observed through this process of paraphrasing. There is not enough space here to detail each one, but they include:

- Exalted Nature of Prophets, Apostles, Mary
- Predestination
- Denial of Jesus’ Death
- Minimizing Jesus’ authority
- Paradise as a sensual realm

In the issues mentioned here, the paraphraser imposed her worldview on the text and as a result unintentionally distorted the meaning of the original message. Even though the misunderstandings mentioned above are not due to missing contextual information *per se*, they are partially a result of reading passages in isolation and can be remedied through a wider exposure to the whole Scripture. For example, the death of Jesus, which is often rejected at first by Muslim readers, can be convincingly communicated by exposure to OT prophecies, Jesus’ own predictions of his death, the actual accounts of his death, and the apostles’ testimony of his death and resurrection. All these passages come together as part of a coherent metanarrative to gradually convince the reader.

Theoretical Considerations: Relevance Theory

A common misunderstanding of human communication is called the code model of communication. This theory assumes that human communication is simply a process of encoding and decoding a particular thought or message. One might use English, Turkish, or even visual symbols to communicate a particular message, but according to this approach, the entirety of the message is contained in the encoded utterance. While we can explain a certain amount of human communication with this theory, there are many other aspects of communication that require a more complex model.

In the traditional code model, the meaning of the message should be the same no matter who sends and receives it, and no matter what the environment

is in which the message is communicated. A recent model of communication called Relevance Theory, on the other hand, explains the role that the Communicator, Receptor, and environment each play in the communication of meaning.

According to Relevance Theory, the Communicator has certain assumptions about which the Receptor already knows, and formulates her³ message accordingly. The Receptor has certain assumptions about what the Communicator knows, and about what the Communicator thinks the Receptor knows, and interprets the message accordingly. In order for effective communication of meaning to occur, there must be a significant degree of overlap in the two sets of assumptions, called the mutual cognitive environment. The set of assumptions and the cognitive environment that is shared between the Communicator and Receptor is also called the context of the message (Figure 1).

When a speaker produces an utterance, she takes into consideration the context that is shared with the Receptor. Similarly, when the Receptor receives an utterance, he interprets it based on their shared cognitive environment. But it is important to keep in mind that both Communicator and Receptor intend and interpret meaning based on what they *perceive* as the shared cognitive environment. *Contextual mismatch* occurs when either the Communicator or the Receptor misjudges what makes up the shared cognitive environment

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(For further discussion of Relevance Theory, see Gutt 2005).

Contextual mismatch is less likely to occur when speakers from the same cultural background are speaking face to face. However, the chance of a contextual mismatch occurring increases as Communicator and Receptor are separated by time, distance (as in a written versus a spoken message), language and culture. Even more problematic is the situation in which the current recipient of the message is not the original addressee, as is the case, for example, with the Bible. To put it in other words, current readers of the Bible are “listening in” to a message between two parties that was communicated thousands of years ago, in a very different linguistic and cultural environment. The overlap of cognitive environment between the Communicator and the modern Receptor is relatively small and so the potential for misunderstanding is large.

When people read the Biblical message, they use all available information to interpret it. Most importantly, they access their worldview, and assimilate the new information to their existing worldview. When the information and assumptions in their worldview do not match those of the Biblical writers, then contextual mismatch occurs.

With regards to cross-cultural communication of the gospel message, the results of contextual mismatch are readily observed: blank looks, laughter, angry retorts, or polite assent to the message with no subsequent change in worldview. It would be easy to attribute these responses to inferior intelligence, irreverence or hardened hearts, as Christians often do when Muslims misunderstand the Bible. And yet more often than not, the problem lies in a three-way lack of shared assumptions: between the Biblical writers, the evangelist (often expatriate) and the modern recipient of the message.

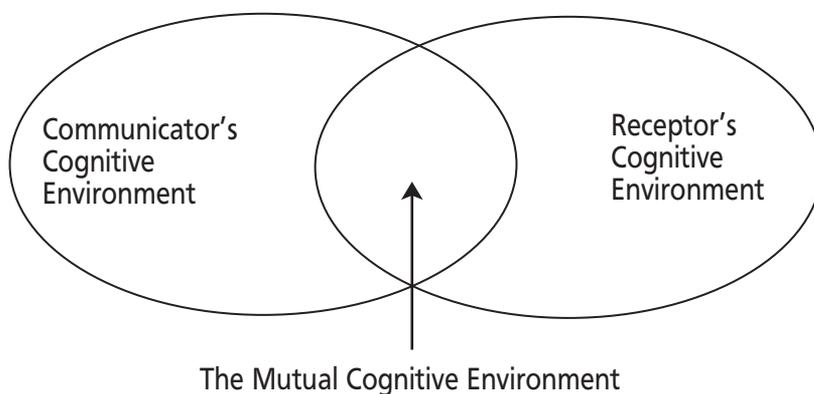
The theological implications of contextual mismatch are many. When not recognized or dealt with, contextual mismatch can lead to rejection of the message based on incomplete or incorrect information, or to the acceptance of doctrines without a changed life. Both of these results are serious failures in any church-planting endeavor.

Contextual Adjustment

How can these contextual mismatches be avoided or corrected? How do we provide our reader/listener friend with the information he or she needs to make sound conclusions from Scriptural data? Returning to the diagram that we used above, we must examine the Receptor's worldview (his *cognitive environment*) and determine where background information is missing—information necessary to correctly interpret the Biblical text. The goal is to widen the overlap between the Biblical worldview and (in this case) our Muslim friend's worldview. See Figure 2 (next page).

The cross-cultural evangelist's worldview must also be examined in order to discover possible elements that he or she considers to be part of the Biblical worldview, but in fact are not. Sometimes non-Biblical notions can be learned even in Bible colleges and semi-

Figure 1. (from Hill 2006)



naries! This worldview research needs to be done particularly for Biblical passages or topics that most confuse or offend the current receptor. It is important that the evangelist does not pass on information from his own worldview, presenting it as the Biblical worldview.

Assuming that we have thoroughly researched and exegeted a particular passage to determine the Biblical context and worldview, there are several approaches that we can take to pass on this contextual information to our audience. The solutions offered below progress from micro to macro level, from textual to para-textual.

1. Provide necessary information in the text

In some cases we can help readers or listeners to make the correct inferences by translating in a thought-for-thought rather than a word-for-word fashion, or by modifying a noun or verb with an adjectival or adverbial phrase to provide the original meaning. How we do this will depend on the nature of the translation and its intended audience. For instance, in an audio Bible story about the life of Jesus, in-text explanations and clarifications will play a larger role than in a printed study Bible.

In some Bible translations for audiences with little or no previous exposure to the Bible, messianic titles have been translated in a meaning-based fashion to avoid false inferences. For example, the title “Son of David” has been translated “heir to the throne of the prophet

David” in several translations intended for Muslim audiences.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, part of the point that Jesus was making depends on the fact that Samaritans were traditional enemies of the Jews, hated as half-breeds and corrupters of the Torah. This can be hinted at within the text as the New Living Translation in English does using the modifier “despised”:

Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt deep pity (Luke 10:33, NLT).



2. Provide extra notes and helps

Sometimes the detail and depth of background information that is necessary to ensure a correct interpretation cannot easily be provided in the text itself. In such cases, a footnote is often useful. For example, readers often misunderstand the genealogy in the Gospel of Luke because it appears to be a genealogy of Joseph the husband

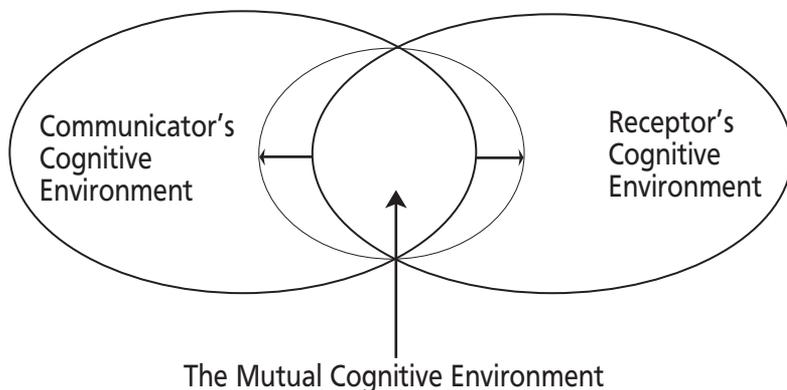
of Jesus’ mother Mary, and not of Mary. This is quite confusing for a Muslim—or any modern reader for that matter—since Jesus has in fact no direct biological link to Joseph. The modern reader therefore wonders why the genealogy is included. One approach would be to follow the explanation given by Thomas and Gundry (1988) and provide a footnote that enables correct comprehension by the modern receptor, perhaps saying something like the following:

In the first century, the legal identity of a child was taken from the father and not the mother. Since Jesus had no biological father, his biological descent can be traced only through his mother Mary. But as it was not normal practice to trace such descent through women, Mary’s name was omitted from the list, and the record jumps straight from Jesus to his maternal grandfather.

Contextual mismatch related to concepts that are complex or of major importance may be more effectively corrected by appended articles. Articles of this kind have been included in some recent Muslim-sensitive commentaries in Arabic: *An Eastern Reading of the Gospel of Luke*; *A Sufi Reading of the Gospel of John*; *The Origin of the World* [a commentary on Genesis]. In the case of the commentary on John, the authors provided an article on the title “Son of God.” Another major concept that should be explained in an accompanying article is the “Kingdom of God.” Such an article ideally would provide relevant background from the Old Testament.

Section titles, section introductions and book introductions can all be used in written Bible translations to provide necessary supplemental information. Maps, charts and timelines are also tools that are very helpful for readers who do not have a clear understanding of the interrelation of the main characters and events. We have met Muslims who do not know that David came after Moses, or that the Joseph married to Jesus’

Figure 2. (from Hill 2006)



mother is not the same person as the prophet Joseph of the Old Testament.

While footnotes and articles are quite effective in a written translation, they are not an option in audio productions. One technique that has been successfully used is to have a narrator telling the biblical story to his companions. The narrator can offer clarification of various issues when necessary. For example, in one dramatized audio production of the story of David, one of the listeners interrupted the account of Samuel anointing Saul to ask, "Why did they wipe oil on his head?"

The narrator responded, "It was the custom that God, when he wanted to put a king over the sons of Jacob, would say to them, 'Anoint him with oil.'" This information is not only necessary for understanding the story of David, but provides essential background to the term "Messiah" (anointed one) that will appear over and over again in the Gospels.

3. Chronological Storying

Many of the foundational concepts and themes necessary to correctly understand the Gospels and Epistles are set forth in the Old Testament. As Brown (2001) notes:

God spent centuries preparing the sons of Israel for the coming of his kingdom, and he spread their books and synagogues throughout the Western world to prepare the Gentiles. Then, when he sent the Savior King, God also sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for him. But in spite of all this, it was only with difficulty that the people believed and accepted Jesus as the Messiah. People still need preparation today.

Brown goes on to cite research indicating that without this background, the response to the gospel will likely be syncretism rather than biblical faith.

Much of the Old Testament teaching on these themes is given in narrative genre, which is attractive and compelling for people of all ages. In addition, while doctrinal points presented analytically or didactically are often

How many people presenting the Old Testament background to the Gospel deliberately discuss prophecies of the Kingdom of God . . . ?

resisted by Muslims, they will usually enjoy listening to audio stories of the Biblical prophets, or hearing these stories recounted personally by a Christian friend. This approach helps them to see the distinct nature of each prophet's message, and to see the progression in revelation that occurs over time, contrary to the cyclical view that they have learned.

For example, a friend of ours came to an understanding of the divinity of Christ through a storying approach to the book of Acts. The fact that the apostles healed and performed miracles in the name of Jesus was compelling evidence to her that he was more than a prophet, even though she might not have expressed her new understanding in conventional Christian theological language.

When choosing Scripture passages for a Chronological Storying set, the cross-cultural worker might want to consider which Old Testament stories would help fill in missing background information for important concepts in the New Testament. For example, another Muslim reader of the Gospel of Mark, an intelligent young student, was full of questions including, "Who is Isaiah?" and "What is the Kingdom of God?" And yet how many people presenting the Old Testament background to the Gospel deliberately discuss prophecies of the Kingdom of God, passages such as Daniel 2 and 1 Samuel 7? How many think to cover the story of Isaiah, including a selection of his prophecies of the coming Messiah?

4. Cycling/Repetition

The differences between Biblical worldview and that of the Receptor are such that they cannot easily be absorbed in a short amount of time. This is why practitioners of Chronological Storying often will create "story cycles" focusing on certain themes. In this way they

give listeners repeated exposure to these complex themes, adding a little bit of new information each time.

One of the strengths of the Muslim worldview is that it ties together constellations of concepts in intricate webs of connection. The concept of God's transcendence and unknowability is tied in with the focus on God's commandments, and with the good deeds/reward system. In order for the Biblical message and worldview to truly take root in a person's life, the whole biblical picture must be seen. The Biblical story is a compelling and attractive narrative, but the logic of it can best be seen through extended exposure and repetition.

For example, our paraphraser continually attributed Jesus' miracles and healings to God rather than Jesus himself. While it is true that God was powerfully working through Jesus, as Jesus himself testifies in the Gospel of John (e.g., John 5:19, 5:30, 6:38), the text of Mark does not always say this. The paraphraser's worldview would not allow her to see a mere human as performing miracles from his own power, and her worldview informed her that Jesus was a mere human. Through continued exposure to the New Testament, however, she should be able to see Jesus' unique power, his authority from God, and his deeds and attributes, which in many cases were considered to belong to God alone.

5. Community

Ultimately, many people are drawn to the person of Christ not simply through reading or hearing the Bible, but through seeing Biblical teaching lived out in the lives of a community of believers. The Biblical epic narrative will be no more than an enchanting tale unless the listeners can see its relevance to their own life. This community will need to be one that is culturally accessible, one that new believers can join without excessive dis-

ruption from current social relationships, and one to which they can invite others from their social network.

Implications of Contextual Adjustment for Cross-Cultural Communicators

The above discussion of contextual mismatch suggests that evangelism or discipleship based on teaching from the Gospels apart from their full Biblical context is likely to create confusion, which will result in people rejecting or accepting Jesus, but for the wrong reasons. Those who accept Jesus for the wrong reasons tend to become syncretic in beliefs and practices and struggle with problems of self-identity.

An important element of the Muslim worldview (and the Biblical worldview!) that is often ignored in traditional Christian discipleship materials and methods is the whole realm of the supernatural. Andrea has two Muslim friends who became followers of Jesus and were discipled both by Western missionaries and by local Christians. However, neither had received Biblical guidance in how to deal with jinn, fortune-telling and the Evil Eye. One woman continued to recite the Fatiha (the first chapter of the Qur'an) to get rid of demons that were bothering her in the night. She was surprised and excited to find out, after we read together several relevant biblical passages, that as a believer she had authority in the name of Jesus to send away the demons.

The other woman was struggling with how to deal with the death of her infant sister, purportedly due to the Evil Eye. Having been told by Christians that the Evil Eye is a superstition, she didn't know how to explain her sister's death in the context of her faith in Christ. The tension this created inside her was evident. When Andrea led her through a brief survey of the Biblical concept of Satan, evil and demons, as well as Jesus' work to free us from the bonds of Satan, she was better equipped her to explain her environment, including supernatu-

ral happenings, according to her new (Biblical) perspective.

We have found Old Testament background to be essential in explaining most messianic titles, the concept of the Kingdom of God, and the death of Christ. One Muslim acquaintance asked Leith for a copy of the Bible. Later Leith asked this man his opinion of what he had read, and he quite hesitantly said, "Well, there was one thing..." It turns out that the term "Son of God" was very offensive to him, and in a brief discussion of the Old Testament background Leith was able to successfully deal with his objections.

In another discussion, a young Muslim student expressed his confusion with the concept of the Holy Spirit and none of Leith's explanations seemed to make sense. However, later the student asked, "What is the Christians' *shari'ah* [divine law]?" Leith was able to point to Jeremiah 31:31-34 (also quoted in Hebrews) that talks about God writing the Law on people's hearts. This led to a discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. The success of this explanation was due partly to the fact that it answered a felt need expressed in the Muslim's own terminology and categories, and partly due to the Old Testament reference that leaves out less information and assumes less shared information than an explanation of the Holy Spirit based solely on New Testament passages.

For a movement of Jesus followers to emerge in the Muslim world, cross-cultural workers will need to present the full panorama of Biblical revelation—the compelling narrative of God's activity from creation to the Day of Judgment. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

¹ This process can be described by the Piagetan term, "assimilation." Its complimentary process, "accommodation," in which the existing worldview is modified in order to accommodate new information, occurs only rarely without help from contextual adjustment, which will be discussed below.

² Considering the importance of the Biblical concept of the Holy Spirit, it is clear that further research on this particular point is needed. It may be that the traditional Muslim belief that the Holy Spirit is the angel Gabriel is reinforced by Bible translations in Arabic.

³ In keeping with the conventions of Relevance Theory notation, the Communicator is referred to with a feminine pronoun and the Receptor is referred to with a masculine pronoun.