Easter through Muslim eyes

The Crucifixion of the Lord Jesus is a well-known point of difference between Christians and Muslims. While it is central to Christian belief, Muslims believe that someone else was crucified in Jesus' place and that the Lord Jesus was taken up to God without dying.

Ibn Khaldun (died 1406 AD) and Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad (died 1964 AD) are two giants of Arab Muslim writing. Both deal with the status of the New Testament and the events of the Crucifixion. Although they are from very different periods they are linked by their relatively positive statements about the New Testament.

The aim here is to explore how their views of the New Testament impact their views of the Crucifixion. For each of them I give a brief introduction to their life followed by an outline of their views on the New Testament and their understanding of the events surrounding the Crucifixion.

Ibn Khaldun 1332-1406 AD

He was born in Tunis in 1332 AD. He was a diplomat and a courtier in North Africa and Muslim Spain, subsequently spending 24 years in Cairo. His own encounters with people of other faiths include being sent in 1364 AD by the ruler of Granada, Muhammad V, as an emissary to Pedro the Cruel, the Christian ruler of Seville. However, once in Cairo Ibn Khaldun had little contact with the Jewish and Christian communities there.

Ibn Khaldun is famous for his **Introduction** (Al-Muqaddima) completed in November 1377 AD. It is a classic case of an introduction overshadowing the work it introduces! It reflects on a wide range of subjects including the philosophy of history, sciences, sociology and religious topics. It introduces the **"Book of Examples"** a history of the Arabs, the Persians, the Berbers of North Africa and other peoples. Within the **Book of Examples** Ibn Khaldun gives an account of the life of the Lord Jesus. He uses the Quranic terms *Tawrat* for the Old Testament and *Injil* (Gospel) for the New Testament.

The New Testament

At the start of **The Introduction**, Ibn Khaldun makes clear his traditional understanding that both the Old Testament and the New Testament mention Muhammad, **"The Arab prophet, whom Torah and Gospel have mentioned and described."**

Ibn Khaldun also regards the Old and New Testaments as fundamentally different in nature to the Quran. He wrote, **"The Quran is alone among the divine books in that our prophet received it directly in the words and phrases in which it appears. In this respect, it differs from the Torah and the Gospel and other heavenly books. The prophets received them in the form of ideas during the state of revelation. After their return to a human state they expressed those ideas in their own ordinary words"**.

It is possible to interpret this passage positively, since it grants considerable scope for genuine revelation in the process by which the Old and New Testaments were composed. Contrasting the process of the revelation of the Quran with that of any other Scriptures however, also gives Ibn Khaldun scope to discount views deemed as contradicting the Quran.

In defending his extensive use of the Old Testament (*Tawrat*) as a historical source, Ibn Khaldun discusses explicitly the question of the corruption of the previous Scriptures. He writes concerning the possibility of the Bible text having been altered, **"The statement concerning the alteration is unacceptable to thorough scholars and cannot be understood in its plain meaning, since custom perverts the people of the religions from dealing with their divine Scriptures in such a manner."**

This statement is not found in any of the manuscripts of **The Introduction** and is omitted from many parallel Arabic editions. Ibn Khaldun also mentions a hadith in the collection of Al Bukhari ruling out

all textual corruption of the Hebrew Bible. No such hadith is actually found there and so the reason for Ibn Khaldun's comment remains a mystery. Is it a simple error or an attempt to add to the authority of his statement by drawing the name of the most renowned Sunni hadith collector?

In another comment, this time on the Injil, Ibn Khaldun states, **"Not all of it is pure revelation, but (the Gospels) have a mixture of the words of Jesus and the apostles."** This is a not uncommon Muslim view that the genuine *Injil* can be found by filtering out extraneous material which Christians have allowed to enter the Gospels. It is unclear how this view of the Gospels as a mixture of revelation and other material relates to Ibn Khaldun's view that the people of religions would not alter their Scriptures.

The Crucifixion

The topic of the Crucifixion usefully highlights the difficulty of classifying Ibn Khaldun's view of the reliability of the New Testament. Muslims, customarily though not exclusively, believe that someone else took the place of Jesus on the Cross. They base this on sura 4:157. This verse criticises the Jews for claiming to have killed Jesus and adds, *"Yet they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but it only seemed like that to them."*

In **The Introduction** Ibn Khaldun states that, **"The Roman Emperor gave (the Jews) permission to kill him and the story of Jesus as recited in the Quran occurred."** This seems to be a straightforward rejection of the canonical Gospels' insistence on the death of the Lord Jesus on the Cross. Can we argue that Ibn Khaldun, in mentioning **"the story of Jesus as recited in the Quran"** holds any different interpretation of the Quran 4:157?"

To answer this question we can turn to Ibn Khaldun's discussion of the life of Jesus. The account draws on a variety of named sources including apocryphal Gospel material, Muslim historians and a brief reference to the Gospel of Matthew. Doubtless influenced by the Quran, Ibn Khaldun's interest in the life of Jesus centres on Mary and the birth narratives of Jesus with very little reference to the focus of the canonical Gospels on the adult ministry of the Lord Jesus, his death and resurrection. This last receives no mention at all.

On the question of Ibn Khaldun's view of the Crucifixion, his chapter on Jesus demonstrates that his view is firmly in line with the usual Muslim view. Ibn Khaldun directly contradicts the testimony of the four Gospels that Jesus died on the Cross preferring the theory that someone resembling Jesus died in his place. He wrote, **"This resemblance was killed and crucified and rose on the seventh day. His mother came to weep at the Cross. Jesus came to her and said, 'What are you weeping about?' She said, 'About you'. He said, 'God raised me up and the end did not befall me'. This was something that only seemed like that to them."** (Quoted from the Quran 4:157)

Ibn Khaldun's view of the Gospels previously quoted helps to shed light on how he deals with the issue of the Crucifixion. He presumably regards the Christian accounts that it was Jesus who was crucified as representing parts of the Gospels that are not revelation, although he nowhere makes this clear. However, in the four Gospels it is not only particular verses that describe the death of Jesus. Whole passages presuppose it. In the case of the Gospel of John, the whole of the second half is preoccupied with the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Sadly, Ibn Khaldun does not comment on how he might reconcile his two positions – often positive about the Gospels, but flatly rejecting the Crucifixion.

As an afterword, Ibn Khaldun offers practical advice on the question of reading the previous Scriptures – i.e. the Bible. But despite his own great intellectual interests, he explicitly forbids ordinary Muslims to study the Bible.

Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad 1889-1964 AD

His book **"The Genius of the Messiah"** was first published in 1953 AD. It is a reflective study on the life of Jesus based on the four canonical Gospels. Al-Aqqad was largely self-taught. He never attended a

university or college, yet he became one of Egypt's most respected and prolific authors. He was very active in journalism and politics. He also wrote two books against Nazism. He composed a series of books under the title "**The Genius of …..**" One of these was on Muhammad written in 1942. Others were on the first four Caliphs of Islam and there is also one on "**The Genius of the Messiah**".

The New Testament

Al-Aqqad's clearest statement defending the use of the Gospels reads, "**It is incorrect to dismiss all the Gospels as unreliable for determining the history of the Lord Jesus just because they were not recorded right away. It is correct to accept the Gospels as the sole basis for writing the history, since they claimed sayings which are completely appropriate and difficult to claim as fabrications.**"

While positive, Al-Aqqad's acceptance is by no means unqualified as we will see. Nevertheless, in contrast to Ibn Khaldun, he invites his readers to read the four Gospels for themselves as a source of information rather than to critique them. Regarding what he considers the "**wretched conditions**" of first century Palestine, he writes, "**The reader need only examine the Gospels whatever he may believe about them from the religious point of view, to realise that they represent the hopeless and wretched conditions which prevailed under Roman occupation**". He makes plain his belief that the mission of Jesus was also to the Gentiles, not just to the Jews.

Al-Aqqad seems to have an ambivalent view of how much he has based on history. This is relevant since we will look at his treatment of one of his central historical claims of the Gospels – that Jesus was crucified. He seems to value history, yet he also wrote the following, "**We have relied on the Gospel records with respect to the historical events they relate …. Rather, we have sought to enquire what lies behind these events that would elucidate the personality of the message.**"

The Crucifixion

Al-Aqqad writes regarding the immediate action of the authorities at the Crucifixion, "**The manner in which the action has been related in several accounts which go their separate ways. Here the role of history ends and the role of faith begins**". He adds however that, "**There is however an account of a historical nature that it would be improper to neglect, since it deserves particular attention**". He then relates that Jesus, although put on the Cross, was taken down alive and lived on for many years before dying in Kashmir. This view comes from the Ahmadiyya Movement built on the teachings of their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (died 1908). This Ahmadiyya view assumes that at least some of the disciples knew that Jesus had revived and left the area rather than dying on the Cross. Yet Al-Aqqad endorses the integrity of the disciples in more general terms earlier in his work. He writes that we should trust the words of the apostles, "**There is every bit of difference between the behaviour of the believer who has no concern about death as he affirms his faith and the behaviour of the impostor who is lying and who knows he is lying and calling people to believe his lies. Such a person does not risk death for the sake of an innovative creed for he would be the first to know of its dishonesty and deception. It is out of the question that intentional liars would be among those who defy death in order to propagate their message.**"

This is the key tension at the heart of Al-Aqqad's view of the Crucifixion. On the one hand, the disciples would risk death for their message of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection as he states here. Yet on the other hand they must have known that Jesus recovered from his ordeal and went to India!

Al-Aqqad appears to accept the Ahmadiyya stance on the Crucifixion despite having no other known connections to Ahmadiyya thought. Perhaps he was more attracted to this than the traditional Muslim view that there was some form of mistaken identity at the Cross with either God changing someone's appearance to look like Jesus or the crowd not realising that someone else had been crucified.

Conclusion

While both writers lived in Egypt, Ibn Khaldun for part of his life and Al-Aqqad for his entire life, it is their understanding of what the Quran permits that provides their shared testimony. Ibn Khaldun invokes the Quran explicitly, whereas Al-Aqqad leaves this more implicit although it isn't hard to see that this would be the impetus behind his veering away from his reliance on the Gospels at what could be called – if a pun may be forgiven – the crucial moment. Even though they both express a degree of trust in the New Testament in general terms – especially Al-Aqqad, both find that giving similar credence to the belief that the Lord Jesus died on the Cross is a step too far.