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A New (and Old) Muslim Approach to the Apostle Paul
Shabbir Akhtar on Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Abstract

In 2018 Shabbir Akhtar (d. 2023) published *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes: Paul's Letter to the Galatians*. The book is built on a verse by verse commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, one of the Pauline epistles in the New Testament. Both a goad and a guide, Akhtar is attentive – unusually amongst Muslim Biblical scholarship – to the original Greek text of a complete New Testament book. A historical review of Muslim attitudes to Paul sets in context the unusual nature of Akhtar's approach. He pays serious attention to the text, largely suspending judgment during the course of discussion, while making a series of critical assessments at the close of the book. This article explores the strengths and weaknesses of Akhtar's approach and aims to draw out the wider significance of his close engagement with New Testament Greek. It is proposed that Akhtar's detailed and serious reading of a New Testament epistle could represent a significant step forward, a fork in the road of Muslim Biblical scholarship, encouraging other Muslim engagement with Biblical material which attempts to take seriously the self-understanding of the believing community even while not wholly accepting it.

Keywords: Paul; Galatians; New Testament; Muslim; interpretation

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1 Introduction

It is unusual that a comment placed at the start of a bibliography is worth quoting. However, Shabbir Akhtar, so often quotable, begins the bibliography of *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes* with the remark, "No Muslim has written a commentary on any Pauline epistle" (Akhtar, 2018a, 271). This aptly highlights the vacant space into which he stepped in writing his commentary on Galatians, part of a Routledge series entitled *Reading the Bible in Islamic Context*. The aim of this article is not simply to explore his comments and conclusions, but also the implications of his method for Muslim study of the Bible. After a sketch of Shabbir Akhtar's life and other relevant writings, his thoughts on method for a Muslim approaching the Bible are explored through a recent essay of his. There follows a brief introduction to the Letter to the Galatians and Akhtar's reasons for choosing it as the focus of his attention. A historical survey of some Muslim views of Paul then sets the scene for Akhtar's own interreligious responses to the apostle. Two assessments conclude this study. First, Akhtar's evaluation of Paul, and finally an assessment of Akhtar's own book. The historical survey of Muslim responses to Paul will help to show how far Akhtar's approach is both new, and yet also in some ways traditional. I shall frequently present him in his own words, not only because of his often distinctive voice, familiar to me through his works but also because of our being colleagues for several years. It is also because paying attention to a text – in this case Akhtar's own – echoes how he has addressed Paul's letter, with a careful if critical eye. While giving the text of Galatians his careful attention, his approach is to make only occasional evaluative comments in the main body of his book. Instead he reserves broader judgments, positive and negative, for his closing discussion. I shall follow the same pattern here. While a number of reviews of Akhtar's commentary have appeared, this article is, to my knowledge, the fullest engagement with his text so far (see Welle, 2018; Nickel, 2019; Novenson, 2019; Palanci 2021; Ryan, 2021; and the longer review by Kaltner, 2024).

2 Shabbir Akhtar: a life of ideas

Shabbir Akhtar sadly died suddenly in July 2023, at the age of 63. Born in Pakistan, he moved with his family to Bradford, England, at the age of ten (2018a, 10). After attending (by his own account in conversation with me) a relatively non-academic school, he was picked out by one of his teachers, who encouraged him to set his academic sights higher than those around him. As a result he applied to, and was accepted by, the University of Cambridge. After an undergraduate degree in philosophy, he moved to Canada for a doctorate under Professor Kai Nielsen at the University of Calgary. This was published as *Reason and the Radical Crisis of Faith* (1987), exploring how various Western thinkers have attempted to render theistic faith intellectually defensible.

Following this he featured in what became known as the Rushdie affair, involving Muslim outrage at Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, published in 1988. He produced a book related to this affair, *Be Careful with Muhammad!* (1989), which recently appeared in a second edition (2020). Akhtar taught in Malaysia and the USA, after which he returned to the United Kingdom, all the while pursuing his love of writing. His other works include *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind* (2008), and *Islam as Political religion* (2011). However, Akhtar was not a conventional academic. In fact he said to me more than once that 'I am not an academic, I am a thinker'. He had limited interest in reading books in which an author summed up the views of many others rather than

offering their own. He wanted to know what an author *thought*. He was extremely widely read in the field of English literature, and wrote poetry in both English and Urdu. Always a wordsmith, he was probing, provocative and unusual. He could be combative and given to exaggeration, while also capable of great subtlety based on extensive learning. I have personally never met someone who could move seamlessly from startling overstatement to highly articulate insight (and back again) with apparent ease and unconcern. His book on Galatians is a (relatively) restrained work, though one occasionally finds him taking aim at groups of which he disapproves, such as some reformist Muslims (2018a, 119).

The following words are worth quoting at length, since they capture many of his characteristic features. These include his commitment to seriousness, evident in his good New Testament Greek, as well as his fondness for strong positions, including his own emphatically Sunni identity.

> The translation of Galatians is my own and it is a wholly literal one. In this way seminal Christian themes are made to confront the Quran, through the human lens of a Muslim thinker. I have also translated the Quran myself and, moreover, endorsed only accepted Sunni interpretations of its claims. For this is the voice of the majority, the inherited normative and orthodox stance of a global community. This is the voice of the mainstream with whom outsiders should seek to engage. The increasingly proliferating views of countless dissident minorities give a distorted and unrepresentative view of original and current Islam. It can be no business of the outsider to encourage or patronise these minority understandings, let alone make them central. (2018a, 16)

The bluntness of the closing sentences here may leave many blinking in surprise. Yet it is interesting that an author keen to warn "outsiders", including of course Christians, regarding how to approach Islam, should nevertheless, as an outsider to the Christian faith, undertake a serious study of a Pauline Epistle – indeed, to my knowledge and Akhtar's, the first such thorough study by a Muslim author. As will become clear below, he regarded this commentary as engaging with a core Christian text. As a result, it can be assumed that Akhtar would certainly not see writing about Galatians as dealing with "the increasingly proliferating views of countless dissident minorities".

The seeds of the Galatians commentary, rather than being buried under his other concerns, are in plain sight in Akhtar's occasional references to Paul in his previous works. In *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind* he mentions Paul's reference to "an inward faculty of self-accusation and judgment" referring to Romans 2:14–15 in the New Testament. He places this alongside the Qur'an's mention of the self-accusing soul (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*) in Q75:2 (2008, 100). This is just the type of parallel, observed for interest rather than for any evaluative comparison, which abounds in *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes*. He also mentions in *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind* Paul's influence in universalising the new faith, in contrast to the "arabolatry" of Islam (2008, 164). This is a view he repeats in his commentary on Galatians. He also comments on Muhammad's distress at the unbelief of others alongside Paul's similar concern in Romans 9:30–11:32 (2008, 245). In *Islam as Political Religion*, there are also brief appearances by Paul. Here we find Akhtar at his most sweeping. The imitation of Paul is "easier than *imitatio Christi* since we know much more about Paul than about Jesus" (2011, 69). In similar expansive vein Paul is described as "the real if unacknowledged founder of Christianity" (2011, 83). Here seems to lie the impetus for Akhtar's launching into his detailed commentary on Galatians, although in this work he more regularly restrains himself from such broad judgments. The presenting question for Akhtar, though not

expressed in so many words, is as follows, and explains his undertaking a book length and detailed study. If Paul is the founder of Christianity, what are Muslims to make of his statements? Before we turn to the commentary itself to explore Akhtar's answer to this question, however, a word on his method is in order.

3 Akhtar on Method in Approaching the Bible

In order to understand Akhtar's approach to the Letter to the Galatians it is necessary to explore his method in approaching the Bible more generally. Fortunately he provides a clear guide to this in his essay 'Three methods for a Muslim reading of the Bible' in *Reading the Bible in Islamic Context* (2018b).

Akhtar lists three possible ways of approaching the Bible as a Muslim. He discusses these "in order of decreasing levels of Islamic faith commitment" (2018b, 273). First, the Qur'an is read by Muslims as asserting the corruption of the extant Biblical scriptures. Akhtar terms this "a simple if not rather stereotypical affirmation of an uncompromisingly Abrahamic monotheism" (2018b, 273–74). Secondly, "we acknowledge an enduring deadlock among the Semitic trio" (2018b, 274). He sees this as an acceptance of irreconcilable differences which can only be resolved in the next world – so a form of agnostic focus on description rather than evaluation of different scriptures. Thirdly, Akhtar's own approach is different, though he terms it "an evolution of the attitudes implicit in the second". Here he advocates "consciously suspending, albeit temporarily and solely for academic purposes, one's routine faithful endorsement of the comprehensive authority of one's own scripture" (2018b, 274).[1] He explicitly links this method to his commentary on Galatians, stating in his essay that "I have recently used this method to write an experimental commentary" on that Epistle (2018b, 274). For Akhtar, "this final method effectively *postpones* judgment long enough to treat the rival seriously, that is, on its own terms" (2018b, 277 – emphasis original). As we shall see, this suspension of judgment for Akhtar is both real, yet also clearly temporary, since he offers various assessments, occasionally in the main text, and in broader terms at the end of his commentary.

There are of course other ways in which Muslims have approached the Bible, some of which assume a possible greater degree of perceived harmony between the Qur'an, Islamic teaching, Muslim views (or all of the above) and the Bible. These cannot be surveyed here, but note in passing that this more harmonising perspective can arise from different starting points. One angle of approach is a study of the Biblical text itself, as in the case of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, discussed below. A different starting point, built on a reading not of the Bible, but of the Qur'an as non-supersessionist, is given by Mehr (2023).

At the end of Akhtar's essay on method he imagines comments from Muslim critics. "It is wiser, the Muslims would say, to ignore or else confront the non-Muslim opponents rather than to seek to engage them sympathetically, let alone to accommodate their criticisms." His low estimation of

[1] For discussion of a different type of suspension of judgment by a Muslim regarding parts of the Biblical text, focussed on suspending the judgment that a given part is either clearly corrupted or uncorrupted, see R. Michael McCoy (2021, 126–130). This relates to the discussion by al-Biqāʿī (d. 1480) in his *Al-Aqwāl al-qawīma fī ḥukm al-naql min al-kutub al-qadīma* (*Just words on the Permissibility of Quoting from the Previous Scriptures*). The Arabic text of this work, along with discussion of it, is available in Saleh 2008 (90 in Arabic text section).

ignoring or simply confronting non-Muslims is clear in his closing line. "Ignorance is strength, as the Party in Orwell's dystopia *1984* preaches" (2018b, 284). Nevertheless, despite his own commitment to understanding, for Akhtar empathy can only go so far. Suspending belief does not equate to hiding commitment (2018b, 281), as will become clear in what follows.

4 The Letter to the Galatians, and Akhtar's Reasons for Choosing it

Paul's letter to Galatians was written in around 50CE, or in the very late 40's, to churches in what is now central Turkey. The exact area to which the name Galatia refers is debated by commentators (see, for representative discussion amongst extensive literature, Dunn, 1993, 5–7; Longenecker, 1990, lxi–lxxii; Martyn, 1997, 15–17). It could refer to an area of northern modern Turkey as well as, or instead of, a more limited southerly central Turkey. However, the Roman province of Galatia referred to a more southern central area, causing some commentators to consider that Paul was referring to the more southerly region. The term "church" at this time denoted not buildings, but communities of believers in Christ who gathered together for worship, teaching and fellowship. These communities, to which Paul wrote, would have included, if the southern area hypothesis is accepted, places mentioned in the Book of Acts of the Apostles. In Acts chapter 14 we read of Paul preaching in Lystra, Derbe, and also Iconium, modern Konya, the city now strongly associated with the famous poet and mystic Rūmī, who features in the historical survey given below.

Akhtar's commentary opens with the words "Exegesis of a rival scripture can be a concealed form of polemic. Our aim, however, is to enter into St. Paul's mind and present fairly his vision to the Muslim (Gentile) reader" (2018a, 1). Akhtar's good understanding of New Testament Greek is linked to respectable knowledge of New Testament scholarship on Galatians (see for example the judgment of Welle, 2018). As quoted above, he offers his own translation of Galatians, and frequently comments on Greek grammar. In other words, he is serious about the task. Akhtar offers us his own assessment of his approach. "I want to write with charity and clarity, not evasion and malice" (2018a, 12). There is a bold yet simultaneously realistic description of the project. His description of his task is bold. "It is an unparalleled ambition. Its product, if successful, will be an unprecedented new initiative" (2018a, 13). Yet there is also realism. "I need not contribute much to the minutiae of existing scholarship on the New Testament, but I must be articulate in the tradition" (2018a, 11). Being "articulate in the tradition" is a realistic as well as an important aim. Akhtar's contribution lies in the field of Christian-Muslim relations, rather than in groundbreaking New Testament exegesis of a more traditional type. This contribution takes the form of suggesting new angles on the text for Christian readers, and drawing the attention of Muslim readers to an important New Testament work which rarely features in Muslim discussion of the Bible. By so doing he makes a specific contribution to the wider task of helping Muslims and Christians at least to understand one another's texts, even if they do not agree with them.

But what about the issue of Biblical textual corruption? This is usually referred to in Arabic as *taḥrīf lafẓī* (as opposed to *taḥrīf maʿnawī*, the lesser charge of corrupt interpretation of a sound text). Does the question of textual corruption not loom over such a painstaking study of a Biblical epistle, potentially (at least) undermining the very project in Muslim eyes? In particular, the gospels are sometimes treated as a puzzle by Muslims since they are written in Greek when Jesus would have spoken Aramaic (although he may well also have spoken Greek – see Buth, 1992).

Akhtar considers (2018a, 11), rightly in my view, that he can disregard the issue of textual corruption in relation to Galatians, for two reasons. First, Pauline authorship is not disputed by New Testament scholars. Dunn comments that "So far as we know, no question was ever raised in these early centuries as to its integrity or authenticity (1993, 1), while Longenecker remarks that "The most uncontroverted matter in the study of Galatians is that the letter was written by Paul" (1990, lvii). Secondly, the letter's original language is Greek, and does not involve translation from another language, thus avoiding the question Muslims typically raise about the gospels and language.

Why did Akhtar choose this particular epistle from within the New Testament? He explains that "I judge it to be the founding document, 'the Quran' of Christianity" (2018a, 7). It is also "The *Magna Carta* of Christian liberty" (2018a, 12). The leading themes of Galatians help to illustrate these comments. The letter has a strong overall focus on grace over law, grace available through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and faith in him. This helps to explain why its main themes might engage, even provoke, a Muslim reader. Because of the emphasis on justification by God's grace, rather than works of law, circumcision is not important, nor the keeping of other ritual requirements. There is a stress on the unity of all who believe in Christ, both Jew and Gentile. Freedom (in Christ) from the law is paramount. Related to this, Paul gives a severe warning about false teaching, namely the idea that things other than faith in Christ (particularly here, circumcision) are necessary for salvation. Galatians is the only New Testament letter which omits the customary opening section of thanksgiving. Instead Paul moves from initial greetings to blunt criticism of the Galatians. I quote here and throughout from Akhtar's own translation of Paul's letter, which will sound unfamiliar, since self-consciously literal, to the experienced Bible reader. "I do wonder how quickly you are removing yourself, from the one who called you by the grace of Christ" (Galatians 1:6). This particular rendition is a little more muted than the more typical translation of "I am astonished" or similar. Paul's wondering, or astonishment, is also why he later addresses them as "O foolish Galatians!" (Galatians 3:1) as already noted. Paul is greatly exercised by what he perceives as a major wrong turn by the Galatian believers, under the influence of false teachers. Teaching reliance on something other than faith in Christ for salvation, here the necessity of circumcision, distresses him.

The really interesting point, in the context of writing about a tradition other than one's own, is Akhtar's remark that "the false teachers' view is compatible with Islam" (2018a, 118). This is not just in the context of debate over circumcision, but over the broader idea, which Akhtar sees as Islamic, that "the Abrahamic covenant (promise) was completed with the addition of the later Mosaic covenant (law)" (2018a, 118). Akhtar considers that the Qur'an also follows this model of partial abrogation and partial continuity. Some divine requirements are set aside while others can be carried over to the next phase, or dispensation, in God's dealings with humanity. So for Akhtar Muslims are, in some respects, theologically allied with the opponents whom Paul condemns.

Akhtar notes something that might seem so obvious as to be easily overlooked, particularly by many Christians familiar with the New Testament epistles. As mentioned above, the letter begins with what is widely regarded as the most stinging rebuke by Paul in any of his letters. Later (Galatians 3:1) Pauls adds, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" As Akhtar wryly comments, "In the event, the Galatians, unlike some modern congregations, actually heeded their pastor! They preserved the epistle and thus gave us an exciting glimpse into the normative

patterns of emergent Christian piety" (2018a, 156). As Akhtar highlights, the fact that the letter to the Galatians was preserved, despite its stinging criticisms, is itself interesting. However, Akhtar's phrase "normative patterns" is ambiguous. It could refer to the practices of the Galatian churches in adopting extra requirements for salvation. Or it could describe Paul's understanding of the requirements of true faith in Jesus alone, which he clearly regarded as normative. Or thirdly, perhaps Akhtar intends the "patterns" of disagreement and tension over the true understanding of Christian faith.

Having said all the above, it is shortly time to dive more deeply into Akhtar's reflections, comparisons and disagreements in relation to Paul. A brief overview of some earlier Muslim engagements with Paul will help to set in context the new methodological paths which Akhtar takes, and the conclusions – not always so new – which he reaches.

5 Paul in Muslim history

As a chronological and geographical tour of Muslim writings will show, Paul is widely regarded as the central figure in distorting the original teachings of Jesus, teachings understood to be in agreement with Islam. The occasional glimpse of a more positive view does, however, also appear. Paul, either through error or deliberate deceit, is typically regarded by Muslims as having introduced the wrong turns that mark out historic Christian beliefs as deviations from Islam. These include the worship of Christ as a divine figure, and the abandonment of legal requirements such as circumcision and food laws. For those unfamiliar with the contours of Paul's life, the Book of Acts of the Apostles provides a New Testament narrative of his initial opposition to, then passionate adoption of faith in Christ. It is worth noting that Paul is not a major focus of Muslim criticisms of Christianity in terms of length of discussion. The gospels and their status, or Christian doctrines such as the Trinity or incarnation, are usually the subject of more extensive treatment. However, where Paul is mentioned, he is often implicitly or explicitly associated with the very errors just mentioned, and becomes a vital tool for Muslims in explaining the departures from the truth (of Islam) into which historic Christianity has strayed.

Despite Paul's importance in historical Muslim views of Christian belief and scripture, there is no explicit reference to him in either the Qur'an or in Hadith literature. He is occasionally linked to Q36:13–14, as the third figure in a passage which states, "Strike a parable for them: the companions of the town, when the envoys came to it. When We sent two men to them, and they called them liars, We reinforced (them) with a third. They said, 'Surely we are envoys to you' " (tr. Droge, 2017; for comments on this passage and Paul see Whittingham, 2021, 141–142). The earliest prophetic biography, *The Life of Muhammad* by Ibn Isḥāq (d. c. 150/767) supplies only a brief, neutral rather than critical report. "Those whom Jesus son of Mary sent, both disciples and those who came after them, in the land were: Peter the disciple and Paul with him (Paul belonged to the followers and was not a disciple) to Rome" (Ibn Isḥāq, 1858–60, 972, tr. Guillaume, see Ibn Isḥāq, 1955, 653).

So the role of Paul begins in very modest and insignificant ways. However, there is an early account by the little-known figure of Sayf b. 'Umar which paints a very different picture. Sayf (d. c. 180–193/796–809) portrays Paul as not only mistaken, but as a deliberate deceiver (Sayf b. 'Umar, 1995; Anthony, 2008). His plan, according to Sayf, is to prevent Jews converting to Christianity by

intentionally corrupting Christian teaching and introducing false ideas, while pretending to be a believer in Christ. In this way, the narrative goes, Paul will cause Jews to recoil from belief in Jesus (belief presented by the deceiver Paul as including his divine sonship and related errors), recognising it as a serious mis-step. When belief in Jesus becomes distasteful through being distorted in this way (that is, through the teaching of a divine Christ) Paul achieves his goal of deterring Jews from deserting their own faith. There are reasons to believe that this theory of Paul the conspirator originated outside Islam, in the anonymous Jewish work *Toledot Yeshu* (2014). As Jewish converts to Islam brought with them their familiarity with stories from their own community, so these stories entered the new community of Muslims (Whittingham, 2021, 142–48). For Sayf, Paul is a warning from history about not letting a deceiver corrupt true faith.

An important account of Paul is given by the Muʿtazilī jurist Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025). His work *The Confirmation of the Proofs of Prophethood* (*Tathbīt dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*) proposes a different view of Paul's motives in corrupting Christianity (ʿAbd al-Jabbār, 2010, 100–104). For ʿAbd al-Jabbār, Paul wanted power and therefore sought to gain favour with the ruling Roman authorities of his day. Again, false teaching is the strategy he is said to employ. Abandoning the true teachings of Jesus (in agreement with Islam), Paul promotes a series of measures including calling for monogamous marriage, abandoning circumcision and declaring all foods permissible. According to ʿAbd al-Jabbār, all this is done to ally himself with Roman power, while abandoning the true believers in Jesus.

The most famous, and famously harsh, Muslim critic of the Bible from the early centuries of Islam is Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), a native of al-Andalus, or Muslim-ruled Iberia. He makes a variety of criticisms of Paul, grouping him among "the most deceitful people of creation" (Ibn Ḥazm, 2007, 253), condemning him for forbidding circumcision (270), labelling him a "cursed one", and stating that accounts of miracles by him are lies (327).

The poet and mystic Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), when explaining why the gospels are corrupted, also draws on the motif of the scheming Jew. Again, this clearly echoes portrayals of Paul (though he is not named) as a deceiver who deliberately undermines Christianity from within. Rūmī narrates a tale in the *Mathnavī* of how a Jewish vizier, in order to oppose Christianity, deceived the Christians over the text of the gospels and led the Christians into false belief. The vizier pretends to be a secret follower of Christianity, circulates several scrolls of the gospels which contradict each other, and sows violent division amongst the Christians (Rūmī, 1926, II: 28–30, Persian text in Rūmī, 1925, I: 30–32, representing Book I, lines 463–499 of the *Mathnavī*).

An early Ottoman Turkish anti-Christian work preserves the same conspiracy theory as is found in the account of Sayf b. ʿUmar and in Rūmī. In the anonymous *The Book of Exile of Prince Cem* (*Gurbetnâme-i Sultan Cem*) dating from around the 1520's, Paul is again a conspirator seeking to undermine Christian belief from within. The work includes a dialogue between Prince Cem (d. 900/1495), a real historical figure, and Pope Innocent VIII, which is said to have taken place around 1490. This reflects the actual circumstances of Prince Cem's exile in Europe (see Finkel, 2005, 81–89, for a concise account of relevant events). Once again, although Paul is not named, the account of a deceitful Jew undermining Christianity is clearly based on a familiar portrayal of the Apostle. This deceiver is said to teach the sanctity of Sunday, the spiritual power inherent in drinking wine, and the need to venerate the cross (Demiri, 2015, 676–687; Flemming, 2018, 247–248).

Moving to the final years of Safavid Persia, Paul is mentioned in criticisms of Christianity written by the Augustinian missionary António de Jesus (d. c. 1722). He caused consternation amongst his fellow Augustinians in Isfahan by converting to Islam, adopting the name ʿAli Quli Jadīd al-Islām. In his anti-Christian work *The Sword of the Faithful in the Fight Against the Associators* (*Sayf al-mu'minīn fī qitāl al-mushrikīn*) he criticises Paul for altering references to food laws in the Biblical book of Deuteronomy (Tiburcio, 2020, 140–41). Here, unusually, ʿAli Quli's main target in discussing Biblical corruption is the Bible translator Jerome (d. 420), but Paul is also implicated. In the same work he also accuses Paul of defending pantheism (Tiburcio, 2020, 170).

Two very different examples from 19th century India show that responses to Paul can vary. Rahmat Allah Kairanvi (d. 1891), wrote what has subsequently become a very famous work of anti-Christian polemics, *The Truth Revealed* (*Iẓhār al-ḥaqq*). He composed this work in Arabic in Ottoman Istanbul in the 1860's, at the request of the Sultan Abdulaziz. The book, however, was the fruit of his debate in Agra, North India, in 1854, with the Christian missionary Karl Gottlieb Pfander, as well as drawing on Kairanvi's earlier works in Urdu. The Sultan requested that Kairanvi write his book since Pfander had moved from India to Istanbul and was actively promoting his views in that city in the early 1860's. In *The Truth Revealed* Kairanvi describes the apostle Paul as "one of the liars who appeared in the first generation, although he was revered among the people of the Trinity" (Kairanvi, 1989, 387). It is also worth noting, since it is so widely circulated, the rather free English translation of this same passage which clearly inherits many of the aspects of portrayals of Paul from earlier centuries. The translation describes Paul as "a traitor and a liar who introduced a completely new concept of Christianity, absolutely different from what Jesus himself preached" (Kairanvi, 2003, 218). The gulf between the true, Islamic teachings of Jesus and the false views of Paul is underlined emphatically by the translator.

The second Indian example shows that the picture of Paul in Muslim writings is not always negative. A more positive, though far less common, view is given by the Indian educationalist and reformer Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898). His commentary on Matthew's Gospel, chapters 1–5, is in some ways a forerunner of Shabbir Akhtar's work in its close attention to the Biblical text. Khan mentions Paul briefly in commenting on Matthew 5:16, a verse mentioning letting your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and thank God. Khan remarks that "Yes, it is very easy to preach, but to be and speak like St Paul is extremely difficult" (Troll et al., 2020, 295). Khan also cites Paul as providing evidence (though he does not illustrate his point) that commandments from an earlier religious dispensation, or sharia, are abrogated by a later one. In so doing, Khan appeals to Paul's writings as an apparently reliable source confirming Khan's own position. Elsewhere Khan is willing to list "Matthew, Paul and Muhammad" as united in being recipients of revelation. This is a startling remark, even given that Khan qualifies it by stating that revelation given to the first two of these is of a different nature from that granted to Muhammad (Ramsey, 2021, 162).

This overwhelmingly negative picture of Paul in Muslim eyes is the backdrop against which Akhtar approaches his subject. Akhtar uses Galatians as the springboard to highlight areas he wants to clarify in the area of Christian-Muslim understanding and difference, or to pause for reflection on topics attracting his interest.

6 Akhtar's Interreligious Comments on Galatians

Akhtar comments on a large number of issues, some briefly and some at greater length, in working his way verse by verse through Galatians. I offer for discussion here my own selection of those which seem of particular importance or interest. But first, I quote the opening words of Akhtar's first main chapter. These words aptly capture his procedure, and the way in which he has picked out what drew his attention, rather than working his way through every possible question or issue.

> In each chapter of the textual commentary a brief general introduction opens the way to a short commentary on each verse (or a few related verses) of our chosen part of the letter. Sometimes, I merely paraphrase the material under consideration if no commentary is needed. A topic-oriented longer commentary is offered on themes emerging from the *pericopae* being studied. The short commentary consists of aphorisms and brief observations from several perspectives: Christian exegetical, Islamic, agnostic, philosophical and secular humanist. A single verse rarely requires all these perspectives or in this order; I indicate the perspective but it is often self-evident, especially as we proceed further in this inquiry. These somewhat desultory reflections are my *pensées* in the style of Blaise Pascal. (2018a, 15)

The nature of prophethood is a central theme in Islam and a well-known example of Muslims and Christians using a common term in different ways. As Akhtar notes, "Christians subtly transcended the Old Testament category of prophet after its perceived fulfilment in Jesus. Thus, New Testament prophets have different, indeed comparatively attenuated, roles". He then adds that Paul "was perhaps too much of an intellectual to be a prophet" (2018a, 57). By contrast, Isaiah is most like the Qur'anic concept of prophet. "He preached the straight path, condemned crookedness, and was no jingoist" (2018a, 57). Paul's standing as an apostle is undermined, for Akhtar, since the letter states that he was commissioned by Jesus Christ. Since, in Muslim eyes, Jesus is a human being and therefore in no position to send or commission a messenger or apostle, this renders Paul's apostleship "unacceptable" from a Muslim point of view (2018a, 56). Akhtar does not comment on the obvious counter-argument, which is that Paul writes that he was sent "through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (2018a, 46).

The crucifixion is another area of Muslim-Christian discussion and debate. Akhtar comments that "the gospel of the cross, like persecuted Meccan Islam, would appeal to powerless victims" (2018a, 65). But Akhtar much prefers solutions to the human predicament (however diagnosed) which involve both politics and action. As he states in *Islam as Political Religion*, "political religion is the only alternative to daydreaming" (Akhtar, 2011, 268). Such a statement begs questions regarding what a faith tradition needs to embrace in order to be "political". But here, in relation to the crucifixion, Akhtar notes that "Muhammad moved from the soothing catharsis of merely moral outrage into the tougher arena of effectively activist agency" (2018a, 66). It is clear that Akhtar sees himself in this world of activist agency, albeit expressing it through writing. In *Islam as Political Religion*, he remarks, after some personal comments regarding his own work, that "by moving beyond mere scholarship and research towards insight and wisdom, a thinker can sometimes awaken a whole generation of his people" (2011, 3).

Perhaps because of his preference for socio-political action over what could be seen as the symbolic or representative suffering of Jesus, Akhtar says little about the crucifixion itself. His most substantial comments come in the wake of his observation that, "Muslims rarely have the patience

and conscientious respect even to appreciate, let alone explore, core Christian soteriological convictions" (2018a, 64). There is some discussion of sacrifice, noting that the Qur'an supports the Hebrew Bible in seeing it as "a divinely-ordained way to show self-surrender and affiliation to the covenant". Nonetheless, Akhtar adds in relation to the New Testament focus on the sacrifice of Christ for sin that, "The Qur'an would see this obsession with eliminating sin with sacrifice, animal or human, as corrupt pagan superstition" (2018a, 64). Paul writes that "With Christ I have been co-crucified" (Galatians 2:20, though 2:19 in Akhtar's rendition), and presents the crucifixion as foundational to his experience and faith. However, Akhtar describes the crucifixion as "a matter of faith and not subject to objective verification" (2018a, 167), thus sidestepping a central issue in Christian-Muslim discussion. Note also that Akhtar's remark seems to assume (though he does not make this explicit) that the Qur'an straightforwardly denies that Jesus himself was crucified. In this he is in company with the overwhelming majority of Muslims, though the interpretation of the key verse in this discussion, Q4:157, continues to be scrutinised, including in a recent and very thorough exploration of the exegetical issues (Paniello, 2023).

The role of the Holy Spirit in Paul's thought is, like the crucifixion, given less attention than might be expected. His remarks in this regard on Galatians 3:2 and 3:5 are brief (2018a, 110–111), but the treatment of Galatians 4:6 is more reflective. The verse reads, "And because you are sons, God sent forth the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' " This addressing of God as father is a notable point of difference between Christians and Muslims, but prompts no criticism at this point from Akhtar. Instead he notes with fairness to Christian perspectives that, "This spirit's presence creates the *morphē* (form or character) of Christ within the Christian" (2018a, 142). Akhtar here shows a real willingness to describe carefully perspectives which he clearly would not share.

His discussion of the famous passage in Galatians 5:16–26 (2018a, 192–207), which includes discussion of the fruit of the Spirit, does not engage with the key presenting question of how life lived by the Spirit compares or contrasts with Akhtar's own more law-based approach to right conduct. This passage would seem to be a highly promising junction inviting discussion not just of interesting Biblical and Qur'anic parallels, but how the wider logic of Galatians sits alongside the alternative concept of the Galatian false teachers and of Akhtar himself. It is only fair to point out that there is further discussion of the role of the Spirit in relation to Paul's mysticism (2018a, 106–07), but without addressing some of the key issues – central to Akhtar's interest in law and its alternatives – regarding how to know and practise right behaviour in ways alternative to a reliance on law.

The conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus is mentioned in Galatians 1:13–17. Akhtar draws a partial parallel with the conversion of the second Caliph 'Umar (d. 23/644). He left his pagan past, and, like Paul, "repudiated… his passionate hostility to the new faith". In fact he was "transformed into the most fervent Muslim colonialist of all times" (2018a, 71). This reference to Muslim colonialism is not intended negatively, as Akhtar solidly supports the divine origin of the early Muslim conquests. He refers, in *Islam as Political Religion*, for example, to "the unparalleled courage of Muslim fighters, reminiscent of Islam's glorious origins" (2011, 239).

Should believers be seen as servants or sons of God? The role of the believer as a son of God, not just a servant, is emphasised in Galatians 4:1–7.[2] This contrasts with the more positive Muslim view of the servanthood of the believer as the highest human state. Paul's concept of believers being adopted as sons is "doubly unsettling for Muslim readers" (2018a, 141), not only because of the Christian theological notion of adoption, but also because adoption as a practice in human families is severely limited in the light of Q33:4–5. Furthermore, "servanthood is the highest station of which the human creature is capable" (2018a, 142). For Muslims, Jesus is also a created human being, and Akhtar draws attention to Q4:172, which he translates as "The messiah shall never disdain to be a servant of God, (2018a, 143). Here the Muslim Jesus affirms the noble status of servanthood. In addition, the Muslim posture of prostration in worship is appropriate, even though it suggests "humiliation (associated with fear)". This is because "love is often insufficient to motivate righteous conduct. The ingredient of fear is needed" since "we human beings need more than one kind of motivation" (2018a, 143). For Akhtar, seeing the believer as a fearful servant of God is much preferable to Paul's notion of an adopted son.

Akhtar reflects on pastoral concern in both Paul and Muhammad in the context of Galatians 4:19–20, "My children, with whom I am again in the pains of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you… I am perplexed about you." He draws a parallel with Muhammad, citing Q9:43, 61 and 128 (2018a, 159). Q9:128, reads, "What you suffer is a mighty (weight) on him, (for he has) concern over you, (and he is) kind (and) compassionate with the believers" (where "him" refers to Muhammad). Akhtar also compares followers of Jesus, followers described in Q57:27 as showing "kindness and mercy" with those of Muhammad, who are exhorted in Q48:29 to be "harsh against the disbelievers". As a result, "disbelievers must be made to sense Muslim harshness – though only in the context of active hostilities" (2018a, 159). In Akhtar's view, Muhammad's pastoral care is much more evident in his biography and in hadith reports of his customary practice, rather than in the Quran, "a mysteriously detached scripture even though its verses deal with zeal and passion" (2018a, 159).

The practice of imitating a founding figure is another prompt for reflection. Paul invites imitation of his example in Galatians 4:12. "Become as I am because I am also as you are" (2018a, 155). Akhtar adds mention of the imitation of Christ in Christian tradition and then criticises Muslim practice for its focus on imitation of Muhammad's external habits as preserved in the Hadith. Akhtar terms this imitation, "a rather mechanical copying of the Prophet's actions rather than of the just and merciful dispositions that motivated those actions". It thus becomes "a rather arbitrary and pointless imitative piety". By contrast, "the followers of Jesus and Paul never imitated their culinary and aesthetic tastes, but rather only their moral and spiritual values". Muslims ought similarly to cultivate "a penitent awareness of one's place in the world" (all quotes 2018a, 160). At this point Akhtar lifts Christian practice, or at least intention, above that of many Muslims. Nor is this elevation of Christians unique in the commentary. On treatment of poor people, he writes (2018a, 82) that "Only prejudiced persons could deny the compassionate nobility of the Christian record regarding service of desperately poor people". As for Muslims, whom he feels have a less exalted history on this point, "their failing was caused by a gradual apostasy from the high standards of enthusiasm set by the Prophet and his early disciples".

[2] See also John's Gospel 15:14–15, where Jesus is recorded as stating that he no longer calls the disciples servants, but friends, if they do what he commands.

The relationship of faith and works is a central issue for believers of both faiths. Here Akhtar is, in my view, genuinely insightful in attempting to understand Paul despite being outside the community of those who would follow him, and identify as Christians. Akhtar makes a number of comments that show how hard he has worked to grasp Paul's worldview. For Paul, "works are integral but not instrumental to faith, since works carry no merit with regard to salvation". However, works remain important. Referring to *agape*, one of the New Testament terms for love, we read that, "Paul's whole counsel emerges once we *synoptically* read Galatians *and* Romans: Christian faith is active in agape. The faith that justifies is the faith that expresses itself in works and actions. This considered Christian stance is compatible with the Islamic view of the unity of faith and works, of *īmān* and *a'māl*" (emphasis original) (2018a, 176). This remarkable openness to a Pauline perspective also, of course, opens up a huge area of theological interreligious debate. The implications of the term "compatible" here are not fully spelled out, and Akhtar himself would no doubt, if he were still with us, have much more to say about difference as well as similarity.

Amongst all the comparisons and reflections Akhtar offers, his love of language leads him to frequent musings on Greek and Arabic terms. It would be unfair to him to close this section without at least a nod to his frequent linguistic comparisons, though they are often in the form of passing comments rather than designed to make a substantive theological or other point. On anger in Galatians 5:20, for example, he writes that, "*thumoi* are outbursts of anger as opposed to *orgē*, the disposition of settled anger. The Quran uses *ghussa* for passionate anger that chokes a person, the word's literal sense" (2018a, 196). Yet these regular linguistic comments are more significant than they seem at first glance, not primarily for their importance in understanding the text, but in the evident satisfaction Akhtar takes in exploring the original language of Christian scripture. Given the importance for Muslims of studying the original language of the Qur'an, and the relative rarity of study of the original languages of the Bible in Muslim Biblical scholarship, Christian readers might take heart from Akhtar's habit of discussing Greek along with Arabic at what seems like any possible opportunity.

7 Akhtar's assessment of Paul, and an assessment of Akhtar

Having largely suspended judgment for much of the commentary, Akhtar concludes with some more evaluative comments. As will be seen below, however, these can also be found occasionally in the main body of the commentary. The combination of careful reflection followed by final analysis seems a fitting way to go about the detailed study of the scripture of another tradition. However, Akhtar's own words, as well as Paul's, merit some evaluative comments. First, to borrow the title phrase of the book, we turn to Paul in Akhtar's own particular "Muslim Eyes".

On the positive side, while Paul made errors he was, according to Akhtar, nonetheless sincere. Granted "he was a sincere preacher who got many things wrong" but he also "got much right" (2018a, 269). This contrasts starkly with the usual history of Muslim accounts of Paul, including some outlined above, which portray him as a deceiver, or at the very least deceived and in error.

Secondly, Paul was "a wise mentor. I believe that he would advise Muslims to imitate the prophetic Muhammadan consciousness of the world rather than a robotic imitation of his actions" (2018a, 173). This seems quite a robust challenge to the role, or interpretation, of hadith reports.

Thirdly, Muslims can learn from Paul regarding making a new faith universal. He moved belief in Christ away from Jewish ritual and belief, and this, according to Akhtar, could help Muslims "to make Islam a more self-consciously universal faith, finally removed from traces of its historically conditioned Arabolatry" (2018a, 269).

But then, as he puts it, "sadly, however, it is time for some hard statements" (2018a, 268). A faith which underplays the role of law is problematic. It is "effectively a regress to an earlier and more primitive stage of religious evolution". A consequence of this is that Christianity "offers no guidance on how to live well" (2018a, 268). This is allied to a more general perception that "Muslims generally regard Christianity as suited only to a spiritual elite", an elite "behaving irresponsibly by neglecting their social and political duty to establish God's Kingdom on this side of the grave" (2018a, 261). In passing, it is not clear how this remark integrates with his praise, mentioned above, of Christian treatment of poor people down the centuries (2018a, 82). His view of the irresponsible neglect of Christians in bringing in the Kingdom of God in this world no doubt reflects his preference for "effectively activist agency" (2018a, 66). The crucifixion in particular is, for Akhtar, not only historically doubtful but also, perhaps, too passive to chime with his worldview.

Sometimes Paul is both praised and criticised. Akhtar notes the "humility" with which Paul sees himself. "God through Christ is the active agent", rather than Paul himself, in Paul's self-perception. And yet, "Note the contrast between Paul's humility towards his God-given mission here with his intolerance, noted above towards his religious rivals" (2018a, 81). He is also said to be "uncharitable and intolerant" towards those he opposes amongst the Galatian false teachers (2018a, 229).

According to Akhtar, a wider criticism of Paul echoes down the centuries. "Pauline Christianity has also been continuously the nursery of the European character for at least a thousand years. And that has had consequences for the entire human race. I see Paul as the essential European. He has nothing to learn from anyone else" (2018a, 168), and this attitude "persists largely unaltered to this day" (2018a, 169). This is an example of a broad and sweeping remark at the opposite end of the spectrum from his explorations of the minutiae of language or theological detail.

While probably not expecting to shape a millennium of thought, Akhtar, like Paul, wanted to exert influence. So it is time to turn a sympathetic but critical lens towards Akhtar himself. What are the weaknesses, strengths, and implications of his close engagement with Paul? As for weaknesses, the tendency to sweeping judgment emerges even as he picks his way carefully, even painstakingly, through his chosen text. In addition, he has at times an unreflective view of his own faith. For example, his own version of Sunni Islam is emphatically imposed as the (only?) correct version of Islam. He has no time for Sufis, whose tradition is "foreign" to Islam (2018a, 107). He regards Muslims in general, apart from probable heretics, as having an aversion to theological speculation (2018a, 124). This bears on his perception of Muslim-Christian relations, since "only Shi'ite (and most mainstream Sufi) perspectives can be expected to evince sympathy, albeit vaguely, for characteristically Christian dimensions of messianic expectation, redemptive suffering, marginalisation and political powerlessness" (2018a, 9–10). Akhtar is certainly self-aware, but painting in such bold tones in regard to his own tradition probably also limits his responsiveness to elements within Christianity which, however much he may disagree, still constitute an important part of the tradition he is trying to explore. His distaste for "redemptive suffering" seems to link to the relative

disregard of the crucifixion in Paul's thought in Galatians. Even if Akhtar denies the fact of Jesus' crucifixion, he could have wrestled far more with the implications of the fact that Paul sees the event of the cross as historical fact.

More positively, Akhtar asks interesting questions, notably whether Muslims can learn from Galatians (2018a, 267). And right from the outset, he makes clear that he will not reach for standard criticisms. He comments that "Muslims slander Paul when they assert that he wanted Christians to behave as libertines" (2018a, 12). This draws out one of the fundamental questions in Galatians, and often in Christian-Muslim relations, namely the relationship of works and faith. Akhtar is helpful in drawing attention to the fact that this relationship was a matter of debate and difference in both early Christianity – hence Paul's letter, for example – but also in early Islam (2018a, 265).

This question of works and faith has been much discussed in more specialised Pauline scholarship in recent decades. Akhtar engages thoughtfully, if briefly, with the so-called 'New Perspective' on Paul, which has emerged since the 1970's and the writing of E. P. Sanders (Akhtar, 2018a, 253–54; Sanders, 1977). Akhtar is not simply borrowing an analysis of Paul in order to make points, but providing a considered reflection on a discussion over whether good works are means of entering right relationship with God. Alternatively as Sanders and others have proposed, good works may be seen as boundary markers to show Jewish identity. Akhtar questions the validity of the New Perspective. The fact that his discussion of it occurs late in the book probably reflects Akhtar's view that the New Perspective gives no cause to overturn his views on Paul's criticism of reliance on works for salvation. I know that Akhtar also attended a New Testament Studies conference focussed entirely on Galatians, and was engaged in ongoing discussion with some leading figures in the field. This kind of willingness to be informed is helpful because it is easier to conduct meaningful dialogue where one does not have to spend significant time clearing away misunderstandings. Instead energy can be spent on matters of real import, which are at least mutually understood, if not mutually agreed.

Furthermore, Akhtar is really *thinking* about comparisons, not picking verses to criticise. Importantly, this connects to his choice of exploring the whole text of Galatians. In engaging a complete New Testament book, not just selected parts or verses, he is setting a standard for Muslim Biblical scholarship, as he is with his command of New Testament Greek. At the same time, he demonstrates that this type of close study does not require or have to lead to compromise. If it leads to changes of view, that is, one hopes, the result of genuine thinking, not an inevitable spiral initiated by stepping into the world of serious New Testament scholarship.

So in some ways Akhtar treads new ground. And yet while his commentary is new in its method, it is in some ways familiar in its conclusions. As the book closes, Akhtar comments, "If Muhammad was the last prophet, Paul was the lost prophet" (2018a, 269). While this conclusion might recall some of the dismissals of Paul discussed in the historical overview given above, it is based on a much more thoughtful weighing of Pauline thought. Disagreement can act as a prompt to further enquiry, instead of closing such enquiry down. In a separate essay, often more strident than his Galatians commentary, Akhtar urges Muslims seeking Biblical proofs for the prophethood of Muhammad, to avoid "torturing the plain meaning of biblical passages as interpreted by Christian commentators" (Akhtar, 2021, 136). A fair assessment of the commentary is that it has not tortured the text of Galatians. As a result, perhaps it can contribute to a change of direction in Muslim

Biblical scholarship. Devin Stewart has recently highlighted some fascinating forks in the road in the history of Western Qur'anic studies (Stewart, 2024). Specifically, he charts the willingness or otherwise of individuals to explore the academic field of Biblical texts and Jewish and Christian traditions with possible connections to Qur'anic passages. At times individual scholars were influential in discouraging the study of these Qur'anic connections to the Jewish, Christian and Biblical landscape surrounding the rise of Islam. By frowning on such lines of enquiry they helped to set the direction of travel for years to come. More accurately, they helped to dissuade travellers from exploring what would have been fruitful enquiry, though that reluctance has now changed significantly. Perhaps Akhtar's commentary may be seen, in retrospect, as being a comparable fork in the road, this time in the field of Muslim scholarship on the Bible. It might point in a direction which others may follow, despite its limitations, this time with the effect of opening up exploration, rather than closing it down as in the case of those who sought to discourage the tracing of possible connections between the Qur'an and other religious communities and their texts. What conclusions future writers in this field of Muslim Biblical scholarship draw will be up to each individual, but the methods set out by Akhtar will be useful travelling companions.

To sum up the findings of this study, a number of points are worth emphasising. The value of Muslims taking seriously the original Biblical languages is clear. So is the attempt to provide an analysis of Christian and Biblical self-understanding which reduces the heat in exchanges and replaces it with a strong base of evidence and reflection. Galatians provides a useful way into the Bible which sidesteps the usual discussions about textual corruption, while Akhtar's criticisms of Paul are not based on constructing historical scenarios in which Paul is an untrustworthy schemer. All of this enables a thoughtful exploration of a Biblical text which nevertheless does not avoid difference. The book has its limitations (which work does not?) but could point the way to future works of Muslim Biblical scholarship which readers can recognise as responsive to issues in the field of Biblical studies and Christian-Muslim relations.

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