

RETHINKING JOHN THE BAPTIST

Reflections on Agron Belica's *Ihyā' Al-Nabīy Yahyā* (The Revival of the Prophet Yahya)

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Perhaps the strangest person in the New Testament is John the Baptist.¹ Agron Belica's recent research focuses upon the Biblical and Quranic material about John and his relationship with Jesus, and then ventures new interpretations and visions of their respective roles in the events leading to the climactic scene of the crucifixion. Armed with copious quotations from the Bible, the Quran, and later Muslim commentators, Belica even suggests that John may have taken the place of Jesus on the cross.

John the Baptist substituted for Jesus on the cross? Indeed, an astounding conjecture! The informed reader may dismiss such a proposition outright simply because of the chronological difficulties and not proceed to any other arguments. According to the Synoptic Gospels,² John was beheaded by Herod Antipas some two years *before* the events of the crucifixion; hence, John could not have been a participant in them. Or could he? Are the chronological problems insurmountable? We shall consider them below, but first, who was John the Baptist?

According to *Luke* (Lk. 1:57), John was born in Judaea (traditionally, since the 6th century CE, in 'Ain Karim, about five miles west of Jerusalem) to Zechariah and Elizabeth of priestly (Levite) ancestry shortly before Jesus, about 4 BCE. As a lad, he left home and went to the Wilderness of Judaea where he joined and was probably taught by hermits, quite possibly connected in some manner with the Essenes at Qumran.³ John was a lifelong celibate, as were the

¹ For this article, I have consulted several reference works, including the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, from the *Standard Edition* (2009), especially the articles on John the Baptist, Josephus, Herod Antipas, Essenes, and Mandaeans. I have also referred to the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* (Scribners, 1961), the *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, 1963 edition; the *Jerusalem Bible* (1966); the *Oxford Annotated Bible* (1962), and the *Hughes Dictionary of Islam* (1994). The *Oxford Annotated Bible* is the source of Biblical quotations, with occasional changes in punctuation, capitalization, and second-person singular. We have been eclectic in the Quranic passages quoted in English translation. Pickthall's admirable work is often used as the starting point for many of the translations. However, we have made one consistent change in his work: substituting the English "God" for the Arabic "Allah" to avoid the invidious connotation that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are talking about different Supreme Beings. (After all, Christian Arabs also call God "Allah.") We have made other modifications based upon consultations with other versions, such as those of Allamah Yusuf Ali, Maulana Muhammad Ali, the English translation of Maududi, Arberry, and Sale, among others. We must take responsibility for the final wordings in this work.

² Synoptic Gospels: in the New Testament canon, the three gospels that share approximately the same view of the nature of Jesus and his mission: *Matthew, Mark, and Luke*. The Jesus of *John* is quite different, more than historical. The viewpoints of the four gospels are discussed in many places, including the present writer's *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, pp 103-16, or in the separate volume taken from that, *Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 105-18.

³ Essenes: Probably the first monastic movement in the Mediterranean world, they seemed to have appeared, mostly in Judaea, as a reaction to the oppressive rule of the Hellenistic Seleucids in the decades preceding the Maccabean revolution of 167 BCE. Their beliefs and organization went through several phases during the course of their existence until they disappeared from history towards the end of the 1st century CE. Both Philo (c.20 BCE to c.50 CE) and Josephus estimate their number at about 4,000, perhaps an inflated number considering that the population of Judaea at that period that was probably fewer than 100,000. They were celibate and they eschewed family life and worldly

Essene elite. Josephus (see below) remarks: “These Essenes reject pleasures as evil, but esteem continence and the conquest over our passions to be virtue. They neglect wedlock, but look to choose out other persons’ children; and esteem them to be of their kindred, and form them according to their own manners.”⁴

This appears to have been a kind of adoption and a process of indoctrination. As the Essenes practiced baptism, and this practice was a characteristic of John’s preaching, he may very well have been adopted and educated by them, presumably with the acquiescence of his parents. John could also have been influenced, if not directly, by traditions of the Old Testament Nazirites,⁵ ascetics who also dedicated themselves to God and eschewed (with the notable exception of Samson) most of the ordinary comforts of family life. However, when John bursts upon the first-century CE Palestinian scene, he appears as a charismatic loner attracting crowds with his urgent warnings to repent lest they be brought down in the cataclysm of impending doom, that is, the end of the world and Divine Judgment. At that stage of his career, he does not seem connected with any formal community, such as that at Qumran.

In many respects, the Baptist was less worldly than Jesus, who often immersed himself in the social occasions of daily life, such as feasts and weddings. John’s theology and preaching are infused with the fiery eschatological ideas of his period, that the Day of Judgment was near: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” he cried (Mt. 3:2). These were beliefs that he shared with the Qumran community. However, instead of restricting salvation to an elite few, as did the Essenes, he worked to open it to all through the sacrament of baptism. Repent and be reborn through baptism was his message (see Mk. 1:4⁶). He attracted a considerable following and the admiration of Josephus. Many also believe that his influence is to be seen in the beliefs and practices of the Mandaean⁷ of lower Mesopotamia, who practice baptism and venerate John, whilst regarding Jesus as a false messiah.

connections, much like the Christians monks who, perhaps unwittingly, followed their example. Their identification with the Qumran community situated some 15 miles east of Jerusalem and the producers of the Dead Sea Scrolls is still disputed, but most scholars now accept it. Two figures, the Teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest, are prominent in their writings and a number of attempts to identify by them have been made by scholars. During the period of John the Baptist and Jesus, Essene eschatological beliefs became more dominant and like many Christian evangelicals of our own period, they believed that the end of the world and the Day of Judgment were imminent and that only they would be saved. Amid the chaos of Roman Palestine, the community dispersed from Qumran some time in the second half of the 1st century CE.

⁴ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, ii. 8.2, p. 476.

⁵ The Nazirites were not an organized faction. They were usually individuals who were consecrated in some way to God, or felt themselves to be. Smith defines the term as: “one of either sex who was bound by a vow of a peculiar kind to be set apart from others for the service of God.” (Wm. Smith in *Bible Dictionary*, Family Library, 1975) The name means “one who is separated.” Among the outward signs of their calling were abstinence from wine, not cutting the hair, and avoidance of contact with the dead and all unclean food. The tradition goes back to the Old Testament and continued through New Testament days: Joseph (the son of Jacob, not the husband of Mary is called a Nazirite (Gen. 49:26) and perhaps the most famous Nazirite of the Old Testament was Samson, both of whose stories are discussed in *The Old Testament: An Islamic Perspective*. Despite the controversy about Nazareth and the Nazarenes, Jesus does not seem to have been a Nazirite, but both John the Baptist and James the brother of Jesus were. (From the writer’s *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, pp. 79-80, or *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 80.)

⁶ “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mk. 1:4)

⁷ Mandaean: sometimes called the “Christians of St. John (the Baptist).” Members of a sect that still survives in southern Iraq. The sect has affinities to dualistic Persian Manichaeism as well as Gnosticism, and it reveres John the Baptist but regards Jesus as a false messiah. They are noted for their bathing customs and the Arabs have also called them *Al-Mughtasilah*, “those who wash themselves.” (Muhammad Ali’s translation of the *Holy Quran*, Note 103).

In the Quran, where John the Baptist is referred to as *Yahya*,⁸ he is mentioned by name but five times, whilst the name of Jesus is found twenty-five times.⁹ The remarkable circumstances of John's birth are mentioned, but not his kinship with Jesus, nor are his baptismal activities—his most familiar characteristic in Christian tradition. John is held in great esteem in Islam as a prophet, but unlike Moses, David, Jesus, and the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon them all, he is not considered the recipient of a revealed book. However, his importance in the history of religion is validated by these words in the Quran: *God gives thee [Zechariah] the good tidings of Yahya, one bearing witness to the Word of God, one who is honored, one who is chaste,¹⁰ one who is a prophet from amongst the doers of righteousness.* (Q. 3:39) In another verse, God says: *We gave him wisdom whilst he was a child [a reference to John's having left his home as a boy to be taught by hermits, perhaps the Essenes?] and compassion from Our Presence, and purity and he was devout and kind to his parents and he was not oppressive or rebellious. Peace be upon him the day he was born, the day he dies, and the day he is raised alive!* (Q. 19:12-15) John (*Yahya*) was also instructed to *take hold of the Book with firmness.* (Q. 19:12) Which book? According to the Commentary known as *al-Jalalayn*, the book is the Torah.

There is a tradition that its founders were a group who emigrated to the comparative safety of southern Mesopotamia, then ruled by the more tolerant (or indifferent) Parthians. If this be true, it is possible that disciples of John were among those who fled the oppressive Roman rule. They may be the Sabians mentioned in the Quran, along with the Jews and the Christians, as a People of the Book.

⁸ *Yahya (Yaḥyā)*: The Quranic note that John bore a name not given to any other—*We have given the same name to none before (him)* (Q. 19:7)—is qualified to mean any prominent person. This is probably connected with the verses in *Luke* about the naming of John: “Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son... And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they would have named him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said, ‘Not so; he shall be called John.’ And they said to her, ‘None of your kindred is called by this name.’ And they made signs to this father, inquiring what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ And they all marveled. And immediately (Zechariah’s) mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.” (Lk. 1:57-64)

It should also be remarked that John's name in Arabic, *Yaḥyā*, is applied only to John the Baptist and not to any of the other Biblical Johns who are called *Yūḥanā* or *Yūḥanān* in Arabic. The form is pre-Islamic. The name would appear to be related to the root *ḥ-y-y* or *ḥ-y-w* meaning, “to quicken, animate, give live to” (especially the fourth form of the verb). It may have referred to his mother's “quicken” womb and perhaps is in the nature of an epithet. “John,” despite the shared guttural *ḥ*, has a quite different meaning in the original Hebrew: “Jehovah has been gracious.” (*New Compact Bible Dictionary*, Zondervan, 1967.) However, Smith translates it as “Jehovah's gift.” (Smith's *Bible Dictionary*, Family Library, 1975.) (From the writer's *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, p. 193; also in *Jesus*, p. 43.)

⁹ To put this in perspective, Moses is mentioned by name 136 times; Abraham, 69; Joseph, 27.

¹⁰ “chaste”: the Arabic word so rendered is *ḥaṣūr*. In translations of the Quran, it is most commonly rendered “chaste.” It comes from a root meaning, among other things, “to encompass, enclose, besiege, restrict, narrow, gather together,” etc. The Arabic-Arabic Dictionary *Muḥīt al-Muḥīt*, p. 174, has a paragraph about the word, mentioning its use in the Quran: “...and the epithet for John the Baptist as he collected in himself all praiseworthy virtues, and in Surah Al-Imran: *God gives thee one bearing witness to the Word from God and one who is honored and one who is continent...* It is said, that is, [the word refers to] his excessiveness in self-repression from carnal passions and amusements.” Among other things, it can also mean “one who conceals secrets, secretive; one who does not resort to women whilst he is able to do so, or is forbidden them, or one who has no appetite for them and does not approach them.” The commentary *Al-Jalālayn* interprets the word thus: “[one who is] prohibited women.” Reviewing some of the more popular translations of the word *ḥaṣūr* into English, we find that George Sale in *The Koran*, N.J. Dawood in *The Koran*, Mohammad Pickthall in *The Glorious Quran*, Muhammad Ali in *The Holy Quran*, and A. Yusuf Ali in *The Holy Quran* all use the word “chaste.” Laleh Bakhtiar in *The Sublime Quran*, uses “concealer of secrets.” In his book, *Iḥyā al-Nabīy Yaḥyā (The Revival of the Prophet Yahya)*, Agron Belica uses the phrase “concealer (of secrets).” Syed Abdul Latif's translation of the Mawlana Azad text, *The Tarjuman al-Quran*, uses “a man of purity,” whilst Abul A'la Maududi in *The Meaning of the Quran*, uses “he will be highly disciplined.”

The words are taken to imply that he was given a special message to be promulgated amongst a people or all mankind. Nothing about the circumstances of his death is said in the Quran.

Yet, these verses are an extraordinary commendation from his Creator! Truly, John was a great man of God and deserves more than the cursory attention he is usually given as the herald of Jesus and the victim of Salome. Agron Belica discusses these Quranic references in considerable detail, often raising questions that prod us to reconsider their traditional interpretations. These Quranic references are put under the microscope, offering new interpretations of certain key words, such as *sayyid*, *ḥaṣūr*, *walīy*, *ḥanān*, and *samīy*. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the meager evidence of the New Testament and Josephus, and to rethink John the Baptist.

The sometimes fragile Jewish independence that was the fruit of the revolt of the Maccabees in c.167 BCE against Alexander the Great's Seleucid successors to the eastern portion of his empire was ended by the entrance of the Roman general Pompey into Jerusalem in 63 BCE. The yearning to restore that independence gave rise to the messianic movements that periodically convulsed Palestine during the next two centuries. Palestine was governed directly or indirectly first by Rome and later by the Eastern Romans (Byzantines), until the Muslim Caliph Umar entered Jerusalem in 634 CE and established Islamic hegemony.

The period of John the Baptist and, therefore, most of the events being discussed herein, was about forty-five years long, from c. 5 BCE to c. 37 CE; much shorter (ending at c. 27 CE) if one agrees with the New Testament chronology. It was an era of messianic excitement unparalleled in Israel's history. Prophets proclaimed imminent coming of the Messiah, and several claimants to the title had already arisen, raised armies that fought heroically to regain Jewish freedom, but ultimately failed to prevail against the might of Rome. Despite these failures, the Jews continue to pray and work for a messiah who would deliver them from Roman oppression. The Christian movement, under Paul's guidance, later decided that Jesus was that messiah, even though he had failed to re-establish Jewish independence, and transformed the expected worldly salvation into a spiritual one.

For information about John the Baptist, we have two primary ancient sources: the New Testament and the writings of Josephus. The principal reason for John's inclusion in the New Testament gospels is to introduce and validate Jesus as this Messiah, not to celebrate John. To perform this task, in the Biblical narrative, John appears suddenly from the wilderness (probably the sparsely populated regions of southern and eastern Judaea), preaching salvation with the cleansing baptism by which the baptized signified their repentance and spiritual rebirth or recommitment.

The oldest of the canonical gospels, that of *Mark* thought to have been probably composed at Rome c. 65-70 CE, says the most about him. This is his description of John: "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leathern girdle about his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey," (Mk. 1:6). *Luke*, writing in Greece c. 80-90 CE, whilst focusing on John's baptismal activities (also mentioned by *Mark*), omits any description of his manner of living. *Matthew* (c. 85 CE), usually more concerned with Jewish matters, merely paraphrases *Mark*: "Now John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey." (Mt. 3:4) In the pericope about John's sending his disciples to question Jesus about his teachings, *Matthew* (written c. 85 CE, at Antioch in Syria) manages to link implicitly the

followers of John with the “despised” Pharisees (Mt. 9:14).¹¹ *Luke* omits *Matthew*’s identification of John’s followers with the Pharisees, but puts a speech into the mouth of Jesus that minimizes John’s importance (Lk. 7:24-28).¹²

Characteristically, *John*¹³ concentrates upon the Baptist’s introduction of Jesus and remarks (disparagingly?) that John performed no miracles (Jn. 10:41). Perhaps to emphasize Jesus’ precedence over John, in another place *John* reports that Jesus had baptized more disciples than John (Jn. 4:1). According to *John* (Jn. 1:35-42), there was something of a group desertion of several of John the Baptist’s disciples to Jesus after John had pointed Jesus out to them and declared: “Behold the Lamb of God!” This is consistent with the Christian idea that John was merely a forerunner and had ceded leadership to Jesus almost as soon as he (John) had begun his mission.

However, since (again according to the gospels) John had to send disciples to Jesus to find out about his teachings, one may be forgiven if he wonders whether the whole business of Jesus’ baptism by John and his enthusiastic endorsement of the mission of Jesus as the true Messiah is little more than a pious fiction perpetrated by the authors of the fourfold gospel. Surely, if John had acted the way the gospels show him doing, he would have kept himself informed about the man whom he would then have believed to be the expected Messiah and would have had little need to send a special delegation to question Jesus (Mt. 11:2-6; Lk. 7:18-23).

¹¹ “Then the disciples of John came to [Jesus], saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples do not fast?’” (Mt. 9:14) The Pharisees were a pious puritanical group drawn from all classes, largely from the laity, with notable democratic tendencies. They appear as a recognizable group during the Maccabean era of the mid-2nd century BCE. The name of their movement is the Greek version of the Aramaic *perushaya* meaning “separatists,” itself from the Hebrew *perushim*. They accepted the resurrection of the body, heaven and hell, and angels and demons. In response to societal changes, they had adapted to contemporary conditions by accepting a supplement to the Written Law of Moses called the Oral Law that was rejected by the Sadducees. Although they respected the Temple and participated in its rites and sacrifices, the synagogues were their real centers of worship, study, and charity. They were deeply involved in Messianic speculations and regarded the Bible as divinely inspired. As a consequence of these “innovations,” they were often at loggerheads with the Sadducees, whom the Pharisees regarded as corrupted by power and their informal alliance with Israel’s oppressors. The aforementioned Oral Law ultimately became the Mishnah, the core of the Talmud. It is evident that the Pharisees—despite the disparaging depiction of them offered by the Pauline gospels—stood in the mainstream of the development of modern Judaism.

The New Testament view of the Pharisees is probably Pauline disinformation. (As part of his self-vindication, Paul claimed to have been a Pharisee before his conversion.) The word “Pharisee,” as uttered in modern Christian sermons and even in popular speech is now synonymous with dry formalism, false piety, and hypocrisy. The adjectival form “pharisaical” is a pejorative, a word redolent of hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and legalistic hair-splitting. This is truly an insult to the pious Jews who were the ancestors of modern Judaism. The term is now imbued with such odium that one hesitates to make the obvious parallel to Islamic institutions: the Pharisees were a class much like those of the *‘ulama* and their supporters who defend the people (not as successfully as one might wish) from the oppressions of the rich and powerful in modern Islam. The opponents of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, were the establishment priesthood whose center of power and livelihood was the Temple and its rites and worship. They reveled in robes and patronage, much like those of the *‘ulama* who were called “court theologians” in recent imperial Iran, and their like in other Muslim states. (From the section on the Pharisees in the writer’s *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, pp. 70-72; also found in *Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 71-73.)

¹² “I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (Lk. 7:28)

¹³ *John*: The writer of *John* (working c. 100 CE or later) was almost certainly not John the disciple of Jesus and definitely not the John of Patmos, who is credited with *Revelation* (c. 96 CE).

Of the four canonical gospels, only *Luke* establishes the kinship of John and Jesus,¹⁴ but all agree that John baptized Jesus. Apparently, John himself was the originator of this sacramental innovation. His activities attracted great crowds from Jerusalem and its environs, a circumstance that would certainly have been a source of concern for the religious and political establishment of the time, always wary of challenge or insurrection, and was perhaps viewed unfavorably by later Christians who wanted nothing in the Bible to detract from the uniqueness of the Christ.

In any event, having accomplished this task, John virtually disappears from the gospels, except for the odd reference and the mention of his death at the hands of Herod, which, in gospel chronology, occurred some two years before the disappearance of Jesus. According to many Christian students of the New Testament, the Baptist's career lasted but six months.¹⁵ To us, that would seem too short a time to accommodate his rise to prominence, the spread of his teachings, the perception of the threat he posed, and the events of his final days, irrespective of whether one accepts Belica's speculations about the Baptist's later involvement with the events of the Passion or not.

Let us now first compare the description of John in *Mark* cited above with that of our only other roughly contemporary source for these events, the Jewish historian Josephus (born 37-38 CE, died c.100 CE). He had some considerable experience with the type of anchorite represented by John. In his *Life*, he writes: "When I was informed that one whose name was Banus, lived in the desert and used no other clothing than grew upon trees, and had no other food than what grew of its own accord, and bathed himself in cold water frequently, both day and night, in order to preserve his chastity, I imitated him in those things, and continued with him three years." Thus, it is clear that Josephus had personal knowledge of the kind of ascetic that John represents, but chronological problems make it unlikely that he had ever met him.¹⁶

Now, Josephus has considerable authority as a witness to the tumultuous events of first-century CE Roman Palestine. He was a Jewish general in the Jewish-Roman war of 66-73 CE—a major rebellion against Roman rule—but switched sides when he realized the impossibility of defeating the Roman war machine. Despised and regarded as a traitor and apostate by patriotic Jews, he spent much of the rest his life in acts of self-justification. Fortunately for us, these acts included two major histories, without which we would be much poorer in our knowledge of the Palestine of the New Testament era. The first was *The Jewish War*, written about a decade after the event; the second, the monumental *Antiquities of the Jews* (93 CE), a somewhat secularized account of the history of the world and role of the Jews in it that parallels the Bible in scope, beginning with the creation but continuing past the end of the Old Testament (c. 400 BCE) until his own time.

¹⁴ Rev. J.C. Rylaarsdam, the author of the article on John the Baptist in *Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by James Hastings, suggests that the birth story of John originally circulated amongst his followers and was later attached to the birth story of Jesus by the author of *Luke-Acts* in order to establish kinship, thus further validating the mission of Jesus by linking the popular John to him. (Hastings, pp. 509-10)

¹⁵ Hastings *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 509.

¹⁶ Josephus, *Life*, 2. In a footnote, the translator, William Whiston, suggests that this Banus may well have been a disciple of John. Others go even further and propose that this Banus was in fact John himself, name disguised for political reasons. Since Aretas IV's victory over Herod Antipas is firmly dated 35-36 CE, and Josephus was born about a year or so later, it would be impossible for Banus to have been a bi-name for John the Baptist, as Josephus' three-year sojourn in the desert would have occurred c. 51-54 CE, long after the reign of Herod ended in 39 CE. However, Banus was certainly of the type of John, a prophet repelled by the corruption of the world.

More importantly for our purposes, Josephus refers to several New Testament figures by name: Jesus, his brother James, and John the Baptist. Although Paul (who would have been a contemporary of Josephus) appears not to have been mentioned by Josephus, there is a tantalizing reference to one Saul (the birth name of Paul) involved in riots some time after the disappearance of Jesus.¹⁷ However, that is beyond our brief, but the passage in the *Antiquities* relating to John is worth quoting in full for its information and implications:

“Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment for what he did against John that was called the *Baptist*; for Herod slew him who was a good man and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water]¹⁸ would be acceptable to Him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or remission] of some sins [only,] but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness.

“Now, when [many] others came to crowd about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his¹⁹ power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late.

“Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper, to Macherus,²⁰ the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God’s displeasure against him.”²¹

Thus Josephus. What does the New Testament say about John’s fate?

The oldest canonical gospel, *Mark*, introduces the story with a preamble: “King Herod heard of it [the activities of Jesus and his disciples]²²; for Jesus’ name had become known. Some said, ‘John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him.’ But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’ But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’” (Mk. 6:14-16) From this we learn that apparently John also possessed miraculous powers. Jesus’ deeds are likened to those of John, and John is linked with another strange Biblical character from the Old Testament who too possessed miraculous powers, Elijah.

Now we flash backwards in time: “For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife; because he had married her. For John

¹⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XX. 9.4. Of course, such an identification of the rioter Saul with the Saul/Paul of the New Testament is rejected by most Christian scholars. The name Saul was and is a common name amongst Jews; however, we know that Paul, according to his own words, was involved in a number of riots and the time is right. Such a circumstance invites speculation. See also the writer’s discussion of this issue in *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, pp. 405 & 504, or in the separate volume taken from that, *Paul and Early Christianity*, pp. 13 & 108.

¹⁸ The brackets [] in this direct quotation from Josephus are found in the printed text. Otherwise, any brackets used in this article are explanatory material introduced by its author.

¹⁹ I.e., John’s (power).

²⁰ Macherus (also spelled Machaerus): A Maccabean fortress, situated about 5 miles from the eastern shore of the Dead Sea rebuilt by Herod the Great on the edge of his Kingdom, it frequently served Herod Antipas as a fortress palace. It later became a center of Jewish resistance to Roman rule.

²¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, 5.2.

²² Material between brackets [] in quotations from the Bible is by the writer of this article.

said to Herod, 'It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.'²³ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly.

"But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias' daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests, and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever thou wishest and I will grant it.' And he vowed to her, 'Whatever thou askest of me, I will give thee, even half my kingdom.' And she went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask?' And [her mother] said, 'The head of John the baptizer.'"

The unnamed daughter is, of course, the notorious Salome of Christian tradition.²⁴ *Mark* continues:

"And she came in immediately with haste to the king, and asked, saying, 'I want that thou give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' And the king was exceedingly sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests, he did not want to break this word to her. And immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard and gave orders to bring his head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body, and laid in a tomb." (Mk. 6:17-29)

Luke gives a much shorter and more sober version, devoid of lurid domestic intrigue: "Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was done [by Jesus and his disciples], and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the old prophets had risen. Herod said, 'John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?'..." (Lk. 9:7-9) Once again, John is compared to Elijah, as he is in other places in the New Testament. Herod Antipas' familial situation is not mentioned at all.²⁵

Matthew gives more a literate and reserved account containing the essentials of *Mark's* tale, which it again virtually paraphrases.²⁶ The author of *John* seems to ignore the Baptist's death, perhaps considering its irrelevant to his purposes.

²³ "Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife; she is thy brother's nakedness." (Lev. 18:16) "If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness, they shall be childless." (Lev. 20:21) See also Deut. 25:5. There is an exception for levirate marriage, an arrangement by which, if a man dies without issue, his brother would take his widow, and the firstborn would be declared the son of deceased man. This fiction was done to preserve the dead man's lineage.

²⁴ The Biblical story of John's death and Salome's role is the subject of numerous works of art, including paintings, poems, books, films, plays—that of Oscar Wilde is the most famous amongst speakers of English—and operas. Richard Strauss' masterpiece *Salome*, based upon the Wilde play, still firmly retains its popularity on the world's operatic stages.

²⁵ According to *Luke*, this Herod was at first glad to see Jesus when the latter was brought before him during the events of his trial, but later mocked him for his silence (Lk. 23:8-11).

²⁶ "At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus; and he said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist, he has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him.' For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison, for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because John said to him, 'It is not lawful for thee to have her.' And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.

"But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.'

Mark's, the basic narrative, seems to make an effort to exonerate Herod for his action by introducing the frivolous story of Herodias' jealousy and hatred and the suspension of his political acumen by acceding to Salome's ghastly request. Is this, like the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, history or fable? The calm way John's disciples come to collect his remains is in remarkable contrast to the melodrama of the circumstances of his death. May we infer from this that his death may not have been that dramatic? Josephus merely states that John was put to death. Josephus has a quite a lot to say about Herodias and Herod's love for her, but nothing in connection with John.²⁷ His silence is perplexing, *unless* the lurid but entertaining Biblical tale has *no* foundation of historical truth.

We cannot cite Josephus' silence to repudiate absolutely the veracity of the Biblical text and the roles of Herodias and Salome. Herod's marriage to Herodias probably was the cause of some dissatisfaction among his Jewish subjects, but would a sane man—especially a ruling politician—have acquiesced to Salome's grisly request? Notice how quickly, in the Biblical story, Herod qualified his offer of “whatever thou askest of me” to a mere “half my kingdom.” Slaying a very popular prophet at the whim of a dancing girl would surely be more offensive to his subjects than his marital misstep. The reasons given by Josephus, that Herod feared John's popularity and the possibility that, acting like another messianic claimant, he might raise an insurrection against Herod's rule, are much more plausible. In our opinion, this calculation, based on statecraft and realpolitik, is considerably more likely to have been the cause of John's death in the dungeon of Macherus than Salome's gyrations before Herod and his guests.

Josephus does not mention the manner of John's execution, but beheading is certainly a possibility. One may speculate, although without much supporting evidence, that he could have escaped to the eastern desert, as Macherus was located but a few miles from the eastern shore of the Dead Sea and some ten or twelve miles south of Mt. Nebo where Moses viewed Canaan before dying. However, that would be mere conjecture, attested neither by the Bible, nor by Josephus.

Of course, the Bible story of Salome and John is so colorful and salacious, so entrenched in Christian and Western culture, that to reject it as history may seem mean-spirited. We must permit the reader to make his own decision. However, there still remain the chronological problems posed by Josephus' text quoted above to consider, and it is now time to look at them.

Accepting the death of John at Macherus as an historical fact, Josephus gives us one firm date: Herod Antipas' defeat in battle at the hands of the Nabataean King Aretas IV (rgd. 9 BCE to 40 CE), whose daughter Herod had married and divorced. Angered by the perceived insult to his family and honor by this repudiation of his close kin, Aretas sought revenge by sending his troops into battle against Herod's army. That occurred in 36-37 CE. In the Biblical story, John's death is the direct result of his opposition to that marriage, therefore the order of events is Herod's divorce, his marriage to Herodias, John's criticism and death, and Aretas' armed reprisal, not mentioned in the Biblical tale, but strongly affirmed by the evidence of Josephus. Consequently, the date of John's death could not have been later than the date of that battle, 36-37 CE.

The lower end of the dating is that of the New Testament, which indicates a date up to two years before the events of the Passion, usually given now as c. 29 CE. Thus, according to

“And the king was sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests, he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it; and then they went and told Jesus.” (Mt. 14:1-12)

²⁷ Josephus. *Antiquities*, XVIII.5.1.

Bible, John died c. 27-29 CE. Reconciling the Bible and Josephus means that John died some time between c.27 CE, the downward limit, and 36-37 CE, the upward limit, a period of some ten years.

If we hold that the Bible is correct, Josephus is wrong or, one might argue, that ten years had elapsed between the Herod's insult to Aretas' family honor and that both are correct. Since Josephus says only that John's death occurred before the battle of 36-37 CE, is it realistic to suppose that Aretas waited ten years before avenging Herod's insult?

Josephus wrote: "Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment for what he did against John..." Josephus then goes on give the proximate cause for this act, the fear of the prophet's popularity and the possibility he might raise a rebellion. Does that not suggest a shorter interval between the events of John's death and Herod's defeat than *ten* years?

Looked at another way, would Aretas have waited *ten* years to avenge a public insult to his family's and therefore his personal honor? We have the divorce, the marriage, the criticism of Herod's marriage by John, the fact of John's popularity and the imminent possibility of still another messianic insurrection, John's death, and the battle. Public insults demand a quick response, especially from rulers. Aretas would have become a figure of ridicule had he dithered about for ten years before seeking revenge. He was, after all, the king of the Nabataeans, a prosperous kingdom, with the ruins of his capital at Petra still one of the most spectacular sights in the world.

Prof. Nineham agrees: "On the basis of the Synoptic Gospels (see especially Luke 3:1), it is usually assumed that John was executed in A.D. 29-30. On the other hand, Herod's defeat by the Arabians, referred to in Josephus, took place not long before the death of Tiberius in March A.D. 37. The cause of the Arabian war was Herod's repudiation of his first (Arabian) wife for Herodias, so, if the dates are to be reconciled, the Arabians must have waited a very long time before taking their revenge, and the Jews must have attributed Herod's defeat to an event which had taken place six or seven years earlier. As we know nothing of the attendant circumstances, neither of these possibilities can be ruled out."²⁸

We need not be that cautious. Prof. Eisenmann thinks that Josephus' text suggests a date of c. 36 CE for the death of John.²⁹ Josephus' text supports a rapid scenario. Aretas, not being

²⁸ D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*. Pelican New Testament Commentaries. Penguin, revised 1969, p. 173. Prof. Nineham's reference to *Luke* points us to a good example of how *Luke*, more concerned with chronology than any of the other canonical gospel writers, fixes a date, in this case the date of the beginning of John's public mission: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness..." (Lk. 3:1-2)

With all that information, one might think it would be easy to convert it into a fairly exact year in our present calendric system. However, our hopes may be somewhat moderated when Dr. Caird (G.B. Caird, *Saint Luke*. Pelican New Testament Commentaries. Penguin, 1963, p. 71) commences a discussion of this date with: "Luke's date has been interpreted in three different ways..." The three different calculations would lead to (1) 28-29 CE, (2) 25-26 CE, or (3) 27-28 CE. Dr. Caird observes that the first would leave too little time between John's appearance and the crucifixion (30 CE). He rejects the second because of a lack of evidence of coinage in Tiberius' name for that year, although, if one accepts the historicity of Luke's statements, it would a more reasonable time for the length for John's mission prior to the beginning of Jesus' public mission, which traditionally lasted three years, especially if one accepts 29 CE for the date of the Passion. The third calculation is based upon Jewish reckoning, but would also be a little tight for the complete mission of Jesus. Of course, this is all about the beginning of John's ministry, not its end and is cited here so that the reader may appreciate the difficulties one encounters in Biblical chronology.

²⁹ Robert Eisenmann, *James the Brother of Jesus*, Penguin Books (1997).

obstructed by overzealous lawyers, would have sought to restore the honor of his family in the old-fashioned way, with swift, peremptory action, perhaps within a year or two of Herod's act of *lèse majesté*. That would make Prof. Eisenmann's suggested 36 CE quite plausible, superseding the traditional c. 27 CE based upon the Pauline New Testament. We think that the implications of the words of Josephus present a serious challenge to the received view, a view that is influenced by lingering ideas of Biblical infallibility.³⁰

How would this later date affect our discussion of Belica's theories, especially his suggestion that John was the principal actor in the crucifixion, not Jesus? Put simply, it would remove it from the realm of chronological impossibility to that of chronological possibility. The alternative would require us to shift the date of the Jesus' Passion from 29 or 30 CE to a date *after* 36 CE. However, here we encounter another problem. The Biblical evidence—the only source of information that we have about Paul—indicates that he never met Jesus in person. His conversion reputedly took place some time c. 34–36 CE. To move the crucifixion to a date as late as 36 CE or later would appear to be impossible.

There is yet another piece of evidence to be considered when we look at the chronology of those momentous events in the Palestine of two millennia ago: the question of Jesus' age at the time of his Passion. The text of the New Testament suggests that he was about thirty-three years of age. Josephus gives us no reliable evidence about his end.³¹ So, we must turn to the latest of the canonical gospels, that of *John the Apostle*, for a curious passage, again largely ignored, that touches on the question. It may represent a tradition unknown to or ignored by the Synoptics. At one point in his narrative, *John* depicts a debate between the Jews and Jesus that presumably occurred a few months before the Passion. According to the Synoptics, Jesus would have been about thirty-three. Jesus is speaking:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad.’ The Jews then said to him, “Thou art not yet fifty years old and hast thou seen Abraham?’ Jesus said

³⁰ The patient reader may be interested in the fate of Herod Antipas after he had been defeated in battle by Aretas: at the urging of Herodias, Herod sought from the Roman emperor Caligula (rgd. 37–41 CE) the title of king. The couple went to Rome for this purpose, but Herodias' brother Agrippa, coveting Herod's territories, brought charges against Herod. This resulted in Herod's banishment to Gaul (modern France) by Caligula, who was Agrippa's friend, in 39 CE. Herodias stayed with Herod and he died there in Lyons, far away from Palestine. Herod Antipas had the longest reign of any Jewish ruler of the Second Temple period, some 43 years. Aretas IV remained on his throne until 40 CE.

³¹ The extant text of Josephus, which might have given us some valuable information about this, has been tampered with by later Christian scholars, zealous in their devotion to the Christ, but perhaps indifferent to the value of historical truth. There are two references to Jesus in the *Antiquities of the Jews* of Josephus. One is thought to be genuine and merely attests to Jesus' existence: “so he [Ananus, the high priest] assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others... (Antiquities, XX.9.9, p. 433)

The other, found in XVIII.3.3. runs thus: “Now, there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works,—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day. And even now the tribe of Christians named after him is not extinct.”

If this passage were genuine, it would be of immense value in verifying some events of the life of Jesus. Alas, it is not. Although attempts have been made to rehabilitate the paragraph, it is still regarded by most modern scholars as a later interpolation by Christian hands—a cruel deception for the scholar, at best a pious forgery for the more charitable. (From the author's *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, pp. 135–6; also in *Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 137–8.)

to them, ‘Verily, verily, I say to you, before Abraham, I was, I am.’ So they took up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple.” (Jn. 8:56-59)

The tone of the passage and indeed of most of *John* is rather hostile to the Jews. Note that Jesus does not even admit to being one of them, saying “your father Abraham” instead of “our father Abraham.” Of course, this has to do with *John*’s divinization of the eternal Jesus and that need not detain us here. However, the phrase “not yet fifty years old” does arrest our attention. If a man be thirty-three, would one be likely to say to him, “you are not yet fifty” or rather “you are not yet forty”? The only reason the Jews would address him thus would be if he appeared to be middle-aged, in his forties.

John Marsh, in his commentary on *John*, writes: “From the time of Irenaeus [c. 125 CE to 202 CE], this verse has been the reason why some scholars have held Jesus to have been between forty and fifty years old during the years of his ministry. But this is not a necessary inference. If there be any allusion to the years of levitical service, this would imply that the Jews were saying to Jesus, ‘If you are still, as you claim “in God’s service”, you cannot be fifty years old. How can you have known Abraham?’”³²

Prof. Marsh should be applauded for at least addressing the issue, though we are not persuaded by his argument. We have pointed out above that the Synoptics represent one rather closely related set of traditions, whilst *John* represents another set of traditions. The two views of Jesus are in many ways incompatible. In any case, *John*’s exalted vision of the ethereal divine Jesus is not really related to history, but more to the world of religious drama. However, even drama is rooted in reality at some level and therefore *John* may very well inadvertently preserve a genuine truth.

Moreover, there is a verse in the Quran that supports this view of the older Jesus: *He [Jesus] will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is one of the righteous.* (Q. 3:46) The word translated as “manhood” here is *kahl*, actually meaning “middle-aged, a man of a mature age.”³³ The statement may very well reflect a tradition preserved in the oral literature of the Hejaz at the time of Prophet that is the context of the Quran.³⁴ If this interpretation be correct, as well it may be, then the reference in *John* should be given much more weight. The statements in both the Gospel and the Quran may reflect the same tradition of the older Jesus in circulation, despite the prevalence of the Synoptics’ view of his age at the time of the Passion—or it may even reflect memories of the older, living Jesus who had survived the supposed crucifixion.

After this review of the problems in establishing hard dates for the most of the events under discussion, we can probably say only one thing with certainty: we shall never be able to resolve all of the problems of this chronology without time travel. There are doubts about

³² John Marsh. *Saint John*. Penguin, 1968.

³³ In the dictionary *Muḥīṭ ul-Muḥīṭ*, *kahl* is defined as “one who has turned gray... or one who has exceeded thirty or thirty-four until fifty-one.” George Sale also discusses this in a note to the verse in question “...and the passage [of the Quran] may relate to Christ’s preaching here on earth. But as he had scarce attained this age when he was taken up into heaven, the commentators choose to understand it of his second coming.” Sale, who published his translation of the Quran in 1734 CE, cites the commentaries of Jallalo’ddin. Al Beidawi. Medieval Muslim commentators, faced with a united Christian front on such issues as the age of Jesus, more often than not allowed themselves to be persuaded by the more established and colorful Christian traditions when they did not directly conflict with words of the Quran.

³⁴ See the writer’s section on “The Role of Oral Literature” in the Quran in both *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective* and *The Old Testament: An Islamic Perspective*; or in *Introduction to the New Testament* and *Introduction to the Old Testament*.

everything except the approximate year of Herod Antipas' defeat by Aretas (c. 37 CE). The birth years of both Jesus and John are conjectures; the date of the alleged crucifixion of Jesus relies heavily upon those conjectures, although it is more probable than the birthdates. The sequence of the death of John and the crucifixion is thrown into doubt by the evidence of Josephus, the most impartial witness we have from that period. Furthermore, even the age of Jesus, traditionally thirty-three, at the time of his Passion (and therefore the dates of his birth) is compromised in the tradition cited by *John* and that of the verse in the Quran.

If, for the sake of argument, we accept the theory of a longer life span for Jesus, say forty-five years instead of the traditional thirty-three, how are we to reconcile it with the events in the lives of John and Jesus? Neither Jesus nor John was evident in Palestine during the period of Paul's activities, which commence in the middle of the 30s of the first century CE. Let us assume that the date of the Passion was indeed c. 30 CE or a bit earlier, as the New Testament would have it. For Jesus to have been middle-aged, let us say forty-five, he must have been born c. 16 BCE instead of 4 BCE. John the Baptist may also have been born about the same time. As Paul was born c. 1 CE, this would also make them much older than Paul, who died c. 67 CE, a relationship in ages that would seem more suitable than being virtual contemporaries as the traditional dating makes it.

The alternative, that Jesus was born c. 4 BCE and the Passion occurred c. 40 CE, is virtually impossible, because the comments about his age clearly refer to a period shortly before the Passion and we bump in the beginning of Paul's work c. 35 CE. The crucifixion must have taken place prior to that date. We have described above our reasons for believing the good possibility that John was in fact martyred *after* the crucifixion. As the kinship link between Jesus (Davidic) and John (Levite) may be a Lucan fiction, then John could have been born at any time, but his death must have occurred before Herod Antipas' defeat, c. 37 CE. The fact that Paul does not mention John in his writings proves nothing. The most important question for us regarding John's career in this inquiry is whether he could have possibly substituted for Jesus on the cross. So far, nothing has ruled out that as a possibility.

Thus, though none of this proves that John *did* survive Jesus or was substituted for him on the cross, Agron Belica's speculations cannot be dismissed merely because they contradict the traditional Biblical chronology. We have shown that an argument from that chronology against Belica's proposition is seriously weakened by the evidence of Josephus.

It is, therefore, now time to look at Belica's most audacious proposal: that John the Baptist may have substituted for Jesus on the cross at the climax of the Passion. We have pointed out above that the very possibility of such a substitution is first conditional upon the question of chronology. We have discussed the chronological problems of reconciling the gospel accounts of John's death with the notice by Josephus in the *Antiquities*. We believe that sufficient doubt has been raised about the reliability of the New Testament chronological references to John for us to proceed to the next supposition. Putting aside our preconceptions derived from the prevailment of the received view of the Passion derived from the gospel accounts, let us ask: "Now that the chronological problems are not insurmountable, in what circumstances could John or any person have been substituted for Jesus at the crucifixion?" We should keep in mind that this is an exercise in possibilities, not certainties. As we have stated above, when faced with such meager evidence, all we can do is speculate upon events. Today, the absolute truth is known only to God.

It is clear from the writings of Paul that the Christian movement he divided and usurped believed that Jesus had died on the cross. The doctrine of Jesus' death and his resurrection are

still the core of Christian faith, a sincere belief in which, it is held, will secure for the believer his salvation in the afterlife. The Islamic denial of this doctrine is the most crucial difference between Christianity and Islam and one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is the Islamic belief in the revelation of the Quran as the Word of God to His last Prophet, which Christianity tacitly rejects. Muslims also honor Jesus as a prophet and concede the title Messiah to him, though they deny his divinity as they do its corollary, the doctrine of the Trinity.

For the Muslim, the whole question of the crucifixion revolves about the word *shubbiha* found but once in the Quran, in this verse: *And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, God's messenger—They slew him not nor did they crucify him, but it appeared so [shubbiha] unto them; and lo! Those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture. They slew him not, for certain.* (Q. 4:157)

This is an explicit denial of the reality of Jesus' crucifixion. This will be dismissed summarily by many simply because of the weight of two millennia of Christian tradition, so this investigation can only be pursued if we suspend our prejudgments and agree to consider possible alternatives, if only as an intellectual exercise. As we have discussed this issue at length elsewhere,³⁵ we shall confine ourselves to a summary of the various arguments here.

It may be admitted that above verse permits differing interpretations. These differing interpretations are primarily concerned with the meaning of two phrases: does *mā ṣalabūhu* in 4:157 mean "not crucified"; that is, "they did not nail him to the cross," or "they did not cause his death on the cross"? And what is the meaning of *wa lākin shubbiha lahum*, "and but it appeared so unto them"? Wehr defines *shubbiha* as "to be doubtful, dubious, uncertain, obscure."³⁶ It should be noted that *shubbiha* is the passive past tense of an active verb with the basic meaning of "make to resemble/appear." In the passive voice, the basic literal meaning would be "he/it (masc.) was made to resemble/appear"; thus, one could say: "it was made to appear (that)..." "Being doubtful" and "unclear" are specialized uses of the form.

Keeping all of this in mind, does the passage mean that Jesus was actually placed upon the cross and only appeared to die? That is, did he suffer and survive the crucifixion? Or does it mean (with Sale) that someone else was crucified in his place? Or was it a mere shade without spirit that appeared upon the cross? An early Christian heretic, Cerinthus (fl. 100 CE), taught that Jesus was possessed by the Messiah who departed from him before the Passion. In other words, Jesus was crucified, but not the Messiah.

"As the apocryphal gospels, pseudepigrapha, polemics, and other early Christian writings testify, there were other, contrary traditions about the crucifixion already in circulation; evidence that the Pauline interpretation of the life of Christ had a number of competitors. In the present form of the gospels, some element of polemic against denials of the reality of the death of Jesus on the cross survives, indicating that there were indeed early alternative traditions and interpretations of the mission and nature of Jesus."³⁷

A Gnostic tradition held that the Simon of Cyrene mentioned in *John* was crucified in place of Jesus. That story was in circulation by the last decade of the 1st century CE, if not earlier. It is reported in the writings of early fathers of the church. Irenaeus (c. 130-200 CE) mentions the teaching of the Gnostic heretic Basilides who was active about 120 CE: "that (Jesus) had not suffered and that a certain Simon of Cyrene had been compelled to carry his cross for him

³⁵ See the writer's "The Passion and Disappearance of Jesus" in *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, esp. pp. 296-306; or in *Jesus*, pp. 126-181.

³⁶ Hans Wehr. *Arabic-English Dictionary*. Spoken Language Services. Ithaca, NY (1976).

³⁷ From the author's *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, pp. 301-2; also in *Jesus*, pp. 149-50.

and that this man was crucified through ignorance and error, having been changed in form by him so that it should be thought that he was Jesus himself.”³⁸ The Docetists³⁹ believed that only the body of Jesus was crucified and his spirit had already departed from it.

The early Christian Gnostic *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, has another version of the substitution story in which Jesus was really crucified but only appeared to suffer. It even suggests that Jesus was a shapeshifter. In another Nag Hammadi document, Jesus consoles his brother James, declaring that he had suffered in no way whilst upon the cross. The Manichaeans had still another version of the simulated suffering, but as we are concerned with Belica’s suggestion of an outright substitution, let us proceed towards that.

Most readers will be familiar with the story of the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, slightly different accounts of which are found in all four canonical gospels. The priests, temple elders, slaves, and soldiers seized Jesus when the traitorous Judas identified him by greeting him with a kiss. He was then brought before the high priests.

From this episode, it is clear that Jesus was not a familiar figure in Jerusalem—most of his teaching had been conducted in the north and east—and the authorities who were alarmed by his actions and teachings did not know what he looked like. Enter Judas who agrees to identify him for a mere thirty pieces of silver. Judas has been much vilified in books and from the pulpits throughout the ages for his betrayal of Jesus, but there is a contrarian theory which holds that Judas’ alleged betrayal was actually an attempt to save Jesus from his enemies by having some one else take his place at the arrest. Whether it was anticipated that the arrest would lead to a crucifixion or not is not known, but it was a probable outcome in those brutal times.

Why were the authorities so concerned with Jesus’ actions? What made it so important, according to some theories, to substitute another—presumably a volunteer—for Jesus at this time? Was he not simply a peaceful teacher preaching the kingdom of heaven?

Perhaps not. Here is *Mark*, the oldest of the gospels, writing about the events of the second day of the Passion: “And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple.” (Mk. 11:15-16) *Matthew* virtually repeats *Mark*, but *Luke*, with a wary eye on Rome, merely states: “And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold...” (Lk. 19:45) Interestingly, *John* (Jn. 2: 13-16) shifts this event at Jerusalem to a time

³⁸ Cited in Tisdall, p. 183; Goodspeed, p. 62. The Basilidians were followers of Basilides, active in Alexandria and Egypt in the 2nd century CE. The anti-heresiarch Irenaeus, in refuting the ideas of the Basilidians, described some of their beliefs. About the crucifixion, Irenaeus says, quoting their beliefs: “(Christ) appeared in human form and taught, but at the crucifixion changed forms with Simon of Cyrene, so that the latter was crucified in the form of Jesus, while Christ Himself stood by and mocked at His enemies in the form of Simon; for, since he was incorporeal, He was essentially invisible, and so He returned to the Father. Hence no one who really knows the truth will confess the Crucified [Christ], for, if he understands what really happened at the crucifixion, he is freed from them.” It has been proposed that the explicit statement in *John*, that Jesus went to his crucifixion carrying his own cross (Jn. 19:17), was intended to refute the Synoptics version in which Simon of Cyrene bore the cross in his place. (Basilides, ERE, Vol. II, p. 428.)

³⁹ The Docetists, the most famous of whom was the 2nd-century CE heresiarch Marcion, held that Jesus was not a real human being, but rather an apparition or phantom. They constituted the first known Christian heresy. (ERE, IV, 832-835; Docetism, CE, 581.) For more about them, see the section on doctrinal disputes in the Story of Paul (IV). Docetism greatly influenced the heretical Cathars in southern France who became the object of a brutal, merciless crusade set in motion by Pope Innocent (See Note 625). For more about them, see the section on doctrinal disputes in the Story of Paul (IV).

shortly after the beginning of Jesus' ministry, a time when the Synoptics have Jesus still in Galilee. Since the Markan tradition is much older, it would seem that *John* wanted to get this episode out of the way before beginning his narrative of the Passion that occupies the second half of his gospel.

Now, consider what has happened according to *Mark*. Jesus and his followers have invaded the Temple of Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith, and taken control of it. This is not likely to have been accomplished without threats and even violence; in fact, it sounds very much like an armed insurrection. (We know that some of Jesus' followers were armed from incidents reported at the time of his arrest.) Although Jesus rarely uses the word "messiah" to describe himself (he seems to have preferred "son of man,"⁴⁰ if we may trust the gospel writers), just about everyone else thought of him as such. Judaea had experienced several "messiahs" and they all had tried to re-establish Jewish independence through armed conflict, but failed.

After taking over the Temple, the disconcerted priests tried to negotiate. It would seem that Jesus and his followers were later either expelled by force or left on their own accord in the face of overwhelming Roman power. The gospels are silent on this point. In any event, after celebrating the Last Supper, they eventually retired to the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives that overlooked Jerusalem and the Temple from the east. In the traditional version by *Mark*, Jesus was aware of the fate awaiting him and passed his time in prayer until Judas and "a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders" arrived to arrest him. After a scuffle in which a slave or servant was wounded by the sword of one of Jesus' followers (unnamed in the Synoptics, but identified as Peter by *John*), Jesus was taken for examination and trial and later crucifixion, all on the same day (Mk. 14: 43-50).

That is the "official" version of events. There is no suggestion of organized resistance or a substitution. Nevertheless, that his followers were carrying arms has not escaped our notice. That is an uncomfortable fact for the believers in the pacifist Jesus. Since Josephus is silent on these matters (or has been silenced by tampering with his text), we may now only speculate alternative strategies that Jesus and his followers may have adopted to save him from the harsh certainties of Roman justice. Indeed, he may not have been a party to these possible machinations by his supporters.

One such strategy received much publicity with the publication of Dr. Hugh Schonfeld's book *The Passover Plot* (1966), which details a possible scenario by which Jesus' followers may have tried to save him from the usually lethal consequences of crucifixion. The whole scheme of the plotters depended upon getting Jesus down from the cross as quickly and with as little trauma as possible and then spiriting him away from the eyes of authority in order to act swiftly to revive him.

Now, crucifixion was a shameful method of execution. It was one of the most horrible forms of execution ever devised by man, precisely because of its length. Victims on the cross would usually survive several days, dying painfully from thirst, hunger, and exhaustion. Yet, Jesus spent but three to six hours (versions vary) on the cross. When his death was reported to Pilate, he was astonished by Jesus' speedy demise. And then, when Joseph of Arimathea came to ask Pilate for the body, as Agron Belica correctly points out in his book, Joseph asked for Jesus' "body" (Gk. *soma*), whilst Pilate refers to Jesus' "corpse" (Gk. *ptoma*). The implicit connotations of the two words are roughly the same as they are in English.

⁴⁰ See the section on "son of man" in the writer's *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, pp. 162-4; or in *Jesus*, pp. 16-18, or any standard Bible dictionary.

If Jesus' followers were trying to save him, was the vinegar given to Jesus drugged? If such was the case, was he aware of the plot to save him, or ignorant of it?

More possible evidence: When the soldier thrust the spear into Jesus' side, blood flowed. Not much flows out of a dead man as the heart has stopped beating. The excuse to take him down from the cross early because of the approaching Sabbath seems rather spurious. Had his enemies not foreseen this conflict? They surely would have wanted to leave him on the cross for days, dead or alive, as a warning to would-be rebels and to broadcast their triumph and the certain fate faced by the enemies of Rome. Many of the incidents connected with the crucifixion and its aftermath seem rather contrived. If he survived the crucifixion, then it would only have *appeared* to his enemies that they had crucified him, one interpretation of *shubbiha*. If this was the case, perhaps Jesus finished his days still teaching the Kingdom of Heaven in Kashmir, as some would have it.

But, suppose it was not Jesus who was crucified on that fateful occasion. Suppose his followers had spirited him away to the comparative safety of the neighboring Parthian Empire, an easy caravan journey across the northern steppes and deserts of Arabia. In another interpretation of the Quranic verse, it would have appeared (*shubbiha*) to Jesus' enemies that they had crucified him, but in reality they had crucified another, and the plot of his followers may have been designed to save that volunteer.

He could have been Simon of Cyrene, but Belica thinks that that man may have been John the Baptist. We have discussed the chronological possibilities of such an event above. If we assume that it is chronologically possible, what else might link the two prophets to make John's sacrifice more plausible?

Of the gospels, only *Luke* speaks of a kinship between John and Jesus. According to *Luke*, both of John's parents were Levites. His mother Elizabeth was relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus, so presumably she also was a Levite—if we may rely upon *Luke's* evidence.⁴¹ As we have noted above, the canonical gospel-writers introduced John the Baptist primarily as the herald of the coming of Jesus and had very little to say about him thereafter. Since both men were active in their missions at roughly the same time in an area smaller than Connecticut, it would be strange if they had not had more contact, especially if they were kin. Since we believe that the gospel writers were desirous of putting the focus on Jesus and did not want to confuse the issue with a charismatic competitor, their comparative silence is not entirely unexpected.

This should not be taken to imply that we feel that Jesus and John were any in sort of competition for followers, God forbid! However, their later propagandists may have been less tolerant. Consider the fate of the Essenes, an influential community of that era; they are not mentioned at all by the fourfold gospel, even though their views on the Messiah were quite apposite to the nature of the mission of Jesus. Moreover, they were hardly a secret society; there was even a Gate of the Essenes in Jerusalem at the time of Josephus! Yet, there is not a word about them in the Bible.

In the gospels, *Luke* writes about the beginning of the fame of John and his preaching and baptizing: "As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ [Messiah]." (Lk. 3:15) Of what were the people in expectation? The Messiah would, among other things, release them from the yoke of Rome. What did the priest Zechariah, his father, say about John at his birth? "And thou, child, shalt be called

⁴¹ See the discussion of the birth stories in *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective*, pp. 191-3, 201-16; or in *Jesus*, pp. 41-3; 51-64.

the prophet of the Highest... to give knowledge and salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins through the tender mercies of our God..." (Lk. 1:76,77) and *John*: "And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who art thou?' He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ [Messiah].' And they asked him, 'What then? Art thou Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.'" (Jn. 1: 19-20)

Though not claiming to be the Messiah, John was a charismatic prophet of considerable repute on his own. The fact that he acknowledged the precedence and greater importance of Jesus links them together implicitly, despite the gospel writers' relative silence. The lingering fear that he posed a threat as a potential messiah probably contributed to Herod Antipas' decision to have him executed, as they thought had executed Jesus.

So, for the sake of argument, we may postulate that the connection between Jesus and John, both shepherds in the fields of salvation, probably had more direct or indirect contact than the texts of the canonical gospels would suggest. Furthermore, there is the question of the messiahship, a question that may possibly also involve the Essenes. We have mentioned the strong possibility of John's having Essene connections above. The Essenes had proposed two complementary messiahs: the Priestly and the Royal to rule the ideal Jewish state. They had also proposed two antithetical characters: the Teacher of Righteousness and his foe the Wicked Priest. These two were apparently real people and there has been much speculation about their identities.

The Mandaeans, whom we have mentioned above, may have had Essene connections and their parallel to the Essene dichotomy, John the Baptist in opposition to Jesus, hints at stronger links between the two groups. Does their position reflect some earlier Essene approval of John the Baptist and disapproval of Jesus, for whatever reason?

There were some in Judaea at that time who thought that John might really be *a* messiah but that he was concealing the fact out of caution. Not that he was the Davidic or Royal Messiah, but rather the Priestly Messiah. John was of Levite descent and therefore at least qualified by descent to be a candidate for that role. If Jesus were the Davidic (Royal) Messiah and John the Priestly Messiah, their relationship would be more understandable and take on a different hue. One may speculate that the delegation of inquiry sent by John to Jesus probably wanted to know his plans, possibly with a view to a declaration of their joint messiahship.

Appropos of this topic, Prof. Mowry writes: "Interestingly, some of John the Baptist's followers apparently thought of him as one who fulfilled the hope for a priestly Messiah. In the nativity stories of John, as they are preserved in Luke's gospel, we read that the 'poor' of Israel will rejoice at his birth because it signifies the arrival of the day of redemption (Lk. 1:46-55)⁴² What is said in praise of John as the wonder child (Lk. 1:16-17) who would create a prepared people by transforming them into obedient children of God expresses the ideals of deeply pious rural priests. It is not surprising, therefore, that John, as the son of such a priest, could be regarded as fulfilling the hopes of those looking for a Messiah from the tribe of Levi. This does not necessarily imply that John the Baptist had such messianic views, or that he thought of himself as fulfilling the promises of a Messiah..."⁴³

As real or potential messiahs, Jesus and John each posed a potential challenge to different aspects of the ruling establishment that supported Roman rule. Both had to be eliminated to preserve the status quo. John the Baptist met that fate at Macherus, most likely *after* the Passion of Jesus—unless he managed to escape from the castle into the eastern desert and flee to

⁴² Dr. Mowry's footnote refers to Carl H. Kraaling, *John the Baptist* (NY, 1951), pp. 166-71, 181.

⁴³ Lucetta Mowry. *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Early Church*. Univ. of Notre Dame Press (1962), pp. 163-4.

lower Mesopotamia where some of his followers would flee and where the Mandaeans would later be centered.

In Islamic belief, Jesus escaped his fate on the cross in some manner, perhaps to live in exile for the rest of his life, profiting others with his teachings rather than the Jews. Jesus may have been saved by rescue or he may have been replaced by another. If the latter be the case, then we may speculate as to the identity of that person. If John were alive at that time, as we believe probable, then who would have been more appropriate for that sacrifice than he, with kindred missions, beliefs and perhaps even family? Perhaps then, it was John who was saved from the cross to continue his ministry for a while until his rendezvous with Herod at Macherus.

Of course, this is all speculation, supposition, and deduction from too little hard evidence for a positive conclusion. Agron Belica speculates; all of us speculate. That is the part of our natural mental inquisitiveness that often leads to invention and new insights. Sometimes, even our wildest speculations are not so far from the truth. John the Baptist, this neglected and underestimated prophet, has found an enthusiastic advocate in Agron Belica. Let us hope that his efforts will encourage others amongst us to reconsider old "truths." *And God knows best.*