

IḤYĀ° AL-NABĪY YAḤYĀ

(THE REVIVAL OF THE PROPHET YAḤYA)

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Edited by Dr. Jay R. Crook

The Quran mentions the prophets as having special names and qualities. For example, Prophet Muhammad is called the Seal of the Prophets (Q. 33:40) and a mercy for the worlds (Q. 21:107). Abraham is called Imam (Q. 2:124), the friend of God (Q. 4:125), a model to the world (Q. 16:120), one who is forbearing and repentant (Q. 11:74), a monotheist (Q. 16:123). Isaac is also given the quality of an Imam (Q. 21:73) who has power of vision (Q. 38:45). Aaron is called a minister (Q. 20:29); he is blessed with eloquence (Q. 28:34) and he is sent with signs and manifest authority (Q. 23:45). David is called a vicegerent on the earth (Q. 38:26) who has power and wisdom (Q. 2:251); a man of strength (Q. 38:17). Solomon is a king (Q. 38:35); he is taught the speech of birds and is bestowed with all things (Q. 27:16). Joseph is a ruler (Q. 12:88) and one who interprets dreams and visions (Q. 12:21), a man of truth (Q. 12:46), concealed as a treasure (Q. 12:19). Jacob is also called Imam (Q. 21:73). He is given the power of vision (Q. 38:45). Jesus is called the Messiah (Q. 3:45). He spoke in the cradle (Q. 3:46) and is a sign to humanity and a mercy from God (Q. 19:21).

These are all prophets whose lives are familiar to us. What about the Prophet Yahya? What have we been taught about this prophet who has been overlooked and misrepresented. One reason he has been overlooked is because there are five words used in the Quran to describe Prophet Yahya that have been misinterpreted in translations of the Quran.

The first is the word *ḥaṣūr* used in the Quran (Q. 3:39) which is usually translated “chaste.” My research shows that the Arabic word *ḥaṣūr* does not mean “chaste” with regard to Yahya; rather, it means “a concealer [of secrets].” Why the mistake in translation and commentary? As there was no extensive information given in the Quran about the life of Prophet Yahya nor in the Tradition (*Hadīth*), the commentators then turned to Christian tradition and simply repeated what they found there.

Nonetheless, the commentators of the Quran have placed considerable emphasis on this word. Al-Tabari interprets the word *ḥaṣūr* to mean one who abstains from sexual intercourse with women. He then reports a Tradition on the authority of Said ibn al-Musayyab which has Prophet Muhammad saying the following: “Everyone of the sons of Adam shall come on the Day of Resurrection with a sin (of sexual impropriety) except Yahya bin Zechariah.’ Then, picking up a tiny straw, he continued, ‘this is because his generative organ was no bigger than this straw (implying that he was impotent).’”¹

Does this mean that even the prophets outside of Yahya will be raised up with this sin of sexual impropriety? How can we accept that this was said by such a modest human being,

¹ Tafsir of Tabari, cited by Mahmoud M. Ayoub in *The Quran and Its Interpreters*, Vol. II, p. 109 (Albany: University of New York, 1992).

comparing a straw to another prophet's generative organ? Was Yahya impotent? One commentator, Ibn Kathir, a renowned Islamic scholar, rejects this view and adds, “This would be a defect and a blemish unworthy of prophets.” He then mentions that it was not that he had no sexual relations with women, but that he had no illegal sexual relations with them. Indeed, the whole discussion is unseemly. It is known that prophets of God are immune from major sins, so this statement makes no sense at all when interpreting the word, *ḥaṣūr*. In addition, I would like to mention the fact that in his commentary, Ibn Kathir says he (Yahya) probably married and had children. He said this on the basis of what was related in the Quran of the prayer of Zachariah.

There are several reasons why interpreting *ḥaṣūr* in this context as “chaste” or “celibate,” as has been done by some commentators, is a misinterpretation: First of all, there is another word in the Quran for “chaste” and that is *muḥṣin*. As God used a different word with *ḥaṣūr*, it must mean something different. Secondly, God says in the Quran that Islam did not bring monasticism but that it was something that they (the Christians) invented. (Q. 57:27) Also, *And verily We sent messengers (to mankind) before thee, and We appointed for them wives and offspring, and it was not given to any messenger that he should bring a portent save by God's leave. For everything there is a time prescribed.* (Q. 13:38) This is definitely not a recommendation for monasticism. Furthermore, we find in the Traditions that the Prophet said that there is no monasticism in Islam. Therefore, God would not have sent a Prophet who was celibate. In addition, it is contrary the exhortation in the Torah to “go forth and multiply.” Thirdly, Yahya's father, Zechariah prayed for a protector who would provide descendants (*dhurrīyah*) for his family. *There Zachariah called to his Lord; he said: My Lord! Bestow on me good offspring from Thy presence; truly Thou art hearing supplication.* (Q. 3:38) God gave him Yahya. God would not have sent a son to Zechariah who would not carry on the line of Jacob's descendants because then God would not have answered the prayer of Zechariah.

The word *ḥaṣūr* is used only one time in the Quran and that is in regard to the Prophet Yahya. A major Arabic-English lexicon, that of Edward William Lane (Taj al-Arus) states that when *ḥaṣūr* is used alone, it means “concealer [of secrets].” In his translation, of Ibn al-Arabi's Book of the Fabulous Gryphon, Elmore also translates the Arabic *ḥaṣūr* “as concealer [of secrets].” In the referenced passage, “chaste” would not have been appropriate (Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, Brill 1999, P. 482)

The second word that has been misinterpreted is *waliy* (Q. 19:5) which in this verse and many other places in the Quran means “protector” rather than “heir” or “successor.” In this specific case, Zechariah prayed to his Lord: “And truly I have feared my defenders after me and my wife has been a barren woman. So bestow on me from that which proceeds from Thy Presence a protector (*waliy*).” In Q. 3:39, Zachariah's prayer was answered, “...God, giveth thee glad tidings of (a son whose name is) Yahya (who cometh) to confirm a word from God, and (he will be) a chief (*sayyid*), and concealer (of secrets) (*hasur*), a prophet of the righteous.” His prayer for a protector was answered by God's giving him a son, one with spiritual authority (*sayyid*).

It is commonly thought that Zachariah was simply asking for a son; however, this misconception may be corrected by reading further into the text. After receiving this good news, Zachariah asked, “O my Lord! How shall I have a son, when age hath touched me already and my wife is barren?” Zachariah was asking how this would be possible as he had not even contemplated being blessed with a son in his old age, and that with a barren wife. Compare this with Mary who said, when she was given good news of a son, “How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?” (Q. 3:47) Both Zechariah and Mary were asking about the *possibility* of such a thing. If Zachariah were asking for a son, as has been suggested by many scholars of Islam, than why did he ask such a question when God

informed him of the impending birth? The truth is that Zachariah was not asking for a son explicitly. He was asking God to send him a divinely appointed protector, from the same place whence Maryam received her provisions (*rizq*); hence “Give me from thy presence a protector (*waliy*)’ (Q. 19:5, 3:38).

The third word that is misinterpreted is *fard* in Q. 21:89: “And mention Zechariah when he cried out to his Lord: My Lord! Forsake me not unassisted (*fard*) and Thou art the Best of the ones who inherit.” It is usually translated as “childless” or “heir,” but the same reasoning applies as above. The word “unassisted” refers to the fact that Zechariah did not want to be left alone without any protector. He feared for those who would defend him and his honor after he died, that they would be left without a protector and thereby could not defend his honor.

The fourth misinterpreted word in relation to Prophet Yahya is *sayyid*. Prophet Yahya is referred to as a *sayyid*, chief in the Quran. The commentators have interpreted this to mean that he was a scholar of religious law, a wise man, a noble wise and pious man, and so forth. This was a prophet of God. Knowledge and wisdom were given to him by his Lord. The title given to Yahya by his Lord shows that Prophet Yahya is one who has spiritual authority over his people and not “noble” or “honorable” as this word is usually translated. Honor and nobility are good qualities but they fail to indicate that Prophet Yahya is given a role of leadership by his Lord.

The fifth word is *hanān* which means “mercy,” which is part of the compound name Yu’hanan (in English “John”), meaning “God is Merciful.” The word *hanān* is used once in the Quran (Q. 19:13) and that is in reference to Prophet Yahya: “And continuous mercy from Us and purity...” This is singularly appropriate to the circumstances of the Prophet Yahya.

The names Yahya and Yuhanan are not the same as many assume. They have two entirely different roots. *Hanān* and the *hannah* both derive from the Semitic root *h n n*. While the word *hannah* means “mercy or tenderness,” the root word for Yahya is *h y y*. It means “life” or “he lives.” One does not need to be a linguist to see the obvious.

In addition, I would like also to mention that this name and attribute given to Prophet Yahya can also be found in Sabian literature. The Sabians are mentioned in the Quran in verses (Q. 2:62), (Q. 5:69) and (Q. 22:17). In their canonical prayer book we find Yahya Yuhanna. It has been known that it is the practice of the Sabians to have two names, a real name and a special name. According to the Sabians, this prophet’s real name was Yahya (*he lives*) and his lay name was Yuhanna (John).

Prophet Yahya is the only one given this name as the Quran clearly states: “O Zechariah! Truly We give thee the good tidings of a boy; his name will be Yahya (he who lives) and We assign it not as a namesake (*samīy*) for anyone before.”

Again, another word that we need to pay attention to is *samīy*. It is used twice in the Quran, once in reference to Yahya (Q. 19:7) “O Zechariah! Truly We give thee the good tidings of a boy; his name will be Yahya and We assign it not as a namesake (Q. *samiya*) for anyone before.” The other time it is used is in reference to God. “...Knowest thou any namesake (*samīy*) for Him [God]?” (Q. 19:65) In the famous Arabic lexicon *Lisan al-Arab*, the root *s m w* means “elevation or highness.”

See *The Sublime Quran Pocket Size* translated by Laleh Bakhtiar (2009) which incorporates the results of this research about the Prophet Yahya.

WAS THE PROPHET YAHYA BEHEADED?

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The Prophet Yahya could not have been beheaded as has been stated by many Muslim and Christian scholars. In regards to Jesus in the Quran we read: *Peace on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day I will be raised up again.* (Q. 19:33) The verse states that Jesus was given safety and security in these three situations. But what about Yahya ibn Zechariah? We find the same description for him as we find for Jesus, *Peace on him the day he is born, the day he dies, and the day he is raised up again.* (Q. 19:15)

We are told by an early historian, Josephus, that Yahya was put to death because of his political importance. The belief that he was is probably related to the New Testament story of his beheading at the behest of Salome, a story the truth of which we reject. Josephus does not mention the manner of Prophet Yahya's death. Others have stated that Prophet Yahya was beheaded. If it be true that Prophet Yahya was put to death by Herod Antipas on the suspicion of planning an insurrection as Josephus indicates, the punishment would not have been beheading. Under Roman law, only Roman citizens were sentenced to beheading. Any non-Roman citizen was sentenced to death by crucifixion for such activity. This was the case with Jesus, a non-Roman citizen, being accused of treason and sentenced to crucifixion. In addition, we see that when Paul was sentenced to die, he pleaded that he was a Roman citizen so that he would be beheaded and not crucified (Acts 22:27-28).

Certainly, if it is the case that Yahya's followers were many, spread far and wide, as it has been reported by some, and that Josephus mentions that the Jews were greatly moved by Prophet Yahya's words, and that Herod Antipas feared that Yahya's influence over the masses would cause a rebellious uprising leading to a revolt by the Jews against the Romans (Antiquities 18:5.2 116-119), then this would be in accord with the practice of capital punishment of said criminals under Roman law. That is, that non-Roman citizens be crucified.

How does the supposed beheading of Yahya fit with the above Quranic verse of one given peace by his Lord? We find in the commentary of Ibn Kathir that Yahya was also given safety and security in these three situations, but the book speciously ascribed to Ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets*, agrees with the Gospel accounts of Yahya's being beheaded and the serving of his head on a platter. How do we explain the beheading of this Prophet of God? How, then, is he one who was "safe and secure"? Are we to say that God saved Jesus, but abandoned Yahya? Is this divine justice? As far as we know, all the prophets mentioned by name in the Quran were delivered from their enemies. Yet, the Prophet Yahya, whose name ironically means *He Who Lives*, is popularly supposed to have been put to death.

It is my belief that Prophet Yahya was possibly put on the cross in place of Jesus in a case of mistaken identity. However, he did not die on the cross. By God's giving him the name of Yahya (*he who lives*) in the Quran and the Quranic fact that the Messiah was not crucified, but it appeared to the people as such, the Quran is telling us that that person was Prophet Yahya.²

Prophet Yahya survives as he lives out the words from God of "peace be upon him" as was the case with Prophet Abraham when he was thrown in the fire yet he was saved, "We said: O fire! Be coolness and peace for Abraham!" (21:69); hence: "*Peace be on Abraham! Thus We give recompense to the ones who are doers of good!* (37:110)" Prophet Yahya died a natural death at some later time, as did Jesus. It is my belief from my understanding of the Quran that

² See the article entitled *Shubbiha* below.

Yahya was raised up in honor (*rafa'a*) as was Jesus. Because this is not mentioned in the Quran, it does not mean that it could not have happened that way.

Again, we must turn to the Quran and its divine wisdom to receive understanding. When one compares Jesus and Yahya, we can observe that Jesus has been mentioned in detail, whereas Yahya has not. Here are some examples for one to consider: The Quran tells us that Jesus was sent to the children of Israel, but Yahya is not mentioned as being sent to them. Was Yahya sent to the children of Israel? Of course he was.

Jesus in the Quran speaks to the children of Israel, but Yahya is not mentioned. Did Yahya speak to the children of Israel? Of course he did.

We are told that Jesus had disciples, but Yahya's are not mentioned. Did he have disciples? Of course he did.

We are told that Jesus received the Gospel (*Injil*), but Yahya's revelation was not specified, but he was told to hold onto the scripture with might. Did Yahya receive scripture from his Lord as did Jesus? Of course he did.

Because Yahya is not mentioned in similar circumstances, it does not mean that he was not as favored as Jesus. *And God knows best!*

*SHUBBIHA*³

MISTAKEN IDENTITY?

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*And because of their saying: 'We slew the Messiah
Jesus son of Mary, God's Messenger—
They slew him not nor crucified him,
but it appeared so [shubbiha⁴] unto them; and lo!
Those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof;
they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of conjecture;
they slew him not for certain. (Q. 4:157)*

“Although Muslims believe in the words of God, that the son of Mary was neither killed nor crucified, they too ask questions about the circumstances of the crucifixion and the identity of the victim if, indeed, there was one and the whole crucifixion was not an illusion. In common with the early Christian sects that doubted the reality of the crucifixion, Muslims also have proposed many theories about who may have been crucified in place of Jesus. We find the commentators of the Quran offering contradictory theories about this. Some say it was a companion of Jesus who volunteered to be crucified in his place. This theory can be found in the famous commentary of the Quran by Ibn Kathir.⁵ In it, he mentions a strong chain of narrative⁶ going back to Ibn Abbas,⁷ who is known in the Islamic world as a great interpreter of the Quran.

³ The passages from the Quran quoted in this article are based primarily upon Mohammad M. Pickthall's translation, with an occasional change when warranted by the context and with the uniform replacement of the Arabic word *Allah* by the English *God*. We have used the *Revised Standard Version* of the Holy Bible (RSV) as the standard for Biblical quotations, also with occasional changes and the uniform replacement of *you* when singular with *thou*, with attendant changes for case (*thee, thy, thine*) and in associated verbs. References and quotations from the editor's own work *The New Testament: An Islamic Perspective* are designated by his name: "Crook, p..."

⁴ *shubbiha* is derived from an Arabic trilateral verbal root *sh, b, h* with the general meaning of "resemblance" or "resembling." It is the masculine third-person singular of the Passive form of the Active Form II verb *shahhaba*. Form II verbs are usually transitive and often causative in meaning. In this case, the Active form means "to make equal or similar, to compare or liken." The Passive form, *shubbiha*, means "to be doubtful, dubious, uncertain, or obscure, to appear like or as though."

⁵ Ibn Kathir: well-known 14th-century CE Syrian commentator.

⁶ "chain of narrative" Arabic *sanad*: the chain of authorities going back to the Prophet or his Companions upon which the reliability of a tradition is based.

⁷ Ibn 'Abbas, a Companion of the Prophet, died 687 CE. The 11th-century Persian commentator Surabadi gives us his version of this story: "...when Gabriel came to carry off Jesus, Jesus (who appears in this tradition to have been imprisoned with his disciples) asked which of them would volunteer to be crucified in his place. Only Simon volunteered. Then Jesus named Simon as his successor. Simon was then transformed into the image of Jesus. When they came to take Simon, thinking he was Jesus, this image of Jesus was transferred to the executioner. Simon fled, while the executioner was executed in his place, and the people disputed about it. The ending of both versions, with the people disputing about what happened, is to explain the ending of the Quranic verse: *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)." (Crook, pp. 298-9.) (See also Note 8 below.)

“Yet in the commentary of Ibn Abbas,⁸ it is reported that he said: God destroyed their man Tatianos⁹... God made Tatianos look like Jesus and so they killed him instead of him [Jesus]... certainly they did not kill him,”¹⁰ thereby contradicting the Ibn Kathir’s version noted above. So, clearly we can see the conflict in the commentaries. Others say it was Simon of Cyrene,¹¹ a Roman soldier, or even that it was Judas Iscariot.¹² This last theory is found in the *Gospel of Barnabas*.¹³ Unfortunately, there is no factual evidence to prove any of these theories. The Quran challenges us, *Say: Bring your proof if ye have been speakers of the truth!* (Q. 2:111) Consequently, with so many different and incompatible traditions flying about, the matter of the true meaning of the Quranic verse cannot be considered closed and one may feel free to argue other possibilities, as I shall do below.”¹⁴

So, who was the man who was identified, tried, and put on the cross? We are told in the Quran that it was not the son of Mary, but someone (or something) resembling him. Who would likely to have resembled him more than a relative? If not Jesus, could it have

⁸ The commentary attributed to Ibn Abbas, a 7th-century CE Companion of the Prophet, *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir ibn Abbas*, was almost certainly not written by him. More probably, it was based on traditions he reported and collected (probably with some extraneous material) by the 15th-century CE Muhammad Ibn Ya‘qub Firuzabadi.

⁹ Tatianos (or Tatyanus): Probably Titus, the Roman general who destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. He went on to become the ruler of the Roman Empire, reigning from 79 to 81 CE.

¹⁰ *Tanwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir ibn Abbas* for Q. 4:157. The 11th century Persian Commentator Surabadi gives a fuller version of this tale: “In his version, Herod, the king of the Jews, had locked Jesus up and erected a gallows for a public execution. When the time appointed for the execution arrived, Tatyanus the executioner entered the cell to bring out Jesus. Gabriel came, carried Jesus away through an aperture, and transported him to the fourth heaven. Then he caused Tatyanus to assume the outward form of Jesus. When he came out of the cell and told the people that Jesus had escaped, the people looked at him and said that he was himself Jesus. He tried to fight off the people with magic, but failed and was executed. After this was over, the people looked about for the executioner and then began to have doubts.” (Crook, p. 298.) (See also Note 5 above.)

¹¹ “It has been suggested that the absence of the pericope about Simon the Cyrene’s bearing Jesus’ cross in *John* and *John*’s emphatic statement that Jesus went out “bearing his own cross” (Jn. 19:17) is a refutation of the Gnostic tradition that Simon of Cyrene was crucified instead of Jesus. That story was already in circulation by the last decade of the 1st century CE, if not earlier. Proof of the antiquity of this story is found 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 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. (Crook, p. 302.)

¹² “It has been suggested that Judas Iscariot, the alleged betrayer of Jesus, was a Zealot, and that his surname Iscariot derives from Sicarii, although other derivations—perhaps more plausible—have been proposed.” (Crook, p. 74) He is supposed to have committed suicide in remorse for his betrayal (Acts. 1:13).

¹³ *The Gospel of Barnabas*: Almost certainly not by the Barnabas mentioned by Paul in the New Testament. “The manuscript that was the basis of [the] edition was an Italian 16th century CE Venetian copy of an earlier Tuscan manuscript. No Greek or Latin texts are known to exist and there is no manuscript evidence that pushes the history of the text nearer to the time of the putative author, St. Barnabas, the companion of Paul, who was active in the 1st century CE. The Raggs [the editors of the text] cite a reference to a 100-years Jubilee as a clue that the gospel may have been written some time between 1300 and 1350 CE. The first Church jubilee was held in 1300 and the Church originally planned to hold a jubilee every century. However, in 1350, another jubilee was held and the interval was changed to every 50 years. This points to a date of composition between 1300 and 1350 CE.” (Crook, p. 160.) In *Barnabus*, Judas is transformed into the image of Jesus and mistaken for him by the other disciples. It was he who was arrested and brought before Pilate, condemned and crucified and buried in the tomb arranged by Joseph of Arimathaea. (See David Sox, *The Gospel of Barnabas*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984, pp. 44-47.)

¹⁴ Agron Belica, *Maybe a Messiah*, p. 1.

been his cousin Yahya? The victim does not die on the cross but is taken down from the cross when the Roman soldiers mistakenly think that he is dead. An indication of this may be found in *Mark*¹⁵ where we read that a certain Joseph of Arimathea¹⁶ went to Pontius Pilate,¹⁷ the Roman governor of Judaea, and asked for the body of a man on the cross whom many assume to have been Jesus. What is interesting to note is that he asks to take down the body (*soma*), while Pontius Pilate had told him to take the corpse (*ptoma*).¹⁸ There are many signs in the New Testament that suggest that the man crucified that day did not die on the cross.

What does all this mean? Keep in mind that Yahya in Arabic suggests life, “he lives.” The victim survives and continues to teach in secret after this ordeal. God tells Yahya, ... *hold fast the Book* (Q. 19:12) What does this mean? It suggests that Yahya may have been given a special book or task and will face great opposition.

All Muslims agree that Jesus did not die on the cross; rather, what the witnesses of the crucifixion saw was a deception, a similitude, or a substitution. It is my belief that they saw a substitution. By using the method of explaining the Quran by the Quran, (as should be done with regards to the crucifixion in relation to the word *shubbiha*), I examined this word *shubbiha* more closely, and if there were anyone more similar or shared any kind of resemblance to Jesus, it would have been Yahya, the son of Zechariah, and no one else. Here are some of those distinct similarities:

Both were born miraculously: (About Yahya) *He said: ‘My Lord! How can I have a son when age hath overtaken me already and my wife is barren?’ (The angel answered: ‘So (it will be). God doeth what He will.’ (Q. 3:40) and (about Jesus): ‘She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me?’ He said: ‘So (it will be). God createth what He will. If He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is.’ (Q. 3:47)*

Both were given unique names: *And the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: God giveth thee glad tidings of (a son whose name is) Yahya, (who cometh) to confirm a word from God, chief, concealer [of secrets], a prophet of the righteous (Q. 3:39) and he whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God).’ (Q. 3:45)*

¹⁵ Mk. 15:42.

¹⁶ Joseph of Arimathea: “... he *may* have been a member of the Sanhedrin; if he was not, he was certainly a local worthy. Joseph’s motives have been much discussed. It has been suggested that he was impelled by the rabbinical traditions that a dead body should not remain unburied, in which case it was an act of piety that does not necessarily indicate that he was otherwise connected with Jesus and his followers. He may also have been prompted, again out of piety, by the Mosaic injunction in *Deuteronomy*: “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and thou hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; thou shalt not defile thy land which the Lord thy God gave thee for an inheritance.” (Deut. 21:22-23) One might question whether he would have used the tomb he had prepared for himself for such a purpose. *Mark* states that he “was also himself looking for the kingdom of God.” (Mk. 15:43) Commentators have usually taken that to indicate that he was connected with the Jesus movement. However, the IDB article also points out that the phrase could equally mean that he was a good Pharisee, probably sympathetic to Jesus. (Joseph of Arimathea, *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Nashville, Vol. 2, pp. 980-1.) (Crook, Note 791.)

¹⁷ Pontius Pilate: Pontius Pilate was the procurator of Judaea from 26 to 36 CE, the Passion—in the tradition which Tacitus is recording—must have occurred between 26 and 36 CE, which fact negatively gives credence to a date around 30 CE. Unfortunately, Tacitus did not specify which year in the reign of Tiberius the event was supposed to have occurred. (Crook, Note 350.)

¹⁸ The difference between Greek *soma* and *ptoma* parallels the difference between *body* and *corpse* in English: A “body” can be living or dead, whereas a “corpse” is always dead.

Both were given significant titles by God: Yahya: ... *chief, concealer [of secrets], a prophet of the righteous* (Q. 3:39) and Jesus *whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto God)*. (Q. 3:45)

Both Yahya and Jesus received mercy: In regard to Yahya: ... *And mercy from Our presence, and purity; and he was devout*. (Q. 19:13) and in regard to Jesus: ... *and a mercy from Us, and it is a thing ordained*. (Q. 19:21)

Both were prophets of God: In regard to Yahya: ... *a prophet of the righteous*. (Q. 3:39) and Jesus: *He spake: 'Lo! I am the servant of God. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet.'* (Q. 19:30)

Both were righteous: Yahya: ... *a prophet of the righteous*. (Q. 3:39) and Jesus: ... *and he is of the righteous*. (Q. 3:46)

Both were given sagacity: Yahya: *And we gave him wisdom when a child*. (Q. 19:12), Jesus: *And He will teach him the Scripture and wisdom...* (Q. 3:48)

Both were associated with the Word of God: Yahya: ... *who confirms a Word from God* (Q. 3:39); Jesus: *God gives glad tidings of a Word from Him*. (Q. 3:45)

Both were respectful to their parents: Yahya: ... *and (he was) dutiful toward his parents* (Q. 19:14); Jesus: *And (God) hath made me dutiful toward her who bore me*. (Q. 19:32)

Both were humble: Yahya: *and he was not arrogant, rebellious*¹⁹ (Q. 19:14); Jesus: *and (God) hath not made me arrogant, villainous*.²⁰ (Q. 19:32)

In addition, both were saved as infants from death²¹; both were unknown when they returned to Judaea (Yahya) and to Galilee (Jesus). One baptized with water (Yahya) and the other with the Holy Spirit (Jesus). Both had followers and disciples; both were sinless; and both were sent to the Children of Israel. Both finished and completed their missions successfully and were elevated and honored with God's peace: Yahya: *Peace be upon him the day he was born, and the day he dies and the day he shall be raised alive!* (Q. 19:15) and Jesus: *Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!* (Q. 19:33)

Moreover, there are parallels in the conditions of Mary and Zechariah. Both reacted with incredulity when given the news of their future offspring: (Zechariah: *(Zechariah) said: My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren and I have reached inform old age?* (Q. 19:40; see also Q. 3:40) Mary: *(Mary) said: How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste?* (Q. 19:20; see also Q. 3:45)

If anyone was substituted for Jesus, as has been suggested above, then the substitute must have been Yahya. One cannot dismiss the implications of the circumstantial evidence which points to the Prophet Yahya and explains why it was possible to mistake the identity of one for the other. There is no *factual* evidence for the belief that it was any of the other men mentioned in the commentaries when explaining

¹⁹ "rebellious": the Arabic is *'asiyan*. It is from a root connoting disobedience and rebellion.

²⁰ "villainous": the Arabic is *shaqiyan*. The word can mean being miserable, wretched, unhappy, and also villainous, criminal, rogue, etc.

²¹ In the Bible, *Matthew* (Mt. 2: 7-19) tells of the dangers to the infant Jesus posed by the fear and anger of Herod the Great that prompted the flight to Egypt. In that apocrypha, we find that John the Baptist was encompassed by the same threat and his mother Elizabeth fled to the hill country with, not returning until it was deemed safe (*Protevangelium of James* in James, M.R., *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford University Press, London (1953), p. 48.)

this verse (Q. 4:157). Keep in mind that the word *shubbiha* also has the meaning of “to be doubtful, dubious, uncertain, or obscure.” Circumstantial evidence may be weaker than fact in a court of law, but when facts are absent, strong circumstantial evidence is often enough to prevail.

This brings us to the question of the mistaken identity. Turning to the New Testament, we read in *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.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Art thou Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Art thou the prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ They said to him then, ‘Who art thou? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What dost thou say about thyself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” as the prophet Isaiah said.’ (Jn. 1:19-23)

It is quite clear from this passage that John was causing quite a stir; why else would the Jews be sending their priests and Levites to him? His position of authority is confirmed in the Quran with the title “chief” (*sayyid*), given to him not by man, but by God (Q. 3:39). Zachariah had prayed to God for a “protector” (*wali*) from His Presence (Q. 19:5). The Arabic word so used in the Quran in this context denotes one with authority. Yahya’s prominence is well known from the passages about him in the *Antiquities* of Josephus,²² as well as in other traditions. Yet, perhaps the most important part of this passage is that he does not mention his name. He conceals his identity from them; hence, the Quranic reference to him as *hasur*. Let us continue with *John*:

“Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, ‘Then why art thou baptizing, if thou be neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water; but among you is one whom ye do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.’ This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.” (Jn. 1:24-28)

This passage would indicate that in addition to his baptizing, his powerful preaching was of a special kind, and not as it was usually heard by the Jews. It also appears that what he was saying touched upon something they had found in their traditions concerning the signs of a messiah; hence, the gospel passage: “and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Messiah.” (Lk. 3:15) If we look more closely, not only had John not revealed his own identity, but he also had not disclosed the identity of his contemporary, Jesus. Note, too, that the people

²² Josephus wrote more about John the Baptist, at least in the present form of the text if we disregard interpolations, than he did about Jesus: “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] 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 his 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, 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.” (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVII, 5.2.)

mentioned by Luke must have thought that the man they had just met was worthy of consideration as a potential messiah, so much so that they wondered about his real identity.

One cannot miss the appearance that John is concealing something (*hasur*) here. Why is that? Though the messiah is present, he is not yet to be revealed. There is a reason for this, that is, if we follow scriptures. According to the Quran, after the birth of Jesus, when Mary brought her infant to her people, they accused her of fornication. This accusation is also recorded in extra-Biblical Jewish tradition.²³ Does this have anything to do with Jesus' identity not being revealed?

According to Jewish law, “and the daughter of a priest, if she profanes herself by playing the harlot, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire” (Lev. 21:9). If the accusation mentioned in the Quran against Mary were true, then accordingly, Jesus would have been labeled illegitimate. Jewish law states that “no bastard shall not enter the assembly of the Lord, even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord” (Deut. 23:2) Jesus never revealed his identity just as John never revealed his. That is why we never find in the gospels either of them mentioning their own names. Little wonder that Jesus is also mysterious to the point that today some even deny the reality of his very existence.²⁴

That Jesus was present, but not known, does not remove him from the picture. He continued his mission in secret, while John filled the office of “protector” (*wali*) and “chief” (*sayyid*). He was designated as such by God and given command over his people.

What does this have to do with *shubbiha*? As was mentioned above, the Jews did not know who Jesus and John were. John's own testimony is sufficient. We have also shown above from the text of the Quran the complementary natures of Jesus and Yahya. One can see that it was quite possible for one to be mistaken for the other. It was John's authority and reputation that certain factions among the Jews wished to do away with. It is for this reason that I believe that John the Baptist was put on the cross. Consider the meaning of *shubbiha* in this context. *And God knows best!*

²³ For example: It could very well be an answer to the statements in the Talmud and otherwise circulating amongst the Jews that Jesus was a bastard: “Rabbi Shimeon ben Azzai said, I found a genealogical roll in Jerusalem wherein was recorded, Such-an-one [a euphemism in the Talmud for Jesus, made out of fear of Christian reprisals] is a bastard of an adulteress.” (Dunkerley, Roderic. *Beyond the Gospels*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957, p. 52.)

²⁴ Another point should be considered when judging the possibility of a case of mistaken identity: in an age in which there was no photography, no mass media, and no instant communication, as was the case in the Ancient World, identities could easily be mistaken or even forged. According to *Mark*, the oldest of the four gospels, Jesus was active and preaching only in Galilee and the Jordan valley for the first two and a half years of his mission. He did not actually go to Jerusalem until the season of the third Passover, during which he was arrested and then supposedly crucified. (Other gospels mention a few earlier visits of Jesus to Jerusalem.) He was not well known in Jerusalem and he had to be identified by a traitorous disciple for the men who came from the priests and elders to arrest him. But if the disciples were part of a plot, the identification could have been pre-arranged to save Jesus by providing a substitute. There were not many in Jerusalem who have been able to positively identify him, especially if there were any familial resemblance.

On the other hand, with respect to John, it is clear from the passages quoted above that those coming down to meet him from Jerusalem did not know what he looked like. John, though in Judaea of which Jerusalem was the chief city, had spent most of his life away in the wilderness and along the edges of the Jordan valley.