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Jesus in the Last Days, According to Islam

By Brent Neely

Every Muslim is required to believe in “The Last Day.”¹ However, when it comes to Muslim apocalyptic eschatology,² there is no single, universally-agreed upon work laying out a complete picture of last days expectations, particularly the lead-up to the end.

The picture is complicated further when one accounts for the very important distinctions between Sunni and Shia eschatology. To briefly take one obvious example, both Sunni and Shia traditions expect a warrior-leader, a “rightly-guided” savior-like figure to emerge before the end. This Mahdi, descended from the prophet, will right wrongs, liberate the oppressed, defeat Islam’s enemies, and spread peace and justice in the world. But, the Mahdi is a lightning rod of contention between Sunni and Shia. For the latter, he is an actual historical leader of their community, now hidden in heaven awaiting his return, and he is an infallible and quasi-supernatural figure. Typically, a primary target of his retribution will be the oppressive Sunni rulers! In this article, however, we set aside many complications and focus on a simplified Sunni view of the last days (before the resurrection); with particular interest in the Islamic idea of the second coming of Jesus.

Building Blocks of Eschatology: Quran and Hadith

The starting point for the construction of the Muslim apocalypse (story of the last days before the end) lies in two sources, the Quran and the Hadith. While the Quran is generally not considered an apocalypse in the literary sense, its content seems to reflect an apocalyptic atmosphere: notions like judgment, cataclysm, signs of the end,³ resurrection, and reward and punishment resound (sometimes with skin-crawling immediacy) in its pages.

The Quran’s is a pointedly eschatological message. However, the Quran is also famously allusive and ambiguous in its style, and, with respect to the final days of history, it contains very little narrative, contextualization, or even a clear cast of characters. Some of the central components of the traditional Muslim story of the last days are nowhere to be found in the Quran, or at best, can only be discovered in its pages through the creative exegesis of Muslim commentators. So, for example, one will find no direct and clear reference to such critical latter-days figures like the Mahdi or the Dajjal (the Muslim Antichrist). Jesus, of course, does enjoy some prominence in the Quran, but when it comes to his role in the end-times story (prior to the Islamic judgment

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Until All Have Heard

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? – Romans 10:14

Mark Brink

International Director
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Reaching Muslim Peoples



Recently a colleague and I landed at the Manila airport, exited the arrival hall and booked a taxi to our hotel. The taxi driver proudly told us that he has three children, all attending costly private schools. He was committed to do whatever was necessary to secure for them a better future. We asked how many hours he worked per day and he exclaimed “It is a 24-hour job!” He went on to tell us that he had been driving a taxi for 14 years, many of those on the southern island of Mindanao, a heavily Muslim-populated area that continues to experience great unrest. “In fact,” he said, “Some of the areas of Mindanao are so dangerous that taxi companies will not provide service.”

His words reminded me of a Filipino pastor. Peter (pseudonym) moved from the north Philippines, a predominantly Christian area, to Mindanao. His new ministry is on a plantation in the heart of the island – the very area where much Islamic unrest is taking place. It both convicted and encouraged me to realize that while a taxi company would not serve these areas, Peter and his family *volunteered* to move there. They have chosen the path of “intentional vulnerability” – even danger – so that Muslims in Mindanao may have the opportunity to hear the plan of salvation.

Peter is just one example of thousands of national church workers who have been trained in our *Institutes for Islamic Studies* programs in many countries. These friends are now taking the gospel to unreached Muslim people groups around the world. Many of the places they go are dangerous, but the love of Christ compels them to be obedient to the call to carry the message of hope. They do not abandon the call to ministry to Muslims simply because the task is difficult.

As Jesus was giving instructions to His disciples He commanded them, “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Fredrick Bruner states about this passage “Trouble, suffering, problems - these are to discipleship what water is to fish, discipleship’s environment. Trouble is the habitat of Christian work. It was not an accident or coincidence that the disciples faced trouble and persecution. It was part of Jesus’ plan. In the Greek Jesus’ emphatic ‘Look, I myself am sending you’ (*idou ego apos-*

tello hymas) means that his mission of sheep to wolves is not a mistake; it is the way the true God works. It is the way of intentional vulnerability.” (Frederick Bruner. *Matthew: A Commentary*. Vol. 1: The Christbook, 2007)

Please join us in interceding for faithful workers like Peter and his family. They deserve to know that we appreciate their unwavering commitment to the task of letting every Muslim know the truth about Jesus Christ – especially in very dangerous places.





Muslim World News

Coptic Boy, 16, Murdered on Holy Thursday

Egypt

Gamal Gabriel, 16, was murdered on Holy Thursday, April 13, four days after two churches were bombed. Gabriel was killed by Islamic extremists hoping to further intimidate Christians in the run up to Easter, says his family.

Allam Bashay Gabriel found his 16-year-old son, Gamal, with his throat slit and lying in a pool of blood, in Qai village, Upper Egypt. In February, the Islamic State said it wanted to “wipe out” Egypt’s Copts. A spate of killings of Copts then followed in the North Sinai Governorate, leading to an exodus of Copts from the main town there, El-Arish.

“The way he was killed is the way of Daesh [IS], as they are the only ones who slaughter people like that,” said Allam Gabriel. “They slaughtered my son because of his faith in Jesus Christ.” – *World Watch Monitor*

Blasphemy Lynching

Pakistan

Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, has urged his countrymen to collectively condemn the lynching of a Muslim student killed for allegedly posting “blasphemous” content on Facebook. Mashal Khan, 23, was reportedly “stripped, beaten, shot, and thrown from the second floor” of the Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan, northern Pakistan, on April 13.

Thirteen people, including university employees, have been arrested in connection with his murder, according to a local police officer. “Some employees of Abdul Wali Khan University could be seen among the mob, which has given the investigation a new direction for the time being,” said

District Police Officer Mian Saeed. The Deputy Inspector General of Police, Mohammad Alam Shinwari, added that the mob “wanted to burn his body, before police intervened”. – *World Watch Monitor*

Christian Leader Fatally Stabbed

Sudan

A Sudanese Christian was killed earlier this week while participating in a peaceful protest against the government’s attempted appropriation of a Christian school.

Younan Abdulla, part of the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SEPC), was participating in the three-day protest, after the government-linked committee in 2016 authorised the sale of the land on which the school is situated, without the school’s consent.

A second church member, Ayoub Kumama, also suffered stab wounds. According to reports, around 20 people armed with knives and other weapons attacked the protestors, some of whom are thought to be linked to the committee, which was set up in contravention of Sudanese law. Police made one arrest. – *World Watch Monitor*

Three More Churches Closed

Indonesia

Indonesian authorities in Bogor, West Java, have banned three churches from holding religious activities. According to *UCANews* the Methodist Church Indonesia, Huria Batak Protestant Church and a house used by Catholics for catechism classes were ordered to close their doors. Local authorities said they could not guarantee the safety of the communities. – *World Watch Monitor*

Jesus in the Last Days

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day), one finds but passing reference.⁴ Yes, eschatology — looming judgment and reward—stands out front-and-center in the Quran. But, when it comes to the narrative of the last days of history, the Quran’s contribution is rather modest.

The primary resource for the Apocalypse is the Hadith literature. The Hadith are reports said to be handed down from Muhammad by a chain of transmitters. These reports or traditions allegedly preserve words, actions, stories, and prophecies directly from Muhammad. In the first two-to-three centuries of Islam, famous Sunni scholars sifted through hundreds of thousands of traditions to screen out fabrications so that only reliable and sound ones would remain.⁵ Six different multi-volume books of Sunni Hadith rose to a quasi-canonical prominence which they still have today. As a collection of what Muhammad said and did, the Hadith are supposed to form the *Sunnah*, the model path or way-of-life that Allah has established for the Muslim. Thus, the authoritative collections of Hadith form the second source of authority in Islam, just after the Quran.

Within the Hadith, one will find substantial sections containing Muhammad’s prophecies and depictions of the last days. Given that there are hundreds of apocalyptic hadiths to sift through, and given that many traditions do not harmonize readily, it is little surprise that no universally-acknowledged source provides the seamless “last word” on the last days of earth. As Muslim scholars studied, compared, and compiled the large collections of apocalyptic hadiths, a vague consensus arose about the expected sequence of latter-day events.⁶

Context and Content of the Apocalyptic Hadith

Themes and elements throughout the apocalyptic hadiths connect them to very particular external contexts — Jewish and Christian ideas about the end, are one example. There is considerable overlap between these Muslim traditions and biblical and post-biblical apocalyptic writings. In the Islamic latter-days panoply one will encounter Jesus and other messianic figures, an Antichrist figure, apocalyptic battles, cataclysms and portents in nature, events in the Holy Land, Gog and Magog, and so on. This is not to say, of course, that the Islamic versions of these entities are in harmony with the relevant Jewish and Christian texts—at times the contradictions are explicit and intentional.

The first two centuries of the Islamic empire witnessed much turmoil and conflict, both internal and external.⁷ This

is another context of the apocalyptic hadiths. The conflicts of early Muslim history provide many images and themes for the eschatological traditions. These include battles with Turkic tribes and with the Byzantines; intra-Muslim civil wars and violent changes of dynasty; theological and political struggles with heretical Muslim groups, and so on.

All these elements, whether biblical or contemporary-historical, are taken up into the Hadith and processed as predictions by Muhammad of the ultimate end of human history. Then, the hadiths become a rich source of speculation and expectation to be used and reinterpreted from generation to generation. So, for example, some famous apocalyptic hadiths that are rooted in events of the eighth century contain elements that are being emphasized once again in our day by radical groups like the so-called Islamic State.⁷

A Timeline of the End Days

Relying on the traditional narratives and prophecies, we present here one possible sequencing of the Islamic latter-day timeline:

- A period of moral decay, loss of piety, and increased conflict and heresy within the Muslim community (wealth increases, tall buildings are erected, sexual perversion proliferates, women rise to prominence, the Kaaba in Mecca is burned, etc.)
- Signs and portents in nature (events in the heavens, plagues, famine, fires, metamorphosis, etc.)
- The Mahdi arrives and leads Muslim armies to victory and rules with justice
- A Muslim alliance with Byzantium (reinterpreted today as “the West”?) collapses, and the Muslims prevail, conquering Constantinople
- The “Islamic peace” prevailing in the world is disrupted by the rise of the Antichrist, or Dajjal - the false messiah
- The Dajjal/Antichrist devastates his enemies, offers false peace, and brings both miracles and temptations, claiming to be a Muslim; he has divine pretensions; he is one-eyed and is marked on his forehead as an infidel; his followers include Jews, heretics, women, and other marginal groups
- Jesus returns from heaven to rescue the Muslims severely threatened by the Dajjal
- Jesus defeats the Dajjal in the Holy Land (which is perhaps the seat of the Mahdi’s rule as well)
- Jesus rules the world according to the pattern of Muhammad, pigs and crosses are eliminated, and non-Muslims must convert to Islam or die

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- Gog and Magog (bizarre quasi-human creatures) run rampant on the earth, until Allah intervenes to save the world from this scourge

- The earth under Jesus (as also the Mahdi) is verdant and peaceful; children are safe from predatory beasts (reminiscent of Isaiah's vision); and pomegranates are so large a family can live in their husks

- Jesus marries, dies, and is buried in Medina, awaiting the general resurrection

- The world goes into a tailspin of moral decay; "good souls" are raptured out of it

- On the day that the sun rises in the west, each one's doom is sealed: judgment has come and there is no further scope for repentance

- Trumpets are sounded, all die, the earth is transformed and washed clean, and a mysterious rain comes down; then...

- All are raised naked, standing together (for a "day", perhaps 50,000 days long by our reckoning!) awaiting a terrifying audience before Allah the judge

- In painful detail, all are justly judged (though Allah's inscrutable will can never be presumed upon)

- Each one finds his fate in the fire or paradise (with gruesome or pleasurable consequences)

Signs of the Hour and the Return of Jesus

Signs of the Hour are a major element of latter-days eschatology; critical historical events have been predicted by the prophet, and when the faithful Muslim sees these things occurring, it is a sign that the last days are fast unfolding! At various points in Islamic history, the occurrence of events resembling apocalyptic signs has triggered political disturbance, massacres, or other frantic responses.

Over the course of time, Muslims have come to designate some signs as "greater" and others as "lesser," though there is not total precision as to which signs fall into which list. Typically, the lesser signs of the hour relate to social degradation and religious corruption. They may also include unrestrained violence, a pelting of meteorites, famines, a fire in the Arabian Peninsula visible in Syria, sexual excess, extreme wealth, and so on. The greater signs are often presented in the traditions in groups of six or ten. Some of the most common of these greater signs are the coming of the Mahdi, the Dajjal, the descent of Jesus from heaven, Gog and Magog, the disappearance of knowledge of the Quran, and (finally) the sun rising in the West, among others.

The return of Jesus in the end times is certainly one of the major signs of the hour. There are a multitude of hadiths on Jesus' "return," a return which is more properly called his descent (from heaven). In Islamic theology, the Quran is interpreted through hadiths to teach that, in his first mission on earth, Jesus the prophet was raptured up to heaven, escaping death on the cross at the hands of the Jews (Surah 4:157-159). He waits in paradise with Allah to return to earth for the final phase of his mission — as depicted in the apocalyptic hadiths. A variety of hadiths about Jesus are brought together to connect the stories of his escaping crucifixion to stories of his triumphant abolishing of the cross upon his return, and, at the same time, to interpret ambiguous and debatable passages in the Quran. In this way, hadiths about the apocalyptic Jesus support specifically *Islamic* concepts about Jesus and Allah, about salvation and human destiny.

In a highly-simplified summary, this is a possible storyline of the Muslim Christ's return: The handsome Jesus descends from heaven to Damascus' east; his head appears to be wet; he joins the Muslim warriors, praying with them behind the current imam, probably the Mahdi. (The matter of leading the army in Islamic prayers is a key issue in the hadiths; usually, the greater figure, Jesus, is shown to yield in this issue, with the imam leading the prayers.⁹) In an epic battle with the Dajjal and his forces, even trees and rocks are given voice to alert the Muslim warriors to Jews or other infidel enemies hiding behind them. Jesus leads the Muslims to victory, spearing the Dajjal.

All vestiges of anything other than Islam are removed from the world, especially "Christian" accouterments—pigs and crosses are destroyed. Non-Muslims have the choice of conversion or death. The epic and destructive onslaught of the beast-like hordes of Gog and Magog soon follows; only Allah is able to save Jesus and the Muslims from this peril. Jesus presides over worldwide peace and superabundance, universally enforcing Muhammad's law. After a resplendent rule¹⁰ (and marrying and having children), Jesus dies as all humans must. He is buried next to Muhammad in Medina, awaiting the imminent resurrection to judgment.

Apocalyptic Jesus of Islam/Rejection of Christology

The Islamic return-of-Jesus traditions bear some resemblance to New Testament expectations about the second coming: A resplendent, conquering Jesus suddenly returns to

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rescue his people, to vanquish evil, to judge the world, and to preside over a prosperous, peaceful reign. However, these surface similarities mask a deeper contrast and shocking divergence between the Muslim and Christian narratives. Frequently, apocalyptic texts are deployed as the sharp edge of inter-religious polemic: these narratives about the future are intended to make a statement about the faithful and the infidel, the true and the false faith communities, today. In many ways, the Sunni apocalypse is intended to criticize all other contenders, and to put other groups “in their place”.

It is most important to note the way the apocalyptic traditions about Jesus delegitimize the profile of Jesus in the New Testament: the latter-days Jesus of Islam comes as a massive demotion of Jesus, the crucified and reigning Son. Of course, there is the basic matter of “whose side” Jesus is on. Obviously enough, he comes to fight for the Muslims against all others, and in the end Christians will convert or perish. It is not inconsequential symbolism that Jesus “breaks the crosses”; as we saw, the Muslim Jesus is the Messiah who returns from heaven *after having been raptured away to escape dying on the cross*. The cross, the glory and redemptive hope of the Christian, has ever been an offense to human pride and religious piety (1 Cor. 1:18-2.5). The Islamic descent of Jesus is an emphatic assertion of a cross-less theology.

For all the prestige of the Muslim Jesus, his status is fatally limited from a Christian perspective. Remember, for example, the matter of the prayers behind the Mahdi. Note too that Jesus’ coming rule is according to the law brought by Muhammad. He lives out his mortal life, marries, and dies. He wins military battles for Islam, but he is not the redeeming Lord (Mt. 25:31f.; Jn. 5:25-29; Rom. 2:16; Rev. 22:7-20); no possessor of an indestructible life (Heb. 7:16). He is no pioneer of salvation (Heb. 2:10; 12:2); he simply awaits resurrection and judgment along with the rest of humanity. Yes, for Islam, as a sinless prophet, Jesus will gain paradise, but he is certainly not the adored King sharing the throne with the Father (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Rev. 7:17; 22:1). In fact, in terms of the later judgment before the throne, several hadiths imply that *none but Muhammad* will intercede before Allah, not even Jesus. This is a far cry from the reigning Lord who even now intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25).

The Christian yearning for Jesus’ return is indeed a longing for God himself, for our (re)union with him. The paradox

of the incarnation is, I am convinced, the only hope of the world — our God became one of us to raise us to himself. But, in Islam, this cannot be! It would be an intolerable violation of core doctrine, of *tawhid* (Islamic-style monotheism). And thus, sadly, in the Muslim apocalypse Jesus is radically limited to the category of creature. From so many angles the polemical theology of the Sunni apocalypse dethrones the risen Jesus of the Gospels. In the New Testament, our salvation in Christ is tied to the fact of His divine status, for only God saves. But, the Muslim Jesus is not the Savior, not God-with-us. We have no cross of Christ. No Immanuel. No Son of God. And at the end of the story, no Christian community, no body of Messiah remains.

Yes, the Descent of Jesus is a major sign of the hour in Islamic eschatology. But, this second coming is at best, penultimate. For Islam, Jesus-with-us is not *the* blessed hope (Tit. 2:13). In Islam, the hopes, purposes, and designs of Allah for humanity simply do not find their ultimate fulfillment in the return of Jesus.

There are multiple fascinating elements to Islamic eschatology; and, yes, there are interesting parallels with biblical expectation. But, for me, the greatest lessons come in the *contrasts* between Christian and Muslim expectations about Jesus. For us as Christians, it is my hope that comparative study of these two “Jesuses” results in our being ever more enamored with the splendor of our Lord; and in loving Him, may we love those He loves—not least the people of the Muslim world. *Maranatha!*

1 Due to the limits of space, many points in this essay are over-simplified, and no bibliography is provided.

2 Here we mean primarily things pertaining to the last days of history before the resurrection to judgment.

3 Cf. Quran 47:18.

4 Cf. Quran 43:61.

5 Many Western scholars are quite skeptical about the historical reliability of these traditions.

6 To the chagrin of traditional Muslim scholars, there are also popular apocalyptic writers who construct a “last-days scenario” using not only “sound” traditions but also “dubious” ones, alongside speculation, conspiracy theories, and even popular Christian eschatological writings.

7 Some Western scholars suggest the contents of many Hadith actually pertain to the first couple of centuries after Muhammad, and that the Hadith originated after the prophet’s day and were then attributed to him.

8 For example, “black flags” appearing in the East, or terms like ‘Amaq and Dabiq.

9 Note that one tactic of Muslim debate is to point to Jesus’ praying as proof that he could in no way be divine.

10 For a “generation,” seven years, or some other period of time.



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Friday, July 7, 2017. Please pray for

...*Coptic and other Christians in Egypt* who have suffered bombings and other atrocities in recent months.
...*Ali (pseudonym), a new believer from a Muslim background in Bosnia-Herzegovina.* Ali's family and friends do not know about his decision to follow Christ. Of Bosnia-Herzegovina's population of 3.7 million, 50.5% are Muslim.
...*Summer Institute of Islamic Studies* equipping classes in Missouri USA during July 10-14.

Friday, July 14, 2017. Please pray for

...*Algerian Christians* who often share their faith with Muslim neighbors, despite the possibility of imprisonment. There are approximately 80,000 Christians, mostly Berbers, in 99% Muslim Algeria.
...*thousands of Muslim refugees in Europe* who have decided to follow Jesus. Ask the Lord to give wisdom to churches and ministries who are offering compassionate care.
...*fruit to come from recent training seminars* in a country in the Caucasus region, a predominately Muslim part of the world. Fifty participants came from several countries.

Friday, July 21, 2017. Please pray for

...*Christians and Muslims caught in the crossfire* of the 6-year war in Syria. Months ago, following a bombardment in Aleppo, a medical doctor stated "Today was a taste of hell..."
...*state-sponsored Muslim security guards* who monitor Christians in Turkmenistan; that they will observe "Christ in the Christians." Of Turkmenistan's population of 5 million, 94.7% are Muslim.
...*Muslim students who attend Christian schools* in Lebanon to experience the truth about Jesus and hunger to know Him.

Friday, July 28, 2017. Please pray for

...*Mustapha (pseudonym) in the Arabian Gulf.* He has read Scripture portions and recently attended a home cell group. The Scripture is piercing his heart; pray for him to "surrender to Christ."
...*victory over spiritual forces of evil* that prevent so many Muslims from recognizing that truth and freedom are found only in Christ.
...*Muslim inmates in Turkish prisons* who are being reached with Bible correspondence courses.

*I urge, then, first of all that requests, prayers, intercession and
thanksgiving be made for everyone. – 1 Timothy 2:1, NIV*



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Friday, Aug. 4, 2017. Please pray for

...100,000 Iranians, mostly Shia Muslims, in the Dallas, Texas USA area, many of whom have recently arrived.
...Albanian Bible School students who are engaged in church planting efforts in predominately Muslim areas.
...for Sulieman (pseudonym) in Somalia, a convert from Islam. His wife and one of his children were recently killed by Al-Shabaab terrorists because as converts to Christ they had “defiled Islam.”

Friday, Aug. 11, 2017. Please pray for

...the rising influence of Turkish Muslims in Romania. For example, the city of Medgidia is now 20% Muslim and two-thirds of the leaders of the city are Muslim.
...increasing maturity in the lives of the small number of believers in the country of Qatar in the Arabian Peninsula. Of Qatar’s population of 2.1 million, 87% are Muslim.
...the Word of God to flourish in the The Maldives. The Bible is considered contraband under Maldivian law. Of The Maldives’ population of 365,000, 98% are Muslim.

Friday, Aug. 18, 2017. Please pray for

...Christians in Aceh, Indonesia, who live under sharia law. Of Indonesia’s population of 257 million, 82% are Muslim.
...believers in Sudan. In spite of being intimidated by Islamic sharia law, believers are sharing Christ with their Muslim neighbors. Of Sudan’s population of 41 million, 90% are Muslim.
...23 million Muslim Fulani nomads spread over several countries in West Africa and the Sahel region of Africa.

Friday, Aug. 25, 2017. Please pray for

...the estimated 1,000 Christians who live in the Gaza Strip of Palestine alongside over 1.7 million Muslims. Hamas, an Islamist group, has introduced elements of sharia law.
...thousands of brothers and sisters in Iran, especially those who have converted from Islam. Of Iran’s population of 80 million, 98.5% are Muslim.
...ethnic Kyrgyz converts from Islam facing pressure from their families to deny their faith, which is seen as betraying their Kyrgyz identity. Of Kyrgyzstan’s population of 6 million, 87% are Muslim.

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