

Book Review: The Camel

The Camel: How Muslims Are Coming to Faith in Christ

By Kevin Greeson, [WIGTake Resources](#), 2007. 210 pages. \$18.95

Reviewed by Doug Coleman

According to Kevin Greeson, an IMB missionary in South Asia, God is doing a new thing, evidenced by unprecedented numbers of Muslims in a particular South Asian country dramatically turning to Christ. Reportedly one of the key elements in this movement is the CAMEL, a method of using Qur'anic testimony about Jesus to bridge to the New Testament. The concept of Qur'anic bridging is not new, as those familiar with mission efforts to Muslims know. Yet the publication of Greeson's *Camel Training Manual* in 2004 has generated great excitement about this movement and the CAMEL's supposed role in it among mission personnel and Christians in the United States. One missionary to the Arab world calls the CAMEL the closest thing there is to a "magic bullet" for Muslim evangelism (13). Greeson published a revision in 2007 under the title *The Camel: How Muslims are Coming to Faith in Christ*, and the method continues to enjoy widespread popularity. Yet other than on a few blog sites, the CAMEL has received little critical analysis.

WHAT IS THE CAMEL?

Greeson claims to have learned the method from Muslim-background believers, examined it against the authority of the Bible, and found it to be a powerful tool for reaching Muslims everywhere. He is careful to note that the CAMEL's purpose is not to lead a Muslim to Christ from the Qur'an, rather to elevate Jesus using the Qur'an, draw out the person of peace, and bridge to the New Testament. By asking the Muslim a series of questions related to *surah* 3:42–55, the CAMEL seeks to emphasize three main points: 1) Isa is holy, 2) Isa has power over death, and 3) Isa knows and is the way to heaven. Greeson provides a helpful acrostic for remembering the content of the method:

C – Chosen (Maryam, or Mary, was chosen by Allah for a special purpose.)

A – Announced by Angels (Angels announced the birth of the Messiah to Maryam.)

M – Miracles (Jesus' power is revealed in his miracles.)

EL – Eternal Life (Jesus knows the way and is the way to heaven.)

Obviously, this acrostic is one of the sources for the method's name, the other being the legend that only the camel knows the one-hundredth name of Allah.

STRENGTHS OF THE CAMEL

Before noting some serious concerns with the method, I would like to commend several aspects of Greeson's work. First, the book's autobiographical anecdotes reveal his deep passion for seeing Muslims come to Christ. Second, Greeson affirms the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and acknowledges critical differences with the Qur'an. He also holds to the exclusivity of Christ, agreeing that salvation is found in him alone. Further, Greeson attempts to treat the Muslim context seriously, recognizing the primacy of the Qur'an for Muslims, the serious barriers to conversion, and many of the challenges involved in communicating the gospel to them. Finally, Greeson appears to seek biblical warrant for the CAMEL, finding precedent in Paul's ministry among both Jews and Gentiles. Some, including myself, find his conclusions about biblical warrant unconvincing, but his stated intentions are admirable.

THE CAMEL DRAWS WRONG COMPARISONS TO PAUL'S METHODOLOGY

One of my basic concerns with the CAMEL is Greeson's appeal to Paul's methodology among both Jews and pagans in order to justify making a bridge from the Qur'an to the New Testament. As Greeson points out, Paul often visited synagogues and reasoned with the Jews from their scriptures, the Old Testament. The dispute between Paul and the Jews, however, did not concern the *inspiration* of the Old Testament, but its *interpretation*. Evangelical Christians strongly affirm the Old Testament's inspiration, not the Qur'an's. As such, Paul's appeal to the Old Testament is hardly the same thing as any Christian appeal to the Qur'an.

Regarding this difference Greeson states, "Of course, Muslims are not Jews, and the Qu'ran is not the Old Testament, but the value of exalting Christ through the scriptures sacred to those we are trying to reach has a similarly powerful effect today" (Greeson 2007, 99). Greeson admits this critical difference, in other words, but he dismisses it based on pragmatic results, or "powerful effect."

Like others, Greeson also cites Paul's method at the Areopagus to justify Qur'anic bridging. Clearly Paul seeks a bridge to his audience. However, his method differs significantly from that of the CAMEL. First, Paul primarily concerns himself with correcting his audience's errors rather than affirming or augmenting their beliefs or practices. His main purpose for noting their altar to the unknown god is to demonstrate that idolatry is inconsistent with general revelation. In other words, the Athenians' problem is not ignorance but their failure to worship the God of creation rather than idols. To further demonstrate their rebellion, Paul quotes their own poets as witnesses against them.

Three issues are particularly important here. First, rather than affirming the Athenians' philosophical systems, as the CAMEL does with critical points of the Qur'an, Paul employs their own poets as a means of demonstrating their comprehension of general revelation. He doesn't treat the poets as a *theological* starting point, or as a basis for Christian teaching or doctrine.[1] In other words, Paul does not find truth—other than general revelation—in these poets and affirm it as a bridge to more truth.

Second, Paul's manner of referencing these poets is significant. He introduces his quote with the phrase "as even some of your own poets have said." [2] With the words "your own," Paul distances himself from the poets and their systems. By employing the modifier "even," Paul seems to indicate astonishment likely resulting from the incongruity between the quotations and the Athenians' idolatrous practices. It seems that Paul does not intend to affirm Stoicism or Epicureanism, but rather strongly critique them.

The manner of Greeson's appeal to the Qu'ran is paradigmatically different than Paul's appeal to the pagan poets. The CAMEL repeatedly suggests using an unqualified reference, beginning with such phrases as "According to the Qur'an...", or "The Qur'an says...", as if the Qur'an were a legitimate authority in its own right. Particularly troubling is one of Greeson's recommended questions for initiating conversation with Muslims: "I have been reading the Qur'an and have discovered an amazing truth that gives hope of eternal life in heaven. Would you open your Qur'an to *surah al-Imran* 3:42–55 so we can talk about it?" (Greeson 2007, 106) Such a question implies that "hope of eternal life in heaven" can indeed be found in the authoritative Qur'an. Not only will this create possible confusion regarding true authority on matters of salvation, but it also seems likely to raise questions of honesty and deception in the hearer's mind if we later uphold the Bible as God's unique revelation. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine Paul inviting his

Athenian audience to open Aratus' poem for discussion because it "gives hope of eternal life in heaven."

Third, the Qur'an occupies the place of ultimate authority for Muslims, as anyone generally acquainted with Islam is aware. While the pagan poets might have served as sources of inspiration and guidance for the Athenians, it is difficult to conceive of any role for them remotely analogous to the Qur'an's role for Muslims. The New Testament never portrays Paul quoting any pagan source that claimed to be special revelation, such as the oracles (Schlorff 1984, 160). While the Areopagus event provides insight into Paul's method of establishing contact with a pagan audience, it does not justify an unqualified appeal to the Qur'an among Muslims.

THE CAMEL APPEALS TO UNRELIABLE SOURCES OF TRUTH

Another troubling aspect of the CAMEL is that it appeals to unreliable sources of truth. For instance, the CAMEL introduces confusion in its handling of apocryphal material found in the Qur'an. In *surah* 3:49 the Qur'an mentions several miracles of Jesus, the first of which depicts him breathing life into a bird formed from dust. Greeson acknowledges that this story originates from the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, yet states, "You might say, 'Isn't it interesting that this story says Isa created life out of the dust by breathing life into it? How did Allah create man?' Your Muslim friend may recall that Allah formed man from the dust of the earth and then breathed His life into man. 'According to the Qur'an,' you can say, 'Isa was able to do the same thing by breathing life into birds made of dust. Isa had the power to create life.' Then follow with, 'Do you know of any other prophets who had this power to create life?'" (Greeson 2007, 135)

Greeson clearly rejects the apocryphal account yet encourages employing it, not simply as a point of contact, but as a theological starting point—a basis for Christian doctrine—with the aim of establishing ontological truths about Christ. It is certainly true that Jesus could have breathed life into birds made from dust. Such power would also seem to indicate something special about him. However, affirming a truth based on an apocryphal account repeated in the Qur'an—without reference to the Bible—raises two problems. First, this would give a Muslim listener the impression that we consider this account historical and reliable, which raises questions about the integrity of our witness. Second, this seems to ground truth claims about Christ in unreliable sources rather than explicitly in Scripture. The Qur'an and other extra-biblical sources may contain true statements about Jesus (such as affirming his virgin birth), but their reliability and accuracy can only be established from the Bible. Clarity on the issue of God's standard of authority—the Bible—is necessary in order for believers to be able to discern truth from error.

THE CAMEL GIVES AN OVERLY POSITIVE EVALUATION OF THE QUR'AN

Another problem with the CAMEL method is that it seems to rely on an overly positive evaluation of the Qur'an. Greeson obviously sees much that is commendable in the Qur'an and believes that it contains "enough flickers of truth to draw out God's person of peace" (Greeson 2007, 102). For example, he writes: After reading *surah al-Imran* 3:42–55 and listening to you explain it, no Muslim will be able to honestly say that Isa was merely a prophet. From the text of his own Qur'an, he will see that Isa is far more than a prophet. Offering spiritual food will draw out a seeker who is spiritually hungry. *Surah al-Imran* 3:42–55 attests to divine attributes of Isa that no Muslim can deny. From this passage in the Qur'an he will see that Isa is holy, and all powerful, and can show us the way to heaven. Thoroughly discussing this passage will most likely trigger something in the heart of a Muslim who is already under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. (Greeson 2007, 103)

Granted, Greeson acknowledges some of the critical differences between the Qur'an and the New Testament, including the Qur'an's rejection of the Trinity and its inadequate teaching regarding salvation. These acknowledgements are commendable. Yet he neglects to discuss their implications for our approach to Islam in general and the CAMEL in particular.

Regarding the divinity of Christ, the CAMEL sends contradictory messages. On one hand, Greeson instructs his readers, "Your goal here is not to prove Christ's divinity through the Qur'an. The Qur'an is incapable of doing that; instead, you want to show that Isa's close association with Allah reveals Isa's unequalled holiness" (Greeson 2007, 132). While this contains an implied contradiction (does not Isa's close association with Allah and unequalled holiness imply his divinity?), other statements more clearly illustrate the problem. For example, Muslim interpretations notwithstanding, Greeson claims that *surah* 4:171 bears testimony of Jesus' divinity and exalts him above every other "prophet" in the Qur'an (Greeson 2007, 131). Again, the CAMEL here employs certain passages in the Qur'an that resemble biblical teaching as unqualified theological starting points and seeks to build on those to establish ontological truths about Jesus.

THE CAMEL IMPOSES A FAULTY HERMENEUTIC ON THE QUR'AN

The CAMEL also employs a faulty hermeneutic of the Qur'an.[3] Essentially, this hermeneutic involves appealing to affinities with the Bible as a basis for eisegeting Christian meanings into the Qur'an. Such an approach leaves the CAMEL practitioner open to charges of ignorance or deception. Like Christians, Muslims possess a long history of exegetical and theological tradition. This tradition rejects many, if not all, of the interpretations suggested or implied by the CAMEL method. If the CAMEL practitioner employs these Christian interpretations due to unfamiliarity with Muslim traditions, he operates from ignorance. If he willfully ignores this exegetical tradition and proposes Christian interpretations, he leaves himself open to the charge of deception.

There are several places that Greeson does this. Let's consider his interpretation and use of the terms *kalimatullah* (word of Allah) and *ruhullah* (spirit of Allah) as an example of his flawed Qur'anic hermeneutic (Greeson 2007, 130–32). Greeson nowhere instructs his readers to state emphatically that these words imply Jesus' deity, yet he clearly interprets them as compatible with Christian concepts. He writes, "Point out that the Word and Spirit of Allah are part of Allah Himself. Just as you cannot remove a person's breath or spirit without destroying that person, so too, Allah's breath and spirit are part of Him" (Greeson 2007, 131). Greeson then instructs his readers to reference *surah* 4:171 which states, "Speak the truth; the Messiah, Isa son of Maryam is only an apostle of Allah and His Word which he communicated to Maryam and a spirit from him." Greeson acknowledges the Qur'an's intent to deny Jesus' divinity in this verse but continues, "What is useful as a bridge is the way *Christ's divinity still shines through*, as Isa is called a Spirit from Allah, *a testimony to His divinity* that is not shared by any other prophet in the Qur'an" (Greeson 2007, 131, emphasis mine). The unspoken claim, of course, is that when interpreted correctly, the Qur'an implies, supports, or is compatible with biblical Christology.

While some non-Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an may agree with Greeson, Muslim commentators would beg to differ. For example, Muslims understand the term "word" as referring to Jesus' creation or birth, not his person, and strongly deny any implications of deity (Ali 1993, 239). Furthermore, they do not consider these terms to be exclusive to Jesus but claim that other Qur'anic prophets may be considered a word or spirit from Allah as well (Naik). Also, non-Muslim writers recognize the drastic difference between Islam and Christianity on these points (Robinson 2003, 13–15).

This Christian hermeneutic of the Qur'an is deeply problematic for at least two reasons. First, interpreting Qur'anic data regarding Jesus with Christian meanings encourages a Muslim to continue approaching Qur'anic terminology and concepts as a theological starting point. In other words, giving Qur'anic data *biblical meaning* leads one to concentrate on theological similarities between the Bible and Qur'an—which in reality do not exist. Shouldn't one rather use similar terminology between the two books as a springboard for discussing the Christian meaning?

Second, this hermeneutic encourages a "fulfillment" approach to Islam. It affirms, implicitly or explicitly, much of what exists in the Qur'an and then seeks to expand it rather than transform it. However, if the Muslim understanding of Jesus is in fact radically different from biblical Christology, it seems that a Christian evangelist should seek to displace, not fulfill, what the Qur'an says. Paul was not interested in expanding or fulfilling Epicureanism and Stoicism but uprooting and replacing them.

Perhaps the ultimate question regarding this flawed hermeneutic concerns the issue of authoritative interpretation. Christians who have interacted with Islam to any significant degree are familiar with Muslim claims that the Bible prophesies Muhammad's coming. We often find these Muslim readings of Muhammad in the Bible offensive and conclude that presupposition, not exegesis, drives Muslims to their interpretation. However, CAMEL proponents often fail to see the same fault in their own hermeneutic of the Qur'an. Schlorff sums up the issue well: "Surely, if we who are evangelicals hold the principle that the Bible is its own interpreter and the final judge of the validity of every system of hermeneutics, so we must allow the Qur'an to be its own interpreter and the final judge of validity of every system of Qur'anic interpretation. When we do this we find that its tantalizing 'Christian potential' is only a mirage" (Schlorff 1980, 147).

IF NOT THE CAMEL, WHAT?

It's probably not possible or advisable to completely avoid the Qur'an when witnessing to Muslims. Therefore, it may be helpful to propose a few principles for referencing the Qur'an with Muslims. First, the terminology of the Qur'an may provide points of contact for discussing truth with Muslims. The Qur'an mentions a number of the Old Testament prophets, uses familiar terminology for Jesus, and refers to the "before books." The important issue here, however, is to avoid using these terms as theological starting points. In other words, missionaries must recognize the vast semantic differences between the biblical and Qur'anic terms and avoid unqualified use in conversation.

Second, like Paul in Acts 17, any appeal to the Qur'an must be qualified. Rather than simply introducing a statement with, "Well, the Qur'an says . . .," or "According to the Qur'an . . .," Christians should employ a qualifying phrase such as, "Your book states . . .," or "According to your own book. . . ." This provides a means of referencing the Qur'an while avoiding implication of authority.

Third, Christians may affirm statements in the Qur'an that are consistent with biblical truth, but should do so on the basis of biblical authority and, where necessary, attempt to communicate biblical meaning. If done sensitively, this may create opportunity for further discussion and an invitation to study the Bible. For example, if a Muslim refers to Jesus as *mesih*, a Christian may reply, "We also believe that Jesus is the messiah because the Bible teaches us so. As far as I know, your book does not explain the meaning of this term. However, it is very significant and the Bible explains in great detail what it means. Would you like to look at the Bible to see what it teaches about the messiah?" If such an offer is accepted, the door is opened for discussing a full biblical theology of the identity, nature, and purpose of the messiah. This approach utilizes common

terminology as a *conversational* and not *theological* starting point, references the Qur'an in a qualified way, affirms truth based on the teaching of Scripture rather than the Qur'an, and invites the audience to consider biblical claims. Similar approaches can be employed with other terms or concepts. However, greater attention will be necessary in cases where the Qur'an is more explicit and the degree of theological difference more pronounced. This assumes, of course, that Christians avoid the flawed hermeneutic of some bridging approaches, familiarize themselves with Qur'anic interpretation and Muslim theology, and understand particular passages in light of the entire Islamic worldview.

THAT'S NOT ALL...

Space does not permit discussion of other concerns with the CAMEL such as the potentially deceptive nature of its response to the question of Muhammad's identity, or its failure to account for fundamental theological differences between Islam and Christianity, differences which require a rejection of substitutionary atonement. Again, Greeson's zeal for proclaiming the gospel to Muslims is commendable and hopefully the reported movement in South Asia is indeed theologically sound, as he claims in his book.

Some will likely view these criticisms of the CAMEL as theological nitpicking and evidence of greater concern for orthodoxy than the salvation of souls. However, Scripture encourages us to guard both our lives *and* doctrine closely. For workers among Muslims, this means thinking critically about their methodology, particularly on the issue of Qur'anic bridging.

Doug Coleman has served among Muslims in Central Asia for about ten years.

1. For more on the difference between theological starting points and simple linguistic points of contact see Schlorff, 1984, 150–64.
2. For further discussion of the importance of this qualifier, see Stonehouse, 1957, 27–29.
3. For the history of development of this hermeneutic, see Schlorff, 1984, 107–16.

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