

If You Read This Book...

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The rumbling sound got progressively louder as we neared the two-story cement blockhouse in the diminishing light of evening. I had just finished several hours of teaching Spanish to highly motivated young adults from a mixed Berber and Arabic town of some twenty thousand souls in eastern Morocco. It was the turn this week of Mohamed, the director of the cooperative where I taught, to have me spend the night at his home before I taught another set of classes the following day prior to the hour-and-a-half drive home to my wife and daughter.

As we entered the house it became obvious that the noise was coming from one of the upstairs rooms. Mohamed explained that he lived with his two married brothers, who had married two sisters whose mother had died some years ago, and that tonight they were observing a *tolba* ceremony of Qur'an recitation with a number of neighbors. I mounted the stairs, following my host, toward the sound of the voices and came upon a dimly lit living room with nearly twenty middle-aged men in their caped *djilabas* chanting along with four leaders who, I was told, were local *faqih*s who had memorized the Qur'an in its entirety. My heart sank. When would I be able to get some rest after a long day of teaching? Was this going to be another lost opportunity for personal sharing and conversation?

Benefiting from a brief lull in the recitation, Mohamed launched into a flowery introduction of me as a member of the NGO responsible for many development projects these men would have heard about. As he continued to lavish praise on us something came over me and almost without thinking I interrupted: "All we try to do is follow the example of *Sidna Isa al Masih* (our Master Jesus the Messiah). He did good to everyone. We just try to be like him." The men were delighted! Here was a Westerner who apparently took God and the beloved Prophet Jesus seriously!

I was also quite pleased with myself until I overheard one of the *faqih*s across the room commenting to his neighbor: "You know, it's quite pointless for simple Muslims like us to try to persuade someone like this teacher, who has traveled and studied so much, about the truth of Islam. We actually just need to let people like him continue with their search and eventually they arrive,

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on their own, at the discovery of the truth and end up becoming even better Muslims than you and me!”

Was this the impression I was going to leave these new acquaintances? That I was just slowly but surely making my way from my essentially outdated Christian ignorance toward the true enlightenment of Islam? What could I do in the face of such entrenched notions? The situation seemed rather hopeless....

The ceremony continued long into that cold December night. Past ten o'clock the head *fagih* started wrapping things up so that he and his companions could receive their pay and get home for some sleep before having to lead prayers in their respective mosques an hour before sunrise the next morning. Blessings were pronounced in classical Arabic for the organizers of the event, Mohamed and his two brothers and me, their guest. It surprised me somewhat that upon concluding, the sheikh asked if I had understood what he had said in the significantly different Arabic of religious pronouncements. Not wanting to risk falling into an argument, I simply responded that yes, I had understood his blessing (i.e., that I soon embrace the truth of Islam), and thanked him for his kind wishes—he was after all wishing me the best he knew.

Then the elderly, bearded sheikh *really* surprised me: “No. Come on. Let’s be honest. Why can we believe in your Prophet and you refuse to believe in ours?” It took me a few seconds to regain my composure from the impact of such an “impolite” question on such a sensitive subject in such a public setting! How could I give an answer that would be, like my Master, full of grace and also truth?

What finally came out of my mouth was more or less the following: “Dear sir, your question is *very* important. But, it is now past ten o'clock at night and I don't think we have the time or energy to give your question the answer it deserves. However,”—at this point I went to my briefcase and took out a small green publication—“if you read this book, the next time we meet we will be able to have a very good conversation about your question!”

The book's cover read, in Arabic, *Al-Injil* and in Spanish, *El Evangelio*. It was a bilingual copy of the New Testament, employing the name for what all Muslims know is the divine revelation of “Good News” given through the Messiah Jesus, although hardly any of them have ever been able to read it. The sheikh took the *Injil*, showed it to his curious companions, thanked me and left, as did most of the other men. Four however stayed, wanting to hear even a summarized answer to the question I'd been asked.

I proceeded as follows: “My friends, the problem is this: for someone who has read and understood the *Injil*, becoming a Muslim is like going backwards.” (I noticed their bewilderment at my asserting the opposite of what they

had always heard, namely that Islam, coming after Christianity, is the next step forward in God's grand plan).

Yes, because whoever reads and understands the *Injil* discovers there that *all* the prophets and *all* the apostles give witness to the fact that, in the Messiah, God sovereignly chose to come to earth in human form, to experience what we do, and at the end of a blameless life to freely take upon himself the punishment for all our wickedness by giving his life on the cross, and on the third day resurrecting, victorious over sin and death and the devil!

So, whoever reads, understands, and believes this prophetic and apostolic witness experiences the forgiveness of his sins, has a relationship with God as his loving spiritual Father, and knows that the day he dies he will go to be with his Lord forever! Now, for someone like that to start confessing what the Qur'an says, that the Messiah is only human, that he did not die on the cross in our place, that he is not the Savior, that he cannot forgive sin, ...why, look at everything he would lose! It is *very* difficult for someone who has read, understood, and believed the *Injil* to want to become a Muslim.

To my surprise, the four men offered no objections, simply thanked me, and departed into the night.

Once I had calmed down I got to thinking that the small New Testament might make for difficult reading for the not-so-youthful *faqih*, and that at home I had a complete Bible with larger print and explanatory notes which I should try to give him. But when I asked my hosts for his name and address, no one was quite sure of either! In that large town, how would I find him again? The next morning, as I was about to enter the house of a co-worker for a morning of lesson preparation, who should be coming down the hill but the very man I was trying to find! I greeted him with a Moroccan proverb fit for the occasion: "*Sodfa absan min alf mi'ad!* (By chance is better than a thousand appointments!) I was just asking my hosts this morning about your name—they didn't know!"

"Saïd," he replied.

"*Mucharfeen* (Honored to meet you), Saïd," I responded as we kissed on the cheeks a couple of times.

"I was thinking that you will have a hard time reading the small letters of the book I gave you last night. If you are interested, I have another larger one at home that includes the *Taurat* (Torah), the *Zabur* (Psalms), and the *Injil*."

"Sure," he said, "just bring it to me at the mosque."

And that is what I did.

Some three months later when we again met "by chance," Saïd assured me he was still reading the *Kitab al-Muqadis* (the Holy Book)....

From this as well as many other interactions with Muslim friends, I've come to value the following practices:

1. Readily confess love for Jesus.
2. Work for the welfare of others but give the credit to Christ.
3. Never assume that a person who says she or he is a Muslim is uninterested in the gospel.
4. Make regular reference to the witness of the biblical prophets and apostles and invite Muslims to read the “earlier revelations” for themselves.
5. Take every opportunity to correct two common Muslim misunderstandings regarding the Christian faith:
 - a. that Christians have taken a merely human prophet (Jesus, whom Muslims also greatly admire), and elevated him to divine status, thus deifying a created being.
 - b. that Christians, like Muslims, are just trying their best to obey God's commands and to imitate their prophet in an effort to merit God's favor and earn entrance to paradise.
6. Answer questions and objections sensitively but frankly, in accordance with the apostolic instructions in 2 Timothy 2:23–25 and 1 Peter 3:15.
7. Avoid falling into arguments or attacks on Islam—focus rather on the rich blessings derived from trusting in the Messiah as Lord and Savior.