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Book Review

Ibn Taymiyyah. (n.d.). *The Correct Response for Those Who Altered the Religion of Jesus*. Ummu Al-Qura. 362 pages.

by Akeem Olayinka Kazeem¹

Introduction

This is a review of a section from an abridged and translated version of a six-volume book, *The Correct Response for Those Who Altered the Religion of Jesus*, written during pre-modern times by one of the great scholars of Islam, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263 – 1328 CE).

Ibn Taymiyyah—whose full name is Taqī al-Dīn Abu 'l-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm ibn 'Abd al-Salām Ibn Taymiya al-Ḥarrān—lived during a time when Islam faced many crises both from within and without. The crises were not only physical but also intellectual and inter-religious in nature. This particular book of his is selected for review as it provides an opportunity to learn some facts about Ibn Taymiyyah's approach to comparative religious studies and practical scholarly styles in engaging in inter-religious dialogue. This is because it is a response to a letter or treatise, a 24-page pamphlet by 'Paul The Monk' who was the Bishop of Sayda, entitled *The Logically Proven Statement that Expresses the Right Conviction and Sound Opinion*.

While the book under review was a timely response by Ibn Taymiyyah to the monk, it is an appropriate book that provides a comprehensive study dealing with refutations of the Christians' erroneous claims concerning Islam. It also addresses the contradictions that characterise many Christian beliefs, as it equally refutes their "made-up" creedal principles. The book contains discussions and analysis of issues that would be of interest to many students of comparative studies, particularly Muslims, and every truth-seeker. This is because the letter from 'Paul The Monk', to which it was responding, contained most of the excuses and pleas that are known to be employed by Christians to defend their religion and find fault with Islam. It also contains the untenable reasons they provide for why they would not accept Islam as a religion meant for the whole world, as the writer of the letter erroneously claimed the validity of his submissions.

Therefore, the objective of this review is basically to understand some of the responses Ibn Taymiyyah provided to the Christians of the period, focusing on how relevant they are to our time. More importantly, the review highlights the remarkable approaches and methods used by Ibn Taymiyyah to present his pieces of evidence and argue his points to refute the Christian's mistaken claims. It concisely highlights some of the important stylistic features of the book based on Ibn Taymiyyah's factual confrontation with and exposition of the attendant falsehoods and corrupt allegations of the Christian scholars of the time. The review indicates that Ibn Taymiyyah used textual analysis involving scriptural pieces of evidence from both the

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Qur'ān and the Bible. Besides this, it also notes that he used a historical method and employed logical and linguistic analysis, together with critical analyses involving (re)interpretive approaches.

A Summary of Chapter One of the Book

Given the size of the book (six chapters and 362 pages in its abridged form) and the many vast issues discussed therein, this review focuses only on two of the responses provided by Ibn Taymiyyah to counter and refute some erroneous claims made by the Christians of his time concerning Islam. These are found in chapter one of the book.

Chapter one is chosen because it concerns the universality of the Prophet Muḥammad's prophethood and messengership, which remain the most challenging aspect for Christians to accept. The main focus of the chapter is to disprove the Christians' allegations regarding the limited scope of the Prophet Muḥammad's message, particularly as it concerns the Christians' twisting of the pieces of evidence available not only in their Bible but also in the Qur'ān. This is because they attempted to quote certain verses as grounds for their dubious claims. They even claimed, cunningly, to show they were in no need for Islam, that Christianity is a complete way of life that is not only necessary but also sufficient for them to gain salvation. As such, they would not have to follow the Prophet Muḥammad, whom they erroneously claimed was sent only for the Arabs.

To achieve the refutation of the Christians' various claims and to debunk their unfounded pieces of evidence and false arguments, Ibn Taymiyyah discusses certain fundamental evidences of the Prophet Muḥammad's prophethood. Then, he provides the sound proof of the universality of his messengership and the fundamental basis for establishing the authenticity of his prophethood. The concept of prophethood is examined as the background to generally respond to the Christians' claim that Muḥammad was sent only to the Arabs. The author quotes some of the verses that were used by the Christians to back their wrong claims after narrating certain statements from the letter.

The following statement, for example, was taken from the text as narrated by the author: "We did not believe in this book or in that messenger for several reasons ... the first reason is that this book was revealed in Arabic and not in our mother tongue as stated in its verses" (pp. 3-4). Q12:2 and Q26:195 of the Qur'ān are two of the few verses that were actually mentioned in the letter with respect to the Arabic language as the medium of revelation; these were also captured by the author. In their mistaken argument, the Christians maintain that these verses technically mean the Qur'ān was meant only for the Arabs.

However, the author believed they had not tackled the argument of belief in or disbelief in the Qur'ān. In his words, the author said, "They only claim that it was not sent to them, but was sent to the pagan Arabs, so according to reason it cannot be sent to them" (p. 7). Refuting them, the author said, "the ways in which they seek argument in the verses of the Qur'ān are invalid" (p. 8). According to the author, this is because they could not use a book that they do not believe as a basis for argument ... it is illogical to use it as evidence whatsoever. This is a very logical approach, and it is beside the fact that there are explicit textual pieces of evidence, as the author argues, showing that the Prophet Muḥammad was sent to all mankind. Many of these verses were cited by the author both from the Qur'ān and the Bible.

Furthermore, they pointed to other verses as explicit evidence, in their view, that the Prophet Muḥammad was sent only for the Arabs, citing Q2:151 and Q3:164. Reacting to this, the author shows that "it is ... asserted in the prophetic hadith ..." (p. 11). that the Prophet was sent to all. And he also pointed out certain relevant verses from the Bible, as alluded to in the

Qur'ān, to counter their claim. That is, the author countered their claim not only from the Qur'ān but also from the Bible and hadith. This constitutes complete scriptural evidence!

Beyond logical analysis and scriptural reference, the author effectively used the historical method as well. For example, the author points out that if truly the Prophet was only sent to the Arabs, as they seemed to claim, then why did the Prophet Muḥammad call the Christians of the time, as well as the Jews, as history clearly showed. Furthermore, the author also states that there are records of Christians and Jews who not only accepted Islam but also died as Muslims. The author pointed to an earlier and well-known story of the Abyssinians and their people who accepted Islam upon receiving confirmed news about the prophethood of Muḥammad, even though they were devoted Christians. “This took place during the initial stages of the mission of the Prophet when his companions were very weak and powerless” (p. 19). The case of Waraqah ibn Nawfal, who was the first Christian to acknowledge the prophethood of Muḥammad, was also a powerful historical account used by the author to counter the claim made in the received letter.

An Analysis of Selected Statements from the Book

To have a more concise and focused review, two statements are taken as excerpts from the text (still in chapter one) for a few deeper, though short, analyses. This is aimed at highlighting two of the numerous methods (critical/textual and historical analyses) employed by the author to show how effective and appropriate they are in refuting the claims made by the Christians.

Excerpt one:

Using verses of the Qur'ān by Christians to prove a certain point of view can never be acceptable, for they select what they think proves their points and abandons that which annuls their points. (p. 9)

The above statement was made by the author about numerous verses of the Qur'ān that were found in the letter he was responding to. As rightly argued by the author, the Christians were quoting verses out of context and also cherry-picking verses, interpreting them to suit their bad intentions. The point is that it is logically contradictory and textually incoherent for the Christians to hold and justify a position (i.e., that the Qur'ānic verses show that Arabic is the language of revelation, therefore the Qur'ān is only for the Arabs) based on an aspect of the Qur'ān, while ignoring the other aspect (i.e., verses of the same Qur'ān that clearly shows that Muḥammad is the final prophet for all human race) that counters their position that “Muḥammad was sent only to the Arab.”

The intertextual relation and contextual implications of the verses, in my view, were ignored by the Christians. Or would it be more correct to say they were ignorant of such intertextuality and contextuality of the verses of the Qur'ān? Whichever the case, their claims remain refuted on any of these bases.

Also, with their reference to the Qur'ān's original language to justify that Prophet Muḥammad was not sent to all mankind, it seems more convincing that they were not being realistic. This is because a prophet to the world of multilingual people would be sent primarily through a nation and in the immediate language of that chosen nation. This would explain why Allah has stressed, in more than one place, that the Prophet Muḥammad was sent to all, even though he was an Arab with the Qur'ān in the Arabic language.

Next is the second excerpt for analysis, which is closely related to the above issue. This analysis briefly highlights another approach in Ibn Taymiyyah's refutation of the same claim.

Excerpt two:

... we say that all sects and creeds know the fact that Muḥammad called the Jews and the Christians to believe in him and his message, that he told both parties that Allah sent him to them as well as to the others (p. 13)

The author aimed to show, through verifiable historical records, a series of events, and cases in which the Prophet Muḥammad called different nations to accept Islam. In my humble view, this seemed to be a strong counterclaim and refutation that could always be employed alongside textual criticism, logical analysis, and scriptural references both in the Qur'ān and the Bible. The author correctly made substantial references to history regarding how the Prophet Muḥammad approached the Jews, the Christians, certain kings of other nations, etc., to accept Islam. Some accepted and, as expected, many declined.

This approach by the author to respond to the Christians' claim is a very practical one. For instance, if the Prophet Muḥammad was sent only to the Arabs, then some other individual from Africa, such as Bilāl, would not have become Muslim, contrary to what the Christians wanted us to believe.

Conclusion

Based on the few reviewed issues from the book, this paper finds out how important it is to familiarise ourselves with the books of earlier scholars. It is discovered that many of the issues for which we are looking for solutions have been substantially addressed in the best ways possible, which could be built upon based on the contemporary need. For instance, Ibn Taymiyyah was very familiar with the Bible and actively marshalled it together with the Qur'ān and logic in responding to the Christians' wrong claims. Furthermore, his good knowledge of the Qur'ān was demonstrated as he exposed the manipulative hermeneutics employed by the Christians, though these could easily be used to confuse many Muslims, particularly in our time.

More importantly, it is discovered that Ibn Taymiyyah never turned the issue into abusive engagement or a castigating rejoinder, nor was he apologetic in his approach. This is a very instructive lesson and guide for Muslims engaged in religious dialogue. He meticulously responded with a heap of evidence, using many appropriate methods and approaches to counter their allegations and erroneous claims. The reviewed chapter shows how he was vehemently against a relativistic perspective of religion that the Christians attempted to defend through their misinterpretation of pieces of evidence. This also holds true for their misconception about "chain of prophethood" and its implication for their refusal to accept the universality of the Prophet Muḥammad's messengership.

In all of this, he gives attention to an intellectual approach instead of resorting to abuse and denigrating the parties involved. Ibn Taymiyyah demonstrates in a very remarkable way the following verses of the Qur'ān that say, "Do not argue with the People of the Book unless gracefully, except with those of them who act wrongfully. And say, "We believe in what has been revealed to us and what was revealed to you. Our God and your God is 'only' One. And to Him we 'fully' submit," (Q29:46) and "Invite 'all' to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and kind advice, and only debate with them in the best manner. Surely your Lord 'alone' knows best who has strayed from His Way and who is 'rightly' guided (Q16:125).