

# An Analysis of the Christology of Sheikh Ahmed Deedat

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## Introduction

It is probably fair to say that Sheikh Ahmed Hussein Deedat (1918-2005) does not enjoy high levels of name recognition in Western Christian circles. Yet this South African born Muslim apologist is regarded by many within the Muslim world as one of the greatest ever Islamic scholars of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> This is evidenced by the string of awards that he has received from governments all around the Muslim world (including the prestigious ‘King Faisal Prize for Service to Islam’ awarded by the king of Saudi Arabia in 1986).

One of the main reasons behind Deedat’s fame was the fact that he claimed to radically undermine the Christian faith by referencing the key texts of Christianity itself. This approach was markedly different from standard Muslim responses to Christianity that tended to simply reference Qur’anic teaching that Christianity was superseded by Islam (cf. Qur’an 17:89)<sup>2</sup> and leave it at that. He was also a masterful debater and had superb command of the English language. Both skills proved to be very valuable commodities in a

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent assessment of Deedat’s approach and legacy see: Al-Jazeera, 8 August 2015, *Remembering the life of Sheikh Ahmed Deedat*: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/08/remembering-life-sheikh-ahmed-deedat-150803064519593.html> (Accessed on 1 March 2016).

<sup>2</sup> ‘And indeed, we have fully explained to mankind, in this Qur’an, every kind of similitude, but most of mankind refuse (the truth and accept nothing) but disbelief.’ (Qur’an 17:89, Yusuf Ali) Muslim scholars see this text as the classic confirmation that the Qur’an is the ultimate revelation as it declares itself to be a ‘full explanation’ of everything.

time of aggressive efforts to expand awareness of Islam on the world stage. As Brian Larkin notes: ‘His knowledge of English, his skill at debating, and his mastery of other scriptures endeared him to the millions who have seen his videos or read his tracts, millions of which are sent free of charge all over the world. Deedat’s source of authority, then, is an unusual one, drawing on the mastery of Christian rather than Muslim texts and his skill at English rather than Arabic.’<sup>3</sup>

While some Muslim leaders felt quite uncomfortable with Deedat’s ultra-aggressive approach many others hailed it as the best way forward in convincing Christians to abandon their faith and accept Islam. His books and lectures have therefore been translated into a wide variety of languages and can still be found in mosques and Muslim bookshops all over the world.

While Sheikh Deedat is obviously no longer with us, it is fair to say that his basic approach and key arguments have long outlived him. In addition to the continuing appeal of his books high-profile modern day Islamic apologists like Zakir Naik<sup>4</sup> and Shabir Ally<sup>5</sup> cite Deedat as a major influence and often employ arguments first pioneered by him.

Since Deedat’s ideas are very much alive and well in the Muslim world it is vitally important that Christians who are called to share ‘the hope within them’ (cf. 1 Peter 3:15) with Muslim people familiarise themselves with his thinking.

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Larkin, ‘Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism’ in *Social Text* 96 (Duke University Press, Fall 2008), 105.

<sup>4</sup> Indian medical doctor Zakir Naik is perhaps the best known Muslim apologist in the world today. This is evidenced in the massive following that he enjoys on Youtube. He freely acknowledges the influence of Deedat on both his arguments and methodology. See for example: Zakir Naik, 6 August 2010, *Who is Ahmed Deedat?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGzQA9xyV8c> (Accessed on 1 March 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Shabir Ally is a Canadian Muslim apologist with a very wide following in the West. He has engaged in debates with William Lane Craig, John Dominic Crossan and James White. While Naik (see above) took up Deedat’s mantle in Asia it is often claimed that Ally did so in the West. See for example: The Muslim Debate Initiative, 15 November 2012, *Meet Dr Shabir Ally*: <http://thedebateinitiative.com/2012/11/15/meet-dr-shabir-ally/> (Accessed on 1 March 2015).

Nowhere is this more critical than in the area of Christology. Not only because this represents Deedat's major area of attack against the Christian faith but also because a proper understanding of the nature, life and ministry of Christ should be at the heart of our understanding of the Gospel. Wherever a distorted Christology is proclaimed we should, therefore, stand ready to offer Biblical insights that can correct this.

The purpose of this article is to present a systemisation of Deedat's positions on the life, ministry and nature of Jesus. In the process it will become clear that he not only diverges from Biblical data but also in some cases (e.g. his views on the crucifixion) from orthodox Muslim positions. In fact, it could be argued that his idiosyncratic interpretation of key Biblical texts created a new Islamic Christological 'orthodoxy' that is being widely disseminated by several high profile Muslim apologists who followed in his wake.

In order to understand Deedat's approach it would be useful to have a brief look at his background. After this our attention will turn to a discussion of his Christology as presented in his books. The article will conclude with a brief discussion of possible Christian responses to Deedat's arguments.

### **Ahmed Deedat: A Brief Biography**

Ahmed Hussain Deedat was born in 1918 in the Surat district of the Indian province (now state) of Gujarat to a devout Muslim family. In 1927 he left India to join his father who was working in the South African city of Durban. Upon arriving in South Africa he immediately started to go to school but financial problems forced him to abandon his schooling before completing Year 12. After school he went to work as a shop assistant on the Natal South Coast.<sup>6</sup> Certain events here would profoundly influence the course of his life. Deedat would later write that the shop was located near a Christian seminary and he had regular contact with some of the students who studied there. One of the students regularly spoke with Deedat about accepting Christianity. It seems

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<sup>6</sup> Arabia—The Islamic World Review, 1986, *Ahmed Deedat: A Scholar for the People*, 11.

that his main approach in trying to convert Deedat was to criticise the Qur'an and aspects of Muslim tradition. This greatly agitated the young Deedat but he was at a loss how to respond. An authorised biography of Deedat describes his reaction as follows: 'The incessant insults that the trainee missionaries hurled against Islam during their brief visits to the store infused a stubborn desire within the young man to counteract their false propaganda.'<sup>7</sup>

One day while he was cleaning out the bookcase of the shop owner, who was also a Muslim, he came across a book with the title *Izrahul-Haq* ('Truth Revealed'). This was written by an anonymous Indian sheik in response to British missionary efforts. According to Deedat this book changed his life. In it he found answers to many of the questions that the young seminarian was asking him. The idea of setting up debates between different religions that was advocated in this work also greatly appealed to him. He went out and purchased his first Bible and immersed himself in its pages. This was not for the purpose of drawing religious inspiration from it, but to equip himself to use the Bible as a tool to attack Christianity itself.

Deedat gained quite a bit of influence through his rather aggressive approach and in 1958 he left his job as a salesman to start the *Islamic Propagation Centre* in the Durban city centre. This was the beginning of a long career as a Muslim apologist with the specific focus of attempting to influence Christians to renounce Christianity in favour of Islam. What made his approach unique was the fact that he attempted to use the Bible in his efforts.<sup>8</sup> It is fair to say that most Muslim apologists up to this point more or less ignored the Bible and instead focused mainly on positive aspects of Islam. Deedat, on the other hand, went on the offensive by claiming to find many errors, inconsistencies and objectionable doctrines in the pages of the Christian Bible.

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<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *The Choice: Islam or Christianity?* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1993), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Deedat's debates were often introduced with the words: 'The unique fact about this debate will be that both speakers will use the Bible to prove their point.' See for example: Durban Daily News, 29 August 1981, *6000 Attend Major Debate on Crucifixion*.

An important strategy followed by Deedat, and also a major reason for his fame, was the fact that he organised debates with high-profile Christians on issues like Christology and the inspiration of the Bible. Two of the most famous of these debates was one with Dr Josh McDowell ('Was Christ Crucified?')<sup>9</sup> and another in 1986 with the well-known Pentecostal televangelist Jimmy Swaggart ('Is the Bible God's Word?').<sup>10</sup>

Deedat's debates drew worldwide attention and he is to this day one of the only religious figures who managed to fill both the Royal Albert Hall (London) and Madison Square Garden (New York). His organisation the Islamic Propagation Centre International (the 'International' was added later to reflect his growing reach) used the money that flowed in because of Deedat's activities to engage in several high profile campaigns including the erection of prominent billboards, television advertisements and Qur'an giveaways. In addition to this the Islamic Propagation Centre International put out a steady stream of publications. Most of these were short booklets authored by Deedat in which aspects of Christianity were vehemently attacked.

Despite his worldwide success life was not all plain sailing for Deedat. Many Muslims felt deeply uncomfortable with his aggressive approach, claiming (with some justice) that it alienated the very constituency he was supposedly trying to reach.<sup>11</sup> Others questioned aspects of his theology with some Muslim leaders going as far as claiming that his positions deviated from orthodox Muslim teaching. Such claims led to several protracted pamphlet wars between Deedat and other Muslim leaders.<sup>12</sup>

Mr Deedat suffered a debilitating stroke in 1996 and died in 2005. He is buried in Verulam, Kwazulu-Natal not far from where he had those first encounters

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<sup>9</sup> Durban Daily News, 29 August 1981, *6000 Attend Major Debate on Crucifixion*.

<sup>10</sup> The Leader, 28 November 1986, *Deedat's R10 000 NGK Challenge*.

<sup>11</sup> See for example: The Muslim Digest, July-September 1994, *Christian pastors responds to Deedat after objectionable booklet 'Combat Kit'*. Durban.

<sup>12</sup> See for example: Muhammad Makki in The Muslim Digest (1979:1), *Unfair to insult Muslim community for actions of individuals and organizations* (Durban, 1979).

with the Christian students that so profoundly influenced the course of his life. He is still remembered by many Muslims as one of the most successful and high profile voices in spreading the message of Islam in Christian contexts. His work also continues to influence several high-profile Muslim apologists.

## **An Analysis of Deedat's Christology**

The primary sources for the reconstruction of Mr Deedat's Christology are obviously his books. There are several titles in which he directly addresses the issue of the identity, nature and ministry of Christ. These include the following: *What Was the Sign of Jonah?* (1976),<sup>13</sup> *Who Moved the Stone?* (1977),<sup>14</sup> *Resurrection or Resuscitation?* (1978),<sup>15</sup> *Christ in Islam* (1983),<sup>16</sup> *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (1984),<sup>17</sup> and *The Choice-Islam or Christianity?* (1993).<sup>18</sup> The ideas and arguments presented in these books will form the basis of this section while other smaller works of Mr Deedat will also be consulted as needed.

One of the first things that strikes the reader in analysing Deedat's Christology is his consistent claim that Muslims are the true followers of Jesus. This obviously means that in his mind Christians have a distorted view of Christ and explains the very strong polemical, some would say aggressive, tone in most of his works. Before we focus on some of the very strong denials of Christian doctrine that we find in Deedat's works it might be good to briefly consider what he positively affirms about Jesus. One of his most succinct statements in this regard was the following:

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *What Was the Sign of Jonah?* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Resurrection or Resuscitation?* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *The Choice-Islam or Christianity?* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1993).

We Muslims believe that Jesus was the mightiest of the messengers, that he was the Christ, was born miraculously without any male intervention (which many modern-day Christians deny), that he gave life to the dead by God's permission, and healed those born blind by God's permission. In fact a Muslim is not a Muslim if he does not believe in Jesus!<sup>19</sup>

Let us now turn to Deedat's views on specific aspects of the life, ministry and nature of Jesus.

## **The Birth of Christ**

Deedat's discussion of the birth of Jesus closely follows Chapters 13 and 19 of the Qur'an. It is interesting to note that the birth narratives in these chapters have several similarities with those found in the Gospels. The virgin birth is, for example, strongly emphasised. However, in his treatment of the birth narratives Deedat diverges from orthodox Christian teaching in three important ways. These are: (1) His emphasis on the role of Mary 2) An emphasis on the 'createdness' of Jesus and (3) A strong focus on the exact nature of Christ's conception. Let us look at these emphases in turn:

### ***Emphasis on the Role of Mary***

Deedat often made the claim that Islam provides Mary with a much more honourable position than is the case in Christianity. He points to the fact that there is an entire chapter in the Qur'an that carries her name (Chapter 19 known as 'Sura Maryam' or 'Mary's Chapter') while there is not a single book in the Bible that carries her name, or even the name of Jesus. The fact is, however, that the picture of Mary presented by Deedat (and also by implication the Qur'an) differs markedly from what we find in the text of the Bible.

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<sup>19</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1983), 2.

It should firstly be noted that an element of the miraculous is ascribed to the birth of Mary, something about which the Bible is silent. Deedat says the following about this:

The story is that the maternal grandmother of Jesus, Hannah had hitherto been barren. She poured her heart out to God: If only God will grant her a child, she would surely dedicate such a child for the service of God in the temple. God granted her prayer and Mary was born. She was yearning for a son, but instead she delivered a daughter, in no way is the female like the male for what she had in mind. What was she to do? She made a vow to God.<sup>20</sup>

It should immediately be obvious that Deedat here confuses Mary the mother of Jesus with Hannah the mother of Samuel.<sup>21</sup> It is further clear that Mary (in line with Qur'anic teaching<sup>22</sup>) is identified with Miriam the sister of Moses and Aaron. Be that as it may, Deedat makes much of Mary's discomfort and fear with the birth of Jesus. He quotes extensively from the Yusuf Ali<sup>23</sup> commentary on the Koran:

The amazement of the people knew no bounds. In any case they were prepared to think the worst of her, as she had disappeared from her kin for some time. But now she comes shamelessly parading a baby in her arms! [Through the title 'Sister of Aaron']

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<sup>20</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1983), 9.

<sup>21</sup> John Gilchrist says the following about the origin of this misunderstanding: 'We should perhaps at this stage mention that the original story is first found in the apocryphal work entitled "Protoevangelium of James the Less" and that it was simply taken by Muhammad into the Qur'an without him being aware of its mythical origin' See: John Gilchrist, *An Open Response to the Islamic Propagation Centre* (Benoni: Jesus to the Muslims, 1984), 6.

<sup>22</sup> 'O Sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a man of evil, nor thy mother a woman unchaste' (*Qur'an 19:26, Yusuf Ali*).

<sup>23</sup> The Yusuf Ali translation is the most widely circulated English translation of the Qur'an although it has faced stiff competition from the Sahih International translation (published by the Saudi Arabian government) in recent years.

Mary is reminded of her high lineage and the exceptional morals of her father and mother. How they said she had fallen and disgraced the name of her progenitors! What could Mary do? How could she explain? Would they in their censorious mood accept her explanation? All she could do was to point to the child who, she knew, was no ordinary child and the child came to her rescue. By a miracle he spoke, defended his mother, and preached to an unbelieving audience.<sup>24</sup>

Interesting questions can be asked about the origin of Deedat's, and also the Qur'an's version of the nativity story, because it is certainly quite some way removed from the Biblical accounts. At least part of the answer can be found in apocryphal material like the *Protoevangelium of James the Less*.<sup>25</sup> There is, therefore a clear double standard at work here. Deedat is happy to deconstruct New Testament material using largely discredited higher critical methods but would surely object vehemently to any notion that the Qur'an here borrowed from, very late, non-canonical 'Gospels'.

### ***Emphasis on the Supposed 'Createdness' of Jesus***

One of Deedat's major issues with the Christian view of the birth of Jesus is his total rejection of the concept of the pre-existence of Christ. This is not surprising as ascribing pre-existence to Jesus would obviously raise serious questions about the Muslim doctrine that Christ was nothing more than a prophet. Deedat, describes the birth of Jesus as an act of creation similar to the creation of Adam. He comments as follows on Qur'an 3:47: 'This is the Muslim concept of the birth of Jesus. For God to create Jesus he merely has to will it. If he wanted to create millions like Jesus without fathers or mothers he merely has to will them into existence.'<sup>26</sup> The emphasis here is clearly on the fact that

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<sup>24</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1983), 10.

<sup>25</sup> See John Gilchrist, *An Open Response to the Islamic Propagation Centre* (Benoni: Jesus to the Muslims, 1984), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1983), 24.

Jesus was created from nothing. Not a hint of the Christian doctrine that he existed throughout eternity shines through.

In order to further drive home his point Deedat quotes extensively from Yusuf Ali's commentary on Qur'an 3:9:

After a description of the high position that Jesus occupies we have a repudiation of the dogma that he was the Son of God or anything more than a man. If you said that he was born without a human father, Adam was also born. Indeed Adam was born without a human father or mother. As far as our physical bodies are concerned we are mere dust. In God's sight Jesus was as dust as Adam was or humanity is. The greatness of Jesus arose from the divine command 'Be' for after that he was, more than dust. A great spiritual leader and teacher.<sup>27</sup>

Deedat makes much of the fact that the reaction of Mary to the annunciation of the birth of Jesus is fairly similar in both the Qur'an and the Bible<sup>28</sup>. It is, however, with the angel's response that he has significant issues. He quotes Luke 1:35 from the King James Version: 'And the angel answered and said unto her. The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest **shall overshadow thee.**' He claims to find the language used here to be in extremely bad taste. According to him this statement can be interpreted as indicating sexual intercourse and he goes as far as calling it 'gutter language'. He also strenuously object to the use of the word 'begotten'<sup>29</sup> (see John 3:16 in the King James Version): 'The Muslim takes exception to the word 'begotten' because begetting is an animal act belonging to the lower animal functions of sex. How can we attribute such an action to God?'<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note how Deedat

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<sup>27</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Muhammad – Natural Successor to Christ* (Durban: IPCI, 1990), 10.

<sup>28</sup> Luke 1:34 (KJV): 'Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?' and Qur'an 3:47 (Yusuf Ali): 'She said: O my Lord, how shall I have a son when no man hath touched me?'

<sup>29</sup> He confidently states in his book *Christ in Islam* that 'Begotten mean sired'. See Ahmad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1983), 29.

<sup>30</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1983), 29.

as a supposed ‘Muslim scholar of the Bible’ here latches on to a translation that he objects to without so much as a passing reference to the Greek text. If he did consult a Greek lexicon he would have found that μονογενής (the Greek term used in John 3:16) does not necessarily, or even primarily, refer to what he calls ‘the lower animal functions of sex’.

## The Titles and Names of Jesus

Deedat spends a significant amount of time in his works discussing the names and titles of Jesus. This topic is dealt with at length in *Christ in Islam*<sup>31</sup> and *What is His Name?*<sup>32</sup> For the purposes of this article the discussion will be limited to Deedat’s treatment of Christ (Messiah), Son of God and Nabi Isa (Prophet Jesus).

### *Christ/Messiah*

According to Deedat few words have been so misunderstood and misused as ‘Christ’: ‘The Christian has a knack for transmuting base metals into shining gold...The Greek word for anointed is ‘christos’. Just lop of the ‘os’ and you are left with christ. Now change the little ‘c’ to a capital ‘C’ and hey presto he has created a unique new name.’<sup>33</sup> Deedat moves on from this rather simplistic dismissal of the deep theological affirmations embedded in the title ‘Christ’<sup>34</sup> by claiming that the Hebrew word מָשַׁח (*mashach*, anointed) refers to any form of religious consecration and should therefore not be used as the basis for a proper name or title: ‘There are a hundred such references in the Holy Bible.

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<sup>31</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1983).

<sup>32</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *What is His Name?* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1981).

<sup>33</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1983), 13.

<sup>34</sup> John Gilchrist rightly points out that Deedat is often tripped up by his inability to read the Greek text of the New Testament. In this case Deedat misses the fact that many New Testament references to Jesus as ‘Christ’ includes the definite article (i.e. ‘*ho Christos*’): ‘The use of the definitive article renders the title exclusive in a very real sense and reveals that Jesus was indeed **the** Messiah.’ See: John Gilchrist, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Benoni: Jesus to the Muslim, 1980), 15.

Every time you come across the word ANOINTED in your English Bible, you can take it that the word would be Christos in the Greek translations, and if you take the same liberty with the word that the Christians have done, you will have - Christ Cherub, Christ Cyrus, Christ Priest, Christ Pillar etc.<sup>35</sup> There are a variety of responses to this rather strange argument but it should be pointed out that Deedat's interpretation runs counter to the Qur'an in which the title of Messiah (Masih in Arabic) is only ever used for Jesus.<sup>36</sup> So clearly it is not only Christians taking 'liberties' with this word but the foundational text of Islam itself.

### ***Son of God***

Deedat claims that it is only possible to refer to Jesus as the 'Son of God' in a very limited sense (i.e. that all human beings are children of God). He quotes Romans 8:14<sup>37</sup> and comments as follows: 'Can't you see that in the language of the Jew, every righteous person, every Tom, Dick and Harry who followed the Will and the Plan of God was a SON OF GOD. It was a metaphorical descriptive term, used commonly among the Jews.'<sup>38</sup> In line with Qur'anic teaching Deedat balks at the idea of conceding that Christ is in any way uniquely the Son of God. This would ascribe divinity to Jesus and for Deedat (as for Muslims in general) this crosses the line into the most serious of sins namely *shirk* (i.e. associating anyone or anything with God).

### ***Nabi Isa (Prophet Jesus)***

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<sup>35</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1983), 13.

<sup>36</sup> See for example Qur'an 3:45 (Yusuf Ali): 'Behold! the angel said: 'O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be **Christ Jesus**, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah.'

<sup>37</sup> '...because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God' Romans 8:14 (NIV).

<sup>38</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre, 1983), 25.

Deedat does not only reject some commonly used titles for Jesus he also offers an alternative. It should come as no surprise that this alternative is one that we find in the Qur'an: 'Actually his proper name is 'Isa' (Arabic), Esau (Hebrew) or Yeheshua (Classical) which the Christian nations Latinised as Jesus. Neither the 'J' nor the second 's' in the name Jesus is to be found in the original tongue – they are not found in the original languages.'<sup>39</sup> It is clear that Deedat makes a significant mistake by confusing the name of Esau (עֶשָׂו) with that of Joshua/Jesus (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ) and going even further by claiming that an incorrect form of 'Latinisation' was used. This ignores the universally accepted Greek translation of יְהוֹשֻׁעַ namely Ἰησοῦς (Iésous) and even the widely used Arabic form of the name of Jesus (Yashua) which was used in pre-Islamic times and is still used by present day Arab Christians (who consistently refuse to refer to Jesus by using the erroneous and exclusively Muslim term 'Isa').

John Glichrist in responding to Deedat on this issue points out that: '...Jacob and Esau were enemies for most of their lives and their descendants, the Israelites and the Edomites, were often at war with each other. No Jewish children were ever named after the brother of Jacob, the father of the Israelites, for he stood against Jacob and was rejected by God (Hebrews 12:17). It is thus a fallacy to suggest that the original name of Jesus was Esau...For reasons that have never been apparent Muhammad chose to call him Isa. Deedat's interpretation of this name as "Esau" tends to lend support to the suggestion made by some that the Jews in Arabia cunningly misled Muhammad by subtly perverting the true name of Jesus into the name of their forefather's irreligious brother. If Deedat's conclusion is correct, it militates heavily against the supposed divine origin of the Qur'an.'<sup>40</sup>

## The Ministry of Jesus

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<sup>39</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban: IPCI, 1983), 6.

<sup>40</sup> John Gilchrist, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Benoni: Jesus to the Muslims, 1980), 25.

Deedat does not spend much time in his works discussing the details of the earthly ministry of Jesus. When the subject arises there are two themes that are consistently addressed: (1) An acknowledgement of the miracles of Jesus; (2) An emphasis on the Muslim belief that Jesus was a servant of God and nothing more.

### ***The Miracles of Jesus***

Deedat has no issues with accepting the miracles of Jesus, even acknowledging that Jesus raised people from the dead. He does not, however, draw the conclusion from this that Jesus is in any way divine. He simply performed the miracles by God's permission according to Deedat.

### ***Deedat's views on the importance of the ministry of Jesus.***

It is possible to point to a certain ambivalence regarding the ministry of Jesus in the writings of Mr Deedat. On the one hand it is his duty as a believing Muslim to honour Jesus as one of the greatest prophets of Islam yet the fact that Christians go beyond what the Qur'an regards as proper boundaries<sup>41</sup> by worshipping Jesus often introduces a sour note into any discussion of the life and ministry of Christ by Deedat.

One area where this is evident is in the very limited importance attached to the ministry of Jesus by Deedat. According to him Jesus was spectacularly unsuccessful in his earthly ministry. He even goes as far as suggesting that the lack of success that Jesus experienced during his ministry made him a suicide

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<sup>41</sup> 'O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His messengers. Say not "Trinity", desist, it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs' (Qur'an 4:171, Yusuf Ali).

risk: 'If Jesus would have been a Japanese instead of a Jew he would happily have committed that honourable 'harakiri' (suicide). Sadly he was one of the most unfortunate of God's messengers. His family disbelieved him. In fact, they went to the extent of wanting to apprehend him, believing he was mad.'<sup>42</sup>

With statements like the one above Deedat is attempting to reinforce and support the classical Islamic view that the main reason that Jesus was sent to earth was to predict the coming of Muhammad.<sup>43</sup> It therefore stands to reason that Deedat would search the New Testament for instances where Jesus supposedly prophesies the coming of Muhammad. He claims to find this in the following statement of Jesus: 'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.' (John 4:16-17, NIV)

Aside from the fact that Deedat ignores the clear message of this text (in pointing towards the coming of the Holy Spirit) he also does not explain why he regards this statement as reliable and authoritative while at the same time rubbishing the rest of the Gospels as corrupt and dangerously twisted.

## **Deedat and the 'Historical Jesus'**

Although he nowhere uses the term 'Historical Jesus,' Deedat often engages in attempts to reconstruct the life of Jesus on the basis of historical speculation. He ends up not too far removed from the conclusions of some of the first proponents of 'Historical Jesus' research, namely that Jesus was allegedly a revolutionary intent on overthrowing Roman power in Palestine.<sup>44</sup> In line with

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<sup>42</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Muhammad—The Natural Successor to Christ* (Durban: IPCI, 1990), 37.

<sup>43</sup> See for example: 'And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said: 'O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me, and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad' (Qur'an 61:6, Yusuf Ali).

<sup>44</sup> This view has a very long pedigree and was pioneered as far back as 1778 when Hermann Samuel Reimarrus published his *Vom Zwecku Jesu und Seiner Junger* (*On the Objectives of Jesus and His Disciples*)

this, Deedat presents a reading of the four Gospels that supposedly proves that Jesus stirred the flames of rebellion only for this to be cut short by his eventual execution (or rather 'attempted execution' according to Deedat).

The idea of 'Jesus as rebel' provides Deedat with a hermeneutical lens through which many of the events of the life of Jesus is filtered. This is particularly evident, as we shall see, in his treatment of the events surrounding the crucifixion. According to this reading of events, the earthly ministry of Jesus was essentially '*Preparing for Jihad*' (a chapter heading in Deedat's book '*Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction*').<sup>45</sup>

According to Deedat the main barrier to viewing Jesus as simply a revolutionary prophet (a picture that he claims is self-evident in the Gospels) is the influence of the Apostle Paul: 'Saul was a renegade Jew and the Christians changed his name to Paul, probably because 'Saul' sounds Jewish. Paul made such a fine mess of the teachings of Jesus that he earned for himself the second most coveted position in 'The Most Influential Man in History', the monumental work of Michael Hart. Paul outclasses even Jesus because he was the real founder of present day Christianity.'<sup>46</sup>

By going down the road of the 'Jesus as revolutionary' and 'Paul as the founder of Christianity' hypotheses Deedat clearly displays his willingness to make use of liberal Biblical scholarship. He does so, however, without indicating that many of the supposed 'findings' of such scholarship are vigorously contested. The question also has to be asked why Deedat is willing to accept higher-critical readings of the Gospels (documents written within a generation of the events they describe and in the same region where the events took place) and at the same time accept without question interpretations of the life of Jesus (i.e. those found in the Qur'an) written centuries after the fact in the middle of the Arabian desert. There is, once again, an obvious double standard at work here.

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<sup>45</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Christ in Islam* (Durban, Islamic Propagation Centre, 1983), 24.

## The Crucifixion

Most Christians would be quite surprised at the idea that Jesus did not actually die on the cross but this claim forms one of the centrepieces of Deedat's Christology. His denial of the fact of the crucifixion should immediately be obvious from the title of one of his most influential books: *Crucifixion or Crucifixion?* The basis of Deedat's argument is not new historical research on the life of Jesus or a close reading of the Gospels but simply the well-known denial of the crucifixion in the Qur'an: 'They said (in boast), "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah"—but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not—nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise' (Qur'an, 4:157-158, Yusuf Ali).

Deedat comments as follows on this passage: 'Could anyone have been more EXPLICIT, MORE DOGMATIC, more UN-COMPROMISING in rejecting the dogma of a faith than this? The Muslim believes that this categorical statement is from God. Hence he asks no questions and seeks no proof.'<sup>47</sup> He goes on: 'Had the Christians accepted the Holy Qur'an as the Word of God, the problem of the crucifixion would never have arisen.'<sup>48</sup>

With the statement above Deedat takes 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christians to task for not accepting the views of a document written between AD610-632. This cuts to the heart of his approach, and indeed that of the classical Islamic approach to the crucifixion. Christians are expected to meekly submit to a single sentence written hundreds of years later as the final word on the crucifixion. In the process the actual historical evidence found in documents written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century should simply be ignored. On what basis should this be done? Deedat cannot be clearer: simply because he believes that the Qur'an is the word of God, no further evidence is needed.

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<sup>47</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Crucifixion?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 4.

<sup>48</sup> James White, *What Every Christian Should Know About the Qur'an* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2013), 142

Despite Deedat's strong affirmations a fundamental question remains: On what basis can it be justified to question the historical validity of 1<sup>st</sup> century documents (which Christians also claim to be the Word of God) while at the same time uncritically accepting a much later view of the crucifixion? As James White so eloquently says:

So these forty Arabic words [The Qur'anic denial of the crucifixion] stand alone in the Qur'an. They stand alone without commentary in the hadith literature as well. They stand against not only the natural reading of other Qur'anic texts but also against the entire weight of the historical record. Forty Arabic words written six hundred years after the events they describe, more than seven hundred fifty miles from Jerusalem. Forty Arabic words that are not clear, not perspicuous, and yet this is the entirety of the foundation upon which the Islamic faith bases its denial of the crucifixion, and hence, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Deedat challenges the Christian view of the crucifixion by framing his arguments in the form of a court case in which he 'defends' the Jewish people against the charge that they are responsible for the death of Jesus (something which Qur'an 4:157 states they did not do). He makes it clear that if he succeeds in successfully defending the Jewish people he would have completely disproved the truth of Christianity as the cross is at the heart of the Christian message. He expresses this sentiment in the crudest of terms: 'According to St Paul there is nothing that Christianity can offer mankind, other than the blood and gore of Jesus.'<sup>49</sup>

Deedat's 'court case' in defence of the Jewish people take in the following topics: The arrest and trial of Jesus, the failed attempt (according to Deedat) to execute Him and the burial. We shall discuss each of these topics in turn.

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<sup>49</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 3  
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## *The Arrest and Trial of Jesus*

We have already seen that Deedat viewed Jesus as a revolutionary whose primary mission was to end Roman rule in Palestine. This view of the mission of Jesus deeply colours Deedat's speculations on what happened during the final few days of Christ's life. He interprets, for example, the entry into Jerusalem as a primarily political event during which Jesus made a bid for the support of the general populace in Jerusalem and surrounds. Despite initial excitement the movement fizzles out. This is how Deedat presents his views on the reasons behind the arrest of Jesus: 'Jesus had failed to heed the over-exuberance of his disciples (Luke 19:39). He had miscalculated. Now he must pay the price for failure. His nation was not ready for sacrifice in spite of all their infantile clamour.'<sup>50</sup>

Deedat believes that the political agitation that he accuses Jesus of, rather than any theological factors, caused the Jewish leaders to come to the conclusion that he had to be done away with. Therefore they decide to arrest him as a way to appease the Romans. Despite ostensibly 'defending' the Jewish people he still accuses them of causing Jesus' downfall because their leaders thought him a political liability: 'Between the two (Jews and Christians) they want poor Jesus to die. One for "Good Riddance" the other for "Good Redemption."<sup>51</sup>

Deedat even goes as far as to attempt to rehabilitate Judas. He believes that Judas did not really want to betray Jesus. He simply wanted to give him enough of a scare so that he would take action.<sup>52</sup> The aim is, achieved, according to Deedat in the fact that the disciples are told by Jesus to arm themselves. Deedat conveniently ignores the fact that Peter was told to put away his sword (John

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<sup>50</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 10

<sup>51</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 26

<sup>52</sup> 'Jesus had now developed cold feet. If only Jesus could be provoked, he might react with miracles, and bring down fire and brimstones from Heaven upon his enemies; and of course the legions of angels (which he boasted were at his disposal), which would enable him and his disciples to rule the world.' Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 11.

18:11) when he attacked the servant of the high-priest. It is also curious that Jesus would have said that two swords were enough for his followers (Luke 22:38) if they were about to start a large-scale war. Deedat has a rather ingenious, if entirely implausible, explanation for this. The first battle would be against Jewish people and not against heavily armed Romans. Against 'the riff-raff of the town' two swords would apparently be enough.<sup>53</sup>

The plot that Deedat claims Jesus was hatching came to grief because he made a significant miscalculation in expecting that he would only be facing Jewish resistance. When he realised that the Jewish leaders called in Roman help he lost nerve, or so Deedat claims, and decided to surrender peacefully: 'He had sense enough to realise that against the trained and well equipped Roman soldiers it would be suicidal for his sleepy warriors to offer even a pretence of resistance.'<sup>54</sup>

Deedat concedes that the trial of Jesus was unfair as the outcome was determined beforehand by Jewish authorities. He even goes as far as saying that Jesus' confession of his status as the 'Son of God' is not blasphemous as every human being is in some way a 'child of God'. Significant time is spent in Deedat's works analysing Isaiah 53:7: 'He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before his shearers is silent he did not open his mouth.' He completely rejects the notion that this is an accurate prophetic prediction of the conduct of Jesus during his trial: 'We Muslims believe in many, many miracles of Jesus, but we would be reluctant to believe that he dabbled in ventriloquism. Again and again when the need arose during his trials and tribulations Jesus opened his mouth with telling effect.'<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> 'It would be a battle of Jews against Jews. In such a battle against the temple servants and the riff raff of the town, he would prevail. Of that he was sure. He had with him Peter (The Rock) and James and John (The Sons of Thunder). Together with the other eight, vying with each other to die for him.' Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 13.

<sup>54</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 20.

<sup>55</sup> Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 20.

## *Deedat's Interpretation of the Crucifixion*

It should again be noted from the outset that the Qur'an contains a very strong denial of the crucifixion ('*They killed him not*' Qur'an 4:157). It should, therefore, come as no surprise that Deedat spends much time in attempting to undermine belief in the death of Jesus on the cross. His arguments for trying to 'prove' this were however deeply controversial within the Muslim community. Some Muslim scholars have indeed gone as far as branding Deedat heretical for his views on the crucifixion.<sup>56</sup> This is because he attempts to harmonise Biblical and Qur'anic versions of the events surrounding the crucifixion. He does this by claiming that Jesus was indeed nailed to a cross but that he survived this ordeal and was buried alive. This is significantly at odds with the orthodox Muslim position which states that someone was substituted for Jesus or that the crucifixion was simply an illusion.<sup>57</sup>

Deedat bases this rather novel argument partially on the belief that God would not have allowed one of his prophets to die such an ignominious death and that He therefore responded positively to Jesus' cries for help. He claims to find substantiation for this view in John 19:33 where it states that the Romans saw that Jesus was dead without, according to Deedat, conducting a more thorough investigation: 'When John says that the soldiers 'saw', he means that they surmised. For no modern stethoscope was used to verify death, nor did anyone touch his body before concluding that he was dead already.'<sup>58</sup> He gets around the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' side by claiming that this was, in fact, a sign that he was indeed still alive. God used this, or so Deedat claims, as a ruse to fool the soldiers into thinking that Jesus expired while he was in fact still alive.

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<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Mohammed Makki, *Deedat continues to promote Ahmadi/Qadiani beliefs on Nabi Isa* in *The Muslim Digest*, June-July 1988, Durban.

<sup>57</sup> Mohammed Makki, *Deedat continues to promote Ahmadi/Qadiani beliefs on Nabi Isa* in *The Muslim Digest*, June-July 1988, Durban.

<sup>58</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 36.

The above is obviously based on a very selective reading of the Gospels, something that Deedat's Muslim readers are unlikely to notice. He specifically tries to explain away the fact that it is ruled that Jesus's bones should not be broken (John 19:33) as those in charge of the execution were absolutely sure that he had died.

Deedat seems to have borrowed his views on the crucifixion from a sect that are regarded as heretical by both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The Ahmadi's (or Ahmadiyya) is a Muslim sect that arose in 19<sup>th</sup> century north India. Their main point of difference with other Muslims is the recognition of another prophet (Mizra Ghulam Ahmad) after Muhammad. They also cherish the belief that Jesus survived the cross and lived out his days in the very area where the sect originated. Several Muslim scholars have pointed to direct links between Deedat's views and Ahmadi writings that claimed that he merely 'swooned' on the cross.

### ***The Funeral***

Deedat points to Pilate's surprise that Jesus died so quickly (Mark 15:44)<sup>59</sup> as further proof that Jesus was taken from the cross while still alive. According to him the Romans practiced two forms of crucifixion (a slower and faster method). He claims that Jesus was crucified using the 'slow' method, hence Pilate's reaction: 'What was the reason for Pilate's amazement? Why did he marvel? He knew from experience that normally no man would die within 3 hours on a cross, unless the "crucifragrum" was resorted to, which was not done in the case of Jesus.'<sup>60</sup> Deedat states that it is also quite significant that Jesus' disciples took care of the burial. They were the only people who had contact with the body (with the two Marias as spectators) and had a strong interest in concealing the fact that Jesus was alive: 'If there were any signs of life in the limp body, no one was foolish enough to shout to the retreating

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<sup>59</sup> 'Pilate was surprised when he learned that he was already dead. Summoning the Centurion he asked him whether Jesus had already died' (Mark 15:44, NIV).

<sup>60</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 40.

curiosity mongers: He is ALIVE! He is ALIVE! They knew that the Jews would then make doubly sure that his life was snuffed out.<sup>61</sup> The Jewish authorities thus made several critical mistakes. They, firstly, allowed Jesus to be taken from the cross without checking whether he was alive. They, secondly, permitted his disciples to form the burial party. They, thirdly, did not take enough care to ensure that the grave was sealed. By the time they became suspicious and went to Pilate for assistance, it was too late.

## **The Resurrection**

The title of one of Deedat's books make it very clear where he stands on the topic of the resurrection: '*Resurrection or Resuscitation?*' We are left in no doubt at all how Deedat would answer this question. In line with his belief that Jesus merely swooned on the cross he claims that the resurrection represented nothing more than Jesus 'coming to'. He deals with objections to this idea in two ways. He firstly disputes the nature of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (see below) and he secondly points to many examples of people who were presumed dead but who made dramatic recoveries. In doing so he is attempting to show that his hypothesis is not beyond the realms of possibility.

Deedat's specific views on the resurrection will be discussed under the following headings: a) His appearance to Mary b) the nature of the post-resurrection body and c) the 'sign of Jonah'.

### ***The appearance of Jesus to Mary***

In line with his views on the supposed 'resuscitation' of Jesus Deedat claims that the appearances of Jesus to his disciples and followers on the Sunday morning is further proof that he never really died. He bases this view in part

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<sup>61</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 41.

on the fact that Mary went to his grave to anoint Jesus' body.<sup>62</sup> He states that this would make no sense if she believed that he was dead, but:

...it would, however have made sense if she was looking for a live person. You see she was about the only person besides Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who had given the final rites to the body of Jesus. If she had seen any sign of life in the limp body of Jesus when he was taken down from the cross, she was not going to shout 'HE IS ALIVE'. She returns after two night and a day when the Jewish Sabbath had passed to take care of Jesus.<sup>63</sup>

Mary is surprised and troubled by the fact that she did not find him there as expected. Jesus then decides, according to Deedat, to play a 'practical joke' on her by disguising himself as the gardener and asking her who she is looking for. Even his answer to this question indicates for Deedat that she is convinced that he is alive. By simply saying 'Mary' Jesus confirms that he is still alive although he did not want her to touch him. Not because of his exalted body, Deedat claims, but because he was still in pain from his sufferings on the Friday.

Deedat attempts to further cement his resuscitation hypothesis through a rather interesting and novel interpretation of John 20:17: 'She is not blind; she can see that he standing right before her. What does he mean by "not yet ascended"—GONE UP—when he was DOWN right there? He is in fact telling her that he is not RESURRECTED from the DEAD. In the language of the Jew, in the idiom of the Jew, he is saying: "I AM NOT DEAD YET"—He is saying: "I AM ALIVE."<sup>64</sup>

### ***The Nature of Jesus' Body***

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<sup>62</sup> 'Do Jews massage dead bodies after three days? The answer is NO! Do the Christians massage dead bodies after 3 days? The answer is NO! Do the Muslims (who are the nearest to the Muslims in their ceremonial laws) massage dead bodies after three days? And the answer is again NO!' Ahmad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 44

<sup>63</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 44.

<sup>64</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 44.

Deedat firmly believes that the fact that Jesus had a physical body that people could touch, as well as the fact that he ate, indicate that he did not rise from the dead. He clearly has a very firm preconceived view of what a 'resurrection body' would look like and Jesus' body on Easter Sunday does not 'make the grade' as far as he is concerned. As he emphatically states: '*A spirit has no flesh and bones.*'<sup>65</sup>

The above raises the obvious question as to why it would be necessary for those who come back from the dead to be purely spiritual beings. Deedat claims that this is a firm Biblical principle and even quotes Jesus' answer to the Sadducees in Luke 20:35-36 in support: '...those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage and they can no longer die for they are like the angels.'

Deedat's contention that Jesus, was 'not like the angels' is further supported by the fact that he ate in front of his disciples. This was not some optical illusion but proof that he was 100% human. Deedat reaches deep into the heart of liberal Biblical scholarship for his views and even quotes Frederick Schleiermacher in this instance: 'If Christ had only eaten to show that he could eat, while he really had no need for nourishment, it would be a pretence, something docetic'.<sup>66</sup>

Deedat faces several major obstacles in attempts to prove that he is interpreting New Testament data correctly. Perhaps most important among these is the interaction between Jesus and Thomas after the resurrection (John 20:26-28). Here we see Thomas confessing the divinity of Christ upon being invited to inspect his post-resurrection body. Deedat gets around this rather inconvenient passage (as far as his resuscitation theory is concerned) by simply dismissing it as a later fabrication. He makes the claim that 'Biblical scholars' (who remain unnamed): '...are coming to the conclusion that the 'doubting Thomas' episode is of the same variety as that of the 'Woman Caught in the

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<sup>65</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Resurrection or Resuscitation?* (Durban: IPCI, 1978), 13.

<sup>66</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Resurrection or Resuscitation?* (Durban: IPCI, 1978), 11.

Act', i.e. it is a fabrication. But as the orthodox will not allow this interpolation (John 8:1-11) to be expunged from their versions of the Bible, he exhibits a similar stubbornness in dealing with the verses about 'putting fingers into the print of nails (John 20:28).'<sup>67</sup> Curiously not a single reference is provided to back up the claim that scholars are increasingly viewing this passage as an 'interpolation'.

### ***The Sign of Jonah***

According to Deedat the strongest argument against the orthodox Christian view of the resurrection is to be found in the so-called 'Sign of Jonah' (Matthew 12:39-40): 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.' According to Deedat the Christian interpretation of the resurrection fails this test on two fronts.

Deedat firstly points out that Jonah was alive while he was inside the fish and that he came out alive. According to him 'like Jonah' therefore means that Jesus went into the tomb while still alive:

How was Jesus in the tomb for the same period, dead or alive? Over a thousand million Christians, of every church and denomination give a unanimous verdict of d-e-a-d! Is that like Jonah or un-like Jonah in your language? And everyone whose mind is not confused says that, this is very UN-LIKE Jonah. Jesus said that he would be 'LIKE JONAH' and his infatuated followers say that he was 'UN-LIKE JONAH' Who is lying – Jesus or his followers? I leave the answer to you.<sup>68</sup>

The second way in which Deedat claims the Christian view of the resurrection fails the 'sign of Jonah' test is that Jesus did not spend nearly enough time in

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<sup>67</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 76.

<sup>68</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 67.

the grave: 'You will never, never get three days and three nights as Jesus himself had foretold 'according to the scriptures'. Even Einstein, the master mathematician cannot help you with this.'<sup>69</sup> In this case it is perhaps not a 'master mathematician' who should be called on but someone with knowledge of the Old Testament background to the New Testament. The Old Testament is filled with instances of referring to specific periods as a 'day and night' regardless of whether a full 24-hour period was completed. For example in Esther 4:16 we see the queen requesting that no one was to 'eat or drink for three days, night or day.' However, when only two night had passed she went into the king's chamber and the fast was ended (Esther 5:1).

## **The Ascension and Present Status of Jesus**

Deedat accepts that Jesus was raised bodily to heaven and that he will return to play a role during the final judgement. He does not, however, elaborate very much on these beliefs in his works and is simply content to repeat Sunni Islamic orthodoxy as far as the present status of Jesus is concerned. This is a real pity as it avoids the very interesting questions as to why Jesus (a mere man according to Islamic teaching) was spared death and granted a place with Allah while Muhammad, the central human figure in Islam, died and was buried.

### **Preliminary Responses to Deedat's Treatment of the Life and Ministry of Jesus**

The purpose of this article is not to provide a comprehensive refutation of all the arguments listed above but rather to furnish the reader with an overview of Deedat's views on the life and ministry of Jesus. Views that continue to influence Muslims to this day in their thinking on Christianity. It would, however, be proper to make a few preliminary remarks as to the outlines of a possible response from a Christian perspective. These remarks will mainly be focussed on Deedat's methodology in interpreting the Bible.

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<sup>69</sup> Amhad Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (Durban: IPCI, 1984), 71.

**Exegesis vs. Eisegesis:** It should be clear from the analysis presented above that Ahmed Deedat had a very specific, and in some ways very unique, take on the life and ministry of Jesus. What is very clear, however, is that he framed his Christology with certain presuppositions firmly in place. Chief among these is the belief that the Qur'anic version of the events should be accepted without question. This means that, while we are ostensibly taken on a journey through the Gospels, what we are left with is nothing more than the Jesus of Islamic tradition. It, therefore, seems as if all of his study of the Bible merely brought Deedat to the positions that he already accepted as a Muslim. It could, therefore, be claimed that Deedat is simply engaged in a process of eisegesis in his treatment of the Biblical text.

**Ignoring standard exegetical tools.** During his lifetime Deedat was often touted as 'the foremost Muslim scholar of the Bible'. Yet we see precious little evidence of careful exegesis in his works. Multiple instances can be cited of where the original languages are ignored and where conclusions are instead based on translations. There is, indeed, precious little evidence that Deedat knew either Hebrew or Greek to the level required for scholarly interaction with the Biblical text. We can, furthermore, also note several instances where basic exegetical steps (e.g. taking literary and historical context into account) are not followed. Instead Deedat all too often reaches for the interpretation that is most amenable to a Muslim understanding of the text.

**Are the Gospels authoritative or not?** Deedat has written several works questioning the authority of the Bible and claiming that what Christians read today bears little relation to the original '*Injil*' (a book supposedly given to Jesus by Allah). Yet some of his other books, including those profiled here, use the Gospels in an attempt to 'prove' that Jesus was a good Muslim who did not die on the cross. This leaves Deedat in a classic 'having your cake and eating it position'. Wherever he can present elements of the Gospel in ways that concur with Islamic views he will incorporate it into his books, only to reject those elements that cannot be harmonised with his arguments (cf. his blithe dismissal of Thomas' 'My Lord and my God' statement as a later interpolation). Are we, therefore, to assume that the Gospels are only reliable in as far as they

agree with Islamic doctrine and unreliable where they do not? This seems indeed to be the hermeneutical key consistently employed by Deedat.

***The double standard implicit in Deedat's use of 'Higher Criticism'***: In his works Deedat leans heavily on liberal Biblical scholarship with Rudolf Bultmann getting pride of place as a scholar whose views on the historicity of the New Testament is accepted without question. There is no indication in Deedat's works that the higher critical findings that he presents as incontestable are fiercely disputed by more conservative scholars or are in some cases thoroughly discredited. What is, perhaps, even more troubling is that Deedat has no issue with accepting without question much later material (i.e. the Qur'an's testimony about Jesus) without so much as even a passing enquiry as to whether this is historically accurate. If Deedat allowed the same kind of questions to be asked about the Qur'an's view of Jesus he would quickly be confronted by the fact that much of it is based on a thoroughgoing misunderstanding of Christian doctrine and that certain events or discourses can be traced directly to apocryphal material. Yet these insights never intrude into his works. The guiding principle seems to be: Question the historical reliability of the canonical Gospels (even though they were written within a generation of the life of Jesus) but accept without question the testimony of the Qur'an (written hundreds of years after the events and clearly drawing on later apocryphal sources).

## **Conclusion**

It is hoped that this article has helped the reader to come to grips with the views on Christology of one of the most influential Muslim apologists of recent memory. This is vitally important as these views continue to influence Muslim views of Christianity into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is, furthermore, hoped that some of the preliminary responses listed above will help Christians seeking to share the Gospel with followers of Islam to formulate their own responses that will powerfully challenge the objections to the Gospel raised by Deedat and those who followed in his footsteps. It is vital that this be done in order for Muslim people to be confronted with who Jesus truly is instead of being content with the mere human prophet they encounter in the Qur'an. Kenneth Cragg's words

about 'Isa' in the Qur'an is equally valid for the picture that Deedat paints of Christ:

Consider the Quranic Jesus alongside the New Testament. How sadly attenuated is this Christian prophet as Islam knows him? Where are the stirring words, the deep insights, the gracious deeds, the compelling qualities of him who was called the Master? The mystery of his self-consciousness as Messiah is unsuspected; the tender searching intimacy of his relationship to the disciples undiscovered. Where is 'the way, the truth, the life' in this abridgement? Where are the words from the Cross? Where the triumph of the resurrection from an empty grave? There is in the Qur'an neither Galilee nor Gethsemane, neither Nazareth nor Olivet. Even Bethlehem is unknown and the story of its greatest night is remote and strange. Is the Sermon on the Mount never to be heard in the Muslim world? Must the story of the Good Samaritan never be told there. Must the simple, human narrative of the prodigal son never mirror the essence of human waywardness and forgiveness? Is 'Come unto me all you who are weary and I will give you rest' an invitation not to be heard and Jesus' taking bread and giving thanks a negligible tale? Should not all humankind also be initiated into the meaning of the question 'Will you also go away'? In short, must not the emasculated Jesus of the Qur'an [And as presented in Deedat's works – PJS] be rescued from misconception, disclosed in all his relevance, in words, deeds, and sorrows to the plight and aspiration of all of humanity? Our concern about assaying it will surely measure our own estimate of who and what he is – the Christ who questioned his disciples on one crucial occasion: 'Who do you say that I am?' The answer matters to Christ and all the world. We have no right either to suppress the question or to neglect the response. Rather inseparable from our Christianity, is the duty to bring others to Him, who asks, that they may answer for themselves.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (London: Collins, 1985), 234-235.