

INTRODUCTION

In this book, Agron Belica offers a fresh interpretation of the momentous events on a hillock beyond the walls of Jerusalem nearly two millennia ago: the Crucifixion. Belica asks disconcerting questions about the received version of gospel “history” and gives free rein to his inquisitive nature. Many of his ideas and speculations will strike the casual reader schooled in the ancient Biblical traditions with which they conflict as unhistorical, impossible, and unbelievable. Yet, when questioning established premises, the impossible may often be shown to be possible, as Socrates was fond of doing.

Mr. Belica does not claim to be *proving* anything, except that with some speculation and reinterpretation of the Biblical record and relevant Quranic texts, when coupled with a few remarks from Josephus, the whole traditional version of the Crucifixion can be seen in a different light. Belica throws new ideas and new possibilities at the reader, asking only that they be considered. Like a barrage of rockets shot into the moonless night sky, some flaring more brightly than the others, some of his speculations are more plausible than others, but all are provocative and worth thinking about. His is the first innovative interpretation of the Crucifixion since Dr. Hugh Schonfield looked at it two generations ago.

Beyond that, Belica has taken upon himself the task of redressing the imbalance between the gospel Jesus and the gospel John the Baptist and, in our opinion, has done so with justice on his side. The gospel writers diminished John in order to exalt Jesus and transform him into a superhuman, divine entity. While their motives are understandable, the researcher who seeks to explore unanswered questions and obscure “competitors” to the demigod they were creating, is understandably frustrated and can only mourn the lost evidence. This is particularly true for John the Baptist. In the New Testament, he is a minor figure, his purpose is to introduce and validate the mission of his kinsman Jesus as the Messiah.

Belica asks why was John the Baptist so used by the gossellers and then dismissed to the limbo of silence, together with the Essenes who, though a considerable presence in the Palestine of the day, are not even mentioned by them? He was intrigued by that question and began to study the references to John, gradually conceiving unprovable, but provocative theories.

His work became known to a mutual friend, the author of a number of valuable books and articles on various aspects of Islamica, Dr. Laleh Bakhtiar—who also became interested in John the Baptist, and through her, I was introduced to him. At first, I was rather skeptical, but was persuaded to look into the historical injustice done to John. (He is much better served in the Quran than he is in the Bible.) Having trusted her instincts over the years in such things in my own literary projects, and with her continuous encouragement and suggestions, I set to work. The result of my own inquiry, the monograph *Rethinking John the Baptist*, is appended to the present volume.

Meanwhile, Agron Belica continued his own research, examining new evidence while elaborating and working out his theories and speculations. The results of this work constitute the main portion of this volume that is dedicated to the rehabilitation of the repute and stature of that much neglected prophet, John the Baptist, known in the Islamic world as Yahya. I was pleased to be chosen as his editor and annotator for this book.

The reader may note that when Jesus and John are mentioned in their Biblical and Western context in this book, they are referred to as John and Jesus, or John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ. However, in an Islamic context the Quranic names are generally used: for John, Yahya (*Yahyā*); and for Jesus (*ʿĪsā*). We hope that this does not cause undo confusion.

We have used Pickthall's admirable translation as the starting point for all of the translations of Quranic verses. However, we have made one consistent change in his work: substituting the English "God" for the Arabic "Allah" to avoid the invidious connotation that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are talking about different Supreme Beings. (After all, Christian Arabs also call God "Allah.") We have also made some modifications based upon Belica's interpretations.

We have used the *Revised Standard Version* of the Holy Bible (RSV) as the basis for Biblical quotations. We have also consulted other translations of the Bible, principally the *King James Version* (KJV) and the scholarly *Jerusalem Bible* (JB). We have also had occasion to refer to the Hebrew text with parallel English translation issued by the Hebrew Publishing Company of New York.

In our Biblical quotations we have restored the distinction between second-person singular *thou* and plural pronouns *ye* (with attendant verb changes), because we feel strongly that an important distinction is often lost by ignoring this difference. Is the addressee an individual or a group? Many times in order to clarify the matter we have had to refer back to the KJV, the magnificent prose of which—though not so accurate in places as that of the RSV—maintains that distinction. However, when the Bible is being quoted in the context of a direct quotation taken from another source, we have usually respected the author's usage in such matters, though on occasion we have also made some alterations in punctuation and capitalization of a minor nature to improve readability.

Biblical quotations are designated in the standard fashion, using the abbreviated name of the book, the chapter, colon, and verse or verses. The fourth verse of chapter one of *Genesis* = Gen. 1:4. The abbreviations used to designate the various books of the Bible will be found in the list following this Foreword. As in the case of the Quran, we are responsible for the final form of the quotations.

Italics are used in quotations from the Quran, for names of Biblical books and other writings when they occur in our text, especially where there is likely to be confusion between the name of the writer and his work as, for example: "The disciple Matthew is the putative author of *Matthew*." The phrase "May the blessings and peace of God be upon him!" uttered following the Prophet's name and similar phrases honoring other Prophets and the Companions are not indicated in our text, but should be uttered by the Muslim reader either aloud or in his heart when they occur.

We would remind the reader that this contains both fact and speculative theory. We hope that we have made the difference between the two clear in the text and notes. We do not claim to have said the last word about John the Baptist, but we offer our opinions and speculations in the hope that we may stimulate others to join us in the project to restore John/Yahya to his proper rank and dignity among the prophets. *And God knows best!*

THE EDITOR