

THE FANTASY ISLAM OF REZA ASLAN

Welcome to the game of hiding what's in the Koran.

October 27, 2015 Dr. Stephen M. Kirby



Fantasy Islam: A game in which an audience of non-Muslims wish with all their hearts that Islam was a "Religion of Peace," and a Muslim strives to fulfill that wish by presenting a personal version of Islam that has little foundation in Islamic Doctrine.

As I have mentioned before, "Fantasy Islam" is a popular game among many non-Muslims and so-called "moderate" or "reformist" Muslims. Reza Aslan appears to be such a Muslim.

Reza Aslan was born in Iran. In 1979, at the age of seven, he and his family fled the Iranian Revolution and came to the United States. At the age of 15 he converted to evangelical Christianity, but later returned to Islam. His website states that he is "an internationally acclaimed writer and scholar of religions." He is currently a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside.

In 2005 Aslan wrote a book titled *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. The updated edition came out in 2011. This article addresses that updated edition.

It should be noted that in his book Aslan listed *The Life of Muhammad* and the multi-volume work *The History of al-Tabari*, as among the books he “consulted.” These are classical works by Muslim scholars and major sources for information about Muhammad and Islam. Aslan even specifically mentions them as among those that have “catalogued” the story of Islam (p. xxiv). Unfortunately, although Aslan claims that he “consulted” them, we will see that he apparently overlooked conflicting information in these works in favor of playing *Fantasy Islam*.

Death Penalty for Apostasy is “Un-Quranic”

On p. 121 Aslan stated that the death penalty for apostasy was “un-Quranic,” and he stated that nowhere in the Koran “is any earthly punishment prescribed for apostasy.”

The only problem for Aslan is that in 4:89 of the Koran Allah commands Muslims to take hold of those apostates who have left Islam and “kill them wherever you find them.” So the death penalty for apostasy from Islam is in the Koran.

In addition, Muhammad said that death was the penalty for a Muslim who left Islam (e.g. *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Nos. 6878 and 6923; and *Sahih Muslim*, No. 1676). And Muhammad even specified the nature of that death:

If someone changes his religion - then strike off his head!

Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik ibn Anas, 36.18.15, in a section titled “Judgement on Abandonment of Islam.”

No Foundation in the Koran for Stoning

On p. 71 Aslan wrote about the “misogynistic tendencies” of Umar, the second Caliph, and how Umar

instituted a series of severe penal ordinances aimed primarily at women. Chief among these was the stoning to death of adulterers, a punishment which has absolutely no foundation whatsoever in the Quran but which Umar justified by claiming it had originally been part of the Revelation and had somehow been left out of the authorized text. Of course, Umar never explained how it was possible for a verse such as this “accidentally” to have been left out of the Divine Revelation of God[.]

It is a common play in Fantasy Islam to claim that stoning is not a part of Islam because it is not in the Koran, so let’s take a look at this claim.

In the first place, it is correct to state that the Koran says nothing about stoning. The original punishment for adultery in the Koran (4:15) focused on women and confining

them to their houses until they died; but there was a key provision at the end of this verse: "or Allah ordains for them some (other) way."

Muhammad later received a "revelation" from Allah explaining that "other way":

'Ubada b. As-Samit reported: Allah's Messenger (SAW) saying: Receive (teaching) from me, receive (teaching) from me. Allah has ordained a way for those (women). When an unmarried male commits adultery with an unmarried female (they should receive) one hundred lashes and banishment for one year. And in case of married male committing adultery with a married female, they shall receive one hundred lashes and be stoned to death.

Sahih Muslim, No. 1690

So now, instead of confinement, the punishment for adultery would be lashing and stoning. The punishment of lashing was codified in 24:2 of the Koran. Muhammad considered stoning as the appropriate penalty for adultery up to his death. He ordered many an adulterer to be stoned, as did his successors.

Umar did make the claim that the Verse of Stoning had been left out when the Koran was compiled (e.g. *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, No. 6830). But when the Koran was being compiled Umar had tried to get it included. However, the standard for including a "revelation" as a verse was that it had to be certified by two witnesses, and there appeared to be only one witness: Umar.

But in reality there was a second witness, Muhammad's favorite wife Aisha:

It was narrated that 'Aishah said: "The Verse of stoning and of breastfeeding an adult ten times was revealed, and the paper was with me under my pillow. When the Messenger of Allah died, we were preoccupied with his death, and a tame sheep came in and ate it."

Sunan Ibn Majah, No. 1944

Even though on p. 70 Aslan had written that "nearly one sixth of all 'reliable' hadith can be traced back to Muhammad's wife Aisha," the idea of using her as a witness apparently came up against 2:282 of the Koran. This verse requires the testimony of two women in order to equal that of one man in property matters. So even though both Umar and Aisha claimed there had been a stoning verse "revealed," we would still only have at best one and one-half witnesses, therefore falling short of the two witnesses required to include a verse in the Koran. It would appear that this is why there is no Verse of Stoning in the Koran. Nevertheless, it is still a part of Islam:

Now the punishment of adultery has been fixed, which is stoning to death. That

punishment also remained in force during the times of the Rightly-Guided caliphs (successors of the Messenger of Allah) and that remained the unanimous opinion of all the jurists and scholars afterwards...The law that prescribes stoning the adultery [sic] to death is supported by authentic hadeeths, and their narrators are numerous, and hence, scholars grade those hadeeths as mutawatir [frequently reported]. A Muslim has, therefore, no choice except to acknowledge and accept it.

Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan, Vol. 3, p. 665

Muhammad's "Political Marriages"

Aslan pointed out that Muhammad had been married to nine different women over the course of ten years; he explained that most of these marriages had been political arrangements to forge links outside the Muslim community. Aslan mentioned two of those "marriages" on p. 64:

His marriage to Rayhana, a Jew, linked him with the Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayza, while his marriage to Mariyah, a Christian and a Copt, created a significant political alliance with the Christian ruler of Egypt.

However, two of the works "consulted" by Aslan have this to say about these "marriages":

Rayhana: Rayhana was among the female captives taken when the Muslims conquered the Banu Qurayza tribe. Muhammad supervised the beheading of 600-900 of the captured Jewish males (combatants and non-combatants) and picked Rayhana for himself as his share of the plunder. Some of the women were sold to purchase horses and weapons, and others of the women were divided among the Muslim warriors. (*The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 461-468; *The History of al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet*, pp. 137 and 141; and *The History of al-Tabari: The Victory of Islam*, pp. xiii, and 27-39).

Mariyah: Muhammad sent a letter to Al-Muqawqis, the Christian ruler of Egypt, "inviting" him to Islam. Al-Muqawqis declined, but sent Muhammad either two or four slave girls. Two of these slave girls were Mariyah and her sister Sarin. Muhammad kept Mariyah as his slave concubine and gave Sarin to Hassan B. Thabit as a gift (*The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 499, 653, and 711, n. 129; *The History of al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet*, pp. 137, 141 and 147; and *The History of al-Tabari: The Victory of Islam*, pp. xiii, 66, 100, and 131).

With regard to the first "marriage," after Muhammad and the Muslims got finished there simply wasn't much left in terms of a Jewish tribe with which to be "linked." With regard to the second "marriage," the ruler of Egypt simply sent some slave girls over for

Muhammad to do with as he pleased. There was no “significant political alliance.”

No One Speaks for God

In the prologue of his book, Aslan wrote (p. xxvi):

No one speaks for God – not even the prophets (who speak about God).

Aslan has some major conflicts with Allah and Muhammad. For example, in the Koran we find Allah saying:

He who obeys the Messenger (Muhammad) has indeed obeyed Allah[.] (4:80)

And Muhammad himself said:

Whoever obeys me, he obeys Allah, and whoever disobeys me, he disobeys Allah[.]

Sahih Al-Bukhari, No. 7137

To claim that no one speaks for God requires Aslan, a Muslim, to deny statements from Allah, the god of Islam, and Allah’s Messenger, Muhammad.

Islam Has Never Had a Single Religious Authority

On p. 283 Aslan made an amazing claim:

Unlike Judaism and Christianity, however, Islam has never had a single religious authority...that is, a centralized religious authority that claims the right to speak for the entire Muslim community.

One might expect to hear such a claim from a non-Muslim who knows little about Islam. But Aslan says he is a Muslim and his book is about Islam. To make such a claim, Aslan had to not only dismiss the Koran verse and *hadith* mentioned in the previous section, but he also had to dismiss Koran verses such as these:

Chapter 33, Verse 36:

It is not for a believer, man or woman, when Allah and His Messenger, have decreed a matter that they should have any option in their decision. And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he had indeed strayed into a plain error.

Chapter 59, Verse 7:

And whatsoever the Messenger (Muhammad) gives you, take it; and whatsoever he forbids you, abstain (from it). And fear Allah; verily, Allah is Severe in punishment.

Chapter 4, Verse 115:

And whoever contradicts and opposes the Messenger (Muhammad) after the right path has been shown clearly to him, and follows other than the believers' way, We shall keep him in the path he has chosen, and burn him in Hell - what an evil destination!

And Aslan also had to dismiss the following statement from his prophet Muhammad:

Whoever obeys me will enter Paradise, and whoever disobeys me is the one who refuses (to enter it).

Sahih Al-Bukhari, No. 7280

To deny the centralized, singular religious authority of Muhammad is to deny Islam.

Muslims, Christians and Jews are One Big Ummah

On p. 101 Aslan wrote that Muhammad believed that although the Muslim, Christian and Jewish religions each

comprised its own distinct religious community (its own individual Ummah), together they formed one united Ummah...Muhammad aligned his community with the Jews in Medina because he considered them, as well as the Christians, to be part of his Ummah.

To be valid, this claim would have meant that Muhammad rejected both the words of Allah in the Koran, and his own teachings:

In the Koran we find that Allah is angry with the Jews, and the Christians are misguided because they believe that Jesus is the son of God (1:7). Muslims are commanded not to make friends with Jews and Christians (5:51), although Muslims can pretend to be friends if the situation so dictates (3:28). Jews are among the worst enemies of Islam (5:82). Muslims are commanded to fight Jews and Christians until the Jews and Christians pay protection money with willing submission and feel themselves subdued (9:29). Allah curses the Jews and the Christians (9:30). And Jews and Christians are among the worst of creatures and "will abide in the fire of Hell" (98:6).

Muhammad said:

Jews and Christians are each worth only half of a Muslim (Sunan Ibn Majah, No. 2644).

Do not greet the Jews and the Christians before they greet you and when you meet any one of them on the roads force him to go to the narrowest part of it (Sahih Muslim, No. 2167).

The Hour will not be established until you fight against the Jews, and the stone behind which a Jew will be hiding will say, 'O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, so kill him (Sahih Al-Bukhari, No. 2926).

The Jews were grave robbers (Sahih Al-Bukhari, No. 3452).

Jews and Christians will take the place of Muslims in Hell (Sahih Muslim, No. 2767R1).

I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslims (Sahih Muslim, No. 1767).

Muhammad did not reject the Koran or his own teachings, but Aslan had to in order to make the claim of there being one, big *Ummah*.

Muhammad and the Banu Qaynuqa

On p. 91 Aslan wrote that the Jewish Banu Qaynuqa tribe had broken their oath of mutual protection with the Muslims and had therefore committed treason; so, according to "Arab tradition," the men of the tribe were to be killed, and the women and children were to be sold into slavery. But Aslan wrote that everyone was shocked when Muhammad "rejected traditional law" and simply exiled the tribe from Medina.

But some of the works "consulted" by Aslan tell a different story. In reality, after the Banu Qaynuqa were defeated, Muhammad actually wanted to kill his fettered captives, but he was persuaded otherwise by 'Adbullah b. Ubayy, who went to the point of grabbing Muhammad by the collar to get him to exile the Banu Qaynuqa instead of killing them. Muhammad finally had this to say about the Banu Qaynuqa: "Let them go; may God curse them, and may he curse [b. Ubayy] with them" (*The History of al-Tabari, The Foundation of the Community*, p. 86; and *The Life of Muhammad*, p. 363).

Conclusion

On p. 286 Aslan stated that Islam was a personal religion with "no mediator between the believer and God," and "all people have the ability to discern God's will for themselves." He called this a "radical creed" that some have used

to develop wholly new interpretations of Islam that foster pluralism, individualism, modernism, and democracy; others have used it to propound an equally new ideal of Islam that calls for intolerance, bigotry, militancy, and perpetual war. Which of these interpretations is "true Islam" is an unanswerable question, since the rejection of institutional authority means that all interpretations of Islam must be considered equally authoritative.

So according to Aslan, Islam is whatever anybody wants it to be, and on top of that it can still be called Islam! And so Fantasy Islam is played.

◆ **Tags:** Islam, Lies, Reza Aslan

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