An Assessment of *The Camel*
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I. An Initial Assessment of *The Camel*

*The Camel* is one of many “bridging” techniques, whereby a missionary uses a common element in another worldview, culture, or religion and uses that common element as the opening for a gospel conversation. In evaluating *The Camel*, several questions should be asked:

A. Is it appropriate to “bridge” to the gospel?
There is precedent in the Scriptures for using bridges to the gospel, so long as those bridges do not undermine the gospel itself. Such bridges may come from philosophies, works of literature, other religions, etc. Any false philosophy, worldview, or religion contains elements of truth and those elements of truth may be used as “hooks” to grab the interest of an unbeliever.

Moses used a pagan word, *elohim*, to describe YHWH. John used a pagan word, *logos*, to describe Christ in John 1. This word, *logos*, was used in a variety of manners by pagans. Philo used logos over hundreds of times in his published works. Paul used pagan poets and philosophers in his speech in Acts 17. As long as the pagan system of belief isn’t spoken of as being a true way of salvation, a comprehensively true way of belief, then we can use elements of that worldview or philosophy to point people to Him in whom is all Truth, to Him in whose name there truly is salvation.

Augustine of Hippo modeled this approach in his classic treatise *The City of God*. In arguing that the Graeco-Roman polytheistic worldview was fundamentally flawed and was a false system of salvation, Augustine quoted their poets, philosophers, and historians in a favorable manner as often as he could. But all of this was toward the end of showing that the gospel contained in the Grand Biblical Narrative is the only way to salvation, and the only way to make sense of the world.

B. What is the basic approach of this particular bridging method? Does the basic approach contradict the gospel?
The basic approach of *The Camel* is to use the Qur’an to show that even in a Muslim’s own holy book a Muslim finds freedom to believe that Jesus is more than a prophet, and that the Bible is a book from God. After having seen this, a Muslim often feels the freedom to read the Christian Scriptures and study the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It identifies insights, values, and virtues that are affirmed both by the Qur’an and by the Scriptures, and uses those shared beliefs

C. Is it clear that the bridge is only a bridge?
Greeson makes it clear that if a person goes through *The Camel* with a Muslim, the person has still not understood the gospel, because *The Camel* is not the gospel (111). What the Muslim has understood, however, is that they should view the Christian
Scriptures and the person of Christ through new eyes. *The Camel* is only a bridge (19), something at the front-end of the evangelism process. For him, the gospel is given by the Christian Scriptures. The purpose of bridges is to point people to the Bible, which alone gives us the plan of salvation (17). While the Quran echoes some truths of the Bible, we must never confuse the Quran with the Bible (17). We appreciate Greeson’s high view of Christian Scripture. He treats Christian Scripture, not the Qur’an, as authoritative and sufficient for salvation.

D. Is there a need to use a bridge?
Greeson points out that if the MBB evangelist-church planter shares the gospel immediately, the gospel almost always will be rejected out of hand (36-37). For this reason, he uses some passages from the Qur’an to soften their attitude toward the person of Christ and toward the Christian Scriptures.

It is our opinion that a Qur’anic bridge of some sort is often very helpful in Muslim evangelism. For a Muslim, the highest sin is that of “shirk.” The sin of shirk is the sin of “assigning partners to God.” In other words, the highest sin is to believe in the Trinity, although Muhammad misunderstood Christian teaching about the Trinity. Muhammad, as well as today’s imams, teach that Christians believe that God the Father had sex with God the Mother (Mary) and out came the baby Jesus. This, along with other crude misinterpretations and false Muslim teachings, keep Muslims from even allowing us to speak the words of the gospel unless something (e.g. a bridge) makes them willing to give the gospel a hearing. In my (Bruce Ashford) experience as an evangelist and church planter in a Muslim republic, Qur’anic bridges were often helpful. Without a bridge, Muslims would sometimes plug their ears, shout me down, or even walk away; they wouldn’t even listen to the words of the gospel. But with a simple bridge of some sort, often they would soon be willing to give a hearing to the gospel.

In sum, a bridge can help overcome the religious, socio-cultural, and political prejudices that keep Muslims from even listening to a gospel presentation.

E. Are there elements of *The Camel* that we would change?
Yes, there are some elements of *The Camel* book about which we would raise questions. We treat those questions below. However, we do not think that those questionable elements discredit the basic approach of *The Camel*.

F. Conclusion for the first section of this assessment: Is *The Camel* sound in its fundamental approach?
*The Camel* is on solid ground in its basic approach. (1) To “bridge” to the gospel is a sound approach, modeled by John, Paul, and others in the Bible, as well as Augustine and others in church history. (2) It is acceptable to use the Qur’an as a bridge, just as it was acceptable for Paul to use pagan poets and philosophers, and for Augustine to use pagan poets, philosophers, and historians. (3) It seems that the MBBs who use *The Camel* are using it as a bridge rather than a parking lot; in other words, a bridge is OK as long as it is not conflated with the gospel, as long as it is a short-lived transitional element in a much more comprehensive approach to sharing the gospel. (4) With Muslims, a bridge is often
useful in helping them overcome religious, socio-cultural, and political prejudices against the gospel, so that they will give a hearing to the evangelist.

II. Are there questions we would raise about The Camel book? Yes.

A. What the Qur’an teaches about Muhammad as a prophet:
Greeson’s response to the question, “Do you agree with what the Qur’an says about Muhammad?” (144) raises a question for us. To affirm what the Qur’an says about Muhammad is problematic. It is true that Muhammad is a prophet; he is a false prophet. But the Qur’an is affirming that Muhammad is a legitimate prophet of God. Therefore, we would not answer this question by saying, “We agree with what the Qur’an says about Muhammad.” Perhaps the better response would be, “Muhammad said many true things about God.” Or, “Muhammad refuted polytheism and taught that God is one; he also taught against homosexuality and sexual immorality. These are very good things.” In other words, we do not answer the question fully, but only answer in part. This partial answer is tentative and provisional, and later in the friendship, evangelist can help the Muslim or new convert see that Muhammad was wrong about many things, including especially the person of Christ and the nature of salvation. Therefore, while we do not agree that the approach in The Camel is deceptive in its fundamental approach, we do believe that this particular statement by Greeson needs to be changed or he leaves himself open to the charge that he is deceptive.

B. Whether or not to use the Gospel of Thomas:
The point of using the Qur’an as a bridge is, ultimately, to get the Muslim to listen to the gospel, whereby he may be saved. This entails the subversion of the Qur’an. Similarly, acceptance of the truthfulness of Christianity also entails the rejection of pseudepigraphal books like the Gospel of Thomas, which Greeson suggests might be used in a helpful way (p. 134). The Gospel of Thomas is an unnecessary distraction.

In the Qur’an we are taking something that is culturally acceptable and familiar to Muslims, and bridging to the gospel. With the gospel of Thomas, one would be using something that is not very familiar to Muslims anyway, and could lead to additional confusion.

C. What counts as a vision from God?
Greeson uses the word vision several times (31, 43, 159) in a manner that is questionable. Granted, the term “vision” is used commonly to refer to one’s view of how things should be or might be, often in the sense of goal-setting or strategic planning. But Greeson’s references clearly refer to something more than that; Greeson could be understood to say that such “vision” is a revelation from God. In the Bible “vision” is primarily associated with the Scriptures themselves. Vision is the Word of God, demonstrated in the parallelism of the oft (mis)quoted text of Prov 29:18 (Similar parallels are seen in texts like 1 Sam 3:1; Psa 89:20; Jer 14:14; 23:16; Hos 12:10). When we speak of “vision” it is proper to understand vision as the Word given to and through the prophets. “Vision” functions for those who receive the Scriptures as a way of seeing “with” the Scriptures,
rather than seeing outside of the Scriptures themselves. We shouldn’t confuse our ideas with the vision of God, that is, the Word of God, given in the God-breathed Scriptures.

Once again, however, this is an issue that is very widespread in Southern Baptist life. If Greeson’s book is to be criticized for this statement, then so should the dozens of well-known Southern Baptist authors who fill the shelves of our bookstores.

D. Christian Distinctiveness:
Here, we do not have a criticism; rather we have a question. Greeson speaks of worshiping on Friday (34). Also he speaks of how Christians use Muslim-friendly terms (67). We think that there is not a problem with this, per se. One day is as good as another (Rom 14:5); also, using terms that Muslims use, and filling them with new meaning is acceptable. But there is a larger question to raise here: How do Christians set themselves off as a distinct people in a given cultural context? Are there ways in which the Christian community is seen as distinctively Christian? If much of the language used is the same as that of the Muslim community, and if the primary day of worship is the same, then what are the ways in which the community demonstrates that they are followers of Christ rather followers of Muhammad? We find it hard to believe that Greeson is saying that Christians are not different from Muslims in any of their forms of life and worship.

In light of the fact that our grammar identifies our Christian community, could Greeson suggest the ways in which Christian communities set themselves off as distinctive? When and how do they begin to make public distinction? Is there a certain amount of time? (We believe this is not the decision of the missionary; rather it is the decision of the local church, and the missionary should be prepared to offer wise counsel about this matter, without imposing on the autonomy of the congregation). Is it possible to make such distinction if the grammar is completely the same?

Another question relates to the use of the word “imam.” We are curious if this a distinctively Islamic referent? Or are there non-Islamic uses? (34) Is this word “imam” used in any other context than the religious? If it is only a Muslim word, then we are nervous. Why not translate “shepherd”? But if it could also be used of a CEO or a university teacher, then it might be permissible to use it.

III. Are there questions we would raise about certain criticisms of The Camel? Yes.

A. The “Camel Method” vs. The Camel book:
We must make a distinction between The Camel book and what is called the Camel method. While The Camel is a book that is written by one man, Kevin Greeson, the basic approach of The Camel (Qur’anic bridging) has come to be known as the Camel method. “The Camel Method” seems to be synonymous with the phrase “Qur’anic bridging”.

While there may be questions about this particular book, missionaries on the field use the phrase “the Camel method” to refer to Qur’anic bridging in general. This Qur’anic bridging takes many forms. Often it is merely the use of one Surah or verse in the Qur’an.
In my (Bruce Ashford) experience as a church planter, I would tell Muslims that over 20 people and events in the Bible are also discussed in the Qur’an. Then I would ask them if I could read to them the comprehensive account of those stories, from the ancient Christian Scriptures. Bridging is a method that many evangelists and church planters have used over many years. The basic approach of The Camel, then, is not novel.

In sum, even if a person has some problems with The Camel, one should not then conclude that Qur’anic bridging, or what has come to be known as “the Camel method” is wrong.

B. Is The Camel a fundamentally deceptive book?
We do not believe that The Camel is a fundamentally deceptive book (although there are a couple of statements that we believe need to be changed; see below). From our experience, charges of deception often rest on the fact that the Muslim evangelist using the Camel does not immediately tell everything that he believes about the Qur’an or about Muhammad.

The bigger question here is whether or not partial disclosure is deceptive. We think not. It is not always necessary to give full disclosure. If a missionary is asked the question, “Are you a missionary with the Southern Baptists?” the missionary is justified in answering “I am a language student at University of Islamistan.” The missionary answers the question without fully answering the question. If he answers “Yes, I am a missionary with the Southern Baptist Convention” he likely is kicked out of the country along with all of his teammates; also, it is likely that the nationals with whom he has friendships will then suffer or die. If he only gives partial disclosure, however, he has the opportunity to remain in country and work for the progress of the gospel in this region. This decision is an issue of prudence, of practical wisdom.

C. Would we use The Book of Mormon to evangelize Mormons?
If it were helpful to do so, we certainly have the freedom to use the Book of Mormon, or Hindu or Buddhist scriptures. We may also use Bertrand Russell’s atheistic books, Albert Einstein’s quotes, Caesar’s laws, or the Athenians’ poets and philosophers. We have freedom to use anything in God’s creation, as long as we do so in a way that leads to the gospel, and does not undermine the gospel in its use.

A better question to ask might be, “Is there any need to use the Book of Mormon as a bridge?” Usually there is not. A Mormon is not offended by the Bible; he considers it inerrant, so with the Mormon one may go straight to the gospel. A Muslim, however, often will shout down an evangelist, or leave the room, or plug their ears so as not to hear what the evangelist has to say about the gospel. Is there any good reason not to show then that the Qur’an gives them freedom to read the Christian Scriptures and inquire into the person and work of Christ?

As far as we can tell, evangelists who use Qur’anic bridges are not setting up the Qur’an as an epistemological authority. Rather, in effect they are saying, “Even the book that you
use as your authority gives you permission to read the Bible and obey the teachings of Christ. So why not read the Scriptures?"

D. Is it acceptable to use the word “Allah” for “God” when talking with Muslims?
This is an issue separate from The Camel. However, we want to discuss it because we have noticed that sometimes The Camel is criticized because of this issue; in other words, some of those who use The Camel also use the Arabic word “Allah” as a translation for the Hebrew word “elohim” or the Greek word “theos,” etc.

We believe that it is perfectly acceptable to use the word Allah in evangelism and in Bible translation. Indeed, in most cases this is the best translation to use. We believe this, and can delineate biblical, historical, linguistic, and practical reasons.

There is biblical precedent. For example, Moses used the pagan word elohim to describe YHWH, while John used the pagan word logos to describe God the Son. One might wonder why Moses and John feel free to use pagan words to describe the Christian God. The reason is a linguistic reason: the definition of a word is not found primarily in that word’s origin, genealogy, or etymology, but in that word’s use in context. Moses and John took the most serviceable words available to them, and then filled those words with new meaning. This becomes clear when we look at history. The English word “god” was a pagan word that Christians filled with new meaning. Even the word under examination in this paper, the Arabic word “allah,” was a pagan word that Muhammad stole and filled with new meaning. Finally, a practical reason: in most cases, Allah seems to be a better word than the alternatives in Arabic. In fact, an interesting question is what would be a good alternative?

E. Should The Camel be the only method of Muslim evangelism?
Of course not. Evangelism (and pre-evangelism, which is not disconnected from evangelism) is a person-centered and dialogical activity. Although the gospel remains the same, the ways we make entrance into gospel conversations and the ways we package the gospel vary according to context.

Evangelists in Muslim countries seek to communicate the gospel both faithfully and meaningfully. By faithfully, we mean that their communication of the gospel is true to the Scriptures. By meaningfully, we mean that their communication is comprehensible to a person in his cultural, social, and personal context.

It is for this reason that missions agencies, including the IMB, generally do not prescribe ONE method for evangelism. Each religion, each culture, and indeed each person, comes with a unique set of challenges.

F. What is the ultimate task in missions, and how does this ultimate task shed light upon The Camel and all other missiological tools and strategies?
The ultimate task in missions is to advance God’s kingdom for the sake of His glory. The advance of his kingdom depends, in large part, upon the growth of doctrinally sound, spiritually vibrant, and reproductive church plants. These church plants should be
reproductive, meaning that they should seek to multiply themselves in order to reach their own people. These church plants should be nurtured on sound doctrine, so that their leaders and members turn out to be genuine converts rather than the false converts to whom Jesus so often referred in Scripture, and so that the church continues to grow in the long run rather than merely in the short term.

IV. Concluding Comments

We believe that Kevin Greeson’s approach in *The Camel* is fundamentally sound. He stands upon the exclusivity of Christ for salvation and the sufficiency of Scripture for revealing that salvation. If and when such an approach is helpful in various Muslim contexts, *The Camel* may be used to help Muslims feel freedom to read the Christian Scriptures and to consider the person and work of Christ.

Greeson has demonstrated humility and devotion to sound doctrine in his willingness to significantly revise *The Camel*; the recent edition is an improvement upon the first edition. This is commendable.

While there are some questions that we raise about certain elements of the book, the book should not be dismissed because of the questions raised. We would also want to point out that we wonder if it is not unfair for certain people to subject Greeson’s book to such intense public scrutiny for certain missteps, while leaving on the Lifeway bookshelves numerous best-selling texts (written since the “Conservative Resurgence”) in spirituality, evangelism, and discipleship that have made much larger missteps.