

Peter's Confession in the Synoptic Gospels

When Looking Closely is not Looking Close Enough

By [Anthony Rogers](#)

Some time ago Samuel Green put me in touch with Andrew Livingston, a former Christian who left the Lord Jesus Christ for Muhammad and who now writes for [Taqwa magazine](#). Since I will be debating Andrew in the near future, I thought it might be good to read over his material. I also thought it might be of benefit to the readers of Answering Islam if I thought out loud, particularly since Andrew's methodology appears to be similar to the method employed by Shabir Ally, Paul Williams, Yusha Evans, and many other devotees of Muhammad who are more popular than Andrew.

The first article of Andrew's that I would like to address is titled [A Closer Look at the Bible: Peter's Confession at Caesarea Philippi](#).

In this article, Andrew argues that the version of Peter's confession found in Matthew 16 is an embellishment of what really happened, and that Matthew had a wrong theological agenda and suffered from confirmation bias. This is supposed to be proven by a comparison of Matthew's account with the version found in Mark 8, the latter of which Andrew believes was written first. Here is how Matthew records the story:

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." 20 Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. (Matthew 16)

And here is the account as Mark recorded it:

27 Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 They told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." 29 And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "*You are the Christ.*" 30 And He warned them to tell no one about Him. (Mark 8)

Since Matthew's account includes words not also found in Mark's account, i.e. "the Son of the Living God," we are supposed to believe that Matthew has changed the story to make Jesus out to be the Son of God, something not taught in the supposedly "more original" account or "older" version found in Mark.

It is true enough that there are verbal variations between Matthew's account and Mark's account, but this doesn't require positing the sinister explanation of Matthean embellishment, or anything more than the observation that Matthew included more of what Peter said than Mark did. As PHEME PERKINS, Professor of Theology at Boston College, points out:

It is important to distinguish the textual evidence for differences between ways in which one Evangelist differs from the others and the speculative explanations that are suggested to explain an author's choices. Scholars can

agree on the data and disagree heatedly over its meaning. [*Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), p. 64.]

All Andrew has done in his article is observe a difference between Matthew and Mark, and then offer an explanation that he finds satisfactory or even desirable, but which is by no means necessary.

In addition to being unnecessary, Andrew's speculative explanation is fraught with insuperable philosophical, logical, and exegetical problems, as the following demonstrates.

First, Andrew takes for granted the theory of "Markan Priority" (MP), a position that is no doubt popular but hardly unassailable. Since the argument for Matthean embellishment rests on an undemonstrated assumption that not all Christians buy into, it is hardly an assumption that can be taken for granted in an article intended to disprove what all Christians believe. Since I remain unconvinced of MP, as do many other Christians, this argument does not come anywhere close to challenging my view, not to mention that of any other Christian for nineteen centuries before Gottlob Storr's innovative theory came into vogue.

Moreover, as for those Christians who have bought into MP, since they also believe that Jesus is the Son of God, any argument against the Sonship of Jesus that is premised on the assumption of Markan Priority, if such an argument is deemed to be otherwise sound, might just as well be taken as an argument against MP. In other words, there is no reason that someone who believes in MP and the Sonship of Jesus has to be forced to jettison Christ's Sonship rather than MP in light of an argument from embellishment. The argument could simply be taken as proof that "Markan Prioritists" who confess Christ's Sonship need to get their priorities straight. After all, Christ's Sonship is a fundamental article of the Christian Faith; MP is not. The former is taught in the Bible; the latter is not. If one or the other has to go, then there should be no question for a Christian which one it has to be. In both Matthew and Mark Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ; in neither account does Peter confess that Markan Priority is true. Hence, the former is normative for Christians; the latter is not.

The following analogy might help the reader to see the point:

Suppose you were talking to a pagan who believes the following two propositions: 1) the gods are immortal; and 2) Achilles is a god. Suppose further that evidence is presented proving that Achilles died and thus was not immortal. In light of the evidence for Achilles mortality, which of the two propositions would have to go? The fact is that while the evidence forces a choice between these two propositions, it does not by itself determine which of the two propositions one must choose. For those who are more committed to the view that the gods are immortal than they are to the view that Achilles is a god, they can conclude that Achilles' mortality disproves his divine status. Alternatively, those who are more committed to the view of Achilles divinity than they are to the notion that the gods are immortal can conclude that Achilles mortality is proof that the gods are not immortal after all.

Analogously, Andrew's argument at best only forces a choice between Markan Priority and the Sonship of Jesus. It does not determine which of the two has to be abandoned for the sake of restoring consistency. The fact that Andrew, when faced with a choice, automatically accepts Markan priority and rejects Christ's Sonship is a reflection of his precommitment to Islam. No Christian is obligated to reason according to Andrew's faith commitments, which are in submission to Muhammad and his putative deity. Indeed, Christians belong to the Lord Jesus Christ and are obligated to set Him apart as Lord, which means reasoning in a fashion that is consistent with and in submission to His Lordship.

Having said that, the argument as presented by Andrew is far too facile than to think it is actually sound or that it constitutes a real challenge even to Christians who hold to MP and Christ's divine Sonship. If there are good reasons for rejecting MP, and I believe there are, it is not because of the kind of argument on offer by Andrew. After all, it is clear from Mark's Gospel no less than Matthew's that Jesus is the Son of God. In fact, if the reader continues on in Mark's account, he will see that immediately after Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ that

Jesus goes on to refer to God as His Father, which is simply the correlative of saying that Jesus is the Son of God.

31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. 33 But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 35 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? 37 For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 38 *For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of **His Father** with the holy angels.*" (Mark 8)

So while Matthew's account of Peter's confession is fuller than what Mark provided, it can hardly be argued that the reason why it is fuller is because Matthew was trying to introduce something not taught in Mark's gospel. Whatever the reason was that Mark left the phrase out and Matthew included it at this point, the reality is that the explanation contended for by Andrew does not comport with the facts at all: Jesus is presented as the Son of God in both Gospels; Matthew hardly needed to invent the idea of Jesus' Sonship in an effort to push a "theological bias" that he did not share with Mark.

At this point, it might be asked: If, as you maintain, and as the church has maintained for nineteen centuries, Mark actually wrote after Matthew, then why would he abbreviate the account in the way that he did, i.e. having Peter confess that Jesus is the Christ and leaving out the words "the Son of the Living God"? The following may be said in response.

That Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God goes hand in hand according to Mark. This is evident from the very first verse of Mark's account, which reads:

"The beginning of the Gospel of *Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" (Mark 1:1)

The same thing is seen towards the end of Mark's account, during the high priest's examination of Jesus:

...Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "*Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?*" And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:61-62)

In other words, Mark viewed these two titles as a package deal, a unit: if the one, then the other. He joins them together several times at strategic points in his narrative. So when Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ in Mark 8, from the Markan perspective it was tantamount to a confession that Jesus is exactly what Mark in a fuller way already announced Him to be at the beginning of the Gospel, and what Jesus affirmed about Himself at the end of the Gospel. This is even the view of the High Priest who did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah. Though the High Priest denied that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, he did not deny that the Messiah would also legitimately bear the title "Son of God." This much was clear to him based on the evidence of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In keeping with this, it is clear from Matthew's account that Jesus considered the simple phrase "the Christ" to be a fit summation of what it means to confess that He is "the Christ, the Son of the Living God." This is evident from the fact that the pericope in which Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, is preliminarily concluded in the following terse manner: "Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was *the Christ*" (16:20). The short title, "the Christ," is used here, by way of synecdoche, to refer to the full truth concerning Jesus that Peter had just confessed and that Jesus at this time was telling the

disciples not to broadcast. Another example of a synecdoche is found in this same pericope when Jesus said, “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you...” The phrase “flesh and blood” is used here by Matthew to refer to humanity, which is surely more than just flesh and blood. Another synecdoche is seen when Jesus says that “the gates of hell,” which refers to Satan’s kingdom, will not prevail against the Church. Jesus is not merely saying that the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church but that hell itself will not do so.

So right in Matthew’s gospel, and right after Peter’s confession, Jesus Himself is said to have used “the Christ” as a way of encapsulating all that Peter had just confessed concerning Him. To say otherwise is to say that Jesus in Matthew is telling the disciples that they can’t tell people that He is the Christ *but they can tell people that He is the Son of God*, which is exceedingly untenable. Accordingly, when Mark distilled the full confession of Peter found in Matthew to the simple statement that Jesus is “the Christ,” he did nothing else than what Jesus himself did according to Matthew. If Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel used “the Christ” as a way of referring to Peter’s fuller confession that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” then surely Mark has warrant for doing so as well, especially in his own account where he has already brought these two titles together, even at the very beginning of his account (Mark 1:1), as well as at the end (Mark 14:61-62).

Although it has already been dealt with in principle, another point that Andrew makes in the article in an effort to bolster the claim that Matthew is embellishing upon what Mark reported is that there is a “plot hole” in Matthew. Supposedly Matthew goofed when adding the words “the Son of the Living God” to Peter’s confession from Mark’s account, because Matthew had already taught that the disciples believed in Christ’s Sonship earlier in his Gospel. According to Andrew, if the disciples already confessed Christ’s Sonship, then Jesus would have never asked them to affirm this same truth later, and he also believes that Jesus was surprised when Peter later confessed this truth at Caesarea Philippi, as if Peter never confessed it before. Here is the earlier passage from Matthew that Andrew has in mind:

22 Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. 23 After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. 24 But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. 26 When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” 28 Peter said to Him, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” 29 And He said, “Come!” And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” 31 Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. 33 And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!” (Matthew 14:22-33)

And here are Andrew’s comments on the passage:

Did you catch it?, [sic] can you see the many plot holes? If the apostles confessed right there in the boat that Jesus (may he be infinitely blessed) is the Son of God, why then would he need to ask them a mere two chapters later who they reckoned he was? & [sic] why would he be so shocked to hear one of them give the correct answer? Let alone consider divine intervention to be the only possible explanation for Peter, knowing what he already knew? No, obviously the author of Matthew took the Markan account and theologically embellished it.

The above series of questions from Andrew is based on his already refuted assumptions that Mark wrote first, that Mark did not teach the divine Sonship of Jesus in his Gospel, and that Matthew, who did teach it, forgot that he already introduced this notion in chapter 14 when he added it to Peter’s answer in chapter 16. Once the false assumption of Markan priority is cleared away, the implied answers to Andrew’s leading questions cease to have any force. There simply is no reason to stumble over Jesus calling upon His disciples to confess this

truth again on a later occasion, pretending all the while that this is evidence of a plot hole due to an unmindful alteration of what Mark taught if in fact Matthew did not write after Mark in the first place.

In fact, it is also the case that Mark taught Christ's divinity before chapter 8, even doing so in the course of telling the very story Andrew thinks creates a plot hole in Matthew. The reason Andrew misses it is because he has leaned too heavily on unbelieving scholars who read the New Testament with a theological bias not shared by the Biblical authors. Here is the sea-walking pericope as recorded by Mark:

45 Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida, while He Himself was sending the crowd away. 46 After bidding them farewell, He left for the mountain to pray. 47 When it was evening, the boat was in the middle of the sea, and He was alone on the land. 48 Seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them. 49 But when they saw Him walking on the sea, they supposed that it was a ghost, and cried out; 50 for they all saw Him and were terrified. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid." 51 Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped; and they were utterly astonished, 52 for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened. (Mark 6:45-52)

The reason for saying that Jesus here teaches and fully displays His own divinity to His disciples, who are constantly found wavering or going up and down in their faith and understanding, sometimes immediately after a flash of insight, is because this story has all the earmarks of a divine theophany, and because of Jesus' emphatic self-identification as God in Mark 6:50. While it is not apparent in many English translations, including the NASB quoted above, anyone who can consult the Greek text, or who can at least pick up a commentary, would be aware of the fact that what Jesus literally said was, "Take courage; I Am, do not be afraid."

Here is how Mark 6:50 reads in the Greek text:

πάντες γὰρ αὐτὸν εἶδον καὶ ἐταράχθησαν. ὁ δὲ εὐθὺς ἐλάλησεν μετ' αὐτῶν, καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· **θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε.**

And here is a handful of what can be gleaned from commentators who come from a variety of ecclesiastical and theological backgrounds:

Donahue and Harrington: "*I am*: Many translations render this phrase "It is I," which can obscure the echo of the powerful OT divine revelational formula "I am" used in the context of God's saving presence (Exod 3:14; Isa 41:4; 43:10-11)." (*The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 2 [Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002], p. 213.)

Mary Healy: "Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid! Biblical theophanies are often accompanied by an encouragement not to fear, so overwhelming is the presence of God or his angels. But the key to the episode is in the middle statement: "It is I" (*ego eimi*), which can also be translated "I AM," the divine name revealed at the burning bush (Exod 3:14). It is a veiled reference to the divinity of Jesus. Indeed, his reassurance echoes the divine words of consolation: "Fear not, I am with you; be not dismayed; I am your God" (Isa 41:10). (*The Gospel of Mark* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008], pp. 131-132.)

Morna D. Hooker: "It is I: since the words can mean also 'I am', they could be a reference to the divine name and so have a deeper significance than a simple self-identification: this would certainly be appropriate in the context." (*The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1991), p. 170.)

Francis J. Moloney: “He is not a [*phantasma*] but Jesus: [*ego eimi*] (v. 50b)....Jesus’ self-identification approximates a revelation of his oneness with YHWH (see Exod 3:14; Deut 32:39; Isa 41:4; 43:10).” (*The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002], p. 134.)

M. Eugene Boring: “... in the context of all the other marks of divine epiphany, the phrase here must have the connotation of the divine self-revelation, the disclosure of the divine name as Yahweh, the one who says absolutely, ‘I am.’” (*Mark: A Commentary* [Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006], p. 190.)

William L. Lane: “Not only the immediate context of the walking upon the water but the words with which the emphatic ‘I’ is framed favor the theophanic interpretation. The admonition to ‘take heart’ and to ‘have no fear’ which introduce the ‘I am he’ are an integral part of the divine formula of self-revelation (e.g. Ps. 115:9ff.; 118:5f.; Isa. 41:4 ff., 13 ff.; 43:1 ff.; 44:2 ff.’ 51:9 ff.).” (*The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974], p. 237.)

James R. Edwards: “As in the forgiveness of sins (2:10) and in his power over nature (4:39), walking on the lake identifies Jesus unmistakably with God. This identification is reinforced when Jesus says, “‘Take courage! It is I.’” In Greek, “It is I” (*ego eimi*) is identical with God’s self-disclosure to Moses. Thus Jesus not only walks in God’s stead, but he also takes God’s name.” (*The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002], p. 198.)

One of the very reasons Andrew missed this in Mark is because of his tendency to lean so heavily on people who are hostile to the Biblical faith, i.e. people who are most likely to confirm his own bias. For example, Andrew has written elsewhere that scholars view the absolute “I Am” sayings in John’s Gospel with suspicion because allegedly such sayings are not found in the Synoptic Gospels (See his article: “Did Jesus Ever Claim Divinity?”). An example of a scholar that Andrew often quotes and so would likely have in mind here is Bart Ehrman. Here is what Ehrman has said on this issue in his most recent book:

It is true that Jesus claims to be divine in the last of our canonical Gospels to be written, the Gospel of John....In speaking of the father of the Jews, Abraham (who lived eighteen hundred years earlier), Jesus tells his opponents, “Truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (8:58).... Jesus appears to be claiming not only to have existed before Abraham, but to have been given the name of God himself. His Jewish opponents know exactly what he is saying. They immediately take up stones to stone him.... But looked at from a historical perspective, they simply cannot be ascribed to the historical Jesus. They don’t pass any of our criteria. They are not multiply attested in our sources; they appear only in John, our latest and most theologically oriented Gospel.... Look at the matter in a different light... we have numerous earlier sources for the historical Jesus: a few comments in Paul (including several quotations from Jesus’s teachings), Mark, Q, M, and L, not to mention the finished Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In none of them do we find exalted claims of this sort.... none of these earlier sources says any such thing about him. Did they (all of them!) just decide not to mention the one thing that was most significant about Jesus? Almost certainly the divine self-claims in John are not historical. [Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Teacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2014), pp. 123-125. See also pp. 247-248.]

If Andrew would have availed himself of less hostile sources, he would have known that Ehrman is as wrong as wrong can be, for, as we have seen, Mark most certainly does contain an “I am” saying of Jesus, one that he also shares in common with both Matthew and John. In fact, Mark even includes “I Am” sayings of Jesus that not even John decided to include in His account (q.v. Mark 13:6, 14:62). Since Ehrman and other scholars on whom Andrew relies admit that such a manner of speaking is a claim to divinity in John, Andrew can’t very well lay claim to consistency if he fails to concede from the presence of the same phenomenon in Mark that it is evidence that Mark also taught the deity of Christ, and that he did so even before we meet with the same idea at Caesarea Philippi.

The upshot of the above is simply this: even as Matthew presents the disciples as having been taught and knowing that Jesus is the divine Son of God before He calls upon them in a formal manner to confess it again at Caesarea Philippi, so Mark also presents the disciples as having been taught and being aware of His divinity before the occasion recorded in Mark 8. There simply is no basis for arguing that evidence for a plot hole has been found. Neither is there any grounds for importing into Matthew's account the idea that Jesus is surprised when Peter calls Him the Son of God, which is an embellishment on Andrew's own part that nowhere appears in the story. Matthew 16 does not say that the Father first made this truth known to Peter in Caesarea Philippi. It only says that the origin of Peter's illuminated understanding was the Father, a truth that would be true whenever it first lighted upon his mind, and it would have remained true no matter how many times he confessed the truth thereafter.

Having fully answered Andrew's claims, it is interesting to observe that the Qur'an also has stories in it that are told more than once, and that there are verbal variations and other differences between these accounts. For example, the story of Allah speaking to Moses is told in four different Surahs, none of which read exactly the same.

| Surah 19:50-53 | Surah 20:9-36 | Surah 27:7-14 | Surah 28:29-31 |
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| <p>Also mention in the Book (the story of) Moses: for he was specially chosen, and he was an apostle (and) a prophet. And we called him from the right side of Mount (Sinai), and made him draw near to Us, for mystic (converse). And, out of Our Mercy, We gave him his brother Aaron, (also) a prophet.</p> | <p>Has the story of Moses reached thee? Behold, he saw a fire: So he said to his family, "Tarry ye; I perceive a fire; perhaps I can bring you some burning brand therefrom, or find some guidance at the fire." But when he came to the fire, a voice was heard: "O Moses! Verily I am thy Lord! therefore (in My presence) put off thy shoes: thou art in the sacred valley Tuwa. I have chosen thee: listen, then, to the inspiration (sent to thee). Verily, I am God: There is no god but I: so serve thou Me (only), and establish regular prayer for celebrating My praise. Verily the Hour is coming - My design is to keep it hidden - for every</p> | <p>Behold! Moses said to his family: "I perceive a fire; soon will I bring you from there some information, or I will bring you a burning brand to light our fuel, that ye may warm yourselves." But when he came to the (fire), a voice was heard: "Blessed are those in the fire and those around: and glory to God, the Lord of the worlds. O Moses! Verily, I am God, the exalted in might, the Wise! Now do thou throw thy rod!" But when he saw it moving (of its own accord) as if it had been a snake, he turned back in retreat, and retraced not his steps: "O Moses!" (it was said), "Fear not: truly, in My presence, those</p> | <p>Now when Moses had fulfilled the term, and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire in the direction of Mount Tur. He said to his family: "Tarry ye; I perceive a fire; I hope to bring you from there some information, or a burning firebrand, that ye may warm yourselves." But when he came to the (fire), a voice was heard from the right bank of the valley, from a tree in hallowed ground: "O Moses! Verily I am God, the Lord of the Worlds. Now do thou throw thy rod!" But when he saw it moving (of its own accord) as if it had been a snake, he turned back in retreat, and retraced not his steps: O Moses!" (It was</p> |

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| | <p>soul to receive its reward by the measure of its Endeavour. Therefore let not such as believe not therein but follow their own lusts, divert thee therefrom, lest thou perish! And what is that in the right hand, O Moses?" He said, "It is my rod: on it I lean; with it I beat down fodder for my flocks; and in it I find other uses." (God) said, "Throw it, O Moses!" He threw it, and behold! It was a snake, active in motion. (God) said, "Seize it, and fear not: We shall return it at once to its former condition. Now draw thy hand close to thy side: it shall come forth white (and shining), without harm (or stain), - as another Sign, - In order that We may show thee (two) of our Greater Signs. Go thou to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed all bounds." (Moses) said: "O my Lord! expand me my breast; ease my task for me; and remove the impediment from my speech, so they may understand what I say: and give me a Minister from my family, Aaron,</p> | <p>called as apostles have no fear, - But if any have done wrong and have thereafter substituted good to take the place of evil, truly, I am Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Now put thy hand into thy bosom, and it will come forth white without stain (or harm): (these are) among the nine Signs (thou wilt take) to Pharaoh and his people: for they are a people rebellious in transgression." But when Our Signs came to them, that should have opened their eyes, they said: "This is sorcery manifest!" And they rejected those Signs in iniquity and arrogance, though their souls were convinced thereof: so see what was the end of those who acted corruptly!</p> | <p>said), "Draw near, and fear not: for thou art of those who are secure.</p> |
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| | <p>my brother; add to my strength through him, and make him share in my task: that we may celebrate thy praise without stint, and remember thee without stint: for thou art He that (ever) regardeth us.” (God) said: “Granted is thy prayer, O Moses!”</p> | | |
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With a little bit of effort, one could easily come up with a reconstruction of how these Surahs came about, how they are full of plot holes, and so on. A cursory sketch of how this could be done follows.

In Surah 27 Moses is quoted as saying, “I perceive a fire...” In Surah 20 and 28 these words attributed to Moses are preceded by the phrase “Tarry ye,” words that are lacking in the other two Surahs.

In Surah 20, Allah asks what Moses has in his hand, as though he doesn’t know, to which Moses responds that it is a rod used for various purposes, which provokes Allah to tell him, “Throw it, O Moses!” In Surah 27 Allah appears to already know what Moses has in his hand, and says, without asking, and in different words, “Now do thou throw thy rod!” Perhaps this is why Allah in Surah 20 does not call himself “the wise” like he does in Surah 27. In any case, the command spoken to Moses is recorded differently.

In addition, in Surah 27 Moses is confident of bringing back some information or a burning brand from the fire: "I perceive a fire; *soon will I bring* you from there some information, or *I will bring* you a burning brand to light our fuel, that ye may warm yourselves." But in Surahs 20 and 28 Moses is not so sure:

“Tarry ye; I perceive a fire; *perhaps I can bring* you some burning brand therefrom, or find some guidance at the fire.” (Surah 20)

"Tarry ye; I perceive a fire; *I hope to bring* you from there some information, or a burning firebrand, that ye may warm yourselves." (Surah 28)

Not only is there a difference between Moses’ level of confidence in Surah 27 on the one hand and Surahs 20 and 28 on the other, but even in the latter two, the wording differs.

Furthermore, it makes sense that Moses expresses great confidence in Surah 27 but not so much in Surahs 20 and 28 since in the former Allah, i.e. “the Wise,” is presented as a greater source of confidence than he is in the latter Surahs.

In Surah 20 we are told that once Moses threw his rod “It was a snake, active in motion.” But in Surahs 27 and 28 we are told that the rod was made to move “as if it had been a snake.” Was it a snake that moved? Or did it move as if it had been a snake?

A great many other verbal variations and disparities appear between these accounts. I will leave it to the reader to discern others on his or her own, and to determine whether or not the above versions can be reconciled with each other.

What all of this demonstrates is that just like it is possible for Muslims to try to account for the variations in the Gospels in ways that Christians would reject — the latter for good reason, as already demonstrated above — it is possible for Christians to do the same thing with the different accounts found in the Qur'an. If Muslims do not think this is a problem for the Qur'an, then they need to explain why it is a problem for Christians, especially when Christians have a ready explanation for the differences between the Gospel accounts of Peter's confession, an explanation that shows the complete consistency of the Christology found in Mark and Matthew, one that fully comports with the inspiration and inerrancy of the text of Scripture.