

DISPELLING MUSLIM MYTHS ABOUT THE GOSPEL

by Doug Smith

INTRODUCTION

The word *gospel* is derived from the Old English *gōdspel*, meaning good spell, good story, or good news. It was intended as a translation of the late Latin word *evangelium* or the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning good tidings.¹ The good news as Yusuf Ali, a modern translator and commentator of the Qur'an, writes is the proclamation of "God's goodness to the righteous and forgiveness to those who repent (good news)."² Abyssian Christians probably brought the word into Arabic, translating it as *Injil*, and it would have been in widespread use before the time of Muhammad.³

Both Christians and Muslims teach that the Gospel was taught by Jesus (spelled *'Isa* in the Qur'an), and both believe that it was recorded in written form. When Christians refer to "the Gospel," it means the good news message taught by Jesus. They believe that this message has been recorded by four eye-witness accounts in what are called the four Gospels. Most Muslims, however, hold to the view expressed by Ali:

The Injil (Greek, Evangel=Gospel) spoken of by the Qur-ān is not the New Testament [Christian Scriptures]. It is not the four Gospels now received as canonical. It is the single Gospel which, Islam teaches, was revealed to Jesus, and which he taught. Fragments of it survive in the received canonical Gospels and in some others, of which traces survive. . . . Muslims are therefore right in respecting the present Bible . . . though they reject the peculiar doctrines taught by orthodox Christianity or Judaism.⁴

Ali's view reflects modern day Islamic thought, but it was neither held by Muhammad, early Muslim commentators like Tabari, nor even more recent theologians like Egyptian Muhammad 'Abduh.⁵ Moreover, Islam reasons that since Jesus' words were from God, they would perforce conform to the Qur'an; therefore, only the Qur'an is needed since it is a superset of God's divine revelation.⁶ So, is Ali correct in saying that we no longer have the Gospel given by Jesus? On the contrary, he says that the Gospel is what Jesus taught; therefore, any record of

¹Webster's New World Dictionary (1984), s.v. "Gospel."

²A. Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an: Text, Translation & Commentary* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc., 2001), 232. See also p. 1159.

³Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1965; reprint, 1996), 143 (page citation to the reprint edition).

⁴Ali, 287.

⁵Chawkat Moucarry, *The Prophet & the Messiah: An Arab Christian's Perspective on Islam & Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 56, 65.

⁶Kenneth Cragg, *Muhammad & the Christian: A Question of Response* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 122.

the teachings of Jesus, which would include any eye-witness accounts such as the Christian's four Gospels, are part of Jesus' Gospel.

Nonetheless, Muslims contend that the Christian Gospels contain only fragments of truth, much of which has been corrupted over time. Therefore, this article will attempt to show that the four Christian Gospels in existence today are, in fact, the original "Gospel" and the true teachings of Jesus by demonstrating that they existed uncorrupted during the time of Muhammad, and they have been preserved in their original form ever since.

The Qur'an's Description of the Gospel

The Qur'an mentions the Gospel twelve times by name, but many more times as "the Book" or "the Scriptures." Interestingly, there are no Qur'anic verses that say the Gospel is different from the canonical books of the Christians.⁷ Rather, it teaches that Muhammad referred to the Gospel as being present day ("between his hands") (34:31, 35:31, 10:37, 12:111, 3:3, 5:51), and as the words of God (5:68), which cannot be altered (6:115, 10:64, 18:27). Table 1 summarizes several Qur'anic references to the Gospel.

Sura	Description	Sura	Description
3:3, 5:46	It came from Jesus.	9:111	God's promises are in it.
5:68	God's revelation.	5:47	We are to judge by it.
3:3, 5:46	Guidance and light.	5:66, 68	Christians are suppose to observe it.
10:37	Qur'an explains it.	3:84, 4:136	Muslims should believe it.
34:31	Unbelievers (i.e., Meccans) refused to believe it.	10:94	Refer to it when in doubt.
2:91	Qur'an confirms it.	2:62	Christians need not fear judgment day.
40:70	Judged for rejecting it.	48:29	Compares Muslim worship to a parable of Jesus in the Christian Gospels (Mark 4:27-28).
4:162	Those grounded in knowledge believe it.		

The phrase "between his hands" mentioned above, transliterated from Arabic as *bayna yadaihi*, is often wrongly translated in contemporary English versions as that "which was revealed" or "came before." However, as William Campbell shows in his book, *The Qur'an and the Bible in the Light of History and Science*, this phrase "has the literal meaning 'between or in

⁷Parrinder, 145.

his hands', but usually it is an idiom for 'in his presence', or 'in his power', or 'in his possession', or 'at his disposal.'"⁸

Likewise, Muhammad Asad, another contemporary translator and commentator of the Qur'an, writes:

Most of the commentators are of the opinion that *ma bayna yadayhi* - lit., "that which is between its hands" - denotes here "the revelations which came before it," i.e., before the Qur'an. This interpretation is not, however, entirely convincing. Although there is not the least doubt that in this context the pronominal *ma* refers to earlier revelations, and particularly the Bible (as is evident from the parallel use of the above expression in other Qur'anic passages), the idiomatic phrase *ma bayna yadayhi* does not, in itself, mean "that which came before it" - i.e., in time - but, rather (as pointed out by me in surah {2}, note [247]), "that which lies open before it." Since, however, the pronoun "it" relates here to the Qur'an, the metaphorical expression "between its hands" or "before it" cannot possibly refer to "knowledge" (as it does in 2:255), but must obviously refer to an objective reality with which the Qur'an is "confronted": that is, something that was coexistent in time with the revelation of the Qur'an.⁹

In addition to these six verses (besides many similar verses regarding the Jewish Torah), Sura 7:156-57 speaks very clearly in M. M. Pickthall's highly respected English translation, *Glorious Qur'an*, of "the Torah and the Gospel (which are) with them."¹⁰ What this shows is that there was a copy of the Gospel in existence during the time of Muhammad. Why would the Qur'an say to judge by it, observe it, and call it God's revelation if the copy in existence during Muhammad's day was corrupt? Would that not make Muhammad a false prophet?

Furthermore, the Qur'an says that true Christians lived during the time of Muhammad, noting that Jesus' followers were inspired to follow him (5:110-111), chosen to be God's helpers (3:52-53), prevailed against their enemies (61:14), and that some true believers started monasticism (57:26-27). Likewise, Yusuf Ali attributes Sura 18:10, 25 to Ephesian Christians around A.D. 450, and both Qur'anic translators Ali and Hamidullah attribute Sura 85:4-9, which talks about those who believed in God, to Christians during the sixth century.¹¹ How could true Christians have existed without a true copy of the Gospel?

⁸William Campbell, *The Qur'an and the Bible in the Light of History and Science* (Darby, Pennsylvania: Middle East Resources, 1986), 37. Parts of this book are also available online at <http://www.answering-islam.org/Campbell/contents.html>.

⁹Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Kazi Publications, 1992), Sura 3, Note 3, *Al-Alim* [CD-ROM], ISL Software Corp., 2000.

¹⁰M. M. Pickthall, *Glorious Qur'an: Final Revelation from God* (New Delhi: Idara Exports, n.d.), 133.

¹¹Campbell, 34-35.

The Hadith's Description of the Gospel

The Hadith¹² mentions the Gospel in several places, though it speaks more concerning the Jewish Torah. Three passages worth noting, however, are found in Tirmidhi's and Al-Bukhari's Hadith:

He then said, "Do you not have among you . . . Salman who was a believer in the two Books? Meaning the Injil and the Qur'an. Tirmidhi translated it."¹³

He [Muhammad] replied, "I am astonished at you, Ziyad. I thought you were the most learned man in Medina. Do not these Jews and Christians read the Torah and the Injil without knowing a thing about their contents?"¹⁴

Khadija then took him [Muhammad] to Waraqa bin Naufil, the son of Khadija's paternal uncle. Waraqa had been converted to Christianity in the Pre-Islamic Period and used to write Arabic and write of the Gospel in Arabic as much as Allah wished him to write. (Sahih Al-Bukari, vol. 6, no. 478)¹⁵

Tirmidhi mentions Salman, a believer in both the Gospel and the Qur'an. The question arises, however, how could he be a believer in something that did not exist or why would he believe in it if it was corrupted? In his reference to Christians, Muhammad himself admitted that the Gospel existed. Likewise, how could Waraqa copy the Gospel if it no longer existed? In fact, why would God give him the strength to copy a corrupted version of His revelation?

Clearly, based on the Qur'anic and Hadith accounts, the Gospel must have existed in an uncorrupted form during the time of Muhammad. Nonetheless, the Qur'an and the Hadith also mention *tahrif*, i.e., the falsification of scripture by the People of the Book (i.e., Jews and Christians). The following section addresses this and many other Muslim objections concerning the Gospel.

Tahrif

The word *tahrif* ("corruption") is used by Muslims when referring to Scripture. There are two types of corruption: (1) changing of the meaning (*al-tahrif al-ma'nawī*), and (2) changing of the actual words (*al-tahrif al-lafzī*). The Qur'an mentions that some Jews distorted the Bible with their tongues (3:78). Some or all but a few "change the words from their (right) places" (Ali) or "from their context" (Pickthall) (5:13-14, 4:46, 5:41). Likewise, a party of them

¹²The Hadith (lit., "sayings") is a large collection of sayings and stories about Muhammad and his followers as passed down and recorded by his followers. Muslims consider some hadith more respected and inspired than others.

¹³*Mishkat al-Masabih*, trans. by James Robson (Ashraf, Lahore, 1963), bk. 26, chap. 39, p. 1371-72; quoted in Campbell, 63.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, bk. 2, chap. 1, p. 62-63; quoted in Campbell, 64.

¹⁵All Al-Bukari quotes come from *The Translation of the Meaning of Sahih Al-Bukari (Arabic-English)*, trans. M. Muksin Khan (Al Nabawiya: Dar AHYA Us-Sunnah, n.d.).

perverted God's words (2:75). Notice, none of these verses say that God's words had been physically changed (only that the Jews had distorted them). None of them talk about Christians and the Gospel, and not all of the Jews were guilty; in other words, some remained true and faithful.¹⁶

Only a few hadith mention the corruption of Scripture. For example, Al-Bukhari writes:

'Abdullah bin 'Abbas said, "O the group of Muslims! How can you ask the people of the Scriptures about anything while your Book which Allah has revealed to your Prophet contains the most recent news from Allah and is pure and not distorted? Allah has told you that the people of the Scriptures have changed some of Allah's Books and distorted it and wrote something with their own hands and said, 'This is from Allah, so as to have a minor gain for it. Won't the knowledge that has come to you stop you from asking them? No, by Allah, we have never seen a man from them asking you about that (the Book Al-Qur'an) which has been revealed to you. (Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 9, no. 614)¹⁷

This Hadith does not say that all Scriptures (only "some of Allah's Books") or even which Scriptures had been distorted. In fact, to understand this Hadith as saying that all copies of the Scriptures had been distorted would contradict the Qur'anic verses aforementioned. If this referred to all copies of the Scriptures, then why would Muhammad be told to ask those with the Scriptures (21:7, 10:94)? Likewise, in Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 9, no. 633, why would he refer to the authority of the Jewish Scripture (Torah) by having it fetched and recited?

Ibn 'Abbas did not mean that God's written words were altered because he believed corrupting the words meant only to change its meaning. Ibn Kathir quotes him in his commentary:

Al-Bukhari reported that Ibn 'Abbas said that the Ayah means they alter and add although none among Allah's creation can remove the Words of Allah from His Books, they alter and distort their apparent meanings. Wahb bin Munabbih said, "The Tawrah and the Injil remain as Allah revealed them, and no letter in them was removed. However, the people misguide others by addition and false interpretation, relying on books that they wrote themselves. Then, 'they say: "This is from Allah," but it is not from Allah;' as for Allah's Books, they are still preserved and cannot be changed." Ibn Abi Hatim recorded this statement.¹⁸

Ibn Kathir reasons that Ibn 'Abbas and Wahb bin Munabbih were speaking of an uncorrupted Torah (Tawrah) and Gospel (Injil) that no longer exists, but the text clearly states that *only* the meaning had been corrupted. If anything, Ibn 'Abbas was referring to the other Christian books that comprise the New Testament, which are in addition to the Gospels since he says that they add books and call them from God. Razi, a well-known early Muslim commentator said that "distorted" could possibly mean falsification of the text, but God would not allow His word to be altered so that it was no longer truthful. Razi argues that, theologically,

¹⁶Campbell, 48-52.

¹⁷See also Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 3, no. 850 and vol. 9, no. 461.

¹⁸*Tafsir Ibn Kathir (Abridged)*, ed. Shaykh Safiur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri, vol. 2 (New York: Darussalam Publishers & Distributors, 2000), 196, [Online], available: <<http://www.tafsir.com/default.asp?sid=3&tid=8586>> [11 December 2002]. See also <<http://answering-islam.org/Quran/Bible/ibnabbas.html>>

God's words must reflect His nature. God is trustworthy; Scripture is God's words; therefore, Scripture must be trustworthy. Moreover, the Qur'an says that God's word cannot be altered (6:34, 10:64, 18:27) and that God would guard it from corruption (15:9). If the Gospel has been corrupted, then God has failed to keep His promises. Why would He have even given it if He knew it would become corrupted?¹⁹

Another early disciple of Islam, Ibn Ishāq (A.H. 85-151), in his historical account of the life of Muhammad uses a passage from the Christian Gospel of John to refer to Muhammad:

Among the things which have reached me about what Jesus the Son of Mary stated in the Gospel which he received from God for the followers of the Gospel, in applying a term to describe the apostle of God, is the following. It is extracted from what John the Apostle set down for them when he wrote the Gospel for them from the Testament of Jesus Son of Mary. . . .²⁰

Ibn Ishāq is affirming not only the existence of the Gospel *after* Muhammad's death, but he is affirming that the Christian Gospel of John is part of the Gospel message from Jesus. Others, like Tabari and Ibn Khaldūn, believed that at most, Christians could only misinterpret the Scriptures, and the same with Muslims and the Qur'an. Even Sayyid Ahmad Khān, the first Muslim commentator of the Bible, said that *tahrīf* means either a wrong interpretation of Scriptures referring to Muhammad or not following the explicit laws of the Jewish Pentateuch.²¹

Nonetheless, Muslims are blindly taught to believe that the Gospel has been corrupted, despite the theological implications and the lack of supporting evidence. Many, like H. M. Baagil in his book, *Christian Muslim Dialogue*, accuse the Gospel of being "adulterated" with additions, subtractions, and alterations,²² yet he provides no supporting evidence. Joommal, a Muslim apologist, contends that the many revisions to the different codices (collections) of manuscripts show that the word of God has become the word of man. He states, "The Bible, . . . was once upon a time the Word of God. As centuries rolled on, human hands wrought havoc with the purity and authenticity of the divine Word."²³

ANSWERING MUSLIM OBJECTIONS

Myth 1: Gospel Corruption

Muslims assert that the Gospel has been tampered with, cut and pasted, with words of Jesus missing and verses added. For example, Misha'al ibn Abdullah in his book, *What Did Jesus Really Say?* compares differences between the Codex Sinaiticus (CS), the oldest *complete* set of New Testament Scriptures dating to the fourth century, and the modern day Bible. He

¹⁹Moucarry, 47-8, 72-3.

²⁰A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955), 103-4.

²¹Parrinder, 146-7.

²²H. M. Baagil, *Christian Muslim Dialogue*, (Saudi Arabia: Maramer, 1984), 5.

²³A. S. K. Joommal, *The Bible: Word of God or Word of Man?* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Islamic Missionary Society, 1976), chap. 3, [Online], available:

<http://www.tolueislam.com/Bazm/Joommal/ASK_Bible.htm> [10 November 2002].

shows how verses like Matt. 17:21 is missing in CS, Mk. 1:1 does not have “Son of God,” Jesus’ words are missing in Lk. 9:55-56, the word “angrily” is added to Matt. 8:2 in reference to Jesus, Lk. 22:44 has no angel, and Mk. 16:9-20 did not even exist in CS. Likewise, he argues that Ariston, 400 years later, added Mk. 16:9-20, and that Dr. Tischendorf showed that manuscripts of Mark had been tampered with by using UV light to demonstrate how the text had been erased.²⁴

What Ibn Abdullah fails to recognize is that although the Codex Sinaiticus may be the oldest complete set of New Testament manuscripts, it is by no means the oldest copy of the Gospels. Furthermore, some ancient manuscripts are *palimpsests*; i.e., paper was so valuable that text was rubbed out so that the paper could be rewritten and sometimes both the original text and the new text, *rescriptus*, can be discerned. In fact, Tischendorf’s techniques enabled him to decipher the faint text of the Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus.²⁵

Christians do not claim that the text of our modern day Bible is without errors. Rather, Christians claim that the *original* text was without error. Obviously, scribal errors are undeniable. Perhaps they were caused by bad eyesight, bad hearing of dictation, a phrase stuck in the scribe’s mind while copying, marginal notes that crept into the text, comparing (and consequently adding from other) manuscripts, or attempts to answer difficulties (as in the case of Mk. 16:9-20).²⁶ However, the Bible does not have the 50,000 “errors” as alleged by Ahmed Deedat, a modern Muslim apologist.²⁷ Westcott and Hort showed in 1881 that most of the “errors” in the Gospel were nothing more than misspellings or variants; only 60 legitimate, and of those 60, only 7 were found to be “primitive errors.”²⁸ This means that the Gospels would be 98.33 percent pure.²⁹ Since then, more ancient texts have been found, and New Testament scholar John A. T. Robinson has estimated that only a “thousand part of the entire text” has any concern; in other words, it is 99.9 percent pure, and none of the variants affect any of its meaning.³⁰

Deedat also claims that Christians have corrupted the Bible because there are so many “versions.”³¹ However, Deedat reveals his ignorance of the Christian Scriptures. It is true that there are over 24,000 copies of the New Testament Scriptures, but copies do not mean that there are different “versions” of the text. To make that claim, he would need to admit that the Qur’an has been corrupted because there are many English versions of the Qur’an; yet no Muslim would

²⁴Misha’al ibn Abdullah, *What Did Jesus Really Say?* (IAFA Books, 1995), 213-227, [Online], available: <<http://www.ummah.net/jesussay/download.html>> [2 November 2002].

²⁵Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), 535.

²⁶Campbell, 129-30.

²⁷Ahmed Deedat, *Is the Bible God’s Word?* (Durban, RSA.: IPCI, 1980), chap. 4, [Online], available: <<http://islam101.com/jamaat/bible/BibleIntro.html>> [5 November 2002].

²⁸Campbell, 134.

²⁹Geisler, 532.

³⁰John A. T. Robinson, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1925), 14; quoted in Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Volume One: Introduction, Bible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2002), 463.

³¹Deedat, chap. 3.

admit to such a claim. Nor would a Muslim conclude that many copies of the Arabic Qur'an text means that there are many versions of the Qur'an. Of the 24,000 plus manuscripts, 5,686 are in Greek, the original language of the Gospels.³² Translations into other languages will invariably contain errors, which is one reason why Muslims were so reluctant to translate the Qur'an into other languages. For example, the Ibn Ishāq's reference to the Syriac word *Munahhemana* as Muhammad in Jn. 15:23 (quoted earlier) comes from a corrupted translation. Guillaume (translator of Ibn Ishāq's work) writes in his footnote:

It is interesting to note that the citation comes from the Palestinian Syriac Lectionary and not from the ordinary Bible of the Syriac-speaking Churches. The text is corrupt in one or two places. . . . The most interesting word is that rendered 'Comforter' which we find in the Palestinian Lectionary, but all other Syriac versions render 'paraclete', following the Greek.³³

This demonstrates clearly how a variation in a translation does not make the original corrupt; but rather, the translation is corrupt.

The sheer number of copies of the Gospels allow Christians to have the utmost confidence in their accuracy. For example, consider the following three phrases taken from the Hadith that record the same account:

'Abdullah bin 'Abbas said, "O the group of Muslims! How can you ask the people of the Scriptures about anything while your Book which Allah has revealed to your Prophet contains the most recent news from Allah and is pure and not distorted? (Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 9, no. 614)

Ibn 'Abbas said, "Why do you ask the people of the scripture about anything while your Book (Qur'an) which has been revealed to Allah's Apostle is newer and the latest? (Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 9, no. 461)

Ibn Abbas said, "O Muslims? How do you ask the people of the Scriptures, though your Book (i.e. the Qur'an) which was revealed to His Prophet is the most recent information from Allah and you recite it, the Book that has not been distorted? (Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 3, no. 850)

Not one of these Hadith is exactly the same, but does that mean that they are corrupted? If so, then what Ibn 'Abbas said about Jews and Christians corrupting their scripture cannot be trusted either. Or could it be that by having all three Hadith, Muslims can piece together his words in their *entirety*? The more copies that exist of Ibn 'Abbas' words, the more certain his message becomes. In the same manner, the large number of early Greek copies of the Gospel, unlike any other ancient manuscript,³⁴ allows modern day translators to discover what the original text said with 99.9 percent accuracy.

Furthermore, the same standard used by Muslims against the Gospels needs to be applied to the Qur'an itself. Muslims do not have the original Qur'an—not even an original copy of the

³²Geisler, *BECA*, 532.

³³Guillaume, 104.

³⁴The Qur'an is not considered ancient but Medieval.

Uthmanic codex. The earliest copy extant is A.H.³⁵ 150, and it is written in al-mail Arabic script, while others are written in the Kufic script.³⁶ The Hadith (Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 6, no. 510) shows that there were variant copies that Uthman (A.D. 644-656) had destroyed.³⁷ Other Hadith show that the Qur'an is missing parts; for example, the penalty on adultery (24:2) was abrogated by a verse on stoning (Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. 8, no. 816, and Sahih Muslim vol. 17, no. 4194), and with the except for two verses, there are two suras not found in the Qur'an (Sahih Muslim, vol. 5, no. 2286).³⁸ There were several different versions of the Qur'an, and Abu-Dawud's Hadith mentions one such codex (Sunan of Abu Dawud, vol.10, no.1730). Even modern day commentators admit to variants in the Qur'anic text. Yusuf Ali mentions a variant on Sura 33:6, and Muhammad Hamidullah admits to hundreds of variant readings. He mentions four types of variants: (1) scribal errors, (2) notes in the margin, (3) the result of different dialects of Meccan people, and (4) the fact that no vowel marks were used in the original Arabic script. Arthur Jeffery, in his book, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an*, references fifteen primary (and several secondary) codices, and he shows that there were 1,700 variants in Ibn Mas'ud's copy alone.³⁹ Lastly, Guillaume comments the following on a Qur'anic verse quoted by Ibn Ishāq, "If it was part of the Qur'an it is difficult to see where it stood originally. . . . Most commentators hold that the verse is one of those that was afterwards abrogated, while others say that it was accidentally lost owing to a domestic animal eating the part of the page on which the revelation was written."⁴⁰ If variants are the criteria for a text being corrupted, then the Qur'an itself must be considered corrupted. Unlike the Qur'an, variant copies of the Gospels were not burned, so the original text can be reconstructed in its entirety.

Myth 2: The Original Gospel is Different or Lost

Another accusation lobbied by Muslims is that the original Gospel was different or is lost. Ibn Abdullah says that few of the 24,000 copies of the New Testament date back to the fourth century after Christ.⁴¹ However, he is mistaken in several regards. Most of the copies he is referring to are in Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, and Latin—not the original Greek. Of the 5,686 Greek manuscripts, many date back to very close to the time of Jesus. Gospel fragments such as a fragment of Mark found in the Dead Sea Scrolls date back to A.D. 50. The John Rylands fragment, dating to A.D. 117-138 has portions of John 18. The Bodmer papyri, dating ca. A.D.

³⁵The abbreviation A.H. means "after Hijrah." The Muslim calendar is based on the *hijrah* or "flight" of Muhammad from Mecca with 150 followers in A.D. 622.

³⁶Campbell, 125; John Gilchrist, *The Textual History of the Qur'an and the Bible* (Villach, Austria: Light of Life, 1988), [Online], available: <<http://www.the-good-way.com/eng/article/a02.htm>> [2 November 2002].

³⁷Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappert, eds., *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 15.

³⁸Moucarry, 79.

³⁹Ali, 1104; Campbell, 126; Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937), 14-19, [Online], available: <<http://answering-islam.org/Books/Jeffery/Materials>> [23 November 2002].

⁴⁰Guillaume, 685.

⁴¹Ibn Abdullah, 213.

200, contains many portions of the Gospel of John, and the Chester Beatty papyri contain all of the Gospels, dating to around A.D. 250, only 200 years after they were written.⁴²

Often, Muslims hold that the non-canonical Gospels, especially the Gospel of Barnabas, are the true Gospel. However, these texts have serious problems. For example, the Gospel of Barnabas is typically mistaken for the early manuscript of the Epistle of Barnabas (ca. 70-90). It has over thirty historical, social, geographical, and religious errors, and it contradicts the four canonical Gospels as well as the Qur'an twenty times. For instance, Muhammad, not Jesus, is called the Messiah seven times.⁴³ The Gospel of Barnabas can be easily shown to be a Medieval forgery written most likely by a Spanish convert to Islam. Fourteen Islamic overtones are found in it, like the word used for the pinnacle of the temple where Jesus preached being translated into Arabic as *dikka*—a platform used in mosques. Likewise, Jesus' sermon was modeled after the Islamic *hutba* with praises to God and His holy Prophets.⁴⁴ It also speaks of a golden denarius being divided into sixty minuti, a Spanish coin found during pre-Islamic Visigothic period. Furthermore, the Gospel of Barnabas even quotes from Dante's *Inferno*.⁴⁵ No credible scholar would consider it anything more than a counterfeit.

Moreover, Muslims say that the present day Gospel is not true because it is not one book. True, if the Gospel is defined as everything Jesus did and taught, then no one book contains it all; however, four accounts of Jesus' life and teaching are certainly part of it. In the same way, the Qur'an does not have all of Muhammad's teaching. Does that mean that it is not "the Book" given to him from God? Why then are the Hadith (several books) necessary to complement and complete his teachings? Indeed, Muhammad never received a book because he was illiterate. Yet, he referred to the Torah (several books) concerning the verse on stoning. Likewise, an anthology is comprised of many books, but that does not make it any less of a book. Neither are four books of Jesus' life and teaching any less than the true Gospel.

Myth 3: The Gospels are Not Authentic

Commentator Hamidullah says that since Jesus did not dictate, how can we know that we have his exact words?⁴⁶ Deedat says, "In his life-time Jesus never wrote a single word, nor did he instruct anyone to do so."⁴⁷ Baagil comments on Lk. 1:2-3 that Luke never says that he was an eye-witness nor inspired by God.⁴⁸ So what is to be believed? Are the Gospels authentic?

Muslim commentator Razi said, "A Scripture that has been passed down by means of successive transmission is not liable to textual corruption."⁴⁹ Likewise, Christians respond that

⁴²Geisler, *BECA*, 533.

⁴³Campbell, 120.

⁴⁴Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993), 299.

⁴⁵John Gilchrist, *Origins and Sources of the Gospel of Barnabas* (Durban, RSA: Jesus to the Muslims, 1980), [Online], available: <<http://uproar.fortunecity.com/puzzler/312/Gilchrist/barnabas.html>> [5 November 2002].

⁴⁶Parrinder, 148.

⁴⁷Deedat, chap. 3.

⁴⁸Baagil, 10.

⁴⁹Moucarry, 52.

the authorship of the Gospels is well known, and therefore, can be trusted. The early Church fathers recorded not only the chain of transmission, but there are 19,368 citations of the Gospels found in their writings, including every doubtful passage in the Gospels.⁵⁰ Many of these men were contemporaries of Jesus' disciples or sat under their tutelage. Irenaeus (A.D. 130-202) recorded:

They [Jesus' disciples] departed to the ends of the earth, preaching the glad tidings of the good things [sent] from God to us, and proclaiming the peace of heaven to men, who indeed do all equally and individually possess the Gospel of God. Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.⁵¹

Although Luke does not call himself an eye-witness in Lk. 1:2-3, he refers to other Gospels accounts (probably Matthew's and Mark's), and says that he received his information directly from eye-witnesses. Deedat asserts that since the Gospels say that they are written "according to" and in the third person that they cannot have the author whose name they bear.⁵² However, consider John's Gospel account. The author claims to be part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples (Jn. 13:23-25), which consisted of Peter, James, and John (Matt. 17:1). Peter is always referred to by name, and history records that James was one of the first Christian martyrs; therefore, by the process of elimination, John must be its author.⁵³ Moreover, writing in the third person does not negate a person's authorship; if it did, then Muhammad would be guilty of the same. The opening prayer of the Qur'an, Sura 1, is written in the third person. Other examples include 3:40, 5:14, 5:110, etc., and the Qur'an contains historical narratives about Noah, Abraham, Jesus, Moses, etc., that are not written in the first person. Also, the Hadith record sayings of Muhammad that are not quotes of God or angels.

Myth 4: Gospel Contradictions and Inconsistencies

Lastly, Muslims criticize the present day Gospels as being full of contradictions and inconsistencies. Juwayni, a Muslim theologian, says that the Gospels contradict things like: (1) Jesus' genealogy, (2) Peter's denial, (3) Jesus entering Jerusalem, (4) the robbers' attitude on the cross, and (5) events right after Jesus' death. Ibn Hazm, another Muslim theologian, gives several examples of inconsistencies: (1) how could the "Son of God" be tempted by the devil? (2) Jesus said he did not come to remove the law, but he made divorce unlawful and ended

⁵⁰Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 463.

⁵¹Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *Against Heresies* by Irenaeus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1886), 415. [Online], available: <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers/ANF-01/iren/iren3index.html>> [14 December 2002].

⁵²Deedat, chap. 6.

⁵³Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol., 1, 485.

retaliation, and (3) Jesus said not to speak of His miracles, but miracles prove a prophet's integrity.⁵⁴

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to respond to all of these objections, consider the apparent “contradiction” in Jesus’ genealogies. The Gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke record similar, but different genealogies with Matthew skipping whole generations. Gleason Archer, in his *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, explains the discrepancy. Matthew, speaking to the Jewish people, traces Jesus’ genealogy through his earthly or legal father Joseph to show that he was the *legal* descendant to the throne of David. Luke, on the other hand, traces his genealogy through Mary to show that he was the *natural* descendant from King David.⁵⁵ What appears to be a contradiction always has an explanation, though it may remain a difficulty until we gain the knowledge to explain it. The same holds true in science—until Newton, people could not explain the law of gravity, or until Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, people could not explain eclipses, planetary motion, or solar events. Unexplainable observations in science are not contradictions; rather, simply mysteries until we learn how to explain them.

Ahmed Deedat says, “One of the tests [for inspiration], out of many such tests, is that a message emanating from an Omniscient Being MUST be consistent with itself. It ought to be free from all discrepancies and contradictions” (Sura 4:82).⁵⁶ Christians agree whole-heartedly; but if a text is presupposed to be false, then all sorts of inconsistencies and contradictions can be found. However, if it is understood to be true, then reasonable and satisfactory answers can be found for the difficulties. Consider some Qur’anic contradictions: (1) Suras 2:62 and 5:69 say that Christians will enter Paradise, but 5:72 and 3:85 say they will not; (2) Sura 3:42, 45 show that several angels announced Jesus’ birth to Mary, but 19:17-21 says that there was only one; and (3) Sura 6:34, 115 says that God’s words are perfect and no one can change them, but the Qur’an clearly abrogates previous verses (so does the Hadith, such as the verse on stoning) even though 2:106 and 65:101 say that it cannot.⁵⁷ So should the Qur’an be discarded because there are “contradictions” and “discrepancies,” or are there other explanations for these difficulties?

Critics often say that the Gospels are inconsistent because Jesus is quoted as saying slightly different words for the same message. Yet, had the disciples written the exact same account of the same event, it would have been considered collusion; i.e., they would have been accused of simply copying from each other. No two accounts of the same event will have the exact same words verbatim. One writer may decide to add more, another may desire to give only a synopsis of the event. A good teacher repeats his message not only to the same crowd, but also to different groups. The different Gospel writers may have recorded words from the same message on different occasions, always careful to distinguish Jesus’ words from their own. Since Jesus most likely spoke and taught in Aramaic, the common language of His day, and the Gospel accounts are written in Greek, we cannot have His exact words (*ipsissima verba*) (which

⁵⁴Moucarry, 68.

⁵⁵Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982), 316. For answers to other Bible difficulties, see Archer’s book and Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1992).

⁵⁶Deedat, chap. 7.

⁵⁷For these and a hundred more Qur’anic difficulties, see the following web page: <<http://answering-islam.org/Quran/Contra/index.html>>.

would be in Aramaic), but we do have His exact meaning (*ipsissima vox*).⁵⁸ Again, the same standard needs to be applied to the Muslims. The three Hadith of Ibn ‘Abbas quoted above show how even the same person can relate the same message slightly differently, but his essential message remains the same.

CONCLUSION

Muslims can choose to reject the overwhelming historical evidence for the Gospel's fidelity. They can choose to reject both the secular and early Church father's accounts that support the Gospel claims. They can even choose to reject archaeological findings that confirm the accuracy of the Gospel accounts. Yet, how can they reject their own Qur'anic and Hadithic affirmations of both the Gospel message and its existence in an uncorrupted form during the life of Muhammad?

Muslim objections are nothing more than myths. The first myth, the Gospel corruption, makes no sense logically in the light of Qur'anic verses. How can God's words be altered by man, especially since He guards over them? In addition, the sheer number of early manuscript copies allows us to reconstruct its original text to 99.9 percent accuracy and confidence. No other ancient book has so much supporting evidence. Likewise, if the Gospel is lost (myth two), then why would Muhammad have affirmed its existence? As John Gilchrist puts it, "You cannot expect us [Christians] to believe that God has miraculously preserved one of his books perfectly for centuries and yet proved absolutely powerless to preserve independently in human history even so much as a record that other such books ever existed."⁵⁹ Moreover, if the present day Gospels are not authentic (myth three), then why would William Albright, one of the foremost archaeologist, conclude that, "thanks to the Qumran [Dead Sea Scrolls] discoveries, the New Testament proves to be in fact what it was formerly believed to be: the teaching of Christ and his immediate followers between c. A.D. 25 and c. A.D. 80"⁶⁰ Lastly, simple explanations exist for what Muslims term inconsistencies and contradictions (myth four).

In short, the present day Gospel can be considered in light of the following syllogism:

1. The Qur'an and Hadith affirm the Gospel's existence in an uncorrupted form during Muhammad's lifetime.
2. We have manuscripts of the Gospel that pre-date Muhammad.
3. Therefore, our present day Gospel is uncorrupted.

Given that, why should a Muslim consider reading the Gospel? The Qur'an explains why. First, it came from a prophet of God (4:171); second, Muhammad was told to read it if in doubt (10:94); third, it tells us God's promises (9:111); fourth, it is a guidance and a light (5:46); fifth, all will be judged according to the revelation in it (5:47); sixth, Muslims are commanded to believe it (4:136); seventh, Muslims read the Hadith in order to learn more about the life of their prophet Muhammad; likewise, the Gospel should be read in order to learn more about their

⁵⁸Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol., 1, 484.

⁵⁹Gilchrist, chap. 2.

⁶⁰William F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957), 23; quoted in Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 473.

prophet and Messiah, Jesus; and lastly, if the Qur'an really is a confirmation of the Gospel (3:3), then how will they know unless they read it? Thankfully, we can approach God's revelation of the Gospel without hesitation, with great confidence and faith, knowing that He has faithfully preserved His word uncorrupted through the passage of time.

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