

Muslim Approaches to the Bible

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Muslims typically ask three questions when thinking about the Bible. Is the Bible *corrupted*, and if so, in what sense? Next, is the Bible completely *superseded* by the *Qur'ān*? Finally, how might the Bible be *used* by Muslims, if at all? Another way Muslims might address these three issues would be to ask is the Bible truthful, is it still relevant, and can it be useful? These are questions I am pursuing in my current research for a book on the history of Muslim responses to the Bible. Of course, it is impossible to do justice to the complex history of Muslim responses to the Bible here. Instead, I shall look at a number of *Qur'ānic* verses to highlight some of the critical issues.

Sūra 2 (al-Baqara):285 states that all (Muslim) believers believe in 'God, his angels, his books and his messengers'. It is well known that Muslims believe in a long sequence of prophets, including figures also prominent in the Bible, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. But what does it mean for Muslims to believe in God's 'books', in the plural? Does this require Muslims to accept the Bible as it now exists?

The *Qur'ān* refers multiple times to the scriptures given to the Jews and Christians. These are known as the *Tawrāt* (Torah), the *Zabūr* (Psalms) and the *Injīl* (Gospel). The *Qur'ān* makes at least 150 direct or implicit references to these scriptures, most of them positive. But of course these *Qur'ānic* references raise many important questions of their own. What exactly is being referred to in the *Qur'ān*? If it is not the Bible as it now exists, but a pristine text in agreement with Islam, as some Muslims argue, what happened to this original text? Furthermore, how did the earliest Muslims gain access to information about the contents of the Bible? We should not imagine the early Muslim community sitting down to compare the

Qur'ān with a written copy of the Bible. The evidence suggests that there was no complete translation into Arabic of either the Old or New Testaments until after the rise of Islam.¹ If information was orally passed on from Jews and Christians, how were Muslims supposed to assess these 'previous scriptures', as the *Qur'ān* describes them?

This set of questions is one of many areas of Muslim responses to the Bible on which no settled consensus exists. Another is the presence of Muḥammad in the Biblical text. *Qur'ān 7:157* refers to Muḥammad as the one 'whom they find mentioned in their *Tawrāt* and *Injīl*'. So which Biblical verses are meant here? Some Muslims argue that since Muḥammad is absent from the Bible, this is proof enough that the texts have been corrupted. Al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) states this at the outset of his book on the Bible.² Other Muslims approach this problem by finding implicit references to Muḥammad in Biblical verses. Amongst many examples, they cite *Haggai 2:7*'s reference to 'the desire of all the nations' in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, they understand the Paraclete in *John 16:7* to be a reference to Muḥammad. This approach was used in the early centuries of Islam and is still found in more recent works.³

Returning to the idea of a corrupted Biblical text, how early did this idea arise amongst Muslims? It is easy to assume that it is there from the beginning, written into the *Qur'ān* itself. For example, *Sūra 2 (al-Baqara):75*, states this of the Jews of Madīna: 'a group of them did hear the Word of God, then after they understood it, they knowingly perverted it'. Yet these verses were often taken in early *Qur'ānic* exegesis as referring to specific groups of Jews at the time of Muḥammad, indicating that a sound text was available at that time. In addition,

Muslim scholars understood these Jews not to be tampering with the text itself but elaborating on it orally in reciting or explaining it.⁴

The story of Muslim responses to the Bible between the emergence of the *Qur'ān* and the present day is indeed complex. The effort to understand this story involves tracing who influenced whom. It also involves examining the social and political situations of the writers, since anyone feeling threatened is more likely to respond with hostility. Yet when it comes to the Biblical texts, some Muslim scholars from previous centuries as well as recent times express some qualified acceptance of the Bible. One contemporary Muslim scholar writes: 'If the texts have remained more or less as they were in the seventh century CE, the reverence the *Qur'ān* has shown them at the time should be retained even today. Many interpreters of the *Qur'ān*, from al-Ṭabarī to al-Rāzī to Ibn Taymiyya and even Quṭb, appear to be inclined to share this view' [emphasis original].⁵ The language is provisional, leaving questions still to be answered, but this makes the invitation to explore these important issues all the more appealing.

Notes

- 1 On the Gospels in Arabic, see Sidney Griffith, 'The Gospel in Arabic: An Inquiry into its Appearance in the First Abbasid Century' in *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth Century Palestine* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992).
- 2 al-Juwaynī, *Shifā' al-Ghalīl*, Arabic text and French translation in Michel Allard, *Textes Apologétiques de Ḡuwainī* (Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1968), 39.
- 3 See, for example, 'Abdul-Ahad Dawūd, *Muhammad in the Bible* (Durban: Islamic Propagation Centre International, 1990 reprint). This work dates from the early twentieth century.
- 4 See Gordon Nickel, 'Early Muslim Accusations of *Tahrīf*: Muqātil Ibn Sulayman's Commentary on Key Qur'anic Verses' in David Thomas, ed., *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 207-23.
- 5 Abdullah Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures' in *Muslim World* 92 (2002), 434.

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