

# The Qur'an From a Christian Perspective

*Steve Cable provides a biblical understanding of Islam's holy book, drawing on James White's book What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an {1}. Christians interacting with Muslims will benefit from a basic understanding of the development and the teaching of the Qur'an.*

## Introduction and Background



Beginning with the basics, we need to understand how the Qur'an came into our possession and how it is viewed by most Muslims. The founder of Islam, Muhammad, was born in Mecca around AD 570 and began to receive instruction leading to the religion of Islam at the age of 40 in AD 610. "The classical belief is that while [the Qur'an's] entirety was "sent down" in one night, the Night of Power, but Muhammad himself received it piecemeal over twenty-two years." {2} Muhammad did not receive a written version as Joseph Smith claimed to have received for the Book of Mormon. Rather he memorized what was told him by the Angel Gabriel and passed it on to certain followers.

The popular Muslim belief is summarized in a recent guide to Islam as follows: "The Qur'an is the literal word of God, which He revealed to His Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. It was memorized by Muhammad, who then dictated it to his Companions. They, in turn, memorized it, wrote it down, and reviewed it with the Prophet Muhammad. . . . Not one letter of the Qur'an has been changed over the centuries." {3}

"From the position of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, the Qur'an is as eternal as Allah himself. It is the very Word of God, without even the slightest imperfection. The finger of man has no place in it, as the book held reverently in the hand today is an exact copy of a tablet in heaven upon which the Qur'an has been written from eternity past." {4}

How this view holds up to a critical review of the history of Muhammad and the early days of Islam following his death will be addressed later in this document. For now it is important to understand that to a devout Muslim, the Qur'an in its original Arabic is above analysis and above question, for it is a matter of faith that it has been perfectly transmitted and maintained. Note the Qur'an exists only in Arabic. Even though most Muslims depend upon a translation for their access to the teachings of the Qur'an, Muslims still would say the Qur'an itself is not translatable and the public prayers must also be done in Arabic.

It is interesting to realize that the Qur'an in multiple places states that Allah "sent down the Torah and the Gospel" as works that serve as guidance to mankind. One cannot help but wonder, why God would send down the Torah and the Gospels when the Qur'an existed from eternity past and according to Muslim thought supersedes and corrects misconceptions men developed from reading these earlier texts. Why didn't God protect the Gospels in the same way as the Qur'an?

In what follows, we will look at where teachings of the Qur'an are counter to the truth of the Bible and to the historical facts. We will also consider how the current Qur'an came into existence, asking why the creator of the world would pass down his truth in such an uncontrolled fashion.

## The Qur'an and Biblical Beliefs

Most Muslims, if they know anything about Christianity, will point to three primary problems with our faith:

1. the Trinity,
2. the resurrection of Jesus, and
3. the corruption of the Scriptures.

Is there anything taught in the Qur'an that causes them to reject the Christian concept of trinity?

In his book, James White describes the key Islamic belief in this way, "Ask any sincere follower what defines Islam, and they will answer quickly *tawhid*, the oneness of Allah, as expressed in Islam's great confession, "I profess that there is only one God worthy of worship and Muhammad is His messenger." . . . Without *tawhid*, you have no Islam." {5}

Interestingly, the word *tawhid* in that form does not appear in the Qur'an just as the word trinity does not appear in the Bible. They are words to describe a concept clearly taught in those two books. The difference between these two words is a major difference between these religions. The Islamic concept of *tawhid* is that Allah **has only** and **can only** exist in one form, the creator of the universe. The Christian understanding is that the one God is expressed in three ways or persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. All the persons of God were involved in the creation of this universe and reflect the full nature of God. The Bible is very clear that the Trinity is one God as shown for example in 1 Corinthians 8:4, 6:

"There is no God but one . . . for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him."

In Islam, the most feared of all sins is called *shirk*, associating anyone, or anything with Allah. A person who dies in this state of idolatry cannot be forgiven. In Islamic thought, Allah is free to forgive any other sin if he so desires, but he will not forgive anyone who dies in idolatry.

This teaching causes the Trinity to become an unforgivable sin for Christians. "Many Muslims believe that the doctrine of the Trinity and, in particular, the worship of Jesus is an (unforgivable) act of *shirk*. This has led many of them to conclude that Christians, as a group, are bound for hell." {6}

The Qur'an attempts to address the Trinity but does it show knowledge of the concept so that the criticisms offered are accurate and meaningful? "The reason for the question is self-evident: If the Qur'an is the very words of Allah without admixture of man's insights or thoughts, then it would follow inevitably that its representations will be perfectly accurate and its arguments compelling." {7}

What does the Qur'an say about the Trinity? First, it holds up monotheism as the correction for the false Christian claim of the "three." By holding to this concept of the "three," Christians are actually polytheists, denying that God is one. The author of the Qur'an does not understand that Christians are saying there is one God who manifests in three distinct forms or persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But the misunderstanding goes much further than this. The Qur'an is very clear that the "three" are the Father, the Son, and Mary. As stated in Surah 5:116,

And when Allah said: "O Jesus son of Mary! Did you say to mankind: 'Take me and my mother

for two gods other than Allah?" He said: "Transcendent are you! It was not mine to say that of which I had no right. . ."

And this view is reiterated in the Islamic commentaries, the *hadith*. "Nothing in the Qur'anic text actually addresses the essence of Christian faith, even though it is painfully clear the author thought he was doing so." {8}

White believes this distinction helps us respond to the oft-asked question, "Is Allah the same god as Yahweh?" Although Muslims make reference to the one God of Abraham, they deny the witness of the incarnation and the resurrection. Thus denying the entirety of the Christian faith. "If worship is an act of truth, then Muslims and Christians are not worshiping the same object. We do not worship the same God." {9}

So, we see the Qur'an misrepresents the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and relegates Allah to a lower status than omnipotent God by declaring that Allah is not capable of appearing in multiple forms.

## **The Qur'an, Jesus and Salvation**

As we consider what Muslims are taught in the Qur'an, we next look at the second stumbling block in their view of Christianity: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

The Qur'an has quite a bit to say about Jesus as a prophet of God, specifically stating He was not God and was not crucified. The name of Jesus appears 25 times in the Qur'an, almost always as *Isa ibn Mariam*, i.e. Jesus the son of Mary. Jesus is presented as the result of a miraculous virgin birth. In the Qur'an, Surah 3:47, it is written, "She said, My Lord! How can I have a child, when no man has touched me? He replied, "such is the will of Allah. He creates what He will. When He decrees a thing He only says: 'Be!' and it is." {10}

The question of how Jesus came to be is an important topic for comparison. First, we see the Qur'an says that Allah created Jesus by declaring His existence and having Him born of a virgin. Second, we understand that the author of the Qur'an believed Christians teach that Jesus came into being as the child of a physical, sexual union between God and Mary. Third, Christianity actually teaches that Jesus was the preexistent creator of the universe (John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:16-17), always and fully God, who became fully man being born of a virgin. Note that the primary difference between the Qur'an's view of Jesus' birth and a biblical view of Jesus' birth is not the role of Mary, but rather the Qur'an says that Jesus was created at His human conception and the Bible clearly states that Jesus is eternal and was not created but rather took on a new form at his birth:

Although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

The words attributed to Jesus in the Qur'an, beginning with words spoken from the crib, are not found in any source from the 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. "But the Muslim understanding is that no such historical foundation is needed for lengthy portions of narrative for its words to be true. This is the Qur'an. It has been preserved. For the large majority, that ends the discussion, even when the same believers will then embrace historical criticism to question the value of His words in the Gospels." {11}

When it comes to the cross, the Qur'an stands firmly and inalterably against the mass of historical evidence and the almost universal view of the populace of its day. This Qur'anic view is not sprinkled throughout the teaching, but rather appears in only one verse, namely Surah 4:157—

“They slew him not, nor crucified him, but it appeared so to them; and those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge of it except the pursuit of a conjecture; [but] certainly they slew him not. But Allah raised him up to Himself.”

This verse stands alone in the Qur'an and surprisingly without commentary in the hadith literature as well. This verse, written six hundred years after the events, in a place far removed from Jerusalem, takes a position counter to the gospel texts from the first century and counter to six centuries of Christian teaching. In more recent times, various Muslim apologists have surmised various tales to build upon this one verse. For example, some Muslims believe that someone else died on the cross and Jesus fled to India to continue his ministry there.<sup>{12}</sup> Regardless of what unsubstantiated fairy tales one conjures up to support its claim, this verse is based on no historical knowledge of the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus.

“This suggests the author did not have even the slightest knowledge of the centrality of God's redeeming act in Christ on the cross. . . . The Qur'an places itself, and all who would believe in it, in direct opposition not only to the Gospels but also everything history itself says on the subject. The question must be asked: Who, truly, is following mere conjecture here? Those who were eyewitnesses on the Hill of the Skull outside Jerusalem? Or the author of the Qur'an, more than half a millennium later?”<sup>{13}</sup>

Without the cross, salvation in the Qur'an comes through an unknowable mixture of predestination, good works, and the capricious will of Allah. “In Islam, forgiveness is an impersonal act of arbitrary divine power. In Christianity, forgiveness is a personal act of purposeful and powerful yet completely just divine grace.”<sup>{14}</sup>

One cannot attribute these differences between the Qur'an and the New Testament to a minor corruption of the biblical text as they reflect the core themes of these books.

## **Corrupting the Gospels**

As discussed above, most Muslims have been taught there are three primary problems with our faith: the Trinity, the resurrection of Jesus, and the corruption of the scripture. We have dealt with the Trinity and the resurrection of Jesus. Now let us turn to the corruption of scripture.

Most Muslims will affirm to you that the Christian scriptures cannot be relied upon because they have been changed and corrupted over the years and do not reflect the true message of Jesus. But is this affirmation what is taught by the Qur'an, and does it have any basis other than hearsay?

The Qur'an is very clear that the messages sent to the prophets of the Bible are to be believed. For example, Surah 3:84 says, “We believe in Allah . . . and that which was sent down to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes; and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered.” Or as stated in a hadith, “Therefore, faithful Muslims believe in every Prophet whom Allah has sent and in every Book He revealed, and never disbelieve in any of them.”<sup>{15}</sup>

Very clearly, the Qur'an states that what was given to the Old Testament prophets and to Jesus was the truth of God. It is not just the prophets themselves who were from the Lord, for the Qur'an states

that Allah “sent down the Torah and the Gospel” as works that serve as “guidance to mankind.” If this is the case, why do Muslims not interpret the Qur’an in light of the truth from the Gospels, assuming that Allah’s truth never changes?

In contrast, it is a virtual pillar of Islamic orthodoxy to hold that the Bible has undergone significant revisions so much as to make them totally unreliable and thus, useless to a modern day Muslim. As James White puts it, “Muslims around the world are taught that the Jews and the Christians altered their Scriptures, though there is no agreement as to when this took place. If anything unites Islamic apologists, it is the persistent assertion of Qur’anic perfection in contrast to the corrupted nature of the Bible, particularly the New Testament.” {16}

This position certainly makes sense from a human perspective. For if one takes the position presented by the Qur’an that we are to believe every word of the Bible, then the huge differences between the theology of the New Testament and the theology of the Qur’an leave one little choice: either reject the Qur’an as not from God, or assume that all of the differences are the result of some massive corruption of the message of the Bible. The normal assumption taught to Muslims today is this corruption happened early on, perhaps even with the apostle Paul.

However, the preponderance of verses in the Qur’an which address this issue point to the corruption as being a distortion of the meaning (not the words) of the text. One example is found in Surah 3:78, “And there is a party of them who distort the Book with their tongues, that you may think that what they say is from the Book, when it is not from the Book.” As White observes, “We must conclude that the now predominant claim of the biblical texts themselves, having undergone major alteration and corruption, is a later polemical and theological perspective not required by the Qur’anic text itself. It comes not from the positive teachings of Muhammad but through the unalterable fact of the Qur’anic author’s unfamiliarity with the actual biblical text.” {17}

As noted by a Christian, Al-Kindi, writing to a Muslim around AD 820, “The situation is plain enough; you witness to the truth of our text—then again you contradict the witness you bear and allege that we have corrupted it; this is the height of folly.” {18}

In Surah 5:47, we are urged as Christians to judge by what Allah has revealed in the Gospels. If this admonition has any meaning at all, it must assume that Christians had access to a valid gospel in the 7<sup>th</sup> century during the life of Muhammad. What Christians had as the Gospels in the 7<sup>th</sup> century is what we have as the Gospels today. In fact, “each canonical gospel we read today we can document to have existed in that very form three centuries before Muhammad’s ministry. A Christian judging Muhammad’s claims by the New Testament and finding that he was ignorant of the teachings of the apostles, ignorant of the cross, the resurrection . . . and meaning of the gospel itself, is simply doing what the Qur’an commands us to do in this text.” {19}

Thus, while modern Muslims claim the Bible is corrupt and unreliable, the Qur’an appears to teach that the scriptures available to Jews and Christians during Muhammad’s day were correct and should be followed; as long as one did not reinterpret the meaning into something that was not really said. However, doing so would lead one to the conclusion that the Qur’an was written by someone who was not knowledgeable concerning Jewish and Christian scripture.

## **The Perfection of the Qur’an**

As noted earlier, one of the primary objections Muslims voice toward Christianity is their belief that our Scriptures have been changed and corrupted while the Qur’an in Arabic is exactly the words given to Muhammad fourteen hundred years ago. Does this belief stand up to impartial scrutiny?

The modern Muslim view of the Qur'an does not allow for the critical examination of sources and variations as has been done for the New Testament. Many bible scholars such as Dallas Theological Seminary professor, Daniel Wallace<sup>{20}</sup>, point out that the large number of ancient manuscripts from different locations and times give us a richness of sources allowing us to identify the original text of the Christian New Testament with a high degree of confidence. Muslims on the other hand are relying on a specific follower, Uthman the third Caliph, who was purported to have assimilated the correct version and to have ordered the destruction of all other versions.

If the Qur'an is a perfect representation of the message from Allah, what accounts for the differences in multiple accounts of the same story recorded in the Qur'an? For example, four different Surahs contain the story of Lot in Sodom. Each recounting of the story is different from the others even when quoting what Lot said to the Sodomites. Thus we have Muslims pointing to differences in accounts among the Gospels but ignoring accounts of the same events throughout the Qur'an which differ in detail, order, and content.

When we find this type of variation in the Gospels, we recognize that each gospel was written by a different author with a different perspective inspired by the Holy Spirit. But if the Qur'an was preexistent in heaven and given to one man by one angel, one would not expect these types of variants. But as James White notes, "We could provide numerous examples of parallel passages all illustrating with clarity that the serious Muslim exegete must face the reality that the Qur'anic text requires exegesis and harmonization."<sup>{21}</sup>

In addition to these troubling passages recounting different versions of the same events, we also find legendary stories about the life of Jesus which do not appear in any of the known accounts from the first century. White points out, "The Qur'an fails to make any differentiation between what is clearly legendary in character and what is based on the Hebrew or the Christian Scriptures. Stories that developed centuries after the events they pretend to describe are coupled directly with historically based accounts that carry serious weight and truth content. . . . This kind of fantastic legendary material is hardly the kind of source that can be trusted, and yet the Qur'an's author shows not the slightest understanding of its nature and combines them with historical materials."<sup>{22}</sup>

In addition to the inconsistencies in retelling stories and the incorporation of legends generated centuries after the actual events, we also should consider whether the current Qur'an is the perfectly accurate version of the earliest version supposedly shared verbally by Muhammad with certain followers. The common Islamic claims are strong and clear:

"The Qur'an is the literal word of God, which He revealed to His Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. It was memorized by Muhammad, who then dictated it to his Companions. They, in turn memorized it, wrote it down, and reviewed it with the Prophet Muhammad . . . Not one letter of the Qur'an has been changed over the centuries."<sup>{23}</sup>

"It is a miracle of the Qur'an that no change has occurred in a single word, a single [letter of the] alphabet, a single punctuation mark, or a single diacritical mark in the text of the Qur'an during the last fourteen centuries."<sup>{24}</sup>

Interestingly, the hadiths give us early insight into one view of how the written Qur'an was collected and who was involved. At the time Muhammad died, there was no written version of the Qur'an. It was carried about in the minds of a set of men called the Qurra, each of whom had memorized at least a portion of the Qur'an. However, a number of these Qurra were being killed in battles, raising the prospect that a significant portion of the Qur'an might be lost. According to one hadith, Zaid bin Thabit undertook the task of collecting a written version.

“To many outside the Muslim faith, the Qur’an’s organization looks tremendously haphazard and even Islamic literature notes how one surah can contain materials Muhammad gave at very different times in his life. Many Muslims assume Muhammad was behind this organization, but there is little reason to believe it. Zaid and his committee are far more likely to have been responsible.” {25}

Eighteen years later the third Caliph, Uthman, charged Zaid and others with rewriting the manuscripts in perfect copies. In the process of doing this, Zaid reportedly found at least two more passages that he had missed in his earlier compilation. Once this was accomplished, “Uthman sent to every Muslim province one copy of what they had copied, and ordered that all the other Qur’anic materials, whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt.” {26}

Not every scholar agrees that this story from a hadith is accurate and many suggest a much later date after AD 705 for the compilation of the Qur’an we find today. Whether it was Uthman or some later compilation effort, since the eighth century, we have had a fairly stable text for the Qur’an with few variants. “Muslims see this as a great advantage, even an example of divine inspiration and preservation. In reality, just the opposite is the case. When a text has a major interruption in transmission, one’s certainty of being able to obtain the original text becomes limited to the materials that escape the revisionist pen. For the Muslim, Uthman had to get it right, because if he was wrong, there is little hope of ever undoing his work.” {27}

Al-Kindi, the Christian apologist writing around AD 820, had much to say on the formation of the Qur’an. He records that multiple versions were collated during the time of Uthman stating, “One man, then, read one version of the Qur’an, his neighbor another, and differed. One man said to his neighbor: “My text is better than yours,” while his neighbor defended his own. So additions and losses came about and falsification of the text.” {28} According to Al-Kindi, this situation caused Uthman to take his action while his rivals, such as Ali (Muhammad’s cousin and the 4<sup>th</sup> Caliph), created and kept their own manuscripts. Al-Kindi listed alterations and changes made to the earlier documents in creating Uthman’s version. One of the reasons Al-Kindi had access to this type of information was the open warfare between the Sunnis and the Shiites, led to charges and countercharges of corruption.

Al-Kindi concludes his discussion stating, “You know what happened between Ali, Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman, how they hated each other and quarreled and corrupted the text; how each one tried to oppose his neighbor and to refute what he (had) said. Pray, how are we to know which is the true text, and how shall we distinguish it from the false?” {29}

As White states, “It is self-evident that no matter how stable or even primitive the Uthmanic tradition is, it is not the only stream that can claim direct connection to Muhammad and the primitive period of Qur’anic compilation. The greatest concern for any follower of Muhammad should be what he said (or what he received from the Angel Gabriel), not what an uninspired Caliph later thought he should have said.” {30}

The study of manuscripts shows beyond all possible question that the Qur’an was neither written down in perfection in the days of Muhammad, nor was it never altered or changed in its transmission.

White concludes his study with this thought, “When we obey the command of Surah 5:4 and test Muhammad’s claims in the light of the gospel, of history, and of consistency and truthfulness, we find him, and the Qur’an to fail these tests. The Qur’an is not a further revelation of the God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. The author of the Qur’an did not understand the gospel, did not understand the Christian faith, and as such cannot stand in the line of Moses to Jesus to Muhammad that he claimed.” {31}

## Notes

1. James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an*, Bethany House Publishers, 2013.
2. Ibid, p. 24.
3. Ibrahim, I. A., *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*, Houston: Darussalam, 1997, p. 5.
4. White, p. 19.
5. White, p. 59.
6. White, p. 68.
7. White, p. 75.
8. White, p. 98.
9. White, p. 72.
10. *The Majestic Qur'an: An English Rendition of Its Meanings*, 4th ed.
11. White, p. 113
12. Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, [www.alislam.org/library/books/jesus-in-india/ch2.html](http://www.alislam.org/library/books/jesus-in-india/ch2.html).
13. White, p. 142.
14. White, p. 158.
15. Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Riyadh, Darussalam, 2003, 2:204.
16. White, p. 171.
17. White, p. 180.
18. Newman N. A., *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, Hatfield PA, Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993, 498-99.
19. White, p. 186.
20. Dr. Daniel Wallace, Executive Director of CSNTM & Senior Professor of NT Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, speaking at Prairie Creek Baptist Church on August 30, 2015.
21. White, p. 229.
22. White, p. 237-8.
23. Ibrahim, p. 5.
24. Kazi, Mazhar, *130 Evident Miracles in the Qur'an*, Richmond Hill, ON, Canada, Crescent, 1997, p. 42-43.
25. White, p.258.
26. Sahih Al-Bukhari, 6:510.
27. White, p. 262.
28. This portion of Al-Kindi's apology is found in Newman, *The Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue: A collection of Documents from the First Three Islamic Centuries*, 455-459.
29. Ibid.
30. White, p. 271.
31. White, p. 286.