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USING THE QUR'AN AND THE HADITH AS A BRIDGE FOR SHARING THE GOSPEL

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SYNOPSIS

A crucial key to understanding the Islamic worldview lies in understanding the importance of the *hadith* (the traditions of Muhammad) to Muslims. Only the Qur'an is a higher authority than the hadith for Muslims. There are literally hundreds of thousands of records of the words and deeds of Muhammad, but unlike the New Testament the hadith were recorded over a two-hundred-year period after Muhammad's death, and not by eyewitnesses or friends of eyewitnesses as we have with the Gospel accounts of the life and teachings of Christ. The first authoritative collection of the hadith was compiled by al-Bukhari, who died in AD 870, which was 238 years after Muhammad's death. Despite the questions concerning the reliability of the hadith, Christians can use the hadith, along with the Qur'an, as a bridge for sharing their faith with Muslims. The Qur'an, in fact, affirms three truths that Christians can use while sharing the Gospel: First, God's words and revelations cannot be altered. Second, previous revelations were given to the Jews and the Christians: the *Taurat* (Torah), the *Zabur* (Psalms), and the *Injil* (Gospel). Third, these three revelations were still present with the Jews and the Christians during Muhammad's lifetime. The hadith also affirms this third fact. If the Judeo-Christian Scriptures were present (and uncorrupted) during Muhammad's day, then we can encourage Muslims, based on the authority of both the Qur'an and the hadith, to read the Bible and see for themselves what these previous revelations say about God and about Jesus' claims.

No Christian worker who desires to be effective among Muslims can afford to be ignorant of the Hadith," concludes Greg Livingstone in the foreword to Phil Parshall's *Inside the Community: Understanding Muslims through Their Traditions*.¹

In his introduction, Parshall asks a fundamental question: "What governs the actions of Muslims?" He confesses, "For many years I had missed one of the key components to the attitudes and actions of Muslims. The Traditions (Hadith) of Islam were essentially unknown to me...Yet, Muslims are overwhelmingly affected by the Hadith, which is a record of the words and deeds of Muhammad."²

It is my belief that Christians can use the hadith, along with the Qur'an, as a bridge in sharing their faith with Muslims. By understanding and appreciating the importance of the hadith to Muslims, we can suggest reasons why they should read the revelation of God in the *Taurat* (Torah) and *Injil* (Gospel).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HADITH IN ISLAM

The importance of the hadith (the traditions of Muhammad) to Muslims cannot be overemphasized. "Among Muslims the Qur'an is the only sacred and inspirational book, nevertheless, the hadiths of the prophet are also foundational because of all the minute details that they provide regarding almost every aspect of Muslim life and practice."³

For Muslims, the only authority higher than the hadith is the Qur'an, which itself tells the people to follow the example of Muhammad. Noted Islamic scholar John Alden Williams notes that Muhammad states emphatically in a hadith recorded by Bukhari that all Muslims need to follow his practices: "Whosoever turns from my practice [*sunna*] is none of mine."⁴

Fazlur Rahman asserts that the vast majority of Muslims believe the hadith is authoritative: "The Qur'an incessantly couples Muhammad with God when speaking of authority, and in a large number of verses the Faithful are commanded to obey God and the Prophet of God. Muslims, *at least* since the turn of the 1st/7th century [Islamic/Gregorian dating respectively], and the majority of orientalist, take this to mean that this authority of Muhammad refers to the verbal and preformative behavior of the Prophet outside of the Qur'an."⁵

Parshall succinctly summarizes this (almost) universal Islamic belief as follows: "An understanding of morality is to be derived from a study of the prophet's life. Although Christians can hardly comprehend this...to Muslims it is a theological premise to be accepted and acted upon by faith. To question the Qur'an or authoritative Hadith is to insult God. Few have been so bold."⁶

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE HADITH

Sunna refers to the doings and actions of Muhammad while *hadith* is a verbal report of those deeds. In practice, however, the words are interchangeable; both refer to the traditions of what Muhammad said and did.

Unlike the Qur'an, the hadith was not recorded during Muhammad's lifetime. Instead, it was orally passed down from person to person with the result that no one center in Islam contained all of the hadith.⁷ Rahman writes,

By the middle of the 3rd/9th century the Hadith had taken definite form, had established all its detailed content, and had completely won the field...In order to collect, sift and systematize this massive and amazing product, a number of eminent scholars began to travel throughout the length and breadth of the then Muslim world. This powerful movement is known as "Seeking of the Hadith." Eager seekers went from place to place learning from man to man. By the end of the 3rd/beginning of the 10th century several collections had been produced, six of which have since then been regarded as being especially authoritative and are known as "The Six Genuine Ones."⁸

The names and dates of death of the six compilers of these collections are al-Bukhari (d. AH⁹ 256), Muslim (d. AH 261), Abu Dawud (d. AH 275), Tirmidhi (d. AH 279), Ibn Maja (d. AH 283), and Nasa'i (d. AH 303). All Sunni Muslims hold Bukhari and Muslim in the highest esteem,¹⁰ and Bukhari's work is "acclaimed...by Muslims as being next only to the Qur'an in authority."¹¹

THE RELIABILITY OF THE HADITH

There are many questions regarding the reliability of the hadith. For instance, the type of evidence or testimony in the hadith would likely not be accepted in any non-Islamic courtroom because it is all based on hearsay.

Each hadith is composed of two parts. The first part is a long list of transmitters of the tradition tracing back to Muhammad. This is called the *isnad* of a hadith. The second part is the tradition itself.

According to the Federal Rules of Evidence, hearsay testimony is defined as "a statement, other than one made by the declarant while testifying at the trial or hearing, offered in evidence to prove the truth of the matter asserted."¹² Each hadith is a hearsay account that has been transmitted by a long list of people. On this point alone we must question the historical reliability of the accounts they now contain.

A second reason for questioning its reliability is that the hadith was collected over a two-hundred-year span after the death of Muhammad. As has been noted, the earliest date of the death of any one of the "Six Genuine Ones" was AD 870 (AH 261); Bukhari died 238 years after Muhammad's death, and his collection of the hadith was the first authoritative one in Islam.

I believe this long span of time of oral testimony invalidates any historical reliability of the traditions. We might be able to accept the reliability of oral testimony within a generation of Muhammad, but not over a

two-hundred-year span.¹³ This would be comparable to our accepting the tradition of George Washington's cutting down the cherry tree as being unequivocally accurate and true.

The great uncertainty regarding the factuality of the hadith is in stark contrast to the writings of the New Testament, which were written either by eyewitnesses or by immediate associates of the eyewitnesses (cf., 2 Pet. 1:16; 1 John 1:1-3; Acts 4:19-20; Luke 1:1-2; etc.).

Another reason for rejecting the hadith's authority and/or historical accuracy is that tens of thousands of hadith were rejected by Muslims in the second century AH as being fabrications. For example, out of a group of 40,000 names of transmitters being used at that time, Bukhari accepted only 2,000.¹⁴ Out of a group of about 600,000 reports or traditions, he accepted only 7,275 as being an authentic record of a saying or deed of Muhammad.¹⁵ In his widely used and cited textbook *Man's Religions*, John B. Noss concludes that although the hadith may have value for a "discriminating historian," they still "contain great masses of palpably unreliable material."¹⁶

In addition to questions about the historical reliability of the hadith, there are also good reasons to question the divine authority of their contents. Even some devout Muslim scholars reject the ludicrous advice some of them contain. For example, Maurice Bucaille, a French surgeon and convert to Islam, mentions in his book, *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*, the following alleged medical advice given by Muhammad and recorded in Bukhari's collection: "If a fly falls into the vessel of any of you, let him dip all of it (into the vessel) and then throw it away, for in one of its wings there is a disease and in the other there is healing (antidote for it)."¹⁷

Williams cites the following hadith, also from Bukhari's collection, that he believes shows Muhammad's uniqueness and strengths:

A group of people from the tribe of 'Ukl came to the Prophet and accepted Islam. Then they became ill in Medina, and he ordered them to go to the camel-herd of the public purse and drink the urine and the milk (as medicine). They did, and were cured. Then they renounced their religion, killed the herdsmen and stole the camels. He sent his trackers after them, and they were captured. And he cut off their hands and their feet and burnt out their eyes and did not cauterize their wounds, so they died.¹⁸

Bucaille comments on the medical aspect of this interesting hadith: "We should not be surprised...to find that at a time when there were limited possibilities for the scientific use of drugs, people were advised to rely on simple practices; natural treatments such as blood-letting, cupping, and cauterization, head-shaving against lice, the use of camel's milk and certain seeds....*It does not seem — a priori — to be a very good idea, however, to suggest that people drink camel's urine*" (emphasis added).¹⁹

L. Bevan Jones, in *The People of the Mosque*, gives us another hadith supported by both Bukhari and Muslim: "When anyone of you awakes from sleep and performs his ablutions, let him cleanse his nose three times, because verily Satan takes up his abode in the nose."²⁰ Any thinking Muslim should question the authority of such incredible advice.

Finally, some hadith seem extremely harsh or even cruel, especially when viewed against the backdrop of our Lord and how He reacted to similar events. The following examples, when contrasted with the story of the woman caught in adultery and brought before Jesus in John 8:1-11, illustrate just one of the differences between Jesus and Muhammad:

A man who had become a Muslim came to the Prophet, God's benediction be on him, and confessed to fornication. The Prophet turned away from him. This happened until the man had confessed four times. Then the prophet said to him, "Are you insane?" "No," he said. "Are you married?" He replied "Yes," and the prophet ordered him to be stoned at the Musalla [mosque outside Medina]. When the stones struck him, he ran away, but he was caught and stoned until he was dead. Then the Prophet — the blessing of God and peace be upon him — spoke well of him and prayed over him.²¹

They brought the Prophet, on whom be God's benediction and peace, a Jew and a Jewess who had committed fornication. He said to them: "What do you find in your book?" They said: "Our rabbis blacken the face of the guilty and expose them to public ridicule." Abdallah ibn Salam (who had been a Jew) said, "Messenger of God, tell the Jews to bring the Torah." They brought it, but a

Jew put his hand over the verse which prescribes stoning and began to read what came before it and after it. Ibn Salam said to him "Raise your hand," and there was the verse about stoning beneath his hand. The Messenger of God gave the order, and they were stoned.²²

This last account, as I will discuss below, is an extremely important factor in making an evangelistic/apologetic syllogism (logical argument) derived from the hadith.

AN EVANGELISTIC SYLLOGISM DERIVED FROM THE HADITH

I believe the hadith, coupled with the Qur'an, can be used in an evangelistic way not normally used by Christians. It is common for Christians to compare the Bible with the Qur'an, but I do not recall seeing the hadith addressed in this context, or even quoted in support of the Bible.

The last hadith quoted above, for example, can be used as a clear reference that the Torah was still with the Jewish people at the time of Muhammad; moreover, it had not been corrupted, for if it had been corrupted, it would not have made any sense for Muhammad to seek guidance from it.

In a similar manner, the Qur'an itself bears witness to three truths: First, the words and revelations of God cannot be altered. Second, God gave revelations to the Jews and the Christians in the past. Third, those revelations were still with the Jews and the Christians at the time of Muhammad.

If these three points can be confirmed to the Muslim from the Qur'an, then Christians should encourage Muslims to read these earlier revelations sent from God. Since Muslims accept the hadith as authoritative, moreover, how much more should the Taurat (Torah) and the Injil (Gospels) be authoritative?

THE MUSLIM VIEW OF THE BIBLE

Appealing to the Bible as authoritative, however, is not without its difficulties. Norman Daniel describes the Muslim view of the Bible as follows: "In so far as the Biblical text now known to us is inconsistent with the Qur'an, Muslims believe, sometimes that the latter abrogates the earlier revelations, sometimes that Christians and Jews understand the text perversely, and sometimes that the existing text does not faithfully represent the revelations actually made to Jews and Christians in turn....This corruption of the written text by omitting, in particular, prophecies of the coming of Muhammad, was called *tahrif*."²³

Muslims, therefore, believe the Taurat, Zabur, and Injil to which the Qur'an refers are not the same as our present Torah, Psalms, and Gospels. Yusuf Ali comments:

Just as the Taurat is not the Old Testament, or the Pentateuch, as now received by the Jews and Christians, so the Injil mentioned in the Qur'an is certainly not the New Testament, and it is not the four Gospels as now received by the Christian Church, but an original Gospel which was promulgated by Jesus....Fragments of it survive in the received canonical Gospels and in some others, of which traces survive (e.g., the Gospel of Childhood or the Nativity, the Gospel of St. Barnabus, etc.).²⁴

What can be said in answer to these assertions? The basic answer comes from the Qur'an itself. There are many verses in the Qur'an that state it is impossible for God's Words to be changed or corrupted. In fact, even al-Bukhari, the most respected of all the collectors of the hadith, did not believe that the Bible was corrupted; instead, he believed the Jewish people and the Christians misinterpreted it.²⁵

Concerning the immutability of God's revelations, the Qur'an asserts, "There is none that can alter the words (and decrees) of Allah" (Sura 6:34); "None can change His words" (6:115); "No change can there be in the words of Allah" (10:64).²⁶

In the Qur'an, however, the Jewish people are accused of concealing God's Word (2:42; 3:71), verbally distorting the message in their Scriptures (3:78; 4:46), not believing all of their Scriptures (2:85), and not knowing what their Scriptures really taught (2:78). Nowhere in the Qur'an, however, are the Christians accused of distorting or corrupting the New Testament; instead, in a few passages the Christians are referred to as honest people, the group closest to the Muslims (5:85).

There are, however, many reasons why neither the Jews nor the Christians would ever have corrupted their own Scriptures. First, to do so would be to bring God's wrath down on themselves (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19). Second, if Muhammad really was prophesied in the Bible, then it would certainly have

been advantageous for the Jews and the Christians to acknowledge this fulfilled prophecy. Third, if either group, the Jews or the Christians, had corrupted the Old Testament Scriptures, then the other group would have exposed this misdeed. Fourth, if the Jews and the Christians had corrupted the Bible in order to hide prophecies concerning Muhammad, then it is reasonable to assume they would have removed all of them; however, Muslims still quote alleged prophecies of Muhammad found in both the Old and New Testaments. Finally, the Jewish people as a whole never accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Despite their disbelief, they did not corrupt their Scriptures to hide prophecies concerning the Messiah. There is no reason to believe either the Jews or the Christians had any motive for corrupting their own sacred Scriptures; instead, they were willing to die in order to protect and preserve them.

In numerous places the Qur'an states that both the Jews and the Christians were given revelations from God in the past: "These were the men to whom We gave the book, and authority, and prophethood" (6:89); "He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind" (3:34); "And dispute ye not with the people of the Book...but say, 'We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you'" (29:46; cf. 2:136; 5:46-47, 51; 7:157).

Numerous passages in the Qur'an specifically assert that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures still existed during Muhammad's time: "Say 'O People of the Book! Ye have no ground to stand upon unless ye stand fast by the Law, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come to you from your Lord'" (5:68; cf. 2:91; 3:93; 5:43). It would be impossible for the "People of the Book" to "stand fast" by the Law and the Gospel unless they still had them at that time.

In other places we find that the Qur'an was sent to "confirm" the previous Scriptures: "O Children of Israel! call to mind the (special) favour which I bestowed upon you, and fulfill your covenant with Me as I fulfill My Covenant with you, and fear none but Me. And believe in what I reveal, *confirming the revelation which is with you*" (2:40-41, emphasis added); "And when there comes to them a Book from Allah, *confirming what is with them*" (2:89, emphasis added; cf. 2:91; 3:3). If, however, the Old and New Testaments had become so thoroughly corrupted that they were no longer capable of guiding the people, as Muslims assert, then how could the Qur'an "confirm" them?

The Qur'an affirms elsewhere that it was sent not only to "confirm" the previous Scriptures but also to "guard" them: "To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed" (5:48). Any attack against the authenticity and reliability of the Bible, therefore, is also an attack on the Qur'an, for the Qur'an was sent to "confirm" and "guard" or "protect" the Bible.

The Qur'an also states that Jesus "confirmed" the Law: "And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Law that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Law that had come before him" (5:46). If, therefore, the Law was not corrupted by Jesus' day, then it never has been corrupted. We know this because the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has shown that the Old Testament we possess today is the same one that was in use during Jesus' day.

Finally, the Qur'an specifically states that whoever follows the Jewish Scriptures would not have to fear anything: "Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians — any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness — on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (5:69). The Jewish Scriptures, of course, necessarily still had to have been in existence for anyone to follow them. There is, therefore, abundant evidence from the Qur'an itself that the books of the Old and New Testaments were not corrupted, that they were still in the possession of the Jews and the Christians at the time of Muhammad, and that they — as revelations from God — are to be accepted by all true Muslims.

THE FINAL APPEAL TO MUSLIMS

Very few Muslims will deny the authority of the hadith, and no true Muslim can deny the authority of the Qur'an. Based on this syllogism, we can encourage Muslims to read for themselves what God had said in His earlier revelations.

We can also point out to Muslims that since they accept the hadith as authoritative, although they are never specifically spoken of in the Qur'an, how much more should the Taurat (Torah) and the Injil (Gospel) be received and accepted, which are spoken of repeatedly in the Qur'an?

NOTES

1. Greg Livingstone, foreword to Phil Parshall, *Inside the Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 9.
2. *Ibid.*, 11.
3. Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 83.
4. John Alden Williams, ed., *Islam* (New York: George Braziller, 1961), 86.
5. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 50.
6. Parshall, 12.
7. Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Religion of Islam* (Lahore, Pakistan: The Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1950), 58, 71.
8. Rahman, 63.
9. The Islamic calendar begins with the year AD 622 in the Gregorian calendar when Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina. This flight is called the *hijrah* (also *hegira* or *hejira*), which literally means "emigration." The Muslims date their calendar from the *hijrah*, just as the Christian world dates its calendar from the birth of Jesus; thus, in the Islamic world AD 622 is AH 1 (which comes from *anno Hegirae* or "year of the flight").
10. Ali, 73.
11. Rahman, 63–64.
12. Edward W. Cleary, ed., *McCormick's Handbook of the Law of Evidence*, 2nd ed. (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1972), 584–85.
13. Some may object that Moses reported events that took place millennia before him. My answer would be: (1) we *are not* told anywhere that the Genesis account was based on oral tradition; (2) We *are* told that Moses was divinely guided (Muslims believe this as well) and even stood in the very presence of God! None of the six "Genuine Ones" could or would claim this.
14. Bevan L. Jones, *The People of the Mosque* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1932), 79.
15. Ali, 76; Parshall, 13.
16. John B. Noss, *Man's Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 683.
17. Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*, trans. Alistair D. Pannell (Indianapolis: North American Trust Publication, 1979), 246.
18. Williams, 83.
19. Bucaille, 245–46.
20. Jones, 83.
21. Williams, 82.
22. *Ibid.*, 82–83.
23. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West*, rev. ed. (Oxford: One World Publications, 1993), 67.
24. Ali, 286–87.
25. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 146.
26. All quotations from the Qur'an are taken from Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Battsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2001).