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EXAMINING MUSLIM APOLOGETICS (PART ONE): THE BIBLE VERSUS THE QUR'AN

by James R. White

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SYNOPSIS

As Christians encounter Islamic apologetics the topic quickly turns to ultimate sources of authority. Muslims are taught that the Bible is untrustworthy, and many believe that its text has been altered. In reality it is the Qur'an that suffers in comparison with the Bible on the issue of textual study and purity. Christians believe that the more the Bible's history is studied, the more certain its text becomes. Christians encourage textual study and discovery of new manuscripts, while Muslims show little interest in researching the history of their own scriptures, preferring the traditional belief that the Qur'an is perfect in its current state. Often believers are stymied by attacks on the text of the Bible because of their misunderstanding of the history of the transmission of the text of Scripture. Christians need to be able to defend the integrity of the biblical text and to use the sharp contrast between the scriptures of the two faiths as a means of presenting the truth about Jesus Christ.

In May of 1999, a group of Christians and Muslims gathered at the Bible Baptist Church of Syosset, New York, to hear debate on the question, Does the New Testament teach the deity of Christ?¹ The Muslim position was represented by Hamza Abdul Malik of the Islamic Propagation Center. I represented the Christian position. It immediately became quite clear that Malik's thesis was not that the New Testament, as it exists today, denies the deity of Christ, but that all passages that can be presented to support this doctrine were later interpolations; that is, corruptions of the "original" New Testament writings. When challenged to provide any documentation for this assertion in the form of New Testament manuscripts, however, Malik informed the audience that he could not name any, "but they are there."

This encounter clearly illustrates the foundational nature of the Christian belief in the inspiration and divine preservation of the Bible to all forms of apologetic *and* evangelistic effort. The character of Christ is central to a proper presentation of the Gospel. Muslims, however, reject the revealed truths about Christ and question the accuracy of the biblical texts upon which those truths are based. They seek to contrast the "many errors of the Bible" with the "perfect Qur'an." In this article, the Muslim's assertion that the Bible has been corrupted over time, and that it is self-contradictory, will be contrasted with their claim that the Qur'an is not only perfect in its inspiration but in its preservation as well.

It is no longer possible for *any* Christian to ignore the claims of Islam. It is no longer prudent to remain ignorant of the Qur'an and the tenets of the Islamic faith. Given the continuous attacks against the Christian Scriptures launched from every side, it is also no longer possible for Christians to be effective in the proclamation of their faith without having a firm and accurate knowledge of the means God used to bring us His Word, as well as an understanding of why it can be trusted.

THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'AN CONTRASTED

The Bible and the Qur'an are both called "holy books," but the two works are strikingly different. The Qur'an contains many stories obviously drawn from biblical sources, but the differences between the two texts greatly outweigh the similarities.

The Bible

The Bible contains many different forms of writing, including historical, didactic, prophetic, poetic, apocalyptic, and parabolic forms. A large number of authors wrote the Bible over a period of approximately 1,500 years.² They wrote in different languages and in different parts of the world, and they lived in strikingly different times in world history. Christians, nevertheless, confess that their writing is "God-breathed" — indeed, the very Word of God (Matt. 22:31; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21).

Christians have always desired to see their Scriptures spread far and wide and in as many languages as possible,³ believing the message of the Gospel remains the Word of God even when translated into languages that did not exist when the Bible was written. Christians also believe the original manuscripts of the Bible were inspired, but they do not claim inspiration for subsequent copies. They see God's providential protection of the biblical text in the wealth and consistency of the manuscripts produced over the early centuries of the faith rather than in any single manuscript or "inspired version."⁴

This confidence in God's protection of the text over time has led to a willingness among Christian scholars to engage in detailed examination of the earliest manuscripts of the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament. Christian scholarship thus looks forward to more findings of ancient biblical manuscripts while remaining increasingly confident in the accuracy of the Bible text.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an, on the other hand, is said to have come into existence over a very short period of time (less than three decades). Muslims believe Muhammad recited the words given to him by divine revelation and that those who heard him memorized those words. Early on, some of those words were written down as well. His words were not his own, but they were given by God. Even the organization of the Qur'an is said to come from God. The book is organized by "surahs" (chapters) placed in descending order, longest to shortest.

The Qur'an is written in Arabic. For a time, in the early history of Islam, there was a movement to allow for a broader interpretation and understanding of the text, but Muslim orthodoxy eventually adopted the idea of the "inimitability" of the book. It is perfect only as it is written in Arabic, and translation of the text into other languages is considered commentary at best, and unwise or unholy at worst. As a result, Muslims throughout the world memorize the Qur'an in a language the majority of them do not understand. Those who read Arabic confess that the book is not easily understood, and great confusion exists over the reading of major portions of the Qur'an.

Belief in the perfection of the Qur'an precludes, by definition, interest in the study of its earliest manuscripts, as it is considered impious to entertain even the possibility that its early manuscripts differ in the slightest from the modern version. For Muslim orthodoxy, the Qur'an as it exists in Arabic today is exactly as it came into existence in the decades after Muhammad's death. This is when Uthman, the third Caliph (A.D. 644–656), produced the "official" version of the Qur'an.⁵

ATTITUDES TOWARD MANUSCRIPT FINDS

The indisputable difference between the attitudes of Christian scholars and Islamic scholars is best illustrated by the Sana'a Qur'an find of 1972. Workers, restoring a mosque in Sana'a, Yemen, stumbled across a cache of Qur'an manuscripts in the structure of the building's roof. The manuscripts were stuffed into sacks and probably would have stayed there had the value of the find not been recognized by an

official of the Yemeni Antiquities Authority. No scholars in his country were capable of working on this rich find, and so the Yemeni official called in non-Islamic German scholars to assist. Almost 10 years after the initial discovery, German scholar Gerd-R. Puin was allowed to spend significant time with the manuscripts. Only one other scholar has been given any significant amount of time to study the manuscripts. It was not until 1997 that 35,000 microfilm images of the manuscripts were finally allowed to leave the country so others could examine the materials.

The Sana'a find has tremendous importance for Qur'anic studies, at least for those who wish to see the Qur'an studied in all its actual historical forms. Initial studies of the find indicate that it contains some of the earliest known Qur'anic material. This find also gives evidence of variation from today's Qur'an in both the reading of the text and its order, something unthinkable in traditional Islamic doctrine.

When parallel finds that have bearing on the Bible have come to light, Christian scholars have almost climbed over each other to gain access to the manuscripts. Such finds generate great excitement. No such excitement, however, exists in Islam. The contrast is striking. Christians wish to see more and more light shed on the earliest manuscripts of their scriptures, while Muslims resist, often with great fervor, all such inquiry into the history of the Qur'an.

In 1995, an Egyptian court labeled Abu Zaid an apostate, and his wife was ordered, under Islamic law, to divorce him. He and his wife fled to Holland. His crime? Zaid dared to put into writing a conclusion that a number of other Muslim scholars know to be true (but fear to express openly). He said the Qur'an was a literary document that needed to be examined as such. The study of the Qur'an *outside the parameters of strict Muslim orthodoxy* can be very, very dangerous. One only need mention the name Rushdie to conjure up the possible result of making an "offensive" statement concerning the Prophet or the Qur'an. It is no wonder, then, that many ancient texts bearing directly on the original form of the Qur'an currently sit unexamined in Muslim lands. Fear of being accused of apostasy for daring to question the orthodox view of the Qur'an is the primary reason these texts remain hidden.

MUSLIM TEXTUAL CLAIMS

Islamic apologists, meanwhile, happily refer to the existence of textual variants in the manuscripts of the Bible. A quick Internet search will turn up dozens of pages containing wild claims concerning the level of "corruption" in the Bible. A vast majority of their authors lack any substantive understanding of the issues involved; instead, they seek to utilize sensationalism to communicate to the average Muslim a horribly false picture of the facts concerning the transmission of the text of the Bible. Quotations from scholarly Christian sources are presented without context and with extremely exaggerated commentary appended, presenting conclusions far beyond anything the cited scholars would ever endorse. No care is taken to differentiate between consistent, historical sources and inconsistent, ahistorical, theoretical sources. Islamic apologetic literature as a whole falls far short of even the level of attempted integrity found in the writings of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society or other such cultic groups.⁶ Its sheer bulk, however, often gives the impression to its intended audience that it "must be true."

One such Islamic effort responds to the same criticism I am leveling in this article: the Islamic avoidance of meaningful inquiry into the ancient form of the Qur'an. While asserting that Islam has a long history of Qur'anic study, the Muslim writer makes a glaring admission. He cites from a Christian article that states, "In particular, let us ask why some of the oldest manuscripts are not photographically reproduced and made available to the public and the scholars. Why not start with the Topkapi manuscript in Istanbul, the Taschkent manuscript, and the two old manuscripts in Cairo and Damascus? They are not Uthmanic manuscripts as some believe, but they are quite old."⁷ The Muslim's response inadvertently substantiates the thesis of the Christian article when he remarks, "Firstly, when we have a Qur'anic text right from the time of the Prophet and know the variant readings associated with it beforehand, why do they need the superfluous work of going through the manuscripts to check out variant readings?"

The writer goes on to list numerous "rules" for examining the Qur'an, all of which, of course, developed long after the production of the Qur'an and are designed to establish the current text as the one to be read

and followed. The point, however, has already been established: It is a matter of faith that “we have a Qur’anic text right from the time of the Prophet,” so why sweat the details of ancient manuscripts and their vitally important variations? The overriding assertion of the perfection of the Qur’an simply precludes the meaningful construction of an apologetic defense of its own perfection! This attitude is identical to the King James Only advocate who, when faced with the multitude of papyri manuscripts and major uncial texts from antiquity responds, “We have the perfect Bible in the King James, so examining such ancient texts would simply be superfluous.” The circularity of the argument is clear.

THE VAST DIFFERENCE IN VERIFIABILITY

The fact that Christian scholars welcome the discovery of new manuscript finds and rejoice to study the textual origins of the Bible, while Muslims quietly hope that finds of ancient Qur’anic texts are not noticed provides Christians with a vitally important apologetic tool. What is useful in the witnessing encounter with the Muslim is not merely that we can have full confidence in the results of such factual and fair study;⁸ it is, rather, the truth it points to that must be understood and communicated. The Muslim claim of a “perfect Qur’an” is a statement of faith that cannot be vindicated by factual evidence, but the Christian claim that God has preserved His Word *can be* substantiated. Not only must this truth be understood, but the Christian, who seeks to proclaim the life-giving Gospel to Muslims, must also be able to express it with clarity and force. To do so, we must first understand it ourselves. Since the subject of the transmission of the text of the Bible over time is not normally a part of our Sunday School curriculum (though it should be!), a summary of this vitally important subject is presented here.

The Preservation and Protection of the Biblical Text

The greatest stumbling block facing the Christian apologist who seeks to contrast the historically verifiable pedigree of the Bible with the faith-based, but unverifiable, claims of perfection for the Qur’an is the existence of textual variants in the manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments. Since scholars refer to any variation as a “corruption,” Muslim apologists make reference to this as evidence that the Bible is untrustworthy. The Qur’an, though more than half a millennium younger than the New Testament, likewise displays textual variation in its most ancient manuscripts. As we have seen, however, Islamic theology does not encourage the examination of these variations because the current text of the Qur’an is considered inviolable.

Any written document transmitted over time is going to exhibit textual variation. This *does not* mean that the original readings are no longer present or preserved within the manuscript tradition⁹ itself. Pointing to the existence of textual variation means nothing unless the critic can then prove that the variation results in a loss of the original readings. This is something Muslim apologists do not even attempt to do. They simply rely on the normal, nonscholarly meaning of the term “corruption” to communicate an idea not present in the specific use of the term by textual scholars.

Consider the real situation when it comes to the manuscripts of the Bible. God preserved the Old and New Testaments in different ways, corresponding to the different ways in which they were produced. The Old Testament has one kind of mechanism for preservation consistent with the great length of time over which it was written, and the New Testament another, corresponding to the much briefer period of its writing. Since the controversies between Christianity and Islam focus primarily on doctrines plainly taught in the New Testament, most of the focus of Islamic apologists has been on the New Testament documents rather than those of the Old. The New Testament documents, however, are by far the most easily defended against the charge of purposeful corruption, due to both the younger age of the New Testament as well as the large number of manuscripts available.

We have more than 5,300 manuscripts of the New Testament in the original Greek language. Most of these manuscripts are from a later point in history (after the tenth century), but the witness from the earliest centuries is rich indeed. Beyond the Greek manuscript tradition, which is the primary witness to the original text of the New Testament, we have translations of the Greek into other languages, such as

Latin and Syriac. Of utmost importance, these manuscripts come from all over the known world of the day, not from any central location. This is quite important as we shall now see.

The Muslim Claim of Corruption

It is the body of these manuscripts, especially as seen in the earliest texts, that provides the strongest bulwark of confidence for the Christian and the substance of the Christian answer to Islamic attacks on the Scriptures. Muslims assert that changes purposefully have been made in the New Testament text, either inserting doctrines unknown to Jesus and the apostles (this was Malik's claim in our debate) or deleting doctrines opposed to the evolving Christian orthodoxy (such as "hiding" references to Muhammad in John 14 and 16). The problem for the Muslim is to explain how such insertions or deletions could be made in light of the means by which the New Testament documents were spread across the Roman Empire.

Consider, for example, the prologue of the Gospel of John. This passage (John 1:1–18) contains tremendous theological truths, including references to the deity of Christ, the eternal nature of God, the relationship of the Father and the Son, the Gospel, grace, faith, creation, and more. Let's say some religious leader in Syria at the end of the fourth century wished to "alter" this passage of Scripture by deleting the reference to the eternal relationship of the Father and the Son in the first verse. How would such a change be made? The leader might be able to write a "new" introduction to John and send out copies of his new version, but what about all the manuscripts of John that already exist throughout the Roman Empire? He may not worry himself about them, thinking it is only relevant to have altered copies in his own region; but what will happen in such a situation? Will the altered texts replace the original?

Certainly not! Looking at this situation from our perspective today, it is obvious what would happen. We have manuscripts of the Gospel of John that predate the end of the fourth century. A comparison of these earlier texts with the altered texts would clearly indicate the later alteration. The unaltered texts in the rest of the world, furthermore, would continue to be copied, so the obvious alteration in the one location would be easily detected.

The Tenacity of the Text

The New Testament manuscript tradition exhibits what is called "tenacity," that is, once a reading enters the tradition, it remains there. Scribes were extremely conservative in their handling of the text and were fearful of "losing" anything in the copy or copies they were working from. Even when a scribe might make a mistake that is obvious, the following scribes would be hesitant to change or "correct" what was found before them in the texts they were copying. This tenacity is a vitally important truth, for while it does mean we have to engage in the study of textual variants, it also means something much more important: *the original readings of the original documents remain in the manuscript tradition*. We are not out on some wild goose chase when we examine variations between manuscripts. The original reading is there. The importance of this fact cannot be overstated. The Christian exegete, pastor, scholar, and apologist can respond to the critic, Muslim, or other unbeliever, and say with confidence, "We possess today what the apostles wrote long ago." We can openly embrace the small percentage of textual variations in the text¹⁰ that require us to engage in the work of discovering the original reading. The cost, however, is a small one, for we can also refute, firmly and finally, the claim that the text has been altered in order to remove, or insert, doctrinal content.

We must communicate to the Muslim who doubts the veracity of Scripture the truth that there has never been a time in the history of the world when any one person, one group, or one church had the ability to go throughout the world and collect all the manuscripts of the Bible and make the kind of purposeful alterations Muslim apologists claim were made in the text of the Bible. The wholesale insertion of entire doctrines into literally hundreds of passages across the entire scope of the Bible is simply impossible on any historical basis, and this would be required if, for example, the deity of Christ had been interpolated into a text that originally did not teach it. The manuscript tradition would contain clear and unmistakable evidence of these changes, and yet it does not.

Muhammad in John 14

Consider the common assertion of Muslim apologists that the words of Jesus regarding the Holy Spirit in John 14 and 16 have been altered so that a prophecy of Muhammad could be expunged from the Bible. Lengthy articles have been written to substantiate this allegation.¹¹ The argument is that the “paraclete,” the Holy Spirit, is an alteration, and that the original word was “periklytos,” the “highly exalted one,” that is, Muhammad.

Just a few moments of reflection on the facts, however, will provide an overwhelming response. First, Muhammad died in the middle of the seventh century. We have fragments of manuscripts of the Gospel of John that date to the second century, with complete manuscripts that predate Muhammad by over 400 years! Why would anyone alter the text of John to hide a prophecy about Muhammad centuries before Muhammad came on the scene? Second, no variant readings indicate any alteration of the text whatsoever in manuscripts before or after the time of Muhammad. Not a shred of documentable evidence is in the manuscript tradition to support such an assertion. Third, the simple reading of the text defies the amazingly facile interpretations offered by Muslim apologists who seek to turn the discussion of the Holy Spirit into a prophecy of Muhammad. Despite these facts, however, Islamic propagandists continue to claim the Gospel of John “originally” contained a prophecy about the coming of Muhammad.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE DECEIVED

Muslims who live in non-Muslim countries where some form of Christianity predominates are forced, by their minority status, to consider at least some elements of the religious claims of the Christian faith. The information they have been given on the topic of the Bible’s reliability has probably not come from believing and informed Christians, but from their own community, which has no reason to seriously look at the facts about the transmission of the biblical text.

That means the Christian who seeks to proclaim the Gospel of grace to the Muslim is faced with certain obstacles that must be cleared. When the claim of the perfection of the Qur’an is raised, the fact that this is a statement of faith without foundation must be addressed. When the assertion is made that the text of the Bible has been corrupted and changed, the Christian who is familiar with the issues will be able to stand firmly upon the truth and continue to press forward the claims of Christ. The Christian may not only acknowledge the existence of textual variations in the manuscript traditions of the Bible, but he or she can turn the issue around and demonstrate that through these very variations God has preserved and protected the Scriptures from such wholesale changes over time as the Muslim apologists allege. Such an approach may well earn an open-minded hearing from the Muslim.

NOTES

1. This debate is available in audio, video, and mp3 formats at <http://www.aomin.org>.
2. I reject as unfounded and unverifiable redaction-based theories concerning the origination of both Old and New Testament texts. German “higher-critical” thinking has led only to a denigration of the actual study of the texts of the Bible. It is derived from an antisupernatural worldview, which is directly at odds with a Christian worldview. I find far more reason to believe Moses wrote the Pentateuch than to believe the Graf-Wellhausen theory, which is nothing more than wishful thinking on the part of materialistic naturalists. The everchanging canons of redaction criticism can be used to “demonstrate” any theory an enterprising scholar wishes to see published.
3. The suppression of such a desire through the enshrinement of the Latin Vulgate and the prohibition of “unguided” reading of the Bible in medieval Catholicism derived from the same unbiblical and non-Christian sources as the contemporary doctrine of purgatory, the Inquisition, and the Crusades.
4. Exceptions to this are found in such widely divergent movements as Pope Sixtus V’s “infallible Vulgate” and the modern-day King James Only movement, both of which appeal to a standardized text rather than to the entirety of the manuscript tradition. In response to the King James Only movement, see my article, “Is Your Modern Translation Corrupt? Answering the Allegations of KJV Only Advocates,” *Christian Research Journal* 18, 3 (1996): 20–27.
5. The fact that Uthman had to undertake such a revision should indicate to the open-minded investigator that a *need* existed for the work, which immediately causes one to wonder why one should accept the final decision of Uthman. Such a revision,

moreover, closes the door (outside of the examination of non-Uthmanian ancient versions of the Qur'an) to any meaningful claim to be able to trace the text beyond that point, all the way to Muhammad himself.

6. Christian apologists at <http://www.answering-islam.org> have provided dozens of examples of this kind of factual error in the writings of Islamic apologists.
7. <http://www.answering-islam.org.uk/Quran/Text/criticaltext.html>.
8. I speak of factual and fair study in order to exclude the nonfactual and unfair study that marks such enterprises as the Jesus Seminar.
9. The phrase "manuscript tradition" refers to the entire body of manuscripts of all languages of the same historical document; in this case, the New Testament.
10. Many critics, from Islamic apologists even to Roman Catholic writers (see Robert Sungenis, *Not by Scripture Alone* [Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship, 1997], 254–55), will inflate the amount of textual variation so as to cast doubt upon the text of the Bible. They will list verses, instead of words, in order to inflate percentages. Not every textual variation, moreover, is even relevant; for example, many variants involve transposition of words, which rarely impacts translational meaning. Others include the spelling of a place name or the use of a synonym. Including these variants along with the truly important ones can mislead the person who is ignorant of the true textual purity of the New Testament.
11. These attempts are commonly found in Muslim apologetic writings and on their Web sites. They misuse every form of linguistic study, from acontextual miscitations of scholarly Christian sources to the most inane grammatical arguments. To see the lengths to which some go on this issue, see <http://www.answering-christianity.org/prediction.htm>.