

Concerning the Prophet Muhammad's View of the Gospels from (an Interpretation of) the Earliest Arabic Sources

In this writing we will be quoting from the Qur'an and Sahih-Bukhari, the most trusted collection of Muhammad's (pbuh)¹ doings and sayings (known as *hadith*) in existence today. These are primary source materials from the very earliest moments in Islamic history. However, we recognize that the original, and authoritative, Qur'an and *hadith*, were written in Arabic. Thus, we have taken the liberty to call this work an *interpretation* of the earliest (Arabic) sources, just as Muslim scholars would consider any translation of the Qur'an and *hadith* outside of Arabic an *interpretation*. With that being said, we are using the most trusted English translations of the source material that line up word-for-word with the Arabic sources. This is simply to recognize the Islamic chain of authority to give honor, and respect, to them and their scholarly work.

Modern Islamic scholarship decrees that the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Gospel of John of the Christian New Testament (*injil*; *Gospels*) have been sent down by God (*Allah*) as His Word that is absolutely incorruptible (Qur'an 6:114-115, Qur'an 18:27, Qur'an 3:3-4).² Some of these scholars (albeit few) believe that the supposed Gospel that the Qur'an refers to as having been given to Jesus, the Messiah (*Isa al-Masih*) actually is not a book at all, but rather the very Words Jesus, the Messiah spoke as given to Him by God.³ The long and the short is that this does not fit with the Qur'anic depiction of revelation from God (God's Word; the Scripture, the Holy Books). Furthermore, it is not a logically coherent retort for if one wrote down the exact words Jesus spoke, they would therefore be the same words that God gave to Jesus to speak. A cursory reading of the Qur'an shows that God always 1) revealed His Word vocally to a prophet and 2) preserved that Word through writing. We don't have to look very far to see that the Qur'an itself fits this standard. Looking a bit further reveals, also, that the Torah, the Psalms, the Scrolls of Abraham, etc., fit this standard with exactness. Many more Qur'anic Surahs could be quoted here that would verify the revelation of the Torah (et al) as being preserved in writing by God Himself, but the scope of this study is on the *Gospels* and Muhammad's view (read: the *historical Islamic view*) of these Revelations. It is important that we first establish the fact that the Qur'an teaches, and Muhammad himself believed, that God preserves His revelations in written form and that no man can corrupt them. Here is what the Qur'an says,

"And recite (and teach) what has been revealed to you of the Book of your Lord: none can change His Words, and none will find as a refuge other than Him." (Qur'an 18:27)

¹ (pbuh) means "Peace Be Upon Him" and is a term of respect often said after referring to a prophet (particularly respectful for Muhammad according to Islamic tradition). It means, "we hope God has had mercy on this prophet and that he is in Paradise at peace with the Lord." Whether or not you hold the faith tradition of Islam, one would do well to hope that this sort of peace has been given to everyone

² Maulana Mohammad Ali, *Qur'an with Commentary, Commentary on Surah al-Imran*

³ Maulana Mohammad Ali, *Qur'an with Commentary, Commentary on Surah al-Imran*

We can say with great assurance based on this one Surah alone (and there are many others) that the Qur'an teaches that 1) If God reveals His Word to a prophet then 2) God preserves that Word in written form such that no man could corrupt it even if they wanted to.

Let's go back to the first sentence of this article concerning the New Testament Gospels. While modern Islamic scholars *do* believe the former to be true, they also believe, and with great zeal, that the modern *versions* of these Gospels have actually been *corrupted*. Modern Islamic scholars believe that the Qur'an exists eternally alongside God in heaven written on stone tablets in *Arabic*. Yes, Islamic scholarship does dictate that the heavenly language God has chosen to reveal Himself (particularly in the Qur'an) is *Arabic*. Not only that, Islamic scholarship says that every word, punctuation mark, space, etc., is divinely inspired and cannot be changed by any man (save God alone) lest it no longer be the Revealed Word of God. This brings us to an important distinction we must make; the difference between *changed* and *corrupted*. Decreed within the bounds of historical Islam is the Doctrine of Abrogation. This doctrine submits that God can change any part of His Revealed Word so long as the change is morally superior to the former Revelation. One will find many changes within Qur'anic Revelation. But *change* does not mean *corrupt*. If God decides to change His Word, it still remains to be God's Word. However, if *man* decides to change God's Word, it no longer remains God's Word and instead becomes man's word. This is the criticism leveled against the New Testament Gospels of today by modern Islamic scholarship. They believe that many changes have been made to the Gospels by those (i.e. humans) who have translated it into various languages. Furthermore, they insist that *no original manuscripts of the Gospels* exist to this day and therefore cannot be verified as accurately from God or not. This, they say, seals the deal that the modern Gospels within the Christian New Testament have been changed by man (not God) and are, therefore, *corrupt* rather than *abrogated*. The Qur'an is not like this, since God is the one who abrogates His own Word, not men. What does the Qur'an have to say about the Revelation of God (Word of God)? Do we receive any insight about the nature of the Gospels and the nature of the Qur'an from the words of the Qur'an itself? Here is what the Qur'an says,

"Allah! There is no god but He, - the Living, the Self-Subsisting, Eternal. It is He who sent down to you, in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and **He sent down the Torah (Law of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide (a sign) to mankind**, and He sent down the Criterion (of judgment between right and wrong). Then those who reject faith in the Signs of Allah will suffer the severest penalty, and Allah is Exalted in Might, Lord of Retribution." (Qur'an 3:2-5)

"Say, 'Shall I seek for judge other than Allah? - When He it is Who has sent to you the Book, explained in detail.' They know full well, to whom We have given the Book, that it has been sent down from your Lord in truth. Never be then of those who doubt. The Word of your Lord finds its fulfillment in truth and in justice. **None can change His Words** for He is the One Who hears and knows all." (Qur'an 6:114-115)

"And recite (and teach) what has been revealed to you of the Book of your Lord: **none can change His Words**, and none will you find as a refuge other than Him." (Qur'an 18:27)

"We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption). We sent Messengers before you amongst the religious sects of old." (Qur'an 15:9-10)

There we see it in the very words of the Qur'an itself; no Revealed Word of God can be corrupted by man *because* it is God Himself who preserves His Revealed Word, and the Gospel of Jesus is considered God's Revealed Word sent down by Him. However, like we said earlier, modern Islamic scholars already believe this! They believe that the Gospels given to Jesus and written down by His followers are, in fact, the Revealed Word of God. But they believe that 1) no existing original manuscript means we do not have the Gospel given to Jesus Revealed by God and 2) translations of these manuscripts, if they even did exist, have fundamentally corrupted the Gospel by changing its meaning. We are going to look at this charge - the charge of Christians having changed the Gospels of Jesus - later, but first we must ask ourselves an absolutely foundational question:

What was Muhammad's view of the Gospels of Jesus available during his life in 570-632AD?

Here is where we must delve deeply into the 1700 page *hadith* collection known as Sahih-Bukhari. All Islamic scholarship (whether Shi'a or Sunni or some other sect) recognize this collection of *hadith* as the most trustworthy, most authoritative, and most accurate depiction of what Muhammad said and did during his lifetime. Do these records give us any insight into Muhammad's thoughts about the Gospels? Or does this collection give us any insight into, maybe, what God, in the Qur'an, says about the Gospels? Here are a few separate *hadith* from Sahih-Bukhari reflecting on Muhammad's words,

Volume 1, Book 1, Number 3

"Khadija then accompanied him to her cousin Waraqa bin Naufal bin Asad bin 'Abdul 'Uzza, who, during the Preislamic Period became a Christian and used to write the writing with Hebrew letters and would write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allah wished him to write."

Volume 4, Book 55, Number 605

"The Prophet returned to Khadija while his heart was beating rapidly. She took him to Waraqa bin Naufal who was a Christian convert and used to read the Gospels in Arabic."

Volume 6, Book 60, Number 478

"Waraqa had been converted to Christianity in the Preislamic Period and used to write Arabic and write of the Gospel in Arabic as much as Allah wished him to write."

Volume 9, Book 87, Number 111

"Waraqa was the son of her (Khadija's) paternal uncle, i.e., her father's brother, who, during the Pre-Islamic Period became a Christian and used to write the Arabic writing and used to write of the Gospels in Arabic as much as Allah wished him to write."

What great insight from the Prophet about the Gospels! We can establish 4 facts based on what Muhammad said about the Gospels of Jesus:

- 1) Muhammad says that the Gospels of Jesus were available in written form in 570-632AD, since Waraqa was *reading* them
- 2) Muhammad says that the Gospels of Jesus that Waraqa was reading and copying were verified by God as being the authentic Gospels He revealed to Jesus
 - a. God directed Waraqa to copy them and if these accounts were not authentically His Word, then He lied to Waraqa, and the Qur'an says God cannot lie
- 3) Muhammad knew that the Gospels of Jesus are the historical biographies of Jesus as recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
 - a. Islamic history (as we are reading here), secular history, and Christian history assure us that the only thing known as the "Gospels of Jesus" available during 570-632AD were, in fact, the historical biographical collection of Jesus known as the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
 - b. There exists other documents known as "the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, etc." These documents have never been recognized throughout history as being the "Gospels of Jesus." The only documents known as that are those from the four biographers Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
 - c. Furthermore, in Arabic the *injl* (Gospels) refers to these texts Waraqa was reading (since the *hadith* quoted above use the Arabic *injl* for "Gospels")
- 4) Muhammad says that it was *God's Desire (...as Allah wished him to write...)* for the Gospels to be *copied and translated* from the local languages into Arabic
 - a. If it is God's command to translate His Word, God will maintain the purity of that Word because it is by His command that the language is changed, and therefore remains His Incorruptible Word
- 5) Muhammad verifies that the Christian New Testament Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) existed in their authentic, Revealed as God's Word, form as late as 570-632AD

Now this is astonishing. The Prophet believed that the writings his cousin Waraqa was reading and copying were the authentic Revealed Gospels of Jesus 500-600 years after Jesus, the Messiah ascended to Paradise and left the Earth. Forget what modern Islamic scholars believe, the Prophet himself authenticates *at the very least* the copies of the Gospels of Jesus he had during his lifetime.

Remember, modern Islamic scholars believe that because no original manuscript of the Gospels of Jesus can be reproduced (from 33AD when Jesus ascended to paradise) and that therefore the Gospels of Jesus absolutely cannot be authentic. However, the Prophet says that what he held 600 years later is *still the authentic Gospels of Jesus*. What implications does this have? This means that if we can *reproduce a copy of the Gospels of Jesus that the Prophet would have been likely to have in 570-632AD and match it up with our modern New Testament Gospels, we can then verify that these modern New Testament Gospels are, in fact, of the same authority as Muhammad believed the Gospels he had were; the authentic, Revealed Word of God given to Jesus, the Messiah and recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*. It behooves me to say that there are hundreds of New Testament Gospels manuscripts dated from 500-700AD that are used to formulate the modern New Testament Gospels of today and many of them originate in the Middle East (including Arabia, where the Prophet says Waraqa

read and copied these Gospels). Not only that, these manuscripts also line up word-for-word with modern day translations of the New Testament Gospels that affirm a word-for-word translation approach (such as the New American Standard Bible). Lastly, modern New Testament scholarship have found manuscripts of the New Testament Gospels translated into over 30 languages by the year 600AD, and none of them contradict one another in doctrine, meaning, or description of Jesus, the Messiah.⁴

According to the Prophet's authority, then, the Gospels of Jesus in the modern New Testament of today are, in fact, the Revealed word of God given to Jesus, the Messiah and recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

But what about the charge that Christians have corrupted the Revealed Word of God in the Gospels by fundamentally changing His Words without His authority? We have already established that this is fundamentally impossible on authority of the Qur'an and the Prophet's words. However, we believe that there is a case to be made for Christians having changed both the Torah and the Gospels *fundamentally* such that they did, in fact, become corrupt and no longer represented what God revealed to Jesus as originally written. Sahih-Bukhari records Muhammad recalling a conversation he had,

Volume 9, Book 92, Number 461

"Allah has told you [Muhammad] that the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians) changed their scripture and distorted it and wrote the scripture with their own hands saying, 'It is from Allah,' to sell it for a little gain."

This *hadith* may be the most pertinent of all, because it is here that many Islamic scholars derive their accusation that the New Testament Gospels have been changed by man and therefore corrupted. First and foremost, this quote by the Prophet about God revealing that the Jews and Christians changed their scriptures is clearly pertaining to a *specific group of people* at a *specific point in history*. The specific group are Jews and Christians that the Prophet himself had met, or heard about doing this, and the specific point in history is 570-632AD. What was this group of people, that called themselves Christians or Jews, doing during Muhammad's time? The very last line of the Prophet's recollection reveals all, "...to sell it for a little gain." The Christians deliberately changed the Gospels of Jesus in order to sell it to their community for profit. All the while proclaiming, "this is the true Word of God!" We should have absolutely no reservations in believing that these Christians and Jews actually changed the scripture for carnal, selfish, greedy gain. Why? The "Christianity" of Arabia is historically recorded as being Nestorian, Apollonarian, and Gnostic. Gnostic Christianity was the evidently rampant in Arabia).⁵ This belief system is so contrary what Jesus, the Messiah taught and modeled that the earliest Christian leaders condemned it as unorthodox heresy. Gnostics took advantage of the poor (something the Prophet abhorred), were irreverently carnal (they believed the body could be used for anything including sexual deviance because only the Spirit went to "heaven"), and

⁴ This includes a Hebrew copy of the entire Bible (including New Testament Gospels) written around 600AD called *Codex Hilleli*. For a thorough treatment of the New Testament manuscripts, see F.F. Bruce's *The New Testament Documents*, F.F. Bruce's *New Testament History*, R.Laird Harris' *Canonicity and Inspiration*, and *Expositor's Commentary on the New Testament*

⁵ Sahih-Bukhari 6:60:252, and various other *hadith*

they seriously distorted orthodox teaching of the Gospels (they claimed to have been given the Secret Revelation of God instructing them how reinterpret the New Testament Gospels).⁶ The Gnostics were known as "Christians" who had the "Gospels of Jesus" in their possession. It is clear that these Gnostics are a prime candidate for those that would corrupt the Word of God (the Gospels) for greedy, monetary, profit. To this end the historian can agree, whether he ascribe to be of the Christian tradition or not.

In this study we have seen that 1) the Prophet Muhammad said, and believed, that the Gospels of Matthew Mark, Luke, and John available during his lifetime in 570-632AD were, in fact, the authentic Revelation of God given to Jesus the Messiah, 2) the modern New Testament Gospels of today are, in fact, the authentic Revelation of God given to Jesus, the Messiah, because they are identical to the Gospels the Prophet had in his lifetime, 3) the authentic Revelation of God (including the Gospels) cannot be corrupted by man, try as they may, because God Himself sustains the purity of His Word, and 4) a group of "Christians" during the Prophet's lifetime did, in fact, attempt to corrupt the Gospels by changing their words and meaning, telling others they were the True Revealed Word of God, and selling them for greedy, profitable, monetary gain. Muhammad's view of the Gospels of Jesus as the authentic Revealed Word of God is can be established not as mere theory, but as inference to the best explanation of the Qur'anic data and the *hadith* data as recorded by Sahih-Bukhari, as well as the secular historical data recorded by historians throughout the centuries. The Prophet⁷ did, in fact, believe that the historical biographies of Jesus as recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the authentic Revelation of God given to Jesus, the Messiah, known as the Gospels (*injl*).

⁶ See Elaine Pagel's book *The Gnostic Paul* for a further treatment of Gnosticism

⁷ "The Prophet" and "Muhammad" are used synonymously throughout this writing

* All quotes from the Qur'an come from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English Translation (Interpretation) of the Qur'an