Before Muhammad, after Muhammad?

Big picture: If you claim the NT was changed before Muhammad, why does the Quran affirm the New Testament? And if after, what about the wealth of manuscript evidence?

1. The Bible could not have been corrupted before Muhammad, as the Quran affirms the Bible



One effective way of answering the question of whether the Bible has been changed or corrupted is responding with a question that forces the enquirer to consider the wider evidence that shows the problems with the claim. If the Bible has been corrupted, the question of when the corruption took place should be easily answerable by our Muslim friends, especially in relation to Muhammad's ministry.

The Muslim faces a problem when he says that the Bible was corrupted before Muhammad, because he is then forced to consider the Quran's witness of the Old and New Testaments.

2. Verses in the Quran that seem to suggest the corruption of Scripture do not directly refer to the Bible by name, and so probably refer to people's use of and interpretation of Scripture

In the Quran there are a number of verses which at first glance suggest the Bible had been changed. For example, that there are those who: "perverted it knowingly after they understood it" (Quran 2.75), "write the Book with their own hands" (Quran 2.79) and "distort words from their [proper] usages" (Quran 4.46)1.

While this evidence seems conclusive, it is worth noting that in each of the verses the context and details of exactly what happened is unclear, and the actual names of the revelations are not used in any of these instances, e.g., Torah (Tawrat), Psalms (Zabur) and Gospel (Injil). All these claims, if historically accurate, can be answered by the fact that there have been many throughout history who have misinterpreted, distorted and twisted God's words, while the written revelation of God has remained intact and preserved. The Bible, for example, is full of such instances where false prophets and false teachers have appeared to lead people astray. There is an example too in the Hadith, (Abu Dawud 4431), where Jews allegedly hid, or 'concealed', a verse about stoning from Muhammad with their hand, while the actual text of Scripture remained unchanged.

Also, in at least two of the examples above, the context in their respective chapters or other verses in the Quran clarify that the corruption of the Scriptures is not in view. For example, Quran 2.75 mentions a group of Jews who "write the Scriptures in their own hands", yet in Quran 7.159 others who do not. Also, while Quran 3.78 speaks of 'a party who alter the Scripture with their tongues', Quran 3.113-115 speaks of those who do not.

The Muslim needs to explain why God's revelation, when mentioned by name, is only mentioned in positive terms. One key passage is Quran 5.43-45, which affirms the Torah being in possession of the Jews. Then in the following verses (Quran 5.46-48) the Gospel (Injil) is said to confirm the Torah and is guidance and light (See also Quran 3.3-4). However, verse 47 commands Christians to "judge by what God has revealed therein", assuming, firstly, that Christians at the time of Muhammad still had access to the original text. Otherwise, how else could they judge by what God had revealed? And secondly that the text in their possession was authoritative. It is interesting that Muhammad is told in Quran 10.94, if there are doubts over what has been revealed to him, he is told "ask those who have been reading the Scripture before you". Why would Muhammad be told this if the Christians where only in possession of corrupt scriptures?

3. The use of “between his/its hands” or “in his/its presence” and the witness of the Hadith show the assumption of uncorrupted Scriptures in the 7th Century

It’s also worth noting that when speaking of the previous revelations, the phrases in the English version of the Quran that contain the words “preceded/confirms” in Arabic literally translate “between his/its hands” or “in his/its presence”, showing the assumption that the Bible which existed at the time the Quran was uncorrupted. (For example, Quran 3.3-4, Quran 6.92, Quran 10.37, Quran 35.31 and Quran 46.30) These verses help us clarify the verses that appear to show the Bible’s corruption and show that the Bible could not have been corrupted before the 7th Century. It is hard to underestimate the number of verses in the Quran that affirm of uncorrupted Jewish and Christian scriptures in the time of Muhammad2.

Alongside the Quran’s witness to uncorrupted Scriptures, the Hadith confirms that this was also the view of Muhammad. AbuDawud 4434 accounts Muhammed affirming the Torah in the presence of a group of Jews. Tirmidhi 41.9 similarly accounts the reliability of the Injil.

4. We know the Bible could not have been changed after Muhammad from the manuscript evidence

If on the other hand a claim is made that the scriptures were corrupted after Muhammad, then our Muslim friends have to explain why there is so much manuscript evidence from before the 7th Century, which provides us with the entire text of the Old and New Testaments. See “Abundant NT manuscript evidence” and “Old Testament carefully copied and affirmed by Jesus” for a detailed discussion of the manuscript evidence for the Bible.

5. Most Muslims have not studied the verses in the Quran in detail and are just repeating what they have been told

Muslims are often told that the Quran affirms the corruption of the preceding Scriptures. The verses that they are pointed to are the ambiguous verses mentioned above, while verses that affirm preserved Scriptures are ignored. In reality many Muslims will not have looked into this for themselves, and it is often a good approach to ask them to show you where in the Quran it explicitly says that the Torah or Injil has been corrupted, while being ready to show them the verses that affirm the Christian Scriptures.

It is worth asking your Muslim friend if they have ever actually read the message of Jesus for themselves. Be ready to give a copy of a Gospel for them to read. Encourage them to read it prayerfully, asking God to reveal to them if this is indeed God’s unchanging word.

References

1. 1 In other examples: “They distort words from their [proper] usages and have forgotten a portion of that which they were reminded” (Quran 5.13-14), “they distort words beyond their [proper] usages” (Quran 5.41), “distort the Book with their tongues” (Quran 3.78), “make it into [separate] sheets for show, while ye conceal much [of its contents]” (Quran 6.91), “wronged among them changed [the words] to a statement other than that which had been said to them.” (Quran 7.162), “threw it away behind their backs and exchanged it for a small price” (Quran 3.187), “conceal of the Scripture and overlooking much” (Quran 5.15), “conceal what We sent down of clear proofs and guidance” (Quran 2.159), “who conceal what Allah has sent down of the Book and exchange it for a small price” (Quran 2.174).
2. 2 For example, see Quran 2.40-44, Quran 2.89-91, Quran 2.101, Quran 2.121, Quran 3.81, Quran 4.47, Quran 4.136, Quran 5.68, Quran 7.157, Quran 10.94, Quran 29.46 and Quran 46.12.