Jesus our unchanged Word

Big picture: Christians and Muslims view their Scriptures differently. While Muslims claim the Quran is preserved on tablets in heaven, for Christians our unchanged Word is a person, the Lord Jesus who is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

1. Muslims and Christians view their scriptures differently



When we engage with our Muslim friends on the whole topic of Scripture, it is worth taking the time to consider the nature of Scripture according to Christianity and according to Islam. Understanding how each respective faith views their own scriptures will help us navigate through discussing what can be a difficult but foundational topic.

It is often thought, for example, that Christianity and Islam are directly comparable when considering the main components of each faith. God is Christianity's Allah, Jesus and Muhammad are equivalent as central characters or figureheads and the Bible and the Quran are equivalent textual revelations. However, these comparisons fail on a number of levels. The comparison of the God of the Bible and the Allah of the Quran is problematic as it fails to recognise the triune nature of the Christian God, and a comparison of Jesus and Muhammad fails to recognise the New Testament's declaration of Jesus as divine.

When it comes to scripture too, a direct comparison fails to understand what Christians believe about the Bible and what Muslims believe about the Quran.

2. Christians believe the Bible was inspired through individuals and expressed through their own experiences and personalities

For Christians, the Bible is the Word of God that has been revealed through the writings of chosen individuals as God guided each author what to write by his Spirit. The key phrase the New Testament uses is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), which recognises how each writer was directed by God, yet writes through the lens of their own experience and personality. Peter too highlights the divine authorship of the Bible through human agency, writing that "prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21) This means the wide variety of genre found in the Bible is still considered to be the Word of God whether it is the account of the Fall in Genesis, a Psalm of confession by David1, or a New Testament letter written by Paul.

> *Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness, 2 Timothy 3:16*

3. Muslims believe the Quran was dictated to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel and passed on verbatim

The Quran however is seen by Muslims to be the "recitation" of the speech of Allah2. Rather than being words that Muhammad wrote out of his own experience, the words of the Quran are said to have been dictated to or "sent down" to him (e.g. Quran 17.105), via the Angel Gabriel3. Muhammad's task was to memorise and pass on these words verbatim to others without adding any of his own interpretation or thoughts. The Qur'an written down today is said to be an identical copy of the Quran that is preserved in heaven4, and, as Muslims claim it is not possible to truly translate the Quran into another language without introducing a shift in meaning, the Quran is only the Quran when written in Arabic.

With truth have We sent it down, and with truth hath it descended. And We have sent thee as naught else save a bearer of good tidings and a warner. Al-Isra' 105

4. The God-breathed nature of the Bible is part of the Muslim objection that the Bible has become corrupted

Many Christians will be surprised to learn that that the Quran explicitly affirms the Jewish and Christian Scriptures5 in a number of places 6 However, the assumption is made that these scriptures were "sent down" in a similar fashion and with a similar message to the Quran (see Quran 5.68 for example). When Muslims see a difference in message, they conclude that the Bible has become corrupted.

However, this is not just due to a lack of continuity between the Bible and Quran, but due to the varied genres, content, and authorship of the Old and New Testaments, including for example the inclusion of material that Muslims find objectional7. When Christians affirm the writings of Paul and other authors as part of the Injil (New Testament), Muslims reject these as original and claim the "real Gospel" which was send down to Jesus (Quran 2.136) is now lost, except where snippets of the New Testament Gospels mirror the Quran. This is a standard response, especially where Paul and the other New Testament writers affirm the deity of Jesus and other doctrines that Islam rejects.

5. Rather than comparing the Bible with the Quran there is value in comparing Christ to the Quran, due to the fact they process similar attributes according to each respective faith

While it is important to defend the inspiration of the Bible and show that it has not become corrupt8, it is useful to realise that there is a closer corelation between the person of Jesus and what Muslims believe the Quran to be. For example, Christ according to the Bible is eternal. He is described in John 1:1-2 as the Word who was with God in the beginning, and also Jesus says in John 8:58 "before Abraham was, I AM". The Quran is also seen as eternal by most Muslims9. Jesus was and now is in heaven with the Father; the same is said of the Quran. Allah declares it is "with us" (see Quran 43.4 and Quran 85.21-22). Jesus, according to the New Testament, was sent down (John 20:21); this is also said of the Quran in Quran 12.2. Christ is unchanging (Hebrews 13:8); the Quran also is said to be 'guarded' (Quran 56.77-79). Also, interestingly just as in a similar way that Christ is presented as one who will appear at the last day and one who intercedes for his people, the Hadith suggests that the Quran will appear on the "Day of Resurrection, like a pale man" (IbnMajah 33.126), and as two flocks of birds to intercede for those who recited the Quran during their lives. (Muslim 758).

Jesus is often presented as a revelation in the New Testament. In Hebrews 1:1-2 Jesus is presented as the perfect and final revelation. In John 1:1-3 Jesus is presented as the Word through whom all things came into being. Later too in John Jesus says of himself that he makes known the Father to us (John 14:9). Interestingly, even in the Quran Jesus is known as "a word" sent from God (Quran 3.45, Quran 4.171 and Quran 3.39). Muslims would respond by saying that Jesus being "a word" from Allah only means that he was miraculously conceived (or brought into being) by Allah's command10, which while fitting with the Muslim's understanding isn't what the verses in question actually say.

It was narrated from Ibn Buraidah that his father told that the Messenger of Allah said: "The Quran will come on the Day of Resurrection, like a pale man, and will say: 'I am the one that kept you awake at night and made you thirsty during the day." IbnMajah 33.126

6. According to the Quran itself, its trustworthiness fails even if there is just one change to the text

Seeing Jesus as our ultimate revelation that came down also means that we do not need to be concerned that the Old and New Testament has been revealed and transmitted using human means. Christ himself is in heaven and unchanged (Hebrews 13:8), and even the fact that the textual history of the Bible has been prone to copyist errors

isn't an insurmountable issue to us[11]. The Bible's job is to reveal and bring us into relationship with a person, the Lord Jesus. The claim however, that the written Quran of today is an exact copy of the Quran that exists in heaven is a much more fragile argument. Any evidence of change introduced to the text of the Quran through its transmission means that there is no real way of knowing what the original Quran says, and means that Quran 15.9 is a false claim. While Muslims claim that the Quran is word for word, letter for letter unchanged over the last 14 centuries, modern research is showing this to be far from true[12].

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Hebrews 13:8

7. The Bible has strong internal evidence confirming its God-breathed nature

Keeping the difference in in mind between the Christian view and Muslim of view of Scripture will help us navigate the often-complex debate concerning the trustworthiness of the Christian Scriptures. In defence we can see passages in the New Testament like Luke 24:44 and Luke 24:27, where Jesus defines the three major sections of the Scriptures. Jesus quoted and used the Old Testament on many occasions, including verses that are historical narrative (for example his reference to Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19:5), or passages which in their original context are naturally to be understood as the experience of the writer in question (for example, Psalms 31:5 and Psalms 22:1). The New Testament writers also saw their writings as scripture (see for example 2 Peter 3:15-16).

There is also value, when defending Christian doctrines, in being ready to offer verses from across the breadth of Scripture. For example, to show Jesus' deity one could use Philippians 2:6-11 (Paul), John 1:1-3 (John), Mark 1:2-3 (Mark), Psalms 110:1 (David) or many of the 'appearings' of the Christ in the Old Testament.

8. The centre of the Christian faith is Christ, who is a person and not a book

When talking with our Muslim friends it is important to remember that we are not seeking to introduce them to a religion, a philosophy or a code of conduct. We are seeking to introduce them to a person, Jesus, the one who loves them and gave himself for them. The goal of Islam is to bring people into submission to the commands of Allah. Islam's centre is a book, the centre of Christianity is a Saviour. A key verse that shows this contrast is John 15:15 where Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

References

1. 1 Psalms 51
2. 2 Qur'an literally means, "the recitation".
3. 3 The phrase "Sent down" is used in the Quran over 200 times, see introduction to Abdel Haleem's translation of The Quran, Oxford World's Classics
4. 4 There are a number of legitimate objections to this claim including Muslim sources' own account of the early history Quran's early compilation including reports of missing chapters and verses, obvious changes and corrections made to the earliest surviving copies of the Quran and the controversy around the different 'readings' of the Quran following the introduction of vowelisation into Arabic. These are be explored in more detail in "Is the Quran reliable?"
5. 5 The term "Bible" is not found in the Quran, the Quran however refers to specific books of the Bible, including Tawrat (Torah), the Zabur (the Psalms) and Injeel (Gospel or New Testament).
6. 6 See "Before Muhammad, after Muhammad?".
7. 7 E.g. Lot sleeping with his daughters, Judah sleeping with a prostitute or the sinfulness of the Moses, David or the prophets.
8. 8 See other articles in this section.
9. 9 "Essential Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to Belief and Practice" By Diane Morgan p30 – see also https://-islamqa.info/en/answers/100585/ruling-on-describing-the-quran-as-the-eternal-word-of-allah
10. 10 https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/229/descriptive-titles-of-jesus-in-quran-part-2/
11. 11 Even though we don't have the original copies of the Old and New Testaments and even though there are

many differences between their various manuscripts, we can be sure that the Bible message has been transmitted faithfully. See “Abundant NT manuscript evidence” and “Old Testament carefully copied and affirmed by Jesus” for a more detailed discussion of this topic.

12. 12 See: “Is the Quran reliable?” for a detailed discussion on the Quran.