

# A discussion about the version of the Bible available to Muhammad



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It is a mandate that all Muslims believe in all previous revelations given by God along with the Qur'an (Surah 2:4). Relative to discussions with Christians, Muslims are required to believe the Bible. Some Muslim apologists today contend that the Bible has been 'corrupted' or tainted through the infusion of faulty doctrines and the exclusion of valuable texts that support Islamic ideas by dubious scribes and malicious copyists. According to them there is no way of knowing what was in the 'original text' of the Bible.

This article offers both a response to the Muslim apologist arguments regarding biblical integrity and trustworthiness as well as explains that what Muhammad knew as the Bible through the Syriac Peshitta is essentially the same in biblical content as what most reputable Bible versions contain today. Through the efforts of labour intensive manuscript discovery and exhaustive textual criticism, both Christians and Muslims can know with precision what the early writers of both the Old and New Testament wrote as 'inspired' Scripture. In order for the Muslim to be consistent in following the mandate to believe all the books previously given by God as well as the Qur'an, he must believe the Syriac Peshitta, or a Bible version that is a comparable translation, in order for the Muslim mandate to make sense. Such a concession, however, places the Muslim in an extremely difficult position that needs to be discussed between Christians and Muslims if they both wish and desire to be thought of as worshiping the one true God.

## Introduction

To convince his audience that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, Peter, on the day of Pentecost (Ac 2), refers several times to Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament was the source of authority in which the Jews believed and Peter declared the arrival, redemption and resurrection of our Lord on the basis thereof. From the beginning of his speech on the Areopagus, Paul connects with the beliefs and practices of the Hellenistic times. Instead of citing the Old Testament as authority, Paul uses the creation, which the Greek philosophers are engaged in their study, to bring the people to the Creator and thus to salvation in Christ (Ac 17:22ff.). It is important to know what carries weight for those who listen to you. Because the Qur'an is authoritative to Muslims, it is important for Christians in their conversations with Muslims to know what the Qur'an has say about the Bible and to what extent a connection can be found through it.

Muslims place great emphasis upon written revelation, particularly the Bible, as a guide to lead them in not only their quest for the truth, but in their relationship with Allah. Knowing what the Bible says is imperative, if not an integral part, for anyone claiming to be a follower of Islam. Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Abd al-Muttalib, the founder of Islam, and subsequent Muslim writers and leaders have made it a requirement to read, study and augment their understanding of the Bible (see Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri 1994:811; Ali 2012:147; Surah 4:136). In fact, according to Surah 2:4, a Muslim's walk in this life as well as his eternal welfare absolutely depends upon the Christian Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Muslims seem to have a love-hate relationship when it comes to the Bible. While Muslims must extol the value of the Bible as a recorded prerequisite to the establishment of the Qur'an, they

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1.Surah 2:4 reads, 'And who believe in the Revelation Sent to thee, *And sent before thy time*, And (in their hearts) Have the assurance of the Hereafter' (Ali 1997:17, [author's italics]). According to *Interpretation of the Meanings of The Noble Qur'an*, (Bewley & Isa Waley 2007:4, 6), and Shaykh Safi-Ur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri et al. (2000:1.116) the revelation 'sent before thy time' refers to the Torah, the Gospel, and 'previous Messengers'. While those 'previous Messengers' may include 'Arab, non-Arab, or a person of a previous Scripture', the main emphasis is upon 'People of the Book' or Jews and Christians:

they have a special significance ... since they believe in their Books and in all the details related to that, so when such people embrace Islam and sincerely believe in the details of the religion, then they will get two rewards. (Shaykh Safi-Ur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri et al. 2000:1.118)

Everyone else only gets one and that in only a 'general way'.

demean its trustworthiness as something that has been tampered with by unscrupulous translators and dishonest scribes. In other words, they love the Bible when it supports their Islamic worldview, but they hate it when its history and doctrine run contrary to everything that they presuppose to be true.

Therefore, it is the object of this article to discern what the Muslims means by the Bible, particularly as a document they define as 'scripture'. What version of the Bible was Muhammad referring to when he spoke of 'the Revelation sent to thee, and sent *before thy time*'? Was it basically the same text that Early Church authorities discovered and now comprise the current 66 books or was it something wholly other? If it was based on the same Hebrew and Greek manuscripts that make up all reputable translations currently used by Christians today, then why do most Muslims demonstrate such animosity toward them? If the translation Muhammad referred to was something wholly other, then what is the manuscript evidence to support that translation and what version of the Bible does the modern-day Muslim believe to be absolutely credible, beyond a flaw and unequivocally supportive of his beliefs that contradict Christian doctrine?

The reason for the inquiry is simple: if the Bible is such an integral part of the Islamic faith, which is even more so the case with Christians, and yet the Christians are being led astray by trusting in an aberrant text regardless of the version in which that text or translation appears, it is then incumbent upon the Muslim to divulge that superior text and bring both groups of people into harmony whereby a consistent worship of the one God is possible. Conversely, if the Muslims are unable to specify that the entire other Bible differs greatly from the original 66 books that constitute it, which is handed down from generation to generation 'without essential loss', then the question arises if their criticism of the various Bible versions are necessarily warranted? Much less is his claim that the Bible is an integral part of his faith necessarily true. If that is not necessarily true, then what might be the implications for other adamant statements made by Muslims that are relative to the persons and doctrines both Muslims and Christians hold to be integral?

## The Bible's composition in Islam

Muhammad, the founder of Islam, is reported to have said the following:

Say ye: 'We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the descendents [sic] (children of Jacob) and that given to Moses and Jesus and that given to (all) Prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: and we bow to Allah (in Islam)'. (Surah 2:136)

Similar declarations are found elsewhere in the Muslim holy book (Surah 2:285; 3:84, 119; 4:136). Muhammad, in other words, recognised the importance of the biblical witnesses in both the Old and New Testament, although, in the latter case,

that would pertain only to the Gospels or *Injil*. Such confidence led the highly respected Muslim scholar, Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1997), to opine as follows:

We are thus in the true line of those who follow the one and indivisible Message of the One Allah, wherever delivered. If others narrow it or corrupt it, it is they who have left the faith and created a division or schism. But Allah sees and knows all. And he will protect His own, and His support will be infinitely more precious than the support which men can give. (p. 56)

While it is wonderful, at least from the Christian perspective, that anyone would make such a reassuring confession, it begs the question of just what Muhammad, A.Y. Ali and others of the Muslim faith meant or mean by believing in all those writings relative to Judeo-Christian history. Because there is no indication in the Qur'an or the Hadith – 'Traditions relating to the deeds and utterances of the Prophet as recounted by his companions' (Glassé 2002:159) – that Muhammad, while he was alive, understood the Bible as anything other than what the early Christians accepted it to be – meaning the original 66 books and letters that we find today as part of its constitution. What could possibly be askew about such an understanding of Muhammad's recognition?

## A brief history of the biblical canon

Biblical history, and specifically the Book of Acts, informs us that the gospel message was spread everywhere by Jesus' apostles shortly after his ascension. This came on the heels of his assurance that they would be his witnesses 'both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the world' (Ac 1:8). Wherever the apostles went, they shared their message in the vernacular of the people who they encountered. Hence, the original gospel message was an oral gospel that would later be written as the apostles eventually died and subsequent Christians carried on the evangelistic tradition (Ackroyd & Evans 1970:286–287; Barclay 1991:41–43; Barr 1983:12–13; Barrera 1998:104–107; Carson, Moo & Morris 1992:20–21; Comfort 1990:3; Eusebius 1953:3.39.4; Graham 1987:120–121; Guthrie 1970:222ff.; Johnson 1986:131; McDonald 1995:139; Perkins 1980:196–201; Von Campenhausen 1972:103–104). Such writing helped to preserve the authenticity and authority of the apostolic preaching and teaching.

What is often overlooked in the transmission process of the biblical message is the fact that the early messengers committed to memory the eventual written texts that, early on, is what we commonly call the Old Testament. Meticulous precision would be the best way to describe such an effort, as the Jew was taught from a young age that the Scriptures – the Law, the Prophets and the Writings – were of divine origin and to be valued as one would value his or her own life. Such a commitment meant that very few alterations ever crept into scribal efforts to produce copies of the biblical text. So rare were the variants that Gerhardsson (1998) observed:

It is just because it is the Sacred Word, the source of endless riches, which is found in the Scriptures, that each and every syllable must be both preserved and used. These two tendencies

are also psychologically associated: the perception of the text as sacred leads partly to a desire to preserve the text without corruption, and partly to a desire to appropriate all its incomparable riches. Furthermore, certainty that the sacred words of the text have in fact been preserved without distortion, adds to the frankness with which the very letter of the text is drawn upon for teaching purposes. (p. 41)

Attention to precision and exactitude would be transfer to the transmission of the gospel message, even though initially also done orally. It would not be until a few years after the crucifixion of Jesus that the Christian world would begin to see the gospel message put upon parchment. That is not to say that the gospel would not continue to be transmitted orally. What is meant is that, as the message spread and the church grew exponentially and, as mentioned above, the apostles began to die away, the written page was used to preserve the history, integrity and teachings of both Jesus and his Apostles. Although such manual transmission included thousands of variants among the equally thousands of manuscripts, the message remained coherent and unchanged. A careful perusal through those manuscripts, using textual critical effort, reveals that, amid all the grammatical changes, errors of sight on the part of the scribe doing the transmitting, *homoioteleuton* [similar ending], harmonization, conflation, attempts to correct previous manuscripts and a host of other *faux pas*, one will encounter that the message has remained intact. The overall consensus is that we know with extreme confidence what the New Testament gospel and text comprised.<sup>2</sup> This led the late biblical scholar and textual critic, Sir Frederic Kenyon (1958) to write:

It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain. Especially is this the case with the New Testament. The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world. Scholars are satisfied that they possess substantially the true text of the principal Greek and Roman writers whose works have come down to us, of Sophocles, of Thucydides, of Cicero, of Virgil; yet our knowledge of their writings depends on a mere handful of manuscripts, whereas the manuscripts of the New Testament are counted by hundreds, and even thousands. In the case of the Old Testament we are not

2. Robertson (1925:21–22) argued that, whatever variants there were in the New Testament text, it only effected 'a thousandth part of the entire text'. Metzger (1992) wrote:

Indeed, so extensive are these citations [from the Church Fathers] that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament. (p. 86)

Black (1994:24) concurred with Metzger's assessment. F.F. Bruce (2000:19–20) concluded that, 'The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice.' Dan Wallace (2011:55), after putting Bart Ehrman's hyperbolic criticism into perspective and demonstrating where he agreed with his mentor, Bruce Metzger, who asserted that none of the textual variants found in the Scriptures had an effect upon Christian faith and practice, pointed out that, 'Suffice it to say that viable textual variants that disturb cardinal doctrines found in the NT have not yet been produced.' Therefore, if it is true that we know with more than 99% comprehension what the New Testament consisted, even without those manuscripts in hand we could reconstruct the New Testament by consulting the Early Church Fathers, and even though the 100 000+ variants found in extant manuscripts, none of them have any bearing upon New Testament belief, then despite all the presupposed criticisms to the contrary, we know what the early Christians wrote what became today's New Testament Bible.

quite in such a good position ... In some passages it seems certain that the true reading has not been preserved by any ancient authority, and we are driven to conjecture in order to supply it. But such passages are an infinitesimal portion of the whole. The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries. (p. 55)

One other fact needs to be pointed out, which is simply that the biblical canon was established and essentially closed long before Muhammad and Islam ever graced the earth with their presences. Whether one accepts the Council of Jamnia theory, which dates the closing of the Old Testament Canon at 90 AD<sup>3</sup> or another theory that dates its closing later in the 3rd or 4th century AD, and therefore repudiates the Jamnia theory (Anderson 1959:13; Davies 1998:43–44; Harrison 1969:277–279; Leiman 1991:125ff.; McDonald 1995:35, 49–50; Rowley 1950:170; Young 1958:160), by the time Muhammad arrived on the human scene, the Law, the Prophets and the *Hagiographa* [the Writings] were set.<sup>4</sup> The same applies to the New Testament. All of the books and letters that comprise its make-up were determined no later than 300 AD, with few exceptions. By 367 AD, the Early Church Father, Athanasius, records two catalogue lists of books that became widely accepted by the church as authoritative in respect to both Old and New Testament canons. Athanasius wrote that:

These are the fountains of salvation ... that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these. (Schaff 1996:4.552)

Such lists have remained complete and they constitute our current biblical composition. The only exception being that the Roman Catholic Church subsequently added the Apocrypha to the lists, which were recognised by the Early Church Fathers as 'interesting', but were not of the same weight and calibre as those adopted as inspired scripture. What bearing would this have upon the biblical version available to Muhammad?

3. Frants Buhl (1892:24) was one of the first exponents, if not the first, who advocated this view and wrote, 'It was not until about a.d. 90 that the whole question [about the Book of Ecclesiastes] was brought up for discussion before a Synod at Jabne (Jamnia, a city not far from the coast, south of Jaffa) ... At that Synod the canonicity of the whole of sacred writings was acknowledged.' The later professor and Harvard scholar, Robert Pfeiffer (1941) was quite straightforward on the matter when he wrote in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*:

At the close of the first century of our era, following the fall of Jerusalem in 70 and the resulting disorganization of Judaism, the Council at Jamnia (ca. a.d. 90), under the leadership of Johanan ben Zakkai, fixed for all times the canon of scriptures. (p. 64)

Others, such as Bernhard Anderson (1957:535–536); William Barclay (1991:28–29); R.T. Beckwith (1992:57, 61); Otto Eissfeldt (1965:568); Norman Gottwald (1985:113–114); La Sor, Hubbard and Bush (1982:22); Max Margolis (1948:89); W.O.E. Oesterley (1914:173–174); Oesterley and Robinson (1955:7–8); H.E. Ryle (1899:182–184); James Sanders (1972:94–95); Morton Smith (1971:1), all would agree, either in part or in full with Buhl and Pfeiffer's assessments. Ackroyd and Evans (1970:133–135) qualify their commitment to Jamnia by presupposing an already established canon and then wrote, '[I]t is difficult to doubt that both the tripartite structure of the Canon and its precise contents had been settled soon after a.d. 100, if not earlier.' Samuel Sandmel (1978:14, n.6) called the Jamnia Council 'a convenience, not an irrefutable conclusion'. Aage Bentzen (1972:1.31) argued that 'The synod of Jamnia did not define the Canon, but it undertook a revision', which was his way of saying there already was a canon in existence. The councilors merely revised it.

4. Routledge (2008:18) wish to straddle the fence on Jamnia, so to speak, and have it both ways.



## The presence of Christianity in Arabia

As noted previously, Christian missionaries spread the Gospel everywhere they went. It is a mandate given by Jesus in Matthew 28:19–20 and fulfilled, starting in Acts 1:8. Although the Bible makes it clear that the Gospel spread throughout Judea, Asia Minor, ancient Macedonia unto Rome and possibly even as far as Spain, there is paltry written evidence of its infiltration into Arabia shortly after Pentecost. It is not that the Arabs are not mentioned in the Bible (see Ac 2:11); it is that the missionary effort is not readily noticeable in the biblical text and as Trimmingham (1979) observed:

Jesus must have been in close touch with Arabs. In his homeland of Galilee he would meet them every day. His active ministry was carried on primarily among the pagan populations of Phoenicia, Ituraea, Batanaea, and the Decapolis ... His itinerant ministry, though embracing Phoenicia and Lebanon, was concentrated on Arab regions, Ituraea, and in the Decapolis, among Arab peasantry rather than in Hellenistic cities. The region of Caesarea Philippi, around the present-day Banyas and near the sources of the Jordan, which was his place of retreat, less from Jews than from Galilean revolutionaries who wished to make him their leader, was inhabited by half-settled Arab Ituraeans. (p. 41)

What started with Jesus, would carry over to the establishment of Christian colonies in the Arabian Peninsula. Their influence would have a great impact upon desert dwellers:

The steady spread of the Gospel during the second century is evident from the fact that congregations (*ekklesiai*), each with its *episkopos* or pastoral overseer, were found in most towns and villages of the Province of Arabia when visited by Origen on various occasions during the first half of the third century. (Trimingham 1979:51)

The late Iranian scholar, Ali Dashti, distinguished the Bedouin from the city-dweller by observing that those outside the more populated areas were more idolatrous than those within. The reason for this was the Jewish-Christian presence in the cities. According to Dashti (1994), and particularly with reference to Mecca and Medina, Muhammad's places of rearing and ruling:

The inhabitants of those two towns, particularly Yathreb, had been influenced by the beliefs of Jews and Christians. The word Allah, meaning The God, was in use among them. They considered themselves to be descendants of Abraham, and were more or less acquainted with the legends of the Children of Israel and stories of the Old Testament. The story of Adam and Satan was generally known to them. They believed in the existence of angels and imagined them to be daughters – a fallacy to which the Qor'an several times alludes. (p. 35)

Dashti (1994) added:

Furthermore these town-dwellers had adopted several Jewish practices such as circumcision, ritual ablution, avoidance of menstruating women, and observance of a rest-day, for which they chose Friday instead of Saturday. (pp. 35–36)

Further evidence of the Christian missionary influence is seen in the number of heretical sects that successfully

imposed their particular 'Christian' views upon the Arabs, which later influenced the thinking of Islam's founder. Islamic apologist, Karen Armstrong (1991:57), wrote, 'At the beginning of the seventh century, the Arabs of central Arabia were surrounded by deviant forms of Christianity ...' The divisiveness of the Christian sects led Justo Gonzalez (1975) to conclude:

Thus, monophysism and Nestorianism in Syria, monophysism in Egypt, and the remnants of Donatism in Africa opened the way to Islam, which was seen by many as the arm that God had caused to rise in order to chastise the Byzantine Empire. (p. 2.105)

Islamic scholar Husein Haykal (1976) projected that:

When he [*Muhammad*] arrived at Busrah [*while in the employ of his wife, Khadijah, on a commercial trip*], he came into contact with Syrian Christianity and talked to the monks and priests, some of whom were Nestorians. (p. 61)

Christian Sociology Professor, emeritus, Alvin Schmidt (2013) observed that:

By the fifth century, Arabia and Syria were known as the meeting place of Christian heresies. And by Muhammad's time (early seventh century) numerous Christian sects were present: Arians, Ebionites, Valentinians, Basilidians, Gnostics, Carpocratians, Nestorians, Jacobites, Nazarites, Marcionites, Monophysites, Eutychians, Sabellians, Collyridians, Mariamites, Anti-Dicomariamites, and Monothelites. (p. 80)

According to UC-Berkeley History Professor, Emeritus Ira Lapidus (2002):

Islamic societies were built upon the framework of an already established and ancient Middle Eastern civilization. From the pre-Islamic Middle East, Islamic societies inherited a pattern of institutions which would shape their destiny until the modern age. These institutions included small communities based upon family, lineage, clientage, and ethnic ties, agricultural and urban societies, market economies, monotheistic religions, and bureaucratic empires. The civilization of Islam, though born in Mecca, also had its progenitors in Palestine, Babylon, and Percepolis. (p. 3)

Georgetown University professor and defender of Islamism, John Esposito (2002) wrote:

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam originated in the Middle East. It was not a totally new monotheistic religion that sprang up in isolation. Belief in one God, monotheism, had been flourishing for many centuries. Knowledge of Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism had been brought to Mecca in Arabia by foreign caravan trade as well as through the travels and contacts of Meccan traders throughout the Middle East. Moreover, Christian, Zoroastrian, and Jewish tribes lived in Arabia. (pp. 6–7)

Perhaps those very priests or some others discussed the religion of Jesus with Muhammad, which had by then divided itself into several sects and parties. Ironically, such influences, over the course of time, would have a deleterious effect upon the Arabian culture that would cause it to regress back into anti-Christian thought. Such regression would turn into aggressive hostility toward both the Jews and Christians to the extent that Christian historian, Philip Schaff

(1996:4.159), described it as 'wild, warlike' and 'eclectic' – much like the religion that Muhammad would eventually establish, contrary to later claims otherwise.

While Greek was the *lingua franca* of most of the biblical world, not every nation or territory, visited by a Christian missionary, necessarily spoke or wrote in *Koiné* Greek. Judea's neighbour to her south, Arabia, was one such territory. Arabic, which is a Semitic language, along with its different dialects, is indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, in order for a Christian missionary to make inroads into the Arabian culture, it required the scaling of the language barrier. One advantage the Christians may have had is the fact that Aramaic was akin to Arabic and Hebrew and was also spoken widely throughout the Middle East. Because many, if not most, of the original Christians were Jewish and hence spoke Aramaic as well as Greek, it is not improper to deduce that when they met the Peninsula Arabs, they were already familiar with their dialect.

Prior to the Christian missionary effort to evangelise the Arabs, there was a large contingent of Jews already living in the Hijaz prior to Muhammad's arrival, and especially in southern Arabia. Although removed from the immediate environs of Israel, according to Sidney Griffith (2013:11), the Arabian Jews were in 'continuous contact with Jews elsewhere proper, and particularly in Palestine, and that they were fully aware of current Jewish traditions, both scriptural and rabbinic'. The Arabian Jews were a multilingual culture, speaking both Aramaic and its sister languages, Arabic and Syriac. Such an arrangement would allow for not only commercial trade between the Palestinian Jews to the north and Arabic-speaking Jews to the south, it would also afford the propagation and proliferation of Judaism among the pagan Arabs. As Islamic scholar, Alfred Guillaume (1956), points out:

At the dawn of Islam the Jews dominated the economic life of the Hijaz. They held all the best land in the oases of Taima, Fadak, and Wadi-l-Qura; at Medina they must have formed half of the population...the Jews of the Hijaz made many proselytes among the Arab tribesmen. (pp. 11–12)

## The pre-Islamic Arabic version of the Bible

Given the influx of both Jews and Christians in Arabia long before Muhammad Islamised the Hijaz, and due to the success of both groups to garner converts, even though in the latter case, the 'Christians' were of several heretical sects. As noted above, it must be asked if either group translated any part of the biblical canon into the native Arabic in order to spread their messages. It is a question that has provoked scholars to both affirm and deny the reality. Without rehashing the long history centred on the question of textual transmission from Greek, Aramaic or Syriac into Arabic, two of the most recent arguments from Hikmat Kashouh and Sidney Griffith – the former scholar is a proponent of a pre-Islamic Arabic version of the Bible (or at least the gospel), with the latter scholar rejecting such a proposal – will be investigated.

According to Kashouh (2012:318), the first defence in written form of the Christian faith in Arabic was issued circa 750 AD. Because of our knowledge of such events, the first Christian texts appeared in Arabic sometime before that date. Kashouh (2012:318) argued that evidence of this is seen in two palimpsests, 'Sinai, Ar. 514 and Codex Sinai, Ar. N.F. Par 8 and 28', one of which (Codex Sinai) likely contained Luke's Gospel. Although he (Kashouh 2012:318) is not absolutely certain of the discovery, 'the text is most likely to be a Christian text and pushes back the hypothesis of the existence of the Arabic Bible to the seventh century if not earlier'. Because of 'contaminations' in that text, it is not only plausible, but also 'possible' that 'a number of the eighth/ninth century manuscripts originated in the seventh century'. In fact, due the exclusive nature of the Arabic text that was produced, which '*is incompatible with biblical texts of southern Palestine the roots of which go back to the seventh century*, it is indeed plausible to propose that the Arabic Gospel text first appeared in the pre-seventh century era' (Kashouh 2012:319, [Kashouh's italics]).

The problem with such a conclusion is that no one has ever produced an Arabic text of the Bible that Christians used 'prior to the rise of Islam' (Griffith 2013:49, 98). What we have, according to Griffith (2013:49), are 'tenuous extrapolations' that amount to 'Wishful thinking'. This is not to say that the gospel was not being preached and taught throughout the Arabian Peninsula in the Arabic dialect. As mentioned earlier, the early propagation of the biblical gospel was by word of mouth and *not through the reading of a text*. As Griffith (2013:98) further argues, it would not be until after Islam's rise and Muhammad's death that the importance of collecting the Qur'an's many surahs, along with the Hadith, became an issue. Suddenly there was a need to preserve the sayings and teachings of the prophet, but that would only be done in Arabic. Development of Arabic grammars and dictionaries would not occur until the second half of the 8th century (Griffith 2013:103). Translation of the Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic text of the Bible into Arabic would follow, meaning that those texts would also not come into being until at least the 8th century, and that to compete with the Qur'an. Given the number of biblical allusions to stories and characters found in the Qur'an – many of which were distorted recollections by the heretical sects already mentioned – it should come as no surprise that, later on, the followers of Muhammad would read and rehash those distortions as they made their way into the Qur'an. It is another reason why there was no effort on the part of the 'Christians' to produce, except possibly in note form, a Bible in Arabic that would have possibly kept in check the distortions being spread abroad among the tribal pagans prior to Islam's rise.

While Kashouh's argument shares much with other scholars on the subject (e.g. Anton Baumstark and Ifran Shahid) as 'plausible' or 'possible', Griffith's counter-argument, pointing out the lack of tangible evidence, is enough to defeat the 'wishful thinking'. There was no Bible written in Arabic prior to Islam's rise and sudden expansion throughout Arabia, the

Middle East and North Africa in the mid-7th century. Because Muhammad was dead at the time of the Arabic Bible as well as the Qur'an's rise, what 'books', particularly of the Bible, was he referring to then when he testified that he believed in it and that, by necessity, all subsequent Muslims must also believe in them (Surah 2:285; 4:136; 6:92)? Moreover, how did he believe in them? Was it something written or merely audible? He was obviously aware of something that he found worthy of adoration. But, what was it?

## The version of the Bible available to Muhammad

As has been already established, both the Jews and the Christians occupied land and cities in the Hijaz prior to Muhammad's existence. The texts that those Jews and Christians used as aids to memory while they propagated their message verbally were already confirmed and essentially closed by the mid-4th century AD. Although the *lingua franca* of the day was Greek, not all Jews or Christians necessarily spoke or wrote in Greek, but in other languages such as Latin in the West, Syriac in the East and Coptic in North Africa as they spread abroad throughout the Middle East, Asia and eventually into the Arabian Peninsula. Literally thousands of copies of biblical manuscripts, many of which are extant today, were produced as a result of the rich diversity of the languages and cultures that were encountered by both the Jews and Christians as they shared their messages.

The Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek by the time both the Jews and Christians reached the Hijaz. It was more commonly known as the Septuagint (LXX). Rival stories caused conflict over the designated terminology, *Septuagint*: whether the naming of the translation was due to the number of Jewish scribes employed to create it or whether it had to do with the number of elders who accompanied Moses to Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God. Regardless, the Old Testament was accessible in a language the Jews were speaking and/or writing while they were dispersed abroad. The finalisation of the Old Testament text that encompassed more than just the Torah occurred early in the 2nd century AD. Such wide acceptance, though, would extend into the Christian community, only to be eventually rejected by the Jews, because 'some Christians had based some of their criticisms against Judaism upon faulty LXX texts' (McDonald 1995:89).

Aside from the verbal transmission of the New Testament, the text that most likely had the greatest impact upon Arabian culture at the time Muhammad spoke of the wonders of previous 'revelations', 'books', and 'scriptures' was handed down by the Syrians. They gave aid to not only the Jews and Christians in Arabia, but the influence of the Old Testament, along with five versions of the New Testament they translated into Syriac, was witnessed as far as Lebanon to the north, China to the east and, of course, Arabia to the south. Although the Old Syriac version was not well attested, one particular version, the Peshitta, was

copied and distributed with great vigour and faithfulness. As Bruce Metzger (1977) observed:

Syrian scribes devoted great care to the transcription of the Peshitta version. A remarkable accord exists among the manuscripts of every age, there being on the average scarcely more than one important variant per chapter. (p. 49)

Aland and Aland (1989:194) add the following:

The Peshitta version of the New Testament is the most widely attested and most consistently transmitted of the Syriac New Testament versions. The Syriac church still preserves it and holds it in reverence in this form today. (p. 194)

But, why is the Peshitta version relevant to our thematic question?

The Syriac Peshitta is important for at least three reasons:

- First, aside from Jewish and Christian usage, it was the version being utilised by both the Nestorians and the Jacobites (Monophysites) as they grappled over the identity of Jesus. The conclusions they drew would be reacted to by Muhammad when he taught '(Far is He) from having the partners they [*Jews and Christians*] associate (with Him)' (Surah 9:31). Subsequent Muslims would later take up the gauntlet and 'fight' those foes as projections against orthodox belief.
- Second, the Peshitta version not only consisted of all the books common to the Hebrew Old Testament canon (along with several apocryphal works); it also contained 22 books from the New Testament canon. It included all four Gospels, the Apostle Paul's letters and the Book of Hebrews, with only 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and the book of Revelation left out. Due to the faithfulness of those who translated it from Greek into Syriac, anyone familiar with the former would have a good idea of what went into the latter.
- Such fidelity leads to the important third reason, namely the natural rebuttal of some modern-day Muslim apologists who argue that what can be known about the Torah and the gospel is something wholly other than what Muhammad knew about them in his day. If it is true that the Peshitta is as well attested and preserved as is contended, then what the Syrian Christian Church knew about the gospel in the 6th and 7th centuries of Muhammad's earthly existence is exactly what biblical Christians know about it today. It is not something wholly other that the Muslim apologist wishes everyone to believe.

## Ramifications for acknowledging Muhammad's available 'Revelation'

Since the Syriac Peshitta was most likely the Bible version that Muhammad alluded to in Surahs 2:4, 136, 285; 4:136, 162; 6:92, et cetera, then there are several ramifications for acknowledging it as such. We know its content and that content has not been 'corrupted'. Any prophecies projected about the 'prophet' Muhammad would be dubious at best. The requirement that Muslims must read the Bible would be



faulty. Finally, knowledge about the persons of Jesus and God would be absent. Each of these effects will now be investigated one-by-one to judge their validity and gravity.

### The claim for corrupt versions of the Bible

The Bible has not been changed, nor has it been 'corrupted', in other words, if the Peshitta is the highlighted 'revelation' behind Muhammad's assertion. Many of the later Muslim apologists repeatedly assert just how corrupted or tainted any current revelation is by comparing it with the 'original text'. Nevertheless, the Syriac Peshitta is nothing more than a copy, written in another language and handed down with 'remarkable fidelity' (Metzger 1992:70) to Syriac-speaking Christians in the proclamation of their messages. What can be known from the contents of both the Old and New Testament is the same information as that which was known by both the Jews and Christians for hundreds of years leading up to the development of the Peshitta. Arguments raised by Muslim spokesmen such as Ajjola (1984:78) who speak of believing in the Torah, Psalms of David and the gospel, but yet denigrate them, because they supposedly do not share the 'original form', is misleading if not untrue. Even though Muhammad could not read the Peshitta himself, its contents is essentially the same as that found in the LXX and the Greek text from which the Peshitta was translated. Therefore, whatever charges of 'tampering' and/or adulteration is without merit. Again, please note Sir Frederick Kenyon's comments above in respect to biblical and textual integrity and credibility (see above under the heading titled 'A brief history of the biblical canon').

As long as the Muslims choose to exalt any other non-biblical revelation or to align themselves with the 'People of the Book', there must be a consistency in those revelations and Muslim behaviour that honours and not demeans both the Jews and Christians. The Peshitta was 'the Book' those people were using at the time they made progress in Arabia – both prior to and during Muhammad's reign. No longer can the Muslims accuse the Jews of changing (Surah 2:59) or perverting (Surah 2:75) God's revelation, or speciously writing it with their own hands (Surah 2:79), and not further accuse God of impotence over what he has revealed.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, no longer can the Muslims look down upon the Jews as being or becoming 'apes' (Surah 2:65; 7:166), 'swine' (Surah 5:60) or cursed (Surah 5:60; 9:30; 98:6) simply because the Muslims happen to disagree with any one of a number of beliefs or doctrines they find personally distasteful. Muslims cannot call the Jews or Christians 'losers' (Surah 3:85) or encourage others not to befriend them (Surah 5:51; 60:1). They certainly must end their campaign of *jihad* against them so as to oppress them until they are either killed or 'feel subdued' (Surah 9:29, 73, 123; 47:4). In other words, the Muslims must 'believe the Revelation', as Muhammad claimed he did that would involve any reputable version

5. Although the cited Qur'anic references specifically allude to the Jews, Islamic belief includes Christians as also engaging in alleged impropriety by accusing them of falsifying (Glassé 2002:86), corrupting (Ajjola 1984:79) or introducing defects into the New Testament and thereby making it 'obscene' (Ali 2012:149). Anyone, however, that has spent an appreciable amount of time reading and studying the topic of textual criticism of the Bible knows immediately that such charges and accusations are without merit, if not 'obscene', themselves.

after the order of the Peshitta or the texts upon which it was based, if they are to be consistent in their claim of following the one true religion.

### Prophecy of the coming of Muhammad

A second ramification of accepting the Syriac Peshitta as the Bible version available to Muhammad, alluded to as a previous 'Revelation' leading up to the Qur'an, is the disavowal that Muhammad was forecasted as the successor to Jesus as a 'prophet of God'. It is not uncommon that non-Christian religious followers, and even many who claim to be Christian, wish to exalt their religious leaders to a special status in God's economy. Typically, this status takes the form of some kind of prophet, seer or revelator. The basis for such exaltation is usually the product of biblical manipulation through poor exegesis of the biblical text coupled with a misapplication based on faulty hermeneutical principles. When the exegesis (more properly *eisogesis*) and interpretation are found to be wanting, the critic is either attacked personally – the biblical text is demeaned as somehow missing a plain and precious truth – or the Bible is assumed to have been tampered with somehow. All of that must be denounced when it becomes clear that what Muhammad accepted as the Bible version of his day is the same one used by the Jews and Christians prior to their entrance into the *Hijaz*.

Khurshid Ahmad (1999:86–87) serves as a classic example of a Muslim who believes that the Bible has something to say about Muhammad's revelation that is exegetically untenable. In his explanation on how the Qur'an influenced human history, he wrote:

In Islam religion has been perfected. That is another way of saying that with Islam the age of new revelation has come to a close, and that the age of realization of the principles revealed religion has been inaugurated. That is why in all the earlier scriptures references are to be found to the advent of the Prophet of Islam. Students of the Bible, for instance, know that Jesus had said: 'I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now ... He will guide you unto all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but of whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak' (Jn 16:12–13).

A careful examination of the reference Ahmad provides as his proof text to validate Muhammad's prophethood, reveals that not only is Muhammad not being spoken about by Jesus, but the *modus operandi* Ahmad used to mislead the reader. Nobody should unjustly cite the Bible to his or her own advantage – especially, if his or her own prophet has such a high esteem for the Bible. Ahmad simply excised the passage to exclude any mention of 'the Spirit of truth' in John 16:13 that Jesus mentioned previously in John's Gospel as the one whom both he and the Father would send as another *Paraclete* (John 14:16, 17).<sup>6</sup> With the advent of the Peshitta in Arabia, there is no room for Muhammad to be included among the biblical prophets. Anyone practicing careful exegesis and proper

6. Ali (1997:1461, n. 5438), *et al*, contends that Paraclete is a corruption for *Periclytos* or 'praised one', referring to 'Ahmad' or 'Muhammad'. However, he offers no manuscript support for his contention and there is no variant at John 14:16, 26; 15:26, or 16:7 to justify his contention.

hermeneutical skill would not only see Muhammad's absence, but upon examining the world of Islamic history and doctrine would note that whatever prophetic status he might have, it is different from those who are recognised as biblical prophets.

### Inconsistency in the Muslim's acceptance of divine revelation

Given that the Syriac Peshitta was the biblical version that Muhammad sanctioned while he was alive, it follows that this version or any one of a number of other similar versions, should be 'required' reading for earlier and present day Muslims. Accordingly, the Bible should form the basis for Muslim belief and doctrine, which would include that found in the book Muslims believe, came straight from heaven, namely the Qur'an. There should be no variance, because God would be the author of both. Any progressive revelation would dovetail with previous revelations with the ultimate object of all revelation being the person of Jesus Christ (Lk 24:27; Jn 5:39; 2 Tm 3:15; Heb 10:7; Rv 19:10). That is not the case for the Muslims, however, as they reject, except piecemeal, anything the Bible has to say, especially when it contradicts their own presuppositions. Therefore, the conclusion can be made that today's Muslims are at variance with what Muhammad thought about the Bible in Surah 2:4, 136, 285, et cetera.

If the Muslims reject the Peshitta, as well as any other textual revelation that serves as the basis upon which various Bible translations and versions are created, the mandate that stipulates belief in the Bible is without any authority to enforce it. To state as much as M.M. Ali did, namely that the Muslims are 'required to believe' in all the books of God, would be basically meaningless. If it is assumed the Qur'an serves as a corrector or surrogate for the Bible, it once again implies that God is impotent in preserving his previously transmitted revelation(s). Fallen humanity is capable of doing in the reverse what God is incapable of doing initially. Man's sinful will is more decisive than God's holy will. Furthermore, it assumes that God is mutable. In the Qur'an's case, it would project that God somehow garnered more power, will and control over that revelation than over previous revelations. That, however, would contradict Qur'anic revelation that God was immutable (51:58), which would, in turn, negate that he was self-sufficient (3:2; 20:111) and unified (see Hakim 1992:58) as the one being representative of deity. The only possible way for the requirement to believe in previous revelations to mean anything is for those revelations currently to exist and that there is access to those revelations to be read. Because, according to the Muslims those revelations do not exist except in alleged corrupted or tainted forms, the mandate to believe means nothing in modern-day parlance that also nullifies the words found in the Qur'an – Allah's most perfect book.

### No Jesus, nor God

The best and only historical document that speaks of the life of Jesus is found in the Bible and that in an extremely abbreviated account. Aside from a short birth narrative, coupled with the last three and a half years of his life that is mainly focused on

the Passion Week, what we know about the person of Jesus is found in the New Testament and nowhere else. The Qur'an's recollection is highly polemical and proffers nothing of biographical value regarding the historical Jesus. In fact, in the instance of the Qur'an, Muhammad's 'revelation' seems more interested in arguing with those with whom Muhammad is contending, and that with a 'distinctive prophethood' in mind, than providing any kind of real historical recollection.<sup>7</sup> What little can be derived from the Qur'an in respect to Jesus, has more to do with denigrating his person (Surah 4:157, 171; 5:75, 116; 19:92) than it does in crediting those who wrote about him in their letters according to their personal experiences (1 Jn 1:1–3; 2 Pet 1:16). In other words, in the Qur'an, Jesus ends up being nothing more than an ordinary man (Surah 3:59; 43:59),<sup>8</sup> who only came to seek and save one faction of the human race (Surah 3:49; Ali 2012:158) and never dies for anyone (Surah 4:157; 5:110), while Muhammad is viewed as Jesus' superior, who came to comfort all humans (Surah 21:107; 61:6 cf. Ali 1997:1461, n. 5438).

Without God's revelation, there can be no knowledge of him either. It is why the followers of Muhammad would record him saying that:

It is not fitting for a man that Allah should speak to him except by inspiration, or from behind a veil, or by the sending of a messenger to reveal, with Allah's permission, what Allah wills: for He is most high, most wise. (Surah 42:51)

Unfortunately, the Muslims deny the continuing existence of previous revelation in the form of the Bible. To them it has been perverted beyond recognition while confessing Muhammad's approval of the previous revelation. Because that is the case, there is no possible way to confirm later revelation. Therefore, the Qur'an can be no more a revelation from God than any other religious document, because it lacks God's sanction. Yet, Muhammad acknowledged the existence of previous revelations from God, specifically as it is related to the Bible. The Syriac Peshitta was that relative version every Muslim today must also acknowledge or at least another version consistent with it, lest he be at odds with his prophet and without any true knowledge of God in the world.

## Conclusion

Muslims claim that they are 'required' to believe in previous revelations concomitant with their own revelation, the Qur'an. The founder of Islam made it clear that he believed in all previous revelations, books and scriptures, which would have meant he accepted the contents of the Syriac Peshitta or the version of the Bible used by the Jews,

7. A 'distinctive prophethood' is a hermeneutical principle observed by Griffith (2013), whereby the Islamist recognises certain beliefs, stories and phrases common to both Jewish and Christian understanding, but have been criticised and revised with Muhammad as the focal point of absolute truth. As he put it:

... it is the Qur'an's distinctive prophethood that ultimately controls the process of scriptural recollection, determining which biblical narratives are recalled and which are ignored, a feature of the Bible in the Qur'an that is best studied in reference to well-known instances of the phenomenon rather than merely in the abstract. (pp. 58, 62, 70–71, 76, 83, 85)

8. After a description of the high position which Jesus occupies as a prophet, we have a repudiation of the dogma that he was Allah, or the son of Allah, anything more than a man ... In Allah's sight Jesus was as dust just as Adam was or humanity is. (Ali 1997:142, n.398)



Christians and the sects prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula before and after Muhammad came to notoriety. Even though Muhammad accused the Jews and the Christians of corrupting the biblical text, manuscript evidence shows that whatever corruptions there might have been were minimal at best, meaning the astute observer knows what God revealed and what he wanted humanity to retain.

Muslims completely reject any version of the Bible, Peshitta or otherwise. To them, the Qur'an is the 'corrector' and replacement of all previous revelations, even though it and they supposedly share much in common. The problem, however, still remains that the trustworthiness of the Bible, which Muslims must follow and study to understand God's message through the ages via his prophets, is denied. Because they accept the Qur'an, which alludes to the importance of the Bible, the Bible can still be used as a source of authority in discussions with Muslims who want to know more about the prophets, and especially about the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is a challenge for the Christian to show the Muslims that what Muhammad adored in the Bible, is the same Bible that Christians today confidently holds in their hands as the Word of God.

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### Authors' contributions

P.D. as the PhD student had done the basic research; while H.G.S. as the PhD promoter supervised it and helped P.D. in the finalisation of the article.

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