
Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE

Gospel, Muslim conception of

The **Muslim conception of the Gospel** (Ar. *Injīl*) is of a revelation originally given to Jesus for the Christian community but later either corrupted in some way or lost and reconstructed and therefore no longer accessible in its original form. Muslims have adopted a range of attitudes towards the Gospel as Christians hold it, ranging from acceptance, depending on proper interpretation, to wholesale rejection because the text is distorted beyond recovery.

The Qurʾān refers to the *Injīl* (the original, true **Gospel**) in several places, always as a revelation sent down by God. It was revealed in the same way as the Torah and other scriptures, including the Qurʾān (Q 3:3; 3:65; 5:66; 5:68; 7:157; 9:111; 48:29), and it was given by God to Jesus (3:48; 5:46; 5:110; 57:27) as “a confirmation of the Torah that was before him” (5:46). The Qurʾān says little about its contents—Q 3:49 and 5:110 recount Jesus’s miracles of healing and reviving the dead and touch upon his teaching, but they do not connect these with the *Injīl*—although it implies that, because the Gospel was revealed from the same source as other revelations, it originally contained effectively the same teachings. In general, it comprised “guidance and light” (*hudā wa-nūr*) (Q 5:46), and it mentioned, more specifically, “the unlettered prophet” (*al-nabī l-ummī*) (7:157), who—from Jesus’s prediction of a messenger “whose name is Aḥmad” in Q 61:6—is identifiable as Muḥammad. It is dependable enough for the People of the Gospel to be asked to judge by what God has revealed in it (Q 5:47).

From these scattered references it can be inferred that the *Injīl* is understood, in the Qurʾān, as a single revelation given by God to Jesus, confirming the Torah and other previous scriptures and anticipating the Qurʾān. Jesus delivered it to his community, where it was received in the form of written scripture, *kitāb* (Q 5:48), and could be used as a source of discernment. It also foretold the coming of Muḥammad, frequently

prompting Muslims to search the text and provoking them to reject the Gospels when they were not successful in that search.

In addition to these direct references to the *Injīl*, the Qurʾān also mentions ways in which the People of the Book interfered with their scriptures (e.g., Q 2:75; 2:140; 5:15; 5:41). While Christians are not specifically named as perpetrators of these fraudulent acts, they are implicated circumstantially when they are accused of forgetting “a good part of the message that was sent them” (Q 5:14). Unspecified as they are, such general references form the basis of later accusations by Muslim authors of various forms of corruption of the *Injīl*.

From an early date, the Gospel and its teachings formed an important element in debates between Muslims and Christians. In what has often been regarded as the earliest known Christian-Muslim disputation, dating from the mid-first/seventh century, the unknown *amīr* who interrogates the patriarch John about matters of faith, asks whether there is only one Gospel held by different Christian communities (Nau, 257), while, in the mid-second/eighth century, John of Damascus alludes to more general Muslim accusations that Christians interpret Old Testament texts allegorically to make them say that God has a son (Sahas, 136–7). By the late second/eighth century, Muslims appear generally to have accepted that the Gospel had been changed in some way: in the debate held in 165/782–3 between the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 158–69/775–85) and the patriarch Timothy I (r. 780–823), the caliph complains that Christians would have found references to Muḥammad in the Gospel and Torah if they had not corrupted them (Mingana, 111) and implies that the historical Gospels cannot be the *Injīl* revealed to Jesus because they have been written by four evangelists (Mingana, 196). Neither participant goes into details, although these references clearly indicate that al-Mahdī was alluding to common assumptions.

From the third/ninth century onwards, almost every Muslim who wrote about Christianity regarded the Gospels in the possession of Christians as unreliable, although understandings about the actual form of their unreliability varied. On one side were authors who were prepared to use the text of the Gospel as though it was untainted. Among these, the Zaydī Imām al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (d. 246/860) argues, in his *Radd ʿalā l-Naṣārā* (“Refutation of the Christians”), on the basis of five witnesses attested in the Gospel—God the Father, the angels, Jesus **Christ**, the Virgin Mary, and the disciples—that Jesus was no more than human (al-Qāsim, 321–2) and goes on to paraphrase the early chapters of Matthew in order to show that nothing there supports the doctrine of Christ’s divinity (al-Qāsim, 325–31). While al-Qāsim makes no direct comment about the status of the text and it is possible that he was

simply citing it without accepting its textual integrity, the heavy reliance he places on it and the extensive use he makes of it suggest that he had few qualms about its textual integrity.

The same applies to one of the most expert of the early Muslims on the text of the Bible, the convert from Christianity ‘Alī b. Rabban al-Ṭabarī (d. c. 245/860), a famous medical expert who, although he was an intimate of a succession of caliphs, remained a Christian until he converted at the age of seventy, in about 235/850. He gave his reasons for converting in a work known as *al-Radd ‘alā l-Naṣārā* (“Refutation of the Christians”) and followed this with an apology for Islam and a defence of the prophethood of Muḥammad, the *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla* (“The book of religion and empire”). The earlier of these comprises elaborate comparisons between verses from the Gospels and the Nicene Creed, together with analyses based on straightforward logic, to show that Christian doctrines about Jesus do not correspond to their own scripture. Like al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm, ‘Alī might simply be using the Gospels without accepting their integrity, although this seems unlikely, given his approach in the later *Kitāb al-dīn wa-l-dawla*, where, in accordance with what is said in the Qur’ān, he cites from the Bible more than one hundred examples of Muḥammad and Islam being foretold. Most of these come from the Old Testament, although a few are taken from the Gospels, particularly the Gospel of John, where Jesus’ promises of the Paraclete in chapters 15 and 16—a favourite set of proof-texts for Muslim apologists seeking to substantiate Q 7:157 and 61:6—provide him with strong support for his case (‘Alī l-Ṭabarī, *al-Dīn wa-l-dawla*, 119–20, *Religion and empire*, 140–1). Because he uses the biblical text to identify the predictions on which he builds his case, he clearly, if implicitly, accepts the integrity of the text. His point is that whatever interference or alteration has taken place at the hands of Christians has been in the form of biased or negligent interpretation following from wrong-headed prejudice rather than from sensitive attention to teachings that uphold the original proclamation of Jesus.

While neither al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm nor ‘Alī l-Ṭabarī examines the question of how the four historical Gospels relate to the *Injīl*, both approach the Gospel by accepting it as more or less textually incorrupt although in need of proper interpretation to restore its meaning. On the other side, however, are Muslims who took a much harsher view, among them the Mu‘tazilī theologian and Arabic stylist Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869). In part of a reply to some Muslims who have turned to him for help against Christians by whom they are being pressed to answer difficult questions, known simply as *al-Radd ‘alā l-Naṣārā* (“Refutation of the Christians,” probably written before 232/847), he explains the circumstances in which the historical Gospels were

written: they were composed, he says, by four men, although only two of them were disciples of Jesus, and, because these four cannot be regarded as immune individually from forgetfulness or collectively from collusion to misrepresent the truth, the Gospels cannot be considered beyond suspicion (al-Jāḥiẓ, 24). It is striking that he tells this story briefly, as though assuming his readers are familiar with the facts, thus suggesting that, by the time he was writing, this explanation was well known. If it was, it would have provided a more than adequate circumstantial explanation of how Jesus's original *Injīl* had been replaced by the historical Gospels.

The same attitude is evident in the later Mu'tazilī master, 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadḥānī (d. 415/1025). Writing about Christianity in his systematic treatise *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-ʿadl* ("Summa in chapters on divine unity and justice"), which he completed in 380/990, he repeats the same accusation as al-Jāḥiẓ, that the evangelists might have conspired to corrupt the original *Injīl* (Thomas, 358–9). In his *Tathbīt dalā'il al-nubuwwa* ("Confirmation of the proofs of prophethood"), which he finished in 385/995, he tells in much greater detail how some of the first Christians handed the *Injīl* over to the Romans in return for help against the Jews and then constructed their own Gospels from memory, making as many as eighty of these but with significant omissions from the original and the addition of the crucifixion narrative. Then, as successive authors made their own revisions of earlier Gospel texts, the eighty were reduced to four, in which there are some agreements and some disagreements (Reynolds and Samir, 92–8).

This is a scathing indictment of the first Christian community and a condemnation of the Gospels as historically flawed through personal bias and political self-interest. In its observation that there are similarities and disagreements between the Gospels it anticipates what has generally been regarded as the most devastating Muslim critique of the Gospels, the *Kitāb al-fiṣal fī l-milal wa-l-ahwā' wa-l-niḥal* ("Book of judgement regarding the confessions, inclinations and sects") by the Andalusī polemicist Abū Muḥammad 'Alī b. Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). In this work, Ibn Ḥazm subjects to minute examination accounts of the same incident from Jesus' life as given in the three synoptic Gospels and demonstrates from the major and minor differences between them that they are all flawed and therefore unreliable and provide no basis for recovering the original *Injīl* (Ibn Ḥazm 2:2–81). According to the criterion of a revelation that has been preserved intact from its first proclamation, this condemnation has a cogency that is difficult to deny, and Ibn Ḥazm can discard the historical Gospels as worthless.

This scathing assessment is echoed some years later by Abū l-Ma‘ālī ‘Abd al-Malik al-Juwaynī, Imām al-Ḥaramayn (d. 478/1085), who, in his relatively brief *Shifā’ al-ghalīl fī bayān mā waqa‘a fī l-Tawrāt wa-l-Injīl min al-tabdīl* (“Assuaging thirst in explanation of the alterations that have occurred in the Torah and Gospel”), adduces evidence to support the likelihood that the *Injīl* was altered before it was written down, in order to remove references to Muḥammad. The evidence he assembles is both circumstantial and textual, the latter in the form of differences in accounts of the same incident in Jesus’s life (Allard 56–83).

Some centuries later, in a work that equals or surpasses in thoroughness Ibn Ḥazm’s treatment of the Gospels, the Ḥanbalī scholar Najm al-Dīn Abū l-Rabī‘ Sulaymān al-Ṭūfī (d. 716/1316) presents in his *al-Taḥqīq ‘alā l-Anājīl al-arba‘a* (“Critical commentary on the four Gospels”) detailed analyses of the Gospels to show that they offer no support for Christian doctrines, except in passages that were interpolated later. At the beginning of this work, he affirms that the Gospels have no direct relationship to the original *Injīl* but are instead biographies (*siyar*) written by the disciples, although he does concede that the “parables and aphorisms” (*al-amthāl wa-l-ḥikam*) they record from Jesus may derive from the original (Demiri, 100–3). He then proceeds to demonstrate systematically and in detail that the Gospels lack reason or are simply wrong.

Despite such knowledgeable and thoroughly researched condemnations of the Gospels, some Muslims continued to accept them as textually intact and, like al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm and ‘Alī l-Ṭabarī, to argue that it was Christian interpretation and not the text itself that was distorted. The author of *al-Radd al-jamīl li-ilāhiyyat Īsā bi-ṣarīḥ al-Injīl* (“The fitting refutation of the divinity of Jesus through what is evident in the Gospel”)—which has been attributed to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), though with a weighty consensus against his authorship—addresses the seemingly monumental challenge of showing that the Gospel of John supports the humanity of Jesus and no more, as long as it is interpreted properly and in conformity with reason. In this way, he demonstrates that he accepts the text itself, although he departs entirely from interpretations given by Christians.

The same is true of Burhān al-Dīn Abū l-Ḥasan Ibrāhīm al-Biqā‘ī (d. 884/1480), who worked in Cairo until he was forced to flee to Lebanon, in part because of the way he approached Qur’ān exegesis in his *Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsub al-āyāt wa-l-suwar* (“The string of pearls, on the harmonious relationship between verses and chapters”), begun in 860/1456 and completed over twenty years later. In this innovative *tafsīr*, al-Biqā‘ī not only refers to the Bible to illustrate and explain allusions in the Qur’ān but also

quotes at length whole chapters or sequences of chapters. He evidently knows the Gospels intimately, because he is able to combine verses from all four to produce a harmonised life of Jesus (Saleh and Casey), and, while he defends his use of the Bible on the grounds that the Qur'ān recommends it to be employed against Christians and Jews, his interest in it clearly extends beyond apologetic. His acceptance of the text went against current attitudes and was widely condemned, although he did leave a legacy of sorts. The *Naẓm al-durar* was read in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was known by Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), who himself wrote the ambitious *The Mohomedan commentary on the Holy Bible* (Troll). In his introduction he explains that he accepts the text as substantially authentic though requiring appropriate interpretation.

Khān's attitude was by no means typical of Indian Islam in his time. In direct contradiction, Raḥmatallāh al-Kayrānāwī (d. 1891), who was the main Muslim opponent of the missionary Karl Pfander (d. 1865) in the debate held in Agra in 1854, makes use, in his *Iẓhār al-ḥaqq* ("The demonstration of truth," finished 1864), of European critical scholarship to demonstrate that the text of the Bible, including the Gospels, is no longer intact. This work inspired and served as a source for the South African polemicist Ahmad Deedat (d. 2005), whose many tracts against the integrity of the Bible have given a popular readership in Africa and elsewhere access to arguments that date back more than a millennium and have helped perpetuate harsh attitudes towards the status and reliability of the Gospels.

For Muslims the disagreements between the Qur'ān and the Gospels, chiefly over predictions of Muḥammad and portrayals of **Christ**, rule out any acknowledgement that the historical Gospels are authentic. Whether they accept the integrity of the text or not, Muslims will be unable to accept Christian conceptions or readings of the Gospels while they continue to seek the *Injīl* that they read about in the Qur'ān. The welcome given in many parts of the Muslim world to the Gospel of Barnabas as more authentic than any of the canonical Gospels, because it confirms Muslim understandings of the person of Jesus and his ministry—the consensus among non-Muslim scholars is that it was written by a Spanish convert to Islam in the tenth/sixteenth century—typifies the general attitude that, whatever elements of the original *Injīl*, if any, survive in the Gospels, the Gospels themselves cannot be accepted as they are. On the most favourable judgement, they must be read under the guidance of the Qur'ān, while on the most severe, they must be rejected entirely.

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