

Muslims Who Believe the Bible



by Rick Brown

Muslim Esteem for Scripture and Prophets

Most Muslims are taught the basic doctrines of Islam, namely that they should believe in God, the day of judgment, angels, prophets, and the Scriptures (or else eternal fire awaits them). They are taught that the four main books of Scripture are the Taurāt of Moses (the Torah or Old Testament), the Zabūr of David (the Psalms), the Injīl of Jesus (the Gospel or New Testament), and the Qurʾān (in addition to the writings of Abraham and other prophets). The Qurʾān itself commands Muslims to profess faith in the Scriptures that God revealed to Jesus and the prophets (*Āl ʿImrān* 3:84; cf. *Al-Baqara* 2:285). Given the importance of believing in these books, it is not surprising that most Muslims can readily name all four. Compare this with the fact that “only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels” (Prothero 2007). But the average Muslim’s “faith” in the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel lacks substance, because they have little or no knowledge of the content of these books. This lack of knowledge is all the more serious given the warning in the Qurʾān that those who reject the guidance and verses of the Torah and the Gospel will face the severest punishment (*Āl ʿImrān* 3:3–4). In fact, the Qurʾān often says that its purpose is to confirm the previous Scriptures, and in that way it points the reader to the Scriptures that are being confirmed (e.g., *Al-Baqara* 2:97; *Al-Māʿida* 5:46; *Yūnus* 10:37; *Yūsuf* 12:111).

Muslims use the term “prophets” to designate people whom God used to call people to faith and repentance, whether by word or example. They describe many of the famous figures in the Bible as prophets: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Job, Lot, Abra-

ham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus the Messiah, but they know very little about most of them. The Qurʾān mentions many of them as examples to be remembered and followed, and it clearly assumes the listeners are familiar with their stories from the previous books. In *Sād* 38:42, for example, the reader is told to “remember Job,” who was “afflicted by Satan” and “cried to his Lord.” Job’s story is mentioned again in *Al-ʿAnbiyāʾ* 21:83–84 as something to be remembered, but the story itself is not recounted in the Qurʾān. Similarly the Qurʾān makes mention of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and the twelve tribes, without clearly describing how they are related to one another; it assumes the reader is familiar with them from the previous books. The Qurʾān mentions the disciples of Jesus, but says little to explain who they were. In fact, the Qurʾān not only assumes a familiarity with many of the people, stories and themes of the Bible, it refers the bewildered listener to those who study the Bible:

If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee (*Yūnus* 10:94, Yusuf Ali’s translation)

Bible Study by Open-minded Muslims

Encouraged by this guidance from the Qurʾān itself, and by the requirement to believe in all of the Scriptures and prophets, a number of Muslims

“Muslim” as a Socioreligious Category

From a sociological perspective, Muslims are people who have a social identity as members of a traditionally Muslim community. They may be religiously observant or secularly nominal, but they are in the same socioreligious group, that of Muslims. For many Muslims, being a Muslim is an inseparable part of their self-identity, their background, their family, their community, and their cultural heritage, regardless of what they actually believe about God. It is this everyday sociological sense of the term “Muslim” that is used in what follows.

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are motivated to read portions of the Old and New Testaments, often in a group. They encourage one another, saying, “There are four books of God, but we are familiar with only one of them; let’s study the others together.” When they do, they are often delighted to find the information they needed to understand the many biblical allusions in the Qur’an. They also find that the narratives in the Old Testament are full of historical detail, and they see that the prophets were confirmed by many miracles from God. They gain new insights into God and his goodness and holiness, mankind and its fall into sinfulness and death, the creation and its corrupted goodness, and the promises of God’s salvation through a Savior-King, the Messiah, who ushers in an eternal Kingdom established by God.

It is good to start with Old Testament passages. Many say, “I never understood the New Testament until I read the Old Testament.” But when they read the four witnesses to the Gospel in the light of the Torah, they understand and respect the fact that Jesus was truly sinless, that he sacrificed his life in obedience to the plan of God, that he rose from the dead, triumphant over death, sin, and hell, and that he ascended into heaven. Reading Acts, they see that Jesus is active in the world as Lord and Savior of all, guiding, empowering, and protecting his followers as they proclaim his Kingdom to the nations. Then there is Romans. One well-educated Muslim woman said to me recently, “It was not until I had read Romans that I understood the significance of the Gospels.” Then there is Revelation, which is one of the most popular books, because it speaks to them like their dreams do and describes the return of Jesus and the age to come. Woodberry’s (2007: 27) observation about them is that “as they study the Bible and meet with other disciples of Jesus, these two resources become increasingly important in their spiritual growth.”

Reading the Gospel helps them to interpret the Qur’an. For example, most Muslim scholars interpret the vague verse at *Al-Nisā’* 4:157 to say that Jesus was not really crucified, but it just seemed that way. But a minority of Muslim scholars note that *Āl ‘Imrān* 3:55 and *Maryam* 19:33 say that Jesus was sent to die and then rise to God, and so they interpret *Al-Nisā’* 4:157 differently, saying that the Jews killed Jesus’ body but not his spirit. Ayoub (1980), for example, says that “the denial of killing of Jesus is a denial of the power of men to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious.” When Muslims read the graphic and detailed accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and see that it was a fulfillment of what the prophets foretold and in accord with God’s plan of salvation, they find grounds to agree with the minority opinion. By believing the Bible and letting it be their guide to the interpretation of the Qur’an, they become rooted in the Bible, and we could call

them “biblical” or at least “sub-biblical” Muslims. In their opinion, however, they are simply being better Muslims by submitting to all of God’s books and prophets. (The word “Muslim” means one who submits to the rule of God.)

Biblical Themes that Appeal to Muslims

Open-minded Muslims find much in the Bible that is good news:

1. *God’s goodness, love, reliability, and care for his servants.*
2. *God’s guidance of history towards good ends as he works through events to oppose evil, to train his servants in righteousness and truth, and to fulfill his good purposes for his people.*
3. *The portrait of Jesus himself: his kindness, devotion, wisdom, power, self-sacrifice and ongoing reign as Savior and King.*
4. *The love and forgiveness exhibited by true followers of Jesus.*
5. *The offer of personal forgiveness and acceptance by God.*
6. *The offer of assured and complete salvation from hell and acceptance into God’s kingdom.*
7. *The offer of a personal relationship with the Lord, fully realized in the next life.*
8. *The offer of inner cleansing and renewal through God’s Holy Spirit.*
9. *The offer and example of grace to live a godly life through the strengthening and guidance of the Holy Spirit.*
10. *Power to resist and repel Satan and evil spirits in Jesus’ name.*

They are surprised and challenged by the divine characteristics exhibited by Jesus: He issues commandments, controls nature, creates matter from nothing, commands spirits, restores the dead to life, reveals the thoughts of others, forgives sins, and bestows eternal life.

Muslims Who Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ

As Muslims ponder these mysteries and pray for guidance, it is not uncommon for them to have a dream or vision that confirms the Scriptures and calls them to follow Jesus the Messiah as their Lord and Savior. Thus they become what we could call “Messianic Muslims.” In their own opinion, however, they are simply being better Muslims by submitting to the Messiah whom God sent to guide and save them.

John Travis (1998) classified Muslim believers of this sort as “C5” and “C6,” where C5 groups were open about their study of the Bible and their faith in the

Messiah, and C6 believers kept their faith private. In situations where C5 groups are expanding and multiplying across a network of social relationships, they have been described as “insider movements.” In the groups that Travis described, the Muslims rejected or reinterpreted traditional doctrines that were incompatible with the Bible. Woodberry (2007: 24) has studied one rapidly growing movement for many years, and he notes that these Muslims follow Jesus and “believe what the Bible teaches even where it differs from the Qur’an” (as commonly interpreted). It is a cause for rejoicing that Muslims are studying the Torah, Psalms, and Gospels and are becoming disciples of Jesus Christ.

Obstacles that Hinder Muslims from Studying the Bible

Several things discourage Muslims from reading the Bible. One is the Muslim belief that Jews and Christians have distorted these books, based on statements in the Qur’an (2:59, 75; 3:78; 4:46; 5:13). Muslim scholars disagree, however, whether this corruption involves the text of the Bible itself, which raises theological problems for them, or whether it refers to erroneous interpretations by Jews and Christians, which is what the Qur’an seems to say. Muslim readers take heart, however, from the sayings of Jesus that his words will never pass away (Mark 13:3; cf. Matt. 5:18 re the Torah).

Many Muslims fear that the Injil has been altered to teach people to worship three gods: Allah, Mary, and Jesus. They find relief from this worry in Mark 12:28–30, where the greatest commandment involves affirmation of the oneness of God and a commitment to love him totally.

They also fear terms like “sons of God”, because many have been indoctrinated since childhood, on the basis of the curse in *Al-Tawba* 9:30, that if they say or consent to any statement that someone is an offspring of God, then God will damn and destroy them. They regard the term itself as an earth-shaking insult to God, because it implies that God had sexual union with a woman in order to get children (see *Al-An’am* 6:101; *Maryam* 19:35, 88–92). (For discussion, see Brown 2005a-b and Brown 2007.)

Finally, Muslims fear that Bible study, especially if done with a Christian, could be an effort to get them to deny their own Muslim heritage and join a church, usually at the cost of being expelled from their family or community. John is a Christian who has been living in Southeast Asia for many years. He and his wife like to read the Bible with a few Muslim friends, sometimes including one or two who have already become followers of Jesus the Messiah. Most of their friends and neighbors, however, declined their invita-

tions to join them, in spite of their assurances that they were not proselytizing them. John and his family left the country for six months. When they returned, they found that one of their believing friends had started a weekly Bible study group, and this had grown to the extent that several different groups were now meeting in the area, each on a different day of the week. Teachers of Islam from two different schools have now become followers of Jesus as a result of the witness of these groups. The main attractions are the transformed lives of those who have been studying the Gospels, the stories of the prophets, the gripping encounter with Jesus Christ in the Gospels, and the fact that God now answers many of their prayers. When John asked one of the participants why he would not participate in a Bible study with him earlier, he explained the reason:

You are a Christian, and we thought your invitations were a scheme to get us into a church some day. But while you were away, we saw that Muslims were studying the Bible themselves, without going to a church or becoming apostates, and we felt safe joining them.

So John kept his distance from the Bible study groups, not wishing to interfere.

This fear of apostasy is amplified by socioreligious factors. From a cultural and sociological perspective, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and their subdivisions constitute social groups, each of which has distinctive “boundary-marker” customs that are shared within the group but not outside. Muslims view Islam as a complete culture, with its own historical heritage, art forms, greetings, holidays, books, customs, ethics, politics, values, and beliefs. They view Christianity the same way, not as a relationship to God through Christ but as a contrasting socioreligious grouping, with its own historical heritage, art forms, greetings, holidays, books, customs, ethics, politics, values, and beliefs. And indeed, Christianity in its various forms does exist in the world as a collection of closely related socioreligious groups, such as Roman Catholic, Orthodox (of various sorts), Protestant, and within that Evangelical, etc. So although the Qur’an guides people to the Bible, Muslims typically identify the Bible as belonging to the Christian socioreligious group rather than to themselves. This discourages them from reading the biblical books, especially if they come from overtly Christian publishers, bookshops, websites, or radio stations.

If a Christian invites a Muslim to study the Bible with him, the Muslim often becomes suspicious of the Christian’s motives, thinking he wants to draw him away from the socioreligious community of his birth and “win” him to a “Christian” socioreligious



identity. This is especially the case if the Christian wants the Muslim to read the Gospel of Jesus, because Muslims tend to view Jesus as belonging primarily to the Christians, in spite of Muslim traditions that affirm him. Indeed, both parties might view the matter as a contest between members of competing socioreligious groups. These exclusivist attitudes cause socioreligious boundaries to be one of the chief obstacles hindering Muslims from engaging with the Bible and with the claims of Christ. On the other hand, there are other Christians who view the “Great Commission” as a call to “make disciples of all nations” rather than to convert them to their own socioreligious group. Muslims find such Christians less threatening to their social identity, and they are more receptive to studying the Bible with them. By respecting the socioreligious identity and heritage of Muslims, these Christians lower some of the boundaries and remove these obstacles. Nevertheless, for a Bible study to develop into a “back-to-the-Bible” movement among Muslims, the Muslims need to be meeting to study the Bible on their own, inside their own community, without the presence of non-Muslim outsiders.

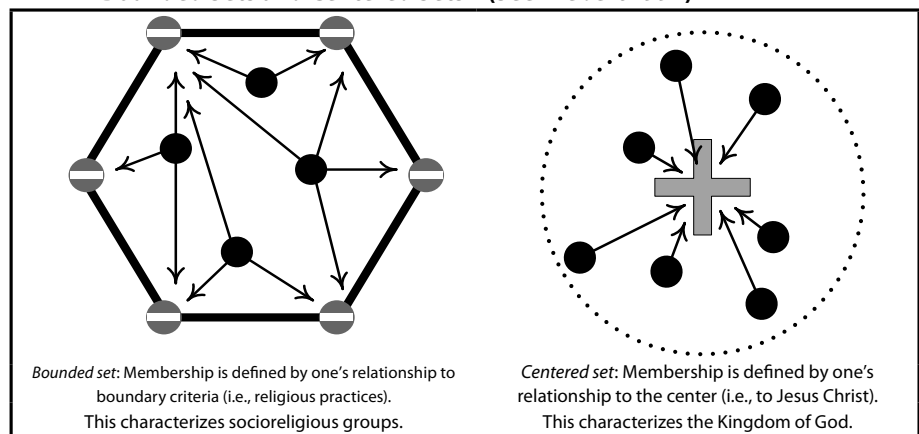
The Great Commission: Christian Religion or Discipleship to Christ?

Drawing on mathematics and philosophy, Paul Hiebert (1994) distinguished these two missiological viewpoints in terms of “bounded sets” versus “centered sets.” Hiebert applies this to believers in Jesus Christ. Bounded-set Christians define themselves as people who meet the boundary criteria of assenting to the same traditional creeds and religious practices (e.g., worship services on Sundays in a church building). As Hiebert notes, people with this view work hard to maintain conformity to these boundary markers and reject non-conformists as non-Christians or heretics. Centered-set Christians define themselves in proximity to the central exemplar, which is the ideal follower of Christ, a model provided by Jesus himself. So their chief concern is fostering greater conformity to this model. Another way to put this is that traditional bounded-set Christians define themselves in terms of a recognizable socioreligious category, whereas centered-set Christians define themselves in terms of discipleship to Jesus Christ. This corresponds to the distinction Charles Kraft has made between “cultural Christianity” and “essential Christianity,” where the latter con-

sists of allegiance to Jesus Christ. Hiebert’s point was that the New Testament presents a centered-set view of mission and holiness, in which the task of mission is to call and disciple people to Christ rather than promote a particular religious tradition in opposition to all others.

This difference leads to misunderstandings and conflicts in missiology. Some missionaries see their task as assisting the expansion and strength of their boundary-defined socioreligious group while others see their task as assisting the growth of God’s Christ-centered Kingdom. While both groups can speak in support of contextualization, they are contextualizing different things. One group is seeking to contextualize their brand of Christian religion, while the other is seeking to contextualize collective discipleship to Christ. So each sees the other as deficient and sometimes as threatening. Personally, I think there is a place for both in God’s plan, but the bounded-set approach often leads to conflict and recrimination between socioreligious groups and to suffering and shame within families. Even extracted, long-standing converts feel the pain of this competitive socioreligious approach. Mary has been a believer for seven years and is known as a convert. Yet she is hurt when Christians speak disdainfully of Muhammad and Islam. She feels they are insulting her culture and its most important historical icon. “Jack” is another convert. He works for a bounded-set mission that constantly denigrates Islam in their publications and broadcasts. He wants to see his people come to faith in Christ, but because of his work with this mission he says, “I feel like a traitor to my people.” “Joseph” converted over thirty years ago and even managed to change his legal religious identity to “Christian.” But because of his apostasy from the Muslim community, his highly respected family lost their position and their honor, to the extent that they could not find husbands for their daughters or good jobs for their sons. After thirty years Joseph returned and apologized to them

Bounded Sets and Centered Sets (See Hiebert 1994)



for all the heartbreak and disgrace he caused them, saying he should have remained in his family and community as a Bible-believing Muslim who follows Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Biblical and Sub-Biblical Muslims

In any movement to Christ, it takes time for people's worldviews to conform to what is taught in Scripture, as God leads them into truth through his Holy Spirit. What is important is that they are moving towards the center, towards greater conformity with a biblical worldview. Until that process has matured, their worldviews (beliefs and values) are likely to be sub-biblical. That is true of all kinds of movements, so we need to distinguish between *biblical* C1/2/3/4/5/6 and *sub-biblical* C1/2/3/4/5/6. It would be less than God's best, however, for believers to remain with a sub-biblical worldview, such as one finds in liberal churches (which are usually C1 or C2), Mormons, and the like. So if there is anything one can do to encourage their maturation towards biblical worldviews, then it would seem desirable to do so.

The question, then, is which beliefs, values and practices are incompatible with the Bible? A related question is what role do outsiders have in deciding this issue? Some have taken the role of denouncing insider movements as syncretistic, because they remain within the boundaries of a Muslim socioreligious category and fail to match all the boundary criteria for a "Christian" socioreligious category. This bounded-set approach, however, is unsympathetic and ultimately unhelpful. Scott Moreau (2000: 924) offers the following guidance. First he defines syncretism as "the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements." Then he provides the following guidelines for identifying them:

Because of the convoluted nature of culture, the declaration of syncretism in a particular setting cannot be simply left in the hands of expatriate missionaries. The local community must be empowered to biblically evaluate their own practices and teachings. Missionaries must learn to trust that indigenous peoples are able to discern God's leading and trust God to develop and maintain biblically founded and culturally relevant Faith and Praxis in each local context. Finally, Christians of every culture must engage in genuine partnership with Christians of other cultures, since often the outsider's help is needed to enable local believers, blinded by culture and familiarity, to see that which contravenes scriptural adherence to the first commandment.

As he points out, the outsiders can give their perspective, but it is the responsibility (before God) of the local disciples of Christ "to biblically evaluate

their own practices and teachings." Hiebert (1987) offers some general guidelines on how they can do that well. These guidelines, however, are unsatisfactory for bounded-set missionaries, because they view a mixture of socioreligious boundary criteria to be a form of syncretism (regardless of the believer's actual beliefs and values). Even phrases like "Messianic Muslim" and "Biblical Muslim" seem oxymoronic and syncretistic to them.

Final Thought

In the article on page 16 I relate the story of Brother Jacob. Jesus appeared to the leader of a large Sufi sect and sent him to a distant house where he had never been, to meet Brother Jacob whom he had never heard of, with the assurance of Christ that Brother Jacob would show him the way of salvation. Brother Jacob was (and is) the leader of a large insider movement, but he had kept a very low profile. At the time of this event there were many missionaries in the country, and there were a number of C2, C3, and C4 churches that they had started. Jesus didn't send the Sufi leader to any of them. Jesus sent him to Brother Jacob, the C5 leader, and God started another insider movement through him and the Sufi leader. That does not mean that Jesus disapproves of C3 or C4; but it does demonstrate that he works in a variety of ways, and that one of those ways is C5. We would do well then to support them all, insofar as Jesus is guiding them in this way, and let Jesus lead them into the future he has for them, a future that we cannot yet see.^f

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