

Islamic Views about Christian Scriptures

By Prof. Dr. Christine Schirmacher

This charge of falsifying the Bible is hinted at already in the Koran. But the charge of textual distortion made against Jews and Christians certainly did not stand at the center of the Christian-Muslim confrontation. In the Koran, it is reported in many places that God has sent new prophets again and again in the course of history in order to call those people who have strayed from the original revelation back to the true message. Jews and Christians, too, received a revelation from God in the past in their languages but, however, strayed from it and ought to have returned to the original message through Mohammed's call to Islam.

This statement by the Koran of the repeated sending of prophets is, of course, to be considered in the historical context more as an argument for the necessity of justifying the sending of Mohammed as the successor of Jesus Christ, since the Jews as well as the Christians refused to acknowledge Mohammed as one sent by God. At the same time, this manner of argument served as a legitimation of Mohammed in the eyes of his compatriots: because they, with their polytheistic faith and idol worship, had deviated from the true worship of God, Mohammed had to remind them again of the belief in one God that had existed from time immemorial.

According to the Muslim view, the Christians, too, have left the true faith proclaimed since earliest times, and have placed two other gods next to God, namely, Mary and Jesus. Also, they have lapsed into errors above and beyond this. They committed one of their greatest errors by not recognizing Mohammed as prophet. Muslim theologians assume that Islam is the original religion of humanity and that Adam – the Koran contains a relatively detailed account of Paradise – already was a Muslim and a confessor of the faith in one God.

There is no doubt that the charge of textual distortion made in Mohammed's time and in the first centuries after his death did not have a significance as great as the one it acquired especially in the last two hundred years. This charge is taken up anew by Muslim theologians of the nineteenth century and substantiated with numerous arguments, above all with the aid of the works of European Christian theologians who used historical-critical methods and who, in the Muslim view, provided as chief witnesses the "proof" that Christianity is untrustworthy and untenable because it is historically unreliable and distorted.

What Does the Koran Say About the Bible?

The Koran mentions several "texts" that in earlier times were revealed to other prophets before Mohammed. Some of these references are imprecise. Thus, for example, Abraham and Moses are said to have possessed several "pages" (the only mention of this is found in Sure 87:18-19) – probably pages of a book – that praise the advantages of the Hereafter in comparison to life in this world. It is possible that this is intended to suggest that Abraham also possessed a text, or one was revealed to him, which the Koran, however, does not name in explicit terms. Apart from

this allusion, the Koran provides no other evidence that Abraham may have received a revelation from God.

Other designations for texts sent to human beings in earlier times are more precise. Thus, the Koran mentions the Torah (Arabic taurâh) as well as the Gospel (Arabic injîl) by name. The Gospel is mentioned twelve times in all in the Koran. But, what does the Koran mean by the Gospel? In the end, it remains unclear whether it means the stories about Jesus, or one of the four Gospels, all four Gospels together, or perhaps the entire New Testament. The last alternative is unlikely in so far as the Koran reports absolutely nothing at all about the teachings of Jesus (the Sermon on the Mount, for example) and especially about the content of his teachings, which resulted in the development of the New Testament church. While the disciples of Jesus are mentioned in passing in the Koran, the text makes not one reference to the New Testament church, the missionary charge given to the Apostles, or to any of the New Testament letters or their contents and authors. The Koran also mentions no Old Testament books, but rather merely the names of several persons from the Old Testament. Also, what is to be understood under the term "Torah" is not explained in more detail. Are certain laws of the Old Testament, the five books of Moses, or the entire Old Testament meant? One must conclude that Mohammed's knowledge of what constituted the faith of his Christian contemporaries was very limited, an assumption that is supported additionally by the fact that, in Mohammed's time, there was no Arabic translation of the Bible.

Positive Statements by the Koran on the Bible

Interestingly, the value of other books, as well as the Bible, that were handed down from heaven in earlier times is nowhere fundamentally questioned in the Koran at the beginning of Mohammed's revelations but, on the contrary, is positively emphasized. Only later does the sweeping charge of distortion of the text appear in the Koran.

In the view of the Koran, the texts sent before Mohammed really do not contradict each other but, on the contrary, mutually confirm each other. Each prophet who, in history, was sent to his people with a revelation from God confirms the message of his predecessors, since God's message can never change. Thus, Jesus confirmed the mission of Noah, Abraham, and Moses, and Mohammed confirms the message of Jesus. The Koran clearly stresses that God has sent the Gospel as a true guide for human beings, just as the Torah was sent earlier: "He also sent the Torah and the Gospel, earlier, as a true guide for the people" (3:3-4). Sure 5:46 speaks in an especially positive manner about the value of the Gospel, which contains the "true guide" and "light":

"And we caused Jesus, the son of Mary, to follow them, so that he might confirm what was there before him, namely the Torah. And we gave him the Gospel, which contains the true guide and light and confirms that which was there before him, namely the Torah, and as a true guide and admonition for those who fear God" (5:46).

At first, the Koran speaks nowhere of the fact that the revelations of the Old and New Testaments (or, as the Koran says, the Torah and the Gospel) fundamentally might be

outstripped or replaced by the Koran. On the contrary, Mohammed places the Koran on a level with the earlier revelations, since, in his view, the Koran confirms the texts sent before (2:97). Likewise, the Koran does not put forward the argument frequently made later by Muslim apologists (defenders of the faith) that the “true Gospel” from Jesus’ time was lost and did not come into the hands of the Church. For the time being, the Koran gives no indication that there might have been a difference between the Gospel revealed by God and the Christian texts in Mohammed’s time.

However, one must take into consideration in this respect the fact that Mohammed, at the beginning of his proclamation, was convinced that Jews and Christians would recognize him as God’s prophet, and that the message of the Koran and that of the Christian texts were completely in accord with each other. Only when it became clear that neither Jews nor Christians would recognize Mohammed as God’s prophet did he attack both groups, the Jews by inflicting military defeats upon them and driving them out of his sphere of influence in Medina through massacre and expulsion; the Christians, whose piety he initially had praised in the Koran, by beginning to charge them with false theological opinions such as Jesus’ divine sonship and the Trinity.

The Bible’s Deviations From the Koran Are Christian Aberrations

After Mohammed, at the beginning of his public activity, had believed that the content of his message agreed with the preceding revelations made to the Jews and Christians, his initial esteem for both groups as bearers of the divine revelation turned into hostility when he was rejected and mocked by them. Made aware of the differences between his revelation and the Old and New Testament (by the lack of recognition of him by Jews and Christians), and in the conviction that he himself was the bearer of the pure Word of God, Mohammed drew the conclusion that the reason for the deviating content of both revelations had to be a distortion of the texts by Jews and Christians.

In this period of struggle for the recognition of Jews and Christians in the years beginning in 622 AD, Mohammed proclaimed that the Jews and Christians had falsified their texts over the course of time, since otherwise they would acknowledge him as God’s Prophet. Islam here is elevated to the status of the original religion of humanity. Even Adam and, after him, Abraham, Moses and also Jesus, it was claimed, always proclaimed the faith in the one God and Mohammed’s mission. Thus, if the Jews and Christians now did not acknowledge Mohammed, then the reason for this had to be their deviation from God’s message.

For this reason, Mohammed in the Koran corrects his earlier unreservedly positive opinion of the Jewish and Christian texts. Sure 5:13-14 now judges more sharply:

“But, because they (=the Israelites) broke their covenant, we have cursed them and hardened their hearts. They distorted the words. And they forgot a part of that with which they had been admonished ... And with those who say: ‘We are Christians’ we concluded a covenant. They forgot a part of that with which they had been admonished. Thus, we aroused hostility and hate among them; this will last until the day of resurrection” (5:13-14).

And Sure 2:74-75 alleges that, after a confrontation with the prophet Moses, the Israelites wilfully falsified the Word of God:

“Therefore, after this had taken place, your hearts became hard so that they became like stones, or even harder... Do you (=the Muslims) perhaps hope that they (=the Jews) believe the same as you do, although a part of them heard the Word of God, but then wilfully distorted it after it had understood it?” (2:75)

Thus, in the later years of his life, Mohammed clearly made the charge of textual falsification against the Jews and Christians. But, in Islamic scholarship today, there is relative agreement that Mohammed thereby did not want to suggest that Jews and Christians undertook major changes in the text of the original revelation. The Koran does not deal with the contents of the Bible in a discriminating way, but rather repeats again and again several standard charges against the Christians and repeatedly laments, for example, Jesus' divine sonship, the Trinity, and the crucifixion. The charge of changing the text is to be explained in Mohammed's case above all on the basis of his rejection as God's messenger.

Muslim Theologians on the Falsification of the Bible

In the apologetics (defense of the faith) in Muslim theology after Mohammed, this charge of textual falsification now was revived and made repeatedly and, in the course of time, extended further, until a theory of the complete falsification of the Biblical texts emerged. There arose, of course, different views among Muslim theologians about what was to be understood under the concept of the falsification of Jewish and Christian texts. While some exegetes of the Koran were of the opinion that Jews and Christians had altered the wording of the Biblical text (Bûrûnî, for example), others assumed only the false interpretation of certain phrases (Tabarî and Ibn Haldûn, for example). However, the Muslim view of the extent to which the falsification of the text of the Bible had been carried out became more and more censorious in the course of time.

Apart from certain exceptions, however, early Muslim apologetics placed less emphasis on this charge and, in addition, formulated fewer concrete charges in regard to what really might be understood as textual falsification. With the growth of the Christian-Muslim controversy, however, this point gained in significance. The opinion soon became common that not only that the meanings of words and individual letters in the Old and New Testaments had been changed, but also that a systematic, deliberate falsification of the Bible had taken place. As “proof” of this, it was stated that Mohammed had been proclaimed in the Old and New Testaments as God's last prophet, but that these prophecies had been erased systematically from all the Biblical manuscripts.

The Muslim Dogma of the Koran as Original Revelation

The assumption that the Koran is the eternal and, in the opinion of the majority of Muslims, uncreated Word of God that has existed from the very beginning of time is intended in the Muslim view to support the hypothesis of textual falsification. The Koran is, namely, taken to be an exact copy of the original revelation in Heaven that existed long before the writing of the Old and New Testaments. In the Muslim view, it is obvious that priority is to be given to the original

revelation over a later one because the former must be the true source of the divine Word. Also, if one assumes along with Islamic apologists that Abraham established the central holy shrine of Islam, the Ka'ba in Mecca, then Islam must be the religion that originated first and is thus the original religion of humanity. Even if Moses and Jesus proclaimed their message before Mohammed, then Mohammed only revives the original message, that is, the message of Abraham, and thus leads humanity back to the origins of God's revelation.

Christian Historical-Critical Theologians as Chief Witnesses for the Proof of the Truth of Islam

The Biblical criticism that had become widely popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe finally provided Muslim theologians with the long-desired “proof” for the fully untenable nature of the Old and New Testaments as divine revelation. Some works by European theologians and philosophers, whose common concern was to call into question the nearly unanimously acknowledged authenticity of the Bible held for many centuries in Christian church history and to shatter this authenticity by the enumeration of supposed contradictions or historical inconsistencies, were translated in the Near East and the arguments found in these works willingly integrated into the Muslim dogma of the falsification of the Bible. If even Christian textual scholars themselves “prove” the falsification of their own texts, then that was for Muslim theologians only the final confirmation of the statement of the Koran, which had always made this charge –albeit in a less detailed way. ¹

One can assume that the comparisons of the Synoptic Gospels that have become usual in contemporary Muslim apologetic works – all of which always have a negative result for the creditability of the Gospels – were taken over exclusively from the works of European theologians and incorporated into Muslim apologetics. The elaboration of differences in the reporting offered by the Gospels is not the “result” of independent Muslim research on the text of the Bible. When Muslim apologists cite European theologians, then this occurs with the goal of emphasizing the “contradictions” in the Biblical text, or of constructing a contrast between “Pauline” doctrine and the proclamation of Jesus and his first disciples. Whoever reads Muslim apologetic literature with an eye for the adoption of European theological thought will be astonished at the high degree of dependency upon Western schools of theology and the thought produced by them, as well as at the high level of information in the Muslim apologetic literature of the present about theological developments in Europe.

Three Islamic Apologists: Advocates of the Theory of the Falsification of the Text of the Bible

1. Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ (1865–1935)

Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ was one of the most influential Muslim theologians at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. He was a student of the famous Mohammad ‘Abduh, an Egyptian “reform theologian” and decided opponent of Christianity. He was active as Mufti, as a provider of legal opinions, and thus publicly gave his views in regard to the most diverse economic, political, and social problems. For us, Rashîd Ridâ's approach to Christianity and to

the reliability of the transmission of the Bible is of special significance here:

“... Ridâ considers the books of the Old and New Testaments to be a mixture of myth, legend, and history together with the true Biblical message as it has been revealed by God.”²

When he takes a position in regard to Christianity and the Bible, Rashîd Ridâ, following the example of the Muslim apologists of the nineteenth century, draws heavily upon the historical-critical exegesis of the Bible, in order to refute Christianity with the works of its own “advocates”. For this purpose, Ridâ concerned himself intensively with the New Testament texts and several works by European theologians, philosophers, and literary figures. In spite of his critical stance in regard to Christianity, he was of the opinion, in contrast to many Muslim apologists, that the original text of the Old and New Testaments had not been changed in later times, but rather that the falsifications of the original text had crept in between the time of the proclamation of Christian doctrines and the recording of them.³ This finding provokes him to undertake a fundamental critique.

Rashîd Ridâ makes the Apostle Paul especially responsible for the introduction of pagan elements into the Christian faith. This argument is one of the most frequent points of criticism brought forward in Islamic apologetics. In Ridâ’s view the parables of Jesus were interpreted in various ways, there arose divisions among Christians, and so different Gospel texts developed that are no longer identical with the original Word of God.

In addition, Ridâ doubts whether the four Gospels originating in the first post-Christian century and accepted as canonical are still identical with today’s Gospel texts, since he assumes that, during the persecution of the Christians in the first three centuries, the original Gospels could not be saved.

“He sees – as do most Muslims in general—the decisive break in the history of Christianity in the fourth century...”⁴,

for, as Muslim apologists repeatedly emphasized, the doctrines of the Trinity and of salvation through the death of Jesus on the cross were elevated to the status of dogma at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, and thus a serious error was made.⁵ For, thereby, the unity of God (Arabic: tauhîd) was replaced with the Trinity, that is, with polytheism. The Gospels today, thus, have been transmitted in a condition that is no longer flawless, and they are no longer intact.

2. Muhammad Muhammad Abû Zahra (1898–1974)

Muhammad Muhammad Abû Zahra, former professor of comparative religion at the famous Egyptian al-Azhar University and holder of a chair in the law faculty at the University of Cairo, was one of the most important personalities in the Muslim scholarly world of the twentieth century. His writings exert a great influence to the present day. Abû Zahra held “Lectures on Christianity” in Cairo for the first time in 1942. These were published later in several editions and continue to play a significant role in the confrontation between Islam and Christianity. Like Rashîd Ridâ, Abû Zahra also is a decided opponent of Christianity.

Abû Zahra falls back on the results of the historical-critical method in European theological and philosophical literature when he cites different views about the time of composition and the question of the inspiration of the four Gospels as arguments against the plausibility of Christianity. He refers in his selection of “Christian works” especially to Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus* (Life of Jesus) that had been published in Paris in 1863, and to Leo Tolstoy’s writings. Because of his ignorance of European languages, however, he had to depend on Arabic translations of these and other works. [6](#)

Abû Zahra’s “Lectures” concentrate first of all upon an idealistic representation of a Christianity that is in complete agreement with Islam as, in his view, it was also taught by Jesus. This Christianity, however, is no longer contained in the Christian texts, he says, because of their falsification through which pagan elements were introduced into Christian dogmas, [7](#) and therefore must be sought in the Koran.

Abû Zahra believes he can identify three reasons for the falsification of Christian doctrine: [8](#)

1. The falsifications of the texts written at the time of early Christianity were the result of the persecution of the first Christians.
2. The texts produced by the first Christians were influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy.
3. The syncretistic character of Roman religion and Greek philosophy falsified the gospel of the uniqueness of God originally preached by Jesus, so that Christianity now presents a mixture of Jewish, Roman pagan, and Neoplatonic elements. [9](#)

A further part of the “Lectures” contains Abû Zahra’s criticism of existing Christianity. Abû Zahra analyses Christian church history with its councils and theological divisions over a period of several centuries and concludes that the Trinity, for example, was not an original Christian doctrine, but rather was introduced into Christianity only after the philosophical school of Alexandria was established [10](#) and Christendom was divided on this question. Only at the councils of early church history were the dogmas of the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the Messiah, for example, formulated, which, he claims, encountered a not insignificant resistance among some Christian groups. [11](#)

The Charge of the Falsification of Christianity Through Paul

That modern Christianity represents a falsification of original Christianity is an argument made by numerous Muslim theologians. There exist, however, numerous theories about the cause and the point in time of the falsification. A “key figure” in these falsification theories is the Apostle Paul to whom, in older and more modern Islamic apologetic works, the principal blame for the introduction of false doctrines into Christianity is attributed. Hermann Stieglecker mentions the tenth century AD (that is, about 300 years after the proclamation of Islam) as the latest time period for the formulation of the view that Paul was the corrupter of Christian dogmatics. [12](#)

3. Ahmad Shalabî (born ca. 1921)

The Egyptian theologian and holder of a doctoral degree in history from Cambridge University, Ahmad Shalabî (born between 1921 and 1924) commented upon Christianity in detail in a comparative theological study published in 1959 under the title *Comparison of the Religions* (Arabic: muqâranât al-adyân). He discusses subjects such as the Trinity, crucifixion, and salvation and is cited here, as a Muslim scholar of the present, as an example from the twentieth century.

For his analysis of Christianity, Shalabî used works by Western Christian and non-Christian scholars ¹³ and Islamic polemic treatises and articles from Christians who had converted to Islam. For Shalabî, Christianity is a mixture of the personal views of the Apostle Paul and pagan elements first introduced into Christianity by Paul. ¹⁴ Ahmad Shalabî also assigns the Gospels of Luke and John to “degenerate” Christianity.

For Shalabî, some reports from the four Gospels, such as Jesus’ birth, temptation, and resurrection, have been drafted on the model of Buddhist legends and the tales of the pagan deities of India and the Near East. Shalabî also rejects the miracles recounted in the Gospels. There are, in his opinion, too many miracles, and they are related in such a theatrical manner that they appear implausible and in his view do not reveal any definite purpose. ¹⁵

Numerous other Muslim theologians holding this negative attitude toward Christian teachings could be mentioned. Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ, Muhammad Muhammad Abû Zahra, and Ahmad Shalabî are examples for how fundamental the critique by influential Muslim theologians of Christianity is, and how great a role the literature of European biblical criticism played as support for Muslim apologists.

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1. The most comprehensive and perhaps most influential work by a Muslim theologian from the nineteenth century is certainly the work, published first in 1867 and since then re-issued regularly up to the present, titled *Izhâr al-haqq* (The Disclosure of the Truth), by Rahmatullâh Ibn Halîl al-’Uthmânî al-Kairânawî, Constantinople 1867. [↪](#)
 2. M. Ayoub, “Muslim Views of Christianity: Some Modern Examples”, in: *Islamochristiana* (Rome), 10 (1984), pp. 49-70, here p. 58. [↪](#)
 3. Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ summarized his ideas on the falsification of the text of the Old and New Testaments especially in a total of sixteen articles in the Egyptian periodical *al-manâr* (The Lighthouse). These were collected in Cairo in 1928 and appeared in a book with the title *shubuhât an-nasârâ wa-hujâj al-islâm* (3rd edition, 1956). With this text, Ridâ wanted to provide a counterweight to the work of European missionaries, for example the text by Niqûlâ Yaqûb Gibrîl, *abhâth al-mujtahidîn* (Cairo, 1901). [↪](#)
 4. Olaf Schumann, *Der Christus der Muslime. Christologische Aspekte in der arabisch-islamischen Literatur* (Gütersloh, 1975), p. 122. See Ridâ’s statements on the compilation, in the fourth century AD, of the four Gospels accepted today in: *al-manâr* 10 (1907-08), p. 386. [↪](#)
 5. The Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, above all, rejected Arianism and formulated the dogma of Jesus’ divine sonship, while the formulation of the dogma of the Trinity can be verified only in the year 381. [↪](#)

6. Ayoub, "Views", p. 61. [↵](#)
7. Abû Zahra, muhâdarât, pp. 160ff. [↵](#)
8. Described by Ayoub, "Views", pp. 63-64. [↵](#)
9. Abû Zahra, muhâdarât, p. 11. [↵](#)
10. Abû Zahra on the Trinity: muhâdarât, pp. 103-110. [↵](#)
11. Abû Zahra, muhâdarât, pp. 129ff. [↵](#)
12. Hermann Stieglecker, Die Glaubenslehren des Islam (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1962/1983), p. 259. [↵](#)
13. Ahmad Shalabî, muqâranât al-adyân, II: al-masîhîya, al-Qâhira, 2. ed., 1965, pp. 55-56. [↵](#)
14. Shalabî, muqâranât, pp. 130-140, and Ayoub, "Views", p. 64. [↵](#)
15. Shalabî, muqâranât, pp. 25ff.; see also Ayoub, "Views", p. 62. [↵](#)