

Issues that Really Matter

Debate: Keith Small and Shabbir Ally

Topic 1.

The Accuracy of the Qur'an and the Bible

A. Introduction

Thank you for the privilege of speaking to you tonight. We live in a great day of opportunity. Never before have we been able to seek out the truth on the issues that really matter as we can today. With privilege comes responsibility. The issues our two religions raise deserve the most careful, fair, and objective study that we can apply. None of us has the luxury of blindly following what we want to believe is true. No one likes to have their holy books or beliefs criticized. But, we must examine them and seriously listen to the questions and criticisms others raise about them. We must, because first of all, our eternal destinies are at stake. And second, Truth is too important, too precious, too wonderful to use as a pawn in partisan religious arguments. The standards of criticism I use will be fairly applied to both books. I am a committed Christian and I believe with all my heart the truth of the Christian faith and the teaching of the Bible. But I also recognize that if anyone's faith is to be based on truth it must be able to stand up to hard questions and criticism. In examining the accuracy of the Qur'an and the Bible there are many ways the topic can be approached. There are many kinds of evidence. Accuracy is a broad word. I am going to examine one aspect of accuracy, the crucial one of historical reliability. Because of time limitations, I am only going to emphasize the evidence for the part of the Bible that is most crucial to tonight's dialogue: the Gospels in the New Testament of the Bible. The question is, do these four Gospels present a historically accurate picture of Jesus? Do they present His actual words, teaching, and claims? Concerning the Qur'an, does it present a historically accurate picture of Jesus? Basic to all of our thinking tonight, both mine and I think Mr. Ally's, is that revelation from God should at the very least be historically accurate. We believe that God does not leave Himself and His acts in time without adequate witness or testimony. And that is what we are here to examine tonight--the historical evidence God has left concerning Jesus Christ.

B. The gospels

The Gospels of the New Testament are the most reliable written testimony we have concerning the life and teaching of Jesus the Messiah. This is borne out by the available historical evidence. What do I mean by historical evidence? I mean actual manuscripts recording Jesus' teaching and actions. I mean other ancient documents that confirm the accuracy of the Gospels. I mean archaeological evidence. We do not have the original handwritten manuscripts of the Gospels, but we do have actual copies of portions of them from within a generation of the lives of the Apostles. We have the sermons and letters of

Christians who personally knew the Apostles, and these Christians quoted from the four Gospels and the other writings of the Apostles. We have 230 portions of the New Testament, from small bits to entire New Testaments, from within the 500 year period before Muhammad was born. And since the time of Muhammad, we have thousands of manuscripts of the Gospels and New Testament that further confirm the contents and authenticity of the earlier portions. This manuscript evidence has been exhaustively researched for changes and mistakes through the science of textual criticism so that we know that the text of the New Testament is 99.5% pure as far as how it compares with the original. Also, other literary evidence and archaeological evidence has confirmed that the Gospels and other New Testament books were written within the first century after Christ's birth, and the great majority of them before 70 AD, well within the lifetimes of the Apostles of Jesus Christ and His other first followers. The conclusion from this evidence, which is documented in many books, is what the Gospels claim for themselves: that they are eyewitness testimony of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, the honest accounts of men and women who spent three years with Jesus as He conducted His miraculous ministry.

C. The Qur'an

How accurate is the Qur'an concerning the historical facts of the life of Jesus Christ? First of all, it must be noted that the Qur'an came to be written down 600 years after the events of Jesus' life. It is the testimony of a book that claims to be revelation from God, but as mentioned earlier, revelation should be at least historically accurate. The account of Jesus' life and teaching from the Qur'an is very different from that in the Gospels. In fact, it contradicts the Gospels on many of the most important claims of Christ and events of His life, especially the crucifixion and resurrection. From a historian's point of view, in order for the Qur'an's view to be more accurate than one written by eyewitnesses 600 years earlier, it would have to come with evidence showing that its testimony was at least as historically plausible, and ideally with evidence that the other view was wrong. Does the Qur'an do this? No, instead it asserts its account of Jesus is the correct one solely on the basis of its claim to be revelation, without providing the evidence to back up its assertion.

D. Revelation as a proof

It is not enough to assert the Qur'an is revelation, and then on that basis assert it has the right to correct the Biblical Gospels. Even supporting the Qur'an with arguments like its inimitability, or asserting it is free from contradictions is not sufficient to establish its authority to correct the Gospels. None of these kinds of evidence is relevant to correcting historical evidence, nor do they establish the ultimate truth of the Qur'an, or the Qur'an's authority over any other book. For instance, the claim that the Qur'an is unsurpassed in its linguistic beauty and style in Arabic is irrelevant in overturning historical evidence, and is also irrelevant for non-Arabic speakers. At most, if true, it can only prove the Qur'an is the most beautiful book in the Arabic language. Asserting it is free from contradictions can at most, if true, only prove it is consistent, which is something we would expect from even ordinary books written by a single author.

E. Muslim use of western Biblical criticism

Some Muslims seek to assert the Qur'an's authority over the Bible by attempting to show that the four Gospels of the New Testament are corrupted. A popular way of attempting this these days is by trying to show that they are the products of a long and varied literary development from an Islamic-style Injil, and that the original view of Jesus has been changed almost beyond recognition. They then assert the Qur'an has the right to impose its view of Jesus as the right one. But this is putting the cart before the horse. First it needs to be proved why the Qur'an even has a right to pass such judgement on the Gospels. Why should a book from the 7th century which claims to be revelation have the right to correct a 1st century book recording the testimony of eyewitnesses? Muslims who use this method don't establish the Qur'an's right to do this. Rather they are just criticizing the Gospels. And this manner of criticizing the Gospels is illegitimate. It is wrong. By borrowing from an extremely skeptical branch of Western scholarship some Muslims develop clever, hypothetical literary theories about the development of legends concerning Jesus. They say that after a long period of oral tradition which developed these legends they were eventually written down in the gospels we now possess. They then present their theories as fact without any actual manuscript evidence. Skeptical Western Scholars have developed their theories mainly because they do not believe in miracles. Muslims borrow this thinking from extreme, skeptical Western scholars, not because they don't believe in miracles, but because they need to create a version of Jesus that agrees with the Qur'an. Without attempting to prove that the Qur'an has a right to change the message of the uncorrupted Gospels, they criticize the existing Gospels and try to make them somehow fit their agenda. This is imposing a view on a text, not presenting historical evidence. It is wrong and misguided. Also, if these Western methods are used on the Qur'an in the same way Muslims use them on the Bible, the Qur'an comes out in even worse shape because there is a 150 year gap between the events of Muhammad's life and the earliest copies of the Qur'an and the earliest Muslim historical sources. Not only is this method flawed at the outset, Muslims are using a double standard when they use it against the Bible but not the Qur'an.

F. Contradictions

Some Muslims also make a big point of looking for contradictions in the Bible. They think they must do this to uphold the Qur'an's claim to supersede the Bible since the Qur'an claims that true revelations will not have any discrepancies in them. But if one goes with that intent, of course one can find problems. If someone approaches anything with a bias of skepticism, it will be hard to be convinced out of that bias. Most Muslims I have talked with consciously or unconsciously have a bias against the Bible, not necessarily because they have studied it with an open mind, but because their belief in the Qur'an's absolute authority requires this bias of them. Also, we would expect a book with one author to not have contradictions. The Bible has more than 40 human authors that God used in writing it. It only stands to reason that there would be things that at first glance would look like discrepancies. But I have found that if you go with an open mind and search for real answers, you tend to find good answers to the difficulties the skeptics raise. Instead of these illegitimate methods, do these Muslim critics present manuscript

evidence of an Islamic-style Injil? Do they present other documentary evidence? Do they present archaeological evidence? No, they do none of these. Rather, they just criticize the existing Gospels on the basis of false assumptions. The more appropriate, scholarly, legitimate approach, if a Muslim wanted to prove the existence of the Injil that the Qur'an speaks of, is to produce that actual Injil, or present alternative historical evidence that is at least equally credible as the present Gospels. This would mean presenting actual manuscript evidence that shows actual changes to the present gospels so that one can see corruption or a revisionist approach to the life of Jesus at work. Another line of legitimate evidence would be for historical, documentary evidence of some meeting or committee that gathered and made the necessary changes to all the Bibles and translations, and then destroyed the originals. Permit me to make one more observation. If one carefully reads the Qur'an and its testimony to the prior Scriptures, one comes away convinced that Muhammad believed the real Injil was in existence in his day and available for any to study it. If this was so, then Muslims should have preserved it so that Christians could be properly corrected.

G. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Gospels of the New Testament of the Bible are the testimony of eyewitnesses and their companions to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. If Muslims want to assert they have been corrupted from an Islamic-style Injil, then the burden of proof rests with them to present actual historical evidence that these changes have taken place, and that the Islamic-style Injil existed in reality. Attempts to assert the Qur'an's authority on the basis of revelation must be backed up with historical evidence of an equal or greater quality than what exists for the Biblical Gospels. Thank you for listening. If any one here would like to receive a free New Testament and a free copy of a book explaining the historical evidence for the Gospels in more detail, please write to me through my website, <http://www.spotlights.org>. There will be cards with the website address as you go out. Thank you very much.

Topic 2: The real identity of Jesus Christ

The first topic tonight looked at the sources for the view of Jesus in our respective religions. I am asserting that the Bible in the four Gospels has the best historical records for the life of Jesus when compared to any other book. The Qur'an's historical testimony to the life of Jesus is much less relevant because it is removed from the time of the actual events of Jesus' life by 600 years, and the view it presents of Jesus is not in agreement with the best historical evidence that is available. Now both of these sets of writings, the Qur'an and the Gospels, present Jesus as a prophet. The Qur'an presents Jesus as just a human prophet. The Gospels, though, present Him as a human prophet and much more. They present Him as the eternal Son of God who had taken on a human nature and body in addition to His eternal spiritual nature and being. And while veiling that eternal nature He lived a normal human life on this earth until the time of His death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and then His ascension into heaven. Many Muslims assert that this is a view that Christians developed over time and then changed the words of their scripture to reflect the change in their thinking about Jesus. Their authority for this

view is not actual evidence that Christians have done this, but rather unproved theories of literary development, and their belief that the Qur'an's view of Jesus is revelation. While I understand and accept the value of believing and accepting revelation, we must test what we view is revelation to see if it squares with historical facts.

A. Apocryphal sources

When we examine the Qur'an's view of the identity of Jesus using legitimate source criticism, we find that rather than the view we find in the four Gospels, its view resembles thinking current in Arabia in the 600's. For instance, the account of Jesus making a bird from clay and the account of Jesus speaking from a cradle are found in religious novels called apocryphal gospels that were written in the four centuries before Muhammad was born--one particularly called the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy. These novels were not preserving legitimate historical evidence that the other gospels omitted. They are fanciful, undocumented stories that were created at best for entertainment and devotional value, at worst to justify some heretical doctrine, and none are known for historical accuracy. In fact, their inaccuracies were noted at the time and that was much of why they were rejected by the majority of Christians. Unfortunately, these stories were better known in some parts of the ancient world than the real Scriptures. Arabia was one of these places. The real Gospels were not translated into Arabic until a century after Muhammad lived. None of the apocryphal books upon which the Qur'anic stories are based ever had a serious claim as being regarded as Scripture. They were known to be unhistorical at the time. Rather than providing alternative historical evidence of the life of Jesus they were attempts at supplementing or revising the existing sources to suit later tastes.

B. Early heretical sects

Another source of historical evidence that has bearing on the Qur'an's accounts of Jesus are early sects that held different views of Jesus than the majority of early Christians. Muslims have asserted that some of these early groups denied the deity of Jesus and held to a strict monotheism like Islam. Groups such as the Nasoreans, the Ebionites, or other early Jewish Christian groups are mentioned. They go on to assert that these groups were the authentic followers of Jesus who were suppressed by the unorthodox groups led by Paul. The problem with these assertions is that if you study these early sects in detail, you find that none of them taught a religion like Islam. Even the groups that held that Jesus was just a man also held that He became the divine Son of God. All except one also believed He died on the cross and rose from the dead. That one group was not a Jewish group either, but a Gnostic one, the Basilidians, and they refused to believe in the crucifixion of Jesus because it didn't fit with their gnostic theology about Jesus, not because they had actual historical evidence that someone else died on the cross. And, when you look at the scriptures they used to justify their views, they used the Old Testament as it exists today, together with gospels that were based on the four Gospels in the New Testament. None of them claimed to have the one true gospel that preceded the Biblical ones. And none of them claimed that the Old Testament scriptures of the Jews were corrupted. Rather, They themselves corrupted the existing gospels which we have in

their uncorrupted forms in the Bible. Also, the churches based in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome, as well as those mentioned in the New Testament had no political power with which to suppress or persecute these other groups. Paul had no power to suppress groups he thought were wrong. He could only preach against them. And, according to the best historical records, Paul's preaching had the approval of all of the other apostles of Jesus.

C. The evidence Muslims need to produce

If Muslims really want to prove that the view of Jesus in the four gospels is wrong and the Qur'an's view is right, they need to do more than just criticize the existing Gospels. Muslims need to produce the following evidence: 1) the actual Injil in an uncorrupted form that the Qur'an talks about as agreeing in content with the Qur'an, along with historical evidence that establishes its trustworthiness over and against the Biblical Gospels. Or, if they can't produce that and believe the current Gospels in some way contain the Injil, they need to present: 2) Manuscript evidence that the current gospels were originally like the Qur'an's Injil, and 3) Firm historical evidence of a religious movement centered on the teaching of Jesus in the time of Jesus and immediately after, that resembles Islam in all its essential doctrines, and 4) Show how the Qur'an has sufficient authority to be used as a standard by which to measure the Gospels. That is what it would take to truly establish Muslim assertions concerning the Injil. Ladies and Gentlemen, Muslims have not been able to produce that kind of evidence for 1400 years. If they can now with the advances in knowledge we have today, then please present it tonight so that the Christians here may be properly corrected. If that is not possible because it requires more research, than Mr. Ally, please do that research and put it up on your website. Until then, Muslims need to heed the reliably reported words of Jesus in the Gospels of the New Testament.

- Listen to the words of God the Father spoken from heaven concerning Jesus: ***"Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well-pleased."*** (Mark 1:11) ***"This is My beloved Son, Listen to him!"*** (Mark 9:7)
- Listen to an Angel of God announcing the virgin conception of Jesus: ***"And she shall bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins."*** (Matthew 1:21) ***"Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means 'God with us.'"*** (Matthew 1:23)
- Listen to Jesus' own words to His disciples: ***"For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."*** (Mark 10:45) ***"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me."*** (John 14:6) To skeptical religious leaders: ***"But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,"*** He said to the paralytic, ***"I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home."*** ***And he rose and immediately took up the pallet and went out in the sight of all..."*** (Mark 2:9-12) To an open-minded religious teacher ***"For God so loved the world***

that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (Jn 3:16)

Ladies and Gentlemen, please heed the words of Jesus. He claimed to be much more than a prophet. He claimed and demonstrated that He is the eternal Son of God, the only Savior given to mankind. Thank you.

Topic 3: The Trinity

As with the last topic on the identity of Jesus, so with the Trinity we are dependent on the sources we hold to be reliable. Our view of God is dependent on which book we hold to be revelation. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is based on the teaching of the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. It is primarily based on statements from Jesus concerning His own identity in the Gospels. At the outset it must be recognized that the Bible's view of God is different from the Qur'an's. The Bible presents God as delighting to reveal Himself and something of His nature to people. The Qur'an does not present God as revealing Himself but rather his will. Since these views are different, and since the Bible's view of God came long before the Qur'an's. Muslims need to show why the Qur'an has the authority to correct the Bible's view of God.

A. The concept of the Trinity

Concerning the Trinity, you will note that I am careful to say that the concept of the Trinity is what is taught by Jesus. All Christians recognize that the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible, and that it was coined by later Christians as they worked out the implications of Jesus' teaching. The starting point for the concept is that Jesus presented Himself as being God in human flesh. This is taken from statements He made, like John 8:58, "Before Abraham was, I am." - a clear reference to the most holy name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush as recorded in the Torah in Exodus 3:14. Jesus' claims to be God were so clear to the Jews of His time that it was for this perceived blasphemy that He was tried and condemned before the Jewish leaders. The claim is further made by Jesus through His miracles. He forgave sin in His own authority. He demonstrated control over the physical forces of nature by speaking a word - reminiscent of God's creating the world with just a word. He also taught in his own authority, not as a normal prophet would say "Thus says the Lord...", but rather "I say unto you...". It is true that Jesus is no where recorded as saying "I am God, worship me." in those exact words. But He did claim to be God in ways the Jews understood, to the point that they picked up stones to stone Him for blasphemy on at least 2 occasions (John 8:59, 10:31). And Jesus did accept worship from people on at least 6 occasions (Matt. 2:11, 14:33, 28:9,17; John 9:38, 20:28), though He never commanded it. Also, deity is expressed in Jesus' use of the title Son of Man and His acceptance of the title Son of God. Son of Man refers back to a vision of the prophet Daniel (7:13,14), a prophecy given at least 600 years before Christ where a divine Son of Man is given everlasting dominion over all the earth. Jesus took that title to Himself. Jesus also accepted the title Son of God for Himself in that He is referred to with this title 53 times in the Gospels (Mt 11x, Mk 5x, Lk 11x, Jn 26x) and never once refused it or corrected the person calling him by that name.

B. Earliest Christians and their testimony

Not only did the Jews of Jesus' time realize He was claiming to be God, His own disciples realized it and accepted it as true. The Gospel according to John was written by one of His closest disciples to demonstrate that very point. Paul, an early believer and Apostle records traditions and early Christian poetry he had received that affirm Christ's deity in Philippians 2:6-11 where the phrase "in very nature God" is used of Jesus; and in Colossians 1:15-20 where the phrase "the image of the invisible God" is used of Him. It is known that Paul recorded these passages around 60 AD, and legitimate source criticism has shown that this is poetry from a still earlier time that he was quoting. Peter also testifies to Christ's deity by quoting early Christian poetry when he wrote 1 Peter 3:18-22 in the 60's AD with the words "who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him." Divine sovereignty is attributed to Jesus Christ. That is deity. Peter's preaching recorded in the book of Acts (2:25,34) which was also written in the 60's AD also confirms His belief in the deity of Christ.

C. The Holy Spirit

Jesus' teaching concerning the concept of the Trinity continues in all 4 Gospels in that he taught that the Holy Spirit of God was a separate spiritual person from God the Father, yet exercised the same powers and prerogatives. This is seen most clearly in the passages concerning the Paraclete in John 14 and 16 which refer to an eternal Spiritual person who would live inside the disciples and guide them into the truth of God in Jesus' absence after He ascended to heaven. It is also seen in passages like Matthew 28:19,20 where Jesus tells the early Christians to baptize converts in the name (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is also in the passages that record Jesus' baptism like Mark 1:9-11 where God the Father's voice speaks from heaven and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus. The rest of the New Testament continues this teaching. This Holy Spirit is not an angel or another prophet to come as Jesus teaches about Him. Rather He is the actual Spirit of God.

D. How can this be?

After hearing all of this, you may be asking, How can this be? How can God be three and One? How can God also be God and a Man at the same time? Those are the exact same questions early Christians wrestled with, including the disciples of Jesus. But Jesus is never recorded as correcting them and saying "I am not God." Rather, He accepted their worship when they believed He was God. It is true that the exact mechanics of how God exists as three Persons sharing one essence is never fully explained in the New Testament. But it is stated and assumed that God exists this way throughout the New Testament. Christians are claiming that in the New Testament God has revealed something of His nature, not that He has revealed it exhaustively. All of us would agree that no man can ultimately, completely know the nature of God. His essential nature is a mystery. It is incomprehensible, as we should expect with the Sovereign Lord of the Universe. One man has impartially noticed that, In light of the Qur'an and the Bible, if

God can see and hear without having eyes and ears like ours, and if he can have a face and hands different from ours, and can sit on a throne different from ours, then it is also possible for him to have a Son in a different way from us. (S. Masood, Why Follow Jesus?, p. 74) Christians believe in the Trinity because it is the best explanation for how Jesus describes his identity and God the Father's and God the Holy Spirit's. It is hard to understand, but it is not illogical, nor is it blasphemous on the terms the Bible lays out for blasphemy. Muslims need to realize that it is not legitimate to judge the Bible's view of God by the Qur'an's view of God. Rather, since the Bible came first and is not corrupted, the burden of proof rather lies with Muslims to show why the Bible should not instead judge the Qur'an's view. This evening we have examined some of the historical evidence concerning the Gospels and the identity of Jesus Christ. I have attempted to show that the 4 Biblical Gospels are the best historical sources we have concerning the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The Qur'an, coming 6 centuries later does not present a convincing case for overturning the view of Jesus presented by the Biblical Gospels. If Muslims are still convinced its view is true, than please, for the sake of the eternal souls of Christians, bring us the historical evidence that the Injil of the Qur'an really existed, and that the Qur'an's view of Jesus is true. In closing let me again thank you for the privilege of speaking to you all. I would also like to repeat my offer that if any of you would like a free New Testament and a book that explains more of the historical evidence concerning the life of Jesus Christ, then please contact me. Thank you, and may God bless you as you seek the truth.