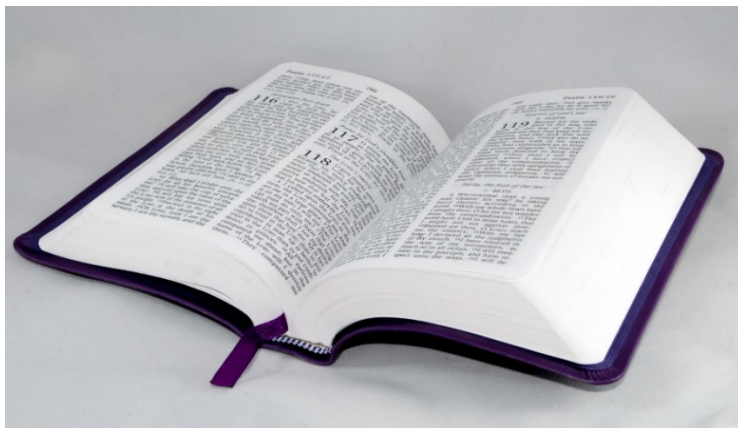




Christians, Muslims & the Bible

A short guide exploring the history and diversity of both Christian and Muslim attitudes and approaches to the Bible

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CMCS Hikmah Study Guides

'Hikmah' is an Arabic word for wisdom. *CMCS Hikmah Study Guides* are an accessible way for the reader to develop an understanding of complex and potentially controversial topics which Muslims and Christians encounter together. Each guide is written with input from both Christian and Muslim scholars and is intended to be non-partisan whilst not ignoring difficult or controversial issues and histories. The guides can be read by both specialists and non-specialists in the field and reading is suggested for those who want to study further. They can also be used as guides for small group discussions and the questions for reflection at the end are designed to help us all think more deeply about these important themes.

Cover picture

An open Bible turned to the Book of Psalms

Hikmah Guide No.4

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Introduction

No other book in history has been so widely published, printed and distributed as the Bible. As many as 5 billion copies may have been produced.¹ In addition to several hundred translations from the original languages into English, the Bible has been translated into 670 languages around the world and portions of the scriptures have been produced in over 3000 languages.² It is sold in bookshops, given away free and can be found in libraries all over the world. At the same time, in some countries, it is banned, and is illegal to import.

As the scripture shared by all Christians, the Bible has been read, revered and followed for almost two millennia since the canon – the list of accepted writings – was agreed by the early councils of the Christian church. During that time, it has shaped cultures, been used as the basis of laws and inspired countless individuals. It has been quoted to support freedom – and to deny it. It has united people – and divided them. It has been exposed to intense academic scrutiny and has been vehemently defended.

Not even Christians have always agreed about how it should be interpreted and what authority it has in the life of the Church and individual believers. So, the first part of this Hikmah Guide looks at the history and nature of the Bible and the diverse ways in which Christians have understood and used it.

However, it is not only Christians who read the Bible. Part of the Christian Bible is shared by the Jewish faith and these Hebrew scriptures, or *Tanakh*, are referred to as the Old Testament. Along with these older writings, the events and writings of the New Testament are also of interest to Muslims who recognize many of the prophets and events contained in the Bible. The Qur'an (see the forthcoming *Hikmah*

¹ <https://brandongaille.com/27-good-bible-sales-statistics/>

² <https://www.biblica.com/resources/bible-faqs/how-many-different-languages-has-the-bible-been-translated-into/>

Guide to Christians, Muslims & the Qur'an) even makes reference to these scriptures which predated the rise of Islam in Arabia.

So, the second part of this guide looks at the history of how Muslims have read and used the Bible and the different ways which Muslims may view it today. These approaches range from trying to find prophecies in it about the coming of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, to accusations that Christians and Jews have deliberately changed or falsified parts of it.

Given so many different views and approaches on both sides, it is important that Christians, Muslims and others understand more about how different groups understand the nature, authority and interpretation of this book that has done so much to shape history.

Christians and the Bible

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

This prayer, set for 'Bible Sunday' in the Book of Common Prayer, which has been one of the greatest influences on the thinking of the English-speaking world³, concisely expresses a Christian understanding of the Bible. It is twice called 'holy': that is, it is unique and pure and of God. It is 'Scripture' and 'God's Word': through it, God is speaking to humankind. The human responsibility is not only to read and obey it, but also to study, to take heed, and to make it part of one's inner being. This is part of the path to salvation and to eternal life; and it is God alone who can help people to tread that path.

For Christians of all kinds, the Bible is an important source of faith and of authority. Exactly what that means in both theory and practice has

³ This collect was in Thomas Cranmer's 1549 prayer book read mark learn. 'Bible Sunday' is the second Sunday in Advent, the month preceding Christmas. The Book of Common Prayer has been used in Anglican and other Episcopalian churches since 1662, whether in the original or in revised or translated forms.

varied during history, and there are many different views in today's world. In order to understand the range of views, we need first to recognize that the object of faith and the source of authority for Christians is not the Bible, but God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Bible is an important source because it tells us about God and about Jesus, and it is an important authority because it records words of God and of Jesus. More than that, Christians believe that the books of the Bible were produced through the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. In short, Christian views of the Bible depend closely on Christian views of God as Trinity.⁴

The nature of the Bible

The Bible is not one book, but a collection of many books. The books come from different periods in history and have different human authors. Over the centuries, these books became recognized as sacred texts by Jews and then by Christians. Today, there is full agreement amongst Christians world-wide on the scriptural status of the 66 canonical (accepted) books of the Bible. However, Roman Catholic Bibles are likely to include a further 7 books, known as 'deuterocanonical' (secondary canon), which are not considered to have full scriptural status, but are recommended for edifying reading. The Orthodox churches call these books the 'longer canon', and the various Orthodox churches add still more Jewish writings⁵.

Further, the Bible falls into two major parts, known as the Old and the New Testaments, the latter being in Greek and the former mostly in Hebrew⁶. The word 'testament' here refers to God's covenants, first with the Jewish people and then with people of all nations through Jesus Christ. Thus, the Old Testament contains the books recognized as

⁴ Will we have another Hikmah guide on 'Christians, Muslims and the Unity of God'? See also Glaser, 'Towards a mutual understanding',

⁵ See Barton, *What is the Bible?* Chapter 2 and Ginz *Introduction to the Bible*, chapter 10.

⁶ There are also sections in Aramaic e.g. Daniel. The deuterocanonical books are in Greek, having been included in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures.

Muslims and the Bible

It is very difficult to capture a single Muslim view of the Bible. This is not only because of the individual variations of the many Muslims who discuss it, but because there are two different understandings of the previous scriptures of Jews and Christians, understandings which have co-existed in Muslim thought down the centuries. One idea of the previous scriptures is that they are the texts originally given by God. These are referred to regularly in the Qur'an, which therefore provides a foundational reference point for this idea (more on this below). The second concept of previous scripture is that of the extant texts used by Jews and Christians through history up to the present day. For Muslims, these may well be textually corrupted or at the very least misunderstood and misinterpreted. Grasping and analyzing these two concepts goes a long way towards understanding Muslim views of the Bible.

Islamic Scripture and the Bible

The Qur'an, emerging in the seventh century CE, contains many different types of connection to the Bible. There is one almost exact quotation. Q21:105 reads, "My righteous servants shall inherit the earth", closely resembling Psalm 37: 9, 11, 29. There are also several more approximate parallels to specific verses.¹⁴ . However, in general the Qur'an is not aiming to quote the Bible in any precise way, and it is sometimes thought that many of its Biblical echoes reflect oral interaction with Jews and Christians.

Resemblance to Biblical passages is one type of Qur'anic connection with the Bible. Another is the occurrence of many figures in the Qur'an who are also found in the Bible. These include Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses, David, Solomon and Jesus. A third type of connection is explicit statements made about the scriptures of Jews and Christians. It can

¹⁴ See Sidney Griffith, "The Bible in the Qur'an" in David Thomas (ed.), *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 42-48.

surprise those unfamiliar with the Qur'an that the positive verses far outnumber the negative.

Positive verses

The term *Tawrāt* (Torah) occurs eighteen times in the Qur'an, and seems to be derived, perhaps indirectly, from the Hebrew *Torah*. It describes a scripture given to Moses (Q25:35), which was "sent down" from God (Q5:44). *Zabūr* (Psalms) is a term denoting a scripture revealed to David and occurs three times in the Qur'an.¹⁵

The term *Injīl* (Gospel) occurs twelve times in the Qur'an, nine times in conjunction with the *Tawrāt*.¹⁶ The word most probably derives from the Greek for gospel or good news, "*euangélion*," through the Ethiopian *wangēl*.¹⁷ This Gospel is believed to have been sent down by God to Jesus; for example, Q5:46 and Q57:27 state that, "We gave him the *Injīl*." The Qur'an also assumes that a text which it calls the *Injīl* was available to the Christians contemporary to Muhammad, and that this text could serve as a reliable source for their judgments (Q5:47). Whether, and to what extent, such an apparent affirmation refers to what Christians understand to be the four New Testament gospels is an important question, to which Muslim answers have varied.¹⁸

A further type of Qur'anic connection to the Bible is that the Qur'an assumes that the Bible, in its original form, predicts the coming of Muhammad. Q61:6 states, "Sons of Israel! Surely I am the messenger of God to you, confirming what was before me of the Torah, and bringing good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name will be Aḥmad." This verse captures well the Qur'anic idea of continuity of

¹⁵ Q 4:163; 17:55; 21:105. For discussion of the term see Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 148--49.

¹⁶ The *Tawrāt* and *Injīl* are mentioned together in Q3:3, 48, 65; 5:46, 47, 66, 68, 110; 7:157; 9:111; 48:29; 57:27. The term *Injīl* occurs alone in 5:46, 47, and 57:27.

¹⁷ Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 71--72. >

¹⁸ See Martin Whittingham, *What is the 'Gospel' mentioned in the Qur'an?*, available for download from <http://cmcsxford.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Research--Briefing--Spring--2016.pdf>

scriptures – the basic message is the same, brought by different messengers. This is why the Qur'an, and Muslims more generally, can affirm that God sent down authoritative scripture previously to Jews and Christians. If God sent it, it must be reliable, and it must agree in its fundamentals with the message of Islam. Another important verse in this regard is Q7:157, which refers to Muhammad the messenger, "whom they find written in their Torah and Gospel."

Negative verses

The negative verses about the Bible all occur in Suras 2-7, traditionally understood as arising during Muhammad's time in Medina later in his life (622-32 CE). Q2:75, 4:46, 5:13 and 5:41 all feature terms related to the word *tahrīf*, the most common word for corruption (though this precise term does not occur in the Qur'an). Q4:46 and 5:13 feature the identical phrase "they alter the words from their places" (*yuḥarrifūna al-kalim 'an mawāḍihi*). What is the significance of this altering? A surface reading of Qur'anic verses on alteration indicates that they are describing opposition to Muhammad by specific Jews. This opposition could be either concealing, or occasionally textually altering, the meaning of certain key passages from their scripture. The concealed or missing passages are often thought to concern Muhammad himself. Christians are not implicated in these accusations, even though the Qur'an criticises their doctrines far more than it criticises Jewish beliefs, owing primarily to the dispute with Christians over the identity of Jesus.

These verses on corruption, can be plausibly read as referring to the actions of particular groups of Jews interacting with Muhammad. But they are often taken as the basis for a more generalized assumption that the extant Biblical texts are corrupted. This is unsurprising since the extant text of the New Testament contradicts the Qur'an on certain key points, such as the divinity, death and resurrection of Jesus. If God has sent down consistent messages, as the Qur'an states, how can such differences exist? So, for most Muslim thinkers, Christians and Jews must be the ones responsible for any inconsistency between their scriptures and the Qur'an.

Questions for reflection

Questions for Christians

- How well does your church teach people about the history of the development of the Bible?
- In your study of the Bible, in what ways do you relate its human dimension and its divine dimension?
- What should be the roles of reason and of tradition in interpreting the Bible?
- In practice, are some books of the Bible more important to you than others? Why, or why not?
- Who has the authority to interpret the Bible? Anybody? Any Christian reader? Church leaders or the ordained clergy? Trained theologians?
- How does the Bible help you think about your Muslim neighbours?
- Have you ever asked a Muslim what they think about the Bible? What do you think that a Muslim you know might say?

Questions for Muslims

- Have you ever read any of the Bible? Why or why not?
- What did you like about it? What seemed familiar? How did it differ from the Qur'an in content, style and message?
- Do you think it has been changed? By whom and when? Or do you think that Christians have misinterpreted it?
- In what ways are Christian views of the Bible similar to Muslim views of the Qur'an? In what ways are they different?
- Have you ever asked a Muslim what they think about the Bible? What do you think that a Muslim you know might say?

Questions for everyone

- Have you read the Bible? What do you know about it?
- The Bible has had an undeniable impact on societies and cultures in many parts of the world. Has this been a force for good or bad?

- Do you see the Qur'an and the Bible as essentially similar, teaching the same message, or are they different?
- What challenges do Christians and Muslims share in interpreting their Books in today's world (e.g. on gender roles and relationships)?

Hikmah Study Guides

“These Hikmah Guides are an excellent resource, looking constructively at issues which sometimes appear to divide Christians and Muslims, and applying the same standards and criteria to each tradition”. *Prof Hugh Goddard (Professor Emeritus, University of Edinburgh).*

“Readers are expertly guided so that they can comprehend and then reflect on the sheer range of sectarian diversity within the modern world's two global religious superpowers”. *Dr Shabbir Akhtar (Regent's Park College, Oxford)*

“At last, accessible and readable guides to hot button issues in Christian-Muslim encounter, at once non-polemical and academically rigorous. The fruit of a sustained collaboration by Christian and Muslim academics. Highly recommended. *Dr Philip Lewis (Inter-faith Consultant to the Bishop of Leeds and former Lecturer at Bradford University)*

“*Hikmah*. Wisdom. We need to understand how the world works if we are to interact with it rightly. This series lives up to its name and I thank God for it!” *Dr Ida Glaser, Founding Director of CMCS*

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