

ANSWERING OUR MUSLIM FRIEND'S MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF THE  
CHRISTIAN FAITH

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Q. Sooner or later my Muslim friends ask me how it is that Christians worship three gods. No doubt they base their ideas on the Qur'anic verses, in sura 5 verses 116 and 117: And when God said, "O Jesus, Son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, 'Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God'"? He said, "To Thee be glory. It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, Thou knowest it, knowing what is within my soul, and I know not what is within Thy soul; Thou knowest the things unseen. I only said to them what thou didst command me: "Serve God, my Lord and your Lord."

A. Yes, many Muslims think that Christians worship three gods - God, Mary and Jesus. The Qur'an rejects not the Biblical conception of the Trinity but a false representation of the Biblical position.

Q. How do you deal with this problem?

A. I start by declaring my belief in the unity of God and quote from the Tawrat "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut 6:4). I also refer to the words of Jesus the Messiah in which he quotes from Deuteronomy and affirms his belief in the unity of God when he was asked which was the greatest commandment. "Jesus answered, "The first is 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'." Mark 12:29. James in his letter also writes as a believer in the unity of God. "You believe that God is one; you do well" (James 2:19).

Q. So the teaching of the New Testament as well as that of the Old Testament affirms the unity of God.

A. Yes. Then I go on to explain to my Muslim friend that God is infinite and man is finite. It is obviously impossible for finite man to comprehend the infinite God. If man could comprehend God fully he would be equal to God. Man can only understand what God has chosen to reveal. God has chosen to reveal Himself in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ who became man. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. How he is fully divine and fully human is a mystery. He is the second person of the glorious Trinity. The third Person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit who is sent into the world by the Father and the Son. I confess to my Muslim friend that although I can establish from the Bible the divinity and personality of each member of the Trinity I cannot, being finite, properly explain the mystery of the Eternal one in three. I generally conclude by referring to my religious experience - that through the Lord Jesus Christ I have come to know the Father and then I became aware of the Holy Spirit who reveals more of Christ to me and helps me in praying and in understanding the Bible which he has inspired.

Q. When your friend asks how you can believe that Jesus is the Son of God what do you say?

A. First, I declare that it is blasphemy for me too to say that God took a wife (Mary) and that Jesus was their son. I believe that Jesus is the Eternal Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word *was* with God and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh" (John 1:1,14). The Word became flesh only when he was miraculously born of Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself spoke of his eternal relationship with God: "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). At his baptism the voice from heaven declared: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). The Greek words translated so often 'in whom I am well pleased' can be more clearly translated "in whom my pleasure rests' i.e. 'on whom my plan for the salvation of mankind is centred' (*St. Matthew*, R.V.G. Tasker, page 51). The aorist tense in Greek "was pleased" becomes clear when we remember that the verb *eudokein*, when it is used for persons, often has an intensive sense and is equal to *eklegesthai* and *hairtizein*, "to select or choose for oneself". The good pleasure is expressed in the choice. The aorist is historical but it also denotes that there was no time past, present or future when God was not pleased with his Son who is the lamb slain before the foundation of the world (*The interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, R.C.H Lenski). I then go on to say that God is greater than all and he has the right to choose how he will reveal himself and his will. He who chose to save mankind in the days of the prophet Noah through the ark has chosen to reveal himself in a person, to send not just a message but the Messenger himself (Hebrews 1:1-3). If God had not entered our human life and suffering he would not have experienced our greatest needs. God surely must be greater than his creatures in experience and in suffering. If in his love he chooses to bear the sin of man and to let go free that is his right and his choice. We cannot say that he must not or that he should not or he did not. "God commends his love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Q. How do you answer those who say the scriptures are corrupted and changed?

A. First, I express surprise at the suggestion that God has not preserved from corruption the scriptures that he has inspired. Then I ask my friend to show me where the scriptures are changed. I enquire if he has read them. If he has not I invite him to do so and then to have a discussion later about them. I also point out that the early Muslim commentators considered the corruption to be not in the written text but in the way the text was read aloud by omitting, changing or mispronouncing words. The accusation of actual changing the text itself was made by later Muslim apologists from the twelfth century on. Presumably the differences between Qur'anic and Biblical teaching led to the formulation of these accusations of textual alteration.

Q. So how do you answer?

A. I point out that the textual evidence for the reliability of the text of the Bible as we now have it in the original languages is excellent. The whole New Testament was written within a century of the birth of Christ and was widely copied and circulated. It would have been very difficult to introduce changes that would not later have come to light. Many commentaries and works of the early Church Fathers have survived from the end of the first century on. The writers quoted extensively from the New Testament and these quotations can be compared with the Greek text. Before the end of the third century the New Testament had been translated into Syriac, Gothic and Latin. These translations were based on older Greek manuscripts than we now possess,

We still possess ancient Greek manuscripts from before the time of Muhammad. The most famous are:

Chester Beatty Papyri from the first half of the third century, containing the Gospels and Acts and all Paul's letters.

Codex Alexandrinus, now in the British Museum, contains nearly all of the Greek Bible except for most of Matthew and the Psalms, John and 2 Corinthians.

Codex Vaticanus is a manuscript of the Greek Bible from the first half of the fourth century. Genesis 1:1-46, Psalms 106-133 and all Hebrews after chapter 9:4, the general epistles and Revelation are missing.

Codex Sinaiticus dates from the middle of the fourth century. It contains the whole of the New Testament and nearly half the Old Testament.

Q. How is the reliability of the text of the Hebrew Old Testament established?

A. It is established by:

1. The oldest Hebrew manuscripts of parts of the Old Testament are from the first century A.D. or earlier. Take for example the book of Isaiah. The oldest manuscript we had until 1947 when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered was from several centuries after Christ. Now our oldest copies manuscript has been dated in the first century B.C.
2. Ancient versions or translations help us e.g.
  - a) the Samaritan Pentateuch in Hebrew. As the Samaritans had so little dealing with the Jews it is interesting that the Pentateuch used by the Jews and by the Samaritans is so little different.
  - b) the Greek Septuagint made in Alexandria in Egypt in the third century B.C. is based on Hebrew manuscripts older than any we now possess.
  - c) the oldest existing manuscript of the Syriac Old Testament translated from Hebrew into Syriac is of 464 A.D.

d) The Vulgate, Jerome's translation from Hebrew into Latin was completed in 404 A.D.

3. The Targums or Jewish paraphrases were made as people forgot Hebrew and used Aramaic.

Q• Some of this is rather technical. Would you go into it with every questioner?

A. No, obviously I would see where the person's interests lay. Some students of English are familiar with weighing up textual evidence and are conversant with these matters. However, my main objective would be to get the questioner to suspend judgment until he had read the Bible for himself. In any case I would not pursue the argument to the embarrassment of my friend as I am more concerned with winning people than with winning arguments.