

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Four: We need guidance!

We have seen in Part Three that all human beings are called to the high dignities of being the *abd* or loving servant of God and the *khalifa* or regent of God on earth. All human beings are endowed with reason and are required to establish justice as the central ethic of human living. In the light of this, all human beings will be held to account by God. It would be fundamentally unjust of God to hold people to account without giving them guidance on how to live the human project. That would be like telling people that they would be punished for breaking the speed limit but not telling them what the limit is on that stretch of road!

Who needs this guidance? The whole of humankind. God has been sending guidance to the earth from the very beginning. The first people to receive guidance from God were the first human beings, Adam and Eve [Q. 2:37-39]. The Qur'an tells us that no people or nation on earth has been left without guidance. God is one and all human beings are equal. God has no favourites. We all belong to the one human race. This means that the essence of the guidance sent by God is always the same. It would be unjust for God to guide one group of people to live the human project one way and another group in a fundamentally different way.

Two deposits of revelation

Guidance from God is called revelation. The Qur'an tells us that revelation comes in two deposits: in the scriptures and in the world around us, the "book of nature." We should not think that "scripture" has to be something written down. It could be verbal guidance given by God. We do not know how many scriptures have been sent to the earth but we can assume that it must be hundreds. All the peoples of the earth have been sent at least one. We can also read the signs of God in nature [Q. 3:190-191]. By using our powers of observation, investigation and reason, we can draw out guidance from the natural world [Q. 91:1-10]. This might be through observing the ways of life of animals. It might be through investigating the health-giving properties of plants. We can see that if we do certain things, like destroying our natural environment, certain consequences will follow. It is interesting that the word that we translate as verse, as in the verses of the Qur'an, *aya*, literally means "sign." The signs of God's guidance are there in the scriptures as well as in nature. When a gale hits us or there is a flood, we are reminded how puny human beings are compared to the forces of nature. We cannot control such forces and we cannot control the will of God either; we are creatures not the all-powerful creator. If God does not send the rain and sun in due proportion, the farmer cannot grow the crops; nature recalls us to our dependence on God.

As both the scriptures and the creation are full of the signs of God, then both the theologian and the scientist are serving God in unpacking them and seeking to read the signs. There is no fundamental conflict between science and religion in Islam. If our science appears to contradict what we read in the scriptures, then we have either more science to do until we resolve the apparent contradiction or we have to go back and re-interpret our scriptures to understand them more fully. The Qur'an tells us on many occasions to puzzle things out and use our reason [Q. 3:190]. The medical researcher trying to find the cause of an illness and its remedy or the food technologist seeking to find better ways to produce the food that we all need are servants of God obediently seeking to read God's signs. There are verses of the Qur'an that puzzled earlier generations of scholars that speak of the development of the human foetus in stages: a drop of fluid that lodges in a secure place, becomes a clinging mass, then fleshy tissue, which develops bones and then the bones are clothed in flesh [Q. 23:13-14; 22:5]. Their meaning only became fully clear in the twentieth century with the development of ultrasound scanning to monitor the development of the foetus in the womb, thus the scientists helped the theologians to understand the signs of God in the scripture.

All our study, research and seeking to gain wisdom must result in action. Islam is not just a body of wisdom to be known but rather guidance to be put into action. All true knowledge enhances our ability to live a life in service of God and that life of service draws us deeper in knowledge of God. As one well-known statement of God related by the Prophet Muhammad puts it,

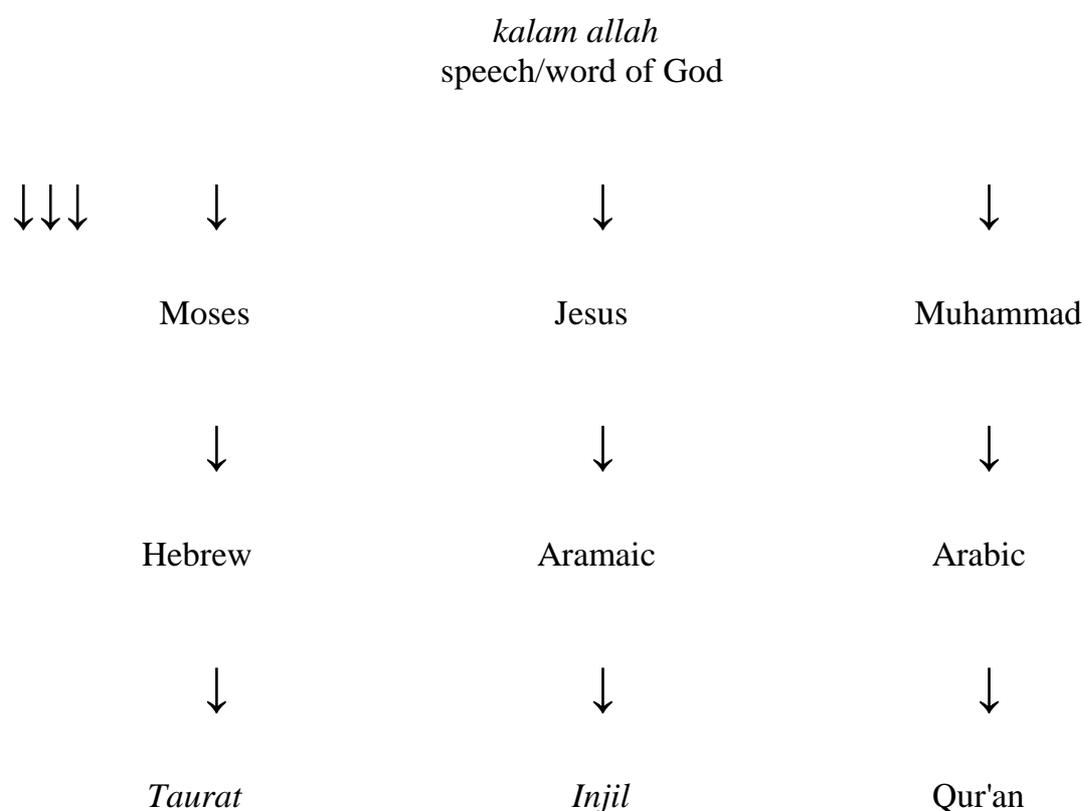
My servant keeps on coming closer to me through performing good deeds beyond what are commanded, until I love him. When I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, I am the sight with which he sees, I am the hands with which he holds and I am the feet with which he walks.

We do not know the number of scriptures that God has sent to the earth; all that we can say is that none of the peoples of the earth has been left without guidance. It is for the scholars to investigate the religious books of the earth to see to what extent they might be the remains of these earlier scriptures. The Qur'an is the benchmark by which possible scriptures can be judged. The extent to which they agree with the Qur'an determines the level of probability that they may be deposits of authentic scripture. When the Mughals ruled in India, they encountered those people who followed the Vedas. Some Muslim scholars investigated the Vedas and were prepared to say that, on the balance of probabilities, they seem to contain some authentic revelation. This can only be a scholarly assessment of probability; we can never be sure.

The Qur'an does however mention five scriptures by name. These were the scriptures sent to Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad. Before examining those scriptures in more detail we need to see how they relate to God and the word or speech of God.

The sending down of the word of God

God is transcendent, beyond our world. God communicates through the *kalam allah*, which we can translate as the speech or word of God. The *kalam allah* is not God but it cannot be separated from God; the speech cannot be separated from the speaker. The *kalam allah* belongs with God beyond our world but throughout the centuries of human existence, God has been sending down this word to human prophets in earthly languages. There is one *kalam allah* but the languages of the earth are many and various. Human beings need to have their revelation in earthly languages that they can understand; it would be no good to communicate with an Arabic-speaking prophet in Chinese! [Q. 12:2]. The following diagramme makes this clearer:



The one *kalam allah* was sent down to the earth an unknown number of times in different languages to prophets who spoke them; these are represented by the three arrows to the left of the diagramme. However, we can take three of the five examples mentioned in the Qur'an and say that the *kalam allah* was sent down to Moses in Hebrew and is called by the Qur'an, the *Taurat*. The same *kalam allah* was sent down to Jesus in Aramaic and is called by the Qur'an, the *Injil*. Finally, the *kalam allah* is sent down in Arabic to Muhammad and that is the Qur'an. We see here the principle of continuity: the source and the message are the same but the languages, prophets and scriptures are different. The particular details contained in the scriptures may differ but the essence of the message is always the same. For example, the Jews were taught through the scripture sent to Moses that there are certain animals that may not be eaten, that the name of God is to be mentioned over the animal before it is killed and

that it is to be killed as quickly and painlessly as possible by shedding its blood. The same essential message is contained in the Qur'an. When it comes to particulars, the Jews were taught that acceptable animals had to have cloven hooves and chew the cud, which ruled out the pig amongst other animals, that fish must have scales and fins, and so on. The particulars contained in the Qur'an rule out the pig and animals that feed on dead animals, like the hyena, but the list of excluded animals is shorter than for the Jews.

The earlier scriptures

Let us look now at the five scriptures mentioned by name in the Qur'an and the prophets to whom they were sent. They were:

Abraham (Arabic: Ibrahim)	–	<i>Suhuf</i> (“leaves/sheaves”) [Q. 87:19]
Moses (Musa)	–	<i>Taurat</i> (Torah?) [Q. 6:91]
David (Daud)	–	<i>Zabur</i> (Psalms?) [Q. 17:55]
Jesus (Isa)	–	<i>Injil</i> (?) [Q. 5:46]
Muhammad	–	Qur'an

The last in the list is easy: Muhammad was sent the Qur'an. We know nothing of the scripture sent to Abraham other than that it was called the *Suhuf*, which is normally taken to mean something like loose leaves or sheaves of writing. If we begin with David, the Qur'an tells us that he was sent a scripture called the *Zabur*. The obvious question arises as to how this relates to the collection of Psalms contained in the Hebrew Bible. There are 150 Psalms in the Bible, which are poetic songs that, for example, praise or give thanks to God. If we ask a modern Christian biblical scholar about the Psalms, then we are likely to get an answer that some probably go back to the time of David but others have been written and added later. The Book of Psalms is normally thought of as the hymnbook of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (Built after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon in 515BCE and demolished to make way for the building of Herod's Temple in 19BCE). They could hardly be thought of as a complete guide to a way of life. From a Muslim perspective, this means that our current collection of Psalms may contain some material from the *Zabur* but it cannot be seen as a definitive deposit exclusively of the scripture that was given to David.

Moses was given a scripture called the *Taurat*; how does this relate to the Torah of the Hebrew Bible? The Torah is the first five books of the Bible or the Law as Jews understand it to have been given to Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This is the essential deposit of the Law to govern the way of life of the Jewish people and therefore it probably resembles the type of material contained in the *Taurat*. There are however problems: we will take just one here. Some of the

accounts of the lives of the prophets contained in the Torah do not fit with the exemplary lives of prophets as understood by Islam. We can think of Lot (Arabic: Lut) becoming drunk and committing incest with his two daughters as an example (Genesis 19:30-38). Lot was a prophet sent by God according to the Qur'an and prophets do not act in such a way, therefore that cannot be a true account of Lot's life. The biblical account of Lot's incest must have been added by someone else. Once some errors have crept into a scripture, then it loses its sense of being an accurate deposit of the original. We do not know what else may have been added or changed. Indeed, the Qur'an speaks of the Hebrew scriptures as containing unspecified errors, additions and misunderstandings [Q. 2:75-79]. Even though the Torah as we have it today may contain much that was originally revealed to Moses in the *Taurat*, it must be regarded by Muslims as an unreliable deposit.

When we come to Jesus and the *Injil*, we have even greater problems. There are four Gospels contained in the New Testament and Christians understand them to be the work of human authors under divine inspiration, who wrote a theological account of the life and teaching of Jesus based on the accounts that had been remembered and passed on by the earliest generations of Christians. They are generally held to have been written forty to seventy years after the death of Jesus and are edited works to which several hands contributed. Christian history and theology does not know of or recognise a scripture given to Jesus by the name of *Injil* or any other name; it simply does not fit within the Christian system.

The word *Injil* is generally held to be an Arabic borrowing from the Greek, *evangelion*, from which we get the English word gospel. Some scholars understand it as an Arabic word based on the root *njl*, in which case it would mean something like "that which issues forth," as in an oral tradition. Over the centuries, Muslim scholars have put forward different suggestions about the *Injil*. Some have seen it as an earlier scripture from which the gospel-writers drew but which is now lost. In this case, the best deposit that we have of it is in the reported direct speech of Jesus in the Gospels. Some have held it to be an early gospel that was not included in the New Testament by the early Christian Church; we know that many gospels existed at this time and that the Church collectively decided that only these four were worthy of inclusion in the New Testament. There exists a document called "The Gospel of Barnabas" that was discovered in the seventeenth century in an Italian edition but most scholarly opinion is that this is of medieval origin. A document of that name was listed in the early Christian centuries but how it relates to the seventeenth document is unknown and there is no trace of it in the intervening centuries. It has won some following amongst contemporary Muslims as, where the Qur'anic account of the life of Jesus differs from that of the Christian Gospels, it follows the Qur'anic account. Whatever may be the truth of these various theories, the simple fact remains: the Qur'an teaches that Jesus received a scripture from God called the *Injil* and Christians do not have it intact or teach it today.

The critical importance of the Qur'an

Now we can see why the Qur'an is of critical importance for Muslims. It is the only accurate and authentic deposit of the *kalam allah* that is available today. It is the word of God and as such acts as the benchmark by which all other scriptures can be judged. Anything that differs from the Qur'an is by definition in error. Things have happened to the earlier scriptures given to Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus: errors have crept in, things have been changed, an unknown amount has been lost; they have not been preserved in their pristine form as they were given originally to the prophets. The Qur'an says of itself that it comes to restate the original, perennial, authentic guidance from God to humanity and to correct errors of fact and misunderstandings contained in the contemporary versions of those earlier scriptures [Q. 10:37-38; 2:97]. As the Qur'an is the literal revelation of the word of God sent down to Muhammad, God, who speaks in the Qur'an, knows best the contents of that perennial message. Whereas the earlier scriptures were given to the communities who followed those prophets for safekeeping, which they failed to do, the Qur'an says that God will be the custodian and protector of this last scripture and will preserve it free from error for all times [Q. 15:9].