

Prolegomenon: What are the Gospels? A Christian reflection on abstracts received¹.

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If the responses to our two 'Reading the Bible in the context of Islam' conferences are in any way representative, Christian academics are much more at ease with reading the Old Testament in Islamic context than they are with reading the New Testament in Islamic context. An obvious reason for this is that there are clear parallels between many Old Testament narratives and Qur'anic narratives, so that 'conversations' between the texts can easily be set up.

A glance at the abstracts received for the current conference might confirm this. Such a large proportion of the papers which deal with particular New Testament texts have their focus on Luke's Gospel that we have a whole stream devoted to it; and most of those have the narrower focus on the first two chapters of Luke which have such close parallels in the Qur'an.

A second glance at the abstracts indicates something which is, perhaps, more surprising: the conference is on 'reading the Gospels', but very few of the authors intend to actually offer readings of the Gospels. Some are reading the Qur'an, and asking how it represents or 'reads' the Gospels; some are reading Islamic writings, and asking how Muslims have understood (and, perhaps, read) the Gospels; some are asking how far and in what way Muslims might read the Gospels; some are comparing parts of the Qur'an with parts of the Gospels; and some are reporting on translations of the Gospels. Very few seem to be asking how the Gospels themselves are read and understood in Islamic context.

In other words, a great deal of this conference could be described as prolegomena to reading the Gospels in Islamic context: what do we need to think about even before we begin seriously to read? And, of course, this question is going to be answered differently by different Muslims and by different Christians.

Underlying most of these studies are questions about the nature of the Gospels. These require, if you like, a prolegomenon to the prolegomena. This paper offers one person's way into those questions, and then reflects briefly on the implications for future reading of the Gospels by Muslims, by Christians, and by Muslims and Christians together.

Prolegomenon to the prolegomena: What are the Gospels?

Before people encounter other scriptures, they are likely to assume that the Holy Book of their community is normal. It is the way that scriptures are, and hence becomes the standard of what they should be. I am no exception. Before I encountered the Qur'an, the Bible was what I knew scripture to be. Within the Bible, the Gospels were the apex. In the church tradition with which I was most familiar, we stood in respect as the Gospels were carried into the midst of the congregation, and read with a sense of awe.

It was not until the encounter with the Qur'an and with Muslim discussion of the Gospels that I realized how unusual the Gospels are. Far from being 'normal' scripture, they are a unique genre which even biblical scholars find difficult to categorise². I thereupon spent a year at a Bible College, and began with

¹ Note: this paper is a reflection on the abstracts received, written prior to receiving the papers themselves. It is therefore not intended for publication but as a conference starter, and has limited footnotes.

² See, for example, C.H. Talbot, *What is a Gospel? The genre of the canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). Most New Testament introductions include some reflection on this question

a term's study of 'What is a Gospel?' The resulting (unpublished) paper was a reflection on how the **form** of the Gospels relates to their **content and intent**. In 'form', I included 'formation': that is, 'form' has to do with the way in which the writing was produced as well as the literary form that it takes³.

A future historian might point out that I was writing during the 'medium is the message' era⁴, and that is so. However, 40 years later, I continue to consider that form & formation and content & intent are closely related not only in the Gospels but also in all other scriptures (and, probably, all other writings), and that one cannot understand one without also understanding the other. This becomes acute when reading the Bible in Islamic context: if one reads biblical writings expecting them somehow to fit into an Islamic form, one is unlikely to understand their content and intent⁵.

So, whether we are reading papers which look at Muslim views of the Gospels or papers which compare the content of the Gospels, the Qur'an and other traditions about Jesus, we need to think about the form of the Gospels in order to develop understanding of their content and intent. Only then can we assess the relevance and significance of the historical discussions and current comparisons.

Thinking about form

For the Muslim reader, it seems to me that it is very difficult NOT to try to read the Gospels as fitting into an Islamic form; and I see that as a problem fundamental to many of our papers. The problem arises because the Qur'an itself sees the *Injil* as part of the Islamic flow of revelation, which means that the Muslim reader is bound to read it as such.

Clearly, the Gospels are very unlike the Qur'an. They are simply not a message given to Jesus by God. Obvious choices open to the Muslim reader are (a) to see some of the recorded teachings of Jesus as the original *Injil*, and to try to recategorize the documents within which they are transmitted or (b) to try to find another Islamic category into which to fit the Gospel writings or (c) to reject the Gospels as scripture. (These options are not necessarily mutually exclusive). A less obvious choice, but one which, in my view, would be much more constructive for building scholarship and understanding, would be to start by trying to understand the Gospels in their own right, and only then to proceed to a reflection on the implications of this for the Muslim reader. Shabbir Akhtar's reading of Luke seeks to do this, and to go the second mile of also taking account of its place in Christian thought.

I look forward to seeing how far the various Muslim approaches to the Gospels explored in the conference papers fit into these alternatives. Here, I want to reflect on one of the more obvious categories through which to view the Gospels: that of Hadith. If one wishes to choose a category which, on the one hand, recognizes some authority for the Gospels but, on the other hand, recognizes that they are accounts of Jesus the Messiah rather than messages transmitted through Him, this is arguably the most obvious category, and there are Muslims past and present who use it⁶.

The Gospels as Hadith?

The category of hadith offers a way of fitting the Gospels into an Islamic view of revelation: of assigning them a status which might permit serious engagement for academics and others. However, as I

³ Note that this is a broader concern about 'form' than that of 'form criticism'. 'Form criticism' has generally been concerned with the forms and formations of individual pericopes.

⁴ The phrase was coined by Marshall McLuhan in his *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*, (McGraw Hill, 1964)

⁵ The same applies, of course, to trying to read them as, for example, a 19th century German or 21st century British form.

⁶ Examples include Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Afifi al-Akiti. This footnote will reference relevant conference papers.

anticipate some papers will demonstrate, it can rapidly become problematic and produce polemic. In particular, anyone opening the Gospels will immediately find that they are almost totally lacking in *isnad* - the chain of transmission for any Hadith which affirms its validity. One may quote a Hadith without its *isnad*, but everyone knows that, without *isnad*, the Hadith is spurious. No wonder, then, that we have papers considering the long history of accusations that the Gospels are invalid because of alteration or uncertain transmission. If we expect the form of Hadith, we will find half of it missing.

The discussions tend to focus on questions of authenticity and authority. How far can the Gospels be considered true accounts of Jesus and His teaching, and what authority might they have as revelation? If we are trying to read them as hadith, then authenticity is largely going to be judged through *isnad*, and lack of *isnad* immediately disqualifies a Hadith. The authority of a Hadith depends on authenticity; and, in any case, the authority of even the most authentic Hadith is secondary to the authority of the Qur'an. The choice of treating the Gospels as similar to Hadith necessarily diminishes their perceived authority. The choice might open a way for a Muslim to begin reading the Gospels, but it is not one likely to be easily accepted by Christians, and it might not be the best basis for Muslims and Christians to discuss the Gospels.

I wonder what would happen if we could begin with a discussion on the form of the Gospels. The form of a Gospel writing is that it comes with minimal *isnad*. Each Gospel has in its manuscripts only a traditional attribution – to Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Otherwise, there are traditions from the second century AD as to who these people were and how their Gospels came to be recognized. As is well known, the past 2 centuries have seen intensive discussions of the minutest details of such reports: we might say that Christian writers, too, examine *isnad*.⁷

If, however, form is consistent with content and intent, perhaps it would be more fruitful to see the lack of *isnad* – and the other aspects of the form of the Gospels - as feature rather than problem. Only thus, I would suggest, are both Christians and Muslims likely to reach understanding – that is, to reach understanding of the Gospels. This is not just a quest for Christian understanding of Muslim views and Muslim understanding of Christian views: it is a journey which will probably challenge Christians as well as Muslims in their understandings of what the Gospels are as well as how they should be interpreted in Islamic contexts. My own journey has certainly challenged my own understanding!

My 1980 paper focused on how the ideas of truth presented in the Gospels relates to their form. It started with a study of what the synoptic Gospels mean by 'gospel'. This still seems to me a good place to start: what did the early Christians mean when they called Matthew, Mark, Luke and John 'Gospels'? The first thing that becomes obvious from looking at 'gospel' in the New Testament is that the word is always used in the singular. The epistles make this explicit: there is only one genuine gospel – other purported gospel is false.⁸ As far as we know, this singular usage continued for at least a century after the time of Jesus. The earliest use of the plural to refer to the four written Gospels is from Justin Martyr in the mid 2nd century (*First Apology*, 66), who says that 'the memoirs composed by the apostles' are

⁷ For an overview and critical discussion of scholarly speculations, see Gathercole, S., "*E pluribus unum?* Apostolic Unity and Early Christian Literature", in Carson, D., (ed), *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), pp407-455.

⁸ See for example, 1 Cor 15:1-9; Gal 1:6-2:10. There is, of course, plenty of discussion as to what, precisely, the *euangelion* is, and as to whether all the New Testament writers recognized the same *euangelion*.

called 'Gospels'. Before that, and frequently after that, the singular is used even when referring to the whole collection of four books⁹.

The word translated 'gospel' is *euangelion*, which does not mean a piece of writing, but 'good news'. This is the sense in which *euangelion* is used in the New Testament, and in which 'gospel' is often used by English speaking Christians. So, when the Gospels tell us that Jesus preached the *euangelion*, they do not mean that He recited a book but that He proclaimed good news.

The early manuscripts describe the four Gospels as *kata Maththaion, Markon, Loukan, Ioannen*. according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. The preposition *kata* can hold a variety of meanings. Thayer's Lexicon describes it as 'a preposition denoting motion or diffusion or direction from the higher to the lower'. It is hence that it takes the meaning of 'through' and of 'according to'. This is interesting in our context: the Gospels are not, as the English 'according to' might imply, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John's versions of the story of Jesus. Rather, they are the *euangelion* which has come down to their hearers and readers through the agency of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The language here suggests a parallel between the Gospel writers and prophets in the Islamic sense – both are people who receive and transmit the good news given to them by God. What is that good news? We need to read the Gospels to find out!

Prior to the written Gospels, the one of the earliest New Testament writings summarises the *euangelion* thus:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. (1 Cor 15:1-7).

It is striking that the *euangelion* here is not a message – it is not a doctrine or a set of instructions, although it has something to be 'believed'. Rather, it comprises historical events; and those historical events have salvific significance. Even earlier, the *euangelion* is discussed in terms of God's powerful salvific work throughout history, and as the *euangelion* of God and of Jesus the Messiah (1 Thess 1:3-10; 2:2-9; 3:2; Gal 1:7; 3:8-9).

In the synoptic Gospels themselves¹⁰, the *euangelion* is generally something that is preached – by Jesus (e.g. Matt 4:23; Mk 1:14; Lk 4:18) or, at Jesus' command, by his followers (e.g. Matt 9:35; 24:14; Mk 13:10; 14:9; Lk 9:6). It is also something which has to do with fulfilment. On the one hand, Jesus' proclamation is a fulfilment of the specific prophecy of Isaiah that the anointed one (the Messiah) will

⁹ See, for example, F.F. Bruce, 'Gospels', in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1980, pp581-585).

¹⁰ John does not use the word *euangelion*.

preach good news (Is 61:1 cf Lk 4:18). On the other hand, the specific content of the preaching includes the announcement that the time of fulfilment has come (Mk 1:15).

What is this *euangelion*? Interestingly, the Gospels do not tell us the exact content of a verbal message labelled '*euangelion*'; and they often put general 'teaching' alongside the preaching of the *euangelion*. Perhaps the nearest we get is in Mark 1:14-15

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

The *euangelion* has to do with something happening at a particular time, which is called the 'kingdom of God'. It is to be believed, and people are to repent. Matthew regularly refers to the '*euangelion* of the kingdom' (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Mark is the only Gospel which introduces itself as *euangelion*, in the much discussed first verse:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Does this announce the beginning of the book, or is the whole book seen as only the beginning of the *euangelion*? The phrase 'Son of God' is missing from some manuscripts, so was it added later or sometimes omitted for some reason? Does the genitive imply that the *euangelion* is about Jesus, or that it is what He announced, or both? However we understand the verse, it is clear that the *euangelion* is all about Him, and reading the Gospel certainly affirms that.

Matthew begins

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
(Matt 1:1)

Luke introduces his work as

A narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us. (Lk 1:1b-2)

John does not describe what he is doing until towards the end of his book:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (Jn 20:30-31)

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (Jn 21:24-25)

Since these four, and only these four, were the Gospels recognized by Christians from early times, it is clear that these descriptions were not considered as alternative ideas of the *euangelion*, but as complementary announcements of it.

Putting together the clues above, we see that:

1. The *euangelion* is about Jesus, and about Jesus as 'Christ' – the Greek *christos* translates the Hebrew word that comes into English as Messiah.
2. The Messiah is the long-expected king in the line of David: the one who would bring salvation to God's people and who would bring in the just and righteous reign of God. Thus the '*euangelion* of the Kingdom' is about the establishment of the rule of God through the Messiah.
3. The Gospels are not themselves the *euangelion*: they are accounts of what happened when the Messiah was in 1st century Palestine.
4. They, either directly or indirectly, witness: they are accounts of what people experienced and heard and saw.
5. The intent of the Gospels is not only to inform, but also to call people to repentance and faith and new life.

Much more could be said (and has been said!): here, I want to point out that the form of the Gospels is intrinsically linked with this content and intent. The Gospels are accounts of Jesus the Messiah, and each is structured and presented as a proclamation which calls people to faith, which implies acknowledging the Messiah as King.

The way in which the *euangelion* is passed on is 'witness' (*marturia*); and this single concept can take us a long way towards understanding the Gospels' forms. This is a particular theme in John's Gospel, where the function of John the Baptist is to bear witness to Jesus (1:7-15; 3:26-30; 5:33); and the witness of God, of the miracles, and of Jesus Himself all affirm the nature of the Messiah (e.g. 5:31-40; 8:13-18; 10:25; 18:37), so we can read the whole Gospel form as one of witness. Moreover, in biblical legal terms, witness must be plural – nothing can be established in a law court on the basis of a single witness (Deut 17:6; 19:15), so having more than one Gospel is not a problem but a necessity. The mature reflection of a direct eyewitness (Jn 21:24) is needed; but so is a careful collection of as many eye-witness accounts as possible (Lk 1:1-4). And so on.

We might imagine how the second century Christians who first circulated the four-fold Gospel might have responded to questions about *isnad*. Why, they might ask, do we need *isnad*? We know that these Gospels are accounts of what people saw, heard and touched (1 Jn 1:1-3), and they have been handed on to us through the whole church. We don't need the names of individuals! These events happened well within the memory of the first Gospel readers, so we don't need a chain of transmission to the writers. And the Gospels are witnesses - each gives us a complementary account of our Lord Jesus. Yes, some people have put them together into one account, but we also benefit a lot from having the different viewpoints. It is the new things that people are writing that need to be checked: they may claim to be secret knowledge passed down from an apostle, or to be the story of part of the Messiah's life which was known only to His family, but we are not sure of the validity of these claims. We can see the point of asking for a chain of transmission for those later writings!

It is interesting that something like *isnad* can be found in the Gnostic *First Apocalypse of James* (probably late 2nd century: this Gospel, like other late Gospels, was never included in the accepted

canon). But this is not a claim for public transmission of texts: quite the opposite! It is a chain of secret transmission of a secret revelation given by Jesus to James.¹¹ Such purported secret revelations are characteristic of Gnostic material, and the secrecy is one of the reasons for the rejection of the authority of such writings.

The People of God as witness: a key to understanding

The term 'witness' has not only to do with the idea that the Gospels represent the accounts of eye-witnesses of the historical person of Jesus. It is also significant because the people of God were previously described as God's witness (e.g. Isaiah 43:10, 12; 44:8), so, when the Messiah describes the twelve whom he chose as companions in terms of 'witness' (Lk 24: 46; John 15:27; Acts 1:8), the reader understands that this is somehow a fulfilment of the call of the twelve tribes of Israel. The community of believers will later be 'witnesses' (e.g. Matt 24:14; Acts 13:31; Rev 20:4) that is, they will take their part in fulfilling this commission.

A key to a comparative understanding of the Qur'an and the Bible is that, while the Qur'an sees the locus of revelation as prophets, the Bible sees the locus of revelation as the People of God. As the Qur'an is believed to be a book given to Muhammad, so a natural Islamic expectation would be that previous scriptures were given to particular prophets. Whilst the Bible includes books which can be seen as fitting into such expectation, there are many parts of it which evidently do not fit; and the Gospels are an acute example of this. In the Bible as a whole, the writings of the prophets are only one way in which God speaks to and through His people.

As I argue elsewhere¹², the biblical scheme is of God calling not a series of prophets but a people; and the people carry not so much the words of God as the presence of God. The various books of the Bible tell the story of that people, but they also include the writings of that people and the records of how God spoke to that people through prophets. Christians see the Gospels as the heart of biblical history, because they express the heart of God's revelation. That is, they record the actual presence of God in the person of Jesus the Messiah. The Messiah is, therefore, the sum and fulfilment of the people through whom God is revealing Himself, and the point of opening up of the people to include all believers. The believing people (often called the 'Church') are the ongoing locus of God's presence, through the Holy Spirit.

It is to this **presence** that the People of God are witness – not only through a law or a message, but through their history, as they and others see what God is doing in them and through them. That is why their Psalms of praise and prayer, their questioning of human wisdom and their narratives of their experience are just as important as their collections of law and of prophetic oracles. In Christian understanding, it is also the presence of God through the Holy Spirit which guides the writing and recognition of the texts which authoritatively transmit the witness.

What form, then, might we expect for the written records of the life of the Messiah? If the content is the record of the presence of God in the Messiah, and the intent is to communicate that content in order to call to faith and to build and resource the community, in what way might the records be

¹¹ Gathercole, *idem.*, p447.

¹² *Thinking Biblically about Islam*,

produced and what might we expect them to look like? Given that the Messiah lived 2000 years ago, I would suggest that we might expect them to look like the Gospels!

We would certainly expect some transmission of the Messiah's teaching, but his words would be only part of the record. Individuals might do the actual writing, but these would be the records of the community of faith rather than of individual experience. The major intent would be that people should see the presence of God in the person of the Messiah.

We can note here another contrast with the Hadith. For the Gospel writers, it is Jesus who is God's revelation, and there is no more primary revelation which He communicates or to which He points. In contrast, for the transmitters of Hadith, Muhammad is not in himself God's revelation, and his actions are only so in a secondary sense. God's revelation is the Qur'an: the Hadith tell us only about the prophet through whom the revelation was given. The Jesus of the Gospels is not just a figure of the past: He is risen from the dead, and so the figure to be met as God's revelation in the present.

Thinking about content and intent: How far can we read?

If the form of the Gospels is related to their content and intent, any understanding of the Gospels needs to take account of what is actually in them and of what questions they are seeking to answer. While only Matthew and Luke pay attention to Jesus' birth and early life, all four give approximately a third of their words to the events surrounding His death. While each Gospel has its own concerns, all three of the synoptics have at their centre the series of events which begin with the question of who Jesus is and finish with Him coming down from the mount of transfiguration to heal a demonized boy (Matt 16:13-17:23; Mk 8:27-9:32; Lk 9:18-45) and John arguably begins from a theological reflection on the transfiguration ('We have seen His glory', Jn 1:14). For all of the synoptics, the central portion, itself centred on the transfiguration, is the pivot of the story which turns towards the journey to the cross. It comes, if you like, as God's direct response to the question of what it means that Jesus is the Messiah, and whether He is to go to a shameful death. For John, the cross is in mind at least from 1:29, which sets an agenda for the Gospel: 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.'

These macro observations indicate major aspects of the content and intent of the Gospels: they are not only account of Jesus' life and ministry, but of His death and resurrection. Their intent is not just to transmit His teaching and His actions, but to ask who He was, and how He fitted into God's work in His world. And their major interest accords with the early statement of the *euangelion* cited above:

3For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, (1 Cor 15:3-4)

The overall literary forms of all the Gospels indicate this priority: the death and resurrection of the Messiah determines the form of literature that we have come to know as 'Gospels'.

Returning to the abstracts: I note that there are only two (Sabbagchi and Akhtar) which deal explicitly with the overall question who Jesus is, and only Akhtar does that on the basis of the Gospels themselves. One other (Peters) takes us to the crucifixion of Jesus – and, even then, to only one saying. What the New Testament writers saw as 'of first importance' does not seem to be what our conference contributors see as important.

Or, perhaps, these questions are just too important and too difficult in this context. The nature of the Messiah and the fact and significance of His death are, of course, two of the most contentious issues between Muslims and Christians, and it is these as much as the nature of the Gospel writings which make 'Reading the Gospels in Islamic Context' challenging. How can Muslim scholars seriously approach writings whose form as well as content has primarily to do with who it was that died and why? Looking at the crucifixion accounts through the lens of 'Hadith' and *isnad* is particularly problematic, especially if one thinks that the eye-witnesses were deceived by God Himself into believing that they saw Jesus die¹³.

So, I ask myself, how far can we read in the Gospels in Islamic context? Will reading the synoptics past the transfiguration, or reading John at all, inevitably lead towards unconstructive contrary interpretations based on our pre-understandings not only of what Scripture should be, but also of what it should contain? I trust that our study together will open fresh windows on the texts, and hence lead to fruitful engagement for us and for many others.

Where might this conference lead?

If the papers presented at this conference are largely 'prolegomena', something said before the reading begins, what is it that they are introducing? I hope that they are leading towards serious readings of the canonical Gospels by Muslim scholars, and to serious engagement with Islamic contexts by Christians in their biblical theology and New Testament scholarship.

The challenge of reading the Gospels together Muslim and Christian views of the Gospels are, I suspect, so different that reading them together is always likely to be difficult. Even academic study is affected by the faith (or lack of faith) of the academics: if this is so in all disciplines, how much more in the study of the Gospels. Often, the best we can achieve may be good quality disagreement – through paying careful attention to the texts and their contexts and their commentators, through taking the trouble to hear and study each other's views, and through committing ourselves to respecting each other's integrity.

But there is, I think, a way in which, for the Christian reader, the category of 'Hadith' offers a way forward into a point of thinking and working together with Muslims. A major *use* of Hadith has to do with following the example of Muhammad. Might Muslims and Christians be able to agree on the Gospels as a source for seeing the example of Jesus, and then to agree that this is, at the very least, a prophetic example that all could follow? This was the idea behind the 'following the example of Jesus' which has been part of the vision of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, Oxford.

Of course, this is not without challenge – as with the Hadith and the example of Muhammad, we see Jesus acting in different ways in different circumstances, so we need much study and discernment. Moreover, Christians think about following the example of Jesus in significantly different ways than Muslims think about following the example of Muhammad.

¹³ See Martin Whittingham (2008) 'How Could So Many Christians Be Wrong? The Role of *Tawātur* (Recurrent Transmission of Reports) in Understanding Muslim Views of the Crucifixion', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 19:2, 167-178, DOI: [10.1080/09596410801923659](https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410801923659)

The challenges of reading the Gospels within our faith traditions

One of the functions of Scripture is, I think, to bring humankind into question. I well remember the turning point in my thinking when, as I first started seriously to read the New Testament, I suddenly realized that it was questioning me rather than vice versa. I had been writing critical notes in the margin – Why did it say this? Was that a contradiction? Was the other really true? Suddenly, it was speaking to me, asking whether I was contradicting myself, whether what I believed was true, and whether my life was what God wanted it to be.

One conclusion to be drawn from this prolegomenon is that ‘reading the Gospels in Islamic context’ will challenge BOTH Muslim AND Christian views of the Gospels. On the one hand, encounter with the canonical Gospels challenges Muslims to ask how they relate to what the Qur’an means by *injl*, and to find categories for reading which take account of what these Gospels actually are. On the other hand, the whole discussion challenges Christians to ask again why the Gospels are what they are. In both cases, we are challenged to read the Gospels as they are, rather than as an inferior version of what we think they ought to be.

And that reminds me of Thomas Kuhn’s seminal work on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962), which argues that science does not simply develop in response to demonstrated facts. Rather, scientists, like other people, work within ‘paradigms’ - frameworks of understanding through which they interpret the world. They will stretch a paradigm to include contradictory evidence as far as they possibly can until, eventually, the paradigm breaks, and they are forced to adopt a new paradigm. How much more do we try to stretch our paradigms of faith in our interpretations of our own and other’s Scriptures?

But the Scriptures are what they are. Reading the Gospels challenges the paradigms within which we read. And re-reading them will always challenge our paradigms again.