



If thou wert in doubt as to what  
 We have revealed unto thee, then  
 ask those who have been  
 reading the Book from before  
 thee....  
 (Surah 10 verse 94)

**+**

**WAS  
 THE INJIL  
 CHANGED AT  
 NICEA?**

**AND**

**HOW WAS THE  
 NEW TESTAMENT  
 CANONISED?**

**☾★**

*There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues: (As they read) you would think it is a part of the Book, but it is no part of the Book; and they say, "That is from Allah," but it is not from Allah. It is they who tell a lie against Allah, and (well) they know it! Surah 3:78*

This passage raises a serious charge against Christian belief. Today Muslims accuse Christians of changing their Scriptures. The accusation is that the Injil was deviously changed to support beliefs about Jesus that have no foundation in fact. Instead of looking into the historical record to find out if this is the case or not, Muslims have simply said that it happened, not bothering to investigate. Christians respond:

**When** did Christians change their Scriptures?

**Who** changed them?

**How** did they change them?

It is appropriate to ask for dates, names and evidence if Muslims make such a serious charge.

To address this charge we provide the factual answers to six questions:

1. Was the Injil Changed at Nicea?
2. Who was Arius?
3. What is The Nicean Creed?
4. What was the Nicean Council?
5. How do these charges face an impossible Situation?
6. What Conclusions can we reach?

### **Was the Injil Changed at Nicea?**

Ahmed Deedat, Muhammad 'ata ur-Rahim and other Muslim apologists have proposed that at this council the Pauline Church of the north not only destroyed other gospels, but subdued the rest of Christendom, eradicating the true teachings of Jesus, which were Islamic. By their reckoning Arius (a fourth century clergyman) was

### **Canonisation of the Qur'an**

To follow a consistent argument, that the late development regarding the discussion of canonicity shows that there was early human manipulation, we need to apply the same standard of inquiry to the Qur'an. It is widely accepted that the revelations of God to Muhammad were memorised by him and recited to his followers who, likewise, memorized them. Some of these companions wrote down pieces of the message on scraps of wood or bone or stones. But after the Battle of Yamama in 632 AD, when so many of those who had memorized the Qur'an died in battle, it was decided by Abu Bakr that the Qur'an needed to be written down and protected for fear that "a large part of it may be lost" (Bukhari 6:509 in Khan trans.). It is commonly accepted that this was done by Zaid ibn Thabit shortly thereafter.

The earliest Hadith collector al-Bukhari (d. 870AD) tells us that within twenty years of this event there arose significant manuscript variations, however. So many that Caliph Uthman in 653AD ordered that all available manuscripts be collected and burned so that an officially sanctioned Qur'an could be disseminated (Bukhari vol. 6: 510). While this is not referred by Muslim scholars as 'canonisation,' that is, in effect, what was done.

To contrast, for the NT there was an early standard acceptance of authoritative books with variations and distortions coming much later; whereas for the Qur'an, there were distortions and variations from the very earliest compilation of the Qur'an with unity coming later. As a result an official copy needed to be produced and the variants destroyed. Unlike the NT, which was canonised later as an official declaration regarding what was already in place, the Qur'an was canonised very early as an attempt to humanly control variants and distortions.

The two accusations: 1. that the NT was canonised very late; and 2. with an overarching human conspiracy, have been disproven for the NT. Yet, this second and greater accusation of human manipulation can be much more powerfully levelled against the Qur'an.

cepted corpus of inherently authoritative books, but that the books were so widely held as authoritative Scripture that there was no need to stipulate them (even the Old Testament, while established for quite some time, was not officially recognised as canon until the Synod of Jamnia in 90AD).

Historians tell us that controversy and crisis often serve to refine existent beliefs, and rarely function as an opportunity to create new beliefs. As false gospels started to arise in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, the discussion of canon arose as well. But the very controversy itself regarding the infiltration of false gospels shows us that the canonisation of the NT was already in process. To substantiate this claim, let's look at the earliest discussion of canonicity. The first mention of a canon of the NT as Scripture is the Muratorian Canon in 170AD. Two hundred years later (367AD) we have Athanasius' famous 39<sup>th</sup> festal letter that lists all 27 books of the NT as we have them today. Between these times there were 6 other lists of canons, each consistent with the others, repeatedly listing all 27 NT books between them (Canon of Origen ca.185-254AD, Canon of Eusebius ca. 265-340AD, Codex Claromontanus ca. 300AD, Canon of Cyril ca. 350AD, Cheltenham Canon ca 360AD, Canon of Laodicea 363AD). These lists also tell us which other books were in circulation at the time, the process by which books were considered canonical, and which apocryphal books arose from heretical sects. In the end, the Synod of Hippo Regius (393AD) brought closure to the debate affirming the 27 books of the NT as we have them today. There is no need to speculate concerning the acceptance or rejection of a canon of Scripture. The books in the NT today have always been the inherently authoritative divinely inspired Word of God. Metzger concludes his whole history of canonicity by saying that "no books or collection of books from the ancient Church may be compared with the New Testament in importance for Christian history or doctrine."

a proto-Muslim of sorts, holding to the oral teaching of Jesus against the "evil Pauline churches." Below is an example of the Islamic interpretation of Nicea.

*In 325 A.D., the famous Council of Nicea was held. The doctrine of the Trinity was declared to be the official doctrine of the Pauline Church, and one of the consequences of this decision was that out of the three hundred or so Gospels extant at that time, four were chosen as the official Gospels of the Church. The remaining Gospels written in Hebrew should be destroyed. An edict was issued stating that anyone found in possession of an unauthorised Gospel would be put to death. This was the first well-organised attempt to remove all the evidence of Jesus' original teaching, whether in human beings or books, which contradicted the doctrine of the Trinity.*

Although many Muslims hold this romantic view, the historical record will simply not support it. In order to properly understand Nicea we need to begin with Arius.

### **Who was Arius?**

Arius (AD 256-336) was a clergyman of Alexandria. He insisted that Jesus Christ, the Son, was created by God before anything else to be an instrument of the creation of the world. For him and his followers, Jesus was a demi-God, neither fully divine nor fully human, the highest of God's finite creatures. "God was not always a Father....The Word of God was not always, but originated from things that were not....for the Son is a creature and a work."

Some Muslim apologists would infer that Arius held to the original teachings of Jesus and, hence, was a Muslim, just as Adam, Noah, David and other holy men before had been Muslims. Arius, however, was in no way a forerunner to Islam, which he would have condemned as heretical. He believed Jesus Christ (this "demi-god") was the Son of God who died for our sins on the cross and was resurrected on the third day. He did not teach the unity of God as Muslims teach it. His teachings concerned many Church leaders. From the New Testament until then, Christians understood that Jesus was both fully man and fully God and it was important for them to declare what they had always believed. With the arrival of

the emperor Constantine, a Christian, to the imperial throne, Church leaders from around the known world had the opportunity for the first time to meet and decide questions such as this one.

### **What is The Nicean Creed?**

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of His Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth.

Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead.

And we believe in the Holy Ghost.

And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence from the Father or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic church anathematizes them.

### **What was the Nicean Council?**

The arguments between Arius and other leaders of the church became so stormy that Constantine called for a council, which he moderated. Over 250 bishops from both within and outside the Roman empire congregated to discuss the person of Jesus Christ. Although he presided, Constantine was not a central participant. He simply allowed the Church to carry out its business.

The bishops of the Church, when examining the issue of who Christ is, were very conservative. They did not intend to develop

thority. And even though some of these books were kept in codices alongside canonical texts, they were explicitly set apart from the rest, as the very first canonical list (the Muratorian Canon 170AD) makes plain.

According to these criteria, the many late Gnostic and apocryphal gospels and epistles that arose in the second and third centuries are considered ‘non-canonical’ [eg. the Gospel of Thomas (ca. 175AD), the Gospel of Judas (ca. 180AD), the Gospel of Philip (200-350AD), the Gospel of Mary (ca. 220AD), or the many “infancy gospels” (all within 140-235AD)]. That is, these apocryphal books are not inherently authoritative, and are far too late to have been written by apostles, many being written after the very discussion on canonicity began. Additionally, early church fathers, like Irenaeus or Cyril of Jerusalem, wrote against inclusion of these very books, showing their lack of coherence to doctrine and lack of widespread acceptance. Finally, while it is difficult to evaluate the power of conviction that these books might carry, even a cursory read of these books will show a sharp disparity from the books of the NT. Princeton scholar Bruce Metzger concludes that “the evaluation of modern readers will no doubt corroborate that of the early Church...the voice of the Good Shepherd is heard in only a muffled way, and that it is, in fact, often distorted beyond recognition by the presence of supplementary and even antagonistic voices.” We challenge our Muslim friends to actually read these books before making claims concerning them.

### **Received and embraced, not selected and protected**

To state quite simply what we find is that there was no official canon of NT Scripture in the earliest church history as there was no need for an official canon of Scripture. Metzger continues, “the Church did not create the canon, but came to recognise, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the Church.” The lack of a ‘canon’ does not mean that there was not a generally ac-

which was used as a unit of standard measurement. Thus *kanon* came to mean a “rule” or “standard” by which one can evaluate. The canon of Scripture is the standard for the authoritative collection of books and the collection of authoritative books, simultaneously.

While, admittedly, the discussion of canonicity did not arise until one or two centuries after the books themselves were written, the current books of the NT have always been recognised as authoritative for the church. The church alone does not determine canonicity, and no council decreed authority to certain books to the exclusion of others. On the contrary, the books themselves carry inherent authority. God gives the book authority, and not councils or churches. The early church recognised this authority by discerning certain qualities of NT canonicity:

1. Was the book written by an **apostle of God**? [apostles were 1<sup>st</sup> century eyewitnesses of Jesus, and hence reliable in what they describe (for the case of Mark and Luke who did not see Jesus, they are recording the stories of persons who did)]
2. Did the message tell the **truth about God**? (coherence: the book cannot contradict itself or accepted church doctrines)
3. Was it accepted by the **people of God**? (widespread acceptance by the church)
4. Does it carry the **power of God**? (conviction: living power to challenge and change a person’s life. Jesus prepared his disciples for this in promising the Holy Spirit who would “guide you into all the truth” John 16:13)

It was debate concerning weight or priority amongst these that caused for disagreements over official lists. Of the books under discussion for canonicity that are not included in the NT canon, only three were seriously considered by the church [Epistle of Barnabas (2<sup>nd</sup> C), Shepherd of Hermas (2<sup>nd</sup> C), 1 Clement (early 2<sup>nd</sup> C)], and these failed to be written by an apostle or attested by an apostle. In fact, in some cases (eg. 1 Clement, Shepherd of Hermas), the author states dependence upon other apostles for the writing’s au-

new ideas or doctrines. Their central question was, What did Jesus and the Apostles teach? After studying and discussing the Scriptures, the leaders of the Church virtually unanimously agreed that Arius was in error and drew up a statement of faith known as the Nicene Creed.

While assembled, Church leaders agreed on a number of canons (rules) by which to regulate the discipline of their churches. This was all that happened at the Council of Nicea.

For as long as they could remember the church had only used the four Gospels, not because they voted upon them, but because the Apostles wrote and gave them to the Church in the first century. These same Gospels they read and cherished. Nicea had nothing to do with selecting or destroying Scriptures or other gospels.

### **How do these charges face An Impossible Situation?**

The way some Muslim apologists present the Council of Nicea is impossible. There is no evidence for the burning of Gospels at Nicea or any other time in the history of Christianity. Even if someone had the desire, the task would have been impossible. A conspiracy to change the Injil would require several steps:

1. By the fourth century the Injil was in the Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Gothic and Ethiopic languages. Christendom itself extended beyond these tongues into places as far removed as Britain, Armenia and India. There was no circle of people powerful enough to seize every single copy of the Scriptures in every church in the world to falsify the Injil. Unlike the early history of Islam, which had a caliphate, the Christian churches in the world were independent and under the jurisdiction of no human being. Many of these churches were outside the realm of the Roman empire. We have manuscripts and fragments from the Injil which are older than AD 325. Did the conspirators also forge these?
2. Forcibly changing the practices and beliefs of Christians from around the world. To make the new Injil accepted, the conspirators would have had to force believers to adopt new customs and cere-

monies such as communion (symbolic of the crucifixion of Jesus), baptism (symbolic of the forgiveness of sins in Christ), Sunday worship (in honour of Christ's resurrection) and religious belief in the Cross. What were the older ceremonies? Why do we have no record of them? How could anyone bring about such a dramatic change without any evidence of controversy?

3. Remove all traces of the original Injil. Not only were there the copies of the Injil, but many writers had already quoted extensively from it in the first, second and third centuries. We know of over 32,000 of these quotations! If the conspirators were going to make their job perfect, they needed to find and destroy any writings that quoted from the original Injil, replacing them with quotations from the new and corrupt one.

This is all impossible. In the way Muslims would have us believe, a conspiracy against the original teachings of Jesus had to completely reconstruct a fraudulent history and convince the rest of the world it was true. The job was obviously so good and perfect that the only ones to discover it were a handful of Muslim scholars of the ninth and tenth centuries. Where is the evidence?

### **Conclusion**

Muslims may not like the Council of Nicea. They may reject a creed which reflects the original Apostolic teaching. But let Muslims not say that it was here at Nicea the Scriptures were changed. The questions Christians pose to Muslims are still relevant.

**When** did Christians change their Scriptures?

**Who** changed them?

**How** did they change them?

**Not one Muslim has been able to present evidence and they never will, as long as accuracy in history remains a value.**

## HOW WAS THE NEW TESTAMENT CANONISED?

The Scriptures were not changed at Nicea. They were, as they always have been in Christendom, upheld and preserved.

Historians tell us that controversy and crisis often serve to refine existent beliefs, and rarely function as an opportunity to create new beliefs. As false gospels started to arise in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, the discussion of canon arose as well. But the very controversy itself regarding the infiltration of false gospels shows us that the canonisation of the NT was already in process. To substantiate this claim, let's look at the earliest discussion of canonicity. The first mention of a canon of the NT as Scripture is the Muratorian Canon in 170AD. Two hundred years later (367AD) we have Athanasius' famous 39<sup>th</sup> festal letter that lists all 27 books of the NT as we have them today. Between these times there were 6 other lists of canons, each consistent with the others, repeatedly listing all 27 NT books between them (Canon of Origen ca. 185-254AD, Canon of Eusebius ca. 265-340AD, Codex Claromontanus ca. 300AD, Canon of Cyril ca. 350AD, Cheltenham Canon ca 360AD, Canon of Laodicea 363AD). These lists also tell us which other books were in circulation at the time, the process by which books were considered canonical, and which apocryphal books arose from heretical sects. In the end, the Synod of Hippo Regius (393AD) brought closure to the debate affirming the 27 books of the NT as we have them today. There is no need to speculate concerning the acceptance or rejection of a canon of Scripture. The books in the NT today have always been the inherently authoritative divinely inspired Word of God. Metzger concludes his whole history of canonicity by saying that "no books or collection of books from the ancient Church may be compared with the New Testament in importance for Christian history or doctrine."

### **Process of Canonisation**

The word 'canon' comes from the Greek word *kanon* for "reed,"