

## How Did God Preserve the Bible?

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The first Muslims believed that God had watched over the revelations that He had given prior to the time of Muhammad; God continues to protect and preserve His Word. But how does He do it, and what proofs can we furnish to show that the Bible has survived intact?

### A LITTLE HISTORY

To better understand the preservation of the Bible, and especially of the New Testament, it would be useful to remind ourselves of the history of the first centuries of Christianity.

The books which make up the New Testament were written by the apostles and other God-inspired men in the years following the death of Jesus. These men were either eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus, or men who had a lot of contact with the eyewitnesses. They finished writing these books before the end of the first century, during the lifetime of those who had known Jesus personally, his enemies as well as his friends. This is important when we consider that these books were circulating just about everywhere in the world at the time when it would have been easy to point out errors, lies or exaggerations. The writers of the Bible could not have allowed themselves to invent miracles that Jesus did not do or teachings that he never gave. We should point out that typically a great deal of time passes between the lives of great men of history and the writing of the first biographies telling their stories. For example, the principle biographies describing for us the life of Alexander the Great, the Greek emperor who conquered the world from Greece all the way to India, were written around 400 years after his death. Ibn Ishaq, the author of *Sira Rasul*, the first biography of Muhammad, was born more than 70 years after the death of the prophet. He was not a witness of the events that he described and would barely have been able to speak with an eyewitness of even the latest events in Muhammad's career. Besides, we no longer even have his book, but only an abridged version produced by Ibn Hisham, who died 60 years after Ibn Ishaq. So the nearness of the Gospel writers to the events they describe gives us confidence that these are reliable accounts.

Let us consider then the matter of how these writings were preserved in such a way that they did not undergo changes.

### ORIGINAL TEXTS AND FIRST COPIES

The books which make up the New Testament were written in the Greek language, which at that time

was the *lingua franca*, the international language which was used every day by people in all the countries of the Roman Empire. The authors wrote on papyrus, a kind of paper made from a type of reed that grew in Egypt. These accounts of the life of Jesus and letters addressed to churches and individual disciples were sent to various cities of the world. Those to whom they were addressed carefully made copies of them in order to share them with others. These handwritten copies are called manuscripts. Each local congregation made sure to acquire them in order to teach its members. These manuscripts did not all come from a single place or from one central organization. Christians in every city, region and country applied themselves to the task of lovingly recopying these texts so that as many people as possible might have access to them. This is why they began very early on to translate the Gospel into different languages. Just as today there are people in English-speaking countries who do not speak English and people in French-speaking countries who do not understand French, there were some people at that time who did not know Greek. Translations of the Bible were made for them in their own languages, just as translations of the Bible and the Qur'an exist in various languages today.

(It seems worthwhile to point out parenthetically that some people are confused by the word "version," which is often used in the place of "translation." These people think that the different "versions" of the Bible are different Bibles, books with very different contents and meanings. This is not at all the case. These are translations made from the same Greek text in order to make it understood by those who do not know the Greek language. We can have several translations in the same language because languages evolve over time and because not everyone has the same level of instruction or the same vocabulary. I personally own four different translations of the Qur'an in English and two in French. Even though they do not use exactly the same words, the ideas are the same. These translations are very useful, given the fact that it is estimated that 80% of Muslims around the world do not speak Arabic.)

Back to the subject of manuscripts. Copies were made not only because of the growing number of Christians and local churches, but also because papyrus, the paper of that day, was not very durable. The manuscripts were used constantly, and with time they wore out. It was necessary to make new copies

both for the new congregations and to replace those that were no longer in good condition.

As you can certainly see, we do not have the original manuscripts, written by the hands of the apostles; but that should not alarm you. You see, we don't have the original manuscript of the Qur'an either, the one produced by Zaid ibn Thabit on the orders of the Caliph Abu Bakr. Contrary to popular opinion, we no longer possess the copies made from this first manuscript, copies which were made later at the command of the Caliph Uthman. In this we are in much the same situation whether we speak of the Bible or of the Qur'an: the originals are not available today.

### THOUSANDS OF MANUSCRIPTS

On the other hand, ***we possess thousands of ancient manuscripts of the Bible, and here is where we see the hand of God protecting His word. To be more specific, we have at least four kinds of manuscripts which allow us to confirm that the Bible we possess today is the same word of God that was given to begin with.***

Archeologists have discovered thousands of partial manuscripts which date back to the time from 100 A.D. to 325 A.D. These are manuscripts containing parts of the New Testament. They are in complete agreement with the manuscripts of the entire New Testament produced later on in the form of books (codex) rather than scrolls. Furthermore, when we compare these partial or complete manuscripts to one another, we see that they are derived from the same original sources.

As for the complete manuscripts, there are several of them. One of the oldest is the Codex Sinaiticus. It dates from 325 A.D. and is kept in the British Library in London. Other complete manuscripts are the Codex Vaticanus, which dates from 350 A.D. and the Codex Alexandrinus, which dates back to 400 A.D. All modern translations of the Bible are made on the basis of these manuscripts. It is very, very significant that Muhammad was born in 570 A.D. ***The Injeel could not have been corrupted after the lifetime of Muhammad. The manuscripts of the Injeel which we possess today go back centuries before his ministry.*** In recommending that people read the Scriptures of the people of the Book, Muhammad explicitly gave his approval to the very texts that Christian and Jews read today.

There are people who do not understand the value of having so many thousands of manuscripts. Consider this: suppose that someone, a non-inspired man, had gathered together all the copies of the Injeel, that he

had made his own manuscript, and that he had burned all the other copies. From that point on, all future copies of the Injeel would have come from that single copy made by this person. There would no longer be any means of verification to prove that this man had not omitted certain parts or added things or changed the words that had been used originally. If, in looking at the copies that had been sent to him, he saw any variants, he could have chosen only the versions of the text that suited him and his supporters. After all, if the copies that had been sent to him had not differed here and there from the manuscript that he produced, there would have been no reason to burn them after finishing his work. Destroying all "unofficial" copies would only be useful if one wanted to hide something or silence all other points of view. The multitude of New Testament manuscripts that we have today gives us reason, not to doubt, but to have complete confidence that God has preserved His word.

### THREE WAYS TO CONFIRM THE MANUSCRIPTS

In addition to the number of manuscripts of which we have been speaking, we have three other tools to confirm the authenticity of the Bible.

1) One source of confirmation that the current text of the Bible is identical to that of the early centuries of Christianity is the body of writings produced by those who are sometimes called the Church Fathers. These were leaders and theologians among the Christians during the first two centuries after the death of the apostles. They wrote letters to churches and even to unbelievers they wanted to persuade concerning the truth of the Injeel. These writings, produced by over 200 authors, contain so many direct quotations from the copies of the New Testament that was available to them, that we could use them to verify the totality of the text that we have today. These quotations agree perfectly with the manuscripts of which we have spoken.

2) A second kind of document which confirms the text of the New Testament is something we call a lectionary. These books contained the designated Bible readings for public gatherings of the church throughout the year. More than 3,000 ancient lectionaries have been discovered and are available for study.

3) Finally, we can speak of the different translations of the Gospel made by the early Christians in the various languages of the day, such as Latin, Syriac, Copt, Armenian, Ethiopian, Nubian Arabic, Slavic and Persian. More than 6,000 manuscripts of ancient

translations in many languages have been found. One can retranslate these texts into Greek and then compare them to the Greek manuscripts that we have. The result confirms once again that the Bible we have today is the same as that of the early Christians. It has not been changed.

#### **PROOF TO THE CONTRARY?**

It is easy to gratuitously claim that the Bible has been corrupted; it is something else to actually provide details and proof. For example, how and when were these changes made? Since manuscripts were scattered throughout the world, there would have been no way to change them all, especially in light of the fact that for centuries no centralized power or worldwide hierarchy existed among Christians. If the changes had been made before the time of Muhammad, it must be explained why, instead of warning that the Torah and the Gospel had been corrupted and were no longer trustworthy, he instead strongly recommended listening to them, following them and using them to confirm the message that he was receiving. On the other hand, the Bible cannot have been changed since the time of Muhammad, because the texts from which our modern translations are made go back centuries before the time of Muhammad.

We do not have space to describe all the efforts that enemies of the Faith have made over the centuries to destroy all Christian scriptures, to tear up or burn every copy of the Bible. As we have already demonstrated, these efforts were all in vain. No, it is very clear: "No change can there be in the Words of Allah, this is indeed the supreme success" (Qur'an 10:64).