THE *INJĪL*: AN ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONS

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Abstract

This paper explores the range of questions raised by the Qur'anic term *Injīl*. After comment on the etymology of the term, there follows a review of the Qur'anic concept of *Injīl* as revelation. Next the Qur'anic view of the content of the *Injīl* is discussed. Thirdly, this paper assesses the historical question raised by the apparently positive implication of Q5:47, which exhorts the Christians to judge according to the *Injīl*. What Muslim proposals are there for how best to understand this verse, and how far should the verse be seen as an endorsement of any part of the New Testament gospels?

Key words: *Injīl*, gospel, Ibn Taymiyya, *taḥrīf*.

1. Introduction

The term *Injīl* occurs 12 times in the Qur'ān, predominantly in verses traditionally ascribed to the Medinan period, and most occurring in Suras 3, *'Al-'Imrān*, and 5, *al-Mā'ida*. The term *Injīl* is obviously significant both in Qur'anic studies itself but also in relation to the wider concerns of Muslim-Christian relations. The approach here will be to remain firmly focussed on the Qur'anic text, but with occasional cross-references to issues of mutual Muslim-Christian perceptions. The paper begins by considering the etymology of *Injīl* before moving on to discuss the Qur'anic concept of the *Injīl* and its revelation. The question of the content of the *Injīl* is then explored, after which a historical question is raised. This historical question relates to the fact that the Qur'ān makes some positive statements about the *Injīl*, prompting exploration of exactly what text or content is being endorsed at the time of the rise of Islam. The views of Ibn Taymiyya feature periodically, since he offers a number of statements on the matter. A number of other figures will also feature, Sunni writers from both classical and more recent periods. The intent here is not to provide a detailed historical survey, but simply to illustrate the fact that there is a varied Muslim discussion of some of the issues raised below.

2. Etymology

Exploring the etymology of the term *Injīl* does not necessarily shed great light on its meaning in the Qur'ān. Some early Arab authorities try to find an Arabic origin for the term in the root *n-j-l*. Al-Qurṭubī suggests that *najl* could mean root, or water, or breadth (hence the *Injīl* is a broad source of light and guidance) and he offers other possibilities too.[1] But others

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[1] Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-kātib al-'arabī, 1387/1967), IV: pp. 5-6; English translation in Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'ān and its Interpreters,* Volume II (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 11.

reject this, including the exegetes al-Zamakhsharī and al-Baydāwī.[2] The most likely origin is that *Injīl* can be traced back to the Greek *euangelion* or good news, but has entered Arabic via the Ethiopic *wangēl*. Jeffery points out that the long vowel ending in this Ethiopic term, echoing the long second syllable of *Injīl*, is a closer resemblance than another proposed route into Arabic, the Syriac *'evangelion'*.[3] The assumption that some Qur'anic terms were originally non-Arabic words has sometimes been seen as controversial, but as is well known, various Muslim authorities have written on foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān. For example, al-Suyūṭī in his *Itqān* devotes a chapter to this topic, though he makes no mention of the term *Injīl*.[4]

3. Concept

What is the Qur'anic understanding of what the *Injīl* as revelation? To discuss this issue requires addressing the wider question of how both Muslims and Christians understand the phenomenon of revelation. According to the Qur'ān, the *Injil* is a message sent down to Jesus, in the same way that the *Tawrāt* was sent to Moses and the Qur'ān to Muhammad, that is, without any human involvement. The Qur'ān states that God 'gave' Jesus the gospel (Q5:46, Q57:27), and 'taught' him it too (Q5:110).[5] Furthermore, the *Injīl* was given to Jesus all at once. This is a common view of exegetes contrasted with the Quran being sent down in stages.[6] Al-Suyūṭī in his *Itqān* mentions a tradition that the *Injīl* was sent down on the 13th day of Ramadan.[7] Note also that the word *Injīl* is always singular, though the Arabic plural *anājīl* was developed later. The recent translation by Abdel Haleem on one occasion translates *Injīl* as 'gospels' plural, at 3:65, for reasons not made clear. Whether the *Injīl* was a book in the lifetime of Jesus is not stated by the Qur'ān, as noted by Abdullah Saeed, though the clear assumption in Muslim thinking is that the *Injīl* took on the form of a book, as did the Qur'ān.[8]

But for Christians of the 1st/7th century, as for today, this is not the understanding of what 'gospel' means. Rather than being a message sent down to Jesus, Christians understand the term 'gospel' as follows. First, it can refer to the message about Jesus' life, death and resurrection, proclaimed either by Jesus himself, or by his followers. Badawi and Abdel Haleem capture this in their *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, 'The Christian tradition speaks about it being synonymous with the good news taught about Jesus, whereas the Islamic concept of al-*Injil* places emphasis on the notion of a divinely revealed text'.[9]

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[2] See al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1410/1990), I: 331, on Q3:3.

[3] Arthur Jeffery,*The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), pp. 71-72.

[4] See al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār iḥyā' al-'ulūm, 1407/1987), I: 366-381. On the phenomenon of designating Qur'anic terms as 'foreign' as an explanatory exegetical device see Andrew Rippin, 'The Designation of "Foreign" Languages in the Exegesis of the Qur'ān' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Walfish and Joseph Goering (eds.) *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 437-444.

[5] Qur'anic references are taken from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān: a new translation* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

[6] Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, I: 331.

[7] Al-Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, I:120.

[8] Abdullah Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures' in *Muslim World* 92 (2002), p. 431.

[9] Elsaid Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 57.

Second, the term 'gospel' can denote one of four books, regarded by Christians as divinely inspired and authoritative, known as gospels and contained in the New Testament. This is closely related to the first meaning, since the New Testament gospels are regarded by Christians as an account of the good news about Jesus. So the Gospel according to John is the good news according to John, that is, an account of the message about Jesus.

It is worth noting in passing that these differences in the understanding of *Injīl* and gospel reflect wider differences in the concept of revelation between Muslims and Christians, differences revolving around the extent to which human involvement can co-exist alongside authoritative divine inspiration, or whether the two are mutually exclusive. This affects issues such as the idea that the *Injīl* or other scriptures can have 'authors', and the permissibility or desirability of translation. But these wider issues need not detain us here. One further important issue is that of reliable transmission, again too involved to be discussed at length here. Suffice it to say that the idea that the Qur'ān is the supreme *mutawātir* text means that any text perceived to be in conflict with that text cannot by definition be regarded as correct. In this regard it is interesting to speculate on the role of the Qur'anic *ḥawāriyyūn*, regarded as the disciples of Jesus. The Qur'ān does not comment on whether or not they should be understood as being involved in transmitting the *Injīl*.[10]

So between Muslims and Christians, there are two different traditional concepts of Gospel or *Injīl* in operation. One is of a message sent down to Jesus, all at once. The other is of records which Christians view as divinely inspired but also humanly authored, of a message about Jesus. Since the canonical New Testament gospels do not seem to fit the Muslim expectation of what the *Injīl* should be like, Muslim scholars have proposed the existence of a pure, original *Injīl* which is partly or sometimes barely preserved in the New Testament gospels. This leads us to the question of the proposed content of the Qur'anic *Injīl*.

4. Content

The Qur'ān does not provide much comment on the content of the *Injīl*, though the emphasis on continuity between different scriptures, for example at Q3:3, means that it is always assumed that the Qur'anic *Injīl* would affirm core Qur'anic doctrines of *tawḥīd*, and the warning of judgment, and also affirms the *Tawrāt* (Q5:46). As for other details, the *Injīl* is said to mention Muhammad (Q7:157). It is also said to promise heavenly reward for those who fight in God's cause (Q9:111). The *Injīl* also includes a parable of believers portrayed as a plant growing strongly (Q48:29).

It is plausible that the Qur'anic *Injīl* may be thought to include aspects of Jesus life as portrayed in the Qur'ān, such as his creation of enlivening of clay birds (Q3:49). However, this is open to question as it is sometimes argued that the *Injīl* contained commands and precepts

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[10] On the *ḥawāriyyūn*, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, 'The Quran and the Apostles of Jesus' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 2013, pp. 1-19.

taught by Jesus, rather than a history of his life. For example, Rashīd Riḍā, writing in the early twentieth century, states that the *Injīl* consists of 'warnings, wisdom, and precepts that God Almighty revealed to Christ'.[11] As a result, Riḍā is more willing to accept Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (The Gospel of Matthew, chs. 5-7), since it fulfils these criteria which he has listed.[12] It is presumably these to which the Christians at the time of Muhammad should have responded, though Riḍā does not make this explicit.

The parable in Q48:29, likening believers to a strong plant, has some parallels to the parable of the sower (see, for example, The Gospel of Matthew 13:1-23). However, where Christians deny certain components of the Muslim view of the *Injīl* this has prompted charges of alteration of the text (*taḥrīf lafẓī*), or of alteration of the interpretation (*taḥrīf maʿnawī*). An example of the second, that is corrupt interpretation, would be failing to discern references to Muhammad in the Bible, or misunderstanding metaphorical statements about Jesus and the Father as literal. It is worth noting in passing that although quite a number of writers give considerable scope to corrupt interpretation, such as Ibn Khaldūn and Ibn Taymiyya, in practice this does not lead them to accept teachings sharply diverging from the Qur'ān or Muslim interpretation of the Qur'ān, notably on whether the crucifixion of Jesus occurred.[13] So the content of the *Injīl* as understood in Qur'anic terms is significantly different from how Christians understand it.

However, there are verses where the Qur'ān seems to affirm the *Injīl*, so an obvious historical question presents itself. If the Qur'anic *Injīl* diverges from the New Testament gospels, to what text of the *Injīl* is the Qur'ān referring? This question is not only textual, but of course historical.

5. Historical question

Turning to the historical question of the referent for the Qur'anic term *Injīl*, this section surveys some previous Muslim responses. The key verse here is Q5:47.

وَلْيَحْكُمْ أَهْلُ ٱلْإِنجِيلِ بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ فِيهِ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ يَحْكُم بِمَآ أَنزَلَ
ٱللَّهُ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

'So let the followers of the Gospel judge according to what God has sent down in it. Those who do not judge according to what God has revealed are lawbreakers'.

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[11] Rashid Riḍā, *Shubuhāt al-naṣārā wa ḥujaj al-Islām,* Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1947 2nd edition, p. 4; English translation in Simon Wood, *Christian Criticisms, Islamic Proofs,* (Oxford; OneWorld, 2008), p. 76.

[12] Riḍā, *Shubuhāt,* p. 4; tr. Wood, *Criticisms,* p. 77.

[13] On Ibn Khaldūn see Martin Whittingham 'The Value of *Taḥrīf Maʿnawī* (Corrupt Interpretation) as a Category for Analysing Muslim Views of the Bible: Evidence from *al-Radd al-jamīl* and Ibn Khaldūn', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22:2 (2011), pp. 209-222. On Ibn Taymiyya and the crucifixion, see Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1988), I: 210.

There is a question over the reading of the verse. As Ibn Taymiyya and other exegetes explain, 'Let the followers of the Gospel judge' (*wa'l-yaḥkum*) is a command, using the jussive mood. An alternative reading uses the subjunctive, '*waliyaḥkuma'* or 'so that the followers of the Gospel judge'. This expresses the reason why Jesus was given the *Injīl*, namely so that the People of the Gospel could judge by it. But this does not affect the heart of the verse's meaning, as al-Ṭabarī states.[14] The verse has been interpreted in various ways, linked to the question of whether Q5:47 is exhorting Christians in some sense to follow the *Injīl* available at the time of the rise of Islam, which would indicate that the *Injīl* in circulation in the 1st/ 7th century was a valid criterion for judgment. This raises the question of what form of the *Injīl* was invoked.

The occasions of revelation literature does not help here. Al-Wāhidī's *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* on this verse and the ones preceding it narrates a story about Muhammad finding out whether the Tawrāt does or does not include the penalty for stoning for adultery.[15] Moving on to *tafsīr* and other literature, there are various proposals about how the *Injīl* should be understood in the light of Q5:47. First, is it referring to a command given to the people of the *Injīl* before the time of Muhammad, whereas after the time of Muhammad they should consult the Qur'ān? Ibn Kathīr in his *tafsīr* is one who mentions this possibility.[16] But by contrast, Ibn Taymiyya, in *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-masīḥ,* or '*The Correct Answer to those who changed the religion of the Messiah'*, judges this view to be impossible as God would not issue a command to those who had died before that command was issued.[17]

Ibn Ḥazm emphatically denies the truth of the *sabab al-nuzūl* recorded by al-Wāhidī.[18] He then states that the verse refers to God sending down the necessity to believe in Muhammad, and that this is therefore what the Christians should believe. As for the fate of the text of the original *Injīl*, 'The gospel sent down from God disappeared, except for small sections which God preserved as a proof against them, and a shame for them'.[19]

But despite this dismissal by Ibn Ḥazm, Q5:47 would appear to be appealing to the gospel as existing in the 1st/7th century as a standard of judgment. If so, were there two versions circulating at the time of Muhammad, one pure and one corrupted? Ibn Taymiyya identifies this as a plausible position. He states that a proper Muslim view of the *Tawrāt* and *Injīl* is:

> That in the world there are true (*ṣaḥīḥ*) copies [versions], and these remained until the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and many copies [versions] which are corrupted… The Qur'ān commands them to judge with what Allah revealed in the Tawrat and *Injil*. [Allah] informs that in both there is wisdom [*ḥikmah*]. There is nothing in the Qur'ān to indicate that they altered all copies [versions].[20]

[14] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fi'l-taʾwīl al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1999), IV: 605.

[15] Al-Wahidī *Asbāb al-nuzul* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Hindiyya, 1315/1898), p. 145; English translation Mokrane Guezzou *Asbāb al-nuzūl* (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2008), p. 68.

[16] Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Beirut: al-Risāla, 2000), p. 417.

[17] Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-masīḥ* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-nīl, 1323/ 1905), I: 382; English translation in Thomas Michel, *A Muslim Theologians' Response to Christianity* (Ann Arbor: Caravan Books, 1985), p. 227.

[18] Ibn Ḥazm *Kitāb al-Faṣl fi'l-milal wa'l-ahwā' wa'l-niḥal* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 2007), I: 239.

[19] Ibn Ḥazm, *Faṣl*, I: 254.

[20] Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, I: 209; English translation from Abdullah Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures' *Muslim World* 92 (2002), p. 430.

Ibn Taymiyya's solution is thus to assume that the Qur'ān gives grounds for believing that there must have been some reliable versions of the *Injīl* in circulation at the time of Muhammad. He does not state whether these had disappeared by the time he was writing, though this seems to be the implication. To accept his argument, however, it would be necessary to find evidence of uncorrupted and different gospels which had previously been accepted as authentic by Christians. (This excludes apocryphal or non-canonical gospels, which are in general very different from the New Testament gospels, and were never regarded as authoritative by large numbers of Christians). Abdullah Saeed notes that by the time of Muhammad's preaching, the Christian scriptures were documented, and were the same as those used today. He argues that, 'Since the Qur'ān refers to those same scriptures, its references to them should equally apply in the modern era. This is perhaps the main challenge to Ibn Taymiyya's position'.[21]

However, a recent writer, Muhammad Abu Laylah, identifies four other challenges to Ibn Taymiyya's position. These problems arise not from apparent tensions with historical or manuscript evidence, but from factors arising from Islamic principles.[22] First, if a sound version of the *Injīl* endured until the time of Muhammad, and presumably beyond, why did no early Muslim mention it in books? Secondly, why was it not preserved by Muslims? Thirdly, Muhammad would surely have safeguarded a proposed original *Injīl*. Fourthly, Muhammad would not have allowed the four New Testament gospels to eclipse the pure *Injīl*.

It is interesting that despite his statements in his *Tafsīr*, Ibn Taymiyya puts forward a different, more traditional view in *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*.[23] Here he interprets the reference in Q5:47 to 'what God sent down' in the *Injīl* as a command about following Muhammad: 'God handed down in the Gospel the command to follow Muhammad, just as He commanded it in the Torah'.[24]

Can Ibn Taymiyya's two different statements be reconciled? Perhaps it can be stated that they are not in direct conflict, since a command to follow Muhammad – or at least a prediction of him - can be found, according to some Muslim exegesis, in the extant New Testament gospels. This would preserve the view Ibn Taymiyya expresses in his Tafsīr that some sound version of the *Injīl* was in existence in the 1st/7th century. However, this would still leave Ibn Taymiyya with the problem that those gospels contain plenty of information about Jesus, such as his crucifixion, which no Muslim usually accepts.

Abu Laylah refers to two further proposals as to what the true *Injīl* represents. One comes from Maududi, who suggests that where the New Testament gospels contain statements spoken by Jesus, or truths taught by him, that is the *Injīl*.[25] However, Abu Laylah points out that this means of identifying the *Injīl* would include many statements unacceptable to Muslim thought.

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[21] Saeed,'Distortion', p. 434.

[22] Muhammad Abu Laylah, *The Qur'ān and the Gospels: a comparative study* (Cairo: Al-Falah Foundation, 1426/2005), p. 167.

[23] Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*.

[24] Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ*, I: 382; English translation in Michel, *Response*, p. 227.

[25] Abu Laylah, *Qur'ān,* p. 168.

A second suggestion is that the *Injīl* can be found in those passages where all four New Testament gospels agree. Here the problem for Abu Laylah is that this would include accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus, again unacceptable to almost all Muslims.

These discussions of which text is invoked in verses such as Q5:47 highlight the diversity of Muslim views in attempting to reconcile two different ideas. These are, on the one hand the apparently positive tone of Q5:47 and other verses towards some form of the *Injīl* and on the other hand the disagreement between the New Testament gospels extant in the 1st/7th century and the teachings of Islam which the *Injīl* is supposed to affirm. This leads us to some concluding reflections.

Conclusions

It appears that there is a persistent ambiguity over what the *Injīl* could be. This is witnessed in the differing Muslim discussions over how to identify it. Secondly, there is an expectation that the Qur'ān regards Christians as responsible for responding rightly to God's revelation, which indicates that they possessed enough of that revelation, particularly about Muhammad, to form a right judgment. However, on the basis of what the Muslim writers say, it is difficult to know how contemporary Christians could themselves have identified what the true *Injīl* stated. Was it a command to follow Muhammad, precepts taught by Jesus, or, more broadly, the New Testament if rightly interpreted?

Finally, a wider question presents itself. What are the implications of these questions about the Qur'anic Injīl for Muslim academic study of the New Testament gospels? Abdullah Saeed suggests that, 'If the texts have remained more or less as they were in the seventh century CE, the reverence the Qur'ān has shown them at the time should be retained even today'.[26] Yet it is far from clear how many would share that judgment. When Saeed mentions 'reverence' he favours the Qur'ān's theoretical endorsements of the *Injīl* in general. Yet of course the Qur'ān also rejects many important details of the New Testament gospels. This difference between acceptance in principle and rejection at the level of actual detail seems to underlie the variation which characterises Muslim writers' responses to the idea of the *Injīl*.

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[26] Saeed, 'Distortion', p. 434.