

## **Which comes first?**

Is it a religion, or a Book that comes first from God? Strange question, perhaps, but important, I think.

Possible answer one: In Israel, it was the religion. That is, the encounter. For many hundreds of years, there was no full book in Israel. But the teachings, the expectations for Israel, were real. Some great leaders came and went, with no official book. Over and over it is the encounter from Heaven that generates a people that eventually generates the great book of Judaism, what Christians know as the Old Covenant, that is, the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, the writings of the Prophets.

Moses in 1400 B.C. writes the stories of our origins 2,500 years after the fact! The truth passed on to Him and dictated to Him was real but it was encounter-driven, not book driven. God comes on the scene, He acts among His people, His people make the record.

When the book came it was revered but also disputed. Interpreted. By the time of Jesus, though the original words of Moses were intact, they had often been set aside for the traditions of men. A new encounter was needed. A new vision. A new agreement between God and man. A Person.

Which of course leads to possible answer two: The Book of the Christians also begins with God talking to men. One Man in particular. The new Adam. The new Moses. The final lawgiver. The new Elijah. The final Prophet. The son of David. The Son of God. The Person. The Encounter. The Miracle.

Only slowly, very slowly, was a book formed. The earliest Christians hung to the Old while the New was being superimposed on top of it. Here comes James. Paul to the Galatians. The Gospel stories. 100 years from the birth of the Founder to the last writings of the Book. Many years more before all those writings came together as one Book.

Books record movements of God, dispensations of God, encounters. Books record the very words of God. But in the case of Israel and Christianity, the books came second. The entire book of these people that we call the Bible took a full 1,600 years to complete. Over 40 men put it together. We estimate the number because some of the books are anonymous, including a host of Psalms.

We don't know all of our Biblical authors. We aren't sure about a lot of the dates. But collectively, as a body of people full of the ultimate author of the Book, the Holy Spirit, we believe that Book. We just believe it. God has worked in our hearts. The encounter has taken place. We have met the Man, and His Book is ours.

That's how it works in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

That's not how it works in Islam. Not at all. When I first discovered this troubling fact I was a bit taken aback. It would seem to me that a ready-made religion, one like Mormonism that is dropped out of the sky to my waiting arms would be a better, safer way to go.

Yet take a look. Mormonism and Islam basically claim this instant revelation. But neither can convince the other or a whole host of earthlings that their pre-fabricated book is from God.

Revelation is tricky. If it comes all at once in book form, one has the problem of bibliolatry, worship of the book. And transmission, the passing on of the revelation, will be nearly impossible, since the perfect original will be held in such high esteem. Translations, moving the revelation to other people groups, will also cause trouble, as in Islam. Most Muslim scholars hold their breath when they see their holy book put in another language than the holy Arabic. How can their thoughts be expressed perfectly in an unholy medium?

And if this ready-made Book comes to and through one man, what sort of man must he be? How can one man handle such responsibility, to give all God's truth to all men of all times? Eventually stories are made of such a man that match the miracle, instead of matching the realities of his life and character.

No, God in His wisdom has decreed that the once-and-for-all book (we still call it simply "the Book", that is, "the Bible"), if it is to be formed, must be communicated to a variety of men, speakers then writers, all in agreement because of the One Spirit. It must lend itself to translation into any language. Though no one man must have a perfect memory, individuals will be guided by their memory into various portions of the task. No man is praised for it all, no man is given the credit for this book. When the book is disobeyed or ignored, it is God who is so treated, not some man.

So we have no apologies to Isaiah, or Paul, or John for our stubborn ways. But the Muslim feels forever bound to honor and defend and nearly praise this man Muhammad.

A Book is necessary of course, but without a Divine Person, it is all futile. "You search the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them," says Jesus. But you don't have eternal life in Them. It's in Me. It all goes back to encounter, after all. In Christ, the encounter precedes the writing about the encounter.

But in Islam, the book, or the revelation that would within a few years be the book, is right there at the beginning. Muhammad received his first revelations in 610, per the Muslim explanation. All gathered and approved by 654. Forty-four years and done! Ready-made, the book for all ages is here, defying all other books, on the authority of one man, an Arabian prophet.

In my judgment, this is not how revelation comes into our fallen world. If there is a Man to be honored above all men, it is Jesus the God-man, who to our knowledge wrote no book, even the supposed "Injil" of Islam. If there is a Prophet Who is to receive all revelation for all time and pass it on to His people, it is the Prophet Jesus. If there is a Perfect One Who is able to bear the responsibility of originalizing, transmitting, and translating a Message from God, it is the one who is God Himself, the One called Jesus.

Individual books of our Bible have come by encounters of God and one man. But God was gracious enough to let us hear many such voices from many such men, a group of sounds so strong as to be impossible to be ignored, as the revelation of one was in perfect harmony with all the others.

In my study, I will for the most part not quote the skeptics of Islam, but traditional Islamic belief itself. We Christians have our skeptics. The guns of academia have been turned on the Scriptures too. Never with any lasting effect, mind you, but guns nevertheless. No use getting involved in a fight that has no purpose but to show a man's talents at debating. Since mine are lacking a bit anyway, I doubly do not want to go there.

No, let's hear from *Muslims* about Islam. It is that fired-up bunch of souls that is in fact making the news these days. Many of them, like many of us, believe their book absolutely literally. So let us see what the "Prophet" has said, compare notes with what God has taught us, and thus be ready to discuss firmly and truthfully with those who are even now coming to us, prime and unwitting targets of the grace of God!

Also by way of introduction to my coming study of the Koran, I wish to state that I will be focusing on the *book*, and not the people, that is, the history of Islam. It is a fascinating history, even after we come into the period where all the facts can be verified. There is much blood, much power gained and lost along the way, a study if ever there was one, about the arm of mere human flesh. Yet, what is called Christian history has unfortunately much of the same. I leave that study to true historians. We may touch on historical matters from time to time, but always with a view to dealing with what was written, as compared to Christian thought.

And that Christian thought, may I summarize by saying, is most seriously acquired by an encounter with the Christ Who lives forever. Which brings us back to the beginning. Which comes first, an encounter with God, or a Manual of Truth? When a person comes to know our God, he knows the answer.