

When God's Kingdom Grows Like Yeast:

Frequently-Asked Questions About Jesus Movements Within Muslim Communities



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In Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:20 Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to yeast, a substance that transforms from the inside out. In the days surrounding His death and resurrection, Jesus instructed His followers to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom to all peoples of the world. Today numbers of Muslims have accepted this good news, allowing the yeast of the Kingdom to transform their lives and their families, while remaining a part of their own Muslim communities. Since there is a variety of perspectives on this phenomenon, even among the Islamic Studies faculty where we teach, we here seek to address some frequently-asked questions about it.

1. What are some examples of this type of movement to Jesus within Muslim communities?¹

In one such movement, a middle-aged Muslim woman read the New Testament with a Christian friend for a number of years. During that time, her son was dramatically healed of a serious disease after receiving prayer by her friend's husband. A year later she came to faith in Jesus as a Muslim. Soon thereafter she felt God calling her to take the message of Jesus to her Muslim family and friends. She was known as a devout woman with true

concern for her community. Due to the empowering of the Holy Spirit and her gifts as a communicator and community organizer, she led dozens to faith and began many small Jesus fellowships, primarily through her own extended family, neighborhood and work associates. The message of Jesus and the Kingdom continues to multiply like yeast, Muslim follower of Jesus to Muslim, through a number of social networks.



Another such movement began with a high-ranking Muslim leader who had a dream that involved Jesus. He sent some of his followers to a group of local Christians to see if someone could help him understand the dream. Over time this Muslim leader felt God was calling him to follow Jesus. He did not believe, however, that God was calling him to change his religious community. He shared the dream and his subsequent experiences with a number of people under his spiritual care. Many of them became followers of Jesus as well. The yeast of the Kingdom continues to permeate this large Muslim network.

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In another Jesus movement, a young Muslim man boarded with a Christian family, and came to faith as he joined them in their daily reading of the Bible. He came from an influential family and, once saved, committed himself to sharing the gospel with family members in a way they would understand, Muslim follower of Jesus to Muslim. The entire family accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, and through them the gospel spread to in-laws and distant family members. These Jesus-following Muslims gather regularly in their homes to study the New Testament. Due to natural networks created through marriage and careers, this Jesus movement has spread to a number of nearby ethnic groups.

In yet another case, the scholars running a Qur'anic academy began studying the Bible, and God confirmed His Word to them through dreams, visions, and answers to prayer. They believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior and began offering Bible instruction in their academy, in addition to instruction in the Qur'an. They also encouraged the formation of home groups for study and prayer. This launched a movement that has grown quite rapidly.

A very different example is the movement that began when a Muslim Sufi master was praying earnestly to be shown the way of salvation. He was told in a vision to travel to a particular town, to a specific house, where he would meet a man of such-and-such ancestry, who would show him the way of salvation. In the end, the man's Sufi movement became a Jesus movement.²

Another movement was started by a convert from Islam who, after years of rejection by both the traditional church of a different ethnicity and by his community of birth, apologized to his father and began witnessing within his community of birth. A large movement has resulted.³

2. If Muslims confess Jesus as Savior and Lord, why would they not simply want to join the Christian religion?

In some cases, they do. Numbers of Muslims accepting Christ leave Islam and take on a Christian religious identity. For many, however, religious identity is strongly linked with all other aspects of life, so that a change of identity would make it nearly impossible to remain a part of their own family and community. Martin Goldsmith expresses this well:

Islam is within the whole warp and woof of society – in the family, in politics, in social relationships. To leave the Muslim faith is to break with one's whole society. Many a modern educated Muslim is

not all that religiously minded; but he must, nevertheless, remain a Muslim for social reasons. . . . This makes it almost unthinkable for most Muslims even to consider the possibility of becoming a follower of some other religion.⁴

It is because of this strong fusion of family, community and socio-religious identity that some Muslims who have received the gospel, in an effort to keep their family and social networks intact, choose to remain Muslim, so long as they can be true to Jesus, the Bible and the leading of the Spirit. The dynamics of witness then become Muslim follower of Jesus to fellow Muslim. Where Muslims find a way to do this, Jesus movements within their communities become viable.

3. Why is the phenomenon of Jesus movements within Muslim communities only being observed in recent years?

Essentially, the first 2,000 years of church history has been the story of reaching *peoples from animistic or pagan backgrounds*,⁵ devotees of what are called minor religious traditions.⁶ As for those in the major religious traditions such as Islam and Judaism, few have ever embraced the good news of Jesus.

Today, however, numbers of adherents of the world's major religions are turning to Jesus, some of them sensing no call of God to leave the religious community of their birth.⁷ For example, some Jews have accepted Jesus as Messiah, while retaining their Jewish socio-religious identity.⁸ A similar trend is happening among some Muslims who have become sincere followers of Jesus and the Bible, and have remained within their own religious community, without joining a branch of the traditional Christian community.

4. It is an interesting idea that the Kingdom could move like yeast within a person's original religious community. However, are there not risks associated with Jesus movements remaining inside such communities?

Yes, it would be naive to suggest there are no risks associated with Jesus movements remaining within original religious communities. At least five areas of particular concern exist for Jesus movements within Muslim communities.

The first is that folk or popular Islamic practices (the use of charms, amulets, divination, numerology or occult rituals to obtain spiritual power) are deeply

ingrained in many Muslim societies, though largely forbidden by formal Islam. These must be renounced by followers of Jesus in order to experience spiritual freedom. If still practiced, Jesus movements would become syncretistic. (Syncretism, as often understood in Christian circles, refers to the incorporation of values, beliefs and practices contrary to the Scriptures, resulting in a sub-Biblical faith and a compromised message.) All movements, including those that take place in Christian denominations, have the potential to become sub-biblical or syncretistic if they do not adhere closely to God's Word and the leading of his Spirit.



The second concern is that although many Muslim beliefs are compatible with biblical revelation, some commonly-held Muslim teachings and interpretations of the Qur'an contradict the gospel. If these are retained, the gospel message would be compromised. (See question 5 below.)

The third is that the presence of strong family and community solidarity may interfere with ultimate allegiance to God through Christ. This solidarity is a strength for Jesus movements, when extended families embrace the good news together. On the other hand, community pressure can overwhelm new followers of Jesus, making discipleship difficult and witness tenuous. It follows that they must walk in both wisdom and boldness, with great sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

The fourth is that in some Islamic communities, violence may await any who deviate from locally established norms and teachings. In these situations, the lives of Jesus-followers are sometimes at risk.

The fifth concern is that the phenomenon of Jesus movements can, and often does, raise confusion among and opposition from traditional Christians in the same region and thus could lead to divisions within the Body of Christ.

5. How do movements remain faithful to Jesus and the Bible when Islam contains teachings that are not compatible with biblical revelation?

Among groups of Muslims who follow Jesus, a three-fold pattern is observed: they reject certain traditional beliefs and practices that are contrary to the Bible; they reinterpret others in accordance with

the Bible; and they minimize others. To understand this, it may be helpful to look at a similar phenomenon within Judaism, another monotheistic Abrahamic faith. Judaism traditionally holds, for example, that Jesus is not the Messiah, that forgiveness of sins is not granted through his death on the cross, and that the New Testament is not

the Word of God. Jews who follow Jesus, however, affirm that Yeshua⁹ is the Messiah and Savior of the world, and that the New Testament is the Word of God. They interpret the traditional 18 Jewish prayers in ways compatible with their belief that Jesus is the Messiah, and celebrate Hanukkah and other traditional Jewish holidays in light of New Testament understanding.

A similar process is happening among Jesus-following Muslims. Most Muslims interpret the Qur'an to say that Jesus did not die on the cross and that the biblical text has been corrupted. However, the meaning of certain qur'anic verses is unclear, and historically Muslim commentators have given interpretations of the Qur'an that affirm the accuracy of the Bible and allow for the death of Christ.¹⁰ Born-again Muslims fully believe in the bodily death and resurrection of Jesus ('Isa)¹¹ and affirm the authority of the Bible¹² as the Word of God. They reject the pursuit of spiritual power through mystical or magic-oriented practices that are common in many Muslim contexts. Similar to Yeshua-following Jews who celebrate Hanukkah, many Jesus-following Muslims keep the Ramadan fast and daily prayers, yet interpret their meaning in a way compatible with their faith in Jesus. They do not view the fast and daily prayers as a means of salvation and forgiveness of sin, but as a means to draw near to God. Just as with all followers of Christ, as whole-hearted allegiance to Jesus is realized in obedient lives, the relative importance of some components of their background is minimized.

6. By not calling oneself a Christian, could not this be viewed as a form of denying Christ, the very thing Jesus warned of in Mark 8:38 and in Matthew 10:32-33?

The answer depends on what is meant by the word "Christian." In most parts of the Muslim world, it does not mean what it does to Western evangelicals. For evangelicals, it has a spiritual meaning: one has experienced new birth in Christ and follows Him

as Lord. In most of the Muslim world, however, “Christian” has an almost exclusively cultural, ethnic or political meaning: Christians are either Westerners (often seen as immoral) or members of local non-Muslim ethnic minorities. They have their own calendar, rituals, holidays, clergy, terminology, diet and dress. Historic animosity over a thousand years (e.g., Christianity in light of the Crusades) taints the word “Christian.”

If asked whether they are Christians, Jesus-following Muslims rightly say no: they are Muslims, not Christians. If asked, however, whether they follow Jesus as Lord and Savior, they say yes, and give an appropriate explanation. Though they retain an official, social and/or cultural identity as Muslims and do not identify with “Christianity” as a socio-religious institution, they do identify with Jesus, and this is the very point of the Mark 8 and Matthew 10 passages. They are not ashamed of Christ.

7. What does it mean to retain an official, social and/or cultural Muslim identity?

Retaining official Muslim identity means that Jesus followers have not legally or publically taken steps to remove themselves from Islam. In some Muslim countries, one’s religious identity is determined by law, and often laws specify that people born of Muslim parents are legally Muslims and cannot change their religious identity. In other Muslim countries, religious identity is determined only at the community level.

Retaining a social and/or cultural Muslim identity means that followers of Jesus see themselves, and are seen by others in society, as Muslim.¹³ However, like genuine disciples of Christ in all societies, they clearly hold some new values and beliefs not shared by all their neighbors.

There is already great variance throughout the Muslim world in beliefs and practices. Many Muslims lean toward belief systems technically incompatible with Islam, such as secularism, communism, occultism or even agnosticism. Yet they identify with the Muslim community and are considered full members of it. A well-known Muslim follower of Christ notes that Muslims do not have to perform all practices or believe all doctrines of Islam to be Muslims. But the day they choose to renounce their

identity as Muslims is the day they are no longer seen as part of the Muslim community.

8. Are Jesus movements within Muslim communities the only type of movement among Muslims today?

No. Jesus movements within Muslim communities are not the only thing God is doing, they may not happen everywhere, and they may not be what many Muslims choose for association when they receive the gospel. A variety of large and small movements to Christ are taking place. The C1-C6 spectrum was developed to help describe various expressions of faith in Jesus among Muslims.

9. What is the C1-C6 spectrum?

The spectrum, also referred to as the C-scale, describes six basic types of Christ-centered communities or fellowships that exist in the Muslim world, in terms of language, culture, religious forms and religious identity.¹⁴ A particular fellowship may or may not be part of a movement. Movements are characterized by a multiplication of fellowships, where the gospel has a life of its own as it moves through existing communities and networks. Jesus movements of all types reflected on the C-scale are found in the Muslim world. Points on the scale are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, and dynamic rather than static. A given Jesus fellowship or movement may take on different expressions over time.

10. How do these movements start?

Individuals become followers of Jesus in a variety of ways, with the most common factors being 1) reading or hearing about Jesus in the Gospel narratives; 2) hearing the experiences of fellow Muslims who are disciples of Jesus; 3) seeing the message of Jesus confirmed through answered prayer; and 4) dreams and visions given directly by God, often following the personal witness of friends. For example, a Muslim

hears the story of a friend at work who has just become a Jesus follower; he then has a dream about Jesus; he finds a Bible and reads it, and then takes the message directly to his family and friends. Of course, outsiders often have been instrumental in leading the first few Muslims to faith, and also have been involved in such endeavors



as Bible translation, translating the JESUS Film, or protracted intercessory prayer for a particular people group. What allows Jesus movements to launch, however, is that Muslims themselves become convinced that this good news of Jesus is for their family and friends and that they communicate the gospel, person to person, with God confirming the message in multiple ways.

11. Scripture teaches that in Christ we are “one body” (Ephesians 4:4-6). Even though Jesus-following Muslims do not join traditional Christian churches or denominations, do they see themselves as part of the Body of Christ?

Based on comments from Muslim followers of Jesus as well as colleagues who know these believers well, we can affirm that the great majority of Jesus-following Muslims view all people who are truly submitted to God through Christ, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, as fellow members of the Kingdom of God. The presence of the Spirit of God in both born-again Christians and born-again Muslims points to realities — the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God — that go beyond socio-religious labels and categories. This reality was apparent in the Acts 10 account of Peter’s visit to Cornelius’ Gentile home, and it later prompted his magnificent declaration in Acts 15:11, “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we [Jews] are saved just as they [Gentiles] are.” Jesus-following Muslims are saved today by the same grace that saves those who identify themselves as Christians.

12. Fellowship and commitment in a local expression of the Body of Christ is central to life in Christ. Do Muslim followers of Jesus gather together, or are they simply individuals who have believed in Jesus?

Normally they meet in their homes for prayer, fellowship and the study of God’s Word, and are highly committed to one another. They become an expression of the Body of Christ in that locale. Having said this, however, they must be discreet and wise in how and where they meet. In some cases they meet like the underground church of China; in other locations they are more open. In some contexts the interpersonal or social skills of Jesus-following Muslims significantly impact neighborhood reaction and freedom to meet.

13. Some have said that Jesus movements within Islam exist so that Muslims can avoid persecution and suffering for their faith in Christ. Is this true?

By far the most common reason Jesus-following Muslims give for staying inside their original religious community is their burden and desire to see their loved ones experience the good news in Jesus. Their hope is that Jesus movements among Muslims would be like the earliest Jesus movement described in Acts 2:46-47.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

While we rejoice whenever the Lord is daily adding to the number of Jesus followers, and whenever Jesus movements are experiencing the favor of the Muslim community, we realize that movements are not static. As the biblical record of the first Jesus movement shows, seasons can change. Not hoping that any movement would move out of a season of favor, we pray earnestly for these believers to be prepared for any suffering that may come.¹⁵

While a certain stigma of “changing religious communities” is avoided in these movements, in many Muslim contexts pressure is still exerted (from either family or religious leaders) on members of the community who have different spiritual ideas. In some cases this pressure increases to full-blown persecution. A recent tragic case occurred in August 2009, when a leader in one Jesus movement died as a martyr, poisoned by his own family. Villagers said this leader was killed because he would not stop talking about Jesus, and this was an embarrassment to the family. Other Jesus movements have similar stories.

14. It has been said that some Christians have assumed a Muslim identity in order to relate to and have an audience with Muslims. Does the existence of Jesus movements within Muslim communities suggest that Christians should take on a Muslim identity in order to reach Muslims with the Gospel?

No, not at all. These are two separate issues. The movements we are discussing here involve Muslims who were born inside those communities.

There have been rare instances where Christians

have assumed varying degrees of Muslim identity in an effort to “become all things to all men” to “win as many as possible” (I Cor. 9:19-23). Though the decision of a Christian to *change* socio-religious identity is entirely different from the decision of a Muslim to *retain* socio-religious identity, some critics of the type of Jesus movements discussed here have attempted to link the two.

15. What about the traditional Christian sacraments of baptism and communion? Are these followed in Jesus movements within Muslim communities?

In some movements it seems to be a common practice to remember the sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins during a meal shared together.

Most Jesus-following Muslims practice some form of water baptism as well, not to indicate a change of religious affiliation, but as a sign of identifying with Jesus, who has opened the way for the cleansing of sin and for new life in Him. Some Muslim disciples of Jesus who do not yet practice outward water baptism consider themselves to have been baptized spiritually because of their relationship with Christ, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

16. Would Jesus-following Muslims still repeat the confession, “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s Messenger”?

The following explanations are given by some Jesus-following Muslims who continue to recite the confession: Muhammad called his people to turn from polytheism to the God of Abraham; he commended to them the Holy Books of the Jews and Christians, and he warned of an impending day of God’s judgment, for which all people must be prepared. For these reasons, he is honored. It is of interest to note that in one large movement some Jesus-followers explained that they do not repeat the second part of the Islamic confession, choosing instead to substitute something that is both biblically and Qur’anicly correct such as “Jesus is the Word of God.”¹⁷

The issue of repeating the confession looms large in the minds of some Christians (including Christians who have converted from Islam). However, it does not seem to arise as a matter of such importance in fellowships of Jesus-following Muslims. They do not share the antagonism that many Christians feel toward Muhammad and Islam. It should be noted,

however, that in these Jesus movements, Muhammad is not viewed as a mediator or intercessor.

17. Do Jesus-following Muslims still refer to God as Allah?

Yes. Not only do Jesus-following Muslims use the term Allah, but all *Arab Christians* use Allah as their term for God, as do millions of Christians in various parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the Middle East.¹⁸ Even before the rise of Islam, Arabic-speaking Christians called God Allah, since the name Allah pre-dates Islam.¹⁹ Jews used the term Allah in their Arabic translation of the Old Testament.²⁰ Following in the tradition of Arab and Christian use of the term Allah, the Qur’an uses Allah to refer to God, the creator of heaven and earth, the God who revealed himself to Abraham, the God of the Bible, indeed the God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims. A person’s accurate understanding of God is a separate issue from the term used for God.²¹

18. How do Muslims who follow Jesus communicate with fellow Muslims about Jesus and the Bible?

Jesus Muslims who share their experience of Jesus with other Muslims are convinced that Jesus is for them — He died for them and is on their side. They know that Jesus is not only the Savior of Christians, but that He is the Savior of every person who calls on His name. They believe that salvation truly is through the sacrifice of Jesus alone and is not dependent upon a particular religious affiliation. They are also convinced that salvation is only through Christ, and are therefore determined to find a way to explain this to family and friends. It is this Muslim-to-Muslim communication of the good news and personal testimony, with divine confirmation, that fuels the growth of Jesus movements.

Muslims know that the Qur’an affirms the holy books that came beforehand to the Jews and Christians,²² and this is one of the six basic articles of Islamic faith. So when Jesus-following Muslims talk about their reading of the “neglected” holy books of Islam, some of their friends become interested in joining them. Once seekers begin to ingest the Word of God, especially the accounts of the life of Jesus, and see it confirmed in the lives of their friends, the power of God is released in their lives, often resulting in them coming to Christ in faith.

While miracles of healing and provision draw Muslims to the gospel, the greatest attraction is the

changed lives of Muslim followers of Jesus, who are growing in love and holiness, within the religious communities of their birth. f

Endnotes

- 1 The authors are acquainted with the following examples, along with others, but actual names and locations have been omitted.
- 2 See "Brother Jacob and Master Isaac: How One Insider Movement Began," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24/1 (2007): 41-42.
- 3 For another such case study, see J. Dudley Woodberry, "Contextualization Among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars," in Dean Gilliland, ed., *The Word Among Us* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1989), 303-306.
- 4 *Missiology: An International Review* 4 (1976): 317-323.
- 5 Peoples of animistic backgrounds who have turned to Christ during the last 2,000 years include peoples of Europe (e.g., Goths, Saxons, Celts, Vikings, etc.), peoples of Africa, peoples of Asia, indigenous peoples of North and South America, and others.
- 6 Typically these new believers linked with various branches of Christianity. This has meant moving from a minor to a major tradition – from a locally-known religion to the global religion of Christianity.
- 7 Various terms have been used to describe these types of Jesus movements, such as "insider movements," "Messianic movements" or "Christ-centered movements."
- 8 Some of these Jews are quite integrated into the traditional Jewish community and synagogue life; others maintain a more nominal Jewish identity.
- 9 Many Jews who follow Jesus refer to Him by His Hebrew name, Yeshua.
- 10 For major Muslim Qur'an commentators who allow for a real crucifixion, see Joseph Cumming, "Did Jesus Die on the Cross? Reflections in Muslim Commentaries" in J.D. Woodberry, O. Zumrut, and M. Koylu, eds., *Muslim and Christian Reflections on Peace: Divine and Human Dimensions* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 32-50.
- 11 Many Jesus-following Muslims refer to Jesus by His Qur'anic name, 'Isa, which is commonly understood to be an Arabized form of the name Syriac-speaking Christians used (see A. Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Koran," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 11 (1927): 84).
- 12 Many Jesus-following Muslims refer to the Bible using the terms *Taurat*, *Zabur* and *Injil*. The *Taurat* (which literally is the first five books of the Old Testament but is often interpreted as referring to the entire Old Testament), *Zabur* (Psalms) and *Injil* (Gospel, although it is often used for the Gospels or the entire New Testament) are understood to be the Word of God in the Qur'an. Muslim scholar Abdullah Saeed's article "The Charge of Distortion of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures" shows how both the Qur'an and Islamic tradition support the view that the texts of the *Taurat*, *Zabur* and *Injil* have not been corrupted and are still to be regarded as holy books by Muslims (*Muslim World* 92 [2002]:419-436).
- 13 The particulars of retaining Muslim identity vary according to the given Muslim context.
- 14 Here is a brief summary of the C-scale (see John Travis, 1998, "Must All Muslims Leave Islam to Follow Jesus?" *EMQ* 34(4):411-415), showing various expressions of faith used by believers in Jesus of Muslim background:
 - C1 – Believers in traditional Christian fellowships where worship is not in the mother tongue
 - C2 – Same as C1, but worship is in the believers' mother tongue
 - C3 – Believers in culturally indigenous Christian fellowships that avoid Islamic forms
 - C4 – Believers in culturally indigenous fellowships that retain biblically permissible Islamic forms, but not identifying as Muslims
 - C5 – Muslim followers of Jesus in fellowships within the Muslim community, continuing to identify culturally and/or officially as Muslims, though a special kind
 - C6 – Muslim followers of Jesus in limited, underground fellowship
- 15 The very movement described in Acts 2-4 moved into a season of persecution a number of years later, as recorded in Acts 5 onward, especially noted in Acts 8:1-3.
- 16 This is similar to the position on baptism and communion held by Quakers and the Salvation Army.
- 17 It is worth noting that Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Islam's most celebrated theologian, on two occasions gave a confession that both Christians and Muslims can affirm: "Jesus is the Apostle of God" (Al-Qustas al-Mustaqim, ed. V. Chelhot, 68, in Chelhot, "La Balance Juste," *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales*, 15 (1958); al-Munqidh min al-dalal (The Deliverer from Error), ed. Jamil Saliba and Kamal Ayyad (3rd ed., Damascus, 1358/1939), 101, trans. W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953), 39.
- 18 In Indonesia alone, the entire Christian population of over 30 million uses the term Allah for God.
- 19 See P.K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 6th ed. [London: Macmillan, 1956], 101.
- 20 Sa'adiah Gaon bin Joseph, a 9th- and 10th-century A.D. Jewish scholar, translated the Jewish Scriptures from Hebrew into Arabic, using Allah for God (Kenneth J. Thomas, "Allah in Translations of the Bible," *The Bible Translator: Technical Papers Vol. 52:3*, July 2001, pp. 301-305).
- 21 See J.D. Woodberry, "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" *Christian Century* (May 18, 2004): 36-37.
- 22 Over 40 times the Qur'an refers to the Bible (*Taurat*, *Zabur*, or *Injil* – the books that came beforehand) as holy books.