



# Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

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## An Early Islamic Challenge to Christian History

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# INSIGHTS

The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

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## An Early Islamic Challenge to Christian History

One of the great lessons to be drawn from the Islamic world of the Middle Ages is that in order for people of varying faiths and persuasions to coexist peacefully, it is not necessary that significant differences between them be settled or even downplayed. Islamic society was vibrant with debate and ideological rivalry. But there was a framework of tolerance that allowed for these differences while preserving basic modes for coexistence. For example, the Islamic caliphates (beginning in the seventh century and continuing into the early modern period) treated the Jews and Christians living within their domains as *ahl al-kitab* (“People of the Book”), a Qur’anic designation that recognized that these communities, too, worshipped the God of Abraham and had at least part of his truth revealed to them and recorded in their scriptures—the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, respectively. Therefore, these non-Muslims, though not accorded the same legal or social status as Muslims, were nevertheless allowed to practice their religions freely and openly and to participate in the pursuit of knowledge.

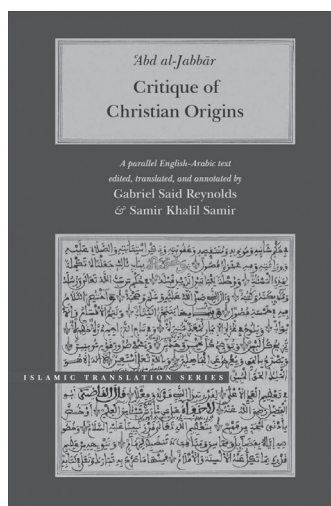
The various religious factions vigorously debated one another, each tradition seeking to establish its own merits and validity while demonstrating the invalidity and sometimes even the moral turpitude of the others. Such disagreements were seldom if ever the basis for armed conflict—that was reserved for the more mundane questions of territorial and political control. Nevertheless, nodes of sectarian rivalry jostling within a general climate of mutual tolerance during the Islamic caliph period is a feature difficult to miss in its literature.

The most recent title published by the Maxwell Institute’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative is the

*Critique of Christian Origins*, by Abd al-Jabbar, an early Muslim rationalist theologian who did his best to make the case that Christianity lacked merit both doctrinally and historically. His use (and misuse) of the Bible and other historical data is a fascinating glimpse into the sectarian world of his day.

In the *Critique*, Abd al-Jabbar develops what might be considered the first Islamic history of Christianity. Unlike Muslim scholars before him, Abd al-Jabbar criticizes Christianity not only theologically (a major focus being the doctrine of the Trinity—a notion that Islam vehemently rejects), but also on historical grounds. His main argument responds to a notion that is familiar to Latter-day Saints, who believe that there have been a number of dispensations of the true gospel on the earth, each dispensation followed, however, by an eventual decline and ultimately a loss of essential truths and priesthood authority.

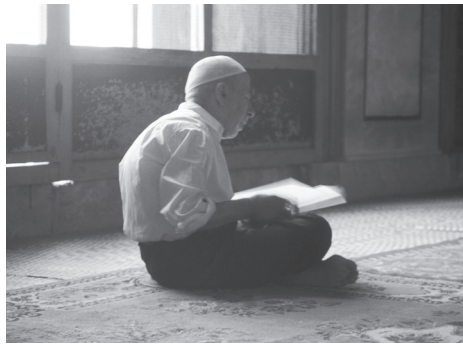
Similarly, Muhammad taught his followers that Islam (submission of one’s individual life and will to the one true God) did not begin with Muhammad, but with Adam, and had been renewed through chosen prophets from time to time throughout the ages of the world. Abraham was another prophet who brought true Islam; Moses, another; and, most significantly for Abd al-Jabbar’s argument, Jesus was another. The Qur’an refers to Jesus’s revelation of true Islam as the Injil—a word clearly derived from the Greek word for “good news,” *evangelion*. Many readers of the Qur’an suppose that this Injil, or gospel, refers to the New Testament (a collection of books and letters written *about* Jesus and his teachings, but not *by* him), but Abd al-Jabbar read the Qur’an to mean that Jesus had brought his own book, called the Injil, and that when he delivered it to the world, it was pure and correct, but that it was subsequently lost or corrupted through neglect or



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deliberate misrepresentation by Jesus's followers. According to Abd al-Jabbar, these followers (Peter



*Reading the Qur'an in a mosque in Syria.*

and Paul, among others) were responsible for the corruption of the pure Islamic message of Jesus, as well as for characterizing him as the Son of God who had died for the sins of the world and been resurrected. These were claims, argues Abd al-Jabbar, that Jesus himself as a true prophet of Islam never would have made and deeds that he did not perform. He was a great prophet, but not divine, not an atoning savior of the world. So says Abd al-Jabbar, and so he endeavors to convince his reader, marshaling evidence—or what he claims to be evidence—from a variety of sources, including the Bible, religious rituals, and Christian miracle accounts. By any fair account, Abd al-Jabbar's historical attack on Christianity is far from compelling, undermined as it is by his own misuse of source material and outright misrepresentation of New Testament teachings. The degree to which his argument and his use of his sources is (un)per-

suasive may perhaps best be measured by the fact that it is being introduced to a modern audience by devout Christians who obviously do not feel threatened by its content. Gabriel Said Reynolds, at the University of Notre Dame, has expertly rendered this work into English with many helpful scholarly aids, while the Arabic text itself has been carefully edited and prepared for publication by Father Samir Khalil Samir at the University of Saint Joseph, in Lebanon.

If Abd al-Jabbar's attempt to use Christianity's own sources against itself seems to fall short, however, his work is nevertheless fascinating for the wealth of information it contains about the ideological contours of tenth-century Baghdad, including perspectives on Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and several sects within Islam itself, in addition to Christianity. It is evidence of a time when people who had fundamental disagreements over basic spiritual truths nevertheless lived together in an atmosphere of not just tolerance but cooperation and mutual help as they forged what remains one of the greatest civilizations on record. ♦

By D. Morgan Davis  
*Director, Middle Eastern Texts Initiative*

## Nibley Lecture Series Presentations Available Online

The lecture series "The Work of Hugh W. Nibley: On the 100th Anniversary of His Birth" concluded in April. The videos of each lecture are currently being prepared for availability on our Web site. Presently, video of four of the lectures can be accessed through the Upcoming Events section of the Maxwell Institute home page ([maxwellinstitute.byu.edu](http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu)).

Videos of Richard Bushman's lecture, "Nibley and Joseph Smith," Robert Millet's lecture, "Nibley and the Church," Daniel C. Peterson's lecture, "Nibley as Apologist," and Zina N. Petersen's lecture, "Nibley's Early Education," are now available.

An introduction to the series and an overview of Nibley's work by Paul Y. Hoskisson are available at the beginning of Bushman's video.

In addition, transcripts of the lecture by Marilyn Arnold, "'Words, Words, Words': Hugh Nibley on the Book of Mormon," and the lecture by C. Wilfred Griggs, "Hugh Nibley, Mentor to the Saints," are also available on the Web page.

The lectures were sponsored by the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, the College of Religious Education, and the Harold B. Lee Library. Presenters explored the scholarship and scope of Hugh Nibley's work. ♦