

## Who were the Ahl al-Kitāb? (The people of the Book)

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The Quran repeatedly refers to a group of people or peoples that it calls Ahl al-Kitāb, the people of the book. The identity of these people is usually assumed to be Jews and Christians; however, while this opinion is widespread, it is not supported by the Quran. Also, while Jews generally accepted the term refers to them, few Christians would describe themselves by this title. Even though Christians read the Bible and trust in the words of the Old and New Testaments, it was only since the introduction of the printing press in the 15th century that Christians began to carry a book. Today the Bible has been translated into hundreds of different languages, but Christians were preaching the Gospel a long time before they had a book.

Before we attempt to identify the Ahl al-Kitāb, we should at least have an understanding of the word “*al-Kitab*” as presented in the Quran.

The word Kitab means “writing” but different translations of the Quran translate the word as, book, scripture, record or revelation.

The word Bible or Book comes from the Greek word Biblion, meaning books. The early Christians did not have a single book but circulated the writings of the prophets, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and various memoirs and letters among the different churches. It was the Hellenistic Jews that first used the expression “*ta biblia*” (singular), to refer to their sacred books. Later, the term was also adopted as a reference to Christian texts around 223 AD.

In 367 AD, Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria listed the 27 books that became the accepted canon of the New Testament. These books, together with the Old Testament scriptures now make up the Bible we have today. The 66 books of the Bible only became a single physical volume around the 5-6th century, after Jerome translated the Hebrew scriptures into Latin.

Centuries before the birth of Mohammad, there were many books that could be associated with the people of the book. There was the Jewish Tanakh, the Greek Septuagint, various Bibles and New Testaments, such as the Latin Vulgate, the Syriac Peshitta and different Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian versions in existence.

There was a proliferation of texts in different languages, but no complete Arabic translation of the New Testament existed until around the eighth century. There was also a book called the Diatessaron, which may have prompted the singular expression of “Gospel” or Injil, as found in the Quran. Tatian, an Assyrian Christian, wrote the Diatessaron in 150 AD; it was a single narrative that attempted to combine or harmonise the four gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John into one book. This harmony of the gospels remained the standard Gospel text of the Syrian church until around AD 400. It was also translated into Arabic and Persian and remained in use apparently until the middle ages.

The Quran makes numerous references to the “*injil*”, meaning Gospel or Good News (Q 3:3, 3:48, 3:65, 5:46, 5:47, 5:66, 5:68, 5:110, 7:157, 9:111, 19:16 48:29, 57:27).

The Quran also makes specific references to the scriptures of Moses (Q 53:36), the scriptures of Abraham and Moses (Q 53:36-37, 87:19), the Torah (Q 5:43-45, 5:110, 48:29), and the Psalms of David (Q 4:163, 17:55, 21:105).

There are also many references to *al-kitāb* in the Quran but is it a reference to one particular scripture or a general reference to all the scriptures, including the Gospels? The Quran says *al-kitāb* was given to Moses and was a guide to the Children of Israel (2:87, 32:23). So it could be a specific reference to the Ten Commandments, which were written on stone tablets and given to Moses. However, it would appear that the term *al-kitāb* does have a much broader meaning, more like a metaphor. Moses received the Law but is also credited as the author of the first books of the Jewish Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. However, the *al-kitāb* was given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob before Moses had written his scriptures (29:37) and it was also given or revealed to Jesus.

The Quran reminds us that God taught Jesus "the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel" (Q 3:48). These words echo the previous scriptures and the words of the prophet Isaiah who wrote of the Messiah.

*"And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD" Isaiah 11:2*

The Quran also echoes the words of Luke, who wrote, *"And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."* Luke 2:52

### **A Definition:**

The word *al-Kitab* means writing, but as a metaphor, it speaks of;

'the truth and revelations, words given to the prophets, which, in turn, were written as scripture'.

"The Book" is not a reference to one particular Scripture or Book, rather it refers to the progressive revelation given to the succession of prophets. The expression appears to be a reference to the Torah and all sacred scriptures; the revelation and the physical 'Book' the prophets, including Jesus, held "between his hands" (3:3, 5:46, 10:37).

The Book and the Quran are not the same. The Quran presents itself as a reminder rather than a revelation, and there is no indication that the Quran ever referred to itself as a Book.

Mohammad and the Arabs were not a people of the Book, and Mohammad did not read from a book. Mohammad received the revelations that confirmed the Torah and the Gospel; it was only after Mohammad's death that the Quran became a book.

Mohammad received *al-kitāb* (87:31), as had other messengers before him (Q 40:70, 57:25), and continued to receive revelations over many years until his death.

The *al-kitāb* was miraculously revealed to Mohammad in one night (Q 44:3, 97:1) during the month of Ramadan (Q 2:185). However, God revealed the Quran to Mohammad over many years. It was a work in progress and existed in scattered pages and the memories of Mohammad and his closest followers.

The Quran instructs its audience to remember the Book (Q 2:231) for it is described as complete and already written (Q 13:36, 9:111, 21:105, 39:23) and as being read (10:94). The revelation of the Book is spoken of in the past tense (Q 4:105) and associated with the previous prophets.

God asked Mohammad, *"Were not My Verses recited to you, and then you used to deny them?"* (Q 23:105).

The Quran praises the Book but does not appear to make any reference to itself.

*"Ta Seen. These Verses, the recitation, and the Book (are) clear." Q 27:1*

Mohammad received the knowledge of the Book; the Torah and the Gospel, as a revelation (Q 45:2) for he could not read Hebrew or Greek. He received the words in his "tongue" (Q44:58), so he could memorise and recite the words he received to the people (Q 29:46-47).

*"Alif. Lam. Ra. These are verses of the Scripture that maketh plain. Lo! We have revealed it, a Lecture in Arabic, that ye may understand." Q 12:1-2*

The Quran says that Jesus received the Book and received teaching and understanding of the Torah and the Gospel (Q 3:3, 3:48, 5:46, 10:37, 19:30, 57:27). Mohammad was also given knowledge and the ability to recite the Hebrew scriptures in Arabic without having ever read them (Q 6:114). It appears Mohammad received knowledge in the same way as all the prophets of God, that is, through the Holy Spirit writing the words unto their hearts (Q 2:97). Throughout Israel's history, prophets could hold scrolls in their hands, these being the words of the previous prophets. Each prophet received knowledge and the words to recite, revelations for the time and future generations. The Arabs wanted a book that they could read in their own language (Q 17:93), but they would have to wait another two hundred years before the entire New Testament was translated into Arabic.

During Mohammad's time, translations of the New Testament existed in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Syriac but there were Arabic translations. As the awareness of themselves as a separate people grew, so did their desire to be able to read the written word in their own Arabic language. However, the Quran says that even if God had sent down a written scripture on a page, and they could touch with their hands, they still would not believe (Q 6:7).

It appears that most of Mohammad's audience was familiar with the stories from the scriptures and the Gospels, even if they did not necessarily believe in them. So, when Mohammad preached that Jesus was the Messiah, his audience would have viewed him as a Christian preacher. When he spoke of the Book, the Jews would have understood he was speaking of the Torah and the scriptures.

When unbelievers heard Mohammad reciting the scriptures in Arabic, they would say, *"this is an old falsehood"* (Q 46:11). However, when the believers heard Mohammad reciting the scriptures in Arabic, they would remember their former teachings and *"fall down upon their faces worshipping"* (Q 17:107-108, 46:12, 46:30).

The word qur'an is an Aramaic word, meaning reading or recitation. The word was used by Syrian Christians when referring to liturgical readings of hymns and Bible extracts.

The Quran does not refer to itself as a book, but as a reminder. It was never a *"clear Book"* (Q 43:2), and no reader has ever described the Quran as a book" explained in detail" (Q 6:114). The Quran says the previous scriptures are *"exalted and full of wisdom"* (Q 43:4). Jesus continually quoted from Scripture, but it is the Torah that can rightly be called the *"Mother of the Book"* (Q 13:39).

## Ahl al-Kitāb

We know the identity of the “People of the Gospel’ (5:37), Ahl al-Injil, but who were Ahl al-Kitāb, the People of the Book?

The Quran states that two peoples received the book (Q 6:156), and while Jews and Christians are usually identified, this misinterpretation is a major obstacle to our proper understanding of the Quran.

The Jews are obviously one of the people of the book, but the Quran does not identify Christians as Nazarenes or as People of the Book. The Quran describes the people of the Book as Israelites and the offspring or physical descendants of Abraham (Q 7:52, 29:27, 57:26).

*“We gave Moses the Book and made it a Guide to the Children of Israel”* (Q 17:2, 40:53).

The Quran says that the People of the Book were the recipients of the Book (Q 45:16). It describes them as a people of the covenant (Q 3:187) who had restrictions on what they could eat (Q 5.5). They are the people who God appeared to on the mountain in fire and smoke and the people who worshipped the calf (Q 4:153). The Quran says that they were people who also received the Scriptures and authority and prophethood (Q 6:89) and regarded themselves as pure and set apart (Q 4:49). They were people who had believed in the revelations given them in the morning but not the evening (Q 3:72). A people who were not believers for they had rejected Jesus as their Christ (Q 4:159).

Arabic tradition also identifies the People of the Book as Jews, saying that they would read the Torah in Hebrew and explain it in Arabic to the Muslims.<sup>i</sup> The apostle Paul wrote, it was the Jews who were entrusted with the oracles of God (Romans 3:2). Peter spoke to the Jews and identified them as “children of the prophets and of the covenant” (Acts 3:25).

The Jews would have recognised that Mohammad was speaking to them when he addressed them as the People of the Book. The ancestors of the Jews had written the scriptures and had guarded and preserved the books of the prophets. The Jews had received the Books; the Torah and the writings of the prophets as an inheritance (Q 7:169, 40:53). The Israelites had been commanded to study the Torah, both old and young, rich and poor, priest and labourer, all of Israel were instructed to study the Book so that they would prosper.

*“This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.”* Joshua 1:8

When the Jews had returned from Babylon, Ezra called on the people of Israel to return to God and to put away foreign wives; *“let it be done according to the law”* (Ezra 10:3). All the people came together, and when Ezra opened the Book, the people stood up. Ezra read aloud from the Book from daybreak until noon, and all listened attentively and wept. (Nehemiah 8).

The two peoples of the Book could be the Israelites and Jews. However, there is another people that also fits the description as the people of the Book. During the reigns of David and Solomon, the Israelites became divided into two kingdoms: the Kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judea. Then after the northern tribes of Israel were conquered by the Assyrians and its people scattered and killed, another people emerged calling themselves the descendants of Israel: - the Samaritans. Both Jews and Samaritans considered themselves to be the true descendants of Israel, both held onto the oracles of God, and both thought themselves to be the keepers of the Torah.

Even today the Samaritans exist as a people and live in Palestine and Israel and celebrate the Passover on Mount Gerazim each year. Their numbers are now only in the hundreds, but the

Quran suggests they will continue to exist as a people up until the final coming of Christ (Q 5:14).

The People of the Book are the Samaritans and the Jews because their ancestors were the people who received the Book of Law given to Moses and the writings of the Old Testament prophets. The Jews and Samaritans were both expecting a Messiah, and when Jesus visited these two people, they both initially flocked to see and hear him speak. But ultimately, they both rejected Jesus as their Messiah. In their rejection, they also denied the signs God had shown them and the truth of their own books, and they have become no different from the disbelievers.

There appears to be some irony in the use of the term "People of the Book". Mohammad was an Arab merchant, an unbeliever. Yet, God sent Mohammad to remind the Jews of the truth of their own scriptures. He told them to believe in the scriptures which God had given them. Of all people, the Israelites should have been the ones to recognise their Messiah. They were the people Paul identified as the natural branches. Mohammad chastised the Jews for their lack of belief and said that if the Book had been sent down to his followers, *"we would have been better guided than they"* (Q 6:157).

Mohammad pointed them to the Gospel as the word from God (Q 5:68) and instructed them to *"believe in the Book for the whole of it is from our Lord"* (Q 3:7).

Unfortunately, instead of accepting their scriptures and accepting Jesus as the Christ, the people of the Book denied the signs and believed in their own righteousness. Many do not identify with the Jewish scriptures but in their oral traditions. Since the fifth century, the Jews began to identify with books they had written themselves, the Mishnah and the Talmud.

The Quran warns, *"woe be unto those who write the scripture with their hands and then say, 'This is from Allah,'"* 2:79

Arabic tradition also mentions that many *"left the Book of God"* and dedicated themselves to the Book they wrote with their own hands.<sup>ii</sup>

Christians do read the scriptures and believe them to be true, but this is no reason to include Christians as a People of the Book. The scriptures and even the Gospels tell the story of the prophets of Israel and the Jewish Messiah. Christians are the people of the Gospel, believers who proclaim the good news of peace through Jesus Christ (Acts 10:36). The good news of Jesus' victory over death and the coming of the kingdom of God (Matthew 24:14). Christians are freed from the law and the regulations that were included in the Jewish scriptures and have their identity and hope only in Jesus Christ. Christians come from different cultural backgrounds and from all nations and collectively have no single literary background and have not inherited any books or scriptures.

While People of the Book are warned against calling God three (Q4:171), this does not necessarily indicate that Christians are a people of the Book. Instead, it reminds us that there were believers (Mu'min) among the people of the Book (Q3:199). In verse 4:171, Mohammad is speaking to the Jews, telling them that Jesus is the Messiah, the word and Spirit of God. Telling them to believe in God and his messenger [Jesus] but also warning them to avoid any false doctrines that count God as three.

*"O people of the Book! Do not err in your judgment.*

*Do not say of God anything other than the truth.*

*The Messiah 'Issa son of Mary is assuredly God's messenger,*

*His word (kalima) which he sent over Mary and a breath [spirit] from Him.*

*Believe in God and his messengers and (do) not say, "Three;" desist (it is) better for you. Only Allah (is) God One." (4:171).*

Mohammad was right to speak out against false doctrines for these can become obstacles to belief. The Quran does not speak against Christians. It is interesting how Mohammad spoke against false doctrines without accusing Christians of holding these false views. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,

*"there is no condemnation of those which are in Christ Jesus" Romans 8:1*

*"Who then will bring charges against God's elect? Who will then condemn us?" Romans 8:33-34.*

Since the angels of heaven cannot condemn God's people, it should not be surprising that the Quran only praises those who follow the teachings of Jesus. It says God has placed "compassion and mercy" in their hearts (Q 57:27) and those who follow the prophet [Jesus] are the "most worthy of Abraham" (Q 3:68) and followers of Jesus will be the ones who will prevail on the last day (Q 61:14). Mohammad spoke against the unbelief of the People of the Scriptures who had not only rejected the truth of their own scriptures but had rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

The Quran was not revealed to abrogate the previous Scriptures but to confirm them; It lists the Torah and the Gospel together and gives them equal authority. The Quran advises believers to hold fast unto the wisdom which they reveal (Q 19:12), for God has preserved them by setting a guardian over them (Q 5:44,48). The previous scriptures are a guide for people in the ways of peace to bring them from darkness to light (Q 4:136, 5:15-16).

The Quran affirms the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the central part of the revelation given to all prophets including Mohammad. It also warns against denying "the messengers who were before thee". Those that reject the message of the Quran reject the messengers before you who came with clear signs and the scriptures - a Book of enlightenment (Q 3:184).

i Bukhari: 9.460, 6:12

ii Musa, Aisha Y. 2008 Hadith as Scripture pp 26