

## Review Article

**The Gentle Answer**Adam Dodds<sup>1</sup>

Gordon Nickel, *The Gentle Answer – to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification*. Calgary: Bruton Gate, 2015. 493 pp. pb. \$19.95, isbn 978-0993997211.

**1. Introduction**

Muslim philosopher Shabbir Akhtar explains the Muslim claim and self-understanding that Islam “supersedes its two predecessors”, Judaism and Christianity, “by subsuming and augmenting and, especially in the case of Christianity, explicitly rejecting, their doctrines.”<sup>2</sup> This is problematic given that Christian doctrines come from the Bible, and the Qur’an claims to confirm the previous revelations of the Torah and Gospel (Q3:3-4).<sup>3</sup> Sixteen verses in the Qur’an state that the Qur’an confirms the pre-Islamic scriptures, thus underscoring the Bible’s authority. Yet, the message of the Qur’an at times openly contradicts core biblical teaching.<sup>4</sup> For example, “the New Testament contains many commands to love, while the Qur’an contains no command to love either God or humans.” (295) The way out of this riddle that Muslims developed is the doctrine of *tabrif*, that Jews and Christians corrupted their own scriptures thus rendering them as unreliable. (279) Akhtar relates that “Muslims typically reject both testaments of the Bible as being, in their extant forms, corrupt or at least humanly revised.”<sup>5</sup> This widespread Muslim perception of the Bible being corrupt has been a significant impediment to Christian mission amongst Muslims. Ayman Ibrahim recounts a conversation he had with his Muslim friend Ali: “Whenever I used a passage from the Bible to make a point in conversation, Ali would immediately shut me down, pointing to the Bible as a false book.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the Bible, said Ali, “You will never find a different Qur’an. The Qur’an is one unchanged text.”<sup>7</sup> *The Gentle Answer*, authored by Canadian missionary-scholar Gordon Nickel, critiques both claims: that the Bible is corrupt, and the Qur’an is unchanged.

Nickel’s stated aim for the book is to encourage readers to read the Bible and Qur’an, and reason together. (1) Most of the book focuses on removing obsta-

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2 Akhtar, *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes*, 240.

3 Sinai, *The Qur’an*, 138.

4 Nickel, *The Quran with Christian Commentary*, 502-503.

5 Akhtar, *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes*, 240.

6 Ibrahim, *A Concise Guide to the Quran*, 102.

7 Cited in Ibrahim, *A Concise Guide to the Quran*, 102.

cles that prevent Muslims from doing this. This is because *The Gentle Answer* is a response to Rahmat Allah Kairanwi's *Izhar al-haqq (Demonstration of Truth)*, published in 1864. The *Izhar's* central argument is the Bible has been falsified; *The Gentle Answer* aims to disprove this. (2) Thus, *The Gentle Answer* is a work of apologetics, offering a "systematic defence and promotion of Christian faith".<sup>8</sup>

Approximately half of the book focuses on arguing for the reliability of the Bible (Sections One and Two), while Section Three examines critical questions about the Qur'an's historical reliability and coherence. Nickel takes the *Izhar's* accusations against the Bible: "contradictions, ... errors, alterations, additions and omissions", and asks the same questions of the Qur'an. (277) In confronting Islamic beliefs Nickel employs polemic, which one of Nickel's doctoral students, apologist and polemicist Jay Smith, defines as "confront[ing] another person's beliefs".<sup>9</sup> According to Jim Coggins, Smith also contributed to *The Gentle Answer*, but this nowhere mentioned.<sup>10</sup> The traditional character of polemics, in content if not in tone, can be harsh and aggressive, since the word *polemic* derives "from the Greek word '*polemos*', which means 'war' ..."<sup>11</sup> Intentionally departing from traditional polemics, Nickel's tone embodies his pacifistic Mennonite tradition in writing with gentleness. The content, however, is at times polemical, to correct the *Izhar's* uneven methodology – applying critical scholarship only to the Bible and not the Qur'an – and thus level the playing field. (278) Nickel employs a twofold methodology majoring on defending (apologetic) while also confronting (polemic). For example: "If it is true that the Qur'an understands the Christian confession of Son of God to mean that Christians believe God had relations with a woman, then one must conclude that the Qur'an is in error." (440)

Having accomplished this 'ground-clearing', Nickel arrives at his goal in the fourth and final section of commending the biblical Jesus to the reader. (382)

## 2. History

Nickel omits the historical background to his work.<sup>12</sup> *The Gentle Answer* is like Act Four in a theatre production. In Act One missionary Carl Pfander (1803-1865) wrote *Mizan ul-Haqq (The Balance of Truth)*, 1829), in which he sought to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus and the Bible over Muhammad and the Qur'an. This led to written exchanges with Muslims and, eventually, Indian Muslim scholar Rahmat Allah Kairanwi invited Pfander to a public Munazara – Act Two.

<sup>8</sup> Kirk, "Apologetics", 22.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *The Life, Work & Legacy of Carl Pfander*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Coggins, "A Gentle Answer has cosmic implications", pages unnumbered.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *The Life, Work & Legacy of Carl Pfander*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Nickel does mention "a highly-charged political atmosphere" but refrains from giving details, perhaps because it does not promote gentleness. (5)

The Munazara was a two-day debate in Agra, India, in April 1854, chiefly between Kairanwi and Pfander.<sup>13</sup> Far from settling the matter, the *Mizan ul Haqq* remained popular, so “The [Ottoman] Sultan called for Kairanwi to come to Istanbul and write his final refutation against Pfander, the Izhar al-haqq”.<sup>14</sup>

Act Three is Kairanwi’s writing of the *Izhar*, the written structure of which mirrored the Agra Munazara.<sup>15</sup> Nickel’s *The Gentle Answer*, Act Four, is a book-length response to the *Izhar* 150 years later (9), a testament to the *Izhar*’s enduring influence. One scholar described the *Izhar* thus: “The first great classic of modern Muslim polemic has never been superseded”.<sup>16</sup> The great Hungarian Islamicist Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) said that during his visit to Damascus in 1877 everybody was talking about the *Izhar*. The famous Reformist Islamic scholar Egyptian Rashid Rida (1865-1935) drew heavily on the *Izhar* when discussing Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Tone

Nickel describes the *Izhar* as “an angry attack” (2): it used the Bible as “a mere excuse to attack” (207) and “in order to make accusations of contradiction” (396), thus revealing “its unscholarly character and its merely polemical use of academic scholarship.” (216) *The Gentle Answer* does not respond in kind. The titular ‘gentle’ is based on Proverbs 15:1 and 1 Peter 3:15 which exhort gentleness. (3) Nickel’s intent is to “remove anger from the disagreement” so Muslim and non-Muslim can “read and reason together”. (4) Underneath this gentle tone, however, are scholarly arguments that are devastating in their implications. We will return to this shortly.

### 4. Audience

*The Gentle Answer* has been written for three readerships; first, Christians. The *Izhar* has intimidated and discouraged Christians. (159) Christian friends in India asked Nickel if there were answers to the *Izhar*’s accusations, challenging him to help. “That’s finally why I did it”,<sup>18</sup> Nickel commented. *The Gentle Answer* gives Christians confidence by answering long-standing Muslim polemic. Second, Nickel directly addresses Muslim polemicists (9, 159). Third, the frequent mention of

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *The Life, Work & Legacy of Carl Pfander*, Chapter 2.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *The Life, Work & Legacy of Carl Pfander*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *The Life, Work & Legacy of Carl Pfander*, 137.

<sup>16</sup> H. G. Dorman, *Toward Understanding Islam* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1948), 44, cited in Schirrmacher, *The Islamic View of Major Christian Teachings*, 126.

<sup>17</sup> Schirrmacher, *The Islamic View of Major Christian Teachings*, 126-27.

<sup>18</sup> Nickel, “Muslim Accusations of Biblical Falsification w/ Dr. Gordon Nickel (Live!)”, 11.30. Coggins also mentions “a Christian leader from Asia” who initiated *The Gentle Answer*. “A Gentle Answer has cosmic implications.”

“Dear Muslim reader” (152, 310, 342, 397, 478), “Muslim friend” (357, 442), and “Muslim reader” (198, 394, cf. 423) suggests Muslims are Nickel’s primary audience. *The Gentle Answer* is aimed at an intermediate readership, it draws on and exposes the reader to academic material in an accessible way and includes a Glossary of Arabic terms. This book is well-researched, long, informative, engaging in style, and covers a breadth of topics.

## 5. Summary

At 493 pages *The Gentle Answer* reads like a compilation of four books, called sections, each with a distinctive focus. In Section One Nickel argues meticulously from the Qur’an, with support from the *tafsir* and other early Islamic literature, that the Bible has not been falsified. The two Arabic words that are usually used to accuse the Bible of being corrupted are *tahrīf*, from the verb *harrafa*, and *tabdīl*, from the verb *baddala*. The earliest extant *tafsir* was written by Muqātil ibn Sulaymān. Nickel shows that Muqātil’s *tafsir* understood the usage of *baddala* and *harrafa* to refer to Jewish unbelief in Muhammad, not to scriptural falsification. (39-50) Nickel’s expertise on early *tafsir* literature is widely recognised. Shabbir Akhtar says Nickel “displays an encyclopaedic intimacy with the Quran and the tradition of classical commentary. . . .”<sup>19</sup>

Turning to Ibn Ishaq’s *Sira*, what is striking about his usage of People of the Book, observes Nickel, “is the absence of any accusation of falsification of the previous scriptures.” This is notable given that Ibn Ishaq depicts the Jews as “deceitful, obstinate, and indeed treacherous”; therefore, would not Ibn Ishaq have considered “the accusation of their falsification of the Torah helpful for his portrayal?” (61) Al-Waqidi wrote that the second caliph ‘Umar visited the Jews of Medina when they were studying Torah. He would “marvel at how the Torah concurs (*muwāfaqa*) with the Qur’an and how the Qur’an concurs with the Torah.” (69)

In sum, Nickel demonstrates from according to early Islamic sources – Qur’an, *tafsir*, *sira*, *Hadith*, *Ta’rikh*, *Asbab al-nuzul*, and *maghazi* (chapter four) – “the majority view among Muslims of the early centuries of Islam was that the earlier scriptures were intact in the seventh century.” (71) Nickel further establishes the veracity of the Old Testament through presenting its manuscript evidence (chapter six). The repeated accusation is that the Medinan Jews *concealed* references in the Torah to Muhammad, rather than falsifying the Bible. In short, “The problem is not with the earlier Scriptures. Rather, the problem is with those who possess them.” (55) Thus, he concludes “This chapter has established the falsehood of the Muslim accusation that the Jews of Medina erased or changed references to the messenger

<sup>19</sup> Akhtar’s endorsement in Nickel, *The Qur’an with Christian Commentary*, 1.

of Islam from the Torah... consequently, those who accuse should fall silent. To use a helpful expression from the Qur'an, 'Produce your proof if you speak truly' (Q. 2:111)." (106)

Chapter Seven places the *Izhar* and *The Gentle Answer* in its apologetic-polemical context, showing the long history of Muslim questions and Christian and Jewish answers. The *Izhar's* uniqueness lies in incorporating Western biblical criticism into Muslim polemic. In response Nickel defends the Old and New Testaments, relying particularly on manuscript evidence (chapters Ten to Twelve). Two examples will suffice. Nickel argues for the early dating of the New Testament. Citing F. E. Peters, he notes that over a century before Christians gained political power, "all the works in our New Testament were already in the published edition in use among Christians, probably from the second century onward." (180) He further argues for early dating of the gospels in contrast to the earliest biography of Muhammad. Quoting Peters again, "The earliest extant lives of Muhammad are far more distant from the events they describe than the Gospels are from the life of Jesus". (174) Nickel ably relates the quantity and early dating of New Testament manuscript evidence drawing on recent scholarship. He explains that no other ancient writing comes close to the abundance of evidence for the New Testament. In *One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Martin Hengel writes "The text of the Gospels is the best transmitted in the whole of antiquity."<sup>20</sup>

Nickel shows that the biblical scholarship on which the *Izhar* drew is outdated. Many biblical manuscripts were discovered in the century following the *Izhar's* publication in 1864. Between 1896 and 1956 several collections of papyri were discovered totalling 127 papyri, and this includes the earliest known manuscript fragment of the New Testament. Forty-nine of these papyri are paleographically dated to the second and third centuries. Nickel summarises "In total, scholars are now able to study 206 Greek and forty-four Latin New Testament manuscripts that predate the seventh century." (186) The evidence clearly shows the writing in the New Testament is consistent, from almost five centuries before the Qur'an to the present day. Due to the abundant evidence, he asks "where is the evidence for corruption or falsification?" He answers his own question: "Since this material evidence offers no ground for the accusation, therefore, the accusation now needs to fall silent." (187)

In Chapters Eight and Nine Nickel answers many of the *Izhar's* assumptions and accusations with calm logic and presenting relevant evidence. The *Izhar* claims the Bible has been falsified "on the basis of the Islamic claim that prophets do not sin", but the Bible openly depicts their sins. (136) Nickel responds that nowhere in the Bible or Qur'an "are we led to believe that prophets are sinless!" (137) He proceeds to show that both Qur'an and hadith describe the prophets sinning. (138-

<sup>20</sup> Hengel, *One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 28, cited in Nickel, *The Gentle Answer*, 183.

44) The *Izhar* claims the Gospels have been falsified because of chronological inconsistencies between them. Nickel responds that the gospels do not claim to be organised chronologically, and neither does the Qur'an, which Nickel observes has its own sequential inconsistencies. (162)

In Section Three Nickel investigates scholarly questions about the Qur'an in response to the double-standard of Muslim polemic. (260) He discusses questions from Muslim scholarship (chapter thirteen) and critical scholarship (chapter fourteen). Nickel's quotation of Fred Donner is apposite:

Those of us who study Islam's origins have to admit collectively that we simply do not know some very basic things about the Qur'an – things so basic that the knowledge of them is usually taken for granted by scholars dealing with other texts. They include such questions as: How did the Qur'an originate? Where did it come from, and when did it first appear? How was it first written? In what kind of language was – is – it written? What form did it first take? Who constituted its first audience? How was it transmitted from one generation to another, especially in its early years? When, how, and by whom was it codified?<sup>21</sup>

Chapters thirteen, sixteen, and eighteen explore these questions.

In chapter eighteen Nickel demonstrates that the Qur'an, far from being a stable and unchanging document, existed in multiple variants until these variants were suppressed. The clearest example discussed is the San 'a' palimpsest, discovered in in a mosque in Yemen in 1972. A palimpsest is a manuscript in which writing has been erased and then new text written on the same parchment. Using modern technology, the earlier writing (*scriptio inferior*) that had been erased can be recovered and read. The San 'a' palimpsest is a manuscript of the Qur'an except there are significant differences between the lower and upper writings. Furthermore, there are corrections to that scholars have detected. One expert on the San 'a' manuscript, Elizabeth Puin, called the earlier writing "a different Qur'an". (cited 367) While Nickel's overview of the San 'a' palimpsest is helpful, he omitted crucial and important details between the lower and upper writings. The surah order is different, words and passages have been changed within a narrative, different words are used, in some instances entire verses and sentences are missing and in other instances words and whole passages have been added. Nonetheless, Nickel paints a broader picture. He mentions four early tafsirs all of which comment on variant Qur'an readings, with no indication that these variants were unacceptable. These different Qur'anic codices were suppressed in the fourth Islamic century, as enforced by 'Abbāsīd vizier Ibn Muqla (d. 940). Why is this relevant?

<sup>21</sup> Donner, "The Qur'an in recent scholarship," 28, quoted in Nickel, *The Gentle Answer*, 259.

The central argument of the *Izbar* is that the original Bible no longer exists. Nickel asks the obvious question “does the original of the Qur’an exist?” (373) In chapter eighteen Nickel competently summarises the evidence, drawing on recent scholarship. Keith Small, whom he quotes, concludes that “Physical corrections in manuscripts and palimpsests provide substantial evidence of the standardisation and suppression of variant texts.” (372) Nickel considers early textual fluidity, deficiencies of seventh-century Arabic, manuscript variants, and signs of standardisation. Nickel also examines the Qur’an for contradictions, omissions, additions, and alterations (chapter fifteen), and devotes a whole chapter (seventeen) to the Qur’an’s problematic relationship with history. These problems include the unreliability of early Islamic sources, (332) the Qur’an’s ahistorical view of the world, (334-35) and apparent quranic denial of a well-attested historical fact. (331, 346-50)

Nickel offers strong conclusions, for example: “The Qur’an that Muslims hold in their hands today is not the same text as the earliest manuscripts of the Qur’an known to scholars... The ‘original’ of the Qur’an is not known to exist.” (355) This is important given that the central claim of the *Izbar* is that the original Bible no longer exists. (373)

The previous Sections are means to Nickel’s goal: “a friendly conversation about the contents of the scriptures...” (382) The apologetical and polemical historical accretions between Islam and Christianity explain why several hundred pages of careful argument is required. In Section Four Nickel presents the gospel message to Muslims,<sup>22</sup> highlighting fulfilled prophecy (chapters nineteen, twenty, twenty-three), Jesus’ identity as Lamb of God (chapter twenty-one) and Son of God (chapter twenty-two), and the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete (chapter twenty-four). For Christians this is largely familiar material.

## 6. Critical Engagement

This is an apologetic work with academic depth. *The Gentle Answer*’s originality lies in assembling in one volume a wide array of material to answer the Muslim allegation of biblical falsification. By design, topics are not investigated exhaustively but to be sufficiently convincing. Nickel’s intention is to answer Muslim polemic and offer a counter-polemic to put both scriptures on a level playing field. He hopes this will allow polemics to be set aside and a friendly conversation to be held.

*The Gentle Answer* has several shortcomings. There are several quotations that are repeated verbatim: by Patricia Crone (174, 223-4, 324), F. E. Peters (323, 332), and Al-Razi (188 and 351, 188-89 and 352). There is also a strange apolo-

<sup>22</sup> In Section Four Nickel directly and repeatedly addresses his Muslim readers (page 394, 397, 423, 442, and 478).

getic omission. Chapter twenty-three discusses the prophecy of Deuteronomy 18 but omits explaining why Muhammad cannot fulfil this prophecy, (457) which is curious, given that Nickel engages with other alleged biblical prophecies of Muhammad (390-92, 473-77). *The Gentle Answer's* main weakness, however, is Section Four. There Nickel does not display equivalent mastery over biblical and Christian theological scholarship in comparison with his expertise in Islamic scholarship (Sections One to Three). It is not unusual in inter-disciplinary work for authors to have greater expertise in one subject than the other, and Nickel is an Islamicist. Section Four rarely engages with biblical commentaries<sup>23</sup> in contrast to his engagement with *tafsir* literature over which he has expertise.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Nickel's argument would have been strengthened with reference to theological literature, for example interpreting Jesus' miracles as revealing his deity. (404-405)<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, his arguments in this Section are sound, and he succeeds in presenting Jesus to the reader.

Since *The Gentle Answer* was published scholarship on the Qur'an's origins has advanced. In *Creating the Qur'an*, Shoemaker argues persuasively that the Qur'an does not have a singular origin in the central Hijaz but comes from a range of historical contexts and was later brought together into one canonical text. Multiple details in the Qur'an simply do not fit a central Hijazi origin, including geographical conditions, references to seafaring and farming, the presence of Christian culture, the presence of Jews in Mecca, and three hundred foreign words from dozens of ancient languages.<sup>26</sup> Shoemaker's thesis is there are layers to the Qur'an, with an early layer originating in the central Hijaz. The final layer and editing of the Qur'an came from Syro-Palestine, where, under caliph under Abd al-Malik, the Qur'an was finally collected, collated, and edited. That the Qur'an derives from a range of historical contexts explains the evidence, argues Shoemaker, and means "we must embrace an understanding of the Qur'an as a fundamentally composite and composed text that, in the form in which it has come down to us, does not have a singular origin in Muhammad's teaching."<sup>27</sup> Although scholarship on the Qur'an's origins has progressed in the eight years since *The Gentle Answer's* publication, more recent scholarship largely confirms and strengthens Nickel's argument.

Following the *Izbar's* methodology, contemporary Muslim debaters readily employ Western critical scholarship to attack the Bible, but when Western critical

<sup>23</sup> The two exceptions are pages 464n14 and 474n36.

<sup>24</sup> See Gordon Nickel, *Narratives of tampering in the earliest commentaries on the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Oden, *The Word of Life*, 303; Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology*, 152; Warrington, *Healing & Suffering*, 23-4.

<sup>26</sup> Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, chapter 9.

<sup>27</sup> Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an*, 256.



scholarship asks similar questions of the Qur'an, this can sometimes be cheaply dismissed as the work of *orientalists* to distract and deflect.<sup>28</sup> Orientalism used to designate a respected branch of scholarship but is now a pejorative word, thanks largely to Edward Said. Said argued that "every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was... a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric."<sup>29</sup> Such sweeping claims have been subjected to serious scholarly critique,<sup>30</sup> yet the mud seems to have stuck. The terms orientalist and orientalism are now associated with racism and colonialism, and for some, Islamophobia.<sup>31</sup> In short, these terms have been poisoned and likely "polluted beyond salvation".<sup>32</sup> While labelling of all criticism of the Qur'an as *orientalism* may be effective in a debate, it is a distraction for dispassionate scholarly investigation. *The Gentle Answer* is not a work of orientalism; it displays expertise over Muslim and Western scholarship of the Qur'an and is both informed and fair. Further, Nickel's insistence on asking the same respectful and critical questions of both holy books rightly sets the tone and direction of inter-faith, apologetic, and evangelistic conversations.

It is rare to wait 150 years for a book to be published. *The Gentle Answer's* importance is directly proportional to the *Izhar's* enduring popularity, which includes decisively influencing the modern Muslim polemicist, South African Ahmed Deedat. His fame owes to his prolific output – millions of copies of his books and pamphlets were distributed, and his controversial style. According to Al Jazeera, Deedat was so prolific that when Nelson Mandela travelled internationally the first question he was often asked was, "How is Sheikh Deedat in South Africa?"<sup>33</sup> Lockhat records that the "techniques and enormous success" recorded in the *Izhar* inspired Deedat to *da'wab* (Islamic missionary work).<sup>34</sup> "According to Deedat this book changed his life."<sup>35</sup> It inspired Deedat to set up debates with Christians, and after reading the *Izhar*, he purchased a Bible and studied it in order to attack Christianity. "Deedat's ultra-aggressive approach" appears to follow the *Izhar*, which only engaged with the Bible to disprove it.<sup>36</sup> It is this motive that Nickel repeatedly questions. Prior to Deedat, avers Scheepers, Muslim apologists typically focused on the positives of

<sup>28</sup> For example, this approach is employed by Muslim Abdullah Kunde when debating Christian Samuel Green over the question "Is the Qur'an Miraculous?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvYb3MQp-c>, accessed 24/02/2023.

<sup>29</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 204.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," unnumbered; Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West*.

<sup>31</sup> Zebiri, "The Redeployment of Orientalist Themes", 2; Elahi and Khan, eds, *Islamophobia*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," 4.

<sup>33</sup> Dziewanski, "Remembering the life of Sheikh Ahmed Deedat".

<sup>34</sup> Lockhat, "About the Author," 1; cf. Westerlund, "Ahmed Deedat's Theology of Religion", 266.

<sup>35</sup> Scheepers, "An Analysis of the Christology of Sheikh Ahmed Deedat," 2.

<sup>36</sup> Scheepers, "An Analysis of the Christology of Sheikh Ahmed Deedat," 1.

Islam, but Deedat went on the offensive by attacking the Bible.<sup>37</sup> Those familiar with modern day Muslim apologists will recognise that Deedat's methodology and style has become paradigmatic, a methodology that derives from the *Izhar*. This underscores the importance of Nickel's content, and tone, in refuting such allegations.

Nickel's voluminous tome bears witness to the comprehensiveness of the refutation of the allegation of biblical falsification. One gets the sense that for Nickel, though this is a labour of love, it is nonetheless laborious. With exasperation Nickel notes that the *Izhar* continues to be reprinted in multiple languages by substantial Muslim networks and publishing houses, regardless of the demonstrably false allegations. *The Gentle Answer* deals primarily with content, but occasionally Nickel queries the sceptic's intent. He challenges readers "Where is the will to pursue the truth about the scriptures? Are these 'questions' asked in order to find answers, or only to attack?" (234) To the extent that the *Izhar* continues to be widely published and distributed, and while the doctrine of *tabrif* is still propounded by Muslims, *The Gentle Answer* deserves a wide readership.

## 7. Conclusion

In *The Gentle Answer* Nickel underemphasises the substantial implications of his argument, which are potentially devastating for Islam. Elsewhere he explains these:

1. The Bible has not been falsified and is therefore reliable.
2. The Bible does not prophesy about Muhammad as the Qur'an says.
3. This directly challenges the Qur'an's reliability.
4. This contradicts and undermines the claim that Muhammad was truly a prophet.<sup>38</sup>

Nickel's book is gentle in tone but not in its implications. Such is the nature of apologetic and polemic between two rival ultimate truth claims. While Nickel's tone in *The Gentle Answer* is likely more irenic than Carl Pfander's *Mizan ul Haqq*, a scholarly comparison between the two would be intriguing. Perhaps *The Gentle Answer* might, however unintentionally, provoke a written response as Pfander's work did?

*The Gentle Answer's* main purpose and primary contribution is to emphatically answer the *Izhar's* main questions; in this it succeeds. *The Gentle Answer* merits becoming the standard Christian text for all who are interested in questions concerning the reliability of both the Bible and the Qur'an. This makes it of great value for those engaged in Christian-Muslim dialogue and mission.

*The Gentle Answer* is an invaluable scholarly contribution to refuting the doctrine of *tabrif* that is widely held amongst Muslims, with the goal of removing this

<sup>37</sup> Scheepers, "An Analysis of the Christology of Sheikh Ahmed Deedat," 2.

<sup>38</sup> Coggins, "A Gentle Answer has cosmic implications." Apologist Shamoun also elucidates significant implications from Nickel's work. "The Quran, the Holy Bible, and the Issue of Corruption."

defeater belief to share the gospel. The dissemination of this knowledge is surely an urgent missionary task. Is it possible that, over time, the knowledge contained within *The Gentle Answer* might make a genuine dent in widespread Muslim belief in biblical falsification? There are many other intellectual barriers to sharing with Muslims the good news of Jesus, but in *The Gentle Answer* Nickel has made a successful, important, and unique contribution.

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