

Parables & Proverbs

The following material has been taken from a floppy disk that circulated in the Middle East several years ago. It was simply titled "Ministry Tools." There is much more information on the disk than is presented here. Ministry Tools has been put together by a group of tentmakers in the Arab World. At one time the disk could be ordered from Arab World Ministries, PO Box 4006, Worthing, W. Sussex BN13 1AP, England. As I understand it, the disk is no longer available.

Sample Parables

A Home in Every City

Here is a story my friend's father told him when he was very little. It is not only a good lesson, but also illustrates how words do not always have a literal meaning. The story can be easily adapted to your region and currency.

"There was once a very rich man who became quite sick and neared death. He called for his oldest son and said to him, 'Dear son, all that I have is for you. Just make sure you have a house in every city.' Then the father died.

"The son loved his father very much and set out to build a house in every city of the country... but he soon discovered that building houses can be expensive. In fact, he was beginning to run out of money and he still hadn't built a house in every city. The son didn't know what to do, so he went to his uncle for help. 'I am so busy building all these houses, that I don't have enough money to buy a shwarma for myself.'

"The uncle stared at the son and said, 'You are a very stupid son! When your father told you to build houses in every city, he meant you to use the money to make friends for yourself in each of the cities. Then, wherever you go, you will have a house for the night!'"

Airline Tickets Home

Seeing that I live in the Middle East and my oldest son lives in America, I tell this story to illustrate the books of God and the Qur'an, and how each relates to our lives today. The story can also be used to explain why I can't become a Muslim.

"My oldest son studies at a university in America and during his semester break, I wanted him to come and stay with us in the Middle East. However, you know that the airline tickets are very expensive, so I decided to buy the tickets for him.

"First, I wrote him a letter saying that I know how expensive the tickets are, so I will be purchasing the tickets and sending them in the mail to him. He should not buy the tickets himself, but wait for my letter with the tickets.

"Then, I sent him another letter saying that I am arranging the tickets and that they will be enclosed in the next letter. Wait for that letter and then use those tickets to come and see me.

"When the third letter arrives, my son opens it finding the promised tickets! He is happy and excited about his trip to the Middle East, but another letter arrives in the mail...

"This fourth letter is not written in my handwriting, but my name is signed at the bottom! In the letter, it tells my son to throw away the tickets and instead to take flying lessons and build an airplane so he can fly to the Middle East and see me.'

What do you think my son should do?

Joha and His Clothes

Here is a fun story that illustrates how what is on the outside is not the same as what is on the inside. It can be used to lead into discussions of works and how God will not judge like the governor's guard.

"One day Joha was working out in his fields when he heard a great commotion and gunfire in the village. He

quickly left his work and ran off to the village to see what was happening. As he approached the village, he saw many people running about. He stopped one man inquiring about the event.

“The governor has decided to throw a huge banquet for everyone in the village and so we are hurrying off to his house before all the food is gone!” exclaimed the man.

“So, Joha quickly ran off to the governor’s house in order not to miss out on the food. As he neared the house, he could see a guard in front of the house ushering some people to the left and some people to the right. As Joha entered, the guard directed him to the left where he entered a large room filled with beggars and poor people dressed in old and torn clothes. The room had only a few old rugs on the floor and only bread and water for the banquet.

“What kind of feast is this?” thought Joha. Then he peeked across to the other room on the right and he could see roast lamb, trays of rice, a large table and lots of people dressed in their finest clothes.

“So, Joha left the governor’s house secretly and went to his own house in order to shower and put on his best clothes. Then he returned to the governor’s house and, of course, this time was directed by the guard to the right.

Joha was seated at the table and given a large glass of juice. Then a huge tray of rice filled with meat was placed in front of him. Joha looked at the food and began to do something very strange.... He took the juice and poured it into his pocket. Then he took the chunks of meat and put them down his shirt. He took the rice and put it in his trousers!

“The people seated near Joha began to stare at him and soon the whole room was staring at Joha in silent unbelief. The governor himself broke the silence, saying, ‘Joha! What are you doing? Please, don’t embarrass us!’

Joha looked at the governor and said, ‘First I came here from the fields and my clothes were dirty so I was directed to the left. Then I went home and put on clean clothes and returned here. Then I was directed to the right. I did not change... only my clothes, so the clothes must deserve the food.’

Letters from Egypt

Here is a personal story used to argue against the idea that a later book of God makes it unnecessary to read a previous book of God.

For a time, when I was engaged to my wife, she lived in Saudi Arabia working as a nurse while I was living in Egypt. I very much missed her and so I wrote her everyday, but you know the Egyptian postal system... some letters arrive in a few days and some letters would take weeks to arrive!

One day, she opened her mailbox, and behold, there were four letters from me... each written on a different date. If you were her, which letter would you open first? Usually, the listener would say that he would look at the dates on outside of the envelopes and read the letters in chronological order. Ask the listener why he would do this? Why not read the last letter first?

You may get all kinds of reasons, but in the end, agree with him and explain that is why it is important to read all the books of God.

The Traitor

Here is a story that illustrates how the smallest, secret sin still deserves judgment from God.

“There was once an esteemed general who was kind and generous to all the people in his country. He ruled the country fairly and protected the poor from evil. Often, he held banquets, providing food for entire villages. He even helped dig new wells for the poor farmers to water their crops. Among the people of that nation, there was none his equal in generosity and kindness.

“Then one day, it was found out that this very man was a traitor! He had been caught selling information about the military to a foreign nation. He was accused of treason, arrested, and brought before the judge. What do you suppose will happen to the general? He will be punished and executed for treason. Did his good deeds help

him? Will our good deeds help us in our condition of rebellion against God?

The Wife and Ramadan

Using an example I heard from Victor H., I told the following story to a man who was boasting about the glories of the fast during Ramadan. I said, “Once there was a man who was engaged to be married. When talking with his fiancée, she told him, ‘Let’s get one thing clear. For two months out of every year, I will be the perfect wife. I’ll cook your food, do the dishes, wash your clothes, never leave the house, and never even look at another man. However, for the other ten months, I want to do whatever I feel like doing. If I don’t want to cook or clean, I don’t have to. If I feel like going out with my friends or with another man, I will because I think that this is fair.’ What do you think about a woman who would say these things?” I asked him.

“She should have her throat cut!” he declared vehemently.

Then I said to him, “But that’s exactly what so many people are doing to God! They tell him, ‘Before and during Ramadan, I’ll do everything you want, but don’t expect me to behave all year long.’ What do you think God will do to people who live like that?”

He stood there staring into space for a couple of minutes looking like his world had just disintegrated, and then he said suddenly, “Well, I have to go now. Good-bye.” And he walked away in a daze.

Sample Arabic Proverbs

Eating the Falcon

He who does not recognize the falcon grills it.

This is an Arab Gulf proverb which is used to illustrate the problem of ignorance.

His own Enemy

The ignorant person is his own enemy.

Inside and the Outside

From the outside marble and from the inside soot.

Judging One’s Self

The hand with the pen does not write bad about itself.

One Rotten Fish Spoils All

The rotten fish spoils all the fish.

This is a Gulf proverb used to illustrate how bad company can corrupt a good character.

Shame and the Blood

Nothing cleanses the shame except the blood.

I’ve used this proverb several times as it is well known in the Middle East. My only problem is that my friends always say that it predates Islam, coming from the tribal times of Jahliyya, and has nothing to do with religion.

Conversation Starters:

A Follower of the Last Prophet

This is a bit cheeky and can get some Muslims angry, so please be wise in using it. If you are asked, “Are you a Christian or a Muslim?” try answering, “I am a follower of the last prophet, the Messiah.”

This answer is not meant to boldly deny that Mohammed is a prophet, but instead to affirm the teaching in Islam that the last prophet to come before the Day of Judgment is Jesus.

Are you a True Muslim?

When I first meet a Muslim here, it seems that one of the first questions asked is: “Are you a Christian or a Muslim?” So, after the initial greetings and before this question, I ask my new friend, “Are you a Muslim or a true Muslim?” This question immediately leads to, “What is the difference?” I then have the opportunity to explain either 1) the Kingdom of God and its members or 2) my testimony of submitting my life to God and His way of salvation in order that I may serve and glorify Him.

Citizenship in the Kingdom of God

I have used this approach with overall good effectiveness with taxi drivers and other chance meetings where I'm likely to have only a 15-minute window of opportunity.

As a Westerner sooner or later I am invariably asked, "What is your citizenship?" This is usually a lead-in to their real question: "Can you get me a visa-wife-job in the USA?" So to the first question try answering: "The Kingdom of God." Then be prepared to defend your answer biblically - especially to explain what it takes to become a citizen of God's Kingdom and who is and isn't in it. At some point I try and share that I value my citizenship in heaven far more than my American one, because the American one is only temporary, can be lost, is sometimes detrimental.

Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh

At Christmas, instead of a nativity scene, I fill a mandoos (brass buttoned wooden box popular in the Gulf) with frankincense, gold (chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil), and myrrh. I use this to tell the story of the three wise men.

In the Name of the Messiah

This is a conversation jump starter. You will get a reaction! When you sit down to eat a meal with a group of Muslims, about the time they start to bismillah (in the name of Allah) the food say bismilmassih (in the name of the Messiah). When you get a shocked reaction, explain that the Scriptures teach us to pray in the name of Jesus whenever we pray. This can lead to further discussion about prayer and Jesus as an Intercessor.

[Editor's note: What about bismibnallah (In the name of the Son of God)?]

The Meaning of Injil

When you have a chance always ask your Muslim friend the meaning of the word "Injil." When you explain that it means "good news," you have a simple opening to share with him just that.

Wordless Book Bracelet

A like-minded friend has had a very nice and rather expensive gold bracelet made with five colored stones corresponding to the colors of the wordless book. (Green: God created Adam and Eve and they lived in harmony with Him in paradise. Black: Adam sinned and his heart became black. All of us, Adam's descendants, sin and have black hearts. Red: Christ died on the Cross and shed his blood to pay for our sins so that... White: our hearts could be white and pure. They were black with sin but are now white and pure before God. Gold (for which she substitutes blue): everyone with a white heart will go to be with God in heaven when they die. She shares the story of her bracelet with her friends and acquaintances and often they will ask her to repeat it for them. It is always there for her to refer to. One time she asked the colors of the flag of that person's country. As with many of the Middle Eastern countries, the colors were: green, black, red, and white, all of the colors of the wordless book except blue. She pointed out this fact in order to remind the person of the colors and the story whenever he saw or thought about his flag. One could include the blue by mentioning that the flag is flying against the blue sky.

A male version: Prayer beads in the colors of the wordless book.

Answers to some Muslim Objections

Corruption of the Bible

When the argument that the Bible has been corrupted is introduced, I usually respond by asking my friend whether he has read the Bible. The answer is usually negative. I express my surprise that someone with his level of education and emancipation (a little flattery doesn't do any harm) would be content to accept at face value what others are saying rather than going directly to the text in question and finding the facts for himself. I then offer to lend him a Bible which he can read. Once he has done that, I tell him, we can intelligently discuss whether or not the Bible has been corrupted. Until he has done that we are merely discussing in ignorance, which will be of no value to either of us.

I confess I haven't been able to distribute a great number of Bibles by this means, but it usually silences the objection.

If the response to the first question is positive, I then ask him to show me a text of the Bible which he believes is corrupted. He is usually unable to do this and the objection is again quelled.

If he comes up with some of the more common arguments that references to Mohammed have been deleted, that the deity of Christ has been added, etc., I begin to ask the classic questions of:

“Who changed it, the Jews or the Christians?” (It is inconceivable that the two would have agreed to the changes needing to be made.)

“When was it changed, before the time of Mohammed or after his time?” (If before, why does the Qur’an instruct Muslims to read and consult it? If after, why the relative wealth of manuscripts predating Islam which prove its essential validity today?)

“Where did the changes take place?” (Both Judaism and Christianity were widely spread geographically well before the time of Mohammed, and were divided in multiple and often hostile factions. Is it conceivable that all these widely dispersed factions could have gotten together to agree on very fundamental changes in their Holy Book?)

Disagreements Among the Manuscripts

One of the major stumbling blocks to Muslim acceptance of the Bible is that they believe it has been corrupted. As proof of this, Ahmed Deedat and others talk about textual variations in the original Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Instead of hiding this problem, it can be highlighted using texts like Geisler and Nix’s A General Introduction to the Bible. Pose the question to your Muslim friend: ‘If there are a thousand manuscripts or fragments of the Bible and 50 of them have a different reading, the other 950 will show us the correct reading. However, if there were 7 manuscripts and all of them were burnt except for one (in the case of the Qur’an), how do we know the correct manuscript was preserved?’ The more manuscripts there are, the higher the degree of confidence that the text we have is 100% accurate, even if there are variants.

Christ Humiliated in Death

Many Muslims object to the story of Christ being captured and killed. God would not let himself lose face that way, they say. He would not allow Himself or his prophet to face such disgrace and weakness.

One way to respond is to ask them:

‘Who is the stronger man (and brings more honor to his master): one who beats up and fends off his attackers and opponents

OR

one who allows his opponents to do their worst, binding him with their strongest cords, and then with a laugh (cf. Psalm 2) shows his and his master’s total dominance of his enemies by breaking the bindings and walking free?’

If they refer to the second answer, say that Jesus, in taking the worst—including death—that His enemies could do to Him and then visibly, publicly triumphing over them by His resurrection, shamed His enemies and glorified God far more than He would have had He merely beat off His enemies and imposed a military-political triumph over them.

It is best to let Muslims object to the death of Christ before bringing in this analogy.

When I have used this analogy to date, only about 30% of questioners have acknowledged the point; of the rest, Islamic conditioning was too strong for them to concede anything.

While some workers might want to flesh out the above analogy through the Biblical character, Samson, both his own death during his public victory over his enemies and his prior sins make this approach problematic.

Gospel of Barnabas

Most likely written by a Muslim who had never traveled to Palestine and was not familiar with the history of the time of Jesus. Earliest known manuscript is written in Italian and dates to the 16th century.

Geographical Problems: States that Tiro (Tyre) is near the Jordan River; Nazareth at the shore of Lake Galilee. Jesus goes up to Capernaum, the lowest town on the earth's surface. Author speaks of Israel and Samaria as separate places. Jesus went by boat to Jerusalem.

Historical Problems: Jesus and disciples observe 40 days of Lent (first known 400 years later). Jubilee is assumed to occur every 100 years. Pharisees said to be present in the time of Elijah. Apostle Philip remarks that 200 pieces of gold could not buy enough bread to feed the masses. Romans gather army of 600,000 men at Mizpeh, yet whole Roman army was 300,000. Jesus born when Pilate was governor (AD 26-27). Jesus observed 5 daily prayers. One denarius is equal to 60 minuti, and minuti were used only under Khalif Abdul Malik - AD 685. Soldiers rolled away like barrels - barrels unknown in Israel at that time. Mohammed called the Messiah, contradicts the Qur'an. Many quotations from Dante's works - Dante lived AD 1245-1321. Barnabas was not one of the 12 disciples of Jesus. He became a disciple after Jesus' death. No mention of John the Baptist (Yahya Ibn Zakariya).

Some Muslim scholars claim the Gospel of Barnabas is a forgery: Professor Aabas Mahmoub Aqad, article entitled Barnabas in the Al Akhbas newspaper, Oct. 26, 1959; Dr. Mohammed Chafiq Ghorbal, Arabic Encyclopedia, Al Misra, under the heading Barnabas.

Jesus is not the Son of God

Answer the normal way first by putting the question back to the person: What does the title Son of God mean? Surely you don't mean to say that God fathered a son by the normal human fashion, because that would be blasphemous... etc. Then quote Rom. 1:4 that Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead" — and then suggest to the person that the real question has to do with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If someone does not believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, then he won't believe that He is the Son of God. Explain the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Christian hope of the resurrection and the fact that Jesus said of Himself "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies..." (John 11.25).

Jesus on the Cross

The dreaded conversation about Ahmed Deedat doesn't have to be so bad. I will express my dislike of him because of his disrespect for the Bible and state how he will be judged for this on Judgment Day. But, I will also say, there is one thing I like about Ahmed Deedat. He believes that it really was Jesus on the Cross. Deedat believes in the swoon theory, or at least that is how he presents it in his book "Crucifixion or Crucifixion." The whole book is about how Jesus could have survived the crucifixion. (He argues at one point that several people in modern times have been crucified and survived. i.e. in the Philippines.) This will hopefully take our friends one step closer to believing Jesus died on the Cross, especially when such a respected figure as Ahmed Deedat believes Jesus was on the Cross and not someone else. It also shifts the conversation to the Cross and often to discuss HOW Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Qur'an Replaces Previous Revelations

I often hear the argument that the Torah was useful in the day of Moses, the Zabur was useful in the day of David and the Injil was useful in the day of Jesus, but now the Qur'an has come which replaces all previous revelations. I first ask my friend, "Does God change or is He the same today as He was long ago?" The answer is usually that God is the same. Then I ask him, "Isn't it true that God gave the same message to all of the prophets?" The Islamic teaching of this is "Yes, God gave the same message," and so usually my friend agrees. I continue saying that if this is so, then we need to have the same faith as that of Abraham, and that this is what the Injil affirms, quoting, or reading Galatians 3:7 how Abraham is the father of all believers. And what is the faith of Abraham? Galatians 3:6-8.