PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

Because Jews and Christians had received earlier scriptures from earlier messengers (Moses and Jesus), they were referred to in the Qur’an as “People of the Book” (the “Book” referring to two earlier scriptures: the Torah and the Gospel). Several Qur’anic revelations refer to the “People of the Book”, particularly discussing how Muslims were to deal with them and also emphasizing that the “People of the book” had become misguided regarding certain scriptures, adopting corrupt understandings of those scriptures. Moreover, Christians were especially wrong in their belief that Jesus was the son of God, that he was divine, that he could in any way be “ascribed as a partner with God”. The Qur’an was the final, and most accurate and true, rendition of the “Book” of scripture.

Here is one of the more important references to the “People of the Book” found in the Qur’an. (Taken from the M. A. S. Abdel Haleem translation of the Qur’an.)

“Believers, those who ascribe partners to God are truly unclean: do not let them come near the Sacred Mosque after this year. . . . Fight those People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax* promptly and agree to submit. The Jews said ‘Ezra is the son of God’,** and the Christians said, “The Messiah is the son of God’: they said this with their own mouths, repeating what earlier believers had said. May God thwart them! How far astray they have been led! They take their rabbis and their monks as lords beside God, as well as Christ, the son of Mary. But they were commanded to serve only one God: there is no God but Him; He is far above whatever they set up as partners! They try to extinguish God’s light with their mouths, but God insists on bringing His light to its fullness, even if the disbelievers hate it. It is He who had sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to show that it is above all [other] religions, however much the idolaters may hate this. You who believe, many rabbis and monks wrongfully consume people’s possessions and turn people away from God’s path. [Prophet], tell those who hoard gold and silver instead of giving in God’s cause that they will have a grievous punishment: on the Day it is heated up in Hell’s Fire and used to brand their foreheads, sides, and backs, they will be told, ‘This is what you hoarded up for yourselves! Now feel the pain of what you hoarded!’”.

(9: 28-35)

*[Haleem’s note]: “Etymologically, jizya means ‘payment in return’ . . . i.e. in return for the protection of the Muslim state with all the accruing benefits and exemption from military service, and such taxes on Muslims as zakat. Jizya was levied only on able-bodied free men who could afford it, and monks were exempted. The amount was generally low (e.g., one dinar per year).”

**[Haleem’s note]: “Clearly this refers to a certain group who, possibly at the time of the Prophet or earlier, made this claim.”

Other references to “People of the Book” in the Qur’an include: 4:153-173 (condemning their demand that Muhammad produce miracles and their mistaken view of Jesus as divine); 3:199 (“Some of the People of the Book believe in God, in what has been sent down to you and in what was sent down to them: humbling themselves before God, they would never sell God’s revelation for a small price. These people will have their rewards with their Lord: God is swift in reckoning.”).