

Jesus in Islam

Jesus and his mother Mary are held in high esteem in Islamic sources.¹ It is even reported that when Muslims captured the Ka'bah in 630, Muhammad ordered that all the statues there should be destroyed except for those of Mary and Jesus. In fact, right from the beginning, Muhammad saw himself as the immediate successor of Jesus. A tradition reports him as saying, 'I am the nearest of mankind to Jesus son of Mary—on both of whom be peace—because there has been no Prophet between him and me'.

Why Study Jesus in Islam?

Some people might wonder why it is necessary to concern ourselves with what people of other faiths, and particularly Muslims, have to say about Jesus Christ. Kwame Bediako's response to this question is astute:

Strange as it may seem, theological affirmations are meaningful ultimately, not in terms of what adherents say, but in terms of what persons of other faiths understand those affirmations to imply for them. In other words, our Christian affirmations are validated when their credentials and validity are tested not only in terms of the religious and spiritual universe in which Christians habitually operate, but also—indeed especially—in terms of the religious and spiritual worlds which persons of other faiths inhabit. For it is in those 'other worlds' that the true meaning of Jesus Christ becomes apparent and validated. Christian history shows that as Christian faith engages with new cultures, new insights about Jesus Christ emerge.²

We are called not only to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, but also to witness to this truth about him. Our witness, as Bediako points out, stands to be enriched by new insights that can be gained from other points of view. With this in mind, we shall seek to delineate some of the key theological agreements and disagreements between Islam and Christianity as regards the identity and mission of Jesus.

Jesus' Birth

Sixty-four of the 93 verses in the Qur'ān that speak about Jesus are found in the nativity narratives in suras 3 and 19. Kenneth Cragg observes that if the Gospels are said to be really passion narratives with extended introductions, 'it could well be said that the Jesus cycle in the Qur'ān is nativity narrative with attenuated sequel'.³ *Maryam*, or Mary the

¹ For more information on this topic, see John Azumah, 'Islamic Christology: A Case of Reverential Disavowal', in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 8 No. 1, June 2005: 50–60

² Kwame Bediako, 'Christianity, Islam and the Kingdom of God: Rethinking their relationship from an African perspective', in *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Dec. 2004): 6

³ K. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999): 19

mother of Jesus, is greatly honoured in Islam. She is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'ān (34 times) and a whole chapter (19) is named after her. She is identified as the daughter of Imran, the sister of Aaron (3:35; 19:28),⁴ and is described as a chaste woman whom God chose, made pure and preferred to all the women of creation (3:42). Before her birth, her mother pledged her unborn child to God. She was greatly distressed when she gave birth to a girl, and asked that she and her daughter be protected from Satan. Mary was put under the guardianship of Zachariah in the temple, where she was miraculously fed.⁵

The Qur'ān contains two accounts of the annunciation of Jesus' coming birth (3:33–49; 19:16–34). In Sura 3, God is said to have sent an angel to Mary, while in Sura 19, it was a spirit that was sent to give her the good news. The angel appeared to Mary and addressed her in the following words:

O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous (3:45–46).

When Mary queried how this was going to be since no man had known her, the angel assured her that God could do anything. Some Muslim exegetes state that the angel then breathed into a slit in Mary's cloak, which she had taken off. When she put it on again, she conceived Jesus. However it was done, Mary conceived and withdrew to a distant place. When the time came, she gave birth under a palm tree and took the child home to her people. She was accused of having brought shame and dishonour to her family. In response, Mary simply pointed to the infant Jesus lying in his cradle, who then spoke the following words:

Lo! I am the slave of Allah. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet, And hath made me blessed wheresoever I may be, and hath enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I remain alive, And (hath made me) dutiful toward her who bore me, and hath not made me arrogant, unblest. Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive! (19:30–33).⁶

Jesus as Son of God

Although the Qur'ān accepts the virgin birth, the incarnation is strongly and repeatedly rejected. His miraculous birth is not considered to prove that he was either the Son of God or God. The Qur'ān strongly condemns the very idea and insists that Jesus is no more than a human being and a prophet:

⁴ In Numbers 26:59, Amram is the father of Moses, Aaron and Miriam (or Maryam). This passage suggests that the Qur'ān is confusing Miriam, the sister of Moses, with Mary the mother of Jesus.

⁵ The apocryphal *Protevangelium of James* contains the story of Mary being fed by angels in the temple.

⁶ The Arabic and Syrian versions of the *Infancy Gospels*, which are said to have been in circulation in Arabia during the time of Muhammad, also have Jesus speaking from the cradle to announce his identity and mission.

The Messiah, son of Mary, was no other than a messenger, messengers (the like of whom) had passed away before him. And his mother was a saintly woman. And they both used to eat (earthly) food! (5:75).

In arguing that Jesus is a created being, Muslims cite the angel's words to Mary when she asks how she can have a child while still a virgin. The angel replies that when God wills something he commands it 'Be! and it is' (3:47). On the strength of this verse, Muslim theologians insist that Jesus was a creature made by God, the creator who has no associate.

Muslims also argue that the creation of Adam was even more marvellous than that of Jesus. God created Adam from dust and commanded him into being (3:59). He had no father and no mother, did not have to go through the normal developmental stages of life, and was honoured by God who asked his angels to prostrate themselves before him (i.e. worship him). If unusual birth makes one the Son of God or God, then, Muslims argue, Adam qualifies even more than Jesus!

Mainline Islamic teaching about Jesus is summed up in the following quotations from the Qur'ān:

O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not 'Three'. Cease! (it is) better for you! Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that he should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender (4:171).

They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary. The Messiah (himself) said: O Children of Israel, worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Lo! whoso ascribeth partners unto Allah, for him Allah hath forbidden Paradise. His abode is the Fire. For evildoers there will be no helpers. (5:72).

Indeed the Qur'ān reports Jesus denying ever instructing his disciples to take him and his mother as gods along with God (5:116).

The Qur'ānic denial that Jesus is the Son of God is based on the idea that his conception would have required God to physically take Mary as his wife. The term used for 'child' in all except one of the verses denying that God has offspring is *walad*, a word which denotes physical conception. The Qur'ān thus asks: 'How can He have a child, when there is for Him no consort?' (6:101). In other words, for Allah to have a child, he must take a spouse, and it is not in his nature to do such a thing. Yusuf Ali, one of the leading Qur'ānic commentators of the last century, sums up the Islamic position in the following words:

Begetting a son is a physical act depending on the need of men's animal nature. God Most High is independent of all needs, and it is derogatory to Him to attribute such an act to Him. It is merely a relic of pagan and anthropomorphic superstitions. Such an attribution to God of a material nature, and of the lower animal functions of sex is derogatory to the dignity and glory of God. The belief in God begetting a son is not a question of words or of speculative thought. It is a stupendous blasphemy against God. It lowers God to the level of an animal.⁷

⁷ See Christian Troll, 'Jesus Christ and Christianity in Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English interpretation of the

The Islamic position seems to have been influenced by the pre-Islamic Arab belief that God had daughters in the form of female deities whose intercession was sought. In fact the Qur'ānic denials of God having children were first directed at the pre-Islamic Arabs, who are accused of preferring sons for themselves, but assuming that God only has daughters (53:19–22). It appears that these denials were then extended to the Christian teaching about Jesus being the Son of God without a good understanding of what Christians mean by that title. Unfortunately, this position remains the orthodox Muslim teaching regardless of Christian protestations to the contrary.

Jesus as God

The Islamic denial of the deity of Jesus is rooted in core Qur'ānic teaching and Islamic beliefs about the Oneness of God (*tawhid*), his transcendence, and the nature of revelation.

The core message of the Qur'ān is that Allah is *wahid*, the sole divinity. The assertion 'Lo! thy Lord is surely One' (37:4) is at the very core of Muhammad's preaching concerning God, and is constantly repeated throughout the Qur'ān (e.g. 'It is inspired in me that your God is One God —41:6; see also 2:163). Indeed, belief in the Oneness of God forms the cornerstone of the Islamic witness or Shahadah: 'I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.'

Sura 112 of the Qur'ān is the sura of unity (*tawhid*) par excellence: it stresses that God Alone is the Master, not begetting and not begotten, without equal. It asserts the unity of the divine nature, whose intrinsic mystery cannot be fathomed (see also 23:91). God the creator is unique and totally other; to associate anything or anyone with him constitutes *shirk*, the greatest and unpardonable sin. Consequently the Christian teaching that God took human form and came to dwell with human beings is both alien and repugnant to Islam. God is absolute and transcendent—the very possibility of Emmanuel (God with us) is unthinkable. As long ago as the tenth century, a Muslim scholar in a correspondence with a Christian expressed this repugnance as follows:

In your error, your ignorance and your presumption in the face of God—Praise and Glory to Him—you still pretend that God came down from His Majesty, His Sovereignty, His Almighty Power, His Light, His Glory, His Force, His Greatness and His Power, even to the point of entering into the womb of a woman in suffocating grief, imperfection, in narrow and dark confines and in pain, that he stayed in her during nine months to come out as do all the sons of Adam, that he was then fed at her breast during two years, behaved as any child does and grew as any other child, year by year, crying, sleeping, eating, drinking, experiencing hunger and thirst during the whole of his life. Well then: who was ruling the heavens and the earth? Who was holding them? Who made laws for them? Who dictated the course of the sun, the moon, the stars, of the night, of the day, and of the winds? Who created? Who gave life and death while Isa was in the womb of his mother and after he came into the world? Praise and Glory to God!⁸

Qur'ān', in *Islamochristiana*, Vol. 24 (1998): 93–94

⁸ Umar's Letter to Leo, cited in Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in*

However, just as Christians have debated whether Jesus was divine or human, and have finally settled on the position that he is fully divine and fully human, so Muslims have debated the nature of the Qur'ān. As the literal word of God, is the Qur'ān created and therefore not eternal? Or is it uncreated and therefore eternal and divine? The official position, reached in the early tenth century, is that Muslims should believe in the Qur'ān as uncreated and eternal 'without asking how' (*Bila Kayf*).

The role of Muhammad in the revelation of the Qur'ān is comparable to that of the Virgin Mary in Christianity. Just as God chose to reveal his Son through Mary in Christianity, so he chose to reveal his will through the 'illiterate' Muhammad.

It may be that the issue of the nature of revelation is an area in which Christians and Muslims can hope for constructive dialogue on Christological questions.

Jesus' Mission and Miracles

According to the Qur'ān, Jesus was no more than a prophet. His mission was primarily to the children of Israel, whereas Muhammad's mission was universal. Jesus was a sign from God for humanity, strengthened by the Holy Spirit (5:110, 2:87). He was taught Scripture by God (3:48).

The content of Jesus' teaching, for example, the Sermon on the Mount, is barely mentioned in the Qur'ān. All that is said is that he came to confirm the truth in the Torah and make lawful what was hitherto declared unlawful (3:50, 4:46, 3:93). He came to clarify previous revelations (43:63), enjoin the fear of the one God, and warn against ascribing partners to God (5:72). The religion Jesus established was the same as that of Noah, Abraham, Moses and subsequently Muhammad—or in other words, Islam (33:7, 42:13). The *injl* (gospel) given to Jesus contains guidance, light and admonition (5:46) as well as good tidings about the coming of an 'unlettered prophet' (7:157). The gospel and message preached by Jesus have, however, been tampered with and corrupted by successive generations of Christians. Jesus himself prophesied the coming of a prophet named *Ahmad* or 'the praised one' (61:6). The *Gospel of Barnabas*, which has been proved beyond any doubt to be a fictitious work produced in Spain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, develops this theme more fully.⁹ In this so-called 'gospel', Jesus predicts the coming of Muhammad by name, and Muhammad, rather than Jesus, is identified as the Messiah.

Jesus and Mary are the only two people whom the Qur'ān describes as sinless (3:36, 46). Islam rejects the concept of original sin, but nevertheless there is a tradition which states that 'every son of Adam when newly born is touched (or probably squeezed) by Satan [and infected with sin] ... it is at this contact that the child utters his first cry.'¹⁰ The only exceptions were Mary and Jesus, both of whom were granted the extraordinary privilege of being preserved from any contact with the devil at the instant of their birth.

History, Vol. II (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, 2000): 153.

⁹ Jan Slomp, 'The *Gospel of Barnabas* in recent research', in *Islamochristiana*, Vol. 23 (1997): 81–109. The *Gospel of Barnabas* clearly contradicts the Qur'ān by referring to Muhammad rather than Jesus as the Messiah. Strangely, it refers to Jesus as 'Christ' but reports him denying that he is the Messiah.

¹⁰ G. C. Anawati, 'Isa', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* CD-ROM edition.

They are unique, for the Qur'ān reports other prophets falling into temptation, sinning and asking for forgiveness—Adam (7:22–23), Abraham (26:82), Moses (28:16), Jonah (37:142) and Muhammad (3:31; 47:19).

Many traditions abound about Jesus' omniscience and supernatural powers both as a child and an adult. He is the only one, apart from God, with the power to create life (birds) by using clay and breathing life into them (3:49). This tradition about his modelling of birds is found in the apocryphal gospels (the *Gospel of Thomas*, chapter 2; the *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy* chapters 1, 36, 46; and the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* chapters 18 and 2). Christian apologists have always pointed out that the verb *khalāqa*, used of Jesus' creating birds, is a verb that the Qur'ān elsewhere uses exclusively to refer to God's activity. The substance used, clay, is what God used to create the first man, Adam (6:2; 7:12; 28:38). The act of breathing into the birds is similar to the way God breathed into Adam and into Mary. The breath of Jesus, like that of God, has the power to give life. This point should not be dismissed lightly.

The Qur'ān acknowledges that Jesus was the only one of all the prophets to be given the power to heal the sick and raise the dead, and says that he performed all these miracles by the permission of God (5:110). But it denies that these unique signs of healing and even giving of life indicate that Jesus is something more than a prophet. Muslims argue that other prophets, especially Moses, performed even greater miracles than Jesus did. Responding to Christian use of Jesus' miracles as signs of his divinity, a tenth century Muslim noted:

And if you are to consider Isa as a god only because he raised the dead to life, cured the sick, and accomplished miracles with the permission of God, then (I would answer) that Hazqil [Ezekiel; Ezek 37] also raised the dead to life, as you can see in your book, thirty-five thousand people ... many more than were raised by Isa and yet you have not made him into a god. In the same way Elyas [Elisha] raised to life the son of the old woman as you maintain ... The miracles of Isa are not superior to those accomplished by Musa in the presence of Pharaoh's magicians ... And both of them only did what they did with the permission of God, on His order, and in virtue of His Decree, because God decides in His wisdom, and acts with Power.¹¹

On the whole, Muslim commentators regard Jesus' mission as a failure at worst and an unfinished or preparatory task at best. They point out that he never married, achieved military victory over his enemies, or attained temporal power. By contrast, Muhammad wrought a mighty revolution and made the Arabs master of the then civilized world' whereas Jesus 'could not free his people from the yoke of the Romans'.¹²

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is derided as impracticable, unrealistic and too docile. One Muslim writer describes it as 'pathetic and escapist', appeasing the Roman overlords by making virtue out of suffering and oppression and preventing action in this world by offering consolation in the next. He goes on to describe the Sermon on

¹¹ Umar, cited in Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History, Vol II* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, 2000): 154.

¹² See Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997): 63–66.

the Mount as ‘meek and spineless’.¹³ In other words, Jesus failed to achieve manifest success. But Muslims then have to face the problem of explaining how a prophet could be failure. Does this represent a failure on God’s part? In an apparent attempt to resolve this problem, Islam teaches that Jesus will return to earth before the end of the world to accomplish what he could not do in his earlier life. This second coming is known as the ‘Descension of Jesus’ – *nuzul ‘Isa*. This belief is derived from Sura 43:61, which talks of Jesus being the ‘sign of the hour’. Tradition has surrounded this rather oblique reference with a mass of detail. Some of these details are as follows: On returning to the earth, Jesus will descend onto the white arcade of the eastern gate at Damascus or (according to another tradition) onto a hill in the Holy Land. His head will be anointed. He will have in his hand a spear with which he will kill the Antichrist (*al-Dajjal*). Then he will go to Jerusalem at the time when the imam is leading the dawn prayer. The imam will try to give up his place to him, but Jesus will put the imam in front of him and will pray behind him, as prescribed by Muhammad.

Then he will kill all pigs, break the cross, destroy synagogues and churches, and kill all Christians except those who believe in him (following 4:159). Once he has killed the false Messiah, all the Peoples of the Book (Jews and Christians) will believe in him, and there will be only one community (the Islamic umma). Jesus will make justice reign. Peace will be so complete that it will extend even to man's relations with the animals and to the relations among animals. Jesus will remain for forty years, will get married and have children, and will then die. The Muslims will arrange his funeral and will bury him at Medina, beside Muhammad.¹⁴ To sum up, Jesus will complete the mission that had been cut short. As a prophet of God, he must not only succeed; he must also be seen to have succeeded.

Contemporary mainstream Muslim writers see the mission of Jesus principally as preserving the Torah and announcing the coming of Muhammad and regard Islam as a culmination and replacement of whatever he taught. S. H. Nasr, for instance, sees Muhammad as synthesising the elements of faith, law, and the spiritual way as represented by Abraham, Moses and Jesus respectively.¹⁵ Cragg notes that

If Jesus ... supplies Islam with its eschatological perception and goal, Muhammad supplies the historical realism which is wanting in Jesus and precluded by his context. If Islamic traditions need to anticipate a Christ-style future, Jesus needed to anticipate a Muhammad-style future, the one in eternal the other in temporal terms. The Gospel may have it right in the ultimate; but the Qur’ān has it right in the concrete.¹⁶

In talking about the Qur’ānic view of Jesus and his mission, however, the Christian

¹³ See Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians*: 63–66.

¹⁴ G.C. Anawati, ‘Isa’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

¹⁵ S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981): 210

¹⁶ K. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*: 53

theologian Hans Küng rightly observes that ‘the portrait of Jesus in the Qur’ān is all too one-sided, too monotone, and for the most part lacking in content’.¹⁷

Jesus’ Names and Titles

Despite vigorous Qur’ānic and Muslim denials that Jesus is divine, the Qur’ān gives him a series of honourable titles, some of which strongly hint at divinity. The list below includes most of the names and titles given to Jesus in the Qur’ān:

- *Isa* is Jesus’ personal name, derived from the Syriac version of the Hebrew Yeshua or Jesus. It is used twenty-five times in the Qur’ān.

Nabi Isa (Prophet Jesus) is the way Muslims commonly refer to Jesus.

Nabi Allah (Prophet of God) is used only once in the Qur’ān with reference to Jesus (19:30–31), even though he is always listed among the prophets.

Rasul Allah (Apostle or Messenger of God) is used ten times (e.g. 5:75; 61:6). Jesus is one of if not *the* favoured or exalted apostle of God (2:253).

Isa Ibn Maryam (Son of Mary) is used twenty-three times in the Qur’ān. This title, which occurs only once in the New Testament (Mark 6:3), appears five times in the *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy* and fifteen times in the Syriac version of the same gospel, indicating that early Arab and Syrian Christians referred to Jesus in this way.

Abdallah (Servant or Slave of God) is used three times (4:172, 19:30, 43:59). It simply means a creature indebted to God.

Al-Masih, (the Messiah) is used eleven times in the Qur’ān exclusively for Jesus. In the account of the annunciation, we read that ‘His name shall be the Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary’ (3:45). However, according to the Qur’ān, this title does not make him any different from other prophets for ‘the Messiah, son of Mary, was no other than a messenger’ (5:75).

Wajih (outstanding) is the way Jesus is described in 3:45. This word comes from *wajh*, meaning face, and indicates being in the forefront, pre-eminent, or highly honoured.

Muqarrab (drawn near) is also used in 3:45 to describe Jesus’ relationship with God. Elsewhere, the same word is used to refer to those who are admitted to Paradise (83:21, 28, 56:88) and to angels (4:172).

Āya (sign) is the title assigned to Jesus when Gabriel tells Mary of God’s intentions: ‘We are to make him a sign for mankind’ (19:21). The word translated ‘sign’ can also be translated as ‘miracle’. It later came to be used to refer to the individual verses in the Qur’ān, each of which is considered a miraculous sign from God. Muslim commentators take the ‘sign’ to which Gabriel refers to be Jesus’ miraculous conception. Jesus himself is also reported as saying, ‘I came to you with a sign from your Lord; so fear God and obey me’ (3:50). Here the ‘sign’ may be any of the miracles Jesus performed. In Sura 21:90, the use of ‘sign’ is even more embracing: ‘We made her and her son a sign for the world.’ One would expect this verse to be interpreted as a reference to the universal scope of Jesus’ mission.

Rahma (mercy) is another title assigned at the annunciation, when Gabriel explains that Jesus is to be ‘a mercy from us’ (19:21).

¹⁷ Hans Küng, ‘Christianity and world religions: The dialogue with Islam as one model’, in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (April 1987): 89

Blessed is another word applied to Jesus at his birth, where he is said to have spoken from his cradle and announced that God has ‘made me blessed wheresoever I may be’ (19:31). *Ayat ul-Allah* (Sign, Revelation or Token from God to the world) is used to describe Jesus in 19:21; 23:50. Traditionally, Muslim commentators have taken it to mean that Jesus is the ‘Sign of the Hour’, and that his second coming and all that he will accomplish then will signal the end of the world.

Kalimatu Allah (Word of God) is one of most striking titles of Jesus for Christians. The Qur’ān uses it when the angel tells Mary: ‘Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary (3:45). Classical Muslim commentators have interpreted this title in various ways. Some say that Jesus is the fulfilment of the creating word of God, uttered at the moment of his conception; others that he is the prophet announced in the word of God, received and preached by the earlier messengers; others that he is the word of God because he speaks on behalf of God and thus leads men in the right way; and still others that he is a word of God because he is, in his own person, ‘good tidings’.

Ruh Allah (Spirit of God) is another striking title used for Jesus alone in the Qur’ān: ‘The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him’ (4:171).

While Christians may be tempted to interpret some of the names and titles in the preceding list as pointing to the divinity of Christ, Islamic orthodoxy has vehemently insisted that all of them are honorific and that their meaning should be taken at face value. But all human races, and especially Semitic and African people, attach deep significance to names and titles. This point is evident not only from the Bible, but also from the practice of several people-groups today. Names, surnames, nicknames and titles are bestowed upon people and places in order to express their significance or some special circumstance relating to them. For instance, names can tell us where someone comes from and, in African cultures, the circumstances under which that person was born. Titles tell us something about what a person has achieved. As an African, I think it requires more faith to take all the names and titles given to Jesus in the Qur’ān only at face value than it does to admit that there is something unique and special about him, even among prophets!

Jesus’ Passion

The Qur’ānic witness to Jesus’ passion is even more problematic than its witness to his birth. It appears to deny either the crucifixion or that Jesus was the one crucified:

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah’s messenger. They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain, But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, wise (4:157–58)

The passage is part of an invective against the Jews, who were apparently boasting about having crucified Jesus. The Qur’ān insists that the Jews did not kill Jesus but that it only ‘appeared so unto them’. This part of the verse has been the subject of intense speculation by various Muslim commentators. Almost all agree that a crucifixion did take place, but that Jesus was not the victim. So the questions that have been debated are, firstly, what is meant by ‘it appeared so unto them’ and secondly, who was the victim? A common

Muslim interpretation is that a substitute made to look like Jesus was crucified in his place. This view has tantalising parallels to the ancient Gnostics' position that a substitute died in place of Jesus, or that only Jesus' body was crucified while the true Jesus within did not suffer.¹⁸ Various Islamic traditions and commentaries suggest the following possibilities:

- God outwitted the Jews and deluded them by making all of Jesus' disciples look like him at the time of his arrest. One of these disciples was then arrested and crucified.
- Simon of Cyrene, one of Jesus' disciples, volunteered to take on his likeness and his place on the cross.
- Jesus bribed his way out of the cross by promising paradise to one of his disciples (Sergus) who took his place.
- God cast the likeness of Jesus on Judas, who was crucified as punishment for his treachery.
- God outwitted the Jews by taking Jesus to heaven. To conceal this ascension, the Jews seized an innocent man, crucified him on an isolated hill, and barred anyone from coming to the place until the features of the body had changed beyond recognition.
- Pilate ordered his soldiers to free Jesus Barabbas but they mistakenly set Jesus of Nazareth free, who then escaped and went to meet with his disciples.¹⁹

According to the so-called *Gospel of Barnabas*, Jesus was whisked away to heaven by four angels and his likeness was cast upon Judas, who was then arrested, crucified and buried by the disciples, under the impression that he was Jesus. Some of the disciples then stole the body and started to spread lies about a resurrection. Jesus pleaded with God in heaven to let him go back and console his mother and disciples and God granted him three days. He then returned under the protection of the same four angels, met his mother and disciples on the Mount of Olives and explained what had actually happened. He warned them to stop spreading lies about his death and resurrection, after which he was taken back up into heaven.²⁰

But these Islamic denials of Jesus' death are complicated by the existence of other Qur'ānic verses that allude to his death. The infant Jesus is reported to have said, 'Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!' (19:33). Zechariah invokes the same blessing on John the Baptist in 19:15, implying a real death and resurrection in each case.

In 3:55 God says to Jesus, 'Lo! I am gathering (*mutawaffika*) thee and causing thee to ascend unto Me'. The verb *tawaffa* is associated with death in the other twenty-five uses of it in the Qur'ān, including in 4:157, where it is used to deny that the Jews had killed Jesus. On three occasions, this verb refers to Muhammad's death. In fact Muhammad, arguing against the divinity of Jesus in a discussion with Christians from Najran, is reported to have asked them: 'Do you not know that our Lord is living and

¹⁸ J. M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977) 245, 332, 334.

¹⁹ See Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

²⁰ See excerpts in J. M. Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes, Vol. II: 175–78*.

does not die, and that Jesus passed away?’²¹ In this tradition, Muhammad appears to accept that Jesus died, and in fact uses his death as an argument against Christian claims of Jesus’ divinity.

Mainstream Islamic teaching has continued to maintain that all references to the death of Jesus in the Qur’ān are eschatological (that is, they refer to his death forty years after his second coming). However, some individual Muslim commentators and writers have acknowledged that 3:55 and 3:48 may refer to a real death of Jesus. Some have said that Jesus died for three hours before being raised, others that he was dead for seven hours. Ibn Kathir (died 1373) simply said, ‘God caused him to die for three days, then resurrected him, then raised him.’²²

Mahmoud Ayoub, a Lebanese Shia Muslim living in the United States, is of the opinion that Muslim commentators have not been able to convincingly disprove the crucifixion. On the contrary, they have made the matter even more complicated by introducing the substitution theory. The Qur’ān, according to Ayoub, is not denying the crucifixion as a historical event but rather its theological implications. Rather than speaking about a righteous man who was wronged, the Qur’ān is speaking about the Word of God who was sent to earth and who returned to God. The denial of the killing of Jesus is thus a denial of the power of men to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious.²³ Another highly respected contemporary Egyptian Muslim scholar declares:

The idea of a substitute for Christ is a very crude way of explaining the Qur’ānic text. They had a lot to explain to the masses. No cultured Muslim believes in this nowadays. The text is taken to mean that the Jews thought they had killed Christ but God raised him unto Himself in a way we can leave unexplained among the several mysteries which we have taken for granted on faith alone.²⁴

The Ahmadiyya Movement (see chapter 6) claims that Jesus was crucified on the cross, taken down in a coma and nursed by his disciples in a cave. He is said to have recovered and escaped to India in search of the lost tribe of Israel. He lived in India for 120 years, died and lies buried in Kashmir. It appears that in order to claim the title Messiah for himself, Ghulam Ahmad (the founder of the movement) had to find a grave for Jesus. Even more important, he wanted to counter the Christian argument that Muhammad is dead and buried in Medina while Jesus is alive with God in heaven.

The stance of the Ahmadiyya Movement and much of the Muslim attitude to Jesus seem to be shaped more by Christian claims that Jesus is superior to Muhammad than by Qur’ānic teaching. At the heart of the Islamic puzzle about the passion of Christ are the contrasting prophetic experiences of Muhammad and Jesus. When the Meccans plotted to

²¹ Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*: 272.

²² See Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*: 120–22.

²³ Mahmud M. Ayoub, ‘Towards an Islamic Christology, II. The death of Jesus: Reality or delusion’, in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (April 1980): 116–118

²⁴ Muhammad Kamil Husain, *City of Wrong* (trans. K. Cragg: Amsterdam: 1958): 222

kill Muhammad, he escaped, leaving his cousin Ali in his bed to deceive his pursuers. He hid in a cave for three days and then slipped away to Medina. From there, he organised his followers, fought his enemies and finally captured Mecca. So crucial is the hijra in Islam that this event, rather than the birth or death of Muhammad, marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. When Muslims compare his escape with Jesus' capture in Gethsemane, they see the vindication of Muhammad in his rescue from his enemies and, more importantly, in his victories over them in subsequent battles. The image of a suffering prophet is therefore difficult to reconcile with what Kenneth Cragg calls the 'manifest victory' or 'success' associated with the prophetic office in Islam. As one key Muslim writer put it

in the Qur'ān, everything is aimed at convincing the Believer that he will experience victory over the forces of evil ... Islam refuses to accept this tragic image of the Passion. Not simply because it has no place for the dogma of the Redemption, but because the Passion would imply in its eyes that God had failed.²⁵

Islamic objections to the passion of Christ are also rooted in contrasting views of what constitutes the human problem and the solution required. According to Christian teaching, Jesus is not just a prophet but also a saviour who came to redeem humanity from the power of sin by offering the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Thus the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) is intimately associated with Christ's suffering and death. On the other hand, in Islam the human problem is not sin but ignorance of the will of God. What is needed is therefore a prophet who will bring guidance rather than a saviour bringing redemption.

Kenneth Cragg summarises the Islamic objections to the passion of Christ as follows: 'It did not, historically; it need not redemptively; and it should not morally happen to Jesus.'²⁶ Historically it did not happen because the Qur'ān denies it! Redemptively, it need not happen because 'Islam holds man to be not in need of salvation' but of success, which can be obtained with the right guidance of the law. Morally, it should not, because everyone is responsible for their own sins. Why should a just God hold one person responsible for the sins of another? Moreover, if the redemption of humanity from the power of sin is what Jesus set out to achieve through his death on the cross, then he failed because he ended his ministry with only a 'few believers' and human beings continue to live under the power of sin. Muslims therefore regard Jesus' death on the cross (assuming that they admit that this did happen) as a pathetic misadventure unworthy of a prophet of God, let alone one believed to be God. As one eleventh-century Muslim apologist put it:

[Jesus] gave his blood freely, according to what you say, desiring to save mankind from error, and only a small number believed in him. Yet people believed in other Prophets who did not go so far as this ... Moses, on whom be peace, did not die till a large number believed in him, a great multitude; nor did Muhammad—may God bless him and give him peace—die till a huge number

²⁵ Ali Merad, 'Christ according to the Qur'ān', in *Encounter* (1980): 14ff

²⁶ K. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*: 178

believed in him, who thereby gained possession of the lands and conquered the horizons, and God made him victorious over every religion ... If Jesus, on whom be peace, knew the Unseen, why did he give his blood through a desire for that which was not accomplished, and from which he gained nothing?²⁷

With regard to the person, mission and passion of Christ, in Islam faith and belief take precedence over empirical historical evidence. It is futile to try to convince Muslims that some aspects of Islamic Christology are mistaken because they are not in line with the biblical accounts or empirical evidence. Any such suggestion strikes at the heart of the integrity of the Islamic faith. Making this point, Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes that it is God who revealed the Islamic doctrine of Christ to Muslims. If certain verses of the Qur'ān like those of Surāt Maryam are incorrect, then by what criterion should Muslims accept the rest of the Qur'ān? If certain verses of the Qur'ān are rejected because of some extrinsic argument or in order to make friends with Christians or achieve world peace or get into the United Nations, or for any other worldly reason, however laudable, then the rest of the Qur'ān must also be rejected as the Word of God.²⁸ Nasr explains further that 'even if [the crucifixion] had been recorded on film and thoroughly documented (God forbid), nevertheless the Islamic position would not *logically* [his emphasis] be destroyed.'²⁹ The point Nasr is making on behalf of all Muslims is that since the Muslim teaching about Christ is revealed by God and recorded in the Qur'ān, it cannot be contested let alone contradicted. The Qur'ān says Jesus was not crucified and no amount of 'evidence' can contradict that, since that would amount to questioning the integrity of God and the Qur'ān.

Jesus in Muslim Traditions and Devotion

While firmly rejecting the divinity of Jesus, Muslim traditions and devotion seem to have gone far beyond the usual interpretation of the Qur'ān in providing detailed accounts of Jesus' birth, physical features and ministry.

Islamic traditions tell that Mary conceived Jesus at the age of thirteen (others say fifteen). She and her cousin Joseph the carpenter lived and worked in a mosque as water-carriers. One day, Mary went to fetch water and God sent Gabriel to her and made him resemble a 'handsome young man'.³⁰ And he said to her, 'O Mary, truly God hath sent

²⁷ Al-Baji (1012–1081), in J. Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes, Vol. II*: 182–83

²⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Response to Hans Küng's Paper on Christian–Muslim Dialogue' in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (April 1987): 100

²⁹ S. H. Nasr's comments during discussions on 'Christianity and World Religions', in *The Muslim World*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (April 1987): 124

³⁰ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this section are taken from Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ: An Essay on the Life, Character and Teachings of Jesus Christ According to the Koran and Orthodox Traditions* (New York: American Trust Society, 1912), as found in the CD-ROM, *The World of Islam: Resources for Understanding Islam* (Colorado Springs: Global Mapping International/Fuller Theological Seminary, 2000).

me to you that I may give you a pious child.’ When Mary said, ‘I take refuge from you,’ he said to her, ‘Verily I am the apostle of thy Lord to give you a pious child.’ She said, ‘Shall there be to me a child, and no one has touched me, and I have committed no folly?’ He said, ‘That is true, but thy Lord finds a miracle easy.’ And he breathed in the opening of her dress which she had taken off; and when he departed from her, Mary put it on, and so she conceived Jesus.

Joseph and Mary escaped to Egypt because Herod wanted to kill Jesus. While there, he was sent to school but was too clever to be taught by any teacher. He and his mother lived in the house of the ruler of Egypt and he performed one of his first miracles during the wedding ceremony of the king’s son:

The King made a feast and collected all the people of Egypt and fed them for two months. And when it was finished, certain people from Syria came to see him, and he did not know of their coming until they came down upon him. And on that day he had no drink for them. And when Jesus saw his anxiety on this account, He entered some of the chambers of the ruler in which there were rows of jars, and He passed by them one by one, touching them with His hand; and every time He touched one it was filled with drink until He came to the last one. And He was at that time twelve years old.

Unlike the Qur’ān, which gives no details about Jesus’ healings and other miracles, Islamic traditions contain many colourful accounts of dazzling miracles. For example, when Jesus was describing Noah’s ark to his disciples, they are said to have responded:

If you had sent us some one who had seen the ark and could describe it to us, we would believe.” So He arose and came to a little hill, and struck it with His hand and took a handful of the earth and said, "This is the grave of Shem, the son of Noah. If you wish, I will raise him for you." They said, "Yes;" and He called upon God by His greatest name, and struck the hill with His staff and said, "Come to life by permission of God." Then Shem, the son of Noah, came forth from his grave, white haired. And he said, "Is this the resurrection day?" Jesus said, "No, but I have called you out in the name of God Most High." Shem had lived five hundred years and he was still young. So he told them the news of the ark. Then Jesus said to him, "Die;" and he said, "Only on one condition, that God protects me from the agonies of death." Jesus granted his request by permission of God.

Another tradition, recounted by Said Kaab, describes Jesus as

a ruddy man, inclining towards white. His hair was not lank, and He never oiled it. He went barefooted; and He never owned a place, or a change of garments, or property or vesture or provisions, except His daily bread. And whenever the sun began to set, He would kneel and pray until the morning. He was in the habit of healing the sick and the lepers, and raising the dead by the will of God. He could tell those about Him what they ate in their houses, and what they laid up against the morrow. He walked on the face of the water on the sea. He had dishevelled hair, and His face was small. He was an ascetic in this world and greatly desirous of the world to come; diligent in serving God. And He was a wanderer in the earth till the Jews sought Him and desired to kill Him. Then God lifted Him up to

heaven, and God knows best.³¹

Many Islamic traditions speak highly of Jesus' teaching and portray him not only as a modest self-effacing ascetic but as someone unique and special even amongst prophets. One of the most respected Muslim mystics, Al-Ghazali (died 1111) reports a tradition that when Jesus was asked 'Are there any on earth like you?', he answered: 'Whoever has prayer for his speech, meditation for his silence and tears for his vision, he is like me.'³² One of the earliest and most famous sufis, al-Hallaj (died 922), while not speculating about the person of Jesus, was enthralled by the mystery of the cross. His guiding ideal was union with God through an all-absorbing love, a love which could not find expression in enjoyment but only in suffering and the cross. A line from one of his poems reads: 'I will die in the religion of the cross. I need go no more to Mecca or Medina.' And so he died, crucified as a heretic.

Ibn-Arabi (died 1240), another celebrated Muslim mystic, also speculated about Jesus. He is responsible for popularising the title 'the seal of saints' (*khâtam al-anbiyâ'*) for Jesus, which corresponds to Muhammad's title 'the seal of prophets' (33:40). He argued that Muhammad brought definitive legislative prophecy; Jesus will bring definitive holiness when he returns, sealing all holiness from Adam to the end of time.

Merad Ali, a French Muslim of Algerian origin, is of the view that the classical commentaries 'do not shed light on the figure of Christ in the way he deserves'. He points out that 'everything in the Qur'ân points to the fact that Christ is seen as an exceptional event in the history of the world, an event pregnant with exceptional meanings'. Merad stresses the aura of mystery surrounding the person of Jesus in the Qur'ân; the use of terminology such as 'Spirit' and 'Word' when referring to him, terms which are used of no one else; and the uniqueness of the miracles attributed to him, in particular those of creation and healing. He accepts that the Qur'ân denies Christ's divinity, but finds it significant that 'at no time is the term *bashar* (human being) applied to Christ'. Merad ends on an open note, saying that the Qur'ân aims 'to provoke reflection rather than to furnish final answers'.³³

Coming home to Africa, Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1900–1991), a Malian Muslim mystic and scholar, talks about what he calls 'the mysterious link which appears between the Qur'ânic name of Jesus and the name by which God has named himself'. Bâ uses numerology to calculate the numerical value of the name Allah and the title 'Messiah, son of Mary', exclusively given to Jesus in the Qur'ân. He concludes:

Whoever is enlightened by this secret stops being amazed when he hears that Jesus participates, in a certain way, in the Essence of the Divine Being. Are not the Word and the Spirit of a being inevitably a part of him? But, the two expressions 'God's Word' and 'the Spirit of God' were attributed to the Virgin Mary's son by the Qur'ân itself ... I could, without trouble, without prejudice or fear, set myself to listen to the Christian Path and to appreciate, for example, the

³¹ See S. M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ*: 56ff

³² Cited in K. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*: 49

³³ Merad Ali, 'Christ According to the Qur'ân', in *Encounters*, Vol. 69 (1980): 2–17

depth of the Gospel according to John, notably in the first three verses of its prologue: 'In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, without him nothing came to be'.³⁴

Before a wrong impression is created that the Muslims mentioned above are Christians in all but name, it has to be said that whatever is said of Jesus in Muslim traditions and devotion, much more is said of Muhammad. The superiority of Muhammad is maintained in every way (see chapter three). In summarising the whole of Islamic Christology, Cragg notes:

Islam has a great tenderness for Jesus, yet a sharp dissociation from his Christian dimensions. Jesus is the theme at once of acknowledgment and disavowal. Islam finds his nativity miraculous but his Incarnation impossible. His teaching entails suffering, but the one is not perfected in the other. He is highly exalted, but by rescue rather than by victory. He is vindicated, but not by resurrection. His servanthood is understood to disclaim the sonship which is its secret ... Islam has for him a recognition moving within a non-recognition, a rejectionism on behalf of a deep and reverent esteem.³⁵

But what significance does Islamic Christology have for Christian witness? What are its implications for Christian witness? And in the light of these reflections, how are we to approach Islam and Christian witness to Muslims in the twenty-first century? These are the questions we will try to address in the next chapter.

³⁴ Cited from J. Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes, Vol. II*: 158–9

³⁵ K. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*: 278–79

